

## ETHELRED COURT, OLD HEADINGTON, OXFORD

### EVALUATION REPORT

18th NOV '92.

#### SUMMARY

A field evaluation was carried out by the Oxford Archaeological Unit on behalf of Mr John Cole at Ethelred Court, Old Headington, Oxford on 5th-6th October 1992. Medieval features indicated occupation on the site in the 14th-15th Century.

#### INTRODUCTION

In early October an evaluation was carried out by the Oxford Archaeological Unit, on behalf of Mr John Cole in respect of his application for planning permission for the construction of a new house on land at present used as an orchard. The site lies to the south-west of Mr Cole's house at grid ref SP54150771.

#### ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

Old Headington is an area of rich archaeology which is little understood. It was a major centre for late Roman pottery production. There are many manufacturing sites of which the closest known is at The Rookery, or Ruskin Hill, north of Dunstan Road (SP54320775; County Sites and Monuments (SMR) Number 3669).

The most important local feature is the Anglo-Saxon Palace and Royal Manor of Headington built by Offa and occupied by King Ethelred (hence the name of Ethelred Court). It was reported in the mid 19th Century that foundations of this palace could be traced in Orchard or Court Close (SMR No 3623). The precise layout and position of the palace is not known but it is conventionally located about 65 m north of the present site. Manor Farm (SMR No 3624) was present in the 17th Century and the Rookery was constructed about 1600. The parish church of St Andrews, about 350 m east of the present site, is Norman in date with a chancel arch of about 1160. Little is known about the medieval settlement which existed in the area of the church.

In 1988 small-scale trial excavations immediately to the north of the present site produced evidence of late medieval occupation.

#### TOPOGRAPHY AND LAND-USE

The site lies at the northern end of Headington Hill, just below the highest point, at about 100 m O.D. The local geology is Corallian Ragstone overlying Oxford Clay. The site is, at present, used as an orchard. The subsoils indicate garden activity over a long period and it is unlikely that it has been ploughed in recent centuries.

#### ASSESSMENT STRATEGY

One trench was hand dug by the OAU, measuring 5 m NW/SE by 1.20 m NE/SW. Hand digging proceeded down to a depth of 0.76 m where archaeological features were

encountered. The trench was cleared at this level and the features present were then sampled by hand to determine both their nature and depth and also to recover dating evidence. The features were planned and their sections drawn. See Figure 1 for trench location plan.

## RESULTS

The general soil type encountered was loam, becoming more clayey and altering in colour as it progressed downward to the archaeology. Context 1 was the topsoil; a moist grey/brown silty loam (40% silt) approximately 0.14 m thick along the length of the trench. Finds were retrieved from it. Context 2 was the subsoil; a moist grey silty loam (30% silt) approximately 0.25 m thick along the length of the trench. Context 3 was a layer directly under 2; a moist light brown/grey silty loam (35% silt) approximately 0.35 m thick along the length of the trench. Finds were retrieved from both of these which lay over and cut into the natural sand. This deposit overlay the archaeological features and the natural. Context 7 was the natural geology, a mottled pale brown/orange sand; it appeared, at least within the confines of this trench, to be undisturbed.

The archaeological features appeared to be concentrated towards the NW end of the trench. These consisted of a stone spread and a stone filled gulley 4 and 5. Feature 6, a posthole about 300 mm in diameter and 250 mm deep, occurred to the south east of the above and was filled with closely packed mortar and stones. No dating evidence was recovered from it. (See Figure 2 for Trench Plan and Sections).

## Finds

The preservation of the pottery was generally very good. The sherds were examined by Cathy Underwood-Keevill and the following is based upon her observations. Retrieved from Context 1 were post-medieval 19th-20th Century Red Wares, one roof tile and one late/post-medieval Brill/Boarstall sherd.

From Context 2 came a Brill/Boarstall miniature Baluster jug base dated to the late medieval 14th Century; also one piece of plain and one piece of glazed floor tile.

From Context 3 came three pieces of glazed floor tile and one 13th-14th Century Brill/Boarstall jug sherd.

From Context 4, the stone spread, came fragments of tile, partially glazed and one very worn 13th-14th Century jug sherd.

