

# Excavations at Oxford 1971

## FOURTH INTERIM REPORT

By T. G. HASSALL

WHEN the Oxford Archaeological Excavation Committee was established in 1967, a four year programme of rescue excavations phased with the first stages of the redevelopment of the city was envisaged. 1971 was therefore intended to be the final year of excavation, to be followed in 1972 by a year of publication.<sup>1</sup> The sites of excavations actually carried out in the period 1968-1971 within the walled city and its immediate suburbs are shown in FIG. 1. However, in 1971 it became clear that the Committee's activities would have to continue for at least another five years, if further archaeological sites are not to be destroyed unrecorded. From this year onwards, therefore, it is proposed to run the excavation and publication activities of the Committee's work in parallel, in order, not only to attempt to publish in full the results so far, but also to salvage further material.

In the last Interim Report the Westgate Centre site was less prominent than in previous years as other, smaller, sites were available for excavation elsewhere in the city. This happened also in 1971 when excavations took place at the following sites within the city: the Little gate and the city wall in St. Ebbe's; various sites in St. Aldate's; the Radcliffe Science Library Extension; the Churchill Hospital and Godstow Nunnery.

A full account of the Romano-British material rescued from the Radcliffe Science Library Extension is published elsewhere in this volume as also is an account by Mr. David Ganz of the floor tiles salvaged from the bank of the Thames at Godstow.<sup>2</sup> Mr. C. J. Young who co-directed the excavation of the Romano-British pottery kiln site at the Churchill Hospital has prepared an Interim Report of this excavation which also has been printed separately.<sup>3</sup> Notices of additional observation sites are recorded in Notes and News.

As always the success of an archaeological operation of this kind depends on the unstinting help of many people amongst whom some deserve special mention. Mr. B. G. Durham has been responsible for the on-site supervision of all the Central Area Redevelopment excavations; Mr. D. A. H. Richmond was in charge of surveying and the preparation of plans for publication for most of the year; Mr. D. Sheard took over as draughtsman at the end of the year; Mrs. J. de Goris, Miss Susan Walker and Mrs. R. Crane have been involved with the finds. In addition, it is a pleasure to thank all those officers of Oxford City Council and Oxfordshire County Council who have helped with the administration of the excavations; Miss C. Preston of the Town Clerk's Department, who

<sup>1</sup> For previous accounts of recent excavations in Oxford see the Interim Reports in *Oxoniensia*, xxxiv (1969)-xxxvi (1971).

<sup>2</sup> See pp. 38-50 and pp. 155-7.

<sup>3</sup> See pp. 10-31.

