

Cornmarket Street
Oxford
Oxfordshire



Archaeological Watching Brief



Oxford Archaeology

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SUMMARY

From August to October 2001, Oxford Archaeology (OA) carried out an archaeological watching brief at Cornmarket Street, Oxford, Oxfordshire (NGR SP 5126 0639). The work was commissioned by Oxford County Council in advance of the installation of a service trench along the length of road. The watching brief revealed that Cornmarket Street had been extensively truncated by modern services and phases of road resurfacing. However, the base of the city's medieval North Gate and part of the medieval town ditch were revealed.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Location and scope of work

- 1.1.1 From August to October 2001 Oxford Archaeology (OA) carried out an archaeological watching brief at Cornmarket Street, Oxford, Oxfordshire (Fig. 1). The work was commissioned by Oxford County Council in respect of planned excavations for a new service trench along length of road.
- 1.1.2 A project brief was set after discussions between OA, Brian Durham, the City archaeologist, Planning Control and Conservation, and Peter Evans of Oxfordshire County Council.
- 1.1.3 OA prepared a Written Scheme of Investigation detailing how it would meet the requirements of the brief.

1.2 Geology and topography

- 1.2.1 The site lies on terraced river gravels at 64 m OD. The site is situated on the north-south axis of Cornmarket Street within the historic core of Oxford.

1.3 Archaeological and historical background

- 1.3.1 The archaeological background to the watching brief was prepared for the WSI for the project (OA, 2001) and is reproduced below.

The Northgate

- 1.3.2 Cornmarket Street was a major north-south route, linking the Midlands to the Channel ports by the time Oxford was founded in the late 9th century. A gate existed on this site from that time, at first built of wood. Later, as the defences themselves were reconstructed in stone, so too was the gate. Its physical form is known from post-medieval maps (Agas 1575, Loggan 1675) which shows two rounded towers projecting north from a two storey gatehouse. This extended back alongside the church tower. The gateway and the gatehouse were demolished in 1771-2, and the road widened, suggesting that any remaining part of the structure could lie beneath the present street surface.

St Martin's Church

- 1.3.3 The 14th century rebuilding of St Martin's Church effectively narrowed the south end of Cornmarket and the east end of Queen Street. In 1820 the church was demolished, with the exception of the tower, and rebuilt again, still taking up much the same space (VCH iv, 386). The corner was cleared completely by the demolition of the church, and the south end of Cornmarket straightened out to its present alignment as part of the Carfax Improvement Scheme of 1896 (VCH iv, 203).

2 PROJECT AIMS AND METHODOLOGY

2.1 Aims

- 2.1.1 To identify and record the presence/absence, extent, condition, quality and date of archaeological remains in the areas affected by the development.
- 2.1.2 To make available the results of the archaeological investigation.

2.2 Methodology

- 2.2.1 The trench was excavated by mechanical excavator under archaeological supervision and the new services were laid in the trench, which was then backfilled and the road resurfaced. This operation was carried out in a number of sections along the street (Fig. 2).
- 2.2.2 All archaeological features were planned at a scale of 1:100 and where excavated their sections drawn at scales of 1:20. All excavated features were photographed using colour slide and black and white print film. A general photographic record of the work was made. Recording followed procedures detailed in the *OA Fieldwork Manual* (ed. D Wilkinson, 1992).

3 RESULTS

3.1 Description of deposits

- 3.1.1 The trench ranged from 0.7 m to 1.1 m in width, with larger holes being excavated for manholes. The trench was excavated to a maximum depth of 2.5 m and exposed a number of archaeological layers and features (Figs 3 and 4).
- 3.1.2 The trench cut through the present day road surface (11) and road make up (10). It also exposed a number of modern service trenches (8) cutting along and across the trench. These deposits were identified where the trench was excavated at the junction of St. Michael's Street and Ship Street and headed north towards Magdalen Street.

The medieval city ditch

- 3.1.3 A large ditch (2) aligned east-west was recorded at the north end of the new service trench in the area between the junction of St. Michael's Street and Ship Street (Fig. 3 and Fig. 5, sections 1, 2 and 3).

