ABINGDON VINEYARD REDEVELOPMENT

Revised Archaeological Evaluation April 1991

Introduction

The evaluation presented to the Vale of the White Horse District Council in 1988 was based upon a small number of assessment trenches comprising less than 0.5% of the development area, and inevitably larger-scale excavation has both amplified and modified our understanding of the archaeological development of the site, an outline of which is presented below.

The broad conclusions of that report, that the most complex and best-preserved archaeology lies in Areas 4 and 5 at the south end of the Action Area, with less dense activity towards the north, have been borne out by excavations so far carried out in Areas 1, 5 and 6. However, the extent of the River Stert was considerably over-estimated, and the discovery of a major defensive ditch, which bounded the town of Abingdon in Iron Age and Roman times, has necessitated a re-evaluation of Areas 2 and 3 in particular. A revised assessment of Area 4 is also included, based upon the detailed knowledge obtained from Area 5 adjacent.

The opportunity for archaeological investigation presented by a redevelopment on the scale of the Vineyard Action Area comes to an historic town very rarely, and the results so far have revolutionised the history of the town. The remaining areas are likely to bring forth substantial new discoveries. The archaeology of these areas represents a serious constraint upon redevelopment, and in the light of PPG 16 these areas should continue to be investigated prior to redevelopment.

Summary of discoveries

The site appears first to have been occupied in the Early Iron Age (c. 500 BC), and pottery of this date has been found right across the site in Areas 5, 2 and 6. By the Middle Iron Age (c. 200 BC) settlement was concentrated in the southern half of the site in Area 5 (and probably Area 4); at least a dozen roundhouses of this date have been identified (see Figure 2). Dense occupation continues in these areas through the Late Iron Age and Early Roman periods (down to c. 100 AD); the settlement is divided up into ditched rectangular plots and is surrounded by a defensive ditch and bank running through Areas 2 and 3 (see Figure 1).

In the 2nd century AD all this settlement is swept away to make way for a Roman stone building erected in the south-east corner of Area 5 (continuing into Area 4), which was surrounded by a rectangular enclosure ditch. North of the defensive ditch in Areas 1 and 6 there is no trace of occupation from the Middle Iron Age to the Early Roman period, and Roman activity begins in the 2nd century AD. This looks like suburban growth outside the former settlement boundary after the reorganisation inside the town.

Later Roman activity is scanty, except for a small group of high-status burials in lead coffins, one of which dates to 300 + AD. The Abingdon Chronicle tells us that there was a Pagan Saxon (400 - 650 AD) settlement at Abingdon before the Abbey was founded, and two Saxon sunken-floored houses were found in Area 5, the first from the town centre. The Chronicle places the Saxon abbeys south of the Action Area, and this appears to be confirmed by the absence of Later Saxon activity in Areas 1, 6 or 5, but Late Saxon pottery was recovered from the assessment in Area 3. It is noticeable that the Roman features in Areas 5 and 3 are not aligned in relation to the course of the River Stert, and this, coupled with the proximity of the defensive ditch to the Stert, strongly suggests that the course of the river is later than the Roman period. It is possible that it was diverted in the Late Saxon period by Abbot Aethelwold to provide a greater head of water for his mill-stream (see Figure 4).

Areas 5 and 4 contain part of the medieval lay cemetery of Abingdon. Over 750 skeletons were recovered from the Area 5 excavation, and a similar number can be anticipated when Area 4 is redeveloped. The cemetery appears to begin at around the time of the Norman conquest, c. 1050 AD. Within the lay cemetery was part of a buttressed chapel and of a free-standing octagonal bell-tower which continues into Area 4. The bell-tower was destroyed in the early 14th century, probably in the town riot of 1327 AD.

Running south-west from the River Stert across Area 5 was the Convent Ditch or moat, recorded in the Acts of the Obedientiaries of Abingdon Abbey and shown on the 15th century Monk's Map. This contained the supports of a timber bridge dated by tree-ring analysis to c. 1510 AD.

Area 1 lay outside the abbey precinct, being occupied by tenements from the late 12th century onwards. Just before this it appears to have been used for semi-industrial purposes. Area 6 supposedly lay within the abbey vineyard, but along the street frontage were tenements similar in date to those in Area 1. This seems to represent a period of new development around the boundaries of the abbey precinct. Little trace of the structures survived in either area, most of the finds coming from rubbish or cess pits.

In the English Civil War a former orchard within Area 5 was used by the Parliamentarians as an overflow cemetery from 1645 until c. 1661. 285 skeletons, all buried in north-south graves, have been recovered from this. Together the medieval and Civil War cemeteries present an unique sample for the study of a town's population over 600 years.

Area 2: Former Railway Station site.

Information to date

Observations and limited excavation during road-construction and pipe-laying have established the existence of a major defensive ditch running E-W across this area (see Figure 1). This appears to have been c. 10 m wide and cut up to 3 m into gravel, and contained waterlogged deposits at the bottom. Pottery recovered from the upper fill demonstrates that the ditch was constructed before c. 50 AD, and this was probably a Late Iron Age ditch surrounding the town. To the south of this a blank area of similar width may indicate the former position of an upcast bank on the inside. Observations in Area 3 to the east (see below) suggest that there may have been a second parallel ditch north of the first. South of the ditch and 'bank' area dense Iron Age and Early Roman occupation is present (see Figures 1 and 2).

