

**Beckett Hall, Defence Academy,
Shrivenham, Oxfordshire**

An Archaeological Watching Brief

by Richard Oram

Site Code BHS05/16

(SP2468 8917)

**Beckett Hall, Defence Academy,
Shrivenham, Oxfordshire**

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For Defence Academy**

by Richard Oram
Thames Valley Archaeological Services Ltd

Site Code BHS 05/16

March 2006

Summary

Site name: Beckett Hall, Defence Academy, Shrivenham, Oxfordshire

Grid reference: SU 2468 8917

Site activity: Watching Brief

Date and duration of project: 31st August to 14th November 2005

Project manager: Steve Ford

Site supervisor: Richard Oram

Site code: BHS 05/16

Summary of results: Two late post-medieval culverts and a cistern were located.

Monuments identified: None

Location and reference of archive: The archive is presently held at Thames Valley Archaeological Services, Reading and will be deposited at Oxfordshire County Museum Service in due course.

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Report 05/16

Introduction

This report documents the results of an archaeological watching brief carried out at Beckett Hall, Defence Academy, Shrivenham, Oxfordshire (SU 2468 8917) (Fig.1). The work was commissioned by Ms Bridie Bunce, Defence Academy, Quatermasters Department, Building 15, Shrivenham, Swindon SN6 8LA.

Planning permission has been granted by Vale of White Horse District Council for the construction of a new three-storey residential block at Beckett Hall. This permission is subject to a condition which requires the implementation of a programme of archaeological work, in accordance with the Department of the Environment's Planning Policy Guidance, *Archaeology and Planning* (PPG16 1990), and the Council's policies on archaeology. The field investigation was carried out to a specification approved by Mr Hugh Coddington, Deputy County Archaeological Officer (Coddington 2005), advising the District. The fieldwork was undertaken by Richard Oram between 31st August and 14th November 2005 and the site code is BHS05/16. The archive is presently held at Thames Valley Archaeological Services, Reading and will be deposited at Oxfordshire County Museum Service in due course.

Location, topography and geology

The site is located within the Royal Military College of Science to the east of Shrivenham, Oxfordshire. The land around Beckett Hall itself is currently unused and the building is uninhabited. The site lies at approximately 90m above Ordnance Datum and the underlying geology is mapped as loam overlying sand and clay forming part of the Corallian Beds (BGS 1971). The natural geology was not seen during these works.

Archaeological background

The archaeological potential of the site has been highlighted by a brief prepared by Mr Hugh Coddington of Oxfordshire County Archaeological Services. In summary the site is located in the vicinity of the medieval village of Beckett, which was deserted and destroyed by Viscount Barrington during the creation of Beckett Park in the 17th and 18th centuries. Beckett Hall itself is thought to stand on the site of an earlier manor house, which was destroyed during the Civil War. The exact location of the medieval village is unclear but pottery dating to

the 13th century has been found in the area (Coddington 2005). The site also lies within an area from which a number of Roman sites and finds have been recorded in recent times (Briggs *et al.* 1986)

Objectives and methodology

The purpose of the watching brief was to excavate and record any archaeological deposits affected by the new construction work associated with the new facilities. This involved examination of footing and service trenches and the digging of test pits prior to piling.

Results

Only one area monitored involved deep excavation and this did not produce any finds or deposits of medieval or earlier date (Figs 2 and 3). However, two culverts and an associated cistern were located along with a continuation of an existing standing wall. The mortared red-brick wall extended some 3m below the finished ground level and appeared to be faced on the exposed side. The other side could not be seen but as the wall was finished on at least one side it is likely that this was meant to be seen and could therefore represent a cellar wall rather than a very deep foundation. The depth of the wall meant it was not possible gain safe access for closer inspection.

The two culverts appeared in plan to respect the position of the wall with one parallel and the other perpendicular to it. At the limit of the excavation a small hole in the parallel culvert allowed excess water to pass through the wall. It is therefore very likely that these three features are the same date as the standing wall and form part of the post-medieval rebuild of Beckett Hall rather than a surviving fragment from the earlier manor.

The culverts were formed from stone blocks with no bonding material and were 1m deep and 1m wide. The full extent of the culvert could not be seen as the one parallel to the wall was loosely backfilled with brick rubble and the other turned sharply just after the limit of excavation at the road.

A large circular red brick-built cistern with a closed dome roof was located mid-way along the length of the perpendicular cistern. This was well built with finished brickwork on both the inside and the outside of the structure. For safety reasons it was not possible to enter the hole to recover any bricks for dating purposes or to understand its precise relationship with the culverts.

Finds

No dateable finds were recovered.

