

*Caroe and Partners*

*St. Lawrence's Church, West Wycombe, Buckinghamshire*

**ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF REPORT**

*NGR SU 8270 9500*

**Oxford Archaeological Unit**

**October 2000**

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**Oxford Archaeological Unit**

**October 2000**

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## Oxford Archaeological Unit

October 2000

### Summary

*In September 2000 the Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) undertook a watching brief at St Lawrence's Church, West Wycombe (NGR SU 8270 9500). The church, originally medieval, lies within an Iron Age hillfort. A pipe trench excavated across the earthworks of the hillfort and through the graveyard revealed possible ditches associated with those defences, and graves and other graveyard features associated with the church.*

### 1 Introduction

The watching brief was commissioned by Caroe and Partners. It was undertaken to a brief set by and a Written Scheme of Investigation (WSI) agreed with Sandy Kidd of the Buckinghamshire County Council Archaeological Service (CAS), and involved the machining of approximately 320 m of trench, for the insertion of a plastic water pipe (Fig. 2). St Lawrence's Church is located within an Iron Age hillfort on a hill overlooking the village of West Wycombe (Fig. 1), which itself lies to the north-west of the town of High Wycombe.

### 2 Background

The hillfort at West Wycombe is one of four *within* the Buckinghamshire Chilterns (as opposed to on the scarp or associated with the Thames - see Fig. 2). No previous archaeological work has taken place there, with just a few (?Iron Age) pottery sherds having been recovered from the centre. The area has produced evidence of Iron Age activity in the form of at least one La Tene I brooch and a number of coins, found by metal detectorists (Farley 1995, 29).

St Lawrence's Church, built within the earthworks of the hillfort, originally dates to the medieval period, when it was the church of a village called Haveringdon, now deserted. The chancel is thought to be 13th century, and the lower half of the tower 14th century.

In the mid-18th century the church was significantly enlarged by Sir Francis Dashwood, Lord Le Despencer, of nearby West Wycombe House. The tower was heightened and had a great golden ball placed at its top, and the nave was rebuilt. Later in the 18th century the family mausoleum was built to the south-east of the church, set into the defences of the hillfort (Pevsner 1960, 283-289).

### 3 Aims

The aims of the watching brief were to identify and record any archaeological remains revealed by the ground works, paying particular attention to the potential for Iron Age and later remains within the hillfort.

### 4 Methodology

The trench was excavated from north to south using a 'chain trencher' for the first 220 m, across a National Trust grassed amenity area north of the hillfort, to a depth of 0.75 m and a width of 0.25 m. A straightforward sequence of topsoil/turf overlying



weathered natural chalk was revealed in this section of the trench. From a distance of approximately 20 m north of the earthworks defining the hillfort (a Scheduled Ancient Monument), a 0.45 m wide toothless bucket was used instead of the trencher, in order to create a trench wide enough to allow adequate records to be made of the features thought likely to be encountered from that point onwards. The trench entered the graveyard through the current north-western gate, also assumed to be the approximate location of the original entrance to the hillfort, and followed the path to the main door of the church, and then ran alongside virtually the whole of the northern wall of the nave. A manhole was also dug, 1.2 x 1.2 x 0.75 m. Excavation of the full length of the trench and of the manhole was monitored by a representative of the OAU, with appropriate records made of any features revealed. Articulated human remains were recorded and lifted, before being left with a representative of the church for eventual reburial.

Within the constraints imposed by the narrowness of the trench 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. Recording procedures followed established OAU standards, using the Fieldwork Manual (ed Wilkinson 1992).

## 5 Results

### 5.1 *The earthworks*

Approximately 19.5 m north-west of the centre of the internal bank of the defences the trench revealed a cut (1) 3.52 m wide and over 0.5 m deep (Figs 3 and 4). The southern edge sloped steeply, with the northern edge more gradual; the base of the feature was not reached. It appeared to be linear, running NE-SW, although the narrowness of the trench meant that this interpretation remained tentative. The feature was filled by a primary, secondary and tertiary sequence: fills 7 and 8 were light-brown silts, containing 10% fine chalk fragments, and appeared to have derived from slippage from the sides of the feature. Fills 4 and 5 were also light brown silts, but contained lower quantities of chalk fragments and may have derived from slippage from a positive feature such as a bank, or may simply represent gradual silting. Finally, fill 3 was a grey-brown loam, with a high concentration of chalk fragments, and may represent an episode of ploughing which has created the final fill of the feature. This deposit was overlain by the current topsoil/turf (2). No finds were recovered from the fills of this feature.

