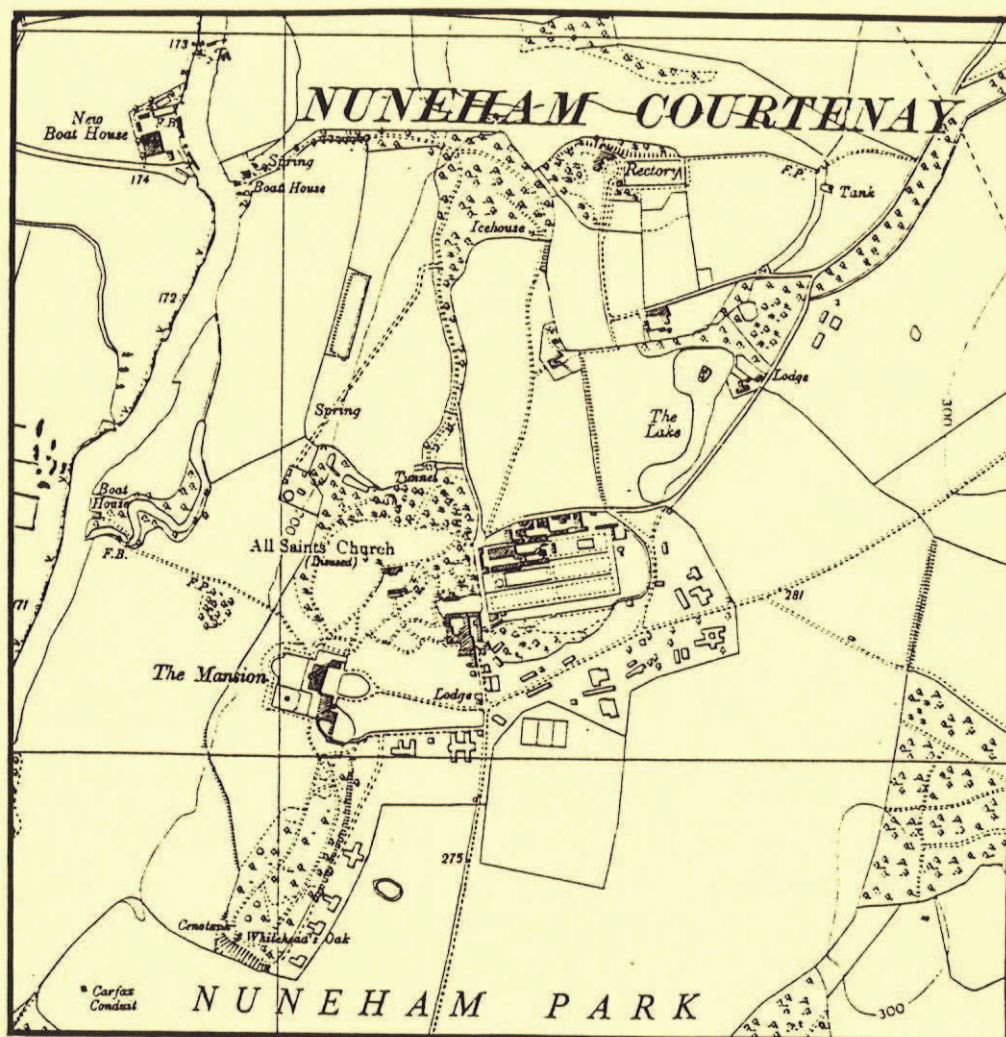


Nuneham Courtenay, Oxfordshire

Book Repository Phase IV

Archaeological Watching Brief Report

NGR SU 5428 9818



OXFORD ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT

November 1995

NUNEHAM COURTENAY, OXFORDSHIRE
BOOK REPOSITORY PHASE IV
ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF REPORT
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1 SUMMARY

Features of medieval date, and a number of undated features were discovered during work at this site. The features included a medieval ditched enclosure, an undated boundary gully and a number of pit features, one of which contained the remains of two early medieval pottery vessels.

2 INTRODUCTION

The Oxford Archaeological Unit undertook a watching brief during September 1995 in the grounds of the mansion at Nuneham Courtenay (Fig. 1). The work involved the monitoring of a topsoil strip in advance of construction of a book store for the Bodleian Library. A row of Victorian walled gardens (adjacent to the former stable block) are being redeveloped for this purpose (Fig. 2). The walled gardens have recently been in use as nurseries.

