

Belvedere Nurseries Fenny Stratford Nr Milton Keynes Buckinghamshire



Archaeological Watching Brief



June 2006

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on behalf of Dobbies Garden
Centre PLC**

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**Land at Belvedere Nurseries,
Fenny Stratford, Near Milton Keynes, Buckinghamshire**

ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF REPORT

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SUMMARY

Between February and April 2006 Oxford Archaeology (OA) carried out an archaeological watching brief at Belvedere Nurseries, Fenny Stratford, near Milton Keynes, Buckinghamshire (NGR SP 8874 3395). The work was commissioned by Dobbies Garden Centre PLC in advance of the development of a garden centre. The watching brief revealed evidence for a Roman field system. Four ditches were identified from which Roman pottery and animal bone was recovered. Previous work had revealed Roman inhumations, though none were seen during the Watching Brief.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Location and scope of work

- 1.1.1 Between February and April 2006 Oxford Archaeology (OA) carried out an archaeological watching brief at Belvedere Nurseries, Fenny Stratford, near Milton Keynes, Buckinghamshire (NGR SP 8874 3395). The work was commissioned by Goodsons Associates (acting on behalf of Dobbies Garden Centre PLC.) in respect of a planning application for the development of a garden centre.
- 1.1.2 The watching brief was commissioned following discussions with Goodsons Associates and Nick Crank, Milton Keynes Council, Assistant Archaeologist.
- 1.1.3 OA prepared a Written Scheme of Investigation (OA 2006) detailing how it would meet the requirements of the brief.
- 1.1.4 The site lies in an area of known archaeological potential, north of Watling Street and immediately adjoining the site of the small defended Roman settlement of *Magiovinium*.
- 1.1.5 Previous survey, evaluation and watching brief work identified Roman field systems dating from the 1st century AD and a Roman cemetery dating from the 3rd century AD (OA 2001, 2004a and 2005).

1.2 Geology and topography

- 1.2.1 The site is on land between Watling Street (the old course of the A5) and the existing A5, and is *c* 6 ha in area. The underlying geology is Oxford Clay with overlying alluvium (BGS sheet 220), which lies *c* 80 m to the south-west of the development area. The 1st and 2nd terrace gravels were identified on the site during the course of previous archaeological work on the site (OA 2001).
- 1.2.2 The site is generally flat, at *c* 67 m OD, but slopes down gently into the valley of the River Ouzel. The site comprises fields to the east of the Belvedere Nurseries and to the north-west of Dropshort Farm (Fig.1).

1.3 Archaeological and historical background

- 1.3.1 The archaeological and historical background to the site has been the subject of a separate and extensive desk-based assessment (DBA - OA 2004b) and this was briefly summarised in the WSI (OA 2006), which is reproduced below. OA numbers (e.g. OA 6, 16 etc) refer to sites or archaeological findspots entered on a gazetteer and features map in the DBA.
- 1.3.2 The possibility of Neolithic and Bronze Age activity within the valley of the River Ouzel has been highlighted by an excavation at Fenny Lock. However the probability of Neolithic or Bronze Age occupation within the proposed development area was considered to be low.
- 1.3.3 A number of Iron Age sites have been identified on gravel terraces overlooking the Ouzel valley (OA 6, 16, 24, 36) and from the immediate vicinity of *Magiovinium* itself (OA 5), indicating that the area was fairly intensively settled in the later Prehistoric period. An Iron Age ditch has been identified at Dropshot Farm (OA 24) immediately adjacent to the proposed development and the possibility of features attributable to the late prehistoric period extending into the development area was considered a possibility.
- 1.3.4 The site lies on the north side of Watling Street Roman Road and to the north of the former Roman settlement of *Magiovinium*. The settlement comprised a nucleus incorporating a defensive perimeter bank straddling Watling Street with ribbon settlement extending along the road to the south east and north west.
- 1.3.5 Excavations preceding the construction of the present A5 demonstrated there to be extensive roadside settlement and industry associated with this settlement. Evidence was also found for some Iron Age activity on the site (Neal 1989).
- 1.3.6 An excavation at Dropshort Farm uncovered a Roman inhumation burial and an Iron Age ditch. Roman burials and artefacts have also been noted during ploughing at the farm.
- 1.3.7 Two geophysical surveys were undertaken of the area to the north of the proposed development (Bartlett 1994) and the development area itself (Bartlett 1999a/99b) prior to the commencement of intrusive archaeological works. The results of these surveys revealed many linear features and enclosures usually aligned north-south or east-west (see Fig. 2, this report). The density of these features declined to the north of the development area (away from Watling Street) and appeared to end at a roughly east-west aligned, major anomaly that may have represented the northern extent of activity.
- 1.3.8 OA undertook an evaluation (OA 2001) within the south/south-west part of the site. High groundwater levels hampered this investigation but Roman features and deposits were identified in all of the evaluation trenches. The 2001 evaluation located a number of ditches and gullies that probably formed boundaries of a field system lying between *Magiovinium* and Watling Street to the south. These could be associated with allotments identified by the excavations preceding the construction of the A5.

