



# Rhodes Building, Oriental College, Oxford

## Archaeological Watching Brief Report



December 2016

**Client: Marcus Beale Architects Ltd**

Issue No: 1

OA Job No: 5692

NGR: SP 5162 0623





Client Name: Marcus Beale Architects Ltd  
Client Ref No:  
Document Title: Rhodes Building, Oriel College, Oxford  
Document Type: Archaeological Watching Brief Report  
Issue/Version Number: 1  
Grid Reference: SP 5162 0623  
Planning Reference: 09/02820/FUL  
Invoice Code: OXOCRBWB  
OA Job Number: 5692  
Site Code: OXOCRB13  
Receiving Museum: Oxfordshire County Museum Service  
Museum Accession No.: OCMS 2014.TBC

Issue	Prepared by	Checked by	Edited by	Approved for issue by
1	Robin Bashford Site Supervisor	Ben Ford Senior Project Manager	Leo Webley, Head of Post-excavation	David Score

Document File Location: X:\o\Oxford, Oriel College\_Rhodes Building\Report  
Graphics File Location: \\Samba-1\invoice codes i thru q\O\_codes  
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Janus House

Osney Mead

Oxford OX2 0ES

t: +44 (0) 1865 263800

e: [info@oxfordarch.co.uk](mailto:info@oxfordarch.co.uk)

f: +44 (0) 1865 793496

w: [oxfordarchaeology.com](http://oxfordarchaeology.com)

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## **Rhodes Building, Oriel College, Oxford**

### *Archaeological Watching Brief Report*

*Written by Robin Bashford*

*with contributions from John Cotter and illustrated by Markus Dylewski*

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## Summary

*Between March 2014 and January 2015, Oxford Archaeology (OA) undertook a watching brief during alterations to The Rhodes Building, Oriel College, Oxford. The watching brief was focussed on the excavation of a new lift pit, a trench for the installation of a crane base and the excavation of new service trenching within The Rhodes Building and St Mary's Quad.*

*The site lies on the High Street frontage of Oriel College, between Oriel Street and Magpie Lane and, prior to the construction of the Rhodes Building in 1909-1911, was occupied by a row of re-fronted tenements, with the Principal's Lodgings of 1833 projecting southward into what is now St Mary's Quad.*

*Two undated pits were revealed in the base of the lift pit trench, but the majority of the deposits and structures encountered during the works related to the early 20th century backfilling of cellars belonging to the buildings demolished in advance of the re-development of the High Street frontage. In particular, a light well in the south wall of a cellar in the crane base trench is clearly identifiable in a photograph of the Principal's Lodgings by Henry Taunt from the late 19th or early 20th century.*

*The remaining deposits encountered related to landscaping within St Mary's Quad and are also likely to be contemporary with the construction of the Rhodes Building.*

## 1 INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Scope of work

- 1.1.1 Oxford Archaeology (OA), was commissioned by Marcus Beale Architects Ltd (MBA Ltd) on behalf of Oriel College to undertake an archaeological watching brief during the installation of a new lift pit, services and other engineering impacts for the development of additional accommodation in the Rhodes Building, which forms the north range of St Mary's Quadrangle at Oriel College's central campus on High Street, Oxford.
- 1.1.2 The watching brief was undertaken as a condition of planning permission (Application No. 09/02820/FUL), and specifically in response to a brief set by David Radford, Oxford city archaeologist, Oxford City Council (OCC), which established the scope of work required. OA produced a written scheme of investigation (WSI) which outlined how OA would implement the requirements of the brief.
- 1.1.3 All work was undertaken in accordance with the National Planning Policy Framework (2010).

### 1.2 Location, geology and topography

- 1.2.1 The college lies within the historic core of Oxford on the south side of High Street. The Rhodes Building was constructed in the early 20th century and forms the north range of St Mary's Quadrangle. The building fronts onto the High Street opposite St Mary's Church between Oriel Street (to the west) and Magpie Lane (to the east).
- 1.2.2 Topographically the site lies towards the southern end of a gravel promontory between the Thames to the west and the Cherwell to the east, and the underlying geology is gravel of the second (Summertown-Radley) gravel terrace (BGS Sheet 236). The site currently occupies relatively level ground at approximately 62 m OD.

## 1.3 Archaeological and historical background

### ***Prehistoric***

- 1.3.1 The site is situated on the Summertown-Radley gravel terrace of the Thames. These deposits have yielded Palaeolithic artefacts in the past. To the north, the Oxford Wolvercote gravel deposits have yielded numerous Acheulian handaxes that pre date the Summertown-Radley gravels, although archaeological evidence for later prehistoric activity in the area is limited.

### ***Romano-British***

- 1.3.2 Roman coins have been found adjacent to the site whilst other finds have been recorded at Brasenose College.

### ***Saxon***

- 1.3.3 The town of Oxford is believed to have its origins in the early 8th century about the time that the early religious house of St Frideswide was founded on the site of what subsequently became Christ Church. The city was developed as a fortified *burh* in the reign of King Alfred or his son Edward the Elder. By the 10th century a network of streets had been established and a defensive circuit constructed. Some evidence for a turf rampart has been found and wherever the early medieval rampart has been observed it has been on or close to the line of the later medieval wall.
- 1.3.4 It has been argued that the early medieval defences originally only enclosed an area from Oriel Street westwards and that the eastern part of the town was enclosed later. An excavation in Corpus Christi quadrangle (Hassall 1973) revealed a deep north-east/south-west aligned feature, which was interpreted as a ditch possibly forming part of the defensive circuit. However, the trench in which this possible feature was seen was not accessed as it was in excess of 4m deep, and the feature was rapidly recorded prior to backfilling. Additionally, the natural gravel of the second terrace was not encountered - which was interpreted at the time as evidence for the location of the nearby St Frideswide's minster (subsequently Christ Church Cathedral) being on a promontory of the gravel. The potential ditch was seen to "*cut through loam*" - the origin of which is unclear - and the alignment seems incongruous with the interpretation of the feature as the eastern defensive ditch of the late-Saxon burh. Consequently, the veracity of the interpretation of this undated feature as a late-Saxon defensive ditch is uncertain.
- 1.3.5 Within the immediate environs of the site several Saxon features and findspots are recorded. Sites include the Church of St Mary which is believed to have later Saxon origins, though the fabric in the present structure dates to the 13th century AD, St Mary's Entry of Brasenose College and a number of sites along the High Street.

