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Oxford University Surveyors Office

New Oxford University Clubhouse, Mansfield Road, Oxford

*ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION REPORT*

NGR SP 5175 0608

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April 2001

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## New Oxford University Clubhouse, Mansfield Road, Oxford

### ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION

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## SUMMARY

*The Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) carried out a field evaluation at the site of the University Clubhouse, Mansfield Road, Oxford on behalf of Oxford University Surveyors Office. The evaluation revealed an undated curvilinear ditch, thought likely to be prehistoric. Modern services and tree roots obstructed excavations designed to locate features associated with the extant earthwork known as 'Kings Mound', a Civil War defensive feature adjacent to the site. Terracing on the site was investigated and found to be a result of landscaping for the current playing field.*

### 1 INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1 Location and scope of work

1.1.1 In April 2001 OAU carried out a field evaluation at the Oxford University Clubhouse, Mansfield Road, Oxford on behalf of Oxford University Surveyors Office in advance of a planning application for the demolition of the current clubhouse and the construction of a new one. Following advice from Mr Brian Durham of the Oxford City Council a Written Scheme of Investigation (WSI) was produced by OAU. The WSI was then approved by Mr Durham. The development site is situated at NGR SP 5175 0608 and is approximately 0.2 hectares in area (Fig. 2).

#### 1.2 Geology and topography

1.2.1 The site lies on alluvial deposits over Oxford Clay at 60 m above OD.

1.2.2 The development site is located on the north edge of the historic core of Oxford, and in the vicinity of Oxford's Civil War defences. The site is bounded to the north by the Institute of Virology, to the west by Mansfield Road, to the south by a large 19th century building known as 'King's Mound', and to the east by playing fields stretching as far as St. Cross Road (Fig.1).

#### 1.3 Archaeological and historical background

1.3.1 There is evidence for extensive prehistoric activity in the area to the north of the site. Aerial photographs of the University Parks show cropmarks indicating a range of features, from the ring-ditches of five Bronze Age barrows to a Roman field system. Excavations at the Rex Richards building in the University Science Area by OAU (Parkinson et al 1997), uncovered two concentric ring-ditches and also revealed Iron Age activity.

1.3.2 There are several other known locations with archaeological remains adjacent to the development site. Romano- British agricultural and domestic activity has been seen at both Mansfield College and the new Institute for American Studies (Booth and Hayden forthcoming), and is currently being excavated by OAU at the New Chemistry Research

Laboratory (OAU in progress). Both sites lie to the north-west of the current proposal area.

- 1.3.3 There is little archaeological evidence for the Anglo-Saxon or medieval periods in the vicinity of the site, and this coincides with the historical information, which suggests that this area was still farmland beyond the city boundaries at this time.
- 1.3.4 The excavations at Mansfield College, to the north-west of the site, revealed a 7 m wide, east-west aligned Civil War defensive ditch which ran to the north of and parallel to the contemporary standing earthwork immediately to the east of Rhodes House. Current excavations at the New Chemistry Research Laboratory have revealed an 80 m length of the outer circuit of the defensive ditch which matches very well with the drawing designed to show the predicted line of the defences, published in Ashdown and Hassall, 1975.
- 1.3.5 The fortifications on the north side of Oxford were the first to be constructed, in 1642, but were destroyed when Oxford fell into Parliamentary hands. Works were recommenced when the city was retaken by Charles I on the 3rd November 1642. The interpretative plan showing the Civil War Defences in relation to the topography of the modern city (see above), suggests that the scarp defining the boundary between the two playing fields to the south-east is an earthwork that linked the inner and outer circuit of the defences at this point. The mound adjacent to the proposed area ('King's Mound', see Fig. 2) seems to be part of the inner circuit (Ashdown And Hassall, 1975).
- 1.3.6 There appears to have been no significant post-medieval building in the vicinity of the site until the construction of residences and University buildings in the nineteenth century. The building to the south of the site known as 'King's Mound' was constructed in 1893, and is the residence of the Master of Balliol College.

