

Iris Court, New Lane Hill,
Tilehurst, Berkshire



**Archaeological Watching Brief
Report**

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1	Mike Sims Project Supervisor	Tim Allen Project Manager	Bob Williams Chief Operations Officer	

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Janus House

Osney Mead

Oxford OX2 0ES

t: +44 (0) 1865 263800

e: oasouth@thehumanjourney.net

f: +44 (0) 1865 793496

w: oasouth.thehumanjourney.net

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Iris Court, New Lane Hill, Tilehurst, Berkshire

Archaeological Watching Brief Report

Written by Mike Sims and Tim Allen

and illustrated by Markus Dylewski

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Front cover: Standing rectory building

Fig. 1 Site location

Fig. 2 Site plan showing location of trenches and probable channel

Fig. 3 Sections 1 to 8

Plate 1 Channel (5) in section

Plate 2 Channel (5) in plan

Plate 3 Channel (10) in section



Summary

In July 2012 Oxford Archaeology undertook an archaeological watching brief during re-development work at Iris Court, New Lane Hill, Tilehurst, Berkshire (NGR: SU 673 730). During the current phase of work the groundworks intruded upon the old courtyard of a previous development which had the potential for surviving archaeological stratigraphy.

The watching brief observed that the entire area of the previous development, including the old courtyard, had been heavily disturbed, probably during the construction of the 1970s development, with no stratigraphy pre-dating the 20th century surviving above the terrace gravel.

A possible palaeo-channel was recorded within the surface of the terrace gravels, but no finds or environmental material were observed.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Scope of work

- 1.1.1 Planning permission has been granted for the demolition of buildings flanking a 19th Grade II Listed rectory and the construction of 43 sheltered care units and ancillary accommodation at Iris Court, New Lane Hill, Tilehurst, Berkshire (NGR:SU 6730 7300) (Planning reference 06/01319/FUL).
- 1.1.2 An archaeological desk-based assessment of the site was undertaken in October 2009, which considered the site to have a high potential to contain the remains of a Medieval and Post-Medieval rectory and a moderate-high potential for sub-surface features evidencing Roman occupation.
- 1.1.3 In March 2010 a programme of archaeological evaluation (Planning compliance Ref. 10/00292/APP/CON), in the form of trial trenching, was undertaken on the site (TVAS 2010). The programme of trenching recorded evidence of Early Bronze Age and Post-medieval activity. Based on the results of the archaeological evaluation the Archaeological Officer at Berkshire Archaeology, Mary O'Donoghue, recommended a programme of further work on the site comprising of a programme of Strip Map and Sample and a programme of archaeological monitoring (watching brief). The programme of archaeological strip, map and sample has been completed, and very little in terms of finds and features was recorded.
- 1.1.4 With the commencement of the current development a watching brief was conducted on groundworks including grubbing out of foundations within the footprint of the extension of Iris Court, ground reduction and excavations for foundations and services within the internal courtyard of the previous development.

1.2 Location, geology and topography

- 1.2.1 The conurbation of Tilehurst lies to the west of Reading, Berkshire (Fig. 1). The site of Iris Court is located on the southern extent of Tilehurst. The site is situated on relatively level ground at 93m AOD on the edge of the plateau of high ground between the River Thames to the north and the River Kennet to the south.



- 1.2.2 The site is bounded by the churchyard of St Michael's Church to the south, New Hill Lane to the west, residential gardens fronting the Meadway to the north and by a residential block and the modern rectory to the east.
- 1.2.3 The site was previously occupied by a 19th/20th building complex including an enclosed courtyard. The majority of the buildings have been demolished leaving the 19th century rectory standing.
- 1.2.4 The underlying geology is Winter Hill Gravels overlying Upper Chalk (British Geological Survey, Sheet no. 268).

