

Vale of White Horse District Council

**Disabled Access Ramp, The Guildhall, The Vineyard,
Abingdon.**

NGR SU 4990 9725

ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF REPORT

Oxford Archaeological Unit

September 1999

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Prepared by: *Alan Daulton*

Date: *21/9/99*

Checked by: *Jan R Smith*

Date: *23/9/99*

Approved by: *R. Williams* HEAD OF FIELDWORK

Date: *28/9/1999*

Oxford Archaeological Unit

September 1999

Summary

In April 1999 the Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) undertook a watching brief at the Guildhall, The Vineyard, Abingdon, Oxfordshire (NGR SU 4990 9725). No archaeological features were seen; a quantity of finds were retrieved from demolition layers. Red brick rubble, probably from a terrace of houses which formerly occupied the site, was also seen.

1 Introduction (Figs 1 & 2)

The development proposal comprised the construction of a new ramp providing access for the disabled to the Guildhall, Abingdon. An archaeological watching brief was required in accordance with PPG 16 as the site is located within the Vineyard, an area of proven archaeological significance.

The watching brief was commissioned by the Vale of White Horse District Council. Oxfordshire County Council Archaeological Services did not prepare a brief for the job, however the fieldwork and reporting strategies were agreed verbally with the Deputy County Archaeologist.

2 Background

The development site lies on the southern edge of the Vineyard, closest to Vineyard areas 4 and 5, and on the north-western edge of the site of Abingdon Abbey. The archaeological and historical background to the Vineyard and the Abbey has been extensively described elsewhere (OAU 1998), and only a summary of the relevant portions is included here.

The Abbey of St Mary was founded in 675 by Hean, and refounded by Aethelwold, a monk of Glastonbury, in the 10th century. Aethelwold also built a new church, new conventual buildings, the Abbey mills on Thames Street and had the Abbey Millstream dug for their water supply. Monastic foundations are commonly associated with royal residences. The Chronicles of Abingdon Abbey record the unlawful construction of such a residence on Andersey Island in the 8th century, with the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle recording a visit there by Athelstan in 926, while attending a council of the Witan (Cox 1986, 102-3 and 239).

The Abbey Grounds includes the core of the medieval Abbey of St Mary, including the site of the church and cloisters. The Abbey was almost entirely robbed out after its Dissolution in 1538, and nothing of the church and cloisters remains above ground.

The Guildhall itself, built in the late 1960s, is located on the site of a former terrace of Victorian houses and shops demolished in 1938, and which enclosed Roysse's Court, and ran east from immediately behind the former police station on Stert Street, adjacent to the Abbey Gatehouse. The Gatehouse was built in around 1450 on the site of the original structure. After the Dissolution, it served as the Borough's prison from 1556, until it was converted into Abingdon's Masonic Temple during the reign of George IV.

The terrace in turn was located in the vicinity of the site of St John's Hospital, between the Inner Court and the Base Court of the Abbey Precinct, where much of the activity associated with the day to day running of the Abbey took place. St John's moved from this location to the Vineyard in 1800, although one building from the 12th century hospital still survives in the present day Roysse Court, and is one of Abingdon's oldest buildings.

3 Aims

The aims of the watching brief were to identify any archaeological remains exposed on site during the course of the works, and to record these to established OAU standards (Wilkinson 1992), in order to secure their preservation by record.

4 Methodology

The watching brief was undertaken by means of five separate inspection visits; all excavation was by Kubota mini-digger supplemented by occasional hand digging and use of a pneumatic drill.

Within the constraints imposed by health and safety considerations the deposits exposed were cleaned, inspected and recorded in plan, section and by colour slide and monochrome print photography. Written records were also made on proforma sheets. Soil description utilises standard charts for the approximation of percentage of inclusion types in soil deposits.

5 Results (Figs 3 & 4)

The ramp was constructed on a grass verge immediately outside and to the north-east of the main entrance to the Guildhall. After levelling, three trenches aligned east-west were excavated by Kubota mini-digger; these trenches were then linked by two shorter north-south trenches at either end of the excavation. After archaeological inspection the trenches were filled with concrete prior to the construction of the ramp itself.

