

ROYAL HOSPITAL CHELSEA

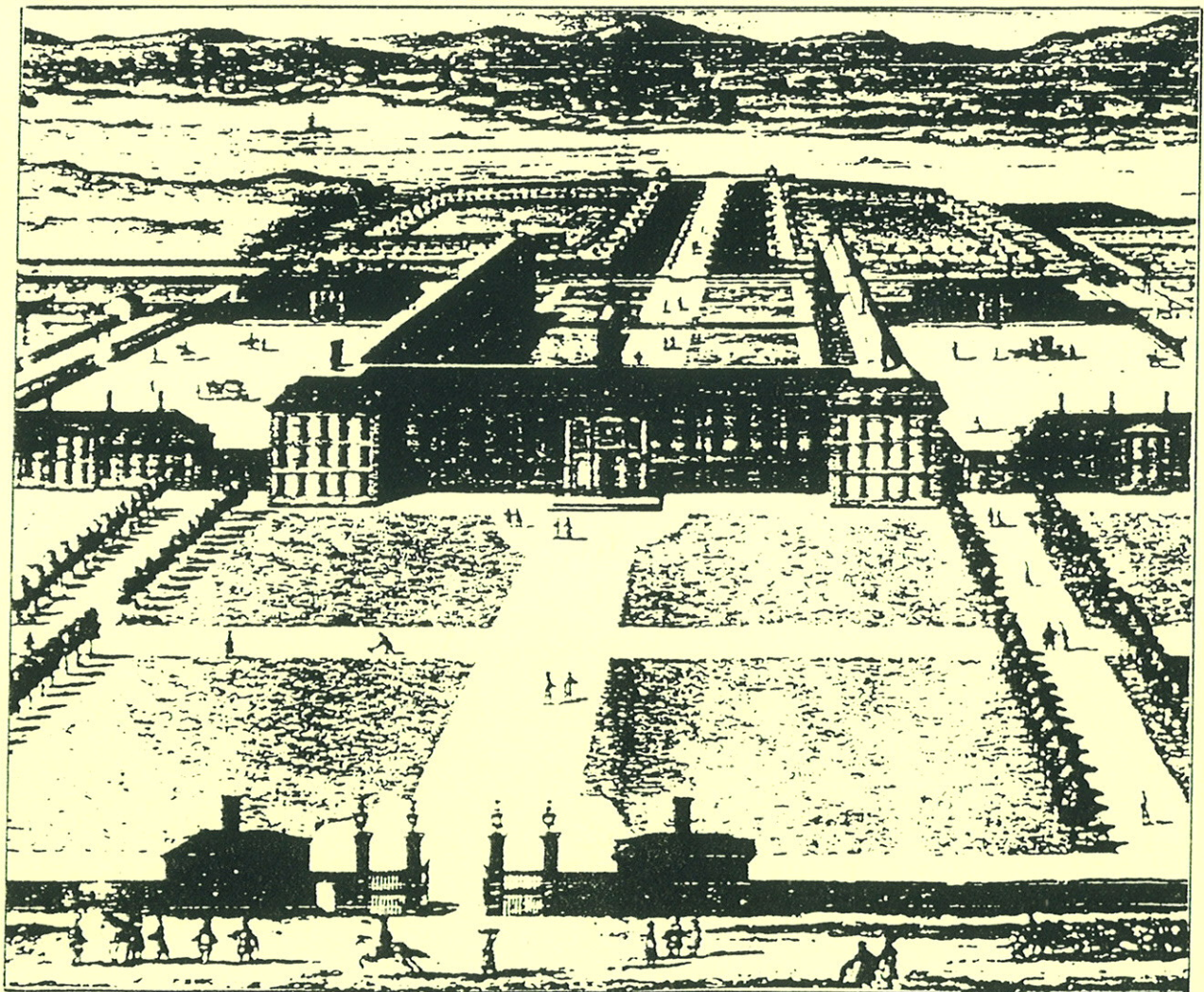
Royal Hospital Chelsea

London Borough of Kensington and Chelsea

NGR TQ280781

Installation of a Communications Duct System

Archaeological Watching Brief Report



Oxford Archaeological Unit
June 1999

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Cover illustration: Kipps View of the Royal Hospital from the North-West in the 17th century

Chelsea Royal Hospital

Installation of a Communication Duct System Archaeological Watching Brief Report

Summary

An archaeological watching brief carried out during the installation of a communication duct system revealed some evidence of 18th century garden features associated with the hospital. Some evidence was found possibly relating to the area prior to the construction of the Hospital.

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) was commissioned by the Royal Hospital Chelsea to maintain a watching brief during the groundworks for the installation of a communication duct system in the grounds of the Chelsea Royal Hospital, Middlesex (NGR TQ280781). A Desk Top Assessment (*Installation of a Communication Duct System - Archaeological Desk-Top Assessment* OAU Feb 1999) concluded that the minimal proposed depth of the required trenches would be likely to pose an insignificant threat to archaeological deposits, and that a watching brief, maintained during the works, would be the most appropriate mitigation.

2. Historical Background

- 2.1 The Royal Hospital is situated in the ancient parish of Chelsea on the edge of the first gravel terrace of the River Thames. The medieval centre of the village, clustered around the church lies to the west of the hospital and it would appear that when originally constructed the hospital lay in open fields running down to the Thames.
- 2.2 The parish would appear to have pre-Conquest roots. Chelsea is mentioned in a number of Anglo-Saxon charters and the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle tells us that Offa, King of the Mercians, held a synod in Chelsea about AD 787. No recorded Anglo-Saxon material has been discovered in the immediate vicinity of the hospital.
- 2.3 During the medieval period the site of the hospital lay within Thameshott, an arable field at the eastern edge of the parish of Chelsea.
- 2.4 According to Faulkner (1804, 237) Thameshott was the site of an 'Ancient Cross' which reputedly stood within the area now occupied by the south-west precinct of the Royal Hospital, and which was removed in 1642. The date and function of this cross is unclear: such crosses were often set up in the open fields or at roadsides, as boundary marks, memorials or marks to guide the traveller.

