

Two Medieval Smithies at Newington, Oxfordshire

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This article reviews archaeological work by SOAG in the early 1980s and its follow-on some 20 years later. The result of the more recent work was the recovery of two early Medieval smithies, of which there are only a few in the country. Fieldwalking by SOAG has confirmed the existence of buildings shown on a late 16th-century map.

Preamble

Between 1983 and 1986 South Oxfordshire Archaeological Group undertook a programme of archaeological interventions in the grounds of Newington House, Newington, Oxfordshire (Fig. 1). A recording action, test-pitting, and excavation were carried out at Park Field, Newington House; and field-walking at Great Bowling Field, east of the A329; documentary research was undertaken at the Bodleian, at Christ Church, Canterbury and at the Oxfordshire County Record Office. All this work was carried out under the direction of Cynthia Graham Kerr and her enthusiastic team of amateur archaeologists (Fig. 2).

The Sealed Knot (SK) had been invited by a previous owner, Christopher Maltin, to demonstrate a Civil War period encampment at Newington House, which would have been newly built in the mid 16th century. With Cyn, a number of SOAG members visited, and Medieval pottery was collected from a mocked-up well. Subsequently the palisaded ditch, excavated by SK, was recorded (Fig. 3).

However, by 1986 the project was coming to a close and despite the keen involvement of a number of people on various parts of the project, the archive was put aside, along with the research, and largely forgotten. A few notes had crept out in the regional publication of the Council for British Archaeology (CBA), South Midlands Archaeology (SMA) every year during the project, which ended up on the county's Sites and Monuments Record (SMR), now the Historic Environment Record. Similarly the site is recorded on the National Monuments Record, but in both cases the details are insufficiently accurate.

Some twenty years later, in 2006, the present owner applied for planning permission to create a lake in the gardens at Newington House. As the precise location of the previous works was not known, a watching brief condition was felt to be sufficient to cover all eventualities.

Machining commenced and almost immediately stone footings were revealed. Further cleaning of the excavated surfaces revealed extensive evidence of ditches, pits and postholes. Sampling of the features revealed a date-range from the 11th to 13th centuries.

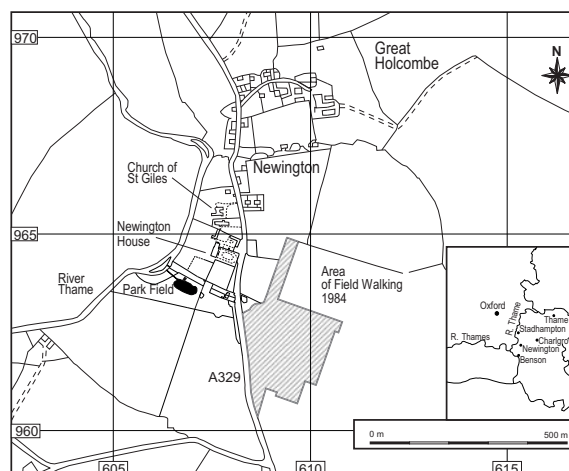


Fig. 1. Newington, showing location of interventions in text



Fig. 2. SOAG at Newington House



Fig. 3. SOAG recording Sealed Knot trench

The structure – it was clear – was more than a domestic building: it was a smithy of which there are only a half-dozen or so Medieval examples in England; most of which are later Medieval or early post-Medieval in date and none from Oxfordshire.

The landowner was in a position whereby either to continue or to backfill would require further work, neither of which were options in the context of such a singular find. At this point English Heritage (EH) was approached for help in concluding the excavation. Following site visits by EH, and a Written Scheme of Investigation and fieldwork budget prepared by JMHS under tight time-constraints, EH generously provided funds enabling the conclusion of the dig.

Due to weather conditions, the digging extended over the next couple of months but it covered the complete excavation of the 13th-century smithy and the partial excavation or recording of a further four structures, in addition to pits, ditches, a palaeochannel, and midden deposits. Following completion of the fieldwork, JMHS made contact with SOAG and were kindly lent the SOAG archive, enabling the identification of a further building at Park Field, and tying the two campaigns of fieldwork together.

Topography & geology

The site, which is on a bluff on the east bank of the Thames overlooking the river between Chiselhampton and Dorchester-on-Thames, is located on a plateau at the foot of the rolling landscape between the Chilterns and the Thames Valley. The geology is the Gault Clay, although some Head gravel deposits are also present.

