Medieval Features at Beecroft Yard, Church Road, Weston-on-the-Green, Oxfordshire

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SUMMARY

An evaluation and subsequent excavation at the former yard of David Beecroft Plant Hire, Church Road, Weston-on-the-Green, near Bicester, led to the discovery of one possible Saxon feature in addition to a small number of medieval and post-medieval features and deposits. The evidence from these pits, postholes and ditches suggests medieval occupation of an area adjacent to the road, which adds some detail to the topography of the original settlement.

INTRODUCTION

A proposal to redevelop land at the former yard of David Beecroft Plant Hire, Weston-on-the-Green, prompted a field evaluation conducted by Thames Valley Archaeological Services in November 1998.[1] A small excavation targeting the main area of archaeological potential followed on immediately.

The development site occupies an approximately rectangular area of *c.* 0.42 hectares located on the north side of Church Road, Weston-on-the-Green, near Bicester (SP 5325 1870) (Fig. 1). Domesday Book records the estate of Westone as being in the possession of Robert d'Oilly, the first Norman castellan of Oxford.[2] The land apparently passed to him on the death of Wigod of Wallingford, the Saxon lord who owned the land at the time of the Conquest and whose daughter, Ealdgyth, he married.[3] In 1130 Robert's grandson, also Robert, gave the church of *Westone* and probably also grants of lands in the manor to the newly founded Oseney Abbey. Most of the village was held by the abbey until its dissolution in 1539.[4] The current parish church of St. Mary incorporates elements of the medieval church and lies just 200 m. to the west of the development, which is itself in the historic core of the village. The western limit of the medieval village may be represented by the leat for a medieval mill, which has been identified on the ground as a linear feature immediately to the west of the church.[5] As Church Road is the main east–west thoroughfare in the village it was anticipated that deposits revealing evidence of the origins and development of Weston-on-the-Green would be encountered. Later use of the plot is evident on the map by Davis, dated 1797, which shows a building standing on the eastern part of the site.

[1] K. Taylor and S. Ford, 'Land at Beecroft Yard, Church Road, Weston-on-the-Green, An Archaeological Evaluation' (Thames Valley Archaeological Services Report 98/47, 1998).

[2] *V.C.H. Oxon.* i, 414.

[3] J. Blair, *Anglo-Saxon Oxfordshire* (1994), 174–5.

[4] *V.C.H. Oxon.* vi, 346–52.

[5] Oxfordshire Sites and Monuments Record, number 4371.

Fig. 1. Location of site within Oxfordshire and Weston-on-the-Green, and location of trenches and excavated area.

The evaluation and excavation followed schemes of work approved by Oxfordshire County Archaeological Service, archaeological advisors to the District Council, and were carried out in accordance with PPG16[6] and the District policies on archaeology. The site lies on level ground at a height of approximately 71 m. above Ordnance Datum. According to the British Geological Survey[7] the underlying geology is Lower Oxford Clay, a dark grey fissile and bituminous mudstone, although a limestone gravel was actually encountered during the fieldwork. The site code is BYW98/47 and the finds and archive have been deposited with Oxfordshire Museum Service (accession number OXCMS:1999.24).

THE EVALUATION

Six machine-excavated trenches, nominally 10 m. long and 1.6 m. wide, targeted the footprints of the proposed buildings (Fig. 1). These revealed features in Trenches 1, 4 and 6, the other trenches producing just a single sherd of post-medieval pottery from a spoil heap. Trench 4 contained two features: ditch 10, which crossed the trench from north-east to south-west, and pit 11. The ditch was 1.25 m. wide and 0.35 m. deep, with a rounded profile. It contained a single sherd of 5th- or 6th-century Saxon pottery (Fig. 3, 1), which may be residual. Evidence from pit 11 suggested a 13th- to 15th-century date whilst gully 1 in Trench 6 was undated.

Most of the deposits revealed in the evaluation were in Trench 1, parallel to Church Road. Of the nine features found three were investigated at this stage: gully 2, posthole 4, and pit 5. These, and the surface of one of the unexcavated features, contained five sherds of 11th- to 13th-century pottery and one sherd of post-medieval pot.

