

Prehistoric and Early Roman Field Systems at Halifax House, South Parks Road, Oxford

by SIÂN ANTHONY

with contributions by LUCY CRAMP and JANE TIMBY

SUMMARY

Previous archaeological work undertaken in the area around South Parks Road has located an extensive complex of prehistoric features including Bronze Age barrows, and later prehistoric and Roman field systems. A watching brief during redevelopment on South Parks Road resulted in the location of a complex of ditches and gullies forming different phases of a field system with additional intercutting pits and several postholes. When taken together with results from other sites nearby, the Iron Age and early Roman date-range of these features helps to demonstrate a gradual migration of late prehistoric and Roman settlement activity in the area.

The site lies at the corner of South Parks Road and Mansfield Road to the north of the city centre and west of the River Cherwell (SP5170 0695; Fig. 1), at 60 m. above Ordnance Datum, rising slightly to the north-west corner at 61.4 m. The underlying geology is the edge of the Summertown-Radley gravel terrace.¹ Redevelopment of the existing houses at South Parks Road (Halifax House) for the University required archaeological monitoring, which was undertaken from December 2003 to March 2004 by Thames Valley Archaeological Services. Much of the northern portion of the site was truncated by deep cellars, however, the gardens in the south of the site were relatively undisturbed, and a supervised strip of a block of land at the rear of the site resulted in the discoveries described below.

The site code is HHO03/89 and the finds and the archive will be deposited with the Oxfordshire Museum Service under the accession number OXCMS:2003.178

THE EXCAVATION

The site was monitored by watching brief to confirm the expected levels of truncation in the northern (cellar) areas. In the south of the site, expected to be intact, stripping was supervised. The main area of the new build was sheet piled for deep excavations and the area inside this (Area A) was removed by mechanical excavation under continuous archaeological supervision (Fig. 2). This revealed, at approximately 59 m. AOD several linear features and a large indistinct area of intercutting pits and other deposits (Fig. 3). A second area (B) directly to the south of Area A was also supervised; this too resulted in discovery of a small number of features at the same height as Area A. Slots totaling 20% of the length were excavated across the linear features and pits were excavated to a minimum 50% sample, and in many cases fully excavated. Twenty bulk soil samples were taken for the recovery of charred plant remains and finds.

OVERVIEW AND DISCUSSION

This excavation has produced evidence of human activities in a small area, beginning from scattered flint finds from the Mesolithic and Neolithic periods to 19th century landscaping

¹ BGS, British Geological Survey, 1:50 000 Sheet 236, Solid and Drift Edition, (1982).

