

# Archaeological Investigations at Longwall Quad, Magdalen College, Oxford

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with contributions from L. ALLEN, P. BRADLEY, G. LAWS, M. ROBINSON,  
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## SUMMARY

*Archaeological investigations within the grounds of Magdalen College revealed evidence relating to medieval properties fronting onto High Street, and a substantial ditch and the probable remains of a medieval building on the alignment of Longwall Street.*

## INTRODUCTION

The archaeological investigations (Figs. 1 and 2) were carried out by Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU), and were occasioned by Magdalen College's proposal to construct student accommodation and an auditorium on the site of the former Fellows' car park and squash courts (NGR SU 5199 0635). A preliminary evaluation, carried out by OAU in 1991,<sup>1</sup> found no structural remains, but the recovery of medieval finds and deposits from evaluation trenches in the vicinity of the squash courts suggested that medieval features and structures could exist within the impact area of the proposed development. An excavation and watching brief were subsequently undertaken in 1995, and form the subject of the present report. The work was carried out in accordance with a planning agreement made between the college and Oxford City Council.

## BACKGROUND

The site of Magdalen College was occupied for much of the medieval period by the Hospital of St. John the Baptist, one of the most important charities and religious houses of the medieval town.<sup>2</sup> The hospital was finally suppressed in 1457 as part of the endowment of the college, but had occupied the site from at least 1231, when it had been refounded by Henry III. The exact location of the original hospital, thought to have been in existence in the 12th century, remains unknown. H.E. Salter suggested, however, that it was located to the east of the church of St. Peter in the East, and outside the town wall. This theory implies that the original site of the hospital lay within the development area, possibly under the Fellows' car park.

The south side of the development area was thought likely to impinge on land at the rear of fourteen tenements on the High Street frontage, which are known to have existed during

<sup>1</sup> B. Durham and J. Moore, 'Magdalen College Grove' (Oxford Archaeological Unit unpubl. evaluation report, 1991).

<sup>2</sup> A recent account of the Hospital of St. John can be found in B. Durham, 'The Infirmary and Hall of the Medieval Hospital of St. John the Baptist at Oxford', *Oxoniensia*, lvi (1991), 17-75.

