

Archaeological Work at the Rover Plant Site, Cowley, Oxford

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SUMMARY

Between October and December 1995 the Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) carried out an evaluation and subsequent excavation of the site of the proposed Rover Vehicle Quality Building, Roman Way, Oxford. Results of an evaluation and subsequent watching brief by the OAU at the adjacent Rover Paintshop site are also incorporated in this report. The evaluation at the Vehicle Quality site revealed a ditch of probable Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age date and this was fully revealed and recorded in the course of the excavation. No other contemporary features were identified, although three post-medieval ditches were found. Finds included Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age pottery, bone and a few pieces of flint from the prehistoric feature, and pottery sherds from Roman and medieval ploughsoils. The feature is of interest as evidence of activity of this date is relatively sparse in Oxford, particularly on the limestone geology.

INTRODUCTION (Fig. 1)

The area of the proposed developments (centred at SP 5600 0400) lay to the east and west of Roman Way, and immediately north of the former Oxford to Wheatley railway, within the Rover Group manufacturing complex at Cowley, Oxford. The major area of impact lay to the east of Roman Way, where Rover Group proposed to construct a new Vehicle Quality Building covering an area of just under 2 ha. At the time of excavation, this site had been in use as a car park. The nature of the site, with a substantial slope from east to west, meant that the west end of the area would be substantially reduced in level before foundation works, while the eastern end would probably be built up. This was to involve the removal of a substantial depth (more than 1 m.) of limestone from the west end of the site, extending well into the central area. In addition, several very deep features such as tanks were to be built within and possibly outside the limits of the building, and service trenches were also to be dug.

The second area of development, for a new Paintshop, lay on the opposite side of Roman Way. At the time of the evaluation, this site was laid to tarmac and concrete, the latter largely associated with a substantial modern building that had been demolished in recent times.

Both proposed developments lay within an area of very high potential for the survival of Roman remains, and this was confirmed by a desktop study of the archaeological background

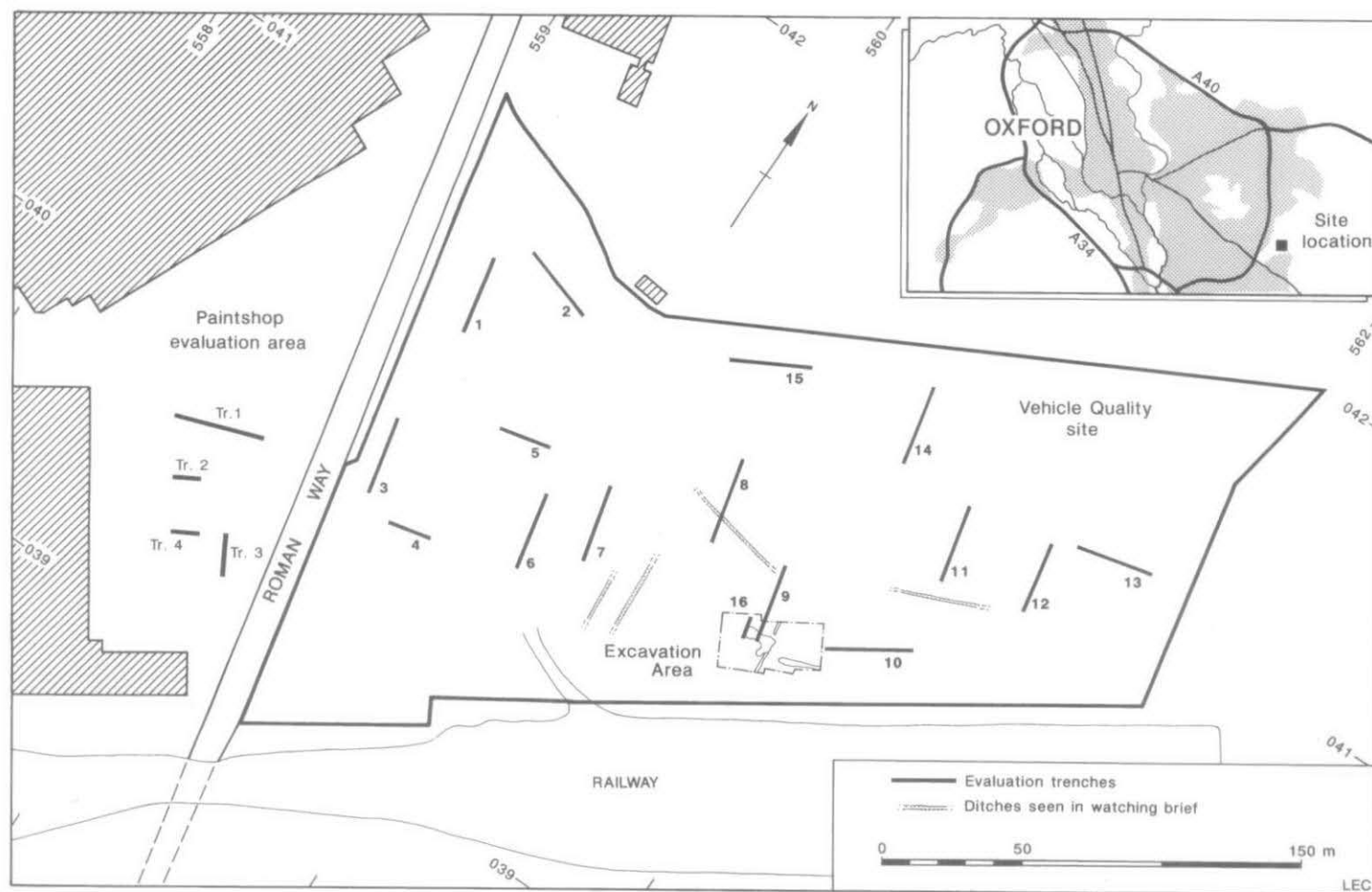


Fig. 1. Rover Plant Site, Cowley: site location and position of trenches.

