

# The 'Golden Age' of Oxfordshire Archaeology, 1965–1980

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## SUMMARY

*This article reflects upon on some aspects of the spectacular growth of archaeological activity which began in Oxfordshire during the late 1960s. This expansion was a response to the realisation that the survival of local archaeological sites was coming under threat on an unprecedented scale from motorway construction, urban redevelopment, suburban expansion, gravel extraction and intensive agriculture. Much was achieved through major organisational changes, initiated in what was then the Oxford City and County Museum and Oxford University's Delegacy for Extra-Mural Studies. Major developments included both the training and mobilisation of a considerable volunteer force from the general public, and the creation of the Oxfordshire Archaeological Unit as a professional excavation team. In Oxfordshire as elsewhere, expansion was accompanied by important advances in the nature of archaeology itself, in particular its integration alongside other disciplines into landscape studies.*

The untimely death of Mick Aston in June 2013 robbed the archaeological community of one of its most colourful and influential characters.<sup>1</sup> Mick spent the greater part of his working life in the West Country, but like the present authors he first learned his trade in Birmingham and the West Midlands. All three of us subsequently worked in Oxfordshire, Trevor Rowley from 1969 to the present, Mick Aston from 1970 to 1974, James Bond from 1974 to 1986. The late 1960s saw the dawn of a spectacular expansion of archaeological activity in the county, a time of great enthusiasm and strong commitment which some recent commentators have recalled fondly as the 'golden age of Oxfordshire archaeology'. During that period Mick Aston and Trevor Rowley (Fig. 1) collaborated in writing *Landscape Archaeology*, a handbook designed as a practical guide to fieldwork techniques and the recognition, recording and interpretation of the historic landscape.<sup>2</sup> At a time when threats from gravel extraction, road construction, urban redevelopment, the expansion of suburban housing, hedge removal and ploughing-up of earthworks in old pasture seemed ubiquitous, it was hoped that the book would encourage more active public participation in non-destructive extensive fieldwork. W.G. Hoskins's *Fieldwork in Local History*, published in 1967, had already pointed the way forward, though still clinging to the primacy of documentary sources.<sup>3</sup> The title *Landscape Archaeology* (believed to be the first coinage of this term) acknowledged a considerable debt to Hoskins's concept of landscape history, but it also indicated a significant change of emphasis away from documents towards archaeological fieldwork. The fortieth anniversary of *Landscape Archaeology* came in 2014, and this seems an appropriate moment to reflect upon the climate of that time and what all came together in this particular place to make it such an exciting working environment.

<sup>1</sup> Anon, 'Professor Mick Aston', *The Times*, 26.6.2013, p. 49; C. Dyer, 'Michael Anthony Aston, archaeologist, born 1 July 1946, died 24 June 2013', *The Guardian*, 25.6.2013; J. Bond, 'Professor Mick Aston (1st July 1946–24th June 2013)', *Proceedings of the Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society*, 157 (2013), pp. 217–20.

<sup>2</sup> M. Aston and T. Rowley, *Landscape Archaeology* (1974).

<sup>3</sup> W.G. Hoskins, *Fieldwork in Local History* (1967).



Fig. 1. Mick Aston (right) and Trevor Rowley, c.1982. Photo: Mick Aston's collection.

#### *Before the 1960s*

There is, of course, a long tradition of antiquarian, historical and archaeological investigation in the city and county of Oxford, extending back into the seventeenth century.<sup>4</sup> The destruction of historic buildings within the city of Oxford had begun to cause concern in the nineteenth century, and John Chessell Buckler (1793–1894), well-known for his topographical drawings, undertook detailed surveys of a number of Oxford buildings during their demolition.<sup>5</sup> Although an early examination of below-ground archaeology had taken place when the university Examination Schools were built on the site of the Angel Inn in 1876, it was not until the late 1930s that serious investigation began. At that time, the demolition of a row of medieval and later buildings on the north side of Broad Street to make way for the New Bodleian Library prompted a co-ordinated response, with W.A. Pantin recording the standing

<sup>4</sup> A. Crossley, 'Oxfordshire', in C.R.J. Currie and C.P. Lewis (eds.), *English County Histories: A Guide* (1994), pp. 323–35.

<sup>5</sup> J. Munby, 'Tackley's Inn and Three Medieval Houses in Oxford', *Oxoniensia*, 43 (1978), pp. 123–69.

buildings and Rupert Bruce-Mitford the below-ground archaeology.<sup>6</sup> The resumption of piecemeal redevelopment after the Second World War had included the removal of the Clarendon Hotel on Cornmarket, which was recorded during demolition by Pantin,<sup>7</sup> who also undertook a documentary investigation of the site, with limited excavations undertaken during construction of the new Woolworths building.<sup>8</sup> However, by the 1960s it was clear that the next phase of redevelopment, the demolition of a large area of what was then considered sub-standard housing in St Ebbe's and its replacement by the Westgate shopping centre, with associated underground services and car parks, would take place on a much bigger scale. A more radical response would be required to cope with the proposed destruction of a significant sector of the historic city.<sup>9</sup>

Outside the city, along the gravel terraces of the Thames valley crop-marks had been recognised from ground level since the middle of the nineteenth century as indicators of ancient settlement sites and cemeteries.<sup>10</sup> The advent of aerial photography pioneered by O.G.S. Crawford in the 1920s and continued in the 1930s by Major Allen of Iffley and by Derek Riley began to revolutionise perceptions of the density and complexity of ancient settlement and land use.<sup>11</sup> Gravel extraction had prompted occasional emergency excavations at least from the mid nineteenth century, but it was not until the 1930s that the increasing scale of exploitation began to cause serious concern. Even then rescue excavation continued to rely solely upon the interest and initiative of individuals, notably E.T. Leeds and Humphrey Case of the Ashmolean Museum.

Concerns about individual monuments had been expressed as far back as 1870, when the owner of the Dyke Hills at Dorchester-on-Thames had begun to level the Iron Age earthworks to convert the pasture to arable land. This had provoked a considerable outcry from 'men of taste and knowledge, especially in the neighbouring University', and a plea that rights over private property should have some limit and that such sites should receive some protection in law.<sup>12</sup> Agricultural changes were always much more difficult to monitor than gravel extraction or urban redevelopment, but by the second half of the twentieth century the grubbing-out of hedgerows and the levelling of ancient and medieval earthworks on old pasture by bulldozing and ploughing was also causing growing concern.

### *The Challenge of the 1960s*

By the 1960s it was becoming increasingly clear that existing provisions were no longer adequate to meet the challenges of the new age. A series of interconnected organisational

<sup>6</sup> W.A. Pantin, 'The Recently-Demolished Houses in Broad Street', *Oxoniensia*, 2 (1937), pp. 171–200; R.L.S. Bruce-Mitford, 'The Archaeology of the Site of the Bodleian Extension in Broad Street, Oxford', *Oxoniensia*, 4 (1939), pp. 89–146.

<sup>7</sup> W.A. Pantin, 'The Clarendon Hotel, Oxford, Part II: The Buildings', *Oxoniensia*, 23 (1958), pp. 84–129.

<sup>8</sup> E.M. Jope, 'The Clarendon Hotel, Oxford, Part I: The Site', *Oxoniensia*, 23 (1958), pp. 1–83; D. Sturdy, 'Thirteenth-Century and Later Pottery from the Clarendon Hotel and other Sites in Oxford', *Oxoniensia*, 24 (1959), pp. 22–36.

<sup>9</sup> T. Hassall, 'Archaeology of Oxford City', in G. Briggs et al. (eds.), *The Archaeology of the Oxford Region* (1986), pp. 115–34.

<sup>10</sup> S. Stone, 'Account of Certain (Supposed) British and Saxon Remains recently Discovered at Standlake in the County of Oxford' and 'Recent Exploration at Standlake, Yelford and Stanton Harcourt, in Oxfordshire', *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of London*, 1st series, 4 (1857–8), pp. 70–1, 92–100, 213–19; F. Haverfield, 'Some Romano-British Remains in the Upper Thames Valley', *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries*, 2nd series, 18 (1899), pp. 10–16.

