

# NOTES

## EXCAVATIONS AT ST HILDA'S COLLEGE, COWLEY PLACE, OXFORD

Between December 2003 and February 2004 Oxford Archaeology (OA) carried out an archaeological evaluation, watching brief and a subsequent excavation at St Hilda's College, Cowley Place, Oxford (NGR SP 5222 0590) (Fig. 1). The work was undertaken on behalf of St Hilda's College, in respect of a planning application for the extension of the current library.<sup>1</sup>

### *Geology and topography*

The site is situated *c.* 30 m. to the east of the River Cherwell at *c.* 59.30 m. O.D., just outside the historic core of Oxford, within the parish of Cowley. The site overlies terrace gravel and sand, beneath which is Oxford Clay. The site is flanked to the west by the current college library and by Cowley Place to the east. The area had been used as a small car park.

### *Archaeological and historical background (Fig. 1)*

St Hilda's College is located *c.* 70 m. to the south of the Plain roundabout, the original site of St Clement's Church. The church was flanked by the London Road and the new London Toll Road created in the late 1700s, forming the island that became the Plain. St Clement's was consecrated in 1122, but, as the parish population expanded during the late post-medieval period, it became too small and was demolished in 1828, to be replaced by a new church on Hacklingcroft Meadow.

Land immediately north of the present site was subject to a watching brief during alterations and extensions by Magdalen College School.<sup>2</sup> Finds of late 11th-century date suggested the presence of some form of settlement here.<sup>3</sup>

In 2000, a watching brief exposed 18th/19th century pottery and features associated with the construction of the school buildings.<sup>4</sup> Further work in 2002 at the Jacqueline du Pré Music Building revealed an undated ditch.<sup>5</sup> Historically the site appears to have been located within the open fields of Cowley parish, and *c.* 100 m. south-west of the position of the Civil War defences plotted by de Gomme in 1644.<sup>6</sup>

St. Hilda's College Old Building originated as an 18th-century house, which was built on the foundations of an earlier building by Dr. Humphrey Sibthorpe, Sherardian Professor of Botany, between 1775 and 1783. It was constructed of locally made bricks and its proportions were far from the norm as Dr. Sibthorpe had 'spoilt its arrangement' in order to accommodate some large windows and a fine staircase that he had purchased at the demolition of Lord Abingdon's house at Rycote, near Thame.

<sup>1</sup> St Hilda's College funded the fieldwork and subsequent post-excavation analysis, for which the authors are very grateful. This note summarises the findings and a full report may be found in the archive, which will be deposited with the Oxfordshire County Museums Service under accession number OXCMS:2003.182.

<sup>2</sup> Planning Ref: 00/588/L, Oxford Archaeology, 'Magdalen College School Archaeological Watching Brief Report' (unpublished client report, 2001).

<sup>3</sup> John Moore Heritage Services, 'An Archaeological Watching Brief between no. 1 and Nos 2 and 3 Cowley Place, Oxford' (unpublished client report, 2001).

<sup>4</sup> *op. cit.* note 2.

<sup>5</sup> Oxford Archaeology, 'Building Extension at the Jacqueline Du Prés Music Room, St Hilda's College, Oxford, Archaeological Watching Brief' (unpublished client report, 2002).

<sup>6</sup> Oxford Archaeological Unit, 'St Hilda's College Oxford, Desktop Assessment' (unpublished client report, 1999).



In 1877 the land, to the south between the river and the cricket ground was leased from Christ Church by Augustus Vernon Harcourt, tutor of Physical Chemistry at that college. Vernon Harcourt built a large house, Cowley Grange, on a site close to the river; this can be seen on the 2nd edition OS 25'' map.

St Hilda's Hall was founded in 1893 by Dorothea Bell, Principal of Cheltenham Ladies College. She purchased Cowley House and established it as a hall of residence for ladies from Cheltenham, so that they might take advantage of the educational opportunities newly available to women at the University.

In 1902 Cowley Grange and its grounds were taken over by the Church Education Corporation Ltd, which established Cherwell Hall as a training college for women teachers. The foundation soon outgrew the house and between 1907-1911 new buildings, doubling the size of the original house, were constructed. In 1921 Cherwell Hall was closed and St Hilda's College acquired the lease.

#### *The excavations (Fig. 1)*

A single evaluation trench measuring approximately 2.5 m. x 4 m. was located in the northern part of the site; subsequently a full archaeological excavation of 0.01 ha. was undertaken. A watching brief was carried out during the removal of services and demolition of a 20th-century basement.

