

# **South Lodge Courtyard, Merton College, Oxford**

**An Archaeological Watching Brief**

**For Merton College**

by James Lewis

Thames Valley Archaeological Services Ltd

Site Code MCO 08/24

**July 2009**

## Summary

**Site name:** South Lodge Courtyard, Merton College, Oxford.

**Grid reference:** SP 5193 0609

**Site activity:** Watching Brief

**Date and duration of project:** 13th–17th of July 2009

**Project manager:** Steve Ford

**Site supervisor:** James Lewis

**Site code:** MCO08/24

**Area of site:** c. 120 sq m

**Summary of results:** Four ditches, two of which are likely to be of medieval date, one of uncertain date but earlier than these, and one post-medieval were identified.

**Monuments identified:** Medieval boundary ditches.

**Location and reference of archive:** The archive is presently held at Thames Valley Archaeological Services, Reading and will be deposited at Oxfordshire County Museums Service with accession code OXCMS:2008.101.

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Report edited/checked by:	Steve Ford ✓ 20.10.09
	Steve Preston ✓ 19.10.09

# South Lodge Courtyard, Merton College, Oxford An Archaeological Watching Brief

by James Lewis

**Report 08/24c**

## **Introduction**

This report documents the results of an archaeological watching brief carried out at the South Lodge Courtyard, Merton College, Oxford (SP 5193 0609) (Fig. 1). The work was commissioned by Mr Jolyon Price of Ridge and Partners LLP, The Cowyards, Blenheim Park, Oxford Road, Woodstock, OX20 1QR on behalf of Merton College, Oxford.

Planning permission has been sought (08/01454/FUL) from Oxford City Council for the construction of a new lecture theatre in South Lodge Courtyard, Merton College. The archaeological potential of the site was highlighted in a desk-based assessment (Preston 2008) and subsequent evaluation (Lewis 2008) which recorded early post-medieval activity. Due to the close proximity of the site to the medieval city walls and based on the results of the evaluation, a watching brief was requested by Mr David Radford, Oxford City Council's Archaeologist.

This is in accordance with the Department of the Environment's Planning Policy Guidance, *Archaeology and Planning* (PPG16 1990), and the City Council's policies on archaeology. The field investigation was carried out to a specification approved by Mr David Radford, Oxford City Council's Archaeologist. The fieldwork was undertaken by James Lewis between 13th–17th July 2009 and the site code is MCO08/24. The archive is presently held at Thames Valley Archaeological Services, Reading and will be deposited at Oxfordshire County Museums Service in due course with accession code OXCMS:2008.101.

## **Location, topography and geology**

The site is located on a small irregularly-shaped parcel of land in central Oxford, between South Lodge and Meadow Cottages, to the west of Rose Lane and south of High Street, facing the Botanic Gardens and backing onto Merton College. It includes part of the College's Rose Lane building, which is stepped slightly above the surrounding ground level. A wall of Merton College, which was also part of the medieval city wall, forms the western boundary of the plot, but is not included within the area to be developed. The site lies at around 57m above Ordnance Datum on the floodplain of the River Cherwell just north of its confluence with the Thames, in

an area where both rivers are extensively braided. The site's geology is mapped as being on the First Terrace (floodplain) gravels (BGS 1982) very close to the boundary with the alluvium of the Cherwell.

## **Archaeological background**

The desk-based assessment details the archaeological background for the area (Preston 2008). In summary, finds of all periods from the Palaeolithic onwards have been made in the vicinity of the site, with a probable major Neolithic site suspected at nearby Christchurch, and Iron Age settlement widely attested. It seems that the city itself had no or little Roman settlement, despite the potential existence of two major river crossings in the area (Henig and Booth 2000, 50). Rather, settlement appears to have spread along the gravel terrace with quite a density of sites, perhaps one every kilometre.

A Saxon *burh* was founded by AD900 at the latest, however an earlier Saxon settlement certainly existed in the area. The evolution of the Saxon town can be traced through the development of the street systems and the town defences (Hassall 1986, 118–20). The High Street seems to have existed in its current form, already extensively built up, by the 11th century at latest (Dodd 2003), and although it has been argued that the Saxon defences extended no further east than the Church of St Mary the Virgin and Oriel Street (Hassall 1975), what has been thought to be a Saxon bank has been identified on the same line as the medieval walls within Merton College. These were either an extension to, or the main line of, the Saxon defences which can now be placed on the same line as the medieval wall (Dodd 2003, fig. 2.4).

