
MAGDALEN COLLEGE GROVE

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION



THE OXFORD ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT



**MAGDALEN COLLEGE OXFORD:
PROPOSED NEW LONGWALL QUAD.**

EVALUATION OF ARCHAEOLOGY, APRIL 1991

SUMMARY *A four-day field survey of an area of car parking and parkland at Magdalen College Grove showed a body of medieval deposits concentrating towards the south of the area where the parkland adjoins the rear end of medieval properties on the corner of the High Street and Longwall St. The findings are consistent with the usage of this area as a rear access to the later site of the medieval Hospital of St John the Baptist which lies under the older parts of the college, and may indicate a traditional connection. No structural evidence was found of the first phase of the hospital which has been suggested to lie on this site, but there was residual pottery of the period and it is possible that a cluster of buildings the size of the hospital of St Bartholomew in Cowley could lie under the squash court.*

INTRODUCTION

OAU was asked by Magdalen College to evaluate the proposed site of its new quadrangle in Longwall Street, in advance of an application for planning consent. A fruitful partnership had been built between the college and the Unit over the last five years during the relocation of the kitchens, leading to the discovery of the most important and informative remains of the medieval hospital of St John lying under the early college buildings.

The area of the proposed development at Longwall, as shown on a plan provided by the College, is roughly 40 m x 95 m. The scheme includes an open quadrangle above an underground car park sunk to a depth of 10 feet below existing, and embraces the site of the existing squash court and fellows car park, with part of the deer park.

Because of the chance of disruption in the fellows car park, the trenching was done at short notice during the week following Easter. This meant that the 'desktop' evaluation had to wait, but this probably did not have any major deleterious effect since the background of the area is reasonably well known. A desktop study is built into the present report as follows.

GEOLOGY AND LOCAL TOPOGRAPHY

The site lies mainly on the Cherwell flood plain gravel terrace as it begins to rise up towards the second terrace. Typically these periglacial terraces at Oxford are covered by a distinctive red-brown loam, as seen in a relatively undisturbed state in three of the present trenches. The break of slope between the two terraces is probably indicated by the line of the city wall 40 m. to the west of the survey area, and by a spring line which was to become the Crowell.

This side of the Grove was enclosed by the great wall during the six years following 1467, when the newly founded Magdalen College was defining its boundaries. 16th and 17th-century maps show an arrangement of formal gardens within the wall, the earlier of which have been suggested as a legacy of the hospital which occupied the site in the 13th to 15th centuries. The gardens are mainly to the east, while the survey area is shown mainly with avenues of trees. References to deer first appear in the college accounts in the early 18th century.

More recently the College buildings have begun to expand towards this corner of the Grove. The former Magdalen College School on the corner of the High Street was absorbed for Longwall Quad in 1928-30, and since that time the squash court and fellows car park have extended into the SW part of the Grove itself.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

J C Buckler, while working as architect to the college, started a long tradition of archaeological investigations into the remains of St Johns Hospital. The hospital was suppressed in 1457 as part of the endowment of the college, but fragments of its buildings still survive and have been the subject of detailed investigations in the last five years (see B Durham 'The infirmary and Hall etc' typescript). Recent fieldwork elsewhere in the college has included a watching brief on the gas main connection from the fellows car park across the Grove to the New Buildings in September 1983, and observations in the President's Garden in April 1986.

Other recent archaeological work which relates to the area includes the investigation of the double line of the city wall near the site of Crowell in 1979-80 (see Durham et al 'Northern Defences' *Oxoniensia* (1983)). Excavations on the N side of Holywell Street in the last 12 months for both Merton College and Manchester College have been aimed at identifying the process by which open field strips became domestic properties.

One of the spinoffs from a century and a half of studying the hospital has been a recognition of the importance of its water works. The present understanding has been presented in Fig. 6, and it is clear that the early aqueduct from Crowell might be expected to run close to the present survey area.

MEDIEVAL DOCUMENTARY BACKGROUND

Fig. 6 illustrates a geographical framework for the available medieval documentary evidence for the area. The 13th-century site of the hospital seems to have occupied the roughly square area of Bishop Waynefleet's college buildings. Between this the east gate of the town were a series of strip tenements. They were largely rebuilt by the college in the 1480s, and

included the site of the later Greyhound Inn and Magdalen Hall.

H E Salter, the compiler of the cartulary of St Johns Hospital, came to the conclusion that the original site of the hospital in the 12th-century (as distinct from the second site begun in 1231) should lie outside the City Wall east of a property which itself was east of St Peters church (see Fig 5). He also appeared to believe that the manor of Peter Boterel, on which the later hospital was founded, should also be in this area. The implication is that the early hospital was in the area of the proposed development.

