

Anglo-Saxon Settlement above the Vale of the White Horse: Summary Report on Archaeological Investigations at Challow Park in 2017

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SUMMARY

Excavation in advance of a residential redevelopment revealed small quantities of residual prehistoric and Roman finds. The majority of features dated to the sixth to seventh centuries AD and included two sunken-featured buildings (SFBs), several pits and a ditch, possibly forming part of a more extensive Anglo-Saxon settlement.

Between May and June 2017 Cotswold Archaeology undertook excavations ahead of a residential redevelopment at the request of Narvo Asset Management on behalf of Mactaggart and Mickel Homes England Ltd. The site (centred at NGR SU 3841 8806; Fig. 1) comprises 1.9 hectares of land previously occupied by a council depot. It lies within farmland between Wantage and East Challow and occupies the north-facing slope of the Downs, at 105 metres above Ordnance Datum, overlooking the Vale of the White Horse to the north. The solid geology is mapped as calcareous sandstone and siltstone of the Cretaceous Upper Greensand Formation;¹ this was confirmed during the excavation.

Prior to the work reported on here, no remains had been recorded within the site. Cropmarks 200 metres to the south probably represent later prehistoric and/or Roman enclosures, pits and trackways (Fig. 1). In 2016, an archaeological evaluation immediately west of the site revealed intensive Roman occupation thought to have been associated with the cropmarks.² A scheduled Roman villa lies 850 metres east of the site (SM 1004854; Fig. 1).

The 2016 evaluation to the west of the site recovered a small assemblage of pottery dating to the sixth to eighth centuries AD, although this came from the western part of the evaluated area and the finds may have been residual within later features.³ East Challow itself was within the parish and Domesday manor of Letcombe Regis, recorded in the Domesday Survey (1086).⁴ Medieval settlement at East Challow probably focused around St Nicholas's church (which before its restoration contained much twelfth-century fabric), 280 metres west of the site, with the site itself lying within surrounding fields.

A geophysical survey of the site in 2016 produced negative results.⁵ A subsequent evaluation showed no continuation of the Iron-Age or Roman remains recorded to the south

¹ British Geological Survey, 'Geology of Britain Viewer', <http://mapapps.bgs.ac.uk/geologyofbritain/home.html> (accessed 2 May 2017).

² 'Land off A417, East Challow, Oxfordshire: Archaeological Evaluation', unpublished CA report, 16137 (2016).

³ 'Land off A417: Archaeological Evaluation'.

⁴ *VCH Berks.* 4, pp. 222–8.

⁵ 'Land at Challow Park, Oxfordshire: Archaeological Geophysical Survey', unpublished AOC Archaeology report, 51501 (2016).

