

# NEWS

Winter 1994

## OXFORD'S RIVER CROSSING

The coat of arms of the City of Oxford shows a red bull strolling nonchalantly across a row of neat blue waves, the Oxen Ford of the city's name. The relationship between the Thames crossing and the history of human settlement at Oxford has always been one of the OAU's major research interests. By a happy coincidence, 1994, the year of the Unit's 21st anniversary, sees the completion of Brian Durham's report on his work on Saxon Oxford, including evidence for the early history of the river crossing.

For thousands of years the area between the foot of St Aldates and the southern bank of the river at Folly Bridge was cut and flooded by changing river channels, whose silts created a watery landscape of islands and streams. In 1991 British Telecom dug a deep tunnel under St Aldates, and observations by Greg Campbell for the OAU produced the earliest evidence for the river yet — a slow flowing channel with abundant plant life. A radiocarbon date shows that this channel was open during the mesolithic period (c 10,000 to 4,000 BC).

Unfortunately, the tunnel did not yield any dating evidence for the earliest evidence for human activity at the crossing, a stone ford which was probably laid down before the mid Saxon period. The BT ford, and another possible ford surface seen in 1863 during the building of Christ Church's Meadows Building, may

support the theory that there was an established river crossing at Oxford in the Roman period. It has been suggested for some time that there was a Roman road on the Banbury Road-Parks Road-Oriel Street alignment, crossing the river in the St Aldates area to join the known Roman road network at Redbridge to the S.

However, it was the route down the modern St Aldates which was eventually chosen as the preferred river crossing, a choice which may have been made as early as the reign of King Offa of Mercia (AD 757-796). Excavations at 79-80 St Aldates revealed a blue clay bank which may have been an early Mercian causeway, and a second cobbled surface in the BT tunnel may also date to this period. A row of substantial timber piles from the BT tunnel failed to provide a tree-ring date, but a sample of outer rings from one gave a radiocarbon date range of 680-860. Was this part of a trestle bridge?



Figure 1: Detail of 1728 engraving of Agas's 1578 map of Oxford showing Grandpont & St. Aldates. North is to the bottom.

Oxford is first mentioned in documentary sources in 911. Brian Durham's research suggests that the town may have been fortified at this time as one of a network of defended places established by King Alfred and his son Edward the Elder as a defence against Viking attack. The archaeological evidence from St Aldates suggests that the river itself played a part in the defences, with the Saxon engineers diverting the many small channels of the braided river system to run into one huge 80 m wide defensive channel which became the county boundary known locally as the Shirelake.

In the 11th century, documentary sources tell us that Robert d'Oilly, the Norman lord of Oxford, built his *Grand Pont*, a great bridge and causeway spanning the river and marshy ground as far as Redbridge. A survey of Folly Bridge carried out in 1984 plus the evidence of many small observations along St Aldates and the Abingdon Road have confirmed that much Norman masonry survives below the road surface and under part of the bridge, which in its present form dates to 1825. It is virtually certain that the arches which still stand belong to Robert d'Oilly's first bridge, making this one of the oldest bridges in Europe still in daily use by vehicular traffic.

The construction of bridge arches encouraged the build-up of river silts and the creation of islands, and these were soon colonised for housing. The story of St Aldates from this time onwards is one of a steady process of reclamation of land from the river and the development of the area into a southern suburb outside the medieval walled town.

