

# Early Roman boundaries at Headington School, Headington, Oxford

by Simon Cass

with contributions by Jane Timby and Joanna Pine

**Report 07/149b**

## **Summary**

*An excavation in advance of construction of a new music building within the grounds of Headington School, Headington, Oxford, uncovered Early Roman boundaries forming part of a rectilinear plan. The majority of features encountered can be dated to the first century with a few residual sherds of late Iron Age pottery. The boundaries probably form part of a field or enclosure complex but with domestic occupation not too far removed.*

## **Introduction**

An archaeological investigation was undertaken by Thames Valley Archaeological Services at Headington School, Headington, Oxford (SP 5374 0685), during June 2008. Planning permission (App no. 07/01484/FUL) has been granted by Oxford City Council for the construction of a new music building on the site of an existing temporary classroom, to the west of the main school complex. This consent was subject to a condition (13) requiring a scheme of archaeological mitigation to be undertaken. This took the form of a geophysical survey of the area to be developed (Haddrell 2008), followed by trial trenching to investigate anomalies identified by the survey (Cass and Pine 2008), and finally a small area excavation to investigate further the archaeological remains identified, as reported here. This follows the guidance in *Archaeology and Planning* (PPG16, 1990) and the City Council's policies on archaeology. The archaeological work was carried out to a written scheme of investigation approved by Brian Durham, Oxford City Archaeological Officer.

Headington School lies at Headington Hill, to the north-east of central Oxford. The school grounds are bounded on the south by the A420 and to the north by an area of residential property. The excavated area lies to the west of the main buildings, slightly to the rear of the property, with playing fields further to the west (Fig. 2). The site slopes down slightly from north to south at a height of approximately 96.2m above Ordnance Datum. According to the British Geological Survey (BGS 1994) the underlying geology is Beckley Sand and this was observed across the area stripped.

## *Archaeological Background*

The site lies within an area from which a wide range of sites and find-spots from various periods have been recorded. The historic core of the medieval village of Headington is a short distance to the north-east, though the site is believed to lie outside this zone. A number of find-spots and sites of Roman date have been previously identified in the environs, including those relating to pottery production such as kilns (Briggs et al 1986, maps 9 and 10). The areas to the south and east of Oxford are notable for the large quantity of kiln sites whose produce was widely traded across southern England during Roman times. Several kilns are recorded at Headington such as at Headington Quarry to the south, Headington Poor Lot to the north east and at Headington Wick also to the north east along with a villa complex (Henig and Booth 2000 fig 6.7; Dodd 2003, fig 2.1; Young 1977 fig. 2). None though are yet recorded especially close to this development site.

## *The evaluation*

The site was initially subject to a geophysical survey (Haddrell, 2008). The survey revealed a number of anomalies, several of which clearly related to modern activity, but with others vague linear patterns of uncertain origin. Further evaluation then took place with four trenches being excavated by machine to provide a uniform coverage of the site and investigate the anomalies identified by the geophysical survey. (Cass and Pine 2008). This trenching identified archaeological deposits in two of the trenches on the western side of the site comprising seven linear features dating from early Roman period with residual pottery finds of later Iron Age date.

## **The excavation**

The third phase of work carried out described below consisted of an area excavation covering the total footprint of the new building. A roughly square area of approximately 900 sq m (Fig. 2) was stripped of topsoil and subsoil, under constant archaeological supervision, by a machine fitted with a toothless bucket to expose the uppermost levels of archaeological interest. All archaeological features were investigated by hand.

## **Phase summary**

Activity on site the site can be considered as belonging to two phases, namely the late Iron Age/Early Roman period and later post-medieval period.

### *Phase 1: Late Iron Age/Early Roman*

The majority of the features date to this period. These deposits mostly comprise four, possibly five approximately parallel linear features aligned east- west (1000,1001,1002,1003) which all terminate within 5m of each other. The fifth deposit (3) may be a similar feature but was only revealed at the very edge of the stripped area. The four main linear features appear to be associated with wide linear feature 1005 which is aligned north-south. Together these elements appear to form a rectilinear corner, such as a paddock, field or enclosure, most of which lies to the north west beyond the stripped area.

