

Excavations in St John's College, Oxford, 2003

By STEVE LAWRENCE

SUMMARY

Oxford Archaeology (OA) undertook an excavation and watching brief at St John's College, Oxford in May/June 2003, prior to the construction of a new Senior Common Room extension. The excavation, centred at NGR SP 5128 0668, identified a late medieval soil horizon and pits, post-medieval quarrying predating the Baylie Chapel and the foundations of the free-standing kitchen block built in 1643. The structure and internal features of the 19th-century replacement kitchen were also recorded. The following report is a summary of the results. A fully detailed report is deposited with the archive.

St John's College lies north of the historic core of Oxford, on the east side of St Giles (Fig. 1). Within the college precinct, the development site lies to the east of the north quadrangle, within the 1950's Senior Common Room extension and bounded to the east by the President's garden. The underlying geology comprises the southern spur of the Summertown-Radley gravel terrace, to the east of the River Thames and to the west of the River Cherwell. The site lies at approximately 64 m. O.D.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

St John's College stands on the east side of St Giles on the site of the former St Bernard's College. In 1437 Archbishop Henry Chichele founded the college of St Bernard for students of the Cistercian order, and this eventually formed the front quadrangle of the existing college. Sir Thomas White acquired the site and buildings from Christ Church in 1554, with the condition that within three years he should establish a college there.

The free-standing kitchen block

The kitchen was built in 1643, and demolished in the mid 19th century. The date of its construction has been established by financial records which state that £550 was spent on "*the raising of the new chambers by the Kitchen and the new building neere to the President's Lodging*".¹

The Senior Common Room

The Senior Common Room (SCR), built in 1676, forms a wing extending northwards from the chapel. The original SCR building remains although the exterior of the east wall has been much affected by the history of extension, demolition and rebuilding undertaken against it. This wall bounded the western limit of the excavation area.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

Over the last 50 years, medieval material has been recovered at various points around the college precinct as a result of building work, although never in the context of large scale archaeological excavation. Perhaps the most significant and certainly the most coherent

¹ Quoted in V.C.H. Oxon. iii (1954), 262.