Early Norman Oxford seems to have suffered from initial neglect or decline, but if so, the decline was short-lived and Oxford was again one of the country's major towns by the early 12th century. Abbeys, friaries and monastic colleges were drawn to the city and the University cemented its importance. It was not long before medieval Oxford expanded beyond its defensive walls (Hassall 1986, 124) and indeed even at the time of Domesday Book houses outside the walls are mentioned. As yet there is no solid evidence for expansion beyond the Eastgate (as there is to the west and south) however, there was at least St John's Hospital by the late 12th century next to Magdalen Bridge, and the Trinitarian priory closer to the walls (Salter 1936). St Frideswide's minster and priory owned extensive property and its grange barn (which is thought to have been located close to the present site) would have been an important building.

A previous evaluation found no evidence for the priory or any definite medieval deposits it did however find a 19th-century school and an earlier post-medieval ditch (Lewis 2008).

## **Objectives and methodology**

The purpose of the watching brief was to excavate and record any archaeological deposits affected by the groundworks. This involved examination of all areas of intrusive groundworks in particular ground reduction for the new basement.

## **Results**

During the watching brief it was possible to observe the removal of the soil associated with the construction of the basement and excavate and record all archaeological deposits found. No archaeological features were observed in the north-east part of the basement however in the south-west area several intercutting ditches were recorded (Fig. 3).

### Undated Ditch (7)

The earliest ditch (7) was aligned NW-SE and the surviving dimensions were at least 10m in length, 1m wide and 0.5m deep. The ditch contained two fills; the uppermost was light grey-orange gravel and sand (79). This included small snail shells, occasional animal bone and a worked stone possibly a post pad. Below this was a thin layer of grey-clayey silt (78) 0.1m thick which also contained small snail shell inclusions. Unfortunately, no pottery or other dating evidence was recovered from the ditch.

### Medieval Ditch (100)

Ditch 100 truncated the SW side of undated ditch 7. This was likewise aligned NW-SE and the surviving measurements were; 10m in length, 2.2m wide and 0.8m deep. The ditch was identified in sections 3 (where it was labelled 4) and 4 (where it was labelled 6). Section 3 displayed the base of the medieval ditch (100) and the post-medieval ditch (101) truncating it. Ditch 100 appeared to contain a wood and stone lined drain (3). This contained soft plastic grey clay (67) within which was found pottery which is dated from the late 11th to mid 14th century. This fill was enclosed by a number of wooden (possibly oak) slats (80) which measured at least 2m in length, 0.05m wide and were 0.01m thick. This in turn was encased in a layer of small stones which were only identified on the south-east side and the top of the drain. The stones (86) were limestone and measured about 0.1m sq. The drain appeared to cut through black soft silty clay (68 and 69) which formed the earliest fill of the medieval ditch. Within this were found tile and charcoal inclusions and pottery dated between the late 11th to mid 15th century. This context was very similar to fill 75 recorded in section 4. Above this but not cut by the drain was light brown silty clay (70 and 82). This contained pottery dated between the 13th and 16th centuries. This fill was also truncated by the post-medieval ditch (101).

Section 4 displayed the remains of four ditches; the undated ditch (7), a medieval ditch (100), a later medieval ditch (9) and a post medieval ditch (101). Five fills (75, 76, 83, 84 and 85) were identified in the medieval ditch. The earliest fill (83) was grey brown sand and this was located at the base on the NE side of the ditch. No finds were associated with this fill and it probably formed through an initial slump soon after the ditch was dug. Above this was black, organic soft silt (75), which was the main base fill of the ditch, up to 0.3m thick. This fill contained small pieces of wood and pottery broadly dating to the late 11th to mid 15th century. Above this lay grey silty clay (76) which was between 0.1m to 0.3m thick, and pottery dated to the 13th to 16th century was recovered from this context. Overlying this was light grey silty clay (85) with no inclusions. Above this was grey black silty clay (84) with no inclusions. These two fills were located on the SE side of the ditch and were cut by the later medieval ditch (9) and the post-medieval ditch (101).

