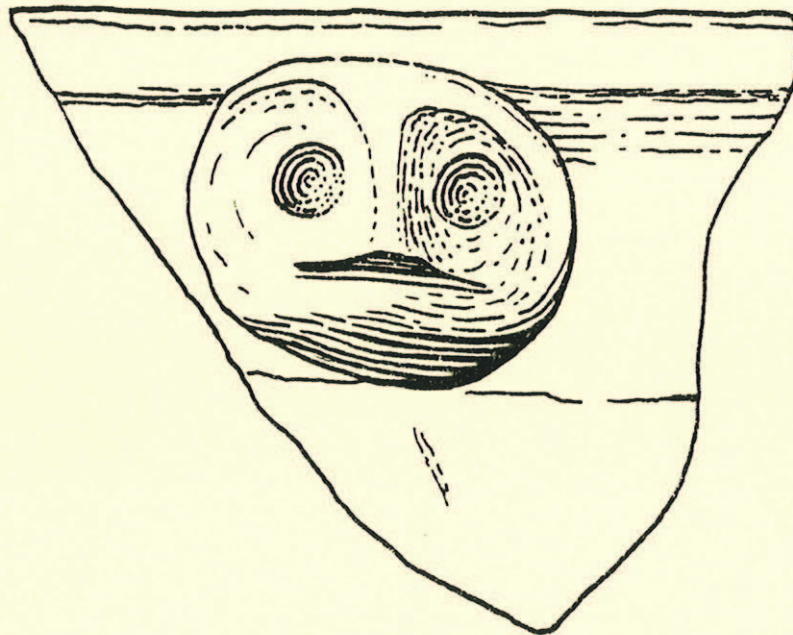


REWLEY ROAD, OXFORD

Archaeological evaluation

October/November 1993



OXFORD ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT

REWLEY ROAD, OXFORD
ARCHAEOLOGICAL FIELD EVALUATION 1993

NGR SP 5067 0645

Oxford Archaeological Unit

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1 Introduction

The Oxford Archaeological Unit carried out an archaeological field evaluation at Rewley Road, Oxford, on behalf of Oxford City Council. The Rewley Road site covers part of the area known to have been occupied by Rewley Abbey, a Scheduled Ancient Monument (Oxfordshire No. 80). The need for an evaluation arose from proposals to develop the land, and a brief was set by the Oxford Archaeological Advisory Service. This brief, together with a specification designed to fulfil its terms, formed the basis of an application for Scheduled Monument Consent to carry out the evaluation, which was granted on the 26th August 1993 (Reference HSD 9/2/640 Pt8).

2 Topography and geology

The Rewley Road site lies at NGR SP 5067 0645 and is bounded to the east by Castle Mill Stream, to the north and west by sleeper or chain-link fences and to the south by Wareham Stream (Fig.1). The area thus enclosed is approximately 0.3 ha. On the east side is a standing wall of limestone, with a small watergate, which runs parallel to the Castle Mill Stream. This wall has been generally assumed to have belonged to the medieval Abbey. The northern part of the site is currently in use as a car park while the southern part is waste ground but retains the concrete floor slabs of previous buildings.

Current ground levels on the site vary from 58.30 to 58.60 m OD on the west side of the stone wall, but are lower, 57.25 m OD, on the east (river) side.

The site lies on the Thames gravels, which are overlain by alluvial silts.

3 Historical and archaeological background

Rewley Abbey was founded in 1280 as a Cistercian place of study, and the Cistercian order insisted that the foundation be a proper abbey. Documentation for Rewley in the medieval period is scattered and obscure, though one key text shows the crown granting the buildings of the *studium* to the Abbey in 1381 after the *studium* had failed. The Cistercians remained at Rewley until the dissolution in 1536.

Parts of the remains appear on historic maps and views from 1578 onwards but these provide direct information only on the walls around the site (see also below) and on the buildings west of the site currently under discussion (marked *studium* on Fig.1), some of which survived into the 19th century. A study by Julian Munby (1984) first raised the possibility that these were the *studium* buildings and that the Abbey church and cloister lay to the south-east. A possible layout for these buildings was obtained by using a half-scale plan of Hailes Abbey (Ibid. and see Fig.3).

In 1986 an archaeological evaluation was undertaken by the OAU for British Rail and Oxford City Council (OAU 1986). The results of this evaluation, which involved trenches only on the very edge of the Rewley Road site, are summarised on Figure 1. Figure 3 shows how Munby's suggestion appeared to be vindicated at least in part by the discovery of robbed walls and pier bases interpreted as belonging to the Abbey church, but the detailed plan of the church, and of any related cloisters to its north or south, remained unknown.

In 1993 George Lambrick, acting as advisor to Oxford City Council Planning Department, made the suggestion that a cloister immediately north of the Abbey church (thus forming effectively a double cloister with the *studium* buildings) was also a possibility, and that archaeological evaluation should take this into account. Lambrick also noted that there were discrepancies between the position of the riverside limestone wall as it is today, and that shown on Agas' (1578) and Loggan's (1675) maps of Oxford (Figs 4,5). Agas shows the wall turning a right-angle in the north-east corner of the site, and following an alignment well back from Castle Mill Stream, while Loggan shows an obtuse angle in the same corner, with the wall following the stream edge. The wall visible today certainly has an obtuse angle, and is parallel, though 5 to 6 m away from, the stream. In general, then, the current situation is close to that depicted by Loggan, if the present land between the wall and the stream is considered to have built up since 1675 (see 5.7). This, together with suspicions about the validity of the watergate as an original medieval feature, led to the hypothesis that the wall had been rebuilt at some time, possibly not on its original alignment. These questions, also, were to be addressed by the evaluation (5.7).

