OXFORD ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH AGENDAS 2011

1) PALAEOLITHIC TO MESOLITHIC

Version: 28/1/2012

1. Palaeolithic to Mesolithic Research Agenda

This document sets out an archaeological research agenda for Oxford covering the Palaeolithic to Mesolithic periods. The document should be read in conjunction with the period resource assessment for the City (Oxford City Council 2011) and the Thames Solent Regional Research Agenda (2010).

1.1 Overview

The Oxford Local Authority area contains one known Lower Palaeolithic site of national importance, the Wolvercote Channel, which in the early 20th century produced a rich assemblage of faunal and artefactual remains, but which remains poorly understood both in terms of orientation and location. The Oxford area is also notable for the quantity of rolled worked flint material recovered from the edges and quarried areas of the 2nd gravel terrace. Furthermore the gravel sequences of the Summertown Radley and Wolvercote terraces remain to be accurately plotted and dated, and there is considerable potential for scientific dating and more detailed geological mapping to enhance our understanding of these sequences.

With regard to the Upper Palaeolithic and Mesolithic periods the Oxford area has to date not produced any exceptional sites, however the landscape remains of considerable interest with regards to understanding the utilisation of the Upper Thames and its surroundings during this period. Furthermore peat deposits within the Local Authority Area offer are an important source of information regarding climatic and environmental change during these periods.

1.2 Zones of potential

The Local Authority Area LAA has been divided into five broad landscape zones based on surface geology and relief (please note the geological areas have been simplified and are not intended to be used as a guide to local geology):

A The North Oxford Terrace (Summertown-Radley and Wolvercote gravel terrace)

B The Thames floodplain and 1st terrace gravel islands

C The Cherwell Floodplain (with pockets of gravel)

D The alluviated stream valleys of the Corallian Ridge

E The Corallian Ridge

Some research questions provide an assessment of potential for the zones listed above; these are referred to in terms of high potential (e.g. the zone has already demonstrated its ability to contribute to this agenda) or general potential based on comparison with similar landscapes.

1.3 Chronology

Lower Palaeolithic

1. Further recording and scientific dating of gravel deposits during significant interventions into the Summertown-Radley and Wolvercote terraces may help further define the Lower Palaeolithic depositional sequence (noting the potential for Optically Stimulated Luminescence and Amino Acid dating techniques to be of value).
    - *Zone potential: A High*

Upper Palaeolithic-Mesolithic

2. There is considerable potential for the enhancement of the chronology of the Oxford region through the study of the artefactual and environmental evidence. This may be achieved by further review of existing material and through targeted intensive investigation of sites with higher potential. For example more detailed investigation of surface sites (use of grid and sieving techniques) where previous finds or topography may suggest higher potential.

- *Zone potential: A High; B High; C High; D General; E General*

3. There is considerable potential for the investigation of peat deposits within the Local Authority Area to contribute towards our understanding of climatic and environmental change during these periods.
    - *Zone potential: B General ; C General D High E General*
4. Opportunities to undertake scientific dating of the orange loess buried land surface deposit often recorded on 2nd gravel terrace sites (sometimes referred to as 'supra natural') would be warranted where well preserved. Noting that this layer is often thin (300mm) and bioturbated and therefore any sampling needs to be undertaken on the basis of specialist advice.
    - *Zone potential: A High*

1.4 Landscape

Lower Palaeolithic

1. The production of more detailed geological maps from a review of existing bore hole data would be of great value. Opportunities to examine sizable exposed sections of gravel deposits should be carefully assessed for the potential to further map and understand the depositional sequence and potentially identify areas of greater potential for warm period channel side activity.
    - *Zone potential: A High; B General ; C General*
2. Can we further understand the formation of the Summertown-Radley and Wolvercote terraces and the evolution of the Thames and Cherwell rivers?
    - *Zone potential: A High; B High; C High*
3. What effect did the climate of the Pleistocene have on the floral and faunal environment and what effect did it have on human settlement patterns. The Wolvercote Channel is a nationally important site in this respect.
    - *Zone potential: A High; B General; C General*
4. Can a review of the Wolvercote Channel site archive produce further insights (including archives from the extraction company)?
    - *Zone potential: A High*
5. Can we further identify and map palaeo-channels within or on the edge of the gravel terraces that may have attracted activity?
    - *Zone Potential: A High*

