

New Drainage Works  
St James Church  
Somerton  
Oxfordshire



**Archaeological  
Watching Brief Report**



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# St James Church, Somerton, Oxfordshire

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## SUMMARY

*In September and October 2008, Oxford Archaeology (OA) carried out an archaeological watching brief at St James Church, Somerton, Oxfordshire (NGR: SP 4965 2860). The work was commissioned by the Parochial Church Council in advance of the installation of new drains along all four sides of the church. The watching brief revealed deposits of made ground probably originating during the construction of the north aisle in the 14th-century and from the restoration of the church in the 1850s, including the addition of the buttresses. Also exposed were probable 19th/early 20th-century repairs to the foundation plinth of the south wall of the south aisle. A burial predating the construction of the chapel was encountered, together with an 18th-century brick vault.*

## 1 INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Scope of work

1.1.1 In September and October 2008, Oxford Archaeology (OA) carried out an archaeological watching brief at St James Church, Somerton, Oxfordshire (NGR: SP 4965 2860). The work was commissioned by the Parochial Church Council in advance of the installation of new drains along all four sides of the church.

1.1.2 A project design was agreed between OA and the PCC prior to the commencement of works.

### 1.2 Location, geology and topography

1.2.1 The village of Somerton lies approximately 14 km south-east of the town of Banbury (Fig. 1). The Church is located on the western edge of the village and is sited on a west facing ridge of high ground sloping down towards the River Cherwell at approximately 101 m above OD. The underlying geology is a ridge of clay overlying clay, silts and siltstone (Geological Survey of Great Britain, sheet no. 218)

### 1.3 Archaeological and historical background

1.3.1 *The following is an edited history of Somerton and the Church of St James taken from the Victoria History of the County of Oxford, volume VI.*

1.3.2 The name Somerton derives from the old English *Sumortun* meaning “farm used in summer”. The presence of a good water supply (from both the River Cherwell and nearby springs) would have provided good pasture for cattle in the summer months when the uplands in the area were subject to drought. By 1086 the community at Somerton included 9 plough teams and over 130 acres of meadow and pasture. It is probable that this settlement and the later medieval village lay to the south of the church. In a field to the north-east of the church, mounds and fishponds marking the site of the medieval castle of the de Greys can be seen sloping down to the river and 13th-century pottery was recovered from this area in 1954. By the 16th and 17th

centuries the village had moved to its present position astride the road leading from Ardley to the east and North Aston to the west.

- 1.3.3 The church of St James is stone-built and comprises a chancel, clerestoried nave, north aisle, south chapel north porch and western tower. All that remains of the original 12th-century church is a blocked up doorway in the centre of the south wall of the nave. The north aisle was added in the late 12th or early 13th-century and is separated from the nave by an arcade of four arches carried on circular columns. A single late 13th-century window indicates that the chancel was probably rebuilt in this period, but the sedilia and other windows date from the 14th-century. The east window and the chancel arch are 19th-century restorations.
- 1.3.4 On the south side of the nave are two 14th-century arches which indicate that a south aisle preceded the existing chapel. The spring of another unfinished arch shows that a third bay was intended but never built. Square-headed windows were inserted later in the east and west walls. The tower dates from the late 14th-century, but the battlements and pinnacles were added in the 15th-century. The clerestory and a battlemented parapet were added to the nave and aisles in the late 15th or early 16th-centuries, possibly before the Fermor chantry was built, and the tie-beam roof of the nave dates from the same period.
- 1.3.5 At the beginning of the 16th-century the east end of the south aisle was probably lengthened and converted into a chantry by William Fermor. He inserted new windows, made a new entrance, and built the present round-headed arch which gives access to the aisle from the chantry. The original high pitched chancel roof survived until the beginning of the 19th-century and was replaced c1811 by a flat one. At the same time the east window was lowered.
- 1.3.6 In 1854 £75 was spent on repairs to the church, when the chancel arch was rebuilt and new flooring put down. By 1889 the church was reported to be unsafe by the architect J.D.Sedding, and the church was conservatively restored at a cost of approximately £2,500. In addition to the repairs to the nave and the roof, a buttress was added to the north wall of the chancel.

## 2 PROJECT AIMS AND METHODOLOGY

### 2.1 Aims

- 2.1.1 To identify and record the presence or absence, extent, condition, quality and date of archaeological remains in the areas affected by the development.
- 2.1.2 To preserve by record any archaeological features or deposits that may be disturbed or destroyed during the course of any groundworks.
- 2.1.3 To make available the results of the archaeological investigation.

