

JOHN MOORE HERITAGE SERVICES

AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF

AT 11 FYFIELD ROAD

OXFORD

OXFORDSHIRE

NGR SP 51465 07735

On behalf of

RIACH Architects

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REPORT FOR RIACH Architects
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CONTENTS

	Page
SUMMARY	1
1 INTRODUCTION	1
1.1 Site Location	1
1.2 Planning Background	1
1.3 Archaeological Background	1
2 AIMS OF THE INVESTIGATION	3
3 STRATEGY	3
3.1 Research Design	3
3.2 Methodology	3
4 RESULTS	3
4.1 Excavation Results	3
4.2 Reliability of Techniques and Results	5
5 FINDS AND ENVIRONMENTAL REMAINS	5
5.1 Finds	5
5.2 Environmental Remains	5
6 DISCUSSION	5
7 BIBLIOGRAPHY	6
FIGURES	
Figure 1 Site location	2
Figure 2 Underpinning pit showing stratigraphic sequence	4
Figure 3 Underpinning pit showing wall construction technique	4

Summary

John Moore Heritage Services carried out a watching brief at 11 Fyfield Road as part of a house extension. No archaeological remains predating the construction of the house were present. An unusual form of wall-footings was present and is commented upon.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Site location (Figure 1)

The site was located at 11 Fyfield Road, Oxford, NGR SP 51465 07735. The site was a residential house and garden. The underlying geology was 2nd (Summertown-Radley) Terrace Deposits close to the boundary with the 1st (Flood Plain) Terrace Deposits.

1.2 Planning Background

Oxford City Council granted planning permission for the demolition of the existing rear extension and conservatory and for the erection of single storey rear extension with basement below, and erection of 2 storey side extension to create 2nd and 3rd floor levels above existing side extension. The basement scheme was not carried out. A condition of the permission stated that an archaeological watching brief should be carried out during the work. The Oxford City Planning Archaeologist provided a Brief for the work. A *Written Scheme of Investigation* was prepared by John Moore Heritage Services for the archaeological watching brief, proposing a suitable methodology to satisfy the requirements of the brief. The WSI was approved by the City Archaeologist.

1.3 Archaeological Background

Evidence from aerial photographs and archaeological excavations indicates the presence of an extensive prehistoric ritual and agricultural landscape across this part of the Oxford gravel terrace, involving Middle Neolithic – Early Bronze Age ritual and funerary monuments, Iron Age /Roman agricultural field systems and subsequent Saxon rural settlement.

An extensive cropmark complex recorded in the University Parks to the south incorporates a possible Neolithic/Bronze Age linear barrow cemetery and later Iron Age/Roman agricultural enclosures. A Neolithic/Bronze Age henge monument and three Bronze Age ring ditches belonging to this complex have recently been excavated at Queen Elizabeth House, St Giles and at the Radcliffe Infirmary site (TVAS and MoLAS, forthcoming).

Fyfield Road lies in a poorly understood part of the terrace located between the known find clusters of Bronze Age and Saxon material south of Park Town and an extensive landscape of monuments and field systems recorded in University Parks. An undated, but probable prehistoric, gully was recorded during an evaluation in 2007 at