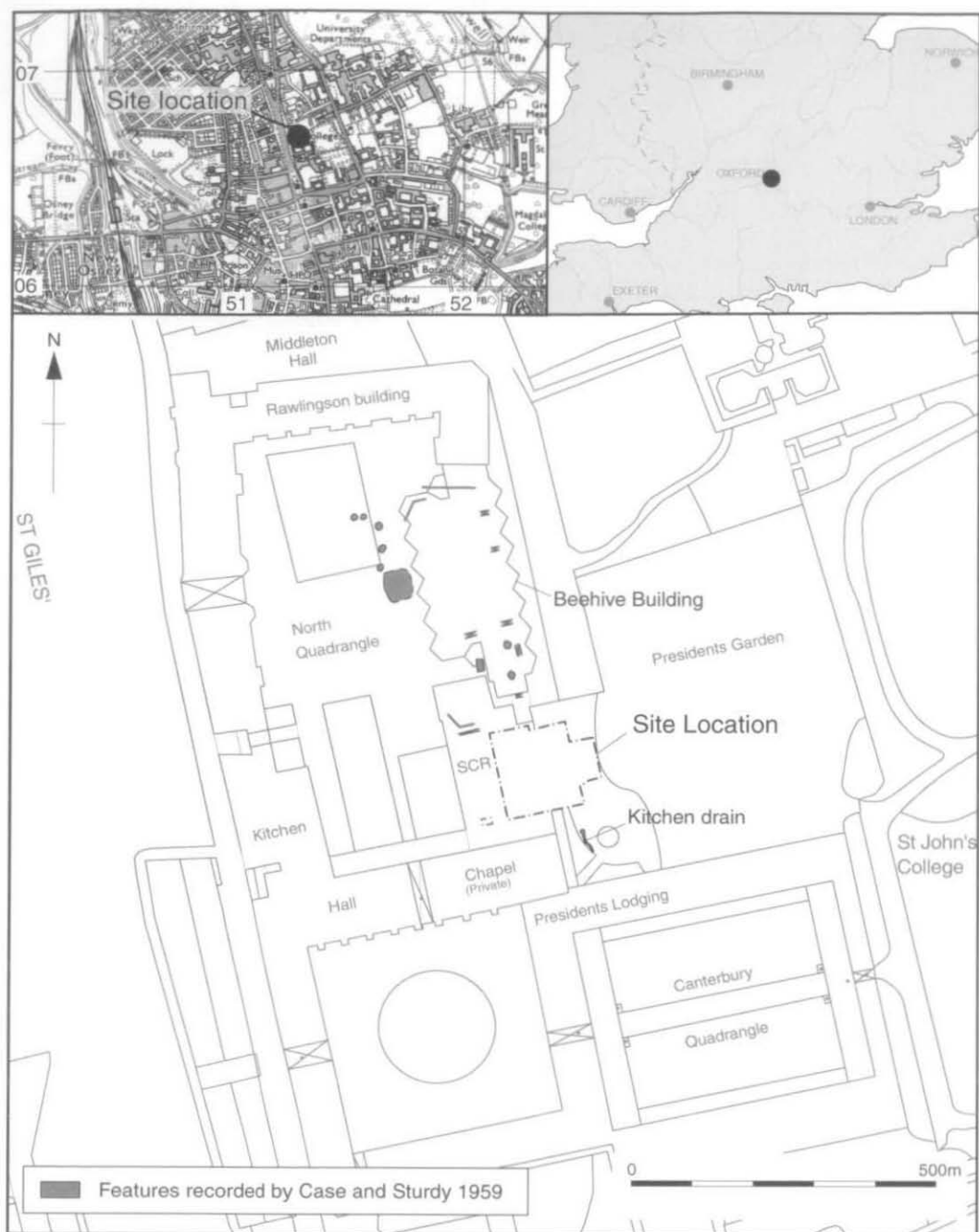


Fig. 1. St John's College and excavation area.

assemblage of pottery was recovered from excavations undertaken during the construction of the Dolphin Quadrangle range of buildings on the southern side of the college.²

The only other piece of archaeological work undertaken at the college that has produced significant archaeological remains took place prior to the construction of the Beehive building in the mid 1950s, to the north of the present site. The record of this work and its discoveries is limited to a short note of the presence of a '...12th century pit and five smaller pits or wells of the 13th or 14th centuries....Foundations of the stables and other College outbuildings of the 16th century were also seen.'.³ The location of these features, hitherto unpublished, has been reproduced in Fig. 1.

EXCAVATION METHODOLOGY

Scope of the Fieldwork

The excavation area measured 13 m. x 14 m. with a rectangular area 3.5 m. x 7 m. extending off the eastern side. Additionally, the position of a lift shaft pit, to be constructed within the standing SCR building, was archaeologically excavated to the surface of the natural gravel.

Fieldwork Methods and Recording

After the overburden was removed by mechanical excavator, under archaeological supervision, all excavation was by hand, and recording followed procedures laid down in the *OAU Fieldwork Manual*.⁴

PHASING (Fig. 2)

The activity on the site is phased by a combination of the known historical dates of the surrounding buildings, those structures encountered within the site boundaries, stratigraphic relationships between features and the stratified artefact dating.

Phase 1 Late medieval

The supra-natural (505) was overlain by a grey brown soil layer (652); pottery dating from the 12th to the 14th century was recovered from within the layer. Two pits (511/517 and 547) were identified, both containing 14th- and 15th-century pottery and bone fragments.

Phase 2 Late 16th/17th century

The most significant feature was a large gravel quarry pit (529/542), backfilled and later built over by the Baylie Chapel (in 1662). Post-medieval pottery was recovered from the quarry's backfill.

Phase 3 17th century

The free-standing kitchen block

Stone footings (593 and 602) of the 17th-century kitchen block were revealed; a small portion of the interior stratigraphy was excavated but no evidence of an internal floor remained.

² E. M. Jope and R. I. Threlfall, 'Note 4. St. John's College', *Oxoniensia* xi/xii (1946-7), 169; E. M. Jope, H.M. Jope and S. E. Rigold, 'Pottery from a late 12th-century Well-filling and other Medieval Finds from St. Johns College, Oxford, 1947', *Oxoniensia*, xv (1950), 44-62.

³ H. Case and D. Sturdy, 'Oxford, St. John's College', *Oxoniensia*, xxiv (1959), 101.

