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AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL FIELD EVALUATION AT BIERTON HOUSE, AYLESBURY ROAD, BIERTON, BUCKINGHAMSHIRE

SUMMARY

An archaeological evaluation was carried out at Bierton House by John Moore Heritage Services. The work consisted of two machine excavated trenches located across the footprint of a proposed new dwelling and a garage. Aside from two rubbish pits of nineteenth or twentieth century date, the only other feature of archaeological interest was a shallow ditch crossing the site of the proposed garage. The ditch produced a small mixed period assemblage comprising sherds of late Bronze Age and Roman pottery, as well as plain body sherds of Iron Age or Saxon date. Though the evidence is slight, the pottery may represent activity peripheral to the main focus of late prehistoric, Roman and Saxon settlement, which is believed to lie to the south of the evaluation site.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Origins of the Project

A planning application (02/01709) for the construction of a single dwelling and garage at Bierton House was submitted to the local planning authority. In view of the archaeological potential of the proposal area, Buckinghamshire Archaeological Service (BCAS) advised the planning authority that a desk-based assessment and field evaluation should be carried out prior to determination of the planning application. In compliance with a brief for the work supplied by BCAS, John Moore Heritage Services prepared a Desk-Based Assessment (JMHS 2004) and Written Scheme of Investigation. The latter document set out the methods to be employed for demonstrating whether or not any archaeological remains survive on the site, and for establishing their significance in relation to the development proposal.

1.2 The Site

The proposed development is located immediately to the north of Bierton House in the village of Bierton, approximately 2 km north-east of Aylesbury town centre (Figure 1). Bierton House stands on the north-western side of the Aylesbury Road (A418), opposite the Parsons Lane junction. The application site is partly within the garden of Bierton House and is centred on National Grid Reference SP 8366 1542 (Figure 2). It occupies the gentle south-east facing slopes of a low ridge at a height of approximately 90 metres above Ordnance Datum.

The geology of the surrounding area is mapped as the Portland Beds, which is a late Jurassic formation (Geological Survey of Great Britain [England and Wales] Aylesbury Sheet 238), and is part of an extensive outcrop to the east of Oxford (Sumbler 1996). A section exposed to the north-east of the application site in the Bierton Brickyard in 1921 revealed an upper horizon of brownish white limestone, with blue-grey limestone and lydite pebbles at the base (Sherlock 1922).

Figure 1: site location (scale at 1 to 25000)

The soils above the Portland Beds belong to the Aylesbury Series (Hinxman n.d.) and in the Bierton Brickyard were found to be 0.6 metres deep (Sherlock 1922). Another local soil profile at Badricks Farm was slightly shallower (0.5 metres) and consisted of two distinct horizons (Hinxman n.d.). The upper Ap horizon was 0.18 metres deep and consisted of a very dark greyish brown clay loam containing a few limestone

fragments. The lower B/C horizon was 0.32 metres deep and comprised a light olive brown stony clay loam (ibid.).

1.3 Archaeological Background

The earlier prehistoric evidence suggests an episodic use of the area to the south of the application site during the Neolithic. During the early Bronze Age, the land to the south-west of the application site was the focus of burial. Evidence for settlement first appears in the middle Bronze Age at Church Farm and may have continued into the late Bronze Age, with features appearing to concentrated at the north-western end of the excavation site (Fenton 1996).

The earliest substantial evidence for past occupation in the vicinity of the application site dates to the late Iron Age. The sites include part of a settlement excavated in the vicarage garden, 140 metres south of the proposed development (Allen 1986). This was characterised by a series of enclosure ditches up to 1.4 metres in depth and approximately 2.5 metres wide; several shallow curvilinear and rectilinear gullies marking the position of houses; and numerous pits and postholes (ibid.). The environmental evidence and large bone assemblage indicated a mixed farming economy.

The settlement features clearly continued beyond the excavated area and its limits have yet to be established. It does not appear to have extended as far as Church Farm. A small assemblage of scattered Iron Age sherds were found during the evaluation (BCMAS 1996), but related features were absent within the subsequent area excavation (Fenton 1996).