4 Methodology

The layout of the four trenches excavated was as defined in the specification for the evaluation. Reasons for the positioning of each trench and possible extensions of some were also contained in the specification and are listed in Appendix 2. The final trench layout is illustrated in Figure 1. Two trenches were extended during the evaluation as provided for in the specification. Trench 2 was extended to the north-west in order to try and move outside what appeared to be a post-medieval pond (see 5.4) and to link in with a trench dug during the 1986 project (Fig.1). Trench 1 was extended to the south-west, as the east wall of the Abbey church was not found within the original trench extent, and to the north-east, to investigate deposits on the river side of the wall.

Provision was made for an extra trench, Trench 5, but, again as defined in the specification, this was not excavated as neither the south cloister nor a cemetery were identified in Trenches 3 and 4.

Excavation techniques were as set out in the brief. The top 1.4 - 1.7 m was removed by machine and in practice the bottom of a 19th-century cultivation layer was clearly identifiable, and served as a machining level. The water table was

reached in all trenches except Trench 4, and necessitated pumping, in some cases making excavation difficult.

Dr Mark Robinson of the University Museum visited the evaluation twice to examine deposits in the field and to advise on their sampling and palaeoenvironmental potential.

Spot-dating of the ceramic material was carried out by Maureen Mellors using the Oxford type-series and is summarised in Appendix 1.

5 Description and discussion of the archaeology

5.1 Natural silts

Natural alluvial silts, i.e. those overlying the Thames Gravels and probably pre-dating any human activity on the site, were identified in Trenches 1 (111, 131 at 55.68 to 55.73 m OD), 2 (209 at 55.51m OD) and 3 (at 55.74 m OD). Probing suggested that the lowest silt in Trench 2, 209, lay about 0.25 m above natural gravel. Dr Robinson of the University Museum examined (in the field) the lowest, and undated silt, 133, in Trench 1 (Fig.2, NE of wall) and noted the remains of molluscs which would only have lived in clean, well-oxygenated water with a reasonable flow. This evidence would be consistent with the silt having formed within what is now Castle Mill Stream, showing that it was either wider or on a slightly different line (see also 6.3).

Other silts relating to later activity on the site are discussed in 5.4 and 5.7.

5.2 Retaining walls and land reclamation

Two walls examined during the evaluation were apparently intended, at least as far as their lower courses were concerned, torevet layers dumped behind them. The clearest example of this was the lowest 1.25 m, of the riverside wall (115; Fig.2A) which had a foundation trench cut into the silts. The consequent construction of the wall, with the faced stones beginning at a lower point on the river side shows clearly the intention to terrace the ground. Deep layers, typically of orange clay and gravel (Fig.2a; Layers 107, 102) were then dumped behind the wall with the intended ground surface apparently being at the top of layer 102, where the faced stones begin. Depending on the function of this area of the Abbey (see 6.2) a topsoil may have also been laid down at this time.

As regards the date of the operation described above, two fragments of late-13th or early-14th century glazed floor tile were recovered from the silt (131) immediately below the foundation trench and from the foundation trench fill, 130. These are ambiguous as dating evidence, in that some tiles are likely to have been broken on the site during the original (late 13th century) construction phase, but they could also indicate a later date when a tiled building was already being

demolished or refurbished. The presence of tile in hard core imported from another site can also not be ruled out. Better dating evidence comes from the dumped layers behind the wall which produced pottery from the late 13th to the 15th centuries, with layers 102 and 143 (Fig.2) in particular containing 6 sherds and 13 sherds respectively of 14th- to 15th-century wares.

The second revetting wall, again built over silt, was found in the north-west corner of Trench 2 (Fig.1, 226)) and is likely to be a continuation of a wall found slightly further to the north-west during the 1986 evaluation. A short (3.5 m) length of the wall was found in 1993, running on a north-west/south-east alignment, and with a very rough face on the only visible (south-west) side. The suspicion that this was not intended to be a visible face was confirmed by a deep layer of orange clay, 224, having been dumped against the wall. Similar stratification was recorded in 1986. Layer 224 contained a group of 18 sherds of pottery which can be no earlier than the late 14th century, but could be 15th century.

Other deep layers, though not associated with revetting walls, were found in Trenches 3 and 4. In Trench 3 an orange gravelly clay overlying the silt, and similar to that in Trenches 1 and 2 produced a group of mid-12th to mid-13th century pottery (18 sherds, all found in close proximity) but also 11 sherds of 14th- to 15th-century wares. The layer thus contains domestic debris from either a pre-Abbey phase of activity on the site, or which was imported from elsewhere in the city. Some early material was also recovered from another deep, but much darker and more midden-like layer, 407, in Trench 4. Abundant later material from 407 suggests a 15th-century date.

Overall, there is evidence of a deliberate raising of the ground level by revetting and dumping over the areas of the site covered by the evaluation. The dumps were shown to directly overlie waterlain silts, showing that the raising of the ground was intended to reclaim boggy ground which was probably subject to seasonal flooding. The top levels of the dumped clay layers in Trenches 1-3 and the midden in Trench 4 are 56.41, 56.82, 56.47 and 56.50 respectively, which is broadly similar to the range of levels for floors and surfaces found during the 1986 evaluation. This could be seen as a gradual or staged operation over the late 14th to 15th centuries, but the similarity of many of the dumped layers may indicate a single operation, in which case a 15th-century date is the most likely, though a later date cannot be ruled out (see also 6.3).

