

High Street Oxford



Archaeological Watching Brief Report



April 2007

Client: Jacobs

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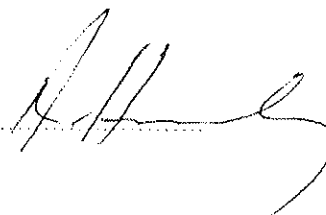
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ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF REPORT

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SUMMARY

In February 2007 Oxford Archaeology recorded three test pits during the digging of a trench for a new drain located between Longwall Street and Magdalen Bridge at the south eastern end of High Street, Oxford (NGR SP 520 061). This work was commissioned by Jacobs and formed part of a watching brief being carried out by them on a programme of road improvements. The watching brief recorded a road surface and associated stone built culvert and manhole that are likely to have formed part of the improvements known to have been made to Magdalen Bridge and High Street during the 1770s. A wall foundation was also recorded that could not be dated beyond being earlier than the road surface, but which may have been the footings of an enclosure wall belonging to the 13th century St John's Hospital, which stood on the site of Magdalen College.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Location and scope of work

1.1.1 In February 2007 Oxford Archaeology (OA) recorded three test pits during the digging of a trench for a new drain located between Longwall Street and Magdalen Bridge at the south eastern end of High Street, Oxford (NGR SP 520 061, Fig. 1). This work was commissioned by Jacobs and formed part of a watching brief being carried out by them on a programme of road improvements.

1.2 Geology and topography

- 1.2.1 The site is situated on the 1st gravel terrace, c 20 m from the western bank of the River Cherwell and c 1 km north of the confluence of the river with the River Thames.
- 1.2.2 The site lies at c 58.5 m OD on ground which has been built up and now slopes upward toward Magdalen Bridge to the south-east.

2 PROJECT AIMS AND METHODOLOGY

2.1 Aims

2.1.1 The aims of the watching brief were:

- To identify and record the presence/absence, extent, condition, quality and date of archaeological remains in the areas affected by the development.
- To make available the results of the archaeological investigation.

2.2 Methodology

2.2.1 All archaeological features were planned at a scale of 1:20 and where excavated their sections drawn at a scale of 1:20. All excavated features were photographed using

colour slide and black and white print film. A general photographic record of the work was made. Recording followed procedures detailed in the *OAU Fieldwork Manual* (ed. D Wilkinson, 1992).

3 RESULTS

3.1 Description of deposits

- 3.1.1 The trench for the new drain was excavated along the middle of High Street and was found to follow the line of an 18th century culvert, which was recorded in detail at three locations (Test pits 1-3, Fig. 2).

Test pit 1 (Fig. 3)

- 3.1.2 Test Pit 1 comprised a section of the pipe trench measuring 3.4 m x 1.0 m. Excavation terminated at formation level, at a depth of 1.8 m (56.24 m OD) without reaching the base of the culvert. The culvert (7) was of dry stone construction, made from roughly hewn blocks of limestone (Fig. 2, section). It consisted of two parallel side walls 0.70 m apart and at least 0.60 m high with a barrelled roof. The barrel was constructed of particularly large pieces of stone measuring up to 0.36 x 0.36 x 0.30 m, with smaller stone wedged between them. The lowest fill encountered during excavation of the culvert was a light grey sandy silt at least 0.12 m thick (11), which was overlain by a layer of more gritty material with red mottling and 0.30 m thick (10). Above this was a thin layer of dark grey silt (9) and an uppermost fill of gritty brownish grey sandy silt 0.30 m thick (8). Toward the south-eastern end of the test pit was a repair to the south-western side of the culvert, constructed from brick and a hard light grey mortar. A deposit of brick and stone rubble observed immediately to the south-west of the test pit may be the back-fill of a pit dug to access the culvert during this repair.
- 3.1.3 The culvert was overlain by a layer of light grey gravel and sand (6) that had been used as make up for a well-made road surface (5). A glass seal from a wine bottle from Magdalen College bearing the date 1763 (Plate 1) was recovered from layer 6. The road was only exposed in the north-eastern face of the test pit and comprised a layer of limestone blocks and smaller pitched stones, on which was a surface layer of flat limestone blocks.
- 3.1.4 Road surface 5 was overlain by a layer of gravelly sand made ground 0.50 m thick (4) associated with the current tarmac road surface (1). The made ground was cut by a modern feature of uncertain form and function (3), which truncated the road surface.