- 1.3.9 A subsequent watching brief and features mapping exercise was undertaken on the development area during topsoil stripping (OA 2004b) and identified numerous ditch and pit features as well as at least 23 human inhumations. The Watching Brief also confirmed the existence of a series of enclosures identified by the previous geophysics and evaluation phases on the site. The presence of up to 23 inhumations indicated the presence of a sizeable Roman cemetery associated with *Magiovinium*. The full extent of the cemetery was not elucidated by the features mapping exercise, owing to time and financial constraints. Dates from the limited finds recovered from this phase of work indicated a 3rd-4th century date for the use of the cemetery. Earlier pottery in the area of the cemetery was thought to be residual. Metal working slag was also found, suggesting some form of industry close by.
- 1.3.10 A second phase of evaluation on behalf of Dobbies Garden Centres PLC. was carried out in December 2004 (OA 2005), and comprised 17 trenches located in the northern and eastern parts of the site. The trenches revealed systems of field ditches and possible domestic rubbish pits in the south and east of the evaluated area, and evidence in the form of large irregular shaped pits for possible gravel quarrying. Ditches were revealed in the area of land belonging to Dropshort Farm. All of these features could be assigned to the early Roman period (1st-2nd centuries AD) on ceramic grounds. There was no further evidence of the Roman inhumation cemetery previously located alongside Watling Street, suggesting that it may not have extended further to the north and east than previously defined. A post-medieval boundary ditch ran across the northern part of the proposed development area. To the north and north-west of the site very little archaeological activity was found.
- 1.3.11 Excavations have revealed a Roman road within 65 m of the present development site that may relate to the layout of the cemetery and of the field enclosures (Brian Giggins, *pers comm.*). The enclosures are noticeably at a different angle to the line of Watling Street. It is possible that this road related to the establishment of the cemetery, as Watling Street would probably have been principally utilised for main road traffic rather than for local traffic.

2 PROJECT AIMS AND METHODOLOGY

2.1 Aims

- 2.1.1 To establish the presence/absence of archaeological remains within the proposed development area, and to establish the ecofactual and environmental potential of archaeological deposits and features.
- 2.1.2 To determine the extent, condition, nature, character, quality and date of any archaeological remains present. A specific aim was to establish the presence of any further remains associated with the known Roman field system and cemetery.
- 2.1.3 To make available the results of the archaeological investigation.

2.2 Methodology

- 2.2.1 The groundworks comprised the excavation of foundation pads and service trenches. The overburden within these areas was removed by a mechanical excavator fitted with a toothless bucket, under close archaeological supervision. Machine excavation ceased at the upper level of the archaeological horizon or the proposed impact level, whichever was reached first. The impact of the foundation pads did not exceed 66.2 m OD.
- 2.2.2 The foundation pads were up to 1.7 m wide and up to 1.4 m deep. The service trenches were *c* 1.5 m wide and up to 2 m deep. Where the archaeological horizon was revealed any exposed features were cleaned and excavated.
- 2.2.3 All features and deposits were issued with unique context numbers, and context recording was in accordance with established OA practice (*OAU Fieldwork Manual*, ed. D Wilkinson, 1992). All contexts, and any small finds and samples from them were allocated unique numbers. Bulk finds were collected by context.
- 2.2.4 All archaeological features were planned at a scale of 1:20 and where excavated their sections drawn at scales of 1:20. All excavated features were photographed using colour slide and black and white print film. A general photographic record of the work was made. Recording followed procedures detailed in the *OAU Fieldwork Manual* (ed D Wilkinson, 1992).

