

ST NICHOLAS' CHURCH, SEVENOAKS

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ARCHAEOLOGICAL FIELD EVALUATION 1992

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OXFORD ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT



ST NICHOLAS' CHURCH, SEVENOAKS  
ARCHAEOLOGICAL FIELD EVALUATION 1992

A report on the field evaluation undertaken from the 14th to the 25th  
of September 1992 at St Nicholas' Church, High St, Sevenoaks, Kent

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## 1 Introduction

The Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) undertook a field evaluation on behalf of, and funded by, the church of St Nicholas, Sevenoaks, as part of the church's Building for the Gospel project. Archaeological fieldwork ran from the 14th of September to the 18th of September, and from the 23rd of September to the 25th of September 1992, a total of 8 working days.

## 2 Topography and geology

The Parish Church of St Nicholas is situated at 154 m OD, near the top of the gradually rising slope on which Sevenoaks is built. From this 'top of the town' location the church has a commanding view over the urban centre. The church building measures 45 x 30 m overall and encloses an area of c. 722 sq m.

Geologically, the slope is that of a greensand ridge, and excavation showed the natural subsoil to be a compact red- to yellow-brown sand with much iron staining.

## 3 Historical and archaeological background

Historically, the first mention of Sevenoaks church appears in the Textus Roffensis of 1122, but, as the main church serving a substantial parish, there is a strong possibility that it was a pre-conquest foundation. The existing ragstone and sandstone structure appears mainly 15th century (perpendicular) on the outside apart from the 14th century (decorated) work of the north aisle. Victorian restorations are also in evidence. Inside, the 13th century nave arcades are the earliest visible parts of the church (Newman 1976: 510-11).

An archaeological evaluation of the church interior was undertaken from October to November 1990 by the Canterbury Archaeological Trust (CAT). The evaluation consisted of two trenches, the first of which, Trench A, revealed a foundation built of rough green sandstone at 152.2 m OD and cut into the natural sand. The foundation is aligned with, but off-centre from, the line of the existing nave arcade (Fig. 2). Disturbed sand overlay the green sandstone and was cut by 2 or possibly 3 burials, the whole being covered by a compact levelling deposit, probably 19th century.

Trench B also contained rough foundations of green sandstone, in two separate areas, one again being aligned with the nave arcade while the other (although rather fragmentary) appeared to run at right angles to the south (Fig. 2). The difference here was that an earlier section of a ragstone structure, perhaps also a foundation, underlay the northernmost area of green sandstone. Disturbed sand again lay above the green sandstone foundations, and the trench contained one articulated burial, one brick barrel-vaulted tomb and much



disarticulated bone including 8 skulls. A similar levelling deposit to that found in Trench A sealed all the above. A third trench, Trench C, was placed outside the church and is not described here. Further detail on all three trenches is contained in Hicks and Ward 1990, from which the above summary is taken.

#### 4 Strategy

The proposed Building for the Gospel scheme involves the construction of an undercroft covering almost the entire area of the present church. Only half of the westernmost bay and the west tower are excepted. The building of the undercroft will require the removal of all deposits down to at least 4 m below the existing floor over the whole undercroft area.

The evaluation by CAT described above demonstrated that while archaeological deposits of some value remained in situ, much (e.g. medieval floor levels) has been lost to grave cutting and, in particular, to later restoration. The archaeology is not, therefore, such as to warrant preservation in situ, but does merit controlled archaeological excavation prior to construction. With this established, David Miles (OAU), as archaeological consultant to the building project, felt that further evaluation work could provide useful information bearing on the approach taken to the final excavation. It was also felt that since the proposed scheme occupies such a large area of the church, it would be worthwhile to increase the evaluation coverage; Rodwell (1989: 115) cites several examples of churches where the degree of preserved archaeology varied radically from one part of the church to another<sup>1</sup>.

The strategy chosen for the OAU evaluation involved three trenches whose positions are shown on Figure 2. Trenches 1 and 2 lay across the line of the nave arcades, running into the north and south aisles respectively. Trench 3 was at the east end of the north aisle. The intention behind placing the trenches in this manner was to increase the evaluated sample of the nave and aisles and to provide some evaluation closer to the west end. In particular, it was felt that by laying two trenches across both nave and aisles, some useful

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<sup>1</sup> In stressing spatial variability of preservation, Rodwell also argues vehemently against evaluation trenches within churches. The authors of this report feel that this is both misconceived - evaluation need not be damaging if it is well-recorded and excavation of stratified deposits minimised - and impractical. It is impractical because at least some idea of what lies under the floor over a church's area needs to be gained in order to plan and cost an area excavation. It should also be pointed out that the more evaluations that are done prior to area excavation, the better we are likely to become at interpreting their results.

information might be gained about burial patterns, given that the aisles may have been constructed over earlier graveyard deposits.

Finally, details of the aims and strategy of the evaluation are contained in the Project Design (Appendix 1). The general aim within each trench was to establish the nature and significance of surviving archaeological remains, but to achieve this with the minimum excavation of stratified deposits.

