

Trenching Adjacent to the Ashmolean Museum Beaumont Street Oxford



Archaeological Watching Brief Report

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ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF REPORT

CONTENTS

Summary.....	1
1 Introduction	1
1.1 Scope of work.....	1
1.2 Location, geology and topography.....	1
1.3 Archaeological and historical background.....	1
2 Project Aims and Methodology.....	3
2.1 Aims	3
2.2 Methodology	3
3 Results	3
3.1 Description of deposits.....	3
3.2 Finds	4
3.3 Palaeo-environmental remains	4
4 Discussion and Conclusions.....	4
Appendix 1 Archaeological Context Inventory	6
Appendix 2 Bibliography and References	6
Appendix 3 Summary of Site Details.....	6

LIST OF FIGURES

- Fig. 1 Site location
- Fig. 2 Site plans
- Fig. 3 Sections
- Fig. 4 Overlay of street plan of Oxford with the 1750 Taylor map

Front cover: Trenching in the eastern end of Beaumont Street

SUMMARY

On March 26th 2009, Oxford Archaeology (OA) carried out an archaeological watching brief during trenching adjacent to the Ashmolean Museum, Beaumont Street, Oxford (NGR: SP 5118 0654). The work was commissioned by Oxfordshire Highways as part of new trenching for new kerbing and drains. The watching brief revealed a well constructed stone built cess pit with a stone arched roof and an access passageway leading off to the east. The feature was sealed by deposits producing 18th/early 19th dating evidence. No other significant archaeology was observed.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Scope of work

1.1.1 On March 26th 2009 Oxford Archaeology (OA) carried out an archaeological watching brief adjacent to the Ashmolean Museum, Beaumont Street, Oxford (NGR: SP 5118 0654). The work was commissioned by Oxfordshire Highways as the result of the discovery of a void under Beaumont Street during the excavation of new service trenching.

1.1.2 A mitigation strategy detailing the level of archaeological recording was agreed with Paul Smith, the County Archaeological Officer representing Oxfordshire Highways, prior to the backfilling of the void.

1.2 Location, geology and topography

1.2.1 Beaumont Street (Fig. 1) is located on the northern edge of the historic centre of Oxford. The site was situated on the edge of the street adjacent to the main entrance to the Ashmolean Museum at the eastern end of Beaumont Street. The road level at this point is approximately 64 m above OD. The underlying geology is alluvium over floodplain terrace gravel (Geological Survey of Great Britain, sheet no 236).

1.3 Archaeological and historical background

1.3.1 Evidence for early activity in Oxford is scarce although Neolithic arrow heads have been recovered and evidence for Bronze age and Iron Age burials has been observed approximately 450 m north of the site. Roman boundary ditches and evidence of occupation in Oxford has been observed most notably in the South Parks area 550 m to the east.

1.3.2 In the Saxon period an abbey was established and Oxford underwent a period of growth due to its location on the trade route between the Kingdoms of Mercia and Wessex. Coins stamped with the mark "Ohsnafordia" have been found suggested that there may have been a royal mint at Oxford it this period. King Alfred established a

system of “burhs” or fortified towns to counter the threat of Danish raiders and Oxford became a “burh in 911.

