

Medieval Pits at the Old Post Office Whittlesey



Archaeological Watching Brief Report



June 2012

Client: The Whitfield Group

OA East Report No: 1256

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NGR: TL 5271 2971

Medieval Pits at the Old Post Office, Whittlesey

Watching Brief

Site Code: WHSOP011

CHER No. ECB2979

Date of Works: January – March 2011

Report No: 1256

Excavator: John Diffey

Client: The Whitfield Group

Report Date: April 2011

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Summary

Between the 10th of January 2011 and the 11th of March 2011, OA East carried out an archaeological watching brief at The Old Post Office, Whittlesey (TL 5271 2971). The monitoring was carried out during all ground works, undertaken as part of the sites redevelopment, including piling, foundation trenching and service trenching.

1 GEOLOGY AND TOPOGRAPHY

- 1.1.1 The site lies on an island of sand and gravel (March Gravels) overlying Oxford Clay at a height of between 6.00m and 7.00m AOD.

2 ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

- 2.1.1 Whittlesey sits on a large gravel-capped island of high ground in the fens immediately east of the 'mainland' at Peterborough and straddles the Romano-British (or Romanised) 'Fen Causeway' route across the fens from Peterborough to March and on to Norfolk. It has been extensively settled and exploited, particularly in the Bronze Age, Iron Age and Romano-British periods, and large areas of ritual and settlement archaeology of these periods have been excavated along the western fringes of the island prior to gravel and clay extraction. However, little is known of the archaeology of Whittlesey itself as the town centre has seen little systematic archaeological fieldwork (Mortimer, 2008).
- 2.1.2 Medieval activity is likely to have been centred on the area of the current town centre. The Whittlesey Society excavations of the early 1980s recovered large quantities of medieval pottery along with animal bone, glass, worked bone and stone, and a few metal finds, including a 15th century silver penny and copper-alloy brooch. These works, comprising a total of fifteen test pits, revealed medieval pitting in the centre of the development area with a possible later cobbled surface towards the east (HER 01963 and 11910). The medieval St Mary's Church and Manor House lie immediately to the south of the site and Anglo-Saxon remains were recorded in excavations within this area in 2004 (ECB 1616 and MCB 15935) (Mortimer, 2008).
- 2.1.3 An Evaluation carried out at the site by Oxford Archaeology East in 2008 found a number of substantial pits within the development area. These included potential quarry pits, some showing re-use as rubbish pits, and a possible well. The archaeological remains recorded during the evaluation were similar in character to those encountered during the early 1980s excavations.
- 2.1.4 The development area lies within the historic core of the town, close to the Market Cross (HER 02814 and SAM 32) and it was thought possible that Saxon as well as Medieval deposits, features and finds of a domestic and/or industrial nature could have survived (Mortimer 2008).

3 METHODOLOGY

- 3.1.1 The objective of this watching brief was to determine as far as reasonably possible the presence/absence, location, nature, extent, date, quality, condition and significance of any surviving archaeological deposits within the development area.
- 3.1.2 The Brief required that archaeological monitoring take place during the initial stages of construction. Including all ground works such as service runs, ground reduction and piling.
- 3.1.3 During piling spoil was sifted and metal detected. While ground reduction and service trench excavation was carried out by a 360 excavator with a toothless bucket under archaeological supervision.

- 3.1.4 All archaeological features and deposits were recorded using OA East's *pro-forma* sheets. Trench locations, plans and sections were recorded at appropriate scales digital photographs were taken of all relevant features and deposits.
- 3.1.5 Site conditions were good with dry and sunny weather .

4 RESULTS

4.1 Piling

- 4.1.1 Piling took place on site between the 10th and 21st of January 2011 and involved the drilling of over 40 piles up to 13m deep and 0.3m in diameter within the footprint of the two buildings being constructed. This work was carried out under constant supervision by the author and all material that was excavated was sifted and scanned with a metal detector for finds. Some evidence for archaeological deposits was seen in the form of dark humic material being removed by the pile drill from two holes within the north-west corner of the development area. No finds were associated with this material, however it is likely that it represents a fill or fills from the medieval pitting recorded in the previous archaeological evaluation (Thatcher 2008).