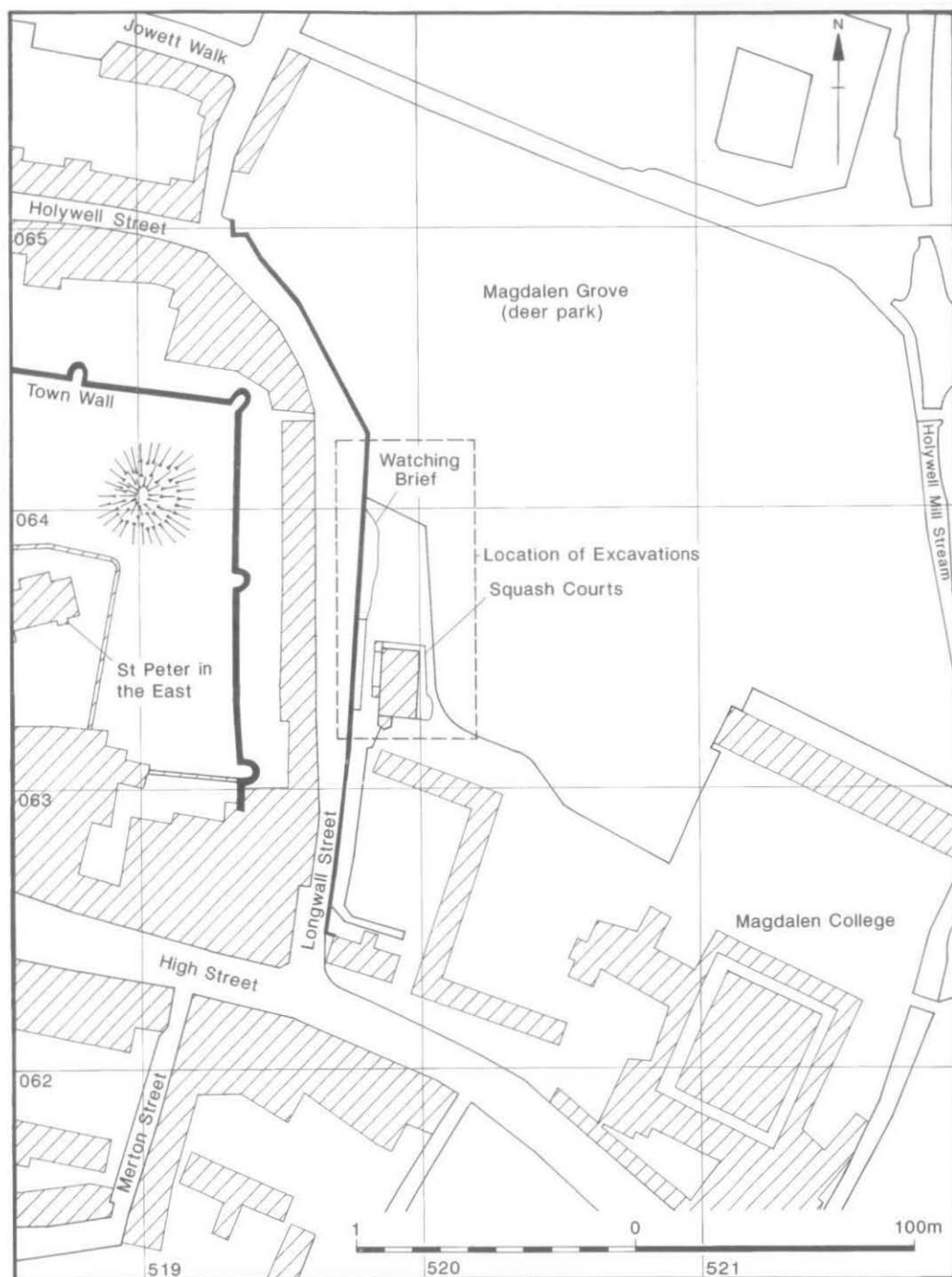


Fig. 1. Magdalen College, Longwall Quad: site location.

the medieval period between the site of the refounded hospital and the east gate of the town at the corner of Longwall Street. These tenements were largely rebuilt by Magdalen College in the 1480s. The tenement at the west end of the row was the Cardinal's Hat Inn, which had become the Greyhound Inn by 1556. The site of the tenements was later occupied by Magdalen College School, until its redevelopment as Longwall Quad in the 1930s. The area to the north, known as the Grove, was enclosed during the foundation of Magdalen College, and was used as gardens and a deer park. The south-west part of the Grove and deer park were subsequently encroached upon by the Fellows' car park and the squash courts.

## THE EXCAVATION AND WATCHING BRIEF

### *Methodology*

The excavation (Fig. 2, Trench 6) took place within the squash courts, in the area identified during the evaluation as having the highest survival of medieval deposits. The trench measured 14 x 2 m.; it was laid out by OAU and machine-excavated under direct archaeological supervision to the top of the 14th-century horizon identified in 1991. Thereafter, the trench was hand-excavated and recorded in plan and section. A watching brief was maintained on the digging of service trenches, but the only results of archaeological interest came from the service trench located above a large drain adjacent to Longwall Street.

## DESCRIPTION

### *Geology*

The site lies mainly on the Cherwell floodplain gravel terrace as it begins to rise up towards the second terrace. Overlying the gravel in Trench 6 was a layer of natural subsoil consisting of compacted orange sand (600). This was found at a level of 57.04 m. OD.

### *Watching brief (Fig. 3)*

The watching brief revealed evidence for a north-south aligned ditch, possibly of two phases, running parallel to Longwall Street. Only the eastern edge of this feature was exposed within the area of the service trench, and its full extent, assumed to survive beneath the modern Longwall Street, remains unknown. The apparently earlier ditch (711) was partially excavated, and was in excess of 2 m. wide and 0.9 m. deep. A sequence of fills was identified (712, 713, 715, 716, 717), but only a single sherd of pottery was recovered, from central fill 715, and of late 11th- to 12th-century date. A partial section suggested that ditch 711 had been recut by a later ditch (710) on the same alignment, but this could not be fully investigated owing to the presence of modern services. Two gravel dump layers (705 and 706) overlay ditch 711, and four small sherds of pottery, dating no later than the 13th century, were recovered from 706.

