



JOHN MOORE HERITAGE SERVICES

**A SUMMARY REPORT ON THE FIRST PHASE OF  
AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION**

**AT**

**BRYAN HOUSE, CHAPEL STREET**

**BICESTER, OXFORDSHIRE**

**NGR SP 5843 2221**

*On behalf of*

**Mansell Construction Services Ltd**

**MAY 2011**

## **Summary**

*John Moore Heritage Services carried out an evaluation on land at Bryan House, Bicester. The evaluation comprised in the first phase the opening of five trenches. Four trenches were excavated to the rear of Bryan House giving onto Priory Lane, where two trenches revealed evidence for consolidation of earlier marshy ground; the second two trenches revealed demolition and walls perhaps associated with the apse of the Austin priory church. A single trench was excavated on Chapel St, which revealed evidence for a late medieval or post-medieval house. This report is an interim summary report.*

## **1 INTRODUCTION**

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

The proposed development site is located in the centre of Bicester, on the western side of Chapel Street and south of the Causeway (SP 5843 2221). The site lies at approximately 69.3m above OD and the underlying geology is shown as Cornbrash. The site is currently a residential development.

### **1.2 Planning Background**

Outline planning permission has been granted for the demolition of existing buildings and construction of 27 No. flats on the site under the application reference 05/00412/OUT in March 2005. This was approved in June 2006. A subsequent planning application was made for the demolition of the existing Bryan House and development of 23 units of affordable housing (10/00106/F) in January 2010. Due to the potential presence of archaeological remains a field evaluation has been required. This is in line with PPS5 and Policy BE13 of the Local Plan. The evaluation formed the first phase of staged investigations. Oxfordshire County Archaeological Services (OCAS) prepared a Design Brief for Archaeological Field Evaluation. A *Written Scheme of Investigation*, which proposed a suitable methodology to satisfy the requirements of the Brief, was submitted to and accepted by OCAS.

### **1.3 Archaeological Background**

The site of proposed development is located within the core of the medieval settlement of Bicester. It lies close to St Egburg's Church, which dates to the early medieval period although documentary evidence shows that there was a church on the site during at least the later Anglo Saxon period. It is highly probable that it was a Minster church in the Anglo Saxon period. This site is also within the eastern side of the site of the Austin priory that was founded between 1182 and 1185. Whilst not being an extensive monastic house it supported a Prior and eleven canons until its dissolution in 1536.

The area of the Bryan House site was the subject of limited archaeological investigations in September 1968, ahead of extension work to the TA Centre, which formerly occupied the site, which uncovered a large, medieval dated, wall, (D. A. Hinton, *Oxoniensia* XXXIV 1969:22). This was assumed to be the north wall of the



0 500 m  
1:12500



0 50 m

Figure 1: Site and Trench Location

north transept of the Priory's church. Other walls and archaeological deposits were encountered by the builders but not recorded including a number of burials which were not retained. It is possible that other aspects of the Priory and its immediate environs will be encountered in the proposed building works.

To the north of the site is the Causeway that linked the medieval centres of Kings End and Market End appears to be at least C14th in origin. Evaluation and subsequent excavation by John Moore Heritage Service, immediately to the north of the proposal area around Vine Cottages (SP 5841 2228) (PRN 16212), did not refute this and indicated that the land between the site and the causeway was low lying and marshy until it was deliberately levelled in the early post medieval period. From this it is likely that the Causeway was a raised track-way between the two settlements across this marshy lowland.

On the east side of Chapel Street an evaluation undertaken by Wessex Archaeology at the Kings Arms site revealed Anglo Saxon activity along the street frontage (SP 5851 2223) (PRN 16137). The extent of this activity westwards is unclear but it is quite probable that it extended westwards on either side of the River Bure and was associated with the Minster church. The presence therefore of medieval and earlier burials should not therefore be discounted within the grounds of Bryan House.

Excavations carried out on the rear of properties to the north of the site, on the Causeway, produced high status Roman pottery as well as flue and roof tiles. This was possibly related to a high status Roman building somewhere in the near vicinity or imported into the area (SP 5843 2231) (PRN 16268). It is possible therefore that the development of the proposal site could encounter archaeological remains of Roman date.

The areas immediately around Bryan House are likely to have been disturbed during the development of both the TA Centre and Bryan House. However it is highly likely that further aspects of the medieval priory, including aspects of the Church along with human remains will be encountered on site. It is also possible that archaeological deposits related to the Roman and Saxon settlement of the area could be encountered during this development.

Much of the above information has been obtained from the OCAS' *Brief*.

## **2 AIMS OF THE INVESTIGATION**

The aims of the investigation as laid out in the Written Scheme of Investigation were as follows:

- To establish the presence or absence of any archaeological remains within the site
- To determine the extent, condition, nature, character, quality and date of any archaeological remains encountered.
- To assess the ecofactual and environmental potential of the archaeological features and deposits.

In particular

- To establish whether features related to the medieval priory survive in the area
- To establish whether features related to the Roman and Saxon settlement survive in the area.