5.3 Stone structures

Excluding the revetting walls discussed in 5.2 above, three other limestone structures were found. A narrow wall, 116, of which only one course survived, crossed Trench 1 on a north-east/south-west alignment. It had no associated floors or other deposits. In Trench 4 was the stub of a robbed wall, 408, surviving 0.25 m high and associated with patches of very hard mortar floor, 412 (Fig.2). Both wall and floor directly overlay the midden 407 (5.2); a linear cut 4.5 m to the

north-east (Fig.1) may represent the robbing of an associated wall, in which case the structure was aligned north-east/south-west.

Neither of the walls discussed above can be securely dated, though they should be 15th century or later. The very hard mortar floor in Trench 4 did not appear typically medieval in character by comparison with other Oxford sites, and may be a post-medieval feature. It may also be significant that neither wall followed the north-north-west/south-south-east alignment which characterises those buildings known to have definitely formed part of the Abbey complex (Fig.1).

The third structure was a stone-built drain, 135, found in the south-west corner of Trench 1, and contained within a larger cut, 139, into the clay reclamation layers (Figs.1,2). Vertical cut slots on both sides of the drain were presumably made so that a sluice-board could be lowered to block or partially block the drain. This last feature is puzzling in that the drain ended against the cut in the reclamation layers. A solution to this problem would require excavation over a wider area. The sides of the drain were aligned with the known parts of the Abbey complex, but its date, stratigraphically, should be 15th century or later. The drain could only be earlier if it was butted by the reclamation layers, but this seems unlikely, as it should be a feature constructed below ground-level in the first place.

The cut, 139, which contained the drain also ran 2.3 m to the north-east. This feature, which contained some unshaped limestone pieces in the bottom, is again enigmatic; it could represent a robbed-out wall though the shape was not the typical near-vertical cut of a robber trench.

5.4 Probable later pond

A north-east/south-west cut (Fig.1, 234), at the north-west end of Trench 2, cut through both the reclamation layers and the overlying demolition rubble of wall 226. At present it seems most likely that the silt layers, and overlying layers containing building rubble (in some cases associated with 17th-century pottery), to the south-east of this cut were all within the feature. Dr Robinson carried out a preliminary examination of one of the silt layers, and this was clearly laid down in still or very slow-moving water. A north-west/south-east cut (Fig.1, 213), in the centre of Trench 2, was probably also part of the same feature. If this was the case, then part of the trench lay outside the feature.

A preliminary interpretation of this feature is that it is one of the ponds shown on a number of historic maps (e.g. Figs 4,5). The stratigraphic evidence would then confirm the previous hypothesis that these are post-dissolution ponds, possibly decorative, rather than monastic fishponds.

5.5 Cultivation layers

Narrow furrows into the top of the reclamation layers in Trench 3 were associated mainly with 14th- to 15th-century pottery, and only one furrow contained a later (18th-century) fragment. There is thus a possibility of medieval cultivation in this area, though the pottery could have been ploughed up from the layers below at a much later date.

Above the furrows was a layer of loam, which was found across the full extent of all four trenches. Pottery dating to the 18th-19th centuries was recovered from this context in all of the trenches, and it clearly represents the garden level which as depicted on maps of the 19th century.

The top and bottom levels of the cultivated soil layer in each trench area as follows:

Trench 1	Top	56.68 - 57.28
	Bottom	56.48 - 56.88
Trench 2	Top	57.20 - 57.40
	Bottom	56.80 - 57.00
Trench 3	Top	57.26 - 57.42
	Bottom	56.62 - 56.72
Trench 4	Top	57.18 - 57.25
	Bottom	56.88 - 56.95

5.6 Final make-up layers

Up to 1.5 m of coal, ash, gravel, sand and other material was dumped across the whole site directly on top of the general cultivation layer described in 5.5. This must be connected with the arrival of the railway in Oxford in the 1850s, and represents the gradual dumping of material outwards from the main line, raising the ground level for further lines and associated activities.

The bottom levels of this layer are given in 5.5, as the top levels of the underlying cultivated soil.

5.7 The standing wall and stratification on its north-east (river) side

The stratification on the river side of the standing wall (Fig.2) was, as might be expected, markedly different from that found elsewhere on the site. A silty gravel (129) against the wall overlay the foundation trench, and can probably also be associated with the wall construction. This was overlain by a thick layer of rubble and mortar, 127, including large faced limestone blocks. Such a rubble layer

probably resulted from a partial collapse of the wall, and this would explain why a different, and cruder building technique, 103 (Fig.2), can be identified in the upper section. Above the rubble were a whole series of silt layers of which the lowest, 126, contained 17th-18th century pottery. The wall collapse was thus a relatively late event in the life of the site. At the top of the silt sequence was a surface of laid bricks, 121, overlain by topsoil and leaf mould, 120.

As regards the wall itself, the construction of its first phase, 112, used mainly large stones (c. 0.3 m in length) and was quite neatly faced and coursed, the courses being 0.12 - 0.20 m high. The failure of this coursing, and the use of a building stone in far more varied shapes and sizes, marks the change to the later rebuild, 103. The wall is discussed further in 6.3.

