

Oxford Archaeological Unit: The First Twenty-Five Years

By DAVID MILES

INTRODUCTION

In the early 1970s thoughts about new professional regional units were very much in the air, and 'as the rescue situation rose to crisis pitch private plans were everywhere to be heard'.¹ Some people, naively perhaps, expected that the Department of Environment would establish a State Archaeological Service in England. In Oxford local archaeologists, prompted by the new County Council, decided not to wait for central government. They set up the country's first independent county-based regional unit in July 1973.

Oxfordshire had a long history of rescue archaeology, with pre-war Ashmolean stalwarts such as E.T. Leeds scrabbling almost single-handedly in the gravel pits of Sutton Courtenay, and E.M. Jope and R.S. Bruce-Mitford peering downwards and upwards in the City of Oxford. The tremendous pressures of development in the 1960s and early 1970s had led to the creation of a series of Archaeological Excavation Committees to deal with the destruction of archaeological sites in Thames Valley gravel pits, in historic towns, and beneath the expanding motorway network. By 1973 there were five excavation committees in the county (for the Upper Thames, Oxford, Abingdon, Banbury and M40), each tackling specific problems and drawing on the same pool of enthusiasts for their trustees, but with no strategic plan or cover for the region as a whole. The newly established County Council was approached for funds by two of these archaeological organisations on the same day. Not surprisingly the Council suggested that local archaeologists should co-ordinate their efforts and priorities.

Discussions began in autumn 1972 and with remarkably little dissent it was agreed to create a new organisation with sole responsibility for rescue policy and excavation in the county of Oxfordshire. The Oxfordshire Excavation Committee was constituted in 1973 and the Department of Environment agreed to provide a single county grant from April 1973.

At the same time several of the Upper Thames team, including the present author, moved into the three small, soon-to-be-demolished terraced houses at Luther Terrace provided by Oxford City Council. This was just across the road from the Oxford Excavation Committee premises at Cambridge Terrace. Subsequently Luther Terrace was demolished and the OAU moved to 46 Hythe Bridge Street – the former Flying Horses Public House, overlooking the canal and Worcester College. Excavation at the site of Luther Terrace, before redevelopment, revealed evidence of occupation by archaeologists, a rare case of archaeologists confirming their own existence.

Tom Hassall, head of the Oxford Excavation Committee, was appointed as Director of the Oxfordshire Archaeological Unit, which formally began operations on 1 October 1973. The first County Archaeological Committee was chaired by Professor Barry Cunliffe. In

¹ B.W. Cunliffe, T. Rowley and T. Hassall, 'The Oxfordshire Archaeological Unit', *Antiquity*, xlvii (1974), 93-8.

addition to its Director, the Unit's staff included a Senior Field Officer (David Miles) responsible for Upper Thames gravel sites and survey, Field Officers for Oxford and Abingdon (Brian Durham and Mike Parrington), Kirsty Rodwell to co-ordinate a study of historic towns, and two Field Officers for other rural sites and roads, John Hinchliffe and Richard Chambers. With the optimism of youth the new organisation stated that 'the individual Field Officers will carry out an excavation and then write it up before going out into the field again'. In future years this turned out not to be quite so easy as it sounded.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s rescue archaeology was often frantic, a fire-brigade response to destruction, with little in the way of strategic thinking or academic research design. The new Unit in Oxford aimed to work within a more coherent research framework, and not simply dig for the sake of it. The avoidance of the word 'rescue' in the new Unit's title symbolised this way of thinking. To this end the Unit undertook a series of surveys, on the Upper Thames gravels (the report was sold at £2),² historic towns in Oxfordshire,³ and the impact of plough damage.⁴ It was possible to produce these rapidly because Oxfordshire had the country's first Sites and Monuments Record. The Upper Thames Gravels survey had a major long-term impact, helping to set the agenda for long-scale excavations around Abingdon, Dorchester and Stanton Harcourt. Two further surveys were initiated by the OAU and the Inspectorate of Ancient Monuments, for the Thames in Gloucestershire/Wiltshire,⁵ and the Middle Thames below Goring.⁶ These extended the excavation programme upstream and downstream of Oxfordshire.