### ***Medieval***

- 1.3.6 Oriel College was founded in 1324 by Adam de Brome, Rector of St Mary's Church, and was first located in the building now known as Tackley's Inn. In 1326 the college was re-founded and endowed by Edward II. St Mary's Hall was appropriated by Oriel College in 1326, whilst Bedel Hall, to the south of St Mary's Hall, became part of Oriel in 1455 when it merged with St Mary's. By the 16th century St. Mary's Hall had developed a separate identity as St Mary's Society and did not return to Oriel College until 1902. St Mary's Hall was not situated immediately facing the High Street, and a

row of shops with medieval origins existed between Oriel Street and Magpie Lane until they were demolished to make way for the Rhodes Building in 1908.

- 1.3.7 Within the immediate environs of the site numerous medieval features and find-spots have been identified, including a number of 11th to 13th century pits within the immediate environs of Oriel.

### ***Post-medieval and modern***

- 1.3.8 Ralph Agas' 1578 map of Oxford shows a row of two-storey buildings facing the High Street, presumably a mix of shop fronts and tenements. St Mary's Hall and presumably Bedel Hall are clearly depicted off Oriel Street. A row of tenement buildings situated on the west side of Magpie Lane is also well defined. Agas' map depicts an area within St Mary's Quad as open ground partially enclosed by the buildings listed above.
- 1.3.9 Loggan's map of 1675 illustrates tenements and shops fronting the High Street, with further tenements on the west side of Magpie Lane. Loggan's map also clearly depicts the St Mary's Hall Buttery, Hall and Chapel (built 1639-40), and the south-west angle of the Quad appears to have been constructed by the time Loggan's map was completed.
- 1.3.10 Williams' map of 1743 was produced in the same year that the east range of St Mary's Quad was rebuilt. The 1743 rebuild retained a medieval wall situated on the west side of Magpie Lane. Williams' map depicts St Mary's Quad essentially in the same form it was to remain until the construction of the Rhodes Building in 1908-1911. The major addition to the northern portion of the Quad was the addition of the Principal's Lodgings attached to the north-east of St Mary's Hall in 1833.
- 1.3.11 Two enclosed areas of apparently undeveloped land appear to survive in the north-east corner of the Quad, north of the St Mary's Hall buildings within the area occupied by shops fronting the High Street.
- 1.3.12 Ordnance Survey mapping produced in 1876 suggests an amalgamation of two of the High Street fronting shop buildings in the north-west corner of the Quad and the central High Street fronting shop would appear to be in the use of St Mary's Hall as access onto the High Street.
- 1.3.13 The construction of the Rhodes Building, completed in 1911, included the demolition of all the medieval High Street fronting shops and the buildings on the west side of Magpie Lane, north of the East Range. The demolition also included the Principal's Lodgings to the north-east of St Mary's Hall; this was done to make way for the southern extent of the Rhodes Building itself, and to clear ground for the northern portion of the newly laid central grounds of St Mary's Quad.

### ***Previous Investigations***

- 1.3.14 An archaeological evaluation was undertaken at the site by Wessex Archaeology (2011). Two test pits were excavated within the basement of the east wing of the Rhodes Building and one against the external, south wall of the east wing. The evaluation recorded masonry and brickwork structural remains of medieval/early post-medieval and 18th-20th century date, associated with possible medieval cellars and later recorded structures including the 'Doll's House' (built 1743) and the Rhodes Building itself. No artefactual, structural or stratigraphic evidence of pre-medieval date was recorded (WessexArchaeology 2011).
- 1.3.15 In the vicinity of the proposed lift pit 19th century brick cellar walls were recorded, with a light-well facing Magpie Lane. A well-preserved flagstone floor was partially exposed,



lying directly on the natural gravel geology (at 59.15m AOD). Artefactual evidence from the cellar infilling, undertaken prior to the Rhodes Building construction, included 11th–13th and 16th–20th century pottery and many large masonry rubble blocks, suggesting the demolition of a medieval (11th–15th century) or early post-medieval (16th–17th century) cellared structure at this location, probably associated with shops fronting the High Street to the north (Wessex Archaeology 2011).

- 1.3.16 In the south part of the east wing the test pitting identified a substantial masonry wall lying on the west side of Magpie Lane, along with a poorly built masonry wall perpendicular to it, both on a slightly different alignment to 19th century brick walls built over them, indicating possible medieval structural remains.

## 2 PROJECT AIMS AND METHODOLOGY

### 2.1 Aims

- 2.1.1 The aims of the watching brief were to:

- establish the presence/absence of archaeological remains within the development area,
- determine and confirm the character of any remains present,
- determine or estimate the date range of any remains from artefacts or otherwise,
- characterise any underlying archaeological strata down to undisturbed geology,
- determine the palaeo-environmental potential of archaeological deposits

### 2.2 Methodology

- 2.2.1 A summary of OA's general approach to excavation and recording can be found in Appendix A of the WSI. Standard methodologies for geomatics and survey, environmental evidence, artefactual evidence and burials can also be found in the appendices to that document (Appendices B, C, D and E respectively).

