

Shenstone and Partners

The Church of St Peter and St Paul, Olney,  
Buckinghamshire

*NGR SP 4890 2509*

ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF REPORT



Oxford Archaeological Unit

May 1998

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Date: 3/6/98

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Date: 3/6/98

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Date: 15/6/1998

Oxford Archaeological Unit

May 1998

## *Summary*

*In May 1998 the Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) undertook a watching brief at the Church of St Peter and St Paul, Olney Buckinghamshire (NGR SP 4890 2509). The watching brief monitored the excavation of a French drain around the north side of the church, and two drain runs running north to two soakaways. The French drain revealed the foundations of the north wall of the church; the drain runs revealed graveyard soil and a small quantity of human charnel; the soakaways revealed graveyard soil to a depth exceeding 1.6 m, one grave cut and a substantial quantity of human charnel. All of the human bone was retained for reburial at the completion of works.*

### **1 Introduction**

The development proposal comprised excavations in advance of the provision of improved drainage around the north side of the church; this was monitored archaeologically in accordance with the terms of the Faculty granted by the Oxford Diocese.

The watching brief was commissioned by Shenstone and Partners, the project architects, on behalf of the Church, and was undertaken in consultation with the Diocesan Advisory Committee's Archaeological Advisor, Mr David Miles.

### **2 Background (Fig. 1 and cover illustration)**

The church of St Peter and St Paul lies at the south end of the town of Olney. The present building is believed to contain elements of a 12<sup>th</sup> century structure, but mainly dates from the 14<sup>th</sup> century. At this time the chancel was rebuilt and enlarged, the north and south aisles added and also the distinctive tower and spire.

The south aisle was almost completely rebuilt at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the entire building was extensively restored in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

This watching brief is further to one undertaken by the OAU at the church in late 1995 during renovation and rebuilding work inside the tower, and also during the excavation of new service trenches immediately to the north and west of the church (OAU 1996). Features associated with the periodic repair and refurbishment of the church were located inside the tower; externally, a buried graveyard soil was identified containing a substantial quantity of human charnel.

### **3 Aims**

The aims of the watching brief were to record any archaeological remains exposed on site during the course of the works to established standards (Wilkinson 1992), in order to secure the preservation by record of any archaeology, the presence and nature of which could not be established in advance.

#### 4 Methodology

One inspection visit was made to the church by prior arrangement with the contractor; human remains, when encountered, were discreetly handled, kept covered and retained for reburial at the completion of works.

Within the constraints imposed by Health and Safety considerations the deposits and features exposed were cleaned, inspected and recorded in plan, section and by colour slide and monochrome print photography. Written records were also made on proforma sheets. Soil descriptions use *estimated* percentages based on the use of standard charts for the approximation of percentage of inclusion types in soil deposits.

#### 5 Results (Figs 2 and 3)

The French drain was dug to a depth of 0.35 m below present ground surface, exposing the large limestone block foundations of the north wall of the church. Two deposits were revealed in section:

- (1) – topsoil; 0.13 m of mid gray silty clay loam with 10% medium-coarse subrounded gravel. This sealed;
- (2) – a mid brown/gray silty clay loam with 10% medium-coarse subrounded gravel, which remained consistent to the base of the cut.

Both drain runs, connecting the French drain to the soakaways, revealed (1) and (2); deposit (2) as seen in both of them produced a quantity of human charnel which was bagged and retained for reburial.

The eastern soakaway was excavated to a depth of 1.25 m, its section displaying the following:

- (1) – topsoil; 0.13 m of mid gray silty clay loam with 10% medium-coarse subrounded gravel, sealing;
- (2) – subsoil/graveyard soil; 0.64 m of mid brown/gray silty clay loam with 10% medium-coarse subrounded gravel, sealing;
- (3) – buried graveyard soil; dark gray silty clay loam with 5% coarse subangular gravel, consistent to the base of the cut.

