STATEMENT OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL INTEREST NO 3

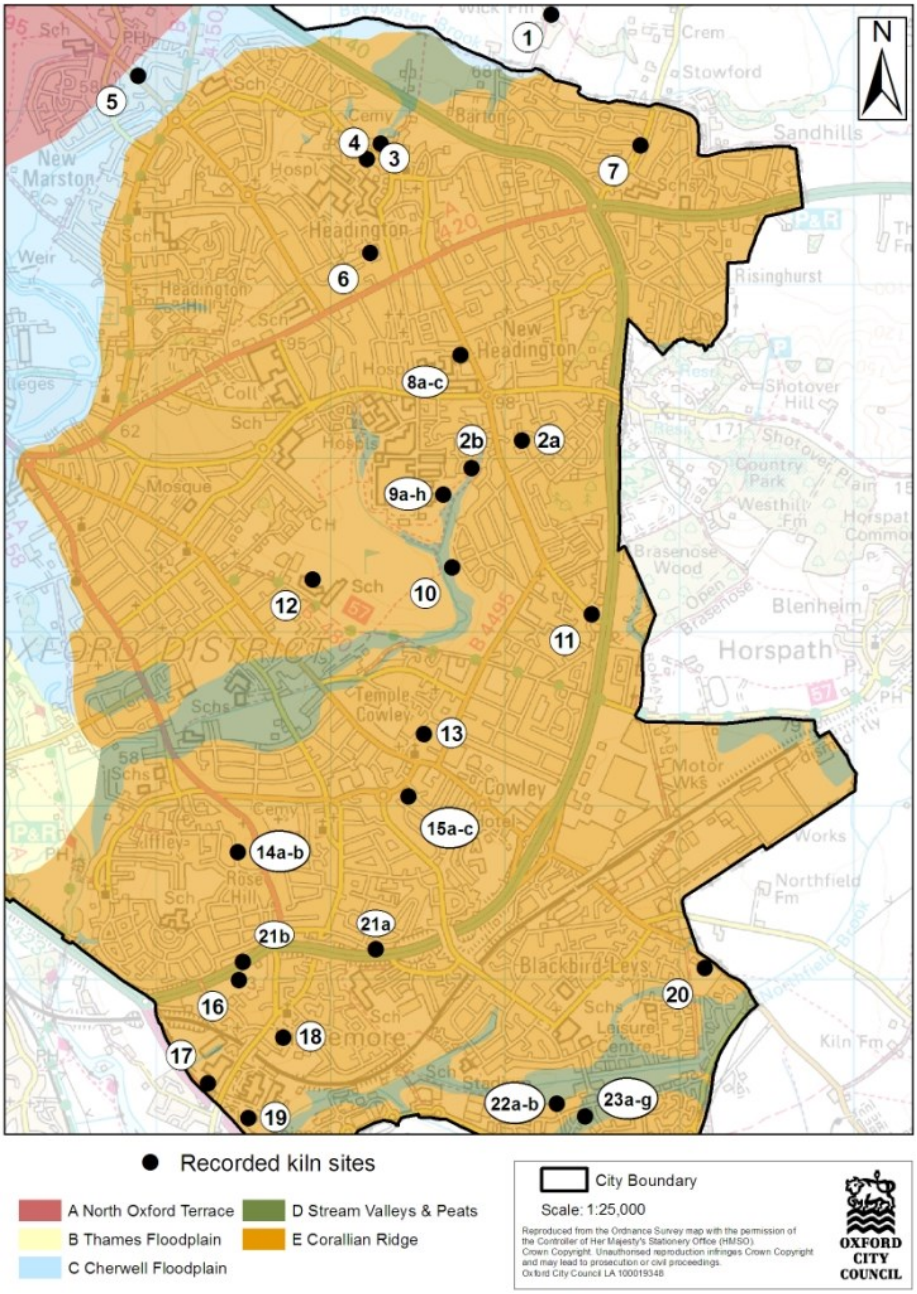
OXFORD ROMAN POTTERY INDUSTRY (EAST OXFORD)

Asset/Monument Type: Potteries (Roman)

Summary: The Oxford Roman Pottery Industry was a nationally successful industry established in the 1st century AD and which flourished during the 2nd-4th centuries. The manufacturing zone was orientated on the Dorchester to Alchester Roman Road and extended from Otmoor to the north to Abington to the south. A significant concentration of kilns are located on the Corallian Ridge east and south of central Oxford.

