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OXFORD ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT NEWSLETTER INCLUDING
OXFORDSHIRE PARISH SURVEY NEWS

Vol. XIV, No. 2 - June 1986

ASTON: Housing Estate - R A Chambers

An intermittent watching brief over the ground work for the first of fifty houses at Aston in West Oxfordshire has not revealed any archaeological material.

BICESTER: The Old Priory - R A Chambers

The new owner of The Old Priory has demolished the connecting wall between the house and the barn without either planning consent or listed building consent. Locally there is now great concern over any plans the new owner may have for this site. The house is thought to have originated as a late medieval hospice to provide accommodation for visitors to the Augustinian priory. It is also likely that part of the site was used for burial. A shrine to St Edburga, the canonised daughter of Edward the Elder may have stood in the grounds.

BICESTER: Queens Avenue Housing Development - R A Chambers

This site, laid down to trees and grass in the 1960's, contained a continuation of the medieval settlement recorded to the east during the development of Lower Home Close in 1979. The earthworks on this present site were recorded in 1983 and a plan published in CBA Group 9 Newsletter 14 (1984), 99-101. In particular, the earthwork remains of a substantial building apparently arranged around three sides of a yard may represent the remains of the Nuns of Markyates' manor house, a building traditionally located about 100 yards to the south in the grounds of Bicester House.

Building work on the site confirmed parts of the earthwork survey revealing the lines of several ditches, yard areas and domestic debris including medieval pottery. The medieval quarries exposed during the development of Lower Home Close encroached on to the site for some 30m. The often incomplete removal of topsoil from the site and poor weather handicapped the archaeological recording. The Unit is grateful to Bovis Homes for allowing free access to the site during development.

DEDDINGTON: Water mill site at Ilbury - R A Chambers

The outstanding earthwork remains of a water mill and associated leat and fishpond were surveyed as part of the ODES weekend course in surveying for certificate students under the supervision of James Bond and R A Chambers.

The mill site, centred SP 436 300, lies c. 0.4km (0.25 mile) west of Ilbury bridge and south of the South brook. The medieval village of Ilbury, now deserted, lay a similar distance to the north-east of the mill site on the opposite bank of the South brook.

A water mill at Ilbury formed part of the manorial estate in the 16th century, and was leased to the Lyne family. The mill may have survived from the deserted medieval settlement although it was not mentioned in a survey of 1279 and may have been built after this date.

The water mill is depicted on an estate plan of 1619 as Yelburie Mill (sic.) and drew its water from a leat which ran east from Worton brook which has since been diverted and enters the South brook further to the west.

The mill comprised three buildings whose positions illustrated on the 1619 plan can still be located from the surviving earthwork platforms beside the leat and tail race. The water wheel mounted at the end of a two-storey building appears to be a undershot wheel but given the limited flow of water and the earthwork evidence, in reality it was almost certainly a breast wheel. The mill survived in 1721 but by 1777 the field in which it had stood was called Burnt House Close; later it was called Mill Ham (VCH Oxon, XI, 107-8).

The survey will be published in a forthcoming BAR volume on Aspects of Water Management edited by M. Aston.

DORCHESTER: 11 Queen Street - R A Chambers

Excavation by the Oxford Archaeological Unit has now been completed on this site. A watching brief will be maintained during house building. The excavation was undertaken for the HBMC using labour supplied by the Manpower Services Commission and supervised by John Moore.

The site, centred SU 5783 9439, lies within the scheduled area (County Monument no. 116) east of the High Street where nothing is known of the limits of the Roman town, of the subsequent Anglo-Saxon occupation or of the medieval abbey precinct.

The excavation was divided into two phases. Trial trenching along the frontages of 11 Queen Street and the adjacent property to the north was followed by building demolition and the removal of 1m of overburden which allowed limited area excavation.

The excavations revealed that all the remains predating the post-medieval period had been truncated at a point a little below the Roman period topsoil.

