

St Birinus School
Queen Street
Dorchester on Thames
Oxfordshire



**Archaeological
Watching Brief Report**



Oxford Archaeology

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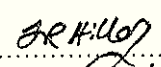
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Prepared by: James Mumford
Position: Supervisor
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Checked by: Paul Booth
Position: Senior Project Manager
Date: 3rd August 2004

Approved by: Nick Shepherd
Position: Head of Fieldwork
Date: 5th August 2004

Signed.....  PP. N. SHEPHERD

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Oxford Archaeology

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Janus House
Osney Mead
Oxford OX2 0ES
t: (0044) 01865 263800
f: (0044) 01865 793496

e: info@oxfordarch.co.uk
w: www.oxfordarch.co.uk

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Oxfordshire*****ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF REPORT*****CONTENTS**

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SUMMARY

In July 2004 Oxford Archaeology (OA) carried out an archaeological watching brief at St Birinus School, Queen Street, Dorchester on Thames, Oxon (NGR SU 5788 9439). The work was commissioned by British Telecom in advance of the installation of a new service duct. The watching brief revealed two undated soil horizons pre-dating the construction of the school.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Location and scope of work

- 1.1.1 In July 2004 Oxford Archaeology (OA) carried out an archaeological watching brief at St Birinus School, Queen Street, Dorchester on Thames, Oxon (Fig. 1). The work was commissioned by British Telecom in respect of the installation of a new service duct.
- 1.1.2 A project brief was set by Paul Smith of Oxfordshire County Archaeological Service (OCAS).
- 1.1.3 OA prepared a Written Scheme of Investigation (WSI) detailing how it would meet the requirements of the brief.

1.2 Geology and topography

- 1.2.1 The site lies on the Thames Valley terrace gravels. Brickearth has been recorded overlying the gravels around Dorchester Abbey church, although gault and greensand deposits are located beyond the gravel terraces (British Geological Survey, Sheet 254) at *c* 49 m above OD. The site is situated in the school playground on the eastern side of Queen Street.

1.3 Archaeological and historical background

- 1.3.1 The archaeological background to the watching brief was prepared for the WSI for the project (OA 2004) and is reproduced below.
- 1.3.2 Dorchester has been a focal point for human activity for *c* 4000 years. The immediate vicinity was part of a larger monumental landscape from as early as the Mid Neolithic with the existence of a Neolithic Cursus which was destroyed by 20th century quarrying activities.
- 1.3.3 Dorchester on Thames is situated within the site of a small Roman town, which consisted of roughly rectangular defences enclosing a civil settlement of about 13.5 hectares. It is generally thought to have been developed in the Flavian period subsequent to late Iron Age and possible early Roman military phases. An unusual increase in late Roman (Theodosian) coinage implies a thriving occupation throughout the 4th century and probably into the 5th century.

- 1.3.4 The present St Birinus School lies just outside the approximate line of the north-east defences of the town. The line of the destroyed rampart was defined by Hogg and Stevens in their 1935-6 excavations (Hogg and Stevens 1937). They interpreted a light gravelly/clayey layer as the vestiges of the destroyed bank material. During archaeological works within the school grounds in 1994, evidence of some peripheral extramural occupation dating from the 1st to the 4th centuries AD was encountered. The archaeological deposits were found to be only 0.2 m below the surface in places and therefore it was possible that the 0.5 m depth of the communication duct would impact upon sensitive deposits.
- 1.3.5 Dorchester has been a centre of Christianity for nearly fourteen centuries. It came to prominence as a religious centre in AD 635 when Oswald of Northumbria, overlord of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms and a Christian king, met the Pagan king Cynegils of Wessex near Dorchester. The two kings not only celebrated the marriage of Cynegils' daughter to Oswald, but also Cynegils' baptism by a missionary bishop named Birinus. According to the eighth century historian Bede the two kings gave Birinus the city of Dorchester, then called Dorcic, for his episcopal see. Hence Birinus built a church in the city in the mid-7th century. It has been asserted that the present church is possibly situated on the site of Birinus' first Saxon church. Birinus was buried in Dorchester in 650 and had sainthood bestowed on him posthumously. However, in the 660s, when war seemed imminent with the northern Kingdom of Mercia, the episcopal see was moved to the relative safety of Winchester in the south. At a later point the relics of St Birinus were taken there.
- 1.3.6 The church at Dorchester became part of the diocese of Leicester, being served by secular canons for the next century or so, until the Danes invaded West Mercia. At this time the bishoprics of Leicester and Lindsey were dismantled and in AD 869 Dorchester again became the seat for a vast Mercian see, stretching from the Thames to the Humber.
- 1.3.7 The last Saxon bishop of Dorchester, Wulfwig, died in 1067. He was succeeded by the only Norman bishop of Dorchester, Remigius who moved the seat of the see to Lincoln. The church at Dorchester was once again served by secular canons until 1140 when Alexander of Lincoln refounded the church as an abbey of Augustinian Canons. A new church was constructed in the transitional Norman style, a cruciform plan, without aisles. The west end of the Norman church is the nave of today's abbey church.
- 1.3.8 In 1225 the tomb of St Birinus was opened, making the abbey a popular place of pilgrimage. This initiated an extensive programme of rebuilding with the addition of the north choir aisle, which included an intricately carved marble shrine for the saint, added around 1320. Later this was moved westward to create the south nave aisle, now the People's Chapel. In the final phase of building, around 1340, the chancel was extended by one bay; this area is the present day sanctuary. The south porch was added in the 16th century, and in 1602 a new tower was built incorporating older material.
- 1.3.9 The church flourished until 1536, during the reign of Henry VIII when the abbey was dissolved and the shrine destroyed. Richard Beauforest 'a great riche man' of