5.8 Finds and reliability of dating

Few of the excavated contexts were rich in finds, although the midden layer 407, and the reclamation layer 326 both produced good quantities of pottery. Fairly broad chronologies have been proposed for the major events on the site so as not to overstretch the limited dating evidence, but for the dating to be refined it would be necessary to considerably increase the excavated sample.

Aside from pottery and tile, only a very small quantity of animal bone was recovered, and a single, plain copper alloy finger ring from layer 134.

5.9 Palaeoenvironmental

Samples were taken from the lowest alluvial silts inside and outside the riverside wall in Trench 1. Silt from the probable post-dissolution pond was sampled, as was the midden layer 407.

Although the silt layers excavated on site clearly have some potential in that they are waterlogged and organic material survives within them. Detailed analysis would only be worthwhile if these deposits could either be dated, or, at the very least, fitted into a better sequence that was the case with the evaluation trenches. As an example, a pre-Abbey alluvium might well merit analysis, but it should preferably underlie a sequence which definitely includes the earliest (late 13th century) phase of the Abbey. Waterlogged deposits which could be shown to be contemporary with the Abbey would also have potential, including the fills of stone drains like that found in Trench 1 (135).

6 Conclusions

6.1 Preservation of the archaeology

The preservation of the archaeology was moderate in the evaluated areas. A considerable amount of wall-robbing has evidently taken place (Fig.1) and the preservation of either floors or other surfaces is particularly rare. Considerable quantities of broken glazed floor tile were recovered, suggesting that the medieval tiled floors were extensively robbed. Preservation is likely to be better in the areas south-west of Trenches 1 and 2, which probably includes the east end of the Abbey church (containing burials, Fig.1) and parts of a north range of buildings (6.3). Burials could also exist within the church transepts (but see 6.2). The stone drain in Trench 1 suggests better-preserved remains, while in the 1986 trench at the top of Trench 2, some surfaces were discovered to the south-west of the two walls (Fig.1). This area is also closer to the much better-preserved *Studium* buildings.

6.2 The layout of the Abbey complex

Firstly, the evaluation showed that reclamation of this part of the site was not contemporary with the original (late 13th-century) construction. Instead, it took place either in a number of stages from the late 14th century onwards, or possibly in a single operation, in which case a 15th-century date is most probable.

Trench 1 was unsuccessful in locating the east end of the Abbey church. The ground level identified in Trench 1 (top of layer 102, see 5.2) is therefore likely to have been covered by topsoil and, in the absence of any cemetery evidence, to have been part of a garden.

While the strong evidence for an aisled building found in the 1986 trenches must still support the argument for a church on the alignment shown on Figure 1, the 1993 work has shown that its east end cannot lie as far east as was previously proposed. Projecting from the pier bases and walls which are known to exist from the 1986 evaluation, the area within which the east end should lie can now be predicted and this is shown on Figure 1. Two positions for the east wall are shown and these should be regarded as equally possible on present evidence.

The areas which may be occupied by the transepts of the church are also shown on Figure 1. These are more difficult to predict than the east end itself, as the only traces of possible transept walls could also belong to buttresses. It should also be noted that the church walls as defined by robber trenches actually cross the area which the transepts occupy and this means either that there were no transepts, or, that continuous foundations were laid even when gaps in the walls were intended - either argument is possible.

Taking the above arguments into account, there is thus potentially a considerable difference in the archaeology to the north and south of the east end of the church.

This is because to the north, while a transept may perhaps not exist, there is a reasonable possibility that a north range of buildings occupied the space. A north range is likely for the following reasons:

- * Unless the Abbey departs completely from the Cistercian plan there should be a cloister either to the north or to the south. On the evidence of this evaluation, a cloister on the south side is unlikely.
- * The wall 405 in 1986 Trench IV (Fig.1) and its associated surfaces could form part of a north range. Other evidence may have been robbed out by the late pond in Trench 3.
- * A much larger quantity of building material (i.e. mainly broken floor tile) was found in Trenches 1 and 2 than in the southern area (Trenches 3 and 4).

6.3 The riverside wall

Finally, it has been shown that the riverside wall in its present position is likely to be a 15th-century feature. This does not solve the problem raised by George Lambrick of the differences between two historic maps (see Figs 4 and 5), unless the wall (and therefore the associated reclamation) has been dated much too early, and belongs to the late 16th-century. Archaeologically there is no evidence, at present, for this being the case. However, the idea that the wall originally had a predecessor further to the south-west remains possible, if unproven. The alluvial silt found in Trench 1, which formed in a running stream (5.1) shows that the wall was built over a reclaimed watercourse. Arguably, Agas' map shows the remnant of such a watercourse just outside the wall alignment which he depicts.

6.4 Impact of the current development proposal

The footprint of the flats currently proposed for the site is shown on Figure 6. Provided that all ground beams, pile caps, other foundation details and all services can be contained within the post-1850 dumps which overlie the site (5.6) the impact of the development will be limited to a change in the setting of the riverside wall, and to the areas affected by piling. At present, the areas requiring the greatest sensitivity of approach in terms of piling layout are the east end of the church with possible transepts, all of which are likely to contain burials, and the proposed range north of the Abbey church (Figure 1).