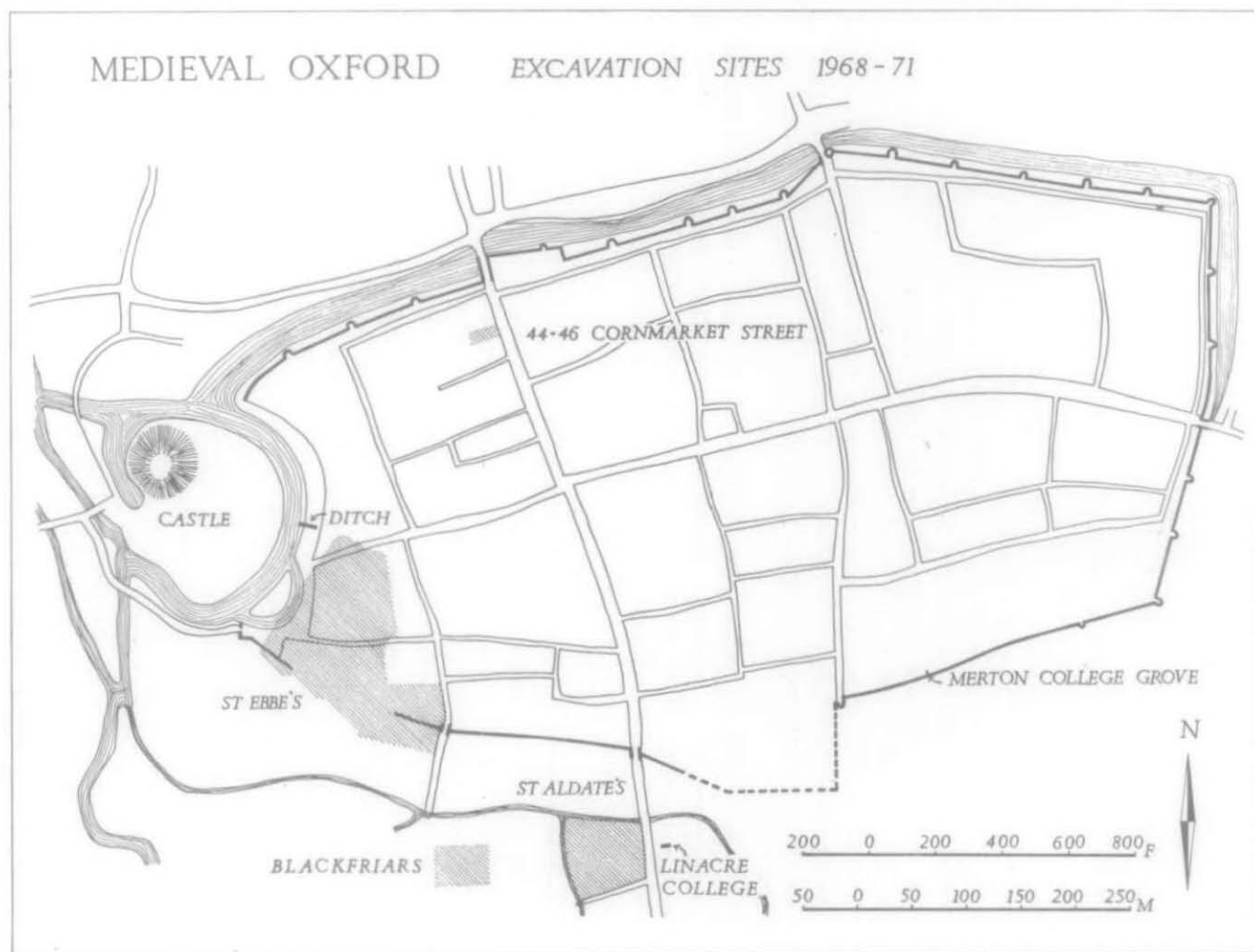


FIG. 1

Sites excavated by the Oxford Archaeological Excavation Committee, 1968-71.

continued to serve as assistant secretary to the Committee; Messrs. J. Day, H. Davies, M. Petty of the County Treasurer's Department, all of whom dealt with financial matters and Mr. A. B. Lindsell of the same department who has continued to help with insurance. Mr. W. H. P. Davison took over from Mr. H. Bedwell as Honorary Treasurer; Mr. Bedwell up to his retirement had shown unfailing interest in the work of the Excavation Committee. Thanks must also be recorded to the City Architect and his staff, in particular Messrs. P. Beresford, K. Hearne and K. Lichtenstein, to the City Estates Surveyor and especially Mr. L. R. Flint of his department and the City Engineer and members of his Special Projects section. Assistance has also been very gratefully received from Mr. Richard Foster, the Director of the Oxford City and County Museum and his staff, in particular the Conservation Officer, Mr. Ahmed Shishtawi; Mr. David Hinton of the Ashmolean Museum has also continued to provide specialist advice with particular reference to the finds. Without the help of all these people and many more, the Excavation Committee could not carry out its work.

#### ST. EBBE'S SITES (FIG. 2)

##### *35-37 Church Street and The New Rectory*

The new shopping centre in St. Ebbe's with its associated shop and office developments has consistently provided sites for rescue excavation since 1968. In 1971 archaeological work was confined first to the observation of new basement works for the second phase of the Selfridge development, i.e. immediately to the east of the excavation site Nos. 31-34 Church Street; and, second, a watch was kept on the foundation works for the new St. Ebbe's Rectory (FIG. 3). The former site was covered with pits, but owing to the way in which the bulk excavation was carried out, little useful material was recovered; similarly on the latter site, the design of the new foundations coupled with the considerable depth of overburden rendered this site of little value. The presence of many stray human bones indicated that the Greyfriars Cemetery extended as far east as this site.

##### *The Littlegate and The City Wall (FIGS. 2 and 3)*

Excavation in advance of development in St. Ebbe's in 1971 was confined to a site at the corner of Littlegate Street and Charles Street. The results of the excavations on the site of the Greyfriars,<sup>4</sup> taken in conjunction with topographical studies seemed to indicate that the line of the city wall at this point described by the Royal Commission on Historical Monument was incorrect and needed clarification.<sup>5</sup> Fortunately extensive disturbances by modern cellars and a factory basement had left the relevant part of the site untouched, although they rendered the site of little value for any additional excavation which might have examined further tenements in this area.

Three trenches were excavated (Trenches I-III, FIG. 3). These trenches clarified the development of the stone city wall but failed to produce any evidence

<sup>4</sup> See the previous Interim Reports in *Oxoniensia*, xxxiv (1969)-xxxvi (1971).

<sup>5</sup> Royal Commission on Historical Monuments, *City of Oxford* (1939), 161 and map facing 136.

