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Areem Design Ltd

Proposed Centre for Islamic Studies,
Holywell Mill Lane, Oxford

Report of Archaeological Evaluation

(OXHYM 96)

Oxford Archaeological Unit

June 1996

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Summary

Three archaeological evaluation trenches were dug by the Oxford Archaeological Unit in advance of a planning application being submitted for a new building on the site of the former common of Holywell parish. The excavation located two medieval ditches, but no other significant archaeological deposits were found.

1. Introduction

Areen Design Services commissioned this report in support of an application for planning permission for a new centre for Islamic Studies on open land to the north of Holywell Mill Lane (Fig. 1). The Oxford Archaeological Advisory Service (OAAS) set a brief and the Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) prepared a written scheme of investigation (WSI), but in the event the suggested trench location was modified following an on-site meeting with OAAS because part of the site was not available for investigation.

2. Archaeological and historical background

- 2.1 The site lies outside the medieval city of Oxford, and within Holywell Manor, immediately south of the church and manor house. The manor was acquired by Merton College in 1294, and the suburban part (Holywell Street) and the farmland behind it (including the Science Area and extending as far north as the University Parks) remained a source of income for the College both in the form of agricultural produce and of rent from properties. The arable land lay near the manor house and the Holywell properties, and the pasture lay further north. It is not certain where the medieval peasant houses were located, but recent archaeological work in Jowett Walk (1993) has suggested that there was occupation spread along St Cross Road towards the church and manor house.¹ If this were so, then occupation might be expected on both sides of the road, but excavations on the immediately adjacent site next St Cross Road in 1994 found no evidence for this, though there had been extensive quarrying since the 13th century (presumably for gravel).² As expected, archaeological

1 Mark Roberts, 'Excavations at Jowett Walk, Oxford', *Oxoniensia* 60 (1995), 225-246.

2 Alan Hardy, *St Cross Road, Oxford, Archaeological Evaluation*, OAU (1994).

evaluation at the manorial mill, the house now called Holywell Ford (1993) did produce medieval occupation material.

- 2.1 The earliest detailed depiction of the site is on David Loggan's birds-eye map of 1675 (Fig. 3), which shows the large field south of the church and the holy well as fenced pasture land (i.e. he does not, as elsewhere, show arable strips); a ditch and bank on the east of the field are indicated as remains of the Civil War fortifications. The south boundary of the site was formed by the crenellated wall of Magdalen College Grove, which is assumed to be the successor to the garden grounds of St John's Hospital. The series of Merton College estate plans is useful, both that of 1672 by Richard Holland, and Edward Smith's plan of 1758 showing this as 'The Common' of about 5½ acres. Taylor's printed map of Oxford in 1750 shows this as 'Holywell Mill Meadow'.
- 2.2 Later printed maps show the gradual encroachment on this open land. In 1848 the joint parishes cemetery was built, extending the small triangular cemetery of St Cross church eastwards across the north of the field. This is shown on Hoggar's 1850 map, together with the parish school that had been built on the south side of the cemetery; a parsonage house was added by 1864,³ as shown on the first edition OS plan of 1876 (Fig. 4). By then the eastern part of the field beyond the cemetery (including remains of the entrenchments) had been fenced off, while by the 1900 OS plan the northern end of the area had the houses in Manor Place constructed on it, and a small area in the south-east corner had been detached to join the garden of Holywell Mill, which had changed its name to Holywell Ford (Fig. 5). The 1921 plan shows allotment gardens on the site of the entrenchment, and by 1939 tennis courts had appeared in the south part of the field; more allotments had appeared next the lane to Holywell Ford by the 1958 plan. The vicarage has subsequently been demolished, and a new building for Brasenose and St Cross College built on the west end of the field. The remaining part to the east of this was the subject of the present excavation.

3. Archaeological methodology

The total surface area of the site investigated was 91 square metres, 2% of the development site. The site is either covered by tennis courts or under grass. No previous work had indicated archaeological deposits on the site, while the adjacent excavation on the St Cross/Brasenose site gave an expectation of extensive quarrying (see above, note 2).

The three trenches (each 20 m long; see Fig. 1), positioned to prospect for archaeological material within the footprint of the proposed building, were dug by machine in spits down to the top of the gravel and monitored and hand-

3 *V.C.H. Oxon* iv, 376.

cleaned, unless archaeological features were found at a higher level.

No environmental samples were taken because it was not thought that any of the features would provide meaningful palaeoenvironmental material.

