

EYNESHAM ABBEY FISHPONDS

ARCHAEOLOGICAL APPRAISAL REPORT

INTRODUCTION

This short report presents a summary of the Eynsham Abbey fishponds' history, an assessment of their archaeological significance and potential, and a brief discussion of future management.

Work has concentrated on

- examination and analysis of information held in the Oxfordshire County Sites and Monuments Record;
- other research, principally in various publications (eg M Aston and J Bond (eds) 1988, *Medieval Fish, Fisheries and Fishponds in England*);
- several site visits, in some cases with other specialists from the project team;
- a brief discussion with Mr Hugh Coddington of the County Archaeology Service, who has responsibility for archaeology within the planning and development control process in west Oxfordshire; and
- an initial appraisal of the character and depth of soils filling up the ponds, carried out with a manual auger on 15 October 2004. Hugh Coddington had been supportive of this approach as a simple and rapid method of at least starting to gather basic archaeological information about the ponds.

The Sites and Monuments Record contains a relatively small amount of information (reflecting the lack of archaeological work on the ponds to date), but the material held there is useful nevertheless. It consists of an index card (Primary Record Number 4615) referenced to the sources in the SMR:

- a short published description of the ponds (CBA Group 9 Newsletter No 8 (1978), pages 65 and 67, with a sketch plan);
- some aerial photographs, especially a Fairey Air Surveys vertical photo from 1961 (ref 4.031.2);
- various manuscript notes and sketches from the 1970s by James Bond and John Steane, both formerly of the County Archaeology/Museums Service;
- a few items of correspondence, including an interesting letter from James Bond to Mr J Fletcher regarding local concern about a 'proposal' (possibly only rumoured) to "straighten out the Chil Brook and to relandscape the area of the abbey fishponds with ornamental pools"! – evidently any such proposal came to nothing; and
- an internal report on the ponds written by James Bond, dated 30.5.1979.

The SMR also includes the results of a rapid, desk-based re-appraisal of all the county's documented fishponds. I will return to this shortly. Suffice it to say for now that the importance of the ponds has long been recognised, but that they remain as they always have been, unprotected by statutory designation.

SUMMARY HISTORY

- The ponds cannot pre-date the early 13th century, as the ground they occupy was privately owned until 1217 when the abbey bought this land in order to extend the monastic precinct.¹
- Bond was only able to find a single direct documentary reference to the abbey's fishponds, dating to c 1360 and describing a 'large and well-planted garden with fish ponds recently made'. This could refer either to the ponds in question, or a smaller set a little further to the east. I incline to the latter, and see no reason why the main ponds should be other than 13th century in date. In many ways, of course, the exact date scarcely matters – these are clearly medieval, monastic fishponds.
- The ponds appear to have gone out of use soon after the Dissolution of the Monasteries (1536-9), though they were still remembered for what they had been at the beginning of the 18th century. The Thames Water pipeline excavations in 1991-2 largely concentrated on the moated site ("Harvey's House") but did look at parts of the water system associated with the ponds. It was notable that virtually no post-medieval material of any sort was found at any stage in the project.
- The ponds will have silted up gradually once they were no longer being maintained. By the middle of the 20th century they had become no more than earthworks, though still with traces of the original watercourses associated with the ponds. The Fairey air photo referred to above shows that the ponds were in much better condition in 1961 than they are now, especially at the west end. Some tipping/infilling must have occurred in the late 1960s or early 1970s, though there is no direct reference to any specific known event in the SMR.
- As we know, the ponds passed into the ownership of the National Playing Fields Association (1980s?), though largely by accident as they were primarily interested in the land now occupied by the sports field – the ponds were presumably part of the same overall land parcel.
- The Royal Commission on the Historic Monuments of England surveyed the ponds at my request in the early 1990s. Until the current project, this was the only formal archaeological work carried out on the ponds directly so far, though as already noted the Thames Water pipeline project in 1991-2 did offer the opportunity to look at the moated site and some aspects of the channels associated with the ponds.

AUGER RESULTS

The fishponds fall into two groups of three to either side of a central row of immature trees running north-south from close to the north-west corner of the moated site. The ponds to the west of this seem to have been the most affected by modern fly tipping. Initial attempts to probe the depth of deposits here consistently met with obstructions that appeared to be consistent with rubble or similar coarse fill at depths of around 0.3m. Augering was therefore restricted to the eastern ponds. Two bores were made in the first pond to the east of the tree line (ie Pond 4), and a third was sunk in the next

¹ See Bond C J 1992, The fishponds of Eynsham Abbey, *The Eynsham Record* 9, 3-17; Keevill G D 1995, *In Harvey's House and God's House: Excavations at Eynsham Abbey 1991-3* Thames Valley Monograph No 6, especially 4-28.

pond to the east (Pond 5). Further partial cores were taken in this pond, and also in the clearly defined water channel that runs along its north and east edges.