3 The Royal Hospital

- 3.1 In 1682 Christopher Wren was appointed to build the Royal Hospital at Chelsea. The original plan was for buildings around a single courtyard (Figure Court); the side courtyards (Light Horse Court and College Court) were additions of 1686. With a few minor changes the main buildings that we see today are essentially those of the 1690's.
- 3.2 The Hospital was built partly on the site of an unsuccessful Theological College built in the reign of James I. In the Parliamentary survey of 1652 this building was described as a four storeyed brick structure. It comprised an entry hall, two parlours and kitchen premises on the ground floor with six large rooms and four closets on both the first and second floors and a long gallery on the top floor. Except on its northern side, where there was a wooden palisade, the building was surrounded by small walled gardens and yards.
- 3.3 In 1667 the building was transferred to the newly founded Royal Society although it appears to have been of little use to them. In 1678 the roof collapsed and the building was considered so derelict that the Council of the Society recommended that 'the tiles and timber of Chelsea College be taken down and stored in some place near the same' and that their Vice President should 'direct some person to go about the pulling it down forthwith' (although it does not appear that this threat was ever carried out). Despite various attempts to sell the college and its lands the property was to remain in the hands of the Royal Society until 1682 when the land was finally sold to the crown as the site of the Royal Hospital.

4. Archaeological Background

No prehistoric or Roman sites have been identified in the immediate vicinity of the Royal Hospital. However the location of the site on the first gravel terrace overlooking the river suggests that it would have been an attractive place to settle, both agriculturally and strategically. The chance find spots of prehistoric and Roman material (see OAU, 1996), may suggest some level of activity in the area. The grounds of the Royal Hospital itself have produced Roman material: a coin of Tetricus (259-274 AD) was found in College Court during the construction of a sewer in 1886.

- 4.1 A significant number of burials have been located during various works in the Hospital grounds, particularly in the 19th and 20th centuries. They seem to be concentrated in the area of College Court and to the west. It is not known if these burials are all of the same period, although it is highly likely they date to before the construction of the Hospital (Dean 1950, 30).

5. Recent Archaeological Work

- 5.1 In 1997, The OAU maintained a watching brief during the installation of an automatic irrigation system around and within the three main courts of the Hospital - College Court, Figure Court and Light Horse Court (*Royal Hospital Chelsea. Automatic Irrigation System Installation. Archaeological Watching Brief Report* OAU 1997) Evidence, in the form of brick wall footings, was found which could represent part of the theological college, immediately south - east of the college court. However, the depth of these remains suggested that the current work would not be likely to impact upon other pre - Hospital deposits.

6. Methodology

- 6.1 The excavation of the duct trenches was archaeologically monitored. The trenches were mostly excavated to an average width of 0.30 m x depth of 0.45 m. Where possibly significant deposits were revealed, these were manually cleaned and recorded according to standard OAU practice (Wilkinson 1992). A total of 6 areas of significance were identified (see Fig 2). These were identified with the corresponding engineers' trench numbers - 9, 17/18, 25, 42, 44, 46.
- 6.2 The fieldwork was carried out between February and April 1999.

7. Results

7.1 Trench 9 NW-SE (Fig. 3)

The trench was situated on the pavement directly to the rear of No. 4 East Road. A mortared brick wall (105), 0.56 m wide was revealed, oriented north-east - south- west, and aligned with the NW wall of No 4, East Road. The wall survived at a depth of 0.40 m below the present ground level. Mixed soil with small fragments of mortar and brick abutted both sides of the wall (layers 103 & 104). Sealing both layers and wall was a levelling deposit (106) of mixed soil and sand. and a layer of topsoil (101). A sample of the wall fabric was recovered, along with a small fragment of post-medieval bottle glass and a piece of roof tile from layer 104.

7.2 Trench 25 (Fig. 3)

The trench was situated immediately south-east of the laundry house. The earliest feature was a linear brick foundation (139) oriented north-east - south-west. It measured 0.75 m across at its base, stepping to 0.44 m across at the surviving top of the structure, which was at a level 0.18 m below present ground level. A layer of mixed soil and brick rubble (140) was identified against the base of 139. Against either side of the wall was a loose sandy rubble mix (144). Tipped against this was a 0.20 m thick layer of garden soil 141. Overlying all the features was a layer of modern make up and tarmac (142).

7.3 Trench 17/18 NW-SE (Fig. 4)

The trenches were situated in the West Road, extending north from Creek Gate. The earliest feature was a brick wall (134), revealed along the west side of the trench. It was oriented north-west - south-east and survived, in at least four courses, up to a level 0.40 m below present ground level. At the north end of the recorded part of the trench there was possible evidence of a return wall or buttress (138) extending south west, although at this point two modern service pipes had badly truncated the evidence. Dumped against the exposed side of the walls 134 & 138 was a sporadic deposit of sandy silt (137), and over the top of the wall 134, where it was exposed, was thin layer of mortar and fine rubble. A mixed layer of stone and brick rubble (136) sealed all the features and deposits, and was itself overlaid by a thin layer of modern tarmac.

7.4 Trench 26 NW-SE (Fig. 5)

The trench was situated north-east of the boiler house. The earliest deposit was a flinty gravel, (133) just visible at the north eastern extent of the area examined, which might represent natural subsoil. This appeared to have been cut by a large pit, only part of which was exposed, containing a decorated ceramic urn or planter (125). The top of the urn was 0.40 m below the present ground level. The decorative motif, which ran in two bands around the shoulder of the vessel, is reproduced in Fig 5, along with a photograph of the urn in situ. Only a small part of the vessel was exposed, but sufficient to estimate its diameter at 0.8 m - 1.0 m. It appeared to have been deliberately set within a large pit, and layers of loose soil/gravel (131) & (130), and garden soil (132) tipped in around it. A small piece of 18th century pottery was recovered from layer 132. Layer 127, a sandy cultivation soil, overlay 130, and was cut by construction cut 129 for the laying of a concrete slab. This directly overlay the top of the urn (125), but whether by design or chance was not clear. The concrete was sealed by a silty sand layer (128) and a loamy topsoil (126).

