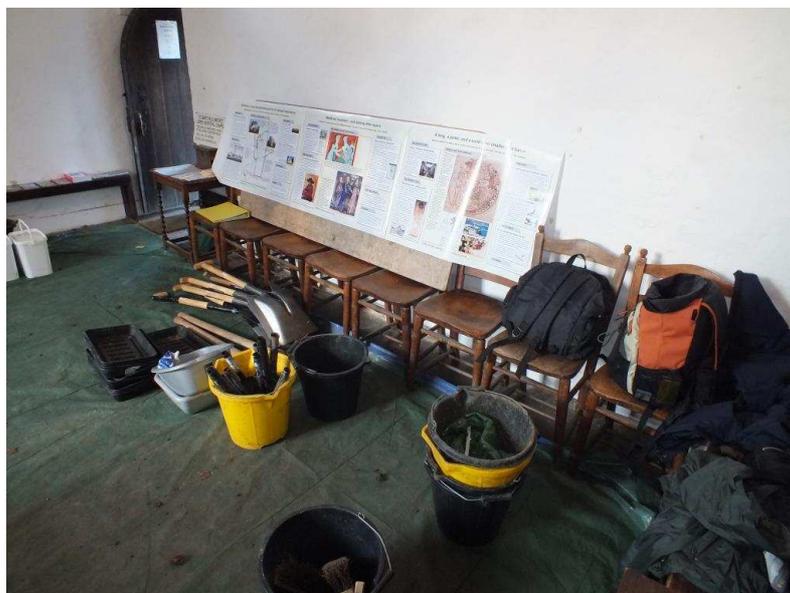


Layers of Buildings and All Sorts of Burials

The Bartlemas Chapel Excavations 22 September – 4 November 2011: an interim summary report

The Project spent six weeks, in mostly wonderfully mild and dry weather, excavating three trenches in the grounds of Bartlemas Chapel. Dozens of local volunteers dug, recorded, drew, photographed and cleaned and organised finds with support and training from the Project team. The excavation uncovered a range of buildings from the early medieval period to the nineteenth century, a variety of burials, and finds from the Romano-British period to the nineteenth century. Today Bartlemas Chapel and its surroundings sit in a quiet enclave: the excavations revealed a more disturbed and dramatic past.



Inside the Chapel

The opportunity to dig arose because the chapel needed work doing to improve the damp problem inside the building. This work involved digging a trench all around the chapel and the Diocese of Oxford gave the Project permission to excavate deeper within this trench and to dig areas west and south of the chapel. The grassy area west of the chapel had already been investigated using 'ground x-raying' geophysics equipment; spreads of stone had shown up in the results. Were these the buried remains of an earlier chapel or of nineteenth century farm buildings?

The outline history of the area is apparently well-known. From being a twelfth century leper hospital the area had, by the fourteenth century, transformed into an alms house, leprosy having almost disappeared in this country by that time. During the seventeenth century Civil War (1642-1651) Bartlemas Farmhouse, now operating as an inn, and the chapel itself were used as a base by Parliamentarian soldiers besieging Royalist Oxford; reports suggest the chapel and the almshouse were severely damaged during that conflict. After the war the chapel and Bartlemas House were rebuilt and continued to operate as an alms house until the chapel and surrounding buildings were absorbed into a farm in the nineteenth century. Finally in the early twentieth century the chapel was adopted by the Diocese of Oxford and the houses became private dwellings. But many questions remained. Could we find out more about the layout of the early leper hospital? There should be an earlier chapel on the site as the present chapel is fourteenth century and the leper hospital, founded in c 1126, must have had a chapel from the outset. What happened on the site in the Civil War? Where was the burial ground? Were there other buildings near the chapel before the scatter built rapidly in the farming nineteenth century and then demolished? How was water used on the site? These were some of the questions we had in mind as work began on 22 September 2011.

Trench 1: around the Chapel

The excavation began with the metre wide trench right around the Chapel: the first third of a metre of existing drainage gravel was taken off using a small mechanical digger – for some volunteers their first taste of 'digger-watching'. Their careful watching of all the soil removed by the digger bore fruit as pieces of pottery, old glass and window-leading were extracted from the already-disturbed ground. We

were immediately struck by how much loose building stone and rubble was uncovered to the west and south of the chapel – some of it dressed and occasionally carefully worked. This hinted at times of extensive damage followed by major rebuilding. Perhaps the chapel had suffered more than documentary evidence suggested. The digger-watchers' vigilance was also rewarded to the north and east of the chapel. To the north well-built courses of stone were revealed, on a slightly different alignment to the existing chapel. To the east of the chapel a mortar floor – the interior of a small building – was uncovered in the northern half of the trench, with fragments of human bone already turning up in the top-soil to the south of that floor.

Small metre wide trenches were dug into the narrow trench around the chapel. In places these little explorations were extended to make sense of the archaeology found, especially to the north to make it easier to complete the drainage works around the early walls and foundations there. Overall, we were struck by the poor quality of some of the foundations of the fourteenth century chapel, perhaps reflecting the damage done in the Civil War, with the chapel requiring quite major repair. None of the present fourteenth century windows match each other, and the stonework of the window tracery may have been imported from other buildings in Oriol College's estate in a renovation exercise in the seventeenth century. On the south and east sides the foundations of the existing building incorporated large arches which seem to have been an architectural feature, perhaps designed to spread the load of the structure over the plentiful small water courses running across the site?