The two augers in Pond 4 went through a fairly stiff deposit of silty clay with occasional very small flecks of stone, and a few snail shells were noted. The soil was reminiscent of compacted leaf mould in its upper levels, with a more developed, very dark grey clay content (most probably caused under waterlogged oxygen-free conditions) towards the base of the profile. This was reached in both bores at a depth of *c* 1.2m below current surface level, when the auger came down to an impenetrable gravelly layer. While it is impossible to be certain that this was the natural river gravel, it was at about the level expected in this area (based on data from the 1991-2 Thames Water excavations). The auger in Pond 5 started from a somewhat higher surface level, and thus it was not entirely surprising that the core penetrated to a depth of *c* 1.5m before stopping on what may be taken as the same gravelly material. The upper soils were also similar to those in Pond 4, but the basal clay was of a mid-brown colour (with some waterlogged grey clay above it). This bottom layer may have been a deliberately laid impervious lining to prevent loss of water into the gravel below, though this must be no or than conjecture until more extensive work can be carried out. The partial cores in Pond 5 provided results consistent with those just described. The sampling in the channel, however, seemed to confirm previous observations by Paul and Verity Hughes as part of this project, which suggested that the channel had a stone-lined base at a level significantly higher (at least 0.5m) than the apparent base level of the ponds. This is consistent with the need to create a gravity feed of water from the channel into the ponds, ie a fall of water from the one to the other.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE AND POTENTIAL

Bond's 1979 report makes it clear that the county's archaeological officers felt that the ponds were vulnerable to unwitting or deliberate damage because they were not statutorily protected as Scheduled Monuments (often described as Scheduled Ancient Monuments). He clearly felt that they deserved to be protected in this way, but at that time the county had been unable to persuade the Department of the Environment (the English Heritage of the day) that this should be the case – or at least had been unable to get any response from them!

More recently Susan Lisk, the current SMR Officer, assessed all the county's ponds as noted above. This work was entirely desk-based, ie it did not involve any site visits but simply a trawl through the information in the SMR itself. This is likely to have lead to a lower score for many of the ponds, including those at Eynsham. The scores were based on the system used to determine whether a site is sufficiently important to be designated as a Scheduled Monument. Sites are assessed against criteria such as survival/condition, potential, archaeological and historical documentation, group value, diversity and amenity value. In all, 170 sites were assessed, and 73 were looked at in detail to see if they warranted designation. The Eynsham ponds received the seventh highest mark in the county (31, I believe out of a possible total of 48), and clearly passed the test in terms of Schedulable quality. Hugh Coddington also felt that the ponds deserved to be Scheduled, but given various events within English Heritage,

and the current review of the entire designation system, there seems to be little prospect of imminent action.

In terms of archaeological potential, there is no doubt in my mind that this is exceptional despite the relatively recent damage. In fact this may not have had much of a negative impact on the ponds' archaeological interest, as the dumping of material should have caused only limited damage through physical compaction of lower soil horizons. The apparent fact that the ponds have been unmanaged since the 16th century (or perhaps slightly later) suggests that both the structure of the ponds (and associated water channels) and associated silt/soil layers within them should be in good condition. Even a rapid visual examination of the earthworks supports this – though not easy to appreciate, it is clear that the various banks and channels do preserve the basic form of the original ponds.

This is not to say that the ponds are untouchable archaeologically. Excavations on ponds elsewhere have shown that they were commonly kept very clean through regular drainage and maintenance during the medieval period (and afterwards, when they continued in use). There may not be all that much of interest lying in situ on the bottom of the ponds, therefore, though this would need to be established by further fieldwork. Any in situ layers could be of very considerable interest as they might contain fish bones, associated finds such as net/line weights, or even remnants of fish traps. Organic materials such as leather and wood might also survive in oxygen-free waterlogged conditions towards the bottom of the ponds. In summary, the ponds and associated features have very considerable archaeological potential, but the precise extent of this can only be demonstrated by further archaeological fieldwork.

FUTURE MANAGEMENT – INITIAL THOUGHTS

The current lack of management and relatively poor physical (but not archaeological) condition is a potential threat to the ponds' future. Archaeologically I see no reason to oppose an improved management regime, so long as archaeological concerns are taken fully into account. Even a simple programme of annual maintenance should improve matters, while there is some potential for improvement (especially to habitat) and perhaps even partial re-instatement. Obviously this would need to be carefully designed from all perspectives (archaeology, ecology, safety etc), and should be limited in extent. Available resources are likely to point in the same direction unless substantial grant aid is forthcoming. The most important point, however, is that more archaeological information is needed before any major proposals can be considered. The augering has provided the first step in this process, but I have no doubt that some trial excavations will be needed in the future if we are to suggest anything much more than simple maintenance.

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