



JOHN MOORE HERITAGE SERVICES

**AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL  
WATCHING BRIEF ON LAND AT OLD PLACE YARD,  
BICESTER, OXFORDSHIRE**

**SP 5835 2205**

*On behalf of  
Sanctuary Group*

**October 2011**

**REPORT FOR** Sanctuary Group  
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## **Summary**

*A watching brief was conducted by John Moore Heritage Services during ground reduction for a new car park (Planning Ref: 11/00517/F) at Old Place Yard, Bicester, Oxfordshire (NGR 5835 2205). A total of three site visits were made intermittently over the period from 3<sup>rd</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> October 2011. The monitored ground works involved initial topsoil stripping followed by further reduction to finished levels across the area of the new car park. The surface of the natural geology was not encountered, except in one service trench located in the north western corner of the site. No archaeological features or finds were present at the site.*

## **1 INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1 Site Location (Figure 1)**

The site is located on the south side of Bicester and the south eastern side of Old Place Yard (SP 5834 2211). The site lies at approximately 68m above OD and the underlying geology is Cornbrash.

### **1.2 Planning Background**

Planning permission has been granted by Cherwell District Council for the creation of additional car parking spaces including disabled facilities for Charter residents at Old Place Yard, Bicester (11/00517/F). Due to the possible presence of archaeological features, including skeletal remains a condition was requested requiring that an archaeological watching brief be maintained during the period of ground works. This is in line with PPS 5 and Local Plan policies. Oxfordshire County Archaeological Services (OCAS) prepared a *Brief* for archaeological work. This was followed by a *Written Scheme of Investigation* produced by John Moore Heritage Services, which outlined the method by which the watching brief would be carried out in order to preserve by record any archaeological remains of significance.

### **1.3 Archaeological Background**

The area concerned lies within an area of some archaeological interest located close to the precinct of the medieval St Edburga's Priory (PRN 1593). The Priory buildings itself were located approximately 70m NE of the site and burials associated with the Priory Church have been recorded 80m north (PRN 15868). A late 15<sup>th</sup> century house thought to be a guest house of the Priory and now a private dwelling is located 70m north east of the site (named the Old Priory) (PRN 10612). In addition Roman and Saxon occupation has been recorded 160m to the SE (PRN 17407). This small plot has remained undeveloped since the first edition OS maps.

The Priory at Bicester was founded by Gilbert Bassestt around 1183 for a Prior and eleven canons. It was endowed with land and buildings around the town and other parishes, but always collected only a modest income. The Priory was typical of Augustinian traditions of the time, set within a precinct wall containing church, cloister, refectory, kitchens, dormitory and Prior's lodgings. The Priory Church was enlarged during the 14<sup>th</sup> Century when the shrine of St Edburg was instated, probably sited within the North Transcept of the Church.

