

Archaeological Test Pits at First Court St. John's College, Cambridge



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Introduction

Seven archaeological test pits were excavated at St John's College, Cambridge, between the 26th and the 29th of October 2010. This work was commissioned by the College in order to evaluate the potential archaeological impact of a proposed new path, which would connect with the existing paths in First Court and thus establish a complete circuit of the area. The work was carried out at the northern end of First Court, in close proximity to the location of the former chapel and infirmary of the Hospital of St John the Evangelist – both of which were demolished in 1863 – and the extant 19th century college chapel (see Figures 1 and 3). For this reason, the test pits were principally situated so as to target the areas of greatest archaeological potential. Test Pit 1, for example, was located immediately adjacent to a grave slab preserved on the college lawn in order to determine what was beneath and whether it could be moved at any stage. Test pit 2 was located immediately adjacent to the line of the old chapel wall, and Test Pit 3 within the hospital's infirmary building (which was formerly situated between the old and new chapels). The remaining Test Pits – numbers 4 to 6 – extended to the northwest, parallel to the present college chapel, along the line of the proposed path. Each of the test pits was excavated by hand and recorded using the CAU-modified version of the MoLAS system (Spence 1994); base plans were drawn at a scale of 1:20, whilst sections were drawn at a scale of 1:10. A digital photographic archive was also compiled. Geologically, the site is situated upon second terrace river gravels overlying Gault clay (British Geological Survey, sheet 188).

Results

The results of the evaluation are summarised below, on a test pit-by-test pit basis.

Test Pit 1

This test pit was situated towards the northeastern corner of First Court, in close proximity to the Old Music Room. It measured 1.0m by 1.0m in extent and was excavated to a depth of 0.40m. At the top of the sequence, a large gravestone – [010], which measured 0.13m thick – was present. This was inscribed with the name 'Joannis Newcome S[TP]/ Obit 10 Jan 1765/ Anno Ætatis 82'. Abutting this slab was [011], a layer of modern turf and topsoil 0.13m thick. Beneath both the topsoil and the adjacent gravestone were situated mixed demolition deposits [012], [013] and [017], which each consisted of banded mid to pale greyish brown sandy silt with frequent mortar fleck and CBM fragment inclusions. These layers were a maximum of 0.15m thick. To the south, beneath the slab, [017] sealed friable mid brown sandy silt deposit [015]. This latter material, which was 0.20m+ thick and continued below the limit of excavation, contained projecting disarticulated human remains, including a pelvis, a long bone and a rib (these were not recovered, but left *in situ*). To the north, outside the area of the slab, additional demolition deposits [014] and [016] were present. These appeared to abut [015], and were near identical to deposits [012] and [013] described above. They measured 0.13m+ deep, but were not bottomed. Both contained 19th century material.

Test Pit 2

This test pit was situated towards the northeastern corner of First Court, adjacent to the line of the old chapel wall. It measured 1.0m by 1.0m in extent and was excavated to a depth of 0.40m. In the first instance, stone edging [020] was encountered; this demarcated the wall of the former hospital chapel, and measured 0.13m thick. It was set upon a concrete foundation, which in turn measured 0.18m thick. Abutting [020] was turf and topsoil deposit [021], which measured 0.16m thick. Beneath this was encountered [022], a stone-capped drain that was aligned north-northeast by south-southwest. The drain consisted of large flat flagstones (measuring 0.38m+

across) that were set with rough concrete and proud jointed. Its upper surface lay at 8.29m OD. This feature had partially truncated [023], a 19th century demolition layer which consisted of friable pale grey and yellowish brown silty mortar with frequent mortar, CBM and clunch fragments inclusions. The layer measured 0.26m+ deep (but was not bottomed) and in turn abutted [024], the remnant of a lime mortared limestone foundation. A single block of this foundation, measuring 290mm by 120mm by 100mm, was fully exposed, with the truncated remnant of a further block remaining above it and additional masonry extending below. This foundation represents part of the footing of the former hospital chapel; its uppermost surviving element was situated at 8.14m OD.

