



57 St John's Street Oxford

Archaeological Watching Brief Report



Oxford Archaeology

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Prepared by: James Mumford
Position: Supervisor
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Checked by: Greg Pugh
Position: Contracts Manager
Date: 04th June 2003

Approved by: Nick Shepherd
Position: Head of Fieldwork
Date: 16th June 2003

Signed.....



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Oxford Archaeology

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Janus House
Osney Mead
Oxford OX2 0ES
t: (0044) 01865 263800
f: (0044) 01865 793496

e: info@oxfordarch.co.uk
w: www.oxfordarch.co.uk

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Cover Plate: general view of site from the west during the ground works.

SUMMARY

In January and February 2003 Oxford Archaeology (OA) carried out an archaeological watching brief at 57 St John's Street, Oxford (NGR SP 1035 6618). The work was commissioned by BHP Harwood Architects in advance of construction of new extension with basement at the rear of the property. The watching brief revealed early 19th century construction relating to the building, overlying cultivated soils from the Beaumont gardens.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Location and scope of work

- 1.1.1 In January and February 2003 Oxford Archaeology (OA) carried out an archaeological watching brief at 57 St John's Street, Oxford (Fig. 1). The work was commissioned by BHP Harwood Architects in respect of a planning application for new extension with basement at rear of property (Planning Application No. 02/0441/FUL).
- 1.1.2 An advice note regarding the development was prepared by Brian Durham, the City's Archaeologist on behalf of Oxford City Council.
- 1.1.3 OA prepared a Written Scheme of Investigation (WSI) detailing how it would meet the requirements of the advice note, which was approved by the City's Archaeologist.

1.2 Geology and topography

- 1.2.1 The site lies on the second terrace of the River Thames, at c 64 m OD. The drift geology consists of Pleistocene terrace gravels overlying Oxford clay (Geological Survey Map, Sheet 236). During the excavations at the Sackler Library, the underlying clay was reached at a depth of 58 m OD.

1.3 Archaeological and historical background

- 1.3.1 The archaeological background to the watching brief was prepared for the WSI for the project (OA 2002) and is reproduced below.
- 1.3.2 *Prehistoric:* The site lies just to the north of the confluence of the Thames and the Cherwell. A Neolithic pit was recently found at Mansfield College to the east and a further two are known from the New Chemistry building (Booth and Hayden 2000, 293). Evidence for a Bronze Age barrow cemetery has been found elsewhere in the city at University Parks to the north-east and St Michael's Street to the south (Parkinson et al. 1996) and possibly at Logic Lane to the south-east (Radcliffe 1962). In addition, two barrows were identified on the site of the Sackler Library to the north-east. Chance finds in North Oxford include a Bronze Age palstave and a number of Iron Age coins (Leeds 1939). Probable Iron Age features have been identified, seen as cropmarks in University Parks, and evidence of early, middle and

late Iron Age activity was seen during excavations adjacent to the Parks at the Rex Richards building (Parkinson et al. 1996, 47-8). A putative Bronze Age barrow with 4 inhumations has recently been excavated (April 2002) at the Gene Function site nearby (OA, forthcoming).