Test pit 2 (Fig. 4)

- 3.1.5 Test Pit 2 measured 2.4 m x 2.0 m and was excavated to a maximum depth of 1.6 m (56.38 m OD). The earliest deposit encountered was a layer of greenish-grey sandy silt (28) encountered at a depth of 0.86 m (57.12 m OD). This was cut by a foundation trench and the construction cut for the culvert.

- 3.1.6 The foundation trench (22) was aligned NW-SE and extended beyond the test pit in both directions. It measured 0.4 m wide and 0.35 m deep and contained an irregularly coursed dry-stone foundation (21) constructed from roughly hewn limestone pieces up to 0.35 x 0.25 x 0.1 m.
- 3.1.7 The foundation was sealed by a layer of purplish-grey sandy gravel 0.08 m thick (20), from which was recovered the base of a pottery vessel dating from *c* 1575-1625/50. This layer, and all the deposits above it, had been truncated by the cut for a modern service trench and survived only along the north-western edge of the test pit. Layer 20 was a make up layer for a road surface (19) constructed from a mixture of pitched limestone pieces up to 0.15 x 0.10 x 0.10 m and larger horizontally laid blocks measuring up to 0.20 x 0.20 x 0.15 m. The road surface was overlain by a layer of greenish-grey sandy silt made ground 0.40 m thick (18) and a make up layer of orange sandy gravel 0.10 m thick (17) for a concrete surface (16). Above this were made ground comprising a layer of orange sand and gravel 0.25 m thick (15) and the modern tarmac road surface.
- 3.1.8 The culvert lay within a construction cut (27) at least 1.1 m wide, the south-western side of which lay beyond the edge of the test pit. The north-eastern side of the part of the culvert exposed in Test Pit 2 comprised a wall of limestone bonded with a soft yellow lime mortar with a barrelled roof that was bonded with the same material. The structure was sealed by a layer of grey sandy clay (25) interpreted as the back-fill of the construction cut, from which a mixed collection of late 18th-century pottery was recovered. The south-western half of the culvert had been truncated by a later cut (14) interpreted as being the trench for a later drain running on a parallel alignment immediately to the south-west of the culvert. During the construction of the later drain a substantial timber measuring 0.2 m square and more than 1.40 m long was inserted to support the surviving part of the barrel of the culvert. A deposit of concrete within the service trench was exposed at the base of the south-western edge of the test pit (23), overlain by a main fill of light grey gravely sand (13).

Test Pit 3 (Fig. 5)

- 3.1.9 Test Pit 3 was located at the south-western end of the area of the watching brief and measured 2.20 x 2.10 m. A dry-stone structure interpreted as a manhole (32) providing access into the culvert for cleaning and maintenance was encountered at a depth of 0.89 m (57.89 m OD). The entrance to the manhole was sealed by a pair of flagstones measuring 0.65 x 0.55 x 0.10 m which were removed to enable the structure to be examined. The entrance was 0.60 m square and comprised a short, steeply sloped shaft 1.2 m deep that gave access to the main culvert. The manhole could not be accessed for more detailed examination due to health and safety issues.
- 3.1.10 A layer of friable bluish grey tarmac-like material (31) extended throughout the test pit around the manhole and sealed some of the stonework, but did not appear to extend over the flagstones, and is presumably a contemporary road surface. This was

overlain by made ground comprising a layer of orange gravel and sand 0.6 m thick (30) and the modern road surface (29).