## 2 EVALUATION AIMS

- 2.1.1 To establish the presence/absence of archaeological remains within the proposal area.
- 2.1.2 To determine the extent, condition, nature, character, quality and date of any archaeological remains present.
- 2.1.3 To establish the ectofactual and environmental potential of archaeological deposits and features.
- 2.1.4 To make available the results of the investigation.

## 3 EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

### 3.1 Scope of fieldwork

- 3.1.1 The evaluation was based upon a 2.5% sample of the development area, and consisted of three trenches. Trench 1 was excavated in two adjoining segments each

5m long while Trenches 2 and 3 were each 10 m long. All the trenches were 1.6 m wide (Fig. 2).

### 3.2 Fieldwork methods and recording

- 3.2.1 The overburden was removed by a mechanical excavator (JCB) under close archaeological supervision.
- 3.2.2 The trenches were cleaned by hand and the revealed features were sampled to determine their extent and nature, and to retrieve finds. All archaeological features were planned and where excavated their sections drawn at scales of 1:50 and 1:20 respectively. All features were photographed using colour slide. Recording followed procedures laid down in the *OAU Fieldwork Manual* (ed D Wilkinson, 1992).

### 3.3 Finds

- 3.3.1 A single find was recovered by hand during the course of the excavation and bagged by context.

### 3.4 Palaeo-environmental evidence

- 3.4.1 In view of the absence of suitable archaeological deposits no environmental soil samples were taken during the evaluation.

### 3.5 Presentation of results

- 3.5.1 The results of the evaluation are described by trench from the earliest deposits to the latest. Following those results there is a discussion of the significant feature. An inventory of all contexts is presented in Appendix 1.

## 4 RESULTS: GENERAL

### 4.1 Soils and ground conditions

- 4.1.1 The site is located on clayey gravel overlain by clay silts. Ground conditions were generally dry throughout the excavation and conditions for archaeological excavation and recording were good.

### 4.2 Distribution of archaeological deposits

- 4.2.1 A fairly consistent sequence of deposits (see below) was identified in the trenches during the evaluation, with the natural gravel exposed at the base of the sequence in each case. The sole archaeological feature was located in Trench 3 and consisted of a curvilinear ditch orientated approximately east-west.

## 5 RESULTS: DESCRIPTIONS

### 5.1 Description of deposits

#### *Trench 1 (Fig. 3)*

- 5.1.1 Trench 1 was located in the car park of the existing club-house, and was designed to locate features or deposits relating to the earthwork known as 'King's Mound' (see section 1.3.5), which lies less than 5 m to the south of the trench. Numerous modern services, together with considerable root disturbance, prevented any machine or hand excavation close to the base of the mound.
- 5.1.2 Towards the northern end of the trench the natural gravel (103) was observed at a depth of 59.62 m OD and was overlain by an orange-brown clay silt (102), which was 0.40 m thick. This in turn was overlain by a grey-brown clay silt (101), 0.16 m thick. Deposits 101 and 102 are interpreted as possible ploughsoils. These deposits were truncated by various modern services (104 and 106) and overlain by the tarmac of the present car-park (100).

#### *Trench 2 (Fig. 4)*

- 5.1.3 Trench 2 was positioned to investigate a point at which the ground level was seen to rise from the level of the playing field to the level of Mansfield Road. The trench contained a similar sequence of deposits to those seen in Trench 1.
- 5.1.4 The natural sand and gravel (204), was recorded at a depth of 59.48 m OD and was overlain by an orange-brown clay silt (203), which was 0.25 m thick. This deposit was in turn overlain by a grey-brown clay silt (202), which was 0.30 m thick. Deposits 202 and 203 are interpreted as possible ploughsoils. At the south-western end of the trench these deposits were overlain by a sandy make-up layer (201), 0.07 m thick. A layer of redeposited topsoil (200) overlaid the sand and was 0.28 m thick at the south-western extent of the trench, but only 0.08 m at the north-eastern end. This topsoil bank appeared to have been formed of a dumped soil presumably generated during the landscaping of the flat playing field to the east of the trench.