The south wall of the Chapel under excavation

The northern side of the chapel showed several phases of rebuilding: the well-built courses running almost the entire length from the north-east corner to the north door did indeed run under the present chapel and buttresses. Had we found the earlier chapel? The complexity of the stonework around the buttresses suggested more than one episode of re-building – some of it done rather sloppily. To the east there seemed to be an extension of that earlier-than fourteenth-century building seen to the north. This was cut through by the construction trench for the existing chapel. Although it was difficult to decide the layout of this building there was plentiful evidence for worked stone and mortar. The floor of this eastern building seems to have been re-used in the nineteenth century: farmers making good use of existing foundations.

The trench around the chapel also produced burials. Under the terms of the agreement with the Diocese all undisturbed burials were to be left where they were found and simply drawn, measured and photographed. We needed to retrieve already disturbed and re-located bones, however, for examination and then re-burial in a peaceful spot on chapel land. To the east of the chapel we found a well-preserved skeleton of a young man laid out on his back with his head in the east against the chapel wall and his toes to the west. That is if we could have seen his toes: when the full burial was uncovered it was found a later burial had cut into his grave and his lower legs and feet were obscured by the skull of

another west-east laid-out burial stretching away into the trench-side. This re-cutting of graves happened frequently in medieval cemeteries, especially smaller ones. The young man had good teeth and the bones of someone who had not spent his life in manual labour. With his head in a prime spot against the altar perhaps we were looking at one of the officials of the leper hospital?

To the north and south of the chapel we found two charnel pits: where bones disturbed in digging later graves, or in building work, had been gathered together for re-burial in other prime spots under the 'eaves-drip' of the chapel. Some of these re-buried bones may have been disturbed during and in the aftermath of the Civil War. The pit to the north was very interesting as it started out with carefully laid out long bones and ended with a jumble of human bones, glass and animal bone including a dog's skull. To the south a much damaged and disturbed stone-lined grave, lying east-west only half a metre from the chapel, contained many more human bones, heaped together and probably including the original occupant of the grave. These bones will be carefully examined and the results will tell us much more about the people buried around the chapel. For it clearly was a well-used grave-yard, not only do the two charnel pits suggest that, but during the digging of a vital new soak-away to the south of the chapel three more west-east burials were recorded and left in place. Later examination of the bones did indeed reveal evidence of leprosy – see Anthea Boylston's report in 'Specialist Report's

Trench 2: to the west of the Chapel

This L-shaped trench, maximum size 10m x 6m, uncovered a sequence of small buildings and outside yards and working surfaces as well as several more burials. The earliest building lay on a completely different alignment, NNE-SSW, to any other on the site and seemed to have been slightly dug into the natural clay ground with a roughly paved surface to the north-west. Two west-east laid out burials found in the final days of the dig had been dug through the floor surface of this structure. We saw little more than the skulls of these burials but again one grave had been slightly cut into the other. Both of the skulls were turned to one side and other long bones in one of the graves suggested that perhaps the arms of one skeleton were tucked under the head.

The burials and the early building were covered with the gravel-mortar floors and rubble-remains of other later small buildings and yards in this southern area of the trench. The more detailed work now under way will tell us more about these little buildings, but they may have been everything from medieval buildings related to the leper hospital, through temporary structures put up during the Civil War, to out-buildings for the farm. The pottery assemblages suggest that both the early building in the south and the first building in the sequence slightly to the north originated in the pre-14th century phase of the site. The southern building may have been built when the hospital was founded in the twelfth century. Certainly the surfaces and parts of the buildings were re-used during the Civil War and in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The remains of a substantial probably eighteenth century boundary-like wall were found running north-east south-west across the south of the trench.



Trench 2 under excavation from the SE

Another burial was discovered just north of this sequence of buildings. This grave was shallow and dug to run north-south, a surprise in a Christian grave-yard where burials were conventionally laid west-east. Some of the skeleton ran into the trench-side but the pelvis and legs were visible. Again we were slightly surprised that the occupant of this perhaps un-approved grave was a young child. Pottery in the grave-fill suggested that the burial might have been a little later than the fifteenth century. Less than a couple of metres to the north under another sequence of walls, yards and small buildings was another child burial, again relatively shallow and lying north-south. This time the skull and upper spine had also been damaged by the digging of a slot for a line of small upright stones that may have been the kerb support for the internal wall of a later structure. The grave had either been un-marked or forgotten.

In the north-east corner of the trench we uncovered the legs of another burial, one that seemed to echo the three in the soak-away trench. This grave was clearly west of the buildings in that area and west-east aligned, dug well-down and neatly laid out. All these four graves may have been dug from the same land surface. The sequence of buildings in the north of the trench began slightly later than that to the south, perhaps in the later twelfth to early thirteenth century and later surfaces were associated with a number of Civil War finds: clay pipes, pottery and un-fired musket balls. There was a considerable amount of Civil War period material across the site suggesting that the occupation may have been for some time and by quite a number of soldiers. Thus Trench 2 not only produced fascinating burial evidence but also evidence for small buildings in the vicinity of the chapel: the earliest northern building may have been a domestic structure, perhaps a leper cell while the earliest slightly-sunken building in the south was more likely to have originated as an outbuilding or workshop.

Trench 3: south of the Chapel

This small trench, 3x2m, produced more evidence for structures in the grave-yard; only a corner of the building was uncovered and the proximity of the chapel means it cannot have been very big, perhaps three metres long, but the foundations were stone-built, substantial and related-to what may have been a stone-flagged floor. Almost nothing was found inside the building except fragments of human bone. The pottery fragments found beneath the floor suggest the building originated in the twelfth century. Was this a small chapel, a vault, a detached bell-tower or perhaps an ossuary? We may never know.

Another stone-lined grave just showed in the corner of the trench and the area also produced very interesting evidence for the working of animal bone and an example of poorly-executed nineteenth century drainage.



Trench 3 under excavation from the north

Detailed reports on the Trenches with photos and drawings are also available: see separate PDFs.