

OXFORD ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT  
AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT OF  
FORMER REAL TENNIS COURT,  
ORIEL COLLEGE, OXFORD.

## OXFORD ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT

### An Archaeological Assessment of Proposed redevelopment of the Former Real Tennis Court, Oriel College, Oxford

#### Background (Fig 1)

Oriel college has for several years been refurbishing its property on the "island site" enclosed by High Street, Oriel Street, Oriel Square and St Edward Street. There are built-up frontages on each street, with some rear extensions, but the most conspicuous rear structure is a stone block 100 feet long by 30 feet wide with high windows, looking in some respects like a converted barn, but identified as a converted court for Real Tennis. A brief history of the standing building was prepared by John Ashdown for Oxford City Council date August 1987. The building was still used as a tennis court in 1859, but was converted to four billiard rooms within the next nine years, and came into the ownership of the college in 1878, after which it was converted to lecture rooms.

The building is now divided into five sections, the northernmost including the original entrance having already been converted by the college. The remainder now houses the college medical centre and various stores. As an Oxford building it is very unusual in having high quality ashlar facing on the inside, while the outside is rubble. The reason here is that the ashlar was providing playing surfaces for the hard cork-centred tennis balls, and the wall finish reverts to plaster on rubble where it was originally protected by the pentice "galleries" against the west and south (and originally north walls). On the east wall the ashlar playing surface has been concealed by panelling, behind which the "chase" markings of the tennis court survive as painted numbers 2 to 5.

When the building underwent its 19th-century conversion it was provided with a partition forming a corridor roughly along the line of the west gallery. This partition was carried up to ceiling level and now forms the outside wall with large windows. Structural support for the roof trusses seems however to be provided by the series of oak posts and wall-plates standing on the stone outer wall, which match those of the east wall.

The double-trussed roof is of pine, and would fit happily with a date in the late 18th or early 19th century. A possible sequence of events is therefore as follows:

- 1 Single truss roof by 1675 (Loggan's Map).
- 2 Oak posts and braces reused to carry pine double trussed roof, perhaps late 18th century (Julian Munby).

- 3 Conversion to billiard rooms with corridor, with the west windows being reset in the corridor partition to give maximum light.

The above sequence suggest that the court could have retained its original roof well into the late 18th century which may well have been of oak, standing on the surviving oak posts. A date for this roof arrangement would be given by tree-ring dating, but as has ben noted by J H Ashdown, the court need not always have been roofed, and may have existed for many decades before its earliest depiction in 1675.

#### The Archaeological Background (Fig 4)

The tennis court stands in one of the oldest parts of the city, close to the High Street, just west of the presumed line of the Saxon east ramparts, and beside Oriel Street, which has long been argued as the anomaly in the Oxford Street layout, possibly linking an ancient ford close to St Frideswides priory with areas of prehistoric and Roman Settlement under the Science Area and the presumed Roman road on the line of the Banbury road.

The ground beneath it is therefore likely to have been of considerable archaeological importance in its own right, enhanced by having been sealed at this early date.

#### The Redevelopment Proposal

Following discussions with the Bursar, the Clerk of Works and Dr Vincent Smith, it is understood that the College will underpin the walls of the existing structure to a depth of 11 to 12 feet, and dig out the interior. In view of the comparative rarity of early tennis courts, the likelihood that the playing surface seals a unique time capsule of 16th-17th century Oxford, and the likelihood of important evidence related to the Saxon settlement before and after the foundation of the first town circa AD 911-12, this assessment was undertaken to determine what would be lost to Oxford's heritage.

#### Method

In order to minimise costs and disturbance to the deposit it was agreed that the archaeological survey should take advantage of trial holes which had been proposed for engineering reasons. These were cleaned up and recorded archaeologically, and in the case of Trench 2, deepened to provide a full profile of deposits

Datum in each trench was the level of the recent boarded floor, visible on all walls.

### Trench 1

Small areas of mortar screed were stripped by hand down to a grey loam surface, which was itself excavated to depths of 0.1 m. Finds included a fragment of medieval window glass.

### Trench 2 (Figs 2,3)

Excavated mechanically to 1.1m below datum. The section showed mortar 2-1 above and loam 2-2, like the equivalent layers in Trench 1, and a gravelly yard surface 2-3 at 1m below datum. Beneath was a further 0.8m loam including a horizontally laid deposit of stone (2-4/1) at 1.65 below datum. The loam sealed the curving stone at the edge of a hollow feature 2-5 which was filled with layers of ash and white clay, and which is interpreted as the base of an oven yielding pottery of the -- century.

