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POLICE STATION, BELL LANE, THAME  
ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION

# **POLICE STATION, BELL LANE, THAME. ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION**

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## **Summary**

A field evaluation was carried out by the OAU at Bell lane, Thame on behalf of Oxfordshire County Council Department of Planning and Property Services in association with Thames Valley Police. There were medieval pits and gullies with evidence of ironworking which were sealed by a layer of medieval demolition debris in trench 1 and in trenches 2 and 3 by garden soil.

## **Introduction**

In August 1991 an assessment was carried out by the Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) on behalf of Oxfordshire County Council DPPS in association with Thames Valley Police in advance of construction of a Police Station. The site was 150 m N of Thame High Street, within the curve formed by Bell Lane and North Street.

## **Archaeological background (Fig.1)**

Little is known of the details of the development of this area of medieval Thame but Thame was a market place and ecclesiastical centre.

- i) It was the centre of a bishop's estate before the Domesday Book was compiled in 1086-7, and had a Minster Church.
- ii) The Church of St Mary's, to the W of the site, was the focus for the settlement which shifted to the SE from the mid-12th century onwards.
- iii) The focus for the 'New' Thame of the 12th century was now the High Street and Cornmarket to the S of the site rather than St Mary's Church.

- iv) Thame Abbey (now Thame Park) to the SE of the site was linked to the Oxford to Aylesbury road by North Street.
- v) An assessment was carried out by the OAU in 1988 on the property surrounding the site to the S and E, currently a construction site. The assessment located a 12th- to 13th-century building, rubbish pits and property boundaries thought to be ribbon development along the line of North Street (see iv). A 15th-century building was also located to the rear of 105-106 High Street and represents development in the burgage plots of 'New' Thame along the High Street.

## **Topography**

The site is 150 m to the N of Thame High Street and 250 m E of St Mary's Church. The site is currently overgrown with scrub but had previously been an orchard; mature apple trees grew densely on the site. The site was approximately 0.60 x 0.60 m.

The site sloped gently from the SE to the N, falling 0.60 m in 20 m. This slope had been disrupted by construction and demolition. The N of the site leading to the road had been levelled off and backfilled as had the W of the site adjacent to the access road for the construction site to the S; to the W the modern disturbances had not adversely affected the archaeological deposits. The natural contours survived in the NW corner because of the density of trees. The undisturbed slope fits the general trend of the spot heights on the Ordnance Survey map which indicate a gradient from S to N. It should be noted that the road surface was approximately 0.60-0.90 m below the surrounding ground surface. The site was between 68.23 and 66.3 m O.D.

## **Assessment strategy (Fig. 2)**

The assessment strategy was to place three 25 m long trenches across the site, representing a 3.33% sample of the area. The sample consisted of two 24.3 m and one 18.8 m long and 1.6 m wide trenches dug by mechanical excavator (JCB). The trenches were shorter than 25 m because of the density of the foliage (Fig. 2).

The features were sampled by hand to determine their nature and depth and to recover dating evidence. The features were planned and if excavated their sections were drawn.

## **Results**

### **Soils**

The general soil type was sandy silt, derived from the natural subsoil which was an orange/buff sandy silt. The turf overlay a deep brown silt loam identified as garden soil from the orchard. The garden soil directly overlay the natural subsoil, apart from in trench 3 where it had been disturbed and in trench 1 where it overlay medieval rubble.

The medieval features located survived where they had been cut into the natural subsoil. They were filled with a mid to dark grey sandy silt. The truncation of features, as was visible in trench 2, is typical of ploughing so the garden soil may represent an old ploughsoil, but this was indeterminable in the trench sections.

The natural subsoil and the medieval features had been disturbed by treeholes and animal burrows in trenches 2 and 3. This disturbance was not visible elsewhere. The root disturbances were filled by a very pale grey sandy silt and the burrows often survived as voids surrounded by dark grey brown silt.

## Archaeology

The earliest features on the site were 13th-century. They were shallow ditches aligned N-S and two groups of pits with one solitary pit. These features were overlain by garden soil, which had truncated them. The exception to this was in trench 1, where the features were sealed by a layer of 14th- to 15th-century building debris or rubble, which was in turn overlay and sealed by the garden soil. There were four postholes in trench 2 which may also be medieval in date as might the shallow posthole in trench 1. There was one 17th-century pit in trench 1.