DESCRIPTION OF THE EXCAVATION

The excavation consisted of a rectangular area 7 m. x 14 m. centred on evaluation Trench 1 (Fig. 2, A). Stripping was carried out by machine under constant archaeological supervision. The high watertable and necessary avoidance of areas contaminated by oil hampered the excavation of several of the features. The excavation identified 19 features and deposits. The methodology employed was to half-section pits and postholes and to sample ditches by slots. Most features contained little dating evidence and, after recording, were searched for finds.

The excavation revealed no further evidence of early Saxon activity; the earliest features in the excavated area are 11th- to 13th-century in date.

Four, possibly five, pits and a gully date to the mid 11th to late 13th centuries. Three of the pits (100, 103 and 104) were roughly circular in plan and ranged in diameter from 1.24 m. to 2.00 m. Pit 103 clearly cut pit 104. Pit 111 was sub-rectangular, 1.38 m. by at least 1.64 m., but a later feature truncated the eastern end and the precise shape is unknown. All had bowl-shaped profiles and were shallow, the maximum depth being 0.36 m. In keeping with the generally low density of finds on the site, none produced more than ten sherds of pottery. Gully 300 extended roughly southwards from the northern edge of the trench. Two slots were dug across the gully, in addition to that dug during the evaluation. The feature was 1.24 m. wide and 0.55 m. deep at the baulk. It became shallow and narrow and petered out approximately 3.00 m. into the trench, although machining may have truncated the original terminal.

Pit 116 contained seven sherds of pottery from one vessel, a cooking pot of early to mid 13th-century type. This places it either in the phase described above or the following phase as the dates of the majority of the pottery overlap. The pit was 1.98 m. by at least 0.90 m. and roughly sub-rectangular in plan. A later drain had removed its western side but it was similar in profile to the pits already described.

Four other pits are more securely dated to the 13th to 14th or 15th centuries. Pits 101 and 102 were sub-circular in plan with diameters of approximately 1.70 m. and 1.28 m. respectively. The relationship between the two pits was not clear (Fig. 2, A). Modern disturbance had removed the northern side of both features. As

[6] *Archaeology and Planning* (1990), Dept. of the Environment, Planning Policy and Guidance Note 16, HMSO.

[7] *British Geological Survey* (1994), 1:50,000, Sheet 237, Solid and Drift Edition.