4.2 Foundation trenches

- 4.2.1 Following completion of the piling on site, two large areas (6m x 16m and 7m x 12m) covering the footprints of the buildings being constructed were reduced to a level of 6.3mOD for construction of the building foundations as seen in **figure.....** The archaeological deposits recorded in this and previous phases of work were not encountered until reaching a level of c. 6.0m OD therefore this phase of work had no impact on the previously recorded archaeology. The reduction in level involved firstly the removal of a layer of modern building rubble recorded later as context **18** and subsequent removal of the upper level of the buried topsoil layer **14** which lay below the modern rubble.

4.3 Service Trench

- 4.3.1 On the 11th of March 2011 excavation of an 18.5m x 0.5m wide service trench took place running north to south across the eastern side of the development site. Finishing at 5.85m OD this trench was the deepest part of the groundworks within this phase of the development, however at this depth only 0.1-0.2m of material was removed from below the upper level of the archaeological horizon. No features were excavated but were recorded in plan and section where possible down to the finished level of the trench. A plan and section of the trench is shown in **figure**
- 4.3.2 The natural geology **01** consisting of a mid yellow sandy gravel was reached at a level of 6mOD and was removed down to a level of 5.85m across the trench. Cutting the natural geology within the southern 14.75m of trench, four separate archaeological features were recorded **[08]**, **[06]**, **[04]** and **[02]** and are described respectively below. A total of nine pottery sherds was recovered from the upper fills of the features.
- 4.3.3 At the far south of the trench was large pit **[08]**. The feature measured 4.75m+ x 0.5m+ and extended beyond the trench to the south, east and west. Although the overall shape and size remains unknown the cut had relatively steep sides with a sharp break

of slope at the top. Cut **[08]** contained three observable fills from which six pottery sherds were recovered. The lowest recorded fill, **09**, comprised a soft dark grey-black clayey silt containing occasional small sub-rounded flint stones and abundant charcoal. This fill contained a sherd of Bourne D pottery dating to the early post-medieval period circa AD1550+. However, there is a possibility that this may represent an intrusive find as it was found along with a piece of early medieval pottery c. 1150-1350 and similarly early pottery was recovered in the overlying fills **10** and **12** (see below). Fill **09** was overlain by fill **10** which consisted of a soft mid greyish brown sandy silt containing moderate small sub-rounded flint stones and occasional charcoal. Fill **10** contained three pottery sherds dating to the early medieval period c. 1150-1350. Overlying fill **10** was fill **12** the final fill recorded for feature **[08]**. Fill **12** consisted of a soft dark greyish black clayey silt containing occasional small sub-rounded flint stones and abundant charcoal. Fill **12** contained two sherds of pottery; an Ely type ware and a flat bottomed base sherd of Grimston-type. Both of these sherds date from the early medieval period c. 1150-1350AD.