The groundwork was carried out by Kingierlee Building Contractors of Oxford under plans devised by the Oxford University Surveyors Office.

3 HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

The mansion and church were built by Simon, the first Earl Harcourt (1714-77) on the site of the medieval village of Nuneham Courtenay. In the 1760's Earl Harcourt's son, George Simon, recommended that the old village and church be demolished and replaced, away from the mansion. The tenants' cottages were rebuilt out of the site of the house: the 'new village' was constructed either side of the Oxford Road, and consisted of terraced brick-built cottages, a forge, and an inn. The new village did not acquire a church until All Saints was built by C.C. Rolfe in the early 1870s.

The Nuneham Estate was furnished with lavish gardens, described by Horace Walpole in 1780 as the most beautiful in the world. Stables were also constructed, and a church erected as an ornamental temple in the new classical grounds.

In view of the history of the site it was thought possible that features relating to the medieval village might be encountered.

4 METHODOLOGY

For constructional purposes the groundwork involved the stripping of soil deposits to two different levels. At the east end of the site topsoil and the underlying deposits were excavated to a depth of 1.0 m below the present ground level, to the top of the natural clay and sand. At the west end of the site the excavated depth

top of the natural clay and sand. At the west end of the site the excavated depth was only 0.40 m below ground level, and only recent soil horizons were removed. A number of modern, but disused services and culverts were removed in the course of the stripping. The early and latter stages of the soil stripping were observed by the OAU, and written, drawn and photographic records made. Three site visits were made in total.

5 RESULTS

The earliest deposit identified was a compacted deposit of reddish-brown sand with outcrops of Quartzite pebbles and patches of light grey clay (10). This deposit was interpreted as the natural geological horizon.

Several features were observed cutting the natural at the east end of the walled plot (Fig. 3). A linear feature, 7, aligned NE-SW, was interpreted as a ditch and was sample excavated. The ditch was 0.55 m wide and 0.22 m deep, and had a gently curving base and 30° sloping edges. The ditch ran southward for a length of 4.5 m, then curved in a gentle arc to the west, where it ran under the southern extent of the site. The fill (6) of ditch 7 was a mixed grey clay and loam deposit, which had a silty texture. The fill contained charcoal flecks, animal bones and one sherd of Roman pottery (mortarium).

Further cleaning of the surface revealed that the feature 7 had a terminus at the point where it extended beneath the S balk of the site. The alignment of ditch 7 was maintained by a second ditch feature, 21, which extended away to the west. This ditch was 0.28 m deep with a curved base and 80° N edge. The fill, 20, was a loose dark-grey silty loam, which contained charcoal flecks, animal bone, and two sherds of early medieval pottery (see finds report below).

A second, smaller feature (9) was situated to the west of ditches 7 and 21, and extended parallel to 7 for 2.5 m before curving away to the NW. This feature was interpreted as a gully. The gully was at most 0.30 m wide, with edges varying from near vertical to gently curving. The depth of the gully was also variable, between 0.10 m and 0.25 m deep. The feature contained two distinctly different fills. At the east end of the site the fill (8) was a dark grey silty clay loam, not dissimilar in texture to that in ditch 7. Further to the west, however the fill (11) was a compact grey-brown sandy loam more similar to the natural subsoil. This fill contained frequent charcoal flecks, and stones, and some animal bone. It was not possible to establish the relationship between the two fill deposits, and the reason for the different soils was not apparent.

Three pit features were identified to the north of the ditches and gullies, to the centre of the site. A further potential pit was not excavated.

Pit 15 was circular in shape and was half-sectioned to reveal a curved base and near vertical sides. The diameter of the feature was 0.71 m, and its excavated depth 0.83 m. The base fill (14) of the pit was a loose light-grey sandy loam which contained 30% rounded quartzite pebbles, but no dating material. Above 14 was

fill 13, a dark grey clay loam which contained 5-10% charcoal flecks, animal bone, and a quantity of early medieval pottery from at least two vessels (see finds report below). The uppermost fill of the pit (12) was a deposit of light brownish-yellow sand with some charcoal flecks. No finds were recovered from the top fill.

To the immediate south of pit 15 was another cut feature (17), again interpreted as a pit. Pit 17 was ovoid, and was half-sectioned to reveal a flat base and 45° sloping sides. The pit was 0.12 m deep and had a diameter of 0.63 m. It was filled with a loose dark grey clay loam (16) which contained flecks of fired clay and charcoal. No finds were recovered from this fill.

