

## STATEMENT OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL INTEREST NO 20

### MERTON COLLEGE

**Asset/Monument Type:** Academic College

**Summary:** Merton College is one of the earliest colleges to be established in Oxford. It was one of the first colleges to add purpose built structures in the late 13<sup>th</sup> and early 14<sup>th</sup> century and was instrumental in evolving academic college design. Among the Oxford colleges Merton has the most extensive survival of medieval fabric. The college coalesced around a group of buildings adjacent to the former Church of St John on Merton Street, which eventually was rebuilt as the college Chapel. It gradually expanded to incorporate the larger portion of the south side of the street up to the city wall. There are several associated collegiate properties on the north side of Merton Street.

**Location (NGR):** SP51700606

**Definition:** A college is an establishment housing a community of secular clergy sharing a degree of common life less strictly controlled than that within a monastic order. Colleges are normally identified through documentary evidence. Their buildings are usually associated with a parish church (not necessarily of formal collegiate status) although some extra-parochial and academic colleges had their own chapel. Other morphological elements present may include one or more cloisters or quadrangles, ranges of lodgings (either communal or more commonly as separate apartments), a common hall or refectory, service buildings (kitchen, buttery etc), a master or warden's lodging, a guest house, gate houses and sometimes an associated school or bedehouse.

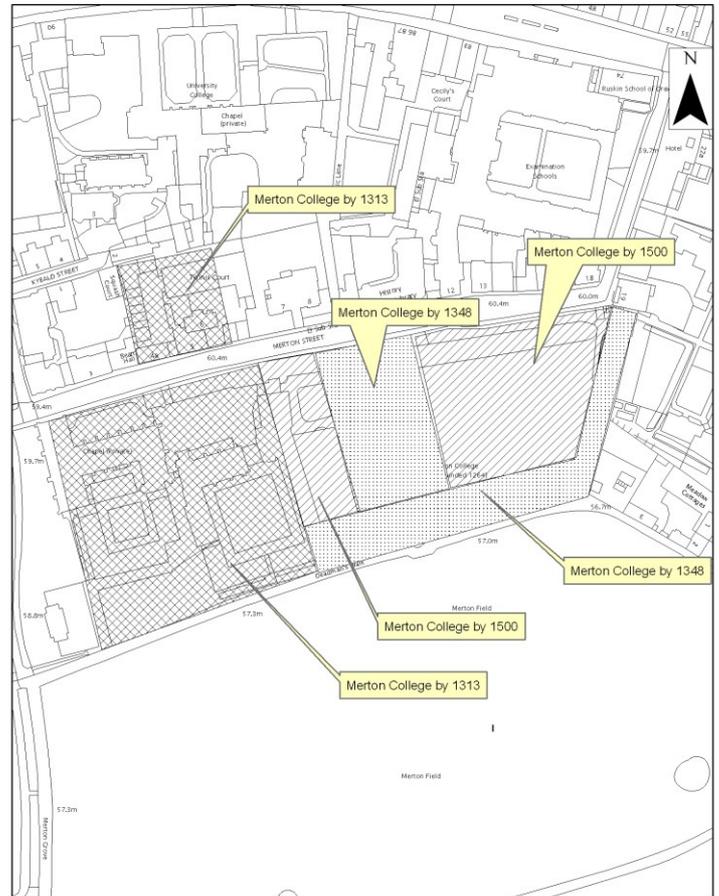
**Version:** 12/2/2012

#### Key characteristics

*The following criteria (which are not in any order of ranking) are based on the Secretary of State's criteria for assessing Scheduled Monuments. They should not be regarded as definitive, but as an indicative provisional assessment.*

**Period:** Does the asset characterise a category or historic period?

**Assessment:** The collegiate college was founded in the 13<sup>th</sup> century and remains in use today. Academic colleges are just one of many asset types which characterise the medieval and post-medieval period.



Merton College in 1313 and 1348  
From Catto, J.I. (ed) 2006, The History of the University of Oxford Volume 1, Map3 & 4. Also extent of the college by c1500.