THE FIELD EVALUATION by Michael Parsons

Five trenches were dug by machine down to the top of undisturbed natural ground to establish whether any archaeological remains would be disturbed or destroyed by the proposed quad buildings. The trenching amounted to a 2% sample of the area specified for the development.

Three 10 m. trenches (1,2,3) were dug within the confines of the deer park, and a fourth to the north of the squash courts within the car park. Trench 5 was 3 x 1.2 meters, located against the W wall of the squash court just inside the Longwall street entrance.

TRENCH 1 Fig. 3a

The northern-most of the trenches was machine excavated to a depth of 1.20 m. below the modern turf (1/1). 0.50 m. of modern rubble, bricks, tiles, slates etc (1/2), was seen to overlay the sub soil (1/3). The natural horizon is an orange/brown sandy silty clay (1/4, 1/5).

One small Victorian pit 1/6 was recorded which contained pottery and small quantities of iron. Also recorded was a small post hole 1/7 which contained no finds.

TRENCH 2 Fig. 3a

A N-S trench in the deer park was excavated to a depth of 1.75 m. There were large amounts of modern rubble 2/1 just below the turf 2/2. Below this rubble was a possible plough soil 2/3, which was clearly undulating in section, and which merged into the underlying natural loams.

One modern feature was recorded, 2/5 a square rubble and slate filled soak-away. No other features were seen.

TRENCH 3 Fig. 3b

The southern-most of the deer park trenches was excavated to a depth of 1.0 m. The modern turf 3/1 overlaid a layer of rubble (3/2, 3/8, qv similar deposits in Trenches 1 and 2.) which in turn sealed another buried turf. Beneath this turf was a layer of compacted mortar 3/4, which was 0.40 m. thick at the south end thinning to 0.10 m. to the north. This could be the destruction rubble from a building further to the south. This mortar in turn overlays a yet earlier turf 3/5.

A small post hole 3/7 was cut from this level (undated).

Below this third buried turf a large hollow 3/13 was detected, although only its northern edge was recorded. It was necessary to bring back the machine to cut a section through its southern fill 3/11, 3/12, which showed that it was at least 8.0 m. wide. Fragments of 13th-century pottery were recovered from the bottom.

TRENCH 4 Fig. 3b

This trench was cut along the N side of the squash courts, within the car park. Immediately below the tarmac surface 4/1 and /2 was a layer of building rubble 4/3. Several pieces of 15th- and 17th- century window tracery were recovered from this layer. Below it was a dark grey layer of 17th- 18th-century occupation debris 4/4, which

contained large quantities of clay pipes, oyster shell and pottery. Below this a layer of dark brown sandy clay 4/5 contained some 11th- and 13th-century sherds, and below this again was undisturbed natural soil.

Two modern square features 4/7 and /8, presumably soakaways, were the only other features visible in the trench, cut from above 4.4.

TRENCH 5 Fig. 4

This trench was situated just inside the entrance to the car park from Longwall Street. The machine removed the tarmac etc 5/1 and /2 to reveal unsuspected service trenches, two drain pipes and a electricity cable 5/4 - /6. It was impossible to continue with the machine, so digging continued by hand. Again below the tarmac surface rubble was encountered 5/3, and again some 15th- century window tracery. Below this were undisturbed post-medieval layers 5/7 to 5/12, the first having a strong anaerobic smell typical of waterlogged deposits. At 1 m. depth were medieval levels 5/13 down to 5/15.

Due to the obstruction caused by the service runs it was only possible to excavate a 1.0 m. X 0.50 m. sondage down to a maximum 2.0 m. depth. At the lower levels there were still sherds of 14th-century pottery, and no natural level was encountered in this trench, so it cannot be said that the deposits were fully assessed.

FINDS FROM THE EVALUATION TRENCHES

A brief assessment of the finds has been done and the records will be lodged with the site archive. Small finds include eight of copper alloy (a thimble, pins, tags and folded sheet fragments), a sandstone whetstone and a single flint flake. Vessel and window glass was recovered from six contexts, all post medieval, tile and brick from five similar contexts, animal bone from 11 contexts of all periods, oyster shell from four (mainly medieval) and clay pipe from seven contexts, including about 30 bowls from 4/4.

