

Archaeological Investigations In Paradise Square, Oxford

By ALAN HARDY

with a contribution by LUCY WHITTINGHAM

SUMMARY

The following report synthesises the results of recent archaeological studies carried out by Oxford Archaeological Unit, arising from the redevelopment of the south end of Paradise Square. Evidence was found of the use of the area in the early 13th century, the occupation of the area by the Friars of the Sack and the Greyfriars, and the later development of the area as a nursery and pleasure garden.

INTRODUCTION (Fig. 1)

In 1994, Laing Homes Ltd. applied for planning permission to redevelop the area of the former St. Ebbe's School as flats. The development site (SP 5100 0597) comprised the south half of Paradise Square. A preliminary desk-based assessment¹ had identified a number of potential deposits likely to be affected by the development, including a post-medieval nursery and pleasure garden, the 'Paradise' or gardens of the Greyfriars, and possible survivals of pre-Norman defence works at the north edge of the watercourse that survives as the Trill Mill Stream. Subsequently, a small archaeological evaluation was carried out in July 1994² and the results are summarised below.

A watching brief was maintained in 1995 during the construction of the piles for the new building's sub-basement. When the extent of the disturbance to the earlier medieval deposits exceeded original expectations, a further small area was archaeologically excavated, in such a position as to provide, with the evaluation, a complete north-south transect of the archaeological deposits on the site.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND (Fig. 2)

The site lay outside the medieval walled town, south of the former West Gate, but within the curve of the Thames and Trill Mill Stream which together provided part of the natural defence

¹ 'Paradise Square, Oxford' (Oxford Archaeological Unit unpubl. archaeological desktop study, November 1993).

² 'Paradise Square, Oxford' (Oxford Archaeological Unit unpubl. archaeological evaluation report, 1994).