Pottery, which may be of Iron Age date, has also been found in gardens to the south of the Aylesbury Road. These find-spots are between 100 and 150 metres to the south-east and east of the application site.

Evidence for extensive Roman settlement and associated activity has been found in the vicinity of the proposed development. The settlement established during the late Iron Age in the vicarage garden continued to be occupied throughout the Roman period (Allen 1986). The structural evidence included a series of fence-lines; traces of a rectangular timber building; the footings of a boundary wall; and the southern edge of a substantial stone building (ibid.). The site produced numerous tesserae, fragments of wall plaster, together with roofing and flue tile, all pointing to a high status villa somewhere outside the excavated area (ibid.).

The excavator suggested that the main villa buildings might lie beneath the church and churchyard with ancillary structures to the south-east (Allen 1986). This is supported by the recovery of Roman pottery and ceramic building material from later features at Church Farm, to the north of St. James' Church and some 130 metres south-west of the application site (Fenton 1996); and by a series of similar finds to the south-east of the vicarage garden. These include tessarae, roofing and flue tiles at the Parsons Lane School, approximately 300 metres south of the proposed development; and pottery and tiles from two locations some 150 to 200 metres south-east of the application site. The closer of the two find-spots only produced a single fragment of flue tile.

A Roman inhumation accompanied by a series of ceramic drinking vessels was found nearby in 1861, just across the road from Bierton House and about 100 metres from the application site (Sheahan 1862). Chance finds include Roman pottery from nearby gardens, also to the south-east of the proposed development at distances of 100 and 150 metres.

Scattered coins and pottery indicate further activity all around the application site. These include a fourth century coin from Old Orchards, some 200 metres to the west; a coin of similar date from the Great Lane allotments, 200 metres to the north-west; pottery from a surface collection some 500 metres away in the same direction; a late second to early third century coin from Number 141 on the Aylesbury Road, just 150 metres to the north-east; and a late third century coin from Number 146 on the Aylesbury Road, 450 metres north-east of the application site.

By the Saxon period the focus of settlement seems to have shifted away from the vicarage garden, where there were early Saxon finds but no structural features (Allen 1986). It has been suggested that the earliest phase of occupation may have been located in the vicinity of the Roman villa, possibly under the church and in the churchyard (Allen 1986).

By the middle Saxon period (AD 700 to 900) settlement had shifted towards Church Farm. The excavations revealed two sunken floored buildings associated with a series of pits (Fenton 1996). Scattered pottery found during systematic surface collection and by chance indicates other areas of early to middle Saxon activity, some 500 metres north-west of the application site; and approximately 100 metres to the south-east.

Occupation at Church Farm continued throughout the tenth and early eleventh centuries (Fenton 1996). By this time the earlier buildings had been replaced by a series of post-built structures, with associated hearths, pits and gullies (ibid.).

It has been suggested that some of the inhumations uncovered in the nineteenth century, just across the road from Bierton House, may have been of Saxon date (BCMAS 1996). These have been attributed to the Civil War (Sheahan 1862), but the evidence is ambiguous (BCMAS 1996).

At the time of the Domesday Survey part of Bierton was recorded as a manor, while the rest is thought to have fallen within the Royal Manor of Aylesbury (Page 1908; Allen 1986). The documentary evidence suggests that there was a Chapel of Ease in Bierton in the early medieval period (Allen 1986). A separate parish church was established in AD 1266 (ibid.), but the church of St. James is of early fourteenth century date (Page 1908; Pevsner and Williamson 1994).

The late Saxon settlement at Church Farm continued to be occupied into the twelfth century (BCMAS 1996; Fenton 1996). The limits of this settlement have not been established since many of the features extended beyond the excavated area (Fenton 1996). The structural evidence identified during the excavations included the remains of seven buildings, a cellar, hearths, pits, gullies and boundary ditches (Fenton 1996). One of the structures was circular and is thought to have been a dovecote (ibid.). Buildings of this type are generally indicative of manorial or monastic ownership

(Allen 1986) and it is possible that one of the Bierton manors was originally located at Church Farm.

