78 MILL STREET, WANTAGE, OXFORDSHIRE

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION

BY
ALISTAIR BARBER
FOR
THAMES VALLEY HOUSING ASSOCIATION

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SUMMARY

An archaeological evaluation was undertaken by Cotswold Archaeological Trust in April 1998 in advance of proposed development at 78 Mill Street, Wantage, Oxfordshire.

Fieldwork involved the machine-excavation of four trial trenches in proximity to several proposed house plots. A linear ditch of potential Anglo-Saxon date was identified. No other archaeological features predating the modern period were encountered.
1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

1.1.1 In April 1998 Cotswold Archaeological Trust was commissioned by IBIS Construction Consultants, on behalf of Thames Valley Housing Association, to undertake an archaeological evaluation on land at 78 Mill Street, Wantage, Oxon (centred at NGR SU 3950 8814, Fig. 1).

1.1.2 The evaluation was undertaken in accordance with a detailed project design produced by CAT in consultation with Mr. Hugh Coddington, Deputy County Archaeological Officer, Oxfordshire County Council (CAT 1998). The fieldwork also followed the 'Standard and Guidance for Archaeological Evaluations' issued by the Institute of Field Archaeologists (IFA 1996).

1.2 Geology and topography

1.2.1 The natural geological substrate of the study area is mapped by the British Geological Survey as Upper Greensands and Pleistocene 'Head' (the latter a general term for Pleistocene colluvial deposits, in this case a chalky marl solifluction deposit probably relating to the Devensian Late Glacial).

1.2.2 The site lies at between approximately 86m and 91m OD, immediately north of Mill Street on the western slopes of the Letcombe brook. To the east of the stream the ground slopes gradually upwards towards the centre of the medieval and modern town, whilst immediately north-west of the study area the ground rises towards Belmont.
1.3 Archaeological background

1.3.1 The study area lies immediately west of known Romano-British and Anglo-Saxon occupation (Heaton et al, 1993, Holbrook et al 1996). Occupation evidence, dating between the late first and fourth centuries AD, included stone and wooden granary buildings, an aisled timber building, ditched agricultural enclosures and palisades. These have been considered indicative of either a villa complex or small Roman town. Evidence for early Anglo-Saxon ditched agricultural enclosures was also encountered.

1.4 Methodology

1.4.1 The field evaluation was carried out in accordance with the detailed project design (CAT 1998). The aim of the evaluation was to establish whether archaeological deposits lay within the study area and, if so, to establish their extent, date, character, condition, significance and quality. This information would assist in devising appropriate mitigation action where necessary.

1.4.2 Four 1.5m wide trenches, with a total length of approximately 60m, were excavated in the positions shown in Figure 2 (Trenches 1-4). The number and position of trenches varies from that specified within the project design, reflecting repositioning necessitated by current tree cover and by site access requirements to the existing builders’ yard.

1.4.3 Subject to the agreement of the legal landowner the finds and site archive will be deposited with Oxfordshire Museums Service under accession number OXCMS: 1998.66
2. EVALUATION RESULTS

2.1 The natural geological substrate, consisting of grey chalky solifluxion deposits, was encountered within all four evaluation trenches at depths averaging 0.40m below present ground level. Extensive root penetration of the natural substrate was noted within Trenches 3 and 4, with a number of sampled features proving to be tree boles.

2.2 A single archaeological feature predating the modern period was encountered during trenching, within Trench 2. This consisted of a linear ditch [203], up to 1.10m in width, running on a broadly north-east to south-west orientation. The ditch had a vertical edge on its northern side and a steeply-sloping, becoming near vertical, southern edge, which dropped to a flat base at a depth of 0.30m. No evidence for recutting was encountered. The homogenous brown clay-loam fill (204) of ditch [203] yielded three abraded sherds of Romano-British pottery.

2.3 Several modern intrusions were noted within Trenches 1, 2 and 3, including shallow waste pits and possible geotechnical trial holes. Within Trench 1 all soil horizons had been truncated, such that a layer of modern hardcore for the extant car park directly overlay the natural geological substrate.

2.4 Trenching also revealed a steep-sided linear cut or slope [105] running the full length of Trench 1. Initially viewed as a possible linear ditch, on investigation the feature was found to represent either a deliberate terracing/cutting associated with Mill Street itself (although no modern contamination was found within fill (102)) or, perhaps more likely, a natural break of slope, containing accumulated, artefact free, colluvium.

2.5 Throughout Trench 1 the natural substrate was directly overlain by approximately 0.60m of modern hardcore supporting the present car park.
surface, whilst within Trenches 2 to 4 the natural substrate was overlain by approximately 0.4m of silty loam topsoil. A single sherd of Romano-British pottery was recovered from the topsoil horizon (401) within Trench 4.

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

4.1 Field evaluation, targeted upon the areas of proposed development, has revealed only a single archaeological feature predating the modern period. Linear ditch [203] lies in a position and on an alignment to suggest it is a continuation of one of the segmented early Anglo-Saxon boundary ditches (1582) or (1661) noted immediately east of the study area during CAT excavations in 1994 (Holbrook et al 1996). The small quantity of abraded Romano-British pottery recovered from ditch [203] appears to be residual in this context.

4.2 The presence of further features of Romano-British or Anglo-Saxon date within the study area cannot be entirely discounted. However their absence within Trenches 1 to 4, together with the paucity of artefactual material recovered, suggests a marked fall-off in the density of features compared with those immediately east of the study area, excavated by CAT in 1994. This suggests a concentration of occupation on the higher ground immediately north and east of the site.

4.3 Within the southernmost part of the site on the Mill Street frontage it is likely that any archaeological features dating to these periods, if present, may have been damaged or entirely removed by medieval and later activity, in particular by the construction of a series of nineteenth-century cottages that once stood set back from the frontage (Heaton et al 1993) and by the construction of the present car park.
5. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Cotswold Archaeological Trust would like to thank Mr. Rupert Ruff, IBIS Construction Consultants; Amanda Green and Derek Thurgood, Thames Valley Housing Association; Ted Hammond, BHP Harwood; Mr. Hugh Coddington, Deputy County Archaeological Officer, Oxfordshire County Council for their assistance throughout the project. The fieldwork was carried out by Alistair Barber and David Kenyon, and the report compiled by Alistair Barber with illustrations by Rick Morton.

6. BIBLIOGRAPHY


Holbrook et al, 1996 The Roman and Early Saxon settlement at Wantage, excavation at Mill Street, 1993-4, Oxoniensia, 61.


APPENDIX I

Finds Register

Trench 2

(204)  1 x tile fragment (unidentifiable to type)
       3 x Romano-British sherds, abraded.
       1 x sheep tooth.

Trench 4

(401)  1 x Romano-British sherd.