Three phases of activity were identified based on an analysis of the stratigraphic evidence and the pottery dates:

Phase 1 – 11th-15th centuries

Phase 2 – 15th-18th centuries

Phase 3 – 18th century onwards

#### Phase 1 (11th-15th centuries)

A discontinuous soil horizon, possibly a ploughsoil, was traced across the site. It produced no finds but was cut by a sequence of three north-south aligned ditches (515-517) with fills containing 13th-century material. Two small pits lay in the northern part of the site and were cut by one of the ditches (515).

The westernmost ditch (517) was 1 m. wide and 0.4 m. deep and its fills appeared to be derived from garden soil. The eastern edge of the ditch was cut by ditch 516, which measured 0.5 m. wide and 0.3 m. deep. It had a rounded base and was filled with silt and clay. Ditch 516 was cut by ditch 515, measuring between 0.6 m. and 1 m. deep and between 1.3 m. and 2.2 m. wide. This had a flat base and was filled with dark brown silt deposits. The ditches were probably part of a field system or may have formed a boundary around St Clement's Church.

A line of postholes (482, 506, 518, 491 and 514 not shown) lay along the eastern edge of ditch 515, perhaps representing a fence line bordering this ditch. A tree-throw hole (477) lay to the north of the post alignment.

#### Phase 2 (15th-18th centuries)

A silty loam was exposed in patches across the site. It was probably a ploughsoil or garden soil. It produced mid 16th-century pottery and was cut by the foundation trench of a north-south aligned limestone wall (275). The wall was constructed of rough unworked limestone blocks with no evidence for dressing on the exposed eastern face. Five irregular courses, bonded with soft creamy mortar, standing to 1.1 m. were recognised. A length of stone wall abutted wall 275 but was only visible in the south section (not shown). These walls may represent a boundary on the line of the earlier ditches.

Overlying the soil layer was a series of dumped deposits that were cut by a small pit, filled with brown loam. The pit was cut by a possible robber trench, which appeared to truncate the northern part of wall 275 and was filled with dumped silts. A pitched stone surface, which overlay the dumped deposits produced 17th-century pottery.

At the northern end of the site 17th-century make-up layers were overlain by a mortar surface (206) cut by four square postholes (207, 209, 211).<sup>7</sup> They measured between 0.7 and 0.3 m. wide and 0.1 to 0.15 m. deep and were sealed by a collapse or dump of mortar (205). A construction cut (252) lay to the north of the postholes. It was filled with a dump of blue clay upon which was constructed a square limestone structure (225) with a circular shaft (355). The shaft was 1 m. in diameter and 0.8 m. deep with a well-constructed inner face bonded with coarse lime mortar. The structure may have been an ornamental (folly) well. An apparently contemporary limestone wall (399) abutted the structure.

Six pits lay within the excavated area. The largest (468) lay in the north-east corner of the site and was over 2 m. in diameter and 0.8 m. deep. It was filled with dumps of silt and sand. Few finds were recovered from the pit, which may have been dug as a source of soil for levelling ground elsewhere. The small pottery assemblage dated to the mid 16th-century and a fill also contained butchered horse bones.

#### Phase 3 (18th century onwards)

A limestone walled cellar (group 471) lay along the western edge of the excavated area. It was c. 4 m. wide and 2 m. deep and the walls (375) were constructed of ashlar blocks with a vaulted brick ceiling (370), supported on a limestone plinth (469). It had a floor of limestone cobbles. The backfill (383) of the construction cut for the cellar contained mid 18th-century pottery. The cellar probably belonged to the late 18th-century Cowley House.

The phase 2 deposits were overlain by 19th-century levelling layers. Two robber trenches (221 and 223), lay on the same north-south alignment as wall 275 but turned north-east at the point of the folly well (355). They were filled with silt and patches of decayed mortar and may have represented boundary walls similar to 275. A repair (358) at the northern end of 275 may have been associated with the robbing event.

Make-up deposits, modern wall footings and the base of a shed were also exposed.

#### *Discussion*

The excavation area was heavily disturbed by the construction of the college buildings and later service trenches. A scatter of residual medieval pottery was recovered from across the site but much of the medieval ground levels had been removed. Nonetheless, the artefact assemblage from undisturbed medieval deposits produced some indication of the nature and chronology of the site.

A sequence of three north-south aligned medieval ditches ran the length of the site. These may represent field boundary ditches within Cowley Parish. Alternatively, they may have defined the eastern limits of the parish of St Clement's or St Clement's churchyard. A line of postholes along the western edge of the ditches may have formed a fence line. These ditches provide additional evidence for early-medieval activity, suggesting that after the Conquest Oxford's expansion may have developed to the east as well as along St Giles, to the north of the city walls. The environmental evidence indicates an area of damp and open grassland; the paucity of artefacts would accord with limited farming in this area east of the city walls.

<sup>7</sup> The fourth posthole was not planned.