The gravel dumps levelled the ground for a surface of compacted yellow gravel (704), which had the appearance of a floor, and extended underneath Longwall Street. This measured 1 m. by 2 m. within the watching brief area, and was 0.08 m. in depth. Dating evidence is scarce, consisting of four small sherds of pot. Three of the fragments date from the late 11th to mid 13th century but the fourth is of 16th- to 18th-century date. It is possible that this surface was associated with two post pads, 707 and 708, in the north-east of the area. These consisted of two small stones set on the natural subsoil, and overlain by a cultivation soil (701).

### *The excavation, Trench 6 (Fig. 4)*

The earliest feature excavated was a narrow east-west aligned gully (637) cut into the natural subsoil. The gully had been truncated by ploughing, and three plough furrows were recorded within the area of excavation (from south to north 641, 639 and 614), all aligned roughly east-west and a minimum of 0.80 m. in width. A number of finds were recovered from the furrows, included struck flint, late 12th- to 13th-century pottery, iron nails and an incomplete buckle pin (from 638, the fill of 639). The furrows were overlain by a cultivation soil (608), 0.20 m. in depth, which was itself overlain by a second very similar dark orange-brown cultivation soil (607) that generally survived to a depth of around 0.30 m. and contained occasional inclusions of charcoal and shell. The soils contained pottery of 13th- to 15th-century date.

A series of four features were recorded on the east side of the trench (from south to north 632, 633, 645 and 653). These are probably all the remains of truncated pits, but of differing forms. Pits 632 and 653 were completely excavated, and were both roughly circular in plan, of bowl-shaped profile and very shallow. Pits



Fig. 2. Magdalen College, Longwall Quad: evaluation and excavation trenches, and location of watching brief.

