



OXFORD ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT
46 Hythe Bridge Street
Oxford OX1 2EP
Telephone Oxford (0865) 243888

OXFORD ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT NEWSLETTER INCLUDING
OXFORDSHIRE PARISH SURVEY NEWS

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Contributions to the next Newsletter should be sent to the above address not later than Monday, 5 September 1983.

Gloucestershire

FAIRFORD: CLAYDON PIKE - David Miles and Simon Palmer

Excavations recommenced in April following the large scale topsoil stripping in late winter. Fortunately the crop mark plots showed an accurate and complete picture of the paddock systems, extending south and east of the main excavations, and this kept salvage work to a minimum.

The only surprise was a small circular building cut by a Victorian field ditch at the back of the main platform. This was c. 7m in diameter with broad stone footings and its interior contained almost two hundred late Roman coins. This circular shrine in addition to the rectangular shrine at the centre augments the interesting religious element of the site.

The building sequence at the front of the main platform has now been clarified. The late Roman 'villa' building underwent various stages of development, the main ones being the addition of two rooms at the back. The later of these contained two pits or tanks running from wall to wall. One pit was sunk as deep as the Roman wells while the other went down to the top of the water table. The function of these is not obvious although tanning is one possibility.

An earlier but similar pit 5m square lay just to the north and this produced the remains of a small basket.

Contemporary with this late building, although not standing as long, was a smaller two roomed structure. One room of which appears to have contained a hypocaust system. This was evidenced by a stoke hole in the adjacent room and a collapsed and much disturbed opus signinum floor overlying an original cavity.

Pre-dating both these buildings was a smaller rectangular building. This also had stone footings and appears to have had painted plaster on the walls. The date of construction is not yet clear but it may date from the later second century.

All three of these stone buildings overlay a large aisled-building which probably belongs to the late first century layout of the site and thus is presumably contemporary with the aisled 'barn' at the rear of the platform.

Two parallel lines of posts, seven in each row, would have formed a building similar in size to the aisled 'barn', but with three extra pairs of aisle posts. Further excavation is required to determine the agricultural or domestic usage (or combined) of this building.

Excavation is at present concentrated on the south of the main platform in an area due to be quarried in the near future. Here, fronting on to the central crossroad is a small gatehouse or elaborate gateway. This forms the principle entrance into the platform and the road leads from this to the side of the aisled building and thence into the paddocks at the rear.

At present an MSC scheme is working the site but from 4 July a large scale volunteer excavation will begin which is in need of volunteers in August and September.

Oxfordshire

BICESTER: BICESTER HOUSE, QUEENS AVENUE - Richard Chambers and Jeff Perry.

Two trial trenches to investigate the nature and extent of medieval settlement to the north of Bicester House have now been completed. The land will be developed for housing.

The site covers approximately 2 hectares and is bounded to the south-west by the present grounds of Bicester House, to the south-east by Lower House Close, to the north-west by Queen's Avenue and to the north-east by the river Bure which is now just a stream. There is a narrow flood plain which extends some 30m from the present river channel providing a band of low, wetter ground along the north-east edge of the site.

The area is well sheltered. Consequently traces of slight earthworks on the southern part of the site have remained obscured by undergrowth throughout the winter. The earthworks appear to be confined to the higher ground away from the flood plain.

Both trial trenches were excavated by hand. The first trench was located some 70m north-west of Lower Home Close where extensive medieval settlement remains were uncovered by building contractors in 1970. The trial trench crossed a low platform some 18m wide and revealed medieval building foundations covered with rubble. Part of one foundation was cleared of rubble. The 0.7m wide foundation comprised unmortared coursed limestone rubble which survived several courses high. A quantity of medieval pottery and domestic refuse was recovered.

The second trial trench lay further to the north-west, some 150m from Lower Home Close and well beyond the area of possible earthworks. This trench also revealed medieval occupation levels resting directly on the natural limestone bedrock. A substantial north-south medieval boundary? ditch 1m deep contained limestone rubble in its upper filling. This is assumed to be building rubble and was associated with medieval pottery.

Locally it is assumed that the present Bicester House marks the site of the medieval manor house owned until the Reformation by the Nuns of Markyates in Bedfordshire. The foundation uncovered in the first trial trench was similar in build to those of the 12th century manor house at Chesterton. It is possible that the first Bicester trial trench has revealed a part of the Nuns of Markyates' manor house or an associated structure.

BICESTER: LAUNTON INDUSTRIAL ESTATE, SKIMMINGDISH LANE - Richard Chambers and Mike Shakespear

Construction work continues on this site. The site has not yielded any archaeological material to date. However it is proving impossible to keep a constant eye on the ground work. Several archaeological monuments are known from cropmarks.

