

Roman and Late Saxon Occupation at 61 Priory Road, Bicester, Oxfordshire

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SUMMARY

A small area excavation near the core of Bicester revealed a Roman ditch, late Saxon occupation, and residual pottery from the earlier Saxon period. There was no evidence of any later use of the site until the nineteenth century, although it was alongside a road with probable medieval origins and not far from the Priory.

A programme of archaeological investigation was carried out during January and February 2006 by Thames Valley Archaeological Services in advance of a housing development in the historic core of Bicester (SP 5851 2206). The site comprises an irregular plot of land which until recently had been occupied by the Bakehouse and no. 61 Priory Road (Fig. 1), which were demolished shortly before the excavation. The western half of the site is bounded by Priory Road, with housing to the east and a large commercial yard to the south-east. The site is relatively flat, at 68 m above OD. Geological maps indicate that the underlying geology is Cornbrash.¹ Whilst this was encountered across most of the site during the excavation, a reddish-brown clayey sand and gravel was present at the southern end of the stripped area.

Approximately half of the site was to be occupied by a new apartment block, and the excavation investigated this area to comply with a condition on the planning consent.²

ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

The site lies just outside the historic (Saxon and medieval) core of Bicester,³ but still within an area of considerable archaeological potential. Saxon material was recovered from the site during an evaluation (below). Excavations in Chapel Street, just to the north, revealed a number of early and mid-Saxon sunken-featured buildings, timber halls, and ditches, along with ditches of late Saxon to early Norman date.⁴ Excavation to the north of the present site uncovered late Saxon and early medieval ditches and pits,⁵ with a hiatus in occupation from the thirteenth to eighteenth centuries. A recent evaluation immediately to the south-west of the site revealed a number of ditches, some of which could be dated to the medieval period.⁶ The site of St Edburg's Priory lies

¹ British Geological Survey sheet 219, 1:50,000, Solid and Drift Edition, Keyworth.

² In accordance with PPG16, 1990, Department of the Environment Planning Policy Guidance 16, *Archaeology and Planning*, HMSO.

³ Julian Munby, Kirsty Rodwell, and H. Turner, 'Bicester', in Kirsty Rodwell, ed, *Historic Towns in Oxfordshire: a Survey of the New County* (Oxford, 1975), pp. 61–8; John Blair, 'Anglo-Saxon Bicester: the minster and the town', *Oxoniensia*, 67 (2002), pp. 133–40.

⁴ P. A. Harding and Phil Andrews, 'Anglo-Saxon and medieval settlement at Chapel Street, Bicester: Excavations 1999–2000', *Oxoniensia*, 67 (2002), pp. 141–79.

⁵ Graham Hull and Steve Preston, 'Excavation of late Saxon, medieval and post-medieval deposits on land at Proctor's Yard, Bicester', *Oxoniensia*, 67 (2002), pp. 181–98.

⁶ Richard Oram, 'Land off Priory Road, Bicester, Oxfordshire; an archaeological evaluation, phase 1' (TVAS TS report, 135, 2005).

