

**JOHN MOORE HERITAGE SERVICES**

**AN INTERIM REPORT ON**

**AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF**

**AT**

**LAND TO WESTERN END OF WESLEY LANE,**

**BICESTER, OXFORDSHIRE**

**SP 5832 2262**

*On behalf of*

*Talencross Ltd*

**JUNE 2005**

**REPORT FOR**

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## **Summary**

*A watching brief was conducted by John Moore Heritage Services during the excavation of a length of foundation trench. The earliest feature found was a ditch thought to date to the late 11<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> centuries. The amount of pottery found within the very small part excavated indicates occupation close by. Following a period of cultivation that may have been associated with a nearby property a building was constructed in the area of the investigation. This may have been built in the 13<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> centuries or soon after. Later the area was used for further cultivation before becoming gardens for properties on Wesley Lane.*

## **1 INTRODUCTION**

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

The development site was located at the western end of Wesley Lane and to the north of Bure Place, Bicester (NGR SP 5832 2262). The geology is Great Oolitic Cornbrash and the site lies at approximately 71.30m OD. The site was in use as a service area for Wesley Lane.

### **1.2 Planning Background**

Cherwell District Council granted planning permission for the construction of five shop units with associated flats, car parking and service areas (00/00652/F). Due to the potential presence of below ground archaeological deposits a condition was attached to the planning consent that required the implementation of an archaeological watching brief during the course of the groundworks in order to preserve by record any archaeological remains of significance. Oxfordshire County Archaeological Services (OCAS), on behalf on Cherwell District Council, provided a *Brief* for the work. John Moore Heritage Services undertook the work in accordance with a Written Scheme of Investigation approved by OCAS.

### **1.3 Archaeological Background**

The development was located within the historic core of Bicester. Bicester is now known to have been settled in the early to mid Anglo Saxon period through recent archaeological work carried out at the Kings Arms Hotel, located along the east side of the now canalised River Bure. The development area is situated approximately 120m north of known medieval settlement remains and was thought to lie on the periphery of the medieval settlement of Bicester, which was centred on Kings End and Market End. It was therefore considered possible that the proposed development may have disturbed archaeological features and deposits that relate to the development of settlement in Bicester in the medieval period or earlier.

Munby, Rodwell and Turner considered that the site lay outside of the extent of the town in *c.* 1700 (Rodwell 1975). The 1<sup>st</sup> edition Ordnance Survey 1:2500 map of 1881 shows a row of cottages at the west end of Wesley Lane parallel to Sheep Street. A narrow passage existed between the end of the cottages and the properties on the northern side of the lane. This passage led to an area of small plots, lying between the cottages and the River Bure, separated by boundaries and paths.

Figure 1. Site Location and Watching Brief Areas.

## **2 AIMS OF THE INVESTIGATION**

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

- To make a record of any significant remains revealed during the course of any operations that may disturb or destroy archaeological remains.
- In particular to record any evidence relating to the medieval and earlier settlement of Bicester.
- To make public the results of the investigations.

## **3 STRATEGY**

### **3.1 Research Design**

John Moore Heritage Services carried out the work to a Written Scheme of Investigation agreed with Oxfordshire County Archaeological Services (OCAS), on behalf of the local planning authority.

### **3.2 Methodology**

An archaeologist monitored the excavation of an 11m length of foundation trench. This was situated in the extreme western corner of the proposed development site. Depths of contexts were related to the top of the slab (07) existing in the north-west corner of the site. It was established that this lay at 71.32m OD from the OS bench mark on the front of 71 Sheep Street (73.12m OD).

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.

The recording was carried out in accordance with the standards specified by the Institute of Field Archaeologists (1994).

## **4 RESULTS (Fig. 2)**

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. Numbers in bold represent walls.

The lowest deposit encountered was the top of the natural Cornbrash (11) comprising mid orange (slightly brown) clay with abundant pieces of limestone. The top of this was 1250mm below modern ground surface (mgs) on the south-west side of the site at 70.07m OD tipping down slightly to the north-east and more towards the east where the top was at 69.87m OD. Cut into the natural was a ditch [13] orientated east/west. Within the width of the foundation trench the sides of the ditch did not appear to be parallel. The ditch was not excavated but investigation of the sides showed that the

Figure 2. Plan of trench

surviving top of them were at an angle of 60-70° and the ditch was *c.* 1m wide. The ditch fills seen was a lower deposit of pale-mid grey-brown silty clay overlaid by dark grey-brown clayey silt 120mm thick (12). A quantity of pottery recovered from the upper fill dates the ditch to the late 11<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> century.