3 RESULTS

3.1 Description of deposits

General

- 3.1.1 Natural gravel (5004) was revealed within the southern and easternmost foundation pads and within the southern limits of the main NE-SW aligned service trench. Elsewhere excavation did not reach the level of the natural (see Fig. 4, Section 1; Foundation pit 6). Excavation did not go significantly beyond the level of the natural horizon, which coincided with the level of the water table. The exposed archaeological features which were not fully excavated due to health and safety constraints. However, sufficient dating evidence was recovered from the upper levels of the features, which formed part of the same field system revealed in the 2004 evaluation (OA 2005).
- 3.1.2 The gravel was overlain by 0.6 m of disturbed alluvial clays which were below 0.6 m of silty clay. The silty clay was recently deposited so as to raise the level of the site.

Foundation pits 1 and 3

- 3.1.3 A N-S aligned ditch (5005 and 5009) was revealed that continued through both Pits (Figs 3 and 4). It was over 1.8 m wide and filled with a reddish brown sandy silt (5006 and 5010) that contained pottery dated from the 3rd century, and animal bone.

Foundation pit 2

- 3.1.4 The terminus of a N-S aligned ditch (5008) was revealed (Fig. 3). It was 0.5 m wide and filled with a reddy brown silt (5009) that contained Roman pottery.

Foundation pit 4

- 3.1.5 A W-E aligned ditch (5011) was revealed (Fig. 3). It was over 0.4 m wide and filled with dark grey silty clay (5012).

Foundation pit 5

- 3.1.6 A NE-SW aligned ditch (5014) was revealed (Fig. 3). It was over 0.6 m wide and filled with a dark grey silty clay (5015) that contained pottery dated to the 1st century AD and animal bone.

Pottery

- 3.1.7 Seven sherds of Roman pottery were recovered from the site. The assemblage was of mixed date and recovered from ditch fills and redeposited make-up layers. A south Gaulish ware platter dated to the later 1st or early 2nd century AD, while a sherd of handmade black-burnished ware from Dorset arrived during the mid 2nd century or afterwards. Context 5006 contained a white ware mortarium fragment from the Nene Valley, which reached the site between the mid 3rd and mid 4th centuries AD; a sherd of pink grogged ware, which was produced in the Towcester region (Taylor 2004), was found in the same context and was of similar date.
- 3.1.8 This small assemblage is broadly consistent in terms of date and typological range with pottery recovered from earlier phases of fieldwork (Biddulph 2004; Booth nd). Considered together, the pottery indicates activity in the area that spanned the 1st to at least the later 3rd century AD, although it is worth noting that no assemblage from the site has produced pottery that definitely indicates activity continuing into the 4th century.

Animal bones

- 3.1.9 Ten bones were recovered from the fills of two ditches. Two bones could be determined to species, cattle and horse. Gnawing marks were evident which were indicative of the presence of a dog. The radius and pelvis were fused, indicating adult or sub-adult individuals.

3.2 Palaeo-environmental remains

- 3.2.1 The deposits comprised ditch fills dating from the 1st to the 3rd centuries AD. The deposits were not fully excavated and environmental samples were not taken.

4 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

- 4.1.1 The results of the Watching Brief were limited by the relatively small size of the observation area. The bulk of the work involved monitoring the excavation of the foundation pads for the new building. Natural geology was not revealed to the north and west of the site, where natural gravel was exposed it was at the base of deep excavations. Any archaeological features were below the water table and the level of impact of the development. The Foundation pits were also narrow, the pads did not exceed 1.7 m in width, and the full dimensions of the exposed features could not be ascertained.
- 4.1.2 Despite the constraints of the work, the upper fills of the archaeological features provided good dating evidence and the results, when combined with the previous archaeological work, increase our understanding of the site.
- 4.1.3 It is clear that the revealed ditches form part of the early Roman field system identified in the 2004 evaluation (OA 2005). The features were revealed to the west of Evaluation 18 but did not extend into the Foundation pit.
- 4.1.4 Only limited work took place over the site of the Roman cemetery and no inhumations were revealed. The service trench was only 1.5 m wide and natural gravel was only revealed at its southern extent. It is likely that the trench was located in an area between the relatively well spaced burials.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1 ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXT INVENTORY

Context	Type	Width	Comments	Finds	Date
5000	other		Tip line		
5001	layer		Make-up layer	Pot	ROM
5002	other		Tip line		
5003	layer		Make-up layer	Pot	ROM
5004	layer		Natural gravel		
5005	Cut	more than 1.8 m	Ditch		
5006	Fill		Fill of ditch	Pot/Bone	250-350
5007	Cut	0.5 m	Ditch		
5008	Fill		Fill of ditch	Pot	125-410
5009	Cut	more than 0.5 m	Ditch		
5010	Fill		Fill of ditch		
5011	Cut	more than 0.5 m	Ditch		
5012	Fill		Fill of ditch		
5013	layer		Root disturbance		
5014	Cut	more than 0.5 m	Ditch		
5015	Fill		Fill of ditch	Pot/Bone	43-110