# OXFORD ST EBBES SITES 1968-71

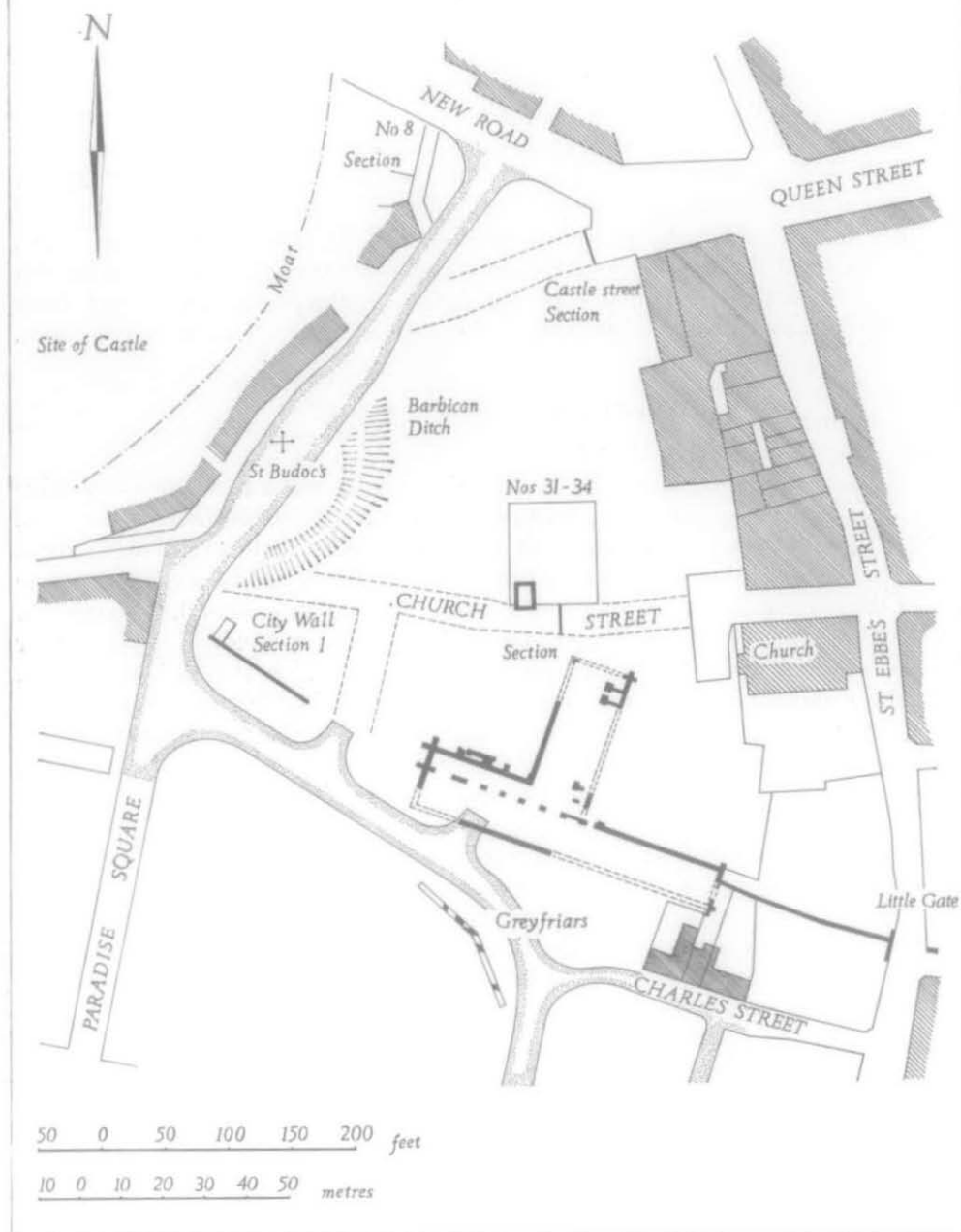


FIG. 2

Based on the City of Oxford Central Area 1 : 500 Survey. By permission of the City Engineer.

on the nature and line of the late Saxon defences other than indicating that the mid-13th century wall was built on a domestic site and not on a previous defensive line as had previously been supposed.

In trench I the following phases were uncovered : (1) A pre-wall phase represented by a small domestic semi-basement, or undercroft, cut into the natural gravel with stone faced internal walls ; a large stone-built oven with a surviving flue and stoke-hole ; several large rubbish pits and associated occupation debris ; this first phase was associated with many sherds of tripod pitchers and can therefore be placed in the 12th to early 13th century ; (2) The western wall of the Little gate which was in existence by 1244, when it was referred to as the Water gate ;<sup>6</sup> (3) A wall running southwards from the gate which can presumably be identified with the wall that the Greyfriars were required to build by Henry III around their property when they began to build their church in 1244 ;<sup>7</sup> (4) The city wall extending westwards from the western side of the Little gate to link up with the east end of the Greyfriars Church ; this wall is presumably the new wall specified by Henry III in 1248 when he modified his previous requirements of 1244 and simply allowed the Greyfriars to connect the Little gate and their church with a stone wall ;<sup>8</sup> (5) A large structure on the north side of the wall of which three large, ?pier bases survived ; this building seemed to be substantially built and at least 10 metres from east-west, unless the bases were in reality for supporting a platform jutting out from the wall ; (6) Post-medieval disturbances in the form of pits and refacing of the south face of the city wall which remained in use as a property boundary up to 1971.

Trench II was dug mechanically in front of the wall line of 1248 in order to make absolutely certain that there were no defensive ditches either of the 13th century or earlier in front of the wall. This trench showed conclusively that the wall of 1248 was built exactly on the point where the gravel of the Second Gravel Terrace gave way to a stratum of yellow clay, not the Oxford clay, which extended along the length of Trench II. There were no indications of any ditches cut into this clay and above it there was no surviving stratification. The whole area south of the 1248 wall was remarkably sterile.

Trench III (FIG. 4) was excavated to shed further light on the wall of 1248 and also to examine the extent of disturbances northwards from the wall in an area uninterrupted by modern cellars. The following periods were represented : (1) A ? Neolithic pit, feature 105, filled with red-brown loam, cut into the natural gravel and containing two flint flakes ; (2) the city wall, i.e. that of 1248 with its construction trench 1/1 ; (3) A series of pits, features 106, 109, 112, 113 of various dates ; these pits, lying under a modern basement floor would totally have removed any structures which might have lain as far back as this point from the street frontage.

One pit, from Trench III, feature 108, which does not appear in the section published in this Interim Report, was interesting from the point of view of its

<sup>6</sup> A. G. Little, *The Greyfriars in Oxford*, O.H.S., xx (1891), 14.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 23.

