

4 Stephen Road Headington Oxford



Archaeological Watching Brief Report



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Archaeological Watching Brief Report

Written by Brian Dean

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Summary

Between 9th January 2012 and 18th January 2012 intrusive groundworks were carried out at 4 Stephen Road, Headington, Oxford, prior to the construction of an extension to a domestic dwelling. The work was supervised on behalf of Dr Arnold by Oxford Archaeology. The excavations impacted to a maximum depth of 1m below current ground level. Although potential existed for the presence of Anglo-Saxon burials no evidence was uncovered to support this. The only archaeological activity encountered was a modern (1940s) brick built structure interpreted as an air raid shelter dating to the Second World War. The structure was extant to an area in excess of 6m² and was recorded to a depth of 0.75m.

INTRODUCTION

Scope of work

The intrusive groundworks comprised three trenches excavated as strip foundations for a two storey rear extension to the northern side and a single storey extension for a garage to the southern side of the existing domestic dwelling. Further intrusive groundworks were necessary for the purpose of drainage to the east of the existing building (Fig. 2).

The works combined machine excavation under close archaeological supervision with a degree of hand excavation. Machine excavation was utilised until the natural sand horizon was reached, at which point hand excavation was employed to ensure no damage would be caused to any archaeological deposits.

The work was commissioned by Dr Arnold and was undertaken in accordance with a brief set by Oxford City's Planning Archaeologist as a condition of Planning Permission.

Location, geology and topography

The site was located to the rear (east) and sides (both north and south) of 4 Stephen Road, Headington, Oxford. Headington is located on a hill in East Oxford at a ground level of c 106m OD.

The underlying geology was Beckley Sand Member, formed of sand and calcareous sandstone.

Archaeological and historical background

Headington has its origins in the Saxon period, but the earliest archaeological evidence from the area comprises scattered finds of flint objects dating between the Mesolithic and Bronze Age, a Neolithic polished axe and flint scraper and Bronze Age and Iron Age pottery (JMHS 2007). Pottery sherds from the area attest to Romano-British activity, but have no association with archaeological features (ibid.).

Headington derives from a Saxon personal name *Hedena* (Bloxhan and Shatford 1996, 9) and it has been suggested that the village was the nucleus of a Saxon Royal Manor (VCH 1957, 157). The most compelling evidence for this royal connection comes from a charter of AD 1004 by Ethelred, which states: *in villa regia quae vocatur Hedindona* (in the royal residence, which is called Headington). This connection is also evidenced on the first edition Ordnance Survey mapping of 1876, which records the foundations of an ancient building known as Ethelred's Palace in Court Close, adjoining Manor Farm. However, archaeological evidence is yet to be found to corroborate this (OA 2003).



Early Anglo-Saxon activity is notoriously difficult to detect in the archaeological record (Crawford 2010) and the Headington area is no exception. Loom weights or pot boilers, believed to be early Post Roman, were found in 1876 on the site of the reservoir at the top of the hill leading to Headington (OA 2007). In addition, two early Saxon burials have been recorded in the area. The first is an unaccompanied burial that was exposed close to the Fox Inn at Barton, a quarter of a mile east of Headington Village during the construction of the Oxford northern bypass in 1931. It was found at the bottom of a sunken featured building (*Grubenhaus*) from which Saxon sherds were also recovered (VCH 1957, 356). The second burial was discovered during an archaeological watching brief carried out at 2 Stephen Road, Headington (OA 2003). The burial was that of a 40 to 50 year-old female, who was accompanied by a range of grave goods, including two copper alloy brooches, a copper alloy pin, a necklace of amber beads, an iron knife and another iron object that was unidentified (OA 2003). A mid-late 6th century date was assigned to the burial.

It is very unlikely that either of the burials were in isolation and they may belong to a more extensive Saxon pagan cemetery. Anglo-Saxon cemeteries may be concentrated or dispersed and may comprise inhumations and cremations, the latter of which can be in containers made of glass, ceramic or metal. Both types of burial can be accompanied by grave goods, most notably food offerings and jewellery.

A number of important Anglo-Saxon cemeteries have been found in Oxfordshire (for example, Abingdon, Berinsfield), and have made a significant contribution to present understanding of early Anglo-Saxon furnished inhumation ritual (Crawford 2010). Cremations and cemeteries comprising inhumations and cremations are, however, less well studied (*ibid.*).

PROJECT AIMS AND METHODOLOGY

Aims

The primary aim of the archaeological excavation was to seek to establish, as far as practicable, the chronology, plan, form and function of archaeological features affected by development. In the event that Saxon burials were identified, specific questions, set out by the City Archaeologist, would have to be addressed. These are given in OA's Written Scheme of Investigation (OA 2011).