The earliest deposit seen on the site was a friable dark grey/brown silty clay, (7), containing broken tile, pot, bone and fragments of clay pipe, with 10% mixed fine-coarse subrounded gravel and small stones/pebbles. Only 0.30 m of this deposit was visible throughout the eastern end of the site. As seen in section 2 this deposit contained a lens of yellow sand and was sealed by (8), a loose orange sandy gravel with 50% mixed fine-coarse subrounded small gravel, 0.05 m thick. Both these deposits were interpreted as makeup layers, as (8) was sealed by (9), a yellow/grey concrete surface 0.20 m thick.

Deposits (7), (8) and (9) were cut by [6], a linear feature with near vertical sides. It was visible to a depth of 0.60 m within the confines of the trench; this feature represented the foundation trench for the Guildhall. The fill of [6] was (5), a friable dark brown clayey silt with 15% mixed rounded stones and a mixture of fine-coarse subangular and subrounded gravel measuring > 0.20 m thick, a very mixed deposit backfilling the Guildhall construction trench.

Sealing these deposits and features was a friable yellow/orange silty clay with 10% mixed fine-coarse subangular gravel, (2), interpreted as a make-up deposit for the sloping grass verge fronting the Guildhall. This in turn was sealed by (1), topsoil for the lawn.

As seen in section 3, the silty clay (7) was cut by [11], a box cut 0.07 m deep by 0.25 m wide, and containing a shallow wall [10] constructed from orange/red bricks measuring 0.11 m by 0.22 m by 0.07 m; the bricks were neither frogged nor stamped. The wall comprised three courses, one brick wide with all sides faced and was bonded with a creamy yellow gritty concrete mortar. The wall in total measured 0.22 m wide by 0.25 m high, and was interpreted as a garden wall associated with the concrete surface (9). Both (9) and [10] were sealed by subsoil (2), as before.

The earliest deposit seen in section 1, in the south-western portion of the site, was (5), construction trench backfill as described above. It was sealed by a loose yellow/white silty sand with 20% rubble, cement and mortar, (4), measuring 0.30 m at its thickest point, interpreted as a makeup layer. This was sealed to the west by a friable dark blue/grey silty clay with 50% mixed fine-coarse subangular gravel and rubble, (3), 0.60 m thick; this appeared to be a moist unbonded cement mix used as make-up beneath the main access steps to the Guildhall. Both (3) and (4) were sealed by (2), subsoil as described above. (2) was sealed by (1), topsoil as described above.

6 Finds

All finds retrieved came from context (7) and comprised 11 potsherds, 6 pieces of bone, 1 piece of tile, 2 pieces of shell and 8 pieces of clay pipe. Context (7) had clearly been disturbed in the recent past, and none of the finds are thought to be *in-situ*.

Clay Pipe.

All pieces retrieved were plain and undecorated and comprised of one complete bowl, two bowls with stem fragments with the remainder being stem fragments. All were dated to the late 19th/early 20th centuries.

Animal Bone.

All pieces retrieved originate from cattle, and some bear evidence of butchering. It is possible that they are related to use of the area, immediately to the north of the site, as a cattle market prior to its redevelopment, or derive from domestic/occupation contexts from previous use of the site itself for terraced housing, and have been disturbed and redeposited.

Pottery.

All pieces retrieved were glazed and comprised three rim sherds, one base and a handle, the remainder were body fragments. All were dated to the 16th/17th centuries.

7 Environmental results

Due to the absence of any significant archaeology, no environmental soil samples were taken.

