

Archaeological Excavations at 64-66 St. Thomas's Street, Oxford

By SEAN COOK

with contributions by L. ALLEN, P. BLINKHORN, C. CROPPER and J. MUNBY

SUMMARY

An excavation by Oxford Archaeological Unit in November 1997 partially exposed medieval and post-medieval buildings on the northern frontage of St. Thomas's Street. The excavated remains comprised the rear part of a medieval building, partially overlain by the remains of a post-medieval building, formerly No. 64 St. Thomas's Street. The excavation also partially revealed the remains of the former No. 65 St. Thomas's Street and walls to the rear of the property that may date from the later medieval period.

INTRODUCTION (Fig. 1 – location map)

The development and archaeological response

The excavation that forms the subject of this report was part of a series of archaeological investigations undertaken by the Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) at the site of the former GPO Transport Depot and car park, Nos. 57-66 St. Thomas's Street (NGR SP 5080 6170), during 1997. The work was occasioned by a proposal from Laing Homes Ltd. to redevelop the site for blocks of flats, and was undertaken to mitigate the effects of the development on archaeological deposits. The work was carried out in accordance with a planning agreement made between Laing Homes Ltd. and Oxford City Council. Two desktop surveys undertaken by OAU had suggested that archaeological remains were likely to be present,¹ and an archaeological evaluation was subsequently carried out on the car park site (Nos. 64-66 St. Thomas's Street) in May 1997.² A second evaluation was carried out at the adjacent Transport Depot (Nos. 57-63 St. Thomas's Street) in September 1997. Subsequently a watching brief was maintained during groundworks at the frontage of the Transport Depot, followed in November 1997 by the excavation of the frontage of the car park. The most significant results were gained from the evaluation and excavation of the car park site, and an account of the findings of the evaluation precedes the main excavation report below. By contrast, the work at the Transport Depot produced no significant archaeological results.

The site lies on the floodplain of the River Thames, some 200 m. from the edge of the Summertown-Radley (2nd) Gravel Terrace on which the medieval town of Oxford was built. The natural subsoil is alluvium, which lies at a depth of approximately 55.38 m. OD in this area.

¹ '57-63 St. Thomas's Street, Oxford: Post Office Garage Redevelopment' (unpubl. archaeological desktop study, Oxford Archaeological Unit, Nov. 1996); '64-66 St. Thomas's Street, Oxford: Post Office Car Park Redevelopment' (unpubl. archaeological desktop study, Oxford Archaeological Unit, Apr. 1997).

² '64-66 St. Thomas's Street, Oxford: Archaeological Evaluation Report' (unpubl. client report, Oxford Archaeological Unit, May 1997).