Pottery

Medieval pottery was recovered from Trenches 3, 4 and 5. The finds were washed and marked, and compared with a Type Series of reference material at OAU. The earliest sherds were of St Neots Ware, distinctive of the 10th and 11th centuries in Oxford, which were associated with later material in layers 3/11 and 5/11. There were also flint-tempered fabrics typical of the 11th and 12th centuries in 4/5 and calcareous gritted fabrics of 12th-13th century date (3/5, 3/11, 4/5, 5/10). All this material might be indicative of settlement in the immediate area before the foundation date of the 13th-century hospital. All these finds were recovered from layers with later pottery which must provide the date for the deposits.

The largest and most instructive assemblages came from the broad hollow area in Trench 3. Here the pottery was predominantly from the main local supplier at Brill in Bucks (31 sherds), and the jug fragments and glaze types suggest a date not much later than the mid 14th century.

From Trench 4 there were 6 medieval sherds from the top of the plough soil 4/5 with a spread from the 11th to the 13th centuries. There was also a small sherd of a soft sandy fabric which may be a Roman greyware. Immediately above this was a rich 18th-century assemblage with Delft-type wares and porcellain.

Trench 5 was less productive for the medieval period because of the minute area available for excavation, but there was a single medieval sherd from 5/13 and residual medieval wares amongst 18th-century material in 5/11.

DISCUSSION

At the time of writing, there are several major college rebuilding projects in Oxford's planning pipeline. Many of them are in areas which would be regarded as 'suburban' to the medieval town; at St Annes there is a Roman interest, in the case of Manchester College it relates to the use of medieval open field strips for permanent settlement.

At Magdalen the interest is more specific yet at the same time less certain. Salter's evidence for the location of the pre-1231 hospital is clear, yet the implication would be that an important medieval charity had established itself at the back of all the High Street properties half-way along Longwall Street, and this is by no means convincing (Fig 5).

Several clear comparative points emerge from the results of the field evaluation. Firstly there is much more medieval activity at the south end of the survey area than would be expected on a comparable open field site, for instance that at Manchester College. This material belongs to a period after the hospital had moved to its later site however, and the earlier medieval pottery is not well enough stratified to be taken as evidence that there was a building in the survey area at the time of the putative early hospital. There are nevertheless some significant pointers.

The gradual thickening of the stone rubble layer in trench 3 suggests a building demolished in perhaps the 18th-century. This material was clearly the last phase in the reinstatement of an area where the natural soil profile is absent, disturbed in a way which is quite untypical of ordinary ploughland. The wide shallow hollow 3/13 is not deep enough to be a defensive ditch, which otherwise might be explicable as a physical defence around the suburban properties here. Nor is it typical of a plough headland. The implication is that this part of the deer park had a special usage in the lifetime of the later hospital, a usage which is unlike anything shown on maps of the area after the college had been founded.

Two particular special circumstances suggest themselves. Firstly the early hospital, when it was abandoned, may have left a legacy of usage in this area, perhaps a herbal garden which was dug deeper than the surrounding ground and continued to be cultivated. Another possibility is that the water from Crowell, which until 1267 had been carried by an aqueduct to the second site of the hospital, might have been diverted into a shallow pond for raising some sort of water-grown crop. The most likely use would have been fish husbandry, perhaps the precursors of the complex of ponds which the early maps show

elsewhere in the Grove in the 16th century and later, and which Sturdy suggests as starting during the hospital period. Relocation of the ponds would have been a logical result of the change in water source after 1267. These and other possibilities could only be tested by further excavation; for present purposes it is enough to note that this part of the Grove has sufficient archaeological differences from the remainder to signal a degree of caution about what may be beneath the squash courts.

It is therefore clear that if there is any early hospital building in the survey area (including any boundary ditch and service area) it is confined within the area S of Trench 4 and W of Trench 3. This means that the norther half of the development area has no structure relating to the hospital, although the discovery of a flint flake and a possibly Roman sherd are reminders that there may be earlier archaeological features concealed beneath early plough soils.

RECOMMENDATIONS

There seems to be no archaeological reason why the development should not proceed in its present form. It is difficult to quantify the risk of finding early hospital buildings or an aqueduct beneath the area occupied by the squash court, but in view of the general increase in volume of medieval finds southwards across the site, it would be prudent to look in more detail at this area in the period immediately ahead of the building contract. It would also be prudent to build an archaeological watching brief into the main contract, because of the possibility of finding early features concealed within the red loam natural soil.

This evaluation provides a framework by which the cost and timescale of such an operation could be estimated.