#### *Trench 3 (Fig. 5)*

- 5.1.5 Trench 3 was located across a step in the playing field level similar to that investigated in Trench 2. The trench was also designed to locate any features associated with the scarp to the south-east (not illustrated), thought likely to be an element of the Civil War defences (see 1.3.5)
- 5.1.6 The natural, 310, was observed at a depth of 59.54 m OD. At the south-western end of the trench a curvilinear feature was observed truncating the natural. This feature was orientated approximately east-west and appeared to curve inwards to the north. A sample trench through half of its profile established its base at 58.66 m OD. The northern (inner) edge sloped 45° before breaking to a flattish base. The ditch contained six fills. These were, in stratigraphic sequence from the earliest, 309, 308,

307, 306, 305 and 303 (Fig.5). All the fills were compacted clay silts with the exception of 309 and 306 and all were reddish brown in hue except 306. The primary fill, 309, was a friable clay silt with a 15% gravel content and was 0.10 m thick. The secondary fill, 308, was 0.25 m thick whilst 307, 305 and 303 were 0.10 m, 0.25 m and 0.30 m thick respectively. Fill 306 was a greenish brown, compacted clay 0.12 m thick and possibly represents a phase of consolidation, i.e. a turf line, formed between phases of infilling. The top fill of the ditch, 303, contained a single sherd of medieval pottery at its uppermost level and may indicate intrusion through ploughing.

5.1.7 The overlying clay silt 302 was similar to deposits 102 and 203 in Trenches 1 and 2 and was 0.15 m thick. Deposit 302 is interpreted as a medieval ploughsoil (see above). The deposit that would have corresponded to layers 101 and 202 was not present in Trench 3. A modern service trench, 301, cut from current ground level down to base of 305. Another modern intrusion, noted on plan (Fig.5), obscured the top of the ditch to the east.

5.1.8 Ploughsoil 302 was overlain by topsoil and turf (300). The topsoil had been banked at the south western end of the trench, creating a slight step similar to that observed in Trench 2. Again this was thought likely to be the result of landscaping associated with the creation of a level playing field.

## 5.2 Finds

### *Pottery*

5.2.1 The only artefact recovered during the evaluation was a single sherd of highly abraded medieval pottery from the upper limit of ditch fill 303.

## 6 DISCUSSION AND INTERPRETATION

### 6.1 Reliability of field investigation

6.1.1 In each of the three trenches the natural gravel was exposed, although the number of obstructions in the southern end of Trench 1 (modern services and tree roots) limited sample excavation.

6.1.2 The curvilinear ditch in Trench 3 yielded no datable evidence (apart from an intrusive sherd of medieval pottery) but the profile and the nature of the fills strongly suggest that it is prehistoric. Although the upper fills and the top of the inner edge of ditch were truncated by modern services the surviving profile, half of which was hand sampled, was well preserved.

6.1.3 The paucity of artefacts within the ploughsoils means that they cannot be securely dated. However, a single sherd of abraded medieval pottery was located from the top fill of the possible prehistoric ditch in Trench 3. This was most likely intrusive and may support the theory that the area was farmed prior to the Civil War period (see Section 1.3.3).



- 6.1.4 One of the main aims of the evaluation was to locate features associated with the possible Civil War earthworks adjacent to the proposed development area. Excavations at the base of the earthwork known as 'King's Mound' were not possible due to obstructions within Trench 1. Trench 3 was located in order to check for the presence of features associated with the scarp defining the boundary between the two playing fields to the south-east. No evidence of Civil War activity was seen in Trench 3, but this may simply be due to the fact that the trench was located too far to the north.
- 6.1.5 Another aim of the evaluation was to determine the date and function of the landscaped banks observed in Trenches 2 and 3. These were clearly modern in construction and not elements of the Civil War defences. Also evident from Trenches 2 and 3 was that the levelling of the current playing fields had only resulted in a partial truncation of the ploughsoil.