- 2.2.2 The scheme entailed a limited amount of groundworks and the watching brief specifically monitored the following excavations, the location of which are shown on Figure 2:

- the excavation of a construction trench for the new lift shaft in the east wing of the Rhodes Building.
- previous plans to extend the basement levels throughout the east wing were subsequently removed from the scheme, although the watching brief also monitored the excavation of a trench for the installation of a crane base in St Mary's Quad.
- trenches excavated prior to the installation of new services (mainly foul and storm water, but also electrical) with associated inspection chambers/man holes, especially but not exclusively within St Mary's Quad.

## 3 RESULTS

### 3.1 Description of deposits

#### *Lift pit trench (Figs 3 and 4)*

- 3.1.1 The trench for the new lift pit measured approximately 3m<sup>2</sup> and was excavated to 2.1m below existing ground level. Natural gravel was encountered the base of the trench and

had been cut by two sub-circular pits (20 and 22), both of which were filled by a mid-dark reddish-brown clay silt (21 and 23 respectively). The fills were overlain by a c 0.07m thick layer of compacted mortar (24) which was in turn overlain by a series of very mixed deposits (3) which are likely to constitute the backfill of a cellar. It is possible that deposit 24 represented the cellar floor, or a bedding deposit for a subsequently removed floor surface.

- 3.1.2 The pit fills and possible cellar floor had been truncated by a north-south aligned cut (25) for a stone wall foundation, the top of which was at 1.66m below ground level. The stone footing was directly overlain by a concrete foundation for a one-brick-thick wall which ran the length of the trench and was broken out to the formation level for the new lift shaft. The concrete returned to the west approximately 1.9m to the south of the northern edge of the trench. To the west of the north-south aligned brick wall were a series of deposits (18) very similar in composition to deposit 3 to the east, and it is likely that these formed part of the same phase of deposition.
- 3.1.3 The relationship between the construction cut and the backfill deposit(s) was uncertain, but it seems likely that the deposits abutted the brick wall and therefore post-dated it. No construction cut was apparent on the western side of the stone, concrete and brick structure, and deposit 18 appeared to continue to the base of the trench.
- 3.1.4 The north-south section of the concrete footing ran parallel to, and approximately 0.4m to the east of the stepped brick foundation for a dividing wall within the east wing of the Rhodes Building. The stepped brick footing also overlay a stone foundation, and it was considered that the brick walls may have re-used the foundations of the buildings which previously occupied the site. However, it seems more likely that both foundations were constructed within cut 25 and this is discussed in further detail in Section 4.

#### ***Crane base trench (Plates 1-3)***

- 3.1.5 The trench for the crane base was originally intended to measure 4m<sup>2</sup>, but following the removal of approximately 0.3m of turf and topsoil along the eastern limit of the trench, the top of a stone wall (27) was revealed with a loose, rubble- and mortar-rich 20th century fill (33) to the west of it. Consequently the trench was moved approximately 0.5m to the west to avoid the necessity for dismantling the structure, with the expectation that the wall marked the eastern limit of a cellar backfilled prior to the construction of the Rhodes Building in the early 20th century. Continued excavation of the 20th century fill revealed the southern (28) and western (29) walls of the cellar, with the northern extent having been truncated by a roughly ENE-WSW aligned foul water ceramic pipe which is likely to post-date the construction of the Rhodes Building. Where this pipe cut through the east wall of the cellar (27), a straight joint at the northern extent of the wall suggested that the pipe was laid through a doorway in the wall, and the suggestion of an opposing face c 2.5m below ground level in the north-east corner of the trench appeared to confirm this supposition (ground level at this point being the flagstone path around the northern edge of the Quad).
- 3.1.6 The trench was excavated to approximately 2.5m below the existing level of the turf in St Mary's Quad, which revealed the floor of the cellar. In the south-east corner, this comprised large limestone cobbles (30) abutting the southern and eastern walls of the cellar, with a straight rectilinear joint marking their northern and eastern extent. To the north and east of this joint, the floor comprised smaller rounded cobbles (31), and the eastern extent of the smaller cobbles was marked by a north-south aligned joint, to the west of which the floor was constructed from brick which abutted the western wall (32) of the cellar. The south-west corner of the floor had been truncated by an earlier

ceramic foul water pipe which was aligned north-south and is likely to have been contemporary with the construction of the Rhodes Building. The trench for the pipe had also undermined the western end of the south wall of the cellar (28).

- 3.1.7 In addition to the possible doorway at the northern end of the western wall (27), there was some evidence for an internal dividing wall in the same elevation (immediately behind the base of the ladder on Plate 2), although this did not appear to correspond with the interface between floor surfaces 30 and 31. An opening in the southern wall (28) almost certainly represented a light well giving in to the cellar from the south.
- 3.1.8 The fills of the cellar were hand excavated by the groundwork contractor and comprised a series of very mixed deposits with 20th century material throughout.

### ***Service trenches and new manholes***

#### ***Internal***

- 3.1.9 A trench for a foul water connection to the existing manhole in Magpie Lane was excavated within the eastern wing of the Rhodes Building (Fig. 2). This was 0.5-0.6m wide and was excavated almost exclusively through what were likely to be cellar backfill deposits to an approximate depth of 1.8m below existing ground level. The exception to this was an east-west aligned stone wall footing in the northern arm of the trench which is likely to represent a dividing wall between cellars of the pre-Rhodes Building structures demolished in the early 20th century.

