5-12a West St Helen Street, Abingdon, Oxfordshire

An Archaeological Recording Action
for Oxford, Swindon and Gloucester Co-operative Society

by Sarah Coles and Pamela Jenkins
Thames Valley Archaeological Services Ltd

Site Code WSA04/126

October 2005
Summary

Site name: 5-12a West St Helen Street, Abingdon, Oxfordshire

Grid reference: SU 4965 9701

Site activity: Watching Brief

Date and duration of project: 20th April-19th May 2005

Project manager: Steve Ford

Site supervisor: Sarah Coles

Site code: WSA 04/126

Area of site: 925 sq m

Summary of results: A series of test pits (pile probing holes) were monitored as was a shallow overburden strip. A limestone cellar wall was observed aligned north-south along West St Helen Street frontage and a 20th-century brick culvert was located to the rear. A sherd of early post-medieval pottery was also recovered

Monuments identified: A cellar wall and a culvert

Location and reference of archive: The archive is presently held at Thames Valley Archaeological Services, Reading and will be deposited with Oxfordshire County Museum Service in due course, with accession code OXCMS:2005.64.

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Report edited/checked by: Steve Ford ✓ 12.10.05
                          Steve Preston ✓ 13.10.05
**Introduction**

This report documents the results of an archaeological watching brief carried out at 5–12a West St Helen Street, Abingdon, Oxfordshire (SU 4965 9701) (Fig. 1). The work was commissioned by Mr Simon Turoff of Bates Guest Partnership, 3 Cheapside Court, Buckhurst Road, Ascot, Berkshire, SL5 7RF on behalf of Oxford, Swindon and Gloucester Co-operative Society.

A planning consent (ABG/1145/9) has been granted by The Vale of White Horse District Council to demolish the existing Co-op store and replace it with a new store, apartments and car parking. This is subject to a condition which requires the implementation of an archaeological watching brief to be carried out during groundworks.

This is in accordance with the Department of the Environment’s Planning Policy Guidance, *Archaeology and Planning* (PPG16 1990), and the District’s policies on archaeology. The field investigation was carried out to a specification approved by Mr Hugh Coddington, Deputy County Archaeological Officer, adviser to The Vale of White Horse District Council on archaeological matters. The fieldwork was undertaken by Sarah Coles, Steve Ford and Pamela Jenkins between 20th April and 19th May 2005 and the site code is WSA04/126.

The archive is presently held at Thames Valley Archaeological Services, Reading and will be deposited at Oxfordshire Museum Service in due course, with accession code OXCMS:2005.64.

**Location, topography and geology**

The development site is located in the centre of Abingdon, on the west side of West St Helen Street opposite the junction with Lombard Street (Fig. 2). The site occupies an L-shaped parcel of land of c. 925 sq m on the street frontage. The site lies at approximately 53m above Ordnance Datum, sloping gently down back from the street frontage. The underlying geology is mapped as first terrace gravel (BGS 1971), however, where encountered, a pale yellow sand was observed on site.
Archaeological background

The archaeological potential of the site has been highlighted in a brief prepared by Mr Hugh Coddington of Oxfordshire County Archaeological Service. In summary, the site lies within the historic core of Abingdon, which was an important town in Saxon times, and especially in medieval times with the development of Abingdon abbey, which became one of the richest in the country. Various archaeological evaluations, excavations and watching briefs have been undertaken within the town and these have provided much field information with which to document the early development of the settlement. Of most note, is the recognition of the presence of a substantial Roman settlement at Abingdon (Allen 1991; 1993). Several investigations have taken place immediately to the west and south of the development area. An excavation to the south of the current development area revealed substantial stone tenement buildings dating to the 13th century which fronted onto West St Helen Street, and a cellared building dating to the 14th century. At the rear of the building two stone garderobes were located and a series of tanning pits. Late Iron Age and Early Roman defensive ditches were also located (Allen 1991). Work to the west of the site revealed a complex of archaeological deposits ranging from Roman through to post-medieval in date and included a civil war cemetery (Allen and Poore 1997).