Dorchester bought the monastic parts of the church so that the people of his parish could use them. The site has been the centre of worship for the inhabitants of Dorchester ever since.

2 PROJECT AIMS AND METHODOLOGY

2.1 Aims

- 2.1.1 To identify and record the presence/absence, extent, condition, quality and date of archaeological remains in the areas affected by the development.
- 2.1.2 To make available the results of the archaeological investigation.

2.2 Methodology

- 2.2.1 After the tarmac had been cut, the trench was excavated to depth by a mini excavator using a 0.20 m wide toothless bucket. Once this had been done the new ducting was laid and the trench backfilled. This was carried out under archaeological supervision.
- 2.2.2 All archaeological features were planned at a scale of 1:100 and where excavated their sections drawn at scales of 1:20. All excavated features were photographed using colour slide and black and white print film. A general photographic record of the work was made Recording followed procedures detailed in the *OAU Fieldwork Manual* (ed. D Wilkinson, 1992).

3 RESULTS

3.1 Description of deposits (Figs 2 and 3)

- 3.1.1 The new service trench was 19 m long, 0.25 m wide and 0.50 m maximum depth. The trench cut into a light yellow brown coarse sandy clay loam (1), which was exposed in the north-west end of the trench. This had been overlain by a 0.10 m to 0.44 m thick layer of cultivated soil of dark reddish brown silty sand (2). Overlying layer 2 was a 0.12 m thick layer of compact crushed brick and tarmac (3) forming a hardcore base for the 0.08 m thick tarmac surface (4) of the playground. Cutting into this layer at the south-east end of the trench was the foundation trench for the school buildings (5). This had been cut at the north-west end of the trench by the construction cut for the present road surface (6).

3.2 Finds

- 3.2.1 No finds were recovered during the watching brief.

3.3 Palaeo-environmental remains

- 3.3.1 No deposits suitable for environmental sampling were identified during the watching brief.

4 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

- 4.1.1 The trench did not reveal any significant archaeological remains due to its limited depth and width. It did cut into two soil horizons, the lower being exposed in the northwest end of the trench and representing a disturbed soil layer, but no finds were recovered to date it. Sealing this was a thick layer of cultivated soil, which represented old topsoil on the site, possibly pre-dating construction of the school. This suggests that the site was a garden or allotments prior to the school's construction. No finds were recovered from this layer within the confines of the trench to date it.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1 ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXT INVENTORY

<i>Context</i>	<i>Type</i>	<i>Depth</i>	<i>Width</i>	<i>Height</i>	<i>Comments</i>
1	Layer				Soil horizon
2	Layer	0.2 -3 m			Cultivated soil
3	Layer	0.12-15 m			Hardcore base
4	Layer	0.08 m			Tarmac surface of playground
5	Cut				Foundation cut for school building
6	Cut				Carriageway surfacing cut

