

Excavations in the Bodleian Library Exhibition Room, Oxford

By MARK R. ROBERTS

with contributions from LUCY BOWN and LEIGH ALLEN

SUMMARY

An excavation in the Exhibition Room of the Bodleian Library located traces of five buildings on the east side of the former School Street. All the walls associated with these buildings had been robbed. The pottery assemblage from the excavations ranged in date from the early 13th century to the 16th century.

INTRODUCTION

During January 1994, Oxford Archaeological Unit undertook small-scale excavations beneath the Exhibition Room of the Bodleian Library (SP 51540638), that is the School of Natural Philosophy in the south-west corner of the Schools Quadrangle in the Old Library. This was in advance of the creation of a new plant area. The plant area measures 5.8 by 2.8 m., and is 0.6 m. deep; this is in addition to a pre-existing 0.6 m. deep void (bottom 63.78 m. O.D.) under the floor of the Exhibition Room. The lowest excavated level of the trench was therefore 1.2 m. (63.18 m. O.D.) below the surface of the Exhibition Room floor which is at the same height as the quadrangle.

BACKGROUND (Fig. 1)

The site lies within the north-east corner of the original late Saxon town defences that were discovered in excavations in the Clarendon Quadrangle in 1899.¹ The line of the defences turns south and presumably runs through the library, but was not observed in the excavation of the Radcliffe Square bookstore in 1910 which was observed by T.E. Lawrence and others but never reported. School Street, the northward continuation of the road along the west side of Radcliffe Square, would have been an intramural road inside the defences. The exact site of the road is not certain, but it would appear that the parish boundary shown by marker stones is likely to be its east side, and that its south end is occupied partly by Exeter College garden and partly by Radcliffe Square, and its north end partly by the library Proscholium and partly by the Schools Quadrangle.² It had been assumed that the road ran along the front of the Divinity School, but that building had a porch (some part of which survives below the floor of

¹ F.H. Penny and W.M. Merry, *Buried Oxford Unearthed, being some account of the Excavations undertaken by the Oxford Architectural and Historical Society during August and September 1899*.

² J.T. Munby, 'The Topography of Schools Street, Oxford', *Oxoniensia*, xxxvi (1972), 246-8.