<sup>11</sup> O.G.S. Crawford, 'Air Photographs near Dorchester, Oxon.', *Antiquity*, 1 (1927), pp. 469–74; G.W.G. Allen, 'Marks Seen from the Air in the Crops near Dorchester, Oxon.', *Oxoniensia*, 3 (1938), pp. 169–71; D. Riley, 'Archaeology from the Air in the Upper Thames Valley', *Oxoniensia*, 8/9 (1943–4), pp. 64–101; D. Benson and D. Miles, *The Upper Thames Valley: An Archaeological Survey of the River Gravels, Oxfordshire Archaeological Unit Survey*, 2 (1974), pp. 19–23.

<sup>12</sup> J. Cook and T. Rowley (eds.), *Dorchester through the Ages* (1985), pp. 18–20; C. Welch, 'The Destruction of the Dyke Hills, Dorchester-on-Thames', *Oxoniensia*, 79 (2014), pp. 77–95.

changes initiated during that decade were to have a fundamental effect upon almost every aspect of archaeological practice in Oxfordshire, including education, fieldwork, excavation, museums, the involvement of local communities and interactions with planning procedures.

Events in Oxfordshire coincided with the emergence of the 'Rescue' movement, which arose from concerns raised by archaeologists in the late 1960s that the increasing pace and scale of development was resulting in a level of destruction of archaeological sites which could not be tolerated in a nominally civilised society. As Philip Barker put it, if a number of original documents from the Public Record Office or British Library were randomly burned each day without being read or transcribed, there would be an international outcry; yet this was exactly what was happening to the country's unwritten archaeological record.<sup>13</sup> Matters came to a head at three meetings held at Barford in Warwickshire in February 1970, at Newcastle-upon-Tyne in November, and in London in January 1971. A number of proposals were put forward, including the immediate formation of the RESCUE organisation, to increase public awareness of the problem, to press for improved legislation for the protection of archaeological sites and increased funds for basic survey, rescue excavation and publication, and to improve archaeological training at all levels. A hope for the longer term was for the creation of a State Antiquities Service with some twenty regional centres, which would have sufficient funds to provide 'a unified and effective service capable of dealing with emergency situations well in advance, through early consultation with planners and developers,' and would also create a national archive storing in easily retrievable form archaeological surveys of the whole country.<sup>14</sup>

In fact, several of those initiatives were already under way at local level in Oxfordshire, focussed around three particular organisations, the City and County Museum at Woodstock (founded in 1964), Oxford University's Delegacy for Extra-Mural Studies (where a staff tutor in Archaeology was appointed for the first time in 1969) and the Oxfordshire Archaeological Unit (founded in 1973).

## ORGANISATIONAL CHANGES

### *Museums*

Since its opening in 1683, the Ashmolean had been the premier museum in the county. As a national museum with an overall brief for world-wide collecting and research, local work had never been its priority. Nevertheless, some of its staff, including Humphrey Case, David Sturdy, David Hinton and David Brown, did maintain an active involvement in local archaeology, and played a very significant part in the excavation and publication of local sites. It also housed Major Allen's remarkable collection of oblique monochrome aerial photographs, many of which were of Thames valley cropmarks. Smaller established museums elsewhere in Oxfordshire had local or specialised collections, but neither the brief nor the resources for outreach activities on any scale.

In 1964 the local authorities of the city and county collaborated in the jointly funded establishment of the Oxford City and County Museum, based at Fletcher's House in Woodstock, which opened in 1966. This had a specific county-wide role. Under its first Director, Jean Cook, it took an adventurous and innovative approach, and alongside the first essential of acquiring collections and setting up displays, there was from the outset a concern with the context from which objects had come, and an active role in education. One of the museum's most significant innovations was the establishment of a Field Department, the early years of which have been described by the first field officer, Don Benson (Fig. 2), who held the

<sup>13</sup> P. Barker, 'The Scale of the Problem', in P.A. Rahtz (ed.), *Rescue Archaeology* (1974), pp. 28–34.

<sup>14</sup> Idem, 'The Origins and Development of RESCUE', in Rahtz (ed.), *Rescue Archaeology*, pp. 280–5.



Fig. 2. Mick Aston (right) and Don Benson, October 1974. Photo: Mick Aston's collection.

post from 1965 to 1975.<sup>15</sup> Part of his brief included the recording and collection of material evidence relating to traditional crafts, trades and industries of Oxfordshire, themes which were prominent in the museum's first permanent displays, and which have continued to be an important theme ever since. However, the vulnerability of Oxfordshire's archaeology became an overriding concern. His assessments of the threats from urban redevelopment in Oxford and the expansion of gravel extraction in the Thames valley resulted in influential pioneer surveys, which provided a model soon to be employed widely elsewhere.<sup>16</sup>

It had become obvious that a major obstacle to mounting any effective response to such threats was the absence of any comprehensive local resource of readily retrievable information. To overcome this lack another far-reaching innovation was introduced, the establishment of the first County Sites and Monuments Record, prototype of the SMRs (now termed Historic Environment Records) which would be set up in every English county over the next couple of decades.<sup>17</sup> As a pioneer venture in a pre-computer age, there were many conceptual and practical difficulties to overcome, not the least of which was how a 'site' was actually to be defined; and, as the record itself grew in volume and the range of demands placed upon it by public enquiries, research requirements and planning needs continued to expand, limitations in the original optical coincidence punched-card retrieval system inevitably began to emerge. Yet it is a tribute to Don Benson's vision that for most of the time it was able to answer most of the queries addressed to it, and many years passed before it was finally computerised.

Jean Cook had hoped that the museum would in due course have its own professional excavation unit, but in the meantime a salvage excavation of a Roman villa near Great Tew

<sup>15</sup> D. Benson, 'A Museum: Oxfordshire', in E. Fowler (ed.), *Field Survey in British Archaeology* (1972), pp. 16–21; D. Benson, 'In the Beginning: Memories of the First Ten Years in the Field Department at Oxford City and County Museum', in M. Henig and C. Paine (eds.), *Preserving and Presenting the Past in Oxfordshire and Beyond: Essays in Memory of John Rhodes*, BAR BS, 586 (2013), pp. 71–4.

<sup>16</sup> D. Benson and J. Cook, *City of Oxford Redevelopment: Archaeological Implications* (1966); Benson and Miles, *The Upper Thames Valley*.

<sup>17</sup> D. Benson, 'A Sites and Monuments Record for the Oxford Region', *Oxoniensia*, 37 (1972), pp. 226–37.

was undertaken using local volunteers in 1965, and then, over four seasons from 1966 to 1969, the excavation of a long barrow at Ascott-under-Wychwood threatened by a proposed road-widening scheme. The latter was a huge task, at that time the most complete excavation of any Cotswold long barrow, which pioneered new techniques in photogrammetric recording and dealing with large quantities of disarticulated human remains. It was supported by the secondment of the museum's conservation officer to set up an on-site conservation laboratory and photographic processing unit. However, the post-excavation work was to prove an enormous problem, and it was many years before the site was fully published.<sup>18</sup> It was evident that the demands of a major excavation project were incompatible with all the other calls upon the museum's resources, and although from time to time the museum continued to have some involvement in smaller excavations, nothing on the scale of the Ascott project was ever attempted again. Thereafter the focus of the Field Department's work was in survey and historic landscapes, rather than in excavation, and in improving liaison with the local planning authorities. Following the appointment of John Steane in succession to Don Benson in 1975 there was also an increasing involvement in extensive recording of upstanding buildings.<sup>19</sup>

During his years as assistant field officer in the early 1970s, Mick Aston played an active part in developing and enhancing the SMR on a broad front, his earlier experience on moated sites, fishponds and deserted village sites in the West Midlands contributing to a spectacular expansion in the records of medieval earthworks, often including his own distinctive hachured sketch plans (Fig. 3). Mick also initiated the provision of transparent overlays to the basic record maps, portraying the distribution of ridge and furrow, and noting field-names, initially a by-product of work on the M40 described further below. His additional career in broadcasting had already begun, with regular talks on BBC Radio Oxford, and his ambition to reach the wider public was also reflected by a couple of motor trails guiding readers around features of interest in two regions of Oxfordshire. He even managed to find time to publish a substantial piece of research on one of Oxfordshire's distinctive local industries, the production of Stonesfield slate.<sup>20</sup>