10.5 m south of the southern edge of feature 1, another cut (12) was seen, which was 7 m wide (Fig. 3); as with feature 1, it had a steep edge to the south and a more gradual edge to the north. Again, the base was not seen, but the feature would have been at least 0.6 m deep. Unlike feature 1, this feature did not appear to run straight across the trench, but appeared to form either a large pit or a terminating ditch. Again, the width of the trench makes firm identification of the feature impossible. Feature 12 had a single fill (13) of mid grey-brown loam, containing a high percentage of chalk and ceramic tile fragments. Fill 13 appears to represent a phase of final, deliberate infill of the feature, in the medieval or post-medieval period, and was overlain by up to 0.3 m of topsoil /turf (2). Other than tile, no other finds were recovered from this fill.

## 5.2 *The graveyard*

Within the graveyard, just inside the limit of the internal bank, the stratigraphic sequence became slightly more complex than that seen in the area north of the hillfort. Overlying the chalk was a deposit of mid-brown loam (10), up to 0.45 m thick, interpreted as the original graveyard soil, or possibly an earlier ploughsoil derived from agricultural activity pre-dating the church. Some disarticulated human bone was recovered from this deposit. Above layer 10 was a deposit of loam with a very high proportion of chalk blocks and fragments (9), up to 0.40 m thick, which had the appearance of a make-up/dump deposit. Overlying layer 9 was the current topsoil/turf 2, up to 0.3 m thick. The chalk natural was therefore not seen until mechanical excavation had reached on average a depth of 0.9 m.

As the trench ran eastwards from the graveyard path and along the north wall of the nave, this changed, with the sequence reverting to topsoil (and some made ground), to an average depth of 0.35 m, overlying the chalk. A number of features interpreted as graves were revealed (14, 16, 18, 20, and 23 - see Fig. 3). All cut the natural chalk and were on average only 0.3 m deep, suggesting some truncation in this area, probably during the 18th century expansion of the trench. As shown on Figure 3, alignments varied, but all were roughly east-west, as far as could be established in the narrow trench. Articulated human remains were recovered from graves 14, 16, 18 and 20, with sufficient of the skeletons in 14 and 16 seen to establish that they were supine, with the heads to the west. The skeleton in grave 23 was not disturbed, as the grave was slightly deeper than the others. Towards the eastern end of the church the sequence deepened again, with deposits of made ground beneath the topsoil to a depth of up to 0.6 m. This corresponded with a clearly defined rise in the ground level in the churchyard at this point, again possibly associated with the work in the 18th century.

A number of other features associated with the church were revealed. Structure 11 was a brick culvert, 0.5 m wide and built of unfrosted bricks and lime mortar, aligned east-west and likely to drain storm water from the roof of the church. Only the top of the structure was seen, at a depth of approximately 0.75 m. Two brick wall foundations were seen, 22 and 24: foundation 22 was 0.3 m wide and survived to a height (below ground) of 0.3 m; its function was unclear. Foundation 24 was encountered 0.15 m below current ground surface, and was 0.7 m wide and survived to a height (below ground) of 0.5 m; it appeared to be the remains of the graveyard wall still standing to the south, which had been demolished at this point to make way for an element of the 18th century rebuild.

## 6 **Artefactual evidence**

### 6.1 *Pottery by A Barclay*

The excavation recovered a single slack-shouldered sherd from a handmade fineware vessel manufactured from a fabric tempered with moderate calcined flint and quartz sand. The surfaces were black with traces of burnish on the inside.

The use of flint temper occurs in the late Bronze Age and continues into the Iron Age (Bryant 1995, 17-8). However, the admixture of flint and sand could favour a date in the early Iron Age. The form and surface appearance of the sherd would be consistent with this date.

The sherd was unstratified but was recovered from within the defensive earthworks of the hillfort.