## 6.2 Overall interpretation

### *Summary of results*

- 6.2.1 The only archaeological feature located in the evaluation was the possibly prehistoric ditch examined in Trench 3. The ditch was orientated approximately east-west but curved inwards to the north. Despite the limited extent of the area exposed, it is thought possible that this feature may be a Bronze Age barrow ditch (see below).
- 6.2.2 The evaluation trenches were located as close to the Civil War mound and scarp as ground conditions would allow. No archaeological features associated with the Civil War were found.
- 6.2.3 The landscaping to the north-west and south-east of the clubhouse was associated with levelling of the playing field, and possibly the creation of a platform for the positioning of the clubhouse itself. Trenches 2 and 3 revealed that the levelling of the playing fields had not truncated the previous ground levels to any great extent.

### *Significance*

- 6.2.4 The extensive prehistoric activity to the north of the site, (see Section 1.3.1) including evidence for up to six Bronze Age barrows, supports the possibility that this feature might be associated with that period, and may even be a barrow ditch. The depth and profile of the ditch, along with reddish hue of the ditch fills, supports this possibility, being consistent with recently excavated barrow ditches at the Sackler Library (Poore and Wilkinson, forthcoming). The lack of artefacts from such a feature is not unusual. The presence of a barrow ditch is significant in itself, as is the possibility that any central burial or cremation may be preserved, possibly within the development area.
- 6.2.5 The failure of the evaluation to locate features associated with the extant Civil War earthworks cannot be taken as evidence that such features do not exist within the area likely to be affected by the proposed development.

## APPENDIX 1 ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXT INVENTORY

<i>Trench</i>	<i>Ctxt No</i>	<i>Type</i>	<i>Width (m)</i>	<i>Thick. (m)</i>	<i>Comment</i>	<i>Finds</i>	<i>Date</i>
001							
	100	Layer		0.10	Tarmac		
	101	Layer		0.15	Topsoil		
	102	Layer		0.40	Ploughsoil		
	103	Layer			Natural clay gravel		
	104	Cut	0.70		Modern service		
	105	Cut	0.64		Modern service		
	106	Cut	0.34		Modern service		
	107	Fill			Fill of 104		
	108	Fill			Fill of 105		
	109	Fill			Fill of 106		
002							
	200	Layer		0.25	Make-up		
	201	Layer		0.07	Make-up		
	202	Layer		0.25	Topsoil		
	203	Layer		0.15	Ploughsoil		
	204	Layer			Natural clay gravel		
003							
	300	Layer		0.35	Topsoil		
	301	Cut	0.15	0.75	Modern service		
	302	Layer		0.15	Ploughsoil		
	303	Fill		0.30	Top fill of ditch 304	Pot	
	304	Cut	1.90	1.00	Possible barrow ditch		
	305	Fill		0.25	Fill of 304		
	306	Fill		0.12	Fill of 304		
	307	Fill		0.10	Fill of 304		
	308	Fill		0.25	Fill of 304		
	309	Fill		0.10	Fill of 304		
	310	Layer			Natural clay gravel		

**APPENDIX 2 BIBLIOGRAPHY AND REFERENCES**

Ashdown, J and Hassall, T, 1975 'Oxford', in *Historic Towns of Oxfordshire* ed. Rodwell 141

Booth, P, and Hayden, C, forthcoming A Roman settlement at Mansfield College Oxford, *Oxoniensia* 65

Parkinson, A, Barclay, A, and McKeague, P, 1997 The excavation of two Bronze Age barrows, Oxford, *Oxoniensia* 61, (for 1996), 41-64

Poore, D, and Wilkinson, D, forthcoming *Beaumont Palace and the White friars: Excavations at the Sackler library, Beaumont Street, Oxford* Oxford Archaeological Unit Occasional Paper

