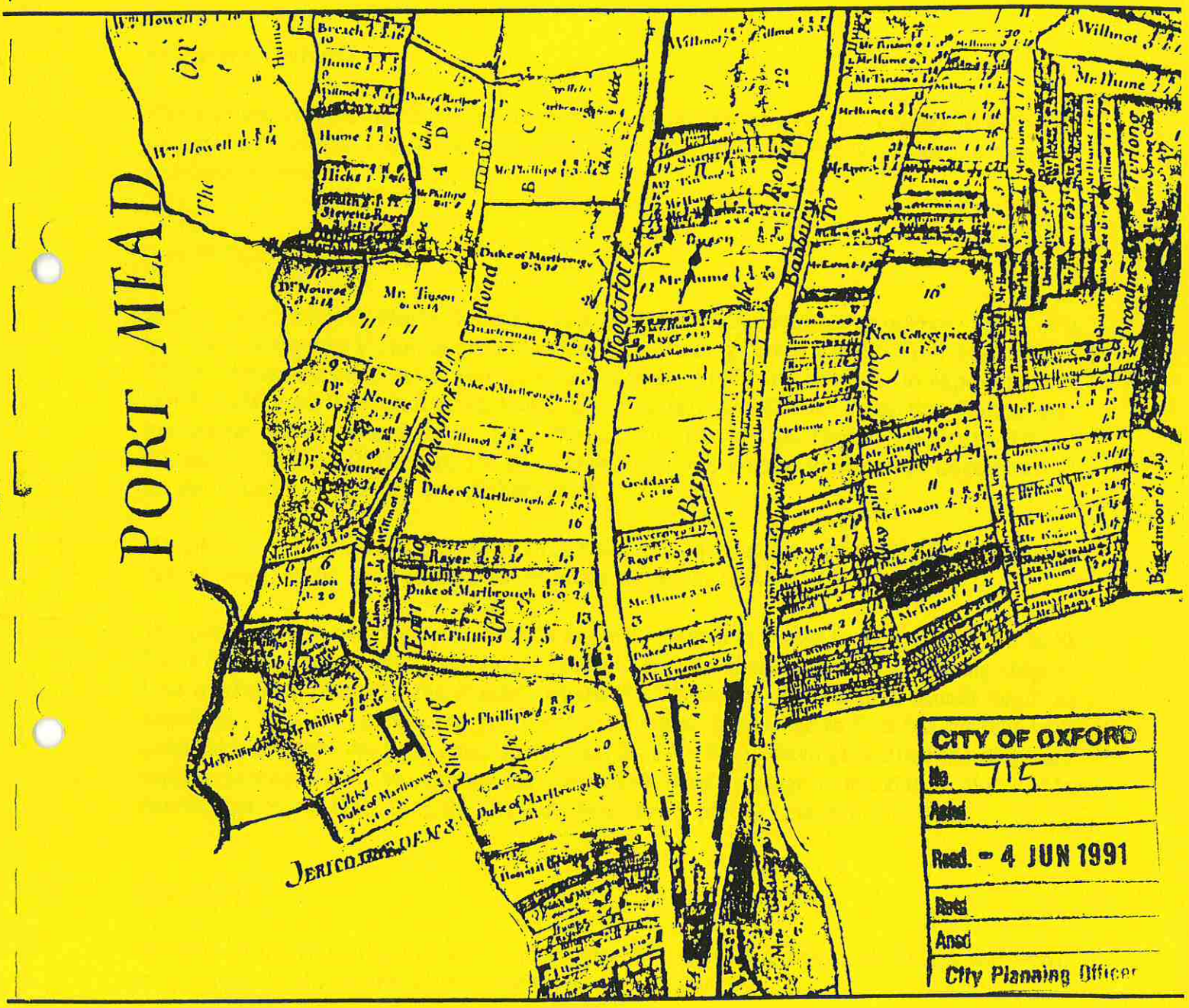
EVENT NO 358

OXFORD ST ANNES COLLEGE
NEW RESIDENTIAL ACCOMMODATION

ARCHAEOLOGICAL FIELD EVALUATION MAY 1991



The Oxford Archaeological Unit

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INTRODUCTION

The Oxford Archaeological Unit was asked by architects for St Annes college to carry out an evaluation of the site of their proposed new accommodation block, under the terms of planning consent.

