

OXFORD

SMITHSON

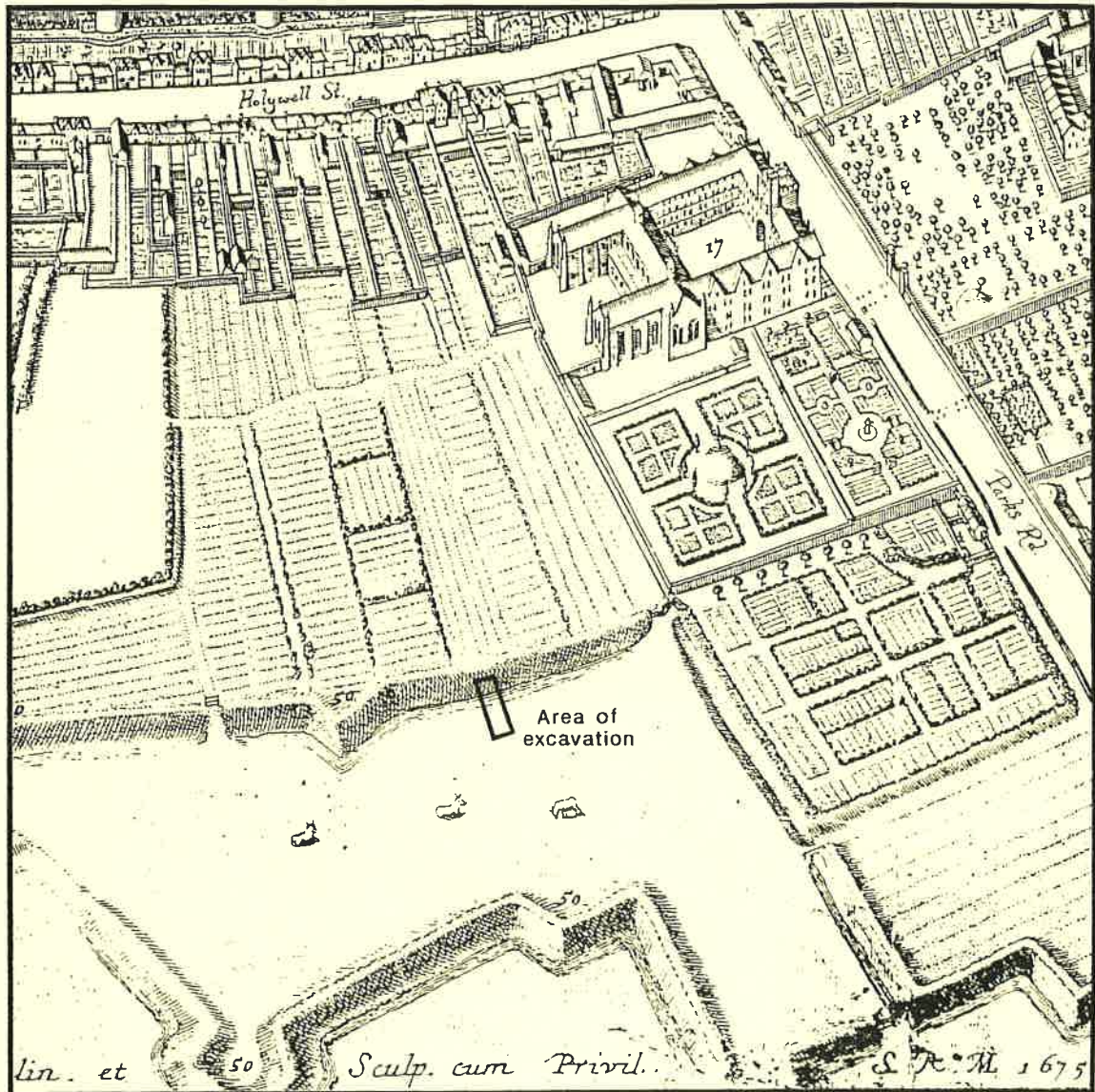
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MANSFIELD COLLEGE

EVALUATION REPORT



THE OXFORD ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT



Mansfield College, Oxford

RIC 29 May '92

Archaeological Evaluation**Introduction**

At the end of April 1992 the Oxford Archaeological Unit carried out a small archaeological investigation through the line of the supposed Civil War defences, which now form part of the S boundary of Mansfield College in Oxford. The visible surviving part of the defences consists of an earth bank running E - W and standing to a height of 2.40 m. It is presumed that there would have been an associated ditch, running parallel immediately to the N of the bank, though there is no topographical evidence confirming its existence.

