

## **RESULTS OF AN EVALUATION AT HYDE LAUNDRY, GORDON ROAD, WINCHESTER**

### **Introduction**

An archaeological evaluation was requested by Winchester City Council regarding the redevelopment of the former Hyde Laundry premises (NGR: SU 48250 29895). The purpose of this work is to assess the archaeological potential threatened by the development and thereby formulate a scheme of archaeological mitigation that will satisfy the statutory planning requirements whilst pursuing vigorous research aims in an area that has previously witnessed few archaeological interventions.

### **Background**

The study area (37.50m AOD) lies in a largely flat area that forms a former flood plain serviced by the River Itchen and lies to the north and outside of the Roman and later Medieval city wall.

In antiquity, this marginal area consisted of a series of abraded sinuous channels that formed small eyots or islands within a slow moving body of water. These small islands formed from chalk brash or flint gravel were aligned north-south, consistent with the flow of water and stood to a height of little more than 2.00m.

During remote prehistoric periods, this environment may have been rich in wildfowl and fish, whilst the raised land forming the eyots could have afforded sufficient shelter for hunter-gatherer communities to assemble.

From the late first century AD, management of the river system was initiated as Roman town planning encroached into a previously poorly drained area, that became the lower town. This action required the probable diversion of the River Itchen around the eastern town wall, formalising existing channels and requiring a network of drains within the newly created lower town that discharged into the river.

The study area under consideration was probably not subject to this attention, remaining a largely marginal area probably subject to periodic flooding only suitable for pasture.

However, to the west of the study area albeit upon slightly higher ground that possessed superior drainage qualities, vestigial traces of Roman activity such as pits and timber buildings have been recorded whilst a metalled road appears to be aligned towards this area.

The model that emerges is of a marginal area, unsuitable for permanent or conspicuous settlement, where spatial organisation is arranged in a seemingly *ad hoc* manner but where potentially important infrastructure tasks that sustained the town's economic and social welfare may have been performed.

These infrastructure tasks are most likely to be industrial processing, agricultural organisation such as stockholding or markets or market gardening whilst it is possible that social groups excluded from the town through qualification or undertaking undesirable activities e.g. tanning, may have been located.

Following the demise of Winchester as an important urban centre by the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD, management of the river system that maintained the integrity of the lower town began to fall into disrepair. Upper, Middle and Lower Brooks reverted to their natural courses through the town before being formalised as culverts during the Medieval period.

The Alfredian revival of the town during the late 9<sup>th</sup> century AD probably coincided and was conditional on successful drainage maintenance especially for the lower town.

Although the physical evidence is scanty and derived from documentary sources, there is suggestive evidence for late Saxon watercourses in this vicinity, so that by the late 10<sup>th</sup> century the study area was probably part of a series of water meadows formalised by ditches under ecclesiastical or royal control.

This process was consolidated with the arrival of Hyde Abbey in the early 12<sup>th</sup> century who acquired the land. A dispute in ownership during the 13<sup>th</sup> century between the King and the Abbey suggests that the area possessed unknown but valuable attributes (possible rent revenues?) beyond being merely marginal water meadows.

By 1611 following a substantial decline in Winchester's economic and social importance during the late Medieval period, the study area is illustrated as a probable orchard sub-divided by a water course. This topographic feature is consistently recorded on successive 18<sup>th</sup> century surveys and documented on the 1871 Ordnance Survey map whereupon it succumbed and was lost to late 19<sup>th</sup> century development.

## Results

Two evaluation trenches were excavated within the study area in order to discover the presence of a historic water course that appeared to be in existence circa 1611.

Trench 1 was aligned east-west (20m x 6m) and intended to recover the northern limb of the watercourse where it veered slightly north-westwards.

Real-world constraints however meant that the trench was slightly shunted eastwards and reduced in size to 15m x 4m in order to satisfy health and safety considerations and to maintain the integrity of nearby standing structures.

Four major phases of activity were evident.

### *1. Gravel and putative channel*

The earliest activity appeared to comprise a slightly sinuous channel that curved north-eastwards. Upon excavation, this feature appeared to comprise of dense angular flints within a grey clayey silt matrix flecked with chalk. Despite the presence of small fragments of abraded ceramic building material (probably Post-Medieval or later) and very occasional Roman pottery, it is likely that the bed of gravel that appeared to fill a putative channel was a natural deposition adulterated by intrusive, extraneous cultural material that had penetrated through the gravel via natural agency.

