Land adjacent to 1 Priory Terrace, Priory Lane, Bicester, Oxfordshire

An Archaeological Watching Brief

For Richkin Limited

by Andrew Mundin
Thames Valley Archaeological Services Ltd

Site Code PTB 08/54

November 2008
Summary

Site name: Land adjacent to 1 Priory Terrace, Priory Lane, Bicester, Oxfordshire

Grid reference: SP 5845 2215

Site activity: Watching Brief

Date and duration of project: 29th May – 20th November 2008

Project manager: Steve Ford

Site supervisor: James Lewis, Andrew Mundin

Site code: PTB 08/54

Area of site: c.350 sq m

Summary of results: No deposits of archaeological interest were recorded and no structural remains from the Priory were uncovered. A single sherd of medieval pottery was recovered from levels containing limestone rubble, probably originating in post-medieval times.

Location and reference of archive: The archive is presently held at Thames Valley Archaeological Services, Reading and will be deposited with Oxfordshire Museum Service in due course.

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Report edited/checked by: Steve Ford✓ 03.12.08
    Steve Preston✓ 05.12.08
Introduction

This report documents the results of an archaeological watching brief carried out at land adjacent to 1 Priory Terrace, Priory Lane, Bicester, Oxfordshire (SP 5845 2215) (Fig. 1). The work was commissioned by Ms Christina Reed, Richkin Ltd, 9 St Teresas Close, Princes Risborough, Buckinghamshire, HP27 0JH.

Planning permission had originally been granted by Cherwell District Council in 1992 (CHS 392/92), 1997 (97/00425/F) and in 2001 (01/01394/F), and more recently amendments, in 2006 (08/00861/F), have been made relating to the time period stated in the previous permissions. The permission is still subject to a condition (13) that requires an archaeological watching brief to be carried out before piling and during intrusive groundworking.

This is in accordance with the Department of the Environment’s Planning Policy Guidance, *Archaeology and Planning* (PPG16 1990), and the District Council’s policies on archaeology. The field investigation was carried out to a specification approved by Mr Richard Oram, Planning Archaeologist for Oxfordshire County Archaeological Service. The fieldwork was undertaken by James Lewis, Andrew Mundin and James McNicoll-Norbury between the 29th May and 20th November 2008. The site code is PTB 08/54.

The archive is presently held at Thames Valley Archaeological Services, Reading and will be deposited at Oxfordshire County Museum in due course.

Location, topography and geology

The site is located at the south of Bicester, within the historic core of the town. To the west lies St.Edburg’s Church, and King’s End, leading to the Causeway and Market End; which are north of Priory Lane. The site is a roughly triangular parcel of land to the south of Priory Terrace and is on relatively flat ground at a height of approximately 68m above Ordnance Datum (OD). The underlying geology is generally Cornbrash Formation Limestone although the Bure has also left alluvial deposits in the area (BGS 2002); no natural geology was uncovered on site. The River Bure (or a braided channel of it) flows south, forming the east boundary of the site.
Archaeological background

The site lies in the historic core of Bicester (Munby et al. 1975). The site lies in an area of the town that has witnessed recent investigation of the Saxon and Medieval remains that are represented in the area. Documentary evidence suggests (very indirectly) that there has been a church at the site of St. Edburg’s since the later Anglo-Saxon period. It is thought it was a Minster church, established probably in the 10th or 11th century (Blair 2003).

The site also lies within the projected extent of the eastern side of an Augustinian priory that was founded here in the later 12th century. The cloister has been speculated to be 30m north-west of the site. It is thought that the edge of the original course of the river running though this part of the town formed the priory building’s eastern limit, with a possible site boundary identified during an excavation at Proctor’s Yard to the north-west (Hull and Preston 2003). This work also identified the edge of a possible flooding zone. A stone wall was identified in archaeological works in 1968 at Bryan House (Hinton 1969). It was thought that this could be the north wall of the northern transept of the Priory Church. From this it is thought that other structural remains from the Priory could be represented on the site.