## 5 Description of the archaeology

### Trench 1 (Figs 3,4)

This trench was divided by a floor support. The two halves, 1A and 1B, produced notably different sequences which are described below. Similarities between the two are noted where these exist.

#### Trench 1A

Dimensions: 1.74 x 0.96 m; Stratification from 152.56 to 152.9 m OD; Context numbers 200-213

A friable dark reddish-brown sand, 213, covered the whole trench. This is likely to have been the natural subsoil. Above it, in the northern end of the trench, was an irregular patch of sandstone fragments, none larger than 0.22 by 0.12 m. A layer of loose red-brown sand, 212, containing fragments of chalk and charcoal then extended over the entire trench. It contained two lead off-cuts. It was overlain by another patch of sandstone, 211, in the south-west corner of the trench. The sandstone pieces were up to 0.4 by 0.2 m in size and bonded with soft yellow-white mortar.

Layer 212 was also cut by three discrete features. A small posthole, 208, was 0.31 m deep and lay close to the sandstone feature 211. At the north end of the trench was an east-west linear cut, 203, which coincided roughly with the stratigraphically lower sandstone feature, 210. It is thus possible that the cut, 0.17 m deep, was intended to rob out whatever overlay 210. The fill of the cut, 202, was a loose sand containing mortar, brick fragments and stone fragments; it was very similar to layer 303 in Trench 1A. On the east side of the trench was the western extremity of a grave cut, 205 (not illustrated) which was seen to contain a wooden coffin adorned with at least one metal strip. The fill of the grave was loose sand with mortar, brick and stone, 204, 209.

All three cut features, and the sandstone 211, were overlain by a thin deposit of sand and mortar, 210, which extended over the whole trench. This contained a few lead off-cuts, and was sealed by 200, a layer of grey-white sand, mortar and plaster containing stone and wood chips. This context was very hard on its surface, as if deliberately rammed. It was identical to context 300 in Trench 1B.

## Trench 1B

Dimensions: 1.9 x 0.74 m; Stratification from 152.5 (or lower) to 152.92 m OD;  
Context numbers 300-307

B  
Natural subsoil was not reached in Trench 1A as this would have involved too much excavation of stratified deposits. The earliest context revealed was a feature of rough green sandstone, 306. The feature was at least 3 courses (0.3 m) high and measured at least 1.18 m across (north-south). The northern edge of the feature appears to be a fairly regular east-west line, and on the evidence of the limited area seen, 306 would appear to be a linear feature running east-west, along the alignment of the existing nave aisles (Fig. 2). The green sandstones of 306 were covered by a compact dark brown sand, 305, which filled the interstices between the stones and extended further to the north. Here it encompassed a large sandstone block, the relationship of which to 306 is unclear.

Above the compact sand, 305, was a thin spread of very hard yellow-white mortar, 304, containing fragments of chalk and green sandstone. To the north, 305 was cut away by the foundation trench, 307, for a brick barrel-vaulted tomb, 301. The fill of the foundation trench, 303, was a loose sand with fragments of tile and brick which also extended over the whole trench, presumably as a levelling layer (Fig. 4). It was similar to Context 202 in Trench 1A (see above). Finally, the whole trench was sealed by 300, a very hard sand, mortar and plaster layer identical to Context 200 in Trench 1A. Both the brickwork supporting the existing floor of the church, and the brick cladding, 302, which surrounded the base for the nave arcade pier west of the trench (Fig.3), were built directly onto layer 300.

## Trench 2 (Figs 5,6)

Dimensions: 2A, 2 x 1 m; 2B, 2 x 1 m; Stratification from 152.65 to 152.9 m OD;  
Context numbers 1-7, 100-109

This trench was divided, like Trench 1, by a floor support. However, as the stratification was simpler than in Trench 1, and there were a number of similarities between the two halves, 2A and 2B, they are discussed together.

The lowest level in Trench 2 was again fine, compact red-brown sand, 5, 105. In Trench 2A this was cut by two features, the first being a linear east-west cut, 4, of which only the south side was revealed. It is possible that the north side lies under the baulk between Trenches 2A and 2B. The cut was filled with large pieces of rough green sandstone, 3. At least two courses of sandstone exist, but the cut was not excavated so the actual depth is unknown. Compact, dark-brown sand partially overlay the green sandstone and filled the interstices, as in Trench 1B. The natural sand, 5, was also cut by an east-west grave, 7, in which a coffin stain was clearly visible. Part of a skull, SK1, was

uncovered in the fill, 6, of the grave and it can be presumed to contain an articulated skeleton.

2 B  
In Trench 1 the sand, 105, was cut by a single small posthole, 107, and by the foundation cut, 104, for a brick vaulted tomb, 101, at the north end of the trench.

st. 102  
a. 100  
2. 100  
3. 100  
All of the stratification described above was overlain by a layer of loose, fine sand, 2, 102, with some plaster and mortar, and sparse fragments of brick and stone. Layer 102 contained a single fragment of clay pipe stem and was very similar to layers 203 and 303 in Trench 1. It was covered in turn by grey-white sand, plaster and mortar, 1, 100, with much small rubble. This layer had a very hard surface, and was identical to layers 200 and 300 in Trench 1. The brick supports for the existing wooden floor were built directly onto this deposit. Layer 1 contained a single fragment of painted plaster, a body sherd of 17th century tin-glazed pottery, several clay pipe fragments, including part of a 19th-century decorated bowl and a few fragments of human bone.

