

CgMs Consulting on behalf of St. Michael's Parochial Parish Council

St Michael's Church, Bishop's Stortford, Hertfordshire

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION REPORT

NGR TL 486 213

Planning reference: 3/98/1055/FP

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St Michael's Church, Bishop's Stortford, Hertfordshire

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION

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SUMMARY

The Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) carried out a field evaluation at St Michael's Church, Bishop's Stortford for CgMs Consulting, on behalf of St Michael's Parochial Church Council (PCC). The evaluation revealed an intensive sequence of inter-cutting burials, including two brick-built burial vaults. No evidence for an earlier church was identified.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Location and Scope of Work

1.1.1 In October and November 2000, OAU carried out a field evaluation at St Michael's Church, Bishop's Stortford, for CgMs Consulting on behalf of St Michael's Parochial Church Council (PCC). The evaluation was carried out in response to a planning application for a new Parish Hall (planning application reference 3/98/1055/FP) and to a brief set by, and a WSI agreed with the County Archaeology Office of Hertfordshire County Council. The development site is situated within the graveyard of St Michael's Church immediately adjacent to Church Street, and is approximately 0.04 hectares in area (Figures 1 and 2).

1.2 Geology and Topography

1.2.1 The site lies on an underlying drift geology consisting mainly of glacial Boulder Clay (with occasional outcrops of Reading Beds in the area to the north and west of the town centre) at approximately 75 m above OD. The site is currently used as a graveyard containing several mature trees, and is raised above the level of the road by some 2 m.

1.3 Archaeological and Historical Background

1.3.1 The archaeological background to the site has been the subject of a separate desk study in response to the current application (Hertfordshire Archaeological Trust 1999) and is briefly summarised below.

1.3.2 A settlement at Stortford was first recorded in the Domesday book of 1086, although the only archaeological finds of Saxon date are a pair of spearheads. A priest was mentioned in Stortford, suggesting that a church existed at that time. While it is not certain that the late medieval church was built on the same site as the earlier structure, this was generally the case elsewhere. Following the Conquest, the late Saxon manor of Stortford became the property of the Bishops of London, who kept it until the 19th century. Stortford became fairly prosperous during the Middle Ages, in particular due to the presence of leather and tanning industries. The industrial focus subsequently changed towards brewing and malting, and the town has grown rapidly since the mid 18th century.

- 1.3.3 The desk-based assessment also included a detailed survey of the area of the graveyard which would be affected by the proposed development scheme. This survey recorded all the surviving grave memorials in this area and where possible correlated memorial inscriptions with the burial register for the church.
- 1.3.4 The graveyard survey recorded 36 grave memorials which, based on the evidence from memorial inscriptions and the church burial register, commemorate approximately 100 historically recorded individuals buried in this area of the graveyard from about 1735 until 1840, with only a few burials after the latter date.
- 1.3.5 The assessment also suggested that many more unrecorded and earlier burials are likely to have been located within this part of the graveyard, although the date from which this part of the churchyard was first used for burials, and the extent to which such remains have been disturbed or truncated by the later interments was not known. The assessment also highlighted the potential for the site to contain structural remains relating to a church predating the predominantly late medieval church which currently stands on the site.

2 EVALUATION AIMS

- To define the extent, historical development and archaeological potential of the cemetery
- To define the depth and density of burials
- To determine the level of preservation of burials
- To define the range of burial practice within the cemetery
- To identify the range and level of preservation of coffins and associated fittings
- To define the types of vaults and brick-built shaft graves and to ascertain their depth
- To recover an osteological sample which represents a cross-section of the community
- To identify named individuals within the proposed evaluation trenches
- To define the number of burials likely to be affected by the road construction
- To make available the results of the investigation

3 EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

3.1 Scope of Fieldwork

- 3.1.1 The evaluation consisted of three trenches located within the footprint of the proposed development (Figure 2), and of slightly varying sizes due to restrictions on their excavation because of the presence of gravestones. (A Faculty is in place and this governs the exhumation of human remains, the removal of tombstones and other memorials and the excavation and removal of grave goods or personal effects.) Trench 1 was 3 m by 2.9 m, Trench 2 was 3.3 m by 1.8 m, and Trench 3 was 2.5 m by 2.2 m.

3.2 Fieldwork Methods and Recording

- 3.2.1 The initial overburden was carefully removed under close archaeological supervision, by a mini digger fitted with a toothless bucket. Machining stopped before any burials were reached, and all subsequent excavation was carried out by hand.
- 3.2.2 Hand excavation of the trenches continued until the uppermost burials were encountered, and the deposits were then carefully cleaned. The human remains encountered were then subject to detailed recording, comprising the compilation of written, drawn, and photographic records. All inhumations were planned at a scale of 1:10, and photographed by both black and white print and colour slide photography. The stratigraphic and juxtapositional records of all human remains were compiled with sufficient detail and precision to ensure that, in the event of further investigation, the excavation records can be securely tied-in with the records from the evaluation trenches.
- 3.2.3 As none of the articulated human remains encountered were fully exposed by the trenches, they (and the coffin fittings) were all left *in situ* to avoid partially removing burials. All human remains were treated with due care and attention and mindful of the sensitivities of parishioners and other members of the local community. The entire area was protected from public view using Heras fencing with attached screening.
- 3.2.4 An auger was then used in Trenches 2 and 3 to determine the likely maximum depth of the burials.
- 3.2.5 All techniques, recording systems and sampling procedures conformed with the guidelines set down in Methods Statement No.1 - *Standards and Practices for Archaeological Excavation of Exploratory Trenches*, as indicated in the brief and also according to standard OAU procedures (Wilkinson 1992).
- 3.2.6 All excavation of human remains was carried out under the guidance of an osteological specialist in accordance with Excavation and Post-Excavation Treatment of Cremated and Inhumed Human remains. (*IFA Technical Paper Number 13*) - J. I. McKinley & C Roberts

