

Archaeology in Oxford

Oxford City report to the Oxford City and County Archaeological Forum

National Planning Policy Framework related field work in October 2022- February 2023

Littlemore House, Littlemore Park

In October an archaeological evaluation was undertaken by John Moore Heritage Services in the grounds of Littlemore House, Littlemore Park. The work was requested to increase the evaluation sample size at this site which has been the subject of earlier evaluations. The trenching was undertaken in advance of a development involving a significant new basement. Previously a small number of Roman features were recorded at the site. The 2022 work recorded a shallow ditch probably dating to the medieval period.

The Yard, Brookes University, Headington Hill

In November an archaeological evaluation was undertaken at The Yard at Brookes University by AOC Archaeology prior to the development site of an Engineering Building. No significant archaeological remains were encountered. The work was requested because of the likely proximity of the Parliamentarian siege works and camp on Headington Hill.

No 52 High Street

In December test pits were excavated in the basement of No 52 High Street by Thames Valley Archaeological Services to inform plans to lower the floor level. The test pits demonstrated that the proposed floor reduction would impact on early-modern make up levels only and that these were sitting directly on-top of natural Oxford Clay.

University College North Site (Woodstock Road, Banbury Road and Staverton Road)

In January an archaeological evaluation was undertaken by Oxford Archaeology at the University College Oxford North site bounded by Woodstock Road, Banbury Road and Staverton Road. No significant archaeological features or artefacts were identified. The geology was notable in that the usual thin brickearth/loess cover seen overlying the second terrace gravels of the Oxford promontory was not identified. Instead, much thicker deposits of loess/brickearth mixed with silty clay and clay deposits were recorded.

Gibbs Crescent, Osney

In January trial trenching was undertaken by Oxford archaeology at the Gibbs Crescent development site which sits over the southern end of the precinct of Osney Abbey. To date the work has revealed a stone lined water channel with in-situ timbers located beyond the walled precinct and the wall of a structure or stone lined channel within the precinct. Further targeted excavation is planned at the site.



Right: A medieval wall belonging to Osney Abbey at Gibbs Crescent.

Trinity College Kitchen and Yard

In January Thames Valley Archaeological Services recorded a likely medieval well within the kitchen yard as part of ongoing development works. A more substantial excavation is to follow.

Not previously reported

Oxpens

Between August and September 2022 a targeted archaeological evaluation was undertaken on the site of the Oxpens Masterplan area by Oxford Archaeology following previous electro-magnetic survey work. The results of the trenching were then combined with the results of an geoarchaeological borehole survey to produce a geoarchaeological model of the area.

Within the north-western part of the site the trenching revealed two medieval pits, a medieval trackway and a ditch. These may be associated with the nearby Osney Abbey or (perhaps less likely) previously unrecorded activity along Osney Lane. One of the pits contained a variety of coprolite material and plant and animal remains including pig, sheep/goat, rabbit and cat bones. It also contained goose bones, which can be associated with high status or ecclesiastical sites. The east-west medieval stone trackway found within this trench may have led from the eastern end of the Osney Abbey precinct into central Oxford.

A trench was located in the middle of the Oxpens site to examine a channel/causeway marked on post-medieval maps and speculatively considered as potential candidate for a significant Saxon routeway (See the article by Alan Crossley in the 2018 edition of *Oxoniensia*). An east-west ditch with an area of raised ground to the north was recorded which matched the position of features shown on post-medieval maps. The ditch was probably the latest phase of part of a network of drainage channels shown on 17th century maps that survived and were mapped into the late 19th century which were located within the site. The raised ground is likely to have been an upslope bank for medieval or earlier post-medieval phases of the ditch or less likely an earlier causeway/routeway. Radiocarbon dating of an upper deposit from this positive feature was dated as 13th-14th century. No traces of a long lived or metaled causeway were identified.

The evaluation and assessment work demonstrated an area in the central part of the site was capped by a brickearth-type subsoil which may represent the remains of an intact land surface of probable prehistoric date. Here an evaluation trench recorded five probably early prehistoric flint tools that seemed to have been deliberately placed in a tree-throw hole.

