

Beechcroft Developments Limited

Former Primary School, Charlbury, Oxfordshire

*ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION REPORT*

NGR: (SP 3580 1950)

Planning Application: W97/1167,8 (West Oxfordshire District Council)



OXFORD ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT

October 1997

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Prepared by: <i>S. Homan</i>
Date: <i>3/10/97.</i>
Checked by: <i>J. Hiner</i>
Date: <i>31.10.97</i>
Approved by: <i>MR Rokub</i>
Date: <i>15 Nov 1997</i>

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# Former Primary School, Charlbury, Oxfordshire

## ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION REPORT

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## SUMMARY

*The Oxford Archaeological Unit carried out a field evaluation at the Former Primary School, Charlbury in September 1997, on behalf of Beechcroft Developments Limited. The only previous archaeological investigations carried out in the vicinity include two small scale excavations carried out at St.Mary's Church (OAU, 1990, 1995). Documentary and topographical evidence indicate that the site lies within the core of the medieval settlement of Charlbury.*

*The only archaeological feature revealed during the evaluation was a 20th century soak-away or similiar feature. The levels at which natural bedrock were encountered indicate that the area immediately to the west of the development area has been extensively terraced, destroying any archaeological remains that may have been present. However, the Former Primary School site itself does not seem to have been levelled to the same extent. The absence of archaeological remains may therefore suggest that the land was not intensively used for settlement or industrial activity in the medieval period.*

## 1 INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Location and scope of work

In September 1997 the Oxford Archaeological Unit carried out a field evaluation at the former County Primary School, Charlbury, on behalf of Beechcroft Developments Limited, in respect of a planning application to demolish the existing buildings and construct fourteen cottages, two apartments, an office, poolhouse and garaging (West Oxfordshire District, Planning Application No. W97/1167,8). The evaluation was required prior to determination of the planning application, in accordance with Planning Policy Guidance Note 16 (PPG16) and the local district plan. It was conducted in accordance with a brief set by, and a WSI agreed with Oxfordshire County Council's County Archaeological Service (OCC CAS 1997). The proposed development site is located to the east of Church Street, at the junction of Brown's Lane and The Playing Close and is c.0.45 hectares in extent.

### 1.2 Geology, topography and land-use

Charlbury is located on the eastern valley slope of the River Evenlode on loamy soil overlying Great Oolite, with bands of gravel, alluvium and other strata occurring along the Evenlode Valley. The settlement lies at the centre of a minor road network linking it to Burford, Woodstock and Chipping Norton (Rodwell 1975, 77).

The development area lies between 112m and 115m O.D, and is occupied by buildings of the former Charlbury County Primary School. The site is currently used as a night club and day nursery, with attached gardens and car parking.

### 1.3 Historical and archaeological background

Little is known of the archaeology of the town. Prehistoric barrows and earthworks are known in the surrounding area, including a section of Grim's ditch located to the west of the River Evenlode. The site of a Romano-British Farm has been excavated at Lee's rest, to the east of the town. Archaeological finds recorded from the town itself include a group of undated skeletons from north of the churchyard and a Roman brooch, reputedly gold, also found in the vicinity of the church. The topographic setting of the settlement suggests that it might lie on the site of a Roman villa (Rodwell 1975, 77-84).

The placename 'Charlbury' means the *burh* of Ceorl, suggesting the presence of a significant Anglo-Saxon settlement on the site. There are two 7th century Saxon cemeteries in the north-west of the parish. The later Anglo-Saxon settlement appears to have been centred on the Church of St.Mary and on either side of Church Street. A tradition current in the 11th century suggests that the church is the resting place of St.Diuma, the first bishop of the Mercians, who died in 658 AD in a territory called *Infepingham* (*Ibid.*). Two small-scale evaluations have been carried out at the Church. Assessment trenches excavated in 1990 discovered little of significance (OAU 1990). However a second evaluation, carried out in 1995, uncovered a stone wall footing which may have formed part of the Saxon building (OAU forthcoming).