3.3 Finds

- 3.3.1 Finds were recovered by hand during the course of the excavation and generally bagged by context. Finds of special interest were given a unique small find number. However, coffin fittings were not removed from graves, but were left *in situ*.

4 RESULTS: GENERAL

4.1 Soils and Ground Conditions

4.1.1 The site is located on well drained chalky soils, and ground conditions were good.

4.2 Distribution of Archaeological Deposits

4.2.1 As expected, a sequence of soils representing charnel deposits or grave fills were encountered in all trenches. In most cases individual grave cuts could not be identified, and they had to be inferred from the skeletal and coffin remains. This is symptomatic of an area which has been used for burials over a long period. As well as the relatively intensive sequence of intercutting graves, two brick-built burial vaults were also discovered. All the burials encountered were aligned east-west and the skeletons appear to have been placed in a supine extended position.

5 RESULTS: DESCRIPTIONS

5.1 Description of Deposits

Trench 1

- 5.1.1 Excavation terminated in Trench 1 when a small burial vault or brick-built grave (103) was revealed in the centre of the trench, and a much smaller part of a similar structure (106) was exposed in the north-west corner of the trench (Figure 3). Both structures were constructed from bricks measuring 0.22 by 0.65 by 0.11 m, although the handmade bricks used in structure (103) appeared older than those used in the second construction. The rest of the trench contained a very disturbed charnel-like deposit (100), which is likely to represent the upper parts of a number of different grave fills, although no grave cuts could be discerned. no such brick structures were encountered in Trenches 2 or 3.

Trench 2

- 5.1.2 Trench 2 was excavated until the first articulated human remains were observed, and at this level three partial skeletons were exposed. Skeleton (204) extended into the trench from the east facing section, and was revealed from just above the pelvis to the feet (Figure 4). Two coffin handles (218) were identified as of Type 2a (Reeve and Adam 1993), and were found on the left side of the skeleton. Grips of this type were in use between 1763 and 1837.
- 5.1.3 South of this another skeleton (207) was uncovered protruding from the same section, this time visible from just below the pelvis to the bottom of the legs (Figure 4). In this case the feet had either been truncated, or were not preserved, and the grave was obviously truncated to the north by (214) because the left femur was absent. A single coffin handle of Type 1 (Reeve and Adam 1993) was present (219) next to the right leg. This style of coffin fitting was in use between 1747 and 1847.
- 5.1.4 The remains of a third burial (206) were found immediately to the south of (207), but the relationship between the two could not be established (Figure 3). Burial (206) had been truncated at least twice, because the right hand side of the remains were absent, as was the left hand side from above the tibia. None of the cuts associated with these burials ((200), (213), and (212) respectively) could be seen clearly. The rest of trench 2 contained a very mixed deposit (202), which was similar to (100), and which is likely to represent the upper fills of numerous other intercutting graves, all with unidentifiable cuts.

Trench 3

- 5.1.5 The excavation of Trench 3 (Figure 5) revealed the lower legs and feet of three burials protruding from the east facing section (302), (301), and (300). The cuts associated with these burials were faintly visible, (304), (306), and (308)

respectively, and their relationships showed that (304) was the earliest and (308) was the latest. The earliest of these contained a Type 2b (Reeve and Adams 1993) coffin handle (321) at the feet end (dating from between 1763 to 1837), and the right leg was absent, suggesting truncation to this side.

- 5.1.6 At least four other grave cuts were identified in this trench (310), (312), (314), and (317), although of these only (317) had human remains visible at this level. Two of these graves were inter-cutting (312) and (314), and these also cut the sequence of three burials to the west described in paragraph 5.1.5.

5.2 Auger Results

- 5.2.1 The use of an auger in Trenches 2 and 3 revealed that deposits likely to represent grave fills (i.e. bone was present), existed to a significant depth below ground level.
- 5.2.2 In Trench 2 the auger reached natural deposits at a depth of 1.85 m below ground level. However, in Trench 3 the auger reached a maximum depth of 2.09 m below ground level before hitting an impenetrable object in Auger Hole 1. Elsewhere in Trench 3, the auger reached a layer probably representing colluvium, at a depth of 2.30 m below ground level in Auger Hole 2 and 2.35 m in Auger Hole 3. These results suggest that the depth of burials may vary somewhat, but that graves can be expected at up to 2.35 m below the current ground level.

5.3 Finds

Small finds

- 5.3.1 Charnel deposit (100) produced a George III coin (1760-1820).