7.5 Trench 42 NE-SW (Fig. 6)

The trench was situated in the garden to the rear of London Gate House. The earliest deposit was layer 123, a layer of mid-brown sandy silt with charcoal flecks. This was cut by (120), the construction trench for a brick wall (118) 0.24 m wide and oriented north-west - south-east. The trench was backfilled by deposit 119, a similar material to layer 123. On the north-east side of the wall layer 119 was sealed by successive layers of rubble (121) & (122) and the modern pavement. On the south-west side was a 0.20 m deep layer of garden soil.

7.6 Trench 44 NW-SE (Fig. 7)

The trench was situated in East Road, south-west of Major's House. The earliest deposit was layer 112, a fairly clean sandy gravel. This was cut by a brick culvert (107) oriented north-east - south-west and set within a construction trench (109). A metre to the north layer 112 was also cut by an indistinct feature (116) which contained a disturbed layer of limestone cobbles or setts (114), overlain by a rubble spread (113) and a dump of silty gravel (117), very similar in

character to the backfill (108) of the culvert construction trench. To the north of the edge of cut 116 was a layer of mixed rubble, tile and mortar fragments (115). Sealing all these deposits was a compact mortar/concrete layer (110), and a modern layer of hardcore and tarmac (111)

8. Discussion

- 8.1 While the existence of a number of post-medieval wall foundations has been confirmed by the watching brief, the very restricted size of the trenches must mean that only tentative conclusions can be drawn about the general changes in the local topography generated by the construction of the Hospital and associated buildings. The results of the 1997 watching brief suggested that at least the western part of the Hospital site had been subjected to a considerable amount of levelling up prior to the Hospital construction. This appears to be the case in the eastern part of the site also.
- 8.2 The wall foundations (105 - Tr 9 & 118 - Tr 42) and the culvert (107 - Tr 44) identified in the eastern part of the site deserve little further comment. All appear to be associated with extant buildings. The history of the site has shown that the area to the west of West Road has been subject to considerable rebuilding since the Hospital's construction, and the structural remains could represent elements of this process.
- 8.3 In the first quarter of the 18th century Robert Walpole constructed a garden pavilion comprising a raised terrace adorned with urns, supported on low brick arches (see illustration in Dean, 1950 - facing page 129). The urn found in Trench 26, although apparently no longer in situ, could well have derived from this pavilion. The substantial wall found in Trench 25 is in the right location to be associated with the pavilion; its alignment is different to the common alignment of the extant buildings on the site, but, as the pavilion's detailed design is not known, it could be a part of that structure.
- 8.4 The wall found in Trench 17/18 could be related to the greenhouse that was built alongside the pavilion in the 18th century (Dean 1950, 205, and see Fig 8). However, it is significant that there are similarities to the proposed pre-Hospital wall located 3.0 m to the east in the 1997 watching brief. The depth at which both walls were located is similar, as are the size and colour of the bricks as observed, (within a reasonable margin - in the region of 180-200mm x 55-60mm x 100-105mm). Dean himself mentions 'massive brickwork' foundations, presumably of the college, found under West Road in the 19th century (*ibid.* 29). The absence of readily dateable finds does not help to resolve the uncertainty. Without a more extensive excavation of the deposits in this region a definitive interpretation as to whether these foundations are part of the 17th-century college or 18th-century greenhouse - or indeed both - must be withheld.

Alan Hardy
OAU
June 1999

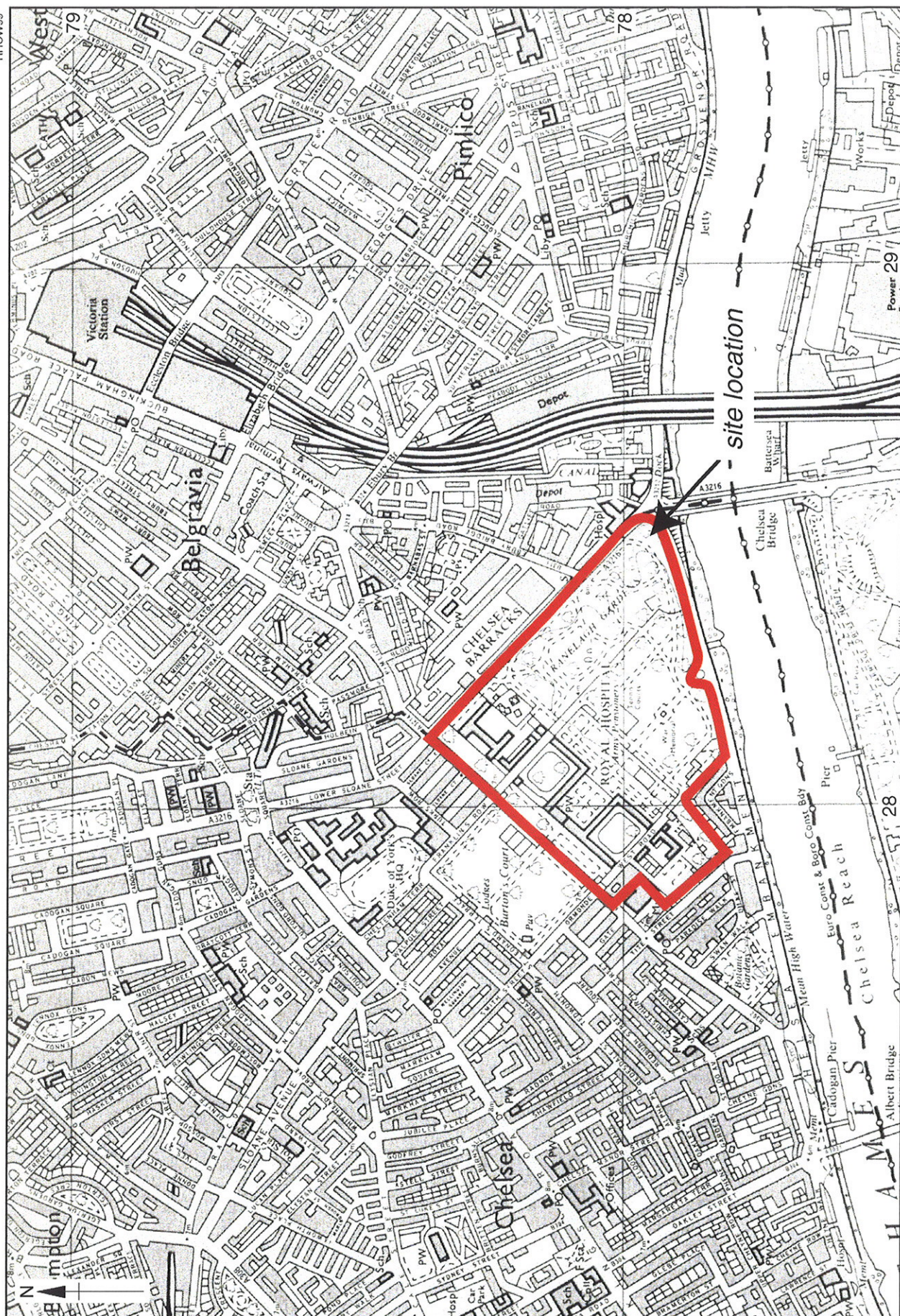
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- OAU (1999) *Installation of a Communication Duct System. Archaeological Desk-Top Assessment*
- Wilkinson, D (Ed) (1992) *Oxford Archaeological Unit Field Manual*

