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Thames Water Utilities Limited

Grandpont Causeway, Abingdon Road, Oxford

NGR SP 5142 0575

ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF REPORT

Planning Ref. No. 97/606/NFH

Oxford Archaeological Unit

January 2001

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Date: 8/2/2001	

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Summary

In February, March and April 2000 the Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) undertook a watching brief at the Grandpont Causeway, Abingdon Road, Oxford (NGR SP 5142 0575, Fig. 1). Limestone rubble from the Norman bridgework was exposed in plan in the base of the trench; excavation did not proceed below this point. No further features were seen and no finds were retrieved. Further work was carried out during repairs to the existing water main in January 2001 and a small section of the eastern face of the bridgework was exposed.

1 Introduction

The development proposal (planning application no. 97/606/NFH) comprised the excavation of a trench for a new water main from the new development at the former Salter's Boatyard site, south along the line of the Abingdon Road, then west to terminate at an existing water main in Western Road (Fig. 2). An archaeological watching brief was required in accordance with the planning consent granted under PPG 16, as the excavations were likely to reveal the upper surface of the Norman Grandpont, which is a Scheduled Ancient Monument (SAM 21757). Scheduled Monument Consent was also required for the work.

The watching brief was commissioned by Lang Hall Archaeology on behalf of Thames Water Utilities Limited. It was undertaken to a brief set by and a WSI agreed with the Oxford Archaeological Advisory Service and English Heritage.

In addition to this new connection, further work was carried out in January 2001, to repair a leak in the existing water main on Abingdon Road, opposite the junction with Western Road and adjacent to the entrance to Grandpont House (Fig. 2).

2 Background

Environmental evidence indicates that the course of the River Thames to the south of Oxford has undergone a series of changes since the last Ice Age. During the Neolithic period and the Bronze Age the river channel was much wider than that which can be seen today. A number of clay banks have been dated to the early Saxon period, forming channels which remained stable into the mid-late Saxon period as a result of both increased alluviation caused by a rise in the water table, and reclamation activity.

Evidence from archaeological excavations and observations over the last 25 years suggests that in the Saxon period the southern approach to Oxford was carried across this series of streams and islands, initially by means of a ford and from the late Saxon period by a timber bridge. The stone causeway is believed to have been built as a part of the 'great bridge' built by Robert D'Oilly in the late 11th century. It ran from close to the southern end of Christchurch to South Hinksey, on the far side of the floodplain, a distance of *c*1.5 miles.

A gate tower with a drawbridge was built in the 13th century, where the bridge crossed the main stream of the Thames. Repairs to the bridge are recorded in the 14th century.

The gate tower, also known as the Folly, was finally demolished in 1779, with the bridge itself being rebuilt in 1825.

Simultaneously, a major redevelopment of the riverside facilities took place, including new wharves and streets constructed on the north side of the river, fronting a basin, while the navigation stream was diverted south through a pound lock (to the south of the development site).

Several excavations and monitoring exercises have been carried out in the immediate vicinity of the study area:

- Rescue work in the Telecom Tunnel beneath St Aldate's to the north of the site revealed possible late Saxon or Norman occupation following construction of the bridge and the infilling of a former river channel (Campbell, forthcoming).

- Across the Thames, to the north-east of the site, evaluation work at the "Head of the River" Public House produced information relating to medieval land reclamation (OAU 1994).

- Excavations at Whitehouse Road, c. 250 m to the south-west of the site, revealed evidence of Middle Iron Age occupation on the lower gravel terrace (Mudd 1993, 1996).

- An archaeological desktop study, field evaluation and watching brief at Salter's Boatyard located evidence of substantial dumping and levelling in the 19th century (OAU 1997, OAU 1998a, OAU 1998b).

- An archaeological watching brief at 1-2 Folly Bridge similarly identified evidence of substantial dumping and levelling works dating from the 19th century (OAU 1999).

- An archaeological recording action during excavation on the proposed line of the new water main (RPS Consultants, 1999).