Coffin fittings

- 5.3.2 Four iron coffin fittings partially representing the remains of three coffins were recorded, and were then left *in situ*. These fittings were categorised according to the types identified at Christ Church, Spitalfields (Reeve and Adams 1993).
- 5.3.3 Coffin (218) consisted of two grips of Type 2a, dating from between 1763 and 1837 (Reeve and Adams 1993). These were located at the pelvis and foot on the left side, with the right side having been truncated, and the upper part not exposed in the trench.
- 5.3.4 Coffin (219) consisted of a single Type 1 grip in poor condition, positioned at the right hip. This style of fitting dates from between 1747 and 1847 (Reeve and Adams 1993).
- 5.3.5 Coffin (321) consisted of a Type 2b grip at the foot end of the burial, with the rest of the coffin beyond the trench. This style of fitting dates from between 1763 and 1837 (CBA 1993).

Other finds

- 5.3.6 Three small sherds of post-medieval glazed pottery, and a single fragment of post-medieval clay pipe were recovered from charnel deposit (202).

6 DISCUSSION AND INTERPRETATION

6.1 Reliability of Field Investigation

6.1.1 As is often the case in cemetery excavations, the tops of the cuts of individual burials were impossible to identify in plan. Relationships between graves could only be established by observing that one burial was truncated by another. However, because the skeletal remains and coffin fittings were generally reasonably well preserved, evidence of one burial being truncated by another was usually fairly clear at the level of the human /coffin remains. Above this level the fills of the inter-cutting graves could not be distinguished, and were collectively identified as a very mixed charnel deposit.

6.1.2 Of the three burials dated by their coffin fittings (200), (213) and (304), only 304 had a nearby grave marker. However the single coffin fitting gave a date for this burial of between 1763 and 1837, whereas the grave marker recorded a date of 1735. This discrepancy could be caused by the misidentification of the coffin fitting, but could also suggest the subsequent positioning of an earlier grave marker on the grave. Alternatively the coffin fitting in question may actually have a wider period of circulation than that identified at Christ Church, particularly as the stratigraphic relationships between graves (304), (306), and (308) identified in Trench 3, matches the sequence recorded on the nearest grave markers (Hertfordshire Archaeological Trust numbers 108, 107, and 106 respectively) (Figure 2). A further possible explanation is that the coffin fitting is from a later (and unidentified) grave to the east or south of grave (304).

6.2 Overall Interpretation

Summary of results

6.2.1 The desk-based assessment (Hertfordshire Archaeological Trust 1999) suggested that burials earlier than those represented by the gravestones may also be encountered in the development area. This study also highlighted the possibility that structural remains related to an earlier church may be preserved within the area of the proposed development.

6.2.2 Bone preservation was variable, ranging from poor to good. In every case only the bones of the legs were recovered and therefore only limited osteological information could be recovered. This is summarised in Appendix 1.

- 6.2.3 This evaluation exercise has shown that as well as the latest graves, a dense sequence of earlier burials do exist in this part of the graveyard, and it appears that they demonstrate differing degrees of truncation.
- 6.2.4 The auger results demonstrate that graves are present down to 2.35 m below ground level, although this depth may vary across the site. The average depth from ground level down to the uppermost human/coffin remains was 1.2 m. Therefore these results suggest a vertical thickness of at least 1.1 m containing human remains. If we assume a build-up of around 0.15 m for each 'layer' of burials, then we may expect a minimum of one and possibly as many as three or four layers of burials in this part of the graveyard.
- 6.2.5 The existing grave markers record approximately 55 individuals in this part of the churchyard. However, it is difficult to attain a precise figure as some of the inscriptions were illegible, and may commemorate more than one person; conversely in some cases it seemed likely that two gravestones may be commemorating the same individual. Graves 99 and 104, and graves 132 and 135 (Hertfordshire Archaeological Trust numbers) are examples of this (Figure 2). In both cases the same initials and dates are shown on two grave markers, positioned such that the smaller of the gravestones is at the foot-end of the burial.
- 6.2.6 The evaluation also revealed that burials later than those represented by grave markers do exist. For example Trench 2 revealed a number of burials dated to the 18th or 19th centuries by their coffin fittings, despite the absence of gravestones. In this case it is likely that the construction of a path through the churchyard to the west of the trench, resulted in the removal of the grave markers associated with these burials, or that no grave markers had been erected.
- 6.2.7 The desk based assessment concluded (on the basis of both the gravestones and the burial register) that this part of the cemetery was likely to contain approximately 100 individuals. Therefore it is highly likely that the grave markers (which record around 55 individuals) significantly under-represent the number of burials from the churchyard's final phase of use.
- 6.2.8 By combining the auger results (paragraph 6.2.3 above) with the estimates of the number of individuals buried in this area in its final phase (paragraph 6.2.6 above), an estimated total of between 200 and 450 burials can be expected within the footprint of the proposed building. This estimate assumes a similar density of burials throughout the development area.
- 6.2.9 No evidence of structural remains relating to an earlier church was located. However, the trenches were not excavated below the level of the latest burials, so the existence of such remains cannot be discounted.

