

**Knowles and Son**

**1-2 Folly Bridge, Abingdon Road, Oxford**

*NGR SP 5143 0550*

**ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF REPORT**

**Planning Ref. No. 96/676/NFH**

**Oxford Archaeological Unit**

**January 1999**

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Prepared by:

Date:

Checked by:

Date:

Approved by:

Date:

Oxford Archaeological Unit

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## ***Summary***

*In August and September of 1998 the Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) undertook a watching brief at 1-2 Folly Bridge, Abingdon Road, Oxford (NGR SP 5143 0550). Dumping and levelling deposits of probable 19<sup>th</sup>-century date were identified.*

### **1 Introduction (Fig. 1)**

The development proposal (planning application no. 96/676/NFH) comprised the construction of a new restaurant, gallery and residential accommodation. An archaeological watching brief was required as a condition on the planning consent, granted under PPG 16.

The watching brief was commissioned by Knowles and Son on behalf of Mr O Levinson. It was undertaken in consultation with the Oxford Archaeological Advisory Service.

### **2 Background**

Environmental evidence indicates that the course of the River Thames to the south of Oxford has undergone a series of changes since the last Ice Age. During the Neolithic and Bronze Age the development site probably fell within the river channel. A number of clay banks appeared in the early Saxon period, forming channels which remained stable into the mid-late Saxon period as a result of increased alluviation caused by a rise in the water table, and reclamation activity.

Evidence from archaeological excavations and observations over the last 25 years suggests that in the Saxon period the southern approach to Oxford was carried across this series of streams and islands, initially by means of a ford and from the late Saxon period via a timber bridge. The stone causeway is believed to have been built as a part of the 'great bridge' built by Robert D'Oilly in the late 11<sup>th</sup> century. It ran from close to the southern end of Christchurch to South Hinksey, on the far side of the floodplain, a distance of c. 1.5 miles (SAM 21757).

A gate tower with a drawbridge was built in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, where the bridge crossed the main stream of the Thames. Repairs to the bridge are recorded in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. The gate tower, also known as the Folly, was finally demolished in 1779, with the bridge itself being rebuilt in 1825.

Simultaneously, a major redevelopment of the riverside facilities took place, including new wharves and streets constructed on the north side of the river, fronting a basin, while the navigation stream was diverted south through a pound lock (to the south of the development site).

Several excavations and monitoring exercises have been carried out in the immediate vicinity of the development site:

- Rescue work in the Telecom Tunnel beneath St Aldate's to the north of the site revealed possible late Saxon or Norman occupation following construction of the bridge and filling a former river channel (Campbell, forthcoming).

- Across the Thames, to the north-east of the site, evaluation work at the Head of the River Public House produced information relating to medieval land reclamation (OAU 1994).
- Excavations at Whitehouse Road, c. 250 m to the south-east of the site, revealed evidence of Middle Iron Age occupation on the lower gravel terrace (Mudd 1993, 1996).
- An archaeological field evaluation and watching brief at Salter's Boatyard, c. 25 m to the south east across the Thames, located evidence of substantial dumping and levelling in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (OAU 1998a, OAU 1998b).

The site lies on alluvial clays and gravels, overlying Oxford Clay, on the Thames floodplain at c. 57 m OD. The site consists of an island in the River Thames, which probably is of natural origin although extensively built up and surrounded by river walls and bounded to the north by a pontoon. The 'folly bridge' forms the eastern boundary of the site, and is a Scheduled Ancient Monument. This structure is some distance away from the standing building on the site, which was converted as a part of the development, however the medieval gatehouse also known as Friar Bacon's study was founded on cutwaters which would have been substantially wider than the bridge causeway itself. Efforts to identify the location of the tower from purely cartographic evidence have been inconclusive, and thus there was a possibility of encountering remains relating to this structure.

### **3 Aims**

The aims of the watching brief were to record any archaeological remains exposed on site during the course of the works to established OAU standards (Wilkinson 1992), in order to secure the preservation by record of any archaeology, the presence and nature of which could not be established in advance.

### **4 Methodology**

The watching brief was undertaken by means of separate inspection visits. Groundworks were well advanced on commencement of the watching brief, with some of the foundations and services already having been dug and backfilled. Those excavations yet to be undertaken were observed and recorded.

Within the constraints imposed by health and safety considerations the deposits features exposed were cleaned, inspected and recorded in plan, section and by colour slide and monochrome print photography. Written records were also made on proforma sheets. Soil description utilises standard charts for the approximation of percentage of inclusion types in soil deposits.