## 2.2 Methodology

- 2.2.1 The watching brief was undertaken as series of site visits during works that were likely to impinge or damage any potential archaeological deposits or features.
- 2.2.2 A plan showing the extent of any excavations was maintained at a scale of 1:100 (Fig. 2, Site plan) and any recorded sections were drawn at a scale of 1:20. All excavations, any features and any recorded sections were photographed using digital photography, colour slide and black and white print film. A general photographic record of the work was also made. Recording followed procedures detailed in the *OA Field Manual* (ed D Wilkinson, 1992).

## 3 RESULTS

### 3.1 Description of deposits

#### *North side of Church*

- 3.1.1 These excavations consisted of a 0.5 m wide by 0.9 m to 1.2 m deep trench along the base of the chancel, north aisle and porch for the installation of a “French Drain” (Fig: 2, Site plan).
- 3.1.2 At the base of the trench a layer of orange-brown silt clay containing many sub-angular stone fragments (4) (Fig. 3, Sections 1, 2 and 3) was encountered at a depth of 0.8 m below the current ground level at the eastern end of the church, rising to 0.5 m below ground level at the western end. This deposit was very clean and represents a layer of undisturbed natural.
- 3.1.3 Layer 4 was overlaid by a 0.3 m - 0.4 m deep layer of dark yellow-brown clay silt which also contained many sub-angular stone fragments as well as flecking of orange brown sandy clay and grey-brown silts (3). The disturbed nature of this layer suggests that it may be an earlier churchyard soil horizon.
- 3.1.4 Within the area of the north aisle this was sealed by a 0.25 m deep layer of dark yellow-brown clay silt (5) (Fig. 3, Sections 2 and 3). This deposit contained stone fragments, charcoal and lime mortar inclusions and produced fragments of charnel suggesting that it is a later churchyard soil horizon. It may also represent the material excavated when the north aisle was added to the nave.
- 3.1.5 Sealing layer 5 and layer 3 at the eastern end of the site was a 0.18 m deep layer of pale yellow-brown silt containing many angular stone fragments and lenses of lime mortar (2). This deposit produced fragments of bottle glass, creamware pottery and 2 fragments of clay pipe suggesting a 19th-century origin and is probably a construction layer associated with the 1889 restoration of the church.
- 3.1.6 Overlying this construction layer was a 0.2 m deep layer of dark grey-brown clay loam (1), a landscaping layer of topsoil and turf.



*East of the church*

- 3.1.7 The trenching across the eastern end of the chancel measured 0.8 m wide by 0.6 m deep (Fig. 2). The depth of trenching increased to 0.8 m deep as it passed along the eastern of the chantery.
- 3.1.8 A continuation of the churchyard soil (3) was encountered at a depth of 0.3 m below the current ground level (Fig. 3, Section 4). This was overlaid by a 0.15 m deep continuation of the construction layer (2), which was sealed by the present day topsoil and turf, the landscaping layer (1).

*Trenching south of the chantry, south chapel and tower*

- 3.1.9 These works consisted of the removal of the existing brick drainage channel adjacent to the chantry and chapel base, and excavation of a 0.6 m wide trench, 0.8 m deep at the south-west corner of the chapel and beside the tower, lowering to 1 m at the south-east corner of the chantry (Fig.2, Site plan).
- 3.1.10 A continuation of layer 4 was observed in the trenching alongside the chantry and south aisle (Fig. 3, Sections 5 and 6). This was overlaid by the earlier churchyard soil (2) and by the present day topsoil and turf (1).
- 3.1.11 Approximately in the centre of the chapel/chantry wall a shaft burial was encountered (6) (Fig. 2). The construction cut (9) for this feature was visible in the surface of layer 3. The coffin-shaped brick vault measured 2.6 m long by 1 m wide and had been trench-built within the cut. The vault had been constructed using hand moulded red bricks measuring 0.225 m x 0.105 m x 0.063 m laid using a flemish bond and lime mortar. The northern edge of the vault butted the foundations of the south wall in places. The brick size suggests a late 18th or early 19th-century date. The vault had been backfilled with a yellow-brown clay (12), with the present day churchyard soil (1) sealing the brickwork and fill. The backfill was excavated down to a depth of 0.6 m below the edge of the brickwork, but no inhumation was encountered. Presumably the shaft had originally been topped with a monument or slab. No evidence for this had been visible in the present day churchyard and it is probable that it had been removed as evidence for it having collapsed into the shaft was observed during the excavation.
- 3.1.12 While trenching along the western wall of the south chapel a burial (10) was observed in layer 4. This was aligned east-west and contained an articulated adult skeleton (10) at a depth of 0.7 m below the current ground level. The skeleton had been truncated just below the ribcage by the west wall of the south chapel suggesting that the burial is 14th-century or earlier. The grave cut was sealed by the churchyard soil 3.
- 3.1.13 The trenching along the south walls of the nave and tower showed that this area had been disturbed, possibly during the 19th-century restoration of the church or during installation of an earlier heating system whose flue could be seen emerging through

