Harris and Sutherland

PROVOST'S GARDEN, QUEEN'S COLLEGE, OXFORD

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ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF REPORT

Oxford Archaeological Unit

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Oxford Archaeological Unit

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Summary

In April 2001, Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) undertook a watching brief in the Provost's Garden, Queens College, Oxford. The watching brief monitored the excavation of six geotechnical pits which were dug in advance of a proposed new library building. The watching brief identified a number of archaeological deposits and potential features but the characterisation of the deposits was problematic given the restrictive nature of the excavation. OAU also undertook an evaluation of the site in 1998 which is summarised below.

1 Introduction

The site lies on the Summertown Radley Gravel Terrace (Fig. 1) at approximately 61 m above OD and is currently used as a private garden. A plan of the college from 1578 shows the land in use as gardens and orchards until the later expansion of the college, when the area was used as a bowling green prior to its current use.

2 Background

The site lies in the parish of St Peter in the East, outside what is thought to be Oxford's first defensive circuit, but within the area of the medieval walled town. Queen's Lane (formerly Torald Street) now forms the northern and eastern boundary of the College (Fig. 2). It is possible that Queen's Lane originally continued past the parish church of St Peter's towards the east wall, and it is likely that houses lined the road in the 13th century.

Queen's College acquired the site in 1340, since when it has always been open ground. In general, the north-east corner of Oxford fell into decay in the 14th century, a process which was hastened by the spread of Black Death in 1349. The majority of the quarter was purchased by William of Wykeham for the foundation of New College in the 1370's.

The 1998 evaluation consisted of four trial trenches. These revealed a roughly constructed gravel surface and associated features considered, on the basis of the ceramic evidence, to possibly date to the Saxo-Norman period. One of these features, a large pit, contained fragments of slag indicative of metalworking which possibly took place within the proposed development area. The remaining features consisted mostly of 13th- and 14th-century pits and included some evidence of post-medieval pits. The purpose of the pits was unclear although it was suggested in the evaluation report that gravel extraction associated with local building was very likely.

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 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 proforma sheets. Soil description utilised standard charts for the approximation of percentage of inclusion types in soil deposits.

5 Results

The work monitored during the watching brief involved the machine excavation of six geotechnical pits to establish the depth of foundations of the standing walls which delineate the site from Queen's Lane to the north, the Wren Library to the east and Nun's Walk to the south. The location of the pits is shown in Figure 2.

5.1 *Test Pit One (Fig. 3) - TP1*

TP1 was located against the west wall of the Wren Library, approximately 6 m from the north-west corner of the building. The existing paving was removed and the test pit excavated to a depth of 2.9 m. As the depth of the foundation was greater than anticipated, the trench was extended to the west in order to create a stepped excavation.

The stratigraphic sequence revealed by the excavation was difficult to determine as it was not possible to properly clean the deposits due to the depth of the trench. Consequently, the deposit(s) observed have been given a single context number (37). It can be conjectured that the deposits within TP1 form a similar stratigraphic sequence to those observed to the west (see TP3-6 below), although this is by no means certain. A probable construction cut (34) was observed cutting deposit(s) 37 and several fragments of clay pipe were recovered from the fill (35).

Extending approximately 0.60 m below the existing paving to the west of the library building were two courses of dressed stone. The lower course measured 0.30 m x 0.50 m, while the visible dimensions of the upper course were 1.50 m x 0.30 m. These two courses overlay a foundation of roughly hewn and roughly coursed stone of varying dimensions (av. 0.30 m x 0.15 m) which extended to a depth of 2.6 m below the dressed stone. The foundation stepped west approximately 0.30 m at the interface with the dressed stone. The construction cut (34) was also observed below the base of the foundation, cutting the natural gravel (36).

The fact that two courses of dressed stone were observed beneath the current paved surface suggested that the ground had been considerably made up prior to the paving being laid, and a layer of made ground was visible in the north and south sections of the trench.

5.2 Test Pit Two (Fig. 3) - TP2

TP2 was also located against the west wall of the library, approximately 9 m from the south western corner of the building. The trench was excavated to a maximum depth of 2.3 m and was also stepped to the west.

