



JOHN MOORE HERITAGE SERVICES

**AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL
WATCHING BRIEF AT THE OLD SCHOOL HOUSE,
WATER STREET, SOMERTON, OXFORDSHIRE**

NGR *SP 4968 2887*

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On behalf of

Mrs Rees Jones

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Summary

John Moore Heritage Services maintained an archaeological watching brief during groundworks of the construction of a new garage (Planning Ref: 09/01892) at Old School House, Somerton, Oxfordshire (SP 4968 2887). The ground works involved the excavation of wall footing trenches and cross beam trenches around the footprint of the new build. A soakaway and service trenches were also monitored. No archaeological features or finds were observed, except that of an animal burial, probably dog of unknown, possibly medieval date. Two sherds of medieval pottery were also discovered within a buried topsoil.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Site Location and Geology (Figure 1)

The site is located on the north side of Somerton, on the western side of Water Street and east of the Railway line (SP 4968 2887). The site is currently in residential use. It lies at approximately 82m OD and the underlying geology is Middle Lias Clay, Silts and Sandstone.

1.2 Planning Background

Planning permission was granted for the construction of a new garage with side store and rear loggia on the site in Somerton (09/01892). Due to the possible presence of archaeological features, including skeletal remains, a condition was attached 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 such 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 site of proposed development is located within an area of considerable archaeological potential immediately adjacent to a probable Anglo Saxon cemetery (County Historic Environment Record PRN 1705)(SP 4968 2884). The development was located in an area where fourteen burials have been found during the previous half century. All were located on an east west axis and none were within a coffin or had any attendant grave goods. Most had a slab laid across the skull. This was a Christian practice dating from the later Anglo Saxon period into early medieval period but it is a practice that is not wholly understood at present. There is a tradition that the site lies within the inner court of a medieval castle but there is no real evidence to substantiate this (PRN 2455)(SP 4969 2881). To the south of the proposed development are a series of earthworks that are the remains of the medieval settlement of Somerton and it is a Scheduled Ancient Monument (SAM 261). The Old School House itself is a grade II listed building, originally dating to the 16th and 17th century and is thought to have stood on the site of the Castle's Chapel (PRN 5079).