Deposits (2) and (3) produced a substantial quantity of human charnel, all of which was bagged and kept covered in the soakaway itself prior to its reburial.

The western soakaway was excavated to a depth of 1.60 m, a higher ground level in this area necessitating a greater fall from the drain to the soakaway. Its section displayed the following:

- (1) – topsoil; 0.13 m of mid gray silty clay loam with 5% medium-coarse subrounded gravel, sealing;

(2) – subsoil/graveyard soil; 0.63 m of mid brown/gray silty clay loam with 15% fine-medium subrounded gravel, sealing:

(3) – buried graveyard soil; dark gray silty clay loam with 10% coarse subangular gravel, consistent to the base of the cut.

Deposits (2) and (3) had been much disturbed by grave digging, with one grave cut showing clearly at the upper horizon of deposit (3); both produced a substantial quantity of human charnel, with deposit (3) containing 12 skulls, all of which was bagged and kept covered as before, prior to its reburial.

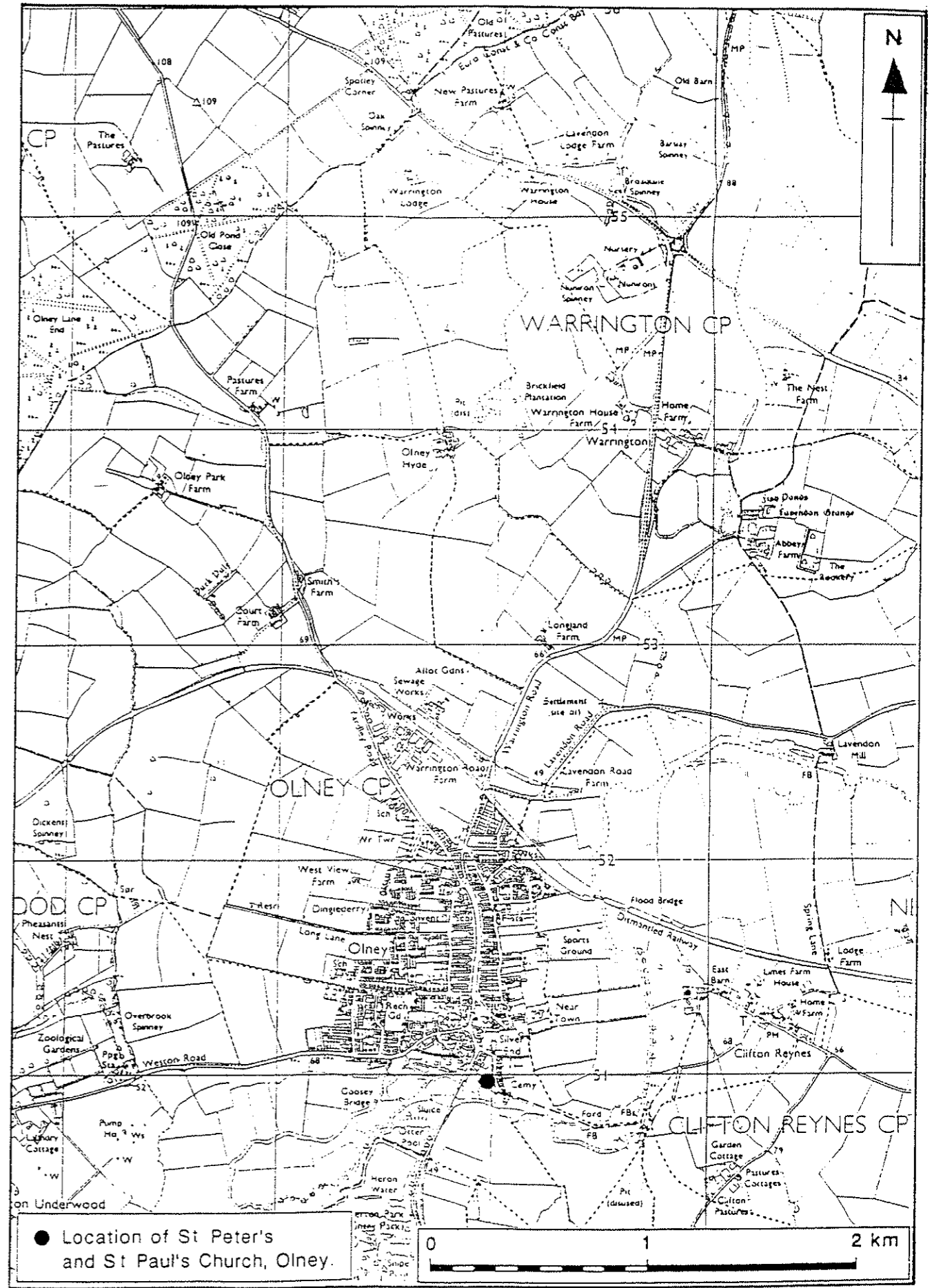