Prehistoric

Fieldwalking in Great Bowling Field (Fig. 1) by SOAG recovered a modest assemblage of prehistoric pottery. There is no other prehistoric activity recorded in the immediate vicinity of Newington and it is hard to put the pottery in its context. A few residual flint flakes were also recovered during the JMHS excavations, although there was no flint in the SOAG archive. However, the pottery does indicate prehistoric settlement in the environs of Newington, which given the proximity of the River Thames is unsurprising; it is perhaps worth bearing in mind the amount of prehistoric activity along the river. In the environs of Thames, there is much Mesolithic, Neolithic and later prehistoric occupation on both sides of the river, indicating the colonisation and use of the landscape from early prehistory.

Roman

Roman pottery was picked up by SOAG in Great Bowling Field during fieldwalking; residual sherds of Roman pottery were also recovered from a number of later Medieval features from the excavations by JMHS in Park Field. A number of the sherds found by JMHS were unabraded and did not appear to have moved far. This indicates the strong possibility of Roman activity – perhaps a small riverside settlement – in the vicinity of the confluence of the Thames and the unnamed tributary at the foot of Great Bowling Field. Certainly to the south-east Roman activity was found during the excavation of the Aylesbury-Chalgrove

pipeline, and of course to the west, Dorchester was an important Roman town.

Although the data for the prehistoric and Roman periods is not abundant, nonetheless it is clear that the landscape was already inhabited and worked. At Newington there is then an apparent hiatus in activity until the 11th century.

Medieval

The earliest documentary reference to Newington is in the late 10th or early 11th century when Queen Emma, wife of Cnut, gave Newington to the priory of Holy Trinity, Canterbury. A number of charters refer to this gift, some of better authenticity than others (Gelling, 1979). No archaeological remains from this period have yet been found at Newington.

Phases 1 & 2 (Fig. 4)

From the late 11th or early 12th centuries, no doubt associated with Archbishop Lanfranc's taking over of the Canterbury estates, enclosure ditches were laid out in Park Field. At Domesday the population of Newington consisted of 5 slaves, 22 freeholders and 10 smallholders, which gives an estimated total of something in the region of 130 inhabitants for the whole parish, from the Canterbury holdings at Berrick and Britwell Priors in the south to Brookhampton in the north.

North of the enclosure ditches a stream ran toward the drain that separates Park Field from Newington House. This palaeochannel ran north-west from the pond in Park Field and appears to have been subject to silting up. Rubbish pits were dug between the enclosure ditches and the stream creating a midden area for rubbish disposal.

Phase 2a (Figs 5 & 6)

By the late 12th century the enclosure ditches had been backfilled, and a number of plots were laid out (Fig. 5). During the excavations by JMHS three such plots were identified. The westernmost plot, nearest the River Thames, revealed the footings of a stone building. This building was only seen in section and its function is not known.

In the neighbouring plot to the east, the north and south gable-ends of an earth-fast timber building and its associated beaten earth floor were investigated, measuring 13.5m x 7m. This building was more than likely a smithy. Unfortunately, most of the building was under the island in the lake, and consequently was not fully investigated (Fig. 6). However, a range of metallurgical debris including smithing hearth bottoms, hearth lining and hammerscale was recovered from a number of features in the immediate vicinity of the building. The floor of the probable smithy was clean of remains. A similar process has been observed at other smithing sites, specifically at Sønder Sø, Denmark (Jouttijärvi, n.d.) where during a period of