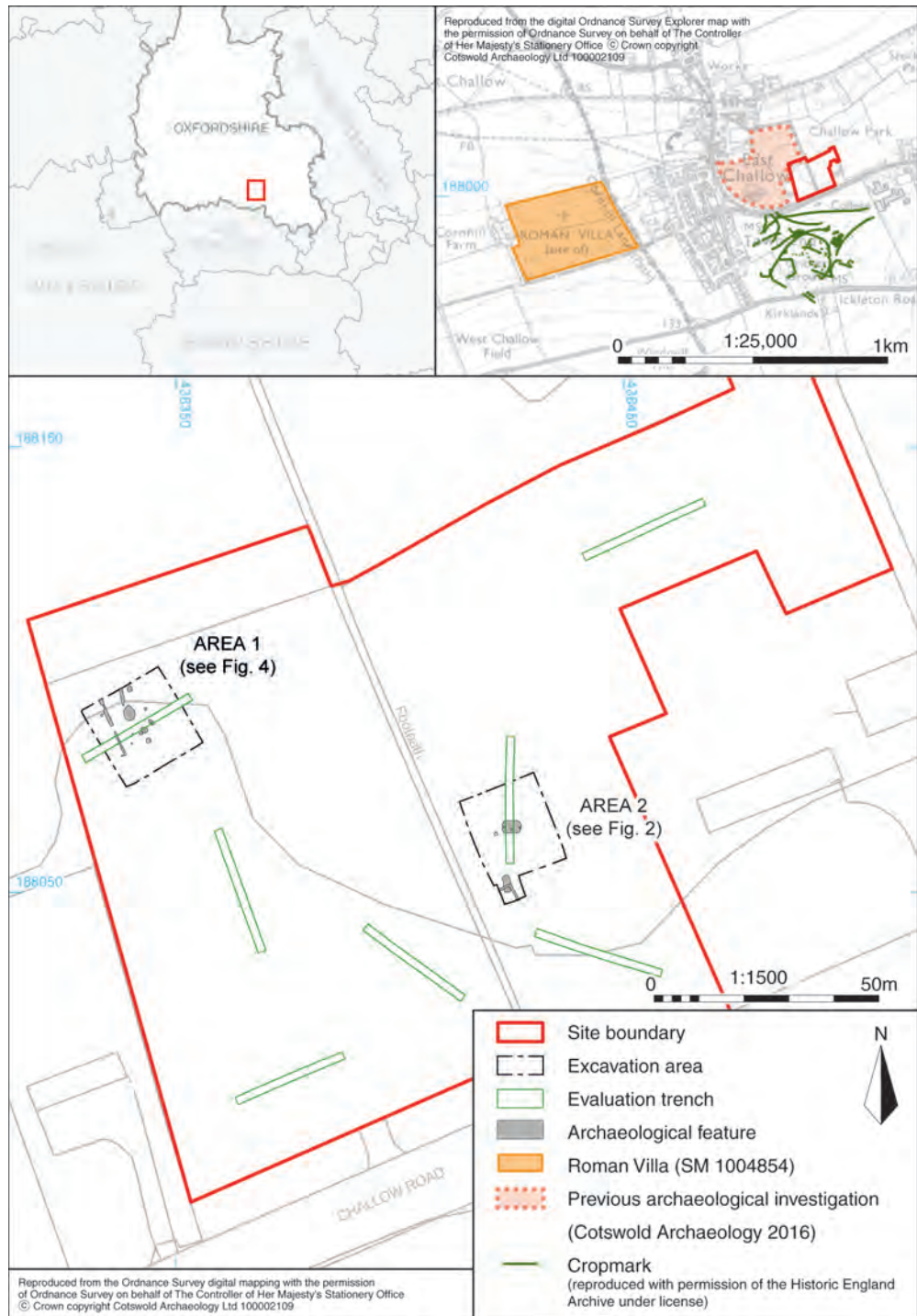


Fig. 1. Site location plan (1:25,000; 1:1,500).

and west, but did identify an Anglo-Saxon sunken-featured building and a ditch, both of which produced Anglo-Saxon pottery.⁶

Based on the findings of the evaluation, Hugh Coddington, Principal Archaeologist at Oxfordshire County Council Archaeology Service (OCCAS), requested archaeological mitigation in the form of two excavation areas (Areas 1 and 2) centred on the ditch and sunken-featured building (Fig. 1). The findings of that work form the basis of this summary report. They are fully detailed within a typescript report which will form part of the archive and is available via the CA website (<http://www.cotswoldarchaeology.co.uk/>, report no. 17365).⁷

DISCUSSION

The excavation confirmed the results of the evaluation, that an Anglo-Saxon sunken-featured building (SFB) was present within the site, and provided additional information about the archaeological setting and dating of this feature, and of other remains uncovered during the excavation (Figs. 2–4). The few flints recovered were all residual and only broadly dateable, and so little can be said of these. Roman pottery sherds were similarly all found as residual items, mostly within Anglo-Saxon features, as was a Roman spindle whorl and a possible Roman hobnail. The use of Roman finds during the Anglo-Saxon period is well attested, with Roman pottery having been collected,⁸ and Roman coins having been perforated for use as jewellery.⁹ It is likely that the Roman finds collected from the current site derived from the Roman settlements in the near vicinity, although too few were found to indicate whether or not these had been deliberately curated by the Anglo-Saxon occupants of the site, rather than being merely incidental inclusions.