BACKGROUND

The gravel terraces of North Oxford have a scatter of early settlement evidence, much of it recorded during the Victorian expansion of house building (Oxon County PRN 3426; 3584; 3594). Alterations and extensions to these properties in the area continue to expose pottery and burials, and it is clear from work in the university's Science Area that Roman and prehistoric activity was intense, from Bronze Age barrows (B Durham 1989) to Roman decapitated burials (T Hassall, 1972). There is also place-name evidence of three barrows on the Radcliffe Infirmary site (Salter 1936).

No artifacts are recorded from the St Annes site, but this is not surprising since the borehole data shows that the soil profile is undisturbed by recent activity.

The pre-enclosure arrangement of fields in North Oxford is shown on a map of 1769 at St Johns College (see cover). The site of St Annes is at the S end of the long tapering strip of land marked as 'Between the Roads', where the Woodstock and Banbury Roads begin to converge. This is evidently the point where it became impossible to fit a full furlong strip cross-wise between the roads, and on the land S of the future Bevington Road the strips are shown running NS. The strip on the Woodstock Road frontage is marked as plot 1, Mr Hume, that to the E fronting the Banbury Road being plot 2, Quartermain.

METHODS

Because of the limitations of access at present, a 3 ft wide Kubota mini-digger was used, with rubber tracks to protect the existing paving and turf.

Trenches were dug down to the top of an undisturbed deposit, which in many places was immediately recognisable as a red-brown silty loam encountered by the borehole survey. Where this was not found, the trenches were taken down a further 0.1 m. into the disturbed ground. The trench floor and sides were then cleaned by hand to confirm the outlines of the disturbances and the profile in section.

RESULTS: TRENCH 1 (Fig. 3a)

The first trench was situated in the garden to the rear of No 50 Woodstock road. It was aligned roughly N/S and 13m long.
Immediately below the turf a large modern (Victorian) rectangular pit (1/4) was seen in the northern end of the trench, cutting down through an early garden soil which had truncated two other features 1/5 and 1/6, both linear and both Victorian in date.
All three features in this trench cut through an orange/brown silty sub-soil (1/3) which contained fragments of medeval pottery and one silver coin dating from James I 1604-1619.

TRENCH 2 (Fig. 3b)

The second trench was situated in the garden of the Principal's house at 29 Banbury Road. It was laid out to avoid a wooden gazebo, an apple tree and other garden features, and was therfore close to the edge of the proposed building. It was excavated to a depth of 0.70m by the machine, followed by hand cleaning and excavation of the features.

Immediately below the turf 2/1 was a lens of gravelly mortary loam 2/5 which might be the remains of a path or perhaps rubble left from the original building of the house. This material overlay a plough/garden soil 2/2 which was 0.30 m. thick. This in turn overlay another plough soil 2/3 through which a broad shallow NW/SE aligned linear feature 2/7 had been cut, with its base cutting down just into the orange-brown loam of the original soil profile. This presumed ditch was 2.75m wide and 0.30m deep, truncated by the upper plough soil 2/2. It contained finds dating from the 14th through to the 17th centuries. The only other feature was a narrow channel which might be a plough furrow 2/8, just W of 2/7 and aligned rather more NS than it.

Both these features cut through loam layers with medieval pottery, ie 2/3 above, 2/4 underneath. The upper of the the two was more friable and less reddish than the lower, and would suggest a longer history of ploughing. However, since medieval pottery was found in the deeper level it seems likely the plough had cut down from time to time into these level.

A small sondage was dug by hand in the middle of the trench to establish the level of the natural gravel, which was recorded at 61.93m OD.