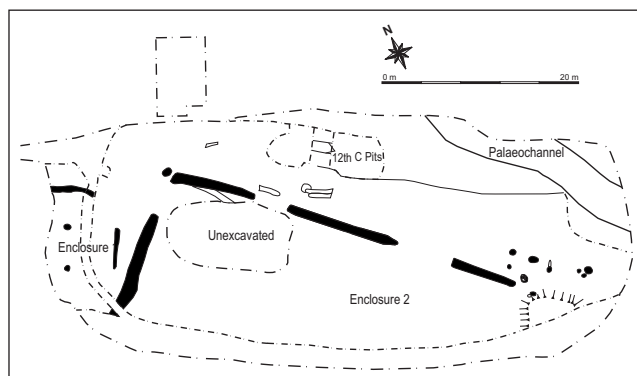


Fig. 4. Phases 1 & 2: 11th- to early 13th-century

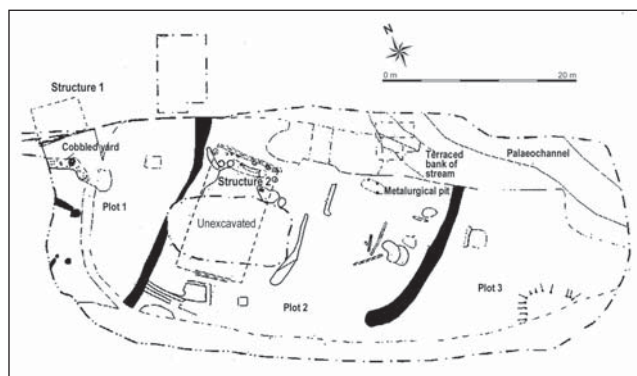


Fig. 5. Phases 2a: 12th- to 13th-century

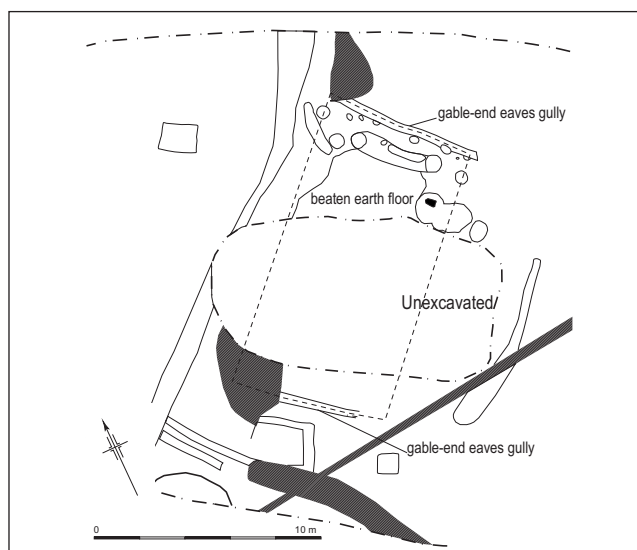


Fig. 6. Structure 2 smithy

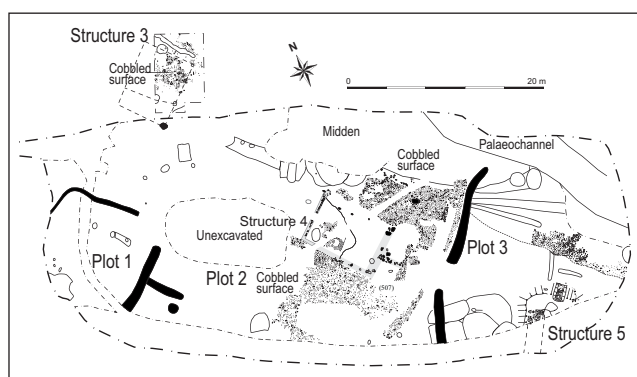


Fig. 7. Phase 3: 13th- to 14th-century

just over five years in the late 10th century a smithy was maintained for periodic visits by a smith before it was rebuilt *de novo*. This would indicate that the smithy at Newington was probably not abandoned, but decommissioned.

The easternmost of the plots evidenced only light occupation activity as a possible fence line was laid out. The midden area adjacent to the stream was terraced at that time, possibly to improve the flow of water.

Phase 3 (Figs 7 & 8)

By the 13th century, the plots were reorganised (Fig. 7), the earliest smithy had been decommissioned and a new building, Structure 4 (Fig. 8) had been laid out east of the earlier 12th-century smithy. This building measured 8m x 5m and consisted of stone footings on the west, south and east sides and postholes to the north; a small annexe on the east side of building probably functioned as a fuel store or similar. Within the later smithy a stone anvil setting, a pair of perpendicular hearths and a bosh were located in the southwest corner of the building. Samples for hammerscale indicated that this was indeed the location of the anvil. Similar, if later, smithies, such as that at Alsted, Surrey (Ketteringham, 1976) – also a Canterbury manor – have a more centred smithing area within the smithy; however, the location of the hearth, anvil and bosh in the corner of the Structure 4 smithy at Newington do create a larger space for horses to be shod within the building.

At the same time the plot in which the later smithy stood was increased in size to the north, as Plot 1 was reduced. In this northern part of the plot stood Structure 3 (Fig. 7), originally excavated by SOAG between 1983 and 1986. The full extent of the building is not known, but it appears to have comprised a north-west/south-east oriented partially post-fast timber building, with two, possibly gable, post-pads at the east end and a drip gully on the northern side. Internally the floor was a rough stony spread and patches of beaten clay. During the more recent excavations, a further post-pad was recovered. The most significant find was perhaps the ceramic tuyère of a bellows, associating the SOAG work with the smithies excavated twenty years later.

Test-pitting carried out by SOAG at this time effectively located the site of the smithy excavated in 2006. The results of this work are reported for the first time here. Postholes, pottery and hard-standing were reported in the SOAG archive, extending across all three plots investigated by JMHS.

