Parterre Gardens Witley Court Great Witley Worcestershire



Archaeological Evaluation



February 2002



Issue N^O: 1 OA Job N^O: Planning Ref N^O: SMCC 08/2001

NGR: SO 769 648

English Heritage

Witley Court Gardens Great Witley, Worcestershire

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION REPORT

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Oxford Archaeology

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Great Witley, Worcestershire

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Planning ref. SMCC 08/2001

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Client Name:

English Heritage

Client Ref No:

Document Title:

Witley Court Gardens, Great Witley Worcestershire

Archaeological Evaluation Report

Document Type:

Client report

Issue Number:

Draft final

National Grid Reference: NN 0000 0000

Planning Reference:

OA Job Number:

785

Site Code:

WOWC 01

Invoice Code:

WOWCEX

Museum Accession No:

Prepared by:

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Position:

Date:

Checked by:

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Date:

Approved by:

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Date:

15 February 2002

Document File Location

V:\ric.tyler\OAU\RIC\Current Buildings Projects\Witley Court\Gardens\Report txt.doc

Graphics File Location

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Witley Court Gardens

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION

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Witley Court Garden Great Witley, Worcestershire

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION

SUMMARY

Oxford Archaeology (OA) carried out an archaeological evaluation in the gardens of Witley Court, Worcestershire, on behalf of English Heritage, to inform the current restoration project. The purpose of the investigation was archaeologically to excavate sample pathways and step foundations to discern the state of preservation of these features with regards to their future reinstatement. The evaluation revealed two of the foundations of the 19th- century garden steps, and associated parterre garden pathways. Some traces of drain runs were found with a metal-detector survey.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Location and scope of work

In August 2001 Oxford Archaeological Unit (now Oxford Archaeology) carried out an archaeological field evaluation within the parterre of Witley Court gardens, Great Witley, Worcestershire (NGR: SO 769 648 (Fig 1); SAM 306) on behalf of English Heritage. The evaluation has been undertaken as an initial investigatory stage in a proposed restoration of the historic garden scheme. The evaluation was carried out in response to a brief set by English Heritage, West Midlands Region and in accordance with a WSI prepared by OAU (2001). The work was covered by a Scheduled Monument Class Consent (SMCC 08/3001, dated 2 August 2001) in respect of the trenching, and a licence for a metal detector survey (dated 4 July 2001).

1.2 Geology and topography

1.2.1 The site lies on a sandstone scarp at c.85 m OD. The land is presently kept under a basic landscape management policy with the site being open as a public attraction through the Guardianship of English Heritage. The surrounding area is open farm land and woodland.

1.3 Archaeological and historical background

- 1.3.1 The archaeological background to the evaluation has been the subject of a separate desk study, the results of which are summarised below. The site itself has produced significant archaeological evidence with reference to the 19th century gardens and the state of preservation relating to the associated features.
- 1.3.2 During the Saxon period, the parish of Great Witley was a growing community and after the Norman Conquest was granted to Urso d'Abetot, a relative of William the Conqueror. By 1100, William de Beauchamps acquired the manor until it passed into the Beauchamps family allies, the Cooksey family, at the end of the 13th