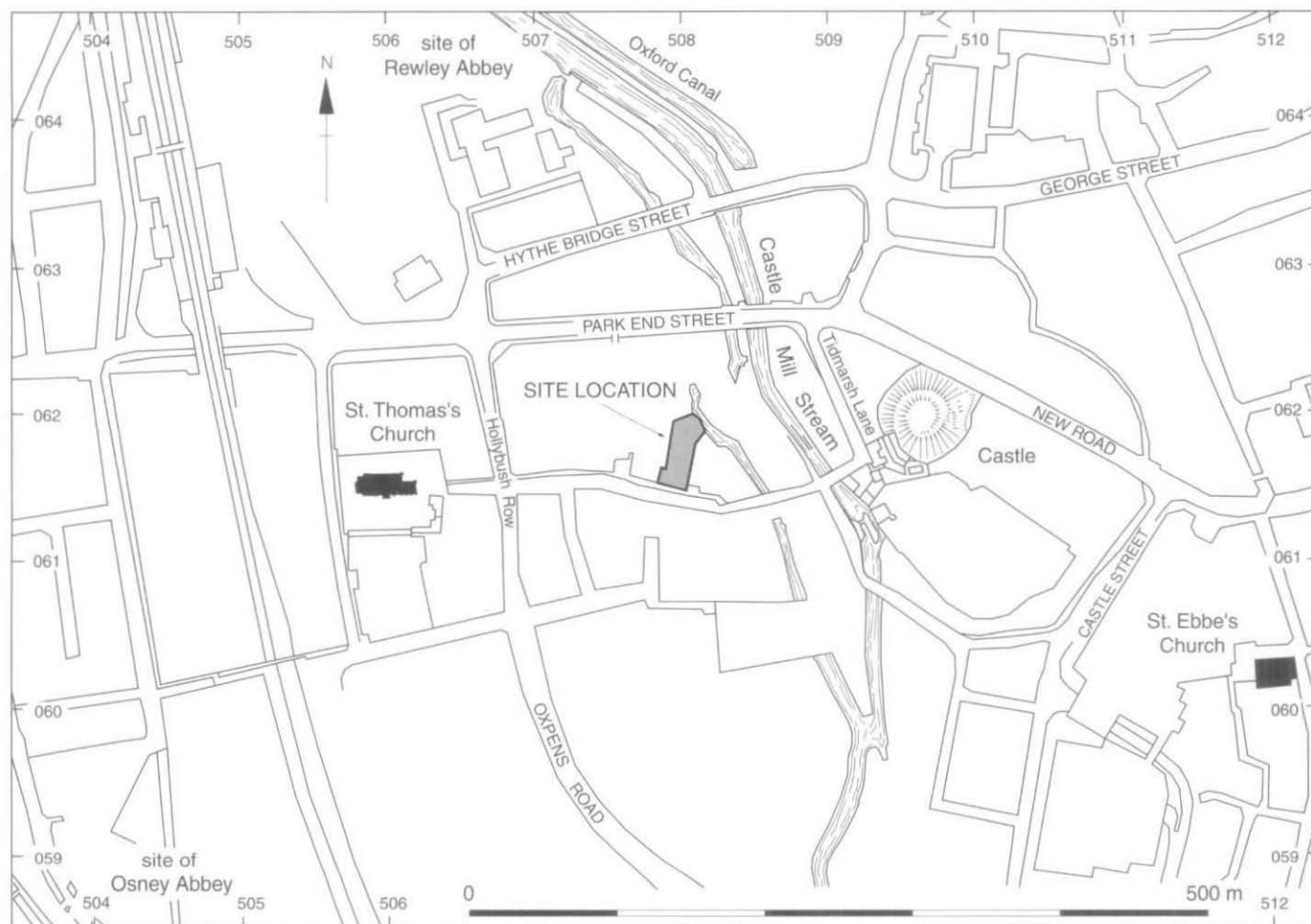


Fig. 1. 64-66 St. Thomas's Street: site location.

Documentary history of the excavated tenements by JULIAN MUNBY (Fig. 2)

As with the nearby sites reported recently,³ this site is likely to have been part of the North Oseney property that passed to Rewley Abbey, rather than the South Oseney manor that belonged to Oseney Abbey. The history of both sides of the road is much the same, with the suburb commencing in the 12th and 13th centuries, and being further developed by rebuilding and infilling in the 16th to 19th centuries. The Rewley properties were acquired by the Dutton family of Gloucestershire in 1574, and leased out by them often on very long leases. Unfortunately the leases do not necessarily identify occupants, and the taxation records cannot always be connected with particular properties. It was certainly the case that in 1772 the two buildings on the car park site (Nos. 64 and 65-6) were each divided into two, with Mr. Hughes and Mrs. Kates in No. 64, Mr. Crawford in No. 65 and Mr. Busby in No. 66.⁴

The area of the investigations is recognisable on the 1878 OS 1st edition 1:500 map of Oxford, as a row of five tenements with developed yards. Those occupying the site of the subsequent GPO Transport Depot were (from west to east) Holyfield's Yard (Nos. 58-9), Peacock Yard (Nos. 60-61) and Plasterers' Arms Yard (Nos. 62-3). Those on the site of the later car park, where the excavation took place, were the Windsor Castle Public House (No. 64) and Wareham's Yard (Nos. 65-6). The yard behind the Windsor Castle was relatively clear of buildings, and these may have been removed when the property was converted into a public house. All the others have small structures, probably a mixture of domestic, industrial and storage buildings, ranged about the yard.

The excavated tenements are recognisable on Loggan's map of 1675, which shows the yards less built up, and a different boundary between Nos. 65-6. At the rear of the properties, Loggan shows an open strip of land terminating at the rear of No. 57, bounded by a watercourse fed by the backstream.

The houses that stood on the street frontage of the tenements are known from drawings and old photographs, and comprised at least four pairs of timber-framed houses, each about 24 ft. wide. All had two main storeys with large attics, and one or two jetties overhanging the street. The upstanding remains of Nos. 64-6 were recorded by J. Doran in 1962 prior to, and during, their demolition,⁵ and the foundations were partially revealed again during the course of the present excavations. The original ground floor plans recorded by Doran are reproduced for the purpose of comparison in Fig. 5 of this report.

CAR PARK SITE EVALUATION RESULTS (Figs. 2, 3 and 4)

Three evaluation trenches were dug on the site of the car park: Trench 1 was located towards the rear of the area of early building, Trench 2 was positioned towards the back of the property, and Trench 3 towards the street frontage, within the area of the subsequent excavation trench. No features of archaeological interest were seen in Trench 2, but Trenches 1 and 3 both located significant remains.