A 16th- or 17th-century boundary wall lay on the same alignment as the ditches. Its northern end was robbed, but the evidence suggests that it had a north-east aligned return, perhaps marking the northern limits of the churchyard. The wall may have been associated with a structure demolished to make way for the 18th-century Cowley House. An ornamental, or folly well had been constructed on a layer of redeposited Oxford clay to the west of the wall. A mortar surface and associated postholes located nearby may have been associated with this structure. These features appeared to date from the 17th or 18th centuries and may have been garden features in the grounds of the 18th-century Cowley House or an earlier structure.

The 18th-century vaulted cellar was probably part of the original Cowley House, infilled after the establishment of St Hilda's College during the 19th century; the other walls and soakaways represented features within the grounds of St Hilda's College.

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#### 'CELLULAR MARKINGS' AT THE COTTAGE, NEWNHAM MURREN

Located at SU611885, the cottage is a small rectangular structure with later additions, adjacent to a substantial farmhouse with medieval origins standing close to the Norman church of St Mary. It is possible that the building was once a detached kitchen to the medieval manor house. The cottage is timber framed on a tall brick plinth largely concealed under render and modern lime wash. The timber framing has been much renewed and parts of one and a half bays can be seen.

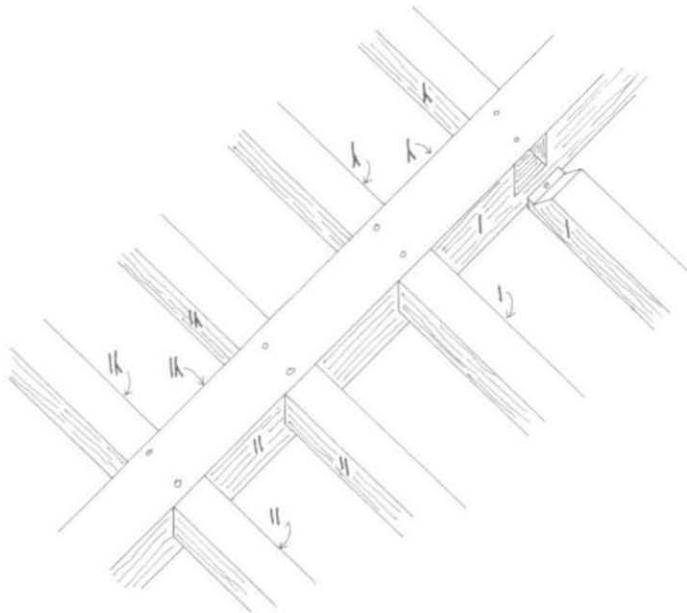


Fig.2. Cellular markings at Newnham Murren

An inserted floor consists of a spine beam supporting joists with diminished haunch soffit tenons at 17" centres.<sup>8</sup> This structure has been dated to 1551 by Nottingham University Dendrochronology Laboratory. Normally, a carpenter would mark each joist and the appropriate place for it on the spine beam with a unique number – usually in Roman numerals – so that it can be reassembled correctly on site. At The Cottage the assembly is marked up in the 'cellular' style, illustrated above in Fig. 2 whereby the numbers are scribed on the inner faces of the joists and spine beam in alternate 'cells'. Here, although cells on opposite sides of the spine beam were given the same number, one side is differentiated by applying a small tag to one of the strokes. This allows reassembly in only one correct way. The purpose of cellular marking seems only to be to minimise the amount of scribing required.

The interest and potential importance of this is that it appears to be the first example of this type of assembly system found in Oxfordshire. Ten examples have been found in Essex, one possibly from around 1510 (Brookes Farm, Stisted)<sup>9</sup> but most are from the 17th century. An example has been found in Wales from the late 17th century,<sup>10</sup> and at 173 High Street, Berkhamsted, Herts. on a floor structure inserted in 1638.<sup>11</sup> It is clearly usable only where there can be no confusion as to which way the joists are to be inserted into the spine-beam. Until further examples are found and recorded it must remain conjectural as to whether this system was widespread geographically or in time, invented independently in different parts of the country at different times, or the trademark of a small number of carpenters who may have moved around.

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<sup>8</sup> For technical terms, see N. W. Alcock *et al.*, *Recording Timber-framed Buildings: an Illustrated Glossary* (CBA Practical Handbook in Archaeology 5, 1999).

<sup>9</sup> Richard Shackle, 'Brookes Farm, Stisted', *Historic Buildings in Essex*, 5 (1990), 9–15.

<sup>10</sup> Elphin Watkin, 'Cellular (Brentwood) Marking over the Border', *Historic Buildings in Essex*, 10 (1998), 27.

<sup>11</sup> James Moir, pers. comm.