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**Medieval masonry at 36 Cornmarket, Oxford
NGR SP 5125 0637**

Watching Brief [Archive Report]

Oxford Archaeological Unit
April 2001

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1 Introduction

- 1.1 The corner of a substantial block of masonry was revealed in the course of reconstruction work in a cellar at 36 Cornmarket, Oxford, which is situated on the west side of the street almost exactly opposite St Michael at the Northgate. The contractors, Messrs Knowles, informed the Oxford Archaeological Advisory Service and it was subsequently arranged that the site should be visited by staff of the Oxford Archaeological Unit.
- 1.2 This was done on 8th May 1998 when the structure was recorded. It had not been anticipated that the redevelopment of the building would have any archaeological implications, so no provision had been made for archaeological work on the site.

2 Method

- 2.1 The exposed feature lay beneath the concrete floor just to the north of the principal east-west dividing wall in the middle of the basement of 36 Cornmarket. It was revealed as a result of the need to insert a concrete pier base on the line of the wall at this point to support the structure above.
- 2.2 The hole for the pier base, with maximum dimensions of c 2.3 m east-west x 1.95 m north-south, was partly excavated, and the overlying cellar wall removed at this point, by the time the site was examined. The necessary shoring, both for the hole itself and the structures above, made access for further investigation and recording difficult. In particular, conditions were very unsuitable for photography.

3 Archaeological Sequence

- 3.1 The natural subsoil, encountered across the southern and western parts of the hole as excavated, was a clean orange brown sandy gravel of varying hardness and with variable gravel content (32). At its highest point this deposit was some 1.40 m BBFL (below basement floor level). In the north face of the pier base hole the highest point of 32, here a very hard deposit, was c 1.69 m BBFL, but here it was overlain by an apparently distinct looser brown gravel layer (31) up to 0.15 m thick, in turn sealed by a layer of grey-brown loam (30) and a further red-brown sandy gravel (29), the top of which lay c 1.43 m BBFL.
- 3.2 These deposits and the sand and gravel natural were cut by an almost vertical sided feature (28) located in the north-east corner of the pier base hole. The feature was aligned approximately east-west and north-south and as observed had minimum dimensions of c 1.2 x 0.75 m. Its south-west corner had been removed by the excavation for the pier base, but its approximate outline can be reconstructed. The feature was cut at least 1.45 m into the natural. Its base was

not certainly located, but the lowest examined fill, of small flat limestone rubble (27) which extended right across the width of the cut, is thought to have been the primary fill and was considered likely to have been quite shallow; the bottom of the cut was therefore probably at approximately 2.85 m BBFL.

- 3.3 Above 27 was the stone structure (11), a block of hard, irregular Ragstone stonework with little indication of coursing and so much mortar, particularly on the south face, that it was impossible to obtain meaningful dimensions of the individual stones. The south-west corner of the structure, however, consisted of well-cut quoins of yellowish oolitic limestone. Five courses of quoins, with a combined height of 1.21 m, survived *in situ*, and the positions of a further four were visible in the north section of the pier base hole. The eighth quoin from the base of the structure appears to have been of Ragstone, but still had a good quality west face. The dimensions of the quoins varied. The deepest, at the base of the structure, was 0.31 m deep, while the maximum east-west dimension was 0.44 m. Only the external (and upper and lower) faces of the quoins were finished. Those of the next to basal stone had light diagonal tooling on both exposed faces, but none of the others had comparable treatment. The stones were carefully laid with mortared joints at most c 10 mm wide.
- 3.4 The core of structure 11 survived to a maximum height of c 2.42 m above its base. It was at least 1 m east-west x 0.33 m north-south but was presumably much larger than this in both dimensions. The corner of the structure appeared to be vertical, but the south face sloped inwards by some 0.15 m in 2.3 m from the vertical, though it is not certain if this was an original characteristic of the structure. The base of structure 11 was inset c 0.44 m from the south edge of cut 28, and c 0.22 m from the west edge. Above the basal layer 27 the cut was infilled against the wall faces by slightly different sequences. This material had been almost entirely removed by the contractors' excavation and was thus only observed in the east and north sections of the hole. The sequence in the east section consisted of gravel (18), a lens of loam (17), more gravel (16) and gravelly loam (15). Some 1.14 m above the base of structure 11 fill 15 was overlain by a mortar spread up to 0.06-0.07 m thick (14), itself overlain by another deposit of gravelly loam (13). Fills 13 and 15 both contained mortar fragments, and fill 16 produced the only significant artefact from the site, a single fragment of roof tile.
- 3.5 The sequence of fills of construction cut 28 seen in the north section was broadly comparable. The lowest fill (26) was again of gravel, sealed by loamy sand and gravel (25), a lens of slipped natural gravel (24) and a further gravelly loam, incorporating occasional irregular Ragstone pieces (23). Some 0.6 m from the base of the structure fill 23 was overlain by a thin mortar spread (22), sealed by more gravelly loam (21) with another mortar deposit (20) c 1 m from the base of the structure. Above 22 was yet another dark grey brown gravelly loam (19) which may have been the upper most fill of construction trench 28 at this point but was indistinguishable in section from the overlying deposit (10) which extended westwards beyond the confines of cut 28. This deposit was potentially up to c 0.7 m deep. It was cut by modern concrete features, between which another deposit of dark grey gravelly loam

