

JOHN MOORE HERITAGE SERVICES

AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION

ON

LAND OFF COMBE ROAD,

STONESFIELD, OXFORDSHIRE.

SP 3974 1703

On behalf of

West Oxfordshire Housing Ltd

MARCH 2004

REPORT FOR

West Oxfordshire Housing ltd.
Windrush House
Windrush Park Road
Witney
Oxfordshire
OX29 7EY

PREPARED BY

John Moore

FIELDWORK

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ENQUIRES TO

John Moore Heritage Services
Long White Cloud
Waterperry Road
Holton
Oxfordshire OX33 1PW

*Telephone/Fax 01865 876637
Email: jmhs99@hotmail.com*

Site Code:

SFCR 04

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1409

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Summary

An archaeological field evaluation took place as part of the consideration of a planning application for residential development on land to the east of 16-19 Combe Road, Stonesfield, Oxfordshire. No archaeological remains of significance were found although pottery probably dating from the middle Iron Age period suggests occupation of that date in the near vicinity of the site. No remains associated with the Roman villa, some 280m to the east, were present.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Site Location (Figure 1)

The site of the proposed development is located on the north east side of Combe Road, Stonesfield (NGR SP 3974 1703). The site presently is four gardens, only one of which had been recently maintained. The geology is Great Oolite Cornbrash and the site lies at approximately 110m OD.

1.2 Planning Background

An application submitted to West Oxfordshire District Council proposes the construction of eight dwellings with car parking spaces (03/2376/P/FP). As part of the consideration of the application West Oxfordshire District Council required that an archaeological evaluation be undertaken prior to determination in accordance with PPG16 and Local Plan Policies. Oxfordshire County Archaeological Services (OCAS, 2003) prepared a brief for such an evaluation.

John Moore Heritage Services (JMHS), in accordance with a Written Scheme of Investigation (JMHS, 2004) approved by OCAS, carried out the works.

1.3 Archaeological Background

The proposed development site was considered to be of archaeological potential as it is bounded on its southeastern side by the Scheduled Ancient Monument of Stonesfield Roman Villa (SAM 25). A tessellated pavement depicting the figure of Bacchus riding on a panther was discovered in 1712 during ploughing. In 1779 two further mosaics, both with geometric patterns, were discovered. The mosaics have been lost and only engravings of them survive. Documentary evidence from 1779 suggests that part of a bathhouse was found but this appears unsubstantiated (Taylor, 1941). The exact location of the mosaics is also unclear but the inference is that they were approximately 280m to the east of proposed development. A vertical aerial photograph suggests the presence of a rectangular enclosure about 100m to the east of the application site. Fieldwalking in 1983 did not reveal any significant concentrations of artefacts for either the enclosure or the possible site of the mosaics. The presence of several mosaics does suggest this was a site of considerable status, perhaps like the nearby villa at North Leigh. It is likely that the site contains a villa with bathhouse, which formed the focus of a villa estate.



Figure 1. Site and Trench Location Plan

The mosaics date to the early 4th century when several villas were at their most prosperous (e.g. North Leigh and Wiggington). It is possible that Stonesfield was a courtyard villa although there is no firm evidence (Henig & Booth, 2000).

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 assess the ecofactual and environmental potential of the archaeological features and deposits.
- In particular:

to determine whether any remains relating to a villa estate are present
- To make available to interested parties the results of the investigation subject to any confidentiality restrictions.

3 STRATEGY

3.1 Research Design

In response to a *Brief* issued by OCAS, a scheme of investigation was designed by JMHS and subsequently agreed with OCAS and the applicant. The work was carried out by JMHS and involved the excavation of two trenches.

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 field evaluation comprised of the excavation of two trenches. Each trench was 20m in length and was each 2.10m wide. The trenches were to be positioned in the footprints of the proposed blocks of houses. In the event the presence of rubble meant that Trench 2 had to be located slightly further to the north-east.

