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Initiatives in Design

New College Sports Ground, St Cross Road, Oxford

NGR SP 5200 0690

ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF REPORT

Planning Ref. No. 97/1022/NF

Oxford Archaeological Unit

January 1999

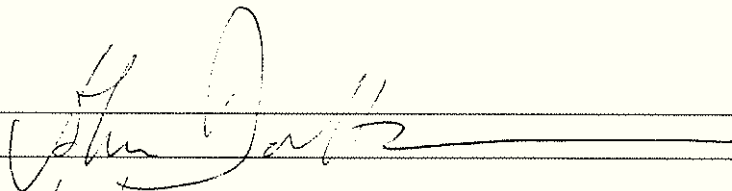
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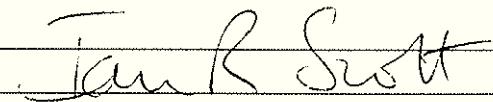
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Planning Ref. No. 97/1022/NF

Prepared by: 

Date: 29/1/99

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Date: 08/02/99

Approved by: R. Williams HEAD OF FIELDWORK

Date: 11/2/1999

Oxford Archaeological Unit

January 1999

Summary

In mid-late 1998 the Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) undertook a watching brief at New College Sports Ground, St Cross Road, Oxford (NGR SP 5200 0690). The city's Civil War defence in this area, in the form of a wide ditch, was identified in plan.

1 Introduction (Fig. 1)

The development proposal (planning application no. 97/1022/NF) comprised the demolition of five two-storey houses which previously occupied the site and the construction of new student accommodation comprising 45 study bedrooms. The works were managed by Gifford Consulting Engineers (Southampton) on behalf of New College.

The watching brief was commissioned by Initiatives in Design, Chartered Architects, on behalf of New College. It was undertaken to a brief set by and a WSI agreed with the Oxford Archaeological Advisory Service.

2 Background

The defensive ditches of the medieval town and castle were re-dug in preparation for the Civil War siege of 1646, in order to bolster the outer artillery fortifications. The nature of the Civil War defences has been the subject of much discussion and it has become clear, primarily through archaeological monitoring of various development projects, that far greater refurbishment of the medieval defensive works took place than previously was thought. This is particularly so in the case of the north ditch.

The development site is located on the line of the city's defensive works. The 1875 Ordnance Survey map of the area indicates a wet ditch in a truncated lozenge shape. A comparison of this shape with maps dating back to 1675 demonstrates clearly that this represents the remnants of one of the bastions of the outer Civil War defences of Oxford, constructed circa 1642. Its existence as a ditch in 1875 would seem to imply that its demolition came a great deal later than most of the other bastions. Despite the fact that the site had been occupied by houses, it was thought possible that much of the ditch survived intact.

The development site comprises a rectangular plot of land immediately to the east of St Cross Road and immediately to the south of New College Sports and Recreational Grounds. Further to the east lies a recently constructed cricket pavilion and students hall of residence; these buildings comprised Phase 1 of the college's redevelopment scheme.

Defining the southern margin is a tree-lined access roadway, separating the site from the college library. Previously the site was occupied by two-storey college houses and associated gardens. The ground surface prior to demolition was roughly level and covered both by lawns and hardstanding.

The geological survey map shows alluvial deposits over Oxford clay; the Kellaway Beds are also known in the vicinity. The watching brief is further to a borehole survey of the site by Bolton Priestley, Soil Consultants Ltd.

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

Subsequent to the demolition of the existing houses, the site was cleared by two 360 mechanical excavators prior to the importation of crushed hardcore, which was deposited across the site to a mean depth of 0.50 m. Different portions of the site were available for inspection in plan during this process, and by its completion the whole site had been inspected in plan. Archaeological inspection was suspended during piling operations but continued during the excavation of ground beam trenches; in practice this only impacted 0.50 m – 0.60 m below the crushed hardcore.

Within the constraints imposed by health and safety considerations the deposits and 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 (Fig. 2)

The initial fieldwork on site was confined to establishing how much of the ditch survived in plan, and then making a scaled plan of the ditch within the development site (see Fig. 2). It quickly became clear that the foundations of the demolished houses, while invasive in terms of depth, had not obliterated evidence for the width and shape of the ditch.

The natural (1) was exposed across the width of the site and comprised an orange/brown sandy clay loam with 2% fine-medium subrounded silt. The ditch, cut through (1), and the modern foundations, cut through both the ditch and (1) were clearly visible.

The ditch, numbered as [3] and c. 6 m in width, was filled by (2), a very mixed and dirty combination of dark brown silty clay loam with a high percentage of humic material and a dark grey clay which primarily was seen defining the edges of the ditch cut. Both of these deposits contained modern housebrick, white china, fragments of clay pipe and terracotta and sundry pieces of metalwork in random distributions. A sample of this material was retained.

