

Oxford City and County Archaeological Forum
Oxford City Report May - October 2014

National Planning Policy Framework related field work in Oxford
Recent work predating May but previously not in the public domain.

The Old Cloisters, Brasenose College

Between November and December 2013 an archaeological evaluation was undertaken by Oxford Archaeology within the Old Cloisters at Brasenose College. The evaluation sought to clarify the character of the remains below the modern floor of the building, where students were known to have been buried in the late 17th-18th century. The evaluation identified that small islands of stratigraphy had been left intact between the grave cuts. These deposits represented a 400 mm thick sequence of mortar floors interleaved with silts which overlaid an undated garden soil. The earliest identified sequences contained pottery of 1550-1650 date. These mortar deposits likely represent a building or buildings dating to the period between the construction of the main Quadrangle at Brasenose in the 16th century and the construction of the Second Quadrangle which was begun in 1656.

A total of five separate graves were located, but not excavated. The graves and marker stones largely corresponded with a historic college plan of interments, although one marker stone was revealed to have no grave beneath it. The graves were found to be undergoing gradual post-depositional decay and consequently it was observed that there are significant below ground voids where coffins have disintegrated but the spaces have not infilled with surrounding material.

The President's Garden, St John's College, St Giles

Between January and early February Oxford Archaeology carried out a field evaluation in the President's Garden at St John's College. The evaluation revealed a series of pits cut through the natural gravel. No pre-medieval fills or finds were recovered. Pit digging activity was evident from the late 12th century onwards, with the majority of medieval finds dated to the later centuries of the medieval period (c. 1250 - 1500). The pits were possibly of a domestic nature, with the larger ones likely indicating quarrying for sands and gravels from perhaps as early as the 13th – 14th century.

If the noted activity is domestic this would suggest that the later tenement boundaries shown on Agas' late 16th-century map may have been further to the east than the evaluation site. The north-south tenement boundary may be represented by an identified ditch that was evidently was precursor to the early 17th-century 'Sprott Wall' in the President's Garden. The formalisation of the ditched boundary by the construction of the stone built 'Sprott Wall' appeared to post-date late-16th-century quarrying and definitely pre-dated quarrying in the first half of the 17th century by the College, before the area was laid out to formal gardens in the later that century.

Nos 23-25 Broad Street

Between January and June building recording and a watching brief was undertaken by John Moore Heritage Services during refurbishment works on the grade II listed properties at 23-25 Broad Street. The recording work identified six phases of development from the 17th century onwards.

Fieldwork from May onwards

New Sports Building, Headington School, Headington Road

In May an archaeological watching brief was undertaken by Oxford Archaeology at Headington School during ground works associated with the construction of a new sports building and classroom extension. The watching brief revealed a cluster of early Iron Age pits that may have been associated with an as yet un-located domestic focus situated somewhere to the south and/or west of the development site. Other features revealed included an isolated undated pit, the base of a possible furrow, and a brick well or soakaway of probable 17th-18th century date.

No 23 Banbury Road

In May an archaeological watching brief was undertaken by Oxford Archaeology at 23 Banbury Road in advance of the construction of an small extension. The excavation of the strip foundations revealed the natural gravels overlain by a post-glacial loessic subsoil which was in turn overlain by a buried topsoil deposit which was directly overlain by modern landscaping and bedding deposits. A large discrete feature which was likely to be a pit pre-dating the modern activity, was observed, but the function and date of the feature was unclear. The work was required because of the proximity of known prehistoric and Civil War features.

Luther Court, Thames Street

Between May and June a programme of work (watching brief during building demolition, trial trenching and archaeological bore holes) was undertaken by Oxford Archaeology at Luther Court. The site is located between the historic route of the Shire Lake channel of the Thames and precinct of the medieval Dominican Friary to the north.

The evaluation revealed a considerable depth of modern made ground over an earlier garden soil, cut by shallow broad features filled with Victorian occupation debris, presumably from activity in the backyards of the tenements known from documentary evidence to have been established on the site in the mid-19th century. Pits were recorded containing a large numbers of horn cores, suggesting that hide preparation, glue-making or some other process connected with leather-working was carried out in the vicinity. These cut a layer that contained one small 19th century sherd, pottery. Furthermore tile of 16th or early 17th century date came from their fills. The sequence likely indicates the reclamation of this low-lying area between the 17th and early 19th century. This fits the historic map evidence, which reveals the gradual narrowing of the Shire Lake channel of the Thames by reclamation during this time. Channel fills containing finds of late medieval date were also noted.

Boreholes were targeted on a deep channel crossing the southern part of the site. The deepest organic sediment in one borehole has produced a Mesolithic radio-carbon date and a sample from the organic sequence in a second bore-hole has produced a Late Bronze Age date. The full report is forthcoming.

Former Community Centre Site, Barns Road

Between May and June the Avon Archaeological Unit undertook an excavation at the former Cowley Community Centre site at Barns Road. The excavations recorded the remains of buildings shown on the 1853 enclosure map of Cowley. Earlier pits and ditches produced finds of pottery and animal bone including sherds dated to the Roman and medieval periods. The report is forthcoming.



View of Barns Road site, looking north. Image by Avon Archaeological Unit

The Priory Hotel Site, Minchery Farm, Littlemore

Between May and August an archaeological excavation was undertaken by John Moore Heritage Services on the site of a 12th-16th century Benedictine nunnery at Minchery Farm, Littlemore. The excavation targeted the footprint of a consented hotel complex located to the north of the up-standing Dormitory range of the nunnery. The excavation exposed the heavily robbed foundation trenches of the nunnery church and recorded over 80 burials from the interior and exterior of the church. A likely bell pit associated with the church tower was also identified. A second stage of works at this site will follow later this year and initial discussions have taken place with Reading University about the potential for a research project on the burial assemblage. A site tour was organised for OCCAF members and Archeox volunteers in August.