The Anglo-Saxon features on the site dated to the sixth to seventh centuries and comprised two SFBs (Figs. 2–3) and, some 45 metres to the north-west, a ditch, pits and postholes (Fig. 4). SFB Pit X is a textbook example in shape and size, and with the presence of co-axial postholes which are usually interpreted as having held post supports for a ridge pole supporting a tent-shaped roof,¹⁰ presumably of poles/wattle covered with turf or thatch. There is debate as to whether the pits of these buildings constituted the floor levels, or were below suspended wooden floors.¹¹ The absence of any deposits relating to the use of the SFBs within the examples at Challow Park perhaps favours the latter interpretation, but this is by no means conclusive since it is conceivable that the pits were regularly cleaned out if they formed the floor bases.

The limited extent of the excavation means that it is unlikely that the settlement was revealed in its entirety. Settlements of the period typically covered extensive tracts of land, wherein the settlement focus shifted several times over the course of centuries. That at Mucking, Essex covered at least 18 hectares and included in excess of 200 SFBs and fifty larger post-built halls of which it is estimated that perhaps fourteen SFBs and eight to ten post-built halls stood at any one time.¹² At Challow Park, the cropmarks to the south do not seem to contain any obviously Anglo-Saxon features, but only excavation would be able to test this. To the north and east of the site, the fields are pasture and do not lend themselves to cropmark formation, and it is conceivable that further parts of the settlement lie beneath

⁶ 'Land at Challow Park, East Challow, Wantage, Oxfordshire: Archaeological Evaluation', unpublished CA report, 17225 (2017).

⁷ 'Land at Challow Park, East Challow, Oxfordshire: Archaeological Excavation', unpublished CA report, 17365 (2017).

⁸ C. Going, 'Roman Pottery from the *Grubenhäuser*', in H. Hamerow, *Excavations at Mucking Volume 2: The Anglo-Saxon Settlement* (1993), pp. 71–2.

⁹ Idem, 'Roman Coins from Anglo-Saxon Contexts', in Hamerow, *Excavations at Mucking*, pp. 72–3.

¹⁰ Hamerow, *Excavations at Mucking Volume 2*, pp. 14–15 and figs. 57–81.

¹¹ *Ibid.* pp. 14–15.

¹² *Ibid.* p. 90.