#### ***External***

- 3.1.10 A number of trenches were excavated across St Mary's Quad; the locations of those monitored is shown on Figure 2. These trenches were up to 1.1m wide and a maximum of 1.5m deep, and were predominantly excavated through mixed deposits with construction debris throughout. It is likely that this material originated from landscaping contemporary with the construction of the Rhodes Building in the early 20th century, and it had been truncated by numerous later service trenches and manholes associated with the installation of a later drainage system.
- 3.1.11 In the base of an east-west aligned trench, immediately to the south-west of the crane base, was a section of north-south aligned limestone wall footing which returned to the east and ran for approximately 2.5m before probably returning again to the north. The easternmost of the north-south aligned sections of wall corresponded approximately with the alignment of the western wall (29) of the crane base cellar.
- 3.1.12 A trench for a new garden bed was excavated at the southern end of St Mary's Quad (not illustrated). The trench was excavated to a maximum depth of 0.95m below existing ground level through a mixed deposit which was almost certainly the equivalent of the landscaping deposits encountered within the service trenching.

## **4 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

### ***Gravel***

- 4.1.1 Natural gravel was encountered at c 58.17m OD, although this had been truncated by two pits (see below) and therefore probably does not represent the top of the second terrace, although it is broadly consistent with observations of the top of the gravel terrace at Oriel College kitchen (c 58.45m OD) to the south (OA 2015).

***Possible early medieval features***

- 4.1.2 The function and date of the pits in the base of the lift pit trench were indeterminate. No dating evidence was recovered from the fills of the two pits, although the composition appeared to be primarily re-deposited brickearth, which elsewhere in the city has characterised the fills of relatively early features.

***Post-medieval structures***

- 4.1.3 It is possible that the mortar layer overlying the pit fills in the lift pit trench represented the floor of a cellar related to the buildings demolished immediately prior to the construction of the Rhodes Building. This may correspond to the flagstone floor surface encountered within Trench 1 of the evaluation undertaken by Wessex Archaeology in 2011 (Wessex Archaeology 2011), and possibly represented a bedding deposit for flagstones which were subsequently removed prior to the deposition of the backfill deposit (103) in the early 20th century.
- 4.1.4 The backfill deposits themselves almost certainly represent the infilling of a cellar within one of the structures demolished in advance of the construction of the Rhodes Building. Similarly, the east-west aligned wall in the northern arm of the trench for the foul water connection to the south of the lift pit, and the backfill deposits encountered within the rest of the trench, are likely to relate to one of these structures. The possible location of these structures in relation to the buildings shown on the OS first edition map of 1876 is shown on Figure 5.
- 4.1.5 The location of the cellar within the crane base trench is very likely to be within the Principal's Lodgings, and is also indicated on Figure 5. The light well in the south wall of the cellar is clearly identifiable in a photograph of the Principal's Lodgings by Henry Taunt from the late 19th or early 20th century (Plate 4), and the interface between the cobbled and brick surfaces in the base of the cellar roughly corresponds with an internal division shown on the OS mapping (Fig. 5).
- 4.1.6 The walls encountered within the service trenching to the south-west of the crane base trench do not appear to correspond with any of the structures shown on the later mapping and may relate to an earlier structure, despite the fact that they appeared to be abutted by 20th century landscaping deposits (see below).

***20th century landscaping***

- 4.1.7 The majority of the mixed deposits encountered within the trenching in the St Mary's Quad are likely to represent landscaping associated with the construction of the Rhodes Building.



## APPENDIX A. ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXT INVENTORY

Lift pit trench						
Context no	Type	Width (m)	Depth (m)	Comment	Finds	Date
3	Fill			Cellar backfill		
18	Fill			Cellar backfill		
20	Cut			Pit cut		
21	Fill			Pit fill		
22	Cut			Pit cut		
23	Fill			Pit fill		
24	Deposit			Bedding deposit for cellar floor?		
25	Cut			Early 20thC construction cut		
26	Fill			Fill of early 20thC construction cut		
Crane base trench						
Context no	Type	Width (m)	Depth (m)	Comment	Finds	Date
27	Structure			East wall of cellar		
28	Structure			South wall of cellar		
29	Structure			West wall of cellar		
30	Surface			Large cobbles forming cellar floor		
31	Surface			Small cobbles forming cellar floor		
32	Surface			Brick cellar floor		
33	Fill			20thC Backfill of cellar		



## APPENDIX B. BIBLIOGRAPHY AND REFERENCES

Impey, E, 2011, The Rhodes Building at Oriel, 1904-11: Dynamite or Designate?, *Oxoniensia* **76**, 95-104

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Wessex Archaeology, 2010, 'Alterations and Additions to the Rhodes Building, Oriel College, Oxford: Archaeological Desk-Based Assessment. Unpublished client report ref: 73970.02

Wessex Archaeology, 2011, Alterations and Additions to the Rhodes Building, Oriel College, Oxford. Archaeological Evaluation Report. Unpublished client report ref: 73971.02

## APPENDIX C. FINDS REPORTS

### C.1 Metal by Ian R Scott

C.1.1 There are two copper alloy finds and a small circular button or stud of iron with a 'celluloid' (?) cover, all from context 18.

#### Context 18

(1) Tapering strip of copper alloy, somewhat bent and twisted, with at least one pin or nail hole and a small cut-out at the wider end suggesting this might be a narrow buckle strap. Not closely datable. L:c 70mm; W:10mm

(2) Tiny Cu alloy sheet fragment with a pair of tiny pin holes. Function unclear. L:10mm; W:6.5mm.

(3) Small button or stud of iron with 'celluloid' covering. D: 10mm.

C.1.2 None of the finds is closely datable, but the 'celluloid' covered stud most date later than 1860s or 1870s.

### C.2 Glass by Ian R Scott

C.2.1 There are three pieces of wine bottle glass from context 18. Although the base sherd (1) does not refit with the two small body sherds (2 & 3), it is possible that the sherds are from the same bottle.