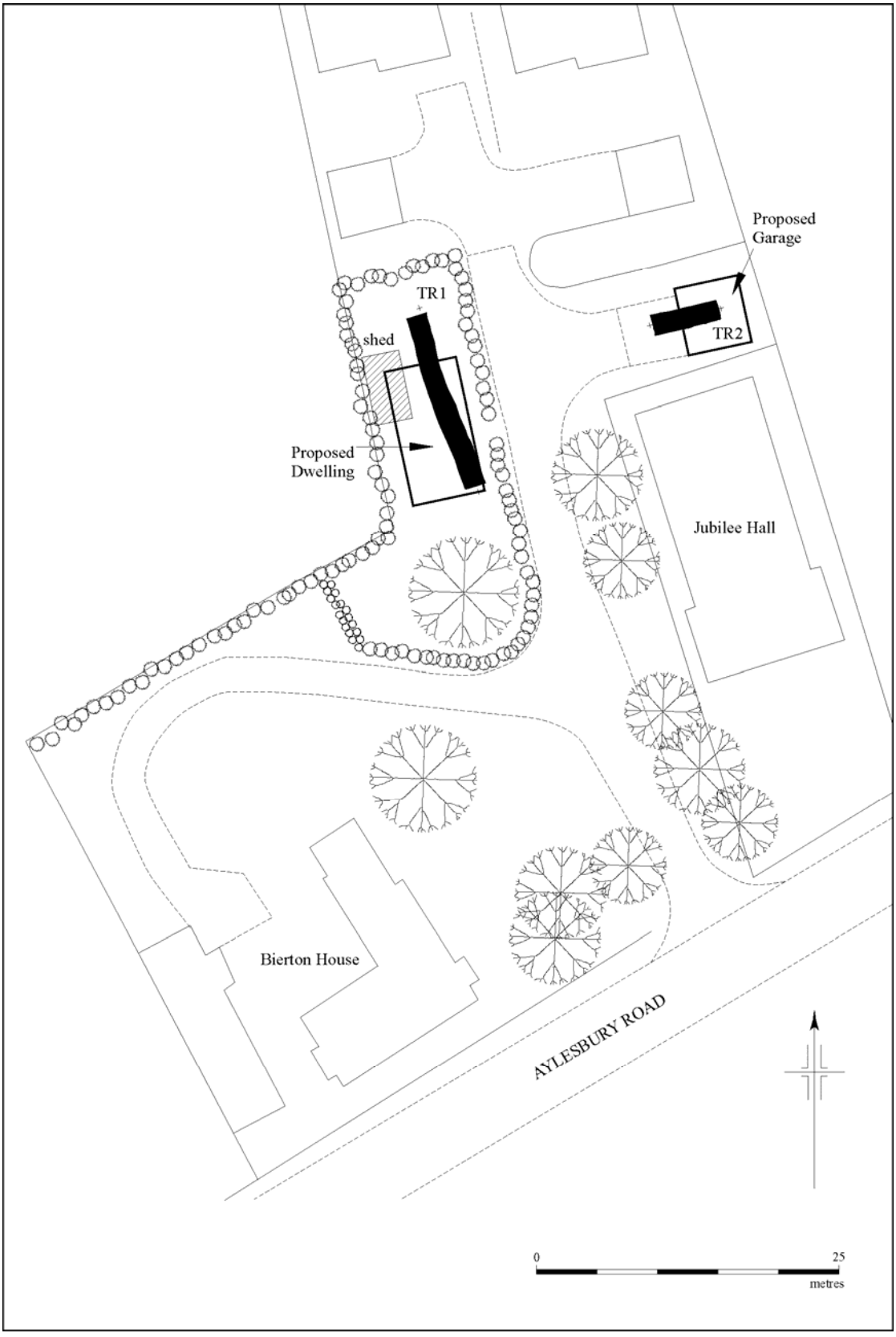

Figure 2: trench locations

Evidence for medieval settlement was also uncovered during the excavations in the nearby vicarage garden. The earliest pottery from the site dated to the eleventh century, but the surviving features belonged to later phases (Allen 1986). They included twelfth to thirteenth century boundary ditches; twelfth to early fourteenth century hearths, pits, and wells; and two structures of uncertain phasing, one of which may have been a dovecote (Allen 1986). The presence of this building has led to the suggestion that the settlement in the vicarage garden may have been a manorial site (ibid.). The dating might indicate that the earlier occupation at Church Farm, which seems to have been of a similar status, shifted to a new location south of the church during the twelfth century.

The homestead moat, which is a Scheduled Ancient Monument (SAM Number: 32102), has been proposed as the site of Stonors manor house (Allen 1986). This is situated approximately 350 metres to the south-west of the proposed development and survives as a well defined earthwork associated with a fishpond. It is recorded as Dove House Close on the Inclosure map of AD 1780.

A series of earthworks in a paddock about 100 metres to the north-east of the proposed development may mark the location of another area of medieval settlement. The features include a holloway, depressions and a series of possible terraces, which may be house platforms.

The aerial photographs show extensive areas of ridge and furrow around Bierton village. This encompasses the fields to the north of the proposed development, with the closest surviving traces of medieval cultivation approximately 100 metres away.

The only other site in the vicinity of the proposed development, which has been attributed to the medieval period, is St. Osyth's or the Uptown Well. This lies some 200 metres to the south-west of the application site. A watching brief carried out during the restoration of the well indicated that the well house enclosed a spring and had been rebuilt during the early nineteenth century, but did not identify any earlier features (Zeepvat 2002, 154).

The rest of the medieval finds from the area include pottery recovered during systematic surface collection, some 500 metres to the north-west of the application site; medieval pottery and a rowel spur from a location about 200 metres to the north-east; and pottery found during the construction of the Parson's Lane School, approximately 300 metres to the south-east of the proposed development.