A third feature to the south of pits 15 and 17 was investigated, and was again thought to be a pit. Pit 23 was 0.20 m deep and 0.85 m wide and was filled with 22, a very dark grey loam which contained frequent charcoal inclusions, flecks of fired clay and patches of light grey clay. No finds were recovered from the fill. Another possible pit to the SW of 23 was not investigated.

At the north end of the site was a discontinuous shallow linear feature (a gully?) aligned NE-SW. Feature 19 was 0.07 m deep and 0.61 m wide and extended for a length of 5.60 m from the E end of the site. The single fill of 19 was a loose greyish-brown silty loam (18) with occasional charcoal flecks, which contained no finds. The alignment of 19 was maintained by linear feature 25, which had similar dimensions and was filled with identical soil. Feature 25 was visible for a length of 2.50 m at its NE end, and the two were traceable in places for a total length of nearly 9.0 m.

A large rectangular feature at the extreme north of the site was partially excavated but was found to contain modern brick and glass fragments: this feature was not further investigated.

The fills of all of the features except the modern pit were sealed by a layer of light reddish-brown sandy loam (3), which contained substantial quantities of pebbles but was otherwise a very clean deposit.

Two modern services were observed in the SE corner of the plot at a level above that of the features cutting the natural (and therefore not on Fig. 3): a land drain (4) covered with gravel, brick and Willow Pattern china was aligned E-W, and observed at the level of layer 3. However the recent finds associated with the drain suggest it was probably inserted at the level of layer 2 or 1.

A second service, in this case a red-brick culvert, 5, was also aligned E-W and ran parallel to 4. The culvert was 0.28 m deep and 0.40 m wide and capped with red brick tiles. This culvert may have been a replacement for drain 4.

The soil above layer 3 was a mid-dark brown sandy loam (2), including stones and recent flower pot sherds. The present topsoil (1) was a loose dark brown sandy loam, covered with structural elements and debris from recently dismantled greenhouses.

6 THE FINDS

Early medieval pottery was recovered from two contexts. A total of 24 sherds were recovered from fill 13 within pit 15. Of these sherds eleven were from a St. Neots-type bowl dated to the 10th-early 11th century. Thirteen sherds were from a deep sided bowl with an inturned rim, dated again to the 10th-early 11th century.

Two sherds of late 11th-mid 13th century pottery (OXY type) from a cooking pot were recovered from the fill (20) of ditch 21. If, as seems likely, ditches 21 and 7 are contemporary and form an enclosure, then the single sherd of Roman mortarium from fill 6 in ditch 7 would have been residual.

Eighteenth-twentieth century pottery was recovered from modern land drain 4 and layer 2 below the topsoil.

7 CONCLUSIONS

The most conclusive evidence for nearby occupation is demonstrated by the quantity of pottery and animal bone in the central fill of pit 15. The pottery would appear to have been deliberately placed in association with several animal bones sometime after the pit had filled up, as no pottery or bone was recovered from the base fill of the pit. The uppermost fill of the pit was clean, redeposited natural sand.

