

## **EOXP TEST PIT 32**

### **24 Abberbury Road, Iffley**

**Area excavated:** 2m x 2m

**Date of Excavation:** 10<sup>th</sup> April 2012

**Conditions:** Generally cool and dry with sunny spells but occasional heavy showers.

**Method of excavation:** spade, trowel and mattock. Excavated soil sieved.

**Excavators:** Sheila Fairford, Mandy and Sam Roberts, Leon Quelch, Tim Lee, Phil Price, Pete Banks, Tricia Hallam, Graham Jones, Olaf Bayer, Jane Harrison.

**Report by:** Tim Lee

**GPS location and height over sea level:** SP 5294 0368, 81.5m OD

### **Introduction**

Several test pits have already been excavated in the Iffley area, including three on Abberbury Road - test pits 11, 12 and 21. All three of these sites provided evidence of Roman activity – pottery, including fragments of mortaria and a 3<sup>rd</sup> century Roman coin of Postumus. To the east of this site there is extensive evidence of Roman manufacturing activity, particularly in respect of pottery production. One of the goals of this excavation was to establish whether the evidence of Roman activity in Iffley extended in the direction of other sites to the east.

The garden in which this test pit was to be dug already held a claim to fame in that it was in the supposed location of a very significant find late 19<sup>th</sup> century - a bronze Saxon brooch which is now held at the British Museum (see right). The Museum describes the brooch as *'a silver gilt S-brooch, set with garnets; bird head terminals and ribbing on panels between gold foil backed settings'*. The Oxfordshire Historic Environment record PRN 3655 also describes the brooch, noting that one of the bird head terminals has been lost. The OHER report also observed that the discovery of the brooch *'could indicate the presence of an inhumation and may be suggestive of an inhumation cemetery'*.



**Saxon brooch found in 1874  
near site of test pit**

The current householders were told by a previous owner of the house that the precise location of the find was under a greenhouse on the south-east side of their rear garden. (But given that the house was built many decades after the finding of the brooch, this claim perhaps cannot be relied upon). The householders intend, in the near future, to replace the greenhouse and this will provide an opportunity for an excavation of the putative find site. In the meantime this excavation would establish whether there was any evidence of Saxon or Roman activity in the area immediately adjacent to the find site.

As well as this excavation, two smaller 1m<sup>2</sup> test pits (TPS 33 and 34) were dug at the same time in this garden, to the south-west of the find site.

### **Summary of Excavation**

This test pit was dug in the back garden of a large detached house built in the 1930s. The site is close to the top of Rose Hill, the highest hill in this part of Oxford (c 89m OD max.), overlooking Iffley village and central and east Oxford. Historic maps show that it was used for agriculture prior to the building of the house. The garden slopes downwards from south to

north and the test pit was located in the centre of the lawn, approximately 20m to the north-west of the brooch find site.

The 2m by 2m test pit was dug to a depth of approximately 0.57m. Two 0.5m x 0.5m sondages were dug in the north-west and south-east corners of the pit. The natural geology was reached and comprised worn limestone. Excavation was primarily in 0.1m spits and no clear boundaries between layers were observed.

The first spit (101) was a yellowish-brown garden soil with inclusions of smooth round pebbles, angular stones and flecks of charcoal. Two small lenses of charcoal about 20mm in diameter were apparent to the north and south of the pit. The most consistent finds were angular fragments of grey-black Bakelite 20mm x 20mm x 5mm. Other finds included glass, brick fragments, 3 iron nails, a small fragment of slate, two small blue and white china fragments, one piece of oyster shell, one piece of burnt flint and one animal bone.

The soil of the second spit (102) was also yellowish-brown and the inclusions were similar to (101) plus some shell fragments. Finds were again dominated by numerous fragments of the Bakelite material. Other finds were four pieces of CBM, two pieces of clay pipe, modern glass, one piece of white glazed pottery and fragments of clinker and coke.

In view of the large size of the excavation it was decided to dig a 0.5m x 0.5m sondage (103) – sondage B, in the south east corner of the pit. This was excavated with trowel and light mattocking. The colour of the soil changed slightly and was mid-yellow to grey-brown. Inclusions were limited to very occasional limestone flecks. The Bakelite fragments were still evident, but less numerous. The only other finds were one piece of glass and two pottery sherds. A further spit in sondage B (104) produced inclusions of poorly sorted limestone fragments and no finds; it was concluded that we had reached natural limestone geology.