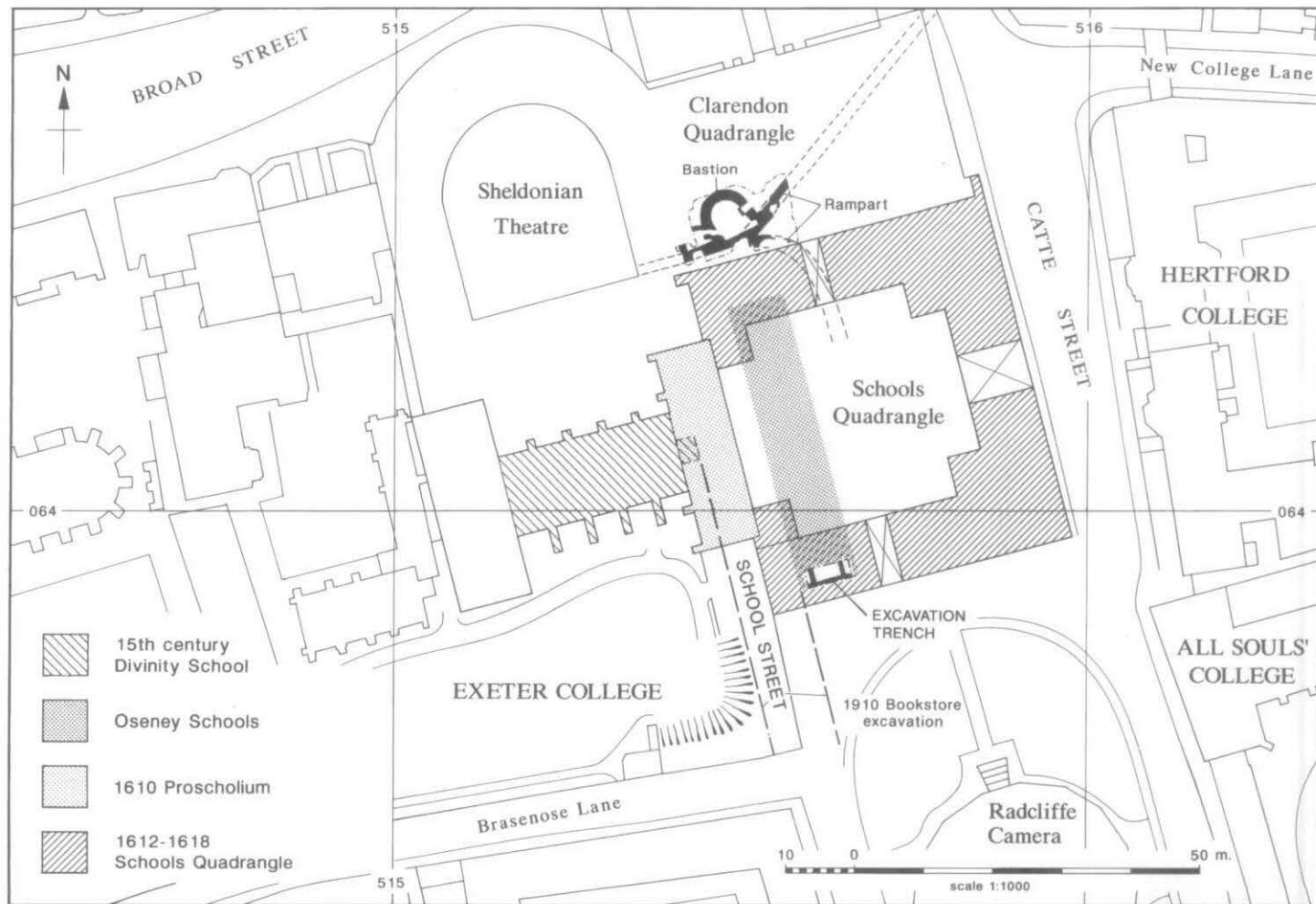


Fig. 1. The Bodleian Library, showing the location of the excavations.

the Proscholium), while the strongest evidence that the road lay further east is the fact that the Queen Mary's Schools on the east side of the road were still standing when the Proscholium was being built in 1610. Thus the site of the excavation lay immediately behind the medieval street frontage.

As its name suggests, School Street was the central teaching area of the medieval university, with numerous small properties rented out as lecture rooms, whose topography has been described by Salter and Pantin.³ This vicinity, and especially Catte Street, was also the centre of book production.⁴ On the east side of School Street at the north end was the Oseney Schools, comprising three tenements let as twelve schools (Salter NE (106)). This may not have been the exclusive use, as the names of occupants from the early 13th century suggest that book production continued. Likewise in the next property to the south, the Schools of University College were earlier used by the book trade (Salter NE (104)). While the precise measurements are not certain, the boundary between the Oseney and University Schools is probably located on or just south of the area of the excavation.⁵ The Oseney Schools were rebuilt by Abbot Hooknorton in 1440 as ten schools, named after the seven arts and three philosophies of the Arts degree.⁶ The Divinity School of the University had already been begun on the opposite side of the road, but was not completed until the end of the 15th century with the addition of Duke Humphrey's Library. The Oseney Schools were rebuilt by Queen Mary's benefaction and these are the schools illustrated by Bereblock and on Agas' map of Oxford.⁷ Sir Thomas Bodley first added the Proscholium to the front of the Divinity School in 1610, and then between 1612 and 1618 the present Schools Quadrangle was built, which comprised schools on the ground and first floors, and the library above.

COMMENT ON THE EXCAVATION

The excavation of deposits in a very confined space within an existing building was complicated by the lack of natural light which made differentiating the soils difficult. In addition the soils were very dry having last been exposed to the atmosphere in the early 17th century. In the description of the buildings the construction and destruction of the structures are combined because so few elements from the lifetime of each building survived. As the trench was small the overall dimensions of the robber trenches could not be determined; in many cases only one side of a robber trench was found as the other side had been cut away by later deposits.

