

Archaeology in Oxford

Oxford City report to the Oxford City and County Archaeological Forum

National Planning Policy Framework related field work between October 2025 and February 2026

Hertford College, Main Quad and Chapel

Between October and February excavations by Oxford Archaeology continued at Hertford College Main Quad. Further medieval features (stone lined pits, cellars and waste pits) have been excavated. At the base of the sequence a cess pit and steep sided rectangular pit were recorded. These features contained St Neots ware and they are likely to be Late Saxon in date. The steep sided pit may be a cellar pit and appeared to be aligned on Catte Street rather than the Late Saxon back lane, previously excavated at The Queen's College, that likely ran close-by towards what became Smith Gate at the north end of Catte Street. Further work is ongoing below the Chapel and to the south of it, revealing further medieval pits associated with a tenement or tenements formerly fronting onto Catte Street.

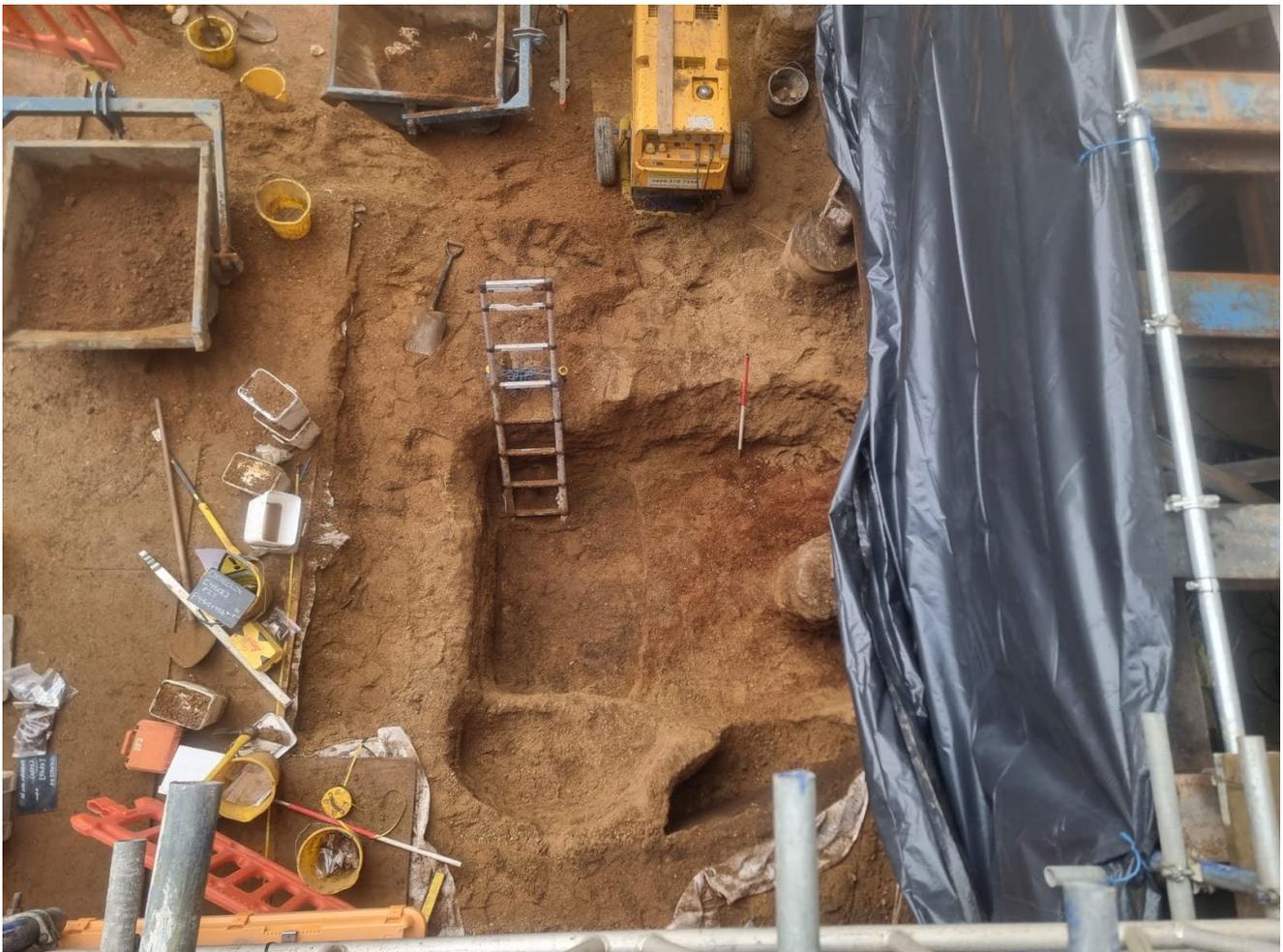


Image above: A likely late-Saxon cellar pit at Hertford College (feature not yet bottomed in this picture), Catte Street. Image courtesy of Oxford Archaeology.

