Gotch Saunders & Surridge Architecture

Site of Former Government Buildings
Marston Road
Oxford

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION REPORT

NGR SP5295 0675

Planning Application No: 00/1565/NOY

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Prepared by: Annie Bingham, site supervisor Date: 23rd October 2001
Checked by: J Hiller, Project Manager Date: 23rd October 2001
Approved by: R. Williams Date: ASSISTANT DIRECTOR 24/10/2001

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Site of Former Government Buildings
Marston Road
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ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION

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SUMMARY

In October 2001, the Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) carried out a field evaluation at Marston Road, Oxford, on behalf GSS Architecture for their client, Brookes University. The evaluation revealed a series of naturally formed colluvial and alluvial layers to a depth of over 1 m. In places these deposits had been truncated by terracing, probably when the recently demolished buildings on the site were constructed. The remains of a ?farm structure were observed in one of the trenches associated with a modern ceramic pipe; this structure, probably dates to the 19th century. No artefacts were recovered from the excavated trenches and no deposits of archaeological significance were encountered.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Location and scope of work

1.1.1 In October 2001 the Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) were commissioned by GSS Architecture of Northampton to carry out a field evaluation at the site of the Former Government Buildings, Marston Road, Oxford, on behalf of Brookes University in respect of planning proposals for new student accommodation on the site (Planning Application No: 00/1565/NOY).

1.1.2 A previous desk-top study prepared by OAU formed the basis for a Written Scheme of Investigation (WSI) that was agreed with Brian Durham, Oxford City Council's Archaeological Representative, in respect of an advice note regarding the need to evaluate the archaeological potential of the site. An agreed number of trial trenches were targetted at the site of the new development, forming a 2% sample of the area to be affected by the new buildings on the site (Fig. 1).

1.2 Geology and topography

1.2.1 The proposed development area is situated within the ancient parish of Headington, *c* 900 m north-east of the edge of the historic city of Oxford, at NGR SP 5295 0675. The site lies on a gentle west-facing slope of the Cherwell Valley at *c* 65 - 75 m OD. The River Cherwell flows north-south at the foot of the hill, *c* 200 m to the west across the line of Marston Road.

1.2.2 The geology of the site consists of a West Walton Formation of dark grey silty mudstone, which is part of the Ancholme Group (BGS Sheet 236, 1982 and BGS Sheet 237, 1993).

1.2.3 Most of the former government buildings have been demolished and their footprints covered by a thin layer of rubble. The buildings in the north-eastern part of the site are extant. The remainder of the site has seen little apparent ground disturbance.

1.3 Archaeological and historical background

1.3.1 The archaeological background to the evaluation has been the subject of a desk study (OAU June 2000), the results of which are summarised below. The site itself has produced no significant archaeological evidence. There are however several known locations with archaeological remains adjacent to the development site.

1.3.2 The line of a possible prehistoric trackway was identified *c.* 450 m to the south of the site and there was a chance find of an undated prehistoric end scraper (before 1974), c 800 m to the west of the site. The site of a ring-ditch (ploughed-out remains of a late Bronze Age round barrow) was located *c* 450 m to the north-east and a late Bronze Age spearhead was found in the vicinity of the barrow in 1974. Further afield there is cropmark evidence of prehistoric activity in the form of possible settlement and barrow cemetery immediately outside the development area to the north-west. Evidence of Iron Age settlement has been found in the area of Churchill Hospital *c.* 1.5 km to the south-east.

1.3.3 There are two sites dated to the Roman period within 1 km of the development site. These are the chance find of a Roman coin in 1836, *c* 300 m to the south-west of the site and sherds of Roman pottery found within a Civil War defensive bank *c* 900 m to the south-west during an excavation in 1957. The significance of these finds is uncertain but indicates a Roman presence in the general area. No individual Roman site has yet been identified in the centre of Oxford, although small quantities of Roman pottery have been found on many sites in the city and it would appear likely that central Oxford contains some evidence of settlement.

1.3.4 The main area of activity was the Roman industrial area in East Oxford, which was an important centre of pottery production. In the 1970s a number of kilns dating from the 1st to 4th centuries were excavated on the site of the Churchill Hospital *c.* 1.5 km to the south-east of the development area. Pottery production utilised Oxford Clay (on which the site lies) to manufacture pottery. It is probable that there were associated settlements housing the workers in the vicinity of the kilns, although no evidence of such has been found to date.

1.3.5 The development site lies *c.* 1.5 km east of the historic core of Oxford, which was founded in *c.* AD 900 as a planned town and fortified *burh* (borough), as part of a line of defences protecting Wessex from the Vikings. The eastern line of the *burh* is believed to lie immediately east of Christ Church Cathedral in the centre of Oxford (Hassall 1987, 16). There is evidence to suggest the presence of a Danish community in both the late 10th and 11th centuries in the area of St Clements to the south-west of the area of proposed development. Several sherds of late Saxon pottery were recovered in the vicinity of the church from the soil of the Civil War Bastion during excavation at Magdalen College School in 1957. During the whole of the medieval period the development area lay within the bounds of the royal forest of Shotover and Stowood, on the western edge of the parish of Headington. Domesday Book lists the

manor (estate) of Headington as a Saxon royal manor, which remained in the king's hands after the Conquest. The exact location of the royal residence is not known.

1.3.6 Evidence suggests that the royal manor, and hitherto important administrative centre of Headington, declined in importance from the mid- 15th century onwards. This probably followed the decision of King Henry I (1100-1135) to make Woodstock the favoured royal residence in the county. In the mid-13th century King's Mill was granted to St John's Hospital and it passed in due course to Merton College. During the later medieval period the development area lay within a small but important area of pasture beside the Marston Road. Considering the relative value of the land as communal pasture in this period it is highly unlikely that this land was developed. Quarries at Headington provided the chief source of supply for Oxford's buildings from the beginning of the 15th century to the middle of the 18th century. There is a significant cutting into the hill slope in the north-eastern part of the site (OAU 200); it is not clear whether this is the remains of an old quarry or terracing prior to construction of the Government Buildings. However, on early Ordnance Survey maps no quarry is marked in the vicinity of the development area.

1.3.7 The site is likely to have continued in use as arable or pasture fields throughout the post-medieval period. Map evidence suggests that during the Civil War a line of parliamentarian defences were built close to or possibly on the development site. Bernard De Gomme's contemporary (1644) plan of the defences of Oxford shows the royalist line of defences around the city of Oxford and the parliamentary siege-works to the east which were constructed in 1646. OAU have digitally plotted the line of the siege-works that indicate that they lie immediately to the south-west of the site. Whilst no traces of any defences have been found within the area of proposed development it is possible that the defences did fall within the site.

1.3.8 After De Gomme the earliest maps that show the development area record little detail but show the site as an open field beside the Marston Road. No buildings or evidence for the parliamentarian siege-works are shown. In addition to the siege-works there is the potential for the below ground remains of a building first shown on the OS 1st edition 25" map of 1876. However, any such remains would be of strictly local historic interest. The government buildings, constructed between 1939-58, that formerly occupied the site have largely been demolished. Remaining are the buildings in the north-eastern corner of the site currently used as a Driving Test Centre, and a building in the centre/north of the site which is used as a classroom.

2 EVALUATION AIMS

2.1.1 To establish the presence/absence of archaeological remains within the proposal area. Particular attention will be paid to identifying any features/deposits that may be associated with the Civil War siege-works.