In retrospect, the surveys of historic towns and plough-damage failed to generate coherent responses in the field. Regular excavation continued in Oxford but, despite the model survey by Rodwell & Co., the smaller historic towns of Oxfordshire were neglected during the late 1970s (as they were nationwide). Similarly the plough-damage problem encouraged by national and European agricultural policies is still with us, unresolved 25 years later.

EARLY RESEARCH

The Unit's first Annual Report stated, 'Most of the Unit's work is instigated by the necessity for rescue excavation; however, the structure of the Unit is such that current projects are becoming increasingly research-and-problems orientated within the rescue situation ... Priorities reflect genuine academic needs and not simply an emotional reflex to the destruction of sites'.

In the 1970s OAU research focused on the Iron Age and Roman landscape, stimulated principally by the results of aerial photography, and exploiting the scale of gravel extraction and suburban expansion. At this time the OAU's agenda was influenced by the processualist ideas of New Archaeologists such as Binford and Clarke, the environmental and geographical studies of Graham Clark and Harry Godwin, and the British tradition of regional studies of Cyril Fox and the Fenland Research Project.

Aerial survey showed that the late prehistoric and Romano-British landscape was a much more complex and interesting place than the simple Little Woodbury models of the Wessex

² D. Benson and D. Miles, *The Upper Thames Valley: an Archaeological Survey of the River Gravels* (1974).

³ K. Rodwell (ed.), *Historic Towns in Oxfordshire: A Survey of the New County* (1975).

⁴ G. Lambrick, *Archaeology and Agriculture: A Survey of Modern Cultivation Methods and the Problems of Assessing Plough Damage to Archaeological Sites*, OAU Survey 4 (1977).

⁵ R. H. Leech, *The Upper Thames Valley in Gloucestershire and Wiltshire: An Archaeological Survey of the River Gravels* (1997).

⁶ T. Gates, *The Middle Thames Valley: An Archaeological Survey of the River Gravels* (1975).

downland had suggested. At the same time, Harding's recently published survey of the Iron Age Upper Thames Valley⁷ illustrated the shortcomings of earlier piecemeal methods. The OAU's approach in the 1970s was to target a variety of regional site types, to explore their economic basis, and their relationships with each other and with their changing environment. This is exemplified by the excavation of sites such as Ashville and Barton Court Farm, near Abingdon,⁸ the Farmoor Reservoir,⁹ and later Gravelly Guy and its neighbours around Stanton Harcourt. At all of these, particular attention was paid to the recovery of environmental data. The Unit was fortunate to recruit a talented team of environmental scientists: Martin Jones (now Pitt Rivers Professor of Environmental Archaeology at Cambridge University), Dr. Mark Robinson (now Director of the Environmental Unit at Oxford's University Museum), and Bob Wilson, a zoologist from New Zealand. The particular strength of the Unit's approach was to integrate the environmental scientists into the archaeological teams, to influence the research agendas and sampling policies and to educate the field archaeologists. At Mingies Ditch, for example, Mark Robinson directed the excavation of this well preserved, waterlogged Iron-Age site because the biological data were seen as paramount;¹⁰ and Bob Wilson ensured that the animal bone deposits were recorded and analysed in unprecedented detail. The investigations at Farmoor Reservoir, George Lambrick's first rural project for the Unit, had already demonstrated the potential of wet sites on the valley floor. Farmoor is now a classic site in British prehistory for its clear demonstration of seasonal Iron Age pastoralism and occupation on the Thames floodplain. The Unit carried out pioneering sampling exercises at Ashville, on the second gravel terrace, retrieving carbonised cereals and weeds from Iron Age pits to reveal the development of cereal cultivation and arable farming. The Abingdon sites also demonstrated the existence of variations in Iron Age society. In contrast with the traditional community at Ashville, nearby Barton Court Farm proved to be a go-ahead farmstead, promoting new farming techniques, using coinage, wheel-thrown pottery, and new plant varieties and forms of land management. The enclosure around the farmstead may also have symbolised the adoption of individual land ownership, and the withdrawal from traditional community arrangements. Not surprisingly, it was Barton Court Farm rather than Ashville that embraced Roman culture and developed as a villa-type estate.

