

TEST PIT 5 / AKT1

Ark-T Centre, Church Cowley, Outer Garden

Area excavated: 1.5m (c. N-S) x 1m in lawn

Date of Excavation: 19-20th March 2011

Conditions: Sunny – occasional cloud, dry and bright.

Excavators: Jonathan Acton, Charlotte Allen, Louise Bailey, Rita Bevan, Anne Bartlett, Marilyn Ching, Sue Cooke, Greg Collier Jenni and Paul Laird, Mike MacLean, Rachel Midgley, Jane Parkinson, Carl Petrokovsky, Roelie Reed, Julie Thomson, Bob Whiteman, Jane Harrison.

Report by: The Team and JH

GPS location and height over sea level: SP 5407 0394; 73.2m OD

Summary of the two Ark T test pits (6 and 7)

Two test pits were excavated at this site before landscaping work on the outer garden to create a new play-space. The inner garden test-pit reached the natural sand geology found in this part of Oxford after 0.3m of excavation. That in the outer garden reached the same sandy geology after 0.8m but also revealed a medieval ground surface and below that, dug into the sand, a v-shaped ditch which is possibly Romano-British.

The Ark-T site is at the heart of what was the medieval village of Church Cowley: both Beauchamp Lane and Crowell Road have at least medieval origins - the 'wish-bone' shape of the junction of the roads suggesting early beginnings. The 12th century church of St James lies to the south-west on Beauchamp Lane, complemented by old stone walls and the stone-built cottages which reflect the agricultural core of the village. Old maps show a smithy lay on the west side of the Lane with a farm on the right. The village may have been linked with an earlier incarnation of the 17th-18th century manor which is recorded to the east.

The area is linked to considerable Roman activity within a radius of 1km to both the east and west. All of this – especially to the east – seems to relate to the pottery industry with dumps of pottery wasters, puddling floors, pits and occupation surfaces. There are reports of fragments of Romano-British pottery, or possibly tiles, being discovered when the old preaching platform was removed from the inner garden.

The surface of the outer garden is considerably higher than the pavement of Crowell Road (over 1m – we need the exact readings adding in here). Originally this was thought to be relatively recent build-up, perhaps connected to the building of the multi-storey car-park, but all the houses and buildings along Crowell Road are elevated above the road with sloping front gardens or areas. This suggests that the road has been worn and/or cut down – that hollowing must at least in part have occurred during the medieval and post-medieval centuries before the road was surfaced. The test-pit confirmed that there was minimal recent build-up of soil and that the ground level of the original church building – now the hall – was probably slightly dug down, perhaps in levelling the site before building. This idea was also supported by soil in the inner garden test-pit as that appeared to have been stripped and levelled, almost certainly by a machine.

There was very little modern material in the outer garden test-pit at any level and none below about 0.4m below ground level. A medieval soil was discovered in this test-pit at just over half a metre from the ground surface. As this was still at some height above the pavement level, this confirmed that the road was well worn down. The medieval pottery sherds were mostly in good condition suggesting that the soil had not been ploughed but perhaps part of orchard or pasture land close to the farm (see map analysis); the pottery included some pieces that suggested better quality wares were being used in nearby buildings.

The narrow (0.5m) v-shaped ditch running NNW-SSE across the trench found below the medieval layer had been disturbed and truncated by the later activity, but may be Roman – tile and a sherd of white ware mortaria were found in association with it. This ditch may have been part of the potters' settlement in the area.

Interestingly the test-pit clearly lay not far below an active spring-line. Although the sandy soil was very free draining, the roots in the soil act as conduits for water running down-slope from roughly south to north: as the pit was dug water dripped from the roots exposed in the section and soaked away in the sand. This would explain the presence of both a pump and a well marked on or near the site on old maps.

Summary of TP 6 Excavation

The test pit was dug to a depth of c1m. The natural geology was reached at c.0.8m below ground surface.

