

English Heritage

Eltham Palace, Greenwich

NGR TQ 425739

ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF REPORT

PROJECT CODE: ELTHA WB



Oxford Archaeological Unit

September 1999

English Heritage

Eltham Palace, Greenwich

NGR TQ 425739

ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF REPORT

PROJECT CODE: ELTHA WB

Prepared by: *David Scone*

Date: *1/11/99*

Checked by: *JRS*

Date: *3/11/99*

Approved by: *R. Williams* HEAD OF FIELDWORK

Date: *5/11/1999*

Oxford Archaeological Unit

September 1999

Summary

In September 1999 the Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) undertook a watching brief at Eltham Palace, Greenwich, NGR TQ 425739 (Figure 1). No archaeologically significant deposits were noted in the Watching Brief trenches. However, a gravel path, part bordered by bricks, observed in the immediate vicinity of the trenches was investigated. This feature probably relates to the landscaping of this area in the 1930s. A brick border, dividing another gravel path from a flowerbed situated adjacent to the dry moat on the south side of the palace, was also recorded.

1 Introduction

Eltham Palace is a scheduled ancient monument, national monument number 26336. As part of an ongoing programme of landscape works it was proposed to remove two sets of existing MoD concrete steps and their footings situated on the bank of the moat to the south-east of the palace. These would then be replaced with Bredon gravel steps, reinforced with softwood risers and strings. Dr Michael Turner of English Heritage gave class consent for the work on 10 September 1999.

The Landscape Branch of English Heritage commissioned the watching brief. It was undertaken to a brief set by and a WSI agreed with Dr Michael Turner. The potential impact of the works was not expected to be great but the Watching Brief was instructed in order that a record could be made of any pre-existing steps or features in the area and in case any earlier profiles of the moat could be recognised.

It was also requested that an investigation and record be made of a gravel path in the immediate area of the steps the existence of which had been revealed by the uncovering of a brick border. A record was also required of a separate brick border dividing a flower bed from another gravel path running along the inner edge of the dry moat to the south of the palace. The Watching Brief and additional investigations were carried out on the 22 and 23 September 1999.

2 Background

The archaeological background to this watching brief has been the subject of a separate desktop study and archaeological evaluation carried out in February 1996 (OAU 1996) in response to proposals by English Heritage to provide improved visitor facilities, car-parking and vehicle access. The results of this investigation are summarised below.

The site lies on a prominent hilltop at a height of 60 m OD on Claygate Beds.

The Greater London Sites and Monuments Record indicates no recorded pre-medieval archaeology in the immediate vicinity of the site. However the Eltham area does have a possible Roman farmstead 900 m north east beyond Eltham High Street and chance finds of Roman burial urns to the north and east.

Settlement on the site can be demonstrated from at least the 11th century onwards from archaeological and historical sources. The earliest recorded structure on the site,

identified by Woods' excavations between 1975 and 1979 (Woods 1982), was a timber building dated to the late 11th century with two further phases of wooden building dating to the late 12th and early 13th centuries. The first substantial stone-built remains on the site belong to the late 13th-century palace of Anthony Bek, the Bishop of Durham.

Little now remains of Bek's stone-built manorial complex although excavations in the 1950s revealed the western perimeter wall and two towers at its north-west and south-west corners. Woods' investigations in the 1970s revealed remains of possible chapel and hall structures. Bek passed the manor house to Edward II in 1311 and it was used extensively as a royal palace for the next 200 years with various additions and episodes of rebuilding particularly in the 14th century. During this period much of the surrounding area consisted of royal parkland. The focus of medieval settlement seems to have been to the north.

From the middle of the 16th century the importance of the palace declined and it fell into disrepair, becoming little more than a hunting lodge. During the Commonwealth, Colonel Nathaniel Rich appears to have demolished most of the buildings with the exception of the great hall. At this time the parks were also heavily plundered to provide timber for Cromwell's shipyards.

In the 19th and 20th centuries, after the site had become little more than a picturesque ruin, a series of developments and new building took place culminating in 1933 with the acquisition of the lease of Eltham Palace from the crown by Stephen Courtauld. He completed the restoration of the Great Hall, demolished the 19th century tenements and constructed the new Eltham Hall, also undertaking extensive landscaping of the grounds

Excavations at Eltham Palace have been undertaken by Dr D Strong and Maurice Craige in 1952 and by Humphrey Woods in 1975-9 (Woods, 1982). A field evaluation by the OAU (OAU 1996) was carried out on land to the east and south-east of the moated site. A number of post-medieval features which were interpreted as field boundaries were noted as well as a possible prehistoric ditch, although no evidence for associated settlement was seen. A previous Watching Brief by the OAU (OAU 1998) during excavation of a trench for an electric cable across the inner court yard of the Palace revealed only previous excavation backfill as the impact of the trench was limited.