³ A. Hardy, 'Archaeological Excavations at 54-55 St. Thomas's Street, Oxford', *Oxoniensia*, lxi (1996), 225-73; M. R. Roberts, 'A Tenement of Roger of Cumnor and other Archaeological Investigations in Medieval North Oseney, Oxford', *Oxoniensia*, lxi (1996), 182-224. The history of the suburb of St. Thomas's was reviewed in detail in N. Palmer, 'A Beaker Burial and Medieval Tenements in The Hamel, Oxford', *Oxoniensia*, xlv (1980), 124-225.

⁴ *Surveys and Tokens*, ed. H.E. Salter (Oxf. Hist. Soc. lxxv), 39.

⁵ J. Doran, 'Nos. 64, 65, 66 St. Thomas's Street', in 'Houses of the Oxford Region', *Oxoniensia*, xxvi/xxvii (1961/2), 329-32; J. Doran, 'A Further Note on the Houses at 64, 65, 66 St. Thomas's Street', *Oxoniensia*, xxix/xxx (1964/5), 195-8.



Fig. 2. 64-66 St. Thomas's Street: the excavated site in relation to the 19th-century topography of the area.

The earliest evidence was identified in Trench 1, and seems to derive from early 13th-century reclamation of low-lying and marshy land, possibly part of a stream channel, to the north of the line of St. Thomas's Street. This was achieved by the means of the construction of a cob wall, 29 (Figs. 3 and 4), built to contain levelling material 44 to the south. The wall was 1.4 m. wide and 0.88 m. in depth, and was built of orange-brown silty-clay containing pea grit and small stones. The area to the north of the wall was left at its original level, which in the succeeding two centuries slowly rose with the accumulation of occupation deposits. The cob wall may have persisted into the early 16th century. Slightly to the north of the cob wall were the remains of a post-medieval wall, 21, that followed approximately the same line. It could represent a later boundary wall between a garden area to the north and a domestic or yard area to the south.

Evaluation Trench 3 located the back wall of a medieval building, and the rear chimney stack of its post-medieval successor, together with the remains of a floor and drain. These features were examined in greater detail during the main phase of excavation and are described in the excavation report that follows.

THE EXCAVATION OF THE CAR PARK SITE (Figs. 3 and 4)

Methodology

A trench measuring approximately 12 x 9 m. was laid out in the south-western part of the site, in the footprint of the proposed new building. The location of the trench was designed to take account of known hazards and impediments and the likely impact of the new development, the foundations of which were designed to use piles linked by ground beams with the intention of minimising the impact of ground intrusion on archaeological deposits. The evaluation suggested that good post-medieval remains could be expected within the building footprint, and that medieval deposits would be encountered at approximately 0.7 m. below existing ground level. The main aim of the excavation was to record in plan the post-medieval building formerly known as No. 64 St. Thomas's Street, which had been demolished in the 1960s.

Modern deposits were removed by machine from the area of excavation. The post-medieval building was then exposed by hand-cleaning and recorded in plan.

MEDIEVAL FEATURES

Medieval features were identified only within two limited areas of deeper excavation located respectively in the south-west corner of the main excavation trench, and approximately halfway along its eastern edge. Section 4 illustrates the sequence in the south-west corner, and Section 6 that on the east side of the trench. The main features are also shown on the excavation plan, Fig. 3.

Section 4 (Fig. 4)

Section 4 was exposed following the removal of backfill from a modern cut associated with the demolition and clearance of the site prior to construction. At the base of the sequence were layers of greyish-brown clayey silt (517, 528). Both layers contained pottery suggesting a 13th-century date, and layer 517 also contained frequent flecks of charcoal. Layer 517 was cut by a probable foundation trench (653) that contained compacted rubble (529) resembling a foundation deposit to a former wall. No evidence of the superstructure of this wall was seen.

A short distance to the south, layer 528 was cut by a second wall foundation trench (651), which was filled by rubble (652); this was only partially excavated, to a depth of 0.22 m. It was seen partially to overlie or incorporate the southern edge of the earlier compacted rubble foundation, 529. Foundation 652 supported wall 523, which was identified running east-west for a distance of approximately 5 m. along the southern edge of the excavation immediately beneath the post-medieval building. Wall 523 measured a maximum of 0.84 m. in width and 0.66 m. in depth, and was built with roughly faced sides enclosing an inner core of rubble. Three sherds of 13th-century pottery were recovered from the inner wall fabric.