Scale: 1:1,385  
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**Score:** Medium

**Rarity:** *What is the rarity of the asset in terms of regional and national context?*

**Assessment:** At a national level The University of Oxford is an institution only directly comparable to the slightly later University of Cambridge. Merton is one of three 13<sup>th</sup> century academic college foundations in Oxford (excluding the monastic Durham and Gloucester Colleges). The land holding dating from this time is therefore of particular interest for understanding the development of the college system.

**Score:** High

**Documentation:** *To what extent is the significance of the asset enhanced by existing documentation or lack thereof?*

**Assessment:** The college maintains an exceptional documentary archive. Records of the college begin with the foundation statutes of 1264, bursarial accounts, 1277, and decisions of the governing body, 1483. Records of college estates include deeds, surveys, court rolls and maps, and date from the twelfth century onwards: <http://www.oxfordarchives.org.uk/> . Histories of the college include GH Martin and JRL Highfield, *A History of Merton College*, (OUP,1997); A Bott, *Merton College: A Short History of The Buildings*, (Merton College, 1993); JRL Highfield, (ed.), *The Early Rolls of Merton College*, (OUP, 1964); HE Salter, (ed.), *Registrum Annalium Collegii Mertonensis 1483-1521*, (OUP, 1923); JM Fletcher, (ed.), *Registrum Annalium Collegii Mertonensis 1521-1567*, (OUP, 1974). The college has reasonable archaeological documentation.

**Score:** High

**Group Value:** *is the value of the asset enhanced by its association with related contemporary monuments or with monuments of different periods?*

**Assessment:** Merton College comprises an exceptional group of grade I buildings, is one of five 13<sup>th</sup> medieval academic and monastic colleges founded at Oxford. It has strong associations with the 13<sup>th</sup> century wall and other properties in Merton Street including No 4a of likely c1300 date,

**Score:** High

**Survival/Condition:** *What is the estimated level of above and below ground survival?*

**Assessment:** The College contains an exceptional group of medieval buildings including the 13<sup>th</sup> century Chapel and South Range, the 14<sup>th</sup> century Mob Quad and the 15<sup>th</sup> century Front Quad. Limited modern archaeological investigation on early college property has recorded well preserved remains from rubbish pits and other features.

**Score:** High

**Fragility/Vulnerability:** *susceptibility to change*

**Assessment:** Vulnerable to small scale works, permitted development and pressure to improve on site facilities.

**Score:** Medium

**Diversity:** *Does the asset possess a combination of high quality features?*

**Assessment:** Merton College includes four Quads, a medieval Chapel and Library and a large garden. A real Tennis Club built in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and owned by Merton College is recorded on the northern side of Merton Street.

**Score:** High

**Potential:** *Is there a likelihood that currently unrecorded evidence can be anticipated?*

**Assessment:** The site has the potential to preserve important Saxon and medieval archaeological remains. Well preserved remains relating to the development of the 13<sup>th</sup> century and later college can also be anticipated. Previous archaeological investigations have identified parts of the medieval city wall and a substantial proportion of the wall is still extant on the south and east boundaries of the college.

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**Score:** High  
Overall score (22/24)

## **Overall Assessment of Archaeological Interest: High**

### **HERITAGE ASSET DESCRIPTION**

Merton College is located in the south eastern part of the city, within the proposed eastern extension of the Late Saxon burh. It lies within the eastern part of the medieval walled town with a scheduled section of the 13<sup>th</sup> century city wall forming its southern boundary. The college includes the site of the former parish church of St John the Baptist. Several academic and non academic halls preceded the formation of the college on this landholding. The topography of the eastern part of the city in the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> century was transformed by the foundation of several colleges including Merton, as tenements and shops were abandoned and subsequently incorporated into college precincts. On a site adjacent to the medieval Merton College, St Albans Hall was an academic hall founded in 1230 and belonging to Littlemore Priory. The Hall remained a separate structure until 1548 when Merton College was able to purchase the site after the Dissolution. The modern college also includes a 20<sup>th</sup> century campus just beyond the City Wall on the site of the Trinitarian Friary.

Merton College was first founded in 1262-4 by Walter de Merton for Merton Priory and was intended to support 20 scholars. In the original statutes the college endowments remained vested with the Priory but when a new set of statutes was agreed in 1264 the endowments belonged solely to the college (VCH iii: 95). The present college site was bought by the founder in 1266 and building began soon after. The college received a generous foundation and was therefore able to construct its own purpose built structures. The medieval architecture of the surviving college buildings are discussed by Sherwood and Pevsner (1974), Hassall (1971c) and Tyack (1998) amongst others.