undertaken for Rover Group by the OAU during October 1995.¹ Roman Way was a major Roman thoroughfare between the small towns of Alchester and Dorchester-on-Thames. A watching brief during the construction of a gas main across the line of the Roman Road in 1959, located 250 m. south of the proposed development area, had revealed two adjacent metalled road surfaces (OSMR 8033) constructed of limestone gravel and rubble. A number of possibly Roman inhumation burials have been recorded to the north and west of the development area during the last 100 years, most recently in 1959, when two burials were discovered 150 m. to the east of the present site, during the digging of a drainage trench for a car park at the Pressed Steel plant. At least seven burials had been discovered some 100 m. to the west of the present site during the 1940s,² and it is possible that these were part of a more extensive cemetery located in the vicinity. The study area also contained evidence of Roman settlement. Roman coins and pottery were found in the 19th century at Northfield Farm off the road to Garsington, to the south-east of the Rover complex, and Roman ditches, possible wall foundations and a kiln were seen in 1956 during the construction of an electricity substation at the point where the Roman Road crosses the Watlington Road. The development area seems to have survived as agricultural land into modern times, with the construction of a factory building c. 1939 on the site of the proposed Paintshop, and a series of factory buildings on the site of the proposed Vehicle Quality building, constructed between 1939 and 1956 and demolished in recent times (after 1972-3).

Topography, geology and soils

The solid geology across the site is Corallian limestone, and this is overlain in places by a thin superficial deposit of compact and cohesive clay. On the western side of the Paintshop site the geology changes from limestone to sand. The land slopes from east to west and from north to south with Ordnance Datum values of 77.3 m. in the north-east corner and 73.75 m. in the south-west corner. The main break of slope from east to west occurs more than halfway into the former car park from the east, making the eastern half of the site appear relatively flat and accentuating the slope westwards down to Roman Way.

SUMMARY OF THE EVALUATION RESULTS

In late October 1995, OAU carried out an evaluation of the proposed Vehicle Quality Building site. Sixteen trenches were excavated over the car park site (see Fig. 1), and most showed evidence of ground clearance down to natural limestone geology predating the car park's construction, probably during the 1970s. The trenches close to Roman Way revealed modern disturbance due to the construction of buildings and the insertion of services. No evidence of Roman activity was recovered. Natural features probably relating to land clearance for agriculture were found in Trenches 5 and 6 and ploughsoils of medieval or later date were found in most trenches in the western part of the site. These were generally mid or dark brown silty clays, or reddish or yellowish brown clay sand. Only a few sherds of medieval pottery were found in these layers. The results are of interest in confirming that the land had been in agricultural use for a very long period. Surprisingly, the only archaeological feature of significance to

¹ The desktop study was incorporated as Appendix 1 of the evaluation report prepared by OAU on the evaluation of the Vehicle Quality Building site, 'Rover VQ Building, Garsington Way, Oxford: Archaeological Evaluation Report' (OAU unpubl. client report, 10 November 1995). There is a separate report on the Paint Shop site, 'Paint Shop Building, Garsington Way, Oxford: Archaeological Evaluation Report' (OAU unpubl. client report, November 1995).

² 'Romano-British Skeletons from Cowley, Oxon.', *Oxoniensia*, vi (1941), 89.



Fig. 2. Rover Plant Site, Cowley: excavated area of Vehicle Quality site.

be identified was a substantial ditch seen in Trenches 9 and 16, which contained Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age pottery in its fills. Subsequent work, which is reported in full below, was therefore concentrated on an extension of Trenches 9 and 16 (see Figs. 1 and 2), with the aim of excavating the ditch in order to determine whether other features existed in association with it, and in order to recover sufficient assemblages of artefacts and environmental evidence to understand the ditch's significance. A watching brief was to be maintained simultaneously during groundwork operations over the remainder of the Vehicle Quality Building site.

A second evaluation was carried out by OAU at the site of the proposed new Paintshop, during the period 30 October to 2 November 1995. Four trenches were excavated (see Fig. 1) but no archaeological features were found, and modern truncation had removed any traces of archaeological potential in parts of the area (Trench 3). On the western side of the site the change in the underlying geology was observed in Trench 1, where several natural features were also found; these probably represent tree-throw holes, which may relate to later prehistoric or Roman period land clearance for agriculture. A Roman ploughsoil up to 0.30 m. deep, containing Roman and earlier pottery, was identified in Trenches 1, 2 and 4; this ploughsoil was noted only where the underlying geology was sand rather than limestone. An intact medieval ploughsoil was also revealed in Trenches 1, 2 and 4. Although no Roman burials were located during the evaluation, it was agreed that a watching brief would be maintained during groundworks for the proposed new building, since the possibility of encountering Roman burials or other features could not be precluded given the likelihood that a Roman cemetery had existed in the vicinity. The watching brief at the Paintshop site was carried out during July and August 1996, and included observation of the excavation of a large, deep coagulation pit, and lift pit and a number of foundation pits; nevertheless, no further archaeological features were discovered.

