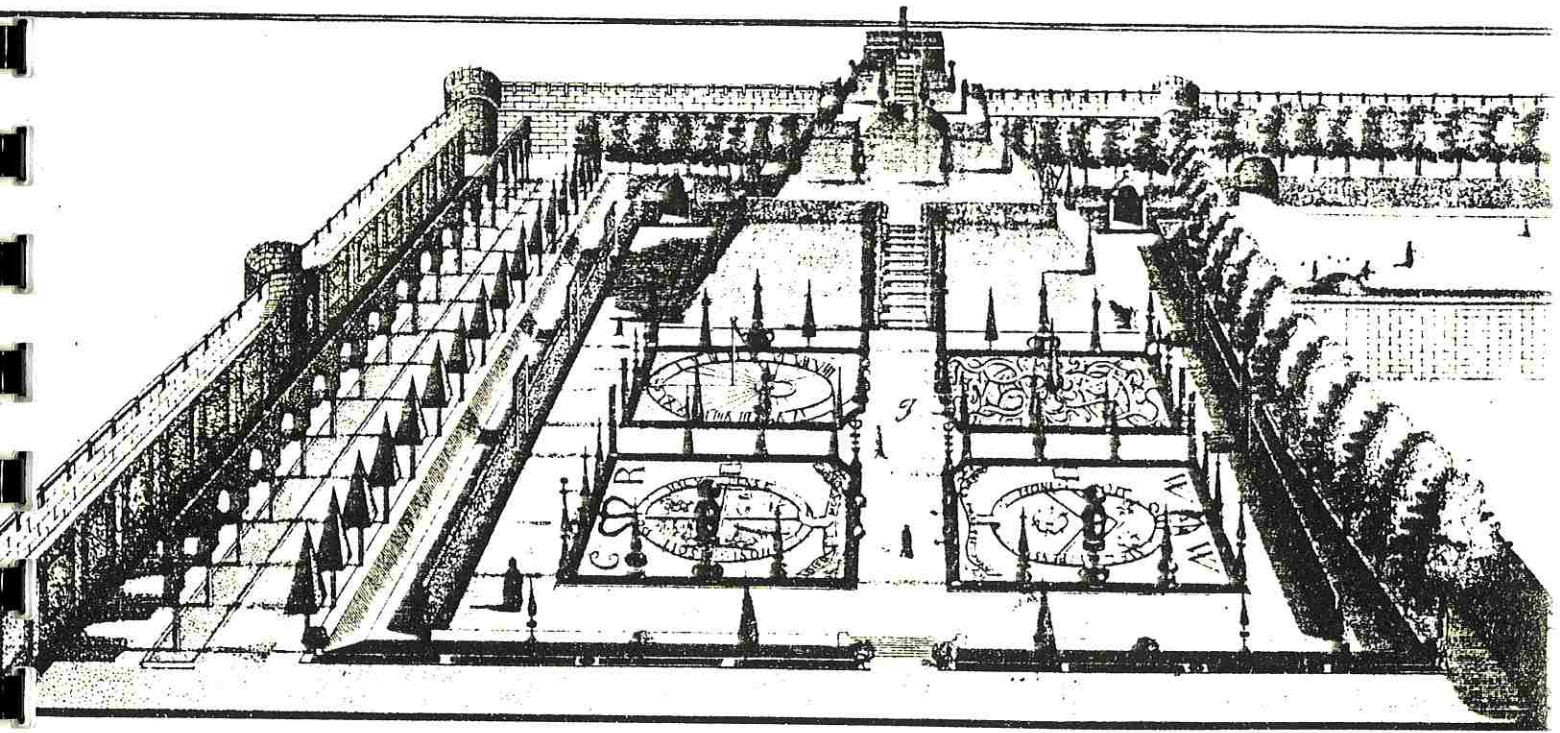


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NEW COLLEGE MOUND, OXFORD

An Archaeological Investigation



OXFORD ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT

1993



UAD 367

New College Mound, Oxford. An Archaeological Investigation

by Chris Bell, Oxford Archaeological Unit

Acknowledgements

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Introduction

In 1991 New College received a donation from a former student for the improvement of the mound in the College garden. It was intended to rebuild the stone steps which once ascended the front of the mound and to lower and flatten the top, which was to be paved. Oxford City Council stipulated that there should be a preliminary archaeological investigation to locate and record any surviving structural remains of the original layout, as the proposed work would disturb or possibly destroy them. Survey and excavation were accordingly undertaken at the beginning of April 1993 by the author and several volunteers from the Oxford University Archaeological Society. The records and finds will be deposited with the Oxfordshire County Museum Service.