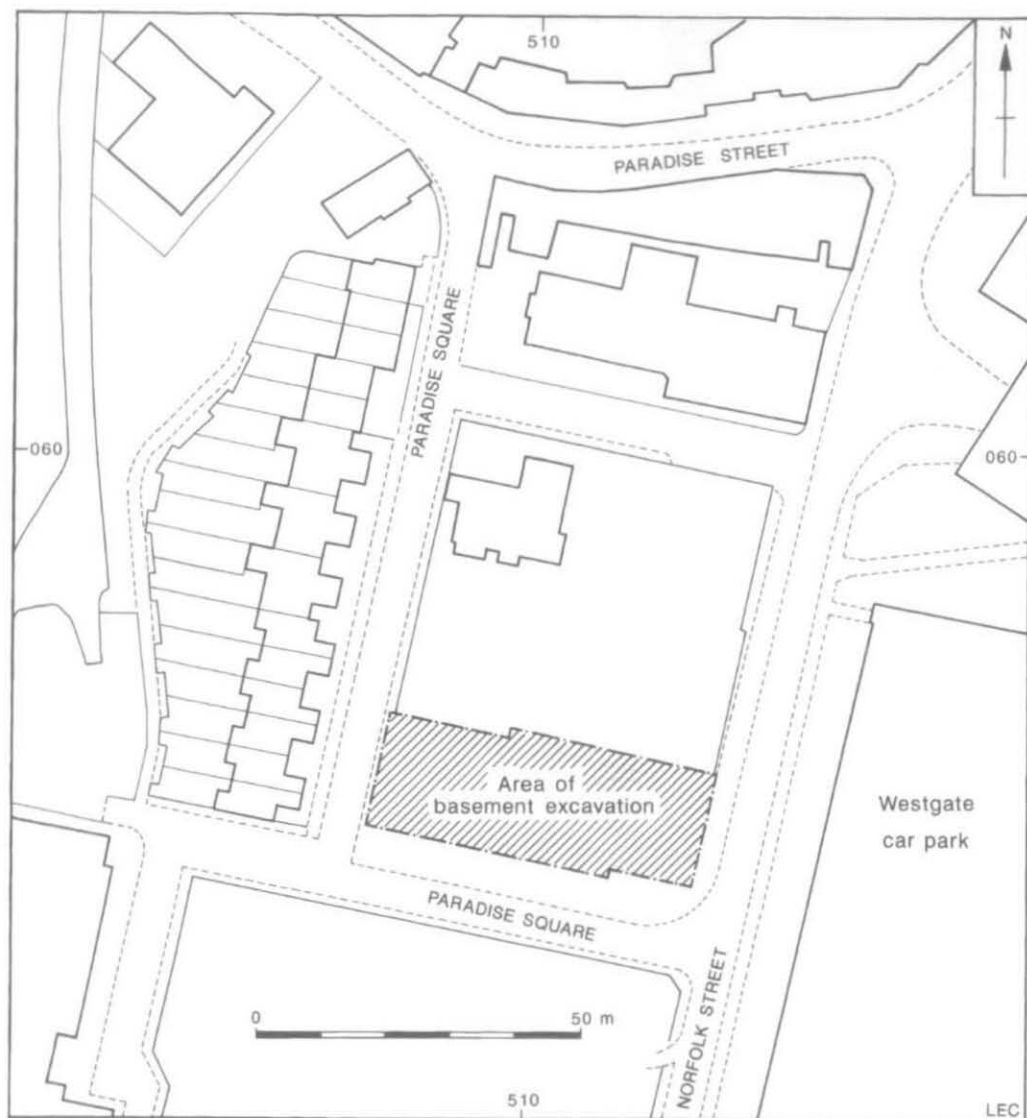


Fig. 1. Paradise Square, Oxford: location of the development.

of the town in the south-west quarter. The line of the 13th-century town wall is known (shown on Fig. 2), but the south-western defences of the pre-Norman town, which may have incorporated the Trill Mill Stream in a wider form, have not been identified. The area is believed to have lain relatively undisturbed until the late 12th century, when the church of St. Budoc, outside the West Gate, provided a focus for a small settlement.

Between 1262 and 1274 the site was held by a short-lived house of the Friars of the Sack (or the Friars of the Penance) in a holding that included St. Budoc's church and a strip of