THE EXCAVATION ON THE SITE OF THE VEHICLE QUALITY BUILDING (Figs. 2, 3 and 4)

Introduction

The excavation was carried out between 27 November 1995 and 14 December 1995, and the watching brief followed in stages determined by the ongoing groundworks. An area of approximately 36 by 20 m. was excavated, centred on the southern end of evaluation Trench 9 (see Fig. 2). Modern overburden was removed by machine under archaeological supervision, and the trench was then cleaned manually. Sampling strategies for the ditch were defined on site in consultation with the City Council's archaeological advisor. Recording methods followed OAU standard practice.³

The excavation results

Following the removal of the 0.10 m. thick car park tarmac surface material (100) and the associated underlying 0.20 m. thick limestone rubble makeup layer (101), a c. 0.10 m. thick band of modern disturbed material (102) was revealed across the entire trench. This material truncated a lower layer of pale brown silty clay (103), which represents the remnant of a modern (i.e. post-medieval) ploughsoil. Removal of deposit 103 revealed the underlying natural limestone (104) and a number of intrusive features.

Later prehistoric. Cut into the natural bedrock was a roughly L-shaped feature of probable Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age date (110) corresponding to the Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age ditch found in Trench 9 of the evaluation. As predicted by the evaluation results, it was shown to have a western terminal in the area between evaluation Trenches 9 and 16. Ditch 110 was an irregular-sided feature which looked in plan like a series of pits dug through one another (see Fig. 3), but excavation of a number of sections revealed a homogeneous series of fills throughout, and no traces of any cuts other than for the overall feature. Ditch 110 had variable sloping sides (see Fig. 4) and an undulating flattish base. The sections show a sequence of five silty clay fills, which were generally light brown, yellowish brown and greyish brown in colour. A deposit of charcoal and burnt stone (150) was found in a slight depression in the area of the south terminal, and the surrounding clay subsoil showed evidence for burning *in situ*. A second area of

³ OAU Field Manual, ed. D. Wilkinson (1992).

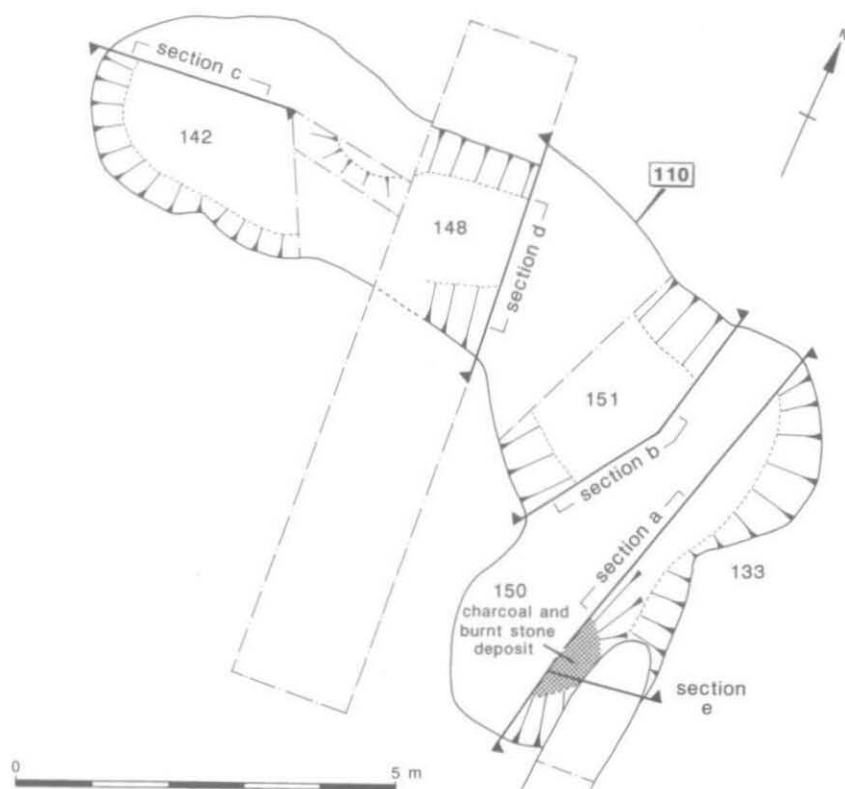


Fig. 3. Rover Plant Site, Cowley: plan of feature 110.

charcoal concentration in the west terminal (138) was sampled, and a column taken for environmental analysis. Finds from the various fills of ditch 110 included pottery of Late Bronze Age or Early Iron Age date, and a small quantity of animal bone and antler. No other contemporary features were found in the rest of the excavated area.

Post-medieval and modern. Three ditches or gullies (105, 108 and 109) were uncovered during the excavation. Feature 105 was an east-west oriented ditch seen in the south-eastern part of the stripped area (Fig. 2). Its width varied over the 14 m. of ditch preserved in the stripped area from 1.1 to 2.0 m. Three sections excavated through the feature, one near the western terminal and two in the middle section, revealed similar flat-bottomed ditch profiles with gently sloping sides (the section from the central part of the ditch is reproduced as Fig. 4 Section f). The ditch generally survived to a maximum depth of 0.15 m., although a fourth section in the south-east corner of the trench showed a greater depth of preservation (approximately 0.25 m.) and a steeper stepped profile to the ditch. Pottery recovered from the ditch sections strongly suggests that ditch 105 dates to the post-medieval period. However, the original relationship between this feature and the two other post-medieval features 108 and 109 (see below) remains unclear.