#### Context 18

(1) Base of a cylindrical wine bottle with conical push-up. Probably moulded in a three-part Rickett's type mould. Dark olive green glass. Ht extant : 81mm; D: 79mm.

(2 & 3) Two small refitting body sherds probably from a moulded wine bottle in dark olive green glass. Not measured.

C.2.2 The base sherd dates to the late 1820s or later.

### C.3 Pottery Identified by John Cotter, compiled by Geraldine Crann

Context	Description	Date
3	2 sherds transfer printed pearl ware (PEAR TR); 1 post medieval redware pot base (PMR); 1 Frechen jug body sherd (FREC); 1 Cotswold ware cooking pot base sherd (OXAC). 287g	1810-1840 17th century 16th-17th century 1050-1250
18	1 discoid lid sherd late Brill Boarstall ware (OXB); 7 sherds from a single relief moulded coloured stoneware teapot (RFMCS). 221g	16th-17th century 1820-1900

### C.4 CBM Identified by John Cotter compiled by Geraldine Crann

### C.5 Clay pipe Identified by John Cotter compiled by Geraldine Crann

Context	Description	Date
18	Stem with heel fragment. 6g	18th century 13th-14th century

## APPENDIX D. SUMMARY OF SITE DETAILS

Site name: Rhodes Building, Oriel College, Oxford

Site code: OXOCRB13

Grid reference: Centred at NGR SP 5162 0623

Type of watching brief: Intermittent

Date and duration of project: March 2014 - January 2015

Summary of results: Between March 2014 and January 2015, Oxford Archaeology (OA) undertook a watching brief during alterations to The Rhodes Building, Oriel College, Oxford. The watching brief was focussed on the excavation of a new lift pit, a trench for the installation of a crane base and the excavation of new service trenching within The Rhodes Building and St Mary's Quad.

The site lies on the High Street frontage of Oriel College, between Oriel Street and Magpie Lane and, prior to the construction of the Rhodes Building in 1909-1911, was occupied by a row of re-fronted tenements, with the Principal's Lodgings of 1833 projecting southward into what is now St Mary's Quad.

Two undated pits were revealed in the base of the lift pit trench, but the majority of the deposits and structures encountered during the works related to the early 20th century backfilling of cellars belonging to the buildings demolished in advance of the re-development of the High Street frontage. In particular, a light well in the south wall of a cellar in the crane base trench is clearly identifiable in a photograph of the Principal's Lodgings by Henry Taunt from the late 19th or early 20th century.

The remaining deposits encountered related to landscaping within St Mary's Quad and are also likely to be contemporary with the construction of the Rhodes Building.

Location of archive: The archive is currently held at OA, Janus House, Osney Mead, Oxford, OX2 0ES, and will be deposited with the Oxfordshire County Museum Service in due course, under the following accession number: OXCMS: 2014. TBC





Reproduced from the Ordnance Survey's 1:50,000 map of 1994 with the permission of the Controller of Her Majesty's Stationery Office © Crown Copyright. Licence No. 854166

