

Batterton Tyack Architects

**St Hilda's College, Oxford  
New Student Accommodation**

*NGR SP 5220 0570*

**ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF  
REPORT**

Oxford Archaeological Unit  
March 2001

Batterton Tyack Architects

St Hilda's College, Oxford  
New Student Accommodation

ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF REPORT

Prepared by: Robin Bashford

Date: March 2001

Checked by:

*J. Hill*

Date:

*19/3/2001*

Approved by:

*R. Hillman*

ASSISTANT DIRECTOR

Date:

*19/3/2001*

Oxford Archaeological Unit

March 2001

**St. Hilda's College, Oxford**  
**New Student Accommodation**  
**NGR SP 5220 0570**  
**Archaeological Watching Brief Report**

*Summary*

*In July, August and September 2000, Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) undertook a watching brief at St Hilda's College, Oxford. Excavation of foundation and service trenches was monitored, although the earliest stages of groundwork took place without archaeological supervision. Nonetheless, the earliest finds and features on the site were dated to the post-medieval period, most likely to the 18th century or later. The absence of medieval and earlier finds from any of the excavated deposits suggests that historically the site was little used until the 19th century at the earliest. Deposits and pits observed on the site relate to the foundation of buildings on the site in recent times.*

**1 Introduction**

St. Hilda's College is located c 50 m east of the River Cherwell, outside of the historic core of Oxford, but within the ancient parish of Cowley (Fig. 1). The development area was located in the eastern corner of St Hilda's, adjacent to the college boundary wall (Fig. 2).

The underlying geology of the site is Flood Plain Drift, comprising Terrace and River Gravels overlying Oxford Clay. A geotechnical survey undertaken in 1998 found Drift Geology to a depth of 2.7 m, sealed beneath modern 'made ground', comprising tarmac and crushed stone overlying sand, gravel and brick. The site has been the subject of an archaeological desk-based assessment (OAU, April 1999).

The new development comprised the construction of student accommodation and associated services. Owing to the potential for disturbance to below-ground archaeological deposits, a condition for an archaeological watching brief was attached to the planning permission, in line with PPG16 and the Oxford Local Plan.

The watching brief was commissioned by Batterton Tyack Architects on behalf of the college. It was undertaken to a brief set by and a Written Scheme of Investigation agreed with the Oxford Archaeological Advisory Service (OAAS). The groundwork was carried out by Leadbitter Construction.

**2 Background**

The desk-based assessment concluded that the site held uncertain potential for prehistoric, Roman or medieval archaeology; there are no known archaeological sites or finds within the development area. The potential for later medieval and post-medieval archaeological deposits was considered to be slight, as the site appears to have been located within the open fields of

Cowley parish, away from the main focus of settlement, and c 100m south-west of the position of the Civil War defences plotted by de Gomme in 1644 (OAU, 1999).

The brief prepared by OAAS suggested that the location of the site, close to the confluence of the Rivers Thames and Cherwell, could indicate a degree of archaeological potential within or close to the development area. The desk-based assessment suggested that *"it is .... possible that any potential archaeological features, cut into the underlying natural deposits, may survive within the area of proposed development"* (OAU, 1999, 6), while acknowledging the presence of modern made ground to a depth of 0.47 m, as identified in the geotechnical survey.

From 1877 the site's history is well documented. In this year all of the land between the river and the cricket ground was leased from Christ Church by Augustus Vernon Harcourt, the tutor of Physical Chemistry at the college. Vernon Harcourt built a large house (Cowley Grange) on a site close to the river and laid out the remainder of his holding as gardens. This arrangement can be seen on the 2nd edition OS 25" (1904, Fig. 4). The proposed development lies on the east edge of the grounds of Cowley Grange, and is shown on the map containing a row of small outbuildings.

The late 19th century also saw the establishment of St Hilda's College, to the north of the development site. Dorothea Bell, Principal of Cheltenham Ladies College, founded the college in 1893. She purchased Cowley House (St Hilda's Hall, Fig. 5) and established it as a hall of residence for ladies from Cheltenham, so that they might take advantage of the educational opportunities newly available to women at the University.

In 1902 the Vernon Harcourt family left Cowley Grange. The house and its grounds were taken over by the Church Education Corporation Ltd., who established Cherwell Hall, a training college for women teachers in secondary schools. This new foundation quickly found the house too small for their purposes and the years 1907-1911 saw a programme of new building, which effectively doubled the size of the original house (Fig. 5).