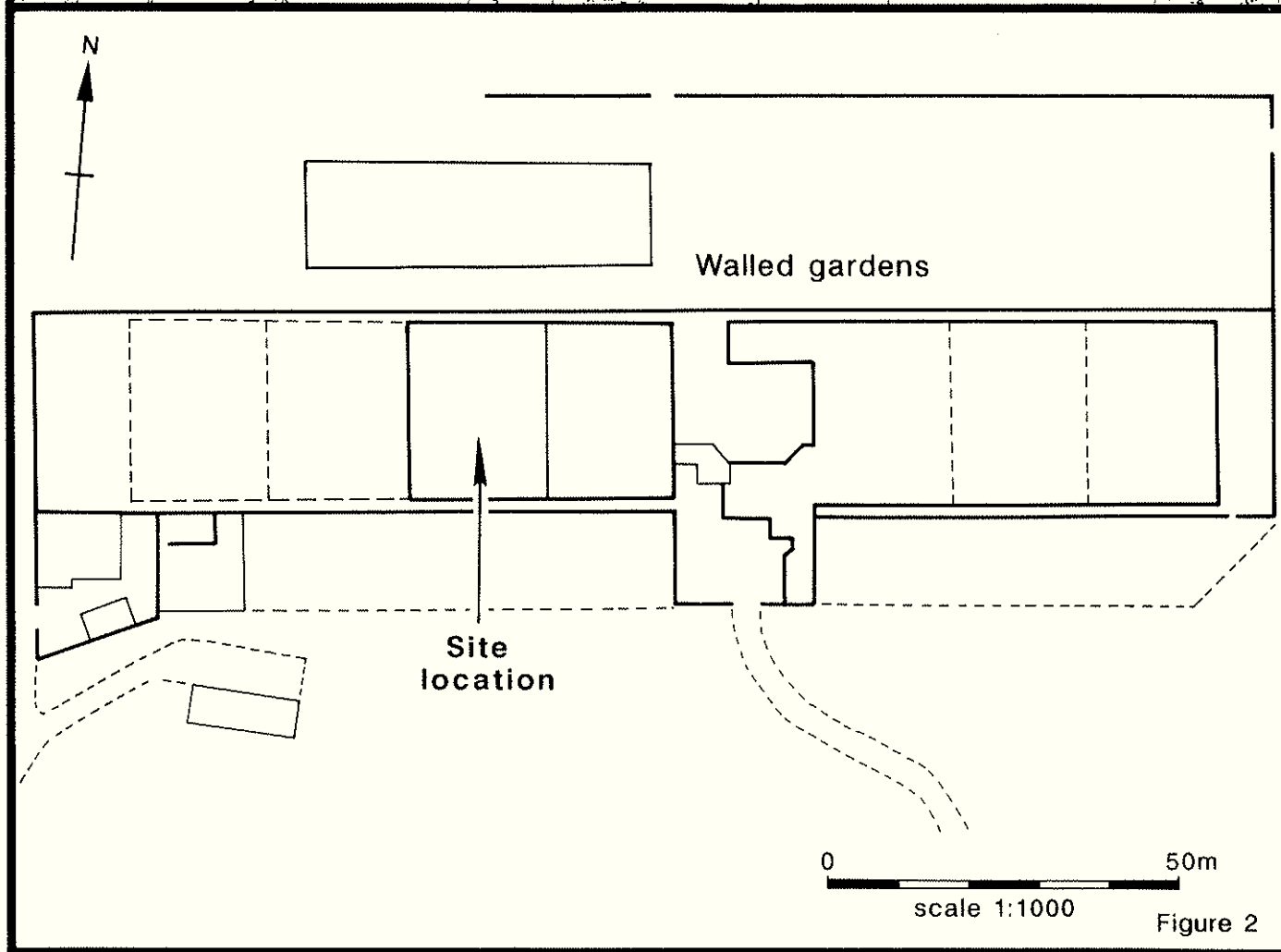
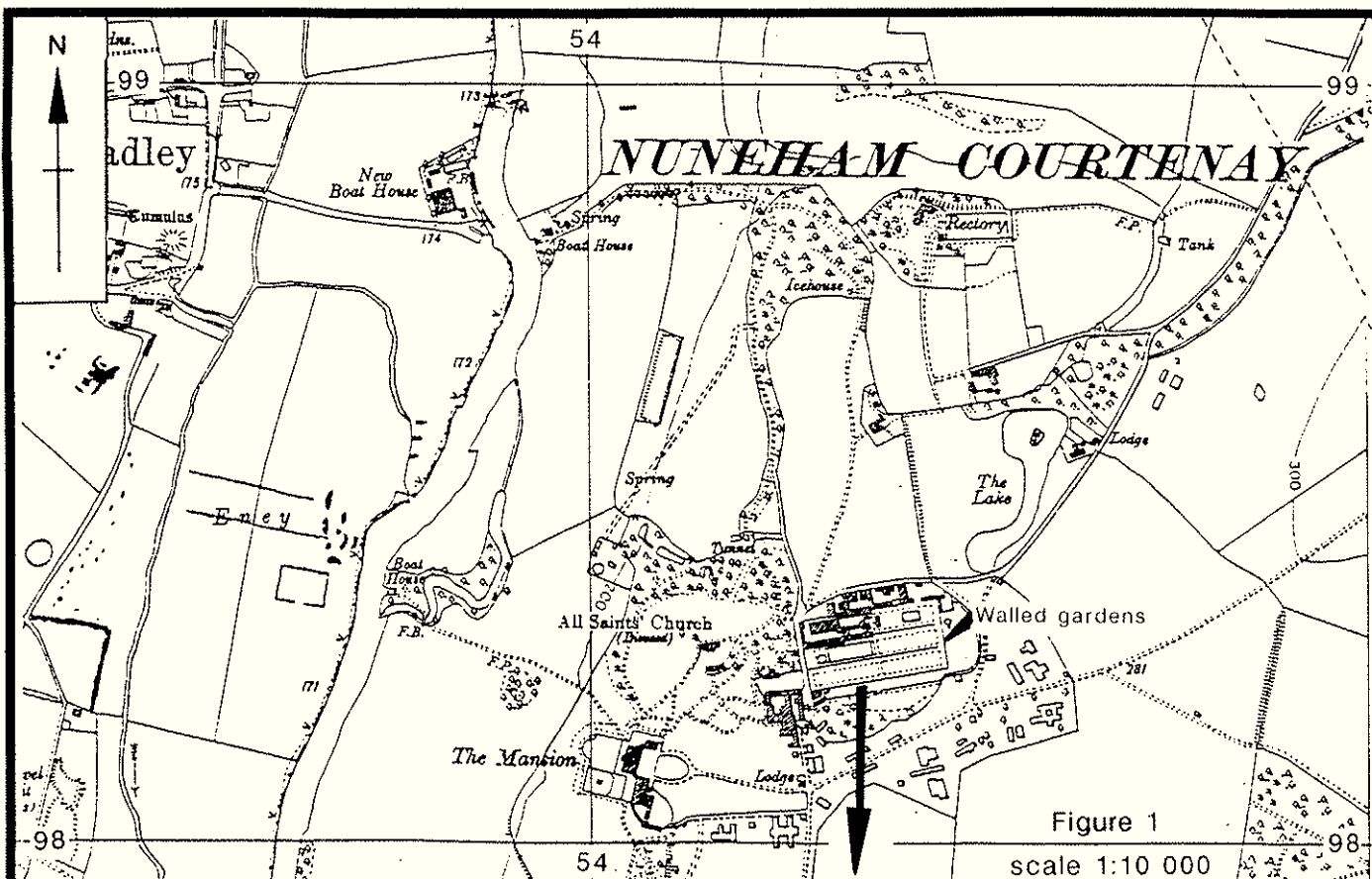
Pit 15, and the undated pits were bounded to the north and south by linear features. The similarity of alignment suggests that ditches 7 and 21 perhaps formed part of an enclosure, with an entrance represented by the gap between the ditch butt ends. Pottery from the fill of 21 dates the infilling of this ditch to the early medieval period. The discontinuous gully features 19 and 25 might have constituted the northern side of this enclosure. Whether this enclosure was contemporary with the curving linear gully/ditch 9, or of a different phase of activity was not proved during this investigation. There is a hint, however, in the way in which the alignments of 7 and 9 appear to respect each other, that the two features may have been broadly contemporary. Alternatively gully 9 may have been of the same phase as gullies 19 and 25 to the north. The linear features and the pits may not have been of the same date. No pottery was recovered from the fills of any of these gullies.

