

Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit

Report No. 290

March 1994

BROOK STREET, BENSON, OXFORDSHIRE

An Archaeological Evaluation 1994

by A.E. Jones

For further information please contact:
Simon Buteux (Manager), Peter Leach or Iain Ferris (Assistant Directors)
Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit
The University of Birmingham
Edgbaston,
Birmingham B15 2TT
Tel: 021 414 5513

Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit

Report No. 290

March 1994

BROOK STREET, BENSON, OXFORDSHIRE

An Archaeological Evaluation 1994

by A.E. Jones

For further information please contact:
Simon Butcux (Manager), Peter Leach or Iain Ferris (Assistant Directors)
Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit
The University of Birmingham
Edgbaston,
Birmingham B15 2TT
Tel: 021 414 5513

BROOK STREET, BENSON, OXFORDSHIRE

An Archaeological Evaluation 1994

1.0: SUMMARY

Features of archaeological and geological origin were identified and sampled by a programme of evaluation trial-trenching at Brook Street, Benson, Oxfordshire. The archaeological features were datable to the 18th or 19th centuries, except for one undated feature (F6, Tr. 4, see Section 5.3 below). No artifacts dated earlier than the 18th-century were recovered from primary or secondary contexts.

2.0: INTRODUCTION

This report describes the results of an archaeological assessment of approximately 1.5 ha. of land off Brook Street, Benson, Oxfordshire (centred on NGR. SU 623920: Fig 1A). Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit were commissioned to undertake the assessment by McAlpine Homes Limited, required as a condition of planning consent imposed by South Oxfordshire District Council. This archaeological assessment was undertaken in accordance with a brief prepared by the County Archaeological Services Department of Oxfordshire County Council, and a project specification prepared by Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit.

The purpose of the assessment was to define the presence, extent and survival of any archaeological deposits that may be affected by the proposed development, and, if appropriate, to provide an informed basis for an agreed mitigation strategy to preserve or record such remains.

3.0: THE SITE AND ITS SETTING (Fig 1B-C)

The archaeological assessment was located in a former scrapyard, which also included the site of a disused slaughterhouse, off Brook Street, on the eastern edge of Benson. This assessment area is bounded on the north side by Brook Street, to the east and west by the grounds of private houses, and to the south by a Royal Air Force airfield. A stream runs under a culvert along the northern site boundary. The assessment area contains a brick office block, a former slaughterhouse building, and areas of concrete hardstanding associated with other buildings recently demolished. The ground surface is uneven, and the topsoil is mixed with spreads of demolition debris and corroded metal.

The site lies on the terrace gravels of the River Thames, which is located approximately 1km to the west of the assessment area. Aerial photography has identified a concentration of cropmarks within Benson airfield (Benson and Miles 1974, map 41: Oxfordshire SMR No. 8583-8), which appear to define a cursus, dated to the Neolithic period, formed by two parallel ditches aligned southwest-northeast, together with traces of undated cropmark enclosures and field systems. Finds of Roman artifacts, including coins and pottery recovered from gardens to the north and east of the assessment area (Oxfordshire SMR No. 2106, 8039, 8041, 9882, 9887) suggest a focus of Roman activity in the near vicinity, although no traces of structures associated with such a putative settlement have yet been found. Finds of Saxon pottery from a similar area (SMR No. 4493, 8042-3, 9880), suggest activity near to the assessment area continued in this period. Some finds of medieval pottery have also been made from the surrounding area, but the assessment area appears to have been located between contemporary settlements focussed on Benson

and Fifield (SMR No. 1062) to the east. The survival of a number of timber-framed houses of 17th-century date along Brook Street suggest some ribbon development had occurred along this street by that date. Map evidence (1863 Tithe award; O.S. First Edition map) suggests the assessment area was undeveloped in the later 19th-century, and the area may have been under cultivation.

4.0: METHODOLOGY

Site evaluation took the form of the excavation of machine-dug trial-trenches, fieldwalking and geophysical survey being considered inappropriate techniques for archaeological assessment because of the extent of ground disturbances, and the presence of extensive spreads of metal and building rubble. The evaluation trenches were positioned to sample the assessment area as widely as possible and, in particular, to intercept any major linear features crossing the former scrapyards. The trench plan was also devised to avoid the areas contaminated by chemical deposits during the working of the scrapyards.