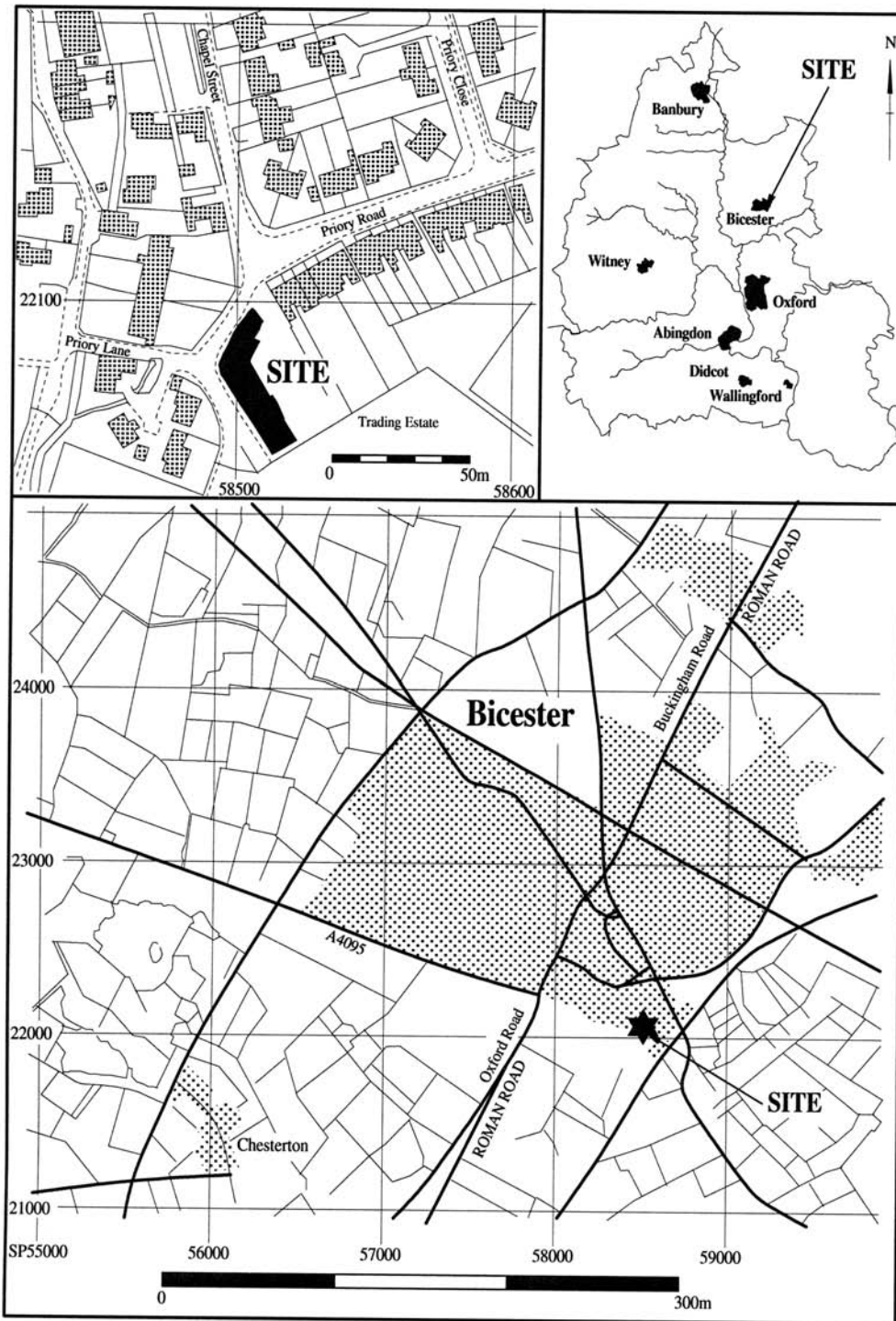


Fig. 1. Site location

immediately west of the river Bure, which flows approximately 100 m to the west of the present site. It is unclear whether any part of this religious complex extended east of the river.⁷

THE EVALUATION

As there were still buildings on the site at the time, the possibility for evaluation in advance of the development was restricted. Two 1.6 m-wide trenches were machine excavated on the site in April 2003 by Oxford Archaeology, one 17 m long (Trench 1) and one 20 m long and 'L'-shaped (Trench 2).⁸ An east-west aligned ditch containing late Saxon pottery was recorded in Trench 2, along with another possible ditch of comparable date. These features also contained a small number of residual struck flints. Late Saxon pottery and a further struck flint were also recovered from the subsoil in Trench 1, but no features.

DISCUSSION

It was thought that excavations on the site at 61 Priory Road, in close proximity to the former Augustinian priory and the historic core of Bicester, would reveal information about the early development of the town and the extent of the priory complex. Although some features indicate Saxon occupation of the site, there was no evidence of medieval activity. One ditch may date to the Roman period.

A small assemblage of struck flints (all from later features) suggests some prehistoric activity in the area. The earliest occupation on the site seems to date from the Roman period, but comprises only ditch 1003. As only a small length of this ditch was exposed during the excavation, and no other contemporary features were recorded, it is impossible to ascertain its function.

Pottery recovered from ditch 1000 seems to indicate that it may date to the early Saxon period, possibly the sixth century. If so, it would be broadly contemporary with the earliest Saxon occupation evidence excavated from the Chapel Street site, just to the north.⁹ However, this feature did also contain one small sherd of St Neots ware, which ought to make it late Saxon in date and all the Roman and early–middle Saxon pottery sherds residual. As it lay broadly parallel to late Saxon gully 1001, these two could be associated. If so, it is tempting to argue that ditch 1003 also belongs to the same layout, and all its pottery should be treated as residual, but this seems unlikely, given the quantity and the fresh condition of much of this pottery.

