

EOXP TEST PIT 64

Location: 47 Oxford Road, Littlemore.

Date of excavation: 15-16 June 2013.

Area of excavation: 1.0m x 1.0m.

Weather conditions:

Day 1: Overcast, with heavy showers in the late afternoon.

Day 2: Overcast with light rain during the day.

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Report by: Kristyn Maguire.

GPS Location and OD: SP 53672 03066, 78m OD

I. Abstract

The medieval village of Littlemore was a tiny agricultural community miles outside the walled city of Oxford (Lobel 2008, 206). Today it is located approximately 2.5 miles (4km) southeast of the city centre of Oxford, between Rose Hill, Blackbird Leys, Cowley and Sandford-upon-Thames. Previous archaeological investigations have revealed that Littlemore was an important medieval village with two centres. However, more in-depth study is needed to determine its original size (Jane Harrison, personal correspondence, June 15, 2013). In order to further research this phenomenon and provide a grounded overview of archaeology throughout the settlement, the East Oxford Archaeology and History Project conducted a series of test pits throughout the village core from the 15th to the 16th of June 2013. One of these test pits was undertaken in the grounds of a 19th century semi-detached stone house, located at 47 Oxford Road, Littlemore. This report will provide a detailed analysis into the small scale excavation conducted at this site. Further information about this project and the Littlemore test pits can be found at:

<https://www.archeox.net/investigations>.

II. Background to the Site

a. Historical References

Littlemore is situated upon the settled plateaux landscape, 15 metres above the Thames Floodplain (Oxford City Council 2008, 4). The underlying geology is mapped as calcareous rocks and mudstone (National Environment Research Council, Soils Portal 2013).

Littlemore only became a recognised parish during the late 19th century and, as such, the early development of the civil parish is somewhat confused (VCH 1957). This is due to the fact that Littlemore was originally a township split between the nearby parish of Iffley and the parish of St Mary the Virgin, Oxford. The connection with Iffley parish is believed to date from the 12th century, and the parish of St Mary's can be traced back to the Norman times. In medieval times, Littlemore was a tiny agricultural community miles outside the walled city of Oxford. While the historical evidence for the parish is not clear, it seems that the total area of the ancient township, or liberty as it was called, was 846 acres. Records from 1877 show that five detached parts (613 acres) including Littlemore village were owned by St Mary's and the rest (i.e. 233 acres) by Iffley. Historical records show that the village was comprised of only seven households listed in 1086 AD. However, by 1279 the number had increased to 16 households in the Littlemore manor and 10 or 12 in Iffley (Lobel 1957, 206-208). One of the earliest surviving maps of the area is Thomas Langdon's 1605 map of Corpus Christi College's holdings in Littlemore. The map clearly shows the layout of the roads as they appear today: Oxforde Way, the road from Church Cowley to Littlemore and the way to Dorchester (Sandford Road) (Oxford City Council 2008, 6). The total land mass of Littlemore parish also increased in 1885 with the Iffley part of the liberty and some additional acres transferred to Littlemore civil parish, thus bringing Littlemore parish's land mass up to 877 acres. Under the Oxford Extension Act of 1928, a further 161 acres were transferred from Iffley and Littlemore, making the area of the modern parish 1,038 acres (Lobel 1957, 206-207).

Despite the growth of Littlemore into a self-contained east Oxford suburb, the historic core of the village has been retained with many surviving historic buildings and the original street plan. “The traditional styles of buildings span the 15th to 19th centuries and are archetypal of an evolved village settlement. There are 13 statutorily listed buildings within the conservation area, including farm houses, the church of St Mary and St Nicholas, Newman’s College and Lawn Upton House” (Oxford City Council 2008, 1). Earlier test pits conducted in Littlemore by the East Oxford Archaeology and History Project have shown that older homes in the village were built on land less able to sustain cultivation because the bedrock was so close to the surface. This directly corresponds with the Anglo-Saxon origin of the place name ‘Littlemore’ which simply translates as “little area less good for growing things”. Littlemore remained a farming hamlet until the mid-1800s, sparsely populated with farm cottages, surrounded by open fields. According to Lobel (1955) at the end of the 19th century Littlemore still maintained its rural character. “Two farms remained and fields stretched almost unbroken to Iffley Turn. Beyond St. George’s and the new Cheshunt Terrace (c.1890), the road to Cowley remained a country lane with a few straggling houses and a group known as ‘Up Town’ before it reached ‘Van Diemens’ on the border of the parish” (Lobel 1995, 206).