Anne Dodd and Brian Durham

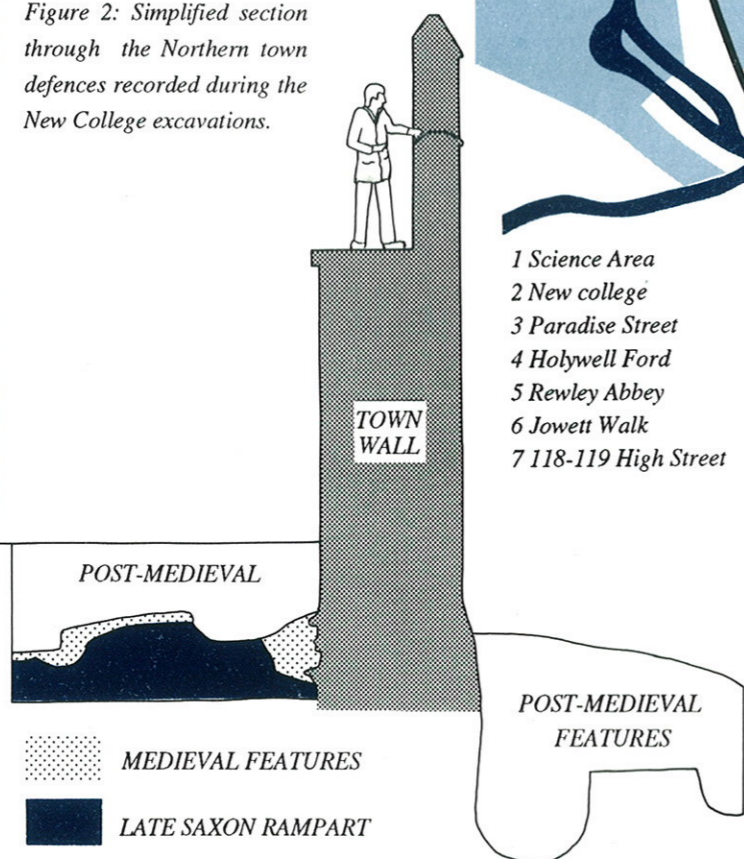
**Recent archaeological work by the OAU in the City of Oxford**

In the Science Area, building work has exposed one of the last sectors of a Bronze Age double concentric ring ditch, previously investigated in 1982 and 1989. The latest excavation, by Andrew Parkinson and John Moore, allowed the ring ditches to be sampled further, enabling more artefacts to be recovered and providing evidence of late Iron Age activity in the area.

Alan Hardy and John Moore evaluated a site in the medieval village of Temple Cowley, the most surprising feature of which was the stokehole of a 2nd-century Roman pottery kiln. This discovery adds to the ever-widening evidence of Roman pottery manufacture to the E and S of the city.

Paul Booth carried out small-scale excavations at New College, examining the early 13th-century northern town wall. No trace of the outer town wall was found, probably because the excavation was not deep

Figure 2: Simplified section through the Northern town defences recorded during the New College excavations.

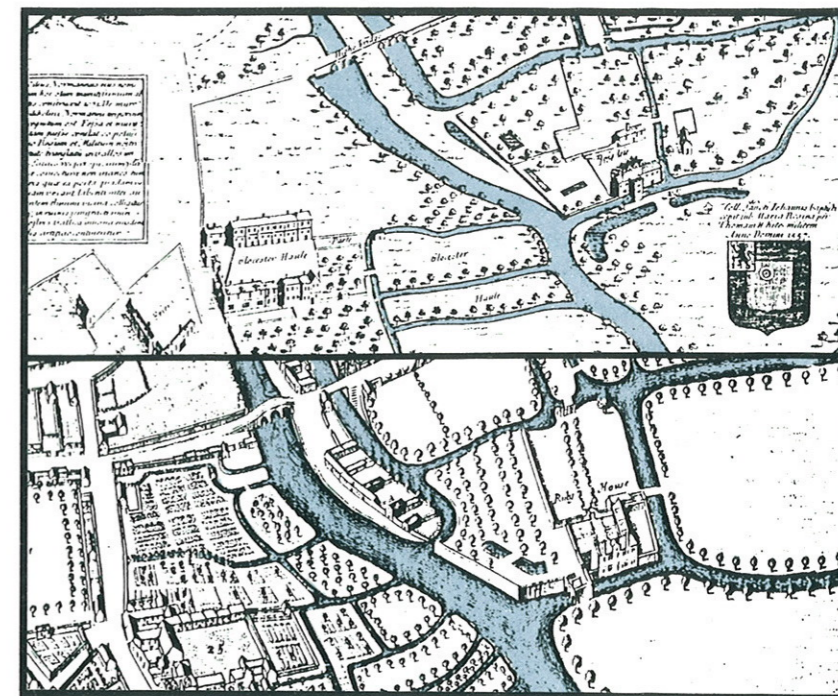


enough, but an earlier rampart inside the line of the standing town wall was located, surviving as a mound of earth and turves up to 0.82 m high. There was little dating evidence, but it is known that the defended area of central Oxford was extended to the E in the early 11th century on a line indicated by the stepped outline of the later town wall, and the New College earthwork probably represents this late Saxon extension.