- 3.1.4 The north edge of the ditch was defined (section 1), the southern edge being lost due to modern disturbances at that level, and only 5 m of its width was exposed to a depth of 0.7 m; the base of the feature was not reached. At the base of the edge of the feature which cut the natural gravel (1) was an orange-brown silty gravel slump (3) from the side of the ditch. This was overlain by a deposit of dark grey-blue silty clay (4), which was in turn overlain by a further grey-blue clay layer (5).
- 3.1.5 A similar sequence of deposits was noted in section 2 (Fig. 5) just south of section 1. Gravelly deposit (14) was sealed by clay (13) and in turn overlain by a further and orange-brown clay layer (12).
- 3.1.6 Section 3, south again of section 2 revealed at the base of the trench two layers of grey-black silt (21 beneath 20), which were overlain by a series of a number of layers of ground make up (19 beneath 18, then layer 17 beneath 16) that appeared to have been laid across the last fills of the ditch.
- 3.1.7 A former cobbled road surface (6) was identified sealing layer 5 (Fig. 5, section 1) but could not be traced further to the south (Fig. 5, sections 2 and 3). Here the ditch fills (12 and 16) were overlain by a compact gravel surface (7) also seen overlying the cobbling to the north. Layer 7 was truncated by a modern cut for services (8 filled by 9), the upper sequence in the trench therefore comprised entirely modern material.

West side of the medieval city North Gate

- 3.1.8 Further south along the new service trench and directly opposite St Michael's Tower, the foundations of the west side of the city's medieval North Gate was exposed in section. The masonry consisted of a single course of ashlar cotswold stone (28) seated on a foundation (27) of ragstone laid in rough courses and of drystone construction. The structures had been built in a foundation trench (26) with vertical sides and flat base. The trench was 0.92 m wide and 1.04 m deep. This had cut through a series of undated ground make up layers (19, 29 & 30) of orange brown silty gravel (Figs 3 & 6, section 4).

Other features

- 3.1.9 Where Market Street joins Cornmarket Street, the remains of a small pit were partly exposed cutting into the natural. The pit had been heavily truncated by modern services. It contained a number of fills of dark brown and reddish brown silt (22, 23 & 24) and was probably post-medieval or of modern date (Fig. 6, section 6).
- 3.1.10 The remainder of the trench exposed a number of layers of ground make up and road levelling, which had been cut numerous times by services dating from the late 19th century onwards (Fig. 6, section 5).

3.2 Finds

- 3.2.1 No finds were recovered from the watching brief.

3.3 Palaeo-environmental remains

- 3.3.1 Two (monoliths 2 & 3) samples were taken from the medieval ditch fill context 20. These were not processed as it was felt that the samples could have suffered from later contamination from ground works over the site of the ditch.

4 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

- 4.1.1 The results from the watching brief showed that most of Cornmarket Street has been heavily truncated and disturbed by services and road repairs. However, a two important archaeological features were identified.
- 4.1.2 The most significant find was the discovery of a stone structure just 0.3 m below current street level that has been interpreted as part of the medieval city's north gate or gatehouse. The structure was located directly opposite St. Michael's Church and corresponds with the suggested location of the medieval town's northern defences and conjectured layout of the north entrance to Oxford (after Durham, Halpin and Palmer, 1984, 13-40).
- 4.1.3 Discussions with the city archaeologist during the progress of the works led to the conclusion that the stonework most likely represented the west foundation of the gatehouse, or gate, that was conjectured from excavations in 1972 to lie opposite St. Michael's Church Tower (*ibid.* 34.). The gatehouse was demolished and levelled to widen the width of Cornmarket Street in 1771.
- 4.1.4 Towards the north end of Cornmarket Street, the north edge of the medieval city ditch was revealed in section. Its full width was not determined within the present service trench due to disturbance from a number of modern services. However, the southern edge of the feature was identified during excavations at St. Michael's Church in 1972 (*ibid.* 16), and the width of the feature where it passes the north gate of the city appears to be c. 13 m based on the approximate alignment of the feature in the Churchyard. No finds were recovered from the ditch fills to aid dating of the feature fills.
- 4.1.5 The only other feature of note was a possible post-medieval pit (25) that was otherwise un-noteworthy and contained no finds.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1 ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXT INVENTORY

