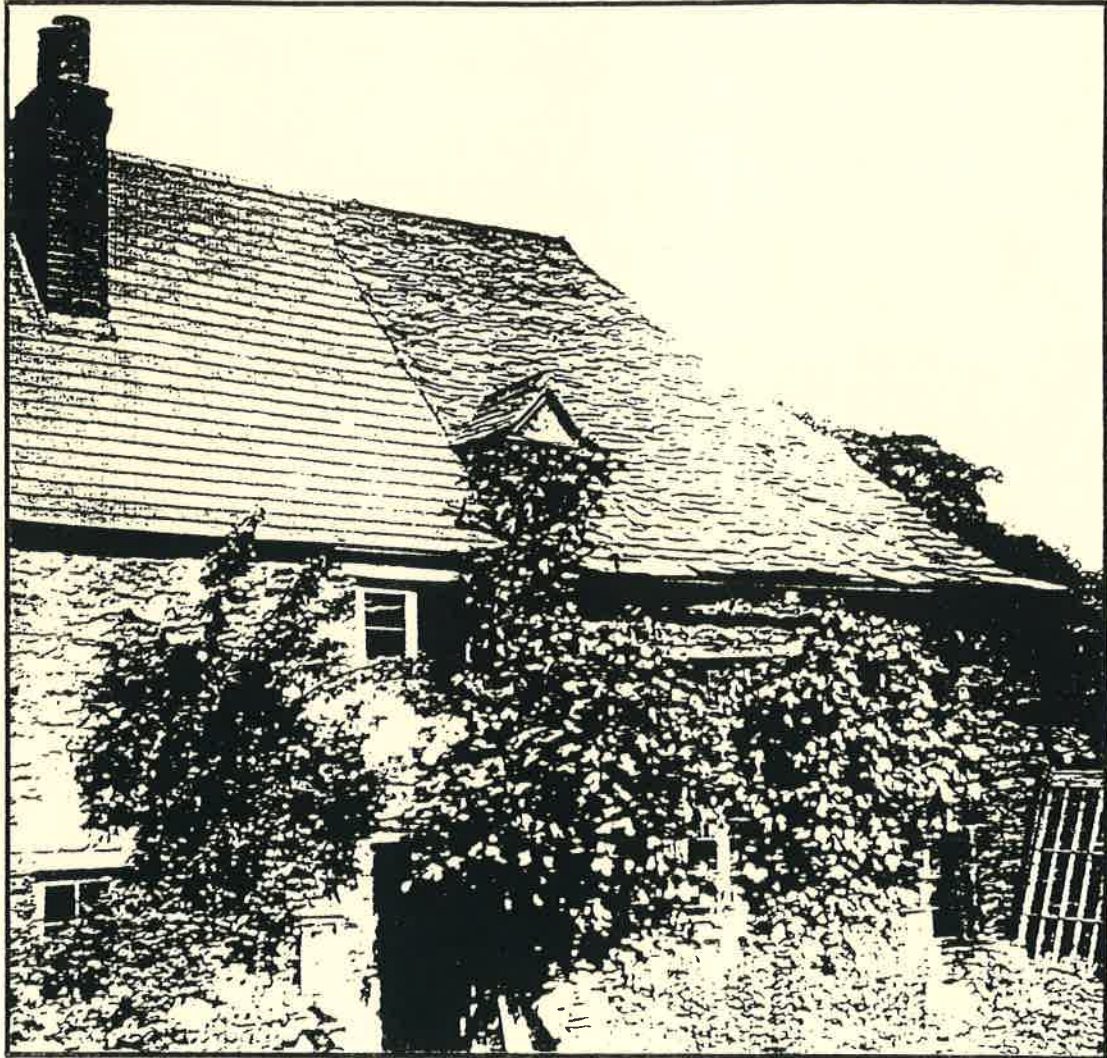


ST. CROSS COLLEGE OXFORD

ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS
IN ADVANCE OF REDEVELOPMENT

1991



THE OXFORD ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT



ST CROSS COLLEGE, OXFORD

ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE EVALUATION

Summary: Trenching on the site of the proposed dining hall wing at St Cross College in St Giles, Oxford, exposed the foundations of Oxford's first Friends Meeting House built in 1687, and showed how it had been fitted into the rear area of properties with evidence of medieval cultivation and pits.

Introduction

An archaeological assessment was carried out by the Oxford Archaeological Unit on behalf of St Cross College, Oxford, between 10-11th June 1991.

The terms of planning consent required an archaeological watching brief on the excavation for the basement of the new wing, but the members of the College felt that the area of the development should be more fully evaluated in advance of groundworks.

