

Stowe School

Stowe School, Stowe, Buckinghamshire

*NGR SP 6700 3750*

**ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF REPORT**

**Oxford Archaeological Unit**

**October 2000**

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## ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF REPORT

Planning Ref. No. 00/00361/APP

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Checked by:

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Date:

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Approved by:

*E. C. R. L.*

Date:

*30/11/00*

Oxford Archaeological Unit

October 2000

## ***Summary***

*In June and July of 2000 the Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) undertook a watching brief at Stowe School, Stowe, Buckinghamshire (NGR SP 6700 3750). Some features potentially related to a previous layout of the grounds were identified.*

### **1 Introduction**

The development proposals (planning application no. 00/00361/APP) comprised the installation of a new subterranean oil tank and the excavation of an associated service trench, in addition to the creation of four new car parking areas and an associated contractor's compound and access road to the site. All of these works are part of a two-year rolling programme of improvements currently being undertaken at Stowe. An archaeological watching brief was required in accordance with the planning consent granted under PPG 16 as the site lies within an area of archaeological potential; the formal gardens at Stowe are listed Grade I.

The watching brief was commissioned by Neil Brown, Building Services Engineer, on behalf of Stowe School. It was undertaken to a brief set by and a WSI agreed with the County Archaeologist for Buckinghamshire.

### **2 Background**

The development site is located within an area of Roman activity; the Roman road linking Towcester to Alchester (CAS 2980) runs close to the site, with a further Roman road running to the south of the site on a south-east/north-west alignment (CAS 2979). The location of the oil tank, the scheme's major impact, was in the vicinity of the junction of these two roads. Other Roman archaeology also survives in the area, as demonstrated by the previous discovery of a Roman pottery kiln at the school.

It was thought possible that the excavation for the oil tank might reveal the backfilled ha-ha wall, thought to be in the immediate vicinity. The service trench for the oil tank passes either through, or in close proximity to, several parkland features and/or monuments and, despite the limited nature of the excavation, it was thought possible that it might yield information as to the nature of the buried archaeology in this area. Similarly, the new access road to the site was located in the vicinity of one of the roads and a further probable location of the ha-ha wall surrounding the site.

### **3 Aims**

The aims of the watching brief were to identify any archaeological remains exposed on site during the course of the works, and to record these to established OAU standards (Wilkinson 1992), in order to secure their preservation by record.

### **4 Methodology**

The watching brief was maintained by means of separate inspection visits undertaken by an archaeological supervisor; all excavation was undertaken by 360° mechanical

excavator. The National Trust's Project Archaeologist at Stowe, Oliver Jessop, was also in attendance.

Within the constraints imposed by health and safety considerations the deposits and features exposed were cleaned, inspected and recorded in plan, section and by colour slide and monochrome print photography. Written records were also made on proforma sheets. Soil description utilises standard charts for the approximation of percentage of inclusion types in soil deposits.

## 5 Results

### *The Oil Tank.*

From an existing ground level of 132.90 m OD a pit measuring 10 m by 4 m by 4 m deep was excavated in advance of the installation of the new oil tank; particular attention was paid to identifying any evidence for the backfilled ha-ha, however no archaeological features were seen. One sherd of post-medieval pottery was retrieved from the subsoil, (2). The following sequence was identified:

- (1) - topsoil; mid grey silty clay loam with 2% fine-coarse subangular gravel, c. 0.30 m thick.
- (2) - subsoil; mid brown/orange silty stony loam with 5% fine-coarse gravel, c. 0.50 m thick.
- (3) - subsoil; dark brown silty stony loam, c. 1.20 m thick.
- (4) - natural dark brown/gray clay with 2% fine silt, reached at c. 2 m depth.

### *The Service Trench.*

The service trench was dug to a depth of 0.90 m and a width of 0.30 m; for the majority of its length only deposits (1) and (2) were seen. However, in the central portion of the trench a short length of red brick wall, cut from the lower horizon of the topsoil and through the subsoil, with a possibly associated gravel surface was identified. The brick wall comprised red unfrogged bricks bonded with a gritty white/yellow mortar and was approximately 0.80m long. The gravel surface, which lay immediately adjacent to the south of the wall, comprised compacted coarse subangular gravel which appeared to have a slightly worn or weathered upper horizon and which appeared to be laid directly onto subsoil (2). No finds were retrieved from either of these features and no further features were seen within the service trench.

### *Car Parks 2 & 3.*

The designated areas for car parks 2 and 3 were stripped to a depth of 0.30 m, which was sufficient across both areas to expose the subsoil (2) in plan, before being covered with geotextile matting and crushed Type 1 hardcore as a makeup layer prior to the deposition of the tarmac car park surface. Car park 3 comprised two separate areas in the immediate vicinity of the oil tank and service trench excavations and particular attention was paid during stripping works to identifying any traces of the ha-ha, however none were seen and nor were any other archaeological traces. The area of car park 2 presented featureless, heavily rooted subsoil.