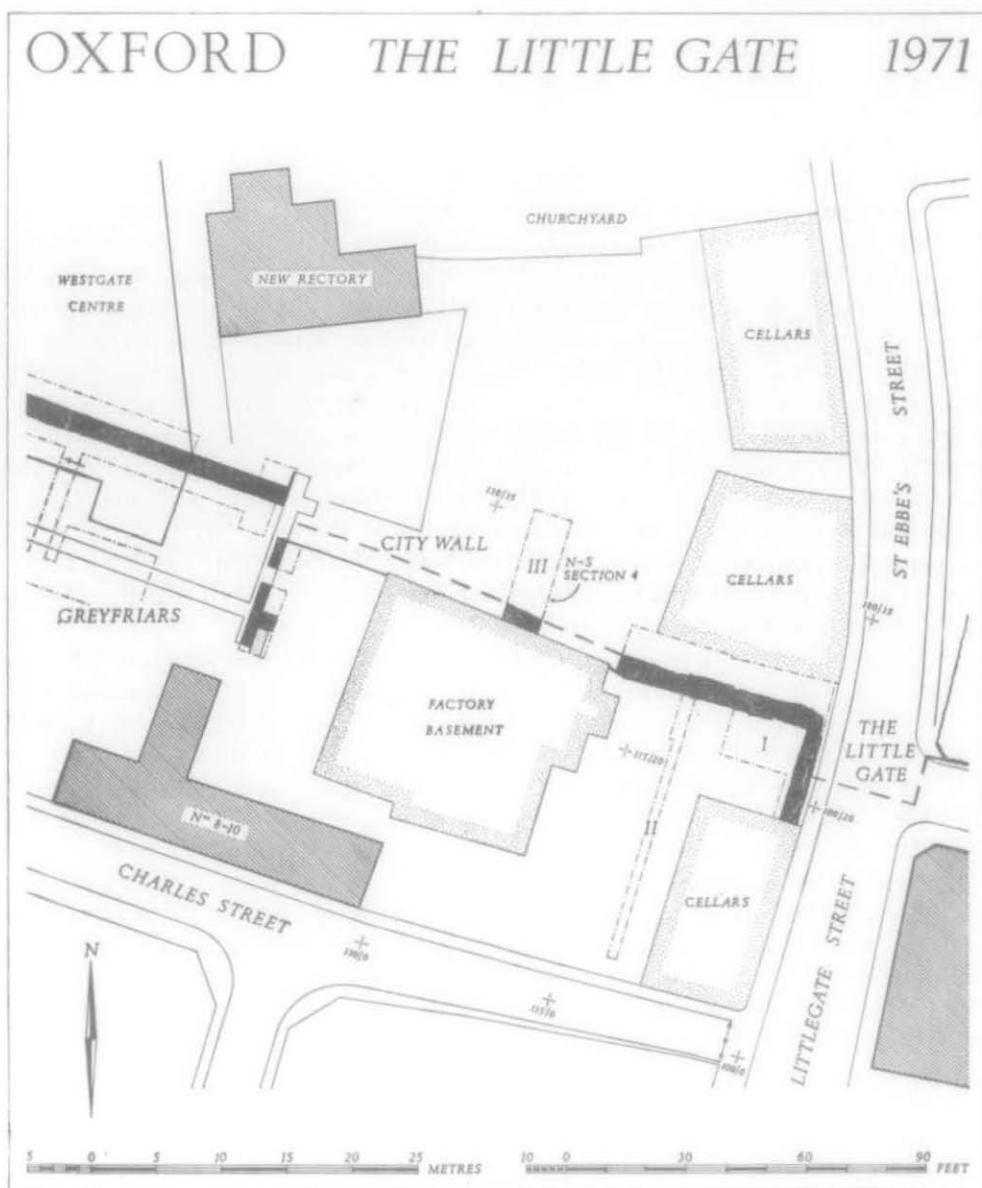


FIG. 3

date and its position. It contained a sherd of Stamford ware, sherds of coarse, gritty ware, including a body sherd with horizontal rows of impressed ornament, which can be compared with a sherd from Seacourt.<sup>9</sup> This pit, therefore, can be dated to the late 11th to early 12th century and represents the earliest late Saxon domestic occupation from this site. Its position, only 3 metres behind the 1248 wall line, would seem to preclude an earthen defensive bank resting solely on the ground surface at this date. It is also worth noting that this pit comes nearest in time and place to the town-house (*curia*) given by Aethelmar to Eynsham Abbey before 1013 together with the church of St. Ebbe already built on part of the ground as one of its 'pertinences'.<sup>10</sup>

### ST. ALDATE'S SITES (FIG. 5)

#### *The Survey Area*

The general nature of the survey area was described in the last Interim Report.<sup>11</sup> In 1971 work was carried on both above and below ground. When No. 81 St. Aldate's was demolished a record was made of the building and its staircase was removed by the Oxford City and County Museum for possible re-erection.

Excavations were brought to a satisfactory conclusion on the site of Nos. 79-80 St. Aldate's and were briefly extended under No. 81 after the latter's demolition. The Oxford University Archaeological Society, under the supervision of Mr. M. Robinson excavated an area behind Nos. 82-83 St. Aldate's, Littlemore Hall. New sewer works in connexion with Bridewell Square Redevelopment were observed and a section on the site of No. 2a Speedwell Street was recorded. Finally at Christmas 1971 a small trial excavation was completed in the front garden of Linacre College to amplify the results from across the road and to test the potential of the site in view of a proposed extension to the front of the College.

#### *79-81 St. Aldate's*

Excavation on this site was mainly confined to a portion of No. 79 St. Aldate's in which only a narrow strip could be excavated. In spite of the limitation in the size of the site the work here has produced major results and fully demonstrated the archaeological potential of all future redevelopment projects in St. Aldate's.

