

St CROSS ROAD OXFORD [OXSCRD94]
(SP520066)

Archaeological Evaluation Report

SUMMARY

In May 1994 the Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) conducted an evaluation on a site S of St Cross churchyard. Evidence was found of medieval and post-medieval pits close to St. Cross Road, and medieval quarry pits and Early Modern landfill further to the E.

INTRODUCTION

Brasenose and St. Cross Colleges are proposing to build student accommodation blocks on a site fronting St. Cross Road, between St. Cross churchyard and the lane leading to Holywell Ford (Fig.1).

As the site lies within an Area of Archaeological Interest, under Oxford City Council's environmental policies EN 43-47, planning permission is subject to an archaeological evaluation of the deposits. Prehistoric remains have been found in this part of Oxford: a major Bronze Age barrow cemetery exists under the University Science Area and University Parks, and numerous flint artefacts of Neolithic/Bronze Age date were recovered during the recent excavation at Holywell Mill.

The brief prepared by the Oxford Archaeological Advisory Service (OAAS) called for a desktop study, and fieldwork in the form of strategically sited trenches.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The site lies within the medieval manor of Holywell to the north-east of the medieval walled town. The parish church of St Cross was for long a chapel of St Peter-in-the-East, but the manor seems to have been quite distinct from Oxford in 1086 and to have remained so until 1667. Merton College acquired the lordship of the manor in 1294, from when its history is well recorded in the college archives.

The church lies immediately north of the site with the manor house just beyond it. This was the focal point of the village, and its route of communication to the town was the road from the manor house and church to the east gate of the town, now St Cross Road and Longwall Street. Another route ran east along Holywell Street and on to the river at Holywell Mill. The line of the road to the mill is uncertain, and may in origin have continued straight on through what in the 15th century became Magdalen Grove, though it could have doglegged to be the lane (on the south side of the present site) down to the Mill and Ford. There are charter references to properties on a lost Benseval Street here in the 13th century.

Holywell Street contained houses from at least the 13th century as part of the village, but situated close to town and forming a suburb. The houses extended almost the wholelength of Holywell Street and turned the corner a short way into St Cross Road. Although there is little evidence of a servile tenantry in the manor of Holywell in the records of Merton it is possible that some agricultural tenants lived along St Cross Road, and some evidence for this was found at the Jowett Walk site behind no 2 Holywell Street).

All early maps show the site as open, and Loggan's birdseye view of 1675 indicates a meadow traversed by paths leading to the eponymous Holy Well, and an earth bank alongside the road. The 1758 Merton estate map names the site 'The Common', and it remained open land and was not built on before the 19th century.

METHODOLOGY

Three trenches were sited within the footprint of the proposed building, to investigate the St. Cross Road frontage (Trench 1), the lane frontage (Trench 2), and the E end of the site (Trench 3). (Fig. 2) Each trench was machine excavated, using a 3½ ton mechanical excavator equipped with a toothless ditching bucket, down to either the first significant archaeological horizon, the natural subsoil, or the depth limit dictated by Health and Safety Regulations. All archaeological features were manually cleaned, recorded in plan and section and photographed. Sufficient hand excavation was then carried out to clarify their nature, function and date. All features and deposits were assigned unique context numbers. The site work took place from May 9th to 11th 1994

RESULTS

Trench 1. W-E 6.0 m x 2.0 m. (Fig.5)

The trench was machined to a depth of 1.10 m at the W end, rising to 0.60 m. A sondage was manually dug along the N side of the E half of the trench to examine the lower deposits.

The natural gravel subsoil was revealed 0.60 m below present ground level, at a height of 60.35 m OD.

Cutting into the gravel were three pits 107, 108, and 109. All contained a very similar orange brown sandy silt fill. The fill of 107, 122 produced one pottery sherd of Late Saxon date, and two others of 12th to 13th century date. Only a small part of 108 projected into the trench from the N. Similarly, only the N edge of 109 was revealed in the S side of the sondage. Neither produced any dating evidence.

Cut into 109 in the E half of the trench was a large cut feature 103, which extended beyond the E end of the trench. Accumulated and dumped deposits 114, 115, 116 and 117 within this feature were recorded in section, their horizons sloping down to the E. Pottery finds from 114, and 115 were included with 116, and tended towards a date of 14th -16th century, with one residual Saxon sherd. The lower layer 117 produced earlier pottery, but some of this was residual, disturbed from the fill of 109, which it had truncated.

At the W end of the trench, two large cut features were partly revealed (104 and 105). Machine removal of their upper fills produced 19th century pottery, glass and brick and tile fragments, and some residual medieval sherds.