Charlbury was the centre of a large episcopal estate in the late Saxon period. The manor was held by the Bishop of Lincoln at the time of the Domesday Survey of 1086 AD and passed to Eynsham Abbey in 1094. A weekly market was established by charter in 1256, apparently resulting in commercial development to the east and north of Church Street. By analogy with

similar medieval market towns in Oxfordshire and elsewhere in the south-east, development in this period probably included the establishment of tenements fronting onto the street, with domestic and industrial activity and waste disposal taking place in the rear areas of the burgage plots. The proposed development site lies within the historic core of the medieval settlement, in an area that probably fell within or to the rear of tenements fronting onto Sheep Street.

The medieval and post-medieval town does not appear to have developed any corporate organisation, either religious or secular, though Eynsham Abbey maintained a courthouse on the site of the house now called 'The Priory' (*Ibid.*).

The centre of Charlbury is a conservation area including 57 grade II and grade III listed buildings. Most buildings in the town centre are stone-built and of 18th or 19th century date, though some eighteen buildings have pre-1700 features. The earliest elements of the former Primary School buildings date from the early 19th century (*Ibid.*).

## 2 EVALUATION AIMS

The aims of the evaluation are as stated in the Written Scheme of Investigation (WSI) (OAU 1997):

- To establish the presence/ absence of archaeological remains within the proposal area.
- To determine the extent, condition, nature, character, quality and date of any archaeological remains present.
- To establish the ecofactual and environmental potential of archaeological deposits and features.
- To make available the results of the investigation.

## 3 EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

The evaluation was conducted by the excavation and recording of three trial trenches.

### 3.1 Sample size and scope of work

The brief required the excavation of trenches equivalent to one 70m x 1.5m trench (105m<sup>2</sup>, c.2% of the total development area), trench locations to be dependent on landscape and structural constraints. Three trenches were excavated, to various dimensions (see 5.1 and Fig.2). Practical considerations, including the location of underground services and restricted access to the garden area at the north-west end of the site, necessitated minor revisions to the trench plan as set out in the WSI. All trenches were machine excavated, to natural, weathered oolitic limestone bedrock. The investigation excluded areas still covered by standing buildings and areas known to be occupied by service trenches.

### 3.2 Fieldwork methods and recording

The trenches were not cleaned by hand as it was clear from first inspection that the natural subsoil and bedrock were undisturbed except by a single modern intrusion in Trench 3. There were no deposits with sufficient environmental potential to justify sampling. Trench plans were drawn at a scale of 1:50, and sample sections at a scale of 1:20. All trenches were photographed using colour slide and black and white print film. Spoil heaps were briefly scanned for medieval or earlier finds, without result. Recording followed procedures laid down in the *OAU Fieldwork Manual* (ed D Wilkinson, 1992).

### 3.3 Finds

No finds were recovered during the evaluation

## 4 RESULTS: GENERAL

### 4.1 Soils and ground conditions

The general subsoil type was calcareous mid-brown silty loam, overlying weathered oolitic limestone. The subsoil was sealed by garden soil in the north-western part of the site and by tarmac in the south-eastern part. Ground conditions were dry.

### 4.2 Distribution of archaeological deposits

No significant archaeological features or finds were present. Trench 3 contained part of a large square -cornered feature of modern date (14), possibly a soak-away or similiar feature.

## 5 RESULTS: DESCRIPTIONS

### 5.1 Trench descriptions

#### 5.1.1 Trench 1

Fig.2

Dimensions: 1.6m x 20.5m

Orientation: NW-SE

Trench 1 was excavated along the south-western boundary of the development area, at the lower end of the Old School House garden. The soil sequence consisted of a dark orange-brown silty clay natural subsoil (3) (0.22m thick), overlain by a dark yellowish brown silty clay buried soil (2) (0.2m thick) and a friable dark yellowish brown silty loam topsoil (1) (0.3m thick). These three layers were removed by machine to a total depth of 0.72m. Small to medium sized fragments of weathered limestone were common in all but the topsoil layer. No archaeological features were present.

A test pit was excavated at the north-western end of Trench 1, to a total depth of 1.10m, demonstrating that the weathered oolitic limestone (cornbrash) at the base of the trench was natural rather than made ground.