- 1.3.3 *Roman*: There is some evidence for settlement in the form of scattered farmsteads in Oxford and the surrounding area (Taylor 1939). The possibility of a settlement nearby is suggested by a quern stone found in St John Street (Manning and Leeds 1921, 252) in the vicinity of the plot of No. 57, and a second from George Street to the south of the site. Excavations at the Radcliffe Science Library, Mansfield College and Oxford's New Chemistry Building, all to the north-east, have revealed evidence of small-scale rural settlement dating from the late 1st to the 4th centuries, consisting mainly of ditched enclosures and field systems. A timber building was found at Mansfield College; seven inhumations were found at the earlier excavations at the nearby Science Library (Booth and Hayden 2000, 301-2, 329). Two sherds of Roman pottery were recovered from excavations in the Ashmolean Museum forecourt.
- 1.3.4 *Anglo-Saxon*: Early and mid-Saxon evidence is rare in the vicinity of the site, with only a few observations and finds known, to the north of the site. A cemetery may have existed at the site of the Radcliffe Infirmary to the north (Dickinson 1976, II, no. 114); the finding of a gold bracteate during the construction of the Civil War defences in St Giles Field, opposite the entrance to the Infirmary, is recorded as an early find (Manning and Leeds 1921, 253), and a bone heddle stick, probably of Saxon date, was found to the north of the Infirmary (Anon. 1938, 168). The late-Saxon town occupying the southern end of the Oxford promontory, and dating from c 900, lay within defences to the south of the site, with earlier evidence of settlement, in the form of a possible ford across the Thames and associated 8th- to 9th-century finds, seen at the southern limit of the medieval town (Blair 1994, 89-92). There is no evidence for a pre-Conquest northern suburb, although two important mid to late-Saxon roads (now Woodstock Road and Banbury Road, converging as St Giles) run north-south towards the ford, immediately to the east of the site (ibid., 88).
- 1.3.5 *Later Medieval*: The medieval period is the first well represented period in the study area, ranging from isolated pottery finds to monastic sites and a royal palace. The most extensive remains are those of Rewley abbey around 550 metres west of the development site, originally founded in 1280. A 300 foot section of the wall and a 15th century doorway remain within the area of this scheduled ancient monument, and the outline of the church and buildings of the unique monastic college have been found prior to being built on by recent developments.
- 1.3.6 The north suburb is well documented from the 13th century, and excavations in the forecourt of the Ashmolean Museum, and within the road, revealed three pits, a cess pit, an oven, and wall foundations from a tenement fronting on to St Giles. The majority of the pottery recovered dated from the 13th and 14th centuries. In addition, to the south of the site, at the rear of tenement blocks on Magdalen Street, 12th-century and 13th-century activity was located. The only coin of the period in the area was a base metal forgery of a Henry V or VI groat, found immediately to the

east of the Randolph Hotel. Other medieval finds include pottery from the area formerly known as 'Brokenhayes' to the south-east (now Gloucester Green), and tree planting pits and a small number of ditches and gullies on the site of the Sackler Library to the south. The development site lies within the precinct of the former palace of Beaumont, built in around 1132, which at its peak consisted of a hall with a porch on its southern entrance, a great chamber, two chapels, a kitchen, at least two chambers, and a cloister. These were no doubt high quality stone buildings, while the roofs of the main buildings at least were probably oak shingles, then perhaps later exchanged for stone. Apart from the single building mentioned above, the precise location of the palace is unknown, though it presumably lay within the field later known as Beaumont. The scale and frequency of royal visits suggests a sizeable establishment, which could almost have been on the scale of Clarendon Palace near Salisbury if equally spread out across the large site. However, the extent of the Whitefriar's buildings may give some indication of its location and size. In 1318, Edward II gave his 'manor of Oxford' to the Carmelite friars, and it continued to grow in size, for example the grant of land in 1401 from Henry IV, so the friars could enlarge their 'long and narrow house'. By the time of its surrender in 1538 the friary consisted of the friary buildings, two houses and gardens, and an entry from Magdalen Street; the two houses mentioned may be the same as those granted to the Carmelites at the same time as the palace, between the road near Gloucester College and the palace.

- 1.3.7 The most significant discoveries were those of Herbert Hurst, a local archaeologist working at the end of the 19th century, who records his observations of finding skeletons in Beaumont Street, and writes of the finds in 1829: *'one distinctly remembers the careful inspection of several heaps of bones, made one evening in 1829, by myself and school-fellows in search of rings which were rumoured to have been buried with the corpses that were being exhumed'*. He also drew a plan showing the location of the burials at the end of the century, and quotes a letter from a former occupant of No. 15 Beaumont Street in 1890: *'on enlarging the area for the underground larder window, a skeleton most perfect was dug up... there were no houses in those days on the north side of the street, or any in St. Johns Street... when the houses opposite to mine were built, many bones and skeletons were dug up, and when the sewer was made in the middle of the street I heard that more were found'*. The most obvious interpretation of these burials is that they came from the Whitefriars' cemetery (and thus outside and eastwards of the cluster of buildings on Loggan's map). If this were so, then the main buildings of the palace and friary may in fact be located at the west end of Beaumont Street. Burials, presumably of the same period, were observed during construction of the Oxford Repertory Theatre in 1938 and in the construction trenches for the playhouse theatre extension in December 1973, c 140 metres to the south of the development site. The eastern limit of the cemetery has not been defined.
- 1.3.8 *Post-medieval*: The post-medieval period is also well represented with a good diversity of sites within the study area, including the civil war defences to the north of the site. The majority of the sites and finds however show a continuity between

medieval and post-medieval periods, with many pits containing pottery of both periods, for example, the excavations in the Ashmolean Museum forecourt. Excavations on the development site in 1949, whilst extending the hotel, recovered post-medieval pottery and a wine bottle. To the south in Victoria Court, off George Street excavation in the 1930s recovered a number of clay pipes, possibly from a manufacturing workshop.