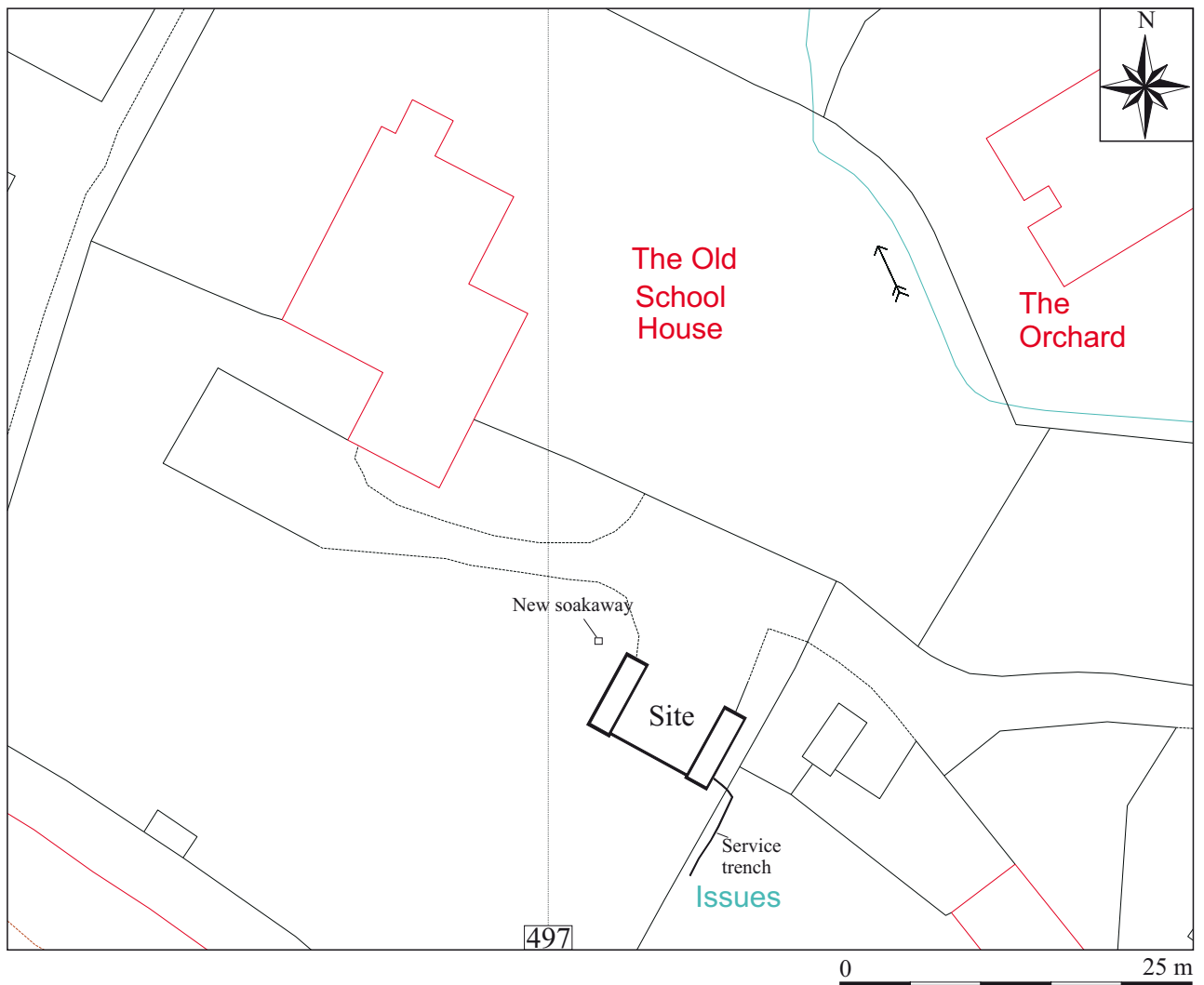
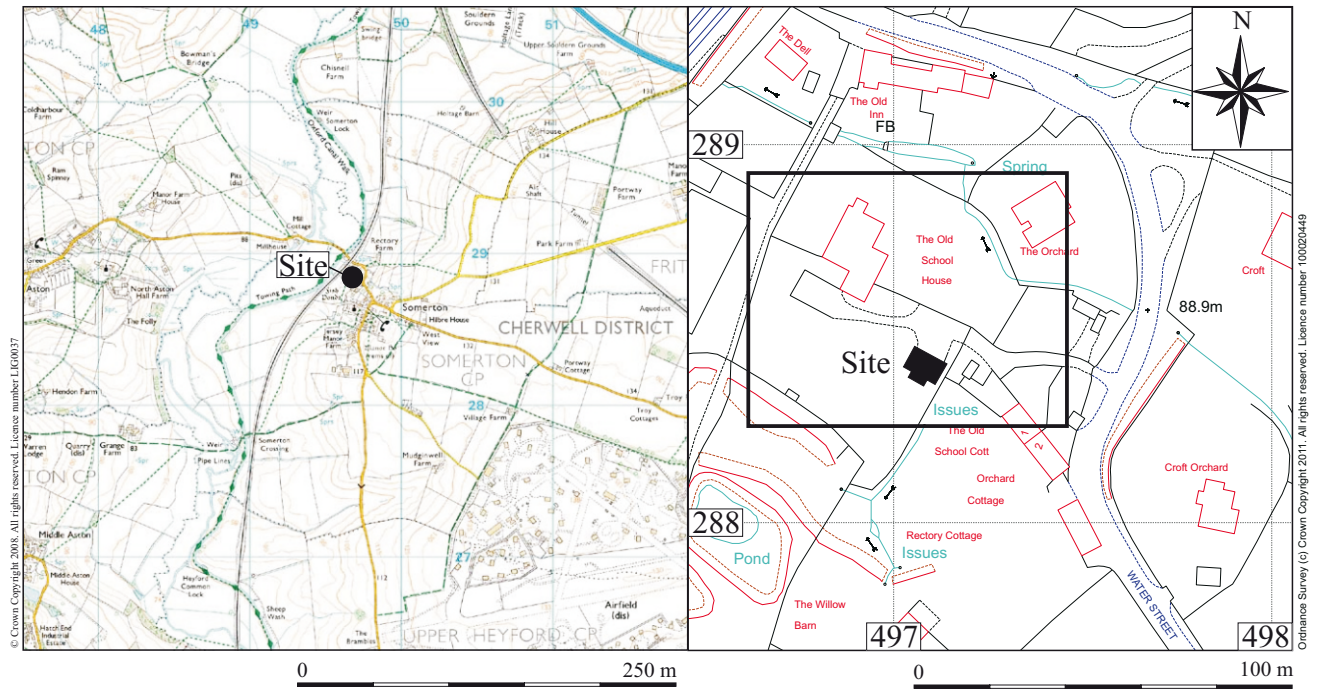