## **6 Discussion**

The watching brief identified and recorded deposits associated with the medieval graveyard of the church. The service trenches and soakaways did not reveal any significant archaeological deposits other than the buried graveyard soil. It was however observed that there was a greater occurrence of disturbed human bone in the soil to the west of the church than to the east. This may suggest that there has been a greater tradition of burial on this side of the church, correlating with the evidence of early graves and burial activity discovered beneath the tower in the course of the previous watching brief (OAU 1996).

## **References.**

OAU 1996 St Peter and St Paul's Church, Olney, Buckinghamshire. Archaeological Watching Brief Report.

Wilkinson, D (ed) 1992 Oxford Archaeological Unit Field Manual, (First edition, August 1992).



SP 85/95  
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Figure 1

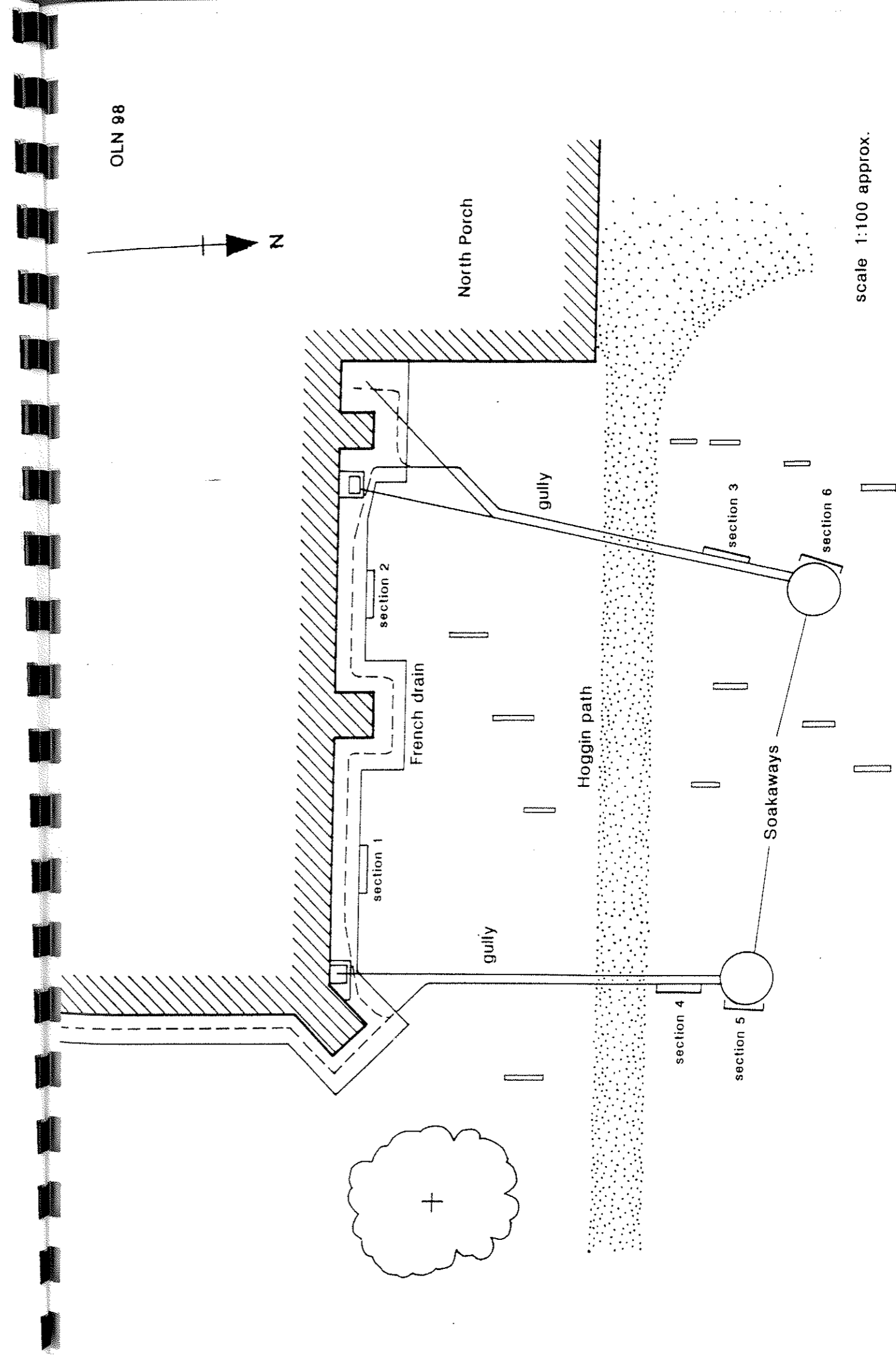
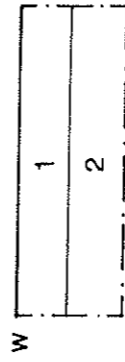


