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Replacement of Gas Mains, Cornmarket, Oxford

NGR SP51270637

Archaeological Watching Brief

Oxford Archaeological Unit
May 1996

REPLACEMENT OF GAS MAIN, CORNMARKEt, OXFORD

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ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF REPORT

SUMMARY

A watching brief of on the excavation of a gas main trench along Cornmarket Street, revealed no evidence of surviving structural elements or other significant archaeological deposits in the vicinity of the site of the original North gate of the town. On the site of St Martins Church, Carfax, disturbed human remains and a fragment of grave slab were found in the demolition layer of the church.

INTRODUCTION

The Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) undertook a watching brief during part of the replacement of a main service by British Gas Transco along the length of Cornmarket Street, Oxford. The Oxford Archaeological Advisory Service (OAAS) advised that the ground disturbance ensuing from the work, of the order of 1 m deep x 0.75 m wide, could expose significant archaeological deposits in the vicinity of the site of the north gate, adjacent to the surviving St Michael's Church Tower. Therefore the contractor should allow archaeological observation and recording of the trench excavation at this point in the programme.

During a later stage of the programme, prompted by the contractor's discovery of human bones and a fragment of grave slab, further archaeological observation was carried out at the south end of Cornmarket, where the trench was excavated over the east end of the site of St Martin's Church.

The watching brief took place during April 1996.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Northgate

Cornmarket Street was a major north-south route by the time Oxford was founded in the late 9th century. A gate existed on this site from that time, at first built of wood. Later, as the defences themselves were reconstructed in stone, so was the gate. Its physical form is known from post-medieval maps (Agas 1575, Loggan 1675) which show two rounded towers projecting north from a two storey gatehouse. This extended back alongside the church tower. The gateway and gatehouse were demolished in 1771-2, and the road widened, suggesting that any remaining part of the structure should lie beneath the present street surface.

St Martin's Church

The 14th century rebuilding of St Martin's Church effectively narrowed the south end of Cornmarket and the east end of Queen Street. In 1820 the church was demolished, with the exception of the tower, and rebuilt again, still taking up much the same space. (VCH iv, 386). The corner was cleared completely by the demolition of the church, and the S end of Cornmarket straightened out to its present alignment as part of the Carfax Improvement Scheme of 1896 (VCH iv, 203).

METHODOLOGY

To minimise the disruption by the contractor's excavations, the trenching was done at night, in phases over a period of days. During each phase, a length of trench was machine excavated to a depth of 0.90 -1.0 m. The location of the trench was planned, and, where necessary, sections were drawn of the exposed deposits. The spoil was also inspected for artifacts. All recording followed normal OAU procedures (OAU Field Manual ed. D Wilkinson 1992).

Trench 1 was observed from the north corner of the junction of Ship Street with Cornmarket Street to a point approximately 8 m north of the northern face of St Michael's Tower.

Trench 2 was observed along a 9 m length directly east of St Martin's Tower.

RESULTS

Trench 1 (Northgate) Fig 1.

The deposits revealed in the trench varied little either in character or stratigraphy throughout. The lowest deposit (104) was a mix of dark orange gravel and grey silty clay, with inclusions of brick fragments and very occasional lumps of limestone. Two large unworked blocks of Coral Ragstone were also noted in this layer. Layer 104 was exposed in the trench for a depth of approximately 0.20 m..

A layer of brown coarse gravel with a slight clay content (103) overlay 104, and varied in depth from 0.30 m to 0.40 m. Occasional fragments of brick and limestone pieces were noted in the layer.

Layer 103 was sealed by the hardcore (102), and reinforced concrete and tarmac (101) of the modern road surface, together averaging 0.50 m in depth.

No significant archaeological artifacts were recovered from any of the contexts exposed.

Trench 2 (Carfax) Fig 2.

