



JOHN MOORE HERITAGE SERVICES

AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION

FOR

**TOWN CENTRE DEVELOPMENT,
BICESTER, OXFORDSHIRE**

SP 583 225

On behalf of

Town Centre Retail (Bicester) Ltd.

MAY 2006

REPORT FOR	Town Centre Retail (Bicester) Ltd. c/o Stockdale, Orchard House Hopcraft Lane Deddington Oxfordshire OX15 0TD
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Summary

An evaluation of this site was conducted by John Moore Heritage Services between 21st March and 8th May 2006. Four trenches, totalling 50 metres in length, were excavated to reveal the underlying natural geology.

Modern ground disturbance was identified in the north of the area, while to the south was a very thick layer of made ground. Map evidence suggests this disturbance may be localised. An undated wall was recorded to the south. A palaeo-channel was recorded running north to south across the site.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Site Location (Figures 1 & 2)

The site is located in the centre of modern Bicester between Manorsfield Road and Sheep Street (NGR SP583225). It is currently in use as a car park, with retail units and a dance studio nearby. The site is located at approximately 73m above OD. The underlying geology is Cornbrash but close to the boundary with Oxford Clay.

1.2 Planning Background

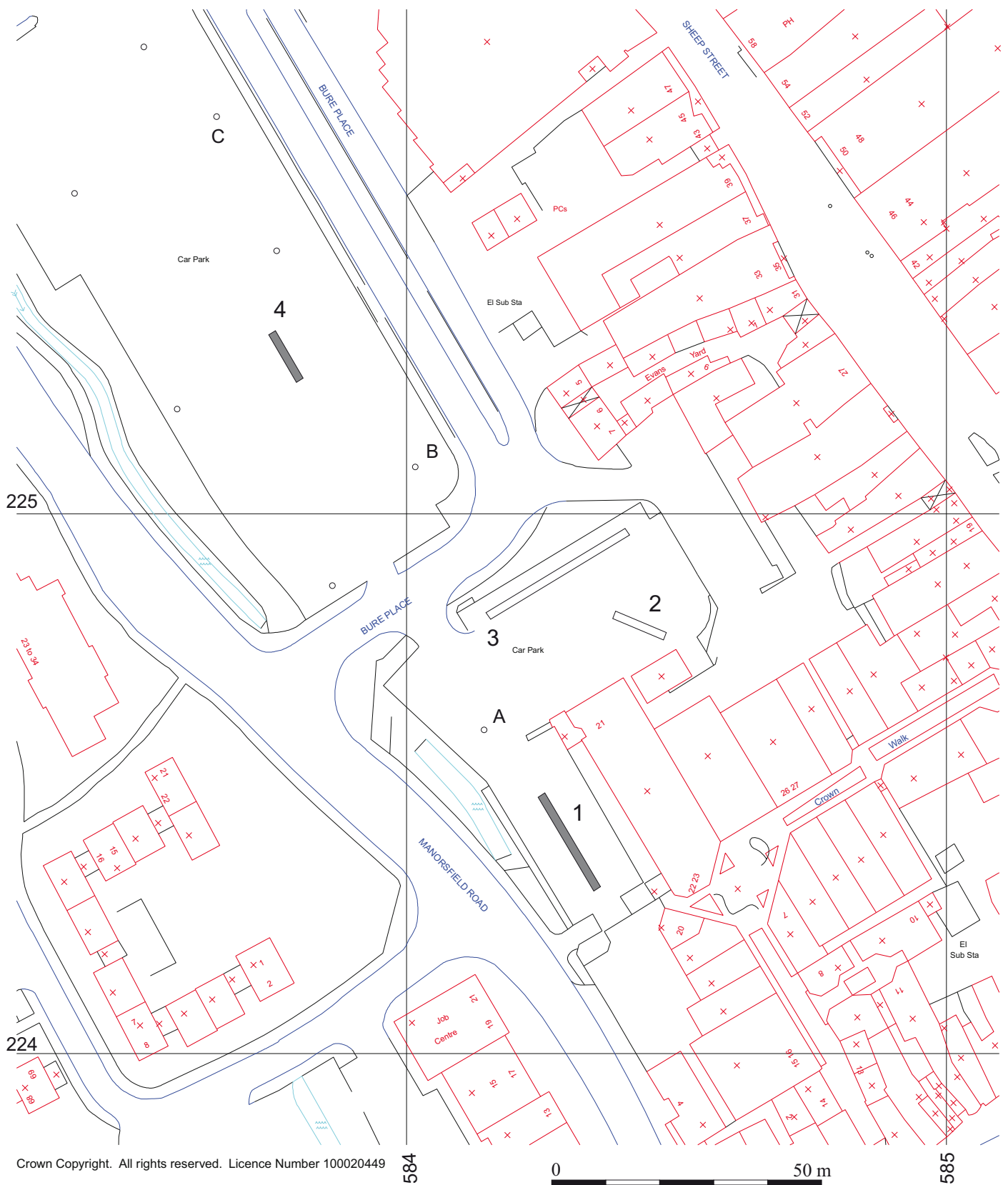
The site is identified in the September 2002 revised deposit draft of the Cherwell Local Plan 2011 for proposed mixed use development. There have since been a number of planning applications for the site for mixed development of retail units, flats, cinema etc. (most recently 04/00219/F). Due to the potential for remains of archaeological significance to be present on the site, an archaeological evaluation of the site has been required prior to the determination of the planning application. This is in line with PPG 16 and Local Plan Policies.

