

LAND AT WHITEHOUSE ROAD, GRANDPONT, OXFORD

Former Oxford City Football Ground
and Adjoining Land

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION PHASE 1

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Summary

A field evaluation was carried out by OAU at the former Oxford City Football Ground at White House Road on behalf of Pegasus Developments Ltd in association with Brasenose College. There were four main phases of archaeology; an area of Iron Age activity in the W, medieval boundaries, slight disturbance caused by later ploughing and the turfed football pitch which overlaid everything. There was also a relict stream course, an earlier channel for the Hogacre Ditch, which showed phases of bank revetment.

Introduction

In August 1991 an assessment was carried out by the Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) on behalf of Pegasus Developments Ltd associated with Brasenose College in advance of an application for planning permission for a retirement home with space for car parking. The area for the development is at present covered by the former Oxford City Football Club grounds and the Grandpont Nursery School and belongs to Brasenose College. The site is S of the River Thames where it runs through Oxford, about 200 m. S of Folly Bridge and immediately to the W of Abingdon Road and the line of the Norman Grandpont at grid reference SP 51350530 (Fig.1).

Archaeological background

Known archaeological sites in the area relate particularly to the Saxon and later crossing of the Thames, and there has been comparatively little work on the remainder of the flood plain in the city itself. This is mainly because most of the higher ground and even some of the lower ground has been built up by housing and other development, and in the undeveloped areas the ancient surface of the flood plain is at a deep level and covered by alluvium. There are flood plain sites upstream however which illustrate the type of settlement which must have existed at Oxford before the main alluviation, many of them from the Iron Age, and they fit into a pattern of settlement on and around the course of the Thames (see fig. 4);

- i) Port Meadow, cropmarks on aerial photographs.
 - ii) University Parks, cropmarks on aerial photographs.
 - iii) Boar's Hill, a small site was excavated.
 - iv) Botley, sites and a pit alignment.
 - v) Hinksey Hill, mid Iron Age settlement.
- The site lies between the large Iron Age occupation areas at;
- vi) Eynsham/Cassington complex, Hillforts and settlements
 - vii) Abingdon, Iron Age settlements and a later Oppidum.

There is a scatter of Roman finds from the area, but most of the later evidence relates to the middle Saxon period when Oxford as we know it was established on the N side of the Thames, controlling a river crossing which was presumably the 'Oxen Ford', and later a bridge on the same line. It was to become one of the most important towns in Midland England, with the only

Norman stone bridge which can be identified anywhere in England (Grandpont, see B Durham, 'The Thames Crossing, *Oxoniensia*, xlix (1984), 57-100) (fig.5). This bridge survives under the Abingdon Road forming the E perimeter of the present site, and seems to have been linking a series of high points on the flood plain gravels, which must have stuck out like low islands above the flood waters in winter, including the Whitehouse Rd site.

There are two names for the land on the S side of Folly Bridge, Westwyke and Swinsell, and the Brasenose College plan of the early 16th century makes it clear that the site in question was then known as Swinsell Farm. The medieval and later history of the land is covered by the Victoria County History Vol IV, 283.

Topography

The proposed development site lies on the S side of the current course of the Thames in the flood plain between the gravel ridge that Oxford is built on and the higher ground at Kennington. It includes the old Oxford City Football Club grounds and the Grandpont Nursery school.

To the NW of the site an old stream course had been canalised into the Hogacre Ditch. This ran across the W corner of the Football pitch and to the N of Grandpont Nursery School.

The evaluation was carried out on the old football pitch which was approximately 0.84 hectares at a height of 56 m O.D.

The site has not been ploughed for the past 100 years, since the football stadium was built, and not intensively ploughed before that.

Assessment strategy (fig.1)

The assessment strategy was based on a 2 percent sample of the area of the football pitch, as other areas of the proposed development area were inaccessible at this stage and would need to be the subject of a second phase of evaluation in due course. The trenches were set out across the line of cropmarks identified from the aerial photograph, in order to determine their date and function. The sample consisted of two x 25 m long, one x 20 m long, two x 15 m long and five x 10 m long trenches. These 1.6 m wide trenches were dug by JCB mechanical excavator. This original layout was supplemented by five further trenches between of 10 m or less in length.

The archaeological features were sampled by hand to determine their nature and depth and to recover dating evidence. They were recorded in plan, and sections were drawn where they were excavated.

Results

Soils

The natural subsoil sequence was windblown loess on top of glacially deposited gravel. The general soil type was a sandy silt loam with varying amounts of gravel inclusions which was derived from the windblown subsoil. This had overlain the gravel until it was disturbed by human activity.

The turf of the football pitch, which included a distinct layer of worm sorted pea-grit, overlaid a dumped layer to the N of the pitch and ploughsoil elsewhere. The ploughsoil directly overlay the gravel in some trenches while in others there were deposits of loess of differing thicknesses. This had been disturbed and in places contained finds pressed into its surface.

The N part of the site had been much lower lying than the S until the site was levelled off for the football pitch. The layers of dumped infilling which created the football pitch overlaid a clear old turf layer. The old turf layer overlaid a gravelly layer analogous to the old ploughsoil seen elsewhere. This layer overlaid features cut into the gravel.

Archaeology

Four main phases of human activity were identified on the site

- 1 an Iron Age settlement, mainly concentrated to the W;
- 2 a complex pattern of medieval boundaries;
- 3 slight disturbance of the above deposits caused by subsequent ploughing;
- 4 extensive shallow landfill for the football pitch.

