

Archaeology in Oxford

Oxford City report to the Oxford City and County Archaeological Forum

June-October 2021

National Planning Policy Framework related field work in Oxford

The Clarendon Centre, Queen Street

Between May and July a series of test pits were excavated within the units of the Clarendon Shopping Centre for geotechnical and archaeological purposes and were monitored by Pre-Construct Archaeology. The initial results suggest a pattern of deeper modern disturbance that previously indicated by PCA's 2012 excavation within the H&M store. The results of the survey will be used to scope out requirements for archaeological excavation across the phase 1 development if planning consent is forthcoming. Three development phases are proposed. The final phase is likely to involve a significant basement excavation on the Cornmarket frontage, partially revisiting archaeological work undertaken at Nos 55-58 Cornmarket in 1962.

North Bailey House, New Inn Hall Street

In May and September an archaeological watching brief was undertaken by Pre-Construct Archaeology at North Bailey House, during geotechnical investigations. A likely medieval pit was observed below the basement slab. The results of this work will inform future recording requirements relating to minor works within the existing basement.

Nos 1-3 George Street

In June Pre-Construct Archaeology undertook an archaeological watching brief at Nos 1-3 George Street during geotechnical investigations. A probable archaeological made-ground/infilling deposit, relating to the infilled medieval town ditch was observed from 0.50m below ground level to a least 4.00m depth. No structures earlier than the current building foundations were recorded during the investigations and no datable finds were recovered.

Boswells Department Store Broad Street

Between July and August a staged programme of archaeological excavation was undertaken in the basement of the former Boswell's department store by Oxford Archaeology. Previously a borehole transect was undertaken within the building's basement, across the line of the Late Saxon and medieval town ditch. The results of this work are keenly awaited. The date and sequence of this part of the defences have recently been the subject of a paper by Jeremy Haslam who has suggested a late 10th century date for the tower of St Michael at the Northgate and the forward enclosure in the town wall built around the its churchyard (Link to [Archaeological Journal](#)).

The latest phase of work involved the excavation of late 15th-early 16th century fills from the town ditch, producing moderate amounts of bone and pottery along with cassy fills suggestive of soil /night soil dumping into the ditch near the North Gate. The trench, excavated in advance of a new lift shaft, was extended northwards to successfully capture the northern profile of the ditch. Elsewhere along its northern line the town ditch has produced evidence for a 17th century re-cut likely associated with the re-defence of the town when it became the Royalist capital during the Civil War, however the absence of evidence for a re-cut at this depth at the Boswell's site strengthens the case for any possible Civil War re-cut line being directed around the Northgate, somewhere further to the north.

Lucy Faithfull House, Speedwell Street

Between June and July excavations by Museum of London Archaeology continued at the site of the medieval Blackfriars (2nd site) at Lucy Faithfull House. The excavations targeted the footprints of new stair cores,

ground beams, pile caps and service routes revealing part surfaces belonging to the possible galilee (a porch area where penitents could wait outside the friary church before confession), fragments of painted glass from the west end of the church and floors and walls (and possible staircase base) from the interior of the west range of the main cloister. Other features included waste pits from the friary garden, monumentally large bedding trenches for the primary walls of the main cloister (these were found to be deep stone filled trenches reaching 1.6m through the water table down to the natural gravel) and a stone coffin lid (carefully covered over and left in situ). Further site works are to follow.

The Old Library, Christ Church

Between July and September Graham Keevill, the retained Cathedral Archaeologist, has been recording features exposed by repair and upgrading works to the Old Library at Christ Church. The building originated as part of the southern cloistral range of the medieval Priory of St Frideswide's, forming the *Frater* (or refectory), however it was substantively rebuilt in the 16th century and has undergone multiple later rebuilds and refits. Although medieval fabric dating to before the 15th century was anticipated to survive within the structure it was unclear whether this could be identified and dated. It therefore came as a shock when oddly shaped 19th century plasterboard surrounds were removed from the third floor revealing datable 13th century colonettes. Other remarkable discoveries include the survival of 15th century arcading on the north, south and east interior wall of the building that had been cut back and covered over by later building phases. Also of great interest is the painted medieval pulpit that survives within the range and is to be subject to conservation work by Cliveden Conservation. A 3d image of the pulpit can be viewed here: <https://p3d.in/YQBDN> . Recording work on this fascinating building continues.



Above left and centre: Colonette revealed by the internal works (provisionally identified as 13th century in date) at the Old Library Christ Church. Above right: some of the late medieval arcading revealed by the building work.



Right: A blocked doorway that may relate to the approach to the former Frater entrance. Far right: The painted medieval font within the Old Library, Christ Church.

Simon House, Paradise Street

Between July and August Oxford Archaeology undertook a targeted excavation of the Castle Bailey ditch at Simon House. As the new development here was unable to reuse the piles from the previous late 1970s building an excavation to the base of the castle bailey ditch sequence was required in mitigation. This is the first time the bailey ditch has been investigated to its base, involving the excavation of a 6-7m deep sequence and special training for the OA team. The excavation and adjacent water monitoring established that whilst the ditch remains periodically wet and preserves organic material the water table sits below the base of the ditch, which becomes energised after rainfall. The dig revealed a barrel with cessy fill (possibly used as a toilet by the occupants of housing established in the edge of the ditch by the 17th century) and a central post medieval recut revetted with wooden stakes. Below this tips of pottery, bone and shoe leather were recorded, with the unlined base of the ditch formed by the Oxford Clay. Two distinctive pieces of moulded stone were found dumped into the ditch could conceivably be from the former church of St Budoc's that was demolished to make way for the castle barbican in the early 13th century.



