

Hertford College - Old Quad

Archaeological excavations and college buildings

Public open day

Saturday 6th of September 2025

10.30am – 3.30pm

Free entry – main gate, Porters' Lodge, Catte Street, Oxford, OX1 3BW



Hertford College
UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

Site Tours
Finds Displays
Meet The Archaeologists
Library Display
Visit The College Chapel
Refreshments Available

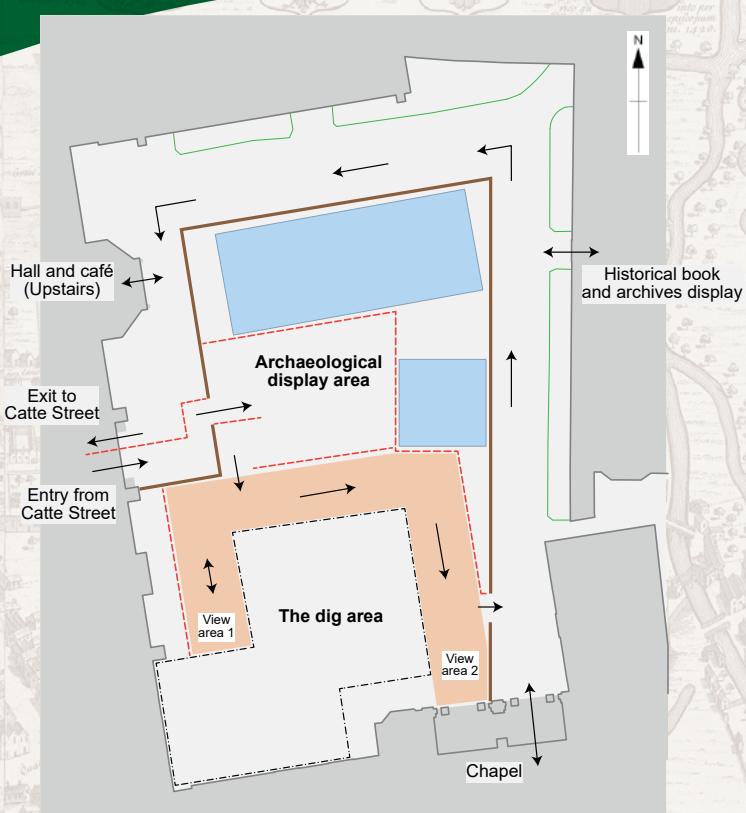
WELCOME!

Welcome to our open day. Inside the wooden fence there is an archaeological display, after which a tour around the archaeological excavations will lead you back into the College Quad. Here you can visit the Chapel, a special display on some of the college's old books and archives and take refreshments in the Hall. The plan should help you find your way around.

What Are The Archaeologists Doing At Hertford College?

Oxford Archaeology is here to excavate, record and recover all the remains of human activity that have survived on the site. This work is taking place during the initial stages of the construction of the basement of a new library and archive building for Hertford College by Beard Construction Ltd. The archaeological work is funded by Hertford College and is a requirement of the planning permission that was granted by Oxford City Council.

The new basement will extend from the Quad under the Old Chapel up to the boundary with All Soul's College and will connect to the existing basements in the West Range. You are only able to view the Quad excavations today. The excavations are focussed on the area of the new basement. In the Quad the concrete piled basement walls have already been installed and propped, the old Chapel has been supported on steel 'needles' and this allows us to safely excavate to the required depth.



Excavation is our one-time chance to recover information before building work starts in earnest. Our ability to understand the site depends on accurate hand-excavation, surveying, photographs and detailed descriptions and drawings of the archaeological remains, such as walls, pits and wells, ditches and occupation deposits.

Artefacts and soil samples are collected by hand to be processed back at our offices in Oxford. They will then be studied by specialists in pottery, worked stone, metal objects, coins, glass, building materials etc and animal bones. Environmental evidence, such as pollen, charcoal, and snails, will also be studied.

All together, this evidence will tell us many things about how people have lived at this location over the centuries – including the local environmental, past diets, artisan / craft activity, what the buildings looked like, and the techniques used to construct them.

Eventually, after all the site and analysis work is completed, the results will be published, and all the evidence will be stored with the County



Hertford College
UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD





CATTE STREET

It is along this famous street that visitors from across the world will pass to reach the Bodleian Library, stand and stare at the circular Radcliffe Camera, glimpse through the iron gates the grassed seclusion of All Souls Quad, mount the stairs to take in the 'dreaming spires' from the tower of All Mary's Church, or take pictures in front of Oxford's own 'Bridge of Sighs'. What few visitors will realise is how different this street was in the past.