APPENDIX 2 BIBLIOGRAPHY AND REFERENCES

A.H.A. Hogg and C.E. Stevens, 1937 Defences of Roman Dorchester, *Oxoniensia* Vol II

OA 1992 *Fieldwork Manual (1st edition ed. Wilkinson D)*

OA 1999 *Dorchester Abbey Church, Oxfordshire: An Archaeological Watching Brief Report*

OCAS 2004 *St Birinus School, Dorchester-upon-Thames: Design Brief for an Archaeological Watching Brief*

OA 2004 *St Birinus School, Dorchester-on-Thames, Oxfordshire Written Scheme of Investigation*

APPENDIX 3 SUMMARY OF SITE DETAILS

Site name: St Birinus School, Queen Street, Dorchester on Thames, Oxfordshire

Site code: DOSBS 04

Grid reference: NGR SU 5788 9439

Type of watching brief: Excavation of new service trench.

Date and duration of project: One day on the 27th July 2004.

Area of site: 19 m x 0.25 m x 0.50 m

Summary of results: Two undated soil horizons pre-dating the construction of the school were uncovered.

Location of archive: The archive is currently held at OA, Janus House, Osney Mead, Oxford, OX2 0ES, and will be deposited with Oxfordshire County Museums Service in due course, under the following accession number: OXCMS 2004.79

Server: 10:/oaupubs/_AtoH*/DOSBS04*/DOSBSWB*/St. Brimus School, Queen Street, Dorchester on Thames*/jim*30.07.04