### Trench 3 (Fig.7)

Dimensions: 1.6 x 1.6 m; Stratification from 152.5 to 152.85 m OD; Contexts 400-409

A layer of compact dark brown sand, 408, lay across part of the northern area of the trench. If, as seems most likely, this was the natural subsoil then it survived to a greater height, 152.85 m OD, than in Trenches 1 and 2. Also in the northern half of the trench was 406, a deposit of rough sandstone fragments in a matrix of dirty sand. It is likely that this deposit overlay 408, although the relationship was not clear, and no excavation of 406 was carried out.

Both 406 and 408 had been cut in the north of the trench by an east-west linear feature, 403, of which only the southern and eastern edges were revealed. The cut was 0.42 m deep and was filled with 301, a friable dark brown sand with mortar, tile and ironstone fragments, and containing a few fragments of human bone. It is possible that feature 402 was a grave which had been disturbed at a later date, and the body removed.

In the southern half of Trench 3, the sand 408 had been cut, 409, for the insertion of a substantial brick and stone tomb, 403. The tomb has brick walls, and stone slabs top and bottom. At least two chambers, laid end-to-end originally existed, and it is possible that further chambers exist under the lower slabs. The easternmost of the two chambers seen had been cut away, 404, possibly to allow another brick and stone construction, 405 to be built. The latter, however, is strangely aligned (north-south/east-west) for a tomb and it could represent support across a difficult void for the existing wooden floor. If this was the case then the reason for cut 404 is unclear.



Finally, the current wooden floor of the church is supported on brickwork which directly overlies fill 401 in the northern half of the trench and over the stone slabs of 405 in the southern half (but see above).

## 6 Summary and discussion

### 6.1 Survival of archaeological deposits

The surviving stratification averages about 0.4 m in depth, although it is occasionally deeper where features (e.g. postholes, graves) are cut into the natural sand. It is clear that the stratification as revealed in the evaluation trenches does not represent the complete historical sequence of the church. This is best demonstrated by Trench 1B (Figs 3,4) where the faced section of the existing 13th-century pier base begins at 153.36 m OD, and this should correspond to the height of the 13th-century floor. As the top of surviving stratification (a 19th-century layer) is at 152.8 m OD, the inevitable conclusion is that later activity has removed much of the medieval and later archaeology over large areas of the church. The loss of floor levels relating to earlier phases of the church is particularly notable, although it is still possible that there are pockets of stratification within the church where survival is better. The most likely area for this is within the chancel, where the current floor level is higher.

In addition to the truncation of deposits described above, the stratification is also interrupted by later brick- or brick- and stone-built tombs. The foundation cuts for these structures will nearly all reach down into the natural subsoil, removing all earlier deposits. The only exception to this is likely to be where an earlier and deeper grave underlies the tomb.

### 6.2 Structures and the stratified sequence

It is now almost certain that substantial foundations of green sandstone exist below, and roughly aligned with, the nave arcades (Fig.2). No associated datable material was recovered, but as the column bases of the nave arcades are themselves 13th century, the foundations must be earlier than this. It also seems probable that these are not the foundations for the nave arcades themselves: certainly the alignment is slightly off-centre though this in itself is not conclusive, and could be a medieval construction error. More probably, the green sandstone foundation once supported the walls of an earlier church, narrower than the present building, and perhaps of the 12th century but conceivably earlier still.

We can also note the existence of less substantial sandstone features, some of them mortared, which occur both earlier and later in the stratified sequence than the green sandstone work discussed above. This can be seen in Figure 4 (Contexts 210 and 211) and an earlier ragstone feature was also uncovered

in one of the CAT trenches (Hicks and Ward 1990: Trench B, Context 15). Postholes were also seen in several trenches and may be related either to construction work (scaffolding) or to wooden structures. The overall point here is that an open area excavation will have the potential to provide a sequence of both deposits and structures for at least part of the church's early history. This, as has been discussed above in the section on survival of stratification, is likely to be followed by a gap in the sequence, and then by a later story, mainly that of the burial pattern/sequence as represented by inserted tombs. Finally on this topic, it should not be forgotten that detailed examination of both the standing fabric of the church, and of the surviving documentary evidence, will aid the interpretation of the archaeological record and lead to a more integrated history of the building.

As regards finds, and particularly those capable of furnishing dating evidence, the picture from the evaluation is a very poor one. On current evidence, the dating of the archaeological sequence is likely to be the most difficult aspect of an open area excavation.

### 6.3 Burials

The number of articulated burials encountered in all of the evaluation trenches within the church (CAT trenches included) probably lies between 7 and 12. If this density of burials is taken as being typical of the whole area to be affected by the undercroft, then the total number of articulated burials would lie between 185 and 320. Naturally, figures arrived at in this way must be treated with extreme caution, and can only provide a very rough guide.