Background

New College was built in an abandoned quarter of the town, on the site of medieval streets and houses which were already disused in the late fourteenth century.¹ This may in part account for the amount of medieval material recovered from the mound (see 'The Finds'

below). The brief history of the mound which follows is drawn from the researches of the late John Buxton and others in the College archives.

Mounds or 'mounts' had become a common feature in formal gardens by the end of the Elizabethan period. New College mound, as well as being a spectacular feature in itself, would also have served as a viewing platform for the parterres below and for the open view beyond the city wall which surrounds the garden (Fig. 2).

There is a mention in the Bursar's roll as early as 1529 of the bringing of large quantities of soil into the garden,² although it is uncertain whether this relates to the construction of the first stages of the mound, or to the levelling out of the existing garden. In 1594, however, the sum of £3 was paid to the gardener of New College specifically 'towards ye making of ye mount',³ so we know that the mound was well under way by the end of the 16th century.

It was not completed until 1648/9 when it was 'perfected with stepps of stone and setts for ye Hedges about ye walke',⁴ much as it appears in Loggan's map of 1675 (Fig. 2a).⁵ There is a tradition that the mound was used as a gun emplacement during the Civil War, but there is, however, no real evidence for this use and the intermittent 'perfecting' of the mound throughout this period also seems to make it unlikely. On the top of the mound was a wind-dial with a stone base and a cylinder depicting 32 points of the compass to indicate the exact direction of the wind. This is the structure which appears on Loggan's map.

In 1694 Celia Fiennes described a summer house on top of the mound,⁶ suggesting that

the wind-dial had already gone by the end of the century. There are, however, no pictures or prints of the summer house, and William Williams' print of 1732 (Fig. 2b) still shows the wind-dial.⁷ This, combined with the fact that there is a very small surface area at the top of the mound to support it, must cast some doubt as on its existence. One possible explanation for the confusion, is that the wind-dial and 'summer house' may have been part of the same structure.

By the middle of the 18th century it is clear that all the structures had gone, as the top is described in 1749 as 'being encompass'd with Rails and Seats, and a Tree growing in the Middle'.⁸ During the late eighteenth century the steps were replaced with a serpentine path, and the mound was planted with shrubs and trees, taking on a less formal, more rustic, appearance. An engraving of 1817 by Joseph Fisher shows a small Doric temple at the base of the mound, which is believed to have been built in the 1780s and was not demolished until the 1890s.⁹

Topography

The mound, which is 33 metres square at the base and some 15 metres high, stands at the east end of the garden. An initial survey showed that the foundations of some of the walls which had surrounded each tier (Fig. 2b) still survived and were partially visible (Fig. 3).

Strategy (see fig. 3 for trench locations)

As the proposed building work was unlikely to penetrate deeper than 0.25-0.30 metres below the present ground surface, excavation was limited to a depth of 0.40 metres,

Trench 1, 3 m x 1.2 m in size, was excavated at the base of the mound to try to locate any remains of the Doric temple. Trench 2, of a similar size, was then excavated on the upper slope and western part of the summit, where rubble could be seen protruding through the surface. Several smaller trenches (5, 6 and 7) were also excavated up the west face of the mound to determine whether any of the original steps survived.

The results from these initial trenches then dictated the position of further trenches and trench extensions where they were necessary.

The excavation

In trenches 1 and 3 at the base of the mound, walls, possible wall foundations and a mortared floor surface were located at an average depth of 0.40 metres below the present ground surface.

In trench 4, also at the base of the mound, a gravel surface was found at a depth of 0.30 metres.