Scale 1:25,000

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Figure 1: Site location

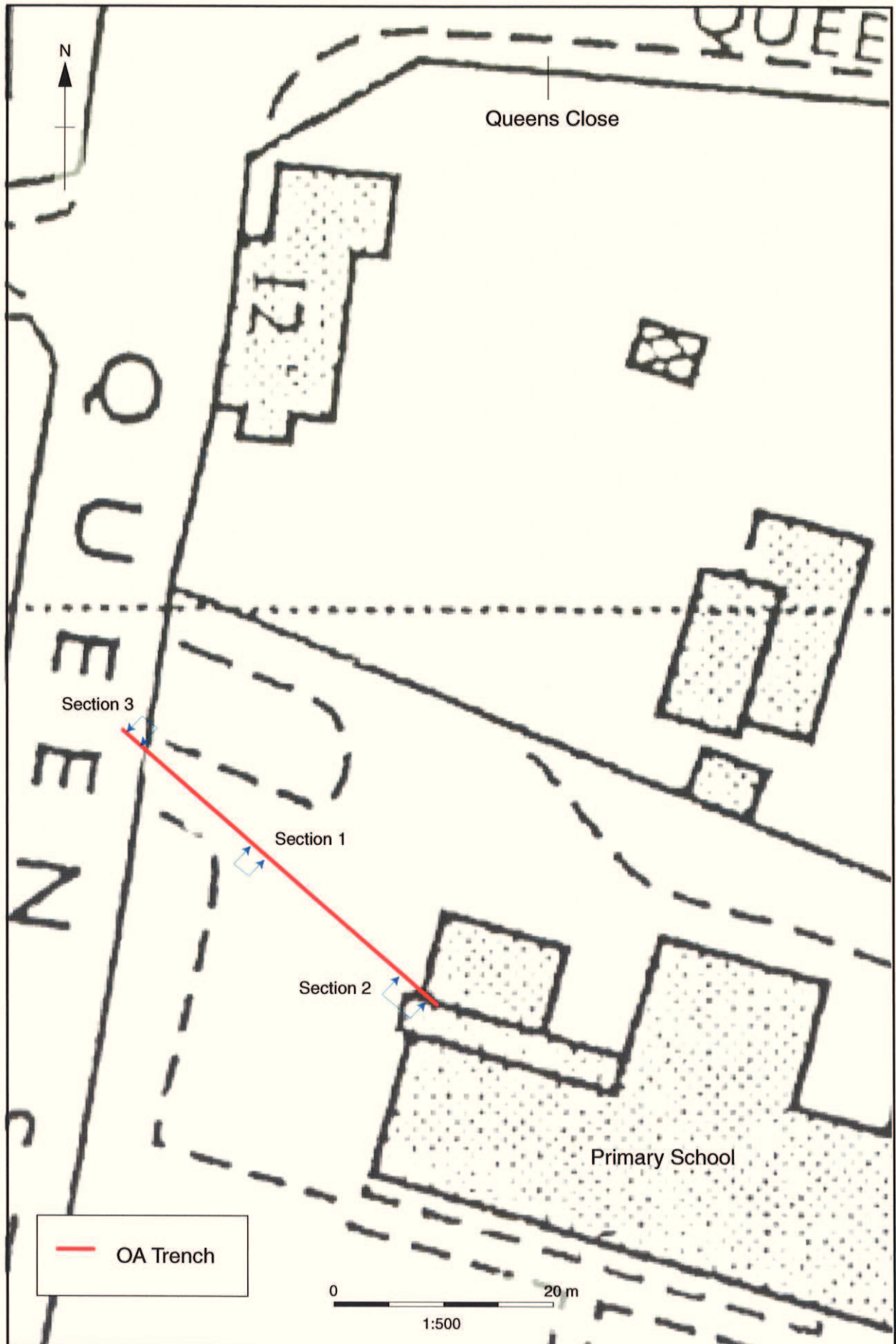


Figure 2: Location of Trench and sections

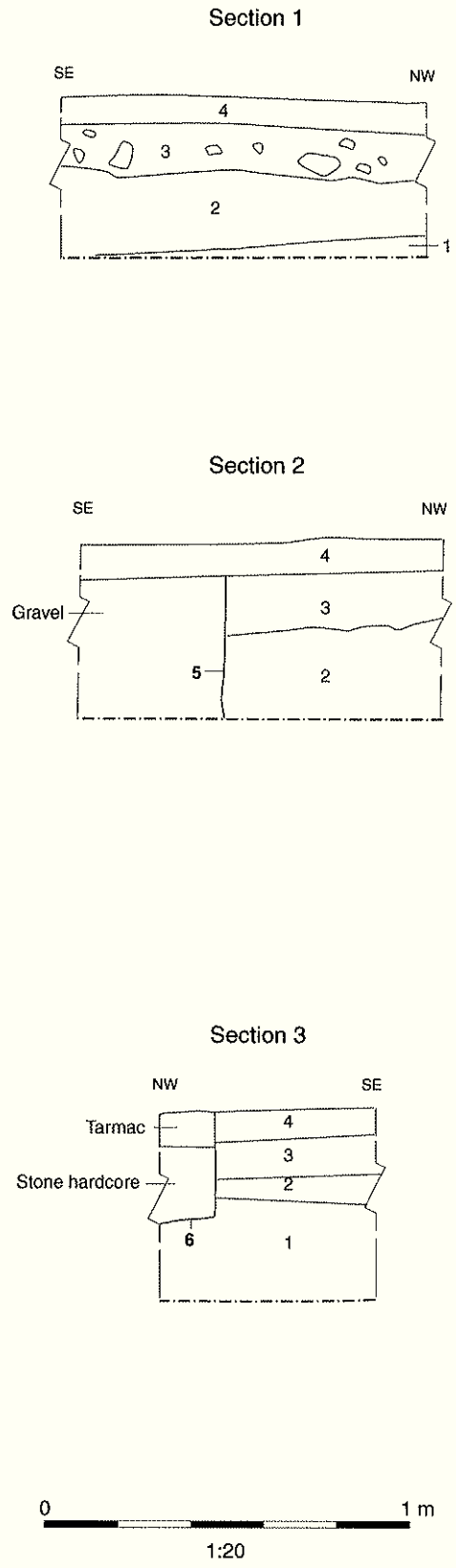
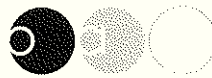


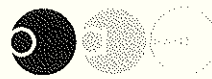
Figure 3: Sections 1-3



Oxford Archaeology

Janus House
Osney Mead
Oxford OX2 0ES

t: (0044) 01865 263800
f: (0044) 01865 793496
e: info@oxfordarch.co.uk
w: www.oxfordarch.co.uk



Oxford Archaeology North

Storey Institute
Meeting House Lane
Lancaster LA1 1TF

t: (0044) 01524 541000
f: (0044) 01524 848606
e: lancinfo@oxfordarch.co.uk
w: www.oxfordarch.co.uk



Director: David Jennings, BA MIFA FSA

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