

# Rye Environmental Centre, High Wycombe, Bucks



## Archaeological Watching Brief



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**THE RYE ENVIRONMENT CENTRE, HIGH WYCOMBE,  
BUCKINGHAMSHIRE**

NGR SU 8740 9238

***ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF REPORT***

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## SUMMARY

*Between February and September 2002, Oxford Archaeology (OA) carried out an archaeological watching brief at The Rye Environment Centre, High Wycombe, Buckinghamshire (NGR SU 8740 9238). The complex overlies the site of Rye Roman villa and the groundwork revealed sections of the villa walls and a possible make-up layer for the villa floor surface. Roman levels were sealed by modern deposits associated with the swimming pool complex built on the site in the 20th century.*

### 1 INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1 Location and scope of work

1.1.1 Planning permission was granted by Wycombe District Council for the conversion and extension of an existing derelict building of the Holywell Mead Swimming Pool Complex in High Wycombe into an Environment Education Centre (Fig. 1). The development involves the demolition of an existing boiler house and the construction of new buildings to the front (east) and rear (west) of the existing swimming pool plant room (Figs 2 and 3).

1.1.2 The redevelopment proposals comprised a piling construction programme, which aimed to minimise damage to underlying deposits and structures associated with the villa. Wycombe District Council required an archaeologist to be in attendance during the piling operations and any other groundworks likely to affect archaeological deposits, and to record any unexpected discoveries. This was in line with PPG 16. It was a condition of the planning consent that existing pipework was left *in situ* wherever practical to avoid disturbance.

1.1.3 No formal *brief* was prepared, though discussions took place with Buckinghamshire's Senior Archaeological Officer as to the best way to mitigate the impact of the construction works. In accordance with PPG16 and local plan policy, a Written Scheme of Investigation was produced and agreed with the County Archaeological Officer.

#### 1.2 Geology and topography

1.2.1 The site is located at the end of an access road west of Bassetsbury Lane and south of the River Wye (Fig. 1).

1.2.2 The underlying geology comprises alluvial sand and gravel overlying chalk (BGS sheet 255); the site lies at approximately 65m OD.

#### 1.3 Archaeological and historical background

1.3.1 The Rye Roman Villa has been previously excavated by Langley (1797), by Payne in 1862-3 and Colmer in 1932 (VCH Bucks 2). The most extensive excavations were undertaken in 1954 in advance of construction of the swimming pool at the site. Initially the excavation was under the direction of Mr R R Inskeep but latterly by BR

Hartley F.S.A. (Hartley, 1959). This exposed the extent of the villa building (Figs 2 and 4), ancillary bath house buildings, an impressive gated entrance and boundary wall.

- 1.3.2 The location of further ancillary buildings north-east of the main villa building has been suggested by the discovery of stacked tiles during the erection of a goalpost in 1995, and further confirmed by a recent resistivity survey. In addition, a watching brief undertaken during refurbishment works to the swimming pool located numerous possible archaeological features (Parkhouse 1996). The precise interpretation of these deposits was limited however by the restricted nature of the work and it remains possible that some of the deposits encountered were related to the possible demolition and back-filling of the villa following the 1954 excavation.
- 1.3.3 The villa is not currently scheduled but has been identified as being potentially of national importance by English Heritage's Monuments Protection Programme.
- 1.3.4 From Hartley's report and the position of the modern buildings in relation to the villa complex, it seems likely that a large portion of the villa house was destroyed during the construction of the swimming pool complex. However, an evaluation carried out by Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU - now Oxford Archaeology, OA) in 2000 suggested that where not truncated by the 1954 development, the villa walls survived at a depth of *c* 0.9 m below current ground level, and that deposits relating to the floors of the Roman buildings also survived (OAU, 2000).
- 1.3.5 The location of the villa in relation to the new development suggested that only the easternmost room of the south wing of the house would be affected (Figs 2 and 3). This was initially one of three large rooms within the south wing, but had been later modified into a heated room through the insertion of a hypocaust. This was accomplished by dividing the room into 3 smaller compartments (XII, XIIa and XIIb - Fig. 4). The northern compartment (XIIb) became a stoking room, with a flue built into the dividing wall between XIIa and XIIb.

## 2 PROJECT AIMS AND METHODOLOGY

### 2.1 Aims

- 2.1.1 To preserve by record any archaeological remains (if present), which the works would remove or damage within the development area.
- 2.1.2 To make available the results of the investigation.

