

STANDLAKE (OX)

OLD SHIFFORD FARM, STANDLAKE

ASSESSMENT BY

OXFORD ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT

MAY 1988

Old Shifford Farm

Assessment 1988

Introduction

The site comprises an area of c. 32 acres adjacent to the existing Standlake Sands and Gravels pit at Old Shifford Farm, which the company proposes to extract for gravel. It lies c. 300m north of the river Thames and 2km west of the river Windrush. Although shown on the Geological Survey as alluvium, the site in fact sits upon fairly well-drained 1st gravel terrace, and is bounded to the west by a higher outcrop of Oxford clay upon which the present farm sits.

Cropmarks, mostly of ditches, cover much of the site. These cropmarks fall into three groups (Fig. 1). In the northern part is an agglomeration of enclosures, whose focus appears to be at the western edge of the threatened area, with larger paddocks and fields on the east side and a trackway alongside. South of these down the western side of the area was a number of smaller discrete enclosures and a few linear boundaries. The south-eastern area contains less clearly defined cropmarks including linear boundaries and probable small enclosures.

Strategy

Following well-established assessment procedures, a series of ten 1.5m wide trenches amounting to a sample of about 2% was cleared of topsoil and ploughsoil by machine (Fig. 1). These were positioned both to investigate the known cropmarks to obtain dating material and assess the level of presentation, and to investigate the blank areas, in case buried features were obscured by alluvium or other overburden. Plans were made of all the exposed features. A sample of these (c. 75%) were then excavated by hand to investigate the character of the fills, the likelihood of waterlogged or other environmental remains and to recover dating material.

Results

The character of the three cropmark areas is summarised below, and a selection of the trenches is illustrated (Figs. 2-4). Brief reports on the Roman pottery and the environmental samples are appended at the end of the section.

The northern cropmark complex (Trenches A - D) proved to be late Roman, and the concentration of finds and the dark fills of the features in Trench D confirm that the focus of domestic occupation lay on the west. The number of features in Trench A also demonstrates that the surrounding area without cropmarks is as densely occupied as those areas with known features. As well as

the large ditches visible as cropmarks, an oven (304) and shallow pits (eg. 303) were also found in Trench D, and slighter features such as small gullies and postholes survive cut into gravel. Ploughing has truncated features down to gravel, except in a small area in Trench D, where an area of stone slabs had protected some 0.15m of subsoil. Apart from the pottery the finds include fragments of quernstones, slag from smithing, parts of butchered carcasses and other animal bones. The trackway ditches and field boundaries in Trenches B and C were sectioned in C but, as expected, produced few finds. There were however gullies and other features not visible as cropmarks, showing that these areas too were densely occupied.

The southerly group of trenches (G, H, J and K) revealed another focus of occupation, this time of 1st/2nd century AD date. The extent of occupation proved to be greater than suggested by the cropmarks, stretching almost to the south and east edges of the field. The features were mainly deep ditches, but small gullies were also found.

The finds again suggest domestic occupation, including pottery, fragments of quernstone, bone artefacts and other animal bones.

Many of the ditches went down to the present water table, but none contained waterlogged deposits, except on the very east edge of the site, where deep ditches were cut into alluvium, and sealed by further alluvial deposits. A preliminary inspection of these waterlogged deposits has suggested an open environment without scrub or hedges.

Few finds were recovered from Trenches E and F, but here too the occupation appears to be Roman, probably of 1st and 2nd century date. As in the other two areas features include small gullies and postholes as well as the cropmark ditches. A shallow well or waterhole of a type common to early Roman settlements in this area was also found (503).

The Roman Pottery by Sarah Green.

Almost 6 kilos of Roman pottery were recovered. The bulk of this came from Trenches A-D, which were the most thoroughly excavated and had more dark soils and other evidence of domestic occupation than features from the rest of the site.

The pottery from each context was examined to assess the range of material present and its date.

The ceramic evidence points to two main periods of activity. The earlier, from Trenches G-K, appears to begin in the early/mid 1st century, and possibly continues into the beginning of the 2nd century. It is characterised by fabrics and form types which have their origins in the local late Iron Age traditions, that is calcareous and organic/grog tempered fabrics mainly in the form of Belgic inspired jars. Good parallels can be found on sites in the Windrush Valley. One interesting variant on jar forms was recovered from context 702, which also produced the base of a large jar with five holes drilled at regular intervals after firing. A few hand-made sherds (e.g. an Iron Age shell-tempered sherd from 712), were also recorded.