Objectives and methodology

The purpose of the watching brief was to:

a) Excavate and record all archaeological deposits and features within the areas threatened by the proposed development.
b) Produce relative and absolute dating for deposits recorded on the site.
c) Establish the character of these deposits in attempt to define functional areas on the site such as industrial, domestic, etc
d) Produce information on the economy and local environment and compare and contrast this with the results of other excavations in the region.

The foundation design comprised piles and ground beams with no basements and no other large intrusive structures such as lift pits. Following demolition which did not involve removal of any below ground foundations, the preliminary works which involved ground disturbing activity before construction comprised the digging of test pits, and the formation of a level area for a piling platform.
Results

Test pit monitoring

In preparation for piling and testing for buried obstructions, some 31 test pits of varying dimensions and depths were excavated across the site. The test pits were dug with a narrow toothed bucket and had tapering sides such that at the lowest depths their dimensions were much less than at the surface as shown on Figure 3. The test pits are detailed in Appendix 1.

None of the test pits revealed unambiguous evidence for the presence of buried archaeological deposits, although as the holes were deep and relatively small, close inspection was not always possible. However, inspection of the arisings did not result in the recovery of large amounts of pottery, tile or animal bone that might have been expected if, say, rich medieval pits had been disturbed. Test pits at the street frontage were located within backfilled modern basements.

In test pits 7, 10, 15–18, 20–21 and 29, a deep deposit (mostly around 1m thick) of grey-green clayey silt containing flecks of chalk, and in places limestone lumps, was observed. In pit 18 this contained willow-pattern china, in pit 15 clay pipe fragments, and in pit 21, brick fragments. From this layer in pit 20 came a single large sherd of 17th-century pottery. Where the pits extended deep enough (21, 29), this layer overlay natural sand but most pits did not reach beyond this layer. The origins of this layer are unclear but it was confined to the central portion of the site and does not appear to have been particularly old.

Cellaring was most clearly observed in test pit 26, where it consisted of 13 courses of rough-hewn limestone blocks roughly dressed and bonded with pale yellow lime mortar, extending from the south end of the east edge of the pit for 4.6m, then giving way to an 18th/19th century brick wall, 20 courses high, in header and stretcher bond, which returned westward and again south within the same test pit. The cellar in test pit 2 was similarly a mix of roughly hewn limestone and brick, in this case more clearly part of a single build.

In test pit 19 a 20th-century brick and cement culvert was observed 0.60m below the surface. Below this and parallel to it was an unbonded single course of limestone blocks, which might be remnants of an earlier drain or might have been preparation for the modern drain. Both were set into made ground.

Test pits 11 and 12 at the rear of the plot came down straight onto sterile mid or dark brown clay silt for the entire depth excavated. These are the only two test pits without modern made ground or disturbance, but they were both shallow (1.5m and, 1.3m respectively). No archaeology was present at this level but the natural (sand or gravel) was not reached.
Ground reduction

The site sloped down from north-east to south-west with a fall of about 0.6m. In order to construct a level piling mat, ground reduction took place. This comprised excavation to a depth of c. 0.8m in the north-east where the site fronts onto West St Helen Street but with only 0.2m reduction in the central area and with areas at the rear of the site being at the correct level or requiring building up. By and large this ground reduction was too superificial to reveal any deposits of archaeological interest. However, with the deeper excavation along West St Helen Street, the cellar wall already observed in test pit 26 aligned north-south along the front boundary of the site was further revealed, which contained two lightwells. The lightwells were constructed of brick with the walls made from limestone as had previously been observed in test pits 2 and 26. The cellar was backfilled with brick and limestone rubble containing 19th- and 20th-century pottery.

Finds

Pottery by Paul Blinkhorn

A single sherd of pottery was noted, from test pit 20. It was a large sherd (weight 352g) from the base of a polychrome slipware pancheon or large bowl. Such pottery is coded as OXRESWL in the Oxford type series (Mellor 1984; 1994) and generally dates to the 17th century. This sherd has a fragment what appears to be a bird and a geometric border executed in yellow slip on the inner surface, underneath a variegated green and orange glaze.

Conclusion

The test pits allowed for a significant percentage of the site to be assessed. Previous building on the site has resulted in almost total truncation and all of the test pits (except two at the western extreme of the site) showed 20th-century made ground and demolition rubble, cellars, or major disturbance. A layer of grey-green clayey silt across the centre of the site appears to be of no great antiquity. Natural geology was not observed across large parts of the site, which leaves open the possibility that there may be archaeology remaining. However, no archaeological deposits have been unambiguously disturbed by the groundworks and any that may be present will have been preserved in situ.

