25–26a, Friar Street, Reading, Berkshire

An Archaeological Desk-Based Assessment
for Berkeley Homes (Hampshire) Limited

by Steve Ford
Thames Valley Archaeological Services

Site Code 25FS99/88

December 1999
Introduction

This desk-based study is an assessment of the archaeological potential of a plot of land at 25–26a Friar Street, Reading, Berkshire (SU71460 73600) (Fig 1). The report was commissioned by Mr Stuart Forrester of Berkeley Homes (Hampshire) Ltd, Berkeley House, London Street, Basingstoke, Hampshire, RG21 7NY, and it comprises the first stage of a process to determine the presence/absence, extent, character, quality and date of any archaeological remains which may be affected by redevelopment of the area.

Site Description, Location and Geology

The site is located within Reading town centre on the north side of Friar Street, one of the two main streets of the town. It occupies a rectangular parcel of land accessed from both Friar Street and Garrard Street to the north (Fig 2) and covers an area of approximately 2300sq m. The site is mostly on level ground at a height of 45m above Ordnance Datum (AOD) although the northern extreme slopes down steeply to 42m AOD. A visit on 15th December 1999 revealed that approximately half of the site is occupied by the former ABC Cinema and much of the remainder comprises a yard. The street frontage is occupied by three properties: number 25 is a retail unit (currently an amusement arcade) on part of the ground floor of the cinema; 25a is the former cinema; and 26a is the Boars Head Inn. Plot 26 is vacant but is used as a garden by the inn. Access to the rear yard is via a gap between plot 26 and the inn. Another small yard is present to the rear, defined by a brick and concrete wall containing carparking, an electricity substation and oil tanks; accessed off Garrard Street.

The British Geological Survey (BGS 1946) indicates that the site lies on river gravel but, as with other sites in the Reading area, it is anticipated that the gravel is capped by brickearth. The northern extreme of the site, which slopes down from the main gravel ridge towards the floodplain of the Thames, lies close to the junction between the gravel and an area of alluvium. No geotechnical investigations have yet been carried out on the site as a part of this proposal.

Planning Background and Development Proposals
Planning permission is to be applied for for the demolition of all existing buildings and the erection of a new block comprising parking and retail units on the ground floors and apartments on the upper floors. There are as yet no definitive layout plans or design foundations but the new building will involve basement retail and carparking across much of the site.

The Department of the Environment’s Policy and Planning Guidance Note, *Archaeology and Planning* (PPG16 1990), provides guidance relating to archaeology within the planning process. It points out that where a desktop study has shown that there is a strong possibility of significant archaeological deposits in a development area it is reasonable to provide more detailed information from a field evaluation so that an appropriate strategy to mitigate the effects of development on archaeology can be devised:

Paragraph 21 states:

‘Where early discussions with local planning authorities or the developer’s own research indicate that important archaeological remains may exist, it is reasonable for the planning authority to request the prospective developer to arrange for an archaeological field evaluation to be carried out...’

Should the presence of archaeological deposits be confirmed further guidance is provided. *Archaeology and Planning* stresses preservation *in situ* of archaeological deposits as a first consideration as in paragraphs 8 and 18.

Paragraph 8 states:

‘...Where nationally important archaeological remains, whether scheduled or not, and their settings, are affected by proposed development there should be a presumption in favour of their physical preservation...’

Paragraph 18 states:

‘The desirability of preserving an ancient monument and its’ setting is a material consideration in determining planning applications whether that monument is scheduled or unscheduled...’

However, for archaeological deposits that are not of such significance it is appropriate for them to be ‘preserved by record’ (i.e. fully excavated and recorded by a competent archaeological contractor) prior to their destruction or damage.

Paragraph 25 states:

‘Where planning authorities decide that the physical preservation *in situ* of archaeological remains is not justified in the circumstances of the development and that development resulting in the destruction of the archaeological remains should proceed, it would be entirely reasonable for the planning authority to satisfy itself ... that the developer has made appropriate and satisfactory provision for the excavation and recording of remains.’