1.3 Archaeological Background

A desk based assessment was undertaken for the site by CgMs in 2005. This outlined the potential of the site to retain well preserved archaeological and palaeoenvironmental deposits. Much of the site has not previously been disturbed having been burgrave plots and in more recent times under tarmac as car parking. Any below ground deposits were considered therefore likely to be well preserved with a high possibility of waterlogged deposits present.

The majority of the archaeological investigations that have taken place in Bicester to date have been undertaken in areas to the south of the proposal site. In the area of the former King's Arms Hotel, Wessex Way (now known as Saxon Court) to the southeast of the proposal area, significant features relating to Saxon settlement in the area were uncovered including a number of sunken feature buildings.

To the south of the proposal site, in the area south of the Causeway between Chapel St and Church Lane, a number of archaeological excavations and evaluations have been undertaken. A Saxon ditch, possibly marking the western boundary of the Kings Arms Hotel Saxon settlement site, was identified during excavation to the rear of 1



Causeway by John Moore Heritage Services (2001). At Proctors Yard on the corner of Church St and Chapel Lane excavation by Thames Valley Archaeological Services in 2000 revealed late Anglo-Saxon, medieval and post-medieval features (pits, gully and postholes) including a ditch that may represent an eastern boundary of the precinct of the Minster church which appears to have been backfilled before the Austin priory was founded in the later 12th century. Excavation in this area has also provided evidence suggesting that the area was low lying and marshy in the 10th-11th centuries until the 14th century when there seems to have been an attempt at land reclamation. Evaluation at 3, 5, 9-13 Causeway undertaken by John Moore Heritage Services in 2000 confirmed this and also provided further evidence of Roman activity in the area. A number of sherds of Roman fine wares recovered from later deposits from this and other evaluations in the area suggest the possibility of an as yet undiscovered Roman settlement or villa site of fairly high status in the vicinity of Chapel Street and Market Square. The likely presence of a Roman site of reasonably high status in the area of modern Bicester is further supported by the finding of a fragment of writing tablet from an archaeological excavation by the eastern perimeter road. However it is also possible that the pottery sherds have been brought into the town during building works in the Saxon period along with other materials collected from the nearby Roman town of Alchester.

To the west of the proposal site a cemetery was discovered in the course of stripping the area to create a car park. It is believed that this may be related to the 12th century priory or the 10th century Minster church. The site was hesitantly dated to the Saxon period on the basis of a single mid-late Saxon sherd that was the only find recovered from the excavation, as there were no associated grave goods.

In the north of the proposed site an archaeological watching brief by John Moore Heritage Services (2005) for the excavation of foundations for a new building at the western end of Wesley Lane recorded a ditch, believed to date to the 11th-12th century, which contained a quantity of pottery indicative of settlement nearby. This was followed by a period of cultivation before a building was constructed probably in the 13th-14th centuries. The area then returned to cultivation before becoming domestic gardens.

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/absence of archaeological remains within the site.
- To determine the extent, condition, nature, character, quality and date of any archaeological remains encountered.
- To make available to interested parties the results of the investigation subject to any confidentiality restrictions.