As regards disarticulated bone, it is interesting that while a relatively large quantity was found in one of the CAT trenches, much of it from a single context, very little bone was found elsewhere. This may mean, again only if we can assume that the evaluation trenches are reasonably representative of the whole area, either that the overall density of burials was not very high, or that it was, but the disturbed bone has since been concentrated into relatively few areas. In the former case, the total number of articulated burials should lie near the low end of the figures given above, while in the latter case the same may still be true but time and care would be needed during the excavation to record large and possibly deliberate concentrations of disarticulated bone.

The general quality of bone preservation within the church was good. The bone surfaces were fairly hard, and very little if any erosion appeared to have taken place.

#### 6.4 Excavation conditions (including Health and Safety)

The natural light in the church is often too poor to allow the difference between deposits to be discerned, and the electric lights presently fitted do not greatly improve the situation. It will therefore be necessary, particularly during the winter months, to install supplementary lighting, both for excavation and photography.

Deposits within the church retain very little moisture, thus blurring the distinctions between deposits. A suitable water source and hose will be required during excavation.

During the evaluation dust was found to be a problem in that the air quality rapidly deteriorates when soil is being moved. The dust created, particularly from the upper strata, is extremely unpleasant to breathe. Use of water as mentioned above will be of some help here, but it may also be necessary to use masks and/or extractor fans.

A written opinion should be sought from the consulting engineers regarding the structural stability of the church during the excavation. If it is likely that excavation will destabilise any part of the building, the engineers should be asked to devise temporary shoring.

#### 6.5 Excavation specification/project design

As has already been agreed, a detailed specification/project design will need to be drawn up prior to any excavation taking place. The specification will need to address the following problems in particular:

- 1 The amount of detailed analysis to be carried out on the human skeletal material, with regard to both human skeletons and disarticulated bone.
- 2 The level of recording and analysis to be applied to later brick- and brick- and stone-built tombs.
- 3 The integration of architectural and documentary evidence with the archaeological record.

D. Wilkinson - Oxford Archaeological Unit, 2/10/92

## Bibliography

Hicks, A and Ward, A, 1990 *St Nicholas Church, Sevenoaks* (Canterbury Archaeological Trust Evaluation Report)

Newman, J, 1976 *The Buildings of England: West Kent and the Weald* (2nd edn)

Rodwell, W, 1989 *Church Archaeology*, (2nd edn)

## Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the Reverend Miles Thompson, Brigadier Dobbie (Project Manager) and Robert Potter (Architect) for all their help in making the evaluation run so smoothly. We would also like to acknowledge the help of church volunteers, and of the verger, Bernard Sharp, in putting the church back to rights after excavation was finished. We are grateful to Dr John Williams, County Archaeologist, for visiting and commenting on the evaluation at short notice.



## Appendix 1 Project Design for the OAU Evaluation

### Introduction

Consideration is being given to the construction of an undercroft which would occupy a large area beneath the nave and aisles of the building. An archaeological evaluation has previously been undertaken by the Canterbury Archaeological Trust (CAT).

The church has commissioned a second stage of evaluation in order to clarify the financial and time resources required to mitigate the impact of the proposed undercroft on the church's archaeology.

#### 1 Aims

- 1.1 To establish the depth of archaeological deposits in other parts of the church.
- 1.2 To establish the density of burials in other parts of the church.
- 1.3 To establish whether earlier graveyard areas exist under the present church and their relationship to the present church and its predecessors.
- 1.4 To establish the depth of overburden above significant archaeological deposits, (i.e. 19th century rubble floor make-up that could be removed by the main contractor under archaeological supervision).
- 1.5 To establish skeletal condition in other parts of the church.

#### 2 Strategy

- 2.1 The second stage of field evaluation to be undertaken by a maximum of four hand excavated trenches.
- 2.2 Trenches 1 and 2 to be 1 m x 4 m in size and Trenches 3 and 4 to be 1 m x 2 m.
- 2.3 Sufficient hand excavation to meet the aims stated above to be undertaken. It is the intention to cause as little disturbance of stratified deposits as possible. This may be achieved solely by the excavation or partial excavation of grave fills. However, a sample of stratified deposits may need to be excavated. No burials to be removed from grave cuts.
- 2.4 All trenches to be planned at 1:20 with larger scale plans of features as necessary. Sections of features and sample sections of trenches to be drawn at 1:20. Full trench sections to be drawn where necessary.

2.5 Context recording to be by OAU standard method. All contexts, and any small finds and samples from them to be given unique numbers. Bulk finds to be collected by context. Colour transparency and black-and-white negative photographs to be taken.

2.6 It is envisaged that the work would be undertaken in a maximum of ten days by a Senior Archaeologist (Mr D Wilkinson, MIFA) and three technicians.

### 3 Report and Archive

3.1 A report to be completed within three weeks of the end of on-site work. The Field Officer and OAU finds specialists to undertake the report stage.

3.2 The level of artefact analysis to be sufficient to establish date ranges of archaeological deposits, a general assessment of the types of pottery and other artefacts to assist in characterising the archaeology, and to establish the potential for all categories of artefacts should further archaeological work be necessary.