RESEARCH IN TOWNS

The mid to late 1970s was a disappointing period for research into the small towns of Oxfordshire. After the first flush of interest in 1972-4 archaeologists did relatively little in Abingdon, and even less in Bicester, Wantage, Wallingford and Banbury. The exception was Oxford. As a result of the longer tradition of excavation and more clearly defined research objectives, the Inspectorate of Ancient Monuments continued to fund excavations (albeit relatively small) in advance of development. The long series of observations on St. Aldate's was particularly successful, gradually revealing the post-glacial changes of the Thames, the

⁷ D.W. Harding, *The Iron Age in the Upper Thames Basin* (1972).

⁸ M. Parrington, *The Excavation of an Iron Age Settlement, Bronze Age Ring Ditches and Roman Features at Ashville Trading Estate, Abingdon, Oxfordshire, 1974-76*, CBA Research Rep. 28 (1978); D. Miles, *Archaeology at Barton Court Farm, Abingdon, Oxfordshire*, OAU Rep. 3 and CBA Research Rep. 50 (1986).

⁹ G. Lambrick and M. Robinson, *Iron Age and Roman Riverside Settlements at Farmoor, Oxfordshire*, OAU Rep. 2 and CBA Research Rep. 32 (1979).

¹⁰ T.G. Allen and M.A. Robinson, *The Prehistoric Landscape and Iron Age Enclosed Settlement at Mingies Ditch, Hardwick-with-Yelford, Oxfordshire* (Thames Valley Landscapes: the Windrush Valley 2, 1993).

emergence of the Oxenforde, possibly from the Bronze Age, the development of the Anglo-Saxon and medieval waterfront and the construction of the Grandpont. Small-scale excavations also established the line and character of the Anglo-Saxon defences, gateways and streets, and religious houses such as the Blackfriars and Rewley Abbey. Larger excavations outside the city walls also uncovered the medieval occupation at The Hamel and Oxford's earliest settlement (Middle Iron Age) on the site of the former Oxford City Football Ground.¹¹ Air photography in the hot summers of 1975/6, together with excavations in the University Science Area and the Ashmolean car park, also showed that Oxford has its own prehistoric ritual focus – a major barrow cemetery running from the University Parks to the St. Giles area.¹² This period also saw the development of important studies of the Oxford medieval pottery sequence.¹³

RESPONSES TO PROBLEMS

Through the 1970s the OAU had a core staff of about 15 people; 80 percent of its funding came from the state, through the Department of Environment/Inspectorate of Ancient Monuments and local government. For those archaeologists working in the field this was a period of considerable excitement and fulfilment, as new ideas and opportunities were explored on an unprecedented scale. Now though, re-reading the Director's Annual Reports of the 1970s, I am reminded that this was also a time of horrendous financial stress and uncertainty: '1975... a year of consolidation and retrenchment ...dramatic drop in development owing to the national economic situation...Inflation of salaries and costs meant two field officers could not be replaced'. (1975 was also the year that the word 'computer' was used for the first time in an OAU project – in processing carbonised seeds.) The one advantage of the mid 1970s recession was that work progressed rapidly on excavation reports, which masked the problems that would arise later.

The financial uncertainty also helped to stimulate an entrepreneurial culture. The OAU soon learnt that it could not rely unduly on the taxpayer. It was just as well to appreciate this lesson before the 1979 general election. In practice the OAU first looked to broaden its geographical area of activities by undertaking excavation for Northamptonshire County Council at Towcester (1976) and later for Warwickshire County Council at Wasperton. In 1979 a ten-year project, the largest rural excavation in Britain at the time, was launched on Iron Age and Romano-British complexes near Lechlade and Fairford in Gloucestershire. As Tom Hassall wrote prophetically in 1976, redundancies were avoided by 'contracting out a trend which may well develop in the future'.