Ditch 1001 and gully 1002 produced more convincing later Saxon dates, although these too contained almost as much earlier residual material, which may suggest that they were allowed to silt up gradually. Both features seem to head westwards towards the river Bure, and may therefore have been for drainage. It is possible that some of the postholes may also date from this period, although only one contained a single, tiny sherd of late Saxon pottery.

There is no evidence for any further activity on the site until the nineteenth century, when a boundary wall and a culvert were built alongside Priory Road, on the line of a roadside ditch. This road was previously the main route out of Bicester towards Aylesbury, and London beyond. It is likely to have had medieval origins, taking traffic to and from the priory. The road continued in use into the nineteenth century, but by the time of the First Edition Ordnance Survey map (1881) it had fallen out of use. It is possible that the coming of the railway to Bicester may have influenced the diversion, although the current main road is already shown on a map of 1833.

⁷ Hannah Fluck, personal communication.

⁸ 'No. 61 Priory Road, Bicester, Oxfordshire: archaeological evaluation report' (OA TS report, 2003).

⁹ Harding and Andrews, 'Chapel Street, Bicester'.

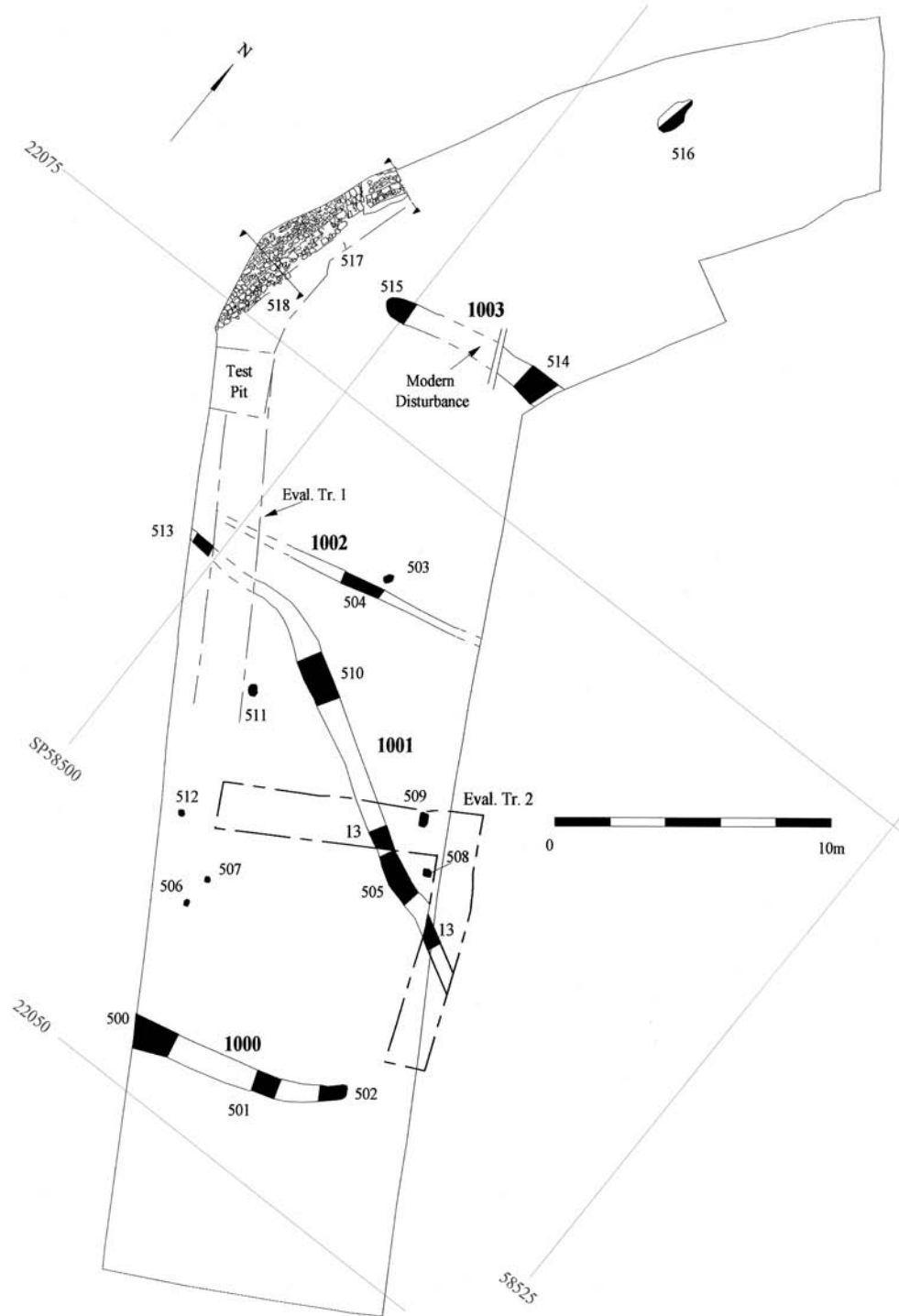


Fig. 2. All excavated features

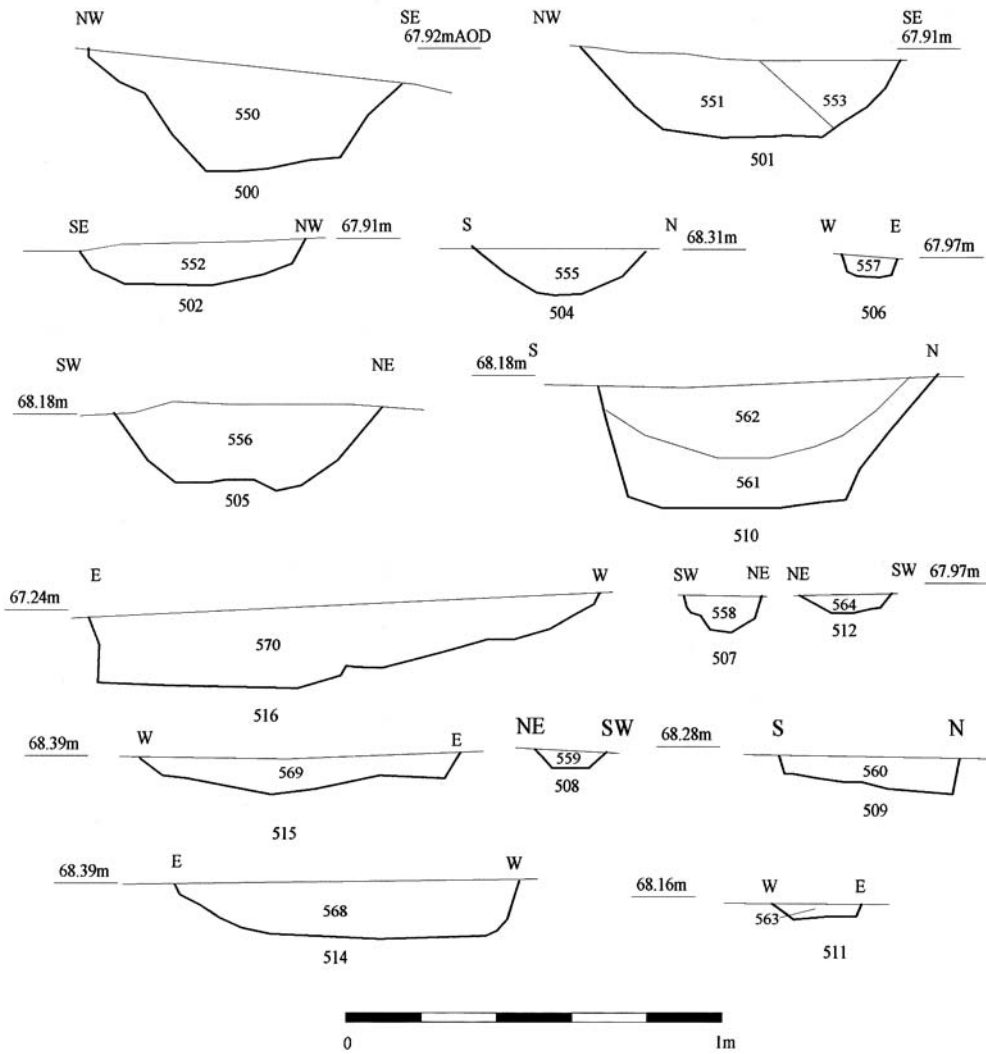


Fig. 3. Selected sections

EXCAVATION METHODOLOGY

The excavation was targeted on the part of the site which would be most affected by the development, covering 550 sq m. Topsoil and subsoil were removed mechanically, followed by hand cleaning of the stripped surface. The stratigraphy consisted simply of topsoil on to subsoil, which sealed the archaeological features, all of which cut the natural geology. The only exception to this was the far western corner of the site, which had obviously been disturbed in the recent past. The shallower topsoil here contained numerous nineteenth- and twentieth-century finds, and lay directly above stonework of a nineteenth-century wall and culvert, not further described here (details in archive). Bulk soil samples were taken from four contexts; none of these produced environmental evidence, although pottery and animal bone were retrieved from two of them.