Figure 1: Site location

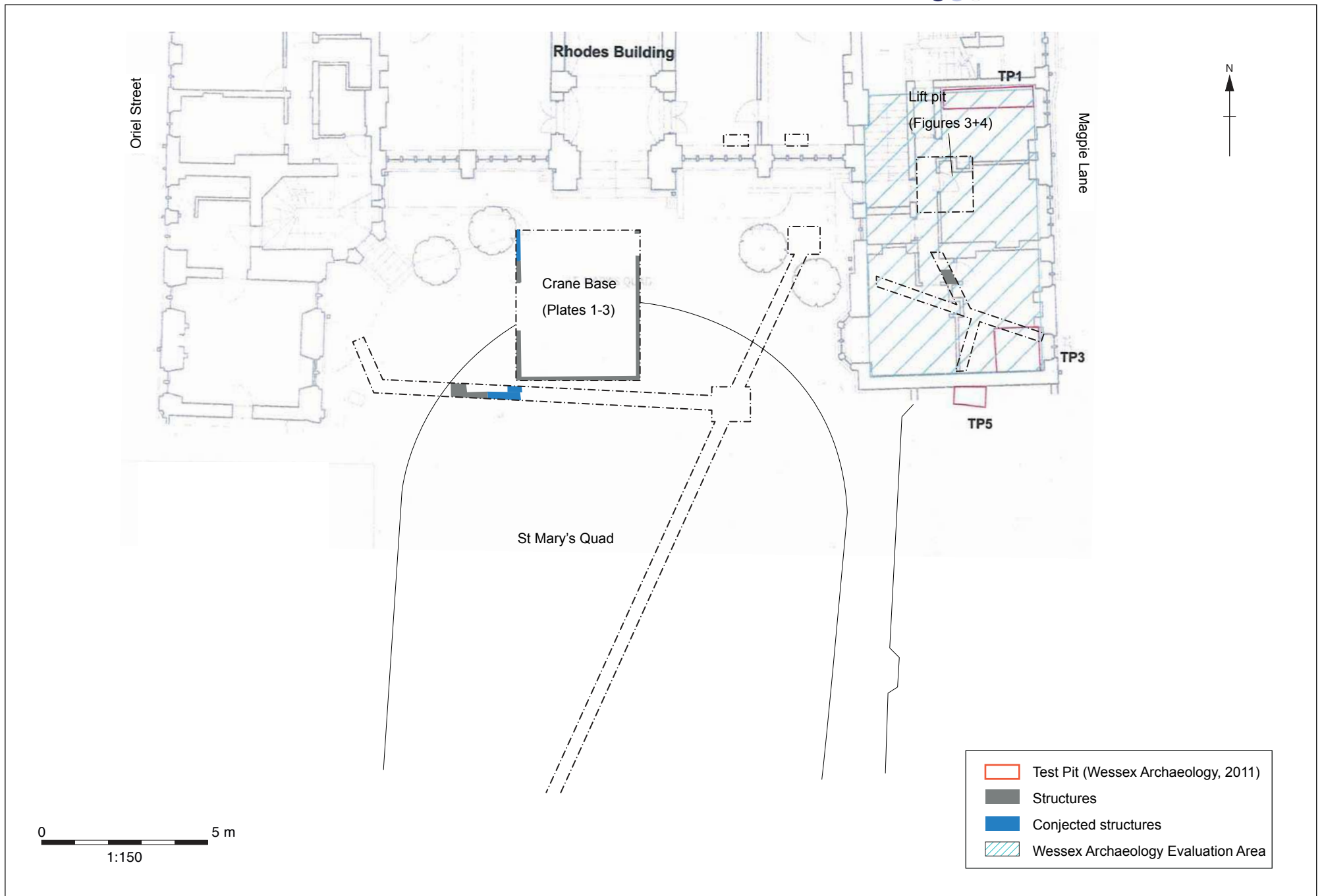


Figure 2: Site plan showing monitored groundworks



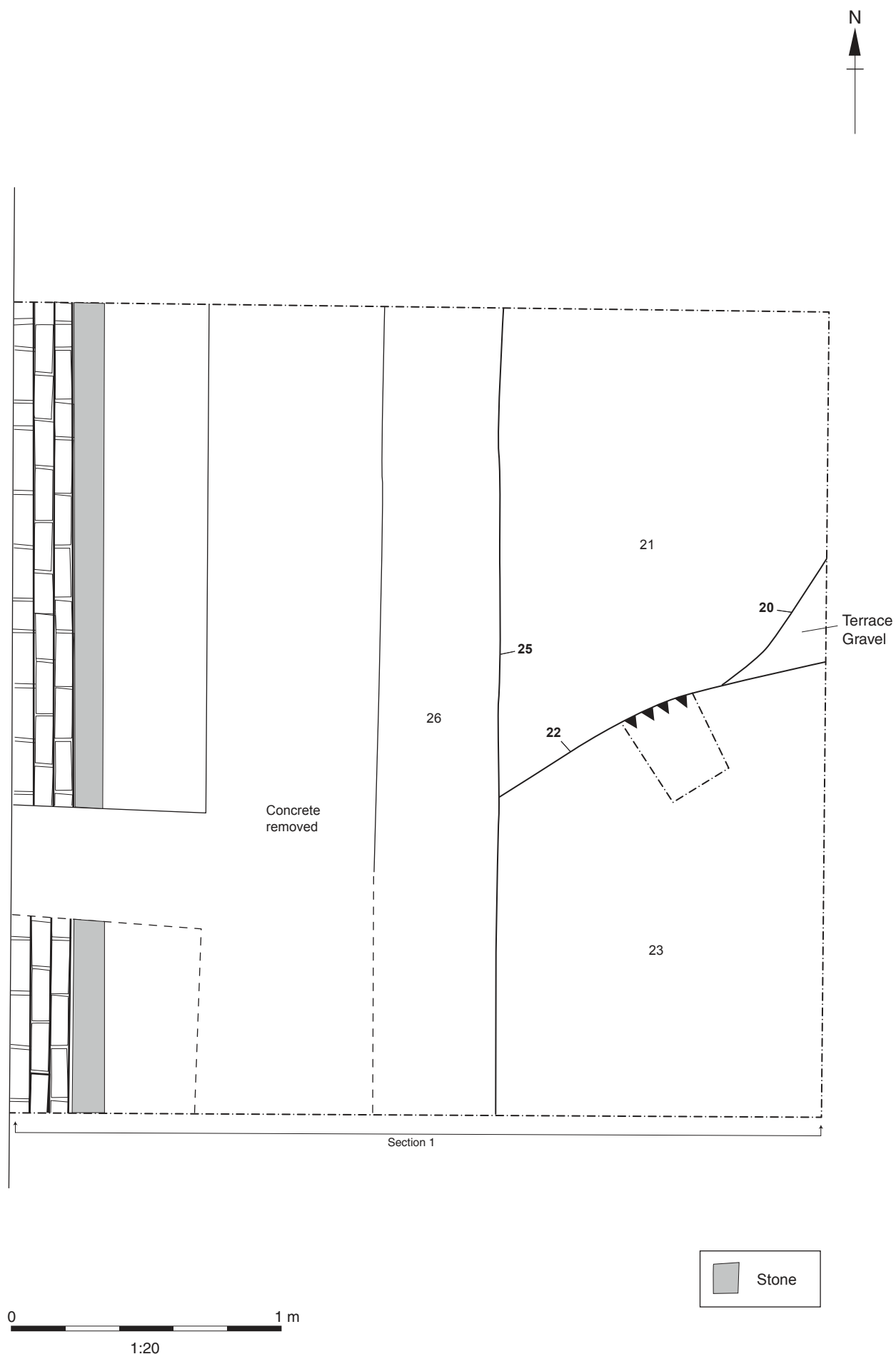


Figure 3: Plan of lift pit trench

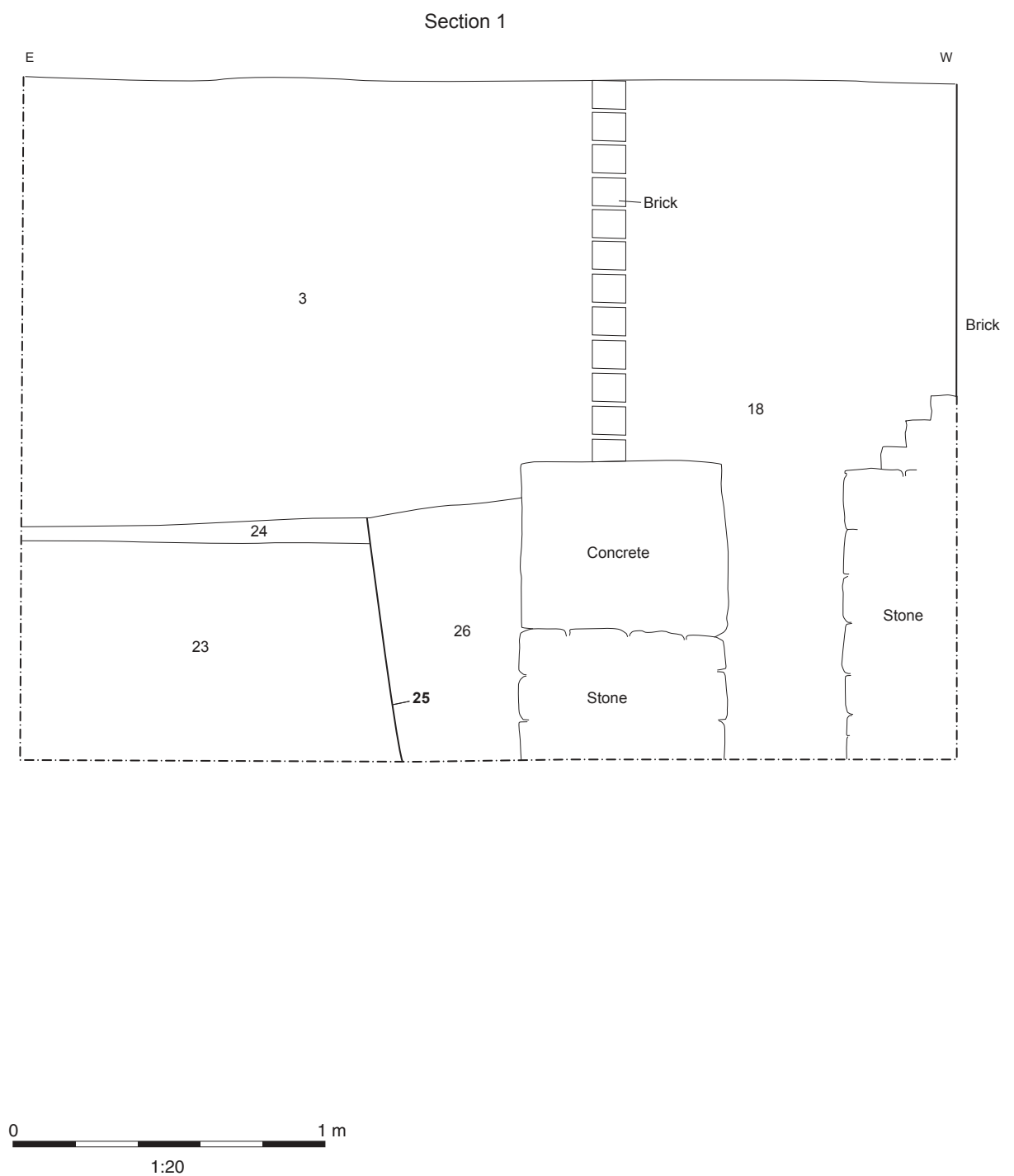


Figure 4: Section in lift pit trench

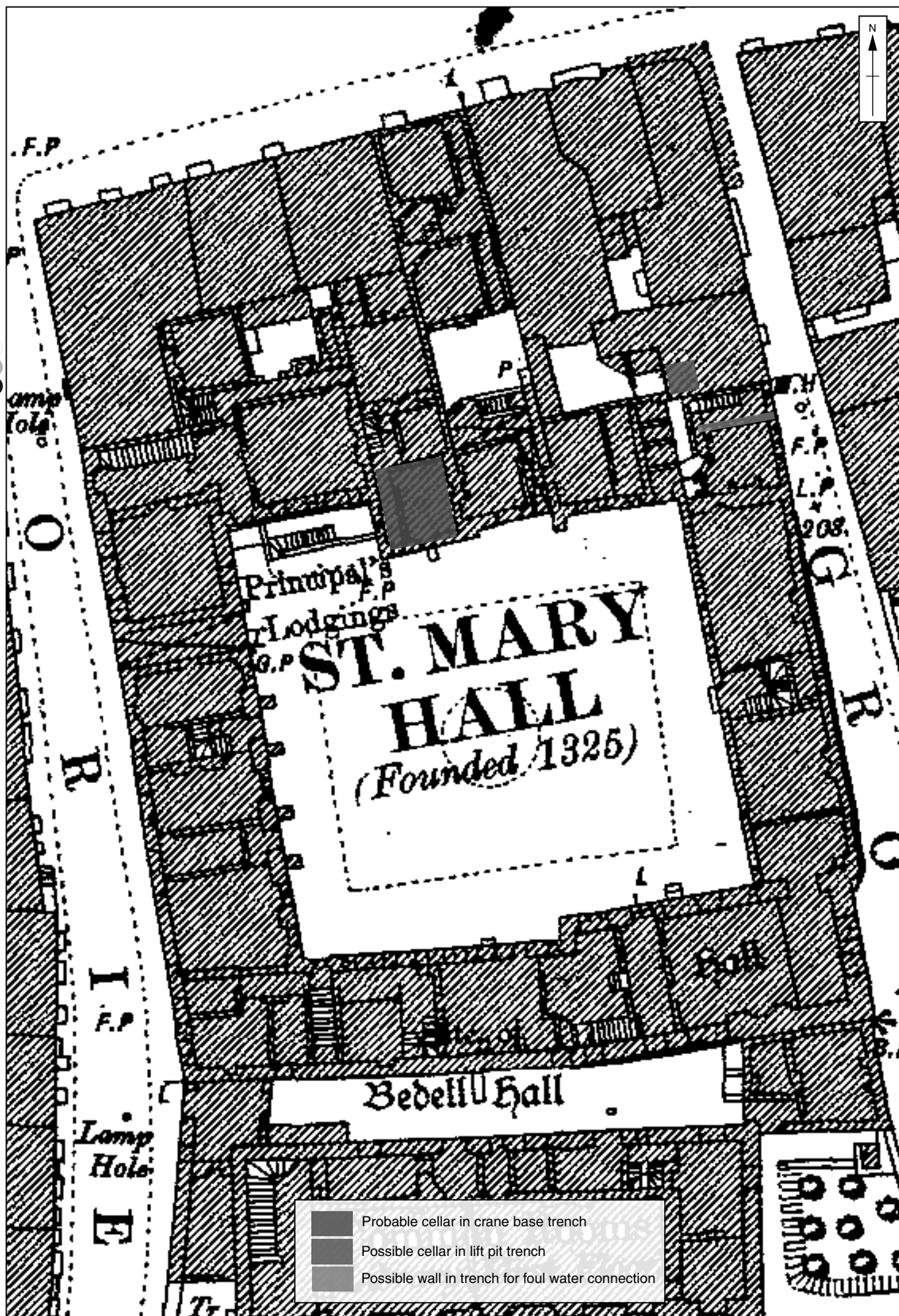


Figure 5: Structures on OS 1st Edition map (1876)





Plate 1: Lightwell in south wall of crane base cellar



Plate 2: East wall of crane base cellar