Methodology

The foundation trenches were machine excavated to the depth of the underlying geology at which point they were hand excavated to ascertain that no archaeological deposits were present. The drainage ditches were machine excavated to a lesser depth and no hand excavation was required. Machine excavation was undertaken using a toothless bucket and was closely supervised by an archaeologist.

All intrusive work was recorded through black and white and digital photography. A drawn record was also kept with all excavations being drawn in plan at a scale of 1:50 and a representative section showing the deposits revealed.

A detailed description of the methodology employed is provided in OA's (2011) Written Scheme of Investigation.



RESULTS

Description of deposits

The deposits consisted of a 0.38m thick upper layer of topsoil/garden soil (100) which comprised a friable dark greyish brown silty sand. This matrix included some general building debris and garden detritus. A 0.4m thick deposit of subsoil comprising a loose mid reddish brown sand (101) was encountered above the loose light brownish yellow sand of the underlying geology (102) (Fig. 3).

No evidence of prehistoric activity was observed during the excavation of the trenches. Nor was there any evidence to suggest the disturbance of earlier archaeological deposits by subsequent activity.

The only archaeological deposit revealed was the extant walls of a Second World War air raid shelter (103). This consisted of a brick built structure revealed below 0.25m of topsoil and exposed to a depth of 0.75m. The walls that were observed consisted of nine courses of mid brownish red London bricks. They extended beyond the excavated trenches to both the east by over 3m, and to the south for 2m (Fig. 2). The full extent of the structure remains unclear. A construction cut (105) was observed which extended for 0.16m beyond the exterior face of the walls. A construction backfill (104) of compact dark greyish brown sandy silt was also recorded. The walls were recorded in plan and by photography.

Finds

No finds were recovered during the excavation. This is consistent with the overall lack of archaeological activity evidenced within the site.

Environmental remains

No deposits were encountered which required sampling and therefore no environmental remains were recovered during the project.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

A total of three trenches were excavated for the foundations of an extension at 4 Stephen Road. The trenches were located to the north (Trench 300) and south (trenches 100 and 200) of the existing structure and were excavated to a maximum depth of 1m. In addition, a soak-away and a series of five drainage trenches were excavated. These were excavated to the rear (east) of the building and were excavated to a depth of 1m for the soak-away and between 0.4m and 0.6m for the drainage.

No evidence for prehistoric activity was recovered during the excavations. The only activity found was that of a brick built underground structure at the rear (east) of the house. This is interpreted as an air raid shelter dating to the Second World War. The shelter was later utilised as a cellar and as such appears to post-date the construction of the house itself. The construction involved excavation of a substantial area to the rear of the property to enable the walls below ground level to be erected. This will have impacted on any archaeology that may have been present within the footprint of the structure.

In conclusion, no evidence was recovered to suggest the presence of any Anglo-Saxon activity relating to the burials located in the proximity of the site. In addition, no prehistoric activity of any description was revealed. The modern structure which was revealed may have had an impact on any archaeological deposits located within its footprint but this remains speculative.



APPENDIX A. ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXT INVENTORY

Context	Type	Depth (m)	Width (m)	Length (m)	Comments	Finds	Date
100	Layer	0.38	-	-	Topsoil/garden soil	-	-
101	Layer	0.4	-	-	Subsoil	-	-
102	Layer	-	-	-	Natural geology	-	-
103	Structure	0.75	0.22	>3	Wall of air raid shelter	-	-
104	Fill	1	0.16	>3	Fill of construction cut	-	-
105	Cut	0.75	0.38	>3	Construction cut for 103	-	-