References

Allen, T, 1993 ‘Abingdon, Abingdon Vineyard, Oxfordshire, Areas 2 and 3, the early defences’, South Midlands Archaeol 23, 64–6
# APPENDIX 1: Test pit details

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Test pit</th>
<th>Length (m)</th>
<th>Breadth (m)</th>
<th>Depth (m)</th>
<th>Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.0 (N-S)</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>0.0-0.10m Tarmarc; 0.10-0.40m concrete; 0.40m+ id grey brown clayey silt with occasional modern tile. Base level: 51.98m AOD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>8.0 (E-W)</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>0.0-0.05m brick; 0.05-0.30m concrete; 0.30m+ mortared limestone cellar wall with brick facing. Base level: 51.28m AOD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.7 (E-W)</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>0.0-0.40m brick rubble; 0.40-0.50m concrete; 0.50m+ brown grey clayey silt. Disturbed by pipework and footings of demolished building Base level: 52.90m AOD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.0 (E-W)</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>0.0-0.15m concrete; 0.15-0.80m mid grey brown clayey silt; 0.80-1.10m yellow brown natural sand. Disturbed by footings. Base level: 52.11m AOD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.0 (E-W)</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>0.0-0.40m concrete and brick rubble; 0.40-1.30 brick rubble and soil made up ground; 1.30m+ blackish grey clayey silt soil. Base level: 51.78m AOD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>2.4 (E-W)</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>0.0-0.35m concrete; 0.35-1.0m modern made ground disturbed by pipe trenches; 1.0m+ blackish grey clayey silt with occasional chalk flecks. Base level: 52.15m AOD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>5.0 (E-W)</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>0.0-1.0m modern made ground containing brick rubble; 1.0-2.0m mid dark grey green clayey silt containing frequent medium-large limestone lumps; 2.0m+ mid dark greyish black silty clay. Base level: 51.13m AOD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>3.0 (E-W)</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>0.0-0.70m modern brick and rubble made ground; 0.70-1.50 greyish brown silty clay; 1.50m+ mid yellow sand natural. Base level: 51.88m AOD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>4.0 (E-W)</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>0.0-1.0m mid pale brown clayey silt with modern brick rubble made ground; 1.0m+ modern brick rubble made ground; 1.0m+ greyish brown clayey silt with occasional chalk flecks, large sub-angular limestone blocks. Base level: 51.93m AOD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>3.0 (N-S)</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>0.0-0.80m modern brick rubble made ground; 0.80-1.60m greenish brown clayey silt. Base level: 51.86m AOD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>3.5 (N-S)</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>0.0-0.30m gravel shingle; 0.30-1.50m brown clayey silt. Base level: 52.10m AOD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>3.0 (E-W)</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>0.0-0.30m+ blackish brown clay and silt. Base level: 52.00m AOD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>2.0 (N-S)</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>0.0-0.80m greyish green clayey silt and modern brick rubble made ground; 0.80m+ mid black greyish clayey silt with occasional chalk flecks. Disturbance on western edge containing sand and modern brick. Base level: 51.66m AOD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>3.0 (E-W)</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>0.0-1.20m modern brick rubble made ground; 1.20m+ greenish grey silty clay. Base level: 52.06m AOD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>3.0 (E-W)</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>0.0-0.30m modern brick rubble made ground; 0.30m+ greyish green clayey silt (clay pipe in fill). Base level: 52.03m AOD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>3.0 (E-W)</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>0.0-0.10m Tarmarc; 0.10-0.60m concrete; 0.60-1.0m modern brick rubble made ground; 1.0m+ greyish green clayey silt with occasional charcoal and chalk flecks. Base level: 51.11m AOD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>5.0 (E-W)</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>0.0-0.40m modern brick rubble made ground; 0.40m+ greenish grey clayey silt with occasional charcoal and chalk flecks. Base level: 51.81m AOD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>2.5 (N-S)</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>0.0-0.80m modern brick rubble made ground; 0.80m+ greenish grey clayey silt containing ‘willow pattern’ china. Base level: 52.03m AOD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>4.0 (N-S)</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>0.0-0.30m modern brick rubble; 0.30-1.60m modern made ground sand and clay mix, circular-sectioned 20th-century brick and yellow cement culvert; 1.60-1.80m yellow sand (made ground) with limestone blocks in east facing not bonded aligned parallel with culvert. 