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Christchurch Tom Quad, Oxford

NGR SP5148 0599

Archaeological Watching Brief Report



Oxford Archaeological Unit

September 1996

CHRISTCHURCH TOM QUAD, OXFORD

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ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF REPORT

Introduction

The Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) maintained a watching brief during groundworks for the installation of an access ramp to the south-west terrace of Christchurch Tom Quad, Oxford.

Background

Following the submission of a proposal to install an access ramp to the south-west Terrace (Planning Application 95/1769/NFH), Christchurch College were required, on the advice of the Oxford Archaeological Advisory Service (OAAS), to accommodate a programme of archaeological recording of the significant deposits revealed by the relevant groundworks, which would entail the removal of up to 0.50 m in depth of the terrace.

Historical and Archaeological Background

Christchurch Tom Quad was laid out between 1525 and 1529, as part of Cardinal Wolsey's proposed new 'Cardinal College'. The Quad was a huge court or cloister, and as it was situated on a relatively steep slope just inside the southern defences of the town, this entailed a major programme of infilling of the southern half of the area, and (probably) a lowering of the northern half.. Contemporary accounts suggest that almost a metre of material was removed from Tom Quad in the 1660s, during the remodelling of the court into the Great Quadrangle. (Wood, 1899). This operation apparently left the terrace around the perimeter of the court at its original level. The court perimeter was originally intended to be roofed, as shown by the surviving springers on the internal facades, but Wolsey's fall from office in 1529 led to an immediate cessation of building work, leaving the perimeter of the court open.

The only recent archaeological investigation of the Quad took place in 1972, with the construction of a soakaway providing an opportunity to examine the deposits in the south-east corner of the Quad (Hassall 1973, 270-74). This revealed a series of burials relating to the 12th century Priory Church. Of more relevance to the present watching brief was the fact that natural gravel was encountered at approximately 1 m below the level of the turf in the Quad, which itself is some 0.75- 0.90 m below the level of the paved terrace.

Methodology

The site was initially visited on the 10th September at the beginning of the work. After consultations with Mr A.P. Morris (Clerk of Works), the site was visited again on the 12th September, when the archaeological recording took place.

Results Figs 1 and 2

General

The groundworks entailed the removal of the modern paving and makeup over an area of approximately 8 sq m. The depth of material removed by the contractors amounted to no more than 0.40 m at the deepest, which was at the southern end of the trench. Approximately 60% of the area exposed had been disturbed by modern service trenches. A small assemblage of unstratified finds was recovered by the contractors during their excavation. This included late medieval pottery and tile, and bone fragments, one of which was the upper part of a human humerus. Where significant deposits did survive, and were archaeologically cleaned, the integrity of the ensuing finds is in no doubt.

Description

The earliest revealed deposit was 107, a mix of compact dark brown silty clay and 30-40% medium / coarse gravel, with inclusions of pottery, tile fragments, occasional animal bone, and charcoal flecks. By partial excavation of service trench 102 against the southern section, layer 107 was seen to be at least 0.40m deep. Layer 107 butted against the footings of the West Range wall (108) on the west side of the trench, which include the springer footing (111). There was no evidence of a construction trench for the wall. Insofar as could be determined by the small overall area of layer 107 exposed, the surface of the layer appeared to be tipping slightly from west to east, away from the West Range. This was also indicated in the section.

Overlying 107 was a layer of off-white mortar (106), up to 0.08 m deep, which effectively levelled up the west-east slope of 107. Layer 109, a thin patch of mortar identified in the middle of the trench, may have been a residue of 106. In section layer 106 was overlaid by a very thin accumulation of soil (105), which itself was overlaid by a further layer of buff mortar (104) up to 0.09 m thick. No finds were recovered from these layers.

The later deposits consist of a concrete drain capping, built against wall 108, and various service trenches (102, 112, 115) sealed by the pavement (100), and its make up layer (101). The northern end of the trench exposed the bedding layer (110) for the terrace steps.

Discussion

From the mixed character of layer 107, and the finds recovered from it, it would be reasonable to argue that this material represents part of the levelling layer imported to raise the surface of the southern part of the Quad, at the time of its original construction between 1525 and 1529. The presence of residual 13th and 14th century pottery would be consistent with this. The fragment of human bone suggests that some of the material must have derived from an area used for burials, possibly close to the Priory Church.

The lack of a construction cut suggests that the West Range was built before the terrace material, or at least the upper part of it, was deposited. No other evidence was seen, at this level, of any foundations which might have been intended for the proposed cloister.