The earliest recognisable features were early Roman and comprised several shallow pits and two parallel ditches. Although parallel, the ditches were dissimilar in size and may not have been contemporary. The larger ditch presented a V-profile some 2m deep as excavated. The smaller, U-shaped ditch cut 0.5m into the gravel subsoil. Both ditches appear to have silted up rapidly. The only domestic debris present in the ditches occurred in the upper levels.

The two parallel ditches suggest a substantial land boundary with the shallower ditch on the northern side delimiting a trackway. If this boundary track continued in the direction suggested by the excavation it would appear to lead either towards or a little to the east of the point where the north wall of the town cuts the present High Street. Presumably that 11 Queen Street lies beyond the walled area of the Roman town the evidence suggests that this area may have been open farmland until at least the 1st century AD.

The site had been heavily disturbed by post-medieval occupation culminating in a range of wells, cesspits, soak-aways, drains and other service trenches which served the former school. It is possible that all of the evidence for post-Roman land use on this site had already been lost to this legacy of 19th and 20th century development, the extent of which was only revealed by excavation.

The excavation did not throw any light on the extent of the sub-Roman occupation or on the extent of the medieval abbey precinct.

DRAYTON: the Cursus - George Lambrick and John Moore

Excavations have resumed on the low lying northern section of the Drayton Cursus. An area c. 40 x 60m where the monument is sealed by alluvium has been very carefully stripped for us by the gravel company, J Curtis Ltd. Salvage observation of the gravel extraction also continues. The site lies on the west side of the Cursus, immediately adjacent to the area excavated on its east side by the Abingdon Archaeological Society a few years ago. Unfortunately the western ditch of the cursus stops short of the area sealed by alluvium. This suggests the longest of several gaps in the cursus ditches known from earlier observations where they cross drier land to the north. The eastern ditch shows that the cursus did extend this far however, and further trenches on the east side show that the ditch there simply ends, before reaching a stream running across its line. There is no evidence that the ditch turned west to form a terminal. Possibly the stream acted as a terminal, but it is possible the cursus continued on the other side to join up with the southern section of cursus known from cropmarks and excavations by Leeds, on the second gravel terrace. The Abingdon Society found no evidence of the eastern ditch south of the stream, but in view of the long gap in the western ditch this need not indicate that the monument did not continue.

The advantage of having the area sealed by alluvium is that the original ground surface is relatively intact. Small post-holes and patches of soil with charcoal are apparently associated with somewhat denser concentrations of flint work and bones, and in one case burnt quartzite pebbles, suggesting domestic activity. It is not yet clear whether this is directly associated with the cursus itself (it could predate it at least in part). There is not

enough material to suggest anything more than casual usage. There are a number of other features most of which are irregular and as yet make little sense. The general distribution of flintwork and other finds is being plotted, and among the finds to date are a fine earlier neolithic leaf-shaped arrowhead and a greenstone axe fragment (possibly of Cornish origin).

Later features include a possible Iron Age ditch running across the line of the cursus, beneath the alluvium, and two Roman ditches with their gravel up-cast banks in tact, cut from within alluvium. The Roman ditches appear to be associated with a ploughsoil in the less low lying area away from the stream. A rectangular pattern of ploughmarks resulting from cultivation with an ard has been found at the bottom of the ploughsoil.

Various processes of soil development, including the change from soil to alluvium, various transitions within the alluvium, and the effects of ploughing are to be studied by Richard McPhail from the Ancient Monuments Laboratory. The possibility of dating the alluvial sequence using magnetic dating techniques is being looked at by Dr Tony Clarke. Other aspects of the environment are being considered by Dr Mark Robinson.