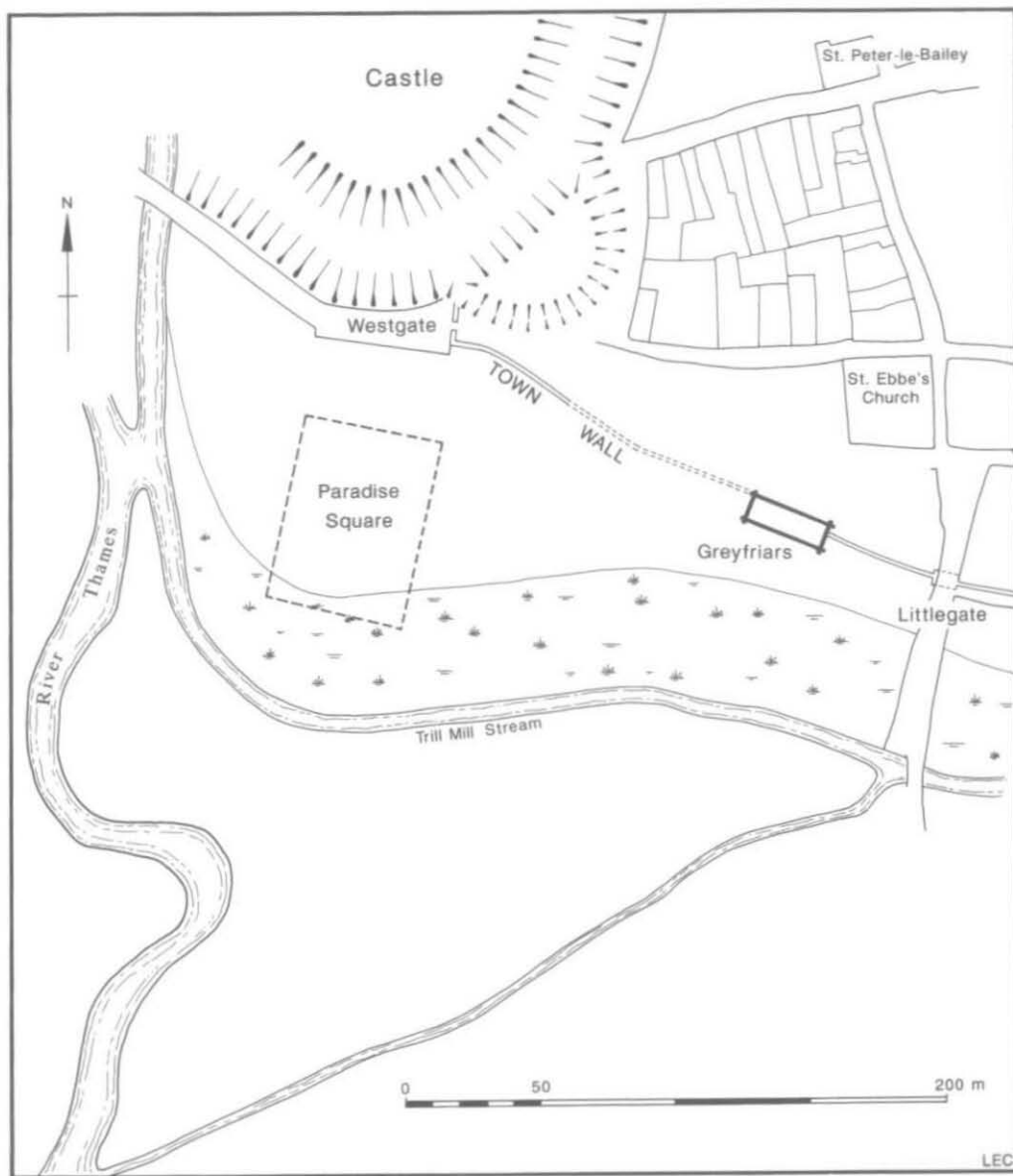


Fig. 2. Paradise Square, Oxford: St. Ebbe's c. 1250 after T.G. Hassall et al., 'Excavations in St. Ebbe's Oxford, 1967-76: Part I: Late Saxon and Medieval Domestic Occupation and Tenements, and the Medieval Greyfriars', *Oxoniensia*, liv (1989), Fig. 83.

land to the south, which appears to have included most of what is now Paradise Square. After the suppression of the Order the site was granted to the adjacent house of the Greyfriars in 1309, and appears to have been part of a large garden or cemetery known as 'Paradise', outside the main precinct where the church and claustral buildings of the Greyfriars stood.³

Following the suppression of the Greyfriars in 1538, the site became a prosperous and renowned pleasure garden and nursery, surviving until its redevelopment for housing following sale at auction in 1838.⁴ The school, which was demolished for the present development, was constructed on the site in 1858 to extend the crowded schools of St. Ebbe's parish.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL DESCRIPTION (Figs. 3 and 4)

Summary of Evaluation Results

The natural gravel was seen to be sloping slightly towards the south, but no definite edge of a channel was exposed. The lower silty clay deposits were cut by shallow gullies whose orientation appeared to be west-east. These features, interpreted as possible drainage gullies for raised cultivation beds, were dated to the 12th to 13th century from the associated pottery. Subsequent 0.50 m. deep cultivation layers were interpreted as evidence of the area's use as a garden by the Greyfriars in the 14th and 15th centuries, and as a nursery and pleasure garden in the 17th and 18th centuries. The development of Paradise Square after 1838 was attested by the modern infilling layers.

The Watching Brief

Once the overburden was removed by the contractors in the area of the sub-basement, soil profiles were recorded at points around the edge of the trench, demonstrating that the post-medieval stratigraphy was broadly similar across the site. Following the discovery by the contractors of human bones against the north edge of the trench, the local area (Trench 1) was manually cleaned of machine disturbed material, at a level corresponding to the top of the natural gravel, in order to determine whether the burial was part of a cemetery. The discovered burial was that of a male, lying supine, head to the west. Only parts of the long bones and fragments of skull survived the pile construction. A fragment of the back of the skull was still *in situ* against the north baulk, and from this it was possible to deduce the burial's orientation. There was no indication of a grave cut in the overlying post-medieval cultivation soil, and it is likely that the burial dates from between the 12th and 15th centuries. No further burials were found in the development area.

The manual cleaning revealed two linear features, 206 (fill 205) and 213 (fill 211), cut into the natural gravel (218). Both features were oriented north-east/south-west; feature 206 was 2.2 m. wide \times 0.20 m. deep, and 213 was 1.6 m. wide \times 0.5 m. deep. Both were sealed by a later medieval cultivation soil (204) equivalent to layer 118 in the evaluation, and both contained late 12th- to 13th-century pottery.

