

CANONS ASHBY (NH)

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The National Trust

CANONS ASHBY HOUSE  
NORTHAMPTONSHIRE

**ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF REPORT**

NGR SP 5757 5069

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September 2001

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NGR SP 5757 5069

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SUMMARY

*In June 2001, Oxford Archaeological Unit undertook a watching brief at Canons Ashby House, Northamptonshire. The watching brief monitored a phase of ongoing repair work taking place over the next few years. During the works, a section of the 18th-century drainage system was revealed, as was the foundation of a retaining wall in the South West Garden.*

1 Introduction

- 1.1 A watching brief has been commissioned by The National Trust to monitor ongoing repair work at Canons Ashby House, Northamptonshire (NGR SP 5757 5069, Fig.1). The house is part of a Scheduled Ancient Monument (Northamptonshire 154, National Monument No. 13643) which also includes the park and gardens, the remains of a medieval monastery, castle, settlement and fields and a series of dams.

- 1.2 The site lies at 100m OD and the underlying geology is clay.

2 Background

*The background information below is quoted directly from an archaeological watching brief report produced by OAU in August 2000 following a watching brief which monitored groundwork for the construction of the new tea rooms at Canons Ashby House:*

- 2.1 Canons Ashby derives its name from the 12th-century priory of Augustinian canons, whose medieval church still survives in truncated form 100 m to the south of Canons Ashby House. In the early medieval period the settlement originated along a trackway which ran up hill from south-west to north-east. This central part of the village was located in the vicinity of Canons Ashby House, and later extended to the north-west towards the motte and bailey castle, and to the south-east towards the monastery. A group of dammed ponds were created to the west of the settlement to power a number of water mills during the medieval and post-medieval periods.

- 2.2 The core of the present house was built in the 1550s, and probably incorporated parts of an earlier farm on the site. The H-shaped red brick house of the 1550's consisted of a great hall range, built with a kitchen at one end and

a tower at the other. The house was extended in the 1590s, when the courtyard was enclosed for the first time.

- 2.3 The last major alterations were made to the house in 1708-1710 when the southern front was almost entirely faced in stone. The gardens were also given their present appearance at about this time, with descending terraces, flights of stairs and stone walls set with vases. The parkland surrounding the house and gardens contains the well preserved earthwork remains of the castle, settlement, and ridge and furrow cultivation.
- 2.4 After the Dissolution the church and the rest of the priory estate passed to the Cope family, and through marriage to the Drydens, who remained at Canons Ashby thereafter. The Copes and the Drydens have been responsible both for the upkeep of St Mary's Church and for appointing and paying the incumbent. In the last fifty years the church had fallen into disuse and decay and was boarded up, due to increasing vandalism. A major programme of restoration was begun in 1981 by The National Trust (having taken over care of the house, gardens and church in 1980), with large-scale repairs to the roof and to the stonework being undertaken throughout the building. A redundant quarry at Stow-Nine-Churches was reopened especially for this purpose.

- 2.5 Today St Mary's Church consists of only the two westernmost bays of the original medieval nave, the remainder having been demolished by the Copes and the Drydens in order to build their respective houses in the latter half of the sixteenth century. The original nave of five bays with the chancel beyond gave the building a total length of 217 feet, fully four times the length of the present building. Excavation in 1828 established foundations running more than 100 feet east of the present building (Steane, 1974); the south-west corner of the cloister has also been uncovered. Also the moat, enclosure banks and ponds lie to the south-east and partly survive, despite substantial recent agricultural disturbance.

### 3 Watching Brief Aims

- 3.1 To record the presence/absence, extent, condition, character, quality and date of archaeological remains within the entire area affected by development.
- 3.2 If exceptional archaeological remains were discovered, for which the resources allocated were insufficient to support a treatment to a satisfactory and proper standard, the OAU would signal to all parties that such an archaeological find had been made.
- 3.3 To make available the results of the investigation.

### 4 Methodology

#### 4.1 Scope of fieldwork

The watching brief was undertaken on all areas of ground disturbance.

#### 4.2 Recording

4.2.1 Archaeological features were planned at a scale of 1:100, sections were drawn at 1:20. All excavated features were photographed using colour slide and black and white print film. Recording followed procedures lay down in the OAU *Fieldwork Manual* (Wilkinson, 1992).

#### 5 Results

5.1 The watching brief monitored the excavation of an exploratory test pit in the South West Garden; a trench for the installation of a new land drain to the east of the house and the excavation at the base of the rainwater pipes flanking the northern entrance.

##### 5.2 The South West Garden (Figs 2 and 3)

5.2.1 The test pit was excavated against the retaining wall to the west of the South West Garden. The ground level within the garden is approximately 1 m above the ground surface to the west of the wall.

5.2.2 The stratigraphy revealed comprised a mid-dark grey clayey silt (1) overlain by a mid grey clayey silt (5) which was in turn overlain by a deposit of mixed gravel, stone and sand (2). Overlying deposit 2 was a mid-light grey silty clay subsoil (3) overlain by topsoil / turf (4).