As indicated in the previous account of this site disturbance was minimal and the stratification survived virtually undisturbed to a depth of over two metres. The provisional list of phases from the site is now as follows :

- o. Alluvial flood plain material overlying the 1st Gravel Terrace. Provisional radio-carbon dates for this material are about 600bc.
1. A clay bank (FIG. 6), apparently man-made, cut into by two gullies. One of these

<sup>9</sup> Martin Biddle, 'Medieval Village of Seacourt', *Oxoniensia*, xxvi/xxvii (1961/62), Fig. 18, no. 11, 142.

<sup>10</sup> *Eynsham Cartulary*, 1, ed. H. E. Salter, O.H.S., XLIX (1906-7), viii.

<sup>11</sup> *Oxoniensia*, xxxvi (1971), pp. 10-14.



OXFORD  
CITY WALL

THE LITTLE GATE  
NORTH-SOUTH SECTION 4

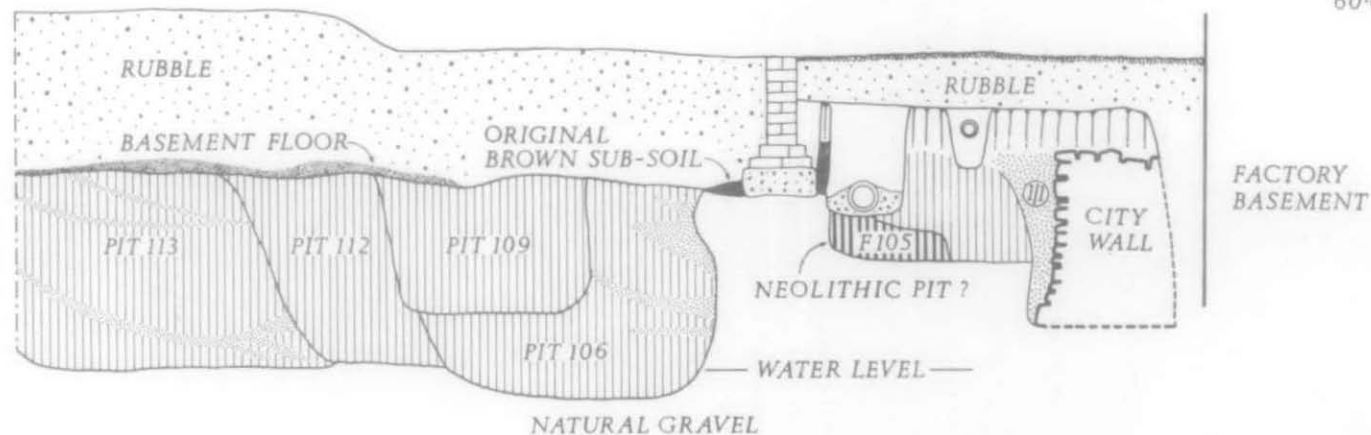
1971

144

124/35-62

124/26-00

OD.M.  
60-00



1 0 1 2 3 4 5 METRES

5 0 5 10 15 FEET

OD.M.  
55-00

FIG. 4

T. G. HASSALL



gullies was wattle revetted with evidence for its use as a flax retting trench (PL. XV, A). A further wattle fence on the tail of the bank appeared to be a boundary fence (PL. XIV). Provisional radio-carbon dates indicate that the wattle fences are early 9th century in date, thermoluminescence indicates a late 8th century date for the pottery.

2. A hearth sunk in a pit dug into the clay bank. Probably associated with this hearth was a complex arrangement of wattle fences and baulks of timber (PL. XV, B) which did not appear to form part of a building, but were reminiscent of methods of land reclamation still in use today in the Wash.<sup>12</sup> Provisional radio-carbon dates suggest a rapid development from Phase 1 to Phase 2.

3. A gravel spread c. 15–20 cm. thick. Stratified floor and occupation layers started from this level.

3a. A sequence of floor and occupation layers. In one of the floors was a ? beam slot on an east-west alignment with stake holes at either end.

4. A clay floor with associated occupation layers limited by a ? beam slot at its western end. Apparently contemporary with this floor was a spread of stones at the rear of the site. The north-east corner of the stones was defined by a series of post holes. This phase may represent a house with a yard behind it.

5. A clay floor with no associated structure.

6. Traces of structure extending over the site of both Nos. 79–80, although the area examined was insufficient to reveal any coherent plan. Indeed the beam slot and robber trench excavated may not have formed part of a building, but rather the site may have been an open working area containing several hearths. Pottery associated with this phase can be compared with that from under the Castle Mound pre c.1071.<sup>13</sup>

7. An apparently composite structure with post holes containing massive posts standing on stones, a robber trench and associated stone wall. The structure was contemporary with an occupation layer 158. 11th–12th century.

8. A single building occupying the site of both Nos. 79 and 80 St. Aldate's with stone footings parallel to the street. Late 12th–early 13th century.

9. No. 79, the building at the corner of Speedwell Street and St. Aldate's, was separated off from No. 80 by a post hole partition and its back wall was rebuilt. 13th century.

10. The wooden partition between Nos. 79–80 St. Aldate's was replaced by a stone wall. The plan of the corner building was basically as described in the last Interim Report.<sup>14</sup> Late 13th century.

11. No. 80 produced the ground plan of a building as shown in FIG. 8 in the last Interim Report. The structure of No. 79 probably remained unaltered from the previous phase but there were no associated occupation layers. 14th century.