Feature 108 was a north-south oriented narrow ditch or gully (Fig. 2). Two excavated sections showed that the profile of the feature varied from narrow and flat-bottomed against the southern edge of the stripped area to wider and V-shaped towards its northern end. The original northern terminal of 108 was obscured by a later recut (124, fill 123) dug into the prehistoric ditch 110 (Fig. 4 Section e). The profile of this recut also varied from flat-bottomed near the southern end of the feature to V-shaped towards the north. The recut redefined the northern end of gully 108 and may have demarcated the southern limit of an entrance formed by gully 108 and gully 109 to the north (see below). Finds from the fills of both gully 108 and recut 124 demonstrate that 108 is post-medieval in date.

Feature 109 was a narrow ditch/gully which followed the same alignment as gully 108 (Fig. 2). Two sections excavated through the feature revealed a mirror image to gully 108; a V-shaped profile close to the southern terminal

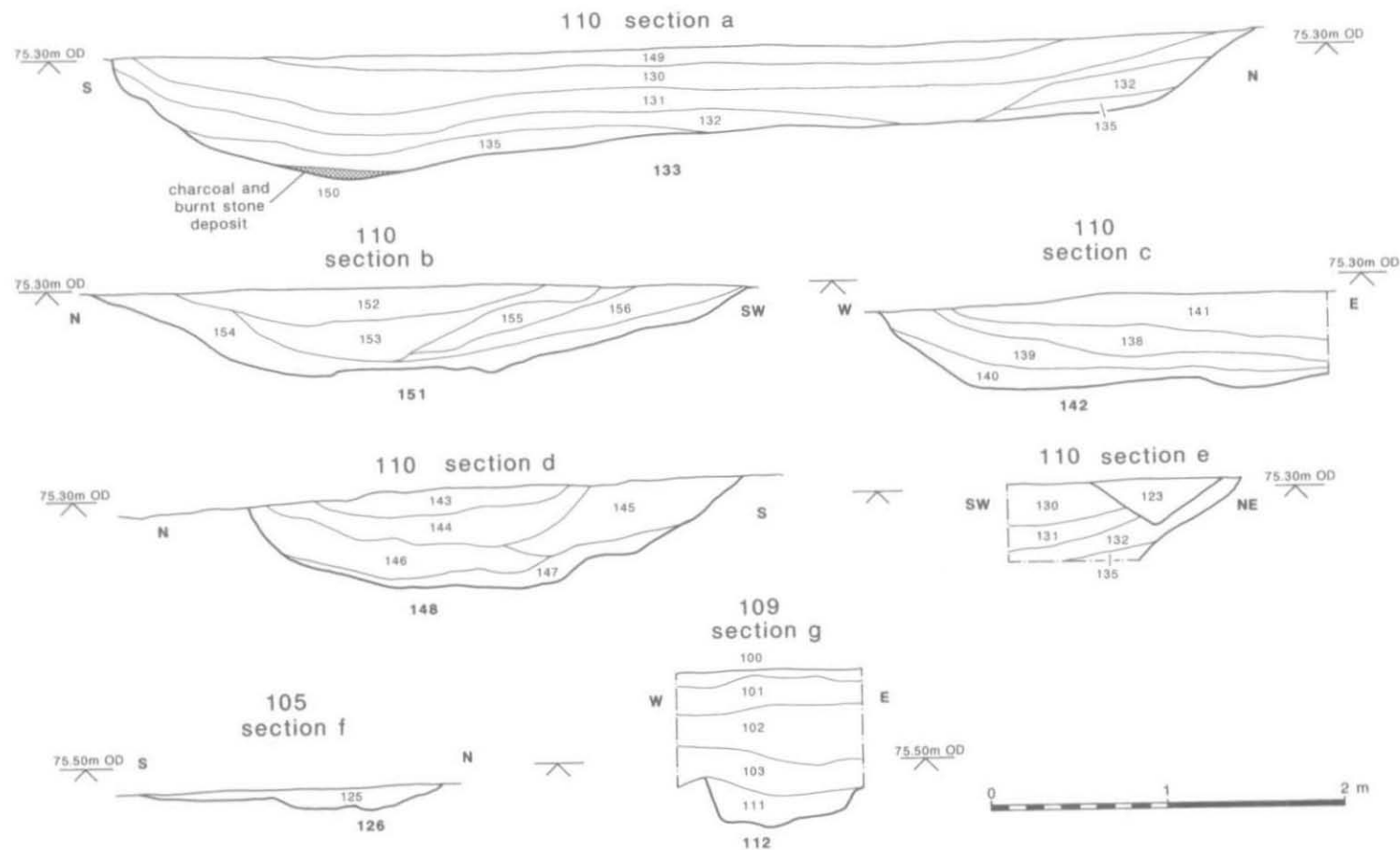


Fig. 4. Rover Plant Site, Cowley: sections.

and a steep-sided, flat-bottomed profile against the north baulk (Fig. 4 Section g). The similarity between the two gullies, and their consistent alignment, suggests that they were originally associated. This was supported by the presence of similar types of post-medieval finds in both gullies. Four further ditches of probable post-medieval or modern date were observed during the subsequent watching brief, and are shown on Figure 1.