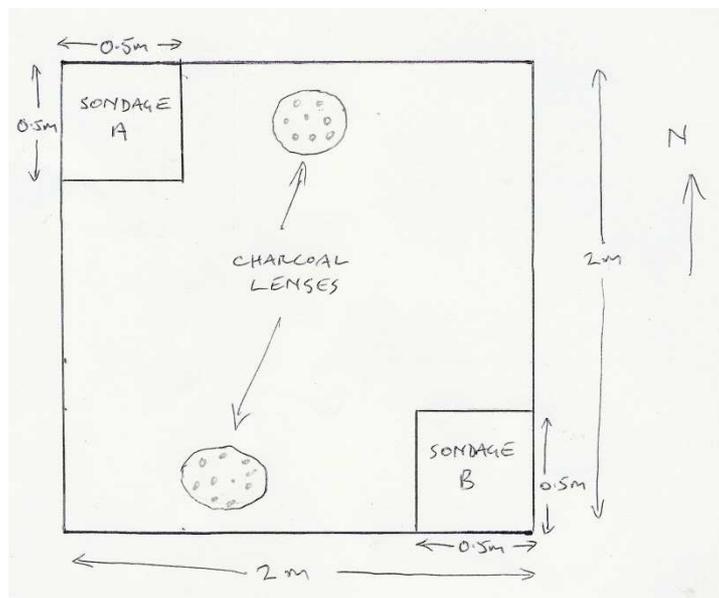
A second 0.5m x 0.5m sondage (sondage A) was dug in the north-west corner of the pit and the first spit from this sondage (105) produced inclusions of very occasional charcoal flecks, small sub-angular limestone fragments and occasional sub-rounded stone fragments. Finds included more Bakelite fragments, glass fragments, a ferrous object and a small pottery fragment. A second spit in sondage A (106) produced inclusions similar to (105) but with a slightly raised frequency of charcoal inclusions. Finds were more Bakelite fragments, though less than in (105) and one burnt stone. The final spit in sondage A (107) produced inclusions of very occasional charcoal flecks and finds of two pieces of clay pipe stem. Excavation with trowel and mattock continued until natural deposits were reached.

### **Interpretation**

Given the proximity of this excavation to such a significant Saxon find there was some disappointment that it seems to have produced no evidence of either Saxon or Roman activity. The absence of any Saxon finds suggests that this is unlikely to be the site of an inhumation cemetery. The most consistent find, the scatter of fragments of Bakelite-like material, may be a result of clay pigeon shooting. The other finds were indicative of building, agricultural and domestic activity, some of which may pre-date the construction of the house.

Spit/ context	Type of deposit	Description	Soil sample	Drawings
<b>Spit (101)</b>	Layer below turf (100)	0.05m of turf removed by hand; spit 0.1 deep. Yellowish brown silty clay. 5% smooth round pebbles, <30mm-40mm; <3% charcoal in two lenses 20mm in diameter; <5% angular stone >150mm x 40mm. <b>Finds:</b> 50+ fragments of angular grey/black Bakelite-like material, 20mm x 20mm x 5mm; large glass fragment; 4 x brick fragments; 3 x iron nails; 1 x small burnt flint fragment; 1 x oyster shell fragment; 1 x small slate fragment; 2 x small blue and white china fragment; 1 x animal bone. <b>Garden soil with domestic and building debris. Possible evidence of clay pigeon shooting on site, prior to construction of the house?</b>		Sketch plan
<b>Spit (102)</b>	Layer below (101)	Diffuse boundary with (101) above and similar inclusions but fewer charcoal flecks; small shell fragments present. <b>Finds:</b> More Bakelite fragments together with 4 x CBM <80mm x 50mm x 10mm; 2 x clay pipe fragments (stem and bowl); clinker and coke. <b>Further evidence of disturbance related to house building and domestic activity. Agricultural activity prior to construction of house.</b>		
<b>Spit (103)</b> Sondage B 0.5m x 0.5m in SE corner of pit	Layer below (102)	Mid yellow grey/brown slightly silty clay. > 1% very occasional > 0.1mm limestone flecks <b>Finds:</b> Occasional Bakelite fragments; 1 x glass fragment; 2 x pottery sherds. <b>Origins similar to contexts above – post-medieval plough soil?</b>		
<b>Spit (104)</b> Second spit in sondage B	Layer below (103)	Mid-yellow grey/brown silty clay (more yellow than (102)). Poorly sorted sub-angular limestone fragments between 1mm <sup>3</sup> and 10mm x 4mm x 2mm. <b>Finds:</b> none <b>Contact with natural limestone geology</b>		
<b>Spit (105)</b> Sondage A 0.5m x 0.5m in NW corner of pit	Layer below (102)	Mid-yellowish brown silty clay with very small sand particles. Very occasional limestone flecks; small sub-angular limestone fragments; occasional sub-rounded stone fragments. <b>Finds:</b> Bakelite fragments; glass fragments; 1 x ferrous object; 1 x RB small pottery fragment. Arbitrary split between (102) above and (106) below. <b>Post medieval plough soil with C20th intrusions.</b>		
<b>Spit (106)</b>	Layer	Mid-yellowish brown silty clay with very small		

Second spit in sondage A	below (105)	sand particles. Inclusions similar to (105) above but with slightly raised frequency and size of charcoal flecks. <b>Finds:</b> Bakelite fragments, less than (105) above; 1 x burnt stone <b>Post medieval plough soil with C20<sup>th</sup> intrusions.</b>		
<b>Spit (107)</b> Third spit in sondage A	Layer below (106)	Mid-yellowish grey clay silt with no sand particles. Very occasional charcoal flecks. <b>Finds:</b> 2 x clay pipe stem Indistinct boundary with (106) above. Finds due to interference. <b>Contact with natural limestone geology</b>		



Sketch Plan





Looking S



Sondage A looking W



Sondage B looking W