EXCAVATIONS ON
A ROMANO-BRITISH ROADSIDE SETTLEMENT AT

HEATH ROAD, WHITCHURCH,

SHROPSHIRE
INTRODUCTION
The Romano-British settlement at Heath Road, Whitchurch, is situated approximately 2.5 km south-south east of the centre of modern Whitchurch (the site of a Roman auxiliary fort and the later settlement of Mediolanum). The site lies on gently undulating ground, and is traversed from north to south by Heath Road, the former A41 Trunk road, which at this point is purported to follow the line of the Viroconium to Mediolanum Roman road.

The natural subsoil in this area consists of red clay with a covering of up to 1 metre of sand and gravel.

In January 1972, during the construction of the dual carriageway improvements to the A41 between Prees and Whitchurch, the remains of a Romano-British settlement (Shropshire Monuments Record number SA4288) were found at a point about 2.5km south of Whitchurch. (Fig 1). The bulk of these remains were seen to cover an area at least 160m long, although no northern limit was defined at the time, and consisted of pits, hearths, ditches and cobbled yards. A substantial quantity of Roman pottery was also recovered. (Rogerson and Grenter).

The construction of the new A41 Whitchurch Bypass, some two decades later, has presented the opportunity to examine further the remains of this settlement. During the fencing off of a small triangle of land within the new road corridor on the south-west side of what will become the new heath Roundabout (Fig 1), a quantity (about 20 sharts) of Roman pottery was discovered, suggesting the presence of surviving archaeological deposits. The site was made available for excavation by the road contractors, Birse Construction Limited, who also kindly removed the topsoil from the site.

Archaeological investigation of the site, which lay some 100a to the north of the earlier discoveries, was conducted (when weather permitted!) by the author on behalf of the Leisure Services Department of Shropshire County Council and in conjunction with the Whitchurch Area Archaeological Group during February and March 1991.
THE EXCAVATIONS
The area allotted for detailed archaeological investigation formed a triangle, about 30m long by 11m wide, bounded by a small stream to the north, the western edge of the new bypass road corridor to the west, and Heath Road to the east (Fig 2).

After removal by machine of about 20cms depth of topsoil, and the hedge bank on the west side of Heath Road, the area was cleared by hand. This revealed a linear feature (1009), comprising pebbles and cobbles set in orange clayey sand about 2m wide underlying the hedgebank (which had proved to be of modern formation) and parallel to the edge of Heath Road. Extending west from this feature to cover the remainder of the site was a layer of brown silty sand (1008) in whose surface were apparent a number of (modern) plough marks. It was decided to sample this layer for any underlying deposits, and to examine the linear pebble feature, and accordingly two trenches were cut perpendicular to Heath Road, and linked by a further north/south trench. (Fig 2). A sequence of stratified deposits was revealed, and these have been provisionally phased as follows.

Phase 1 (Fig 3)
Probably the earliest deposits revealed were the initial construction layers of a Roman road. The road was only sectioned in the northern of the two east-west trenches; here, these early road foundations consisted of a layer of large, closely packed, cobbles set in brown clay sand (1040) and capped with a layer of pebbles in light brown clay sand (1028). About 1m width of these deposits was visible within 0.5m of the western edge of Heath Road, and the surface of 1028 lay about 0.3m below the present day surface of Heath Road. In the southern section, these early road deposits were again seen to consist of pebbles in a brown clay sand matrix (1048). About 7m to the west of the road, a u-shaped ditch (1039) was cut from north to south, perhaps providing drainage for the road. Between the ditch and the road, overlying the natural sand, was a hard packed pebble and gravel surface (1025), perhaps a yard surface, but possibly representing the floor of an otherwise undefined structure.

Phase 2 (Fig 4)
The fills of the ditch 1039, which contained some Romano-British pottery, were sealed by a layer of reddish brown sand about 10cms thick (1038). This layer contained substantial amounts of pottery, and slumped somewhat into the top of the ditch. 1038 in turn was overlain by a light brown sandy layer, again up to about 10cms thick (1034). A linear feature (1045) over 2m long by about 0.5m wide and 15cms deep was cut into 1034 and was filled with grey silt and cobbles.
It ended in a rounded terminal to the south, and extended beyond the excavated area to the north. This feature may represent the remains of a partially infilled drainage gulley. Also cut into the sandy layer 1034, on the west side of this linear feature, was a small posthole (1032) 20cms in diameter and 20cms deep. These deposits and features were all sealed by a layer of greyish brown silty sand (1023) which extended east up to the edge of the pebble surface 1025.

In the southern east-west trench, the earliest road-side deposits consisted of a layer of dark-grey silty sand (1043) 15cms deep, producing a substantial quantity of pottery and containing a number of large cobbles. Although these cobbles did not appear to form part of any coherent structure they may represent the partially robbed remains of a platform for a building lying mainly to the south of the trench.

Also belonging to this phase was a ditch (1062) cut along the west edge of the Roman road. In both the north and south sections, this ditch appeared to cut the earliest road layers; in the northern section, it was also seen to cut the east edge of the pebble surface 1025, and in the southern section it cut the grey silt layer 1043. This ditch was V-shaped and lm wide by 0.5m deep, and was presumably intended to provide drainage for the road, perhaps as a replacement for the earlier ditch 1039.