Archaeological background

St Giles is believed to have its origins as a broad fairground *cum* market place outside the north gate of Saxon Oxford. Topographical comparisons with other Mercian towns suggest a Middle Saxon date, and this is supported by a coin of Offa (AD 757-96) from the site of the Martyrs Memorial. It is possible that the long narrow burhage plots on either side arise from subdivision of Saxon fields.

The site in question was therefore expected to show traces of backyard activity from the 8th century onwards. There was also a possibility of the presence of prehistoric and Roman finds since both are widely distributed on the gravels of Oxford, and there are Roman finds from St John's Street.

The stone corbels and tracery preserved in the W wall of the garden do not seem to be referred to in the usual sources; the medieval items are most likely to come from the Carmelite Friary (the Oxford Whitefriars) established on the site of Beaumont Palace 100 m to the SW of the St Cross site. The exception to this is the corbels which are used to support the tracery, which seem to be copies of the remaining corbels, probably made at the time that Pusey House was being built.

The 1878 edition of the Ordnance Survey (Fig. 3) identifies the site of a Friend's Meeting House to the rear of houses in St Giles. When it was founded in 1687, Oxford's first meeting house was to include a burial ground, and there was therefore a likelihood of Quaker burials in this area. However there was a major contradiction in that no detached building appears at the back of any of the St Giles plots in any of the 18th-century plans of Oxford, ie Taylor (1750), Fayden (1787) or Davis (1794), and it was important to resolve this apparent contradiction.

Methodology

Two trenches were excavated by mechanical digger down to the first undisturbed levels in order to detect archaeological remains. These trenches were situated where it was convenient, away from walls and trees, and across the line of the proposed building.

Results Trench 1 (Fig. 2)

This trench was aligned NS and measured 11.75 x 1.75 m. Below the turf was a layer (1/2) of modern build-up (ca. 0.6 m in depth). Stratified below this were a number of features. The probable remains of a gravel trample path (1/15) lay just below the modern build-up and was approximately 1.2 m wide.

A series of intercutting pits were identified along the length of the trench. A large sub circular pit (1/6) was revealed at the southern end, with medieval pottery, clay pipe fragments and oyster shells. This was cut on its SW edge by another pit (1/7) with modern rubbish pit containing willow pattern pottery, other white glazed ceramics and brick fragments. Underneath 1/7 was another pit (1/8) only visible in the section and not excavated.

Features 1/6, /7 and /8 were cut into layer 1/4, an earlier orange grey brown silty loam layer.

In the middle of the trench was an ovoid pit (1/10, ca.2.5 m. in length), overlaid by layer 1/2. Finds recovered from it included post medieval pottery, red brick fragments and clay pipe. It cut pit 1/11 to the E, which was sub-square with vertical sides, and not fully excavated.

A large circular pit (1/9) with near vertical sides was cut by both pits 1/10 and 1/11. This contained the earliest pottery recovered from the site, 13th and 14th-century ceramics including green glaze pottery, also mortar fragments and animal bone.

To the northern end of the trench there was an EW linear feature (1/12) which has been interpreted as a plot boundary wall. It survived only as a robber trench where the wall has been removed an infilled with stone fragments and mortar. This boundary wall cut away an ovoid pit (1/13) on its northern side, and 1/13 was in turn cut by pit 1/10 on its southern edge. Cut into the top of 1/12, the robber trench for the boundary wall was another pit, or perhaps the robber trench of a buttress.

Trench 2 (Fig. 2)

This trench was aligned NS between the two mulberry trees; it was 16.5 x 1.75 m, and its N end was extended to the W by 6 x 3.5 m, forming an L-shape.

Dealing first with the NS part of the trench first, a 0.5 m. layer of modern loam build-up (2/1) existed below the turf. Below it in the southern end of the trench was a layer of well sorted loam (2/2) that had probably been a garden soil (ca. 0.25 m. in depth).

Layer 2/1 overlay a number of other features. A linear feature (2/6) was aligned WSW / ENE, and was probably a boundary wall like feature 1/12 in Trench 1, since both had the appearance of robber trenches. Another gravel path also existed (2/10) like that in Trench 1 (1/15).

Also overlain by layer 2/1 was a presumed pit (2/12) seen in section containing mortar and red brick fragments, which also cut layer 2/11, it was unclear what this layer was originally. Beneath layer 2/11 was a robbed trench, aligned EW.

A number of pits were visible in plan but not in the section. These were not excavated since their relationships with one another were clear in plan and pottery from them was all late in date (mainly Victorian). All these pits cut layer 2/3.

