

Summer Fields School Mayfield Road, Oxford

ARCHAEOLOGICAL OBSERVATION AND RECORDING



understanding heritage matters

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SUMMARY

Human remains were found by groundworkers digging a service trench associated with a new pavilion at Summer Fields School. A programme of archaeological recording and analysis was able to determine that the groundworkers had stumbled on the burial of a young adult female probably buried in the unfurnished Christian tradition with her head to the east probably between 346 AD and 540 AD. It is likely that she was interred in a cemetery that included Christian Romans and Pagan Anglo-Saxons. Although other archaeological features were recorded they could not be dated or characterised.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Planning permission was granted by Oxford City Council for the construction of a pavilion with changing facilities at Summer Fields School, Oxford (13/03393/FUL). A desk-based assessment of the site by Archaeology Warwickshire established the potential for archaeological remains to be disturbed by the development (Soden and Thompson 2014), though a visit to observe and record several geotechnical test pits and a subsequent archaeological evaluation of the proposed site did not encounter any significant archaeological remains (Rann 2014).

1.2 Construction work on the pavilion had begun when human bones were discovered by contractors whilst digging an associated service trench. Archaeology Warwickshire were subsequently commissioned to examine the trench, record the context of the finds and determine if any other archaeological features were disturbed by the trench. This report presents the results of that work. The project archive will be stored at Archaeology Warwickshire until it can be deposited with the appropriate repository.

2 SITE LOCATION

2.1 The site is located on the eastern side of Mayfield Road in north Oxford, at National Grid Reference SP 5095 0916. The site lies on generally level ground and includes the present buildings of Summer Fields School and associated grounds. The service trench was located between the Headmaster's residence and the main school building.

2.2 The geological sequence is recorded by the British Geological Survey as Summertown–Radley Sands and Gravels and nearby alluvial deposits. The site lies some 700m north-west of the River Cherwell.

3 ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

3.1 The Historic Environment Record for Oxfordshire, includes cropmark evidence for a possible Bronze Age ring ditch (Historic Environment Record no. MOX 15407) and several undated enclosures (MOX15408) to the east and north-east of Summer Fields School. In 1924, near to a St. Edward's School in Oxford, Roman pottery was found which may indicate a nearby settlement (MOX3814). Other pottery evidence suggests Roman settlement a little further to the north. Summertown-Radley has been identified as having Saxon Artefacts and areas of Roman activity and burial (Oxford Archaeological Plan: Resource Assessment, Roman Oxford, *Draft*).

3.2 During an expansion of Summer Fields School in 1898 an assemblage of Anglo-Saxon weapons was uncovered (MOX6218). Although there is no mention of human remains, the shield boss, shield grip, knife and spear are typical grave goods. An earlier find of an Anglo-Saxon lance or spearhead was also made at the school (HER MOX 3690. The discovery in 1850 of human bones, a knife, a disc brooch and a string of 23 beads in a garden trench on the east side of Banbury Road, all substantiate the premise that there is an Anglo-Saxon cemetery in the vicinity of the school.

3.3 The 19th century reports did not detail the precise location of the finds so several possibilities were suggested in the desk-based assessment (Soden and Thompson 2014), based on documented construction activity from 1898. No archaeological remains were found when observing geotechnical pits, or subsequently a trial trench (Rann 2014).

3.4 The 1887 First Edition Ordnance Survey map shows that the area of service trenching was within a field to the north-east of the school. On the 1921 map it was within the garden of Mayfield house or a smaller paddock. Mayfield Cottage, the current headmaster's residence, was built by 1967 and the trenching area was then part of the garden.

4 AIMS AND METHODS

4.1 The main aim of the work was to record any archaeological remains disturbed by the service trench associated with the development, to collate the records in an archaeological archive and present the significant aspects of the archive in a report for dissemination.

4.2 The secondary aim was to form an understanding of the remains recorded in terms of their character and date, and to place the evidence in its local and regional context.