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

**APPENDIX 3 SUMMARY OF SITE DETAILS**

**Site name:** Oxford New University Club.

**Site code:** OX MAUC 01

**Grid reference:** SP 5175 0608

**Type of evaluation:** Three 10m trenches.

**Date and duration of project:** April 2001, two days.

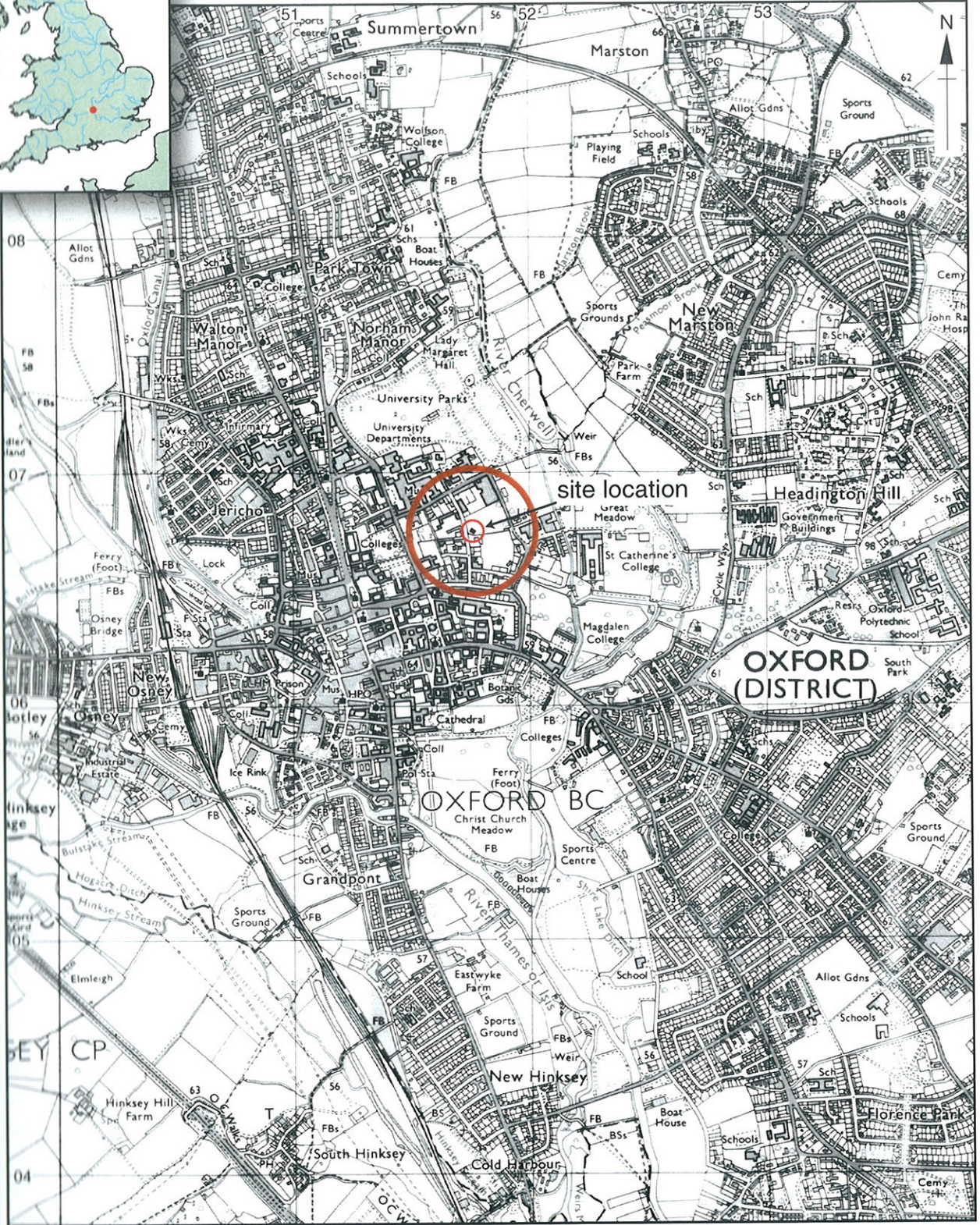
**Area of site:** Approximately 0.2 ha

**Summary of results:** A possibly prehistoric curvilinear ditch was found.

**Location of archive:** The archive is currently held at OAU, Janus House, Osney Mead, Oxford, OX2 0ES, and will be deposited with the Ashmolean Museum in due course.



