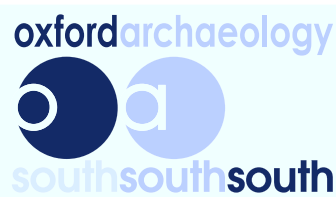


High Street Oxford Phase 3 Resurfacing



Archaeological Watching Brief Report



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Phase 3 Road Resurfacing, High Street, Oxford

ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF REPORT

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Front Cover: Resurfacing at the Western end of the High Street

SUMMARY

Between January and April 2010 Oxford Archaeology (OA) carried out an archaeological watching brief in the High Street, Oxford (Between NGR: SP 5147 0621 - SP 5195 0623). The work was commissioned by Oxfordshire County Council, in advance of the resurfacing of the street. The watching brief revealed stratigraphy indicative of the earlier road construction, associated service trenching and modern made ground. The depth of excavation was insufficient to expose any earlier deposits. No other deposits or features of archaeological significance were observed.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Scope of work

- 1.1.1 Between January and April 2010 Oxford Archaeology (OA) carried out an archaeological watching brief in the High Street, Oxford City (Between NGR: SP 5147 0621 to SP 5195 0623) (Fig. 1). The work was commissioned by Oxfordshire County Council (OCC), in advance of the Phase 3 resurfacing of the street as part of the programme of road reconstruction and repair within Oxford City.
- 1.1.2 Paul Smith, County Archaeological Officer for Oxfordshire prepared a brief setting out the requirements and standards for the archaeological work, this in line with PPG16 (OCAS, Nov. 2008).
- 1.1.3 OA prepared a Written Scheme of Investigation detailing how it would meet the requirements of the brief (OA, 2009).

1.2 Location, geology and topography

- 1.2.1 The High Street runs roughly east-west across the centre of Oxford from the Junction between Cornmarket and St Aldates Street in the west to Magdalen Bridge across the Cherwell in the east (Fig. 1). The road slopes from west to east from Cornmarket at approximately 65 m AOD down to Magdalen Bridge at approximately 59 m AOD. The underlying natural geology is 2nd Terrace Gravel deposits (Geological Survey of Great Britain, Sheet No. 236).

1.3 Archaeological and historical background

- 1.3.1 The High Street is one of the original and the principal E-W Saxon street dating from the 10th-century Saxon burh, it running from Carfax to Magdalen Bridge where it crosses the River Cherwell, and remains one of Oxford's principal urban highways.
- 1.3.2 Elements of Oxford's earliest streets, including High St, in the form of surfaces and their associated drains, have been revealed during previous services work in the 1970s and 80s.

- 1.3.3 The first phase of High Street works, between Carfax and Turl Street, did not impact on any archaeological deposits or features. During the second phase of works, between Long Wall Street and Magdalen Bridge a stone built culvert and associated road surface probably dating from the 1778 highway improvements were identified. A trench for a new drain was excavated along the middle of the road and was found to follow the line of an 18th century culvert. This was recorded in detail at three locations using test pits.
- 1.3.4 In Test Pit 1, about 30 m east of Rose Lane, the culvert was of drystone wall construction, made from roughly hewn blocks of limestone. It consisted of two parallel sidewalls 0.70 m apart and at least 0.60 m deep with a barrelled roof. The culvert had been repaired with bricks at one point. The culvert was overlain by a layer of light grey gravel and sand that had been used as make up for a road surface. This layer produced a glass seal from a Magdalen College Common Room wine bottle bearing the date 1763. The road surface comprised a layer of limestone blocks and smaller pitched stones, on which was a surface layer of flat limestone blocks. This was in turn overlain by a gravelly sand layer 0.50m thick forming the modern road sub-base.
- 1.3.5 Test Pit 2, just over 30 m further east, revealed, along its northern section, a foundation trench containing an irregularly coursed drystone wall foundation. The foundation was sealed by a layer of sandy gravel 0.08 m thick, from which was recovered the base of a pottery vessel dating from the later 16th to mid-17th centuries. A modern service trench truncated this layer and succeeding layers, although the vestiges of a thin make up layer and a road surface of pitched limestone pieces were recorded just over 0.6 m below the modern road surface. The stone culvert, of similar character as in TP 1 was again recorded on the southern side of TP2.
- 1.3.6 Test Pit 3, about 45m east of TP2, revealed, at a depth of 0.89 m (57.89 m OD), a drystone structure interpreted as a manhole providing access into the culvert. The manhole entrance was sealed by a pair of flagstones. When these were removed it revealed an entrance 0.60 m square into a shaft 1.2 m deep that gave access to the main culvert. A CCTV survey confirmed that this section of the culvert survived in good condition including the barrelled roof. The culvert had been blocked off on its west side by a stone wall built across its interior. A small outlet was noted on the east side, probably originally draining into the River Cherwell.
- 1.3.7 The pottery assemblage from these investigations ranged from the late 17th to early 19th centuries, but was mainly of 18th century date. In addition, a small assemblage of re-used architectural stone was recovered. These included a limestone jamb from an unglazed window, a fragment of newel stair, both originating from a high status late medieval building. Four other pieces, including voussoirs, also probably originated from earlier buildings.