Upper Palaeolithic-Mesolithic

6. There is further potential for local peat deposits to provide evidence for the changing climate.
    - *Zone potential: A General; B General; C General; D High; E High*
7. The heavy braiding of the river channels in the Palaeolithic to Mesolithic created a number of islands or islets. Is the evidence that these were these utilised as temporary camps, working areas within this section of the Upper Thames? Can targeted sieving of floodplain sites produce flint assemblages? E.g. as at Denham Area 4 in Buckinghamshire.
    - *Zone potential: B High; C High*
8. Further investigation into the effect of fluvial activity such as erosion and sedimentation on the local environment is desirable. E.g. the effect of fluvial activity on the condition of flint implements to assess degree of *ex situ* reworking.
    - *Zone potential: A High; B High; C High; D General; E General*

1.5 Settlement

Lower and Middle Palaeolithic

1. Other than the Wolvercote Channel no *in situ* deposits are recorded within the LAA for these periods, however should they be identified they would be of great interest.
   - *Zone potential: A High; B General; C General*

Upper Palaeolithic and Mesolithic

2. Can occupation/utilisation sites be identified; how do these vary across topographies and geologies? Was the Corallian Ridge a preferred location for activity areas in the Mesolithic; if so what factors influenced this?
   - *Zone potential: A General; B General; C General; D General; E High*
3. Poorly understood Mesolithic scatters are recorded at Iffley and Littlemore; can these be further investigated?
   - *Zone potential: E High*
4. Consideration should be given to gridding and sieving techniques should the opportunity arise to examine areas with Mesolithic potential (noting the difficulty in closely mapping areas of potential from existing information other than identifying higher ground close to water).
   - *Zone potential: A General; B General; C General; D General; E High*
5. Can further examination of the geology of recorded assemblage sites aid more detailed mapping of potential activity areas?
   - *Zone potential: A General; B General; C General; D General; E General*
6. There is some limited evidence that favoured sites attracted activity throughout the prehistoric period (e.g. low levels of material from multiple periods at Manor Ground, Headington); are there other similar sites? What were the factors that made such sites attractive?
   - *Zone potential: A General; B General; C General; D General; E High*

1.6 Material Culture

1. The archaeological resource for the Palaeolithic to Mesolithic overwhelmingly comprises flint assemblages that are used to identify and date sites. Finds of other materials are extremely rare (e.g. bone, wood).

Lower Palaeolithic

2. The further potential for rolled artefacts on the edge of the gravel terraces should be noted.
   - *Zone potential: A High; B High; C High*
3. Further reassessment of the existing museum collections may be warranted to produce detailed gazetteers and consider the re-classification of artefacts. The value of the re-examination of non-flint assemblages such as MacRae's study on quartzite has been noted.
   - *Zone potential: N/A*
4. Further study of 'rolled' and 'un-rolled' deposits may allow artefacts to be more accurately placed within their geological sequence.
   - *Zone potential: N/A*

Upper Palaeolithic-Mesolithic

5. What do finds from the LAA tell us about the movement of raw materials such as flint? What can this tell us about changes in landscape use, technological and social organisation?
   - *Zone potential: N/A*

6. The desirability of database for flint scatters including images, drawings and analysis is noted. The aim would be to produce a detailed typological sequence for the Oxford area that can be related to national and international sequences.
    - *Zone potential: N/A*

Compiled by Ruth Beckley and David Radford

For full acknowledgements please see the online Oxford Archaeological Plan Introduction document.

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Fig 1: Simplified geology map (areas of gravel island and Ampthill Clay have been amalgamated and are not shown, please see introduction document for a detailed surface geology map).