

5302 Oxford University: Physics Building

Site summary

Cotswold Archaeology are currently carrying out an archaeological excavation in advance of the construction of the new Oxford University Physics Building. The archaeological works are being undertaken in accordance with a Brief issued by David Radford, Archaeologist, Oxford City Council Heritage and Specialist Services Team.

Archaeological background

A desk-based assessment of the site was undertaken by Cotswold Archaeology to gauge the archaeological potential of the site prior to the excavation, the results of which are summarised below.

Considerable prehistoric activity has been recorded within the vicinity of the site. A Neolithic pit alignment and a Bronze Age ditch have been identified to the south-east of the site. Further evidence of Neolithic activity has been recorded south-west of the site at an excavation at Kendrew Quadrangle where a probable Neolithic Henge was identified.

A substantial focus of probable prehistoric activity lies to the north of the site within the University Parks, where a number of parch marks and soil marks have been recorded which seem to be part of an extensive Bronze Age barrow cemetery. To the south-east of these, excavations on the site of the Rex Richards Building and the Rodney Porter Building identified two concentric ring ditches of a Bronze Age barrow. In addition to this, evidence of Iron Age occupation was recorded as ditches and pits cut into the fill of the Bronze Age features.

Iron Age pottery and animal bone from a probable pit were recorded at the Clarendon Labs during improvement work in 1956. A series of Iron Age linear features have also been recorded on a number of occasions during ground works within the vicinity of the site, which appear to indicate a well-developed late prehistoric agricultural landscape.

Excavations at Parks Road immediately to the west of the site recorded a Romano-British ditch and a skeleton. A focus of 2nd-century AD Roman activity has been identified to the south of the site. Several ditches and posthole groups were identified, along with a single grave; whilst further burials were located within the ditches. Further evidence of Roman activity has been identified to the south-east of

the site where seven north-south aligned ditches of a probable Roman date were recorded.

Although there is no evidence of Saxon activity within the vicinity of the site, recent excavations at Kendrew Quadrangle to the south-west of the site identified a mass 'Saxon' grave set outside the northern town walls.

Oxford served as the Royalist capital during the Civil War, and the defences surrounding the town have been mapped by various sources. Evidence from the First Edition Ordnance Survey Map of 1876 suggests that the defences ran close to the north of the site. Immediately to the east of the site during the construction of the Clarendon Laboratory, several ditches, up to 4m deep, were identified consistent with the cartographic depictions of the Civil War defences.

An archaeological evaluation of the site was undertaken by Cotswold Archaeology in 2010. Four trenches were excavated. No prehistoric artefacts or features were found. A single sherd of Roman pottery was recovered from a post-medieval soil. A series of wheel ruts were encountered. The ruts contained residual medieval pottery and late 17th to 18th-century clay tobacco pipes. A ditch, possibly later recut, a bedding trench and a possible quarry pit had all been backfilled with soil and contained 19th-century pottery. These are interpreted as horticultural or landscaping features and probably relate to the use of the site as part of the University Parks. A well-developed subsoil and topsoil was recorded in each trench and contained 19th-century ceramics.

Results of the excavation so far

Prehistoric –

No evidence of prehistoric activity within the site has been recorded.

Roman –

A possible Roman ditch aligned parallel with Parks Road has been identified along the western edge of the site and probably formed one side of a field or settlement enclosure.

Medieval –

Two parallel ditches running through the centre of the site, one of which contained sherds of medieval pottery may represent former field boundaries.

Civil War –

Although the First Edition Ordnance Survey Map of 1876 suggested that the civil war defences ran to the north of the site within the area now occupied by the park, the initial results of the archaeological excavation suggests otherwise.

Two substantial east-west aligned ditches measuring in excess of a combined 9m wide and 3m deep bisecting the centre of the site have been excavated. These contained artefacts including pottery and coins consistent with a 17th-century civil war date in addition to large quantities of animal bone and other domestic debris. The smaller ditch stops short of the Clarendon Laboratory, whereas the larger of the two ditches turns to the north as it nears the front door of the laboratory, before turning to the east, heading beneath the north-west corner of the building, almost certainly joining with the ditches revealed during the construction of the laboratory in the 1950's.

Evidence for an associated defensive bank along the southern side of the ditches has been revealed and artefacts recovered from the uppermost ditch fills suggest it was used as the 'town dump' in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Modern –

A number of modern quarry pits and horticultural or landscaping features have also been excavated and probably relate to the use of the site as part of the University Parks.

Ray Holt, Project Officer.

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