4.3 The groundworkers had collected skull fragments and part of a femur. The Archaeological Research Agenda for the Solent - Thames region for the Roman Period states that radiocarbon dating of burials potentially post-dating 400 AD is a priority (Fulford 2014).

4.4 The Resource Framework for the Early Medieval Period (Solent-Thames) describes a key focus on when people in the region adopted Anglo-Saxon ways of living and burying the dead, to understand the transition from the late Romano-British period to the Anglo-Saxon (Dodd 2014). It also recognises the value of radiocarbon determinations in encouraging fresh perspectives on established models. More specifically the North of Oxford has been identified as having potential to provide information on the relationship between early Saxon burials and Roman sites (Oxford Archaeological Plan: Resource Assessment, The Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian Period, *Draft*).).

4.5 Following an initial visit to verify that the bones were human and that they had been buried in antiquity, a team of experienced archaeologists were made available to record the sides and base of the excavated trench. The team also examined and metal-detected the associated spoil heap, which had been kept on site, for any human remains and potential grave goods.

5 RESULTS

5.1 The 0.5m to 1m wide service trench had been dug c.0.9m deep through the modern overburden into the yellowish brown gravel geological natural (75), c.63m aOD (Photograph 1, Fig 2). The trench was cleaned by hand but no deposits were found in the trench base.

5.2 A grave cut 66 was visible in the NW facing section of the trench (Photograph 2). Both patellas were recovered from the spoil adjacent to the trench and parts of the corresponding femur and tibia were still articulated within the grave (Photograph 3). No grave goods or other artefacts were recovered.

5.3 It is likely, given the relatively good preservation of the recovered remains that the greater proportion of the skeleton (76) had been removed during the initial excavation of the trench. However, it can be assumed that the body had been laid in a prone or supine position, facing east.

6 HUMAN REMAINS by Malin Holst

6.1 The human remains were assessed following English Heritage guidelines (Mays et al. 2002). The potential of the remains to supply osteological information on age, sex, stature and metrics was assessed.

6.2 The remains represent a single individual adult, aged eighteen years old or older (Table 1). The individual is 30% complete and the surface preservation of the bone is good to moderate. The slight size of the elements suggest that the individual was female. No pathological lesions were noted on any of the remains.

Table 1 Catalogue of human remains

Skeletal Element	Bone	Side	% of Bone	Surface Preservation	No. of Fragments	Age	Sex
Femur	Shaft	Right	80%	2	2	Adult	Female?
	Distal epiphysis	Left	10%	2	1	Adult	Female?
	Proximal 1/3	Left	40%	2	1	Adult	Female?
Humerus	Shaft	Left	90%	2	1	Adult	Female?
Ulna	Proximal 1/3	Left	30%	2	1	Adult	Female?
	Distal shaft	Left	30%	2	1	Adult	Female?
Patella	All	Right	100%	2	1	Adult	-
	All	Left	100%	2	1	Adult	-
Skull	Generic skull fragments	-	5%	2	3	Adult	-

7 RADIOCARBON DATING

7.1 Bone fragments were sent to the Scottish Universities Environmental Research Centre (SUERC) in order to obtain a radiocarbon C14 date. There was a 95.4% probability that the bones dated from between 346AD to 540AD CAL (below), placing the burial into either the late Roman or early Anglo-Saxon period.

Laboratory Code	SUERC-64314 (GU39271)
Site Reference	Summer Fields School, Oxford
Context Reference	76
Material	Bone: Human
$\delta^{13}\text{C}$ relative to VPDB	-20.5 ‰

