MOUNT ANVIL

The Devonport Buildings

King William Walk
Greenwich

London Borough of Greenwich

NGR TQ3830 7785

TQ3850 7760

Archaeological Watching Brief Report

Oxford Archaeological Unit
July 1999

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Summary

A watching brief held during the excavation of seven engineering test pits in the vicinity of the infirmary and the Devonport Buildings revealed evidence of human burials, particularly in the area of the extant tennis courts and the memorial. The burials were within, or sealed by, a substantial layer of accumulated grave soil, containing post-medieval debris.

1. Introduction

1.1 The Oxford Archaeological Unit was required by K Whittaker of English Heritage (GLAAS) to undertake a watching brief at the Devonport Buildings, Greenwich, London (NGR 3830 7785), during the excavation of engineering test pits by Mount Anvil. The archaeological recording of these pits would form the first stage of an archaeological assessment of the area, which is targeted for future development.

2. Historical and Archaeological Background

2.1 The Royal Hospital at Greenwich was founded in 1694 by Royal Charter on land adjacent to the existing Royal Palace, and east of the borough of Greenwich itself. Intended originally as a naval counterpart to the Chelsea Hospital for soldiers, The Greenwich Hospital survived until 1869 when its buildings were taken over by the Royal Naval College.

2.2 The vicinity of the area under investigation was used as an extension to the cemetery of St Alphege's Church Greenwich during the early 18th century, and later exclusively as a burial ground for the Hospital. The burial ground was closed in 1856. Construction of a tunnel for the London-Greenwich railway in the 1870's, which ran through the northern part of the burial ground necessitated the exhumation of an estimated 1,400 bodies. In 1892 a memorial was erected by the Admiralty to the memory of the 20,000 naval pensioners buried there. A further 4,000 bodies were exhumed in 1925, to allow the construction of the Dreadnought Buildings across the northern part of the burial ground. The southern part of the burial ground is currently under tennis courts.

2.3 No previous archaeological investigation is known to have been carried out in the vicinity of the site.

3. Methodology

3.1 Six test pits (Nos 1 – 6) were originally proposed. One extra test pit was excavated (No 2A). To avoid confusion in the allotted context numbers, those for the extra test pit were pre-fixed with the letter A.

3.2 The test pits were excavated to a common width of 1.0 m, and varied in length from 2.0 m to 3.4 m. Depth was dependent on the revealed deposits and the level of the natural sand/gravel.

3.3 The test pits were mechanically excavated, using a toothed bucket. Their depth precluded any manual cleaning or close visual examination of revealed deposits. Within these constraints, it was possible to produce reasonably accurate records of the stratigraphy. Such artifactual material as was identified was noted but not recovered. The excavation method and the ground conditions (see below) meant that the distinction between hitherto undisturbed graves, and scatters of redeposited human bone was extremely difficult.

3.4 The fieldwork was carried out between the 14th and the 16th of July 1999.

4. Results

4.1 **Test Pit 1** 2.0 m (L) x 1.0 m (W) x 1.8 m (D) *Figs.2 & 3*

The natural (102), in the form of silty sand, was identified at a depth of 1.70 m below ground level. It was overlaid by a 1.3 m deep layer of yellow brown sandy silt (106), which contained fragments of brick, tiles and mortar. This was overlaid by a thin spread of lime mortar (105), and a modern concrete yard surface (103) on a bedding layer (104). In the north – facing section of the pit the brick footings (101) of the standing building were exposed to their base, at a depth of 1.68 m below ground level.

4.2 **Test Pit 2** 3.4 m (L) x 1.0 m (W) x 1.8 m (D) *Figs 2 & 3*

The natural (204) – comprising sand and rounded gravel - was identified at a depth of 1.10 m below ground level. It was cut by two grave cuts; 205 was oriented west-east and contained an inhumation and evidence of a coffin in the form of a scatter of nails around the skull. The west end of 205 was cut by a north-south grave (206), which appear to also contain an inhumation. Neither burial was subjected to further excavation after being exposed by the machine bucket. A layer of sandy silt (202),up to 1.50 m in depth, sealed the burials. No evidence of grave cuts were seen in this material. Layer 202 was overlaid by a 0.20 m layer of topsoil (201).