Significance

- 6.2.10 As only some of the latest burials were exposed, the preservation, condition, and level of truncation of the earlier burials could not be established. However, the condition of the later burials was variable ranging from poor to good, demonstrating that at least some bone is well preserved on the site.
- 6.2.11 The investigation has confirmed that this part of the churchyard contains earlier sequences of burials as well as those of the final phase of use. The presence of a thick charnel deposit in all the trenches shows that there is likely to be a very dense sequence of burials prior to the final phase. The auger results show a significant depth of burial deposits, and hence an estimate of the total number of burials within the site has been made. An approximate range of between 200 and 400 burials shows that there are likely to be significant quantities of burials in this part of the churchyard.
- 6.2.12 No evidence for structural remains of an earlier church was revealed, although because of the very limited scale of the evaluation, this is unsurprising. Therefore the absence of early structural remains in the evaluation trenches cannot be taken as conclusive proof that such features are absent from the site.

6.3 Research Priorities

- 6.3.1 Research issues in post-medieval archaeology were recently defined in some detail (Reeve 1998, 222) and are listed below.
- Funerary archaeology. Sub-headings include charnel pits, mass graves, artefact developments, taxonomies, social and gender archaeology, the English funeral, ownership and choice of vaults, burials as entities, graveyard methodology, location of interments to memorials
 - Osteoarchaeology. Sub-headings include palaeodemography and demography, biological anthropology, pathology, epidemiology, osteological methodology (pathology, age and sex, stature), forensic science, clinical medicine, genealogy
 - Archaeological methodology, theory and practice, curation procedures and environments
 - Evidence for known historical events, eg epidemics
 - Management of the graveyard through time - discussion of the stratigraphy
 - Tombs and other built structures
 - Coffins and coffin furniture
 - Treatment of the dead
 - Individuals with biographical information from stones and coffin plates
 - Individuals without biographical information
 - Development of the church and the use of the site
- 6.3.2 The evaluation indicated that skeletal preservation was variable. Poor preservation can limit the osteological potential of the material. It has been estimated that between 200 and 400 burials may well be encountered within the footprint of the proposed building, and as preservation has been characterised as variable many of that number

are likely to be in a fair or good state of preservation. A small number of ferrous coffin fittings were recovered and they were identified as known types with accepted date ranges. Two brick shaft graves were identified in addition to the table tombs already known to exist. It is highly likely that further shaft graves and burial vaults exist in the proposed development area. Clearly then the material likely to be encountered within the footprint would have considerable potential to address many of the research issues outlined above.

- 6.3.3 There are a number of published excavation reports which would be of particular relevance were the footprint to be excavated. These include Christ Church, Spitalfields, London (Reeve and Adams 1993; Molleson and Cox 1993), St Nicholas, Sevenoaks, Kent (Boyle 1994; Boyle 1998, Boyle in press), London Road, Kingston-upon-Thames (Bashford and Pollard 1998; Start and Kirk 1998), and St Bride's Church, Fleet Street, London (Scheuer 1998). A number of other relevant articles have also been published in a recent monograph dedicated to the study of post-medieval burial (Cox 1998).

APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1 ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXT INVENTORY

Trench	Context No	Type	Width (m)	Thick. (m)	Comment	Finds	Date
001							
	100	Fill		1.02	Charnel deposit	Pot, bone, coin	
	101	Layer		0.22	Topsoil		
	102	Cut	0.91	0.63	Construction cut for brick vault		
	103	Structure	>2.4 by 0.85	>0.28	Vault constructed with hand-made bricks		
	104	Fill		1.02	Fill of 102	Pot, bone	
	105	Cut	>0.24 by 1.8	>0.63	Construction cut for brick vault		
	106	Structure	>1.7 by 0.2	>0.18	Brick built vault		
	107	Fill		1.02	Fill of 105	Pot, bone, metal	
002							
	200	Cut		1.4	Grave containing 201, 204, and 218		
	201	Fill		1.4	Fill of 200	Pot, bone, metal, CBM	
	202	Fill		1.4	Charnel deposit	Bone, metal, CBM	
	203	Layer			Deposit overlain by 202		
	204	Skeleton			Adult, exposed from pelvis to feet		
	205	Layer		0.22	Topsoil		
	206	Skeleton			Adult, left lower leg exposed, right side truncated		
	207	Skeleton			Adult, only legs and feet exposed, left femur absent		
	208	Layer			?Grave fill encountered by auger		
	209	Layer		0.18	?Grave fill encountered by auger		

	210	Layer		0.05	Lens of natural sand encountered by auger		
	211	Layer			Natural clay encountered by auger		
	212	Cut	0.6	1.45	Grave containing 206, and 215		
	213	Cut	0.5		Grave containing 216		
	214	Cut			Grave containing 217		
	215	Fill	0.6 by >0.75	1.5	Fill of 212	Pot, bone, metal, CBM	
	216	Fill			Fill of 213	Pot, bone, metal, CBM	
	217	Fill			Fill of 214	Pot, bone, metal, CBM	
	218	Coffin			Two iron coffin handles		1763-1837
	219	Coffin			One iron coffin handle		1747-1847
	220	Cut			Grave containing 221		
	221	Fill			Fill of 220		
003							
	300	Skeleton			Adult, only exposed from knee down, left side absent		
	301	Skeleton			Adult, only exposed from knees down		
	302	Skeleton			Adult, only exposed from above knees to feet		
	303	Skeleton			Adult, only right femur exposed		
	304	Cut		1.1	Grave containing 300, 305, and 321		
	305	Fill		1.1	Fill of 304		
	306	Cut		1.1	Grave containing 301, 307		
	307	Fill		1.1	Fill of 306		
	308	Cut	0.7	1.2	Grave containing 302 and 309		
	309	Fill		1.1	Fill of 308		
	310	Cut	>0.65	>1.3	Grave containing 311		
	311	Fill		>1.3	Fill of 310		