J Moore, B Durham

OAU 25.4.91

*OAU is grateful to Magdalen College for
commissioning this evaluation.*

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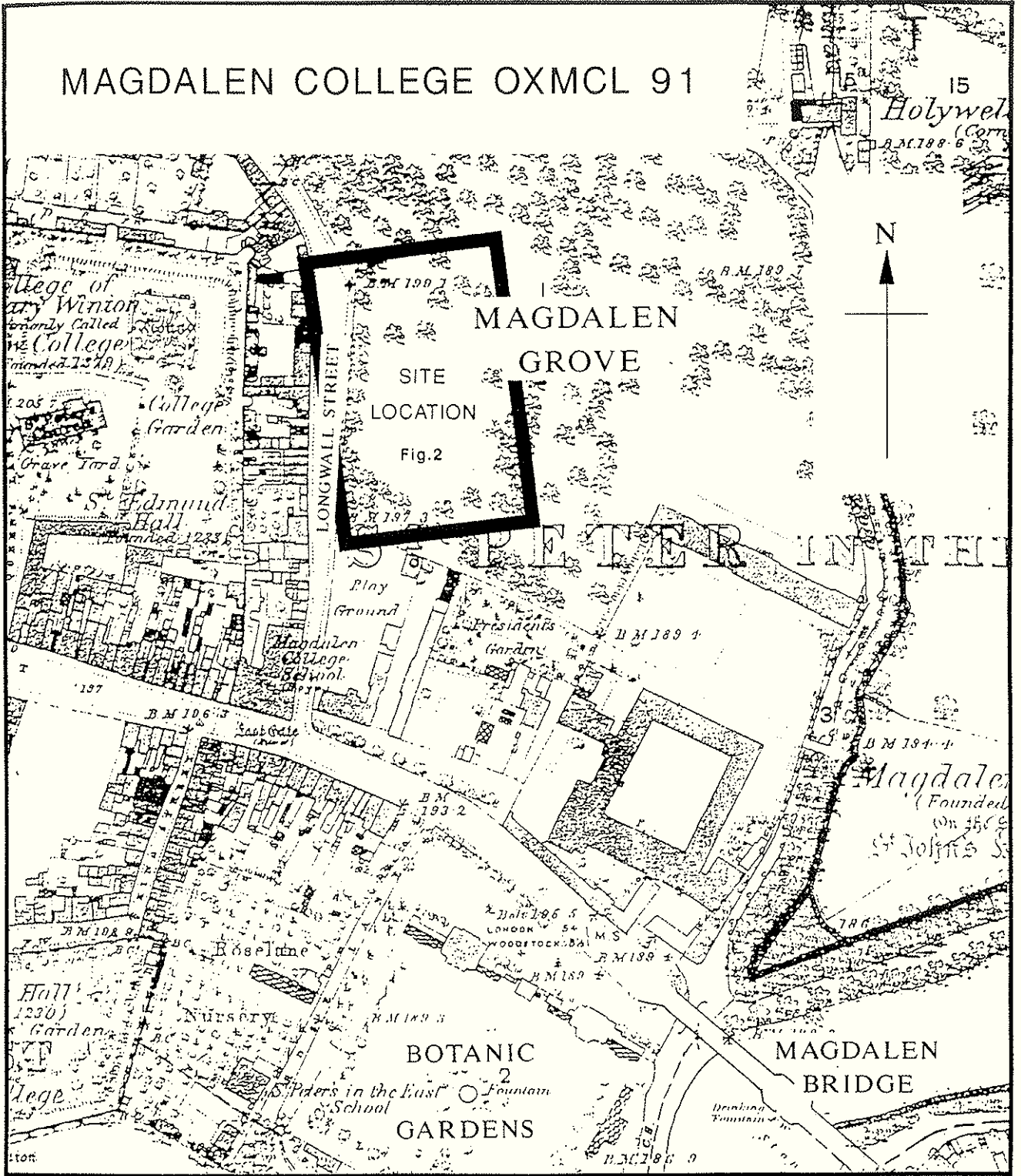
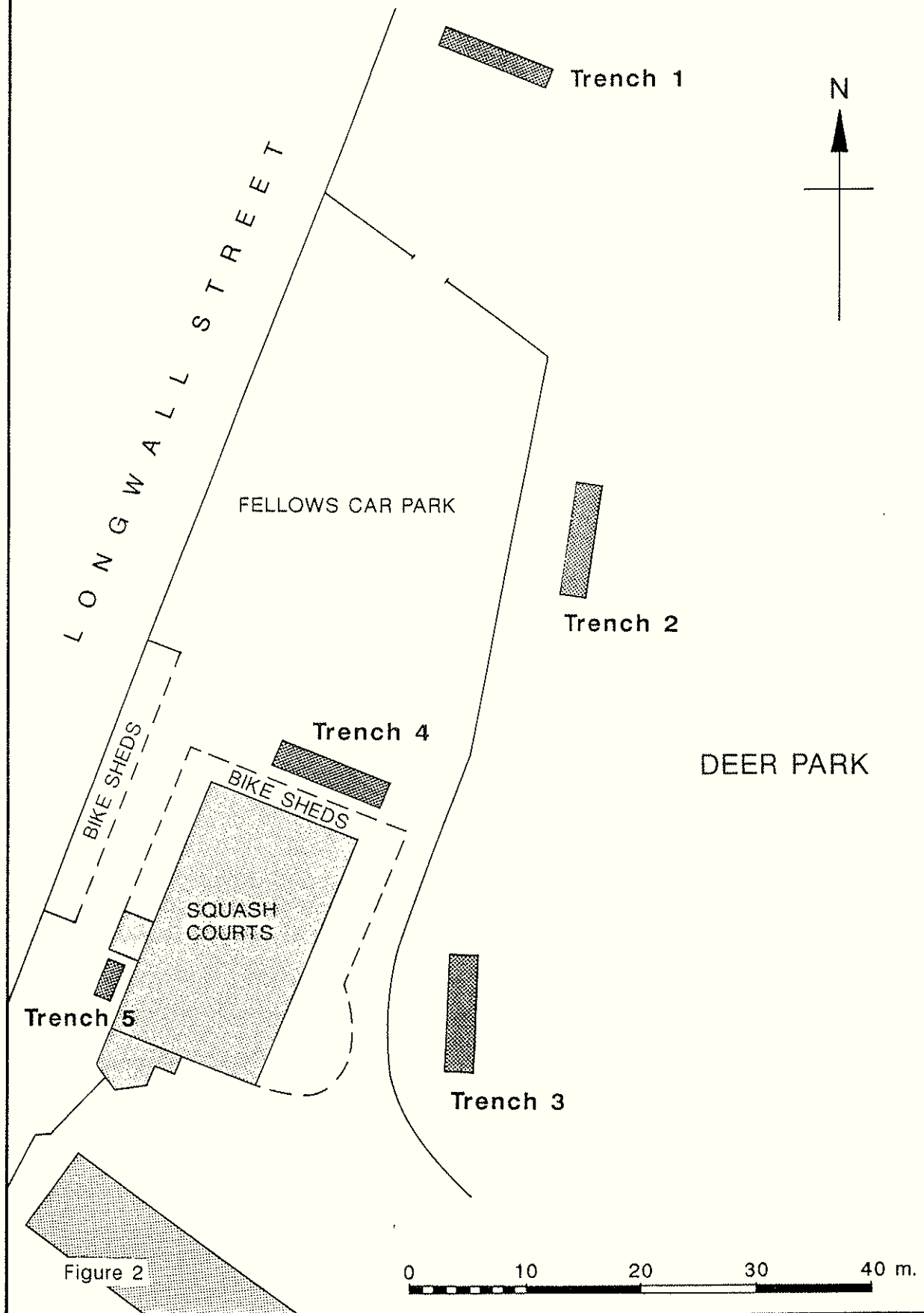
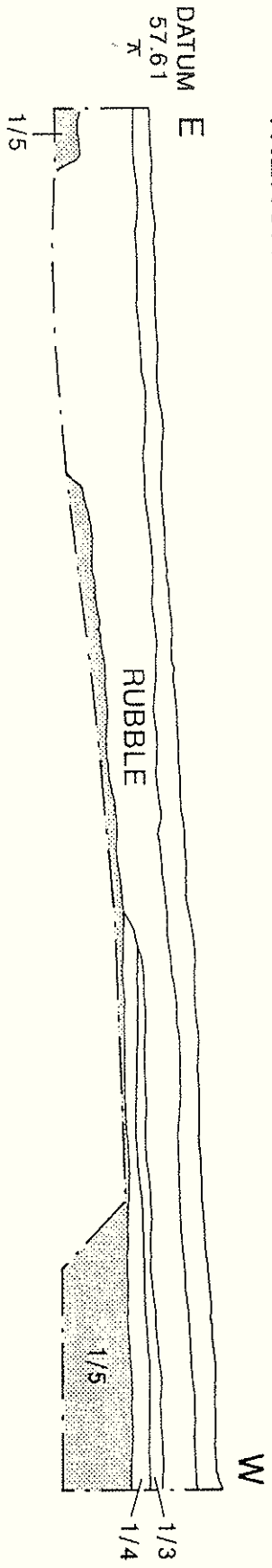