As with TP1, the instability of the trench negated the possibility of cleaning the deposits to a degree by which they could be sufficiently characterised. These deposits were again given a single context number (40). The dressed stone observed in TP1 was again apparent, as was the roughly coursed foundation. However, the foundation only extended to a depth of 1.4 m below the dressed stone and stepped out 0.40 m at approximately 0.70 m below the dressed stone.

The made ground underlying the paved surface was also apparent and confirmed that the ground level has been raised prior to the installation of the paving.

A possible construction cut was again recorded (38) although no dating evidence was recovered from the fill (39) or any of the other deposits observed within the test pit.

5.3 Test Pit Three (Fig. 3) - TP3

TP3 was located approximately 11.90 m from the western face of the library building and against the standing wall marking the northern limit of the site. It was excavated to a depth of 1.60 m and measured 0.80 m x 2 m.

The stratigraphic sequence revealed a 0.14 m+ thick layer of a mid bluish grey silt deposit with 2% gravel inclusions (4). This was overlain by a 0.70 m thick layer of mid brown sandy silt with 20% gravel inclusions (3), which was in turn overlain by a mid-dark grey silty clay deposit with 5% gravel (2) which measured approximately 0.30 m thick. A 0.40 m thick layer of topsoil (1) overlay all these deposits.

A deposit of crushed stone mortar (7) appeared to overlie deposit 2 and was assumed to be the foundation of - or construction debris from - a structural feature visible within the fabric of the standing wall, which has subsequently been blocked up.

A possible construction cut (6) for the standing wall was observed in section, although it appeared to be filled with a mixed deposit (5) of re-deposited gravel natural and deposit 3 and was therefore difficult to establish with any degree of certainty. The wall itself appeared to stand on a foundation of re-deposited gravel to a depth of 1.50 m below the present ground surface.

Test Pit Four (Fig. 3) - TP4

TP4 was located in the north-west corner of the site against the north-east/south-west aligned standing wall which is to be demolished to allow access during the proposed groundwork. It was excavated to a depth of 1.70 m and measured 0.80 m x 2.10 m.

The stratigraphic sequence comprised natural gravel overlain by a 0.32 m thick layer of mid-red brown clay silt (11) which displayed some evidence of scorching. This was overlain by a 0.60 m thick deposit of crushed stone mortar (12) which presumably

originated from the construction of the Provost's Lodging to the south-west. This was directly overlain by a 0.50 m thick layer of topsoil (13).

A feature (10) was observed cutting through deposit 11 and sealed by deposit 12. Given the limited nature of the test pit, it was difficult to attribute a function to this feature although a number of suggestions are put forward in the discussion section below.

Test Pit Five (Fig. 4) - TP5

TP5 was located against the standing wall marking the southern boundary of the site, approximately 25 m west of the library building. The trench was excavated to a depth of 1.90 m and measured 0.80 m x 1.50 m

The earliest deposit observed was a mid-grey clay silt deposit with 20% gravel inclusions (15). This deposit was at least 0.80 m thick and was directly overlain by a mid brownish grey sandy silt and gravel (14) similar to deposit 3 in TP3. This was overlain by a 0.30 m thick layer of topsoil.

In the northern section of the test pit were a number of deposits of uncertain origin. These were initially thought to represent pit fills, although the nature of the fills and the presence of similar deposits in TP6 make this unlikely. The deposits observed were a 0.10 m thick layer of crushed stone 'mortar' (20), overlain by a 0.15 m thick layer of re-deposited gravel (21) which was in turn overlain by a 0.20 m thick deposit of re-deposited gravel in a mid brown silty clay matrix (22). The relationship between these deposits and deposit 15 is uncertain as no obvious cut was apparent. Despite the absence of an obvious cut, the southern limit of these deposits has been given a cut number (24) and it has been assumed that deposit 15 is truncated by 24, although it should be stressed that this is conjectural.