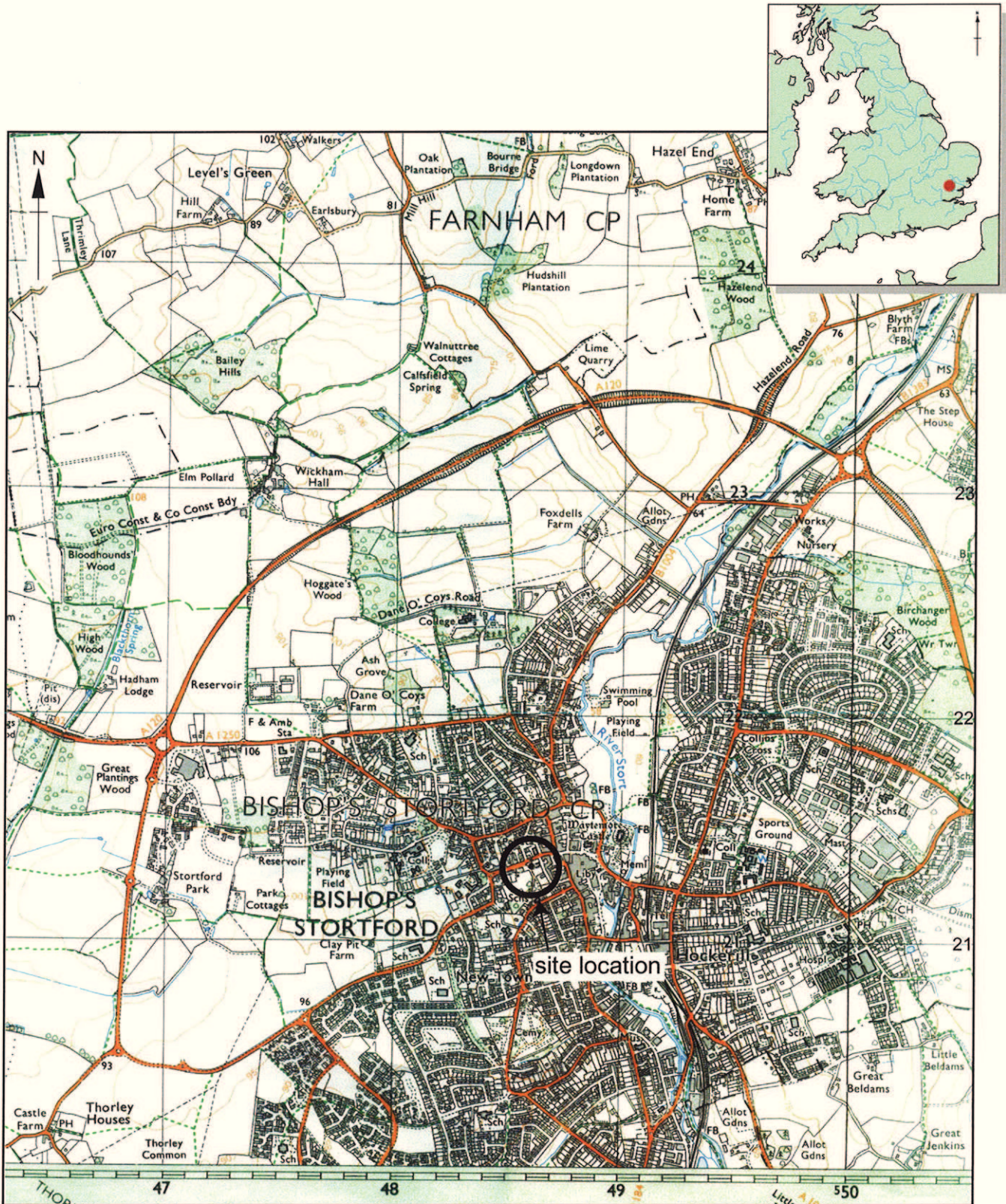
	312	Cut	0.5	>1.3	Grave containing 313		
	313	Fill		>1.3	Fill of 312		
	314	Cut	0.8	>1.3	Grave containing 315		
	315	Fill		>1.3	Fill of 314		
	316	Fill			Grave fill, no cut identified		
	317	Cut	>0.4	>1.3	Grave containing 318		
	318	Fill		>1.3	Fill of 317		
	319	Layer		1.1	Charnel deposit		
	320	Layer		0.2	Topsoil		
	321	Coffin			One iron coffin handle at foot end		1763-1837
	322	Layer		>0.2	?Grave fill encountered by auger		
	323	Layer		0.15	?Grave fill encountered by auger		
	324	Layer		0.2	?Colluvium encountered by auger		