Figure 1

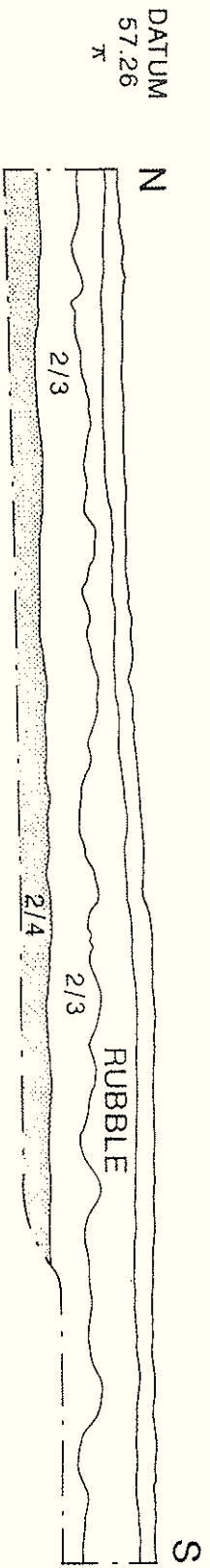
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TRENCH 1



TRENCH 2

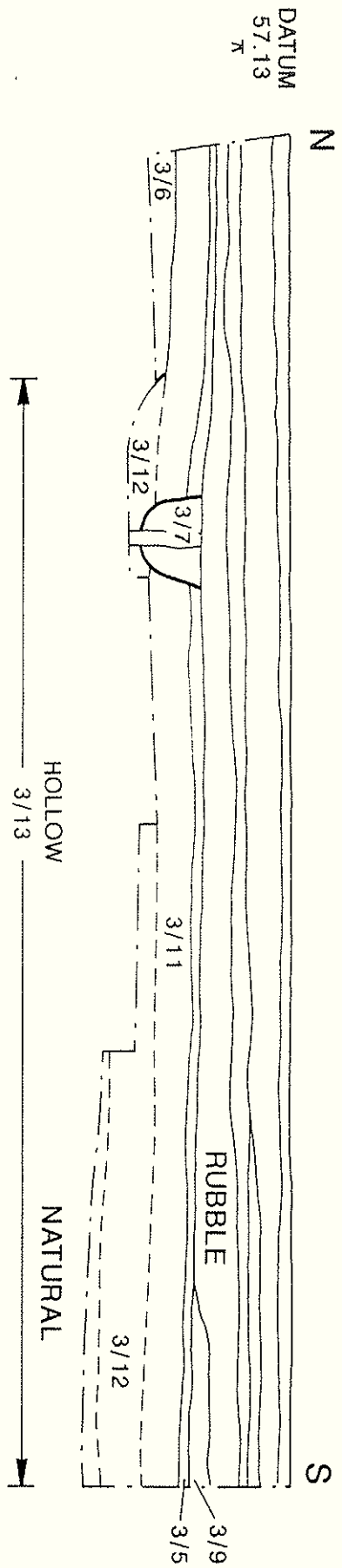


