

THE OXFORD  
ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT



Oriel College Real Tennis Court:  
Archaeological Investigations

1990

# **ORIEL COLLEGE REAL TENNIS COURT: ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS**

## **AREA EXCAVATIONS PHASE 1 by Greg Campbell**

In April 1990 the Oxford Archaeological Unit carried out the first phase of excavations on the site of Oriel College's real tennis court, in the centre of the island of buildings formed by the High Street, Oriel Street, Oriel Square and King Edward Street. This first phase was an attempt to investigate the late medieval archaeology associated with and preserved by the physical structure of the tennis court, in advance of this structure being consolidated. The second phase, to investigate the early medieval and Saxon periods first observed under this building during the archaeological assessment in 1989, is programmed to follow this consolidation.

This report has been completed without the detailed analysis of the finds, or any dating evidence which may come from the historical record, and the conclusions are therefore provisional.

### **THE BUILDING**

The existing building is approximately 30x100 ft., running almost due N-S. The rubble face of the walling is on the exterior with the smooth ashlar face on the interior. This reverses the usual practice of the period, and arises because the walls as well as the floor were part of the playing surface in real tennis. A York slab floor [Context no. 100] survives in certain areas within the structure (Fig. 1A).

### **VICTORIAN DEVELOPMENTS**

Three brick partition walls [121,124,129], two with fireplaces, divide the building into rooms, and a stud partition [120,131] separates these rooms from a hall or passageway running along the west side. The southern three rooms of the building were available for prior excavation. The stone slab floor [100] had presumably been removed from the southern two rooms at the time the building was partitioned, because the upper part of one wall-construction trench [122] was filled with flat stone slabs. Several individual slabs had already been lifted in Room 3 and holes [139 to 145, perhaps 'trial pits'] excavated into the material below. In Room 2 the topmost layer included footings for floor joists [101, 102, 103], two of which were made of carefully laid rows of flat slabs, presumably re-used from the York Stone floor.

The present windows are likely to be a Victorian replacement of an earlier and probably unglazed (probably netted) window area, for which the main oak framing still survives. The history of the roof appears to have been complex (see previous Survey), and it is also possible that the court in its original form lacked any superstructure.

Two doors and a curious oval hole, all carefully blocked up, were observed in the east wall. The doors were 19m and 21m north, and the oval hole was 15m north, of the southeast corner. These openings must belong to the 1830's during the brief period that the building was used as a theatre, and they had been subsequently reinstated with ashlar masonry.

## THE TENNIS COURT

A real tennis court is surrounded on three sides by a viewing gallery or 'penthouse' at ground level, the roof of which forms part of the playing surface. On the south wall of the Oriel court, c. 2m above the present surface, is a narrow sloping offset which could be the remains of the sloping roof of such a penthouse. The floor of the penthouse is preserved as the floor of the existing corridor, and was continuous with the playing surface [100](Fig. 1A). This means that the inner wall of the penthouse, which would have been of ashlar blocks like at the Merton College court, must have been built off these slabs; construction trench [126] and footing [125] for an original west wall of the penthouse were found to still exist in all three rooms under the eastern edge of the corridor floor.

The stone slab floor found intact in Room 3 proved to be the latest of a series of playing surface, and linear paintmarks on the slabs (see Fig. 1A) probably relate to the scoring of the game. Further painted designs, redone several times, also still existed on the ashlar face of the east wall in Rooms 1 & 2, and others in Room 3 survived in a fragmentary form after heavy chiselling to provide key for later plasterwork. The remainder of the walls had been painted black, the lower areas being badly damaged by rising damp.

Removal of the stone floor [100] in Room 3 (Fig. 1B) revealed its bedding layer [133] which could also be detected in Room 2 [106]. Under this was a thin mortar floor in Room 3 [134] which also covered a small portion of Room 2 [111]; areas of this floor bore a grid of nine-inch square tile impressions. Parts of this floor had been destroyed by the construction of a drain [113] which emptied into a large oval soakaway [116], whose north wall was later incorporated into a more robustly constructed square replacement soakaway [147]. The upper infilling of this later soakaway [137] produced an assemblage of clay pipes and pottery fragments provisionally dating between c. 1680-1740 (M. Mellor, pers. comm.). It would suggest that the owners of the court were being required to dispose of their roof runoff beneath the building, at a time when an 'eavse-drip' arrangement would have been more normal for a building of this sort.

Under the nine-inch tile floor [134] and its bedding layer [160] were the remains of two further superimposed mortar floors. The upper of these two floors [162] still retained a small area of six-inch square tile impressions; the lowest floor [178] had a smooth upper surface. These floors probably are repeated reconstructions of tennis court playing surfaces.

