

OXFORD (OX)

OXFORD - WORCESTER COLLEGE
HYTHE BRIDGE STREET DEVELOPMENT
INTERIM REPORT ON ARCHAEOLOGICAL
EXCAVATIONS 1987-89

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by Brian Durham

Summary: The Oxford Archaeological Unit carried out an investigation of the archaeological deposits exposed when Worcester College redeveloped its Hythe Bridge Street frontage in Oxford, and revealed important new evidence on a property which was constructed beside the bridge around the beginning of the 13th century, with evidence of the life of the occupants including working in gold.

Preliminary work on the site was done in 1987 by arrangement with the college, after the area had been cleared for the pre-contract civil engineering. Prior to the start of groundworks for the new accommodation block itself, the college negotiated with its main contractor, Messrs Milne Contracts, to give the Archaeological Unit a period of four days to record the known antiquities on the site.

Hythe Bridge is recorded in about AD 1200, and is seen as a new development of this time to provide an alternative route to Osney Abbey and north Berkshire. Previously the West Gate would have been the main route out of Oxford to the west, but was probably at this time becoming increasingly disrupted by additions to the castle defences. The new bridge would have attracted settlement along both its approaches, a pattern which has been seen elsewhere in Oxford at this time, as a growing population recognised the potential of permanent bridges for attracting passing trade. The bridge was built by Osney Abbey, and the abbey cartulary records tenements on the Worcester College side as early as 1220-25 in the name of John the Fisher.

Recognising the potential for medieval buildings and a 'hythe' on the site, and knowing of the college's interest in the history of its own property, the Unit made approaches in 1987 to assess the quality of the remains. The college was unable to finance this work, so the Unit arranged for members of the University Archaeological Society to do it under our supervision. This followed a watching brief on the diversion of the main North Oxford sewer; which was a necessary preliminary to the college's building proposals.

THE SEWER DIVERSION (September 1987)

It is comparatively rare to see trenches 4m deep in the city, and the college's need to reroute the sewer offered a chance to confirm the local bore-hole evidence for a thick peat deposit alongside the Castle Mill Stream. Here the peat formed layer between c. 54.4m and 55.4m OD, very conminuted and without the

'twigs and branches' reported to the south. Nor was there any major timber structure as would be needed if this had been the site of the hythe. This was the pattern along most of the trench, and it was only at the extreme south end, where it ran into the disturbance caused by the Victorian sewer, that there were significant deposits above it. These took the form of a thick layer of gravelly silt up to 55.7m OD, above which were finely laminated layers of silt and gravel typical of medieval domestic floors. This profile is just like the domestic deposits either side of the medieval south bridge, and signalled the likelihood of a built-up frontage, and hence the need for further trial trenching.

TRENCH II (OUAS, Autumn 1987) by Roger Ainsley

The excavations were under the direction of Andrew Millard of the University Archaeological Society. They recovered a sequence which commenced with the dumping of refuse (L35-L42) into a marshy area adjoining a channel of the Thames in the mid 12th century. At the end of that century stone footings for buildings, presumably timber framed and fronting Hythe Bridge Street, were put down (F28,33,34). Although the remains of floor layers were found (L29,30,32), these were not hard packed and the main occupation may have taken place on the floor above which would have had a more convenient access to the street.

Above these footings was an accumulation of loam with pottery of the mid to late 13th century (L22,26,27). These layers were overlain by soil containing 17th century material, and 19th century yard surfaces and a gully formed the last phase of occupation (L1-21), much of which was excavated by machine.

TRENCH III (OAU, June 1989)

This trench was excavated by courtesy of Messrs Milne Contracts, using a machine sub-hired to the Unit. The trench was 12.5m long, up to 2m wide and between 2m and 3m from the boundary wall on Hythe Bridge Street. It was dug down to the level where the first stone walling appeared, 57.58m OD, at least 0.6m higher than the stone seen in the Trench I. A workforce was therefore hurriedly assembled to record the associated deposits.

Within the angle of walls F104 and F104/1 were a series of internal floor surfaces, excavated as L107, L109-109/2 and L110/1. They were all compacted and finely laminated, typical of the sort of floors one finds in medieval houses of this period in Oxford. A conspicuous feature was a drain lined with stones (F111), which ran across the building and through the north wall adjacent to a doorway (F112/1). This drain must have been set into a trench during its use, and therefore indicates that the building had a later life after more floors had built up. Outside the building to the north at this time was a yard surface, but again there was an indication from a wall at the east end (F108) that there must have been a north extension at some later stage.

The most interesting and unusual feature of this building was a low dais (F113) around the inside of Walls F104 and 104/1. It became gradually clearer as the floors were removed, and was eventually standing to a height of 0.15m (6") and about 0.6m wide. Alternative explanations of this structure are discussed below, but it must have represented an obstruction in the room. Beneath it was an area of burning F113/1 and within it a well-laid pile of stones F113/2.

