



OXFORD ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT

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OXFORD ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT NEWSLETTER INCLUDING
OXFORDSHIRE PARISH SURVEY NEWS

Vol. XV, No. 2 - June 1987

Berkshire

READING: Business Park - John Moore

Archaeological work is in progress on the first stage of this large scale site. Excavation in one field and an assessment of two other fields have shown areas of Bronze Age activity and Roman field systems.

In a 9 x 22m. area of Long Ground at least one post-built round house and associated storage pits have been found. This occupation is located on a small irregular shaped, low island approximately 50 x 60m. in area. The finds indicate that occupation belongs to the middle/late Bronze Age. The area under excavation on this 'island' is at present being extended.

Elsewhere, in Long Ground, two Bronze Age ditches, one ending in a sump, have been located. It is hoped that more of this field system will be revealed in the future. Overlying the Bronze Age levels and later alluvial deposits is a ploughsoil thought to belong to the early Roman period.

A Roman field boundary ditch has been found in the southern field, known as The Moors. The assessment in the western field, The Commons, has shown further Roman field boundaries; in one case the bank of a ditch overlies an earlier ditch. Two areas of Bronze Age activity have been identified, one of which may have a Bronze Age ditch running along its edge. Two 30m. square areas will be opened up around the two prehistoric areas.

UPTON NERVET: Poor's Allotment - David Miles

An assessment has been carried out on behalf of ARC of an area of approximately 8ha around a Bronze Age barrow 10km south-west of Reading. The entire site, on sandy plateau gravel, was heavily furrowed by forestry plantations. No evidence of archaeological importance was found.

Oxfordshire

DAMPTON: The Beam - R A Chambers

Building work on the north-west side of the cottage has revealed more human burials and has provided further evidence for the extent of the late Anglo-Saxon cemetery around the chapel. A further few fragments of Romano-British pottery and a polished double-ended bone pin were recovered from disturbed levels.

BENSON: Airfield - R A Chambers

By arrangement with the Ministry of Defence the foundation pit for a new communications building was inspected for archaeological features in March and again in May. Several small silt-filled irregular depressions may have been the product of sapping along a former spring line. One depression contained charcoal flecks and eroded bone fragments whilst another yielded a waste flint flake. Any potential prehistoric activity in this area is of interest because of the possible relationship with the prehistoric monument complex that lies beneath the aerodrome.

BILCOTTER: Local History Exhibition - R A Chambers

The OAU provided a small display outlining the several archaeological excavations undertaken in the town during the last 10 years. The exhibition, which was opened by the town's Mayor, proved very popular with an estimated 800 visitors during the day. The quality of the work displayed by the various contributors was exceptionally high.

CHINNOR: St. Andrew - Ian Burrow

A drainage trench was dug in late March 1987 running due south from the south-east angle of the south aisle for about 3m. At the south end a soakaway 1m. east-west by 1.50m. north-south had been dug to a depth of 1.60m. Stratigraphy in the pit was as follows: 1. humic soil and burials 0-1.10m.; 2. natural chalk 1.10m. to base. No other archaeological material was noted and no major damage apparently done. Any further work should, however, be archaeologically recorded.

DORCHESTER: Martin's Lane - R A Chambers

Further visits were made to this site during April to inspect foundation trenches but little information was revealed except for an adult inhumation discovered by workmen. This north-south burial lay immediately above the gravel close to a similarly orientated child burial recorded during trial trenching in December last year. Both burials are likely to be later 4th or 5th century.

Gloucestershire

SOMERFORD KEYNES: Neigh Bridge - David Miles and Simon Palmer

Excavations have now come to an end at this site in the Cotswold Water Park. The site spans the pre- to post-Roman conquest period and supplements our views of Roman interference on the native Celtic population during the late 1st century AD in the Cirencester to Lechlade area.

The late Iron Age occupation, very similar to Claydon Pike, is defined by large irregular enclosures and small rectangular plots, but with no definable buildings.

These enclosures were overlaid in the late 1st century AD by a rectangular block of Roman boundaries which tie into a large ditched enclosure on the edge of the Thames. Within these enclosures lay a large aisled building (27 x 9m) formed by ten paired postholes. Several posts on the western side had been replaced and incorporated in the packing of one replacement was a large slab of tile-kiln base.

Around the building and scattered in large quantities across most of the site were large quantities of Minety tiles, displaying a broad and unusual range of types. The majority of these tiles appeared unused. A logical assumption is that the tile has been stored here and the site was functioning as a 'depot' for the Minety tile industry whose kilns are located on the Claylands 4km to the south.