- 4.3.4 Feature **[06]** was located 0.35m north of the northern edge of feature **[08]**, it was 2.2m across and appeared circular in shape but extended out of the trench to the east and west. The cut had sloping sides with a shallow break of slope at the top. It contained a single recordable fill **07** which comprised a soft dark greyish brown sandy clay containing occasional small sub-rounded flint stones and moderate amounts of charcoal. No finds were retrieved from this context to provide a date for the feature although it is likely that it is of similar medieval date to the other pit features recorded across the site in this and previous phases of archaeological work.
- 4.3.5 Feature **[04]** was located 0.4m north of the northern edge of cut **[06]** and measured 2.25m across but extended out of the trench to the east and west. The cut appeared to have sloping sides and a medium break of slope at the top of the cut. The feature contained a single recordable fill **05** consisting of a soft dark greyish brown sandy silt containing occasional small sub-rounded flint stones. No datable finds were recovered from this fill.
- 4.3.6 Located 1.7m north of the northern edge of cut **[04]** was pit feature **[02]**. It measured 3m across but extended beyond the trench to east and west and was cut by wall **13** to the north. It appeared to have sloping sides with a sharp break of slope at the top of the cut. This feature contained a single recordable fill, **03**, which comprised a soft dark greyish brown silty clay containing occasional small sub-rounded flint stones and occasional charcoal. A single sherd of pottery was recovered from this fill dating to the early medieval period c. 1150-1350 along with a single large sherd of early Saxon pottery, residual within this context but in good unabraded condition. Similar residual Saxon material was found in earlier phases of work suggesting that the medieval activity is likely to have disturbed earlier Saxon contexts.
- 4.3.7 All of the features described above were capped by a layer of what appears to be a garden topsoil consisting of a soft mid reddish brown clayey silt containing occasional small sub-rounded flint stones and occasional charcoal. This layer extended from the southern limit of the trench 14.75m north where it was cut by wall **13**. Its thickness gradually decreases from 0.6m in the south to 0.3m in the north. A lack of subsoil and sharp lower horizon suggest that this layer may have been imported into the site following some earlier truncation event.
- 4.3.8 Wall **13** which cuts both the medieval archaeology and the garden topsoil that caps it runs east-west across the trench 3.5m south of the north end of the trench. The wall comprised of a 2 brick thick construction 6 courses high made from yellow unfrogged

bricks measuring 235mm x 110mm x 65mm laid with a yellowish cream lime mortar. The brickwork appeared to be a rough construction with no clear bonding and is likely to represent the foundation level of the wall. The wall ran parallel to the back wall of the old post office building which was previously a manor house and is likely to represent an extension or out building associated with the extant structure. A sample brick was dated to the 17th or 18th century. North of wall **13** the stratigraphy was completely different to that found south of the wall and suggests that this would have been the inside of the building which the wall formed part of. The stratigraphic sequence north of the wall is described below.

- 4.3.9 As opposed to the natural sands and gravels found across the rest of the site the earliest context found north of wall **13** comprised a layer of made ground (**15**) which consisted of a soft mid grey sandy clay containing frequent ceramic building materials (CBM) and charcoal. The extent of the layer was limited to the south by wall **13** but extended out of the trench to the east, west and north. The thickness of this layer is unknown as the trench stopped at the upper horizon of this context.
- 4.3.10 Overlying this layer of made ground was demolition layer **16**. This was 0.25m thick and like layer **15** below it extended beyond the trench to the north, east and west but was limited to the south by wall **13**. This demolition layer was made up of building material consisting of yellow bricks and cream mortar identical to that found in wall **13** and is therefore likely to be the result of this structure being demolished and spread over the area north of where it once stood.
- 4.3.11 Overlying the demolition layer was another imported garden topsoil, layer **17**. Different from the topsoil layer found south of the wall this layer was made up of a soft dark greyish brown clayey silt containing occasional small sub-rounded flint stones and CBM pieces. This layer was 0.25m thick and extended beyond the trench to the north, east and west but was again limited to the south by wall **13** perhaps suggesting that lower courses of the wall remained above ground as a garden wall post-demolition.
- 4.3.12 Overlying the wall and the topsoil layers north and south of it was the uppermost layer recorded on site which consisted of a compacted stone ballast light yellowish cream in colour which varied in thickness across the whole of the site. This layer is modern in date and acted as a levelling layer and hardcore base on which block paving was laid forming a parking area to the rear of the post office building.

5 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The foundation trenches and service trench appear to have had a limited impact on the archaeological deposits known to exist beneath the development site. As previously seen, the archaeology of the site is characterised by a dense concentration of pitting, chiefly of medieval date but possibly continuing through into the early post-medieval period. Thatcher (2008) described similar features on site as quarry pits subsequently used as rubbish pits and it is likely that the features found in this phase of work represent similar activity. A number of residual Saxon finds including one found in this phase of work suggest that this medieval activity may have disturbed or destroyed earlier phases of activity within this location.

This phase of work has added to our knowledge of more recent activity on site with the discovery of a post-medieval wall and associated demolition layer thought to be related to the extant post office/manor house building.

