SITE FOR HENLEY ROWING MUSEUM, MILL MEADOWS, HENLEY, SOUTH OXFORDSHIRE

An archaeological evaluation for
the Rowing Museum at Henley Foundation

Thames Valley Archaeological Services

SITE FOR HENLEY ROWING MUSEUM, MILL MEADOWS, HENLEY, SOUTH OXFORDSHIRE
Archaeological evaluation. Report 91/1

by Jackie Bates and Steve Ford

Introduction

The proposal site comprises an area of approximately 0.07 Ha consisting at present of a gravel car-park and surrounding scrub land (SU 820766). The area was considered to have some archaeological potential due to its location within the rich Thames Valley and particularly because of its proximity to the river itself. The river has produced numerous finds, especially weapons and tools of the Neolithic and Bronze Age and contemporary occupation sites may be located on the river banks. As the site is low- lying, there was also the possibility of old peat- filled river channels providing good palaeo- environmental information.

The strategy comprised initially the digging of six machine cut trenches, 1.6m in width and varying between 15m and 43m in length. A further two trenches, 11m and 6m in length, were dug adjacent to trenches 1 and 4 in an attempt to clarify the significance of possible archaeological deposits in these trenches. The location of the eight trenches is shown in figure 1.

The siting of the trenches took into account the intended position of the museum building itself; any archaeological deposits of this area being the most likely to be affected by the proposed development. Trench 1 was sited along the southern edge of this area, and a further two trenches (numbers 2 and 5) were positioned within the area to be covered by the building.

Results

Natural gravel was located in all trenches at depths of between 1m and 2.8m below the modern ground surface, with the exception of trench 7, which was only dug to 0.8m through the silty clay. The deeper trenches were situated furthest from the river adjacent to the railway line. Generally the gravel was overlain by a layer of grey silty clay, varying between 0.4m and 2.3m in depth, directly below the old topsoil. This in turn was capped by 0.5m of made up ground. Trenches 3, 4 and 6 contained layers of brown sandy silt below the grey clay, presumably filling an ancient river channel within the gravel.

In trench 8 the gravel dipped from south east to north west and probably marked the limits of the ancient river channel as noted above. This seemed to form a relatively localised hollow which contained peat deposits up to 0.7m thick and commenced immediately beneath the old topsoil. A thin band of grey clay divided the peat into an upper peat (0.25m band) and lower peat (0.45m band). The eastern limit of the peat was located in the end of the trench.

Two linear features were located in trenches 1 and 6. The feature in trench 1 (F2) may be a drainage ditch relating to the hollow in adjacent trench 8. No evidence of a continuation of this feature was observed in trench 8. A single struck flint was the only find recovered from the fill. The undated feature in trench 6 (F3) appeared to be a shallow gully, again best interpreted as a drain.

Trench 4 contained a low- density scatter of burnt flint and some struck flints. These finds were located towards the base of the grey silty clay, and were present along the full length of the trench. They did not come from a distinct horizon and were distributed over a depth of several centimetres. No features could be identified and there were no obvious spreads of charcoal. A further trench (7) was dug adjacent to trench 4 to make a further search for any additional deposits. This only located a little more burnt flint and a few struck flints.

The struck flint from trenches 4 and 7 included 2 core fragments (flaked pieces originating from broken naturally flawed cores) and 4 'bashed lumps' (cores with less than 3 flake removals). It is suggested that the bashed lumps are either nodules tested for their suitability for flaking and then rejected, or are the result of ad hoc use of flint. With such a small sample of material, and the possibility of it being quarry debitage, it is not possible to suggest a date other than Mesolithic to Late Bronze Age.
Where identifiable the flint is of river gravel origin.

Conclusion

There is little to indicate the presence of significant archaeological deposits within the area evaluated. The two linear features are not thought to be of any great antiquity, although strictly undated. It seems plausible that they may have been dug to drain a piece of wet ground. The scatter of burnt flint and struck flints indicates the presence of some prehistoric activity within the vicinity, but not necessarily within the application area. These finds may have been derived from higher ground to the south, washing into the top of the old channel.

Of rather more significance is the discovery of the peat filled hollow. Dr. Michael Keith-Lucas of Reading University has been consulted and considers this deposit to have palaeo- environmental potential, in particular for palynological study. If this potential can be realised, it could provide an important sequence to infil the gap in the distribution of similar studies in this part of the Thames Valley. As yet, these are only located at Reading and Maidenhead.

APPENDIX 1
TRENCH DETAILS

Origin at North or west end unless stated otherwise

	Length	Notes
1	43m	Natural gravel 1m below the modern ground surface, overlain by grey silty clay 0.40m thick. One ditch (F2) running north/south at 4m containing one struck flake.
2	19m	Natural gravel between 1.1m and 1.2m below the modern ground surface, overlain by grey silty clay 0.65m thick.
3	19m	Natural gravel between 1.1m and 1.2m below the modern ground surface, dipping to 2.8m at the southern end of the trench. This dip is interpreted as an ancient river channel and was filled with orange sandy silt up to a thickness of 1.3m. This was overlain by grey silty clay between 0.3m and 0.7m thick.
4	19m	Natural gravel between 2m and 2.8m below the modern ground surface, overlain by orange sandy silt 0.5m to 1.3m thick, and grey silty clay 1.2m thick. Burnt flint and struck flakes found within the grey silty clay.
5	15m	Natural gravel between 1.1m and 1.2m below the modern ground surface, overlain by grey silty clay 0.45m thick.

