The Town Hall
Wallingford, Oxfordshire

Record Of Archaeological Monitoring Visit

Site code: WATH 94

NGR SU 6072 8936

OXFORD ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT

February 1995

THE TOWN HALL, WALLINGFORD, OXFORDSHIRE
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INTRODUCTION

The Oxford Archaeological Unit undertook an archaeological monitoring visit to the Town Hall, Wallingford, Oxfordshire. Staff of Wallingford Museum had been informed that a quantity of pottery and animal bone had been found during groundworks for renovation of the Tourist Information Centre, and they contacted OAU.

BACKGROUND (Airs *et al* 1974, 155-8 and maps)

Wallingford, formerly in Berkshire, is one of the most important towns in the Upper Thames valley. It was among the Burghal Hideage list of defended Wessex strongholds compiled in c. AD 919. Large parts of the Anglo-Saxon defences survive in good condition, especially in the Bull and Kine Crofts along the W side of the town. A pagan Saxon cemetery was discovered to the SW of the defences in 1924, and sherds of early Saxon pottery are occasionally recovered from excavations.

The rectilinear street pattern within the defences is generally thought to be contemporary with the Anglo-Saxon defences. Some streets seem to have been lost, especially in Bull Croft where a priory was founded after the Norman Conquest. A castle was also established in the NE quarter of the town after the conquest. Construction of the castle destroyed a long stretch of the *burh* defences and also involved rerouting the N road into the town to the W, and a new gate also had to be built. The castle survives as an impressive complex of earthworks.

Wallingford was extensively involved in the disorder of King Stephen's reign, when the castle was held by a supporter of Queen Matilda. The castle was used as a royal residence until 1385. The town prospered until the mid 13th century, but declined thereafter. The castle was besieged and houses in the town were destroyed in 1646 during the civil war. Wallingford remains a small market town, although the pace of housing development has increased somewhat in recent years.

SITE LOCATION (Fig. 1)

The Town Hall sits in the middle of the Market Place immediately N of the church of St Mary le More. The existing building dates to 1670 and is a particularly fine example of its type. The Market Place is probably a primary feature of the Saxon *burh*, and there was a guildhall with open shops in the town centre during the medieval period.

REASON FOR THE MONITORING VISIT

A small collection of animal bone and pottery was recovered by labourers during the excavation of a deep foundation pit at ground floor level in Wallingford Town Hall. The site was visited by Graham Keevill of OAU on 11 April 1994. The pit measured 1.4 m (E-W) x 1.3 m and was 2.55 m deep; the excavation had been stepped in on the N and W sides at 2.05 m. Unfortunately digging had already been completed by the time the visit was made, and the extremely poor lighting conditions made recording difficult. The ground floor of the Town Hall is open except for an office on the S side, but the site had been boarded off for the duration of the groundworks. This blocked out daylight, but a small arc light was kindly supplied by the building contractor. This was used throughout

the examination of the site, but only two sections could be lit at all adequately at any one time. All the sections were cleaned, and two of them were recorded. A location plan was also drawn. Small assemblages of finds were recovered from two contexts in section.

The results are described below. There is no doubt that much more information could have been obtained if the excavations had been monitored, rather than only recording the pit once it had been excavated. Ideally, the pit should have been archaeologically excavated. The following description should be read with these comments in mind, although valuable data were still recovered despite the limitations on the work.

RESULTS

Stratigraphy (Figs 1 and 2)

A layer of compact red-brown silty sand (10) was found at a depth of 2.14 m below the surface. This deposit appeared to occupy the bottom 0.4 m of the trench, although the darkness at the base of the pit even with the arc light made it impossible to determine whether it was a single entity. Layer 10 was sealed by a 0.5 m-thick deposit of orange-brown gravel (9). A N-S feature (11) cutting layer 9 was exposed at the W edge of the pit. It was impossible to determine the nature of this feature, but it had a steeply-sloping E edge and was approximately 0.32 m deep within the excavation; its full dimension are unknown. The fill (8) was a dark red-brown silty sand. Two sherds of medieval pottery were recovered from the fill.