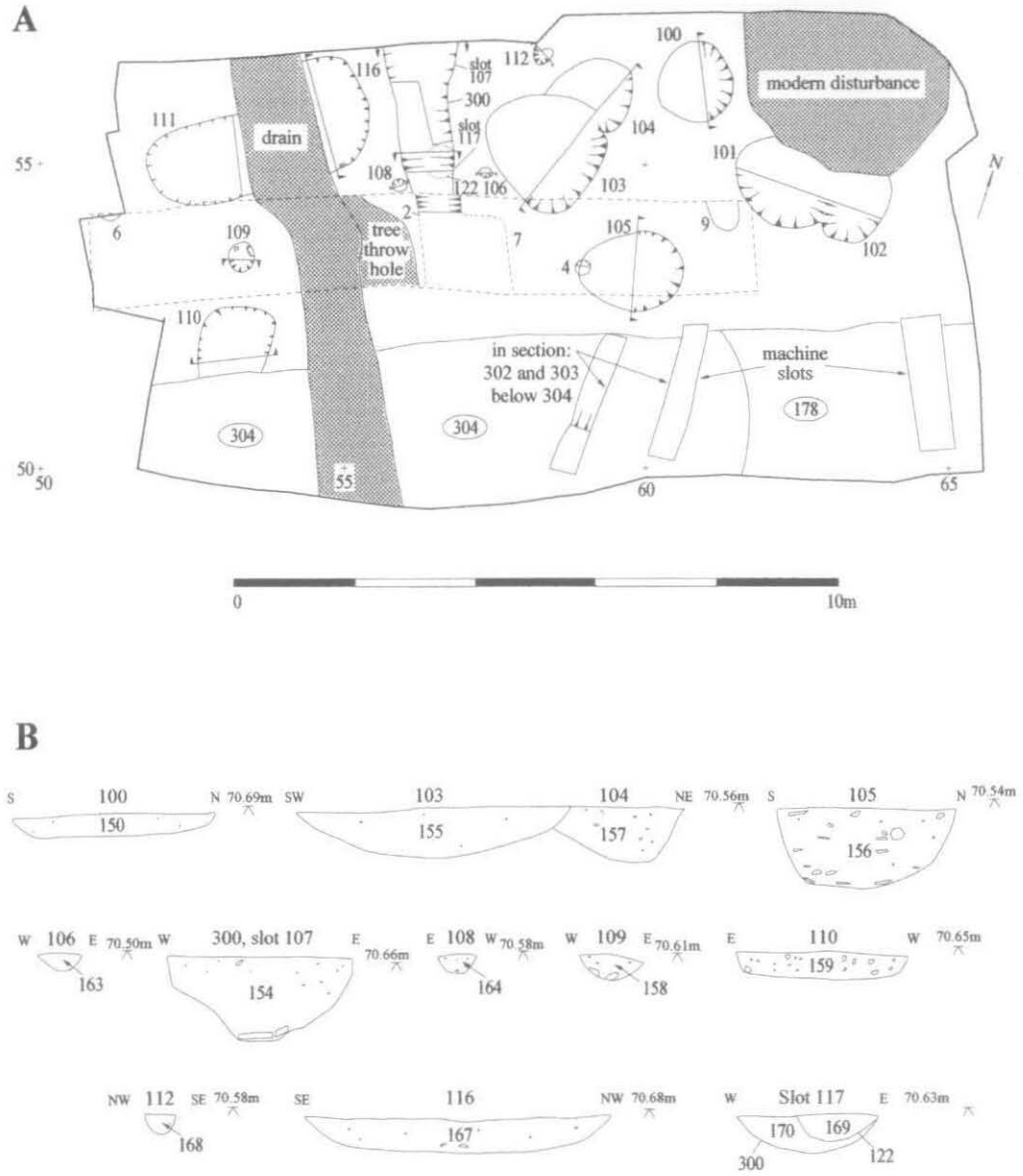

Fig. 2. A. Plan of excavated area. B. Selected sections (all heights are in metres above Ordnance Datum).

with the sub-circular pits belonging to the previous phase, 101 was shallow (0.24 m.) and bowl-shaped, whilst 102 was deeper (0.54 m.) with steep sides. Although truncated by later features, pit 110 was flat-bottomed, sub-rectangular, 1.33 m. wide, at least 1.10 m. long, and 0.16 m. deep. Pit 105 (5 in the evaluation) was also sub-rectangular and flat-bottomed. It measured 1.75 m. by 1.22 m., and at 0.54 m. deep was considerably deeper than the other pits, except for pit 102. It flooded during excavation. Ten sherds of pottery came from pit 101, nine from pit 102, and eight from pit 110. Posthole 4 contained a single sherd from a cooking pot of mid 11th- to late 13th-century date.

A machine was used to excavate slots, which flooded quickly, across a large dark stripe at least 2.60 m. wide taking up the whole of the southern part of the trench (304). These slots revealed two ditches, 302 and 303, parallel to each other and to the road. Ditch 303 was apparently cut by ditch 302. The ditches were covered by the silty clay layer (304) which in turn was overlain by 177, a thin layer which contained limestone rubble. A further layer, 178, could be seen towards the eastern side of the site. As the southern part of the site was sloping and extremely wet these layers were probably intended to create a more level and firm area. Pit 110 was cut by ditch 302, which was itself cut by a 19th-century drain. It can therefore be deduced that ditch 302 is of late medieval or post-medieval date and ditch 303 is earlier, although neither produced any finds.

The 19th-century drain was constructed with limestone slabs and crossed the excavated area from north-west to south-east. This cut a tree-throw hole which also contained 19th-century pottery. A sample of finds collected from each of these features includes pottery, brick, and glass. The treehole is noteworthy as it contained two large joining sherds of a mid 13th-century triple-decker type jug (Fig. 3, 2).

