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# The Slype, New College, Oxford

NGR SP 518 064

## Archaeological Watching Brief Report



Oxford Archaeological Unit

September 1996



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NGR SP51800648**

## **Introduction**

The Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) was commissioned by Rodney Melville and Partners (Chartered Architects), on behalf of New College, to maintain a watching brief during the excavation of a test-pit in the Slype at New College, Oxford. Part of the retaining wall on the north side of the slype, which lies over the line of the outer defensive wall, is considered to be in some danger of collapse. The proposed solution of Gifford & Partners (Consulting Engineers) is to insert a concrete wall against the south side of the outer defensive wall, and link the two together by steel ties. A test pit sited on the south side of the outer wall was deemed necessary to establish the character of the existing wall foundations, and the archaeological potential of the deposits which would be removed by the construction of the concrete wall. The fieldwork took place on August 29th, 1996.

## **Historical and Archaeological Background**

The fact that the city walls on the north side of Oxford were double was first proposed in 1912 by the Reverend H.E. Salter in his 'Lecture on the Town walls of Oxford', and established beyond dispute by subsequent documentary research and small scale excavation (Palmer 1976; Durham, Halpin, and Palmer 1983). The outer wall was probably built between 1280 and 1300, within the extant town ditch, and the resulting gap between the walls, now known as the slype was, at least to some degree, infilled. By the late 14th century the *raison d'etre* of the double walled defence had largely disappeared and the city discontinued the maintenance of the outer wall. It was rapidly dismantled, at least to the ground level existing between the walls, and the town ditch was allowed to fill up. There is some evidence in the 17th century map of Oxford by Loggan that the wall was rebuilt as part of the reinforcement of the city defences during the Civil War, but subsequent to this the infilling of the inter-mural ditch continued. The area to the north of the line of the outer wall was infilled and, in the nineteenth century, developed as gardens behind the new frontage of New College along the south side of Holywell Street..

## **Methodology**

The test pit, 3 m long x 1.4 m wide x 2.4 m deep was machine excavated, under archaeological supervision. Within the constraints imposed by Health & Safety considerations the deposits and features exposed in section were cleaned, examined and recorded by plan, section, and colour slide and B&W photography. The removed spoil was also visually examined for finds. All recording followed the OAU standard practice (OAU Field Manual

## Results

The earliest feature exposed was the south face of a west-east oriented coursed rubble wall (102), revealed to a depth of 1.3 m, and extending beyond each end of the test pit. From the area of the exposed wall face that was manually cleaned, it appeared that the stones were thin (0.10 m) rubble slabs, bonded with a reddish brown silty clay mixed with gravel. As this was indistinguishable from the lowest deposit abutting the wall (106), it is possible that what was seen was a residue of 106 between the stones. A depth of approximately 0.6 m of layer 106 was exposed. Both 106 and wall 102 continued below the limit of the excavation, which was 2.4 m below ground level (61.85 OD). There was no evidence of a construction cut through 106 alongside the wall, which suggests that 106 was dumped against the constructed wall.

The top of 102 formed a reasonable level surface, onto which was set wall 101, set back to the north by approximately 0.28 m. This wall was also built of coursed rubble, bonded by a buff coloured clay/mortar mix. the wall face had a slight batter of 0.12 m over the exposed depth of 1.1 m. This wall extended to the present ground surface. The wall continues above the ground as context 100, and has ashlar facing on its south side and a moulded parapet.

Layer 105 overlay 106 and abutted the upper part of 102. 105 was a friable dark brown silty clay, averaging 0.75 m deep with up to 40% small to medium rubble and inclusions of a few fragments of red roof tile, and occasional animal bone fragments. No securely dateable artifacts were found in this deposit. Overlying 105, and abutting 101 was a composite layer, averaging 0.80 m deep, of lenses of gravel, dark brown silty clay, and sand, with occasional pieces of limestone rubble (104). Fragments of clay pipe stem were recovered from this deposit. Layer 104 was sealed by layer 103 the modern tarmac road/pathway.

