

Archaeology in Oxford

Oxford City report to the Oxford City and County Archaeological Forum

National Planning Policy Framework related field work between June - October 2024

Staircases 1, 2, 3 and Wardens' Lodgings, Wadham College

Between March and August historic building recording was undertaken at Wadham College by John Moore Heritage Services during refitting works within the 17th century college buildings. The roof of the main quad is a fine, relatively unaltered example of a college building completed in a single phase and dating from the early 17th century. The structure was found to be remarkably intact with very few signs of repair and minor alteration during known subsequent periods of conversion; the relatively untouched nature of the roof overall reflecting the



buildings single phase of construction between 1610 and 1613. Additionally, it was possible to record carpentry techniques used and identify a distinct series of carpenters' assembly marks.

Above right: A carpenter's mark on the roof timbers of Wadham College.

Oriel College Kitchen

Between July and September an archaeological investigation was undertaken by Oxford Archaeology at the site of the former Oriel College Kitchen on Magpie Lane. Previously in May two east-west close-spaced archaeological borehole transects were completed at the site. The results appear to have confirmed the route of a north-south primary burh ditch first suggested 125 years ago following excavations in the Clarendon Quadrangle, where a wall and bank were recorded heading south-east. The presence of a smaller or 'primary' defended town or burh, protected by a bank and ditch, that may have been later expanded eastwards and westwards, has long been a topic of discussion and debate. For example, in 1956 the eminent local archaeologist E.M. Jope wrote that:

“The suggestion that the part of the town to the east of the re-entrant angle at Smithgate, north-east of the Bodleian, was an eastward addition to an earlier enclosed town cannot be supported by positive evidence and...there are other indications that this would not represent the true development of the town.” (E.M. Jope 1956)

The boreholes appear to show the ditch, some 20m wide and 3m deep, approaching from the north-east, a line consistent with the old parish boundary that runs through the college. The initial radiocarbon dating results suggest that the organic fill at the base of the ditch dates to the late 9th-10th

century, consistent with the construction of a primary burh by King Alfred or his children, although the range is still relatively broad and an earlier date for the construction of the ditch remains possible as we should factor in the possibility that it was kept clear/scoured out for a period before being allowed to silt up. A further round of borehole work was undertaken after an attempt to excavate a deeper sondage was abandoned due to logistical issues and therefore further results are anticipated.

The near surface archaeology included walls and a hearth surface that may relate to the former medieval college kitchen and also buried floor layers within the basement of the 17th century east range of the Front Quadrangle, which are likely to relate to the former medieval east range. Further excavation work is due to be undertaken at this site. A separate historic building record is also being undertaken by Oxford Archaeology. Read the [BBC News report](#).

Right: Part of a medieval hearth excavated at Oriel College Kitchen.



Gibbs Crescent, Osney

Between August and early October Oxford Archaeology have undertaken a second stage of excavations at Osney Abbey. The investigations have focused on the new drainage trench line and related pumping station site located within the former medieval abbey precinct. The service trench has been hand excavated revealing walls, surfaces and channels.

A number of north-south water channels revetted with timber were revealed and an important discovery was a timber lined north-south channel running under the pre-14th century buttressed precinct wall.

This suggests at least three major reconfigurations of the site 1) A 12th century priory/early abbey layout evidenced by the water channel 2) the construction of a large precinct wall enclosing the southern end of the abbey site, thought to be pre-14th century in date and 3) the subsequent contraction of the site and the construction of a later precinct wall further north with some of the former southern precinct turned over to water management (channels and fish ponds). A last-minute redesign of the drainage scheme was secured which significantly reduced the archaeological impact, with the pumping station relocated to the eastern side of the site thus raising the foul sewer levels. A number of significant stay finds were recovered which will be reported at a later date.



Above right: A stone spread or surface encountered in the drainage run at Osney Abbey, Gibbs Crescent.

The Warden's Lodge, Merton College, Merton Street, Oxford.

Between July and August a watching brief was undertaken by Museum of London Archaeology during the creation of a sunken terrace to increase light provision to lower ground floor rooms at the rear of 19 Merton Street. Only 18th-19th century garden soil was noted.

The Waynfleet Building, Magdalen College, St Clement's

Between August and September a phased evaluation was undertaken in the grounds of the Waynfleet Building at St Clement's by Pre-Construct Archaeology. Medieval and post-medieval remains were recorded. The report forthcoming.

