

Minster of St Mary-the-Virgin
Reading
Berkshire



**Archaeological
Watching Brief Report**



December 2006

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Reading, Berkshire*****ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF REPORT*****CONTENTS**

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SUMMARY

On 2nd October 2006 Oxford Archaeology (OA) carried out an archaeological watching brief at the Minster of St Mary-the-Virgin, Reading, Berkshire (NGR: SU 714 733). The work was commissioned as part of the consulting process prior to the consolidation of a cracked ledger stone in the vicinity of the south porch. The watching brief revealed evidence of 19th century made ground which contained charnel, presumably originating from burials disturbed during restoration work.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Scope of work

1.1.1 On 2nd October 2006 Oxford Archaeology (OA) carried out an archaeological watching brief at the Minster of St Mary-the-Virgin, Reading, Berkshire (NGR: SU 714 733). The work was commissioned as part of the ongoing site investigations during renovation work.

1.1.2 OA agreed a specification for the watching brief with the architects, engineers and the Church Commissioners following consultation with the Diocesan Archaeological Advisor, Julian Mumby.

1.2 Location, geology and topography

1.2.1 The site lies within the central area of Reading, south of the River Thames and the railway station (Fig. 1). The site itself is on a very gentle south facing slope running down towards Holy Brook and is located at approximately 44 m above OD. The underlying geology is valley gravels over alluvium (Geological Survey of Great Britain sheet no. 268).

1.3 Archaeological and historical background

1.3.1 Historic Reading straddles the gap in a gravel ridge through which the River Kennet flows. With the supplanting of the Roman road system based on Silchester, Reading became an important communications centre during the medieval period. The roads from Oxford to Southampton and from London to Bristol passed through or close to the town and, although the town does not lie on the banks of the River Thames, it was sufficiently near to the river to provide easy access to London, Wallingford and Oxford. The ease of access from the capital and the major provincial towns has ensured that Reading has retained an important place in the country's communications.

1.3.2 Reading is first documented by the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle in 870-1 AD when the Danes wintered there and repulsed the attacks of King Ethelred and his brother Alfred. Although the Danes wintered again in 1006, no further mention is made of the settlement here until the later 11th century. A reference to Reading in Domesday

indicates that it had become a town by 1066. A royal borough, separately mentioned, which included 29 *hagae*, a pasture called “portmansbrook” and land held for official guests, points to an urban community.

- 1.3.3 The post-Conquest history of Reading is dominated by the presence of the abbey and its effect on the town. Henry 1’s foundation of the abbey in 1121 AD gave the town an increased impetus to urban development. Construction of a new bridge over the Kennet by 1186 and the creation of another wide street, London Street, with burgable plots either side were part of this phase of urban expansion. London Street runs to the south-east of St Mary’s.
- 1.3.4 The major industry for this period came to be cloth working, with its attendant trades, weaving and fulling. By the mid 13th century fulling mills along the Kennet are documented as well as the town wharf with its wool beam. By the 14th century Reading had become established as the major town in Berkshire, having long outstripped Wallingford. In the 15th and 16th centuries the population had probably tripled, and there was a corresponding increase in manufactories and commerce.
- 1.3.5 The town’s prosperity was, however, severely dislocated during the Civil War, with the alternate occupations by the Parliamentary and Royalist forces between October 1642 and July 1644. These occupations hastened the decline in the old industries of cloth and leather working, and contributed to a reorientation of the town’s economy. This reorientation was finally achieved with the completion of the Kennet and Avon canal, linking Reading with Bristol in 1810. The decline in the clothing industry was offset by the manufacture of gauze, silk and sailcloth, whilst the brick and tile making and tanning had expanded considerably. The success of the town’s economy is reflected in the virtual rebuilding of the town centre in the late 18th and early 19th centuries.
- 1.3.6 The site itself is situated on the south-eastern extent of the medieval town of Reading. To the south-east of the site is the 12th century church of Saint Giles, whilst to the south west are the preserved remains of a medieval tile kiln.
- 1.3.7 Pevsner describes the building as having a Norman doorway, possibly reset, within the north wall and a southern arcade *c* 1200. At the east end of the north aisle an arch *c* 1300 must once have connected to a north transept with an eastern chapel. The west tower, built of chequer flint and stone with polygonal buttresses dates between 1550-3. The chancel dates to 1864 and the north aisle to 1872.
- 1.3.8 The ledger stone is located in the aisle leading from the south porch to the nave. The inscription reads as follows (north is at the top):

