

# Excavations at Friar Street, Reading, Berkshire

*By Kate Atherton*

OAU Occasional Paper Number 5



MAKING SENSE OF THE  
**PAST**

# Excavations at Friar Street, Reading

*by Kate Atherton*

*with contributions from*

*Paul Blinkhorn, Cecily Cropper, Nick Mitchell and Andrew Parkinson*

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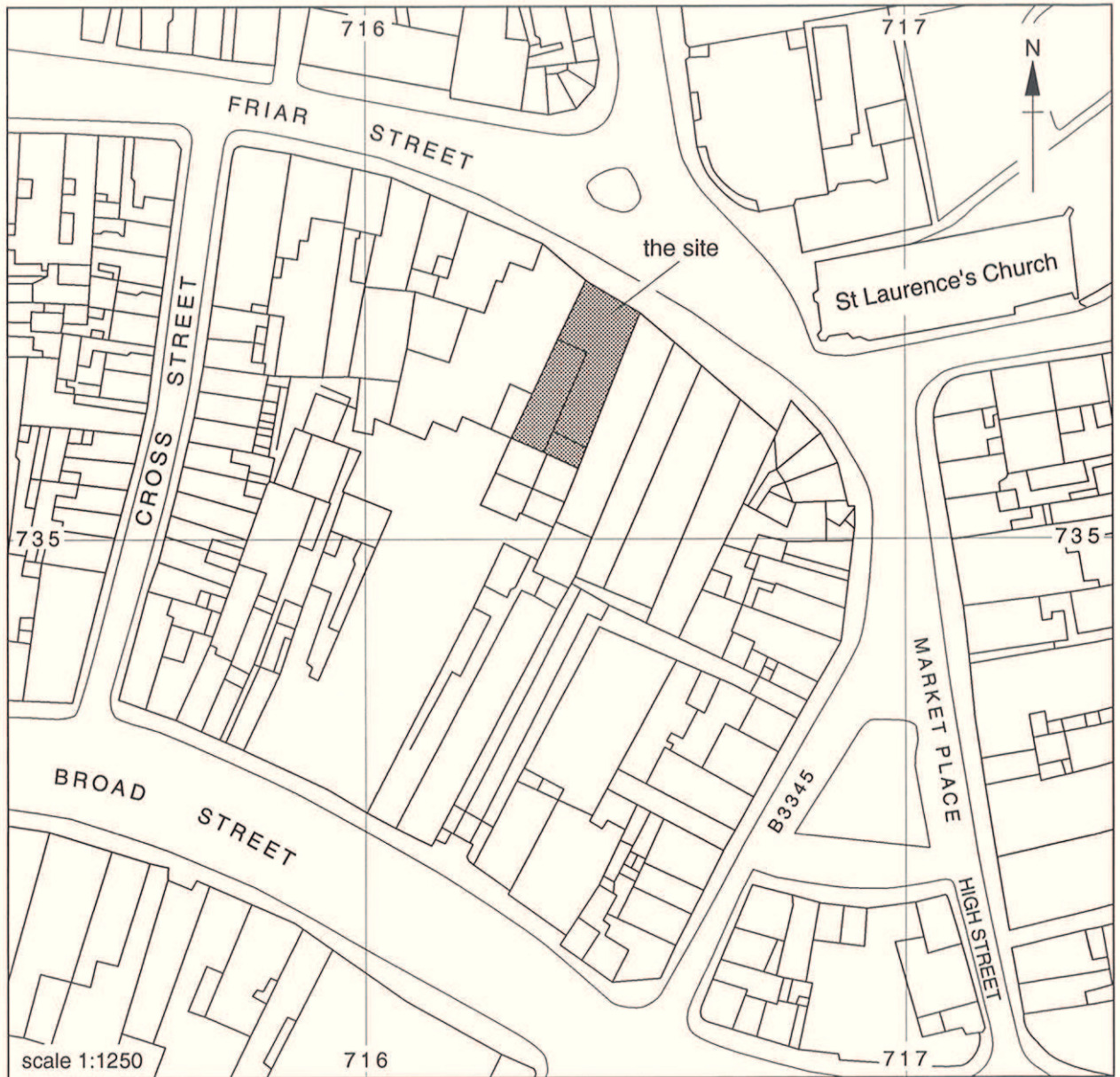


Figure 1 Site location

# Excavations at Friar Street, Reading

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## SUMMARY

The Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) carried out an excavation in August 1997 at Friar Street, Reading, on behalf of Marks and Spencer plc, in advance of the proposed extension of the existing Marks and Spencer store onto the site of the former Woolwich Building Society premises.

A preliminary archaeological evaluation uncovered early post-medieval structures and a hearth that was possibly medieval. The results suggested that, although the site had been heavily disturbed, it was likely that medieval or earlier deposits could survive in undisturbed areas. The subsequent excavation revealed a succession of hearths, with associated structures, dating from the 13th century through to the post-medieval period.

## INTRODUCTION

### Site location and geology (Figs 1 and 2)

The site is located on Friar Street in the centre of Reading at SU 7164 7353. The area available for excavation was confined within the boundaries of Friar Street to the north, the existing Marks and Spencer store to the west, a sub-station to the south and a brick wall to the east. The area was further restricted by the presence of scaffolding. This part of Reading lies at 44.9 m OD and is located on a gravel ridge between the rivers Thames and Kennet.