#### Later Medieval Ditch (9)

This ditch was only identified in section 4. It had a single fill of dark orange-grey clayey sand (77) which was 0.9m thick and included bone, pottery and iron. The pottery can be dated from the 13th century.

#### Post-Medieval Ditch (101)

Post-medieval ditch (101) was aligned NE-SW. The ditch measured 0.9m deep and contained two fills. The earliest fill was black soft silty clay (72) which was 0.3m thick and was very similar to fill 71 which was observed in the section 3. This included small snail shells and pieces of wood, however no pottery was recovered from this fill. Above this was blue-black clay (73) which was the main fill of the post-medieval ditch and this was 0.9m thick with charcoal inclusions and 16th century pottery. During the evaluation a very small amount of 19th century pottery was also found at the very top of this feature. During the evaluation the conditions were less than ideal and this pottery could have been intrusive from Victorian dumping above.

#### 19th-century feature

The post-medieval ditch in turn was cut by a large 19th-century feature (8) located at the very edge of the basement area. It was unclear if this feature was a ditch or a large pit. It contained soft black smelly silt (81) with large roots, branches and pottery inclusions.

#### 19th -20th century Wall

Located at the west end of the east wing of the modern building were the remains of a wall (66). The wall measured 3m in length, 0.34m wide and was 0.95m deep. The wall was exposed on its east side and consisted of 3-5 courses of red brick set upon 3 courses of irregular shaped limestone blocks. The wall cut through dark brown sandy clay (65) which contained tile and bone. This overlay thick brown sandy clay (64) which contained

lenses of mortar and building rubble and 19th-century pottery. The wall presumably belongs to the school which stood here during the 20th century.

## **Finds**

### *Pottery by Paul Blinkhorn*

The pottery assemblage comprised 61 sherds with a total weight of 1173g. It comprised a mixture of medieval and post-medieval material, with most of the former dating to the 13th century. It was recorded utilizing the coding system and chronology of the Oxfordshire County type-series (Mellor 1984; 1994), as follows:

OXY: Medieval Oxford ware, AD1075–1350. 12 sherds, 44g.

OXAM: Brill/Boarstall ware, AD1200–1600. 22 sherds, 184g.

OXST: Rhenish Stoneware, AD1480–1700. 5 sherds, 249g.

OXFH: Border wares, AD 1550–1700. 1 sherd, 5g.

OXDR: Red Earthenwares, AD1550 onwards. 2 sherds, 141g.

OXFM: Staffordshire White-glazed English Stoneware, 1730–1800. 1 sherd, 4g.

WHEW: Mass-produced white earthenwares, 19th - 20th century. 18 sherds, 546g.

The pottery occurrence by number and weight of sherds per context by fabric type is shown in Appendix 2. Each date should be regarded as a *terminus post quem*. The range of fabric types is typical of sites of the period in Oxford. The medieval material mainly dates to the 13th century, but much of the pottery in the ditches, (particularly context 77) is somewhat abraded, and likely to be re-deposited, suggesting that the backfilling of the features dates to the time when Merton College was established in Oxford in 1274.

Most of the medieval sherds are from jars and jugs, but the five sherds of German Stoneware from context 73 are all from the same beer-mug, a typical product of the tradition, and probably dating to the 16th century. Previous excavations at Merton College found that drinking pottery was particularly well-represented in contexts of such date (Blinkhorn in press a), and it seems to be a feature of late medieval and early post-medieval assemblages in Oxford Colleges generally, as a similar pattern was also seen amongst contemporary assemblages at Christchurch College (Blinkhorn in press b)

### *Struck Flint by Steve Ford*

A small collection comprising just 2 struck flints was recovered during the course of the watching brief. One was recovered from ditch 100 (77) and the second from ditch 7 (78). They were both broken flakes and clearly residual. Neither piece is closely datable and only a broad Neolithic or Bronze Age date can be suggested.