The Bull/Boarstall sherd type is so-called as it comes from Bull/Boarstall in Buckinghamshire. The tile recovered could also come from Bull/Boarstall, or from local/regional sites at Penn, or Denham in Buckinghamshire.

The limestone tempered tile in Context 2 is interesting as a similar type occurs at Eynsham Abbey circa 13th-14th Century.

Also recovered were bone, shell, glass and a nail.

## INTERPRETATION

This small-scale sample indicated relatively intensive activity on the site in the late medieval period. The trench was too small to reveal the precise character of the activity. However the stone spread (possibly a yard or floor surface) post-hole and gully and the relatively large amount of tile pottery and mortar present indicate occupation on the site in the 13th-14th Century. These may be the remains of timber or stone structures and associated yards. The preservation of the medieval occupation layers is good as they have not been disturbed by ploughing or later occupation.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The archaeological evaluation, although on a small-scale, has confirmed the presence of well-preserved medieval occupation on the site. No trace was found of features relating to the Anglo-Saxon Palace of Ethelred which probably lay immediately to the north. In view of the restricted scale of the evaluation trench the absence of Anglo-Saxon features cannot be regarded as conclusive evidence that the Palace and its associated buildings did not stretch this far south.

The medieval evidence indicates that the site was occupied in the 13th-14th Century. The character of the occupation is uncertain but the quality and quantity of the tile and pottery and the presence of the stone spread and other features suggest that buildings and yards are present on or close to the site.

The medieval character of Old Headington has never been substantially investigated. Any building on this site is likely to have an impact on the buried archaeological levels, through foundation trenches, service trenches and any clearance of topsoil.

It is not felt that the archaeology of this site is of such importance that it merits preservation in situ. However with regard to the recommendation of Planning Policy Guidance Note 16 and the criteria used by English Heritage for the Monuments Protection Programme, it would be desirable to archaeologically record the footprint of the proposed building in advance of construction. The precise location of the proposed building within the site does not affect this recommendation. Any other features, such as service trenches or access-ways, which involve the removal of the topsoil and the disturbance of archaeological layers should also be archaeological recorded.

The results of archaeological excavations should be analysed and reported at an appropriate level and the archive and finds deposited with the County Museum.

It is recommended, therefore, that a specification for archaeological investigations should be drawn up in relation to the finalised plans for the site. If design solutions can be proposed, which will minimise the impact of the development on the buried archaeology, then less excavation would be required.