A sequence of layers were revealed butting the north and south side of wall 523. Layer 527, a yellowish-greyish brown clayey silt overlay and sealed 528. Overlying 527 was a very conspicuous thin gravel layer numbered 526, measuring only 0.06 m in depth and with no obvious inclusions. Immediately above the gravel deposit was layer 525, a yellowish-greyish brown clayey-silt containing a fairly substantial gravel component and a noticeable charcoal fleck inclusion. The upper layer 524 contained noticeable amounts of coarse sand

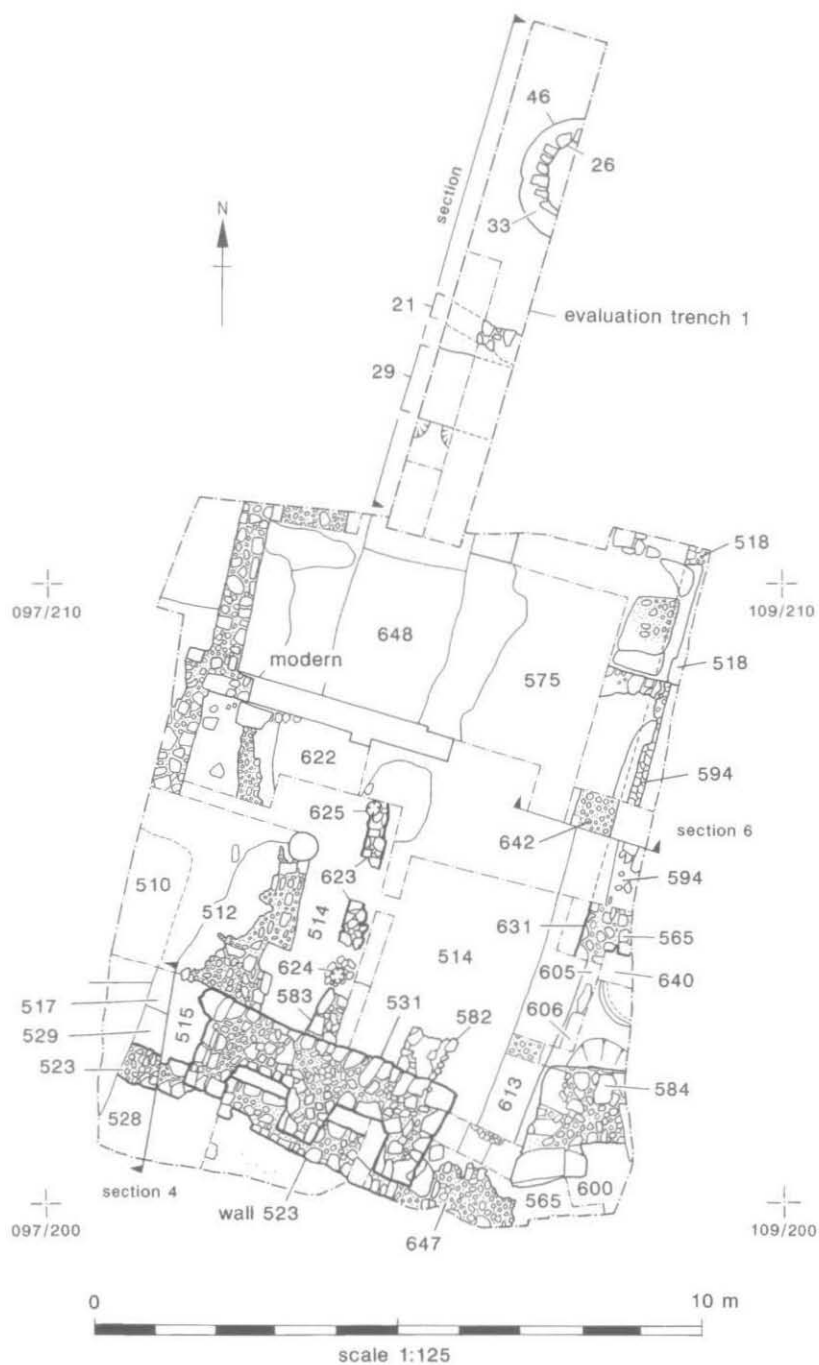


Fig. 3. 64-66 St. Thomas's Street: plan of excavated features.

