Land to the South of Mably Way, Wantage, Oxon

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATION

OXFORD ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT

March 1998
Crest Homes (Eastern) Ltd

Land to the South of Mably Way, Wantage, Oxon

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATION

NGR SU8910 3950

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Summary

In September 1997 the Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) undertook an excavation on the site of a proposed residential development to the south of Mably Way, Wantage. The excavation was carried out in response to the results of an evaluation and as part of the planning conditions set by Oxfordshire County Council. The presence of Romano-British activity to the south of the site and the evidence revealed during the evaluation suggested that evidence for agricultural activity and possibly settlement would be encountered during the excavation. In the event several linear features were encountered but the majority related to modern or post-medieval field drainage systems and ploughing. Only two features could be tentatively interpreted as Romano-British as the paucity of datable finds recovered makes any dates questionable.

1 Introduction

1.1 It is proposed to develop a plot of land south of Mably Way, at the north edge of Wantage, for residential use. In February 1995 a planning application was submitted to the Vale of the White Horse District Council for permission to develop this land and in line with PPG 16 an archaeological field evaluation was requested, which the Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) subsequently carried out. As a result of this evaluation it was recommended by the Oxfordshire County Council that an excavation be carried out in advance of development. This work was undertaken by the OAU on behalf of Crest Homes (Eastern) Ltd.

1.2 The site is located on the outskirts of Wantage at NGR SU 8910 3950 and is bounded to the north by Mably Way, a light industrial park to the east and houses facing on to Roman Way to the south and west (see Fig. 1). The site is approximately 83 m OD. The geology is mainly composed of Head and younger Coombe deposits with outcrops of Gault clay and Upper Greensand. The soils are loamy calcareous deposits and chalk gravel overlying gault. The land use of the site at the time of the excavation was rough pasture.

2 Archaeological and historical background

2.1 The site of the proposed development lies within an area of archaeological potential. During construction works immediately to the south significant and extensive Romano-British features were revealed. Inhumations dating to that period suggest the presence of a sizeable cemetery. The artefactual evidence includes coins and pottery. Close by, to the east, is a Roman road running south from Frilford to Wantage (Lambrick 1970). A recent excavation at Mill Street (Holbrook & Thomas 1997), c. 1 km to the south of the site, has revealed the presence of a Romano British settlement/villa estate; it seems probable that settlement at that time was on the north side of Wantage and evolved in a linear fashion along the Letcombe Brook and the Roman road leading to Frilford.

Wantage is a well known historic market town although its development is poorly documented. In 1993 and 1994 a series of excavations by the Trust for Wessex Archaeology and the Cotswold Archaeological Trust at 76 Mill Street (to the south-east of the development site) encountered 1st to 4th century enclosures, wells and palisades. A 2nd-century aisled building was also recorded which was replaced by a 3rd-century stone
building. Pottery, dating to the 5th to 8th centuries, and loomweights were recovered, indicating Saxon occupation (SU 395 881). Other Romano-British artefacts have been recovered to the north on the hillside overlooking the town. Significant Roman activity has been located to the north along the line of the Roman Road which runs from Frilford.

2.2 Wantage was of some importance in the Saxon period. There was a Royal Villa (Asser states that King Alfred the Great was born in a *Villa Regia* in AD 849). In AD 990 Ethelred summoned his council there and the *Witan* met there in AD 997. In AD 1006 Wantage was destroyed in a Danish Raid.

2.3 In December 1995 the OAU undertook an archaeological evaluation of the above site (OAU 1996). The evaluation established the following:

Archaeological features were located in all of the excavated trenches. Most of these features appeared to be ditches and were thought to represent a series of enclosures or paddocks. The dating evidence was limited but the presence of Romano-British pottery indicated that they pertain to that period and that the enclosure system was in use for a considerable period of time. Some gullies and post-holes were identified suggesting a specialised activity, albeit short term, in part of the site, possibly including the construction of a structure.

3 Excavation Methodology

3.1 The OAU excavated two areas (Fig. 2). The first measured 30 by 30 metres (900 square metres) and was located in the area between the 1995 evaluation trenches 2 and 3. The second area was located in the area west of evaluation trench 5 and measured 15 by 30 metres (450 square metres).

3.2 Both areas were stripped under close archaeological supervision using a mechanical excavator with a toothless bucket. All surfaces were then cleaned and recorded.