Appendix 1

Table of Contexts

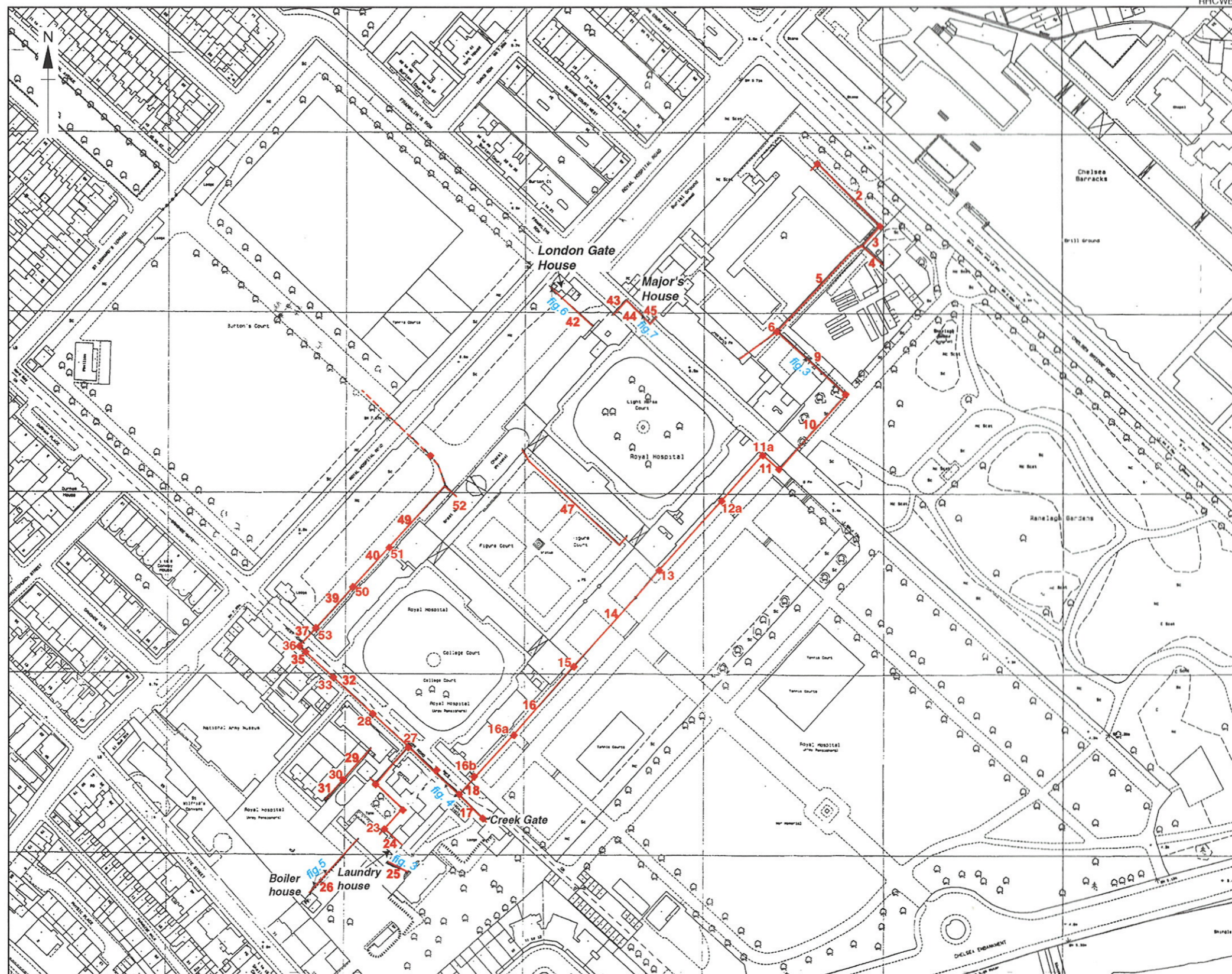
TRENCH	CONTEXT	TYPE	WIDTH	DEPTH	FINDS	COMMENT
9	101	Layer	-	0.18 - 0.32	-	Topsoil
	102	Layer	-	>0.45	-	Modern brick rubble make up
	103	Layer	-	>0.45	-	levelling
	104	Layer	-	>0.45	Glass/Tile	Garden soil
	105	Wall	0.56	>0.25	CBM	NE-SW brick garden wall
	106	Layer	-	<0.40	-	Make up
44	107	Culvert	0.40	>0.15	-	NE-SW Brick
	108	Fill	-	>0.20	-	Fill of construction trench 109
	109	Trench	0.50	>0.20	-	Construction trench for 107
	110	Layer	-	>0.16	-	Mortar/concrete surface
	111	Layer	-	>0.10	-	Modern tarmac
	112	Layer	-	>0.22	-	Subsoil
	113	Layer	>1.50 N-S	-	-	Rubble
	114	Feature	>0.45	0.05	-	limestone setts
	115	Layer	>1.0	-	-	Rubble dump
	116	Cut	-	-	-	Linear, related to culvert?
	117	Fill	-	>0.20	-	Fill of 116
42	118	Wall	0.24	>0.30	-	Brick garden wall
	119	Fill	0.15	>0.10	-	Fill of construction trench 120
	120	Trench	0.27	>0.10	-	Construction trench for 118
	121	Layer	-	0.20	-	Make up
	122	Layer	-	0.20	-	Rubble dump
	123	Layer	-	-	-	Subsoil?
	124	Layer	-	0.20	-	Garden soil
26	125	Urn	>0.15	>0.40	-	Decorative planter?
	126	Layer	-	0.30	-	Garden soil
	127	Layer	-	<0.20	-	Lower garden soil
	128	Fill	-	<0.20	-	Fill of cut 129 (inc concrete)
	129	Cut	-	<0.20	-	Construction cut for 128
	130	Layer	-	0.10	-	Levelling
	131	Layer	-	0.12	-	Fill?
	132	Layer	-	>0.15	Pot	Fill?
	133	Layer	-	-	-	Natural gravel
17 - 18	134	Wall	>4.80 NW-SE	>0.30	-	Brick
	135	Layer	1.20	>0.14	-	Levelling
	136	Layer	-	>0.40	-	Make up
	137	Layer	-	-	-	Dump
	138	Feature	-	-	-	Possible wall/buttress?
25	139	Wall	<0.70	>0.30	-	NE-SW Brick
	140	Layer	-	-	-	Levelling
	141	Layer	-	<0.30	-	Garden soil
	142	Layer	-	0.10	-	Modern levelling
	143	Not used	-	-	-	-
	144	Layer	-	<0.30	-	Rubble and sand dump



