

Graduate Centre Lady Margaret Hall Oxford



Archaeological Excavation Report



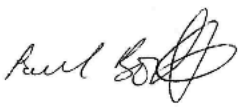
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Graduate Centre, Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford

Archaeological Excavation Report

Table of Contents

Summary.....	2
1 Introduction.....	3
1.1 Project details.....	3
1.2 Location, topography and geology.....	3
1.3 Archaeological and historical background.....	3
2 Aims and Methodology.....	5
2.1 Aims.....	5
2.2 Methodology.....	5
3 Results (Fig. 3).....	6
3.1 Soil and feature descriptions.....	6
3.2 Finds summary.....	7
4 Discussion.....	8
5 Bibliography and References.....	9
Appendix A. Summary of Site Details.....	10

List of Figures

Fig. 1	Site location
Fig. 2	Trench location
Fig. 2	Plan of the excavation and key sections



Summary

Oxford Archaeology South was commissioned to undertake an archaeological excavation ahead of the construction of a new Graduate Centre at Lady Margaret Hall. The only archaeological feature encountered was a single curvilinear gully, which had previously been recorded during the evaluation stage. The gully was undated and was sealed by a buried soil layer that was cut by 19th century pits and drains. The 19th century features were overlain by a sequence of made ground deposits totalling 1.2m in depth. A single sherd from a Roman wine amphora was recovered from one of the 19th century drains.



1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Project details

- 1.1.1 Oxford Archaeology South (OAS) was commissioned by Bidwells on behalf of Lady Margaret Hall to undertake a programme of archaeological excavation ahead of the construction of a Graduate Centre at the college. This related to planning application reference 06/01796/FUL.
- 1.1.2 The excavation was carried out in accordance with a written scheme of investigation that detailed the scope of mitigation measures to fulfil the associated planning condition, as agreed in discussions with David Radford, planning archaeologist for Oxford City Council.
- 1.1.3 All work was undertaken in accordance with local and national planning policies.

1.2 Location, topography and geology

- 1.2.1 The college is sited within grounds on the north side of Oxford, approximately 1.3 km from the city's central point at Carfax and some 400m east of the Banbury Road, the main northern route from the city. The River Cherwell flows south along the eastern side of the college with the late 19th-century development areas of Park Town and Norham Manor located to the west and north and the University Parks to the south. The area lies within the historic parish of St Giles.
- 1.2.2 The site is located within a plot of land centred on SP 51555 07540 at the eastern end of Norham Gardens, on the southern side of the road (Fig. 1). Norham Gardens and the entrance to the college form the northern boundary to the site, with Lady Margaret Hall to the immediate east and 19 Norham Gardens to the west. The southern side of the plot is bounded by University Parks.
- 1.2.3 At the time of the excavation hard surfaces and a bicycle parking area occupied part of the plot with overgrown undergrowth within the southern half. The ground surface sloped from north to south between c 60.5-59.0m OD, where it meets the edge of the River Cherwell floodplain. The underlying solid geology is Oxford Clay with parts of the college and immediate surrounds set upon the Northmoor Sand and Gravel first terrace.

1.3 Archaeological and historical background

- 1.3.1 The archaeological background has previously been presented in detail in a desk-based assessment (OA 2006). The original document should be consulted for detail although a summary is presented below. A trial trench evaluation was undertaken by OAS in 2007 that identified archaeological features of possible prehistoric origin within the site. These remains comprised a narrow gully which pre-dated the more recent historical development of the area. The location of this feature adjacent to University Parks suggests that it may be related to the important remains known to exist within the Park (see below). However, it was not possible to establish the specific importance of the feature within the scope of the evaluation.
- 1.3.2 The desk-based assessment highlighted the fact that the area is surrounded by rich archaeological remains dating from the early prehistoric period through to the Saxon period. Bronze Age remains are particularly conspicuous through the presence of several burials and associated ring ditches, suggesting that a barrow cemetery



probably extended across this part of Oxford in this period. Evidence for contemporary settlement has also been suggested by cropmarks within University Parks.