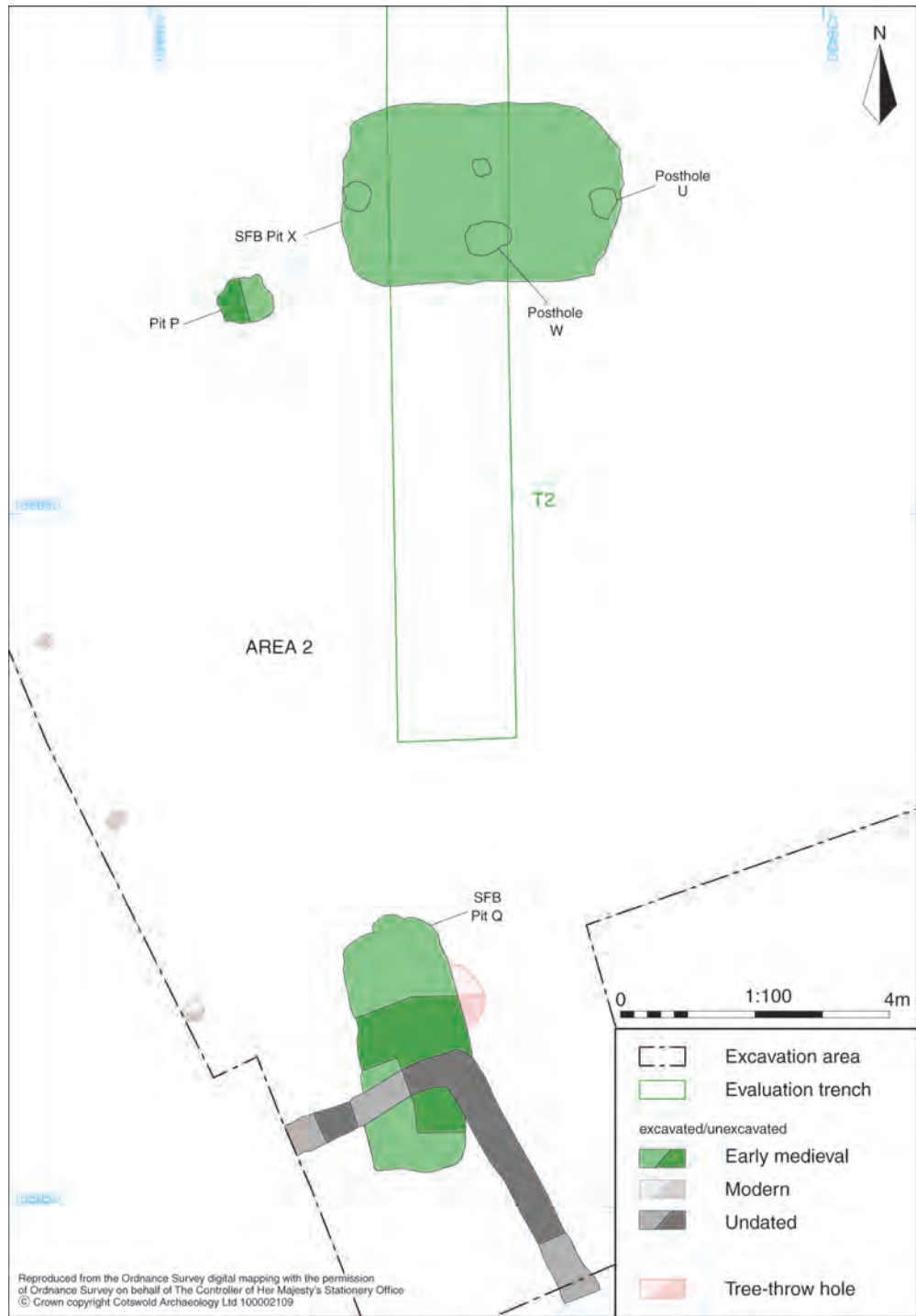


Fig. 2. Detail plan of Area 2 (1:100).



Fig. 3. SFB Pit X, looking west (scales 1 metre and 2 metre).

these. The probably residual sixth- to eighth-century pottery recovered during the evaluation undertaken immediately west of the site in 2016 suggests that elements of the settlement may have extended into that area, although features of that date were not identified.

The discovery of a sixth- to seventh-century settlement at Challow Park is significant because the majority of known or suspected settlements of this date have been found along the valley gravels to the north, particularly in advance of gravel extraction at sites such as Yarnton,¹³ rather than on the uplands of the Downs where far less development work has been undertaken. Anglo-Saxon occupation on the Downs is little attested but the Challow Park settlement can now be added to the early Anglo-Saxon remains discovered at Mill Street, Wantage 1.25 kilometres to the east. At Mill Street, a Roman settlement was succeeded by a series of ditches associated with grass or organic-tempered pottery most likely dateable to the sixth to seventh centuries AD.¹⁴ No structural remains were found at Mill Street, and it was suggested that any settlement lay to the north or west, the latter direction raising the possibility that the ditches at Mill Street lay on the eastern periphery of the settlement of which the remains at Challow Park probably formed but a small part.

There was little evidence as to the activities undertaken by the occupants of the Challow Park settlement, and it should be borne in mind that much evidence may have been deposited within middens, subsequently lost to ploughing, or may lie beyond the excavated area. Certainly, cereal processing was undertaken. As well as the remains of the cereals themselves

¹³ G. Hey, *Yarnton: Saxon and Medieval Settlement and Landscape. Results of Excavations 1990–96*, Thames Valley Landscape Monograph, 20 (2004).

¹⁴ J. Timby, 'The Pottery', in N. Holbrook and A. Thomas, 'The Roman and Early Anglo-Saxon Settlement at Wantage, Oxfordshire. Excavations at Mill Street, 1993–4', *Oxoniensia*, 61 (1996), pp. 136–7.