2.1.2 To determine the extent, condition, nature, character, quality and date of any archaeological remains present

2.1.3 To establish the ecofactual and environmental potential of archaeological deposits and features.

3 EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

3.1 Scope of fieldwork

3.1.1 The evaluation consisted of eight trenches, four measuring 30 m in length x 1.6 m in width, the remaining four measuring 15 m length x 1.6 m width (Fig. 2). Trench sizes and locations were determined by Brian Durham on behalf of Oxford City Council. The overburden was removed under close archaeological supervision by a JCB mechanical excavator fitted with a toothless bucket. Trench 8 was extended to the west and made into an 'L' shape to excavate beneath the existing tarmac and hardcore surface at the south-west part of the site.

3.2 Fieldwork methods and recording

3.2.1 The trenches were cleaned by hand and the revealed features were sampled to determine their extent and nature, and to retrieve finds and environmental samples. All trenches were planned and their sections drawn at scales of 1:20. All sections were photographed using colour slide and black and white print film. Recording followed procedures laid down in the *OAU Fieldwork Manual* (ed. D Wilkinson, 1992).

3.3 Soils and ground conditions

3.3.1 Government buildings formerly occupied the site and in some areas a substantial layer of demolition material covered the footprint of the buildings, making the machine excavation rather slow.

3.4 Distribution of archaeological deposits

3.4.1 Around the northern and western parts of the site were spreads of alluvial silts deriving from the River Cherwell. These were overlain by colluvial clays (hillwash) which were generally concentrated around the central area of the site. At the highest point of the area (Trench 8) was a series of naturally formed silts overlying the colluvial clay.

4 RESULTS: DESCRIPTIONS

4.1 Description of deposits

4.1.1 The trenches and interpretation of the deposits are presented below:

Trench 1

4.1.2 Trench 1 (Fig. 3) was aligned E-W and measured 30 m in length. The earliest deposit within this trench was a friable layer of orange silt (105), which extended the length

of the trench and was at least 0.3 m thick. Above this was a light brown-orange silt (104) that was 0.7 m thick and again extended the length of the trench. Overlying this layer was a N-S aligned tarmac footpath measuring 2 m wide and 0.04 m in thickness. A layer of modern demolition debris (101) consisting of brick, stone and reinforced concrete sealed this. At the west end of the trench this layer was 0.4 m thick and extended to the east for 10 m, where it met the modern overlying topsoil (100) that sealed all the earlier deposits. Layers (105) and (104) were alluvial silts deriving from the flood wash of the River Cherwell. These deposits appeared within the northern and western area of the site and were therefore also observed in Trench 2.

Trench 2

4.1.3 Trench 2 (Fig. 4) was aligned N-S, measured 30 m in length, and sloped gently down to the north. At the base of the trench was a layer of dark orange silt (203), which ran throughout the length of the trench and was at least 0.3 m thick. Overlying this was another orange silt layer (202), which contained occasional limestone flecking. Similarly this deposit extended the length of the trench and had a maximum depth of 0.84 m. A modern land drain, one of several noted across the site was observed set into layer 202. This layer was overlain by an orange-brown clay silt (201), which had a maximum depth of 0.5 m and was sealed by modern topsoil (200). The sequence of deposits noted within Trench 2 corresponded with that of Trench 1 and represents naturally formed alluvial silts.

Trench 3

4.1.4 Trench 3 (Fig. 5) was aligned N/S, measured 15 m in length, and was within an area previously levelled by modern terracing. All of the deposits extended throughout the length of the trench. The lowest deposit revealed was a dark grey-brown clay (306) that was at least 0.15 m thick. This was overlain by a series of dark grey clays (305, 307 and 304) that had a combined maximum thickness of 0.6 m. Sealing layer 304 was a very mixed brown-grey silt clay (303) that contained frequent fragments of fossilised oyster shell and was 0.2 m thick. Above this was clay layer (302) that was similar in colour and composition to (303), but contained notably fewer fragments of shell and had a maximum depth of 0.34 m. Sealing this was a thin layer of modern topsoil (301). The grey clay layers within Trench 3 all represent colluvial deposits. The uppermost colluvial clay (302) had been truncated by modern terracing, necessitated by the construction of the former government buildings.

Trench 4

4.1.5 Trench 4 (Fig. 6) was 15 m in length and was positioned on an E-W slope in order to determine the extent of terracing within nearby trenches. The lowest deposit (405) was seen in the west end of the trench, extending down-slope to the west for 7.5 m. This was a very dark grey silt clay containing fragments of oyster shell and with a thickness of at least 0.1 m. Overlying this was a compact layer of dark grey silt clay (404), which contained fragments of fossilised oyster shell and reached a maximum

depth of 0.3 m Clay silt layers (403) and (402) overlay this, both consisting of a dark orange-grey silt clay with frequent limestone flecking and measuring a maximum of 0.1 m and 0.4 m respectively. The earlier deposit (403) extended from the eastern end of the trench for 9.5 m. Sealing (402) was a light brown-grey silt clay (401) which extended throughout the length of the trench, had a maximum thickness of 0.4 m and was sealed by modern topsoil (400). A modern pipe and part of a modern brick wall were noted at the west end of the trench.

4.1.6 The deposits within Trench 4 all represented colluvial episodes which did not appear to have been truncated. The deposits at the base of the trench were similar in character to those within the top of Trench 3. Due to the terracing above Trench 3 there is a gap in the sequence of colluvial deposits between those recorded in the base of Trench 4, and those recorded in the top of Trench 3, but by comparing the levels this would appear to be only on average 0.4 m.

Trench 5

4.1.7 Trench 5 (Fig. 7) was orientated E-W with a gradual slope down to the west, and measured 30 m in length. The earliest deposit was a compact dark grey silt clay (506), which was at least 0.2 m thick. This was overlain by (505) a compact brown-grey silt clay with limestone fragments throughout which had a maximum thickness of 0.26 m. This lay beneath a compact layer of brown-grey silt clay (504) which reached a depth of 0.2 m. Above lay a layer of grey silt clay (503) which had a maximum depth of 0.4 m decreasing to 0.2 m at its western extent, and containing a high density of manganese staining. Above lay deposits (502) and (501), the former consisting of a brown silt clay containing frequent small sub-rounded stone. This had a consistent depth of 0.15 m until the area of terracing where it appeared to have been built up to a maximum of 0.7 m thick. (501) was a layer of demolition material and extended across the top of the trench to a maximum depth of 0.4 m, and was sealed by a thin layer of modern topsoil (500).

4.1.8 The deposits within the base of Trench 5 (503 - 506 inclusive) all represent natural formation via colluvial processes. The deposits overlying have derived from the disturbance of natural deposits due to modern terracing (i.e. 502), and the demolition of former buildings (i.e. 501).

Trench 6

4.1.9 Trench 6 (Fig. 8) was aligned N-S and was 15 m length. The lowest deposit was a friable orange silt (601), overlying a compact light grey clay only seen in plan at the base of the trench. Layer 601 was at least 0.18 m thick and extended the length of the trench. Above was a substantial layer (600) up to 0.82 m thick of demolition debris deriving from the previous standing buildings.

Trench 7

4.1.10 Trench 7 (Fig. 9) was aligned E-W, measured 30 m and sloped gradually down to the west. The lowest deposit was a compact grey clay (704), which was at least 0.4 m

thick and contained fragments of fossilised oyster shell. Above was a dark grey silt clay (703) containing shell fragments and with a maximum depth of 0.4 m. Overlying this was a compact layer of brown-grey silt clay (702), 0.4 m thick, overlain by the remains of a possible wall (701), consisting of loose limestone rubble, orientated NE/SW through the trench to a depth of 0.24 m. This had a disused ceramic water pipe running along its axis which was only observed in plan and did not appear in any recorded section. Butting the limestone rubble and extending over the top of it was a layer of demolition debris (700), which extended throughout the trench to a depth of 0.42 m.