In 1921 Cherwell Hall was closed and St Hilda's College acquired the lease. The only new building within the development site was a (temporary) chapel, the site of which partially covers the development area. The building was removed in 1969 when the Garden Building, which forms the western limit of the site, was constructed. It was presumably at this time that the Wolfson Building was also constructed (Fig. 2). In 1993, the outbuildings were demolished and the site is now a car park.

### 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 (OAU 1992), in order to secure their preservation by record.



#### 4 Methodology

The watching brief was undertaken by means of separate inspection visits; all digging was undertaken by mechanical excavator. 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 pro-forma sheets. Soil descriptions utilise standard charts for the approximation of percentage of inclusion types in soil deposits.

#### 5 Results (Figs. 2 and 3)

The initial phases of groundwork were undertaken without archaeological supervision (see Discussion section below). Later examination of the service trenches and a proportion of the foundation trenches generally revealed a stratigraphic sequence which suggested that there had been considerable 19th and 20th century truncation in the form of service trenches (probably associated with the Wolfson Building), made ground and rubbish pits.

In general the stratigraphic sequence comprises natural gravel (2) overlain by a mixed deposit of reddish-brown clay loam with c 5% fine sub-angular gravel and occasional charcoal lenses (1). This was in turn overlain by redeposited natural gravel and clay (5) acting as a levelling layer for the present ground surface.

##### 5.1 *East Foundation Trench* (Fig. 3 - Section 1)

The natural gravel was sealed by soil layer (1) to a uniform depth and observed along the entire length of the trench. Fragments of bricks and pieces of white china were present throughout the layer and no features were observed beneath or cut into the layer.

##### 5.2 *North Foundation Trench* (Fig. 3 - Section 2)

A small pit (3) was observed in the trench section. The pit appeared to be truncated by the concrete foundation for the south building the college. White china and clay pipe were recovered from the pit fill (4), which was a mixed loam containing gravel, probably derived from layers 1 and 2.

##### 5.3 *Drainage Trenches* (Fig. 2)

Trenches for storm water and foul water drains were excavated north-west of the Wolfson Building. In this area of the site layer 1 had been truncated by existing services, presumably those associated with the Wolfson Building. A series of intercutting but poorly defined pits were visible in section in the south-west end of the trench. The finds observed within the pit fills included 'frogged' bricks and stoneware inkpots, suggesting a late post-medieval date for these features.

## **6 The Finds**

No prehistoric, Roman or medieval finds were observed from the excavated deposits. Late post-medieval and 19th/20th century material including house-bricks and white china were not retained.

## **7 Environmental**

No environmental soil samples were taken in the course of the work.

## **8 Discussion**

During the course of the groundwork, a degree of confusion arose as to the nature and level of archaeological monitoring required for this development. While the lack of communication between all parties is regrettable, the phases of groundwork that were monitored did not suggest that any significant archaeological remains had been missed. The absence of finds of medieval or earlier date from any of the excavated deposits suggests that historically the site had been little used until the late post-medieval period at the earliest.

General soil layer (1) contained fragments of house brick and abraded sherds of white china - some with transfer patterns. This layer may represent landscaping during the creation of Magdalen College's playing fields that lie immediately south and east of the development site.

The pits observed within the drainage trench to the north-west of the Wolfson Building may be associated with its construction, or with the demolition of the chapel and subsequent construction of the 'Garden Building' some time between 1957 and 1971 (see Figs 2 and 6). The pit in the north foundation trench was clearly truncated by the south building of St Hilda's, that was constructed between 1907 and 1911 (Figs 4 and 5). Fragments of white china and some clay pipe were retrieved from the section. Given the stoneware observed in the pit fills within the drainage trench, it is possible that the pits observed within the drainage trench also date to this period.