4 Fieldwork methods and recording

4.1 The stripped areas were cleaned by hand and the revealed features were sampled to determine their extent and nature, and to retrieve finds and environmental samples. All archaeological features were plotted at a scale of 1:50 and where excavated their sections drawn at a scale of 1:20. All features were photographed using colour slide and black and white print film. Recording followed procedures laid down in the *OAU Fieldwork Manual* (ed D Wilkinson, 1992).

5 Finds

5.1 As well as finds excavated from features, spoil heaps were searched in order to identify the level of material disturbed by ploughing or other intrusive actions.
6 Results

6.1 Presentation of Results

6.1.1 The following describes the features and deposits encountered during the excavation. The two areas are described separately and, where possible, in chronological order, starting with the earliest deposits. Relevant context numbers are given in brackets after the description of the deposit or feature, with full context information provided in Appendix 1. For ease of presentation a family number has been assigned to features that had more than one section excavated through them, and therefore have multiple cut numbers. These family numbers have been used to identify the features in the text and drawings. The original cut number has been used for section illustrations (Fig. 5).

6.2 Description of deposits and features

6.2.1 Area 1 (see Fig. 3)

A layer of light grey clay (3), the natural subsoil, was cut by nearly all the features. A small undated, circular pit (19) was located toward the centre of the excavation. A narrow, v-shaped gully (69), aligned north-west to south-east, cut the pit as it diagonally crossed the excavation. The gully is filled by a single grey brown clay (fill 22 is probably a disturbed version of the main fill) which produced no finds. The gully was truncated, probably by ploughing, at the north end of the site giving the appearance that it is segmented.

A north-north-west to south-south-east-aligned ditch (67) ran from the south edge of the excavation, across the centre of Area 1, to its north edge. The ditch was 2 m wide, nearly 1 m deep and was filled by two deposits. The primary fill (48) was very thin, weathered and lined the base and sides of the ditch, indicating that the ditch had been left open for some time. The secondary fill (49) contained two Roman sherd in and a post-medieval sherd. A rectangular feature (24) measuring 2.25 m long, 1 m wide and 0.2 m deep cut into the south edge of ditch 67, at its south-east end. The feature is of unknown function and was filled by a single deposit (25). This fill produced a single, abraded, residual sherd of Bronze Age pottery.

A 0.22 m-deep plough furrow (68) extended roughly north to south from the south-west edge of the excavation and continued into the north-east baulk. The furrow was c. 3 m wide and contained a single fill which produced post-medieval finds. The intersection of the furrow and ditch 67 was disturbed, though the later was certainly cut by the furrow, and the furrow appeared to spread to 4.55 m in width.

The terminus of a shallow gully (70) was encountered in the east corner of the excavation. The gully was north-south aligned, terminating at the south end and continuing into the baulk section at the north. A single deposit (5) containing Roman and post-medieval finds filled the gully. Evidence of disturbance in the upper part of the feature caused by either ploughing or animal burrowing was visible within the fill.
Three irregular features (60, 62 and 64), probably the result of tree root activity, were located at the south west end of the site, between furrow 68 and gully 70. One of these features had been caused by a relatively large tree and was over 4.5 m wide. The remaining tree holes were much smaller.

The truncated remains of an isolated and undated posthole (45) was encountered at the north end of the site. The feature was filled by a single deposit which produced no finds. A long, irregular feature (8) was located close to the tree holes. The feature produced no finds.

A series of gullies (52 and 54), very shallow plough scars and two shallow ditches (16 and 56) aligned north-south were revealed at the east corner of the excavation. The fills were similar in composition and colour. A single sherd of Romano-British pottery was recovered from ditch 56 and a sherd of post-medieval pottery was recovered from the secondary fill of ditch 16.

A single, shallow field drain, aligned north-south, ran across the middle of the excavation area on the line of plough furrow 68.

An old plough soil (2) was revealed at the south and south west end of the excavation. The deposit was only encountered in patches and may have formed the remains of a ridge and furrow system still partially visible at the west end of the site.

6.2.2 Area 2 (see Fig. 4)

A circular cut (110) with an irregular base and sides and a single undated fill was the only feature revealed in the west corner of the excavation area. A large sub-circular treethrow hole (146) was revealed towards the centre of the excavation area. The feature was devoid of finds but provided some useful environmental information (see 6.4).