4.1.11 The lower grey clays within Trench 7 are similar in nature to those recorded in Trench 5, and all derive from colluvial processes. The limestone wall foundations (701) is not in keeping with the style of building material used for the former government buildings (i.e. red brick), and may possibly relate to a previous building on the site which was demolished between 1939-1958 (Ordnance Survey 1st edition 1876).

Trench 8

4.1.12 Trench 8 (Fig. 10) was aligned N-S and was 15 m long. The location of this trench had to be moved to the west due to ground conditions, and to compensate an additional 9.5 m of E-W aligned trench was excavated from its northern edge at the request of Brian Durham.

4.1.13 The earliest deposits seen in the north end of the trench were a series of natural formation silts. Layer 807 was at least 0.1 m thick and consisted of a friable orange silt. A loose orange silt-sand containing small angular pieces of calcareous sandstone (806) overlay this and was a maximum thickness of 0.12 m. Above this was (805), a friable orange silt containing a large amount of manganese staining, which had a thickness of 0.08 m. A dark orange-brown silt-sand (803) was above this and was at least 0.16 m thick. (804/802) was overlying this and consisted of a friable orange silt with lenses of fine grey silt. This deposit extended the length of the trench and reached a depth of 0.4 m. Another layer of orange silt (801) extended across the top of (804/802) and reached a maximum depth of 0.32 m. Sealing the deposits within the trench was a layer consisting of demolition debris (800).

4.1.14 The deposits observed within Trench 8 all consisted of natural formation silts, similar in character to the silt recorded within the base of Trench 6. The E-W extension to the trench revealed a continuation of silts (804/802) and (801) throughout its length.

4.2 Finds

4.2.1 No finds were retrieved from the evaluated trenches, or from the spoil heaps.

5 Discussion And Interpretation

5.1 Reliability of field investigation

5.1.1 All eight trenches were machined through layers that have formed through natural processes, and no significant archaeological deposits were present. Where truncation at the north-east part of the site could be seen, it is just possible that this may have removed archaeological features. However the absence of artefacts/occupation evidence of any period prior to the modern 20th century, suggests that the site has not seen human occupation previously other than arable land-use and pasture.

5.2 Overall interpretation

Summary of results

5.2.1 Terracing in the north-eastern area of the site has most likely truncated only colluvial deposits, as the sequence of deposits noted within the undisturbed areas, for example Trench 4, show an undisturbed sequence of colluvial layers. Around the southern area of the site, the natural silts seen within Trench 8 also appear to have been cut away further to the west to facilitate construction of buildings. A sondage was excavated to a depth of 2.2 m within the southern end of Trench 8 and this revealed dark grey colluvial clay layers beneath the silts. Therefore Trenches 5 and 7, which only contained colluvial layers, probably had the overlying silts removed when the area was terraced.

5.2.2 The remains of a demolished ?farm outbuilding in trench 7 was the only notable feature within the trenches, pre-dating the construction of the government buildings on the site. The ?farm building was associated with a modern pipe and is therefore a recent construction.

5.2.3 The lack of significant artefactual and ecofactual evidence from any of the deposits within the trenches, or from the scanned spoil heaps suggests there has been no occupation within the investigation area until the 19th or 20th centuries. The underlying clay layers probably always precluded settlement in prehistoric and later times, and the site was outside the limits of Oxford in the medieval period.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1 ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXT INVENTORY

Trench	*Ctxt No*	*Type*	*Width (m)*	*Thick. (m)*	*Comment*	*Finds*	*No./ wt*	*Date*
Trench 1								
	100	Layer		0.25	Modern topsoil			
	101	Layer		0.4	Demolition debris			
	102	Layer	2	0.04	Tarmac footpath			
	104	Layer		0.7	Alluvial silt			
	105	Layer		0.3	Alluvial silt			
Trench 2								
	200	Layer		0.2	Modern topsoil			
	201	Layer		0.5	Alluvial silt			
	202	Layer		0.84	Alluvial silt			
	203	Layer		0.3	Alluvial silt			
Trench 3								
	301	Layer		0.06	Modern topsoil			
	302	Layer		0.34	Colluvial clay			
	303	Layer		0.2	Colluvial clay			
	304	Layer		0.12	Colluvial clay			
	305	Layer		0.22	Colluvial clay			
	306	Layer		0.15	Colluvial clay			
	307	Layer		0.26	Colluvial clay			
Trench 4								
	400	Layer		0.2	Modern topsoil			
	401	Layer		0.4	Colluvial clay			
	402	Layer		0.4	Colluvial clay			
	403	Layer		0.1	Colluvial clay			
	404	Layer		0.3	Colluvial clay			
	405	Layer		0.1	Colluvial clay			
Trench 5								
	500	Layer		0.05	Modern topsoil			
	501	Layer		0.4	Demolition debris			
	502	Layer		0.7	Made ground			

	503	Layer		0.4	Colluvial clay			
	504	Layer		0.2	Colluvial clay			
	505	Layer		0.26	Colluvial clay			
	506	Layer		0.2	Colluvial clay			
Trench 6								
	600	Layer		0.82	Demolition debris			
	601	Layer		0.18	Alluvial silt			
Trench 7								
	700	Layer		0.42	Demolition debris			
	701	Wall foundation		0.24	Loose limestone rubble			
	702	Layer		0.4	Colluvial clay			
	703	Layer		0.4	Colluvial clay			
	704	Layer		0.4	Colluvial clay			
Trench 8								
	800	Layer		0.56	Demolition debris			
	801	Layer		0.32	Silt			
	802	Layer		0.4	Silt			
	803	Layer		0.16	Silt			
	804	Layer		0.4	Same as 802			
	805	Layer		0.08	Silt			
	806	Layer		0.12	Silt			
	807	Layer		0.1	Silt			

APPENDIX 2 BIBLIOGRAPHY AND REFERENCES

OAU 2000 *Proposed Development at Site of Former Government Buildings; Archaeological Desk-Based Assessment.*

Ordnance Survey 1st Edition 25" Map. Oxon Sheets XXXIII.15 (1876), XXXIII.16 (1876)

Wilkinson, D. 1992 *The Oxford Archaeological Unit Field Manual, (ed)*Oxford Archaeological Unit.

APPENDIX 3 SUMMARY OF SITE DETAILS

Site name: Site of Former Government Buildings, Marston Road, Oxford.
Site code: OXMAR01
Grid reference: SP5295 0675
Type of evaluation: Four 30 m trenches and four 15 m trenches.
Date and duration of project: October 2001, three days.
Summary of results: No significant archaeological deposits were encountered - naturally formed colluvial and alluvial clay layers were omnipresent throughout all trenches, overlain by C19-C20 structural remains.
Location of archive: The archive is currently held at OAU, Janus House, Osney Mead, Oxford, OX2 0ES, and will be deposited with Oxfordshire County Museums Service in due course.