The site lies on alluvial clays and gravels, overlying Oxford Clay, on the Thames floodplain, at *c*57.54 m OD, at the top of the modern road surface. The medieval gate house, also known as 'Friar Bacon's Study', was founded on cutwaters which would have been substantially wider than the bridge causeway itself. Efforts to identify the location of the tower by purely cartographic means have been inconclusive and, as the pipe trench crossed the line of the causeway from east to west, there was a slight possibility of identifying remains related to the cutwaters, if not the gatehouse itself.

3 Aims

The aims of the watching brief were to identify any archaeological remains exposed on site during the course of the works, and to record these to established OAU standards (Wilkinson 1992), in order to secure their preservation by record.

4 Methodology

The line of the pipe trench, running south from Salter's Boatyard along the eastern side of the Abingdon Road carriageway and then turning west to cross the carriageway and terminate at the existing water main in Western Road, was cut by disc cutter with the tarmac being broken up by pneumatic drill. Excavation then took place by JCB to the cut-off point of c. 0.50 m, or the upper horizon of limestone rubble, believed to signify the beginning of deposits associated with the Norman bridgework. Shingle was laid directly onto this material with the new pipe being laid in sections on top of this. Subsequent to testing of the new pipework, two pits were dug at either end of the backfilled trench in order to make the final connections to the new building on Salter's Boatyard and the existing water main.

The repairs to the existing water main involved the excavation of a trench, approximately 2 m x 3 m, around the damaged section (which comprised a burst collar between two sections of the pipe) and the subsequent removal and replacement of the compromised collar.

Within the constraints imposed by health and safety considerations the deposits 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. Soil description utilised standard charts for the approximation of percentage of inclusion types in soil deposits.

5 Results

The pipe trench.

A consistent sequence of deposits was identified in the section of the pipe trench. The earliest deposit seen was a layer of uncoursed, unworked ragstone fragments in a matrix of mid brown sandy gravel (6). This was exposed only in plan at the base of the trench and was sealed by, a band of mid grayish/brown silty sand, *c*0.15 m thick (5). This underlay a possible surface, numbered as (4), *c*0.10 m thick comprising medium rounded pebbles in a matrix of decayed lime mortar and < 2% silty sand; this deposit petered out towards the southern end of the trench. Deposit (4) was sealed by a 0.15 m thick deposit of fine-coarse subangular light brown sandy gravel (3). This underlay a dump of modern red housebricks (2), with some being dumped randomly and some laid in courses along their long edges, serving as makeup for the modern tarmac road surface, numbered as (1).

None of the deposits seen in the pipe trench produced any dating evidence.

Service connection pits.

The service connection pits at both ends of the pipe trench were dug through backfilled service trenches in order to reach existing mains connections. The deposits exposed in both excavations comprised a mixture of fine-coarse subangular gravels, Type 1 hardcore with concrete, brick and tarmac lumps. At the Salter's Boatyard

connection a quantity of dumped scaffolding brackets were also retrieved. None of these deposits were thought to be of archaeological significance.

Repairs to existing water main *(Figs 3 and 4)*

The trench was excavated to a depth of approximately 1.0 m and revealed a series of services, the majority running parallel with the Abingdon Road and impacting to a maximum depth of 0.80 m (this being the bottom of the water main itself). The services appeared to cut through a layer similar to the deposit recorded in the pipe trench (deposit 6 -unworked and uncoursed ragstone fragments within a mid brown sandy gravel deposit - which is numbered within the repair trench as deposit 2). deposit 2 was approximately 0.40 m thick and directly overlay a course of worked stone at the base of the trench (1). This comprised at least four worked ragstone blocks, each between 0.32 m and 0.48 m in length, and at least 0.24 m in width, aligned roughly SSW to NNE. Only the top 0.10 m of this course of stonework was revealed by the excavation. Overlying the sandy gravel deposit (2) was a layer of mixed sandy gravel and mid grey clay (3), *c*0.30 m thick which was tentatively interpreted as a make up layer beneath the overlying hardcore and tarmac surface (which were both approximately 0.10 m thick). The deposits labelled 4 and 5 within the pipe trench were not observed, presumably due to the greater concentration of services and higher degree of truncation beneath the pavement.