A levelling layer of mid brown sandy silt (110), up to 0.15 m deep, sealed the upper fills of 104 and 105. A buried modern topsoil (102) overlay 110.

At the E end of the trench a thin layer of mortar (113) overlay the upper fill (114) of feature 103, and was itself overlaid by a compacted layer of mortar and crushed limestone 112, which was up to 0.20 m deep. In section the W edge of 113 and 112 appeared to be aligned N-S, and both layers extended beyond the E end of the trench. The buried topsoil 102 abutted, and slightly overlay (111) the W edge of 112/113.

Sealing 112 and 102 was a 0.25 m deep layer of compacted hardcore 101, the present carpark surface.

Trench 2. N-S 15.0 m x 2.0 m (Fig.4)

The trench was machined to a general depth of 1.20 m. with a sondage to 1.50 m at the N end. Natural gravel (215) was revealed at a depth of 1.45 m (58.87 m.OD) cut from W-E by two features 211 and 213.

Sealing these features and the natural gravel were layers 210, 209 and 208, tipping slightly to the S. 210 was a mix of gravel lenses with sandy silt, and 209 and 208 comprised mid - dark brown sandy silt with lenses of gravel. Medieval pottery was recovered from layers 208, 209 and 210. The accumulated depth of these layers at the N end of the trench was 0.45 m.

Sealing 208 was a layer of gravelly silt and limestone rubble 207, with a maximum depth of 0.08 m.

Layer 207 was overlaid by 206, a dumped levelling layer of dark brown sandy silt, with a maximum depth of 0.65 m. No finds were recovered from this layer.

The S extent of 206 was defined by 216, a possible pit, approximately 3.00 m N-S, with a fill 203 containing a large amount of 19th century glass and pottery.

South of 216, and either cut or overlaid by it, was a compact deposit of pale brown sandy silt with inclusions of rubble and fragments of tile (204). This was partly excavated, to reveal 205, a W-E aligned feature of compacted rubble and mortar, with inclusions of small pieces of tile or brick. This appeared to extend beyond the S end of the trench.

Overlying 206, 203, and abutting the top of 204 was a 0.35 deep layer of silty loam 202, which was itself sealed by 201, the present turf/topsoil layer.

Trench 3. N-S 15.0 m x 2.0 m (Fig.5)

The trench was machined generally to a depth of 0.80 m, 1.20 m at the N end.

Natural gravel (305) was identified in the centre of the trench, on the E side, at a minimum depth of 0.42 m (58.72 m OD). It was cut on the W side of the trench by two large features 307 and 310, which appeared to be contemporary. Both extended beyond the edges of the trench. A shallow sondage dug against the W side of the trench, sampling both features, recovered sherds of Medieval pottery from their respective fills 308 and 309.

Sealing both 307 and 310 was a mid brown sandy silt layer 304, up to 0.38 m deep. Cut into the exposed natural gravel along the E side of the trench were a series of irregular holes (306), up to 0.40 m wide and 0.20 m deep, filled with material indistinguishable from the overlying 304. The N end of the surface of 304 sloped down slightly, and a buried modern topsoil 303, up to 0.28 m deep, levelled the depression but did not extend to the S end of the trench.

At the S end of the trench was the N edge of a vertically sided feature 302, filled with a loose dump of slate and rubble.

Sealing 302 and 303 was the modern turf/topsoil, up to 0.27 m deep at the N end.

TEST PITS (Fig.2)

During the excavation, three test pits were machine dug by the developer, to examine the deeper strata. All three showed evidence of large deep features cut into the gravel to a maximum depth of approximately 3.0 m from present ground level. The gravel was seen to overlay Oxford Clay at a depth of approximately 3.5 - 4.5 m.

INTERPRETATION.

The exposed natural gravel in Trenches 1 and 3 indicates the original topography of the site, a gentle slope of approximately 1.5 m W-E.

The presence of residual Saxon pottery sherds in Trenches 1 and 3 suggests that there was some occupation on the site in the 8th -9th centuries, although no identifiable Saxon features were found in the trenches.

The medieval pits 107, 108, & 109 in Trench 1 are of an apparent size to suggest that their function could have been as rubbish pits behind buildings fronting St. Cross Road. No evidence of contemporary structures was found in Trench 1, implying either that they were sited to the W of the trench, or that the later pits have destroyed any such evidence.

In Trench 2 (features 211 and 213) and Trench 3 (features 307 and 310), there is evidence of extensive excavation, presumably for gravel, in the medieval period, which suggests that the quarrying may have begun in the area before the St. Cross Road frontage was cleared.

