

NOTES

Archaeological Work in Oxford, 2016

This year saw a wide variety of projects undertaken in Oxford including the conclusion of the extensive excavation at the new Westgate Shopping Centre and other significant excavations within the walled town and its historic suburbs. Separate projects at Savile House and at St John's College appear to have together proved the theory of David Sturdy (former assistant keeper of the Ashmolean Museum) that an east-west bank and ditch of likely defensive character stretched across the gravel terrace between the Thames and Cherwell rivers to the north of the *burh* in the eleventh century. The feature, which can be followed in surviving property boundaries along part of its route, may yet prove to be earlier in date. Its discovery demonstrates the further potential for significant new discoveries within this rich and well-studied archaeological landscape. Initial summaries of these works are provided below along with a selection of other projects.

SELECTED PROJECTS

Westgate: Main Phase of Works

The extensive archaeological recording project by Oxford Archaeology (OA) at the Westgate Shopping Centre site continued from 2015 through to June 2016. Towards the end of the main excavation, work within part of the medieval Franciscan friary cloister revealed an impressive tiled floor of thirteenth- to fourteenth-century 'Stabbed Wessex' tiles. The tiles have been carefully lifted and conserved. Elsewhere a small investigation within the friary church revealed the southern wall of the church and a small number of medieval burials. The burials were revealed and recorded in plan before they were carefully preserved in situ.

One small additional piece of work was undertaken within the footprint of the 1970s Westgate where a trial trench was excavated to establish whether any trace of the late Anglo-Saxon *burh* defences or medieval town wall survived to the west of the former Franciscan church. Remarkably a small section of wall was exposed, sandwiched between the service basement of the Westgate and truncation caused by improvements to Castle Street to the west. The depth and character of the un-mortared foundation indicates that it may have formed part of the late Anglo-Saxon defences. However, the structure was disturbed by later pits and a Victorian cellar and did not produce any conclusive dating evidence. The proposed nearby pile cap was rotated to preserve the section of wall in situ.

During this period further outreach work for the Westgate project was undertaken by OA with pupils from Northfield School. Another very successful pop-up museum exhibition 'Westgate – the story so far', with artefacts from the 2015–16 dig, was hosted by the Museum of Oxford between March and April. Thanks are due to the army of volunteers who helped staff the exhibit and contributed greatly to its success. The exhibit was concluded with a public talk on the results of the excavation by OA project director Ben Ford in the Town Hall. The success of the excavation has been recognised by the British Archaeological Awards which presented Land Securities and OA the Best Archaeological Project Award in July.

The Old Cloister, The Stocker Room and Second Quad, Brasenose College

Between October 2015 and February 2016 a watching brief was undertaken by OA during further renovation works to the Old Cloister at Brasenose College. A previously unrecorded post-medieval wall painting was exposed in the Stocker Room (in the south-east corner of the Old Quadrangle). Recording and assessment was undertaken in advance of the consolidation and conservation of the painting, with initial results suggesting an early seventeenth-century date. A watching brief within the Second Quadrangle revealed a stone lined well that may be contemporary with the nearby medieval kitchen as well as a stone built drain.

New Student Accommodation Block, Mansfield College

Between January and June an excavation and watching brief was undertaken at Mansfield College by OA prior to the construction of new student accommodation block. The ditch of the inner Royalist Civil War defensive line was sectioned and a number of Roman pits and ditches were recorded.

The Tinbergen Building, South Parks Road

Between April and June a strip and record excavation was undertaken by OA within the footprint of the proposed extension to the Oxford University Tinbergen Building on South Parks Road. The excavation revealed the truncated ditch of the outer Royalist Civil War defences and a series of six parallel large steep-sided pits containing limited seventeenth-century pottery, pipe stems and a horse skeleton. These parallel features may have been 'man traps' or 'pitfalls' protecting sensitive parts of the defensive line. One of the pits also yielded a Rose farthing of Charles I (1625–49).