From the mid-19th century onwards, new development has forever altered the ‘face’ of Littlemore. The historic core of the village, while still clearly discernible, has been completely engulfed by 20th century development. Thereby, as Oxford City Council (2008, 18) eloquently states, Littlemore has “continued to evolve, reflecting its change in function from small farming community, mid-19th century development into a self-contained village....to a 20th century suburb of Oxford”.

b. Archaeological Investigations

Numerous excavations have taken place in and around Littlemore. These previous studies have helped to map the changing nature of land use and occupation in the area, from the Neolithic period to Roman pottery production, working and residential medieval buildings, and post-medieval structures. The extension of the Littlemore Science Park produced evidence for Mesolithic, Neolithic, early Bronze Age and mid-late Bronze Age activity (Moore et al. 2001, 163). At the Science Park site, sherds of early Iron pottery and also three Iron Age (one from the later Middle Iron Age) pits containing Beaker pottery were discovered. According to Moore et al (2001, 163) roman pottery was present on the site both in the form of a general scatter thought to represent manuring of fields and by deliberate selection and importation onto the site by Anglo-Saxons. A settlement of the Anglo-Saxon period was represented by the presence of sunken featured buildings while a medieval farmstead had been destroyed by a 19th-century limestone quarry.

Roman pottery and kiln remains were also recovered during Littlemore Hospital’s construction in 1843 (Ford 1995). The construction of an extension to Littlemore Hospital in 1954 led to the discovery of another kiln with its stokehole and related pottery scatter (SP 533 024-centered). Kiln remains have been quite prevalent in this area, with many kiln sites plotted between Rose Hill and Cowley (Henig and Booth 2000; Young 1977; Challis 2005). An excavation at Sandford Road (RPSC 1996) revealed medieval pits below a late medieval plough soil and a post-medieval boundary wall. Roman and Saxon pottery sherds were also recovered from later deposits, thus suggesting that there may have been an earlier settlement present. At Lawn Upton School, a medieval lane boundary was also discovered (PRN 15837). During the construction of the Blackbird Leys Peripheral Road, now known as Genoble Road, further evidence of Roman activity, Iron Age and some Bronze Age activity was found, thus demonstrating the continuity of the site. Following excavation, an Iron Age settlement was located, comprising a double ring ditch feature with a large outer ditch and a less substantial later inner ditch (SP 555 020).

The East Oxford Archaeology and History Project Minchery Priory excavation which finished in November 2012 also unearthed worked flint, revealing prehistoric activity in the area. The area around Minchery Farm has been subject to a number of archaeological evaluations and watching

briefs since four Roman pottery kilns were found at Sandford Sewage Farm (NGR SP 5499 0227) and exacted in 1879, along with the discovery that about an acre slightly further east was covered with pottery debris (SP 5540 0228). Further Roman discoveries followed a Roman egg-shaped urn found at Minchery Farm in 1920 (SP 5485 0229) and a succession of discoveries of pottery, kilns and coins within 1 km of Littlemore Science Park.

III. Test Pit Aims and Methodology

The property at 47 Oxford Road, Littlemore is a stone built mid-19th century detached cottage positioned at the junction of Oxford Road and the Eastern Bypass (refer to figure 1). The location of the property is of particular interest to the East Oxford Archaeology and History Project as it falls within the triangle of Cowley Road and Oxford Road. Like most of the historic properties in Littlemore that date from the 18th to 19th centuries, (Oxford City Council 2008), 47 Oxford Road has been interspersed with 20th century infill. This is clearly evident in the backyard of the property, which is significantly more raised than the foundations of the house. Level with the house is a modern patio extension, which encompasses the rear of the property. The test pit was located 9.93 metres from the boundary patio and approximately 9 metres from the back garden shed - refer to Appendix 1. The test pit was excavated according to a single context recording system, with all finds bagged according to their context number.