- 3.1.11 On 30th March a CCTV survey of the manhole was carried out by DBI. This confirmed that the entrance shaft opened directly into the southern side of the barrelled roof of the culvert. This section of the culvert survived in good condition and was a further 1 m in depth from the base of the shaft. Immediately to the north-west of the manhole the culvert had been blocked off by the construction of a stone wall across its interior. In Test Pits 1 and 2, to the north-west of this, the culvert had completely silted up, but south-east of the wall it was open and unobstructed (Plate 2). A small opening was observed in the side wall forming the north-eastern side of the culvert. This appeared to slope downward from the culvert and is therefore likely to be an outlet rather than an inlet.

3.2 Finds

Pottery

- 3.2.1 A total of 15 sherds of pottery weighing 189g were recovered from contexts 20 and 25. These are nearly all of post-medieval date. Overall the pottery assemblage is in a fragmentary condition although the sherds are mostly quite fresh. Context 20 produced the base of an Anglo-Netherlands tin-glazed drug jar (albarello) dating from c 1575-1625/50. This may have originated from a pharmacy or a prosperous household with its own store of medical remedies. Context 25 produced a mixed collection of 18th-century pottery sherds including Chinese porcelain teabowls and a Staffordshire-type Creamware tankard rim dating this assemblage to c 1770-1830. This context also produced two residual late medieval coarseware sherds. The assemblage, overall, probably represents ordinary domestic rubbish.

Glass

- 3.2.2 A circular glass seal from a wine bottle bearing the legend "Mag Col C R 1763" (Plate 1) was recovered from a layer of made ground in Test Pit 1. Mag Col C R refers to Magdalen College common room.

Clay pipe and CBM

- 3.2.3 A small piece of clay pipe stem (weight 1g) was recovered from context 25. This is probably of 18th century date. A very abraded lump of red brick (87g) was recovered from the same context. This can only be assigned a broad 16th- to 18th-century date.

Other finds

- 3.2.4 A total of nine pieces of animal bone weighing 208 g and a single iron nail were also recovered from context 25.

4 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

- 4.1.1 The watching brief recorded a stone culvert extending along the middle of High Street at a depth of *c* 1 m below the current road surface. The culvert is believed to have served as a drain, most likely feeding into the River Cherwell a short distance to the south-west. A limestone road surface overlying the culvert in Test Pits 1 and 2 is likely to be of contemporary construction. The dating of the pottery recovered from the back-fill of the construction cut in Test Pit 2 and the seal from a wine bottle bearing the date 1763 recovered from a deposit of made ground associated with the overlying road surface in Test Pit 1 indicates that the culvert and road surface were constructed during the late 18th century, and is likely to be associated with the improvements known to have been made to Magdalen Bridge and High Street during the 1770s following the establishment of the Paving and Lighting Commissioners by an Act of Parliament after a City petition to Parliament in 1770 and 1771 (Hobson 1962). The pottery assemblage is relatively high status is probably refuse from the adjoining college, along with the seal.
- 4.1.2 A manhole providing access for cleaning and maintenance of the culvert was exposed in Test Pit 3 at the south-western end of the area of the watching brief. The culvert had been deliberately blocked off by construction of a stone wall across the interior immediately north-east of this manhole. To the north-west of the wall the culvert had been allowed to silt up, but toward the river it remained open. A modern cover has been placed over the manhole to preserve access for future investigation.
- 4.1.3 The foundation of a dry stone wall was recorded in Test Pit 2, but no evidence was recovered to indicate its date beyond a stratigraphic relationship demonstrating that it pre-dated the construction of the road surface contemporary with the culvert. The most likely context for a wall in this location would be as part of the complex of the 13th century St John's Hospital, which previously stood on the site of Magdalen College (Sherwood and Pevsner 1974, 149). The foundation is too insubstantial to be part of a large building and is more likely to be the footings of an enclosure wall fronting onto the High Street.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1 ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXT INVENTORY

