

TEST PIT TP24

Manor House, Sandford Road, Littlemore, Oxford.

Area excavated: 1m x 1m in lawn

Date of Excavation: 3rd September 2011

Conditions: Dry and Overcast

Excavators: Peter Banks, Tim Lee, Charlotte Michael, the two nieces of the owner and David Pinches.

Report by: The Team and PB

GPS location and height over sea level: SP 5360 0275, 70.2m OD

Summary of Excavation

The site of the test pit was the Manor House in Littlemore, Oxford. The building was constructed in 1530 and would have been at the heart of the western centre of the bifocal settlement of Littlemore. The test pit was to be one of four excavated over the weekend of the 3rd and 4th September; one of the others being a short distance away in the neighbouring property of the Community Hall which backs onto the Manor House. (Our proximity to the HQ at the Community Hall was fortuitous as it allowed easy access to cups of tea over the garden fence!) The other two were taking place in Long Lane a short distance away to the North East of the first two pits.

Upon speaking with the owner of the property Diane Mackenzie an area of the garden was pointed out as having once been the site of a driveway which used to be used as a side entrance to the property. This was clearly visible as a shallow ditch curving around a circular raised area situated centrally in the lawn and was presumably once an area of raised flower bedding. With these features in mind it was decided to site the test pit further down the garden. A shallow ditch where the grass appeared to grow a lot greener ran roughly north south along the length of the garden and it was decided to position the test pit centrally in the garden with the eastern portion of the pit over this visible feature to see if this represented any archaeological features.

The test pit was measured in and aligned north south. The first context below the turf (Context - **101**) was dug to a depth of 0.12m, 0.14m and 0.15m. These measurements were taken along the eastern edge of the test pit at the northern corner 0.5m along the edge and in the southern corner respectively. (As indeed were all depth measurements to follow.) Context **101** proved to be a loose dry layer of garden topsoil. It was a dark yellowish brown in colouration and was fine sandy silt in consistency. It contained a small quantity of pebbles/stones varying proportions (0.07m – 0.1m in diameter) The layer also contain approximately 10% charcoal shards. These shards were angular and between 0.1m – 0.2 m in size. The finds consisted of a few pieces of pottery, bone and the ubiquitous clay pipe stems (but no bowls). There was also a large amount of iron nails (some square shafted) and CBM (both roof tile and glazed floor tile). Perhaps the choice find from this context was a slate stylus. Despite the best efforts of the team to locate the test pit a safe distance away from any of the larger vegetation at the boundaries of the

garden we still came upon a quantity of sizable roots in the layer. The reason for this would become apparent as we dug deeper. At the depths mentioned above there was a gradual change to the next context.

The two young nieces of the home owner greatly added to the work effort of excavating Context **101**. A number of recently buried children's toys were discovered during the excavation of this layer including a large silver coloured coin which initially excited the excavators of the test pit until it was explained that this had in fact come from a children's toy cooker set and had been deposited within the last few years. Grateful to have recovered the missing piece to coin was reunited with the aforementioned cooker set. It is not often an archaeologist has the opportunity to question the depositor of archaeological finds about their origin and meaning!

The transition to Context **102** was marked by an increase in the pebble and stone inclusions in the context and a slight and gradual change in colouration. Context **102** was excavated to a depth of 0.2m, the depth of the next spit level. The layer was also a loose dry layer. Its colouration was a light greyish brown and its composition was sandy silt. The occurrence of the small pebbles (0.07m – 0.1m in diameter) became more frequent. There were also a number of larger angular pieces of grey and limestone rocks. There was a very large amount of clinker and charcoal pieces within this layer, approximately 10-12%. A charcoal lens was visible in the western half of the pit and was approximately 0.2m in diameter. There was also a lens of ash in the south western quadrant of the test pit, again approximately 0.2m in diameter. The finds included a few pieces of pottery, almost certainly post medieval in date, a small quantity of animal bone and some burnt stone. The quantity of iron nails and CBM also increase from the layer above. Rather interestingly 3 9mm bullet cartridges were recovered from this layer and a small piece of lead runoff. The bioturbation from the plant roots continued as a constant from the context above.

There was clear evidence for burning within this layer with the large quantity of charcoal, clinker and ash within it. Whether this burning took place in situ was unlikely due to the lack of burnt natural material (primarily stones) found within it. It is more likely that the burnt material found in this layer represents the deposition of burnt waste in this area of the lawn.