Bibliography

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OAU 1986 *Rewley Abbey, Oxford: an archaeological assessment of the Scheduled Ancient Monument.*

Appendix 1 Summary of finds data

3S = Number of pottery sherds

3T = number of tile fragments

G = glazed floor tile

UG = unglazed tile

R = roof tile

L13th = late 13th

E13th = early 13th

M13th = mid-13th

Unident. = unidentifiable

Context No.	Type of context	Finds summary
Trench 1		
100	Layer	4S 15th-16th
102	Layer	6S 14th-15th 2T G 6T UG
104	Fill	4S 18th-19th
106	Layer	1S 14th-15th
107	Layer	1S 13th-15th 1T G 2T UG
109	Fill	1S R
114	Fill	11S E18th-M19th 3T UG 1T R
117	Layer	2S 17th-18th
124	Layer	1S E17th-18th
126	Layer	1S 14th-15th 3S L17th-18th 1S M18th 3S Unident.
131	Layer	1T G
134	Layer	1S M13th-L13th 1S 15th-16th
140	Fill	5T G 7T UG
143	Layer	13S 14th-15th
145	Fill	3S L14th-15th 3T G
146	Fill	2T R

Trench 2

201	Layer	2S L19th-20th
202	Layer	24S 18th-19th
203	Layer	1S 19th
204	Layer	1S 14th-15th 1S M17th-18th 2S L17th-18th 1S 17th-18th 1S M18th-19th 1S L18th-19th 8T G
205	Layer	2S 17th 2S 17th-18th 1S E18th-M18th 12S M18th-L18th 1S L18th-19th 4T UG
206	Layer	1S 13th-15th 1S 16th-E17th 1S E17th-M17th 2S E17th-L17th 14T G 5T UG
207	Fill	3T G 15T UG
208	Layer	1S 13th-14th 2T G
209	Layer	3T R
214	Fill	1S M13th-E14th 1S 13th-14th 1S 15th 14T G 2T UG
215	Fill	1S Unident. 1S 12th-M13th 17T G
216	Fill	5T G
218	Layer	5T G 6T UG
219	Layer	6T G
220	Layer	2T G 3T UG
221	Layer	3T G
223	Layer	1S M13th-L13th 1S M13th-14th 3S 13th-14th

224	Layer	4S M13th-L13th 1S 13th-E14th 2S M13th-E15th 8S L14th-15th 3S Unident.
232	Fill	2S 14th-15th 1S Unident. 2T UG

Trench 3

302	Layer	2S 19th
303	Layer	2S 13th-14th 1S M17th-L17th 1S M17th-E18th 1S M18th-E19th 1T UG
304	Fill	2S 13th-14th 4S 14th-15th
306	Fill	1S 12th-14th 7S M13th-E14th
310	Fill	2S Unident. 1S M13th-E14th 4S 14th-15th
312	Fill	2S 12th-M13th 1S 14th-15th 1S L14th-15th 1T G
317	Fill	1S 12th-M13th 1S M17th-L17th 1S M17th-E18th
324	Fill	1S 14th-15th 2T G
325	Layer	1S E12th-M13th 37S M13th-L13th

326	Layer	18S M12th-M13th 1S M13th-E14th 10S 14th-15th
327	Fill	6S Unident. 1S M12th-M13th 1S M13th-L13th 2S 19th 2T G

Trench 4

406	Layer	1S 13th-14th
407		1S 12th-M13th 2S L12th-M13th 20S Unident. 3S 14th-E15th 37S 14th-15th
410	Layer	1S 14th-15th
414	Fill	3S Unident. 3S M13th-E14th 1S 14th-15th 3T G 3T R
416	Layer	2S L12th-M13th 1S 13th-14th 1S Unident. 11S 14th
420	Layer	1S M13th-15th
422	Layer	L12th-13th

Appendix 2 Reasons for trench location (from specification)

- Trench 1 To establish the monastic boundary and river location and the eastern end of the church. Dimensions: 1.6 m x 6 m minimum. The trench will be extended NW by up to 5 m if access is possible. An extension of 5 m to the SW will only be carried out if the initial trench indicates that the boundary has moved to the NW since the medieval period or if the eastern end of the church has not been located.
- Trench 2 To establish the location of the possible monastic cloister on the north side of the church. Dimension: 1.6 m x 19 m (minimum). A further extension of 10 m if necessary to clarify the relationship of the cloister to the church.
- Trench 3 To establish the location of the possible monastic cloister on the south side of the church (see also Trench 4 aims). Dimensions: 1.6 m x 15 m (minimum) to 20 m maximum.
- Trench 4 To establish the presence/absence and location of a possible medieval cemetery. Dimensions: 1.6 m x 9 m (min.) to 15 m max. to be extended if more information is required about the possible cemetery. Any burials will be excavated in situ to establish condition, etc, but will not be removed.
- Trench 5 Aims as in Trench 3, but will only be excavated when the results of Trench 3 can be evaluated. If neither the cloister nor cemetery are found Trench 5 may not be required. Dimensions: 1.6 m x 10 m.