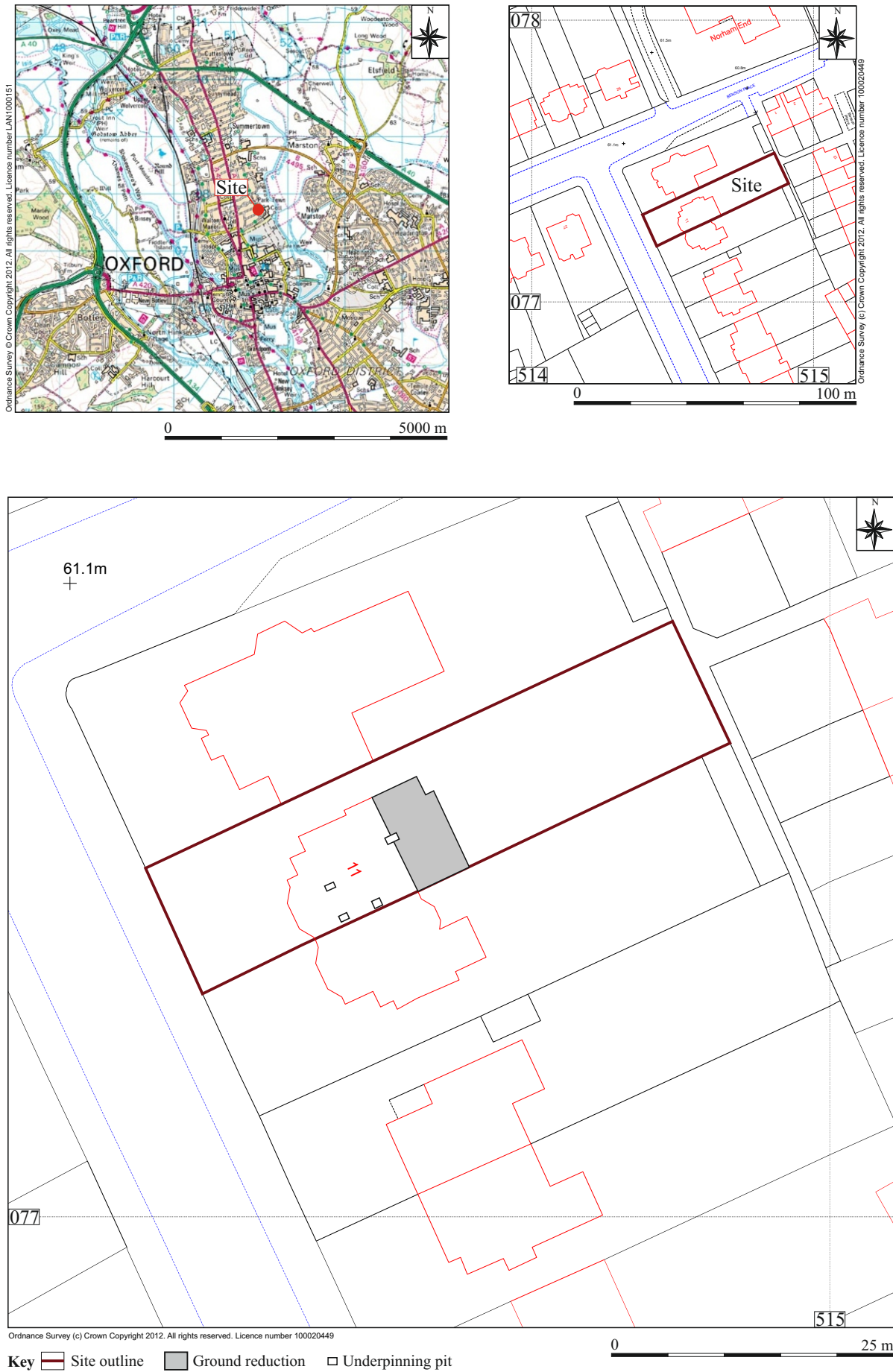


Figure 1. Site location

Lady Margaret Hall located 180m to the north-east of No 22 (Oxford Archaeology, 2007; UAD No 1708).

2 AIMS OF THE INVESTIGATION

The aims of the investigation as laid out in the Written Scheme of Investigation were as follows:

- To record any archaeological remains that will be impacted on by the development
 - o In particular to determine whether any Bronze Age, Iron Age, Roman or Saxon activity is present

3 STRATEGY

3.1 Research Design

An archaeologist was on site during all works which had the potential to disturb any archaeological remains. After it became clear that there was no archaeological potential present, it was agreed with the City Archaeologist to suspend the watching brief.

Site procedures for the investigation and recording of potential archaeological deposits and features were defined in the *Written Scheme of Investigation*. The work was carried out in accordance with the standards specified by the Institute of Field Archaeologists (1994) and the principles of MAP2 (English Heritage 1991).

3.2 Methodology

The watching brief was maintained during excavation of underpinning within the present structure and machining of footings trenches for the new extension.

4 RESULTS

4.1 Fieldwork (Figure 2)

All areas were excavated to a minimum depth of 0.8m below present ground level, with further excavation to a depth of 1.3-1.45m within the footings trenches and underpinning pits. Natural gravel was not attained. The lowest deposit encountered was red brown gravelly sandy loam (104), 0.25m thick, present in all areas of investigation (Fig. 2). This deposit had the appearance of an *in situ* former cultivation soil.

Overlying this layer of cultivation soil was dark brown gravelly loam (103), c. 0.25m thick. This layer had the appearance of more recent topsoil, presumably predating the construction of 11 Fyfield Road. A layer of red brown gravelly sandy loam (102)

0.15m thick, overlay the layer of former topsoil (103); the layer (102) appeared to be the same former cultivation soil as layer (104) and was undoubtedly associated with the construction of the houses on the east side of Fyfield Road.



