

# Magdalen College School All Weather Sports Pitch



## Archaeological Watching Brief Report



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# Magdalen College School, Oxford: All Weather Sports Pitch

*Archaeological Watching Brief Report*

*Written by Mike Sims*

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## Summary

*In June 2013 Oxford Archaeology conducted an archaeological watching brief during the construction of an all weather sports pitch at Magdalen College School, Oxford (centred at NGR: SP 5276 0650).*

*The watching brief recorded that a significant percentage of the site had been truncated by previous playing field construction. No evidence of activity, either in the form of truncated features or residual finds, pre-dating this event was observed.*

## 1 INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Scope of work

- 1.1.1 Oxford Archaeology (OA) was commissioned by West Waddy ADP on behalf of Magdalen College School to undertake a watching brief on the site of a proposed all weather sports pitch at Magdalen College School, Oxford (Fig. 1).
- 1.1.2 The work was undertaken as a condition of Planning Permission (planning ref: 12/02703/FUL). A brief has been set by David Radford of Oxford City Council (OCC 2013) detailing the Local Authority's requirements for work necessary to discharge the planning condition and OA produced a Written Scheme of Investigation (WSI) showing how it would implement those requirements (OA 2013).
- 1.1.3 All work was undertaken in accordance with local and national planning policies including policy HE2 of the Adopted Oxford Local Plan 2001-2016.

### 1.2 Location, geology and topography

- 1.2.1 The site lies approximately 800m to the east of the historic centre of Oxford, centred at NGR: SP 5276 0650 (Fig. 1). The area of proposed development currently consists of a grassed sports field lying to the west of Marston Road and is bounded on the western side by the River Cherwell, by new buildings to the north and by open ground to the south.
- 1.2.2 The ground slopes noticeably down to the south from approximately 62m AOD at its highest point and falling by approximately 1.5m along its length towards the river. Inspection of the development area before the commencement of excavation observed that its eastern end had been terraced into the slope by roughly 0.8m and that its western end had been raised by approximately 0.5m above the natural slope.
- 1.2.3 The geology of the area is Oxford Clay Formation and West Walton Formation Mudstone.

### 1.3 Archaeological and historical background

- 1.3.1 A heritage statement has been produced for the site by West Waddy ADP (2012), and will not be further replicated here.

#### ***Potential***

- 1.3.2 The site lies adjacent to the River Cherwell, in the vicinity of the projected line of the Royalist Civil War defences, although the presence of these has not been confirmed by previous works to the north of the site.



- 1.3.3 The higher ground adjacent to the River Cherwell has previously produced evidence for activity of Mesolithic date, and a general potential for prehistoric activity in this location is noted.

## 2 PROJECT AIMS AND METHODOLOGY

### 2.1 Aims

2.1.1 The general aims of the watching brief were:

- To determine the presence or absence of any archaeological remains which may survive. Should remains be found to ensure their preservation by record to the highest possible standard.
- To determine or confirm the approximate extent of any surviving remains
- To determine the date range of any surviving remains by artefactual or other means.
- To determine the condition and state of preservation of any remains.
- To determine the degree of complexity of any surviving horizontal or vertical stratigraphy.
- To assess the associations and implications of any remains encountered with reference to the historic landscape.
- To determine the potential of the site to provide palaeoenvironmental and/or economic evidence, and the forms in which such evidence may survive.
- To determine the implications of any remains with reference to economy, status, utility and social activity.
- To determine or confirm the likely range, quality and quantity of the artefactual evidence present.

2.1.2 Site specific aims were:

- To identify and record any remains identified during the ground works with especial reference to confidently demonstrating the presence or absence of any Civil War features within the area.

### 2.2 Methodology

2.2.1 The watching brief was conducted as a series of site visits during those operations which had the potential to disturb or destroy archaeological deposits.

2.2.2 These operations included the diversion of existing services, excavation of new service trenches, excavation of foundations, topsoil stripping and ground reduction.

2.2.3 The bulk of the excavations was accomplished using a tracked excavator fitted with a toothless bucket. Final levelling of the site was done using a 9 tonne blade after archaeological inspection.