The reorganisation of local government in 1974 considerably increased Oxfordshire's area by the addition of the Vale of White Horse from Berkshire. Fletcher's House at Woodstock then became the headquarters of the new Oxfordshire County Council's Department of Museum Services. Under the guidance of Richard Foster, who had succeeded Jean Cook as director in 1970, existing town museums in Banbury and Abingdon came under its administration, and new museums were opened, first in Oxford, to reflect the archaeology and history of the city, and then at Manor Farm, Cogges, primarily to depict the agricultural heritage of the county. It was a bonus that the farm at Cogges included a farmhouse with upstanding structure going back to the thirteenth century and a superb range of vernacular farm buildings, and that its immediate setting embraced a late eleventh-century ringwork castle, an alien Benedictine priory with a church surviving in parochial use and a partly thirteenth-century domestic range, a deserted village site, a failed medieval new town extension, a documented medieval fishpond and the ridge and furrow remains of open fields, all of which had considerable potential for future research.<sup>21</sup> Following the appointment of John Rhodes, who held the post of Keeper of Antiquities from 1972 to 1988, and whose career has recently been commemorated by a memorial volume,<sup>22</sup> the displays at Fletcher's House were completely reorganised to portray the evolution of the Oxfordshire landscape.

<sup>18</sup> D. Benson and A. Whittle (eds.), *Building Memories: The Neolithic Cotswold Long Barrow at Ascott-under-Wychwood, Oxfordshire* (2007).

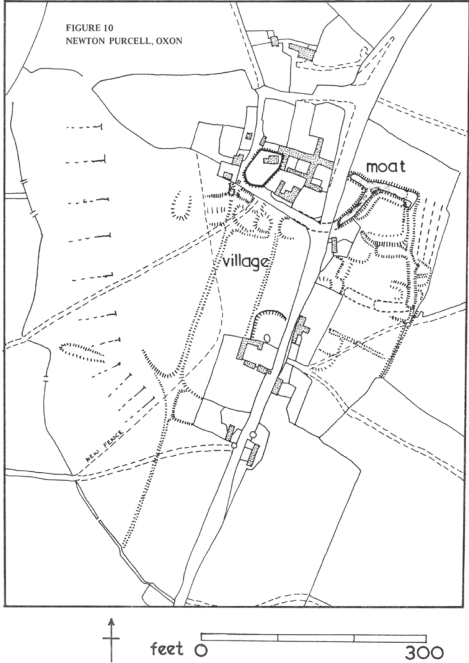
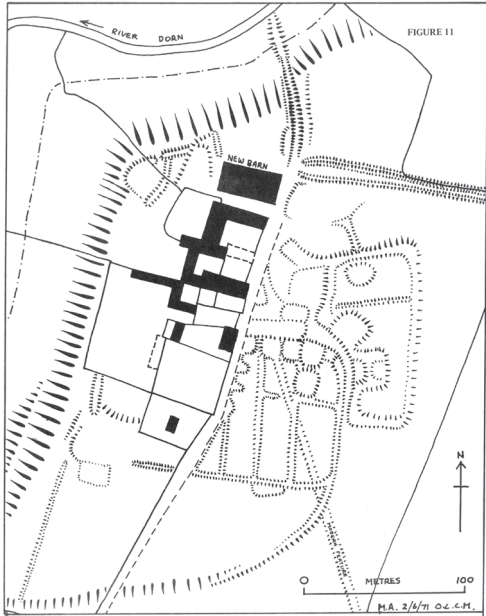
<sup>19</sup> Annual reports appeared in *SMidA*; J. Steane and J. Ayres, *Traditional Buildings in the Oxford Region, c.1300–1840* (2013).

<sup>20</sup> M. Aston, *Stonesfield Slate*, Oxfordshire County Council Department of Museum Services Publication, 5 (1974).

<sup>21</sup> T. Rowley and M. Steiner, *Cogges Manor Farm, Witney, Oxfordshire* (1996).

<sup>22</sup> Henig and Paine (eds.), *Preserving and Presenting the Past in Oxfordshire and Beyond*.

LOWER DORN FORD DMV, WOOTTON, OXON.



MOTTE & BAILEY, ASCOTT EARL.

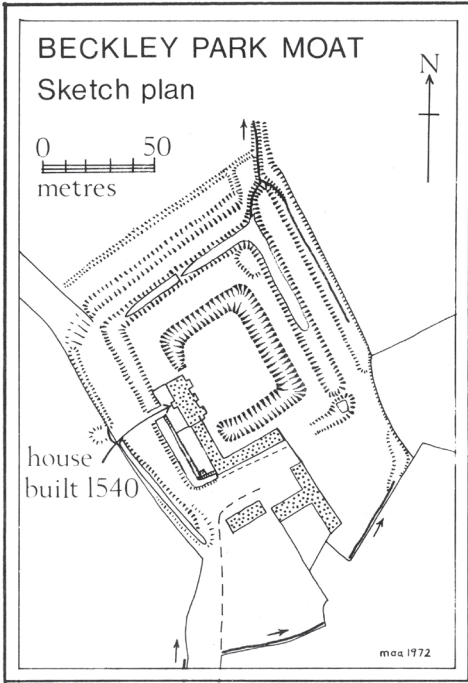
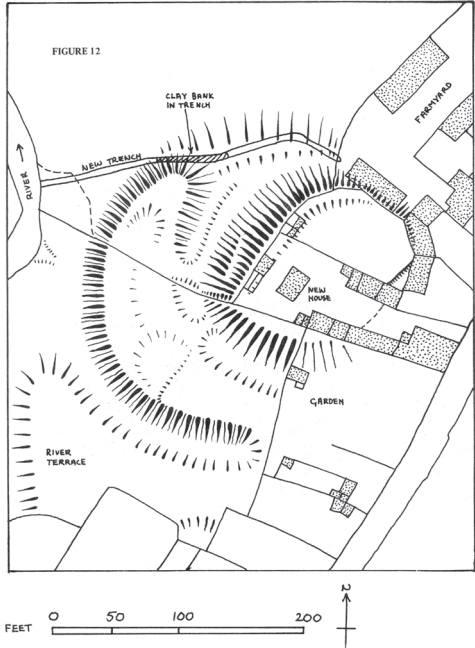


Fig. 3. Some of the hachured sketch plans produced by Mick Aston during the early 1970s while employed as Assistant Field Officer at the Oxford City and County Museum, Woodstock.

Aston left Oxfordshire for Somerset in 1974 and was replaced by James Bond, who continued to develop and expand the work which he had begun, increasing the number of measured earthwork surveys and expanding the field-name record. Contributions to conferences increasingly provided a specific incentive to revise and enhance particular parts of the SMR and to place 'sites' within a broader landscape context.<sup>23</sup>

As an institution, the Museum Service was involved in the collection and dissemination of information on archaeology, buildings and landscape in several different ways: most distinctively through its permanent and temporary displays; through public use of the SMR; through the educational activities of its staff at a variety of levels; through its own publications; and through a sequence of staff research projects on specific local topics (working-class housing, brick, tile and pottery manufacture, the brewing industry), recently reviewed by Sarah Gray.<sup>24</sup>

### *Oxford University*

W.G. Hoskins had been Reader in Economic History at Oxford from 1952 to 1965, during which time he co-authored with Martyn Jope the chapter on the Middle Ages for *The Oxford Region*, published in 1954 by the British Association for the Advancement of Science, and produced his seminal book *The Making of the English Landscape*, which concludes with a characteristically elegiac description of the view from his window at Steeple Barton (where he wrote the book), 'an epitome of the gentle, unravished English landscape'.<sup>25</sup> Hoskins's *Making of the English Landscape* was immensely influential in establishing landscape history as a distinct sub-discipline in its own right, and it was followed by the initiation of a series of county volumes, in which Oxfordshire was covered by Frank Emery, a university lecturer in historical geography. Emery's final chapter noted some of the contemporary pressures on the landscape which Hoskins himself had generally viewed with abhorrence, including the impact of industrialised farming, housing expansion and Dutch Elm disease.<sup>26</sup>