### **5 Results (Figs. 2 & 3)**

Trenches 1 and 2 were foundation trenches, dug to c. 1 m depth; trench 3 was a service trench dug to c. 2 m depth. All of the excavations were cut through a variety of fills, none of which formed a definite surface.

### Trench 1 (Fig. 3, Section 1)

The earliest deposit seen was (3), a very mixed and dirty deposit of coarse subangular charcoal stained gravel with occasional lumps of gray silty clay. This was sealed by (2), a mixed deposit of sand and clay with occasional loamy lenses which in turn was sealed by (1), a deposit of fine-coarse yellow/white subangular sand and medium-coarse subangular gravel with occasional lenses of charcoal-stained gray clay. No finds were retrieved.

### Trench 2 (Fig. 3, Section 2)

The earliest deposit seen here was (13), a heavily disturbed deposit of mid yellow coarse subangular gravel with much charcoal staining and occasional lumps of gray silty clay. This was sealed by (12), a mixed deposit of clay and sand with occasional lenses of gravelly loam. Overlying this was (11), a deposit of fine-coarse white/yellow subangular sand and coarse subangular gravel with very occasional lenses of silty gray clay. No finds were retrieved.

### Trench 3 (Fig. 3, Section 3)

The earliest deposit seen here was (100), a redeposited alluvial clay; this was sealed by (101), a deposit of clayey sand containing pieces of mortar and brick. This was sealed by five further clayey sand and gravel deposits (102)-(106), forming makeup layers raising the ground level by c. 1 m. Prior to ground reduction the area had been sealed by a compacted mixture of coarse subangular sand and fine-coarse subangular gravel (107), a layer of clinker (108), a layer of fine subangular gravel (109) and a layer of rolled concrete (110). No finds were retrieved.

## 7 Environmental results

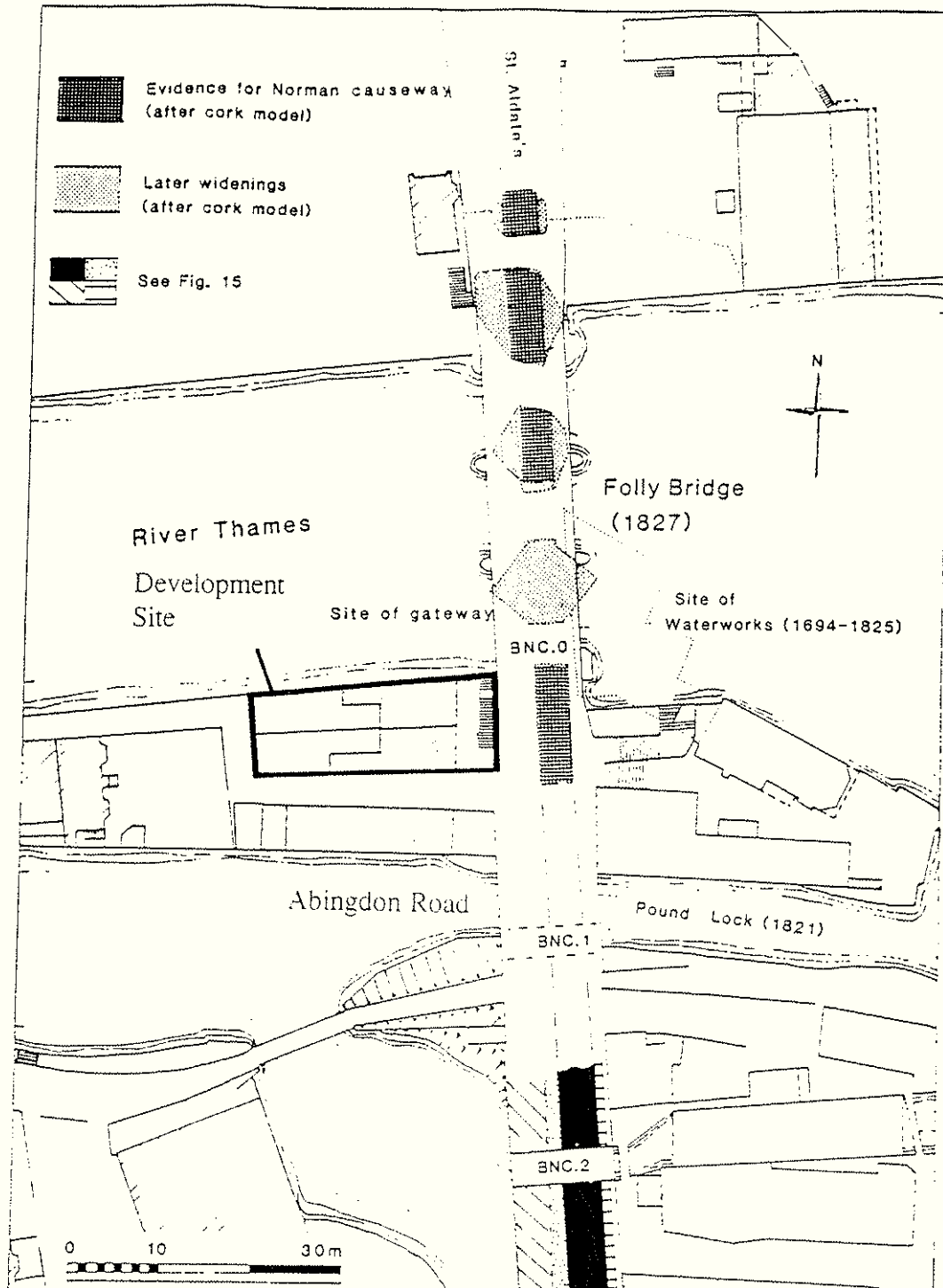
Due to the absence of significant archaeological deposits, no environmental soil samples were taken.