2.2.4 All spoil generated by both the machine and any hand excavations was examined for the presence of archaeological artefacts.

2.2.5 The construction of the new all weather track involved the topsoil stripping of the area, reduction in ground level and the excavation of associated service trenches



- 2.2.6 During these works, features and deposits were issued with unique context numbers, and context recording was in accordance with established OA practices (OA, 1991). Bulk finds were collected by context. Black-and-white negative photographs and a digital photographic record was taken of all excavations, general settings and archaeological sections.
- 2.2.7 Site plans showing the location of any excavations and any recorded sections were maintained (Figs. 2 and 3). Section drawings of features and sample sections were drawn at a scale of 1:20.

### 3 RESULTS

#### 3.1 Description of deposits

- 3.1.1 During the preliminary walkover of the site it was observed that the existing pitch did not follow the natural slope of the ground. The western end of the site had been raised by approximately 1m above the level of the footpath running north to south along the boundary, while the eastern end had been terraced into the bank flanking Marston Road by approximately 1.5m.
- 3.1.2 Prior to the stripping of the strip a series of test pits were dug along the length of the site (Fig. 3). These measured approximately 1.5m square and up to 0.3m in depth.
- 3.1.3 At the western end of the site a layer of orange-brown gravels in a sandy clay matrix (2) was observed at a depth of 0.18m below the original ground level (Fig. 4, Section 1). Contained within this deposit were occasional fragments of modern brick. This was overlaid by a 0.18m deep layer of light grey-brown sandy loam (1) which formed the old pitches topsoil and turf.
- 3.1.4 In the centre of the proposed new pitch the second test pit revealed a layer of dark yellow-brown silty clay with pockets of olive green clay and chalk (3) at 0.23m below the level of the original pitch (Fig. 4, Section 2). This was overlaid by a continuation of the topsoil and turf (1).
- 3.1.5 The third pit was excavated approximately 10m south of the north end of the pitch. A layer of blue-grey silty clay with occasional chalk flecking and sub-angular fragments of stone (4) was observed at a depth of 0.2m below the pitch level overlaid by layer 1 (Fig. 4, Section 3).
- 3.1.6 After the trial pits were excavated a topsoil strip was undertaken of the entire site, including the footprint for the changing rooms, in order to expose the underlying topology and following surveying to calculate to what extent areas of the pitch would have to be reduced in level or built up.
- 3.1.7 Exposed after the topsoil strip was the underlying strata (Fig. 3). At the eastern end of the site the blue-grey clay, 4, could be seen to extend over approximately 30% of the site. Overlying this clay and occupying the centre of the site was the yellow-brown silty clay (3).
- 3.1.8 At the western end of the site the orange-brown gravels, 2, could be seen to extend over approximately 35% of the site (Section 5). This deposit tapered off towards the east where it overlay layer 3. Cutting all these deposits was a network of French drains extending throughout the area of the old pitch.
- 3.1.9 Calculations based on the amount of material needed to reduce the slope of the pitch showed that up to 0.35m of material needed to be removed from the eastern end of the site and used to raise the western end by a similar amount. This material was removed



using a tracked excavator fitted with a toothless grading bucket, while a 9 tonne blade (bulldozer) was using to move the material and grade the site.

- 3.1.10 The reduction in level showed that the clay, 4, was in excess of 0.45m in depth was no additional stratigraphy exposed (Section 4).
- 3.1.11 During the grading operation the ground reduction was confined to the eastern half of the site, with the eastern edge of layer 3 being truncated, exposing a continuation of the blue-grey clay 4 underneath. Layer 2 was not impacted upon and was sealed below the redeposited material during the grading operation.

### ***The changing rooms***

- 3.1.12 As part of the pitch construction is was planned to install new changing rooms adjacent to the southern edge of the new pitch. A rectangular area measuring 20m long and 12m wide was reduced in level by up to 0.65m in depth (Fig. 3).
- 3.1.13 Exposed throughout the footprint of the building was a continuation of the blue-grey clay 4 (Section 6). This could be seen to have been overlaid by the yellow-brown clay, 3, measuring up to 0.25m in depth. This was covered by the present day topsoil and turf, 1, to a depth of 0.2m.
- 3.1.14 A series of 15 foundation pads each measuring 0.8m square and a further 0.4m deep were excavated within this area. No additional stratigraphy was observed and they were not recorded separately.

