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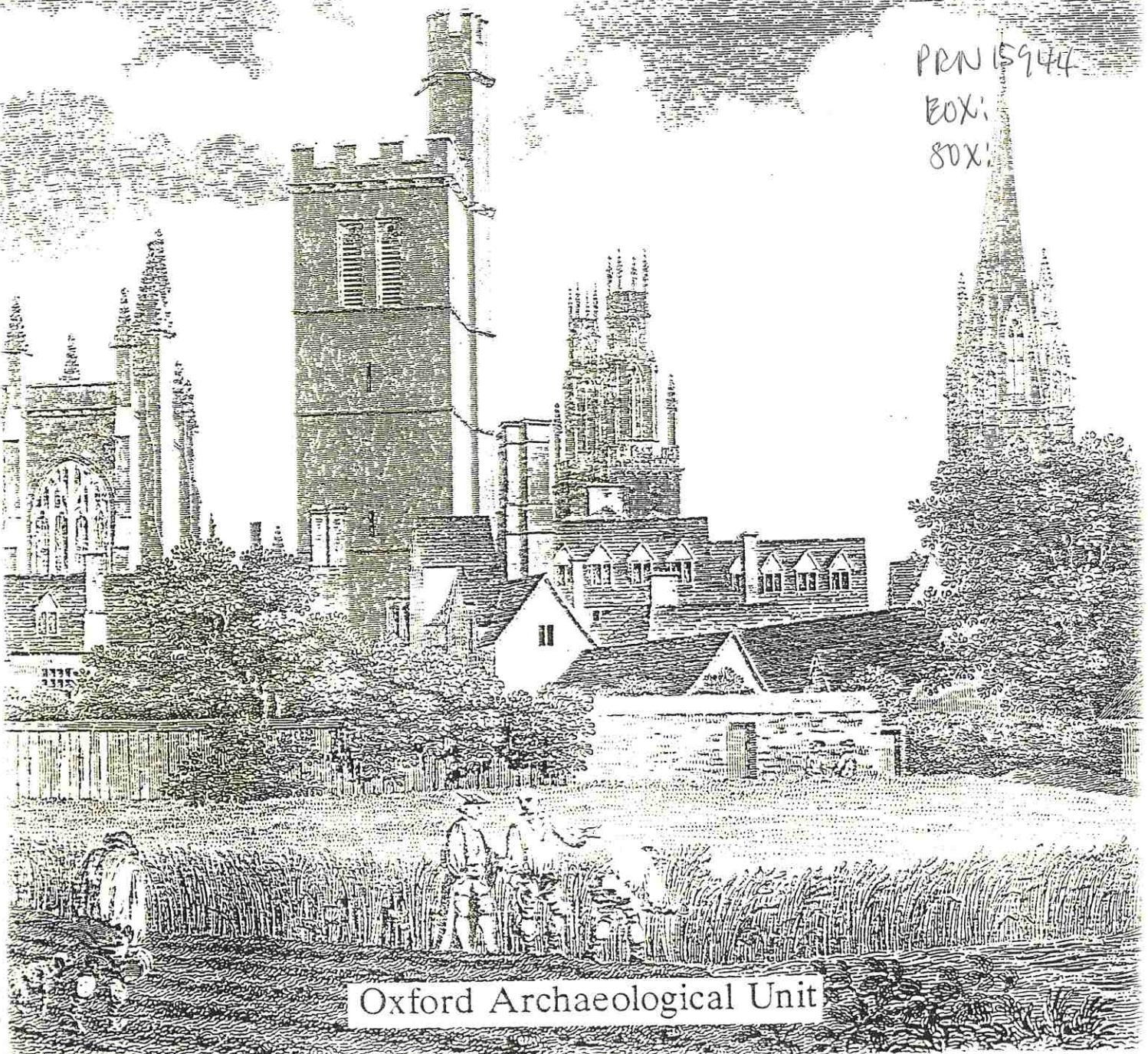
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# MANCHESTER COLLEGE, OXFORD

## ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT REPORT

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Oxford Archaeological Unit



TRACES OF EARLY PROPERTY BOUNDARIES ON THE SITE OF  
MANCHESTER COLLEGE, OXFORD

ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS, MARCH 1991

Summary: *An excavation in the garden area on the NW side of Manchester College showed evidence of the boundary between arable and garden ground, and in one place showed the succession from a low bank to a wall which had later been removed. The plan conforms with a reentrant rear boundary like that shown on the 16th and 17th century-maps of Oxford, and suggests that it may reflect the medieval back boundary between burghage plots on the Holywell frontage and the arable strips of the open field to the rear.*

OAU was asked by Manchester College to provide archaeological services in relation to the above development, in compliance with a condition on planning consent imposed by Oxford City Council.

#### BACKGROUND

The archaeological background for the area suggests widespread prehistoric and Roman deposits on the well-drained Second Gravel Terrace (Rodwell 1975). The picture of a mature farmed landscape was to be permanently altered in the mid- to late Saxon period by the planting of the planned town of Oxford, whose main landward defensive line ran just south of the site. Over a period of more than seven centuries Oxford functioned as one of the most important inland fortresses in England, and in the later 13th century it was embellished with an outer defensive wall on this stretch which is in the style of concentric castles of the period, and unique in northern European towns (Palmer 1976).

The Victoria History of Oxford states that there were medieval houses in Holywell (IV, 272), on the evidence of unpublished muniments of Merton College. Anthony Wood writing in the 1660s records a series of what he describes as medieval 'halls' along the north side of the street, including Sand Hall, Grim Hall, Persover Hall, Fouke Hall and one which was nameless. A possible distribution is indicated by Rodwell *et al* in 1975. This sort of 'ribbon development' must have reduced the effectiveness of a highly sophisticated town defence as described by Palmer. The houses appearing on the 16th and 17th century maps occupy the street frontages of long property strips extending back perhaps 200 m., and the Manchester College site is the last place on Holywell where the strips survive to anything like their full length.

#### OBJECTIVES

The objective of the field work was to investigate early boundaries where they would be affected by the building proposals, with a view to providing a date for the establishment of the property strips. The particular interest was in identifying any early dividing boundaries between plots, since the pattern shown on the 1875 OS 1:2500 (Fig. 1) suggest that these were the remains of regular 1/2 acre plots, which together might have been the block of 9

acres referred to by the VCH (op. cit.).

The recording strategy was designed to provide the detail needed to make sense of other medieval boundaries exposed in the contractor's operations.

## METHODS

A N-S trench was dug within the footprint of the proposed buildings using a JCB mechanical excavator to locate any surviving back boundary of the early plots. The trench was broadened where archaeological features were encountered in order to study the deposits, and the trench was intermittent at the south end where the density of modern activity made it clear that there was little chance of finding early boundaries. A separate trench was dug to the E in an area which showed least modern disturbance, in order to locate a N-S boundary. Those trenches showing no significant early deposits were infilled on the same day, and only those requiring hand-excavation and detailed recording were retained.

## THE EXCAVATION

The first discovery was a water pipe running down the agreed line of the trench, 2 m. from its supposed route, where it had apparently also been hit by a previous contractor. The effect was to weaken the west side of the trench and make it necessary to install shoring for safe working, and meant that we did not have the benefit of a W section for interpretive purposes.

## RESULTS

There was a lot of modern disturbance, particularly surprising at the back of the site which must have been very remote from anything until such time as the lane presaging the line of Saville Road was established. This perhaps related to a building which stood alone in this area in the 18th century.

## DESCRIPTION OF TRENCHES by Mark Roberts

Five trenches were dug in total, four aligned N-S and one E-W. Trenches 2 and 3 were 0.70 m wide, as were parts of trench 1. Trenches 4,5 and part of trench 1 were 1.70 m wide where the sides did not collapse. The trenches were mechanically excavated to a depth of 1.30 m.

## SOIL TYPES

The predominant soil type was grey or brown loam with small amounts of gravel inclusion. The pits had a similar fill but with varying amount of charcoal and in some instances building debris and mortar. The natural gravel was overlain by a red brown silt loam, which probably represents an undisturbed ancient topsoil (referred to below as the subsoil). The top of this layer was the horizon in which early features were expected to be seen; in areas where the layer had not appeared by a depth of about 1 m. the area was treated as disturbed and the mechanical excavation was therefore curtailed.