6 Finds

No finds were retrieved during the course of the watching brief.

7 Environmental results

Although full consideration was given to various sampling strategies, due to the absence of any suitable deposits and the very tight constraints of the excavation, no environmental soil samples were taken.

8 Discussion

None of the ragstone rubble seen in deposit 6 within the pipe trench (and deposit 2 within the repair trench) was faced and there was no evidence for either coursing or any kind of deliberate arrangement. It is possible that this material represents a dumped rubble layer, possibly a part of the surviving upper level of the Norman Grandpont Causeway, although it could also represent subsequent widening and/or revetting works, which are known to have added to the original four metre width of the causeway. Excavation did not proceed either into or below deposit 6, and no dating evidence was obtained, therefore this interpretation is of necessity entirely speculative. The disappearance of deposit 4, thought possibly to represent a previous road surface, towards the southern end of the trench is interesting, and may imply either that it simply never extended this far or that it has been truncated, or eroded, away by later activity.

It is thought likely, based on past experience of deposits encountered in the immediate vicinity, that all the deposits identified post-date the Norman works, and also the Medieval works, and probably date from the 18th-20th centuries, although in the absence of any dating evidence it is not possible to be absolutely certain of this. The deposits identified in the service connection pits identified the invasive nature of modern services paralleling the carriageway, and were not informative concerning either the structural detail or the width of the Norman causeway. It is not thought likely that these features have been truncated, but rather that the trench was insufficiently deep to expose them.

This assumption was verified during the repairs to the water main in January 2001. The stonework (1) revealed represents the eastern face of Grandpont Causeway. Whilst the limited nature of the trench made characterisation of the overlying deposits problematic. No further conclusions could be drawn regarding the sandy gravel deposit overlying the stonework (2) - observed in plan in the earlier pipe trench - and the most likely interpretation remains that it is a dumped rubble layer, possibly part of the surviving upper layer of the causeway. However, the presence of several large ragstone blocks within the deposit - one of which appeared to be worked - may also suggest that it represents a robbed-out section of the causeway, or that the upper courses have been disturbed by the numerous service trenches which are located to the east of the stonework. Whilst it is difficult to draw any definitive conclusions, the recorded depth of the in-situ stonework, and the overlying services, should prove invaluable should any future repairs or associated groundworks be necessary, and also gives an indication of the degree of impact caused by the installation of the services which run along the Abingdon Road.

