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Windale First School,
Blackbird Leys,
Oxford
Archaeological Evaluation

Oxford Archaeological Unit

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Windale First School, Blackbird Leys, Oxford

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Archaeological Evaluation

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Introduction and Summary

An archaeological evaluation was carried out by the Oxford Archaeological Unit from 25th -29th April 1994 in advance of development by WS Atkins for Oxfordshire County Council. Four trenches, each 20 m long and 1.5 m wide, were dug by machine down to archaeological levels (Figure 1). These were excavated by hand and recorded according to the procedures laid down in the OAU field manual (ed. Wilkinson 1992). During the evaluation the site was inspected by B Durham of the Oxford Archaeological Advisory Service (hereafter OAAS).

The land is low-lying, dipping from S to N towards the Northfield Brook. The underlying geology is sand overlain by a thin calcareous gravel. This is overlain by alluvial deposits probably derived from the brook, within which were found treeholes containing preserved waterlogged deposits. These were sealed by further alluvial deposits, within which a buried soil horizon probably of Roman date was preserved. The latest alluvial deposit was overlain on the upslope side by colluvial wash, and this was in turn sealed by the modern topsoil.

Aims

- 1 To establish the presence or absence of archaeological remains within the development area.
- 2 To determine the extent, character, quality and date of any archaeological deposits.
- 3 To determine the environmental/ecofactual potential of any archaeological features or deposits.

Methodology

The trenches were laid out to coincide with the maximum extent of the proposed development (see Figure 1) and in accordance with the wishes of the OAAS. Trench 1 was dug in two parts in order to avoid a buried gas main and overhead electrical cables.

At the request of B Durham of the OAAS the E end of Trench 1 was extended by 1.5 m. The trenches were subsequently backfilled by machine.

The trenches were dug down through topsoil and a sterile alluvial deposit to a buried soil horizon, which was generally excavated by hand. In places, however, the buried horizon was excavated by machine to examine the underlying stratigraphy, and a sondage was dug at the S end of Trench 2 to confirm the geological sequence. Because of the proximity of the Northfield Brook the water table was high, and samples were taken from waterlogged deposits found in Trenches 3 and 4.

Results

The stratigraphic sequence was generally uniform over the whole site. The underlying geology consisted of a fine grey sand of unknown depth overlain by a thin (0.2 - 0.28 m) layer of sandy gravel with some silt (1/5 = 2/5 = 3/9 = 4/6). The surface of the gravel was fairly level, being found at around 60.45 m O.D. in Trenches 1, 2 and 4, and varying from 60.35 to 60.51 in Trench 3. There were however shallow irregularities in its surface, particularly in Trench 4 (Figure 2). The depth of deposits overlying the gravel ranged from 0.8 m at the S (uphill) end of the site to 0.5 m at the N end.

In Trench 4 two irregular holes were found in the gravel (Figure 2: 4/7 and /8), filled with dark grey clay which in places appeared to continue under the surrounding gravel. These were approximately 0.2 m and 0.35 m deep respectively. There were no finds, but 4/7 contained much waterlogged wood, mostly roots, and both features are therefore interpreted as treeholes.

Both the gravel and these treeholes were sealed by a layer of tenacious yellowish brown clay with occasional pebbles (1/4 = 2/4 = 3/8 = 4/5). This layer was from 0.10 - 0.28 m thick, but had a level surface, thinning out upslope towards the S, and was probably of alluvial origin.

The alluvium was cut or interrupted by a linear feature 3/7 aligned NW-SE (Figure 2). This was of irregular profile and depth (maximum 0.35 m), and was filled with dark grey silty clay and waterlogged roots (3/6) similar to the fill of the treeholes in Trench 4. There were however also flecks of charcoal in the fill. The upper part of 3/7 was filled with a clean clay 3/10, and the feature was sealed by further alluvium 3/5, 0.10 m thick. Layer 3/10 was very similar in character to the alluvium below the feature, and probably represents further alluvium accumulating as the organic fill of 3/7 decayed and settled. No finds were recovered from these alluvial deposits in any of the trenches.

In all the trenches the alluvium was overlain by a thin layer of dark grey-brown clay loam with a distinct humic component (1/3 = 2/3 = 3/4 = 4/3 and /4). Charcoal flecks were also present, and were most evident in Trenches 1 and 4. This deposit contained 8 sherds of Roman pottery and a fragment of tile. The humic soil was of variable thickness, around 0.12 m in general, but as little as 0.04 m in parts of all the trenches. In Trench 3 leaching of minerals had stained the interface with the alluvium below pink (Figure 2), and at the E end of Trench 4 a distinction was visible within the humic soil, the upper part (4/3) being as described, the lower part (4/4) a brown silty loam with fine sand only 0.04 m thick.