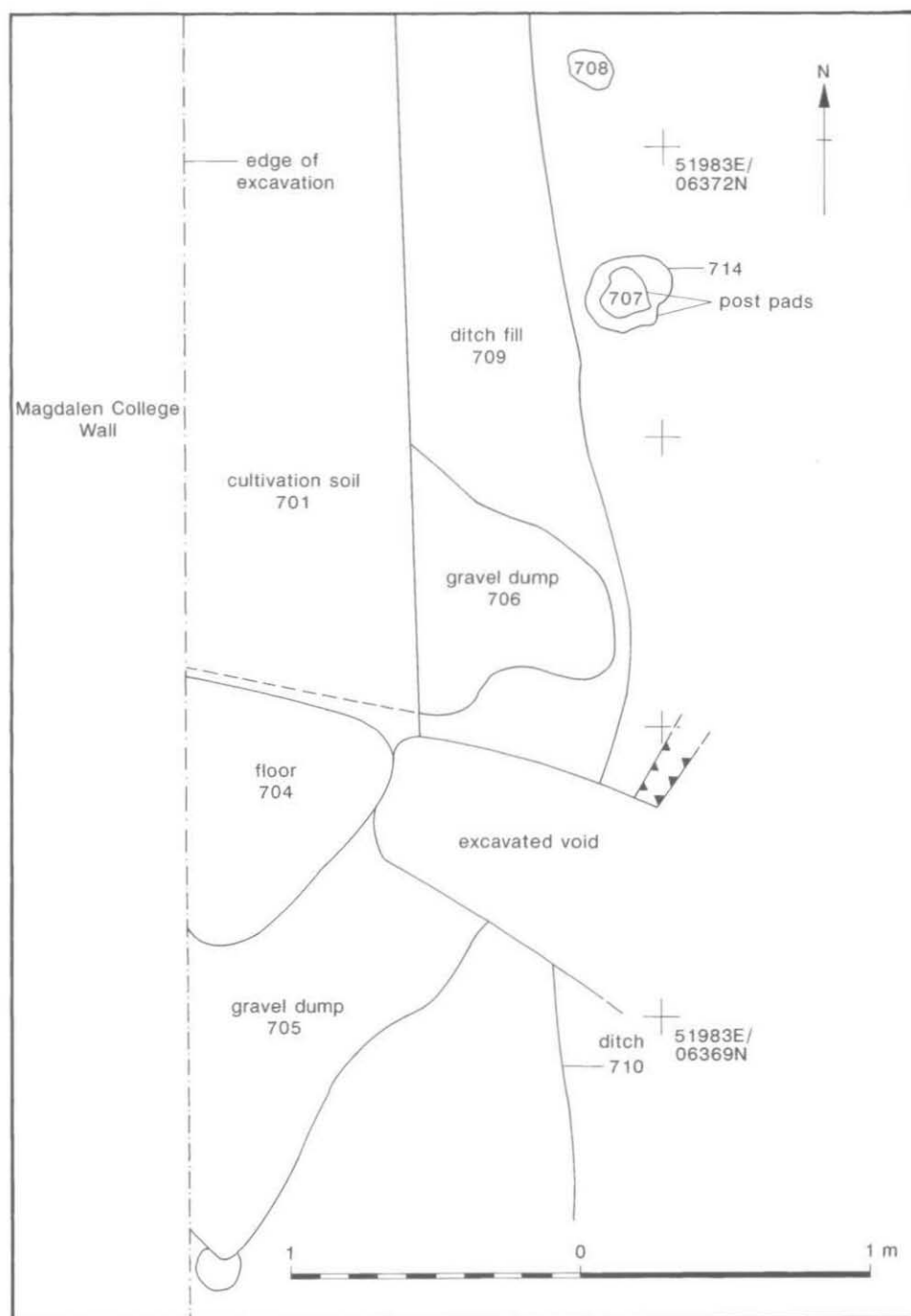


Fig. 3. Magdalen College, Longwall Quad: the watching brief.