The oldest surviving historic map of Oxford was drawn by Agas in 1538. It shows two principal buildings that still exist, the Front Quad of All Souls and All Saints Church, but the street itself is narrow and mainly lined with small regularly spaced buildings. At its northern end (next to the 'Ladies Chappell' which has also survived to the present day) is the old Smithgate through the medieval stone walls. All the other buildings on the Agas map have long gone, many in the 17th

A page from from a medieval 'Oxford' Bible probably from a workshop on Catte Street



1728 Whittlesey map of Oxford, from Agas 1578



Salter's plan of Catte Street with book trades highlighted

and 18th centuries, and the street was widened in 1820. Detailed research into Oxford's many surviving medieval records by the Rev H E Salter revealed that Catte Street between 1250 and 1550 was the focus of a large number of trades and crafts involved in book-making. Before the age of the printing press (about 1500 onwards) and mechanised book production, all these trades were undertaken by hand by skilled craftspeople – and Catte Street was a true artisans' quarter.

One such craftsman was William de Brailes who was associated with a small property that we may have partly uncovered in our excavations. De Brailes illuminated a famous edition of the Book of Hours. The fine penmanship on the page shown here (left) from an 'Oxford' Bible (i.e copied in Oxford) is probably the work of another craftsman on Catte Street.



Hertford College
UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD



THE PRINTING PRESS HERALDS CHANGE

As an existing centre of hand-made book production in Oxford, the Catte Street area became the focus for the 15th century Divinity School's reading room, with the Duke Humphrie's Library added above in 1488.

The invention of the mechanised printing press in the mid-15th century and its spread in the 16th and 17th centuries, followed by the growth of the University in the 18th century, increased the number of books that needed to be produced and shelved. These changes saw the demolition of most of the smaller buildings that had contained the workshops of the artisans involved in hand-made book and manuscript production, and a complete change to the character of Catte Street.

By 1602 the impressive Bodleian Library had been built, and at the end of that century Christopher Wren's Sheldonian Theatre was added, but it was during the 18th century that changes to Catte Street accelerated. At the north end the Clarendon Building, designed by Nicholas Hawksmoor, was finished in 1715 to house the printing presses of Oxford University Press (which moved from the basement of the Sheldonian Theatre). The

The Quad area (looking towards Radcliffe Camera and the Bodleian Library before 1820 showing the backs of the 16th and 17th century buildings on Catte Street (Hertford's Old Chapel – still standing - on the left)



The same view in 1820 showing the older buildings mostly demolished (only the blue coloured building remains) and construction of the new buildings for Magdalen College (later to become part of Hertford College)

The former 16th and 17th century timber-framed buildings on the narrow Catte Street before 1820 (New College Lane on the left)



The same view of the widened Catte Street after 1822 showing the pair of new Magdalen College buildings (still standing and now part of Hertford College)

construction of more library space, first at All Soul's College (another grand Hawksmoor structure) and then on the other side of the street, led to the formation of Radcliffe Square and the central Radcliffe Camera.

By the turn of the 19th century the area that is now Hertford College was a bit of an anomaly, still retaining its 16th and 17th century buildings along the frontage. However, the street was now too narrow for the grandeur of the surrounding new buildings, plus the increase in traffic and a proposal to widen it presented an opportunity for Magdalen College to redevelop.

In 1820-21, the old timber framed buildings, the last to survive on Catte Street, were replaced by two grand stone buildings (still standing and forming the north and south parts of the West Range). A set of remarkable pictures capture this change.

Our excavations revealed the layers of stone dust and chippings created by the masons in 1820-21 seen in the Mackensie print. It is interesting to note that the masons were working in the same area where Beard's construction compound is today.

DANIELIS ROGERSII
Regi Confiditor ac Fancioris
Confidit Serenissime Regiae
a Secretis
AD ACADEMIAM
OXONIENSIS
EPIGRamma.