- 1.3.3 Following the Norman invasion Robert D’Oily built Oxford castle, by the late 11th or early 12th-century Oxford was established as an academic centre for training clerics in spite of a calamitous fire razing Oxford in 1138. By the 13th-century this was centred on houses established by the Dominicans (1221), Fransiscans (1224), Carmelites (1256) and the Augustians (1267). The city suffered during the Black death (1348-1350), the population of the city dropped heavily and the colleges took advantage of the situation by buying up vacant property and greatly expanding their holdings within Oxford.
- 1.3.4 The city became the de-facto capital for the Royalist cause in the English Civil War in spite of the towns people supporting the parliamentary cause, however the university was staunchly Royalist and the presence of the Royalist army in the city carried the argument. Oxford was surrounded by a series of fortifications including a ditch running down Broad Street and possibly continuing along George Street, running parallel to Beaumont Street approximately 120 m to the north, putting the area of Beaumont Street outside the city defences.
- 1.3.5 By the time of the Loggan map in 1675 the defences had been slighted and the site of Beaumont Street is shown as composed of tenement buildings, their backyards and an open area (fields ?) known as Beaumont. From the 17th-century onwards the expanding population of the town found living space in the backs of the suburban tenements and many of the yards were built up with rows of cottages with the Taylor map of 1750 showing rows of tenements running back from St. Giles along the line of what was to become Beaumont Street.
- 1.3.6 The present Beaumont Street was laid out in 1821 when the fields called Beaumont were developed, and the frontage on St Gile’s was opened to create Beaumont and John Streets. The site of the Ashmolean museum was formerly occupied by three properties fronting St. Gile’s Street, with their yards extending westwards down Beaumont Street. These properties were acquired by the University in the years prior to 1839 when work started on the Taylorian Institution and University Galleries, later to become the Ashmolean museum.
- 1.3.7 A drawing was made of the site prior to the demolition of the buildings in 1839, which shows a range of substantial late medieval/17th-century buildings fronting St Gile’s with a row of terraced cottages running westwards along Beaumont Street. These tenements were set back from the street with a high boundary wall running along the edge of the pavement. The tenements themselves were of apparent 17th-century construction.
- 1.3.8 Work on the Ashmolean Museum Forecourt 10 m to the north of the site by OA (then Oxford Archaeological Unit, OAU) in 1994 showed that the area had been truncated

by the excavations for the museum cellars, although the bases of medieval rubbish pits were encountered (OAU, 1994)

2 PROJECT AIMS AND METHODOLOGY

2.1 Aims

- 2.1.1 To identify and record the presence or absence, extent, condition, quality and date of archaeological remains in the areas affected by the development.
- 2.1.2 To preserve by record any archaeological deposits or features that may be disturbed or destroyed during the course of this phase of ground works.
- 2.1.3 To provide information to determine a mitigation strategy for the main phase of construction.
- 2.1.4 To make available the results of the archaeological investigation.

2.2 Methodology

- 2.2.1 The watching brief was commissioned as a result of the discovery of a void in the base of an excavation for new kerbstones being dug along the northern side of Beaumont Street. The void was located in front of the entrance to the Ashmolean Museum (Fig. 2, Plan 1).
- 2.2.2 A plan showing the location of the feature was drawn at a scale of 1:100 (Fig. 2, Plans 1 and 2) and the sections were drawn at a scale of 1:20. All excavations and any recorded sections were photographed using digital colour and black and white print film. Recording followed procedures detailed in the *OA Field Manual* (ed D Wilkinson, 1992).

3 RESULTS

3.1 Description of deposits

- 3.1.1 A void was exposed in the base of the trenching during excavation by machine. Upon examination this void was found to be a stone-lined pit measuring approximately 1.5 m square and with a depth in excess of 1.6 m (18). The west, south and northern walls of this feature were built using roughly dressed limestone blocks laid without mortar. The eastern side was formed of dressed sandstone blocks measuring approximately 0.3 m x 0.2 m x 0.2 m laid in regular courses (19). The pit was covered by a stone arched roof built using dressed limestone blocks measuring approximately 0.35 m x 0.2 m x 0.15 m (Fig. 3, Section 1). All the walls and the underneath of the stone arching was stained black from organic debris (cess?). The uppermost courses of the arch had been displaced by the machine, collapsing into the pit.

- 3.1.2 Leading off the south-eastern corner of this pit was a 0.85 m wide passageway (20) (Fig. 3, Section 2). This was formed by a continuation of the southern wall of the pit (18) and a return of wall (19), and was roofed by flat limestone slabs measuring 1 m x 0.5 m x 0.15 m. This passageway had been backfilled with a grey-brown slit clay (21) and it was impossible to determine its length or purpose.
- 3.1.3 Both the pit (18) and passageway (20) were sealed by a layer of grey-brown clay silt (17) measuring up to 1 m in depth. This deposit produced fragments of brick and clay pipe stem suggesting a late 18th/ early 19th-century date.
- 3.1.4 Within the area of the road this was overlaid by a 0.15 m deep layer of gravel (12) supporting the concrete road base (11). The northern edges of these deposits had been cut by a 0.3 m wide trench (15) containing the concrete base for the kerbstones (16). The modern tarmac road surface (10) was laid butting up to the kerbs. Within the area of the pavement a layer of sand 0.08 m deep (14) had been laid over layer (17) forming a bed for the pavement surface of 0.5 m square concrete slabs (13).