Trench 1 North-West section

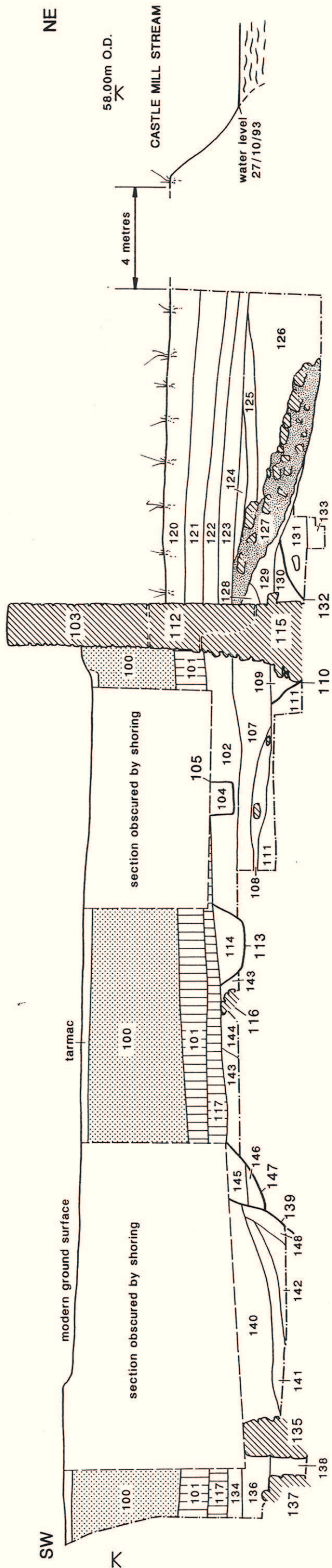


Figure 2a

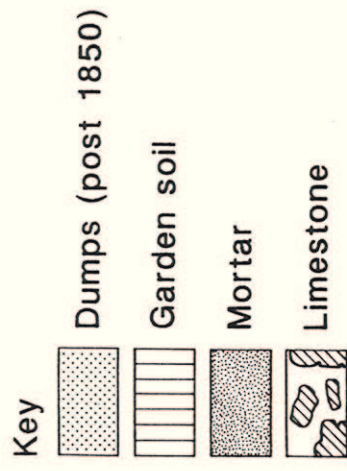