- century. Through marriage the manor then left the Cookseys and became the property of the family of Sir William Russell. The property remained in the possession of the Russells until the Civil War in the mid 17th century.
- 1.3.3 It was after the Civil War that Witley manor left the possession of the old landowner class and moved into the hands of the new industrialist family of the Foleys, who had made their money from iron-working, and Richard Foley's general entrepreneurial skill. It was his son Thomas who bought the manor in 1655 and enlarged the existing Jacobean House. The family maintained the manor for 183 years, gradually extending the house from a modest manor and into a grand mansion. The Foleys went on to extensively landscape the adjoining parkland, demolished the medieval church and replaced it with the existing church to match the architecture of the mansion house.
- 1.3.4 It was also during the time of the Foleys at Witley that the villagers were persuaded to move their homes from the vicinity of Witley Court and on to the present site of Great Witley. The fortunes of the Foley family were squandered by the seventh Thomas Foley, until in 1837 the Foleys sold Witley Court to William Humble Ward, heir to the newer industrial fortune of the Dudleys.
- 1.3.5 The Dudley family were at the forefront of the Industrial Revolution, holding major interests in the Black Country through ironworks, coal mines and limestone quarries. Their vast fortune made Witley Court one of the grandest private dwellings in Europe, by replacing the brick mansion of the Foleys to the stone clad Italianate palace, the remains of which may be seen today.
- 1.3.6 It was during the Dudley phase of the life of Witley that the gardens were completely re-landscaped from the Renton deer park gardens of the 18th century to the wildly extravagant landscaping of the parterre gardens designed and transformed by one of the greatest contemporary landscape architects of the 19th century, William Andrews Nesfield. These gardens included terraced levels with two magnificent centrepiece fountains of classical inspiration, and pathways of coloured gravels segmenting an elaborate design of flowers and topiary.
- 1.3.7 The excessive luxury and design of the Dudley phase of the house and grounds could not last forever, and in 1920, still well in the era of post-Great War depression, the house was sold onto Sir Herbert Smith, supposedly to raise funds to keep the family's industrial interests, and local employment, ongoing. He limited the amount of staff and public access to the property by closing long-used footpaths, and introduced a more economical heating system (up to 30 tonnes of coal a day were used to heat the building during the Dudley family's occupation of the estate) and electricity.
- 1.3.8 In 1937, a fire in the east wing spread into most rooms in the central and eastern part of the house. Although the greater part of the house was untouched, Sir Herbert Smith decided to auction off the remaining assets of Witley Manor. The buildings were sold separately from the land. The structures were sold to demolition contractors and Lord Foley's woodland was felled by timber merchants.

1.3.9 The house and grounds were then left to decay and vandalism with illegal asset stripping, until in 1972 the estate came under the guardianship of the Department of the Environment and later English Heritage. The church was not part of the estate, as it was the parish church, and so was saved from the ravages of destruction and was later restored by a locally organised restoration committee.

1.4 Acknowledgements

1.4.1 Thanks to all the staff at Witley Court for their help during the archaeological works and to Tony Fleming (English Heritage West Midlands) and Stephen Wells (English Heritage Major Projects). The metal-detector survey was undertaken by Dean Crawford of Worcester.

2 EVALUATION AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

2.1 Aims

2.1.1 The aims of the work were to provide information about the paths, steps and drains in the gardens to inform the reconstruction work.

2.2 Objectives

- 2.2.1 Investigation of the make-up of the paths (by clearance and section in two places, immediately south of S3 and 15 m east of S13).
- 2.2.2 The determination through probing of the location of remains of ten sets of steps (no's. S1, S3-6, S8, S10, S12-14).
- 2.2.3 Investigation of the character of the remains of two sets of steps by excavation (S3 and S12).
- 2.2.4 The location of any iron gullies flanking the paths and fountains (by means of metal-detector survey).

3 EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

3.1 Scope of fieldwork

- 3.1.1 The work undertaken at Witley Court gardens consisted of three investigation trenches and generalised surface probing of potential foundations of garden terraces.

 The metal-detector survey is described in Appendix 3.
- 3.1.2 The evaluation consisted of three trenches, two measuring roughly 3 m by 3.5 m which were to examine the surviving integrity of the foundations of the 19th-century steps, and one measuring roughly 1.20 m by 7 m to examine the nature and survival of the parterre pathways and make-up deposits (Fig 2). The trenches were excavated by hand down to the relevant archaeological horizons.

