

Excavations at Ebor House, Blue Boar Street, Oxford, 1995

By JONATHAN HILLER and DAVID R.P. WILKINSON

with a contribution by LUCY WHITTINGHAM

SUMMARY

Recent small-scale archaeological work carried out by Oxford Archaeological Unit has identified a 2 m.-deep sequence of deposits on this city-centre site, extending from early undated soil horizons above natural gravel, up to 19th- and 20th-century buildings including the foundations of the late Victorian Town Hall. Of particular interest are a series of medieval pits containing 11th- to 13th-century pottery. These were rubbish pits, dug in the backyards of properties that fronted on to St. Aldate's, within Oxford's medieval Jewish quarter.

INTRODUCTION (Fig. 1)

In 1994, Oxford City Council, as landowner, submitted a planning application for the redevelopment of a vacant site adjoining the Town Hall, to provide a new multi-storey office block with a basement. Two desk-top studies commissioned by the City Council from Oxford Archaeological Unit¹ had signalled the likely presence of archaeological deposits on the site, and a programme of archaeological monitoring of ground disturbance was subsequently recommended by the Oxford Archaeological Advisory Service. The main contractors, Amey Building Ltd., commissioned Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) to carry out this work, which began in April 1995.

Archaeological and Historical Background

The development site (NGR SP 5142 0612) lies in the heart of the medieval town, on the north side of Blue Boar Street, and surrounded on three sides by public buildings dating from the reconstruction of the Town Hall in the 1890s. The Town Hall itself lies immediately to the west of the site, and further municipal buildings lie to the north. Ebor House, which adjoins the site to the east, was constructed in 1899 as a house for the Chief Constable, the city Police Station itself being located at the back of the Town Hall until 1930.

¹ 'Ebor House, Blue Boar Street, Oxford: Archaeological Desktop Study', and 'Ebor House, Blue Boar Street, Oxford: Supplement to Archaeological Desktop Study' (Oxford Archaeol. Unit unpubl. client reports, September 1993 and July 1994).