### Historical and archaeological background

Friar Street is believed to date from the 12th century and the medieval street plan, as shown in Speed's map of Reading of 1611, is still reflected in the modern topography of the area.

Little controlled archaeological excavation has been carried out in the vicinity of the development site, in the core of the medieval and post-medieval town, and few medieval or early post-medieval buildings now survive there. However, chance finds during earlier construction work confirm activity from at least the 13th century. Approximately 20 m to the south-east of the site, monitoring of construction work during 1958 and 1959 uncovered a complex of cess and rubbish pits that produced a substantial amount of 13th-century pottery, glass and bronze objects (Berks SMR 2113/07/10). Directly south of the site, on Broad Street, building work

in 1933 (Berks SMR 2113/26/1) revealed an area of flint and tile walling at a depth of seven feet, with associated 13th- and 14th-century pottery. These sites appear to be consistent with a classic medieval town pattern of buildings with street frontages and yards, with rubbish pits and cess pits located at the rear of the properties.

Speed's map of 1611 shows the Friar Street frontage of the site as fully developed and the area to the rear as open land. However, this map is not sufficiently detailed to provide much information about buildings that may have stood on the site and it cannot be relied on as proof that the land behind the buildings was completely undeveloped. Rocque's 1761 map of Reading suggests that little had changed on Friar Street. However, it does show a substantial building to the rear of the site, behind Broad Street. The earliest detailed map of Reading, Coate's 1802 map, shows the development area as fully built up.

### The Evaluation

The evaluation (OAU 1997) identified a well stratified sequence of deposits whose earliest features comprised a hearth constructed of ceramic roof tile and a later pit or robber trench. Both features are likely to be medieval although the assemblage of pottery was too small to date features with certainty. Trench 1 may have located the rear of one of the properties shown on the 1611 map with a narrow frontage running at right-angles to Friar Street. Trench 2 revealed only one medieval deposit, a silty floor make-up (207). However, there was some residual medieval pottery. The trenches also revealed the remains of floors and walls similar to those found during the recent OAU excavation at the Oracle Site in Reading, where they are associated with the 17th-century 'Yield Hall' (D Wilkinson OAU, pers. comm.). Truncation of medieval deposits was very apparent, particularly in Trench 2, but because the natural gravel was identified at 0.80 m below the present ground level, it was considered that Saxon or prehistoric features could survive elsewhere in the area.

## THE EXCAVATION

### Methodology (Fig. 2)

An area of approximately 50 m<sup>2</sup> was machine excavated, extending from the south-west of evaluation Trench 1 within the confines of standing walls. However, the

demolition of the Woolwich Building Society building had heavily disturbed almost the entire western half of the excavation area and this could not be investigated. A large pit 329/318 was partially excavated by machine but the remaining features were hand-excavated as fully as safety considerations would allow, although the presence of scaffolding on site prevented full excavation of certain areas. The context numbering system continued that used during the evaluation, and recording followed OAU standard practice (Wilkinson 1992).

The pottery assemblage was generally too small to allow close dating of features but the stratigraphic relationships suggested six phases of activity on the site. The results of the excavation are presented by phase in the proposed chronological sequence of events.

### **Archaeological description**

#### *Phase One (Fig. 3)*

The northern area of the excavation towards Friar Street had the deepest stratigraphy. The natural gravel was heavily truncated throughout the site except for the south and east of the excavation area. The southern area was relatively undisturbed but here there were few negative features. The earliest deposit (327), a thin but heavily truncated sandy gravelly layer of silt, had survived in the north-east corner of the site but may originally have extended over a much larger area. This was also one of the richest deposits, with finds that included a copper alloy brooch dated to the 13th or 14th century and a fragment of window glass belonging to the same period. The pottery evidence supported this dating, with wares ranging from the 12th to 13th century.

To the south of 327, and possibly post-dating it, was feature 336 (Fig. 3, section 1) which was set into the gravel (332). This consisted of a ring of scorched silt, approximately 0.50 m in diameter, surrounded by unburnt silt and with a centre of redeposited gravel. This is likely to be the first of a series of hearths or fireplaces that were recorded in this area. One fragment of featureless brick was recovered from the silt 334.

#### *Phase Two (Figs 4 and 6, section 2)*

Directly above, and sealing, hearth 336 was a similar feature (320) that survived as a rough semicircle in plan comprising a single course of overlapping red bricks and lime mortar; these were set into a silt deposit (326) that showed signs of scorching and did not extend beyond the bricked area. Hearth 320 had been truncated by a large pit to the west (323) which showed the bricks tipping down to the south. The bricks had been subjected to extreme heat and were of uniform size, 229 mm by 111 mm by 52 mm, suggesting that this was not a secondary use; all showed only a slight degree of surface wear. A charcoal lens (322), 0.07 m deep, survived in the corner of the hearth. To the west was an area of vertically pitched roof tiles (315), aligned east to west, which were clearly associated with the hearth. Similar pitched tiles had been noted during the

evaluation but they had been oriented in a different direction.

The remains of a robbed-out brick feature (333) were found to the south-west of hearth 320. Feature 333 had been heavily truncated and its function is unclear; it may have been associated with the hearth. The bricks were overlain by a layer of red scorched silt (330) which also overlay patches of scorched natural gravel. To the north-west of hearth 320 was another feature of uncertain function (314), consisting of a single course of four tiles. Feature 314 was cut by a large pit (317) that corresponds to the large pit 125 recorded in evaluation Trench 1. Pit 317 could not be fully excavated for safety reasons. Its fill (316) contained a sherd of pottery dating from the 10th century, which is almost certainly residual.