Investigations of this nature tend to be limited in their potential for interpretation, as a result of the small area open for inspection. The features may represent activity to the south of the deserted medieval village at Nuneham, and possibly constituted enclosures for agricultural or horticultural use. The occurrence of features potentially of late Saxon/Norman date in this area is of interest.

J.Hiller
Oxford Archaeological Unit
October, 1995

Table of context information

CTX	TYPE	DEPTH	WIDTH	COMMENTS
1	layer	0.31 m	-	present topsoil/nurseries cultivation soil
2	layer	0.17 m	-	former topsoil/cultivation soil
3	layer	0.15 m	-	barren earth layer above the natural and sealing feature fills
4	service	-	0.94 m	modern service and backfill containing willow pattern china
5	service	0.28 m	0.40 m	brick culvert, modern
6	fill	0.22 m	-	grey clay loam fill of ditch 7, 1 x sherd of Roman mortaria pottery
7	cut	0.22 m	0.55 m	ditch in west end of site
8	fill	0.15 m	-	grey clay loam in gully 9
9	cut	0.30 m	0.10-0.25 m	boundary gully, undated
10	layer	-	-	natural clay and sand
11	fill	0.22 m	-	fill of gully 9, but more compact and sandy than 8
12	fill	0.13 m	-	sandy upper fill of pit 15
13	fill	0.20-0.41 m	-	central fill of pit 15, contains remains of two medieval pottery vessels
14	fill	0.50 m	-	base fill of pit 15, no finds
15	cut	0.83 m	0.71 m	medieval pit feature, function not clear
16	fill	0.12 m	-	only fill of pit 17
17	cut	0.12 m	0.63 m	undated pit feature
18	fill	0.07 m	-	single fill of gully/slot 19
19	cut	0.07 m	0.61 m	NE-SW aligned gully/ slot
20	fill	0.28 m	-	fill of ditch 30
21	cut	0.28 m	1.0 m +	ditch, forms 'enclosure' with 7, with entrance between the two
22	fill	0.18 m	-	only fill of pit/feature 23
23	?pit	0.20 m	0.85 m	undated pit feature
24	fill	0.07 m	-	fill of slot/gully 25
25	cut	0.07 m	0.51-0.60 m	gully/slot maintains alignment of 19