The Excavation

To enable a complete north-south transect of the site to be recorded, a small trench (Trench 2) was sited between two pile clusters to the east of Trench 1. A further small trench was added to the south (Trench 3) to complete the transect. As with Trench 1 (Watching Brief), the disturbed material was removed by machine, the resulting surface cleaned by hand, and exposed features at least partly excavated.

³ Cf. A.G. Little, *The Grey Friars in Oxford* (Oxf. Hist. Soc. xx, 1891); A.G. Little, 'The House of Greyfriars', *V.C.H. Oxon.* ii, 122-5; H.E. Salter, 'The House of the Friars of the Sack', *V.C.H. Oxon.* ii, 149-50; T.G. Hassall et al., 'Excavations in St. Ebbe's, Oxford, 1967-76: Part 1: Late Saxon and medieval domestic occupation and tenements, and the medieval Greyfriars', *Oxoniensia*, liv (1989).

⁴ Cf. R.J. Morris, 'The Friars and Paradise: an Essay in the Building History of Oxford, 1801-1861', *Oxoniensia*, xxvi (1971).

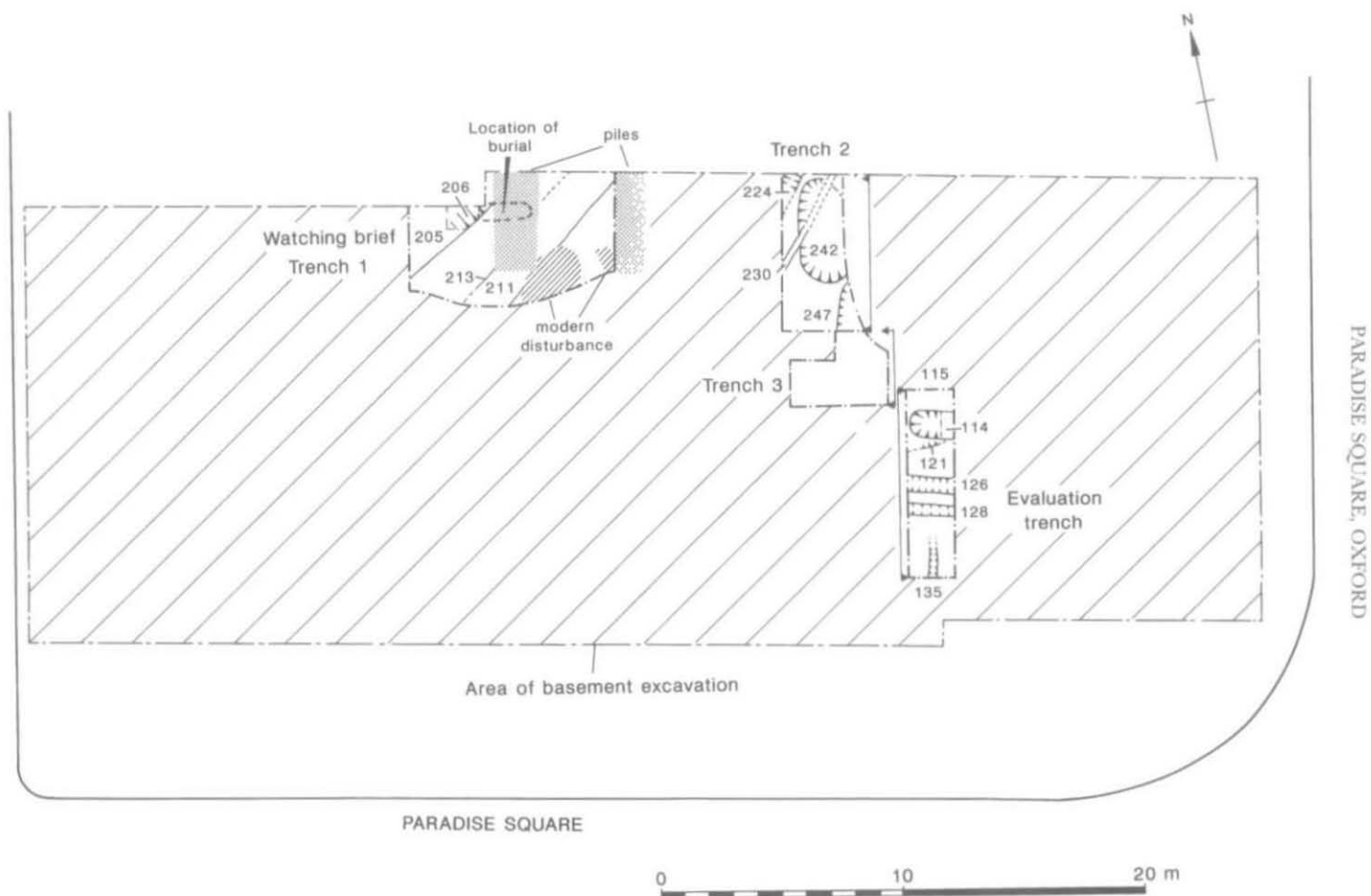


Fig. 3. Paradise Square, Oxford: plan of excavated features.

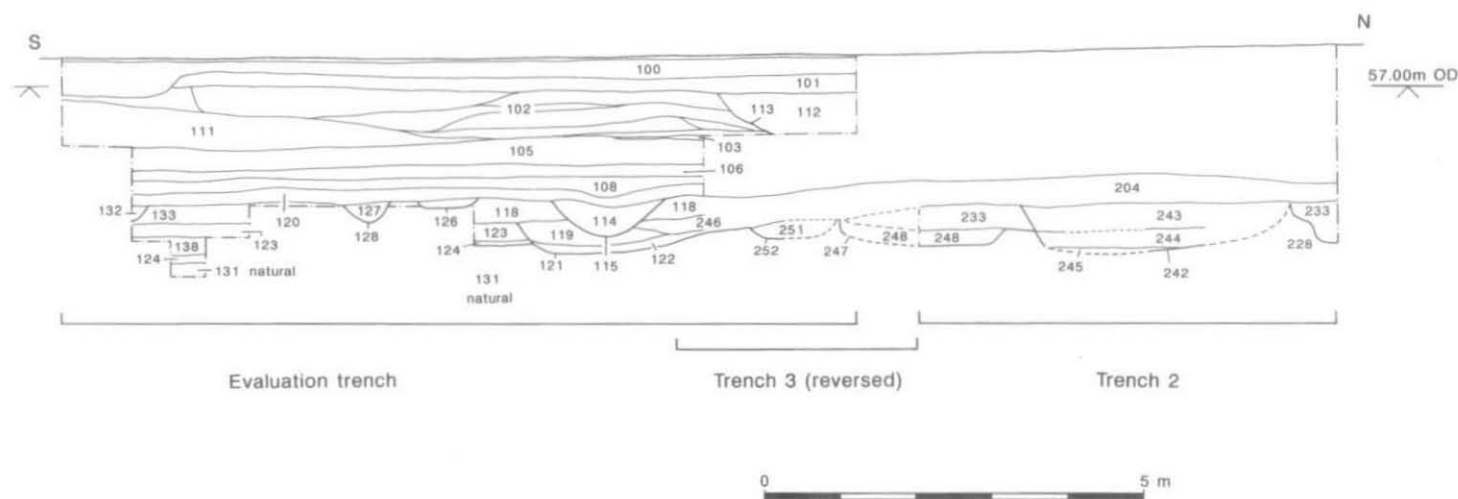


Fig. 4. Paradise Square, Oxford: north-south section of evaluation trench, and excavation Trenches 2 and 3.

Results

Natural gravel was revealed in the bottom of Trench 3 (218), its level of 55.10 m. O.D. being slightly above that determined in the evaluation trench. The earliest features were the partly revealed profiles of three shallow flat-bottomed linear features, 247, 252 and 251, oriented north-east/south-west. Some fragments of animal bone were recovered from 248, the fill of 247.

Sealing 251 and 252 at the south end of Trench 3 was a deposit of light brownish grey silty clay (246) which in section was tipping slightly to the south, indicating that it may represent the fill of a shallow cut feature, rather than a layer. One sherd of 11th- to 12th-century pottery was recovered from 246.

Overlying feature 247 was a 0.20 m. deep mid brownish grey silty clay layer (233), which produced a small assemblage of late 12th- to 13th-century sherds. This layer extended throughout the length of Trench 2, and was cut by a large oval pit (242) measuring 4.2 m. north-south by at least 1.9 m. west-east. The top fill of the pit (243) was very similar in character to 233, and contained pottery of a similar date range. The underlying fill (244) was a very dark grey silty clay with a high percentage of charcoal, fired clay, mid to late 13th-century pottery and animal bone. The lowest fill (245) was a light grey brown silty clay.