6 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

- 6.1.1 The author would like to thank the Whitfield Group who commissioned and funded the archaeological work. The project was managed by Richard Mortimer and the graphics were produced by Stuart Ladd. Carole Fletcher and Paul Spoerry commented on the ceramics.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Mortimer, R 2008 Specification for an archaeological evaluation at The Old Post Office, Whittlesey, Cambridgeshire
- Thatcher, C 2008 Medieval Occupation at The Old Post Office, Whittlesey, Cambridgeshire

APPENDIX A. OASIS REPORT FORM

All fields are required unless they are not applicable.

Project Details

OASIS Number	oxfordar3-129529		
Project Name	Watching Brief at the Old Post Office, Whittlesey		
Project Dates (fieldwork) Start	10-01-2011	Finish	11-03-2011
Previous Work (by OA East)	Yes	Future Work	No

Project Reference Codes

Site Code	WHSOPO11	Planning App. No.	F/YR06/0633/F
HER No.	ECB2979	Related HER/OASIS No.	N/A

Type of Project/Techniques Used

Prompt

Please select all techniques used:

<input type="checkbox"/> Field Observation (periodic visits)	<input type="checkbox"/> Part Excavation	<input type="checkbox"/> Salvage Record
<input type="checkbox"/> Full Excavation (100%)	<input type="checkbox"/> Part Survey	<input type="checkbox"/> Systematic Field Walking
<input type="checkbox"/> Full Survey	<input type="checkbox"/> Recorded Observation	<input type="checkbox"/> Systematic Metal Detector Survey
<input type="checkbox"/> Geophysical Survey	<input type="checkbox"/> Remote Operated Vehicle Survey	<input type="checkbox"/> Test Pit Survey
<input type="checkbox"/> Open-Area Excavation	<input type="checkbox"/> Salvage Excavation	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Watching Brief

Monument Types/Significant Finds & Their Periods

List feature types using the [NMR Monument Type Thesaurus](#) and significant finds using the [MDA Object type Thesaurus](#) together with their respective periods. If no features/finds were found, please state "none".

Monument	Period	Object	Period
PIT	Medieval 1066 to 1540	POT	Early Medieval 410 to 1066
WALL	Post Medieval 1540 to 1901	POT	Medieval 1066 to 1540
LAYER	Post Medieval 1540 to 1901	POT	Post Medieval 1540 to 1901

Project Location

County	Cambridgeshire	Site Address (including postcode if possible)
District	Peterborough	Market Street, Whittlesey, Peterborough, Cambridgeshire, PE7 1AB
Parish	Whittlesey	
HER	ECB2979	
Study Area	370m	National Grid Reference
		TL52712971

Project Originators

Organisation	OA EAST
Project Brief Originator	Andy Thomas
Project Design Originator	Richard Mortimer
Project Manager	Richard Mortimer
Supervisor	John Diffey