### 2.2 Methodology



- 2.2.1 The watching brief monitored all piling operations and the excavation of all service and drainage runs. Where archaeological deposits were encountered in these trenches, the deposits were hand excavated by the attending archaeologist.
- 2.2.2 All features and deposits were issued with unique context numbers, and context recording was in accordance with established OA practice (OA Field Manual, 1992). A context inventory can be found in Appendix 1.
- 2.2.3 The development required a total of 49 piles, 32 for the rear extension and 17 for the front (Fig. 3). The majority of these piles were augered to a depth of approximately 7 m. Where obstructions were encountered during the piling operation, the piles were drilled or driven where appropriate. If this was not possible, then the area of the pile in question was opened by machine under archaeological supervision to remove non-archaeologically significant material; the archaeological deposits beneath were then recorded.

### 3 RESULTS

#### 3.1 Description of deposits

##### *The Rear Extension*

- 3.1.1 The natural geology was not observed during the groundwork for the rear extension as this area of the site was overlain by a 0.8 m to 1 m thick deposit of modern made ground (45), associated with the construction of the swimming pool complex in 1954. This in turn was overlain by concrete and/or paving slabs. The majority of the groundwork did not impact below the modern made ground, but a number of potentially significant archaeological deposits and features were observed and recorded as follows.

##### *Pile Hole 3*

- 3.1.2 At a depth of approximately 1.5 m, the auger penetrated an undated deposit of dark grey silty clay (58) with inclusions of charcoal, chalk and flints.

##### *Piles Holes 9 and 10*

- 3.1.3 A trench approximately 2.5 m in length by 0.6 m wide by 1.1 m deep was excavated between piles 9 and 10 in order to remove an obstruction encountered during the augering of the pile holes. The southern half of this trench was excavated through the backfill of OAU evaluation Trench 2. The northern extent revealed the following stratigraphic sequence (Fig. 5).
- 3.1.4 A 0.3 m+ thick, compact, light grey silty sand (48) with chalk flecks, charcoal, flecks of mortar and lenses of reddish brown staining was observed in the base of the trench. This deposit probably represents a make up deposit for a removed floor surface noted by the Hartley excavations in 1954. Overlying this deposit was a mixed layer of compact, light grey silty sand (47) with inclusions of flint, charcoal, chalk and mortar, which was approximately 0.2 m thick. These inclusions were similar to those

observed within the deposit recorded in pile hole 3. Deposit 47 was in turn overlain by a 0.08 m thick, red- brown silty clay (46) which included brick fragments, flints, mortar flecks, iron mesh and other construction debris, all probably part of the construction horizon for the swimming pool complex. This horizon was overlain by 0.6 m of the made ground observed across the rest of the site (45) which was in turn overlain by 0.2 m of re-enforced concrete underlying the paving.

### ***Pile Holes 2, 7 and 8***

- 3.1.5 The piles immediately to the west of the existing plant room impacted on a concrete covered service pipe which ran adjacent to the concrete foundations of the standing building (Fig. 3). As breaking out this concrete was unavoidable, a trench was opened along the length of the pipe. For the majority of its length, the concrete did not impact below the modern made ground.
- 3.1.6 Between piles 2 and 7 (Fig. 6, Plan 11), an east-west aligned wall footing (50) of un-napped flints with occasional fragments of ceramic tile in a yellowish brown mortar was partially revealed and corresponds to the internal partition between rooms XIIa and XIIb from Hartley's excavations (Fig. 4). This appeared to be overlain and abutted by a deposit (49) similar in composition to deposit 47. This was overlain by the made ground (45). Only the northern face of the wall was exposed, as the majority of the trench did not impact below the made ground.
- 3.1.7 The trench opened around pile 8 (Fig. 6, Plan 12) also revealed an east-west aligned wall footing (53) - which showed evidence of a yellowish brown wall plaster approximately 0.02 m thick (52). The wall was abutted by a deposit similar to 48, observed between pile holes 9 and 10. Layer 51 was a yellow-brown silty sand with flecks of mortar, chalk and ceramic building material. This was overlain by 0.15 m thick deposit similar to 47 and 49 (layer 54), which was in turn overlain by the modern made ground (45). This footing (53) is almost certainly the eastern continuation of the wall observed in OAU Trench 2.