Figure 1. Site location

The above information has been taken from the OCAS's Brief and the WSI (JMHS 2011)

2 AIMS OF THE INVESTIGATION

It was stated within the WSI (JMHS 2011) that the aims of the archaeological evaluation 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 relating to Anglo-Saxon activity in the area.

3 STRATEGY

3.1 Research Design

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 for Archaeologists (1994) and the procedures laid down in MAP2 (English Heritage 1991).

3.2 Methodology

The area of the footprint of the building was reduced, by 0.3m from previous ground level, to form a level surface during the demolition of the previous building. The foundation trenches were then excavated from this prepared surface by a tracked excavator fitted with a toothed ditching bucket.

The depths of the trenches were usually at 1.5m beneath the present ground level. The natural clay was often reached at 1.2m beneath the present ground level. The monitored areas included nearly all of the wall footing trenches and under floor cross beam trenches.

Standard John Moore Heritage Services techniques were employed throughout, involving the completion of a written record for each deposit encountered, with scale plans and sections drawings compiled where appropriate. A general photographic record was produced, which will form part of the site archive.

4 RESULTS

All deposits and features were assigned individual context numbers. Context numbers in [] indicate features i.e. pit cuts; while numbers in () show feature fills or deposits of material.

4.1 Excavation Results (Figure 1)

4.1.1 The New Garage (Figures 1 & 2)

The trenches were excavated to a general depth of *c.* 1.5m beneath the present ground surface. The lowest deposit noted within the trenches consisted of light grey yellow with mottled brown natural sand (05). Above the natural sand was a *c.* 40m thick dark grey brown clay silt natural (04). Above this was *c.* 0.30m thick mid brownish grey silty clay reworked subsoil with two dressed stone inclusions (not retained) and two sherds of medieval pottery (03). Overlying (03) was *c.* 0.40m thick mottled dark greyish brown silty clay (02) with occasional animal bones and limestone fragments. The latest deposit was *c.* 0.30m thick, dark greyish black silty clay (01). (Figure 2; Sections 1, 2 & 3)

Feature

Sealed beneath layer (03) was the fill of a feature which had hard to define edges as it was beneath the Water Table. Limited hand excavation to recover animal bones from its fill (06) retrieved a partial dog (?) skeleton with no other dating evidence. The fill was within cut [07] *c.* 0.40m wide but of unknown complete depth (Figure 2).

Table 1; Summary of Context list

Context	Type	Description	Depth (m)	Width (m)	Length (m)	Finds	Date
01	Deposit	Dark greyish black silty clay topsoil	0.30	Site	Site	None retained	Modern
02	Deposit	Mottled dark brown silty clay subsoil	0.40	Site	Site	None	
03	Deposit	Mid brownish grey silty clay subsoil	0.30	Tr.	Tr.	Dressed stone med pot	Medieval?/Post medieval
04	Deposit	Dark grey brown clay silt	0.40	Site	Site	None	Jurassic
05	Deposit	Light grey yellow natural sand	/	Site	Site	None	/
06	Fill	Light mid grey clay silt	0.20 (min)	0.40	/	Animal burial	?
07	Cut	Cut of pit-animal burial	0.20 (min)	0.40	/	/	/

4.1.2 The Service Trenches (Figure 1)

The service trenches for a new soakaway connected to the new build were monitored for archaeological remains, but the excavations were entirely within topsoil (01) and only finds of modern date were observed.