3.3 Finds conservation to be undertaken by Woodstock Museum or by conservators of the Ashmolean Museum (to be agreed with the County Archaeologist) depending on availability.

3.4 The report to include a copy of the trench location plan at 1:100, copies of the plans showing the location of the archaeological features at 1:100, more detailed plans and sections as appropriate; descriptions of the archaeological features and an assessment of the archaeological potential of the site. Copies to be provided to the Church Authorities and their architects, to the DAC's archaeological officer and to the Planning Director for Sevenoaks District Council.

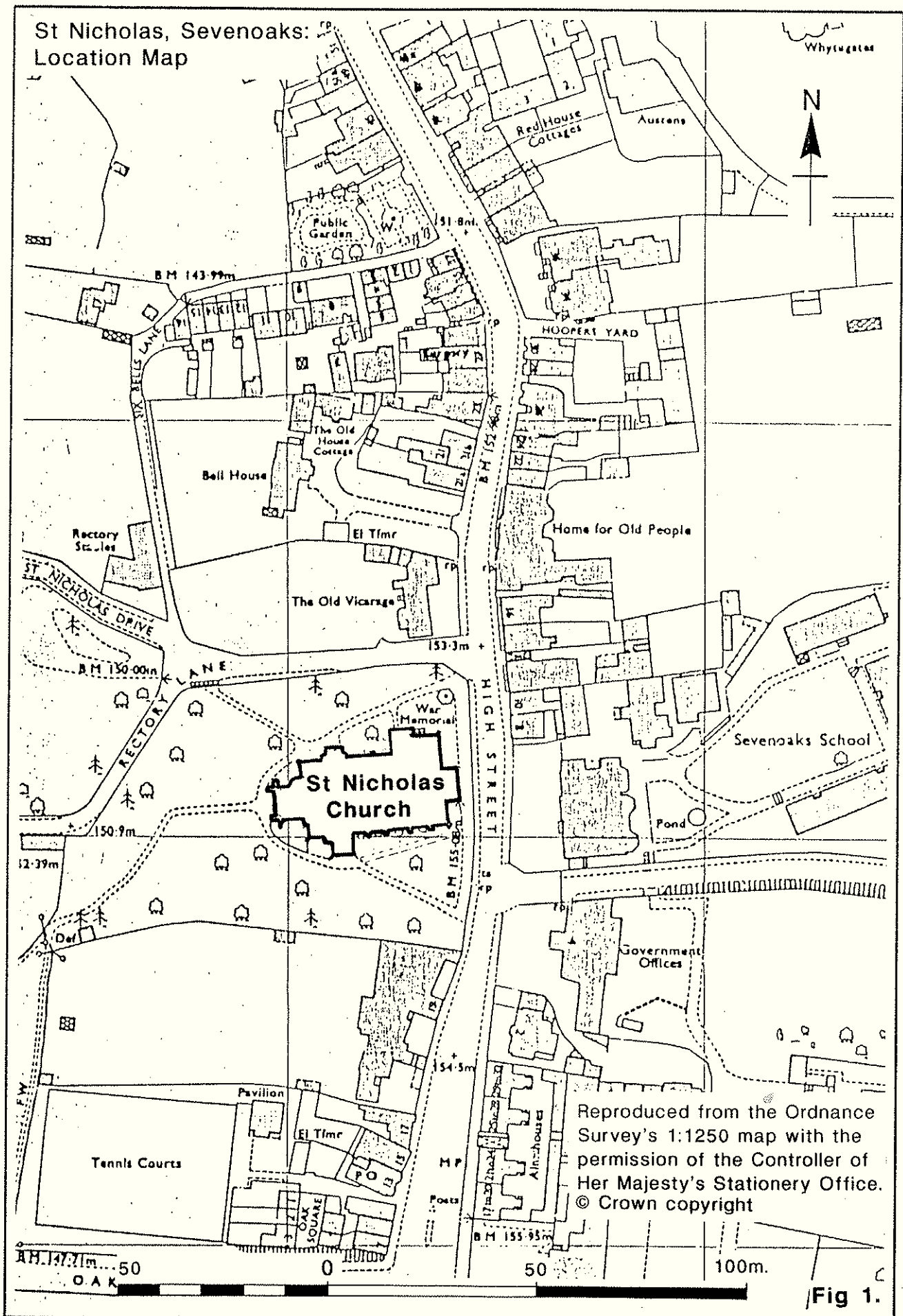
3.5 Should no further archaeological work follow then arrangements to be made for publication of an appropriate report.

3.6 Artefacts to be suitably bagged, boxed and marked in accordance with the United Kingdom Institute of Conservation, Conservation Guidelines Nos 1 and 2.

3.7 The site archive to include all project records and cultural material to be prepared in accordance with Guidelines for the Preparation of Excavation Archives for Long-Term Storage (UKIC 1990). Arrangements to be made to deposit the archive with the Kent Museums Service.