The illustrated section is the one with most of the contexts visible in it. Not all of the layers were visible to their full depth in this section (for example, 10 was up to 0.5 m. deep at the west of the trench but appears as a thin layer in figure 2e).

DESCRIPTION OF FEATURES

Early floors of Building A (Figs. 2a and 2c)

This building was represented by two very small patches of floor (39 and 40) separated by a layer of dump (38), part of which was cut away by 34 filled by 33 of building B. Layer 39 was not excavated (and is below the bottom of excavation line on the section) and layer 38 was only partially excavated below layer 33. 38 contained early 11th- to mid 13th-century pottery and a horseshoe fragment, and 40 contained pottery of a similar date (see pottery discussion for a refinement of this date).

³ H.E. Salter, *Survey of Oxford*, I (Oxf. Hist. Soc. New Ser. xiv), p. 74; W.A. Pantin, 'The Halls and Schools of Medieval Oxford: an Attempt at Reconstruction' in *Oxford Studies presented to Daniel Callus* (Oxf. Hist. Soc. xvi), 31-100, esp. 94 and fig. 14.

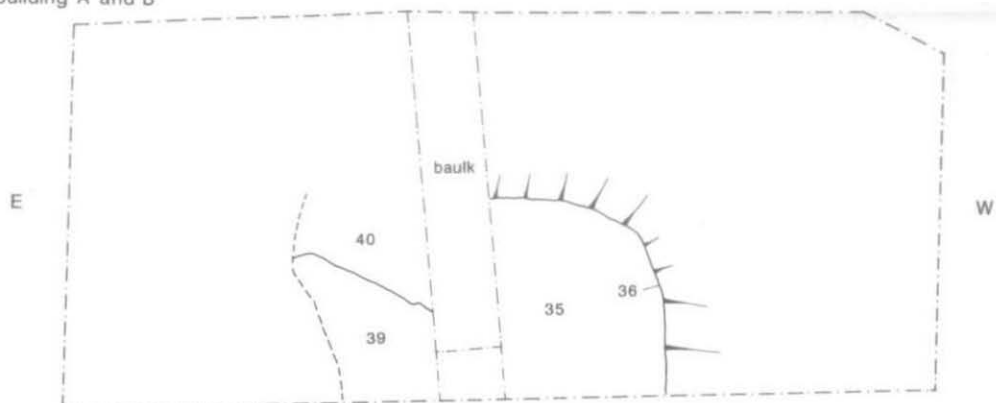
⁴ J. Catto and R. Evans (eds.), *The History of the University of Oxford*, ii, *Late Medieval Oxford* (1992), 141ff.

⁵ The garden was 122 feet long in 1555 (Salter, op. cit. note 3, 75), but the plot was certainly not rectangular.

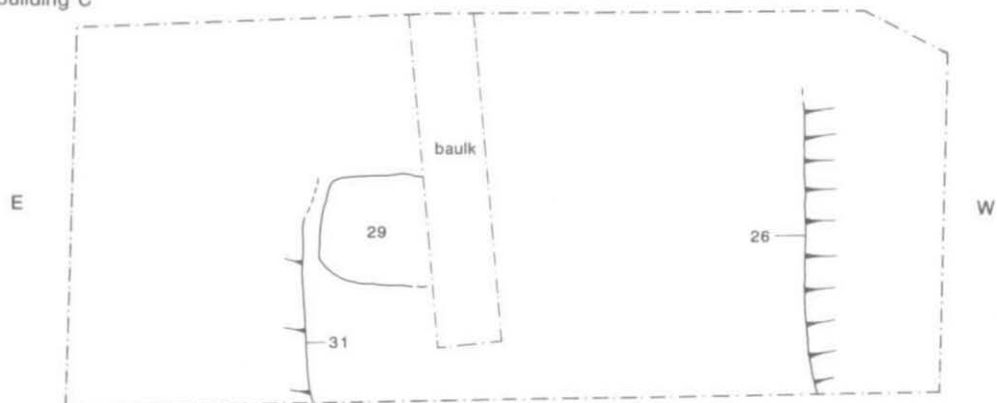
⁶ Pantin, op. cit. note 3, 94.