(9) was barely distinguishable from 10 below, and may actually have been the same, though the section was obscured at this point.

- 3.6 In the south-east corner of the pier base hole an almost vertical sided cut (34) in the natural sand and gravel was not examined in detail, but may have been a pit. The only observed fill (33) was a brown gravelly loam at least c 0.5 m deep. The bottom of this deposit was not observed, and the top was truncated by an irregular cut (12) which extended from the south face of structure 11 apparently to the corner of the pier base hole. A steep sided cut roughly 0.5 m across in the centre of the east section of the pier base hole may have been a feature distinct from the rest of cut 12, but if so this could not be distinguished. Above the line of cut 12 was a reasonably homogeneous deposit of generally dark brown gravelly loam with mortar flecks and stone fragments. This was noticeably somewhat darker towards the base of cut 12, where it contained a number of coal fragments. Immediately south of the cellar-dividing wall a modern ceramic pipe lay within fill 8, with no sign of a cut to contain it. On this basis, while it is quite possible that 8 consisted of a number of different (but physically similar) deposits, the whole of this sequence from cut 12 upwards is thought to be broadly similar in date, and possibly relatively recent.
- 3.7 There was some similarity between deposit 8 and deposits 9 and 10 as seen in the north section of the pier base hole, but these last did not contain the coal fragments evident at the base of 8, nor was layer 10 distinct from the upper fill of the underlying construction trench, so deposits 8 and 10, while superficially similar, may have been of quite different origin and date.

4 Finds

Part of a roof tile of probable medieval date was recovered from context 16, construction trench fill, and a mortar sample was retained together with a sample of the stone from the south face of wall 11. After analysis on site these were not retained.