The college took over a vacant plot and three houses next to the church of St John the Baptist. The first college building was a Hall, raised up over a basement and heated by a central hearth with open timber roof. Here lectures were given and the Fellows dined communally. Parts of the original stone wall of the Hall survive along with the main door with its ornate iron work. The nearby church was acquired by the college and replaced in 1290-4 by a new Chapel, 'the finest late 13<sup>th</sup> century building in Oxford' (Tyack 1998:29). Tyack notes that the east window of the chapel is 'one of the most impressive of its date in England' and that it retains a good deal of its original stained glass (*ibid.*; Fletcher and Upton 1983:120). A purpose built L shaped house was built and extended in the 13<sup>th</sup> century to provide a residence for the head of the college, part of this hall survives at the Middle Common Room. Subsequently an L shaped set of chambers was built for the Fellows south of the chapel in c1304-11, now forming the north and east range of Mob Quad. Thus the college established the pattern of accommodation arranged one room deep with the chambers placed on either side of a lobby and staircase approached through a pointed arch doorway. This approach was subsequently taken up by Corpus Christi College at Cambridge and thereafter became the usual method of arranging residential accommodation in Oxford and Cambridge colleges. The South range of Mob Quad was not built until 1373-8, this contained chambers on ground floor but upper floors were given over to a library, the oldest college library in Oxford and 'One of the finest surviving medieval libraries anywhere' (Tyack 1998: 32). The inspiration for the library may have been the late 13<sup>th</sup> century library in the College of the Sorbonne in Paris but the immediate influence is likely to have been the library of the Dominicans in London which the Merton Warden visited before work began (*ibid.* 32). Thus a quadrangle design was established at Merton, later known as Mob Quad, evolving as result of gradual accretion nor

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conscious design (Tyack 1998: 31). On a site adjacent to the medieval Merton College, St Albans Hall was an academic hall founded in 1230 and belonging to Littlemore Priory. The hall remained a separate structure until 1548 when Merton College was able to purchase the site after the Dissolution.

The modern Merton College includes four quadrangles, a garden and a section of the city wall which the college is required to maintain. Beyond the precinct the college also owns a number of modern subsidiary buildings. The Front Quad comprises the North Range on the street frontage. The gatehouse dates to the 15<sup>th</sup> century while the block to the east was rebuilt in 1590 and a block to the west added in 1631 (LB Ref 9/480E). The hall of the South Range was first built in the 13<sup>th</sup> century but was largely rebuilt in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and only the west end wall was retained (LB Ref 9/480K). The eastern side of the South Range is the 16<sup>th</sup> century FitzJames Gateway which contains part of the 15<sup>th</sup> century former warden's lodgings (LB Ref 9/480H). The East Range of the Front Quad originally housed the warden's lodgings however this was demolished in the 20<sup>th</sup> century to make way for the present structure (LB Ref 9/480G). To the west of the Front Quad, the late 13<sup>th</sup> century chapel formed the west range (LB Ref 9/480B). The sacristy was added to the south of the chapel in around 1300 (LB Ref 9/480D). Mob Quad to the rear of the chapel was slowly built throughout the 14<sup>th</sup> century and largely comprises the college rooms (LB Ref 9/480C). To the north of Front Quad is the early 17<sup>th</sup> century Fellows Quad (LB Ref 9/480J). Further college rooms were added on Back Quad in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the rear of Mob Quad adjacent to the City Wall (LB Ref 9/480A). St Albans Quad to the east of Front Quad was largely rebuilt at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (LB Ref 9/480F). The Warden's House on the north side of Merton Street was also built in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (LB Ref 9/480N). A stone stable block belonging to the college at 4A Merton Street has been reassessed as c.1300 in date (Poore *et al.* 2006).

A number of stray finds and features have been the subject of recorded observations at Merton College since the 19<sup>th</sup> century: for example an early medieval glass wine jug (UAD 1271), an undated foliage wall painting in Staircase 6 (UAD 1352) and several undated burials at St Johns Church (UAD 1558). Hurst records that inhumations were found close to the sacristy to the south east of the chapel. At least one had a stone coffin. The burials seem to relate to the period when the chapel was the parish church of St John the Baptist. A large stone drain beneath the present Merton Grove building in 1864 was uncovered running south to the City Wall (UAD 1568). It is thought that this had given rise to the name of Goter Hall, a medieval academic hall, which had stood to the north.