The later features of Trench 1, (103, 104, and 105), although only partly excavated, could indicate, by their size and apparent date, that quarrying took place here in the late medieval period, later than that over the rest of the site, implying that any medieval buildings fronting St. Cross had been cleared by that time. Both Agas' Map of 1576 and Loggan's Map of 1675 shows the area as an open space or common.

The gravelly silt/rubble layer 207, in Trench 2, suggests that, following the backfilling of the medieval gravel pits, the ground level in this area was left approximately 1.0 m lower than it is today. It is possible that the compact stone and mortar feature (205) at the S end of the Trench represents a contemporary surface of the lane running down to Holywell Ford, and that, prior to the infilling of the area with the dumped 19th century deposit 206, the lane was made up to its present level with the clay and stone make up layer 204. 216 appears to represent either a pit dug for the dumping of bottles, or a dump into a ditch alongside the lane.

The mortar layer 113, and the overlying rubble/mortar layer 113 in Trench 1, may represent a N-S pathway or yard surface, probably relating to the 19th century Vicarage to the E.

The soakaway 302 in Trench 3 also probably relates to the Vicarage.

CONCLUSION

The evidence suggests that the area of the development has been extensively quarried since at least the 13th century effectively destroying any earlier archaeology, including, to judge by the scatter of residual sherds, some Saxon occupation. The infilling of the quarried areas evidently required the raising of the surface of the lane to Holywell Ford.

The survival of medieval pits in Trench 1 indicate that archaeology of a medieval or earlier date may survive along the E side of St. Cross Road, to the W of the development area.

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May 1994

Appendix 1: Pottery Assessment

76 sherds (1Kg) include 3 Saxon, 1 Late Saxon, 29 Early Medieval, 27 Medieval and 16 Post Medieval Wares.

Three sherds of saxon pottery belong to two fabric types (Oxford Fabrics CN and S). Fabric type CN is a limestone tempered, hand built ware which is the earlier of the two, occurring residually in contexts 309 and 116. Fabric type S is a quartz tempered, wheel thrown saxon ware of c.9th century date. This sherd occurs in context 100 where it is also residual.

One sherd of late saxon, 10th to late 11th century, St Neots-type Ware is found in context 122.

The three early medieval wares present in this excavation are typical of the ceramic products found in Oxford between the 11th and early 13th centuries. These fabric types are Fabric BF, AC and Y. The earliest ware (BF), of 10th to 12th century date, is represented by one sherd in context 117. This is a distinctive, coarse, flint tempered fabric which is hand rotated in construction and therefore produces thick crudely finished sherds.

Fabric type AC is a limestone tempered Ware, of mid 11th to late 12th century date, of which two sherds occur at St Cross Road in contexts 17 and 309.

Twenty six sherds of Fabric type Y are the predominant ware found in this period, following the same ceramic trend as found on other sites in Oxford. Of the 26 sherds, 9 are cooking pot rims and 2 glazed jug sherds. These sherds are widely distributed throughout the site between contexts 116, 117, 122, 209, 210, 308 and 309.

Later medieval wares are represented by three types at St Cross Road: Brill/Boarstall products (Oxford Fabric type AW and AM), Oxford Fabrics AQ and AG.

Ten jug sherds of Brill/Boarstall fabrics are the predominant ware for this period, dating from the 13th to 15th centuries and occurring in contexts 100, 116, 117, 208, 308 and 309.

Fabric type AQ is more of a utilitarian fabric associated with cooking or storage vessels in which fifteen sherds occur in contexts 100, 117, 122, 210 308 and 309. This ware has previously been dated as late 12th to 15th century, but on poor stratigraphic evidence (Haldon and Parrington 1975). It is noticeable in this assemblage that Fabrics AQ and early medieval Fabric type Y have a common occurrence and therefore would appear to be associated in date. It is therefore now proposed that Fabric type AQ is more common in the later 12th and 13th centuries than the 14th to 15th centuries as previously thought. One sherd in Oxford Fabric type AG dating from the late 11th to 15th is found in context 309. This sherd is from a highly decorated jug with vertical applied rouletted strips and alternating slip decoration.

A number of post medieval wares include Tudor Green Ware of late 14th to 16th century date, Cologne/Frechen Stonewares of mid 16th to 17th century, Nottingham Stoneware and other English Stonewares, Glazed red earthenwares, Transfer Printed Ware and Creamware of 18th to 20th century. These sherds are found in contexts 100, 116, 117 and 123.