APPENDIX 2 POTTERY

By Edward Biddulph

Context	Sherds	Weight (g)	Comments	Context group date
5001	1	2	Shell-tempered ware body sherd	43-410
5003	2	7	Sandy grey ware body sherds	43-410
5006	1	213	Nene Valley white ware mortarium base sherd (AD 250-350)	250-350
	1	49	Pink grogged ware body sherd (AD 160-350)	
5008	1	919	?Black-burnished ware (BB1) body sherd	125-410
5015	1	30	South Gaulish samian ware platter footring (Drag. 18)	43-110
TOTAL	7	1220		

Seven sherds of Roman pottery were recovered from the site. The assemblage was of mixed date. A south Gaulish ware platter from context 5015 dated to the later 1st or early 2nd century AD, while a sherd of handmade black-burnished ware (context 5008) from Dorset arrived during the mid 2nd century or afterwards. Context 5006 contained a white ware mortarium fragment from the Nene Valley, which reached the site between the mid 3rd and mid 4th centuries AD; a sherd of pink grogged ware, which was produced in the Towcester region (Taylor 2004), was found in the same context and was of similar date. Pottery from contexts 5001 and 5003 could not be dated closely within the Roman period.

This small assemblage is broadly consistent in terms of date and typological range with pottery recovered from earlier phases of fieldwork (Biddulph 2004; Booth nd). Considered

together, the pottery indicates activity in the area that spanned the 1st to at least the later 3rd century AD, although it is worth noting that no assemblage from the site has produced pottery that definitely indicates activity continuing into the 4th century.

APPENDIX 3 ANIMAL BONES

By Lena Strid

The animal bones retrieved from contexts 5006 and 5015 comprised 10 bones from refitted fragments, Two bones could be determined to species (see table 1). Dog is implicitly present, judging from gnawing marks on a longbone. The radius and pelvis were fused, indicating adult or sub-adult individuals.

	Cattle	Horse	Large mammal	Indet.
Radius	1			
Pelvis		1		
Longbone			6	
Indet.			1	1
Total	1	1	7	1
Weight	47	252	41	7

Anatomical distribution of animal bones, including total fragment count and weight.

APPENDIX 4 BIBLIOGRAPHY AND REFERENCES

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APPENDIX 5 SUMMARY OF SITE DETAILS

Site name: Belvedere Nurseries, Fenny Stratford, Nr Milton Keynes, Buckinghamshire

Site code: FESTBN06

Grid reference: SP 8874 3395

Type of watching brief: Monitoring of the excavation of foundation pads and service
trenches

Date and duration of project: February to April 2006

Area of site: c 6 ha

Summary of results: Ditches forming part of an early Roman field system

Location of archive: The archive is currently held at OA, Janus House, Osney Mead, Oxford,
OX2 0ES, and will be deposited with Buckinghamshire County Museums Service in due
course, under the following accession number: AYBCM; 2000.24