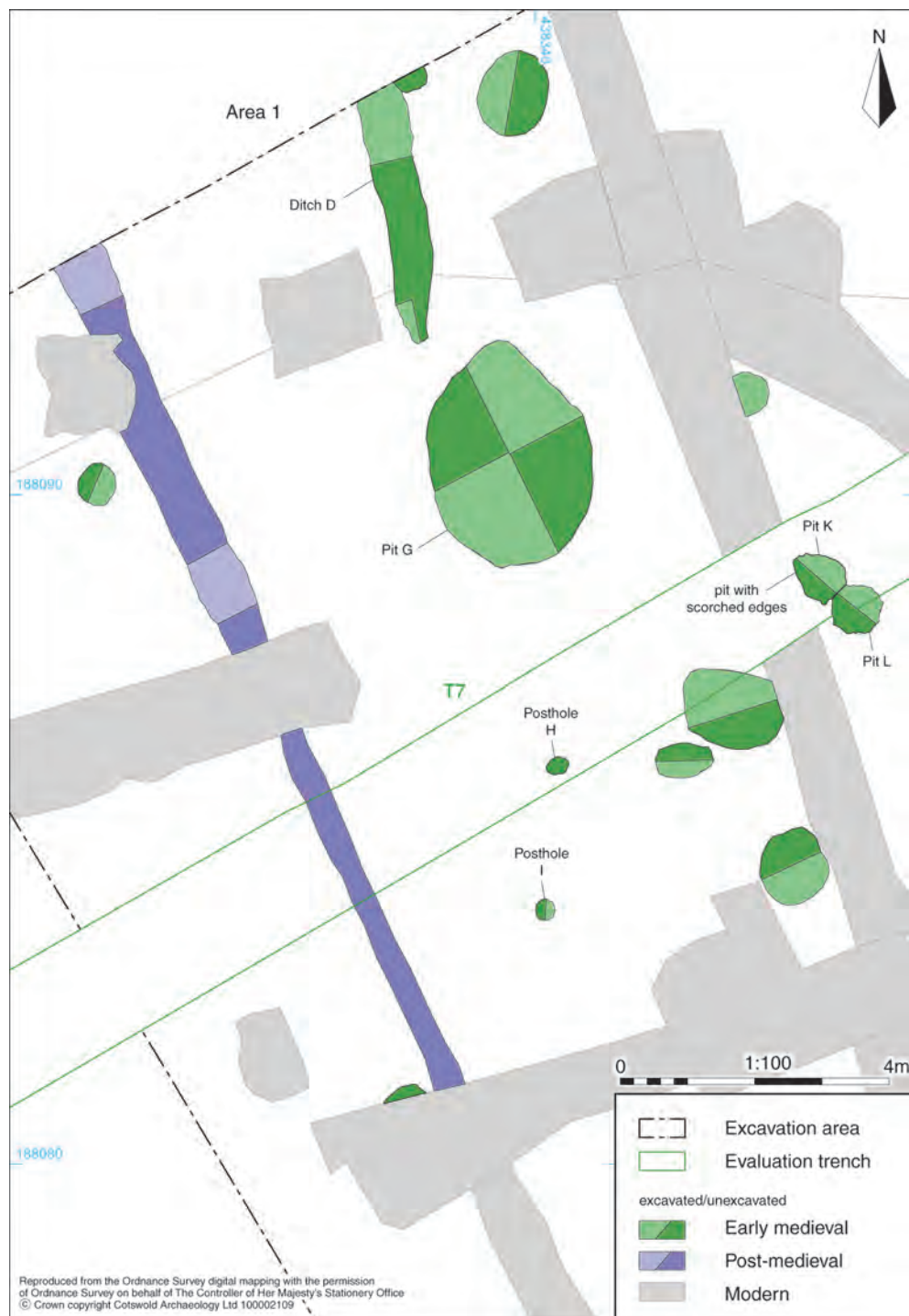


Fig. 4. Detail plan of Area 1 (1:100).