## Discussion

Natural gravel was not reached in the test pit, suggesting that the pit lies over the infilled extra-mural ditch. The evidence suggests that the outer defensive wall, represented by 102, was built in the ditch, and supported, on its south side, by a partial infilling of the ditch (layer 106). The lack of domestic debris, or indeed any finds at all, in layer 106 indicates that the layer is not the result of the gradual accumulation of soil, but a deliberate importation of material from elsewhere. The excavation of the outer wall at Hertford College (Palmer 1983) to the west, also revealed a similar post-construction inter-mural infill, overlying the residual medieval deposits in the original town ditch. Similarly the trench dug across the western end of the Slype in 1993 (Booth 1995, 209-212) encountered silty gravel layers against the south face of the outer wall at a similar depth. In that particular case a small quantity of 13th-15th century pottery was recovered from the deposits.

The high rubble content of layer 105, the top of which corresponds in level to the top of 102,



may represent the demolition of the original superstructure of the wall, and such finds as were recovered from 105 may suggest a late medieval date for the layer's deposition. Conceivably wall 101, surmounting wall 102, could represent the reconstruction of the wall during the Civil War, although there is no direct evidence from the test pit results to support this. The more recent infilling layer (104), and the faced uppermost courses of 101 (100), probably relate to the general reordering of the area between the original town wall to the south and the new buildings of New College erected along the west side of Holywell in the 19th century.