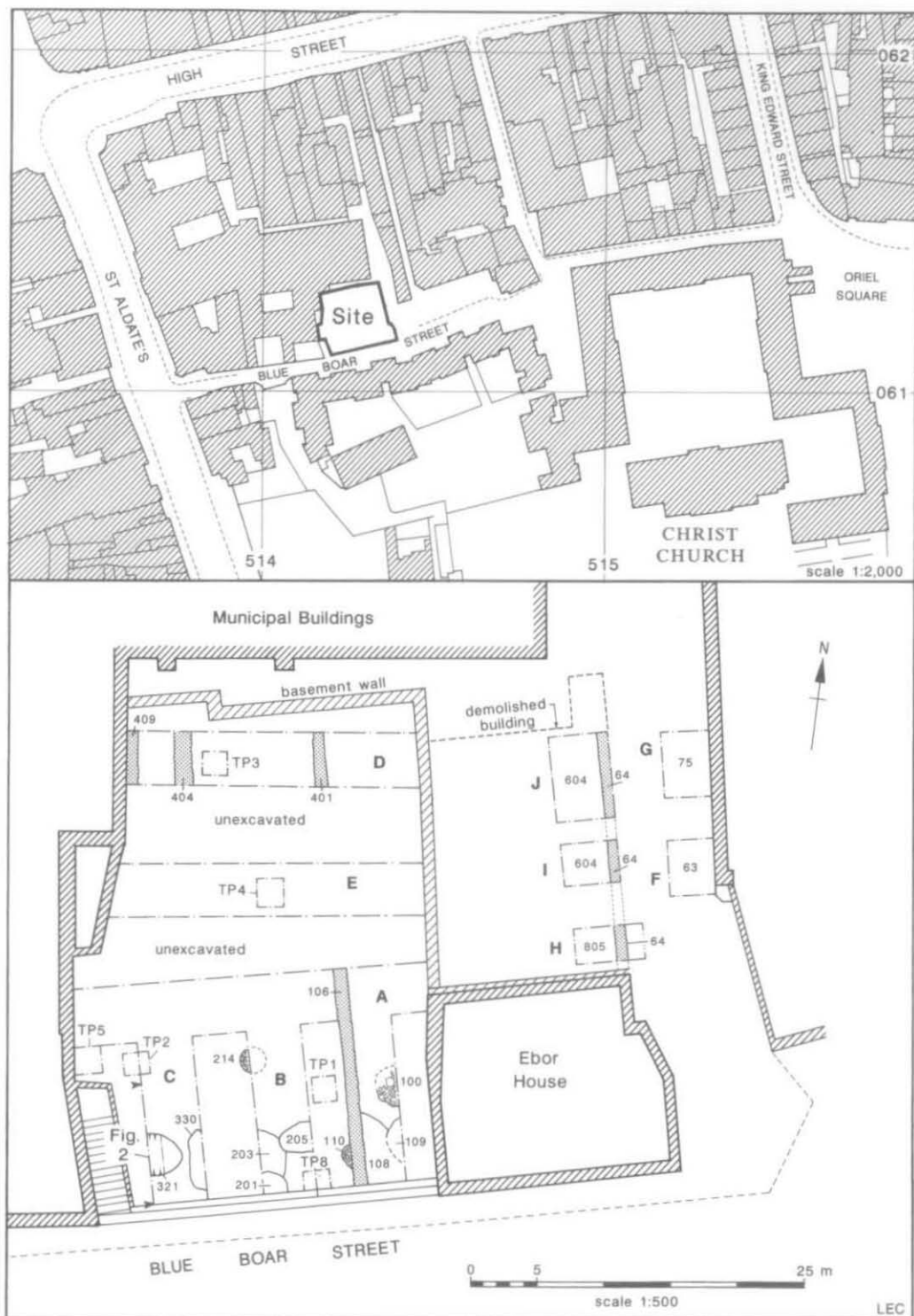


Fig. 1. Ebor House, Blue Boar Street: site and trench locations.

Blue Boar Street (formerly Tresham's Lane) was created *c.* 1550, to compensate for the enclosure of St. Frideswide's Lane by Christ Church, to the south. Throughout the medieval period, therefore, the redevelopment site was not a street frontage property, but lay towards the rear of tenement plots fronting on to St. Aldate's. During the 12th and 13th centuries this was Oxford's Jewish quarter, and the properties fronting on to St. Aldate's probably included some of the most prestigious dwellings in the medieval town, amongst them substantial stone houses.² The recording action at Ebor House was particularly targeted to recover evidence from this period of occupation.

The site appears to have been built on by Loggan's time (1675), and by the later 19th century it is shown on the 1st edition Ordnance Survey map as a series of buildings around a small courtyard.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS (Figs. 1 and 2)

Note

A more detailed account of the features and levels summarised in the present report can be found in the archive, which will be deposited with Oxfordshire County Museum Service.

Methodology

At the time of the development, the site was a vacant basement/open cellar area immediately to the west of Ebor House; its surface lay some 2 m. below street level and was uneven and covered with vegetation and modern debris. In addition, a building to the rear of Ebor House had been demolished to formation level. During April 1995 OAU carried out an evaluation consisting of four test pits within the basement, and further test pits excavated by the contractors were monitored. The excavation by the contractors of foundation trenches, service trenches and borehole pits for buildings to the north and west of Ebor House was observed and recorded during an extended watching brief.

Three trenches (A, B and C) aligned north-south were dug by machine at the south end of the basement area, and were linked with a cross trench aligned east-west (for ease of recording also called C). In accordance with the requirements of the Job Brief, the trench sections were inspected after the machine excavation, and selected features were sampled in plan. Two further very deep trenches, D and E, could not be formally investigated for reasons of safety. Finds were recovered from some of the hand-excavated features in Trenches A, B and C, from the vertical sections of these trenches, and from the spoil heaps. Plans of the trenches were made where possible, and all of the trench sections were drawn.

Early soil horizon

The earliest deposit identified during the excavations was a 0.13 m. thick layer, 82, of loose reddish-brown loam observed at the base of Test Pit 8. No finds were recovered from the deposit, which lay above the natural gravel at 60.20 m. OD, but it may be the same as the 'early' soil horizons often observed on Oxford sites, where the soil sometimes contains prehistoric or Roman finds. No comparable deposit was observed during the excavation of the foundation trenches.