<i>Context</i>	<i>Type</i>	<i>Depth</i>	<i>Width</i>	<i>Length</i>	<i>Comments</i>	<i>Finds</i>
1	Layer				Natural gravel	
2	Cut	0.9m +		2.5 m	Ditch	
3	Fill				Fill of ditch 2	
4	Fill				Fill of ditch 2	
5	Fill				Fill of ditch 2	
6	Layer	0.16 m			Cobbled surface	
7	Layer	0.18 m			Gravel surfaces	
8	Cut				Modern service trench	
9	Fill				Fill of trench 8	
10	Layer				Modern Hardcore layer	
11	Layer				Present street make up	
12	Fill				Fill of ditch 2	
13	Fill				Fill of ditch 2	
14	Fill				Fill of ditch 2	
15	Structure				Modern concrete feature	
16	Layer	0.18 m			Made up surface/ground	
17	Layer	0.14 m			Made up ground	
18	Layer	0.06 m			Surface	
19	Layer	0.12 m			Surface	
20	Fill	0.06 m			Fill of ditch 2	
21	Fill	0.13 m			Fill of ditch 2	
22	Fill				pit fill	
23	Fill				pit fill	
24	Fill				Fill of pit	
25	Cut				Pit	
26	Cut	1.04 m	0.92 m		Foundation trench	
27	Fill				Foundation	
28	Structure				Footing of north gate	
29	Layer				Made ground	
30	Layer				Made ground	

APPENDIX 2 BIBLIOGRAPHY AND REFERENCES

- Hassall T. G. 1971 Excavations at 44-46 Cornmarket Street 1970,
Oxoniensia xxxvi 15-33.
- Sturdy D & Munby J, 1985 Early Domestic Sites in Oxford: Excavations in
Cornmarket and Queen Street, 1959-62, *Oxoniensia* 1 48-94
- OA, 2001 *Cornmarket Street, Oxford* Written Scheme of Investigation

APPENDIX 3 SUMMARY OF SITE DETAILS

Site name: Cornmarket Street, Oxford.

Site code: OXCMK 02

Grid reference: NGR SP 5126 0639

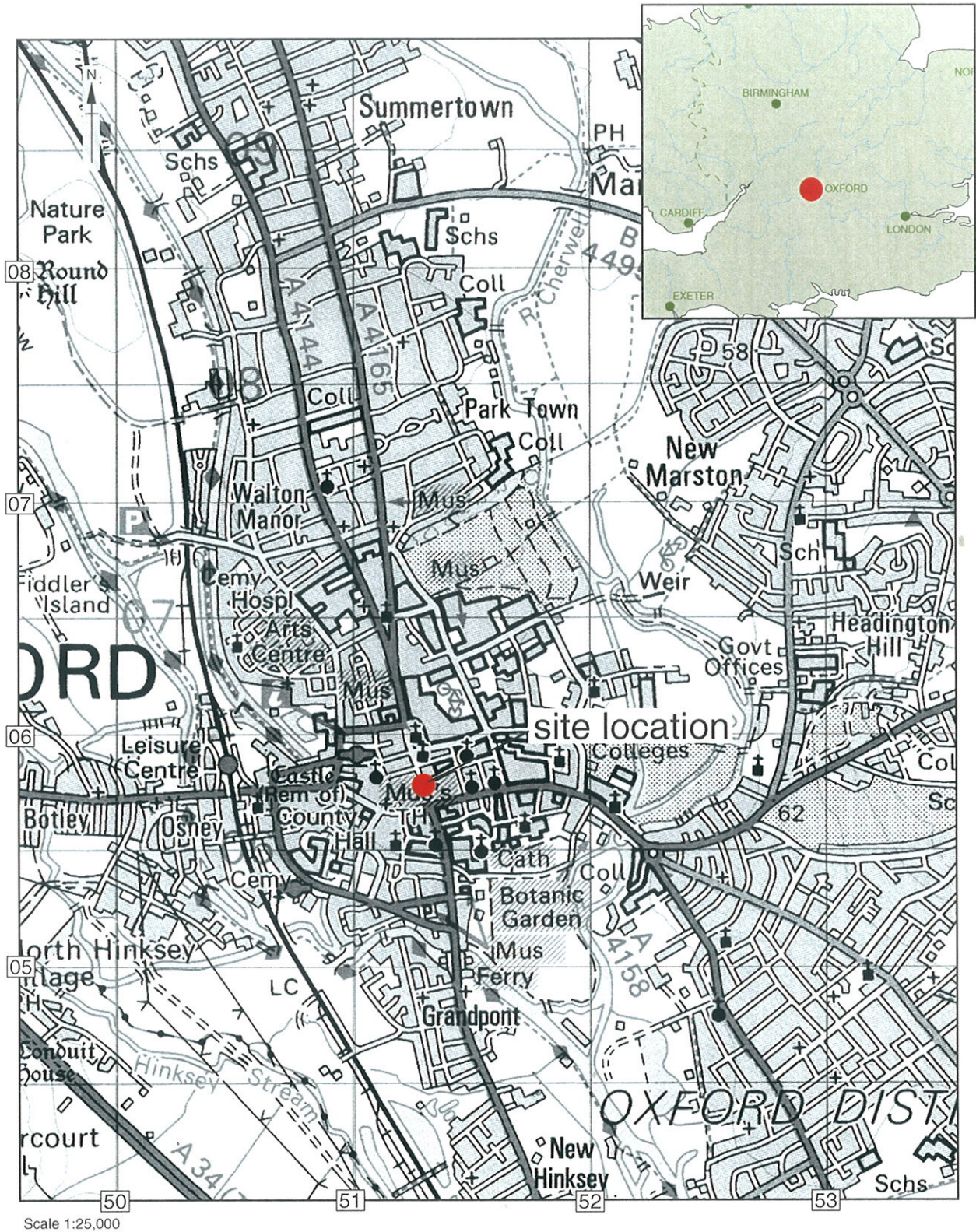
Type of watching brief: Service trench along north south axis of Cornmarket Street.