1.80+ black silty clay. Base level: 51.43m AOD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>3.0 (E-W)</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>0.0-0.60m modern brick rubble made ground; 0.60-1.20m grey clayey silt with occasional modern rubble made ground; 1.20m+ greenish grey silt with occasional limestone pieces. Base level: 50.86m AOD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>3.0 (E-W)</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>0.0-0.50m modern brick rubble; 0.50-1.80m greyish green silty clay with bricks and chalk fragments; 1.80m+ yellow patchy sand possibly natural. Base level: 50.86m AOD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>3.0 (E-W)</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>0.0-0.10m Tarmarc; 0.10-0.20m concrete; 0.20-0.60m brick footings and rubble; 0.60m+ brownish grey silty clay with occasional chalk flecks. Base level: 51.83m AOD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>4.0 (E-W)</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>0.0-0.40m modern brick rubble made ground; 0.40-1.40m greenish brown clayey silt with occasional charcoal; 1.40m+ mid yellow sand probably natural. In south facing section 1m below surface- reinforced concrete 1m x 1m aligned N-S through centre of test pit. Base level: 51.62m AOD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>2.5 (N-S)</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>0.0-0.10 Tarmarc; 0.10-1.0m limestone rubble; 1.0-1.20m greyish brown silt; 1.20m+ mid yellow sand probably natural Base level: 51.96m AOD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>4.0 (N-S)</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>0.0-0.15m paving stones; 0.15-0.35m sand and modern rubble; 0.35m+ west facing limestone cellar wall of roughly hewn blocks 10 courses deep (exposed); 2.0m+ sand natural. Base level: 51.420m AOD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>7.0 (N-S)</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>0.0-0.05m paving stone; 0.05-0.20m brick on sand; 0.20-1.70m cellar wall 13 courses roughly hewn limestone blocks with pale yellow mortar; 1.70m+ yellow sand (natural?). Base level: 50.70m AOD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>10.0 (E-W)</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>0.0-0.10 Tarmarc; 0.10-0.80m modern brick rubble made ground; 0.80m+ pale yellow sand (natural). Base level: 52.10m AOD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Test pit</td>
<td>Length (m)</td>
<td>Breadth (m)</td>
<td>Depth (m)</td>
<td>Comment</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>5.0(E-W)</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>0.0-0.10m Tarmac; 0.10-0.40m modern brick rubble and concrete; 0.40m+ dark grey green clay with brick and limestone rubble made ground. Base level: 51.36m AOD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>4.0(N-S)</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>0.0-0.40m modern brick rubble and concrete made ground; 0.40-1.20m greenish grey clayey silt with occasional small pieces of limestone and charcoal flecks; 1.20m+ yellow sand (natural). Base level: 51.69m AOD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>3.0(E-W)</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>0.0-0.40m modern brick rubble; 0.40-1.20m greenish brown clayey silt with occasional limestone and brick fragments; 1.20m+ blackish grey clayey silt. Base level: 51.86m AOD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31</td>
<td>3.5(E-W)</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>0.0-0.50m modern brick rubble and concrete made ground; 0.50m greyish green with occasional charcoal flecks and brick and limestone pieces. Base level: 51.65m AOD</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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Figure 1. Location of site within Abingdon and Oxfordshire.

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Figure 2. Location of site on West St Helen Street

Scale 1:500
Cellar wall and light wells

brick culvert

Infilled cellars

Figure 3. Location of test pits

Scale 1:250
Test pit 6

N

Concrete

S

Made ground

Blackish grey clayey silt
with chalk flecks

Base of test pit
(natural geology not revealed)

52.15m AOD

Figure 4. Representative sections test pit 6.
Plate 1. Test Pit 10 looking west, horizontal scale 0.5m, vertical scale 2m.

Plate 2. Test Pit 12 looking north-east, horizontal scale 2m, vertical scale 1m.