## TRENCH 1 (fig.2)

This trench was 25 m long and maximum 2 m deep in the hand excavated area. A layer of turf and garden soil 1/1 0.30 to 0.25 m deep overlaid a layer of dumped garden soil 1/2 0.50 m deep. Under this dumped layer was a lens of gravel 1/3 0.05 to 0.10 m thick which was visible as a horizon in trenches 1, 4, and 5. 1/2 and 1/3 were cut by pits 1/18, 1/19, 1/16, 1/15 and 1/13. Under the gravel lens was another layer of garden soil



1/4 0.70 m thick, this layer was cut by pits 1/6, 1/18, 1/14 and 1/17 which were overlaid by 1/3. 1/4 was cut by the pits which cut 1/2 and 1/3. 1/4 overlaid red-brown silty subsoil. 1/14 was partially hand sectioned to recover dating evidence.

#### TRENCH 2

This trench was 6.25 m long, 1.25 m wide and 1.70 m deep. the turf and garden soil 2/1 0.40 m deep overlaid a large Victorian cess-pit 2/2. The walls of the cess-pit varied in construction from regular good quality masonry on the S and N to irregular lumps of limestone on the E and W, the lowest course of the cesspit walls incorporated Victorian bricks. To the south was an un-lined pit 2/4 which was not excavated.

#### TRENCH 3

This trench was 2.80 m long, 0.70 m wide and 1.15 m deep. The turf and garden soil 3/1 overlay a deep layer of garden soil 3/2 0.75 m deep which in turn overlay a layer of natural gravel.

#### TRENCH 4 (fig. 3)

Trench 4 was 5.50 m long, 1.60 m wide and 1.17 m deep. The turf and garden soil layer 4/1 0.20 m deep overlay garden soil 4/2 0.19 m deep, the robber-trench of a wall 4/7 and garden soil 4/8 0.36 m deep. The wall 4/7 would have been aligned N-S and appeared to have been robbed after the deposition of 4/2 and 4/8 as the demolition debris extended over these layers. 4/2 overlay 4/3 a slightly more gravelly layer 0.40 to 0.22 m deep which might be identified with the gravel horizon in trench 1. Under layer 4/3 were 4/4 a layer of garden soil, and between 4/3 and 4/4 were two lenses, 4/11 green/grey silt loam 0.02 m deep and 4/12 red brown silt 0.02 m deep. 4/4 overlaid 4/5 red-brown silt subsoil. To the east of the wall-trench, 4/8 overlaid a layer of grey brown garden soil 0.22 m deep 4/9 which over laid in turn 4/10 a red brown loam 0.21 m deep which overlaid 4/5. To the west of wall-trench 4/7 was a shallow feature 4/6 which might have been related to the construction of the wall, or alternatively a low bank dividing two field strips, overlaid by 4/3, 4/4 and 4/5.

#### TRENCH 5 (fig. 2)

Trench 5 was a southward continuation of the line Trench 1. It was 8.20 m long, 1.52 m wide and 1.20 m deep. The top layer 5/1 was 0.40 to 0.20 m deep and was formed from turf and flowerbed material. This overlay a garden soil 5/2 0.30 m deep which was cut by pits 5/6, 5/7 and 5/10. 5/2 in turn overlay a gravelly loam layer 5/3 0.20 m thick and identifiable with the horizon of 1/3. This overlay 5/4, a garden soil layer of varying thickness, between 0.20 and 0.80 m deep. 5/4 overlay 5/5 a red-brown loam which overlay the subsoil. 5/4 and 5/5 were cut by pits 5/8 and 5/9 which were overlain by 5/3.

#### FINDS

The bulk of the material recovered from the excavation was pottery, and no group was earlier than the mid 18th century. The large pit 1/14 produced most, with 12 sherds of Delft-type tinglaze wares handpainted in blue, 10 sherds of red earthenware, the base of a slipware plate and a clay pipe bowl typical of the second half of the 18th century. Otherwise all the recognisable features were around a century later (1/13; 2/2; 2/6; 3/2), and the only exceptions were finds from unstratified context which included further-18th century wares and an early 17th-century pipe bowl.