Primrose Cottage, 65 Oxford Road, Old Marston, Oxford

In October Thames Valley Archaeological Services undertook a photographic record of No 65 Oxford Road, Old Marston, before minor building works. Four phases of construction were identified

within the 17th century and later Grade II listed cottage, which proved to be rich in architectural detail. The first phase identified consisted of a single storey/single unit farm labourer's cottage with the main entrance to the rear and likely formed part of a pair or row of cottages. It was subsequently raised to a two-storey building. In the 17th century the building was likely extended by an entire bay to the north-west and a front door added towards the Oxford Road. A third bay was added, likely in the 18th century, which until fairly recently was a separate dwelling.



Above: A jowled post detail inside the building. Image courtesy of Thames Valley Archaeological Services



Above: An empty mortise joint in a tie beam. Image courtesy of Thames Valley Archaeological Services

Nos 17-19 Between Towns Road, Cowley

Between October and January an intermittent watching brief was maintained by Southampton Archaeology during service installation works at Nos 17-19 Between Towns Road. Three Roman pits were recorded and a quantity of Roman pottery recovered. The site is located on the edge of a Roman pottery manufacturing compound.

The Waynfleet building, St Clements

In November Pre-Construct Archaeology excavated another trench at the Magdalen College Waynfleet Building redevelopment site as part of a phased trial trench investigation. The general sequence was that of late-post medieval dumping into which late 19th century stone structures were cut, with two parallel walls, possibly leading to the former river steps (shown on 19th century maps), and part of an associated stone surface or plinth. Below this were post-medieval dumped deposits.

The 3rd and deepest step of the trench revealed an earlier stone wall cut into the alluvial horizon. Further work is planned.



Image above: A post-medieval wall near to the river Cherwell at the former Waynfleet Building site, St Clement's. Image courtesy of Pre-Construct Archaeology.

The Eagle and Child and former Green's Cafe, No 49 and Nos 50-51 St Giles

Between December and February surface groundworks have been the subject of intermittent targeted excavation by Oxford Archaeology in the backyards of the Eagle and Child pub and of the former Green's Café on St Giles. The main archaeological discovery to-date has been further elements of an angled early-modern back lane (or entry) that was previously preserved as a single above ground stone wall at the back of the Eagle and Child. The stub of the parallel wall of the lane was exposed and post-medieval and early modern levels recorded. Detailed historic recording has also been undertaken by Donald Insall Associates inside Nos 49 and 50-51, with a notable discovery being simple but unexpected 19th century painted wall panels.



Above: the angled walled lane to the rear of No 49-51 St Giles.

The Warneford Hospital

In December an evaluation was undertaken at the Warneford Hospital by Pre-Construct Archaeology. The evaluation sought to investigate previously identified geophysical anomalies in the hospital grounds (parallel lines, possibly a trackway) noting the previously recorded Roman field system in the near vicinity. Only a 19th century rubbish deposit associated with the Warneford Asylum was encountered. The institution opened as the Radcliffe Asylum in 1826 and was renamed the Warneford in 1843 in honour of its greatest benefactor Samuel Wilson Warneford (1763-1855).



Image above: 19th century waste from Warneford Hospital grounds. Image courtesy of Pre-Construct Archaeology.

Grenoble Road Utility Trench

Between November and January a watching brief was undertaken by ADAS during the excavation of an electrical service trench along Grenoble Road in the zone where it crosses the line of the Dorchester-Alchester Roman Road. Only modern road make up material was observed.

Beaver House, Hythe Bridge Street

In January Oxford Archaeology have begun a phased evaluation at the Beaver House site. Shored trenches and an auger survey have recorded late post-medieval-early modern remains and begun to map the gravel and alluvial horizons to produce a deposit model to inform further mitigation. Further evaluation work is planned.

Previously unreported

St Ebbe's Church

Between January and March 2017, Oxford Archaeology undertook an archaeological watching brief at St Ebbe's Church during works that involved the construction of a new gallery at the west end of the nave, lowering of the floor level within the chancel, and alteration and enlargement of the existing link building between the church and the adjacent church centre. The small recording project turned into something more complex because of the richness and diversity of the finds and has taken some time to process and report on. A selective summary is provided below.



