12a Bell Lane, Thame, Oxfordshire

An Archaeological Watching Brief
for J & J Estates Limited

by Clare Challis
and Graham Hull
Thames Valley Archaeological Services Ltd

Site Code BLT 01/28

June 2001
Summary

Site Name: 12a Bell Lane, Thame, Oxfordshire

Grid Reference: SP 7057 0607

Site Activity: Watching Brief

Date and Duration of Project: 18th April and 8th, 9th and 11th May 2001

Area of Site: c. 200sq m

Summary of Results: Examination of foundation trenches for new building did not reveal archaeological deposits or artefacts. Post-medieval soil imported to create terrace on sloping site

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Site Code: BLT01/28

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Introduction

This report documents the results of an archaeological watching brief carried out at 12a Bell Lane, Thame, Oxfordshire (SP 7057 0607) (Fig. 1). The work was commissioned by Mr J H T Springell, of J & J Estates Limited, Bridgeside Farm, Askett, Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire, HP27 9LT. Planning permission (P99/N0745) has been granted by South Oxfordshire District Council for the construction of offices with access and car parking from Bell Lane, Thame. As part of this application and in accordance with the Department of the Environment’s Policy and Planning Guidance Note, Archaeology and Planning (PPG 16 1990) and the District policies on archaeology, a condition was attached to the planning permission for an archaeological watching brief to take place during groundworks. The field investigation was carried out to a specification approved by Mr Paul Smith, County Archaeological Officer for Oxfordshire County Archaeological Services. The fieldwork was undertaken by Clare Challis and Graham Hull on April 18th and May 8th, 9th and 11th. The site code is BLT01/28.

Location, topography and geology

The site was located to the rear of 91–92 High Street within the core of Thame and was accessed from Bell Lane (Fig. 2). According to the British Geological Survey (BGS 1994) the underlying geology is gravel. The watching brief revealed underlying geology of sand, overlain by grey/brown silty clay topsoil. The site lies at a height of c.72m above Ordnance Datum (OD).

Archaeological background

The town of Thame originally developed towards the north-west around the minster church, now St Mary’s (Airs et al. 1975). This settlement (Old Thame) is mentioned in the Domesday Book (1086). In the 12th or 13th centuries the Bishops of Lincoln, the landowners, established a new settlement (New Thame) to the east of the original settlement, along the realigned Oxford to Aylesbury road, which is now the High Street. The deliberate
foundation of new Thame appears to be reflected in the pattern of property boundaries on either side of the High Street, with a large number of long (200m), narrow burgage plots that are still largely extant today.

This site lies to the rear of 91-92 High Street and the standing buildings there were subject to a survey prior to commencement of alterations with a supplementary survey during alterations (Preston and Dixon 1999, Preston 2000). These building recording surveys described the development of the structure from its original 16th to 17th century cruck-built construction, through a sequence of changes, to the 20th century alterations.

A watching brief was conducted within the upstanding property during alterations at 91-92 High Street (Ford 2000) and parts of the wall foundations relating to the upstanding building were observed.

A watching brief at 13 Bell Lane, as part of earlier works, located a pit tentatively dated to the 13th or 14th century, cut by later medieval pits (Pollinger 1997). These medieval features were located c. 30m to the south-west of the area examined in this report.

Objectives and methodology

The purpose of the watching brief was to excavate and record any archaeological deposits affected by the construction of the offices. This involved examination of areas stripped of overburden, excavation for foundation trenches and trenches dug for services. Excavation was by hand and mini-digger machine. The spoil was examined for finds and a written and photographic record of the ground works was made.

Results (Fig. 3)

A footing trench for a new wall was observed (Plate 1). This trench was 10.5m long and was 1m wide. The observed stratigraphy, from top to bottom, was a modern brick rubble (0m-0.3m), a man-made post-medieval soil (0.3m to 1.3m), overlying a natural sand deposit. The trench had a maximum depth of 1.5m.

The excavation of a footing trench for the new offices was also monitored (Plate 2). This trench had a total length of 47m and was sub-rectangular in plan and was 0.9m wide. The observed stratigraphy was identical to that noted above and was, from top to bottom, a modern brick rubble (0m to 0.2m), a man-made post-medieval soil (0.2m to 1.2m), overlying a naturally occurring geological deposit of orange sand and was excavated to a depth of between 1.2m and 1.75m. The top of the natural lay at c. 70.8m above OD.

The soil overlying the natural geology was a mid greyish brown loam with occasional inclusions of slate and brick fragments and was very probably a relatively modern deposit. It would be reasonable to presume that this soil was imported onto the site in order to raise the ground and provide a level surface behind the properties.
fronting the High Street to the south. It should be noted, in this context, that Bell Lane drops down from the level of the High Street and probably reflects the unaltered local topography.

The spoil did not produce any artefactual evidence earlier than the 20th century and no cut archaeological features were seen in the trench.

**Conclusion**

The watching brief conducted at 12a Bell Lane, Thame produced no evidence of archaeological deposits or artefacts.
References
Ford, S, 2000, 91/92 High Street, Thame, Oxfordshire, an archaeological watching brief, Thames Valley Archaeological Services report 99/59c, Reading
Pollinger, L, 1997, 13 Bell Lane, Thame, Oxfordshire, an archaeological watching brief, Thames Valley Archaeological Services report 97/79, Reading
PPG 16, 1990, Archaeology and Planning, Department of the Environment Planning Policy Guidance Note 16, HMSO
Preston, J, 2000, 91/92 High Street, Thame, Oxfordshire, standing building recording, supplementary report, Thames Valley Archaeological Services report 99/59b, Reading
Preston, J and Dixon, M, 1999, 91/92 High Street, Thame, Oxfordshire, standing building recording, Thames Valley Archaeological Services report 99/59, Reading
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Figure 1. Location of site within Thame and Oxfordshire.

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Figure 2. Location of watching brief. BLT01/28
Figure 3. Location of footing trenches examined.
Plate 1. Footing trench for wall. Looking south. Scale 1m

Plate 2. Footing trench for building. Looking west. Scales 2m and 1m