## 8 Discussion

Neither the foundation nor the service trenches penetrated below the substantial quantities of made ground present on the island. No finds were retrieved from any of those deposits seen, however the made ground deposits are very similar to those seen at Salter's Boatyard during both an evaluation and a watching brief undertaken on that site (OAU 1998a, OAU 1998b); those deposits were dated to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It would therefore seem likely that this site also has been substantially raised and levelled since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. No evidence was seen which would shed light on the history of the site prior to the 19<sup>th</sup> century: nothing was seen relating to the pre-19<sup>th</sup> century extent of the island and no pre-19<sup>th</sup> century structures were seen.

## References.

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- Mudd, A 1993 'Excavations at Whitehouse Road, Oxford, 1992', *Oxoniensia* LVIII (1993), 33-85
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- OAU 1997 Salter's Boatyard, Folly Bridge, Abingdon Road, Oxford. Archaeological Desktop Study.
- OAU 1998a Salter's Boatyard, Folly Bridge, Abingdon Road, Oxford. Archaeological Evaluation Report, January 1998.
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- Wilkinson, D (ed) 1992 Oxford Archaeological Unit Field Manual, (First edition, August 1992).



Location of the medieval Folly Bridge, based on the cork model which seems to have been made c. 1815-25, before or during demolition (Ashmolean Museum 1878.272). The above reconstruction assumes the model was at a scale of  $\frac{1}{4}$  inch to 1 foot (1:64) and embodies conclusions from a scale drawing of the model kindly provided by David Sturdy.

Figure 1: Site Location Plan (after Durham 1984)