### ***Service Trenches***

- 3.1.8 The excavation of new drain runs and associated manholes was also monitored, although the majority of these did not impact below the modern made ground (45). However, around and within the new manholes, the excavation was considerably deeper, and impacted to *c* 1.6 m below the current ground surface. The manhole to the north of the new building was excavated through 20th-century material associated with the foundation of the existing building. The drain run associated with the manhole to the south of the new building revealed three distinct bands of clay (55, 56 and 57) with varying concentrations of sand (Section 15) which may have been alluvial in origin and were overlain by the modern made ground (45). The northern edge of the trench was excavated through the backfill of OAU Trench 1.

### ***The Front Extension***

- 3.1.9 During the groundwork to the front of the existing plant room, the chalk was observed at an average depth of 0.5 m below ground level. Overlying this was a 0.2m

thick deposit of made ground, which was overlain by *c* 0.3 m of rubble from the recently demolished boiler house.

- 3.1.10 It would seem that the impact made during the construction of the swimming pool complex (specifically the now demolished boiler house) was considerably greater in this area of the site and that the alluvial deposits overlying the chalk have been removed. Consequently, no archaeological features or deposits were observed during the groundwork in this area.

## 3.2 Finds

- 3.2.1 No significant finds were recovered in the course of the site works; modern finds were not retained.

## 3.3 Palaeo-environmental remains

- 3.3.1 No deposits suitable for environmental sampling were identified.

## 4 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

- 4.1.1 As the foundations for the new development were specifically designed to have a minimum impact on the underlying archaeological deposits, the disturbance observed during the groundwork was negligible. Where it was necessary to excavate obstructions, the features and deposits observed appear to correspond to those recorded during the evaluation in 2000.
- 4.1.2 The wall footing observed to the west of pile 8 (53) is certainly the eastern continuation of the wall recorded in Trench 2 of the evaluation, although it is interesting to note the presence of *in-situ* wall plaster (52). Whilst wall plaster was recovered during the 1954 excavation, none was found *in-situ*.
- 4.1.3 The wall between piles 2 and 7 (50) corresponds approximately to the internal division added to room XII, although no evidence of the flue recorded by Hartley was observed.
- 4.1.4 A potentially Roman make up deposit (48, 51) was also observed abutting the walls (50 and 53) and was overlain by a deposit which probably represents the limit of Hartley's excavation (47, 49 and 54). All the deposits overlying this were associated with the construction of the swimming pool complex (45 and 46).
- 4.1.5 The deposit observed during the augering of pile hole 3 (58) might well relate to these 'make-up' deposits although it was considerably deeper and its origin is uncertain.
- 4.1.6 The drainage runs do not appear to have impacted on any significant archaeological remains. The possible alluvial deposits (55, 56 and 57) observed to the south of the new building correspond to those observed in the adjacent OAU Trench 1 and are probably natural in origin and pre-date the villa.

- 4.1.7 The results of the watching brief do not add significantly to the interpretation of the results of the evaluation. However, they would seem to further verify the relative accuracy of the ground plan produced following the 1954 excavation, and confirm the reasonably good preservation of the villa walls outside the footprint of the swimming pool complex.

**APPENDICES****APPENDIX 1 ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXT INVENTORY**

<i>Context</i>	<i>Type</i>	<i>Depth</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Same as?</i>	<i>Comments</i>	<i>Finds</i>
45	Layer	0.2m - 1m	all site		1954 made ground	
46	Layer	0.08m	piles 9 and 10		1954 construction horizon	
47	Layer	0.2m	piles 9 and 10	49, 54	1954 excavation horizon	
48	Layer	0.3m+	piles 9 and 10	51	?Roman made ground	
49	Layer	0.2m+	piles 2 and 7	47, 54	1954 excavation horizon	
50	Structure		piles 2 and 7		villa wall footing	
51	Layer	0.2m+	pile 8	48	?Roman made ground	
52	Deposit		pile 8		Roman wall plaster	
53	Structure		pile 8		villa wall footing	
54	Layer	0.15m+	pile 8	47, 49	1954 excavation horizon	
55	Layer	c0.4m	sect 16		?alluvium	
56	Layer	0.2m	sect 16		?alluvium	
57	Layer	0.3m+	sect 16		?alluvium	
58	Layer		pile 3	?48, ?51	?Roman made ground	