RESULTS (Figs 2 and 3)

Apart from the nineteenth-century wall and culvert, the excavated features bore no stratigraphic relationship to anything but the natural geology. As a result, the phasing is based wholly on the pottery. A number of postholes remain undated. The demolition of 61 Priory Road and the complex of bakehouse buildings which previously stood on the site had a varied effect on the archaeological remains preserved below the ground surface. In most places the footings left no trace on the archaeological level, but some service runs were visible, and some contamination of archaeological deposits with demolition debris was apparent, particularly in the west of the site. Excluding the nineteenth- and twentieth-century structures, four phases of activity were identified.

Only seven postholes were recorded (503, 506–9, 511, and 512), and most of them had been badly truncated. They do not form any clear pattern, and they cannot be phased with any certainty. Posthole 509 contained one very small sherd of Roman pottery, whilst two small sherds (one Iron Age, one late Saxon) were found in posthole 507. A number of iron objects, including a possible hook, were the only finds recovered from posthole 511, whilst posthole 503 contained a fragment of burnt limestone.

Prehistoric

A small number of struck flints occurred as residual finds in much later features. A Mesolithic crested blade was found in the subsoil. No prehistoric features were recorded.

Roman

Whilst Roman pottery occurred in several later features, only ditch 1003 seems to date from this period. This was traced for 6.5 m from the eastern limit of excavation, aligned east-west, before terminating; it had been disturbed by modern services. It survived to 0.95 m wide and 0.15 m deep, and contained fragments of fired clay, burnt flint and limestone, animal bone, and over fifty sherds of Roman pottery. Two small post-medieval sherds from the terminus are clearly intrusive. Given that the late Saxon ditches also produced Roman pottery, and that 1003 was broadly parallel to 1000 and 1002, it is possible that 1003 could be late Saxon too, but the Roman pottery in 1003 is in the main reasonably fresh, and those sherds which are not so fresh are the earliest types, which could already have been residual by the late first century AD.

Early–Middle Saxon (AD 450–850)

One small sherd of early–middle Saxon pottery was found in feature 516, along with tiny animal bone fragments and a struck flint. This was originally thought to be a pit, 1.28 m long, 0.74 m wide, and 0.23 m deep, but its irregular nature and the presence of numerous root holes suggest it is better interpreted as a tree bole.

Late Saxon (AD 850–1100)

Ditch 1000 could possibly date from the early–middle Saxon period, as it had four sherds of pottery of this period (and eight Roman). However, it also contained one late Saxon sherd, while the portion investigated during the evaluation had five late Saxon sherds, so the earlier pottery must all be considered residual. This feature extended from the western limit of excavation for 8 m before terminating. Aligned approximately east-west, it became deeper and wider towards the west, up to 0.95 m wide and 0.3 m deep. Apart from the pottery, struck flint, fired clay, and animal bone fragments were recovered from its fills, along with part of a knife blade.

Two linear features more clearly date from the late Saxon period, although again containing a number of earlier residual pottery sherds. Ditch 1001 was aligned NW–SE, and appeared to wind its way across the area, becoming narrower and shallower towards the north-west, where the topsoil cover was much thinner. The pottery from this ditch was almost equally divided between Roman, early–middle Saxon, and late Saxon. Again, the early material must be residual. Ditch 1001 also contained animal bone, struck flint, fired clay, burnt limestone, and part of an iron blade. Gully 1002, to the north of 1001, extended east–west across the site. Animal bone and a large fragment of burnt limestone were retrieved from its fill, along with a small amount of mixed pottery, the latest of which, again, was late Saxon.

An ill-defined, shallow feature (16) in evaluation Trench 2 produced a single late Saxon pottery sherd, two worked flints, and animal bone; no trace of this feature was recorded in the excavation, and it is possible it was simply a remnant of subsoil in a natural dip.

FINDS

ROMAN POTTERY by MALCOLM LYNE

Nine contexts yielded 79 sherds (356 g) of Late Iron Age and Early Roman pottery. This included 19 sherds (29 g) from two environmental samples. Of this total, 25 sherds (72 g) were residual in post-Roman contexts, and the rest came from the fills of ditch 1003 (Table 1).