The lack of definition for a cut and the lack of distinction between putative channel fill and natural gravel suggest that the drift geology comprises a series of horizontal, coarse gravel beds whose interstices have been filled by fine material held in suspension in slow-moving water.

These gravel beds were subject to periodic scouring and erosion from water channels whose course could alter seemingly in a random fashion. When seen in a single truncated plane, the product of machining, these natural deposits appeared to represent regular form that could prior to excavation appear as potential cultural features.

Such a dynamic environmental system where geological material could be subject to transportation and periodic shifts is consistent with an unmanaged abraded channel.

The historic water-course that was anticipated was not evident, almost certainly located to the west of the opened Trench 1.

## *2. Peat horizon*

A homogenous mid-brown peat horizon sealed the gravel described above. This material was slightly uneven between 0.10m-0.20m and thickness that slightly dipped to the west suggesting that the historic channel observed from 1611 lay just to the west of the trench.

No buried soil or pronounced interface existed between the peat and the gravel. This would suggest that the gravel was originally exposed as ostensibly a river bed before river management intervened. The consequence of a deliberate programme of ditches, revetment and groynes firstly removed standing water and then encouraged vegetative colonisation that developed into meadowland.

Occasional ceramic building material drifted into this deposit, a deposit that appears consistent with the medieval and post-medieval date ascribed to the peat in 1986 when first observed in the timber yard adjacent to the north.

## *3. Clay membrane*

A solid membrane of grey re-deposited clay over 1.00m in thickness sealed the peat. This material despite containing Roman pottery was probably imported clay bearing residual Roman pottery dumped to form a water-tight membrane as a prelude to late Victorian development.

## *4. Hyde Laundry*

Formerly used as a drying area for the laundry, there was little evidence for any formal building activity directly beneath a 20<sup>th</sup> century concrete slab covered by tarmac.

Hard core to a depth of 0.40m and modern occasional drains were present directly beneath the slab.

Trench 2 measured 8.20m x 4.20m and was aligned north-south. Originally, this was intended to be an east-west alignment designed to traverse a historic channel. Unfortunately, in order to maintain the structural integrity of the standing building a reconfiguration was required.

Six major phases of activity were encountered.

## *1. Gravel and probable channel*

Due to the excavation constraints within Trench 2, the maximum depth that could be achieved was approximately 1.80m, a depth that was inadequate in order to confirm natural drift geology.

The earliest stratigraphic deposit that was isolated was coarse flint-laden grey clay 212 that formed the upper surface of a tilting plane, a decline from east to west producing a gradient of 20% (1 in 5).

In the upper reaches of this deposit a single sherd of flint tempered ware was recovered that provisionally may represent Saxon coarse ware, whilst the lack of abrasion tends to discount residuality.

This deposit 212 reflected a raised cambered platform that may indicate informal occupation and cultural activity prior to consolidation and formalisation of this area in the 10<sup>th</sup> century.

## *2. Chalk surface and post-holes*

Gravel bar 212 was consolidated by a thick spread of puddled or rammed chalk up to 0.30m in thickness. The initial deposition 226 was on the highest, flat part of the gravel bar with a chalk cap 225, 220 and 219 encroaching into the channel to the west.

Two post-holes 222 and 224 may relate to this activity but stratigraphically they remain insecure.

A possible occupation deposit 218 of light grey chalky clay rested above the chalk membrane.

The purpose for this action remains unclear.

The shallow gradient would appear inadequate for any defensive advantage whilst the alignment appears to be counter to the prevailing defensive arrangement of the town.

The damp conditions, seasonal shifts in the water table and flooding would tend to preclude permanent formal settlement.

The chalk membrane appears synonymous with coarse surfaces often associated with husbandry as the chalk negated the unhealthy properties of urine and other waste, whilst the hardness of the surface prevented the ground from being churned.

Although the physical evidence is extremely limited, possibly the available presence of water and pasture essential for the welfare of livestock, may suggest an informal facility for stockholding enabling driven animals to be fed and watered prior to sale at market or exchanged.

## *3. Bank*

A possible truncated earthen bank 209 may have formalised occupation on the chalk platform. This putative feature was only observed in the southern section of the trench and must remain a provisional interpretation.

## *4. Peat*

Peat horizon 211, 216 and 217 covered chalk horizon 225, 226, 220, 219 discussed above. This homogenous deposit tilted east to west reflecting a western channel and was up to 0.30m in thickness. The peat horizon was clean with no extraneous post-medieval or modern material

suggesting that casual deposition of rubbish was not occurring in relatively recent time. However, a horse skull that appeared to possess a puncture hole from being hung and a shin bone were present.