OAU - September 1992

St Nicholas, Sevenoaks:  
Location Map



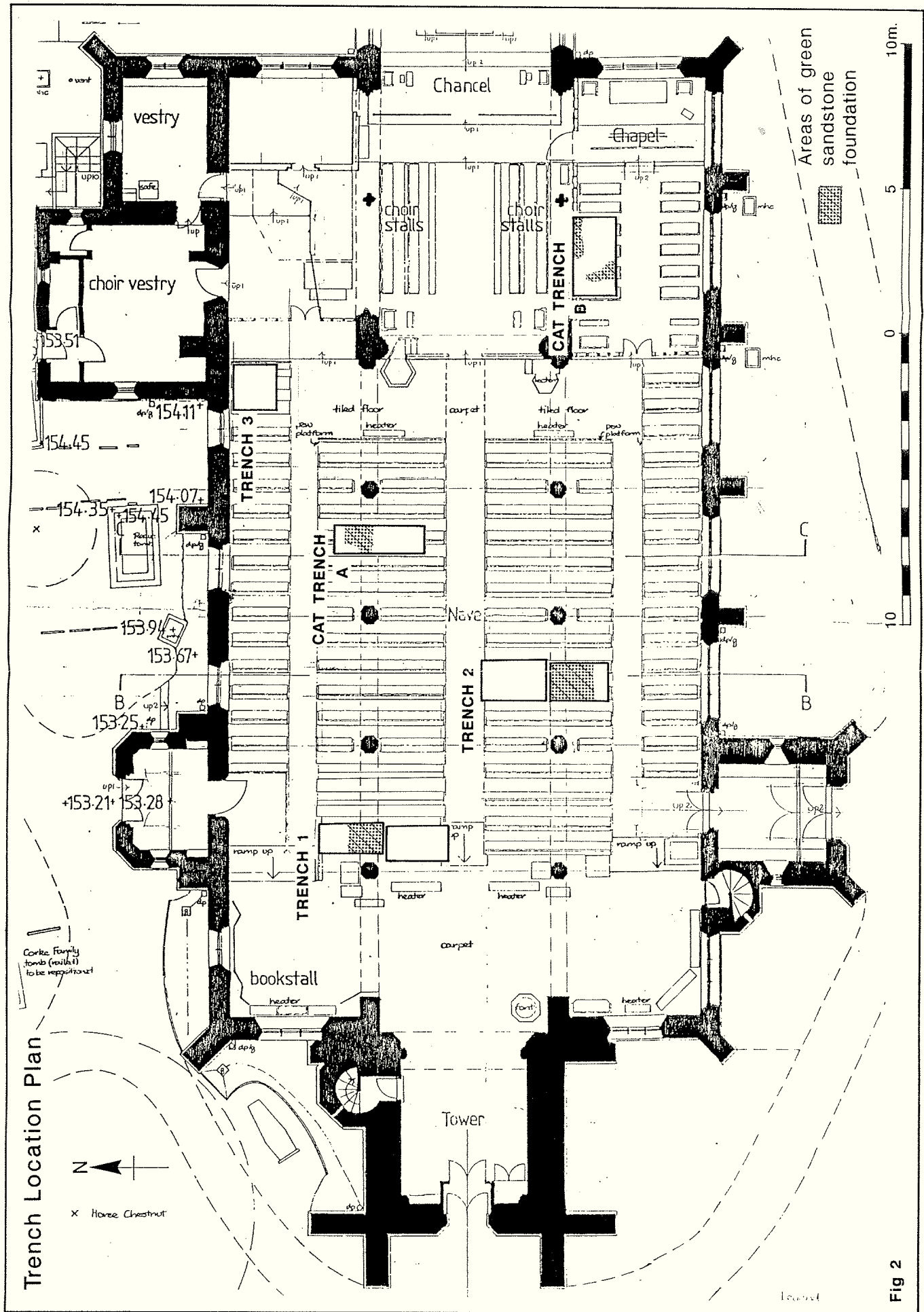
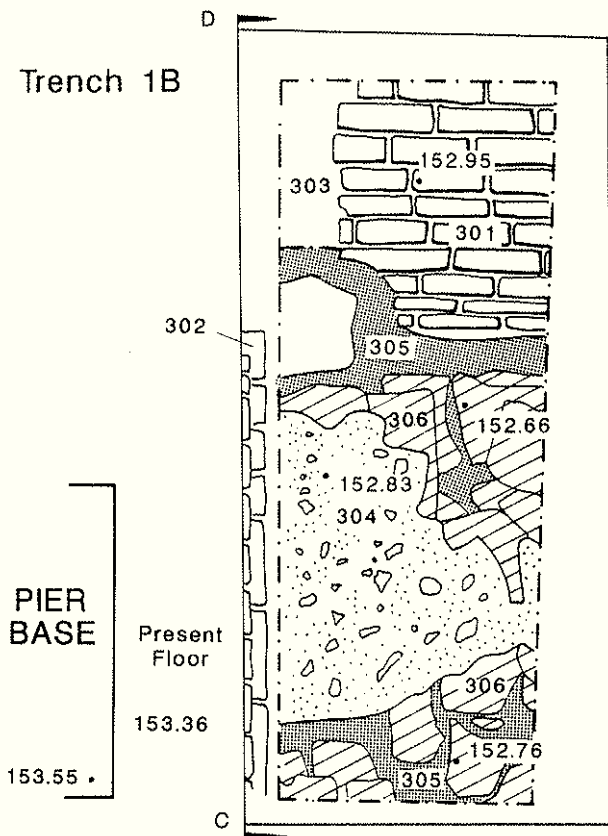