**APPENDIX 2 BIBLIOGRAPHY AND REFERENCES**

- IFA 1999 *Standard and Guidance for archaeological watching briefs*
- OA 1992 *Fieldwork Manual* (1st edition, ed. D Wilkinson)
- OAU 2000 *The Rye Environmental Centre, High Wycombe, Buckinghamshire. Archaeological Evaluation Report.*
- Hartley, B.R. 1959 'A Roman Villa at High Wycombe' in *Records of Bucks 16*, p227-257
- Head, J.F. 1955 *Early Man in Bucks*, p37,81,156,157
- Langley, T. 1797 *History and Antiquities of the Hundred of Desborough*, p29
- Parker, J. 1878 *Early History and Antiquities of Wycombe*, p1-3
- Parkhouse, J. 1996 *An Archaeological Watching Brief at Holywell Mead, High Wycombe, Buckinghamshire.* unpublished client report
- Payne, E.J. 1867 'Roman Villa at Wycombe' in *Records of Bucks 3*, p160-4
- RCHM Bucks 1 p194
- VCH Bucks 2 p17-18
- Journal of Wycombe Municipal Charity Trustees & Delafield MSS c1750 Gough Collection Bucks 6 of 71, Bodleian

### APPENDIX 3 SUMMARY OF SITE DETAILS

**Site name:** Rye Environment Centre, High Wycombe, Buckinghamshire

**Site code:** HWRYE02

**Grid reference:** SU 8740 9238

**Type of watching brief:** Piled foundations for new buildings

**Date and duration of project:** Feb 2002 - Sept 2002

**Area of site:** 0.5 ha

**Summary of results:** Roman villa walls were identified in a few locations together with probable Roman floor make-up deposits.

**Location of archive:** The archive is currently held at OA, Janus House, Osney Mead, Oxford, OX2 0ES and will be deposited with the Buckinghamshire County Museums Service under the following accession number: AYBCM 2000.85.







