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New College Bell Tower Oxford

Archaeological Evaluation Summary Report

Planning Application No. 95/264/L

OXFORD ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT

July 1995

NEW COLLEGE BELL TOWER

OXFORD

SP 51700 06475

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OXFORD ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT

JULY 1995

SUMMARY

A small scale archaeological evaluation within the Bell Tower revealed a sequence of deposits of medieval and post-medieval date. The medieval deposits may have been associated with the construction of the Bell Tower or its later use.

INTRODUCTION

The Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) undertook an evaluation inside the Bell Tower of New College, Oxford (SP 51700 06475). The Bell Tower is situated on the north side of the cloister of the College, on the line of the medieval town wall. New College proposes to install floors in the medieval Bell Tower for the storage of rare books. The work will require a new floor with a foundation excavated to a maximum 900 mm below the existing floor level. A brief for the work has been prepared by the Oxford Archaeological Advisory Service (OAAS).

The archaeological evaluation was carried out on the 10th and 11th of July 1995. The site code was OXNCBT95.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

The late-14th century Bell Tower at New College appears to have replaced one of the bastions (No 10 in the Royal Commission numbering) of the early 13th century town wall of Oxford. The bastion extended into the berm between the wall and a contemporary ditch. At a later date, perhaps in the late 13th century, this ditch was partly infilled and a concentric outer wall, also equipped with bastions, was built. The resulting space between the two walls is known as The Slype. The status of this space at the time of the construction of the Bell Tower is uncertain.

It was thought that there may have been as much as 4 m of medieval deposits within the Bell Tower itself beneath the present floor, and that these might have included:

- i a construction void infilled, as the tower was built, with rubbish of the 14th century and floored over at the existing college ground level.
- ii an undercroft retained in the 14th-century and infilled since. There are various Oxford precedents for the reuse of a space like this, often as a cess pit. Otherwise it could have been retained as a usable space until recent times and infilled with modern rubbish.

AIMS AND STRATEGY

A single trench was excavated by hand in the floor of the Bell Tower. The trench measured 1.22 m x 1.38 m and was 0.93 m in depth. The positioning of the trench

was designed to establish the condition, character and quality of any surviving archaeological deposits and to recover material to date any such deposits present.

RESULTS (see Fig. 1)

For dimensions of deposits and features see Appendix 1.

Trench 1

The lowest layer in the excavated sequence was 110, a compact red brown sandy silt, the highest point of which was at about 63.56 m OD. This deposit was only encountered in the NW corner of the trench. Above 110 was a layer of light brown silty sand with a very high mortar content, some limestone fragments and a single piece of tile (109). This layer also contained lenses of dark brown sandy silt, similar in character to the overlying layer (108), though 108 also included small patches of clay and some charcoal fragments. Layer 108 was sealed by a further brown silt (107), with a variable but high content of mortar and ceramic building material. Layers 108 and 107 both produced medieval sherds, including Brill/Boarstall products assignable to the late 13th-14th century.

Layers 110, 109, 108 and 107 all sloped down from NW to SE, though the upper surface of 107 was very roughly level, ranging from c 63.86-63.95 m OD. Above this the remaining layers (106, 105, 104, 102 and 101) were all level deposits. Layer 106 was a very mixed deposit including stone, mortar and glass. It produced post-medieval pottery and a clay pipe stem. Above 106, layer 105 was of large irregular limestone blocks in a matrix of light brown sandy silt with much mortar (104). Overlying 104 was a localised deposit of small stone fragments and grey-white mortar (103) beneath an extensive mortar and rubbish layer (102) which formed the base for the present floor (101) of stone slabs, with its surface at c 64.32 m OD.

DISCUSSION

All the layers identified appeared to represent deposits within the Bell Tower, or possibly within the earlier bastion. The sloping deposits in the lower part of the sequence indicate tip layers and are suggestive of deliberate infill. The limited dating material contained within these layers would be consistent with their deposition at the time of the construction of the Bell Tower at the end of the 14th century, but does not preclude a later date. It is even possible that they were contemporary with a phase of use of the bastion predating the construction of the tower, though this interpretation would mean that deposits relating to that construction were completely absent, which seems unlikely. The later, approximately horizontal, layers suggest a quite different phase or phases of activity, dating at least to the 17th century, again concerned with raising levels within the tower. While the limited size of the trench constrains interpretation it is notable that there was no clear evidence for floor layers belonging to the Bell Tower at any point in the excavated sequence.