Figure 2b

Trench 4 South-East section

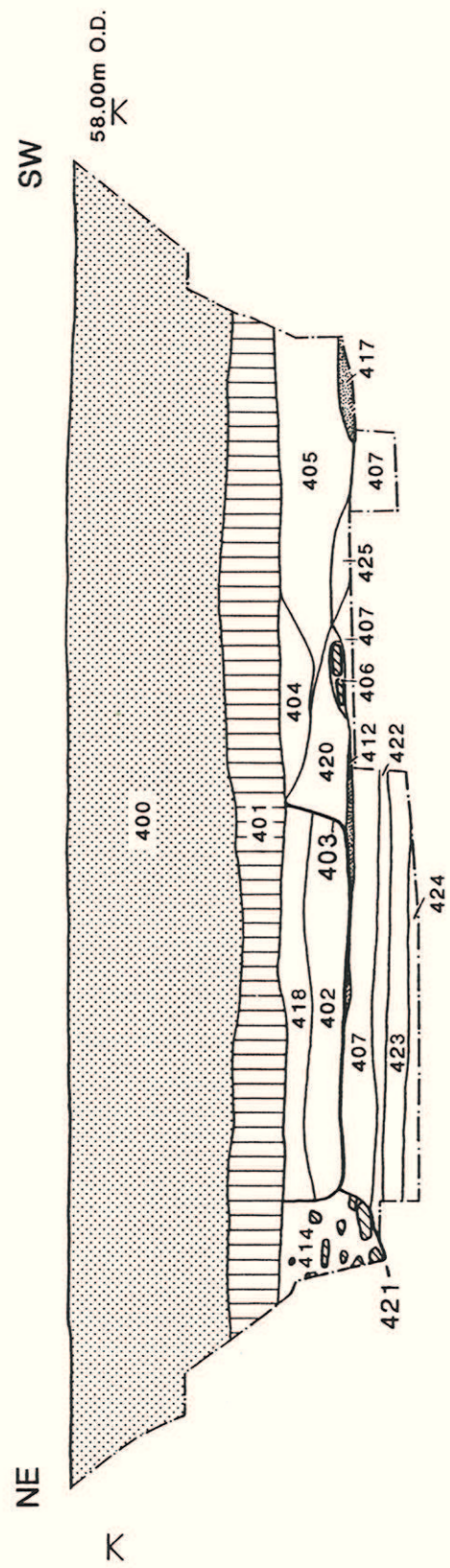
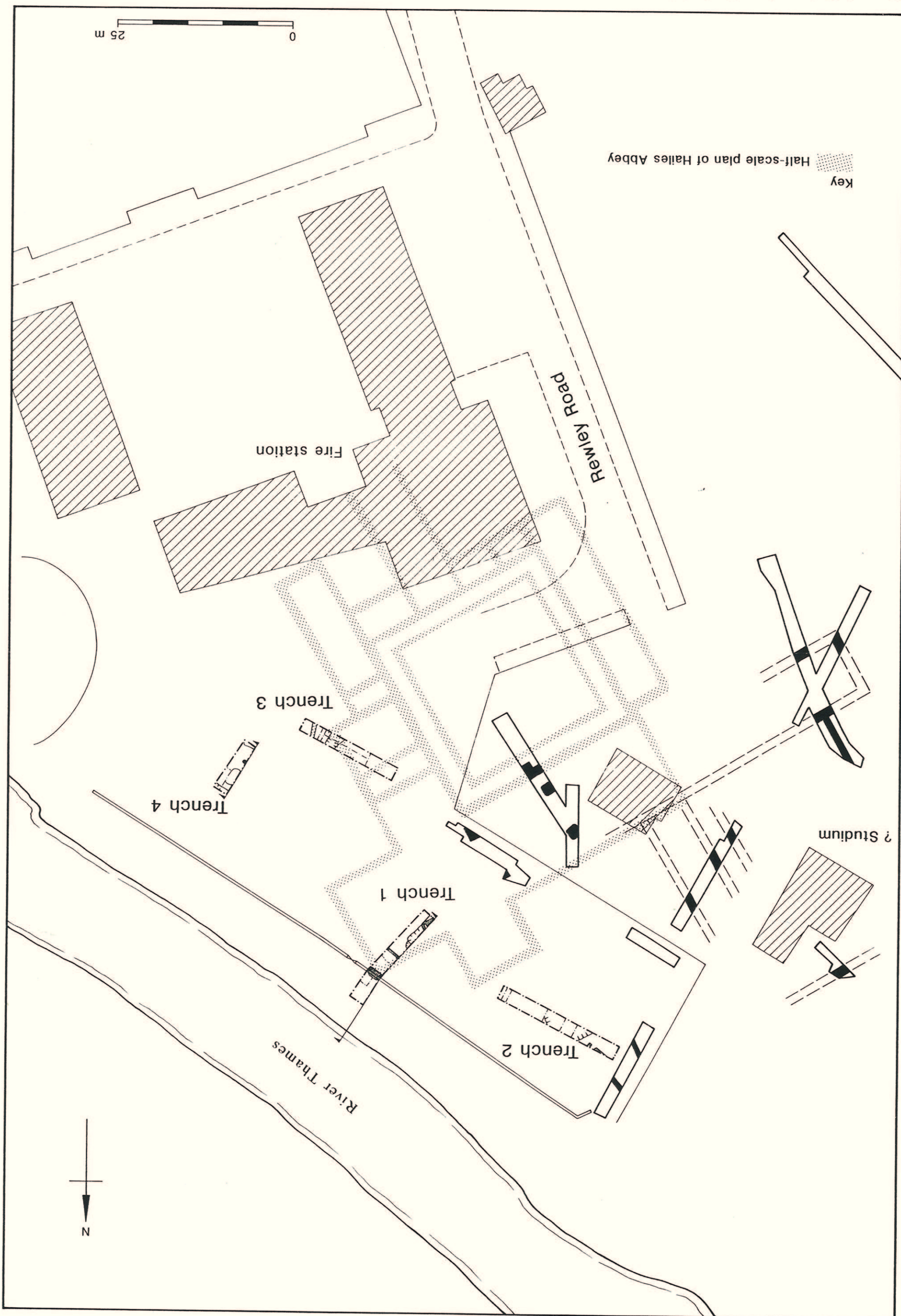