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The archaeological investigation of the garden at Manchester College proved to be an ambitious project in view of the deliberately limited budget, but within the confines of the research design the results were valuable. The succession of a plot division, possibly

corresponding to a former boundary between Nos 28 and 29, was clearly identified, and the former back boundary line of No 29 was narrowed down to a comparatively small tolerance.

Fig 2 summarises the areas where the distinctive red colour of the subsoil survived. The layer immediately above the subsoil in Trench 1 was typical of an old ploughsoil, ie the result of prolonged use of a shallow plough on the natural soil profile. Since the profile is repeated in Trench 4 as far as the line of wall-trench 4/7, it is likely that it reflects the traditional land use in at least this plot.

The contrasting soil profiles E and W of the wall-trench 4/7 in Trench 4, assuming they are representative, would suggest a different land use before the area became garden. Mark Roberts noted a similar contrast along a N-S axis between Trenches 1 and 5, which could imply that the back boundary of the garden area lay in this general area. An alignment of pits indicated by the absence of red subsoil in Trench 4 could be respecting such a boundary (Fig 2) and, although one at least of the pits belonged to a later phase of usage, they may reflect a traditional division on the line of the old back boundary. There is little doubt that the change occurs somewhere along the length of our trenching, and it seems most likely that evidence of a wall had either been lost in disturbance by pits of this sort, or else was missed in the overlap between Trenches 1 and 5.

So the evidence of land use would indicate that the traditional garden area extended further back behind 29 Holywell than behind No 28, ie the back boundary was staggered. Loggan's map of 1675 does indeed show a staggered rear wall, and although it is risky to argue from these early maps, it is possible wall-trench 4/7 represented the reentrant existing in 1675, which by 1750 had been absorbed into the much longer garden lots shown by Taylor.

The area in the N had been extensively disturbed by pits, and the particular pit chosen for hand excavation was the earliest identified (1/14). The pottery dating is consistent with activity after the area had become a garden, ie after the mid 18th century. In view of the size of the disturbance here it would not be impossible that it represented informal gravel quarrying during a period of rebuilding, especially because the surface from which the pits had all been cut was covered by a gravelly layer and building debris, which had effectively raised the ground level of the area by 0.50 m. This raised surface in turn had later pits cut down into it, causing further disturbance of the significant archaeological levels. Trench 3 did not show this sequence, perhaps because it was closer to the house, within a garden area of the property rather than a rear service area, and was already raised higher than the area to the north, but the large stone-lined pit in Trench 2 is in the classic position for a cess-pits at the end of the garden.

The properties to the west were watched during several phases of the Wadham College redevelopment. Contractor's excavations by their nature are never as productive as archaeological trenches, but on the site of the library the contractor's found very large and deep disturbances which were most probably quarries. In that case they were in plots adjoining the rear wall of the house of Augustinian friars which lay beneath Wadham College.



## LESSONS FOR THE FUTURE

*These trenches on the longest surviving stretch of the Holywell strips have shown that the early detail of strip boundaries can survive in the urban context, and have given an example of the necessary conditions. It is clear that these conditions could exist in many other sites in the city where the open fields have been settled, but it is also probable that local factors are involved in the distribution of the pits and quarries which tend to obscure the picture, and it may never be possible to make predictions as to the best locations for future investigation. The E-W section of Trench 4 was however precisely what was needed, possibly showing plough effects at the edge of the field against a field boundary line later formalised with a wall. There are few other places in the city where the development of such a long plot is foreseeable, so there may be few comparative examples, but the Manchester College excavation has provided a classic statement of what can be expected in ideal circumstances, and will serve as a model for interpreting more limited exposures in the future.*

*OAU wishes to express gratitude to the Principal, staff and members of Manchester College for their interest and cooperation in this project*

Brian Durham, Mark Roberts

March 1991

### References

N Palmer, 'Excavations on the outer city wall at Oxford', *Oxoniensia*, xli, (1976), 148-160.