In particular

- To determine whether the medieval settlement extends into the proposal site.

3 STRATEGY

3.1 Research Design

In response to a *Brief* issued by Oxfordshire County Archaeological Service a scheme of investigation was designed by JMHS and agreed with the Oxfordshire County Archaeological Services and the applicant. The work was carried out by JMHS and was to involve the excavation of a total of six trenches across the site (Figures 1 and 2).

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).

3.2 Methodology

The trenching sample specified within the brief was to be achieved through the excavation of six trenches. Trenches 2, 4, 5 and 6 were all 10m long, while Trench 1 was 20m long and Trench 3 was 30m.

All trenches were 1.7 m wide and were excavated by a JCB excavator fitted with a toothless ditching bucket. The resultant surfaces were cleaned by hand prior to limited hand excavation of any identified archaeological deposits.

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 photographic record was produced. The trenches were backfilled and surfaced with tarmac by Red Lime Civil Engineers after recording.

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.

Trench 1 (*Figure 3*)

The uppermost layer was a 0.08m thick surface of tarmac (1/01). Below this was a 0.2m thick deposit of concrete (1/02) followed by a 0.14m thick deposit of coarse gravel (1/03). This gravel layer was directly above a deposit of limestone rubble (1/04) that was at least 1.5m thick. The two ends of Trench 1 were excavated to a depth of 1.9m and revealed a wall (1/05) at this depth at the southern end. It was at least 2.5m long of rough stone in a orange-brown sandy clay matrix, aligned northwest to southeast. It was partially within the baulk but extended 0.45m in width into the trench. It appeared to be cut into a brown clay silt deposit (1/06). Due to the depth and instability of the trench sections these features could not be investigated further due to health and safety concerns.

Trenches 2 and 3

These Trenches were abandoned due to the results of Trench 1 and a Borehole (A) which suggested that the limestone rubble in this area extended to a depth of at least 2.35m below the modern ground surface.

Trench 4 (*Figure 3*)

The uppermost layer was a 0.12m thick tarmac (4/01) surface. This was above a make-up layer of loose gravel (4/02) that was 0.3m thick. Below this was a black sandy clay deposit (4/03) that contained numerous stone fragments and some tarmac lumps.

This rested on a layer of light brown sandy clay (4/04) that contained large limestone blocks, it was 0.44m thick. Below this was a 0.62m thick layer of grey clay (4/05) that was flecked with charcoal and contained brick fragments and small stones. Towards the top of this deposit a band approximately 0.18m thick was slightly darker and had a slightly higher charcoal content and noticeably less stone and brick.

Under this layer was a deposit of blue-grey clay (4/09), it contained a few rare small pea sized stones and a small quantity of animal bone. It was 0.28m thick and covered a layer of peat (4/06). This peat layer was approximately 0.2m thick, and was directly above a 0.26m thick layer of light blue-grey clay (4/07). This clay rested on the bedrock (4/08). This bedrock rose noticeably to the east at the northern end of the trench.

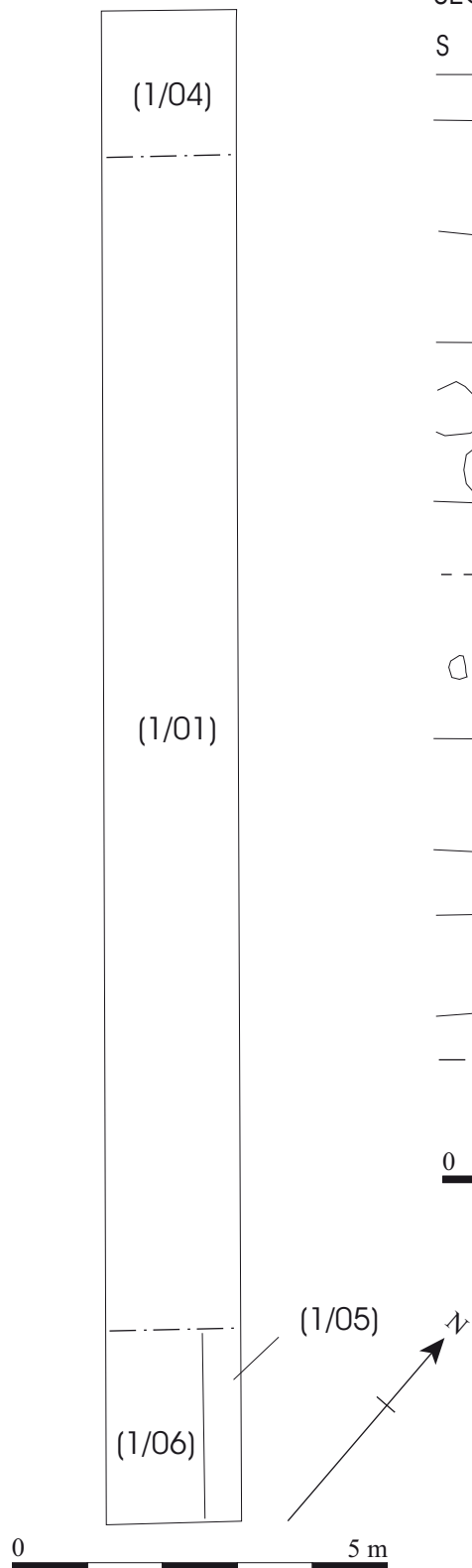
Trench 5 (*Figure 4*)