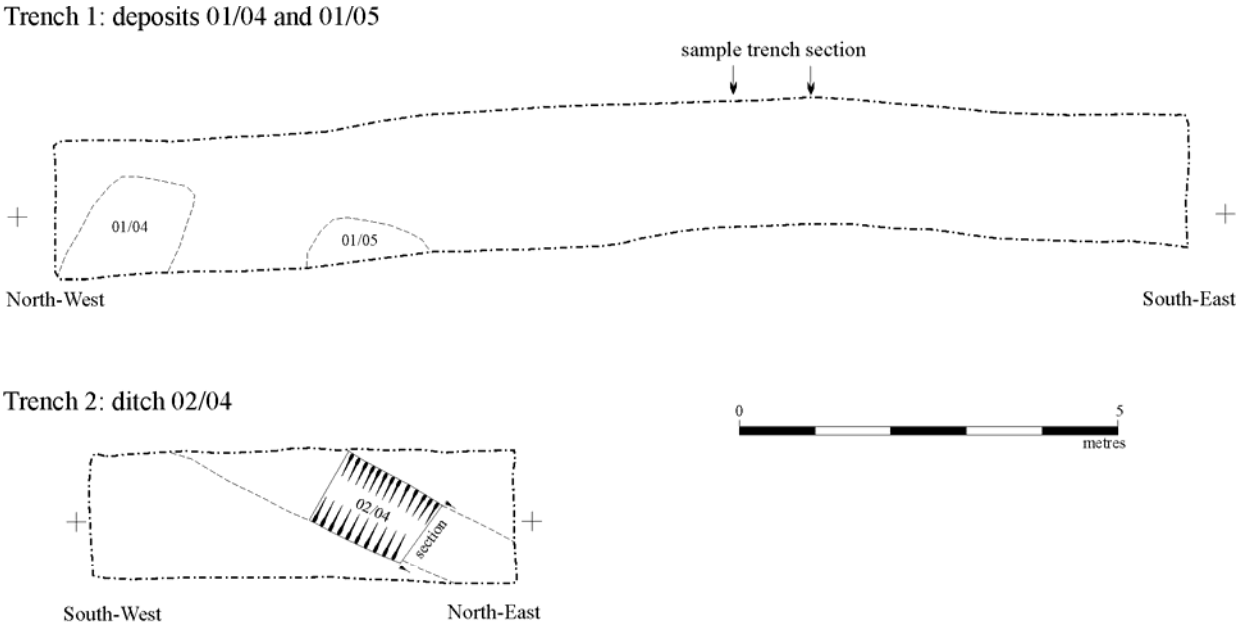

Figure 3:trench plans and sections

2 THE EVALUATION

2.1 The Fieldwork

The fieldwork was carried out over the course of a single day (29th April 2004) and consisted of two machine excavated trenches positioned within the footprints of proposed buildings (Figure 2). Ground conditions at the time of the evaluation were far from ideal, with the combination of heavy rainfall and a clayey sub-soil making finds recovery difficult.

The restricted area available for evaluation necessitated some minor adjustment to the proposed trench layout. This involved the realignment of Trench 1 to accommodate an outbuilding and the roots of a mature tree, and the slight repositioning of Trench 2 to avoid dense scrub.

Both trenches were excavated using a mini-digger fitted with a toothless grading bucket. Trench 1 was located across the footprint of the proposed dwelling and measured 15 by 1.75 metres, while Trench 2 was positioned across the garage footprint and measured 5.5 by 1.75 metres. The machining was carried out under strict archaeological supervision down to the surface of the geology, or to the top of any archaeological features. Subsequent excavation was by hand, and involved the cleaning of exposed surfaces to define the extent of any archaeological features revealed by the machining.

A full list of excavated contexts is provided in the Appendix

2.2 The Evaluation Results

Trench 1
The trench was set out on a north-west to south-east alignment across a small lawn in order to sample the footprint of the proposed dwelling. The machine excavation extended to a depth of 0.92 metres at the north-western end and 1.30 metres at the south-eastern end. At the base of the trench, the exposed geology varied between a light brown sandy clay and a light greyish brown clay with occasional fragments of decayed limestone.

Two irregular features, interpreted as rubbish pits, were exposed in the northern half of the trench (Figure 3, 01/04 and 01/05). Both had been cut into the natural from just below the topsoil and were filled with a dark brown silty clay containing sherds of mass produced white earthenware dating between the middle of the nineteenth century and the twentieth century. Other finds included small fragments of bone, glass and a single oyster shell. None of the finds from contexts 01/04 and 01/05 have been retained.

The two rubbish pits had been cut through a sub-soil deposit consisting of a compact grey/brown clayey silt loam (Figure 3, 01/02), which had a maximum depth of 0.50 metres at the north-western end of the trench. At the south-eastern end of the trench the sub-soil was overlain by a layer of building rubble (Figure 3, 01/06) mixed with soil and lying directly underneath the topsoil (ibid., 01/01). The origin of the deep

sub-soil (context 01/02) is almost certainly colluvial and probably represents the down-slope accumulation of plough-soil from medieval and later cultivation.

No other archaeological features or deposits were found in Trench 1, and no material of archaeological significance was found during the machining and a subsequent search of the spoil heap. Although the conditions for finds recovery were difficult, the absence of significant archaeological material from Trench 1 seems likely to be an accurate reflection of a general trend in the vicinity of the trench.

Trench 2

Trench 2 measured 5.5 by 1.75 metres and was located in an area of grass and scrub (Figure 2). The trench was set out on a south-west to north-east alignment across the footprint of the proposed garage. The machining revealed 0.34 metres of topsoil above a probable colluvial sub-soil which reached a maximum depth of 0.52 metres. With only minor variations, the geology below the putative colluvial deposit was similar in composition to that exposed in Trench 1.

