The University Surveyor

Gene Function Site, University Science Area, South Parks Road, Oxford

NGR SP 5170 0705

ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF REPORT

Oxford Archaeological Unit

March 2000

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Summary

In December 1999 the Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) undertook a watching brief at the site of the new Gene Function Site in the University Science Area, South Parks Road, Oxford (NGR SP 5170 0705). No archaeological features were seen and no finds were retrieved.

1 Introduction

The development proposal comprised the excavation of geotechnical and service location pits prior to the construction of the new Gene Function building. An archaeological watching brief was required as the development site lies within an area of proven archaeological potential.

The watching brief was commissioned by the University Surveyor's Office. It was undertaken in consultation with the Oxford Archaeological Advisory Service.

2 Background

The historical and archaeological background to this watching brief has been comprehensively covered in a separate desktop study (OAU 1999), with which this report should be read in conjunction, and here is summarised only.

There is significant evidence for prehistoric activity within the vicinity of the study area; there is a noted collection of prehistoric features, visible from the air, in the Parks area immediately to the north and north-west of the development site. These features include a collection of Bronze Age round barrows, in a concentration suggestive of a barrow cemetery. The development proposal involves the construction of a large new building, and the conversion of part of a smaller existing building. The smaller building is part of the Old Observatory, while the new building is located to the west. Due to the design incorporating a basement, the construction of the larger building will destroy all archaeological remains within its footprint. The amount of archaeological damage caused by works to the smaller building remains unclear at this time.

The site is located in proximity to known archaeological remains covering a range of periods. The projected line of the "Rex Richards" Bronze-Age double concentric ring-ditch, partly excavated in 1982, 1989 and 1993 is thought to pass within 10 metres of the new building. These excavations also revealed a number of Iron-Age features, while the observatory foundations unearthed a Roman vase in 1876.

A map regression exercise undertaken for the desktop study indicated the likelihood that, prior to recent land use as a part of the University Science Area, the proposed site of the new building did not contain any structures. Further, it was not thought likely that the Victorian greenhouses and other outbuildings were constructed with deep foundations, although the nature and density of services associated with them, and serving buildings surrounding the site, remained an unknown quantity. It was therefore thought that there was potential for preservation of archaeology on the site. The development site was partially occupied by steam-heated Victorian greenhouses,

demolished immediately in advance of these groundworks, and by standing buildings yet to be demolished.

The site slopes from the south at 50.02 m OD to the north at 49.94 m OD; the underlying geology comprises second terrace river gravels (Summertown-Radley) a short distance to the west of the first (flood plain type) terrace, overlying Oxford clay and Kellaway beds (Geology map sheet 236).

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 maintained by means of separate inspection visits undertaken by an archaeological supervisor. Initially it was intended to dig four pits by hand and six by machine, however due to the density of modern services on the site all excavations commenced by hand until a safe window had been established within which machine excavation could proceed.

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 (Fig. 1)

Four trial pits were excavated by hand to a depth of 1.2 m, six by hand initially to a depth of 1.2 m then deepened by machine into natural deposits as far as practically was possible; five boreholes were sunk and trenches were dug across the road bordering the site to the west in order to ascertain the nature and quantity of services within it.

Within the initial two trial pits excavated by hand, HP3 and HP4, disturbance from foundations and services associated with the Victorian greenhouses, comprising ducting and pipework associated with the steam-heating system, ducting and pipework associated with the drainage system, concrete platforms and red brick foundations, was seen to a depth greater than 1 m. This sealed reworked natural gravel with some inclusions of fragmentary red housebrick. A slight trace of cleaner, possibly in-situ natural gravel was seen at the base of dig.

Within HP1 and HP2, the tarmac road surface was seen to seal makeup and made ground containing modern services. Natural deposits were not reached.

Within the machine dug pits an identical sequence to that seen within HP3 and HP4, was identified, with the exception of TP4 which identified a sequence similar to that

seen within HP1 and HP2 with one exception, deposit (43), which was initially thought to be clinker but, when retrieved by machine due to the depth of the excavation, proved to be a weakly cemented agglomeration of fine-coarse subrounded gravels. This deposit sealed natural gravel.

The trenches crossing the road were dug wholly within made ground containing modern services; no archaeology was seen and natural deposits were not reached. The boreholes were archaeologically uninformative, and thus were not monitored.

6 Finds

No finds were retrieved during the course of the watching brief.

7 Environmental results

Full consideration was given to sampling strategies, however due to the absence of any significant archaeology no samples were taken.

8 Discussion

No archaeology was identified during the watching brief; given the density of modern services within the study area it is likely that, if initially present, archaeological traces have been entirely truncated. The provenance and nature of deposit (43) remain unknown at this time; the attending archaeologist felt that it was a natural deposit, possibly water-laid, having said this nothing resembling it has been seen in the vicinity before.

References.