4. Description of Results

Further details of individual contexts, including dimensions, are given in the table (Appendix) see also Fig. 2.

4.1 Ditches

A ditch was located in Trench 1 (105), 1.4 m wide and 0.14 m deep, running north-south, and dated by a single sherd to between the mid 13th and 15th centuries (pottery was identified by L Whittingham). There was a possible gravel bank (108) to the west of the ditch (see Fig. 2), and an old cultivation soil (106) overlay the ditch (see below).

Trench 3 contained a ditch aligned east-west, but this could not be clearly recorded because the trench flooded immediately on excavation. Two sherds from the ditch were dated to mid 13th- and late 12th- to early 15th-centuries.

4.2 Cultivation soil

A cultivation soil (106, 204 but not clearly seen in Trench 3 due to flooding) overlay the sand and gravel in Trenches 1 to 3. The soil did not produce any finds, but it overlay ditch 105 and must therefore be medieval or later in date. This soil was unusually thin at c 0.2 m; contemporary cultivation soils at sites around the application area were up to six times this depth.⁴ In Trenches 1, 2 and 3 this layer was overlain by a layer of old turf.

4.3 Levelling layer

A layer of modern dumping (102, 201 and 302) overlay the cultivation soil and old turf in all three trenches.

4.4 Deposit survey

The two ditches were approximately at right-angles and were both of medieval date. They may delineate medieval properties under cultivation, since there were few finds to indicate domestic occupation. The E-W ditch in Trench 3 may be on the alignment of the southern cemetery boundary but this was unclear within the flooded trench.

4 Roberts, 'Jowett Walk' op. cit. note 1; *Oxford University Parks Pond Enlargement*, OAU 1996, and *Excavations at Long Wall Quad, Magdalen College* (in prep).

The relatively shallow cultivation soil suggests truncation of the site, and the fact that the site is lower than the adjacent land at St Cross cemetery and Holywell Mill lane may also indicate landscaping. The last use of the site was for tennis courts, and this may provide the reason for terracing/landscaping the site.

5. **Assessment of importance**

The features revealed in the evaluation trenches may indicate medieval agricultural activity on the site, though the recorded post-medieval land-use as common might suggest that this was not persistent. It is always possible that the ditches could be water channels related to the mill, but could relate to problems with other ground water. The site is on the edge of the flood plain, and a number of watercourses are shown on early maps (e.g. Fig. 3) and there were wells (presumably springs) both east of the church (Holywell) and on the corner of Holywell Street/Longwall (Crowell). In general the site is slightly less damaged than the heavily quarried end nearer the road, but only negative features survive, because the site has been heavily truncated. The results can be compared with the engineering boreholes made earlier: one of which near Trench 3 (BH2) reached natural gravel at 1.00 m., and the other, south-east of Trench 1 (BH1), the gravel occurred at a depth of 1.2 m.