Very little pottery was recovered from Trenches E and F, too little to date or characterise the activity in this area, but it is possibly early.

The second and later phase of activity is centred on Trenches A - D. Here most of the pottery had a date range from the mid/late 3rd century up to the end of the 4th century. Some exclusively 4th century types were recorded, e.g. an Oxford colour-coated bowl form C94 (Young 1977, p173 fig. 66). The types are consistent with domestic rubbish and a high proportion of the pottery was highly fragmented, weathered and abraded, perhaps suggesting that it had come from rubbish dumps. Forms include local mortaria, colour-coated and white wares and a range of grey ware types. Also present were small amounts of BB1 and late shell-tempered jars. Two different samian bowls of form Dr 37 both came from contexts which contain later material. This strongly suggested that both these early 2nd century vessels fall into the 'heirloom' category. Apart from the samian the only other long distance imports were four fragments of amphora (probably Dr 20) from context 305.

Environmental Report

Two ditches contained waterlogged primary fills, 717 in Trench H and 802 in Trench K. Small samples from these were floated and were examined by Dr Mark Robinson, who has supplied the following identifications and comments. The examination was not exhaustive and the species lists are not intended to be complete.

717 Preservation poor but usable. Some earthworm penetration.

SEEDS	COLEOPTERA	MOLLUSCA
** Ranunculus sp. Batrachium	Helophorus (small)	-
Callitriche	Agabus bypastulatus	
* Chara sp.	Aphodius	
Atriplex sp.	Cercyron	
* Juncus articulatus	Megasternum obscurum	
Polygonum persicaria	Heloptera - unidentifiable	
Potentilla anserina		
Rumex		
Spargenium		
Grass seed - unidentifiable		

802/2 Preservation poor but usable.

SEEDS	COLEOPTERA	MOLLUSCA
** Ranunculus sp. Batrachium	Helophorus grandis	Planorbis
Callitriche	Helophorus (small)	planorbis
Chara sp.	Colymbetes fuscus	
* Alisma	Dryops	
Aphanes arvensis	Tachyporus	
Filipenula ulmeria		
Lycopus urupaeus		
Mentha sp.		
Myosoton aquaticum	* indicates several examples	
Urtica dioica	** indicates many examples	

The assemblages from both samples are very similar, and indicate open well-lit surroundings to the ditches, with an element of disturbed ground. There were no twigs or leaves in the samples, and the absence of shade-loving species also suggests that the ditches were not flanked by hedges or scrub. The ditches themselves would have had stagnant or slow-moving water in them for most of the year; the presence of spargenium in 802, whose roots have to be kept wet, perhaps indicates the proximity of flowing water to this feature.

Recommendations

The assessment has demonstrated that almost all of the threatened area contains archaeological features. To avoid further damage to the standing crop the very north end of the site was not investigated, but despite the absence of cropmarks it is likely that this area also contains features.

A few flints and prehistoric sherds show limited activity prior to the Roman period, but almost all the investigated features are Roman. The Roman occupation falls into two parts: early settlement in the southern half of the field, probably concentrated around a nucleus just north of Trench H, later occupation in the northern half focused on the small enclosures at and beyond the west edge of the site. Trackways run east and west to join other Roman cropmark complexes around Standlake and Cote (Fig. 5).