Potential Archaeology

- 1.3.8 The potential in Phase 3 for structures of the type found in Phase 2 of the High Street works was considered high if the 520mm construction depth was exceeded. The fragment of foundation wall found in TP 2 is especially interesting as it clearly pre-dates the 18th century culvert and contemporary road surface. This could be part of the 13th century St. John's Hospital, which previously stood on the site of Magdalen College and may represent the footings of an enclosure wall fronting onto the High Street. This has clear implications for the stretch between Turl Street and Longwall Street, where similar period remains may survive at between 0.6 and 0.8 m below the modern road surface. It is very probable that, at least on the north side of the High Street, medieval frontage boundaries protruded much further out – possibly as far as the centre line of the modern carriageway. However, none of the Phase 1 or 2 works was deep enough to reveal Saxon features. Evidence of the primary Saxon street surface has been seen during sewerage works outside 33 High Street (SP5173 0627) when it was observed about 1.6 m below the modern road surface. It was cut by a later mid-road drain or 'kennel'.
- 1.3.9 This phase of works covered the following areas: The Junction with St. Mary's Entry and Oriel Street (SP 5158 0624 - spot height at 62.5 m above OD): This is the supposed line of the eastern extent of the late Saxon burh. To date, no direct evidence of the ditch and rampart, or east gate of the Saxon defences has been identified, but the odd Saxon artefact has been found.
- 1.3.10 The junction with Catte Street and as far west as Magpie Lane (SP 5164 0625 - spot height at 61.9 m above OD): This is the area where drainage works in 1981 revealed a probable 5 metre wide ditch running across the High Street in line with Catte Street. This also ties in with the description of a black organic deposit full of animal bones found over 3 metres down in 1873.
- 1.3.11 The junction with Longwall Street (SP 5195 0622 - spot height 58.8 m above OD), the site of the East Gate of the later medieval town defences. No trace of this was found in the Phase 2 works, but some of the re-used stone could conceivably come from this structure.

2 PROJECT AIMS AND METHODOLOGY

2.1 Aims

- 2.1.1 To identify and record the presence or absence, extent, condition, quality and date of archaeological remains in the areas affected by the road scheme and associated operations.
- 2.1.2 To preserve by record any archaeological deposits or features that may be disturbed or destroyed during the course of the work.

2.1.3 To allow, if feasible and practicable, *in-situ* preservation of remains of special importance or sensitivity.

2.1.4 To make available the results of the archaeological investigation.

2.2 Methodology

2.2.1 The work was carried out using a mixture of tarmac cutters, hydraulic breakers and 9 tonne tracked excavators fitted with 1 m and 1.8 m wide toothless buckets. The watching brief was conducted as a series of site visits during and immediately after reduction of the site. The work was conducted as a series of discrete sections each backfilled and resurfaced before the next section was started.

2.2.2 A plan showing the extent of the excavations was maintained at a scale of 1:500 (Fig. 2) and any sections recorded were drawn at a scale of 1:20. All excavations were photographed using digital photography, colour slide and black and white print film. A general photographic record of the work was also made. Recording followed procedures detailed in the *OA Field Manual* (ed D Wilkinson, 1992).

3 RESULTS

3.1 Description of deposits

3.1.1 This phase of work ran between Turl Street (SP 5147 0621) and Longwall Street (SP 5195 0623). Each of the east- and west-bound carriageways was resurfaced separately in order to maintain traffic flow.

Eastbound carriageway

3.1.2 The road surface was reduced by an average of 0.5 m depth within this section. The depth of excavation was determined by the depth at which services were encountered by the works.

3.1.3 The stratigraphy observed was similar throughout its length and an overall sample description can be applied (Fig. 3, Section 1).

3.1.4 Immediately to the south of Queens College a compact layer of oolitic gravel containing a large percentage of grey-brown silts (3) was encountered at a depth of 0.3 m below the original road level. This deposit was seen to be in excess of 0.2 m deep within the section and was observed throughout the base of the reduced area. The trenches for several modern utilities had been cut from this level.