Figure 1: Site location

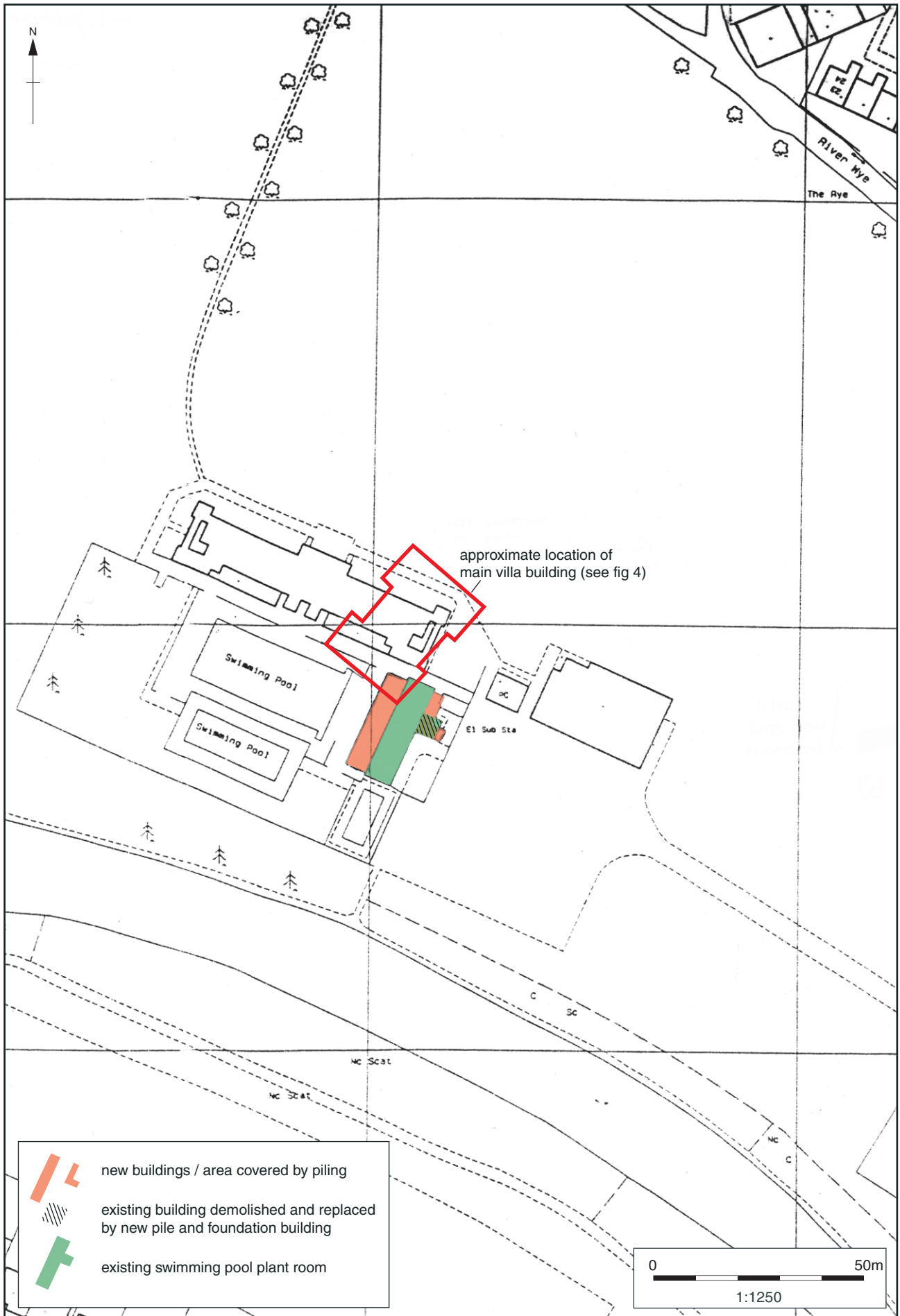


Figure 2: Relative location of existing buildings, main villa building and new development

