



OXFORD ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT

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**OXFORD ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT NEWSLETTER INCLUDING
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BERKSHIRE

THATCHAM: Upper Bucklebury, Hartshill Copse - David Miles and Mark Collard

The Unit has recently completed an archaeological assessment, on behalf of ARC, of a 15 ha area at Upper Bucklebury, near Thatcham, Berkshire. The site lies on a ridge of plateau gravel 50m. above the floor of the Kennet valley.

A late Bronze Age settlement was located covering approximately 200m. x 100m. of the ridge top. The features consisted principally of post-holes and small pits. On the western edge of the ridge, overlooking the Kennet valley were several possible cremations. The pottery cremation vessels may be contemporary with the settlement or of the middle Bronze Age.

A small area of Romano-British activity was found in the south-west part of the field.

The settlement area was suffering from plough damage. Colluvial deposits in the coombs on the western edge of the ridge would blanket earlier material and provide evidence of the cultivation history of the site.

GLOUCESTERSHIRE

FAIRFORD: Thornhill Farm - Simon Palmer

Work at Thornhill Farm (the native complex 1km. west of Claydon Pike), has now come to a timely halt, just prior to the recent inundations which made the site unworkable.

An area c.80m. square has been uncovered centred on the Roman road; half this area has now been totally excavated. It has been clear from the start that the excavation have been on the outer fringes of the main domestic occupation and that we have been examining agricultural features: enclosures, 'hay-stands' as at Claydon, and small pens and paddocks. Domestic activity, however, has been present in the form of hearths, small pits and 'occupation' debris, but as yet without definable structures.

Director Dr. I.C.G. Burrow F.S.A., M.I.E.A.

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The main interest is in the Roman road which cuts through all other features; is this the true impact of Roman imperialism on the native population?

Dating is not tightly defined. The pre-road enclosures certainly run up to the latter part of the 1st century AD. This fits in well with the phasing of the road system at Claydon Pike. Two coins recovered reinforce this general date - a Celtic quarter stater and an as of Domitian.

SIDDINGTON: David Miles and Simon Palmer

In October the Thornhill excavation team spent three days assessing a development adjacent to Siddington Church and the scheduled medieval tithe barn near Cirencester.

An area of about 0.25 ha had been stripped by the Talland Equitation School, prior to the construction of a dressage arena. This cut through earthworks running parallel to the tithe barn, down to the main Cirencester-Siddington road. A number of medieval wall foundations were laid bare.

It appears that a walled trackway ran eastwards from the road and into the churchyard. On its south side are traces of medieval structures running parallel to the barn. About a dozen Roman coins have been found on the site but no contemporary features. Much of the area is disturbed by 19th century rubbish pits.

The development has now halted as the necessary planning permission had not been obtained. Excavations have stopped while English Heritage considers a future course of action.

SOMERFORD KEYNES: Neigh Bridge - David Miles, John Moore and Simon Palmer

During fieldwork in the Cotswold Water Park in connection with the Claydon Pike project an important Roman settlement was located at Somerford Keynes, 7km. south of Cirencester. Large numbers of Roman coins (many of the 1-2 century), much metalwork (mainly early Roman brooches), and building debris were found on a platform of gravel alongside the Thames south of Neigh Bridge. Aerial photographs taken in the summer of 1985 showed that the gravel platform was bounded by multiple drainage ditches. Into this area ran a trackway which formed a T-junction on the highest part of the platform. The internal area of the settlement was subdivided by enclosure ditches, some of which ran into old pasture by the river and may survive as earthworks.

Planning permission for gravel extraction in this field had been granted in 1952 but at the time of the site's discovery extraction was not imminent. In autumn 1986, owing to unforeseen circumstances, the extraction programme was changed and the site threatened with imminent quarrying.

ARC agreed to provide machinery to mount a trial excavation which began in November. The basic layout of the settlement dates from the late 1st/2nd century AD. A boundary ditch at the rear (east) of the site produced three fragments of sculpture of oolitic limestone from the upper fill. These include an eagle and a shield with drapery carved on the rear side. Dr. Martin Henig suggests that these may be parts of a representation of the

Capitoline Triad - the eagle with Jupiter and the shield an attribute of Minerva. It is therefore possible that an official shrine exists in the area. Unfortunately this part of the site is currently under water.

The central nucleus of the settlement is reasonably well preserved and a thin layer of Roman ground surface survives. Traces of structures are beginning to be defined: a large aisled building and a possible building defined by tile filled slots. There are large quantities of Roman roofing tile and tile from a heating system. Roman finds continue to be prolific and a Dobunnic coin has also been found. There are extensive traces of post-Roman flooding around the site.

OXFORDSHIRE

KIDLINGTON: Kidlington Villa - David Miles

In November a ditch was dug by the landowner across the area marked on the O S map as the site of the supposed villa at Kidlington. No trace of Roman material was observed.