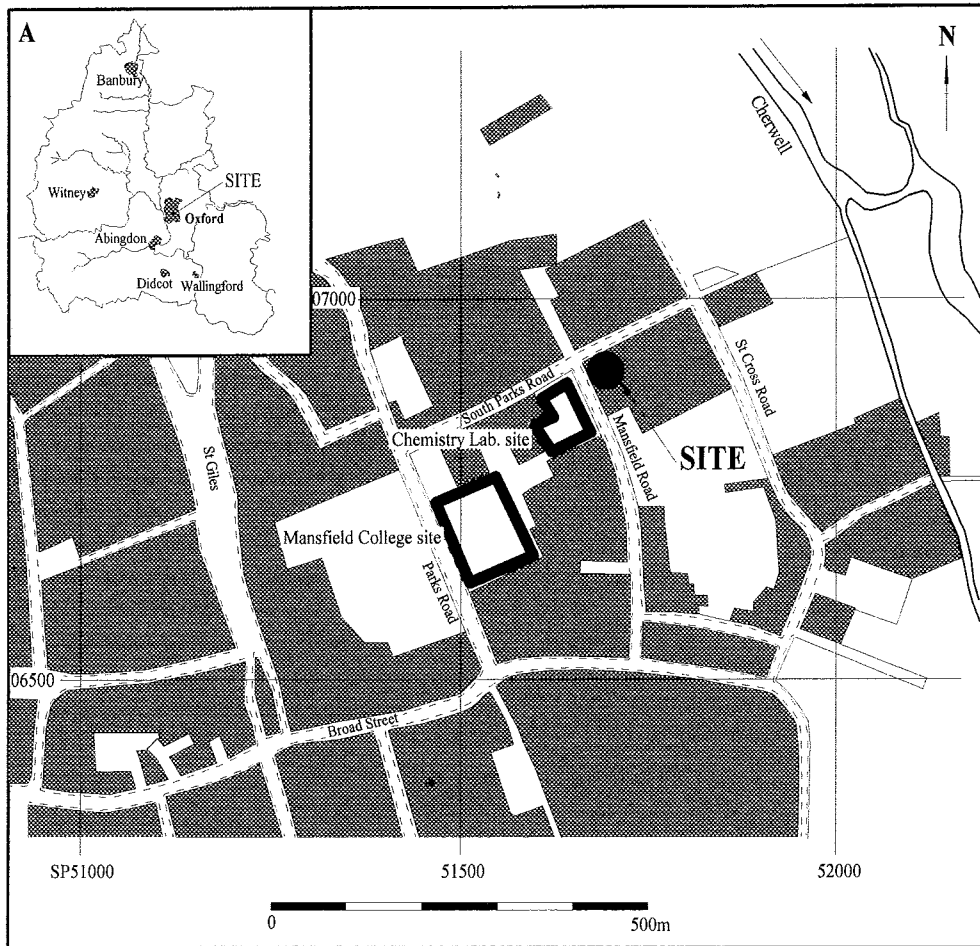


Fig. 1. Halifax House, Oxford. Location of site within Oxford

features. Features can be associated with surrounding activity, including a Bronze Age ritual landscape, and settlement and field system activity from the Iron Age to the early Roman period.

The earliest features on site belong to the Bronze Age, a single ditch (504) terminating at the western limit of the site, and a pit next to it. Pottery from the fills relates these features to the complex of barrows focused to the north of Halifax House, and a single ditch, on a similar alignment but unlikely to be the same feature, has been excavated on the Chemistry Research Laboratory site to the west.² Bronze Age barrows are visible as cropmarks in the Parks; two have been excavated north of Halifax House at the Rex Richards Building³ and another at the Gene Function centre.⁴

² Bradley *et al.*, *Oxoniensia*, lxx (2005), 141-202.

³ A. Parkinson, A. Barclay, P. McKeague, 'The Excavation of two Bronze Age Barrows, Oxford', *Oxoniensia*, lxi, 41-64.

⁴ OA, 'Halifax House, South Parks Road, Oxford, Desktop assessment', unpubl client report (2003).