Sealing the ditch was a deposit of pale grey-brown silty clay containing some limestone rubble (09), which was more abundant east of wall [10]. Here the limestone pieces were mostly large. The deposit was 50mm thick on the south-west edge of the site increasing to 200mm at the north-east end.

Cut into the above deposit were three wall foundations. A corner of a probable wall **06** lay in an angle of the foundation trench. This survived three courses high (280mm). It was constructed of limestone of 150x100x100 – 200x200x100mm in size set in a matrix of pale grey-brown silty clay (similar or the same as 09). It only extended 200mm north-eastwards into the trench and 600mm south-eastwards. Wall **08**, probably passed just to the north of the length seen. This wall **08** was orientated north-east/south-west and was 600mm wide. It was constructed mostly of large limestone (320x250x80mm) with smaller pieces (190x190x50mm) set in orange-brown clay. It survived four courses high (*c.* 400mm) and was bedded on the natural Cornbrash (11). A narrow cut (50mm wide) for the foundation was apparent on the north-west side of the foundation. This was filled with material deriving from the deposit it was cut into (09) mixed with orange-brown clay and small pieces of brash. The top of the foundation survived at 70.17m OD. The third wall foundation was orientated at right angles to wall **08**. This wall **10** again was constructed from roughly hewn limestone (140x120x80 – 260x170x70mm) set in a haphazard form in a matrix of pale grey-brown silty clay (i.e. using the material the foundation was cut into). Again this wall was 600mm wide but only survived three courses high (280mm). It was founded on the Cornbrash. The top survived at 70.27m OD.

Also cut into deposit (09) was a sub-circular post hole [14]. This was at least 400mm in diameter and probably *c.* 7-800mm. It was 320mm deep with near vertical sides and a flat base. It was filled by orange-brown clay and small pieces of brash. This clay was the same as used in the construction of wall **08**.

Sealing the walls and the post hole was a deposit of yellow-brown clayey silt containing 1-2% small stone and occasional to moderate charcoal flecks (03). The deposit varied in thickness from 430-550mm. Cut into (03) was rubbish pit [05]. This was sub-circular with a diameter of 700mm, sides at 60° and a slightly rounded base at a depth of 340mm. This pit was filled by loose mid-dark grey-brown slightly sandy silt with 1% small stone and pieces of iron and animal bone (04). The condition of the metal indicates a late post-medieval date for the pit. Sealing the pit was a 400mm thick deposit of mid-dark brown-grey sandy silt with 1-2% fine gravel and occasional fragments of tile and brick (02). The deposit contained red earthenwares that were not retained. The uppermost deposit to the south of the slab (see below) was grey-brown sandy silt with 10-15% small and medium gravel. This contained modern metal objects and plastic and was *c.* 250mm thick. In the west corner of the site were three layers of concrete slabs with make-up material between and beneath them. The lowest slab was founded on earth and brash. The total depth was 850mm. The south-east edge of the slab was in line with the south-east edge of the southernmost SW-NE length of foundation trench excavated. The makeup for the lowest slab was laid on part of deposit (02).



## 5 FINDS

### 5.1 Pottery by Paul Blinkhorn

The pottery assemblage comprised 17 sherds with a total weight of 203g. It was all Saxo-Norman or later, and indicates that there was activity at the site from the 11<sup>th</sup> – 13<sup>th</sup> centuries.

It was recorded utilizing the coding system and chronology of the Oxfordshire County type-series (Mellor 1984; 1994), as follows:

OXR: St. Neots Ware type, AD900-1200. 1 sherd, 2g.  
 OXBF: North-East Wiltshire Ware, AD1050 – 1400. 1 sherd, 11g.  
 OXY: Medieval Oxford ware, AD1075 – 1350. 12 sherds, 108g.  
 OXBK: Medieval Shelly Coarseware, AD1100-1350. 2 sherds, 77g.  
 OXAM: Brill/Boarstall ware, AD1200 – 1600. 1 sherd, 5g.