#### *Phase Three (Figs 4 and 6)*

A large pit (323) was recorded in the south-east of the site. This pit seems to have been dug to remove brick feature 333, and its fills also partially overlay hearth 320. A complete copper alloy pin was found in pit 323 but is not closely datable. Pit 323 was overlain by demolition debris (311), which also sealed the features around hearth 320. Layer 311 was itself overlain in places by further compacted demolition debris which may have been the base for a robbed-out surface.

#### *Phase Four (Fig. 4)*

A large pit (329, 318), at least 3 m across, cut the demolition debris layers to the west. This could not be fully investigated, or its full size and depth determined, due to heavy modern disturbance. The pit, which was initially recorded as two features but later found to be one pit, is almost certainly pit 121 from the evaluation; pit 121 contained 18th-century clay pipes. This pit is unlikely to relate to features to the south and east and may represent the robbing of a large feature such as a cellar.

The remains of a foundation for a possible external wall, 303, lay to the south-east, post-dating layer 311. This survived for a length of 1.2 m and was 0.45 m thick with two outer faces of brick with English bonding and a central core. The bricks measured 230 mm by 110 mm by 45 mm and were set in lime mortar. The wall had been heavily truncated by modern disturbance and therefore interpretation must be highly speculative. However, it is possible that the wall ran from east to west, predating features 304 and 305 (phase 5).

#### *Phase Five (Fig. 5)*

The possible remains of the base of a robbed-out wall with only mortar traces surviving, overlay the backfill of pit 329/319. This feature, 304, is likely to be associated with a semicircular tile structure (305) to the south-east, possibly the remains of a fireplace or a pillar support. Only one course survived, consisting of bricks measuring 220 mm by 150 mm by 50 mm. The structure was almost 1 m wide from east to west.