## **3.2 Finds**

- 3.2.1 Artefactual evidence was very limited and only recovered from layer 2. This consisted of numerous fragments of brick, all of which were too small for diagnosis, and short lengths of iron reinforcing bar and pipe. The presence of this material was noted but it was not retained.

## **3.3 Environmental remains**

- 3.3.1 No deposits suitable for palaeo-environmental sampling were encountered during the course of the watching brief.

## **4 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

- 4.1.1 The blue-grey clay (4) exposed within both the changing room and the eastern half of the site is representative of the underlying natural geology of the area; Oxford clay. The inclusions within Layer 3 indicate a degree of human activity, the presence of the reinforcing bar and pipe suggests that this activity is of modern origin.
- 4.1.2 The composition of Layer 2 and its stratigraphic relationship with layer 3 points to it being a layer of made ground, possibly formed from dredged river material from the tributaries to the west, although its relatively clean composition may suggest that it is quarried material.
- 4.1.3 Layer 1 is a probable landscaping layer of topsoil and turf. It is unclear if it represents redeposited material or has been imported.
- 4.1.4 The preliminary inspection of the site suggested that the area had already been landscaped prior to the current phase of construction. The watching brief confirmed this impression showing that the eastern end of the site had been truncated removing all the deposits above the natural clay. The band of yellow-brown clay observed in the centre of the site may be the truncated remnants of a subsoil or possibly worked soil



horizon that originally covered the site. Layer 2 appears to be imported material bought in to raise the level of the western end of the site (the clay removed during the ground reduction was presumably not used because of drainage).

- 4.1.5 The topsoil (1) is a landscaping deposit laid down after these operations. It most likely consists of the material removed before the ground reduction being redeposited over the site.
- 4.1.6 No evidence for activity pre-dating the post-medieval period, either in the form of truncated features or residual evidence, was observed during the course of the brief. It is unclear if this absence is due to the degree of truncation of the original pitches construction or to the lack of activity. The absence of residual finds within layer 3 or within the topsoil, 1, may suggest the latter.
- 4.1.7 The watching brief did not produce any evidence to support the proposition that the line of the Civil War defences crossed the area. These are similar findings to those recorded during earlier work to the north of the site.





## APPENDIX A. ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXT INVENTORY

Context	Type	Depth	Width	Comments	Finds	Date
1	Layer	0.15m – 0.25m	> 100m	Landscaping layer of redeposited topsoil and turf	Brick, plastic	C20th
2	Layer	> 0.2m	30m	Modern made ground composed of redeposited terrace gravel	-	C20th
3	Layer	0.12m – 0.25m	> 40m	Probable truncated soil horizon	Brick	C18th/ C19th
4	Layer	> 0.4m	> 60m	Natural clay	-	-



## APPENDIX B. BIBLIOGRAPHY AND REFERENCES

- OA 2013                      Magdalen College School All Weather Sports Pitch: Written Scheme of Investigation
- Oxford City Council 2013      Brief for an Archaeological Watching Brief. Magdalen College Sports Ground, Marston Road, Oxford.
- West Waddy ADP 2012      Laying-out of Artificial Sports Pitch Magdalen College Sports Ground, Marston Road, Oxford



## APPENDIX C. SUMMARY OF SITE DETAILS

Site name:	Magdalen College School, Oxford: All Weather Sports Pitch
Site code:	OXMAWP 13
Grid reference:	Centred at NGR SP 5276 0650
Type of watching brief:	Topsoil stripping and ground reduction during the preparation of a new sports pitch
Date and duration of project:	June and July 2013. Five site visits
Area of site:	Approximately 6000m <sup>2</sup>
Summary of results:	<p>The watching brief recorded that a significant percentage of the site had been truncated by previous playing field construction. No evidence of activity, either in the form of truncated features or residual finds, pre-dating this event was observed.</p> <p>No evidence for the line of the civil war defences passing through the area was encountered.</p>
Location of archive:	The archive is currently held at Janus House and will be deposited with the Oxfordshire County Museum Service under the accession number OXCMS: 2013.36