Until the 1990s the Institute of Archaeology of Oxford University was primarily a postgraduate research department and, while the Institute gained an international reputation, its attentions were never focussed upon local archaeology. Nevertheless, Professors Christopher Hawkes, Sheppard Frere and Barry Cunliffe all actively supported archaeology at a local level. Despite the lack of an undergraduate department, that encouragement led to the University Archaeological Society becoming actively involved (albeit intermittently) in the Oxford region. Among the work it undertook was an excavation on the badly damaged hill fort at Madmarston in the Oxfordshire Cotswolds, where reoccupation in the fourth century AD was demonstrated.<sup>27</sup> Under the direction of David Hinton the society also participated

<sup>23</sup> J. Bond, 'The Reconstruction of the Medieval Landscape: The Estates of Abingdon Abbey', *Landscape History*, 1 (1979), pp. 59–75; idem, 'The Small Towns of Oxfordshire in the Nineteenth Century', in T. Rowley (ed.), *The Oxford Region: Papers presented to a Conference to Mark 100 Years of Adult Education in Oxford* (1980), pp. 55–79; idem, 'Otmoor', T. Rowley (ed.), *The Evolution of Marshland Landscapes: Papers Presented to a Conference on Marshland Landscapes held in Oxford in December 1979* (1981), pp. 113–35; idem, 'Medieval Oxfordshire Villages and their Topography: A Preliminary Discussion', in D. Hooke (ed.), *Medieval Villages: A Review of Current Work*, Oxford University Committee for Archaeology Monograph, 17 (1985), pp. 101–23; idem, 'The Oxford Region in the Middle Ages', in G. Briggs et al. (eds.), *The Archaeology of the Oxford Region* (1986), pp. 135–59, 184–9.

<sup>24</sup> S. Gray, 'Research, Recording and Creativity: Oxfordshire Museums Service Exhibitions and Publications, 1974–1985', in Henig and Paine (eds.), *Preserving and Presenting the Past in Oxfordshire and Beyond*, pp. 75–83.

<sup>25</sup> W.G. Hoskins and E.M. Jope, 'The Medieval Period', in A.F. Martin and R.W. Steel (eds.), *The Oxford Region: A Scientific and Historical Survey* (1954), pp. 103–20; W.G. Hoskins, *The Making of the English Landscape* (1955), pp. 233–5.

<sup>26</sup> F. Emery, *The Oxfordshire Landscape* (1974).

<sup>27</sup> P. Fowler, 'Excavations at Madmarston Camp, Swalcliffe 1957–8', *Oxoniensia*, 25 (1960), pp. 3–48.



in the work on the M40 in the early 1970s.<sup>28</sup> Several members of OUAS, such as George Lambrick and Peter Fowler, went on to distinguished careers as professional archaeologists.

However, it was the Delegacy for Extra-Mural Studies (as it was known in the 1960s, after several changes of name now the Department for Continuing Education), which eventually took up the challenge. University extra-mural education had a long tradition, going back to the 1870s, when, in a rare manifestation of philanthropic conscience, Oxford and Cambridge each established an outreach programme of extension classes and divided up the country between them, providing such notable tutors as R.H. Tawney, G.D. Cole and Arnold Toynbee. After the end of the First World War the new provincial universities also began to establish extra-mural departments, and the government began funding universities to provide pastoral outreach programmes, mainly through evening classes and summer schools. Universities were given what was known as Responsible Body Status for specific designated areas, an informal but effective regional structure which was to provide the perfect vehicle for the new generation of archaeologists to respond to the challenges of the time.

In the West Midlands the Extra-Mural Department of the University of Birmingham became a powerhouse of activity within the counties of Warwickshire, Worcestershire, Herefordshire, Shropshire and Staffordshire, managing the limited rescue funds available and promoting the Council for British Archaeology's Regional Group 8 as an umbrella for all archaeological activity in the region, both professional and amateur. The subject and district staff tutors, including particularly Graham Webster, staff tutor in archaeology and Phil Barker, staff tutor for north Worcestershire, employed a small army of external part-time tutors to run weekly classes, day and weekend schools and training and research excavations. It provided many postgraduate students, including Mick Aston and James Bond, both of whom were then postgraduates in the Department of Geography, with their first experience in teaching – a steep learning curve at the best of times, but especially challenging when faced with adults with an enormous range of professional experience, skills and qualifications.<sup>29</sup>

Despite its involvement in the pioneer years of extra-mural education, Oxford had failed to maintain its early lead, and, philosophically and structurally, had hardly progressed since the 1930s. Dominated by trade union education and still recovering from damaging rifts in the 1950s involving the purging of a communist cell,<sup>30</sup> it was ripe for a takeover by archaeologists with a Birmingham background! In 1969, recognising the lack of a staff tutor in archaeology within the Oxford Delegacy for Extra-Mural Studies as 'a gaping hole in the region's archaeological arrangements', Don Benson drew up a memorandum arguing the case for such a post, which was taken forward to the Delegacy by Jean Cook as museum director. The need was accepted and later that year Trevor Rowley came to Oxford as first staff tutor in archaeology and local studies. Very quickly he was able to introduce those ideas and mechanisms which had been working so effectively in Birmingham.

The first major focus of the department's activity was a training excavation on the site of Middleton Stoney castle, directed jointly by Trevor Rowley and Don Benson. This was also the site of Mick Aston's first professional work in Oxfordshire as Don Benson's assistant (Fig. 4). In his autobiography Mick recalled how he lived in a tent on the site for the first month of his employment, to the consternation of the County Council, as they had no idea where to send his pay cheque.<sup>31</sup> Mick Aston organised the survey of the earthworks of the castle and the wider landscape survey, which was carried through to completion by a stalwart volunteer, Elizabeth Leggatt, wife of a local doctor. The castle itself produced many surprises: though initially it appeared to be a simple motte and bailey, it soon became evident that

<sup>28</sup> D.A. Hinton and T. Rowley (eds.), 'Excavations on the Route of the M40', *Oxoniensia*, 38 (1973), pp. 1–183.

<sup>29</sup> M. Aston, *Mick's Archaeology* (2000), p. 16.

<sup>30</sup> L. Goldman, *Dons and Workers* (1995), pp. 248–98.

<sup>31</sup> Aston, *Mick's Archaeology*, p. 17.



Fig. 4. Mick Aston taking part in the earthwork survey at Middleton Stoney, 1971. Photo: James Bond.

the 'motte' was a heap of spoil around the foot of a ruined stone tower; the arrangement of subsidiary enclosures was much more complex than had been anticipated; and the main building excavated within the rectilinear enclosure east of the tower was in fact that of a Romano-British farmstead.<sup>32</sup>

The department's archaeology provision expanded rapidly in the early 1970s in its responsible body area of Buckinghamshire, Berkshire and Oxfordshire. A number of evening classes were located in places where there were particular development pressures, such as Abingdon, Wallingford, Dorchester-on-Thames and along the proposed route of the M40. These helped to mobilise an archaeological response at grass-roots level. From its headquarters at Rewley House in Oxford, the department also began to organise a prestigious programme of day and weekend conferences aimed at both professional and part-time archaeologists and landscape historians. It fostered the development of the Council for British Archaeology's Regional Group 9 (South Midlands) as an organisation for the dissemination of the results of the work of local archaeological societies and individuals, by running its annual conference and publishing a new annual newsletter, the forerunner of *South Midlands Archaeology*. The Department also played a major role in promoting extra-mural archaeology and local studies on the national stage through its central support of the Standing Conference of Extra-Mural Tutors in Archaeology and its counterpart in Local History.<sup>33</sup>

A further important initiative was the establishment of a more formal training programme for archaeologists, including the introduction of new archaeology certificate qualifications and an in-service training course for the new generation of professional archaeologists. The

<sup>32</sup> S. Rahtz and T. Rowley, *Middleton Stoney: Excavation and Survey in a North Oxfordshire Parish, 1970–1982* (1984).