CHALGROVE: MANOR FARM - Phillip Page

Two small scale watching briefs were carried out by Phillip Page at Manor Farm, Chalgrove. Several trenches for drains were dug in the grounds of the late 15th century moated manor house and were part of the restoration of both the house and the gardens that is currently being carried out by the present owners. It was hoped that these trenches might have revealed some evidence of the medieval buildings which preceded the present structure and were mentioned in a survey of 1336. No evidence of medieval occupation was revealed, only post-medieval occupation debris was recovered and there was no evidence of the earlier buildings.

Work has also begun on the interior of the late medieval Manor House itself. The original screens from the screens passage have been found beneath later plaster. There is clear evidence of a louvre in the roof. The building was constructed in two stages according to Malcolm Airds. The second stage has been held together by early 'nuts and bolts'. So far nothing medieval has been revealed in the floor levels.

MERTON: WEST END FARM - Richard Chambers and Jeff Perry

At Merton a set of fishponds centred 250 m to the north of the parish church have been surveyed during the course of their destruction. Although the destruction of these well preserved ponds is to be regretted the work did provide some useful information on the pond construction and management.

In its final form the fishing appears to have comprised five ponds on marshy ground between a spring line and a stream. Three ponds were arranged in line parallel to the stream. A further two linear ponds, one to the east and one to the west of the three centre ponds were both arranged at right angles to the stream and hill slope.

Mechanically cut sections through the dams separating centre ponds followed by the bulldozing of the banks showed that all except the westernmost pond were filled with spring water. In the case of the centre three ponds, spring water emanated from the pond bottoms. None of the ponds were connected by deep sluice channels although shallow spill-ways to accommodate overflow must

have been present originally.

The ponds lay on land which formerly belonged to Manor Farm. The present farm house still retains parts of the Elizabethan building. A detailed estate map drawn sometime after 1763 only illustrates the easternmost of the five ponds, suggesting that the fishing began as a single pond with further ponds added during the next century. The 1st edition 25 inch to the mile Ordnance Survey map of 1881 shows all five ponds in existence. Earthworks suggest the eastern of the three central ponds had been extended twice, the final extension being made after 1881 as it is not included on the O.S. map.

This fishery appears to have continued to grow for about one hundred years. It is not known when the ponds fell into disuse.

NORTHMOOR: WATKINS' FARM - Tim Allen

Gravel stripping at the ARC pit at Northmoor (SP 4203) has uncovered a new Middle Iron Age and Roman settlement. This had not shown on aerial photographs because the area in low-lying first terrace, and the water table is permanently high. So far part of a large enclosure c.60m across with an 'antenna' ditch at the south-east entrance and several smaller enclosures both inside and outside it have been planned. There are also Roman trackways and enclosure ditches containing pottery probably of 1st century AD date.

Both Iron Age and Roman ditches have produced waterlogged environmental samples, and from a very preliminary assessment Mark Robinson says that the IA environment may have been similar to that at Mingies Ditch, Hardwick, another low-lying enclosed Middle Iron Age site, that is scrubby grassland with some hedges (OAU Annual Report, 1980). Finds from the Iron Age ditches have included one or two decorated sherds, and also querns, crucible fragments and worked bone. It is hoped to carry out a salvage excavation in the next few weeks.

OXFORD: BROAD STREET, THE CLARENDON BUILDING - Brian Durham

We all know that the traditional land marks of university life are slowly disappearing into the mire, but nowhere is it more obvious than in the basement of Clarendon Building. Cracks up to 1 inch wide have appeared between ceilings and partition walls in the area of the gents' loo, and there is no doubt that the bottom is falling out of Hawkesmoor's great press building. Nor is this situation new: A 2 inch fill has been previously added to one door, since which a further 4 inch 'ventilation' space has opened up too. Brian Durham reports that the culprits are the city ditch, and clearly it had been forgotten when the partition walls were installed. Be not dismayed, the building itself is perfectly sound and its piers clearly extend the full 15ft - 20ft to the bottom of the ditch. The University Surveyor's office is currently devising a way of installing a new floor and partitions, either supported on piles or keyed into the main piers.

OXFORD: OSENEY ABBEY - Brian Durham

Just as Jonathan Sharpe has completed his report on the Unit's excavations since 1975, so the contractor have laid their drains exposing new and very

substantial walls. Fortunately the story is consistent. The new finds confirm Jonathan's conclusion that the precinct was first extended south onto very unstable ground which needed foundations of great depth, and that this area was later abandoned when a river diversion to the west released a new island for development. Brian Durham will continue to watch the building works, since the last drains will not be put in till summer 1984.