The features are described below in the sequence of the excavation in order to demonstrate the logic of the stratigraphic analysis.

Identification of the Hogacre Ditch

The excavation was begun with a trench in the NE corner of the site in an effort to identify the suspected relict river channel, ie the Hogacre ditch, which according to the air photograph runs across the NW corner of the football field. This section had evidently been put into a culvert between 1875 (see fig. 6) and the 1890's when the football ground was built. The trenching showed that the original level of the E part of the field had been raised by dumping at around this time, presumably levelling up the edge of the channel for the football pitch, and this was visible in Trenches 1, 2, 5 and 14. However no water-laid deposits were found until a second phase of trenching went considerably further into the NW corner of the site than originally proposed.

Water-laid silts and peat were ultimately found in Trenches 13 and 14, and there was some evidence to suggest an earlier phase of canalisation in the form of wattle revetments

and the stake palisade in trench 14 (14/17, 14/18, 14/19 and 14/20). These peat deposits seemed to be within a bay or inlet in the S bank of the channel, which explains why they were missed in the initial trenching. The wattlework underlay the general dumping on the site (fig. 3) but it was not dated effectively, and the presence of brick-like material in the layer (14/14) behind the wattling could mean that it was 16th-century or later.

Plough Soils and Medieval Boundaries (fig. 2)

Having satisfactorily identified the channel line it was possible to interpret the deposits beside it. A ploughsoil visible across the site (generally layer 2 in trenches where it occurred, see context list) had disturbed the underlying archaeological features rather than truncated them. In Trench 5 for instance the ghosts of early features could be seen in section in the side of the trench, and the streaks of gravel which identified the plough disturbance could be seen running through the fill of the pits and ditches.

The only exception to this was a bank deposit (6/12 and 6/13) in trench 6 to the W of a ditch (6/8). This bank may represent a hedgeline established on the upcast from the excavation of the ditch, which would have the effect of protecting the underlying deposits from the plough. The fill of the ditch alongside had however been disturbed by ploughing, which implies that the bank/hedge outlived its ditch as a boundary marker.

This boundary ran from the old line of Whitehouse Road back to the edge of the Hogacre Ditch (see fig. 6), as did other medieval boundaries (see fig.2 cropmarks). Ditch (6/8) and its bank would have bisected the area between a large ditch visible in trench 10 (10/3) and a grey area on the aerial photograph which perhaps indicates the E limit of the higher ground. This area is in turn bisected by the very large ditch (4/4) seen in Trench 4. Smaller cropmarks at right-angles to this last ditch may indicate further sub-divisions.

Beyond this complex of field boundaries, in the 'grey area', were medieval pits in trench 3. These were perhaps used for refuse disposal at the rear of the property occupied by the White House Inn (fig. 6), perhaps Swinsell Farm, but there were other medieval pits scattered across the site which are not so easily explained.

Iron Age Feature and Deposits (fig. 2)

The Iron Age features were generally filled by a red-brown sandy silt rather than the darker grey-brown of the medieval features. A large circular enclosure visible as a cropmark at the N end of Trench 9 was dated as Iron Age (9/11 and 9/12). The recut ditches had burnt limestone in their fills, evidently tipped from the S. A slight gully (9/9) visible to the S of this complex was vertical-sided and flat-bottomed. Its form suggests that it may be a part of a house structure perhaps a wall trench. It had substantial amounts of burnt limestone in its fill, as well as 11 large sherds of pottery, which at the very least suggests close proximity to a domestic structure. To the S of this feature was a ditch (9/7) which may represent a boundary for the domestic area. It also contained burnt limestone which in

this case had been tipped into it from the N, ie from the area of the suggested building. This ditch may be a later realignment of the pits to the S some of which were Iron Age and may be an earlier boundary in the form of a pit alignment (9/5, 9/6).

To the NE of this area (W end of trench 6) was a vertically sided ditch (6/10) which may have formed a 'D' shaped enclosure with the cropmarks to the SW (see fig 2), a typical Iron Age form. The small annex to the S is also typical.

Features Periferal to the Iron Age Settlement

At the N end of trench 1 was a small pit (1/6) which contained Iron Age pottery, and very close to it an Iron Age ditch (14/16) aligned N-S. To the N of this feature was an undated ditch on the same alignment which may also be of Iron Age date 14/15, since it was overlain/truncated by the same layers (14/7).

Further W along the bank in trench 12 was one Iron Age ditch which appeared to be part of a larger circular cropmark feature, and had the typical soil colour which is distinctively different from that the medieval features in this trench (see above).

There was one undated feature, a ditch in trench 5 (5/5), which had a similar fill to the Iron Age features. If Iron Age it may be part of an enclosure system around the settlement, since it is typical of such perimeter features that the volume of finds drops off with distance from the domestic focus.

Finds

In total 135 sherds of pottery and 80 pieces of bone were recovered. Twenty-nine sherds were middle Iron Age in date with 26 pieces of bone from contexts dated as Iron Age by these sherds.

The ploughsoil contained sherds ranging in date from Iron Age to Mid 19th century: the main bulk of these sherds were medieval with a predominance of 13th century finds. Iron Age sherds were found in the ploughsoil in trench 5 and in medieval contexts in trenches 4, 6 and 12. These sherds, while not in stratified Iron Age contexts, indicate that there was Iron Age activity nearby.