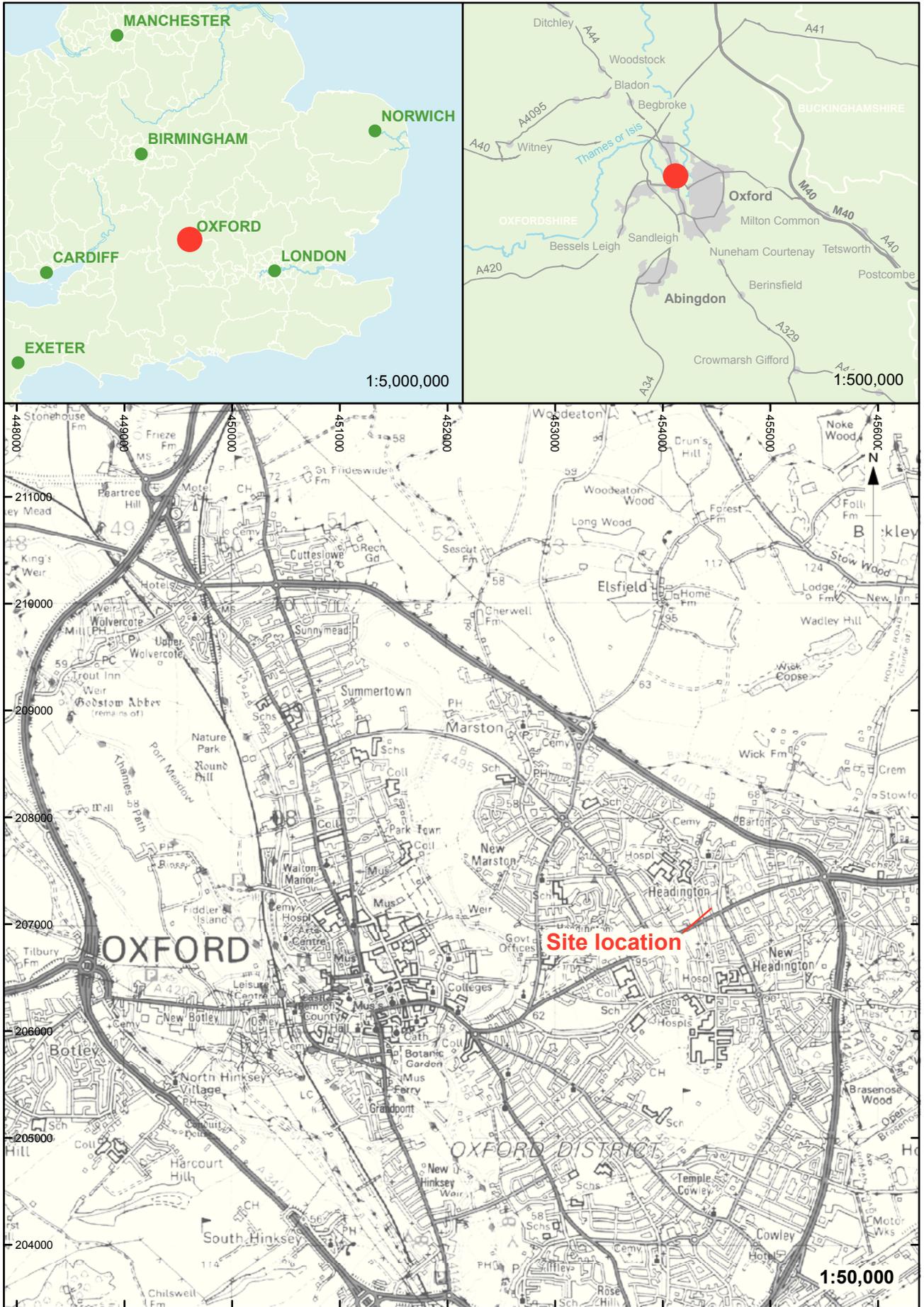
APPENDIX B. BIBLIOGRAPHY

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- OA, 2003 *2 Stephen's Road, Headington, Oxford Archaeology Watching Brief Report*
- OA, 2007 *Oxford Brookes. Masterplan, Oxford Archaeology Desk Based Assessment.*
- VCH, 1957 *Victoria County History, Oxfordshire. Vol. V*