## THE GARDENS BENEATH THE COURT

This repeated reflooring of the tennis court was apparently made necessary by a gradual subsidence in the western part of the excavated playing area, which is likely to have resulted from infilled pits at a deeper level. Aside from this general settlement, the floors each in turn collapsed into the centre of a pit [184] with a stone lining [183] which had gradually filled with a grey-pink silt [182] (Fig. 1B). Pottery indicates that the pit was constructed ca. 1600 (M. Mellor, pers. comm.).

Three superimposed layers of garden soils [171, 191, 199] could be found under the tennis court floors, which could be traced through all three rooms. Pits of various sizes and shapes had been dug into these surfaces, and filled with a mixture of disturbed soil, animal and fish bones, oyster and mussel shells, and some pottery. None of these pits was particularly large or deep, and their density seems to increase towards the north. This would be consistent with the area being used a garden in the rear of a tenement fronting on the High Street, the level of the garden gradually rising as pits were dug for the disposal of domestic rubbish. The middle layer of garden soil [191] included a garden path, a thin band of compacted gravel in Rooms 2 and 3 [109/2], running N-S down the east side of the excavation. In Room 3, this path was covered by irregular stone, perhaps the remains of a collapsed stone wall [189/1].

Cut into the lowest of these soils [199] were two large hollows, roughly square (3.4m x 3.6m) and shallow (0.42-0.46m) [165, 204] filled with a fine sandy silt, whose function is unclear but likely to be horticultural.

## FINDS

An initial survey of the finds shows a large mass of animal (particularly mammal) bones, with oyster and mussel shells, recovered from the fills of pits and the layers of garden soil. Large numbers of clay tile fragments were also often in evidence, especially from the floor makeup layers and the soakaways. Pottery was recovered from most of the features, but was surprisingly rare in the silty fills within the soakaways and the stone-lined pit. Small brass or bronze clothing pins were the most common metal object; also found were a spur, a thimble, an iron key, a belt buckle, a small bell and a brass vessel neck. No coins were found.

Two groups of ceramic finds have been cleaned for provisional analysis by Maureen Mellor, who found as follows:

Layer 137, the destruction level of the latest soakaway [147] produced part of a Rhenish stoneware tankard from Westerwald, an English stoneware tankard, a dipped salt-glaze cup, Staffordshire fine red earthenware (perhaps a teapot), English Delftware including an Arborello-type container, Chinese porcelain and a clay wig-curler. The clay pipe fragments included a bowl of Oxford Type B and a stem with an incuse mark which is almost illegible, but may be William Pearce of Marlborough, working 1700-1740.

Layer 184, the construction trench of the earliest silt-filled pit [183] produced a wider date range of pottery, the latest being black-glazed Cistercian ware from Brill in Bucks., other red-earthenware vessels from the same industry, and 8 sherds of Rhenish stoneware jugs from Raeren. This group is typical of the late 16th or early 17th century, and this gives a provisional date for the feature, but it was accompanied by a range of medieval wares and a sherd of Oxford Late Saxon Ware, typical of the 10th century, all of which must have been dug out from deeper levels.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Before the end of the 16th century, most of the surface now covered by the existing building seems to have been part of the garden of a property on the High Street, and it included a wall and gravel path down its eastern side (189/1, 109/2). This garden was used in a small way for the disposal of household refuse in pits, but the principal features of the period were the two large squarish hollows which are unparalleled in Oxford, and perhaps had a horticultural purpose (165, 204). The absence of a detectable property boundary 20 ft. from the south gable (as indicated by the early documentation in Salter 1960, SW25, SW96) may be because the two properties were being used as one in the late medieval period, or it may simply have been obscured by a Victorian partition.

The garden or gardens appear to have been given over to a 'tennis play', and the date of 1572 (Shadwell and Salter IV, 215) is supported by the dating of the earliest soakaway to c. 1600 (183), by which time there must have been a roof. The first of a series of mortar floors must date to this time (178), but since they only survived in the area of subsidence on the west side of the court, they did not produce the stratigraphic evidence needed to prove that the stone walls belong to this period.

Subsequent refloorings evidently included areas of tile paving (134, 162), and in the later 17th century a large number of the later type of tiles appear to have been reused in the third phase of soakaway and its associated drain (111, 113; the second phase of soakaway was the pit excavated by Wards in the extreme SW corner of the court, 3/3). Subsequently the surviving floor of stone slabs was laid around the beginning of the 18th century (100), extending over the entire building and hence showing that the penthouse structure must have been temporarily removed. In 1833-6 the building was used as the first of Oxford's four 'New' Theatres (VCH IV, 431), with three openings which were subsequently reinstated to a playable standard before the court was used again to c 1860. Its subsequent conversion to billiard halls etc. has left it comparatively intact.