3.1.5 This was overlaid by a 0.15 m deep layer of light yellow-brown heavily compacted gravel (2), which also contained occasional small stone fragments and fragments of brick. Sealing this was a 0.15 m deep layer of tarmac (1), the present day road surface.

3.1.6 Other than the service trenches no features of archaeological significance were observed to cut layer 3. An exception to this was a roughly circular void approximately 0.3 m in diameter exposed during its reduction (Fig. 3, Section 2) located at SP 51539 06232 opposite King Edwards Street. Examination of the void showed it to be 0.5 m deep and to extend underneath layer 3. The sides of the void were composed of a grey-brown gritty clay silt (4) with several animal bones protruding from its edge. After discussions with the site engineer it was determined that the void was probably formed by leaks from a nearby storm drain leaching the soluble material from within deposit 4 leaving a void into which the bottom edge of layer 3 had collapsed.

Westbound carriageway

- 3.1.7 As with the eastbound carriageway the road surface was reduced by an average of 0.5 m depth within this section, the depth of reduction varying between 0.4 m and 0.6 m depending upon the depth at which the modern services were encountered.
- 3.1.8 Likewise the stratigraphy observed was broadly similar throughout its length.
- 3.1.9 A continuation of layer 3, a compact layer of oolitic gravel containing a high percentage of grey-brown silts was encountered at a depth of 0.3 m below the original road level. This deposit could be seen to contain lenses of reddish brown gravel that were interpreted as tiplines indicating variation of the imported material rather than discrete deposits. As with the eastbound carriageway this layer was cut by a number of modern service trenches.
- 3.1.10 During the connection of a new storm drain to one of the existing drains it was necessary to re-excavate one of these trenches to a depth of 1.5 m below the current road level (Fig. 3, Section 3) immediately to the east of Magpie Lane (NGR: SP 51635 06247). A layer of dark grey clay silt (6) containing a high percentage of gravel was encountered at a depth of 1.1 m below road level. Overlying this was a 0.4 m deep layer light grey-brown clay silt and gravel mixture (5). This was sealed by layer 3 which could be seen to be 0.4 m in depth at this point. No dating evidence or any other evidence of activity was recovered from layer 5 and 6.
- 3.1.11 Layer 3 was overlaid by continuation of layer 2, a light yellow-brown heavily compacted gravel, up to 0.18 m in depth. This formed the base for a 0.15 m deep layer of tarmac (1), the original road surface.
- 3.1.12 No features or deposits of archaeological significance could be seen to cut layer 3.

3.2 Finds

- 3.2.1 The only dating evidence encountered during the course of the watching brief was post-medieval in date and included machine-made brick fragments and fragments of salt-glazed pipe. The presence of these finds was noted but they were not retained.

No earlier dating evidence was recovered. The bones recovered from deposit 4 were identified as porcine, but not retained.

3.3 Palaeo-environmental remains

3.3.1 No deposits suitable for palaeo-environmental sampling were observed during the course of the watching brief.

4 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

4.1.1 The watching brief observed successive layers of made ground below the High Street. Layers 2 and 3 are associated with the construction of the modern roadway, while layers 5 and 6 are probable layers of made ground associated with earlier phases of road construction. No dating evidence was available to place them within the known chronology of the High Street.

4.1.2 With the exception of the service trench noted within the eastbound carriageway it was evident that the limited depth of excavation, typically 0.5 m, was insufficient to expose deposits or features below the construction level of the modern High Street.

4.1.3 Deposit (4), associated with the void opposite King Edwards Lane has been provisionally identified as the fill of some type of negative feature, although the extents were not observed and no dating evidence was recovered.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1 ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXT INVENTORY

<i>Context</i>	<i>Type</i>	<i>Depth</i>	<i>Comments</i>	<i>Finds</i>	<i>Date</i>
1	Layer	0.12 m – 0.15 m	Modern tarmac road surface	-	C20th
2	Layer	0.15 m – 0.18 m	Compacted gravel	Brick	C20th
3	Layer	0.4 m	Compacted gravel and silts	Brick, salt glazed pipe	C20th
4	Fill	>0.3 m	Probable fill of an undated rubbish pit	Bone	-
5	Layer	0.4 m	Made ground. Make up of an earlier phase of the High Street	-	-
6	Layer	> 0.3 m	Made ground. Make up of an earlier phase of the High Street	-	-

APPENDIX 2 BIBLIOGRAPHY AND REFERENCES

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APPENDIX 3 SUMMARY OF SITE DETAILS

Site name: Phase 3 Resurfacing Works, High Street, Oxford

Site code: OXHIRS 09

Grid reference: SP 5147 0621 - SP 5195 0623

Type of watching brief: Machine reduction of road level prior to resurfacing.