## **References**

LBH Wembley, 1998 Site Investigation Report: Wolfson Yard Project, St Hilda's College. Ref.LBH1802 (November 1998)

OAU, 1999 Student Residences, St Hilda's College, Oxford Archaeological Desk Based Assessment (April 1999)

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



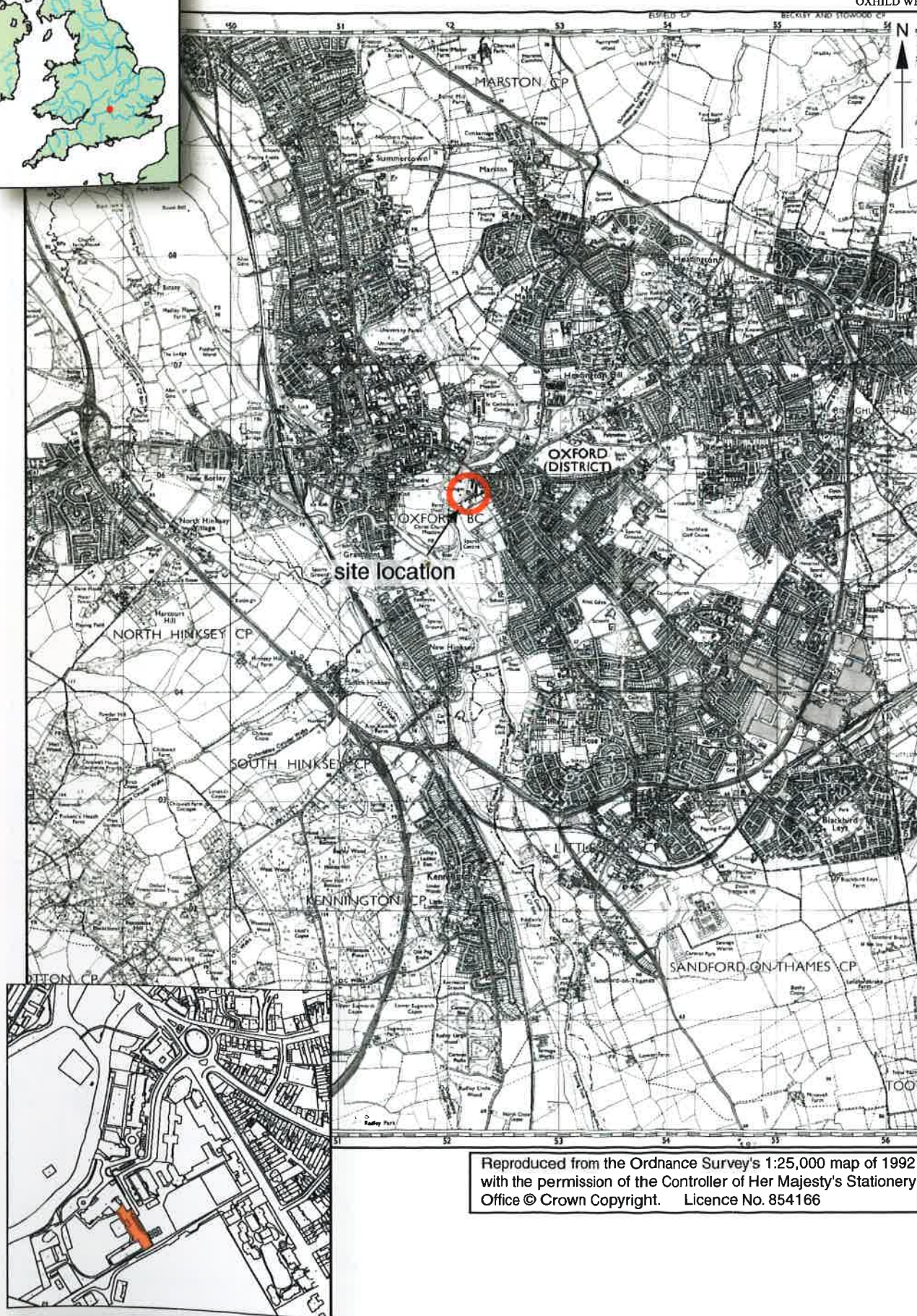


Figure 1: Site location.