3 Aims

The aims of the watching brief were to excavate and record any archaeological remains exposed on site during the course of the works, in order to secure the preservation by record of any archaeology, the presence and nature of which could not be established in advance. In particular any exposed evidence of previous steps and/or profiles of the moat bank and the two brick bordered paths. This would be carried out to established OAU standards (Wilkinson 1992), and in accordance with the Greater London Archaeology Advisory Service Guidelines.

4 Methodology

The existing MoD steps were broken out and removed by hand by the on site contactors. The areas of Trenches 1 and 2 were then reduced to the general impact level using a Kubota mechanical excavator. This work was observed over a period of two days and the trenches examined for archaeological features. The impact of these trenches was limited and no archaeological features or deposits were seen, therefore a brief written description was made but no individual context numbers allocated.

The path in the vicinity of Trenches 1 and 2 (Path 501) was investigated by means of four small hand dug test pits. These included a slot across the path (Test Pit 4) which was used to ascertain its construction and where a section was drawn. Three further test pits (Test Pits 1-3) were used to verify the route taken by the path as this was masked by leaf litter but no extensive excavation was undertaken in these locations. A record of the contexts associated with this path was made on pro forma sheets. The brick border to the south of the Palace (Brick Border 500) was examined and recorded under a single context number also on pro forma sheets. Location plans for the areas of investigation were produced and a colour slide photographic record was taken.

5 Results

Trench 1 (Figure 3)

Trench 1 was 21 m long, 1.60-1.70 m wide and a maximum of 0.40 m deep, although for much of its length it was considerably shallower. It was orientated roughly north-east south-west and sloped down from the north-east at an angle of approximately 30°. The trench exposed light buff brown clay overlain by 0.15-0.25 m of dark brown silty clay topsoil with a high humic content. The steps that were removed consisted of concrete paving slabs bedded on sand. Fourteen metres from its south-western end a deposit of hardcore, sand and gravel was noted in the base of the trench for a distance of 1.70 m. This is assumed to be the same as deposit 507 noted in Test Pit 4 (Figure 4, Section 500) and represents the foundation of path 501 which has been truncated by the construction of the steps. No evidence of pre-existing steps was seen and no earlier moat profiles were noted.

Trench 2 (Figure 3)

Trench 2 was 15 m long, 1.20-1.30 m wide and a maximum of 0.50 m deep, although for much of its length it was considerably shallower. It was orientated east west and sloped down from the east at an angle of approximately 45°. The trench exposed light buff brown clay with patches of crushed shell inclusions overlain by 0.20-0.30 m of dark brown silty clay topsoil. The steps that were removed consisted of stone slabs set in place with cement, with bricks and further slabs used to create foundations to level the steps. No evidence of pre-existing steps was seen and no earlier moat profiles were noted.

Path 501

Path 501 (Figure 3) was recognised by the presence of bricks forming a border at its northern end and could be traced via a slight depression in the ground surface. It is 1.30-1.50 m wide and from the northern end where it has been truncated by the MoD steps in Trench 1 the path runs south for 13 m before turning and heading south-east up to the crest of the moat bank making a total length of 40 m. It was cleaned by hand to expose the extent of the brick border which was noted to run for 10.20 m on both the east and west sides of the path. The path was further investigated by means of four test pits (Figure 3).

Test Pit 1. This measured 1.0 x 0.50 m and was positioned to verify the suspected change in direction of the path and look for evidence of a further brick border. Leaf litter and topsoil to a depth of 0.15 m was dug away to reveal the deposits in plan (Figure 4, Plan 502). The edge of the path was well defined by its linear construction cut 510 and the path surface consisted of compacted gravel and sand (509). There was no evidence of there having been a brick border in this area and the path is cut into light brown silty clay (511) similar to that underlying the topsoil in Trenches 1 and 2.

Test Pit 2. This measured 0.50 x 0.50 m. Leaf litter and topsoil to a depth of 0.15 m was dug away to reveal the compacted gravel path surface.

Test Pit 3. This measured 0.50 x 0.50 m. Leaf litter and topsoil to a depth of 0.18 m was dug away to reveal a deposit of pea gravel 0.02 m thick overlying the compacted gravel path surface.