Test Pit 1

<i>Context</i>	<i>Type</i>	<i>Depth (m)</i>	<i>Width (m)</i>	<i>Comments</i>	<i>Finds</i>	<i>Date</i>
1	Layer	0.30		Modern road surface		
2	Fill	1.05	>1.50	Fill of modern cut		
3	Cut	1.05	>1.50	Modern cut		
4	Layer	0.50		Made ground		
5	Layer	0.40		Road surface		
6	Layer	0.20		Made ground	Glass bottle seal	1763
7	Structure			Culvert		
8	Fill	0.30		Fill of culvert 7		
9	Fill	0.08		Fill of culvert 7		
10	Fill	0.30		Fill of culvert 7		
11	Fill	>0.12		Fill of culvert 7		

Test Pit 2

<i>Context</i>	<i>Type</i>	<i>Depth (m)</i>	<i>Width (m)</i>	<i>Comments</i>	<i>Finds</i>	<i>Date</i>
12	Layer	0.30		Modern road surface		
13	Fill	1.00	>1.00	Fill of service trench 14		
14	Cut	1.00	>1.00	Service trench		
15	Layer	0.25		Made ground		
16	Layer	0.06		Concrete surface		
17	Layer	0.10		Make up for 16		
18	Layer	0.40		Made ground		
19	Layer	0.40		Road surface		
20	Layer	0.08		Make up for 19	Pottery	c 1575-1625/50
21	Structure	0.35	0.40	Wall foundation		
22	Cut	0.35	0.40	Foundation trench		
23	Fill	>0.10		Concrete in service trench 14		

<i>Context</i>	<i>Type</i>	<i>Depth (m)</i>	<i>Width (m)</i>	<i>Comments</i>	<i> Finds</i>	<i>Date</i>
24	Timber	0.20	0.20	Timber support in culvert 26		
25	Layer	0.30		Back-fill of construction cut 27	Pottery, clay pipe, CBM, glass, animal bone, iron nail.	c 1770-1830
26	Structure			Culvert		
27	Cut	>0.80	>1.10	Construction cut for culvert 26		
28	Layer			Greenish grey sandy silt		

Test Pit 3

<i>Context</i>	<i>Type</i>	<i>Depth (m)</i>	<i>Width (m)</i>	<i>Comments</i>	<i> Finds</i>	<i>Date</i>
29	Layer	0.30		Modern road surface		
30	Layer			Made ground		
31	Layer			Tarmac surface		
32	Structure			Manhole		

APPENDIX 2 BIBLIOGRAPHY AND REFERENCES

Hobson, M G 1962 *Oxford Council Acts: 1752–1801*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
 Sherwood, J and Pevsner, N 1974 *The Buildings of England: Oxfordshire*. Penguin Books.
 Wilkinson, D (ed) 1992 *Oxford Archaeological Unit Field Manual*, (First edition, August 1992)

APPENDIX 3 SUMMARY OF SITE DETAILS

Site name: High Street, Oxford

Site code: OXTHIS 07

Grid reference: NGR SP 250 061

Type of watching brief: Three test pits

Date and duration of project: 8/2/2007 - 23/2/2007

Area of site:

Summary of results: The watching brief recorded an 18th century stone culvert and a manhole providing access for maintenance, and an undated wall foundation aligned NW-SE under the middle of High Street.