## Conclusion

The finding of the medieval (and possibly earlier) ditches was an unexpected bonus during the investigation. The function of these ditches is unclear and the lack of dating evidence from the earliest ditch is a problem. Despite this it is possible to suggest a medieval date for this feature, since it is on the same alignment as medieval ditch 100, which indicates that the latter could be re-cutting an earlier ditch which was still visible.

The ditches are located outside the extent of the Saxon *burh* and the medieval defences. Although they might represent an extension to the city defences undertaken during a time of conflict a more likely function is that they were related to the expansion of the city beyond its eastern walls. The ditches perhaps represent boundaries or were used for drainage or both. That they were aligned perpendicular to Rose Lane implies the existence of this lane at an early date. Until more evidence is found, however, the function and date of the boundary must remain conjecture.

Agas's 1578 map of Oxford display no ditches within the study area (Dodd 2003). This suggests either that the ditch was filled in by this time or a lack of detail on the map.

The post-medieval ditch seems to date from the 16th century or later. Unlike the earlier ditches the clayey nature of the fills suggest repeated waterlogging within the ditch and the presence of pottery and charcoal inclusions indicate activity close by. This is borne out by Loggan's map of 1675 (Dodd 2003) which depicts buildings and possibly a ditch in approximately the same area and alignment as the one being discussed.

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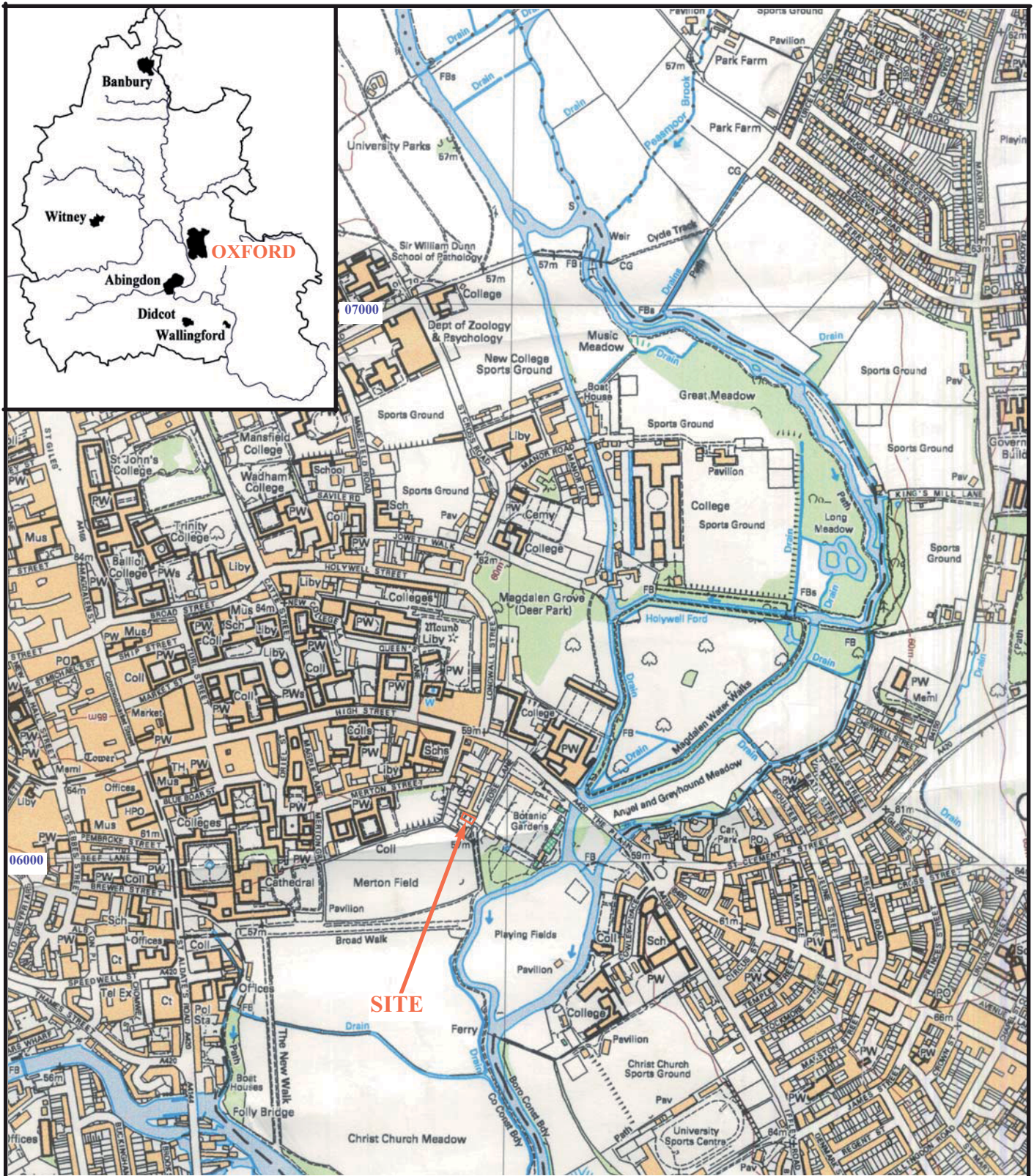