Trench 2, at the top of the west face and across the summit of the mound, showed that a substantial wall foundation, apparently the remains of the top of the steps, survived just below the surface. There did not, however, appear to be any surviving remains of any of the structures that once existed on the summit.

Trenches 5, 6 and 7, which were positioned up the west face of the mound, showed that none of the original steps survived. In the lowest of these, trench 5, however, what

appeared to be the mortar bedding for the steps survived at a depth of 0.20 metres below the present ground surface.

The finds

Apart from the expected 17th, 18th and 19th century pottery retrieved from all of the trenches, a large quantity of medieval pottery dating from the 9th to the 16th century was also found. There was also a large amount of animal bone.

From the top of the mound came a small number of clay pipes dating from the mid 17th century and part of a Bellarmine face jug.

Other finds of note were copper lace ends, and the top of an onion-shaped wine bottle, which came from the base of the mound.

Conclusions

It would appear from the results of the excavation and survey that the Williams print of 1732 is a fairly accurate depiction of how the mound must have looked in its original state.

As the top of the steps survived just below the surface at the summit, it seems that the top of the mound has been lowered so that any remains of the former structures have been lost, leaving the mystery of the 'summer house' unresolved.

It would seem likely that the summit was flattened in the mid 18th century when the top was 'encompass'd with Rails and Seats'. Some reshaping of the mound would also explain the large quantities of medieval pottery mixed in with all the 18/19th century deposits. The medieval pottery, which also included a few sherds of late Saxon, would have been part of the original dump material brought in to make the mound.

At the base of the mound, walls 105, 106 and 112 in trench 1 and wall 305 in trench 3, along with a mortared surface, 107, appeared to form a small rectangular structure. It would seem likely from the location of this structure that it is the remains of the Doric temple.

The buried gravel surface located in trench 4 was almost certainly part of the original layout of paths which can be seen on Williams' print (Fig. 2b).

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3. Ibid.
4. Ibid., 205.
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7. Williams, W., Oxonia Depicta (Oxford, 1732), pl. XXIV.
8. H. Rashdall and R. S. Rait, New College (University of Oxford College Histories, F.E. Robinson, 1901), p. 88.
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New College Mound, Oxford

Captions

1. Location

2. A. Detail from Loggan's map of 1675, showing the New College mound and garden.
B. New College mound and garden from a print of 1732 by William Williams