OAU 1999 Proposed Development Sites in the University Science Area; Archaeological Desk-Based Assessment.

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

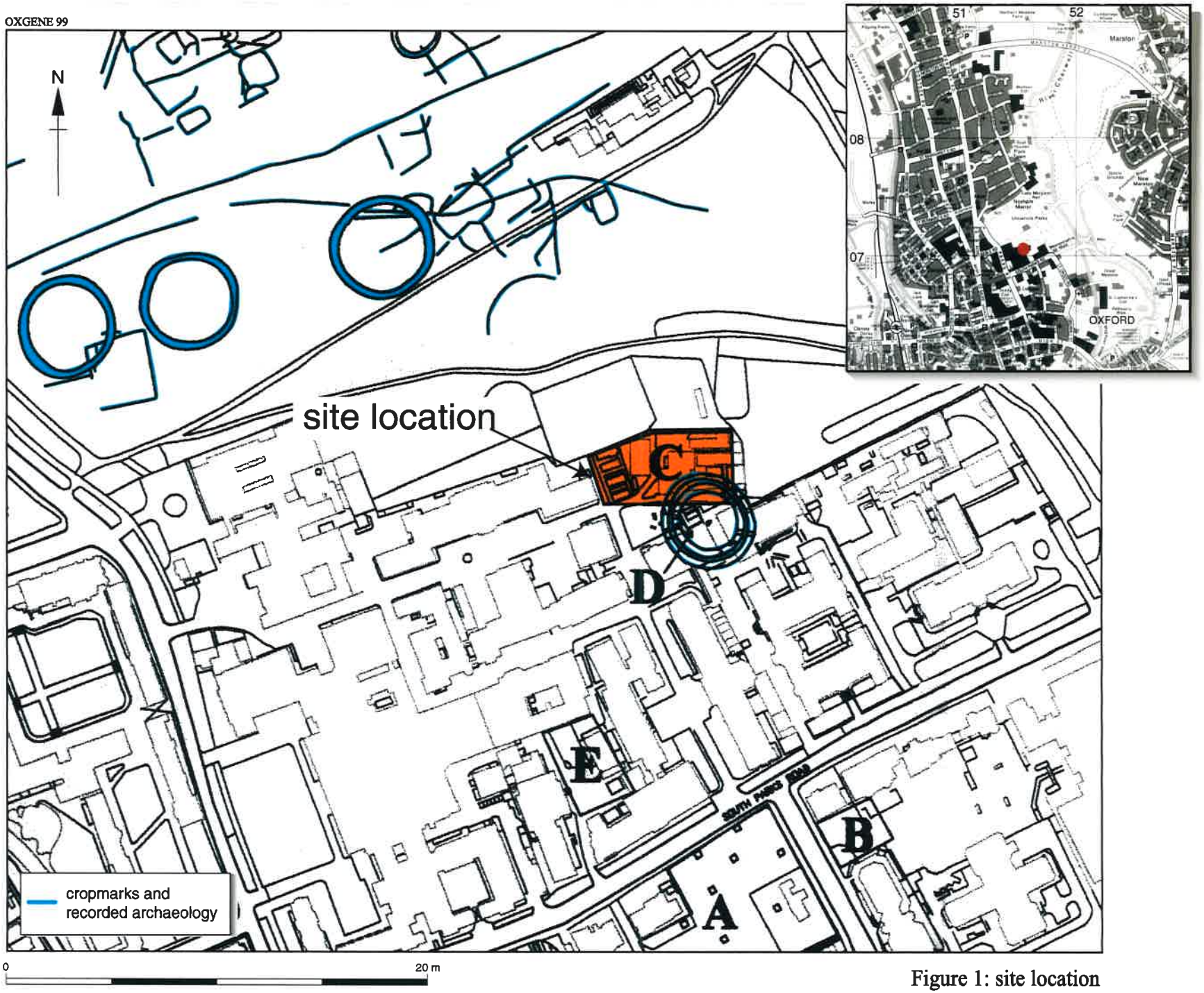

