

# St John's College Chapel Oxford



## Archaeological Watching Brief Report



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Prepared by: Brian Dean and Jon Hiller  
Position: Project Officer  
Date: 20th February 2008

Checked by: Steven Lawrence  
Position: Senior Project Manager  
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Approved by: Alan Hardy  
Position: Senior Project Manager (px)  
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Janus House  
Osney Mead  
Oxford OX2 0ES  
t: (0044) 01865 263800  
f: (0044) 01865 793496

e: [info@oxfordarch.co.uk](mailto:info@oxfordarch.co.uk)  
w: [www.oxfordarch.co.uk](http://www.oxfordarch.co.uk)

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## St. John's College Chapel St. Giles, Oxford

NGR SP 5127 0666

### *ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF REPORT*

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## SUMMARY

*In June and July 2007, Oxford Archaeology (OA) undertook an archaeological watching brief at the Chapel of St. John's College, Oxford, prior to the installation of foundations for a new organ. Excavation of the foundation pits for the new structure revealed six brick-built burial vaults containing human remains, probably of late 17th or 18th century date. Two of the vault roofs had been disturbed during the installation of stone heating ducts in the 19th century. As a result of the discoveries, the design of the foundation pads was altered to accommodate the preservation of the burial vaults in situ.*

### 1 INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1 Location and Scope of Work

1.1.1 Between the 20th June and 10th July 2007, Oxford Archaeology (OA) undertook an archaeological watching brief in the Chapel at St. John's College, St. Giles, Oxford (NGR SP 5127 0666 - Fig. 1).

1.1.2 The watching brief was commissioned by the College prior to the construction of foundation pads to support a new organ. Initial preparation works at the site had encountered human remains immediately below the existing floor of the Chapel. Upon this discovery, the College halted the contractor's works and contacted OA to request that the foundation footprints be archaeologically excavated and recorded.

#### 1.2 Geology

1.2.1 The underlying geology of St. Giles comprises the southern spur of the Summertown-Radley gravel terrace. The area lies to the east of the River Thames and to the west of the river Cherwell at *c* 64.5 m OD.

#### 1.3 A Brief Historical Background

1.3.1 The following is mostly taken from the report produced by OA for St John's resulting from an excavation undertaken prior to the extension and construction of the new Senior Common Room in 2003 (OA 2004). This summarises the entries for St John's College in the Victoria County History of Oxfordshire: Vol. III (Salter and Lobel 1954), 'An Inventory of the Historical Monuments in the City of Oxford' (RCHME, 1939) and 'The Early History of St John's College, Oxford' (Stevenson and Salter, 1939).

1.3.2 St John's College stands on the east side of St. Giles on the site of the former St Bernard's College. In 1437 Archbishop Henry Chichele founded the College of St. Bernard for students of the Cistercian order, and this eventually formed the front quadrangle of the existing building. The chapel was consecrated in 1530 and the last of the medieval work was undertaken on the east range, although this was unfinished

and roofless in a survey of 1546. Following the Dissolution, Cistercian scholars remained at the college, at least until 1539. Thereafter it was occupied as an ordinary hall retaining the name of St Bernard's College although its members could not be monks. In 1546 the Dean and Chapter of Christ Church were granted St Bernard's College by the King and subsequently let the buildings. Sir Thomas White acquired the site and buildings from Christ Church in 1554, with the condition that within three years he established a college there. Construction continued until 1557, during which time the chapel, hall and rooms were furnished, the east range completed and the kitchen added to the north of the hall.