The Iron Age pottery showed distinctive traits primarily exhibited by mid Iron Age pottery; the sandy fabric and rounded shapes of the larger sherds especially those from gully 9/9. There were one large sherd from this gully which had a very black sandy fabric, again very typically mid Iron Age. Wares with shelly inclusions were found and this is typical of all Iron Age sites.

Other Iron Age finds, from ditch 9/11, were a small amount of slag and a piece of loomweight. These finds indicate metalworking and weaving which are common Iron Age 'cottage industries'.

Burnt limestone, pot boilers, was found in 9/11, 9/12, 9/9, 9/7, 10/2, 10/3, 1/8, and 1/16. This is significant because such material was dumped not far from its point of origin and is generally very closely associated with houses.

The medieval pottery was mostly of 12th- to 13th century in date. Unglazed black wares with grit inclusions of local

production predominated, Oxford types, R, AQ, and AC. Some of this pottery came from stratified sequences notably in trenches 1, 6 and 14.

There was an amount of 19th century pottery, mostly from the early part of the 19th century. This came principally from the dumped layers associated with the infilling of the lower lying land for the Great Western Railway Station, at the end of Western Road built in 1843-4, and with the levelling of the ground for the football pitch.

The preservation of the pottery was generally. The pottery of all dates, even from the ploughsoil, was unabraded which suggests that there was little post-depositional disturbance. The preservation of bone was good.

Environmental

No soil samples were taken but many of the features contained charcoal in noticeable amounts, some of which is likely to have been carbonised cereals. The presence of preserved wooden stakes and wattling in the relict stream course indicates that organic preservation will be good in these areas, and this is likely to include deposits associated with the prehistoric settlement.

Comments on the results

Reliability of field investigation

The sample size was adequate within the area assessed but the area of the Nursery School was not evaluated, and the hurried nature of the job meant that some questions are still unanswered. For instance the Iron Age settlement must abut the Hogacre Ditch at some point, but the junction is likely to lie below the current water table, and only the additional trenches 13 and 14 were able to expose even the topmost silts in these areas. To confirm the quality of deposit it would be necessary to locate the original edge of the channel and use a pump to keep the excavation dry, neither of which was possible in the time scale.

The amount of medieval activity was surprising though not totally unexpected, and the trench layout has probably given a fair reflection of the distribution and date of the field system and pits. If there is a failing here it would relate to the extensive disturbances along the edge of the Hogacre ditch, including the peat deposit and wattle fences, which have as yet not been fully explained.

Overall Interpretation

The archaeological deposits were generally well preserved. The small amount of ploughing may be quite recent, although the documentary evidence suggests that the area was not ploughed, and the extensive layer of worm-sorted soil up to 0.15 m. thick at the N end of Trench 1 would argue that this area at least had not been ploughed since the end of the medieval period.

As a result of the low level of plough disturbance the prehistoric features are better preserved than most similar

sites. They seem to form a small Middle Iron Age settlement, perhaps somewhat isolated on an area of higher ground. There were at least two sites of presumed dwellings with pits and ditched enclosures. The features at the highest point did not have water-deposited layers within them, which suggest that the site was permanently dry, unlike another similar settlement at Farmoor where it appears that the buildings were occupied seasonally to take advantage of summer grazing, but abandoned in winter. At Farmoor the most significant data came from the areas where Iron Age deposits were sealed by silts brought by the river, which ultimately led to the abandonment of the settlement. On the Whitehouse Rd site there is evidence to suggest that the Iron Age activity extends to the bank of the Hogacre Ditch, where shallow features with Iron Age finds have water deposited fills and may provide preserved organic evidence for the lifestyle of the settlement.

Elsewhere the amount of domestic debris from hearths, loomweights and slag suggest that the Iron Age settlement will provide evidence for a large range of activities. Structural features are likely to survive well, because although slightly truncated by later ploughing, one posthole in trench 9 (9/10) survived to a depth of 0.35 m., unusual for a prehistoric site in these circumstances.

The medieval ditches forming boundaries are also well preserved. They make a pattern of small fields and sub-plots more complete than anything found in the fields around medieval Oxford, and add significantly to the results of a research theme which has developed through evaluations at Holywell St, Magdalen College and St Annes College. The medieval pits with their large amount of pottery could result from domestic refuse from the farm on the site of the White House, or otherwise early cartage of refuse from the town. The former would most easily explain pits at the SE corner of the site towards the farm, the latter might explain the medieval infill in the disturbed edge of the Hogacre ditch, where the material may have been brought in to fill pits made by gravel quarrying.

Some comment should be made on the noticeable break in activity between the Iron Age and the medieval period, at least a thousand years. There was the odd sherd of late Saxon pottery, but nothing to indicate the frenetic activity which must have accompanied the construction of the ford and bridges. The most obvious reason, which has been alluded to above, is the dramatic change which overcame the river in at some time in the first 1000 years AD, when it began to deposit a thick blanket of silt over the lower parts of the valley floor. At Oxford there are places where this deposit is up to 1 m. thick (G Lambrick, 'Dominican Priory', *Oxoniensia*, L (1985)), and although as we have seen this process did not affect the higher parts of the Whitehouse Rd. site, it could have made it a much less desirable place for settlement. For instance the effective area of the settlement may have been reduced by the higher water level, although this would no doubt be offset by improved summer grazing on the water meadows. Perhaps more damaging would be the increasing difficulty of reaching this 'island' from the higher ground at the sides of the river valley, across roads which became boggy and unreliable in winter, and this may explain why renewed

settlement had to wait for the construction of the raised river crossing with ford or bridge in the 8th or 9th centuries AD.