Pit 2/13 was a sub-square pit of brown mortar-flecked loam (containing blue and white decorated earthenware), in the southern end of the trench which was cut by pit 2/14 along its eastern edge. Pit 2/14 disappeared into the W-facing section. Its fill was grey/brown fine loam.

To the northern of 2/13 and 2/14 was pit 2/15, a square pit which is cut by pit 2/16 (again square). This pit was cut by wall 2/6. Another irregular pit was located in the middle of the trench. Pit 2/17 was cut by 2/18. Feature 2/18 was unclear since only one edge survived. It was cut to the northern by wall 2/9. A pit (2/19) full of modern building rubble was seen in plan against the E section.

When a wall was located at the end of the NS aligned trench, the trench was extended W to learn more about it. The ashlar stone foundations of a building (2/23), ca. 0.75 m. in width (Fig. 2) were located. Inside were the remains of the mortar bedding for a slab floor. These remains lay just beneath the turf. Continuing the line of the building eastwards was a rubble faced wall (2/20) containing bricks and rubble. It formed part of a property boundary wall. Two other walls abutted this boundary at right angles. Wall 2/21 was a narrow (0.3 m.) stone and brick wall and 2/22 was a rubble wall.

The building remains are shown clearly on the 1:500 Ordnance Survey map of 1878.... The Friends Meeting House, with seats for 140, is illustrated within a small walled enclosure, the E wall being evidently 2/21. The map also shows a small structure in the corner of the two boundary walls which can be related to wall 2/22.

Discussion

The earliest level to survive on the St Cross site is evidently a cultivated soil at ca. 1.1 m. depth below turf, represented in both trenches, and disturbed and discoloured in a way that is typical of ploughsoils, with a range of medieval artefacts. It was presumably within one of the strip-shaped properties which extend back 95 m. from the road to the line of Pusey Lane, which shows as a uniform W boundary on the early plans. Such plots are known to historical geographers as 'burghage plots' because they often appear in a very regular form in settlements which had borough status, ie within the regular outline of a planned town or town extension. But there is no comprehensive statement on how such plots are established, and while there are examples where the plot-widths are all very regular as if laid out geometrically, it is likely that in many cases they were originally cultivation furlongs in the open fields of early settlements, where an owner eventually decided to build a house and settle there.

There have recently been an increasing number of excavations on Oxford's medieval fields, as the colleges expand over them, and OAU is building up a corpus of comparative soil profiles from trenches of this sort. At Magdalen College Grove there was evidence of rutting in the surface of a soil horizon buried within the last century, but since the Grove was enclosed in medieval time this was not necessarily the result of ploughing. One strip boundary along Holywell St was identified by trenching in Manchester College. At St Annes there was evidence of a broad shallow hollow on the alignment of the field boundaries which could be a field furrow in a system of medieval ridge and furrow.

Trench 2 at St Cross showed one place where a layer of the distinctive reddish colour of an original plough soil could be seen (2/4), undisturbed by later pits. Trench 1 showed a 1.5 m. length with a slight slope to the N (1/5). The pits which had elsewhere removed the early deposits were of a wide range of size and appearance. Some in Trench 2 had very distinctive fills sandy fills which suggest a specialised function, but for the most part they were filled with a variation on the loam seen in the undisturbed areas. There has been a long history

of speculation on the function of this sort of feature in Oxford, since pits were found beneath the Clarendon Hotel site in Cornmarket St by Jope and Hope-Taylor. In some cases they are certainly cess pits, but the density and distribution would imply that they were being replaced at very frequent intervals, and it is likely that a proportion were dug simply to quarry gravel. This would be the most logical explanation on a site like St Cross where they occur at the remote end of a long plot, and would imply that they were filled in shortly afterwards with waste of the period.

The Plot Boundaries

There were three places where boundary walls were found. 1/12 and 2/9 were each around 13 m. from the S boundary (Blackfriars) and were both robbed of any solid stone. They probably represent a long-term boundary, not one which appears on the 1878 plan. The third boundary is the S wall of the Meeting House itself, because Wall 2/5 leading E from it overlay a looser rubble wall which seemed to be of a different build. This boundary would have been centred less than 4.5 m. from 2/9, narrower than any of the others for which we have cartographic evidence, and it may therefore represent a subdivision of plot at some time before the Meeting House was built.

The Friends Meeting House

Fears about a possible cemetery in the the area of the proposed basement came to nothing, but the college was still interested in having the existence of the 1687 Meeting House confirmed. The OAU's prediction of its location based on the 1878 map proved reasonably accurate, but it was important to study it closely because there is no building of comparable shape or size in this position on any of the 18th-century maps (see Archaeological Background above), and it had to be acknowledged that it could have been resited.