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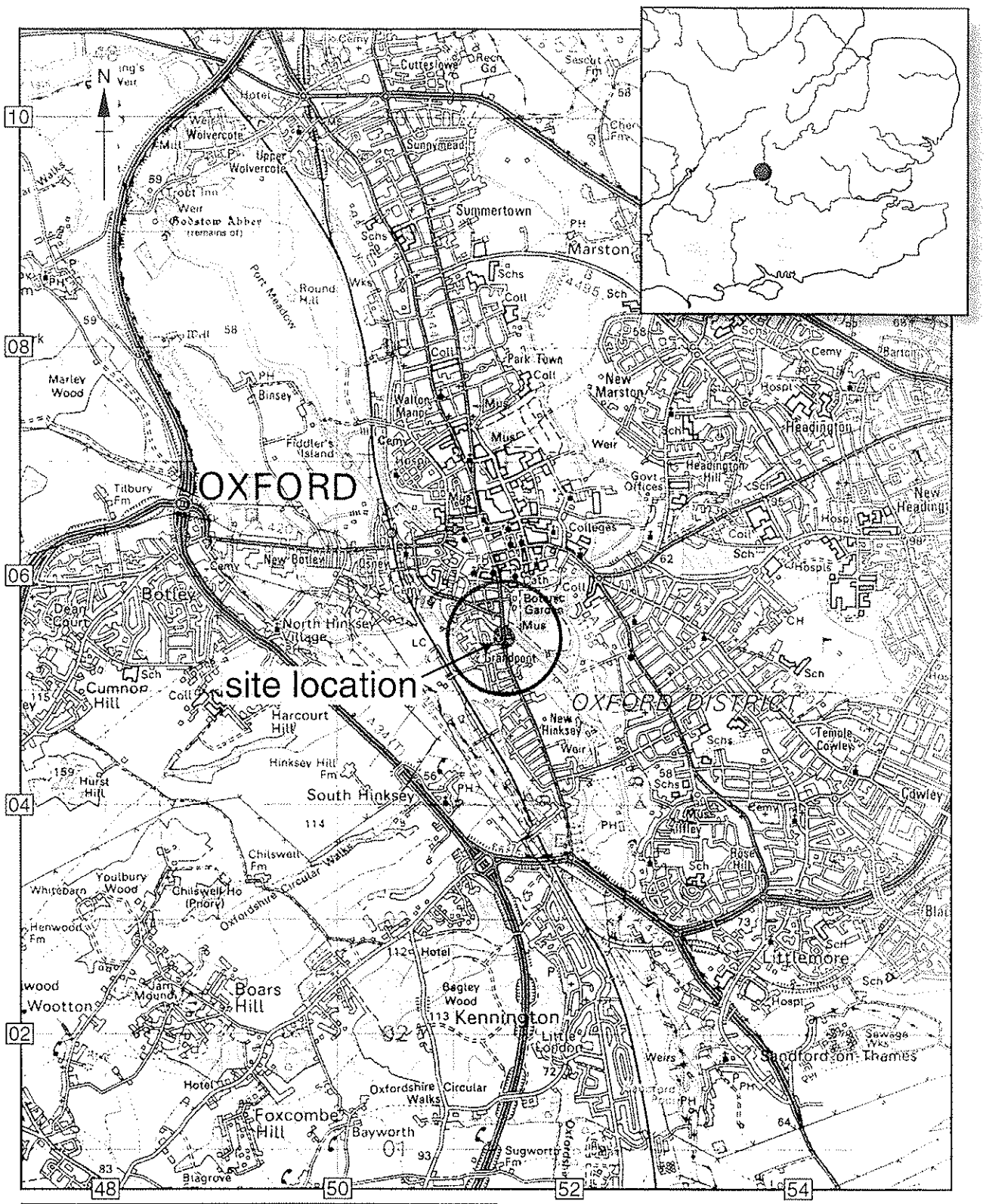