Test Pit 4. This measured 1.40 x 0.50 m and was positioned across the path to ascertain its construction (Figure 4, Section 500). It was excavated to a maximum depth of 0.50 m but tree roots made a full investigation impractical. The path appears to have been created by the digging of a steep sided construction cut (508), into the surrounding mid-light silty clay. The construction trench was only exposed on the east side of the test pit and could not be fully excavated. The foundation for the path comprised a loose mix of brick, tile, chunks of stone slab, flints and pieces of iron in a gravel, sand and crushed mortar matrix (507). This deposit was excavated to a depth of 0.30 m but was not bottomed. It was overlain by a compacted sand and gravel surface (506), 0.06-0.12 m thick which seems to have been eroded away on the east side of the path. This was overlain by a 0.08 m thick accumulation of leaf litter (505), which appears to have prompted the laying of a further surface, 0.05 m thick of pea gravel and sand (504). This in turn was overlain by the present ground cover of leaf litter and topsoil (503). The path is bordered by red, frogged bricks, which measure 0.21 x 0.095 x 0.064 m, unmortared and set on their side's end to end. It is not clear when these were added but their absence further along the path and their position relative to the later surface 504 indicate that they may not be part of the original construction.

Brick Border 500.

Brick border 500 is on the north side of a compacted gravel path 1.70 m wide which runs east west along the north side of the now dry moat to the south of the Palace (Figure 2). It runs for 53.50 m from the wooden moat bridge to the east to the yorkstone pavement coming from the sunken garden to the west. The bricks serve to separate the path from flower beds and can be regarded as an edging to the flower beds as well as to the path. That the bricks are laid directly onto garden soil may argue for them not having been part of the path construction. The bricks are mottled light and dark reddish brown in colour and have small flint inclusions. They are wedge shaped and measure 0.217 x 0.105 x 0.06 x 0.047 m. They are fairly uniform in manufacture and some are impressed with the name NEWTON. The shape of the bricks may point to an intended use in the construction of arches or culverts, however, there was no evidence that the bricks had been re-used. They may have been surplus left over from other works. Bricks of the same manufacture were used in the construction of the paths in the Rose Garden adjacent to the main car parking area on the north-east side of the Palace complex.

6 Discussion

Trenches 1 and 2 had a fairly limited impact although enough material was removed to expose underlying clay deposits. Although there is a possibility that major landscaping may have involved the dumping of large amounts of sterile material this clay is assumed to be the natural. No evidence of earlier steps was seen so if any did exist they must have been completely removed when the concrete and stone steps taken out in the current works were originally instated. No pre-existing moat profiles were noted and if the clay deposits are natural then the present moat cut will have removed any earlier evidence at this location.

Path 501 was constructed of gravel with a substantial hardcore foundation. The material forming this foundation appeared to be of 20th-century origin and although the brick border at the north end could be a latter addition it is possible to speculate that this path may be part of the landscaping of this area which took place in the 1930s. The path could have been in use until fairly recently and had been resurfaced at least once with a spread of pea gravel but probably fell into disuse after the steps in Trench 1 were constructed.

Brick border 500, either served as a border to the flower beds which is much more likely, or as an edge to the path to the south of the Palace, and is considered to be of 20th-century date. Both the path and the flower borders have been subject to renewal and maintenance during this century and the positioning of the bricks would indicate that they are part of this process. However, the bricks themselves could have been manufactured significantly earlier but are provisionally thought to date from the 19th or early 20th century.