The ground level of 'The Bull' car park, which is separated from the Old School House garden by a stone boundary wall, was observed to be 1.09m lower than the ground level beside Trench 1, indicating that the land has been terraced, partly by a build-up of garden soil on the eastern side of the wall, and partly by cutting away the ground on its western side.

### 5.1.2 Trench 2

Fig.2

Dimensions: 1.6m x 16.5m

Orientation: SW-NE

Trench 2 was located in the former school playing ground. The soil sequence consisted of natural weathered oolitic limestone (12), overlain by a mid-brown silty loam buried soil (11) (0.32m thick). The surface of the playing ground was formed by a layer of crushed limestone hard-core in a silty clay matrix (10) (0.06m thick), overlain by tarmac (9) (0.09m thick). No archaeological features were present in this trench and no finds were recovered.

### 5.1.3 Trench 3

Fig.2

Dimensions: 1.6m x 23m

Orientation : SW-NE

Trench 3 was located in the former school playing ground. The soil sequence consisted of natural weathered oolitic limestone (8), overlain by a mid-brown silty loam buried soil (7) (0.25m thick). The playing ground surface was formed by a layer of crushed limestone hard-core in a silty clay matrix (6) (0.12m thick), sealed by tarmac (5) (0.08m thick). The trench was excavated to a total depth of 0.45m. The only feature present was part of a large, square-cornered pit, 3.60m long, lined with slate in a dark grey silty clay matrix, containing glass, brick, tile and charcoal fragments (14) (0.2m thick). The central part of the feature was filled with light yellowish brown sandy gravel. The feature is of 20th century date and is likely to be a soak-away or similiar feature.



## 6 DISCUSSION AND INTERPRETATION

### 6.1 Reliability of field investigation

The evaluation was somewhat limited by the presence of standing buildings and underground services. However, reasonable coverage was achieved in the area closest to the medieval settlement core, to the rear of the former school buildings.

### 6.2 Interpretation

#### 6.2.1 *Significance*

No significant archaeological features were identified by the evaluation. The only cut feature discovered was of modern date. The difference in ground level between the former Primary School site and the plots immediately to the west, indicates that the core area of the medieval settlement has been extensively terraced. Archaeological deposits are therefore unlikely to survive in the area to the west of the proposed development. Terracing does not seem to have been so severe within the development area, since undisturbed natural subsoil survived in the garden area to the rear of the Old School House. The absence of archaeological features may therefore suggest that the development area was not intensively used for settlement or industrial activity in the medieval period.