A view of the Minchery Farm excavation looking east. A central stone cist can be seen, one of the highest surviving graves on the site.

Radcliffe Infirmary, former Outpatients Building

In June a watching brief was undertaken by Oxford Archaeology during ground works at the former Outpatients Building at the Radcliffe Infirmary, Woodstock Road. The watching brief focussed on the excavation of a basement extension at the western end of the building because of the proximity of a known Bronze Age ring ditch. The area was previously disturbed and no significant remains were recorded.

The Turf Tavern garden, Bath Place

In July an evaluation was undertaken by Oxford Archaeology within the garden of the Turf Tavern, Bath Place. The evaluation investigated the northern wall of the terrace garden which is on the projected line of the town's late 13th century outer defensive wall. The work revealed evidence for a substantial earlier wall on the same line as the existing wall of the terrace garden. This may either represent the late-13th century outer curtain wall itself, or a later wall built off it. There was also evidence that a section of this wall had been re-built during a re-configuration of the garden in the 19th century.

Augered boreholes penetrated below the anticipated elevation of the natural gravel, producing arisings that may relate to either a construction cut for the 13th century wall of the in-filled edge of the medieval Town Ditch. The relationship between this possible feature and the structural remains was unclear. Evidence was recovered for an earlier courtyard surface overlying this feature, this comprised limestone 'cobbles' and a linear configuration of kerb stones marking its northern extent. Overlying this surface, the deposits related to the creation of the existing terrace as result of a phase of landscaping in the 19th century.

Summer Fields School, Mayfield Road, Summertown

In July a trial trench was excavated by Archaeology Warwickshire on the former astro turf sports pitch at Summer Fields School prior to development

work. The work did not identify any significant archaeological features, despite being located close to features identified through analysis of aerial photographs. A desk based assessment for the site by AW has brought together map regression data and new aerial photographic analysis of the school playing fields that adds to previous National Mapping Programme plots. The assessment reports also contains a watching brief report on three geotechnical test pits excavated in the vicinity of a proposed extension to the existing laundry. No significant remains were identified during these works.

Colthorn Farm, Old Marston

In July archaeological trial trenching was undertaken by John Moore Heritage Services post-demolition of farm structures and pre-development of new structures at Colthorn Barn, Old Marston. The two trenches revealed modern demolition layers over natural clay with some localised survival of topsoil and subsoil. The work was required because of the potential for medieval or post-medieval remains in this location. No significant archaeological features were identified.

Nos 7-11 St John's Street

Between July and August Oxford Archaeology undertook an archaeological watching brief at 7-11 St John Street, during building works to the rear of the properties. The site is located within the likely precinct of the 12th century Royal Beaumont Palace. The watching brief recorded a steep-sided feature which was only partially revealed within the trench for a new light-well to the rear of number 11. The composition of the fill was predominantly re-deposited loess, which is characteristic of pre-historic and late Saxon features excavated elsewhere within the city. A number of Bronze Age ring ditches have been excavated in the immediate vicinity of the site, and it is feasible that this feature represents a further part of this landscape. However, no dating evidence was recovered and the shape of the feature in plan was uncertain. A further undated pit was revealed within the same trench. A 19th century stone-lined cess pit was also recorded.

No 121 Banbury Road, St Clares College,

In August a trial trench evaluation was undertaken by Oxford Archaeology at 121 Banbury Road prior to development work. The evaluation recorded three east-west aligned linear features which are likely to represent the remnant of an 18th century ridge and furrow field system. The ploughsoil and the fills of at least two of the furrows appeared to have been cut by narrow, rubble-filled linear features which are likely to represent rudimentary field drains, probably contemporary with the ploughsoil, which were installed to replace the redundant furrows. A series of small late 19th-early 20th century pits of indeterminate function were seen to truncate the furrows. No further work was requested at the site.

St Peters College, New Inn Hall Street

In August a trial pit was excavated by Oxford Archaeology along the route of a potential soak away revealing cut features of likely medieval or post-medieval date. Further mitigation work is planned subject to the amended design of the soak away. The report is forthcoming

New Library Extension, Longwall Quadrangle, Magdalen College, Main Phase
In September building recording was undertaken by Oxford Archaeology within the New Library prior to the development work impacting on the lower floor and rear of the building. The report is forthcoming

Canterbury Quadrangle, St John's College, Opening Up Works
In September opening up work impacting the 17th century Room C4.1, Canterbury Quadrangle, St John's College, was observed by Oxford Archaeology. Examination of the timber floor in the former living room and bedroom noted square-edged oak floorboards of differing widths and lengths with some heavily cupped. Many floorboards were fixed with cut nails. The oak floor joists were also recorded. A sondage was dug between two joists to determine the floor structure. This proved that the timber was laid directly onto the uneven, fairly solid earth. Three sequences of work were noted; 1630s construction of the floor by laying the joists on the bare ground and infilling with soil to act as support; the addition of a partition and relocation of a fireplace after 1888 and further partition work in the 1980s.

No 21 Leckford Road

In September a watching brief was undertaken by Oxford Archaeology at 21 Leckford Road because of the potential for extension work to impact on a possible burial site. No significant remains were observed. The report is forthcoming.

Other news

Assessing and Mapping Significant Heritage Assets in a Medieval University City

Oxford Archaeology and the Oxford City Council Heritage Team are currently working on a joint English Heritage funded project looking at a number of Oxford sites as case studies relevant to the assessment of non-designated but potentially nationally significant assets. This will form one of a number of studies commissioned as part of the EH National Importance Project. The project will look at the practicalities of assessment and definition of such assets using existing guidance. The Oxford project will submit a draft report to EH in December.