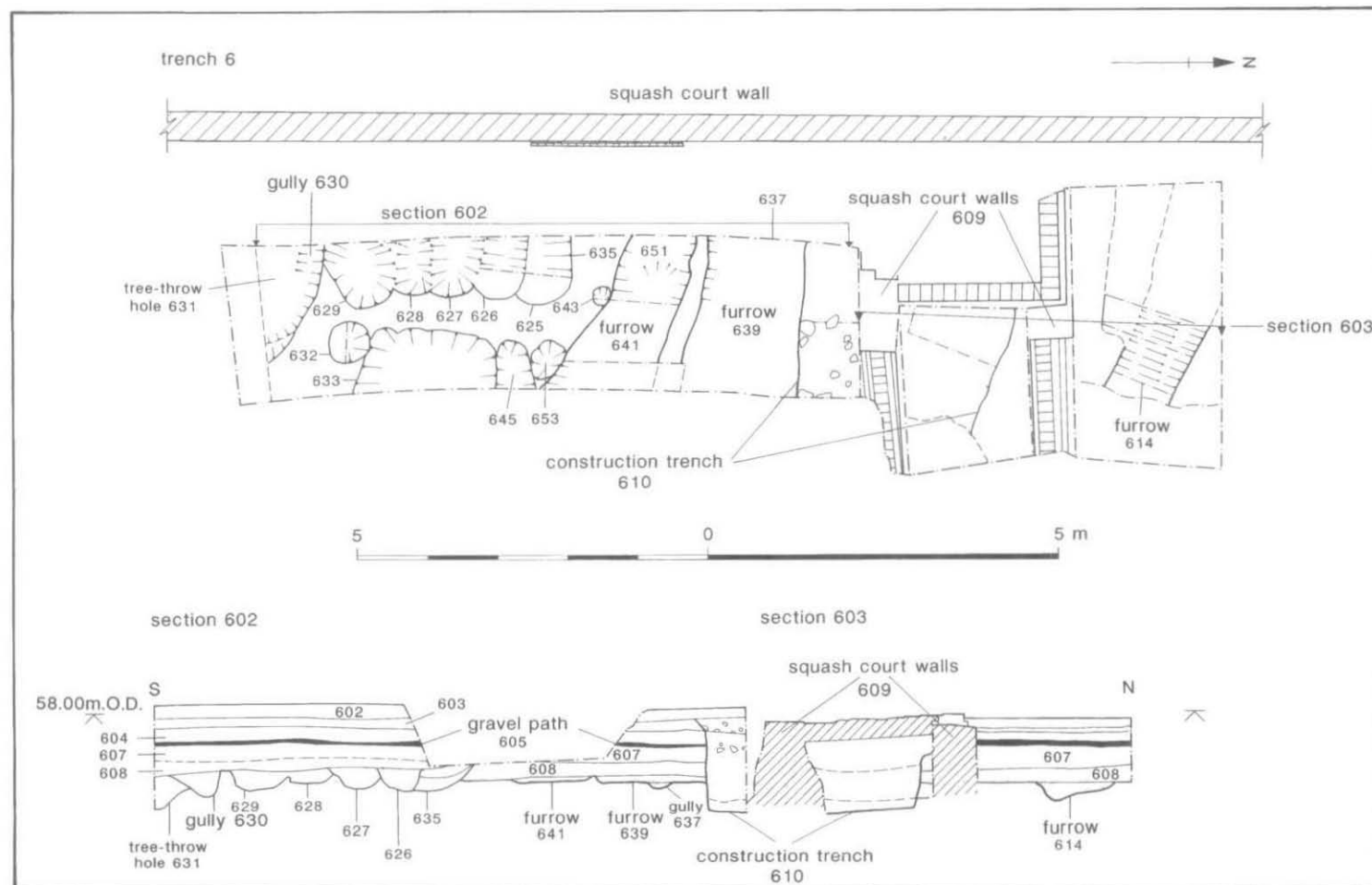


Fig. 4. Magdalen College, Longwall Quad: the excavation, plan and section.

633 and 645 continued beyond the edge of excavation. Pit 645 appeared to be oval in shape, while pit 633 was considerably larger, with minimum dimensions of 2 x 1 m. Both were heavily truncated, and very shallow. The fills of pits 632 and 633 (623 and 624 respectively) contained pottery of 11th- to 13th-century date. All the pits were cut into the lower layer of cultivation soil, 608, that overlay the plough furrows.

A parallel row of six intercutting features was recorded some 0.50 m. to the west, along the west edge of the trench (from south to north 629, 628, 627, 626, 625, 635). Since their full extent was not revealed these features cannot be certainly identified, but their profile in section (Fig. 4) strongly suggests that they represent an alignment of pits. The pits were cut into the natural subsoil, but it is also clear that the northernmost pit, 635, cut layer 608, which overlay the furrows. The pits were overlain by cultivation soil, but no clear horizon was visible here between layer 608 and layer 607. A tree-throw hole (631) in the south-west corner of the trench may predate these features but no direct physical relationship existed. The tree-throw hole was cut by a small curving gully (630). The fill of this gully (621) and the fills of three of the pits, 628, 629 and 635 (619, 620 and 634 respectively) contained pottery datable to the period between the mid 13th and the early 15th centuries. Fill 620 of the oval pit 629 also contained a D-shaped lipped buckle.

A small posthole (643) lay in the centre of the trench. It measured 0.32 m. by 0.28 m. and was 0.16 m. deep. The fill contained no finds and no relationship with any other feature was observed, although the posthole was overlain by cultivation soil 608.

Overlying the cultivation soils were layers of compacted white mortar (605 and 606), probably successive garden paths, which in turn were overlain by an old turf line (604). The cultivation layers and the garden paths were cut by a deep construction trench (610) that measured up to 3 m. wide with a varying depth of around 1 m. This is possibly the remains of a robbed wall foundation trench that was roughly aligned east-west. The differing depths, and the width, of the trench, along with the shifting alignment of the north edge to north-west - south-east, may indicate a later phase of construction or simply be the result of robbing. The trench had been backfilled with a single fill of rubble consisting of mortar, stone and building material (611). The finds date from the 13th to the 20th century and include a medieval buckle and a modern shovel. The demolition is clearly a recent event. A rubble layer (603), make-up for the construction of the squash courts, abutted the construction trench and covered the entire length of the excavation area.

## THE FINDS

The finds reports discuss finds retrieved from all three phases of the archaeological investigations from 1991 to 1995. The excavation and watching brief contexts run from 600 and 700 respectively.

## POTTERY by LUCY WHITTINGHAM

Three phases of archaeological investigation at Magdalen College produced 219 sherds of pottery (2.3 kg.). Most of the pottery is typical of the mid 13th to 15th centuries for the city of Oxford, although the entire assemblage contains a range of wares dating from Roman to late post-medieval. All three phases of archaeological investigation have produced similar assemblages of pottery and will therefore be discussed collectively.