4.3 **Test Pit 2A** 3.0 m (L) x 1.0 m (W) x 1.8 m (D) *Figs 2 & 3*

The gravelly sand natural (A203) was identified at a minimum depth of 1.3 m below ground level. It appeared to have be cut, possibly by one or more graves, as human bones and teeth were noted at a depth of approximately 1.2 m. The natural was overlaid by A202, a layer of sandy silt which was at least 1.50 m deep, and contained mortar fragments. This was overlaid by a 0.20 m deep layer of topsoil (A201).

4.4 **Test Pit 3** 3.0 m (L) x 1.0 m (W) x 3.5 m (D) *Figs 2 & 3*

Natural sand (307) was identified at a depth of 1.5 m below ground level. This was overlaid by a 0.44 m deep sandy silt layer (306) which contained possibly disarticulated human bones. Layer 306 was sealed by a sequence of make up or levelling layers (305, 304 and 303) totalling 0.90 m in depth. Fragments of tile, brick and mortar were noted in these layers. Finally layer 303 was sealed by the modern tarmac of the tennis court (301) over a thin bedding layer (301).

4.5 **Test Pit 4** 3.0 m (L) x 1.0 m (W) x 3.0 m (D) *Figs 2 & 4*

Natural sand (407) was identified at a depth of 1.7 m below ground level. This was overlaid by layer 406, a yellowish brown sandy silt up to 0.80 m deep, and containing mortar and tile fragments. A human skull and other bones in this layer were disturbed by the machine, although there was no evidence of a grave cut. Layer 406 was sealed by a thin spread of mortar (405) and a sequence of levelling layers (404, 403, 402) which was sealed by the tennis court tarmac (401).

4.6 **Test Pit 5** 2.4 m(L) x 1.0 m(W) x 3.0 m(D) *Figs 2 & 4*

The silty sand natural (510), identified at a depth of 1.6 m, was sealed by a 0.50 m deep layer of dark reddish brown sandy silt (509), above which was a levelling layer of sand (508) for a brick drain and soakaway (506). The fill of the soakaway was a dark grey sandy silt (507). The drain was sealed by a layer of redeposited natural sand (505) and 0.30 m deep levelling layer (504) which contained flecks of mortar and charcoal. A buried topsoil (503) sealed layer 504 and was itself overlaid by a modern tarmac layer (501) and its make up layer (502).

4.7 **Test Pit 6** 2 m(L) x 1.0 m(W) x 3.0 m(D) *Figs 2 & 4*

The natural sand (605) was identified at a depth of 1.90 m. This was overlaid by a 1.50 m deep layer of dark grey brown sandy silt (604), which contained occasional fragments of brick and tile. This was sealed by 603, a 0.10 m deep mixed layer of clinker and gravel, forming a bedding for a 0.20 m layer of concrete (602). This was directly covered by a thin layer of tarmac (601).

5. Discussion

5.1 Geology and Topography

5.1.1 The undisturbed natural was revealed in each test pit, and was commonly a yellowish gravelly sand. The dark reddish silt layer noted in TP5 could represent the silting of a paleochannel, presumably oriented approximately north-south.

5.1.2 The apparent natural topography of the area suggests a gentle slope of approximately 0.80 m from the eastern Test Pit 2 - OD 98.2 m) to the eastern Test Pit No 6 – OD 97.3 m). This would be consistent with the existence of a paleochannel running through the western part of the site.

5.2 Archaeology

5.2.1 With the exception of TP5, where a brick drain (506) had truncated earlier deposits, every Test Pit revealed a substantial layer of disturbed or dumped sandy silt subsoil (layers 106, 202, A202, 306, 406, 604). Commonly it contained fragments of brick, tile and mortar, and evidence of human burial was recorded in the four eastern Test Pits (2, 2A, 3 & 4). Although 'in situ' burials were only confirmed in Test Pit 2, it is likely that the bones revealed in the other three Test Pits were from intact burials. The failure to avoid the disturbance of burials was due to the method of excavation of the Test Pits and the absence of the 'warning sign' of visible grave cuts in the disturbed deposit.