²J. Cooper, 'Medieval Oxford', *V.C.H. Oxon.* iv, 27.

Summary of medieval features and levels (Figs. 1 and 2)

The principal features observed in all the excavated foundation trench sections were a series of intercutting pits. In Trench A, the upper fills of three intercutting pits were investigated, pits 107 (fill 102), pit 108 and pit 109. Pit 107 was the earliest in the stratigraphic sequence, and contained four sherds of pottery suggesting a late 11th- to mid 13th-century date. Pottery from pits 108 and 109 dated from the 13th to the 15th centuries. In Trench B, a number of intercutting pits were observed at the base of the trench, although only fill 202 in pit 203 contained pottery. This, however, was a notably early context, with pottery of mid to late 11th-century date.

The earliest deposit observed in Trench C was a layer of dark grey-brown sandy silt, 307, which was 0.4 m. deep, with the base of the deposit lying on top of the natural gravel at 59.94 m. O.D. This deposit was truncated by later features, and may represent either a former soil level or a feature fill. The dark colour of the soil suggests a medieval date for the deposit, rather than the earlier reddish-brown soil horizon (layer 82) seen elsewhere.

A sequence of features typical of the site was observed in the east facing section of north-south aligned foundation Trench C (Fig. 2). The principal early features were two large pits, 321 and 322. The base fill of 321 was a greyish-brown sandy silt, 319, with a greenish hue, perhaps suggestive of cess pit fill, which contained pottery of late 11th- to mid 13th-century date. The upper fills of the pit were suggestive of deliberate infilling, perhaps to cover cess material. Pit 330, to the east of 321, was not investigated. Pit 322 was undated, but fill 323 in 322 was cut to the north by a further large pit, 331, with loamy fills 333 (containing late 11th- to late 12th-century pottery) and 334 (containing late 12th- to mid 13th-century pottery).

The upper pits in the sequence above the level of the fills of pit 321 were generally smaller, with the single exception of pit 306 at the south of the trench. Another possible early cess pit, 324, cut feature 313. It was in turn cut by an irregular U-shaped pit, 335, whose fill (336) contained pottery of mid 11th- to early 13th-century date. The fill of 335 was cut by an undated pit, 340, which in turn was cut by pits 337 (fill 338) and 343 (fill 344) containing pottery of late 12th- to mid 13th-century date.

Intercutting pits observed in the other foundation trenches contained pottery predominantly of the 11th-13th centuries in their fills, although some 14th- and 15th-century material was recovered. Pits and pit fills were observed in the sections of Trenches D and E, but could not be further investigated. The pottery assigned to contexts from these trenches was recovered from the spoil heaps.

Post-medieval features and soil horizons

An exploratory trench (Trench 7 = later borehole pit G) opened by the contractors had at its base a layer of light grey-brown silt loam, layer 76, which contained a substantial quantity of animal bone, glass, clay pipes, oyster shell and post-medieval pottery dated to the 18th century. A near complete pottery vessel and a single large, plain copper alloy ring were recovered from this layer. Above 76 was a similar deposit, 75, which represented the upper part of the post-medieval or early Victorian stratigraphic sequence. The base of layer 75 lay at 62.73 m. O.D. Post-medieval pottery was also recovered from deposits at the base of further borehole pits (F, G, H, I and J) excavated by the contractors. Post-medieval pottery and clay pipe from the bottom layer (903, at c. 61.73 m. O.D.) in borehole pit G, indicates a depth of post-medieval build-up of at least 1 m.

Within the basement area were three post-medieval soakaway/well structures (100, 110, 214) constructed from sandstone blocks, and built within deep construction pits.

Later archaeological features

The upper part of the medieval and post-medieval sequence of deposits and structures was truncated by the construction level for the deep open Victorian basement that occupied the site at the time of the redevelopment. The internal walls of this basement were constructed of bricks bonded with hard grey cement, upon footings of bricks bonded with stone and mortar. Demolition debris from the building constructed above the basement was observed during the excavation of Test Pits 1-4. The stone foundation, 64, of the demolished building immediately north of Ebor House was observed in borehole pits H, I and J.