K Rodwell (Ed), *Historic towns in Oxfordshire*, (1975), 141.

*Victoria History of Oxford (VCH)*, iv, (1979).

*Wood's History of the City of Oxford*, A Clark Ed, OHS xv, (1889), i, 383-5.

### Figures

Fig. 1      Detail of 1875 Ordnance Survey showing location of Fig. 2, and also the pattern of plot boundaries existing at this time.

Fig. 2      Location of trenches in garden of Manchester College (Wadham College to left). The broken line indicates the presumed plot boundaries identified by excavation.

Fig. 3 Composite east section of Trenches 1 and 5. The presumed back boundary of No. 29 would be around the 25 m. point on the long axis.

Fig. 4 N. section of Trench 4, showing the robbed line of wall 4/7, the ridged profile of ploughsoil 4/4, and the contrasting profile E of the wall.



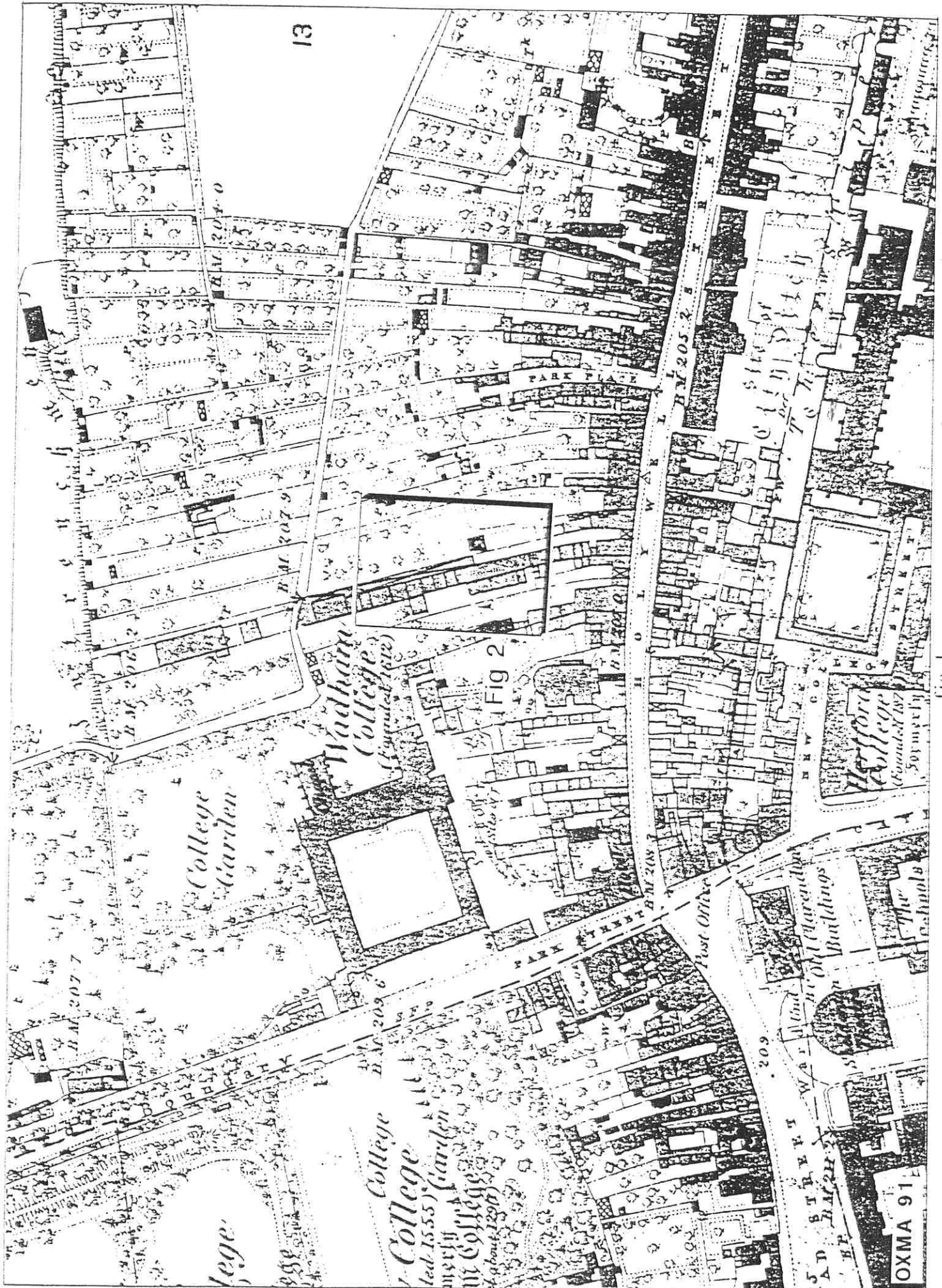


FIG 1

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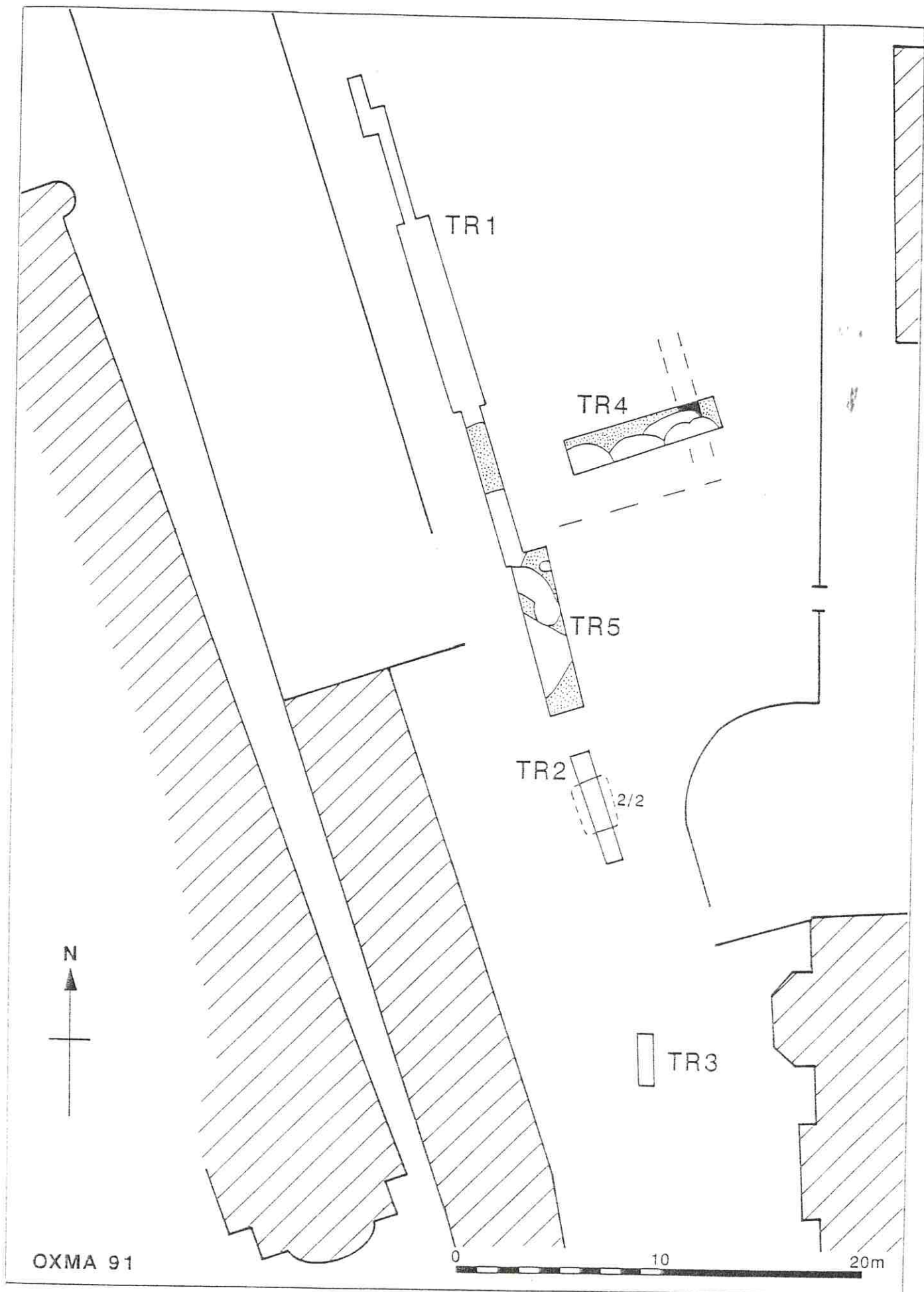