Test Pit 3

This test pit was situated at the northeastern end of First Court, in close proximity to the standing college chapel. It measured 1.0m by 1.0m in extent and was excavated to a depth of 0.40m. The uppermost deposit in this location comprised turf and topsoil [030], which measured 0.13m thick. This overlay backfill deposit [031], which consisted of firm mid greyish brown silty clay with occasional CBM fragment inclusions measuring 0.72m+ wide and 0.10m deep. The latter material had been deposited above stone-capped drain [033], which may well represent a return of drain [022] that was encountered in Test Pit 2. [033] was aligned east-northeast by west-southwest and consisted of large flat flagstones (measuring 0.57m across) that were set with rough concrete and proud jointed. Its upper surface lay at 8.29m OD. The final deposit to be encountered in this trench consisted of 19th century demolition spread [032]. This comprised a mixed layer of semi-friable dark brownish grey clay silt, with frequent CBM and clunch fragment inclusions, which measured 0.29m+ deep (but was not bottomed).

Test Pit 4

This test pit was situated at the northeastern end of First Court, in close proximity to the standing college chapel. It measured 2.0m by 0.5m in extent (being placed longitudinally so as to avoid a known service) and was excavated to a depth of 0.40m. Here, the uppermost deposit comprised turf and topsoil layer [040], which measured 0.19m thick. This overlay dark greyish brown sandy silt deposit [042], which had itself been backfilled into vertically sided cut [043]. The latter measured 0.25m+ deep, but was not bottomed. Given its location, in close association to one of the buttresses of the present college chapel, it is possible that this feature represents the construction cut for the standing building. Alternatively, however, it may represent the remnants of a former bedding trench or flower bed. Also present in this trench was the very edge of stone-capped drain [044], which represents a continuation of drain [033] from Test Pit 3. Its upper surface again lay at 8.29m OD. At the base of the sequence friable 19th century demolition deposit [041] was encountered. This consisted of pale brownish grey silty mortar with frequent mortar, clunch and CBM fragment inclusions. It measured 0.23m thick, but was not bottomed.

Test Pit 5

This test pit was situated at the northeastern end of First Court, in close proximity to the standing college chapel. It measured 1.0m by 1.0m in extent and was excavated to a depth of 0.40m. At the top of the sequence, turf and topsoil layer [050] was present; this measured 0.13m deep. Sealed beneath the topsoil was [051], the backfill of a modern pipe trench. This consisted of a relatively loose deposit of mid to dark greyish brown clay silt with very frequent CBM fragment inclusions, which had been backfilled into vertically sided cut [052] that measured 0.40m wide. The top of the brown salt-glazed ceramic pipe was situated at 7.82m OD and was visibly falling to the east, where it presumably connected to stone-capped drain [033] = [044]. The pipe trench was cut through 19th century banded grey silt and coarse yellow sandy mortar demolition deposit [053], which contained frequent clunch fragment inclusions as well as ceramic and stone peg tile fragments. This deposit appears to represent a continuation of [041] to the east; it measured 0.28m+ thick, but was not bottomed.

Test Pit 6

This test pit was situated at the northeastern end of First Court, in close proximity to the standing college chapel. It measured 1.0m by 1.0m in extent and was excavated to a depth of 0.40m. Here, an identical sequence was identified as has been described above in Test Pit 5. Beneath

turf and topsoil layer [060], which measured 0.18m thick, pipe trench [061] = [051] and [062] = [052] was again identified. In this location, the top of the brown salt-glazed ceramic pipe was encountered at 7.98m OD. Banded demolition deposit [063] = [053] = [041] was also present. Here, this measured 0.28m+ (and was again unbottomed).

Test Pit 7

A further test pit was situated towards the northeastern corner of First Court, in close proximity to the Old Music Room. Test Pit 7 was excavated specifically to investigate the thickness of the adjacent tombstone and to determine if any additional supporting structure was present. It was 0.35m by 0.2m in extent and was excavated to a depth of 0.30m and located to the west of a large gravestone – [070], which measured 0.15m thick. Although the inscription was in poor condition enough elements were legible to identify it as one recorded in the late 19th century as reading Depositum/ Roberti Worsley. Abutting this slab was [071], a layer of modern topsoil 0.13m thick. Beneath both the topsoil and the adjacent grave was a mixed deposit [072] consisting of lenses of dark topsoil and pale brown sandy silt gravel. A narrow slot was dug for 0.20m under the tombstone and no structure was located.

