Barratt Maidenhead

Smith’s Yard, Mill Street
Wantage
Oxfordshire

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION REPORT

NGR SU 3975 8820

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September 2001
Smith’s Yard, Mill Street
Wantage
Oxfordshire

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION

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SUMMARY

The Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) carried out a field evaluation at Smith’s Yard in Wantage on behalf of Barratt Maidenhead. The evaluation revealed a sequence of modern made ground sealing a modern buried topsoil which in turn overlies gravel, clay and silt river terrace deposits. Three possible linear archaeological features and two irregular features (possibly tree throws) were encountered on site. No dateable artefacts were retrieved from these features.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Location and scope of work

1.1.1 In August 2001 OAU carried out a field evaluation at Smith’s Yard, Wantage on behalf of Barratt Maidenhead in respect of a planning application for residential development. The work was carried out to the specifications contained in a brief set by, and a Written Scheme of Investigation (WSI) agreed with Hugh Coddington the Deputy County Archaeological Officer for Oxfordshire. The development site is situated on the North-Western outskirts of Wantage at NGR SU3975 8826 and is approximately 2.5 hectares in area.

1.2 Geology and topography

1.2.1 The site lies on Gault and Upper Greensand formations overlain by River Terrace Gravels at c.85 m above OD. The site is currently a working scrap yard.

1.3 Archaeological and historical background

1.3.1 The proposed development site is located within an area of considerable archaeological potential. To the west an evaluation by Wessex Archaeology in 1993 (Heaton, Seager-Smith & Allen 1993) identified Romano British and early Anglo-Saxon deposits. The evaluation recovered twelve early Anglo Saxon annular clay loomweights suggesting a settlement nearby. A full excavation by the Cotswold Archaeological Trust (November 1993 - March 1994; Holbrook & Thomas 1997) revealed a series of early field boundaries. A small, second century, timber granary and a rectangular domestic building were found to have been demolished and replaced by an early fourth century square stone building, thought to have been a tower granary. A series of contemporary curvilinear ditches were located within the floodplain of Letcombe Brook. It is suggested that the excavated area lay to the rear of linear settlement along the Roman road forming part of a small Roman town or villa estate. A supposition supported by the identification and partial excavation of a small villa just west of Denchworth Road in 1998.

1.3.2 To the south an evaluation revealed second and third century ditches indicative of floodplain agricultural activity similar to the Mill Street excavations (Thomas 1995). Anglo Saxon ditched enclosures on a different alignment to those of the Romano-
British period indicated new patterns of land organisation associated with agricultural production.

1.3.3 An Oxford Archaeological Unit evaluation on land adjacent to Mill Street revealed no archaeological features (Roberts 1996). However, some Romano-British pottery was identified, including pieces of high status southern Spanish amphora and Samian ware.

1.3.4 Romano-British activity was identified immediately east of Letcombe Brook (Wessex Archaeology 1997). Ditches containing Romano British pottery, including tablewares and mortaria, were identified. It is thought that domestic activity took place nearby.

1.3.5 There is little evidence of late Anglo Saxon activity in the vicinity of the proposed development area. King Alfred was born at Wantage in 849 AD, Ethelred summoned a council at Wantage in 990 and in 997 the Witan met there. There are no other recorded royal visits to Wantage. It is highly probable that the later Saxon settlement of Wantage was destroyed by the Danish raid on Berkshire in 1006, perhaps explaining the absence of later Anglo Saxon evidence.

1.3.6 The west side of the proposed development area formed the basin for a canal. This was a branch of the Berkshire and Wiltshire Canal that ran into Wantage supplying coal to the vale towns and villages and transporting agricultural produce. The canal opened in 1810 and closed in 1906 and has since been infilled. Early maps of the area, including the 1st edition Ordnance Survey, show the development area being used as an orchard.

1.4 Evaluation Aims

1.4.1 To establish the presence/absence of archaeological remains within the proposal area.

1.4.2 To determine the extent, condition, nature, character, quality and date of any archaeological remains present.

1.4.3 To establish the ecofactual and environmental potential of archaeological deposits and features.

1.4.4 To make available the results of the investigation.

1.4.5 To define any relevant research priorities if additional archaeological investigation proves necessary.

2 Evaluation Methodology

2.1 Scope of fieldwork

2.1.1 The evaluation consisted of nine trench locations. Originally a 30 m trench was to be excavated at each location. However due to the extreme depth of modern overburden it was agreed during an on-site meeting with Hugh Coddington that the trenches
would be targeted over areas where borehole reports had indicated ‘gravel highs’ and that in areas of deep alluvium only test pits would be excavated at the end of each trench. This would result in mapping the underlying deposits and focusing on the areas of highest archaeological potential.

2.2 Fieldwork methods and recording

2.2.1 The overburden was removed under close archaeological supervision by a 360° mechanical excavator fitted with a toothless bucket.