#### 6.2.2 *Impact of development*

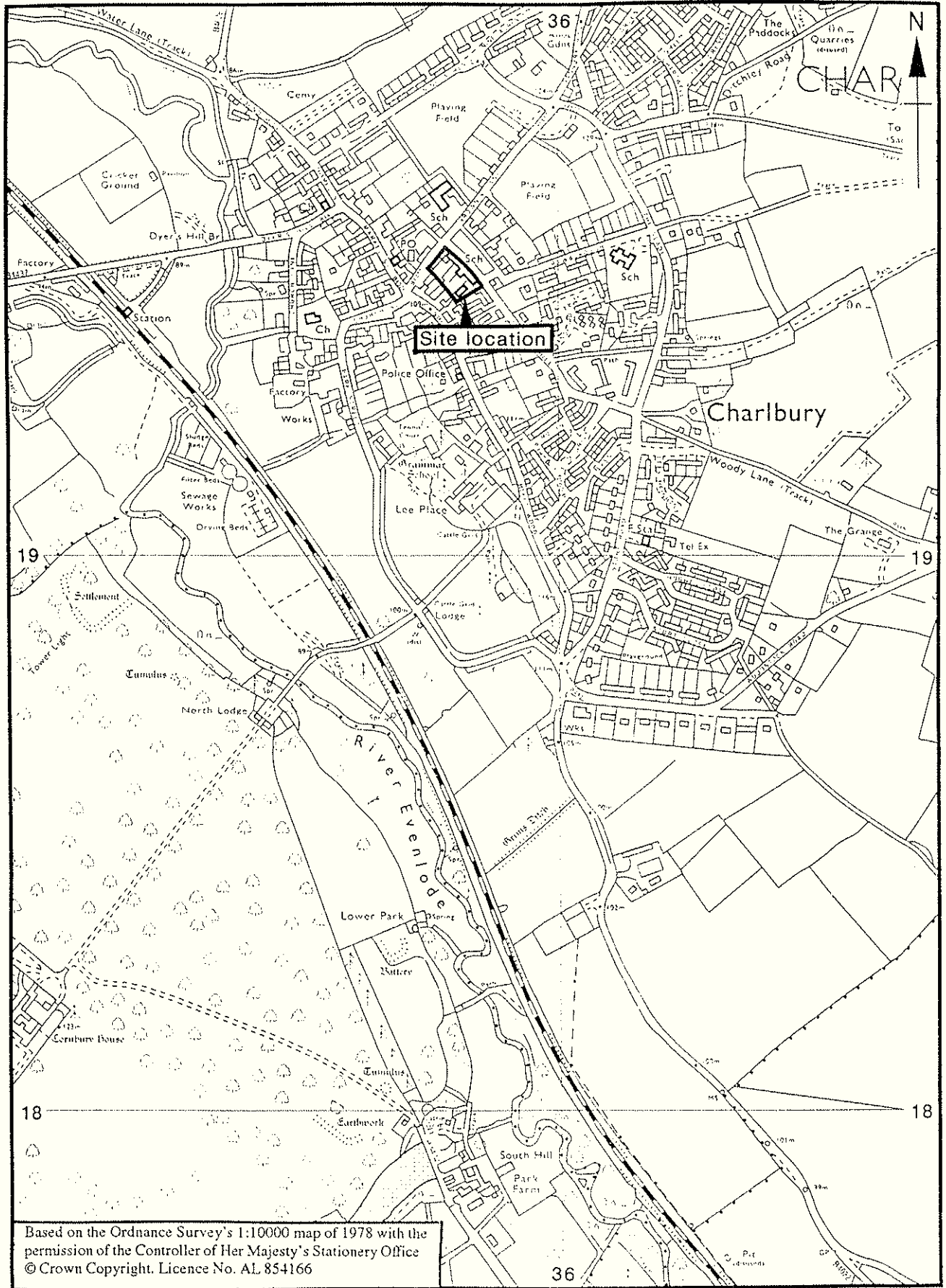
The evaluation suggests that no significant archaeological deposits survive within the proposed development area.

### Bibliography and references

- |                    |      |   |
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| OCC CAS            | 1997 | <i>Former primary school, Pooles lane, Charlbury. Brief for an Archaeological Evaluation. Oxfordshire County Council, County Archaeological Services.</i> |
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| Rodwell, K. (Ed.)  | 1975 | <i>Historic Towns in Oxfordshire: a survey of the new county. Oxfordshire Archaeological Unit, 77-84.</i>   |
| Wilkinson, D. (ed) | 1992 | <i>Oxford Archaeological Unit Field Manual, (First edition, August 1992)</i>  |

