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Errol Wilson and Oxford City Council

15-16 SHIP STREET, OXFORD

ARCHAEOLOGICAL BUILDING SURVEY

OXFORD ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT  
MARCH 2001

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## 15-16 SHIP STREET, OXFORD

### ARCHAEOLOGICAL BUILDING SURVEY

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#### *Summary*

*The refurbishment of Nos 15-16 Ship Street provided an opportunity to investigate the remains of the City Wall and Defensive Tower (Bastion 5) preserved in the listed building. The tower was shown to be extensively rebuilt, but with original work showing at the base.*

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) was asked to undertake an archaeological investigation and record of the works on No. 15-16 Ship Street (a City property), with regard to the remains of the medieval bastion at the rear of the premises (Fig. 1). The works were being undertaken as part of a conversion to hotel use, and these involved reflooring the back room of No. 16 which is built into a tower in the city wall. The opportunity was therefore taken to examine the visible masonry of the tower and to investigate its relationship with the wall (provisionally identified as part of the city wall) at the rear of the tower. Records were made by OAU in January to April 1998.
- 1.2 Nos 14-15, and No. 16, which are on the north side of Ship Street, are Grade II listed, and were included in the RCHM *Inventory* (Monument 116-117) as a 17<sup>th</sup>-century houses with remains of the city wall in the cellar of No. 16.<sup>1</sup> The tower, 'Bastion 5' was also included as part of Monument 51:  
'Bastion (5) now forms the kitchen of No. 15 Ship Street; it is standing to a height of 15 to 20 ft. but has been extensively altered and the N. wall partly reconstructed in Brick without a curve; there is an original loop facing NE. This bastion was repaired in 1423-4.'<sup>2</sup>

## 2 HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

- 2.1 The city wall at this point is on the line of the late Saxon earth wall of c.900 AD, which as is known from elsewhere was later faced in stone and then rebuilt in stone in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The towers in general are thought to be contemporary with the 13<sup>th</sup>-century rebuilding, but they have been occupied from the late

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<sup>1</sup> Royal Commission on Historical Monuments England, *Inventory of the Historical Monuments in the City of Oxford* (1939), 170.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, 159, with reference to H.E. Salter, *Munimenta Civitatis Oxoniae*, Oxf. Hist. Soc. LXXI (1917), 283.

medieval period and have often been rebuilt. The repairs recorded in 1423-4 were to the 'tower opposite Laurencehall'.<sup>3</sup> The ditch on the north side (against which the Broad Street properties were built) was filled in from the 16<sup>th</sup>/17<sup>th</sup> centuries.

- 2.2 Ship Street is a medieval road running along the inside of the wall, and the houses built between the road and the city wall from the 16<sup>th</sup> century are the property of the City of Oxford. They represent late medieval colonisation of land that originally would have been left open to provide ready access to the defences. No detailed history has been researched for No.15, though the lease books in the City Archives would have names of lessees from the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and some names of occupiers could be found in rentals and taxation lists.<sup>4</sup> A plan of the property in the 19<sup>th</sup> century is to be found in the city's 'Vellum Book' of plans (Fig. 2).<sup>5</sup> This shows Nos. 14-15 as interlinked properties, with a large stack having diagonally-set fireplaces in the east wall, and access to the tower at the rear; No. 16 was a three-part plan with two chimney-stacks and a rear stair turret extending out into the yard. In the tower the stair to the cellar is shown in the same place as it was at the commencement of works, though there was not then any indication of a fireplace.
- 2.3 Previous work outside the tower to the north-west was undertaken by OAU behind Flaggs in Broad Street, where an archaeological evaluation was carried out prior to the extension of the shop back to the line of the city wall. Two small evaluation trenches were, in which 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup>-century pottery, clay pipes and glass were found, and remains of two stone walls of earlier date, which were thought possibly to belong to built extensions to the Ship Street properties where they had broken through the city wall.<sup>6</sup>
- 2.4 An archaeological watching brief in the kitchen area of No.16 Turl Street (on the corner of Ship and Turl Streets) investigated the area immediately south of the line of the city wall. Finds below the concrete floor included 17<sup>th</sup>/18<sup>th</sup>-century pottery, glass and clay pipes, and fragments of rubble possibly from the wall.<sup>7</sup>
- 2.5 A post-medieval well had earlier been found in the nearby cellar of No.10 Turl Street during renovations.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Salter, *Munimenta*, 283 from Twyne's transcripts of lost City accounts.