TABLE 1. ROMAN POTTERY FABRICS AND CATALOGUE

- 1 Handmade shell-tempered ware.
- 2 Soapy handmade black fabric with sparse shell.
- 3 Very fine 'Belgic' grog-tempered grey fabric fired reddish-brown or black.
- 4 Hard handmade pink-orange fabric with grog and sparse shell filler, fired patchy black/yellow-buff.
- 5 Coarse handmade black fabric with up to 5.00 mm shell and profuse up to 0.30 mm white quartz filler.
- 6 Handmade black fabric with profuse up to 0.30 mm quartz filler.
- 7 Black fabric with very fine grog and sand filler.
- 8 Oxfordshire oxidized fabric 1 (O11).¹⁰
- 9a Oxfordshire grey ware fabric 2.
- 9b Oxfordshire grey ware fabric 3a (R30).¹¹
- 9c Oxfordshire grey ware fabric 3c.
- 9d Oxfordshire grey ware fabric 5 (R50).¹²
- 9e Oxfordshire grey ware fabric 4.
- 10 South Gaulish samian.

Catalogue

A> From excavation

Group	Type	Cut	Deposit	Fabric	Form	Date-range	No.	Wt (g)	Comment		
1000	Ditch	500	550	6		Late Iron Age to AD 70	1	3	Abraded		
						c. AD 70–300	1	3	Abraded		
1000	Ditch	501	551	6		Late Iron Age to AD 70	1	2	Abraded		
1001	Ditch	505	556	6		Late Iron Age to AD 70	2	8	Abraded		
						Late Iron Age to AD 70	3	8	Abraded		
						c.70–300	4	5			
1001	Ditch	510	561	3	Jar	c.25 BC–AD 50–60	1	3	Abraded		
						c. AD 70–400	1	3	Abraded		
1002	Ditch	504	555	7		Late Iron Age to AD 70	2	18	Abraded		
1003	Ditch	514	568	3	Necked jar etc	c.25 BC–AD 50–60	9	100			
						4	Narrow-necked jar	c. AD 43–70	1	29	Fresh
						9a	Necked jar etc	c. AD 43–70/100	3	69	Fresh
						9c	Young type R15 jar	c. AD 70–400	14	43	Fresh
						Misc	Young type R24 jar	c. AD 70–400	8	14	Fresh
1003	Ditch	515	569	1	Young Type 54 bowl	c. AD 70–150	3	12	Fresh		
						9c		1	1		
						9d	Closed	1	1		
	Post hole	507	558	3		Late Iron Age to AD 50/60	1	2	Abraded		
	Post hole	509	560	2		Middle/Late Iron Age	1	1	Abraded		

¹⁰ Paul Booth, 'The Pottery', in Paul Booth, Angela Boyle, and Graham D. Keevill, 'A Romano-British kiln site at Lower Farm, Nuneham Courtenay, and other sites on the Didcot to Oxford and Wootton to Abingdon water mains, Oxfordshire', *Oxoniensia*, 58 (1993), pp. 134–206.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

B> From sieved samples

Group	Type	Cut	Deposit	Sample	Fabric	Form	Date-range	No.	Wt (g)	Comment
1000	Ditch	501	551	3	Misc			5	6	Pellets
1003	Ditch	514	568	4	1			3	2	Abraded
					3		c.25 BC–AD 50/60	1	3	
					4		Late Iron Age to AD	5	6	Abraded
					9a		50–60	1	6	Fresh
					9d	Beaker	c. AD 43–70/100	2	3	
					10		c. AD 50–150	1	1	
					Misc		c. AD 43–110	1	2	

The Assemblage from Ditch 1003.

This ditch yielded 54 sherds of late Iron Age and early Roman pottery. The late Iron Age sherds comprise four abraded fragments in handmade shell-tempered fabric 1, ten in fine ‘Belgic’ grog-tempered fabric 3, and six from a narrow-necked jar in grog and sparse-shell tempered fabric 4. None of these sherds is likely to be later than about AD 50–60.

All of the remaining sherds, other than a flake of South Gaulish samian (c. AD 43–110) and nine heavily abraded unclassified fragments, come from Romanized, wheel-turned products of the Oxfordshire industry and comprise four necked-jar fragments in Young’s¹³ early grog-and-sand tempered fabric 2, with the appearance of nougat (c. AD 43–100), fourteen in his fine grey fabric 3c (c. AD 70–400, and including fragments from poorly dated jar types R15 and R24), and two from a beaker in the very fine sanded greyware fabric 9d (c. AD 50–150). There are no sherds in this assemblage or in the residual material from other contexts which need be later than AD 150.