The excavation also revealed four postholes that produced no datable finds. Three of these, 106, 108 and 112, were small with approximate diameters of 0.25 m. and a maximum depth of 0.13 m. Posthole 109, on the other hand, was 0.42 m. in diameter and 0.14 m. deep. It contained a number of pieces of limestone, which may be post-packing. None of the postholes has any clear association with other features and their purpose is not clear. However, it is possible that removal of other, shallower, features by machining may have obscured some patterning.

THE FINDS

POTTERY by CATHERINE UNDERWOOD-KEEVILL

In total 51 sherds weighing 1.19 kg. were recovered from the excavation by hand in addition to 11 sherds weighing 0.241 kg. from the evaluation trenches, and 29 sherds weighing 0.133 kg. from wet-sieved samples. The pottery was divided into fabric groups according to the Oxford fabric reference series[8] and the post-medieval fabrics have been given Common Name four letter codes with reference to the MOLAS code system. All nomenclature and dating have been with reference to the Oxfordshire Pottery synthesis.[9]

The assemblage is notable for the Anglo-Saxon bowl sherd from one of the evaluation trenches (Fig. 3, 1), which is similar to types found at Eynsham Abbey.[10] The majority of the material consists of early medieval fabrics: limestone tempered ware OXAC, which is known from the west of Oxfordshire and Oxford and is dated to the early 11th century; flint gritted OXBF; and fine sandy ware OXAE.

The medieval and later medieval period is represented by Oxford Medieval ware OXY and the Brill/Boarstall fabrics OXAW and OXAM. Although the assemblage size is small, the quantity of highly decorated jug sherds (Fig. 3, 2) is surprising and does suggest some high quality table ware was distributed to the smaller towns and villages in Oxfordshire. Small quantities of regional imports from Wiltshire (fabric OXAQ) and from Abingdon in the south of the county (OXAG) corroborate this impression of movement of goods beyond the traditional river trade.

Catalogue

Evaluation

Tr 1, 2 (53)	OXAC	2 cooking pot bodysherds
Tr 1, 3 (54)	OXY	1 flat-topped collared rim cooking pot, early to mid 13th-century type
Tr 1, 3 (54)	GREW	1 orange glazed bodysherd, 18th- to 19th-century

[8] R. Haldon and M. Mellor, 'Late Saxon and Medieval Pottery', in B. Durham, 'Archaeological Excavations in St. Aldates, Oxford', *Oxoniensia*, xlii (1977), 111–39.

[9] M. Mellor, 'A Synthesis of Middle and Late Saxon Medieval and early Post-medieval Pottery in the Oxford Region', *Oxoniensia*, lix (1994), 17–217.

[10] P. Blinkhorn, 'The Pottery', in Oxford Archaeological Unit, Eynsham Abbey Excavations (in prep.).