Figure 1: site location

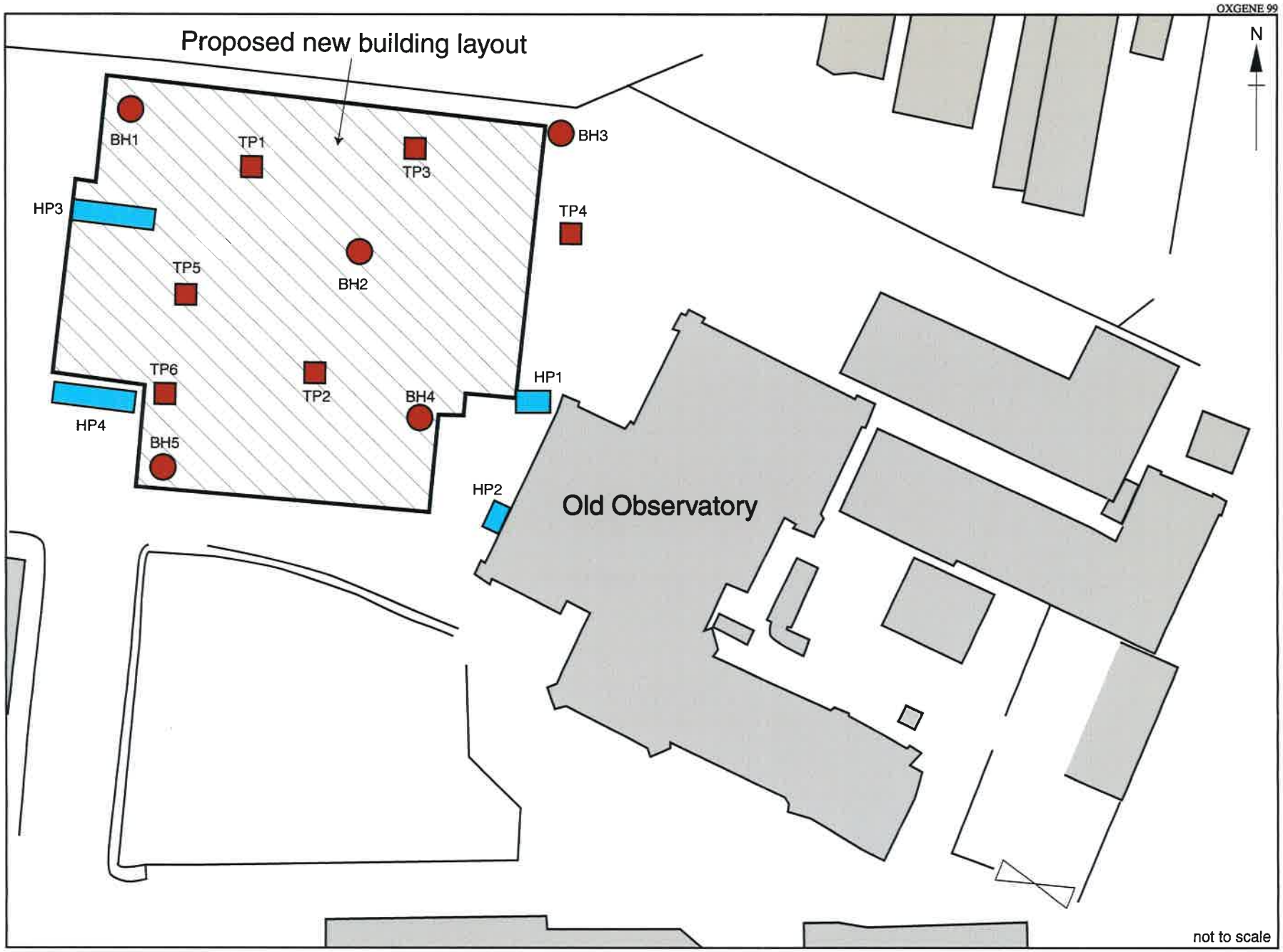

Figure 2: site plan

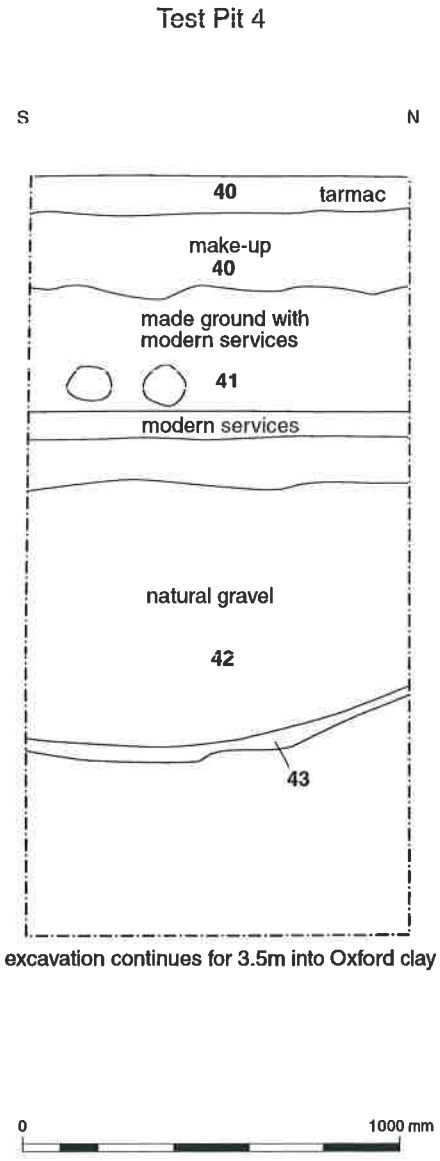

Figure 3: Section of Test Pit 4

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