The Meeting House seemed to have only one course of foundation, although it may have taken support from the boundary wall beneath. Otherwise it was much as would be expected of late 17th-century building in the city, with a narrow offset at foundation level and then coarsly dressed ashlar facing to a wall which would have been ca. 0.6 m. thick. The Ordnance Survey shows some sort of dais at this E end, but this may have been of timber and was certainly not visible in the excavation; the only distiguishing feature was a thin horizontal layer of weak mortar which may have been the makeup for a slabbed floor.

The Meeting House was photographed in 1912 (cover and Fig. 4), nearly 50 years after the Friends had sold up (1867). It has a hipped roof, still partially covered with stone slates, and where it has been reslated it is clear that there is an upper storey. The photographs are part of the the Minn collection, and are most easily accessible in the Local History section of the County Libraries. They are accompanied by several views of the St Giles frontage before and during the building of Pusey House, but in this case their usefulness is reduced because many of them are printed in reverse. The photographs of the Meeting House were shown to John Ashdown, the City Conservation Officer, who suggested that they too may have been wrongly printed, and having checked the shadows and the buildings in the background we have decided to present them rectified left-to-right (Cover and Fig. 4).

The photographs therefore seem to be showing a doorway and apparently a notice board on the S side, opening into the property to the S. When the Meeting House was established in 1687 it was said to have been behind Silas Norton's house, described as Nos. 63-4 St Giles (Salter (1969)). The building excavated is behind No. 60 or 61. It is possible that the association of Silas Norton with Nos. 63-4 was wrong, but equally possible that his ownership extended to land behind adjoining properties. So it is possible that the Friends were largely confined to the small enclosure shown on the 1876 plan, that the doorway on the photographs was simply an access from the property adjoining to the S, because the excavation showed no burials there. This could mean that any burial ground that became a reality (rather than just an intention) was in fact in the 33 m. x 12 m. plot of ground in which the Meeting House is shown on the OS map of 1878 (Fig. 3).

Without further documentary research, which would be outside the scope of the present report, it must be accepted that the Meeting House depicted on the 19th-century maps has been confirmed, but that there are still contradictions about its earlier history, and that future development by the college may therefore still find burials, which should be investigated when any new project is being set up.

Conclusions

- 1 At least one phase of previous property boundary has been identified;
- 2 The medieval plough-soil survives in limited areas;
- 3 No cemetery was shown by the assessment trenches;
- 4 The Friends Meeting House survives to a height of 2-3 courses of stonework;
- 5 Further assessment should be carried out prior to future redevelopment;
- 6 The watching brief on the main excavation should concentrate on confirming the above conclusions.

Acknowledgements

OAU would like to thank the members of St Cross College for their enthusiasm and interest in the assessment, and for their hospitality whilst the work was being carried out.