FINDS (not illustrated)

Trench 1 produced large quantities of Victorian pottery from the large pit 1/4 and the two linear features 1/5 and 1/6. They included the full range of blue-transfer wares and glazed earthenwares, a few sherds of stoneware, clay pipe stems, bricks and clay roof tile. There was also a range of residual medieval types. In the cultivated soil through which these features had been cut was a similar range. Only at the very base of the soil profile was there a group which was significantly earlier, ie 1/3, from which came a sherd of stoneware and a silver half-groat of James I, together with a sherd of a 13th-century cooking pot.

The coin is described by Nicholas Mayhew of the Ashmolean Museum as James I silver 2 shillings (Scots) or 2 pence (English) 1603-25. The English and Scots coins can only be distinguished by the mint mark, which in this case cannot be seen, but he assumes that it is English.

Trench 2 presented a different picture. The unstratified material from the machine excavation included Victorian wares similar to Trench 1, and a rubble level beneath produced 18th century bottle neck. Beneath this however the finds were largely medieval, and the lower plough soil 2/3 included 5 sherds of Brill types *OXAM*, 2 of another sandy fabric *OXY*, one sherd of a flinty fabric possibly *OXBF* , one of a shelly fabric *OXR*, and an iron horseshoe nail of 'fiddle-key' shape . the latter three are typical of late Saxon assemblages at Oxford, and illustrate the period over which one might assume the field had been in cultivation. The deepest layer, 2/4, beneath produced 3 sherds of a similar date range, the smaller numbers being a reflection of the reduced area of hand excavation.

DISCUSSION

The first objective of the archaeological evaluation of this site was to identify the extent of Roman and earlier activity in the area. The results have shown nothing as early as this, and the area of interest therefore moves to the medieval period, when there is a steady proportion of finds in the lower plough soil. They are not as heavily abraded as might be expected from a heavily ploughed horizon, but the scatter is typical of what is found in the open fields around medieval settlements, where it is normally assumed to result from use of domestic waste to manure the fields. It is therefore not necessarily indicative of settlement on the immediate site, and it is reasonable to argue that the arrangement of fields shown on the pre-enclosure map of 1769 (see cover) could be essentially a medieval arrangement, accounting for most of the elements of the soil profile.

Two features possibly support this view. The fields in this area are likely to have exhibited 'ridge and furrow' ploughing, the medieval technique which produces a pattern of broad parallel ripples along the line of the strips. Ridge and furrow in Oxford itself can be most clearly seen at the foot of South Parks, where it runs up to Morrell Avenue. At St Annes the broad shallow trough 2/7 is aligned roughly parallel to the Woodstock Road, and could be the base of a field furrow, while the shallow channel 2/8 just W of it could be an unusually deep plough furrow at the foot of the adjoining ridge. The fact that nothing similar was found in Trench 1 is likely to be because the archaeological trench was running parallel to the field strips, where the changing levels of the ridges would not be detectable.

The conclusions for the later period are broadly what can be inferred from the 19th-century maps. Given the extent of gravel quarrying over this part of North Oxford it is perhaps surprising that the ground was so little disturbed, but the easiest explanation of the large pit 1/4 is that it was small scale quarrying by a builder or an occupier, and the same may apply to the linear features 1/5 and 1/6. This could have been confirmed by digging one of them out, but this was not within the evaluation brief, and it is information which may well come out of the main contractor's operations because these would technically be soft spots needing extra support.

CONCLUSIONS

It is unusual for an evaluation trench to produce coins of any sort, because the priority is to demonstrate the broad outlines of the stratigraphy; for a silver coin to turn up in the first hour of work is almost unheard of, particularly on a site where it proves to be about the most interesting item of the whole job! James I of England was also James VI of Scotland, and he used similar dies to mint a two shilling coin in Scotland and a two pence coin or half groat in England. Nicholas Mayhew of the Ashmolean Museum presumes that this is an English issue, although this could only be confirmed by the mint mark which is not visible.

The reason for the coin being found in what was a North Oxford field are unclear, but it was presumably a chance loss. However it would have been legal currency up to the great recoinage of 1696, so it is not impossible that its loss was related to the events of the 1640s when there was extensive work just to the south to create Oxford's outer defences, and the St Annes area may have seen military activity in anticipation of the Parliamentarian seige.