The modern ground surface here was of tarmac (5/01) and 0.1m thick. This sat upon a make-up layer of stone, mortar and brick fragments (5/02) that was 0.29m thick. Below this was a black-grey deposit (5/03) of silty clay loam flecked with charcoal. It was 0.12m thick. This deposit was directly above a layer of dark orange-brown sandy clay (5/04) with small lime stone chunks and charcoal flecks, which contained some small fragments of brick. This sat upon the natural Cornbrash (5/05) comprising a light orange-brown clay with abundant pieces of limestone.

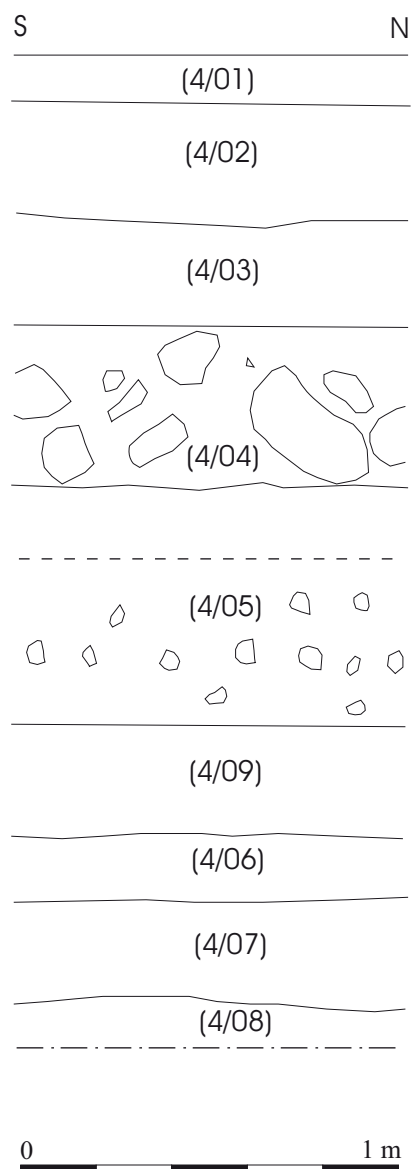
Cut [5/06] through (5/04) and into (5/05) was a 0.45m-0.5m wide trench for a ceramic land drain. This drain was traced the entire length of the trench. The pipe was packed into position with a fill (5/07) of stones in a mid to dark brown silty clay matrix.

In the centre of the trench the natural bedrock (5/09) shelved up until in one place it was only 1.3m below ground surface. The higher rock to the west was covered with (5/05) while the lower rock to the east was covered with a grey silty clay (5/08) deposit containing decaying organics that was up to 0.5m thick. The full section could not be drawn due to the rising water table.