2 PROJECT AIMS AND METHODOLOGY

2.1 Aims

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

2.2 Methodology

- 2.2.1 The site for the new basement and extension was cleared and then excavated by a mini excavator using a ditching bucket to top of gravel. The gravel was excavated using a toothed bucket (Fig. 2).
- 2.2.2 All archaeological features were planned at a scale of 1:50 and where excavated their sections drawn at scales 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 natural yellowish brown gravel (115) was exposed at 1.10 m below the existing ground surface. This had been overlain by a layer of 0.4 m thick reddish brown silty clay (106) Prehistoric subsoil and a 0.4 m layer of grey brown sandy clay (102) garden soil. The Prehistoric subsoil (106) was sealed below dark grey brown silty clay (105) garden soil (Fig. 4).
- 3.1.2 The garden soil (102) had been cut by a linear cut (110) with vertical sides and flat base. It measured 4.5 m x 0.6 m x 1.9 m with a 19th-century brick lined culvert (118) measuring 0.4m wide and 0.14 m height in its base. A series of three fills were recorded back filling the cut (110). These were a compact disturbed gravel (112), overlain by a reddish brown silty clay (111) sealed below a dark grey brown silty clay (113). This fill (113) and garden soil layer (105) had been cut a foundation trench (107) with vertical sides and flat base. It measured a 1 m x 0.6 m x 0.6 m and was filled by dry stone construction of limestone fragments (109) three courses high and was a base for a feature at the rear of the property. This feature had been abutted by two mortar surfaces (101 and 104) of creamy white lime mortar approximately

0.05 m thick. The surface (104) was overlain by a loose creamy white lime mortar (103) with gravel inclusions. All these surfaces had been cut by the robber cut (117) of stone work (109), which measured 0.7 m wide and 0.2 m in depth. It was filled by a reddish brown silty clay (108) (Figs 3 and 4).

- 3.1.3 To the north of mortar surface (104), it had been cut by a robber trench for old boundary wall (116) with vertical sides, but base below impact level. It measured 2.7 m x 0.6 m x 0.6 m and filled by dark grey brown silty clay (114). These were all sealed below a 0.45 m thick layer of grey brown silty clay (100) topsoil and demolition mixed material (Fig. 4).

3.2 Finds

- 3.2.1 Two abraded fragments of CBM were recovered from the mortar surface (104) and were dated to the 19th century.

3.3 Palaeo-environmental remains

- 3.3.1 No deposits suitable for environmental sampling were identified during the watching brief.

4 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

- 4.1.1 The results from the watching brief showed cultivated soils from the old Beaumont garden's, which had been cut by early 19th-century features relating to the construction of the houses along St John's Street. These were part of a footing and two mortar surfaces, one with a repair and could be part of a early outbuilding extension at the rear of the property. These overlaid a brick culvert contemporary to the construction of the property.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1 ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXT INVENTORY

<i>Context</i>	<i>Type</i>	<i>Depth</i>	<i>Width</i>	<i>Length</i>	<i>Comments</i>	<i>Finds</i>
100	Layer				Demolition/Construction layer	
101	Surface	0.05 m			Mortar surface	
102	Layer	0.40 m			Garden soil	
103	Surface	0.10 m			repair to surface	
104	Surface	0.05 m			Mortar surface	CBM
105	Layer	0.40 m			Garden soil	
106	Layer	0.40 m			Oxford supra natural	
107	Cut	0.60 m	0.60 m	1 m	Plinth ?	
108	Fill				Fill of 117	
109	Structure	0.60 m	0.60 m	1 m	Masonry	
110	Cut	1.90 m	0.60 m	4.50 m	Cut for culvert	
111	Fill				Fill of 110	
112	Fill				Fill of 110	
113	Fill				Fill of 110	
114	Fill				Fill of 116	
115	Layer				Natural gravel	
116	Cut	0.60 m	0.60 m	2.70 m	Robber trench	
117	Cut	0.20 m	0.70 m	1 m	Robber trench	
118	Structure				Brick Culvert	

APPENDIX 2 BIBLIOGRAPHY AND REFERENCES

OA 1992 Fieldwork Manual (ed. D Wilkinson, first edition August 1992)

Oxford Archaeology Occasional Paper, 2001

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APPENDIX 3 SUMMARY OF SITE DETAILS

Site name: 57 St John's Street, Oxford, Oxfordshire

Site code: OX57JO 02

Grid reference: NGR SP 1035 6618

Type of watching brief: Ground work for the construction of new extension with basement at rear of property.