The machining exposed a single linear feature running diagonally across the trench from the north-eastern corner (Figure 3, cut 02/04). Further cleaning by hand showed this to be a broad ditch approximately 4.80 metres in length with a maximum width of 1.10 metres. A 1.40 metre long section excavated across the ditch revealed a shallow 'U' shaped profile measuring some 0.28 metres in depth (Figure 3, cut 02/04).

The upper ditch fill (ibid, context 02/03) produced 4 sherds of late Bronze Age pottery weighing 87 grams, 2 fragments of burnt flint weighing 40 grams, a single sherd of Samian weighing 1 gram and 2 pieces of oyster shell. The lower ditch fill (context 02/05) produced a single sherd of late Bronze Age pottery weighing 9 grams.

Small and fragmentary animal bone assemblages were recovered from the ditch fills. These comprised 10 pieces weighing 106 grams from context 02/03 and 5 pieces weighing 44 grams from context 02/05.

2.3 **The Pottery** by Frances Raymond

Introduction

The assemblage is composed of twelve sherds, weighing 122 grams, representing at least nine different vessels which are of various dates (Table 1). The earliest material was produced during the late Bronze Age and was found in the same context as Iron Age or Saxon and Roman pottery. All of the sherds with the exception of a Samian fragment are in similarly fresh condition, suggesting that they entered the ditch from sealed contexts somewhere in the vicinity of the site.

The sherds are derived exclusively from the walls or bases of vessels and are undecorated so that there is no stylistic evidence. The techniques used during the analysis and the level of description provided in this report follow the guidelines recommended by the Prehistoric Ceramics Research Group (PCRG 1997). The fabrics were described with the aid of a binocular microscope set at a magnification of X40.

The Late Bronze Age Pottery

Five sherds, weighing 96 grams, each from a different vessel display characteristics which are typical of late Bronze Age pottery (Table 1). The absence of featured sherds prevents a more refined phasing of the assemblage which can only be assigned broadly to a time span ranging between c. 1000 and 600 BC. This has a potential overlap with ceramics recovered from features at Church Farm which were very tentatively attributed to the late Bronze Age, but have never been analysed (Fenton 1996).

Context	No.	Wt. (gr.)	Fabric	Date	Description
02/03	1	41	FfeMS/1	Late Bronze Age	Handmade body sherd with vertical finger smearing
02/03	1	34	sh/1	Late Bronze Age	Handmade base sherd with applied shell on exterior
02/03	1	6	Lsh/1	Late Bronze Age	Handmade body sherd
02/03	1	6	LGSsh/1	Late Bronze Age	Handmade body sherd
02/03	1	5	FGS/1	Late Prehistoric	Handmade base sherd
02/03	1	3	Gsh/1	Late Prehistoric	Handmade burnished body sherd
02/03	1	7	S/1	Iron Age or Saxon	Handmade burnished body sherd
02/03	2	8	sh/2	Late Iron Age or middle to late Saxon	Wheel thrown body sherds
02/03	1	1	Samian	Early Roman	Wheel thrown split body sherd
Total	**10**	**111**			
02/05	1	9	FGsh/1	Late Bronze Age	Handmade body sherd
02/05	1	2	sh/2	Late Iron Age or middle to late Saxon	Wheel thrown split body sherd
Total	**2**	**11**			

Table 1: Catalogue of pottery

The group includes one thick walled body sherd (12 mm.) with prominent vertical finger smearing; and one base sherd with dense crushed shell applied to the exterior. Both traits are diagnostic of the late Bronze Age and allow the pottery to be assigned to this period with absolute confidence even though there is no supporting stylistic evidence. The three remaining body sherds are all from thick walled vessels (8 to 10 mm.) in wares which are most likely to be of late Bronze Age origin.

The fabrics contain inclusions which are present in geological deposits in the Bierton area. The shell is almost certainly fossilised, particularly where it occurs alongside limestone (Fabrics LGSsh/1 and LSsh/1). This evidence points to local production which is typical of the late Bronze Age, especially of the earlier part of the period (1000 to 800 BC).

