

EOXP TEST PIT 56

Location: Grounds of Fairacres Convent, off Fairacres Road; in the orchard to the north of the vegetable patch.

Date of Excavation: 23-24 May 2013

Area of excavation: 1.0 x 1.0m

Weather conditions: Overcast, breezy with heavy showers

Excavators: Alfie Bowlby, Julia Hawkins, Tim Lee, Gillian Mellor, Leigh Mellor, Phil Price, Isadora Reeves, Nick Swift, Chris Turley, JH

Report by: Leigh Mellor and JH

GPS Location and OD: SP 52615 04773, 61.5m OD

Introduction

The test pit was dug on the crest of the spur of ground that looks SW over the Cherwell. The Convent buildings were set back to the ENE on the flat ground of the top of the spur. Worked flint had been found in two of the gardens on Bedford Street backing onto this area of the grounds to the north; similar finds had not been made in gardens on the southern side of Fairacres Road further down off the spur to the south. The Bell collection (Pitt River museum) of prehistoric worked flint was accumulated somewhere across 6 or so acres of the surroundings of what was Fairacres House – now the central building of the Convent. The discovery of large unabraded sherds of Roman pottery, of a range of fabrics and forms, in this pit suggests that the spur, with its patch of sandy soil, provided a good location for a small, unassuming rural settlement. A spring also runs down the northern edge of the property towards the river. Although the oldest known house on the site is the existing early 19th century building, 11-13th century pottery was also found in this pit and the vegetable patch, so this attractive settlement spot may have been inhabited almost continuously from the Roman period (the lawn test pit produced 17-18th century pottery); with activity from early prehistory.

Areas of the extensive vegetable patch recently dug over or planted with potatoes were ‘field walked’ by all three test pit teams (see below). Roman pottery found in this exercise seemed to concentrate in the vegetable patch nearest the orchard test pit and tail off to the south and west. Medieval and later pottery (17th - 19th) was also collected.

Excavation summary




The undulating surface of natural clay geology was reached at a depth of between 0.65-0.70m. Context (100) consisted of turf and topsoil c 0.06m deep. Context (101) was only c 0.06m deep. This first layer was friable, humic, dark brown sandy silt topsoil with occasional pebbles and gravel; also clay pipe, pottery, iron and burnt flint. It represented long-established, slightly disturbed orchard/pasture topsoil (perhaps since the early medieval period).



Context (102) below was also a dark slightly sandy, silt, again containing river pebbles, flint and limestone grit, fossils and charcoal but also clay pipe fragments, oyster shell, animal bone and teeth, iron objects with some pottery and tile. (102) was c 0.12m deep was clearly a less disturbed layer or subsoil of the pasture soil. Layer (103) below, c 0.08m deep, had fewer finds and was clearly a subsoil, which although still very silty was becoming slightly more clayey with depth. Pottery and animal bone were still found along with river pebbles and flint.

Layer (104) was deeper, at c 0.2m, with the first clear boundary to (105) below. This layer was clearly old buried topsoil – silty and increasingly sandy with depth – with river pebbles, limestone pebbles and occasional charcoal. This was the layer from which the widest range of sherds of Roman pottery fabrics was recovered, along with some smaller medieval sherds and burnt animal bone. This layer came down onto natural clay (105) with river and limestone pebbles and fossils collected at the boundary between the two contexts. The clay, when excavated 0.15m into in a sondage, was sterile of finds.

No plan or section drawings were made, but there are sketches on the reverse of the context sheets.

Results

Spit/ context	Type of deposit	Description	Soil Sample	Comments
(100)	Layer	Turf and humic top soil with turf 0.06m deep.	N/a	
(101)	Layer	Friable dark brown sandy silty (75%) coarse sand. 0.06m from top; 0.03 – 0.05m deep. Inclusions: river pebbles 3%; large fragments of charcoal 1%; limestone and flint grit 1%; gryphea >1% Finds: Fe; clay pipe; oyster shell; burnt flint; brass button; pottery sherds: overall >3% Diffuse boundaries to (102) worm and root disturbance.	N/a	Humic topsoil for orchard/pasture.  (101) finds
(102)	Layer	Friable dark brown sandy silt (75%); c 0.12m deep. Inclusions: fine-medium river pebbles 3%; fine flint gravel >1%; limestone grit 1% and fossils 1% Finds: clay pipe; pottery; slate; oyster shell; animal bone and teeth; Fe and CBM: 3% context overall Boundaries diffuse; worm and root disturbance	N/a	Orchard/pasture soil, less disturbed possible upper subsoil  (102) looking south
(103)	Layer	Friable mid brown slightly clayey slit (75%); level at bottom 0.3m from top; c 0.08m deep. Inclusions: river pebbles 7%; flint grit and gravel 3%; gryphea 3%; shell >1% Finds: pottery sherds, animal bone and v little glass: 3% context overall. Boundaries diffuse; worm and root disturbance	N/a	Subsoil for orchard pasture soil.  (103) looking south