OAU 24 June 1991

Bibliography

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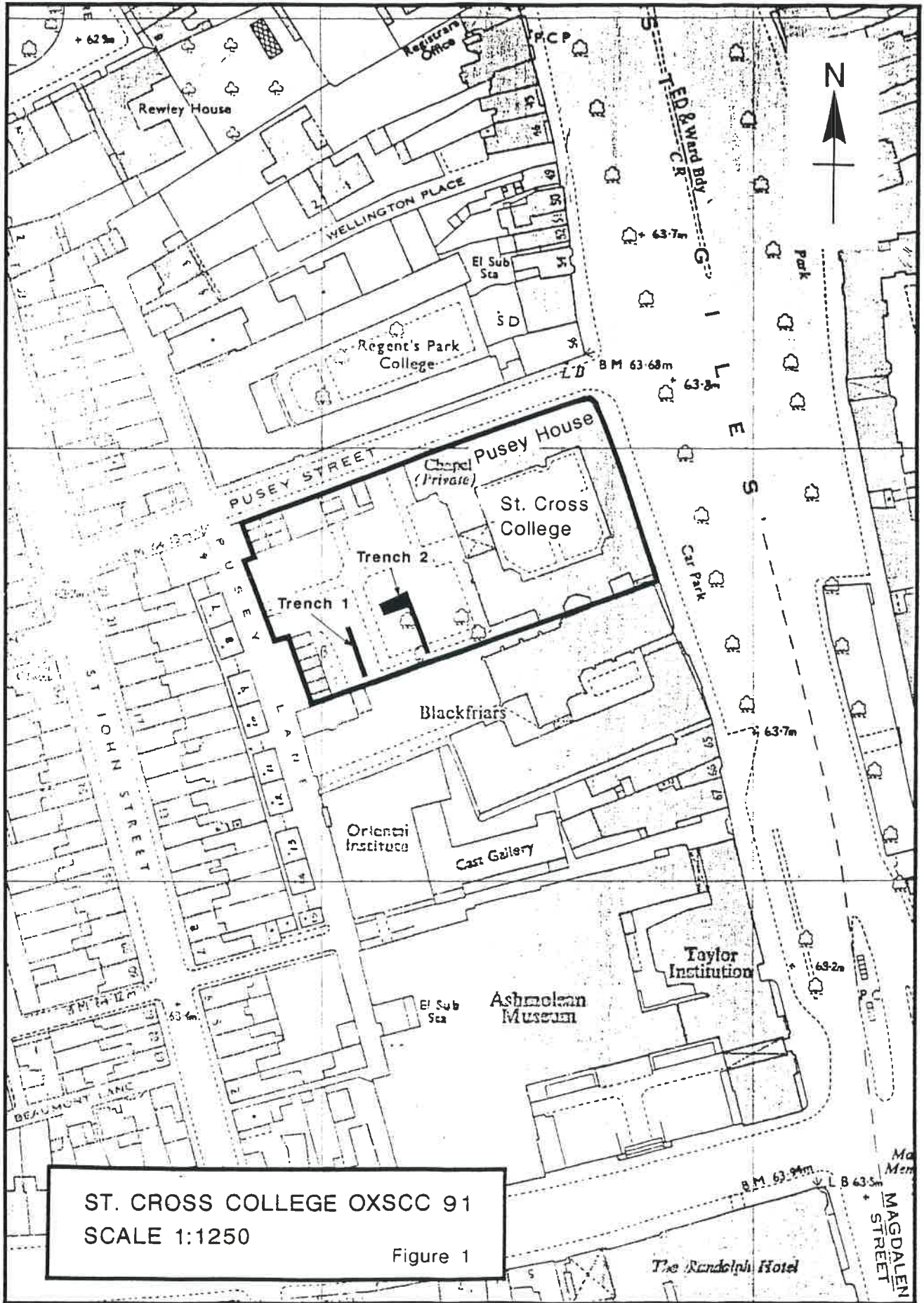
E M Jope and B Hope Taylor in 'The Clarendon Hotel, Oxford', *Oxoniensia* XXIII, (1958).

H E Salter, *Survey of Oxford*, Oxford Historical Society NS XX, (1969), 213-4.

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Illustrations

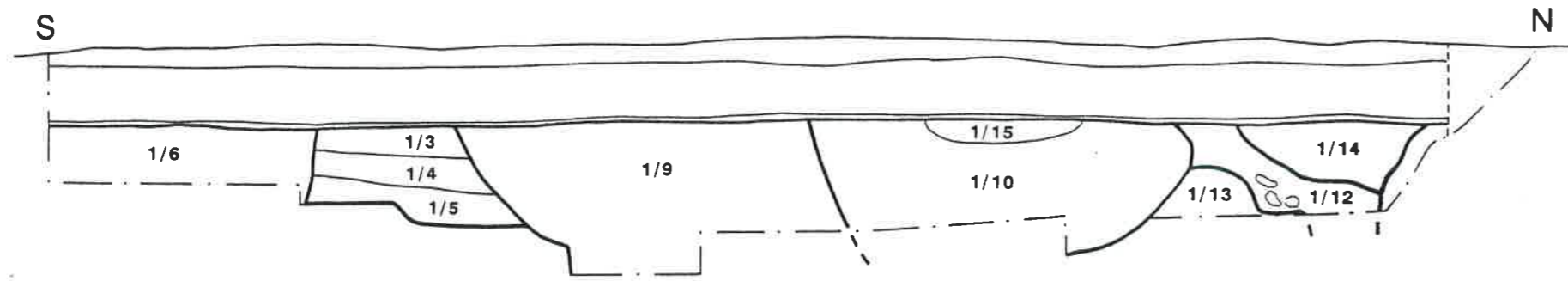
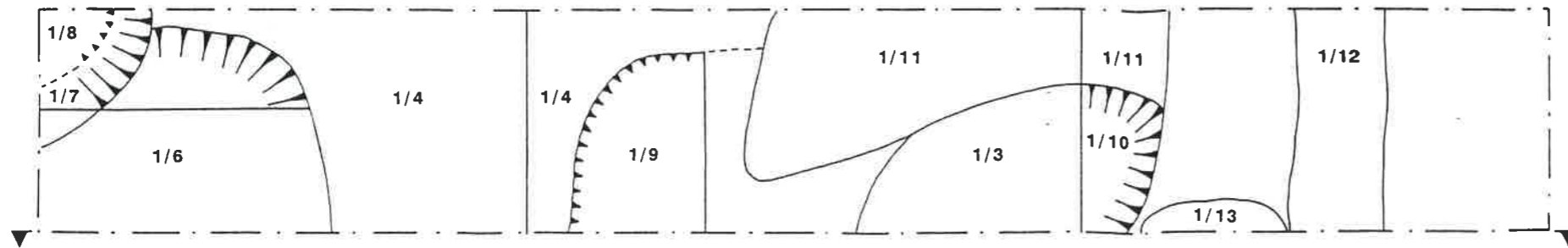
- Cover The Friends Meeting House in July 1911. The shadows and other details suggest that both this and Fig. 4 are views from the S, and we have therefore reproduced them in reverse, as compared with the source prints in the County Library (OCL 27998, Minn 2/22).
- Fig. 1. Location of the site, OS
- Fig. 2 Trenches 1 and 2, plans and sections (the section of Trench 1 (E side) is shown in reverse).
- Fig. 3 Plot boundaries in St Giles, 1876 OS 1:500 (courtesy of Oxon. County Libraries).
- Fig. 4 The Meeting House from the S in July 1911 (Minn 2/23). Beyond the double-hipped roof can be seen the shape of St Annes School in Wellington Square, now Rewley House.



