

**JOHN MOORE HERITAGE SERVICES**

**AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION**

**AT**

**BERNWOOD FIRST SCHOOL SITE,**

**NORTH WAY, BARTON, OXFORD**

**SP 5535 0780**

*On behalf of*

*WS Atkins Consultants Ltd*

**January 2002**

**REPORT FOR** WS Atkins Consultants Limited  
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## Summary

*An evaluation of the school site, which will eventually be surplus to requirements and is therefore being examined for the possibility of development for residential or leisure uses, was undertaken to determine the presence/absence of significant archaeological remains. The excavation of a 3% sample of the present playing field area achieved this. The evaluation found one inhumation of possible Roman date.*

## 1 INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Site Location (Fig. 1)

The site is located on the northern side of North Way in Barton, Oxford (NGR SP 5535 0780). The published 1:50,000 geological map of the area (Sheet 237) indicates that the site is underlain by Beckley Sand Member of the Corallian Formation, which comprises sands and calcareous sandstone. The area of investigation was laid down to green landscaping, being used as school playing fields. The site lies at approximately 95-97m OD.

The school site lies within a roughly triangular area of about 1.74 ha, which has a natural north to north-westerly fall. To the north of the school buildings and the access road is the playing field, which was the subject of the investigation. This is a near level area with a triangular area to the west that slopes steeply away from the hard play area to the boundary to the north (site of evaluation Trench 1). The school buildings have been terraced into the natural slope, as has the playing field at a lower level.

### 1.2 Planning Background

The Bernwood First School site is being examined for possible development potential when it becomes surplus to requirements. Due to the presence of potential remains of archaeological interest in the proposal area, the County Archaeological Services (CAS) advised that an archaeological evaluation of the site should be undertaken as part of this consideration. The CAS produced a Brief for such an evaluation. John Moore Heritage Services (JMHS) in accordance with a Written Scheme of Investigation agreed with the CAS carried out such an evaluation.

### 1.3 Archaeological Background

The line of the Dorchester to Alchester Roman road lies less than 500 m to the east of the investigation site. Flanking the road and lying some 300-400 m east of the school is an area of extensive Romano-British occupation. The evidence for this, as detailed in the CAS Brief, is as follows:

PRN 3664 (SP 5578 0780 centred): During development in 1946 extensive traces of Romano-British occupation were found including inhumations, coins, and Samian and coarse ware pottery dating mainly to 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries AD. Building plans were

not recovered, but this was due to the nature of the building operations and the very limited form of archaeological investigation.

PRN 3665 (SP 5571 0776): During development in 1946 an undated human skeleton was discovered with no associated finds. It is likely to be related to the extensive occupation evidence cited under PRN 3664.

PRN 3666 (SP 5590 0777): Found in 1949 east of the Roman road, a Romano-British cremation burial in an urn of greyware, together with a whetstone and the iron head of a small pick. Dated to the 1<sup>st</sup> or early 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD.

PRN 3668 (SP 5580 0780): Iron Age pottery recorded on OS cards.

PRN 3802 (SP 550 078): About 200 m to the west of the proposal site, in 1931 a single Anglo Saxon inhumation was discovered. This unaccompanied burial was allegedly found at the base of a sunken featured building, which contained Anglo Saxon pottery.

An initial phase of archaeological evaluation comprising geophysical survey was undertaken in October 1998 within the proposal area (*A Report for WS Atkins – Oxford on a Geophysical Survey at Bernwood First School, Barton, Oxford, Stratascan, October 1998*). This consisted of both a magnetometer and resistivity survey. Both surveys produced evidence of below ground anomalies. The anomalies M3 and M4, while being of possible modern origin, were closely aligned on a linear feature M5 that had the characteristics of an archaeological feature. A complex set of roughly linear anomalies (R1) was considered to be geological.

As part of the ground investigation of the sit, a review of old Ordnance Survey plans (1879/81, 1899, 1921, 1936/7, 1956 and 1988) at 1:1250 and/or 1:2500 scales was undertaken (GSP 2001). These indicate that the site had not previously been developed; the school buildings are the only buildings to be shown on the site, which first appeared on the 1956 edition, essentially as existing. Prior to this the site was shown as open fields traversed by a footpath.

## **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.

Figure 1. Site and trench location

Scale 1:1250

- In particular to validate the results of the geophysical survey and determine the character of the anomalies.
- 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 the CAS a scheme of investigation was designed by JMHS and agreed with the CAS and the applicant. The work was carried out by JMHS and involved the excavation of the proposed eight trenches with the addition of an extra trench.

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), and was monitored by Paul Smith of the CAS.

#### **3.2 Methodology**

Two trenches of 23 m length (Trenches 3 & 4), four of 20 m length (Trenches 1, 2, 5 and 8), two of 17-19 m (Trenches 7 & 9) and one of 10 m length were excavated within the proposed development area, see Figure 1. All trenches were 1.60m wide. Two trenches (3 & 4) were realigned to avoid disturbing two football pitches while Trench 7 was moved 5m southwards to avoid roots from the trees along the north boundary of the site.