Date and duration of project: A total of nine site visits were made from 1/08/2001 to 5/10/2001

Area of site: - 1 m wide trench

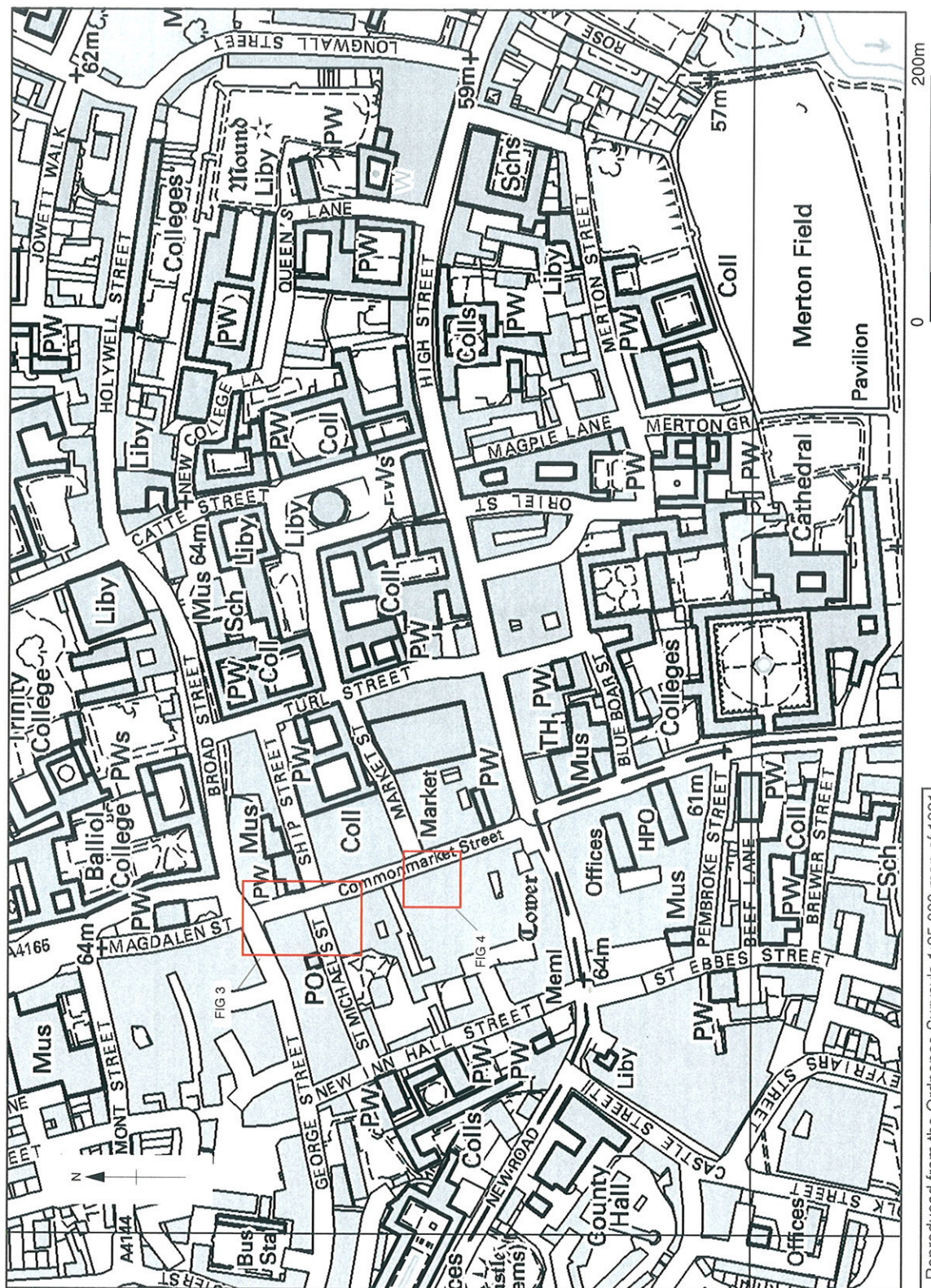
Summary of results: The watching brief showed that Cornmarket Street had been extensively been truncated by modern services and road building, but the base of the city's medieval north gate and the north edge of the medieval city ditch were exposed.