Bellissimum te rite crevit, Cervus pulchra;
Viximus sub tua beata, quid magis, tua, post
Bellum, quod sub tua beata, quid magis, tua, post
Quam viximus, tibi adoramus, tibi adoramus;
Ingratitudo, tibi adoramus, tibi adoramus, tibi adoramus;
Mendax, tibi adoramus, tibi adoramus, tibi adoramus;
Tunc, tibi adoramus, tibi adoramus, tibi adoramus;
Gloria, tibi adoramus, tibi adoramus;

Hertford College
UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

oxford
archaeology

Beard

HERTFORD COLLEGE – THE QUAD AREA

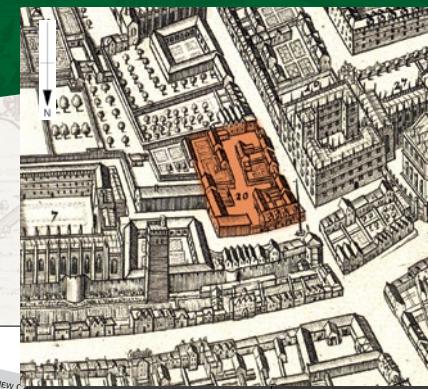
The area of the Quad itself has been made up from many different properties that have been joined up as the College has grown over time. The buildings around the Quad itself were constructed at different times.

As archaeologists, part of our work uses historic maps to give us clues as to how the site has changed over time and to identify the different property boundaries and buildings. But the earliest map only takes us back 500 years – leaving another 500 years to the Norman Conquest with no maps to help us.

We know from other excavations in Oxford that the area of the site sat outside the eastern defences of the first large Anglo-Saxon settlement – a defended town or burh probably built by Alfred the Great in response to Viking threats around AD 900. Catte Street may have been in existence then as a north-south routeway around the edge of the large defensive ditch that circled the town. A while later the defended area was extended to the east and included the site of the Quad – at this point Catte Street probably led to a small gate leading northwards through the defences (later called Smithgate). Later, after the Norman Conquest in 1066, the town started to grow, and although there may have been a few Anglo-Saxon dwellings along Catte Street previously, it is probably not until the late 11th into the 12th century that the street really started to develop.

It is likely that regular properties or tenements were laid out along the street, although street corners see more complex arrangements, and that this pattern was maintained more-or-less for hundreds of years (some surviving into the Victorian period). Medieval documents list occupants on the streets and some of these documents contain measurements. These can be used in conjunction with measured street surveys from the 18th century and the first edition Odnance Survey town maps (1870) to build a picture of the different properties.

Extract from Loggan's 1675 map of Oxford



Current buildings around the Quad, overlaid by buildings seen on Loggan's 1675 map (orange)

In the area of the Quad we can see there are three small medieval academic halls where students were taught and increasingly lived: Black Hall, Catte Hall and Hart Hall. These and other halls were the precursors to the college system. Hart Hall was to survive at the site and become Hertford College. Other properties would have been shops and workshops, which would have been residential too.

The plan above shows the current buildings around the Quad and the dates they were built. It is overlaid by buildings seen on a map of 1675 (by Loggan), using measurements in 18th century documents (these are represented by the orange rectangles). It clearly shows that the area of the excavations covers the rear part of the intersection of four different historical properties. Our work will hopefully uncover these boundaries and from the remains we will deduce when the area was first settled, the changing boundaries and buildings, and the activities and lives of those that occupied them over time.

Regni Confessorum ac Fanciolorum
Cordula Serenissime Regine
a Secretis
AD ACADEMIAM
OXONIENSIS
PIGRAMMA.

Bellum id est regnum Christi palpitat;
Viximus sub buccis quid magis sub auctoritate?
Bellum id est regnum Christi palpitat;
Quam viximus regnum Christi adfert.
Non impetravimus, quia credimus in Christum;
Imperio vero, quia credimus in Christum.
Miserere nos, fratres, quoniam regnum nostrum
est in auctoritate, non in imperio.
Bellum id est regnum Christi palpitat;
Tunc credimus, quia credimus in Christum;
Tunc credimus, quia credimus in Christum;
Hoc credimus, quia credimus in Christum;
Gloria est in auctoritate nostra;
Dilectum est nomen nostrum; Beatus iste;
Iudeus sapientis strata locis locis agnoscitur;
Non enim sapientia voluntatis, sed Christi;
Pax et regnum dei datur omnes Christi pacant;
Agnoscit eum omnes; Hoc est Iudeus docevit.



Hertford College
UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

ARCHAEOLOGY



To uncover the archaeology of the site we mainly use simple hand-tools (pick, mattock, shovel, spade, hoe, trowel). The skill of the fieldwork archaeologist is being able to recognise the different types of deposits and features (we call these 'contexts') and excavate them in the correct sequence. We will pick out the artefacts we see, such as pottery, bone, glass, metal etc, and we may take soil samples to be able to extract smaller items, such as charred plants, seeds and small bones. We will excavate the latest deposits and features first and work back in time until only the earliest deposits and features are visible. In urban locations such as this the sequence is

very complex due to the concentration of human activity over hundreds of years. Each context will get an individual number and a written record. We also make scale pencil drawings and take photographs. In this way when we leave we will have a complete record of what we have done which we then use to analyse and interpret the site.