Provisional Finds Assessment

Small quantities of material were recovered from all of the test pits investigated. The assemblages were dominated by pottery, with smaller quantities of bone, clay pipe, moulded stone and decorated window glass also being present.

Overall, the ceramic assemblage was dominated by 19th century wares, including refined white earthenware, mocha ware, English utilitarian stoneware and coarse plant pot. A small quantity of residual earlier material was also identified, including medieval coarseware, 15th century Cambridge-type sgraffito ware, 16th century Ely bichrome ware and 16th/17th century German stoneware, iron-glazed material and tin-glazed earthenware. In addition to the pottery, a small quantity of bone, including both human and animal material, was recovered; of this group, all of the human remains – including any indeterminate animal bones – were bagged, labelled and reburied. A small number of clay pipe stems were also identified, including one with an eight-spoked wheel on its heel. From Test Pit 1, in the interior of the hospital chapel, a small number of moulded stone fragments were recovered, many of them consisting of ‘waste’ derived from the fragmentation of larger blocks. Finally, a single trimmed pane of medieval decorated window glass was recovered from the possible foundation of the present college chapel in Test Pit 4.

Discussion

Two major medieval buildings are known to be present on the route of the proposed path (see Figure 3). Both of these structures were originally part of the Hospital of St John the Evangelist – an institution which was founded on this site by c.1200, and whose history has been discussed in detail elsewhere (see Haigh 1988, 9-10; Rubin 1987; Underwood 2008) – and both were demolished in 1863 when the construction of the present College Chapel commenced (RCHM(E) 1959 II, 188). The first of these buildings consisted of the hospital’s chapel, which was constructed in late 13th century and was later converted into the college chapel following the hospital’s own conversion in 1511. Four chantry chapels were subsequently appended to this structure, while part of its nave was also converted for use as the Master’s Lodge (for further information on the history of this building, see Babington 1874, 12-28; Willis & Clark 1886 II, 280-309). The second building consisted of the early 13th century hospital infirmary, which is likely to have originally functioned as the hospital’s first chapel. Following the foundation of St John’s College, the infirmary was converted

into stables and a storehouse – in c.1561 – and then later into three stories of student accommodation – in c.1584. The original function of the building was forgotten, and the heavily modified structure became known as the “Labyrinth” (for further information on the history of this building, see Babington 1874, 6-11; Willis & Clark 1886 II, 296-302).

Test Pits 1 and 2 were carefully positioned so as to investigate elements of the former hospital chapel. Although demolished in 1863, it has been noted that “when the old chapel was pulled down, it was considered advisable to leave the slabs covering the graves of those who were interred within it in their places, and to mark out the site by not removing the foundations of the old building” (Babington 1874, 29). The basic outline of the structure remains demarcated on the lawn to this day, and fourteen monumental gravestones are still present (see Babington 1874, 29-31 for full transcriptions of the tombstone’s inscriptions, and RCHM(E) 1959 II, 191 for a summary catalogue). Significantly, however, the degree of archaeological survival in this area has not previously been tested. The results recovered from Test Pit 2 indicate that truncated elements of the chapel’s foundation do appear to remain *in situ*, corroborating Babington’s account. In addition, investigations conducted in Test Pit 1 immediately adjacent to the gravestone of John Newcome (d. 1765), a former Master of St John’s College, also identified the presence disarticulated human remains. Although the associated post-medieval chapel floor surface had clearly been removed, no direct evidence was available to determine whether the slab itself – and thus the possible interment beneath it – had been disturbed. It does seem likely that the slab was at the very least lifted and then reinstated during the demolition process, however, and the disarticulated material could potentially have been introduced at this time (although it should be noted that, given the long lifespan of the building, disarticulated human remains may well have become widely dispersed throughout the chapel by the 18th century). It is also perhaps significant that Babington recorded the height of the original medieval floor of the chapel as lying 1 foot 9 inches (or c.0.50m) below that of the post-conversion 16th century surface (Babington 1874, 5). Should Newcome’s gravestone remain approximately *in situ*, as its upper surface lies at 8.30m OD this would indicate that the original floor of the building lay at c.7.80m OD (or 0.10m below the base of the test pit).