<sup>4</sup> The Ship Street properties (like those in St Michael's Street) are generally, though not wholly, excluded from Salter's *Oxford City Properties*, Oxf. Hist. Soc. LXXXIII (1925). For other sources listing properties, see Salter, *Survey and Tokens*, Oxf. Hist. Soc. LXXV (1920).

<sup>5</sup> Vellum Book 123-4, City Archives (microfilm in Centre for Oxfordshire Studies, Westgate Library). The Vellum Book map references can be traced through the tables in the *Schedule of the Property of the Mayor, Aldermen and City of Oxford* (5<sup>th</sup> edn, 1923), 31; Nos 14-16 Ship Street were rack-rented, map nos. 245-6 and Vellum Book nos. 123-4.

<sup>6</sup> OAU Evaluation Report, 1994.

<sup>7</sup> OAU Evaluation Report, 1999.

<sup>8</sup> OAU UAD draft from SMR

### 3 DESCRIPTION OF DISCOVERIES

- 3.1 The tower is of irregular shape (above base level) and has been subject to a number of post-medieval alterations, including sash windows, and its largely modern roof. The ground-floor room at the back of Nos. 15 and 16 has two windows and a fireplace in the west wall, and an irregular rectangular interior somewhat at variance with the external plan (Fig. 3). The observations were all made at or below floor level, and in the cellar which exists in the east half of the tower. The ground-floor level of the Ship Street house is about 3 m above the level of the yard behind the Broad Street houses, and the yard is a metre or more below the level of Broad Street, and this reflects the difference between the levels of the down, infilled ditch, and suburban street. At a height of 65.6 m OD, the level of Ship Street is one of the highest points in the medieval town.<sup>9</sup>
- 3.2 Removal of the floor revealed the north wall of the tower as a straight rubble face, with a narrow rubble wall dividing the lower level and forming the cellar. If there ever was a cellar in the north half this had been infilled with a mix of mortar, sand, rubble and slate. The present fireplace in the west wall was shown to have a predecessor in the north-west corner by the outline of the brick-lined hearth below the floor. This fireplace had been removed and replaced by a window. Neither the window nor the two fireplaces are shown on the Vellum Book plan (Fig. 2), and so must be later 19<sup>th</sup> or 20<sup>th</sup> century in date. The floor consisted of a large north-south beam (280 x 240 mm) along the top of the wall with a series of regularly spaced joists (100 x 80 mm) tenoned with diminished haunches, and thus probably of 17<sup>th</sup>-century date. The division of the ground-floor room was by modern studwork partitions, not shown on the Vellum Book plan.
- 3.3 The cellar was approached by a dog-leg stair in the south-east corner, through a trap door. The plan of the cellar is also different from that of the ground floor, in that the east wall is thicker than the wall above it, and the north wall has a modern brick facing (Fig. 3). There is a simple division of studs and boards dividing the cellar into north and south parts, standing on a rough stone footing. The walls are of rubble, part whitewashed, and possibly of different dates. The west wall is of irregular large rubble with a relieving arch near the ground, probably where the wall has been built over loose fill or a pit. The east wall is of well-coursed though irregular rubble, and has been rebuilt in brick at the north end. The south wall (on the line of the City wall) has a lower offset of rough rubble, with a better mortared wall above. The junction of the east and south walls in the corner space below the stairs is not conclusive, as the lower (offset) section of the south wall seemed to abut the east wall, though above the offset they appeared to be bonded together.

<sup>9</sup> Ex inf. Roger Ainslie, City Estates.

#### **4 CONCLUSION**

- 4.1 The investigation has proved useful in revealing the number of different building phases in the tower, suggesting that it is neither all medieval nor all modern work. The medieval towers in the walls of Oxford (e.g. in New College) do not usually have walls across their back, though where the towers were converted into houses (e.g. in the Bodleian/Clarendon Quadrangle, excavated in 1899) they did have such walls. It is possible that the well-built east wall of the bastion in the cellar is indeed medieval, and thus the south wall is a later alteration, and the wall dividing the cellar is later still. It is of special significance as being one of only two surviving towers that are still inhabited.