### Trench 1

Trench 1 had a sequence of layers sealing medieval features. The topsoil 1/1 overlay a garden soil 1/2, which overlay a recent rubble layer 1/3. The rubble layer was on top of a clean brown silt loam 1/4, also seen in trenches 2 and 3, and identified as an old garden soil. At the W end of the trench the clean brown garden soil overlaid a layer 1/5 containing much tile rubble which ran almost to the E end of the trench. This in turn overlay the natural subsoil. The layer 1/5 was dated to the 14th and 15th centuries. All these layers had been cut in places by the modern disturbances 1/6, 1/7, 1/8 and 1/9.

The 14th- to 15th-century layer 1/5 sealed two medieval pits 1/12 and 1/16 and two gullies 1/11 and 1/13. There was an undated gully 1/15 which was also overlain by the medieval layer. Ditch 1/11 was aligned N-S and was cut by pit 1/12. This pit contained large lumps of iron slag and charcoal. Ditch 1/13 was aligned N-S to the E of 1/12 and also contained iron slag and charcoal. 1/14 was a large pit dated to the 17th century.

The only evidence of structures that may complement the tile building debris in layer 1/5 was an undated posthole 1/18 to the W of 1/11.

### Trench 2

Trench 2 was stratigraphically simpler; topsoil 2/1 overlay garden/ploughsoil 2/2 (identical to 1/4) which sealed/truncated the features. At the N end of the trench

was a sequence of large pits, 2/4, 2/5 and 2/12. Pit 2/4 cut 2/12 and 2/5. The rest of the trench contained postholes and root or animal disturbances. The postholes 2/6, 2/7, 2/8 and 2/9 ranged from 0.20 m to 0.70 across and from 0.05 m to 0.17 m in depth. Features 2/10 and 2/11 were identified as root disturbances. Although posthole 2/9 was dated by pottery, because of the animal and root disturbance the single sherd recovered may be intrusive as might the piece of clay pipe from pit 2/4.

### Trench 3

In trench 3 the upper layers of garden soil and turf 3/2 and 3/3 had been removed in the N end of the trench with an estimated depth of 0.60 m of subsoil. Modern dump layer 3/1, containing recently disused sewerage pipes and other building debris, overlay the subsoil in the N part of the trench and varied from 0.90 m deep at the S to 0.45 m at the N.

The S end of the trench contained medieval pits 3/9, 3/10, 3/11, 3/12, and 3/15 with one gully 3/13. These features were overlain by 3/3 the garden soil. Pit 3/9 cut pit 3/10. Pit 3/10 was excavated until the water table was reached. The top of gully 3/13 had been extensively disturbed by animal burrows. The top layer of one pit, 3/12, was excavated as a sondage to retrieve dating evidence; no finds were located, but this feature was cut by gully 3/13 and probably by pit 3/9 both of which were dated to the 13th century.

Undated and possibly modern features at the N end of the trench were gullies; 3/7 and 3/8 were rectangular gully terminals which came into the trench from the E. An area of dark charcoal fill 3/6 appeared to form two gullies and a pit but as it was very shallow (0.08 m) where it survived in the subsoil this was difficult to determine. One course of a modern brick feature survived at the very N of the trench and overlay a rectangular pit 3/4, 0.25 m deep, of which, only the SW corner could be seen. Of these features only 3/8 and 3/4 had fills which resembled the medieval features.

### Finds

In total 112 sherds of pottery weighing 1.285 kg and 11 pieces of bone were recovered. The garden soil contained sherds of mid- 19th- to early 13th-century date.

The date range for the finds from the medieval features was consistently 13th- to 14th-century. Most of the ceramic fabrics were derived from Oxford sandy ware type Y, which spans the period from the 11th to the 14th centuries. There were a small number of sherds of Oxford flint gritted wares, type AQ, which spans from the late 12th to the 15th century. There were sherds of a Brill/Boarstall ware jug, Oxford type AM, which spans from the 13th to the 15th century, from pit 1/16. The only unusual medieval sherd was a copy of 11th- to 12th-century northern French ware found with 13th-century pottery in pit 2/4 in trench 2.

The preservation of the pottery was generally good. The preservation of bone was good.

