

The M6 Toll motorway – the long-awaited alternative to our congested West Midlands road network.

Preserving cultural heritage

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Building the new road was a great opportunity for finding new areas of historical interest. In 2000 we began investigating possible heritage sites along the route, before beginning construction work in Spring 2001.



Archaeologists surveying the route prior to construction

The process

We appointed two major archaeological groups, Oxford Archaeology and Wessex Archaeology, to work together on the project. With more than 60 archaeologists working on up to 40 sites, we slowly and painstakingly excavated, photographed and recorded some of the largest and most significant finds the area had ever seen.

The teams began by visiting likely sites, using local and historical knowledge to identify spots that deserved a closer look. They then searched them in a variety of ways.

Ploughing searching ploughed fields for evidence on the soil surface

Geophysical surveys using electronic signals to find underlying features like ditches and rock strata

Watching brief keeping a close watch wherever we were moving earth

Targeted watching brief stripping topsoil and completely mapping selected sites

After this, we were able to single out several sites for trial trenching – a way of

seeing which areas we needed to open up completely. Following this, we carried out full excavations on four sites. We found artefacts from the Bronze Age through to Roman and Anglo-Saxon times, and removed them for examination, analysis and cataloguing.

The sites

Three of our excavation sites turned out to be very important: Wishaw, near the Belfry Golf Course; Langley Mill, east of Sutton Coldfield; and south of the Roman village of Wall.

Wishaw, near The Belfry

Here we discovered a medieval fish farm, as well as artefacts from Mesolithic (8,500 – 4,000 BC) through to Romano-British (AD 410 – 650) times.

In the middle ages, the wealthier classes loved to eat fresh water fish, particularly **2 Quern (grinding) Stones** used for converting grain to flour, dating from the Iron Age, 2nd–1st century BC



Bowl and flagon fragments from the Roman cemetery site at Wall. Items were placed in graves as offerings, and often related to eating and drinking.



Large grey ware jar from the Roman cemetery site at Wall, used as a cremation urn.

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Paul Booth from Oxford and Wessex Archaeology examines artefacts in his laboratory



Items hinting at a domestic shrine dating from 2nd Century AD or later, found near Shenstone



Fragments of a pottery vessel of Neolithic period. The earliest pottery found on M6 Toll site, in the Shenstone area, dating from approximately 4,000 BC.



Mesolithic flint scatter dating from 6,000 –5,000 BC, found near Wishaw Hall Farm. Mainly tools used for cutting, or the waste products from the production of flint tools.



2nd Century AD box fittings from the Roman Cemetery site at Wall. The box could have been used in a grave to contain human remains, or other items.

carp and pike – and built fish farms to ensure a constant supply. Wooden sluice gates diverted natural streams into a series of man-made ponds, where the fish would have lived and grown until ready for the table.

We also recorded over 1,000 pieces of flint from the Mesolithic era, which helped us map out early dwelling areas. And there were signs of several Bronze Age field systems, possibly showing where people had cleared woodland. Small pits on the same spot suggested a sequence of Iron Age (700 BC to AD 43) boundaries, with one pit containing a human skull and fragments of pottery.

This was very exciting, as sites containing so much rich evidence from such different historical periods are extremely rare.

Langley Mill, Sutton Coldfield

At this site, to the west of the A38, we found signs of an Iron Age settlement over many stages of development, suggesting that farmers lived in round houses almost as big as a modern semi. This site is the only one of its kind in Sutton Coldfield and one of the largest in the West Midlands region. Most significantly, it's also

the earliest evidence of Iron Age occupation in the Birmingham area.

Wall, Lichfield

Wall is a former Roman settlement, famous for its bathhouse. It was near here that we discovered the most exciting find along the route – a Roman burial ground.

Our first idea was to excavate on the line of Ryknield Street, a former Roman road connecting the Fosse Way to Derby. As we uncovered the original line of the road, we were amazed to find a large number of burial urns from the same era (AD 43–410), some still in one piece. These urns would have held people's ashes after cremation, with other pots in the grave containing food and drink to help the dead on their way to the afterlife.

We also found the remains of four small enclosures or buildings here, which may have been mortuaries for preparing the dead for cremation. The number of graves, together with the fact that the boundary of the cemetery appears to have moved outwards at least once, suggests the burial ground was in use for a long time.

If this Roman burial ground really is part of the English Heritage site at Wall, it's a truly valuable find, bringing us one step closer to understanding how people lived at this ancient settlement.

Our achievement

We've unearthed sites and artefacts spanning 10,000 years of history – from the Stone Age to the Industrial Revolution – with no mishaps or delays to construction. We're making sure finds and relics go to local museums in the area, to give people a glimpse of life in the West Midlands over thousands of years.

About us

Midland Expressway Limited is a private company with the Government concession to design, build and operate the 27-mile M6 Toll motorway until 2054. Our partners in design and construction are CAMBBA, a joint venture of Carillion, Alfred McAlpine, Balfour Beatty and AMEC.

For more information, visit our website at www.M6Toll.co.uk