Conclusion

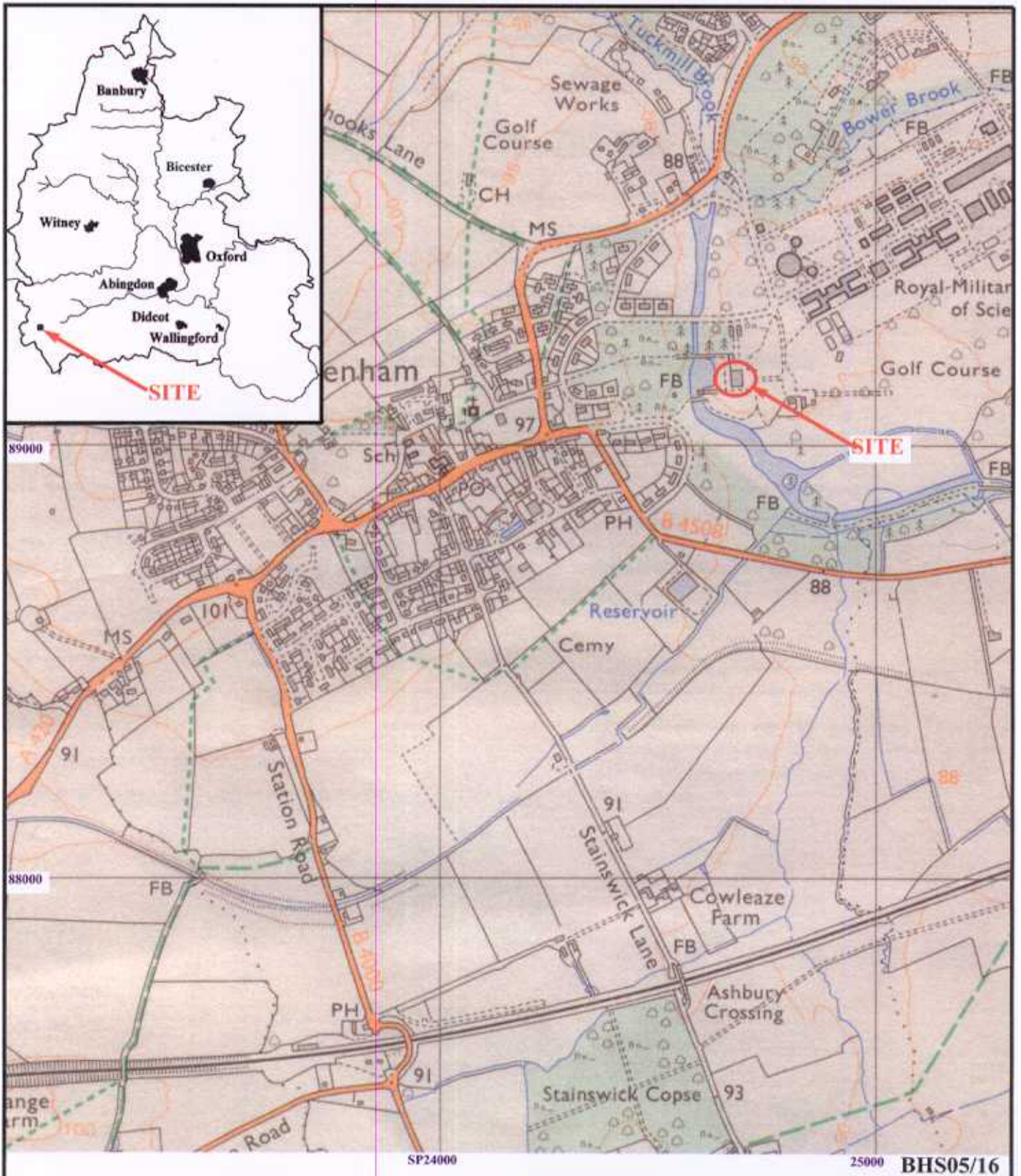
No trace of the medieval manor or village were noted during this watching brief and no stray finds of medieval date were found in the spoil. However, the features noted were in very deep deposits of red brown silty sand. No natural geology was observed on site in this area and as the whole Hall is built on a raised platform overlooking the lake it is possible that this landscaping dates to the 17th- and 18th-century redevelopment of the land. Medieval deposits could have survived below this build up.

Although no medieval finds were recorded in this watching brief the three recorded building features do give us some useful indication as to the extent of the former Beckett Hall. The current standing wall was seen to be surviving at least 3m below the current ground surface, itself forming a built up landscaped plinth in the surrounding countryside. This was most likely to be a cellar wall showing the possible depths of this building.

It is unlikely, given the relationship of the cistern to the culverts and the culverts to the wall, that any of these recorded features predate the redevelopment of Beckett Hall and from their position almost certainly form part of the recently demolished out building of the Hall and are therefore of a relatively modern date. It is still possible that remnants of the earlier manor survive in other areas below the raised plinth.