UNDISTURBED RED-BROWN LOAM



Figure 3a

TRENCH 3



TRENCH 4

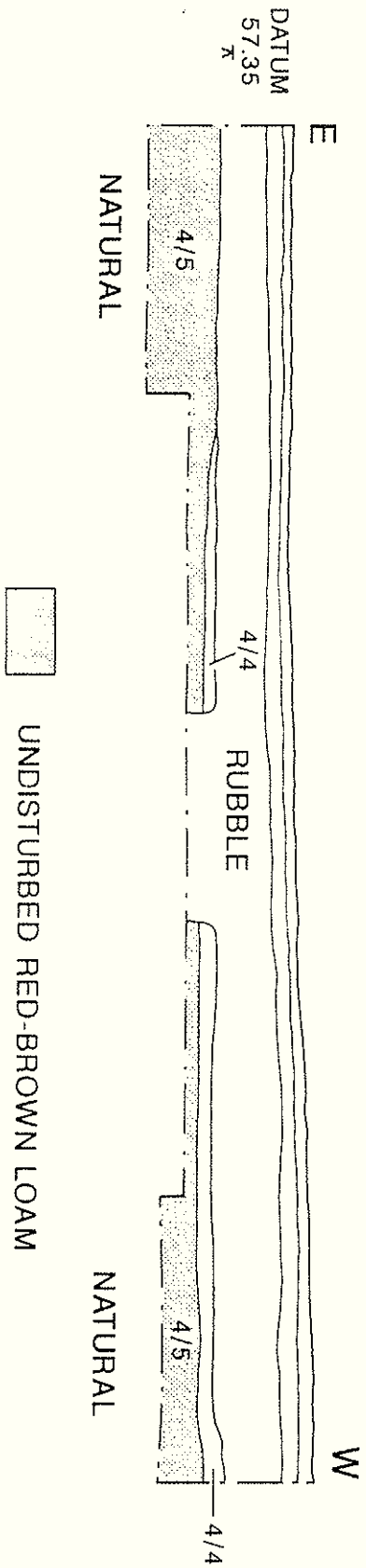
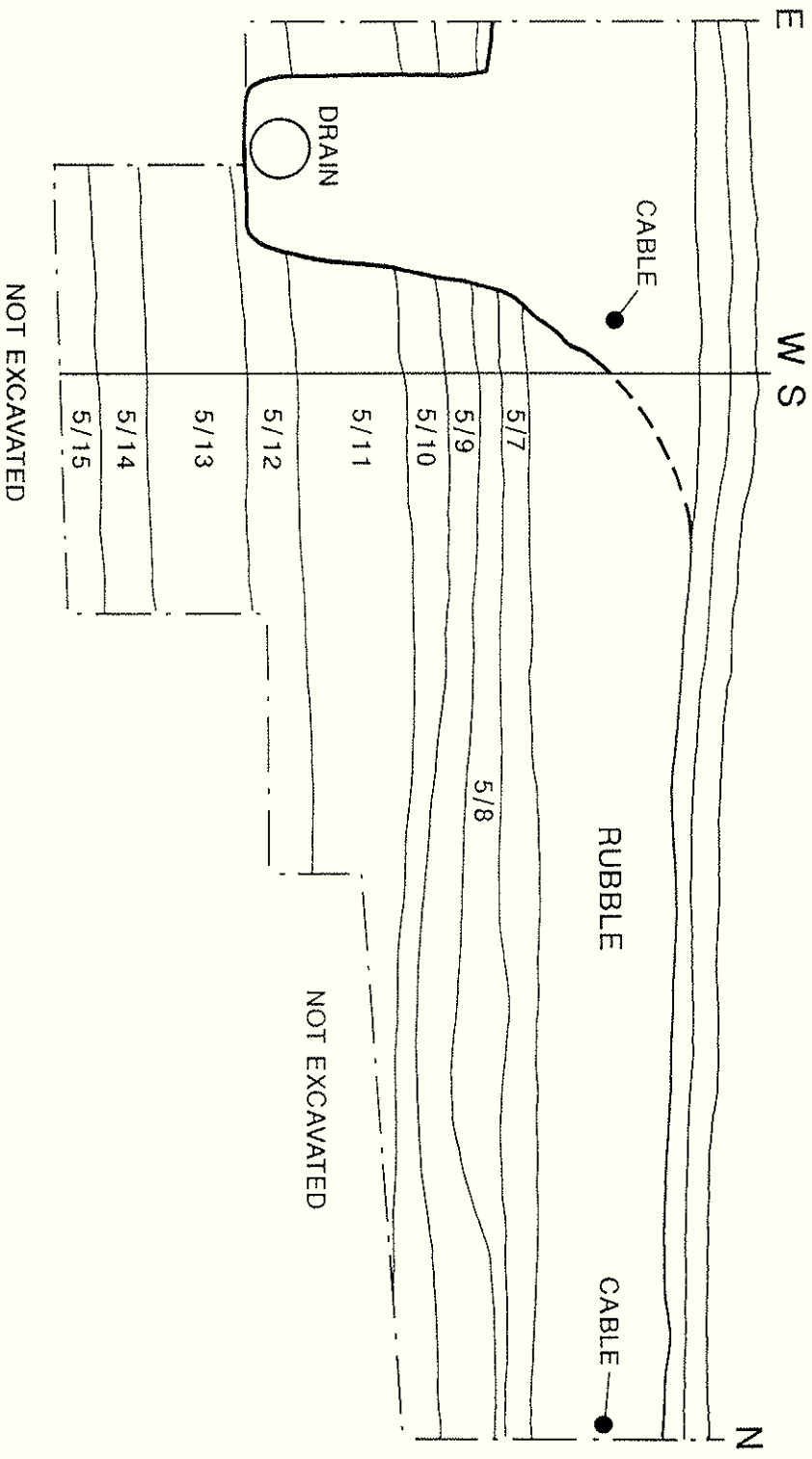