⁴ D Wilkinson (ed.), *OAU Fieldwork Manual* (first edition, 1992).

The stone-lined kitchen drain

To the south of the main excavation, a substantial stone-lined drain (584) was revealed. The lining was built of reused architectural mouldings and ashlar fragments. The alignment of the drain suggests it was originally connected to the south-west corner of the kitchen block.

Stone-lined pit 573

It is likely that the construction and use of a large stone-lined pit (573) located 2 m. to the north-west of the kitchen block west wall also dates to this phase. Partial excavation revealed a neatly constructed dry-coursed limestone lining. No evidence was found of a waterproof lining.

Pit 514

The only other feature of probable 17th-century date was a sub-rectangular pit (514) located to the NW of the kitchen block, containing 17th-century pottery.

*Phase 4. Late 18th/early 19th century*Kitchen block extension

The slight stone footings of an extension to the kitchen block (204 and 589) were uncovered, abutting the north wall. Wall 589 defined a small bay with a slightly sunken floor relative to that in the rest of the extension. The bay also contained a small stone-lined chute sloping down from the north wall 589.

Phase 5. 19th century

No deposits relating to the demolition of the free-standing kitchen block were present within the building although a dump of contemporary transfer-printed ware pottery and humic soil (585/586) levelled the northern extension, supporting a demolition date of the mid-19th century.

The stone-lined pit (573) may have gone out of use at this time; the only fill comprised a loose reddish silt (571), which contained broken stone roofing tiles and several small fragments of limestone column or pilaster from a window moulding.

A replacement kitchen building was added to the eastern side of the SCR in the mid-19th century. Foundation remains from this structure, partly demolished in 1954 to make way for an extension of the SCR, were revealed as two short remnants of limestone wall (530 and 582), and three limestone foundation pads (553, 563 and 575) against the east wall of the SCR. A gravel and brick-lined drain (640) located immediately to the east of wall 582 may also relate to this structure and possibly functioned with a similar gravel-filled drain (535).

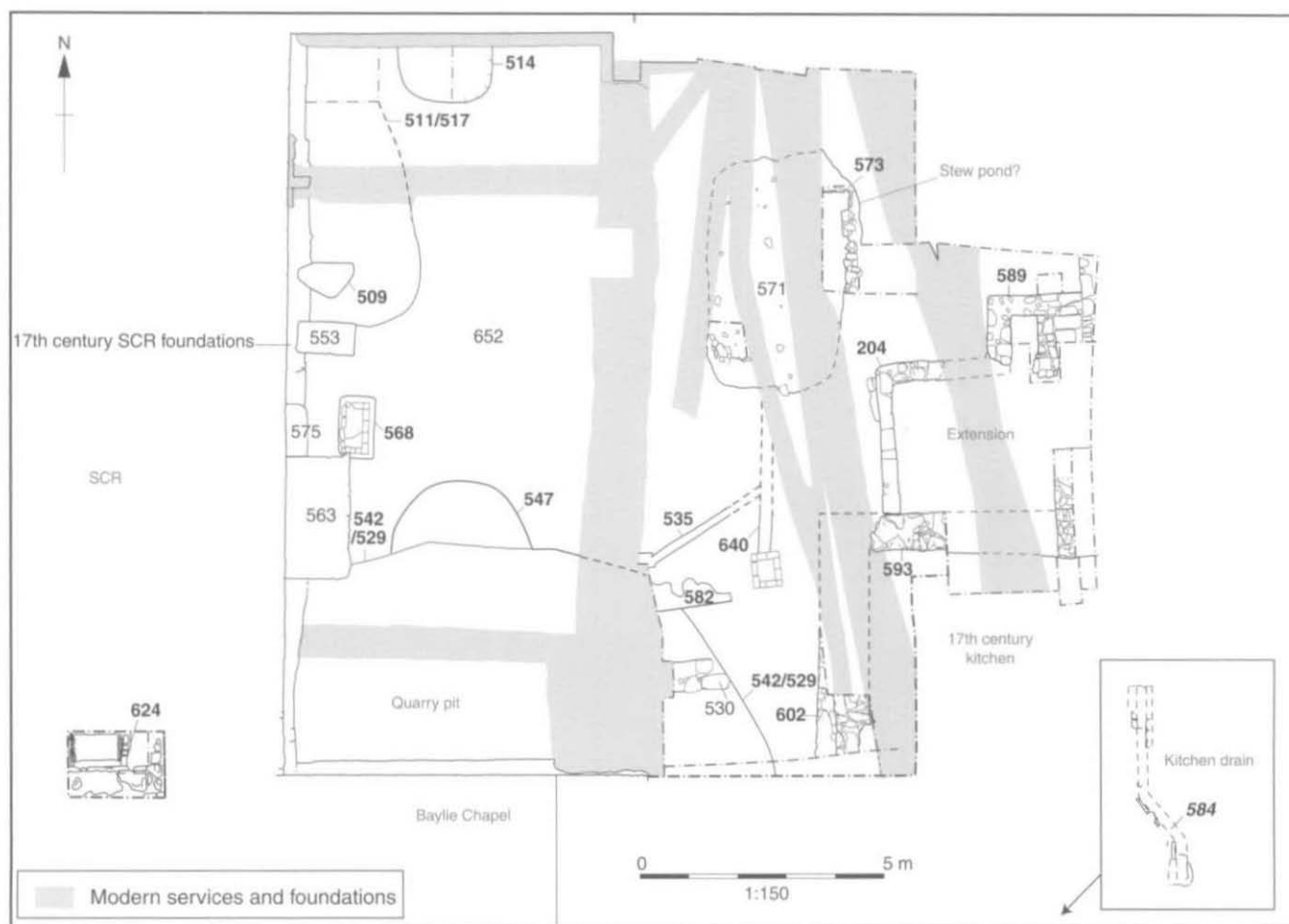
Two internal features of the 19th century kitchen were identified; a small brick-lined fireplace (568), and coal and ash filled pit (509).