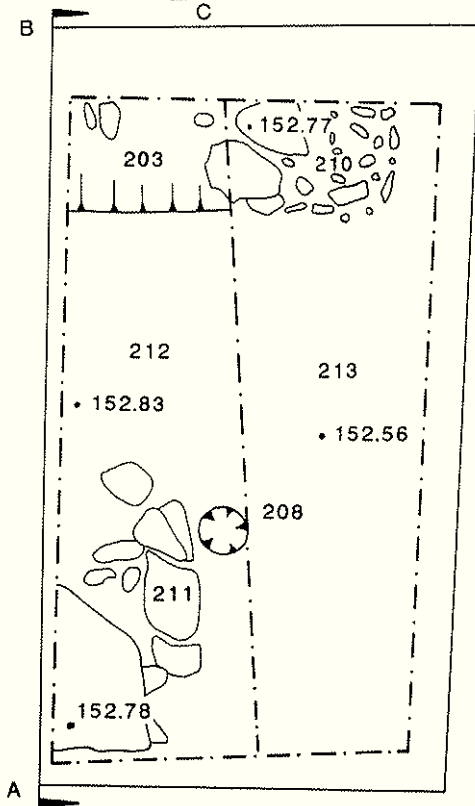
Fig 2



Trench 1  
Plan at end of excavation



For Sections A B, C D,  
see fig 4.









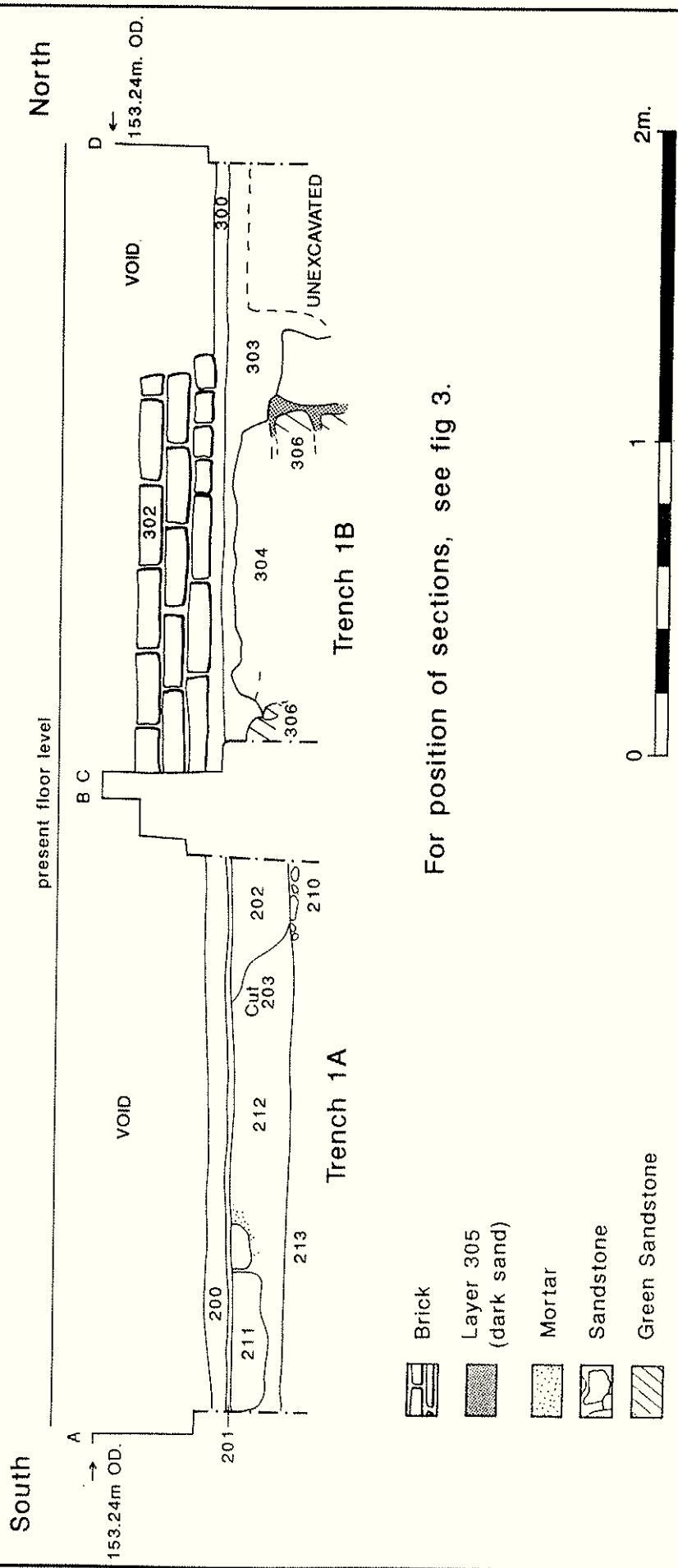
-  Brick
-  Layer 305 (dark sand)
-  Mortar
-  Sandstone
-  Green Sandstone
-  •152.26 Height above Ordnance Datum



Fig 3.