The Berkshire Structure Plan 1991–2006 (BCC 1994) also outlines policy regarding the archaeological potential of development sites:
Policy EN5, para 6.16

‘Archaeological remains are irreplaceable. They are the evidence, in some instances the only evidence, of the past development of our civilisation. They comprise a varied resource, including buried objects and standing structures ranging in date from prehistory to the industrial era. Particular care must be taken to ensure that archaeological remains and evidence are not needlessly or thoughtlessly destroyed’

Policy EN6

‘Scheduled Ancient Monuments and the most important non-scheduled remains, together with their settings, will be protected and managed to ensure that they are not damaged or destroyed. Where a lack of information precludes the proper assessment of a site or sites with archaeological potential, this information will have to be provided in advance of any decision to affect that site or area. Where preservation is not possible local planning authorities should be satisfied before granting planning permission that appropriate arrangements have been made for excavation and recording to take place prior to development.’

This is reiterated in the Reading Borough Local Plan (RBLP 1992) and as modified in 1995 (RBLP 1995):

Policy CUD12:

‘Appropriate mitigation of a development’s effect on archaeological remains will be secured before any planning permission is granted and where appropriate, before development takes place. Where evidence points to remains being of outstanding importance, planning permission may be refused on archaeological grounds.’

Methodology

The assessment of the site was carried out by the examination of pre-existing information from a number of sources recommended in the Institute of Field Archaeologists ‘Standards in British Archaeology’ covering desk-based studies. These sources include historic and modern maps, the Reading Sites and Monuments Record, geological maps and any relevant publications or reports.

Archaeological Background

Reading is first mentioned in AD 871 when a Danish army set up a winter camp here. That Reading was a town of some importance in late Saxon times is indicated by the presence of a mint and market. However, the boundaries of the Saxon town have not yet been fully clarified by archaeological observation. Slade (1969) and Astill (1978) have concluded that the Saxon town lies in the vicinity of St Mary’s Butts at the junction of the roads from Oxford to Winchester and London to Bath. Astill (1978, fig 23) has suggested a boundary to the Saxon town and this is illustrated in Figure 1.

The likely boundaries to the Medieval town are better understood from documentary, cartographic and archaeological evidence. Friar Street was first documented in 1186 when it was called Neve Street. It was
probably laid out by the Abbot of Reading Abbey to control trade by redirecting it away from the earlier focus of the town centred on St Mary’s Butts (Astill 1978). The proposal site clearly lies within the Medieval core of the town (Fig 1) and was occupied by properties in 1552 (Fig 3).

A search was made of the Reading Sites and Monuments Record on 15th December 1999 for an area within a 200m radius of the site. This search revealed 22 entries and these are shown on Figure 1 and briefly described in Appendix 1. There are no Scheduled Ancient Monuments on or close to the site. There is one entry for the site itself [Fig 1, 9] which relates to the Boars Head inn, which possibly dates back to the 15th century and was attached to a brewery in the 1750s.

The other entries include evidence from earlier prehistory up to the present day. The earliest entries are for a Palaeolithic hand axe found on Station Road [15], a late Bronze Age/early Iron Age brooch (fibula?) [11], and a loomweight and bone needle – both difficult to date closely within the later prehistoric period [10].

The Roman period is poorly represented with just two coins [12, 13] and a few sherds of pottery [8, 14] recorded.

The majority of the remaining entries refer to the Medieval period. These include stray finds of pottery [16, 17, 18, 20, 21], a coin [19], evidence from rescue excavations and watching briefs [2, 3, 5, 6] and detailed evidence from modern archaeological excavations [7, 8].

There have been several recent excavations in the town. The nearest to the proposal site was some 200m to the east along Friar Street (OAU 1998) [7]. Four phases of activity were identified ranging from the 13th to 14th centuries up to the early 20th century. Another excavation took place 200m to the west along Friar Street (Ford and Ford 1998) [8]. Despite the presence of cellaring in the excavated area, deposits spanning the Medieval and post-Medieval periods were encountered. These showed that, following use of the street frontage for Medieval structures which were re-furbished on several occasions, the site was derelict in late Medieval times but was subsequently reoccupied. More recently, extensive excavations have taken place on the southern margins of the town during redevelopment of the Oracle complex. These examined various water-related structures such as mills, the original Oracle workhouse, and various deposits of Medieval and Saxon date (D Wilkinson, pers. Comm.).

A number of SMR entries of earlier post-Medieval date were also recorded. These comprise the excavated evidence discussed above [7, 8] and an isolated find of a trade token [22].

**Cartographic and Documentary Sources**
A range of Ordnance Survey and other historical maps of the area were consulted in the Reading Local Studies Library in order to ascertain what activity had been taking place throughout the sites’ later history and whether this may have affected any possible archaeological deposits within the proposal area (see Appendix 2).