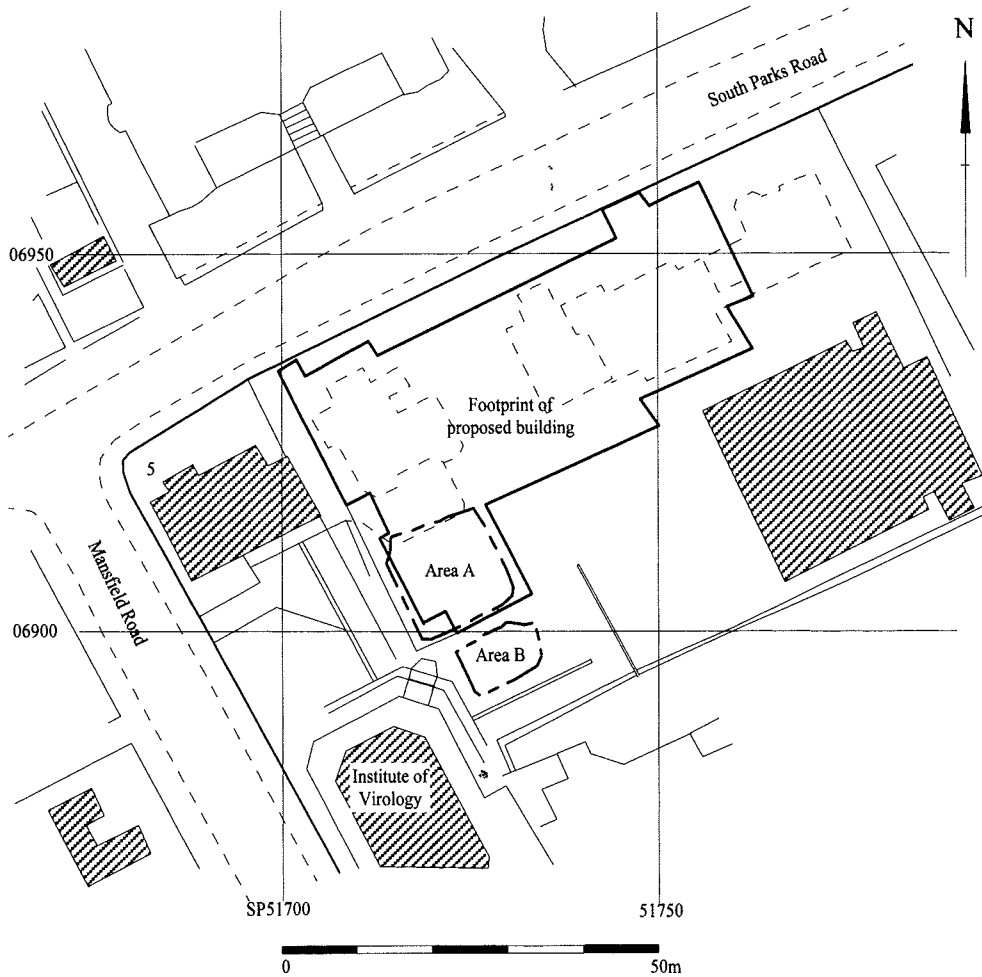


Fig. 2. Halifax House, Oxford. Detailed location of site

Iron Age features include a ditch (505) and a pit in the centre of the site; the large shallow pits at the centre of the site could possibly also be of this period. These may constitute a field boundary and related domestic activity. This phase is not well dated, except that it predates the late Iron Age/Roman transitional period. In the first century AD, the site shows a different alignment of field system, two gullies (506 and its continuation 511, and 508) approximately perpendicular to each other with a gap between. These may form a part of a paddock. A single pit outside this enclosure may be related to it. Later recuts further define the pattern (507, 509) with an expansion on the western side by the addition of a parallel gully (503 and 512) that may have formed a stock management system.⁵

⁵ cf. F. Pryor, 'Sheep, Stockyards and Field Systems; Bronze Age Livestock Populations in the Fenlands of Eastern England', *Antiquity*, 70 (1996), 313–24.

The early Roman period shows another change in orientation, although it reverts to an alignment similar to that seen in the Iron Age. Neither pattern shows any correlation with the alignment of features on the far side of Mansfield Road to the west, which is less puzzling when it is noted that the Halifax House site may have gone out of use before the land divisions traced at the Chemistry Research Laboratory site begin, and certainly before those at the Mansfield College site. None of the Roman pottery suggests use of the Halifax House site for long into the Roman period, perhaps not beyond the end of the 1st century AD. Two ditches (500, 501) form a boundary with a small gap and a further gully (502) supports this, although its function is unknown, possibly it was a palisade trench.

Finds from the site are not prolific. The pottery is dominated by low status coarse wares, unlike the assemblage from the Mansfield College site. There is no ceramic building material to indicate structures. The bones are the expected domesticated species with the exception of some deer bones and a single antler, possibly originally from a prehistoric feature.

Iron Age and Roman activity has been excavated to the north and west of this site.⁶ The focus of this activity, presumably a settlement, has not been located, but it is assumed to be in the vicinity of Parks Road and Love Lane. Previous work to the east and south of Halifax House did not locate activity of this date.⁷

Evidence has shown that what appears to be continuous settlement in this area actually disguises some localized shifting of settlement. Bronze Age ditches found at the Rex Richards Building were found to be infilled in the early to middle Iron Age, and later features were then cut into the barrows. Pottery from these features was of Iron Age and early Roman date. Features uncovered in the extension to the Radcliffe Library site were also from this period, so it is likely that the site at Halifax House is related to these features. Excavations at Mansfield College also contained a phase dating to the late 1st to mid 2nd centuries AD. There is no evidence beyond the earliest Roman period from Halifax House. It seems, then, that the area east of Halifax House was the focus of activity for the Iron Age and transitional Roman period. Early Roman fields (but none from the very earliest Roman period) show a shift to the west, and the Chemistry Research Laboratory site continues into the later Roman period; late Roman evidence continues to the west again at Mansfield College, where the majority of features belong to the late 3rd to 4th century, and there seems to be a distinct difference between these early and late Roman phases. The pattern seen at Halifax House, of minor rural settlement founded in the middle or later Iron Age, not continuing long into the Roman period, seems to be a recurrent picture.⁸ There appears to be a continuous shifting westwards, although it is admitted that the areas investigated are not large.

PHASING

Mesolithic to Bronze Age

No features are present from this period, which is represented solely by a redeposited broken burin, from the surface of gully 506, that may be Mesolithic. Eight other struck flints categorized only as broadly Neolithic to Bronze Age were redeposited in later features.

⁶ P. Booth, and C. Hayden, 'A Roman Settlement at Mansfield College, Oxford', *Oxoniensia*, lxxv (2000), 291–332; T. G. Hassall, 'Roman finds from the Radcliffe Science Library Extension, Oxford, 1970–71', *Oxoniensia*, xxxvii (1972), 38–50.

⁷ OAU, 'Land to the rear of 6–8 South Parks Road, Oxford: Archaeological Evaluation Report', unpubl. client report (1996); OAU, 'Sir William Dunn School of Pathology, Oxford, Archaeological watching brief report', unpubl. client report (1996).