A narrow linear feature (230) 0.25 m. wide by 0.15 m. deep and oriented north-east/south-west, was cut into the top fill of pit 242 and continued beyond the confines of the trench. The south-west part of the feature contained loosely packed small rubble. Otherwise the fill was a dark grey silty clay. In the north-east corner of Trench 2 a posthole (231) was identified within the feature 230. Overlying these features was a 0.20 m. deep cultivation layer of brown silty clay (204), which produced late 12th- to early 13th-century pottery. This was cut in the north-west corner of the trench by a steep-sided ditch (224) oriented north-east/south-west.

Sealing 224 and 204 and extending over all the site with the exception of Trench 3 was a deep layer of cultivation soil (221). This layer had already been heavily disturbed by the construction process, and in Trench 3 had been removed altogether. As these deposits were known from the evaluation to be post-medieval and of low significance, they were removed by machine.

POTTERY by LUCY WHITTINGHAM

The three stages of archaeological investigation at Paradise Square produced 324 sherds of pottery comprising 1% Roman, 2% late Saxon, 71% medieval and 26% post-medieval. All are well known wares in the city of Oxford with a bias towards local products of an early medieval date. The sherds have been quantified using sherd count and weight and classified using the terminology established for the Oxford Fabric Type Series by Haldon and Mellor.³ The fabric codes are given in brackets after the common name.

Seven sherds of Roman and late Saxon pottery occurred as residual material in this assemblage. These include one abraded sherd of Roman greyware (Fabric R10), four late Saxon St. Neot's-Type Ware (OXR) sherds including one bowl with inturned rim, and two undiagnostic late Saxon sherds (OXCD).

The 231 medieval sherds are predominantly of local provenance, and include Oxford Early Medieval Ware (OXAC of the mid 11th to late 12th century), Oxford Medieval Ware (OXY of the late 11th to mid 13th century), and Brill/Boarstall products (OXAM and OXAW of the 13th to 15th century). The range of vessels found in these wares is typical of their industries: for OXAC a minimum of one bowl and one cooking pot with rouletted decoration on the shoulder; for OXY ten cooking pots with inturned or thumbled rims, one bowl, and six tripod pitchers represented by lead glazed sherds; for OXAM and OXAW four jugs, one large jar and one double-shelled lamp.

A small percentage of the medieval pottery was regionally imported ware such as Developed St. Neot's-Type Ware (OXCG) of the 12th to 14th century, Minety Type Ware (OXBB) of the late 13th to mid 15th century, East Wiltshire-Type Ware (OXAQ) of the late 12th to 15th century, and Abingdon Type A (OXAG) of the late 11th to 15th century. The vessel forms are again typical products of their industries, including two Abingdon Type A jugs represented by sherds decorated with white slip trailed patterns, one cooking pot in Developed St. Neot's-Type Ware, and two cooking pots with typical incised line decoration and applied thumbled strips in East Wiltshire-Type Ware.

The only late medieval ware present in this assemblage is a fragment of a lobed cup in Tudor Green-Type Ware. This form is a common product of this particular industry, dating from the late 14th to mid 16th century.

The post-medieval wares divide into two groups. The first comprises a small group of eight 16th- to 18th-century sherds, including an imported Cologne/Frechen bellarmine, Brill/Boarstall red earthenwares, a Surrey/Hampshire Borderware pipkin, and Staffordshire Manganese Speckled Ware. The second group is larger, with 77 sherds of 18th-

³ R. Haldon with M. Mellor, 'Late Saxon and Medieval Pottery', in B.G. Durham, 'Archaeological Investigations in St. Aldate's, Oxford', *Oxoniensia*, xlii (1977).

to 20th-century date, including Transfer Printed Ware plates, bowls and chamber pots, Pearlware, Creamware, English Porcelain, English Stoneware bottles, Glazed Red Earthenware pancheons and deep bowls, Red Basalt, Staffordshire White Salt Glazed Stoneware cups, and Nottingham Stoneware.

Interpretation and dating of contexts

There are very few residual sherds within the assemblage, which indicates that the stratigraphy has survived with little disturbance. The dating of particular groups of contexts has been derived from the association of various types of pottery within them.