FARINGDON: Camden Farm - R A Chambers

Fieldwalking by members of the Faringdon History Group has revealed a ribbon of Romano-British occupation along the south side of the river Thames north of Radcot Bridge. Both this and a similar line of medieval settlement from Eaton Hastings eastwards appears to follow the slightly higher ground along the edge of the valley gravels. This ground is high enough to alleviate all but the worst flooding in years with extreme weather but allows easy access to clean well water from the gravel terrace. Amongst the medieval material so far recovered are several pieces of decorated ridge tile with vents suggesting a building of manorial or similar status. Work continues.

FARMOOR - SWINDON: Water Main - R A Chambers

Jeff Wallis and Roger Ainslie have continued to walk parts of this pipeline when weather permitted and several new sites have been found. This fieldwork has brought them into contact with landowners and has led to further discoveries away from the route of the pipeline. It is hoped that Thames Water will fund the publication of the material recovered from the pipeline route.

FAWLER: Romano-British Villa - David Miles and Tim Allen

Observation of the Thames Water Authority pipeline under construction across the Evenlode Valley has led to the discovery of a Romano-British structure, possibly a bath-house on the north bank of the Evenlode within the Scheduled area of the Fowler Villa. The villa was discovered during the construction of the Oxford-Charlbury railway in the mid 19th century. At that time a mosaic pavement was discovered and destroyed. The placename 'Fawler' is particularly interesting because it literally means 'coloured-floor' in Old English.

The building debris so far uncovered includes box-tile, several shades of painted wall plaster and tufa fragments. To the north near the villa are cobble spreads, walled enclosures and a drain probably of post-medieval date. Observation of the pipeline will continue for at least a further week. The work is funded by the Thames Water Authority.

KIDLINGTON: Parish Church - R A Chambers

Building work on the north side of the nave has disturbed a large number of interments but no new archaeological information about either the churchyard or the church building was seen.

LITTLE WITTENHAM MANOR - R A Chambers

The remains of a wall footing has been discovered beneath the lawn on the south side of the present 17th century house. The footing, made of chalk rubble and clay, has not been dated but it may be part of the medieval settlement. The footing will be reburied and preserved. The Unit is grateful to the owners, Mr and Mrs Wood, and also to Miss Linda Francis for this information.

LLOYDS BANK AWARD

The South Oxfordshire Archaeological Group has been awarded £5 to assist with the purchase of equipment for fieldwork.

OXFORD: Rewley Abbey - Brian Durham

Since the trial trench in 1980 the fortunes of the Oxford Station site have moved slowly. British Rail's nominated developer failed to produce an acceptable design within his time limit, and as his option came to an end, it became known that the scheduled area had been enlarged enormously to include around a quarter of the development area. British Rail withdrew the site from the market to think things over, and both they and the City Council (owners of part of the scheduled area) came to the Unit for an assessment of the archaeological implications of their respective proposals. The net result is a series of trenches designed to establish the limits of the known monastic buildings, to see whether there is a major medieval complex nearby which had not survived the Dissolution, and to look at the edges of the adjoining islands within the scheduled area for evidence of an abbey farm etc.

The first trench located a building forming the southwest corner of the known courtyard or cloister (Fig. 1). It was described in 1720 as a brewhouse, and there was a large cistern or vat with a drain which must have been connected with this function. The walls of the building are well preserved, better than most of the Oxford Blackfriars and Greyfriars. Outside them are the surfaces of the access road and then ditches on both west and south sides.

This part of the excavation was easy since the buildings are well-known. The fragmentary courtyard or cloister of the 16th-19th century illustrations does

not make an abbey plan however, and with its north side limited by a large ditch and fish ponds, it seemed reasonable to expect the abbey church and perhaps a second cloister to the south. Neither seems to be present. Nor indeed is there anything of the scale of a chapter house in our trench across the east range. It is still possible that the south range includes a modest church extending beyond the line of the east range, but one further trench will confirm or refute this. If negative, it looks as if Rewley Abbey is the smallest and most unconventional of the known English Cistercian abbeys.