The small size of the excavated trench and its location mean that no evidence was shed on the question of the possible survival of part of the structure of the 13th century bastion within the lower part of the Bell Tower itself. If it is assumed that the dimensions of the bastion were comparable to those of the extant bastions within the confines of the New College it is possible that fragments could have been retained as parts of the inner foundations of the E and W walls, in particular, of the Bell Tower. In this case it is impossible to determine if the dumped layers observed in the evaluation were laid against surviving fragments of the 13th century bastion, or whether these had been completely removed and the tower constructed *de novo*, simply utilising the earlier site.

With regard to a possible substructure ('undercroft') for the Bell Tower, either an integral feature of it or retained from the earlier bastion, it seems unlikely that any such structure ever existed, though the present work does not prove this conclusively. Work on the line of the town wall less than 10 m E in 1993 showed that the top of the natural subsoil within the line of the wall, and the base of the wall itself, were at c 61.55 m OD, while the construction level for the wall, on its S side, was at about 62.60 m. If the bastions were originally floored at about this latter level this operation might have required the ground to be made up, particularly towards the front (N side) of the bastions. At most, however, this might have involved the dumping of up to 1 m of deposits, but this does not allow room for any lower chamber within the bastions. The natural contour of the site of New College slopes slightly up from E to W and it is noticeable that the level of the Cloister (similar to that of the Bell Tower) is significantly above that of the Chapel to the E and of the Antechapel Yard which lies between the two. This may reflect slight terracing of the site to produce platforms for the Chapel and the Cloister which were level but at different heights. In this case the level contemporary with the construction of the Cloister and Bell Tower on the S side of the town wall was probably well above 63 m OD, though on the N side of the wall the contemporary level is unknown and would probably have been considerably less. As discussed above, however, Bastion 10, probably already had an internal surface at a minimum level of c 62.60 m and the top of the sequence of probable medieval fills within the tower was encountered just below 64 m OD. Again this indicates infilling up to a possible maximum depth of a little more than a metre, but does not allow room for the presence of a chamber in the substructure of the Bell Tower, unless the whole of the infill sequence of the earlier bastion had also been dug out. Since the logic of placing the Bell Tower on the site of an existing bastion was presumably to save labour rather than create it, this possibility seems very unlikely.

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July 1995

APPENDIX 1: Table of Contexts and Finds

NEW COLLEGE BELL TOWER OXFORD (OXNCBT 95)						
Context	Type	Depth (m)	Length (m)	Width (m)	Comments	Finds summary
TRENCH 1						
101	Floor	0.07			Existing York stone floor	
102	Layer	0.09			Dry mix concrete make-up for slabs	
103	Layer	0.05			Part of 102	
104	Layer	0.23				1 brick frag. 4 bone 2 iron nails 1 limestone slab with moulded edge
105	Stones	0.10				1 worked limestone
106	Layer	0.15				1 brown glazed pot sherd 20+ Bones 2 iron nails 1 window came 1 cockle shell 1 tile 1 clay pipe stem 1 faced limestone frag.
107	Layer	0.14-0.20				4 pot sherds 3 bones 4 oyster shells 1 tile 1 ridge tile
108	Layer	0.22-0.24				3 pot sherds 10 bones 1 horn 2 oyster shells 1 mussel 6 tile 1 glazed tile
109	Layer	0.12-0.25				1 copper alloy fitting 1 tile
110	Layer	0.18 m +				