### *The Contractor's Compound.*

The area of the compound was stripped to a depth of 0.30 m, which was sufficient across the area to remove the topsoil and expose the subsoil (2) in plan, before being covered with geotextile matting and crushed Type 1 hardcore. The stripping operation was monitored and the stripped surface cleaned and inspected, however no archaeological features were seen; some fragments of white china with a transfer-printed pattern were retrieved from (1), otherwise no finds were retrieved. The area generally was very heavily rooted, being close to a hedge/treeline, with a great deal of consequent disturbance to the subsoil.

### *The New Access Road.*

The corridor for the new access road was stripped to a depth of 0.30 m, which was sufficient to remove the topsoil and expose the subsoil (2) in plan, before being covered with geotextile matting and crushed Type 1 hardcore. The topsoil here produced a fragment of a sandstone plaque. This artefact had a bevelled edge, one smooth and one rough face; no inscription was identified on the smooth face and no further pieces were found.

In plan, a possible gravelled pathway was identified, potentially associated with a previous layout of the grounds; no finds were retrieved either in association with or above/below this feature and as such it remains undated at this time.

## **6 Finds**

### *Post-medieval Pottery*

Two fragments of post-medieval pottery were retrieved, both deriving from the topsoil (1). One was retrieved from the oil tank excavation and one from the topsoil strip for the new access road. Both would appear to be fragments of flower pots, and probably date to the 19<sup>th</sup>/20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

### *Other Finds*

Sundry pieces of white china were retrieved from the topsoil in all the works monitored, these were examined on site but not retained. The only other find was the plaque fragment retrieved from the topsoil strip for the new access road; it was not possible accurately to date this find, however, given the general style of the carving of the surviving portion of the bevelled edge, it is thought likely that this piece dates from the 18<sup>th</sup>/19<sup>th</sup> centuries.

## **7 Environmental results**

No environmental soil samples were taken because of the absence of any significant archaeology and the paucity of suitable deposits.



## 8 Discussion

The watching brief identified a number of features which may relate to previous layouts of the grounds at Stowe; however, a lack of dating evidence and the fragmentary nature of the work means that any conclusions must be treated with due caution. No evidence was found for either of the Roman roads, nor the ha-ha wall. Further works are planned at Stowe as a part of the two-year rolling programme and it is at least possible that these features may be revealed at a later date.

## References.

Wilkinson, D (ed) 1992 Oxford Archaeological Unit Field Manual, (First edition, August 1992).