**APPENDIX 1: Feature details**

<i>Group</i>	<i>Cut</i>	<i>Fill (s)</i>	<i>Type</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Dating evidence</i>
	1	59	Ditch	16th century	Pottery
	3	67, 80, 81	Ditch	Late 11th century	Pottery
100	4	68, 69, 70	Ditch	Late 11th–13th century	Pottery
101	5	72, 73	Ditch	16th century	Pottery
100	6	75, 76, 83, 84, 85	Ditch	13th century	Pottery
	7	78, 79	Ditch	Unknown	None
102	8	81	Pit	19th century	Pottery
	9	77	Ditch	13th century	Pottery
		66	Wall	19th century	Stratigraphic
		64, 65	layer	18th-19th century	Pottery

**APPENDIX 2:** Pottery occurrence by number and weight (in g) of sherds per context by fabric type

<i>F</i>	<i>Cntxt</i>	<i>OXY</i>		<i>OXAM</i>		<i>OXST</i>		<i>OXFH</i>		<i>OXDR</i>		<i>OXFM</i>		<i>WHEW</i>		<i>Date</i>
		<i>No</i>	<i>Wt</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Wt</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Wt</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Wt</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Wt</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Wt</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Wt</i>	
1	59													2	19	19thC
3	67	1	2													L11thC
4	68	1	5													L11thC
4	70			3	6											13thC
5	73					5	249									16thC
6	75	5	15	2	23											13thC
6	76			1	1											13thC
6	77	5	22	16	154											13thC
8	81									2	141			5	145	19thC
	Total	12	44	22	184	5	249	1	5	2	141	1	4	18	546	



