

Summary

An archaeological watching brief was conducted by John Moore Heritage Services during groundworks for a new vehicle restoration unit at Hopcrofts Holt, Oxfordshire. The site is located at the cross roads of the A423 (Oxford to Banbury road) and the B4030. There is a petrol station and car dealership located immediately to the south of the site and an inn of largely 18th century date across the A423 to the east. Romano-British remains have been found in the vicinity of this building. The watching brief was intended to address the concerns of the archaeological advisors (OCAS) to West Oxfordshire District Council that the groundworks might encroach on possible archaeological remains.

The fieldwork was carried out between 17th and 19th September 2007 and consisted of monitoring during the machine excavation of the foundations for the new vehicle workshop. An undated feature along with modern rubbish pits was found.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Site Location

The site lies in an area known as Hopcrofts Holt, Steeple Barton although in the parish of Steeple Barton, directly to the north of a service station and car sales lot. The site is to the west of the junction between the A423 and B4030 (NGR SP 4649 2520), and is situated on higher ground overlooking the Cherwell Valley to the east. The site lies at 135m OD and the geology is Chipping Norton Limestone close to the junction with Great Oolitic Limestone. However an evaluation on the site directly to the east found clay enriched ferruginous sand.

1.2 Planning Background

West Oxfordshire District Council granted planning permission for the construction of a new vehicle workshop at Hopcrofts Holt, Oxfordshire (07/0466/P/OP). As archaeological remains were found within the vicinity, across the road, during the extension of the Hopcrofts Holt Hotel in 1996, a condition was attached requiring the implementation of an archaeological watching brief during groundworks. Oxfordshire County Archaeological Services (OCAS) prepared 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

An archaeological field evaluation was undertaken directly to the east on the other side of the road in advance of an extension to the Hopcrofts Holt Hotel (OA 1996). This found an area of activity in the form of pits, postholes, a gully and a ditch. A considerable amount of Romano British pottery dating to AD 50 –150 was recovered from these features. The assemblage contained only a small proportion of fine wares suggesting that the site is relatively low status, and that it did not continue beyond the first half of the second century, which is unusual for the area. Although no structural evidence was revealed the nature of the features strongly suggest that there is a small farmstead in the close proximity and given that the evidence was confined to the north-west part of the development area it is plausible to suggest that it is situated in the west area of this development.

There are records of a villa being found in the south but its exact position is unclear. In 1866 human skeletal remains were recorded as being found at Hopcrofts Holt Inn.

Figure 1. Site Location

2 AIMS OF THE INVESTIGATION

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

- To identify and record any archaeological remains exposed during the groundworks.
- The particular aim will be to record and characterise any Roman remains associated with those known to the east.
- 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).

3.2 Methodology

All invasive groundwork was monitored by an archaeologist and all resulting surfaces were then inspected for any significant archaeological features.

Standard John Moore Heritage Services techniques were employed throughout, involving the completion of a written record for each deposit encountered, with scale plans and section drawings compiled where appropriate.

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

4 RESULTS

All deposits and fills have been assigned an individual context number indicated in brackets thus () and cuts in brackets thus [].

The new workshop covers an area of 35m x 15m. The foundations therefore are 35m in length along the eastern and western sides, 15m in length on the northern and southern sides and are approximately 1 metre wide, although this varies along the northern and western sides for reasons that will become apparent below. Every five metres there were pits excavated along the line of the foundations to take pillars, as well as on each corner, resulting in six pits along the eastern and western sides, and two each along the north and south sides. This system was greatly disrupted along the northern and western sides for reasons that shall become apparent below. The pits extend approximately 70cms outwards from the external line of the foundation trenches and approximately 25cms inwards from the internal line. All foundation trenches and pits were designed to be 2.2m deep, although again this varied along the north and western sides.

No significant or dateable archaeology was discovered within the excavations. Soil layers throughout the excavation run from (01/00) to (01/04) with (01/00) – (01/03) consisting of various modern made and disturbed layers and (01/04) being a very thick layer, (1.6m +) of heavily compacted natural blue clay.

Figure 2. Plan of foundations

The edge of a shallow (0.25m deep) cut [1/05] on the inside edge of a pillar base on the south side (see Section 4 on Fig. 2) was seen. The fill was a black silty clay with occasional gravel (1/06). This feature was sealed from (01/02) by a thin orange layer of clay (01/07). No finds came from the fill or the overlying layer. Only approximately 1m length of this feature was exposed making it impossible to come to any conclusion as to its full extent.

The north and western sides of the excavation were heavily disrupted by the discovery of modern rubbish pits. On the northern side these seemed to be filled mainly with car parts, with much of the same on the western side but also large quantities of building rubbish, sections of modern brick and timber, and uprooted, buried tree stumps. These pits were very deep, 2m on the north side and up to 3.6m deep on the west and spreading far into the proposed area of building, causing the trench walls to collapse repeatedly on the western side leaving an open pit almost 3 meters wide and approximately 4 meters deep. Associated rubbish such as drinks cans suggest that the rubbish was deposited before December 1978.

The soil around these areas was heavily polluted with thick oily water and oxidation from the iron waste.

Along the southern side a sewerage pipe was uncovered, (and broken), and the area around this was also heavily polluted by thick oily sludge.

5 FINDS

No finds were discovered in the excavations other than the modern detritus found in the foundations to the north and west. None of this material was retained.

The surface of the made ground was scattered with modern brick fragments and 19th and 20th century pottery within the vicinity of the site.

6 DISCUSSION

The highly disturbed nature of this site makes the identifying of any archaeological remains difficult. The two 'cleanest' sides of the site, the south and east were barren of archaeology while the northern and eastern sides were so heavily disturbed that any archaeology would have been completely destroyed or else almost impossible to identify due to the oil pollution in the soil. Feature [01/05], with fill (01/06) and (01/07) was not revealed to enough of an extent to make any reasonable judgement on its nature. The lack of Romano British pottery suggests that the activity by the Hotel does not extend onto this site.

7 ARCHIVE

Archive Contents

OCAS Brief	The primary site records
Written scheme of investigation	The drawn record
The project report	

The archive will be deposited with Oxfordshire Museum Service under accession number OXCMS: 2007.108

8 BIBLIOGRAPHY

Institute of Field Archaeologists, 1994 *Standard and Guidance for an Archaeological Watching Brief*. Revised Sept 1999

JMHS 2007 *Hopcrofts Holt Service Station. Archaeological Watching Brief. Written Scheme of Investigation*

Oxford Archaeology 1996 *Hopcrofts Holt Hotel, Archaeological Evaluation Report*
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