Former Filling Station, High Street, Dorchester-on-Thames, Oxfordshire

An Archaeological Evaluation
for Country Visions OK Limited

by Sarah Coles
Thames Valley Archaeological Services Ltd

Site Code HSD01/36

May 2001
Summary

Site name: Former filling station, High Street, Dorchester-on-Thames, Oxfordshire.

Grid reference: SU 5788 9410

Site activity: Evaluation

Date and duration of project: 3rd and 4th of May 2001

Site supervisor: Sarah Coles

Site code: HSD01/36

Area of site: 400sq. m

Summary of results: Both evaluation trenches revealed extensive archaeological deposits mostly comprising pits of early Roman (1st–2nd century AD) date.

Monuments identified: Numerous intercutting pits and layers.

Location and reference of archive: The archive is currently held by Thames Valley Archaeological Services Ltd, 47–49 De Beauvoir Road, Reading, Berkshire, RG1 5NR. It is anticipated that the archive will be deposited with Oxfordshire Museums Service in due course.

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Report edited/checked by: Steve Ford✓ 18.05.01
                            Steve Preston✓ 21.05.01
Introduction

This report documents the results of an archaeological field evaluation carried out at the former petrol filling station, High Street, Dorchester-on-Thames, Oxfordshire (SU 5788 9410) (Fig. 1). The work was commissioned by Mr John Spratley of Spratley and Woodfield, Architects and Designers, Overy Farm, Dorchester-on-Thames, Oxfordshire, OX10 7JU, on behalf Country Visions OK Limited, c/o Bower and Bailey Solicitors, Anchor House, 269 Banbury Road, Summertown, Oxford, OX2 7JF.

Planning permission has been granted (app. no. P00/W/0865) by South Oxfordshire District Council for the demolition of the existing filling station and the construction of new housing with garages. A programme of archaeological work in the form of a field evaluation and mitigation measures have been requested as part of the planning condition. This is in accordance with the Department of the Environment’s Planning Policy Guidance Note, *Archaeology and Planning* (PPG16 1990). The field investigation was carried out to a specification approved by Mr Paul Smith, County Archaeological Officer, Oxfordshire County Council.

The fieldwork was undertaken by Sarah Coles and Julian Newman on the 3rd and 4th of May 2001. The site code is HSD01/36. The archive is currently held by Thames Valley Archaeological Services Ltd, 47–49 De Beauvoir Road, Reading, and will be deposited with Oxfordshire Museums Service in due course.

Location, topography and geology

Dorchester-on-Thames is situated south-east of Oxford, north of the River Thames and west of its tributary the Thame. The site is located on the western side of the High Street opposite the Abbey. The plot of land in question is irregularly shaped and covers an area of 400sq. m (Fig. 2). According to geological maps (BGS 1980) the underlying geology is First (Flood Plain) Terrace deposits and this was confirmed during the evaluation which revealed a brickearth overlying gravel. The site lies approximately 50m above Ordnance Datum.

Archaeological background

The site is located in the historic core of Dorchester, and within the Roman, later Saxon and medieval town (Munby and Rodwell 1975). There have been several excavations, evaluations and watching briefs nearby (e.g.
Frere 1962; Torrance and Durden 1998) which have provided specific details. The Roman town was founded in the 1st century AD and may have been a replacement for the Iron Age oppidum at Dyke Hills, just to the west. The Roman town was originally fortified by a bank and ditch and was subsequently walled. The environs of Dorchester were an important focus of early Saxon settlement and became the setting for an Abbey c. AD 635. The importance of the settlement declined in late Saxon times and into medieval times relative to the neighbouring towns of Abingdon and Wallingford.

An entry in the county Sites and Monuments Record points to findings to the west of the site in an area known as Rotten Row where skeletons have been found and which may indicate the presence of a Saxon or medieval cemetery.

Objectives and methodology

The purpose of the evaluation was to determine the presence/absence, extent, condition, character, quality and date of any archaeological deposits within the area affected by invasive development. These objectives were to be achieved by digging two 10m long trenches. The trenches were to be 1.60m wide and dug under continuous archaeological supervision, using a JCB-type vehicle fitted with a toothless bucket. Where archaeological features were certainly or probably present the stripped areas were to be cleaned using the appropriate hand tools. Sufficient of the archaeological features or deposits exposed was to be excavated by hand to satisfy the aims of the brief. The archaeological investigation was to be carried out in a manner that would not compromise the integrity of any archaeological features that might warrant preservation in situ or might better be excavated under conditions pertaining to full excavation. All spoilheaps were to be monitored for finds.

A complete list of trenches giving lengths, breadths, depths and a description of sections and geology is given in Appendix 1 and a list of features is given in Appendix 2.

Results

Two trenches were dug in the positions shown on Figure 3. Due to the circumstances of site access the trench lengths deviated from the planned 10m each but the total length was not reduced.