Excavation was carried out by JCB fitted with a 5' toothless bucket. Excavation proceeded in spits until the top of undisturbed natural subsoil Beckley Sand Member was exposed.

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 after recording.

### **4 RESULTS**

In Trenches 1, 2, and 5-7, at varying depths, the following four deposits were excavated. The underlying geology was Beckley Sand Member that was frequently dark brown orange sandy clay (context 04 in all trenches). Above this was a firm dark yellow brown silty clay (03), which was interpreted as the original topsoil before the development of the school. This was typically 220-300 mm thick except in Trench 5 where it was 380 mm thick and in Trench 2 where it increased in thickness to 900 mm at the north end. The increase in thickness of the topsoil is explained by soil creep on the natural slope of the land prior to levelling for the playing field. Within these trenches, lying above the old topsoil was made ground of redeposited natural Beckley

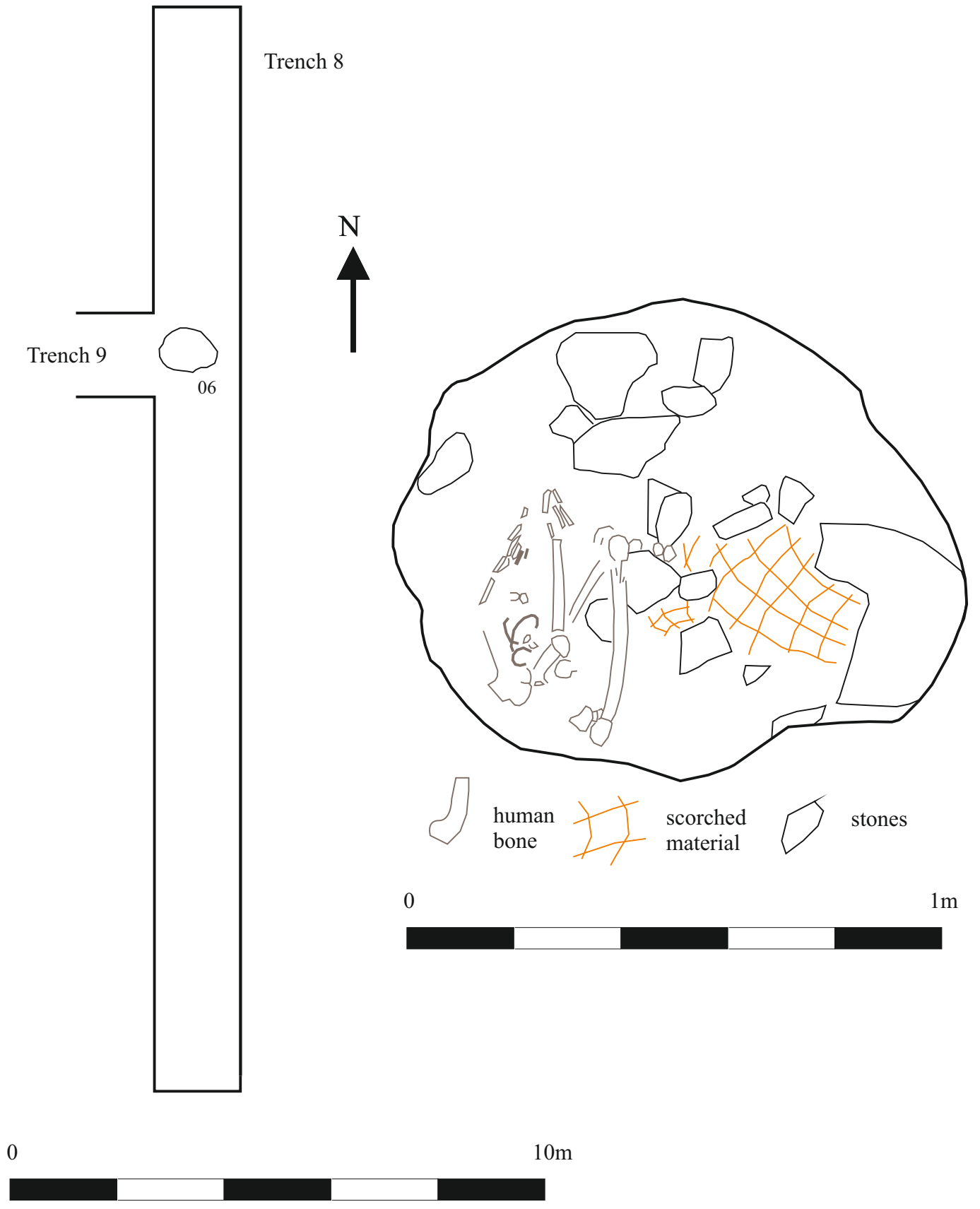


Figure 2. Plan of Trench 8 and Burial



Sand Member mixed with the occasional brick, glass fragments, stone, iron pieces, and lenses of topsoil. This obviously derived from the southern part of the playing field area and probably from the area of the school buildings. Lying above the made ground (02) was the topsoil and turf (01). The last was generally 200-380 mm thick except in Trench 1 where it was 500-600 mm thick.