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Figure 1: Site location

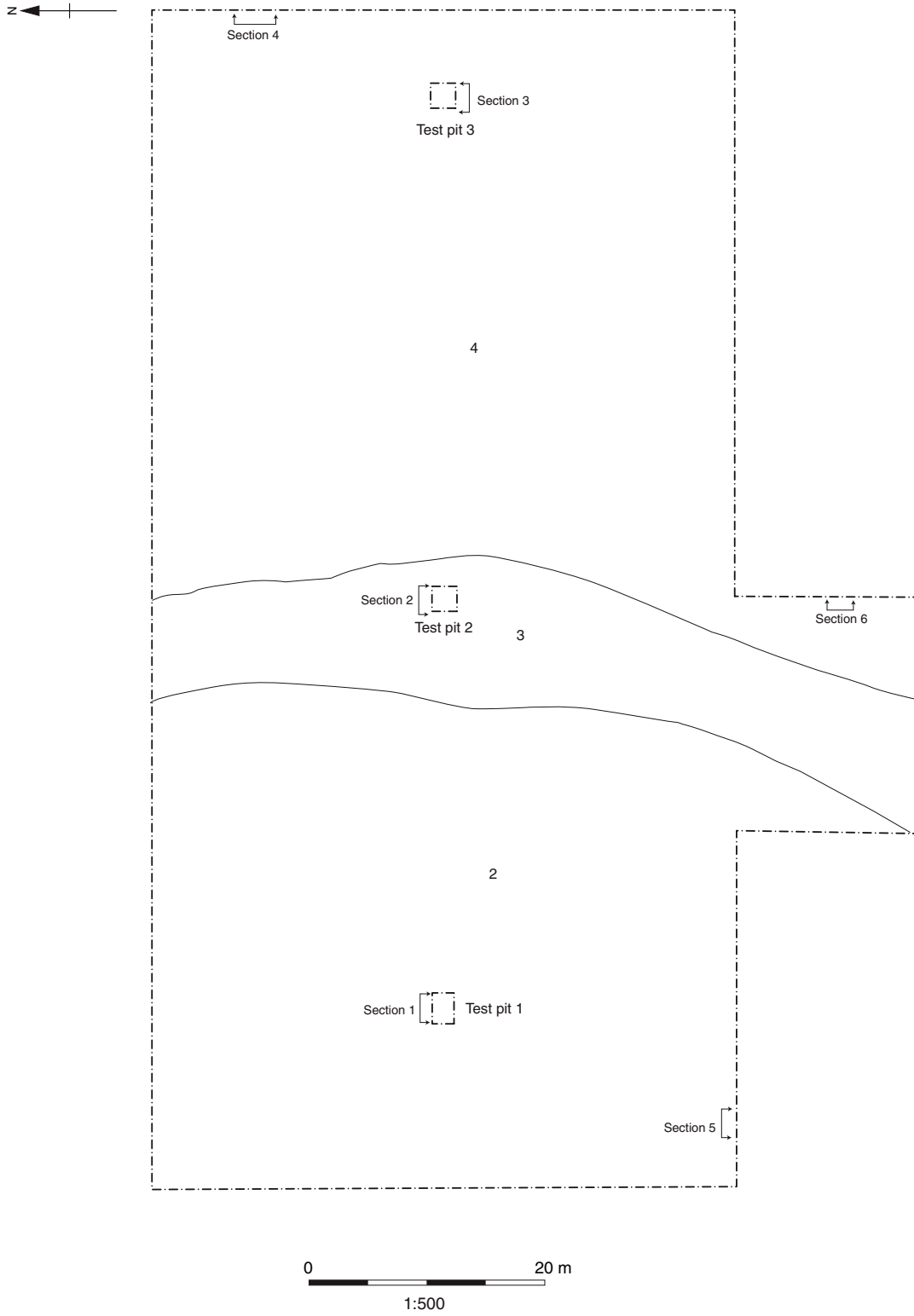


Figure 3: Post excavation