(free-threshing wheat, rye and barley), scorching to the edges of one feature, Pit K, taken with the presence of charred cereals within an adjacent pit, may indicate that a field oven was located here, allowing grains to be dried prior to storage. The animal bone assemblage points to the slaughter and consumption of cattle and sheep/goat, with some pigs. A horse bone displayed pathology normally resulting from the animal's use for ploughing or transport but since horses were not used for traction during this period, it is possible that the deformity had some other cause in this instance, or that the bone was a residual item, as was the case with the Roman finds. The possible re-use of Roman finds has been noted above, raising the possibility that the Anglo-Saxon inhabitants deliberately 'mined' the nearby abandoned Roman settlements for materials for re-use or trade. If so, this raises the interesting question of the durability of such Roman remains as visible elements of the rural landscape.

STRATIGRAPHIC SUMMARY

Period 1: Prehistoric

Prehistoric finds were all residual within later deposits and comprised a single sherd of flint-tempered pottery, not closely dateable, along with six worked flints, a few flint flakes and a burnt flint, all only broadly dateable as Bronze Age or Iron Age.

Period 2: Roman (First–Fourth Centuries AD)

The site produced a few Roman finds, all residual within later deposits. The pottery types spanned the Roman period, and other finds comprised a fired clay spindle whorl and a possible hobnail.

Period 3: Anglo-Saxon (Sixth–Seventh Centuries AD)

Anglo-Saxon remains were found within both areas and comprised pits, postholes, a ditch and SFBs. Pottery from these was primarily in organic-tempered fabrics, although some sand-tempered wares were also present, and the assemblage dates to the sixth to seventh centuries AD. No vessels were complete, but some partial profiles were present, and it was possible to identify three vessels as bowls and five as jars. The bowls included one small rounded type with a flaring rim and one flaring-sided type with a flat base. The jars appeared to be globular or bag-shaped. Two sherds had thick walls and may have been parts of large storage vessels whilst a few sherds were sooted or had traces of burnt food residues. Only one sherd had any decoration, a body fragment with incised curving lines and a possible partial stamp, but all decoration was located close to a broken edge and it was not possible to determine the decorative scheme.

The features also yielded a small assemblage of animal bone, primarily from cattle and sheep/goat, but with a few pig, horse and goose bones also present. The cattle and sheep/goat had been butchered to remove meat-poor elements, but the presence of meat bearing bones such as ribs indicates that consumption also occurred on site.

Area 1 Anglo-Saxon remains within Area 1 comprised ditches, pits and postholes (Fig. 4). Of these, Ditch D, a somewhat irregular cut, produced a sherd of Anglo-Saxon pottery and a small quantity of animal bone. The largest of the pits, Pit G, was 3.4 m long and 0.85 m deep with sloping sides leading to a narrow, rounded base. It had been deliberately backfilled and produced a small assemblage of animal bone as well as two sherds of Anglo-Saxon pottery and two sherds of Roman pottery. Samples from its fills produced charred remains from free-threshing wheat, including grains and rachis fragments, as well as rye and barley grains in smaller quantities, an assemblage indicative of crop-processing waste, although this is unlikely to have related to the pit's function, which was perhaps as a waterhole. The samples also produced charred weed seeds indicative of arable fields, grassland and field margins,

including species associated with the dry calcareous soils of the Downs. Mineralisation observed on some of these charred remains suggests that they derived from middens.

Ten smaller bowl-shaped pits were found within 6 m of Pit G. Amongst these, the substrate around Pit K had been scorched, suggesting use as an oven. It was adjacent to Pit L which contained lenses of charcoal, a sample from which produced a few barley and free-threshing wheat cereal grains, as well as fuelwood charcoal. Finds from these smaller pits were limited to a few animal bones and small quantities of Anglo-Saxon and residual Roman pottery. Two postholes (H and I) to the south-west of Pit G contained no dateable finds.