⁸ cf. M. Fulford, 'Iron Age to Roman: a Period of radical Change on the Gravels', in (eds.) M. Fulford and E. Nicols, *Developing Landscapes of lowland Britain: the Archaeology of the British Gravels: a Review* (Soc. Antiq. London Occas. Pap. 14, 1992), 23–38.

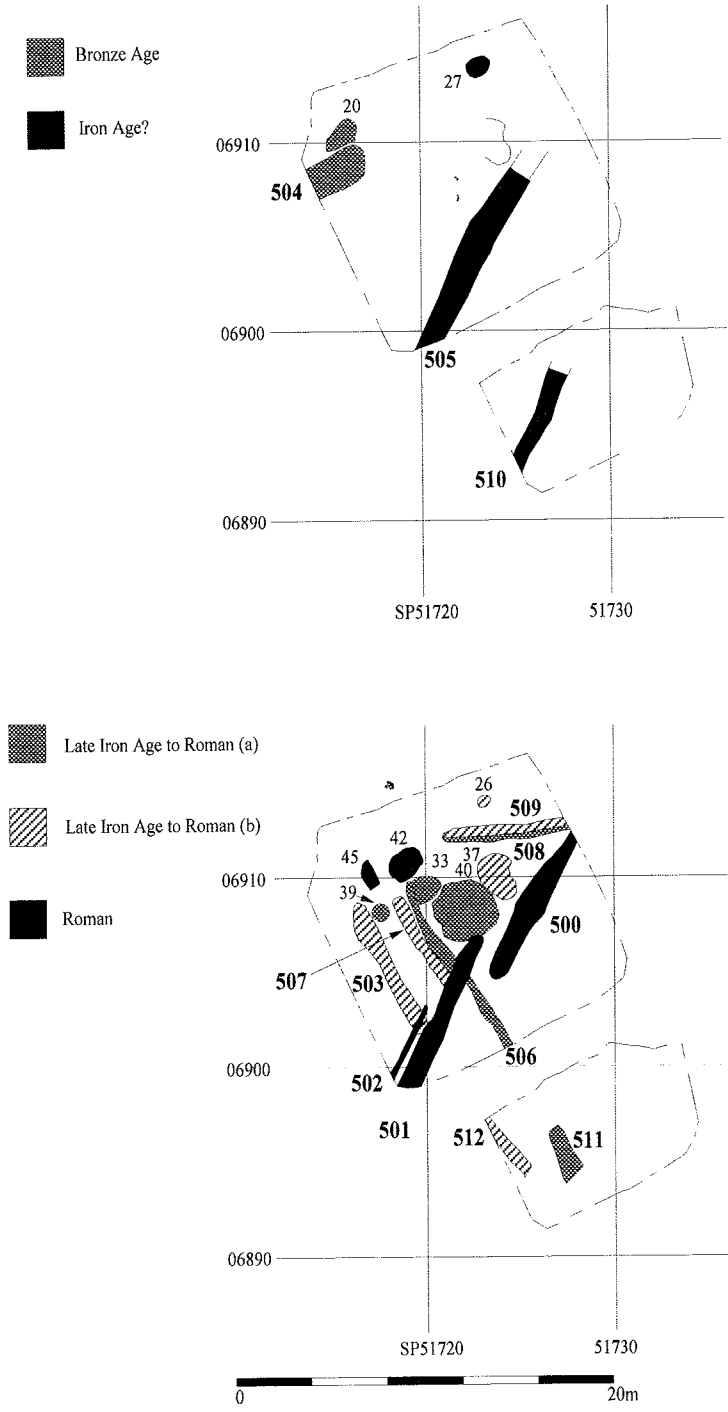


Fig. 3. Halifax House, Oxford. Phased plans

Middle Bronze Age (Figs. 3 and 4)

Two features are dated to this period. Ditch 504 was aligned west-east and continued out of the excavation area. It was 1.85 m. wide and 0.69 m. deep. It had a deep V-shaped profile with three fills. The ditch terminated with a rounded, shallow profile. It contained pottery that could have been a rim from a bucket urn. A single Roman sherd in the top fill appears to be intrusive or a result of late slumping.

Pit 20 was a shallow irregular pit 2.05 m. long and 0.48 m. wide but only 0.18 m. deep; it was disturbed at the western end by root activity. It lay directly north of ditch 504 and contained pottery that could also be Bronze Age.