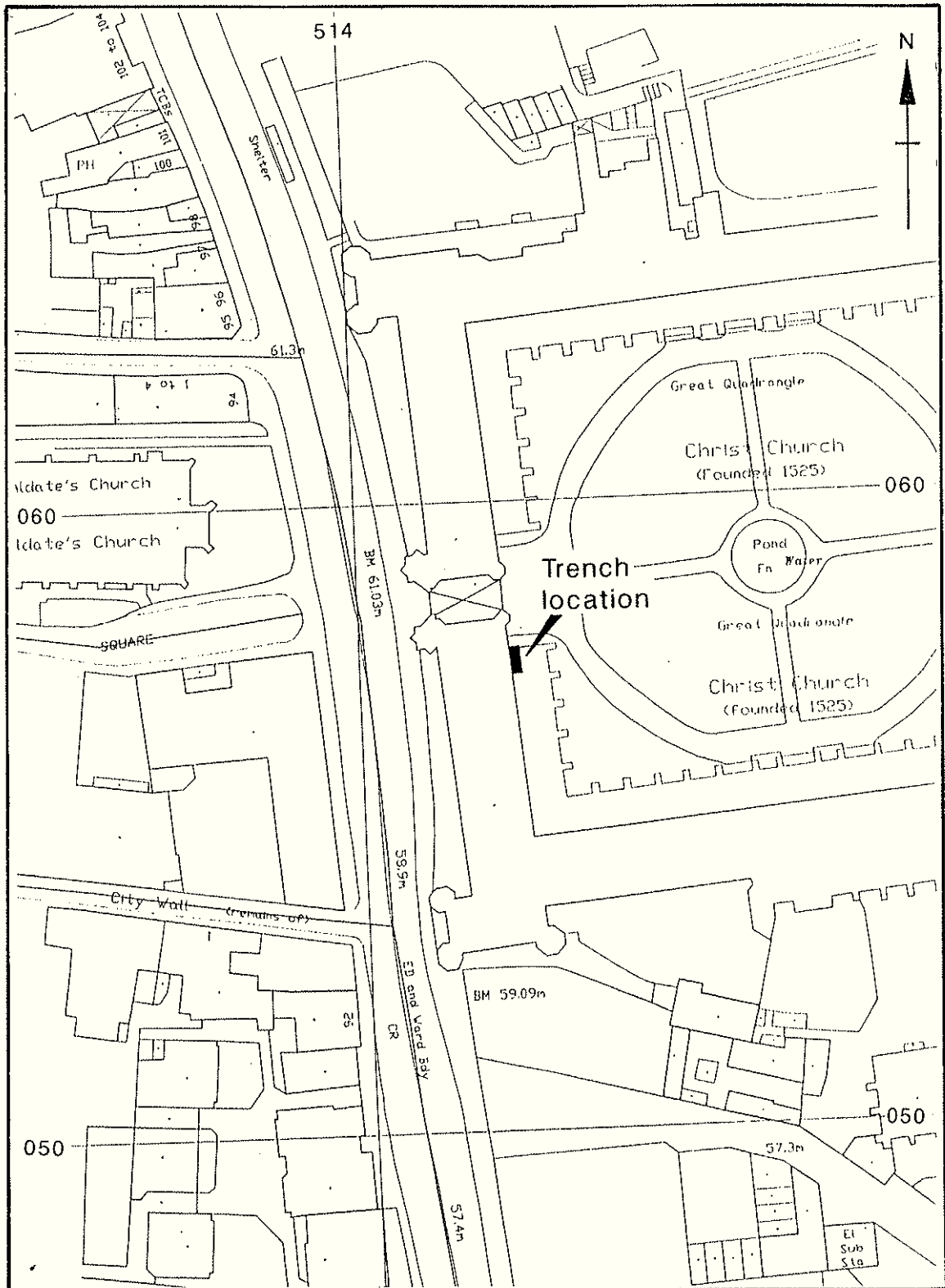
The lower mortar layer (106) may well represent an accumulation of construction trample. The presence of a thin accumulation of soil (105) between 106 and the upper layer of mortar (104) suggests an interval before the upper layer was deposited. Layer 104, from the evidence seen here, is much more convincing as a laid pathway surface, possibly a forerunner to the modern stone pavement.