The excavation of the ground beam trenches revealed only a very shallow section of the *in situ* deposits mentioned above, and no further deposits were seen. The interior of the defensive works were inspected with particular care as it was thought possible

that traces of the internal rampart may have survived (B Durham, pers. comm.). With the exception of modern foundation trenches the only material seen here was the natural (1); however it was slightly more mixed and dirty than elsewhere, and it is at least possible that it had been reworked.

6 Finds

Post-medieval Pottery

A total of eleven sherds were retained as a representative sample of the material seen in the upper fill(s) of the ditch: these comprised four fragments of modern terracotta, probably flower pots; three pieces of glazed china with a yellow slip and four pieces of glazed china with a white slip, all of which were dated to the 19th/20th centuries.

Metalwork

Two pieces of badly corroded ironwork of indeterminate function were retrieved from (2), together with an 18th century copper token.

Other Finds

Two bowl and two stem fragments of clay pipe, dated to the 17th/18th centuries were also retrieved from (2).

7 Discussion

Inspection of the site in plan revealed that the majority of the ditch survives and was clearly visible; the shape of the bastion is well-defined by the clay component of (2). Excavation of the ground beam trenches revealed only the upper fill of the ditch; the lower horizons of the modern foundation trenches were not seen. However it is at least possible that preservation of archaeological deposits is good at a greater depth. No structural elements for the ditch were seen, and it is not possible to speculate on whether any survive at a depth greater than the contractor's cut-off point.

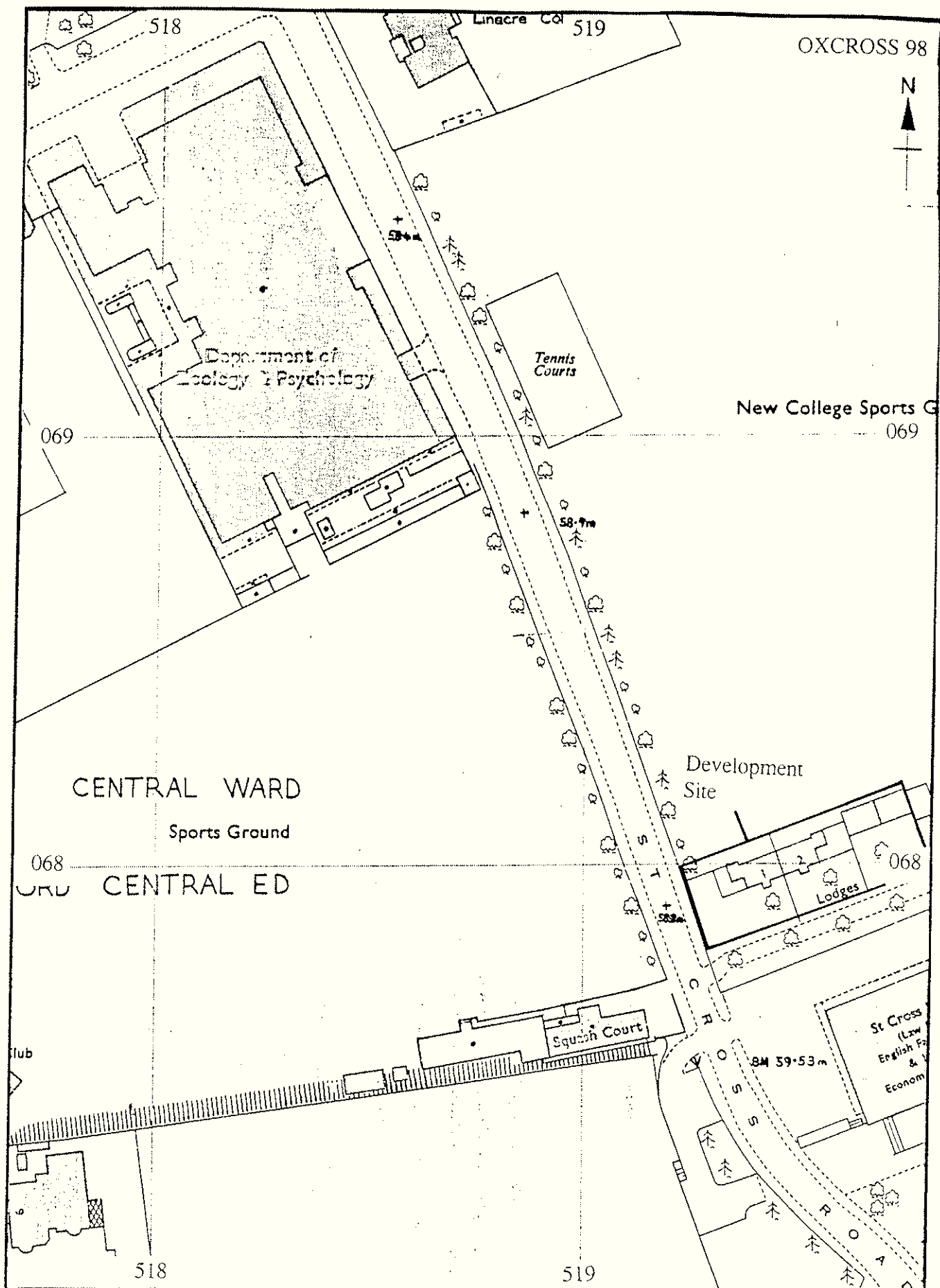
The mixed and slightly dirty natural behind the ditch may suggest that this material was used partially to form the rampart, and subsequently was flattened when the ditch was backfilled. The date range of the finds retrieved from the backfill suggest a 19th/20th century date for the upper fill of the ditch: it is likely that deliberate backfilling completed a process which began with natural silting.