Alan Hardy  
OAU  
August 1996

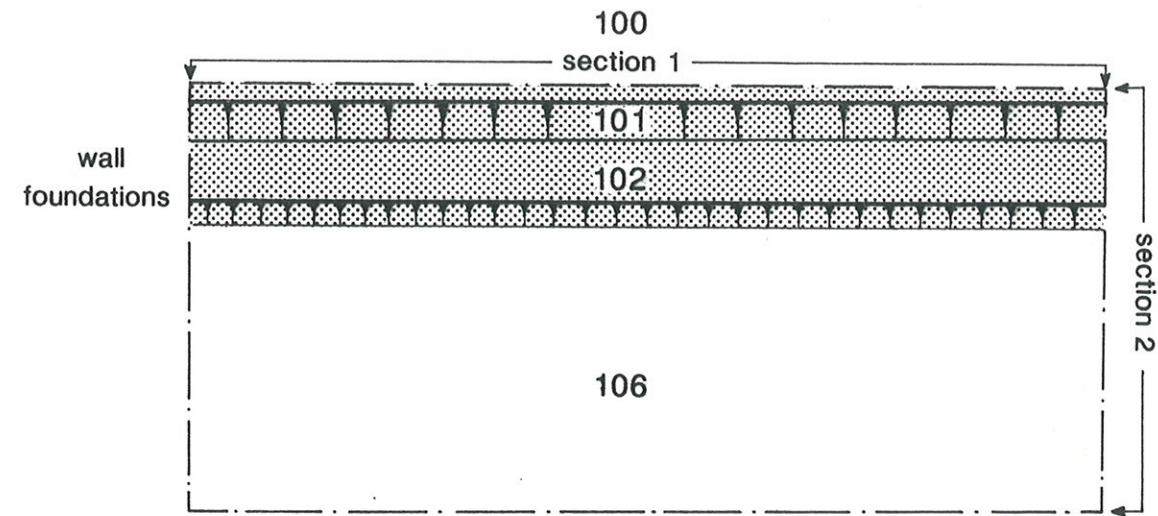
### **Bibliography**

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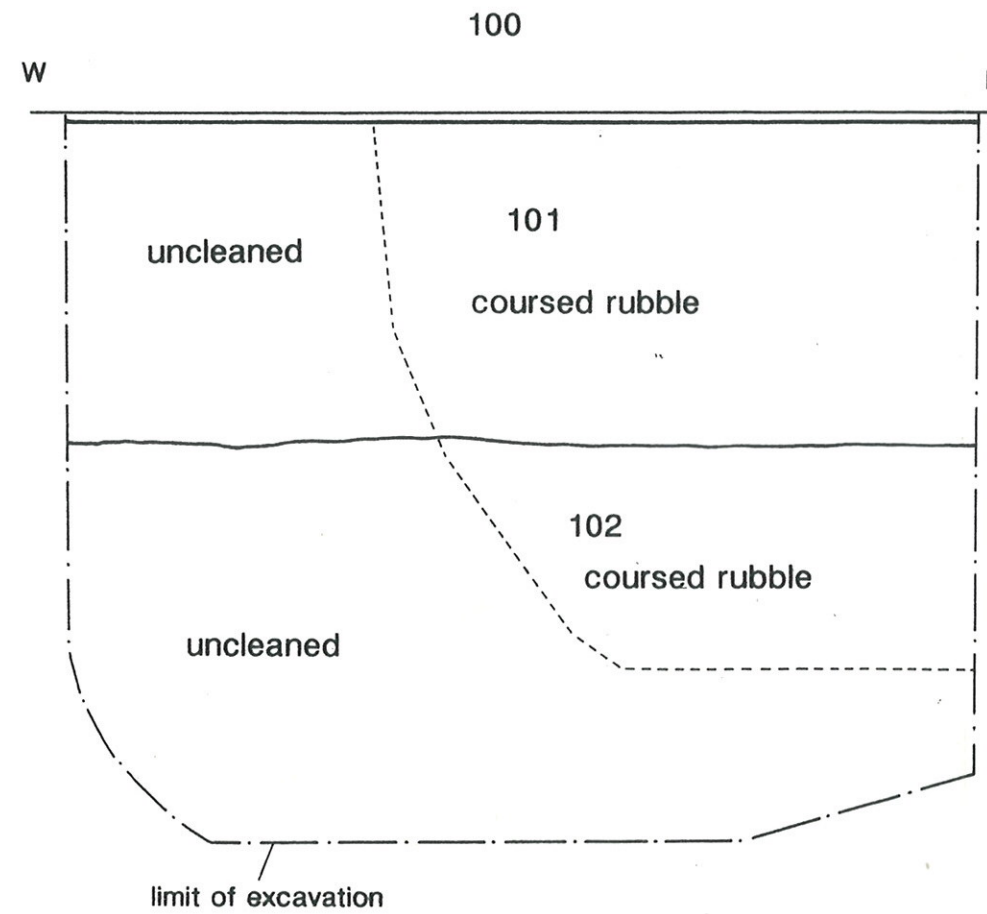
B Durham, C Halpin, N Palmer, 'Oxford's Northern Defences: Archaeological Studies 1971-1982', *Oxoniensia* xlviii (1983), 13-40.

N Palmer 'Excavations on the Outer City Wall of Oxford in St Helen's Passage and Hertford College', *Oxoniensia* xli (1976), 148-160.