5.2.2 There was little evidence of any general truncation of this 'grave soil' deposit, at least in the area of the tennis courts. Truncation was evident in Test Pit 5, close to the 18th century Infirmary building, specifically by an associated drain.

5.2.3 Such an accumulation of grave soil and a lack of visible grave cuts are often features of heavily exploited churchyards, and suggest that there could be a substantial number of burials in the area. The question as to the derivation and date of the burials is difficult to answer at this early stage of the investigation. While the presence of 18th/19th century building debris in the grave soil suggests that the graves are relatively recent, it cannot be assumed that they are all the graves of the naval pensioners commemorated on the memorial stone close to Test Pit 2A.

5.2.4 No evidence was found to clearly indicate activity pre-dating the Royal Hospital, but given the very small sample area investigated, this cannot be taken as proof of its absence.

6. Proposals for Mitigation

6.1 Although the presence of in situ burials has been established, their derivation and date are still unknown, as is their state of preservation. Furthermore, the geographical extent of the burials is at best only hinted at by the Test Pit results. The archaeological significance of the burials cannot be assumed without sufficient historical documentary evidence. *"...the relationship between the historical documentation and the condition of the material is the critical factor in the decision to progress to any form of archaeological recording and analysis in the study of post-medieval burial contexts."* (Reeve J 1998, 221).

6.2 Therefore two-stage programme of further assessment is proposed:

1. A desk-top study to clarify:
   a. the documentary history and location of the extension to the cemetery of the Church of St Alphege, the hospital burial grounds, and the disturbances

caused by the railway tunnel construction in the 1870's, and the construction of the Dreadnought Buildings in 1925.

b. the architectural and historic importance of the standing buildings in the light of the proposed development

2. From the results of the desk-top study, a further series of archaeological evaluation trenches to establish the extent, date, and state of preservation of the threatened archaeological deposits, including the burials.

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July 1999

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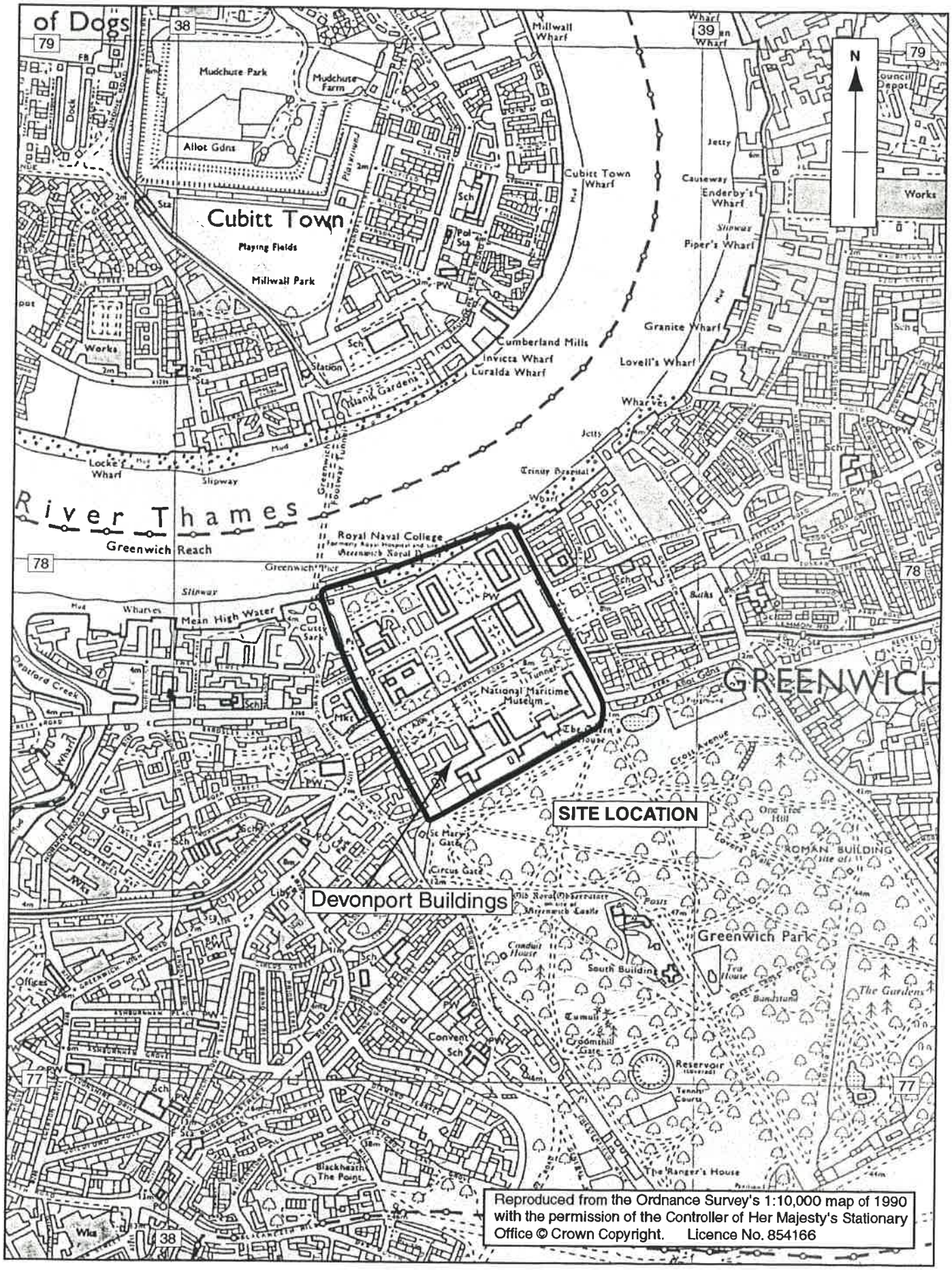
Appendix 1