scale 1 : 10 000

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Figure 1 : site location

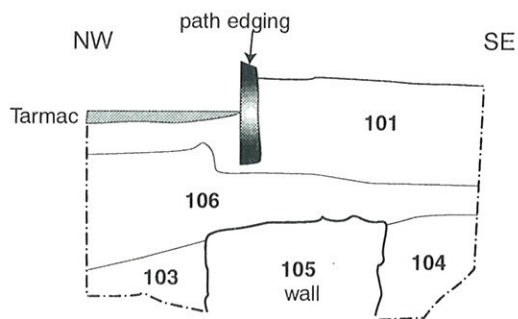


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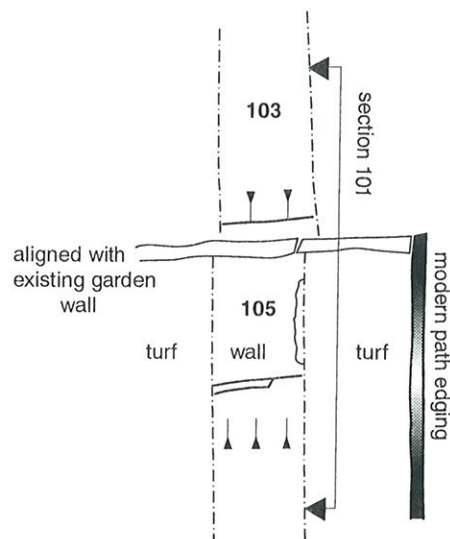
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Figure 2 : site plan, showing trenches and trench numbers in red