Two pieces of struck flint were recovered. One of these came from pit 2/4 and was a late Mesolithic/early Neolithic core which had been struck from a perpendicular angle once the initial striking surface had been exhausted. The other flint was a possible scraper which exhibited no particular diagnostic features.

Ironworking debris in the form of large pieces of slag were found in 1/12, 1/13, 2/4 and 2/5.

Large amounts of tile were present in layer 1/5.

### **Environmental**

Soil samples were not taken. There were only two features, pit 1/12 and ditch 1/13, which contained much organic material. This was in the form of charcoal and was probably dumped with the ironworking slag. Pit 3/10 was cut below the water table and the lower layers of this feature may contain waterlogged material (this feature was not fully excavated in the assessment because of the danger of the trench collapsing).

### **Comments on the results**

#### **Reliability of field investigation**

The sample size was sufficient to adequately define and interpret the archaeology despite the limitations imposed by the number of trees. All the potential features were sampled by hand excavation. The overlying layers were machined off apart from a section of 1/5, the 14th- to 15th-century layer which sealed the features in trench 1, through which two sections were excavated by hand.

The weather conditions were good. The sunny weather made some of the soil differences initially difficult to see in trench 1. Generally, the fills of the features were easily distinguishable from the natural subsoil.

#### **Overall interpretation**

The archaeological deposits were truncated to the top of the subsoil. The features in trench 1 sealed by 1/5 were apparently cut into the subsoil and then overlain by building debris. This may imply that the ground level has been raised, perhaps including the dumping of the garden soil. Despite this truncation the features are quite well preserved. The root disturbance was localised in trench 2 and the animal burrows did not extend into the subsoil.

The ditches probably represent properties aligned at right-angles to North Street. Features 1/15 and 3/13 may be identical and indicate a property boundary on the same alignment as that now existing and turning to the E to the E of

trench 3. The line of the building in this property may be on the line of the boundary located in trench 2 in the assessment in 1988 to the S and E.

This suggested arrangement would give property boundaries radiating towards North Street with buildings set back from the present line of the road. The building in assessment trench 4 of the 1988 assessment is set back from the road as is the later building indicated by the debris in trench 1 of this assessment.

Medieval rubbish pits are commonly aligned along these boundaries, and this site seems to be no exception. The presence of ironworking debris may indicate a forge.

The sealed features and the building debris may indicate the presence of a structure, evidence of which may be preserved if it is sealed by the demolition layer.

The postholes in trench 2 may represent fencelines or sheds at the rear of one of the properties suggested above.

## **Appendices**

### **Trench descriptions**

#### **Trench 1**

This trench was hand cleaned by trowel, including both of the sections and the bottom of the trench, in order to see the features clearly. These which were to some extent similar in colour to the natural. As the trench was exposed to the sun the soil dried rapidly, minimising the colour differences.

Trench 1 had a sequence of layers sealing medieval features. The topsoil 1/1, between 0.10 and 0.20 m deep, overlay a grey silt garden soil 1/2, which overlay a rubble layer 1/3. The rubble layer was on top of a clean brown silt loam 1/4 also seen in trenches 2 and 3 and identified as an old plough/garden soil. At the W end of the trench a tile rubble layer 1/5 overlay the natural subsoil and ran almost to the E end of the trench stopping at gully 1/15. Layer 1/5 without tile rubble was seen to the E of 1/15.

There were several modern disturbances in trench 1, features 1/6, 1/7, 1/8, and 1/9. There was a long feature packed with loose stones 1/10 but this also appeared to be modern. This appeared to be a wall foundation rather than dump-filled pits like the other disturbances (1/6 to 1/9). These features all cut the rubble and garden soil layers.

Layer 1/5 with and without rubble sealed the medieval pits and gullies. The profile of the features was 'U' shaped where this could be determined. 1/11 was a ditch aligned N-S it was 1.1 m wide and 0.25 m deep. It was cut by a pit 1/12 which was 1.7 m wide and 0.45 m deep. This pit contained large lumps of iron slag

and charcoal. 1/13 was a ditch aligned N-S to the E of 1/12 and also contained iron slag and charcoal. 1/14 was a large pit 1.9 m long and 1.05 m wide which was 0.20 m deep. 1/15 was a gully aligned N-S just to the E of 1/14. It was 0.45 m wide and 0.10 m deep. At the E end of the trench was a rectangular pit 1/16.