The earliest plan consulted was a survey carried out by Roger Amyce in 1552, drawn by S A Peyton in 1919, which shows the layout of the ownership of each plot (Fig 3). It is not possible to locate the proposal site precisely on this but its’ approximate position can be determined by reference to Gutter Lane (modern Cross Street) shown on the survey. It is probable that the proposal site was divided into several plots at this time. There is no indication whether any of the plots were actually occupied.

John Rocque’s map of Berkshire dated 1761 (not illustrated) shows the site within the town but does not give any detail of the site itself. Charles Coates’ map of 1802 (Fig 4) shows the site in moderate detail. It can be located relative to distinctive features on later maps, although at this time Station Road had not been built. The site appears to comprise two plots, presumably corresponding to numbers 25 and 26. At this time the Boars Head Inn was present on the street frontage (plot 26) as were a range of buildings to the rear on the western side of the proposal site. The latter were described as a malthouse in 1879. A smaller building was present to the east with a yard between. The northern part was occupied by gardens. For plot 25, the street frontage was occupied by an L-shaped building with an outbuilding. A small yard and a large garden were to the rear (north). Dormer’s map of 1834 (not illustrated) is very similar to Coates’ map of 1802 (Fig 4) and Simmons’ map of Reading and Caversham dated 1861 (also not illustrated) does not show the site in any detail.

The First Edition Ordnance Survey of 1879 (Fig 5) shows the site in detail. Plot 26 was still occupied by the inn and malthouse but with additional stabling to the rear. No gardens are indicated. Plot 25 was mostly built up with further stables and buildings of the Royal Horse and Carriage Repository. A small garden was present close to the street frontage. The smaller scale versions of the First Edition map (not illustrated) add no new information (Appendix 1).

The Second Edition Ordnance Survey of 1900 (not illustrated) shows no changes and the 1913 Edition is at too small a scale to show the site in detail (not illustrated).

The 1938 revision of a 1931 map shows a number of important changes, particularly for plot 25 (Fig 6). The cinema had been built (Central Picture Playhouse) occupying the whole of the plot. For plot 26 there was relatively little change but one of the earlier stable blocks had been demolished.
There is relatively little change indicated on the Ordnance Survey maps of 1957 and 1962 (Fig 7) but for plot 26 the demolition of the malthouse to the rear of the Boars Head had taken place by 1986, and the demolition of the smaller building adjacent to the cinema took place by 1988.

**Listed Buildings**

There are no listed buildings on the site.

**Discussion**

The above study has shown that the site lies within the core of the Medieval town and it clearly lies within an area of high archaeological potential in terms of providing detailed information on the origins, development and economic fortunes of the town. If this area of the town conforms to a layout typical of many Medieval towns, the most complex archaeological deposits (buildings) are likely to lie immediately adjacent to the street frontage with the rear areas used for industrial/commercial activities or for rubbish disposal.

The survival of any archaeological deposits on the site is conditional on the extent of later truncation. For example, basements are present beneath the Cinema and the Boars Head Inn (Astill 1978, fig 24) and these will certainly have removed some earlier deposits. However, the scale and extent of truncation cannot be easily assessed without field observation. The earlier excavations carried out at the western end of Friar Street revealed good survival of deposits despite cellaring in several areas (Ford and Ford 1998). Plot 26 and the access road do not appear to have been basemented and could well contain a whole Medieval tenement without great disturbance by later deposits. Examination of the rear of the cinema shows that it is partly raised to accommodate the fall in land to the north. It is possible, therefore, that the apparent level ground towards the centre of plot 26 is a product of dumping. If this dumping is present, it may have led to good preservation of archaeological deposits in these areas.

The impact of development on below-ground archaeological deposits should be assessed by means of a field evaluation, most easily achieved following demolition. A scheme for the evaluation will need to be drawn up and approved by the archaeological advisor to Reading Borough Council and implemented by a competent archaeological contractor such as an Institute of Field Archaeologists Registered Organisation.

It is beyond the remit of this archaeological study to comment in detail on the merits of demolition of the unlisted but historically interesting cinema building and, to a lesser extent, the Boars Head Inn. However, should
demolition in full or in part take place, it may be appropriate to record the structures photographically, to
RCHME Level 1 standard. The photographic study should take place both prior to demolition, to record the
interior fittings of the cinema, and also during various stages of the demolition process. It may also be prudent to
offer selected items of salvage to Reading Museum and possibly to the Cinema Theatre Association and 20th
Century Society.