The channel observed was probably an earlier, wider water-course that developed into the historic channel illustrated on plans from 1611 onwards.

#### 5. *Clay dumping*

The peat horizon was sealed by grey clay 208 that contained post-medieval peg tiles. This action was probably the same levelling process observed in Trench 1 prior to the construction of the laundry during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

#### 6. *Hyde Laundry*

The original construction for the laundry comprised a concrete slab in which cast iron pipes and brick pillars had been embedded. The overlying void was filled by brick rubble sealed by a modern concrete slab.

### Discussion

The inherent problems of drawing site-wide interpretations from a limited sample size were well-reflected during this archaeological evaluation. Particular relevance can be summarised as follows;

- Difficulty in establishing natural drift geology in Trench 1
- Artificial but essential depth limitations precluding excavation of the full cultural sequence in Trench 2
- The level of extraneous cultural material (brick and tile) infiltrating into soft, earlier archaeological horizons particularly in Trench 1
- Availability of an unimpeded space to insert the trenches above an archaeological target

Despite these limitations, a number of significant archaeological observations can be drawn.

1. Trench 1 appeared to be archaeologically sterile comprising of natural gravel beneath an undated peat horizon.
2. Truncation and modern build-up to a depth of nearly 2.00m in Trench 1 suggests that the northern area within the laundry development will yield few archaeological deposits. Modern cover should be sufficient for preservation *in situ* except in the case of pile-holes.
3. South of Trench 1 and within Trench 2, past cultural impact consisted of a chalk platform that appeared to reflect and utilise the topography of a small eyot or island.
4. A historic channel was not observed but was intimated by the dipping, westerly slope seen in Trench 2.
5. Survival of archaeological deposits within the laundry appeared to be generally well-preserved beneath the concrete slab and probably would be impacted by invasive construction.

6. Ecofacts within the peat were rich but worked, waterlogged timbers that may be indicative of formal or managed water channels were not isolated.
7. Informal occupation may have been present above the chalk raft as suggested by two possible post-holes.
8. Function for this feature remains uncertain, but the underlying wet conditions may intimate seasonal activity associated with husbandry rather than formal and permanent settlement.
9. The limited ceramic assemblage does not represent a substantial body of material but tentatively suggests that informal occupation may correspond to a late Saxon or Medieval period rather than earlier Roman settlement.
10. A possible correlation does exist between the drainage improvements initiated during the 10<sup>th</sup> century and the study area albeit poorly understood at this juncture.

#### Future research aims

The central aim for future research would be to define and characterise the chalk platform discovered within the laundry building. Examination would include;

- Establish natural drift geology and understand fluvial processes that impacted upon the study area
- Isolate ingress and egress to the chalk platform in order to understand how the local topography was culturally adapted
- Define post-hole configurations in order to establish whether occupation was seasonal or permanent, domestic or agricultural
- Should occupation involve livestock, then a diatom survey may be useful to identify species and spatial organisation within the raised platform
- Removal of a significant area of chalk in order to recover ceramic material that is securely stratified. This may test a late Saxon date regarding drainage improvements
- Examine the study area for evidence for remote prehistoric occupation

Based on the evidence established from the archaeological evaluation process the following table seeks to anticipate in broad terms the likely yields and required action for both artefacts and ecofacts.

Item	Present during Evaluation	Yields	Importance	Conservation
Pottery	Yes	Very low	High	No
CBM	Yes	Low	Low	No
Animal bone	Yes	Low	High	No
Environmental samples	Yes	High	High	No
Leather	No	Very low	Moderate	Yes
Flint	Possible	Very low	Moderate	No
Small finds	No	Very low	Moderate	Yes

<b>Structural Timbers</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Very low</b>	<b>High</b>	<b>Yes</b>
<b>Shell</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>Low</b>	<b>Low</b>	<b>No</b>
<b>Worked stone</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Very low</b>	<b>Low</b>	<b>No</b>
<b>Glass</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Very low</b>	<b>Low</b>	<b>No</b>

### Conclusion

Past cultural activity occurred beneath the current laundry building but was probably not present to the north of the laundry.

This activity possibly dates from the late Saxon period whereby the study area was subjected to systematic drainage in order to achieve agricultural improvements and assisting development within the town.

Occupation appears to have remained largely informal, conditioned by the low-lying wet environment and possibly for the benefit of livestock rather than formal settlement.

During the late medieval period up to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the area appears to have been largely neglected reverting to open meadow.