Location of archive: The archive is currently held at OA, Janus House, Osney Mead, Oxford, OX2 0ES, and will be deposited with Oxfordshire County Museums Service in due course, under the following accession number: OXCMS 2007.14

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Figure 1: Site location

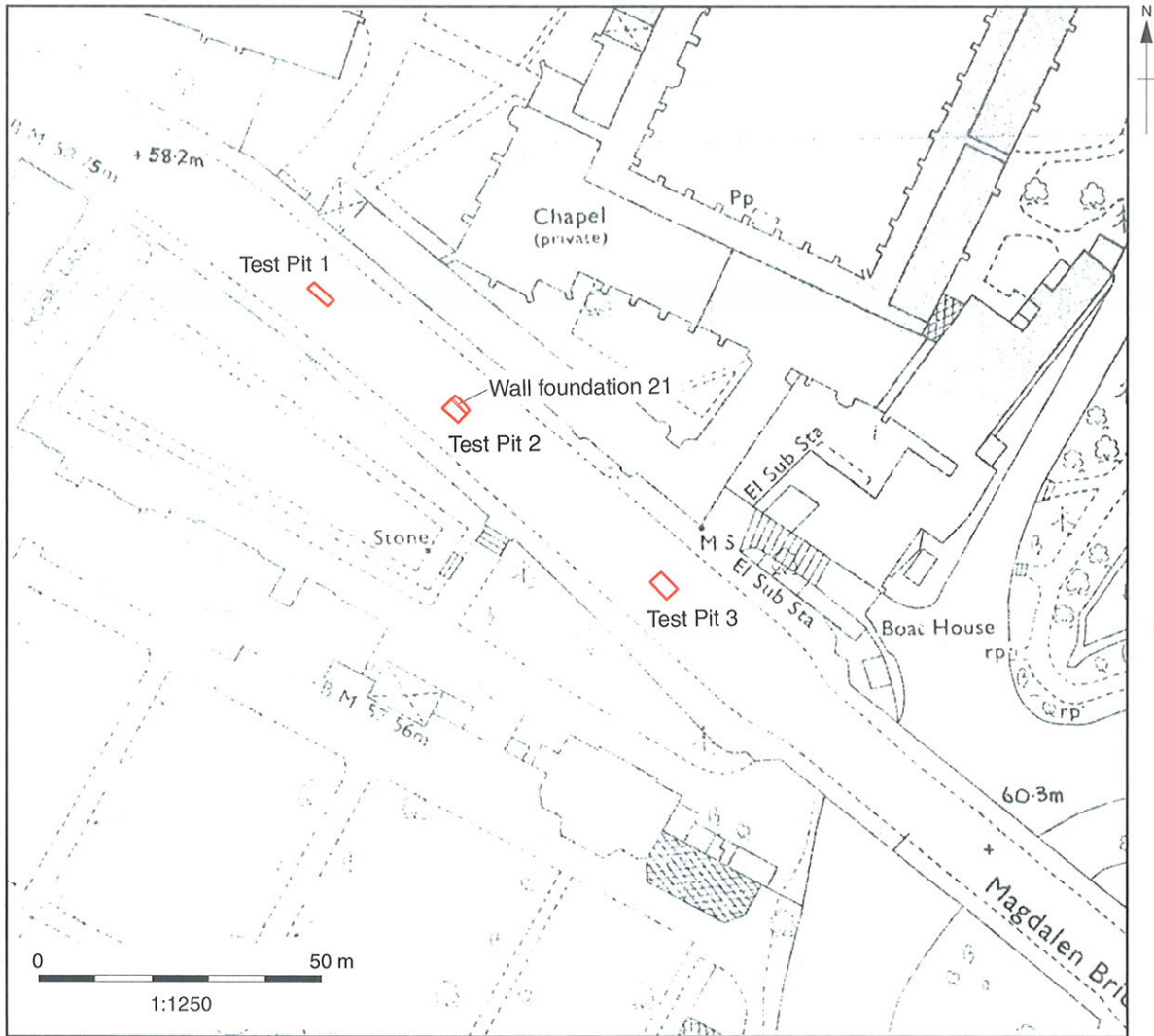


Figure 2: Plan of test pit location



Figure 3: Plan and sections of Test pit 1