5.2.3 The dressed stone of the retaining wall was visible to a depth of 0.8 m below the present ground surface of the garden (bg). The foundation of roughly hewn stone was also revealed to a depth of 1.5 m bg. The dressed stone below the present ground level of the garden was not weathered (indeed, chisel marks were still clearly visible), although it was considerably weathered on the western side where the original ground surface survives.

##### 5.3 The North Door (Figs 2 and 4)

5.3.1 The paving slabs on either side of the north door were removed to inspect the drainage channels beneath. These were planned and photographed but no further recording was deemed necessary as they will remain *in situ*.

##### 5.4 The New Drain (Fig. 2)

5.4.1 No significant archaeological features or deposits were observed during the excavation of the drainage trench.

##### 5.5 Finds

5.5.1 No finds were retained during the watching brief. A quantity of 718th-19th-century pottery and glass was observed during the excavation of the drainage channels by the north door.

## 5.6 Environmental Results

- 5.6.1 Although full consideration was given to various sampling strategies, due to the absence of any suitable deposits and the tight constraints of the excavation, no environmental soil samples were taken.

## 6 Discussion And Interpretation

- 6.1 It seems clear from the results of the test pit in the South West Garden that the deposits of made ground (2, 3 and 4) are contemporary with the construction of the retaining wall. Deposit 1 almost certainly represents a buried ploughsoil, whilst the top of deposit 5 is more-or-less consistent with the present ground surface to the west of the standing wall. The deposit (2) overlying the buried topsoil appears to be a general make up deposit and was overlain by garden soil (3) and turf (4). The stone has been dressed to such a depth because it is visible on the western face where the original ground surface has not been affected. As buried topsoil was observed below the make up layers, it is reasonable to assume that the site has not been levelled prior to the construction of the garden 'terrace' and that archaeological deposits may survive beneath the made ground.
- 6.2 No further archaeological deposits or features were observed during the watching brief with the exception of the drainage channels by the north door.