A compact yellow-brown silty sand (7) overlay feature 11 and its fill. Layer 7 was up to 0.07 m thick and did not extend to the E side of the pit. It was sealed by 0.96 m-thick deposit of compact very dark grey-brown silty clay (6). Three sherds of medieval and one sherd of post-medieval pottery were recovered from this fill. It was overlain by a 0.16 m-thick layer (5) consisting of 75 % broken roof tiles, 20 % mortar and 5 % miscellaneous rubble. Layer 5 was sealed by a compact very dark grey-brown silty clay (3, 4) which was very similar in character to layer 6. Layer 3/4 was cut by a modern concrete foundation (feature 1, fill 2) seen in the N and S sections. The feature had obviously run E-W through the pit immediately under the existing paving, and had been broken out by the contractors.

Pottery, by Catherine Underwood-Keevill

Five medieval pot sherds (36 g) and a single post-medieval sherd (12 g) were recovered from two contexts (6 and 8) during the watching brief. The sherds ranged in date from the 11th century (a possible Michelmersh-type ware in context 8) to the 17th century (a Surrey white ware bowl base from context 6). Other sherds comprised: two sherds of late 13th to 14th-century speckled glazed jug sherds in Oxford late medieval (Brill/Boarstall) ware (fabric OXAM; Haldon with Mellor 1977) in context 6; a 15th-century Coarse Border ware sherd from context 6; and a worn sherd of a Berkshire sandy ware with a date range from the 12th to the 15th centuries (fabric OXAG; Haldon with Mellor 1977) in context 8.

Caution must be exercised in discussing such a small assemblage, but it is similar to other material from Wallingford and Abingdon in that the majority of the pottery comes from areas to the S of the Thames, ie Berkshire, Hampshire and Surrey. The two sherds from

the Brill/Boarstall kilns in Buckinghamshire are the exceptions in this group. The variety of pottery from a wide area is also paralleled at Reading, and assemblages from South Oxfordshire sites appear to be very similar to those from sites down river rather than Oxford and its hinterland. Small collections from sites in South Oxfordshire are therefore important in establishing the different ceramic traditions in this area.

CONCLUSION

The pit displays a sequence of deposits dating back to the medieval period or perhaps the late Saxon. Unfortunately no finds were recovered from the earliest deposits (9 and 10), and feature 11 can only be dated fairly broadly to the 12th century at the earliest. The depth of the deposits below the current surface might suggest a 10th or 11th-century date for layers 9 and 10, but this cannot be proved. It is notable, however, that a possible sherd of 11th-century Michelmersh-type ware was recovered from the fill (8) of feature 11. The character of these early deposits is equally difficult to determine. The gravel layer (9) at least might represent a surface, perhaps a road or courtyard, and layer 10 might have been similar, but the very limited exposure makes any firm conclusion impossible.

During recording it was felt that feature 11 was probably linear because of the angle of the cut through layer 9. It was notable that the overlying layer (7) did not extend fully across the pit and therefore also appeared to be linear, running N-S. Layer 7 is interpreted as a surface; its purpose cannot be determined.
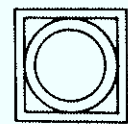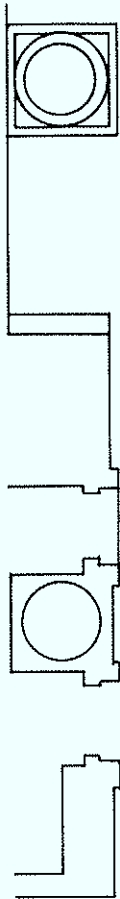
Layer 6 can be interpreted either as a pit fill, or as a substantial and deliberate build-up of soil. Pottery from the fill indicates a late medieval or early post-medieval date (it is not possible to tell whether the 17th-century sherd is properly *in situ* or intrusive). The layer of roof tiles, mortar and rubble (5) clearly represented a dump, probably of material from a demolished building. The tiles were not strongly diagnostic and could have been later medieval or post-medieval. It seems likely that layer 5 reflects the demolition of an existing building prior to the construction of the new Town Hall in 1670 (Airs *et al* 1974, 155).