1.3 Archaeological and historical background

- 1.3.1 Iris Court lies upon the higher gravel terraces within the Thames Valley where quantities of Palaeolithic worked flint have been recorded, including a number of Palaeolithic flints have been recovered from the Tilehurst Plateau on which the site lies.
- 1.3.2 There has been evidence for activity of later periods within the region of the site, these include a Romano-British coin from the area south of the site and further evidence of Roman activity to the west of the site (Gates 1975: Lobb and Rose 1996).
- 1.3.3 St Michaels church immediately to the south of the site is medieval in origin with the earliest part, the Lady Chapel, dated to approximately 1300. The main body of the church is later in date and was extensively restored in 1855 and in the 1950s.
- 1.3.4 It is unknown where the exact location of the medieval refectory is situated, however there is potential for it to have been within the site boundary.

Previous archaeological work

- 1.3.5 An archaeological watching brief was carried out at 313 The Meadway (to the north-west of the site) in 2008 which failed to reveal any archaeological deposits or features. A second watching brief conducted to the north of the present site at No. 297 Meadway and an evaluation was carried out to the east at Meadway School, both of which did not identify any significant archaeological activity (TVAS, 2010).
- 1.3.6 An archaeological evaluation was conducted on the site by Thames Valley Archaeological Services (TVAS) in 2010 which produced evidence of an Early Bronze Age gully, a post-medieval ditch and an undated posthole. Following this a programme of archaeological strip, map and sample was undertaken, but did not provide any additional information (CgMs Consulting 2011).

2 PROJECT AIMS AND METHODOLOGY

2.1 Aims

- 2.1.1 The aims of the watching brief were to:
 - (i) preserve by record any archaeological deposits, structures or features encountered during the course of any ground intrusions;
 - (ii) seek to establish the extent, nature and date of any archaeological deposits, structures or features encountered within the scope of the ground intrusion;
 - (iii) secure the analysis, conservation and long-term storage of any artefactual/ecofactual material recovered from the site;
 - (iv) disseminate results through the production of a unpublished client (grey literature) report.



2.2 Methodology

- 2.2.1 The remit of the watching brief was to observe all works that may disturb or destroy below ground archaeological remains within the potentially undisturbed courtyard area. These works included topsoil stripping, removal of old foundations, excavation of foundation and service trenching, access roads and landscaping. The above works were conducted in the presence of an OA supervisor over a period of 6 days.
- 2.2.2 All spoil generated by the machine excavations was examined for the presence of archaeological artefacts.
- 2.2.3 All features and deposits were issued with unique context numbers, and context recording was in accordance with established OA practices. Bulk finds were collected by context. Black-and-white negative photographs and a digital photographic record was taken of all excavations, general settings and archaeological sections.
- 2.2.4 A site plan showing the location of any excavations and any recorded sections was maintained (Fig. 2). Section drawings of features and sample sections were drawn at a scale of 1:20.

3 RESULTS

3.1 Description of deposits

- 3.1.1 The stratigraphy observed during the watching brief was recorded in a series of sample sections as the excavation of the foundation trenches progressed. These observations will be described individually followed by an overall discussion and conclusion.
- 3.1.2 The underlying natural, a reddish orange-brown gravel (3), was exposed in the base of all the sections recorded. This was encountered at a depth of between 0.6m and 1m below the current ground level.
- 3.1.3 Approximately within the centre of the western edge of the excavations a parallel-sided linear feature running roughly north-north-west to south-south-east across the trench was observed cutting the surface of this deposit (Fig. 3, Section 5). In order to expose solid ground for the foundations this was removed by machine exposing the full profile in section. This was observed to be a shallow “bowl” shaped profile measuring 3.4m in width and 1m in depth. The feature was filled entirely with a homogeneous greyish brown sandy clay-silt (5). This material was heavily saturated with water and slumped repeatedly during the excavation. The material was very clean with no evidence for activity observed either in section or within the excavated material.
- 3.1.4 At the southern extent of the excavations a feature exhibiting a similar profile was exposed cutting the surface of layer 3 (Fig. 3, Section 8). As with feature 5 this was removed by machine in order to expose firm ground exposing the profile of the feature in section (10). This could be seen to have shallow sloping sides coming down to a concave base and measured 2.8m across the top and 0.8m in depth. Sealing the base of the feature was a light greyish brown sandy clay silt (9), 0.6m in depth. Overlying it was a thin line of mixed gravel and silts 0.18m in depth (8) sloping in from the south. The remainder of the feature was filled with a second layer of light greyish brown sandy clay silt (7), up to 0.48m in depth.
- 3.1.5 All the deposits within the feature were very clean with no evidence of activity observed either within the section or within the excavated material
- 3.1.6 Elsewhere during the excavations areas of soft ground consisting of a pale grey sandy clay silt material were observed within the base of the foundation trenches. These



areas were recorded on the site plan but were deemed to be natural in origin and were not investigated. No other features were observed cutting this layer.