12. No. 79 was rebuilt with slight stone footings. 16th century.

13. No. 79 was rebuilt with a large central chimney stack and No. 80 had a small semi-basement. Both buildings were presumably fully timber-framed. 17th and 18th centuries.

14. The final phase was represented by brick built footings when both Nos. 79 and 80 were rebuilt as one. 19th century.

### 82–83 St. Aldate's

Excavations to the rear of Littlemore Hall revealed altogether eight distinct phases which alternated between the use of the area as a small back yard or garden in which were shallow rubbish pits, and a westward range behind No. 83 St. Aldate's, now Alice's Shop. The rear, northern wall of the site remained the permanent property boundary back to the 13th century at least, while the southern

<sup>12</sup> Ex. inf. the Dredging and Construction Co., Kings Lynn, Norfolk.

<sup>13</sup> E. M. Jope, 'Late Saxon Pits under Oxford Castle Mound: Excavations in 1952', *Oxoniensia*, xvii/xviii (1952/53), 83–97.

<sup>14</sup> *Oxoniensia*, xxvi (1971), 12–14 and fig. 8.

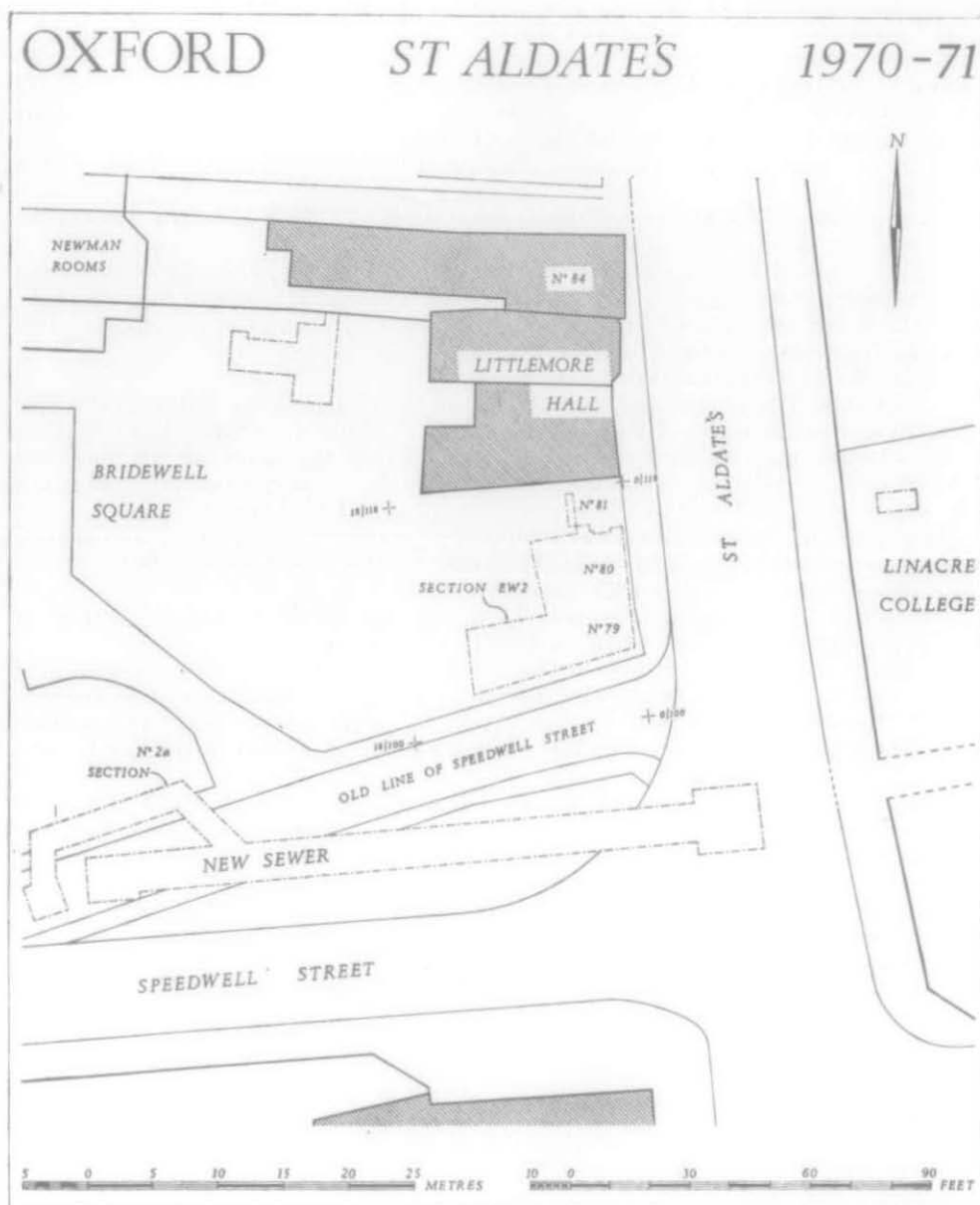


FIG. 5

part of the site was always used as a path giving access to the rear of the tenement from the street.

### *2a Speedwell Street*

Observation of the new sewer in Speedwell Street confirmed the profile of the clay bank as excavated at 79-80 St. Aldate's. Further westwards information was difficult to obtain because the sides of the trench were lined with sheet piling. However, under the site of No. 2a Speedwell Street a space was left between the piles and a section was recorded. This section showed that the 1st Gravel Terrace lay at a depth of 3 metres. Immediately above this lay a wattle fence in a layer of alluvial deposit which was sealed by further layers of silting. The first occupation layer was at a depth of c. 1.25 metres and dated from the 12th to early 13th centuries at which time Overee's Lane (Speedwell Street) was presumably first laid out to give access to what was to become the Blackfriars' mill. This site seems to have been occupied for a comparatively short period of time, represented by two floor levels, before it was abandoned again until modern times.