In contrast to the hospital’s former chapel, the outline of the infirmary building has not been marked out on the lawn of First Court. Part of this structure, however, was the focus of an earlier small-scale archaeological investigation. In November 1991 a narrow trench was excavated in the front lawn of St. John’s College, in close proximity to St. John’s Street (see Figure 3). This trench, which was 10.0m long by 0.6m wide and 0.8m deep, was excavated by machine, although part of it (measuring 1.8m by 1.5m in extent and 0.9m deep) was hand dug (Miller 1991, 1-2). Because this work was conducted in order to monitor the insertion of the Granta Network Cable, only the uppermost part of the sequence was investigated. The earliest features that were encountered at the site comprised two west-east aligned uncoursed limestone and clunch walls, which represent elements of a major structure. These walls were 0.6m wide and the building had an internal width of 5.4m, with traces of clay floors – the uppermost lying at 7.89m OD – preserved within it (*ibid*, 2-4). To the north of the infirmary building a probable laneway was identified whilst, beyond this, the remains of a second stone-built structure were also encountered (Miller 1991, 4). Although a number of ancillary buildings are known to have existed within the hospital during the

medieval period, this structure does not correspond to any of the historically documented examples. As it is clearly broadly contemporary with the infirmary, however, it probably represents a previously unknown building that was demolished at a relatively early date (prior to first historic map of the area in 1592). The presence of such a building raises the possibility that traces of similar structures may also be present in the area surrounding the infirmary. No such remains were encountered in Test Pits 4 to 6 during the present evaluation, however, as these were principally dominated by modern services.

Conclusion

The test pit evaluation conducted at St John's College First Court has produced two principal archaeological findings. In the first instance, the presence of disarticulated human remains is of importance. Although these were primarily found in association with the grave slab in Test Pit 1, a large skull fragment was also recovered from a 19th century deposit in Test Pit 5. Furthermore, the possibility that articulated skeletons remain present beneath the tombstones cannot yet be fully discounted. It is likely, therefore, that disarticulated remains will be encountered even at the relatively shallow depth of the proposed path footings (300mm). They are of limited scientific value and the preferable option is that they are carefully collected and then reinterred in a suitable location on site.

In the second instance, the presence of *in situ* structural remains is also significant. Elements of the hospital chapel's foundations were identified in Test Pit 2, and the results of previous work conducted at the site suggest that remnants of the infirmary's walls might also be encountered along the path's course (as well as possible *in situ* floor surfaces). In addition, two chantry chapels also lie along the proposed route, those of Thomas Thompson to the south of the chapel – which was constructed before 1525 – and Bishop Fisher to the north – which was constructed in 1525-33 (see further Figure 3). The extent to which these structures were demolished in 1863 remains unknown. Given the depths indicated by Babington and confirmed by the trench dug in 1991, the original floor levels of these buildings are likely to lie beneath the 300mm extent of the path footings, however it is likely that wall footings will be encountered for both structures. Within the areas of these known buildings the excavation of the path footings should therefore be closely monitored, with provision for cleaning and appropriate excavation and recording by an archaeologist where required. Unless the removal of human remains are necessitated, this work should be accommodated within the 300mm depth of the path footings.

The two test pits dug to investigate the slabs at the eastern end of the court (Test Pits 1 and 7) demonstrate that the slabs are thick (0.13m in TP1, 0.15 in TP 7), but no obvious structures were seen in association with them. It is clear, however, that there is a concentration of redeposited human bone beneath the slabs, whether this as a result of deliberate redeposition or reflects the previous use of the areas beneath the slabs cannot be determined.