- 3.1.7 A hollow containing reddish brown silty sand, 0.25m in depth (6), was observed cutting the surface of layer 3 in the area of Section 6. This was only observed in section, but the spoil from it was examined, and was sterile.
- 3.1.8 Overlying the fills of features 5 and 10, lens 6 and sealing layer 3 elsewhere across the site was a mixed layer predominately of grey brown sandy silt clay (2) measuring between 0.4m and 1m in depth (Fig. 3, Sections 1 - 8). This deposit contained lenses of dark brown silty loam and orange brown sand together with numerous fragments of modern demolition debris including brick, tile, concrete, iron and copper piping and salt glazed sewer pipe. All this material appeared to be 20th century in date with no earlier material being recovered. The compaction of this deposit was variable across the site ranging from soft to compact.
- 3.1.9 A series of modern (20th century) storm drains constructed using ceramic pipes were observed cut into the surface of this deposit. The presence of these features was noted but they were not recorded.
- 3.1.10 Prior to the commencement of the excavation of the foundations a topsoil strip had been undertaken across the entire area of the build (see Fig. 2). This removed a layer of dark grey silty clay loam (1). Where the layer was exposed along the edges of the stripped area it measured 0.25m in depth. The exposed edges also showed that approximately 0.1m had also been removed from the top of layer 2.
- 3.1.11 No remnants of any previous developments construction, such as the foundations, could be discerned during this phase of groundworks.

3.2 Finds

- 3.2.1 Examples of modern construction material such as brick, tile, concrete and metal piping were observed within the majority of the recorded deposits. The presence of this material was recorded but it was not retained. Isolated examples of 19th century pottery and bottle glass were observed within the topsoil, 1.
- 3.2.2 No material pre-dating the 19th century was observed.

3.3 Environmental remains

- 3.3.1 No environmental material such as mollusc shells, waterlogged plant remains or charred plant remains were observed in the material excavated from the linear feature by machine. Due to the risk of cross-contamination during the machine excavations, and with the depth and instability of the excavations precluding sampling *in situ*, no palaeo-environmental samples were taken during this phase of work.

4 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

- 4.1.1 The depth of the excavations was such that the underlying geology, in this case terrace gravel, 3, was exposed throughout the area of the development. Features were observed cutting into the surface of this deposit in two locations (5 and 10, Sections 5 and 8 respectively). The profiles of these cuts suggest they may have formed part of a channel rather than discrete features.
- 4.1.2 Plotting the features in plan and including the areas of soft ground noted in paragraph 3.1.6 (which most likely constitute the upper fill of such a channel, but were not initially



interpreted as such) shows that they may both be part of a linear feature running approximately south-east to north-west across the development (see Fig. 2).

