

ASHMOLEAN MUSEUM FORECOURT OXFORD

ARCHAEOLOGICAL FIELD EVALUATION

NGR 51180 06548



OXFORD ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT

March 1994

ASHMOLEAN MUSEUM FORECOURT
OXFORD
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A report on the evaluation undertaken between 8/2/94 and 14/2/94 at
Ashmolean Museum Forecourt, Oxford.

NGR 51180 06548

OAU

18 March 1994

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1 SUMMARY OF RESULTS

The Oxford Archaeological Unit undertook a field evaluation in the forecourt of the Ashmolean Museum in February 1994. A N-S 5 x 2 m trench in the centre of the eastern lawn was machine excavated to a depth of 2 metres below the present ground surface. At this depth a wall aligned E-W and a series of three post-medieval and two late medieval pits cutting the natural gravel were encountered. The wall may be a remnant of the tenements demolished in 1839 for the construction of the University Galleries, and the pits are evidence for use of the rear yards of properties as refuse areas.

2 INTRODUCTION

The Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) undertook a field evaluation in the forecourt of the Ashmolean Museum, as part of the consideration of a proposed development to a depth of 5.9 m below the present surface of the forecourt.

The aim of the evaluation was to establish the depth, character, date, and significance of any archaeological deposits relating to the medieval tenements and occupation in the northern suburbs of Oxford.

3 TOPOGRAPHY AND GEOLOGY

The site lies within the forecourt of the Ashmolean Museum, on the eastern lawn (Fig. 1) and is 0.98 m above the E-W-aligned Beaumont Street to the S, and 0.63 m above the N-S-aligned St. Giles's to the E. The forecourt lawns are surrounded by cellars. The cellar floors to the west (the position of test pit 1 from OAU watching Brief 1992) were at a depth of 61.48 m OD, approximately 2.11 m and 3.09 m below Beaumont Street and the forecourt ground surface respectively.

The natural gravel subsoil is overlain by 1 m of alluvium (information from the Ground Investigation).

4 ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

4.1 Archaeological Background

A watching brief undertaken by the Oxford Archaeological Unit in 1992 during the excavation of two geotechnical test pits in the basements of the Ashmolean indicated that the stratigraphy under the cellars had been heavily truncated. A late medieval pit was observed with its base at a depth of 4.3 m below the Ashmolean Museum forecourt surface. What little archaeological evidence remained is in accord with the documentary evidence of tenement plots, extending W from St. Giles's, in the late medieval period.¹

4.2 Historical Background: By Julian Munby (see appendix 3)

Ashmolean Museum - site history

The site of the Ashmolean Museum was formerly three properties on the west side of St Giles's, acquired by the University in or before 1839 for the building of the Taylorian Institution and University Galleries; the Ashmolean Museum was transferred there from Broad Street in 1894.² A plan of the site was included in the specification for the new building issued by the University in 1839,³ and there is a view of the houses on the site made before their demolition (see front cover).⁴ The site is on the corner of Beaumont Street, which was laid out in 1821, when the fields called Beaumont were developed, and the frontage on St Giles's was opened to create Beaumont and John Street.⁵ As early as 1803 Worcester College had been seeking land (including the site of the Ashmolean) in order to 'open a wide and handsome avenue from the front of the College to St Giles St', but nothing seems to have come of this beyond the initial purchase of the houses at each end of what became Beaumont Street.⁶

¹ Oxford Archaeological Unit Oxford, Ashmolean Museum Forecourt (OXAFC92) 1992

² R.F. Ovenall, *The Ashmolean Museum 1683-1894*, 261-4; VCH *Oxon.* iii, 57.

³ Specification by Philip Bliss, Registrar, dated 10 June 1839: University Archives, NW15/15 (formerly WPa/5).

⁴ H.E. Salter, *Balliol Deeds*, O.H.S. lxiv, 1913, opp. p.228.

⁵ Anson Osmund, 'Building on the Beaumonts: An Example of Early 19th-Century Housing Development', *Oxoniensia* xlix (1984), 301-25.

⁶ See below, detailed site histories, and *Balliol Deeds*, 226-7.

Like other properties in St Giles's, the three tenements on the site of the Ashmolean were long and of variable width, and may have originated in the 12th century when the suburban churches of St Mary Magdalen and St Giles were built. The street was fully built up by the time of 1279 Hundred Rolls survey, and the occupiers may have farmed the open fields of north Oxford, and used the backs of the tenements as farmyards. From the 17th century the expanding population of the town found living space in the backs of the suburban tenements, and many of the yards were built up with rows of cottages.

