

# CAU NEWS

The Oxford Archaeological Unit Newsletter

September 1992

## Yarnton Floodplain

Work at Yarnton entered a new phase in August when we moved onto the Thames floodplain. This land was enclosed in the late 17th century when Sir Thomas Spencer died leaving no male heir and the estate was divided between his four daughters. Previously it had been part of the extensive hay meadows belonging to Yarnton village, though it may have been ploughed when pressure on land was at its highest in the 13th century.

Fieldwalking in 1990 located the east edge of a prehistoric flint scatter on the edge of the site and an evaluation took place in November 1991. Our expectations of finding earlier activity was not high but happily we were mistaken. The work demonstrated that the area had been extensively occupied in the Neolithic and Bronze Age periods. We shall be excavating 3.5 hectares of the site before Christmas.

Today's flat landscape masks a more varied past topography. Two early stream channels flowed through the area, cutting the floodplain gravels and creating a gravel island. This island was favoured for occu-

pation in the Neolithic and Bronze Age periods, when conditions were drier than they are today. So far we have located several concentrations of postholes which belonged to timber buildings and have excavated several pits containing early decorated pottery and flint

implements. One pit contained a ritual deposit. A large burnt quartzite pebble was flanked by two stakeholes and surrounded by cremated antler. Large sherds of pottery from several vessels and flint tools also lay in the pit. A beautiful late Neolithic knife came from another pit nearby.

As so little is known about the nature of occupation in these early periods we are sieving and floating much of the soil from the features in order to recover charred seeds, charcoal, tiny animal, bird and fish bones and small chips of flint which indicate sites of flint tool manufacture. We hope to be able to reconstruct the economy of the site and answer questions such as whether the sites were permanently or seasonally occupied and whether the economy was heavily based on pastoralism and the gathering of wild foods or whether crops were also being grown.

One exciting find has been the discovery of part of a timber platform jutting into one of the stream channels from the gravel island which was preserved by the waterlogged silts. A radiocarbon date of c 800 BC was obtained from one of the



*Late Neolithic flint knife*



posts. Next to it is a mat of wooden twigs and branches, which include worked pieces, and small chips of wood and bark from a wide range of native trees. This may represent an attempt to consolidate the muddy bottom and side of the channel as the water table started to rise or it may be the site of a processing area, since flints, pottery, bone and burnt stone have been found in these muddy silts.

Beneath the wood the bottom of the channel seems to have been scooped out, possibly as water collection areas during the dryer summer months. An alternative hypothesis has been that the burnt stone represents the site of a steam bath or sauna and the scoops were dug as cold plunges!

Stripping has just started on a new site south of the channel and the gravel island. This is very low-lying and the soil is mostly clay. In the Neolithic period it appears to have been quite dry and snails of dry-ground species have been recovered from adjacent tree

holes. Some middle Neolithic pottery and large quantities of flint flakes and tools are coming from the old ground surface and the tops of linear features are emerging parallel to the channel, perhaps dug to stem the rising level of the water. Small shallow postholes seem also to have survived sealed and preserved by later flood deposits.

It seems likely that the rising water table led to the abandonment of these sites. After the August rain we can confirm that

in wet weather, even with ARC pumping next to us, the environment is extremely unpleasant. However, the Romans were undeterred and ploughed over the gravel island. The ploughsoil still survives over the early features and contains occasional Roman sherds which have been spread onto the fields with manure.

The Yarnton project is funded by English Heritage.

Gill Hey



Mat made of wooden twigs and branches

## Grims Ditch and the Wallingford bypass

The new Wallingford bypass now under construction cuts one major archaeological site, and several more are affected by cuttings. These include a Neolithic and two Bronze Age sites and a section of Grims Ditch, which runs for 7.2 km from the east bank of the Thames at Mongewell to Nuffield on the crest of the Chilterns and may have been a late Iron Age tribal boundary.

Some of these sites were known from earlier fieldwork: the rest of the route was examined by fieldwalking but there were no dense concentrations of

artefacts to indicate the presence of other sites.

Excavation next to Grims Ditch revealed perhaps as many as four prehistoric houses and a six-post structure, possibly a granary, sealed by a ridged prehistoric cultivation soil, with visible plough-marks within and under it. It is very unusual to find traces of early cultivation: these were preserved by the bank formed by the upcast from digging Grims Ditch. Bronze Age pottery from the ditch and bank may be from the prehistoric settlement. The bank had been damaged by Roman and later

ploughing, a medieval structure and 18th-century landscaping by Capability Brown.