Gully 1000 was 0.65m wide and 0.25m deep. It was investigated by three slots (7, 105, 108). It contained 120 sherds of Early Roman pottery. Its relationship with feature 107 was unclear; the pottery suggests 1000 may be slightly later than 1001 and 1002, but there is not sufficient of it to rely on this.

Gully 1001 was 0.6m wide and 0.3m deep. It was investigated by three slots (6 and 106, 110). It contained 6 sherds of Early Roman pottery and a fragment of fired clay. Its relationship with feature 107 was unclear whereas it was cut by gully 1002.

Gully 1002 was 0.8m wide and 0.15m deep and investigated by two slots (5 and 102). It contained 3 sherds of Late Iron Age pottery. These sherds are residual as this feature cuts gully 1001.

Gully 1003 was 0.7m wide and 0.13m deep but shallowing out to 0.06m deep at the east end. It was investigated by two slots (4 and 101). It contained 4 sherds of Early Roman pottery. A fragment of post-medieval pottery and glass was recovered from the surface of this feature but are thought to have come from remnant topsoil and do not date it.

Feature 107 was *c.* 3.2m wide and at least 10m of it was exposed within the trench. It was steep sided, nearly vertical in places and flat-based at a depth of approximately 0.75m at its deepest point. It contained five sherds of Early Roman (1st century) pottery. It was considered that this feature represents a gully/ditch recut on several occasions but without showing any evidence of variation in either the fills nor profile to support this suggestion.

A small pit (103) oval in plan up to 1.1m across, and 0.4m deep with a bowl-shaped profile. Dating evidence was limited to a single sherd of Early Roman pottery. In the context of the site with only two phases of activity represented and the proximity of this feature to other better dated Roman features, It seems reasonable to assume that this feature is of Roman date.

## *Phase 2 Post-Medieval*

This phase is represented by two ditches. To the east was a north-south orientated ditch, 100, to the east of the site. This feature was approximately 1.0m wide and 0.1m deep and contained modern (19th/20th century glazed pottery (not retained). Further investigation of the terminal of ditch 3 on the south western margin of the site produced 5 sherds of 17th-19th century pottery. A small number of 19th or 20th century ceramic field-drains, were also observed.

## *Undated*

Posthole 104 was undated, although its position in the immediate vicinity of the early Roman gullies could point to a similar date. It was 0.3m in diameter and 0.15m deep.

## **Finds**

### *The Pottery By Jane Timby*

The evaluation and subsequent excavation resulted in the recovery of a small assemblage of 158 sherds of pottery, weighing 3338g, dating to the later prehistoric, early Roman and post-medieval periods. Generally the material is very well preserved with large sherds, several from single vessels, suggesting relatively undisturbed contexts. The overall average sherd weight is 21g. The pottery was all recovered from the concentration of gullies, pits and ditches on the western zone of the excavated area.

The assemblage was sorted into fabrics based on the type and frequency of the main inclusions present and quantified by sherd count and weight for each recorded context. Freshly broken sherds were counted as one. The later prehistoric fabrics are cross-referenced to the Oxford Archaeology's fabric system (E prefixes). The Roman wares are coded following the National Roman fabric system format (Tomber and Dore 1998).

### Later Prehistoric

Three joining rim sherds from a fine, flint-tempered (fabric E60), handmade jar came from gully 1002 (slot 5, 56) (Fig. 4: 1). The vessel was sooted through use on both the interior and exterior surfaces. No further pottery was recovered from this gully.

### Later Prehistoric-Roman

Most of the assemblage contains material that can be dated to the 1st century AD. These comprised a mixture of handmade and wheelmade grog-tempered vessels, sandy wares, a calcareous ware and early products of the Oxfordshire industry.

**Grog-tempered** fabrics (E80) account for nearly 71% of the total LIA-early Roman assemblage, some 107 sherds. Vessels include a handmade carinated bowl or jar, handmade storage jar, and wheelmade necked jars/bowls including one with fine rilling on the upper body (Fig. 4: 2) and a barrel-shaped beaded rim jar (Fig. 4: 3).

**Sandy** wares (E30) were limited to five handmade sherds, one a rim from a necked jar (Fig. 4: 4).

**Calcareous** wares (?E40) were confined to 11 small very vesicular, friable pieces which are presumed to belong to this period from their association with other wares.

