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BHS, between St Ebbe's and Queen Street, Oxford

NGR SP51230610

Archaeological Watching Brief Report



Oxford Archaeological Unit

August 1996

BHS, BETWEEN ST EBBE'S AND QUEEN STREET, OXFORD

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ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF REPORT

SUMMARY

The Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) undertook a watching brief in the courtyard and adjoining basement between the Oxford City Chambers Building and the Museum of Modern Art. Evidence was revealed of possible medieval pit fills.

INTRODUCTION

Prior to redevelopment of the site by BHS, Consulting Engineers Andrews, Kent and Stone Ltd (AKS) carried out a programme of test-pitting to ascertain the nature of deposits beneath the City Chambers Building on the corner of Queen Street and St Ebbe's, Oxford (NGR SP51180611). AKS were advised by Oxford Archaeological Advisory Services (OAAS) that an archaeological watching brief was required. OAAS felt that the results of previous archaeological excavations and the position of the site in the centre of Oxford necessitated this approach.

HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

The site is situated in the ward of St. Peter in the city centre. The first record for the site is c.1185 when, on his deathbed, Geoffrey son of Durand made over a property consisting of a "...bakehouse or forge (*furnum*) which is in the town of Oxford, in front of St. Peter's Church, with five messuages that belong to it" to Osney Abbey.

A number of houses occupied the western part of the site: one, a solar is described as being "on the corner", others were on properties connecting St. Ebbe's to Queen Street. In the 14th and 15th centuries the area is known for the quantity of bakers and brewers: the latter continuing to occupy the quarter until the 18th century despite rebuilding that occurred following the fire of 1644 which razed the quarter.

Small scale excavations were carried out on the western part of the site in 1960 by B K Davison, prior to the construction of the City Chambers building by Oxford City Council (*Oxoniensia L 1985, 47-94*). These excavations took place to the west of the present test-pits along the Queen Street and St. Ebbe's frontages. A number of pits, wells and other structures, typical of urban archaeological sites, were partially investigated.

The evidence suggested a concentration of activity in the 10th and 11th centuries close to the frontage of Queen Street in the form of large pits, possibly used as cellars or stores. By the 12th century the frontages were occupied by larger buildings, the ancillary pits and wells moved further to the rear. Later post-medieval and modern activity had largely destroyed all but the earliest levels of occupation, particularly along the street frontages.

METHODOLOGY (Fig 1)

Six test-pits originally targeted the site. Subsequently this number was increased to eight due to the presence of services externally and of metal ties in the floor internally. These extra test-pits kept their original number but the letter 'A' was appended to differentiate them from the originals.

The pits were excavated manually by the contractors and subsequently cleaned, examined and recorded by the archaeologist. Each test-pit was recorded by plan and section, and photographed in black-and-white and on colour slide-film. This work was carried out between July 16th and 23rd, 1996.

The recording of the archaeological watching brief was carried out according to the procedures as set out in the OAU Fieldwork Manual (ed. D. Wilkinson 1992).

RESULTS

Test pits 1,2 and 2A

Test-pits 1, 2 and 2A were excavated in the courtyard of the City Chambers Building next to the Museum of Modern Art. All three were excavated to a maximum depth of 62.55m OD. No significant archaeological deposits were revealed. All the layers in all three test-pits consisted of concrete and modern rubble; some modern services were observed.

Test pits 3,4,5,6 and 6A

These five test-pits were excavated inside the basement of the City Chambers Building. The quality of light in the basement was poor, particularly in the north-east corner where Test-Pit 5 was excavated. While this made examination of the deposits difficult, it does not significantly jeopardise the conclusions drawn. Layers 1 and 2 of each pit consisted of the same modern bitumen floor and concrete.

Test pit 3

The bottom of Test-pit 3 was significantly higher than that of the other four at 62.25m OD. No archaeological deposits were observed: above a modern dump of rubble [3/3] was a concrete surface [3/2] which created a floor-level over which a bitumen floor-surface [3/1] had been laid. The finds from this test-pit consist of building material from layer 3/3.

Test-pit 4 (Fig 2)

Test-pit 4 was excavated to a level of 61.04m OD. The lowest deposit revealed was a moist, black humic soil [4/4] excavated to a depth of 0.40m. No finds were recovered from this layer. In the east section of the test-pit, the spring of an arch in brick [4/3] was observed, the underside of which was at a height of 61.44m OD. A layer of loose mortar [4/5] was recorded between the underside of 4/3 and the top of 4/4.

Test-pit 5 (Fig 3)

Test-pit 5 was excavated in the north-east corner of the basement. The bottom of the pit was at 60.79m OD. The lowest layer of the test-pit was a clean, fine sand [5/9]. However this may have been a lens in the lowest observed deposit of sandy clay and gravel [5/8] at 60.91m OD. This deposit of sandy clay and gravel measured 0.11m in depth and was compacted.

