

Interpretation and discussion

Prehistoric (Figure 13)

The two curvilinear ditches of Phase 1 are interpreted as Bronze Age barrow ditches. The northern ditch in particular was sufficiently well preserved to establish its profile, dimensions and fill sequence at six separate points along its circumference (see above). Its overall area could also be estimated; given that just under half of its full extent lay within the area investigated, it would have an internal diameter of approximately 28 m (Fig. 4). Circular barrow ditches of this type are known from Barrow Hills at Radley to the south-west of Oxford, where internal diameters of the single ditched barrows ranged on average from 24-40 m, and where ditch profiles, fill sequences and dimensions were very similar to those described above (Barclay and Halpin 1999, figs 1.2 and 4.81). The deposition of primary fills in the northern ditch showed evidence of erosion consistent with the presence of an external bank, as more substantial quantities of gravel had accumulated towards the outside of the ditch.

It is unfortunate that the excavation was unsuccessful in retrieving a central grave or cremation pit, particularly as Figure 3 shows that the centre of the northern barrow would have lain within the area investigated. Disturbance in the form of pits and other features of Phases 2 and 5 is the likely reason for this absence, especially as the cremation pit may have been quite small; the cremation pit found at the centre of the Rex Richards Building barrow (see below) was only 0.5 m across (Parkinson *et al.* 1996, fig. 3).

Mollusc evidence from the northern ditch suggests a local environment of dry, open ground (see Robinson below) during the period immediately following the digging of the ditch (the molluscs were found in a primary fill). This reflects the

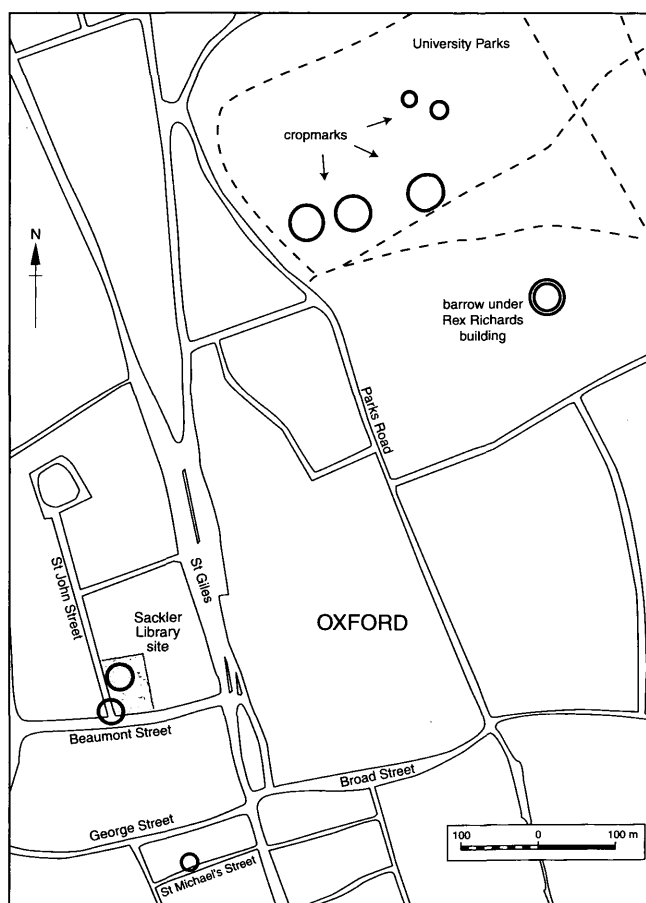


Figure 13: Known extent of the barrow cemetery in North Oxford

well drained nature of the site, on the second gravel terrace between the Cherwell and the Thames, and suggests that the land had been cleared before the barrows were constructed. This may have happened significantly earlier, or the clearance may have been contemporary, possibly to heighten the visual impact of the barrow cemetery itself.