The only other feature discovered was a narrow linear hollow, 137, seen next to the western edge of the stripped area (Fig. 2). Though the associated fill contained a very small amount of shell and charcoal fragments (roughly 6%), the irregular nature of the base of the feature strongly suggests that it was originally a tree hole rather than the result of any anthropogenic activity.

THE LATER PREHISTORIC POTTERY by ALISTAIR BARCLAY (Fig. 5)

Introduction

A total of 72 sherds (276 g.) of later prehistoric pottery were recovered during the various phases of investigation of the two sites. A small assemblage (9 sherds) was recovered from a Roman ploughsoil at the Paintshop site, and the remainder (63 sherds) came from the upper fills of ditch 110, and from the fill of post-medieval gully 109. The assemblage includes a small number of simple rims and angular shoulders from either hooked-rimmed, bucket-shaped or shouldered vessels, and is of a Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age date range. A full report on the assemblage is available in the project archive.

Fabrics

The fabric codes use an alpha-numeric system: A = sand (quartz and other mineral matter), F = flint, G = grog, I = iron oxide, S = calcareous shell, P = clay pellets, Q = quartz and quartzite, V = indeterminate voids either burnt out organic matter or leached shell. L(*) = leached calcareous matter. Inclusion size is denoted by: 0 = very fine, 1 = <1 mm., 2 = <3 mm., 3 = >3 mm. A total of 15 fabrics have been identified and these have been grouped under sand (A1, AP1, AF2), flint (F2), ironstone (I2), quartz/quartzite (QA1-3, QG/PA2), shell (S1-3, SG/P2, SQ2) and indeterminate (V2). Quartz or quartzite is perhaps the most common inclusion type in post-Deverel-Rimbury Late Bronze Age pottery in this area of the Upper Thames region.⁴ Grog is used in the Late Bronze Age and perhaps into the earliest Iron Age.⁵ Shell, used extensively in the Early Iron Age, may have been used to a limited extent in the Late Bronze Age as it is certainly in use during the Middle Bronze Age.⁶ Sand may replace quartz/quartzite in the Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age as it has similar thermal shock properties but this awaits confirmation.⁷ Fabric I2 with ironstone oolites has been recorded from a small number of sites in the Oxford area and is known to have been used to manufacture Middle Iron Age ceramics.⁸ The emerging pattern is one where flint and quartz/quartzite temper was used predominantly in the Late Bronze Age and was eventually replaced by shell and sand tempered fabrics by the Early Iron Age. The occurrence of grog by itself or as an admixture with shell or quartz/quartzite may be largely restricted to the Late Bronze Age transition (8–6th centuries cal BC). Assemblages like the one discussed here with a wide range of fabric types most likely belong to this transitional period (cf. Appleford).⁹

⁴ Post-excavation analysis in progress by the author on late Bronze Age assemblages from Eynsham Abbey, the Cassington-Yarnton Project and the Wallingford Bypass.

⁵ As yet unpublished grog tempered pottery of All Cannings Cross type and earliest Iron Age date (800–600 BC) from excavations at Cresswell Field Yarnton, and late Bronze Age pottery from the riverside site at Wallingford reported in A.J. Barclay with N. Donald, 'The Prehistoric Pottery', in A. Barclay, G. Lambrick and M. Roberts, 'Settlement and Landscape: The Archaeology of the Wallingford Bypass' (in prep).

⁶ Cf. G.H. Lambrick, 'Pitfalls and Possibilities in Iron Age Pottery Studies: Experiences in the Upper Thames Valley', in B. Cunliffe and D. Miles (eds.), *Aspects of the Iron Age in Central Southern Britain* (1984), 162–77, esp. 174; for further work in preparation, see note 4.

⁷ See note 4.

⁸ Paul Booth, pers. comm. There is as yet unpublished material from OAU's excavations of the Iron Age settlements at Worton Rectory Farm, Yarnton, Gravelly Guy, Stanton Harcourt and Wyndyke Furlong, Abingdon. With the exception of the Ironstone oolites, all the inclusions used as temper could have been obtained locally. The source of ironstone oolites is likely to be non-local, with the pottery deriving perhaps from the north of the county, around Deddington or Banbury (pers. comm. Chris Docherty and Fiona Roe).

⁹ C.D. De Roche and G. Lambrick, 'The Iron Age Pottery', in J. Hinchliffe and R. Thomas, 'Archaeological Investigations at Appleford', *Oxonensia*, xlv (1980), 9–111, esp. 45–59.

Forms and decoration

The total assemblage includes five rims of simple form which represent only three vessels. The incurved rims, P2 and P4, are from either hooked-rimmed or bucket-shaped jars of Late Bronze Age type (Fig. 5.2 & 4). Rim P3 (Fig. 5.3) could either be from this type of vessel or equally could derive from an angular shouldered vessel. Hooked-rimmed jars are a common component of Late Bronze Age ceramic assemblages in lowland Britain, although they are relatively uncommon in the Upper Thames Valley and have been recorded from only a limited number of sites.¹⁰

The assemblage includes shoulder sherds from five separate vessels of which one carries linear grooved decoration. The shoulders (Fig. 5.1 and 5.5-8) probably derive from Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age angular jars or bowls of either bipartite or tripartite form.¹¹ P1 is from a vessel of Early Iron Age tripartite form, although the others could all be from less angular bipartite forms, especially P6.