Oxford Archaeological Unit
April 2001

FRONT WALL OF BASEMENT

PLAN 1

36 CORNHARVEST, OXFORD

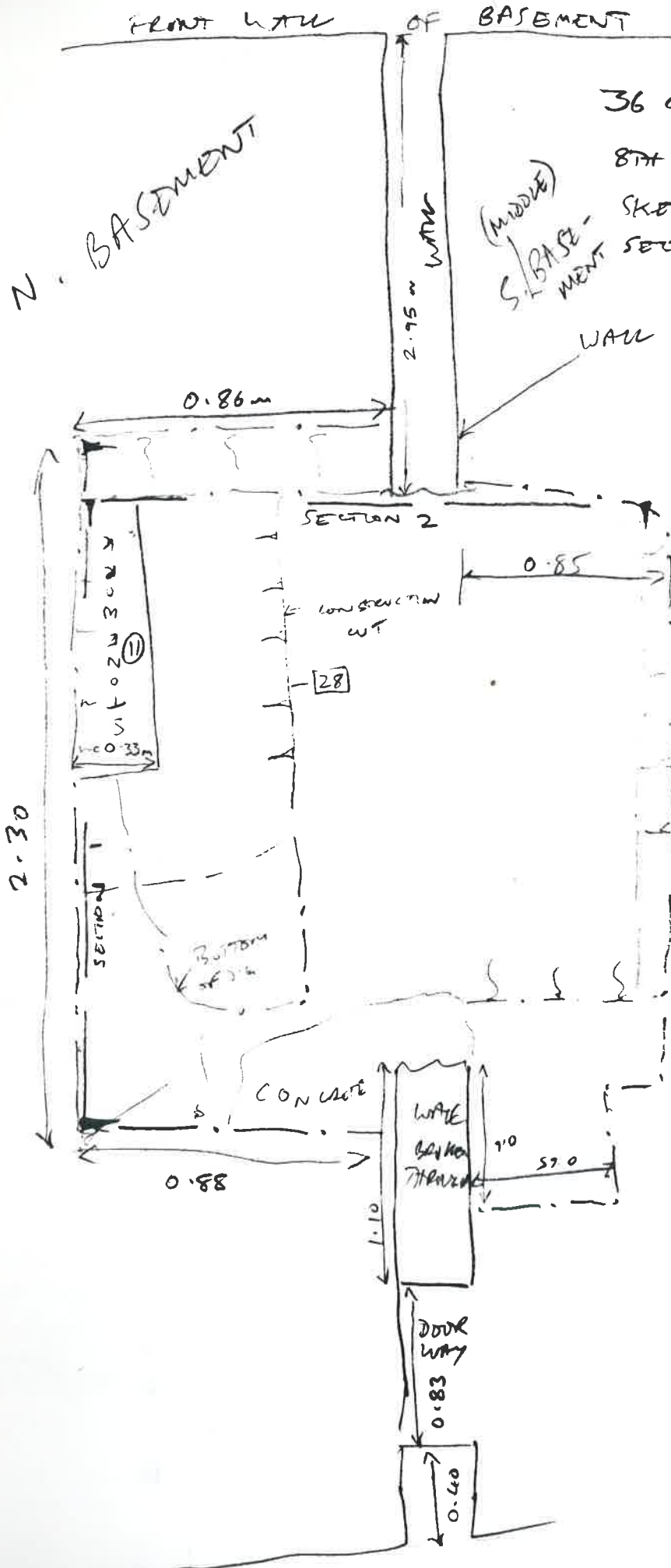
8TH MAY 1998

SKETCH PLAN TO LOCATE SECTIONS 1 + 2

N. BASEMENT

(MIDDLE)
S. BASEMENT

WALL BROKEN THROUGH

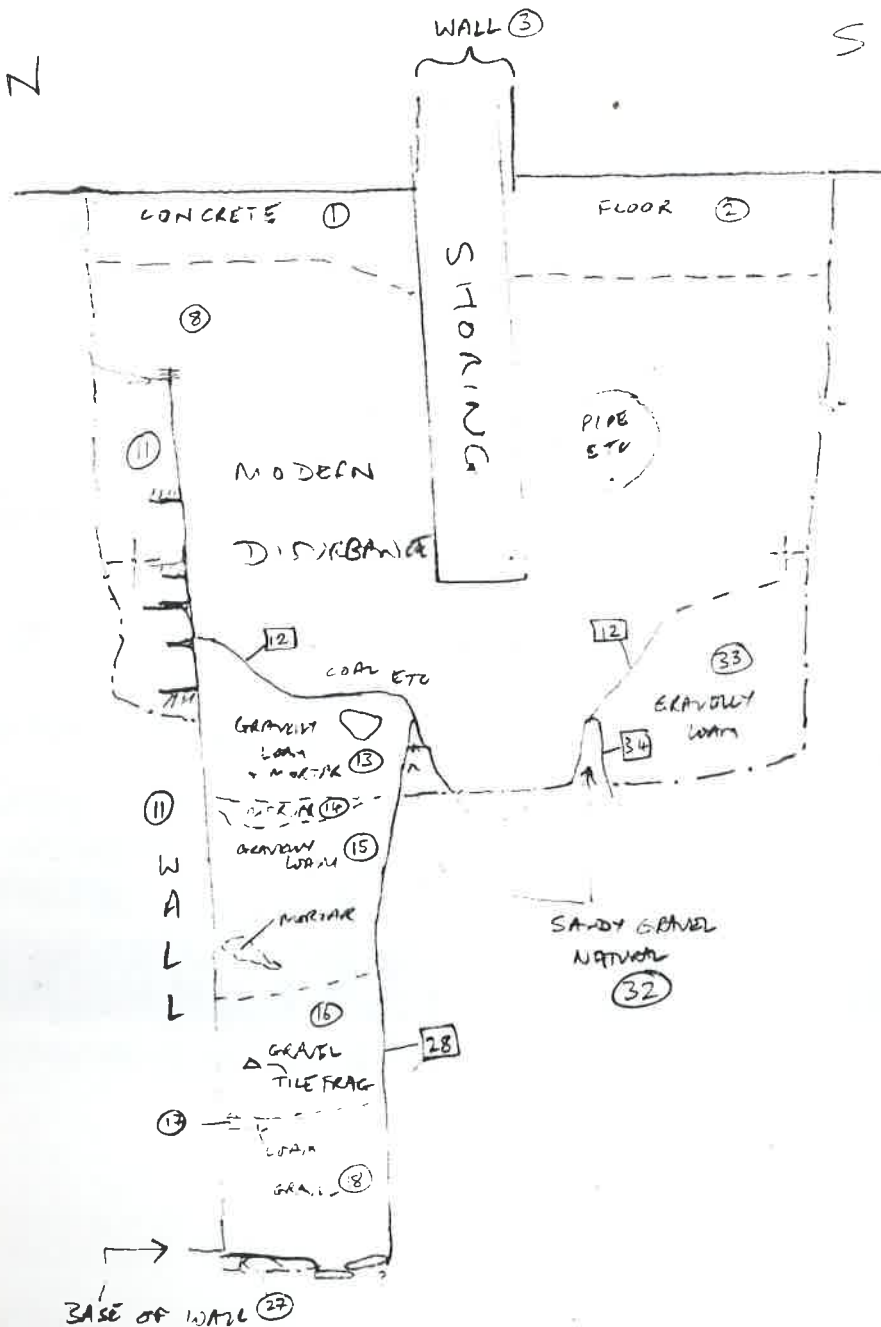