### *Linacre College*

A small excavation in Linacre College's garden revealed another series of occupation and floor levels. Again the clay bank was found cut into by two large pits containing well preserved wood and fragments of leather. The clay bank gave the impression of tailing off towards the eastern end of this trench, although this is a point which can only be settled by subsequent excavation.

From the foregoing description it will be seen that St. Aldate's sites have produced a stratified sequence unparalleled in Oxford. The lowest levels are of outstanding importance for local archaeology, since they extend a stratified sequence of local wares back into the Middle Saxon period. As is hardly surprising, the pottery found in these lowest levels is of a coarse shelly variety from which the local variant of St. Neot's ware presumably developed. Some of the sherds from Phase I of 79-80 St. Aldate's are, however, completely different in character and come from smoother sandy wares which seem totally alien to the associated wares.

The discovery of such early deposits means that for the first time Oxford archaeology can be extended back almost to the time of St. Frideswide.<sup>15</sup> The greatest outstanding problem of this area must be whether the clay bank under St. Aldate's is natural or man-made. There is nothing to prove that it is man-made. Although its extent would seem to make this proposition improbable, equally it did not resemble known superficial geological deposits with regard both to the thickness of over a metre and to the material (blue clay) from which it was constructed. If the clay bank is artificial and a deliberate attempt to create a causeway, then it shows that St. Aldate's as a north-south route was in use from at least the 9th century.<sup>16</sup> In addition the organization of such a major

<sup>15</sup> F. M. Stenton, 'St. Frideswide and her Times', *Oxoniensia*, 1 (1936), 103-12.

<sup>16</sup> Gabrielle Lambrick, 'Some Old Roads of North Berkshire', *Oxoniensia*, xxxiv (1969), 82-4.

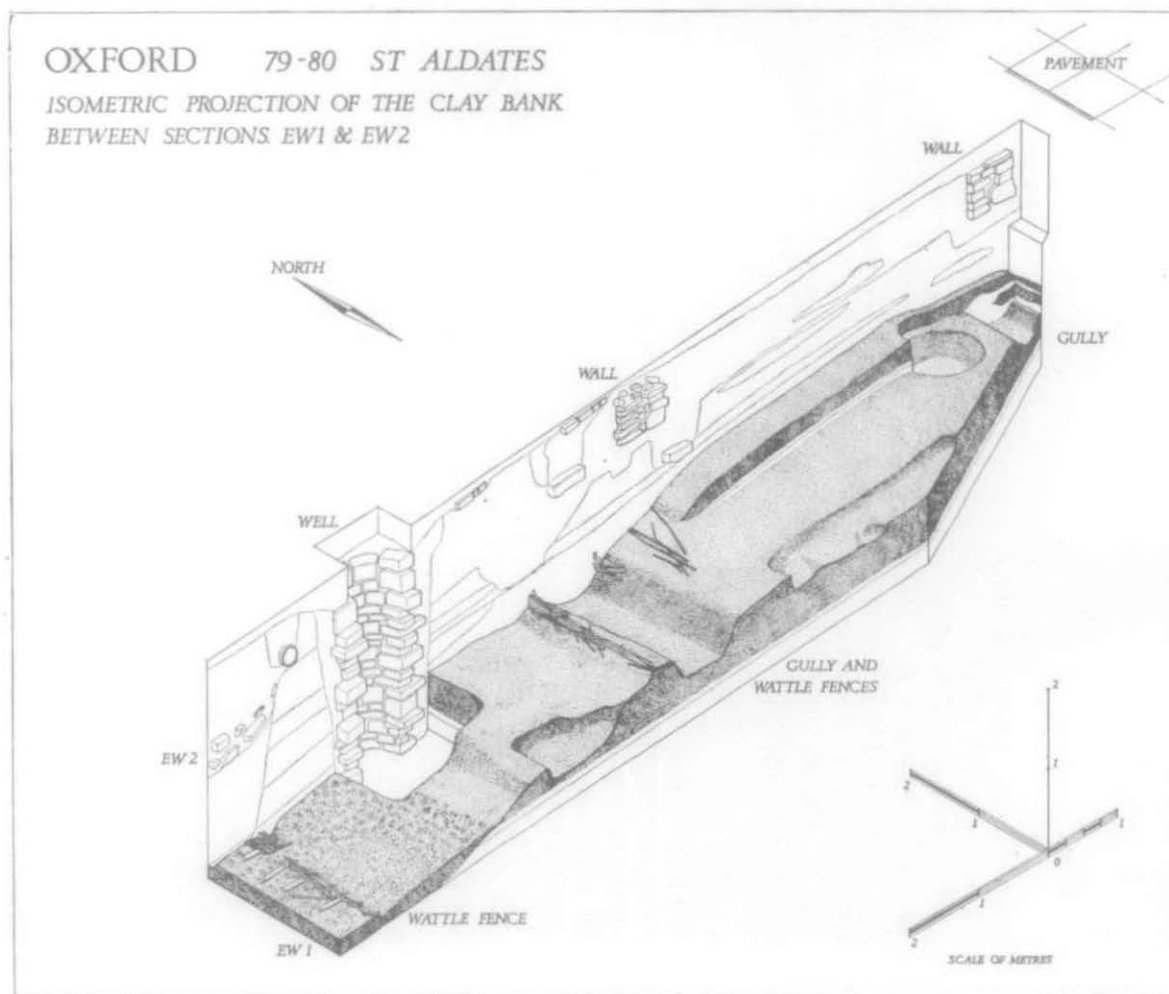


FIG. 6

piece of civil engineering would demand a very powerful administration to carry it through and cannot be seen as a purely local effort.