- 1 Science Area
- 2 New college
- 3 Paradise Street
- 4 Holywell Ford
- 5 Rewley Abbey
- 6 Jowett Walk
- 7 118-119 High Street

John Hiller and John Moore have been excavating at Paradise Street on the right bank of the Castle Mill Stream, and have found evidence of reclamation of the edge of the river. A stone-lined water channel with a sluice was the most interesting discovery. It was continued as a wooden pipe, of which only a cylindrical void remained, running beneath the stone floor of a contemporary building on the reclaimed land.



Figures 3 & 4: Rewley Abbey two views of the remains. Note how the streams, ponds & riverside wall at 'Rois leie' on Agas's map of 1578 (above) differ from those depicted by Loggan at 'Ruly House' in 1675 (below). North is to the bottom of both maps.

Dave Wilkinson carried out an evaluation in advance of development at the Cistercian Abbey of Rewley, founded in 1281. His work illustrates how the abbey gradually extended its boundary towards the river. A terrace wall was built on the W bank of Castle Mill Stream, and material was dumped against the wall to create a higher and drier platform. This westward extension can be broadly dated to the 15th century, a hitherto unknown aspect of the site, but does not seem to explain the different depictions of Rewley on historic maps, which suggest later reclamation. Evidence for ornamental ponds was also recorded.

As regards the abbey buildings, the evaluation was unsuccessful in precisely locating the E end of the church; parts of the nave and aisles had been found by the OAU in 1986. However, the area within which the E end must lie has now been considerably narrowed down, and the discovery of a stone-built drain could indicate the position of an external eastern buttress.

Another water supply system was previously excavated at Oxford the ashlar-lined channels of the Hospital of St John beneath Magdalen College. The hospital's supply was taken from the Cherwell above St Cross, and recent excavation by Chris Bell and John Moore at Holywell Ford revealed a

fragment of an ashlar-lined structure. It would be reasonable to expect settling tanks to be at the mill itself, where the head of water is maximised, and fed from there into the watercourses in the college gardens which were still visible on Loggan's map in 1675.

Mark Roberts excavated parts of at least seven and possibly nine buildings belonging to the medieval manor of Holywell, S of Jowett Walk. The buildings date from the 12th to 14th centuries, and two of them had half-cellars, which seem to have been cut into an extremely large pit. The excavation straddled a property boundary, which until its recent demolition seems to have varied only slightly from its medieval line.

At 118-119 High Street Julian Munby and Ric Tyler undertook a building survey for Lincoln College, which revealed that the roof of No. 118 had undergone extensive changes. The original roof was preserved in the loft space of the existing building, and its central ridge ran parallel to High Street. The present roof is twin gabled and its central ridges are perpendicular to the street. The most curious discovery was a scroll of parchment that fell out of the ceiling of No. 119: a printed pass issued by General Fairfax at the end of the siege of Oxford in 1646, to allow one Samuel Smith to leave the city.

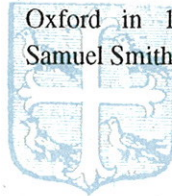
## THE ADVISORY SERVICE AND THE FUTURE

Since April the City of Oxford has operated a new planning policy for archaeology under the DoE Planning Policy Guidance 16 on archaeology and planning, with a newly established independent Advisory Service. The Service is taking a number of initiatives to improve the management of Oxford's archaeology. These include a more detailed constraints map for the city and the investigation of a GIS (geographical information system) which would allow information to be retrieved in plan form.

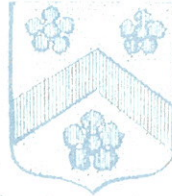
*Brian Durham, with contributions and information provided by Chris Bell, Paul Booth, Greg Campbell, Alan Hardy, John Hiller, John Moore, Julian Munby, Andy Parkinson, Mark Roberts and David Wilkinson*



*Campus feldis*



*Collegium omnium amantissimi  
caput sub Henrico sexto per Henricum  
Chisleu Archiepiscopus. caput inchoavit  
cauem. Anno Domini 1437*



*Christ Church colleges  
and Walkes*

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