Overlying the humic soil was a tenacious silty clay, which was found throughout all of the evaluation trenches (1/2 = 2/2 = 3/3 = 4/2). This clean deposit, which was 0.18-0.20 m deep, is also thought to have been of alluvial origin, and the humic soil which it seals is interpreted as a buried turf or topsoil. The upper alluvium contained 10 sherds of Roman pottery and a fragment of 19th century creamware.

At the E end of Trench 1 the stratigraphy was disturbed by an underground drain alongside the causeway formerly leading to Blackbird Leys Farm, and by the roots of a row of trees planted along the same line. The buried turfline could not be traced E of this. A small extension to Trench 1 was dug in the hope of finding this E of the drain, but this area was also disturbed. There is however no reason to believe that the buried turfline ended at this point.

At the S (upslope) end of Trench 3 this upper alluvium was overlain by a deposit of yellow-brown silty clay (3/2), which was thickest at the S end and petered out to the N within the trench. This was largely removed by the initial machine excavation, and produced no finds. This soil is interpreted as colluvium or 'hillwash' derived from a phase of cultivation upslope to the S.

Both 3/2 and the upper alluvium were sealed by the modern topsoil (1/1 = 2/1 = 3/1 = 4/1), which was 0.16 - 0.25 m thick.

Finds

A total of 22 sherds of pottery was recovered, comprising 18 Roman sherds and 4 post-medieval sherds. The Roman sherds came from the buried soil (one sherd from 1/3 and seven sherds from 2/3) and from the alluvium overlying this (three sherds from 3/3 and seven sherds from 4/2). The breakdown of the Roman material was as follows:

Samian (Central Gaulish)	1
White Mortarium	1
Oxidised wares	7
Reduced wares	8
Grog and quartz	1

All of the sherds were abraded. The more diagnostic pieces, the Samian and two barbotine-decorated reduced wares, are dateable to the second century, and the grog- and sand-tempered sherd is probably of 1st or early 2nd century date. The mortarium sherd, a tall bead, is not closely dateable as it occurs on a number of types dated from the 2nd to the 4th centuries. Two oxidised ware rims were perhaps both from the rim type O41 (Young 1977), dated AD 100-300, but probably most common in the 2nd century. The evidence suggests a predominantly 2nd century date for the material, perhaps contemporary with the earlier use of the Sandford kilns 200 m to the west.

The post-medieval sherds comprise a pearl ware of the earlier 19th century (from 4/2) and three fragments of a willow patterned vessel of the 19th or early 20th century (from 2/1 and 3/1).

Environmental plant remains

Three bulk samples were taken for analysis, two from the buried soil (from contexts 3/4 and 4/3) and one from 3/6, the lower fill of waterlogged feature 3/7. Sample 4/3 was floated and sieved for charred plant remains, but none were found. Samples 3/4

and 3/6 were sub-sampled for waterlogged plant remains and were assessed by Dr Mark Robinson of the University Museum, Oxford, who provided the following comments:

Sample 3/4, a humic clay contained many rootlets and several decayed ancient earthworm cocoons. Seeds of Juncus articulatus (rush) and a single seed of Eupatorium cannabinum (Hemp agrimony) were observed, plus the head of a Philanthus beetle.

This is likely to represent a wet grassland environment. The waterlogged remains were not well-preserved, and the sample is not worthy of further work.

Sample 3/6, a silty clay, contained many root fragments and some twigs, plus a thorn of the hawthorn/blackthorn variety. Several seeds, catkins and a bud of Alnus glutinosa (alder) were observed. Other seeds were: Mentha cf. aquatica (water mint), Prunella vulgaris (selfheal), Eupatorium cannabinum, Viola sp. (violet), Carex spp. (sedges) and Lycopus europaeus (gypsy wort).

Two species of water beetle: Limnebius and an aquatic hydrophilid, and a fragment of an elaterid beetle, were also observed. No charred plant remains were seen.

On the basis of the limited assessment the sample may represent either an open fen woodland or scrubby wet grassland environment, and is tentatively considered likely to be of Bronze Age date. The preservation of the sample offers some potential for further information.

Interpretation of the archaeology

The evaluation has revealed a sequence of alluviation adjacent to the Northfield Brook, within which are found treeholes of probable prehistoric date. The latest of these, 3/7, contains charcoal fragments indicating human activity, and its approximately linear nature might even indicate a boundary of some sort.

A second phase of human activity is represented by the formation of a turfline associated with flecks of charcoal. The little pottery from this was Roman. Further Roman sherds were found in the overlying alluvium.

The Roman pottery from the site in general is sparse, and is unlikely to indicate domestic activity in the immediate vicinity. This material probably represents the very periphery of the area of Roman occupation centred upon the kilns found 200 m to the W. It is possible, especially considering the abraded character of the Roman sherds, that all of the Roman pottery is redeposited on the Windale School site, but the only other dating evidence in the stratigraphic sequence is the single creamware sherd in the overlying alluvium.