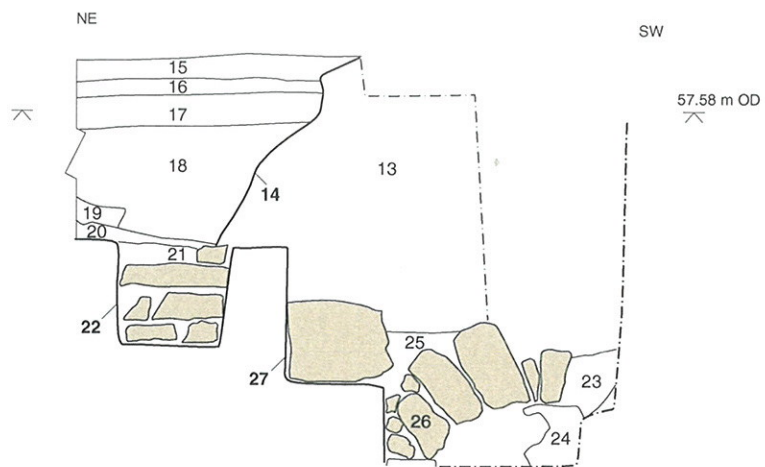
Test pit 1



Key

 Limestone

Section 5



1:25

Figure 4: Plan and section of test pit 2

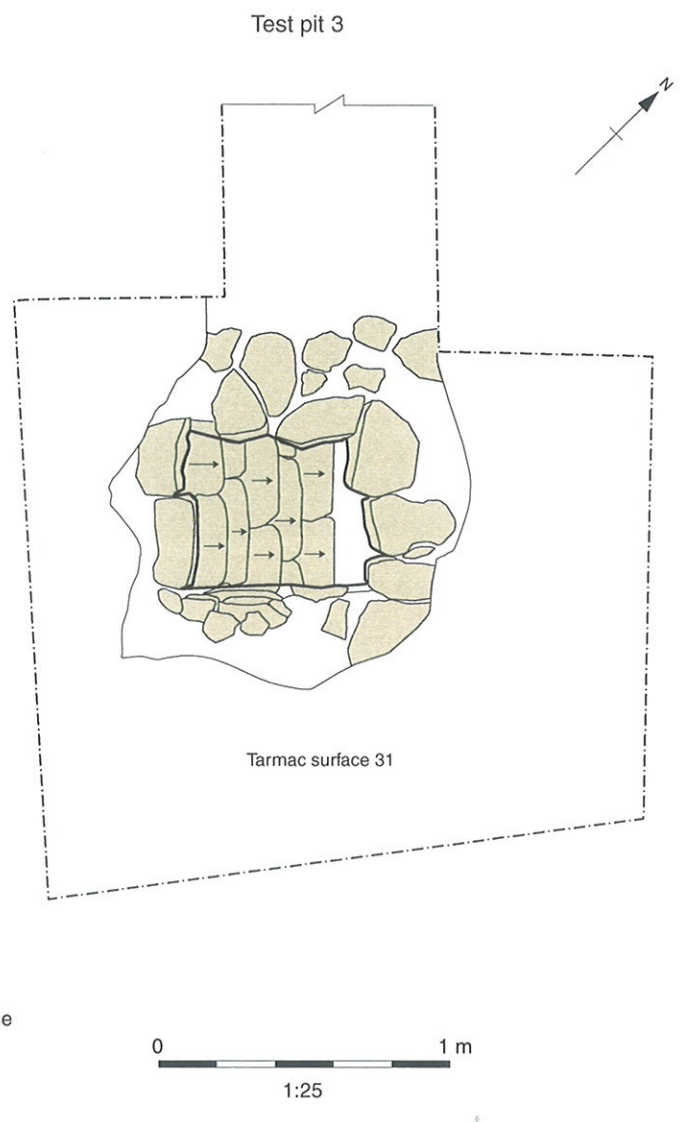


Figure 5: Plan of manhole 32 in Test pit 3



Plate 1: Glass seal from a wine bottle from Magdalen College common room, dated 1763



Plate 2: Interior of the culvert, facing south-east from manhole 32



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