The slightly undulating turfed slopes gently from the raised section of the back yard, around the house, to the rear fence line of the garden. Mature trees were noted in the north-east and south-west corners of the garden. The test pit was situated in the south-east corner of the garden. This location was chosen as it was a fair distance from some of the mature trees in the garden (thus reducing the likely of encountering significant rooting). The owner of the property, Lynn Evans, had discovered ceramic wares (including medieval sherds) in the vegetable garden directly beside the test pit, and it was hypothesised this area could have also possibly served as a midden for the house, based on its distance from the dwelling. Thereby, along with the other test pits in Littlemore, it was envisioned

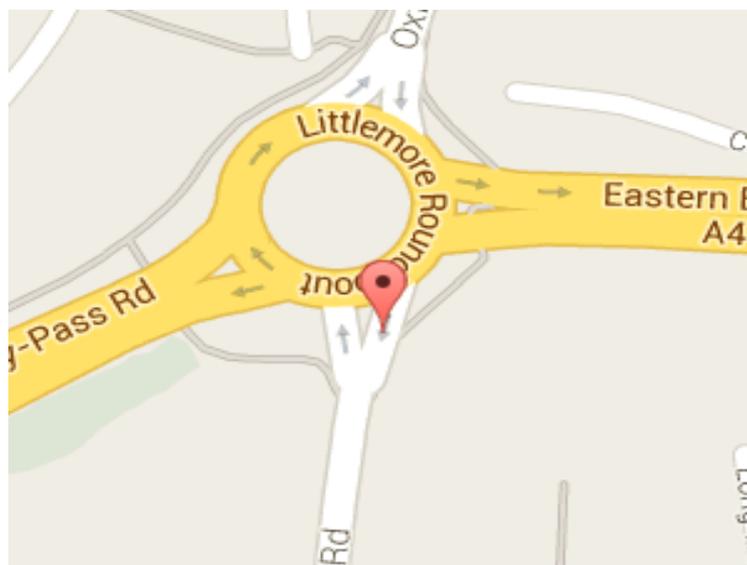


Figure 1 - Location of 47 Oxford Road, Littlemore. Image courtesy of Google Maps.

that this test pit could help fill the following aims:

1. To gain an understanding of the depth of archaeological deposits within the village;

2. To identify levels of archaeological preservation throughout the village;
3. To gain an understanding of the distribution of the period-based activity at different locations within the village.
4. To identify different types of land use throughout the village.

IV. Results

The first context number Context (100) consisted of turf and topsoil. A mattock was used to loosen the soil, followed by hand shovels and trowels. Context (101) was 80mm below the turf to 150mm in depth. This first layer was dry, dark brown, sandy silt topsoil with 5 per cent rounded river pebbles (25mm - 40mm in size), limestone flecks and rotting tree roots. Charcoal was also found lightly scattered throughout the soil but there was a slightly higher concentration in the north-east corner. Finds in this layer included fragmented pieces of stoneware, pottery, glass, coarse building materials (CBM), and animal bone. The glazed stoneware sherds, (possibly early modern in date) were residual. Finds appeared to be moderately mixed in date; as items that were clearly modern in origin were also found in this context together with medieval and possibly Victorian sherds; the modern finds included the end of a fluorescent tube, a gun cartridge and pieces of broken plastic. There was a moderate amount of root activity in this area but there was a clearly defined boundary. Therefore, it is likely that Context (101) was deposited at the site in an attempt to 'raise' the height of the back garden.



Figure 2- Top soil in test pit 64 immediately after the removal of the turf layer (Context 100).



Figure 3 - Context (101) following the removal of Context (100), which consisted of turf and topsoil.