The wall foundation was observed to a depth of 1.10 m below the present ground surface and appeared to step north 0.20 m at 0.70 m below the ground surface. A possible construction cut (17) was also observed, although almost all the deposits observed within TP5 were heavily truncated by tree roots (as was the wall foundation), and characterisation of the deposits within this test pit was problematic.

Test Pit Six (Fig. 4) - TP6

TP6 was also located against the southern boundary wall, approximately 12 m west of the library building. TP6 was excavated to a maximum depth of 1.60 m and measured 0.80 m x 1.40 m.

The earliest deposit observed was a mid brown silty clay deposit (25) with 20% gravel inclusion which was at least 0.22 m thick. This was overlain by a 0.10 m thick layer of re-deposited gravel (26) and a 0.20 m thick layer of crushed stone mortar (27). Both these deposits (26 and 27) appeared to be cut by the construction cut (33) for the standing wall and are similar to the deposits observed in TP5.

The deposit of crushed stone mortar (27) was overlain by a mid brownish grey clay silt with 10% gravel inclusions (28) which was approximately 0.50 m thick and was in

turn overlain by another deposit of crushed stone (29) *c* 0.20 m thick. Although the origin of 29 is uncertain it is possible that it may relate to the laying of the paving to the west of the library building. This was sealed by a 0.50 m thick layer of topsoil.

The foundation for the standing wall was observed to a depth of 1.40 m and lay within construction cut 33 (filled by a mixed deposit of re-deposited gravel and mid-dark grey silty clay). The foundation stepped north by 0.20 m at a depth of 0.90 m.

6 Finds

Pottery Analysis by Paul Blinkhorn

The pottery assemblage comprised 27 sherds with a total weight of 447g. All the material was early medieval (*c* late 11th century) or later, and is typical of finds from the period in the city of Oxford.

Fabrics

Where appropriate, the pottery was recorded utilising the coding system and chronology of the Oxfordshire County type-series (Mellor 1994), as follows:

OXAC: Cotswold-type ware, AD975-1350. 8 sherds, 315g.
OXBF: North-East Wiltshire Ware, AD1050-1400. 1 Sherd, 2g.
OXY: Medieval Oxford ware, AD1075-1350. 11 sherds, 67g.
OXAM: Brill/Boarstall ware, AD1200-1600. 6 sherds, 50g.
OXDR: Red Earthenwares, 1550+. 1 sherd, 13g.

The pottery occurrence by number and weight of sherds per context by fabric type is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Pottery occurrence by number and weight (in grammes) of sherds per context by fabric type

		OXAC		OXBF		OXY		OXAM		OXDR		
TP	Cntxt	No	Wt	No	Wt	No	Wt	No	Wt	No	Wt	DATE
3	U/S	2	102			8	58					U/S
3	2							1	16			13thC?
3	3	1	19			2	6					L11thC?
4	9	5	194									L11thC?
4	12							1	13			13thC?
5	14							1	4	1	13	16thC?
5	15					1	3	1	4			13thC?
6	29			1	2			2	13			13thC?
	Total	8	315	1	2	11	67	6	50	1	13	

7 Environmental results

While due consideration was given to various environmental sampling strategies, no suitable deposits were observed during the watching brief.

8 Discussion

While a number of archaeological deposits and potential features were observed during the watching brief, the limited nature of the excavations and the inaccessibility of a number of the test pits made interpretation difficult. It is unlikely that any further significant insights into the nature of the archaeological activity on the site can be added to those presented in the evaluation report.

However, a number of possible interpretations of the features and deposits observed are presented below.

Although a number of finds were recovered and provided a tentative date for some of the deposits observed, the overall stratigraphic sequence of the site was difficult to reconstruct given the constraints of the test pits. However, a general sequence of late 11th-century deposits overlain by 13th-century deposits and subsequently 16th-century material can be inferred from the pottery recovered (although theses dates are the earliest within the date range of the pottery - see above).