<sup>33</sup> A. Rogers and T. Rowley (eds.), *Landscapes and Documents* (1974).

latter were given training placements in the Oxfordshire Archaeological Unit and Oxfordshire Museum Services, among other places. The department had a flexibility in its remit not found elsewhere in the university, which made it the perfect vehicle for bringing about the changes required in the organization of regional archaeology. It was significant that Michael Heseltine, then Secretary of State for the Environment, announced the proposed establishment of English Heritage at a conference on Planning and the Historic Environment held at Rewley House in 1982. The department was actively involved in the publication of its own archaeological work, for example at Middleton Stoney,<sup>34</sup> of syntheses at both parish and county scale,<sup>35</sup> and of its conference proceedings.<sup>36</sup>

Mick Aston briefly returned to Oxford in 1978 to take up a temporary full-time post as Assistant Tutor in Local Studies, taking over and expanding the programme of local history and local studies courses to complement the archaeology courses. Within the year he had been tempted back to the West Country to take up a permanent post as tutor in archaeology at Bristol University's Extra-Mural Department.<sup>37</sup> The work of the local history programme in Oxford was successfully continued for many years by his successor, Kate Tiller.

#### *The Oxfordshire Archaeological Unit*

A proliferation of excavation committees in the 1960s (described below) had done much to increase funding, but with overlapping personnel there was inevitably some duplication of effort and resources. In 1973 it was decided to merge the existing committees into a single Oxfordshire Excavation Committee, and to establish an executive arm, the Oxfordshire Archaeological Unit, which would conduct the excavation programme.<sup>38</sup> The new unit took over the work of the Oxford Archaeological Unit, the Abingdon Excavation Unit, the Upper Thames Archaeological Committee, the M40 Archaeological Committee and the bodies that organized work in other towns such as Wallingford and Banbury.

The original concept of the Oxfordshire Archaeological Unit was as a full-time excavation team for the county, with a field officer for each of the five newly established local authority districts. Under the exceptional leadership of Tom Hassall, who had been director of the Oxford Excavation Committee, the new unit developed a specialised local knowledge and understanding of local conditions, and, in this capacity, it was an outstanding success. This territorial attachment disappeared with the advent of competitive tendering. Its modern commercial successor, Oxford Archaeology, continues to undertake sterling work within the county, but much of its effort is now engaged elsewhere in Britain and abroad.

#### *The Victoria County History*

The VCH has not previously been mentioned in this article, and for many of the general public it had a less visible presence than the organisations already described. Yet the importance of its programme of research and publication should not be underestimated. Two general volumes for Oxfordshire had been published in 1907 and 1939, but progress had then lapsed. A new local committee involving representatives of the university and local authorities in partnership with London University had been set up in 1949 to revive it, and a volume covering the university and colleges was issued in 1954. In 1965 local management of the project came under the wing of Oxfordshire County Council. Between 1957 and 1969 five further volumes were published under the editorship of Mary Lobel, covering mostly rural parishes in the centre, north, north-east and east of the county. While these volumes continued to be strong on the VCH's traditional concerns of manorial descent and church history, each parish section also had a

<sup>34</sup> Rahtz and Rowley, *Middleton Stoney*.

<sup>35</sup> Cook and Rowley, *Dorchester through the Ages*; Briggs et al., *The Archaeology of the Oxford Region*.

<sup>36</sup> T. Rowley and M. Breakell (eds.), *Planning and the Historic Environment*, 2 vols. (1975–7).

<sup>37</sup> Aston, *Mick's Archaeology*, pp. 19–20.

<sup>38</sup> B. Cunliffe et al., 'The Oxfordshire Archaeological Unit', *Antiquity*, 48 (1974), pp. 93–8; D. Miles, 'Oxford Archaeological Unit: The First Twenty Five Years', *Oxoniensia*, 63 (1998), pp. 1–10.

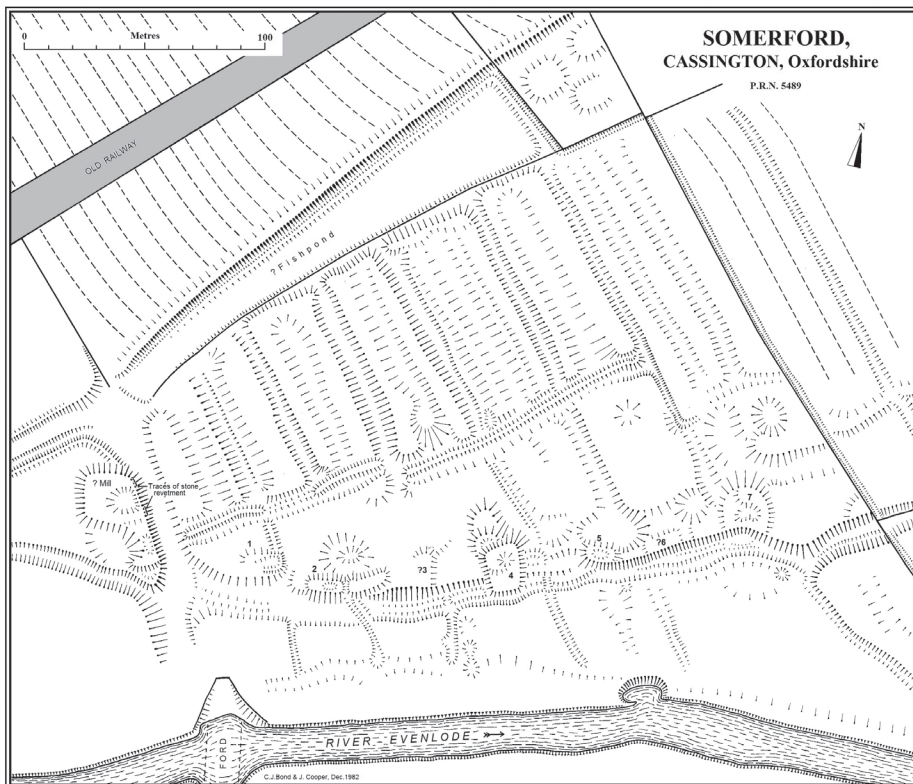


Fig. 5. Survey of earthworks of the deserted hamlet of Somerford near Cassington. Somerford had been identified from documentary records in the 1960s, but its precise location remained unknown until its discovery in 1982 by Janet Cooper during research for the VCH.

topographical introduction and a valuable section on economic history, and their recognition of the landscape as a source of evidence was generally in advance of its time, with many maps based upon earlier estate plans showing landscapes before parliamentary enclosure.

Improved liaison between the VCH and Oxfordshire Museum Services through the later 1970s was reflected in an improved coverage of archaeological matters, and some rewarding collaborative exercises. One example was the location of earthworks marking the site of the documented but previously elusive deserted hamlet of Somerford near Cassington, where the record in 1279 of seven homesteads and a water-mill, which disappear from the record after 1316, matched perfectly with the surveyed earthworks and datable pottery from molehills on the site (Fig. 5).<sup>39</sup> Subsequent volumes edited by Alan Crossley (1969–96) and by Simon Townley (2004–2012) have covered the city of Oxford, the market towns of Banbury, Woodstock, Witney and Henley, and further rural parishes in the north, west and south-east. The resources and procedures of the VCH, and, indeed, its very purpose, meant that it was not able to respond to the pressures of these years by adopting any major changes in format or by effecting any drastic acceleration in its output, and its relatively traditional style (notwithstanding a major redesign in 2002) and stately rate of progress inevitably attracted some criticism. Nevertheless, it set a standard for meticulous research, and provided an

<sup>39</sup> *Medieval Village Research Group, 30th Annual Report* (1982), pp. 9–10.

invaluable bedrock of solid information which no-one working in those parts of Oxfordshire which have received VCH coverage can afford to ignore; and in more recent volumes its level of detail, depth of coverage and attention to the landscape has continued to increase. This was exemplified by collaborative work with the South Oxfordshire Archaeological Group at Bix in 2007–10, coordinated by the VCH's then assistant editor Stephen Milesen.<sup>40</sup>

## KEY AREAS OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL ACTIVITY

The institutional and organisational changes described above made possible a more effective and integrated approach to what were seen as the greatest concerns of the time: the construction of the M40, the pressures of urban redevelopment, the accelerating rate of gravel extraction and the changes in agricultural practices which posed an insidious and unpredictable threat to earthworks, field patterns and other features of the historic rural landscape.