In the shorter term help was at hand from the newly created Manpower Services Commission (MSC). In 1977 ten archaeological workers and supervisors were employed on the Job Creation Programme, rising to sixteen the following year. At the time this seemed a godsend, as the Department of the Environment's then current paper *Rescue Archaeology: the Next Phase* provided no easy solution to the financial problems caused by inflation and stagnant DoE funding. However, although the MSC contribution kept the show on the road and supported some major excavations, in retrospect it also generated other problems,

¹¹ N.J. Palmer, 'A Beaker Burial and Medieval Tenements in The Hamel, Oxford', *Oxoniensia*, xlv (1980), 124-225; A. Mudd, 'Excavations at Whitehouse Road', *Oxoniensia*, lviii (1993), 33-85.

¹² A. Parkinson, A. Barclay and P. McKeague, 'The Excavation of Two Bronze-Age Barrows, Oxford', *Oxoniensia*, lxi (1996), 41-64.

¹³ M. Mellor, 'A Synthesis of Middle and Late Saxon, Medieval and Early Post-Medieval Pottery in the Oxford Region', *Oxoniensia*, lix (1994), 17-217.

including a backlog of post-excavation work that is still not completely resolved. I also have a subjective impression that MSC schemes reduced the number of women working in field archaeology.

As part of the policy of diversification in 1978 the OAU formalised its links with the Oxford University Department of External Studies. In particular the two organisations continued, with the Inspectorate of Ancient Monuments, to promote the Archaeological In-Service Scheme – now the Diploma/Master of Studies in Professional Archaeology. This course has been, and continues to be, a great success, acting as a stepping stone into the profession for many young graduates and archaeological field workers.

The end of the 1970s saw changes in archaeology in England. The Department of Environment, still the principal backers of archaeological units, moved away from supporting organisations and towards project funding. For some organisations this was a fatal blow. Fortunately the OAU had predicted, and even to some extent initiated, this trend. Its problem-orientated research proposals, for example in Oxford and the Upper Thames Valley, fitted neatly into the new orthodoxy. This was recognised when, in 1982, the OAU won the first Country Life Award for the best project by a professional archaeological organisation. The judges summed up 'pioneering work...particularly impressive in the way the Unit has pursued a finely co-ordinated programme within the framework of rescue archaeology'.

RURAL ARCHAEOLOGY: DEVELOPING REGIONAL RESEARCH

The OAU began with a programme of survey. This was revived, and continued, with British Academy funded projects in the Upper Thames Valley. Thanks to the Mediterranean summers of 1975 and 1976, when cricket pitches and college lawns were burnt to the colour of parchment, aerial photographers increased the number of known cropmark sites on the Thames gravels by 30 percent. The new Thames Valley survey (later extended for Richard Hingley's doctoral thesis)¹⁴ also covered the Corallian ridge and the limestone slopes of the Cotswolds, going a little way to rectify the imbalance of regional research, with its emphasis on the Thames gravel terraces. George Lambrick continued with the Thames floodplain survey,¹⁵ which highlighted the potential of an area that was to become an important focus of interest in the following decade.

It is now appreciated that human activity in the past has had a major impact on the Thames and its valley floor. The clearance of forest on the gravel terraces during the Neolithic and Bronze Age, followed by the clearance of the higher slopes, generated increased run-off into the Thames, causing watertables to rise and flooding to occur. The expansion of arable farming and the development of autumn sowing also stimulated a wetter environment in the floodplain. The subsequent deposition of alluvium in the Iron Age, Roman and medieval periods blanketed prehistoric land surfaces and once-dry settlement sites. The appreciation that the best preserved evidence in the region (waterlogged and protected from the plough) lies below the alluvium has stimulated a major change of emphasis – from the dry gravel terraces to the floodplain – in the search for new sites. Changes in the hydrological regime also emphasise the need to research the region as a whole, if the interrelationships between human communities and the land are to be understood.

¹⁴ R.C. Hingley, 'Iron Age and Romano-British Society in the Upper Thames Valley: An Analysis of Settlement Data in Terms of Modes of Production' (Univ. of Southampton unpubl. Ph.D. thesis, 1983).

¹⁵ G. Lambrick, 'Thames Flood Plain Survey', *CBA Group 9 Newsletter*, 11 (1981), 102-4.