Tr 1, 5 (56)	OXAC	1 bodysherd, mid 11th- to 13th-century
Tr 2, spoil	GREW	1 rolled rim to dish with yellow/green interior glaze, 17th-/18th-century type 0–5 m.
Tr 4, 10 (61)	ASQ1	1 slightly everted flat-topped rim, with burnishing on interior. Wide mouthed vessel/ bowl. Anglo-Saxon fabric Q1, with very fine quartz temper, dating from the 5th or 6th century
Tr 4, 11 (62)	OXAM	4 bodysherds, 13th- to 15th-century
Tr 4, 4 (55)	OXY	1 cooking pot bodysherd, mid 11th- to late 13th-century
Excavation		
100 (150)	OXY	1 sagging base cooking pot, mid 11th- to late 13th-century
100 (150)	OXAC	1 bodysherd, mid 11th- to mid 13th-century
101 (151)	OXAC	1 decorated bodysherd with applied strip, mid 11th- to late 13th-century
101 (151)	OXY	1 sagging base cooking pot, mid 11th- to 13th-century
101 (151)	OXAW	1 rilled sherd with light green glaze, early 13th- to 14th-/15th-century
101 (151)	PRL	4 very coarse tempered late Prehistoric (sieved sample 1)
101 (151)	OXAC	1 rim sherd, flat topped bowl rim, 12th-century (sieved sample 1)
101 (151)	OXAQ	1 small fragment of bodysherd (sieved sample 1)
101 (151)	RR20	1 bodysherd Roman reduced sandy ware, 2nd- to 4th-century (sieved sample 1)
102 (152)	OXBF	1 decorated sherd with combed wavy line decoration, mid 11th- to mid 13th-century
102 (152)	OXAC	1 bodysherd/shoulder cooking pot (sieved sample 2)
102 (152)	OXAQ	1 bodysherd cooking pot (sieved sample 2)
102 (152)	OXAW	1 highly glazed dark green jug sherd, 1 plain bodysherd, early Brill/Boarstall ware, 12th- or 13th- to 15th-century (sieved sample 2)
102 (152)	RR20	1 rim square topped jug, mid 3rd- to 4th-century, Young type R10 (sieved sample 2)
102 (153)	OXAG	1 rounded base, base angle, late 11th- to 14th-century
102 (153)	OXAM	1 bodysherd, early 13th- to 14th- or 15th-century
102 (153)	OXAE	1 bodysherd, 11th- to 12th-century
103 (155)	OXY	1 sagging base cooking pot, mid 11th- to 13th-century
103 (155)	OXAC	3 bodysherds and 1 base angle (sieved sample 5)
103 (155)	OXY	2 cooking pot sherds and 3 jug tripod pitcher sherds, light green glaze, late 12th- to 13th-century (sieved sample 5)
104 top	OXAC	1 bodysherd slight sooting on exterior, mid 11th- to late 13th-century
104 (157)	OXAC	2 bodysherds (sieved sample 4)
105 (156)	OXAW	1 green glazed exterior jug sherd, 1 bodysherd cooking pot, early 13th- to 14th- or 15th-century
105 (156)	OXAG	2 bodysherds (sieved sample 3)
105 (156)	OXAM	1 bodysherd (sieved sample 3)
107 top	OXY	1 rounded base, base angle cooking pot, mid 11th- to 13th-century
107 (154)	OXAC	Fine bodysherd cooking pot, sooting patches on exterior, mid 11th- to late 13th-century
107 (154)	OXAC	6 cooking pot bodysherds, patchy sooting on 3 sherds (sieved sample 6)
110 top	OXAM	1 decorated bodysherd with applied curvilinear design with red slip and green glaze, mid 13th-century type
110 (159)	OXAQ	1 bodysherd cooking pot, late 12th- to early 15th-century
110 (159)	OXAE	1 bodysherd, 11th- to 12th-century
110 (159)	OXAM	1 base angle of jug with decoration: curvilinear red slip design and green glaze, possibly the same vessel as 110 top
110 (159)	OXAM	1 jug rim with handle and 3 associated neck sherds with combed/rilled neck and splashed dark green glaze, 14th-century type
111 (160)	OXY	2 cooking pot bodysherds with slight sooting on exterior. 1 glazed bodysherd possibly to tripod pitcher/jug, 12th- or 13th-century
111 (160)	OXAC	1 cooking pot rim, beveled with short everted neck, mid 12th-century type
111 (160)	OXAC	1 bowl rim, flat-topped, 12th-century type
111 (160)	OXAC	1 bodysherd
114 (165)	GREW	1 thick bodysherd, with orange glazed interior, probable large hollow ware/butterpot Glazed Red Earthenware, equivalent to MOLAS code PMR post-medieval red ware, 17th- to 19th-century
114 (165)	OXAQ	1 thick bodysherd, probable storage jar/bowl, late 12th- to early 15th-century
114 (165)	OXAM	1 cooking pot bodysherd with burnt exterior