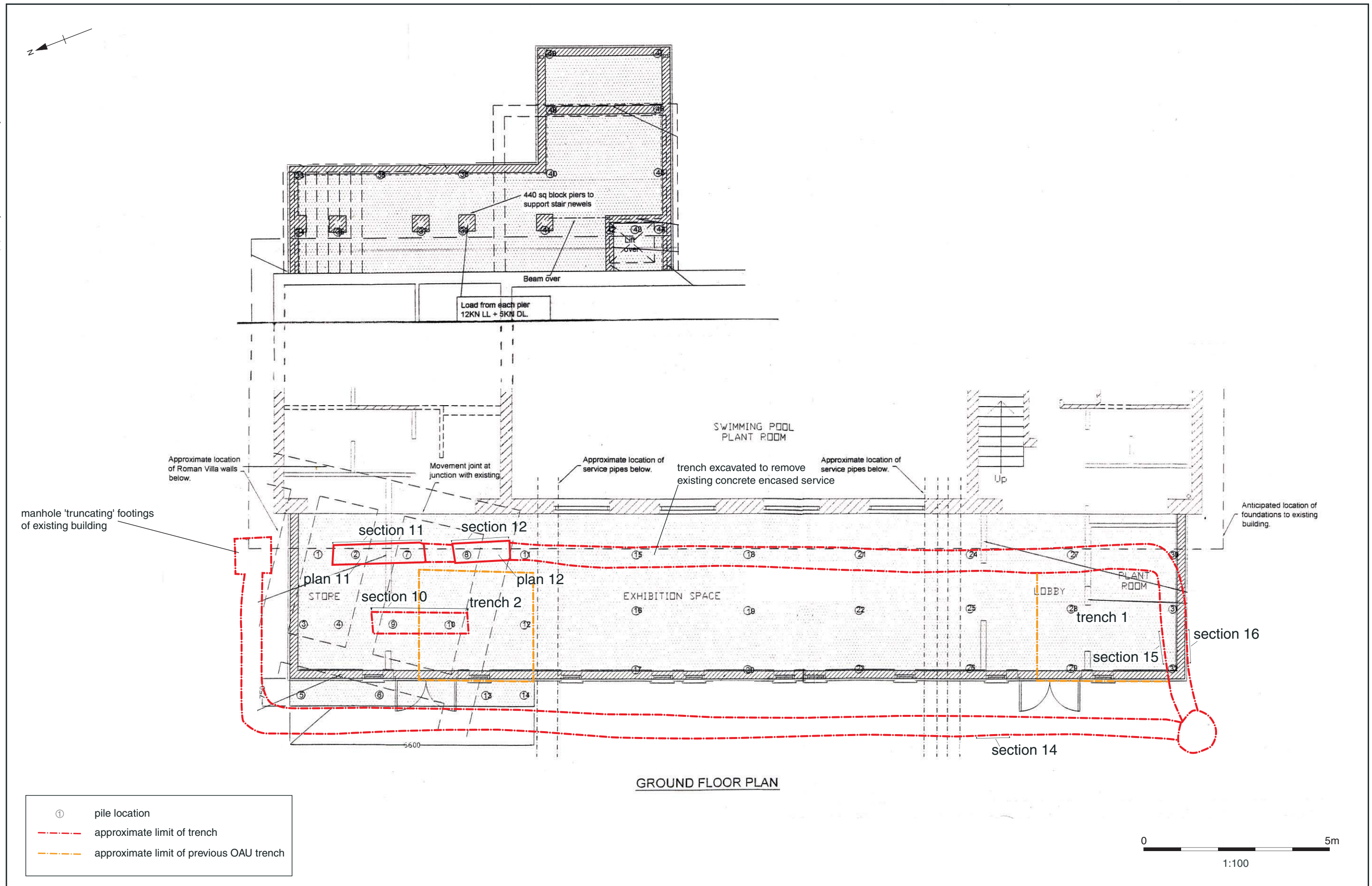


Figure 3: Ground plan of new development showing piling layout and intrusive groundworks