- 1.3.3 The outer library, on the south side of the present Canterbury quadrangle was built between 1596 and 1601; much of the building material came from the demolished White Friars' buildings, which had stood on the west side of St. Giles. Archbishop Laud built the remaining ranges of the Canterbury quadrangle between 1631 and 1636, incorporating the earlier south range (the outer library) which was extended at both ends.
- 1.3.4 Within the chapel an organ loft was added at the western end in 1619-20. Construction of the Baylie Chapel, attached to the north side of the chapel, was started in the 1630s but halted through the Civil War and was not completed until 1662 following the re-appointment of Baylie as President of the college. The hall and chapel also form the southern range of the north quadrangle. The remaining buildings flanking the north quadrangle are Cooks Building (1642-3), New Building (1881-1900), The Rawlinson Building (1909, extended 1933), and the Beehive Building (1963) which replaced a range of buildings which were of 15th/16th-century origin, but had been much altered during the 18th and 20th centuries (RCHME, 1939).
- 1.3.5 The chapel internally is now mostly 19th century work - in 1843 Blore inserted a two-bay arcade to the 17th century Baylie Chapel and substantial renovation work was undertaken in this period as well as provision for under-floor heating. Monuments from the 17th and 18th centuries can be found in the Baylie Chapel (Sherwood and Pevsner, 1974, 196-7).

## 2 PROJECT AIMS AND METHODOLOGY

### 2.1 Aims

- 2.1.1 The construction of the foundation pads for the new organ was not the subject of a planning condition. Therefore the work was undertaken without the issue of a brief nor the production of a project design that would normally define the aims prior to commencing fieldwork. Despite this, immediate appraisal of the works at the earliest opportunity and discussion with the College rapidly identified a series of specific aims. These were as follows:

- To identify and record the presence/absence, extent, condition, quality and date of any archaeological remains in the areas affected by the foundation pads

- To excavate and record any human remains that would be impacted upon or otherwise disturbed by the construction of the foundation pads
- To identify and record, with minimal disturbance, the grave structures present within the footprint of the foundations and provide information to aid the preservation of these and the accompanying burials *in situ*.

## 2.2 Methodology

2.2.1 OA was invited to the Chapel by St. John's following the removal of the floor surface and the uppermost deposits within the foundation footprints by the contractors. This had not significantly affected any of the *in situ* grave structures, with the initial foundation excavations terminating at the point where burial chambers were first encountered.

2.2.2 Following a site visit by an osteo-archaeologist, all further excavation was undertaken by hand by an archaeologist to the surface of the underlying sand and gravel terrace deposits. All archaeological features and grave structures were planned at a scale of 1:10 with sections also recorded at 1:10. Where possible, all human remains and grave structures were preserved *in situ* although previously disturbed and redeposited human remains (charnel) were removed and recorded by context before being reburied within the chapel.

2.2.3 All excavated features were photographed using colour slide and black and white print film. Recording followed procedures detailed in the *OA Fieldwork Manual* (ed. Wilkinson, OAU 1992). All recovered human remains were recorded in accordance with standards set out within *Standards for data collection from human skeletal remains* (Buikstra and Ubelaker 1994) and *IFA Paper No. 7. Guidelines to the standards for recording human remains* (Brickley and McKinley 2004).

## 3 RESULTS

### 3.1 Trench descriptions

#### *General sequence of deposits and structures*

3.1.1 Two foundation pits (Trenches 1 and 2) were excavated within the Chapel (Figs 2 and 3). These were located to the south and north side respectively of the central axis of the Chapel. Trench 1 was excavated to a depth of 2.3 m and Trench 2 was excavated to a depth of 1.8 m. Two representative sections were drawn in Trench 2 prior to reaching its maximum depth as safety precautions precluded the detailed recording of sections at the final depth. These sections are held in the archive.

3.1.2 Within both trenches natural yellow sand (119) overlain by natural gravel (118) was recorded from a depth of *c* 1.5 m below the floor level reflecting the average depth that the graves had been dug to. These had effectively removed the upper horizons of sand and gravel although some of the grave structures did penetrate the remaining



level of natural gravel to a greater depth. All grave structures are described in more detail below.

- 3.1.3 The backfill deposit around each grave structure comprised very mixed sand and gravel with limestone and brick fragments (101). Although individual grave cuts could not be distinguished within the small excavated trenches, the mixed backfill (101) was present around each and partly overlying the vaults where these had not been disturbed by later intrusions.
- 3.1.4 Cut into the rubble backfill deposits within each trench were pairs of east-west aligned limestone-built walls with a limestone slab base (104, 108 and 109). These formed part of a Victorian under floor heating duct with remnants of the pipe heating system remaining in situ. This system had subsequently been replaced within each duct cavity by smaller brick built ducts (105 and 110). The structures lay below a stone slab floor (102), later replaced by the current floor (100). The stone walls of the earlier duct had also disturbed and truncated several of the brick vaulted graves.