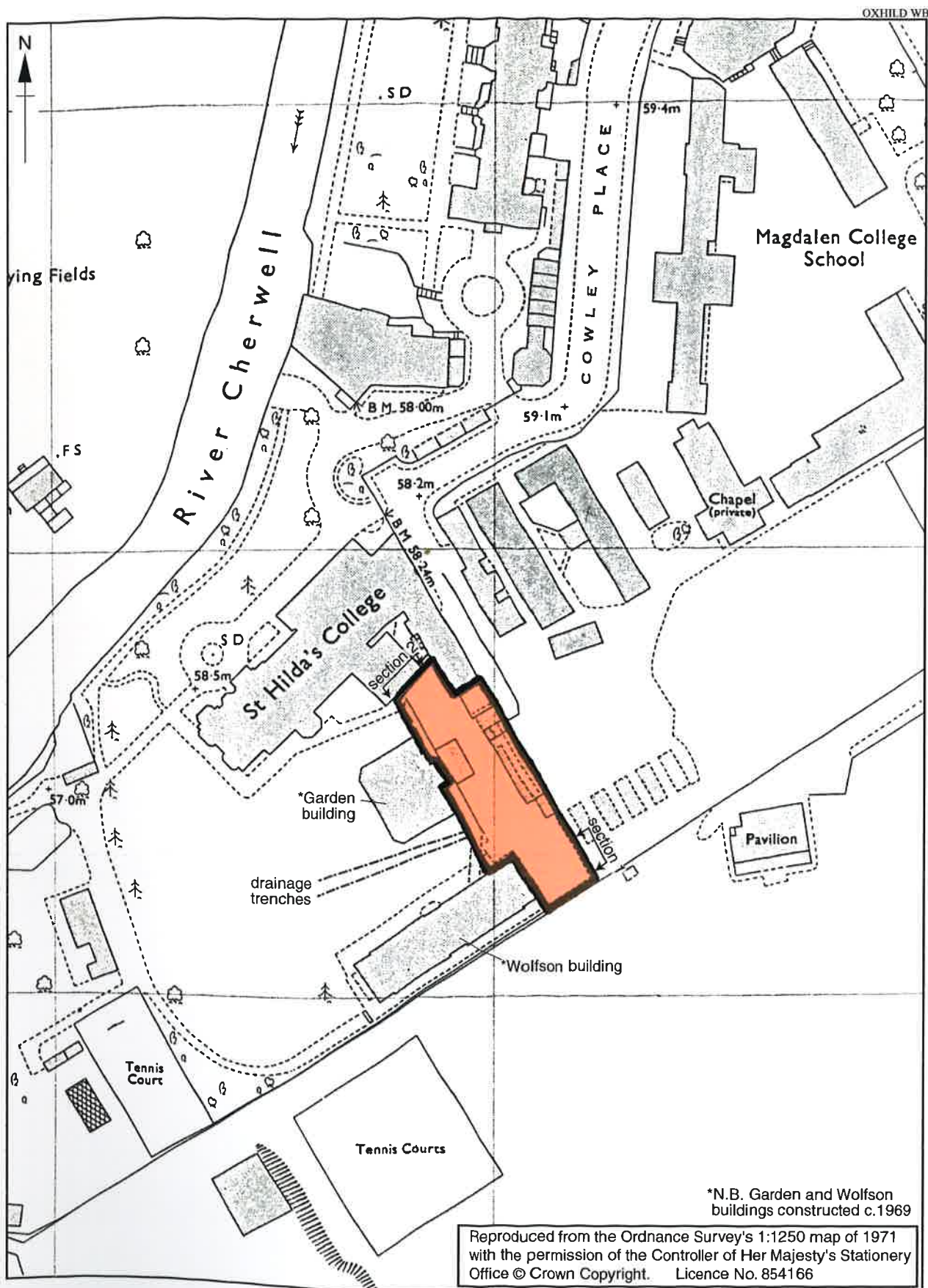
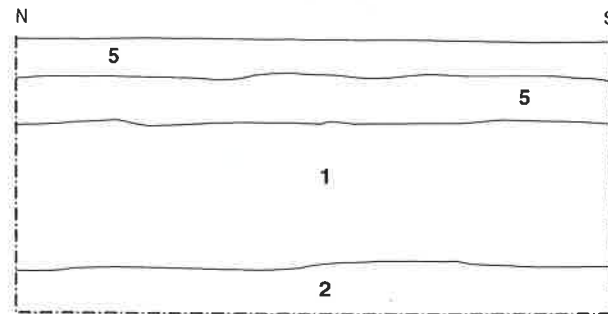


Figure 2: Standing buildings surrounding the development area, and trench / section location.



Section 1



Section 2

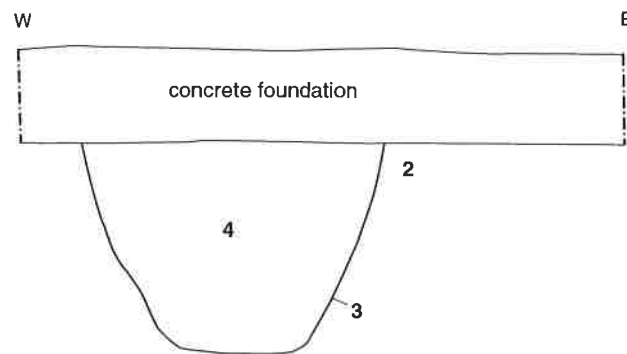


Figure 3: Sections.