Evidence for a Bronze Age barrow cemetery has already been recorded at a number of different sites just to the north of the confluence of the Rivers Thames and Cherwell, and partially under the city of Oxford itself. Cropmarks in the University Parks have been noted since the 17th century, when Dr Plot, first Keeper of the Ashmolean Museum, concluded that they were the result of lightning strikes (Piggott 1984, 206-9). The cropmarks indicate the presence of at least five barrows, amongst other features (Parkinson *et al.* 1996, 62-3). Excavation in 1993 at the Rex Richards building revealed a double-ditched barrow, rare for the Upper Thames, just to the south of the group in the Parks, with a central cremation and grave-like pit (*ibid.*). In 1985, excavations further to the south-west at St Michael's Street revealed another barrow ditch, and approximately 1 km directly south of the group in the Parks at Logic Lane, excavations in 1960-61 revealed prehistoric ditches one or both of which may also have been barrow ditches (Radcliffe 1962).

To the north-west of the Sackler Library site, barrow cemeteries have been observed as cropmarks on either side of the River Thames, in Port Meadow and Binsey (*ibid.*, fig. 1). Further indications of the presence of barrows in the North Oxford area comes from medieval place name evidence. Gelling cites field names from the 12th and 13th centuries which suggest that barrows were still visible at that time in Walton and Binsey (1953, 25 no. 2), and it is possible that the curvilinear boundary at the north-western corner of the later palace/friary precinct, shown on all of the historic maps and to a certain extent still surviving today, may be the result of the presence of a surviving earthwork when the precinct was first enclosed.

It is tempting to draw further conclusions from the name Beaumont itself. Meaning 'beautiful hill', it is thought to date from after the beginning of the university, and Gelling assumes it to be ironic as this area would have been 'flat, open arable land' (*ibid.*, 19). However, as there was no evidence found for significant agricultural activity in the area excavated between the Phase 1 ditches and the Phase 2 pits, it is possible that the barrows survived as earthworks into the medieval period, as appears to be the case to the north-west (see above). Another possible interpretation of the name is that it derives from the attractive views of the town and surrounding countryside enjoyed by scholars taking exercise there; the land is not in fact entirely flat, but lies at the top of a promontory which slopes away towards the Thames and Cherwell to the east, west and south. Views from here would no doubt have been improved from the top of a barrow mound.

Roman and middle Saxon

Although all of the finds from these two periods were residual, they provide useful evidence of activity in the area. Excavations at 24A St Michael's Street, south-west of the Sackler Library site, produced 15 sherds of residual Roman pottery (OAU forthcoming), so the Sackler finds are certainly not unusual. In the case of the middle-Saxon Ipswich ware, Blinkhorn (this volume) rightly defines its possible significance as evidence of trading at this time. Recent work has led to a better understanding of the nature and distribution of this type of pottery (*ibid.*) and previously excavated assemblages from Oxford could usefully be scanned to see if it is present elsewhere.

A Royal Plantation?

The pits assigned to Sub-phase 2.1 are likely to have been dug in order to plant young trees or saplings. This interpretation is based partly on the evidence

provided by the individual pits themselves, which were dug carefully, to a reasonably uniform size and shape, and then deliberately backfilled with a homogeneous deposit (see above). There is also good evidence for the pits having been laid out on a grid - see especially the southern half of the group (Fig. 6). The lack of root-marks in the side or base of any of the pits is due to the fact that tree roots do not penetrate gravel, but follow the top of it in search of fertile soil. This was seen to be the case with a large tree which stood in the middle of the Pusey Lane car park prior to excavation, the roots of which had grown considerable distances along the top of the gravel before finding pits to use as a nutrient source.

Dating of this group of tree-planting pits is based partly on artefactual evidence, with the caveat that the deposits filling the pits are obviously redeposited, and may even have been imported from elsewhere. However, the almost total lack of pottery from wares other than either Cotswold-type ware or Medieval Oxford ware points to a date no earlier than the mid-12th century (see Blinkhorn below). This date is supported by the presence of 'fiddle key' horseshoe nails most common during the 12th century (see Allen below). Stratigraphically, the pits can be dated as a group by the relationship of two of them to the buttressed building of Phase 3, which is clearly later (see above). This combination of artefactual and stratigraphic dating ties the planting pit group to the 12th-13th centuries, the period during which the area was within the precinct of Beaumont Palace (see above and Fig. 14).