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Figure 1: Site location.

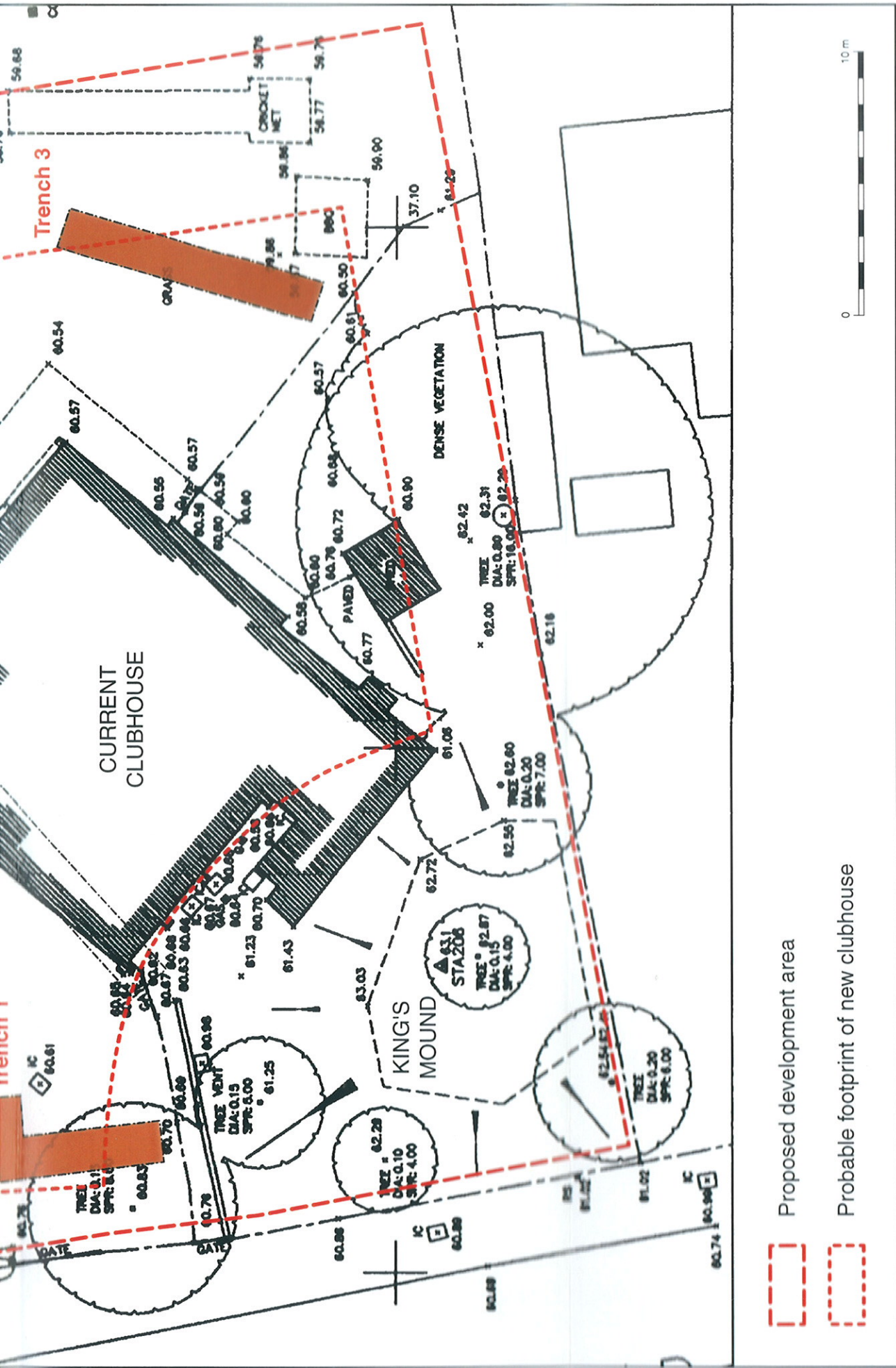


Figure 2: Trench location plan.