OXFORD: The first Oxford excavation report? - John Blair

Like so many mid-Saxon double houses, St. Frideswide's minster had come by the 10th century into the hands of secular canons. These were expelled soon after 1100, and the house was briefly controlled by Abingdon Abbey before Augustinian canons were installed during 1111-22. Some time afterwards, a rumour seems to have developed among the canons that the monks of Abingdon had stolen St. Frideswide's body. The following newly-discovered account (British Library MS Lansdowne 436 ff. 103-4) describes the consequent investigations, which must count as the earliest archaeological work in Oxford. It will be noticed that although the canons could not authenticate their discovery by radiocarbon dating, they had access to a method of proof which any modern archaeologist would envy!

"A three-day fast was ordained; then, excavating the grave secretly by night with plentiful lighting, they found an empty stone coffin. Already near despair, they considered abandoning the enterprise, but urged by an astute man amongst them they set about digging deeper. For he said that it had once been a common practice to put empty coffins over the bodies of saints, so that if thieves came intent on stealing the body, they would go away deluded. So digging eagerly, they reached the virgin's body, whereupon all the lights that they had with them suddenly went out. Then they marvelled (for they had thought that they had not found the virgin's body but someone else's), and almighty God mercifully drove all doubt from their hearts by a plain miracle. For all the lights previously extinguished were rekindled by heaven-sent fire. When they saw the miracle they praised the Lord together, full of great joy. Having assured themselves of the truth, they left the glorious corpse in peace in the same place!"

OXFORD: Broad Street/Ship Street, Historical Galleries - Brian Durham

'AD 1009: and in the New Year they came to Oxford and burnt that town'. The second Viking attack on Oxford will come 997 years later to the month, as Heritage Projects propose to begin building on their new site behind the former Children's Bookshop in Broad Street. But this time they come in disguise, with mortar boards over their helmets and academic gowns over their fighting gear. Confused? Heritage Projects is the company which administers the enormously successful Jorvik Centre in York, and they are moving on to try their magic on Canterbury, Edinburgh and yes, Oxford.

Their chosen point of attack at Oxford is a bastion on the city wall where it loops out to enclose St. Michael at the Northgate. This is the extension to the town which is believed to be dated by the 11th century tower of St. Michael, and it will make an appropriate introduction to the story of the University.

The bastion is not beautiful, having been fitted with domestic windows and having a range of poor quality soft stone in its construction. It seems also to have been badly split at some time, which has necessitated the chasing in of curved timbers to tie the fabric together. Finally its walls are much thinner than any other Oxford bastion, suggesting that it has been rebuilt as a domestic residence when the existing fireplaces were installed on each floor. The below-ground stonework is of the much tougher local rubble stone, and is more likely to be original.

The below-ground stonework also has an interesting shape in plan, more reminiscent of a corner tower than a normal wall tower. Since it is now virtually certain that the town wall here was designed to enclose a churchyard for St. Michaels, it would be logical to expect it to return to the rampart line with a protecting tower at the exposed corner. We have therefore looked at the cellars on the south side of the property for this return, and find a wall five feet thick on the perfect alignment. Remarkably there is a blocked arch three feet wide near the point where it would join the rampart line. This is too small and tidy to be a relieving arch, too low to be a cellar doorway, but just right for a postern through the town wall.

A postern was found at St. Helens Passage in 1975, one was conjectured at Corpus Christi in 1981 and a third at Merton College earlier this year. The town wall seems to have been more like a sieve, no wonder the Vikings got in!

OXFORD: Exeter College, Dustbin Quad - Brian Durham

We reported in March 1984 on trial pits at Exeter, and that same year gave our readers a Christmas treat with a drawing of a cheeky jug spout from the same site. There seems to be no end to the Christmas cheer on this site.

The name Dustbin Quad says most of it. We predicted that the city ditch would be found, and sure enough there was black smelly silt. But there were also walls going down into it, and the contractors assured us they had taken out stone vaults at this level. And while there was the expected 17th century ditch fill over half of the site, the area within the vaults was producing Victorian pottery. The builders were excited about one particular vessel from this area which they had recovered 'complete with its contents'

and urged me to take it away for analysis. I surreptitiously scraped it out before carrying it off, because the shape of the pot and the aroma were quite distinctive of, well, you know what.

Julian Munby has provided the details. In 1631 'without the door in the City Wall stand our publique Privyes . . . in the dungeon of which are left two arches . . . to be taken notice of by Posterity that may have occasion to empt them'. A new Bog-house was built on the same site in 1706, but before that in 1679 there had been a real emergency. The foundations of the old Ashmolean Museum next door had to be taken down to the bottom of the ditch, and in so doing the builders went too close to the adjoining college bog-house 'and had to swim for their lives!'