Deposits cut away by the oven included deeper loam with a reddish component, which dipped to the east into a pit (2-6) yielding the base of a mid to late Saxon cooking pot (Oxford Fabric B). The pit may in fact have been the upper part of a well, since no bottom was found at 2.75 below datum; it was seen to be cut into natural gravel, the highest point of which was at 2.1m below datum.

### Trench 3 (Figs 2,3)

This trench was excavated by the College in the south/west corner of the building, down to the bottom courses of two stone walls (3-3, 3-6) which at least partially underlay the footings of the standing building. As elsewhere, the tennis court walls were here founded on large horizontally laid slabs of sandy limestone (3-7) which served to spread the weight, laid at a level 0.65-0.70m below datum. The north wall (3-7) was built on a substantial rubble footing (3-6) which was probably a medieval property boundary, the south wall (3-8) on compact loam just south of the line of a massive footing of soft limestone (2-3) probably also a property boundary, which abutted the west wall (3-6). In the angle between these two footings was a body of amorphous fill yielding pottery of the first half of 17th century, which appears therefore to be the infill of an at least partially stone-lined case pit (3.2)

Further trenching by the College showed footing 3.3 to extend eastwards, virtually the full width of the building, with a shallower footing 3-4 returning north.

### Pottery

Identification and dates were provided by Maureen Mellor, as follows:

Eight assemblages were assessed visually. Earliest was the base of a small cooking pot in Oxford Fabric B, 10th to early 11th centuries but also in use in the 9th century. It is similar to an example from Hertford College now on display in the Ashmolean Museum.

Just above this Saxon feature was the oven-base with early to mid 13th century pottery (2-5), and this comparable material from loam levels 2-4 which sealed it. Only at a higher level (2-3) was later medieval pottery encountered, including Surrey whitewares and late Brill type (Fabrics AP and BX) which suggest a 16th century date.

The uppermost layer of Trench 2 (2.2 etc) contained sherds of a similar date to those above, with the top surface 2-1 possibly extending into the 17th century. The latest group came from Pit 3-2 in the south west corner, with two Frechen type drinking vessels, a Brill jug in Fabric BX and a baking dish. On national comparisons these would date to the first quarter of the 17th century, about 20 years before Prince Rupert and the king used the court in 1642.

#### Discussion (Fig 4)

An important advance was to establish that not only does the the natural gravel survive in one place but that it was at a comparable level to the original ground surface seen previously 1.5m beneath Oriel Street, (P McKeague, QAU site record OXOST, August 1985). This is proof that whatever disturbance resulted from medieval sanitation pits, on this site it was relatively confined, and this is confirmed by the fact that the tennis court has stood for 300 years on such shallow foundations.

There was at least one early pit on the site, the feature which produced the base of 9th-10th century cooking pot (3-6). The visible area of this deposit was too small to be confirmed whether it was a cess pit, cellar pit or well, and it would need further excavation to produce a clear decision of whether it was before or after the foundation of the fortress town of C. AD 911-12. Either way it joins a comparatively small number of assemblages of this period, which were first recognized in Oxford in the last 20 years and which are now proving important in tying together the ceramic history of southern England. If it predates the Saxon town, it will provide strong support for a new model of preburghal Oxford, and there is no reason why it should not be accompanied by Roman or even prehistoric deposits (J Blair 'St Frideswides Monastery Oxoniesia in press).

Above the Saxon feature was the beginning of an accumulation of loam surfaces which probably represent backyards over the early centuries of Oriel Street properties. They would no doubt include lightweight buildings and other structures which are be unrecognizable in the context of this ---- of assessment, except where they include definitive outlines such as the oven base (2-



5), or extensive spreads of stone such as 2-4/1. Otherwise these levels are likely to represent the frequent floor sweepings from the main house, and other continuous refuse production. It is most significant that no assemblage contained clay pipes, confirming the assumption that the medieval deposits were sealed by the tennis court surface at an early date.

### Medieval Boundaries

The assessment trenches were necessarily confined to the south end of the building which according to H E Salter's map of medieval Oxford would be the rear end of Tenement SE96 fronting Oriel Street.

Oxford's medieval plan has been compiled from documentary evidence using the available topographical sources. Most main frontage properties extend back some 60m, but clearly at street corners there had to be compromises. The tennis court includes an area where the yards of High Street and Oriel Street properties would have interlocked, perhaps changing hands on several occasions. The well preserved stratigraphy in Trench 2 may indicate that this area was in comparatively settled ownership, continuously re-using a single stone lined pit over a long period rather than continually redigging new pits.