Layer 3/4 was very similar in character to layer 6. If the interpretation of layer 5 is correct, 3/4 should post-date construction of the Town Hall. The concrete base (1) was the original foundation which this pit was dug to replace.

REFERENCES

Airs M, Rodwell K and Turner H 1974, Wallingford, in K Rodwell (ed), *Historic Towns in Oxfordshire: a Survey of the New County*, 155-8 and four maps (Oxford)

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N

11
9
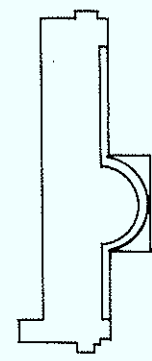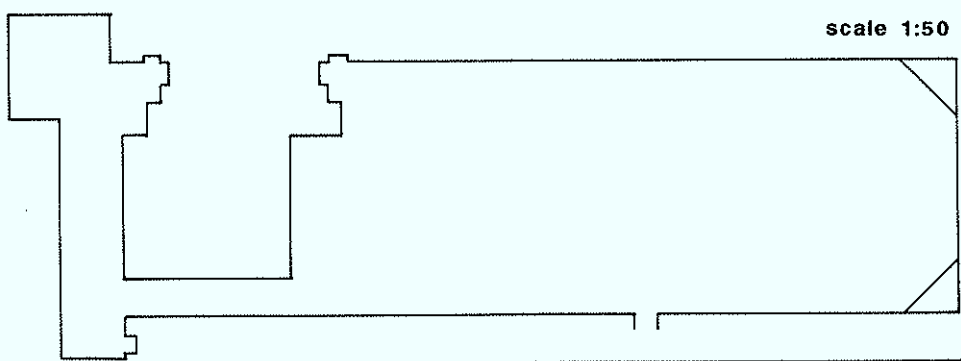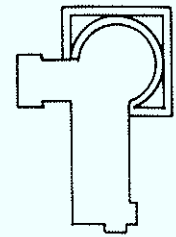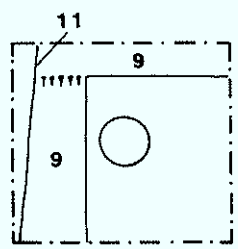9