8 Discussion

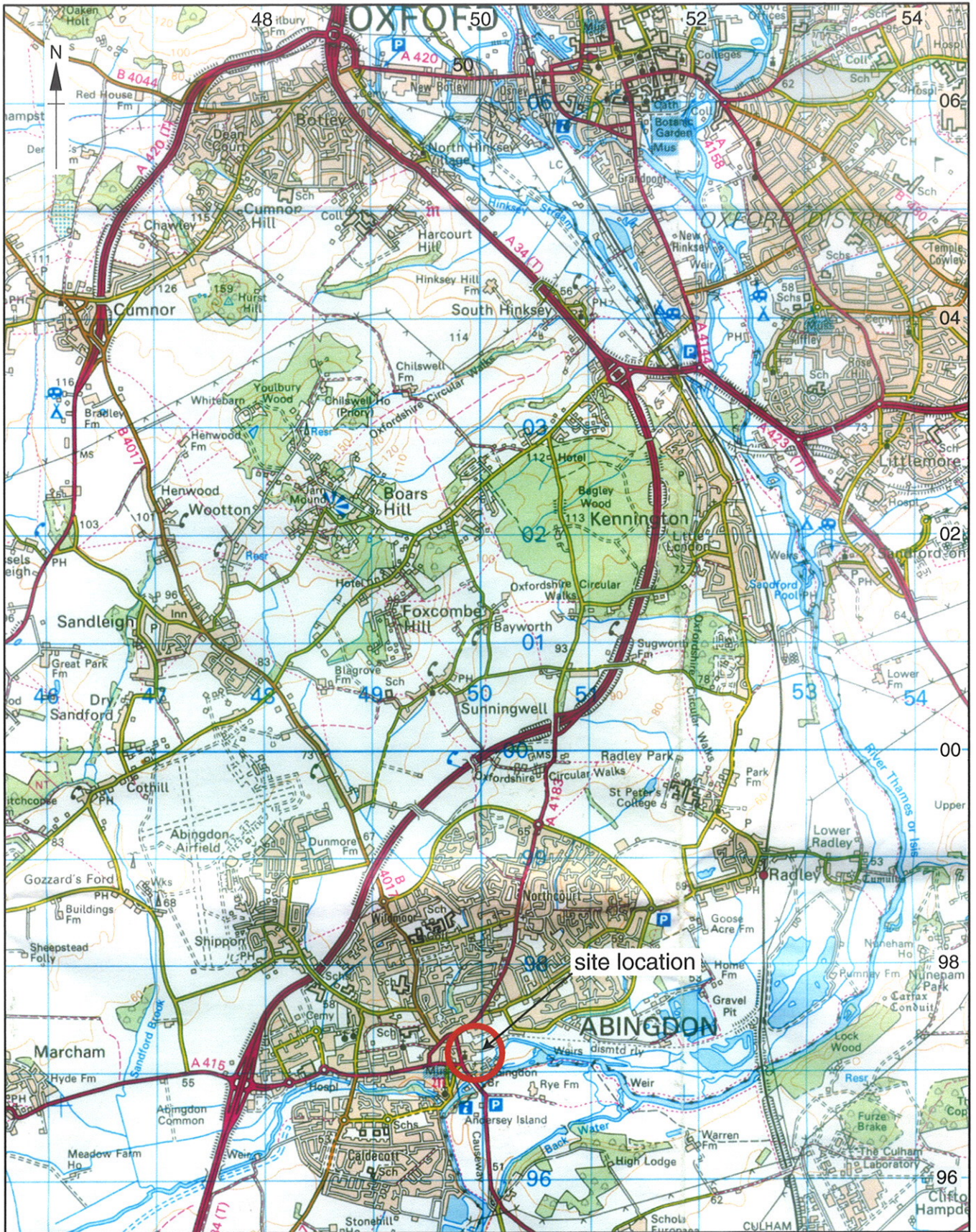
The watching brief did not locate archaeology of any significance; none of the deposits examined predated the 19th-century and appeared to be confined to activity related to the demolition of the terrace of shops and houses previously occupying the site, and to the construction of the Guildhall. Those 16th-century finds retrieved are thought likely to have been disturbed and redeposited during this activity.

References.

Cox, M 1986 *The Story of Abingdon* Leach's the Printers (Abingdon).