Test Pit 5 was excavated by the contractors against the east wall of the Town Hall. The Town Hall wall, 52, consisted of stretcher courses of red bricks, built upon a foundation of cemented gravel and brick rubble, which was at least 0.9 m. deep.

POTTERY by LUCY WHITTINGHAM

Full details of the assemblage, which is only summarised here, are available in the archive, including tables of fabric types and residuality, and the ceramic dating of individual contexts.

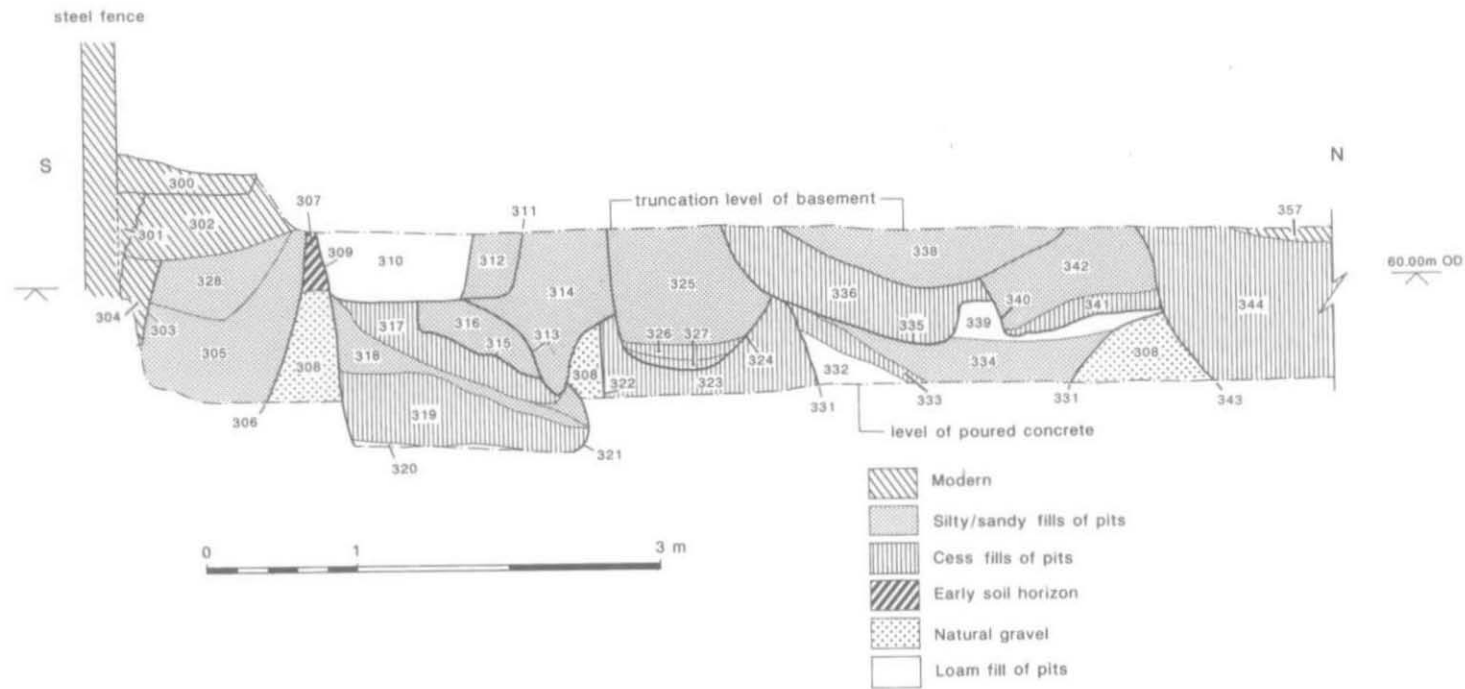


Fig. 2. Ebor House, Blue Boar Street: Trench C section.