RADLEY: BARROW HILLS - Claire Halpin

In mid April the excavation of barrow 1 of Barrow Hills Bronze Age cemetery commenced. The site lies c.1 mile north-east of Abingdon. The cemetery primarily consists of seventeen barrows aligned in two rows, and was first discovered by aerial photography in the 1930s. To date eleven barrows have been archaeologically investigated.

Prior to excavation no evidence of the mound of barrow 1 was visible therefore the initial trial trenching was excavated by hand. These trenches showed that the mound and Bronze Age ground surface had been entirely removed. The plough soil was shallow (c. 30 cm deep) and plough marks were clearly seen cutting the natural gravel. Because of the poor preservation, apart from deturfing, the central area has continued to be worked by hand and about threequarters of the barrow has been cleared.

A sparse scatter of worked flint was recovered from the ploughsoil. This paucity of material is in keeping with the results of fieldwalking by the Abingdon Society over this site. The majority of this material consists of nondescript flint flakes, but a barbed and tanged arrowhead was found and this may have originally been deposited in the mound (i.e. comparable to that found in the mound of barrow 4a, Oxoniensis, xlii (1948), 6).

The ditch has been sectioned in four places and its profile consists of sloping sides, an inner ledge and square base. Its form and silt pattern is directly comparable to that recorded by Michael Parrington for barrow 2 (Oxoniensis, xlii (1977), 34). A single flint blade has been recovered from the primary silt. An upper silt contained animal bone, a Roman sherd and an Iron Age sherd. A Roman coin was recovered from a layer which spread over and dipped down into the ditch.

Threequarters of the central area has been cleared of plough soil and c. 6 ? pits have been revealed.

The excavation is part of a larger 2-year archaeological programme in advance of a housing development. Neolithic and Saxon remains in the same field are to be investigated by Reading University and the Unit.

The Abingdon Archaeological Society, with assistance from the Oxford University Archaeological Society and local volunteers, form the excavation team for the present work. It is envisaged that they will go on to excavate barrows 12 and 13. Excavation continues at weekends until September or October, volunteers are welcome and should contact the Unit for details.

SHRIVENHAM BY-PASS - Richard Chambers

Construction work has begun on the Shrivenham by-pass. Several members of the Shrivenham Local History Society have organised a rota to watch for archaeological features.

WALLINGFORD: ST MARY'S STREET, TOWN DEFENCES - Brian Durham

The Wallingford Historical and Archaeological Society, under Roger Bettess, have started a trench to investigate the front of the old rampart line opposite Claire Halpin's 'Wilders' site of last autumn. The object is to see if any of the original outer facing survives, and how it is constructed. The last time the outer face was seen was in the early 1960s when Nicholas Brooks exposed the 13th century north gate and its ditch. He suggested that the Saxon rampart had a facing of turf which had been stripped from beneath the bank, but which had been subsequently eroded by successive widenings of the ditch. It is hoped that there may have been less erosion on the south side of the town and that we may at last be able to confirm the line of the original face.

WENDLEBURY: LAND NORTH OF ALCHESTER - Richard Chambers

Ground work for a new chicken farm, and access road and two dwellings for Faccenda Chicken Ltd has begun on the north side of Akeman Street some 400m north of the Roman town walls. A watch will be maintained for traces of the extra-mural settlement known to have surrounded the walled area of the town. To date, ground work has proceeded slowly. Several possible natural features have been revealed but virtually no Romano-British domestic refuse.

WITNEY: 27 MARKET SQUARE - Richard Chambers Charles Gott

Charles Gott has now completed the primary excavation archive. It is hoped that a summary of the excavation will be written for Oxoniensia in the near future. A full excavation report will be prepared for the archive.

SUMMER EXCAVATION PROGRAMME

- Claydon Pike Excavations will continue until September. Volunteers are required for August and September.
- Northmoor, Watkins Farm Excavations with Tim Allen are possible during September. This new site is described above.
- Radley, Barrow Hills Excavations will take place every weekend throughout the summer and volunteers are welcome. In July, August and September excavation will take place during the week. The details are still being finalised. See above for the latest news on the site.

Rollright

George Lambrick will be excavating with the OUAs for 13th August for 2 weeks. Local volunteers will be welcome.

Stanton Harcourt, Gravelly Guy

George Lambrick will be excavating the Iron Age site from September - December on weekdays only.

For details of these or other sites please phone the Unit. We are always pleased to receive help with pot washing and the marking of finds.

We congratulate Maureen and Brian Durham on the birth of the 2nd All Unit Production; a little girl, Elaine, born on 15 April. Maureen Durham is probably better known to you by her professional name: Maureen Mellor.