Above, from left: The excavation area within the Castle Bailey ditch. Middle: A post-medieval barrel perched on the edge of the infilled ditch: Right: Pewter cup from the ditch (Photo courtesy of OA). Below, from left: A piece of medieval moulded stone discarded into the ditch. Middle: Site visit by Oxford Preservation Trust and Tom Hassall, former City Archaeologist, who excavated parts of the bailey ditch in the 1970s. Right: A second piece of moulded medieval stone from the ditch.

St Hilda's College

In August LLP Archaeology undertook a field evaluation at St Hilda's College in advance of the construction of new accommodation buildings and gym. The trenching was requested because of the general potential

for prehistoric activity in this location and the proximity of the historic river crossing over the Cherwell. No significant remains were recorded.

Thornhill Park

In August Pre-Construct Archaeology undertook archaeological trenching at Thornhill Park (formerly the Nielsen complex). The work was undertaken because of the general potential for prehistoric and Roman archaeology in this location. No significant archaeological remains were encountered.

Northgate House, Cornmarket

In August Oxford Archaeology undertook a watching brief during the boring of small tunnels under Market Street to allow the connection of new services. No significant archaeological remains were recorded.

Corpus Christi College, New Archive Building

In August Oxford Archaeology undertook an excavation on the line of Oriel Street (formerly Shidyerd Street) where it runs between Corpus Christi and Christ Church College. The work sought to obtain a full section through this historic route way which is believed to have been established in the Late Saxon period, potentially as an intra-mural road running along the inside of a rampart belonging to a smaller 'primary' burh (or defended enclosure around the early town). The excavation was logistically challenging because of the very high adjacent precinct wall of Christ Church but was able to successfully record road surface sequences down to an early compacted gravel layer that was covered by a thin organic silt and pierced by a wooden stake. Later medieval pits were found cut into the edge of the road. The hope is that scientific dating may help to establish the date of this early sequence.



Above left: The line of former Shidyerd Street. Middle: Final reduction through the base of the medieval and likely Late –Saxon street sequence (pointing to the stake - see right). Right: a wooden stake cutting the possible Late-Saxon compacted gravel surface.

Rhodes House, Parks Road

Between August and October Museum of London Archaeology have been undertaking phased excavations prior to the construction of a new sunken accommodation block and garden building at Rhodes House. The new landscaping is designed to open up views of the adjacent Royalist civil war rampart. Excavations to the east of the main building have investigated a series of linear features that may prove to be a mixture of paleo-channels in the gravel terrace and later garden features. A substantial internal ditch mirroring the line of the Civil War rampart was also recorded both east and west of Rhodes House and has produced quantities of 17th century pottery and animal bone. Archaeological work is currently continuing to the west of Rhodes House.

No 1 Acer Walk

Between August and September TJC Heritage Ltd undertook historic building recording prior to the conversion of a 19th or early 20th century electricity sub-station into a residential dwelling. Few internal fixtures and fittings survived, however two phases of building development were recorded and internal details were noted such as the staircase supplied by George Wright & Co London. The report is forthcoming.

Osney Power Station, Arthur Street

Between September and October Oxford Archaeology have been undertaking an excavation at Osney Power Station prior to conversion of the structure into an accommodation block for the Said Business School. The site is located just within the projected northern extent of the former medieval precinct of Osney Abbey. A series of medieval makeup layers, roofing debris and pits have been recorded along with horn cores suggesting medieval leather working activity. To date no clear structures or particularly artefact rich assemblages have been encountered suggesting that this part of the precinct had a utilitarian function. The work is ongoing.

No 80 Old Road, Headington

In August a targeted watching brief was undertaken by John Moore Heritage Services at No 80 Old Road, Headington, to examine the route of a post-medieval trackway with possible earlier origins. A post-medieval ditch was recorded. The report is forthcoming.

Land to rear of No 1 Fisher Row (former soap factory)

In August historic building recording was undertaken by John Moore Heritage Services on the brick built curtilage structure behind No 1 Fisher row prior to its conversion for residential use. The building is believed to be linked to the operation of the Morrell Brewery. The report is forthcoming.

Swan School Grand Opening

A grand opening was held for the Swan School in New Marston in September with Dame Sarah Gilbert, and provided an opportunity to display some of the Roman handlist collection from the site and hand out leaflets about the Cotswold Archaeology excavation that took place before building work for the school began. The dig revealed a series of Iron Age enclosures and a Roman mortaria kiln.

For more information on the dig see:
<https://cotswoldarchaeology.co.uk/the-iron-age-and-roman-settlements-at-swan-school/>



Monitoring Statement for Archaeological Assets 2020

The 2020 Monitoring Statement for Archaeological Assets is now available on the City Council website:
https://www.oxford.gov.uk/downloads/download/483/archaeological_annual_monitoring_statement

Historic Town Atlas

A major new synthesis of the archaeology and history of the Oxford is to be published this October/November <http://www.historictownsatlas.org.uk/atlas/volume-vii/oxford>

Railway Bridge

For an update on the restoration work by the Oxford Preservation Trust on the Rewley Road swing bridge please see: <https://www.oxfordpreservation.org.uk/content/rewley-road-railway-swing-bridge>

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