The Late Prehistoric Pottery

Two of the sherds, weighing eight grams, from Context 02/03 are made from fabrics which could have been produced in either the late Bronze Age or during the Iron Age (Fabrics FGS/1 and Gsh/1). The lack of stylistic evidence within a mixed period assemblage precludes a more precise attribution.

The Iron Age or Saxon Pottery

Four sherds, weighing 17 grams, are made from wares which could equally have an Iron Age or Saxon origin. Again, the uncertainty surrounding the date of these fragments cannot be resolved without stylistic evidence. They include one sherd with a black burnished exterior in a coarse sandy fabric (S/1) that would be entirely

consistent with a middle to late Iron Age date. However, identical wares were also produced during the early and middle Saxon period.

The other three sherds from contexts 02/03 and 02/05 are all made from the same wheel-thrown shell tempered ware (sh/2). These could well be late Iron Age in date, with a potential origin during the first century AD. The sherds are certainly reminiscent of contemporary pottery from the vicarage garden excavations (Allen 1986). However, they could have equally been produced in the later part of the Saxon period from the mid or late eighth to tenth centuries AD, possibly denoting the extent of activity associated with the settlement of this date at Church Farm (Fenton 1996).

The Fabric Descriptions
All of the fabrics are hard and the inclusions have an even distribution.

Late Bronze Age
FfeMS/1: A handmade oxidised fabric which has been tempered with common crushed burnt flint (0.5 to 8.0 mm.) and very common, silt-sized angular quartz sand (<0.06 mm.). Sparse quantities of well rounded black iron minerals (<0.06 to 0.1 mm.) and mica (<0.06 to 0.2 mm.) are also present, as are rare fragments of angular chalk or limestone (0.5 to 3.0 mm.).

FGsh/1: A handmade oxidised fabric which has been tempered with sparse crushed burnt flint (0.5 to 2.0 mm.). Common quantities of well rounded glauconite (<0.06 to 0.5 mm.) and sparse fragments of shell (0.5 to 2.0 mm.) are also present, as are rare flakes of mica (<0.06 mm.).

LGSsh/1: A handmade oxidised fabric which has been tempered with common angular limestone (0.1 to 2.0 mm.). Sparse amounts of well rounded glauconite (0.1 to 0.5 mm.), sub-rounded very fine to medium sand (0.1 to 0.5 mm.) and shell (0.1 to 2.0 mm.) are also present.

Lsh/1: A handmade oxidised fabric which has been tempered with moderate quantities of angular limestone (0.5 to 2 mm.) and sparse shell (0.1 to 1.0 mm.). Rare rounded black iron minerals (<0.06 mm.) and mica (<0.06 mm.) are also present.

sh/1: A handmade oxidised fabric which has been tempered with moderate amounts of shell (0.1 to 4.0 mm.). Rare grains of angular quartz are also represented (0.5 mm.).

Late Prehistoric
FGS/1: A handmade fabric, fired black, containing sparse crushed burnt flint (1.0 to 2.0 mm.); common well rounded glauconite (<0.06 to 0.5 mm.); and common angular silt-sized sand (<0.06 mm.).

Gsh/1: A handmade fabric, fired black, which has been tempered with very common shell (0.1 to 1.0 mm.). Sparse well rounded black iron minerals (0.1 to 0.5 mm.); rare mica (<0.06 to 0.1 mm.) and angular grains of quartz (0.1 to 0.5 mm.) are also present.

Iron Age or Saxon
S/1: A handmade fabric, fired black, containing common sub-rounded coarse sand (0.5 to 1.0 mm.) composed predominantly of quartzite.

sh/2: A wheel-thrown fabric, either oxidised or fired black, which has been tempered with common shell (0.1 to 1.0 mm.)