In a further addition to the main site, a small excavation within the SCR building revealed a brick-lined pit (624) measuring 1.0 m. x 0.6 m. in plan. The sandy backfill contained mixed animal bone and transfer-printed wares demonstrating the feature was backfilled after 1830.

THE FINDS

The following is a summary of the finds recovered during the fieldwork. Full individual reports and catalogues of each category of finds are contained in the archive.

The excavation recovered a modest collection of finds, consisting of pottery, animal bone, ceramic building material, architectural stone fragments, glass and metalwork. In general the character of the material is fairly typical and provided few surprises. The pre-college (Phase 1) finds assemblage comprised a modest quantity of locally made pottery, along with animal bone, typical of domestic back-yard rubbish disposal.



A number of the finds from later phases arguably reflect the higher status and the character of a college environment; these included imported dinner plates, a book clasp dating to the late medieval or early post-medieval period, and fragments of a glass urinal.

Concerning the buildings on site, the presence of late medieval or early post-medieval tiled floors was suggested by a number of fragments of imported glazed tiles. The reuse of building materials was indicated by the stone mouldings used in the construction of a drain, and a scatter of redeposited medieval roof tiles; it is possible that some at least derive from the demolition of the Whitefriars buildings on the other side of St Giles.

DISCUSSION

The earliest evidence is consistent with previous discoveries in the area, and is characteristic of a low level of domestic activity of unremarkable status associated with tenements fronting St Giles in the 14th and 15th centuries. This may reflect the contraction of the domestic settlement of the suburbs to the north of the town as evident at other sites which show a marked decline in occupation in the 15th century.⁵ Two fragments from a glass urinal may be associated with the short-lived monastic St Bernard's College, although they were found within a redeposited context. Urinals are commonly found on monastic sites; they were used to inspect urine for daily prognosis as well as to diagnose health.⁶

From the late 16th century more intensive building and occupation is evident, coincident with the documented establishment of the college. A large quarry pit produced pottery types such as Frechen stoneware jars – all likely to have been wine vessels – and Surrey Border wares, in keeping with the elevated status of the college. Similarly the animal bone assemblage at this time contains significant quantities of bird bones – of ducks and other domestic fowl – not normally part of a low-status diet.

The 17th-century kitchen

The footings of the 17th-century kitchen (and its later extension) were identified, along with associated drains. The absence of a surviving floor implies that it was most likely of flagstone or tile construction – worth salvaging for reuse when the building was demolished. The standing building and those relating to the foundations identified to the north are clearly shown within Williams' view of 1733 from the south east reproduced here as Figure 3.