Here lveith the Body
of W^m ARMSTRONG Gent
who departed this Life
July v^c 19th 1748
Aged 67 Years

Also lveith the Body of
W^m the son of the above
WILLIAM ARMSTRONG
who departed this Life
Jan \ 19th 17(?)56
Aged 29 Years

Also lveith the Body of
Sarah the wife of the above
William Armstrong Gent.
who departed this Life
March \ ?1th 1769
Aged 71 Years

- 1.3.9 It seems unlikely that the stone is in-situ as the floor was almost certainly laid in the 19th century. The fact that the stone is aligned north-south may also suggest that it does not lie directly over the grave.

2 PROJECT AIMS AND METHODOLOGY

2.1 Aims

- 2.1.1 To advise on the archaeological implications of the proposed method of consolidation of the cracked ledger stone.
- 2.1.2 To identify and record the presence or absence, extent, condition, quality and date of archaeological remains in the areas affected by the development.
- 2.1.3 To provide information in order to develop a mitigation strategy for future work in the area.
- 2.1.4 To make available the results of the archaeological investigation.

2.2 Methodology

- 2.2.1 The watching brief was undertaken to assess the potential for the disturbance of archaeological deposits during the consolidation of the cracked ledger stone. The initial visit monitored the removal of wooden floor boards and a small area of tiled

floor to the west of the ledger stone, and the subsequent excavation of a sondage underneath the stone. A second sondage was excavated beneath the timber floor to establish the nature of the ground over which it lay.

- 2.2.2 A plan showing the location of the excavated area in relation to the ledger stone was drawn at a scale of 1:20. All excavations were photographed using 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

- 3.1.1 The floor timbers to the west of the ledger stone were supported on wooden beams, some of which were supported on stepped brick footings (see Fig. 3). This created a c 0.3 m deep void beneath the timber floor. A 0.32 m x 0.52 m sondage was excavated through the deposits exposed beneath the timber floor, which appeared to comprise a mixed, very loose sandy silt deposit with chalk, flint, charnal, ceramic building material and coffin furniture throughout (100). This was interpreted as made ground, possibly associated with the 1872 phase of renovation. A north-south aligned ceramic pipe, approximately 0.2 m in diameter, was encountered within the sondage, although no obvious trench was observed within deposit 100, and it is likely that this was installed prior to the deposition of the made ground and is therefore contemporary with the same phase of renovation. The brick supports for the timber beams also appeared to pre-date the deposition of the made ground as no construction cuts were observed and the deposit appeared to overlie the lower stepped courses of the brick footings.

- 3.1.2 To the east of the timber floor, the made ground was overlain by a bedding deposit for the tiled floor which comprised compacted chalk and flint (101) and was approximately 0.16 m thick. The ledger stone appeared to truncate this deposit and was laid directly over the made ground. A 0.30 m x 0.65 m sondage was excavated underneath the stone to a maximum of 0.43 m below ground level, and the base of the made ground deposit was not encountered.

3.2 Finds

- 3.2.1 Fragments of brick, tile, clay pipe and charnal were observed within deposit 100. These appeared to be of 19th century origin and were noted, but 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 It seems likely that the ceramic pipe and the brick footings for the timber beams had been laid prior to the deposition of the made ground. The bedding deposit for the tiled floor had then been laid over the made ground to the east of the timber floor. The relationship between the ledger stone and the bedding deposit was unclear, although it seems likely that the laying of the stone had truncated the bedding deposit, almost certainly as it is considerably thicker than the tiles to the east and west of it.
- 4.1.2 The initial monitoring visit established that it was highly unlikely that significant archaeological deposits would be compromised during consolidation of the cracked ledger stone. It seems likely that the reason the stone had cracked was that it had been placed directly over the rubble rich made ground deposit (100), as opposed to the tiled floor which was laid over the compacted chalk (101), or the timber floor which was supported on the wooden beams.
- 4.1.3 As the lifting and repair of the stone was impractical given the fragmentary nature of the cracking, it was decided to excavate further sondages under the stone and fill the resulting voids with sandbags to provide a stable base. As this would not impact below the projected extent of the made ground deposit, no further archaeological monitoring visits were considered necessary.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1 ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXT INVENTORY

| Ctxt No | Type | Length (m) | Thick. Depth (m) | Colour | Composition | Inclusions | Comment | Finds | Date |
|---------|---------|------------|------------------|--------|-----------------|--|---------------------------------|-------|------|
| 100 | deposit | | 0.28 + | mixed | sandy silt | mortar, chalk, flint, charnal, cbm, coffin furniture | ?19thC made ground | | |
| 101 | deposit | | 0.16 | white | chalk and flint | | bedding deposit for tiled floor | | |