The southernmost property adjacent to Beaumont Street belonged to Exeter College from 1320 to 1803, when it was sold to Worcester. Known as Batayl Hall, it probably ceased to be an academic hall after the 14th century, and was instead rented or leased as a private house.⁷ It is shown in the pre-demolition view as a pair of houses with a central chimney stack and a substantial back row, perhaps of 17th-century date. The 1839 plan shows the S side of the property truncated by Beaumont Street, and a row of 'tenements' behind a small yard.

The middle property is poorly documented, except from the deeds of its neighbours, but in 1279 it was occupied by the grandson of Philip de Bloby, and it later belonged to the chantry chapel in St Mary's.⁸ Like the house adjoining to the S it is shown in the pre-demolition view as a 2½-storey house with a large gabled dormer overhanging an entrance passage; the 1839 plan shows much of the yard as being open, behind the service areas ('offices') of the house.

The northern part of the site was a property of Balliol College and is well recorded in the college archives; it is mostly covered by the buildings of the Museum.⁹

⁷ Salter, *Survey of Oxford* ii, 218 N(101); C.W. Boase, *Registrum Collegii Exoniensis* OHS xxvii (1894), xiv; Exeter College has some deeds of this property.

⁸ Salter, *Survey* N (99).

⁹ Salter, *Balliol Deeds*, 219-28.

5 METHODOLOGY AND STRATEGY

From the evidence obtained from the OAU watching brief in 1992, it was assumed that when the Ashmolean was built the cellars were dug from the contemporary ground surface and that material from the excavation of the cellars and basements of the Museum was used to build up the present forecourt level. This hypothesis implied that there was a possibility that medieval archaeology survived under the levelling-up material in the area of the forecourt where cellars had not been excavated.

A 5 x 2 m trench was positioned in the area between the cellars with a view of excavating up to 2 m of the build-up material down to possible medieval archaeology. To comply with Health and Safety regulations and to ensure that the trench would in no way undermine or be hazardous to the adjacent cellars, immediately after the excavation of the 2 m of levelling material sheet piles were sunk around the edges of the trench. Gaps of 0.4 m were left in the middle of each profile to allow for records to be made. When the sheet piles were in place props were jacked up on heavy duty boards to effectively secure the sheets from any movement. Hand excavation followed in the form of two small areas in the northern and southern ends of the trench.

6 DESCRIPTION OF ARCHAEOLOGY

6.1 Trench description (Figures 2 and 3)

Gravel and Late medieval pits

A loose reddish yellow gravel containing dirty lenses (110) was identified at 62.70 OD, 2.3 m below the present ground surface. This was cut by two pits (127 and 115) and overlain by the possible remains of a wall (111).

An oval pit with a concave southern edge (115; not totally excavated due to depth restrictions) measured 2 x 0.65 m with a minimum depth of 0.75 m (61.88 m OD). This was filled successively by a mid-brown sandy clay (122) with 50% angular stone (size range 0.1 to 0.3 m³); a very late medieval mid-brown sandy clay (113) which contained gravel and small stones and a dark greyish brown sandy clay (112) which contained charcoal and gravel.

127, a possibly circular pit with gradual sloping sides and a flat base and dimensions of 1.1 x 0.35 m which cut natural gravel (110) and was filled by a late medieval mid-brown sandy clay (118) with 50% gravel.

Post-medieval pits

112 was cut by an irregular steep-sided pit (123) with a minimum depth of 0.6. This was filled successively by a dark greyish-black silt (121) with 50% charcoal; a post-medieval mid-greyish brown sandy clay (114) which contained gravel and small stones; a loose mid-yellowish brown sand (119)

with 70% gravel and a dark brown clayey sand (120) which contained gravel and small stones.

106, a compact light creamy yellow sandy mortar which contained ceramic building material, was above 127 which was cut by a possibly circular pit with gradual sloping sides (126) with visible dimensions of 1.1 x 0.35 m. This was filled by alternating bands of post-medieval black silt and dark brown silt (117) with no inclusions, which was cut by a pit (125; only partial seen in section) with steep sides and a visible length of 1.4 m. This was filled successively by a mid-brown clay (124) which contained large limestone blocks; a light greyish-brown sandy clay (116) with 20% gravel and a mid-greyish brown sandy clay (128) which contained occasional gravel and small stones.