In total, 197 sherds of medieval and post-medieval pottery were recovered, weighing 5.5 kg.³ The medieval assemblage consisted of 64 late Saxon and early medieval sherds in 7 fabric types, and 10 later medieval sherds in 4 fabric types. Although there were a considerable number of wares present in the early medieval assemblage, the majority of the 59 sherds (80%) belong to 2 types: Oxford Early Medieval Ware (OXAC) and Oxford Medieval Ware (OXY). The remaining 5 wares, St. Neot's-type Ware (OXR), Abingdon-type Ware (OXAG), Late Saxon to late Medieval South-East Oxfordshire Ware (OX162), Oxford Late Saxon Ware (OXB) and Early Medieval South West Oxfordshire Ware (OXBF) are each represented by one sherd.

The later medieval assemblage is represented by 10 sherds imported from industries bordering the Oxford region: East Wiltshire Type Ware (OXAQ), a late medieval Red Earthenware (OXAY) and Brill/Boarstall products (OXAM and OXAW).

Half of the early medieval pottery was recovered from later contexts, and was therefore residual. This includes 48% of the OXAC sherds, 40% of the OXY sherds and the sherds of fabrics OXR, OXAG, OX162 and OXBF. A high percentage of the later material was also residual.

The *in situ* sherds in fabrics OXAC, OXY and OXBF occurred in contexts 102, 202, 319, 320, 333, 334, 336, 338, 344, 354 and 359. The relative proportions in which these wares occurred can be used as ceramic phasing to date the earliest features on the site. The presence of OXAC as the only fabric in context 202 suggests that this was the earliest context at Blue Boar Street, of a mid to late 11th-century date. These sherds were all from a single cooking vessel with lid seated rim, which supports the view that the context was undisturbed. The introduction of OXY into the ceramic sequence indicates a date of late 11th to late 12th centuries for context 333, where OXY occurs with OXAC. Fabric OXY continued in production beyond the late 12th century and dominated the Oxford ceramic sequence until the mid 13th century. The occurrence of OXY as the only fabric in contexts 102, 319, 334, 338, 344, 354 and 359, suggests a date of late 12th to mid 13th century. A second early medieval context, 336, is suggested by the sole presence of Early Medieval South West Oxfordshire Ware (OXBF) usually found in Oxford in small quantities between the mid 11th and early 13th centuries.

Later medieval pottery was recovered from contexts 81 and 104. Two sherds of OXAY and OXAW in context 81 suggest a date between the late 12th and 15th centuries, and one sherd of OXAM in context 104 indicates an early 13th- to 15th-century date. A further seven late medieval sherds were present in post-medieval contexts.

Later material from the site consisted of 123 post-medieval pottery sherds (late 17th- to 18th-century in date), which were found in five contexts (76, 600, 601, 604, 903). Each of these contexts contained Staffordshire White Salt Glazed Stoneware, Tin Glazed Earthenware, Post Medieval Brill Ware and a local Red Earthenware. Context 601 also contained English Porcelain. Context 903 contained imported earlier material in addition to the 18th-century material. These were a mid 16th- to 17th-century Cologne/Frechen drinking jug with part of the lead mount/mend surviving, and two late 17th-century Westerwald jugs, decorated with stamped applied pads for leaves and flowers, and stems made with groups of three or five incised lines. Context 76 contained further 18th-century material, including Surrey/Hampshire Borderware, English Stoneware, Nottingham Stoneware and late 18th-century Creamware.

Discussion of the pottery assemblage

The early medieval and post-medieval pottery assemblages represent two quite distinct periods of activity. The earlier, from the mid 11th to mid 13th centuries, is represented by the dominance of Oxford Early Medieval Ware (OXAC) and Oxford Medieval Ware (OXY); the later dates to the 18th century.