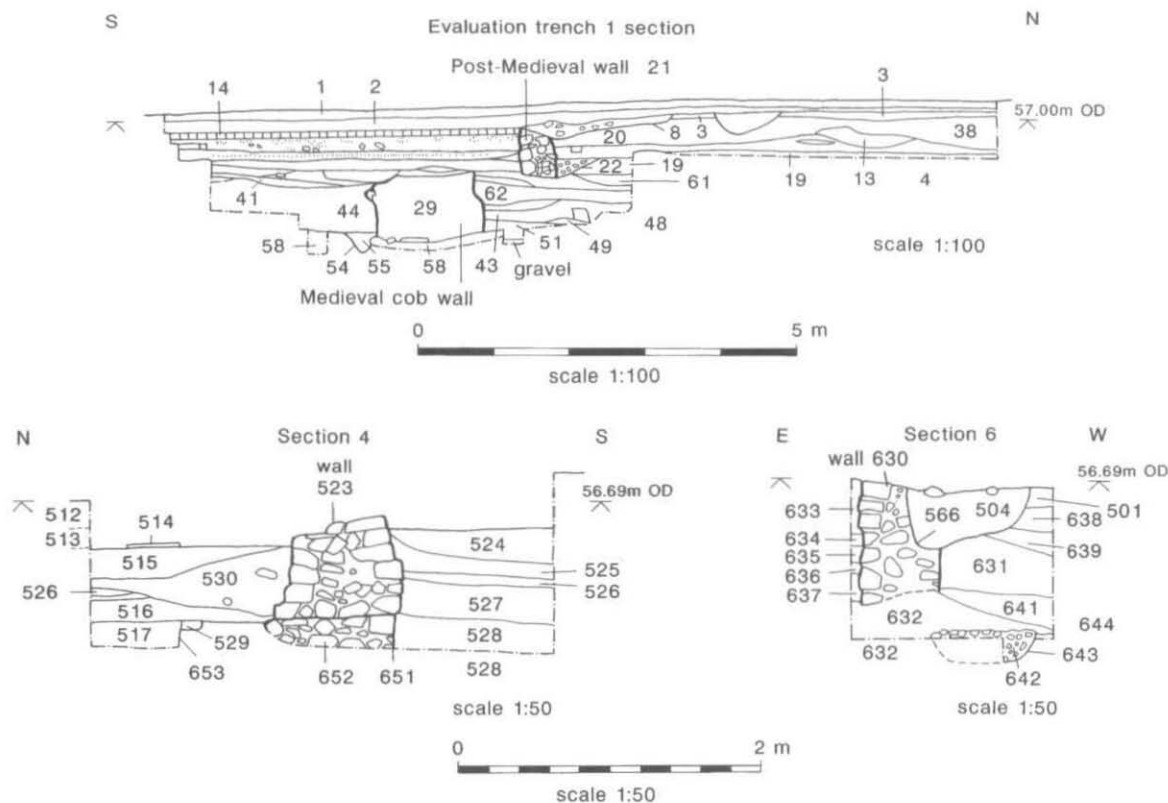


Fig. 4. 64-66 St. Thomas's Street: sections.

and small fragments of limestone. This layer partially obscured the remaining upper course of the wall. One sherd of pottery retrieved from the layer was dated to the 15th century.

On the north side of wall 523 the sequence of events was slightly different. Rubble foundation 529 and layer 517 were sealed by 516, a greyish-brown silty-clay measuring a maximum thickness of 0.14 m., tapering to 0.04 m. at the point where it butted wall 523. Overlying 516 in the extreme north end of the section was a thin lens of disturbed gravel mixed with silt, 0.06 m. thick. A thick deposit of yellowish-greyish brown silty-clay, 530, overlay layer 516, butting and almost completely obscuring the north face of wall 523. Layer 530 was in turn overlain by layer 515, a greyish-brown silty-clay. Overlying layer 515 was a thin deposit of gravel 514. This butted the remains of the post-medieval building.

Section 6 (Fig. 4)

The remaining early layers identified during the excavation were revealed within a small east-west hand-excavated sondage towards the eastern edge of the site, at the rear of the former No. 65. At the base of the sequence was a linear rubble foundation deposit, 642, orientated north-south. This deposit was only partially exposed. It had a width of 0.70 m. and filled a construction trench cut to a depth of 0.18 m. A layer of dark grey clayey silt, 632, containing pottery of 12th- to 13th-century date sealed the rubble and the foundation cut. The western edge of layer 632 sloped steeply downwards, and it was overlain by 641, a clayey silt that had the effect of raising the ground level and creating an even surface running westwards.

A north-south aligned wall, 630=594, was recorded running along the east edge of the excavation. The construction details of the wall could only be recorded within the sondage, where it was seen to measure 0.52 m. in width and 0.82 m. in depth. It was constructed of oolitic limestone with large blocks of worked stone forming the outer face, enclosing a compacted rubble and soil matrix interior. The wall produced two sherds of 15th-century pottery. There was no evidence of a foundation trench or deposit associated with the construction of the wall, which appeared to have been built directly on the surface of layer 632.

To the south, wall 630=594 appeared to return eastwards approximately 2 m. north of the post-medieval chimney stack of No. 65 (584). At this point, it was seen to be on top of layer 640, a dark brown silty-clay.

To the north a further length of wall, 518, was recorded on the north-east edge of the trench. Wall 518 was aligned north-south; to the north it continued beyond the edge of excavation, but at its southern end it appeared to butt the north end of wall 630=594. At this point, wall 630=594 appeared to return eastwards. However, most of the wall fabric in this area was removed by a later intrusion, possibly connected with 20th-century development. As a result, most of the important relationships between these walls have been lost.