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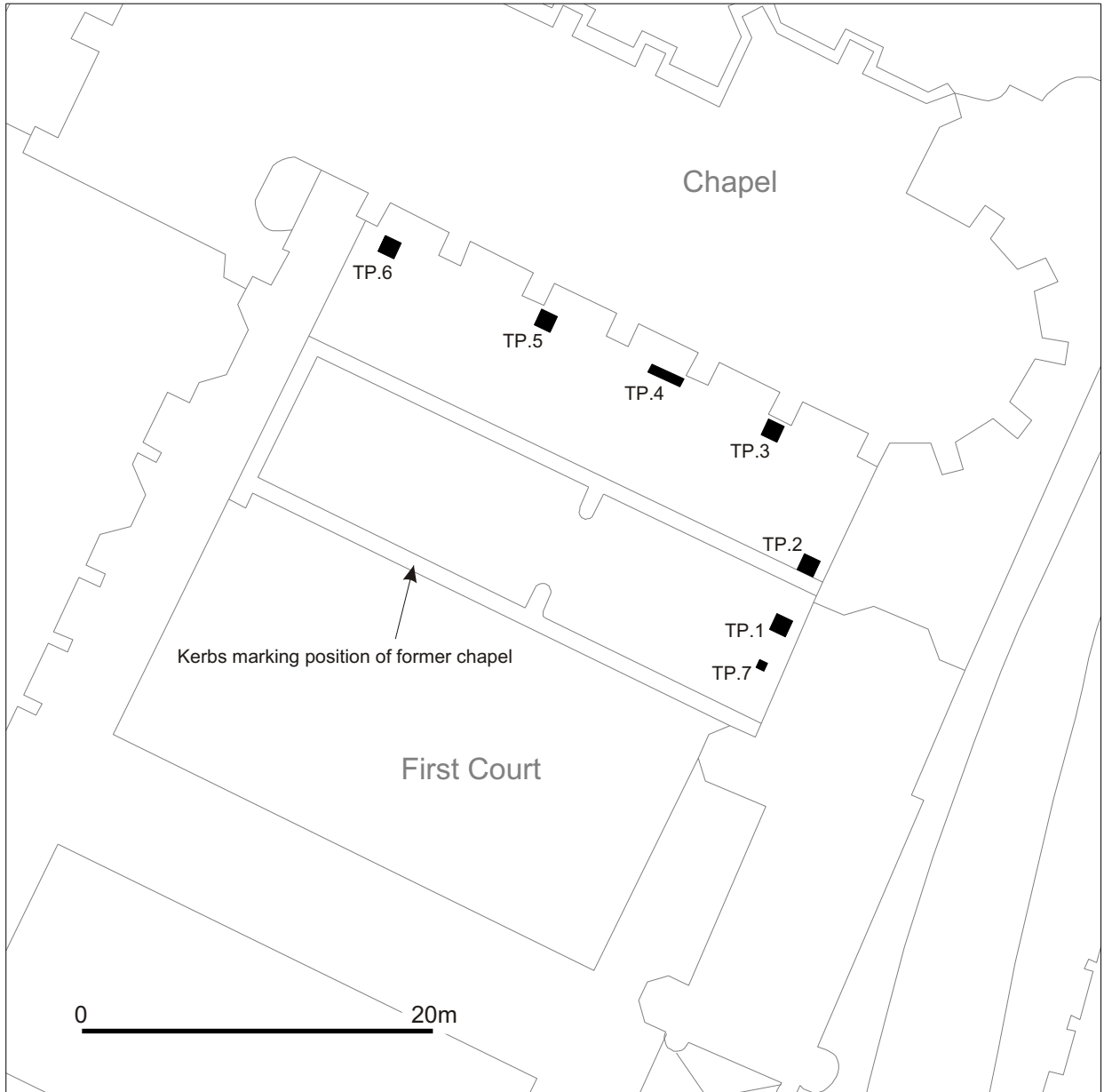


Figure 1 Test Pit Locations



Test Pit 1: Looking southwest



Test Pit 2: Looking southwest



Test Pit 3: Looking northwest



Test Pit 4: Looking northeast (produced at smaller scale)