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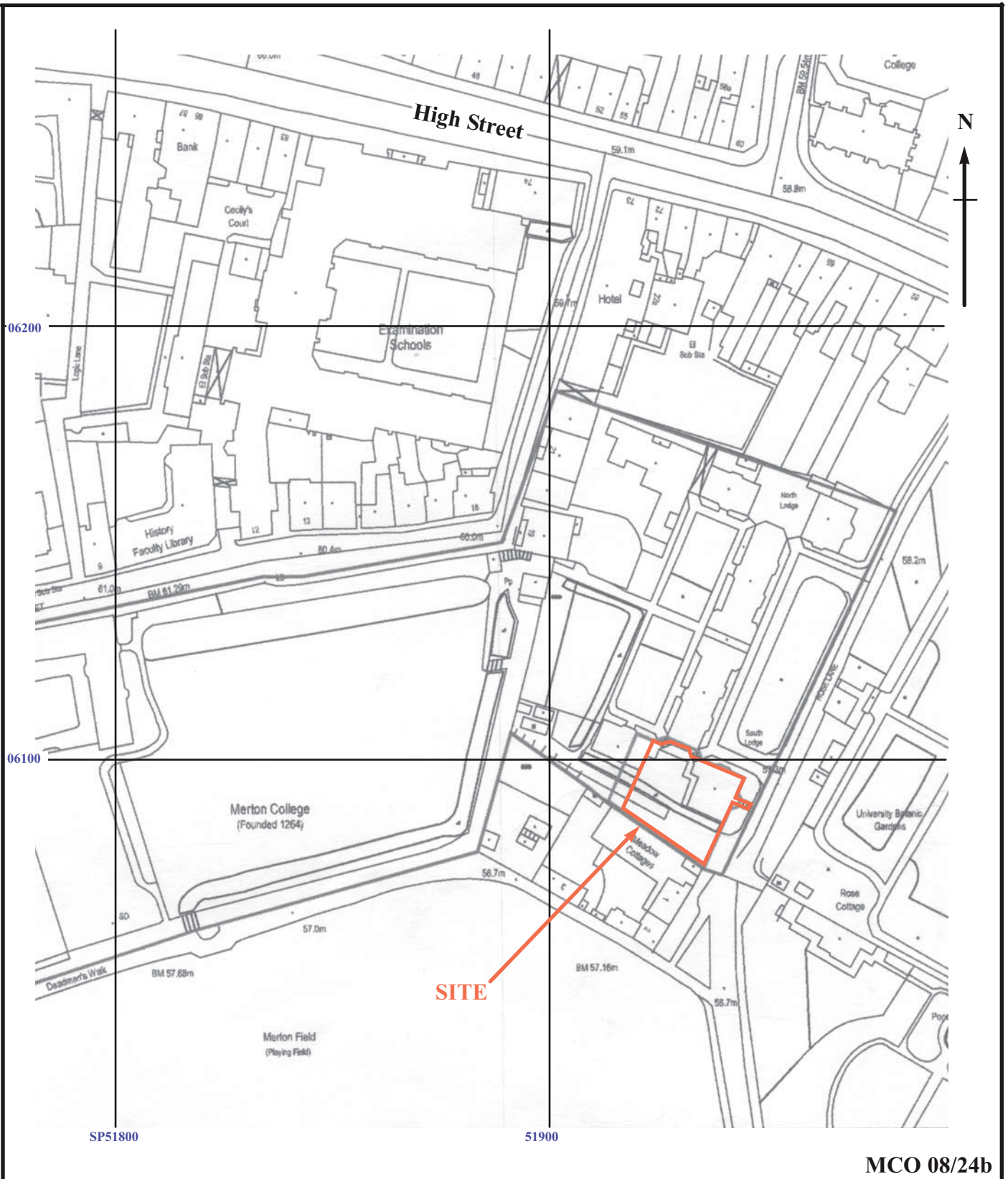
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Figure 1. Location of site within Oxford and Oxfordshire.

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Figure 2. Detailed location of site at Merton College.