4.1.3 The New Soakaway (Figure 1)

The natural clay was observed at the base of the pit (04), overlain by mid brownish grey subsoil (03), then by mottled dark brown silty clay (02) and finally topsoil (01). No finds or features were observed during the excavations.

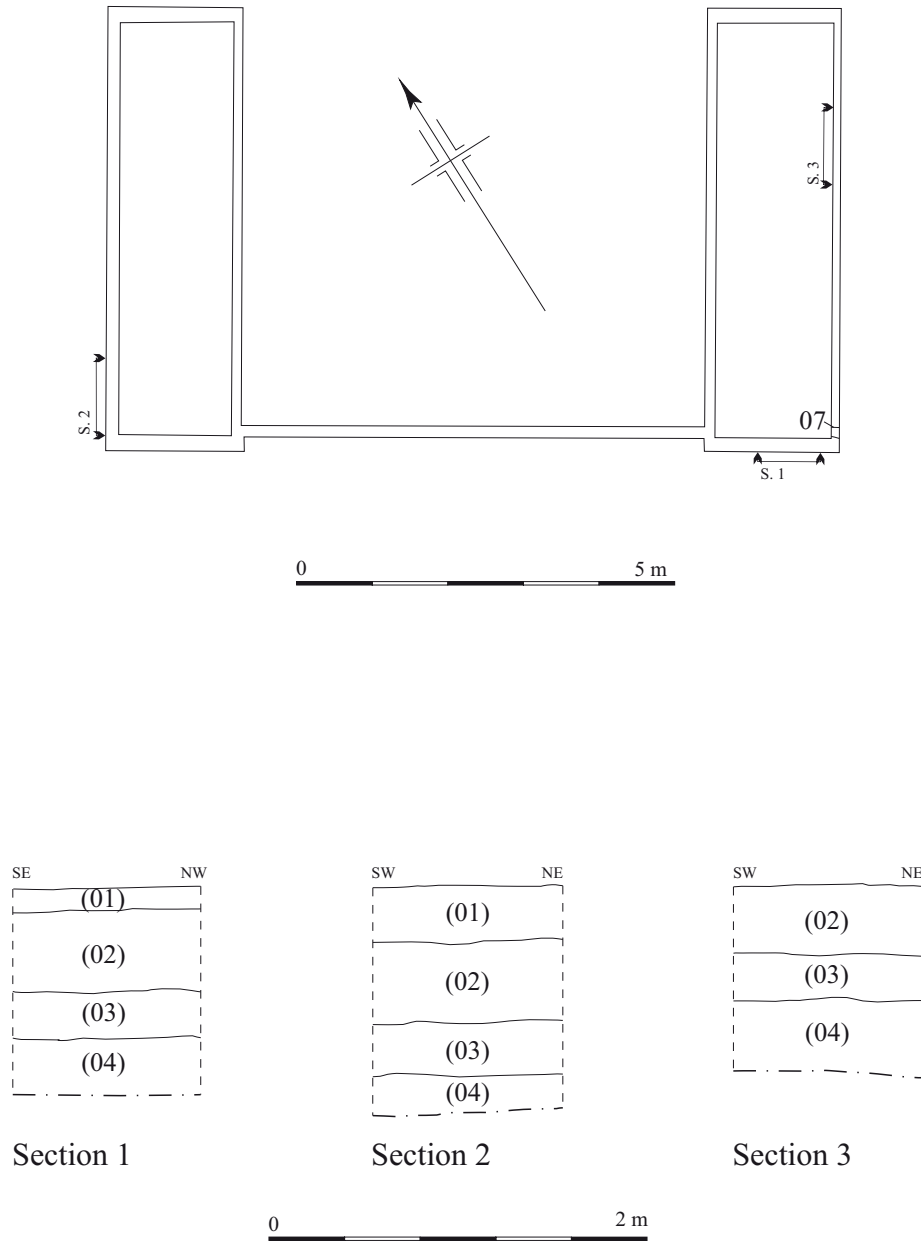


Figure 2. Monitored footings and sections

4.2 Reliability of Techniques and Results

The excavation of the trenches took place in favourable weather conditions but the depth of the trenches (c. 1.5m) meant generally they could not safely be entered. The base of the trenches were observed for archaeology during machine excavation, but were quickly filled by water at the base of the trenches.