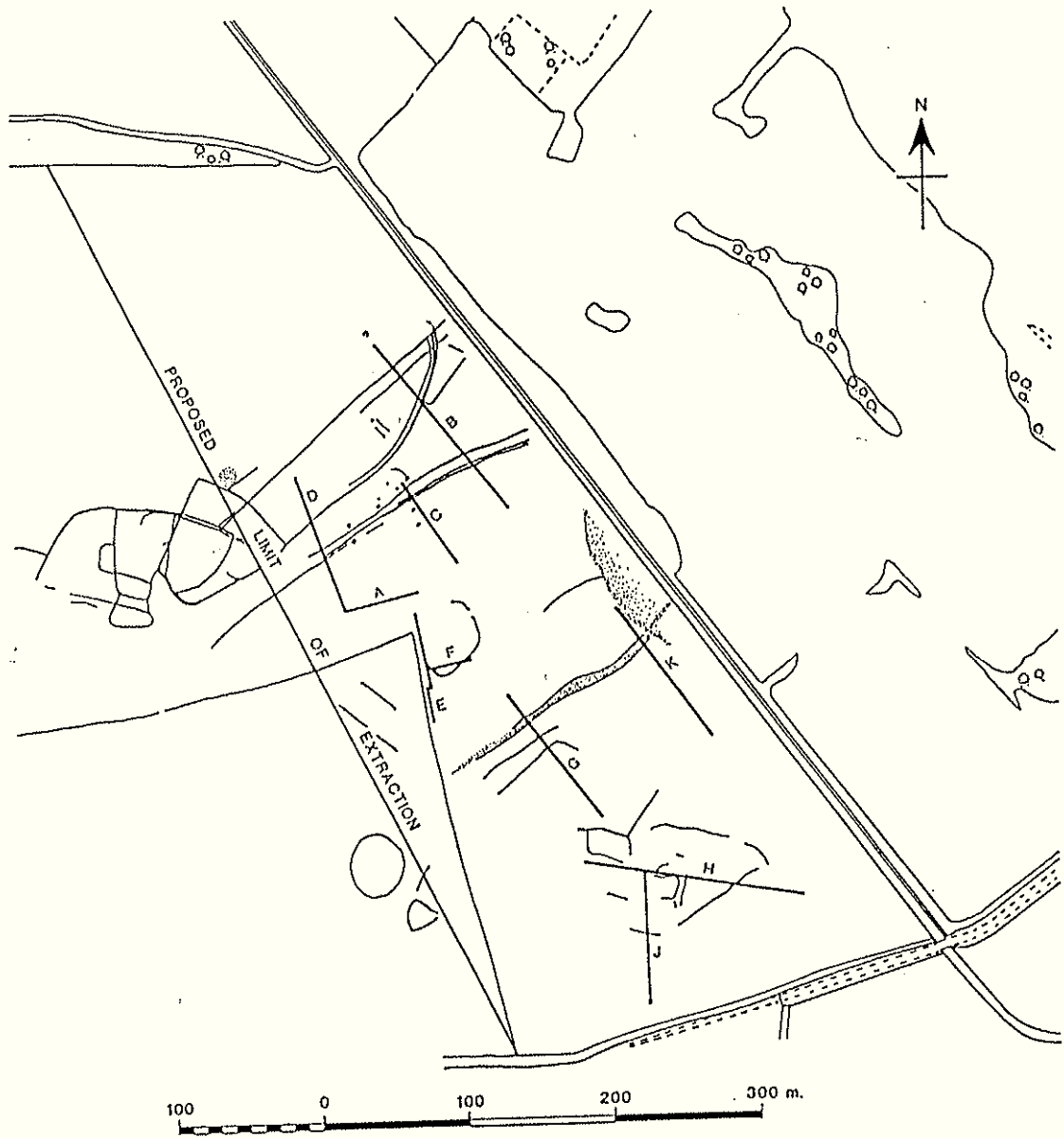
The finds do not suggest that the settlement was of high status or wealth in either period, but it must be remembered that the excavated sample is very small.

Except in very small areas the Roman ground surface does not survive, thus there is no vertical stratigraphy. Neither its state of preservation nor its character distinguishes this site from other gravel terrace settlements as especially worthy of preservation. However, it merits further excavation prior to destruction for several reasons.