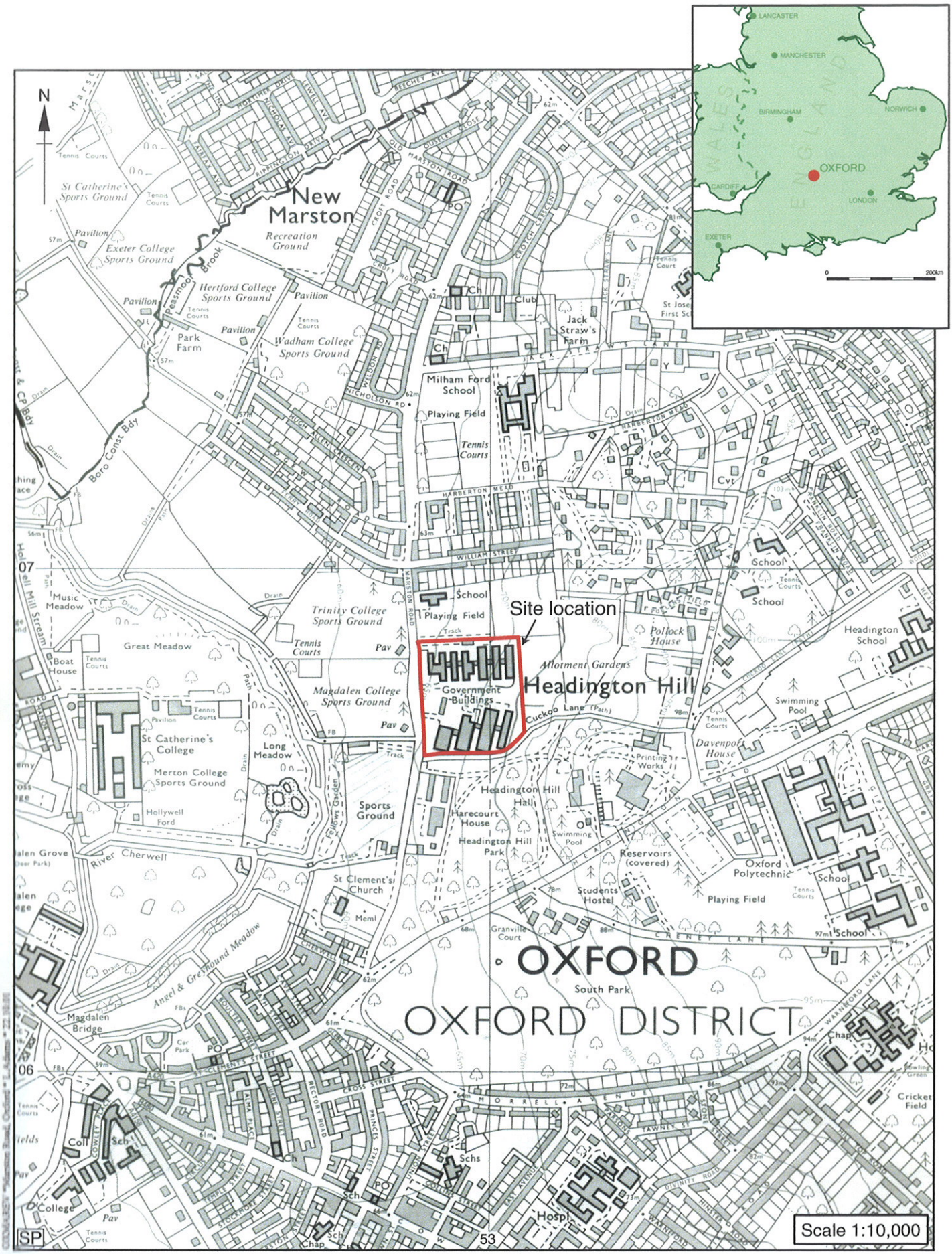
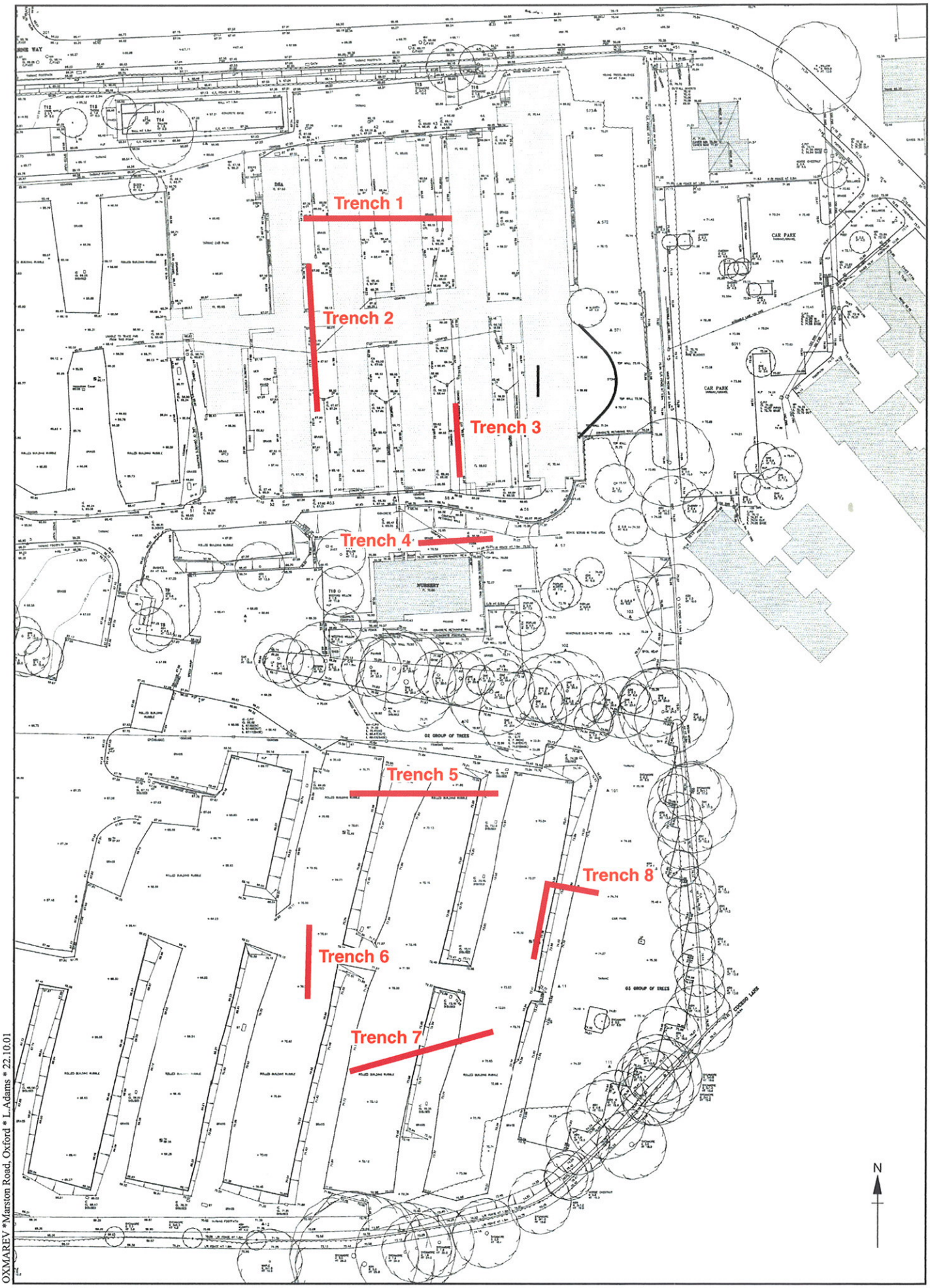