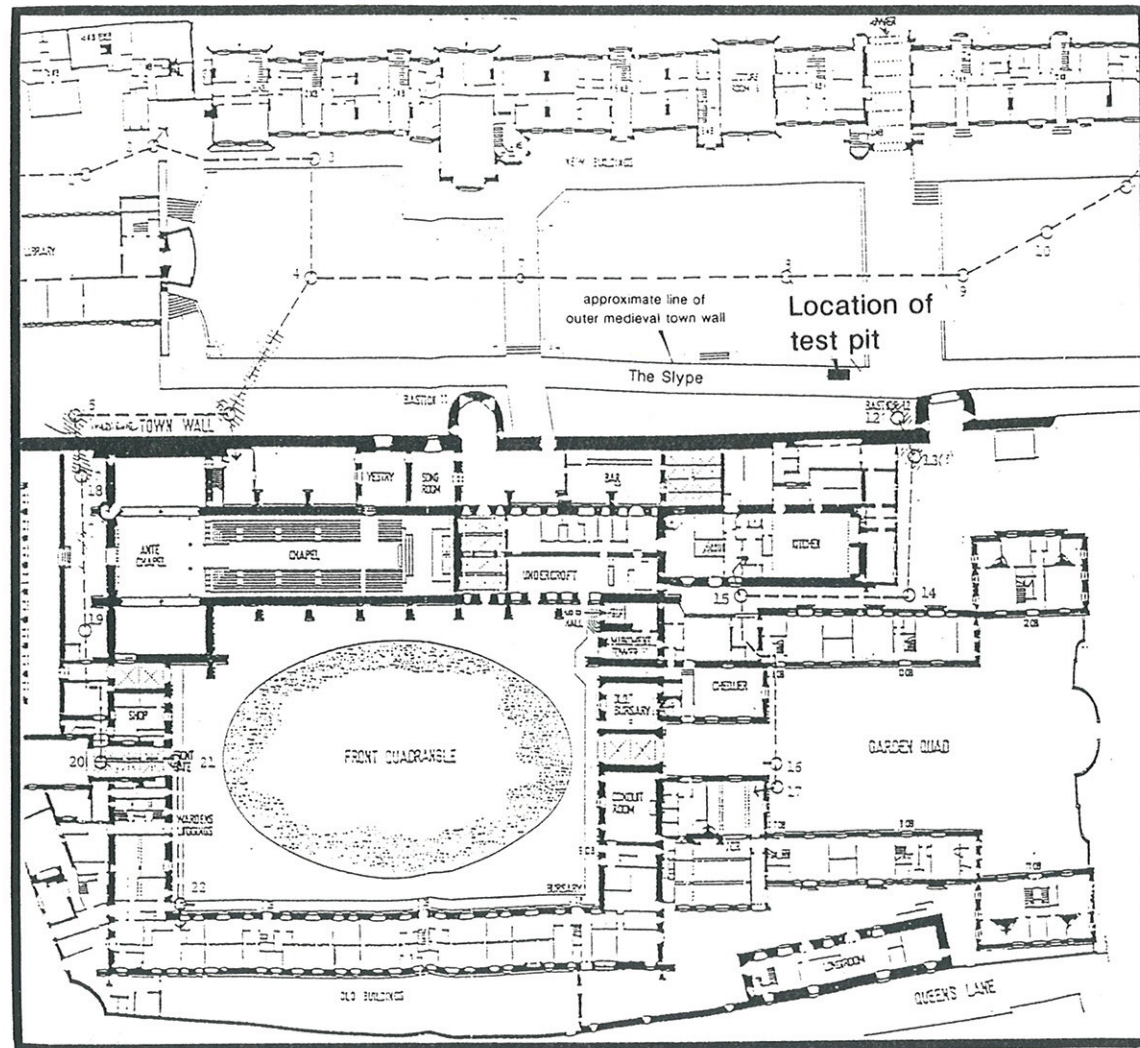
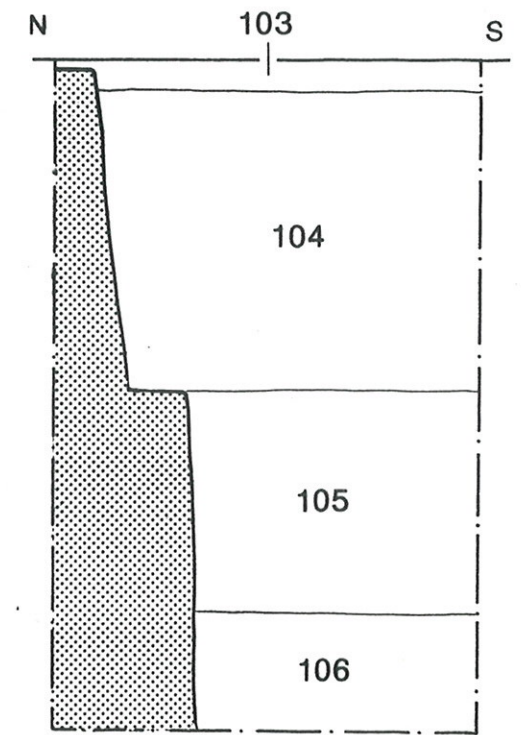
Plan of test pit



section 1



section 2



New College scale 1:1000

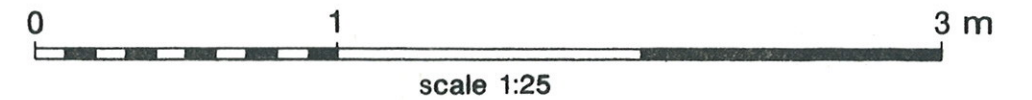


Figure 1





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