## Appendix 1 Archaeological Context Inventory

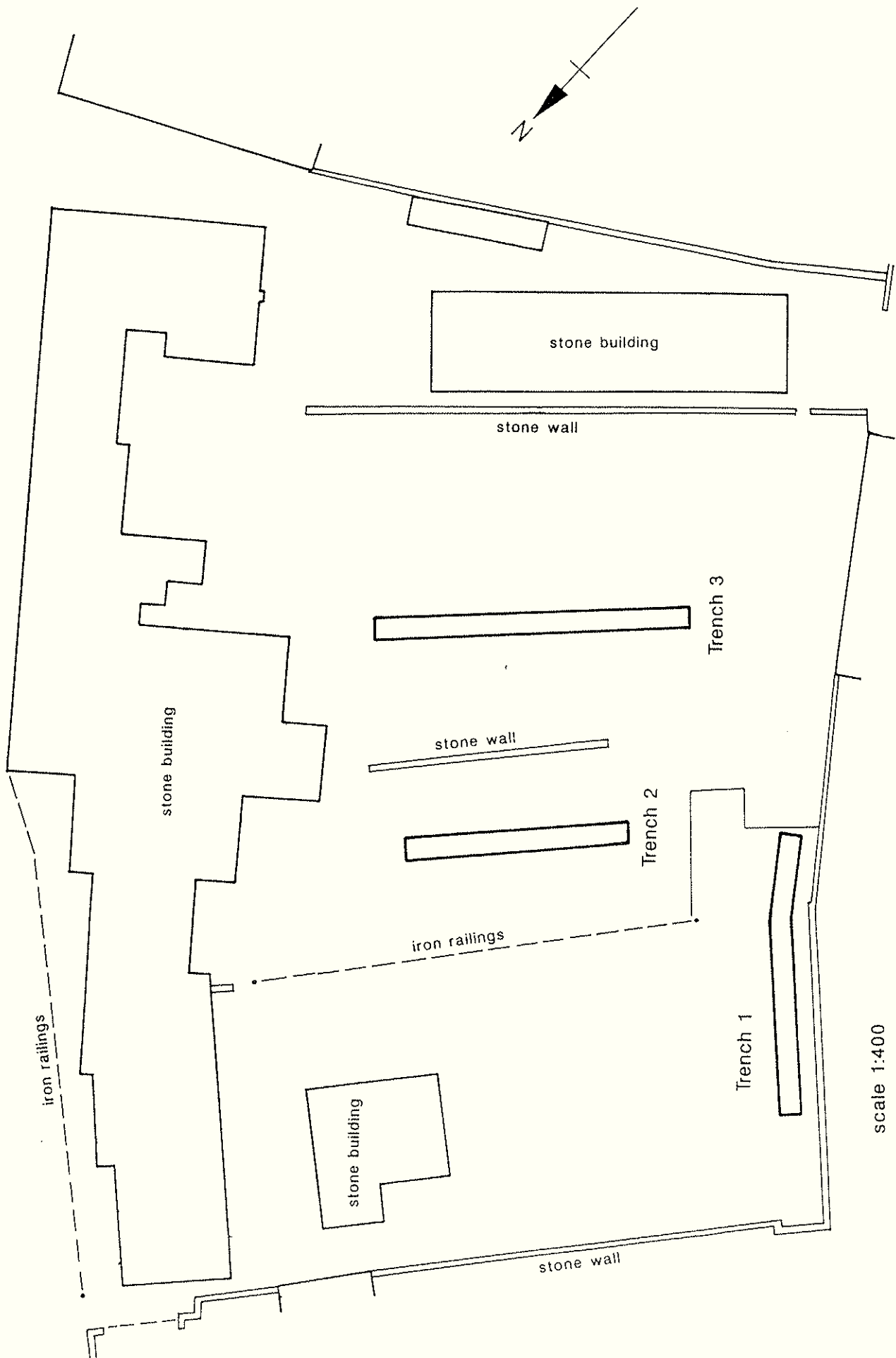
Trench	Ctxt	Type	width (m)	thick. (m)	Comment	Finds	No.	Date
1								
	1	layer		0.30	garden topsoil			19th/20th century
	2	layer		0.2	garden soil			post-med/modern
	3	layer		0.22	subsoil			natural
	4	layer			weathered bedrock			natural
2								
	9	layer		0.09	tarmac			20th century
	10	layer		0.06	hard-core			20th century
	11	layer		0.32	subsoil			natural
	12	layer			weathered bedrock			natural
3								
	5	layer		0.08	tarmac			19th/20th century
	6	layer		0.12	hard-core			19th/20th century
	7	layer		0.25	subsoil			natural
	8	layer			weathered bedrock			natural
	13	Fill	3.6m		fill of 15			20th century
	14	Fill	3.6m	0.2m	fill of 15			20th century
	15	Cut	3.6m		square cornered pit (not excavated)			20th century



scale 1:10 000

Site location map

Figure 1



Trench location plan

scale 1:400

Figure 2



## **OXFORD ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT**

Janus House, Osney Mead, Oxford, OX2 0ES

Tel: 01865 263800 Fax: 01865 793496

email: [oau-oxford.demon.co.uk](mailto:oau-oxford.demon.co.uk)



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Director: David Miles B.A., F.S.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