Several archaeological investigations at Merton College have identified parts of the city wall and the possible Saxon defences (see below). An early investigation in 1922 in Mob Quad recorded evidence of an early building predating the 14<sup>th</sup> century quad along with a quantity of medieval pottery (Jope 1943-4: 102). The site was re-examined in 1992 following drainage works in the Quad. The structure comprised three stone walls that appeared to follow the same alignment as the later Mob Quad (UAD 729). The roof of the college chapel was surveyed in 1982 (UAD 634) during restoration work indicating that it remained largely intact until the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century when measures were taken to support the roof (Steane and Taylor 1983b: 80). The original roof structure appears to be late 13<sup>th</sup> century in date built in two phases between 1290 and 1294 (*ibid.*: 82).

Several building surveys have been carried out at the College including a survey of the 17<sup>th</sup> century Staircase 5 in the Fellow's Quad in 1994 (UAD 514). Samples were also taken from Fellows Quad in 2004 (UAD 1686) for dendro chronology dating indicating a felling range of 1607-1609 for the timbers from the east range and 1607 for the south range (Poore, 2006). Timbers from the Fellow's Quadrangle at Merton College have been subject to tree ring dating, producing a date span from 1442 to 1608. The 1606 timbers can be linked with the

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documented construction date for the Fellows Quadrangle in 1608-10 (Miles and Worthington, 2006).

Archaeological investigations were carried out between 2000 and 2002 to the rear of 4a Merton Street (Poore *et al.* 2006). No 4a is a c.1300 listed building (LB Ref 9/466) and formed the street frontage for the Merton college stables. The property was acquired by Walter de Merton at around the same time as the principal college site in the 1260s and the site appears to have been in use as the warden's stables from at least the late 14<sup>th</sup> century (*ibid.*: 246). To the rear of the stone stables the excavation revealed the remains of a back range of 13<sup>th</sup> century date at right angles to the frontage. A garderobe was constructed against the northwest corner of the range. These structures appear to have been demolished in the late 13<sup>th</sup> and early 14<sup>th</sup> centuries perhaps because extensive earlier pitting had led to subsidence. A new more substantial range was built fronting on to Kybald Street with a garderobe at its eastern end, probably built and demolished in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. From the late 14<sup>th</sup> to the 16<sup>th</sup> century the college appears to have used the site as a stable yard.

Rubbish pits of 13<sup>th</sup> century date contained lamps, drinking jugs and glass urinals used to practice uroscopy, the inspection of urine to monitor for illness. Further evidence for an interest in medicine came from environmental samples for opium poppy, hops and cannabis. It is unclear, however, whether these remains related to the occupation of the site in the 13<sup>th</sup> century by the Edrich family, or by the college in the late 13<sup>th</sup> century. A similar range of plants from a site in St Thomas's Street has been suggested as evidence for a medical herb plot or physic garden. Further evidence for the use of medicinal plants in Oxford was recovered from the Blackfriars site (see above) (*ibid.*: 229; Robinson 1985; 1996: 263-7).

#### **Associated Architects:**

Fellows Quad: Sir Henry Savile 17<sup>th</sup> century

Hall: 13<sup>th</sup> century but rebuilt by Scott 1872-4

Grove Building: Butterfield 1864. Altered 1930 by T H Hughes

St Alban Quad: Champneys. 1904-10

Rose Lane Buildings: Sir Hubert Worthington 1939-40

#### **Academic statements**

MPP Class Description

'A sample of nationally important sites should include examples of early medieval establishments of secular priests (if a well-preserved site can be identified), a prebendal or portional college of the 12<sup>th</sup> or 13<sup>th</sup> century, later medieval chantry foundations of both high and low status in both urban and rural situations, and possibly several major academic colleges. This last type is of special importance in demonstrating the post-medieval continuity of a tradition restricted to a narrow social and economic context' (English Heritage 1989).