3.2 Fieldwork methods and recording

- 3.2.1 The trenches were cleaned by hand and the revealed features were sampled to determine their extent and nature, and to retrieve finds and environmental samples. All archaeological features were planned and where excavated their sections drawn at scales of 1:20. All features were photographed using colour slide and black and white print film. Recording followed procedures laid down in the *OAU Fieldwork Manual* (ed D Wilkinson, 1992).
- 3.2.2 The second phase of archaeological works during this project was to attempt to examine the general survival rate of the garden step foundations via limited intervention through the use of surface probing. Notes were taken with reference to the English Heritage number system for the step positions, relating to the state of the overburden and the estimated preservation of the foundations below (Fig 2).

3.3 Finds

3.3.1 Finds were recovered by hand during the course of the excavation and generally bagged by context. Finds of special interest were given a unique small find number.

3.4 Presentation of results

3.4.1 The results are described in stratigraphic order by trench (§5.1-5.3), and then the probing (§5.4) and gully location investigation through metal detector survey (§5.5) are described subsequently. These descriptive sections will be followed by a general interpretative section (§6).

4 RESULTS: GENERAL

4.1 Soils and ground conditions

4.1.1 The site is located on sandstone bedrock with an overlying sequence of sand and thick sandy loam. The ground conditions were good during the investigative works and the weather conditions were fine and dry.

4.2 Distribution of archaeological deposits

4.2.1 Archaeological deposits and features were located within every investigation trench excavated, the result of which being that the features located were those garden features described through Nesfield's landscape plans.

5 RESULTS: DESCRIPTIONS

- 5.1 Trench 1: Pathway in South Parterre (Fig. 3)
- 5.1.1 Bedrock (106) was located within a sondage at the southern end of Trench 1 at a level of 85.07 m OD. This was weathered sandstone sloping gently to the south.
- Overlying the bedrock deposit was the sand layer 105. This was a layer c.0.1 m thick with a <3% charcoal content. Several small sherds of $18\text{th}/19^{\text{th}}$ -century ceramic were recovered from this deposit. This was overlain by layer 104, a very compacted mixture of sand and fragmented sandstone. This deposit was c.0.2 m thick and had inclusions consisting of 10% charcoal and <3% ceramic building material.
- 5.1.3 Layer 104 was cut by context 107, a construction cut for the 19th-century parterre pathways. This was c.0.2 m deep with an approximate width of 6.20 m and was aligned east-west. This cut was filled by 102, a layer of red/brown compacted sand and gravel c 0.20 m thick. This provided the make-up for the surface remnant of the path 101. This layer showed a slight camber in profile and included imported flint gravel. This deposit was c 0.06 thick.
- 5.1.4 These layers were overlain by deposit 103 which was a topsoil levelling layer of light brown sandy loam c 0.11 m thick which levels out the camber of the path at both sides. The final deposit in the Trench 1 sequence was the turf level of 100.
- 5.2 Trench 2: Steps S12 in South Parterre (Fig. 4)
- 5.2.1 The earliest context located within this trench was the foundation for the steps S12. These foundations were mostly constructed from red un-frogged brick (0.24 x 0.14 x 0.09 m) with two large sandstone blocks measuring 0.30 m by 1 m with an unknown depth. The foundation consists of four steps falling to the south with some residual white lime mortar evident on the surface of each step (presumably from the bonding of the removed limestone block treads). The brick foundations incorporated into the structure include several apparently random pieces of re-used roof slate. The bonding material for the main foundation structure was a sandy mortar.
- 5.2.2 The next deposit in the sequence for Trench 2 was the make-up deposit 207. This was a compacted sand layer with <1% charcoal inclusions with a depth of >0.15 m. This deposit was cut by context 204, a north-south linear feature with a flat base and steep sloping sides c 0.20m wide and 0.15 m deep. This was the cut for the ceramic drain 205 which had an external diameter of 0.14 m. The drain cut was filled by deposit 206 which also overlay the drain itself. This was a moderately compact sandy clay deposit c.0.15 m thick. The gravel path surface 203 overlay these deposits as a contemporary surface level. This was c.0.08 m thick and was of a similar make-up to deposit 101 in Trench 1.
- 5.2.3 Layer 201 Overlay the foundation steps and the pathway alike. This was a layer of dump material including glass slag, brick/tile fragments and iron nails. This deposit was c.0.20 m thick and contained c.30% ash debris; it was overlain by a thin, poor quality turf layer c.0.12m thick.