Figure 1: Site location plan



OXMAREV *Marston Road, Oxford * L.Adams * 22.10.01

Figure 2: Trench locations

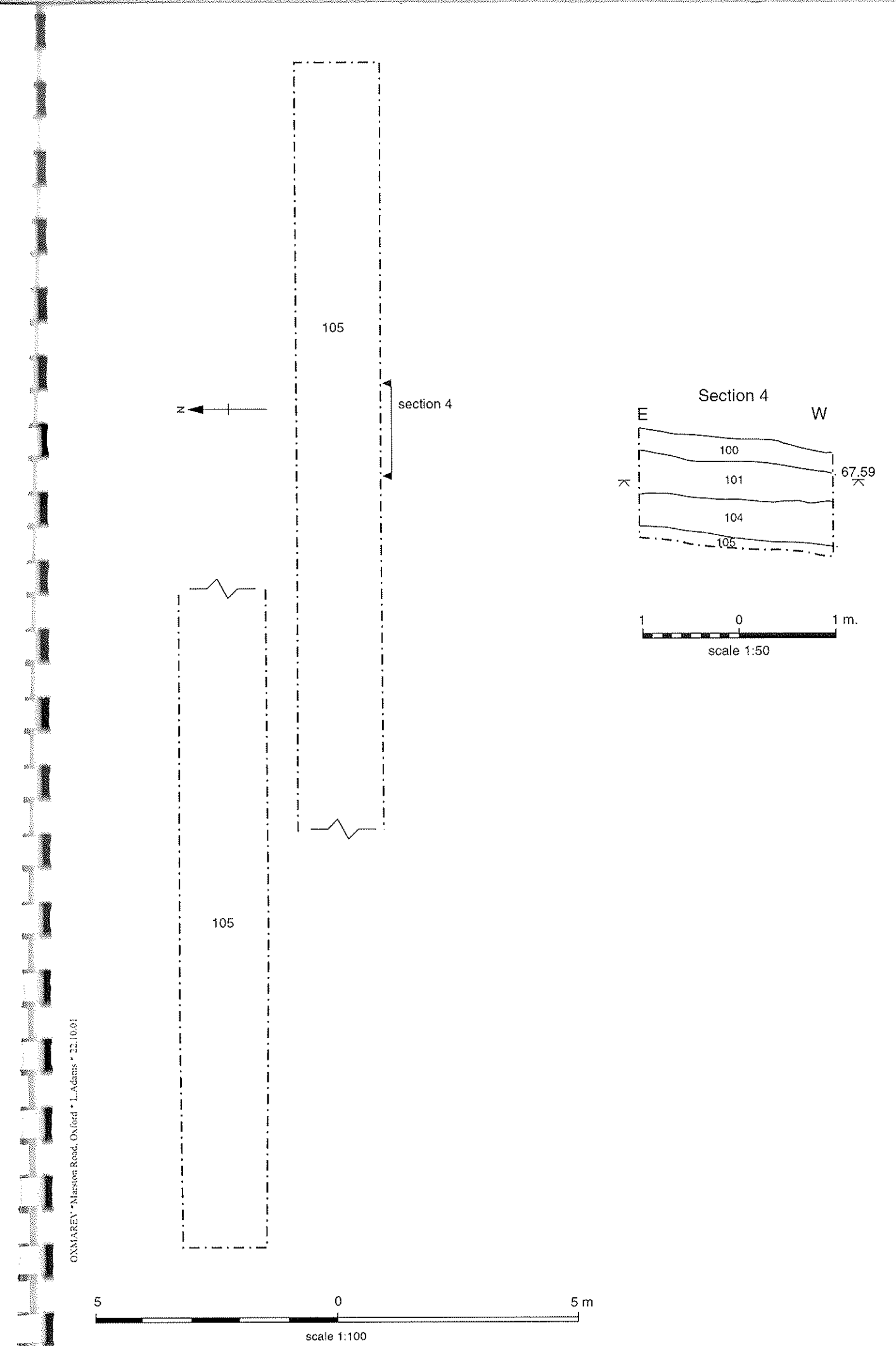
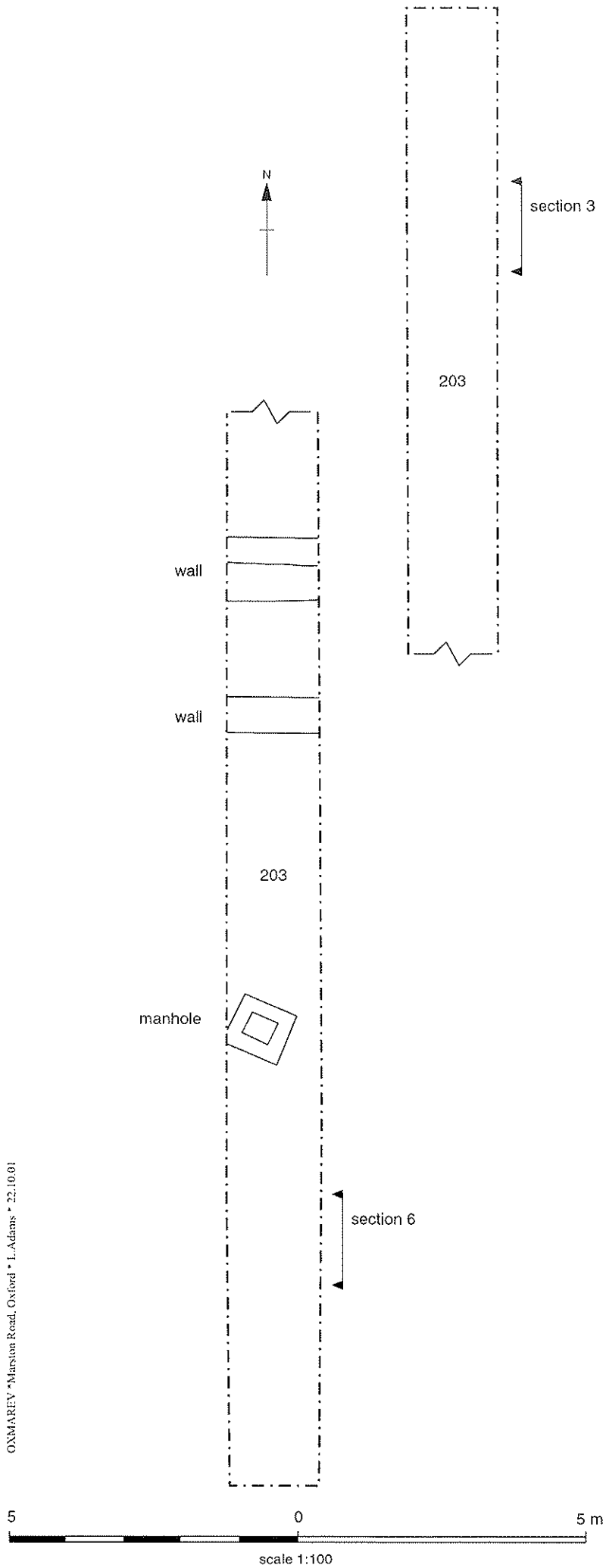
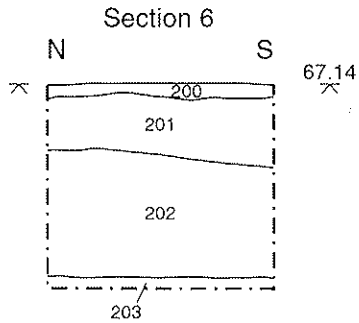