It is possible that the deposits of crushed stone 'mortar' and re-deposited gravel observed in TP5 and TP6 relate to the potential late Saxon "roughly constructed gravel surface" recorded in the evaluation report. They are of a similar depth to the surface referred to in the report (*c* 1 m below ground level), and the composition of the deposits of re-deposited gravel (21, 22, 25 and 26) is also similar. In TP5 however, although the relationship between these deposits and the surrounding deposit (15) is uncertain, deposit 15 produced a sherd of 13th century pottery which suggests that a Saxon origin for deposits 20-22 is unlikely (assuming that 20-22 'truncate' 15). Therefore, there is an element of doubt as to the late Saxon origins of the surface and associated pits recorded during the evaluation. The date range of the pottery recovered during the evaluation would allow for an early-medieval date to be attributed to these deposits, although no definitive conclusions can be drawn on the strength of the test pits observed during the watching brief.

Although a substantial feature (10) was recorded in TP4, the nature and dimensions of the feature were unclear due to the restricted nature of the trench. However, the feature may represent a large pit, similar to those recorded in the evaluation and interpreted as quarry pits. Alternatively, it may represent a ditch marking the boundary between messuages. Pottery recovered from the upper fill of this features dates it to the late 11th century. The overlying deposit (12) produced one sherd of 13th century pottery although this may have been residual as the deposit is likely to be associated with the construction of the Provost's Lodgings (see above).

References.

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

Mellor, M, 1994 Oxford Pottery: A synthesis of middle and late Saxon, medieval and early post-medieval pottery in the Oxford Region, Oxoniensia 59, 17-217