The pottery occurrence by number and weight of sherds per context by fabric type is shown in Table 1. Each date should be regarded as a *terminus post quem*. The range of pottery fabrics is typical of medieval sites in Bicester. The sherd of St Neots ware (fabric OXR) is Denham's T1(2) fabric type (Denham 1985), a later product of the tradition which can be dated to the 11<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> century.

Table 1: Pottery occurrence by number and weight (in g) of sherds per context by fabric type

|         | OXR |    | OXBF |    | OXY |     | OXBK |    | OXAM |    |        |
|---------|-----|----|------|----|-----|-----|------|----|------|----|--------|
| Context | No  | Wt | No   | Wt | No  | Wt  | No   | Wt | No   | Wt | Date   |
| 9       | 1   | 2  |      |    |     |     | 2    | 77 | 1    | 5  | 13thC  |
| 12      |     |    | 1    | 11 | 12  | 108 |      |    |      |    | L11thC |
| Total   | 1   | 2  | 1    | 11 | 12  | 108 | 2    | 77 | 1    | 5  |        |

### 5.2 Other finds

The only other finds were modern material in the uppermost deposit (01), brick and tile within (02) and late post-medieval ironwork and animal bone from the fill (04) of pit [06]. None of these were retained.

## 6 DISCUSSION

The earliest feature was ditch [13], which interestingly is not orientated on Sheep Street or on the later boundaries shown on the 1<sup>st</sup> edition Ordnance Survey map of 1881. Again it appears not to be orientated on the general direction of the River Bure although during its usage there may have been a meander in the river that the ditch was aligned on. The pottery from the upper fill investigated could date from the period of late 11<sup>th</sup> century through to the first half of 14<sup>th</sup> century. The presence of the residual St Neots Ware sherd in the latter deposit (09) suggests activity in the 11<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup>

centuries and therefore it would appear that the ditch was in use in the late 11<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> centuries. The amount of pottery recovered from such a small part of the ditch suggests occupation in the area and that the ditch was not for a field boundary away from settlement. A building was probably in close proximity to the ditch. From the levels on the top of the natural Cornbrash here (69.87 – 70.07m OD) the site lies out of the small valley of the River Bure when compared to levels further downstream (southwards) at the rear of 3,5, and 9-13 Causeway where the Cornbrash level is 66.64 - 67.10m OD and the area was low-lying and marshy (JMHS 2000). For comparison the levels of the top of the Cornbrash adjacent to Chapel Street at this point lower in the town are 69.09 - 69.26m OD (JMHS 2001).

Deposit (09), which seals the infilling of the ditch, probably represents a cultivation soil of some type. The cultivation may have been associated with the nearby earlier occupation, which may have continued into this period with a redefining of gardens or similar. The wall foundations representing a building are cut into this soil. The pottery, given that the sherd of St Neots Ware derives from the earlier occupation, dates this cultivation episode to about the 13<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> centuries. However this cultivation, which may have only been within a garden as opposed to main agricultural activity, may not have been long-lived and that the building may have been constructed within this period or soon after. Without more finds from the cultivation soil (09) or finds from the material (03) sealing the wall foundations the date of the building remains unknown.

The walls probably belong to a single building. The substantial footing orientated NE/SW with its large stones set in a strong clay matrix may be an external load bearing wall with footing **10** being an internal partition. The post hole [14] close to the partition wall suggests a rebuilding phase. It is possible that internal roof supports were by posts and latter replaced by a more substantial partition wall founded on stone footings. This would explain the same clay used as a matrix for the postulated external wall **08** and as the packing within the post hole. The small corner of wall 06 is probably an external feature to the building such as a chimney stack or porch and would relate to the rebuilding phase given the same type of building material. The outer edge of this wall would only have extended 700-800mm from footing **08**.

Following the decline of the building a relatively substantial deposit of material (03) accumulated probably over several centuries. This material was probably cultivated either continuously or periodically. Cut into the top of this deposit was a small rubbish pit of probable late post-medieval date from when the properties along Wesley Lane were inhabited.

Pig styes are known to have occupied the west corner of the site. It is probable that the concrete slabs are related to these. The three slabs indicate two rebuilding episodes.

The medieval occupation found on this site probably relates to a farmstead or isolated cottage lying outside of the medieval core of Bicester and that buildings in the medieval period did not extend continuously this far north from Market End

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