Figure 3: Trench 1, plan and section





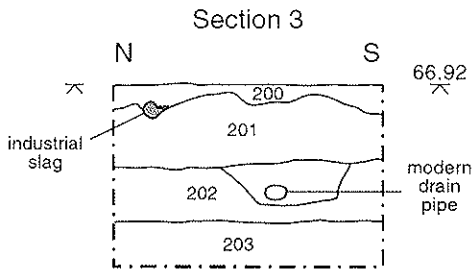


Figure 4: Trench 2, plan and sections

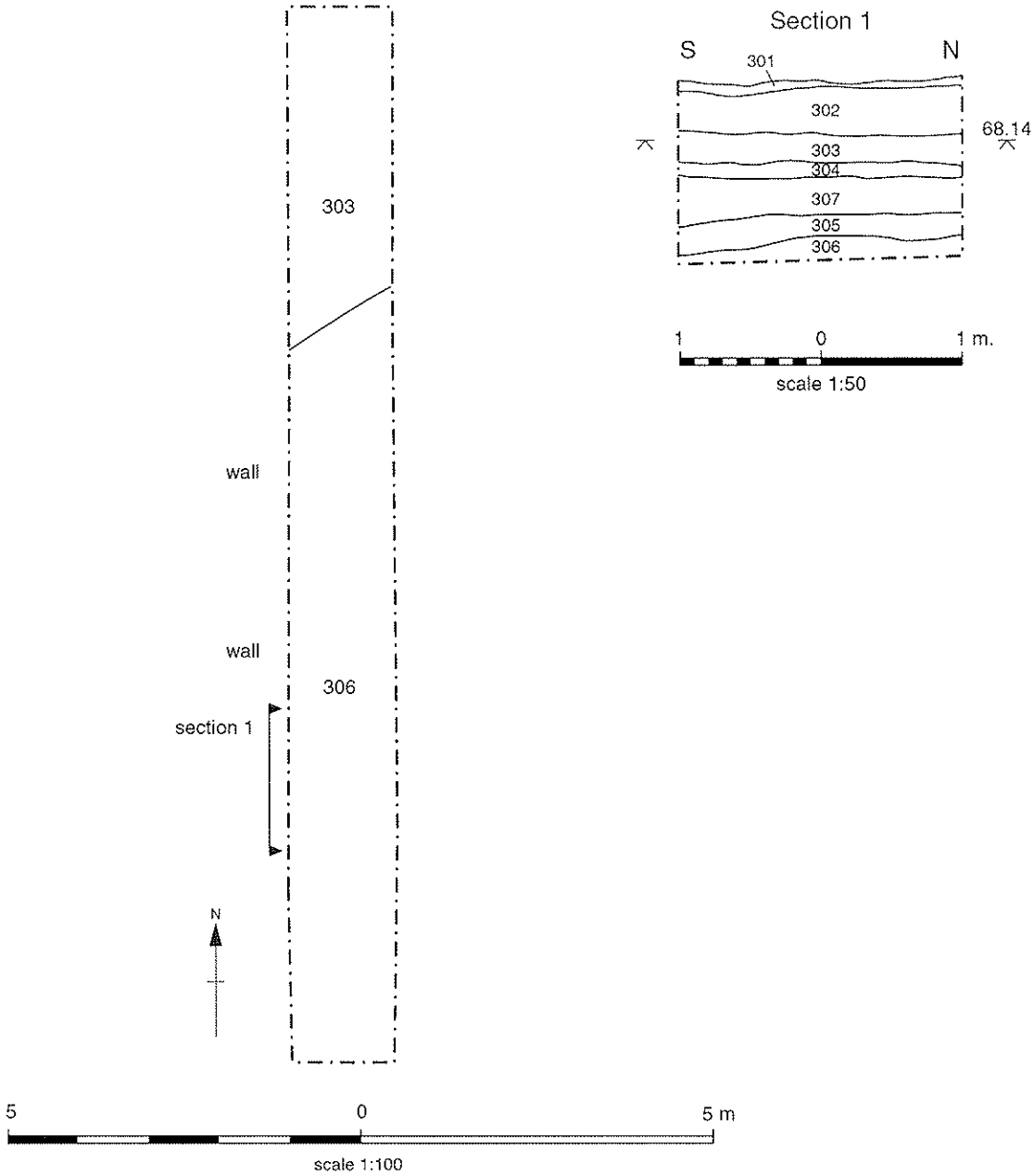


Figure 5: Trench 3, plan and sections

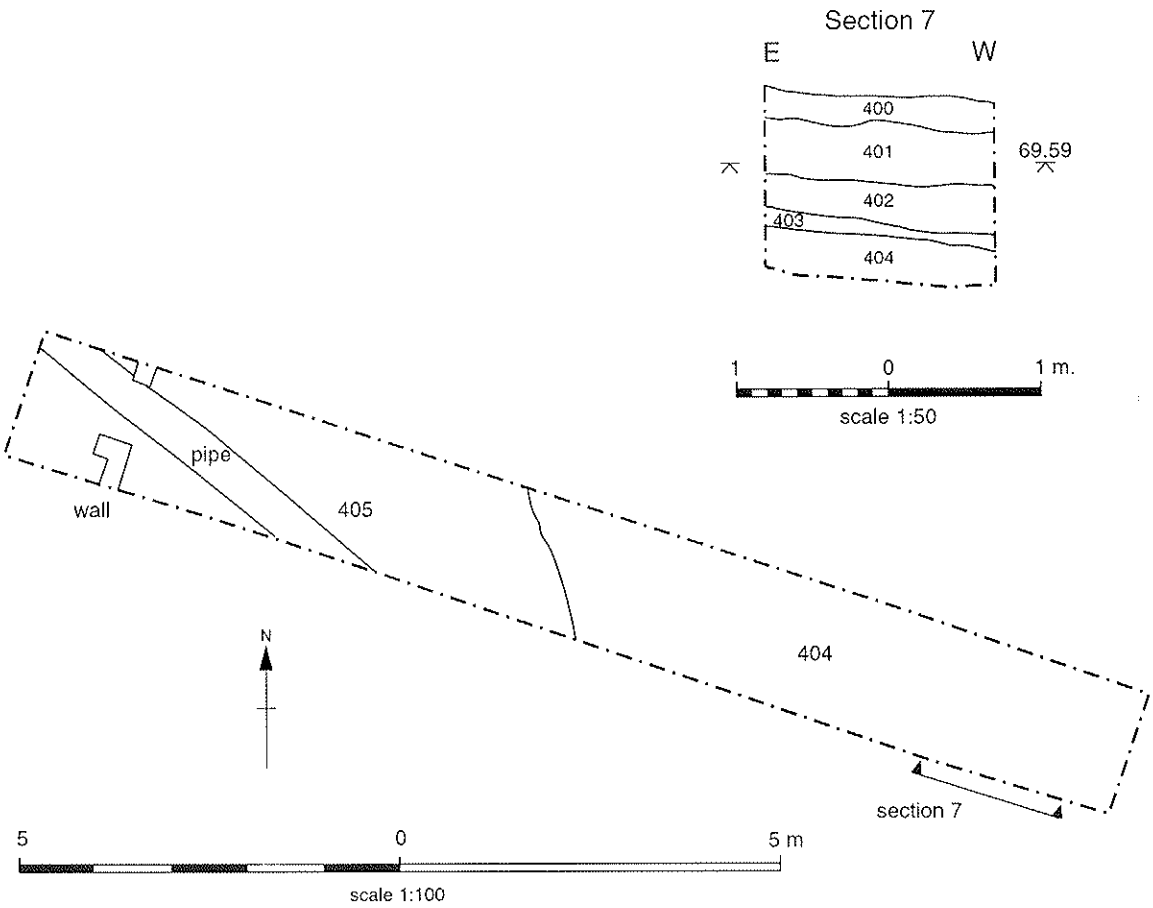
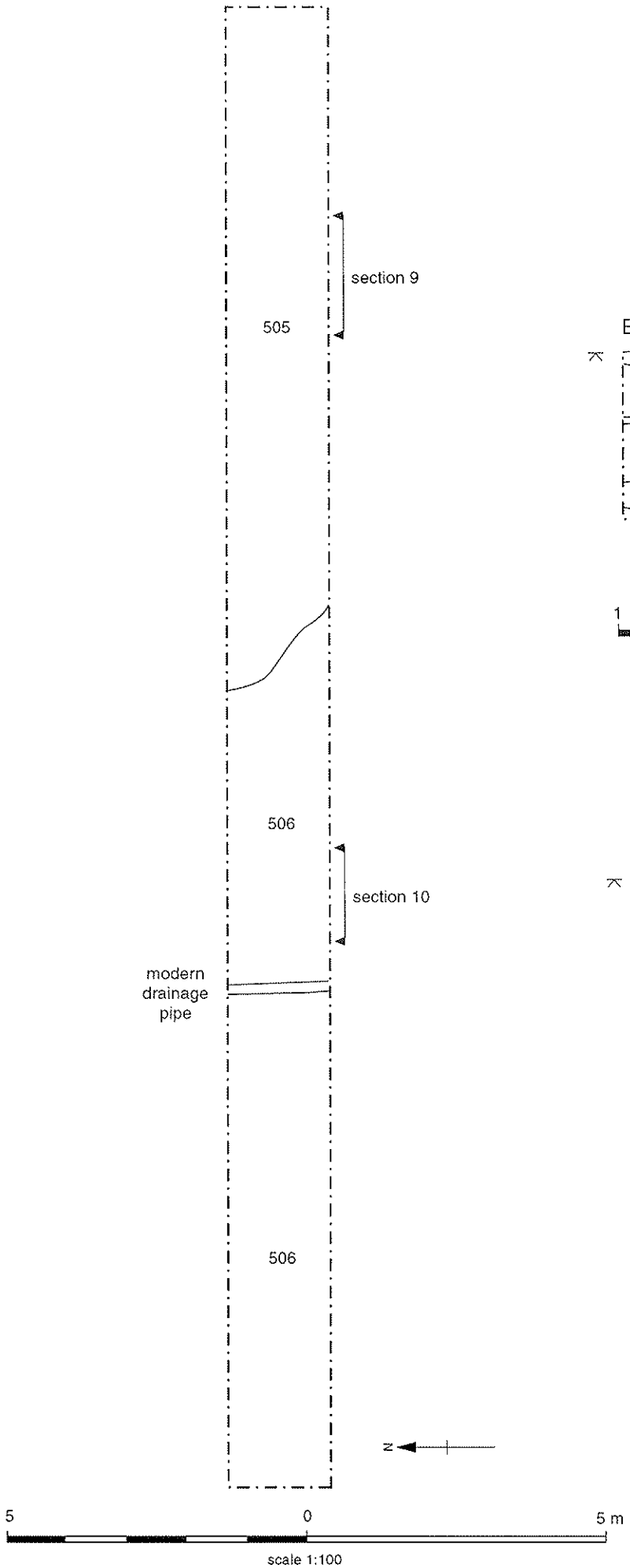
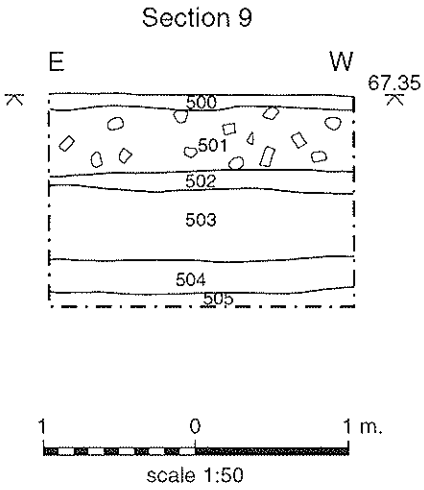