In Trenches 3, 4, and 8-9, natural Beckley Sand Member (04) was directly overlaid by the present topsoil and turf (01), which was 170-300 mm thick. Bands of stone were present in the natural within Trenches 3, 4 and 8.

The only features present were in Trenches 7 and 8. Those in Trench 7 were recent in date, although pre-dating the building of the school, and comprised three small rubbish pits. These were sealed by the made ground (02) and cut from within the old topsoil (03) into the natural (04). Tin cans were present within their fills.

Trench 8 contained a burial pit (8/06). This was an irregular oval in plan, 1060 mm E/W by 900 mm N/S. It was shallow, surviving up to 220 mm deep, with sides at c. 30° from the horizontal and a slightly rounded base. The crouched inhumation lay on its left side with its head (had it survived) to the north (Fig. 2). The burial was immediately under the topsoil (8/01) and had been heavily disturbed by the landscaping for the playing field. The left leg and foot, left side of the pelvis, part of the backbone, and hands only survived. The body lay towards the southwest side of the pit. The fill of the pit was dark yellow brown silty clay, heavily scorched in places (8/05). Several medium/large pieces of stone were present in the fill. Some of these had obviously derived from the cutting of the burial pit as a band of stone continued both east and west of the pit. Other pieces were heavily scorched.

## 5 FINDS

### Early Pottery by Alistair Barclay and Paul Booth

Twelve sherds were recovered from the fill of the burial pit (8/05). They were mostly undiagnostic body sherds of Iron Age date. Fabrics included sand, sand and shell, calcareous and pellets/?grog and therefore could be early or middle Iron Age. The only diagnostic sherd is a worn rim in a sandy fabric that is possibly Roman (Oxfordshire) but could possibly be medieval. Most of the sherds are worn, relatively small and could be redeposited/residual.

### Other finds

The old topsoil within Trench 1 (1/03) contained tile fragments and a sherd of white earthenware (late 18<sup>th</sup> – 19<sup>th</sup> century). No other finds were seen within this deposit in other trenches.

The burial pit (8/05) contained a few fragments of animal bone, some burnt.

## Inhumation (comment from Amy Gray Jones)

From the size of the leg bones the individual was adult and possibly female.

## **6 DISCUSSION**

The anomalies resulting from the geophysical survey can now be interpreted. Anomalies M3 and M4 represent objects within the made ground 02, while the apparent linear feature M5 was not found. This may be the break of slope of the original natural ground where it starts to fall away steeply to the north. The anomalies M1 are pits immediately pre-dating the building of the school. Anomaly M2 was not investigated due to the presence of the football pitch but appears similar to anomalies M1. The complex set of roughly linear anomalies R1 are of geological origin.

The burial pit 8/06 was not found by the geophysical survey, probably due to the fact that it contained a large amount of stone and was set in an area where there was naturally occurring stone within the sandy clay.

The burial pit lies on what is thought to have been a false crest on the valley side. If the landscape was open and the burial had been marked in some way then its position would have been visible from some considerable distance. The position would have offered an uninterrupted view across and along both ways of the Bayswater Brook valley. A substantial, if any, mound did not cover the burial, as no evidence for a quarry ditch was present. It is possible that stripping of turf from the surrounding area may have been used to form a low mound.

The burial is more likely to be Romano British in date than medieval, but an Anglo-Saxon date cannot be ruled out given the finding of one of this date some 200 m to the west. The presence of the burnt material in the fill of the burial pit is difficult to explain. The burial itself had not been subject to heat and there was no evidence of other activity on the site. Similarly the presence of Iron Age sherds along with the possible Roman sherd is difficult to explain. It would appear that material, from elsewhere, was brought on to the site to be used as part of the backfill of the burial pit.

## **7 CONCLUSIONS**

The evaluation shows that the site under consideration contains remains of local archaeological importance. However this is very localised and towards the north-east corner of the present playing field. The burial may be an isolated event or be part of a larger cemetery. If the latter, then other burials are considered likely to be in close proximity to the known one or further east within the gardens of Burchester Avenue.

With respect to the potential development of the site there is nothing of major archaeological significance to prevent development. However, it is considered by the author that, an archaeological watching brief should be undertaken in the area of the burial during any groundworks associated with the development. The burial lay very close to the present surface and any activity would damage further remains in the area. The burial was completely excavated, on the advice of the County Archaeologist, as it

was thought that any harrowing of the trench area for reseedling would have further damaged the inhumation.

## **8 BIBLIOGRAPHY**

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