6	30m	Natural gravel 0.8m and 2.6m below the modern ground surface, overlain by grey silty clay 0.5m to 2.3m thick. The southern end located the ancient sandy silt filled channel as in trenches 3 and 4. A gully (F3) running north west/south east was located at 1m.
7	6m	Gravel not reached. Grey silty clay 0.45m thick beneath the topsoil. Some burnt flint and struck flint recovered from this layer.
8	11m	Natural gravel 1.3m below the modern ground surface, dropping to 1.65m at the western end of the trench, overlain by up to 0.15m of grey silty clay followed by up to 0.6m of peat. The peat disappeared towards the south eastern end of the trench.

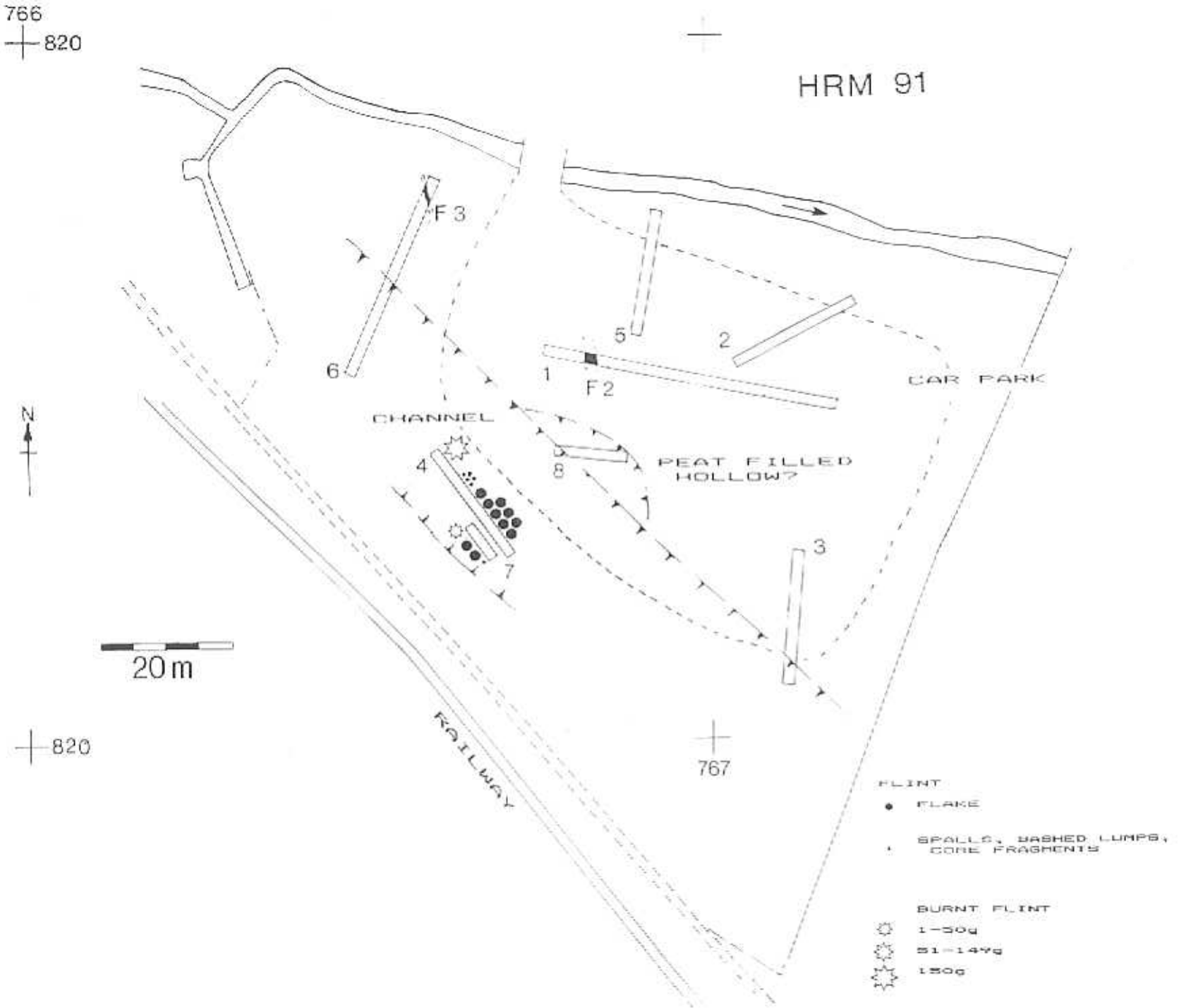
APPENDIX 2
FINDS CATALOGUE

Flint

	Trench		Types
1	1	F2	Intact flake
2	4	Grey clay silt	3 bashed lumps; 2 core fragments; 3 broken flakes; 5 intact flakes (1 patinated); 1 spall
3	7	Grey clay silt	Bashed lump (burnt)- slightly rolled; broken flake; intact flake

Burnt Flint

	Trench	Weight (g)
1	6	377
2	7	26


766
820
HRM 91
F 3
F 2
6
5
2
1
CAR PARK
CHANNEL
4
8
PEAT FILLED HOLLOW?
7
3
N
20 m
820
767
RAILWAY
FLINT
FLAKE
SPALLS, BASHED LUMPS, CORE FRAGMENTS
BURNT FLINT
1–50g
51–149g
150g