Up to 1981 the OAU had focused its rural research principally on sites of the first millennia BC/AD. The Rollright project, a timely shift into earlier prehistory, was followed by excavations on the Dorchester and Drayton Cursuses.¹⁶ At Barrow Hills, Radley, the OAU carried out the most complete excavation of a Neolithic/Bronze Age barrow cemetery in England, with the country's earliest known gold and copper alloy objects. More recently, the major projects at Yarnton and Eton Rowing Lake have shifted the emphasis from monuments to the areas around them, where isolated burials, trackways, bridges, burnt mounds, field boundaries and pits illustrate the remarkable extent of prehistoric activity across the landscape.¹⁷ These projects have also enabled the OAU to build up considerable in-house expertise in the archaeology of earlier prehistory, particularly in the fields of ceramics and lithics, and in new data-recording techniques using computer technology.

MORE CHANGES

While archaeological work has thrived, there have been administrative traumas, notably when Oxfordshire County Council withdrew its financial service in March 1980. In retrospect this proved to be beneficial. The OAU became a Limited Liability Company and had to learn to administer itself and control its own cash flow. This was invaluable training for the harsher world of commercial archaeology that was to come in the late 1980s and 1990s. At the same time the Oxfordshire Archaeological Unit changed its name to the Oxford Archaeological Unit. When our largest project was in Gloucestershire, locals (including Prince Charles) constantly asked why they were being invaded by the neighbouring county unit. The name 'Oxford' has never stimulated such questions, and as a brand name it certainly has advantages.

Modern county boundaries are not a particularly logical basis for archaeological research. An opportunity to extend our interests downstream in the Thames Valley came with the invitation to excavate the site of the proposed Reading Business Park in 1987. This was a watershed. For the first time a developer, required by Berkshire County Council's pioneering archaeological policies to investigate a site, came to the OAU as a contractor. At about this time the OAU was also asked by developers to undertake work in Swindon, at Glastonbury Abbey, and at the proposed Eton College Rowing Lake. Of course, as we know now, the Berkshire policies were the forerunners of the DoE's PPG16 – *Planning Policy Guidance Note 16 (Archaeology and Planning)* – which required developers to evaluate potential archaeological sites and mitigate the impacts of their development if preservation was not possible. The resulting shock-waves were traumatic for English archaeology. Units lost their regional monopolies and increasingly found themselves in a commercial, competitive and highly professional environment.

During this period the OAU's Director, Tom Hassall, had left (in 1986) to become the Secretary of the Royal Commission for Historical Monuments (England). His replacement was Dr. Ian Burrow, previously the County Archaeologist for Somerset. Dr. Burrow himself resigned from the OAU in 1988 to be replaced as Director by the present author, with George Lambrick as Deputy, at one of the most unsettling but challenging periods in the history of British archaeology. In 1988, the OAU saw a rise of almost 50 percent in its

¹⁶ G. Lambrick, *The Rollright Stones*, English Heritage Archaeological Rep. 6 (1988); A. Whittle, R.J.C. Atkinson, R. Chambers and N. Thomas, 'Excavations in the Neolithic and Bronze Age Complex at Dorchester-on-Thames, Oxfordshire', *Proc. Prehist. Soc.* 58 (1992), 143-201.

¹⁷ T. Allen, G. Hey and D. Miles, 'A Line of Time: Approaches to Archaeology in the Upper and Middle Thames Valley, England', in J. Graham-Campbell (ed.), *Riverine Archaeology: World Archaeology*, vol. 29 no. 1 (1997), 114-29.

income thanks to commercial archaeology. We carried out some 50 excavations in 7 counties, involving 10 museums. These statistics are not impressive by current standards but they represented a dramatic culture shock at the time. In the same year MSC projects finally (and by then, thankfully) came to an end.

The new environment required new responses. In 1990 changes were made to the committee structure of the OAU. Professor Frere retired as Chairman to be replaced by Professor Salway. Some of the largely redundant advisory committees were dissolved. The Unit, with English Heritage's support, established a new post-excavation department led by Dr. Ellen McAdam (and now by David Jennings). This development was necessary because the OAU had a considerable problem with unpublished sites – in part due to the massive scale of some field projects and the constant pressure of under-funding, but combined, it is fair to say, with a lack of focus and effective project management. The new post-excavation department created a team dedicated to publishing our projects. The OAU believes that it has an obligation to do this; more pragmatically, in a commercial world it is vital to manage projects effectively, right through to completion. The new structure also included a Field Section led by John Moore (now by Bob Williams) and Consultancy under George Lambrick. Simon Palmer became the Unit Manager.