3.2 Finds

- 3.2.1 Fragments of brick and clay pipe stem were recovered from layer (17). The presence of these artefacts was recorded but they were not retained.

3.3 Palaeo-environmental remains

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

4 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

- 4.1.1 The shape and construction of the pit, combined with the organic staining of the stonework suggest that the feature was originally constructed as a cess pit. A recent discovery during trenching by BT in St Giles exposed a very similar structure which was also interpreted as a cess pit (*pers, comm* David Radford, 2009).
- 4.1.2 Overlaying the current plan of Oxford with the Taylor Map of Oxford c1750 shows that the site was located at the rear of a tenement running off St. Giles Street (Fig. 4).
- 4.1.3 Its location within a standing building may account for the substantial arching and stone slab covered passageway, these being constructed to support the ground floor of the building. The corner of dressed stone (19) may possibly be part of the gable or chimney stack dividing the tenements, while the continuation of the southern wall may be part of the south wall of the tenements.
- 4.1.4 It was impossible to determine the length of the passageway running off the eastern side of the structure or if there was a stairway leading down without further intrusive excavation of Beaumont Street which was impractical at this stage.

- 4.1.5 The row of tenements associated with this feature appear to have been demolished as part of the 1821 development of the area and the construction of Beaumont Street. It is probable that the pit survived the demolition being below ground level. The presence of the deposits containing 18th/early 19th-century finds including clay pipe stem and brick fragments sealing the feature could be evidence of this phase of activity.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1 ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXT INVENTORY

<i>Context</i>	<i>Type</i>	<i>Depth</i>	<i>Width</i>	<i>Comments</i>	<i> Finds</i>	<i>Date</i>
10	Surface	0.1 m	-	Modern tarmac road surface	-	C20th
11	Layer	0.1 m	-	Concrete road base	-	C20th
12	Layer	0.14 m	-	Gravel road base	-	-
13	Surface	0.08 m	2 m	Modern concrete paving slabs	-	C20th
14	Layer	0.08 m	2 m	Sand bedding for paving slabs	-	C20th
15	Cut	0.3 m	0.3 m	Trench for kerbstones	-	C20th
16	Structure	0.45 m	0.3 m	Concrete and kerbstones	-	C20th
17	Layer	> 1 m	-	Layer of made ground/ backfill	Brick, clay pipe	C18th/ C19th
18	Structure	> 1.5 m	1 m	Square stone built cess pit with arched stone arch	-	C18th/ C19th
19	Structure	> 1.5 m	> 1 m	Corner of wall foundation	-	C18th/ C19th
20	Structure	> 1.5 m	0.85 m	Passageway/ steps roofed by stone slabs	-	C18th/ C19th
21	Fill	> 1.5 m	0.85 m	Backfill/ run in in passageway 20	-	C19th

APPENDIX 2 BIBLIOGRAPHY AND REFERENCES

IFA, 2001 *Standards and Guidelines for Archaeological watching Briefs*

OAU, 1992 *Field Manual* (ed. D Wilkinson)

OAU, 1994 *Ashmolean Museum Forecourt, Oxford: Archaeological Field Evaluation Report*

APPENDIX 3 SUMMARY OF SITE DETAILS

Site name: Beaumont Street, Oxford, Oxfordshire

Site code: OXBEVO 09

Grid reference: Centred at SP 5118 0654

Type of watching brief: machine excavation of service trench.

Date and duration of project: 26th March 2009, one site visit

Area of site: c40 m²

Summary of results: The watching brief observed a substantial stone construction approximately 1.5 m square, capped by a stone arched roof. A possible access passage or steps lead off to the east. This was buried by deposits producing late 18th/early 19th-century dating evidence. No other significant archaeology was encountered.

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.