Randolph Street

Between August and September an evaluation was undertaken in the yard of the former Furniture Warehouse at Randolph Street, Cowley Marsh, by ADAS. No significant archaeological remains were noted. The work was required because of the 'marsh edge' location and the previous recovery of a Bronze Age hoard in the vicinity.

Nos 17 & 19 Norham Gardens, St Edmund Hall Student Accommodation

In September Pre-Construct Archaeology returned to Norham Gardens for a further phase of works monitoring the installation of an attenuation tank. A Victorian layer produced some evocative finds from this period including a Great Exhibition 1851 painted clay tobacco pipe and Prattware pot lid with old woman playing cribbage.



Above left: A Prattware pot lid with old woman playing cribbage. Above right: a Great Exhibition 1851 painted clay tobacco pipe.

Littlemore House

In September a watching brief was undertaken during test pitting on the external periphery of the former Littlemore Asylum burial ground by John Moore Heritage Services. No significant remains were encountered.

Frewin Hall

Between September and October Oxford Archaeology have been undertaking a watching brief at Frewin Hall during works to improve the thermal efficiency of the Grade II* 17th century (and likely earlier) range. A small trench in the concrete floor slab of the 12th century undercroft identified at least two cut features at either end (possible pits), plus a darker spread of material near the eastern end. The work is ongoing.

Right: Cable trench through the modern floor of the 12th century undercroft at Frewin Hall.



Not previously reported

Merton College

In May 2023 a borehole survey was undertaken by Museum of London Archaeology at Merton College. The survey has demonstrated, for the first time, compelling evidence that medieval town ditch did extend south of the East Gate. Further work on the samples is under consideration.

Previously the 17th century diarist Anthony Wood had firmly discounted the presence of a town ditch extending this far south, despite encountering a large suspicious feature when labourers cut a ditch for the Royalist garrison during the Civil War linking the southeast corner of the town wall with the wall of the Botanic (Physic) Garden in 1643:

[A] “deep trench dug about that time from the corner of Merton College wall to the physicke garden, there were dug out a great many stones [also] some black earth, [and] red, without any veins of gravel, whereof it seems it had formerly been robbed, which gave occasion to some of the diggers, & other plebeians then present, to imagine, yea & stiffly to maintain, that there had been a moat [here] in former times, and that this town had been formerly moated about on the south side also as well as on the north side, which on my part (being upon a time there present) I denied, feeling that this town was moated only on the north side, also partly eastward, & partly westward” Anthony Wood, Saturday, 8th April 1643 (edited and enhanced text)

The Deanery Garden, Christ Church

Between June 2023 and April 2024 a programme of evaluation was undertaken in the Deanery Garden, Christ Church, to establish the potential impact of an extension to the 18th century Library. Following a radar survey by Sumo Surveys a phased evaluation was undertaken by Keevill Heritage Ltd. The investigations revealed a large construction trench parallel to the library and a number of medieval and post medieval pits, ditches and surfaces. These features belong to medieval tenement activity and to the former buildings and boundary wall of the medieval Canterbury College, which was amalgamated into Christ Church at its foundation in the 16th century.

The finds suggest that activity on the site seems to have begun in the 10th century. This intensified after the Norman Conquest, especially in the 12th/13th century, and found its apogee in the establishment of Canterbury College. The southern boundary wall of this was found, along with two buildings on the north side of the wall which probably formed part of the College's service ranges. These survived into the 18th century, when they were demolished to make way for the new Library and Canterbury Quad. New information on how these were built was also revealed by the excavations.

Court Place Mansion and Gate Lodge, Iffley

Between March 2023 and January 2024 Oxford Archaeology undertook a programme of historic building recording and an archaeological watching brief during refurbishment works at Court Place Mansion, Iffley. The recording confirmed the multi-phase development of Court Place from the 17th to the 20th centuries. The original 17th-century house would have been relatively modest but it was steadily aggrandised in several phases to enhance the social status of its residents, some of which are figures of some note including Dr John Nowell, for 30 years the Principal at St Mary's Hall in Oxford and Captain William Nowell a respected naval officer who rose to the rank of Vice Admiral in the Georgian navy.