Table of Contexts

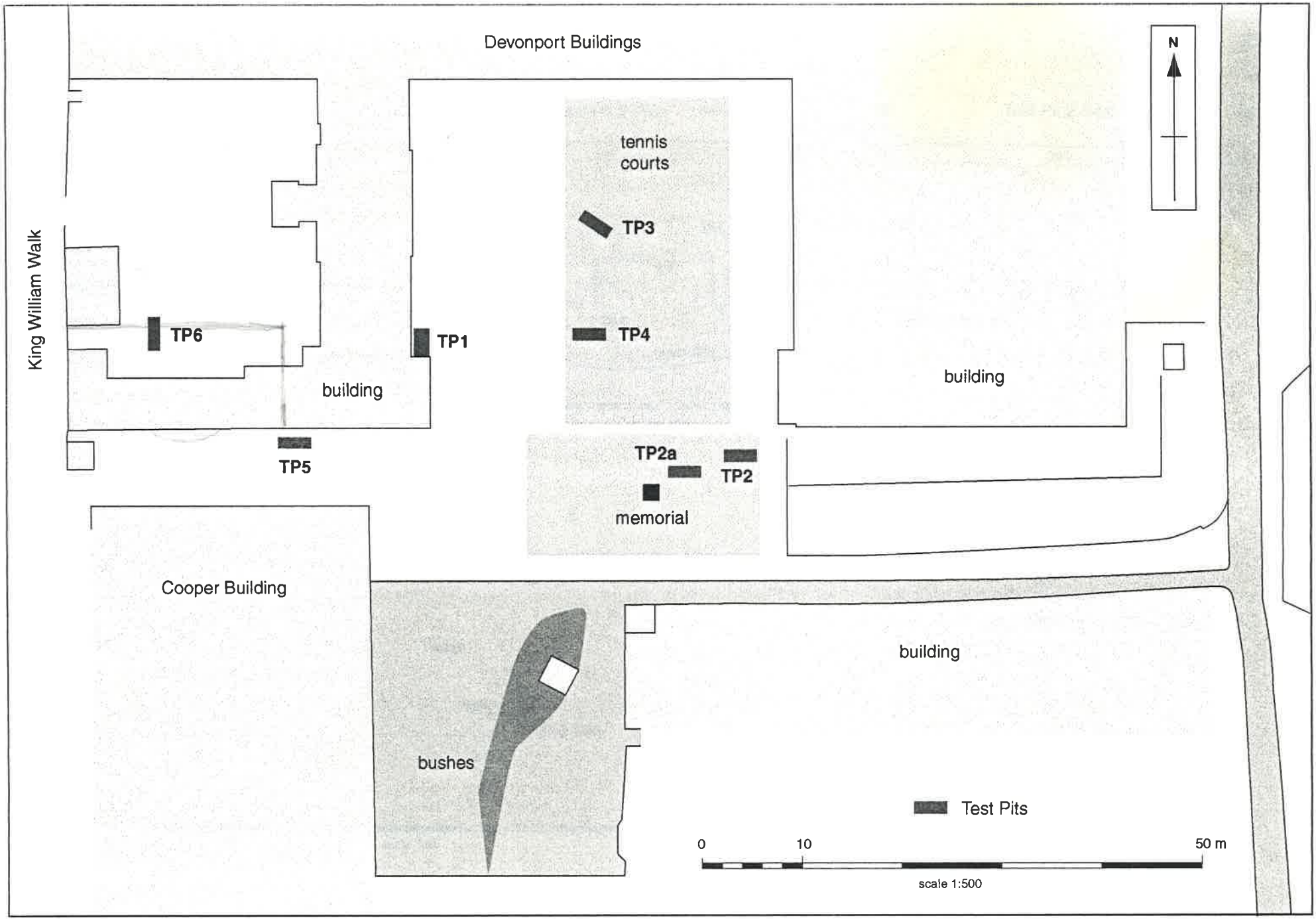
TEST PIT	CONTEXT	TYPE	WIDTH (m)	DEPTH (m)	FINDS/INCLUSIONS	COMMENT
TP1	101	Wall	-	1.68	-	W-E wall of 18th c building
	102	Layer	-	-	-	Natural
	103	Layer	-	0.20	-	Concrete yard surface
	104	Layer	-	0.10	-	Make up for 103
	105	Layer	-	0.06	-	Construction layer for 101
	106	Layer	-	1.30	CBM/Mortar	Disturbed/dumped subsoil
	107	Feature	1.50 W-E	>1.0	-	Brick conduit
TP2	201	Layer	-	<0.20	-	Topsoil
	202	Layer	-	<1.50	Human Bone/Mortar	Disturbed/dumped subsoil
	203	Layer	-	<0.25	-	Natural (Sand)
	204	Layer	-	-	-	Natural (Sand/ gravels)
	205	Feature	0.60	-	Inhumation	Grave (W-E)
	206	Feature	-	-	Inhumation	Grave (N-S)
TP2A	A201	Layer	-	0.20	-	Topsoil
	A202	Layer	-	<1.5	Human Bone	Disturbed/dumped subsoil
	A203	Layer	-	-	-	Natural (Gravel/sand)
TP3	301	Layer	-	0.08	-	Modern tarmac
	302	Layer	-	0.14	-	Make up for 301
	303	Layer	-	<0.26	Pot/CBM/Clinker	Levelling
	304	Layer	-	<0.20	CBM/Mortar	Levelling
	305	Layer	-	<0.42	CBM/Charcoal	Dump