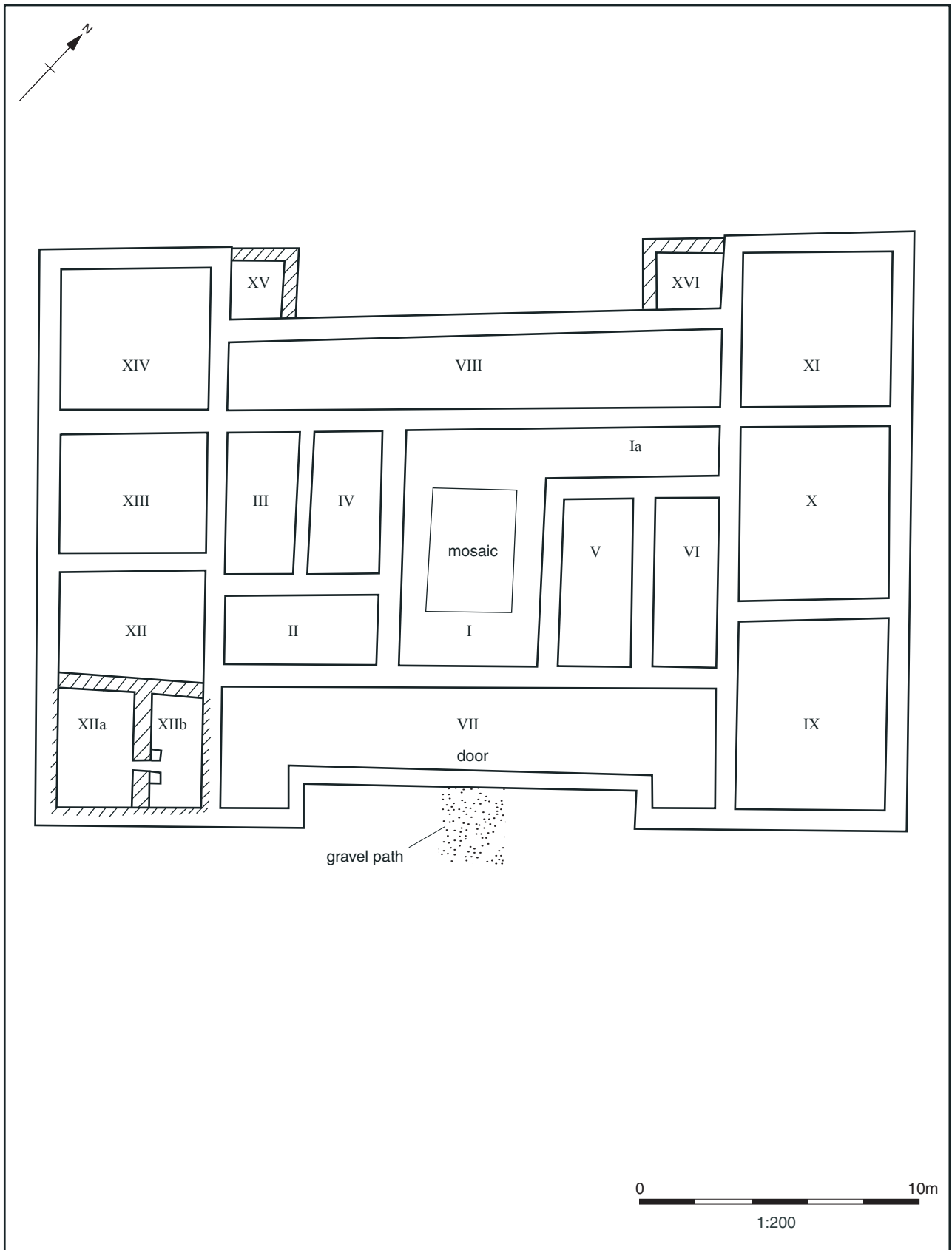


Figure 4: Ground plan of villa produced following 1954 excavation

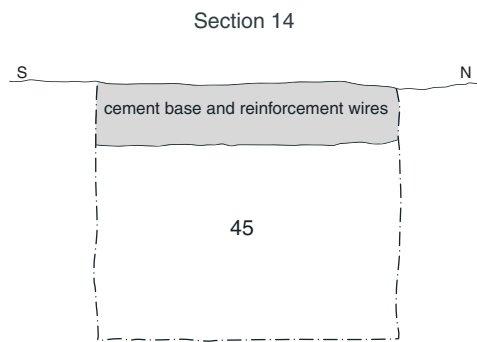
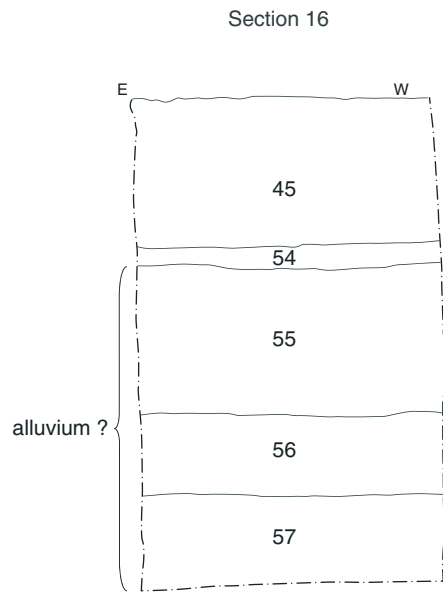
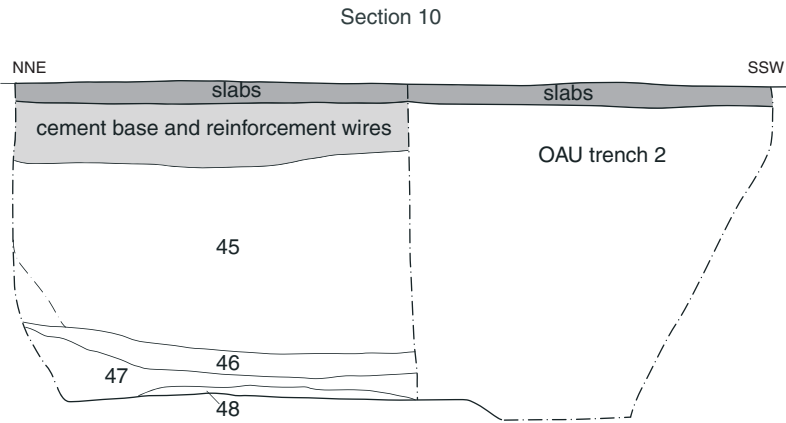