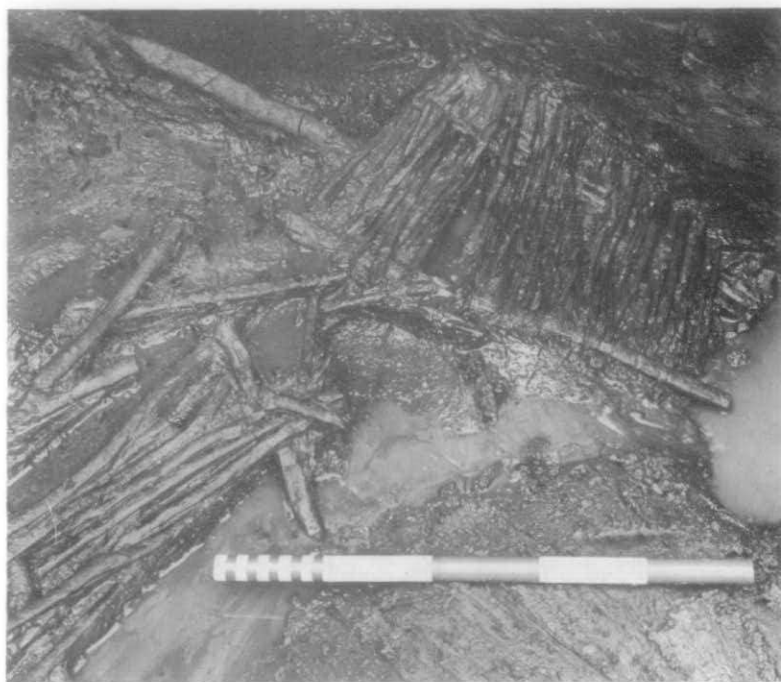
The following have made grants or donations in 1971 : The Department of the Environment ; Oxford City Council ; Oxford University ; the Pilgrim Trust ; the W. A. Pantin Trust ; Oxfordshire County Council ; the Oxford Preservation Trust ; the British Academy ; the Sir Felix Brunner Trust ; the Society of Antiquaries ; All Souls College ; Balliol College ; Brasenose College ; Christ Church ; Corpus Christi College ; Exeter College ; Jesus College ; Keble College ; Lady Margaret Hall ; Lincoln College ; Merton College ; New College ; Nuffield College ; Oriel College ; Pembroke College ; St. Catherine's College ; St. Hilda's College ; St. John's College ; St. Peter's College ; Somerville College ; Trinity College ; University College ; Wadham College ; Worcester College ; B. H. Blackwell Ltd. ; Basil Blackwell and Mott Ltd. ; Blackwell Scientific Publications Ltd. ; and other private donors.

*A grant from the Department of the Environment was received for this article.*

PLATE XIV



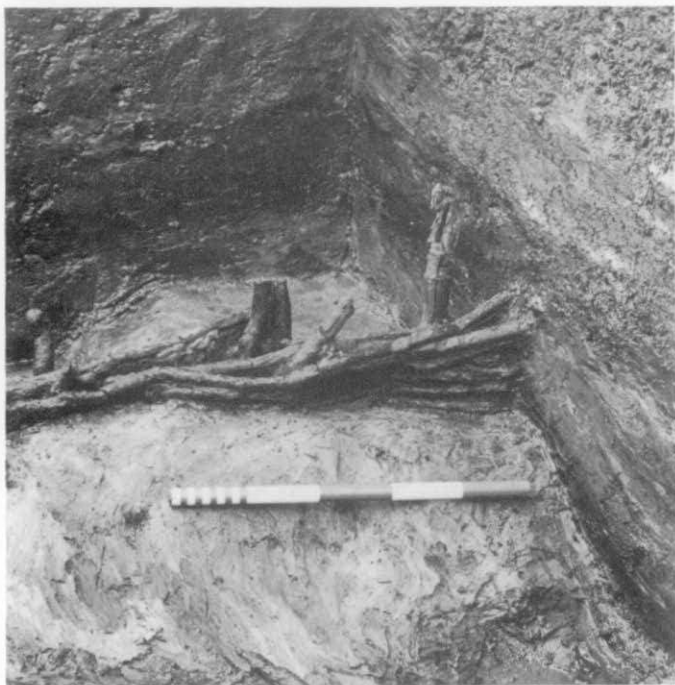
A. 79-80 St. Aldate's, Oxford. Possible boundary fence at the rear of the clay bank, phase 1. Early 9th century. Scale = 2 m.



B. Detail of right hand side of above fence. Scale = 50 cm.

*Photos : David Carpenter*

PLATE XV



A. 79-80 St. Aldate's, Oxford. Detail of wattle revetment to flax retting trench dug into the clay bank phase 1. Early 9th century. Scale = 50 cm.



B. Complex of wattle fences and timber baulks associated with phase 2. Early 9th century. Horizontal scale = 50 cm.

*Photos : David Carpenter*