## 7 Discussion

As has already been emphasised, interpreting features seen within a trench 0.45 m wide has to remain an extremely tentative process. However, it does seem likely, considering the context, that features 1 and 12 are ditches relating to the Iron Age earthworks. This suggests the possibility of paired ditches at the point where it has been traditionally assumed the entrance to the hillfort lies, and at which the current entrance is. As feature 12 appears to be terminating, it may be that feature 1 is an outerwork designed to prevent straightforward access to the main entrance. Feature 12 is running slightly too far east for this theory to work well, and it could equally be that the hillfort had two or more ditches and accompanying banks at this point. The tile in fill 13 would suggest a medieval/post-medieval date for the final fill, and may imply that the ditch still represented a significant barrier to entry at that time, requiring deliberate infilling. It is worth noting that the topography of the hill on which the fort stands means that this would have been the easiest point of attack. The hill is a spur: to the south, east and west the hill drops away sharply, but to the north the ground is fairly level; perhaps the defences were more complex here.

The presence of the deeper sequence of deposits overlying the chalk within the earthworks seem likely to be due to the fact that the bank to the west of the church has been levelled, to enlarge the area of the graveyard (see Fig. 3). The chalky nature of layer 9 suggests that it was once part of that bank, now spread across the original graveyard soil, thereby levelling and slightly raising the area.

The absence of any graves along the line of the north-south path to the western end of the church suggests that this has been the route of the path for a considerable length of time.

## Acknowledgements

The fieldwork was carried out by Dan Poore and Jim Mumford. Illustrations were by Luke Adams. This work would not have been possible without the patience and co-operation of Kevin Boys, site foreman for Agri-Power, who were the principal contractors on-site.

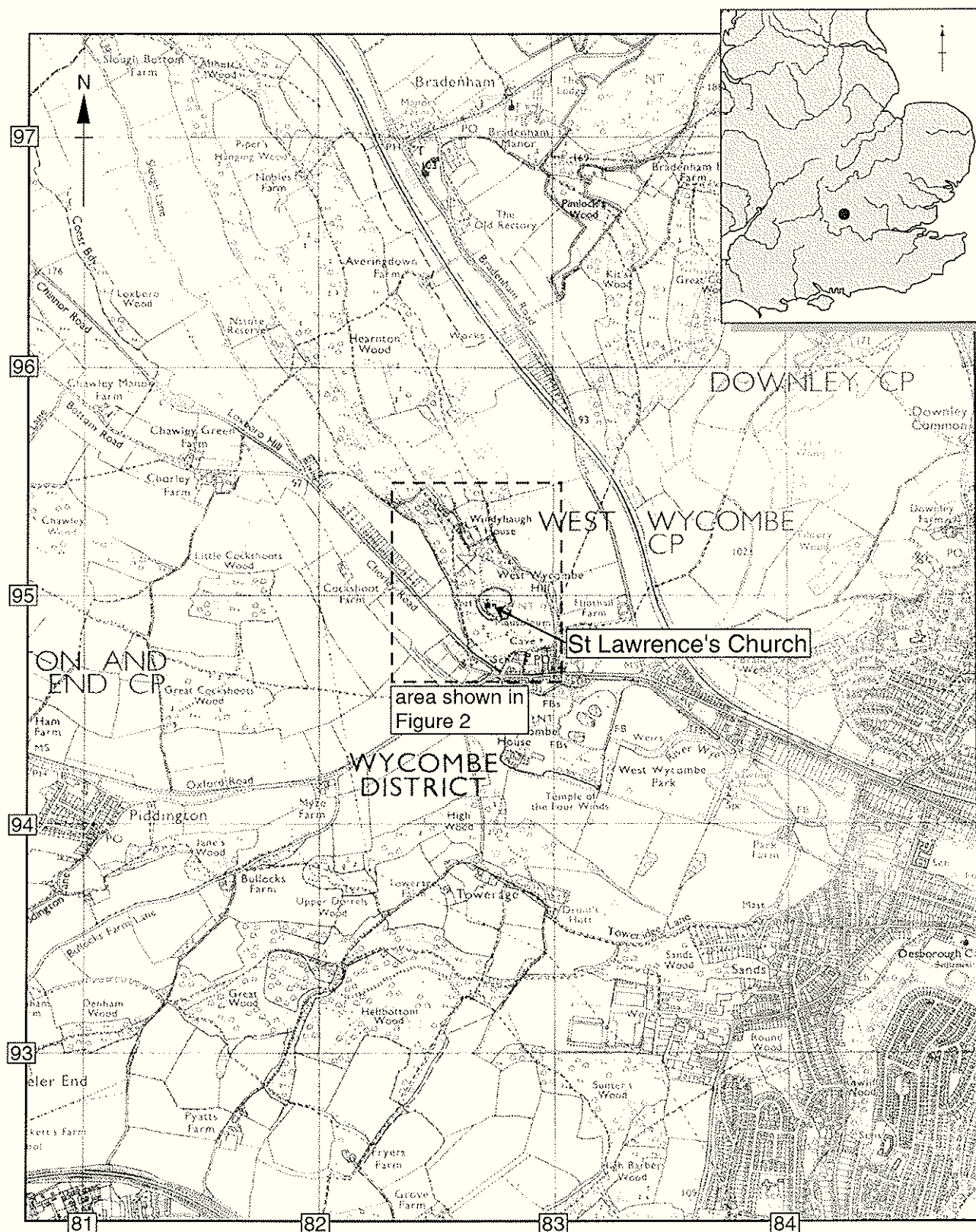
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## 8 Context Inventory