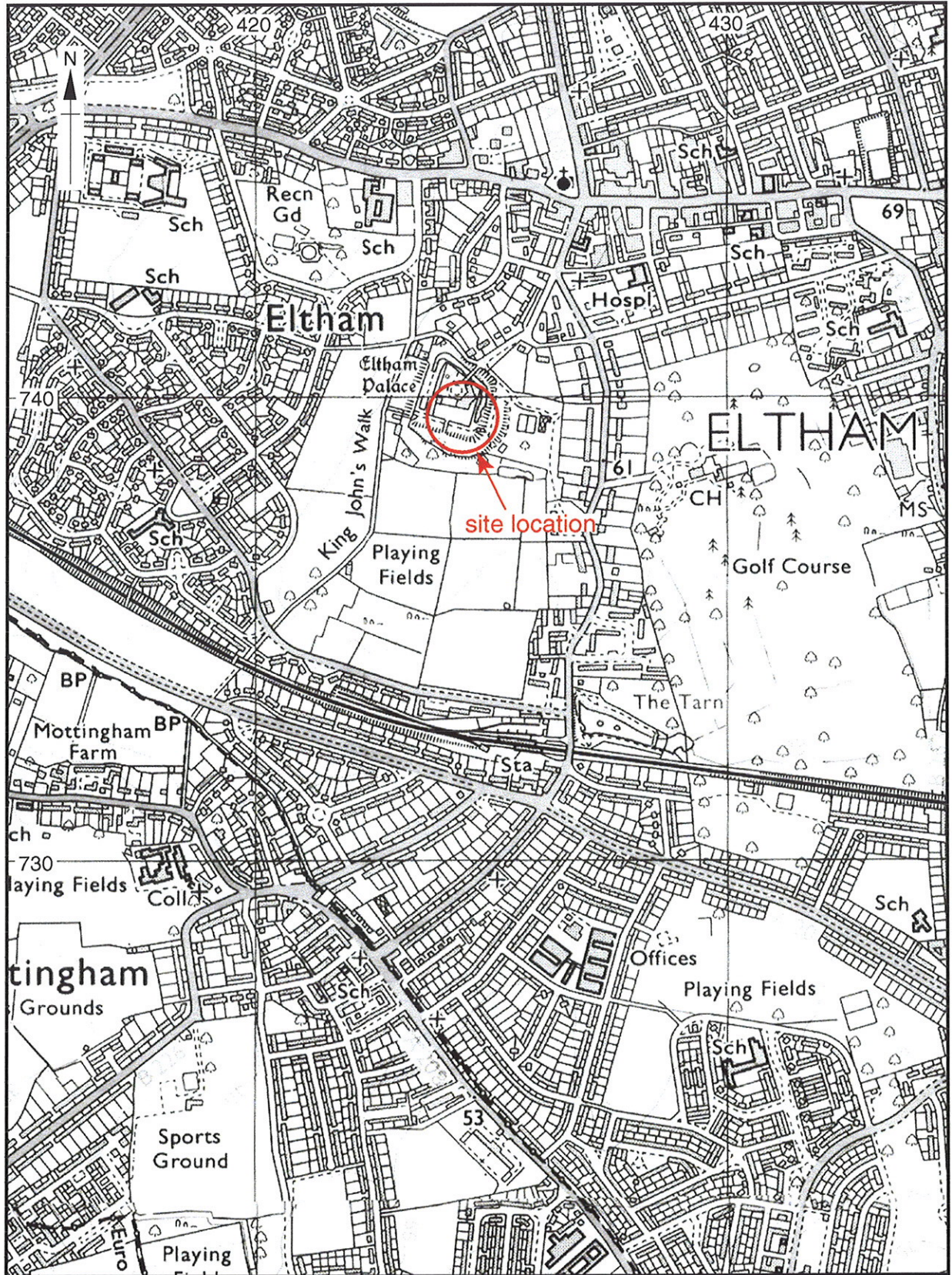
References.

Oxford Archaeological Unit 1998, *Eltham Palace, Greenwich, Archaeological Watching Brief Report*, (unpublished client report).

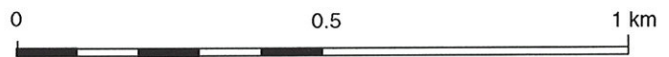
Oxford Archaeological Unit 1996, *Eltham Palace, London Borough of Greenwich, Archaeological Evaluation*, (unpublished client report).

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

Woods H 1982, Excavations at Eltham Palace, 1975-9 *Transactions of the London and Middlesex Archaeological Society* 33, 215-65.



Reproduced from the Ordnance Survey's 1:25,000 map of 1989 with the permission of Her Majesty's Stationery Office © Crown copyright. Licence No. AL 854166