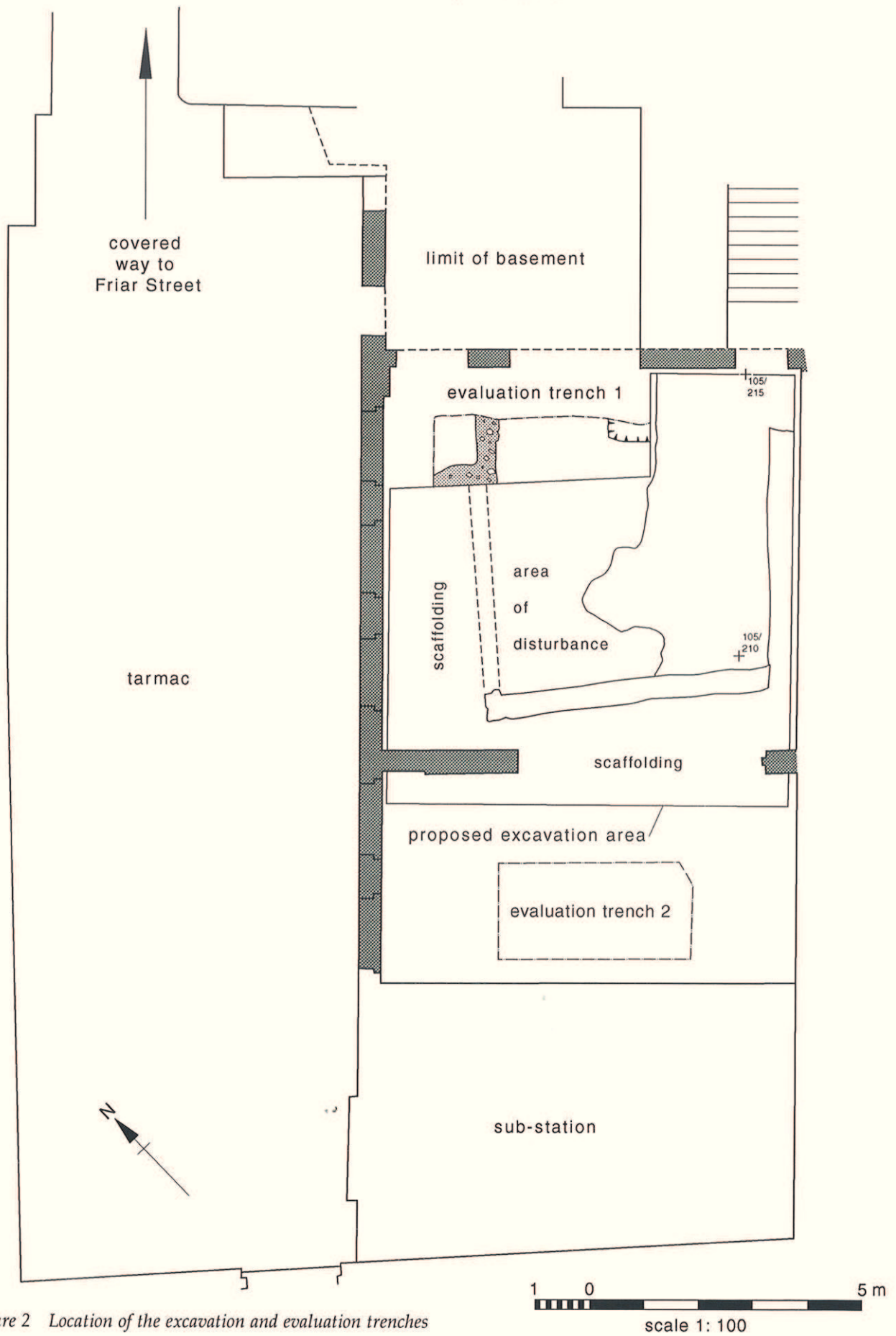


Figure 2 Location of the excavation and evaluation trenches



*Phase Six (Figs 5 and 6)*

A floor or yard surface of brick (302) was recorded in the north-east of the site. The bricks were arranged in a herringbone pattern and laid into a mortar bed (309) above compacted demolition debris (310). The bricks had largely been robbed, with only a small area remaining *in situ*, but a much larger area of the mortar bed survived intact, with the impressions of brick lines. The size of the bricks, 230 mm by 110 mm by 48 mm, suggests a date later than wall 304. The brick surface was overlain by a further floor or yard surface (301), consisting of demolition debris.

In the south-west corner of the site the deposits were overlain by 325, a silt with signs of scorching, which extended below the foundation of wall 324. The silt was not examined in detail but it is possible that the burnt remains result from a fireplace associated with 305. Wall 324 survived for 5.41 m, north-west to south-east, with a standing height of 0.30 m and a width of 0.37 m. The face was on the south-west side of the wall and, therefore, the wall would appear to be external. It consisted of a mix of brick and stone with a flint footing slightly offset from the bottom by up to 0.05 m. The bricks appeared to be handmade and measured 223 mm by 111 mm by 49 mm. The stone was clearly reused because two fragments of limestone showed traces of moulding. The wall turned in the west corner to join up with wall 110 from the evaluation which was constructed entirely from brick. The area between the walls has been completely destroyed by modern disturbance.

The south-eastern side of the excavation is lined by 308, the foundation trench of the 1920s building which is still extant and probably post-dates wall 324. The latest deposit (306) was recorded in the extreme eastern corner of the excavation. This consisted of very compacted mortar with some natural gravel inclusions and was left *in situ*.

**THE FINDS****The pottery by Paul Blinkhorn**

The pottery assemblage from the excavation consists of sixteen sherds with a total weight of 103 g. The occurrence by ware type per context, by number and weight of sherds, is shown in Table 1. The assemblage

from the site is too small to allow any firm chronology to be advanced, other than to give a *terminus post quem* for each of the contexts that produced pottery. The range of wares is typical of urban sites in Berkshire, particularly the Ashampstead wares, which occur in quantity in Reading, and are also known from Newbury, Windsor, Oxford, Abingdon and Wallingford (Mephem and Heaton 1995, 39–41). The industry began producing pottery in the 12th century, with glazed wares first being made in the late 12th to early 13th century (*ibid.*). The other medieval coarsewares are all common types and occur at many sites in the south midlands region (cf. Mellor 1994).

**The glass and copper alloy by Cecily Cropper**

One fragment of window glass was recovered from context 327, stratigraphically the earliest deposit on the site. The glass is opaque and the soil matrix has concreted onto both surfaces, preventing the detection of paint. One edge is grozed or trimmed for a lead mount. The date of this fragment is probably 13th or 14th century.

Two copper alloy objects were recovered, both items of dress:

1 Annular brooch, plain with pin looped over. The pin forms a bud at the looped end. Diameter 25 mm. Small find 2, context 327.

The annular brooch is of a common form and medieval in date. Similar examples have been found at excavations in Norwich (Margeson 1993, fig. 7, nos 54–5, 14–15), one dating from the 13th or 14th century and the other to the late 15th century.

2 Pin, complete, with wire-wound head. Length 37 mm. Small find 3, context 321.

Drawn pins with wire-wound heads have been recovered from contexts as early as the 13th century from Winchester and Southampton (Biddle and Barclay 1990, 563). Similar pins from London were found in late 14th-century deposits (Egan and Pritchard 1991, fig. 200, 301). The production of this type of pin was long-lived, continuing throughout the medieval period and up to the 19th century (Biddle and Barclay 1990, 565).

Table 1 Pottery occurrence by ware type per context by number and weight of sherds

Context	Medieval East Wiltshire Wares	?Ashampstead wares	?Local Sandy Coarsewares	Tudor Green	Late Medieval Transitional Earthenware	Red Earthenware	TPQ
301						1 (14)	?1550+
311				1 (1)	1 (6)		?1400+
316	1 (4)						10thC+?
327	3 (16)	3 (25)	6 (37)				12/13thC
Total	4 (20)	3 (25)	6 (37)	1 (1)	1 (6)	1 (14)	16 (103)