The similarity of alignment between the supposed field furrow in Trench 2 and the line of the Woodstock road may be coincidental, but it is valuable as part of a programme of investigating the physical remains of field systems around the city. The particular interest in this area is its proximity to the prehistoric and Roman agricultural system which can be seen in aerial photographs of the University parks, and any ground level information may help to show how the medieval field plan evolved from its early predecessor.

The Oxford Archaeological Unit is grateful to the members of St Annes College for their cooperation in this evaluation

Mick Parsons, Brian Durham

References

B Durham 1989, 'Glycobiology Building', *Archaeological News (OAU Newsletter) Vol xvii, June 1989, 8.*

T Hassall, 'Roman finds from the Radcliffe Science Library Extension', *Oxoniensia* 37 (1972) 38-50

H E Salter, *Medieval Oxford*, O H S vol C (1936), 4.

Figures

Cover Map of North Oxford in 1769 (St Johns College)

Fig. 1 Historic location of the site (OS 1:2500 (1876).

Fig. 2 Trench locations

Fig. 3 Trenches 1 and 2, Plans and Sections.

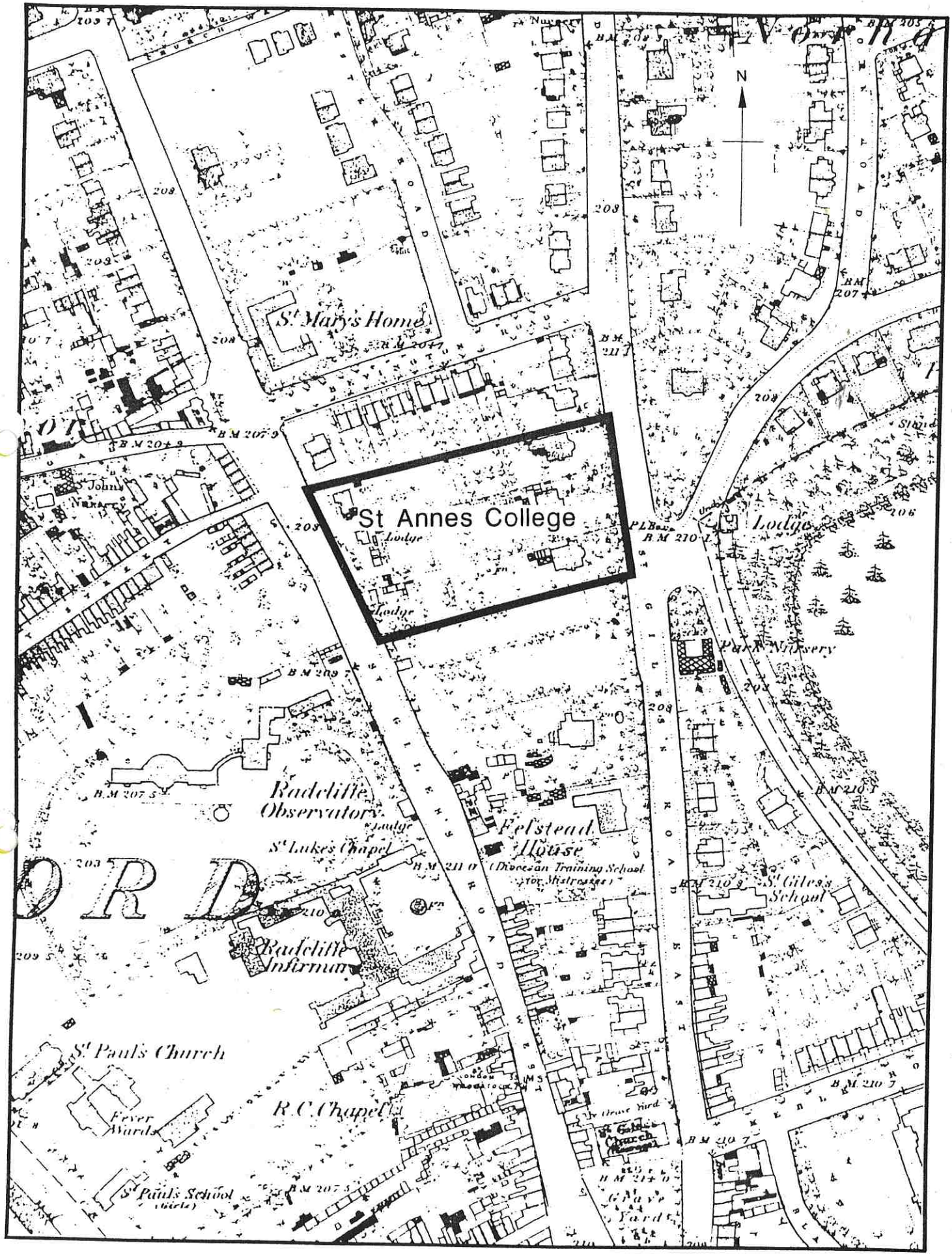

St Annes College
St Mary's Home
Radcliffe Observatory
Radcliffe Infirmary
St Luke's Chapel
Pelstead House
(Diocesan Training School for Mistresses)
St Giles's School
St Paul's Church
R.C. Chapel
Fever Wards
St Paul's School
Lodge
Nursery
N

Figure 1

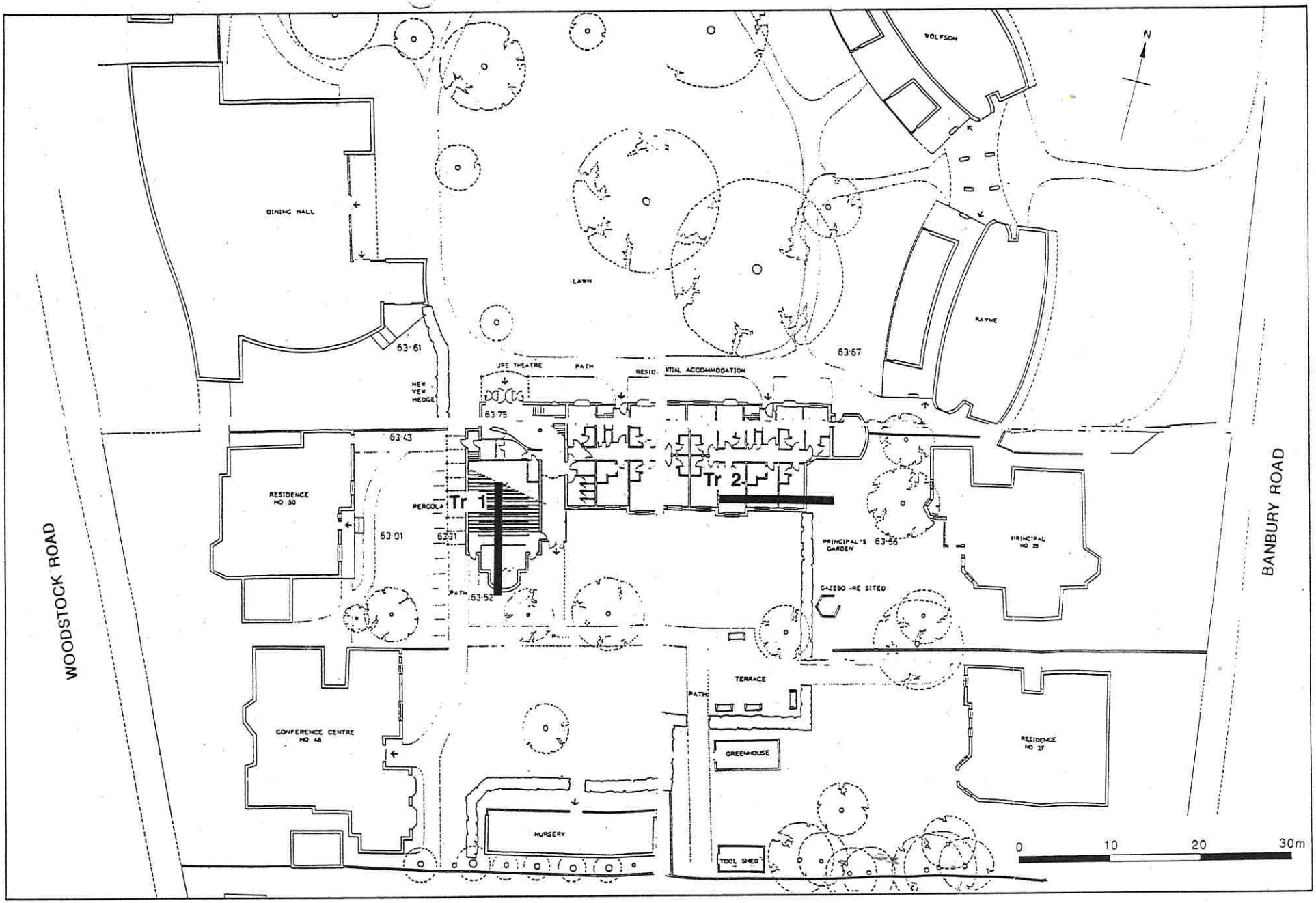
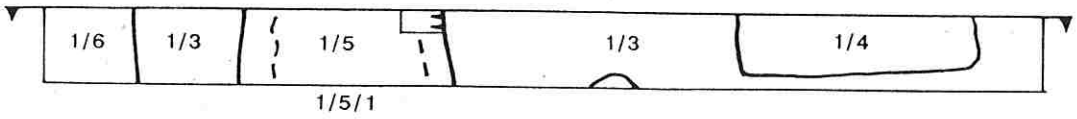