The sequence of deposits varied to either side of wall 630=594, and those on the east side were only very partially exposed. A layer of fragmented and crushed limestone in a silty clay matrix, 637, overlay layer 632 and butted wall 630; it was overlain by layer 636, a dark orangey-brown silty sand containing frequent limestone grit, which was only 0.07-0.08 m. deep. This was sealed by layer 634, a yellowish grey silty sand measuring 0.08 m. in depth, which in turn was sealed by layer 633, a dark greyish-brown clayey silt that contained Victorian pottery and post-medieval building material.

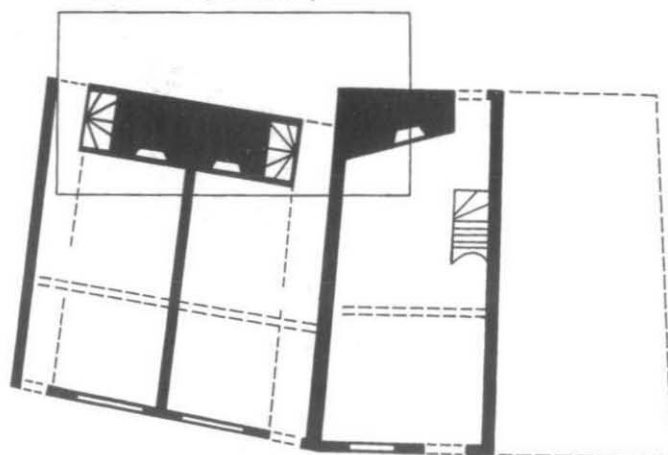
The deposits on the west side of wall 630 were more fully exposed. Layer 631, a grey clayey silt overlay levelling layer 641 and butted wall 630. A single sherd of 12th-century pottery was recovered from layer 631, but is likely to be redeposited in this context. Overlying layer 631 were three layers of clay silt, 639, 638 and 501. Layer 501 contained pottery datable to the 18th century. The relationship between these layers and wall 630 had been destroyed by 19th-century sewer pipes which ran north-south across the edge of the excavation area.

POST-MEDIEVAL FEATURES (Fig. 3)

The foundations of the chimney stack at the back of No. 64 (feature 531) were uncovered in plan along the southern edge of the excavation area immediately below demolition debris associated with clearance or levelling for the construction of the modern tarmac car park. The chimney stack measured a maximum of 2.90 m. long and 1.10 m. wide, and was constructed of roughly hewn blocks of stone. The outer wall of the structure was formed by large faced stones, around a rubble core. The larger stones were set in a light brown gritty sand matrix, representing the former bonding agent. The base of the structure was not exposed. Chimney stack 531 followed a west-north-west/east-south-east alignment, and on the south (internal) side were two recesses for the fireplaces. Doran's plan shows a partition wall through the centre of the building from the chimney stack, but the excavations did not reveal any evidence of this; the east and west external walls of the house lay beyond the edge of excavation.

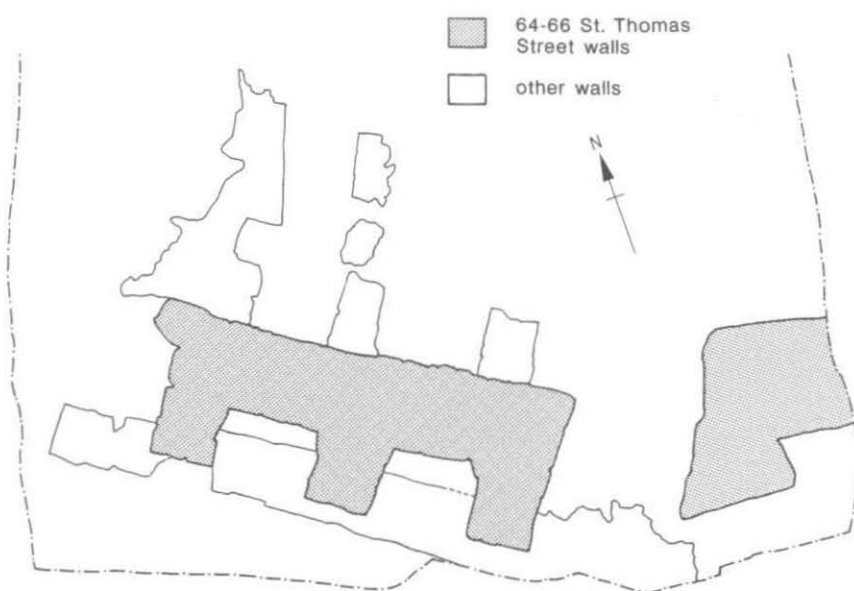
In the south-east corner of the excavation the remains of the former chimney stack to No. 65 were partially revealed, numbered as context 584 and of similar build to chimney stack 531. The stack of No. 65 followed an east-west alignment in contrast to the more oblique angle of the rear of No. 64. The orientation of No. 65 appears to respect a change in the road alignment that is still apparent today. No other evidence for the

Area of Post-Medieval building
in excavation (see below)



Original ground plan of 64-65 St. Thomas Street (J. Doran)

(not to scale)



Footings of 64-65 St. Thomas Street in excavated area

scale 1:50

Fig. 5. 64-66 St. Thomas's Street: interpretative plan.

structural fabric of No. 65 was observed. Doran describes Nos. 65-66 as a three-storey structure made of timber with lathe and plaster, a combination of elements unlikely to survive the effects of later intrusion.