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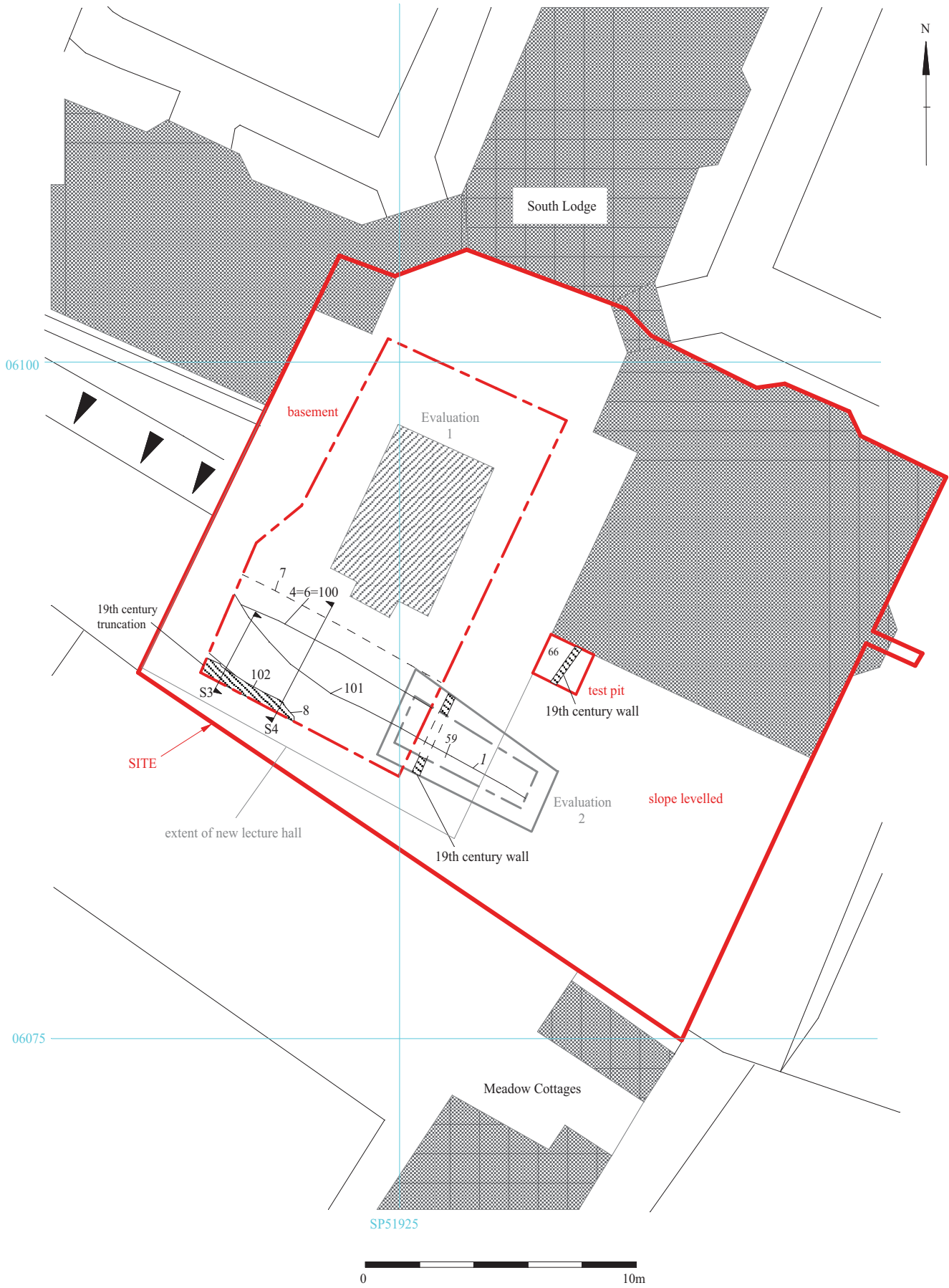
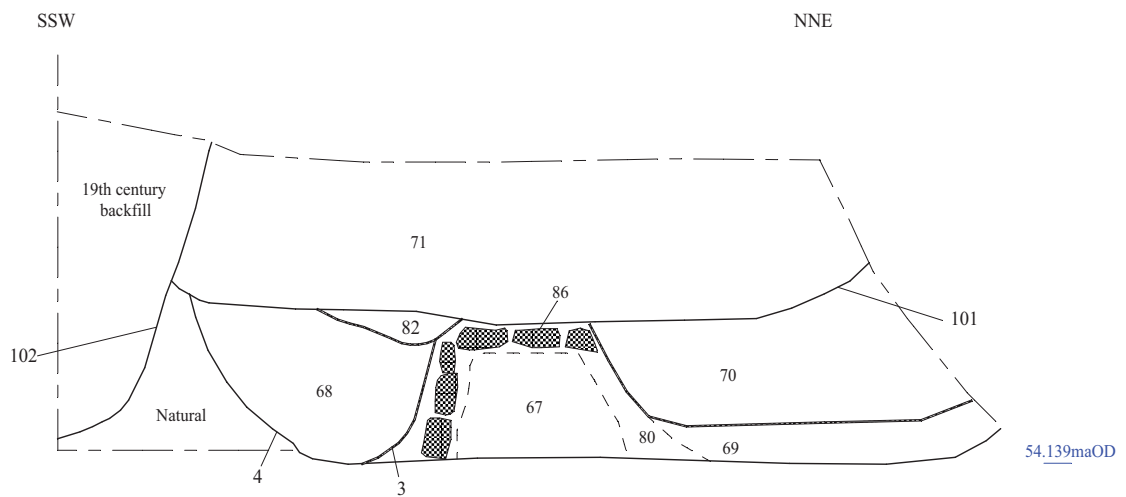


Figure 3. Detail plan of trenches.