- 1.3.3 Remains dating from the Iron Age and Roman periods are more limited, although these are also relatively frequently encountered, suggesting that some settlement was present within the surrounding area. Some of the cropmarks recorded within University Parks are also likely to be of late Iron Age and Roman origin.
- 1.3.4 Saxon remains are infrequently encountered within the immediate surrounds, although a burial accompanied by an iron knife was discovered nearby in 1903 and a shield boss and spear was also found in Park Town in the mid 19th century. However, the main focus of Saxon Oxford was to the south, within the existing city core, where extensive middle to late Saxon remains are known (Dodd 2003).
- 1.3.5 Within the medieval and post-medieval periods the area comprised a mixture of meadow and arable agricultural land within the parish of St Giles, which was established in the 12th century. The earliest available historic map is that of the Parish of St Giles dating from 1769. It shows the site lying, as it does today, on the north side of the Parks (then part of Holywell Manor), in an area of open fields known as Clay Pitt Furlong. The present garden area of Lady Margaret Hall was at that time a meadow, known as Broadmoor.
- 1.3.6 Development of north Oxford proceeded slowly, but plots in Norham Manor, the area between the University Parks and Park Town, were sold in the 1860s. Norham Gardens was built up from 1865 with individually designed villas. The 1st Edition Ordnance Survey map of 1881 shows all the current roads, although not all of the houses had been constructed at that point. Most of the Lady Margaret Hall site is shown as still being field, with Benson Place on the west side making a complete loop from Norham Road to Norham Gardens. Number 19 Norham Gardens and 1 Fyfield Road, which currently flank the entrance to the college, are also shown.



2 AIMS AND METHODOLOGY

2.1 Aims

2.1.1 The aim of the excavation was to expose, record and publish the archaeological remains that would otherwise be destroyed within the footprint of the development. The potential of the archaeological remains was poorly understood at evaluation stage due to the sparsity of artefactual evidence. Therefore the aims were relatively general and it was not possible to link them explicitly to a period-specific Research Strategy of the Solent Thames Research Agenda and the draft Oxford Archaeological Research Agenda. Therefore the stated aims were:

- fi to establish the extent of the archaeological remains within the excavation area;
- fi to determine and confirm the character of the remains present;
- fi to determine the date of the remains from artefacts or through scientific dating methods;
- fi to recover palaeoenvironmental remains;
- fi to modify the excavation strategy according to evidence as it arises and in relation to the appropriate period with regard to the regional and local Research Agendas;
- fi to make available the results of the investigation;
- fi to produce a full archive;
- fi to publicly disseminate the results of the investigation at a level appropriate to their importance.

2.2 Methodology

2.2.1 The full scope of the fieldwork was determined through an ongoing review of the interim results during the course of the machine stripping and hand excavation with the Oxford City Archaeologist. In the first instance this comprised the excavation of an area measuring 15m x 15m (225 sq m) centred on the undated gully identified during the evaluation stage (Fig. 2). Once this area had been excavated, the results were reviewed, at which point it was agreed that full excavation of the building footprint was not required due to the absence of other archaeological remains or artefacts beyond that identified by the evaluation.

2.2.2 Machine excavation of the modern overburden was carried out under the direct supervision and control of the attending archaeologist, including the removal of soil layer 112, which had been identified in the evaluation as overlying the undated gully. The features thus exposed were planned, after which hand excavation commenced. All pits and postholes were half-sectioned and interventions were dug into linear features in order to characterise them. Finds were collected and bagged by individual context. Spoil heaps were monitored in order to recover artefacts. No deposits suitable for environmental sampling were encountered and all recording was carried out in accordance with established OA practice (OA 1992) and with relevant IfA standards and guidelines.

3 RESULTS (FIG. 3)

3.1 Soil and feature descriptions

Natural geology

- 3.1.1 The natural geology encountered across the entire excavated area comprised a firm, yellow/orange clay (100). This corresponds to the surface of the geology recorded in the evaluation at this location which revealed a shallow sequence of weathered clay layers with gravel inclusions over the solid geology of Oxford Clay. The surface of this deposit yellow/orange clay undulated slightly across the site.

Gully 109

- 3.1.2 Gully 109, which had been identified in the evaluation, was exposed in the central part of the excavation area, and was the only archaeological feature that cut directly into the natural clay. It followed a curving alignment that extended for c 3.5m but did not appear to extend beyond much further beyond the limits of the evaluation trench. The intervention that had been excavated during the evaluation was re-excavated and extended in order to recover artefactual material, but none was present. The gully measured 0.2m wide and 0.1m deep and was filled with a single deposit of light greyish brown silty clay (110).