Phase 3 (Fig 5)
The next 'major' activity noted was the laying down of an extensive pebbled surface (1010 and 1017) over the entire northern and western parts of the area examined. Although no features, suggestive of structural elements were apparent in this pebble surface, perhaps indicating its function as ayard rather than a floor, two shallow oval scoops (1018 and 1037) had been cut or worn through the pebbles. In the northern section, this pebble surface was seen to overlie the western edge of the roadside ditch 1062. The remainder of the ditch was sealed in this area by further road construction layers consisting of brown clay sand (1024) and pebbles in a similar matrix (1022). The equivalent road layers in the southern section (1046 and 1047) did not overlie the ditch, although here the ditch fills seemed to have been deliberately capped with a sealing layer of sandy clay (1049).

Phase 4
After the laying of the pebble yard, the occupation of the site was marked by the accumulation of a layer of light brown silty sand (1011, 1015 and 1016) about 10cms thick over the entire area examined up to the edge of the Roman road.
However, the road continued to be maintained beyond this time and two further layers of clay sand (1020) and pebbles (1019) were added to its surface.

**Phase 5**
The sequence of Roman occupation deposits was covered by the layer of brown silty sand (1008) observed after the removal of the topsoil. This layer was about 20cms deep and contained both Roman and post-medieval pottery. The presence of this layer here and elsewhere in the area of the settlement (see below) has probably contributed to the survival of the earlier stratified deposits, protecting them from the effects of modern ploughing.

**SALVAGE RECORDING**
The area of the new bypass road corridor immediately to the north of the excavated area was stripped down to the level of the natural subsoil without archaeological monitoring. However, subsequent inspection of the surface of the sandy subsoil revealed no traces of any negative archaeological features. The Roman road was, however, seen in section in two places. On the northern edge of the cut for the railway crossing south of Heath Villas, a band of cobbles and pebbles overlay the subsoil on the projected line of the Roman road, about 5m west of Heath Road. Unfortunately, this section was not accessible for cleaning and recording. However, on the north bank of the small stream which formed the northern limits of the excavated area (Fig 2) a small slit trench revealed Roman road surfaces consisting of two pebble layers and an intervening layer of sand. These layers sloped down from north to south towards the stream, suggesting the presence of a ford across the watercourse.

A tree re-planting scheme involved the removal of saplings from the east side of Heath road north of the stream, to be replanted for temporary storage in two areas. The first area was the triangle of land north of the stream between the railway and the new bypass road corridor; the second lay between the present dual carriageway section of the A41 and Heath Road, immediately adjacent to the area where the 1972 salvage recording found remains of the Romano-British settlement. In all, 55 trees were moved, the majority by means of a mechanical excavator which cut conical holes 1.7m in diameter by 1.2m deep, removing the trees with their roots intact in a matrix of soil. North of the stream the only archaeological deposit observed was a layer (1090) containing charcoal and a few fragments of burnt bone seen in a tree-pit 6m east of Heath Road and 5m north of the line of the stream (which is culverted on this side of the road).
However, in the tree-pits cut in the verge alongside the A41, substantial archaeological deposits were revealed. 5 of the 12 tree-pits dug here were monitored. (Fig 8; 2 - 5 and 8). Here it was seen that beneath about 30cms of topsoil, and a further layer 30cms deep of a brown sandy soil, similar to that encountered in the excavated area (1008, above), lay a depth of about 40cms of stratified archaeological deposits, containing Romano-British pottery, charcoal and burnt clay. (Fig 9).

In pit 2, the topsoil and brown soil overlay a layer of brown clay sand, in turn overlying a deposit at least 0.3m deep of a dark grey silt, producing a substantial quantity of pottery. Natural was not encountered in this pit. Below the brown soil in pit 3, a sequence of four distinct and stratified deposits were seen above the natural sandy subsoil. One of these consisted of a layer 10cms thick of soot and burnt clay, suggesting the presence of a hearth or industrial feature. In pits 5 and 8, the brown soil covered a layer of packed cobbles, perhaps a yard or building platform. The cobbling only extended into the north half of pit 8, and was not encountered in pit 6, giving an approximate north/south width of 4m to the cobbled area. The east/west extent of the cobbling was not defined.

SUMMARY
The excavations revealed that present day Heath Road overlies a Roman road, presumably the Viroconium to Mediolanum road, of which a strip up to 3m wide survived alongside the western edge of the modern road. The ditches and pebble yards of a settlement of Romano-British date appeared alongside the road shortly after its construction, and at least 4 distinct phases of occupation in the Roman period were observed. Although no analysis of the pottery recovered from these excavations has been undertaken at the time of writing, the pottery from the salvage recording work on the southern part of this settlement in 1972 (Rogerson and Grener) suggested that occupation began in the late first century AD, continuing into the third century at least.

The northern limit of the settlement has also been defined, and seems to have been marked by a stream, whose ancient origin is suggested by the apparent fording of the stream by the Roman road. It seems likely that the settlement extended south from this point for at least 200m, occupying an area on both sides of the Roman road of perhaps 40m width.

The survival of the remains of this settlement between Heath Road and the A41, as attested by the monitoring of the tree-planting scheme, is of particular significance in view of the proposed construction of a new layby (Fig 8), which further threatens these deposits.
A close parallel for the site at Heath Road may, perhaps, be found in the Roman civilian settlement at Heronbridge, near Chester (Mason, 1988). Another similar settlement has also recently been excavated in this region at Meole Brace, Shrewsbury (Hughes, 1990).

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REFERENCES:
ROGERSON A. and GRENTER S. "A Romano-British site at Heath Road, Whitchurch, Salop". (Unpublished).
Fig. 1: Location Map

Fig. 2: Excavation Plan
Fig 3: Phase 1

Fig 4: Phase 2
Fig 5: Phase 3
Fig 8: Locations of tree pits alongside A41
Fig 9: Treepit sections (see Fig 8 for locations)