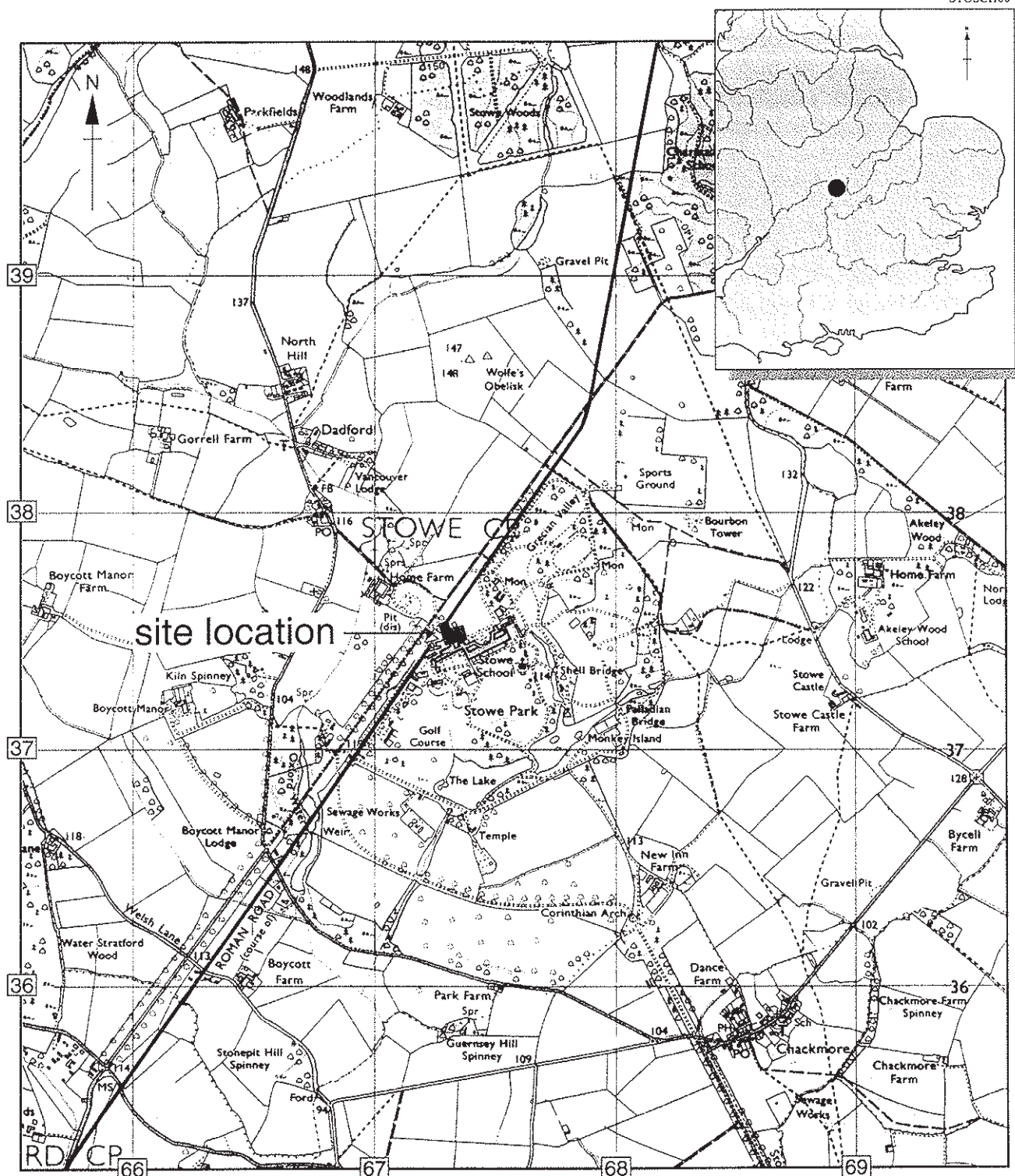


Figure 1: Site location

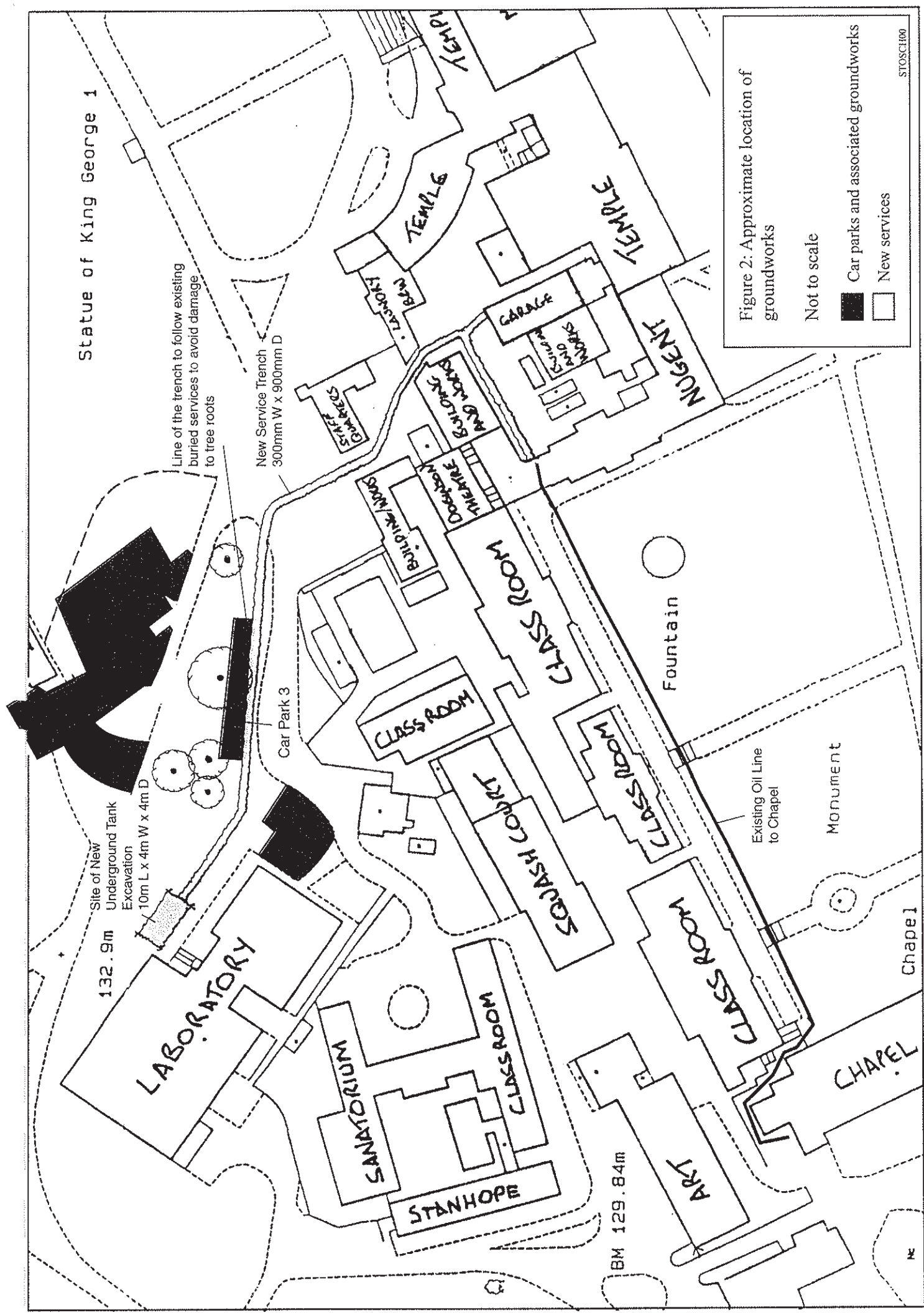


Figure 2: Approximate location of groundworks

Not to scale

- Car parks and associated groundworks
- New services





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