Julian Munby & Andy Simmons  
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March 2001



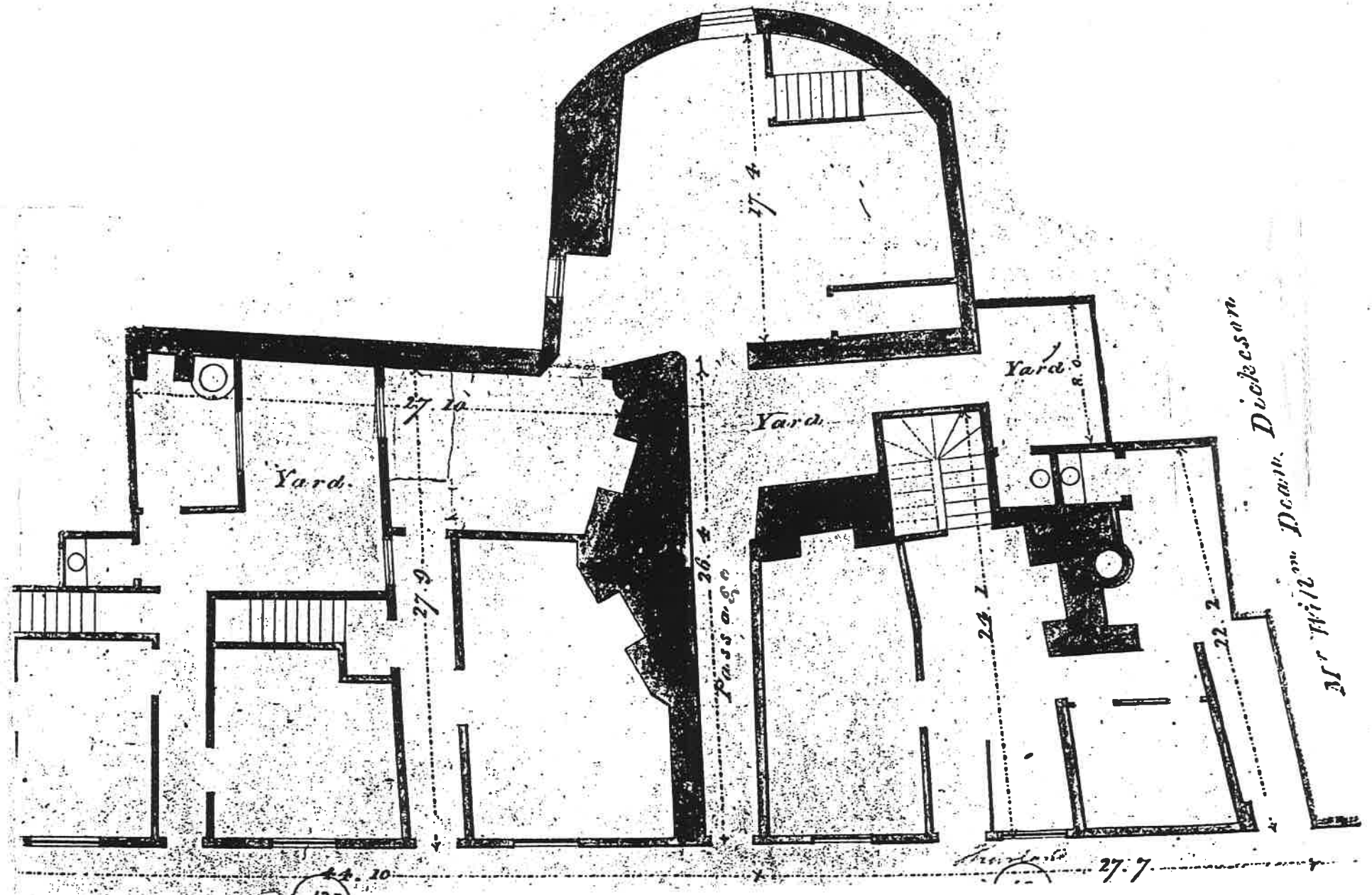


Figure 2: Plan of 14 - 16 Ship Street from the Vellum Book (early 19<sup>th</sup> century)