Buried soil 112

- 3.1.3 A buried soil layer (112) extended across the entire excavation area overlying the natural geology and sealing the fill of gully 109. The layer comprised a greyish brown silty clay and was up to 0.36m thick. No artefactual material was identified in this layer.

Modern features

- 3.1.4 A number of pits and drains were cut into buried soil 112, most of which produced artefacts of 19th century date.
- 3.1.5 Drain/ditch 119 was the earliest of the the features cut into soil layer 112. This was aligned directly across the NE-SW width of the plot and had smaller drains/gullies (117) connecting into it from the NW. The feature was only 0.4m wide but 0.45m deep with a steep V-shaped profile. Its silt clay fill (120) contained glass, brick fragments and pottery dating from the mid-late 19th century, as well as a single sherd from a Roman amphora. This feature corresponds to the gully (414) encountered within the evaluation. In spite of the absence of a ceramic drain pipe, the arrangement of the connecting gullies point to this being a drain which probably had a brush wood fill below the silt clay backfill.
- 3.1.6 Drain 105/123 extended across the site on the same NW-SE alignment as the plot of land in which the excavation was undertaken and was cut into the backfill of drain/ditch 119. It contained a ceramic drain pipe that was constructed from a series of short pipe lengths laid end-to-end. Its backfill (106/124) contained pottery dating from the mid-late 19th century, along with some glass and two pieces of brick. The drain appeared to terminate at a modern brick built soak-away at its SE end. Another drain connected to the soak-away from the SW.
- 3.1.7 Pit 115 was also cut into the fill of drain/gully 117. This pit was oval in plan, measuring 1.2m x 0.7m and had a shallow, concave profile with a depth of only 0.1m. The base of a mid 19th century wine bottle was recovered from its fill (116).
- 3.1.8 Pit 125 was situated near the northern corner of the site, and only part of it was exposed within the excavated area. It was very shallow, measuring only 0.1m deep,



and was characterised by its dark greyish black fill (126), from which sherds of pottery dating from the second half of the 19th century was recovered.

- 3.1.9 A pair of smaller features (101, 103) was located in the eastern part of the excavation area. They were both sub-square in plan and measured 0.1m deep. The features were interpreted as postholes, although no other evidence for a structure was found. Neither contained artefactual evidence, but their stratigraphic location, cutting into buried soil layer 112, suggests that they are likely to have been broadly contemporary with the other modern features.

Made ground

- 3.1.10 The modern features were overlain by made ground which had been deposited to raise the ground level by total depth of 1.2m. An almost complete Keiller marmalade jar dating from c 1873-1925 was recovered from the lower part of this deposit. The section illustrated here from the original evaluation (Fig. 3) shows a detailed representation of the made ground sequence that was encountered within the excavation.

3.2 Finds summary

- 3.2.1 The finds assemblage was recovered entirely from modern features and layers. The pottery assemblage amounted to 59 pieces (1203g) and was all of mid-late 19th century date apart from a single sherd (31g) from a Gaulish wine amphora dating from the 1st or 2nd century that was recovered from context 120. Other finds comprised eleven pieces (672g) of glass, six pieces (581g) of brick, fourteen pieces (108g) of oyster shell and four pieces (35g) of roof slate.

