

The Archaeology and History of Oxford's West Suburb

By JULIAN MUNBY

By way of a prefatory note to the following pair of articles, it may be useful to summarise the history and archaeology of Oxford's west suburb. The recent phase of building on the sites reported here almost brings to an end the reconstruction of St Thomas'. Once a populous suburb, and celebrated in a valuable work of local history,¹ St Thomas' was an early victim of 'slum clearance', which saw its historic buildings and crowded tenement yards swept away to be replaced by a formless industrial area that has only recently returned to housing. The church still stands at the west end of St Thomas' Street, its dedication to St Thomas Becket presumably dating it to a time around the martyrdom (AD 1170). South of and parallel to St Thomas' Street lay Oseney Lane, reached by turning off St Thomas' Street down the Hamel, which led from Oxford directly to Oseney Abbey (the site now in Oseney Cemetery just west of the railway). The suburb was probably created by the abbey, and Oseney, as lord of 'South Oseney' owned much of the land on the south side of St Thomas' Street, while Rewley Abbey later came to be lord of 'North Oseney'. The suburb was surveyed in 1279 as part of the 'Hundred Rolls' inquest,² and numerous property records survive in Christ Church archives. The Warham Bank alongside the Castle Mill Stream of the River Thames was in part a property of the town of Oxford, and part of the separate and longer Fisher Row, which has its own remarkable history.³ A guide to the properties and the sources for their known history appears separately in this volume as the *Survey of West Oxford*.⁴

From the start the suburb was densely populated, with continuous built-up street frontages. One key factor was water management, and as is apparent from Loggan's 1675 bird's-eye view of the suburb, the organisation of natural streams and the creation of roadside ditches was obviously a part of the original layout. Few historic buildings survived until modern times, but these included a 15th-century 'wealden house' on the street corner by the church, which was possibly an inn.⁵ Other buildings recorded before their final removal were 17th-century timber-framed buildings on the north side of St Thomas' Street,⁶ and early photographs suggest that these were typical of many houses in the area. Later buildings of interest include an early example of social housing, the 1866 Christ Church New Buildings,⁷ and a number of breweries, of which the famous Morrell's Brewery was the last survivor. Although its history was written just in time,⁸ it suffered the fate of all of Oxford's large industries in being closed and dismantled with no adequate record of its industrial archaeology being made.

¹ T.W. Squires' *In West Oxford* (1928).

² J. Cooper, 'The Hundred Rolls for the Parish of St Thomas, Oxford', *Oxonienia*, xxxvii (1972), 165-76.

³ M. Prior, *Fisher Row: Fishermen, Bargemen, and Canal Boatmen in Oxford, 1500-1900* (1982).

⁴ J. Munby and A. Dodd, 'Survey of West Oxford', *Oxonienia*, lxxi (2006), 461-498.

⁵ J. Munby, 'A Fifteenth Century Wealden House in Oxford', *Oxonienia*, xxxix (1974), 73-6.

⁶ D. Sturdy et al., 'Houses of the Oxford Region' *Oxonienia*, xvi/xvii (1961/2), 319-35; J. Doran, 'A further note on the houses at 64-6 St. Thomas' Street', *Oxonienia*, xxix/xxx (1964-5), 195-8.

⁷ *VCH Oxon iv* (1979), 195; in London the Peabody Trust was founded in 1862, and Sidney Waterlow's Improved Industrial Dwellings Company built the Stanley Buildings, off Pancras Road in 1864-5.

⁸ B. Allen, *Morrells of Oxford: The Family and Their Brewery 1743-1993* (1994), with an important note on the site development by David Sturdy.

The buried archaeology of the suburb has been rather more fortunate, and the recent decades of rebuilding which have seen the suburb reappear as a densely inhabited part of the city have provided an opportunity for archaeological investigation on several sites.⁹ The now classic site, with ample opportunity for extensive discovery, was in The Hamel, where Nicholas Palmer and the University Archaeological Society conducted an excavation under the Oxford Excavations Committee in 1975[2]. The unexpected discovery of a Bronze-age beaker burial demonstrated that the 'low-lying' land had been habitable in prehistory, and less damp than it was later. A complex sequence of domestic buildings was uncovered, dating from the early 13th century, and the report gave an opportunity for a general account of the medieval and post-medieval development of the suburb.¹⁰ On the north side of St Thomas' Street almost the entire length has now been subject to investigation. Towards the west end the Halls Brewery site (now 'Castle Mews') was partially excavated on Hollybush Row and St Thomas' Street in 1989-90 by Mark Roberts of Oxford Archaeological Unit[3].¹¹ The next large block to the east (now 'The Old Bakery') was dug by Alan Hardy of OAU in 1994[4],¹² and then the next block (now 'St Thomas' Mews') by Sean Cook of OAU in 1997[5].¹³ The excavations of 2003 at 67-69 St Thomas' Street (now Bookbinder's Court and St Peter's College) reported below [6] continue this sequence eastwards to the rear of Warham Bank. South of the road and just east of the Hamel was the final excavation in 1999 and 2002 by Thames Valley (TVAS) [7] also reported below.