Figure 1: Site location

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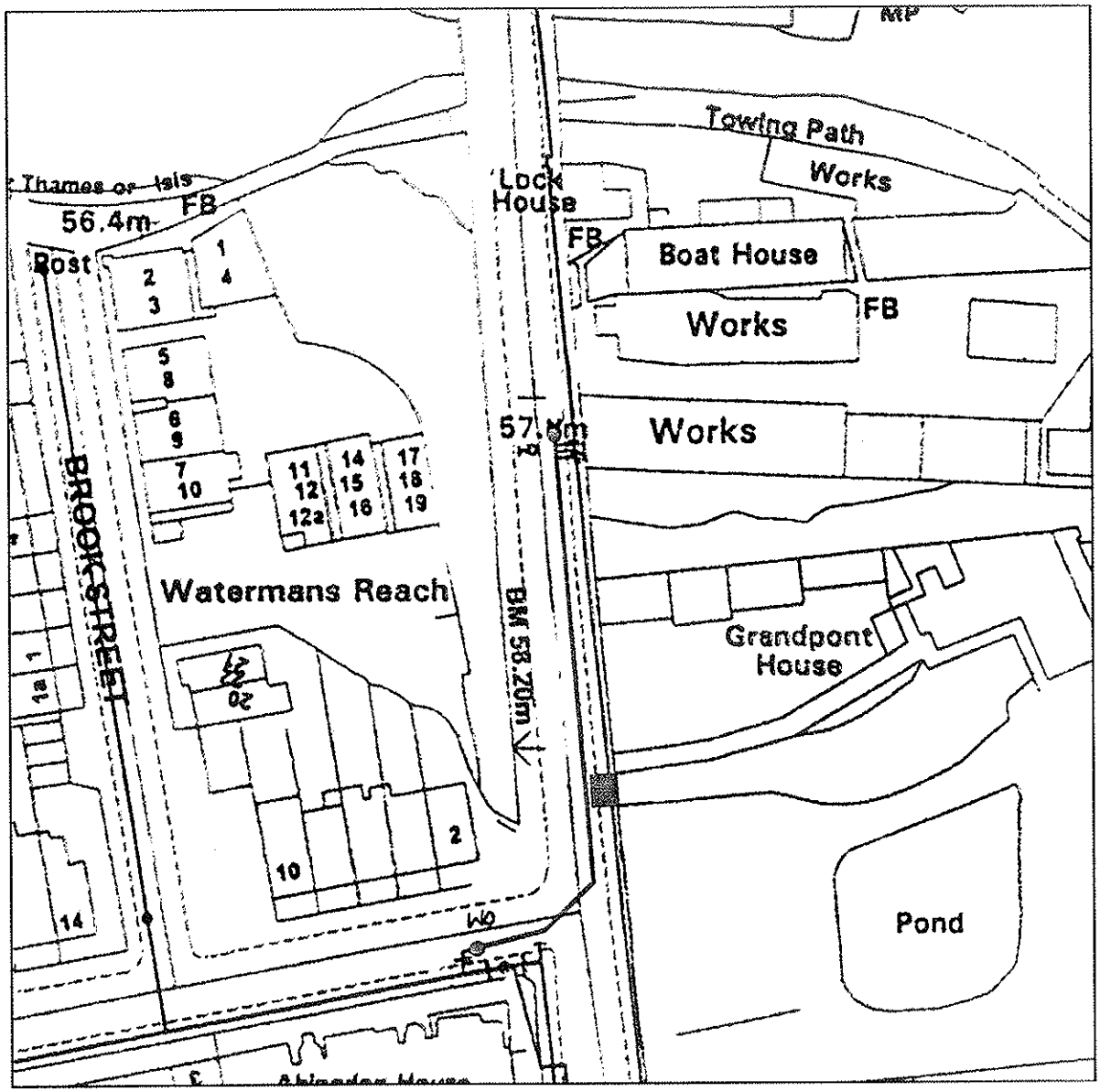