- 5.3 Trench 3: Path and Steps S3 in East Parterre (Fig 5)
- 5.3.1 Natural sandstone (308) was located at c.81.07 m OD. This was overlain by structure 312, the foundation to steps S3. This structure was split into two separate contexts (302 and 311). The first, 302 was c.2.20 m wide (exposed) and was constructed of brick, incorporating two square vertical sockets (one on the upper step, one on the lowest third step). These were located at the western end of the steps and were c.0.30 m by 0.30 m with an internal square socket of c.0.20 by 0.20 m. The bricks within the structure were 0.24 x0.14 x 0.09 m with no strict bonding pattern, in a sandy mortar bonding material and with inclusions of sand stone and re-used roof slate within the build of the structure. This was flanked on its western edge by 311, an apparently later structural addition of the foundation widening out the steps to align perfectly with S2 to the north. This was constructed from the same materials, with both foundation segments showing trace residual deposits of a white lime mortar over the surface of some of the brickwork.
- 5.3.2 The foundation was abutted by a deposit of moderately compacted sand (305) which had a <1% charcoal content with some small brick/tile fragments also evident. This layer was 0.10 m tick and lay directly over the sandstone bedrock 308. This deposit was cut by 306, an east-west drainage construction cut measuring 0.18 m wide and 0.16 m deep with a flat base and steep sloping sides. This contained the ceramic drain 309 which had an external diameter of c.0.14 m and an internal diameter of c.0.11 m. This drain was covered by the fill 307, a moderately compact red/brown sandy clay c.0.16 m thick. Ceramic drain 310 was aligned north-south and had the same dimensions, form and fabric as 309. The association between the two drains was not clear.
- 5.3.3 These were overlain by the deposit 304, a moderately compacted red/brown sand c.0.10 m thick with <5% flint gravel and <3% brick/tile inclusions; it was overlain by 303, a moderately compacted sand and gravel mix c 0.06 m thick.
- 5.3.4 The path and foundation was overlain by the dump deposit 301, a loose grey black sandy material with <5% charcoal and <5% brick/tile inclusions c.0.20 m thick. Structural glass fragments and iron nails were recovered from this deposit. Layer 301 was overlain by 300, friable turf/topsoil layer with <2% charcoal inclusions and a thickness of 0.10 m.
- 5.4 Probing of Step Locations (Fig. 2)
- 5.4.1 SI foundations (leading from the Winter Garden into the south Parterre gardens) were present c 0.12 m below the present ground surface. A thin overburden was noticed and this made the lower step foundation difficult to locate.
- 5.4.2 S2 foundations (located at the north end of the western flanking path of the Perseus and Andromeda Fountain) were assumed to be intact as the limestone block steps were still *in-situ*.