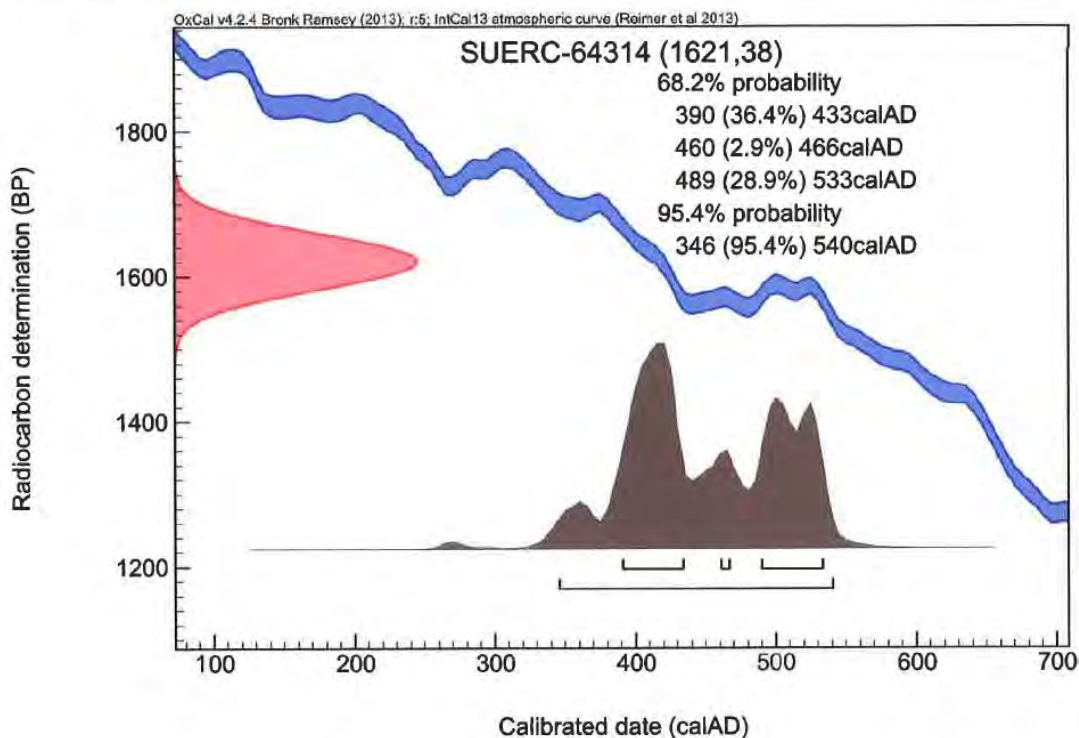
$\delta^{15}\text{N}$ relative to air	9.7 ‰
C/N ratio (Molar)	3.2
Radiocarbon Age BP	1621 ± 38

N.B. The above ^{14}C age is quoted in conventional years BP (before 1950 AD). The error, which is expressed at the one sigma level of confidence, includes components from the counting statistics on the sample, modern reference standard and blank and the random machine error.

The calibrated age ranges are determined from the University of Oxford Radiocarbon Accelerator Unit calibration program (OxCal4).

Samples with a SUERC coding are measured at the Scottish Universities environmental Research AMS facility and should be quoted as such in any reports within the scientific literature.

Calibration Plot



8 CONCLUSIONS

8.1 The adult female was most likely (95.4% confidence) buried between 346 AD and 540 AD. She was laid with her head to the east in an grave with no evidence for a coffin and without grave goods, although it is recognised that and such objects could have been removed inadvertently by the groundworkers.

8.2 The potential burial date straddles the later Roman and early medieval (Anglo-Saxon) periods, an important transitional period where evidence for continuity or change are important research topics.

8.3 The burial could be characterised as Christian, given the orientation and lack of grave goods. 5th Century burials at Queenford Farm cemetery, Dorchester-on-Thames, were considered as evidence for late-Roman conversion (Chambers 1987), although Rahtz (2000 cited in Carver et al 2009) raises the possibility that orientation of burials could relate to a point of reference no longer apparent and the lack of grave furnishings could infer more about status than beliefs (Penn and Brugmann 2007). A series of unfurnished graves at Wasperton likely dated between 400 AD and 480 AD (Carver et al 2009).

8.4 Whilst the other archaeological features identified within the trench were mostly found within the vicinity of the grave, there was no evidence to suggest they were contemporary with it. The grave was on a distinctly different alignment to the features around it. The available evidence does not provide dates or suggest functions for the features but a lack of finds might suggest that they lie some distance from a settlement focus.