Location (NGR): Extensive Area.

Definition: A pottery is a place where ceramic vessels and accoutrements are manufactured. Such sites are usually recognisable on the ground from the surface scatter of kiln debris, pottery wasters and burnt earth.



Key characteristics

The following criteria (which are not in any order of ranking) are based on the Secretary of State's criteria for assessing Scheduled Monuments. They should not be regarded as definitive, but as an indicative provisional assessment.

1. ***Period**: Does the asset characterise a category or historic period?*

Assessment: The evidence indicates a period of pottery production from perhaps the mid 1st century AD to the late 4th century AD. Potteries are one of a considerable number of monument classes that are characteristic of the Roman period, however they represent the most commonly recorded class in the Oxford area.

Score: Medium

2. ***Rarity**: What is the rarity of the asset in terms of regional and national context?*

Assessment: There are approximately 369 recorded examples of potteries in England. Although this will not constitute the entire population existing in the Roman period it is probably a fairly representative sample. There are few examples of large pottery industries operating in England during the Roman period and the East Oxford industry certainly reached regional status if not national importance by the 4th century when it was probably one of the top three areas of pottery production in the country.
Score: High

3. ***Documentation**: To what extent is the significance of the asset enhanced by existing documentation or lack thereof?*

Assessment: Archaeological documentation of the East Oxford pottery industry is good., comprising of several excavation reports and overview studies by Young (1977, 2000) and Booth et al (2007), however some sites have not been fully published and there is great scope for further synthesis and review. Kiln sites have been identified over a wide area.
Score: High

4. ***Group Value**: is the value of the asset enhanced by its association with related contemporary monuments or with monuments of different periods?*

Assessment: Roman pottery sites in the East Oxford area are closely associated with one another through similarities in technology, form and fabric types. The manufacturing industry also has associations with the local infrastructure and settlement pattern and with contemporary sites that were recipients of its wares. The Oxford kilns are part of a wider landscape of kilns stretching from Otmoor to Abingdon orientated on the Dorchester to Alchester road.
Score: High

5. ***Survival/Condition**: What is the estimated level of above and below ground survival.*

Assessment: No above ground remains of this industry and known to survive and no well preserved in-situ sites are documented. However, based on the pattern of previous investigations, further manufacturing sites are likely to be encountered.
Score: Medium

6. ***Fragility/Vulnerability**: susceptibility to change*

Assessment: The known manufacturing sites are located in a heavily developed area with strong pressure for further infilling development.
Score: High

7. ***Diversity**: Does the asset possess a combination of high quality features?*

Assessment: Previous investigations have demonstrated that manufacturing sites can be comprised of a combination of features, for example kilns, working areas, compounds, ancillary structures, puddling holes, waster and clay dumps etc.
Score: Medium

8. ***Potential**: Is there a likelihood that currently unrecorded evidence can be anticipated?*

Assessment: The density of known kiln sites indicates that there is good potential for further sites to be discovered. Wasters recorded from numerous small excavations and observations indicate the presence of further kilns.
Score: High
Overall score (21/24)

Overall Assessment of Archaeological Interest: High

HERITAGE ASSET DESCRIPTION

The Oxford pottery industry area of production stretches on a north-south alignment for almost the entire length of the Dorchester to Alchester Road and on an east-west alignment for almost five kilometres. The evidence for Roman pottery production extends well beyond the Oxford local authority boundary and forms part of an extensive landscape that is beyond the scope of this report. A summary of the known pottery industry was produced by Young (1977) providing an overview of the distribution and setting of the industry as well as a detailed gazetteer of Oxford wares. Young noted at least 30 kilns in the region, the majority of which were in the district. A more recent overview of the Oxfordshire pottery industry notes that the physical remains of approximately 58 kiln sites are known in the region (Booth *et al*. 2007: 306).