- 5.4.3 **S4** upper foundations (north side) appear to be a little more fragmented than the lower steps which felt more solid during the probing investigation. Foundations were present c.0.11 m below the present ground surface, below which there was definitely a deposit of spread debris.
- 5.4.4 S5 step foundations (located south end of the central path to Perseus and Andromeda Fountain) were still present and the square limestone western base rail was still visible through the turf line. Some debris overlying main foundation section was approximately 0.05 0.15 m thick.
- 5.4.5 S6 foundations (located on the eastern flanking path of the Perseus and Andromeda Fountain) are still present and appear to exist at a fairly shallow depth, with some foundation bricks visible through the turf on the eastern side of the step line.
- 5.4.6 **S8** foundations to the south of the Flora Fountain did appear to be present and at a fairly shallow depth. Some overburden was present.
- 5.4.7 S10 foundations to the north of the Flora Fountain were also found to be present c.0.11 m below the present ground level.
- 5.4.8 S13 foundations (located at the south-west corner of the Eastern Parterre Garden) are definitely present. Debris /levelling layer overlies the foundations and three is also some rabbit disturbance through the turf showing some mortar within the soil below. Foundations at the upper step level are c.0.12 m below the present ground surface.
- 5.4.9 S14 foundations are probably intact below the debris/levelling layer, c.0.12 m below the present ground level.
- 5.4.10 S3 and S12 foundations were examined through excavation and therefore have been described within the trench descriptions above (Figs 4 and 5).
- 5.5 Gullies and drains (Fig. 6)
- 5.5.1 The survey to determine the course of the garden drains was undertaken by metal detector (see Appendix 3). Despite the ground contamination there was a good response for linear features, though it was noted that the absence of results may in places have been because of the depth of the feature. The results appear to show a series of pipes delivering water to the fountains, and a drain running around the south (but not the north side) of the Perseus and Andromeda Fountain.
- 5.6 Finds (Appendix 2)
- 5.6.1 A small number of ceramic finds were made, mostly of 18th-19th-century earthenware and flower pots.

6 DISCUSSION AND INTERPRETATION

6.1 Reliability of field investigation

6.1.1 The integrity of the stratigraphic evidence seems to be good as the later disturbance has in-fact left the relationships intact between the step foundations and the gravel pathways and make-up horizons.

6.2 Overall interpretation

Summary of results

- 6.2.1 Whilst examining the condition of the pathway make-up layers within Trench 1, it was clear that the integrity of the pathway was in-fact very stable and in good condition. A slot dug through the path on its southern edge revealed compacted make-up levels (102) sitting within an apparent cut for the feature which truncated earlier levels which possibly relate to a pre-Nesfield pathway running east-west along the northern edge of Repton's landscaped deer park of the 18th century. This of course is only an interpretation of the levels investigated within the area defined by Trench 1, but it may point to an earlier access route or walkway along the eastern side of the manor.
- 6.2.2 The condition of the pathway make-up and surviving surfaces do mean that less consolidation will be necessary to enable the eventual reinstatement of this garden feature.
- The sections of step foundations examined within Trenches 2 and 3 (S12 and S3 6.2.3 respectively), showed an overall stable condition with fairly limited consolidation necessary for their re-use in the reinstatement of the Parterre terrace steps. The excavation of the S3 steps was particularly interesting due to the existence of two possible construction phases with the primary phase of 302 incorporating the square brick sockets. These may have been used for upright banister style features along the western edge of the step sequence (presumably these were mirrored on the eastern side of these foundations). The straight joint created by the junction between 302 (east section of foundation S3) and 311 points directly to an additional section to the western edge of the original foundation, thereby widening out the line of steps (312 was issued as an overall structure group number relating these two phases). It would therefore be of interest to examine the steps to the north of these (S2) for some correlation between the development of the construction design of these stepped landscape features. However due to the limestone steps still remaining in-situ at the S2 location, this comparison of foundation architecture will be impossible to undertake through excavation.
- 6.2.4 Whilst examining the integrity of the remaining fabric of the foundations to the garden steps, this was a good opportunity for a detailed examination of the overlying deposits. The deposit 201 (Trench 2) contained large amounts of ashy material and vitrified glass. This was interesting from the view as to where this glass originated. Trench 2 was located immediately south of the east wing of the main house, and it

may be that the glass found within deposit 201 was in fact related to the fire in 1937. This may also explain the amount of ashy material within this layer as the inside of the house was swept clean of debris. It may be another possibility that this glass was actually residual slag from either on-site glass manufacture, (which was not uncommon on estates such as Witley during the 19th century) or imported material from outside Witley Court.