Figure 3 Main archaeological features (1986 & 1993) with half-scale plan of Hailes Abbey imposed



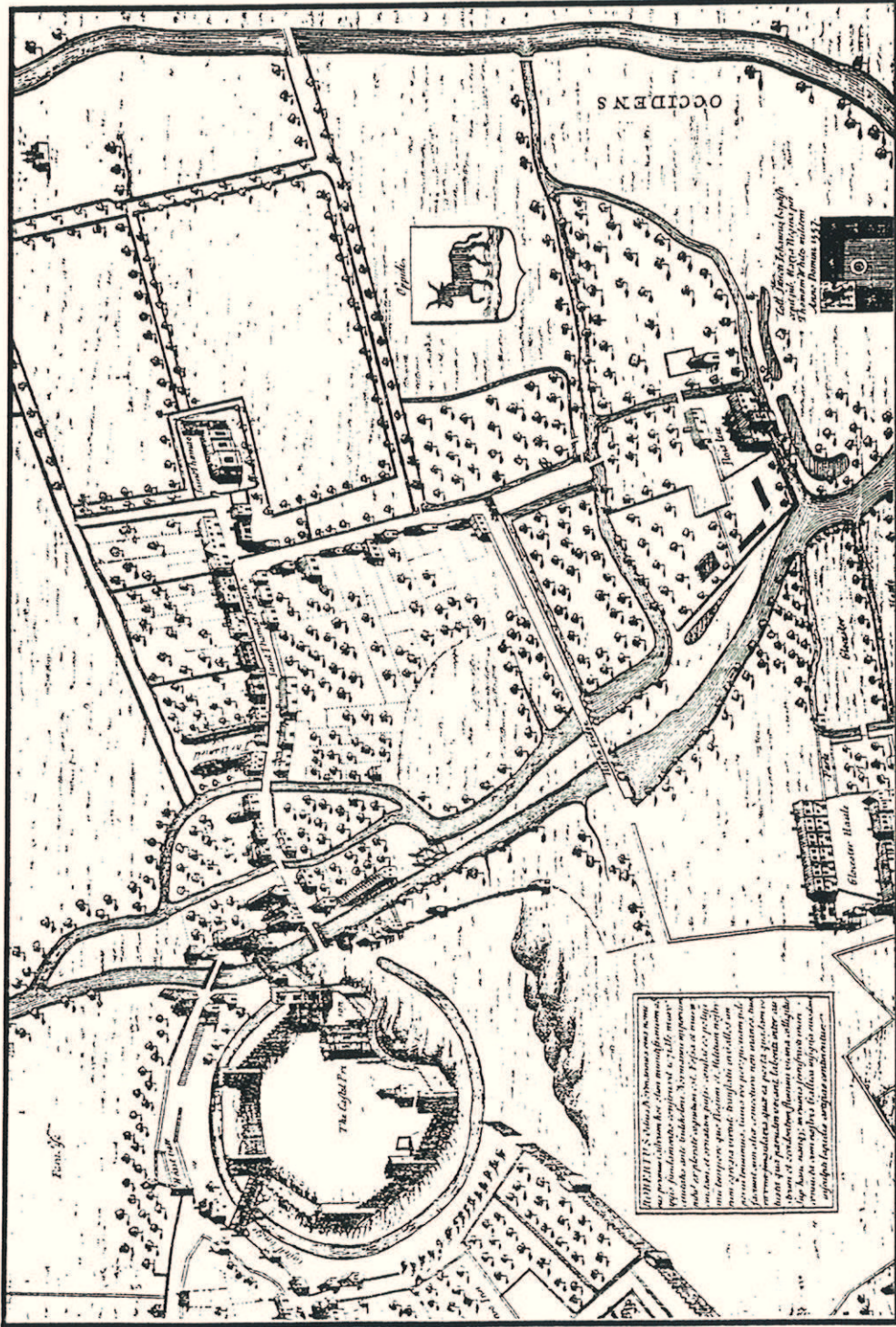


Figure 4 Detail from Ralph Agas' map of Oxford, 1578

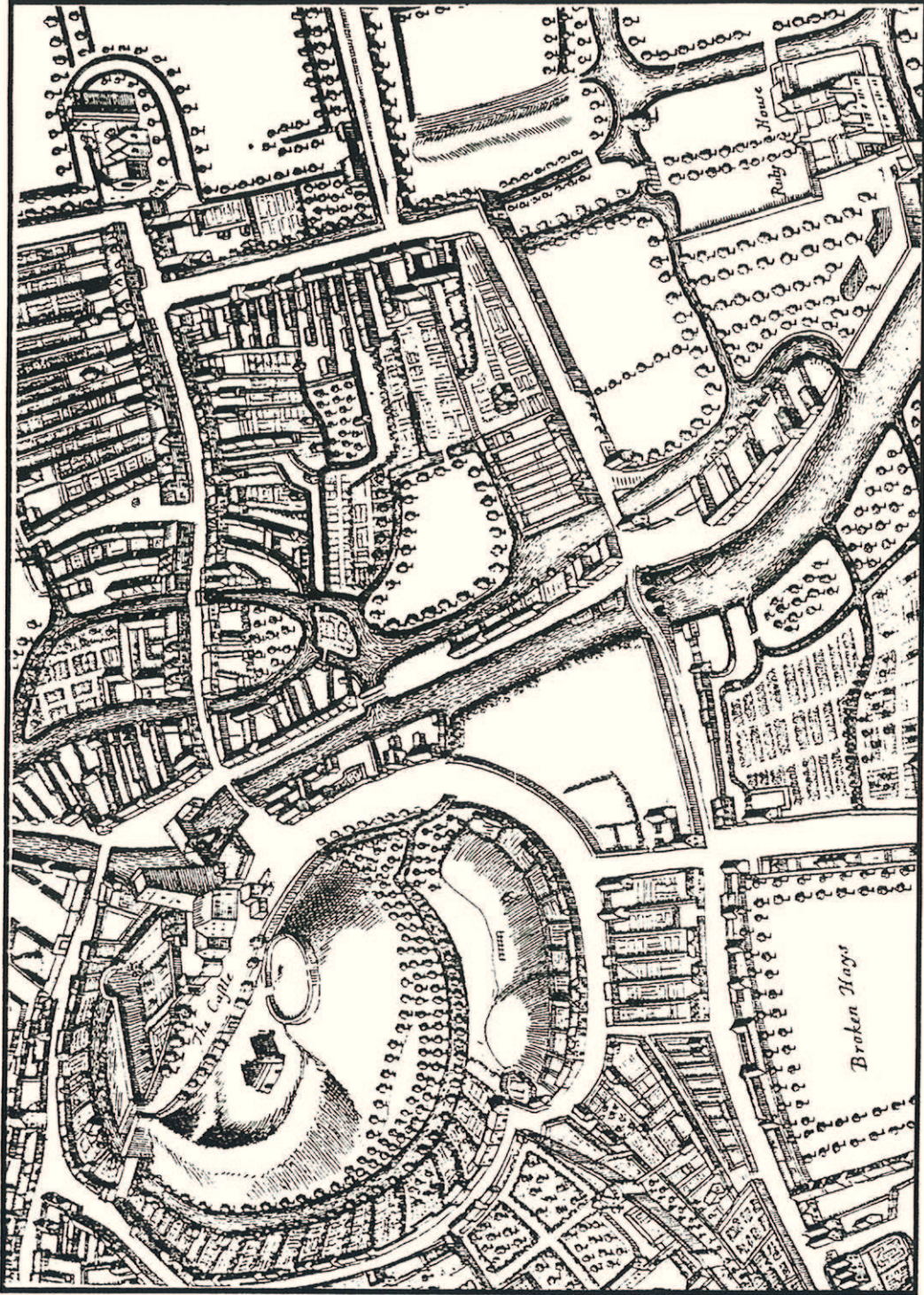


Figure 5 Detail from David Loggan's map of Oxford, 1675

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