fig 2



# Composite section of trenches 1 and 5

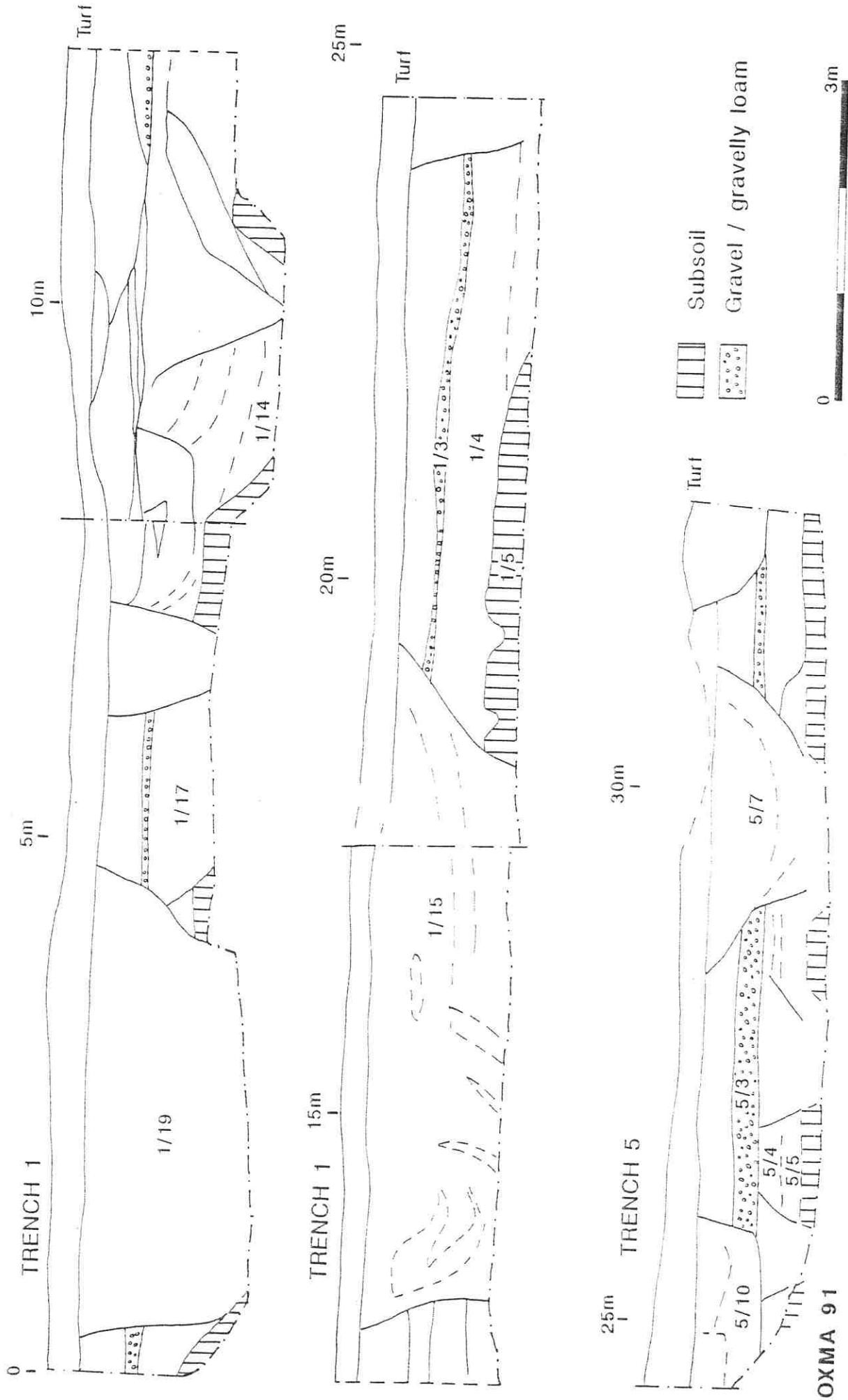