3 DISCUSSION

The mostly negative outcome of the evaluation within the footprint of the proposed dwelling indicates a low archaeological potential for that part of the development site. The only indication of archaeological activity were the two rubbish pits, both of which are likely to be of nineteenth century or later date.

The archaeological evidence from Trench 2, located across the footprint of the proposed garage, consisted of a single ditch. This produced finds including a mixed period pottery assemblage, with a potential date range spanning the late Bronze Age to the Saxon period. A significant number of these sherds were from the same layer, which points to a degree of residuality in the assemblage. That said, the late Bronze Age sherds are in fresh condition and consequently could not have been exposed to a prolonged period of attrition prior to deposition in the ditch. However, the overlying layers in both trenches seem likely to have a colluvial origin, and indeed the desk-based assessment noted the presence of medieval ridge and furrow cultivation in the vicinity of the evaluation site (JMHS 2004, 13).

With the exception of the single sherd of Samian, all of the later pottery sherds are similarly well preserved. This raises two alternative explanations for the inclusion of the sherds; either they were incorporated into the ditch during the Iron Age or Saxon period when it was cut through late Bronze Age deposits, or the pottery entered the ditch from nearby deposits during the initial stages of cultivation and was not exposed to long-term abrasion. However, the date and function of the ditch remains uncertain, and while it may represent a peripheral element of a late prehistoric or Saxon settlement, it could just as easily be medieval.

The condition of the pottery from the ditch fill is itself significant for it implies that an area of settlement may have existed in the general vicinity of the evaluation site. However, the excavations at Church Farm and the Vicarage Garden (Fenton 1996; Allen 1986) suggest that the principal area of settlement from late prehistory to the Saxon period was concentrated to the south of the application site, although there is a nineteenth century record of possible Saxon inhumations found just across the road from Bierton House (BCMAS 1996). Given the general dearth of features and the relative small number of finds from the evaluation it seems unlikely that settlement extended into the application area, which may lie at the northern periphery of the distribution

ARCHIVE CONTENTS

The Paper Record

The project brief
Written scheme of investigation
The project report
The primary site records
The photographic and drawn records
Specialist reports

The Aretefact Record

An index listing all materials retained or discarded
The pottery
The animal bone

ARCHIVE LOCATION

The archive is currently maintained by John Moore Heritage Services pending notification of an accession number. On receipt of an accession number the archive will be transferred to:

Buckinghamshire County Museum
Technical Centre
Tring Road
Halton
Aylesbury HP22 5PJ

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APPENDIX

Gazetteer of Contexts

Context	Description	Below	Above	Thickness	Extent	Finds
Trench 1 (15 X 1.75 m)						
01/01	topsoil under grass	n/a	01/02	0.35 m	trench	none
01/02	?colluvial sub-soil	01/01	01/03 01/04 01/04	0.45-0.50 m	trench	none
01/03	natural	01/02	n/a	n/a	trench	n/a
01/04	fill of rubbish pit	01/01	01/03	not excavated	1.10 X 0.80 m	pot, bone, glass
01/05	fill of rubbish pit	01/01	01/03	not excavated	1.10 X 0.50 m	pot, bone, glass, oyster shell
01/06	building rubble	01/01 01/02	01/02	0.15-0.20 m	2.20 m	none
Trench 2 (5.5 X 1.75 m)						
02/01	topsoil under grass	n/a	02/02	0.34 m	trench	none
02/02	?colluvial sub-soil	02/01	02/03 02/08	0.52 m	trench	none
02/03	upper ditch fill	02/02	02/05	0.17 m	cut 02/04	pot, burnt flint, oyster shell
02/04	ditch cut	02/05	02/08	depth 0.28 m	1.10 X 4.80 m	n/a
02/05	primary ditch fill	02/03	02/04	0.10 m	cut 02/04	pot
02/06	ditch fill	02/03	02/05	0.05 m	cut 02/04	none
02/07	ditch fill	03/03	02/05	0.07 m	cut 02/04	none
02/08	natural	02/03	n/a	n/a	trench	n/a