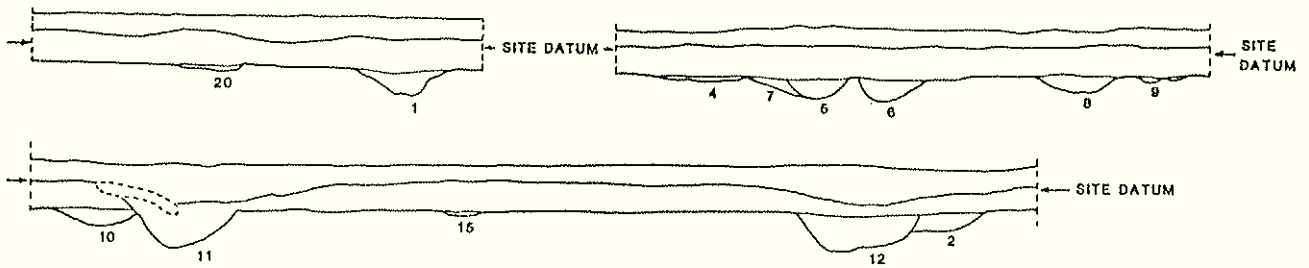
1. Group Value. This site lies within the area of the Windrush valley, whose Iron Age and Roman settlements are the subject of an extensive landscape study.
2. The site appears to contain the successive foci of one settlement, allowing the possibility of comparing the two and examining the causes and process of settlement shift. No such adjacent settlements have been examined before.
3. Previous work has only sampled such Roman settlements, and has not recovered a complete plan such as seems possible here. Part of the late Roman focus will be preserved west of the proposed extraction area, allowing the possibility of total excavation of this two-phase settlement at some time in the future.
4. The area appears to have been largely dry during the Roman occupation, but around the eastern and southern periphery waterlogged features are sufficiently well-preserved to allow the environmental sequence to be reconstructed.

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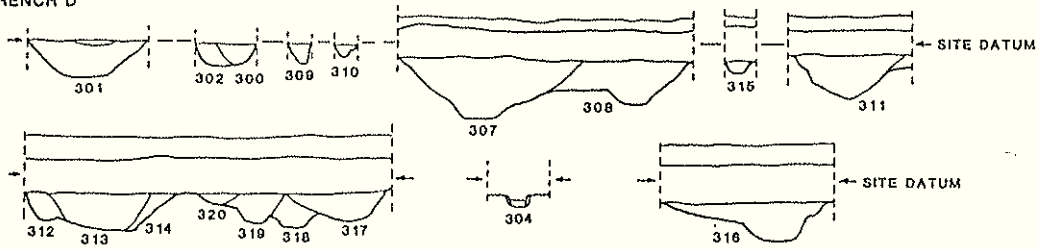
Fig. 1



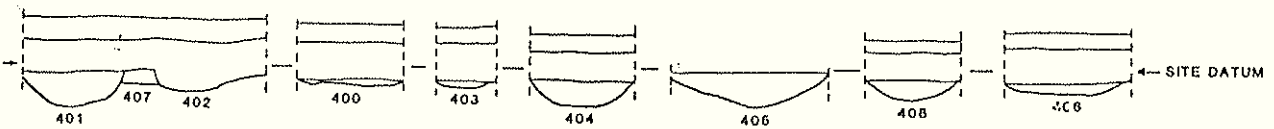
TRENCH A



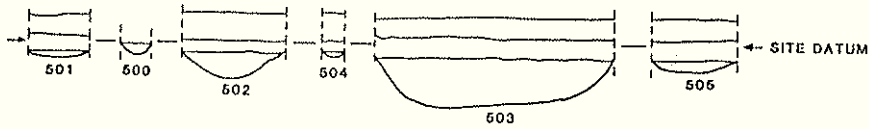
TRENCH D



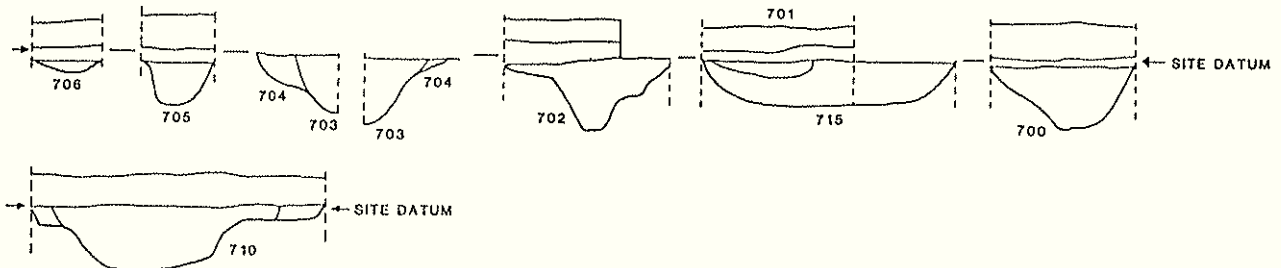
TRENCH E



TRENCH F



TRENCH H



TRENCH J