It is therefore likely that the pits indicate a programme of tree planting during the royal occupation of the site. The planting of trees as elements of bowers or pleasaunces is common in association with medieval royal palaces (Bond and Tiller 1987, 46); in 1264 Henry III had 100 pear trees planted around Henry II's bower at Woodstock Palace (*ibid.*). This parallel is particularly significant in view of the fact that Beaumont Palace was often used as a resting place for the king and his entourage on their journey from London to Woodstock, approximately 8 miles to the north of Oxford. It has in fact been suggested that there could have been nurseries for fruit trees at Oxford (Steane 1993, 118), possibly supplying saplings for the orchards at both Beaumont and Woodstock. Other examples of tree planting in palace gardens include a reference to the buying and planting of saplings in the garden at Clarendon Palace sometime between 1267 and 1273; fruit trees were also planted at Kings Langley, Chester, the Tower of London and Westminster, during the second half of the 13th century (*ibid.*).

The pits of Phase 2 seem to be the earliest evidence of the royal presence at the site, with the possibility that the pits that did not form part of the tree-planting grid are rubbish pits relating to the royal occupation. Limited artefactual and ecofactual evidence from the latter group means that further conclusions are not possible.

Beaumont Palace and the White Friars (Figure 14)

The north-south wall

Although only a short stretch of the robbed-out wall was revealed by the excavation, the dimensions and depth of the construction trench suggest a structure of considerable size. The depth to which the wall builders had dug in order to remove the soft-spot created by the pit (Fig. 11) indicates how important it was that the foundations were based on solid gravel (although not quite achieved in this case). A wall of such dimensions initially suggested a defensive function, and it was assumed that this was the palace precinct wall; however, the precinct boundary in fact lies approximately 15 m to the east (Fig. 14). Palaces of the Norman and Angevin kings were often undefended, owing to the great authority of the throne during this period (Steane 1993, 86). The dimensions of the construction cut were not significantly greater than those of the buttressed building, and may simply reflect the consistent approach to potential soft-spots

