Excavations at Magdalen College, Oxford

Medieval and Later Suburban Tenements and the Cemetery of the Hospital of St John

by Steve Teague, Helen Webb, Louise Loe and Ben M Ford

with specialist contributions by
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Illustrated by
Charles Rousseaux and Magdalena Wachnik

Thames Valley Landscapes Monograph No. 47
2026
Archaeopress Archaeology

ARCHAEOPRESS PUBLISHING LTD
13-14 Market Square
Bicester
OX26 6AD
United Kingdom
www.archaeopress.com

Oxford Archaeology
Janus House, Osney Mead
Oxford
OX2 0ES
United Kingdom
www.oxfordarchaeology.com

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978-1-80583-358-1 (Print)
978-1-80583-359-8 (eBook)

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Front cover: Post-medieval Buildings 9 and 10 and boundary wall 3312 during excavation
Rear cover: Glass bottle seal from Magdalen College Common Room dated 1769, from demolition of Building 9; a selection of ceramic wig curlers from the same deposit; amber and jet paternoster beads, lost or discarded in 14th/15th century drain 8077; medieval tuning pegs from Tenement B

The publication and appendices are available on the Oxford Archaeology Knowledge Hub at https://knowledge.oxfordarchaeology.com/12921

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Typeset by Production Line, Oxford

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Summary

Excavations within the New Library and Longwall Quad of Magdalen College revealed a complex sequence of well-preserved archaeological remains dating from the 10th century to the mid-19th century. The site was located in Oxford's former eastern extramural suburb, and large parts of three tenements dating from the 12th century were revealed, which succeeded late Anglo-Saxon ditches relating to a land boundary and one or more possible trackways. To the north of the tenements was a cemetery that contained at least 112 individuals, including adults, children and infants, in addition to which three neonatal burials were located within the tenements. Bayesian modelling and DNA analysis suggests that the cemetery was in use between the late 12th and early 13th centuries and is likely to belong to the as-yet unlocated first foundation of the Hospital of St John the Baptist. Several buildings, initially in timber and then from the 13th century in stone, were revealed along the High Street frontage and later expanded towards the rear of the tenements that hitherto contained many rubbish and quarry pits. By the 13th century two of the tenements incorporated smithies, and a large quantity of iron-smithing slag was recovered from both the floors and hearths of the buildings and from the fills of pits to the rear. One tenement was under the occupancy of Adam Faber, who was recorded as having a forge there in 1246–7. The animal bone, finds and documentary evidence suggest that the two tenements were also used for the shoeing and caring of horses. From the late 15th century, the tenements were rebuilt and took on a more domestic function, though little evidence beyond this date survived along the frontage area. Demolition deposits associated with a building to the rear of one tenement that dated to the late 17th century contained over 3600 pipeclay wig curlers, believed to be the largest assemblage found on an archaeological site. A date for the deposit was provided by a wine bottle seal marked 1769, when documentary evidence shows that the tenement was under the occupancy of John Broughton, a barber and perukemaker. Evidence for 18th- and early 19th-century buildings was found in an adjacent tenement, which was the site of the Greyhound Inn on the corner of Longwall Street.

Acknowledgements

Oxford Archaeology would like to acknowledge the assistance, patience and understanding offered by all the many Magdalen College staff who have been involved in this project over the past eight years, in particular the current bursar Yong Shen and former bursars Rory Maw and Charles Young, for their support during the various phases of the work. We would also like to thank Dr Christine Ferdinand, former Fellow Librarian, for her interest and enthusiasm during the project, Robert Langley, College Surveyor, for his patience and perseverance throughout all stages of the archaeological site work and reporting, and Dr Robin Darwall-Smith, former College Archivist, for his invaluable support and interest and for the initial thorough review and report on the relevant historic records held in the college archive. Magdalen student Amanda James undertook research into isotopic evidence for the diet of children buried in the medieval cemetery, and we would like to thank her for sharing her results and also thank Dr Zena Kamash, former Director of Studies in Archaeology, for facilitating the study. Thanks are also due to David Radford, Oxford City Archaeologist, who offered a significant amount of time and advice throughout the project.

The project was managed for Oxford Archaeology by Ben M Ford. The various episodes of evaluation trenching and digging of geological test pits in 2011 and 2012 were directed on site by Project Officer Paul Murray, assisted by a team comprising Robin Bashford, Mike Donnelly, Peter Lovett, Kevin Moon, Chris Richardson and Helen Webb. The main excavations were directed in 2012 by Chris Pickard and Dan Sykes and in 2013 and 2014 by Chris Pickard, with Natalie Anderson serving as Site Supervisor and team members James Archer, Ben Attfield, Robin Bashford, Tom Black, Kathryn Blackbourn, Sophie Bojadziev, Benjamin Brown, Martin Campbell, Ian Cook, Sharon Cook, Maria Diaz Tena, Adam Fellingham, Felicia Fricke, Mark Fussey, Mark Gibson, Jack Goodens, Mariusz Gorniak, Lee Grana-Nicolaou, Rose Grant, Victoria Green, James Harriss, Christof Heistermann, Trevor Jose, Lisa Kennard, Richard Kevill, Alex Latham, Rupert Lotherington, Peter Lovett, Javier Martinez-Jimenez, Ben Mcandrew, Claire Mcglenn, Michael Mclean, Julia Meen, Kev Moon, Benn Penny-Mason, Nik Petek, Chris Pickard, Chris Pickard, Emily Plunkett, Meirion Prysor, Chris Richardson, Joanne Robinson, Alice Rose, Thomas Rose-Jones, Charles Rousseaux, Benjamin Slader, Ben Slader, Lee Sparks, Jeremy Stone, Daniel Strachan, Ashley Strutt, Nicholas Swift, Nicholas Taylor, Sian Thomas, Jennifer Thurstan, Helen Webb, Suzanne Westall and Alistair Zochowski. Historic building recording was undertaken by Angela Warner. Copyediting was by Rachel Tyson.

We are also grateful for the on-site help of John Bell, Mike Smith, Cathlin Beaumont and Darren Smyth of Gardiner Theobald, who were construction managers for the Enabling Works and the 2012 excavation, and of Michael Harper, Dave Murphy, Peter McDonald, Tom Wakeford and Paul Grandi of Stepnells Ltd, the main contractor throughout the 2013 and 2014 construction works. The evaluation could not have been completed without the ever-reliable and skilled staff of David Beecrofts Ltd, who supplied the plant and drivers, and thanks are also owed to Dave Sabin and Kerry Donaldson of Archaeological Surveys Ltd, who carried out the geophysical survey of Longwall Quad.

We would like to thank Magdalen College for granting permission to reproduce the images in Figures 1.6, 6.5 and 6.6, the British Library for Figure 6.2 and the Bodleian Library for Figure 6.4.