Context (102) was reached at 150mm – 270mm. This layer, like Context (101), was dug with a mattock, trowel and hand shovel. Context (102) was a dry, mid-yellowish brown clayey sand (50/50) layer. It had moderately sorted round river pebbles that were approximately 20mm-70mm in length, with a small amount of limestone and charcoal. Finds included one brass button (possibly Victorian) two pieces of flint, a limited amount of coarse building material, ceramic sherds (possibly Victorian), glass, and bone. The boundary between Context (101) and Context (102) was clearly defined, with Context (102) possessing a noticeably yellowish hue. The majority of this context showed minor root contamination. However, in the north-west corner there appeared to be evidence of bioturbation caused by roots. A tree root was found at the north-east side of the trench with the root bowl measuring 150mm wide and 300mm in length. This root bowl was later given the Context number (105) as discussed later in this report. There were also more heavy inclusions of charcoal dispersed throughout this layer than seen in Context (101). A heavy inclusion of charcoal was found at the south-east side of the trench at a depth of 210mm with dimensions of 200mm by 200mm; this was later given the context number (104).

Heavy rain in the afternoon halted the excavation.



Figure 4 – Context 102. Notice the bioturbation caused by large roots at the top right of the picture. Bottom, left, also shows evidence of charcoal.



Figure 5 – Root bowl in line with Context (102). This root basin was later given the context number (105).

Context (103) was found directly under Context (102) at a depth of approximately 270mm. It was also a dry mid-yellowish brown, very similar hue to Context (102), but with a more noticeable clay consistency. Root matter, worms and finds were significantly reduced in this layer. Finds included a nail, one piece of Blue Leeds ceramic ware, blue and white transfer ware, and stoneware. It had a minimum amount of small rounded pebbles (36mm-25mm), but a greater inclusion of charcoal in the south-east corner; this charcoal inclusion was given the context number (104) later in the excavation.

Context (103) seems to have been disturbed by Context (105). Context (105) was a substantial root bowl and, thus, was given its own context number. Context (105) was approximately 300mm in length and 150mm wide.

The excavation team originally believed they had hit the natural layer underneath Context (103) at a depth of 640mm, with large pieces of rounded pebbles seen at this level. However, a large piece of worked flint was then located in the north-east corner, at a depth of approximately 270mm, thereby suggesting that the natural soil layer had yet to be reached. Therefore, as no other finds (roots, worms or artefacts) had been found in Context (103), it was determined that this context by sectioned in order to determine the depth of the natural layer. The trench was sectioned 250mm from both sides – and thus 500mm in width of Context (103) was excavated.



Figure 6 - Context (103) was sectioned, with the middle 500mm of the trench being excavated further.

In order to reach the natural bedrock the 500 mm trench was then divided in half again. The natural layer was finally reached at 640mm in depth. The trench was then further sectioned in order to determine the depth of Context (104) and Context (105).

Context (104) was located underneath Context (102), in line with Context (103.) As previously mentioned fine pieces of charcoal were first noted in Context (102) but became a denser accumulation in Context (103). It measured 300mm wide by 202mm. This heavy accumulation of charcoal was predominately composed of fine ash and small to medium sized fragments. The last traces of charcoal were removed at a depth of 280mm. Inside Context (104) were two pieces of metal, possibly a horse shoe or a piece from the bottom of a boot. A possible piece of bone as well as some coarse building materials was found in this fill. Context (104) was removed and collected as an environmental sample.



Figure 7 – Close-up picture of Context (104), the charcoal layer before it was excavated.

The bottom of Context (105) was reached at a level of 360mm. Context (105) was a dry, mid blackish brown, sandy silt (50/50), and was very similar to Context (101); thus reinforcing the bioturbation theory. There was one piece of burnt stone found in this layer, possibly limestone (40mm x 25mm). Other finds included a piece of stoneware, pottery (terracotta) and a piece of clay pipe. Context (105) appeared to be in line with Context (102) and cut down to the same level as Context (103).



Figure 8 – Close-up of Context (105).



Figure 9 – The bottom of Context (105), shown in the bottom left of this picture, was reached at a depth of 360mm.



Figure 10 – The end stage of the excavation following the discovery of the natural soil layer and removal of Context (104) and Context (105).

V. Conclusion

Test pit 64 did not provide any evidence of medieval activity, either domestic occupation or work buildings. Only a very small number of medieval sherds (possibly two) were located in the test pit. Evidence of bioturbation was discovered in the north-west quadrant, which has caused some artefacts (found in Context (105) from other periods to be deposited in earlier layers. The test pit, however, did show evidence of human use through the application of burning. The environmental sample taken from this layer may help determine the cause of the burning.