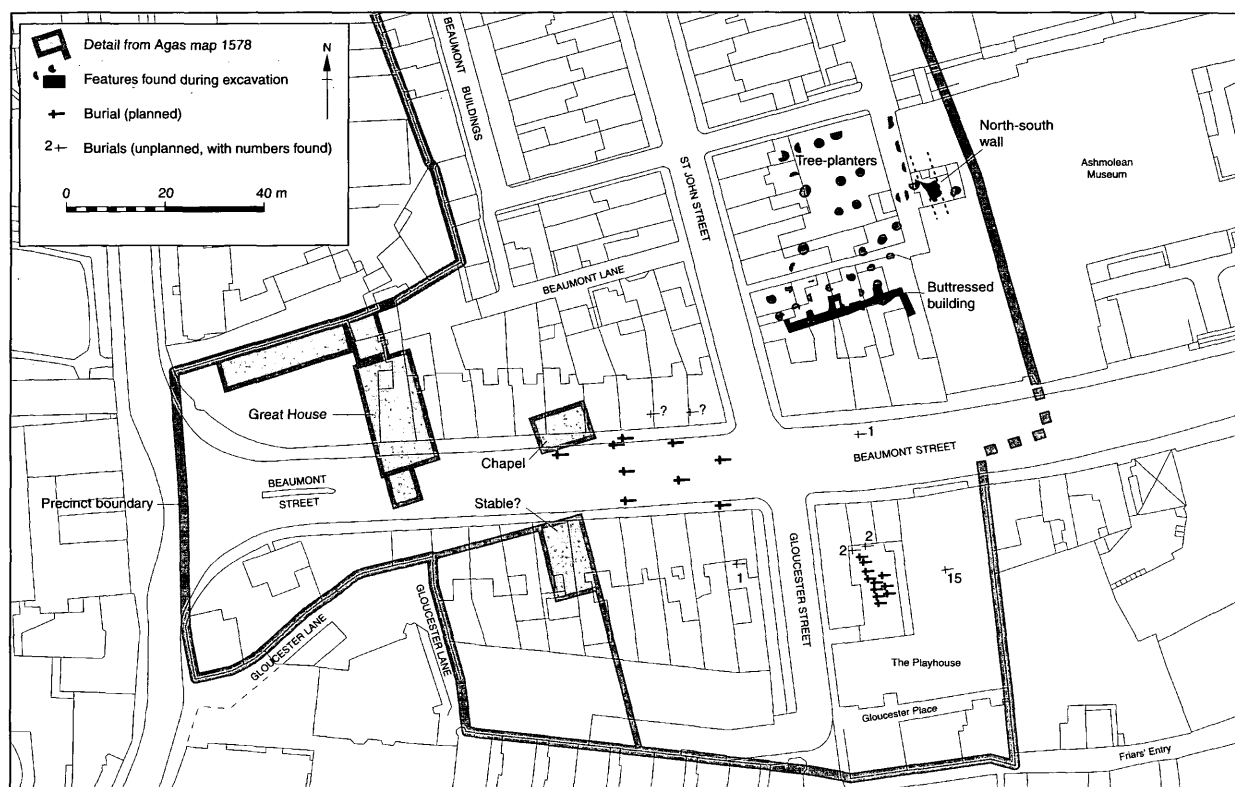


Figure 14: Interpretative plan to show excavated and mapped elements of the southern half of the palace/friary

taken by the builders. Further evidence of the extent of the precinct is provided by the pit of Sub-phase 2.1 which lies at the extreme east of the area investigated, showing the extent of the royal orchard (Figs 6 and 14).

As far as can be deduced from the limited extent exposed during excavation, the north-south wall ran parallel to the precinct boundary and at 90° to the buttressed building. It appears most likely that it was built later than the planting of the orchard, given that it bisects one of the lines of the tree-planting grid. Window glass, and ridge and floor tile were found in the fills of the robber trench, suggesting that the wall may have been part of a building of some significance, possibly built up against the precinct wall or attached in some way to the buttressed building. Agas' map of 1578 shows a building in just such a position, built up against the western precinct wall (Fig. 14 and Plate 1). As with the buttressed building, it is not possible to be certain whether this structure originated as part of the palace or whether it was built by the friars, but the evidence suggests that it had a shorter lifespan than the buttressed building or that less effort was put into its upkeep. No positive dating evidence for the structure itself was recovered as the wall was entirely robbed, but the window glass, of which there were 25 fragments, was all of a type dated to the 12th to 13th centuries, apart from a single piece recovered during machine excavation and dated to the late 15th century; the single piece of window came found was also dated to the 12th to 13th century (see Cropper below). The robber trench contained quantities of Brill/Boarstall ware pottery with a date range of 1200-1600, and there was no clay tobacco pipe at all. Although these are not secure contexts, the lack of clay pipe and post-medieval pottery (which was abundant in the robber trench of the buttressed building), suggests that the north-south wall may have been robbed significantly earlier than the buttressed building, possibly during the medieval period.

The buttressed building

The building was aligned roughly east-west and was obviously substantial. As with the north-south wall, great care was taken by the builders to remove soft-spots

during construction in order to prevent subsidence (see above). The buttressed building cannot have been built any earlier than the beginning of the 13th century, as shown by the presence of four sherds of Brill/Boarstall ware in the mortar bonds of three of the masonry elements that had survived the post-medieval robbing. The presence of the buttresses themselves suggest that the building was in the Gothic style, which would fit in well with a 13th-century date. Stratigraphic evidence also shows the building to be later than two of the tree-planting pits of Sub-phase 2.1 (Fig. 9). Unfortunately it may never be possible to say conclusively whether the building was constructed as part of the palace, or built later by the White Friars. That the White Friars used it, however, there can be no doubt.

Evidence for the length of time that the building remained in use comes in the form of the assemblage of window glass found in the backfill of the building's robber trench (see Cropper, below), which consists of fragments ranging in date from the 12th/13th centuries to the late 15th/early 16th century, and indicating repair/reglazing programmes over a long period of time. Although robber trench fills can be misleading as dating evidence, it is unlikely that material would have been imported any great distance to fill features of this type, and the majority of the glass is most likely to have come from the building itself.