	306	Layer	-	<0.40	Human Bone	Disturbed/dumped subsoil
	307	Layer	-	-	-	Natural (sand)
TP4	401	Layer	-	0.08	-	Modern tarmac
	402	Layer	-	<0.20	Clinker/CBM/Mortar	Make up for 401
	403	Layer	-	<0.22	CBM/Mortar	Levelling
	404	Layer	-	<0.36	CBM/Mortar	Levelling
	405	Layer	-	<0.04	Shell/CBM	Mortar spread
	406	Layer	-	<0.80	Human Bone/CBM/Mortar	Disturbed/dumped subsoil
	407	Layer	-	-	-	Natural (sand)
TP5	501	Layer	-	0.08	-	Modern tarmac
	502	Layer	-	<0.10	Mortar/CBM	Make up for 501
	503	Layer	-	<0.12		Buried topsoil?
	504	Layer	-	<0.30	Mortar/Charcoal	Levelling
	505	Layer	-	<0.20	-	Redeposited natural sand/gravel
	506	Feature	>2.0 W-E	0.60		Brick drain + soakaway
	507	Layer	-	<0.40		Fill of soakaway
	508	Layer	-	<0.26	Mortar/Brick	Levelling
	509	Layer	-	<0.50	-	Alluvial silt?
	510	Layer	-	-	-	Natural (silty sand)
TP6	601	Layer	-	0.04	-	Modern tarmac
	602	Layer	-	0.20	-	Modern concrete
	603	Layer	-	0.10	Clinker	Make up for 602
	604	Layer	-	1.50	Mortar/ Charcoal	Disturbed/dumped subsoil
	605	Layer	-	-	-	Natural (sand)