Figure 6: Trench 4, plan and sections





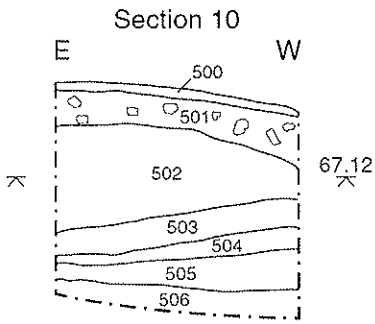


Figure 7: Trench 5, plan and section

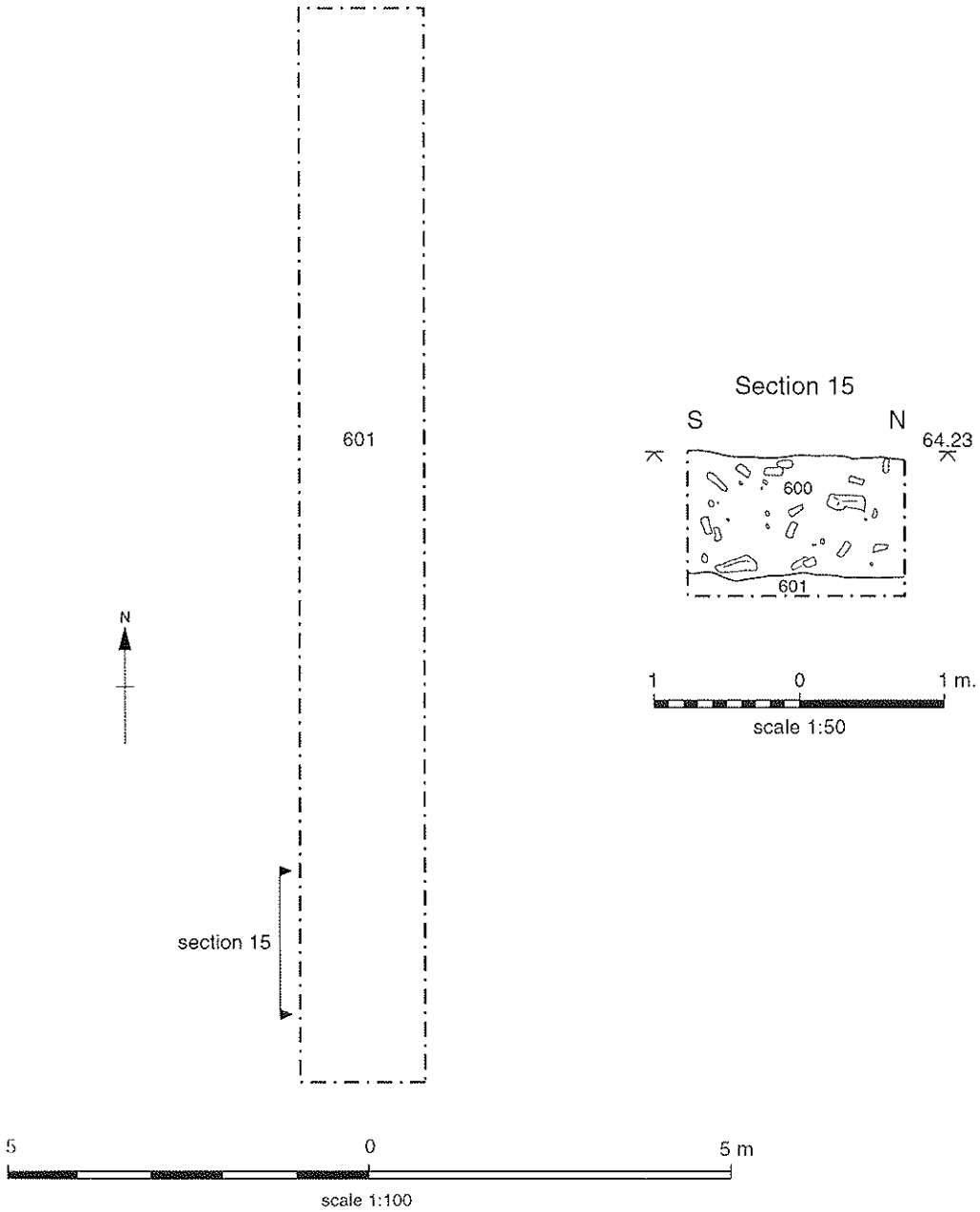
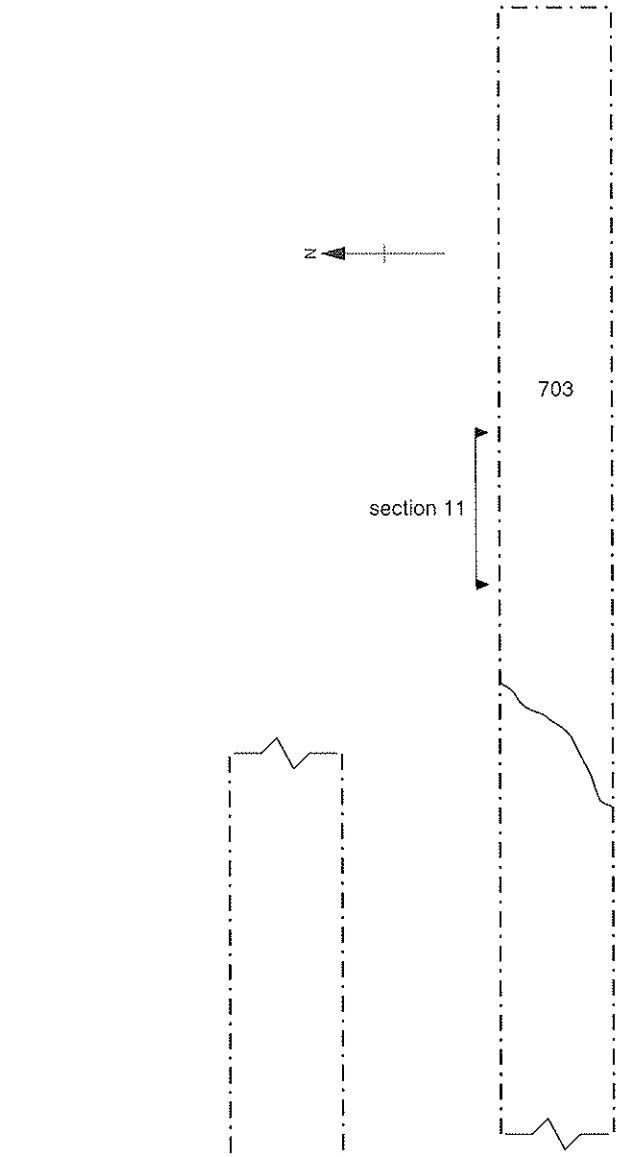
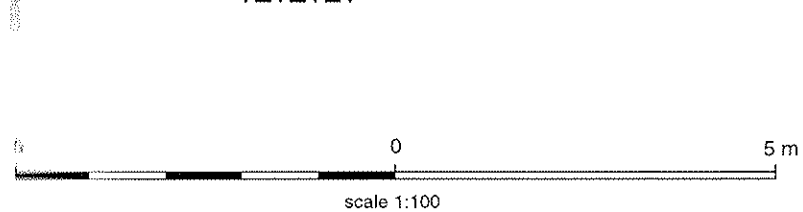
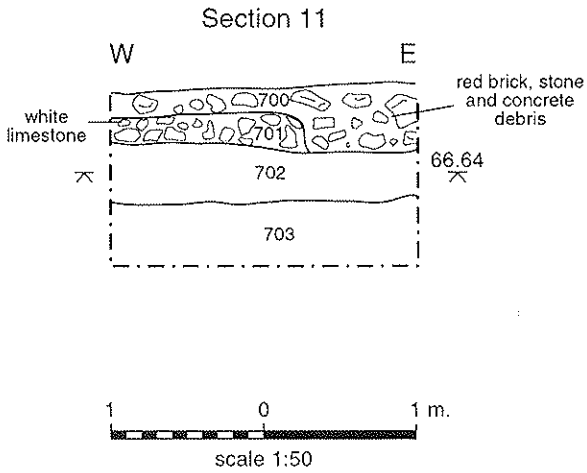