- 6.2.5 As this deposit overlay the foundation steps, it can be determined that the layer was deposited post removal of the limestone dressed steps during the post-war years. This suggests that the deposit was deliberately laid as a levelling layer by the Department of the Environment during the 1970s.
- 6.2.6 The deposit 301, which overlay structure 312 (Trench 3) was found to contain a large amount of broken structural glass. The thickness of the glass ranged between c.2 and 4 cm which corresponded to the thickness of both kinds of glass (window panels and roof) used in the conservatory/orangery building c.60m to the north of Trench 3. With the two dump deposits described in Trenches 2 and 3, it does appear that a lot of the debris material from within the derelict house was re-deposited over the grounds as levelling material across the parterre gardens.
- 6.2.7 The investigation through probing of the steps S1, S4-S6, S8, S10, S12 and S14 did show that foundations are at least present in these given locations. The probing investigation did not however, reveal to what level of preservation the foundations remained, or indeed the nature and surviving depth of the fabric encountered. It was clear through this investigation that debris/dump layers directly overlay the step foundations.
- 6.2.8 The metal-detector search for metallic drains revealed delivery pipes to the fountains, but not the extensive path-side drains that had been expected, apart from a circuit around the south side of the principal fountain in the south parterre. On the other hand, the discovery of ceramic drains in Trenches 2 and 3 may suggest that other drain runs could exist that would not be detectable by this means.

Significance

6.2.9 The discoveries made in these excavations did not reveal any very unexpected details, but were important in providing information in relation to the reinstatement of the pathways and step features of the gardens, since the findings will aid the techniques and methods decided upon for the reinstatement programme.

Oxford Archaeology

February 2002

APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1 ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXT INVENTORY

Trench	Cxt No	Туре	Width (m)	Thick. (m)	Comment	Finds
1	100	layer		0.1	turf/topsoil	
1	101	Іауег	1	0.06	gravel path	
1	102	layer		0.12	make-up for 101	
1	103	layer		0.11	sandy topsoil mix	
1	104	layer		0.2	compacted sand	pot
1	105	layer		0.1	compacted sand	
1	106	layer			natural sandstone	
1	107	cut	6.2	0.18	cut for 101/102	
2	200	layer		0.12	turf/topsoil	
2	201	layer		0.2	dump	glass/iron/CBM
2	202	structure			step foundation (S12)	
2	203	layer		0.1	gravel path	
2	204	cut	0.2	0.15	drain cut	
2	205	service	0.14		ceramic drain	
2	206	fill	0.2	0.15	fill of 204	
2	207	layer		0.2	make-up for 203	
3	300	layer		0.1	turf/topsoil	
3	301	layer		0.2	levelling dump	
3	302	structure	<u> </u>		step foundations (S3)	glass/iron/CBM
3	303	layer	 	0.06	gravel path	
3	304	layer		0.1	levelling layer	
3	305	layer	<u> </u>	0.1	sandy soil	
3	306	cut	0.18	0,16	drain cut	
3	307	fill		0.16	fill of 306	
3	308	layer			natural sandstone	
3	309	service	0.14		ceramic drain	
3	310	service	0.14		ceramic drain	
3	311	structure			step foundation (S3)	
3	312	structure group			S3 group number	

APPENDIX 2 POTTERY ASSESSMENT/ SPOT DATING

Pottery from Witley Court Gardens

By Paul Blinkhorn

The pottery assemblage comprised 10 sherds with a total weight of 106 g. The entire assemblage was of later 18th or 19th-century date, with the following wares noted:

English Yellow-glazed earthenwares. c. 1785-1835. Hard, white, slightly sandy fabric with an thick lemon-yellow glaze. General range of utilitarian forms. 5 sherds, 32 g.

Mass-produced white earthenwares. c. 1810+. A well sorted, reduced white earthenware fabric with rare red subangular quartz up to 0.3mm and occasional fine white quartz up to 0.1mm. Wide range of transfer-printed domestic forms.2 sherds, 39 g.

Horticultural Earthenware. 19th – 20th century. Sandy red earthenware used for flower pots, etc. 3 sherds, 35 g.

The pottery occurrence by number and weight of sherds per context by fabric type is shown in Table 1. Each date should be regarded as a *terminus post quem*.

