

Ray Gasson & Associates

Prescote Manor Farm, Cropredy, Oxfordshire

Archaeological Watching Brief Report

SP 4732 4697

96/00962/F

OXFORD ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT

August 1997

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Prepared by: Helen Drake

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Checked by: *Anne Dill*

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Approved by: *MR Roberts*

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SUMMARY

Oxford Archaeological Unit carried out a Watching Brief during the construction of a new stock building at Prescote Manor Farm, Cropredy for Ray Gasson & Associates on behalf of the farm. Despite the close proximity of this development to known sites of archaeological interest no features or finds of archaeological significance were located.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Location and scope of work

In August 1997 Oxford Archaeological Unit carried out a Watching Brief at Prescote Manor Farm, Cropredy for Ray Gasson & Associates on behalf of the farm in respect of a planning application for the construction of a new stock building (Planning Application No. 96/00962/F) and a brief set by and a WSI agreed with the County Archaeologist. The development necessitated the machining of an area of approximately 0.05 hectares to a depth of 1m. The site was visited on three occasions by OAU personnel, on the 19th and 20th August 1997.

1.2 Geology and topography

The site lies in a peninsula of land formed at the confluence of the River Cherwell and the Highfurlong Brook. It is located approximately 6 km north of Banbury, and lies immediately to the east of Cropredy village. The site lies in the floodplain of the River Cherwell at approximately 100 metres above Ordnance Datum. Prior to the development the land was under rough pasture.

1.3 Archaeological and Historical Background

During the medieval period there was a small hamlet at Prescote, which was deserted at some point between c. 1450 and 1700, the only upstanding remains today being the Manor House. It lies within the ancient parish of Cropredy, for which there is growing evidence of settlement activity during the Anglo-Saxon period.

Possible pre-conquest origins for Cropredy were first suggested by place-name evidence, Cropredy being the modern corruption of two Old English words, 'ridig' and 'cropp', meaning 'a small stream' and 'water plants' respectively (Ekwall, 1960; Gelling, 1954). In 1993, an archaeological evaluation and subsequent excavation was carried out in the north-west of the village at a site known as Poplars Farm, which revealed evidence of Anglo-Saxon settlement activity. Pottery sherds were recovered, and postholes and ditches were recorded. The site lay within an area of earthworks consisting of a bank and external ditch, thought to delineate the village boundary during the medieval period (OAU, 1993).

During the time of the Domesday Survey, Cropredy was held in the main by the Bishop of Lincoln. Five mills are mentioned and the majority of land was either meadow or pasture. Cropredy became an important church in the region during the 11th, 12th and 13th centuries, largely as a result of its status as a main manorial centre and its proximity to water transport (Blair, 1994).

Prescote was held as part of the mother parish of Cropredy during this time and it has been suggested that they formed a 'paired' minster site, with Prescote containing the outlying devotional foci which acted as a complement to the mother church in Cropredy (Blair, 1994). Place-name evidence is suggestive of this as Prescote is a corruption of 'preost' and 'cot(e)', commonly taken to mean 'Priests' cottage' (Gelling, 1954). Further indications are present in the field names

immediately surrounding Prescote Manor, in particular 'Ankers Meadow' and 'Ankers Ground', 'anker' coming from 'ancre' meaning 'hermit' (Blair, 1994).

This latter assumption may, however, be misleading, owing to the existence of the Anker family at Cropredy during the late 17th and early 18th centuries. They are mentioned in sale catalogues dating from the late 17th century as having purchased a farm of 142 acres from Sir Brooke Boothby (VCH, Vol. X). If the land included the above fields then it would appear probable that the fields were named after the landholder.

The sites of Prescote and Cropredy have also been linked with the legend of St. Freomund, thought to be the son of King Offa who was killed in a battle with the Danes in 793. His remains are said to have been interred in the area of Prescote, the topography of which accords with the legend, being described as a plain between the Cherwell and the Bradmere, considered to mean the Highfurlong Brook. After a while they were moved to Cropredy church where they lay until their probable removal in the early 13th century to Dunstable Priory. One of the fields in the area is known as 'Freeman's Ham', thought originally to have meant 'land belonging to Freomund'. A shrine dedicated to St. Freomund also existed within Cropredy Church.