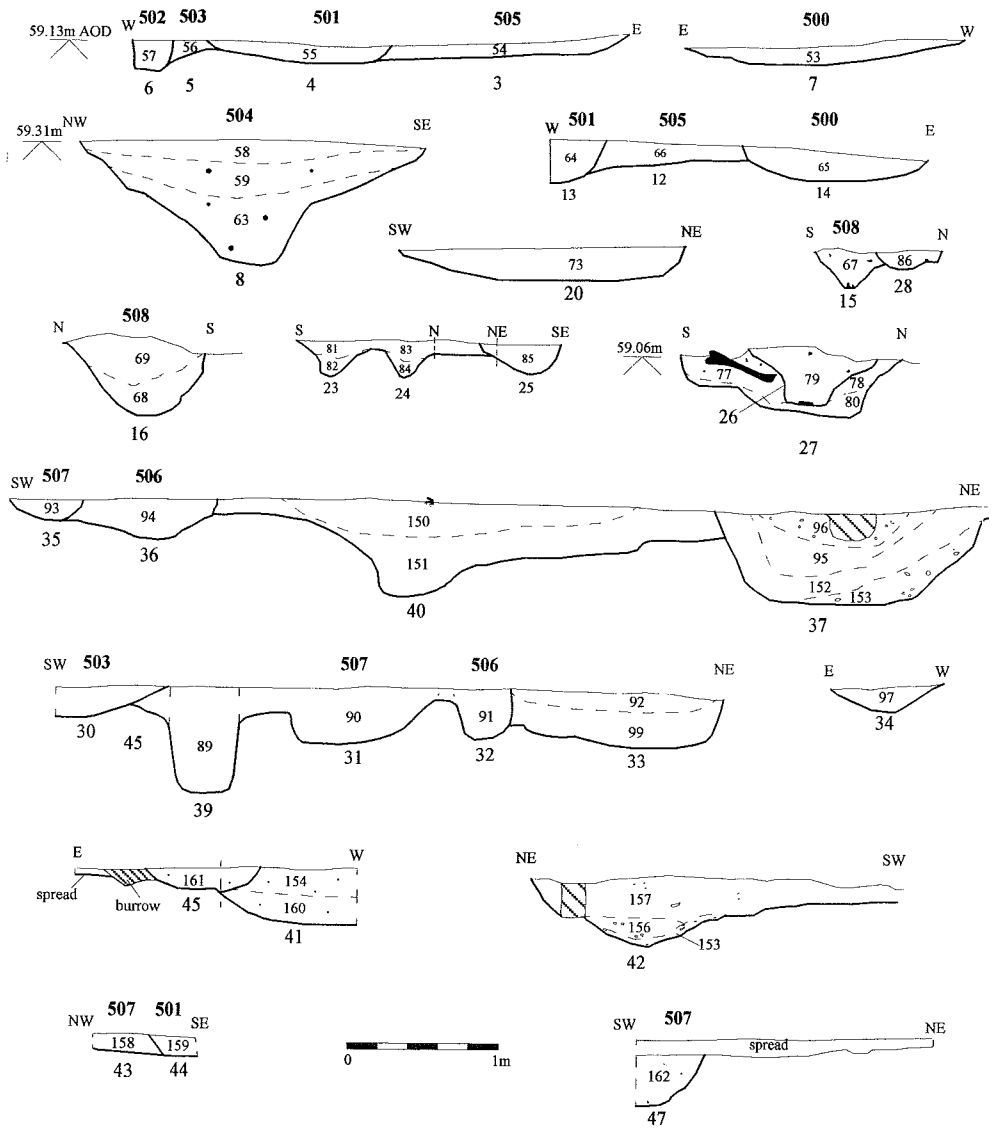


Fig. 4. Halifax House, Oxford. Selected sections.

Iron Age

Ditch 505 was a shallow linear feature, only 0.1 m. deep, with an uncertain original width as it was cut on both sides (by ditch 501 on the north-west and 500 on the south-east). Aligned north-south it potentially originally continued throughout the excavation area. It contained no finds, but was clearly earlier than all the subsequent ditches.

Pit 27 contained Iron Age pottery (a single later sherd is probably intrusive from pit 26 which cut 27). It had a stepped profile with a primary iron pan layer and contained a large complete cow femur from an animal of normal size for the late prehistoric period.⁹

One feature in Area B, ditch 510, is dated to the later prehistoric period by its pottery. It was on a NE-SW alignment similar to ditch 505, with which it may be paired, and also continued out of the western limit of Area B, but was disturbed by modern activity through the rest of the site. It was cut by ditch 512 but its relationship with ditch 511 was obscured by a tree bole.