114 (165)	CIST	1 deeply rilled bodysherd, tankard and 1 narrow strip handle. Cistercian ware (CSTN), 16th- or 17th-century
114 (165)	PEAR	2 dish co-joining rims with painted blue edge and over-glaze. Pearlware, 19th-century
115 (166)	OXAW	2 large co-joining base angle sherds of highly decorated triple-decker type jug, angular jug type with baluster base and three zones of decoration. Decoration consists of red slip curvilinear and horizontal lines and rouletted diagonal lines and applied red slip dots and a green speckled glaze, mid 13th-century type
115 (166)	GREW	1 rim to dish (PRW)
115 (166)	CREA	1 dish rim. Cream ware, late 18th- to 19th-century
116 (167)	OXY	4 cooking pot rim sherds, thumbed top rim with thick interior. Co-joining rim sherds and 3 bodysherds from the same vessel, early to mid 13th-century type

Description of Illustrated Sherds (Fig. 3)

1. Slightly everted flat-topped bowl rim, burnished on interior, fabric ASQ1. Evaluation Trench 4, 10 (61).

2. Baluster base of angular jug, triple-decker type. Finely decorated with curvilinear and horizontal lines, rouletted diagonal lines in red-brown slip, green speckled glaze, fabric OXAW. Excavation 115 (166).

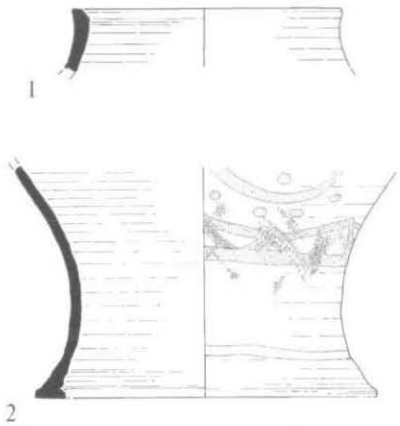

Fig. 3. Pottery: 1. Saxon bowl rim from evaluation trench 4, feature 10 (61). 2. Decorated 13th-century angular jug from feature 115 (166). Scale 1 : 4.

ANIMAL BONE by SHEILA HAMILTON-DYER

Species identifications were made using the modern comparative collections of S. Hamilton-Dyer. Ovicaprid bones were checked for goat.[11] Undiagnostic fragments have been divided into cattle/horse-sized and sheep/pig-sized categories with a further group identified only as mammalian. The few measurements are in millimetres and follow the methods of von den Driesch.[12] The archive record gives full details of each bone. A summary of the species distribution is given below (Table 1).

Results

The animal bone fragments recorded are from 30 individual bones. Most of the material is very well preserved and robust. Sheep/goat bones are the most frequently identified taxa at 12 fragments. Both sheep and goat could be positively identified. Cattle bones number seven and there are also two fragments of horse but none of pig. There is also a single bone of cat. No bones of dog were recovered but the presence of six bones showing damage from canid gnawing offers indirect evidence.

[11] J. Boessneck, 'Osteological Differences between Sheep (*Ovis aries* Linné) and Goat (*Capra hircus* Linné)', in D. Brothwell and E. S. Higgs, *Science in Archaeology* (1969), 331–58.

[12] A. von den Driesch, *A Guide to the Measurement of Animal Bones from Archaeological Sites* (1976), Peabody Museum Bulletin 1.

The sheep/goat bones include one of a lamb only a few weeks old as well as those of mature animals. A complete sheep metatarsus from pit 105 offers an estimated withers height of just 0.506 m. Bones of similarly small size can be found in other late medieval contexts in southern England.[13] Goat is represented by a small fragment of sawn horn core from slot 107 through gully 300. This offcut indicates horn working in the vicinity. Also from this feature are two sheep-sized bone fragments showing evidence of canid digestion.

Two bones show developmental abnormalities: a cattle jaw from slot 2 through gully 300 has no final pillar on the third molar, and a horse upper molar from ditch slot 11 is slightly distorted.

Just two bones exhibited butchery marks, both of cattle and showing clean chops from a heavy bladed implement.

This sample is too small for further analysis, but indicates the potential for further study of material from the area. The well preserved bones result from a variety of activities including slaughter and butchery, horn working and general disposal of dead animals. Cattle, sheep, goat, horse, cat and dog are present and the very young lamb indicates breeding nearby.