The position of the site at a crossing of the Thames on a direct route between the Minety kilns and Corinium - the principal market for the tile - would make it ideally placed for centralised storage and further distribution. This interpretation is supported by the discovery of a new Roman road between Minety and Neigh Bridge. The large quantity of early Roman coins (mentioned in the December Newsletter) would perhaps suggest marketing at an early date. The presence of an official Roman shrine to the Capitoline Triad is also indicated by the sculpture fragments of eagle and shield.

All the evidence seems to support the view that early Romano-British tile manufacturing was under imperial control, in the hands of the military.

This is thus the third excavated site in the Water Park area to show that the Roman occupation severely effected the native population with organised interference of settlements and the landscape.

In April the Roman road between Alchester and Dorchester-on-Thames was sectioned by a pipe trench east of the Blackbird Leys estate. The road is marked by a bridleway presumably following the exact alignment as happens further south between Berinsfield and Dorchester. Conditions did not favour close archaeological observation. The road appeared to have lost its metallurgical presumably through continuous use over nearly 2,000 years. The east side ditch may have been recut in comparatively modern times. The west ditch was not visible.

GORLING: Gatehampton Farm - F G Allen

In advance of pipe-laying by the Thames Water Authority on the north bank of the river Thames a strip 7m. wide and 150m. long has been cleared and excavated along the west side of the Goring-Reading railway. A Bronze Age barrow cemetery was known from cropmark evidence in this field, and George Lambrick conducted an excavation in 1935 which demonstrated that one of the barrows had a surviving mound, and which recovered Bronze Age pottery from beneath alluvium at the river's edge. The 1937 excavation was expected to clip the ditch of another of the barrows, and it was hoped that it would recover peripheral features around it.

In the event features of every period from Neolithic to Roman were discovered, providing a coherent picture of the history of land use. The excavated strip ran north at right angles to the river, rising from the very edge of the gravel terrace and floodplain onto a plateau of sand. This is crossed by a wide silt-filled hollow and gives way towards the north end to a silty clay subsoil. On the terrace edge was a Neolithic settlement consisting of hearths, pits and tree-holes filled with pot-bollers, struck flints, animal bone and a little pottery. The flints are almost all debitage, that is cores and waste flakes, and this was clearly a flint-knapping site. Part of a flint axe was found in one of the tree-throw pits. The assemblage is dominated by long blades, suggesting an Early or Middle Neolithic date. One circular pit over 4m. in diameter may have been a flint quarry; seams of gravel flint like that from which some of the worked examples were made ran round its sides.

Some 80m. further north a low mound (c. 0.3m. high) of buried turf or topsoil was found overlying a silt-filled hollow. The mound was covered with struck flint, which persisted throughout its depth, and overlaid an area of red and black burning containing a few sherds of probable Neolithic pottery. Lumps of charcoal from this should enable the mound to be radio-carbon dated, but the character of the flint, which is similar to that from the pits, suggests that this is a Neolithic monument, perhaps akin to a bank-barrow, belonging to the settlement adjacent.

The presence of a Neolithic monument may explain the presence of the Bronze Age barrows here, since these are commonly grouped

around earlier ceremonial monuments. The ditch of one of these barrows was indeed uncovered, and a trench inside it revealed that some 0.2m. of buried ground surface survived.

At the north end of the trench, cut into the silty clay, was a vertical sided and flat-bottomed ditch of defensive proportions, 2.1m. deep and 1.65m. wide. This contained a crouched burial halfway up the fill, and sherds of flint-tempered and shelly pottery from the bottom. It is likely to be of Late Bronze Age or Early Iron Age date, and from cropmark evidence may possibly be part of a defensive ditch cutting off an area at the bend in the river, in effect a valley fort. There is no evidence for a bank alongside it; this was probably completely removed by later ploughing. In the upper fills of the ditch were sherds of Middle Iron Age and in the very top Roman pottery. The largely infilled ditch seems to have acted as the boundary to a ploughed field to the north in the Roman period, as the soil here had a sprinkling of flint and tile throughout and was mixed and dark in colour.

Further south a large corridor built of tile, chalk and flint was constructed on the edge of the Neolithic mound, and Roman pits were dug inside the Bronze Age barrow. On the edge of the gravel terrace the Neolithic settlement was cut through by the deep ditches of a rectangular early Roman enclosure, which is visible as a cropmark east of the railway line. All of these Roman features were probably associated with Roman buildings destroyed just south of the river when building the railway in the 19th century.

Finally, most of a sub-rectangular shallow feature lay within the trench, c. 4.5m x 3m deep. This had a flat bottom and postholes at the west end, and though it contained Samian pottery, looks very like a Saxon grubenhaus. The area thus emerges as an important prehistoric and Roman landscape. We are grateful to Thames Water for making the work possible.