East of the Structure 4 smithy was Plot 3, which during the earlier part of the 13th century was characterised by rubbish pits within an open area. At the north end of the plot by the stream, which appears to have been slowly silting up again, was an area of hard-standing. At the south end was a large squared stone setting, which was probably part of the stone footings to a building, Structure 5. This was not investigated further but undoubtedly represents part of the earthworks reported by SOAG.

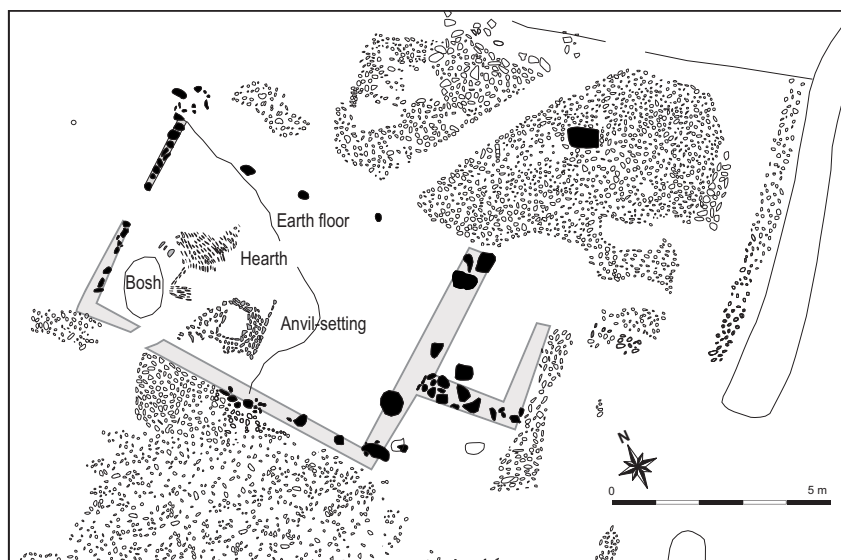


Fig. 8. Structure 4 smithy

At this point the previous plot boundary between Plots 2 and 3 was filled in and cobbles, in places, sealed it. Subsequently, at a point after the second half of the 13th century, a new boundary, incorporating an access between Plots 2 and 3, was laid out, cutting some of the earlier rubbish pits in Plot 3. At the same time a stone-lined oven apparently for roasting iron-ore was built to the north of Structure 5. Similar examples have been excavated in the Weald.

The oven from Newington was never used, although it may be significant that Potterspury ware, from the iron-rich area of Northamptonshire, is represented by one of the largest assemblages so far south in the county. This may well indicate that during the late 13th century, when the Hundred Rolls (Illingworth and Caley, 1818) indicate a population increase to about 280 inhabitants, Newington was flourishing; but that by the 14th century it was not able to sustain the same growth. This was evidenced elsewhere and was due to climatic factors in the early part of the century and then plague during the latter part of the first half of the 14th century.

The social and economic effects of these factors, as well as the financial benefits of the wool trade, had the well-known effect of speeding up desertion of marginal land as people moved to cities or, at the very least, cut themselves loose from their bonds of serfdom. What is certain is that in the early part of the 14th century Andrew le Smith of Britwell Prior was arraigned before the manorial court (Ault, 1972). The Structure 4 smithy at Newington fell into desuetude during the 14th century, and was clearly abandoned with an attempt at managed dismantlement; on the north-east side of the smithy, the yard yielded a concentration of nails and broken roof tile. We do not know if Andrew le Smith moved to Britwell Prior to smithy from there, or if he lived at Britwell and Newington was the

declining manorial smithy, or indeed whether he had abandoned his forefathers' occupation altogether.

Smithing was not a trade into which one could just enter. The costs of the tools were already beyond the capital investment of most, being probably equivalent to that of a yeoman farmer. The raw materials were also a cost; and as smithing was not a year-round business, animals and crop would have to have been maintained as well. It is no surprise that during the 14th century the smithy was abandoned: as the population declined so too would the need for a smith's services.

Phase 4 (Fig. 9)

By the 15th century there was only a large rubbish pit; it would appear that the footings and the cobbles were being over-run by grasses, but that enough was still underfoot for the odd dropped potsherd or metal object to lie there until it became buried by time.