⁷ I.G. Philip, 'Queen Mary Tudor's Benefaction to the University', *Bodleian Library Record* (1954), 27-37; J. McConica (ed.), *The History of the University of Oxford*, iii, *The Collegiate University* (1986), 141, 599-600.

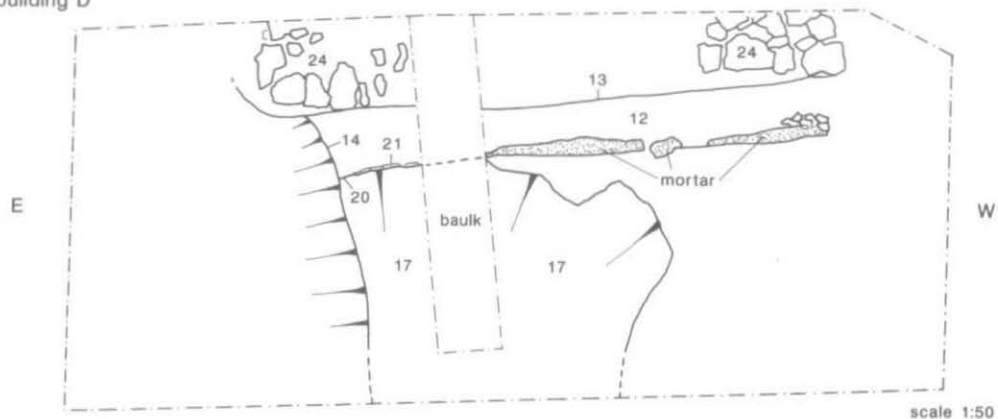
a: building A and B



b: building C



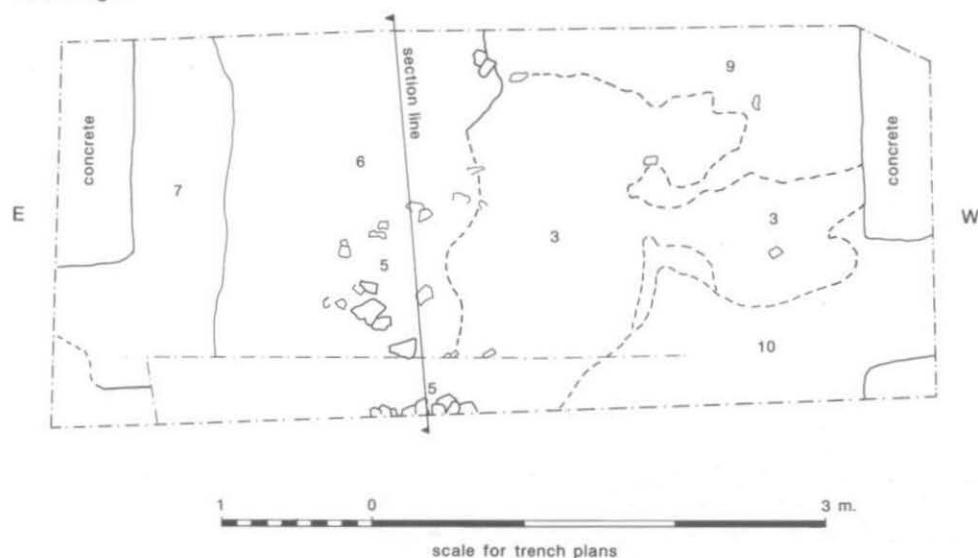
c: building D



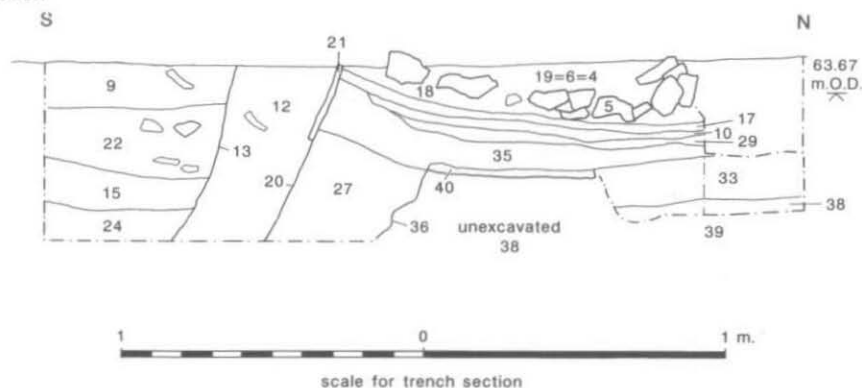
scale 1:50

Fig. 2. Plans and section of excavated features (a)

d: building E



e: baulk section



(b)

Construction and destruction of Building B (Figs. 2a and 2e)

Make-up layer 35 containing mid 13th- to 15th-century pottery overlay these deposits from building A. This dump was cut by a robber trench (36) which was filled by a dump deposit (27) containing mid 13th- to 15th-century pottery with ash and building material. This relationship is not clear on the illustrated section although it was obvious at the west end of the trench. It is possible that dump 35 and fill 27 may be part of the same set of deposit; the sherds of one vessel occur in both contexts and cut 34 and dump 33 may also be part of this possible sequence of contemporary dumps. This second stratigraphic group can probably be dated as mid to late 13th century by the association of Fabrics OXY, OXAQ, decorated Brill jugs and the introduction of Surrey White Wares (OXBG).

Construction and destruction of Building C (Figs. 2b and 2e)

Building C was represented by a possible floor (29), made of compact grey gravelly clay, which contained pottery of late 13th- to 15th-century date and overlay make-up layer 35 of building B. Two robber trenches may represent the building's walls. Robber trench 26 was cut through dump deposit 27 (fill of 36); it ran north-south at the west end of the trench, and was filled with rubble (25) containing pottery of late 13th- to 15th-century date, and a copper alloy book fastening (Small Find catalogue no. 2). A slight robber trench 31 filled by 30, lay at the east of the trench; it contained pottery of late 13th- to 15th-century date, and a composite strap end (Small Find catalogue no. 1). Neither robber trench appears on the section.