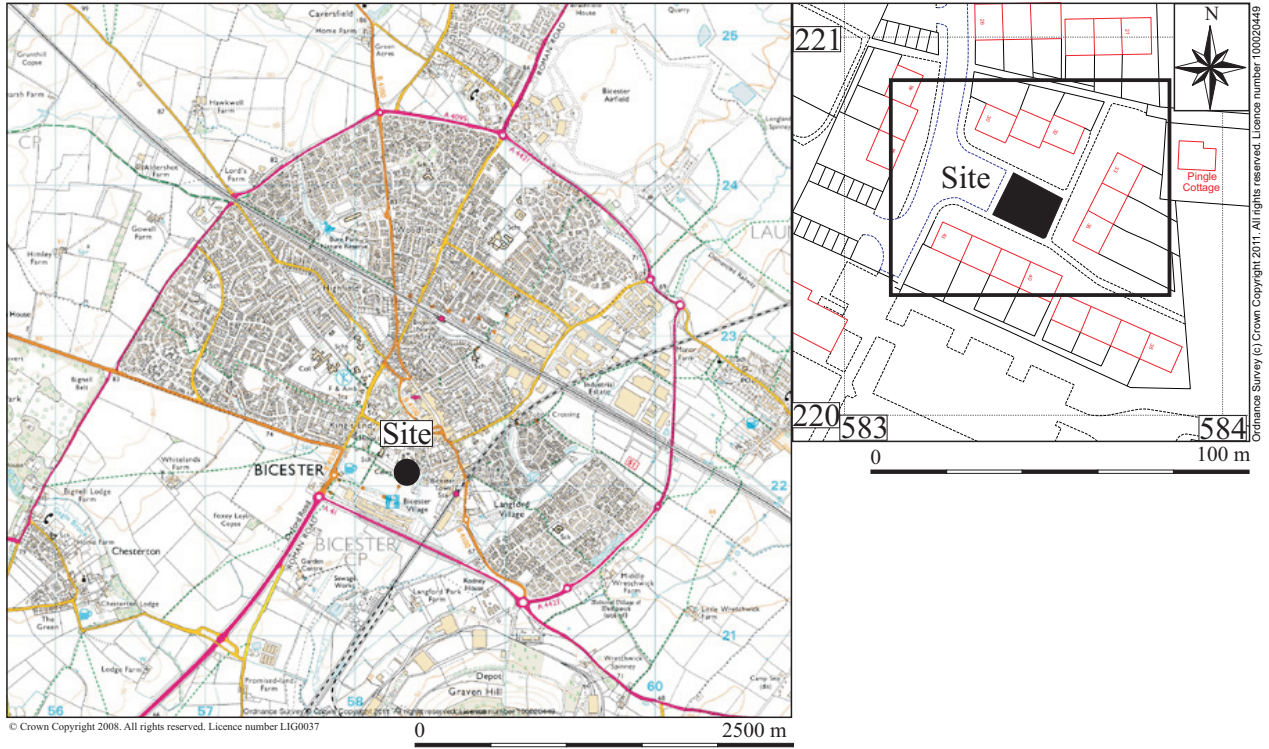


Figure 1. Site location

Aspects of the Priory were recorded during the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century (Dunkin 1816) and during the development of St Egburg's House in the 1960's (Hinton 1968). Following the results of these previous excavations we can now extensively add to the interpretations and summaries first proposed by Dunkin (1816) and Hinton (1968). Recent excavations beneath the former Bryan House by John Moore Heritage Services (Riccoboni 2011 *forthcoming*) uncovered the remains of the eastern (or Chancel) end of the Priory Church and 20 skeletons were removed buried beneath the floors of the church, prior to redevelopment of the site.

After John Dunkin's excavations the Old Place Yard (otherwise incorrectly referred to 'Old Palace Yard' (Hessian 2011)) remained under horticulture. The northern area of the Old Place Yard began to be developed in 1964, when David Watts (then a Schoolboy) started what in effect was a watching brief during groundworks by contractors. The findings have been summarised in Hinton's report on the findings (Hinton 1968). This site is however concerned with an area of the outside of the medieval monastic precinct, but not previously investigated.

## **2 AIMS OF THE INVESTIGATION**

The main and general project aim outlined in the Brief (OCC 2010) was to:

- Identify and record any significant archaeological remains revealed by the ground works, paying particular regard to the potential for prehistoric and Roman remains.

### **2.1 Project Objectives**

This report sets out to fulfil these highlighted objectives along with the following aims stated in the Written Scheme of Investigation (JMHS 2011) which were to;

- to make a record of any significant remains revealed during the course of any operations that may disturb or destroy archaeological remains; and in particular:
- to record any evidence of activity relating to the medieval Priory in the area.

## **3 STRATEGY**

### **3.1 Research Design**

The recording was carried out in accordance with the standards specified by the Institute for Archaeologists (1994) and John Moore Heritage Services *Written Scheme of Investigation* (JMHS 2011).

### **3.2 Methodology**

An archaeologist was present on site during all ground reduction connected to the new car park area. All ground reduction was achieved using a 360° tracked excavator fitted with a ditching bucket.

A journal, recorded on specially designed record sheets, was maintained which detailed times and durations of site visits as well as notes on areas monitored by the archaeologist. Deposits (overburden) were recorded on context recording sheets. A general photographic record of the work was kept and will form of the part site archive to be submitted to the Oxfordshire County Museum.

## **4 RESULTS**

### **4.1 Field Results**

Individual context numbers were assigned on site to deposits encountered during the ground reduction. Context numbers in ( ) indicate deposits of material.

### **4.2 Service trench**

Trench excavations took place to find an existing pipe across the north eastern end of the site which extended across the pathway (Plate 1). The lowest geological horizon attained was the natural Cornbrash (06), The natural consisted of dense layering of limestone set in clay silt. The depth at which this horizon was attained varied slightly across the site but was generally around *c.* 0.80m from the current ground surface.

Overlying the natural was a layer of *c.* 0.10m thick dark brownish grey-silty clay relic subsoil with numerous small limestone fragments throughout (05). This deposit did not contain any significant archaeological material. Overlying (05) was *c.* 0.30m thick dark grey black silty clay relic topsoil (04) with two animal bones thought to be from a sheep (not retained).

The next deposit (03) was *c.* 0.15m thick and of modern origin consisting of heterogenous grey brown silty clay with sand patches. Overlying (03) was *c.* 0.10m thick dark brownish grey silty clay subsoil of modern origin with occasional limestone flecks (02). The latest deposit was 0.10-0.15m thick dark greyish black silty clay topsoil (01) of recent date. No archaeological finds or features were discovered.

### **4.3 The General Site Strip**

The archaeological monitoring involved the removal of topsoil (01) and subsoil (02) both of modern date, down to the surface of (03) also of modern date. No archaeological finds or features were discovered.

### **4.4 Reliability of Results**

The watching brief was carried out in fair conditions with good co-operation from the contractor carrying out the groundworks.