It is not possible from the excavated evidence to make any positive identifications with building works described in documentary sources, but it is clear that substantial works were being undertaken at the site in the earlier 13th century. In 1237-40 a chapel and wardrobe, connected by a pentice, were added to the palace as accommodation for the queen, and such buildings may well have been available for adaptation and re-use following the granting of the site to the friars in 1318. A large number of burials (at least 40) have been found south and south-west of the buttressed building, some dated to the 14th century (Leeds 1938, 174-5 and see above, Historical and Archaeological Background and Fig. 14). This must be the cemetery of the friary, suggesting that the buttressed building to the north may well have been used as a church or chapel by the friars. The spatial relationship of cemetery to church has not been studied in enough detail to make confident predictions about common monastic burial practice and cemetery organisation (Coppack 1990, 60), but it has been known for the monastic and the lay cemeteries to have been segregated, with the monks or friars buried to the east and north of the church (*ibid.*). If this is the case, it may be that the burials found along Beaumont Street are those of townspeople rather than friars, accounting for the apparent size of the cemetery. However, Figure 14 clearly illustrates that there was not a cemetery immediately to the north of the buttressed building, and there seems to be little room available to the east, so it may simply be that the entire cemetery lay to the south.

The buttressed building may not have been built as part of a monastic complex, but as a likely church or chapel, and certainly used by the White Friars, it merits comparison with other monastic churches. The 5 m distance between the buttresses at Beaumont is paralleled by the excavated church at the Coventry Whitefriars, built in the mid-14th century (Woodfield 1971, fig. 11). However, it is also paralleled at a number of local sites, such as the Dominican Priory (Blackfriars) church, which lies just to the south of the city, again just beyond the city wall. There, the excavation of the north wall of the choir revealed buttresses at 5 m centres, identical to the spacing seen here, and interpreted as the bay width for the windows (Lambrick and Woods 1976, 174). The church of the Blackfriars was built during the mid-13th century (*ibid.* 173). The buttresses on the wall of the north aisle of Phase II of the church of the Franciscans or Greyfriars, just to the north-west of Blackfriars, also appear to have been spaced at 5 m intervals (Hassall et al. 1989, fig. 39), and again, that phase of the church is thought to date from the mid-13th century (*ibid.* 186). The widths of the foundations of the buttressed building, as inferred from the robber trenches and some surviving masonry, were broadly similar to those of the churches at Blackfriars, Greyfriars and the Cistercian Rewley Abbey (Lambrick and Woods 1976, fig. 2; Hassall et al. 1989 fig. 35; OAU 1994, 5).

The similarity of the medieval structures examined in Oxford is striking and suggests that further study of building groups in and around specific towns could shed light on the importance of local styles and techniques. This kind of study would also prove a useful counterpoint to the more traditional type where the architecture of a single monastic order is examined.

Dating evidence in the form of pottery and clay pipe found in the robber trenches of the buttressed building suggests that it was robbed no earlier than the 17th century, with some evidence for more than one episode of robbing, as shown by the relationship of the robbing of the internal wall to that of the main wall (see above). Elements of the buildings of the palace/friary are known to have survived into the 19th century. When, in 1828, the last plots of land on Beaumont Street were being sold the advertisement stated that 'at the same time will be sold in lots about 100 yards of wall stones, the remains of Beaumont Palace' (Osmond 1984, 308). However, it seems very unlikely that the buttressed building survived that long, particularly as both Agas and Loggan only show surviving buildings of the friary to the west of the area investigated.

Phase 3 and 4 conclusions

The potential for recreating the layout of the complex of buildings, either during the royal or the monastic occupation, is very limited, even when parallels are considered. Planning of royal houses and palaces was notoriously haphazard, with little more than a linear arrangement to be expected; this piecemeal approach is reflected in the preference for the term 'King's houses' rather than 'palace' - the latter was only used at the time in reference to Westminster (Steane 1993, 87), or Woodstock (Colvin *et al.* 1963, 120). Even were a pattern to emerge from the combination of map evidence and excavated buildings, it cannot be assumed that a single style or influence would have been prevalent during construction - by the time of the Dissolution, the site had been occupied for 400 years. The documentary and archaeological evidence both suggest that the friars maintained and modified the buildings they were granted in 1318, and they may well also have added to the complex. Constrained by the layout as they found it, they might also have been unable to impose the classical monastic plan. It is therefore difficult to draw firm conclusions about the building plan, although identification of individual elements may be attempted (see below).