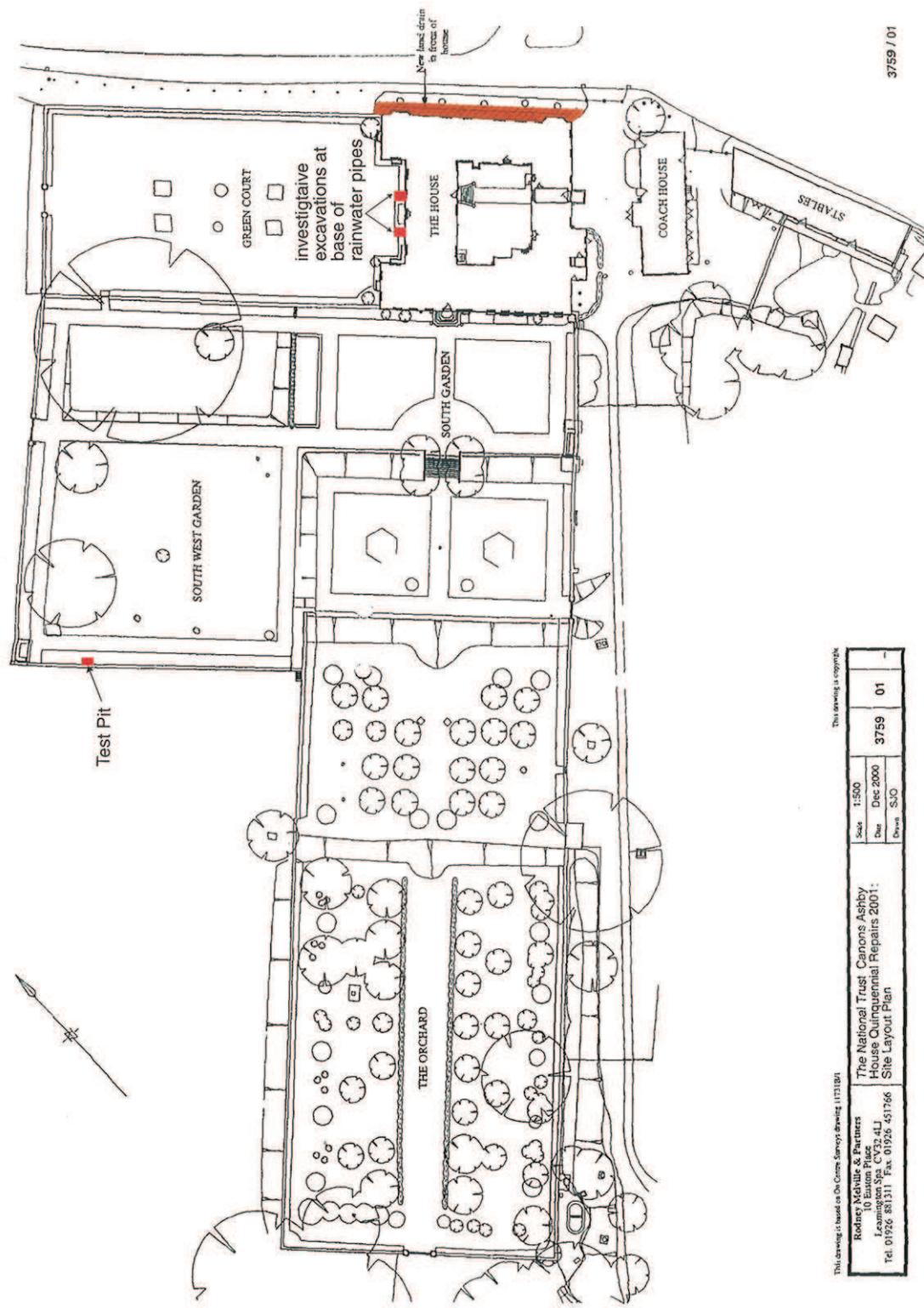
## **References.**

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



Figure 1: Site location plan.

Figure 2: Site plan.



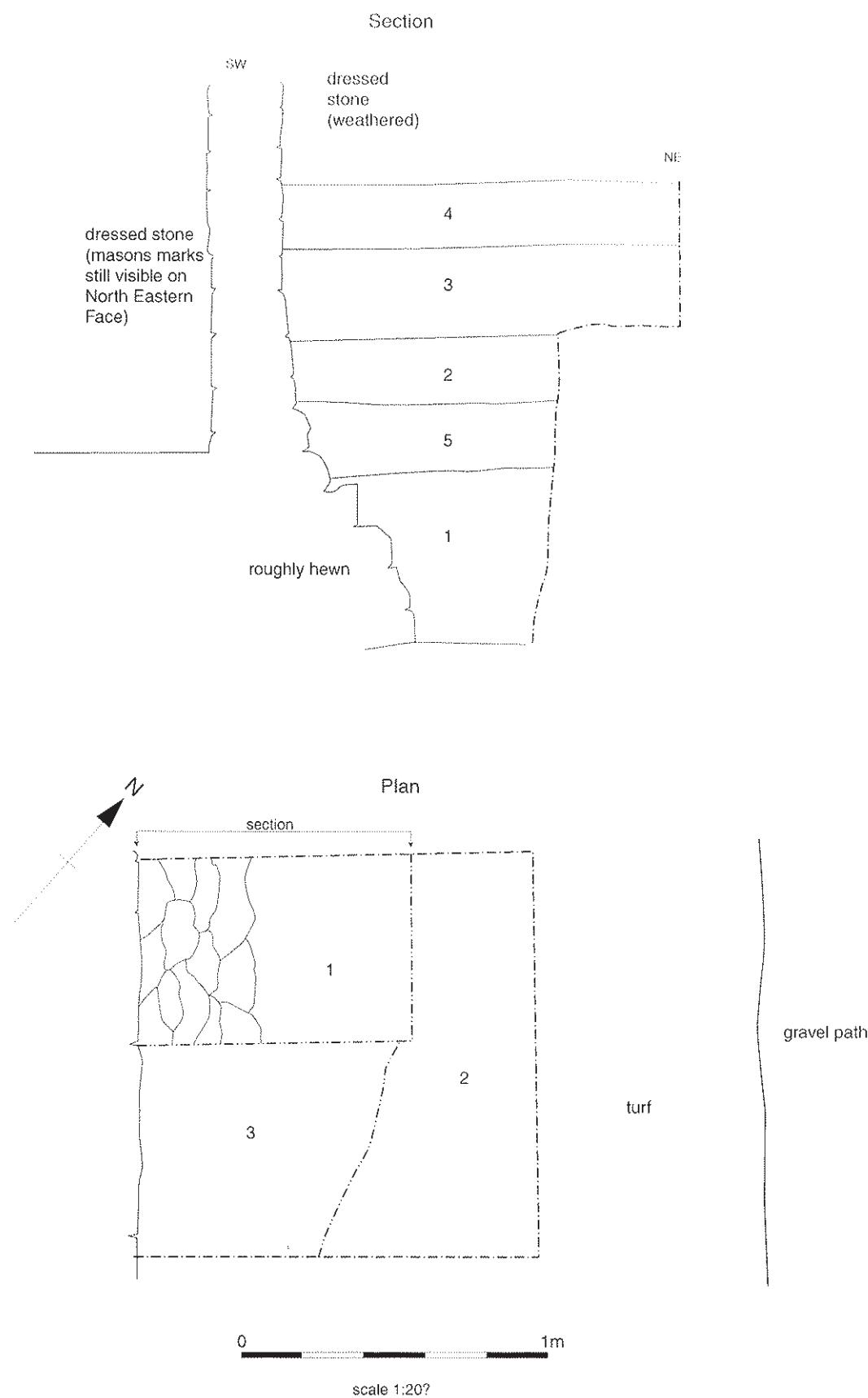


Figure 3: section and plan of test pit in SW garden.



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