ST. CROSS COLLEGE OXSCC 91
 SCALE 1:1250
 Figure 1

TRENCH 1

TRENCH 2



(Section 1 reversed)

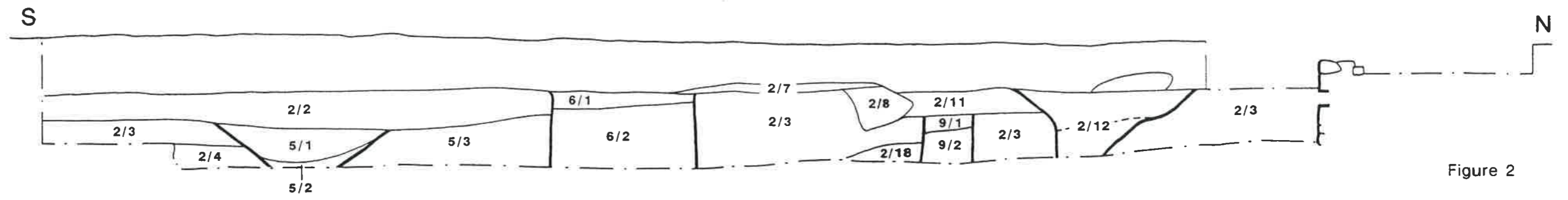