The first 0.1m spit (Spit 1 - **101**) was dug 0.1m below 0.1m depth of turf and topsoil. This proved to be an organic garden soil with little evidence for regular digging suggesting that this area at least had been under grass and relatively undisturbed for some time. Some of the finds were quite worn other not so suggesting some soil may have been added from elsewhere. The layer was a friable, dark greyish black sandy silt containing: limestone pebbles, fragments and flecks of degraded limestone; flecks and fragments of charcoal and occasional burnt stone and flint. The soil became gradually less organic with (**102**) (Spit 2 – also 0.2m) being lighter and sandier but with similar inclusions. (**101**) contained very few obviously modern finds, but fragments of bone, some of which were burnt, some tile, iron objects, clay pipe fragments and occasional fragments of pottery.

Layer (**102**) seemed to be the less organic transition between the garden soil and the pasture or orchard related medieval soil below and may have been a disturbed sub-soil; it graded fairly gradually back into the more organic soil below. The finds were very similar to (**101**) but less abraded, with clay-pipe bowls, and more frequent possible medieval and Romano-British pottery sherds and a lead strip.

At around 0.4m below ground surface layer (**103**) appeared to be the upper disturbed layer of a medieval ground surface. This spit was 0.2m deep and comprised loose-friable dark yellowish brown sandy silt with small pebbles, flecks of degraded limestone and considerably more charcoal than both the upper spits. The finds included a male pig mandible in excellent condition retaining all its teeth, a considerable amount of tile/brick, iron and lead objects and although there were fewer sherds of pottery than (**102**) they were less abraded, included no post-medieval but glazed medieval wares including a large fragment of decorated jug handle; and possible Romano-British pottery sherds. Layer (**104**) below was the more organic and less disturbed possibly medieval soil, similar to (**103**), above the natural sand with concentrations of richly humic deposit around chunks of tile and brick, rare small pebbles and flecks and small lenses of charcoal. The finds included a large fragment of cow scapula, flint, medieval and possible roman pottery (some rims) - with a sherd of white mortaria at the boundary with the ditch fill.

The medieval activity seemed to have truncated the v-shaped ditch [**107**] below, which was only 0.3m deep at most and cut into the natural mineral sand (**105**), seen so clearly in test-pit 2. The ditch was about 0.5m wide and ran NNW-SSE across the pit. Although it is difficult to be certain in a small excavation the ditch seemed to curve slightly to the NW. The organic ditch fill (**106**) was friable blackish brown sandy silt, with occasional small pebbles and charcoal flecks. It was notable for well-distributed chunks of ceramic building material, possibly including roof tile, bone fragments – including heavily burnt bone – and very occasional medieval/Romano-British pottery sherds. But all these sherds had sharp edges

rather than being rolled and abraded. The disturbance of the ditch would account for the intrusive medieval finds in the top of **(106)** and the residual Romano-British sherds in **(104)**.

Results

Spit/con text	Type of deposit	Description	Soil sample	Draw-ings
<p>101 Spit 1 1.5m x 1m pit All soils 100% sieved; dug by hand – spade and trowel</p>	<p>Layer Below turf and topsoil Above (102), Spit 2</p>	<p>C. 0.1m depth of turf and topsoil removed by hand. Spit 1, including turf, 0.2m deep. Friable, dark greyish black sandy silt (fine-medium mineral sand 30%); inclusions: limestone pebbles, fragments and flecks of degraded limestone c. 10% (pebbles av. 50 x 30 x 5mm); flecks and fragments of charcoal 3%; occasional burnt stone and flint. Diffuse boundaries to spit 2: very gradually becomes less organic and sandier. Finds: fragments of bone including teeth – some burnt; degraded fragments of CBM (tile/brick); Fe objects (nails and hinge); clay pipe fragments; occasional glass; pottery sherds – possibly very abraded Romano-British. Very few obviously modern finds. Organic garden soil: with some evidence for regular digging and occasional manuring/amendment. Variable erosion on the finds suggests the soil may have been built up with deposits from elsewhere: possibly partly from stripping of soil in the inner garden?</p>		
<p>102 Spit 2</p>	<p>Layer Below (101), above (103)</p>	<p>0.2m depth; friable mid yellowish brown sandy silt becoming increasingly sandy from c 30%; small fragments and flecks of charcoal 5-10mm 3% (concentrated in areas esp. SW); flecks of degraded limestone 3%; water-rounded pebbles 1%; chunks of limestone 3% 20-30mm x 50mm; occasional slag/ clinker. Diffuse boundaries; some rooting Finds: fragments of bone including teeth, some burnt; clay pipe fragments including bowls; fragments of CBM; rare sherds of white/blue-white glazed pottery; rare slate, glass; possible worked flint; Fe objects; Pb strip; abraded sherds of possible medieval and Romano-British pottery – more frequent than post-medieval. Transition between garden soil and less-disturbed medieval ground surface below. Possibly mixed sub-soil or pasture/orchard related sub-soil; less organic than (101). Grades back into domestic organic soil. This area is below a spring-line: although the soil is free-draining water seeps continually along the roots which act as conduits.</p>		