If, as seems likely, the buildings were originally constructed as part of the palace, there is a strong suggestion of the linear arrangement mentioned by Steane (1993, 87), across the widest part of the precinct, running from Walton Street (once Stockwell Street) in the west to the rear of the St Giles tenements to the east and lying just to the north of what is now Beaumont Street. Figure 14 suggests that there was certainly an alignment between the buttressed building and the building known as the chapel from historic maps and drawings.

The assemblages of 15th-century window glass, decorated floor tile and glazed roof tile found in the robber trenches of these buildings provide further evidence for the importance of the buildings to the friars, with considerable sums of money having probably been spent on their upkeep. The early 15th-century painted window glass in the style of Thomas of Oxford is a striking demonstration of the wealth and patronage that the friars brought to the city. Ringed as Oxford was by monastic institutions, the overall importance of the monks for the city's economy must have been considerable. Other local trades which benefited from the White Friars' presence would have included the stone carvers, and the probable late 15th-century window casement shows that the glazing programme identified for that period may well have been part of a major renovation, or perhaps even the construction of new buildings. The enduring quality of the material is attested to by the thorough robbing, leaving no architectural stone and only small amounts of lead window came, roof or floor tile. Only small fragments of window glass survived, suggesting that larger pieces may also have been plundered.

Plate 11: Medieval small finds:
book clasps, dividers, styli, finger
ring and rosary bead (see Fig.
18)

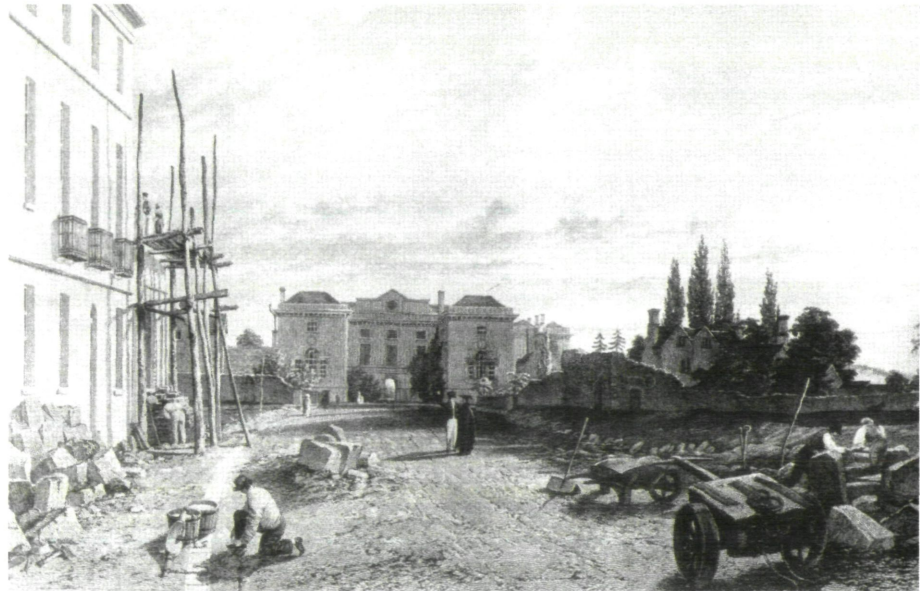


Neither of the buildings found during the excavation appears on either the Agas or the Loggan map, suggesting that the process of demolition had begun sometime before the mid-16th century. It seems likely that the buildings with the richest resources, in terms of building stone, roofing and flooring material, and other commodities, such as lead and possibly glass, would have been targeted for demolition and robbing first. There would have been obvious commercial reasons for this, but ideological and political factors would also have been significant at this time. The dissolution of the monasteries in the 1530s often began with the demolition of the church, removing the focal point of the institution and making any reversal of the process impossible (Aston 1993, 144). As no significant east-west aligned buildings seem to have survived to be drawn on Agas' map, it would appear that the demolition process had been efficiently carried out at the Carmelite friary. The 'great house' which may have been the next most important building on the site, survived until the end of the 16th century and seems to have been targeted simply for its commercial potential (see Munby above).