1: 25,000

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Figure 1: Site Location

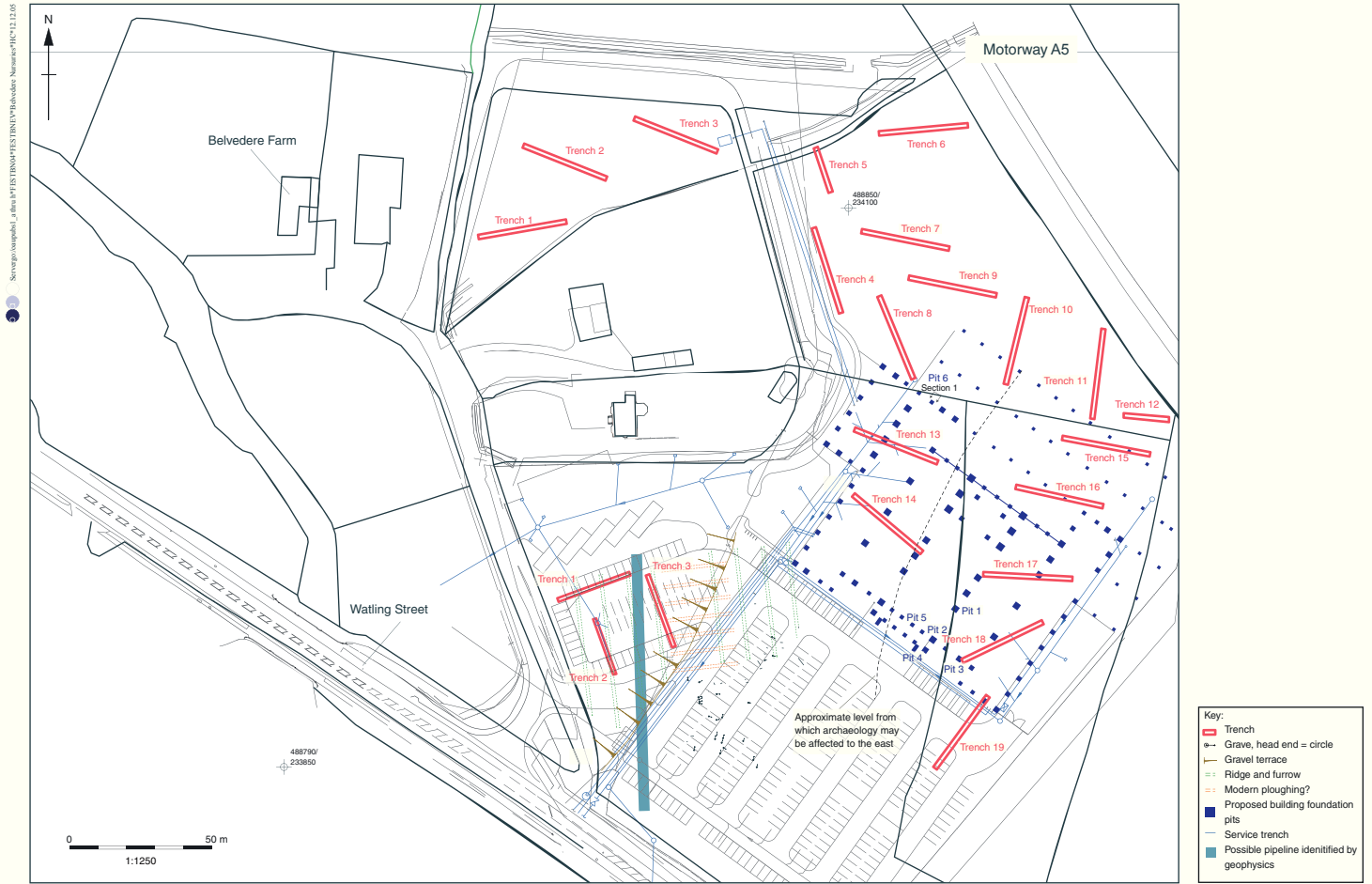


Figure 2: Area of Watching Brief, showing all known archaeological works

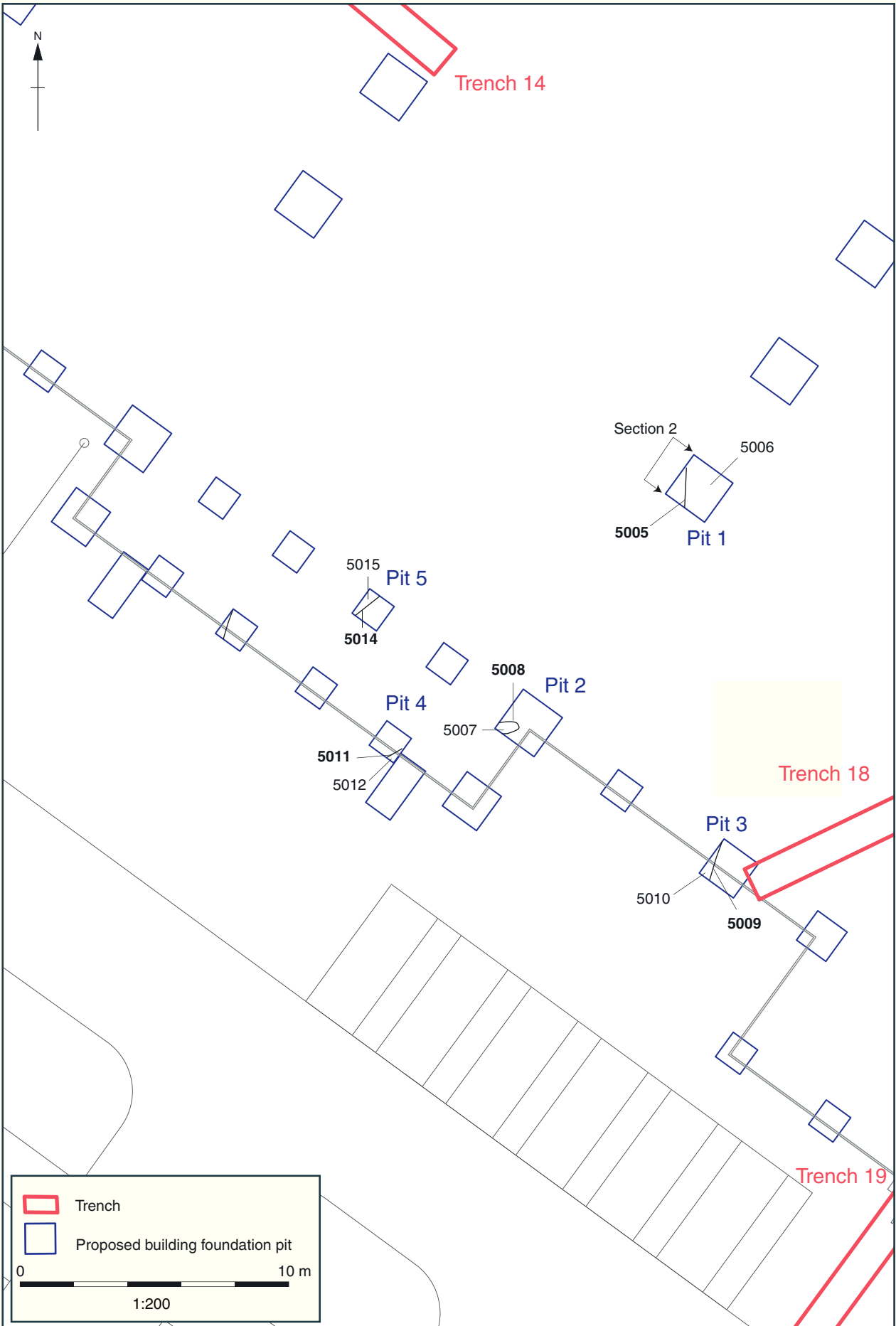
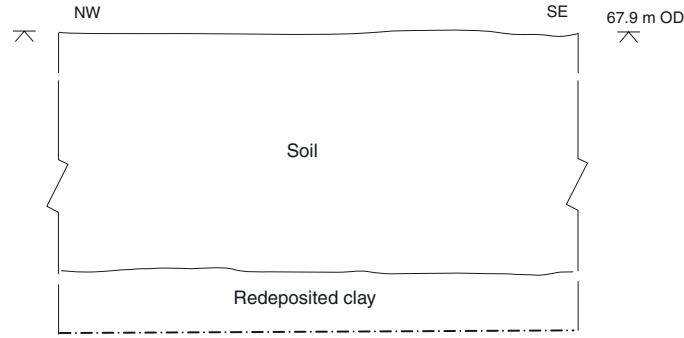