### *Motorway Archaeology*

Peter Fowler, staff tutor in archaeology in the Extra-Mural Department of the University of Bristol, had led the way in demonstrating that motorway construction was both a threat to archaeological sites and an opportunity to investigate a massive transect of different landscapes. His work along the line of the M5 had shown clearly that early settlements were not limited to areas of fertile soil and well-drained gravel terraces, but might be found on the most intractable clays, and that archaeological sites might be expected to turn up, on average, every half-mile of motorway construction.<sup>41</sup>

Plans for the first extension of the M40 motorway into Oxfordshire, from Stokenchurch to Waterstock Crossroads, were already well advanced by November 1970, when the M40 Research Group was established as a joint OUDES/OCCM venture to co-ordinate archaeological investigation along its course. This task would involve a small team of professional archaeologists and a considerable number of volunteers, many of them initially with little or no archaeological experience. Preliminary documentary work, including the location of field-names which might indicate the position of previously unknown sites, and intensive fieldwork were undertaken, prior excavation organised wherever possible, and then a watch undertaken during topsoil stripping and construction. The restrictions imposed by Health and Safety legislation had not yet come into force, and it was possible to walk along and inspect the motorway line at every stage (Fig. 6), a level of access which would be inconceivable today. Fifteen excavations took place over this nine-mile stretch, including Iron-Age sites at Heath Farm and Hailey Wood, Romano-British settlements at Milton Common and Lewknor, Anglo-Saxon cemeteries at Postcombe and Beacon Hill, a medieval assart settlement at Sadler's Wood, and shrunken and shifted village sites at Tetsworth and Lewknor. About half of these sites were discovered before construction began, the remainder being discovered during earth-moving, necessitating salvage excavation. The M40 was subsequently to be extended northwards and, even before the final route had been determined, preliminary work began within a wide study corridor to assess what sites might be affected (Fig. 7).<sup>42</sup>

### *Urban Survey and Excavation*

In the early 1960s the Oxford Excavation Committee was formed within the university with the primary objective of undertaking rescue excavation within the city, though it also carried out some work on the gravel terraces. Following publication in 1966 of Don Benson and Jean

<sup>40</sup> S. Milesen and D. Nicholls, 'The "Lost" Church of Bix Gibwyn', *Oxoniensia*, 76 (2011), pp. 15–37.

<sup>41</sup> P. Fowler, 'Motorways and Archaeology', in Rahtz, *Rescue Archaeology*, pp. 113–29.

<sup>42</sup> Hinton and Rowley (eds.), 'Excavations on the Route of the M40'.



*Fig. 6. Construction work on the M40 motorway extension through east Oxfordshire in 1972. Photos: Trevor Rowley.*

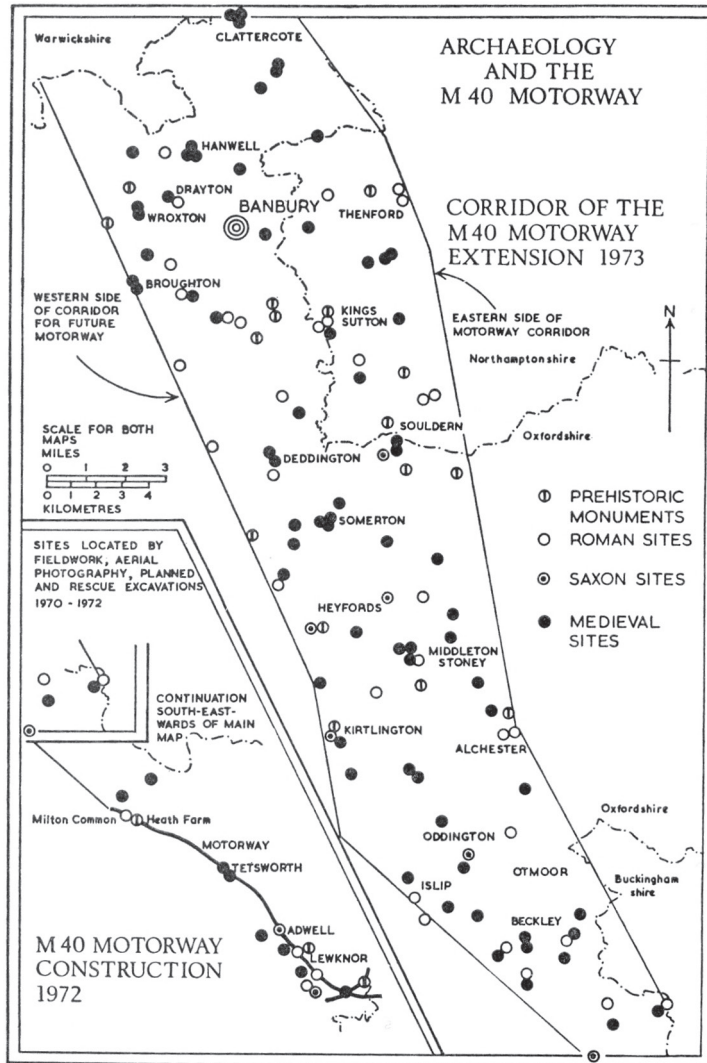


Fig. 7. The route of the M40 extension constructed in 1972 and the distribution of archaeological sites within the study corridor for the further extension through north Oxfordshire in 1973. Plans by Mick Aston.

Cook's report, *City of Oxford Redevelopment: Archaeological Implications*, the following year saw the formation of the Oxford Excavation Committee, which created a small permanent team of professional archaeologists under direction of Tom Hassall, supported by volunteer labour, to undertake excavations in the area of the next major phase of redevelopment, in St Ebbe's and the Westgate. Major work was undertaken on domestic tenement sites,<sup>43</sup> on the castle,<sup>44</sup> on the Franciscan friary<sup>45</sup> and on the Dominican friary,<sup>46</sup> and several summary

<sup>43</sup> T.G. Hassall et al., 'Excavations in St Ebbe's, Oxford, 1967-1976, Part II', *Oxoniensia*, 49 (1984), pp. 153-275, and 'Part I', *Oxoniensia*, 54 (1989), pp. 71-277.

<sup>44</sup> T.G. Hassall, 'Excavations at Oxford Castle, 1965-73', *Oxoniensia*, 41 (1976), pp. 232-308.

<sup>45</sup> Hassall et al., 'Excavations in St Ebbe's, Oxford, 1967-1976, Part I', pp. 140-94.

<sup>46</sup> G. Lambrick and H. Woods, 'Excavations on the Second Site of the Dominican Priory, Oxford', *Oxoniensia*,

syntheses were published.<sup>47</sup> In 1973 excavation within the city came under the auspices of the new Oxfordshire Archaeological Unit, which appointed a field officer (Brian Durham) to conduct excavations in the city (Fig. 8).

Even before the completion of the Westgate development, however, an economic downturn combined with increasing popular pressure for the conservation of buildings and townscapes had begun to reduce the likelihood of any further redevelopment on such a massive scale. Nevertheless, piecemeal redevelopment has continued, enforcing more rapid, small-scale excavations, which have continued to illuminate many aspects of the city's past.<sup>48</sup>

Outside Oxford, other historic towns, particularly Wallingford, Abingdon and Dorchester, were also perceived as particular rescue concerns, and a range of responses were organised largely by OUDES and OCCM working in concert. A significant boost to the confidence and morale of Oxfordshire archaeology came in 1972 when the archaeological bodies of the region combined to oppose and stop a major redevelopment at Wallingford castle.