The above explanation for the break in settlement on this site is plausible, but it reopens questions about the alluviation process on the Thames which have tested the ingenuity of a generation of archaeologists working alongside soil scientists, biologists and hydrologists. Much of the theory of soil formation in valley floors has been generated by these studies, and some of the most important and enigmatic results have come from the flood plain at Oxford within a few hundred metres of the present site. What has been lacking is a convincing dated and levelled sequence of deposits for the pre-Saxon period, to substantiate some Iron Age radiocarbon dates from preserved vegetation with no associated settlement. The present site may have precisely the deposits which have been missing, which could be from the alluvial material at the edge of the Hogacre ditch, or from the lower fills of pits and ditches in the levels below existing water table which were not accessible to the present evaluation.

Proof of the relationship of the Iron Age settlement to its waterside and the effect and date of flooding would be of national significance in the study of valley-floor soils and the causes of hydrological changes in historic time. Another aspect of the present site which would be of enormous significance relates to the medieval levels. Although presently part of the City of Oxford, the site was clearly open fields only 150 years ago, and being on the south side of the Thames it was under a different jurisdiction from the city. It was in fact in a different county, in Berkshire, and interestingly virtually the whole of the 800 m. length of the Norman Grandpont was in Berkshire also, to be maintained by the people of Berkshire at no cost to Oxford. The effect is that there was a major regional boundary here which, taking account of bridge tolls and market tolls on the way into Oxford, may have encouraged the people of Swinsell to think of Abingdon as their market instead. There are few places where one would be able to distinguish market loyalties from the archaeological record, but in the case of Oxford and Abingdon the traditional medieval pottery is quite distinct. So on the present site there is a unique opportunity of trying to characterise the pottery in the pits near the farm and compare them statistically with the bulk fill beside the Hogacre ditch, which is on too big a scale to have come from the farm and would be most likely to reflect the pottery of Oxford itself.

Finally the site has a most unusual feature, an inlet in the side of the Hogacre ditch which contains brick-like material well down into the silts, and yet includes wattle revetments constructed on the medieval pattern. Explanations of this feature range from a gravel quarry reused as a fishpond (but it does not make sense to dig gravel so far below water level, and the gravel sides are too steep for a fishpond), or alternatively some sort of a dock. In any case it would repay further investigation, and if it were a dock, however late, it would be of considerable interest.

Recommendations

The evaluation of the available part of the site has demonstrated that the bank of the Hogacre ditch was the site of intense activity in the Iron Age and the medieval periods, the Iron Age site being perhaps the closest ancestral settlement to the site which was to become Oxford. The Iron Age deposits and the medieval field system are exceptionally well preserved and are at a level where they will be disrupted if not totally destroyed even by topsoil stripping. The deposits bordering the channel of the Hogacre ditch are as important if not more so, for the story they may contain of the hydrological changes in the river and the origins of the city, and these are also subject to disruption by certain types of foundations and deep services.

In the absence of details of the proposed development, its foundations and services, it is difficult to suggest a package which would best mitigate the impact of the development, but it would not be difficult to define an area of excavation which would encompass most of the important issues discussed above.

OAU
August 1991

Appendices

TABLE 1
CONTEXTS AND FINDS

TRENCH	CTX	TYPE	WIDTH	DEPTH	DATE
1	1	turf		0.21	
1	2	dump		0.43	medieval-19th c
1	3	layer		0.18	12th-15th c
1	4	coal		0.17	
1	5	layer		-	13th-15th c
1	6	pit	1.9	0.30	Iron Age
1	7	layer	not fully	excavated	
1	8	layer	not fully	excavated	
1	9	layer	not fully	excavated	
1	10	layer	not fully	excavated	
1	11	layer	not fully	excavated	14th-15th c
1	12	layer	not fully	excavated	13th c
1	13	layer	not fully	excavated	
2	1	topsoil		0.11	
2	2	dump		0.12	
2	3	dump		0.24	
2	4	old turf		0.25	13th c to modern
2	5	old subsoil		0.25	
3	1	topsoil		0.22	
3	2	old turf		0.21	18th c
3	3	ploughsoil	not fully	excavated	13-19th c
3	4	pit	0.70	0.35	14th-15th c
3	5	pit	1	1.00	
3	6	pit		1.00	14-15th c
3	7	pit		1.00	14th-15th c
3	8	pit		0.25	
3	9	pit	not fully	excavated	
3	10	pit	not fully	excavated	13th c
4	1	topsoil		0.30	
4	2	pit		0.40	12th-13th c
4	3	subsoil		0.10	13th c
4	4	ditch	not fully	excavated	
4	5	ditch?	0.14	0.08	late 13th-14th c
5	1	topsoil		0.22	
5	2	ploughsoil		0.40	medieval
5	3	pit	0.55	0.20	14th-15th c
5	4	ditch	1.45	0.20	13th c?
5	5	ditch		0.60	
5	6	pit		0.45	13th-15th c
5	7	pit		0.22	
6	1	topsoil		0.20	
6	2	old topsoil		0.20	19th c
6	3	ploughsoil		0.18	
6	4	pit	not excavated		
6	5	pit	0.80	0.40	
6	6	pit	0.42	0.08	
6	7	disturbance			
6	8	ditch	0.60	0.18	14th-15th c
6	9	pit	0.80+	0.20	15th c