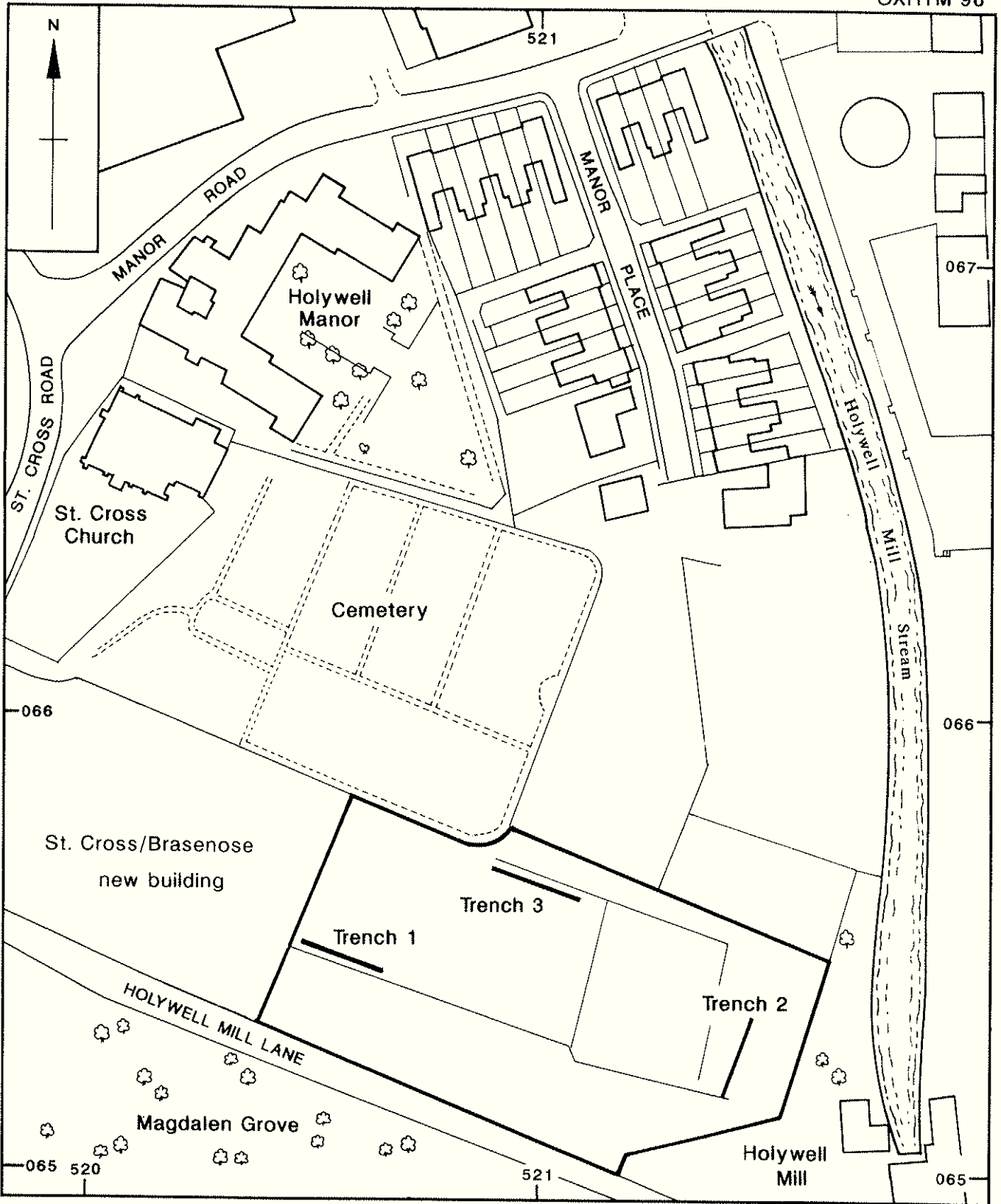
Mark Roberts BA, MIFA
Oxford Archaeological Unit

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Holywell Mill Lane (OXHYM 96)
TABLE OF CONTEXTS

<i>Trench</i>	<i>Context</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Length</i>	<i>Width</i>	<i>Depth</i>	<i>Date of pottery and number of sherds</i>
1	100	topsoil; dark brown silt loam			0.2	
1	101	dump; yellow/brown silt loam			0.22	
1	102	dump; mid-brown silt loam			0.1	19th-century (5)
1	103	buried ground surface? mid brown silt loam			-	?
1	104	fill of ditch 105; pinkish brown silt loam				Mid 13th- to 15th century (1)
1	105	ditch cut	-	1.4	0.14	
1	106	ploughsoil? mid brown silt loam			0.24	
1	107	natural; pinkish brown clay silt	-	-	-	
1	108	gravel dump; yellow brown gravel		1.5	0.25	
2	201	topsoil; dark grey silt loam			0.33	
2	202	dump; rubble			0.21	19th-century (5)
2	203	old turf? dark grey silt loam			0.22	
2	204	old ploughsoil; dark red-brown sandy silt loam			0.11	
2	205	natural; dark buff sandy silt				

<i>Trench</i>	<i>Context</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Length</i>	<i>Width</i>	<i>Depth</i>	<i>Date of pottery and number of sherds</i>
3	300	topsoil; mid brown silt loam			0.2	
3	301	dump; yellow/brown silt loam			0.23	
3	302	dump; dark brown sandy loam			0.2	19th-century (5)
3	303	ditch?				
3	304	fill of ditch?				Mid 13th and late 12th to early 15th century (2)
3	305	natural; yellow silt clay				



Reproduced from the Ordnance Survey's 1:1250 map of 1974
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scale 1:1250