**Oxfordshire** wares. Several slightly different textured grey wares were present ranging from a medium sandy to fine. Most (20 sherds) are of a fine grey ware (OXF REF) typical of early Oxfordshire products and include a cordoned jar and a necked jar (Fig. 4: 5). A slightly coarser grey sandy fabric was used to make a butt beaker (Fig. 4: 6). Also present are two small oxidized sherds, one whiteware and a sherd from a whiteware *mortarium* (OXF WH) indicative of a late 1st-early 2nd century date. The *mortarium* (Fig. 4: 7) does not quite conform to the standardized whitewares associated with the Oxford industry since it has red ferruginous grains amongst the rounded quartz trituration grits. However, it is probably acceptable as an early experimental piece belonging to the earlier phase of the industry (P. Booth pers. comm.).

### Post-medieval

Four sherds from a glazed (PMGRE) and unglazed (PMREW) red earthenware bowls were recovered from feature 3 (50) and the top of gully 1003 (slot 101).

### Discussion

The flint-tempered jar, presumed to be of late Iron Age date, was the only pottery from gully 1002 but is residual. Gullies 3 and 1003 produced late Iron Age grog, sand or calcareous wares which could date either side of the conquest. As such these are amongst the earlier features on the basis of the pottery. Gully 1000 (slot 105) produced the largest group of material with 118 sherds, 75% of the total assemblage. The group comprises a mixture of grog-tempered wares alongside a necked jar in fine grey sandy ware, the butt beaker and the *mortarium* indicating a date in the later 1st century AD. Gully 1004 similarly produced a mixture of grog-tempered and early Oxfordshire wares suggesting a similar date. Pit 103 contained a single Oxfordshire whiteware sherd and gully 1003 (slot 101), three Oxfordshire wares from the fill suggesting these two features are the latest on the site dating to the later 1st or early 2nd century.

In conclusion the site appears to have been occupied in the later Iron Age and early Roman period and, following the established pattern for many of the rural occupation sites of this date in this region, was abandoned by the early 2nd century.

### *Catalogue of illustrated sherds*

1. Handmade jar. Fabric: Flint E60. Gully 1002 (slot 5, 56).
2. Wheelmade necked jar. Fabric E80. Leached interior surface. Gully 1000 (slot 105, 155).

3. Wheelmade barrel-shaped jar with a beaded rim and slight shoulder offset. Reddish-brown in colour. Fabric: E80. Gully 1000 (slot 105, 155).
4. Handmade rolled rim jar. Sooted exterior. Fabric E30. Gully 1000 (slot 105, 155).
5. Wheelmade necked jar with a slight cordon. Fabric: OXF RE (fine). Gully 1000 (slot 105, 155).
6. Wheelmade butt beaker. Fabric: Sandy OXF RE. Gully 1000 (slot 105, 155).
7. Wheelmade *mortarium*. Fabric OXFWH. Gully 1000 (7, 58)

### *Charred plant remains by Joanna Pine*

Three samples taken from pits 103 and 104 and gully 1000 (slot 105). The features were of small size and only 10 Litre samples could be taken. These were wet sieved using a 0.25mm mesh. No seeds were present in any of the flots. Identifiable charcoal was limited to two fragments of Oak (*Quercus* sp) c.5mm in size from gully 1000.

### *The Glass by Simon Cass*

One piece glass was recovered from the gully 1003 (slot 101). It appears to be part of the underside of a green bottle kick and likely to be of modern intrusive origin.

### *Animal Bone by Simon Cass*

Seventeen small fragments of animal bone were recovered from three deposits, 103, 104 and 1000 (slot 105), weighing a total of just 5g. One piece from 105 has been burnt but the small size of the individual fragments prevents identification much less further analysis.

### *Brick, Tile and Fired Clay by Simon Cass*

Four fragments of tile or possibly brick were located during the course of the excavation. They were found on the surface of gully 1003 (slot 101) and weighed a total of 140g. They are likely to be of Roman date, but have few closely datable characteristics. A few undiagnostic fragments of fired clay was recovered from two deposits; 44g from gully 1005 (slot 107) and 4g from a bulk sample taken from pit 103.