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New connection

Trench for repair to existing main

Figure 2: Trench location

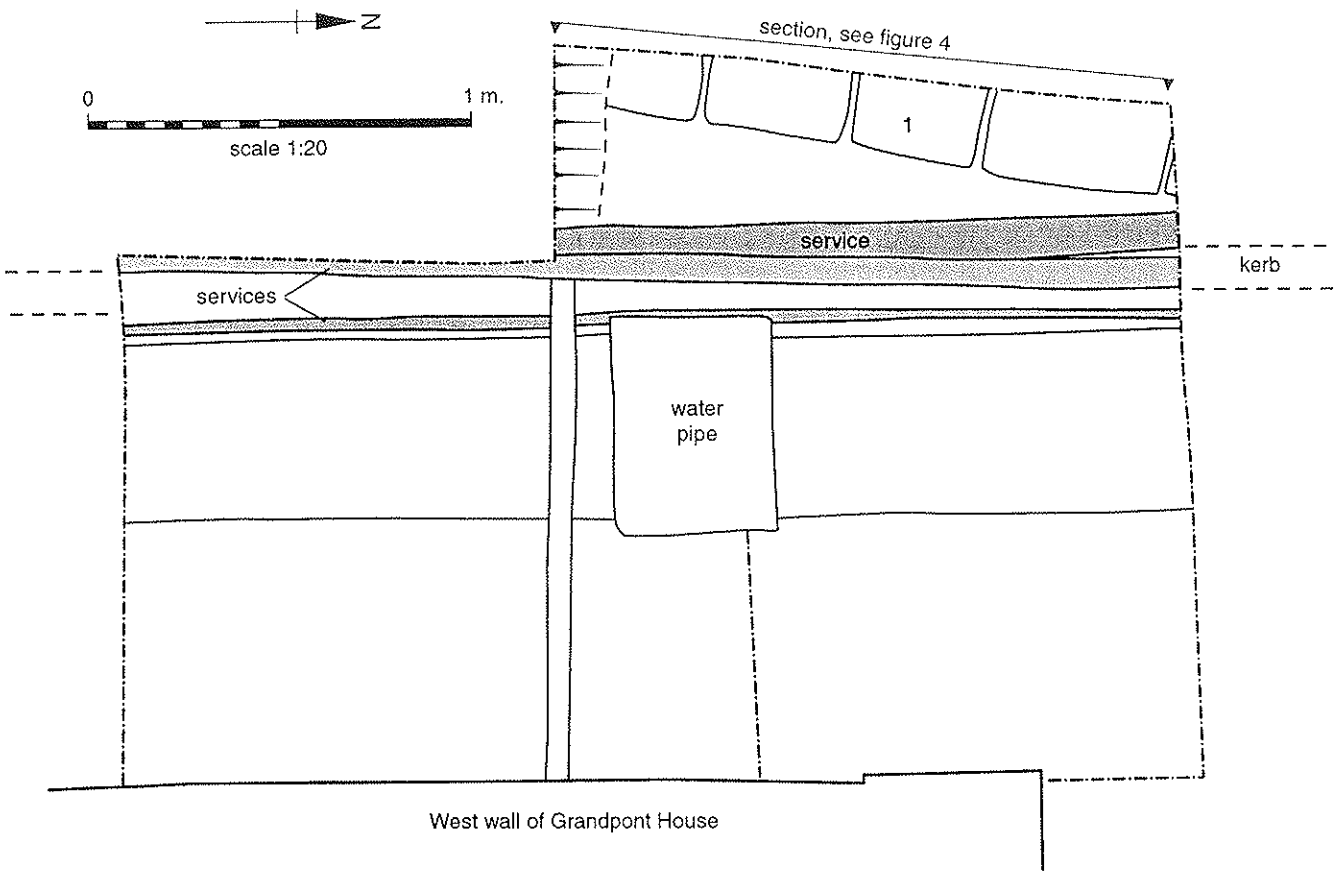


Figure 3: Plan of repair trench

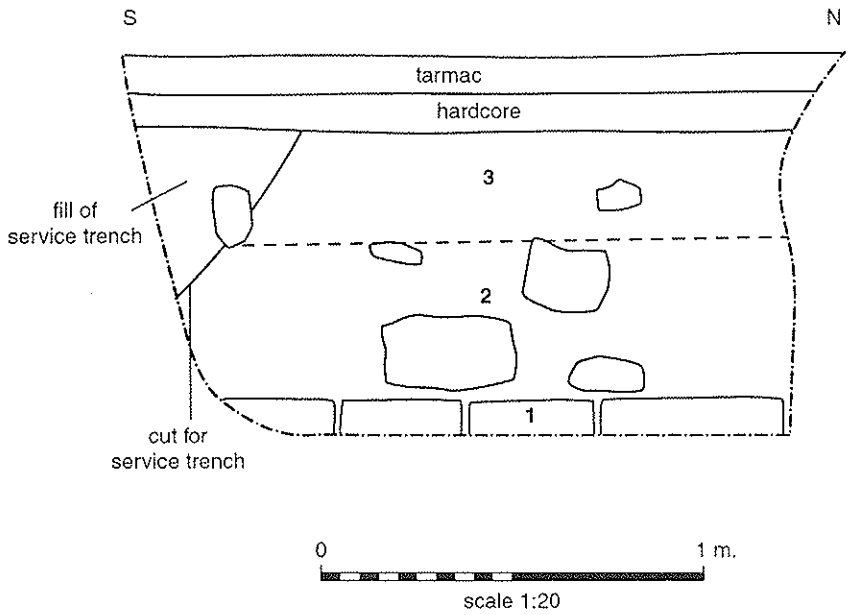
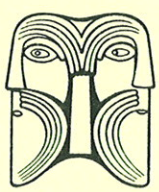


Figure 4: Western section of repair trench



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