It is therefore reasonable to suggest that the horizontal stratigraphy found in Trench 2 may have been widespread in Tenement SE96 and that to the north would be a dateable property boundary defining the rear of the High Street tenement (SE25), with possibly a quite different regime of pits or middens, including deposits of the 15th and 16th centuries which were identified in the research design as a particular objective of the archaeological study.

### The Tennis Court

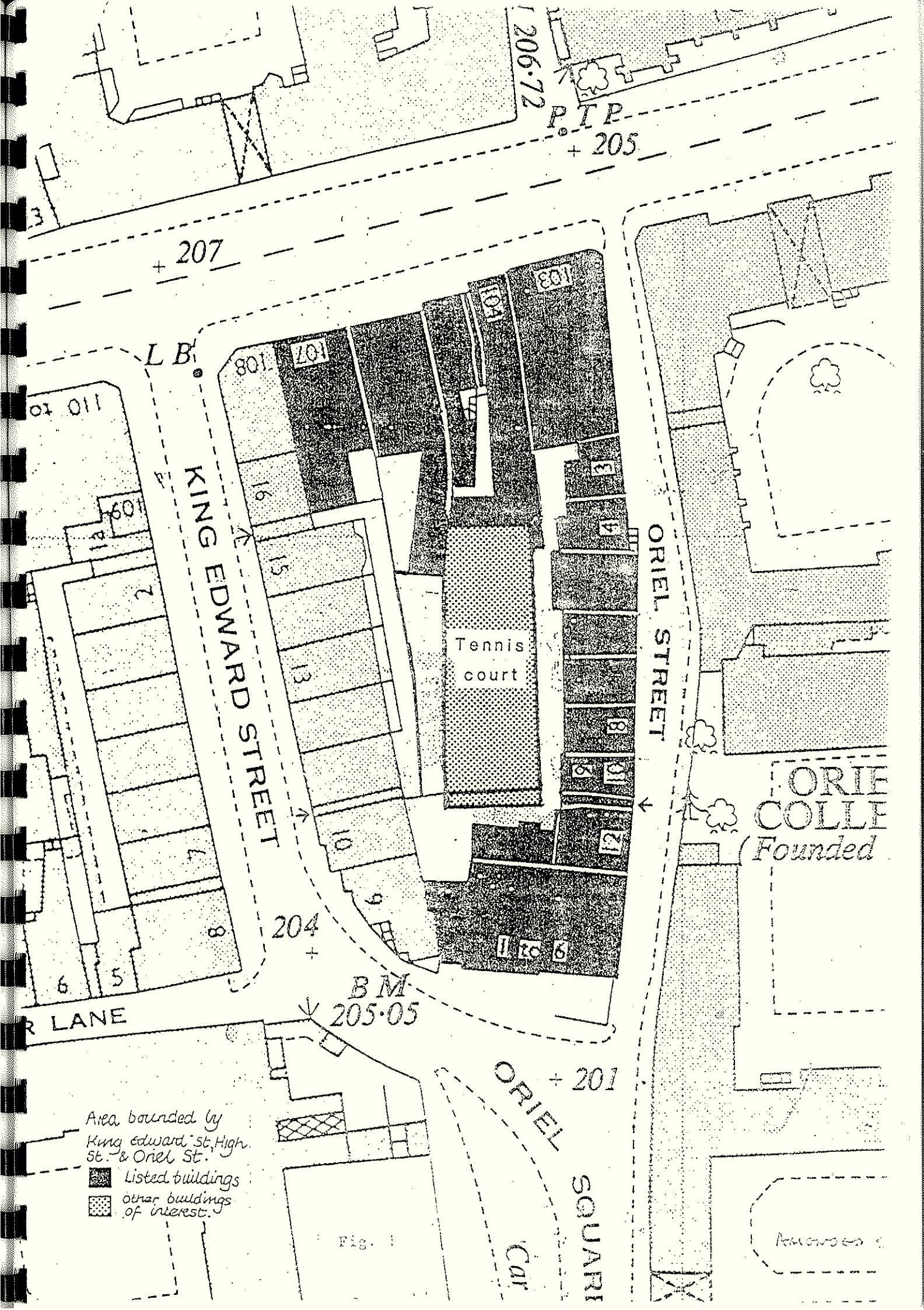
A glance at the building shows that it is a comparatively complete example of its type. Although a full 100ft in length, its 30ft breadth is substantially less than the Merton College Court (736ft) which is reputed itself to be unusually small. The internal ashlar wall finishes are comparatively unweathered, suggesting that they have always been protected by a roof, irrespective of whether there was an unroofed court here beforehand. So the putative dates for the structure rest on the Anthony Wood reference to Charles I and Prince Regent playing here in 1642. This is in slight conflict with the ~~med~~ 17th century assemblage from pit 3-2 in the south east corner. It may therefore be necessary to consider the possibility that a court such as this might have such a sanitation built into the area beneath the pentice gallery in one corner, and if so the lack of clay smoking pipe from beneath the floors elsewhere might indicate an early 17th or even late 16th century date. This could only be properly resolved by tree-ring dating on the oak wall framing.