The surface of the lowest deposit (206) was revealed in small patches during manual cleaning of the bottom of the trench, and appeared to be a layer of compacted small limestone rubble. This was overlaid by (205), a layer of mixed rubble, demolition debris, gravel and sandy loam, with inclusions of brick fragments, averaging 0.45 m deep. Judging by the appearance of the layer in section, there was a noticeably higher proportion of rubble in the east side of the trench compared to the west.

Sealing layer (205) was a thin layer of pale cream mortar (204) averaging 0.06 m deep, overlaid by a 0.08 m deep layer of dark brown silty loam (203). Layer (203) was overlaid by the reinforced concrete (202) and brick setts (201) of the modern road surface.

The fragment of grave slab and human bones were recovered from just to the north of the observed section of trench, probably from the layer 205. A partial inscription was decipherable on the slab: "*Aged..... Also 3 of Their Childr..... Who died in Their Infancy*". The style of decoration on the slab suggests a mid 19th century date.

The human bones were examined by Angela Boyle (see Appendix 1).

DISCUSSION

Trench 1

Although the road level at the south end of Cornmarket has been shown to have been raised considerably since the original Saxon road surface was laid down, this is unlikely to have been the case by the north gate. The superimposition of each new surface, without the prior removal of the old one, would have fouled the gate operation. Further evidence that such accretion of road material has not taken place in this area is indicated by the blocked original doorway in the west face of the tower of St Michael's, which is visible to its full depth.

The presence of post-medieval brick fragments in the lowest of the exposed deposits indicates that the present trench was probably cutting through the backfill of an earlier, and deeper service trench. One such service, among many, along this street is the main sewer. Examination of the City engineer's survey plan of 1984 shows the main sewer line to be well to the west of the gas main trench, and therefore unlikely to be responsible for the deposits observed.

Interestingly, by overlaying the line of the gas main trench onto a projection of the outline of the gatehouse buildings, it can be seen that the trench passes clear of the structure, and through the gateway. The projection is partly conjectural, and therefore its dimensions are not necessarily accurate, but it suggests that the absence of any identifiable structural elements observed in the trench, whether or not *in situ*, should not be taken as proof that the foundations of the gatehouse structure have been entirely destroyed.

Trench 2

Examination of the OS map of Oxford (1st ed 1879) indicates that the trench lay within the footprint of the east end of the 19th century church..

The stoney layer (206), partly exposed at the bottom of the trench, could represent an earlier surface associated with the medieval church, although, given the lack of associated dating material, no firm conclusions can be drawn. Layer 205 is most likely to represent the general levelling of the area after the demolition of the church. According to the contractors' own recollection, the human bones and fragment of grave slab were recovered from this deep layer of mixed material (205), approximately 2 - 4 m further north along the trench line. It would be reasonable to conclude that amongst the dumped material used to level the site would be debris from the adjacent cleared graveyard.

Alan Hardy
OAU
May 1996

APPENDIX 1.

A small quantity of human skeletal material was recovered by workmen during the excavation of a pipeline trench. The material was associated with a fragment of a grave slab. It is probable that all the material was redeposited. At least two adult individuals were represented and these may have been a male and a female. Each of the bones has been examined and the results are detailed below.

Bone identification	Preservation and completeness	Age	Sex	Comments
left pelvis	virtually complete, missing pubic symphysis	adult, possibly 30s	female	
right tibia	missing distal end, damage to proximal end	adult	male??	enemic index (82.6)
left femur	shaft only	adult?		
right femur	shaft only	adult?		
right femur	missing proximal end, some damage to distal	adult	female??	
left tibia	virtually complete, some damage to both ends	adult		enemic index (71)
left radius	shaft only, two conjoining fragments	adult		