References
Reading, 1995, Thames Valley Archaeological Services, report 95/4, Reading
OAU, 1998, Proposed extension to Marks and Spencers, Friar Street, Reading, Oxford Archaeological Unit,
Oxford
HMSO
RBLP, 1995, *Proposed modifications and decisions statement Deposit Draft Reading Borough Local Plan as
amended 1993*, August 1995, Reading
Slade, C, 1969, *Reading, Maps and plans of towns and cities in the British Isles with Historical commentary
from earliest times to c. 1800*, Lovell Johns-Cook Hamley and Kell organisation, for the British Historical
Towns Committee, London
### Appendix 1: Sites and Monuments Records within c. 200m of the development site

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>SM. Ref</th>
<th>NGR (SU)</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Comment</th>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2113.12.010</td>
<td>712 736</td>
<td>Building</td>
<td>Medieval</td>
<td>Associated with Greyfriars Church</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>2113.07.020</td>
<td>716 735</td>
<td>Wall</td>
<td>Medieval 13th–15th century</td>
<td>Also pottery and a pendant</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>2113.07.010</td>
<td>716 735</td>
<td>Cess and rubbish pits</td>
<td>Medieval 13th–15th century</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>2113.07.000</td>
<td>715 735</td>
<td>Friar St</td>
<td>Medieval 12th century</td>
<td>Originally Newe Street</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
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<td>Wall</td>
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<td>Many finds including wood and leather</td>
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<td>6</td>
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<td>716 734</td>
<td>Wall</td>
<td>Medieval 13th–14th century</td>
<td>Also pottery and glass</td>
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<td>7</td>
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<td>716 735</td>
<td>Occupation</td>
<td>Medieval/Post-Medieval</td>
<td>Excavated site (OAU 1998)</td>
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<td>Medieval/Post-Medieval</td>
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<td>9</td>
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<td>Building</td>
<td>Medieval/Post-Medieval</td>
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<td>Occupation</td>
<td>Medieval/Post-Medieval</td>
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<td>11</td>
<td>2060.00.000</td>
<td>715 736</td>
<td>Brooch</td>
<td>Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age</td>
<td>(Fibula?)</td>
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<td>Coin</td>
<td>Roman 4th century</td>
<td>Magnenetius</td>
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<td>Pottery vessel</td>
<td>Medieval (12th–13th century)</td>
<td>Jug</td>
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<td>22</td>
<td>2114.23.000</td>
<td>714 734</td>
<td>Token</td>
<td>Post-Medieval</td>
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</tr>
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Appendix 2: Historic and modern maps consulted

1) 1552 Roger Amyce ‘Survey of Reading’ (Fig 3)
2) 1761 John Rocque, Berkshire
3) 1802 Charles Coates, Plan of Reading (Fig 4)
4) 1834 E Dormers, Map of Reading Borough
5) 1861 T Simmons, Plan of the town of Reading and Caversham
6) 1879 First Edition Ordnance Survey, sheet XXXVII.3.8. 50” (Fig 5)
7) 1879 First Edition Ordnance Survey, sheet XXXVII.3. 25”
8) 1900 Second Edition Ordnance Survey, sheet XXXVII.3 25”
9) 1913 Ordnance Survey, sheet XXXVII NE 6”
10) 1938 Ordnance Survey, revised 1931 version sheet XXXVII.3 25” (Fig 6)
11) 1957 Ordnance Survey, 7173NW 1:1250
12) 1962 Ordnance Survey, 7173NW 1:1250 (Fig 7)
13) 1986 Ordnance Survey, 7173NW 1:1250
14) 1988 Ordnance Survey, 7173NW 1:1250
15) 1999 Ordnance Survey, 1:1250 (Fig 2)
25-26a Friar Street, Reading, Berkshire, 1999

Figure 1. Location of site within Reading and Berkshire showing SMR entries and Saxon town (blue) and Medieval town (green).
(after Astill, 1978)

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Figure 2. Location of site showing current land use.
Figure 3. Roger Amyce’s Survey 1552, drawn by S. A. Peyton 1919.
25-26a Friar Street,
Reading, Berkshire, 1999

Figure 4. Coates map of 1802.
25-26a Friar Street,
Reading, Berkshire, 1999

Figure 5. Ordnance Survey 1st Edition, 1879.
25-26a Friar Street, Reading, Berkshire, 1999

Figure 6. Ordnance Survey, 1938.
Figure 7. Ordnance Survey, 1962.