Following the topsoil removal by a 360° tracked excavator fitted with a ditching bucket across the area of the new car park the total depth reached was *c.* 0.30m from the present ground surface. This only encountered deposit (03), which was considered to be a hardcore laid down when the bungalows were constructed. The natural ground surface (06) or even the buried topsoil (04) were not reached during the majority of the works. Only the service trench reached the natural ground in only the north eastern

of the trench (Plate 1). The rest of the service trench was above the relic topsoil and subsoil.

## **5 FINDS**

### **5.1 Finds**

The only finds recovered were two animal bones thought to be from a sheep and were not retained.

### **5.2 Environmental Remains**

No features were considered to warrant environmental sampling.

## **6 DISCUSSION**

The archaeological watching brief at the new car park on land at the Old Place Yard was unsuccessful in proving that no archaeological features or finds existed at the site. The depths below ground level reached by the contractors were generally *c.* 0.30m. This meant that across the site only a modern layer, perhaps associated with a previous compound was encountered. The natural ground was not seen across the area, except in one portion of the service trench, where a connection was needed to an existing pipe.

The relic topsoil and subsoil (where encountered) seemed relatively undisturbed and it is probable that this area was not previously stripped when the bungalows were constructed, but was simply 'made up' to level the ground by the importation or redistribution of deposits from elsewhere. Two animal bones were recovered from (04) which may indicate this area (as expected) was probably used as pasture, as it is thought to be located just outside the inner monastic precinct, but within the Priory grounds.

## **7 ARCHIVE**

### **Archive Contents**

The archive consists of the following:

#### Paper Record

|                                 |                          |
|---------------------------------|--------------------------|
| The project brief               | The project report       |
| Written Scheme of Investigation | The primary site records |
| The drawn records               |                          |

The archive is currently maintained by John Moore Heritage Services.

## **8 BIBLIOGRAPHY**

Bob Hessian 2011 *The Bicester Priory* Paper presented to the Bicester Local History Society at St Edburgs Church Monday 17<sup>th</sup> October

Dunkin J 1816 *The History and Antiquities of Bicester* pp 1-272.

English Heritage 1991 *Management of Archaeological Projects*



English Heritage 2006 *Management of Research Projects in the Historic Environment*

Institute for Archaeologists, 1999 *Standard and Guidance for Archaeological Watching Briefs* Revised 2008

Gilchrist & Mytum 1989 *The Archaeology of Rural Monasteries* BAR Series 203

Hinton D 1968 *Bicester Priory* in *Oxoniensia* Vol. 33 pp 22- 52

JMHS 2010 *Land at Old Place Yard, Bicester, Oxfordshire; Archaeological Watching Brief; Written Scheme of Investigation*. Unpub JMHS doc. Author Dave Gilbert MIFA.

Watts D A *Short History of Bicester Priory*

## HER Summary Sheet

|   |  |
|---|--|
| <b>Site Name:</b> Land at The Old Place Yard, Bicester, Oxfordshire   |  |
| <b>Site Address:</b> Land at the Old Place Yard, Bicester, Oxfordshire  |  |
| <b>Summary:</b><br><i>A watching brief was conducted by John Moore Heritage Services during ground reduction for a new car park (Planning Ref: 11/00517/F) at Old Place Yard, Bicester, Oxfordshire (NGR 5835 2205). A total of three site visits were made intermittently over the period from 3<sup>rd</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> October 2011. The monitored ground works involved initial topsoil stripping followed by further reduction to finished levels across the area of the new car park. The surface of the natural geology was not encountered, except in one service trench located in the north western corner of the site. No archaeological features or finds were present at the site.</i> |  |
| <b>District/Unitary:</b> Cherwell   | <b>Parish:</b>                             |
| <b>Period(s):</b><br>Modern   |  |
| <b>NGR (centre of site: 8 figures):</b> 5835 2205   |  |
| <b>Type of archaeological work</b><br>Watching Brief  |  |
| <b>Date of Recording:</b> 3 <sup>rd</sup> to 14 <sup>th</sup> October 2011  |  |
| <b>Unit undertaking recording:</b> JMHS   |  |
| <b>Geology:</b> Cornbrash   |  |
| <b>Title and author of accompanying report:</b><br>An Archaeological Watching Brief on Land at the southern end of Old Place Yard, Bicester, Oxfordshire<br><br>Prepared by Paul Riccoboni BA (Hons) Arch AIFA  |  |
| <b>Summary of fieldwork results (begin with earliest period first, add NGRs where appropriate)</b><br><br>No archaeological features or finds.  |  |
| <b>Location of archive/finds:</b>   |  |
| <b>Contact at Unit: :</b><br>Paul Riccoboni<br><a href="mailto:info@jmheritageservices.co.uk">info@jmheritageservices.co.uk</a>   | <b>Date:</b> 21 <sup>st</sup> October 2011 |

Plate 1: South facing section of trench excavation