Figure 2. Underpinning pit showing stratigraphic sequence

The redeposited former cultivation soil (102) was overlain by dark brown gravelly loam (101), 0.55m thick which represents a garden soil, undoubtedly associated with the house. Brick and concrete make-up (100) overlay the former topsoil (101) (Fig. 2).



Figure 3. Underpinning pit showing wall construction technique

In the underpinning pits it was clear that the buried cultivation soil (104) and the former topsoil (103) were cut by the footings trench 108 for the house. Into this trench were laid three courses of well-cut limestone blocks – measuring 250-300 × 150 × 130mm – bonded with pink mortar **107**, approximately 0.4m high. A further three courses of stepped brick **106**, c. 0.23m high, were laid on top of the limestone blocks. The brick wall **105** of the house stood on the stepped brick.

4.2 Reliability of Techniques and Results

The reliability of results is considered to be good. The watching brief took place during reasonably clement conditions on January 7th, 9th 10th and 16th with excellent cooperation from the on-site contractors Sporn Construction Ltd. Thanks are due to Anthony Alder of Sporn Construction Ltd for details concerning 21 Norham Road (see below).

5 FINDS AND ENVIRONMENTAL REMAINS

5.1 Finds

No finds were recovered during the watching brief.

5.2 Environmental Remains

No palaeoenvironmental samples were taken.

6 DISCUSSION

No significant archaeological remains of Bronze Age, Iron Age, Roman or Saxon date were present.

The watching brief was however of value to an understanding of different construction techniques employed by architects and their builders in Oxford at the end of the 19th century.

The house at 11 Fyfield Road, which forms part of St John's College Norham manor estate, was built in 1884 by the builders Ward & Curtis for the partnership Pike & Messenger, who also financed the construction and are named as architects of 27-29 Norham Road, as well as a few isolated houses elsewhere on North Oxford streets, between 1881 and 1888.

Frederick Pike was an auctioneer as well as the secretary of the Oxford and Abingdon Building Society (Hinchcliffe 1992, 55). It is not entirely clear who Messenger was, although the houses at 8 and 9 Fyfield Road were held by Emily Messenger, described as 'Wife/Auctioneer'. The Pike & Messenger partnership is named as architects for numbers 5-12 Fyfield Road.

Frederick Pike himself started speculating in 1878, after failing to persuade University College to sell land at the Mount – now St Hugh's College – for development. St John's archives testify to the testy relationship which often existed between the Oxford construction industry in the 19th century and the bursars of the colleges which

wished to develop lands (Hinchcliffe 1992, 56). The colleges made certain requirements on the prospective developers such as low brick walls and only railings with a planted garden to the front of the houses in Norham Manor (*ibid.* 73).

In 1884, the spinster Mary Bloxham was the leaseholder at 11 Fyfield Road (Hinchcliffe 1992, 225), although it is not necessarily sure that she lived here. Other houses on Fyfield Road – such as 2-4 – were clearly built and rented out as speculations. By the end of the First World War the house at 11 Fyfield Road was occupied by the historian Henry W.C. Davis, father of the medievalist R.H.C. Davis who was born here in 1918, and his family (Weaver & Poole 1933, 34, 43).

The footings described above comprised three courses of squared-off stone, with a further three courses of stepped brick before the wall was attained. This was set in a trench cut through the former topsoil and into the top of the buried cultivation soil. The footings trench did not cut into the gravel.

The method of construction for the house at 11 Fyfield Road, built by Ward & Curtis, contrasts with others within the St John's estate; at 21 Norham Road, built by Dorn & Brown for William Wilkinson in 1880, and which is half-cellaried, the brick footings are only three stepped courses high, before the wall starts (Anthony Alder (Sporn Construction Ltd) pers. comm.). John Dorn built 2-4 Fyfield Road for Frederick Codd in 1881.

It can only be presumed, at this stage, that the rest of the houses built by the combination of Pike & Messenger and Curtis & Ward along Fyfield Road follow the same design. If this is so, then Pike & Messenger, or perhaps indeed Curtis & Ward, appear to have either had surplus stone to dispose of, or else their building techniques were more rigorous than other Oxford builders.

It is hard to assess the full significance of this as yet. The construction of North Oxford houses has not yet sufficient data amassed to make any interpretative comment. To establish the weight of the observation made during this watching brief on the construction methods at 11 Fyfield Road, more work needs carrying out on the construction techniques of other buildings which form part of the St John's College estate.

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