Animal bone was recovered from 5/8 and a small lens of charcoal 0.02m thick was also observed within the layer. Above 5/8 were a further three sandy clay and gravel deposits [5/7, 5/6 and 5/5] with a total depth of 0.31m; all contained inclusions of charcoal as well as animal bone fragments. These deposits were also compacted.

Layer 5/5 appeared to abut a construction in brick [5/3] along the east side of the test-pit. This construction was stepped irregularly from south to north and was characterised by a possible arrangement of headers in red and white brick. The brick construction, 5/3, appeared to have been under-pinned by concrete [5/4] at a later date, which truncated layers 5/6, 5/7, 5/8 and 5/9.

Test-pit 6 (Fig 4)

Test-pit 6 was excavated to a level of 61.19m OD. A moist, black humic soil [6/4], similar to 4/4, was observed in the north-west corner of the test-pit. Layer 6/4 was overlain by concrete [6/2] which surrounded a brick construction [6/3], oriented north - south, which had been badly damaged by the excavation of the test-pit. No finds were recovered from any of the layers in this test-pit.

Test-pit 6A (Fig 5)

Test-pit 6A was excavated to a level of 60.74m OD. The lowest deposit observed was a moist, black humic soil [6A/5], 0.57- 0.60m deep. Layer 6A/5 appeared to be the same as 6/4. Layer 6A/5 abutted a north -south oriented brick construction [6A/3] and is cut by a concrete under-pinning [6A/4]. No finds were recovered from any of the layers in this test-pit..

DISCUSSION

Four of the test-pits provided very little archaeological information: 1, 2, 2A and 3 were filled with modern dumping which served to level the ground. These dumps are probably associated with the construction of the City Chambers Building.

The medieval pits excavated by Davison were encountered at heights of between 61.68m and 62.50m OD. Those that were excavated in Cellar D along St. Ebbe's were at 61.80m OD. The closest test-pit to either frontage, number 5, reached a level of 60.79m OD. The character of the lower deposits in Test-pit 5 could be interpreted as floor or yard surfaces, and in Test pits 4, 6, and 6A, the 'black' humic soil could be seen as a garden soil. However, the fact that these deposits are considerably lower than the 10th/11th century pits found by Davison makes this interpretation implausible. The alternative is that these deposits are either fills within large pits or cellar backfill of uncertain date. The lack of dateable artifacts within these deposits is not very significant, given the very small size of the test pits.

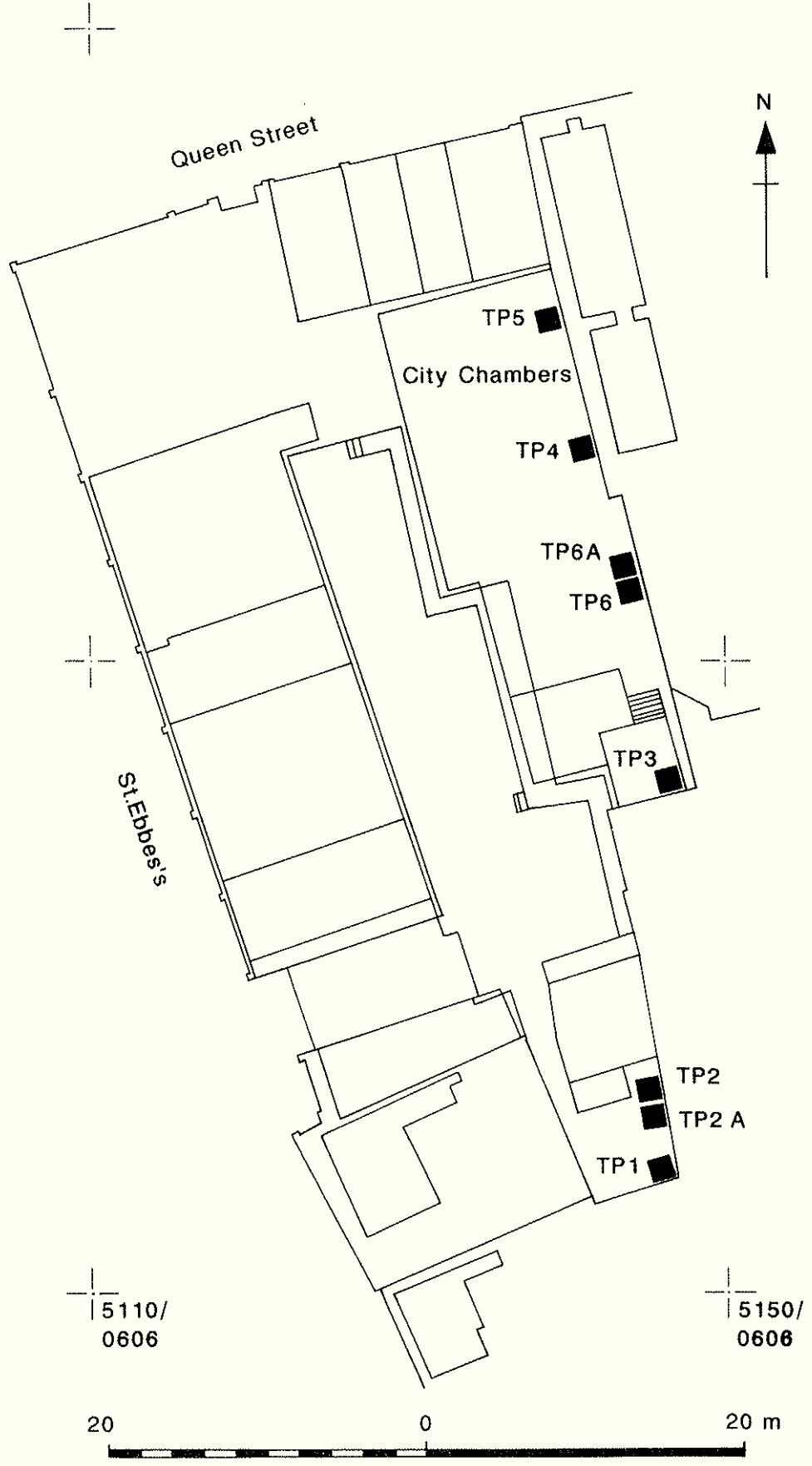
The brick constructions in Test-pits 4, 5, 6 and 6A probably relate to post-medieval cellars oriented north - south along a contemporary boundary line. Though the precise date of these features could not be ascertained, the boundary existed during the nineteenth century when this brick construction and the possibly associated brick constructions to the north in Test-pit 5, (5/3), and to the south in Test-pit 6, (6/3), were in use. The overlying deposits 4/4, 6/4 and 6A/5 suggest a single contemporaneous event to level the ground-surface prior to early modern redevelopment of the site.