Plate 3: Crane base cellar floor

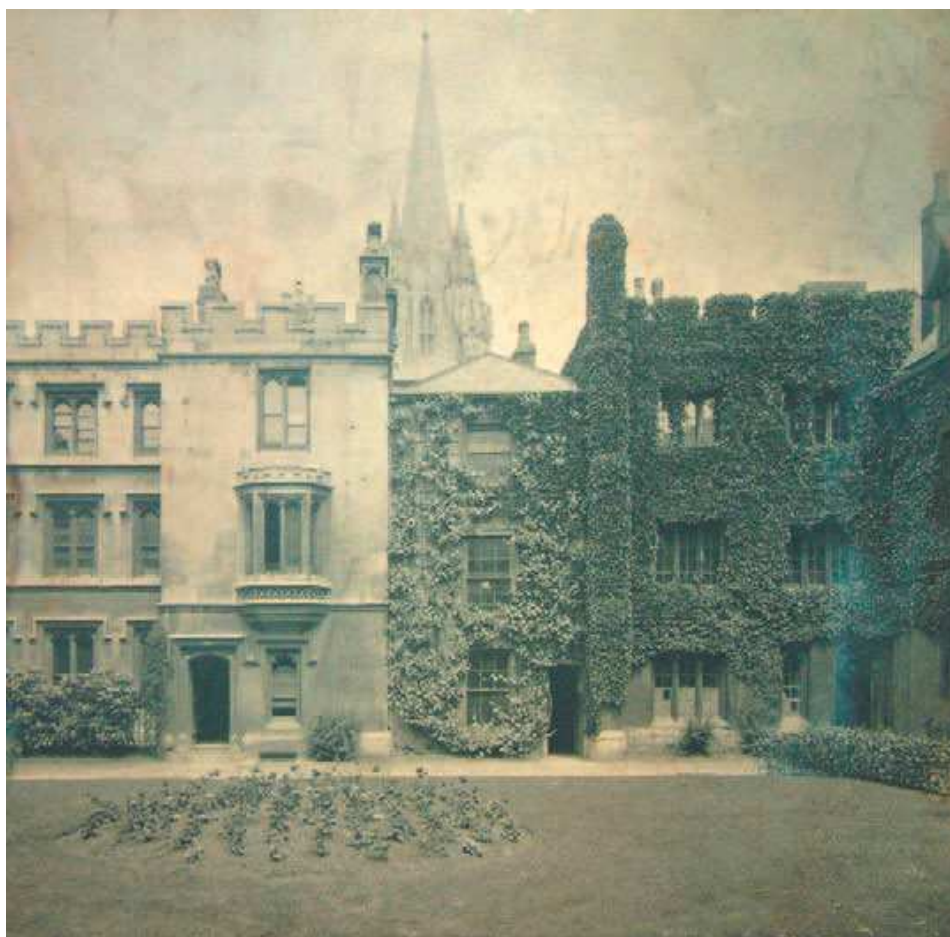


Plate 4: Buildings predating Rhodes Building from St Mary's Quad.  
Photograph by Henry Taunt, late 19th or early 20th century







#### **Head Office/Registered Office/ OA South**

Janus House  
Osney Mead  
Oxford OX2 0ES

t: +44 (0) 1865 263 800  
f: +44 (0) 1865 793 496  
e: [info@oxfordarchaeology.com](mailto:info@oxfordarchaeology.com)  
w: <http://oxfordarchaeology.com>

#### **OA North**

Mill 3  
Moor Lane  
Lancaster LA1 1QD

t: +44 (0) 1524 541 000  
f: +44 (0) 1524 848 606  
e: [oanorth@oxfordarchaeology.com](mailto: oanorth@oxfordarchaeology.com)  
w: <http://oxfordarchaeology.com>

#### **OA East**

15 Trafalgar Way  
Bar Hill  
Cambridgeshire  
CB23 8SQ

t: +44 (0) 1223 850500  
e: [oaeast@oxfordarchaeology.com](mailto: oaeast@oxfordarchaeology.com)  
w: <http://oxfordarchaeology.com>



**Director:** Gill Hey, BAPhDFSAMCIfA  
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