A slightly irregular linear feature (144), located towards the middle of the south baulk section, ran north-south, parallel to a similar feature (142) which lay 4 m to the north and east. The fills of both features were very similar, comprising light greyish brown silty clays, but produced no finds. A north-east to south-west aligned gully (160) terminated 8.5 m from the north-east baulk section. A shallow, north-west to south-east aligned ditch (158) cut across both 160 and 142. A similar ditch (128) ran parallel, 7 m to the south-west of ditch 158. An undated gully (139) which ran north-east to south-west along the south-east edge of the excavation area cut across both ditches, though the intersection of ditch 128 and the gully was so shallow that their relationship could not be clearly identified. A narrow gully (112), possibly a plough scar, ran north-south cutting across ditch 128 and terminating 3.5 m to the south of this intersection.

Two parallel ditches (157 and 161), 11 m apart, ran north-south across the excavation area. The western ditch housed a ceramic field drain and produced Roman and post-medieval finds. These were the deepest (0.6 m) man-made features in this part of the site. A further ceramic land drain (159) cut through gully 160 and ditch 161. A ploughsoil overlying all the features was encountered sporadically across area 2.
6.3 Finds

6.3.1 Pottery

By Nigel Jeffries

The pottery assemblage comprised fifty-three sherds with a total weight of 298 grammes. The fabrics were recorded using the Oxford type-series (Mellor, 1994) to ensure consistency with other published works from the county. The late post-medieval ceramics are largely unremarkable and represent a fairly typical group of the period from the region (Mellor, 1984). The assemblage is for the most part very abraded and in poor condition. Chronologically, the ceramic evidence suggests that the post-Roman activity on the site and its immediate environs began in the late 9th century and continued well into the post-medieval period. The pottery occurrence per context by number and weight of sherds per fabric type is listed in Appendix 2.

6.3.2 Bone

A total of 63 fragments of bone were recovered. The assemblage was in relatively poor condition and showed signs of root damage, reflecting the shallow nature of most of the features. The poor condition of the material and the small size of the sample did not warrant further analysis.

6.3.3 Building Material

A total of 61 fragments of building material was recovered during the excavation. All the tile and brick fragments are post-medieval in date and are unremarkable.

6.4 Environmental data

Two samples were taken for the assessment of environmental indicators, the first from the main fill of a ditch (context 49), and the second from a possible treehole (context 150). The total volume processed from each sample was 30 litres.

The samples were processed by mechanical flotation in a modified Siraf machine with the samples held on a 500µm mesh and the flot collected on a 250µm mesh. The coarse residue was then sieved for small bones and artefacts.

Flots were first put through a stack of sieves, ranging from 500µm to 4 mm to separate the flot into manageable fractions. Each fraction was then scanned under a binocular microscope at x10 to x20 magnification.
6.4.1 The Charred Remains

By Dana Challinor

The flots were small in size and consisted principally of molluscs. A small amount of very comminuted charcoal constituted the main charred content of both samples (contexts 49 and 150). Two germinated cereal grains were present in context 49 but no other identifiable charred material was noted. The grains were well preserved which suggests that the paucity of charred material is not due to preservational bias.

6.4.2 The Molluscs

By Elizabeth Stafford

The molluscan assemblages for both samples were rich and well-preserved. Sample 1, from ditch fill 49, contained species such as Pupilla muscorum and Vallonia costata indicating an open environment. The presence of Vertigo pygmaea and Carychium sp. would suggest damp meadow. The assemblage contained a large number of freshwater mollusca; Anisus leucostoma, Planorbis planorbis and Valvata cristata, all favouring slow moving or stagnant water and indicating possible alluvial deposition.

Sample 2, from treehole fill 150, contained almost exclusively woodland fauna with an abundance of species such as Discus rotundatus, Aegopinella nitidula, members of the genus Vitrea, and of the family Clausiliidae. The large numbers of Pomatias elegans could be significant, as it is commonly associated with the onset of woodland clearance.

7 Discussion And Interpretation

7.1 Reliability of field investigation

7.1.1 The majority of features were very shallow and appeared to have been truncated, probably by ploughing. The shallowness of some of the features made the identification of stratigraphic relationships difficult or impossible.

7.1.2 The finds assemblage was small with a predominance of post-medieval artefacts. The majority of these were recovered from plough furrows or ditches for ceramic field drains. The paucity of Romano-British finds makes certain dating of any features difficult. All the sherds of Roman and Prehistoric pottery recovered were badly abraded and in poor condition.