(104)	Layer	<p>Friable mid yellowish brown slightly clayey silty sand (60%); inc. sandy with depth; 0.2m deep, 0.5m+ from top</p> <p>Inclusions: river pebbles 15% (fine to medium); flint 3%; v occasional mudstone pebble and sub-angular limestone 40-20mm; occasional charcoal flecks</p> <p>Finds: pottery – range of Roman forms and fabrics and medieval sherds; burnt bone: 3% overall</p> <p>Clear boundary to (105); worm and root disturbance</p>	<p>Buried topsoil.</p>  <p>(104) looking east</p>
(105)	Natural	<p>Firm bluish grey clay; occasional sandy lens at boundary (104); 0.15m deep into SE sondage; max depth from top 0.7m</p> <p>Inclusions: river pebbles at junction with (104); v occasional sub-angular limestone pebble</p> <p>Finds: none</p>	<p>Natural clay</p>  <p>(105) looking east</p>



Finds from (104)



Field walking the vegetable path

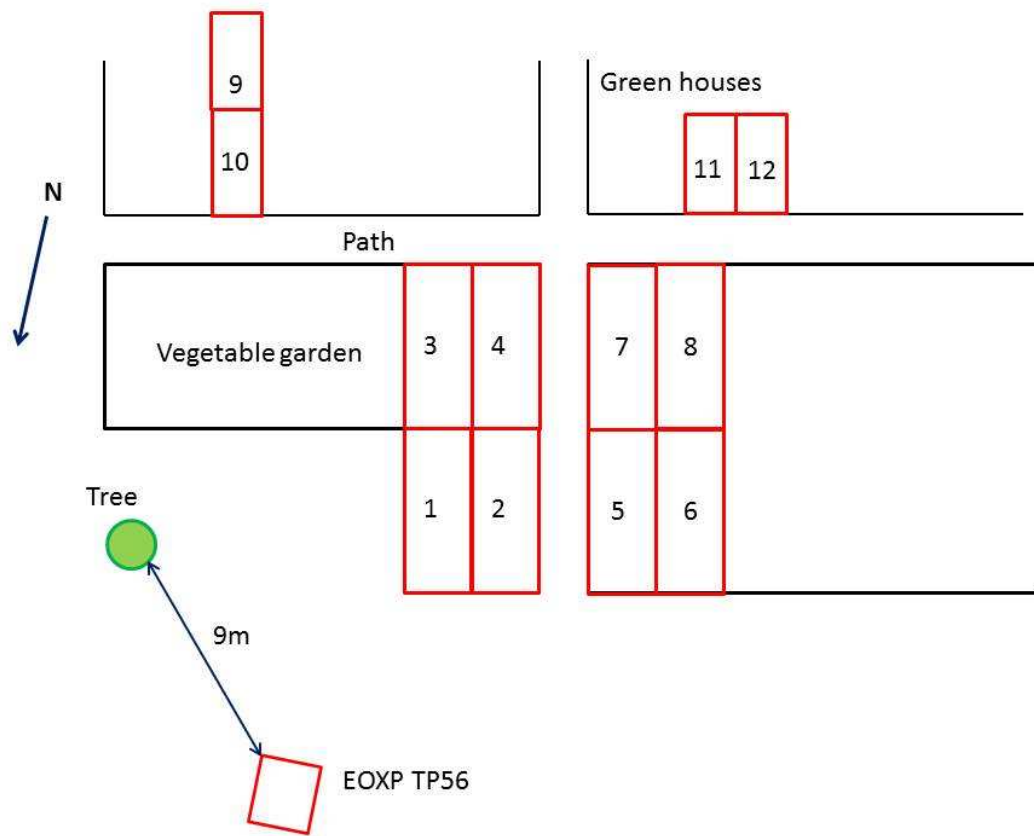
Twelve rectangles of the vegetable patch were walked – see diagram below: when the finds were sorted generic CBM, slate, modern glass and plastic (all associated with gardening), stone, pebbles, wood and coal were discarded.

Square 1: flint, CBM, modern bits and pieces of garden equipment, modern brick, slate, river pebbles, wood, glass coal and pottery including Roman.

Square 2: teaspoon, lead, CBM, limestone, river pebbles, glass, slag, animal teeth, slate and pottery.

Square 3: flint, CBM, limestone, river pebbles, glass, slag, animal teeth, slate, lead and pottery.

Square 4: limestone, CBM, clay pipes, flint, slate, glass, gryphea, river pebbles and pottery.



Field walking 'squares'

Square 5: Fe, CBM, gryphea, flint, slag, limestone and pottery.

Square 6: wood, clay pipes, flint, glass, slate, Fe, animal bone, river pebbles and pottery.

Square 7: gryphea, CBM, limestone, coke, flint, wood, Fe, slate, glass and pottery.

Square 8: wood, CBM, limestone, gryphea, Fe, flint, glass, charcoal, slate and pottery.

Square 9: CBM, shell and pottery

Square 10: CBM, flint, slag, gryphea and pottery.

Square 11: limestones, CBM, clay pipe and pottery.

Square 12: CBM, gryphea, limestone, coke, flint, 1cent piece and pottery



Field walking squares 1-4.