As discussed above, the dating evidence in the robber trench of the north-south building suggests that the process may in fact have been completed during the medieval period. The dating evidence found in the robbing of the buttressed building could show the foundations surviving into the 17th century at least, but the building must have been in a ruinous state, if not already demolished to ground level, for it to have been ignored by Agas. The clay tobacco pipes indicate that the final stage of robbing took place some time in the late 17th to early 18th centuries (see Higgins below).

Taken overall, the medieval finds and the palaeoenvironmental evidence from the Sackler Library site provide a salutary lesson in archaeological interpretation. While finds such as decorated floor tile and painted window glass indicate a site of some status, they would not, without the benefit of the documentary sources, have

Plate 12: G. Hollis' view of Beaumont Street being built in 1824, with the remains of Beaumont Palace on the right (MS. Top. Oxon. a. 36, fol. 67)



allowed the definite identification of either a royal palace or a friary. Other finds, such as pottery, vessel glass, animal bone and plant remains, hardly hint at the high-status nature of the site. This may in part be a function of the type of contexts excavated, but it must also be considered, for the royal palace phase at least, that it owes something to the organisation of the itinerant court, which transported its household around the country. Only for the small objects from the friary phase is there some possible correlation with the occupants, in that a number of objects relating to literacy were found - book clasps, a stylus and dividers - and one object, a rosary bead, relating directly to religious practice (Plate 11).

19th-century development (Plate 12)

Significant evidence relating to the early 19th-century development of the area survived on the site in the form of a number of well preserved stone-lined structures situated to the rear of the Beaumont Street terrace. It was possible to determine accurately which of the four properties each structure was related to, although defining the function of each structure was less straightforward, as all were disused. Some had been infilled, in some cases with domestic rubbish deposits and in others with soil or building material, and one had been entirely robbed of its stone. Only two remained intact but both were sealed up, and nothing survived to indicate their original function.

Of the nine structures to the rear of nos 34-37 Beaumont Street, two groups shared certain characteristics. The first group was situated closer to the rear of the terrace than the second, and consisted of a series of square or rectangular shafts, three of which were lined with limestone blocks and capped with vaulted brickwork. The fourth had been robbed (see above and Fig. 12). It was clear that these were cellars, and as such could have been used for the storage of coal or beer. The second group lay further north and consisted of three structures (633, 632 and 695) aligned on Beaumont Street, and all very similar in dimensions and depth. All were filled with varying amounts of domestic rubbish, as described above, and have been interpreted as outdoor toilets or privies, relying on drainage into the natural gravel and requiring regular cleaning out. In common with other streets in Oxford, Beaumont Street did not have a mains sewer at the time that the buildings were first occupied, but some of the houses were equipped with indoor water closets (Osmond 1984, 311), which may explain the absence of a similar structure to the rear of no. 37; there, occupying the position where the privy would have been was a rectangular rather than square structure, shallower than the other three and likely to have been a coal bunker.

There was also no mains water supply when the houses were constructed, and the occupants would have relied on wells and pumps. Only one obvious well was seen to the rear of the Beaumont Street terrace during excavation (2105) and that lay some distance north, possibly servicing properties that once lay to the east of Pusey Lane but which have since been demolished. Structure 805, the brick-lined structure with the domed roof, seems the most likely source of ground water for the Beaumont Street buildings, but as it was almost entirely silted-up it is not possible to be sure. It closely resembles a type of structure often found in association with post-medieval buildings and known as a 'water bottle', effectively a large well or cistern from which water would have been pumped.

The lack of large, stone-lined pits to the rear of nos 2-6 St John Street seems to confirm the description of the properties on that street as 'narrower and plainer' and less prestigious (see Munby above).

The likely effect of the arrival of the mains sewer to Beaumont Street in either the mid or late 19th century (Selwyn *et al.* 1979, 354) seems to be reflected in the secondary use of structures 632, 633 and 695 as rubbish pits; this also happened to the coal bunker to the rear of no. 37. Large quantities of pottery, glass, some clay tobacco pipes and other domestic refuse were found in these features. The earliest pottery found is unlikely to have been discarded any earlier than 1870 (see Brown, below), but an interesting feature of these deposits is the range of dates of both the pottery and glass, with significant amounts having been deposited in the 20th century. It is therefore possible that these features carried on in use as rubbish pits for a period of up to 40 years.