Figure 5: Section 10 ( between piles 9 and 10), Section 16 and Section 14

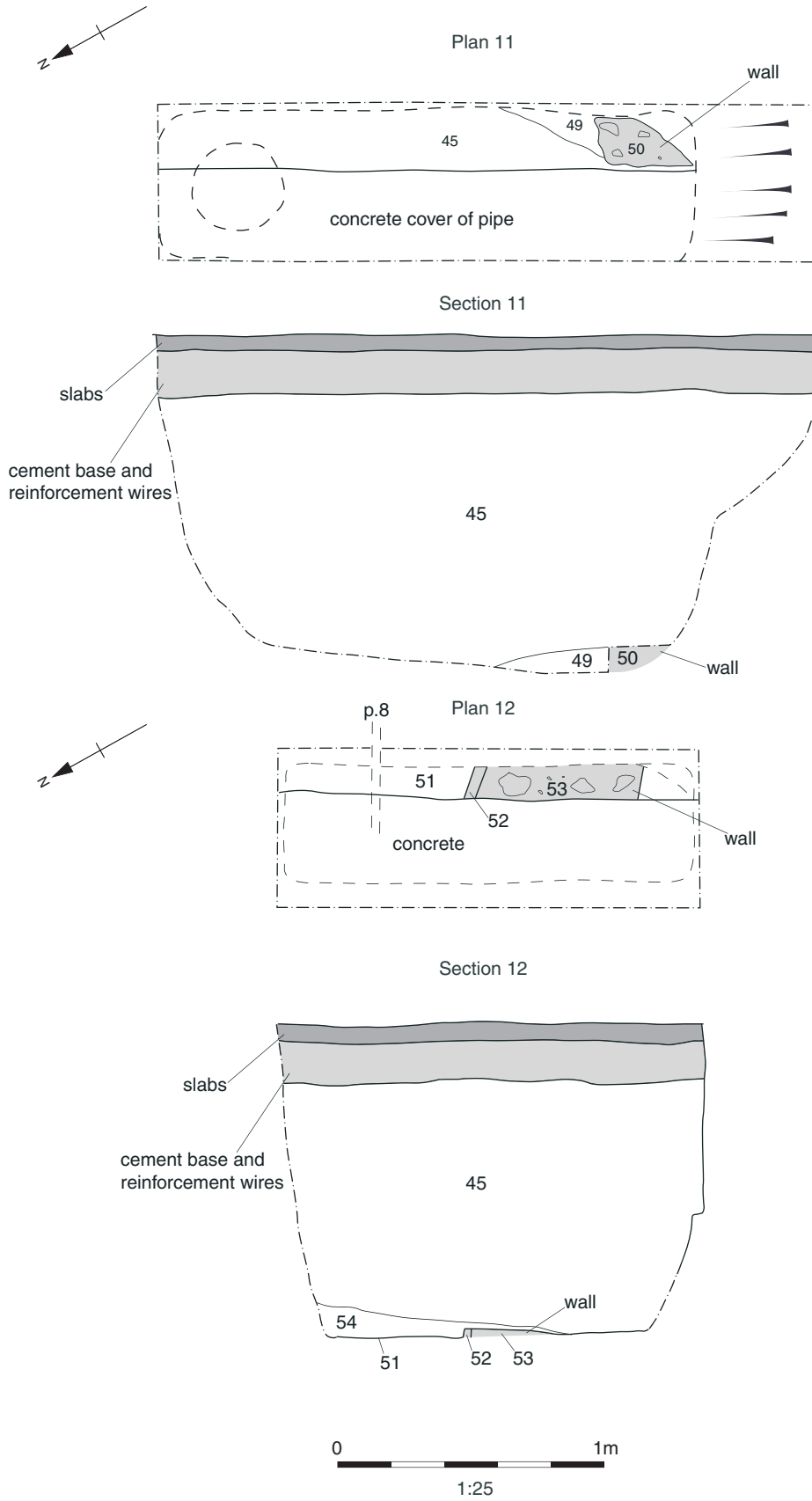


Figure 6: Plan and sections 11 and 12 ( between piles 2 and 8)

Section 16

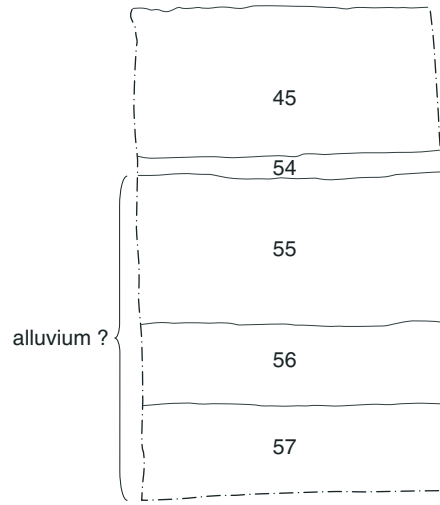
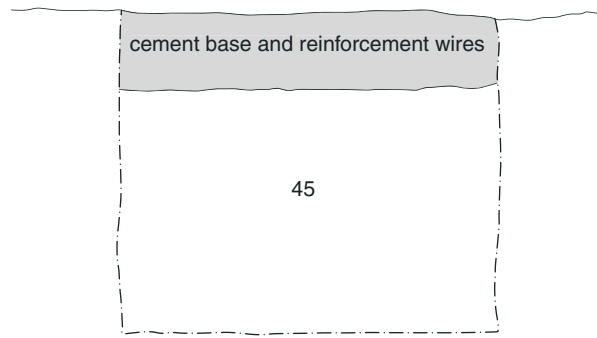


Figure 7: Section 16

Section 14



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1:20

Figure 8: Section 14





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