The trenches were excavated using a 1.5 tonne mini-excavator equipped with a toothless bucket. Trenches were excavated down to the natural geology under direct archaeological control. Features present were sampled by hand excavation.

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.

Hugh Coddington of OCAS monitored the works.

4 RESULTS

Deposits and fills are referred to in the text and figures in brackets: (02), cut features are numbered in square brackets: [04].

The top of the Great Oolite Cornbrash was reached in both trenches. In Trench 1 it (102) comprised small sub-angular limestone pieces and gravel within a mid orange-brown silty clay (forming 70% by volume), while in Trench 2 it took the form of decaying limestone with *c.* 20% mid orange-brown silty clay (201, 202). In Trench 1 a 150-180mm thick natural sub-soil deposit of light grey-brown clayey silt with occasional sub-angular gravel (101) overlaid the Cornbrash. Above the subsoil in Trench 1 and above the Cornbrash in Trench 2 were deposits of topsoil (dark grey-brown sandy silt). The topsoil was 180mm thick in Trench 1 (100) and 240mm thick in Trench 2 (200).

Cut from within the topsoil and cutting into the top of the Cornbrash in Trench 2 were two post holes (Figure 2). The upper fill of posthole (203) contained two modern bricks and was therefore not fully excavated. Posthole [205] contained a piece of coal along with a small sherd of Iron Age pottery in its fill (204). The posthole is modern with the potsherd being residual.

5 FINDS

The Pottery

by Frances Raymond

Five sherds, weighing 18 grams, were recovered from the site (Table 1). The limited stylistic evidence and the fabric characteristics suggest a middle Iron Age date, but this is by no means certain. The same range of traits is also typical of handmade assemblages of the early to middle Saxon period.

Context	Shd. No.	Shd. Wt. (gms.)	Description
100	1	12	Body sherd
100	3	5	Split body sherd
204	1	1	Rim sherd
TOTALS	5	18	