Construction, floor and destruction of Building D (Figs. 2c and 2e)

A thick layer of dump (10) lay over most of the trench (and was much thicker at the west of the trench than is shown on the section), overlying robber trench fills 25 and 30. It contained pottery of late 13th- to 15th-century date. An east-west construction trench (20), filled by sandy loam (12), cut dump 10 and the fill of robber trench 26. Five stone tiles (21) had been placed upright against the north edge of trench 20. Two areas of surviving masonry (24) were seen in the bottom of the trench, which were identified as the same deposit by probing. These had formed a substantial wall over 0.6 m. wide and 0.6 m. deep. A surface (17), made of clay with crushed limestone/mortar, butted up to the tiles and may have been a floor of this structure. Wall 24 had been partially robbed (robber trench 13 filled by 15, 22 and 9, containing pottery of late 13th- to 15th-century date). A robber trench (14 filled by 6) ran north-south from the east end of robber trench 13; this contained pottery of late 13th- to 15th-century date.

Dumps and floor of Building E (Figs. 2d and 2e)

A layer of make-up (4, 6, 18, and 19) with stone dumps within it (5) overlay surface 17. Layer 18 contained one sherd of 16th- to 18th-century pottery. The latest surviving feature was the possible building E, represented by an undated mortar floor, 3. This covered the upper fill of robber trench 13 (building D), and suggests a realignment of the building.

Modern activity

Make-up layer 6 (building E) was cut by 32, the construction cut for the underground book store passage. (This cut was filled by 7 and 8 and concrete.) The sequence was capped by hardcore (2) and concrete (1).