APPENDIX 2 BIBLIOGRAPHY AND REFERENCES

IFA 2001 *Standards and Guidelines for Archaeological Watching Briefs*

OA 1992 *Field Manual* (1st edition, ed. D Wilkinson)

Pevsner, N. 1966 *The Buildings of England, Berkshire*. Penguin.

Astill, G. 1978 *Historic towns in Berkshire; An archaeological appraisal*

APPENDIX 3 SUMMARY OF SITE DETAILS

Site name: Minster of St Mary-the-Virgin, Reading, Berkshire

Site code: REMSM 06

Grid reference: SU 714 733

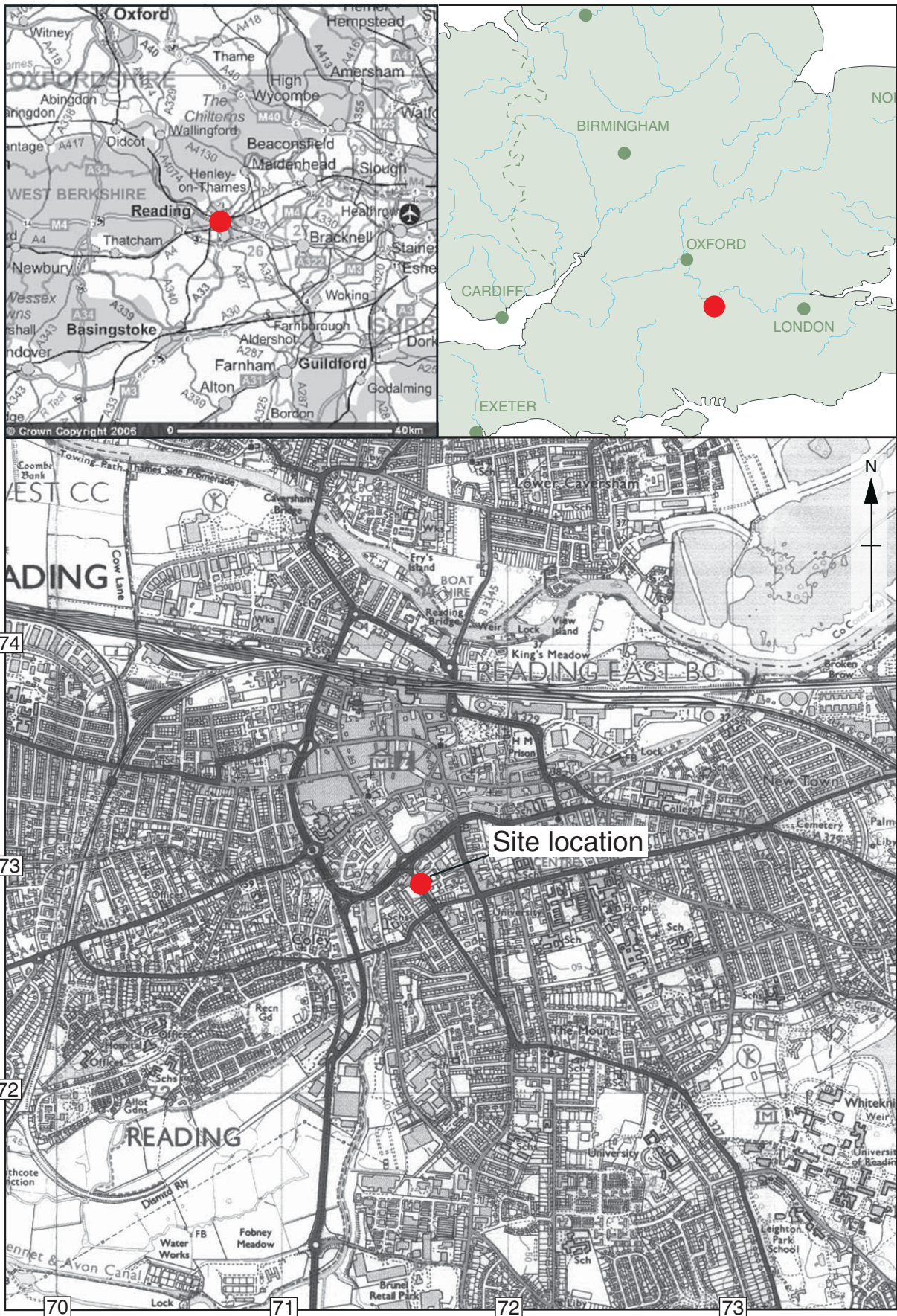
Type of watching brief: consolidation of cracked ledger stone