The industry of the Oxford region appears to have begun as a cottage industry in the 1st and 2nd century before rapidly expanding into a major regional industry in the later 3rd and 4th centuries (Young 1972a: 106). The evidence suggests that the early development of the local industry (spurred by the introduction of white ware mortaria into the repertoire in the beginning of the 2nd century AD) lay in south-east Oxford (Blackbird Leys, Littlemore and St Luke's Road, Cowley and perhaps Rose Hill), with a southward extension of activity towards Dorchester. The later expansion of the industry in the 3rd century seems to have been northward towards Headington, with the Churchill Hospital being the best studied site.

The broad trajectory of the industry is outlined below:

- 1st century AD: first evidence of coarse ware production at the Churchill Hospital site.
- Late 1st century AD: fine ware production is recorded in the Abingdon-Dorchester area including the earliest evidence of white firing clays for mortaria and flagons.
- 2nd century AD: the knowledge and influence of Verulamium potters reaches the area including evidence for complementary coarse ware forms (jars, bowls and dishes) made from the widely available iron rich clays that fired red or grey and some experimentation with use of glaze and colour coated beakers, although not commercially successful lines. The pottery assemblage dating to this period includes numerous examples of stamped mortaria bearing the mark of '*Vossullus*'.
- Late 2nd century AD: the local industry began to develop its own style of mortarium forms that became increasingly popular.
- Mid 3rd century AD: major changes to the Oxford pottery industry with the introduction of the large scale production of red and brown colour coated fine ware replacing the dwindling supply of imported Samian wares and the increased use of potters stamps until the end of the century.
- More changes to mortaria production with the introduction of white slip and white ware fabrics (so-called parchment wares). Although these wares were widely distributed across southern Britain, the earlier oxidised and reduced coarse wares never extended beyond regional markets.
- Late 3rd century AD: the range of white mortaria was simplified, thereafter the character of production did not change significantly.
- A noticeable feature of the late Roman industry is the consistency of products across a wide area suggesting a level of centralised commercial control.

To date, twenty-three sites have provided evidence for the pottery industry in the district comprising thirty excavated kilns, five recorded observations of kilns during development and twenty-two possible kilns inferred from artefact densities and types. Pottery production sites are heavily concentrated in the historic parishes of Littlemore and Headington to the south and east of central Oxford.

At Littlemore, the development of the large housing estate at Blackbird Leys from the 1960s led to the excavation of eleven kilns across several archaeological sites while at Headington extensive excavations at Churchill Hospital since the 1970s recorded some of the best preserved evidence of the industry including possible associated settlement. The important Churchill Hospital site was the subject of a series of interim reports rather than detailed publication with the exception of Young's comprehensive study of the ceramics (1977). Subsequent excavations of pottery manufacturing sites at Minchery Farm, Littlemore, in 1996 have also not been fully published. There is therefore much potential for the re-examination and synthesis of the previously excavated material.

To date only the Churchill Hospital excavation has produced clear evidence of workshop structures. The results of a geophysical survey at Lower Farm, Nuneham Courtenay, located just outside of the Oxford Local Authority Area, provide the best example of the scale and layout of a large manufacturing complex. The site consists of a large number of kilns grouped in enclosures off a trackway. Perhaps 40-50 kilns can be inferred from the survey results, (Henig & Booth 2000: 166-7).