Wall/Structure

111, an E/W-aligned limestone wall (only seen in section) made from roughly worked angular blocks, overlay the natural gravel (110) and was abutted by a mid-brown sandy clay (108) which contained occasional small stones. This, together with 120 (see above), was overlain by a post-medieval mid-brown sandy clay (109) with 30% gravel. This was overlain by a mid-brown sandy clay (107) which contained ceramic building material and small stones.

Post-medieval Build-up

106 and 128 were overlain by a mid-yellowish brown (105) sandy clay which contained ceramic building material, limestone and mortar. This was overlain by a dark brown sandy clay (104) with occasional small stones. This was overlain by a compact light yellowish white sandy mortar (103) with 60% crushed sandstone and limestone which in turn was overlain by a mid-greyish brown sandy clay (102), below a modern friable dark brown humic silt (101). Above this was the present turf line identified at 64.57 m OD.

6.2 Pottery Assessment: By Lucy Bown

A total of 80 sherds (2.2 kg) of pottery were recovered from excavation in the Ashmolean forecourt. The majority are post-medieval with a small presence of late medieval (14th to 15th century) and the occasional early medieval sherd of 11th- to 13th-century date.

The earliest medieval pottery types are those commonly found in Oxford. Two sherds in fabric types AC and Y date from the mid 11th to late 12th century and late 11th to mid 13th century. Two further medieval wares (fabrics AQ and AG) are also present and were part of longer pottery traditions found in Oxford from the late 11th and late 12th centuries through to the 15th century. All of these sherds occur in contexts with later

post-medieval pottery and do not, therefore, indicate medieval activity but are probably residual.

The later medieval/early post-medieval pottery is typical of 15th to 16th century assemblages found in Oxford. The occurrence of Rhenish Stoneware, Surrey Whiteware skillets and Tudor Green type vessels together with later Brill products (Fabrics AM, AW and BX) is typical of an assemblage of this date. The Rhenish wares include Raeren/Aachen drinking jugs and a Cologne/Frechen or possibly bellarmine large jug. Also present at this date are sherds from jugs and a possible fuming pot in Fabric AY dated elsewhere in Oxford as 15th century. These sherds do not, however, occur as a coherent group in the Ashmolean sequence except in contexts 113, 114 and 116. Elsewhere they occur with later post-medieval wares in contexts of mixed date.

The post-medieval pottery, which forms 74% of this pottery assemblage, ranges from early red earthenware types through to 19th- and 20th-century mass produced Transfer Printed Wares. The red earthenwares are products of various sources and include earlier forms such as wide bowls with a copper glaze similar to Surrey Hampshire Borderware forms of the mid 16th to 18th century, 17th- and 18th-century black glazed red earthenwares and later 17th to 19th century coarse flanged dishes and jars with slipped and clear lead glazing. The remainder of the post-medieval wares include 18th-century Tin Glazed Wares and Staffordshire Salt Glazed White Stonewares, and 19th century Pearlware, Creamware and Transfer Printed Wares. All the above types are found in contexts 101, 102, 104, 105, 109 and 117.

7 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

7.1 Discussion of archaeology

Two late medieval pits and three post-medieval pits were found as was a wall which may be a remnant of the buildings demolished prior to the construction of the Ashmolean.

The height of the natural gravel (110) at 62.70 m OD was unexpected; the natural gravel has not been as comprehensively disturbed as might be expected in an area of Oxford which has been occupied since the 12th century. As only two later medieval pits were discovered (115 and 127), this may suggest that the area of the trench was not extensively used for medieval pits. The depth of the late medieval pits (deepest 3.8 m below the forecourt surface) is similar to the depth of the pit seen in the watching brief (depth 4.3 m below the forecourt surface).

The lower fill of the late medieval pit (118) was dated by two sherds of pottery of the 13th to 15th century. The overlying layer of pit fill (116), contained 15th- to 16th-century pottery, putting the date of this feature as late medieval or early post-medieval. The other late medieval (13th- to 15th-century) pit (115) was cut away by a later pit (123).

The pottery from three post-medieval pits (123, 125 and 126) ranges in date from the 17th century to the 19th century. These must relate to activity to the N of the range of buildings seen on the pre-demolition view.