In the very small area between the remains of the chimney stacks and the southern limit of the excavation there was no evidence of the original floor, side walls, or the party wall of the buildings, although these may survive further south beneath the present pavement and road. A small sondage was excavated within the gap between the chimney stacks, and revealed two possible foundation cuts made for their construction, within the same layer (618). This layer, consisting of a greyish-brown clayey silt, was only partially excavated. The two foundation cuts (615, 617) were vertical; they were recorded to a depth of 0.34 m., but not fully excavated. The evidence suggests that they were constructed at the same time, which would appear to conflict with Doran's opinion that No. 65 was built some time after No. 64.

During the excavation evidence was also found for the addition of an extension to the rear of No. 64. The earliest evidence was in the form of a layer of gravel (514) to the rear of No. 64, on the north side of the chimney stack. The eastern side of the gravel had been truncated by the construction of a later drain, but on the west side the gravel appeared to continue beyond the limit of the excavation, although sloping gradually downwards beyond the western side of the building where it began to taper off.

Following the deposition of the gravel, a wall, 623, with a width of 0.34 to 0.40 m. and surviving to a depth of 0.17 m., was constructed perpendicular to and butting the rear of the chimney stack 531. Very little of wall 623 had survived; only a single course of roughly hewn stones representing, perhaps, the foundations of a relatively insubstantial wall that may have been constructed in wood. Two post settings, 624 and 625, were seen within the wall approximately 2 m. apart. The postholes were 0.20 and 0.30 m. wide with an overall depth of about 0.17 m. Wall 623 was on the same alignment as the internal central partition at the front of the building. Two stone foundations (582 and 583), probably from a fireplace within the extension, butted the rear of 531 and formed a recess about 1 m. wide.

Overlying gravel 514 was a layer of orangey-brown silty clay 627 measuring roughly 0.16 m. thick. This layer contained a significant gravel inclusion and is likely to have been redeposited from the underlying gravel surface. Overlying layer 627 was deposit 501, which in turn lay immediately beneath the tarmac surface of the car park. Pottery from layer 501 suggests it was deposited no earlier than the 18th century. Layer 501, which was a very dark grey deposit, contained a significant amount of domestic debris such as animal bone and discarded mollusc shells and sealed the deposits associated with the rear extension.

Doran noted that the extension surviving in 1962 was of late 18th- or early 19th-century date, and probably associated with the merging of the two houses. The structure located by the excavations would therefore appear to relate to an earlier extension, perhaps that noted by Doran as having been in existence by 1750.

FINDS

POTTERY by PAUL BLINKHORN

The pottery assemblage from the excavation at 64-66 St. Thomas's Street comprised 145 sherds with a total weight of 4.062 kg. In addition, the preceding evaluation at the site, and that at the adjacent Transport Depot site, produced a further 323 sherds, with a total weight of 5.611 kg. The two assemblages contained a range of pottery typical of that used in the city of Oxford between the 12th and 19th centuries. Full details of fabric type per context are available in tabular form in the project archive. The fabric codes used are those of the Oxford type series.⁶

The assemblages have a range of ware types typical of medieval pottery groups from the city. Most of the context-specific assemblages are small in size, making it difficult to ascribe any chronology other than a *terminus post quem*. The exception is the group from context 27 of the car park evaluation, which included a near-complete Brill/Boarstall (OXAM) jug, and large fragments of another similar vessel. None of the groups is earlier than the 12th century, although small quantities of redeposited Saxo-Norman pottery (the early forms of OXAC) hint at occupation in the vicinity during that period.

SMALL FINDS by LEIGH ALLEN (Fig. 6)

A total of 60 small finds were recovered from the evaluation and excavation at 64-66 St. Thomas's Street, and full details are available in the project archive. The great majority (48 objects) were of iron, mostly nails and structural metalwork; a whittle tang knife with a highly polished bone handle was recovered from context

⁶ M. Mellor, 'A Synthesis of Middle and Late Saxon, Medieval and early Post-medieval Pottery in the Oxford Region', *Oxoniensia*, lix (1994), 17-218.