### ***Burial Vaults***

- 3.1.5 Six burial vaults of brick-build were encountered within the trenches. Two (103 and 111) in Trench 1 and four (106, 107, 112 and 113), in Trench 2. Vaults 107, 111 and 113 each had vaulted roofs remaining intact and undisturbed. However, vaults 103, 106 and 112 had suffered varying degrees of disturbance and modification resulting from the insertion of the stone heating ducts. This was relatively minor to 103 where only a small portion of the roof construction had been removed by the heating duct trench. Vaults 106 and 112 were constructed at a shallower depth than 103 which had resulted in the complete removal of the roof to these grave structures. To accommodate the heating duct these graves had been sealed with large limestone slabs which formed the base to the duct trench minimising the disturbance of the primary burials.
- 3.1.6 All of the vaults were aligned east-west and constructed of orange-red brick laid in a single skin stretcher bond. Vault 106 contained a large amount of disarticulated human remains (115) below the removed covering slab. The interior of this vault was not excavated further to establish the presence or condition of the primary burial. Vaults 103, 107, 111, 112 and 113 were left undisturbed.
- 3.1.7 Disarticulated human remains/charnel (114/117) were noted in close proximity to structures 103 and 111 and 106 and 107 at interface between deposit 101 and the natural gravel (118). These remains were rapidly analysed on-site before being re-interred. None of the primary burials were exposed or disturbed by the excavation.

## **3.2 Finds**

- 3.2.1 Some coffin fittings were noted, including grip-plates, grips and stud work for upholstery. No clear date could be assigned to these finds, but they broadly date to the 18th century. The bricks used for the construction of each vault was consistent in

size, colour and fabric. These were generally orange-red in appearance with slight firing colour variations. The fabric was relatively fine and sandy with some coarse ironstone inclusions. Each brick measures 8¾"x4"x2¼". This form and fabric is consistent with a late 17th to 18th century date.

### 3.3 Human remains

- 3.3.1 A number of disarticulated human remains were assessed on site prior to being re-interred in the chapel. Where biological sex of the recovered remains could be assessed, the individuals were found to be male. All elements present were of adult age. Stature could be estimated utilising a number of elements. A catalogue of all chanel analysed can be found in the project archive. The table below details the minimum number of individuals present and stature from the analysed remains.

*Table 1: Estimated stature of individuals*

<b>Ctx</b>	<b>Min. no. of individuals</b>	<b>Min. stature (cm)</b>	<b>Max. stature (cm)</b>
114	3	161.37 ±3.27	177.29 ±4.32
115	4	157.8 ±3.27	175.89 ±3.37
117	2	162.56 ±3.27	182.87 ±4.05

## 4 CONCLUSIONS

- 4.1.1 The watching brief indicated that the new foundation pads would impact upon *in situ* burial vaults. As a result, a new scheme was designed to construct the foundations, thus protecting the vaults from unnecessary damage. This allowed the primary burials to remain undisturbed within the associated vaults. The heating duct walls were partially removed and recorded to allow the necessary depth for the foundations.
- 4.1.2 From these limited investigations, it would appear that at the west end of the Chapel the earliest burials date to the late 17th or 18th century, based on the few grave fittings noted and the bricks used in construction of the vaults. However, the amount of chanel present could suggest that earlier graves had been disturbed in the course of vault construction.
- 4.1.3 It is also likely that the installation of heating ducts in the Victorian period led to some disturbance of skeletons within the vaults and subsequent movement of bones from their original locations. This appears to have been limited though with the lower part of the brick grave structures that are likely to hold the coffin and burial remains similarly being preserved *in situ* by the Victorian builders under large limestone slabs. The primary heating system recorded clearly relates to the 1843 record for the insertion of the under floor heating.
- 4.1.4 A secondary heating system appears to have been installed at a later date within the chapel in the later 19th or 20th century and the floor of the chapel has been replaced at least once.