The college plans to build a three storey study-bedroom block with Sir Robert McAlpine as contractor. This building would lie across the presumed line of the ditch and would destroy part of the existing bank.

As there is considerable uncertainty about the date of the surviving bank and of the existence of an associated ditch it was decided that a small archaeological investigation should take place in conjunction with the contractor's ground inspection work in order to verify the date and form of the defences.

It was also intended to locate any other archaeological features existing within the line of the proposed building, particularly ditches associated with prehistoric field systems.

Objectives

- i) To obtain datable finds from within and underneath the bank.
- ii) To establish the existence of an associated ditch and to define its exact location and dimensions.
- iii) To attempt to retrieve datable finds from the fill of the ditch.
- iv) To locate the existence of any other archaeological features within the line of the proposed building and sample them by hand for possible dating evidence.

Archaeological Background

The site of the proposed new building runs up to and cuts into the bank along the S boundary of the college, which appears to be the intermediate line of the Civil

War defences at Oxford. These defences were erected by the people of Oxford under pressure from the king in 1642, and much of their plan can be reconstructed from the maps of the time. The banks along the S and W sides of Mansfield College are clearly shown on David Loggan's map of 1675, (Fig 2) and with the adjoining stretches to the E and N are the only place that these earthworks survive.

The eastwards continuation of this line was seen when Keble College erected a squash court in 1981, but no ditch was seen. This was surprising because the fronting ditch was normally the source of material to construct the bank and was an integral part of the defences, so its absence on this stretch needs to be confirmed. It may transpire that this particular bank was formed by heaping up material from a plough headland or some other existing feature.

Strategy

It was intended to excavate a single trench 22 m in length, N - S in alignment, 2 m to the W of the proposed line of the new building and positioned so that the S end of the trench went at least 2 m into the bank. The exact position of the trench was a problem as great care had to be taken to avoid damaging the line of trees and their root system, which stood along the line of the bank.

The trench was excavated using a JCB fitted with a 1.5 m wide toothless bucket; it was also proposed that in the event of there being a ditch it would be mostly excavated using the machine, leaving only the bottom layers to be sampled by hand for possible dating evidence.

The Excavation

In the event, because of problems of access, only a small Kubota machine could be used and because of the position of the trees the trench had to be split into two separate parts. The first part of the trench, hereafter referred to as Trench 1, was 3.4 m in length and was placed at right angles to the bank and extended 2.8 m into the bank.

The second part of the trench, hereafter referred to as Trench 2, was excavated in the original position but was reduced to 15.5 m in length: the trench could not be continued any further to the N because of the existence of cables.

Trench 1

This trench ran N-S and was 3.4 m in length and 1.3 m wide. It was excavated by machine down to the top of the natural gravel, where it existed. First the modern topsoil 101 was removed along with layers 102, a modern build-up layer, and 103, the subsoil; these layers had been heavily disturbed by tree roots. Below

103 in the S half of the trench where the bank existed were layers 105, 106, 107 and 108 which formed the make-up of the bank. Below 108 the top of the natural gravel was reached 0.80 m below the present ground surface: it sloped down slightly from S to N .

In the N half of the trench the natural gravel had clearly been cut away by a large feature 109, the S edge of which could be seen 1.7 m from the N end of the trench. The part of the feature that was in the area of the trench was excavated by hand to a depth of 1.10 m removing layers 104 and 107. Although the feature clearly continued down below this level further excavation in trench 1 was not possible due to safety considerations, the trench not being large enough to make shoring practical.

The only datable find to come from the bank was a clay pipe bowl, mid to late 17th century in date: (dated from comparison to pipe bowl groups found during the excavation at St Ebbe's, Oxford, 1967-1976) this came from what appears to be a slippage layer (106) on the side of the bank.

Trench 2

This trench ran NNW - SSE, 15.5 m in length and was 1.5 m wide. It was machine excavated down to the top of the natural gravel. First the topsoil 201 was removed along with 202, a modern build-up layer, and 203, the subsoil. Below 203 was an earlier subsoil 204 which had been cut away in the last 3.4 m at the S end of the trench by a large feature 222. The removal of layer 204 revealed the top of the natural gravel, at an average depth of 0.70 m below the present ground surface. This had been cut away at the S end of the trench by feature 222.