Scale 1:50,000

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Figure 1: Site location

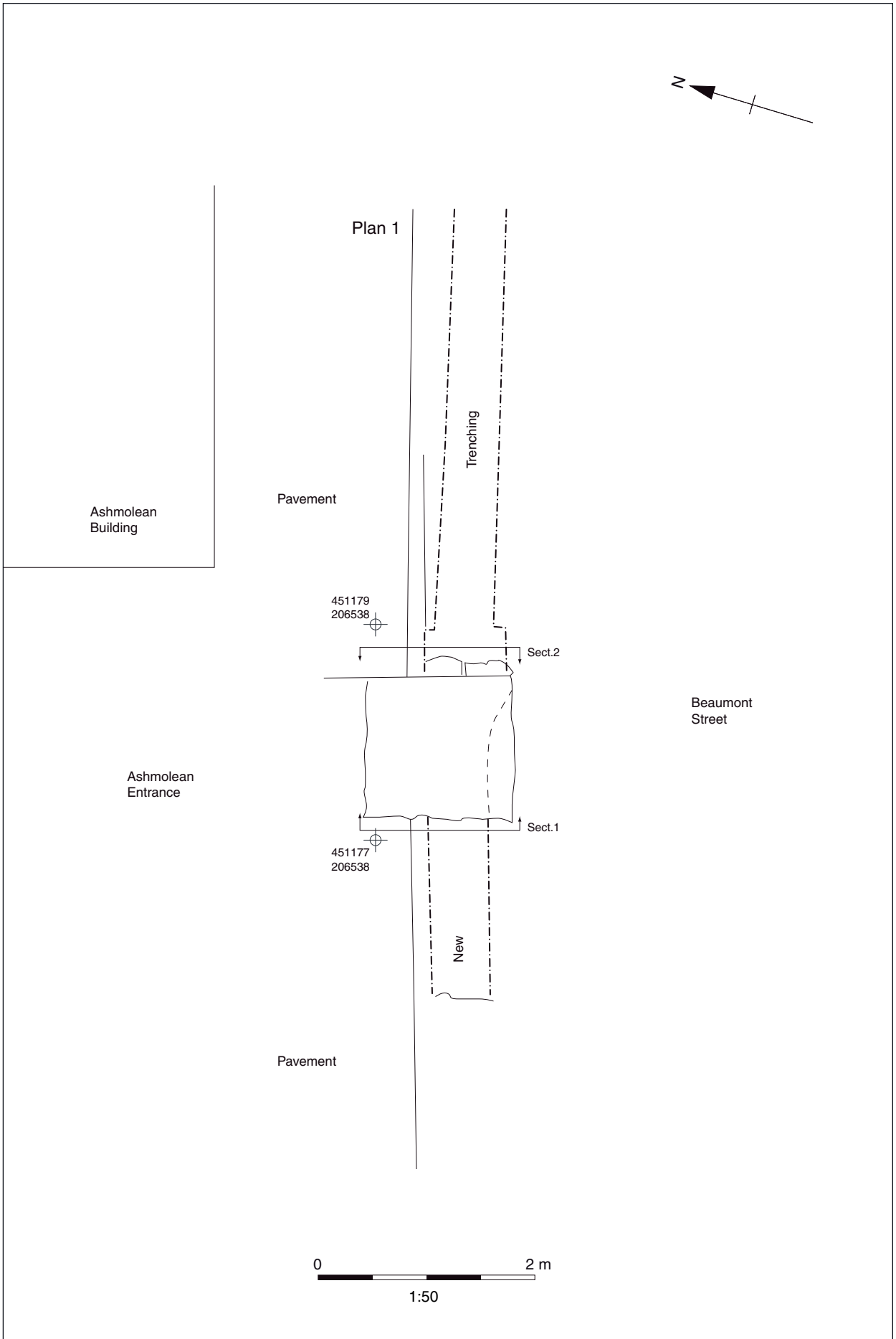