OXFORD: Magdalen College - Brian Durham

The college is proposing to build a new kitchen across the projected line of the medieval range which forms the present kitchen. This range has a late medieval or post-medieval roof which was presumably put on when the college began to use it as a kitchen, but its skew alignment and two blocked lancets suggests that it began life as part of the medieval Hospital of St. John the Baptist. Hence the interest in looking for its continuation.

The assessment trenches have been completed. There is an enormous stone river wall running down the middle of the site, which must be a continuation of the range. A jug of highly decorated Brill pottery of the late 13th or early 14th century came from its construction fill, and behind it is an earlier river wall with ashlar facing standing four courses high. This looks like a previous range and presumably could date from the hospital's campaign of building from 1231 to 1257. There could even be buildings predating this because the hospital was originally a 12th century foundation, but at that stage it may well have been across the road in what is now the Botanic Gardens.

There is a large area available for further excavation following the college's generosity in demolishing the buildings early. We hope that by the time of their building start in March we will have exposed the south-west corner of a hospital courtyard exquisitely sited right on the bank of the River Cherwell.

OXFORD: 16 Winchester Road, Roman burials - Brian Durham

Two burials aligned north-south were found by Mr David Lawton whilst excavating for a basement stair in the front garden of this property. Both graves had been heavily disturbed when seen by Brian Durham, but the northern was certainly a decapitated burial, and both are assumed to have been Roman.

ROLLRIGHT: The Rollright Stones - George Lambrick

In September a small trench was excavated at the Rollright Stone Circle for English Heritage. The need to excavate arose from an act of vandalism earlier in the Summer when one of the Stones was cracked through. It had to be excavated so as to stick the two halves back together. The stone was one

which we had already work out must have been re-erected along with many of the others in 1882. This was confirmed by the excavation which showed that the shallow hole for the stone cut two earlier ones beneath. The discovery of two closely spaced original stone holes supports another theory, that originally the Circle would have formed a continuous wall of vertical stones except for a portalled entrance on the south-east side.

The excavation also revealed that the very slight bank on which the Circle stands may be of Roman origin, and was probably made by scraping soil up from the centre of the circle. Perhaps this prehistoric monument was reused as some sort of small arena in the Roman period - an idea with is perfectly reasonable in comparison with Maumbury Rings outside Dorchester (Dorset) where a large neolithic henge monument was converted into a Roman amphitheatre.

Our illustration on Page 8 shows the King Stone at Rollright drawn by Sir Henry Dryden in 1840. The slight hollows in its right-hand edge resulted from people chipping bits off: comparison of a series of such drawings has shown that the hollow on this side of the stone is the creation of souvenir hunters' activities between 1804 and 1874. Vandalism at Rollright is no new phenomenon!

THAME: The Swan Hotel - John Lange

This report is the result of a watching brief carried out by the Oxford Archaeological Unit for the South Oxfordshire District Council. This was in response to plans for the refurbishment and re-development of the Swan Hotel and the area of land directly behind it. The brief was undertaken with the full co-operation of both the developers, Earlcroft Ltd. and Tim Busby, the project contractors.

Much of the exposed timber frame work at the rear of the hotel suggested a post-1750 date and close examination of the gable roof over the kitchen indicated 19th century construction. Recent alterations to the first phase building have since revealed earlier roof construction, belonging perhaps to the 16th century. Within this first phase building a boarded, medieval painted ceiling was also discovered. A detailed study of this and the rest of the building is to be made by John Steane from the Oxfordshire County Museum Services.

With the demolition of several adjoining outbuildings, a series of foundation trenches were cut parallel and at right angles to the cobbled walkway. At the south-western extent of Trench 1 a pre-1700 stone lined well was discovered 20cms. below the kitchen floor. Constructed of limestone it had a 1m. diameter and incorporated a clay and flint bond. The upper courses were severely disturbed due to the foundations for the kitchen floor. Its true depth could not be established nor could any secure dating evidence be retrieved. Much of the soil around the well had been contaminated by a brick cellar wall. The latter terminated at the junction of Trenches I and II. Between Trenches IV and V a stone wall was recorded running north-west-south-east. Once again its upper courses were disturbed but reached a maximum thickness of 96cm.

At the intersection of Trenches I and III an early medieval pit was exposed. This contained an assemblage of cooking and table-ware from the Brill pottery

in Buckinghamshire. The group have been dated from between 1240-1280. The pottery has already been conserved and a full report on them is to be made in a future edition of Oxoniensia.

WALLINGFORD: The Castle - Brian Durham

Work has begun on a measured drawing of the very eroded south face of the curtain wall, part of which is now leaning dangerously. The stone is the local chalky 'clunch', which was probably originally tooled to an ashlar finish, but has no resistance to the weather. More next time.