Date and duration of project: A total of four visits from 24/1/2003 to 5/2/2003.

Area of site: 5.5 m x 7 m

Summary of results: Early 19th century construction relating to the building, overlying cultivated soils from the Beaumont gardens.

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 2002.211

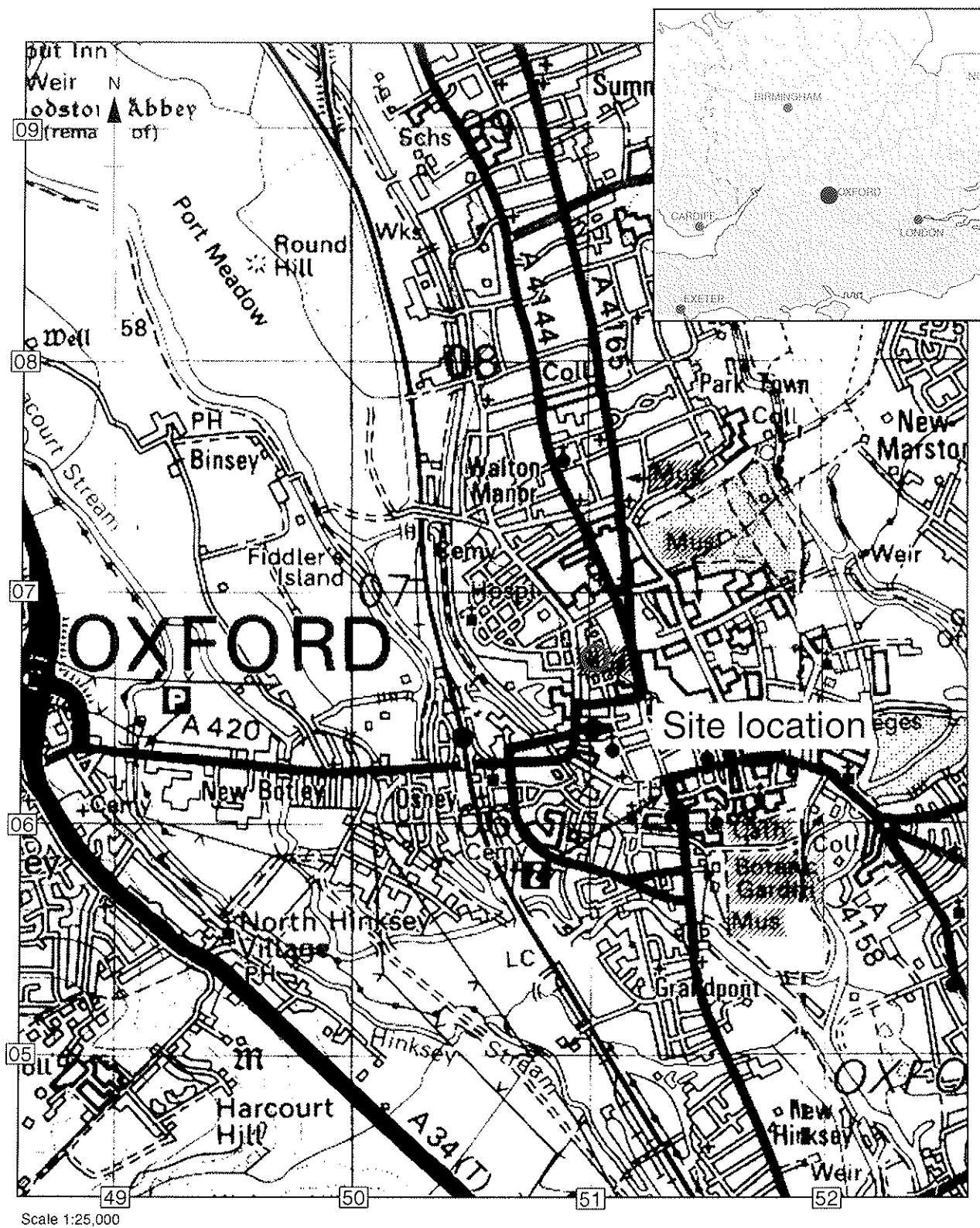


Figure 1: Site location