view of site showing location of sections

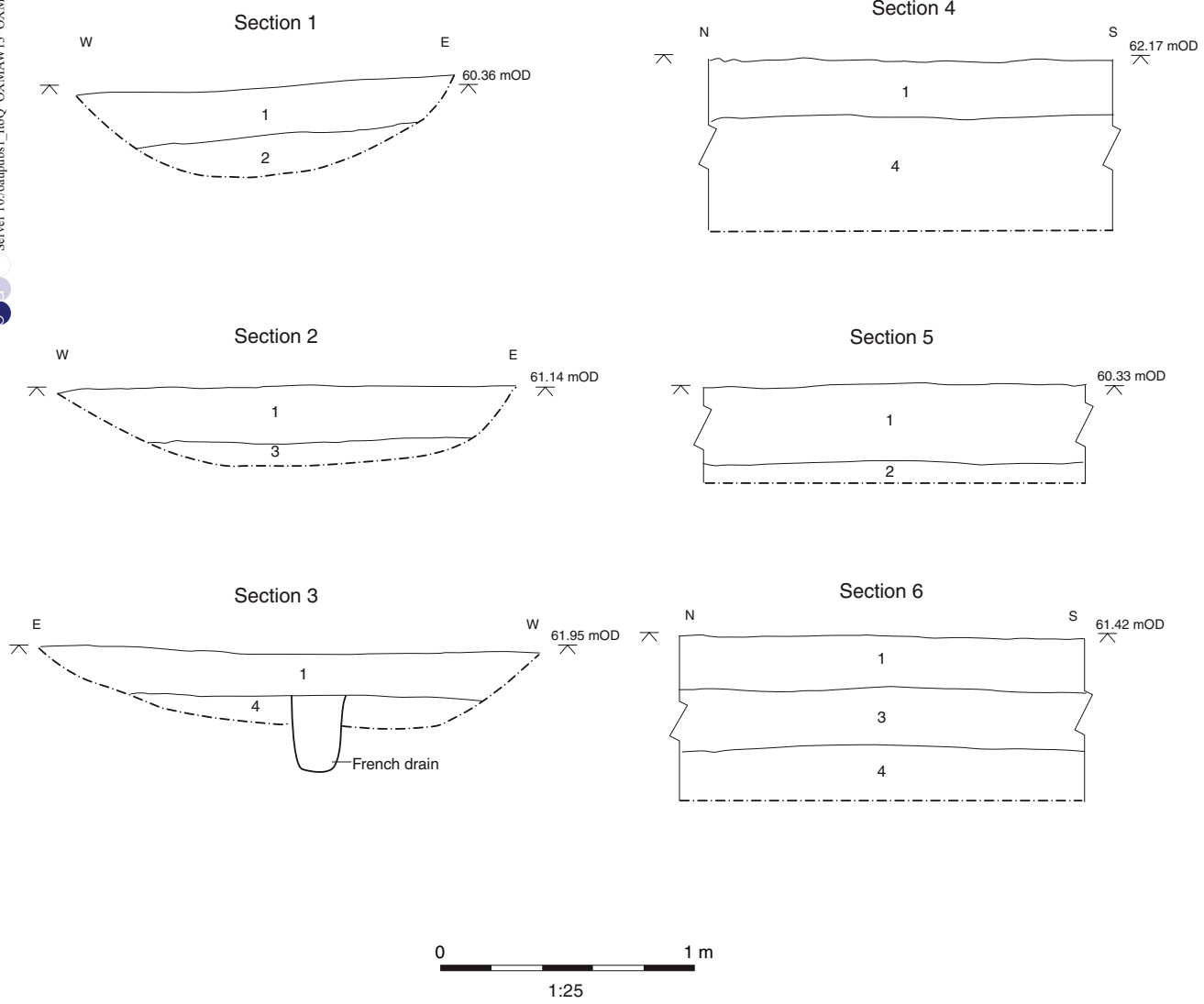


Figure 4: Sections



Plate 1: Section 4



Plate 2: Section 6