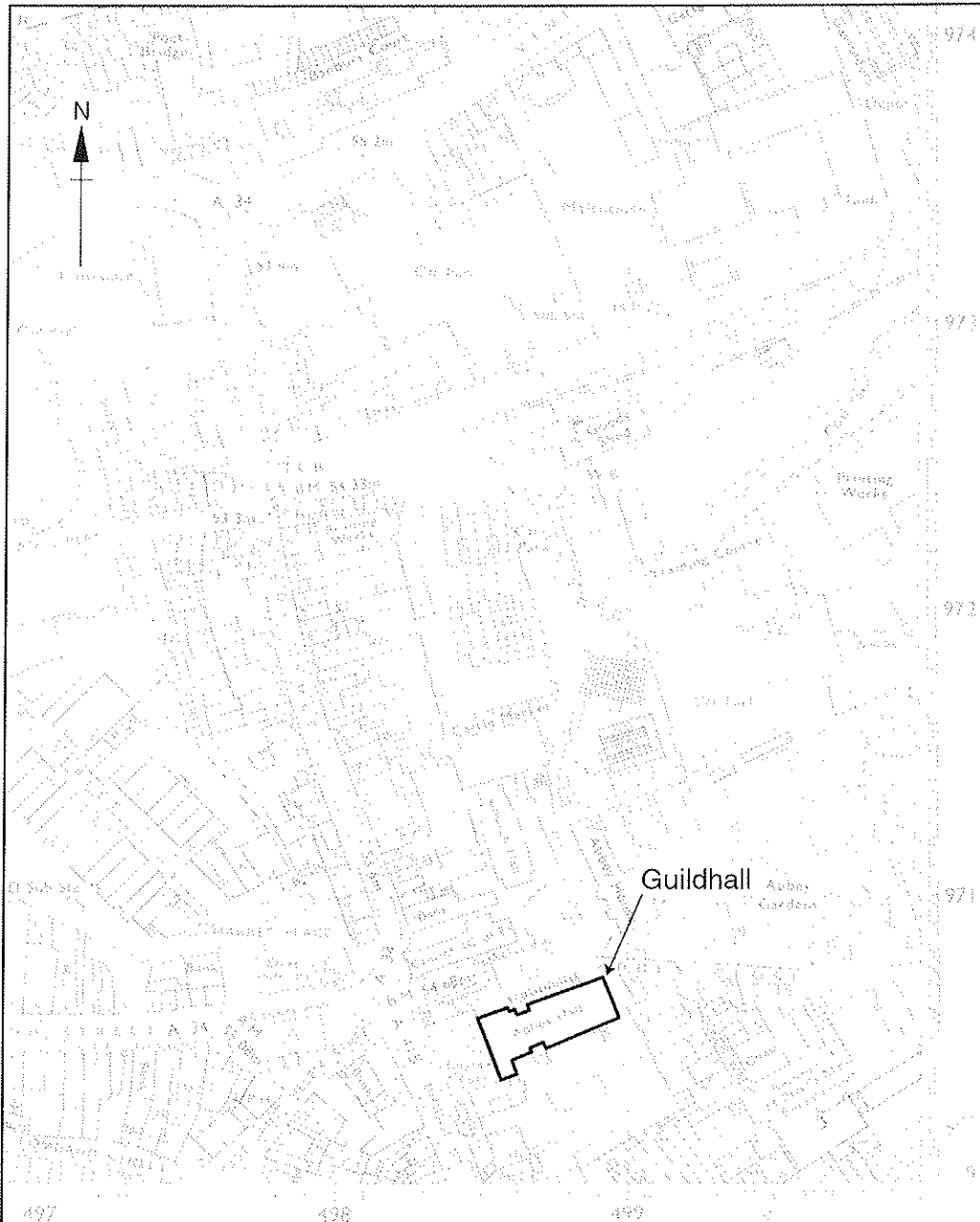
OAU September 1998 Abingdon Abbey Gardens and Abbey Meadows-Historical Restoration Management Plan Appendix 1-Archaeological Background to the Study Area.

Wilkinson, D (ed) 1992 Oxford Archaeological Unit Field Manual, (First edition, August 1992).



