

TEST PIT 4 (EOX)/ BT1

Bartlemas Farmhouse, Bartlemas

Area excavated: 1m x 1m in lawn

Date of Excavation: 28 February – 1 March 1 2011

Conditions: Overcast, cold, damp – occasional drizzle

Excavators: Sarah and Christopher Franks, Ruth Barber, Mandy Bellamy, Pam England, Rob McLean, Tricia Marsh, Steve Nicholson, Roelie Reed, Christine Turley, Jane Harrison.

Report by: The Team and JH

GPS location and height over sea level: SP 5338 0545, 68.0 OD

Summary

A test pit was dug in the front garden of Bartlemas Farmhouse to explore the character of the soils in this part of the site.

Results

We wanted to test the survival of any archaeology and the depth of recently accumulated soils. It appears that the garden has been built up at some point in the history of the Farmhouse and there is certainly evidence elsewhere in the core area of the site for a considerable depth of overburden (up to 1m – see Brian Durham's report). However, the evidence from this test pit suggests that the depth of build-up in other areas may have resulted from more localised, and perhaps relatively recent earth-moving. The excavation suggests that any building up of the Farmhouse front garden soils happened before the mid nineteenth century. It is true that on late 19th century Taunt photographs, looking roughly north towards the Farmhouse, the ground surface in the garden area looks lower than it is now, but the perspective makes it difficult to be certain. The test pit has demonstrated that archaeological levels in the front garden area are both less disturbed and closer to the surface than might have been expected. The proximity of the chapel and the long, important and varied history of the Farmhouse itself mean that these conclusions bode well for any further archaeological investigations.

In the 1840 plan of the site – in Oriel College's archives – the front garden boundary appears to be in much the same location as today, slightly extended beyond the southern corner of the building which reaches out from the north-eastern end of the Farmhouse (at a right angle to it and now joined to the main Farmhouse by Edwardian in-fill – see map details below). The first archaeological layers found in the test-pit (only just below top-soil) were a garden gravel path or surface in the east and a plant bed in the west. This arrangement echoed what looks like a small formal garden laid out in the 1840 plan although again it is difficult to be certain as the accuracy and intentions of that plan are unclear (the relative alignment of the chapel and Farmhouse is not correct, for example).

The gravel surface had been neatly laid over the footings of a carefully dismantled wall running roughly NE-SW across the pit. A thin spread of mortar and flecks of limestone in the surrounding soil suggested that this wall may have been mortared limestone; the footings were substantial and well-constructed of old tile and limestone chunks to create a foundation 0.4m wide. The line of the wall was extremely interesting - running from the end of the building to the north, mentioned above, to join the older course of the track before it bends out round the current front wall of the garden. The wall therefore provides evidence for a boundary and site arrangement not detected so far in any of the maps and plans. Further work is necessary to check this. Interestingly the grass grows in a persistently different way along the possible line of this wall in an area whose cultivation has not changed for perhaps half a century. To the east of the wall line the mossy grass produces spring woodland flowers.

Excavation stopped at this level with dark humic soils on either side of the wall. The finds had been relatively sparse with occasional bone, pottery, clay-pipe, mortar and limestone flecks. Spit 2 contained a small worked bone point and iron structural nails, while Context 4 also contained iron, sub-rectangular profile structural nails.

Summary of Excavation

The test pit was dug to a depth of 0.45m. The natural geology was not reached, with excavation halting at the foundations of a substantial wall (Structure 5).

The first 0.1m spit (Spit 1) below 0.1m depth of topsoil was yellowish brown silty sand with occasional lenses of clay and containing occasional flecks of charcoal, limestone, mortar and clinker. The amount of flint was unexpected – c.3% of the context. There was little evidence for garden manuring. Finds included small fragments of bone and degraded tile or brick (CBM) and a small toggle: this layer may have been a levelling-up deposit as suggested by its varied composition. Spit 2 was similar to Spit 1 but was slightly more humic in the west and increasingly gravelly in the eastern portion of the pit – vertical boundaries were very difficult to distinguish but from this level down the distinction between the possible bedding trench in the west and the gravel surface was increasingly apparent horizontally. The more gravelly area reached nearly 0.7m from the eastern side of the pit. The darker soils of the bedding trench contained fewer and smaller stones than Spit 1, much less flint and occasional charcoal and glass fragments: a small bone point, occasional sherds of eroded glazed (post-medieval) pottery and bird bone were found. Fragments of three square-profiled iron structural nails were also discovered in Spit 2.

By 0.3m below ground level the distinction between the gravel and the bedding trench were clear, and the remaining 0.1m above the wall footings were dug as were dug as Context 3 (gravel) and Context 4 (garden soil in west). Context 3 was gritty gravel with occasional small-medium pebbles and 10% sand, containing very occasional tiny sherds of pottery, fragments of

slate, CBM, clay-pipe and flecks of charcoal. Context 4 was darker sandy silt containing occasional small stones, flecks and small fragments of charcoal and a fine spread of mortar spreading from the top of the wall fittings. The context contained small sherds of glazed and unglazed post-medieval pottery (where identifiable), occasional bone fragments and small chunks of plaster-mortar; a structural nail and two small iron objects were also found. The pottery and bone were in mixed condition suggesting a soil with some manuring additions. The wall foundations – 0.4m wide and NW-SE aligned – were constructed of limestone chunks (av. 0.2 x 0.1 x 0.1m), rough mortar, tile fragments and medium-small limestone cobbles. The stones of the wall had clearly been carefully removed, to be re-used perhaps, and the gravel spread when the garden area was enlarged.