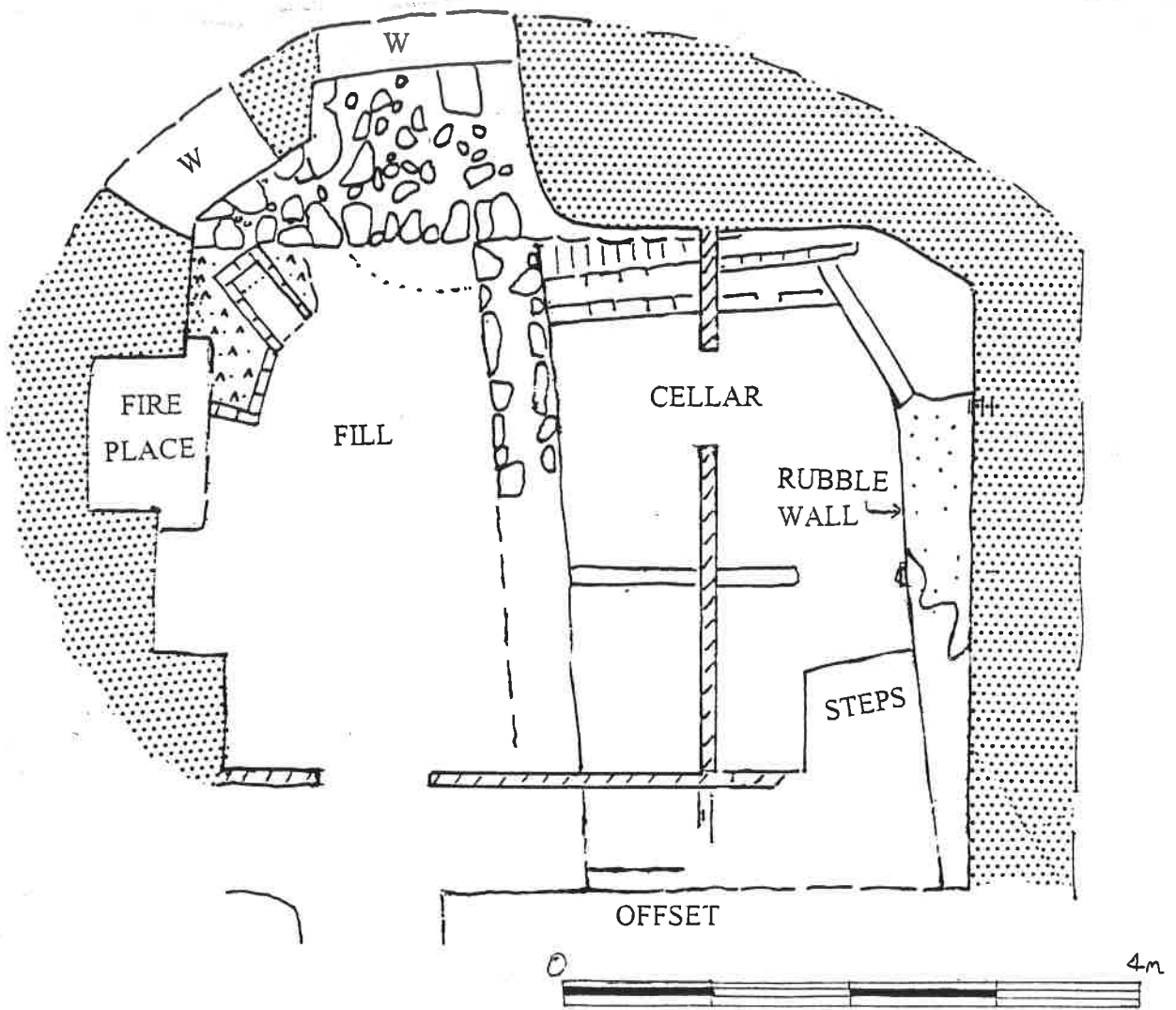


Figure 3: Plan of interior of bastion



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