## APPENDICES

## APPENDIX 1 ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXT INVENTORY

<i>Trench/Ctxt.</i>	<i>Type</i>	<i>Length</i>	<i>Width</i>	<i>Depth</i>	<i>Comments</i>	<i> Finds</i>
1/100	Structure			0.14 m	Current floor surface	C19th
1&2/101	Deposit			1.04 m	Backfill	C18th
1/102	Structure			0.1 m	Earlier floor surface	C19th
1/103	Structure	0.67 m	0.45m	0.3 m	Burial chamber	C18th
1/104	Structure	0.6 m	0.15m	0.65 m	Limestone heating duct	C19th
1/105	Structure	0.3m	0.24m	0.8 m	Brick heating duct	C19th
2/106	Structure	0.7 m	0.78m	0.4 m	Burial chamber	C18th
2/107	Structure	0.71m	0.54m	0.3 m	Burial chamber	C18th
2/108	Structure	1.9 m	0.85m	0.5 m	Internal wall	C19th
2/109	Structure	1.9 m	0.85m	0.5 m	Internal wall	C19th
2/110	Structure	0.1 m	0.23m	0.7 m	Partition wall of heating duct	C19th
1/111	Structure	0.91m	0.69m	0.3 m	Burial chamber	C18th
2/112	Structure	0.51m	0.49m	0.46 m	Burial chamber	C18th
2/113	Structure	0.56 m	0.50m	0.39 m	Burial chamber	C18th
2/114	Deposit				Charnel deposit	C19th
2/115	Deposit				Charnel deposit	C19th
2/116	Deposit	0.7 m	0.78m	0.40 m	Backfill of burial chamber	C19th
1/117	Deposit				Charnel deposit	C19th
1&2/118	Layer			0.54 m	Natural gravel layer	-
1/119	Layer			0.48 m	Natural sand layer	-

**APPENDIX 2 BIBLIOGRAPHY AND REFERENCES**

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Stevenson, W H, and Salter, Rev. H E, 1939 *The Early History of St. John's College.* Oxford Historical Society Vol 1, Oxford.

**APPENDIX 3 SUMMARY OF SITE DETAILS**

**Site name:** St. John's College Chapel, Oxford

**Site code:** OXSJCC 07

**Grid reference:** SP 5127 0666

**Type of watching brief:** Two foundation pits; max. dimensions Trench 1 - 1.6 m wide by 2.20 m long by 2.30 m deep, Trench 2 - 1.5 m by 1.8 m by 1.8 m deep