Area 2 Excavation within Area 2 focused on the SFB (Pit X) identified during the evaluation (Fig. 2). The SFB was fully excavated and proved to comprise a rectangular cut with steep edges leading to a flat base (Fig. 3). It was 4.1 m long, 2.6 m wide and 0.35 m deep. Single postholes were found at each end of its central long axis, one of which was angled to slope into the SFB from the base. The SFB contained two horizontal fills which sealed the posthole fills, and so would seem to represent post-use backfilling rather than deposits which accumulated during the use of the building. Collectively, these fills produced sixty-four sherds of Anglo-Saxon pottery from fifteen vessels, as well as a small quantity of Roman pottery, the largest single assemblage of animal bones from any feature on the site, a Roman fired clay spindle whorl, iron nails (not closely dateable except for a possible Roman hobnail), and a shears blade. An iron knife blade recovered during re-excavation of the evaluation sondage through the SFB was also likely to have come from these backfills. A sample from the lowest fill produced a small charred plant assemblage, which included cereal processing waste. Conjoining pottery sherds from the upper and lower fills of the SFB indicate that these fills were deposited at the same time, or shared a common origin, perhaps a midden.

A second SFB (Pit Q) was located 9 m south of SFB Pit X. It was a rectangular cut 1.9 m long, 1.55 m wide and 0.35 m deep with steep sides and a flat base. The northern and southern ends of this feature were excavated. No postholes were noted, although a curvilinear protrusion at its northern end conceivably represents the edge of a co-axial posthole. The SFB contained a single grey-brown silty clay fill which produced no finds.

Period 4: Late-Medieval and Modern (Fifteenth–Twentieth Centuries AD)

Late-medieval activity comprised a single ditch which ran through part of Area 1 on a north-west to south-east alignment (Fig. 4). Its southernmost extent was lost to truncation by twentieth-century structures relating to the former council depot but it produced a sherd of pottery, dateable to the fifteenth to sixteenth centuries AD.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The work was carried out at the request of Narvo Asset Management on behalf of Mactaggart and Mickel Homes England Ltd, and was directed by Mark Brett, assisted by Peter Searle and Sam Bateman. The pottery reports were written by Grace Jones and Sue Anderson, the mixed finds reports by Katie Marsden, the faunal remains report by Andrew Clarke and the plant microfossils and charcoal report by Sarah Wyles. The illustrations were prepared by Charlotte Patman. The archive was compiled and prepared for deposition by Hazel O'Neill. The fieldwork was managed for CA by Jacek Gruszczynski and Ray Kennedy and the post-excavation work was managed by Jonathan Hart. The advice of Hugh Coddington, Principal Archaeologist at OCCAS, and of the anonymous referee who commented on an earlier draft of this report is gratefully acknowledged.

NOTES

Archaeological Work in Oxford, 2017

After several years of significant archaeological investigations in the historic core of Oxford 2017 saw a change of focus with detailed investigations taking place in previously unexplored parts of the Thames floodplain along the route of the proposed Oxford Flood Alleviation Channel. The full results of these investigations are to follow; however, one widely publicized discovery was a previously unrecorded medieval metalled track approaching Oxford from the west that had been sealed below floodplain alluvium. Elsewhere in the city the creation of new sports facilities on the Oxford Road on the way to Horspath resulted in the first sizable investigation of a Roman settlement site at Oxford for over a decade. Another significant Roman site was investigated towards the end of the year at the former Swan Motors plot close to the known pottery manufacturing site at Between Towns Road, Cowley. There was also a surprising piece of new information from the city's historic core, four scientific dates from the buried remains of the late Anglo-Saxon town rampart at New College. The results, which were obtained from material recovered during investigations in previous years, are consistent with an eighth-century date for at least part of the earthwork here. The full results of this work will no doubt generate considerable debate. Short summaries of selected investigations from 2017 are provided below.

SELECTED PROJECTS

Oxford Road Sports Ground

In January an archaeological evaluation was undertaken by Salford Archaeology on land adjacent to Oxford Road and the BMW sports ground. Further to previous investigations at this site a number of ditches and pits were investigated indicating the presence of late Iron-Age through to second-century AD settlement and associated enclosures and field boundaries. Between May and October a phased excavation and watching brief was undertaken to record parts of the multi-period settlement affected by the laying out of new football and cricket pitches and an access track. The features recorded included postholes, pits, enclosure ditches, field boundaries, and a single crouched inhumation.