The remnant of wall (111) is sealed by a layer (109) which slips into a pit (123) which contains pottery of the 18th- to 19th-centuries. The demolition of the wall can be no earlier than the 18th century and no later than the 19th century. This may indicate that the wall is a remnant of the buildings, built up to the boundary between the properties, seen on the pre-demolition view. These may indicate infilling of gardens and yards with buildings. These can be seen, labelled 'tenements', on the pre-demolition plan of 1839 in the S property. The small portion of wall may be the remnant of this property (perhaps the rear wall). By superimposing the 1839 map on the 1:500 1870 O.S. map (used as a base for Fig. 1) the rear wall of the tenements can be seen passing through very close to S of the trench (see also Fig. 2). The 1839 plan does not quite fit onto the 1870 O.S. map due to cumulative errors in planning. However it is most likely that this fragment of wall is the rear of the tenements built up to the boundary. The post medieval pits may lie in the N property which in 1839 was open yard with 'Offices'.

The wall and the pits were sealed by dumped layers (101-105, 117 and 128) which contained pottery ranging in date from the 17th to the 19th centuries. It was thought during the excavation that these deposits may have related to a water tank which was built on the front lawn of the

Ashmolean during the Second world War. However, the analysis of the deposits after excavation has not substantiated this theory.

The small amount (two sherds) of medieval pottery in the material used to build up the forecourt does not suggest that came it from medieval contexts. It is possible that this material was brought to the site from some distance.

The small amount of residual medieval pottery in the sealed, pre-demolition deposits indicates little medieval activity in the area.

7.2 General discussion

The series of archaeological deposits fits the documentary evidence well. The undisturbed gravel suggests that there was little activity until the 15th-century late medieval pits. Although any early activity may have been removed by the later pits, the lack of significant quantities of residual pottery indicates that there were few earlier medieval features. The documentary evidence indicates that the street frontage was built up by 1279 but that the rears of the properties in St Giles's were used as farmyards even as late as 1573, and so may not have been suitable sites for pits. Domestic debris may have been used to manure the fields instead of being discarded in pits.

The maps published by Salter cannot be used to locate the trench with precision in either of the two properties which were subsumed into the Ashmolean forecourt. The 1839 plan is a nearer fit to the 1870 O.S map used for figure 1. The S property was an academic hall, *Batayl Hall*, until the 14th century, after which it was a private house. It may be that the late medieval pits relate to the use of this property at this time. The infilling of the rear of the property to provide extra living space (which Exeter College could rent out) can be seen in the growth of rear properties between Agas' 1578 and Loggan's 1675 maps of Oxford, as well as the engraving showing the 'tenements'.

Since the Taylorian Institute and the University Galleries were built the site has been lawn, apart from the positioning of a shallow water tank in the area during the Second World War.

7.3 Conclusions

The earliest activity encountered in the trench consisted of late medieval pits. There were also post-medieval pits and the truncated wall of the 17th-century houses seen on 19th-century plans and engravings. The height of the gravel in the evaluation trench and the pit, seen in the test pit observations, suggest that there may be other archaeological deposits which will be affected by the proposed development.

8 Recommendations

As the gravel is relatively untruncated and there are remnants of structures the potential for other archaeological deposits is high.

There are two areas where archaeological deposits might be examined subject to the approval of the City Council. Deposits might take the form of upstanding structures (which may be truncated) and pits or other features cut into the gravel.

The first area would be in a trench as close as practicable to the rear of the Taylorian Institute. It is likely that ranges of buildings stretching back from the medieval road front survive as the 17th century buildings do not reach the back of the houses on St Giles's (1839 pre-demolition map) and so are unlikely to have truncated earlier buildings. Ranges of buildings can be seen on Agas' and Loggan's maps. The aim would be to locate, define and date any structures or activity.

The second area would be where the present steps and path run up to the porticoed entrance of the Ashmolean Museum. The cellars do not extend across this area¹⁰ and a trench aligned N-S would probably locate the property boundary in order to define its type and date and to locate and define associated activity.

Rob Early
Mark Roberts MIFA
March 1994

¹⁰ Oxford Archaeological Unit Oxford, Ashmolean Museum Forecourt (OXAF92) 1992 figure 1