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OAU  
October 1992



# Trench Location Plan

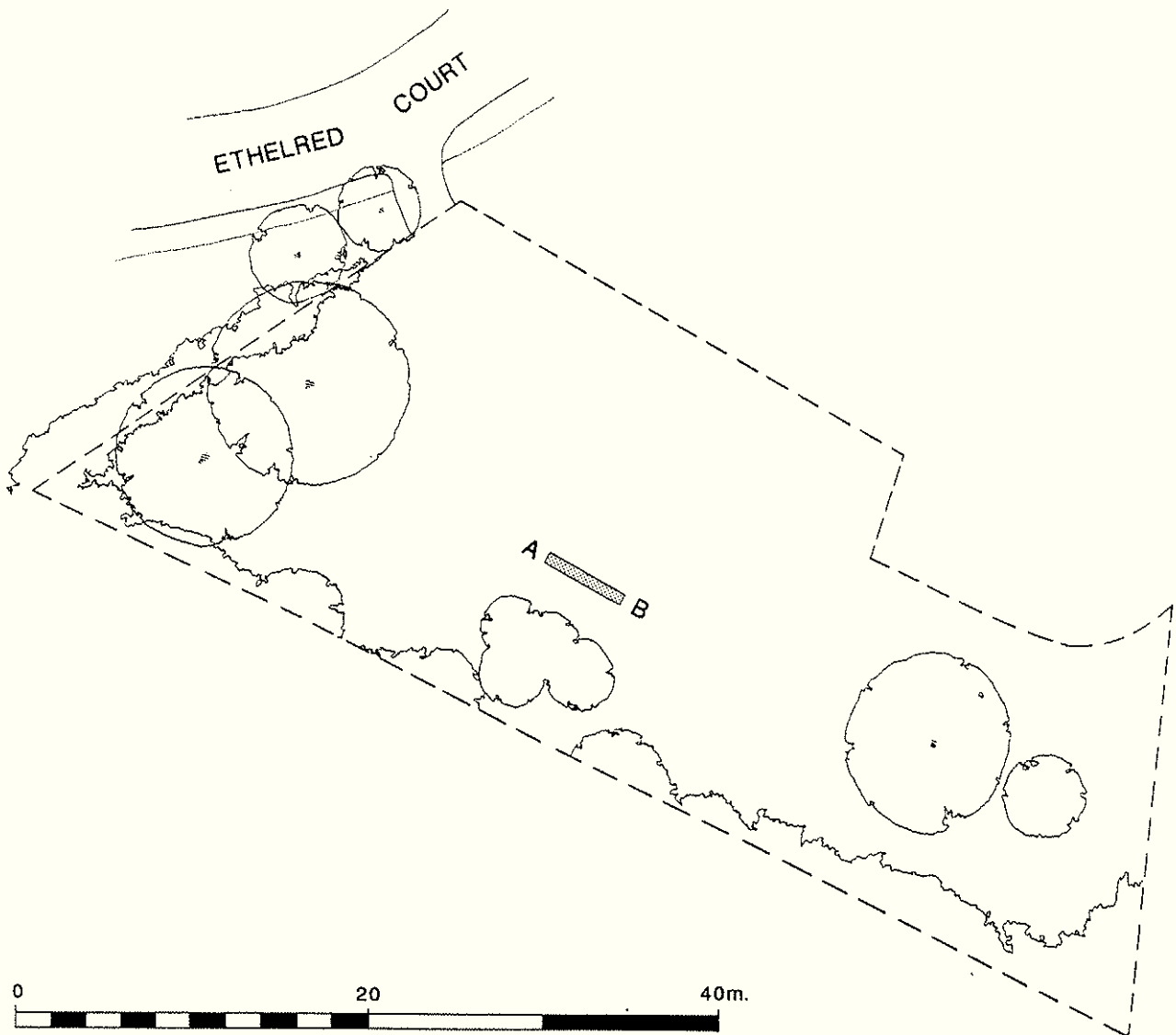
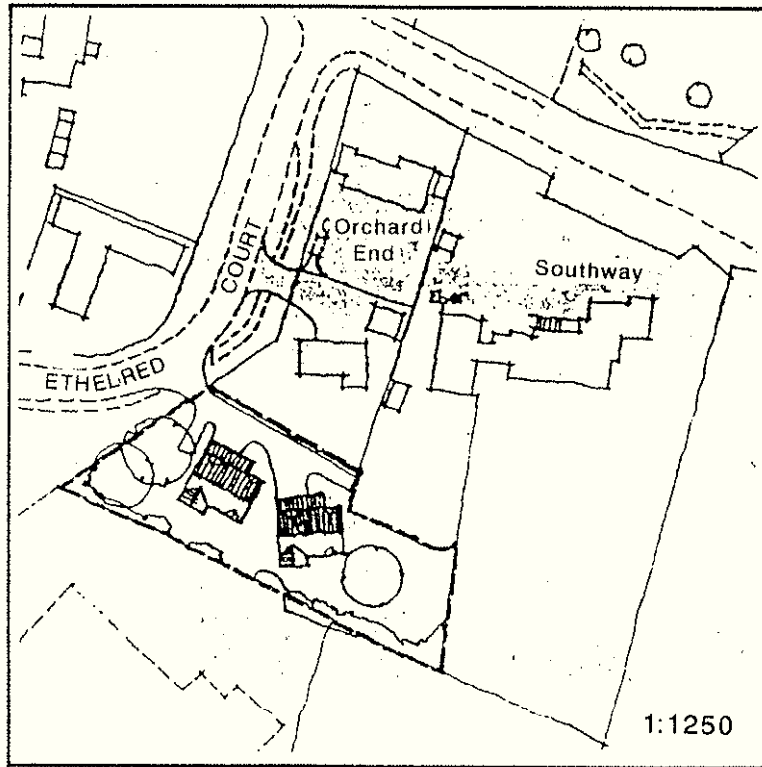