At the southern end of the site a trench recorded archaeological features that may relate to the Civil War defensive outwork known as 'Harts Sconce'. This included an extensive area covered by several layers containing 17th-century finds along with two steep-sided pits, a stakehole and a shallow pit or ditch. It is possible the shallow pit is the remains of the northern part of the sconce ditch.

South east of the Ice Rink the structural remains of the 20th century St Ebbe's Bathing Place were recorded in one trench. A 19th-20th century deposit of made-ground (including a significant quantity of dumped glass bottles) was recorded south east of the Ice rink.



Top right: Investigating possible Civil War layers at Oxpens. Above right: A medieval metalled trackway at the northern end of the site (Image courtesy of Oxford Archaeology).

Plot 27, Littlemore Priory

In September 2022 evaluation trenching was undertaken by John Moore Heritage Services at Plot 27, Oxford Science Park, Littlemore. The trenching identified a previously unrecorded precinct wall of Littlemore Nunnery along with several previously unidentified structures and walls that substantially add to our understanding of the layout of the priory. The likely 12th century barn and 14th century high

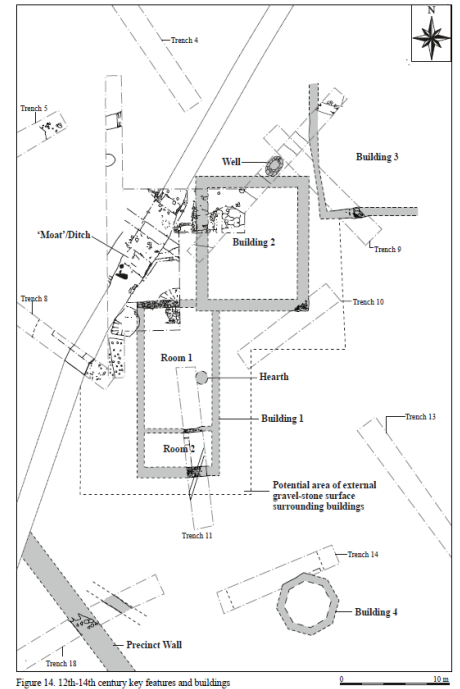


Figure 14 12th-14th century key features and buildings

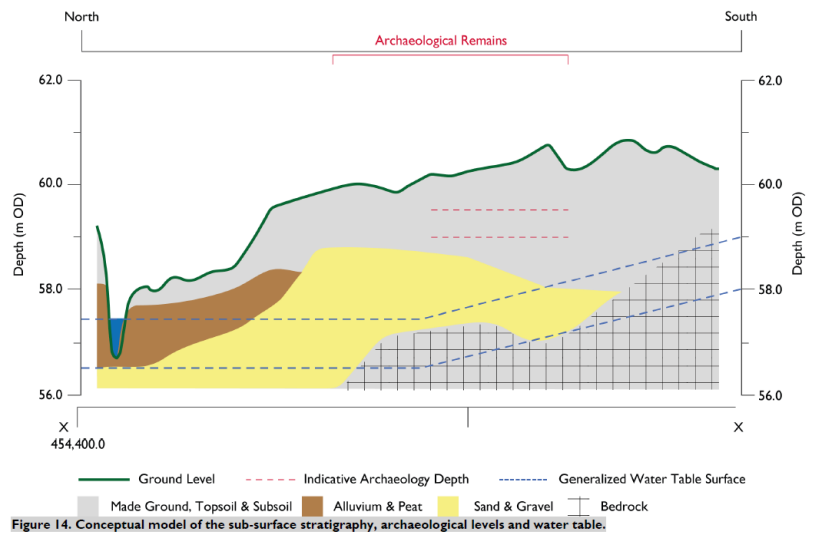
Left: The medieval precinct wall of Littlemore Priory. Right: Some of the new medieval structures identified at Littlemore Prior (courtesy of John Moore Heritage Services).

status building (perhaps a boarding house or Prioresses lodgings) and water channel previously identified by the East Oxford Community Archaeology Project (Archeox) were also subject to light touch investigations to help further determine their character and extent. The City Council is discussing options for substantive preservation in-situ of these structures which may involve an alteration to the currently submitted scheme. A single Roman ditch was also uncovered, as well as a large quantity of residual Roman pottery.