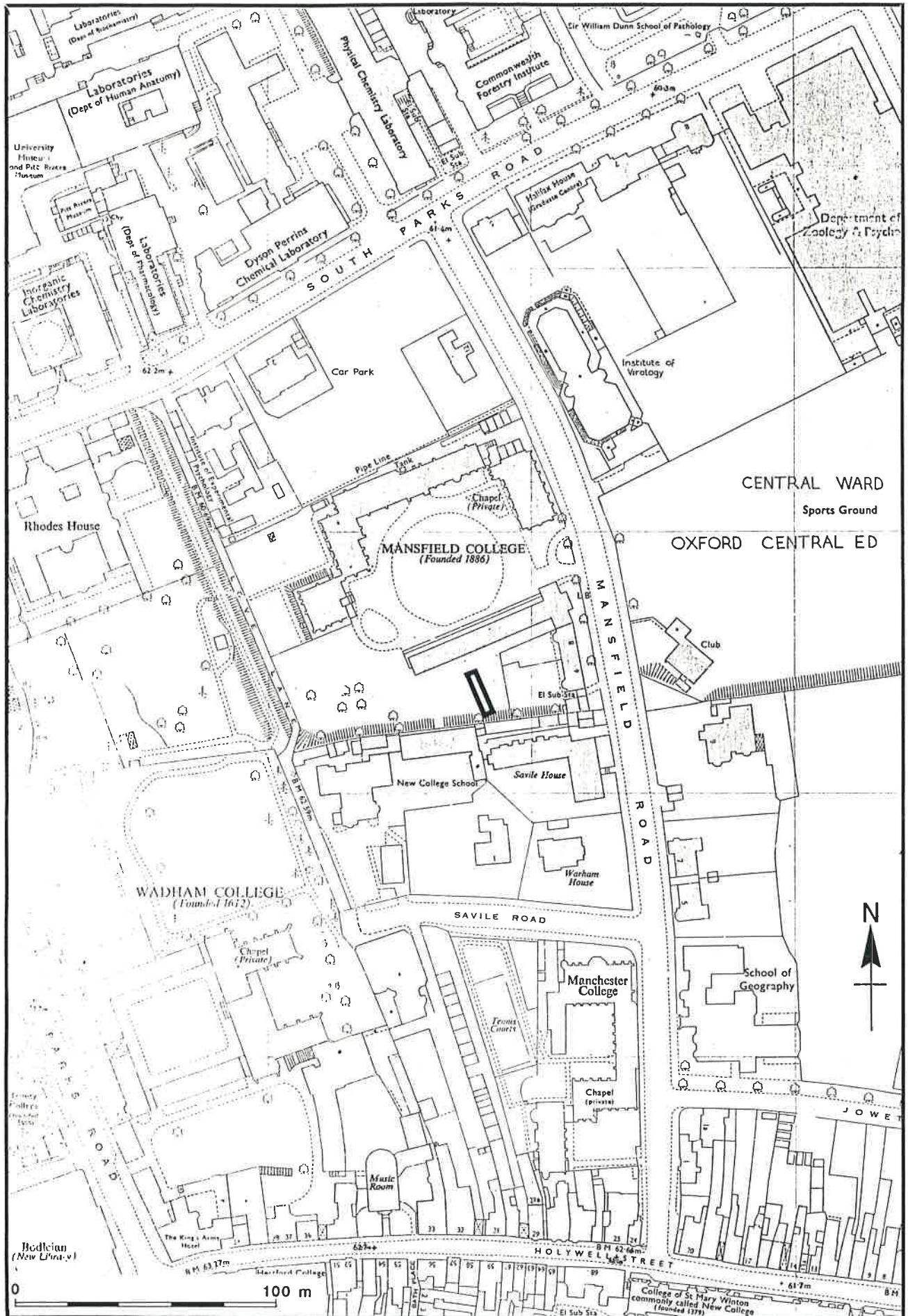
Feature 222 was machine excavated to a depth of 1 m below the top of the natural gravel, revealing a clearly defined N edge of a very large feature, sloping down at 45 degrees from N to S. After shoring was erected, excavation continued by hand in the hope of retrieving datable finds. After a further 0.40 m the bottom of the feature was reached, at a depth of 2.2 m below the present ground surface. The only finds to be retrieved from the lower layers of the ditch were a few small sherds of late Bronze \ early Iron Age pottery and one sherd of Roman pottery, which are obviously residual. Feature 222 was generally filled with alternating layers of a compact, reddish brown sandy silt loams and yellowish brown gravelly silt loams.