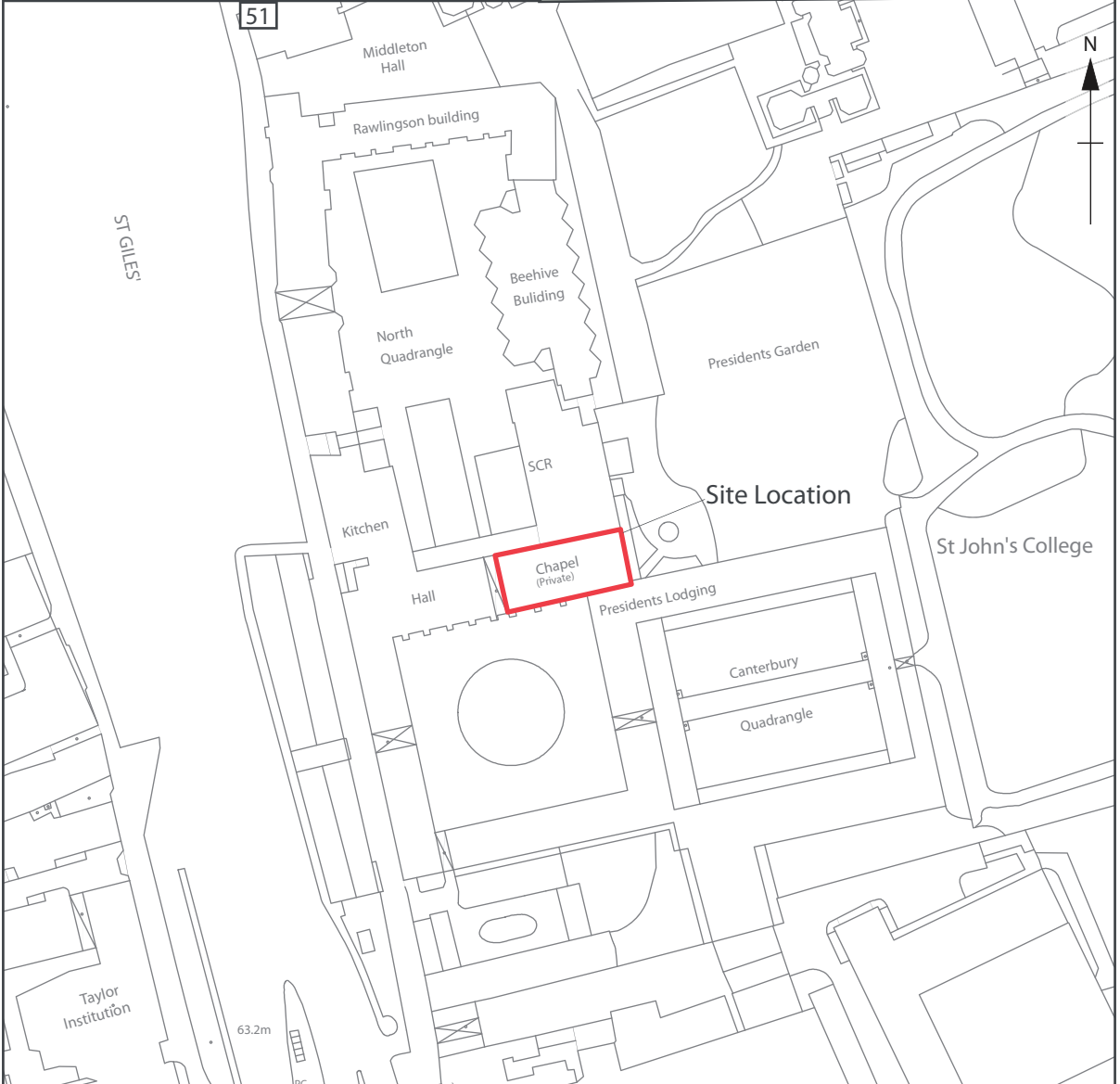
**Date and duration of project:** June 20th to July 10th 2007

**Summary of results:**

In June and July 2007, Oxford Archaeology (OA) undertook an archaeological watching brief at the Chapel of St. John's College, Oxford, prior to the installation of foundations for a new organ. Excavation of the foundation pits for the new structure revealed six brick-built burial vaults containing human remains, probably of late 17th or 18th century date. Two of the vault roofs had been disturbed during the installation of stone heating ducts in the 19th century. As a result of the discoveries, the design of the foundation pads was altered to accommodate the preservation of the burial vaults *in situ*.