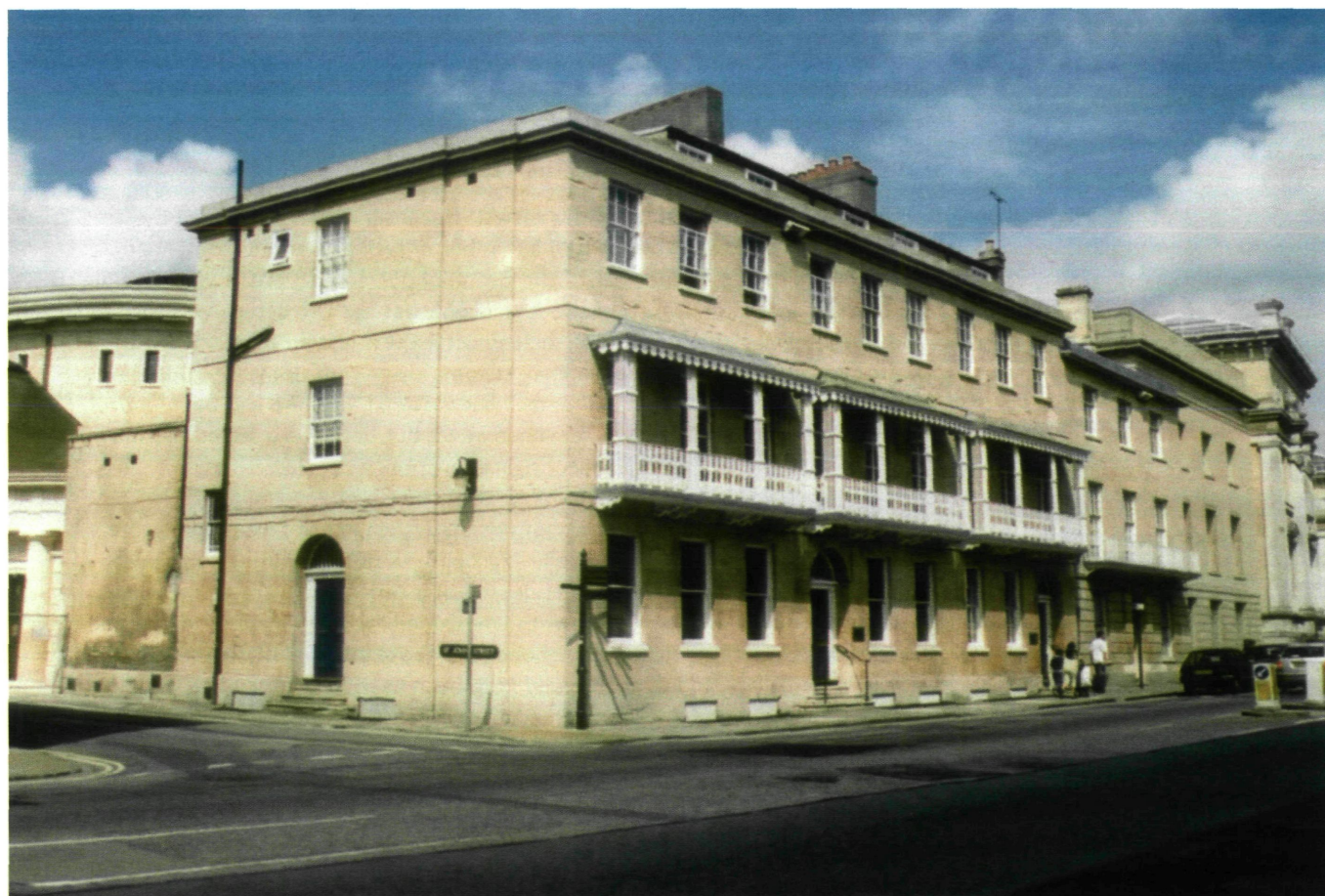


Plate 13: View of Nos 35-7 Beaumont Street, from the south-west, with the new Sackler Library to the rear. The circular reading room overlies the site of the northern Bronze Age barrow