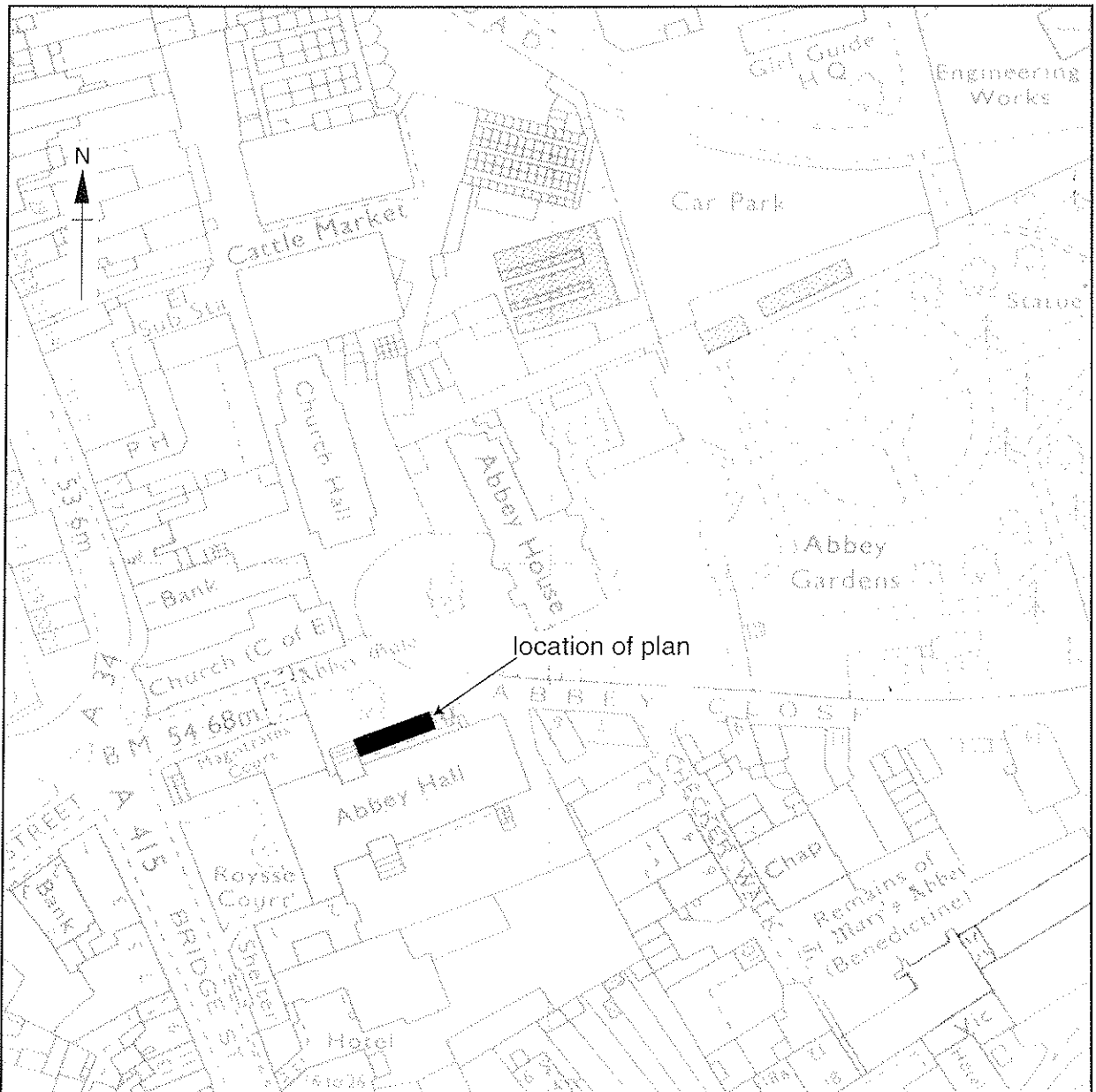
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figure 1: site location