Lifting the floorboards revealed the oldest floor in the 17th century range and an historic sound insulation layer known as 'pugging' in the 18th century range. Examination of the roof showed that the oldest elements are in the 18th century range.

The Gate Lodge consists of two two-storey gabled elements. The first eastern part was built at the beginning of the 20th century, and an extension was added to the west in the 1970s. The main building has original entrance doors, windows, and architraves. During groundwork, three drains from the 18th and 19th centuries were discovered.

Old Kitchen Building, Magdalen College,

Between September 2023 and April 2024 a phased archaeological evaluation was undertaken by Pre-Construct Archaeology to the north and west of the Old Kitchen Bar at Magdalen College. The old Kitchen combines 15th century fabric relating to the foundation of the college with elements of an earlier structure belonging to the medieval Hospital of St John the Baptist. The evaluation recorded medieval wall foundations, walls, and floor surfaces belonging to a northern range of the hospital along with demolition spreads.

Right: An early modern service trench excavated adjacent to the remains of a medieval doorway belonging to the Hospital of St John the Baptist at Magdalen College.

A second phase of evaluation undertaken in April 2024 recorded evidence for a post-built structure and a yard located north of the kitchen range, suggesting that there was no simple continuation of the Old Kitchen building line in the pre-college arrangement of hospital buildings.



Within the Old Kitchen Bar passage the original medieval wall foundations and walls relating to the Hospital of St. John were recorded directly beneath the College walls. The central area of the passageway recorded a complex arrangement of services, that had effectively truncated the archaeological deposits across the entire width of the passageway. No evidence was found for the Jewish burial ground known as "The Garden of the Jews" within any of the proposed development areas.

Medieval town walls, Merton College

Between April 2023 and June 2024 historic building recording has been undertaken on a section of the medieval town wall at Merton College by Museum of London Archaeology, in part to inform repair work following a partial collapse of the wall fabric after heavy rain. Comprehensive repair work has now been undertaken under the supervision of Historic England.

Magdalen College Gardens

In January 2024 a watching brief during geotechnical investigations was undertaken in Magdalen College gardens by Pre-Construct Archaeology. The results were compiled into a geoarchaeological assessment. The site is of interest because a SSSI relating to palaeontological remains in the bedded natural gravels located at Magdalen Grove and question marks over the origins and evolution of the adjacent Cherwell channel located to the east.

Nos 10-12 Turl Street

In August 2023 a Historic Building Assessment was undertaken at Nos 10-12 Turl Street by Donald Insall Associates for Lincoln College. The surviving buildings were noted to be a complex and in places piecemeal arrangement, likely encompassing medieval, early 17th, 18th, 19th and early 20th century fabric. Several very thick stone walls and an earlier roof structure within the two northern bays of the front range suggest that parts of an earlier medieval structure.

The site was in use as the Maidenhead Inn from at least 1579 (but possibly much earlier) and was heavily remodelled in the late 16th/early 17th century. The rear block which runs parallel to that at the front, also contains several walls of great thickness which may have belonged to former ranges associated with the early medieval house, inn or could be partial remains of the Mildred's Hall complex which several sources indicate occupied part of the rear of the site and the neighbouring plot to the north.

Other news

Slade Camp

Volunteers from Wood Farm and beyond have been involved with a project with the City Council Green Spaces Team to uncover and investigate the history of parts of Slade Camp, a World War II army camp and later location for social housing projects into the 1960s. The bases, tracks and infrastructure of the army camp and later house platforms survive within wooded areas of Shotover Park. A very successful open day was held in cooperation with Oxford Preservation Trust for Oxford Open Doors in September. An article on the project can be read on the [BBC website](#): Further work is planned.



Above left: Archaeologist Dr Wendy Austin who is leading the local project to investigate Slade Camp next to the former Officers Hut site. Right: A WWII pill box in the woods.

Greyfriars 800th Anniversary

On September, Tom Hassall and Ben Ford who both directed excavations at the Westgate, joined a party of Franciscans and friends to celebrate the 800th [anniversary](#) of the arrival of the order in Oxford, involving a trip around the town and a cake with a picture of the reconstructed friary on it.

Recent talks

I was pleased to be invited to talk about recent discoveries in Oxford at the Festival of Archaeology event at the Castle in July organised by Oxford Preservation Trust and also to Littlemore History Society in September.

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