Test Pit 5: Looking southeast



Test Pit 6: Looking northwest

Figure 2: Test Pits

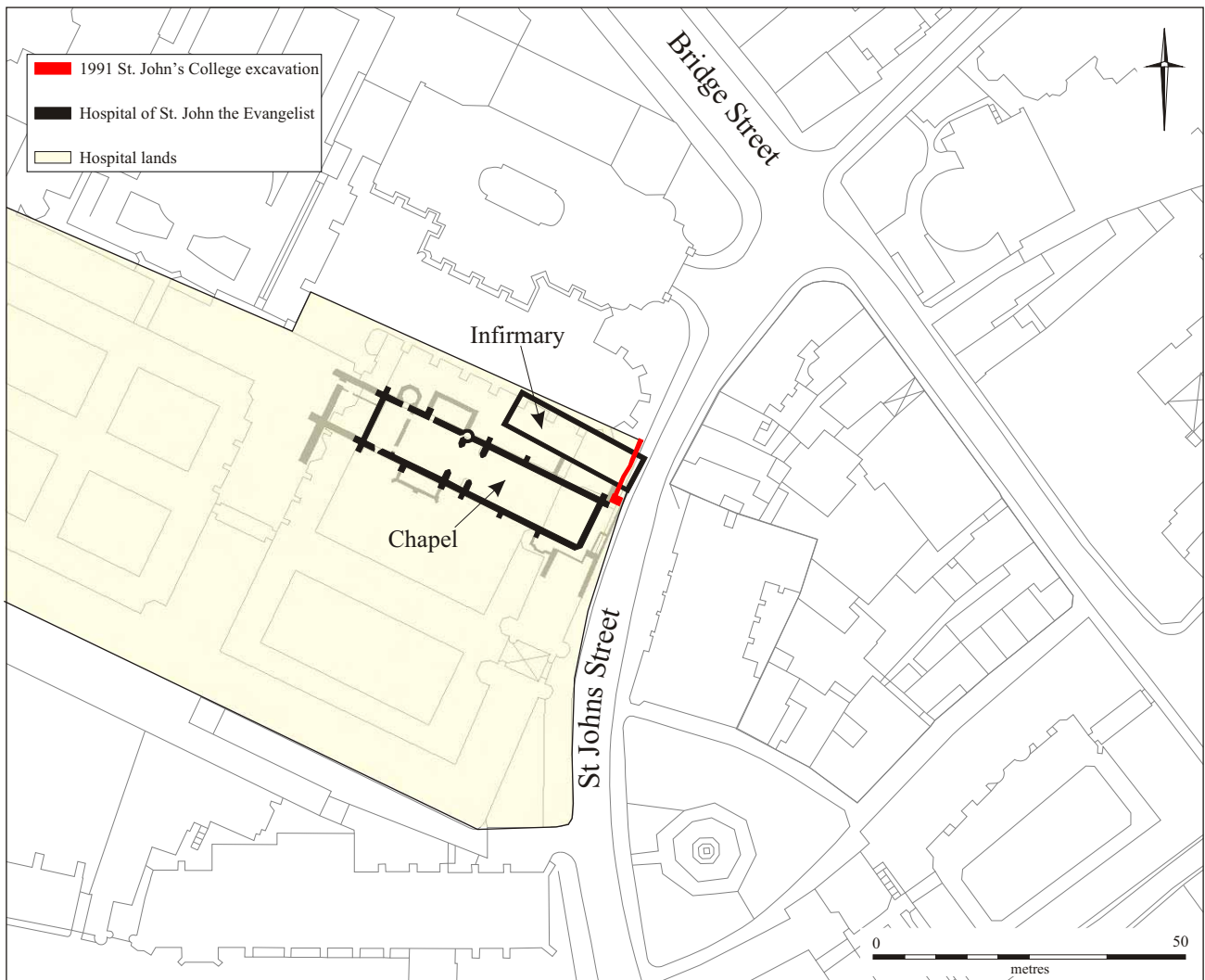


Figure 3: Location of the Hospital of St. John the Evangelist and the 1991 St. John's College front excavation.