A late 12th- to 13th-century date is suggested for the proposed drainage gully, 121 (fills 119 and 122) seen in the excavation, and for watching brief contexts 205 and 211 (fills of linear features 206 and 213). The same date is proposed for excavation Trench 2 contexts layer 233, pit 242 and linear feature 230, which contained fabric types OXY, OXAQ and OXAC. Contexts 119 and 122 contained sherds from the same bowl in fabric OXY. The scarcity of fabrics OXAM and OXAW, which became established in Oxford in the early 13th century, is a key factor in dating these contexts. Two sherds of OXAW in context 119 might indicate that this uppermost context is slightly later in date, in the early to mid 13th century. An early to mid 13th-century date is suggested for the other proposed garden drainage features seen in the evaluation, contexts 114, 126, 127, 128, 132 and 135, and for the associated layers 118, 120 and 108. The same date can be proposed for excavation Trench 2 cultivation layer 204, and the steep-sided ditch 224. These are characterised by an association of fabric types OXY, OXAQ, OXAM and OXAW. The date is suggested by the strong presence of OXY in association with OXAM and OXAW and imported Abingdon Type A Ware (OXAG). In a later 13th-century context OXY would have been replaced by OXAW. The one later medieval ware type, Tudor Green-Type Ware, occurs as intrusive in evaluation layer 108 (medieval garden).

Early post-medieval wares of 16th- to 18th-century date are found in the post-medieval garden layers (evaluation contexts 105 and 106). The larger collection of 18th- to 20th-century post-medieval wares is associated with the uppermost levels (contexts 101, 104 and 110).

DISCUSSION

The slightly sloping natural gravel surface, and the siltier nature of that gravel at the south end of the site, suggests that the medieval edge of the Trill Mill Stream must be close to the south edge of the excavated area. However, no evidence was found to suggest the presence or proximity of pre-Norman defence works. The predominant characteristic of the medieval deposits revealed in the excavation and watching brief is the sequence of shallow gullies, generally oriented north-east/south-west, datable on pottery evidence to the period between the late 12th century and the mid to late 13th century. Their modest dimensions suggest that they were not intended as functional elements of the water management relating to the mills to the north-west. The conclusion reached in the evaluation, that they probably represent shallow drainage gullies for raised cultivation beds, is still the most likely interpretation. Their orientation, to run partly across the slope and into the stream at an angle, may have been intended to minimise the pace of run-off water and the consequent erosion of topsoil. Traces of similar obliquely aligned shallow gullies were found in St. Aldate's, on the north edge of the Trill Mill Stream,⁶ although their function may have been different. Whatever the reason behind the alignment of these gullies it persists through at least two, and possibly three phases. Late in the sequence the common alignment of features is interrupted by the large pit (242), aligned north-south. However, this does not seem to have been part of a major reordering of the area as the later slot (230) and at least one other ditch (224), revert to the original orientation.

⁶ 'Excavations at 89-91 St. Aldate's (the Trill Mill Stream) 1982-5', in *Oxford Before the University* (Oxford Archaeological Unit, Thames Valley Landscapes Monograph, in prep.).

The pottery from these contexts would suggest that they relate to the period just before the occupation of the Friars of the Sack, that is, the early to mid 13th century, during the brief development of the Parish of St. Budoc. The development outside the town wall may have increased pressure to improve what would hitherto have been marginal and very wet land on the north edge of the Trill Mill Stream.

The Burial

The burial had been extensively disturbed by the pile construction, but it is highly probable that it was of medieval date. The main cemetery of the Greyfriars was located some 150 m. to the east of the site, and so it is more likely that this burial derives from the short residency of the Friars of the Sack, whose buildings may have been close by to the north. The evidence suggests that the area may already have been a garden by this stage, with perhaps a part of it set aside as a small cemetery. The rest of the garden is likely to be to the north of the development area, under what is now the garden to the south of the Rectory.

The substantial later medieval cultivation layers seen in all sections of the watching brief and the excavation confirm that the whole area remained a garden, or 'Paradise', once the land passed to the Greyfriars. As in the evaluation, no evidence was found of the layout of the post-medieval pleasure garden and nursery, other than deep cultivation layers containing occasional fragments of 17th- to 18th-century pottery.

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