## **Discussion**

The fieldwork described above has further added to the known distribution of Late Iron Age and Roman sites in east Oxford, though the full nature of what has been recorded is necessarily unclear due to the limited area investigated. The main phase of activity represented dates to the early Roman period. Some pottery of late Iron

Age date was recovered, which whilst only as residual material, nevertheless indicates some activity in the vicinity at this time. The early Roman ditches appears to represent boundary definition with their right-angled plan giving an indication of a rectilinear layout such as for a field or paddock, or, less likely, for a settlement enclosure. The volume of pottery recovered from gully 1000 with large unabraded sherds, does imply disposal of rubbish not too far from the domestic setting where it originated. The boundary appears to have been redefined on at least 3 occasions, but not specifically close to the previously defined line. The complex of deposits extends further to the north-west.

The site appears to have gone out of use quite early in the 2nd century with neither feature digging nor artefact deposition being recorded until boundary ditch digging in later post-medieval times was noted.

## **Acknowledgements**

The work was commissioned by Mr. Michael Clarkson, Bursar of Headington School. The excavation team consisted of Simon Cass, Jamie Lewis, James Haygreen and Steve Crabb. Mr Brian Durham of Oxford City Council monitored the work. The archive is currently held by Thames Valley Archaeological Services and will be deposited with Oxfordshire Museum Service in due course. The site code is HSO07/149.

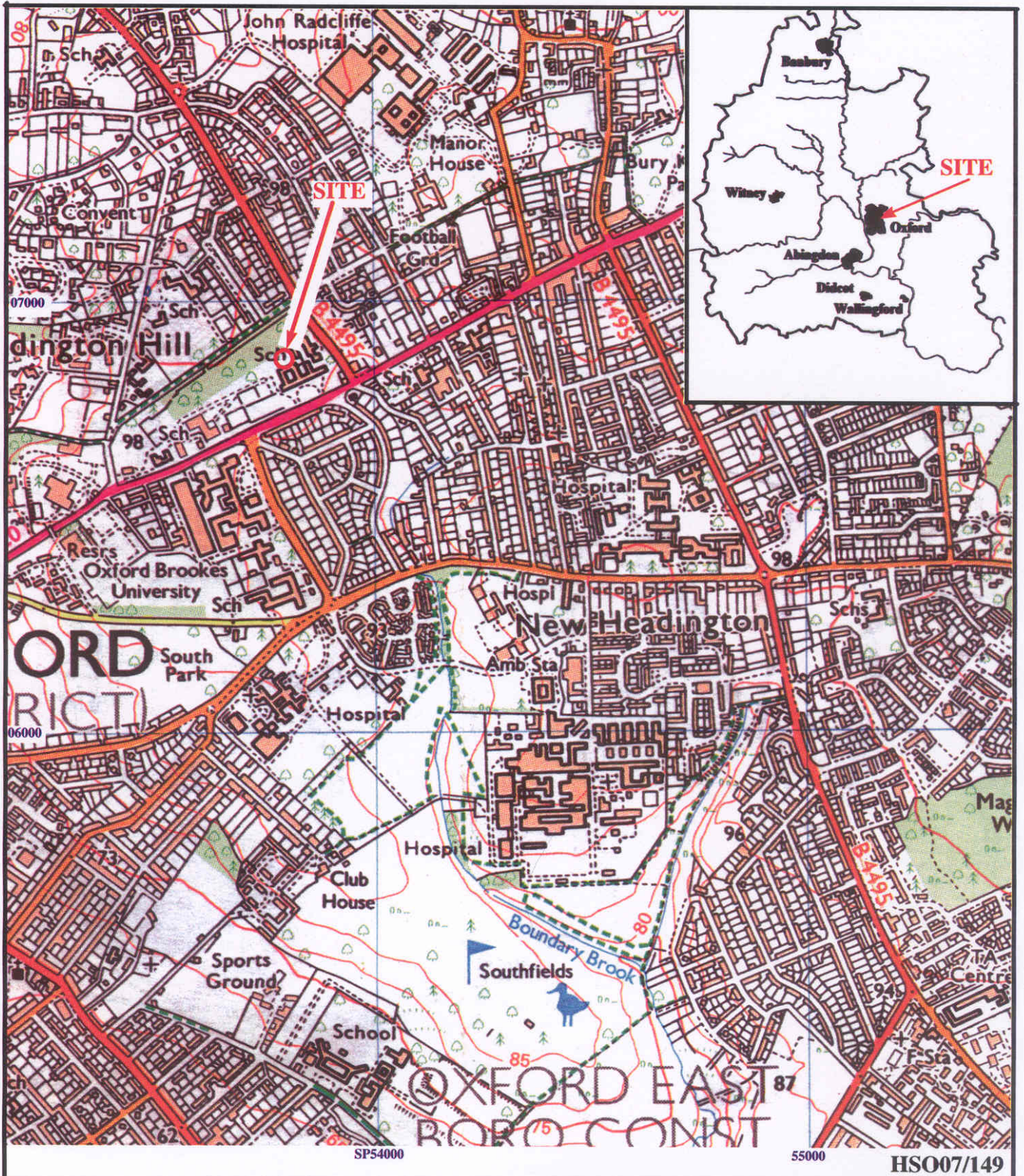
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**Table 1:** Pottery by context

