

Garsington Road, 'J' Block Cowley, Oxford

Higgs and Hill

WATCHING BRIEF

NGR SP 5530 0355

OXFORD ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT

November 1994

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INTRODUCTION AND SUMMARY

In May 1994 a watching brief was undertaken by the Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) for Messrs Higgs and Hill during the construction of retail units on part of the former 'J Block' of the former Cowley Car Works. The watching brief was requested by the Planning Authority according to a brief set by the Oxford Archaeological Advisory Service (OAAS).

The watching brief located no archaeological features, although it was not possible to monitor all of the groundwork. Much of the site had been disturbed and levelled during the construction of the Former Cowley Car Works. An earlier ploughsoil, probably medieval or later, was observed in the northern area of the site.

AIMS AND STRATEGY

The aim of the watching brief was to identify any significant archaeological deposits or features on the site located during groundworks. The strategy was to visit during major groundwork operations. Any deposits identified were then to be recorded to assess the distribution of activity within the development site.

LOCATION (Figure 1, area B)

The site is a part of the former Cowley Car Works, recently demolished and currently undergoing major redevelopment. Situated immediately SE of the Bypass, it is bounded by a further development site fronting the Garsington Road to the N and by the Cowley Works railway to the SE, centred at c SP 55250355. The site occupies just over 1.5 ha of what had formerly been Rover Car Plant 'J Block'. The site lies at about 68 m above Ordnance Datum (OD). The present ground level slopes gently down from a high point at 68.55 m OD at the N to about 67.50 m OD to the SE.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

The site was considered to have archaeological potential as it was thought that relatively undisturbed deposits might survive beneath the extensive car parks associated with former Cowley Car Works.

Romano-British finds have been recovered from the line of the Eastern Bypass. The Roman Road from Alchester to Dorchester on Thames passes the site c. 750 m to the E. Roman coins have been found E of the site between Northfield Farm and Northfield Brook (Manning 1898). The southern and eastern edge of Oxford was a very important area of Roman pottery production. Pottery kilns and other features have been located at a number of sites including Rose Hill, Between Towns Road Cowley, Brasenose Farm, Littlemore, Blackbird Leys and Sandford (Young 1977).

RESULTS

Deposits associated with the former Cowley Works

The southern half of the site was previously occupied by a building associated with the former Cowley Car Works. The general topography of the site suggests that prior to this the ground would have sloped away gently to the S. The deposits associated with the Cowley Works varied in depth.

The whole extent of the groundworks was not observed. An 80 m long section was observed along the northeastern boundary of the site. This revealed a similar sequence of stratified layers to those observed on the two development neighbouring sites associated with the former 'J Block'. The footprint of the Retail Units occupied a reduced level which in the E part of the site lay below the top of the natural subsoil.

In the NW limit of the site the depth from the previous ground surface to the top of the undisturbed natural subsoil was approximately 2.00 m. A layer of cinder 0.28 m in depth overlaid a mixed layer of silt sand and clay. The mixed layer represented a levelling of the site prior to the construction of the Cowley Works. This dumped layer was deepest in the W at 1.20 m. In a section recorded 30 m further to the E, the dumped layer measured 0.88 m in depth (the total depth of the section was 1.21 m).

The dumped layer overlaid a dark brown loam the composition of which varied from a high clay content in the NW to a more sandy matrix to the E. This appeared to represent a soil horizon which existed prior to the construction of the former Cowley Car Works. This deposit was also observed in the neighbouring warehouse site to the N.

The soil horizon overlaid a reddish brown silty sand, 0.10-0.14 m in depth, perhaps a ploughsoil overlying the natural subsoil, which consisted of a reddish brown to red Corallian sand, grading to a lighter buff colour in the deeper exposures.

CONSIDERATION OF THE RESULTS

The complete programme of groundworks was not seen, although the site was observed during the later stages of the building construction. The observations were mainly confined to the examination of an 80 m long section on the northern boundary of the site. Unfortunately the stripping of much of the site to a reduced level below the natural subsoil was not observed, so it is impossible to quantify the amount of archaeological features affected. Any surviving deposits in this area would have been completely destroyed. Archaeological deposits in the part of the site with the least dumping associated with the construction of the former Cowley Works, ie the slightly higher area to the N and

E, where preservation might have been better, would have been most affected.

The reliability of the results should be examined in relation to the type, density and date of any features which might have been expected on the site. Despite the lack of observation of the main excavation the development site would still have revealed large linear features such as ditches, which would have been seen in the edges of the deeper excavation, although shallow or smaller discrete features would not have been seen.

The presence of Roman activity in the form of ditches would therefore have been located unless it was within a relatively localised area. The presence of activity relating to Roman kilns and pottery manufacturing would also have been evident even if truncated by later ploughing (Booth, Boyle and Keevill 1993), unless it was very localised.