Angela Boyle.
OAU
1996

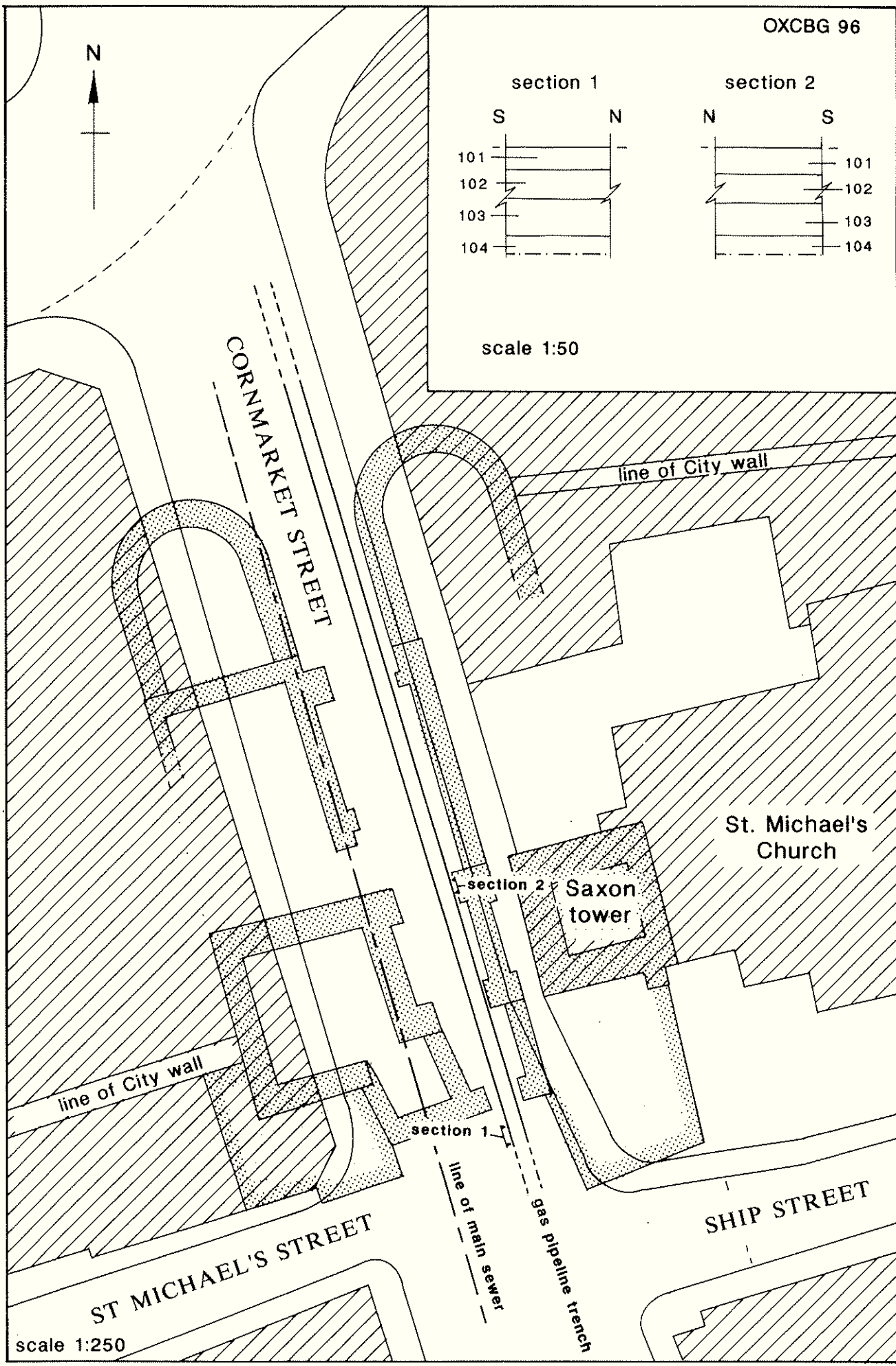


Figure 1: location of gas pipeline and projected earlier gatehouse buildings