Bibliography

Haldon, R. and Parrington, M. 1975 The Medieval Pottery in Excavations in Abingdon, 1972-4: Excavations at Broad Street, Abingdon. Oxoniensia XL pps 30-45

Table of Pottery

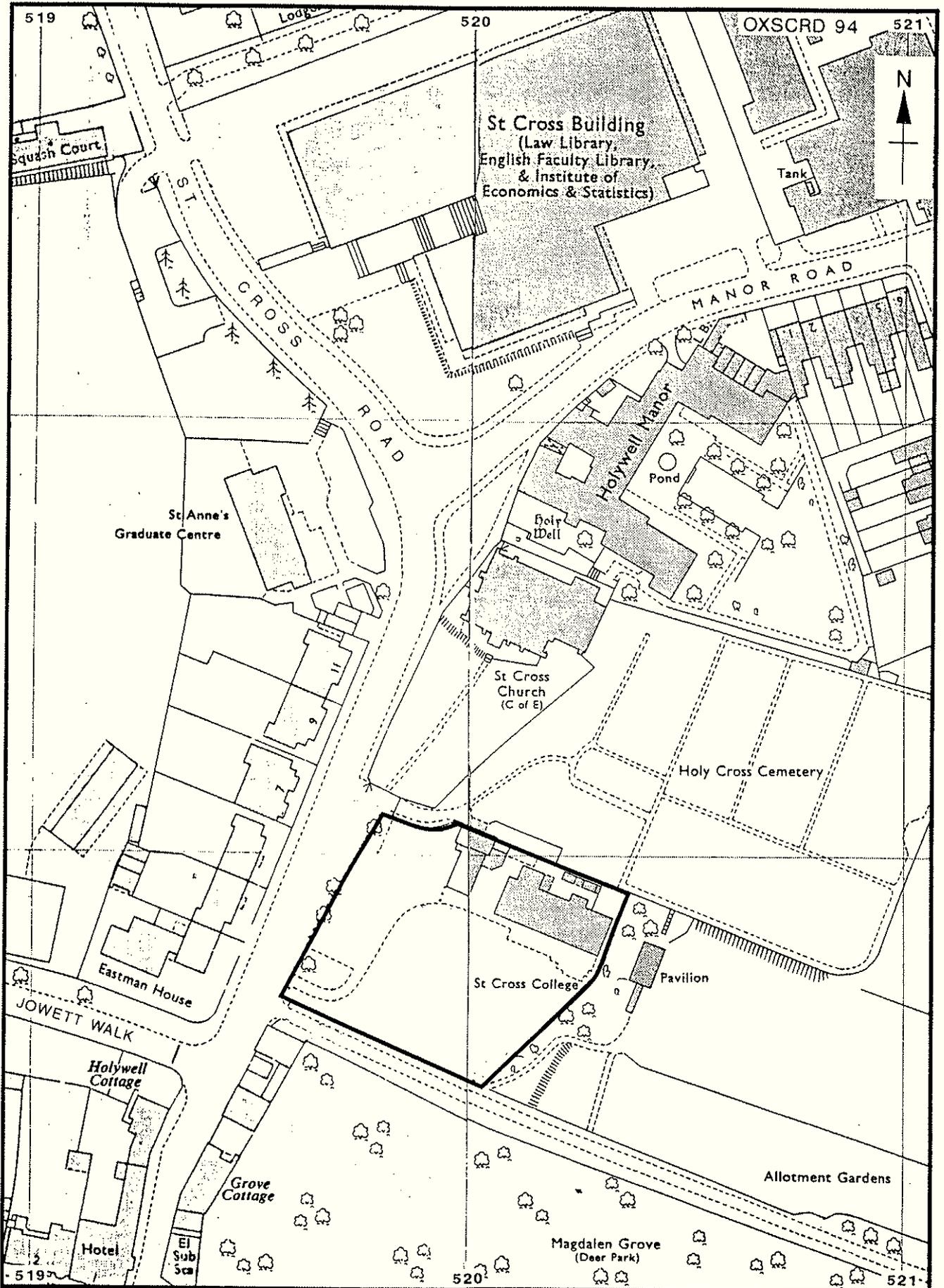
Context	No of Sherds	Period	Date range
100	1	SAX	E9
100	1	MED	L12 - 15
100	1	MED	13 - 15
100	6	PM	16 - 20
116	1	SAX	6 - 8
116	3	EMED	L11 - M13
116	2	MED	L13 - 15
116	2	PM	15 - 16
116	5	PM	M16 - 18
117	1	EMED	10 - 12
117	6	EMED	M11 - M13
117	6	MED	L12 - 15
117	2	PM	16 - 18
122	1	LSAX	10 - L11
122	1	EMED	L11 - M13
122	1	MED	L12 - 15
123	1	PM	18 - 20
208	1	MED	13 - 15
209	1	EMED	L11 - M13
210	2	EMED	L11 - M13
210	1	MED	L12 - 15
308	9	EMED	L11 - M13
308	7	MED	L12/13 - 15
309	1	SAX	6 - 8
309	1	EMED	M11 - L12
309	5	EMED	L11 - M13
309	3	MED	L11/12 - 15
309	4	MED	L13 - 15