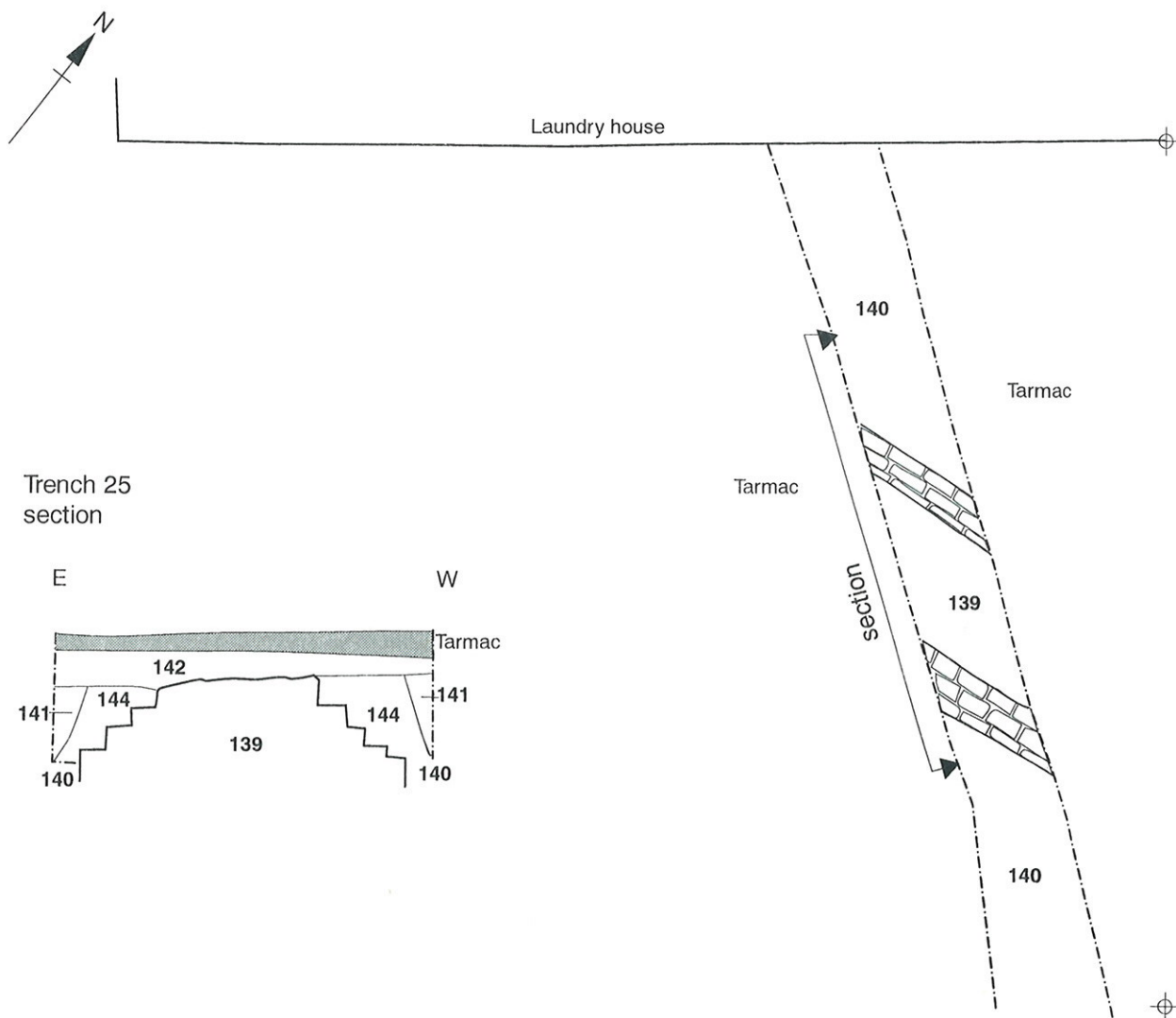
Trench 9
section



Trench 9
plan



Trench 25
plan



Trench 25
section

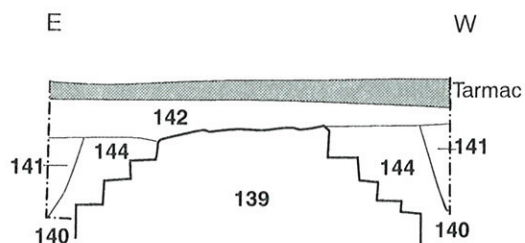


Figure 3 : plans and sections of trenches 9 and 25

trench 17/18
plan

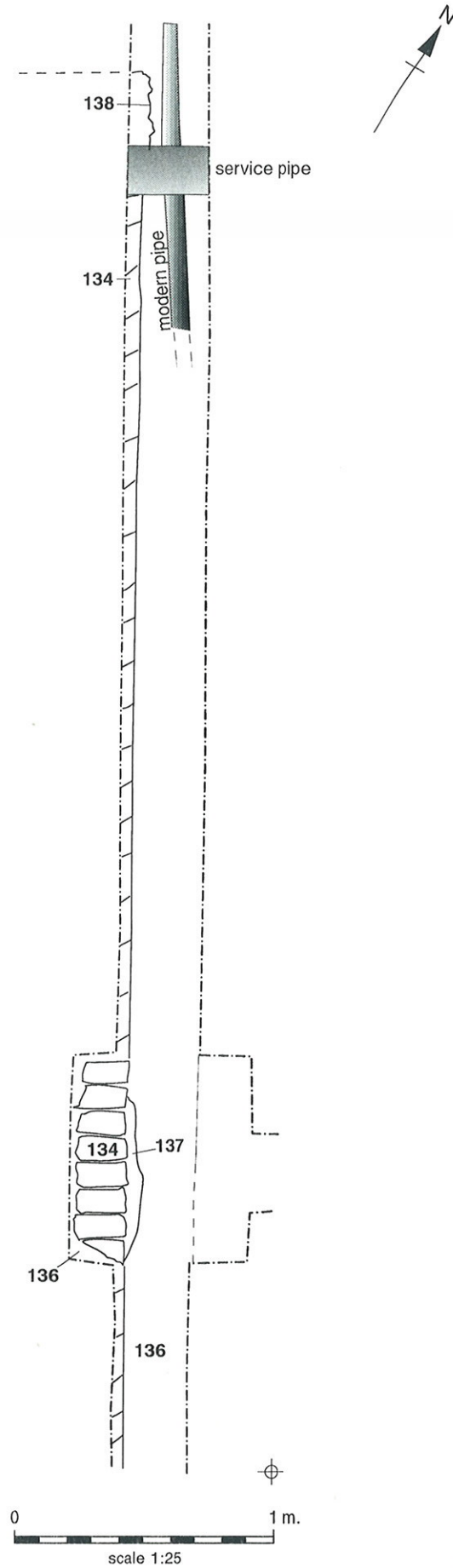
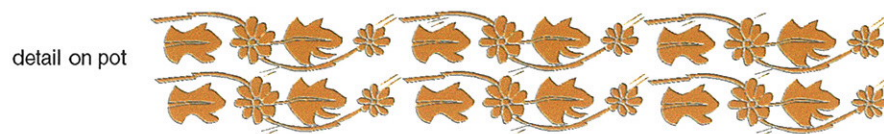