The archaeology we have recovered so far on this site attests to occupation from the Norman Conquest in 1066 up to the 19th century, nearly 900 years of life, work and study in four properties along Catte Street and New College Lane.



Hertford College
UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

ARTEFACTS AND SOIL SAMPLES

The artefacts tell us about fashion, sports, pastimes, everyday objects, tableware and artisanal activities

As book-making was one of the principal artisanal activities along Catte Street, and students would have attended the three academic halls (Black Hall, Hart Hall and Catte Hall), it is not surprising we have a good collection of metal book clasps (which held books shut), writing leads and styli (pencils and pens). But the star find is the perfectly preserved lens, probably used for reading. A huge number of coins and tokens have been recovered too – telling of bustling mercantile trade. No doubt other items relating to these crafts and activities will come to light.



We have bone tuning-pegs from stringed musical instruments, a crossbow nut (the catch that releases the string to launch the bolt), a set of wooden bowling balls (not on display), clay tobacco pipes, drinking vessels and tableware that tell us of leisure activities, and food and drink consumption.

Combs which were made from animal bone tell us about personal care, and metal buckles and strap-ends about clothing and fashion.

When old structures collapsed or were demolished some of the building materials get left behind, these stone and ceramic roofing slates, floor tiles and worked stone give us an idea of what those buildings would have looked like.



From right: a bean, a hazelnut and a pea

Soil Samples: animal bones and organic remains tell us about diet, trade, farming, fishing and woodland management

As an example, a 500-year-old rubbish pit – context 4395 – was used to discard kitchen waste. Bone fragments from a sheep or goat between 2 and 3½ years old which had been butchered using fine knives. Other cut marks down the side of the bone show where the meat was removed during consumption. There were also bones from pigs, rabbits and chickens, as well as an immature goose (which indicates these bones were probably deposited in the summer).

The pit also contained oyster shells, as well as bones of cod, herring, whiting, eel, small flatfish, gurnard and thornback ray. Eels were probably caught locally, the rest are from sea fish which were transported either by road on packhorses or waggons or by river up the Thames from London on boats. The cod would have been wind dried and salted “stockfish”, and the herrings salted and packed in barrels. Both saltfish and fresh fish were sold in Oxford’s markets on the fishmongers’ stalls in Fish Street (St. Aldates).

Charcoal firewood was also abundant and was mainly beech, probably from the Chilterns, but also oak and hawthorn, apple and whitebeam. Other charred plant remains include occasional poorly preserved cereal grain, mostly free-threshing wheat, but also barley grain, sedge seed, and hazelnut shell.

DANIELIS ROGERS
Regni Confessoris ac Fanctoris
Confidit Serenissime Regine
a Secretis
AD ACADEMIAM
OXONIENSIS
EPIGRamma.

Bellissimum te rite coronat Cervus pallidus;
Viximus subtilis quid magis innotescit?
Bellaq. subtilis subtilis subtilis subtilis subtilis
Quam rarae serpens. His adferunt
Amphibios. Quae crevit. Quae vertit.
Mendax. Quae dilatavit. Quae rotundata.
Quae duxit. Quae levata. Quae levata.
Tunc. Quae levata. Quae levata.
Gutti. Quae levata. Quae levata.
Dilectiss. ministrum. coniunct. Bovinus. solit.
Bovinus. solit. levata. levata. levata.
Non. aperte. levata. levata. levata.
Tunc. levata. levata. levata.
Pars. levata. levata. levata. levata.
Aponit. levata. levata. levata.



Hertford College
UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

oxford
archaeology

Beard

THINGS TO SEE ON THE SITE TOUR

We are currently excavating in two areas - the Old Buildings Quad and inside the former Chapel.

Later in the project we will be digging on the other side of the former Chapel and within the existing basements to the buildings along Catte Street. These works are all in advance of the construction of the new Library and Archive basement.

The Quad excavations are investigating the complex junction relating to the back parts of four medieval properties: Hart Hall and Black Hall that had frontage buildings on College Lane, and Catte Hall and a property to its north that had frontage buildings on Catte Street. The patches of natural gravel indicate the broad area of the property boundaries.

We are now at a level which is 2.5 metres below where we started. This level is the depth of the original ground in this area of Oxford, which means that in the last 1000 years 2.5 metres of archaeological deposits have built up and underlie the surfaces we walk on today. We are excavating a large number of archaeological features – most of them are pits for disposing of rubbish, but we also have a well, and three latrine or cesspits. Some of these features may be another 3 metres (or more) deep!