Figure 3b



TRENCH 5



DATUM
58.36
m

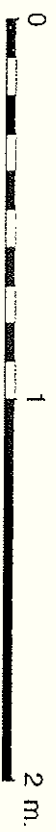


Figure 4

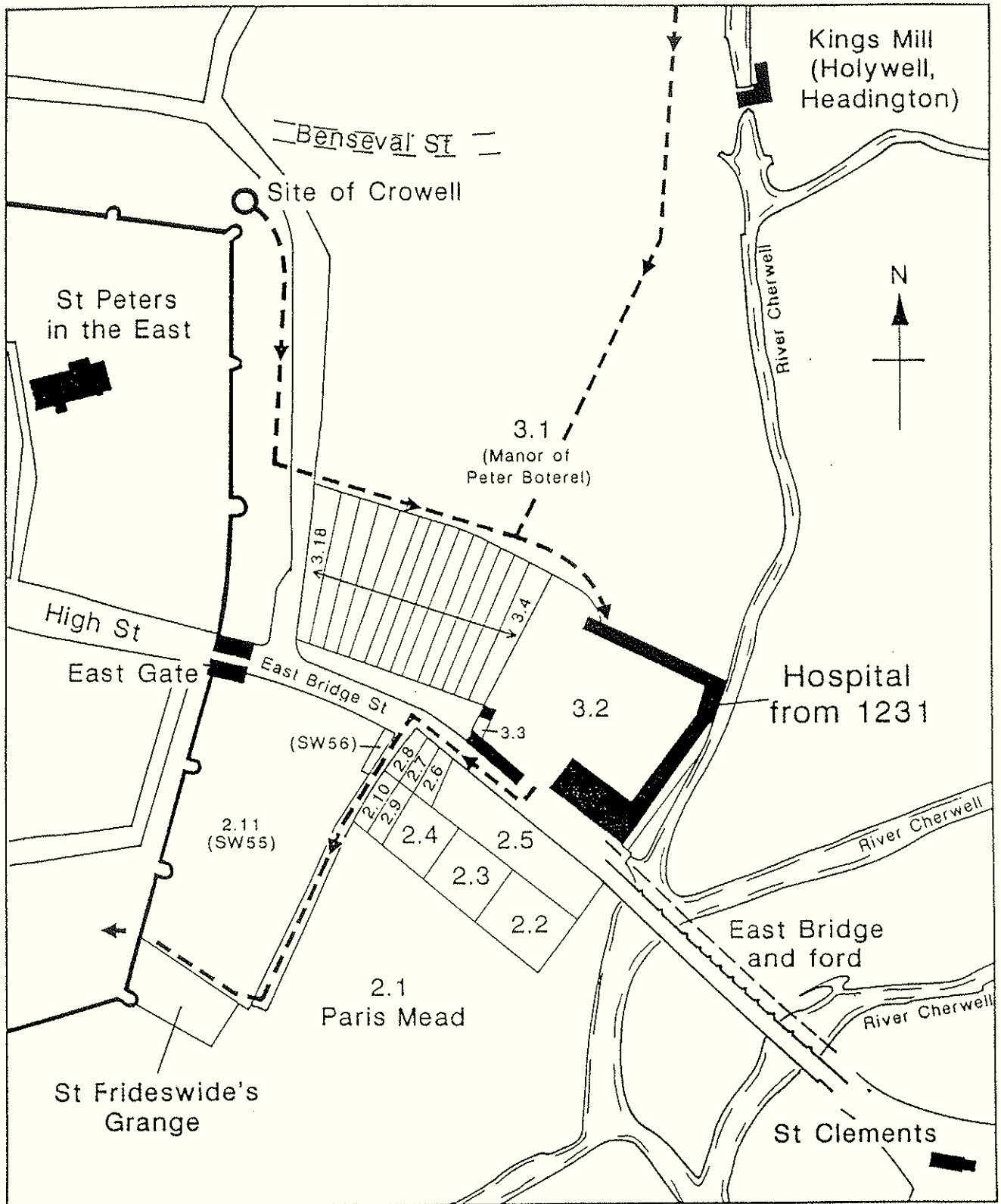


Figure 5

---> Presumed lines of medieval aqueducts

Bibliography

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B Durham et al, 'Oxford's Northern Defences', *Oxoniensia* 1983

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D Sturdy, *Twelve Oxford Gardens*.

H A Wilson, *College Histories: Magdalen College*, (1899)

ILLUSTRATIONS

Cover: Magdalen College Deer Park (Oxon. County Libraries).

Fig. 1 Location of the survey area, OS 1875 1:2500

Fig. 2 Plan of trenches.

Fig. 3a Trenches 1 and 2, drawn sections

Fig. 3b Trenches 3 and 4, drawn sections

Fig. 5 Trench 5, drawn section.

Fig. 6 Medieval eastern suburb of Oxford, after Durham, 'St Johns Hospital' (Oxoniensia LV, forthcoming).