- 4.1.3 No dating evidence was recovered from within any of the fills of this channel nor was any evidence of activity such as charcoal or occupation debris observed within the fills. The absence of organic debris within the fills is also informative. The conclusion is that this linear feature may represent a palaeo-channel formed during the deposition of the terrace gravels, or closely afterwards, which silted up before the colonisation of the area by vegetation.
- 4.1.4 Deposit 6 contained no evidence that it was the fill of a man-made feature. It probably represents an isolated deposit of waterborne sand of late glacial origin in the surface of the gravel.
- 4.1.5 There was no evidence of any intervening stratigraphy surviving between the terrace gravel and the post-medieval layer 2 within the area of the current development. The most likely explanation for this is that any such stratigraphy has been destroyed by subsequent activity on the site.
- 4.1.6 Layer 2 represents a layer of post-medieval (20th century) activity. The composition of the layer suggests that it was formed either during the construction during the 1960s of the previous development within this area of the site or by the demolition of said development between 2010 and 2012. The presence of the intact drainage runs within the surface of this deposit would indicate that it was formed during the construction rather than demolition, most likely by machine rutting and subsequent levelling.
- 4.1.7 It is unclear if the depth and extent of this activity has truncated the surface of the terrace gravel, which may have potentially removed any evidence of shallow features cut into layer 3. The absence of any residual finds earlier than the 20th century within layer 2 may mitigate against this.
- 4.1.8 The absence of any building foundations from the previous development observed during the groundworks most likely suggest that were either of shallow construction and were removed during the topsoil strip or that the previous development utilised pad foundations.
- 4.1.9 Layer 1 represents a landscaping deposit of disturbed and redeposited topsoil, again probably associated with the 1960s development. The 19th century pottery recovered from this context is most likely associated with the construction and occupation of the original rectory in the 19th century.
- 4.1.10 Although archaeological features and deposits have been recorded elsewhere on the site during previous investigations, the depth and extent of modern intrusions within the area of the current development has destroyed the archaeological potential of the area.
- 4.1.11 One of the aims of the watching brief was to investigate the potential for archaeological evidence to have survived within the courtyard area bounded by the earlier buildings (shown on Fig. 2). The watching brief has shown that this area has been subject to the same intrusive activity as elsewhere within the area of the current development.
- 4.1.12 The absence of residual finds (earlier than the 19th century) from either layer 1 or 2 can be interpreted as either absence of activity but may also indicate the difficulty in recovering any such finds from the quantity of material removed.



APPENDIX A. ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXT INVENTORY

Context	Type	Depth	Width	Length	Comments	Finds	Date
1	Layer	0.25m	> 10m	> 10m	Landscaping layer, modern topsoil and turf	Brick, pottery, glass	C19th/ C20th
2	Layer	0.4m – 0.8m	> 10m	> 10m	Disturbed ground	Brick, concrete, iron piping	C20th
3	Layer	> 1m	> 10m	> 10m	Terrace gravel	-	-
4	Fill	1m	3.4m	> 5m	Silting deposit	-	-
5	Cut	1m	3.4m	> 5m	Probable palaeo- channel	-	-
6	Layer	0.25m	c4m	c4m	Lens of waterborne sand, glacial deposit	-	-
7	Fill	0.4m	2.8m	> 4m	Silting deposit	-	-
8	Fill	0.22m	2.4m	> 4m	Silting deposit	-	-
9	Fill	0.7m	2.3m	> 4m	Silting deposit	-	-
10	Cut	0.8m	2.8m	> 4m	Probable palaeo- channel	-	-



APPENDIX B. BIBLIOGRAPHY AND REFERENCES

- Cgms Consulting 2011 Supplementary written scheme of investigation for archaeological mitigation: Iris Court, New Lane Hill, Tilehurst, Berkshire
- OA 1992 Fieldwork Manual, (Ed. D Wilkinson, first edition, August 1992)
- Thames Valley Archaeological Services 2010 Iris Court, Tilehurst, Reading, Berkshire: Archaeological Evaluation



APPENDIX C. SUMMARY OF SITE DETAILS

Site name:	Iris Court, New Lane Hill, Tilehurst, Berkshire
Site code:	TIRISC 12
Grid reference:	Centred at NGR SU 6730 7300
Type of watching brief:	Machine excavation of building foundations over the site of an earlier modern development.
Date and duration of project:	Between the 3rd and 10th of July 2012, Total of 6 site visits.
Area of site:	Approximately 0.14 hectares
Summary of results:	The watching brief observed that the entire area of the current development, including the courtyard area of the previous development, has been subject to deep and destructive activity during the 20 th century, truncating any potentially archaeologically productive deposits. No residual finds were recovered from this activity. A palaeo-channel was recorded within the terrace gravel, but no evidence of activity was observed.
Location of archive:	The archive is currently held at Janus House and will be deposited with Reading Museum in due course.