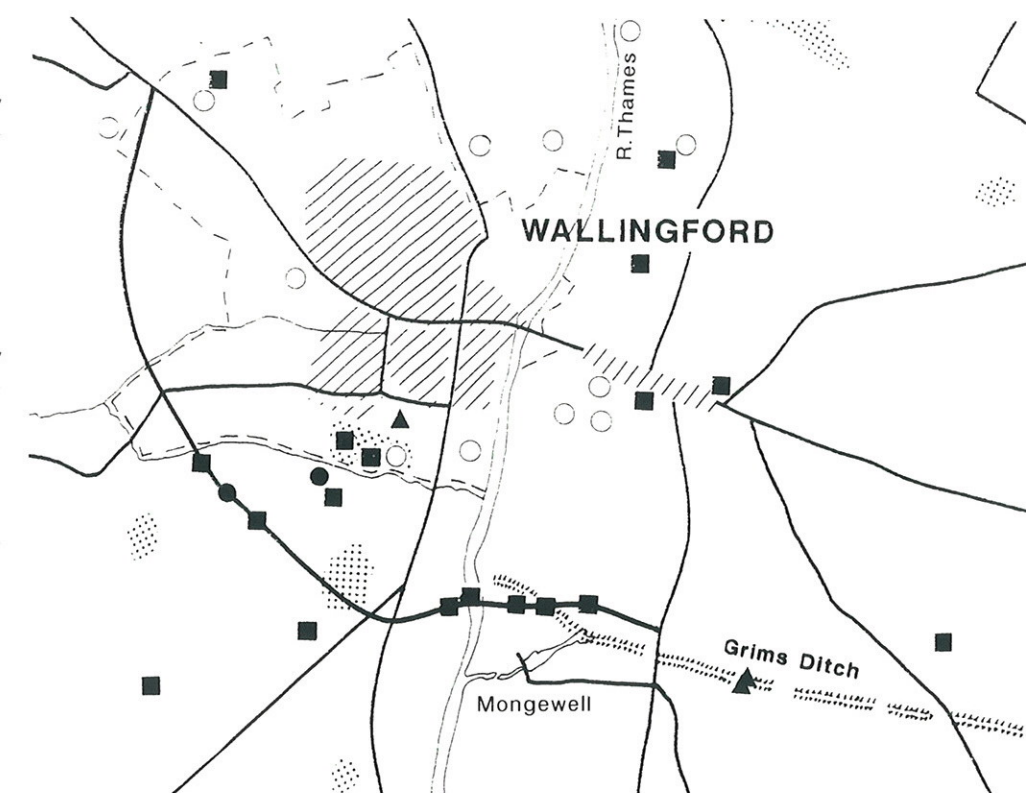
At the point where the carriageway cut through the hill next to Bradfords Brook and Hithercroft Road a Bronze Age settlement with postholes, pits and drainage gullies faced towards the river. On top of the hill a late Roman ditch containing Saxon pottery and occupation debris suggests nearby settlement and an Iron Age site is now buried beneath the road embankment next to Bradfords Brook. A footpath on the edge of one cutting may preserve the

line of an old road through Brightwell-cum-Sotwell to the old west gate of Wallingford, but showed no signs of road surfaces.

The Bronze Age site on the west bank of the Thames, which produced waterlogged timbers, is to be spanned by the new bridge; the Neolithic settlement on the east bank is now buried underneath protective geo-textile and the road has been raised on an embankment to protect it.

Mark Roberts

- Route of By-pass
- Prehistoric site or find
- Roman find
- Roman settlement/burial
- ▲ Saxon site or find
- Cropmarks
- - - Parish boundary
- Roads
- /// Built-up area



## Chastleton House

Chastleton House is a remarkable example of a minor gentry house of the early seventeenth century: small and symmetrical with an imposing exterior and some fine interior plasterwork and joinery. Built by Walter Jones, a Worcester wool merchant and MP, in the years after his purchase of the manor in 1602, the house has escaped drastic restoration or modernisation, while maintaining its period charm through occasional modest repairs by an impoverished family. The first building of the house is almost entirely undocumented, but Jones's probate inventory of 1632 describes the house much as it is today.

Following the National Trust's acquisition of the property, a phase of investigation is preceding the preparation of the conservation plan for the repair and display of the house. A brief has been prepared, with advice

from OAU, for the survey of the house, gardens, and the one remaining piece of land, the large field across the road that contains the dovecote and the site of another manor house.

OAU was asked to survey the brew-house and stables, which are in urgent need of reslating, and are to be repaired in advance of work on the house. The stable courtyard comprises a north wing with brew-house and domestic offices, a west wing with stables and hayloft, and a cart-shed on the east side. Although possibly built in two phases, the similarity of detailing in both parts suggests that they are nearly contemporary and were no doubt built along with the house. The north elevation overlooking the garden and its gable end to the road were designed to have a domestic appearance when viewed beside the main house, partly masking the internal

dispositions. The cart-shed may be the last remnant of the former barn. The 1632 inventory refers to the *Wool howse*, the *Meale howse*, the *Brewhowse*, the *Milkhowse*, the *Stable and the Barne* (the latter containing beasts, hay and gear). It would seem that these buildings comprised the necessary structures for a small home farm, and contained activities such as brewing and baking which could not be done in the main house.