Figure 1

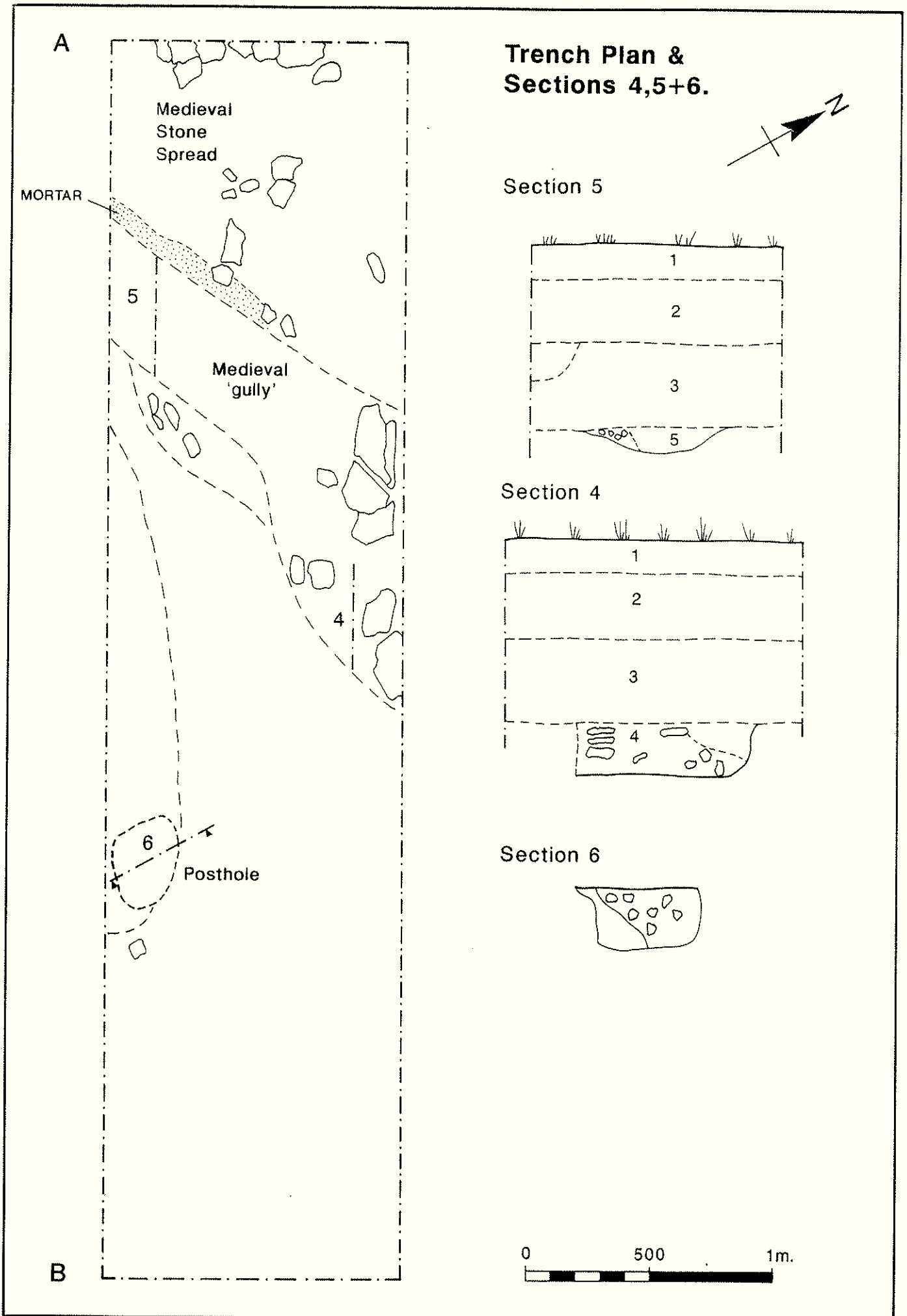


Figure 2