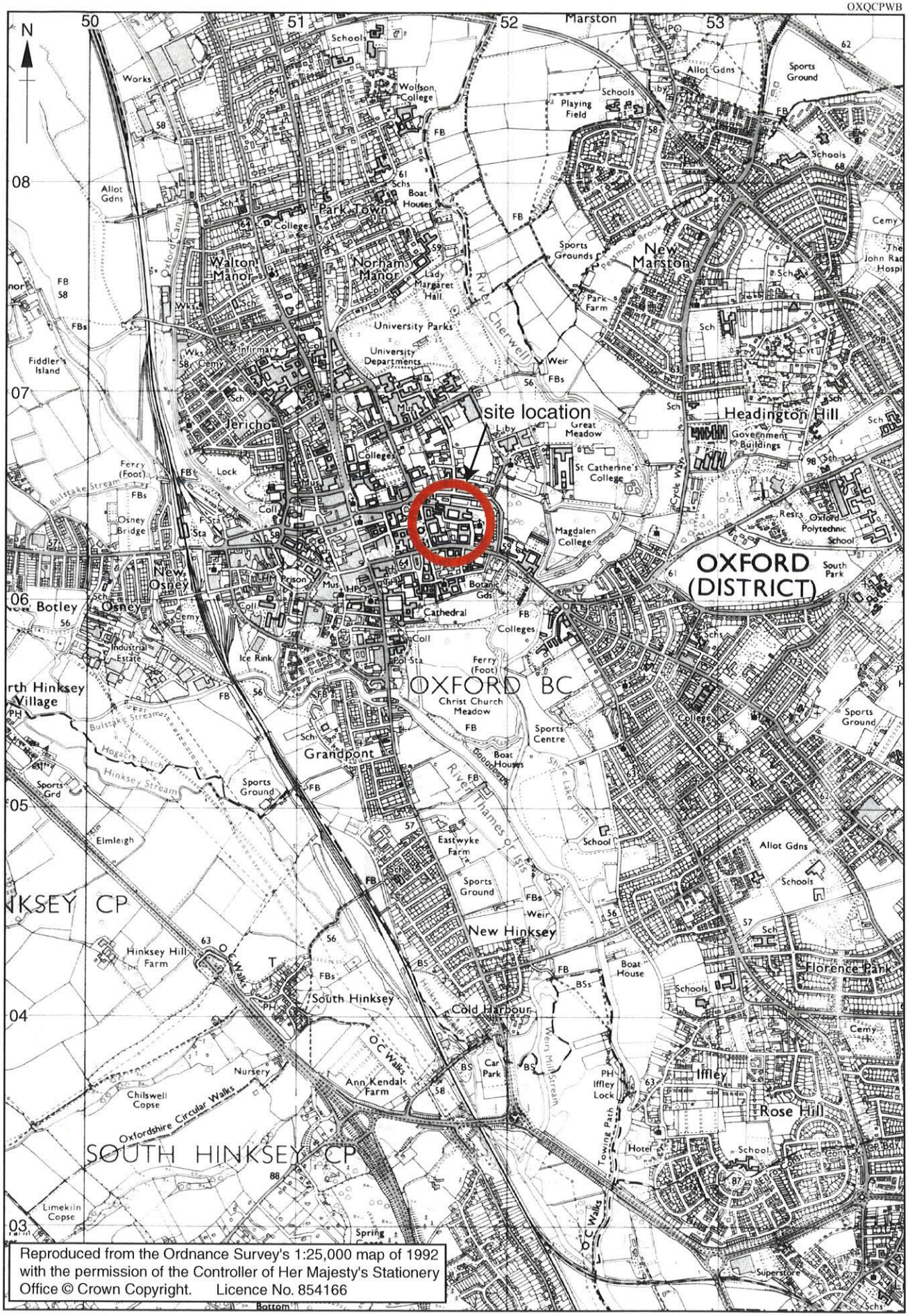


Figure 1: site location.