The only evidence of structures to complement the tile building debris in layer 1/5 was a posthole 1/18 to the W of 1/11. It was 0.38 m wide and 0.02 m deep.

## Trench 2

The soil differences in this trench were clear after the machining. The postholes were visible but the root disturbances were unclear. The root disturbances were sectioned to clarify their nature.

Trench 2 was stratigraphically simpler, topsoil 2/1 overlay garden/ploughsoil 2/2 (identical to 1/4) which sealed/truncated the features. The profile of the features was 'U' shaped where this could be determined. At the N end of the trench was a sequence of large pits, 2/4, 2/5 and 2/12. Pit 2/4 cut 2/12 and was over 1.2 m wide and was 0.61 m deep. The rest of the trench contained postholes and root or animal disturbances. The postholes 2/6, 2/7, 2/8 and 2/9 ranged from 0.20 m to 0.70 across and from 0.05 m to 0.17 m in depth. Features 2/10 and 2/11 were identified as root disturbances.

## Trench 3

The soil differences in this trench were clear after machining apart from the S end of the trench, which required an additional 0.15 m to be stripped to remove the animal burrows so that the features could be seen in plan.

In trench 3 the upper layers of garden soil and turf 3/2 and 3/3 had been removed in the N end of the trench with an estimated depth of 0.60 m of subsoil. The S end of the trench was 1.2 m higher than the N and the total depth of 3/2 and 3/3 was 0.60 m. 3/1, a modern dump layer containing recently disused sewerage pipes and other building debris, overlay the subsoil in the N part of the trench and varied from 0.90 m deep at the S to 0.45 m at the N.

The S end of the trench contained medieval pits 3/9, 3/10, 3/11, 3/12, and 3/15 with one gully 3/13. The profile of the features was 'U' shaped where this could be determined. These features were overlain by 3/3 the garden soil. Pit 3/9 cut pit 3/10 and survived to a depth of 0.59 m. Pit 3/10 was excavated to depth of 0.30 m until the water table was reached. Gully 3/13 was 0.50 m wide and 0.10 m deep although the top of this feature had been extensively disturbed by rabbit burrows. 3/12, the top layer of one pit was excavated down to the next layer, 3/16, as a sondage to retrieve dating evidence.

Undated and possibly modern features at the N end of the trench were gullies; 3/7 and 3/8 were rectangular gully terminals which came into the trench

from the E. They survived to a depth of 0.20 m and 0.15 m respectively. 3/6 was an area of dark charcoal fill which appeared to form two gullies and a pit but as it was very shallow (0.08 m) where it survived in the subsoil this was difficult to determine. One course of a modern brick feature 3/5 survived at the very N of the trench and overlay a rectangular pit 3/4, 0.25 m deep, of which, only the SW corner could be seen. Of these features only 3/8 and 3/4 had fills which resembled the medieval features; unfortunately, no finds were recovered from these features to date them.

**TABLE 1: CONTEXTS AND FINDS**

TRENCH	CTX	TYPE	WIDTH	DEPTH	DATE
1	1	topsoil		0.20 m	
1	2	topsoil		0.20 m	
1	3	rubble		0.22 m	
1	4	topsoil		0.40 m	
1	5	rubble		0.19 m	14th-15th c
1	6	disturbance			modern
1	7	disturbance			modern
1	8	disturbance			modern
1	9	disturbance			modern
1	10	wall?	0.20	0.30	
1	11	ditch	1.1	0.25	12th?-13th c
1	12	pit	1.7	0.45	13th c
1	13	ditch	0.50	0.25	early 13th c
1	14	pit	1.05	0.20	17th-18th c
1	15	ditch	0.45	0.10	
1	16	pit		0.30	early-mid 13th c
1	17	ditch	0.38	0.02	modern?
1	18	posthole	0.10	0.02	
2	1	topsoil		0.18	
2	2	garden soil		0.32	17th c
2	3	subsoil		-	
2	4	pit	1.2	0.61	early-mid 13th c
2	5	pit		0.12+	
2	6	posthole	0.15	0.05	
2	7	posthole	0.60	0.07	
2	8	posthole	0.52	0.17	
2	9	posthole?	0.40	0.11	13th c
2	10	disturbance			13th c?
2	11	disturbance			11th-13th c?
2	12	pit	-	-	
3	1	topsoil		0.75	modern
3	2	topsoil		0.25	
3	3	garden soil		0.60	mid 19th c
3	4	pit		0.25	
3	5	bricks		-	
3	6	disturbance?		0.08	
3	7	ditch	0.35	0.20	
3	8	ditch	0.45	0.15	
3	9	pit		0.39	13th c
3	10	pit		0.30	late 13th-early 14th
3	11	pit fill		-	
3	12	pit fill			
3	13	ditch	0.50	0.10	13th c
3	14	disturbance			
3	15	pit fill			
3	16	pit fill			

