

Wallingford: charting early medieval and medieval expansion and contraction

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Introduction

The small town of Wallingford stands alongside the river Thames in south Oxfordshire, one of a number of prominent former Roman to Saxon and medieval centres along this stretch of the great river, including Oxford, Dorchester, Abingdon and Reading. Wallingford was founded as a Wessex shire *burh* and later developed as a royal castle under the Normans, gaining prominence of course for being the point of crossing of the Thames by the army of William the Conqueror *en route* to London (on the context of site origins and growth see Booth *et al.* 2007; Astill 1984; Blair 1994). Striking is the strong preservation of the urban defences of Wallingford – earthen ramparts and ditch still girding the town’s western half – and of the complex earthworks of the castle site in the town’s north-eastern quarter, dominating river, bridge and north gate (the earthworks here with some Civil War adaptation as well as post-medieval/Victorian period landscaping) (Figs 1–2). Furthermore, the town plan shows clear traces of its early medieval and medieval configuration, and is exceptional in preserving two sizeable open areas within its defences (Kinecroft, Bullcroft) as well as adjoining suburban green space – all providing excellent scope to explore the town’s origins, growth and later medieval contraction.

As previously detailed in interims in the *MSRG Annual Report*, pilot study work (2001–04) comprised a first phase of geophysical survey in the town and across the river and bridge at Crowmarsh, with small-scale test excavation, plus initial compilation of archive data and materials (on pilot work, see interims in Christie 2004 and 2005; Christie *et al.* 2003 and 2004). On Wallingford’s archaeological setting and earlier finds, see summary by Ains *et al.* (1975). However, a much wider and more intensive, three year programme of study has commenced in 2008 with the AHRC-funded *Wallingford Burh to Borough Research Project* – a collaboration between Archaeology staff from the Universities of Leicester, Exeter and Oxford working closely with The Wallingford Historical and Archaeological Society (TWHAS) and Wallingford Museum in particular.⁴ Key targets are to explore in detail the town’s early medieval and medieval archaeology and documentation (textual and physical), its plan and evolution and its material cultural changes through varied survey techniques

(geophysical, topographical, buildings), targeted open excavation, garden archaeology (test-pits), and archival analysis. The focus is on AD 800–1300, but with scrutiny also of the pre-*burh* phases, and late and post-medieval transformations of space and structures, since each inform and enhance the comprehension and modelling of this townscape. Furthermore, a proper landscape context for Wallingford will be explored (in terms of land use, settlement hierarchies, religious landscapes, economics), and two related AHRC-funded PhDs (see summaries below) place aspects of Wallingford’s design and economy into wider, national contexts. Few *burhs* have seen detailed archaeological scrutiny – though the recent compilation of varied excavations at Oxford, including large scale work at the castle site, provides an excellent example of the potential of such work (Dodd 2003) – and this Project thus seeks to offer Wallingford as a further major case study of a British small town’s evolution.

Previous work (unpublished) in the 1960s and 1970s at the castle site – on the defences and on a cob-built structure in the inner bailey – identified the town’s rich potential. This was borne out in recent excavation by Northamptonshire Archaeology (in redevelopment work for Waitrose at the very heart of the town) of 210 late Saxon and medieval burials (see notes in *Medieval Archaeology* 49 (2005), 405–06; *South Midlands Archaeology* 35 (2005), 66). Detailed scrutiny and reporting can therefore shed light on the earliest settlement at Wallingford – a *burh* lacking a direct Roman predecessor, but with a notable cemetery identified in the later 19th and earlier 20th century outside the area of the town’s (later) south-west rampart; on the changes wrought through imposition of a high-status castle with attendant economic growth; and on patterns of urban change prompted by a progressive dispersal of this economic high.

Summer 2008 excavations

July–August 2008 saw the Project explore three trenches in three separate open areas of the town (see Fig. 2), designed to sample different components and periods of the town’s past: Trench 1 in Castle Meadows (exploring space adjacent to the castle outer defences and specifically a platform feature), Trench 2 in the Bullcroft (seeking Saxon and later activity), and Trench 3 in the Kinecroft (for Saxon and medieval domestic space). Each was productive in different ways.

In Castle Meadows, Trench 1 identified deep mixed medieval deposits relating to presumed periodic castle ditch clearance and also landscaping work beyond; but chiefly it exposed part of a chalk-clay platform (Fig. 3) relating to a presumed 17th-century Civil War bastion – Wallingford was a Royalist stronghold in the 1640s,

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Figure 1 Aerial view (from east) of Wallingford and the part-flooded Thames; the earthworks of both burh-town defences and castle (bottom right) stand out clearly (Photo courtesy of the Environment Agency).

withstanding various sieges, and was last to fall in Berkshire; accounts testify to the demolition of houses on the main roads and suburbs and to the provision of emergency defensive works at both castle and bridge. Various geophysical anomalies remain to be explored in the Castle Meadows and to the west and these may help in discussion of medieval suburban growth.