Date and duration of project: Between January and April 2010, 6 site visits

Area of site: Total area monitored, *c* 3800 m²

Summary of results: The watching brief revealed stratigraphy indicative of the earlier road construction, associated service trenching and modern made ground. The depth of excavation was insufficient to expose any earlier deposits. No archaeologically significant deposits or features were observed.

Location of archive: The archive is currently held at OA, Janus House, Osney Mead, Oxford, OX2 0ES, and will be deposited with Oxfordshire county Museum Service in due course under the following accession number OXCMS:2009.62

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Figure 1: Site location

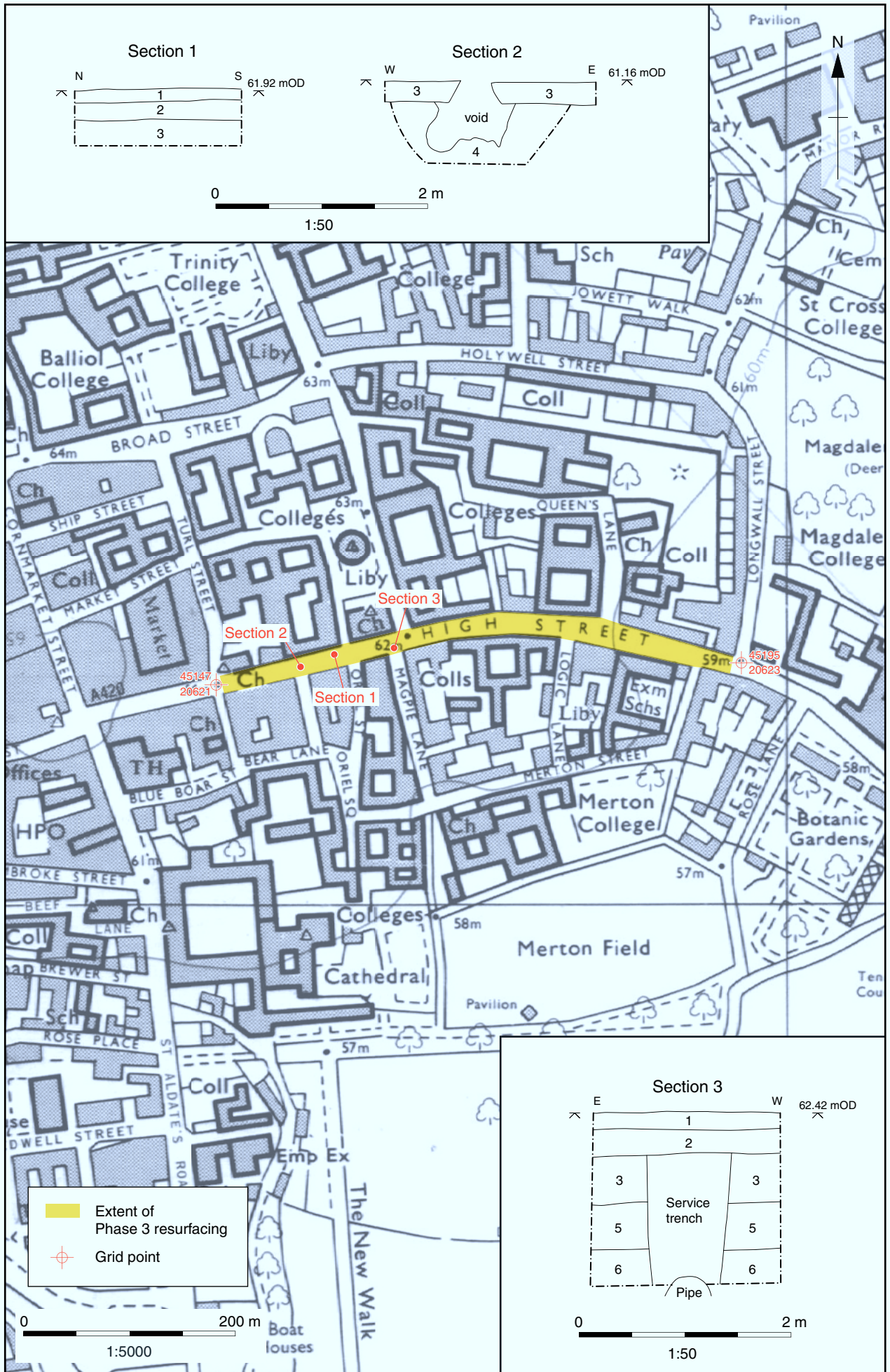


Figure 2: Plan of extent of work and location of sections and detailed sections 1-3



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