3. General plan of trenches and surviving walls

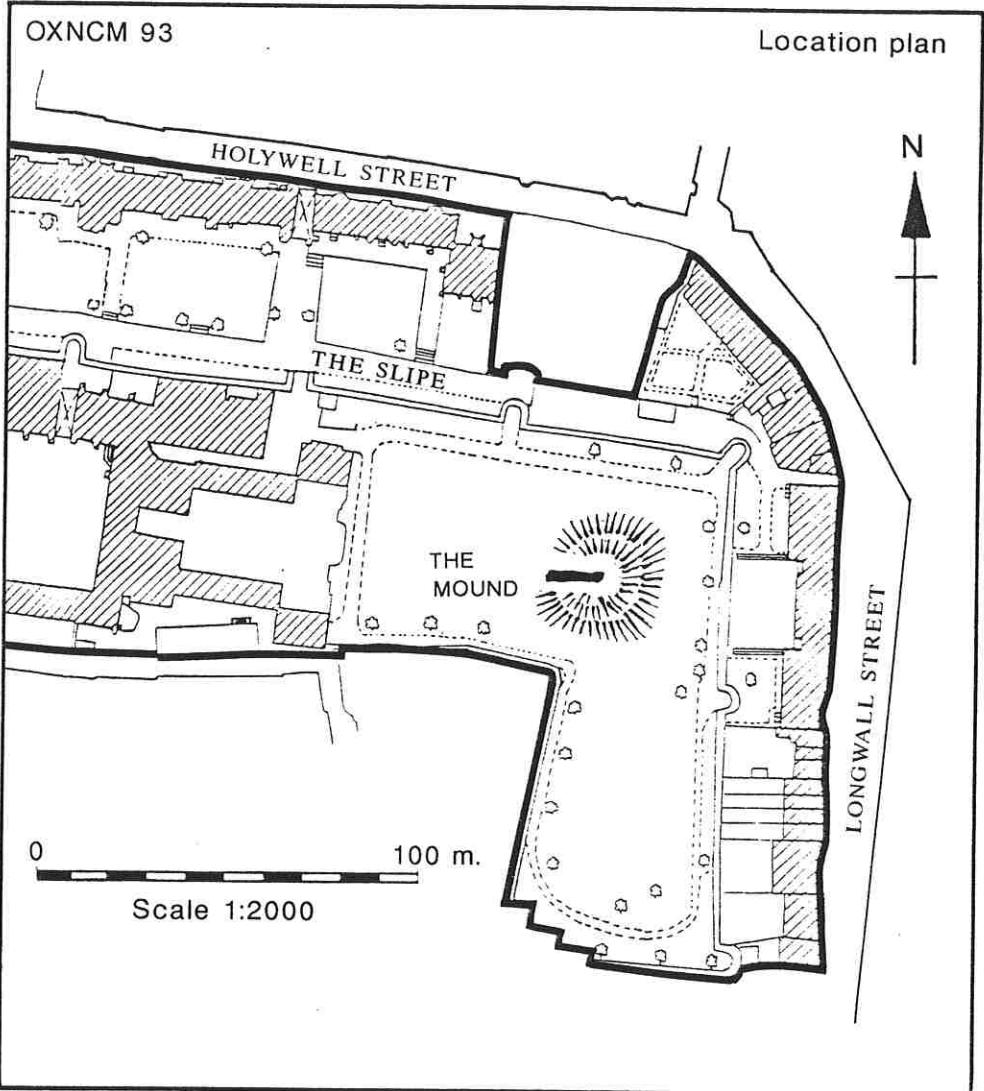
