

**Former Abbey School Site,
Wimblestraw Road, Berinsfield,
Oxfordshire**

An Archaeological Watching Brief

for

Sovereign Housing Association, Newbury

June 1997

**Former Abbey School Site, Wimblestraw Road,
Berinsfield, Oxfordshire
Phases 1 and 1A**

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by Leigh Pollinger**

Report WRB 97/5

Introduction

This report documents the results of an archaeological watching brief carried out at the Former Abbey School site, Wimblestraw Road, Berinsfield, Oxfordshire (SU 572 962). The work was commissioned by Sovereign Housing Association, Berkshire House, 17-24 Bartholomew Street, Newbury, Berkshire RG14 5LL.

Planning permission was granted by South Oxfordshire District Council for a residential development of 24 houses (12 houses in Phase 1 with a further 12 in Phase 1A) with associated roads, parking, landscaping and services on the site of the former Abbey School. A further phase (2) to the east of the current site is to comprise 10 houses. Permission was granted for Phases 1 and 1A with the condition that an archaeological watching brief was undertaken during groundworks on the site. This is in accordance with the Department of the Environment's Policy and Planning Guidance Note, Archaeology and Planning (PPG 16, 1990). The field investigation was carried out to a specification approved by Mr Paul Smith, County Archaeologist for Oxfordshire County Council. The fieldwork was undertaken by Steve Laurie-Lynch and Leigh Pollinger between 12th February 1997 and 13th May 1997. The site code is WRB 97/5.

Location, Topography and Geology

The site is located to the east of Wimblestraw Road in the village of Berinsfield approximately 1 kilometre to the east of the River Thames (Fig. 1). It is a generally flat area being on the second river gravel terrace at a height of c. 55 metres above OD. The underlying geology is Younger River Gravels (2nd Terrace Deposits) according to the British Geological Survey (BGS 1981).

Archaeological Background

The site lies within an area of considerable archaeological interest, the confluence of the Rivers Thame and Thames (approximately 2.5 kilometres to the south of Berinsfield) attracting a series of foci for Prehistoric, Roman and Medieval activities. This is most obviously seen from physical remains as the establishment of the Roman town of Dorchester-on-Thames close to the Iron Age oppidum of Dyke Hills (Cunliffe 1991, 146). Some excavation in advance of gravel extraction and the study of crop marks has identified that this landscape has been well used by earlier communities (Benson & Miles 1974, 66-70 and 91-94).

In Berinsfield and commencing some 200 metres to the west of Abbey School lies a Neolithic and early Bronze Age ritual complex including mortuary enclosures, ring ditches, the Dorchester cursus and the Big Rings henge monument (Atkinson et al. 1951, Bradley and Chambers 1988, Whittle et al. 1992). Some 200 metres to the east of the site lies the route of the Dorchester to Alchester Roman road (Margary 160b) (Margary 1973). Immediately to the east of this road excavations in advance of gravel extraction have revealed evidence of Roman settlement (Sutton 1962), an Iron Age settlement and cemetery and a Roman kiln complex. The Berinsfield site therefore, located mid way between areas of considerable Neolithic and Iron Age and Roman

activity, may provide further evidence of activities during these periods (and others) and thus contribute to providing a more complete picture of the development of the region.

Objectives and Methodology

The purpose of the watching brief was to monitor the groundworks for the presence/absence, extent, condition, character, quality and date of any archaeological deposits within the area of development. This was achieved by monitoring the demolishing and removal of the foundations of the old Abbey School, the excavation of foundation and service trenches of the new housing development for the presence of archaeological deposits and the inspection of spoil heaps for artefacts.

Results

Fourteen visits were made to the site between the 12th February 1997 and 13th May 1997. In detail the areas examined and specific results were as follows (see Fig. 2):

Entrance Roadway: Appears to be the location of a twentieth century rubbish dump or destruction layer comprising red bricks, bottles and quantities of barbed wire which may be demolition debris associated with a former World War II air base.

Drainage/service trenches: Areas inspected included, five 3m. x 3m. soakaways cut into the main roadway to a depth of 1.2 m.; a main drainage trench running along the outside of the site over a distance of 8 m. by 1.5 m. and dug to a depth of 1.4 to 2 m.; a 19 m. by 0.60 to 1.5 m. service trench running east west through the centre of the site. Service trenches to all plots in Phase 1 which were normally dug to a depth of 0.80 m. All trenches were cut into natural gravels. Apart from one soakaway revealing

further evidence of the twentieth century dump, no archaeological features were observed.

