

Summary

John Moore Heritage Services concluded an Archaeological Recording Action at St Giles Street, Oxford on 13th February 2009 on a trench opened by BT Openreach who discovered an underground stone built structure of unknown date. This was archaeologically recorded within the health and safety and practical constraints dictated by the site.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Site Locations (Figure 1)

The site of the work was on the southeast side of St Giles Street and consisted of a rectangular shaped trench to the NE of the Taylor Institution and the Ashmoleum Museum and just to the west of St John's College (NGR SP 51220 06675). This trench lay within an area designated as car parking situated just off the main road. The site lies at an approximate height of 63m Above Ordnance Datum and the underlying geology is Second (Radley-Summertown) River Terrace Deposits (OS 1982). This was not observed during the archaeological work as the trench was not deep enough to expose any natural geological horizons.

1.2 Planning Background

During work to replace a section of cable duct in St Giles, Oxford, contractors working for BT Openreach discovered an underground structure of possible medieval origin and of possible historical significance. Although not subject to planning condition, David Radford, Oxford Council's City Archaeologist requested a salvage and recording exercise to help investigate the structure and promote its understanding. This was kindly agreed by BT Openreach.

1.3 Archaeological Background

St Giles is located where the Woodstock and Banbury Roads meet to create the widest street in Oxford. It extends from St Giles' Church to the north to the Martyrs Memorial in the south.

St Giles Church was founded between 1123-1133 in the fields to the north of the town of Oxford. Settlement in part of what is now known as St Giles' Street also began during this period. The first recorded use of the name St Giles' Street however did not actually appear until 1325.

This route was the main northern thoroughfare into the town and may have been built up by 1279. Despite this, the northern end remained rural with many of the houses being used as farmhouses. Cattle and sheep are known to have been driven along St Giles' with records dating to 1294 showing cows being purchased outside the North Gate. This suggests that there may have been a cattle market in St Giles Street by this time. Early maps also show a pond in the middle of the road where the War Memorial now stands.

Figure 1. Site and trench locations

St Bernard's College was founded on the site of St John's College in 1437 on land to the eastern side of St Giles'. In 1555 this college (now only an academic hall) was bought by Sir Thomas White and was refounded as St John's College. This college has a large frontage onto St Giles'.

The street continued to develop through the 17th century with various significant buildings being erected. These included, Black Hall (now No. 21 St Giles'), The Eagle and Child Public House (first mentioned in 1650) and the Lamb and Flag alehouse (opening in c.1695). 41 St Giles' was also built around the turn of the century c.1700. Other noteworthy events included the first record of St Giles' Parish Wake, the forerunner of the popular Street fair in 1624 which continues to this day and a fire to the north of Black Hall which burnt out 6-8 families in 1669. St Giles was also paved from St Mary Magdalen Church to St John's College in 1672 with further paving up to St Giles' Church by 1675. Loggan's map of Oxford produced in 1675 shows that by this time St Johns College had incorporated part of St Giles into its own grounds.

St Giles' by the eighteenth century had some of the grandest stone faced buildings in the city and was at this time home to many professionals as well as members of the University. As such, the Beaumont Street development was constructed in the same style and materials as the larger houses of St Giles's.

The expansion of the University which began before World War I, quickened soon afterwards when extra funding became available. The sciences benefited most of all creating a need for extra parking to cope with the extra volumes of traffic the expansion had generated. As St John's College was located close to the newly established science area it too was subjected to extra parking just outside its entrance onto St Giles' Street.

2 AIMS OF THE INVESTIGATION

The aims of the investigation were as follows:

- To record as best as possible the stone structure already discovered on site and to locate it in relation to St Giles Street.
- To establish if other archaeological remains had been disturbed during groundworks.
- To determine the extent, condition, nature, character, quality and date of any other archaeological remains encountered.

The extent of the work undertaken was largely determined by Health and Safety and practical requirements. The trench was known to be unstable prompting the use of box and sheet metal shuttering to prevent the trench from collapsing. The trench was also partially backfilled with pea shingle. As this was done before archaeological intervention was considered it meant that most of the trench could not be inspected properly.

3 STRATEGY

In response to Oxford City Council's request, a scheme of investigation was designed by JMHS and agreed by Mr Richard Walter on behalf of BT Openreach. The work was out by JMHS and involved the investigation of the already open and shuttered trench.

Site procedures for the investigation and recording of potential archaeological deposits and features were defined in a *Written Scheme of Investigation*. The work was carried out in accordance with the standards specified by the Institute of Field Archaeologists (1999), the procedures laid down in MAP2 (English Heritage 1991) and the requirements of the Oxford City Council's Archaeologist.

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.