Trench 1 (Plate 1)

This trench was 13.65m long. The stratigraphy of the trench comprised concrete onto made ground, which in turn overlay archaeologically relevant levels which consisted of features cutting the natural brickearth and gravel. At least 12 cut features were recorded in the trench and three of these (3–5) were partially excavated.
Pit 4, which cut pit 3, was a shallow bowl-shaped pit which contained a single fill (56) (Fig. 5, section 1). This fill produced a single sherd of Roman pottery. Pit 3 was a wide, shallow flat-based pit with a single fill (55) and contained 17 sherds of pottery dating it to the 2nd century AD. Nine pieces of animal bone were retrieved from pit 3 including the usual domesticated species of pig, cow and sheep with a bird species also represented. One piece of burnt flint, four iron nails, two oyster shells and a piece of glass also derived from pit 3.

No limits were found for pit 5 within the trench, and due to difficulty of access caused by the presence of a modern foul water pipe only a sondage was dug through this feature (Fig. 5, section 2). Pit 5 contained two fills (60, 50); the lower fill (50) contained eight pieces of 1st century AD pottery. Numerous others sherds were retrieved from the immediately adjacent spoil heaps or stripped surface of layer 50 ranging in date from the 1st to 4th centuries AD, along with animal bone (cow, pig, bird and sheep-sized bones represented). This feature cut the natural brickearth with gravel exposed at the deepest point (1.10m).

Trench 2 (Plate 2)

This trench was 8.90m long. The stratigraphy of this trench comprised concrete above a layer of buried topsoil above the archaeologically-relevant levels. At least five pits and several layers were revealed cutting the natural (brickearth over gravel).

Pit 1 was a shallow, wide flat-based pit with a single fill (51) (Fig. 5, section 3). It contained seven sherds of pottery dating to the 2nd century AD, along with two pieces of tile, two pieces of bone (cattle- and sheep-sized) and one lump of daub. Pit 1 cut a mid-brown orange layer (57) which sealed pit 2, a steep-sided bowl shaped pit 1.1m deep with four fills (52–54, 59) (Fig. 5). Each fill produced pottery. Fill 52 contained eight sherds of 1st century AD pottery, four pieces of daub; fill 53 produced 37 sherds of late 1st century pottery, five pieces of Roman brick, 14 pieces of bone (pig, sheep/goat, bird and cattle-sized represented) and four oyster shells; fill 54 yielded one sherd of 1st century pottery and three pieces of tile and fill 59, three sherds also of 1st century AD date.

Finds

Pottery by Jane Timby

The archaeological work resulted in the recovery of 233 sherds of pottery, weighing 4,329g, mainly dating to the Roman period. Despite the fact that most of the pottery was recovered from surface or spoil deposits the sherds were relatively well preserved with an overall average sherd size of 18.5g. For the purposes of this assessment
the pottery was rapidly sorted into fabrics and quantified by sherd count and weight. The resulting information is summarized in Appendix 3. No detailed research has been carried out as part of this assessment to consider the assemblage in its local or regional context.

**Roman**

The Roman wares include types typical of the 1st to 4th centuries. The assemblage is quite diverse in terms of its components with a number of imports, both continental and regional. Amongst the earlier wares are a number of handmade jars in grog-tempered or sandy fabrics typical of late iron age traditions in the locality. The juxtaposition of this material with Roman wares proper suggests that these wares were still in circulation through the 1st century, possibly into the 2nd century.

The earliest imports are four sherds of South Gaulish samian from Trenches 1 and 2 and several sherds from a white ware butt beaker with rouletted decoration from Trench 2. Three sherds of Dressel 20 South Spanish *amphora* may be 1st or 2nd century imports. Amongst the 2nd century continental imports are two sherds of Gallic wine *amphora*, nine sherds of Central Gaulish samian and one sherd of North Gaulish colour-coated, rough-cast beaker.

Included in the earlier Roman regional imports are sherds of Verulamium white ware and early Alice Holt black sandy ware. From the 2nd century onwards sherds of Dorset black burnished ware appear.

The local wares include sherds from the various Oxfordshire industries. In the later 1st to 2nd centuries these include fine grey and oxidized wares and possibly a white-slipped oxidized ware used to make ring-necked flagons. In the later period, from the 3rd century onwards, a white-slipped *mortarium* sherd and various colour-coated wares are present, mainly from surface deposits.

In addition to the pottery, a large fragment of fired clay with two parallel, smooth flat surfaces and a coarse organic temper was recovered from Trench 1 (50). Thickness 35mm. One surface shows traces of sooting but the fragment is not intensely fired as would be expected of furnace material.

**Post-medieval**

A single glazed red earthenware of post-medieval date (18th–19th century) was amongst the Trench 2 spoil.