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Bibliography

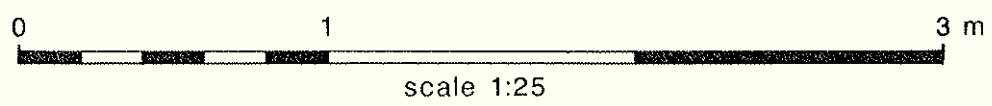
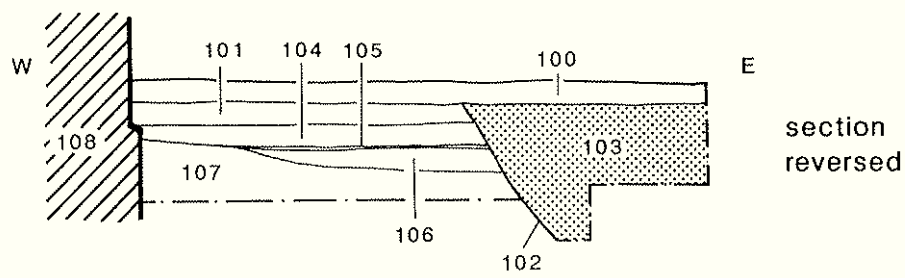
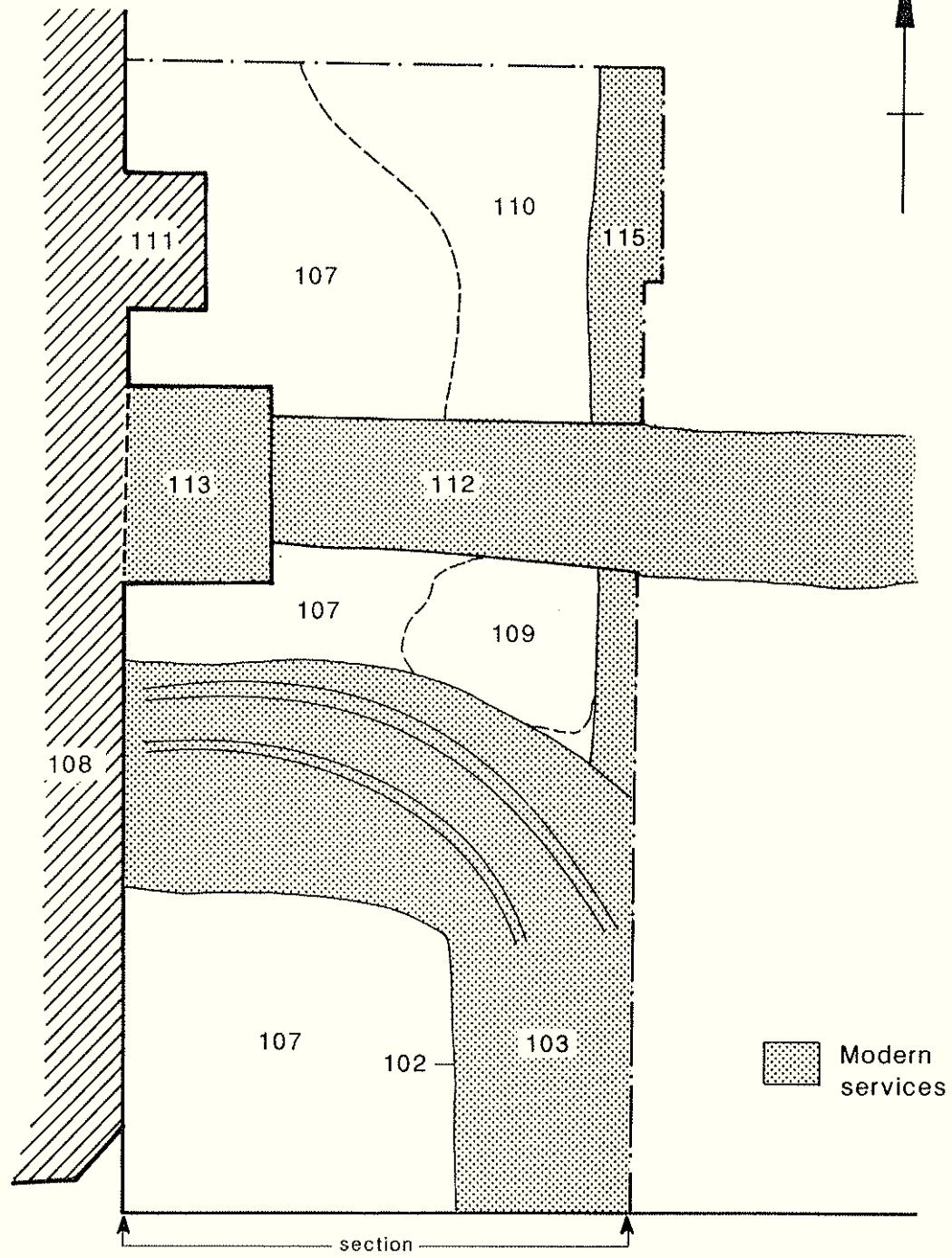
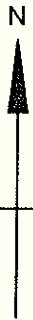
T Hassall 'Excavations at Oxford, 1972: Fifth Interim Report' *Oxoniensia* xxxviii (1973), 268-298.

A Wood *Survey of the Antiquities of the City of Oxford*, ed. A Clark, (OHS xv-xxxvii, 1889-90, 1899)



scale 1:1000

Figure 1





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