Figure 4 : plan of trench 17/18

trench 26
pot 125 in situ



trench 26
plan

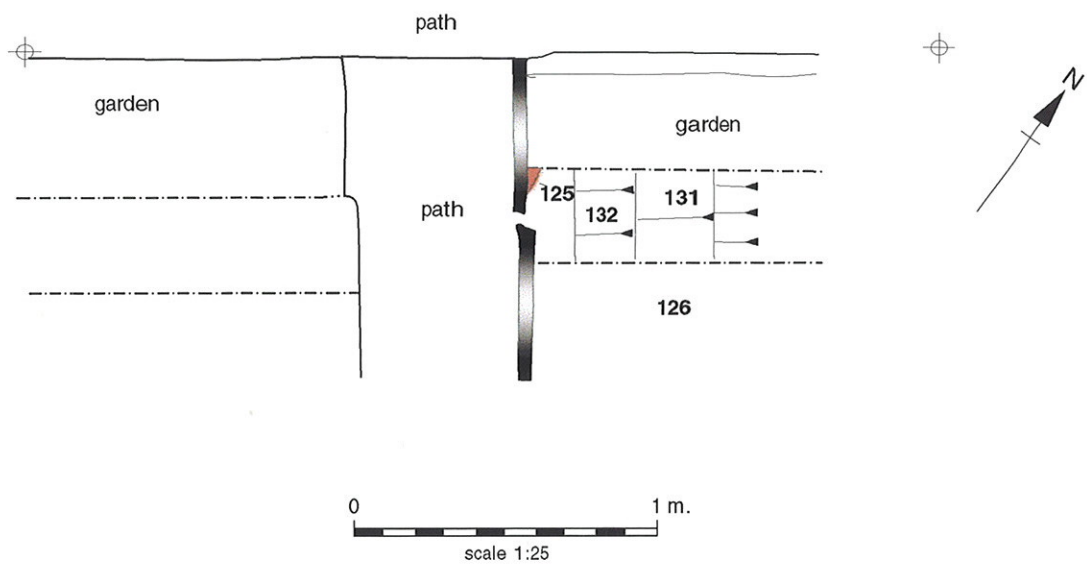


Figure 5 : trench 26, photograph and plan

trench 42
plan

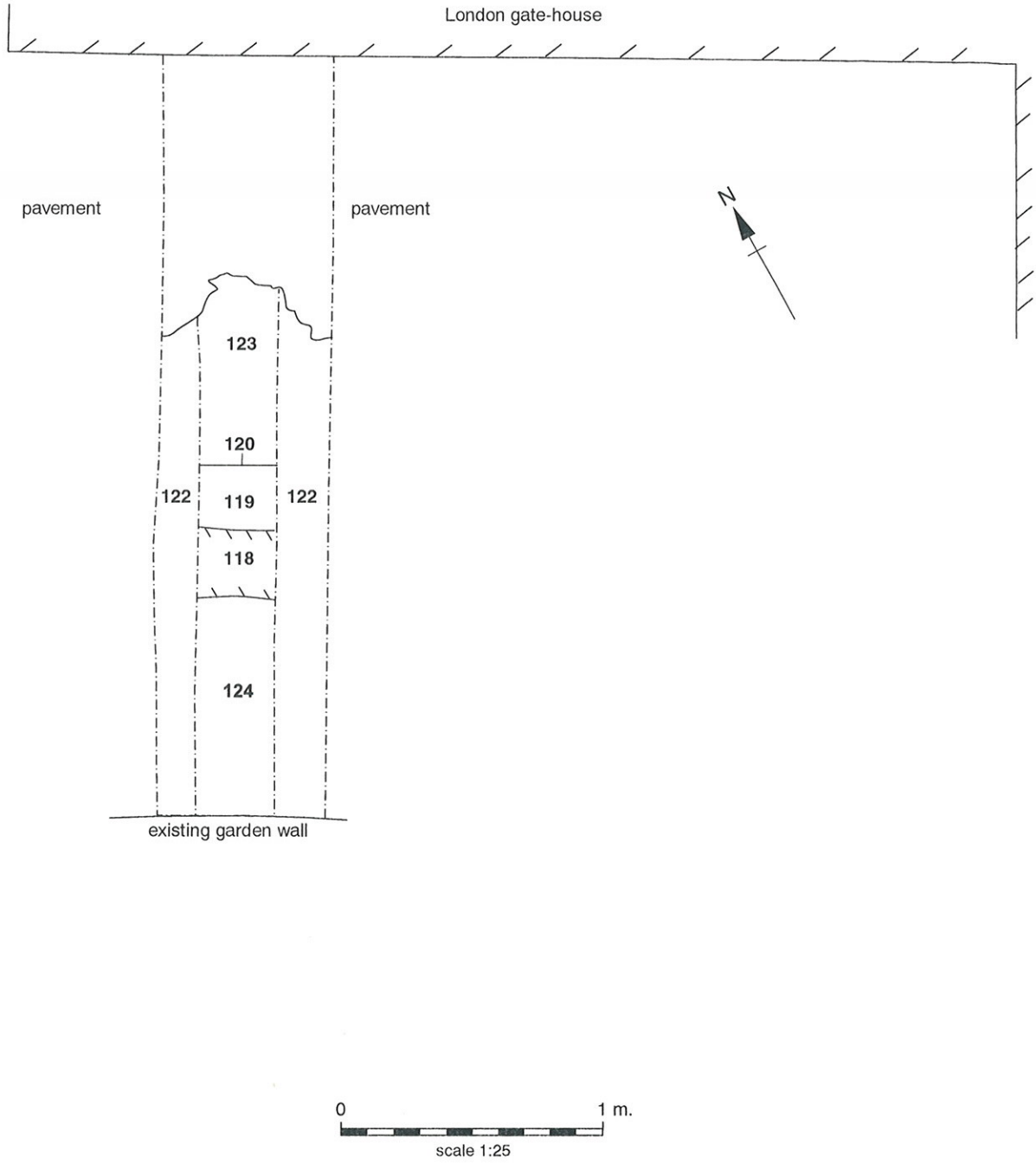


Figure 6 : plan of trench 42