A total of six trenches was opened by machine. In each trench the overburden, comprising garden soils and recent disturbances, was removed by a mechanical excavator with a 2m toothless ditching bucket, to expose the uppermost subsoil horizon, which was cleaned manually. This permitted the definition and sampling of all features cut into this subsoil horizon by selective hand-excavation, to define the profile and fill sequence of individual features, and to recover datable artifacts. The information recovered through this approach is considered adequate for a basic understanding of the nature and survival of archaeological features and deposits. A total area of 186 square metres was trenched, amounting to approximately 2% of the available area of the proposed development zone.

Recording was by means of printed pro-forma recording sheets, supplemented by plans, sections and photographs which are held in the archive.

5.0: THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESULTS (Fig 1C)

5.1: Trenches 1 and 2

Trench 1 was cut on a northwest-southeast alignment for a length of 10m. The upper horizon of the gravel subsoil was encountered at a depth of 0.5m below the modern surface. This subsoil horizon was sealed by a layer of garden soil (1012), mixed with gravel scatters and brick debris, and was overlain by a demolition layer of brick and concrete rubble (1000), which formed the modern surface. No archaeological features could be defined in this trench, and no artifacts were found.

Trench 2 was cut for a length of 17m, following the approximate alignment of Trench 1. Hand cleaning of the upper horizon of the gravel subsoil revealed an area of soft buff-white silt, revealed by excavation to be the fill of a shallow disturbance (F9), probably of geological origin, and containing no artifacts. The subsoil appeared to have been disturbed during deep ploughing. The subsoil and the infilled feature F9 were sealed by a layer of garden soil (1005), also recorded in Trench 1 to the south, which measured an average of 0.6m in depth in Trench 2. Three features were cut from the uppermost horizon of this garden soil, and into the subsoil below. The southernmost of these features was a round-ended pit or gully (F5), which continued beyond the west baulk of the trench. This feature was filled with dark brown clay silt (1006). A quantity of disarticulated human and animal bone was recovered from this feature. The human bone includes fragments of leg and foot bones, and a pelvis, identified as belonging to a woman aged at least 25 years. The two remaining features (F1, F2) were small pits, both containing

fragments of willow pattern pottery and post-medieval tile, but no bone. The garden soil (1005), and features F1-2 and F5 were all sealed by a demolition spread formed of crushed and compacted bricks and concrete blocks (1000).

5.2: Trench 3

Trench 3 was cut perpendicular to Brook Street for a length of 17m. The upper surface of the gravel subsoil was located here at a depth of 0.6m below the modern ground surface. Two gulleys (F3-4), cut into the subsoil in the north of the trench, joined at a right-angled intersection. These features contained similar fills, and their relationship could not be determined. A layer of dark grey-brown clay-silt (1007) sealed the infilled gulleys (F3-4) and the gravel subsoil. Two broad features were cut through layer 1007, and into the subsoil below. One was a ditch of irregular V-shape profile (F8). This feature measured at least 1.8m in depth, but its complete excavation was impeded by the water-table, located here at approximately 1m below the modern ground surface. Part of a circular cut (F10), measuring approximately 6m in diameter, was defined in the south of the trench. A hand-excavated sondage revealed the southern edge of this feature to be formed of stepped vertical sides, but the base of the feature could not be located for safety reasons. The form of the latter feature could suggest it was a well. The fills of cut F10 contained post-medieval tile and pottery.

5.3: Trench 4

Trench 4, aligned approximately perpendicular to Brook Street, was cut for a length of 30m. The uppermost level of the gravel subsoil was defined at a depth of between 0.3 to 0.5m below the modern ground surface. In the north of the trench the surface of this subsoil appeared to have been disturbed during deep ploughing. A ditch (F6) of U-shaped profile was cut into the subsoil on a northwest-southeast alignment. The ditch was filled with light grey-brown clay-silt (1008); no artifacts were recovered from this fill. The ditch and subsoil were sealed by a layer of dark brown clay-silt (1009), which contained fragments of corroded metal, brick and concrete in its uppermost levels. No artifacts were recovered from this trench.

5.4: Trench 5

Trench 5, aligned approximately northwest-southeast, was cut for a length of 11m in the northeast corner of the site. The upper horizon of the gravel subsoil was here overlain by a layer of homogenous dark grey-black clay-silt (1018), measuring between 0.7-1.0m in depth, at the northeastern and southwestern ends of the trench respectively. No archaeological features could be defined in this trench, and no artifacts were recovered.