APPENDIX 1 CONTEXT SUMMARY

Context	Type of Context	Depth(m)	Level Top (mASL)	Date (latest pottery)	Comments
101	Deposit	0.15	64.76	1800-1900	Topsoil
102	Deposit	0.2	64.58	1670-1900	Make-up
103	Deposit	0.3	64.35		Compact Make-up
104	Deposit	0.39	64	17th- to 20th-century	Make-up
105	Deposit	0.35	63.61	18th- to 20th-century	Make-up
106	Deposit	0.16	63.26		Make-up
107	Deposit	0.2	63.2		Make-up
108	Deposit	0.25	62.94		?Occupation Surface
109	Deposit	0.35	62.79	17th- to 18th-century	Make-up
110	Deposit	?1.1	62.70		Natural Gravel
111	Structure	0.5 (Height)	63		Wall
112	Fill	0.3	62.63		Fill of 115
113	Fill	0.3	62.57	16th- to 17th-century	Fill of 115
114	Fill	0.2	62.33	18th- to 19th-century	Fill of 123
115	Cut	?1.9 (top to bottom)	62.57(top); 61.83 (bottom)		?Oval shaped cut
116	Fill	0.25	62.97	15th- to 16th-century	Fill of 125
117	Fill		62.9	1600-1800	Fill of 126
118	Fill		62.62	13th- to 15th-century	Fill of 127
119	Fill	0.15	62.36		Fill of 123
120	Fill	0.15	62.66		Fill of 123
121	Fill	0.1	62.02		Fill of 123
122	Fill	0.4	62.3		Fill of 115
123	Cut	70.6 (top to bottom min.)	62.54		?Irregular shaped Pit
124	Fill		62.64		Fill of 125
125	Cut	?0.3 (top to bottom min.)	62.64		Pit
126	Cut	?0.35 (top to bottom min.)	63.1		?Semi-circular Pit
127	Cut	0.5 (top to bottom)	62.66		Semi-circular Pit

Context	Type of Context	Depth(m)	Level Top (mASL)	Date (latest pottery)	Comments
128	Deposit	0.42	63.52		?Make-up

APPENDIX 2

Pottery Summary

Context	Sherd No	Period	Date Range
101	1	MED	13C - 15C
101	3	PM	1600-1800 & 1800-1900
102	3	PM	1670 - 1900
104	2	MED	L11C - 15C & 13C -15C
104	17	PM	15C - 16C & 17C -20C
105	19	PM	M16C - 17C & 18C -20C
109	3	MED	L11C - M13C & 13C - 15C
109	5	PM	16C - 17C & 17C - 18C
113	9	MED	L12C - 15C & 13C - 15C
113	3	PM	15C & 16C - 17C
114	2	MED	13C - 15C
114	7	PM	15C - 16C & 17C - 18C & 18C -19C
116	1	MED	13C - 15C
116	1	PM	15C - 16C
117	1	MED	L11C - E15C
117	1	PM	1600 -1800
118	2	MED	M11C - L12C & 13C - 15C

Appendix 3 Documentary

The measurements along the street frontage are given in the 1772 survey
[Salter, *Surveys and Tokens* OHS lxxv (1920), 48-9]

Occupier	Frontage	Location	Salter Survey number
Cox	61'6"	Road	
Hughes	15'3"		(100)once Exeter
MacAllaster	14'6"		ditto
Ward; ho & yard	39'6"		(100)
Dewe; ho & yard	16'11'		(99)once Balliol
Tubb; ho	15'6"		ditto
Mrs Herbert; yard	12'	No. 74	()Wyatt's Yard

N(99) Balliol

1270 described as *domum ex opposito aule domini regis* in grant from Henry and Agatha Gamage to Robert and Alice Gamage: BD 219 (406)

later medieval deeds: BD 220-223.

Balliol College leases:

- 1536 Lease to Laur. Atkinson: BD 224 (413)
- 1557 Lease to Edwd Brooke alias Lytle and Margery his wife: BD 224 (414)
- 1601 Lease to John Head husbandman: BD 224 (415)
- 1613 Lease to Joane Herd widow: BD 225 (416)
- 1661 Lease to William Ball of Univ Oxon yeoman: BD 225 (417)
- 1675 Lease renewed: BD 225 (419)
- 1690 Lease to Martha Ball widow: BD 225 (420)
- 1705 Lease to Richard Hedges tailor: BD 225 (421)
- 1719 Lease to Walter Payne mealman: BD 225 (422)
- 1733 Lease to Mary Payne widow in her occ. and Tobias Bennett: BD 335 (423)
- 1747 Lease to William Cully brewer, in occ. Jas Crony or his wife: BD 226 (424)
- 1772 Dewe in Survey, S&T.
- 1775 Lease to Chandless currier, in occ. Ric. Dewe: BD 226 (425)
- 1789 Lease to Mr Dew: BD 226 (427)

1803/4 negotiations for sale to Worcester: BD 226-8 (426-9)

Valuation and description in 1803, BD 227.