2.2.2 All archaeological features were planned and where excavated their sections drawn at scales 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).

2.3 Finds

2.3.1 Finds were recovered by hand during the course of the excavation and bagged by context.

2.4 Palaeo-environmental evidence

2.4.1 No samples were processed for this evaluation. The complete lack of datable artefacts negates the information that could be added to the report by the presence of environmental indicators.

2.5 Presentation of results

2.5.1 Section 4 includes individual context descriptions, with archaeological deposits and features described from earliest to latest. Context information is summarised in the context inventory (Appendix 1).

3 RESULTS: GENERAL

3.1 Soils and ground conditions

3.1.1 The site is located on Gault and Upper Greensand formations overlain by gravel and silt river terrace deposits. The ground surface was covered either in dense undergrowth or dumped material relating to the current use of the site as a scrapyard.

3.2 Distribution of archaeological deposits

3.2.1 Three definite and two possible man-made features were observed. These were all situated on the ‘gravel high’ to the north-west of the site. The evaluation was partially biased in that the greater part of the trenching was targeted to this area.
4 RESULTS: DESCRIPTIONS

4.1 Description of deposits
(See Figs. 2 and 3)

Trench 1

4.1.1 The primary deposit located within the sequence encountered in Trench 1 was the bluish-grey brown silty-clay deposit (102). This deposit was encountered at 81.53m OD, 1.85m below the surface level. Excavation ceased at a level of 80.66m OD, 0.87m into alluvium.

4.1.2 This deposit was overlain by the buried modern soil 101 which was a dark greyish brown silt loam horizon c 0.30m thick. This deposit in turn was overlain by 1.40m of modern dump material (100).

Trench 2

4.1.3 Trench 2 was located approximately perpendicular to Trench 1 to the North of the site. At a depth of 79.2m OD, a very firm dark grey fissured clay horizon (205) was encountered. This was identified as the Gault Formation, the geology underlying the whole site. Overlying 205 was a second mid greyish-brown alluvial clay-silt layer (204), which contained occasional small sub-angular pebbles and was c 1.00m thick.

4.1.4 At a level of 80.46m OD a chalky, angular, fine gravel (203) supported in a grey clay matrix was observed. Four sections were dug across the 30m length separated by 3 narrow baulks to allow satisfactory drainage across this horizon. This allowed the greatest possible clear observation of the gravel surface. At the southern end of Trench 2, a gravel horizon was observed at a depth of 80.20m OD, demonstrating that this surface dipped downwards toward the south. Here this deposit was only 0.23m thick.

4.1.5 Deposit 203 was overlain by a mid-greyish brown alluvial clay-silt (202) at a level of 81.0m OD. A dark greyish brown silt loam horizon (201) overlay 202. This was identified as a modern buried soil. This deposit was 0.60m thick.

4.1.6 As in Trench 1 the made ground (deposit 200) was of considerable depth (approx. 0.9m here). This was the last deposit in the Trench 2 sequence.

Trench 3

4.1.7 Trench 3 was located in the North-West corner of the site approximately 6m west of Letcombe brook. Deposits in Trench 3 were similar to those observed further west in Trench 1, with archaeologically sterile alluvial silts and clays (302) to a depth of 80.34m OD. Deposit 302 was overlain by a modern buried topsoil (301) at a depth of 80.94 m OD. Made ground of maximum thickness 1.5m comprising mixed dump and backfilling deposits (300) overlay all deposits in Trench 3.
Trenches 4 and 5

4.1.8 The sediment profile observed in these test pits was similar to that observed in Trenches 1 and 3, with made ground (400 and 500) down to modern buried topsoil (401 and 501) at 81.51 and 81.4 m OD respectively. The buried soil overlay alluvial silts and clays (402 and 502) at 81.2 and 81.1m OD respectively. Excavation was discontinued below 80.41m OD in Trench 4 and 81 m OD in Trench 5.

Trench 6

4.1.9 Trench 6 was located approximately to the west of the centre of the site, on the southern side of an earth bund.

4.1.10 The primary deposit in the Trench 6 sequence was a chalky, angular gravel (603) in a grey clay matrix at 81m OD. The gravel horizon was considered to have good potential for containing archaeological features, and was stripped back to as much of the 30m extent as possible. As in Trench 2 rapidly rising ground water again presented a problem, and this trench was likewise excavated as 4 sondages and 3 narrow baulks to counter this problem.

4.1.11 Cutting through layer 603 was a northeast-southwest aligned linear feature (604), which was filled by 605, a very dark grey brown silty deposit. The feature was recorded from the trench edge due to health and safety constraints. A section was dug by machine through the centre of this feature giving dimensions of 0.4m wide by 3m long (running the whole length of the easternmost sondage). No finds were recovered. This feature may represent a field boundary or other land partition, although the fact that the feature was cut into very poor draining gravel in clay may suggest some drainage function.