The numbers with descriptions below correspond to the signs on the site:

1. This is a circular stone-lined well at the back of the Black Hall property. It will be deep enough to reach the water-table which is probably another 3 metres down. Most people would have got their water from a well in their back yards because piped water was rare and mainly only supplied to the elite.

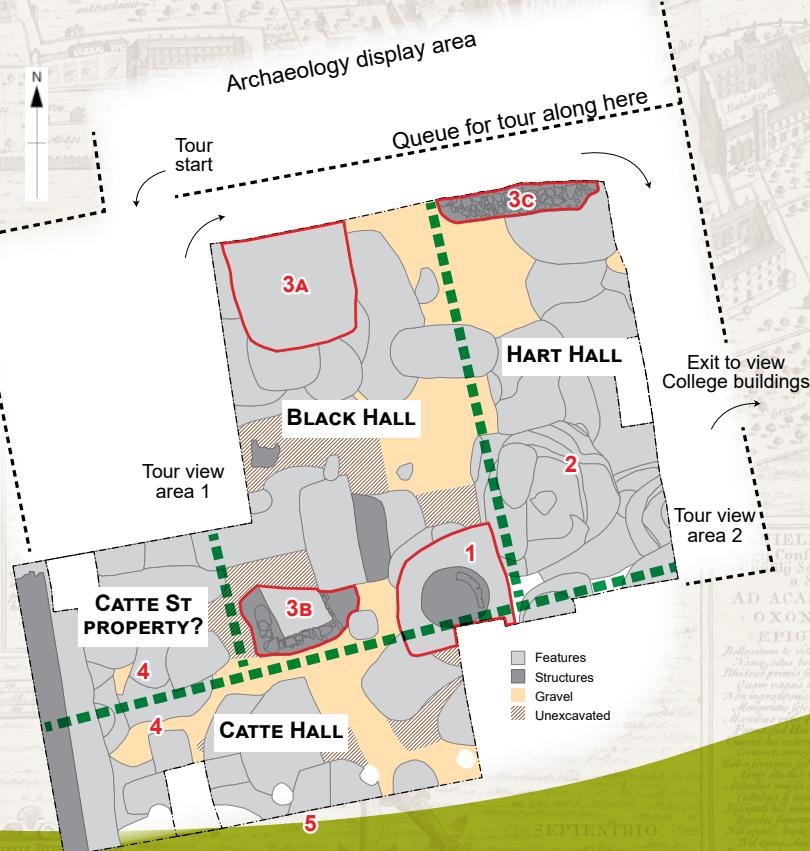
2. This area consists of multiple intercutting rubbish pits in the rear of the Hart Hall property. They were used to dispose of domestic waste and date from 1200-1500 – during which time probably only one pit would be open at once until it was full and then another would be dug.

3. 3a, 3b and 3c – these are latrine or cesspits. **3a** and **3b** are located to the rear of the Black Hall property.

3c is in the Hart Hall property and right on the edge of the excavation. Before the 19th century most people's toilet waste would have been collected in pits. A timber toilet building with a plank floor would have stood above these pits. The proximity of the cesspits to the wells was clearly unhygienic – but this link was not made until the modern period.

4. This is another group of waste pits, but this time in the rear garden/yards of Catte Hall and the property to the north. These pits are earlier than the Hart Hall group and mainly date from immediately after the Norman Conquest (1066) until about 1200. Because Catte Street led directly to the Smithgate it is likely the street was developed before College Lane.

5. These are the massive stone foundations to Hertford College's Old Chapel built in the first half of the 18th century. These will be removed to make way for the new basement, but the building will remain.



Hertford College
UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

oxford
archaeology

Beard

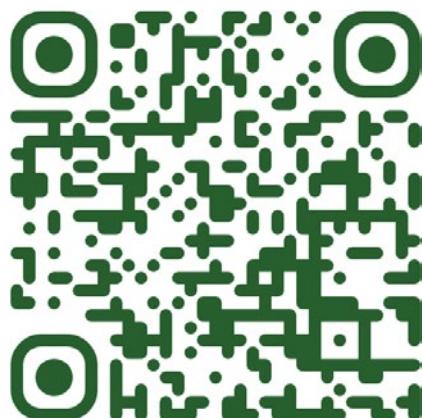


THANK YOU!

On behalf of HERTFORD COLLEGE,
OXFORD ARCHAEOLOGY and
BEARD thank you for visiting the
open day.



We do hope you have found it
interesting and enjoyed yourselves...
...if you have any feedback please let
us know here:



Hertford College
UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

oxford
archaeology

Beard