36 CORNMARKEt, OXFORD

8TH MAY 1998

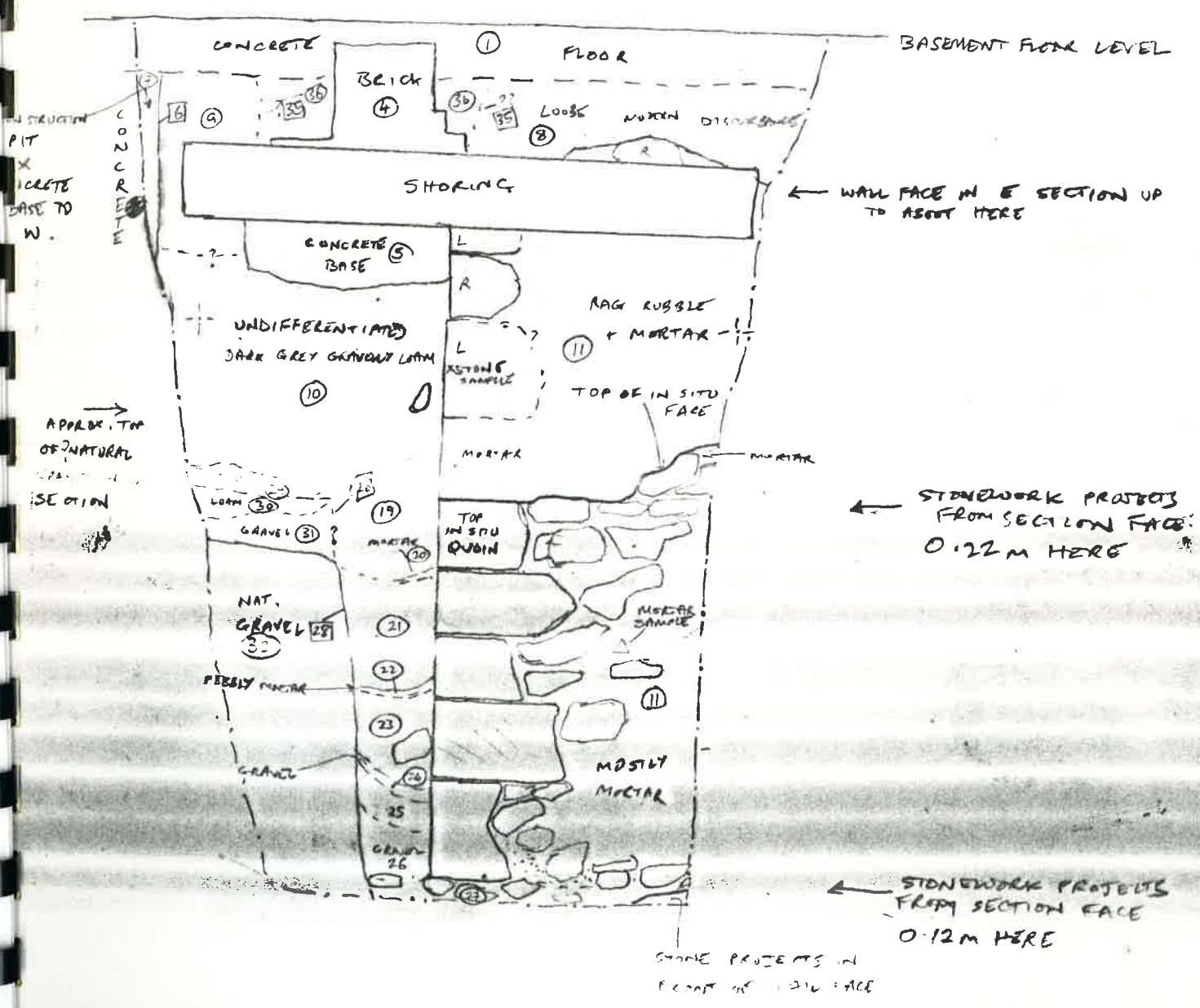
HOLE IN BASEMENT FLOOR, E FACE

SECTION 2 11:20



36 CORNMARKEt, OXFORD 8TH MAY 1998
 W HOLE IN BASEMENT FLOOR, N FACE E

SECTION 1 1:20





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