The nearby stone-lined pit (573) appears to be associated with the kitchen, yet remains difficult to interpret. It seems too large to be a drain or waste water sump, and there was no evidence of a lining to the feature. However, the apparent absence of a lining should be taken with caution, as only the upper part of the feature was revealed. Furthermore, had it originally been furnished with a lead lining, this would certainly have been removed when the pit went out of use, and before it was backfilled.

Similar examples have also recently been recorded in the context of stables at Merton College⁷ and at The Horse and Jockey public house.⁸ The example at Merton was clay-lined

⁵ R.L.S. Bruce-Mitford, 'The Archaeology of the Site of the Bodleian Extension in Broad Street, Oxford', *Oxoniensia*, iv (1939), 89-146; M. R. Roberts, 'Excavations at Jowett Walk, Oxford', *Oxoniensia*, ix (1995), 225-46; P. Andrews and L. Mephams, 'Medieval and Post-medieval Extra-mural Settlement on the Site of the Ashmolean Museum Forecourt, Beaumont Street, Oxford', *Oxoniensia*, lxii (1997), 179-223.

⁶ R. Tyson, *Medieval Glass Vessels found in England, c. AD 1200-1500* (CBA Res. Rep. 121, 2000), 149-53.

⁷ OA, 'Postmaster's Hall Yard, Merton College, Oxford: Post-Excavation Assessment and Updated Research Design' (unpublished, 2003)

⁸ J. Munby pers. comm.

- 1 The free-standing kitchen block
- 2 17th Century SCR building
- 3 Standing building recorded as foundations by Sturdy
- 4 Presidents Lodgings

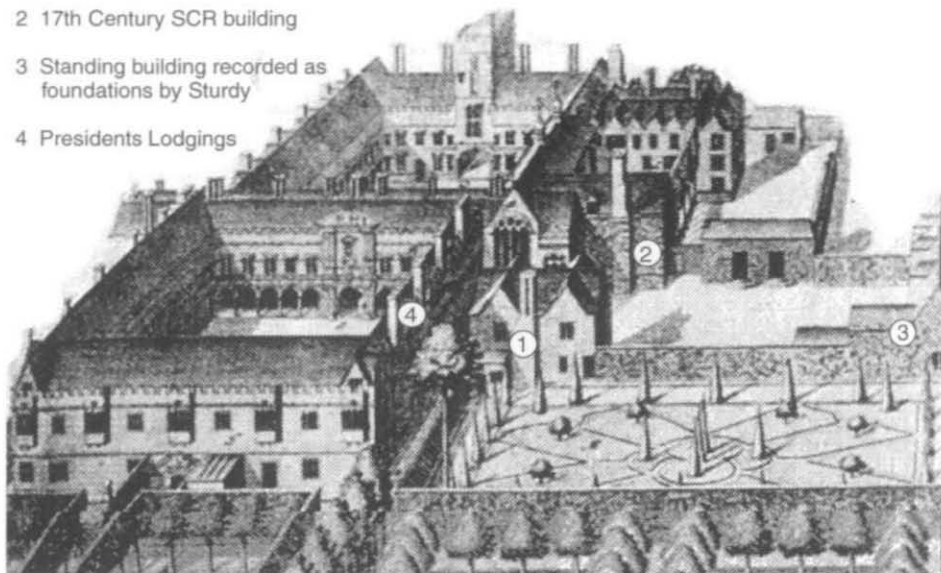


Fig. 3. Williams' 1733 view of the college from the east.

and positioned to collect water draining off an adjacent building, presumably to act as a water trough and supply the stable yard with a water source for the horses. It has been suggested that the example at The Horse and Jockey may have been a drainage sump for collection of horse urine.⁹

In the context of the pit's proximity to the kitchen at St John's College and postulating an original lining (whether of clay or of lead), it may have served as a small 'stew pond' common in monastic precincts, where fish were stored (alive) for days until they were needed by the kitchen.

The 19th-century kitchen

Structural remains of the 19th-century kitchen building were well preserved. The limestone pad foundations and fireplace against the SCR wall could represent the placing of a boiler in the kitchen with a chimney stack extending up the face of the SCR wall.

THE ARCHIVE

The project archive is currently held by Oxford Archaeology, and will be deposited with Oxfordshire Museum Service.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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⁹ Ibid.