To check Worcester College deeds

N(100) Chantry

Chantry in SMM (medieval deeds in BD)

- 1536 John Stagpole S of (99): BD 224.
- 1557 Richard Edwards S of (99): BD 224.
- 1601 John Barnes S of (99): BD 224.
- 1613 Lucas Eaton S of (99): BD 225.
- 1661 Widow Robinson S of (99): BD 225.
- 1675 Antony Kersley S of (99): BD 225.
- 1690 as 1675
- 1705 as 1690
- 1719 Richard Broadwater S of (99): BD 225.
- 1733 Charles May, grocer S of (99): BD 225.
- 1747 as 1733
- 1775 Richard Ward yeoman S of (99): BD 226.

To check was indeed lost to SMM, and for University deeds

N(101) Exeter (Batayl Hall)

Exeter charters: RCE xiv & 340 .

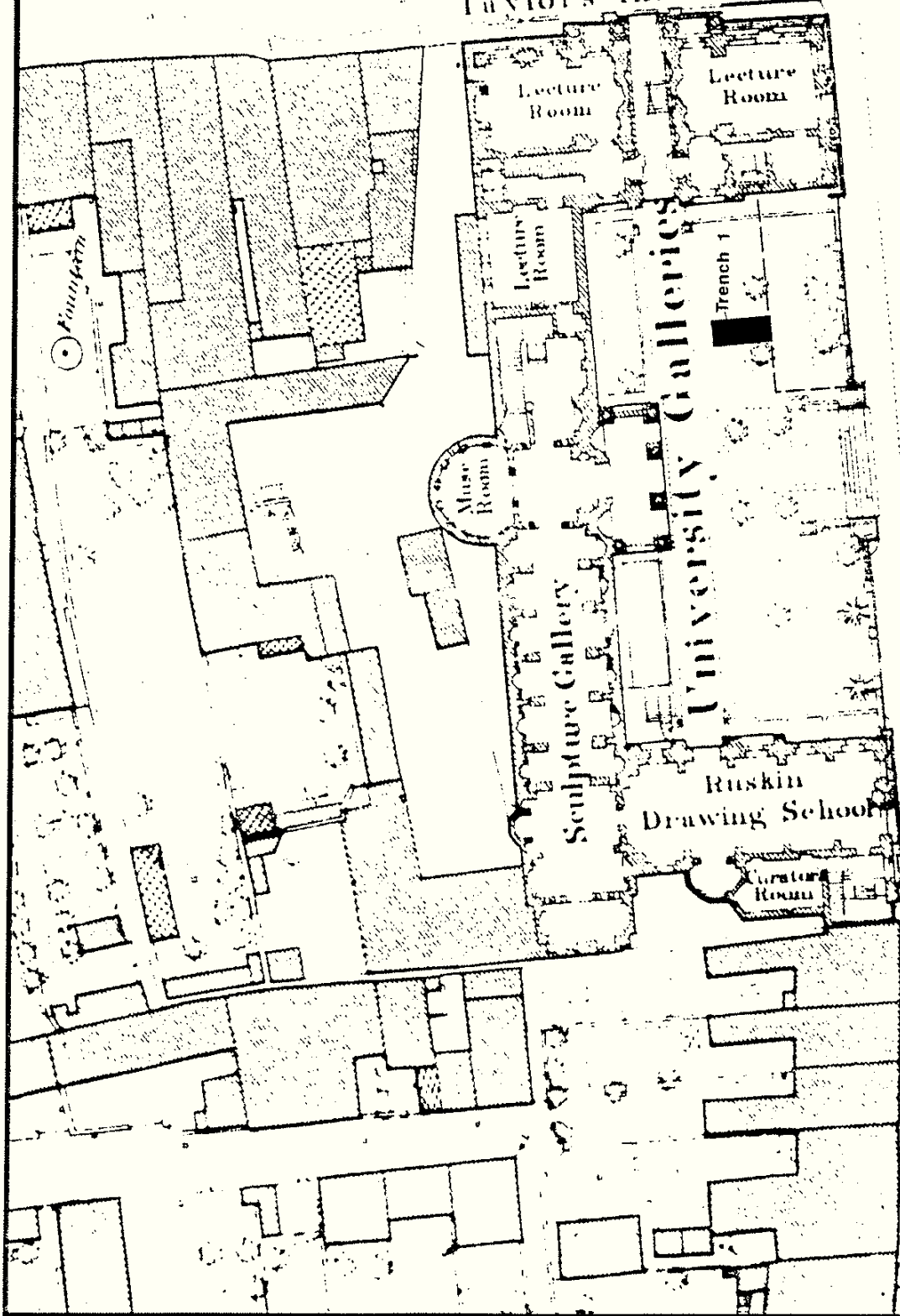
To check Exeter leases and Worcester deeds