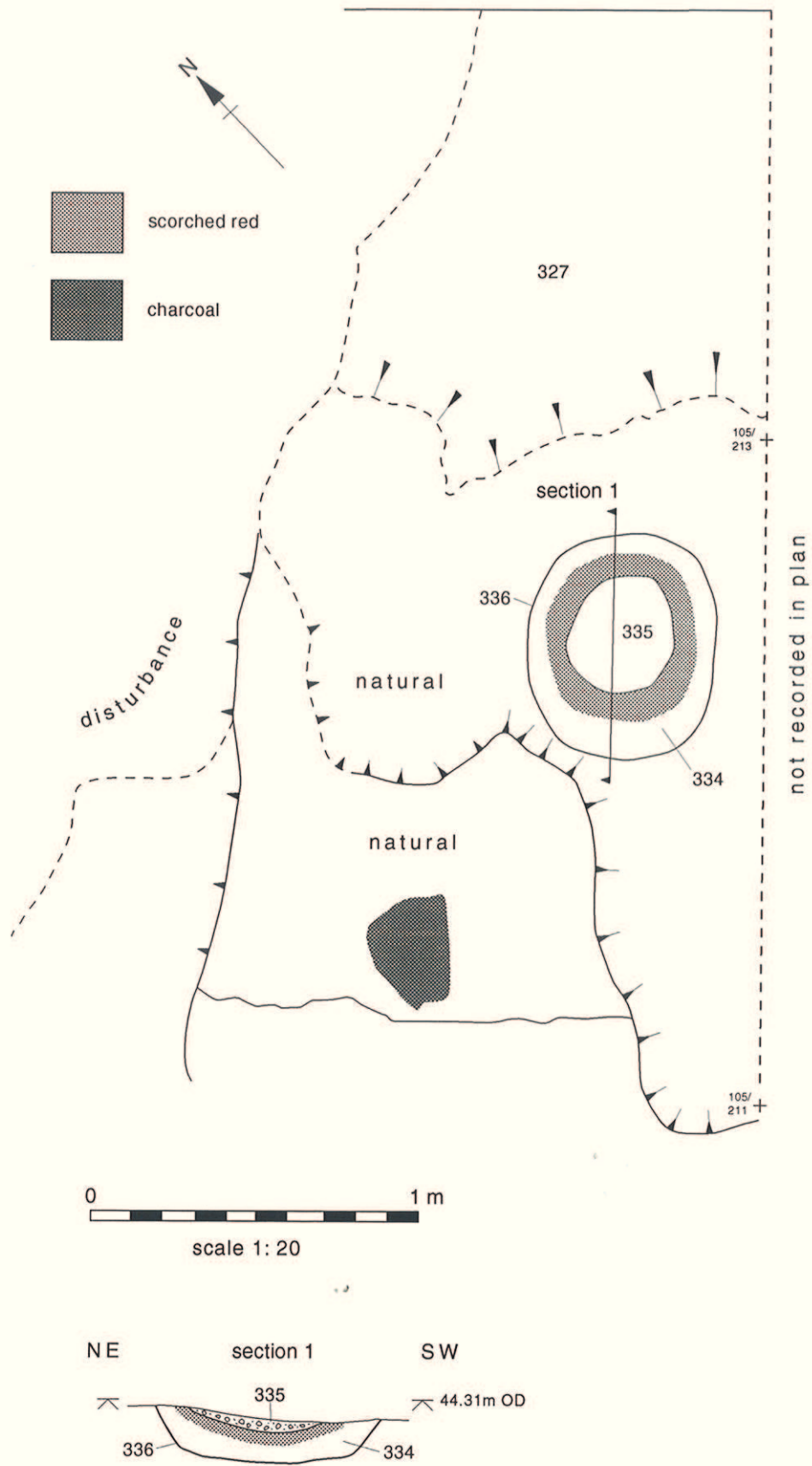


Figure 3 Phase 1 plan and section

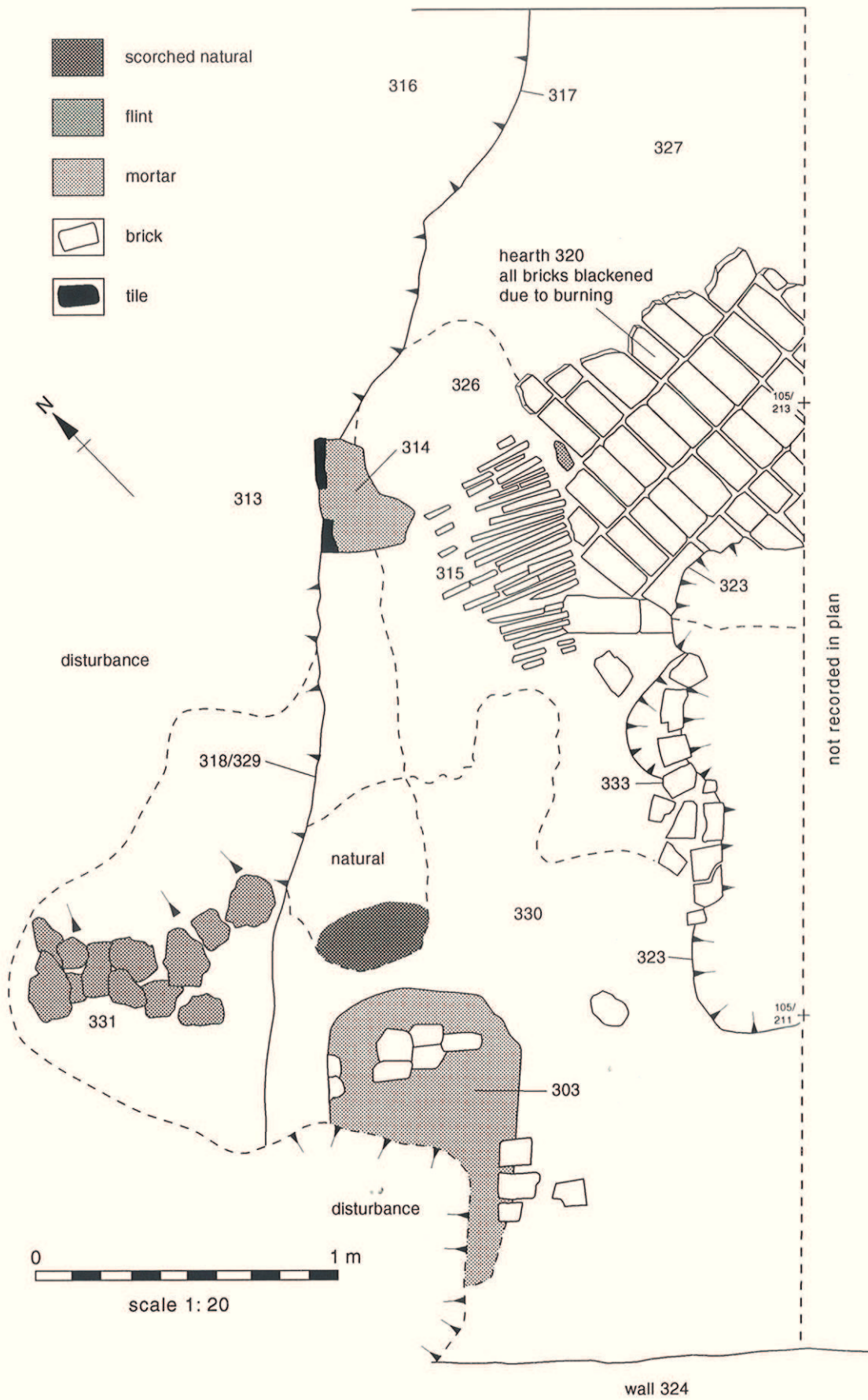


Figure 4 Phases 2,3 and 4 plan

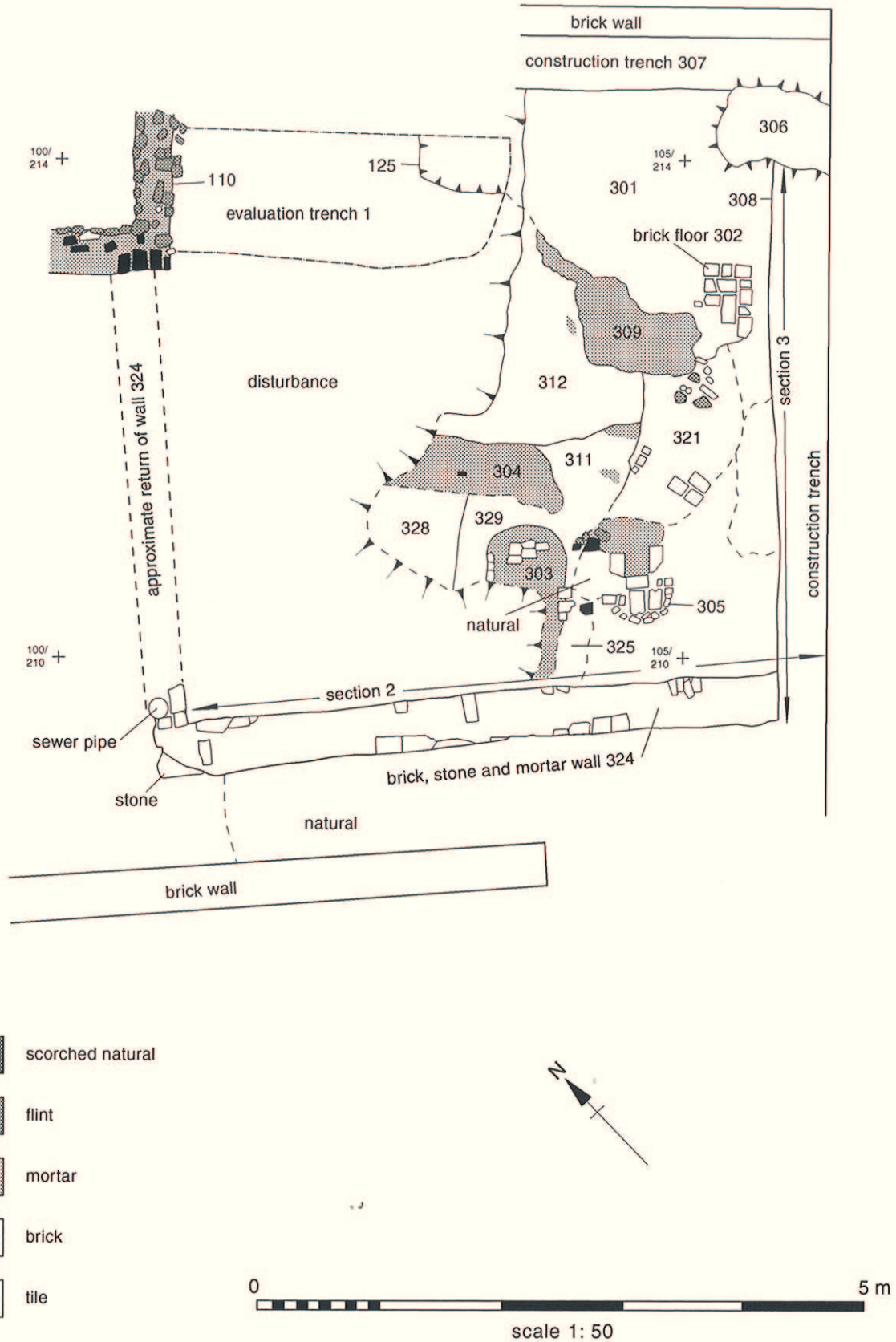


Figure 5 Phases 5 and 6 plan

### Ceramic building material (Tables 2 and 3) by Nick Mitchell

The combined ceramic building material assemblage from the evaluation and the excavation comprises 130 fragments or 25,270 g. The greater part of the assemblage, 78 fragments, 17,140 g, was recovered from the excavation. The material present comprised roof tile, flat or ridged, and brick fragments. The building material was produced from 10 fabrics, with fabrics 1 to 5 largely restricted to tile, while fabrics 6 to 10 were present only as brick. Little can be deduced for the date of manufacture of the fabrics. The forms are not varied or diagnostic and the small amount of associated pottery provides only limited dating evidence. However, fabric 1 is most likely to be the earliest fabric.

#### Fabric descriptions

- 1 soft, mid orange-brown fabric, flaking on underside, with moderate very small quartz and sparse large quartz, frequent mica and grog up to 3 mm.
- 2 hard, bright orange fabric with moderate very small quartz and sparse large quartz, frequent mica and grog up to 5 mm.
- 3 high-fired pinkish-orange fabric with very evenly scattered moderate white mid-sized quartz and abundant grog up to 2 mm.