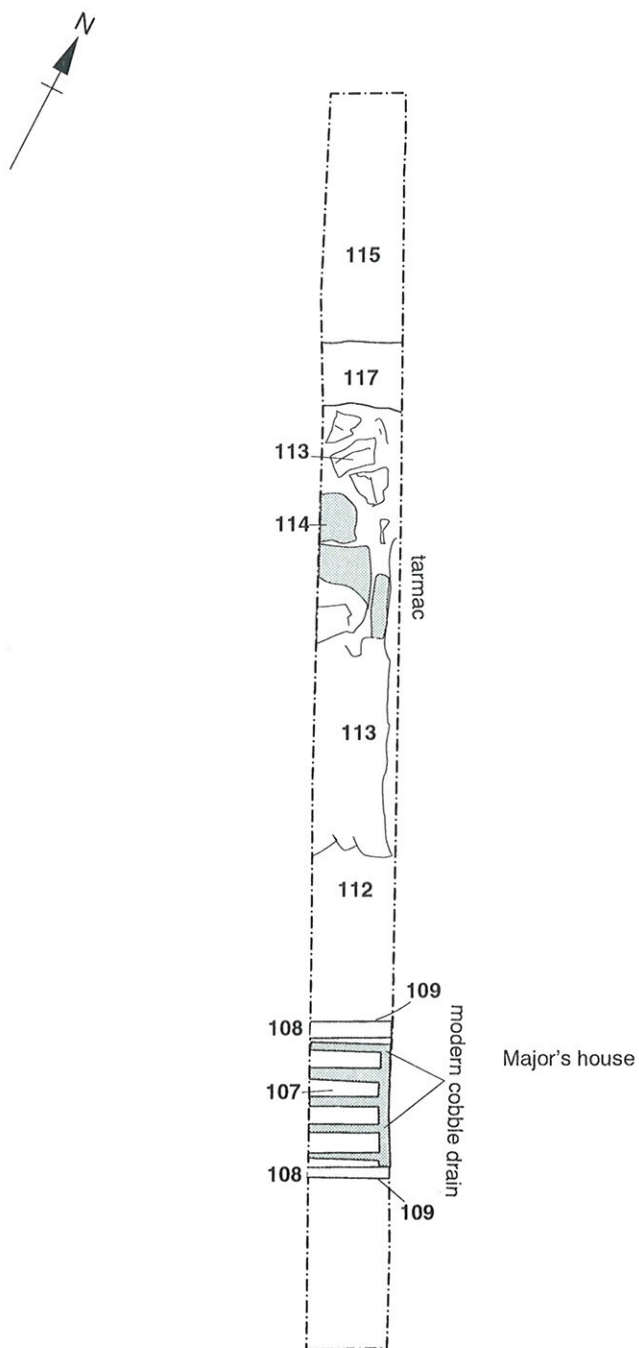


Figure 7 : trench 44

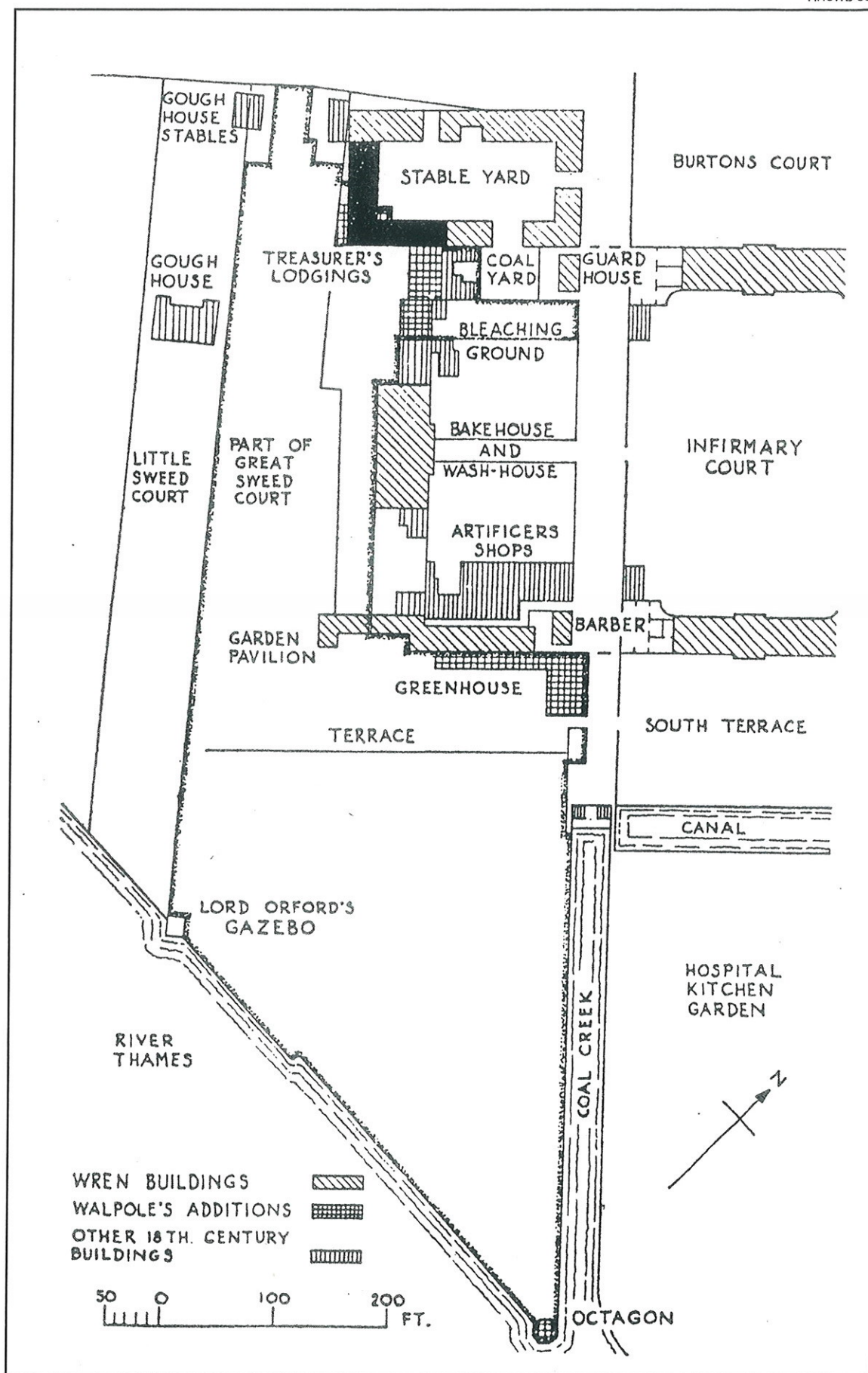
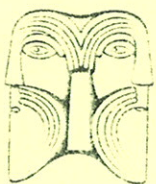


Figure 8 : 18th century layout of Western extent of Hospital as mapped by Dean(1950).



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