Table 1: Pottery occurrence by number and weight (in g) of sherds per context by fabric type

Yellow ware			White E'wares		Horticultural			
Context	No	Wt	No	Wt	No	Wt	Date	
105	5	32					L18thC	
201			2	39	3	35	19 th C	

APPENDIX 3 METAL DETECTOR SURVEY OF DRAINS AND GULLIES

A metal detector survey was carried out on 30/08/01 by Dean Crawford-Specialist Metal Detecting. The purpose of the survey was to attempt to locate and establish the extent of iron drainage gullies on the pathways.

A deep sinking detector was used and it was decided that the best approach was to look for larger and deeper responses and check for linear characteristics. The ground was found to be highly contaminated (iron nails fittings in demolition rubble etc) and this confused the signals somewhat.

Despite the interference the results were good revealing many linear responses all of which were plotted onto a plan (Fig. 6). It was noted that there was considerable variation in the depth of the target, this means that on areas where results were expected but turned out to be negative the size of the target its depth and ground conditions may have merely put it beyond range of the detector.

APPENDIX 4 BIBLIOGRAPHY AND REFERENCES

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House

APPENDIX 5 SUMMARY OF SITE DETAILS
Site name: Witley Court Parterre Gardens

Site code: WOWC 01

Grid reference: SO 769 648Type of evaluation: Three hand dug trenches and investigative

probing

Date and duration of project: 21/08/01 for 5 days

Summary of results: Step foundations located and examined (S3 and S12). Pathway investigated and further probing of remaining step locations.

Location of archive: The archive is currently held at OAU, Janus House, Osney Mead, Oxford, OX2 0ES, and will be deposited with English Heritage West Midlands in due course, under the following accession number:

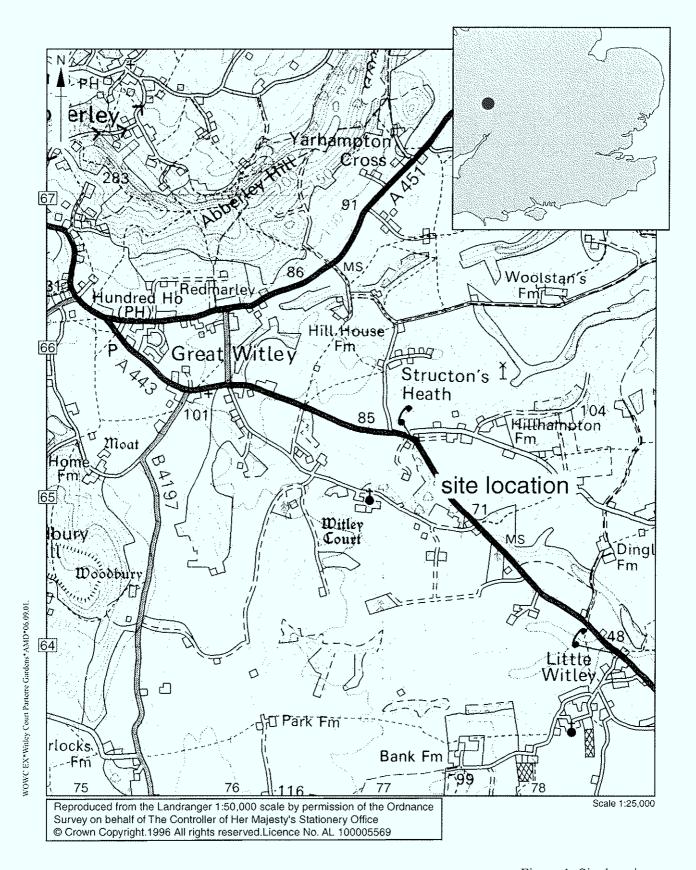


Figure 1: Site location.