### Recommendations (Fig 5)

A practice is being established whereby assessments of this sort are referred to the County Archaeologist for a recommendation on what work should be undertaken to instigate the impact of the proposed development. On the basis of the Unit's experience, however, the objectives would take account of the following.

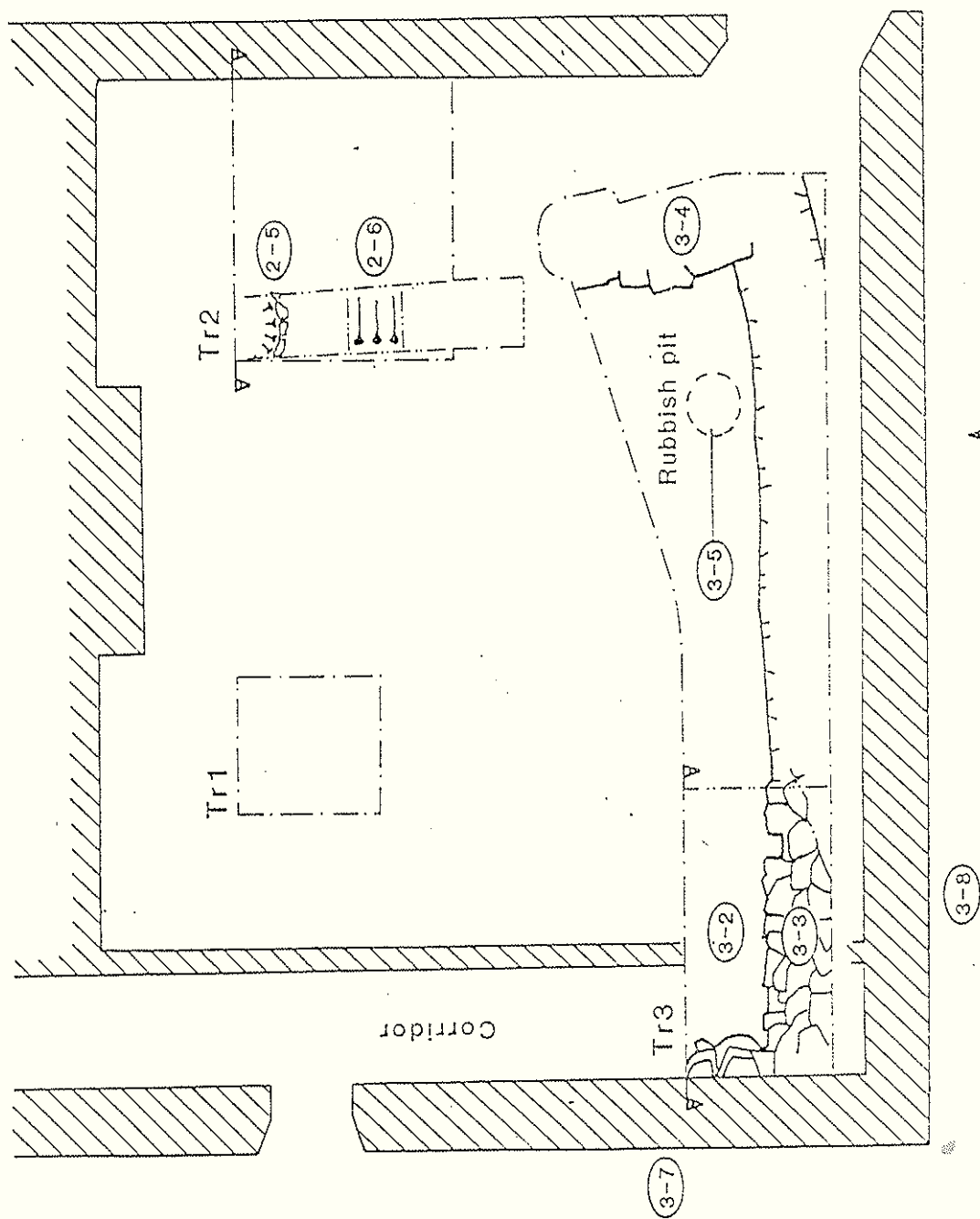
- 1 Survey of existing building, including the roof; the wall framing; the stone walls including several blocked openings and the exaggerated starting-course on the east elevation; the distribution of ashlar and other wall finishes on the interior; the painted court markings; the net supports.
- 2 Dendrochronological (tree-ring) dating of the oak structure.
- 3 Archaeological excavation of the superficial levels below the playing surface as they become available.
- 4 Archaeological watching brief of contractor's excavation.
- 5 Full archaeological research excavation within the bounds of structural stability of the building, partly funded by creation of a hole of an agreed profile to give the main contractor access for his underpinning work