Location of archive: The archive is currently held at OA, Janus House, Osney Mead, Oxford, OX2 0ES, and will be deposited with Oxfordshire County Museums Service in due course, under the following accession number: 2001.116



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Figure 1: Site location.



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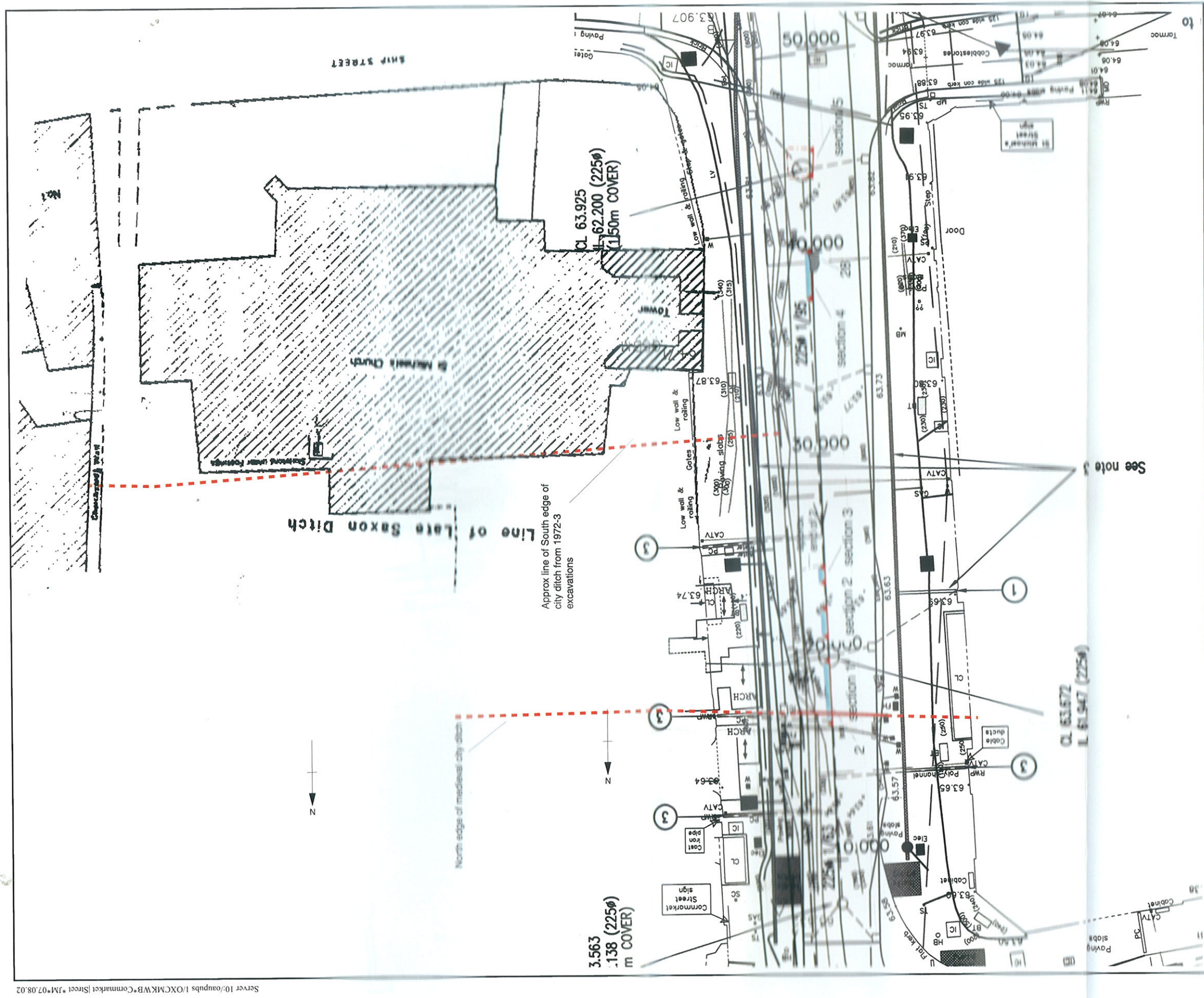
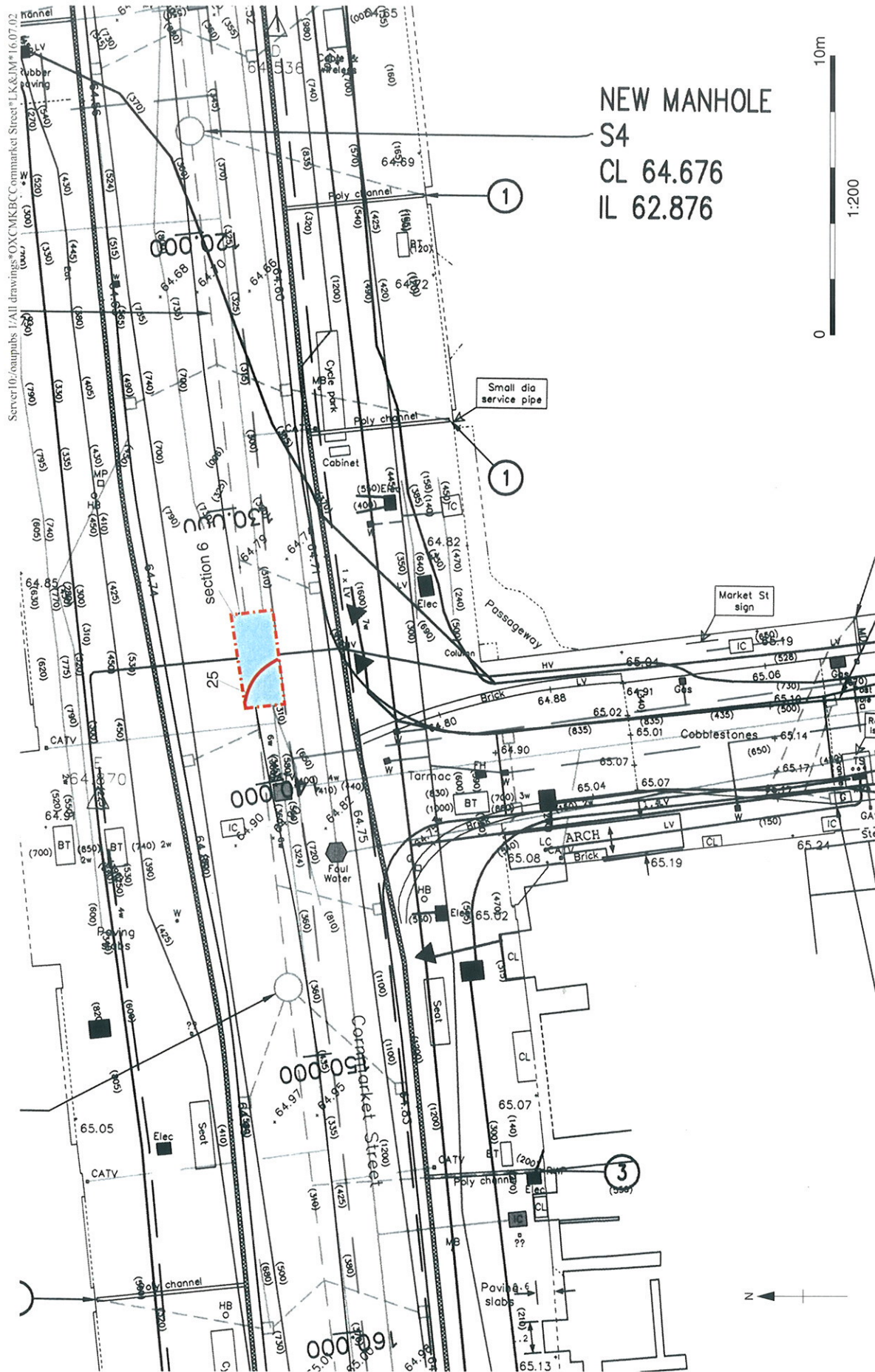