5.5: Trench 6

Trench 6 was cut for a length of 30m on a northeast-southwest alignment. The gravel subsoil was located at a depth of 1.0m below the modern surface. Hand cleaning of the upper gravel subsoil revealed a number of possible archaeological features. One such feature was identified by excavation as a tree-root disturbance (F7). A second feature (F12), approximately 1m wide, which crossed the trench diagonally was a shallow depression, possibly of geological origin, filled with buff-white sand-silt (1017), which contained patches of chalk in the uppermost fill. The gravel subsoil and the infilled features F7 and F12 were sealed by a layer of dark grey-black clay-silt (1011), which contained fragments of corroded metal, brick and concrete. Three features were cut through layer 1011, and into the gravel subsoil from the modern ground surface. Two features of this group were shallow post-holes (F11, F14), the third was possibly a soil test-pit (F13). No artifacts were recovered from this trench.

6.0: DISCUSSION

6.1: Archaeological results

No datable archaeological features belonging to the prehistoric, Roman, Saxon or medieval periods could be identified during this assessment, nor were any artifacts belonging to these periods recovered from disturbed or secondary contexts. It is possible that the undated gully (F6) in Trench 4 may perhaps be datable to the medieval, or an earlier period, but no associated, or possibly associated features could be defined. The fill of gully F6 is markedly dissimilar to the fills of other manmade (post-medieval) features encountered here, and, furthermore, the stratigraphic position of this gully suggests that its infilling pre-dated the deposition of the overall layer of topsoil, whilst the remaining features were cut from, or close to, the modern ground surface.

The negative evidence from this assessment, and the patterning of the previously recorded find-spots of artifacts, might perhaps suggest that the assessment area, or at least part of it, lay beyond the areas settled between the prehistoric and medieval periods, although this hypothesis is difficult to uphold on the present limited evidence. Alternatively, given the demonstrable degree of ground disturbance caused by the operation of the scrapyard, and by the demolition of associated buildings, such archaeological evidence of medieval or earlier activity on-site may have been scoured-out by later operations.

It is also possible that the southeastern zone of the assessment area, excluded from the scope of this assessment because of its chemical contamination, may have provided evidence of settlement or activity datable prior to the post-medieval period. The relative proximity of this southeastern zone to the cropmark complex recorded on the airfield may suggest a higher potential for the identification of features of prehistoric date in this area and, additionally, the dumping of spoil in this area during the creation of the airfield could have resulted in the dumping of unidentified artifacts of prehistoric date in this area.

Evidence from Trenches 2, 3 and 4 suggests that this area was deeply ploughed, probably during the medieval or post-medieval periods.

The group of post-medieval features recorded in Trenches 2 and 3 may have been associated with occupation and/or ground clearance related to the demolition of a terrace of cottages formerly located just beyond the western site boundary. These features include a possible well (F10), ditches (F3-4, F8), and pits (F1-2, F5). Pit F5 contained a quantity of disarticulated human bone, mixed with animal bone, possibly re-buried as a result of the clearance of an earlier human grave derived from a churchyard or elsewhere in the near vicinity.

6.2: Methodology

The limitations imposed on the archaeological assessment were twofold. A maximum sample area of 2% was to be trenched. Secondly, the presence of localised chemical contaminants, standing buildings and other sub-surface disturbances constrained the location of the machined trenches.

The methodology adopted is considered to have provided an accurate understanding of the archaeological potential of the proposed development area, albeit necessarily constrained by the factors noted above in regard to the positioning of archaeological trenches.

7.0: SIGNIFICANCE

The absence of datable artifacts, or associated features necessarily limits the archaeological significance of the gully F6 found in Trench 4. The remaining features are of limited interest.

8.0: ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The evaluation was sponsored by McAlpine Homes. We are grateful to Alan Prince of McAlpine Homes for his assistance. The project was directed by Alex Jones, with the assistance of Ed Newton, Marianne Ridgeway, Derek Moscrop and Julie Smith. The fieldwork was monitored by Paul Smith for Oxfordshire County Council. The report was edited by Simon Buteux and produced at BUFAU by Ann Humphries. The figure was drawn by Nigel Dodds. We thank Dr. Stephanie Pinter-Bellows and Dr. Roger Flinn of Birmingham University for identification of the human bone and advice on its dating, and Jon Strenberg for help on site.

9.0: REFERENCE

Benson, D and Miles, D 1974. The Upper Thames Valley: An Archaeological Survey of the River Gravels. Oxfordshire Archaeological Unit Survey No. 2. Oxford.