A project that typified the new era was the Channel Tunnel Rail Link, for which the OAU was appointed as archaeological consultant in 1989. Such environmental and strategic studies have since become a major part of the Unit's work. Currently, for example, we are undertaking, with Chris Blandford Associates, studies for the management plans of the World Heritage site of Stonehenge and Avebury. Also for English Heritage are our national surveys of Dovecotes and Bridges for the Monuments Protection Programme. Such projects acted as a springboard into diversification: the recording of historic buildings (under Julian Munby), industrial archaeology (Rob Kinchin-Smith) and overseas projects. For example, environmental assessment (EA) is a developing area and the OAU has undertaken EAs in Greece (an 800 km. gas pipeline for the Greek Gas Board, DEPA), an oil pipeline in Oman, and a survey of Montserrat for the Overseas Development Agency in advance of a proposed airport. This last project is the only one OAU has had to abandon because of a volcanic eruption. OAU is undertaking two strategic studies – of historic towns and publication backlog problems – for the Irish Heritage Council. And in 1996 the OAU established an office in Mayenne, Pays de la Loire, for its major investigation of the Château de Mayenne funded by the French Ministry of Culture, the European Union and the local authorities.

In Britain the OAU has extended its activities across much of England and South Wales, and particularly to London and Kent. For the past five years we have acted as consultants to the Historic Royal Palaces Agency (HRPA). As a result we have carried out building surveys at Kensington Palace, the Tower of London, Hampton Court and Kew Palace and established a curatorial system for the Palaces. The most spectacular results have been at the Tower of London where Graham Keevill's excavations uncovered the gatehouse of Henry III, which collapsed dramatically in 1240. The quality of the OAU's buildings research was a factor in our regaining the HRPA contract in 1998 following a European competition. In Kent, in addition to the now long-term work on the Rail Link, we have also produced a survey and implications study of Dover for the District Council,¹⁸ and we have carried out one of the largest church excavations in Britain at St. Nicholas Church, Sevenoaks. The OAU has also recently been appointed by the County Council to undertake a major excavation of a Roman town near Ashford.

¹⁸ D. Wilkinson, *Historic Dover: An Archaeological Implications Survey of the Town* (1991).

By 1991 the OAU was carrying out 136 projects in 22 counties and 3 countries. But research in Oxford and the Upper Thames was not neglected. Thanks to English Heritage support for pre-PPG16 sites, major discoveries have been made in Eynsham, where Graham Keevill directed excavations of the Anglo-Saxon Minster and Abbey, and at Yarnton, where Gill Hey revealed Neolithic land surfaces and the first Middle/Late Anglo-Saxon settlement in the county. At Abingdon, in the Vineyard, excavations funded by the Vale of the White Horse District Council and Waitrose discovered the massive defences of an Iron Age oppidum. As a result, many observations in the town since the late 1960s began to make sense. Dense late Iron Age industrial, craft and trading activities lay within the defences, on a promontory surrounded by water. The defences were, in part, breached on the north side in the Roman period to allow for expansion of the settlement. The remaining defences, however, influenced the siting of the Anglo-Saxon Minster at St. Helen's, Abingdon Abbey, and the topography of the present-day streets.

As a result of PPG16 most local authorities, including Oxfordshire, have introduced stricter archaeological policies into their Local Plans. Consequently the archaeological curators (as the archaeologists providing planning advice are now known) can more frequently recommend that archaeological evaluations should be carried out in advance of development in areas such as villages, small farms and soil unreceptive to aerial photography that have previously been neglected owing to the lack of existing information. For example, evaluation and excavation in the village of Fringford revealed Romano-British and medieval settlement. At Bicester Fields and Blackbird Leys, Oxford, Iron Age settlements were found on clayland.