The question must therefore be asked whether this was ever a full abbey. Its suburban location is certainly unlike the usual Cistercian choice of site, which was typically remote and inhospitable. Perhaps its founder's original intention of establishing a house of studies had influenced the arrangement of the buildings. There have been many attempts to identify the church from the topographical data. Our assessment trenches are not likely to clinch the issue but a reference to a 'chapel' in the north range is significant. It has always been supposed that there could be no church as such in this range because the reredorter would have cut across its east end. A chapel however could have had a solid east wall with a reredos. This sort of plan would have more in common with the medieval Oxford colleges than with an abbey, and herein lies the interest. If the buildings were ready to accommodate the general chapter of the English Cistercian order in 1281, they would predate the earliest known Oxford college buildings, the chapel of Merton College (c.1290) and its adjacent Mob Quadrangle (1304-7).

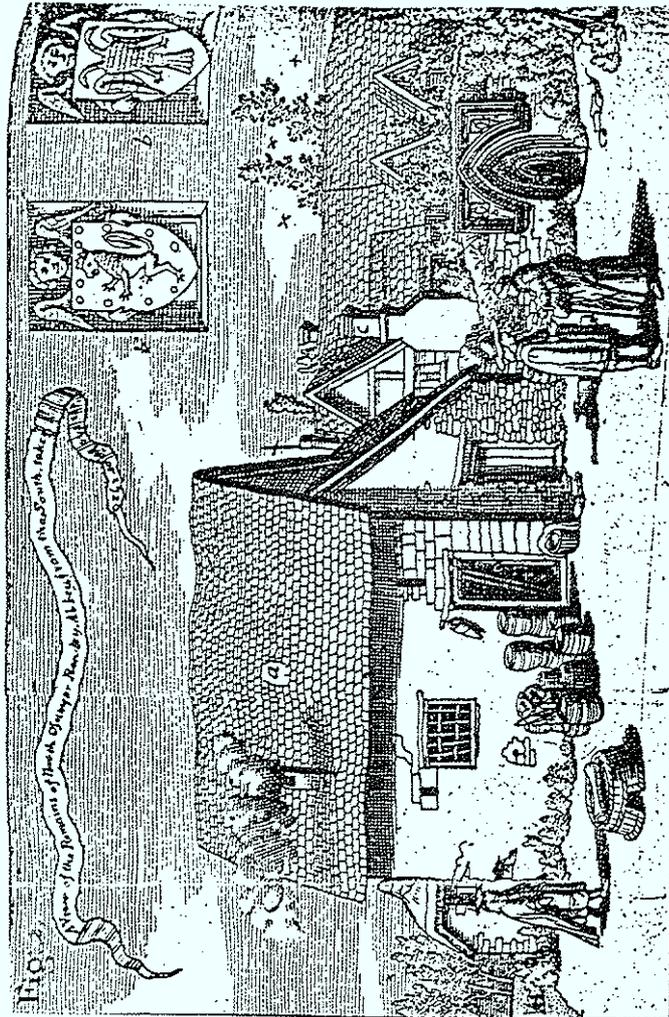


Fig. 1

View of Rewley Abbey from Thomas Hearne's *Textus Roffensis* (1720).

At this stage it is not profitable to speculate what influence Rewley may have had on Merton and the later colleges, both monastic and secular. For this it will be necessary to see a complete plan. If the building complex is really as compact as it presently looks, it would be a quite feasible to strip the whole thing and also investigate the main water defences and the dumping which has raised the site above flood level. It would certainly write a new chapter in the history of the Cistercian order and, in spite of its abbey status, it could prove to be something very important to Oxford, the University's first purpose-built college.

STOP PRESS There is a major aisled building to the southeast which must be the church. We will now look for a conventional cloister to the south, towards the Fire Station on the assumption that the unconventional north cloister is indeed the house of studies.