The layout of the medieval hamlet of Prescote is not visible today with only poor quality earthworks remaining. A newspaper article of 1876 claimed that in wet weather the foundations of old buildings could be seen in a field to the north of Prescote manor house, and there is documentary evidence dating to 1655, that a chapel also existed within the hamlet (VCH, Vol. X). The present manor house of Prescote was built c. 1721 by Sir John Danvers, although the external facade is now mainly Victorian (Pevsner, 1974). Remains of an earlier moat still exist around the house, and are thought to have belonged to the earlier manor house which stood on the site.

2 AIMS AND STRATEGY

The aims of the Watching Brief were to observe operations on site that might disturb or destroy archaeological deposits, and to hand-clean and sample excavate any significant features. It was considered likely that evidence of medieval earthworks relating either to the moat or to 'Prescote' village might be recovered.

The excavation of topsoil was not monitored as the OAU was informed of progress on site after this was completed. However, the stripping had been carried out to a high standard and it was felt that no archaeological information had been lost. Subsequent terracing for the construction of the new stock building was monitored to establish the presence/absence of archaeological remains, and spoil heaps were inspected for finds. The area excavated covered an area of approximately 0.05 hectares, to a depth of 1 metre.

No deposits of archaeological significance were noted and few finds were recovered during the work. Context numbers were assigned to the layers and features identified and record photographs were taken.

3 RESULTS

The new building was rectangular in plan and covered an area of approximately 0.05 hectares. Topsoil stripping revealed a thin layer of ploughsoil which directly overlay the natural sand on the eastern edge of site. On the western edge of site this layer had already been removed, revealing the natural sand. The site itself sloped gently from east to west, and the western edge of excavation abutted a modern storage shed running the length of the area. It is therefore likely that the ground on this side had already been disturbed during the construction of this building. The sand natural occurred at a depth of c. 0.24 m across the site, marked only by occasional rootholes.

Cutting the sand natural on the extreme western edge of site were two irregular shaped pits (Pits 5 & 7) containing animal bone. Pit 5 was the larger of the two and contained a single fill of mid grey-brown sandy silt to a depth of 0.19 m. A large quantity of bone was present, from which a total of seven fragments were kept, representing a 10% sample. Of these, six were identified by Nicola Scott (OAU) as cow, and one as horse. No dating evidence was recovered. Pit 7 was similar in appearance to Pit 5, again with a single fill of mid grey-brown sandy silt, but was smaller and only reached a depth of 0.06 m. This also contained a quantity of animal bone, in this case identified as probably sheep. No samples were kept and no dating evidence was recovered. Both features had been truncated by machining.

Overlying the sand natural on the eastern edge of site was a thin layer of ploughsoil (Layer 3), the depth of which varied slightly from north to south. Cutting this in the north-eastern corner was a small area, roughly 3 m by 4 m, of modern brick and rubble, thought to be the remains of dumping (Layer 2). Overlying this was the topsoil (Layer 1), a mid yellow-brown sandy silt, with inclusions of occasional natural flint and limestone. In section it was seen to reach a depth of 0.15 m at the eastern edge of the site. No finds were recovered.

6 CONCLUSIONS

No significant archaeological remains were found during the course of this Watching Brief. No evidence of any earthworks existed, nor were any residual finds of either an Anglo-Saxon or medieval date recovered. The site, particularly on its western edge, is already likely to have been disturbed by the previous construction of storage sheds. The ploughsoil identified on site was undated, as were the two animal pits, but is likely to be recent.