Figure 3: Foundation pits 1-5, plans

Foundation pit 6 Section 1



Foundation pit 1 Section 2

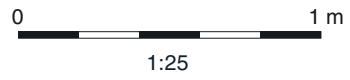
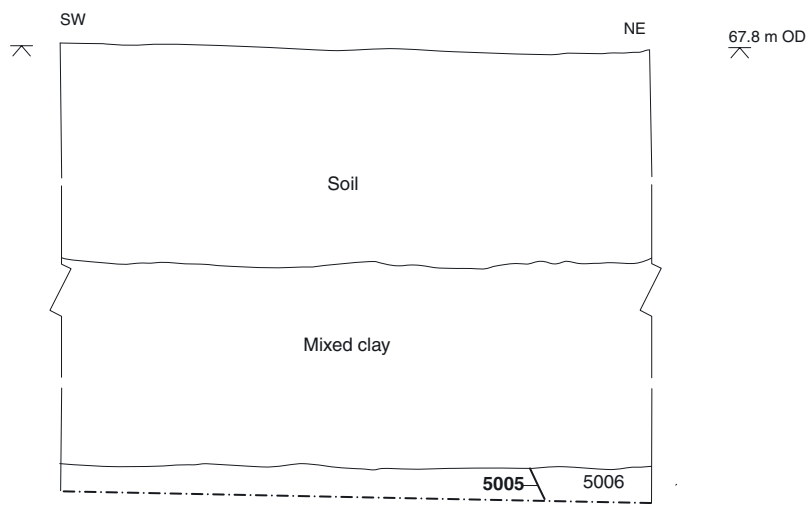


Figure 4: Sections



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