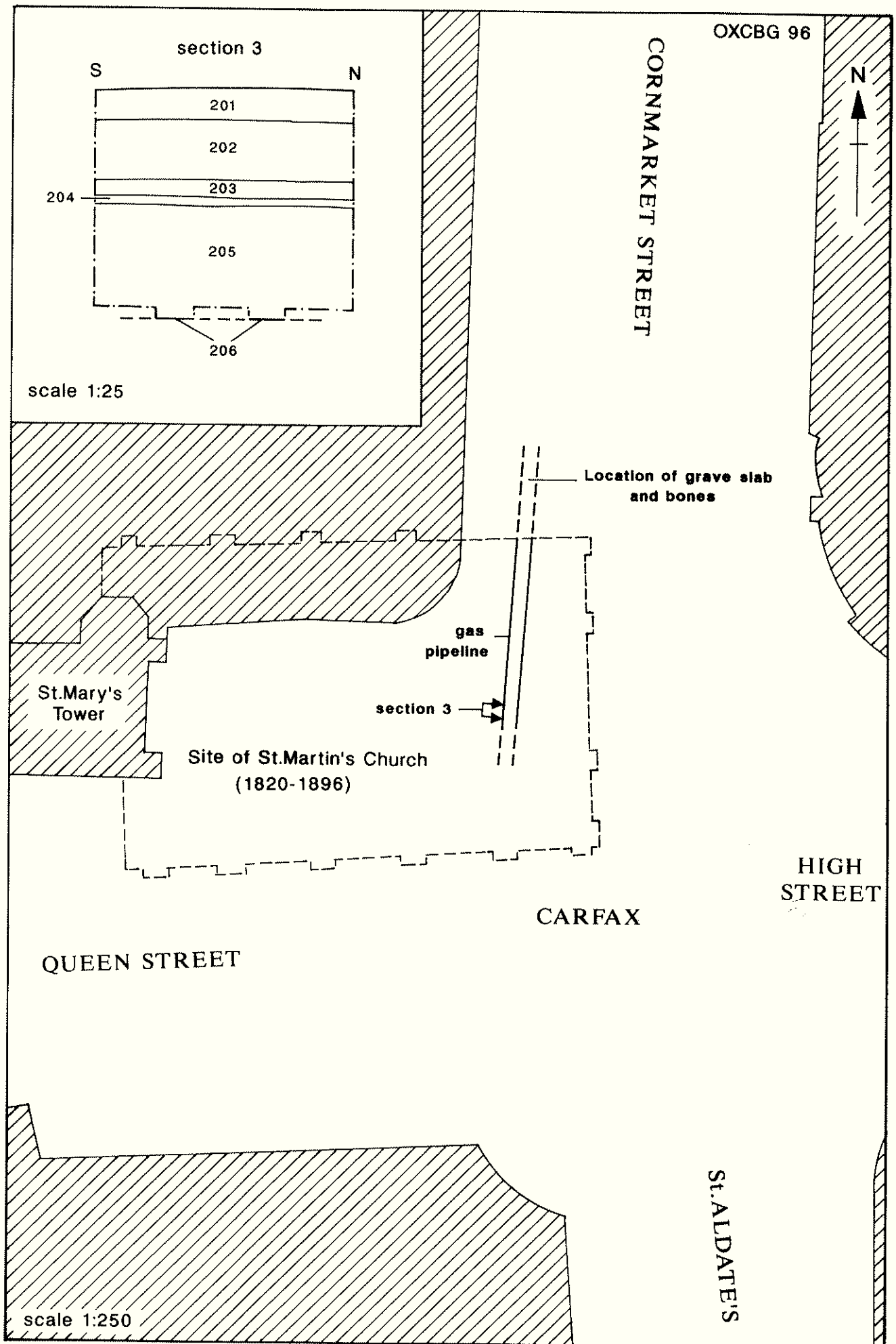


Figure 2: location of gas pipeline at Carfax



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