Public utility companies such as the Environment Agency also routinely commission archaeological survey of their pipelines. As a result the OAU has made important discoveries: at Gatehampton Farm, near Goring, the region's first known Upper Palaeolithic site where hunters lay in wait for migrating herds of horses or reindeer in about 10,000 BC;¹⁹ and a major Roman pottery manufacturing complex found near Nuneham Courtenay. On a much bigger scale the OAU has recently undertaken work for the Environment Agency on the line of the Thames Flood Relief Channel near Maidenhead where particularly important prehistoric and Anglo-Saxon discoveries have been made, complementing other excavations nearby at the Eton College Rowing Lake.

Most people do not associate Oxford with industrial archaeology. However, in recent years this has become an important part of OAU's work, ranging from surveys of breweries and railway buildings, to ironworks at Tondur in South Wales, the Western Docks in Dover, Morris's Cowley works, a bus-depot overlying an 800-year sequence of mills in Reading, and Chatham Historic Dockyard. At Chatham we made our most spectacular discovery; the preserved remains of a unique 18th-century man-of-war, laid out like an Airfix-kit beneath the floor of the rope factory. At the time of writing, a series of medieval water mills are being revealed at the Oracle development in Reading.

Changes continue to take place. In 1998, in response to a request by the British Airports Authority (BAA) to compete for potentially the largest archaeological project in Britain, at the proposed Terminal 5, Heathrow, OAU formed a Joint Venture with Wessex Archaeology. This represents a new approach in British archaeology, and a maturing of the profession after several years of often strained competition between units.²⁰ The joint bid

¹⁹ T. Allen, *Lithics and Landscape: Archaeological Discoveries on the Thames Water Pipeline at Gatehampton Farm, Goring, Oxfordshire, 1985-92*, Thames Valley Landscapes Monograph 7 (1995).

²⁰ The formation of the Institute of Field Archaeologists' Registered Archaeological Organisations scheme is also a welcome move towards improving standards and encouraging communication between competitive organisations.

was successful and in the coming years OAU and Wessex Archaeology, under the name Framework Archaeology, will co-operate to undertake archaeological work at Heathrow and BAA's other airports. This project also reflects a maturing and welcome approach from developers. In a project promoted as world-class, the archaeology should also be of the highest standard. The competition for the BAA project was thus judged on the quality of the archaeological research proposal and of the designated team, not simply on cost. The judges included Dr. John Barrett and Gill Andrews.

We live in interesting times and it is not possible to stand still or become complacent. On its 21st birthday in 1994 the Unit redrafted its constitution for the first time since its creation, to take account of changes in charity law. A smaller group of trustees (chaired since 1996 by Dr. Margaret Ware) was established to concentrate on finance and policy for what is an increasingly complex business organisation. A larger Council and Academic Committee oversee the Unit's archaeological work. New contractual arrangements were also put in place, a Strategic Plan was produced, and efforts were made to re-locate on to a single site (as a result of the expansion the OAU was spread across three buildings in Oxford). This culminated in the move in 1996 to the ex-Olivetti factory – now Janus House – on Osney Mead. One of the major advantages of the move has been the opportunity to improve the Unit's computer network under the Computer Manager, Paul Miles. A good I.T. system is particularly important for the management of administration, post-excavation projects and major field investigations. The OAU is now equipped to deal with the most demanding projects, such as the country's first Design Build Finance and Operate (DBFO) road scheme, the A417/9, from North Wiltshire across the Cotswolds, where a team of 100 archaeologists successfully excavated some 36 sites over 9 months within the framework of a very demanding contract and timetable.

In 1974 the authors of the first survey of the OAU wrote, 'It will be interesting in, say five years' time, to re-examine the validity of the Unit concept and our own small part in it'. Twenty-five years on I hope they would feel that their concept has been worthwhile. Despite the vagaries of the economy and the constant pressures of the market place, the OAU has grown into a mature organisation with a better qualified and equipped team than at any period in its history. If the OAU continues to help people to understand their past, my successor will be able, 25 years from now, to write in *Oxoniensia* on 'The OAU: The First 50 Years', and we will have stood the test of time.