Plot 27, Littlemore Priory

In September-October a tier one water environment assessment was undertaken on land at Littlemore Priory by Quest (University of Reading). This involved a series of archaeological boreholes, radio carbon dating of Minchery Farm Peat Fen deposits and consideration of watching brief information collated during a geotechnical survey of the site. The survey found that within the alluvial deposits across the site a thin peat (Lower Peat) was occasionally observed above the Sand & Gravel deposits, and an Upper Peat was observed above an alluvial (clay-rich) sediment. The Lower peat appeared to date to the Neolithic period (5290 - 4980 cal BP). Three basal dates on the Upper Peat indicate that formation across the site also dates to the Mid-Holocene/Neolithic (5900-5660 cal. BP, QBH22: 5590-5460 cal. BP). In parts of the site peat formation began in the Bronze Age (3450-3250 cal BP). The Tier 1 Water Environment Assessment demonstrated that whilst some of these peat deposits appear to be waterlogged, much of the Peat is (at least seasonally) not submerged beneath the water table.

The limited pollen results from the survey indicated that during the period of Peat formation (Mid-Holocene onwards) the floodplain was likely dominated by a mosaic of sedges and grasses with an alder-carr woodland. The higher dryland appears to be covered by a mixed deciduous woodland comprising species such as oak, lime, elm and beech amongst others. Previous work on the site indicates that older sediments do exist within the confines of the site, with two dates from a previous excavation on the site dating to the Late Glacial Period (13,590-12,360 cal BP & 12,010-11,730 cal BP). The Quest report concluded that these deposits are likely confined to a very small area, potentially an ephemeral hollow or a channel which briefly filled with sediment.



Above right: Diagram from the tier 1 water assessment model (Courtesy of Quest (Quaternary Scientific)).

Other news

Oxford Preservation Trust Awards Frewin Hall

I am pleased to report that archaeology has featured in the OPT awards for the first time. Oxford Archaeology and Brasenose College were awarded a certificate for their excavation and outreach work at the Frewin Hall excavation. For further information on the dig see:

<https://oxfordarchaeology.com/our-projects/frewin-hall-oxford>

Right: Ben Ford of Oxford Archaeology and Philip Parker from Brasenose picking up the OPT award.



Digging for Britain

The excavation undertaken last year at Frewin Hall by Oxford Archaeology was featured on the BBC Digging for Britain Series, where exciting new information was announced. The human remains recovered from a feature cut into the Bronze Age barrow identified at the site have produced a surprising Middle Saxon date (770 - 894 cal AD (88.3%)). In the early Saxon period such earthworks were embraced by settlers who seem to be making a statement by establishing houses and burials close to them. At the end of the Saxon period such earthworks, such as the henge monument at St John's, were likely seen as pagan places by local people, suitable only for placing the remains of miscreants or enemies (for example the mass grave of likely Danes or Vikings found in the St John's henge ditch). The presence of a burial placed in a prehistoric burial mound so close to the possible trading/minster settlement near Christ Church, during a period when the population would have been largely Christian, is intriguing.