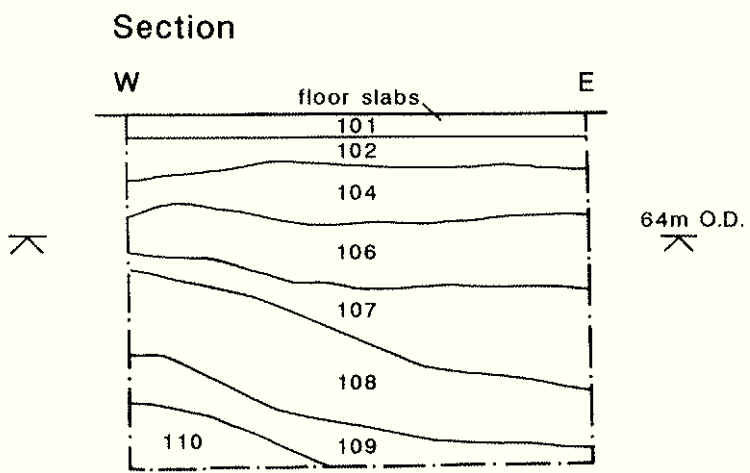
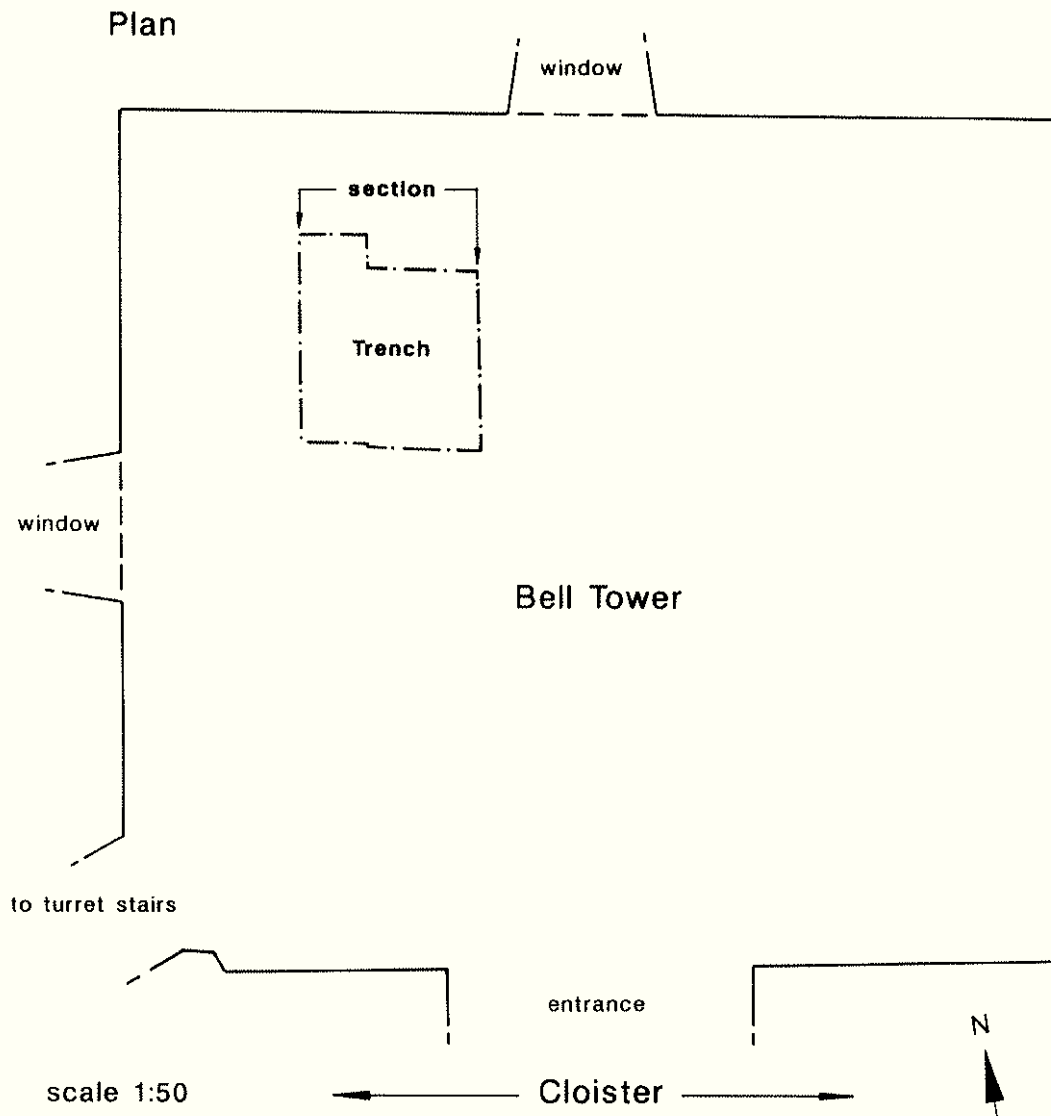


figure 1



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