

BEAUMONT PALACE AND THE WHITE FRIARS: EXCAVATIONS AT THE SACKLER LIBRARY, BEAUMONT STREET, OXFORD

By Daniel Poore and David R. P. Wilkinson

With contributions by

Leigh Allen, Kate Atherton, Paul Blinkhorn, Paul Booth, Angela Boyle, Philippa Bradley, Duncan H. Brown, Greg Campbell, Bethan Charles, Cecily Cropper, Dr David A. Higgins, Claire Ingrem, Nick Mitchell, Julian Munby, Dr Richard K. Morris, Ruth Pelling and Mark Robinson

Illustrations by Luke Adams

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the University of Oxford and Dr Mortimer K Sackler, Hon KBE for jointly funding the project. We thank David Scroggie and Derek Lyne of the Oxford University Surveyor's Office, for their co-operation throughout all stages of the project, and Brian Durham of the Oxford Archaeological Advisory Service (OAAS), for his advice and enthusiasm. Thanks are also due to Wates Construction Ltd for their patience and co-operation during the watching brief.

The authors would also like to thank the site staff who worked so hard throughout the various stages of fieldwork, regardless of the conditions. The report was edited by Anne Dodd and Rachel Tyson.

The Bodleian Library kindly gave permission for the use of Green's, J C Buckler's and G Hollis' views of the remains of Beaumont Palace. The Ashmolean Museum kindly gave permission for the use of J B Malchair's views.

Figures based on the Ordnance Survey's 1:500 map of Oxford are reproduced with the permission of the Controller of Her Majesty's Stationery Office (© Crown Copyright. Licence No. 854166)

Summary

Excavations carried out by Oxford Archaeological Unit in 1998 and 1999 at the site of Oxford University's Sackler Library development revealed evidence of Bronze Age and medieval remains. Two probable Bronze Age barrow ditches were identified, one of which lay largely within the project area and enclosed an area approximately 28 m across.

The development site is thought to lie at the eastern limit of the precinct of Beaumont Palace, a royal residence immediately outside the north wall of the medieval city of Oxford and in use c 1132-1318. Numerous medieval pits were found aligned in rows and possibly dug as tree planters. The dating suggests that they may have formed part of a formal garden associated with the palace.

In the early 14th century, the palace site was granted to the Carmelite Friars. The excavations found evidence for a substantial east-west aligned buttressed stone building, which may originally have been built as part of the palace, but which ultimately formed part of the Friary complex. Slighter evidence for a second medieval building was revealed a short distance to the north-east.

Excavation also revealed a number of stone-lined garden features relating to an early-19th century development of terraced housing on Beaumont Street and St John Street.

Project background

Site location (Figure 1)

The Sackler Library site lies just to the north-west of the centre of Oxford at SP 1100 6550, and is bounded to the south by nos 35-37 Beaumont Street, to the west by nos 2-6 St John Street, to the north by Pusey Place and to the east by the Ashmolean Library and Museum (Fig. 1). The site was formerly occupied by the gardens and outbuildings of nos 35-37 and 2-6, and by a car park west of the southern limit of Pusey Lane. It was bisected by a footpath running from St John Street to Pusey Lane, which was permanently closed prior to the excavation.

Geology and topography

The site lies on the second terrace of the River Thames, at c 64 m OD. The drift geology consists of Pleistocene terrace gravels overlying the Oxford clay (Geological Survey Map, Sheet 236), which was reached during excavation of the library basement at approximately 58 m OD.

Historical and archaeological background

by Julian Munby and Daniel Poore

The following section is a summary of the history and archaeology of the site and its environs prior to the commencement of fieldwork in December 1997. This and the newly excavated evidence were taken into consideration when writing the discussion.

Prehistoric

There is no site specific archaeological evidence for the prehistoric period in the immediate area of the site, although the well-drained nature and relatively high level of the Oxford gravel terrace has always made the area favourable for early settlement, lying as it does just to the north of the confluence of the Thames and the Cherwell. A probable Neolithic pit was recently found at Mansfield College (Booth and Hayden 2000, 293). Evidence for a Bronze Age barrow cemetery has been found elsewhere in the city (Fig. 11), at University Parks to the north-east and St Michael's Street to the south (Parkinson *et al.* 1996) and possibly at Logic Lane to the south-east (Radcliffe 1962). Chance finds in North Oxford include a Bronze Age palstave and a number of Iron Age coins (Leeds 1939). Probable Iron Age features have been identified, seen as cropmarks in University Parks, and