OXAFC 94



St. Giles

Taylor's Institution



1870 O.S. map

figure 1

Beaumont Street

Scale 1:500

Post-excitation plan
of trench excavated

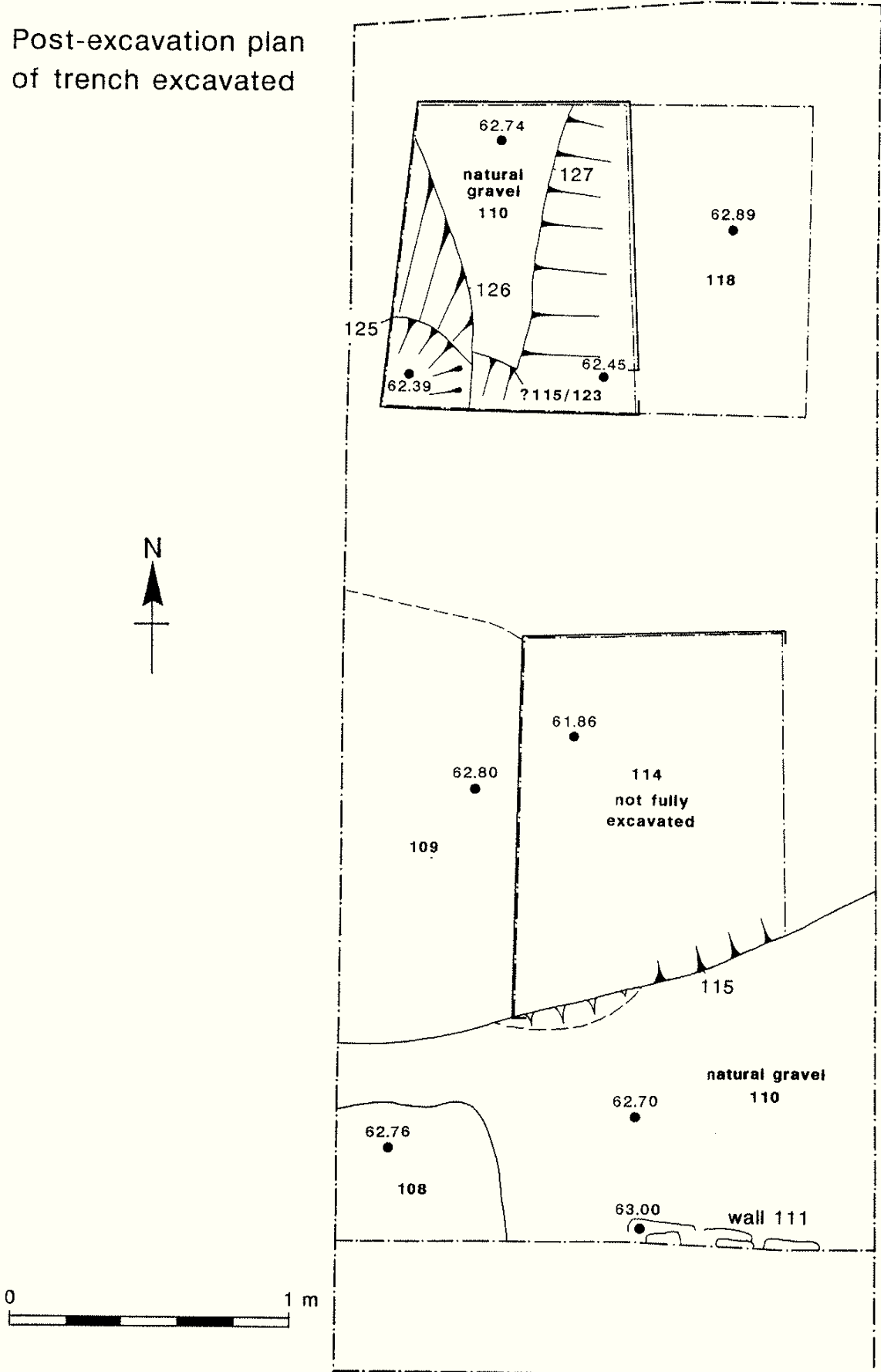
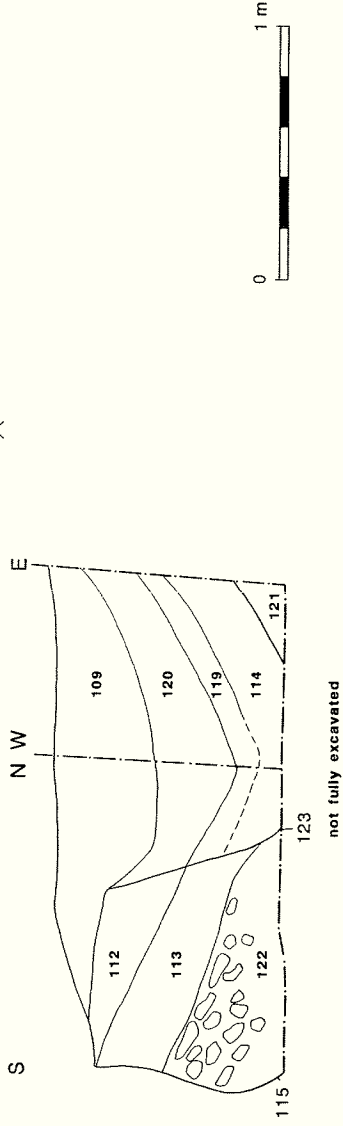