One most curious discovery is the remains of what may be the seigniorial oven, or at least a common village one, buried in a hedgerow in the lane to the north of the house. Although the ownership of this structure is not known, it is hoped that the ruins may be recorded and perhaps restored, since this is a very unusual survival.

Julian Munby



## Consultancy Department

### **Birmingham Northern Relief Road.**

OAU has been appointed as archaeological sub-consultants for the proposed new motorway from the M6 near Cannock to Coleshill.

### **Rail Link**

We continue to act as specialist consultants to British Rail for the Channel Tunnel Rail Link (now the Union Railway), and are advising on route selection.

### **Sussex Road Schemes**

OAU has been involved in a number of studies of proposed road improvements in Sussex. An integrated assessment of the historic environment, including archaeological fieldwork, has been carried out for Acer Consultants on three possible routes for the A27 Worthing By-Pass. Further east OAU has carried out preliminary desk top studies for Chris Blandford Associates on various sections of the A249 round Bexhill and Hastings, Winchelsea and Rye. These cover a variety of landscapes, from coastal marshland to wealden forest, which provide a setting for the historic towns due to be bypassed.

### **Stanmore, Middlesex**

An archaeological and historic landscape study of the area of a proposed country club, golf course and country park includes part of the Roman industrial town of Brockley Hill, Grims Ditch, historic woodland, and landscape garden features of Lord Coke's seat of Canons, 'the most magnificent house' in England, according to Daniel Defoe.

### **Oxford Floodplain**

OAU has been commissioned by the National Rivers Authority to carry out a specialist survey of the historic environment of the Oxford floodplain from Eynsham to Sandford.

### **St Nicholas Church, Sevenoaks, Kent**

St Nicholas Church has appointed the OAU to assist in designing an archaeological strategy prior to the construction of rooms beneath the present nave and aisle.

### **A40 North of Oxford**

OAU has been commissioned by Rendell Palmer and Tritton to provide the archaeological input to the environmental assessment of the proposed By-Pass to the present A40 through North Oxford.

## Fieldwork Department

For the second year running the fieldwork department has been relatively quiet during the first few months of the financial year. New building projects are limited and excavations are therefore mostly on hold. Even evaluations are not taking place, as prospective developers have a stock of developments awaiting a better financial climate.

During April the excavation at **Grims Ditch** was completed. Tuckwells Pit at **Radley** continues to produce interesting sites. The latest excavation, again completed in April, produced late Bronze Age/early Iron Age house enclosures, paddocks, a water hole, and field systems. The watching brief on the Romano-British field system thought to be associated with the scheduled site at Goose Acre Farm is continuing.

Small scale evaluations have been undertaken at **Marcham, Cholsey, Teddington** (Borough of Richmond on Thames), **Faringdon, Banbury** (two sites), **Beckley, Witney** (The Weavers), **Flecknoe** (War.), **Mansfield College, Standlake, Ventnor** (IOW), **Icklesham** (East Sussex), and **Deddington**. In addition watching briefs have been undertaken at several Oxford Diocesan churches.

The evaluations at **Glastonbury Abbey** culminated in a small excavation in July. Only a limited amount of archaeological deposits were to be affected by the proposed building of the new Visitor Centre. These levels were duly excavated and fully recorded. A targeted excavation of part of the cock pit associated with **Holywell Manor** was undertaken on behalf of Balliol College.

Currently in progress are the excavations at **Yarnton** and those on the former Oxford City Football Ground at **White House Road**, Oxford, which covered part of a middle Iron Age settlement.



## Post-excavation Department

The Post-excavation Department has had a full programme. A number of post-excavation assessments leading to revised research designs have been in progress, and all those involved have had to grapple with the difficulties of meeting the exacting standards of MAP2. On other projects at a more advanced stage of completion the members of the Department have been kept fully occupied on the analysis of site and finds data, report writing, editing and archiving.

Since April, work has continued or begun on the following major reports: Oxford before the University: four Saxon themes

The late Iron Age and Romano-British horse ranch at Thornhill Farm, Lechlade

The Anglo-Saxon cemetery at Wally Corner, Berinsfield

The Devils Quoits, Stanton Harcourt Rough Grounds Farm, Lechlade

The Romano-British cemetery and Anglo-Saxon settlement site at Barrow Hills, Radley

Interim report on excavations at Stanwick

The Anglo-Saxon cemetery at Didcot Power Station

Park End Street, Oxford

Tubney New Plantation

### **Our move**

Moving is said to be one of the most traumatic experiences life can offer. In June the Post-excavation Department and Drawing Office moved to Unit 4, King's Meadow, Osney. Telephone 0865-204642

OAU news is published three times a year. The subscription, which includes the Annual Report, is £5 *per annum*. Please make cheques payable to the Oxford Archaeological Unit.

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