Mitigation proposal for the archaeology.

Much of this area will be occupied by the defensive ditch (or ditches) and by the blank area to the south. The archaeology of this area is therefore unlikely to be complicated by numerous intercutting features, though Early Iron Age occupation predating the ditch could cross the area, and some later features are likely to have been cut through the bank. No complete section across the ditch has yet been seen, and the archaeological priority must be to excavate a length of the ditch fills to recover a properly dated sequence.

The proposed new north-south block and its western extension will overlie the ditch, and excavation below this would provide a unique opportunity to obtain a transect across the defences. The ditch is likely to pose problems for the structural engineering of the development. If cut and fill foundations are to be used, emptying the ditch and infilling with stable material may well be necessary because of the dangers of subsidence into the soft fills of the ditch. Other strategies may be adopted such as piling, but archaeologically this is also likely to be expensive, as excavating pile-holes would be time-consuming because of the depth, and is also less acceptable archaeologically because of the difficulties of interpretation in these confined holes.

If this north-south transect is excavated and an area at the west end of the western extension stripped and recorded, any further below-ground disturbance can be dealt with by funded watching-brief.

It is worth stressing that this development offers the possibility of significant publicity for Abingdon's claim to be one of the oldest towns in England, and unique in its occupation of the same site for over 2000 years.

Area 3: Former Coal Yard

Information to date

The initial assessment trenches in this area have been
supplemented by salvage observations beneath the new road at the
west edge of Area 3. It is now clear from excavation in Area 5
and salvage at the west end of Area 3 that the large features
recorded in the initial assessment as river-channels belonging
to the Stert are man-made, and probably include the Late Iron Age
ditch seen further west. The evidence of the assessment trenches
would suggest that there may have been two parallel large ditches
(see Figure 1), but these were not dated and their relation to
one another is uncertain. To the south smaller features of the
Iron Age and Early Roman period were found.
    Late Saxon pottery was recovered from the assessment
trenches in this area. This is particularly significant as the
site of the Saxon 'Barton' or home-farm of the abbey is believed
to have been just north-east of the abbey (see Figure 3), and
some of this probably lies within Area 3.

Mitigation proposal for the archaeology

The alignment and date of the two large ditches has not yet been
established. On the very limited evidence available, it appears
that there may be a change of alignment of the more southerly
ditch between Areas 2 and 3, possibly indicating an entrance.
Since the form that development in this area is to take is still
uncertain, it is not possible to suggest a detailed strategy, but
the positioning of any trenches should be located to establish
the line of the ditches, and dating evidence retreived for both.
THe Late Saxon history of Abingdon is one of the remaining blanks
in the town's history, and area excavation on the north side of
the site cannot be too strongly recommended to establish the
nature of this occupation.

Area 4: Land west of Burgess Printing Works

Information to date

Excavation in Area 5 has established that the medieval lay cemetery comprises up to 23 successive layers of bodies, and over 750 articulated skeletons were recovered. The area likely to be covered by the medieval cemetery in Area 4 is greater than that in Area 5, and over 1,000 skeletons can be anticipated. Within the medieval cemetery are the foundations of an octagonal bell-tower, the north-east quarter of which lies in Area 4. The stratigraphy in this area was the best-preserved anywhere on the site, and beneath the cemetery and bell-tower is a Saxon dark earth horizon sealing a masonry Roman building. This in turn overlay Early Roman and Iron Age features (see Figure 2), including areas of preserved Iron Age ground surface, which there was insufficient time to investigate in detail. Further north the River Stert crosses Area 4, but the precise south limit of this was not established in Area 5 adjacent. North of the Stert is further dense Iron Age and Early Roman occupation.

Mitigation proposal for the archaeology.

The skeletons will have to be removed in accordance with the terms of a Home Office licence, and this will be time-consuming and costly. Since a large sample of skeletons are already being examined from the Area 5 excavation, we would propose to reduce post-excavation analysis by having a human-bone specialist record the bodies during the excavation. During the Area 5 excavation modifications were introduced to the recording system which should speed up the excavation, and it may be possible to refine these further.
     The overall dimensions of the bell-tower have not yet been established, and the full width of the Roman building at its east end will also be found in Area 4. The Saxon presence identified in the Area 5 excavation was slight, but much of the dark earth layer was machined off to reveal the Roman and Iron Age features, and detailed excavation of an area of this soil will be necessary to establish whether further Saxon features were missed. Below part of the Roman building in Area 5 Iron Age ground surfaces were preserved, and if these also survive in Area 4 their excavation is a high priority. The rooms of the Roman building extending into Area 4 are however cellared, and all such deposits may have been removed. North of the Stert features are truncated, and only the larger features are likely to survive.
     The presence of medieval rubble and painted wall plaster may indicate that another medieval building will be encountered within Area 4, but as stated in the original assessment report this is most likely dumped.
     The costs of excavation in this area are inevitably going to be high, and if this is likely to materially affect the feasibility of a successful development consideration should be given to the possibility of excluding part of the area from redevelopment.