Figure 3. Location of Trench, Sections and Features



Section 1

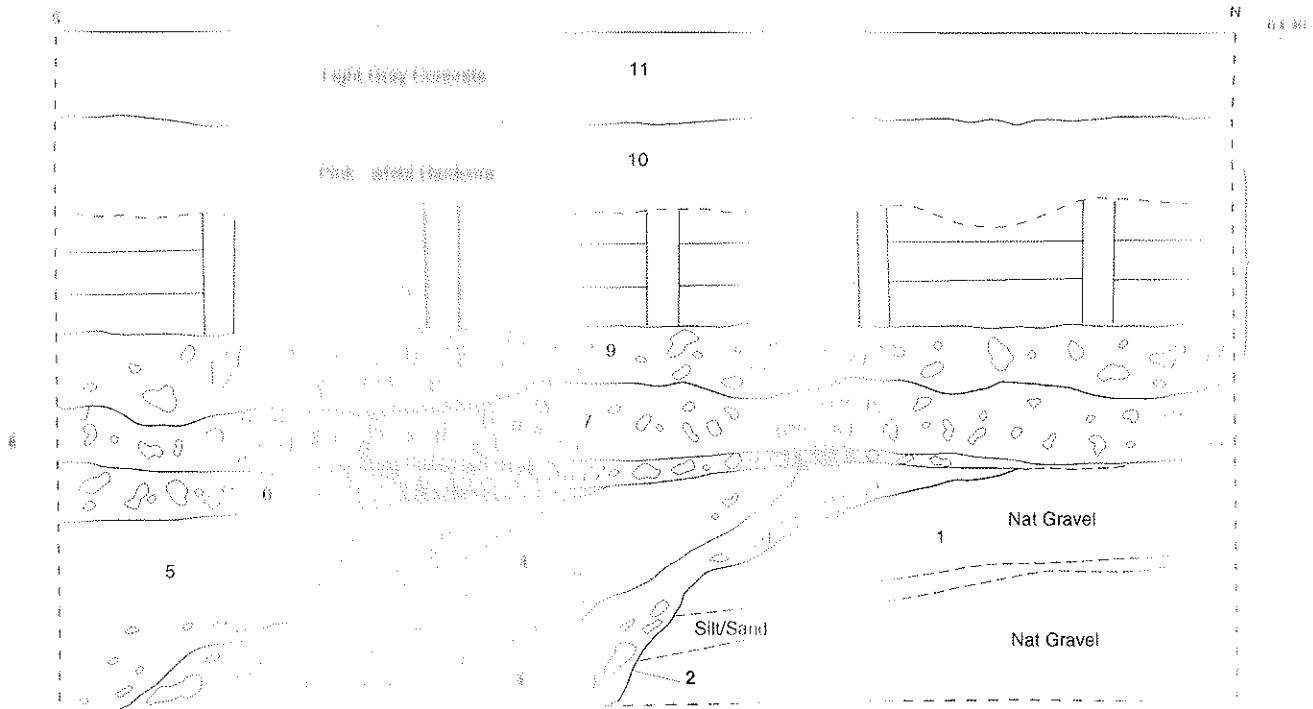