MIXBURY: Fishpond - R A Chambers

I doubt if anyone who drives into Mixbury from the north realises that the road passes across the bed of a massive medieval fishpond. A substantial bank crossing the valley floor to the east of the road is the remainder of a dam which retained a pond several acres in extent. The pond was probably contemporary with the castle begun by the d'Ivry family in the 12th century. The dam was later breached and the pond drained in favour of two smaller, more manageable ponds which are still in existence. The significance of the prominent roadside bank was only realised during field work for the OUDDES Banbury summer evening class.

MONGEWELL: Grim's Ditch - George Lambrick

A single trench was dug across the line of the South Oxfordshire Grim's Ditch close to Carmel College in early May as an evaluation exercise for Oxfordshire County Council in conjunction with the

proposed Wallingford by-pass.

A very substantial ditch, probably of similar dimensions to that found during road widening of the Crowmarsh-Goring road in 1974, was located. The remains of the bank are very spread and disturbed by later ploughing. They seal a prehistoric or Roman field boundary with associated ploughsoils. The remains of the bank seems to have been dug into on the south side, possibly to fill in the ditch, in the late 12th or early 13th century. A pit was also dug, and these deposits may represent the extension of a medieval backwash associated with Mongewell deserted medieval village. These deposits were later taken into cultivation again, and probably remained so until the 18th century when a belt of trees incorporating a shady path was created as part of the pleasure grounds of Mongewell House.

The excavation did not produce definitive evidence for the dating of Grim's Ditch, but demonstrated that probably enough dating evidence could be recovered to date the monument and these other phases of activity if a more extensive excavation was required by the building of the by-pass.

OXFORD: lesser projects (New College, Ship Street, St. Aldates).

It has been a period of follow-up work on several projects. The earliest material has come from St. Aldates, where contractors have made a drain connection for the new Offices adjoining the police station (see last Newsletter). After being flooded for two days, they discovered that Thames Water had surreptitiously raised the river levels, and the water pouring in on all sides was in fact the Thames! Having solved that, the archaeology was patchy. The Norman stone causeway of Grandpont is certainly there, but its face has been cut away by services, so it was unimpressive. There was however another pointed timber of the presumed Saxon bridge, from which a tree-ring sample was kept.

Heritage Project's new gallery at Broad Street/Ship Street is progressing well, and more of the City Wall has been exposed in the service basement. We can now see part of the inside elevation of the postern which we described in our December 1996 issue. It is four feet wide on this side, suggesting that within the thickness of the wall there must be a substantial rebate. We are trying to convince the contractor that he needs to dig out the postern to underpin the wall, which would provide a good chance to look at its construction.

Another aspect of the City Wall has been revealed at New College, where an extension to the JCR required foundations to be dug up against the wall. They were cut into red clay loam, typical of the turf facing of the Saxon rampart wherever it has been seen. It is interesting that there is turf here, because this section of wall is part of the eastern extension of the town, east of Cotte Street and Magpie Lane. We are beginning to think that the rampart of the original town was refaced in stone at a very early stage, and it

would be logical to expect that the extension might have been faced in stone from the outset. Professor Jope excavated both sides of the New College wall near the corner tower, and found no rampart at all. This new observation therefore provides considerable food for thought.

OXFORD: Magdalen College, St. John's Hospital - Brian Durham

Mark Roberts has excavated a foundation pit for the new kitchen of Magdalen College, trying to build up a plan of the infirmary block of St. John's Hospital. A new pier-base appeared squarely within the trench, showing that the infirmary had at least two arcades. The strange thing was that a series of floors extended over much of the pier base, as if the column had been very off-centre, or possibly it had been removed within the life of the building. Its relationship to the south gable of the infirmary is also ambiguous. It still looks as if there could have been a south range here before the infirmary was built, possibly with an opening to the bridge. We are hoping that these inconsistencies will be sorted out when the rest of the trial holes are dug.

RADLEY: 82-84 Lower Radley - R Ainslie and R A Chambers

Further work on the foundations for the new garage has revealed that the mound known as Radley Barrow may be encircled by a ditch from which a flint scraper and two pottery sherds have been recovered. The ditch appears to pass beneath the northern edge of the mound but the profile of the barrow may have been altered in partly agricultural or domestic activity. So much for 'Pleistocene sand dunes' (March Newsletter).

SHILFORD - R A Chambers

The pronounced earthworks of the deserted medieval village of Shifford were well publicised in the late 1960s when Professor Hoskins included the site in a documentary film. The present Victorian church is not the direct replacement of a medieval building but of a Georgian structure built in 1776 to replace a ruinous medieval chapel. Although it is normally assumed that all three churches occupied the same site, the discovery of an octagonal pillar base at Old Shifford Farm suggests this may not be the case.

WITNEY: The Church - Brian Durham

The south end of the south transept is being refloored as a community room, with a new doorway to the east. Nothing was visible beneath the floor, apart from a single brick vault. There was no sign of a sleeper wall for a previous south gable, and generally the whole interior had been reduced in level for a Victorian heating system and underfloor space.