House foundations Phase 1: Examination of the foundation trenches of the Phase 1 plots to the south of the service road revealed several service trenches most likely associated with the earlier school, but no archaeological features.

House foundations Phase 1A: These houses are being constructed in the area of the original school buildings. The school buildings were built on a concrete base laid on top of rubble which extended to a depth of 1.0 to 1.2 m. Excavation and removal of this rubble down to natural gravel was monitored but no archaeological features were revealed. Foundations of plots on the eastern edge of the Phase 1A development revealed that the construction of the former school and its associated services had severely destroyed or truncated any potential earlier features.

Finds

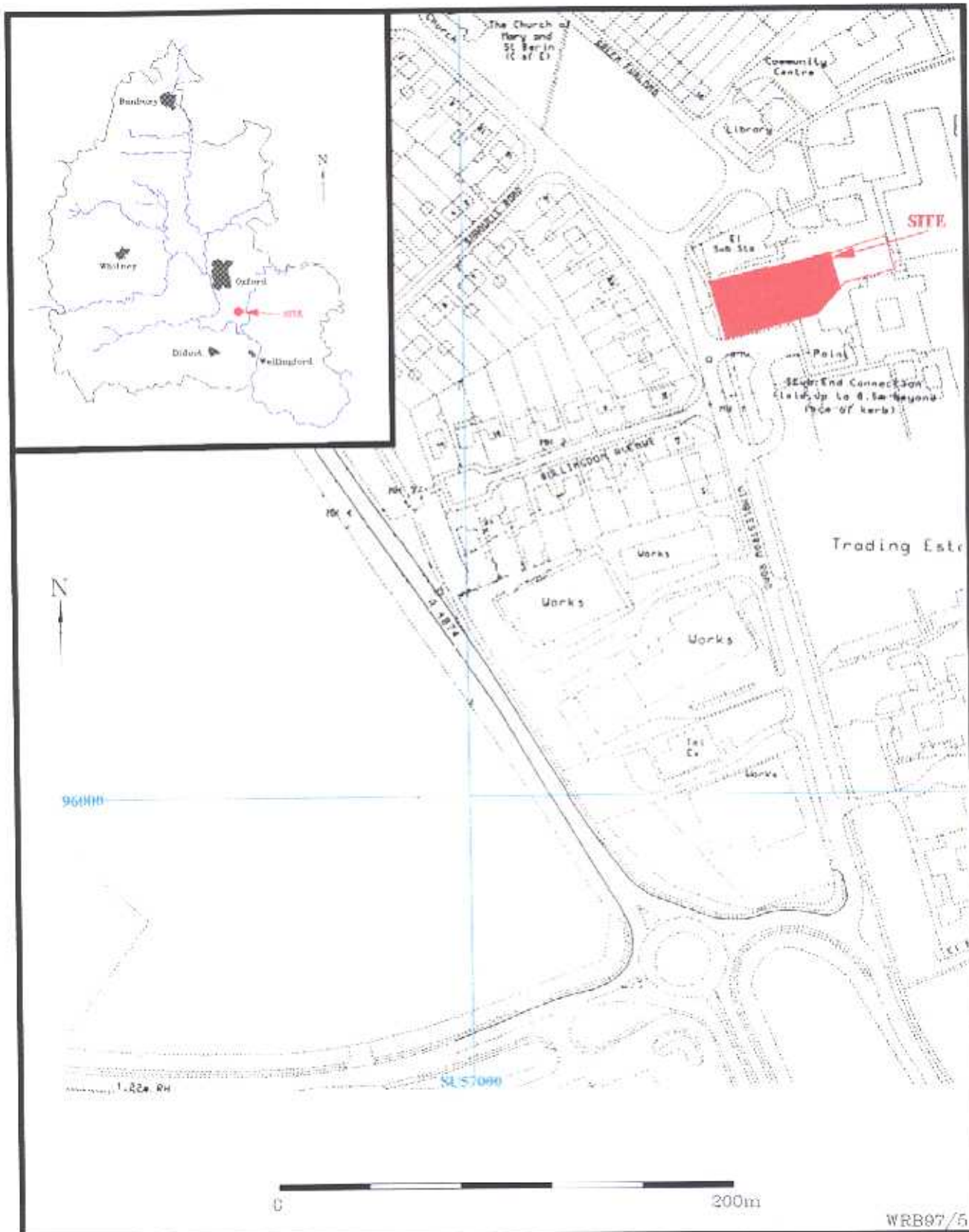
Apart from the twentieth century destruction debris, one piece (weight 2 grams) of samian, and one piece of burnt prehistoric flint blade were recovered, whilst a piece of clay pipe was seen.