Figure 2 : Site plans

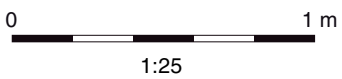
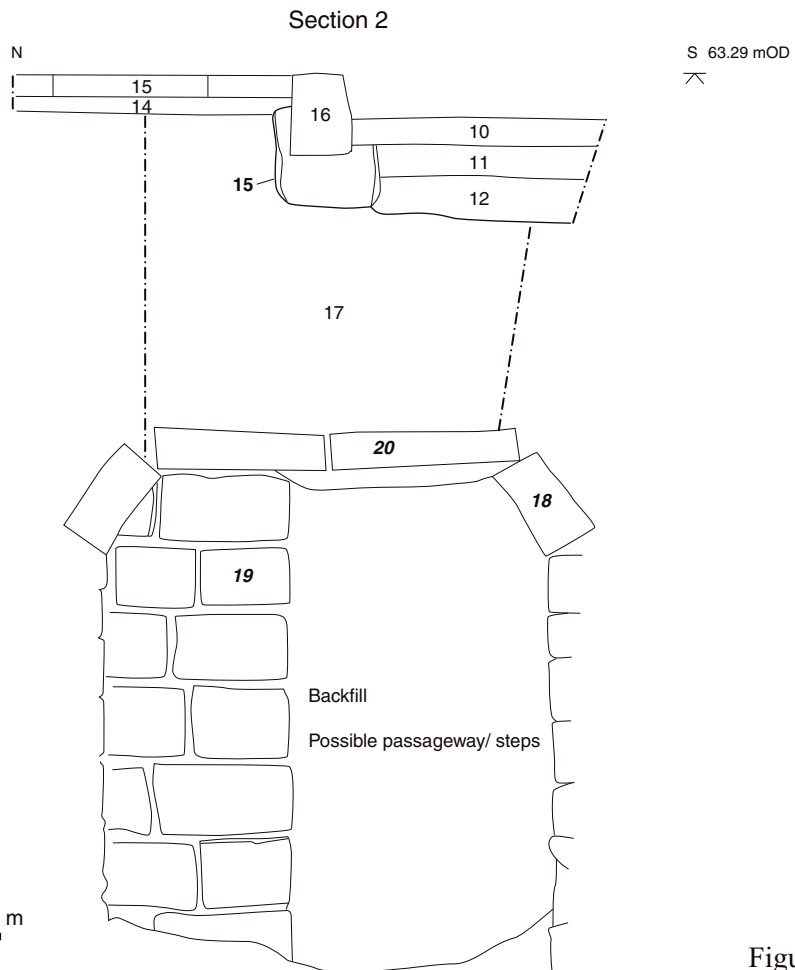
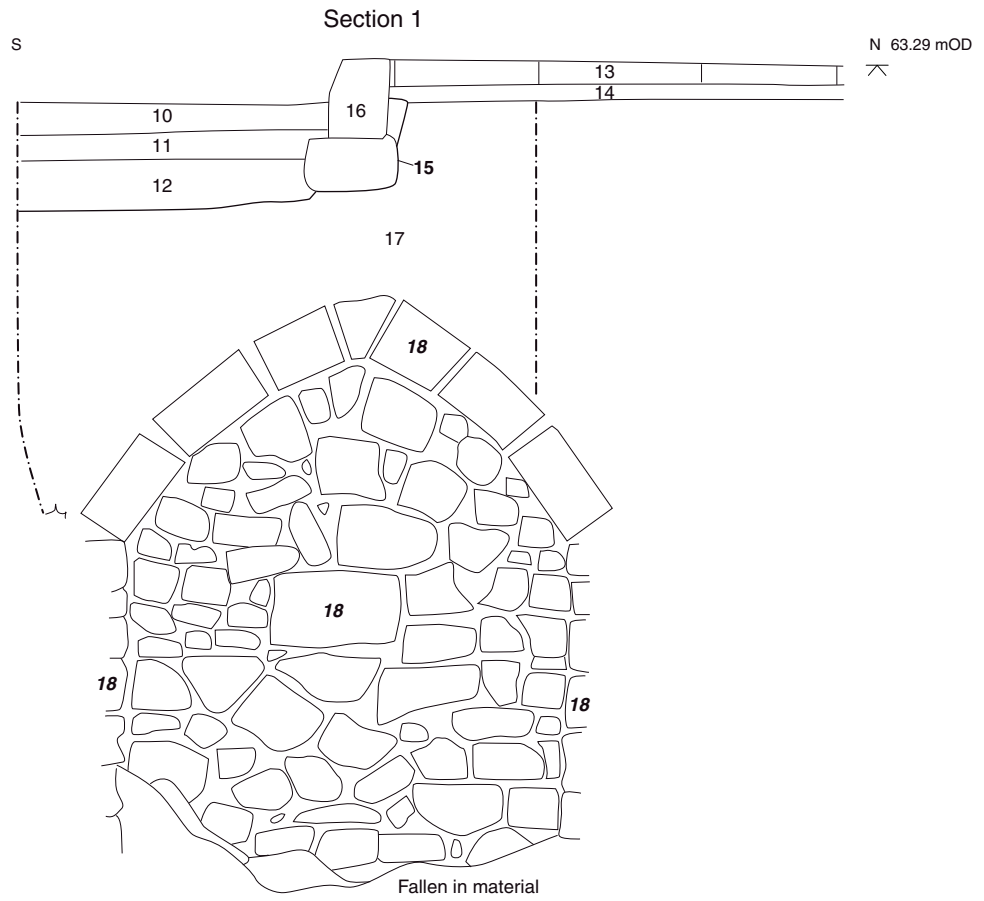