# South Lodge Courtyard, Merton College, Oxford, 2009

## Section 3



## Section 4

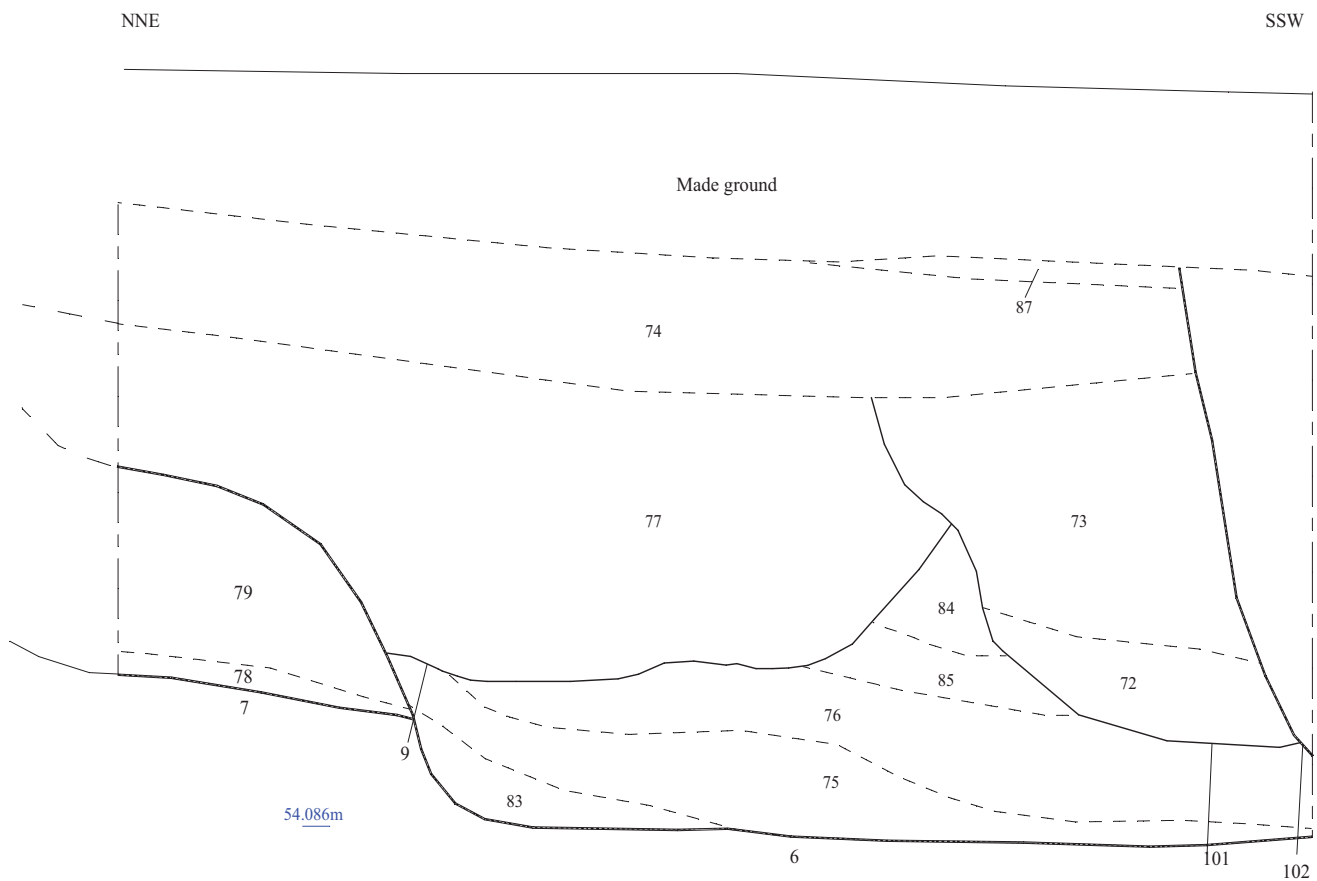


Figure 4. Sections.