BROOK STREET, BENSON, OXFORDSHIRE
An Archaeological Evaluation 1994

CONTENTS

- 1.0: Summary
- 2.0: Introduction
- 3.0: The site and its setting
- 4.0: Methodology
- 5.0: The archaeological results
- 6.0: Discussion
- 7.0: Significance
- 8.0: Acknowledgements
- 9.0: References

Figures

- 1A Oxfordshire and Benson
- 1B Benson and the site
- 1C The site: areas of archaeological investigation, and simplified plan of the main features

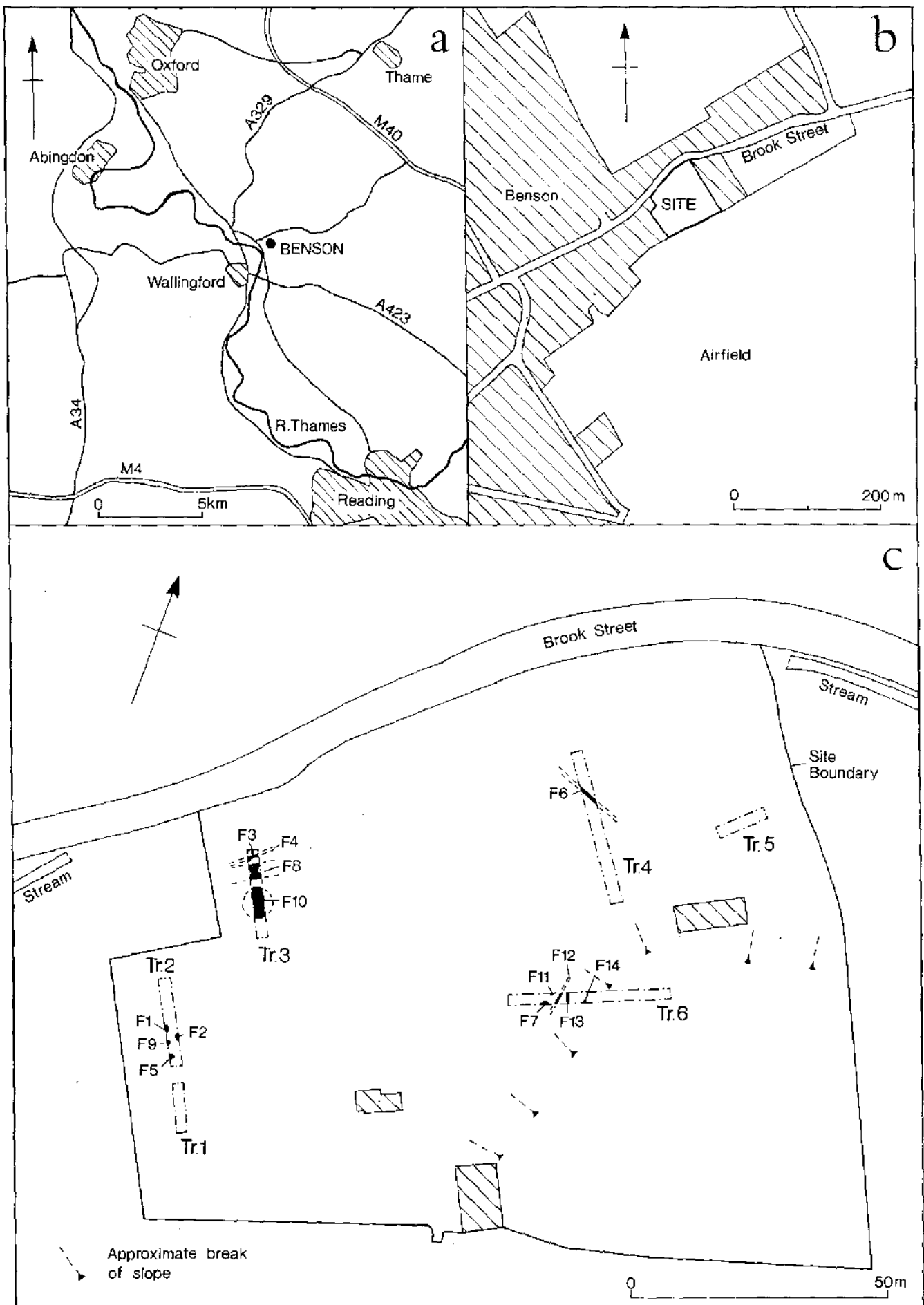


Figure 1