Late Iron Age to Roman transition period

This period is divided into two phases: although dated to a similar period by their pottery, stratigraphically there are features that can be identified as recuts indicating continuous use. Three features can be placed in either phase. Pit 33 was circular, 0.45 m. in diameter, with two fills: secondary fill 92 contained Iron Age pottery alongside some Roman ware; it was cut by ditch 506. Pit 40 may also belong to this phase. This was a large irregular pit in the centre of the site, cut by ditch 506 and pit 37. It contained pottery from the Iron Age to Roman transitional period. Pit 26, in the north corner of Area A, was a recut of pit 27 and had a similar stepped profile and flat base and it contained the same grog-tempered pottery that is presumed intrusive in 27.

Phase (a)

This phase consists of two gullies and a pit. Gully 506 extended from the southern limit of Area A to the north-west and terminated in the centre of the site. It cut ditch 505 but was in turn cut by ditch 501, and probably by 507. None of the five slots excavated across 506 contained pottery but it cut pit 33. Gully 506 may be the same feature as ditch 511 further south, although much of its length is disturbed by modern activity. Gully 508 may also belong to this phase. It was aligned west-east and continued out of the eastern limit of Area A. It was a small U-shaped gully which was cut by gully 509, again no finds were retrieved. Pit 39 dates to this phase: it is a small circular, straight sided pit up to 0.7 m. deep cutting through various earlier features, finds included pottery dated to the transitional period.

Pit 37, just to the north of ditch 505, was a slightly irregular pit of 0.5 m. diameter and 0.62 m. in total depth. The primary layer 153 was a slump of dark grey brown silty sandy clay with moderate gravel and occasional pebbles from the west, probably from the initial spoil heap of the pit. It was overlain by three successive fill layers.

Phase (b)

This phase consists of gully recuts, 507 and 509, ditch 503 and pit 26. Gully 509 may represent a redefinition of gully 508 on the same alignment. No finds were recovered from this feature.

Gully 507 may be a recut of gully 506 although it did not continue as far south. Four slots revealed a small gully with a U-shaped profile. It contained pottery of mixed date – Iron Age and Roman. It also was cut by ditch 501 but was not observed to continue so it is likely to have terminated under ditch 501 in any case. A stratigraphic problem arises in slot 31, where it is likely that the cut was not fully distinguished, and it may have cut through an earlier feature, perhaps a pit. It is possible that the mix of dates from the pottery could result from this unrecognized feature: a red deer antler also came from this slot.

⁹ ADS: Animal Bone Metrical Archive Project (ABMAP), <<http://www.ads.ahds.ac.uk/catalogue/specColl/abmap/index.cfm>> (1996–2004)

Ditch 503 may also belong in this phase as part of a single system with gullies 506 and 507, together forming a small driveway or stock control passage. It terminated at the northern end, cutting through ditch 504 but in turn was cut by gully 502 and ditch 501 at the southern end and terminated in a shallow cut under ditch 501. It showed a small gully profile similar to 507 but contained no pottery. Ditch 512 in Area B was aligned NW–SE, it continued out of Area B but was not observed in Area A; it may have terminated before this point, however it was on a very similar alignment to ditch 503. It contained later Iron Age pottery but has been phased on the assumption that it belongs with ditch 503.

Early Roman

Features of this period include three ditches on the same alignment (500, 501 and 502), and pits 42 and 45. Ditch 500 extended from the eastern edge of Area A and terminated at the centre of the site. It was much shallower and thinner at the northern end retaining a flat base and shallow terminus. It has been dated to the early Roman period by a single small piece of pottery; its only stratigraphic relationship is that it cut ditch 505. Ditch 501 was clearly one of the latest features in Area A: it extended from the south corner, terminating in the centre, at a position closely corresponding with the terminus of 500. Ditch 501 cut ditch 505 and gullies 503, 506 and 507. It showed a shallow profile and was filled with a grey silty fill, darker than other features on site. It contained no finds. Gully 502 was on the same alignment as 500 and 501, but much smaller, only 0.3 m. wide and again very shallow at approximately 0.1 m. depth. It terminated before ditch 501 but continued out of the site limits in the south corner. There were no finds from this feature to date it but it clearly cut ditch 503 and contained a similar dark fill to ditch 501.

Pit 42 was a large feature with rounded profile, *c.* 2.4 m. diameter and 0.42 m. deep. It was one of only two features on the site that contained a primary deposit layer of iron pan. It was cut by a modern drain pipe. Feature 45 is also dated to this phase, although its nature is uncertain, it may be a small shallow depression associated with the central pit area. Both these pits contained Roman greyware pottery.

19th century

The site was developed from 1855–60, as a row of houses for University members. Activity from this stage is clear in Area B, where there was a clear terrace edge for the garden defined by wooden edging and subsequently filled with 19th-century and some later finds, including clay pipes, brick and tile and glass. This terracing extended further to the east of the site, where archaeological observations showed deposits of similarly dated material directly overlying the natural undisturbed layers that are exhibited higher up in Area A.