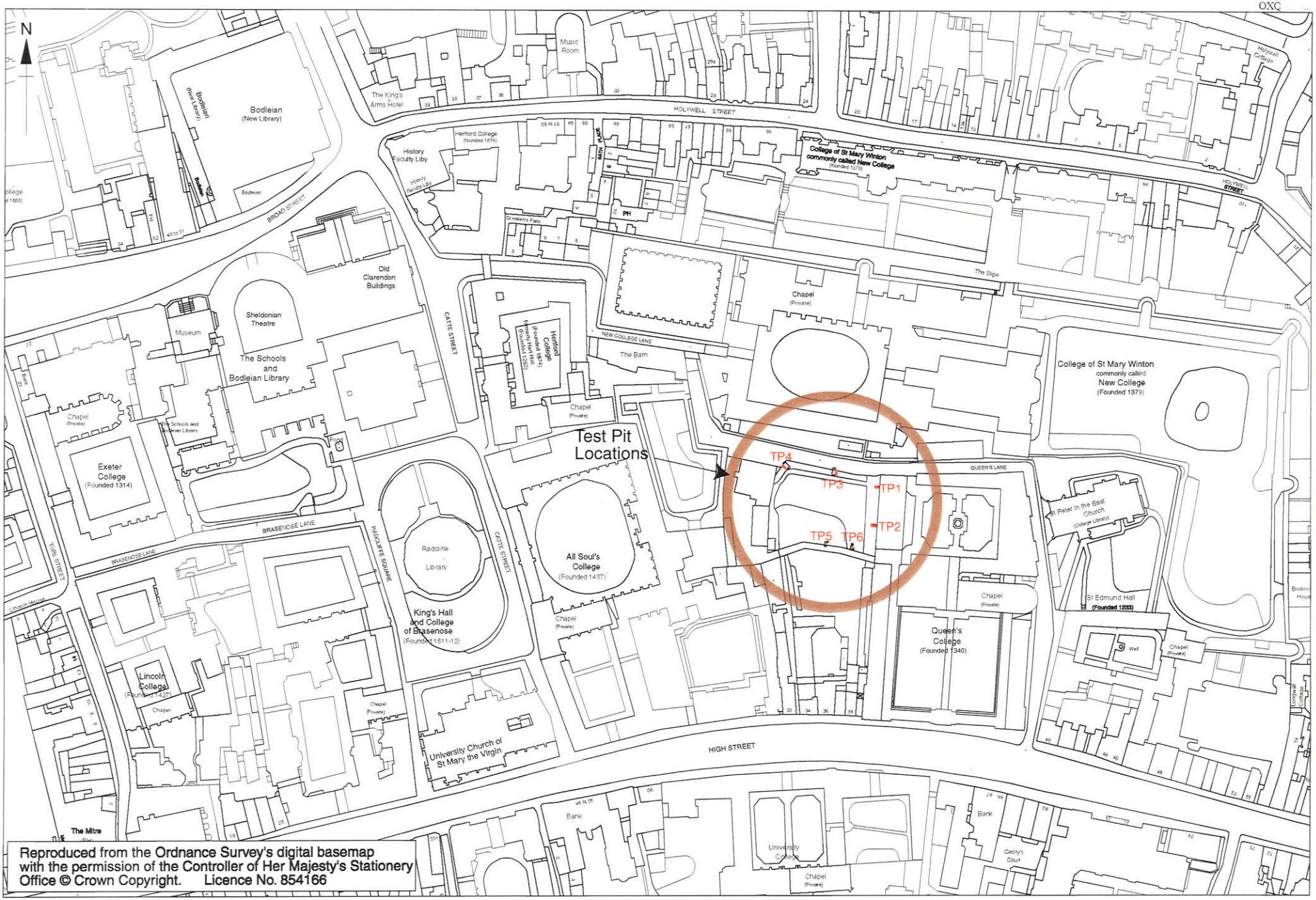
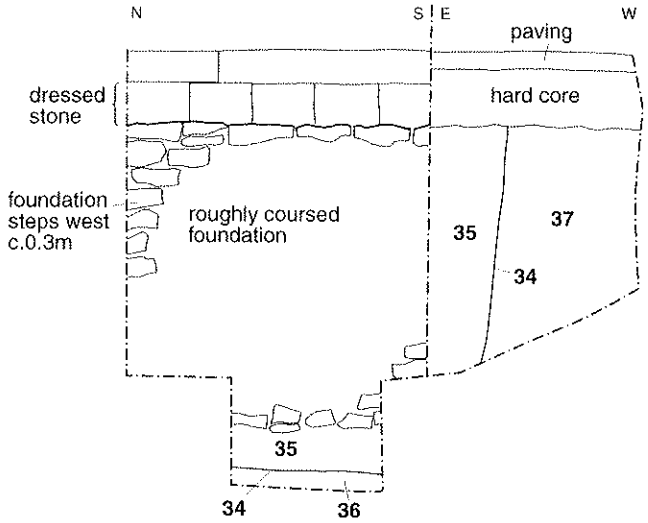
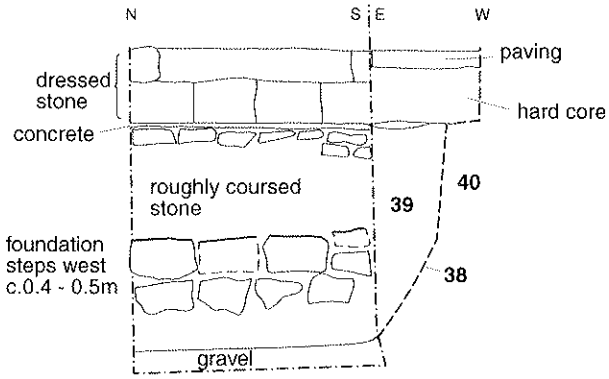


Figure 2: Site plan.