6	10	ditch	0.55	0.55	Iron Age
6	11	pit	not excavated		
6	12	layer/bank		0.04	15th-16th c
6	13	layer/bank		0.04	13th c
7	1	topsoil		0.20	
7	2	ploughsoil		0.30	18th-19th c
7	3	posthole		0.12	
7	4	posthole		0.12	19th c
7	5	subsoil	not fully excavated		
8	1	topsoil		0.21	
8	2	ploughsoil		0.15	14th c-modern
8	3	subsoil	not fully excavated		late 12th-13th c
9	1	topsoil		0.28	
9	2	ploughsoil		0.30	
9	3	pit	1.20	0.10	14th c?
9	4	pit	0.80	0.05	medieval
9	5	pit	1.45	0.25	Iron Age
9	6	ditch	2.05	0.35	
9	7	ditch	1.7	0.72	Iron Age
9	8	pit?	3.5	-	13th-14th c
9	9	gully	0.50	0.35	mid Iron Age
9	10	posthole	0.50	0.35	
9	11	ditch	0.88	0.70	Iron Age
9	12	ditch	2.40	1+	Iron Age
10	1	topsoil		0.30	
10	2	ploughsoil		0.22	15th c
10	3	ditch	not fully excavated		up to late 12th c
11	1	topsoil		0.28	
11	2	ploughsoil		0.30	
11	3	ditch	not excavated		
11	4	ditch	not excavated		
12	1	topsoil		0.20	
12	2	ploughsoil		0.20	
12	3	ditch	not excavated		medieval
12	4	ditch	not excavated		brick/tile
12	5	ditch?	not excavated		medieval
12	6	ditch	not excavated		Iron Age?
13	1	topsoil		0.30	
13	2	dump		0.85	
13	3	layer		0.40	
13	4	layer	not fully excavated		1840-70
14	1	topsoil		0.20	
14	2	dump		0.22	
14	3	layer		0.20	
14	4	gravel lens		0.05	
14	5	dumping		0.28	1780-1820
14	6	bank?		0.16	
14	7	bank?		0.33	
14	8	layer		0.16	
14	9	layer		0.08	clay pipe 18th c
14	10	layer		0.13	
14	11	layer		0.50	brick 16th c?
14	12	layer		0.22	tile/bricks 19th c
14	13	layer		0.30	
14	14	layer	not fully excavated		brick/tile 19th c
14	15	ditch	not fully excavated		

14	16	layer	not fully excavated	Iron Age
14	17	layer	not fully excavated	
14	18	wattling		
14	19	wattling		
14	20	stake revetment		
15	1	topsoil		0.21
15	2	dump		0.43
15	3	layer		0.18
15	5	layer		0.17