scale 1:12,500

Figure 1: Site location

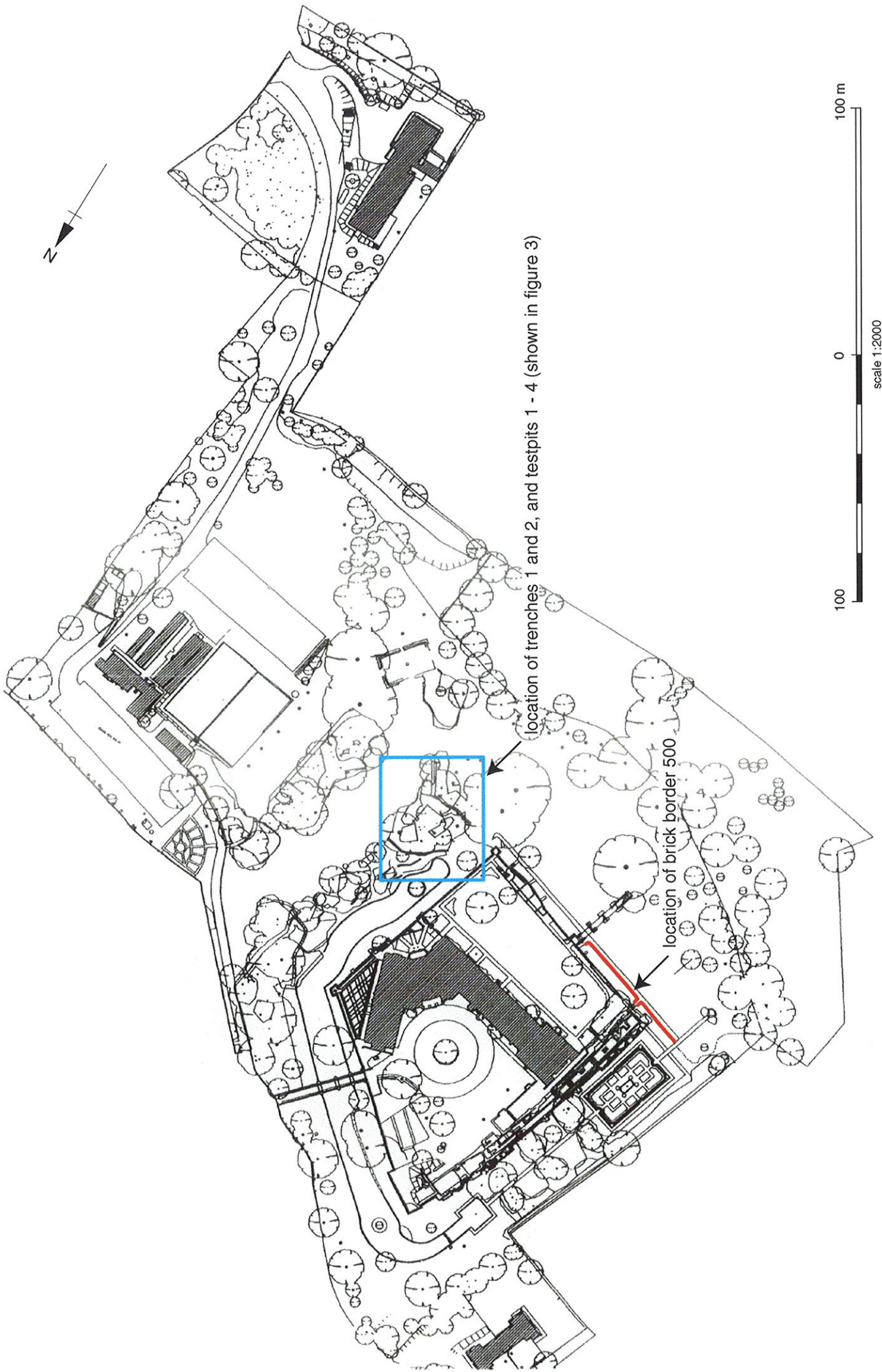
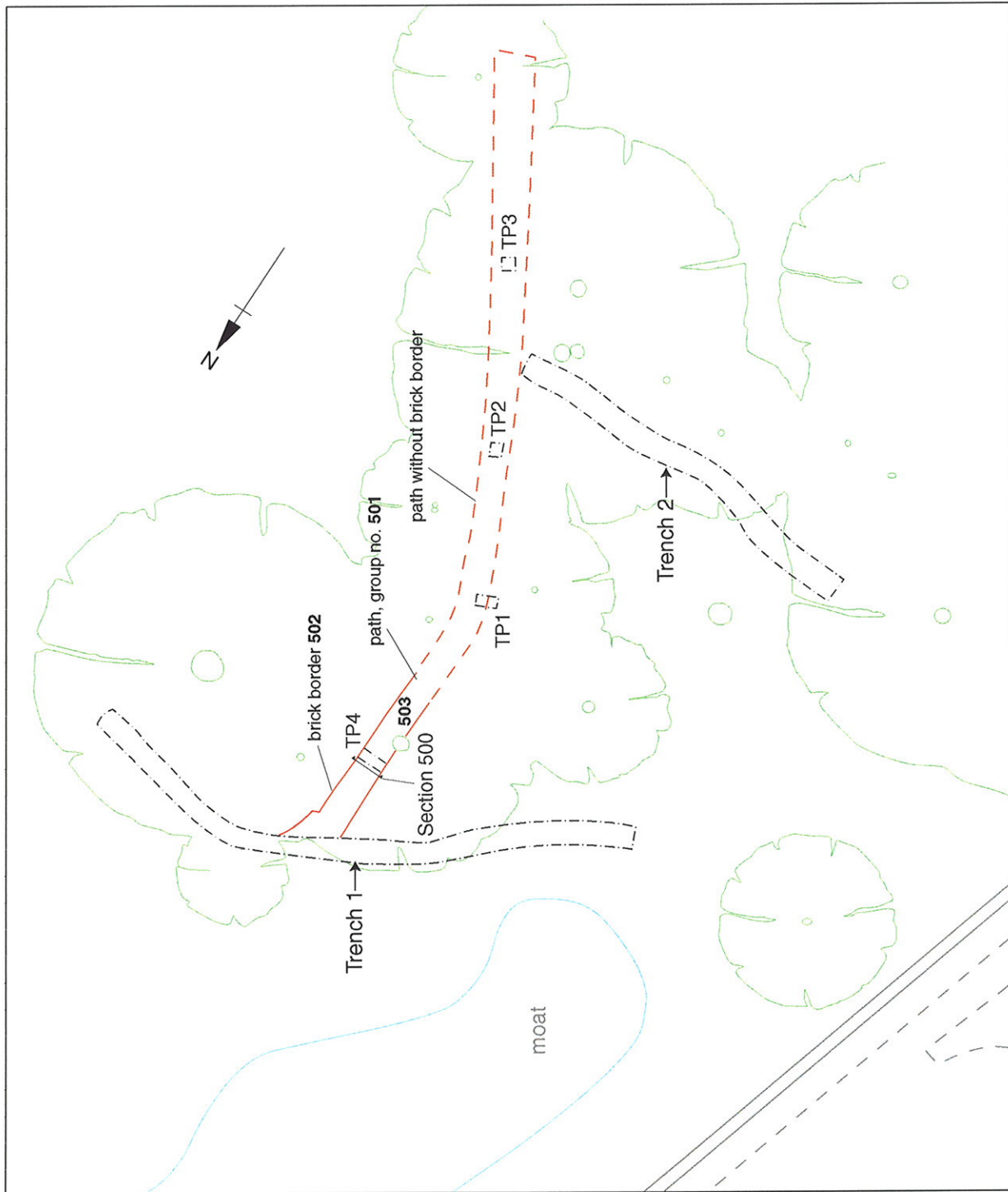
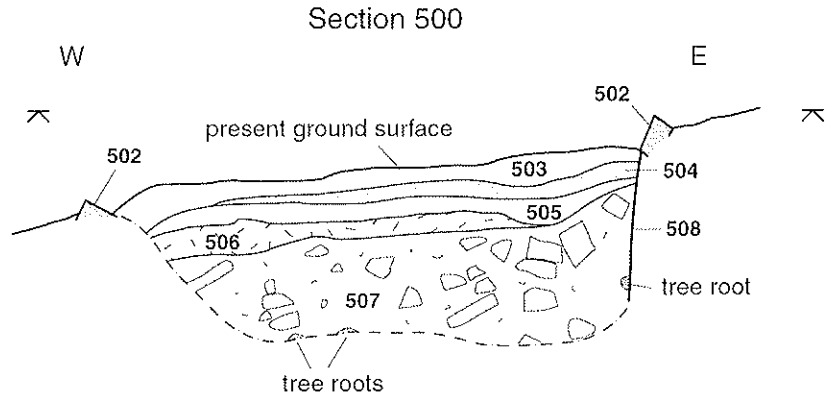


Figure 2: Areas of investigation



Scale 1:300

Figure 3: Location of trenches and test-pits



Plan 502: Test Pit 1

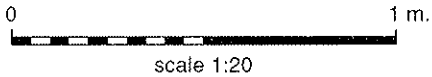
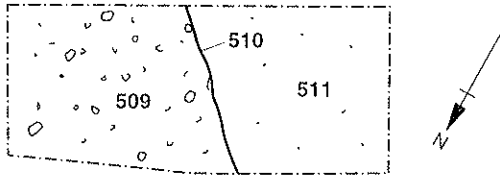


Figure 4: Section 500 and Plan 502



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