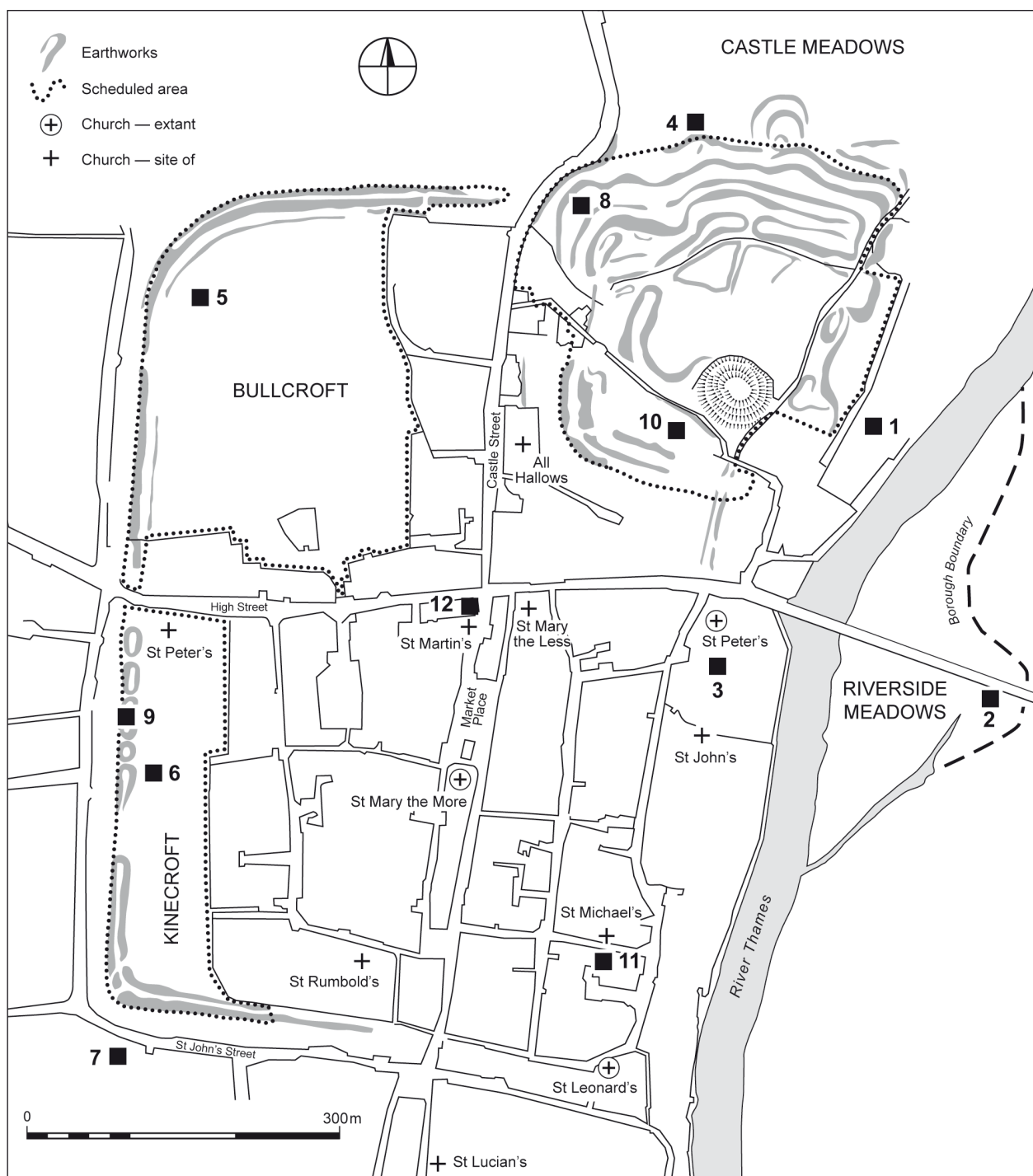
The Bullcroft formed, from the Norman period, a specific religious space, linked to a Priory, whose precinct may have comprised this whole town quadrant, defined by the burh rampart to west and north. The position of the Priory is still to be confirmed, but it most probably lay towards the south, close to the town's main W–E road, where rubble/demolition deposits and old records of burials are known (test-pits in March 2009 identified also remnants of a robbed medieval floor). Excavation in the north-west corner of the Bullcroft was designed to test for Saxon and medieval activity (e.g. intramural lane, house plots, precinct features, etc.), but proved largely empty, suggesting thereby that this urban zone was always open space – perhaps cultivated given traces of low ridge and furrow (this conceivably medieval in date, unless post-medieval and post-Dissolution), whereas an excavated tree-throw implies at least some tree growth here in the Middle Ages.