That is the end of the story at Park Field; at Great Bowling Field the fieldwalking carried out by SOAG revealed a codicil to the Newington story. Spreads of pottery and roof-tile picked up during 1984, 1985 and indeed 1986 revealed the location of 16th-century buildings evidenced on a map of 1595 (not illustrated), commissioned by Robert Hovenden, warden of All Souls, in a court case against Owen Oglethorpe, eponymous grandson of the President of Magdalen College and Bishop of Carlisle, who crowned Elizabeth I. Owen Oglethorpe's grandfather had been rector of Newington between 1538 and 1557, and his father, John, was certainly in possession of the manor by the 1580s, having apparently also married the daughter of Owen Oglethorpe's successor to the rectory, Clem Parratt.

While the plague had probably hit the village, the parish and the manor rather hard, it should be noted that the *Nonarum Inquisitiones* of 1341 indicates that

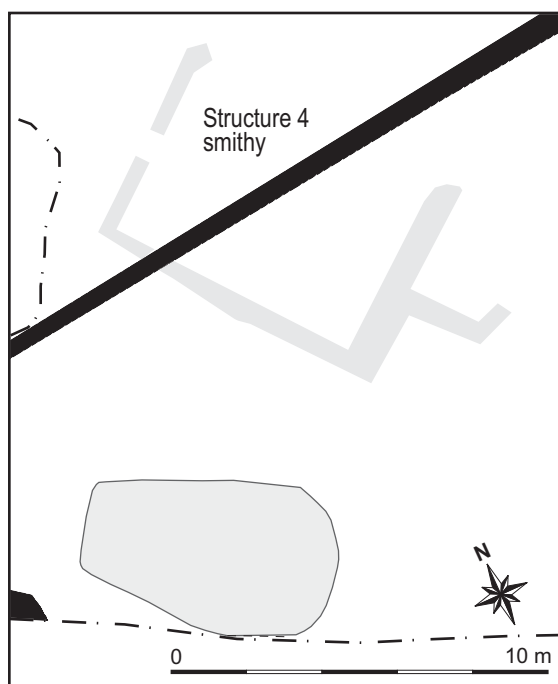


Fig.9. Phase 4: 15th-century

there are twelve people to pay one-ninth of their income (Second and Tapham, 1807). However, the 1595 map shows no more than ten properties in Newington, where the late 13th-century Hundred Rolls indicate nearly twice that number of freeholders. The combination of plague and the change in agricultural regime, from arable to pastoral for the wool-trade, was worked out on the Gault Clay at Newington as at many other more marginal landscapes. Later the dissolution of the monasteries went to provide an asset-base for the sons of clerics as the manor passed into the hands of Owen Ogleforth's son John. The manor was subsequently sold to Walter Dunch who built the present Newington House in 1639 or thereabouts.

Concluding remarks

The identification of a Medieval smithy is not as self-evident as might be expected. As Astill (1993) noted at Bordesley, and as has been noted elsewhere such as Alsted (Ketteringham, 1976), smithing does not always leave significant quantities of waste. Hammerscale fragments are very small and consequently easy to overlook, and often it is the quality of the waste that is the significant factor. The indication of any such deposits should trigger contact with English Heritage, and indeed, it was somewhat unfortunate that we did not make contact at Newington with the regional science officer in good time. Better contact on our part may well have indicated the presence of Structure 2 during excavation.

Furthermore, this short article goes, I hope, some way to illustrating the great importance attached to reporting the results, positive and negative, to the county archaeological service. Although notes are in

the CBA's annual bulletin *South Midlands Archaeology* for the relevant years, the detail was insufficient for the county archaeologist to decide on the appropriate level of work. Happily the SOAG archive could be integrated into the report to provide a fuller picture than might otherwise have been possible.

A longer version of this article will appear in *Oxoniensia* shortly.

Acknowledgements

This article follows from a talk I gave to SOAG in January 2011. I wish to extend my thanks to SOAG for the invitation to talk about the results, and in particular to Sue Sandford who has reliably maintained contact following our initial meeting to pass on information and parts of the archive as these became available. I would like to acknowledge the commitment of all those SOAG members, unknown to me, who worked so hard as volunteers in the 1980s, as well as that of my own team at JMHS, particularly Eoin Fitzsimons who has put in a great deal of extra work to bring this to publication. I should like to thank English Heritage for their financial support for the JMHS fieldwork and for the post-excavation analysis of both SOAG and JMHS archives, and particularly Paddy O'Hara of that organisation for his good humour, patience, support and guidance through the MoRPHE process. Finally thanks are due equally to Cynthia Graham Kerr, whose death sadly preceded the publication of this project, and John Moore, who has helped me bring this to the conclusion it so very much needed. As ever, all errors *mea culpa*.

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