Project Archives

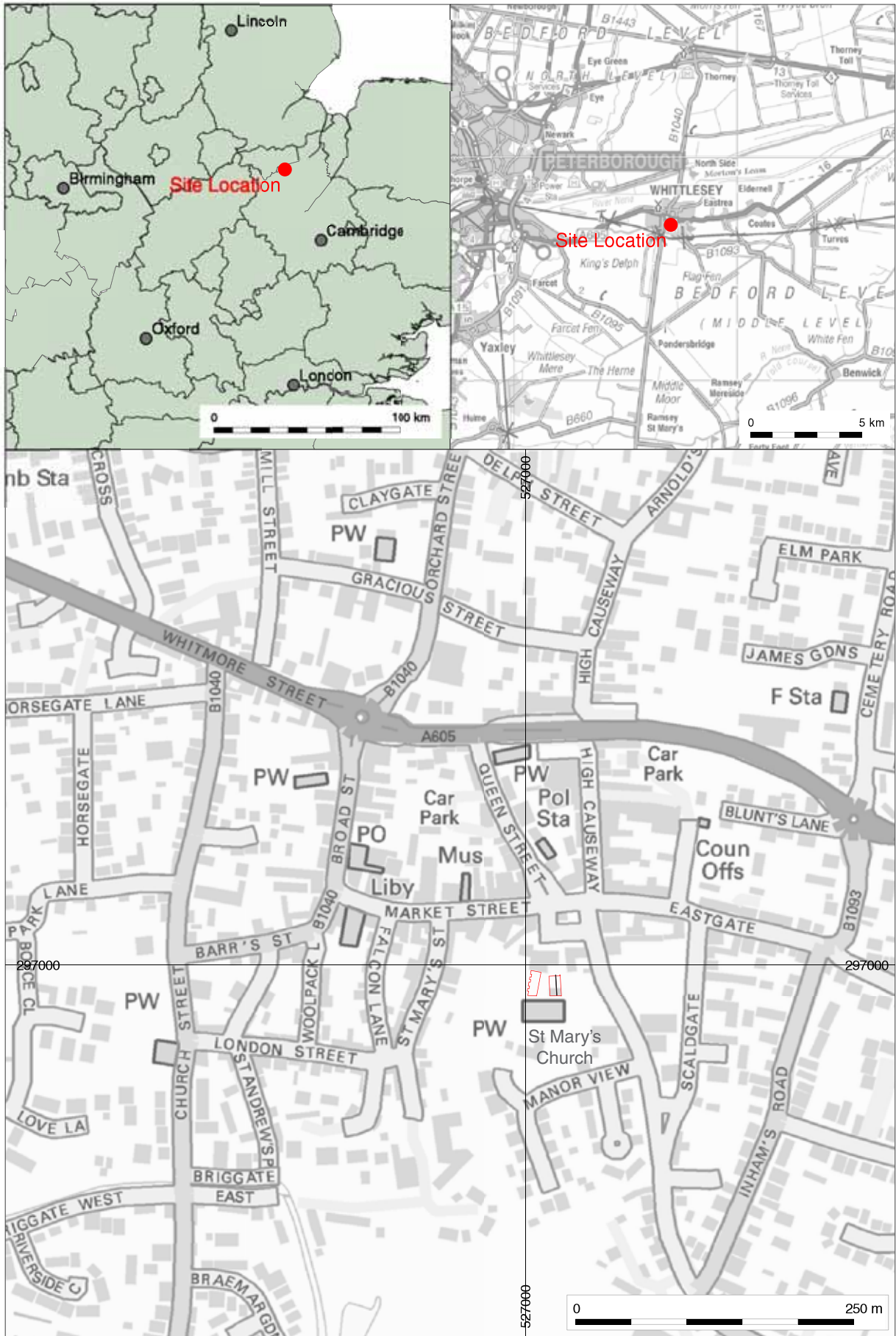
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Cambridgeshire County Stores	OA East, Bar Hill	Cambridgeshire County Stores
WHSOPO11	WHSOPO11	WHSOPO11

Archive Contents/Media

	Physical Contents	Digital Contents	Paper Contents
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Ceramics	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Environmental	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Glass	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Human Bones	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Industrial	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Leather	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Metal	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Stratigraphic		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Survey		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Textiles	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Wood	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Worked Bone	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Worked Stone/Lithic	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
None	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Digital Media	Paper Media
<input type="checkbox"/> Database	<input type="checkbox"/> Aerial Photos
<input type="checkbox"/> GIS	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Context Sheet
<input type="checkbox"/> Geophysics	<input type="checkbox"/> Correspondence
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Images	<input type="checkbox"/> Diary
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Illustrations	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Drawing
<input type="checkbox"/> Moving Image	<input type="checkbox"/> Manuscript
<input type="checkbox"/> Spreadsheets	<input type="checkbox"/> Map
<input type="checkbox"/> Survey	<input type="checkbox"/> Matrices
<input type="checkbox"/> Text	<input type="checkbox"/> Microfilm
<input type="checkbox"/> Virtual Reality	<input type="checkbox"/> Misc.
	<input type="checkbox"/> Research/Notes
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Notes:



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Figure 1: Site location showing foundation trenches (red) and service trench (black)

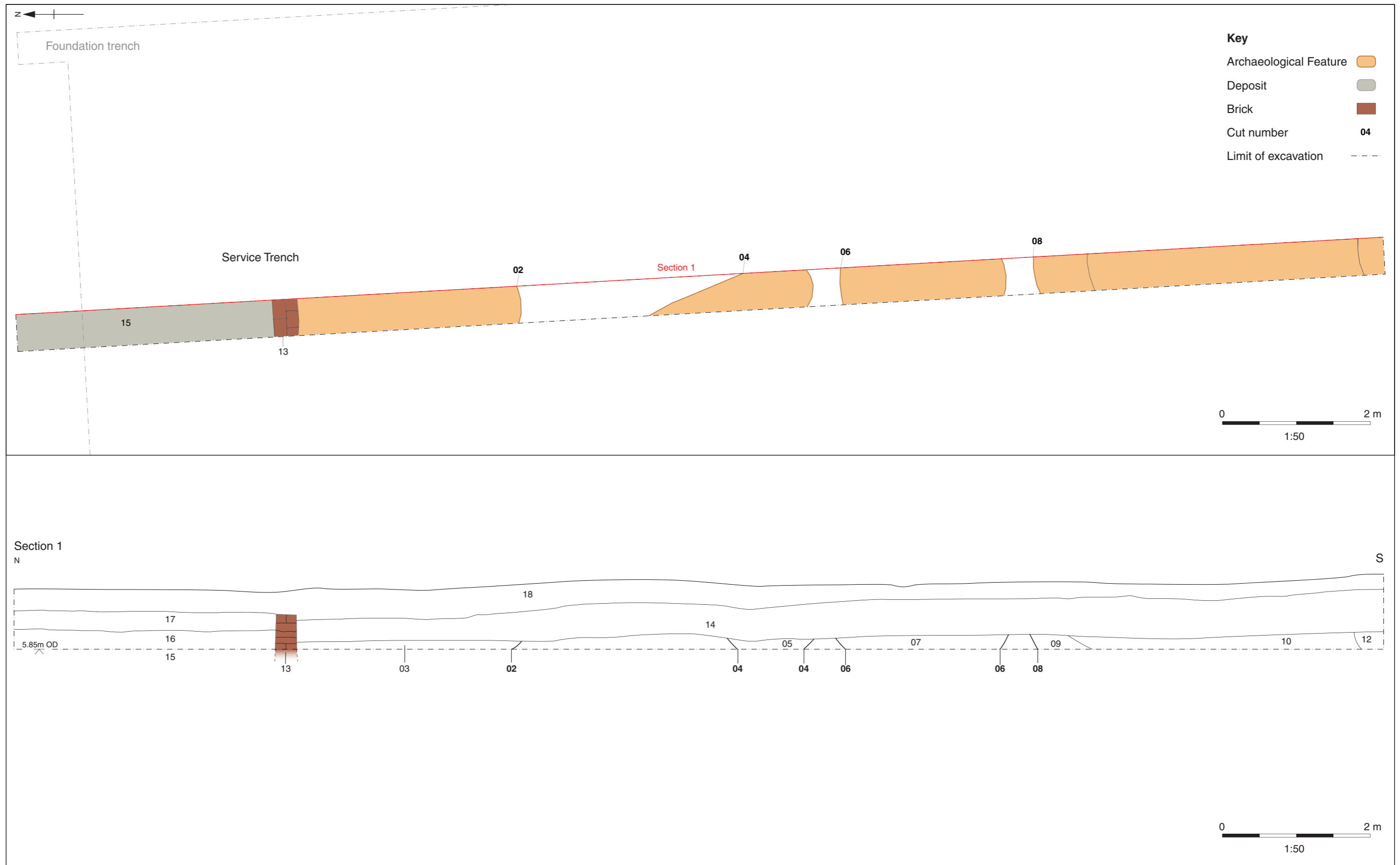


Figure 2: Plan and section of service trench



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