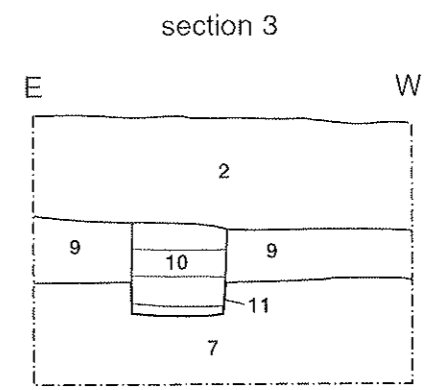
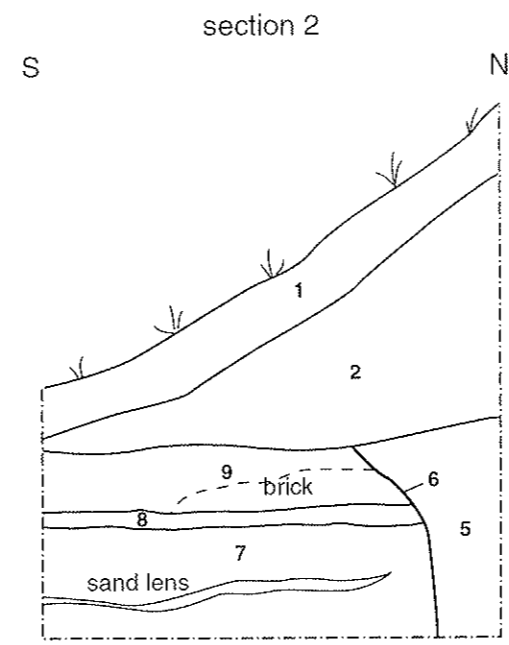
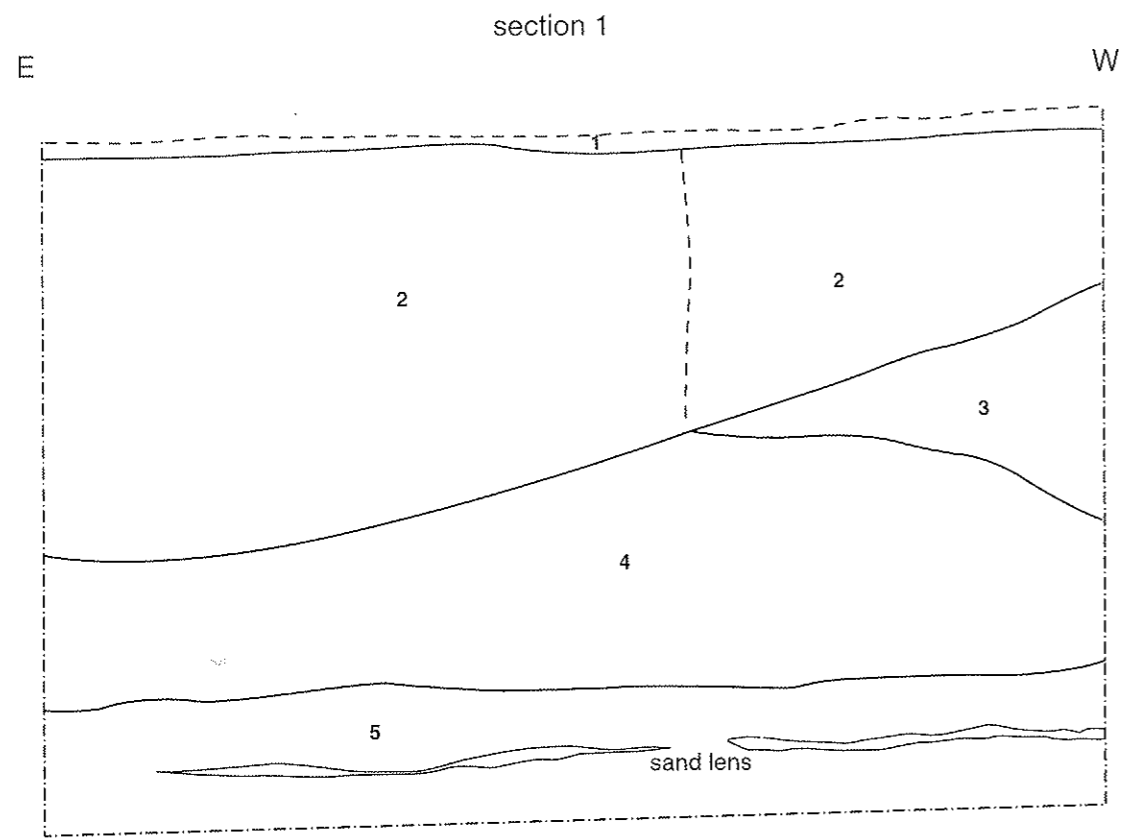
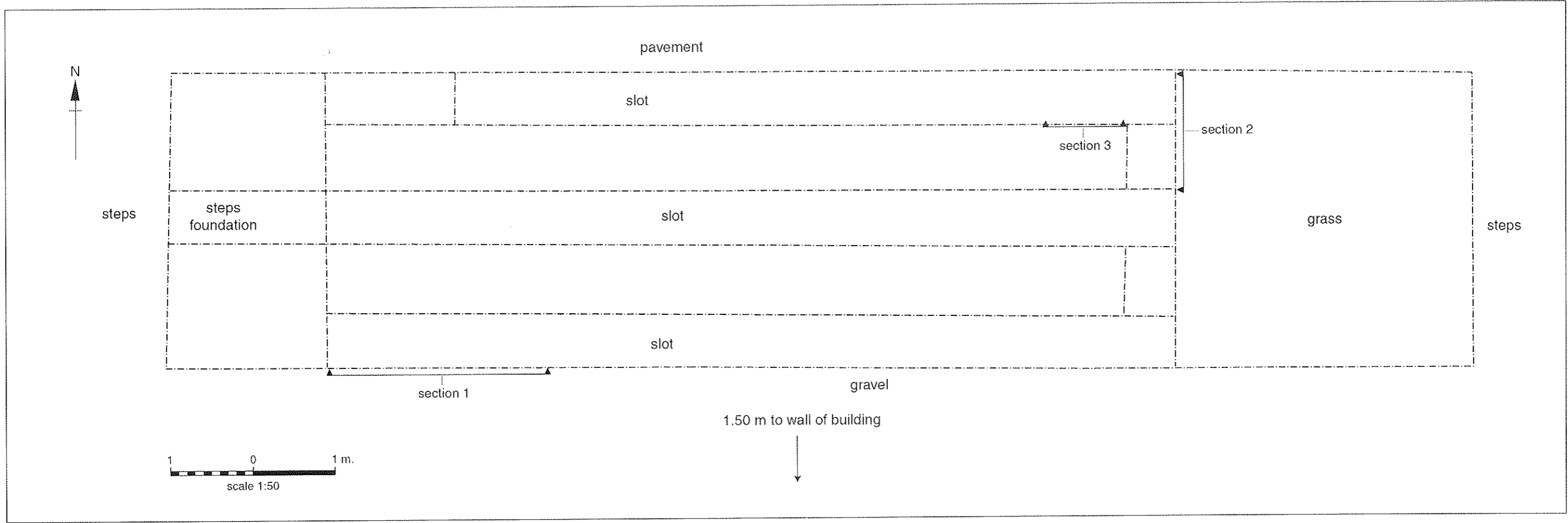
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figure 2: location of Guildhall



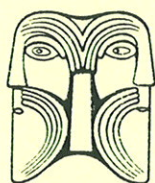
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figure 3: location of plan



all sections 1:20

figure 4: plan and sections



OXFORD ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT

Janus House, Osney Mead, Oxford, OX2 0ES

Tel: 01865 263800 Fax: 01865 793496

email: postmaster@oau-oxford.demon.co.uk



Director and Chief Executive: David Jennings B.A., M.I.F.A. Oxford Archaeological Unit Limited.
Private Limited Company Number: 1618597 Registered Charity Number: 285627.
Registered Office: Janus House, Osney Mead, Oxford OX2 0ES