References

- BGS, 1971, *British Geological Survey*, 1:63360, Sheet 253, Drift Edition, Keyworth
- Briggs, G, Cook, J, and Rowley, T (eds), 1986, *The Archaeology of the Oxford Region*, Oxford Univ Dept External Stud
- Coddington, H, 2005, 'Beckett Hall, Royal Military College of Science, Shrivenham: Design brief for archaeological watching brief', Oxfordshire County Archaeological Service.
- PPG 16, 1990, *Archaeology and Planning*, Dept of the Environment Planning Policy Guidance 16, HMSO



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Figure 1. Location of site within Shrivenham and Oxfordshire.

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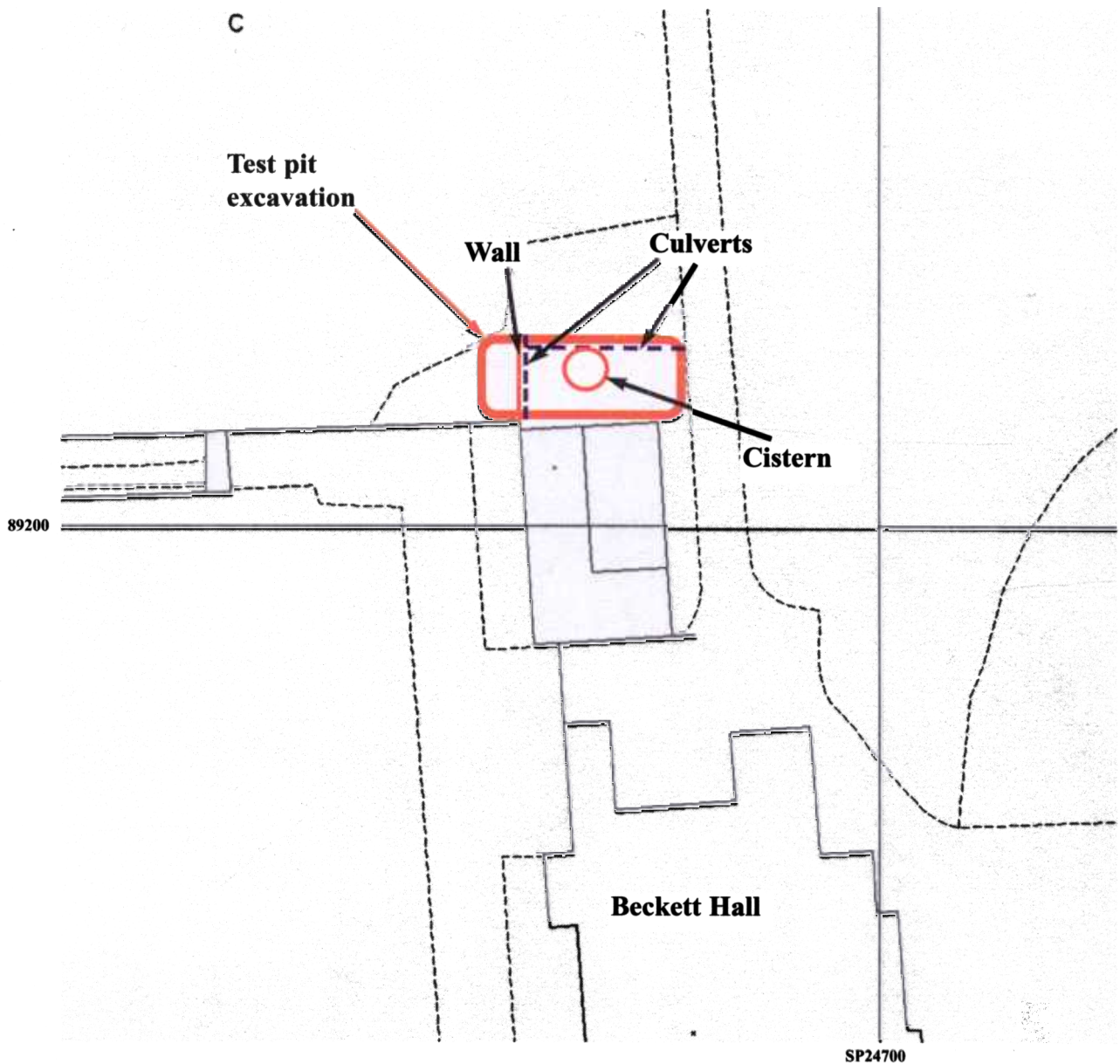
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Figure 2. Location of watching brief at Beckett Hall.

Scale: 1:12500

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Figure 3. Location of culverts and cistern.

Scale: 1:625

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