### **3 STRATEGY**

#### **3.1 Research Design**

In response to a *Design Brief* from OCAS a Written Scheme of Investigation was prepared by John Moore Heritage Services and agreed with Oxfordshire County Council's Archaeological Service. The field evaluation carried out comprised the first phase of a two-phase operation consisting of the mechanical excavation of four trenches at the rear of the proposal area. This was subsequently extended to comprise the further excavation of a trench on Chapel St.

The field evaluation comprised the mechanical excavation of five trenches. Four trenches were located to the rear of Bryan House; one trench was 15 in length and three were 10m in length excavated to the west of the site (Trenches 2-5 Fig. 1). A 5m trench was excavated in the area of the car park to the east of the site (Trench 1). All trenches were 1.6m wide.

Site procedures for the investigation and recording of potential archaeological deposits and features were defined in the *Written Scheme of Investigation*. The work was carried out in accordance with the standards specified by the Institute of Field Archaeologists (1994) and the principles of MAP2 (English Heritage 1991).

#### **3.2 Methodology**

The proposal site was subject to evaluation through the machine excavation of two trenches supplemented by hand investigation of archaeological deposits.

Excavation was by 5 tonne excavator equipped with a ditching bucket.

### **4 RESULTS**

All deposits and features were assigned individual context numbers. Context numbers without brackets indicate features i.e. pit cuts; while numbers in ( ) show feature fills or deposits of material. CBM refers to undifferentiated ceramic building material, which could be brick, tile or daub.

## **4.1 Fieldwork**

### **Trench 1 (Figure 2)**

Trench 1 was located fronting on to Chapel St. Beneath c. 0.3m of topsoil (1/1) were the remains of a building. The earliest deposit, a possible subsoil (1/8), with cornbrash was observed in a sondage excavated in the northern half of the trench. This deposit was overlain by a deposit of dark brown occupation material (1/7), measuring 0.3m in depth, located beneath the demolition against wall 1/4.

The wall 1/6 comprised the external gable wall, oriented east/west, parallel with the wall of the standing adjacent house on Chapel St. The wall make-up was characterised by brick and cornbrash construction. Within the building was the internal north/south wall 1/4, of similar construction. Demolition (1/2) was spread across the area, sealed by topsoil (1/1).

### **Trenches 2-3 (Figure 2)**

Both trenches 2 and 3 were excavated into the marshy land known to exist in the vicinity of the site. Layers of dark clay (2/4), (2/5), (2/9), (2/10), (3/3), (3/4), (3/5), were present measuring between 1.2m and 2.5m thick. These were located between 1m and 1.4m below modern ground level. They were sealed by layers of dumped construction rubbish (2/3) and (2/8) and compacted cornbrash hardstanding (2/2), (2/7) and (3/2). Topsoil sealed the hardstanding.

### **Trenches 4-5 (Figure 2)**

Trenches 4 and 5 revealed possible evidence for the north and south walls of the apse of the Austin priory. Trench 4 revealed the northern edge of wall 4/6 at the west end of the trench. The wall was at a depth of approximately 1.5m from ground-level. Services were present and only a sondage at the west end was opened up.

Trench 5 revealed the possible southern wall 5/6 of the apse at a depth of 1.2m from ground-level. Abutting the wall were demolition deposits (5/8) and (5/5), the latter of which yielded over 9 kg of floor tile, including encaustic examples as well as plain border tiles. It is possible that (5/8) might represent a floor make-up layer, but it was not investigated more than appropriate in the context of an evaluation.

The walls 4/6 and 5/6 was sealed by relict cultivation soils (4/4), (4/3), (5/4) and (5/3). No dating was recovered from these layers.

The cultivation soils were sealed by (4/2) and (5/2), the compacted cornbrash. Topsoil sealed all deposits.

## **4.2 Reliability of Techniques and Results**

The reliability of results is considered to be good. The archaeological evaluation took place during dry and sunny weather on April 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup>. The site was monitored by Richard Oram of the Oxfordshire County Archaeological Services who visited on both days.