4 DISCUSSION

- 4.1.1 The curvilinear gully that had been recorded in the evaluation was identified, but did not appear to extend significantly beyond the limits of the evaluation trench. Excavation of the fill that was not excavated during the evaluation stage failed to recover any artefactual material and the feature thus remains undated. The sherd from a 1st or 2nd century Gaulish wine amphora that was recovered from a modern feature provides a hint of Roman occupation within or near the excavation area, but it is not certain whether the gully was associated with this activity. However, this artefact may equally have been imported to the site by other means.
- 4.1.2 Cropmark evidence has revealed a palimpsest of enclosures and other features within University Parks, immediately to the south of Lady Margaret Hall, which are likely to represent settlement, agricultural and funerary activities spanning the prehistoric and Roman periods, and the gully may be associated with these remains. Other evidence for Roman activity in this part of Oxford was found during the 19th century development of the area, when Roman remains, including burials, were found 300-400m west of the site at Norham Road and Wykeham House (Manning and Leeds 1920-1). Banbury Road, which lies c 400m from the site, is believed to follow the line of one of the main Roman routes through this part of the Thames Valley (Henig and Booth 2000, 50).
- 4.1.3 The gully was sealed by a buried soil layer that was, in turn, truncated by 19th century drains and pits. The pits were all relatively insubstantial and largely removed by the machine excavation of the imported soils that raised the ground level within the plot. The pits appear to date from the same period as the foundation and early history of Lady Margaret Hall and the construction of the adjacent residences. The evaluation investigated the pits in more detail (see Fig. 3 Trench 4 section 6) and each of these contained fills rich in ash, coal, charcoal and domestic debris mostly comprising broken glass and pottery. This plot of land was therefore likely to have been a convenient disposal location for small amounts of waste from the college and/or adjacent residences in the late 19th century.
- 4.1.4 The arrangement of drains indicate that this edge of floodplain location was, unsurprisingly, prone to wet soil conditions. The subsequent sequence of imported soils raised the level by over 1m within this plot to improve ground conditions.



5 BIBLIOGRAPHY AND REFERENCES

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APPENDIX A. SUMMARY OF SITE DETAILS

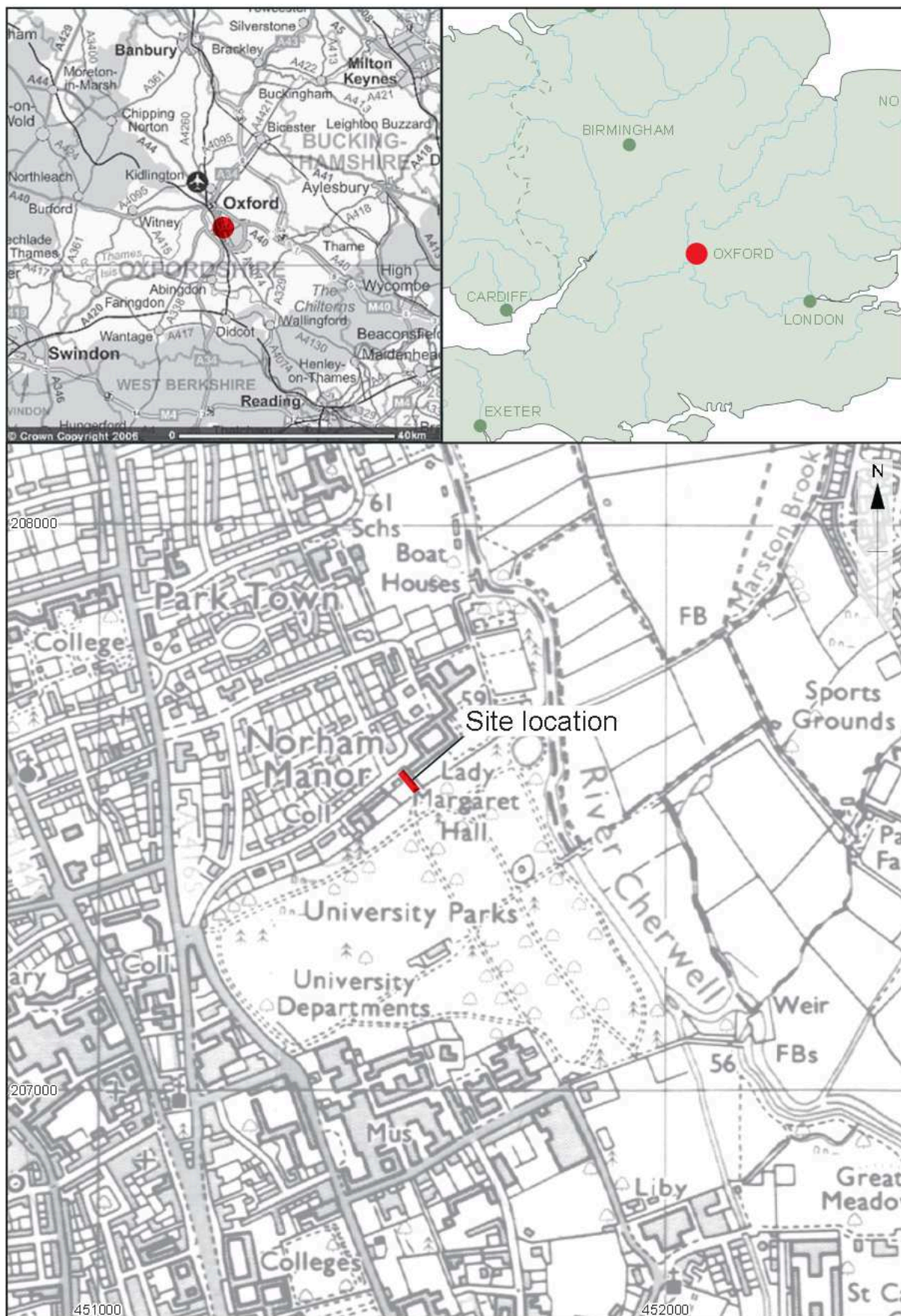
Site name: Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford
Site code: OXLAMA12
Grid reference: SP 51555 07540
Type: Excavation
Date and duration: 19th-23rd November 2012
Area of site: 225m²