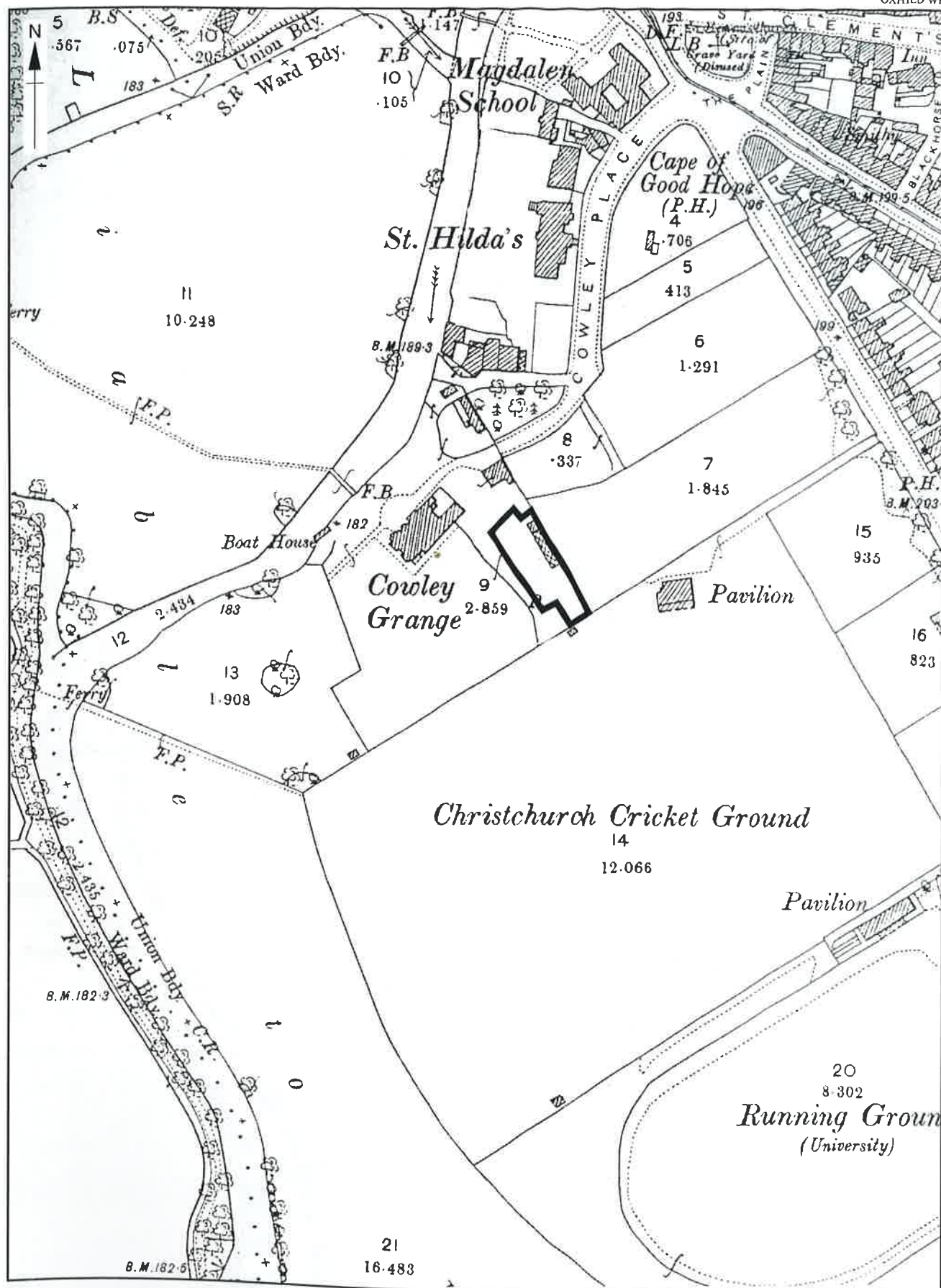


Figure 4: Cowley Grange and first evidence for structures within the development site (Ordnance Survey 2nd Edition 25" Plan of 1900).

Figure 5: Ordnance Survey 25" Plan (1921) showing extensions to Cowley Grange constructed during tenure of Cherwell Hall Ladies college.