OXFORD: St Michael at the Northgate - Brian Durham

The church's scheme of opening the tower to the public is well advanced, and due to be inaugurated by the Duke of Gloucester on 24 June. Whilst the outside was scaffolded, Tim Morgan and Leigh Turner have been making a stone-by-stone survey of the masonry. Phillip Powell's identification of stone types has helped to confirm the repairs and rebuilds detected on the inside faces. Almost all the long-and-short quoins are from the Tayton area, and presumably original therefore. One at least of the ballusters is of Bath stone, which would be just right for the restoration of 1875.

The most interesting development was with the blocked porthole opening recognized at an early stage by John Blair. It was even clearer on the outside face, and so was unblocked by permission of the church. It showed a deep rebate of an original built-in frame at the centre of the two splay, and fragments of wattles surviving from the original basket-work centering around which the arch was formed. It will be glazed and left open.

There was a suggestion of a second porthole, symmetrically above the opposite springing of the same north belfry window. It was marked out in radial voussoirs on the external face, and on the internal face a weathered fossil ammonite marked its position. An attempt to open this one failed totally however, because there was a solid wall with interlocking stones behind it. There can be little doubt that this was a crude attempt to balance the true opening for the sake of symmetry on both inside and outside faces. Almost all other tower portholes are in pairs, as at St Benets, Cambridge and at Dunham Magna. There are therefore two points of interest. Firstly, whatever the purpose of these openings, whether for light, ventilation or sound emission, St Michaels shows that they could function singly. But it would have been so easy to put the single opening in a central position above the balluster. The St Michaels evidence therefore also suggests that the builders were working from knowledge of a stereotype tower, and were determined to provide the appearance of paired openings even if only one was needed.

RADLEY: 82-4 Lower Radley - R A Chambers

The restoration of the pair of timber-framed c.17th century cottages adjacent

to Radley Barrow has revealed that the cottages are built almost entirely of re-used timbers from earlier timber-framed buildings. There are also repairs and alterations of many periods. Because of the vernacular nature of the building methods, of the local materials used and of the extensive re-use of earlier timber-framing it is difficult to date the cottages or to date the majority of the subsequent alterations and repairs.

The older of the two buildings has an unusual, large stone chimney built of re-used limestone, incorporating some originally well dressed limestone heavily weathered before its re-use in the present chimney stack. The older building is of especial note because of the surviving wattle and daub fire-hood and chimney on the first floor.

Excavation of about 0.3m (1ft) of soil beneath the brick-on-earth floors in both cottages revealed a series of earlier hearths each respecting the stone chimney stack. The cottages appear to have been treated as one building fairly soon after erection and the floor levels raised throughout with soil containing unweathered late 12th - early 13th century medieval pottery.

Presumably the materials for both cottages were obtained locally. If this was the case there was at least one building in the medieval settlement with some ashlar dressed stonework on the exterior. Such expense suggests a building of manorial or similar status. Some timber work may have come from the same building. There is smoke blackened purlin re-used in the roof of the later cottage.

The foundation trenches for an extension to the rear of the cottages lay against the edge of the mound known as Radley Barrow, a monument of unproven date. The trenches cut some 1-3m into the subsoil but only revealed two periglacial features, one of which was cut by a post-medieval pit. Further trenches for a garage and workshop will provide another chance to obtain dating evidence for this monument.

WENDLEBURY: Land north-east of Alchester - R A Chambers

The excavation of a new field-drainage ditch across low-lying land to the north-east of the walled area of the Roman town at Alchester, Wendlebury, has so far not produced any archaeology. At the time of writing the ditch has still to be completed.

UNIT NEWS

Several new arrivals on the Unit scene should be mentioned. Congratulations to George and Camilla Lambrick on the birth of their 2nd daughter, Frances Hope. David Miles has acquired a ferocious dog called Meg, a lurcher. She is being trained to lick intruders to death!

On the inanimate side, we have succeeded in acquiring a second IBM PC computer and, after many years discussion, a photocopier. Both these items are already making a useful contribution to our operations, not least because competition for our first computer was threatening to lead to fatalities.