8.5 One such focus may have been indicated c.500m to the west, where Roman pottery was found in 1924. Whilst early Anglo-Saxon settlements in the Oxfordshire Thames Valley are more numerous than other parts of the Solent-Thames region (Dodd 2014), there are none recorded in the vicinity.

8.6 The absence of any other confirmed graves in the trench might be taken to indicate that the burial area was not densely packed and might also indicate that multi-phased burial at Summertown was spatially discrete.

8.7 The recovery of the young adult female burial at Summer Fields School, by happenstance, has provided a scientific footing for future research and analysis of the cemetery at Summertown known from 19th century antiquarian records. It is also an important adjunct to the story of a largely undocumented population who lived and died in north Oxford over 1500 years ago.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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APPENDICES

A Other Archaeological Deposits

Five possible linear features were recorded in the trench (53, 54, 60, 62 and 68). All were aligned roughly NW-SE (Table 2). No dating evidence was retrieved from either the south-eastern or north-western visible sections. They were sealed by a layer of dark yellowish brown silty sand (51) which was probably a former cultivation soil. Pottery dating from the medieval period and the 18th/19th/early 20th century was recovered from it. The features are therefore likely to pre-date the 20th century.

Table 2 Linear features

Context	Description	Width	Length	Depth	Diam	Fills	Finds	Section on Fig 2
53	Steep sides and rounded base, NW-SE gully?	0.55	>0.5	0.44		52 dark yellowish brown silty sand	none	B, C
54	'V' shaped profile with moderately steep sloping sides, NW-SE-	1.15	>0.5	0.6		55 Dark yellowish brown sandy silt with 5% rounded gravel	none	B, C
60	'U' shaped profile NW-SE gully	0.38	>0.5	0.26		61 Dark yellowish brown silty sand	None	B, C
62	Very steep sloping sides, rounded base, NW-SE	0.19	>0.5	0.48		63 Dark yellowish brown sandy silt	None	B, C
68	Steep sloping sides, rounded base, NW-SE ditch	1.1	>0.5	0.5		69 Dark yellowish brown silty sand	None	B, C

5.6 A further four cut features were visible in the south-eastern section. Two of these were adjacent to the linear features found at the north-eastern end of the trench (58, 56) and two were c.15m to the south (70, 72). Undiagnostic fragments of iron wire and an iron nail were found in pit 70. The undercutting profile of 72 could indicate that it was an animal burrow. A cut feature was also visible in the north-western section (64). No dating evidence was recovered from any of these possible pits, postholes or linear feature termini. The two southerly features were overlain by a levelling layer (74) for the grass tennis court to the east of the Headmaster's house.

5.7 A lead weight was found in the spoil during the metal detecting survey. It could be 18th or 19th century in date but had no diagnostic features (Bryn Gethin Pers. Comm.).

Table 3 Other features

Context	Description	Width	Length	Depth	Diam	Fills	Finds	Section on Fig 2
58	Very steep sloping sides rounded base			0.42	0.28	59 Dark yellowish brown silty sand	none	C
56	'V' shaped profile with steep sloping sides			0.26	0.34	57 Dark yellowish brown silty sand	none	C
64	'V' Shaped pit or posthole			0.26	0.38	65 Dark yellowish brown silty sand	None	B
70	Steep sloping sides, rounded base			0.4	0.89	71 greyish brown sandy silty loam, occ.charcoal flecks	FE wire and FE nail	C
72	Vertical sides, part undercutting, possible burrow?			0.58	0.32	73 reddish brown silty sand	None	C

B List of Finds

<i>Context</i>	<i>Type</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Comments</i>
51	Pottery	4	Medieval, green glazed wares
51	Pottery	4	Post-medieval: mocha, manganese mottle ware, modern glazed ware, 19 th /20 th century stoneware
51	Lead	1	Weight (2oz)
71	FE	10+	Iron wire