- 4 soft multi-coloured fabric with abundant small quartz and sparse to moderate large quartz, abundant very small iron-stone and grog up to 3 mm.
- 5 high-fired deep orange fabric with moderate large quartz, and frequent grog up to 3 mm.
- 6 (Brick type 1) high-fired dark red brick fabric with moderate large quartz and frequent grog up to 4 mm.
- 7 (Brick type 2) very gritty brick with large very rounded quartz up to 1 mm, and frequent lime up to 4 mm.
- 8 (Brick type 3) sandy, bright orange brick with abundant mid to large size quartz, occasional grog and iron up to 2 mm.
- 9 (Brick type 4) high-fired red brick with abundant small and sparse mid-sized quartz, with moderate silt-stone.
- 10 (Brick type 5) high-fired mid-orange brick with moderate small and sparse large quartz, moderate mica, and moderate grog up to 3 mm.

### CONCLUSIONS

The results of the excavation indicate four main phases of occupation at the site while also suggesting a consistency of activity, with three phases of hearths or fireplaces with robbing taking place after each phase.

The first phase, the richest in diagnostic finds, probably dates to the 13th and 14th centuries and consisted of a thin layer of silt, possibly the heavily truncated remains of an occupation deposit, that contained small sherds of pottery, small fragments of animal bone, a window glass fragment and a complete brooch. Hearth 336 was possibly associated with this deposit. The single find of a piece of brick from the hearth may suggest that this fireplace had a similar structure to