<p>103 Spit 3</p>	<p>Layer Below (102); above (104)</p>	<p>0.2m deep; loose friable dark yellowish brown sandy silt (c 30% medium sand); 3% pebbles 10-20mm; flecks and fragments of charcoal max 10mm; flecks of degraded limestone. Diffuse boundaries. Finds: fragments of bone, some burnt; male pig mandible in excellent condition retaining all teeth; CBM including larger chunks with depth; Pb and Fe objects: fewer sherds of pottery than (102) but less abraded and no post-medieval; glazed medieval wares including sherd of decorated large jug handle; possible Romano-British pottery sherds. More organic soil: possible disturbed upper layer of medieval ground surface - orchard-pasture? Close to farmhouse to south-west. Pottery all medieval or earlier and in good condition; notable for CBM</p>		
<p>104 Spit 4</p>	<p>Layer Below (103); above (105), (106).</p>	<p>Friable to loose dark yellowish brown sandy silt; more organic than spit 3 above ditch, but sandier at boundary with natural sand (105); rare pebbles; concentrations of more organic deposit around chunks of CBM; flecks and small lenses of charcoal c3%; flecks of degraded limestone and occasional fragments. Boundaries clear to natural; diffuse to more organic ditch fill across central length of pit. Finds: bone including large fragment of cow scapula and teeth; flint; sherd of white mortaria (at boundary with ditch fill); medieval and possible roman pottery, lower in context and above ditch, including rims; CBM; some CBM and bone burnt. Pasture/orchard soil, noticeably more organic at this level above ditch below; sandier to W and E above natural sand.</p>		
<p>105 Natural</p>	<p>Unexcavated Cut by [107] Below (104), (106).</p>	<p>Loose fine mid brownish orange mineral sand with dark brown organic staining from decomposed root systems (leaving a dark brown sandy silt) Clear boundaries to ditch fill and layer above. Finds: None Natural mineral sand</p>	<p>None taken</p>	<p>Plan 1</p>
<p>106 Fill</p>	<p>Fill of [107]; below (104) Excavated by hand in 0.4m wide slot.</p>	<p>GPS readings: ditch cut close to S baulk of pit as first uncovered below (104): 6= 454065.17E, 203940.32N; 72.48OD 7= 454065.52E, 203940.28N; 72.46OD Max depth in slot 0.3m; width of ditch fill 0.5m. Friable blackish brown sandy silt (65% silt), occasional pebbles (3%) c.20mm; charcoal flecks and occasional fragments c 3%. Finds: 30% CBM 10-60mm, sharp edges; concentration of roof tile fragments max 0.15m; occasional flint; bone fragments including</p>	<p>2</p>	<p>Plan 1</p>

		<p>heavily burnt bone and rare medieval/Romano-British pottery sherds – sharp edges, not rolled and abraded.</p> <p>Clear boundaries; some rooting</p> <p>Organic ditch fill with well-distributed smaller fragments of CBM and one concentration of larger, shaped possible roof tiles at GPS point 9.</p> <p>Corners of slot at: GPS points 10-13</p>		
107 Cut	Filled by (106); below (104)	<p>Max depth 0.3m; linear in plan – 0.5m wide – running NNW-SSE; v-shaped in profile, steeper in W; break of slope sharp as truncated by medieval ground surface above. Clear cut in natural sand (105).</p> <p>V-shaped ditch truncated by medieval ground surface; possibly Romano-British with residual finds in (104) above. Finds in fill were not either heavily abraded or water-worn suggesting this was probably not a relict water course.</p>		Plan 1



Figure 1: the section across the v-shaped ditch.