## SUMMARY OF NEW FINDINGS

The high quality of preservation of deposits suspected from last years Assessment has been confirmed. A series of datable soakaways seems to



corroborate the historical evidence for a court established in the late 16th century, and the archaeological investigation has provided a picture of its life until it was partitioned in the 1860s. It is very interesting to find areas of tile paving incorporated in floors which are otherwise of mortar, and this needs comparison with other courts of the time. The succession of at least six layers of paint for the chase markings will provide material for a spectrographic analysis of the pigments available to the keeper of the court from time to time, and a programme of tree-ring dating is more than ever needed to support the archaeological dating of the walls and roof.

For the pre-court level the recognition of an established pathway down the east side of the High Street property (SW25) confirms that the preservation of deposits will go back even earlier than the first reference to the court. There are some unparalleled 'horticultural' hollows amongst the few pits on the other side of the plot, and amongst the pottery from this first Oxford sequence of stratified 16th century deposits there is Saxon pottery coming up from the underlying levels. To the south, where the High Street plot should give way to the land behind 9-10 Oriel Street, the apparent lack of a boundary may reflect on the relationship between the College and the Chantry of St Thomas, whose land it appears to have administered.

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Oxford Archaeological Unit, May 1990

#### Bibliography

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Tennis court structure  
 Tennis court floors  
 Painted lines  
 Victorian:

10 m.



Fig. 1a

Tennis court floors  
 Bedding for floors  
 Tennis court structure  
 Wall Collapse  
 Gravel path

Dark loams  
 Pink silt  
 Tile & Brick  
 Dry stone wall  
 Victorian:

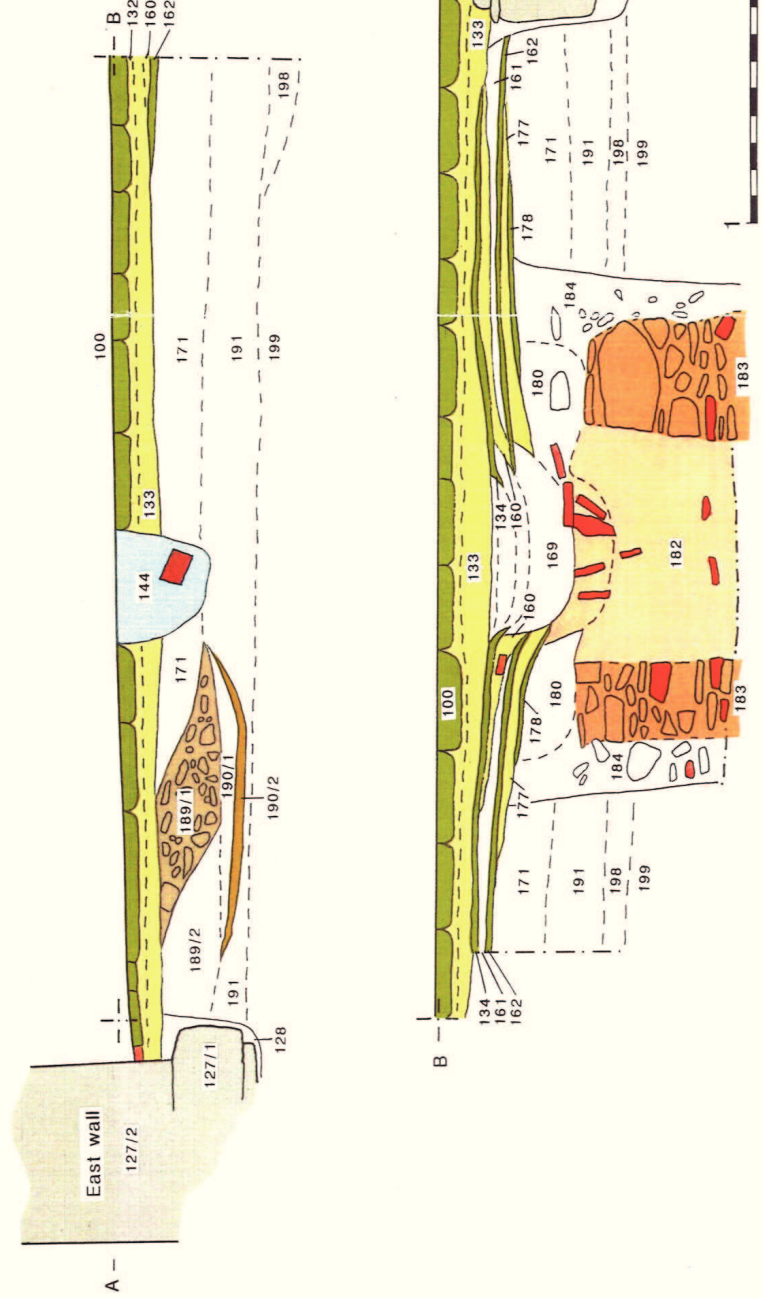


Fig. 1b

2 m.

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