that which succeeded it, comprising tile set into a silt deposit. There were no finds to date the second hearth, 320, and the brick structure 333 could not be identified due to the heavy truncation. However, they are likely to be medieval and may represent a more substantial structure than the ones they replaced. The robbing represented by pit 317, and the demolition debris in the layers above, indicates a brick structure of some size, probably the support for a fireplace.

The next phase of activity can be tentatively dated to the 15th or 16th century on the basis of pottery from the layer that seals it. These finds are more likely to be from the period of robbing than from the demolished structures.

The next period that can tentatively be dated is the large area of robbing, previously recorded during the evaluation, which produced 18th-century clay pipes. What this pit removed is unknown but was possibly a large structure, such as a cellar, that belonged to the

Table 2 Evaluation building material

Fabric	Contexts	No of Fragments	Weight (g)	Type	Comments
1	110,115,120, 205, 209	27	3610	plain roof-tile	2 tiles with patchy clear glaze
1	205	1	160	ridge-tile	
2	120,205,209	13	1200	plain roof-tile	2 tiles with patchy clear glaze
3	205,209	3	310	plain flat tile	
4	120	1	90	plain flat tile	
5	205	4	700	plain flat tile	
6	208	2	1710	brick type 1	43-50 mm thick x 110 x 230 mm, whitish glaze on ends and side
7	205	1	350	brick type 2	40 mm thick
Totals		52	8130		