Conclusions

No archaeological features were observed during the monitoring of the groundworks associated with this site. The extreme destruction of much of the earlier land surface as a result of the earlier construction of Abbey School limited the possibility of features being preserved.

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Former Abbey School site, Wimblstraw Road, Berinsfield, Oxfordshire. 1997

Figure 1. Location of site within Oxfordshire and Berinsfield



Former Abbey School site, Wimblestraw Road, Berinsfield, Oxfordshire, 1997

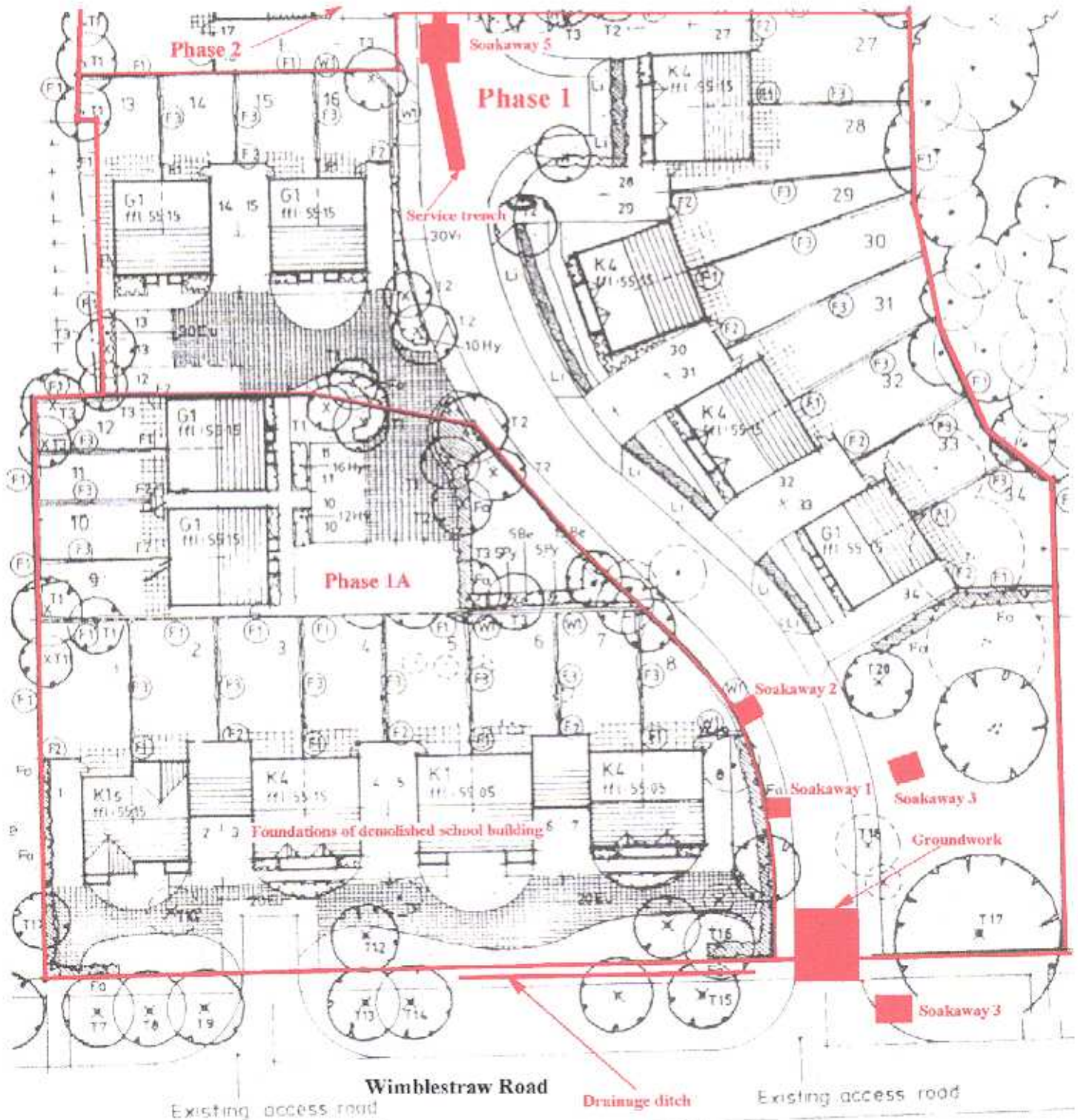


Figure 2. Location of watching brief areas.

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