Figure 1

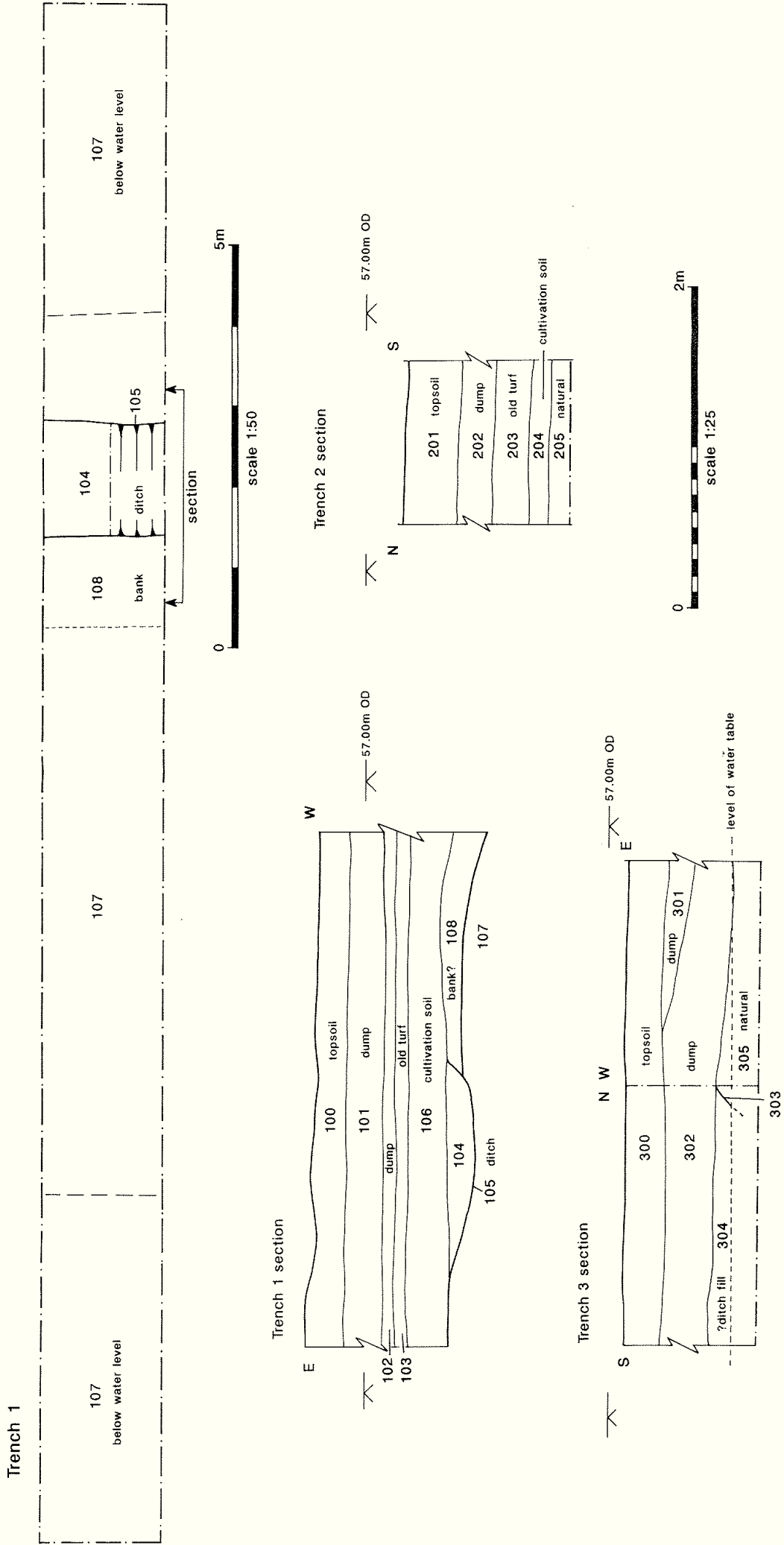