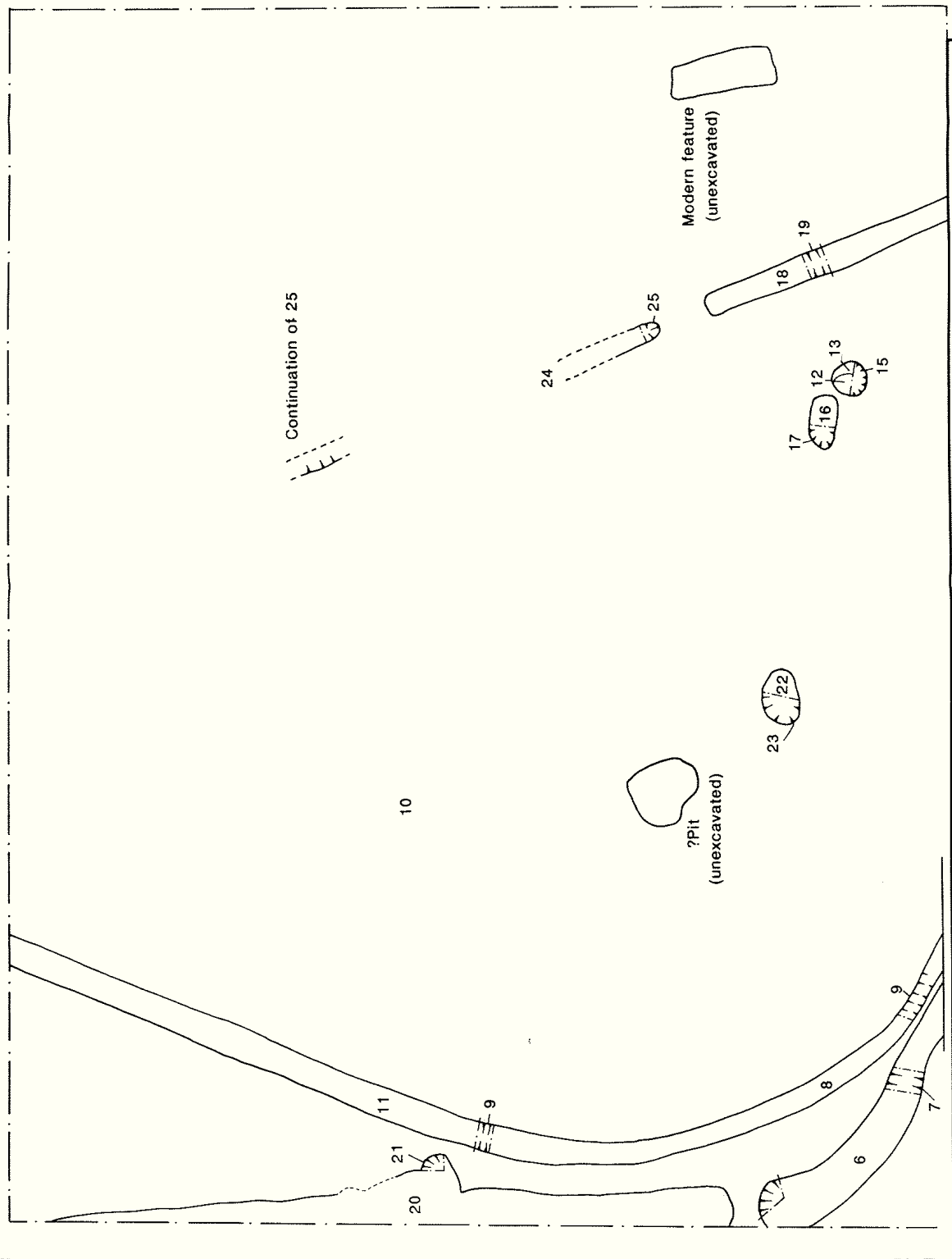


Figure 3



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