Figure 3 : Sections

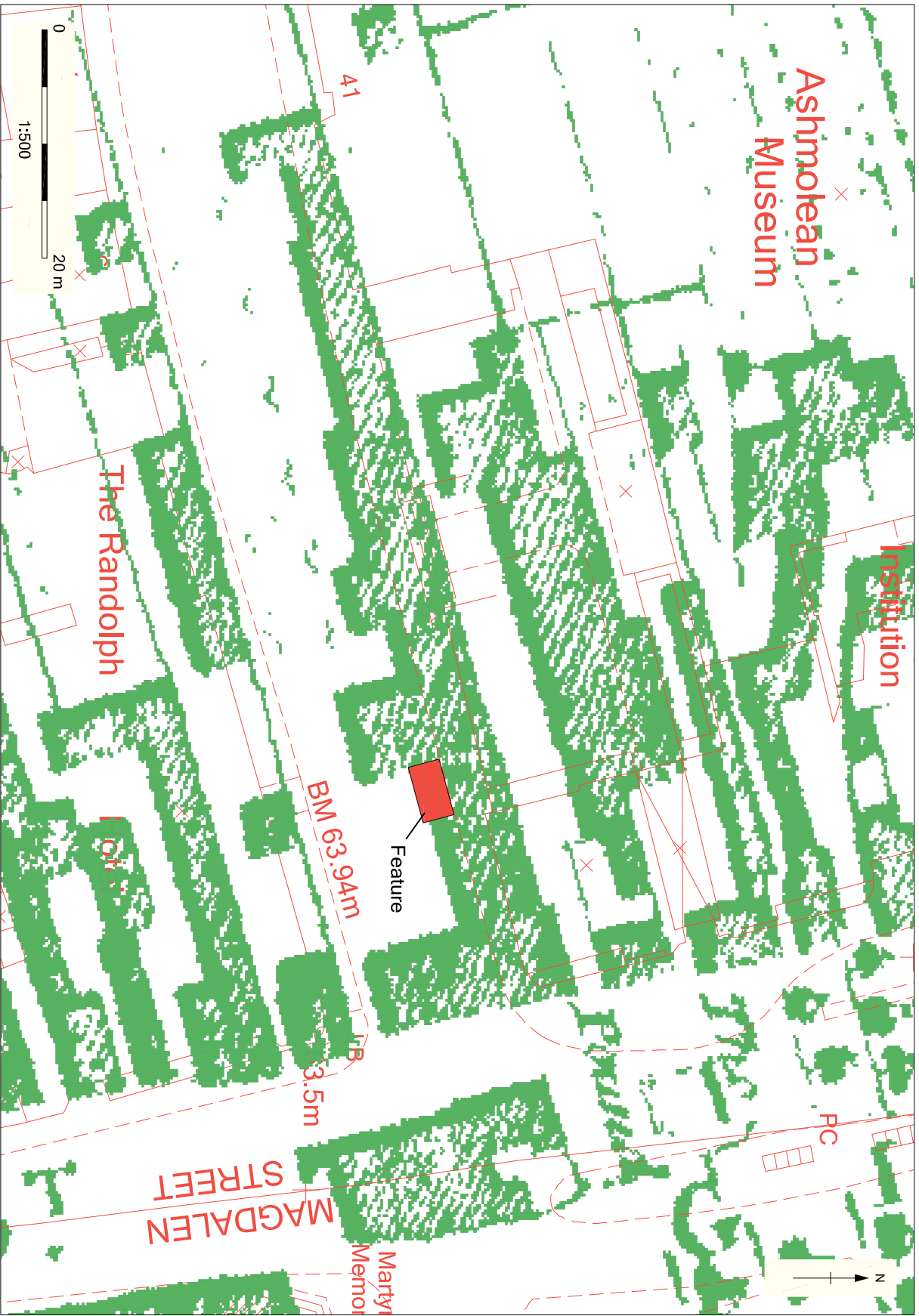


Figure 4: Overlay of street plan of Oxford with 1750 Taylor map



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