However, it should be stated here that a high confidence rating is given that no archaeological features or finds existed within the impact areas of the development.

5 FINDS

A few animal bones were discovered within overburden and two stones were photographed on site, which showed basic facing (not retained).

An almost complete animal skeleton probably of a dog was retrieved from the base of the south eastern footing trench (06) within cut [07].

5.1 The Pottery by *Paul Riccoboni*

Two sherds of pottery were encountered within deposit (03) weighing just 4grams. Both sherds are of medieval date. They were recorded utilizing the coding system and chronology of the Oxfordshire County type-series (Mellor 1984; 1994), as follows: OXAC: Cotswold-type ware, AD975-1350.

6 DISCUSSION

The archaeological watching brief at the Old School House, Somerton provided a useful examination of the potential archaeological deposits across the area of the new garage. The depth of overburden was a little deeper than expected which may be due to redistribution or importation of deposits to raise and level out the site from the medieval period onwards.

An animal burial was sealed beneath a possible medieval soil horizon (03) and may therefore be of an early date. The depth it was located at (1.5m) beneath the present ground surface also indicated that it was buried before the ground levels were raised during the medieval and post medieval period.

One of the primary aims at the outset of the investigation was to record any evidence which relates to the Anglo-Saxon cemetery or any indeed any other evidence related to the possible earthworks which surround the site, thought to be associated with a possible castle.

The lack of archaeological features and finds from this watching brief does not necessarily indicate a lack of archaeology within the grounds of the Old School House. A number of possible Anglo-Saxon inhumations have come from the area and it is assumed that more burials may exist closer beneath the present Old School House,

which is considered to be cited on the location of a medieval chapel connected with an ambiguous castle. The burials that have been found are considered to be Anglo-Saxon, based on the unusual practice of covering the head with a stone and therefore not linked to the medieval chapel. The Saxon burial ground may have been cited in this area before the chapel was even conceived.

A brief study of the OS maps by the author showing the earthworks indicate they do not seem to fit into a regular pattern of earthworks we would normally associate with a medieval castle. However, the extensive and large fish ponds, to the immediate south of the main earthworks, would suggest a large medieval manor or castle in the nearby vicinity. The earthworks are clearly substantial in places and may represent the remains of an unfinished castle moat.

The railway line has caused considerable alteration to the existing topography, especially where the platform was located and more archaeological investigation would be needed to understand the history of the site more fully. The Victoria County History briefly mentions the earthworks;

'..In the field in front of the rectory at Somerton are the banks of the fish-ponds....it is, perhaps, necessary to notice them, as their grass-grown mounds give them the appearance of being earthworks.' (Page 1907).

Although the two large dressed masonry blocks provide some evidence of a hint of building, we cannot link these blocks to any specific structure, such as a castle and they equally could have come from the medieval chapel.

Despite tangible links of The Old School House to a medieval chapel, proving the architectural composition of the building is a more difficult task, as a detailed investigation of the building in 1999 observed: 'While it is possible or even likely that some at least of the bases of the walls may include parts of the old castle chapel, there is no specific evidence of that.' However, the report does state that the old chapel 'may have consisted of the southwest end of the house and part of the old schoolroom' (Corimer 1999).

As a result of the archaeological watching brief no further information regarding the Anglo-Saxon burials was ascertained. The burials were all located around the immediate vicinity of the Old School House itself (*Pers. Comm.* Colin O'Rourke; Grounds Keeper) which may explain why none were recovered during the watching brief as the works were upslope from the house, an area assumed to be outside the boundaries of the cemetery. The Ordnance Survey reference for them on the County Historic Environment Record is therefore wrong.

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PLATE 1: General view of the Old School House looking NW



PLATE 2: General site shot of stratigraphy