Nos. 114–119 St Aldate's and Nos. 4–5 Queen Street

Between April and August a phased excavation was undertaken by OA on the site of a new retail and accommodation development to the rear of St Aldate's and Queen Street. This site offered a rare opportunity to investigate land close to the central crossroads of the late Anglo-Saxon *burh*, and located within medieval market frontage and within properties associated with Oxford's twelfth- to thirteenth-century Jewish community. The first phase of the excavation examined the site of proposed lift pit and recorded a medieval stone lined cess pit and a nearby medieval building and drain. Below these features was a compacted surface on top of the natural gravel cut by features of late Anglo-Saxon or early Norman date. Between June and late August a second phase of excavation took place targeted along the edges of the new building where previous basement construction had left small strips of ground at a higher level and also within the existing basement where a water attenuation tank was required. The lifting and replacement of the existing basement floor slab also offered the opportunity of cleaning and recording the top of archaeological remains at this level.

The work on the east–west aligned boundary between the former Blacks clothing store and the City Council offices produced a surprising amount of archaeology given the scale and character of the surrounding buildings. This included an east–west aligned medieval wall with holes in the masonry to support a suspended wooden floor. This was covered by medieval garden soil through which was cut a post-medieval stone lined waste pit and later boundary wall. The pit was notable for containing dumps of 'tavern waste' from the nearby establishments that fronted onto St Aldate's, including very well preserved clay pipes, pottery from drinking vessels and glassware carrying the stamp of the seventeenth-century Mermaid Inn.

Another surprise was the survival of floor layers and the remains of a stone relieving arch foundation for a medieval building fronting onto Queen Street which survived in the small space between the basements of the Blacks store and former properties on Queen Street (Fig. 1). The excavation of the attenuation tank hole was also very productive, revealing a late Anglo-Saxon cellar pit, containing spindle whorls and late Anglo-Saxon pottery, which itself



Fig. 1. Medieval relieving arch and floor levels of a building facing onto Queen Street with fourteenth-century Carfax Tower (belonging to the former church of St Martin) in the background. Copyright Oxford Archaeology.

cut an earlier cellar pit which contained charcoal deposits which have been sampled for radio-carbon dating.

The site was visited by academics and by the Oxford Jewish Heritage Committee, and filmed by the BBC for a local programme on Underground Oxford. A temporary window display with some of the finds from the site was maintained in the shop frontage and a handling session and talk took place in Oxford Town Hall, hosted by the Museum of Oxford in October.

New College Music Room, Savile House, Mansfield Road

Between June and September an archaeological excavation was undertaken by OA on land between Savile House (New College) and Mansfield College on Mansfield Road. The project involved the restoration of the upstanding Royalist Civil War rampart next to Savile House and the creation of a new sunken music room on the footprint of the old garages and stores that previously occupied part of the site. The intention is to mark the location of the rampart with a stone plaque in the pavement and allow the rampart to be viewed from the public space to the side of the building, thus bringing this part of the Civil War defences back into the public realm.

The footprint of the music room was excavated in strips exposing more of the bank of loam located below the seventeenth-century redeposited gravel rampart that was previously discovered by evaluation trenching. The evaluation results indicated that the Royalists had reused the existing bank and an OSL (Optically Stimulated Luminescence) sample for the loam produced a surprising ninth- to early eleventh-century date range. The excavation recorded a series of undated irregular pits and probable post-holes directly below the loam bank, cut into the stripped natural gravel. Further OSL samples were taken to try and conclusively date this large east–west aligned feature.

New Library and Study Centre, The President's Garden, St John's College

In September an excavation was undertaken by OA on the footprint of the new library building at St John's College, which will form a northward extension of the existing library within the Canterbury Quadrangle. The excavation revealed a five-metre wide 'V'-shaped east–west aligned ditch of late-Anglo-Saxon/Norman or earlier origin that had been re-cut on a number of occasions. The line of the ditch is consistent with the suggestion that the north wall of Canterbury Quad and field boundaries to the east capture the line of a substantial east–west aligned earthwork running across the gravel terrace. The excavation also recorded inter-cutting quarry pits and rubbish deposits that date back to the establishment of the college.

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