Discussions with the owner of the property also revealed that similar square shafted nails had been recovered from floor boards within the Manor House itself. This raises the possibility that the square shafted nails found during this excavation could have had a similar purpose within some similar structure in the area and may date to around the same time period as the flooring in the Manor House.

Context **103** shared largely similar characteristics to Context **102** as it was only differentiated due to the spit level at 0.2m. It went to a depth of 0.28m, 0.29m and 0.25m. It was a dry loose layer, mid greyish brown in colour and again sandy silt in consistency. There were few inclusions in this layer save for a few small angular pebbles/stones > 0.2m in diameter. The finds from this layer included 6-10 pieces of pottery. Some pieces were clearly from the same piece of pottery and one piece contained writing "CKLING... OTTLE"

and was perhaps once used as a “pickling bottle.” There were also numerous pieces of CBM, 2-3 pieces of animal bone, 6 iron nails and a large number of pieces of slate.

At a depth 0.2m, 0.23m and 0.22m a layer of compacted stones was discovered across the entire base of the test pit. This went to the depth of the layer of Context **103**. It appeared to be a levelled floor surface, approximately 1-2 inches deep and made up of large angular stone pieces. This layer had been laid directly on top of the natural limestone bedrock, the presence of which at such a shallow depth was a surprise in itself as we had expected to be digging in an area where the bedrock was supposed to be sandy.

The owner commented that when work had been done by the previous owners of the property to replace a garden wall in the property between 40 and 57 years ago the workmen had commented on the fact that the foundations of the wall were particularly shallow and this could be accounted for by the fact that the bedrock had itself been so shallow. The location of this limestone bedrock was made all the more surprising by the fact that the test pit in the neighbouring Community Hall had already been dug to a depth much deeper than this test pit and the nature of the soil did appear to be the sand anticipated prior to the beginning of the excavation. The test pit in the Community Hall was no more than 50m to the North West of the location of the test pit in the manor house.

The existence of what appeared to be a limestone outcrop in the surrounding sandy soil may also account for the positioning of such an important building in Littlemore centre back in the 16th century. Although not possessed of the knowledge of geology we have today, the people of the day may have had a more instinctive understanding of the best location to construct their houses and settlements.

The materials recovered from this test pit and the compacted stone surface which may have been a levelled floor surface bore a striking resemblance to the materials used to construct an out house to the south east of the test pit. The owner explained to us that this out house was once used as a stables and fronted onto the driveway mentioned above that was once used as a side entrance to the property. It may be that the presence of building materials such as the CBM roof and floor tile and the iron nails together with the potential levelled floor surface may indicate the location of another outhouse. The exact orientation and scale of such a building were beyond the capabilities of this small test pit but it would make an interesting subject for further investigation.

Spit	Deposit	Description	Soil Sample	Drawing
101 1m x 1m	Layer	Dry Loose. Dark Yellowish Brown. Sandy Silt. > 5% small stones 0.07-0.1m in diameter. Angular charcoal shards 0.2m in diameter, approx 10%.	N/A	N/A

		<p>Finds: pottery shards, animal bone, iron nails, CBM (roof and floor tiles), clay pipe stems, a slate stylus.</p> <p>Bioturbation: Some large root intrusions.</p>		
102	Layer above spit 1	<p>Loose. Light Greyish Brown. Sandy Silt. Small pebbles 0.07m-0.1m in diameter. Larger angular limestone/greystone pieces 0.4m-0.5m in diameter. 0.2m² charcoal lens. 0.2m² ash lens.</p> <p>Finds: pottery shards, animal bone, iron nails, CBM 50% of finds (roof and floor tiles), small amount of burnt stone, 3 x 9mm bullet cartridges and a small piece of lead runoff.</p> <p>Bioturbation: Some large root intrusions.</p>	N/A	N/A
103	Layer below spit 1	<p>Loose. Mid Greyish Brown. Sandy Silt. Small pebbles 0.07m-0.1m in diameter. Levelled compacted stone surface at 0.2m - 0.23m over entire base of test pit laid directly on top of bedrock.</p> <p>Finds: 6-10 x pottery shards, 2 x animal bone, 6 x iron nails, CBM, slate pieces.</p> <p>Bioturbation: Some lesser root intrusions.</p>	N/A	N/A