POST-ROMAN POTTERY by PAUL BLINKHORN

The post-Roman pottery assemblage comprised 118 sherds with a total weight of 1068 g (Table 2). It suggests two distinct phases of activity – one in the early Saxon period, around the sixth century, and the other in the tenth century. Medieval wares were all but absent, and there was little post-medieval activity until the nineteenth century.

TABLE 2. POST-ROMAN POTTERY OCCURRENCE BY NUMBER AND WEIGHT (IN g) OF SHERDS PER CONTEXT BY FABRIC TYPE (ALSO INDICATING PRESENCE OF RESIDUAL ROMAN SHERDS)

Group	Type	Cut	Deposit	Roman		E/MS1		E/MS2		OXR		OXCL		OXDR		WHEW	
				No.	Wt	No.	Wt	No.	Wt	No.	Wt	No.	Wt	No.	Wt		
1000	Ditch	500	550	Y	1	3				1	3						
1000	Ditch	501	551	Y	2	7											
1000	Ditch	502	552		1	2											
1001	Ditch	505	556	Y	6	17	1	4	17	113							
1001	Ditch	510	561	Y	13	29			5	13							
1001	Ditch	513	565						1	8							
1002	Ditch	504	555	Y	2	2	1	5	4	6							
1003	Ditch	515	569	Y									1	7	1	4	
	Post hole	507	558	Y					1	1							
	Tree bole	516	570		1	1											
	Culvert		572								1	7				2	13
	Made ground		577										6	146	39	611	
	Wall	518	581										2	33	5	18	
	Wall	519	586													4	15
			Total		26	61	2	9	29	144	1	7	9	186	51	661	

¹³ Christopher J. Young, *Oxfordshire Roman Pottery*, BAR 43 (Oxford, 1977).

FABRICS

Early-Middle Saxon

F1: *Fine Quartz*. Sparse to moderate sub-angular quartz up to 1 mm, most less than 0.5 mm. 26 sherds. 61 g.

F2: *Coarse Quartz*. Moderate sub-rounded quartz up to 1 mm. 2 sherds, 9 g.

Late Saxon and Later

The late Saxon and later material was recorded utilizing the coding system and chronology of the Oxfordshire County type-series¹⁴ as follows:

OXR – *St Neots Ware type T1(1)*, AD 850–1100. 29 sherds, 155 g.

OXCL – *Cistercian ware*, AD 1475–1700. 1 sherd, 7 g.

OXDR – *Red Earthenwares*, AD 1550 and later. 9 sherds, 186 g.

WHEW – *Mass-produced white earthenwares*, mid-nineteenth to twentieth century. 51 sherds, 661 g.

CHRONOLOGY

The range of pottery types present suggests that there were discrete phases of activity at the site, rather than continuous occupation. The earliest datable pottery after the Roman period comprises a small assemblage of early–middle Anglo-Saxon hand-built wares. Most of the assemblage was undecorated, meaning that it can be broadly dated only to the early–middle Anglo-Saxon period (c. AD 450–850), but two small sherds from ditch 1001 did have decoration. The first had two stamp impressions, meaning that it is highly likely to be of sixth-century date, with the second having three parallel incised lines. Such decoration occurs throughout the early Anglo-Saxon period, and so the sherd can be dated only to the mid-fifth to sixth century. A small rimsherd from a jar, with an upright and slightly everted profile, is undatable.

The next phase of activity is evidenced by a small assemblage of St Neots type ware. This probably dates to the tenth century, as the fabrics are typical of the earlier part of the tradition, defined by Denham¹⁵ as type T1(1), while eleventh-century wares, which are common in the town and the region generally, are absent. The only vessel noted was a rimsherd from a small jar, again typical of the earlier St Neots ware.

Later medieval pottery was also absent. The sherd of Cistercian ware, from a nineteenth-century context, could date from the late medieval period, but could just as easily be post-medieval. The rest of the assemblage dates from the nineteenth century, although some of the red earthenwares are potentially earlier.

DISCUSSION

The assemblage of Anglo-Saxon pottery from this site is a small but useful addition to the growing corpus of material of that date from Bicester. A number of excavations in the Proctor's Yard area of the town has produced both early–middle and late Saxon pottery assemblages, such as PYB99/44,¹⁶ where four sherds of undecorated, hand-built material and twenty-three sherds of St Neots ware were noted. Medieval wares were also present at that site, unlike here. Excavations at the King's Arms site, near Chapel Street, produced both buildings and decorated pottery of late fifth- to sixth-century date,¹⁷ and occasional sherds have been noted at numerous small sites in and around this area of the town.