Merton Chapel is 'the finest late 13<sup>th</sup> century building in Oxford' (Tyack 1998: 29)

The East window of the chapel is 'one of the most impressive of its date in England' (Tyack 1998: 29)

'The beauty and interest of the building [the Chapel] is enhanced by the fact that it still retains a good deal of its original stained glass, some of the oldest in Oxford' (Tyack 1998: 29)

Merton College developed accommodation blocks just one room deep with the chambers placed on either side of a lobby and staircase approached through a pointed arch doorway-

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'soon taken up in Cambridge at Corpus Christi and which thereafter became the usual method of arranging residential accommodation in the colleges of Oxford and Cambridge down to modern times' (Tyack 1998: 31).

'Merton Mob Quad evolved as result of gradual accretion nor conscious design. The south ranges of Mob Quad not built until 1373-8 contained chambers on ground floor but upper floors were given over to a library, the oldest in Oxford' (Tyack 1998: 32).

'The [Library] system first appeared in the late 13<sup>th</sup> century library in the College of the Sorbonne in Paris but the immediate influence may have been the library of the Dominicans in London which the Merton Warden visited before work began' (Tyack 1998: 32).

One of the finest surviving medieval libraries anywhere' (Tyack 1998: 32)

The 1608 Fellows Quadrangle- the first large scale extension to a medieval college and heralded a period of intensive building activity which lasted until the Civil War 'marked an important new departure in collegiate architecture. It was the first set of buildings in Oxford designed with three storeys of full height throughout' (Tyack 1998: 88).

The frontpiece 'Tower of the Order' at the centre of the south range 'represents the most impressive attempt hitherto to introduce classical motifs into an Oxford college building' (Tyack 1998: 88).

## **Research agenda**

### *Pre College Research Agenda:*

- What was the date and character of Late Saxon activity in this part of the burh?
- What was the character and extent of activity in the pre college tenements (including the Inns and Halls)? How were existing structures incorporated into the early college?

### *The College Research Agenda:*

- What can the study of the 13<sup>th</sup> century post graduate colleges (Balliol College, Merton College, University College) tell us about the evolution of the college system? How were they distinct from the early monastic colleges?
- How does the material culture, diet and wealth of the college vary through time and contrast with contemporary colleges?
- The potential is noted for geophysical survey in the garden and grounds to identify formal garden design and/or evidence for the medieval academic halls
- The desirability of an integrated conservation management plan that addresses the issue of the long term conservation of below ground archaeological deposits is noted.

## **Associated Monuments**

UAD Monument 2: Saxon defences (site of). Probable line of former burh defences

UAD Monument 4: City Wall (site of). Former line of City Wall through Corpus Christi

UAD Monument 115: Merton College. University College

UAD Monument 387: Church of St John the Baptist. 14<sup>th</sup> century

UAD Monument 398: Trinitarian Friary. 14<sup>th</sup> century

UAD Monument 427: City Wall Bastion 18. Medieval

UAD Monument 428: City Wall Bastion 19. Medieval

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UAD Monument 547: Market Garden, Merton Street. 17<sup>th</sup> century  
UAD Monument 619: Historic Buildings, Merton Street  
UAD Monument 676: Merton College Gardens  
UAD Monument 719: Merton Street  
UAD Monument 728: Rose Lane  
UAD Monument 775: Medieval settlement Salter South East 3  
UAD Monument 776: Medieval settlement Salter South East 4  
UAD Monument 777: Medieval settlement Salter South East 5  
UAD Monument 804: Late Saxon settlement, Eastern suburb  
UAD Monument 845: Goter Hall. Former academic hall  
UAD Monument 857: Hert Hall. Former academic hall, now part of the college  
UAD Monument 874: Nun Hall. Former academic hall  
UAD Monument 880: St Alban Hall. Former academic hall