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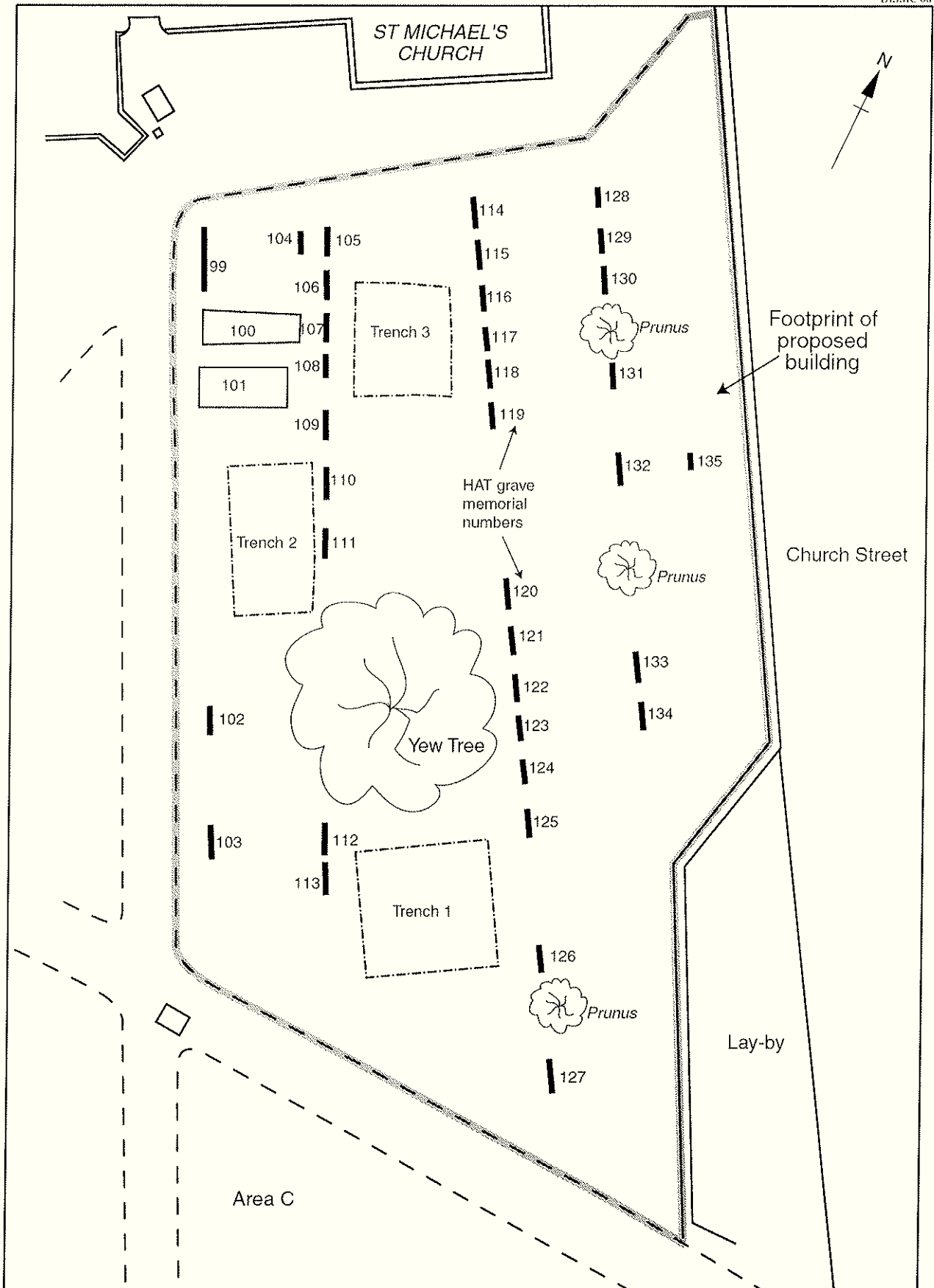
APPENDIX 3 SUMMARY OF SITE DETAILS

Site name:	St. Michael's Church, Bishop's Stortford
Site code:	BISMC 00
Grid reference:	TL 486 213
Type of evaluation:	Three test pits (approx. 3m by 3m)
Date and duration of project:	30 th October to 3 rd November 2000 (5 days)
Area of site:	0.04 ha (approx.)
Summary of results:	The evaluation revealed an intensive sequence of inter-cutting burials, including two brick-built burial vaults.
Location of archive:	The archive is currently held at OAU, Janus House, Osney Mead, Oxford, OX2 0ES, and will be deposited with the Bishop's Stortford and District Local History Society Museum in due course (Honorary Curator is W.J. Wright).



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Figure 1: Site location.