As yet there have not been any finds of pottery from the town which can definitely be dated to the middle Saxon period. Four sherds of Saxon Oxford ware (OXB)¹⁸ were noted at Proctor's Yard, but such pottery can date to the middle or late Saxon period. It is possible that some of the handmade pottery could be as late as the ninth century, as suggested by Mellor,¹⁹ but again there is no way of confirming this from the Bicester material. At this time, therefore, there is no evidence to show that the early Saxon settlement in the town continued unbroken into the late Saxon period.

¹⁴ Maureen Mellor, 'A summary of the key assemblages, a study of pottery, clay pipes, glass and other finds from fourteen pits, dating from the 16th to the 19th century', in T. G. Hassall, C. E. Halpin, and Maureen Mellor, 'Excavations at St Ebbe's', *Oxoniensia*, 49 (1984), pp. 181–219; Maureen Mellor, 'Oxfordshire pottery: a synthesis of middle and late Saxon, medieval and early post-medieval pottery in the Oxford Region', *Oxoniensia*, 59 (1994), pp. 17–217.

¹⁵ V. Denham, 'The Pottery', in M. Shaw, 'Excavations on a Saxon and medieval site at Black Lion Hill, Northampton', *Northamptonshire Archaeology*, 20 (1985), pp. 113–38.

¹⁶ Hull and Preston, 'Proctor's Yard, Bicester'.

¹⁷ Harding and Andrews, 'Chapel Street, Bicester'.

¹⁸ Mellor, 'Oxfordshire Pottery'.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

ANIMAL BONE by MATILDA HOLMES

Just 157 fragments of animal bone, including those from sieving, came from dated contexts, of which 45 were identified to species. Details are in the archive. The Roman assemblage was primarily made up of the partial skeleton of a dog, about six months old when it died. Other than this, fragments of cattle, sheep/goat, and horse bones were present. The Saxon assemblage was dominated by the main domestic species – cattle, sheep/goat, and pig, although fragments of chicken and frog bones were also found.

METALWORK by SEAN WALLIS

Part of an iron knife blade, weighing 18 g, was recovered from ditch 1000. Another iron blade fragment, also weighing 18 g, was found in ditch 1001. Seven iron fragments, weighing 94 g, from posthole 511 may all have been part of the same object, probably a hook.

STRUCK FLINT by STEVE FORD

Six prehistoric struck flints were recovered during the course of the excavation, with a further seven from the evaluation.²⁰ The collection includes a crested blade of Mesolithic date, but the other material is less diagnostic and only a broad Neolithic/Bronze Age date can be suggested. All of the finds were recovered from deposits of later date, but they point to some prehistoric occupation in the area.

OTHER FINDS by SEAN WALLIS

Twenty-one fragments of featureless fired clay were recovered during the excavation, weighing 134 g. The majority came from Roman ditch 1003. Twelve fragments of burnt limestone, weighing 652 g, and only two very small pieces of burnt flint (4 g) were retrieved. The largest piece, weighing 378 g, was found in the fill of gully 1002. All the glass, brick, and tile on the site, and the lone piece of oyster shell, came from nineteenth-century deposits: none of this appears to be earlier. Two small fragments of clay-pipe stem, weighing 3 g, were retrieved from nineteenth-century deposits.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The excavation followed a specification approved by Hannah Fluck of Oxfordshire County Archaeological Service. The project was commissioned by Anthony Rickett of Anthony Rickett Architects Ltd, on behalf of Ambrosden Court Ltd, which funded the fieldwork but subsequently went into liquidation. Post-excavation work and this publication were generously funded by the receivers, Baker Tilly. The excavation was managed by Jo Pine and supervised by the author, and was monitored by Paul Smith, of Oxfordshire County Archaeological Service. The fieldwork team consisted of Ceri Falys and Mary O'Donoghue, with post-excavation assistance provided by Jennifer Lowe and Jo Pine. Paul Smith is thanked for providing copies of a number of old maps and for helpful discussion on the site. Peter Chivers of Bicester Local History Society also provided maps and some useful background information. The site code is PYB05/107 and the archive will be deposited with Oxfordshire Museum Service in due course, with accession code OXCMS 2006.145.

²⁰ Hugo Lamdin-Whymark, 'Table of flints by context', in 'No. 61 Priory Road, Bicester', p. 6.