7.2 Overall Interpretation

7.2.1 The site comprises a network of mostly shallow, linear features of varying alignments, containing little artefactual evidence. The ditches are likely to represent field boundaries. The presence of gullies and both ceramic and gravel field drains suggests that the area is and was prone to flooding. Evidence for settlement was very limited. The paucity of finds suggests that it was short term, or more likely, in the light of evidence from excavations to the south, that the site is on the outermost margins of the settlement. The land use has
been agricultural but the number of treethrow holes and the evidence of the environmental data suggests that parts of the site were wooded.

7.2.2 None of the features from the excavation could be certainly dated to the Roman period. The comparatively large ditch that ran across the middle of Area 1 (67) was distinct in both size and the character of the fills from all the other excavated features and produced two Roman sherds and a single post-medieval sherd. This later sherd, however, was recovered from the top of the secondary fill and may be intrusive. Gully 69 ran parallel and to the east of the ditch. Roman finds were recovered from this gully during the evaluation and so it may be contemporary with 67. Undated ditches 128 and 158 are the only other features of similar alignment (at right angles to the projected alignment of the Roman road 500 m to the south-east).

7.2.3 The majority of the remaining man-made features are of north-south alignment. Only the furrow (68) and the field drains can be certainly dated to the post-medieval period. The solitary post hole (45) is likely to be part of the group revealed in evaluation trench 2, perhaps part of a fence line. Gullies 139 and 160, though of similar nature and alignment, were shown by their stratigraphic relationships to belong to different phases.

7.2.4 The features revealed in the excavation broadly correlate with those seen in evaluation Trenches 2 and 5. Gully 69 in Area 1 appeared to be truncated at the north end and reappears in Trench 2, located along the north-west edge of Area 1, as 207. Ditch 67 was revealed in the evaluation as ditch 204. The relationship between gully 70 and its continuation in evaluation Trench 2, feature 202, is not so clear, however. Evaluation feature 202 was a wide but shallow feature aligned roughly north-west to south-east. The apparent differences between this feature and the narrower gully 70 may be explained by the spreading of the upper part of the fill of 202 by ploughing (which was evident in the excavation baulk section) thus exaggerating its width and distorting the alignment seen in plan.

7.2.5 A similar case can be argued for the features in evaluation Trench 5 vis-a-vis excavation Area 2. The plough soil, sporadically visible in Area 2, may have hidden the true profiles of the linear features revealed in plan during the evaluation, with the implication that the general depth of Trench 5 was slightly less than that of Area 2. Ditch 161, in Area 2, with the associated field drain 159 was probably equivalent to the unexcavated evaluation feature filled by 509. Gully 135 is very similar to feature 503, but the continuation features seen in Area 2 between ditch 161 and gully 135 was obscured in the evaluation trench by deposits 504 and 506 and the modern cut 508. It is possible that the spread 506 concealed a linear feature related to 142 in Area 2.

7.2.6 Part of a Roman field system may have been represented by roughly north-north-west - south-south-east aligned features located in Areas 1 and 2, though the dating evidence is so sparse that this interpretation is speculative. The features in Area 2 can be interpreted as trackway ditches with a field division (160) at right angles to this line. If so, feature 142, cut by the trackway ditch (and by implication the similar feature 144) should have been earlier, though an early Roman date might still be possible, otherwise, prehistoric activity is indicated only by a small fragment of Early Bronze Age pottery, clearly
redeposited. Later features suggest agricultural use of the site in the medieval period and later.
Bibliography and references

Holbrook, N & Thomas, A 1997  ‘The Roman and Early Anglo Saxon Settlement at Wantage, Oxfordshire. Excavations at Mill Street, 1993-4, Oxoniensia, LXI

Lambrick, G 1970  ‘Some Old Roads North of Berkshire’, Oxoniensia, XXXIV


OAU 1996  Land adjacent to Mably Way, Wantage

## Appendices

### Appendix 1  Archaeological Context Inventory

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*March 1998  Mahly Way, Wantage (WAMW 97) Excavation Report*
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**Area 2**

| Field drain | 1.6 | Part of 157 |

| 101 | Fill | 0.6 | Fill of 100 | Pottery | 1 | Roman Post-med. |
|     |      |     |             | Bone    | 2 | Post-med.       |
|     |      |     |             | CBM     | 3 |              |

*March 1998*  
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Appendix 2

Pottery occurrence per context by number and weight of sherds per fabric type

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Site location map

Figure 1

Scale 1:50,000

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