Lucy Bown

Appendix 2: Table of Contents

CXT	TYPE	WIDTH	DEPTH	DATE	COMMENTS
Tr. 1.					
100	-	-	-	-	CLEANING LAYER
101	LAYER	-	<0.25	MOD	HARDCORE
102	LAYER	-	<0.25	MOD	BURIED MODERN TOPSOIL
103	PIT	>3.0 WE x >2.0 NS	>0.85	L.MED/ P.MED	PART EX.
104	PIT	>1.8 WE x >1.5 NS	>0.80	E.MOD	MACHINE PART EX.
105	PIT	>1.0 WE x >1.5 NS	>0.80	E.MOD	MACHINE PART EX.
106	P/HOLE	0.45 WE x 0.60 NS	>0.25	MOD	
107	PIT	1.4 WE x 1.0 NS	<0.50	MED	CONTEMPORARY WITH 108 & 109?
108	PIT	1.4 WE x >0.20 NS	>0.60	MED?	PART EX
109	PIT	>1.6 WE x >0.2 NS	>0.25	MED?	PART EX.
110	LAYER	>2.60 WE	<0.15	E.MOD	LEVELLING
111	LAYER	1.0 WE	<0.06	MOD	OVERSPILL OF 102
112	LAYER	>1.2 WE	<0.20	E.MOD	N-S PATH ?
113	LAYER	>1.2 WE	0.02	E.MOD	PATH/YARD SURFACE?
114	FILL	-	<0.48	P.MED	FILL OF 103, OR LEVELLING
115	FILL	<2.0 WE	<0.15	L.MED	DUMPED FILL OF 103
116	FILL	-	>0.50	L.MED	FILL OF 103.PART EX.
117	FILL	-	>0.35	L.MED	FILL OF 103. PART EX.
118	FILL	-	-	MED	TOTAL FILL OF 108
119	FILL	-	>0.20	E.MOD	FILL/LEVELLING INTO 104
120	FILL	-	>0.60	E.MOD	FILL OF 104
121	FILL	-	>0.80	E.MOD	TOTAL FILL OF 105
122	FILL	-	-	MED	TOTAL FILL OF 107
123	FILL	-	-	MOD	TOTAL FILL OF 106
124	FILL	-	-	MED	TOTAL FILL OF 109
Tr. 2					
201	LAYER	-	<0.36	MOD	TURF/TOPSOIL
202	LAYER	-	<0.28	MOD	POST DEMOLITION LEVELLING
203	FILL	<2.84 NS	<0.58	MOD	TOTAL FILL OF 216