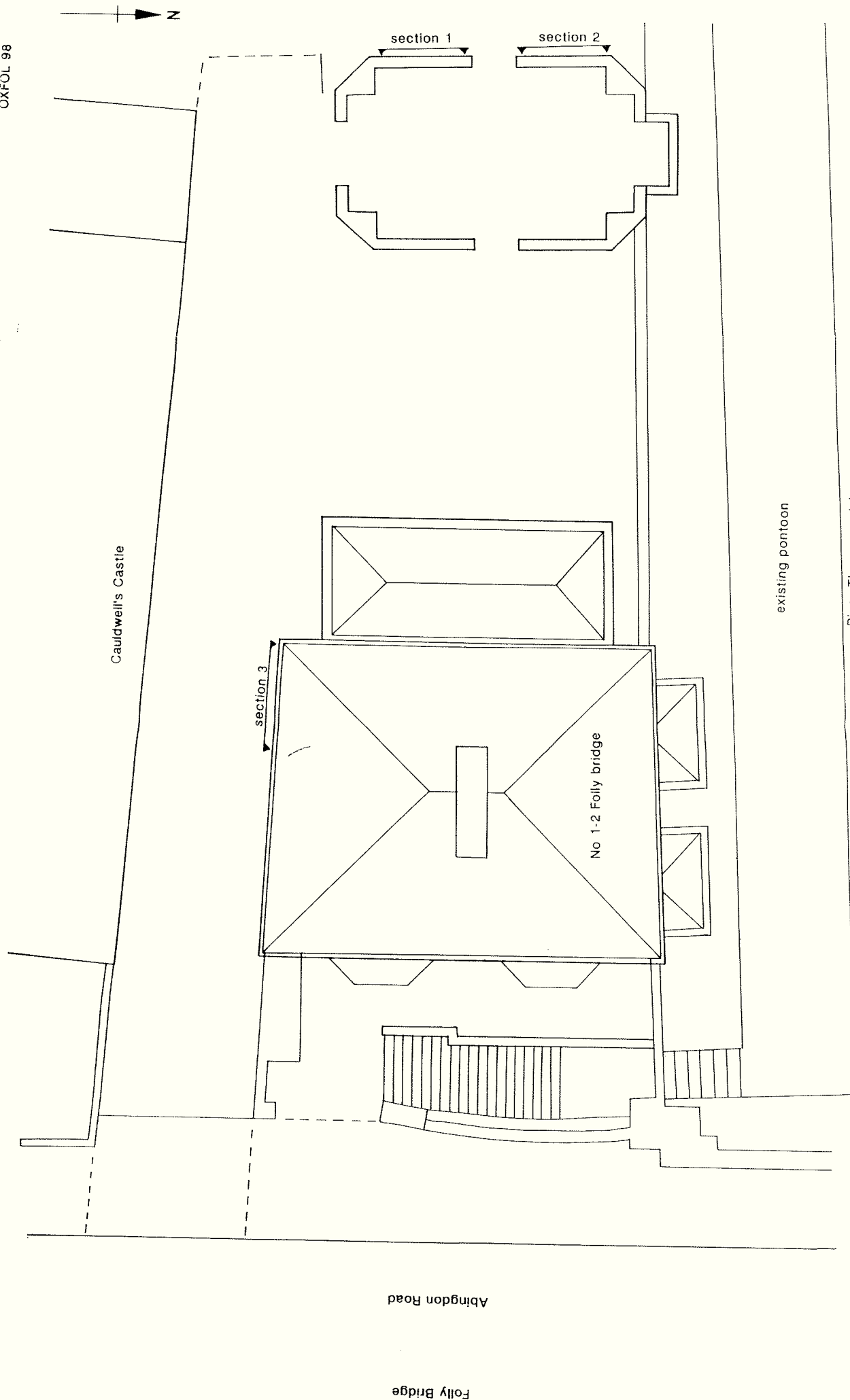


Figure 2 : site plan and section locations



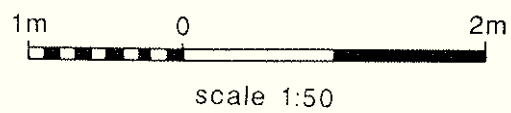
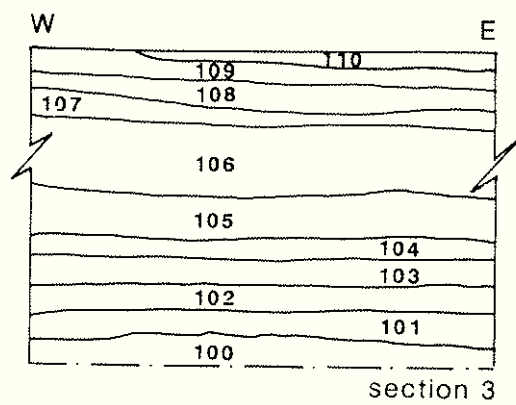
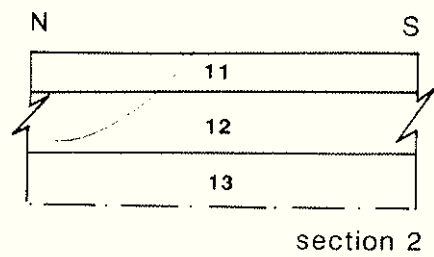
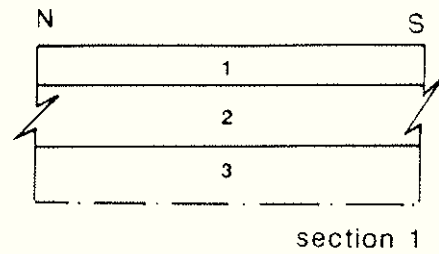


Figure 3: sections



## OXFORD ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT

Janus House, Osney Mead, Oxford, OX2 0ES

Tel: 01865 263800 Fax: 01865 793496

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