Linear decoration on angular vessels is more common on vessels of Early Iron Age date.¹² Finger-tipping, a common decorative element on coarseware vessels of Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age date, is a notable absence at both sites, although this could be a reflection of the small assemblage size.

Discussion

Taken together the two sites have produced evidence for both Late Bronze Age and Iron Age activity, albeit on a very small scale. The nine sherds from the Paintshop site recovered from the ploughsoil 2/5 alongside sherds of Roman pottery (see Booth below) are likely to be residual. This small assemblage in a wide range of fabrics includes material of Late Bronze Age, Early Iron Age and Middle Iron Age date.

The sherds from the Vehicle Quality site include sherds of Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age character in a wide range of fabrics, although many of the sherds are small and abraded. All of this material comes from ditch 110. The variety of fabrics, the range of material and the small and abraded condition could be an indicator that much of this material is redeposited and not necessarily contemporary with the feature. The hooked-rimmed forms, the weakly shouldered, probably bipartite vessels and the occurrence of particular fabrics indicate that this material can be assigned to the Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age transition (800-600 cal BC).

At present not enough work has been done to put forward a regional Late Bronze Age-Early Iron Age sequence, although this position should change with the publication of a number of key assemblages.¹³ Little or no Late Bronze Age pottery has been recovered from the City of Oxford although there is some contemporary metalwork.¹⁴ The pottery from the Oxford Rover sites is, therefore, a small but significant group.

Catalogue of illustrated sherds (Fig. 5 Nos. 1-8)

P1 OXROPS Ploughsoil 2/5. Shoulder sherd from a tripartite angular jar or bowl. Fabric AP1. Colour: ext: grey; core: grey; int: grey. Condition worn.

P2 OXROVQ Ditch fill 9/8. Simple rim slightly incurving. Fabric AF2. Colour: ext: grey; core: grey; int: grey. Condition average.

P3 OXROVQ Ditch fill 9/8. Simple upright rim. Fabric S3. Colour: ext: grey; core: grey; int: grey. Condition average-worn.

¹⁰ J.C. Barrett, 'The Pottery of the Later Bronze Age in Lowland England', *Proc. Prehist. Soc.* 46 (1980), 279-319; unpublished examples from the Wallingford Riverside settlement and Yarnton (see note 4), and examples from Eight Acre Field, Radley in A. Barclay, 'The Prehistoric Pottery', in A. Mudd, 'The Excavation of A Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age Site at Eight Acre Field, Radley', *Oxonensia*, ix (1995), 21-66, esp. 35-8, and from Kirtlington in D.W. Harding, *The Iron Age in The Upper Thames Basin* (1972), plate 48D.

¹¹ Barrett, op. cit. note 10; Harding, op. cit. note 10.

¹² Harding, op. cit. note 10, plates 54 and 56.

¹³ See note 4.

¹⁴ *V.C.H. Oxon.* iv, 248-50.

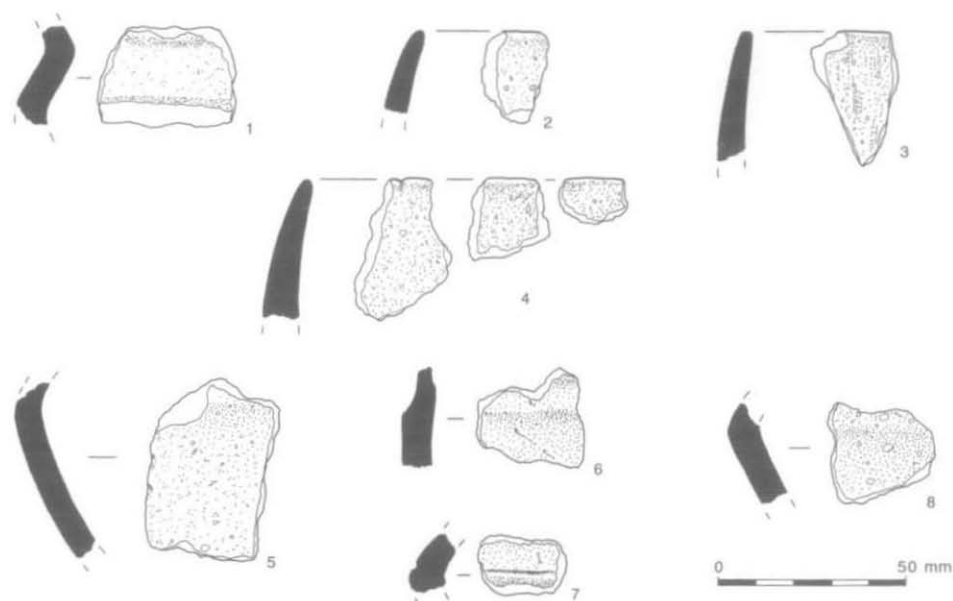


Fig. 5. Rover Plant Site, Cowley: prehistoric pottery.

P4 OXROVQ Ditch fill 9/9. Simple pointed rim. Fabric SG/P2. Colour: ext: black; core: black; int: black. Condition average. Burnt residue on the interior below the rim.

P5 OXROVQ Ditch 110, layer 127. Shoulder sherd from an angular jar or bowl. Fabric QA2. Colour: ext: grey; core: grey; int: brown. Condition average.