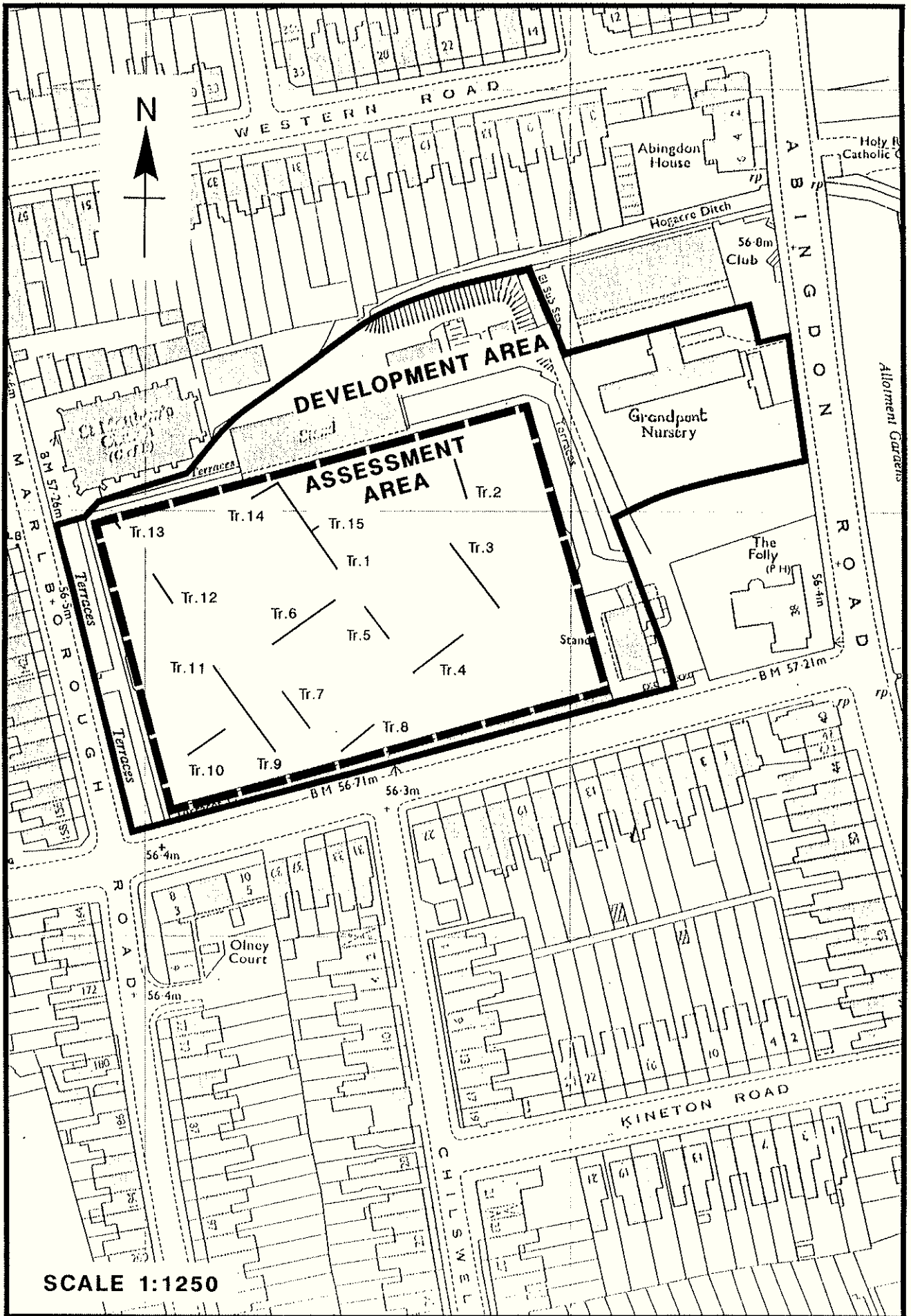
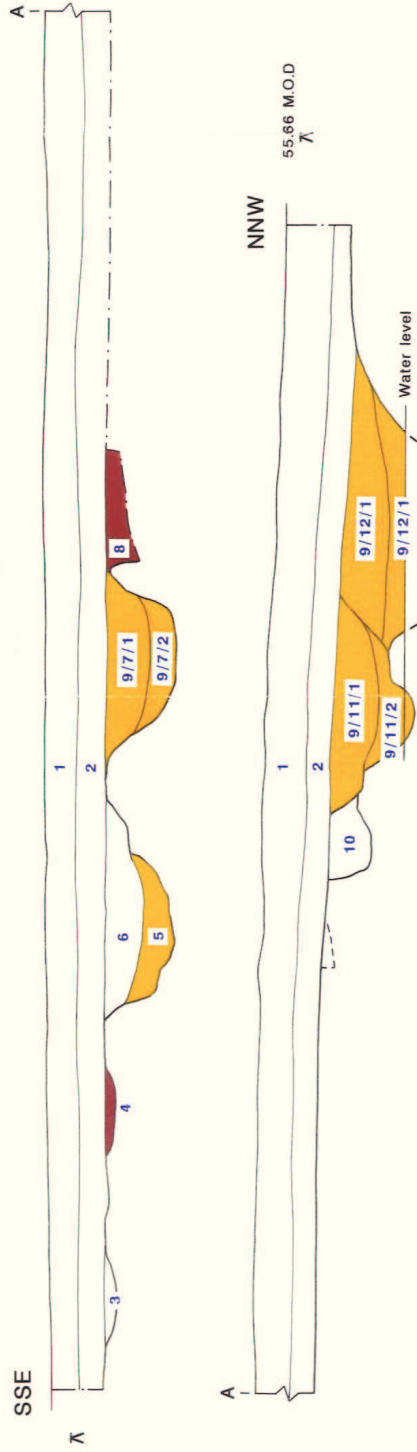