Table 1: Catalogue of Iron Age pottery

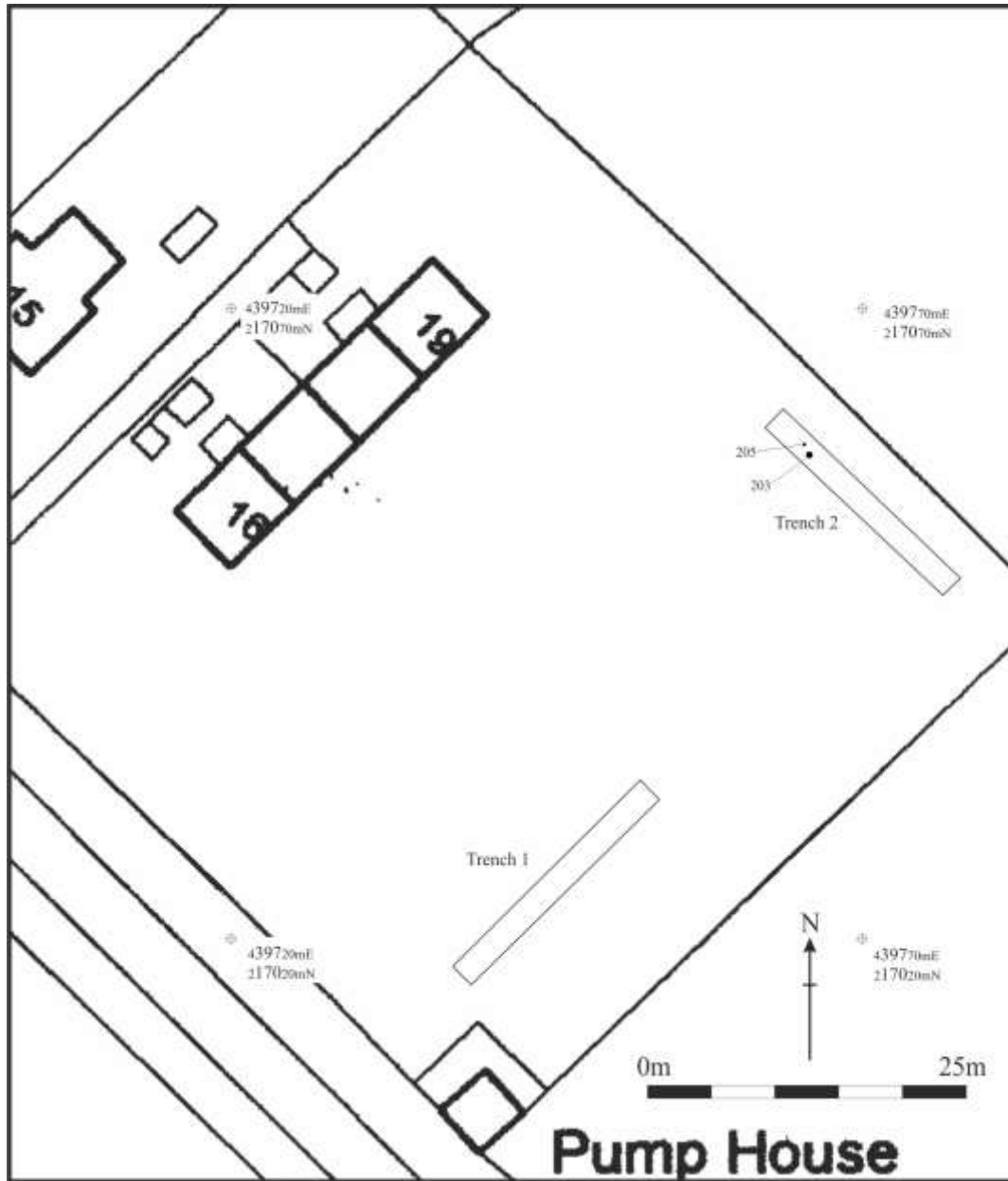


Figure 2. Trench and feature location

The only featured sherd, from context 204, is a small upright rim with a simple, pointed profile. There is very little of the wall remaining below the rim so that it is not possible to determine the vessel form. The sherd is moderately abraded and the surfaces no longer survive.

The pottery from context 100 is made from the same fabric and consists entirely of featureless wall sherds. These are moderately to heavily abraded and are probably derived from a single vessel.

The fabric is soft with a laminar fracture and has been fired under open conditions to a uniform very dark grey colour. It is vesicular and the fresh break has a slightly glassy appearance. These characteristics and the shape of the voids suggest shell tempering, which has burnt out during firing. Apart from rare pieces of very fine mica, other non-plastics are absent, or at least cannot be seen at a magnification of X40.

6 CONCLUSIONS

No Roman pottery was found. It was expected that pottery, derived from manuring of fields, would be found so close to a villa. The lack of such pottery suggests that this area was in pasture during the occupation of the villa.

The probable middle Iron Age pottery must be associated with a nearby occupation site.

7 CONFIDENCE RATING

The work was carried out with snow lying on the ground. However the weather remained dry and bright, and cut features were easily observed truncating the natural geology.

Given the lack of features and the relative lack of finds it is considered that the results from the sample of the site are a true representation of the total site.

8 BIBLIOGRAPHY

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APPENDICES**APPENDIX 1 ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXT INVENTORY**

Context	Type	Description	Depth (mm)	Width (mm)	Length (mm)	Findings	Date
100	Deposit	Topsoil	180mm	Trench	Trench	Pottery	Modern
101	Deposit	Natural Subsoil	150-180	Trench	Trench	None	
102	Deposit	Natural	-	Trench	Trench	-	
200	Deposit	Topsoil	240	Trench	Trench	None	Modern
201	Deposit	Machined top of 202	50-100	Trench	Trench	None	
202	Deposit	Natural	-	Trench	Trench	-	
203	Fill	Unexcavated posthole	240+	420	420	Brick	Modern
204	Fill	Fill of 205	40+	250	250	Pottery, coal	Modern
205	Cut	Posthole	40+	250	250	-	Modern