Image above: The curving feature (orange dotted line) identified at the base of the archaeological sequence.

The investigation revealed a curvilinear ditch that likely pre-dated the church, located beneath the western end of the nave. The fills were derived from the post-glacial brickearth that overlies the second gravel terrace and were of a character that could suggest a prehistoric or Middle-Late Saxon date. One possibility is that the feature is part of a line of north-south aligned Bronze Age ring ditches (former burial mounds) orientated on previous barrows found at the Radcliffe Infirmary, Beaumont Street and elsewhere. It is also possible that the feature may be related to the primary Late Saxon town defences in some way given its location. There remains some potential for a scientific date from this feature, and I will report any progress if and when any results become available.

Above the curving ditch was a gravel surface that was probably associated with late Saxon domestic occupation that had been recorded during a previous watching brief nearby. Other finds that may be from this period included a fragment of structural fired clay, probably part of an oven wall structure. The site also produced a small number of prehistoric flints.

The investigation also revealed further architectural detail about the church, which is first mentioned in 1005 and was substantively rebuilt during the 19th century. In addition to numerous post medieval grave cuts part of a wall was revealed at the west end of the nave that is likely to have formed the south wall of the medieval church building. Other finds provided clues to the appearance of the roof, floor and interior design.

In the 13th-14th centuries the church had glazed peg and ridge tile on its roof in a range of colours including green, olive green, amber and brown. The church floor was surfaced at least in part with stamped two-colour floor tiles produced at Penn, Buckinghamshire, between c 1330 and 1380. One of the decorated floor tiles had a design of a central four-petalled flower with thin pointed petals enclosed within a thin unglazed circle intercutting with arcs of thicker glazed dotted quarter circles, which enclose a further motif, probably floral. It was designed to form part of a repeating pattern. It is unlikely the whole floor was surfaced with decorated tiles, they may have formed a block in a single area or have been interspersed for decorative effect within areas of plain glazed tiles. The Flemish-type green-glazed tile suggests some repairs or renewed flooring were laid in the 15th-16th centuries.

Wall plaster and mortar from the site was mostly made in a cream or white lime sandy mortar mixed with animal hair. A number of recovered fragments of plaster had plant, stone or timber impressions visible in the plaster. Most of the painted surfaces had been coated with a white or cream wash with some pieces having up to four coats. A small number had traces of a pale pink paint and two have a yellow ochre painted over the white. Three pieces had black lettering but only single or partial letters were present. It has not been possible to establish any words or what the text might be: some of the most common texts found on church walls are the Commandments or Lord's Prayer. They presumably post-date the Reformation in the 16th century.

Four fragments of architectural stone were recovered, these were either from free-standing monuments, or possibly from sedilia, the seating for clergy within the chancel area. Three are from tracery or a pinnacle, and one is from a finial. Stylistically they are likely to date from the 14th century. One fragment of worked oolitic limestone had vertical external walls and a slightly conical interior comparable to examples of stone lamps. The absence of blackening or reddening of the stone could suggest it may be a lamp holder of the type that would have contained a small pottery vessel (thereby protecting the stone from burning). Use as a lamp or lamp holder would suggest a date between the 10th and 13th centuries. Alternatively, it could have been a small vessel, perhaps for holding holy water, in which case, its date might be later.

Another limestone ashlar block had neatly dressed faces and on one of the edge faces is a neatly carved six-pointed star (a Star of David). Such a mark is usually assumed to have Jewish connotations, but it is more likely to be a witches' mark, which were carved on stone or woodwork typically near doorways, windows and fireplaces, to offer protection from witches and evil spirits. They are commonly found in churches. The ashlar block is not intrinsically dateable.



Image above: One of the excavated trenches within St Ebbe's Church.

No 12 High Street

In 2025 a remarkable discovery was made at No 12 High Street, a 17th century townhouse and shop, which forms part of a row of former shops being repurposed for use by All Soul's College. The main contractor Kingerlee, drilled a test hole to investigate the current floor slab in the basement, only to discover a previously unrecorded sub-basement that had evidently been in use in the 20th century to store lift gear, but that had been sealed and forgotten about.

The basement has three compartments, with walls of either stone rubble or brick and with brick vaulting. The sub vault is likely to be post-medieval in date (though may have late medieval elements) and there are few close parallels at a national level. Further research is being undertaken and the dating is provisional. The architects for the scheme, Wright and Wright, have completed a redesign to preserve this feature.



Image above: The sub-basement looking north. Image courtesy of Kingerlee

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