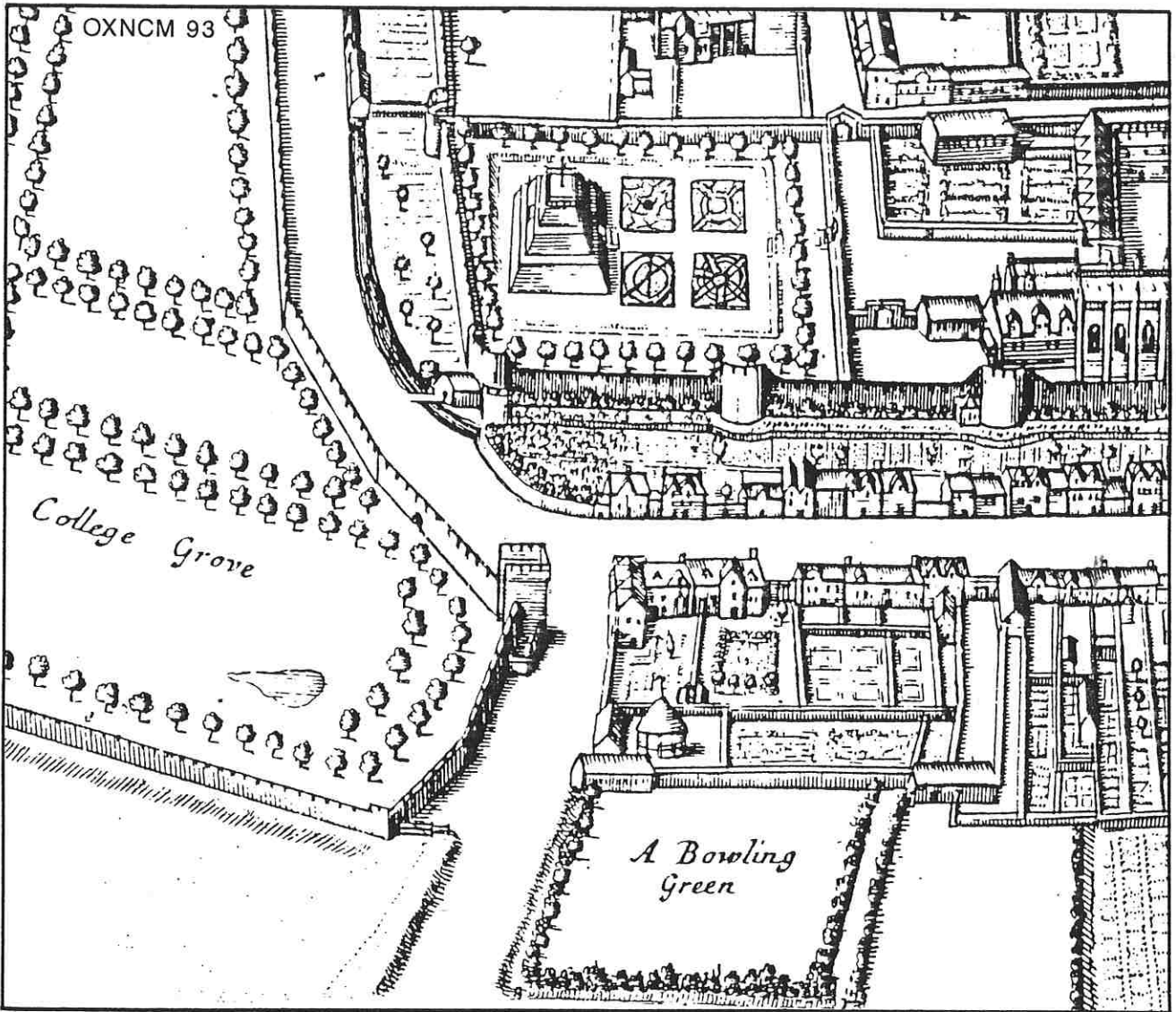
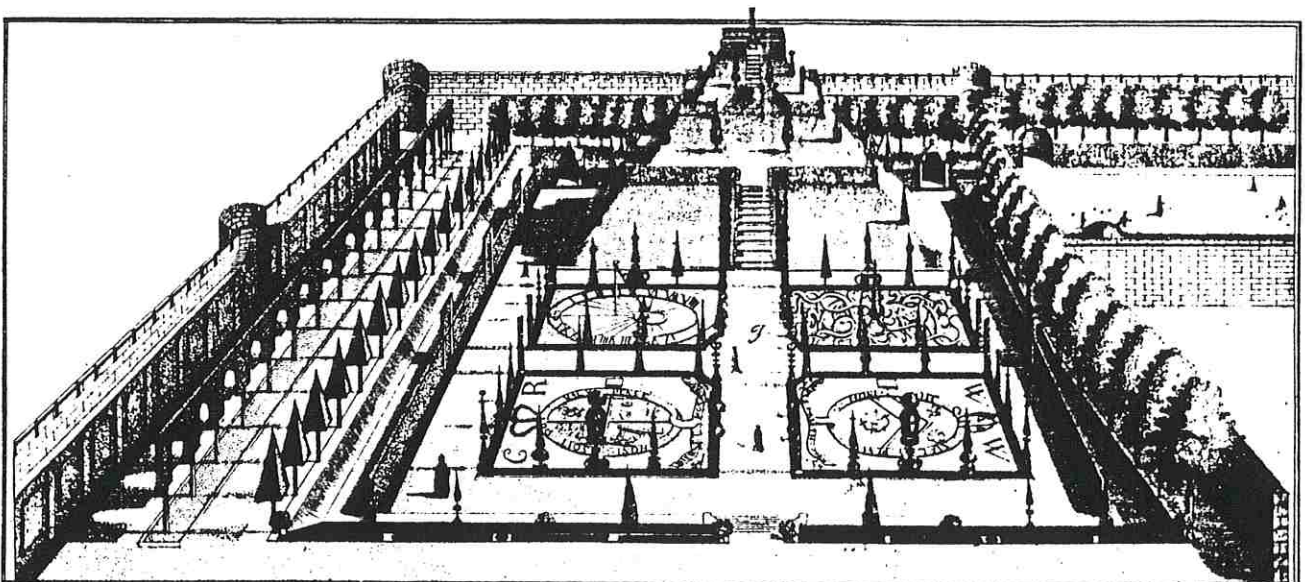