Given the very restricted size of the test pits, the results appear to indicate that, despite the inevitable truncation by post-medieval and modern building, earlier deposits do survive to a degree sufficient to suggest considerable activity some distance back from the street frontages.

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July 1996

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Sturdy D., Munby J. et al. 'Early Domestic Sites in Oxford: Excavations in Cornmarket and Queen Street, 1959-62' *Oxoniensia* vol 50, (1985) 47-94.



Location of test pits

figure 1

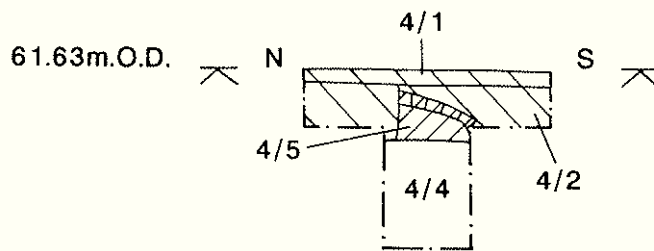


figure 2

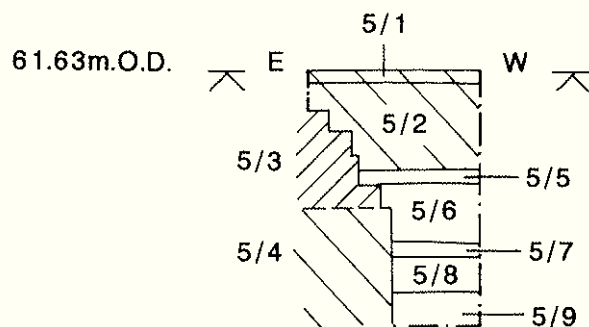


figure 3

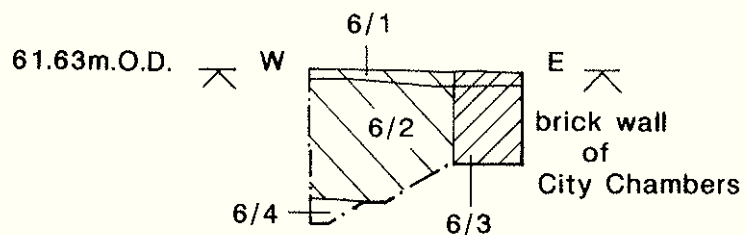


figure 4

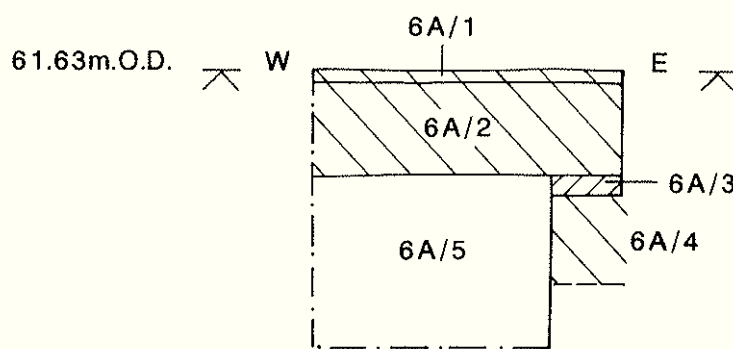
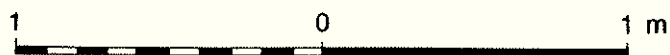


figure 5





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