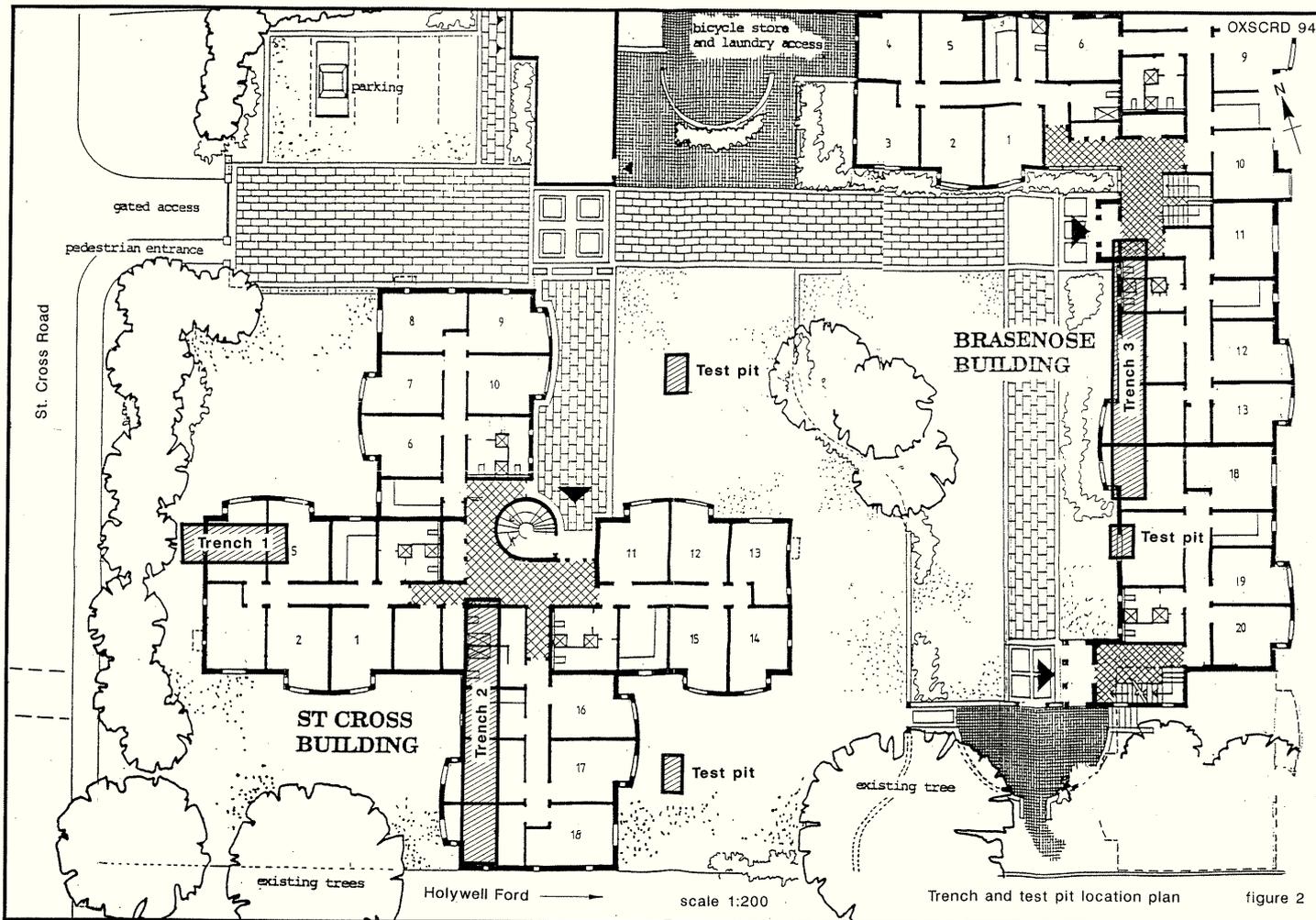
204	LAYER	-	<0.84	E.MOD	MAKE UP FOR RAISED LANE SURFACE
205	FOUNDATION	>0.40 NS	<0.40	L.MED	POSSIBLE LANE SURFACE
206	LAYER	>6.78 NS	<0.54	P.MED	POST QUARRY LANDFILL
207	LAYER	<4.12 NS	<0.10	P.MED	POST QUARRY SURFACE
208	LAYER	>5.94	<0.26	MED	POST QUARRY LEVELLING
209	LAYER	>2.38	<0.24	MED	POST QUARRY LEVELLING
210	LAYER	1.50	<0.32	MED	REDEPOSITED NATURAL
211	CUT	-	>0.20	MED	WE QUARRY EDGE. PART EX.
212	FILL	-	-	MED	TOTAL FILL OF 211
213	CUT	-	>0.20	MED	WE QUARRY EDGE. PART EX.
214	FILL	-	-	MED	TOTAL FILL OF 213
215	NATURAL	-	-	-	GRAVEL
Tr. 3					
300	LAYER	-	-	MOD	TURF/TOPSOIL
301	FILL	-	-	MOD	SOAKAWAY FILL
302	FEATURE	1.8 NS	>0.80	MOD	SOAKAWAY
303	LAYER	-	<0.50	MOD	BURIED TOPSOIL
304	LAYER	-	<0.20	P.MED	LEVELLING
305	NATURAL	-	-	-	GRAVEL
306	FEATURES	<0.40 NS	<0.20	MOD	ANIMAL DISTURBANCE/POST/HOLES
307	PIT	>2.70 NS	-	MED	QUARRY PIT. PART EX.
308	FILL	-	-	MED	TOTAL FILL OF 307
309	PIT	>4.50 NS	-	MED	QUARRY PIT. PART EX.
310	FILL	-	-	MED	TOTAL FILL OF 309