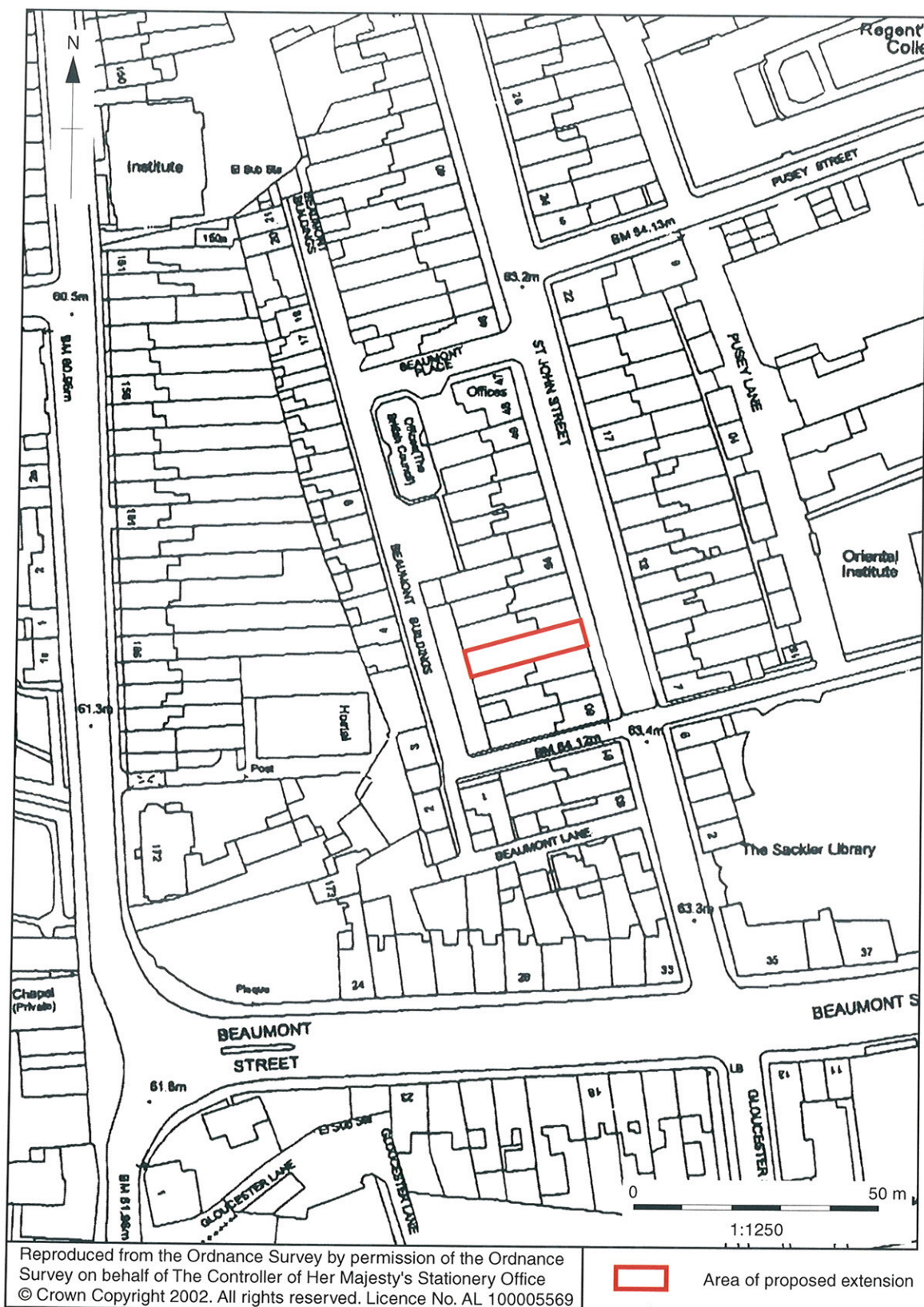


Figure 2: Site location plan

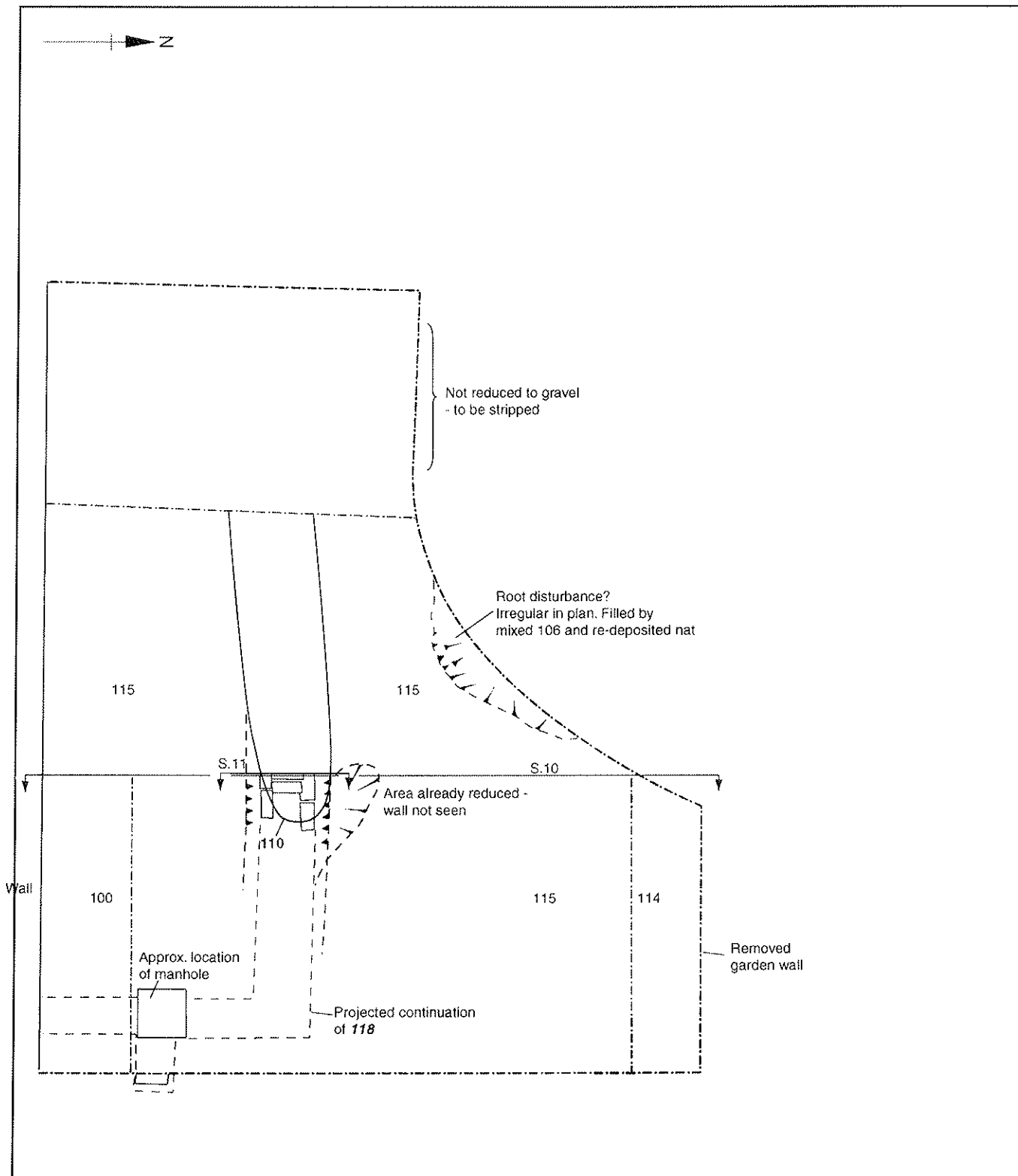


Figure 3: Architectural plan showing plans and section

Sections 11 and 12

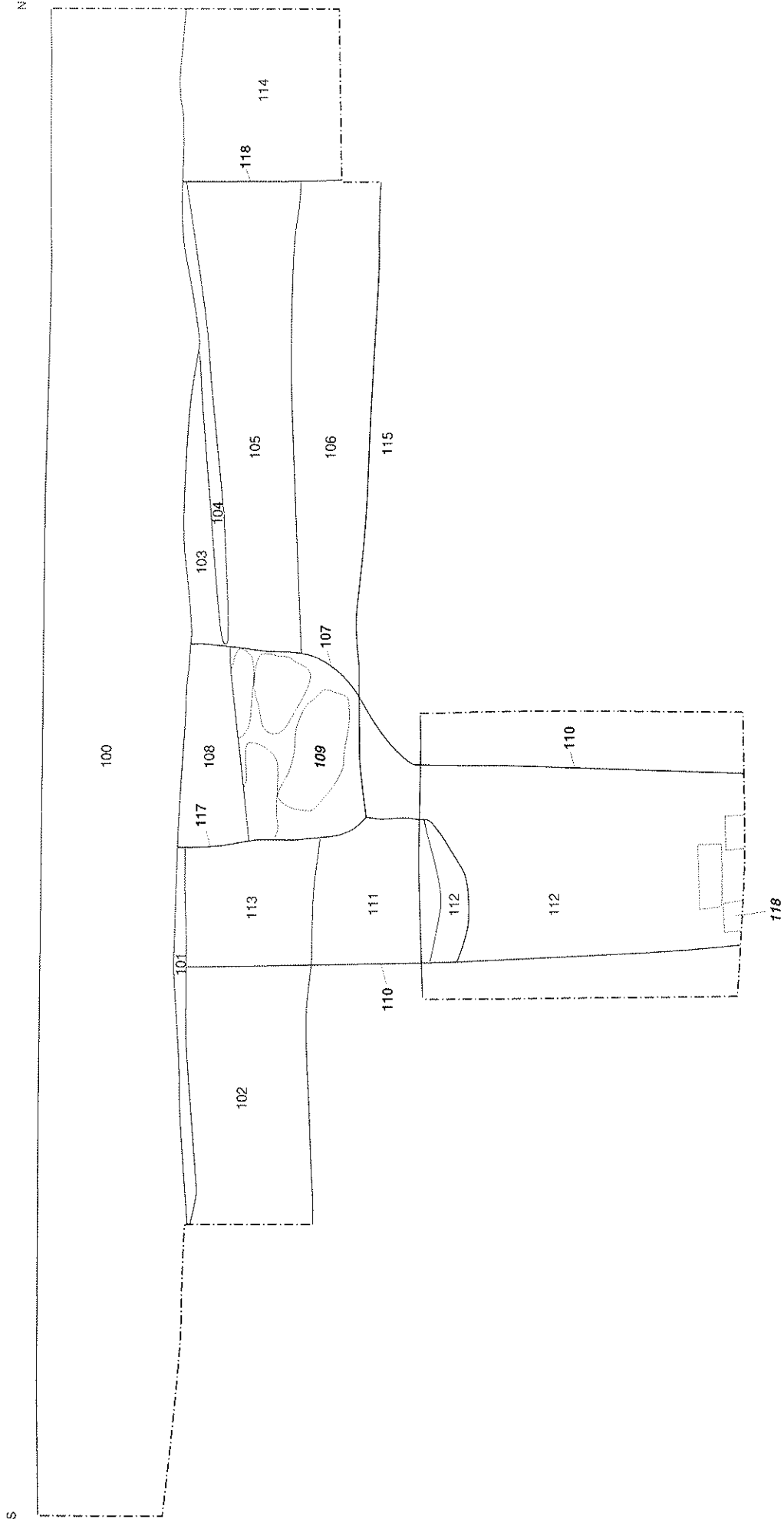

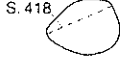









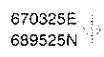
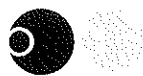


Figure 4: Section 11 and 12

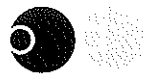
	Section line and number
	Interior section line and number
	Limit of excavation
	Sondage / Interior limit of excavation
	Fill line and number
	Cut line and number
	Structure number
	Unclear boundary
	Stones
	Hachures indicate inclination of slope inside excavated feature
	Levels
	Grid point



Oxford Archaeology

Janus House
Osney Mead
Oxford OX2 0ES

t: (0044) 01865 263800
f: (0044) 01865 793496
e: info@oxfordarch.co.uk
w: www.oxfordarch.co.uk



Oxford Archaeology North

Storey Institute
Meeting House Lane
Lancaster LA1 1TF

t: (0044) 01524 541000
f: (0044) 01524 848606
e: lancinfo@oxfordarch.co.uk
w: www.oxfordarch.co.uk



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