**Location of archive:**

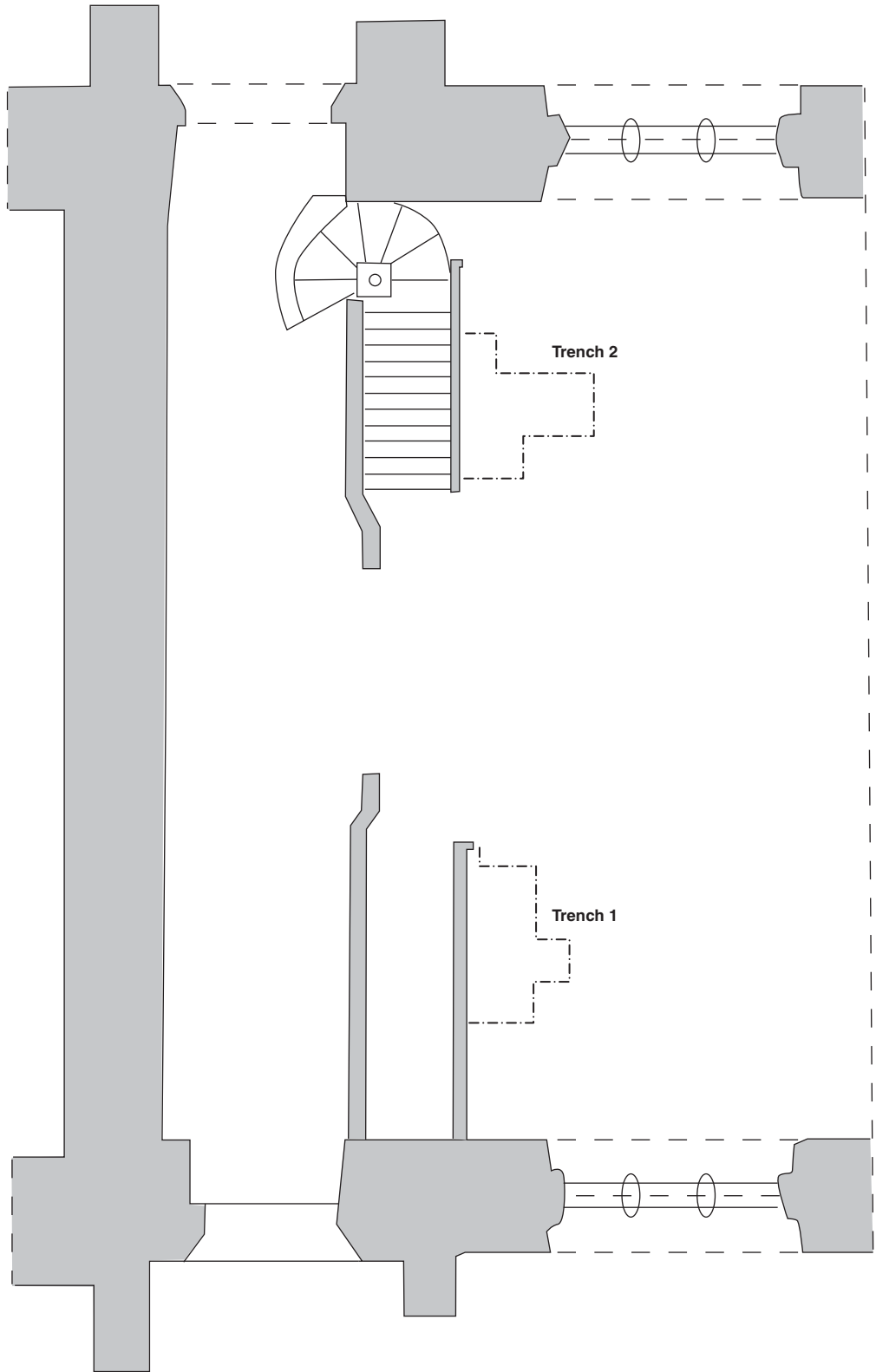
The archive is currently held at OA, Janus House, Osney Mead, Oxford, OX2 0ES, and will be deposited with Oxfordshire County Museums Service in due course under accession number OXCMS: 2007.86.