POTTERY by LUCY BOWN

Methodology

The pottery has been quantified by context using sherd count and weight and classified using the fabric codes established by Haldon and Mellor.⁸

Results

270 sherds (3.1 kg.) were recovered from this excavation, all from a domestic type of assemblage comprising 19% early medieval 11th- to early 13th-century wares, 80% 13th- to 15th-century wares and 1% post-medieval. Owing to the nature of the stratigraphy and the similarity in date of most of the pottery, this report will not discuss the pottery by site sequence/phase but by ceramic type. Since the majority of contexts are of a poorly sealed/stratified nature such as construction trenches, robber trenches and floor make-up layers, all of which are highly liable to disturbance and contamination, the approach to this assemblage will be as for a single context.

⁸ R.Haldon (with a contribution by M.Mellor), 'Late Saxon and Medieval Pottery' in B. Durham, 'Archaeological Investigations at St Aldate's, Oxford', *Oxoniensia*, xlii (1977), 111-39.

Pottery of the 11th to 13th centuries

The earliest pottery found is a single sherd of St. Neot's Ware (Fabric OXR). The earliest date for St. Neot's Ware in Oxford is late 10th to 11th century, but it is possible that this sherd is of Developed St. Neot's Ware type which is dated later, in the 12th to 13th century. The distinctive feature of Developed St. Neot's Ware is the lack of Bryzoa, which cannot be detected in this particular sherd. However the sherd is so small that allocation to one or the other type cannot be definite. The sherd was found in context 35 where most of the pottery is late 13th- to 15th-century in date, and it is therefore likely to be residual.

A small percentage of sherds are local early medieval wares, and were found as residual sherds. These include six sherds of Oxford Early Medieval Ware (Fabric OXAC) and thirty-eight sherds of Oxford Medieval Ware (Fabric OXY). Of the six sherds in Oxford Early Medieval Ware, three are body sherds dating from the mid 11th to late 12th century; one is an intumed cooking pot rim dating from the first half of the 12th century, and another is a possible rim from a spouted pitcher. The body sherds are from contexts 12, 15 and 27, whilst the rims are from contexts 10 and 25. The thirty-eight sherds of Oxford Medieval Ware (Fabric OXY) are predominantly unglazed cooking pot sherds, with a small number (3 sherds) of glazed jug sherds and a substantial part of a glazed dripping pan. A single cooking pot rim from context 10 can be dated to the first half of the 12th century. The remainder of the sherds are not diagnostic and are therefore dated generally as late 11th- to mid 13th-century, though it should be noted that Fabric OXY is the major ceramic tradition in Oxford in the first half of the 13th century.

A small percentage (7%) of earlier medieval wares were imported into Oxford. These are sixteen limestone-tempered sherds in Abingdon Fabric Type C (OXAQ) and four sherds which possibly represent London Types (LCALC) or (LOND). The Abingdon fabric type (OXAQ) is part of a long-lasting tradition dated as late 12th- to 15th-century. There are few diagnostic sherds in this assemblage to suggest a narrower date range. Sherds with combed incised decoration occur, but this is a common form of decoration in this fabric type. A single broad strap handle could be from a pitcher, which would be indicative of an earlier, 12th- or 13th-century date rather than a 14th- or 15th-century date. This fabric type tends to share the same contexts as Fabric Type OXY on this site, that is contexts 25, 27, 29 and 35, which would tend to suggest a date in the earlier 13th century. A small number of sherds need further research. These are predominantly quartz-tempered but with occasional calcareous inclusions. Four sherds occur, all of which are finely thrown, glazed sherds from jugs. It is possible that these are a London type (LCALC) dating from AD 1100 to 1200 or (LOND) dating from AD 1150 to 1350. Three of these sherds are from the same vessel, found divided between contexts 27 and 35. The other sherd is from context 17.