4.1 Excavation Results (Figure 2)

The trench was recorded as best as the circumstances dictated. The presence of the box shuttering and sheet metal shoring prevented a proper investigation of three of the four sections as too did the dangerous digging conditions with partially collapsed and undercutting sections preventing proper recording of those areas still available for inspection. As such it was not possible to draw any of the available sections but instead a series of photographs were taken. It was initially hoped that the trench could be photographed properly once the box shuttering had been removed just prior to backfilling. However, the fragile nature of the sections meant that it would not be possible to remove the box until the trench had been almost completely backfilled.

From the limited work carried out it could be seen that the stone structure noted in SW facing section, (1/04), was part of a vaulted roof aligned approximately NW-SE parallel to the line of St Giles' (Figs. 2 & 3). The upper part of which had already been destroyed during some previous groundworking or demolition episode (Fig. 3). This roof was constructed using limestone blocks in uneven courses with a sandy, gravely light orange/yellow mortar with occasional flecks of charcoal. The remains of this arch consisted of at least eight courses of stone and continued below the depth of the trench. A cut [1/07] had been made through this arch towards the middle of the exposed section to allow the laying of a service to the east. This cut was c.0.50m wide and at least c.0.55m deep and continued below the arbitrary depth of the trench. Within this cut was a cast iron service pipe (1/09) with an approximate diameter of 0.20m. This was aligned at right angles to (1/04). It is uncertain how far this service continues into the trench (if at all) beyond where it was seen in the undercutting section created by (1/04) or for that matter, what its relationship is to (1/03), a trench backfill deposit which lies stratigraphically above (1/04). Covering the pipe and backfilling the cut was a mortar mixed with tile and flint pebbles (1/08). It is possible that this could have been done during the structures lifetime, as the resulting cut has been so neatly backfilled and because it has been filled with mortar at all instead of general backfill. However, it is also possible that the mortar might have been used

Figure 2. Plan and profile.

Figures 3-5

because of doubts over the structures integrity when rediscovered previously and the neatness of the finish could be more to do with personal pride than anything else. Deeper excavation of this arch and being able to see its opposite side might help answer this question.

Notes taken from the SE facing section revealed evidence of a vertical wall, (1/06), of similar construction to the vaulted arch (1/04) running at right angles and appearing to join with it in the extreme NE corner of the trench (Fig. 4). No evidence of mortar was observed between the stone blocks although it was not possible to get close enough to inspect them properly. Six courses of stone were seen with the feature appearing to continue below the arbitrary base of the trench. This wall was only revealed to a limited extent as part of the original trench section had collapsed.

At the extreme SE corner of the trench another vertical wall, (1/05), (Fig. 5) was observed probably joining and running at right angles to (1/04). This was tentatively recorded as it was only visible with the aid of a torch beyond the immediate trench section at the end of a partial void created presumably when the structure was demolished. A ranging pole was used to roughly measure this wall in relation to the trench. Like (1/06) no evidence of mortar was seen. At least four courses of stone were observed.

Stratigraphically above the arch structure and its associated walls was backfill (1/03), a dark grey/brown silty/sandy loam at least 1.60m thick containing occasional pieces of tile and tarmac closer to the surface. It is possible that a further thin layer of made ground lay above this dumping layer and above the arch of the structure itself but this far from certain. Above (1/03) was a compacted stone make up layer 0.22m thick which was sealed (1/01), a layer of tarmac 0.20m thick.

No dating evidence was recovered from the recording exercise.

4.2 Reliability of Techniques and Results

The reliability of results from the archaeological work should be taken with a degree of caution due to the limitations associated with its recording.

5 FINDS

No finds were recovered from the recording action.

6 DISCUSSION

The salvage recording exercise was successful in locating the stone structure in relation to St Giles and St Johns College. Initially it was thought this structure could be part of a stone-lined post-medieval storm drain as the arching roof runs parallel to with the street. However, the presence of the two returning walls which appear to join the main arch at right angles to it make this idea unlikely. Although this feature was only partially exposed so an exact idea of its dimensions could not be established including its total depth, it is likely to be either rectangular or square in shape and c.6.20m wide.

A more likely solution is that this stone structure is the remains of a cess pit formerly serving St John's College. An archaeological excavation slightly further north (JMHS 2004) at the rear of 69 Woodstock Road revealed a similar substantial stone built square structure found to be the remains of a cess pit on land behind the former Horse and Jockey public house. Despite this new discovery being much larger, it must be remembered that it would have facilitated a larger number of people and even though no evidence for a vaulted roof was seen with the Woodstock Road example, there is no reason why this part of the structure should remain if it was subject to a more thorough demolition. This idea seems even more plausible as it is known that the College had incorporated this part of the street into its own land by 1675 and that a cess pit located here would keep it away from the main buildings with easy access to St Giles Street for maintenance. The cast iron pipework could be a later edition to the design. One reservation against this theory is the fact that no evidence of mortar was seen binding the stonework on the two straight walls. A proper inspection of these walls though was not possible.

7 Bibliography

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