The chapel ruins are set on a large grassy mound at the top of a low coastal cliff. The mound is clearly the remains of a broch tower with associated occupation. At least 4m. of stratification are visible in the cliff. This whole complex was contour and hachure surveyed and elevations drawn of all the upstanding chapel walls.

Somerset

TAUNTON: Ian Burrow and Mark Collard

A small team from the Unit carried out an evaluation of a large redevelopment area just outside the East Gate of Taunton on behalf of Somerset County Council. A series of trenches were excavated to examine the town defences and to check on the extent of medieval occupation and possible industrial activity adjacent to the Stockwell stream, a leat possibly created by Taunton Priory in the 14th century.

Examination of the town defences complemented work in 1977 by CRAGGS. The most important discovery was of two outer ditches to the east of, and apparently converging with, the main town ditch. These were both small features about 1m. deep and seem to have silted up during the Middle Ages. Indications are that they are contemporary with the main 12th century earthen defences of the town.

A Synthesis of Oxfordshire Pottery

Maureen Mellor is researching the distribution of late Saxon, Medieval and Early Post-Medieval pots in Oxfordshire. This is a unique opportunity to study the marketing of a major commodity. Some pots will have been sold as containers to market the contents. Apples were transported down river from the Vale in pots, during the 17th century while other pots will have been sold for themselves as cooking pots, wash bowls, lamps etc.

Maureen would be delighted to look at groups of sherds from known sources and add them to the gazetteer which is held on the computer. She can be reached at the Unit on Friday mornings.

Director's Note

Sally Quiney, the Unit's administrative secretary for five years has decided that it is time for a change and is leaving us in July. She will leave a gap which will be very difficult indeed to fill. I certainly would have found it very hard to understand the workings of the Unit without her guidance and support. Everyone here will miss her uniquely extrovert personality, which cunningly conceals great administrative efficiency and sound judgement of people and events. We all wish her the very best for the future.

The most interesting possibility was that something would survive of Bishop Mington's chantry chapel added to the east side of the transept c. 1361-6. Joy Russell-Smith, deaconess of the church, has traced the documentation of the chantry and tried to equate it with the known architecture. She suggests that Mington may have been responsible for extending the south transept by one bay before the chapel was added. The chapel itself is known from an engraving of 1820, where it looks just like a dwelling house joined to the church, with chimneys and first-floor windows. At that time it had been recently occupied by the sexton. A thorough search of its ground area with a soil-auger failed to show any evidence of foundations or even of resilient floors, so it seems that the whole building was either robbed or destroyed by grave-digging.

WITNEY: Park Farm (SP 341 100) - Brian Durham

Park Farm takes its name from the park of the medieval bishops of Winchester. It is about to be swallowed up by a large housing development advancing from the south, which may provide chances to confirm the shape of the park and the location of its medieval buildings.

The northern park 'pale' is visible as an embankment alongside the old A40. James Bond has predicted the rest of its outline from the field names, and traces of a bank and ditch can be detected on the south side amid the humps and bumps of old quarries. The particular field boundary leads down to Colwell Brook, where it is possible to see at least one large fishpond, with a good dam still surviving. The fishpond clearly forms the south-west boundary of the park, but a large factory complex means that it will be very difficult to follow this alignment round to the north.

The farmhouse lies in its own small curved enclosure. An inspection from the outside shows that the refronted south-west block should be the oldest. There is no medieval work visible, but if it is to be demolished there would be a good case for excavating its ground plan in case it proved to be a microcosm of the manor house, now known to us as Witney Palace.

Scotland - Orkney Islands

PETERKIRK: Evie (mainland) - Ian Burrow

The University of Oxford In Service Training Scheme survey week was this year led by Ian Burrow who took the students to survey a broch site on the north-east coast of Mainland Orkney. The historical significance of the site is considerable. The small, much ruined, 12th century chapel which forms the latest phase of occupation on the site probably has an 8th century predecessor. This Peter's Kirk is thought to be one of a number established on earlier broch sites at that time as part of the ecclesiastical and political integration of Orkney into the kingdom of the Picts.

Other, perhaps less dramatic, changes are in the wind. The salary and staff structure of the Unit is being comprehensively examined at present by a Working Party appointed by the Council of Management. The advent of 'Contract Archaeology' has prompted us to adopt a number of policy guidelines to ensure that we behave ethically in this new situation.

There is a growing feeling that we have outgrown 46 Hythe Bridge Street and that the Unit must seek larger and better premises. This will not be an easy matter. Greatly increased costs are almost inevitable, as suitable accommodation is at a premium in Oxford. Can you help us? We need about 4,000 square feet (Gross), preferably with parking spaces for the Unit vehicles. Please let me know if you see any likely buildings available.