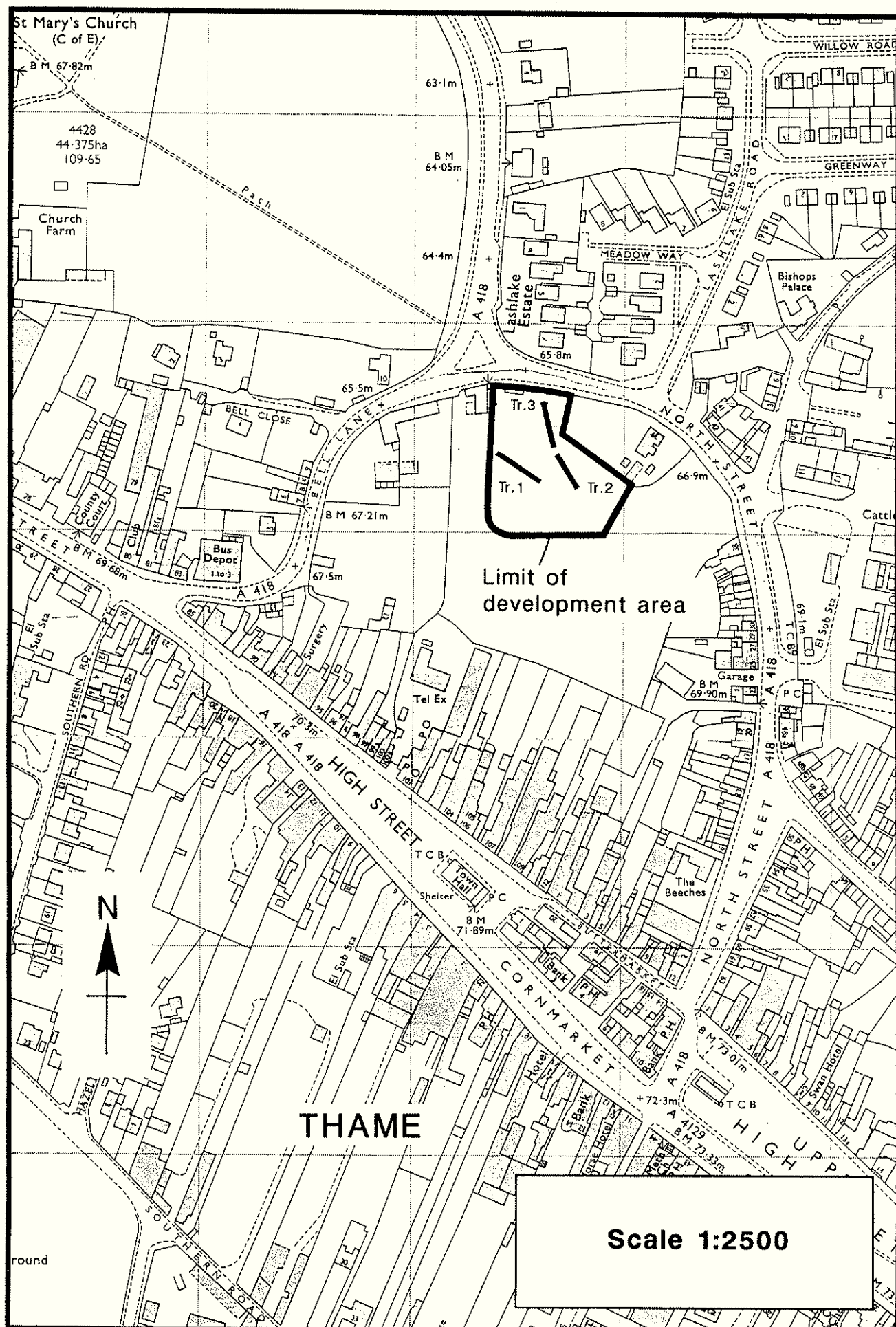


Figure 1

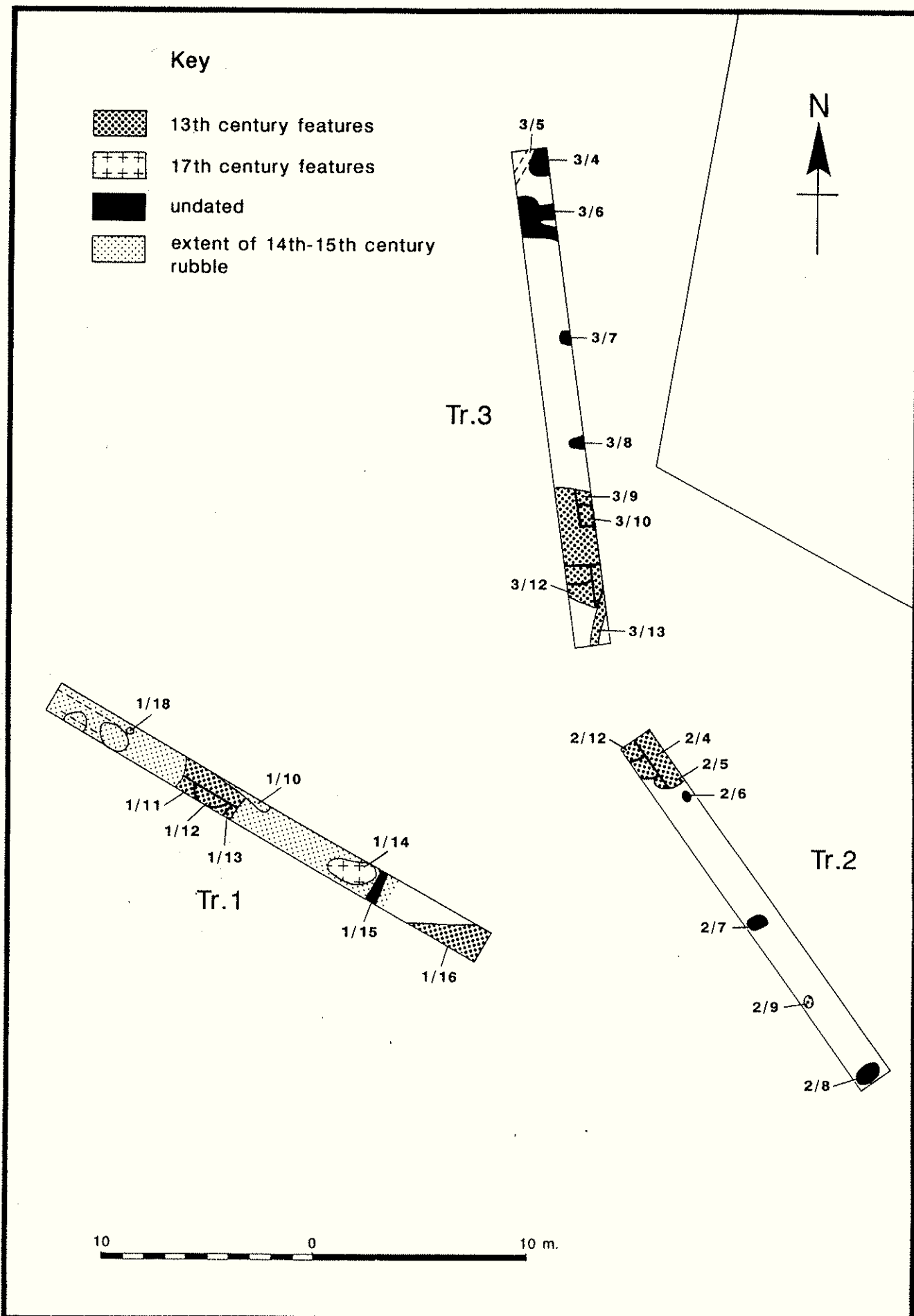


Figure 2



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