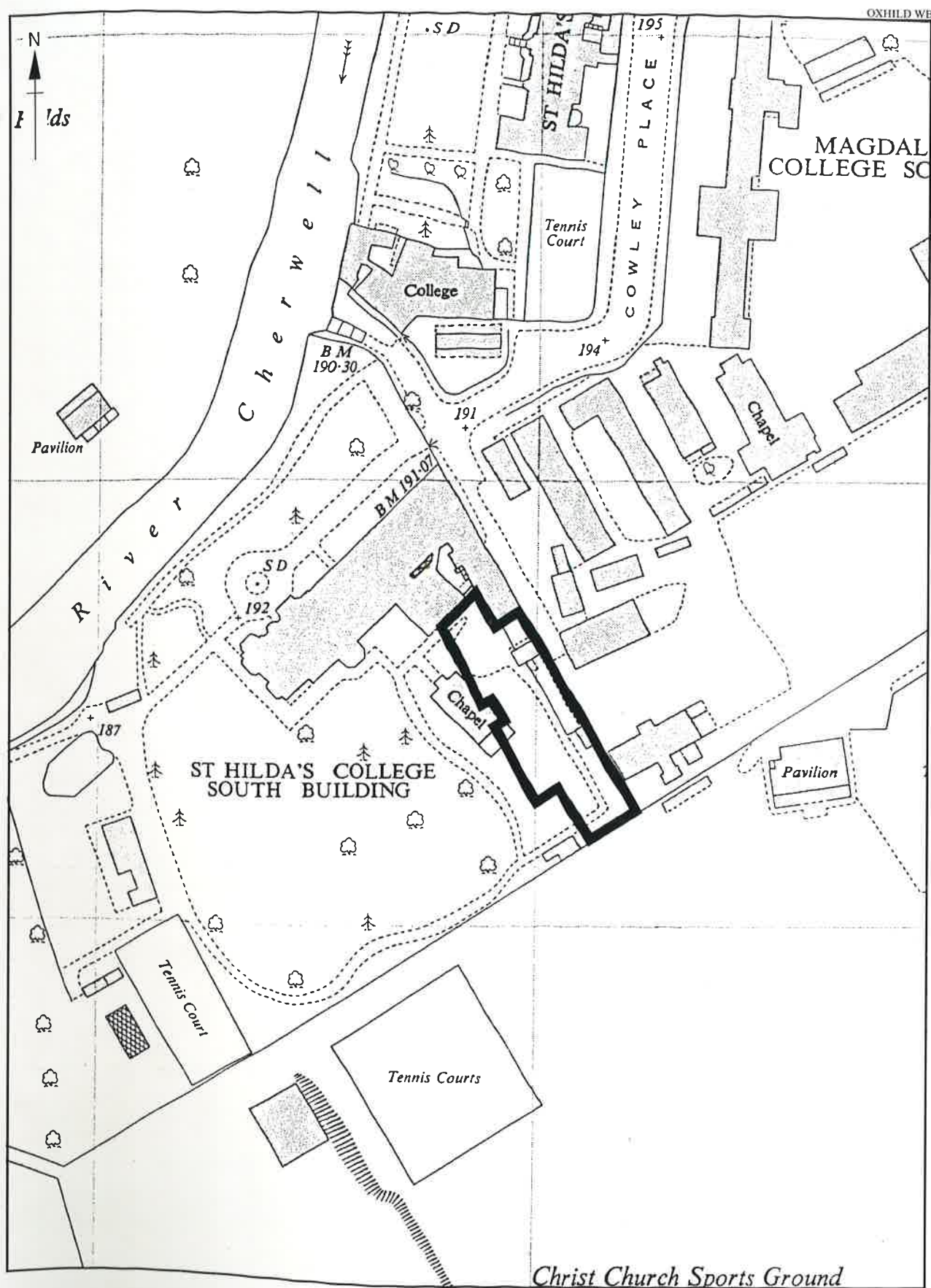


Figure 6: Ordnance Survey 1:1250 Map of 1957, showing construction of east wing of south building and temporary chapel following acquisition by St Hildas in 1921.



## OXFORD ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT

Janus House, Osney Mead, Oxford, OX2 0ES

Tel: 01865 263800 Fax: 01865 793496

email: [postmaster@oau-oxford.com](mailto:postmaster@oau-oxford.com) [www.oau-oxford.com](http://www.oau-oxford.com)



---

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