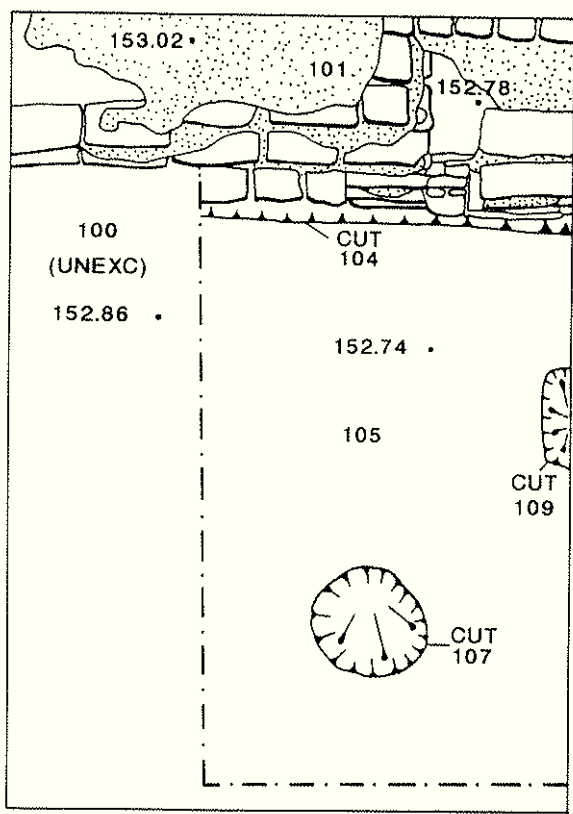
# Trench 1 West Sections



For position of sections, see fig 3.

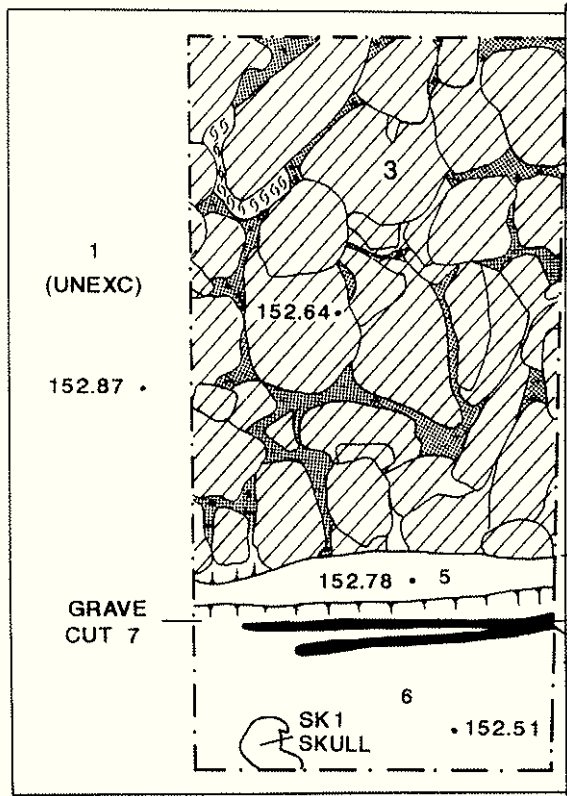
Fig 4.

Trench 2  
Plan at end of excavation



H  
Trench 2B  
G

For Sections E F, G H,  
see fig 6.



F  
Trench 2A  
E

-  Chalk
-  Brick
-  Dark Sand
-  Mortar
-  Sandstone
-  Green Sandstone
- 152.26 Height above Ordnance Datum



Fig 5.

# Trench 2 East Sections

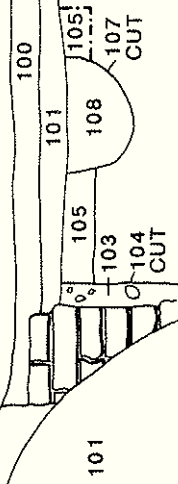
North  
→ H

153.32m OD.

present floor level

G F

VOID

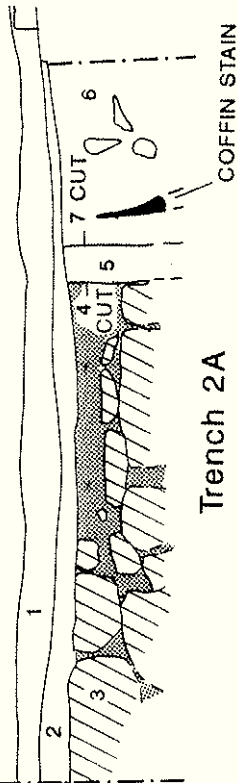


Trench 2B






South  
← E

153.32m OD.

VOID



Trench 2A

-  Brick
-  Dark Sand
-  Mortar
-  Sandstone
-  Green Sandstone

For position of Sections, see fig 5.



Fig 6.







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