the south wall of the nave. The base of the trench exposed a layer of grey-brown silty loam (8), 0.55 m below the current ground level, possibly an early layer of churchyard soil, or a levelling deposit (Fig. 3, Section 7). This was overlaid by a 0.35 m deep layer of dark yellow-brown clay silt (7) containing many small to medium angular stone fragments, possibly construction debris ? The current churchyard soil (1) completed the sequence.

### 3.2 Finds

3.2.1 Dating evidence (glass, pottery and clay pipe stem) was only recovered from the construction layer 2. This was of 19th-century date and is probably associated with the restoration of the church. The presence of these finds were recorded but they were not retained. Numerous fragments of sub-angular brick were observed within the churchyard soil (3), but were not retained.

### 3.3 Palaeo-environmental remains

3.3.1 No deposits suitable for palaeo-environmental sampling were encountered during the course of the watching brief.

## 4 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

4.1.1 The watching brief showed that the continuous use of the churchyard has led to a raising of the ground level, particularly around the eastern end of the church. This continuous use has led to the formation of four distinct phases of churchyard soil, Layers 1, 3, 5 and 8. While only a small amount of dating evidence was recovered during the course of the watching brief it is possible to tentatively date these deposits by their relationship to the church.

4.1.2 Layer 8 may represent a buried medieval topsoil horizon sealed by a later landscaping layer, (7). Layer 3 seals the 14th-century burial 10 and is cut by the 18th/19th century shaft burial 6, suggesting that it dates to the late medieval/ early post-medieval periods.

4.1.3 Layer 5 may represent a layer of redeposited material cast up either during the construction of the north aisle but is more likely to be associated with the 19th-century construction of the buttresses along the north and east sides of the church

4.1.4 Layer 1 represents the current churchyard soil and is 19th and 20th-century in origin.

4.1.5 Only two inhumations were encountered during the course of the watching brief. Burial 10 predates the construction of the chapel and can be dated to the 14th-century or earlier, while the construction of the brick vault 6 suggests an 18th or 19th-century date. It is probable that the build up of churchyard soils has raised the ground level such that the drainage works did not impact upon the majority of the earlier burials.

## APPENDICES

## APPENDIX 1 ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXT INVENTORY

<i>Context</i>	<i>Type</i>	<i>Depth</i>	<i>Width</i>	<i>Comments</i>	<i>Finds</i>	<i>Date</i>
1	Layer	0.18 m	-	Topsoil and turf	Brick, bottle glass	C19th/ C20th
2	Layer	0.18 m	-	Construction debris	Stone fragments, mortar lens	C19th
3	Layer	0.35 m	-	Churchyard soil	Brick	C14th/ C19th
4	Layer	> 0.4 m	-	Natural colluvium	-	-
5	Layer	0.3 m	-	Redeposited material	-	C19th
6	Structure	> 0.4 m	1 m	Brick built vault	-	C18th/ C19th
7	Layer	0.25 m- 0.35 m	-	Made ground, levelling deposit	Brick, stone	C18th/ C19th
8	Layer	> 0.1 m	-	Earlier churchyard soil	-	-
9	Cut	> 0.4 m	1 m	Construction cut for shaft burial 6	-	C18th/ C19th
10	Skeleton	-	-	Articulated adult burial	-	Pre C14th
11	Cut	0.3 m	0.9 m	Grave cut	-	Pre C14th
12	Fill	> 0.4 m	1 m	Backfill of brick vault 6	-	C19th ?