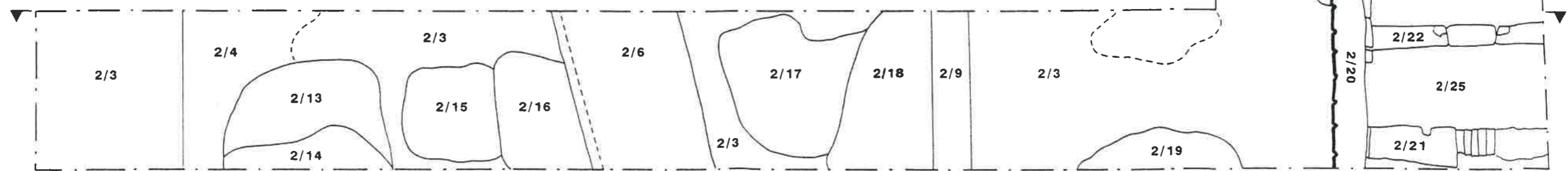
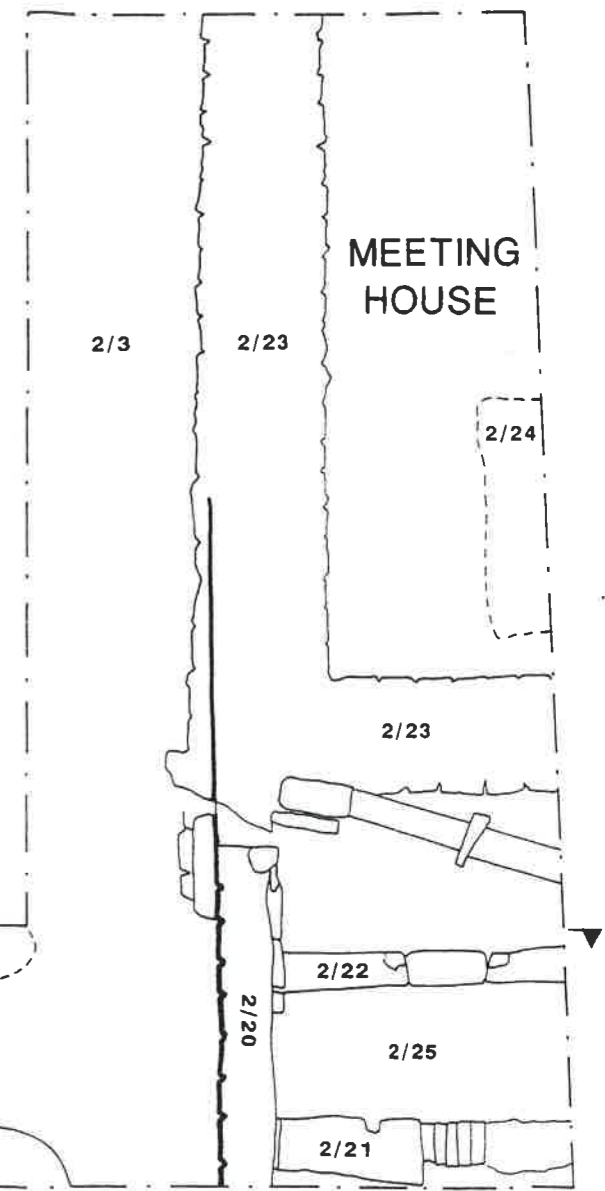
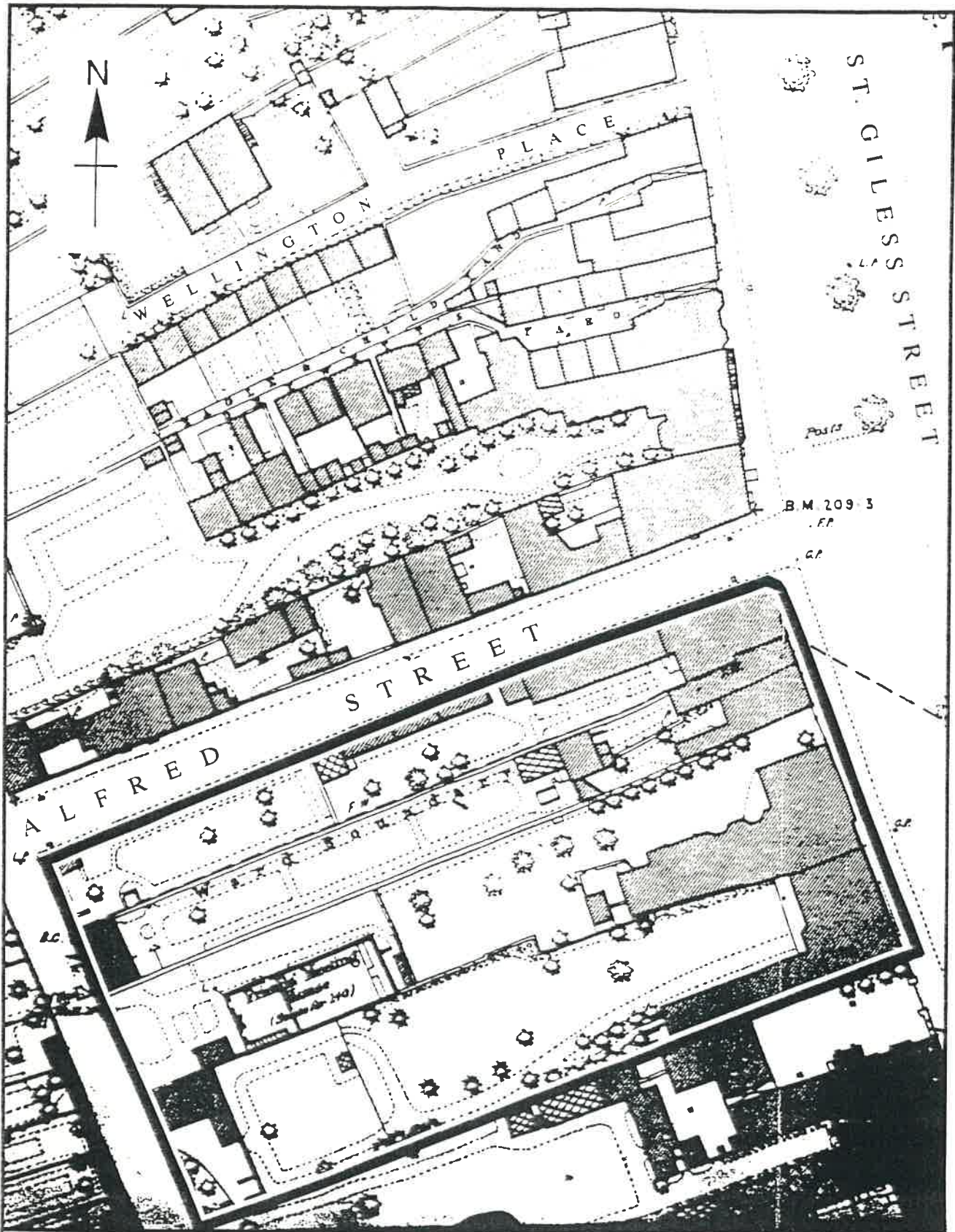