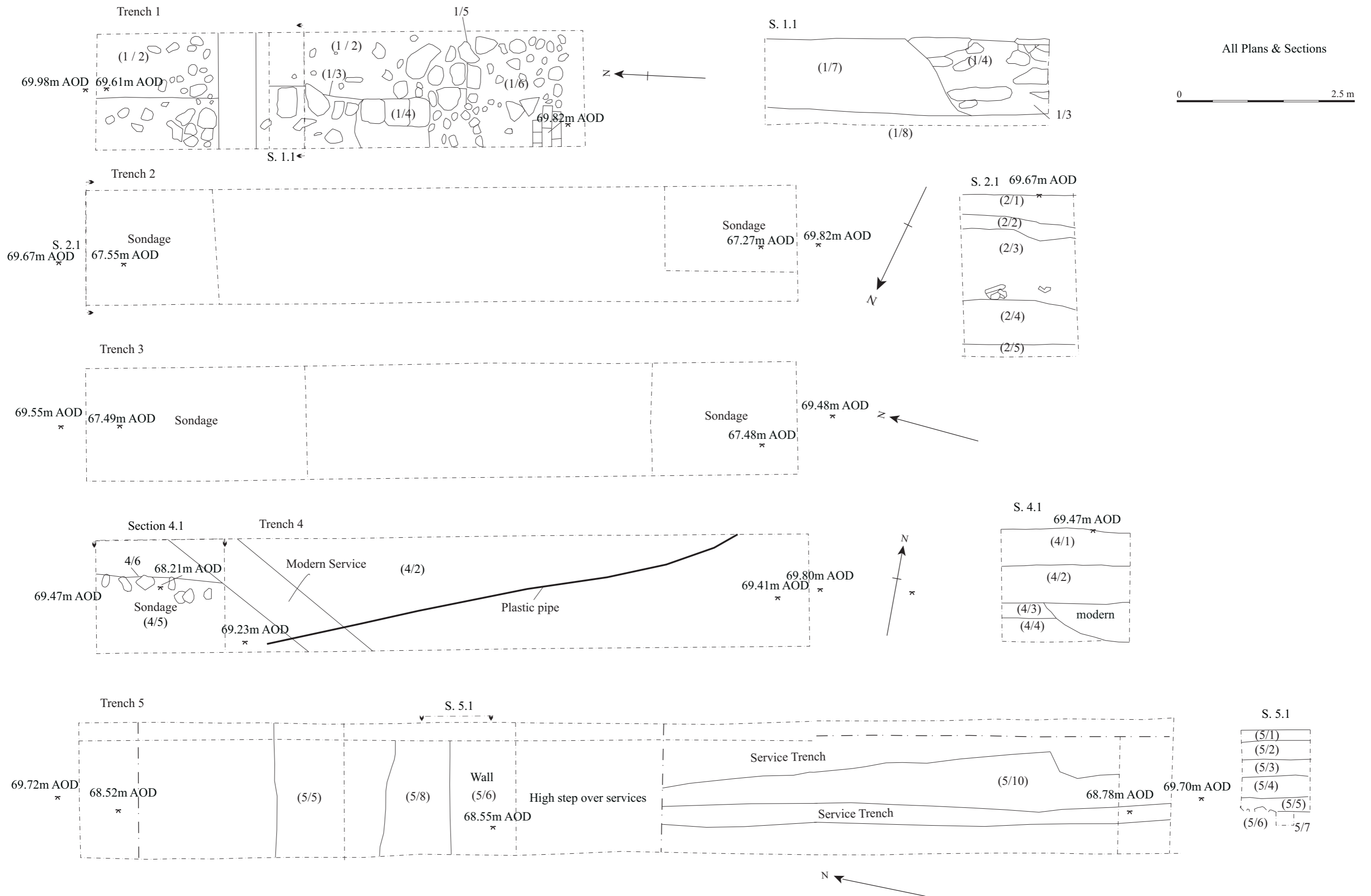


Figure 2: Trench Plans and Sections

## 5 FINDS AND ENVIRONMENTAL REMAINS

### 5.1 Floor tile

Approximately 9 kg of floor tile comprising at least two types of encaustic tile with a range of motifs represented and plain dark border tile fragments were recovered during the evaluation from Trench 5, context (5/5), which was a mortar-rich demolition layer. No further analysis has been undertaken as yet on the tile.

### 5.2 Environmental Remains

No palaeoenvironmental samples were taken.

## 6 DISCUSSION

The evaluation at Bryan House revealed evidence for the walls associated with the Austin priory in Trenches 4 and 5. It was thought that they might be related to the church similar to the walls reported by David Hinton in 1968. These walls were approximately 20m apart, as also seen in this evaluation. However, plotting of their location along with the results of this evaluation shows that they do not correspond. It is possible that there is a discrepancy with the plotting as the 1968 reported walls were surveyed/plotted over a boundary wall. Alternatively the walls seen in the evaluation belong to a further building(s). They were not investigated further during the evaluation. Demolition associated with priory was spread from the south wall to the northern end of Trench 5. Only the northern face of the northern wall was seen in Trench 4. It is not known whether the demolition extended so far, but can be assumed to have done so. Cultivation soils sealed the priory demolition deposits.

In Trenches 2 and 3 clay deposits associated with the marsh, which extended from around the Causeway south, were observed. These were undated. The marsh deposits were sealed with dumping and compacted cornbrash, which dated from the late 1960s or early 1970s. It is not clear whether they were part of the TA construction or Bryan House.

Trench 1 revealed the footings for a modest and probably early post-medieval cottage. An internal wall was also observed. Many of the buildings fronting onto Chapel St were demolished in the 1960s, including that in Trench 1.

The evaluation trenches indicated that there was good survival of structural remains in Trenches 1, 4 and 5. Marsh deposits were present in Trenches 3 and 4.

## 7 BIBLIOGRAPHY

English Heritage 1991 *Management of Archaeological Projects*

Hinton, D., 1969 'Excavation at Bicester Priory, 1968' *Oxoniensia* **34** 21-28

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