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0 500m  
1:12500

Figure 1: Site location



0 5 m

1:100

Figure 2 : Excavation area, west end of chapel

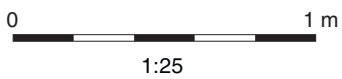
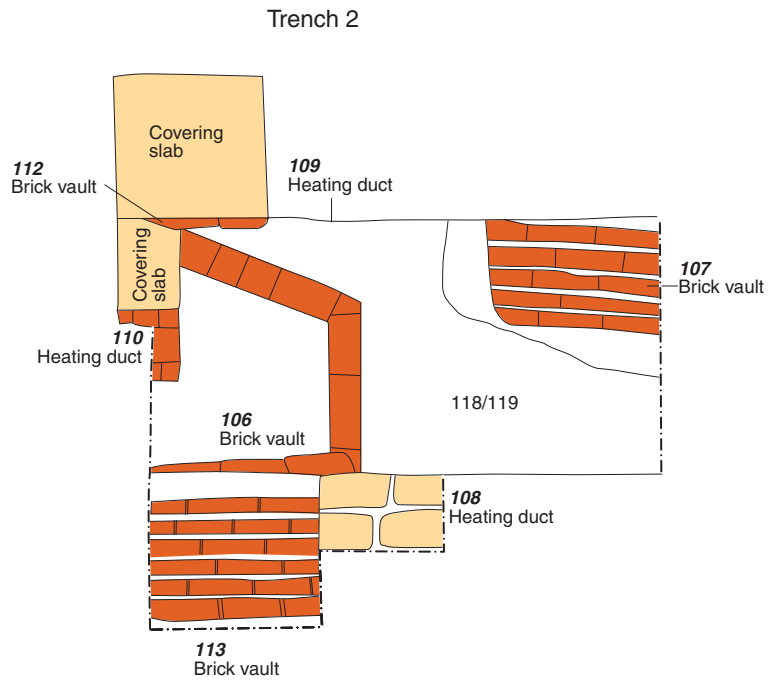
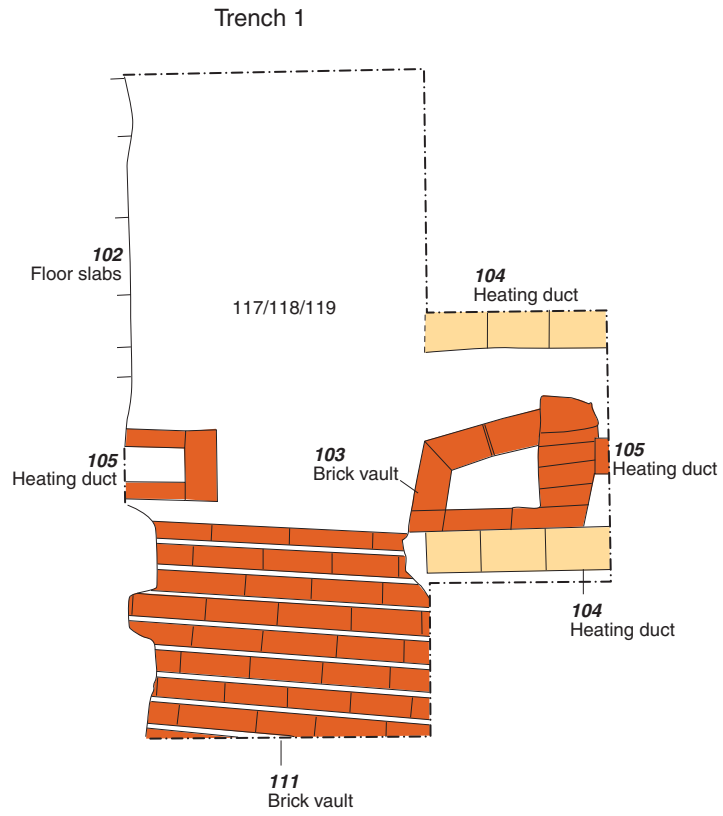


Figure 3 : Trench 1 and 2 plans



## **Oxford Archaeology**

Janus House  
Osney Mead  
Oxford OX2 0ES

t: (0044) 01865 263800  
f: (0044) 01865 793496  
e: [info@oxfordarch.co.uk](mailto:info@oxfordarch.co.uk)  
w: [www.oxfordarch.co.uk](http://www.oxfordarch.co.uk)



## **Oxford Archaeology North**

Mill 3  
Moor Lane  
Lancaster LA1 1GF

t: (0044) 01524 541000  
f: (0044) 01524 848606  
e: [lancinfo@oxfordarch.co.uk](mailto:lancinfo@oxfordarch.co.uk)  
w: [www.oxfordarch.co.uk](http://www.oxfordarch.co.uk)



**Director:** David Jennings, BA MIFA FSA

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Oxford Archaeological Unit  
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