P6 OXROVQ Ditch 110, layer 130. Shoulder sherd with slight carination. Fabric QA1. Colour: ext: greyish brown; core: dark grey; int: dark grey. Condition average.

P7 OXROVQ Ditch 110, layer 130. Shoulder sherd from an angular jar or bowl with linear grooved decoration. Fabric QA1. Colour: ext: grey; core: grey; int: grey. Condition average.

P8 OXROVQ Ditch 110, layer 152. Shoulder sherd from an angular jar or bowl. Fabric SG/P2. Colour: ext: grey; core: grey; int: grey. Condition average-worn.

THE ROMAN POTTERY by PAUL BOOTH

Ten sherds of Early Roman pottery were recovered from the evaluation of the proposed Paintshop site, to the west of Roman Way. All but one of these came from a Roman ploughsoil in Trench 2 (context 2/5), the only context assignable to this period. In addition to residual Late Bronze Age and Middle Iron Age sherds, this group consisted generally of small sherds in grog-tempered 'Belgic type' fabrics and 'Romanised' oxidised and reduced coarse wares. A local source is likely for all these fabrics. The only rim present was from a bowl, or perhaps a cup, in a fine oxidised fabric.

The outside date range for the group is likely to have been mid 1st-mid 2nd century AD, and a later 1st century date is possible for all this material. The sherds, though fairly small (the average weight was c. 6 g.), were not abraded in a way that suggested regular redeposition, e.g. in a ploughsoil. They may, therefore, have derived from relatively closely adjacent settlement. No Roman pottery was recovered from the Vehicle Quality building site.

THE MEDIEVAL AND POST-MEDIEVAL POTTERY by PAUL BLINKHORN

A total of 19 sherds (201 g.) of medieval and post-medieval pottery were recovered from ploughsoils (layers 3 and 4, Trenches 1, 2, 3 and 6) identified in the evaluation of the Vehicle Quality building site. These included 5 sherds

(6 g.) of Brill/Boarstall Ware (dated c. 1200–1500 AD) and 8 sherds (134 g.) of Red Earthenware datable to the period 1400–1800 AD; the remainder of the assemblage was of 19th- and 20th-century date.

Only 16 sherds (619 g.) of pottery were recovered during the subsequent excavation on the Vehicle Quality building site. Over half the assemblage was Red Earthenware, deriving from post-medieval gullies 109 (context 113, fill of 114) and 105 (context 119, fill of 120; context 125 fill of 126). A single sherd of shelly ware was recovered from gully 105 (context 117, fill of 118); this may be medieval but its extremely abraded and leached condition makes confident identification impossible. A single sherd of Tudor Green Ware (dated 1400–1550 AD) came from context 113, within gully 109. The remainder of the assemblage consisted of very small quantities of 18th- to 20th-century pottery, from the same features.

A further five sherds were recovered during the evaluation and watching brief at the Paintshop site. The small size of this assemblage does not allow any conclusions to be drawn regarding dating; the fabrics represented were medieval coarsewares (dated 1100–1400 AD), and Brill/Boarstall Ware.

A full tabulation of the pottery assemblage is available in the site archive.

THE FLINT by PHILIPPA BRADLEY

Three flakes were recovered from contexts 127, 132 and 152. The flint was heavily corticated and worn, and the cortex on one piece suggests a derived origin for the raw material. Additionally three pieces of burnt quartzite were recovered from context 123. The material is not closely datable, but a Bronze Age date would not be out of place.

THE ANIMAL BONE by NICOLA SCOTT

A total of 396 bone fragments were recovered of which 50 were identified to species and anatomical part, and included sheep or goat, cow, pig and dog. Ribs and vertebrae were not identified. The bones had a poor surface condition with degradation being sufficient to prevent the identification of possible butchery marks. The bones were also highly fragmentary. There was some evidence of burning from contexts 130 & 138. Contexts 127 & 140 (feature 110) included shed red deer antler fragments. These did not show signs of tool use although again the surface of the antler was worn. A full listing of identified fragments, by species and anatomical part, is available in the project archive.

THE ENVIRONMENTAL EVIDENCE by MARK ROBINSON

Methodology

A sequence of 1 kg. samples was taken for molluscan analysis through the sediments of ditch 110, and a 20 litre sample was taken for charred plant remains from a layer in which charcoal was evident towards the bottom of the ditch. The ditch was cut into brashy limestone with clay.

The molluscan samples were sieved down to 0.5 mm., dried and sorted under a binocular microscope. Although the site was on limestone and there were small limestone fragments in the ditch sediments, the soil of the site seems to have been non-calcareous and few snails survived in most of the samples apart from eroded fragments of *Cepaea* or *Arianta* shells. Sample 7 from context 146, a yellow brown clay loam with small limestone fragments, however, contained a useful assemblage of shells. The results from this sample are listed in Table 1. The other samples, from which shells were virtually absent, were: Samples 4, 5, 6 and 8.

The sample for charred plant remains (Sample 2/3 from Context 138) was floated on to a 0.5 mm. mesh, dried, and the flot sorted under a binocular microscope. The only charred material found was a small quantity of charcoal. This was identified using high power incident light microscopy as *Rhamnus catharticus* (purging buckthorn) and *Prunus* sp. (sloe etc.).