figure 1



Loggan's map of 1673 showing New College Mound

figure 2a



William Williams' 1732 print of The Mound

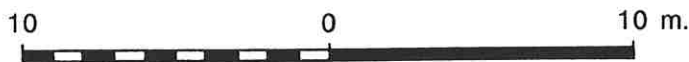
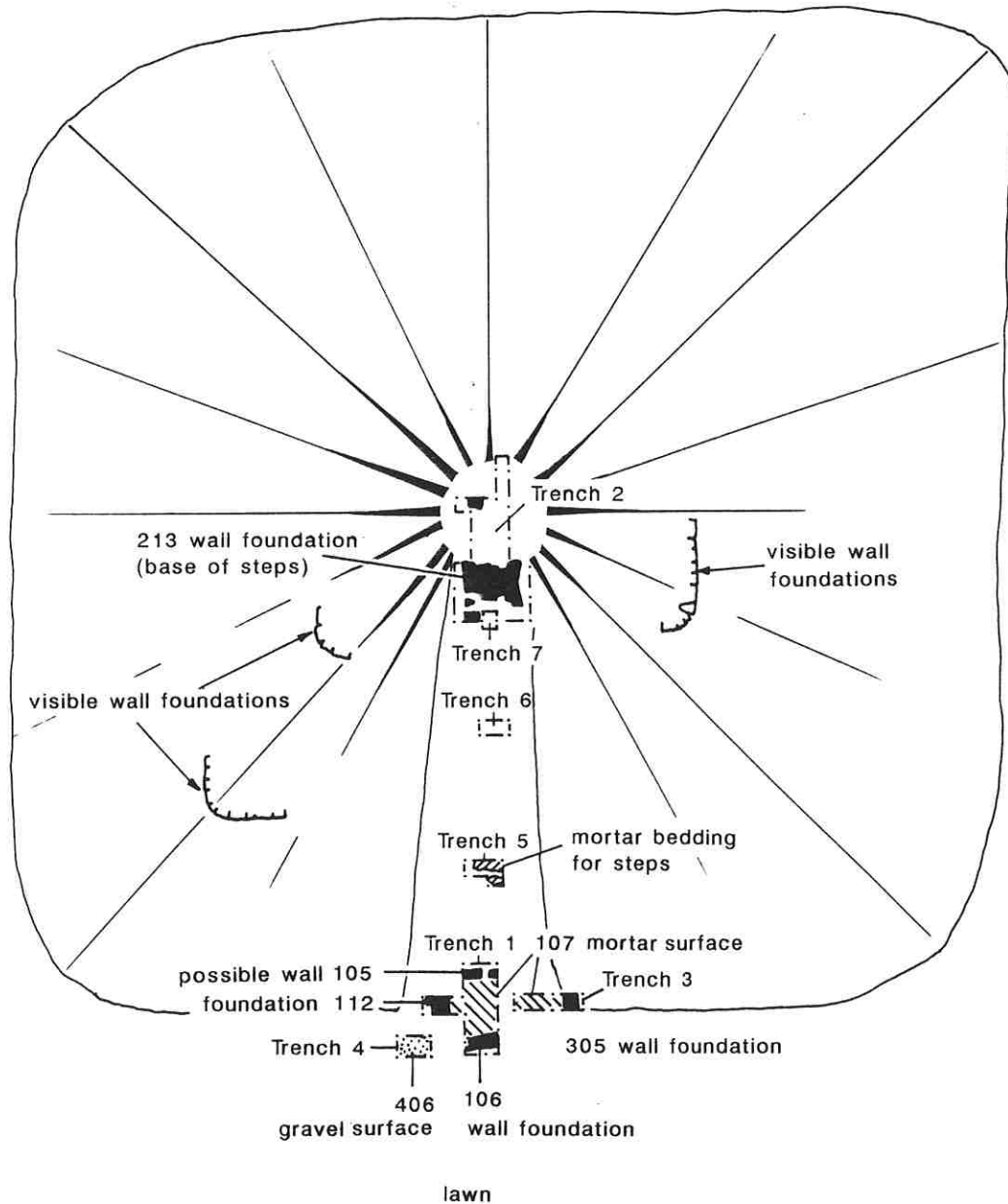
figure 2b

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General plan of trenches and surviving walls

(tree cover omitted for clarity)



Scale 1:250

figure 3



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