Undated

Three intercut postholes (23–25) lying between gullies 503 and 507 remain undated; all were of a similar profile with a rounded base and two distinct layers, none contained finds. Area B also contained two plough scars, both aligned SW–NE, and although they are undated, the site was known to have been agricultural land until the early 19th century, therefore these could be placed between the main period of archaeological activity and this date.

Various natural features were identified through the site. Two irregular scoops filled with loose sand and gravel are interpreted as periglacial. Other natural features included a tree bole at the intersection of ditches 510 and 511, a large tree bole and tree roots in the far east of Area B.

FINDS

POTTERY by JANE TIMBY

A small mixed assemblage of 119 sherds, weighing 583 g. was recovered. The group appears to include earlier prehistoric, later prehistoric and Roman material. The sherds were generally in poor condition with very few diagnostic pieces, only five rims, and no decorated sherds. Sherds were recovered from 18 individual features with 15 sherds from surface collection. Only two features produced more than 10 sherds: pits 27 and 37, with 34 and 14 sherds respectively, 40% of the total. Several pieces were too small to classify to fabric. Attribution of date must therefore be regarded as slightly provisional. The assemblage is summarized in Table 1.

TABLE 1. POTTERY QUANTIFICATION BY FABRIC

<i>Date</i>	<i>Fabric</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>% No</i>	<i>Wt (g)</i>	<i>% Wt</i>
?MBA	FL	coarse, calcined flint-tempered	4	3.4	33	5.7
?IA/BA	GRCASA	sandy with grog and limestone	1	0.8	15	2.6
EIA	SH	coarse, fossil shell	2	1.7	10	1.7
E-MIA	CA	shell and limestone-tempered	14	11.8	83	14.2
	CAFE	calcareous with iron grains	10	8.4	103	17.7
MIA	SA1	fine sandy ware	1	0.8	2	0.3
	SA2	glauconitic sandy ware	9	7.6	16	2.7
	SAOR	fine sandy with organics	19	16.0	28	4.8
LIA	GRSA	sandy with grog	16	13.4	61	10.5
	GRFESA	sandy with grog and iron grains	1	0.8	7	1.2
	E30	medium sand-tempered	1	0.8	7	1.2
	E38	sub-rounded quartz and limestone	2	1.7	27	4.6
	E80	grog-tempered fabrics	10	8.4	35	6.0
Roman	O10	fine oxidised	1	0.8	3	0.5
	R20	general sandy reduced wares	3	2.5	36	6.2
	R90	reduced ware with grog	20	16.8	107	18.4
no date	OO	undesignated crumbs	5	4.2	10	1.7
Total			119		583	

Earlier Prehistoric

At least four sherds of potentially earlier prehistoric date were recovered, all from ditch 504. They are coarse flint-tempered sherds, one a rim possibly from a bucket-shaped urn with a slightly stepped and tapered rim may be similar to vessels from Grimes Graves, Norfolk.¹⁰ A Middle Bronze Age date is possible for this material. A further sherd from pit 20 (73) may also be of Bronze Age date but could equally well be Iron Age. The thick-walled sherd has an oxidized exterior and black interior. The sandy fabric includes inclusions of grog and calcareous grains.

Later Prehistoric

Some 55 sherds (242 g.) were designated as definitely Iron Age on the basis of the fabrics. A variety of wares are present including a sandy ware (SA1), a glauconitic sandy ware (SA2), a coarse shelly ware (SH), a sandy ware with organic tempering (SAOR), a calcareous ware with distinct iron grains (CAFE) and a calcareous ware (CA). Many of the fabrics occur as multiple sherds from individual features suggesting single, albeit very fragmented, vessels. There are no featured sherds present but the range of wares might suggest an early-middle Iron Age date. Pit 27 produced a single sherd of E80 accompanied by 10 sherds of a calcareous and iron-tempered handmade ware (CAFE), 19 very small pieces of a sandy ware with organic inclusions (SAOR) and two sherds of coarse shell-tempered ware (SH) usually regarded as more typical of the Early Iron Age. The bulk of this assemblage would support an early-middle Iron Age date.

¹⁰ L. Longworth, A. Ellison, and V. Rigby, *Excavations at Grimes Graves, Norfolk, 1972-76, fasc 2: The Neolithic, Bronze Age and later Pottery* (1988), fig. 24.60.

Late Iron Age – early Roman

The bulk of the assemblage, some 54 sherds (283 g.), appears to date to the later Iron Age-early Roman period comprising a mixture of native-type wares accompanied by a small number of Roman wares proper. In many cases just single sherds are present or the sherds are accompanied by other sherds designated Iron Age. The main fabrics encountered are Oxford type fabrics E80 (grog-tempered), E30 (sandy), E38 (a quartz and limestone-tempered ware), and a grog and sand-tempered handmade ware (GRSA).