North of the site is the Causeway that links the medieval centre’s of Kings End and Market End, with origins in the 14th century. Works near Vine Cottages (PRN 16137), identified leveling of low lying marshy ground, during the post-medieval period (Oram 2008). Other investigations to the east on Priory Road, uncovered Saxon features though it was unclear if these features were boundaries or for drainage (Wallis 2006). Further afield, a Medieval layer was recorded, sealing a pit at Manor Farm, off King’s End (Mundin 2007). Work on Chapel Street also identified Anglo-Saxon activity on the street frontage (Harding and Andrews 2002). The extent of this activity westwards is unclear but is possible that it could continue along this side of the river Bure, contemporary with the Minster complex.

Objectives and methodology

The purpose of the watching brief was to excavate and record any archaeological deposits affected by groundworks. This involved examination of a geotechnical test pit and the areas of footing trenching, as well as establishing the depth and possibility of any undisturbed standing structural elements of the Priory or other medieval stonework. All elements of excavation were carried out by 360° mechanical excavator with a small toothless ditching bucket.
Results

Test pit

Prior to the main groundworks, a test pit (Fig. 3), was dug under archaeological supervision to view the stratigraphy of the ground on site (Fig. 4). Six levels of deposits were recovered in the test pit. The uppermost deposit was a topsoil (50) of dark brown clayey silt. This survived to a depth of 0.37m below ground level. Underlying this layer was a light brown silty clay with limestone fragments (51). This layer contained a single sherd of 12th -14th century pottery. It is unclear if this is sherd dates the context or is residual. This deposit was not further truncated during the excavation of ground beam footings, and was only noted at a depth of 0.67m in the test pit. Underlying this was a compact brown silty clay (52). This deposit extended to a depth of 1.07m. Underlying this was a dark brown silt deposit (53). This extended to a depth of 1.22m. Beneath this was a compact brown silty clay (54), and at the base of excavation at 1.82m, a blue clay (55) was identified and which was either alluvium or possibly the natural geology.

Groundbeam trenches

The main groundworks for the new structure comprised piles with groundbeams and it was the latter which were examined in the watching brief (Fig. 3). The groundbeams were 0.6m wide, occasionally 0.9m wide and 0.4-0.5m deep. The stratigraphy observed was similar to the upper section of that observed in the test pit above comprising topsoil above a brown silty clay with limestone fragments. No archaeological finds or deposits were recorded.

Topsoil strip

A small area of overburden stripping took place by the bank of the river, for the insertion of reinforcement cages to stabilize the bank. The spoil removal was superficial but it was noted that rubble infilling was present throughout the layers visible in the eroded bank of the stream.
Finds

Pottery by Paul Blinkhorn

A single sherd of pottery occurred in context 51. It weighed 19g, and was from the base of a bowl with an internal green glaze, in medieval Oxford ware (Oxfordshire County type-series fabric OXY. Mellor 1984; 1994). It most likely dates to the 12th-14th centuries, and is a typical find from sites of the period in the area.

Conclusion

No archaeological deposits in general nor structural remains from the Priory were uncovered or disturbed by the groundwork. Archaeological artefacts recovered were limited to a single sherd of medieval pottery. Although limestone rubble was observed on site, this seems to have been laid down after the dissolution of the priory, and probably relate to localized ground raising and stabilization in one of the marshier parts of the town, which will presumably have taken place frequently during the early post-medieval period.

References

Hinton, D, 1969, ‘TA site at Chapel Street, Bicester, Oxfordshire’, Oxoniensia 34, 15–24
Mellor, M, 1984 A summary of the key assemblages. A study of pottery, clay pipes, glass and other finds from fourteen pits, dating from the 16th to the 19th century in TG Hassall et al, Excavations at St Ebbe’s, Oxoniensia, 49, 181-219.
Oram, R, 2008, 1 Priory Terrace, Priory Lane, Bicester, design brief for a archaeological watching brief, Oxfordshire County Archaeological Service, Oxford
Wallis, S, 2006, ‘61 Priory Road, Bicester, Oxfordshire’, Thames Valley Archaeological Services draft publication report, Reading
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Figure 1. Location of site within Bicester and Oxfordshire.

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Figure 2. Location of site off Priory Lane.

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Figure 3. Location of areas observed during watching brief.
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Figure 4. Section from test pit.

68.5m O.D.

01 m

Dark brown silty clay (topsoil)

Light yellow brown silty clay with limestone fragments (Medieval rubble)

Compact brown tacky silty clay

Dark brown silt

Compact brown silty clay with limestone fragments

Alluvium?

Blue clay

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