

Oxpens River Bridge, Oxford – Archaeology Technical Note

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1 Introduction

- 1.1 This technical note has been prepared to identify any key heritage constraints and opportunities in connection with the Oxpens River Bridge development (hereafter “the proposed scheme”).
- 1.2 This document reflects informal discussions with the Oxford City Archaeologist (David Radford) and freely available online resources, including the National Library of Scotland, to provide a high-level screening and summary of designated and non-designated heritage assets which might be affected by the proposed scheme.
- 1.3 It also has benefited from a review of information produced for the OxWED planning application (including the Oxford Archaeology fieldwork and deposit model).
- 1.4 This technical note does not constitute a desk-based assessment, but does summarise the historic environment potential of the proposed scheme and likely mitigation requirements.

2 Proposed Scheme

- 2.1 The proposed scheme is for the construction of a new footbridge across the River Thames c.175m south of the A420 and c.150m east-north-east of the Osney Rail Bridge (National Grid Reference (NGR): SP 50835 05643). The proposed bridge will be orientated approximately north-south.
- 2.2 Proposed works will comprise:
 - Creation of a site compound(s) and temporary accesses;
 - Ground reduction for and construction of piling mats;
 - Installation of appropriately designed piles to support the bridge abutments and bridge structure; and
 - Reinstatement of, landscaping, river bank and upgrading of approaches to the bridge.

3 Historic and Archaeological Overview

- 3.1 Several designated and non-designated archaeology and heritage assets have been identified within 1km of the site, including: Grade II listed memorial; Grade II Osney Abbey and Mill Cottage; Grade I and Grade II listed structures in Oxford City Centre; Harts Sconce incorporating fortifications constructed during the civil war; St Ebbe’s bathing place.
- 3.2 The development area lies on the gravel terraces associated with the course of the river Thames which have been exploited to varying degrees over the millennia.

- 3.3 Prehistoric activity is noted in the nearby area, including an area of Bronze Age settlement at Port Meadow and a linear barrow cemetery at University Parks. The latter area also revealed evidence of several Iron Age farmsteads. Roman evidence is comparatively sparse, with activity focused to the north and east of the modern bounds of Oxford.
- 3.4 The site lies in the hinterland of Oxford in an area commonly associated with flooding and therefore exploited as pasture and until recently unsuited to significant development. The proposed development area lies to the west of the medieval town of Oxford, likely within the parish of St Thomas. Osney Abbey (elevated to an abbey in 1153) lies to the northwest of the proposed development, with Osney Mill being the last standing element of the complex.
- 3.5 The proposed bridge lies in an area associated with defences constructed to defend Oxford during the English Civil War, although the site itself is thought to lie beyond the western extent of the known defences.
- 3.6 The land south of the river was purchased in 1927 by the gas board and was used as a refuse dump before the new gas works was built on the land between 1927-1929. At its peak, the land south of the river had three gas holders orientated north-south, as well as extensive associated buildings that stretched south-east.
- 3.7 The site was demolished after the 1960s, which involved filling the gas holders with rubble/building material and capping them off. The spreading of the building material across the site would have increased the area and depth of contamination.
- 3.8 Contaminated land studies were conducted in the 1970s and 1980s to establish the sites suitability for residential development. However, the investigators concluded that the land was unsuitable due to the high level of contamination.
- 3.9 Remediation work was conducted in 1998 on Marlborough Road, where contaminated material was excavated and removed from the area to allow for residential development. The exact extent of this work is not known, but the contamination was observed to extend below the clay cap into the underlying geology.
- 3.10 The area north of the river was agricultural lands until the extension of the railway tracks in 1921. From the 1950s to present day that area has seen numerous buildings and features constructed including apartments, warehouses, a petrol depot, a car park, and a sorting office.

4 Recent archaeological work

- 4.1 The northern section of the development footprint has, to a great extent, been archaeologically evaluated as part of the Oxpens development. The final report for these works is complete (Oxford Archaeology, 2023) and has been utilised to draw provisional trends pertinent to the proposed development.
- 4.2 It is apparent that the gravel terraces increase in depth as they approach the current alignment of the River Thames. The archaeological evaluation supplied further direct evidence of this, as well as noting the presence of underlying activity of broadly prehistoric date. Horizons of peat were identified, and have been subject to Carbon 14 dating (processing in progress).
- 4.3 There is evidence of considerable depths of 16th century depositions in this area, likely tying into the need to raise the ground level in advance of establishing the Civil War defences mentioned above. It is evident that these defences were focused to the east of the proposed development.
- 4.4 The proposed development is set away from areas of established medieval activity (such as the Abbey and outlying areas of urban activity).

5 Key Constraints, Risks and Opportunities

- 5.1 Construction of gas storage facilities, their demolition and deposition of waste associated with these processes on the south bank of the Thames suggests that archaeological potential on the south side of the river is minimal. Archaeological investigations in advance of proposed development on the north side of the River Thames has been extensive and covers the area between the north bank of the river and the A420. Subject to review of the forthcoming report and confirmation of proposals for the new river crossing the development archaeologists currently considers archaeological evaluation in advance of the bridge construction and associated works to be unnecessary.
- 5.2 It has been suggested that mitigation of the development will be limited to the north side of the Thames. Mitigation may be limited to monitoring of groundworks associated with temporary accesses, ground reduction for piling mats, excavation to formation levels for construction and reinstatement works and landscaping.

6 Next Steps and Recommendations

- 6.1 Given the predicted archaeological resource within the proposed development footprint, it is at present considered proportionate that any necessary archaeological mitigation could be secured as a condition of planning permission (as confirmed with the City Archaeologist via email (3 October 2023). The City Archaeologist should be consulted for their views on the scope of this mitigation, and a Written Scheme of Investigation (the detailed method statement for the archaeological work) produced for their approval.
- 6.2 While this will need to be formally agreed, based on the current understanding of the proposed scheme and related groundworks, in addition to the likely archaeological resource subject to impact, this could readily be achieved through a programme of archaeological monitoring with suitable safeguards for recording.