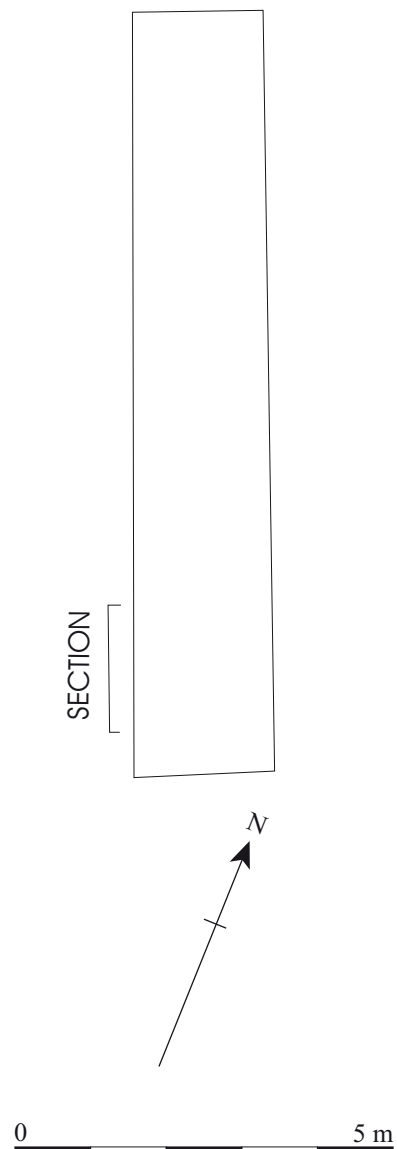
TRENCH 1



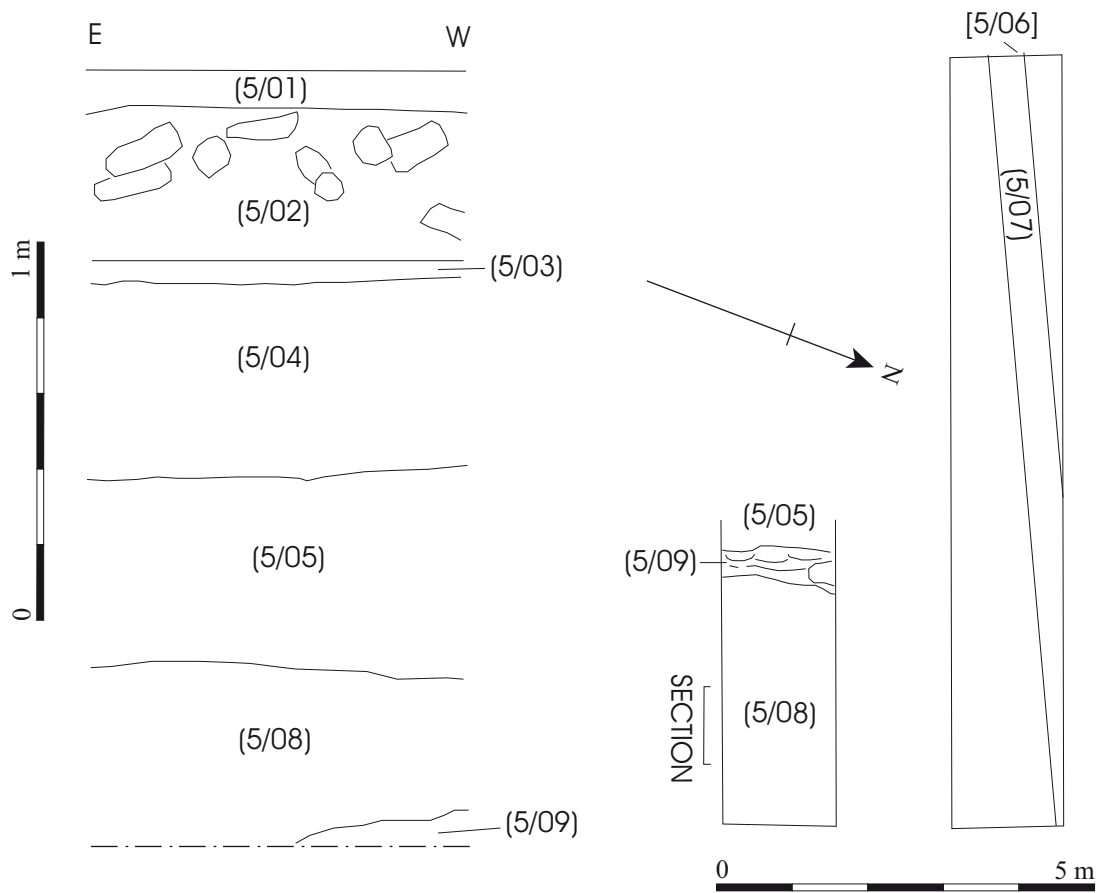
SECTION



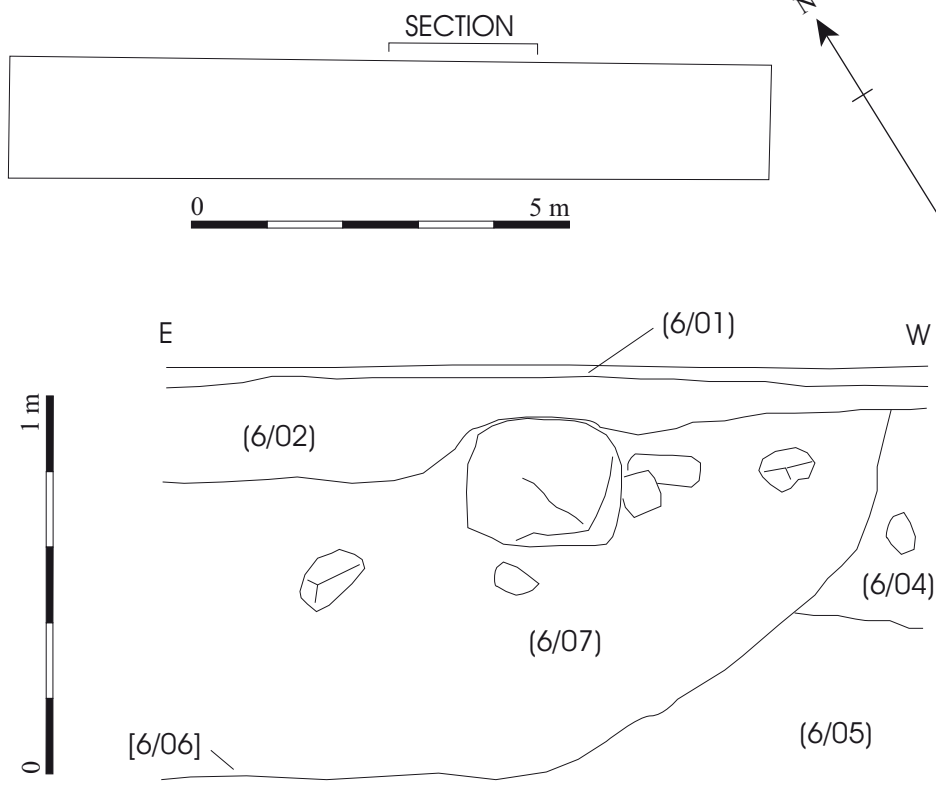
TRENCH 4



TRENCH 5



TRENCH 6



Trench 6 (*Figure 4*)

The uppermost layer was a 0.13m thick tarmac (6/01) surface. This was above a make-up layer of loose gravel, stone and brick fragments (6/02) that varied between 0.1m and 0.15m thick. It has a distinct lens of tarmac towards the bottom of the deposit.

Below this deposit in the western end of the trench was a concrete layer (6/03), 0.1m thick and at least 2m in length. It sat upon a make-up layer (6/04) of gravel, tarmac and stone that was between 0.2m and 0.4m thick. This sat upon the natural Cornbrash (6/05) comprising a mid yellow-brown clay with abundant pieces of limestone. This was sampled to a depth of 0.6m in the northern end of the trench.

Cut [6/06] into layers (6/04) and (6/05) was a wide flat-bottomed feature. It was at least 7m in length, 1.7m wide and 0.86m deep. The only side visible was sloped at approximately 45°. This feature was filled with mid grey-brown silty clay (6/07) with frequent small grit inclusions and flecked with charcoal. It also produced numerous pieces of modern pottery, brick and bone.

A disused service pipe was located in the eastern end of the trench, however, a cut could not be clearly seen in the deposit (6/07).

5 FINDS

5.1 Pottery

Sherds of 19th – 20th century Mass-produced White Earthenwares (WHEW) were noted from deposits (5/03), (6/04) and also from the fill (6/07) of the large cut [6/06]. These sherds were recorded utilizing the coding system and chronology of the Oxfordshire County type-series (Mellor 1994).

5.2 Environmental Samples (*By Dr. Mark Robinson*)

Two sequences of two samples were assessed from waterlogged sediments at Bicester, BIBP06.