<i>Cut</i>	<i>Cxt</i>	<i>Type</i>	<i>Fabric</i>	<i>OA/NFC</i>	<i>Wt</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Rim</i>	<i>Comment</i>
3	50		PMGRE		63	1	1	post-medieval
3	51		GROG	E80	22	2		
3	54		GROG	E80	80	1	1	wheel made early Roman
3	54		GROG	E80	40	3		
3	54		GROG	E80	286		3	well preserved
3	54		SAND	E30	10	1		
3	54		VESIC	E40?	30	11		very light, handmade prehistoric?
5	56		FLINT	E60	50		3	sooted exterior and interior
6	57		GROG	E80	20	1		
7	58		OXFREF	OXF RE	18	3		
7	58		OXFWH	OXFWH	320		1	
7	58		SAND	E30	28	2		
101	151	gully	OXFOX	OXF OX	2	1		
101	151	gully	OXFRE	OXF RE	4	1		
101	151	gully	OXFREF	OXF RE	3		1	
101	top	gully	PMREW		74	1	1	white slip decoration Post-medieval
103	153	pit	OXFWH	OXF WH	4	1		
105	155	ditch	GREY	OXF RE	4		1	butt beaker
105	155	ditch	GRSJ	E80	91	1		
105	155	ditch	GRSA	E80	799	68	5	1 vessel
105	155	ditch	GRSA	E80	814	5	8	1 vessel
105	155	ditch	GYF	OXF RE	111	15	1	wheelmade
105	155	ditch	SAND	E30	102	2	1	
106	156	ditch	GROG	E80	41	3		
106	156	ditch	GRSA	E80	124	2		
107	157	pit	GROG	E80	101	3		carinated bowl
107	157	pit	GROGSJ	E80	83		1	
107	157	pit	OXFOX	OXF OX	4	1		
107	157	pit	OXFRE	OXF RE	10	1		sparse quartz
<b>total</b>					<b>3338</b>	<b>130</b>	<b>28</b>	





**New Music Building, Headington School,  
Headington, Oxford 2008  
An Archaeological Excavation**

Figure 1. Location of site within Oxford and Headington

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# New Music Building, Headington School, Headington, Oxford, 2008