1. Service Trench, looking north-east



2. Grave cut 66



3. Skeletal remains in section



4. Feature 54 in section

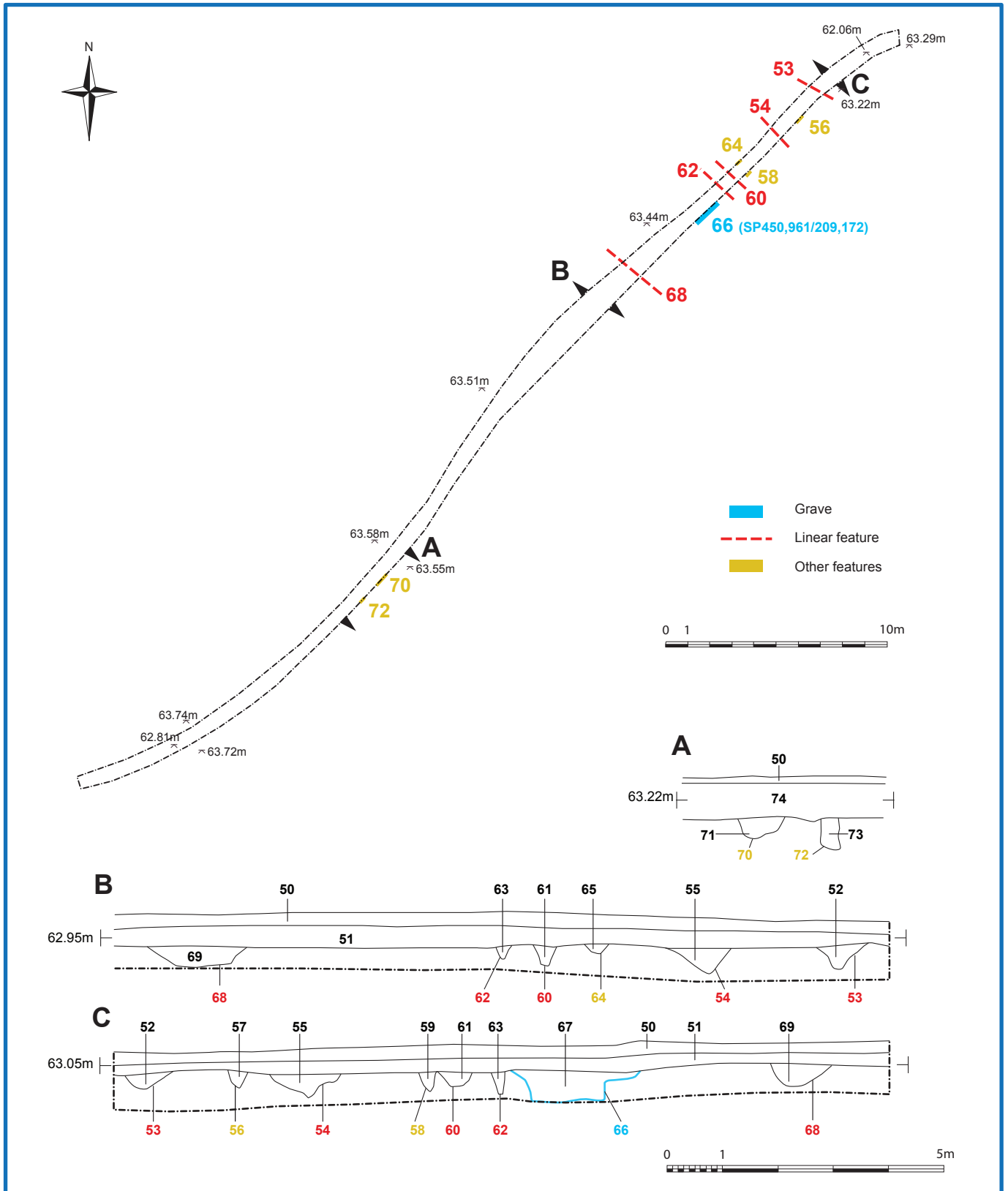


Fig 2: Service trench recording