## APPENDIX 2 BIBLIOGRAPHY AND REFERENCES

IFA, 2001 *Standard and Guidance for Archaeological Watching Briefs*

OAU, 1992 *Field Manual* (ed. D Wilkinson)

Victoria History of the County of Oxford Vol.VI (ed. R.B.Pugh, 1969)

## APPENDIX 3 SUMMARY OF SITE DETAILS

**Site name:** St James Church, Somerton, Oxfordshire

**Site code:** SOSJCH 08

**Grid reference:** SP 4965 2860

**Type of watching brief:** Machine and hand excavation of new drainage trenches

**Date and duration of project:** 30th April to 2nd May 2008, 3 site visits

**Area of site:** 300 m<sup>2</sup>

**Summary of results:** The watching brief exposed

**Location of archive:** The archive is currently held at OA, Janus House, Osney Mead, Oxford, OX2 0ES, and will be deposited with Oxfordshire County Museums Service in due course under the following accession number :OXCMS:2008.113





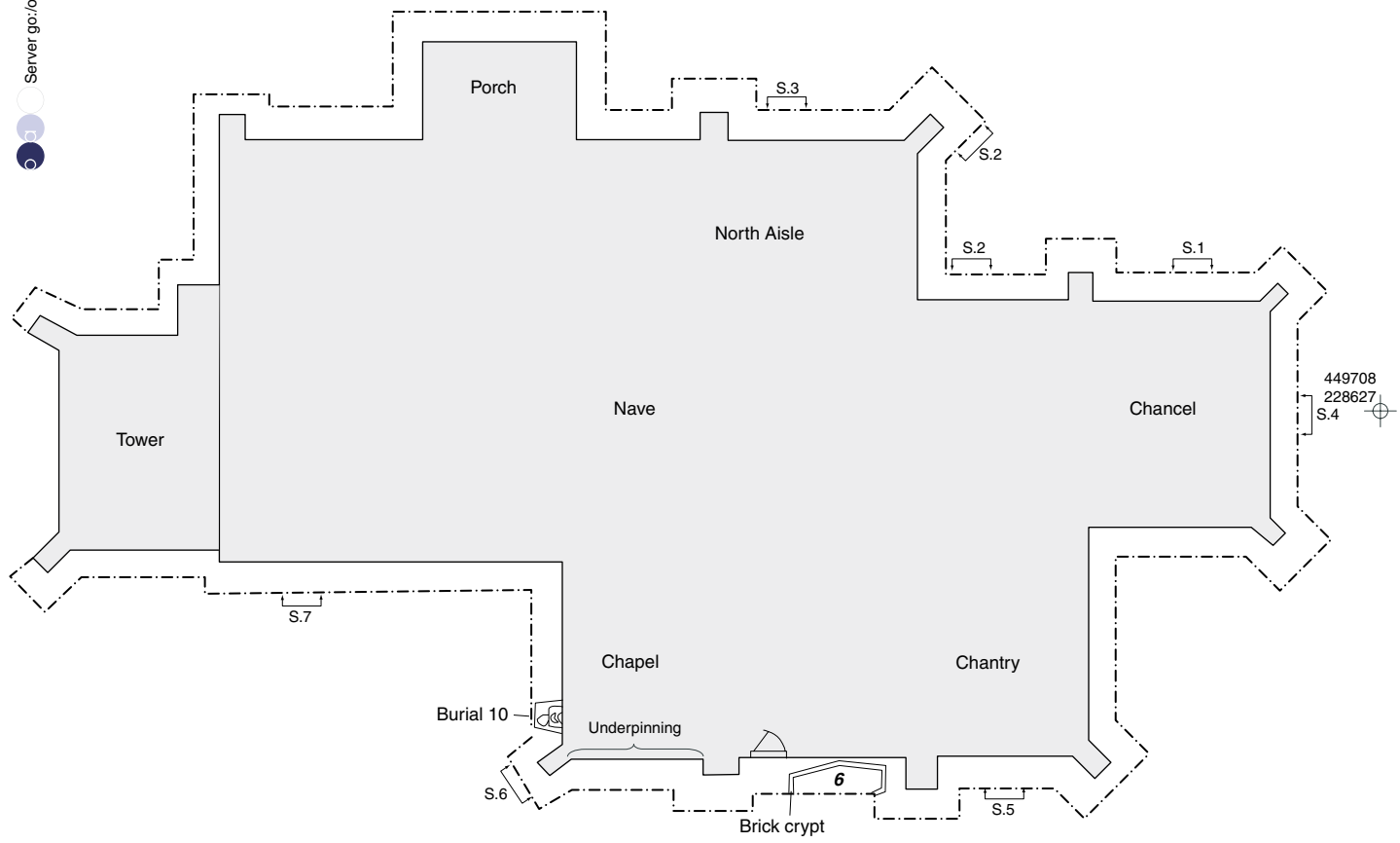


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Figure 1: Site location



449667  
228635



449708  
228627

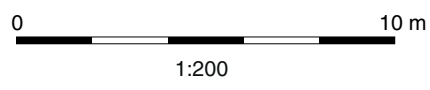


Figure 2 : Site plan showing location of sections

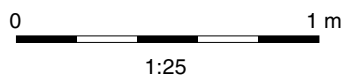
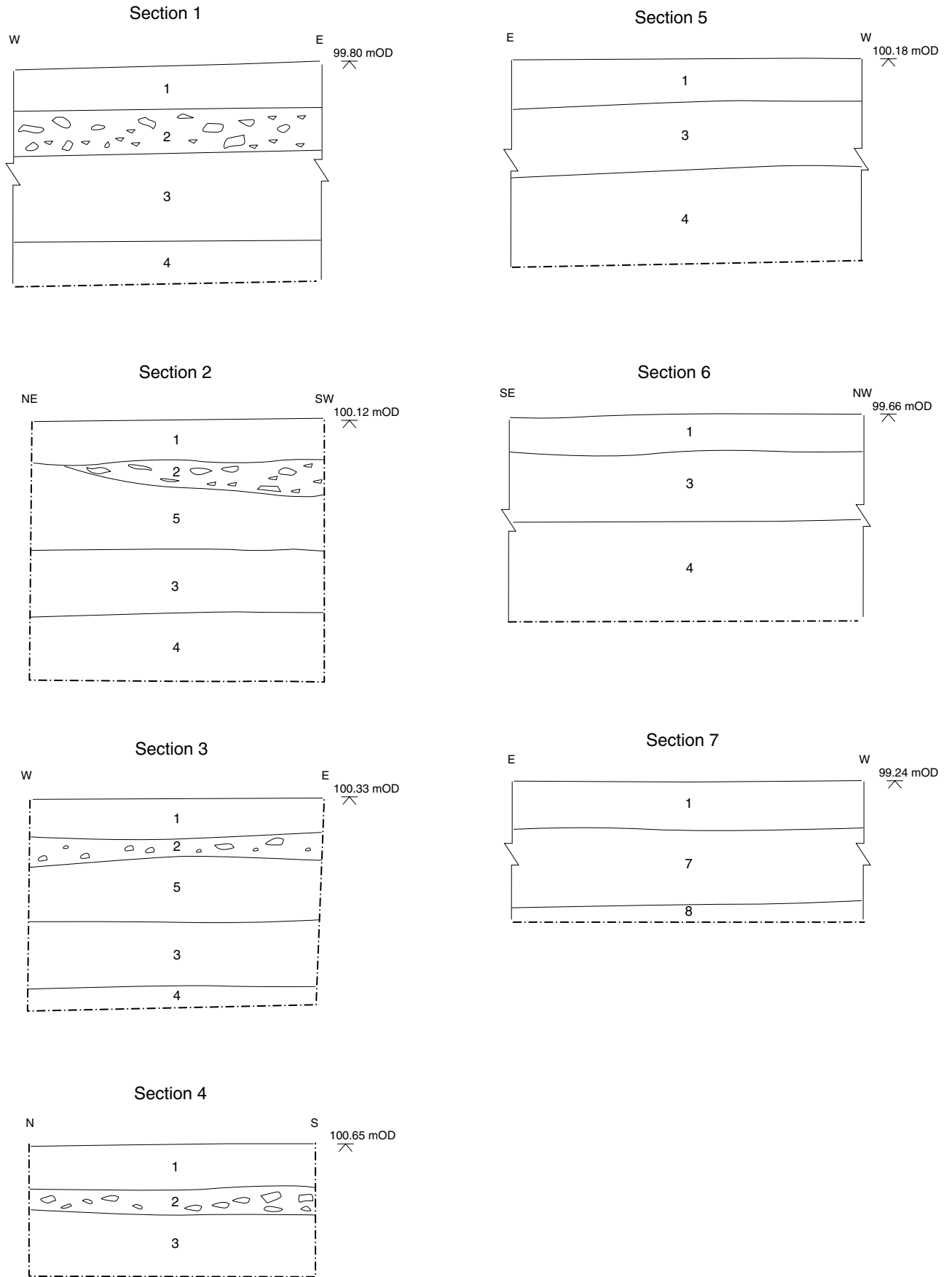


Figure 3 : Sections