4.1.12 Further features (606), (608) and (610) were also found to be cutting through the layer 603. Cut 606 was a possible curvilinear feature, which had a depth of c 0.5m, and a 5m extent. This was filled by a dark brown compacted silt (607). Adjacent to feature 606 was an irregular feature (608). This feature was filled by deposit 609, a layer of identical typology to fill 607. Cut 610 was a linear feature, aligned northeast-southwest, and was similar to feature 604. This feature was not excavated due to the instability of the trench sides. The final, westernmost sondage in Trench 6 revealed a very irregular feature interpreted as bioturbation.

4.1.13 A modern buried topsoil horizon (601) overlay these deposits and a red ceramic land drain segment was recovered from this layer. Deposit 601 was in turn overlain by the modern dump layer 600.

Trench 7

4.1.14 Trench 7 was located to the south-east of the site in the centre of the scrap yard. The same stratigraphic sequence was observed in Trench 7 as in the other trenches, but the deposits here were encountered at a lesser depth from the ground surface due to
the absence of the deep deposits of made ground observed elsewhere. The primary deposit in the sequence recorded within Trench 7 was the natural gravel horizon (703). This was encountered at 81.9m OD at the south end of Trench 7, and continued for approximately 14m north along the trench before being overlain by the alluvial deposit 702.

4.1.15 The alluvial deposit 702 was a tenacious blue-grey silty clay found at c 82.40m OD. This deposit had a thickness of 0.50m and contained occasional degraded chalk flecks.

4.1.16 Alluvium 702 was cut by a linear feature (704) (Fig. 4) approximately aligned east-west and c 0.5m deep and 1m wide. This was filled by a dark bluish-grey, charcoal-flecked deposit (705). Once piece of burnt flint was retrieved from this deposit.

4.1.17 Overlying the alluvium and the linear feature cutting it was deposit 701. This was the buried modern horizon equivalent to 101, 201, 301, 401, 501, and 601. This deposit was a silty-loam, 0.30m thick. This was overlain by the previously encountered modern dump deposit 700, which had a maximum thickness of 0.70m at this location.

**Trenches 8 and 9**

4.1.18 Deposits in Trenches 8 and 9 corresponded to the pattern observed in Trenches 6 and 7. The gravel horizon (803 and 903) was encountered at 81.14 and 81.25 m OD and was overlain by alluvial silts (802 and 902). Modern buried topsoil (801 and 901) graded into alluvial silts and clays (802 and 902) at 81.34 and 81.39m OD. The top of the buried soil (801) in Trench 8 appeared to be partially overlain by a rough tarmac surface, possibly corresponding to a former yard surface for the Tram depot known to have been in existence at the site prior to its use as a scrapyard. This was overlaid with made ground (800 and 900).

4.2 **Finds**

4.2.1 Five pieces of flint were retrieved from deposit 705 as possible artefacts. Only one piece which had been burnt could convincingly be interpreted as impacted on by human activity. No other finds were recovered.

5 **DISCUSSION AND INTERPRETATION**

5.1 **Reliability of field investigation**

5.1.1 The evaluation has focused on the area of highest archaeological potential on the site through the use of boreholes, test pits and trenches carried out as part of these evaluation and in previous intrusive studies. The evaluation has clearly demonstrated that the stratigraphic horizons which could contain archaeological deposits and remains are still intact and that the site as been subject to dumping episodes rather than cut and fill events. However the density of potential archaeological features outlined in this report (three linear features and two possible tree throws) can be
taken as a reasonable indication of the low level of archaeological features likely to be present across the site.

5.2 Overall interpretation

Summary of results

5.2.1 The evaluation has shown a low density of what are likely to be field system or drainage features of probable historic origin. The general absence of artefactual material in any of the trenches (one piece of burnt flint from Trench 7) supports the suggestion that the site saw only relatively low level activity of rural character before recent times.

6 Impact of the Development

6.1.1 Barratt Maidenhead have indicated that the larger part of construction work will involve the use of piled foundations. Should this be the case the only major impact to potential archaeological horizons could be from drainage runs and manhole cuts. No information has been made available for this report on the possible depth of these constructions.
## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX 1  ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXT INVENTORY

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APPENDIX 3  SUMMARY OF SITE DETAILS

Site name: Smith’s Yard Wantage
Site code: WASY01
Grid reference: SU 3975 8820  Type of evaluation: Trenching
Date and duration of project: 13.08.01/seven days
Area of site: 2.5ha
Summary of results: Three undated linear features, two probable tree throws
Location of archive: The archive is currently held at OAU, Janus House, Osney Mead, Oxford, OX2 0ES, and will be deposited with Oxfordshire County Museums Service in due course.
Figure 1: Site location.
Schematic Profile of Stratigraphic Sequence Across Site
(See Figure 2 for Location)
Feature 701

East Face

N

700

701

702

704

S

Figure 4: Section