Although some of the smaller market towns of Oxfordshire had been the subject of historical studies, before the 1960s they had attracted relatively little archaeological interest. However, publication of Maurice Beresford's *New Towns of the Middle Ages* in 1967 had drawn attention to the importance of medieval town planning. Beresford had been concerned primarily with towns planted on entirely new sites, but it was evident that many more towns which had originated as an urban extension to an older rural settlement nucleus showed similar evidence of planning. Urban fieldwork seemed almost a contradiction in terms, but it had amply been demonstrated that, even without excavation, much could be learned about the origins and growth of towns from examination of the layouts of their streets, market places, burgrave patterns and churches. Aston and Rowley's *Landscape Archaeology* included not only a plan of Thame, exemplifying a well-known medieval new town already discussed by Beresford, but also plans of six more Oxfordshire towns, which showed that they too contained some element of deliberate planning.<sup>49</sup>

The threat to the archaeology of English towns, including smaller market towns, had been identified at national scale by Carolyn Heighway.<sup>50</sup> Her report included Abingdon (then still in Berkshire) as a case study and, in that same year, the Abingdon Excavation Committee was established, with David Miles as its full-time director. Don Benson and Jean Cook's report on the archaeological implications of redevelopment in Oxford was followed up by assessments of Banbury and Wallingford,<sup>51</sup> the latter also transferred from Berkshire into Oxfordshire in 1974. In 1975 a survey of twenty historic towns in the newly enlarged county was published by the Oxfordshire Archaeological Unit, summarising the known archaeological, topographical, historical and architectural information as a basis for formulating a coherent policy for research and excavation within the framework of redevelopment.<sup>52</sup>

#### *Rescue Excavations on the Gravel Terraces*

Despite the efforts which had been put into *ad hoc* salvage excavations before the 1960s, it had become all too painfully evident that the archaeological response to the destruction of cropmark sites was utterly failing to keep pace with the accelerating demand for building

41 (1976), pp. 168–231; G. Lambrick, 'Further Excavations on the Second Site of the Dominican Priory, Oxford', *Oxoniensia*, 50 (1985), pp. 131–208.

<sup>47</sup> T.G. Hassall, *Oxford: The City Beneath your Feet* (1972); 'Archaeology of Oxford City', in Briggs et al. (eds.), *The Archaeology of the Oxford Region*, pp. 115–34.

<sup>48</sup> A. Dodd, *Oxford before the University*, Thames Valley Landscapes Monograph, 17 (2003).

<sup>49</sup> Aston and Rowley, *Landscape Archaeology*, pp. 98, 106.

<sup>50</sup> C. Heighway (ed.), *The Erosion of History* (1972).

<sup>51</sup> P.J. Fasham, 'Archaeological Implications of Redevelopment in Banbury', *Cake and Cockhorse* (1972), pp. 49–56; C. Simpson et al., *Wallingford: The Archaeological Implications of Development* (1974).

<sup>52</sup> K. Rodwell (ed.), *Historic Towns in Oxfordshire: A Survey of the New County*, Oxfordshire Archaeological Unit Survey, 3 (1975).





*Fig. 8. Late Saxon, medieval and post-medieval buildings and pits at 31–34 Church Street, St Ebbe's. This excavation was undertaken by the Oxford Archaeological Excavation Committee in 1968 before the building of the Westgate Centre, Oxford. Photo: G.S. Baker.*



Fig. 9. Large-scale rescue excavation on the gravel terraces at Stanton Harcourt in the early 1980s. Photo: Trevor Rowley.

aggregates, which was affecting hundreds of acres a year. In 1967 the Upper Thames Archaeological Committee was established to draw up a long-term policy for co-ordinating and conducting excavation on the Thames gravels between Lechlade and Goring. However, in the absence of any statutory framework, difficulties were encountered, both in securing sufficiently early access for adequate archaeological excavation prior to destruction, and in establishing a permanent excavation team. Into the 1970s rescue excavation shortly before or during gravel extraction continued to be organised by the Oxford City and County Museum and the university's Department for External Studies with the active co-operation of the local gravel companies, but it was recognised that this could only be a short-term measure. Moreover, changing perceptions were requiring 'a shift from the pot-type and rigid-period approach to one in which the landscape is viewed as an ever-changing whole, the activities of one generation of settlers offering restraints to succeeding generations...the broadly based study of developing ancient landscapes seems now to be not only possible but essential'.<sup>53</sup> The scale of the problem and its implications for conservation, research and rescue work were presented in the first attempt to map and identify the cropmark evidence over a large swathe of the Thames valley.<sup>54</sup> Subsequent excavations on gravel sites along the Thames have made a massive contribution to our understanding of early settlement and landscapes (Fig. 9).

#### *Research on Medieval Settlement and Landscape*

It is a sad irony that realisation of the richness of survival of evidence in the countryside for medieval rural settlement and agriculture coincided with a time of increasingly intensive farming methods, when fields were being enlarged and earthworks were being flattened

<sup>53</sup> B. Cunliffe, 'Preface', in Benson and Miles, *The Upper Thames Valley*, p. 7.

<sup>54</sup> Benson and Miles, *The Upper Thames Valley*.



Fig. 10. Aerial view of earthworks of deserted medieval hamlet of Pinkhill near Eynsham. Photo: Mick Aston, c.1973.

through ploughing. The 1960s and 1970s were a particularly exciting time in medieval rural settlement studies, as almost all aspects of the traditional ethnic, static and deterministic models were being undermined. Maurice Beresford's demonstration that large numbers of villages had become deserted in the later Middle Ages was reinforced in Oxfordshire by a county monograph based mainly on documentary evidence.<sup>55</sup> Even then it was evident that some deserted medieval settlement sites, which had survived in earthwork form for several hundred years, had been ploughed out within the very recent past. Mick Aston's extensive programme of fieldwork and sketch survey, allied with occasional forays into aerial photography (Fig. 10), was intended to provide at least a provisional record of the basic extent and character of earthworks which survived in the early 1970s. Some of these were subsequently destroyed without opportunity for more detailed survey, and the sketch-plans deposited in the SMR are now the only evidence for their existence. Equally significant was the demonstration through rapid survey that existing villages had also been subject to shrinkage, migration and changes in plan (Fig. 11).

The recognition of deserted and shrunken villages had already severely dented the old idea of medieval settlement patterns being fundamentally stable. That concept of stability since the days of the pioneer Anglo-Saxon settlements in the fifth and sixth centuries had been based, quite understandably, on the predominance of Old English place-names attached to villages which were still occupied in the twentieth century. The idea that the early Anglo-Saxon immigrants had settled in a heavily wooded and sparsely populated wilderness, ignoring the abandoned Roman towns and villas, had seemed equally well founded; while the doctrine of geographical determinism which placed emphasis upon favourable locations for settlements dictated by spring lines, positions above flood level, river crossings and 'natural' route foci still remained influential. However, all that was to change. Evidence was accumulating rapidly

<sup>55</sup> M.W. Beresford, *The Lost Villages of England* (1954); K.J. Allison et al., *The Deserted Villages of Oxfordshire*, Leicester University Department of English Local History Occasional Paper, 17 (1965).



Fig. 11. Aerial view of Somerton in the Cherwell valley: the hollow way and enclosures in the foreground represent part of the village abandoned probably in the fourteenth century. Photo: Mick Aston, c.1973.

for the primary clearance of virgin woodland having taken place at a much earlier period, in prehistory, for the density of later prehistoric and Romano-British settlement being much more intense than previously realised, extending into heavy clay lands as well as light fertile soils, and for the threads of continuity being much greater. New evidence was also emerging for the nature of the earliest medieval settlements and fields. At one time a distinction had been drawn on ethnic lines between 'indigenous' areas of dispersed settlement with small enclosed fields characterising the 'Celtic fringes' of the west, and the large nucleated villages and open strip fields of the Midlands and east, a pattern of settlement and farming supposedly imported by the early Anglo-Saxon settlers from their continental homeland. The pioneer salvage excavations at Sutton Courtenay undertaken intermittently between 1921 and 1937 by E.T. Leeds for the Ashmolean Museum during the course of commercial gravel extraction had already shown that early Anglo-Saxon settlements could be relatively short lived and on different sites to their later medieval successors, bearing little resemblance to them in terms of plan type.<sup>56</sup> Subsequent work demonstrated that this was not an atypical aberration. Margaret Gray's examination of 4.5 hectares of gravel terrace at New Wintles near Eynsham had revealed evidence of a diffuse hamlet of widely scattered post-built and sunken-featured buildings established in the sixth century and largely abandoned by the beginning of the eighth century.<sup>57</sup> The idea was just emerging that the typical large nucleated villages and open strip fields of the Midlands could not have been introduced by the pioneer Anglo-Saxon settlers, but must have developed over a wide area in the later Saxon period (Fig. 12).