Context 4/06 Sample 1.2 Dark grey-brown humic clay.

Context 4/06 Sample 1.1 Grey-brown humic clay.

Context 5/08 Sample 2.2 Grey stony, silty gravel.

Context 5/08 Sample 2.1 Grey stony, silty gravel.

Sub-samples of around 250g of each sample were wet-sieved to 0.2mm and scanned under a binocular microscope for biological remains. The results are given in Table 1.

The seeds from Sample 1.2 suggest stagnant water with nutrient-rich mud at the edge. The vegetation included *Lemna* sp. (duckweed), *Ranunculus* s. *Batrachium* sp. (water crowfoot) and *Ranunculus sceleratus* (celery-leaved crowfoot). The mollusc shells are all of aquatic species, *Planorbis planorbis* and *Sphaerium corneum* being characteristic of permanent bodies of water. The Coleoptera include *Ochthebius* sp., a small water beetle, and *Donacia* or *Plateumaris* sp., a leaf beetle of aquatic or reedswamp vegetation. The preservation of organic remains in Sample 1.1 is very poor but *Lemna* sp. and *P. planorbis* are present. Context 4/06 is very likely to be sediment which accumulated in

shallow water with little flow to it or the result of sedimentation within a swamp. The possibility that Context 4/06 is overbank alluvial sediment cannot entirely be excluded but the occurrence of preserved organic remains and the absence of flowing-water species make this seem less likely.

Although Samples 2.2 and 2.1 are waterlogged, organic remains are absent. The stones in these samples are angular fragments of limestone which have not been water-rounded. It is possible that Context 5/08 represents dumped material but it could also be a Pleistocene deposit.

No further analysis is recommended for the samples from Context 4/06 and 5/08.

Table 1: BIBP06 Macroscopic Plant and Invertebrate Remains

Context		4/06	4/06
Sample		1.2	1.1
WATERLOGGED SEEDS			
<i>Ranunculus sceleratus</i>	celery-leaved crowfoot	+	-
<i>R. S. Batrachium</i> sp.	water crowfoot	+	-
<i>Chenopodium rubrum</i>	red goosefoot	+	-
<i>Apium nodiflorum</i>	fool's parsley	+	-
<i>Lemna</i> sp.	duckweed	+	+
<i>Juncus bufonius</i> gp.	toad rush	+	-
<i>Carex</i> sp.	sedge	+	-
MOLLUSC SHELLS			
<i>Planorbis planorbis</i>		+	+
<i>Armiger crista</i>		-	+
<i>Bathyomphalus contortus</i>		+	-
<i>Sphaerium corneum</i>		+	-
COLEOPTERA			
<i>Cercyon</i> sp.		+	-
<i>Ochthebius</i> sp.		+	-
<i>Donacia</i> or <i>Plateumaris</i> sp.		+	-

+ present

6 DISCUSSION

Trench 1 was located to the south of the site, which on the 1881 OS map was shown as an area of open ground. It displayed over 1.5m of made ground (1/04), while in Trench 4 a metre of made ground was above a possible buried land surface (4/05). This made ground gets thinner towards the north. It appears to be thicker towards the west as well. On the opposite side of Manorsfield Road the coping stones of a wall can clearly be seen protruding just above modern ground level. This wall appears on the 1881 OS map as a boundary to the River Bure. When the course of the Bure was altered in the 1970s this wall was probably buried during the landscaping. A relict

ditch of the old course of the Bure is still visible in the area. The wall is still marked on the OS maps of 1980 and 1994.

The wall (1/05) located within Trench 1 was undated and could date anywhere between the Roman period to the Post medieval. It was probably part of a building located near to the River Bure, although the possibility that it was a boundary can not be ruled out.

A Palaeo-channel was located within Trench 4 which appeared to run roughly north to south. A build up of alluvial clay overlay the bedrock was capped with a layer of peat, which itself was covered with more alluvial clay. This suggests that the flow of the channel was restricted at some point for a considerable period of time before water flow resumed. The environmental evidence supports this. There was no dating for the buried land surface in Trench 4.

A possible old land surface (5/03) was recorded within Trench 5, although the pottery contained within the deposit indicates that it probably dates to immediately before the construction of the car park. A probable Victorian land drain was dug into the natural (5/05) within Trench 5. On the OS maps of 1881, 1922 and 1968 this area is open ground and the alignment of the drain would suggest that it flowed towards the River Bure.

