Press release: Oxford flood alleviation scheme uncovers a piece of the city's history

The findings include ancient road surfaces, culverts, pottery, and other objects which have helped date an ancient crossing point of the River Thames and its tributaries, at what is now known as Old Abingdon Road.

The Oxford flood alleviation scheme project team commissioned the archaeological study as part of the detailed design for the scheme. Part of the proposed scheme is to construct new culverts to carry flood water beneath the road. These investigations have enabled the team to carefully plan where the new culverts will go to minimise impact on the ancient structures lying beneath.

The route of the Old Abingdon Road is thought to be part of a stone or earth causeway known as Grandpont, which also includes Folly Bridge, built by Robert d'Oilly who built Oxford Castle in 1071. Grandpont had over 30 different arches or culverts which crossed the rivers, streams and marshes in the area, with over 7 of these thought to be beneath the Old Abingdon Road. The causeway may have dated from the Saxon period as there is evidence of 2 fords in this area from that time (source: Historic England).

From past investigations in this area it is believed that there were culverts beneath the road dating from Norman (1066 to 1154) and later medieval (12th to late 15th century) times. The culverts were designated 'scheduled monuments' in October 2012. Our findings suggest there are more culverts along this road.

Joanna Larmour, Project Director, said:

> Our archaeologists found that as the ground was quite compacted beneath the various road surfaces, they had to use hand digging tools to complete their investigations.
>
> We found some great pieces, including pottery shards from a medieval jug, a horseshoe from the late 17th Century to 18th century and most importantly for us, evidence of ancient culverts. These all help us understand just how long this has been a river crossing and a route into Oxford.

The investigation found a total of 6 pottery shards, 4 pieces of clay tobacco pipe, 2 pieces of ceramic building material, 6 iron finds including nails, a horseshoe, a connecting piece from a harness, 7 pieces of glass from a post-medieval bottle or flask, and a window pane.

These were all hidden amongst a series of medieval and post-medieval road

surfaces which the team had to break through to get to the oldest features underneath.

In addition, the investigations found some structural features including stone kerb, a roadside ditch likely to be from the 12th Century, and a culvert, now demolished, which is likely to be Norman or Medieval similar to the known, scheduled culverts.

From these finds and using existing historical knowledge, we can build up quite a picture of life in this area.
The type of soils and gravels in this area suggest that it had firmer soil deposits than the rest of the floodplain, and indicate why it was chosen as a suitable crossing point of the River Thames. The medieval causeway was probably cambered, with drainage ditches either side carrying run off into the streams of the Thames that ran beneath the causeway in a stone culvert. The other culverts in this area have a raised roof, and if this culvert had the same, the causeway would have had a hump-back at this point. From the artefacts found, we know that the route has been used as a crossing from medieval times, up to the present day.

In the late 17th to 18th centuries, the route underwent a major rebuild, which we can tell from the deposits and material that we found. It is possible that this is when our culvert was demolished. The surfaces from this time lie within a series of kerb stones.

The Oxford flood alleviation scheme project team have shared these finds with Oxford City and County Archaeologists as well as Historic England (due to their responsibility for scheduled ancient monuments). They will follow this work up with more archaeological investigations in different locations in the scheme area, which will be completed over the coming months.

Catherine Grindey, Senior Archaeologist for the Environment Agency, said:

> From our perspective, the archaeological evaluation was a great success. We have had many questions answered and have better information on which to base our plans.

This knowledge means that the team can finalise the scheme design in the Old Abingdon Road area, and ensure it has minimal impact on the history beneath the road.

The detailed design of the scheme will be shared at a public consultation from 5 May to 6 June 2017, which will be run both online and at a series of 4 events in the scheme area:

- 2pm to 8pm, Thursday 11 May 2017 at West Oxford Community Centre, OX2 0BT
- 2pm to 8pm, Friday 12 May 2017 at South Oxford Community Centre, OX1 4RP
- 2pm to 8pm, Monday 15 May 2017 at Oxford Deaf and Hard of Hearing Centre, OX1 1RL
- 2pm to 8pm, Thursday 18 May 2017 at St Luke’s Church, OX1 4XB

The consultation will also give local communities the opportunity to give feedback about some of the scheme features they have told us they are most interested in, such as the new bridges we will be installing, footpath furniture and signage.

Keep up-to-date with the scheme via the Oxford flood scheme webpage, via our Facebook page, on Twitter and via our scheme newsletter. If you would like to sign up for our newsletter, please email oxfordscheme@environment-agency.gov.uk.

Notes to editors

The Oxford flood alleviation scheme is a partnership project involving the Environment Agency, Oxfordshire County Council, Oxford City Council, Vale of White Horse Council, Oxford Flood Alliance, The Oxfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership, University of Oxford, Thames Water and Thames Regional Flood and Coastal Committee.

The scheme will involve lowering parts of the floodplain and widening some of the rivers and streams that run through it, to create more space for floodwater, and reduce flood risk to the city. It is currently estimated to cost £120 million.

For media enquiries Mon-Friday 9am to 5pm please call 03708 506 506. After this time, please call the Duty Communications Officer on 0800 141 2743.