Although there are sherds of Roman greyware and St. Neot's-type ware of a 10th- to 11th-century date, they cannot be used to offer reliable evidence of occupation from this date as they are found redeposited in later contexts (607, 613, 624, 4/5, 5/11). The earliest ceramic finds likely to derive from the occupation of the site are cooking pot sherds in Oxford Early Medieval Ware (OXAC) and Oxford Medieval Ware (OXY), dating from the late 11th to 13th centuries (contexts 613, 623, 624, 4/5, 5/13, 706 and 715).

The majority of the pottery is from a variety of jug forms produced by the Brill/Boarstall industry between the mid 13th and early 15th centuries. Associated with these are similar quantities of Abingdon Ware (OXAG) jug sherds and East Wiltshire-type Ware (OXAQ) cooking vessels dating from the late 12th to early 15th centuries (contexts 608, 612, 616, 617, 619, 620, 621, 1/4, 3/US, 3/7, 3/11 and 3/12).

A range of post-medieval wares are datable to the 16th to 18th centuries. These include local Brill/Boarstall products (OXDG) and unprovenanced early post-medieval wares (OXAX), with imported Rhenish Stoneware, Surrey/Hampshire Border-type Whitewares, Glazed Red and Black Earthenwares, Tin-glaze Wares, Creamware and Pearlware (contexts 611, 4/4, 4/7, 5/4, 5/6, 5/7, 5/10, 5/11, 702 and 704).

## SMALL FINDS by LEIGH ALLEN

A small assemblage of metalwork was recovered from the evaluation and excavation, comprising 10 copper alloy objects, 26 iron objects and 1 lead object. Notable amongst the copper alloy objects were a buckle frame and a thimble.

The buckle frame (SF 602 from context 620) is a lipped D-shape frame with a narrow off-set bar. The lip extends into a collared knob, and the ends of the bar also terminate in angled collared knobs. The buckle is decorated with ring and dot motif along the inner and outer edge of the frame. No exact parallel has been found for this buckle, but lipped D-shaped buckles were common in the medieval period. Ring and dot motif, although associated mainly with the Anglo-Saxons, continued to be used in the post-Conquest period and can be seen on the 12th- to 13th-century D-shaped buckle frame from Norwich.<sup>3</sup> This form of robust buckle may be associated with horsegear as it seems intended that it should hang like a pendant rather than secure a belt or strap across the body.

The thimble (SF 7 from context 4/4) is straight-sided with a flat top; the indentations are applied in a spiral over the top and around the sides of the thimble. Below the indentations there is a decorated border consisting of two bands of hatched lines within two incised grooves and between these bands there are flower designs set in circles. Thimbles with decorated rims were introduced in the 15th century, and became popular in the 16th century when quantities of finely decorated thimbles were imported from Nuremberg.<sup>4</sup>

The remaining copper alloy objects are three lace tags, a hooked fitting, a pin and three miscellaneous fragments of sheet or strip. The lace tags are post-medieval in date, as is the drawn pin with a wire-wound head. The hooked fitting (SF 8 from context 4/4) is possibly the catch from a late medieval or post-medieval book clasp. It is decorated with an incised zig-zag pattern along the top of the hook. This type of clasp would have been used to secure a book cover closed by attaching the hook to a bar protruding from the other cover.<sup>5</sup>

There are no notable objects of iron or lead. The iron assemblage comprises 17 nails, 6 miscellaneous fragments, a plain square buckle frame, a buckle pin and a shovel of modern appearance. The lead object is a trapezoidal fragment of lead sheet with cut marks along one edge.

### STRUCK FLINT by PHILIPPA BRADLEY

Three pieces of struck flint were recovered (a flake from context 622 and a flake and a piece of irregular waste from context 638). The flint was quite abraded, and cortication varied from light to heavy.

### ANIMAL BONE by NICOLA SCOTT

A total of 142 bones were recovered from the 1991 evaluation, of which 34 were identified to species and anatomical part and two identified as being from domestic fowl (Table 1). A total of 138 bones were recovered from the 1995 excavation, of which 20 were identified to species and anatomical part and two identified as being from domestic fowl (Table 2). Ribs and vertebrae were not identified.