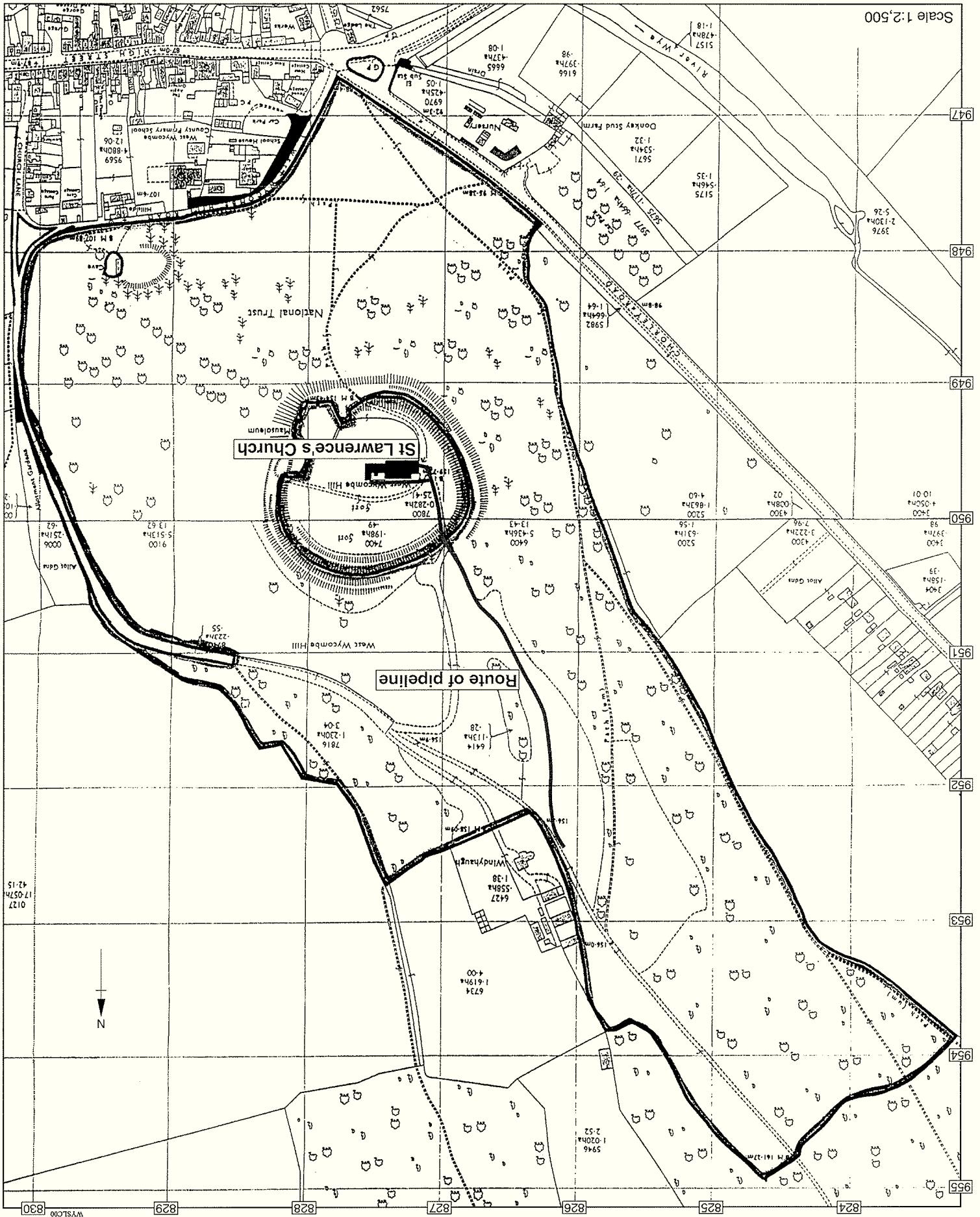
Context	Type	Width (m)	Thickness (m)	Comment
1	Cut	3.52		Prehistoric defensive ditch?
2	Layer		0.3	Topsoil
3	Fill		0.2	Fill of 1
4	Fill		0.26+	Fill of 1
5	Fill		0.26+	Fill of 1
6	Layer		0.26+	Natural Chalk
7	Fill		0.26+	Fill of 1
8	Fill		0.26+	Fill of 1
9	Layer		0.45	Redeposited bank deposit?
10	Layer		0.6	Graveyard/plough soil
11	Structure	0.5		18th c brick culvert
12	Cut	7		Defensive ditch?
13	Fill		0.6+	Fill of 12
14	Cut	0.55		Grave
15	Fill		0.4	Fill of 14
16	Cut	0.55		Grave
17	Fill		0.5	Fill of 16
18	Cut	0.55		Grave
19	Fill		0.15	Fill of 18
20	Cut	0.45		Grave
21	Fill		0.8	Fill of 20
22	Wall	0.3		
23	Cut	0.49	0.75+	Grave
24	Wall	0.7		
25	Layer		0.6	Same as 10
26	Cut	0.4		19th c pit
27	Cut	0.4		19th c pit
28	Cut	0.4		18th? c pit



