

TEST PIT 7

Frys Hill area of Greater Leys

Area excavated: 1.5m x 1m

Date of Excavation: 25 May 2011

Conditions: Sunny

Excavators: Steve Nicholson, Tim Lee, Tricia Hallam, Swii Yii Lim, David Pinches, Jane Harrison

Report by: Maggie Willis, Caroline Gale, Trisha Dale

GPS location and height over sea level: SP 5535 0210, 65.1m OD

Remains of an internationally important Romano-British pottery industry, including kilns, were discovered before the building of the Greater Leys housing estate - within yards of this test pit. Test pit EOXP7 MG could claim to show evidence of human habitation during prehistoric and Roman times, in the hammerstones and fragments of Roman pottery. The natural clay geology found in the test-pit was one of the assets of the area attractive to Roman potters; the Dorchester to Alchester Roman road passes within a very short distance of the site. The present house and garden have existed on the site for only 15 years; before that, no known maps show any buildings. All the existing evidence suggests the land had been used for agriculture. The earliest buildings shown in the vicinity on Ordnance Survey maps seem to be associated with the Blackford Leys farm/hamlet.

The finds were discovered fairly near the present ground surface. This could be because they are old and *in situ*, and any deposits above them had been stripped off by builders' machinery. There was ample evidence for heavy top-soil stripping. However, it is just as likely that the builders of the modern development imported onto the site from nearby any or all of the finds, the exact provenance of which is therefore unknown.

Summary of Excavation

The test pit was dug to a depth of 0.27m, with a further 0.17m in a sondage 0.03m x 0.02m with its length against the SE facing section. The natural geology was reached only in the main test pit.

The first spit was a mixture of clayish silt with firm clay. The second spit had a far greater proportion of clay, the natural was found, except in one corner. The site for the pit had been chosen as far away from known or likely builders' rubble as possible. However the part of the pit nearest the 1996-built house was closed down at once, because it came down on a soak-away, very near the surface, which had not been correctly plotted on building plans. The sondage on the farther edge, towards another house of about the same age, revealed only a

dump of modern broken bricks, it is a matter of conjecture to what extent the finds had been redeposited after the house was built. Two phases of building had also resulted in extensive top-soil stripping.

The smooth pebbles among the inclusions suggested riverbed, marine or glacial deposits. The stratified nature of some of the large lumps of clay is evidence of geological deposit. The two possible hammer-stones are quite different from one another. The smaller one, found nearer the surface, has flattened surfaces on top and underneath. The larger one feels comfortable in the right hand, and even has what appears to be a place worn down by years of pressure from an index finger. Renfrew and Bahn (2008, p. 334) say that hammer-stones have been known to be used, for example, in the process of making bone tools; and some small pieces of flint were found, so perhaps flint-knapping was among the uses to which the hammer-stones were put.

| <u>Spit</u> | <u>Type of deposit</u> | <u>Description</u> |
|---|--|---|
| 101 1.5m x 1m pit | <u>Layer</u> | 0.05m of turf and topsoil removed by hand; 0.2m deep. Friable/firm, mid yellowish-brown clayish silt with 25% smooth, yellow-green clay lenses. Smooth, rounded pebbles 8–60mm, poorly sorted; also fragmented, abraded limestone, flint and slate. Small bivalve mollusc fossil. Finds: Fragmented glass (clear), slag, brick, mortar, breeze block, pottery (two sherds of possible older pottery). One hammer-stone 45x50mm. Garden soil contaminated by roots and worms; disturbed, with some evidence of manuring for agricultural use. |
| 102 | <u>Layer:</u> <u>below</u> <u>Spit 1</u> | 0.2m deep. Firm/friable, mid greyish-brown silty clay, with gradual change to 75% clay lenses, which have dark green bands in some places. Fewer inclusions than in spit 101. One large piece of abraded chalk 90x63mm, small round chalk pebbles, fragmented flint, slag, breeze block and mortar. Small fragment of one oyster fossil. Finds: Hammer-stone 60x45x63mm with possible index finger indentation. Small sherds of pottery, one may be old, abraded. Builders' appear to have stripped away top agricultural layer. The clay vein could have attracted the Romans to excavate for their potting. |
| 103 Excavated in sondage 0.3m x 0.2m | <u>Layer:</u> <u>below</u> <u>Spit 2</u> | 0.17m deep in SE corner, compacted banded clay. Fewer inclusions than for pit 102. Finds: Breeze block and large brick embedded in natural clay. Disturbed, possibly dump of builders' rubble adjacent to house on eastern boundary. |

Reference

Renfrew, Colin and Paul Bahn 2008. *Archaeology: Theories, Methods and Practices*, 5th edn. London: Thames & Hudson.

Personal commentary

In Greater Leys, Oxford, 25 May 2011 dawned bright and sunny. Thankfully, the wind had dropped. The team arrived around 9.30 a.m. and began by sorting out exactly where to dig in my quite small area of back-garden grass. A site was chosen beyond the sewage pipe that the deeds say crosses the space, but as far from the back fence as possible. Measuring done, the guys began to remove the turf – not an easy job after the driest spring for ages!

The first snag was the discovery of soak away pipes. We deduced the builders had skimped on depth, on the clay land – my house is only 15 years old and I knew there was a lot of builders' rubble near the house itself.

The first find of the day was the fossilised inside of a mussel, quite near the surface. Soon energy was being used on both digging and sieving. By late morning the finds had been collected and two of us were trying to categorise them – natural and human-made – while being initiated into the complex world of proper archaeological recording.

Time for lunch! The teams swapped roles, and the first finds were bagged after being washed and recorded. It was fascinating to me to realise the second spit was slightly different from the first, even though it was only a few millimetres deeper below the surface of my grass.

By mid-afternoon we had a sondage in one corner of the pit, but that came onto a builders' deposit of brick dug into the natural clay.

At the end of the day the most exciting finds were two tiny abraded pieces of Roman pottery, two hammerstones, and the fossilised insides of an ancient mussel.

Trisha Dale