**Summary**

The assemblage recovered from the site, with a single exception, comprises wares of Roman date with a particular emphasis on material of 1st-century currency. A scatter of later Roman wares was also present. Despite the location of the site opposite the Abbey no material of medieval date was identified and Saxon sherds were similarly absent.
The diversity of wares present is a reflection both of the early date and that the assemblage is from an urban context as opposed to a rural settlement. In this respect the assemblage complements Roman material previously excavated from the town.

Animal and human bone by Sian Anthony

A small collection of 80 animal and human bones was recovered during the evaluation.

Human bones

**Trench 1**, spoilheap
Proximal and mid-shaft of adult left femur. Robust and extremely rugged muscle markings on *linea aspera*. Slightly weathered.

**Trench 2**, spoilheap (4–8m)
Section of distal adult left humerus. Slightly weathered.

Animal bones

A total of 78 animal bones were analysed; the majority were in excellent preservation, although 29 per cent were extremely weathered. These are summarized in Appendix 4. All the major domestic species were present although the assemblage is dominated by sheep/goats. Butchery marks were present on four bones, with a possible area of gnawing and signs of modern/excavation damage. Signs of disease were present as porous, woven bone on two bones. No ageing information was present and no long bones were complete enough to be measured.

Ceramic building material

A total of 33 pieces of ceramic building material were found, with a total weight of 2137g. Pit 1 (51) contained two tile fragments and pit 2 (54) had three fragments. One piece of *tegula* was found in Trench 2 as a surface find, weighing 230g. The total weight of brick was 291g. One piece of brick was found in pit 1 (51), and five pieces in pit 2 (53). Three fragments were found in pit 3 (55) weighing 148g.
Daub
One piece of daub weighing 20g was retrieved from pit 1 (51), four pieces of daub were found in pit 2 (52) with a weight of 108g.

Burnt flint
One piece of burnt flint was found in pit 3 (55) weighing 43g.

Fired clay
Eight pieces of burnt clay were retrieved from unstratified contexts with a total weight of 48g.

Glass
One piece of blue/green glass weighing 4g was found in pit 3 (55).

Metalwork
Four complete iron nails were retrieved from pit 3 (55). Two unidentified pieces of iron (12g) were retrieved from an unstratified context.

Shell
The assemblage consisted of 12 oyster shells with a total weight of 215g. Six of these were from unstratified contexts. Pit 2 (53) contained four oyster shells, and pit 3 (55) produced two oyster shells.

Conclusion
The evaluation has revealed a dense area of archaeological deposits cutting the natural geology. Although the majority of the deposits were not excavated, at least 17 features were identified, several of which were intercutting. All of the excavated deposits appeared to be of 1st- or 2nd-century AD date (Roman), and surface and spoilheap finds elsewhere suggested that this was also the likely date for the remainder of the deposits revealed. The features excavated were relatively rich in artefacts with pottery, faunal remains, brick/tile/daub, oyster shell, glass, and metalwork being recovered. Finds of later Roman and post-medieval date were few, and those of Saxon or medieval date were absent.
Deep stratigraphy in the form of accumulated layers was not revealed and this absence, coupled with the surprising shallowness of the overburden (<0.45m) suggests that this area had been truncated and levelled during construction of the filling station. However, it is clear that substantial Roman archaeology survives on the site and that despite this truncation (deep in the areas of the old fuel tanks) the site has good archaeological potential.

**References**

**APPENDIX 1: Trench details**

0m at south end

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### APPENDIX 3: Pottery catalogue

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<td>104</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>233</td>
<td>4329</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Tr** Trench number  
**Surf** surface find (with location in trench, measured from south end)  
**Amp** Amphora  
**LIA–ERom** Late Iron Age to early Roman  
**Mort** Mortarium  
**OXFS** Oxfordshire fine red-slipped ware
APPENDIX 4: Animal bone summary

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Species</th>
<th>Cow</th>
<th>Cow-sized</th>
<th>Sheep</th>
<th>Sheep-sized</th>
<th>Pig</th>
<th>Horse</th>
<th>Fowl</th>
<th>Unidentified</th>
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<tr>
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<td>13</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>19</td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>&lt;1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Former Filling Station, High Street, Dorchester-on-Thames, Oxfordshire, 2001

Figure 1. Location of site within Dorchester and Oxfordshire.

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Former Filling Station, High Street, Dorchester-on-Thames, Oxfordshire, 2001

Figure 2. Location of site.
Former Filling Station, High Street, Dorchester-on-Thames, Oxfordshire, 2001

Figure 3. Trench plan showing all archaeological features.
Former Filling Station, High Street, Dorchester-on-Thames, Oxfordshire, 2001

Figure 4. Trench plans.

HSD01/36
Former Filling Station, High Street,
Dorchester-on-Thames, 2001

Figure 5. Sections.
Plate 1. Trench 1 looking north, scales: 0.50m, 1m and 2m.

Plate 2. Trench 2 looking south, scales: 0.50m, 1m and 2m.