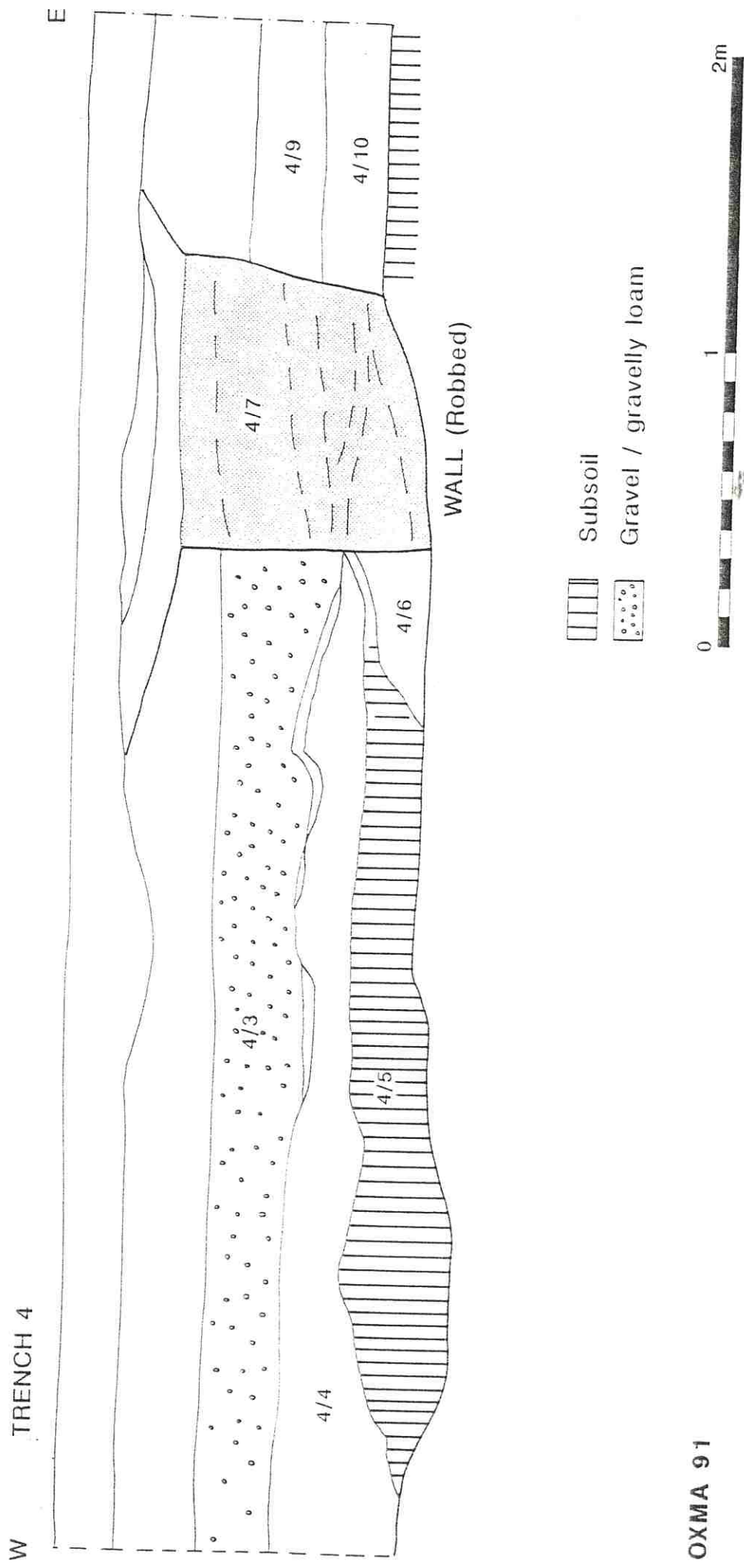


fig. 3





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fig 4