Site location scale 1:1250

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figure 1



Trench 1 : scale 1:25

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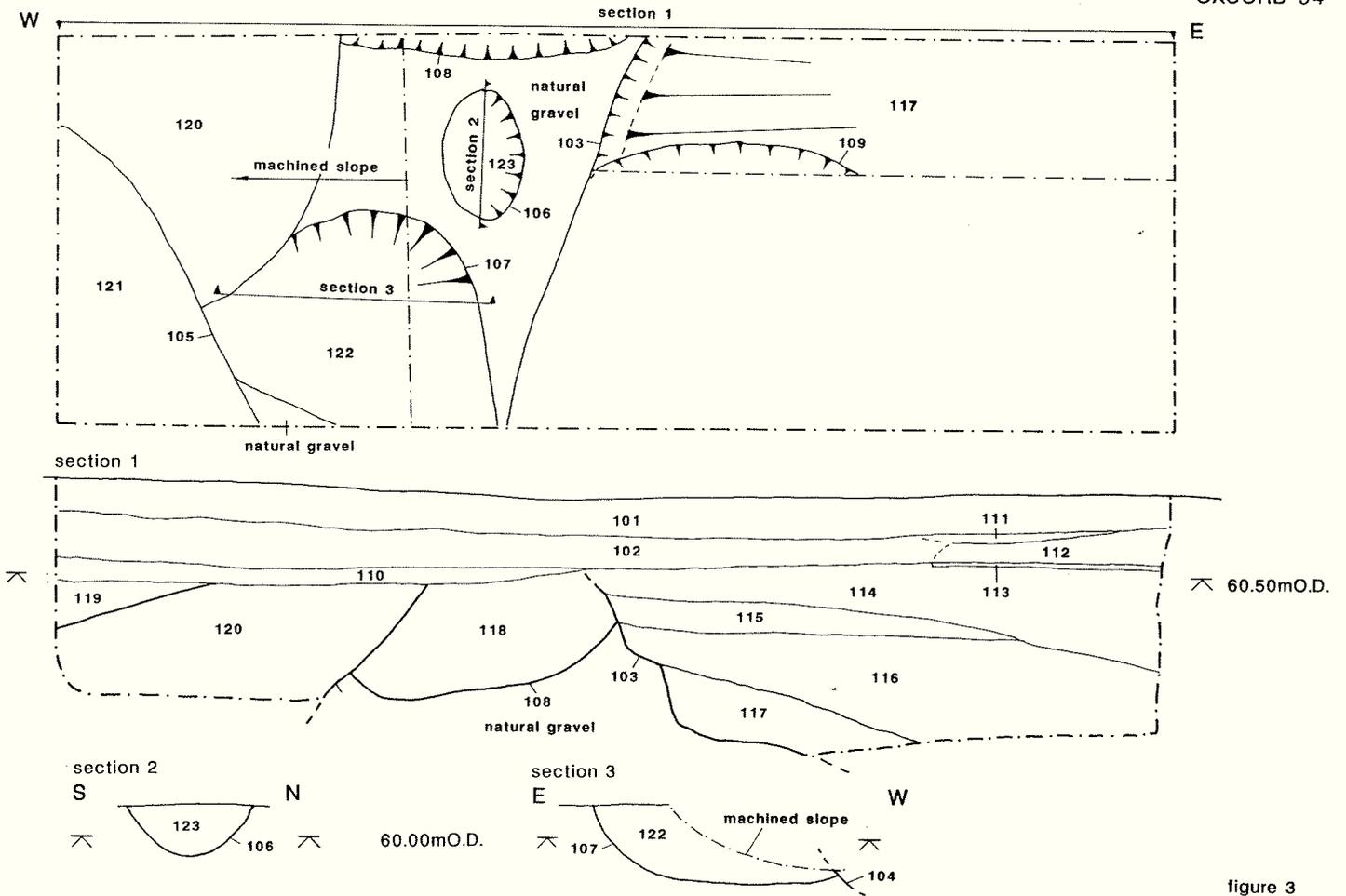