TABLE 1. SPECIES DISTRIBUTION OF ANIMAL BONE

Cut	*Deposit*	*Horse*	*Cattle*	*Sheep/ Goat*	*Cattle-size*	*Sheep-size*	*Cat*	*Total*
2	53	–	2	1	–	–	–	3
4	55	–	–	–	1	–	–	1
5	56	–	1	–	–	–	–	1
10	61	–	1	2	–	–	–	3
11	62	1	–	–	–	–	–	1
100	150	–	1	1	–	–	–	2
101	151	–	–	1	–	–	–	1
102	152	–	–	1	–	1	–	2
103	155	1	–	2	–	–	–	3
105	156	–	–	1	–	1	1	3
107	154	–	–	2	1	3	–	6
110	159	–	–	–	1	–	–	1
116	167	–	2	1	–	–	–	3
	Total	*2*	*7*	*12*	*3*	*5*	*1*	*30*
	percent	***6.7***	***23.3***	***40***	***10***	***16.7***	***3.3***	

CHARRED PLANT REMAINS by MARK ROBINSON

Six features (101–105 and 107) were sampled for carbonised plant remains. The samples of 16–20 litres were floated and sieved using a 0.5 mm. mesh. All six samples produced seed remains but in low numbers, the highest being 13 fragments from pit 104. The seeds were all cereals and included identifiable wheat (*Triticum* sp) and barley (*Hordeum* sp).

[13] J. Bourdillon, 'Town Life and Animal Husbandry in the Southampton Area as suggested by the Excavated Bones', *Proc. of Hampshire Field Club Archaeol. Soc.* 36 (1980), 181–91; S. Hamilton-Dyer, 'The Faunal Remains', in Rawlings et al., 'Excavations at Brown Street and Ivy Street, Salisbury' (Wessex Archaeology report, in press); S. Hamilton-Dyer, 'The Animal Bones', in Russell et al., 'The Lower High Street Project, Southampton' (in prep.).

OTHER FINDS

Besides the pottery and bone assemblages just four other finds were recovered, none of which contributes any further to the dating or interpretation of the site. The single fragment of clay pipe stem was retrieved from the cleaning of the top of pit 5 in the evaluation (105 in the excavation) and is not thought to have been within the fill of this feature. A small piece of burnt flint came from slot 107 through ditch 300. And finally, a fragment of brick and a piece of window glass were found in the 19th-century drain (301), confirming its date.

DISCUSSION

Due to its location in the heart of the medieval village it was anticipated that the investigation of this plot would reveal evidence for the origins of Weston-on-the-Green. The earliest activity recorded during the investigation is reflected by the presence of 5th- or 6th-century Saxon pottery recovered from a ditch which may be of the same date. This single, possibly residual, sherd does not cast much light on the question of the origins of the settlement although it does suggest that some early Saxon activity took place in the vicinity of the site. It is perhaps worth noting that no pottery earlier than the 11th century was recovered from the medieval and post-medieval features in the excavation trench adjacent to the road.

Evidence of medieval activity, although apparently in two phases, is fairly constant in nature from the 11th to the 15th century. The pits and gully are suggestive of occupation of the area at the road frontage but it is interesting to note that no actual structures were identified. These may have lain in the fairly narrow strip between the trench and the road itself, perhaps destroyed by the later ditches, or may have been located to either side of the excavated area. It is, however, possible that the present position of the road may not exactly reflect its location during the earlier development of the village. The late medieval or post-medieval ditches which lie parallel to the modern road may represent the establishment of the road in its current position. This need not have been a major change to the topography of the village but may simply have been a slight realignment or widening, creating the road as it is seen both on Davis's map of 1797 and today.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We wish to thank the following for their assistance during the project: Mr. Jon Neville of Berkeley Homes (Oxford) Limited who commissioned the project; Hugh Coddington of Oxfordshire County Archaeological Services; Suzy Blake, Sarah Coles, Luis Huscroft, Joanna Pine, John Saunders and Sarah Whittaker for their assistance during the fieldwork; Leigh Torrance for the illustrations; Melanie Hall for editing the publication text and illustrations; and Nicola Clarkson for post-excavation work.