The watching brief has established that the majority of the ditch survives both in plan and section; the piled foundation design ensured minimal disturbance of *in situ* archaeological deposits.

References.

Bolton Priestley Consulting Engineers 1997 Site Investigation Report; (Phase 2) New College, Oxford University, St Cross Road, Oxford.

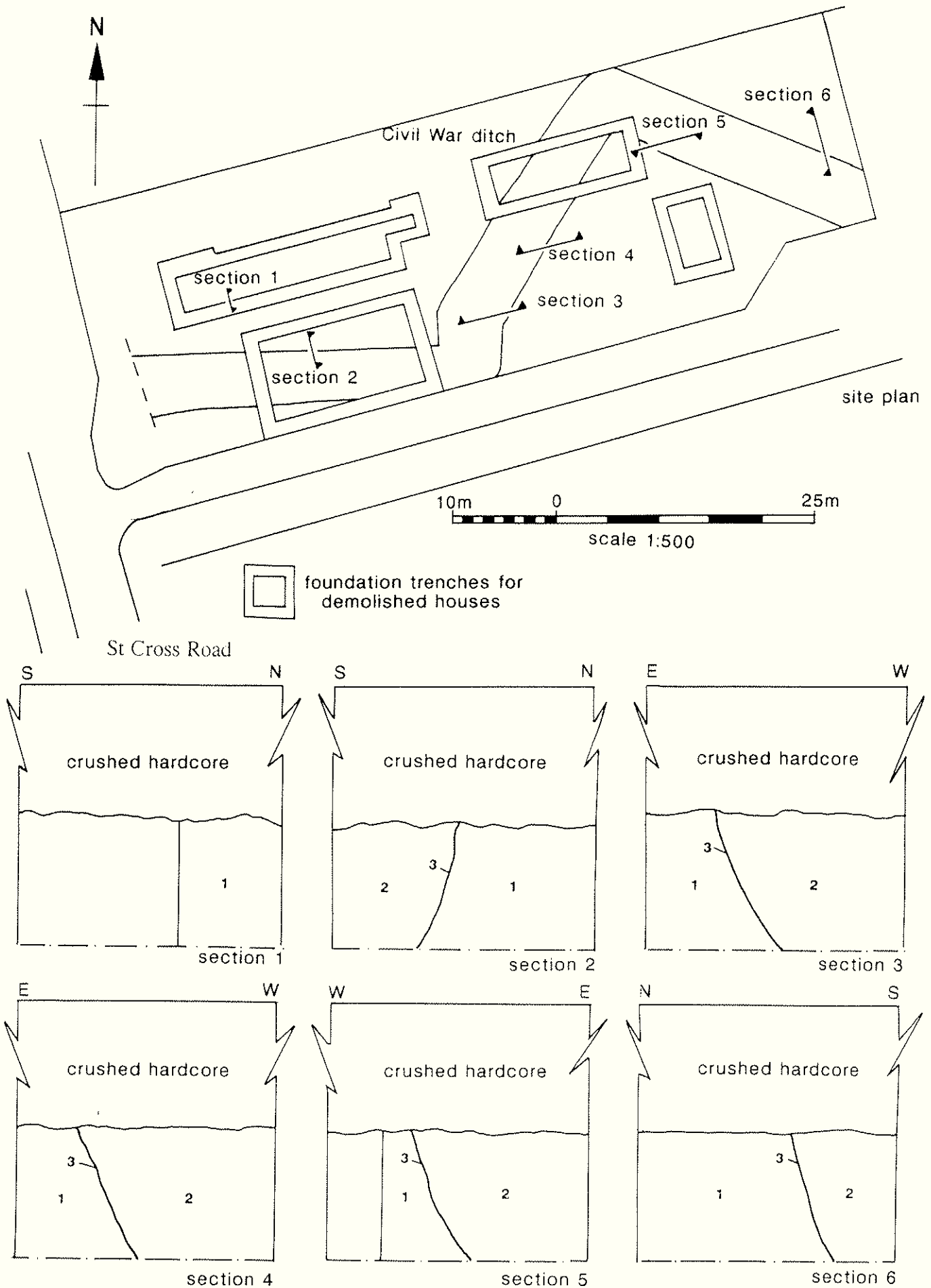
Wilkinson, D (ed) 1992 Oxford Archaeological Unit Field Manual, (First edition, August 1992).



Site location scale 1:1250

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figure 1



Scale 1:20

Figure 2: site plan and sections



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