Results

The molluscs were mostly shade-loving species which tend to occur in woodland. However, they did not comprise a full woodland fauna and a few shells of open country species such as *Pupilla muscorum* and *Vallonia excentrica* were present. More than half the shells were from *Carychium tridentatum* and the next most abundant species was *Aegopinella nitidula*. They are able to flourish in ungrazed grassland and developing scrub as well as woodland. The other woodland

TABLE 1. QUANTIFICATION OF MOLLUSCA FROM SAMPLE 7, CONTEXT 146

	No. of individuals
<i>Carychium tridentatum</i>	45
<i>Cochlicopa</i> sp.	1
<i>Vertigo pygmaea</i>	1
<i>Pupilla muscorum</i>	1
<i>Vallonia costata</i>	3
<i>V. excentrica</i>	3
<i>Vallonia</i> sp.	4
<i>Acanthinula aculeata</i>	2
<i>Arion</i> sp.	+
<i>Vitrea</i> sp.	1
<i>Nesovitrea hammonis</i>	3
<i>Aegopinella nitidula</i>	9
<i>Ceciloides acicula</i>	4
<i>Cochlodina laminata</i>	2
<i>Clausilia bidentata</i>	5
<i>Trichia hispida</i> sp.	1
<i>Cepaea</i> sp.	2
Total	87

species included *Cochlodina laminata* and *Clausilia bidentata*. Ungrazed grassland, perhaps with some scrub, probably prevailed around the ditch. The charcoal of purging buckthorn and sloe type perhaps fortuitously comprised just the species of thorn scrub that might be expected to become established on the site following the neglect of an open area.

DISCUSSION

All pottery found in the irregular ditch 110 came from its middle and upper fills, and was of a Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age date range. This is the only dating evidence from the feature and would suggest a roughly contemporary or slightly earlier date for the ditch itself. However, Barclay notes that the sherds were in a wide variety of fabrics, and quite small and abraded, suggesting that some of the material might have been redeposited. The dating of the ditch to the Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age or slightly earlier cannot, therefore, be regarded as absolutely certain, but this date range remains the most likely. Unfortunately, the original function of this feature remains unclear, though it is possible that it was the result of quarrying for limestone. An antler found in the primary fill of the western terminal (140) may have been used as a pick.

Generally, evidence for settlement and associated activity of Later Bronze Age date is sparse in the Upper Thames Valley, with far greater evidence coming from the lower reaches of the river, the Berkshire Downs and the Kennet Gravels.¹⁵ The transition to the Early Iron Age witnessed the development of new settlement sites, but these tended to concentrate on the gravel terraces, a pattern intensified by the high visibility of cropmarks on this geology and

¹⁵ R. Bradley, 'The Bronze Age in the Oxford Area - its Local and Regional Significance', in G. Briggs, J. Cook and T. Rowley (eds.), *The Archaeology of the Oxford Region* (1986), 38-48.

the excavation of sites prior to gravel extraction.¹⁶ There is relatively little evidence for activity on the limestone away from the river terraces, so there is unfortunately a lack of context for the feature found at the Rover plant site. There is relatively little evidence in the Oxford area for sites of this date, though Barclay has suggested a number of pottery assemblages from the Oxford region that could be broadly contemporary with the material from the present sites.

There is little indication of contemporary activity in the immediate area of the feature, the Oxfordshire Sites and Monuments Record listing finds and sites of mostly Roman date. The environmental evidence suggests that the ditch was situated in an open yet neglected area in the Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age, consisting of ungrazed grassland and scrub. It is likely, however, that there was a settlement of some kind nearby, as the pottery assemblage from 110 was quite substantial given the small size of the feature. All that is known of prehistoric settlement in the vicinity comes from recent work at Blackbird Leys, approximately 1.5 km. to the south, where excavations by the OAU on clay geology have revealed features of Middle Bronze Age, Early and Middle Iron Age date.¹⁷ At Blackbird Leys, a small number of Middle Bronze Age pits and postholes have been found along with an Iron Age enclosure and a pair of almost parallel, partly segmented ditches of Early-Middle Iron Age and Middle Iron Age date, which were oriented roughly in the direction of the Rover plant sites.

Roman ploughsoil and pottery present on the Paintshop site suggests that the area has been under cultivation for a considerable length of time, and that a Roman site lies in the vicinity. A Roman ploughsoil was not identified on the Vehicle Quality building site, although this might be explained by the fact that the soils on this site had been considerably disturbed and completely truncated in some areas.

Probable medieval ploughsoils containing sherds of medieval and later pottery were identified on both sites, and this suggests a fairly continuous arable use of the area until relatively recently; the historic evidence indicates that this was still an area of open fields in the late post-medieval period, and well into the 20th century.¹⁸ It is likely that the pottery sherds were introduced through manuring, suggesting settlement in the vicinity.

In conclusion, therefore, although the recent archaeological work at the Rover sites revealed only a very limited number of archaeological features, it can be seen as a most significant addition to the developing picture of later prehistoric settlement in Oxford.

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¹⁶ R. Hingley and D. Miles, 'Aspects of Iron Age Settlement in the Upper Thames Valley', in B. Cunliffe and D. Miles, *op. cit.* note 6, 52-71; D. Miles, 'The Iron Age', in G. Briggs et al., *op. cit.* note 15, 49-57.

¹⁷ C. Cropper and M. Roberts, 'Peripheral Road and Housing Area C2, Blackbird Leys, Oxford' (unpubl. post-excavation assessment and publication synopsis, OAU, October 1996).

¹⁸ See note 1.