113 = HAT grave marker numbers

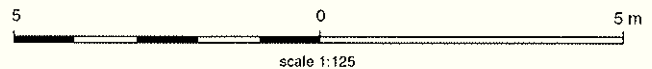
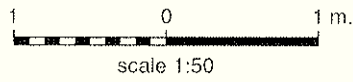
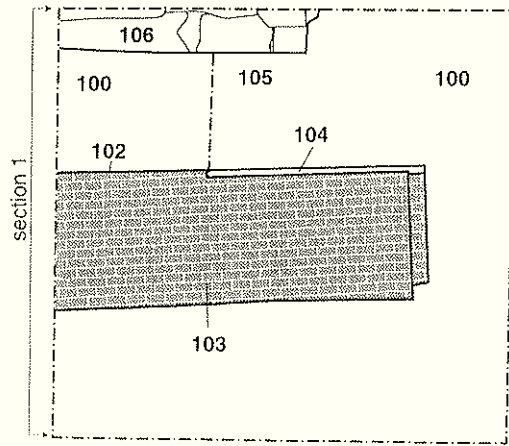


Figure 2: Trench location plan.

Trench
Plan 1



Trench 1
Section 1

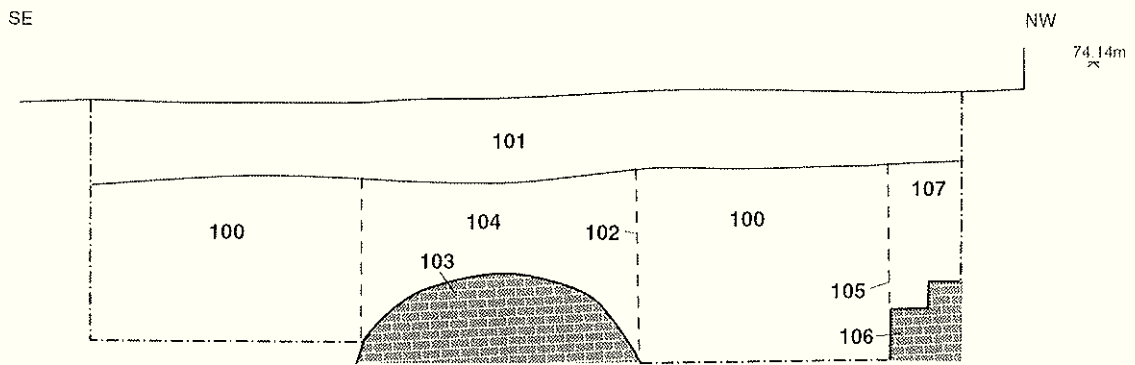
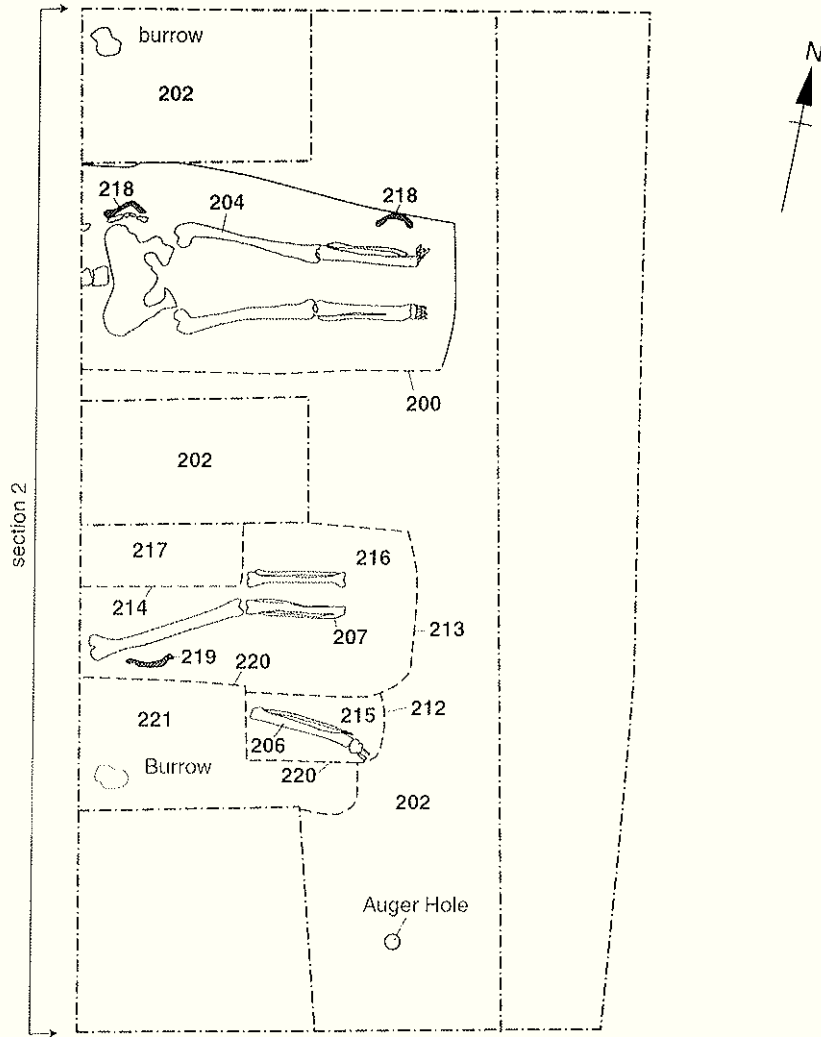


Figure 3: Trench 1, plan and section.