Alluvial deposits within Trench 5 (5/08) were recorded in a natural channel in the bedrock (5/09). This bedrock shelved up towards the west forming a roughly north-south aligned channel. The deposits (5/08) within contained some decaying organic matter, but did not show the peat build up recorded in Trench 4. It is likely that this is a Pleistocene deposit.

Trench 6 was devoid of archaeological deposits. However, this could be due the modern disturbance [6/06]. The extent of this disturbance can be assessed from the map evidence. It matches the line of a row of buildings recorded on the OS maps of 1881 and 1922. The OS map of 1968 shows that these buildings had been removed by this time and that the area was open. This disturbance caused by the removal of the buildings foundations during demolition is likely to be local, implying that archaeological remains could survive in other areas not built upon on the 1881 map as they do nearby at Wesley Lane (JMHS 2005).

7 CONCLUSIONS

While any decision regarding the archaeological importance of the site rests with Oxfordshire County Archaeological Services and Cherwell District Council, it is the view of John Moore Heritage Services that the nature, extent and potential of the archaeological remains are such that a policy of mitigation should be in place during any future development of the site.

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APPENDIX – ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXT INVENTORY

Context	Type	Description	Depth (m)	Width (m)	Length (m)	Finds	Date
Trench 1			1.9	1.7	20		
1/01	Layer	Tarmac	0.08	Tr.	Tr.	-	Modern
1/02	Layer	Concrete	0.2	Tr.	Tr.	-	Modern
1/03	Deposit	"Type 1" stone	0.14	Tr.	Tr.	-	Modern
1/04	Deposit	Limestone Rubble	1.5	Tr.	Tr.	-	Modern
1/05	Feature	Wall	-	0.45	2.5	-	-
1/06	Deposit	Brown silty clay	-	Tr.	Tr.	-	-
Trench 4			2.6	1.7	10		
4/01	Layer	Tarmac	0.12	Tr.	Tr.	-	Modern
4/02	Layer	Loose Stone	0.3	Tr.	Tr.	-	Modern
4/03	Layer	Black loam with Stone	0.3	Tr.	Tr.	-	Modern
4/04	Layer	Limestone Rubble	0.44	Tr.	Tr.	-	Modern
4/05	Layer	Grey clay loam	0.62	Tr.	Tr.	-	-
4/06	Layer	Peat	0.2	Tr.	Tr.	-	-
4/07	Layer	Blue Clay	0.1	Tr.	Tr.	-	-
4/08	Natural	Bedrock	-	-	-	-	-
4/09	Layer	Grey clay loam	0.24	Tr.	Tr.	Bone	-
Trench 5				1.7	10		
5/01	Layer	Tarmac	0.1	Tr.	Tr.	-	Modern
5/02	Layer	Mortar and brick	0.29	Tr.	Tr.	-	Modern
5/03	Layer	Grey silty clay	0.12	Tr.	Tr.	-	-
5/04	Layer	Orange-brown clay	0.3	Tr.	Tr.	-	-
5/05	Natural	Orange clay with stones	0.3 +	Tr.	Tr.	-	-
5/06	Cut	Pipe Trench	0.2+	0.5	Tr.	-	C19th
5/07	Fill	Brown silty clay	0.2	0.5	Tr.	-	C19th
5/08	Layer	Grey Clay	0.18	Tr.	3	-	-
5/09	Natural	Bedrock	-	Tr.	Tr.	-	-

Context	Type	Description	Depth (m)	Width (m)	Length (m)	Finds	Date
Trench 6				1.7	10		
6/01	Layer	Tarmac	0.23	Tr.	Tr.	-	Modern
6/02	Layer	Gravel and stone	0.1 - 0.15	Tr.	Tr.	-	Modern
6/03	Layer	Concrete	0.1	Tr.	2	-	Modern
6/04	Layer	Gravel and stone	0.2 - 0.4	0.01	2	-	Modern
6/05	Natural	Yellow-brown clay with stone	-	Tr.	Tr.	-	Natural
6/06	Cut	Pit (?)	0.86	Tr.	8	-	Modern
6/07	Fill	Grey-Brown silty clay	0.86	Tr.	8	Pot	Modern