Figure 4 Section 1

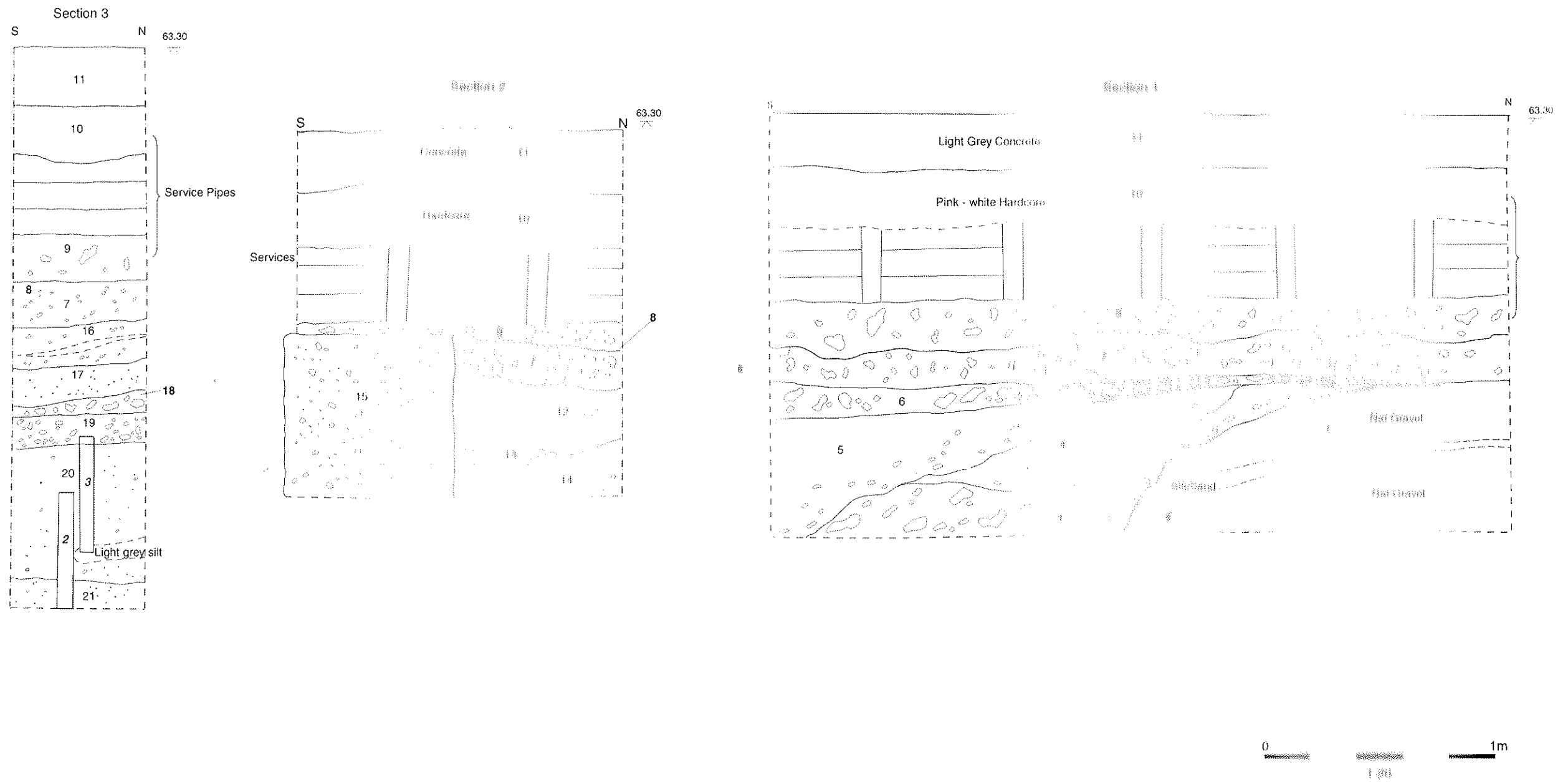


Figure 5 Sections 1-3.