Figure 2



ST. CROSS COLLEGE OXSCC 91 SCALE 1:625



Figure 3

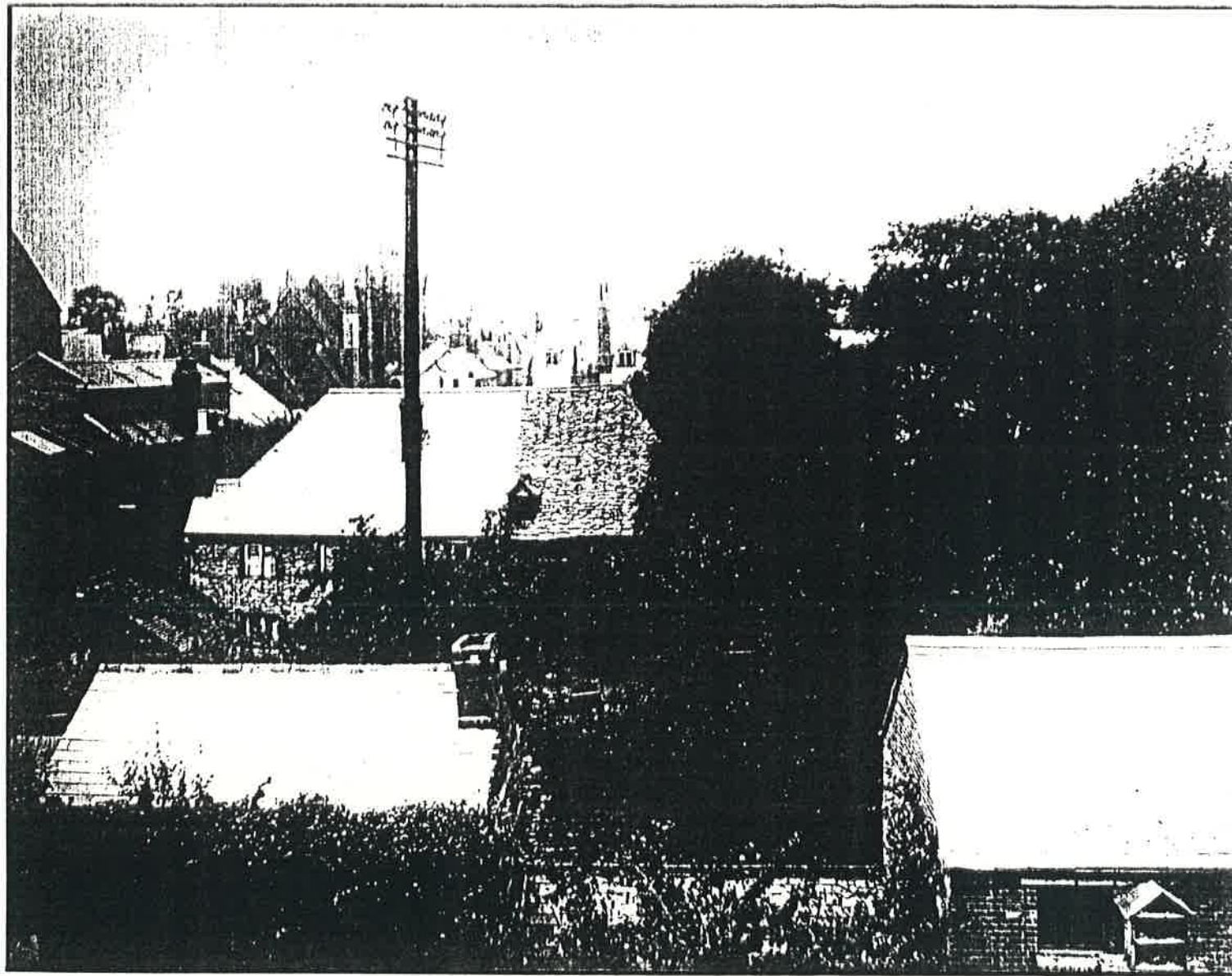


Figure 4

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