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Figure 1: Site location

Figure 2: Route of pipeline



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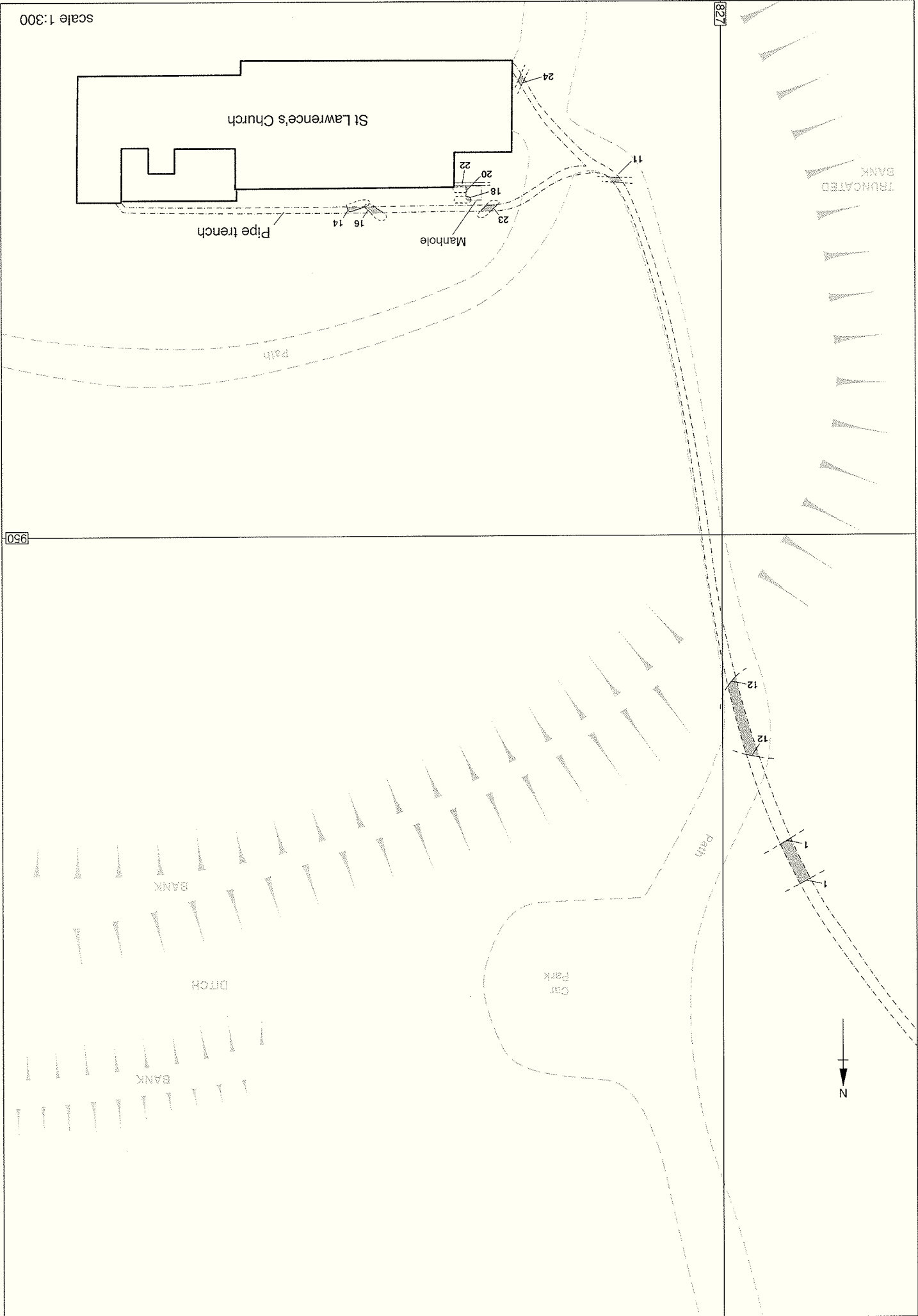