More tangible medieval data derived from Trench 3 on the Kinecroft. Like the Bullcroft, this too is largely an open space – and the very labels ‘Bull’ and ‘Kine’ point to cattle, suggesting a long connection to pasture, grazing

and market use. A key research aim here was to characterise this ‘urban’ space: did the late Saxon and/or medieval street grid and houses once cross the Kinecroft? Or was it always open space? A trench measuring 20 x 6.0 m was set to sample an area highlighted in the previous season's geophysical survey suggestive of a house fronting onto a lane.

In the central part of the trench evidence was revealed for a timber building of earth-fast post-in-trench style of construction (For house types see Grenville 1997; Munby 1987) (Fig. 4). Three substantial beam-slots oriented parallel and perpendicular to each other (oriented N–S and E–W), represented the footings of a large, likely rectangular building. The beam-slots measured c. 6.0 m in length and width, enclosing an area of c. 42 m², though the entire plan of the building was not uncovered by the trench. Internally was a shallow, 3.65m long partition and a small sunken-floored area or cellar, 0.3m in depth. From the finds recovered within the beam-slot fills a 12th-century date seems most likely for the construction and occupation of the building. To the south of the building was a series of intercutting pits, presumably contemporary with the house and situated in a yard to its rear. Traces and hints of other beam-slots were supportive of the presence of an adjoining building (or part of the same, wider building) beyond the west edge of the excavated area.

In the northern part of the trench, a 6m wide W–E running hollow-way or lane was identified; this



Burh to borough project excavations

- 1 Queen's Arbour (2003)
- 2 Riverside Meadows (2005)
- 3 Coach House (2005)
- 4 Castle Meadows (2008, Trench 1)
- 5 Bullcroft (2008, Trench 2)
- 6 Kinecroft (2008, Trench 3)

Other excavations

- 7 Anglo-Saxon cemetery (1930s)
- 8 Wallingford castle (1965-8)
- 9 Kinecroft defences (1971)
- 10 Wallingford castle (1972)
- 11 St Michael's cemetery (1974)
- 12 Waitrose (2004)

Figure 2 Plan of Wallingford, showing sites mentioned in the text and locations of the 2008 trenches.



Figure 3 Excavation of the presumed Civil War rampart at Castle Meadows.



Figure 4 View of the medieval house under excavation, looking north east. The digger is standing in the corner posthole, with beam-slots extending to his left and straight ahead. An internal cellar is being excavated in the background.

appears to have been out of use by the mid-14th century when there was soil infilling and later pitting. The main find from the soil fill was a well preserved, 6 cm long, copper alloy strap-end (Fig. 5), ornamented with two confronted beasts (?dragons), with interlaced tails. The reverse of the strap-end is smoothed by wear and not decorated. Design and decoration currently suggest a 10th-century date and thus the strap-end gives at least

some insight into late Saxon material culture in Wallingford.

Discussion

The archaeological survival of the Kinecroft house (if without the floors and timbers!) is invaluable and promises the potential of other clear medieval (and



Figure 5 Kinecroft strap-end of the 10th century with embracing beasts (above: before restoration; right: the beasts design interpreted).



earlier) domestic units in Wallingford. In particular it points to other built units in this sector of the town, and more needs to be explored to answer whether the Kinecroft house(s) denotes evidence of a formal post-Conquest extension to the plan of the late Saxon town and forms part of a conscious planning decision. The dating, however, argues against Saxon built space here. Interestingly, the Kinecroft excavation data appear to indicate a single building phase (a generation? Or two at most? *cf.* Horsman *et al.* 1988: 67), even if the lane itself (and perhaps a related postern cutting the rampart?) endured longer. Is this a reflection of a short-lived economic and population growth spurt, tied to the impact of the castle and its status?

Subsequently, by the 14th century, the Kinecroft probably reverted to open (but used) space – a status prevailing largely today and reflecting no major intramural expansion until the last century. The Bullcroft in contrast will have remained more active structurally, and will not have seen major change until the demolitions of the Dissolution. Whilst the full causes of Wallingford's late medieval economic and social decline are still being investigated through the documentary record, it is clear that the archaeology offers much scope to chart where and when that decline was happening.

2009 will see further scrutiny through geophysics and excavation of the urban and suburban spaces of Wallingford to expand the archaeological record and increase recognition of this town's early medieval and medieval past.

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