The excavations in Hollybush Row revealed quite substantial stone foundations of houses in a sequence starting in the mid 13th century, and finds included the seal matrix of Roger of Cumnor, sometime owner of the site. The property was rebuilt in the 17th century. On the St Thomas' Street side (where Stuart Rigold had dug a trench in 1947-8) [1],¹⁴ work was obstructed by the presence of water and diesel fuel, but remains of 14th-century cob-walled houses were found, later replaced by buildings of stone. Here as elsewhere the current site area did not permit recovery of the medieval street fronts. In the 1994 excavations some evidence was found for land-use (pasture) before the suburb, and again cob-walled buildings of the early to mid 13th century. One of these was rebuilt in stone, but part of the site was demolished in the 14th century and lay open for a long time thereafter, but the post-medieval period was poorly represented on this site, although there was over a metre of archaeological deposits. The 1997 excavation to the east did uncover partial foundations of the buildings whose demolition had been recorded in the 1960s, but it was not possible to date them. Again the relatively large area excavated did not extend to the historic street frontage, and only partially reached medieval layers, where early cob walls were also found, but the context and stages of development is difficult to discern.

One further site[8]¹⁵ was undertaken by John Moore on the street frontage just east of the church (the former Post Office site). This produced a long sequence of coherent development, from an initial 13th-century reclamation of wet ground (underlying the street

⁹ The numbers in square brackets in the following paragraphs refer to the caption to Fig. 1.

¹⁰ N. Palmer, 'A Beaker Burial and Medieval tenements in The Hamel, Oxford', *Oxoniensia*, xlv (1980), 124-225 with microfiche.

¹¹ M.R. Roberts, 'A Tenement of Roger of Cumnor and other Archaeological Excavations in Medieval North Osney, Oxford', *Oxoniensia*, xli (1996), 181-224.

¹² A. Hardy, 'Archaeological Excavations at 54-55 St Thomas's Street, Oxford', *Oxoniensia*, xli (1996), 225-274.

¹³ S. Cook, 'Archaeological Excavations at 64-66 St Thomas's Street, Oxford', *Oxoniensia*, xlv (1999), 285-96.

¹⁴ 'Notes and News', *Oxoniensia*, xvi (1951), 83.

¹⁵ John Moore, 'An Archaeological Excavation on the Site of the Former Royal Mail Depot, Becket Street, Oxford, January 2005', forthcoming.