Potentially late Iron Age features include pits 26, 33, 39, ditches 506, 501 and gullies 510 and 512. In most cases grog-tempered handmade sherds are present or, in the case of pit 26, a single wheel-made grog-tempered 'Belgic' type sherd.

Features yielding native wares and/ or Roman wares proper include gully 507, ditch 501, pits 40, 42 and 45. The Roman wares are limited to a grey sandy local ware (R20)¹¹ and a grey ware with grog (R90). A single very abraded fine oxidized ware (O10) was recovered from ditch 504, which produced the earlier prehistoric sherds. Ditch 501 produced a small crumb, which may have been from a Roman vessel.

ANIMAL BONE by SIÂN ANTHONY

A total of 227 animal bones were recovered from 22 contexts, 201 (NISP) were identified to phased features (Table 2). Although many smaller pieces of bone were recovered through sieving, these could only be identified as mammalian. The majority of bones were in a good state of preservation with little erosion, damage or gnawing. Few butchery marks were found although many pieces could have been butchered because of the large number of fragments produced. More detail is available in the archive, significant aspects are summarized here.

TABLE 2. CATALOGUE OF ANIMAL BONE BY PERIOD

	<i>Cow</i>	<i>CSZ</i>	<i>Sheep/ goat</i>	<i>SSZ</i>	<i>PSZ</i>	<i>Horse</i>	<i>Mam</i>	<i>Deer</i>	<i>Total</i>
Middle Bronze Age	2	11				1	2	3	19
Iron Age	5	6	2	1	1				14
Later Iron Age/early Roman	28	80	8	13	5		12	3	149
Early Roman	9		1	9					19
Unphased		3	3			1	1		9
Unstratified				1			11		12

Key: CSZ: Cow-sized

SSZ: Sheep-sized

PSZ: Pig-sized

Mam: Mammalian

Both features from the Bronze Age produced animal bone all in a good state of preservation but there were few bones identified to element. Iron Age features containing bone were dominated by pit 27. Overall there are more cattle than sheep although the amounts are too few to analyse in depth. There are butchery marks present from this period on ribs and meat bearing joints.

¹¹ P. Booth, Roman fabric reference collection, Oxford Archaeology (n.d.).

The late Iron Age to early Roman period showed a clear predominance of cattle or cattle-sized bone over ovicaprids. A problem arises with the large amount of animal bone recovered from gully 507 (slot 31, fill 90): with the stratigraphical problems associated with this context, it may be that the bone from this is from an earlier prehistoric period containing a deer antler and horse mandible. The antler is from a red deer, it has been sawn on all three ends, both on the main beam and the one remaining tine. Cut marks near the sawn ends show the initial cutting edges made before the main incision. It is not possible to identify if it is a shed antler or from a killed animal. The size of the antler suggests a relatively mature male.

Small amounts of bone were recovered from the Roman period and from unstratified contexts.

CHARRED PLANT AND MOLLUSC REMAINS by LUCY CRAMP

Very little identifiable charred plant material was preserved in ten samples, and none at all in the rest of the twenty processed. One grain of *Hordeum* sp. (hulled barley) was present in Sample 13 (ditch 501) along with two glumes of *T. dicoccum* or *spelta* (emmer or spelt wheat). A glume of *T. dicoccum* or *spelta* was also present in sample 14 (ditch 507).

Sample 10 (pit 39) contained a considerable number of snail shells. Among these were open country species including *Trichia hispida*, *Vallonia excentrica*, *Vertigo pygmaea*, *Cochlicopa* sp. and *Carychium* sp., and stagnant water aquatic species, including *Lymnaea truncatula* and *Anisus leucostoma*. These species suggest the presence of stagnant water (e.g. a ditch) surrounded by dry, open conditions. Three individuals of the species *Vertigo angustior* were also recovered from this sample (confirmed by M. Robinson). This species inhabits moist, marshland conditions and is extremely rare in the British Isles today, although it occurred more commonly in the past. It was found at a similar Roman site at Abingdon, with the suggestion that it may have moved up the ditch from more marshy conditions on the floodplain.¹² This may be equally applicable here given the proximity of the Cherwell floodplain.

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¹² J. Robinson, 'Macroscopic Plant and Invertebrate Remains', in J. Muir and R. Roberts (eds.), 'Excavations at Wyndyke Furlong, Abingdon, Oxfordshire', Oxford Archaeological Unit (1994), 51-8.