Summary of results:

Oxford Archaeology South was commissioned to undertake an archaeological excavation ahead of the construction of a new Graduate Centre at Lady Margaret Hall. The only archaeological feature encountered was a single curvilinear gully, which had previously been recorded during the evaluation stage. The gully was undated and was sealed by a buried soil layer that was cut by 19th century pits and drains. The 19th century features were overlain by a sequence of made ground deposits totalling 1.2m in depth. A single sherd from a Roman wine amphora was recovered from one of the 19th century drains.

Location of archive:

The archive is currently held at OA, Janus House, Osney Mead, Oxford, OX2 0ES, and will be deposited with Oxfordshire County Museum Service in due course, under accession number OXCMS:2007.18.



Scale 1:10,000

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Figure 1: Site location

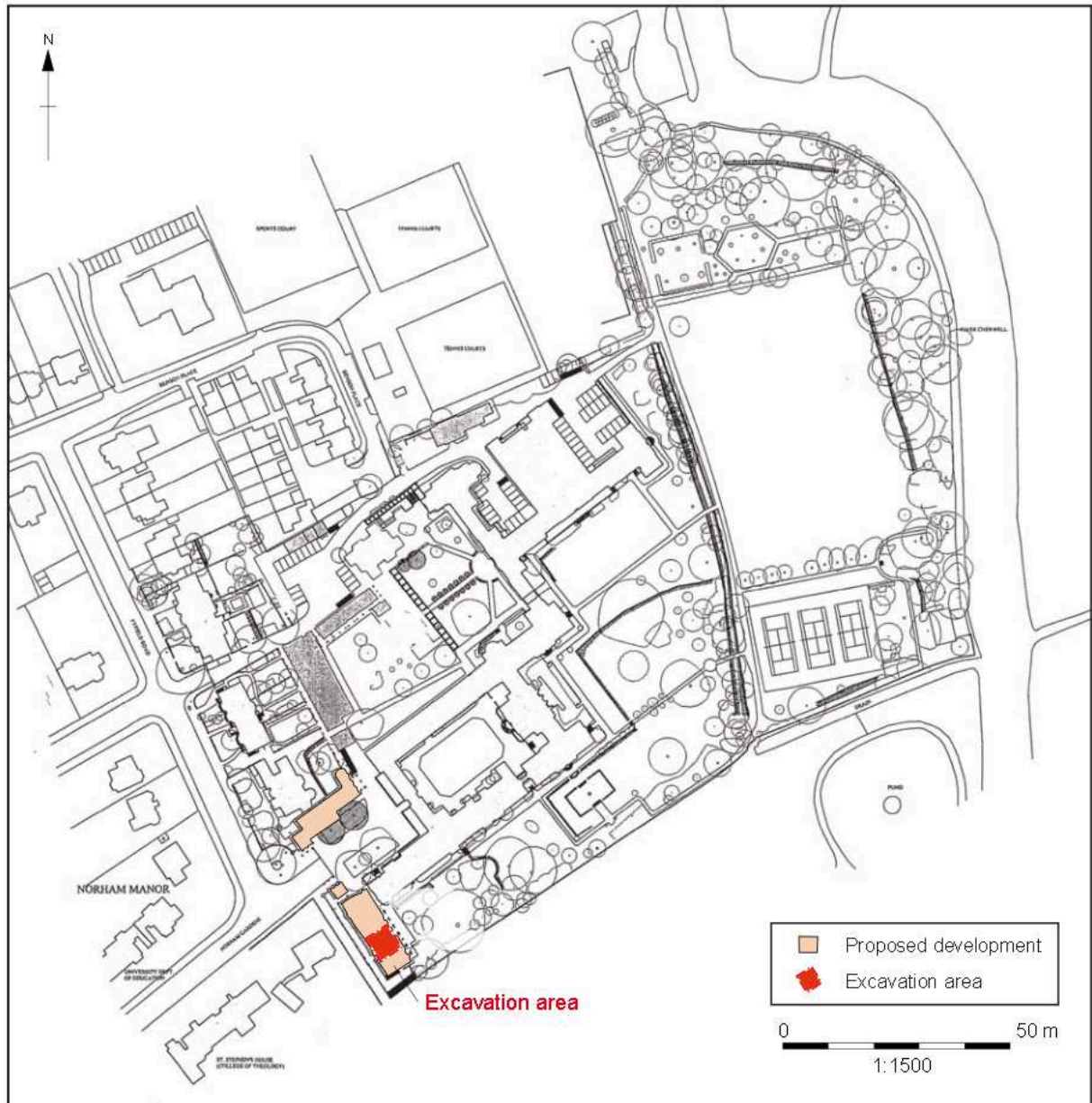


Figure 2: Trench location

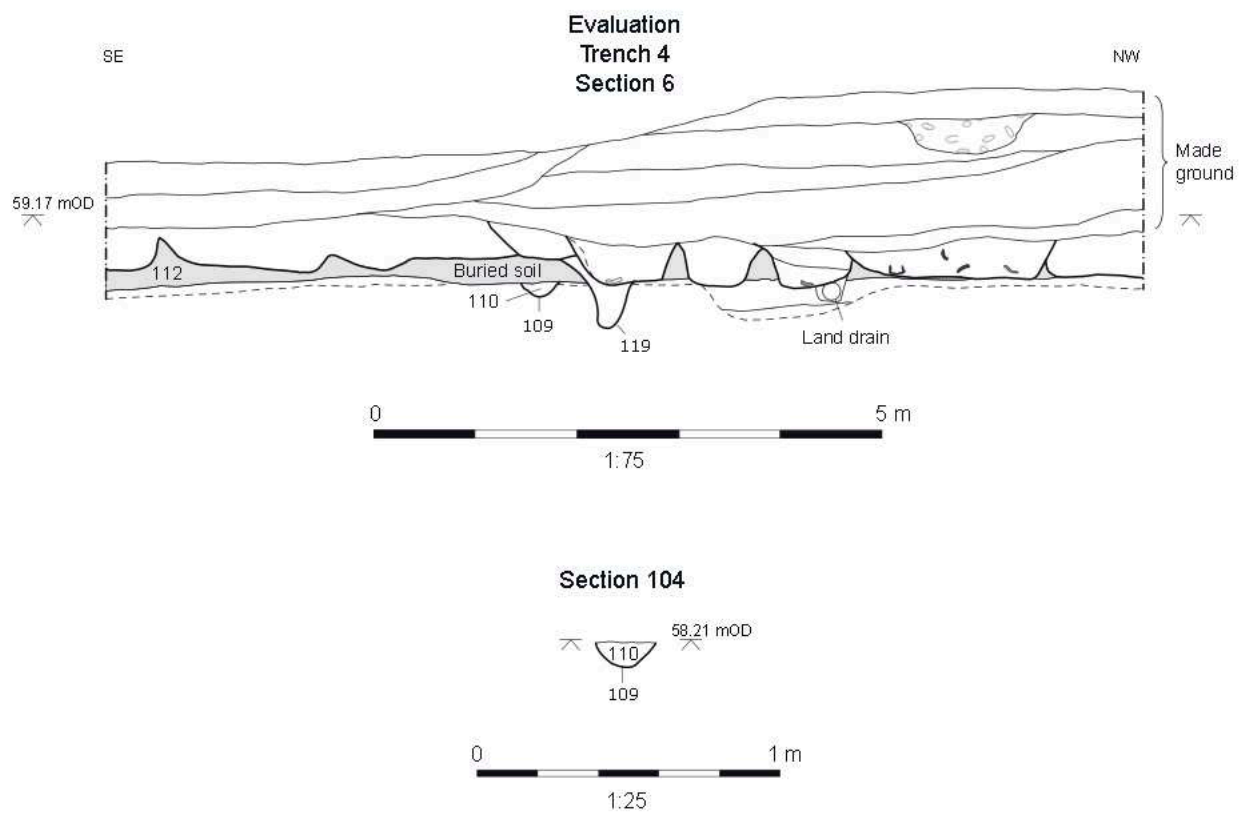
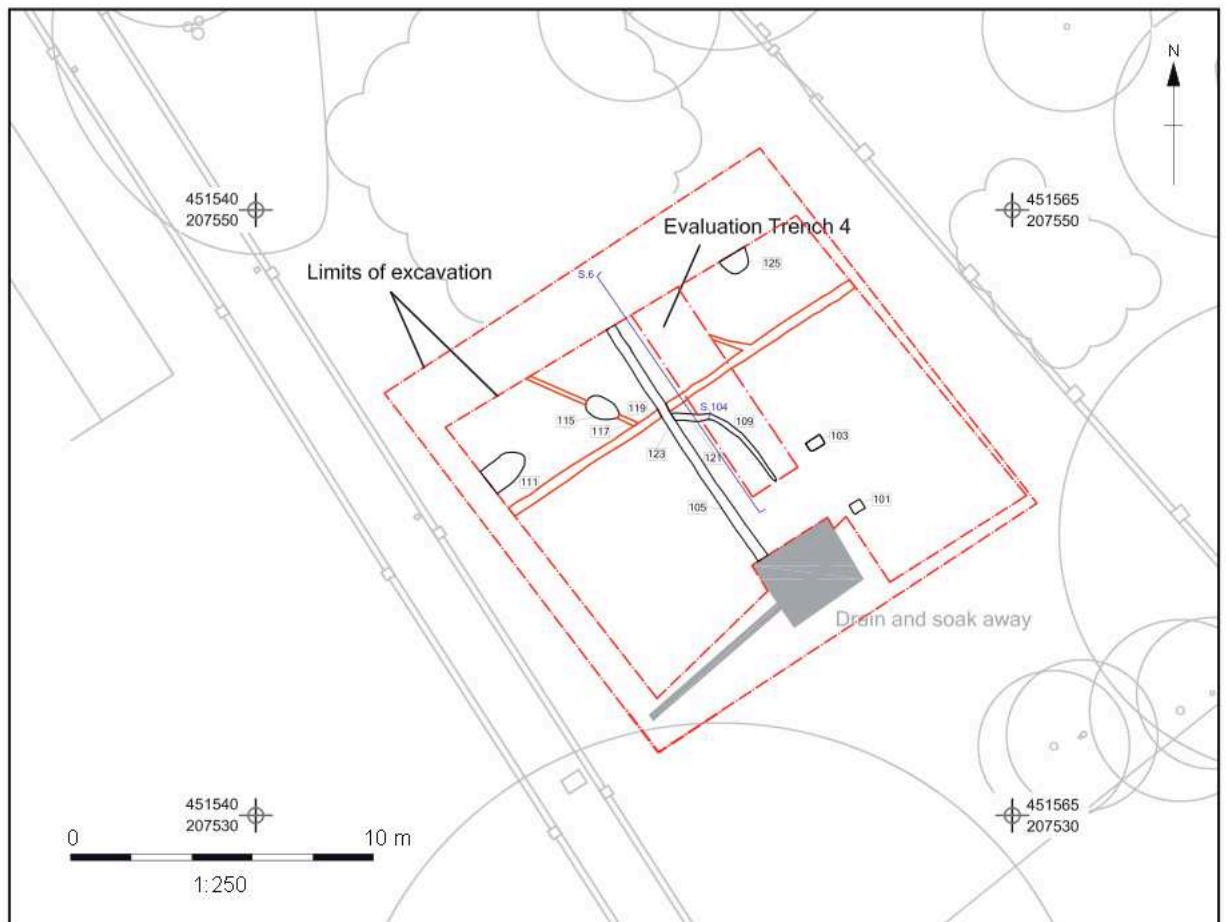


Figure 3: Plan of the excavation and key sections



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