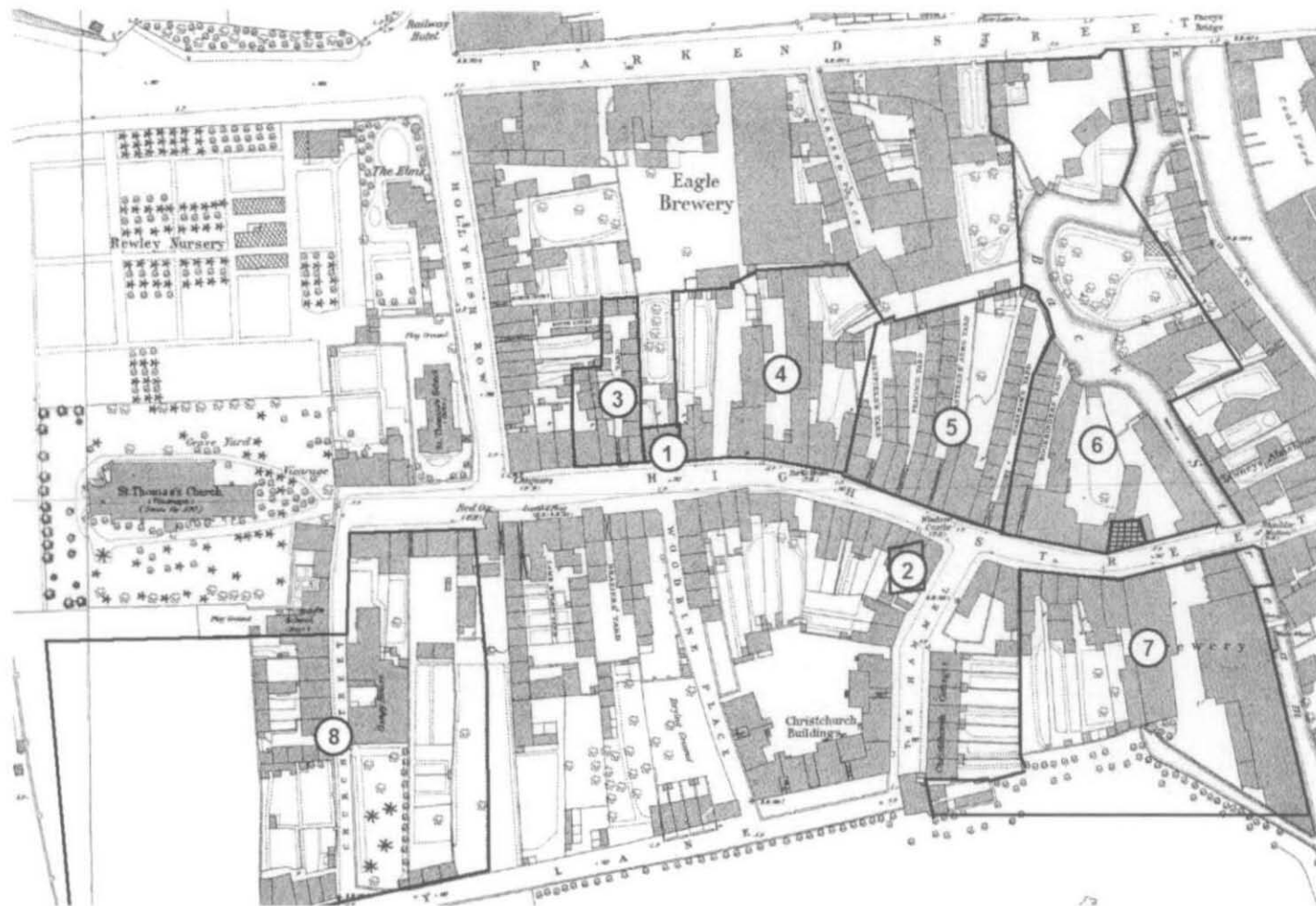


Fig. 1. Location of excavations referred to in the text. 1. Rigold, n. 14. 2. Palmer n. 10. 3. Roberts n. 11. 4. Hardy n. 12. 5. Cook n. 13. 6. Norton, Published in Oxoniensia 2006, (c) Oxfordshire Architectural and Historical Society
The hatched area north of St Thomas' St. is the area common to [6] and [7].

layers). Timber-framed and cob-walled buildings were found in a sequence of rebuilding in the 14th to 16th centuries, and with evidence of industrial activity probably related to wool or cloth production.

Overall the previous excavations and those reported here have shown the considerable potential of the archaeological remains in the west suburb, though recovery has been hampered by the lack of access to historic frontages, restricted depth of investigation, and the difficulty of interpreting the partial remains. The studies of pottery, finds and environmental deposits have also been important, often by comparison with material from central Oxford. It is not clear quite how much still exists at the end of the development phase for future discovery, but it should certainly not be assumed that everything has been destroyed.

Editorial note: In these articles we have tried to name topological features consistently, following the usage of *VCH Oxon.*, iv. The street is called St Thomas' Street, its original name and the name it bears today, but Salter always calls it High St. St Thomas. The bank of the river by the Castle Mill Stream is called Warham Bank – the form Wareham is also found. The eastern stream under St Thomas's is called the Backstream and its bridge Bookbinder's Bridge (Bookbinders' occurs too). The western stream appears to have no generally accepted name and we have called it the western Backstream. This usage does not imply acceptance of the theory that this stream was itself the backstream of mills built by the Abbey on the Backstream. By contrast the bridge under which it flows has any number of names and of these we have selected Knowles's Bridge as being unambiguous, rejecting the name Little Bridge because of its applicability to most of the bridges in medieval Oxford.