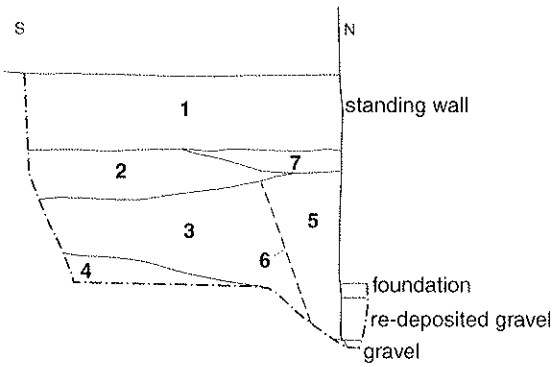
TP 1
Section 1



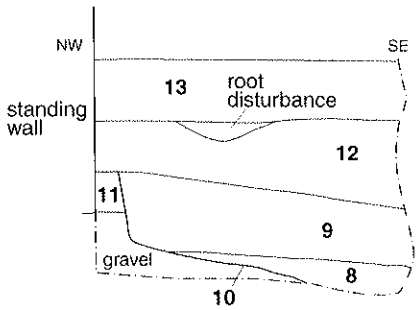
TP 2
Section 2



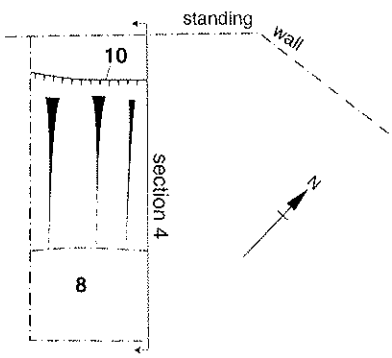
TP 3
Section 3



TP 4
Section 4



TP 4
Plan



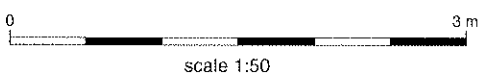
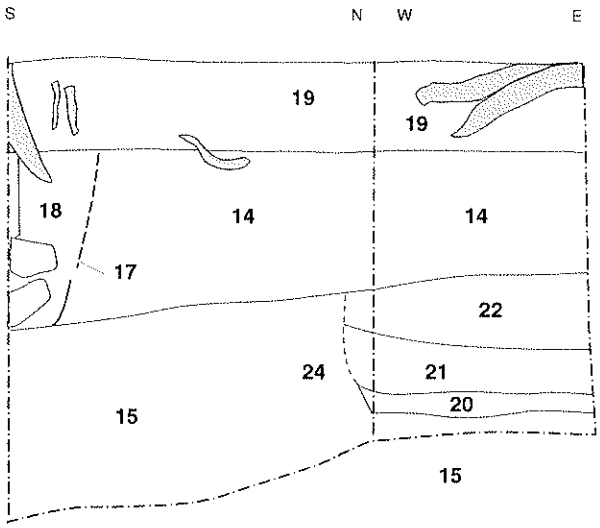
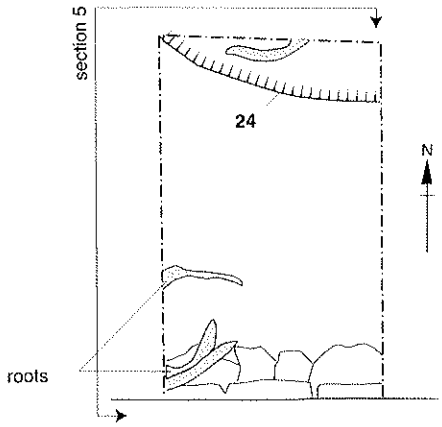


Figure 3: Test Pits 1 to 4.

TP 5
Section 5



TP 5
Plan



TP 6
Section 6

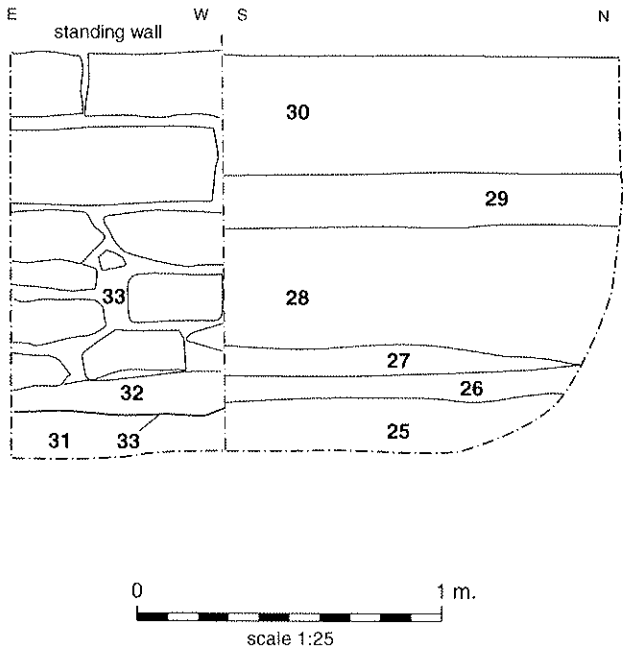


Figure 4: Test Pits 5 and 6.

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