In the absence of other dating evidence the buried soil is considered to be of Roman date. The buried turfline is sealed by 0.2m of alluvium, which is in turn overlain by a colluvial deposit before the formation of the present topsoil, and this sequence is likely to have formed over a considerable period of time. The evidence for cessation

of alluviation and clearance resulting in the formation of a turfline is also best explained in the context of clearance of timber for pottery production and better drainage provided by Roman ditching for the associated settlement.

Conclusions and recommendations

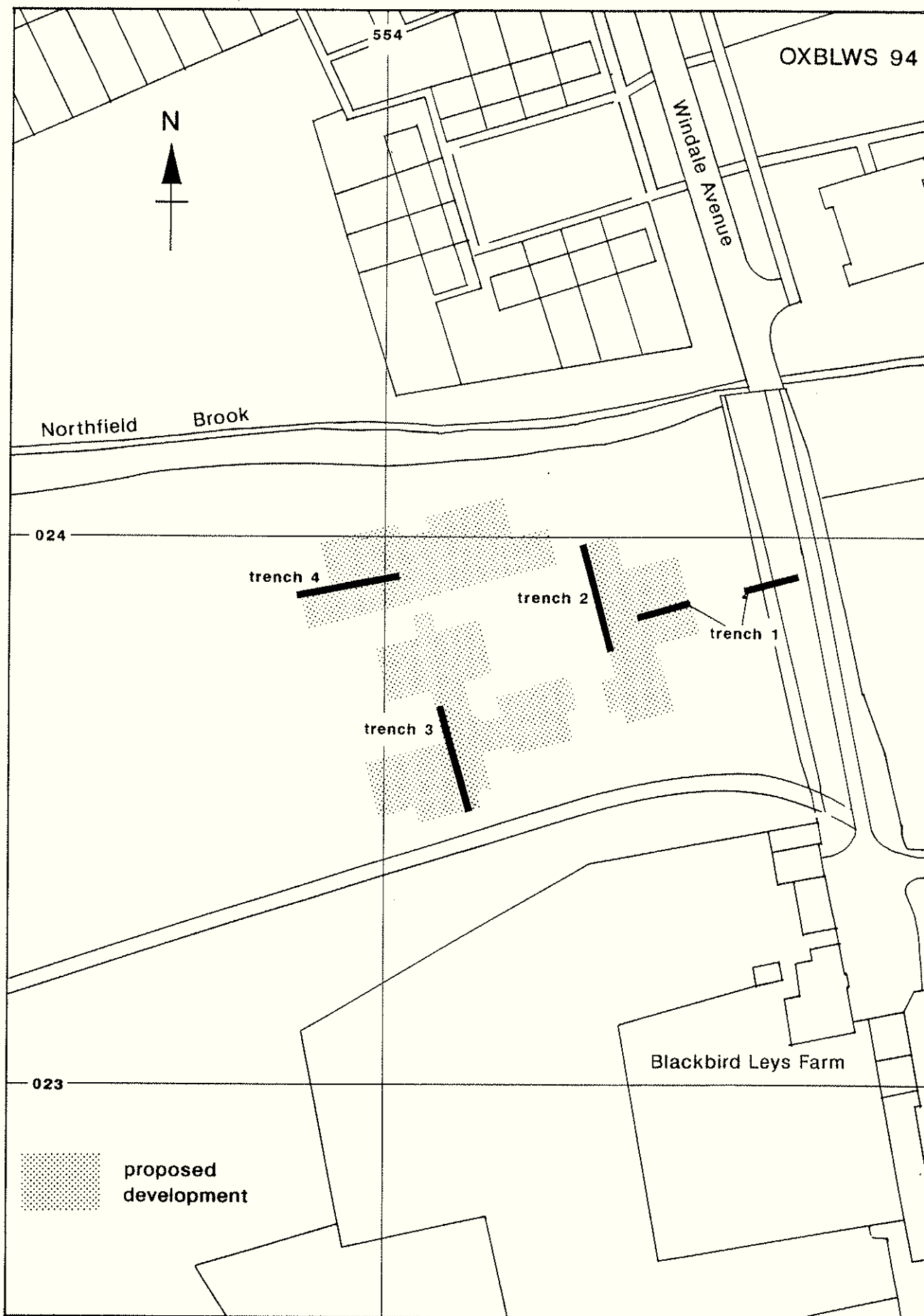
The evaluation has established the presence of archaeological soils, finds and environmental material on the site. The environmental material is of both prehistoric and Roman date, the artefactual material solely of Roman date. The prehistoric activity represented by the charcoal in the treehole is not accompanied by any finds and is at present undated. The quality of the preserved prehistoric environmental remains would merit further study, but only if funds were available for dating the deposit by scientific means. While the identification of a buried Roman horizon is of considerable significance for the wider area, the environmental preservation is poor, and the paucity of finds from the evaluation argues for very low-level human activity on this particular site.