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Helen Drake
Oxford Archaeological Unit
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Appendix 1 Archaeological Context Inventory

Context	Type	width (m)	thick (m)	Comment	Finds	No.	Date
1	Layer		0.15	Topsoil			
2	Layer		0.10	Rubble layer			
3	Layer		0.05 - 0.09	Ploughsoil			
4	Layer			Natural Sand			
5	Pit Cut	1.25	0.19	Animal Pit			
6	Fill	1.25	0.19	Fill of Pit	Bone	5	
7	Pit Cut	0.62	0.06	Animal Pit			
8	Fill	0.62	0.06	Fill of Pit			

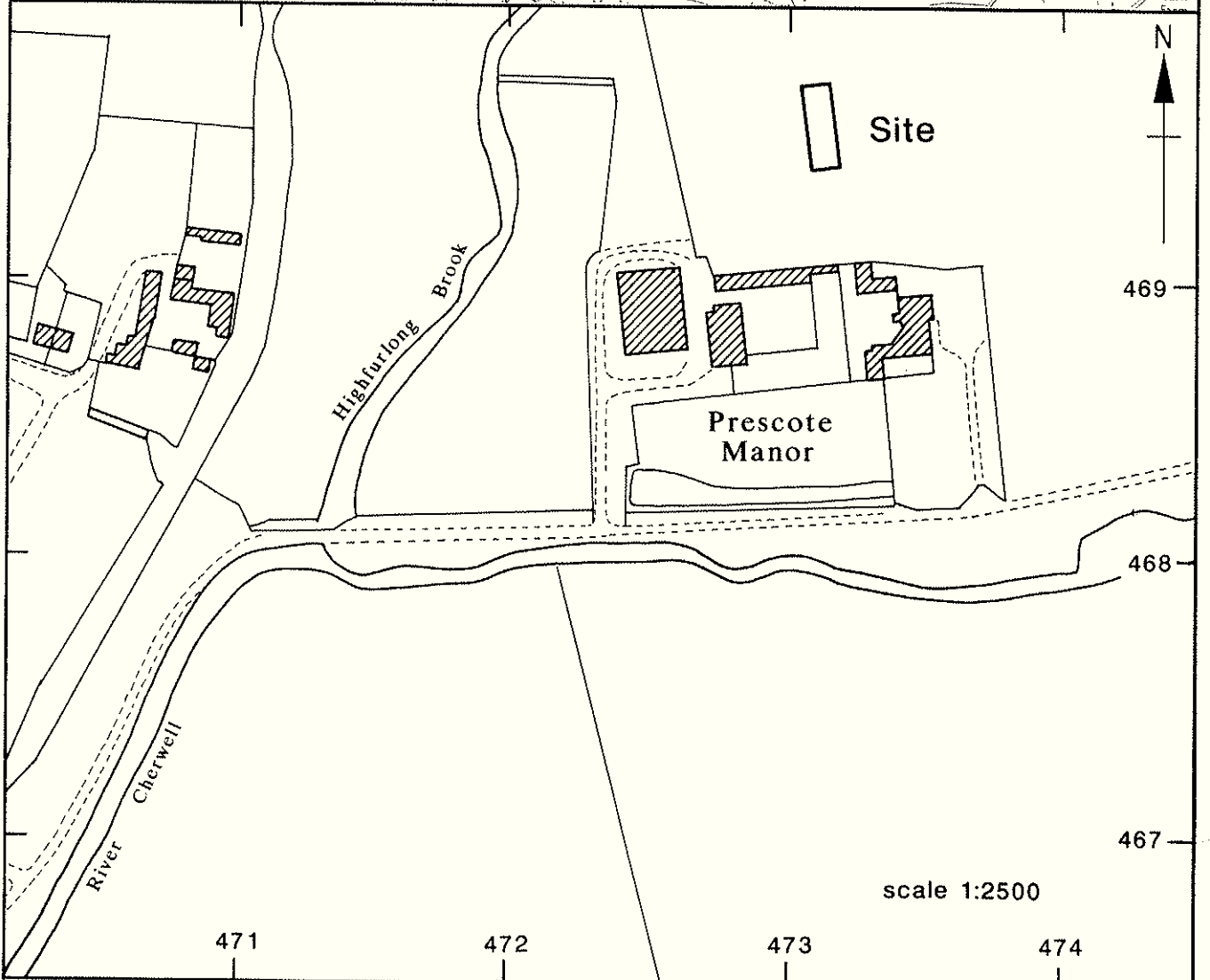
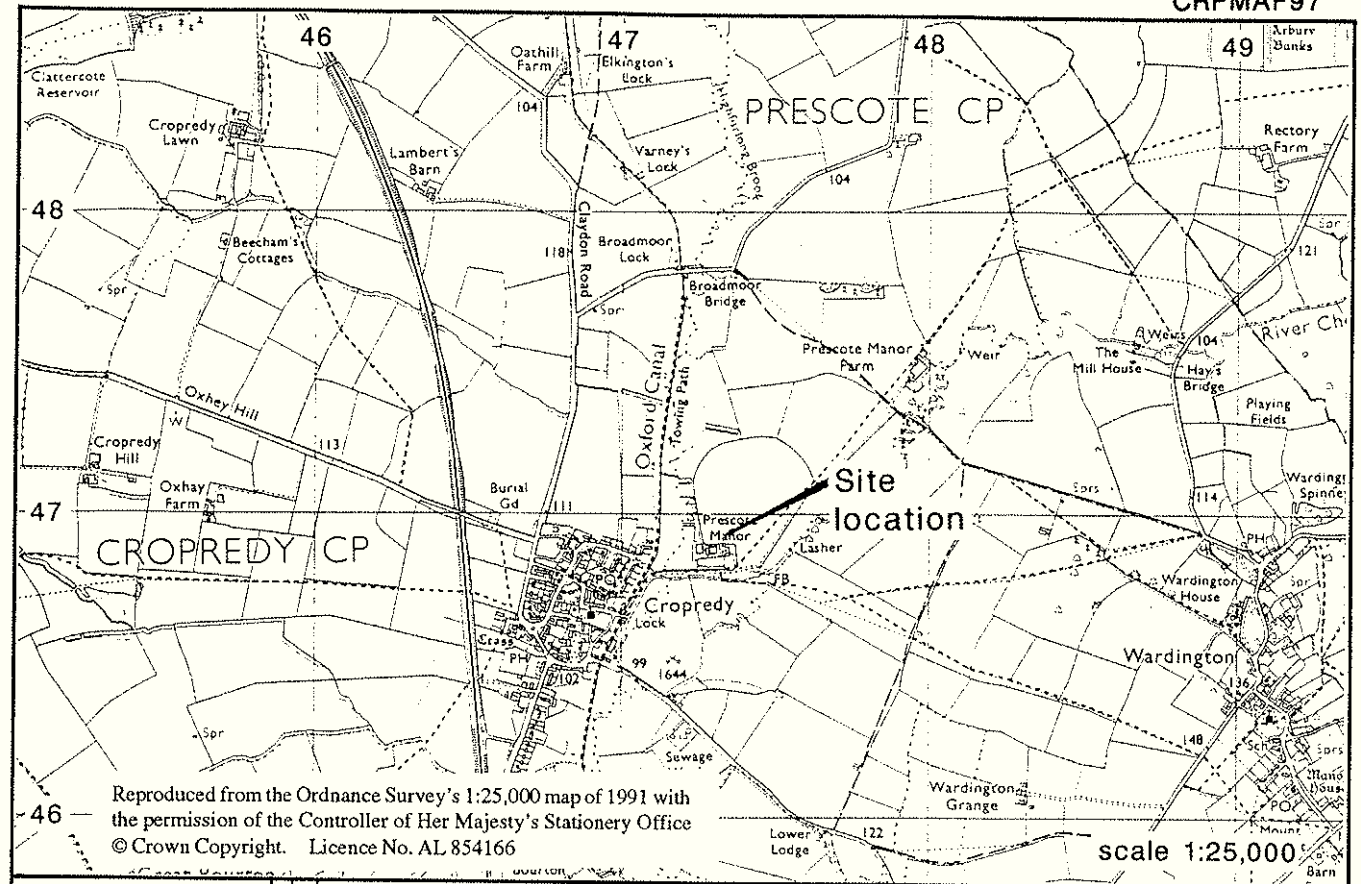


Figure 1



OXFORD ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT

Janus House, Osney Mead, Oxford, OX2 0ES

Tel: 01865 263800 Fax: 01865 793496

email: oau-oxford.demon.co.uk