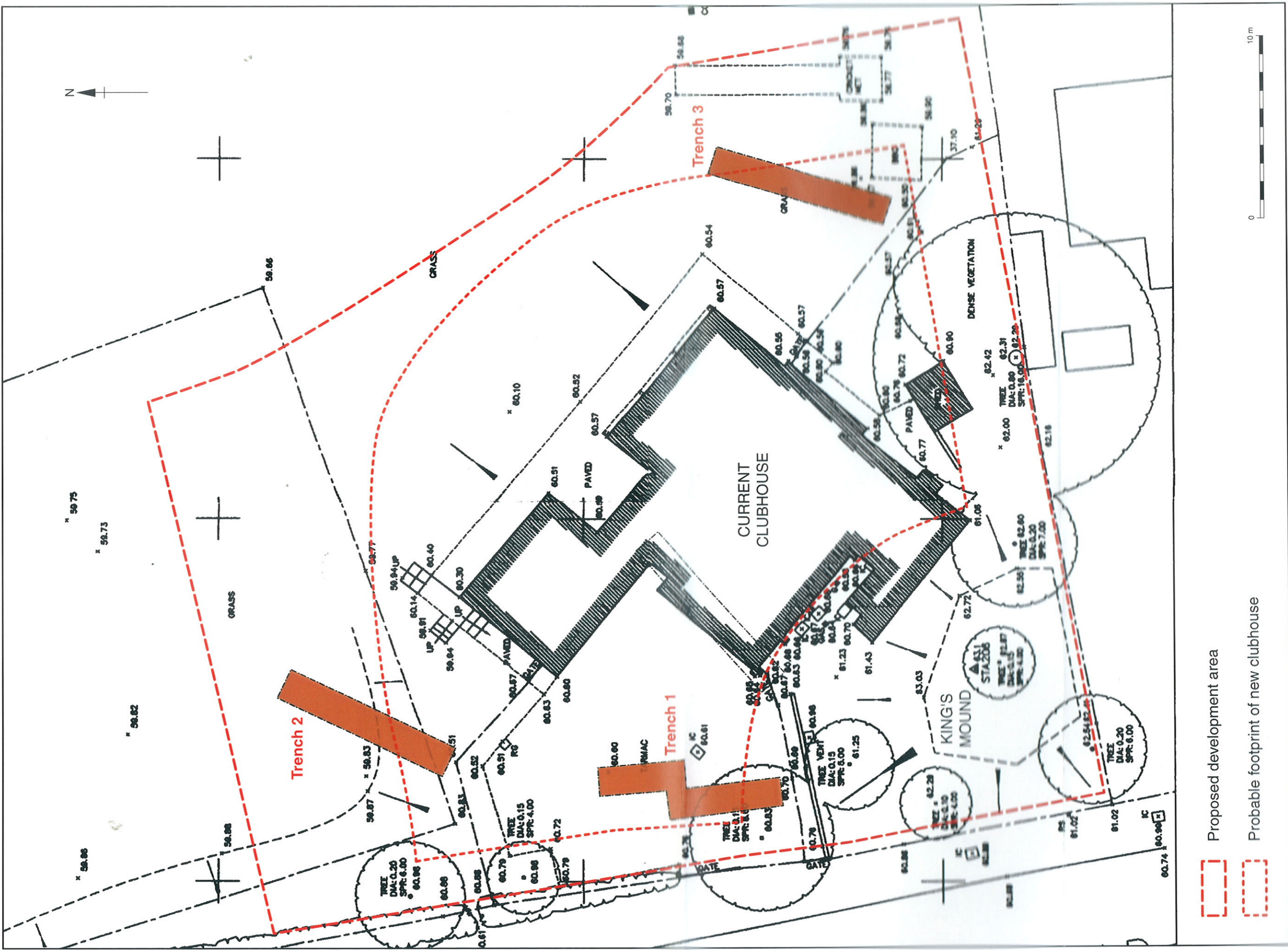


Figure 2: Trench location plan.