Pottery of the 13th to 15th centuries

Between the 13th and 15th centuries the predominant fabric types on this site are those belonging to the Brill/Boarstall industry (Fabrics OXAM, OXAW and OXAB), which dominate the Oxford market between the 13th and 15th centuries. At the Bodleian these occupy 63% of the whole assemblage. The majority of these sherds are from jugs with a flecked or continuous copper glaze. A smaller number have a lead glaze. The decorated jug sherds tend to be found in fabric type OXAM and include square rouletting between vertically-applied strips of red clay, rouletted vertical applied strips, lines of rectangular notch rouletting, and red painted slip. Some decoration is found on fabric type OXAW, including alternating applied strips of red and white clay. These decorated sherds are concentrated in three contexts (8, 25 and 35) and are indicative of a date between the mid 13th and early 14th centuries.

Other vessel types present are the base of a late 13th- to 15th-century bottle, a complete 13th- to 15th-century double-shelled lamp, and a wide, open bowl which is possibly late 14th- or 15th-century but is more characteristic of an early post-medieval form.

A second ware belonging to the same period as the Brill/Boarstall products is Surrey White Ware (OXBG), a small quantity of which (10%) occurs in a number of closely related contexts at this site (Buildings B, C and D: contexts 10, 23, 15, 27, 29 and 35). The majority of sherds are undiagnostic body sherds with splashed lead or copper glazing. Diagnostic sherds occur in contexts 10, 23 and 27. These include a Coarse Border Ware cooking pot with bifid rim dated in London as AD 1350-1500,⁹ a Kingston Type Ware cooking pot dated in London as AD 1230-1350,¹⁰ and Coarse Border Ware stabbed jug handles.

The late medieval period in the 14th to 15th centuries is poorly represented on this site and probably represents intrusive and disturbed contexts. Two hard-fired sherds in Fabric OXAY with continuous lead glazing are a 15th-century ware type. These were found in one context (9) only. One sherd of a Tudor Green Type (Fabric OXBN) dating from the 15th to 16th century was found in context 10.

⁹ J. Pearce and A. Vince, *A dated Type-series of London Pottery: Part 4 Surrey Whitewares*, LAMAS Special Paper, 10 (1988), ill. 476.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, ill. 307.

Later pottery

Later post-medieval wares are scarce. One sherd of Surrey Hampshire Border Ware, dating from the mid 16th to 18th century, was found in context 18 and a sherd of Transfer Printed Creamware of 19th-century date came from context 1.

Discussion of pottery

The earliest contexts with pottery, 38 and 40, are likely to date from the first quarter of the 13th century. The second stratigraphic group, contexts 35, 27, 25 and 29, can probably be dated as mid to late 13th century, based on the association of Fabrics OXY, OXAQ, decorated Brill jugs and the introduction of Surrey White Wares (OXBG). The stratigraphic sequence post-dating this group contains predominantly mid to late 13th-century material, but also a considerable representation of residual 11th- to 12th-century pottery and small quantities of intrusive 14th- to 15th- and 16th- to 18th-century wares. This may be due to the disturbance created by the considerable number of construction and robber trenches.

MEDIEVAL METAL SMALL FINDS by LEIGH ALLEN

1. Composite strap end with forked spacer, copper alloy (incomplete). Circular form with double collared knob, one rivet is present. The arms of the spacer are missing and the plates are very corroded. L: 28.5 mm.
SF 3 Ctx 30
2. Book fastening, copper alloy (incomplete). Two plates secured by a single rivet, with a rectangular shaped and sectioned knob protruding from the face of the upper plate. L: 30 mm.¹¹
SF 5 Ctx 25
3. Strip, copper alloy (incomplete). Plain strip folded over at one end.
L: 15 mm.
SF 1 Ctx 10
4. Wire, copper alloy (incomplete). Coil of fine copper alloy wire, one strand has been twisted around the coil to secure it.
SF 2 Ctx 10
5. Horseshoe fragment, iron (incomplete). Fragment from the arm of a horseshoe, part of a single square/rectangular hole visible. L: 70.5 mm.
SF 4 Ctx 38
6. Miscellaneous fragments, copper alloy (incomplete). Seven fragments, two are curved in profile, possibly binding fragments.
SF 6 Ctx 10
7. Nails, iron (incomplete); three nail fragments.
Ctx 10
8. Strip, iron (incomplete). Irregular shape and section.
Ctx 25
9. Sheet, iron (incomplete). Irregularly shaped fragment of thin iron sheet slightly curved along one side.
Ctx 25