Figure 1



Figure 2

Trench 9



Key

- Iron Age features
- Medieval features
- Bank
- Turf
- Dumping
- Peat and silt

Trench 14

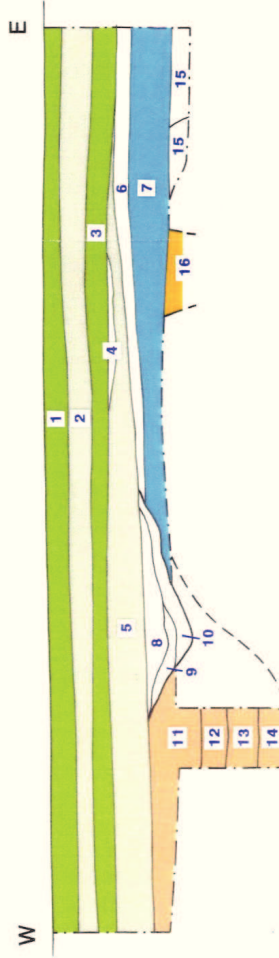


Figure 3

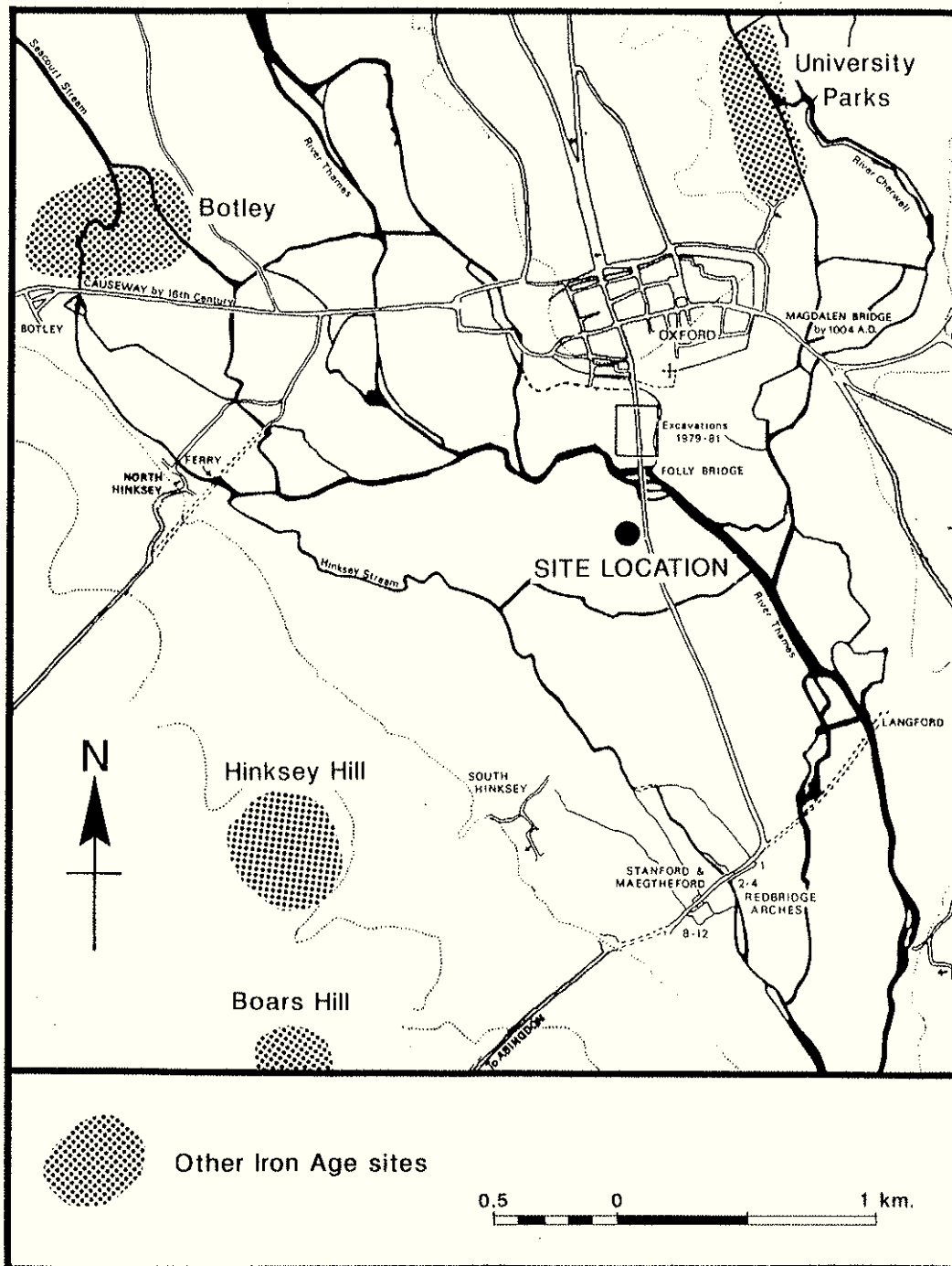


Figure 4

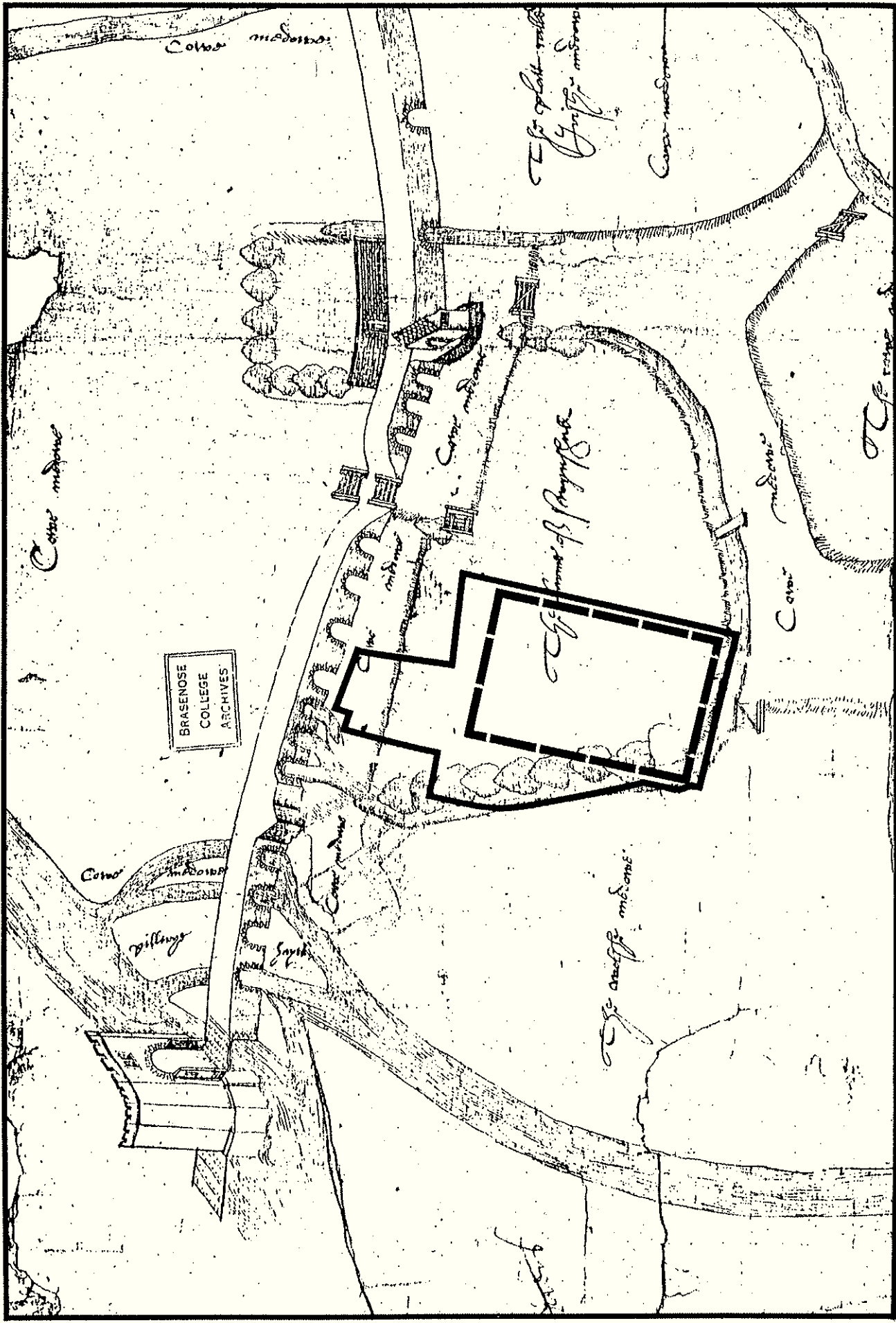


Figure 5

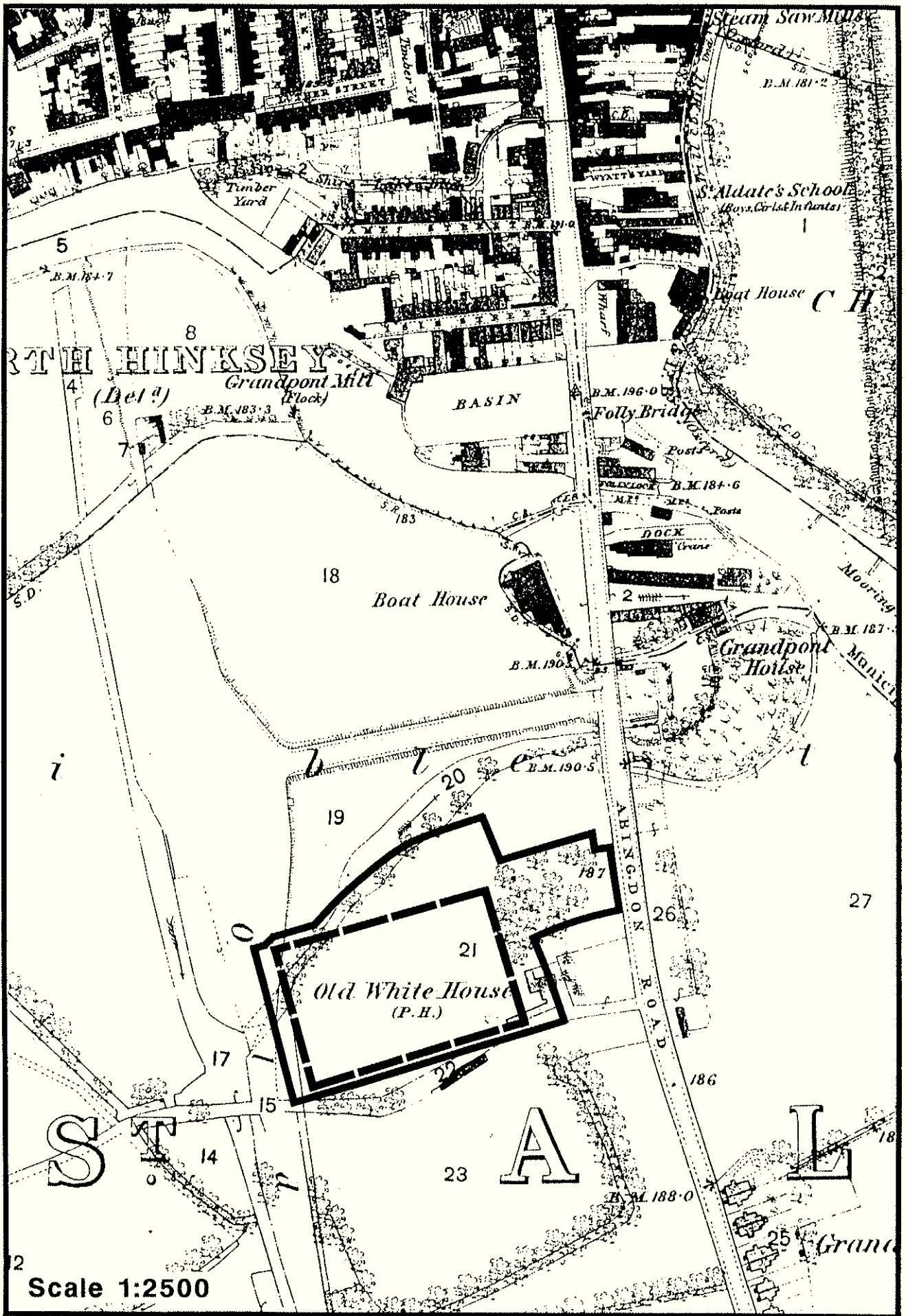


Figure 6