scale 1:50

607   Bank   608   609   610 Landing Stage
895   BM 156.80   151   TCB   895
HIGH   STREET   160   BM 159.37
TCB   BM 159.37
161   Filling Station   PH
St Martin's Church   PH   Car Park   St Peter's Church
(site of)   (C of E)   BM 145.83
                                        The Cottage
                WALLINGFORD   Bridge House
                                        (Old Peoples'   River Thames
894   157   Home)   894
        162   Market   Church
        Place   Bank   Presby   El Sub
        War Meml   Sta   St John's Church
        Bank   (site of)
        Corn Exchange
PO   Town Hall
Dundrum   Garage   Based on the Ordnance Survey's 1:2500 map of 1968
El Sub Sta   Club   with the permission of the Controller of Her Majesty's
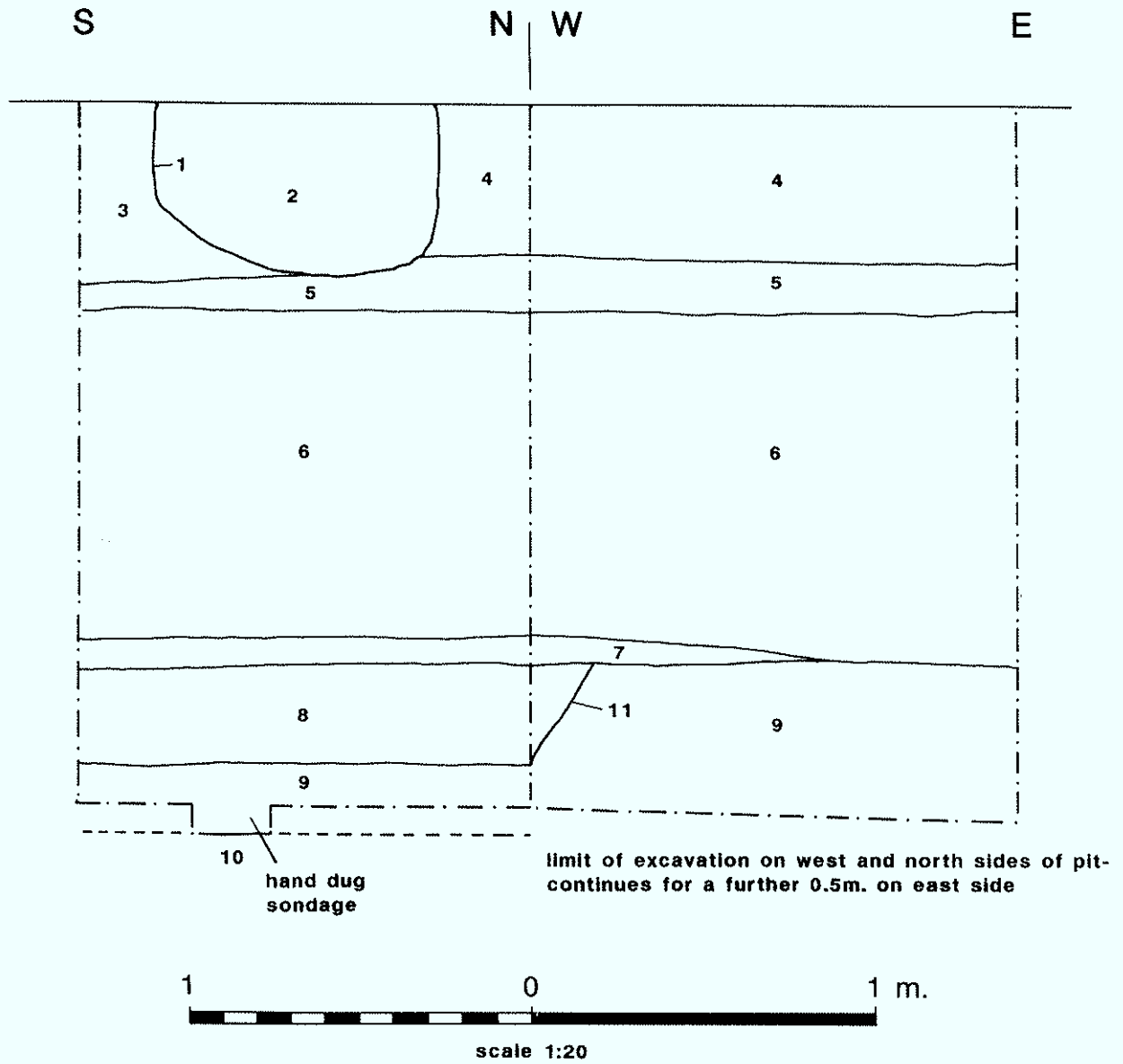Tank   Stationery Office, © Crown copyright
Cinema   St Mary's
                Church
893   607   (C of E)   MART STREET   608   609   610   893

figure 1

S　　　　　　　　　　　　　N⎜W　　　　　　　　　　E

1

3　　　2　　　4　　　　4

5　　　　　　　5

6　　　　　　6

7

8　　　11

9

9

10　　limit of excavation on west and north sides of pit-
hand dug　　continues for a further 0.5m. on east side
sondage

1　　　　　　0　　　　　　1 m.

scale 1:20

figure 2