¹¹ A.R. Goodall, 'The Copper-alloy finds' in T.G. Hassall et al., 'Excavations in St Ebbe's', *Oxoniensia*, liv (1989), p. 223, fig. 62 no. 96.

DISCUSSION by MARK R. ROBERTS

The buildings are dated on the evidence of the pottery. Building A was represented by two possible floor layers (39 and 40), which may date to the first quarter of the 13th century. Building B was represented by a make-up layer (35) and robber trench (36, fill 27), dating to the mid to late 13th century. Building C was represented by a floor and two robber trenches, 26 and 31. Building D was represented by a levelling-up layer (10) and a substantial stone wall (24) with a floor (17). This building sequence contains pottery dating from the 11th to the 15th (possibly 16th) centuries. Building E is represented by one undated mortar floor (3) which covered the fill of the robber trench of wall 24 and is therefore likely to be from a building on a different plan. The dump under this floor contained one sherd of pottery of 16th- to 18th-century date. If this sherd is not intrusive then the early end of this date range is to be preferred.

Little can be said of buildings A, B and C, which must represent the insubstantial remains of the schools buildings known to have occupied the site from the later 13th century. Building A, which probably dates from the first quarter of the 13th century, is earlier than the documented schools; its status and function were not clear from the evidence recovered. The plan of these buildings could not be extrapolated from the evidence in the trench. They were 7 to 10 m. from the west wall of the Exhibition Room, which is likely to represent the middle of School Street. Internal widths of around 3 m. are not unlikely for medieval buildings¹² but these dimensions could equally well be indicative of rooms within a larger building. Such finds as the buildings produced may indicate that they saw both academic and domestic use during the later 13th and 14th centuries. The Brill/Boarstall and Surrey White Ware pottery assemblages contained numerous jugs and cooking pots, suggestive of domestic occupation in the vicinity; the presence of a book fastening in layer 25, building C, is also notable. The residual 11th- and 12th-century pottery probably represents the disturbance of earlier domestic layers.

The activity associated with Building D suggests a significant rebuilding campaign. The levelling implied by the thick layer of dump/make-up 10 suggests radical reorganization of the buildings on the site, and their replacement by a building incorporating substantial stone walls, part of which survived as wall 24. A slight north-south robber trench (14) was found, which may indicate an internal division rather than a rear wall which could be expected to be of similar size to wall 24. This building may have been larger than its predecessors on the site, but as the rear of the building was not located the dimensions of the structure could not be ascertained. Bown (see above) comments on the poor representation of the later medieval and post-medieval period in the pottery assemblage, and this may suggest that academic use of the buildings had superseded domestic occupation by this time. The pottery assemblage as a whole dated from the 13th to the 15th centuries, but this is an unreliable guide to the dating, since extensive redeposition had occurred in these later contexts. However, building D was clearly replaced by a subsequent building, E, represented by make-up layers and a mortar floor (3). The dumps and single mortar floor of building E are the latest indication of a structure, and it must date from before the construction of Schools Quadrangle. Between building E and the modern floor level of the quadrangle, there was a void of 0.60 m. depth; the sequence of

¹² G. Beresford and J. Hurst classify cottages or cots as 3-4 m. wide and 5 m. long in *Deserted Medieval Villages*, London (1971).

excavated buildings did not therefore continue up to the construction of the present Bodleian Quadrangle between 1612 and 1618. It is possible that building D could date from the rebuilding of the schools undertaken by Abbot Hooknorton in 1440, and that building E might represent the subsequent 16th-century remodelling under Queen Mary.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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