Any excavations for the proposed development will almost certainly affect the buried turfline, which lies only 0.4 m below ground. In view of the apparent low level of archaeological activity, however, further detailed archaeological work on this part of the development may not be justified, and might adequately be covered by a watching brief.

Table 1. Table of Contexts showing equivalences and finds

	Trench 1	Trench 2	Trench 3	Trench 4
Topsoil	1	►1	►1	1
Colluvium	-	-	2	-
Alluvium	2	2	3*	►2*
Buried turf	3*	3*	4	3&4
Alluvium	4	4	5	5
Treehole	-	-	10&6	-
Alluvium	4	4	8	5
Treeholes	-	-	-	7&8
Gravel	5	5	9	6

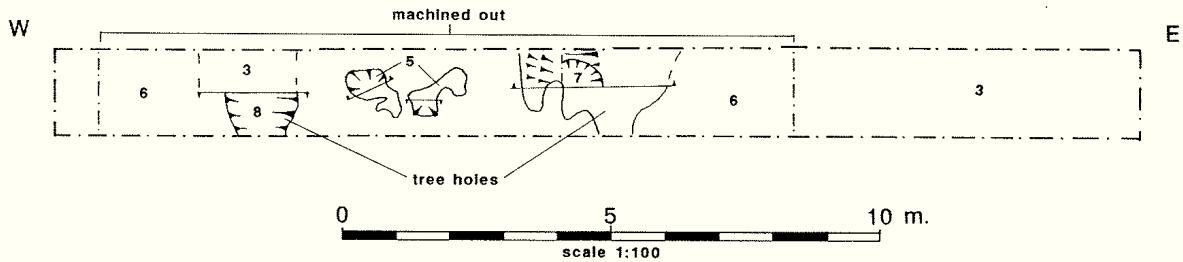
* indicates Roman pottery. ► indicates post-medieval pottery.



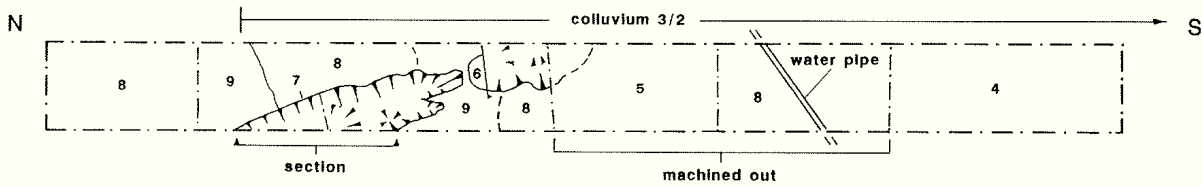
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figure 1

Trench 4



Trench 3



Trench 3 section

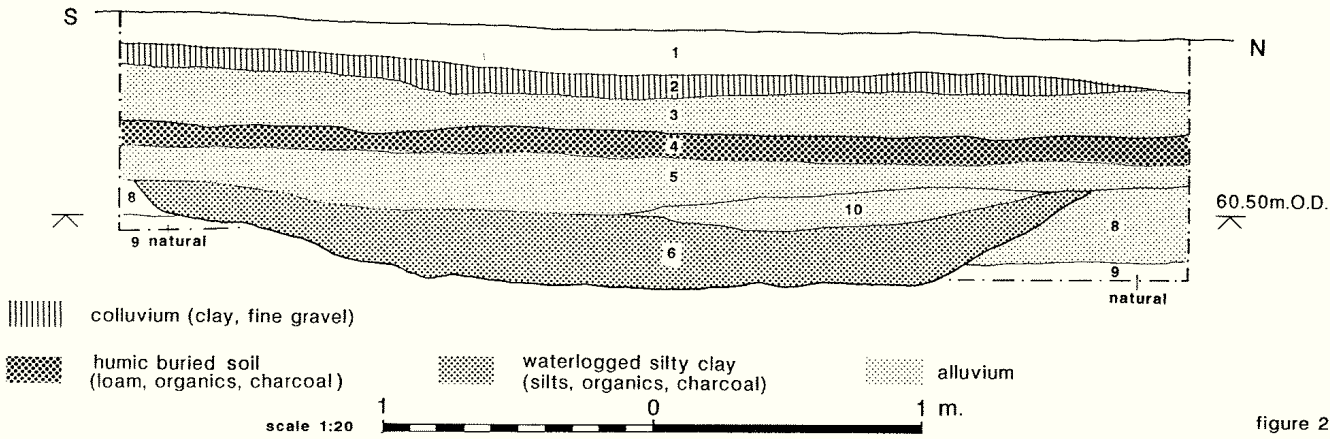


figure 2