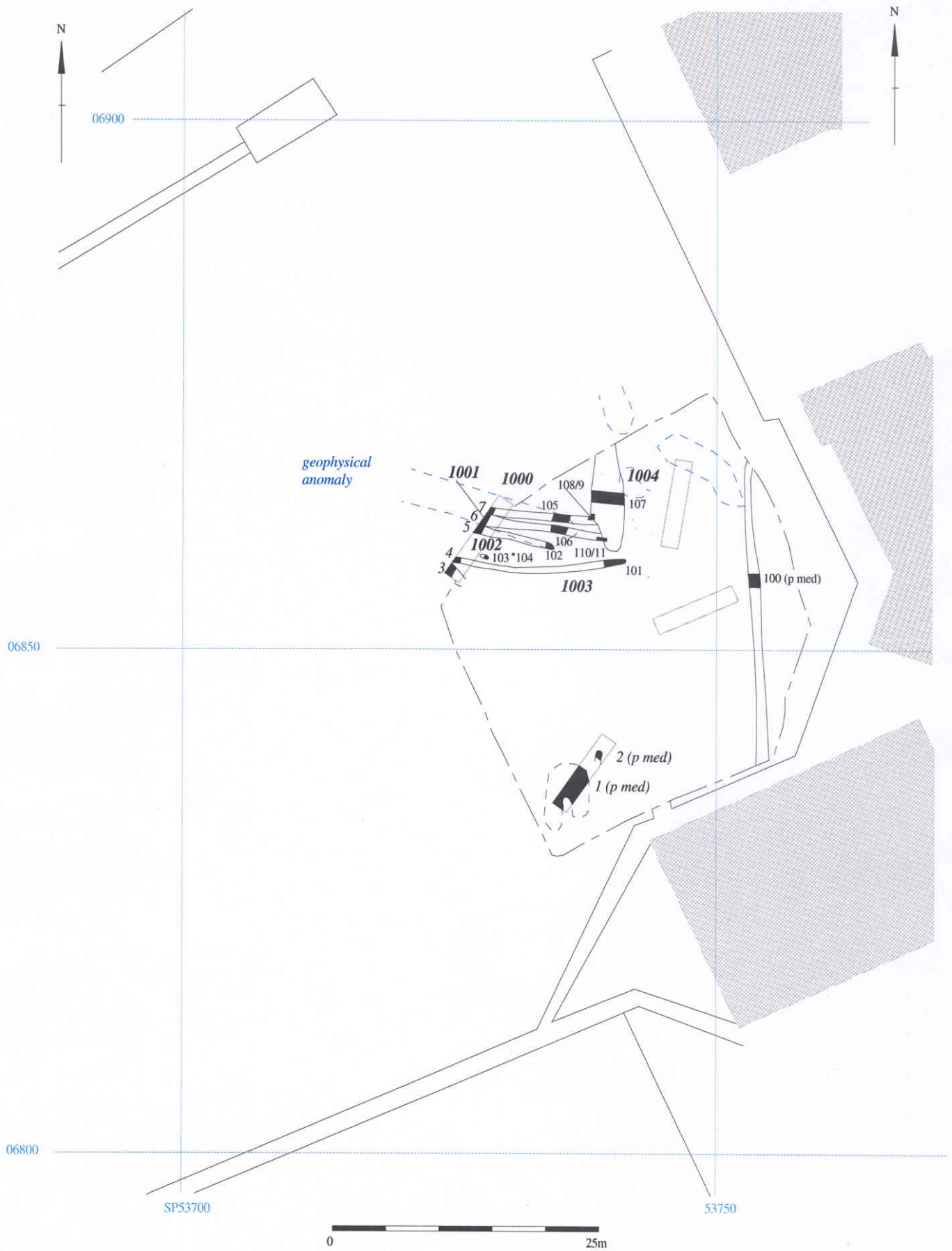


Figure 2. Location of excavation area showing previous evaluation trenches.