figure 2

Composite section in Southern end of evaluation trench

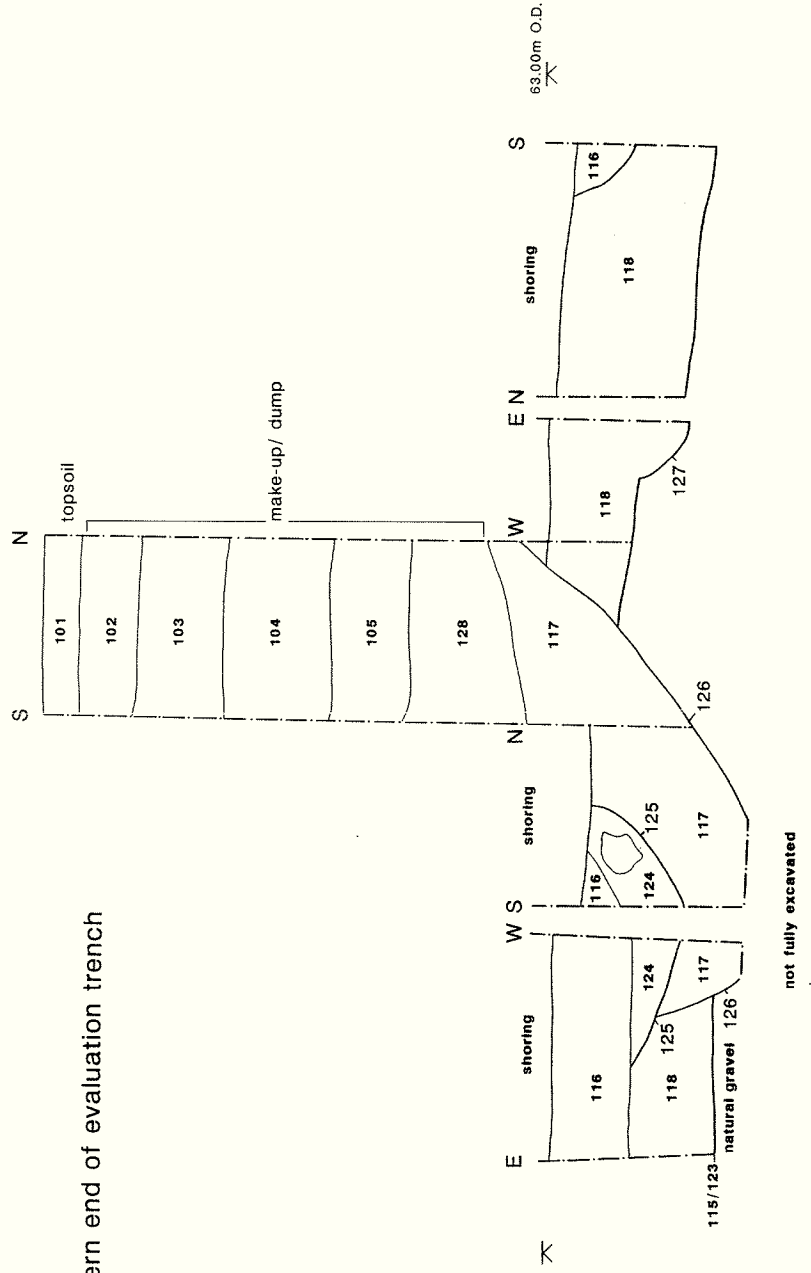
OXAFC 94

63.00m O.D.



not fully excavated

Composite section in Northern end of evaluation trench



not fully excavated

figure 3

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