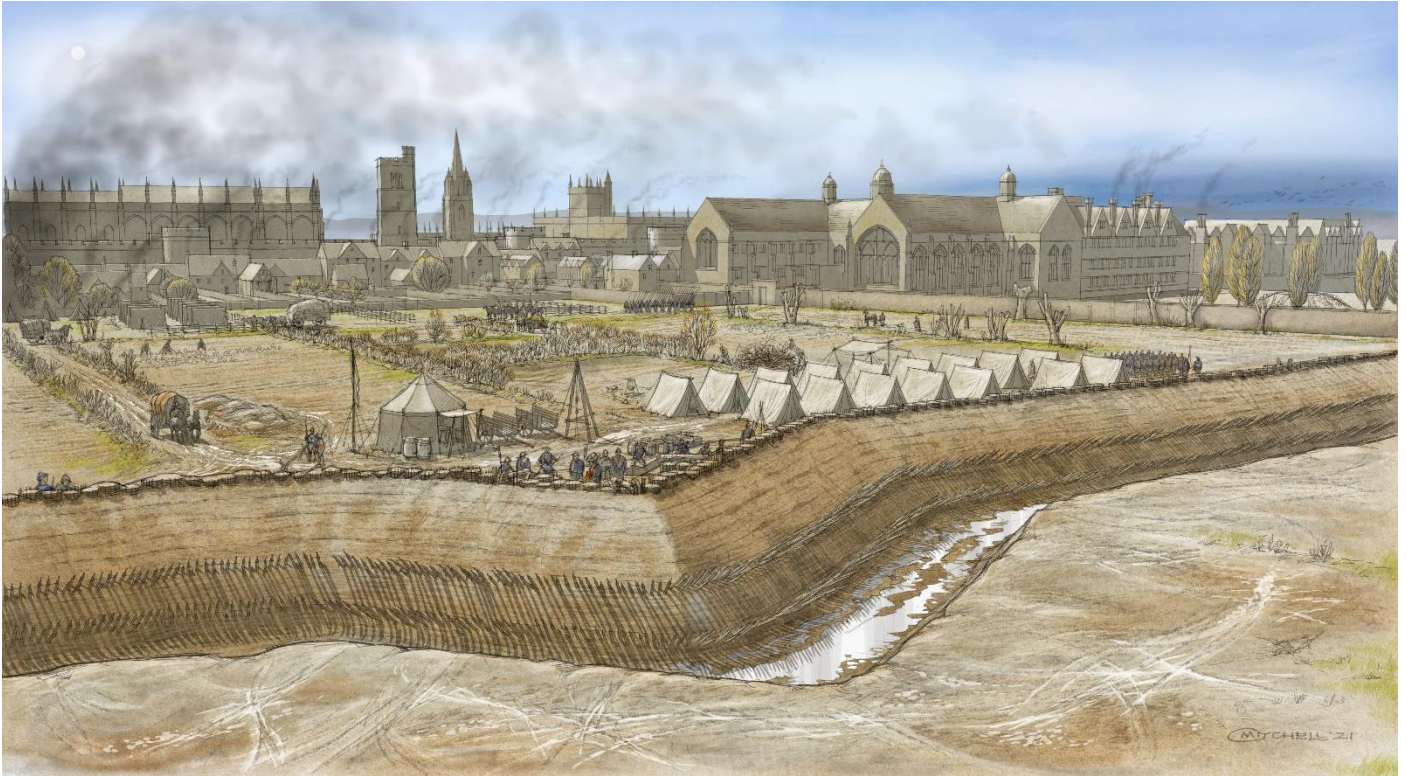
Oxford mail article: <https://www.oxfordmail.co.uk/news/23267909.archaeological-dig-unearthed-oxfords-lost-college-tv/>

Link to Digging for Britain programme on iplayer (Oxford is 50 min in):

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/p0dm7yn3/digging-for-britain-series-10-3-headless-romans-and-anglo-saxon-gold>

Current Archaeology- Civil War defences

The March edition of Current Archaeology features a reconstruction drawing of the Royalist Civil War defences in Mansfield Road by Museum of London Archaeology along with a picture of the Mayor of Oxford uncovering a Civil War plaque at New College Music Room.



Above: A reconstruction drawing of the northern inner line of the Royalist Civil War defences (Courtesy of Museum of London Archaeology).

Top Ten Digs Tweets

Every year I do a series of tweets celebrating the top ten Oxford archaeological digs/events of the year. (See https://twitter.com/DavidRadford_ox/status/1604762658447704064).

This year the Frewin Hall site created the most interest. Stats from the most popular tweets are given below:

- 1) Frewin Hall #1: 20,150 impressions
- 2) Civil War reconstruction drawing #8: 16,745 imps
- 3) Castle Hill House #2: 7,833 imp
- 4) 84 St Aldates #7: 5,034 imps
- 5) Littlemore Priory #3: 3,583 imps



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