Trench 2
Plan 2

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Trench 2
Section 2

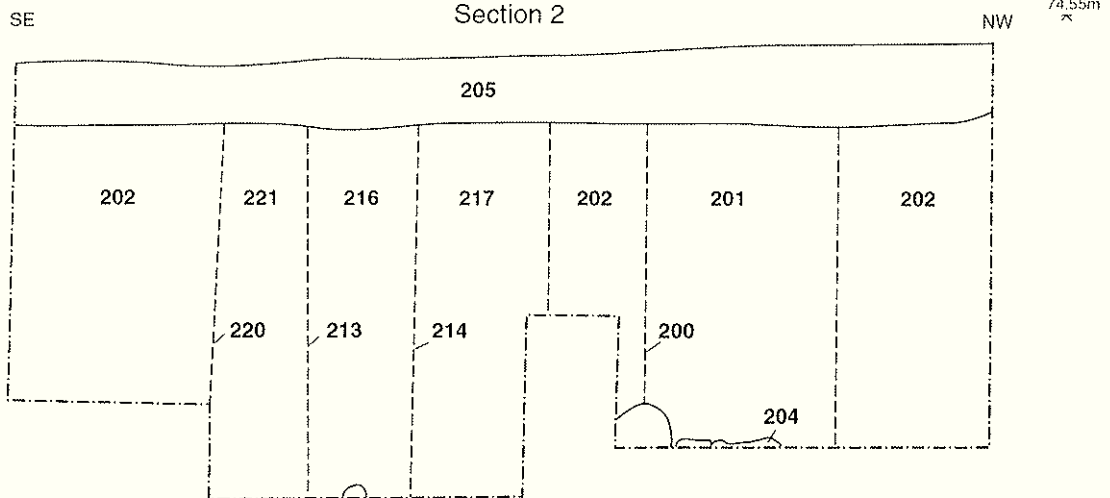
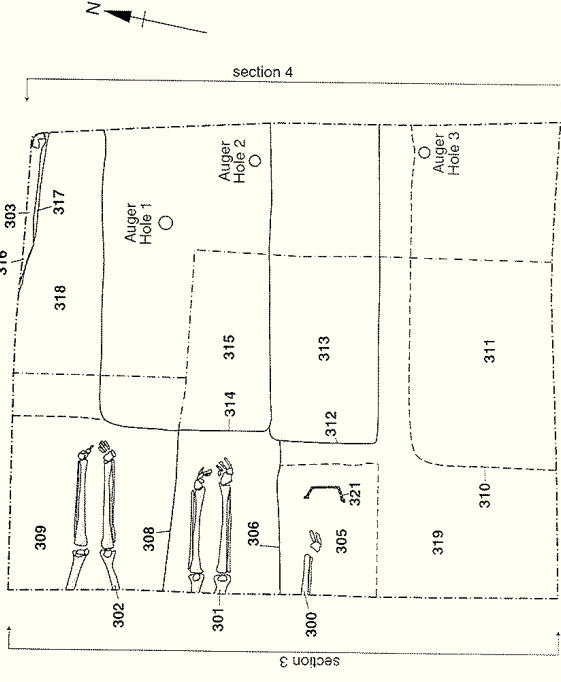
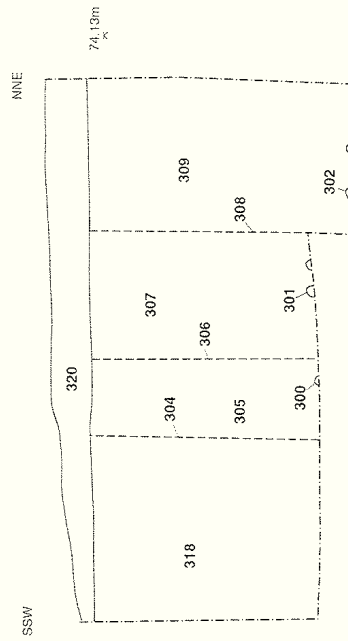


Figure 4: Trench 2, plan and section.

Trench 3
Plan 3



Trench 3
Section 3



Trench 3
Section 4

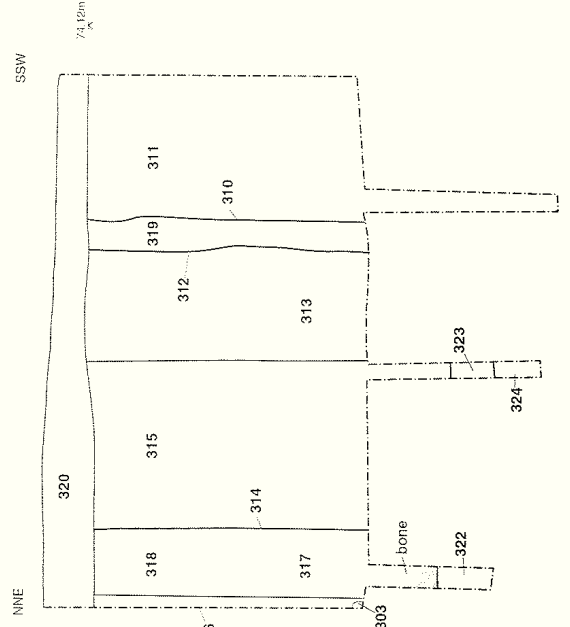


Figure 5: Trench 3, plan and sections.



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