### Associated Events

- *Observations in 1864 (UAD 1568)*: A large stone drain was uncovered running south to the City Wall. It is thought that this had given rise to the name of Goter Hall, a medieval academic hall which had stood to the north.
- *Observations in c1865 (UAD 1271)*: An early medieval glass oinochoe was found.
- *Find c 1872 (UAD 1138)*: An Edward II groat was found with rubbish in the roof.
- *Excavations at Merton College in 1885 (UAD 1198)*: A brass token, an iron knife, a dagger and a key were found. No dating evidence is available.
- *Find in 1889 (UAD 1347)*: An inscription on glass was found in a room on the north side of the quad and sketched by Hurst. It read 'Oxoniam: quare: venisti: premeditare:-'  
Inscriptions like this were common in college rooms.
- *Observations in 1890s (UAD 1352)*: Hurst recorded a mural painting in a bedroom on Staircase 6. The band, about 0.5 m wide was about 1 m in height. The pattern resembles foliage.
- *Observations in 1890s (UAD 1382)*: Hurst recorded jambs in the E side of the wall at New College and inserted pieces in the parapet at Merton College.
- *Observations in 1890s (UAD 1408)*: Hurst made sketches of details and measured plans of the front and quadrangle.
- *Finds, 1890s (UAD 1558)*: Inhumations were found close to the sacristy to the south east of the chapel. At least one had a stone coffin. The burials seem to relate to the period when the chapel was the parish church of St John the Baptist.
- *Observations in 1922 (UAD 132)*: An early building and medieval pottery were found.
- *Building survey, RCHME, 1939 (UAD 876)*: The section of wall between High Street and the SE angle of the city has been entirely destroyed as far as the summer-house in Merton College garden; in this part were formerly two bastions, Nos 17 and 18.
- *Finds in 1957 (UAD 931)*: A number of real tennis balls were recovered from a putlock hole.
- *Excavations in 1962-3 (UAD 195)*: The foundation trench contained the footings of the City Wall. Within the wall lay a deposit of soil, possibly a late Saxon bank along the same line as the later wall.
- *Watching Brief in 1963 (UAD 624)*: Natural gravel 0.75 m below the modern ground surface.

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- *Excavations in 1970 (UAD 228)*: No traces of early defences were found. Below the modern wall was an earlier stone wall, built in two phases from 13<sup>th</sup> century and later. Quantities of early medieval sherds were found, a few metal objects, a piece of tile and some animal bone. The upper layers contained some late medieval pottery, including a lamp base, and some tile.
  - *Watching Brief in 1975 (UAD 533)*: One face of the City Wall was seen. The lowest medieval section of wall was at least 1.8 m wide and gravel packed. There was a 0.75 m wide earth packed section above this while the ashlar wall above ground was only 0.4 m wide.
  - *Building Survey in 1982 (UAD 634)*: The chapel roof was supported by 54 coupled rafters braced with scissors and collars. The scissors were made from long slender half oaks which had been riven and trimmed with an axe. Carpentry marks in Roman numerals on some of the rafters suggest a prefabricated construction.
  - *Watching Brief in 1986 (UAD 583)*: Foundations of a substantial wall, possibly the City Wall. The upper stone walling may have been built when a broad opening was made in the wall after 1675. The tiled wall has been interpreted as the flanking of the opening. It is possible that there was an earlier postern on the site which was blocked with the coursed stone, thus explaining the underlying loam. No sign of any rampart from the late Saxon period
  - *Excavations in 1992 (UAD 729)*: The structure had three walls, two lying parallel and at an angle to the foundations of Mob Quad which cut them.
  - *Building Survey in 1994 (UAD 514)*: The original structure from 1610 consisted of a single frame of posts and joists rising in the centre of the stair, filled with plain studding. Little decoration was seen.
  - *Watching Brief. Postmasters Hal (UAD 1645)*: Well constructed stone built cellar or basement recorded abutting an earlier wall, pottery evidence suggests a date of 11<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> century. Later medieval pottery was recovered from all three new test pits. The excavations are notable for a remarkable ceramic assemblage spanning the 11<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Over 800 animal bones were recovered together with a small number of human bones.
  - *Excavations, Postmasters Hall 2000-03 (UAD 1646)*: Evidence of two structures including a cellar dating to c1200. and a second building to the north. The excavation also recorded an extensive series of pits and a number of wells dating from the 11<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. The results of the post excavation assessment suggest that this is an important site with good potential for further analysis
  - *Fellows Quad, 2004 (UAD 1686)*: Of fourteen timbers sampled from the east and south ranges, eight samples were combined as a 167-ring site master, spanning AD 1442 - 1608.
  - *Watching brief, 2009 (UAD 1758)*: Several ditches recorded, two of which were medieval, one post-medieval and one undated.

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