The chances of prehistoric remains having been present and being identified are rather less. This is in part because these are likely to have consisted of more dispersed or isolated features. While prehistoric activity is more likely on the light silt soils typical of this area, rather than on areas of heavier soils overlying Oxford Clay, the fills of prehistoric features in such areas of light sandy silt soils tend to be very similar to the natural subsoil and features would only appear clearly if seen in plan. Isolated flint scatters would not have been located in the circumstances prevailing the site.

CONCLUSIONS

Although it was not possible to comprehensively monitor all the groundworks, the results obtained, when compared to the neighbouring areas to the N and SW suggest that there were no significant extensive archaeological remains within the area under development. If archaeological deposits had existed on the site they are likely to have been localised and of low density in terms of feature distribution. This might have been particularly true of prehistoric activity. The remains of a probable medieval ploughsoil with the character of a loose silt soil suggests that any shallow features could have been heavily truncated or ploughed out. No finds were recovered from the site.

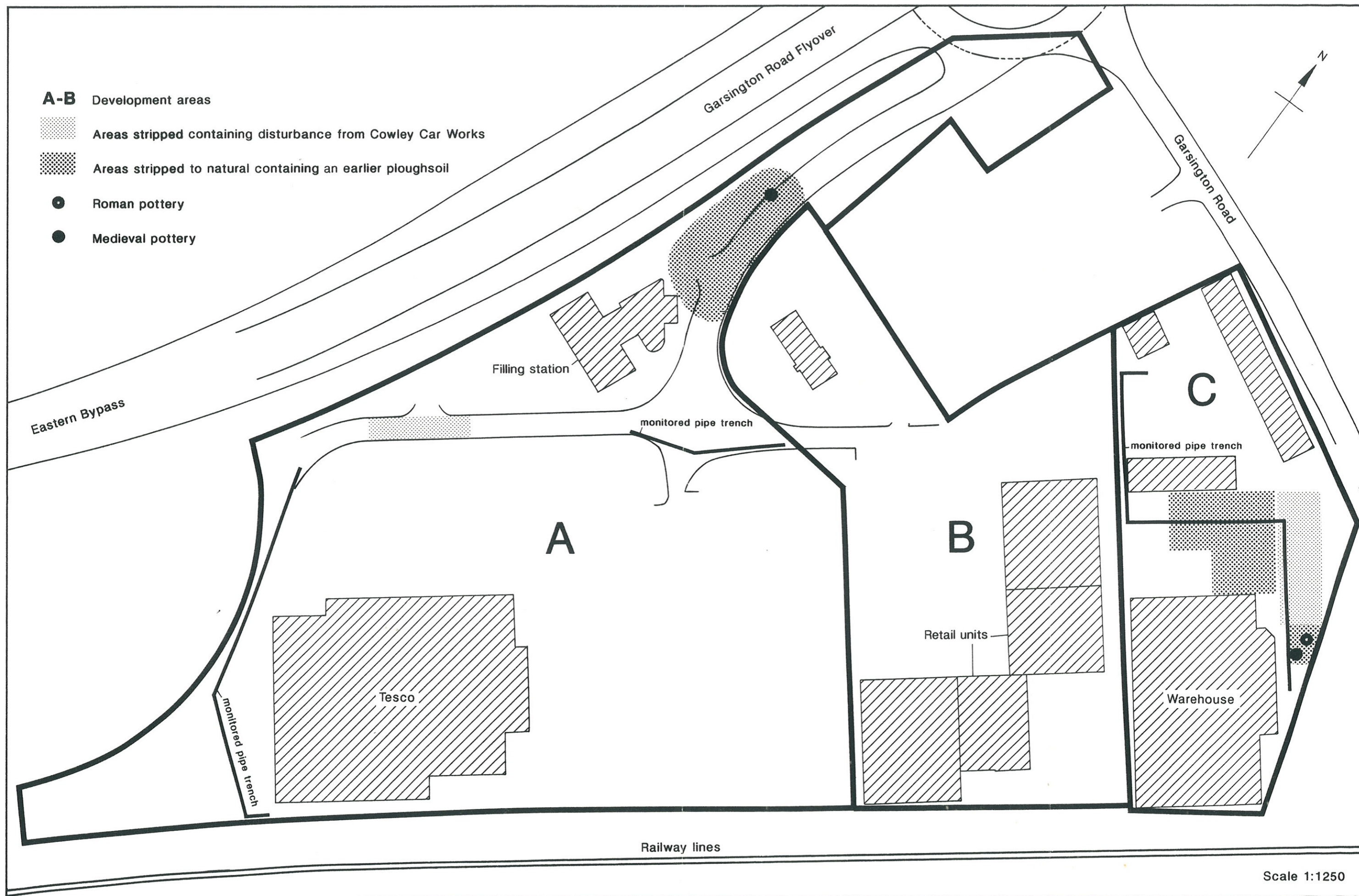
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