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July 1989





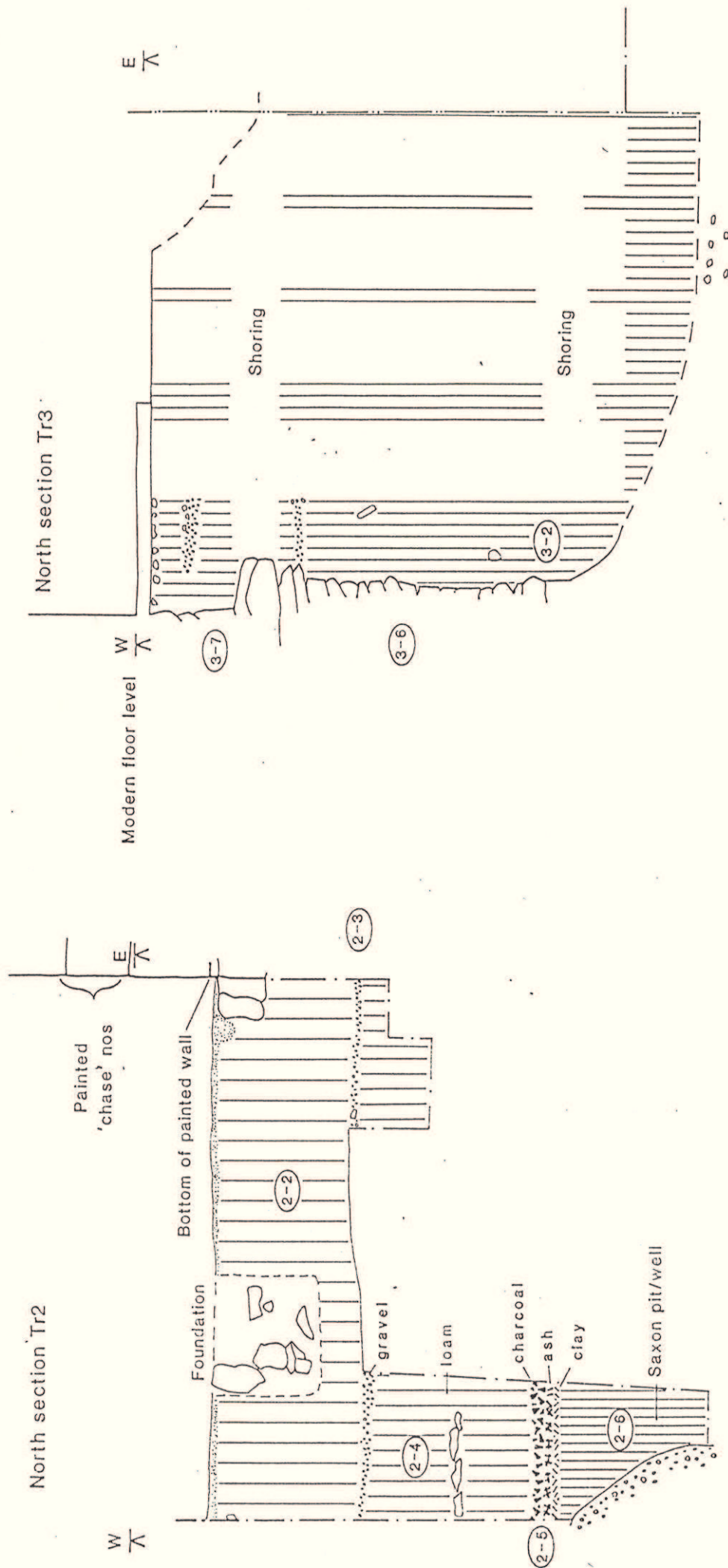




Oxford: Oriel Tennis Court  
 Archaeological assessment  
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0 5m

Fig. 2



Oxford, Oriel Tennis Court  
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0 3 m

Fig. 3

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