501. A lead weight was recovered from context 500. Two of the 10 copper alloy objects are worthy of particular note. A Roman coin of the house of Valentinian dated 335-341 was recovered from context 28 (evaluation; identification by Paul Booth, OAU), and a fine early post-medieval book clasp was redeposited in context 501 (Fig. 6). The book clasp is decorated at the expanded serrated end with fine incised lines in a herringbone pattern, and with three concentric circles mid-way along its length. There are five perforations, two with extant rivets. Book clasps such as this were riveted in position on the cover of a book to keep it closed; they have a sprung backplate on the reverse, and a hook at the other end. Similar examples have been recovered from the excavations at the Vineyard, Abingdon (Oxon), from Castle Rising Castle (Norf.), and from Norwich.⁷ The example from St. Thomas's Street is of early to mid 16th-century date.

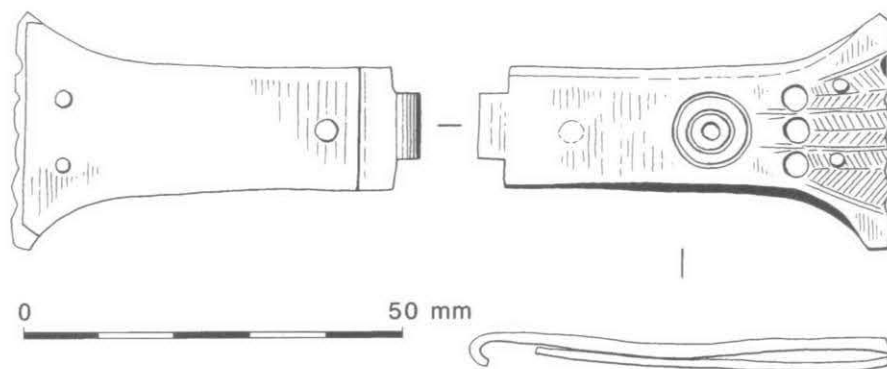


Fig. 6. 64-66 St. Thomas's Street: an early post-medieval book clasp.

GLASS by CECILY CROPPER

A total of 16 fragments of glass were recovered from excavation contexts 501 and 504. There was a single vessel fragment from context 501, deriving from a prismatic vessel or small bottle, most probably 17th- or 18th-century in date. The remaining fragments were all of window glass, predominantly 17th- or 18th-century in date, from plain quarry glazing. Some modern window glass was also present. A further nine fragments of 18th-century window glass were recovered in the evaluation at the car park site. Full details of the assemblage are available in the project archive.

DISCUSSION

The extent of the excavations was determined by the design of the proposed building, and their limited nature precludes detailed interpretation of the results. However, the evidence for reclamation and construction in the area during the late 12th or 13th century is consistent with results from recent work at larger sites in the vicinity,⁸ where cob buildings have been found, datable to the early to mid 13th century. The presence of foundation deposit 529 slightly to the north of wall 523 at Nos. 64-66 suggests two phases of construction, with a slight shift to the south. This can be compared with the evidence from Nos. 54-55 St. Thomas's Street, where a primary cob building was replaced in the later 13th century by a more substantial structure that was at least partially built in stone. The fact that

⁷ L. Allen, 'The Small Finds', in T. Allen, 'Excavations in Abingdon Vineyard, Oxon' (OAU, in prep.); V. Williams, 'The Small Finds', in B. Morley and D. Gurney, *Castle Rising Castle, Norfolk* (East Anglian Archaeology Report No. 81, 1997); S. Margeson, *Norwich Households: The Medieval and Post-medieval Finds from Norwich Survey Excavations* (East Anglian Archaeology Report No. 58, 1993).

⁸ See note 3.

no evidence for the superstructure of wall 529 was seen at Nos. 64-66 leaves open the possibility that here, too, an earlier and flimsier structure had been replaced by a more substantial one.

Wall 630=594 appears to represent the west wall of a former building. Two sherds of 15th-century pottery retrieved from the fabric of the wall could suggest that the building was constructed within the latter part of the medieval period, and it could represent an early extension.

The next period of construction is associated with the rebuilding of Nos. 64-66 St. Thomas's Street during the 17th century. Unfortunately, only the rear of the houses recorded by Doran lay within the area of excavation and the evidence recovered was thus very limited. The excavations did not recover any material to date the construction of the houses more precisely, although evidence of foundation cuts for the chimney stacks suggests that Nos. 64 and 65 may have been constructed at the same time.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author wishes to record OAU's thanks to Laing Homes Ltd. for funding the excavation and the preparation of this report, and for kindly providing canteen facilities on site. In addition, the work of OAU's site team is gratefully acknowledged, as is practical support from Simon Palmer and Graham Walton during the course of site work. Finally, thanks to those who have assisted with the preparation of the report, particularly Mel Costello and Paul Hughes for the drawings, and Anne Dodd for editing.