figure 3

Trench 2

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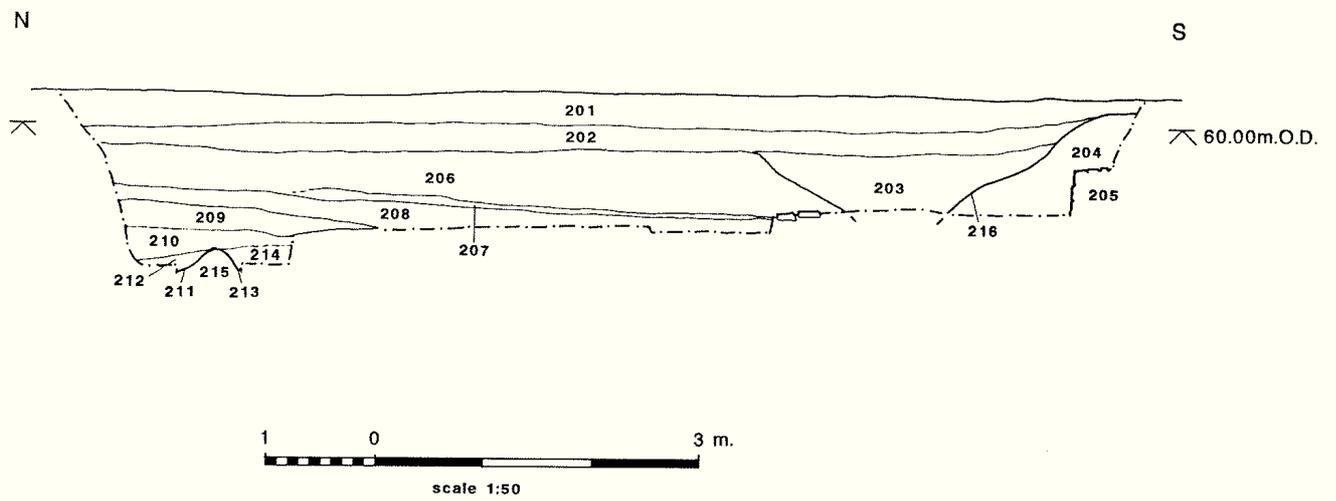


figure 4

Trench 3

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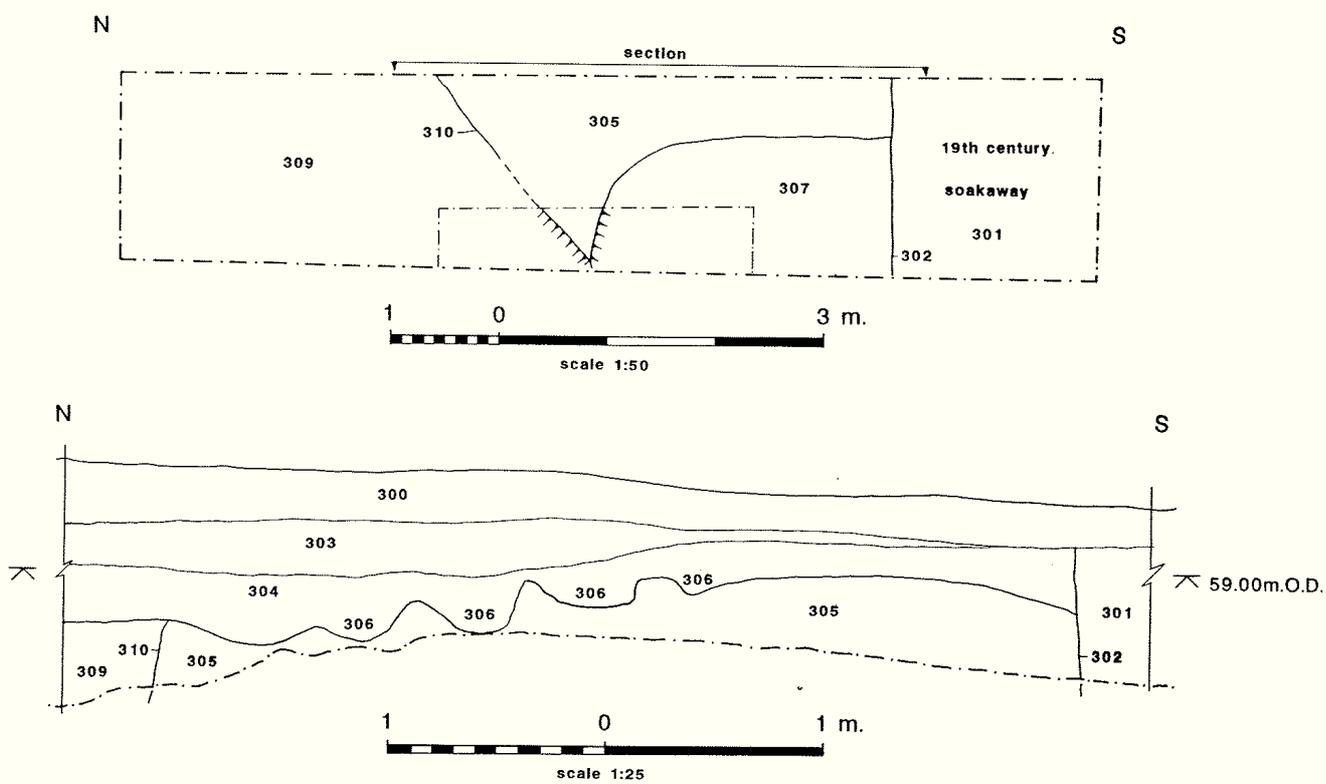


figure 5