# New Music Building, Headington School, Oxford

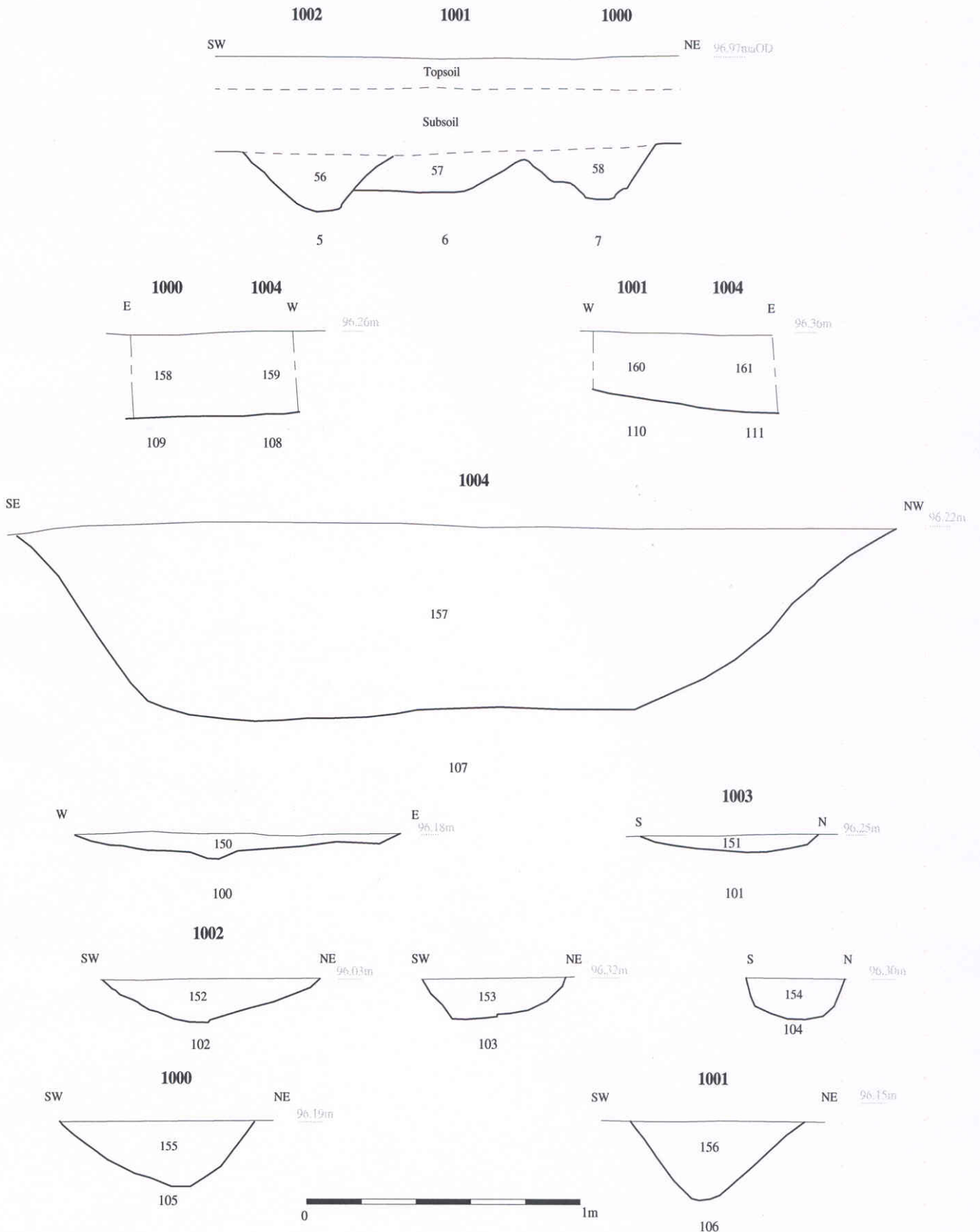
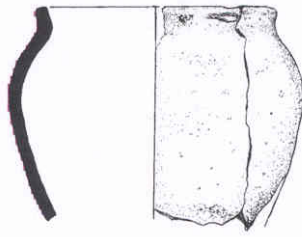
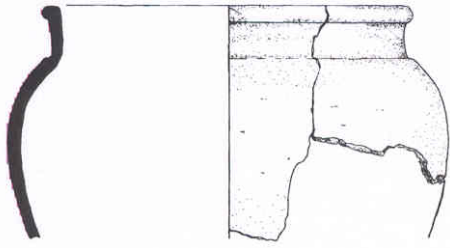


Figure 3. Sections

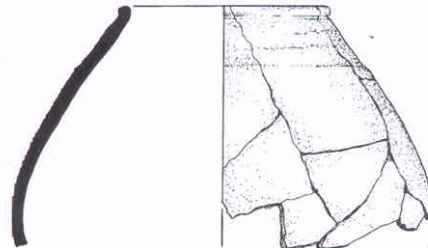


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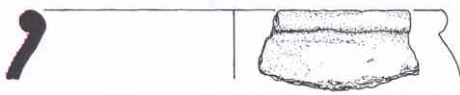
Later Prehistoric



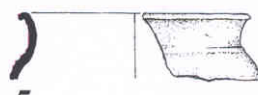
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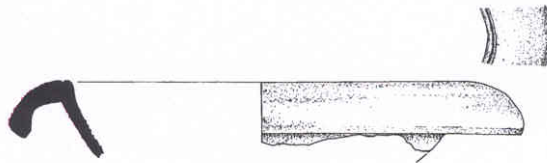
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5



6



7

1st Century