The range of wares and vessels in the early medieval assemblage is not outstanding for a site in the centre of Oxford. The earliest vessel type is a St. Neot's-type Ware bowl of 10th- to late 11th-century date, though the most common vessels are typical mid 11th- to late 12th-century cooking pots and dishes in OXAC, and late 11th- to 13th-century cooking pots and two glazed pitchers in OXY. One unusual fragment in Abingdon Type Ware (OXAG) could be part of a lamp or crucible, similar to a late 11th/early 12th-century example from No. 34 Church Street, Oxford.⁴

³ The pottery has been quantified using sherd count and weight, and identified with reference to the Oxford Fabric Type Series published in R. Haldon and M. Mellor, 'Late Saxon and Medieval Pottery', in B. Durham, 'Archaeological Investigations in St. Aldate's, Oxford', *Oxoniensia*, xlii (1977), 111-39, and revised by Maureen Mellor in her recent paper 'Oxfordshire Pottery; A Synthesis of Middle and Late Saxon, Medieval and Early Post-medieval Pottery in the Oxford Region', *Oxoniensia*, lix (1994), 102. The fabric codes are given in brackets after the common name.

⁴ M. Mellor, 'Pottery', in T.G. Hassall, C.E. Halpin and M. Mellor, 'Excavations in St. Ebbe's, Oxford, 1967-1976. Part I: Late Saxon and Medieval Domestic Occupation and Tenements, and the Medieval Greyfriars', *Oxoniensia*, liv (1989), 205, Fig. 47 no. 7.

The 18th-century assemblage also has a range of vessel types typical of the period, though the presence of an earlier 16th- to 17th-century Cologne/Frechen drinking jug and two Westerwald jugs is of note. These Rhenish imports are common in Britain and are therefore not necessarily a reflection of the status or wealth of the purchaser but have been noted in Oxford as occurring only on sites close to the commercial centre of the City.

OTHER FINDS

A plain copper alloy ring was recovered from the post-medieval layer 76, and animal bone was present in contexts of all periods across the site. Small quantities of building material (tile) were present in a number of excavated deposits: one small sherd of tile was present in medieval pit fill 104, and three sherds were recovered from the infill of post-medieval soakaway 100. Pieces of clay pipe were recovered from post-medieval contexts 76, 600, 601, and 903, which were observed in borehole pits north of Ebor House. A total of 19 pieces of clay pipe were recovered from all excavated deposits. No glass fragments were recovered from any of the medieval deposits: 26 pieces of post-medieval or later glass were recovered from other deposits.

CONCLUSIONS

No features predating the medieval period were seen. The pottery from the investigations is predominantly of mid 11th- to mid 13th-century date, but the unremarkable nature of the assemblage provides little new information about the culture, wealth or status of the medieval occupants of the site. The fills of some of the pits contained cess-like material mixed with lenses of sandy gravel, covered with thicker fills of sandy silt or sandy gravel, and this would be entirely consistent with the usual medieval practice of digging domestic rubbish and latrine pits towards the back of urban properties. No structural features were observed relating to any of these rubbish pits.

The upper fills of rubbish pits 109 and 108 contained slightly later pottery (14th-15th century date), which implies continuity of domestic activity on the site in this period. Further late medieval material was observed in distinct post-medieval contexts. The low representation of 16th- and 17th-century pottery might suggest a change in land use, and it is interesting to note that Agas's map of Oxford (1578) shows the site as an open area of land. However, the severe truncation of the later medieval and post-medieval stratigraphy by the construction of the Victorian basement, together with the limited nature of the investigations, means that such a hypothesis can be only very tentatively advanced. The only surviving features of post-medieval date in the basement area were the three stone soakaways. Loggan's map of Oxford (1675) shows buildings along the line of Blue Boar Street by this time, and the soakaways could well relate to backyard or cellar activity from these dwellings.

The limited nature of the archaeological work means that the above conclusions have to be used with caution. In particular, it is very difficult to know whether the unremarkable nature of the early medieval assemblage, from a wealthy and culturally distinct area of town, was truly representative of the site or simply a factor of the very small sample that was excavated in detail. More detailed excavations on this type of 'back yard' site should be seriously considered in the future.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The archaeological work was commissioned and financed by the landowner, Oxford City Council, and their main construction contractor, Amey Building Ltd. OAU wishes to acknowledge their assistance throughout the project, with particular thanks to David Coon of Oxford City Council, and Amey Building's project manager, Keith Marsh.