WOLFSON
N
DINING HALL
LAWN
RAYNE
63·61
63·67
NEW YEW HEDGE
63·75
63·43
RESIDENCE NO 50
PERGOLA
Tr 1
Tr 2
63·01
63·31
PATH
63·52
PRINCIPAL'S GARDEN
63·56
GAZEBO -RE SITED
TERRACE
PATH
CONFERENCE CENTRE NO 48
GREENHOUSE
RESIDENCE NO 27
NURSERY
TOOL SHED
WOODSTOCK ROAD
BANBURY ROAD
0
10
20
30m

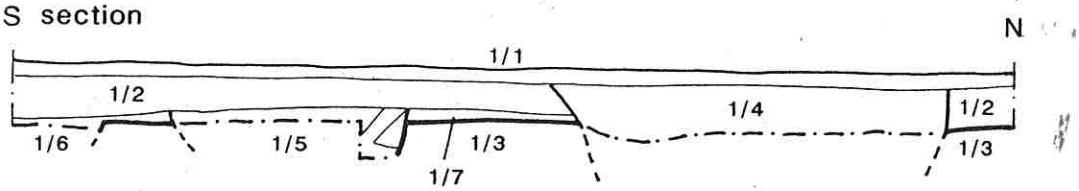
Figure 2

Trench 1

plan

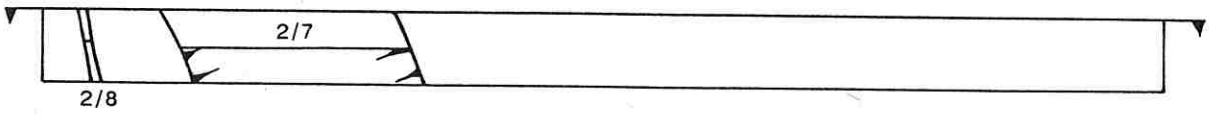


S section



Trench 2

plan



W section

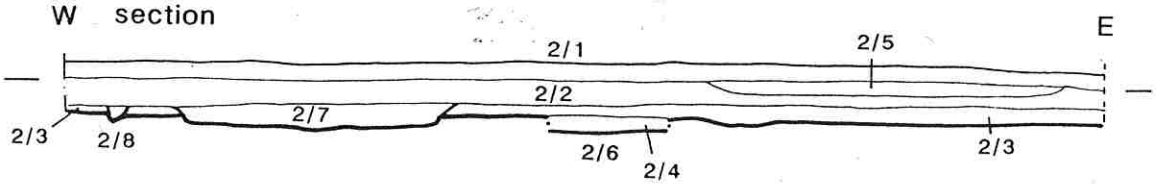


Figure 3