The evidence suggests that clusters of kilns and workshops, some perhaps utilising pre-existing stock and agricultural boundaries, others in purpose built enclosures, were located near water and fuel resources and receiving clay from the iron free deposits at near Shotover. The clay must have been carried over short distances (for example it is approximately 4km from Shotover Hill to the excavated kiln sites at Blackbird Leys) presumably along Alchester-Dorchester road and a system of trackways.

Shotover is also a source of high quality yellow ochre that turns red with heat and may have been a source for local Churchill Hospital and Horspath kilns making parchment ware flagons with moulded head designs (Turner 1989: 399-400).

There is also some evidence for the expansion/migration of manufacturing sites across the landscape over time (for example at St Luke's Road, Cowley) but unclear if this pattern reflects the consumption of local resources (e.g. woodland as a fuel supply) or some other factor. Large amounts of wood would have been required for fuel but to date there is no clear excavated evidence for the management of woodland (e.g. coppicing).

Academic statements

MPP Class Description

Examples representing the production process in its entirety as well as the variety of product types, supply systems, technology and, where appropriate, chronological development should be included in the sample of nationally important sites. Survival of potteries as units of production is poor. Within each site there are some elements which survive better than others. In terms of the proportion of a pottery now extant to that which originally existed, survival of structures is very partial (English Heritage 1989).

'It was clear that from about AD250 the Oxford industry was one of the major pottery producers of Roman Britain, on a par with other major industries such as the New Forest, the Nene Valley or Mancetter/Hartshill. (Young 2000: iii).

'The Oxford pottery industry appears to be exceptional within the region in terms of the scale of its impact on the wider landscape' (Booth *et al*. 2007:307).

Research agenda

- What is the full character and extent of manufacturing infrastructure within the LAA? Can well preserved kiln sites be identified and appropriately conserved?
- Of particular importance is the question of how the pottery industry organised in relation to the wider Roman economy; did potters form part of a larger cooperatives/family or state owned businesses or were they independent operatives? How, when and why was a greater uniformity of production achieved towards the height of the industry?
- Can we further understand the spatial relationship between kilns, workshops, residential settlement, quarries, water sources and woodland?
- Can further evidence be obtained regarding the presence or absence of managed woodland (e.g. evidence for coppicing in ecofact assemblage or regulated supply patterns in terms of species). The further targeted examination of charcoal deposits at manufacturing and settlement sites would be warranted.
- Can Roman quarry workings be identified?
- Geophysical survey has a great deal to add to our understanding of pottery manufacturing sites (e.g. as at Lower Farm, Nuneham Courtenay).
- 1st century activity perhaps involving coarse ware production is suggested at the Churchill Hospital site. Can further evidence of post-conquest manufacturing activity be identified? If so how does the material culture relate to other LIA-early Roman transition sites? To what extent was this a 'local' industry as opposed to the result of an influx of outside talent attracted by the availability of specific raw materials?
- Does the appearance of technological knowledge from *Verulamium* and non-literate stamps indicate an influx of 'apprentice-potters' from *Verulamium*? Can the material culture of both areas provide any further insights?
- How can we explain the increasing uniformity of production in the late Roman period? Is there evidence for greater centralised control on the landscape, supply of materials etc.?
- Did the success of the industry feed into the material wealth of the LAA? If so how did this manifest itself and what does this tell us about the status of potter communities and local landowners?
- How do pottery production areas compare? Is there further evidence for formal layouts (like at Lower Farm), or for clean and well ordered sites (i.e. Churchill Hospital), sites with mixed quality production (quantities of wasters etc.), or less well ordered sites?
- The fabric series of Roman pottery for the Oxford area was developed in the 1970s by Young and has remained the framework by which more recent pottery has been dated; however significant quantities of pottery from recent investigations such as at Headington, Blackbird Leys and Minchery Farm could contribute to a more detailed fabric series.
- Can further domestic settlement or burial evidence (e.g. like those close to kilns at Rose Hill) tell us more about the consumption, status and cultural identity of the potters?
- Can further workshop areas, manufacturing infrastructure and material culture be identified?

Bibliography

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