Ultimately the walls were exposed as originally constructed, forming an L-shape with a door to the rear. The underlying deposits were investigated in the area to the east of the building, and proved to be dump layers L106/1, /2, the nature of which became apparent with the salvage work as follows.

TRENCH IV (OAU Salvage work July 1989)

A watching brief was kept on Milne's groundworks following the infilling of the main excavation. The ground beams yielded little information, but the drainage connections in the extreme southeast corner showed what could have been recovered from a full excavation of the site. In the section exposed below the line of the south boundary wall were a series of floor layers which must have belonged to the medieval building immediately adjoining that in Trench III, lying on dumped loam in the same way. To the east however the base layer changed, with a bank of gravel rising up, and floors of another building at a level about 0.25m higher. There is little doubt that the gravel was the foot of the second terrace, and that in the area between these two profiles (which had been disturbed by existing services) was a natural waters edge at the margin of the Castle Mill Stream. It was thus evident that the dumped loam both here and in Trench III was a platform created to carry these houses.

THE FINDS

Detailed analysis of the finds has not yet been undertaken, and the following brief account is intended to show the range. The richest deposit was a mid to late 13th century level L27 in Trench II, with two whetstones, a lead stylus, an iron horseshoe, staple and shears. Most interesting was a sherd of a crucible with a tiny globule of very pure gold, described by Julian Henderson of the Research Laboratory for Archaeology as typical of medieval gold working. From a similar level in Trench III came the decorated lid of a bronze box (SF3, L107), and another unidentified bronze fitting (SF2, L106). From the upper fill disturbed by the machine came a jetton identified by Nicholas Mayhew as 15th-16th century German origin, and the skeleton of a swan which was perhaps deliberately buried in the corner of the college garden. The pottery represents the highly decorated period of 13th century Oxfordshire tablewares, including types from the southeast of the county. Maureen Mellor notes that some of the jugs may be partly reconstructable.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In an ideal situation the site would have been totally stripped to expose the full plan of the medieval buildings, which have now been detected over an area 20m long by 7.5m wide. More limited objectives were achieved within what was available however, showing how the area was first occupied, and how the buildings were modified and eventually deserted.

There was also some advance in understanding what was here before the buildings. Environmental analysis of the peat by Mark Robinson showed that the vegetable matter was too comminuted to allow identification of seeds etc, and since the only other finds were of bone it is impossible to date the deposit. There are two alternative explanations of its origin, which are worth stating because they may soon be illuminated by work on the Nuffield College development on the other side of Hythe Bridge Street

1. The peat built up in a body of static water held back by the weir at the castle, ie the castle 'mill pond', and need not be older than the mill, either Norman or late Saxon;

2. It was originally a much older and deeper channel, and the deeper peat belongs to a period for which nothing similar survives in Oxford.

Although not found on the Worcester College site, the deepest peat is at a level well below what would be expected for mill flooding. If it is indeed older than 'Oxford' as we know it, ie c. 8th century AD, then it might include traces of a prehistoric or Roman crossing which has been postulated in this area by means of projecting the line of the ridgeway track coming down Harcourt Hill.

However it was formed, the peat is an indicator of an impressively wide channel at the time when it began to be filled in. From pottery evidence this seems to be late 12th or early 13th century (information from Maureen Mellor), which ties in nicely with the dating of Hythe Bridge itself (c.1200). What is not clear is how much of this channel was strictly 'natural'; the town would have had a steady demand for gravel, and the waters edge would have been a good source, as has been argued for the south margin of the town at Littlegate Street; otherwise the natural channel might have been widened to give extra protection to the castle itself.

Deliberate reclamation of shallow water for 13th century building developments has recently been described elsewhere in Oxford. What can be deduced of the building plan on the present site is not especially regular, suggesting that there was no tight monastic control from Oseney Abbey. The low plinth or dais F113 around the inside of Wall F104 was unusual, possibly built deliberately at an early stage in the life of the house. There are however many cases where timber settings in similar positions have been interpreted as 'benches', and it is possible that here we have a series of early floors which have been protected by

benches while the centre of the floor was eroded by vigorous sweeping.

A preliminary look at the finds shows nothing to link the property with the occupational surname of its first tenant, John the Fisher, nor indeed is it obvious from the building plan how he managed to split it into four houses for his four daughters in 1235-6 (Cart. Osen. II, 361). The answer may be that the property took up most of the frontage from Hythe Bridge to the Worcester Street corner, in which case there would have been ample space. Further discussion of the life of the household should however await a complete study of the finds, which can be expected to show the background to the evidence for gold working, and the date at which the property began to be deserted.

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Oxford Archaeological Unit
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