The bones were in a reasonable state of preservation, although somewhat fragmentary. There were no notable butchery marks. Some bones, from tree-throw pit fill 622, pit fill 620 and furrow fill 640, were burnt. The bone assemblage is typical of domestic table refuse.

### SOIL SAMPLE ANALYSIS by MARK ROBINSON

The sole soil sample from the site was 17 litres from context 617, the fill of pit 626. The charred remains were almost entirely wood charcoal, the majority of which was oak (*Quercus*). The only other remains observed in the assessment were two unidentifiable cereal grains. The molluscs were exclusively those of dry land, including *Vallonia excentrica* and *Trichia hispida*. Also present were the claw of a bird and a single fish scale.

### DISCUSSION

The excavation and watching brief, although of limited extent, have nevertheless revealed further interesting evidence for the development of the area during the medieval period. The watching brief revealed evidence of the east edge of a ditch running parallel to Longwall Street that appeared to be a substantial feature, in excess of 2 m. wide. On present evidence, this could be a roadside ditch along the extramural road leading around the east

<sup>3</sup> Cf. S. Margeson (ed.), *Norwich Households: the medieval and post-medieval finds from Norwich Survey Excavations 1971-8* (East Anglia Archaeology 58, 1993), Fig. 13, No.128.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. E.F. Holmes, *Sewing Thimbles* (Finds Research Group 700-1700: Datasheet 9, 1988).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. M. Biddle and D.A. Hinton, 'Book clasp and page holder', in M. Biddle (ed.), *Object and Economy in Medieval Winchester* (Winchester Studies 7, i and ii, 1990), 755-7.



wall of the town; alternatively, it might possibly have been part of the town ditch itself. The precise line of the town ditch or moat is unknown in this area, but Brian Durham (pers. comm.) noted over 3.5 m. of ditch silt with layers of stones forming surfaces in a manhole in Longwall Street, suggesting that a very substantial infilled ditch or moat underlies the modern road. The gravel make-up and surface seen in the watching brief may well relate to a short-lived and relatively insubstantial building encroaching on the ditch, a common occurrence during the medieval period. There is unfortunately nothing in the watching brief results to suggest whether or not this building belonged to the Hospital of St. John, and the pottery can only be dated very broadly to a 12th- to 13th-century range. The ditch appeared to have been recut subsequently.

TABLE 1. OXFORD, MAGDALEN COLLEGE LONGWALL QUAD EVALUATION 1991:  
SPECIES TO FRAGMENT BONE COUNT

	Sheep/goat	Cow	Pig	Horse	Domestic fowl
Mandible	8				
Loose Tooth	1	5		1	
Scapula	1				
Humerus	1		1		
Radius			1		
Ulna			1		
Metacarpal	1	1	1		
Pelvis	2				
Femur		2			
Tibia	2				
Phalanx	3	2			
Calcaneum	1				
Unidentified					2
Total	20	10	4	1	2

TABLE 2. OXFORD, MAGDALEN COLLEGE LONGWALL QUAD EXCAVATION 1995:  
SPECIES TO FRAGMENT BONE COUNT

	Sheep/goat	Cow	Pig	Horse	Domestic fowl
Mandible			2		
Loose Tooth	1	4		1	
Scapula	3		1		
Humerus	1		1		
Radius		1			
Metacarpal	1		1		
Pelvis	1				
Tibia	1				
Metatarsal	1				
Unidentified					2
Total	9	5	5	1	2

The excavation found convincing evidence for arable cultivation in the medieval period, in the form of three very distinct east-west-aligned plough furrows. The subsequent pit digging is typical of the rear of urban tenements, where rubbish was disposed of in pits at the edge of the property (and thus furthest from the house). It is very likely that the pits were at the rear of one of the fourteen tenements facing on to High Street, and the pottery evidence is consistent with occupation from the 13th to the earlier 15th century. A substantial collection of later pottery, of 16th- to 18th-century date, may be associated with the rebuilt tenements, at least two of which are known to have been inns. It may equally derive from the college itself.

The large east-west aligned robber trench was on the alignment of the original rear wall of the college, between the college and the deer park, and may represent the robbed remains of the original college boundary wall dating to the late 15th century.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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