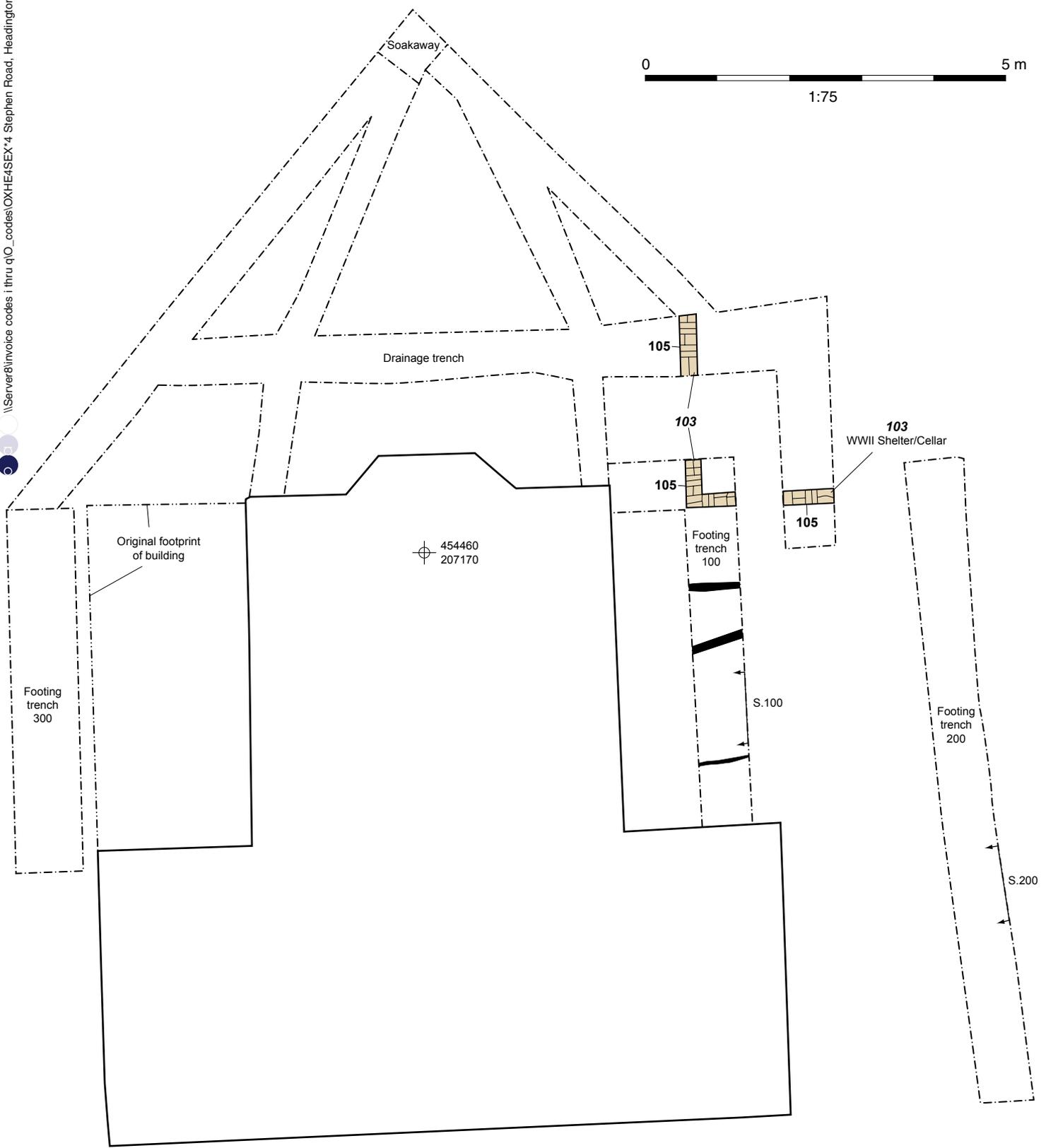
APPENDIX C. SUMMARY OF SITE DETAILS

Site name:	4 Stephen Road, Headington, Oxford
Site code:	OXHE4S 11
Grid reference:	Centred at NGR SP 5446 0717
Type of watching brief:	Supervision of excavation prior to extension of a domestic dwelling.
Date and duration of project:	09/01/2012 - 18/01/2012
Area of site:	
Summary of results:	The excavation of the trenches revealed no evidence for any prehistoric archaeological activity. The walls of a modern (c. 1940s) air raid shelter/cellar were revealed at a depth of 0.25 m and exposed to a depth of 0.75 m below that. The structure extended for 2 m to the south and in excess of 3 m to the east. The construction involved excavation prior to erection of the structure. This would most probably impacted heavily on any archaeological deposits which may have been located within the footprint of the structure.
Location of archive:	



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Figure 1: Site location



- Key
- Brick
 - Modern metal pipes
 - Outline of current structure

Figure 2: Trench location plan

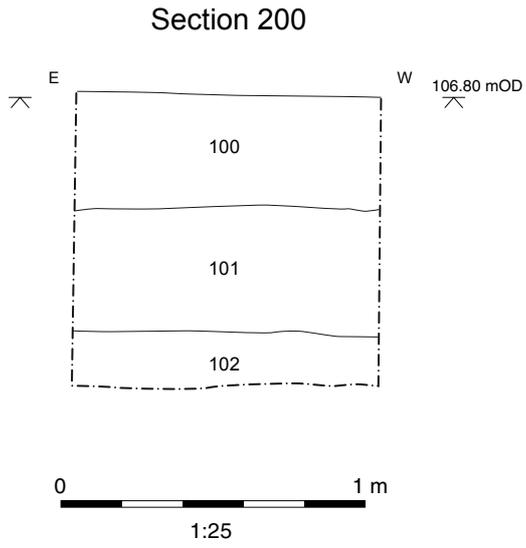


Figure 3: Representative section showing soil deposits



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