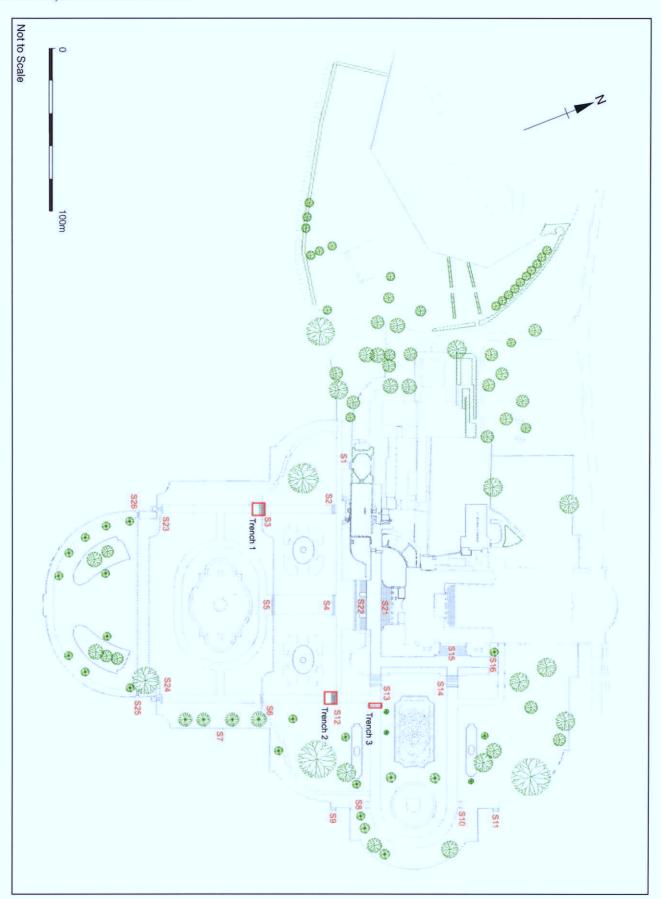
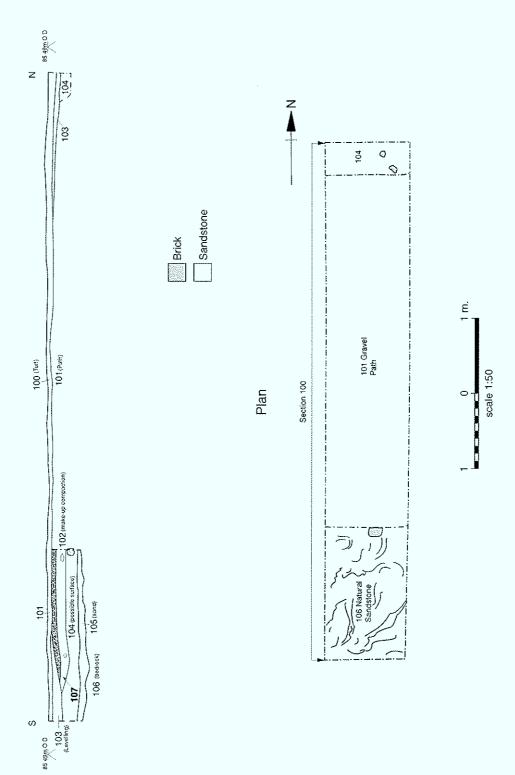


Figure 2: Trench Location plan.



Plan

Brick

Sandstone

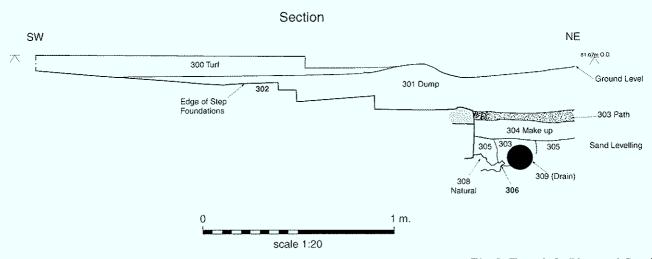


Fig 5: Trench 3: Plan and Section.

Figure 6: Results of Metal Detector Survey 2001.



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