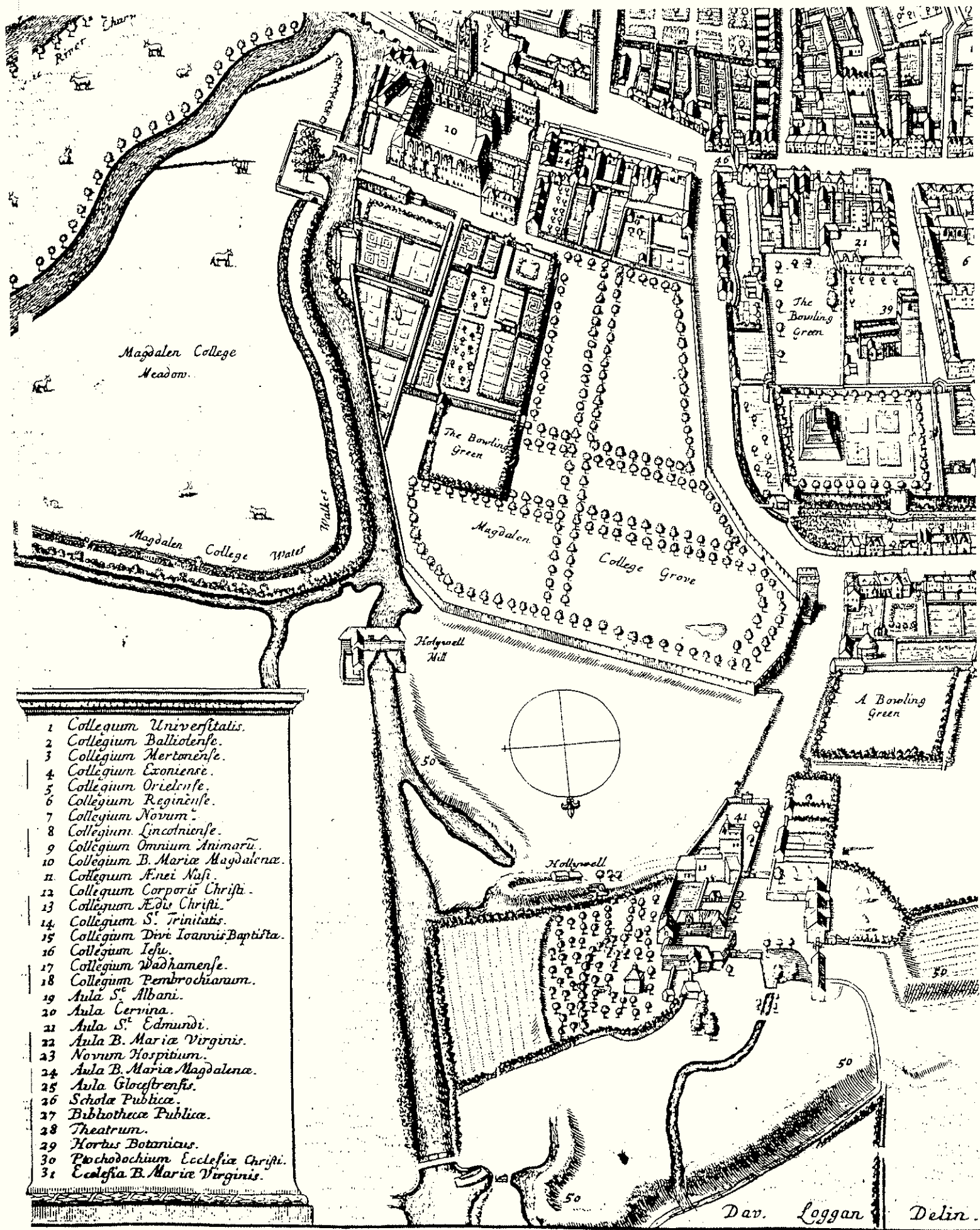