scale 1:10,000

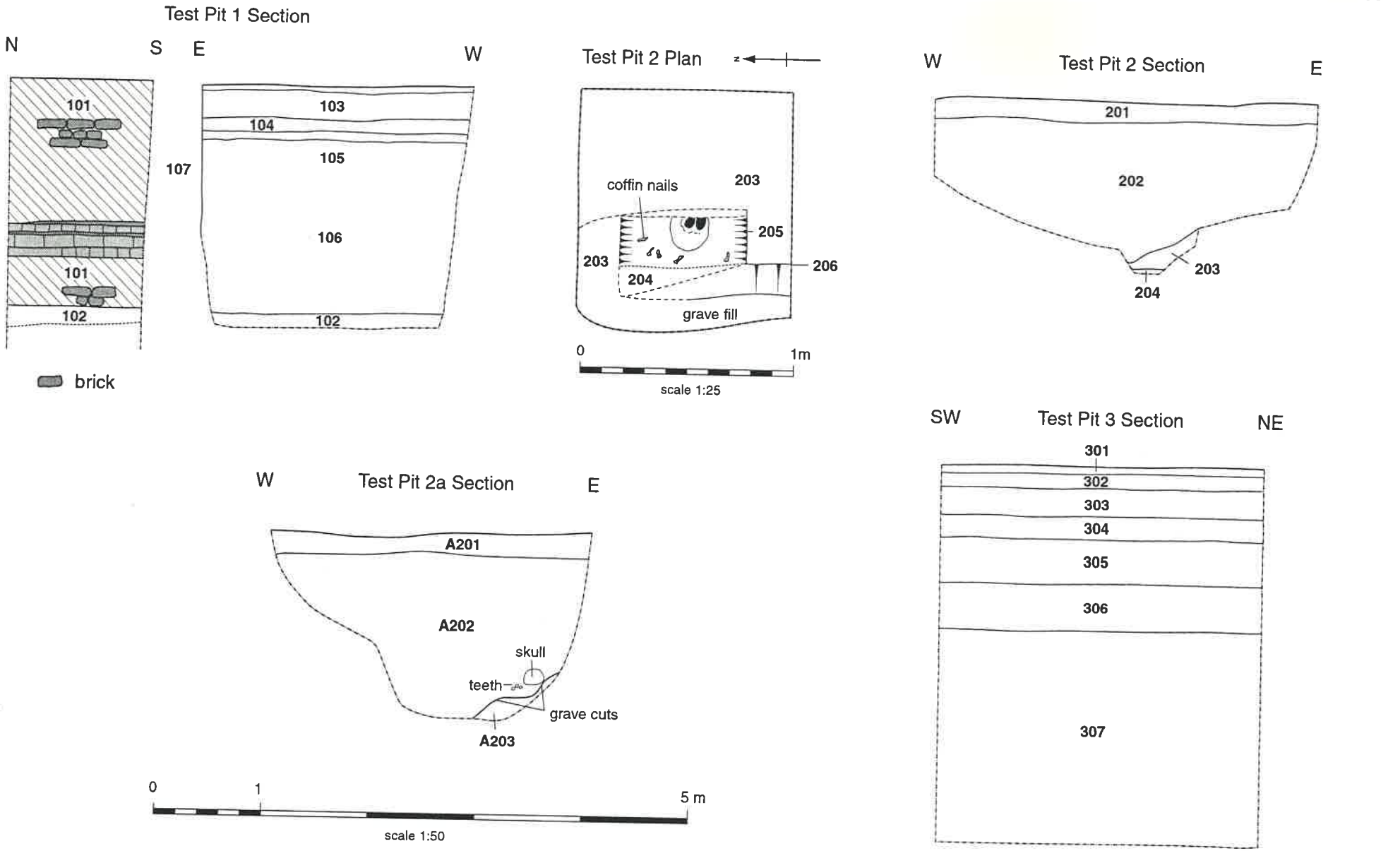
Site Location Map

Figure 1



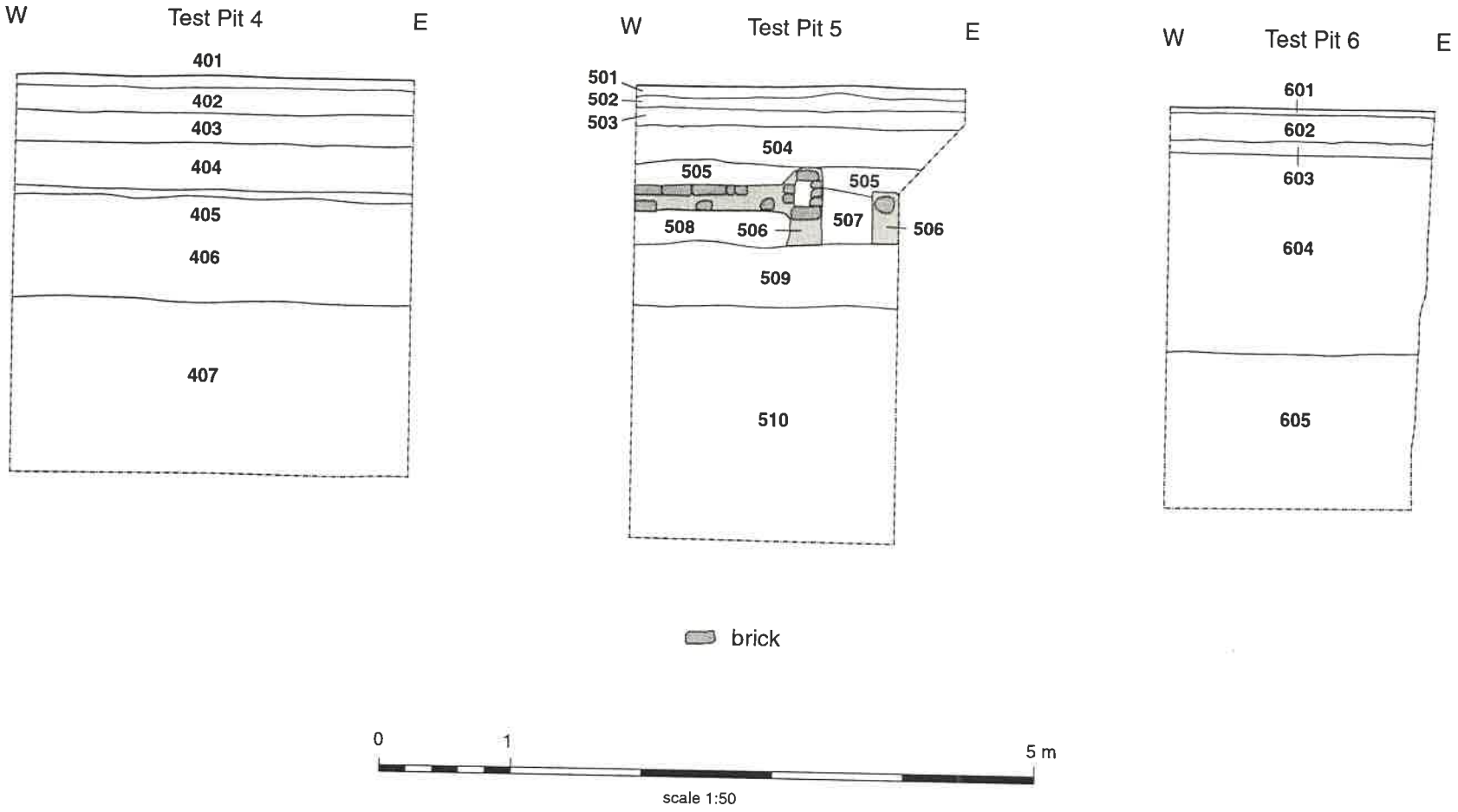
Location of Trenches

Figure 2



Test Pits 1-3, plan and sections

Figure 3



Test Pits 4-6, plan and sections

Figure 4

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