Figure 3: Features exposed during excavation of pipe trench and manhole



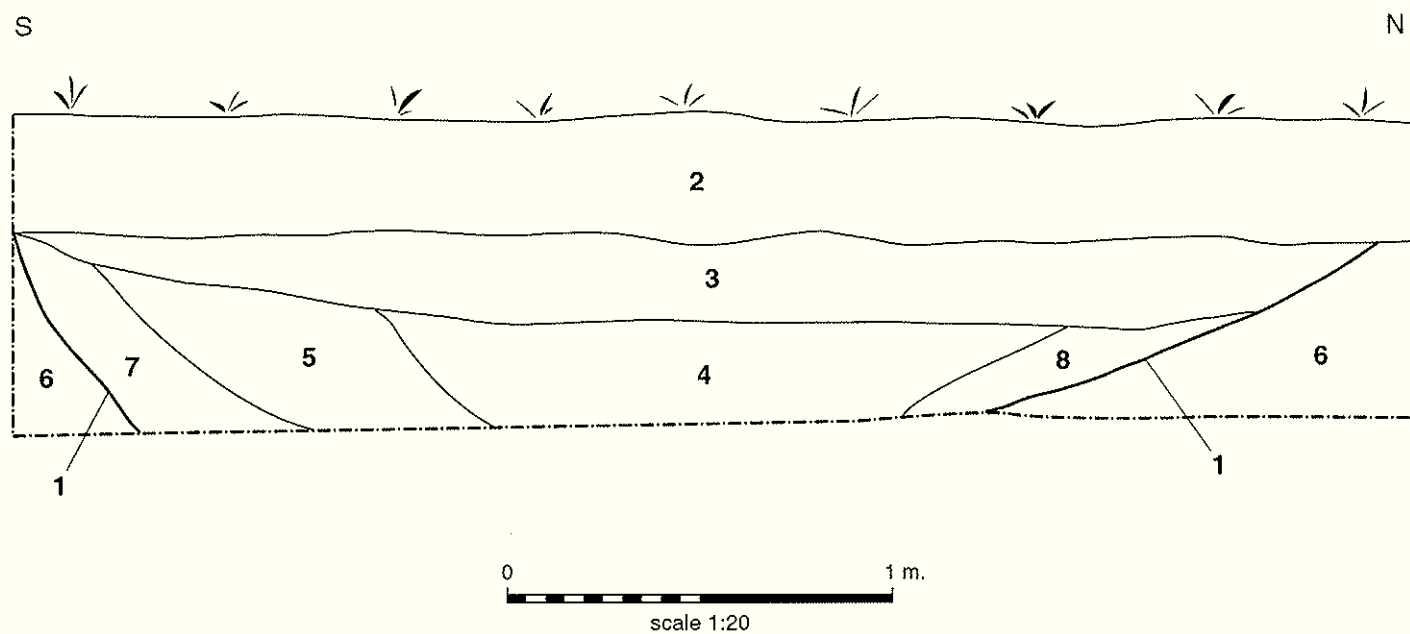


Figure 4: Section across possible E-W ditch 1





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