<sup>56</sup> E.T. Leeds, 'A Saxon Village near Sutton Courtenay, Berkshire', *Archaeologia*, 73 (1923), pp. 147–92; idem, 'A Saxon Village at Sutton Courtenay, Berkshire (Second Report)', *Archaeologia*, 76 (1927), pp. 59–79; idem, 'A Saxon Village at Sutton Courtenay, Berkshire (Third Report)', *Archaeologia*, 92 (1947), pp. 79–93.

<sup>57</sup> M. Gray, 'The Saxon Settlement at New Wintles, Eynsham', in R.T. Rowley (ed.), *Anglo-Saxon Settlement and Landscape*, BAR BS, 6 (1974), pp. 51–5.

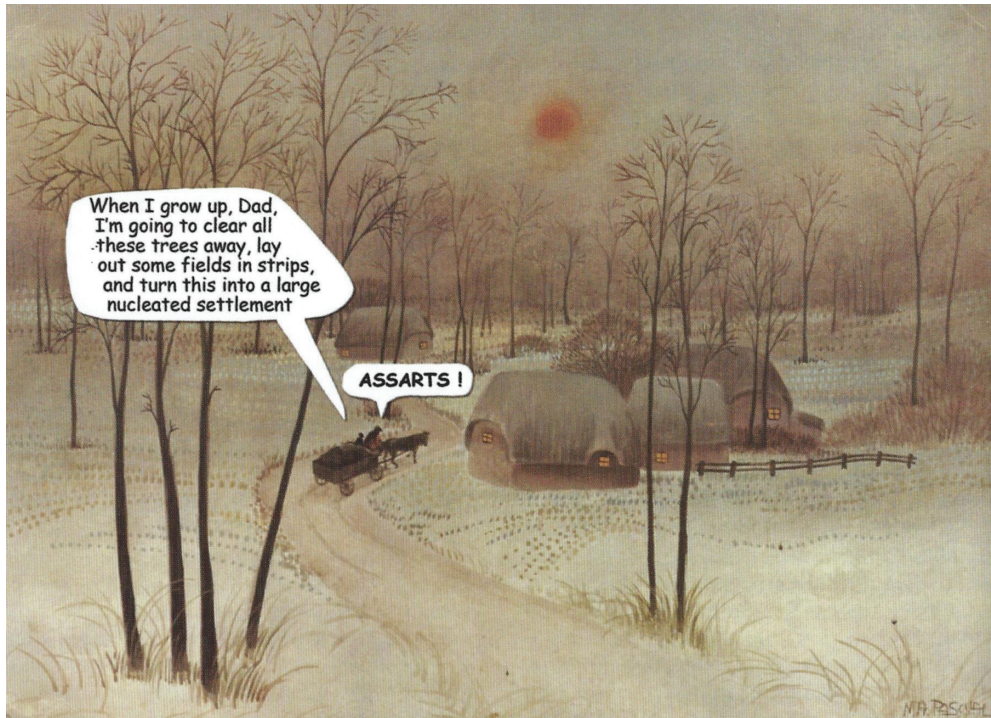


Fig. 12. A new model for medieval rural settlement: one of a long series of 'amended' Christmas cards exchanged between James Bond and Mick Aston, this illustration was extensively used by Mick in his lectures on villages and their origins.

The development and application of a more holistic approach has since produced particular rewards at Yarnton, where multi-disciplinary studies undertaken between 1989 and 1998 in advance of gravel extraction have thrown important new light upon changes in settlement form and location, and in agriculture and social organisation between the end of the Roman period and the Middle Ages.<sup>58</sup>

## POSTSCRIPT

It is all too easy to look back to events several decades ago through rose-tinted spectacles, and those who were directly involved in responding to the rapidly changing demands and expectations of that time were too frenetically busy to see it then as a 'golden age'. Though resources were generally improving, it had taken a great deal of struggle to achieve this, and more was always needed. Yet, from the perspective of the present, Oxfordshire between the mid 1960s and late 1970s was indeed a time and a place of real optimism, energy and progress. The various institutions, the university's Department for Continuing Education, the County Museum Service, the Archaeological Unit and the VCH all had clear, distinct and complementary aims and purposes, sufficient financial resources to achieve at least some of those purposes, and staff with the goodwill and commitment to work individually or together, often way beyond the hours they were paid for, whenever the need arose.

<sup>58</sup> G. Hey, *Yarnton: Saxon and Medieval Settlement and Landscape*, Thames Valley Landscapes Monograph, 20 (2004).

What happened to the wealth of enthusiasm, energy and goodwill that characterised much of the 1970s? Where did it go? It is probably unrealistic to imagine that such a level of commitment could have been sustained indefinitely; and in due course a combination of economic and political circumstances conspired to undermine and distort the vision of the 'golden age'. In some respects by the end of the 1970s the major argument had been won, and it was accepted that there had to be a sustained official response to threats to the historic environment. However, the new professional public rescue archaeological units which were subsequently created had to be formed against a background of national economic stringency and, after 1979, under a governmental obsession for privatisation. In addition to this, the new official mantra in response to any threat was that 'the developer must pay' for damage inflicted upon the national heritage. Thus the government neatly sidestepped much of its own financial responsibility for an integrated state archaeological service. Accordingly, the recently established public archaeological units became private charities and corporations, no longer linked to a specific region or locality. In order to survive they were obliged to compete with each other through a market-led tendering process. Thus the local social and geographical ties which had initially fostered those institutions were largely destroyed.

Local government was also experiencing traumatic changes. Successive national governments incrementally squeezed local authority resources to the extent that councils became increasingly unwilling or unable to finance any tasks unless they had a statutory obligation to do so. In the case of archaeology, this came down to the planning procedure. Accordingly, county archaeologists and their wonderful research archives, originally established in a wave of optimism (and, in Oxfordshire's case, located in a museum where public access had been positively encouraged), became mere bureaucratic tools, reduced to the necessary, but limiting, functions of servicing planning applications. Local authority involvement in local fieldwork and excavation became a distant memory.

Similar financial pressures on universities meant that the old extra-mural departments were also transformed; indeed, most of them simply passed out of existence altogether. The university outreach tradition, which had flourished and had served British archaeology so well after the Second World War, disappeared almost without trace during the first decade of the twenty-first century, a sour victory for the educational accountants at the expense of the community at large. Oxford University's Department for Continuing Education is one of the few survivors, but with a very different shape and agenda from that of the 1970s. The requirement to make all courses self-financing has meant that fee levels have increased to a level where large sections of the community are effectively excluded from participating in classes. Also, with the increased emphasis on studying for qualifications, the flexibility to respond to specific community needs has been significantly diminished. It was especially ironic that this decline in opportunities for public engagement had taken place over a period when, thanks to Mick Aston's hugely successful *Time Team* programmes on television, public interest in archaeology had never been greater. Mick was particularly scathing about the end of extra-mural archaeology in Britain, believing that it represented the pointless destruction of a precious legacy and the squandering of a great deal of public goodwill which had once worked to the mutual benefit of all concerned.

However, all is not gloom and doom. Although on a less extensive scale, enthusiasm, commitment and real achievement continue to be reflected in the active work of some local societies, such as the Wallingford Historical and Archaeological Society (founded in 1974), and in specific community projects. In particular, Archaeox, the East Oxford Archaeology and History Project (2009–15), based at OUDCE, has been an outstanding success story, introducing archaeological investigation and community involvement to a traditionally neglected area of Oxford in a manner reminiscent of the best pioneering archaeology projects of the 1970s.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>59</sup> [www.archaeox.net](http://www.archaeox.net); J. Harrison and D. Griffiths, *The Archaeology of East Oxford: Archaeox, the Story of a Community*, forthcoming (Oxford, 2016).