The only other archaeological features present in trench 2 were what appeared to be two small intercutting pits, cut into the top of the natural gravel but overlaid by layer 204. The larger and later of the two pits (207) was approximately 1.6 m in diameter and 0.52 m deep; only a small part of the earlier feature 209 was within the area of excavation so the exact size and function are not certain but it was 0.60 m in depth and the fill 208 was very similar to the fills of 207 (layers 205 and 206). Both of these features were sampled by hand but unfortunately neither produced any datable finds .

Interpretation

The large features represented by 109 in trench 1 and by 222 in Trench 2 are undoubtedly the two sides of the original ditch which formed part of the defences and produced the material to construct the bank. Combining the two sections from trenches 1 and 2, (Fig 4), the form and approximate size of the ditch can be established. This suggests that it was at least 7 m wide and over 2 m in depth with sides tapering in at about 45 degrees from vertical and with a flat bottom. The ditch runs parallel to the bank and is immediately to the N; adding further mystery to the absence of the ditch in the stretch of the defences to the E investigated in 1981 prior to the construction of Keble College Squash Court.

OAU
May 1992



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Fig. 1



Fig. 2

Dav. Loggan

Delin. et

Sculp. cum Privileg.

S. R. M. 1675

Mansfield College Oxford

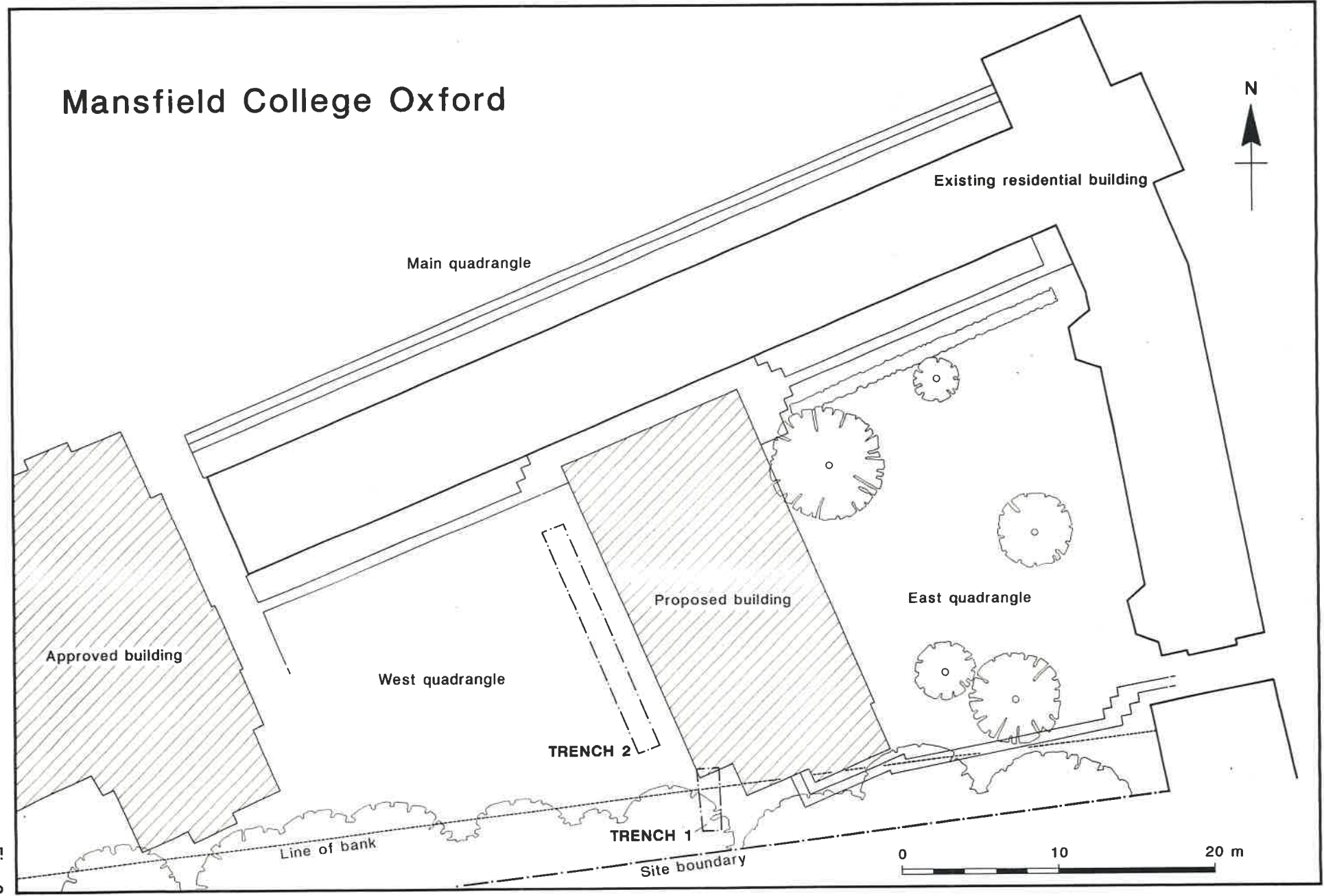


Fig. 3

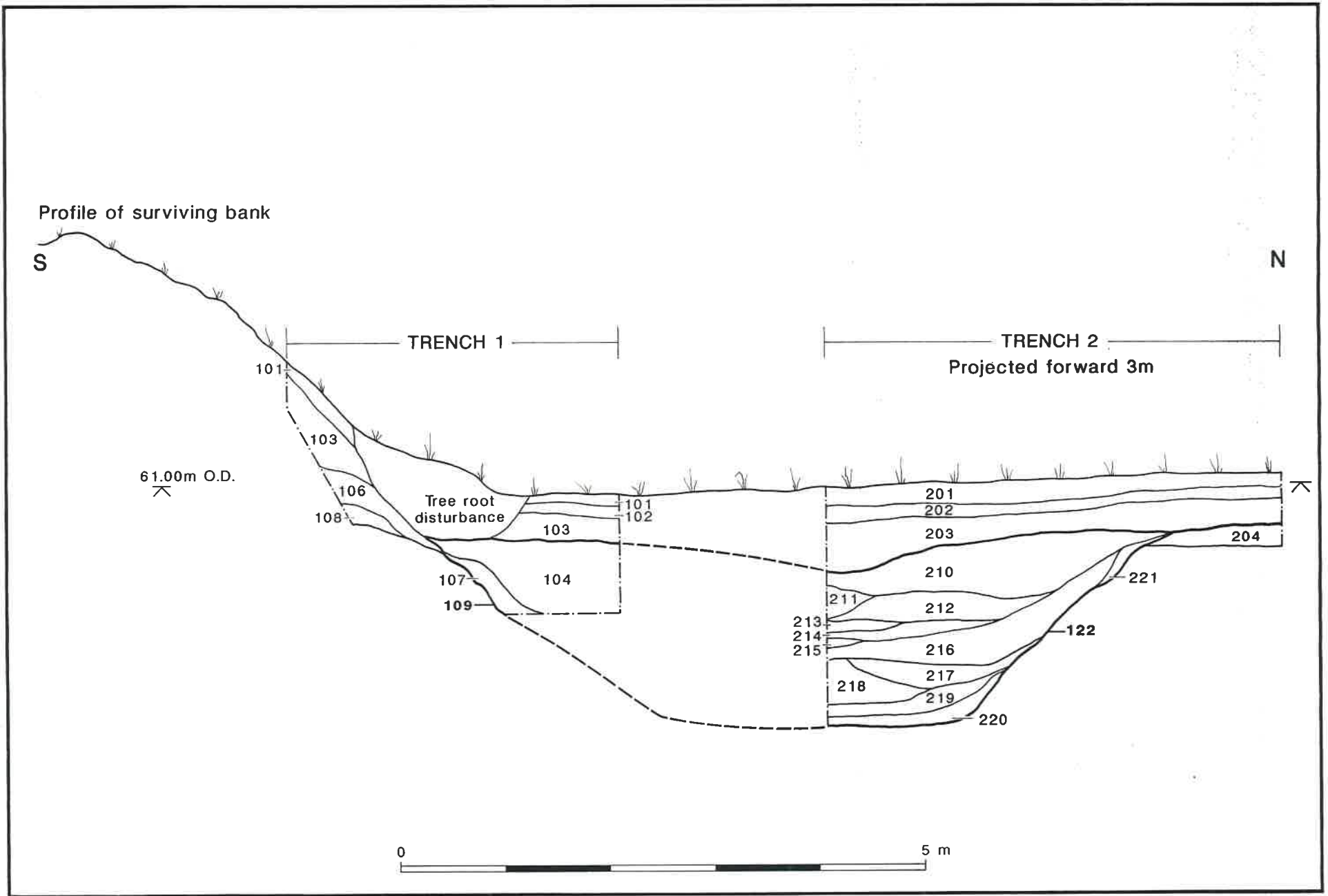
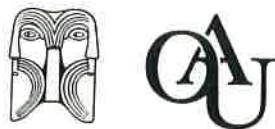


FIG.4



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