Figure 2



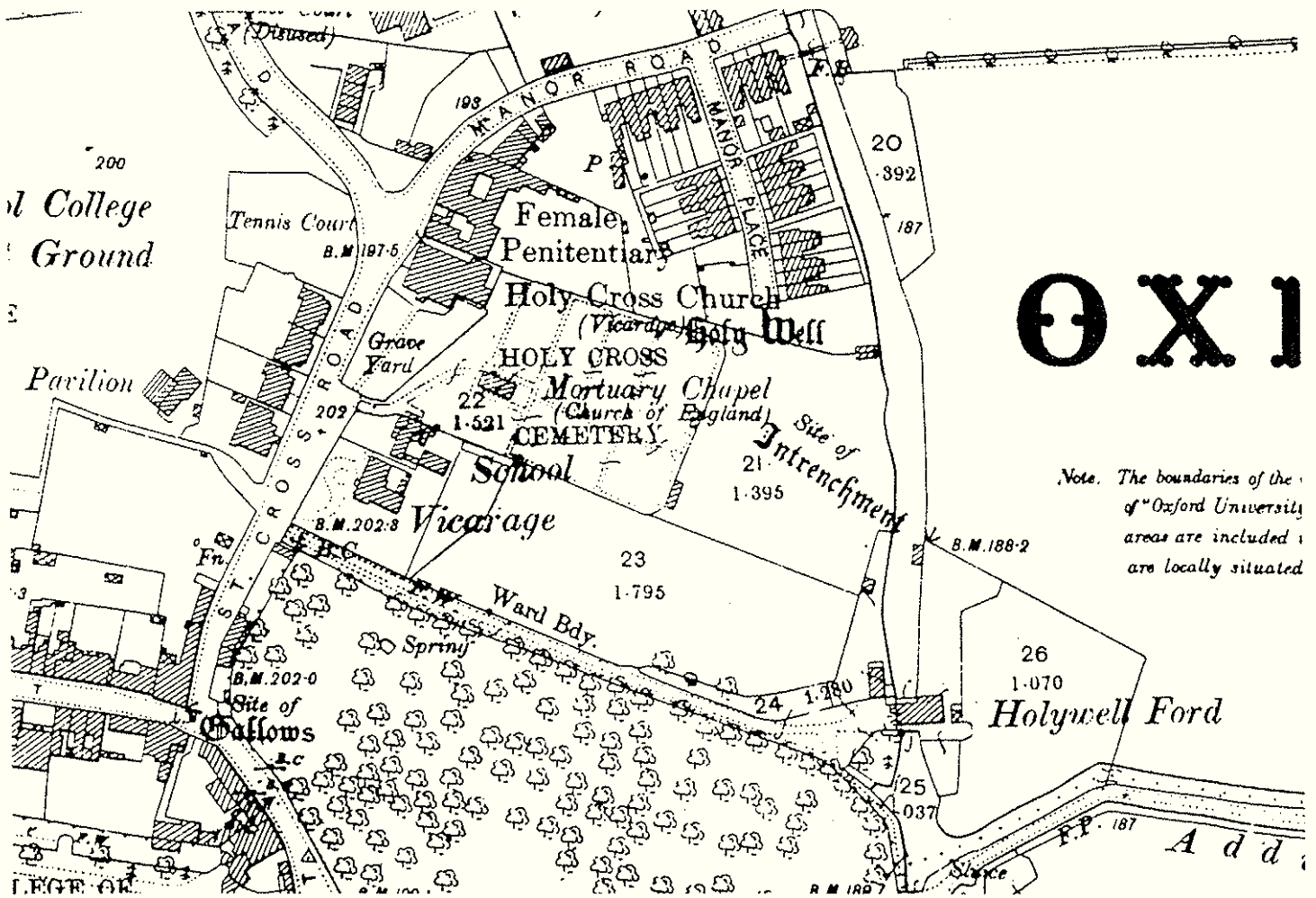
- 1 Collegium Universitatis.
- 2 Collegium Balliotense.
- 3 Collegium Mertonense.
- 4 Collegium Exoniense.
- 5 Collegium Oriolense.
- 6 Collegium Reginense.
- 7 Collegium Novum.
- 8 Collegium Lincolniense.
- 9 Collegium Omnium Animarū.
- 10 Collegium B. Mariæ Magdalena.
- 11 Collegium Anei Nisi.
- 12 Collegium Corporis Christi.
- 13 Collegium Edu. Christi.
- 14 Collegium S. Trinitatis.
- 15 Collegium Divi Ioannis Baptista.
- 16 Collegium Iesu.
- 17 Collegium Wadhamsense.
- 18 Collegium Pembrochianum.
- 19 Aula S. Albani.
- 20 Aula Cervina.
- 21 Aula S. Edmundi.
- 22 Aula B. Mariæ Virginis.
- 23 Novum Hospitium.
- 24 Aula B. Mariæ Magdalena.
- 25 Aula Glocestrensis.
- 26 Schola Publica.
- 27 Bibliotheca Publica.
- 28 Theatrum.
- 29 Hortus Botanicus.
- 30 Pochodochium Ecclesie Christi.
- 31 Ecclesia B. Mariæ Virginis.

Fig. 3: Holywell Manor on David Loggan's birds-eye view of 1675



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Fig. 4: Holywell Manor on OS 25" plan of 1876.



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Note. The boundaries of the Oxford University areas are included and are locally situated

Fig. 5: Holywell Manor on OS 25" plan of 1900.

Oxford Archaeological Unit

46 Hythe Bridge Street
Oxford OX1 2EP
Tel: 01865 243888
Fax: 01865 793496



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