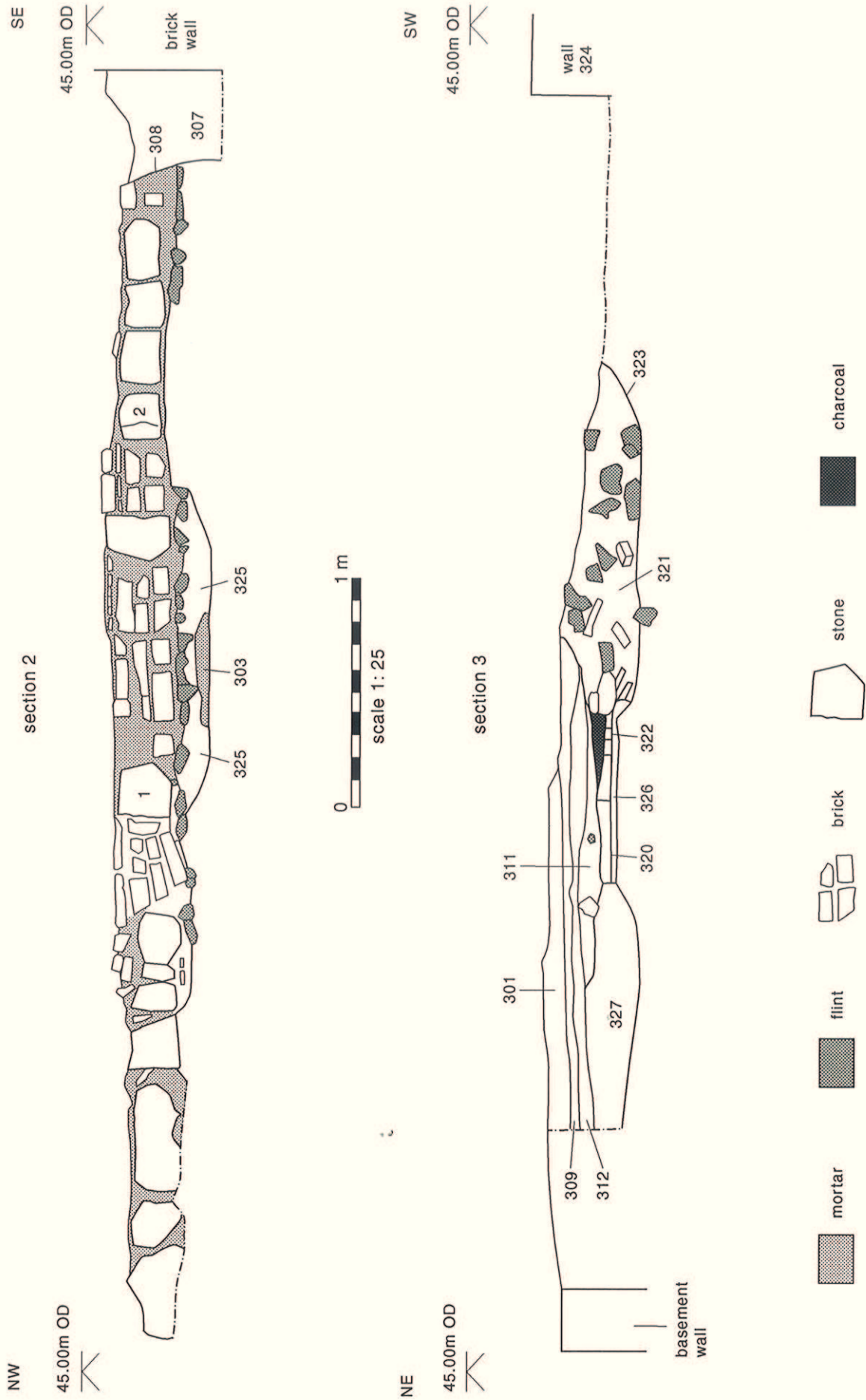


Figure 6 Sections

previous phase. The remains of a possible external wall, 303, may also belong to this period on the evidence of stratigraphy although there were no finds to support this date. Another probable fireplace and an associated wall post-dated the back fill of the large pit. There are no finds to date these features but the stratigraphy suggests they are 18th- or 19th-century in date. It is possible that they were constructed immediately after the backfilling of the large pit.

The final phase is represented by the herringbone brick surface, with its make-up layers, and the wall 324 with its underlying silt deposit. These features effectively seal everything else in the trench. It is likely that they predate the wall to the south, which was constructed in the 1920s, and that the bricks were mainly removed for the construction of the Woolwich Building Society. The construction of this building is possibly the cause of the large area of modern disturbance. The site showed a distinct slope from north to south and the reasons for this are unclear. However, the levelling of the site through a succession of layers consisting of demolition debris may be a contributory factor for the preservation in places of the earlier structures. The archaeological evidence suggests that the deepest layers were relatively intact until the more intensive robbing phases of the 18th century and the construction that took place in the 19th and early 20th centuries. However, the possibility exists that deposits and structures may still survive but only in restricted areas.

Documentary evidence and previous archaeological investigations of the area around the excavation

site indicate a medieval street plan dating from the 13th and 14th centuries, with further construction taking place at the beginning of the post-medieval period. This is supported by the phases of construction and occupation uncovered by the Friar Street excavation. The area available for excavation was too confined and disturbed to allow anything other than a glimpse of a small part of a building which was repeatedly demolished and rebuilt, perhaps on a larger scale, during the succeeding centuries.

#### Acknowledgements

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#### Location of the archive

The records and the finds from the excavation and the evaluation will be deposited at Reading Museum, Berkshire.

Table 3 Excavation building material

Fabric	Contexts	No of Fragments	Weight (g)	Type	Comments
1	310,311,315, 321,328	24	3120	plain roof-tile	
2	301,310,315, 321,328	28	3820	plain roof-tile	1 tile with patchy clear glaze
2	328	1	240	ridge-tile	plain curved
2	321	1	440	brick type 6	48 mm thick
4	301	6	850	plain flat tile	
4	334	1	70	brick?	
6	321	1	250	brick type 1	
8	301,311,320, 321	11	6000	brick type 3	50 x 110 x 227mm
9	321	1	1050	brick type 4	60 x 107 mm
10	321	4	1300	brick type 5	33-37 mm thick
Totals		78	17140		

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