Figure 2

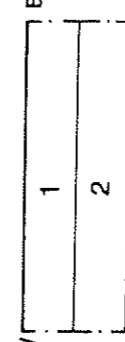
OLN 98

French drain

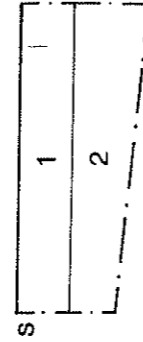
Section 1



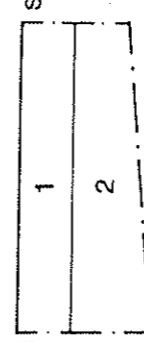
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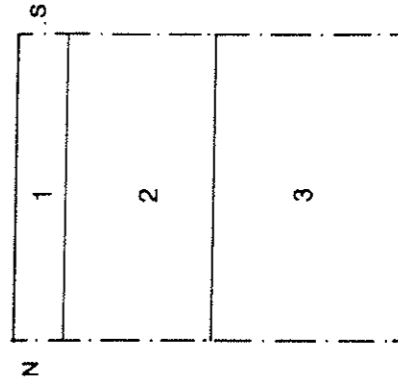
Section 3



Section 4



Section 5  
East soakaway



Section 6  
West soakaway

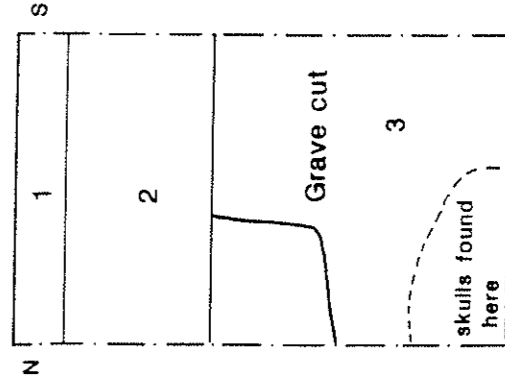


Figure 3





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