New College, Holywell Street, Former Morris Garage

Between June and October an excavation and photographic recording was undertaken at the site of the former William Morris car garage at New College by OA. The brick foundations of the early twentieth-century Morris Garage (which gave its name to the MG car mark and where Morris designed his first car in 1914) were uncovered along with two concrete and brick car pits. Detailed recording was undertaken of the remains which will be partially preserved below a new accommodation building.

The Eagle and Child Pub and Green's Café, Nos. 50 and 51 St Giles

In July evaluation trenches were excavated by TVAS to the rear of Green's Café on St Giles. The investigation, which was constrained by the limited accessible space, revealed two likely medieval walls and a post-medieval pit and postholes.

No. 1 Fisher Row

In July test pits were excavated within No. 1 Fisher Row by JMHS. The grade II listed building is of eighteenth-century date and encompasses a ground-floor vaulted storage area that may pre-date the three-storey red brick town house. The test pits demonstrated that earlier floors survive below the current stone flag floor which itself may be nineteenth century in date. An earlier clay floor was recorded and below this the remains of a brick floor was encountered along with the remains of a hearth. The scheme was subsequently amended to preserve the brick floor and hearth.

No. 12 Crick Road (Park Town)

In August an evaluation was undertaken to the rear of No. 12 Crick Road by JMHS. The trenching revealed a large pit, the excavated sample of which contained nineteen sherds of middle Iron-Age pottery.

Oxford Flood Alleviation Scheme Evaluation Trenching

Between August and October archaeological trenching was undertaken by OA along the route of the proposed Oxford Flood Alleviation Channel as part of a comprehensive programme of evaluation. A total of 189 trenches were excavated in the floodplain within the City of Oxford and the Vale of the White Horse. An extensive programme of soil and sediment sampling from archaeological features, paleochannels and alluvial sequences was completed and allowed a comprehensive set of scientific dates to be obtained, giving an almost unbroken c.8,000-year chronology of floodplain evolution spanning the Mesolithic to modern periods. A full summary of the results of this large project is beyond the scope of this note, but one evocative discovery was a previously unknown metalled stone causeway encountered to the south of Willow Walk (south of the Botley Road), complete with cart ruts and with a late-medieval horseshoe recovered from its surface. The project also gave the Research Laboratory for Archaeology and the History of Art a chance to test a new refined approach to optically stimulated luminescence dating on ridge and furrow earthworks. Thanks are due to the Environment Agency and OA for facilitating this experimental work.

Wadham College, Undergraduate and Aspiration Centre

In September an archaeological evaluation was undertaken by OA at Wadham College next to the Junior Common Room and the Goddard Building within the proposed footprint of the new Undergraduate and Aspiration Centre. A single burial was encountered, likely to belong to the medieval Austin friary which occupied this site between 1268 and the Dissolution. Pits dating to the twelfth or thirteenth century were also present. These were tentatively interpreted as evidence for quarrying. There were also several large indeterminate features that likely related to activity to the rear of the properties laid out along Holywell Street in the early to mid seventeenth century.

Student Castle, Osney Lane

In September and November trial trenching was undertaken by OA at the proposed 'Student Castle' development on the site of the former business units at Osney Lane. The site is adjacent to the railway and the site of the (now demolished) Great Western Railway goods transfer shed. Pits dating from the mid thirteenth to fourteenth century were recorded at considerable depth, sealed by modern made ground; these are likely to be associated with the precinct of Osney abbey.

Somerville College, Catherine Hughes Building, Phase 1, Walton Street and Little Clarendon Street

In June and between October and November an evaluation and targeted excavation was undertaken by OA to explore the projected line of the Civil War defences and examine waste

pits belonging to former post-medieval and Victorian buildings on Little Clarendon Street and Walton Street. Whilst the line of the Civil War ditch was identified by the evaluation trench along the frontage of Walton Street the anticipated return was not identified during the subsequent excavation as the area had been extensively quarried in the post-medieval period. Sizable early modern ceramic and faunal assemblages were recovered from associated waste and quarry pits.

Swan Motors, Between Towns Road

In December a watching brief during demolition works and trial trenching was undertaken by the Southampton Archaeological Unit at the former Swan Motor site on Between Towns Road. A number of ditches containing significant amounts of Roman pottery were recorded and further work was programmed for 2018.

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