Figure 8: Trench 6, plan and section







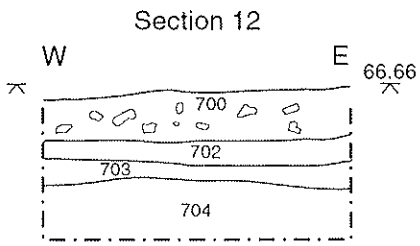


Figure 9: Trench 7, plan and sections

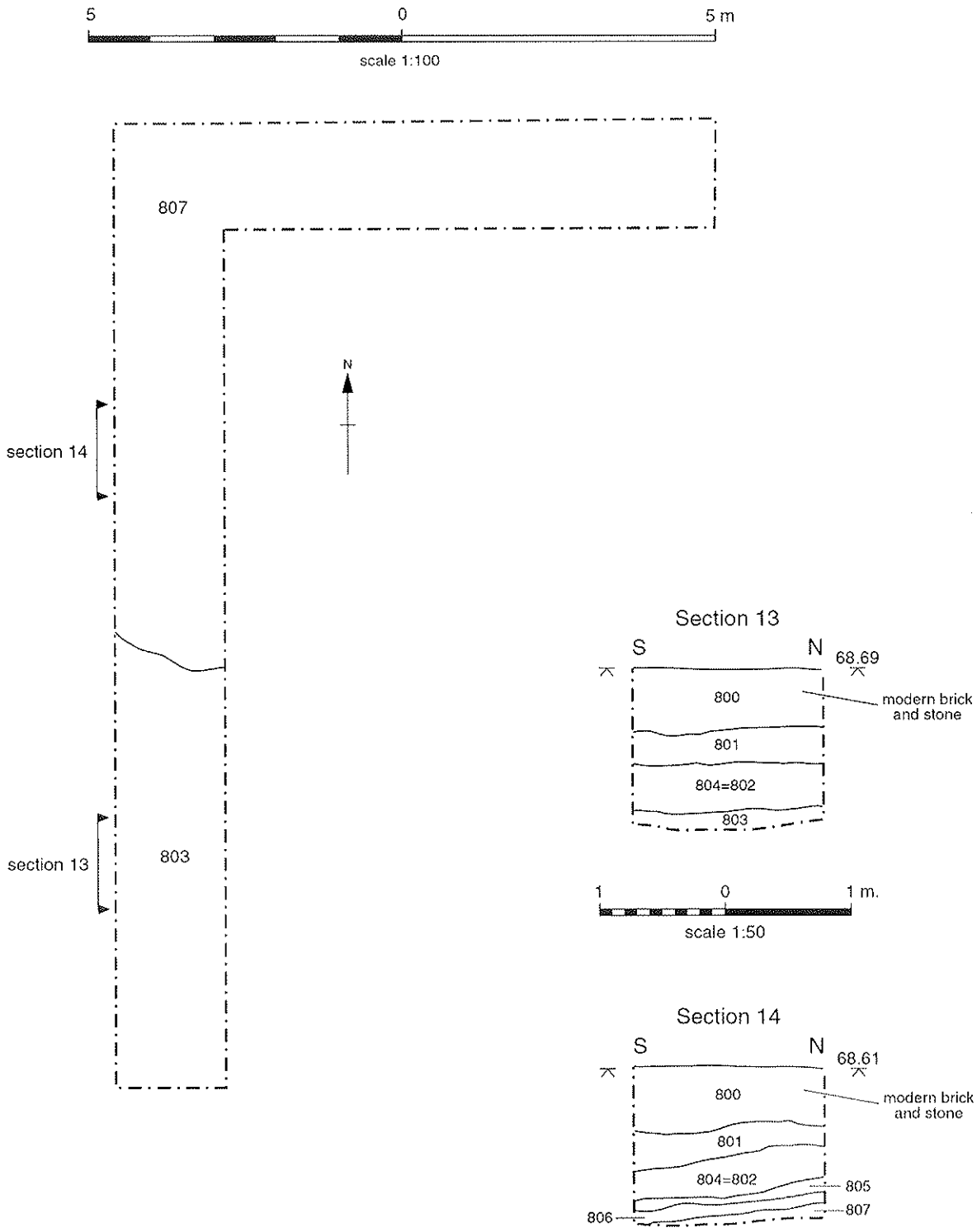
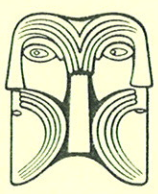


Figure 10: Trench 8, plan and sections



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