Date and duration of project: 3 hours

Area of site:

Summary of results: The watching brief exposed evidence of 19th century made ground probably associated with the 1872 renovation.

Location of archive: The archive is currently held at OA, Janus House, Osney Mead, Oxford, OX2 0ES, and will be deposited with Reading Museum Service in due course.



Scale 1:25,000

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Figure 1: Site location

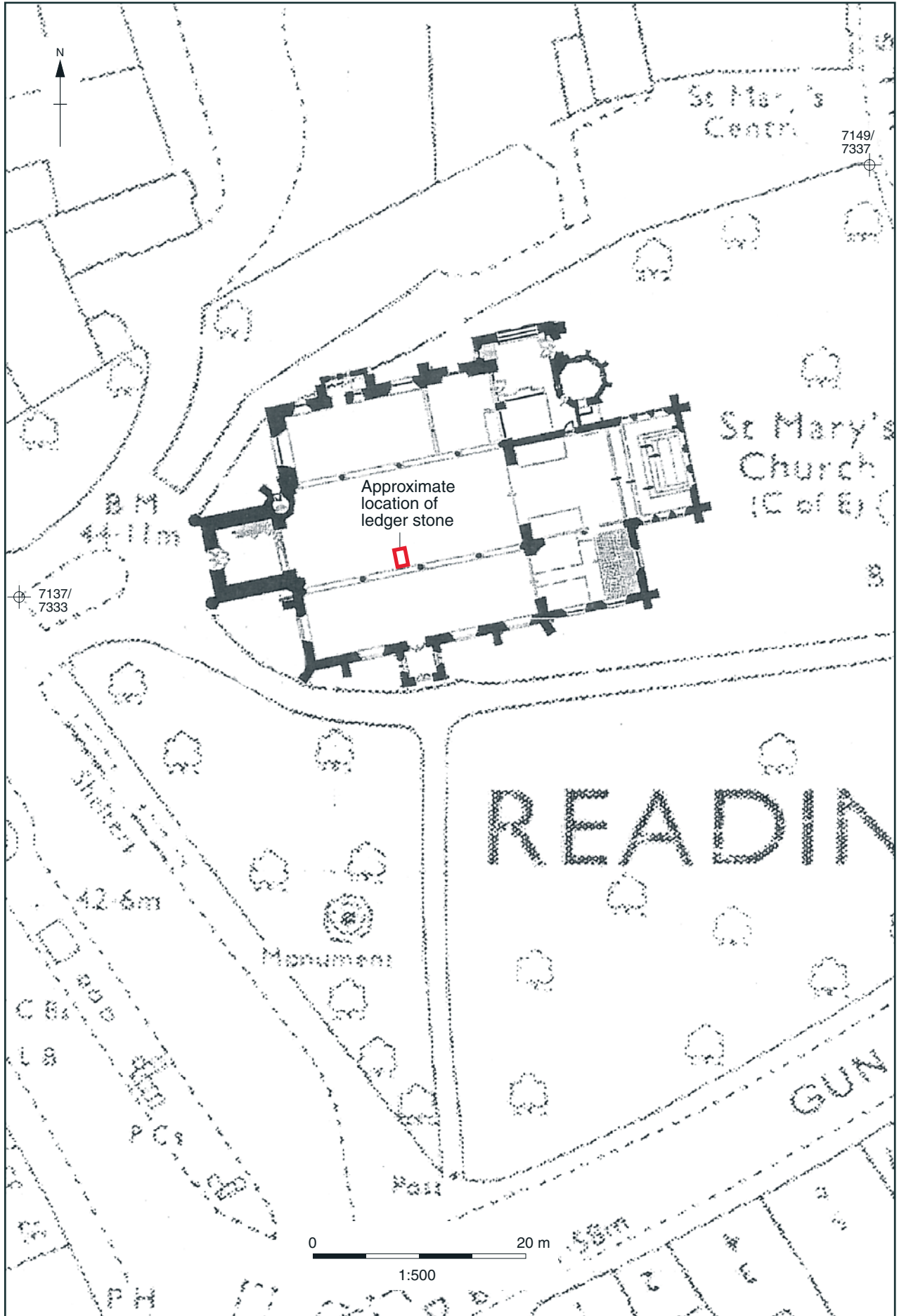


Figure 2: Approximate location of ledger stone

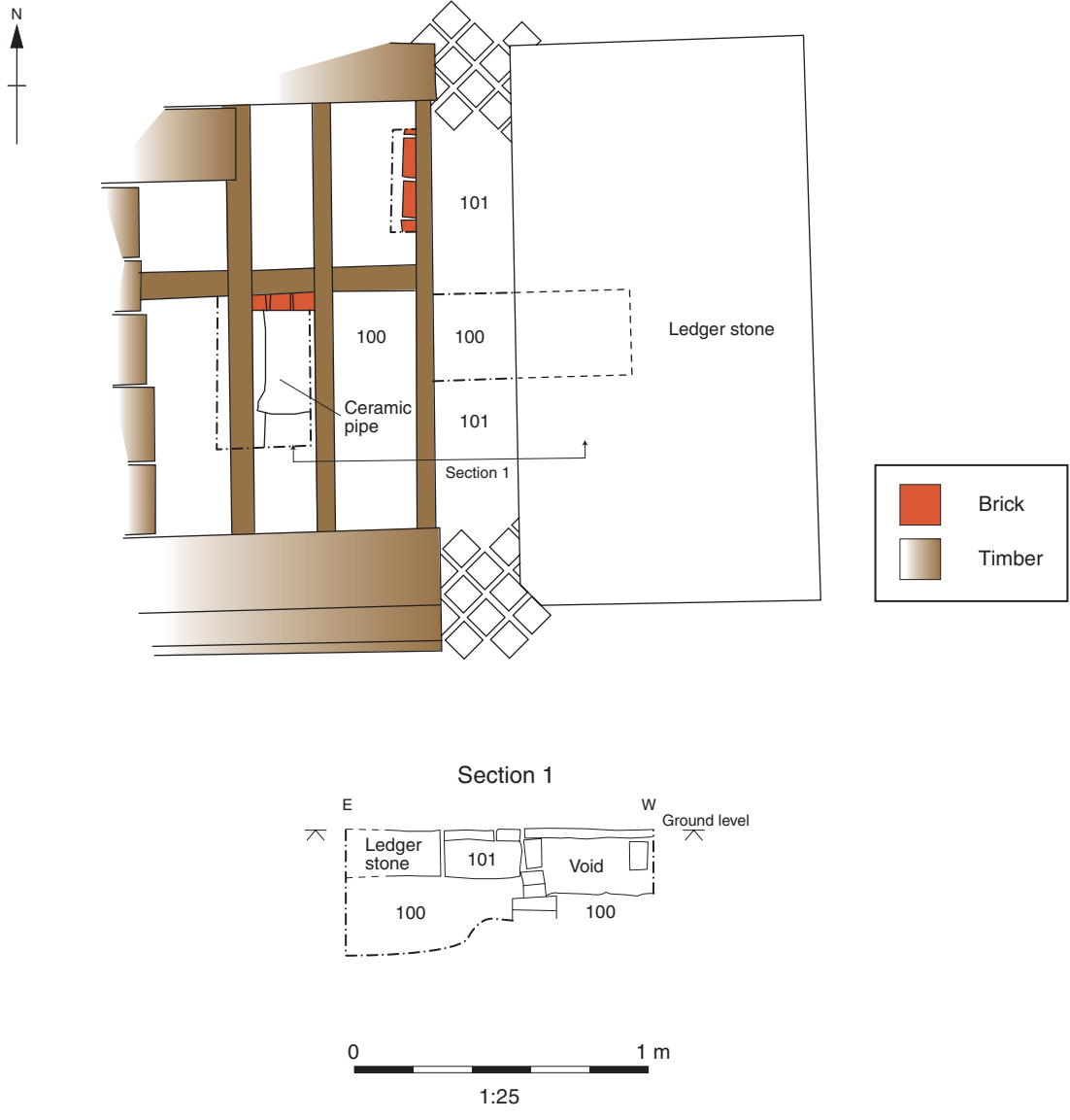


Figure 3: Plan of area monitored and sample section



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