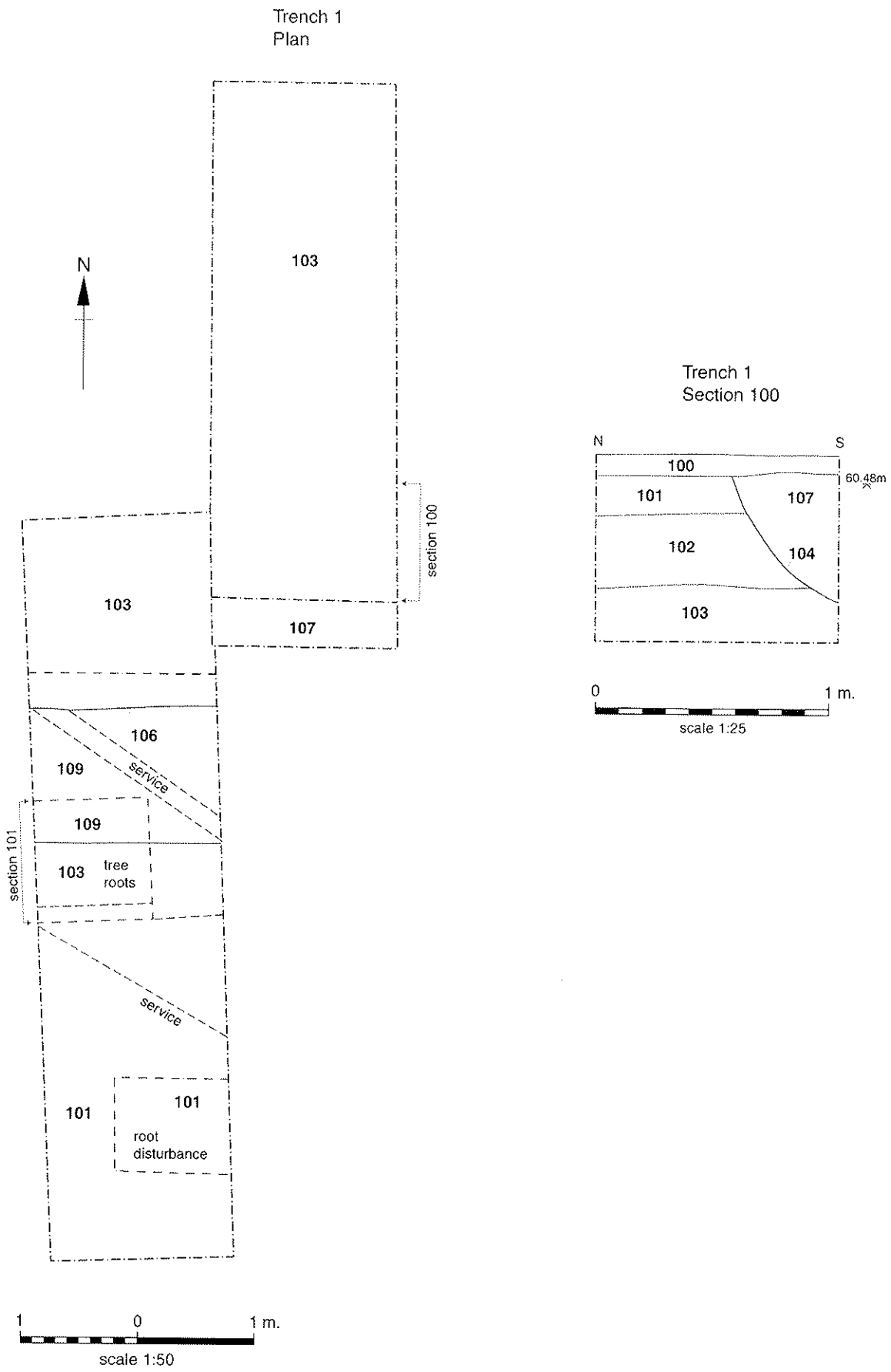
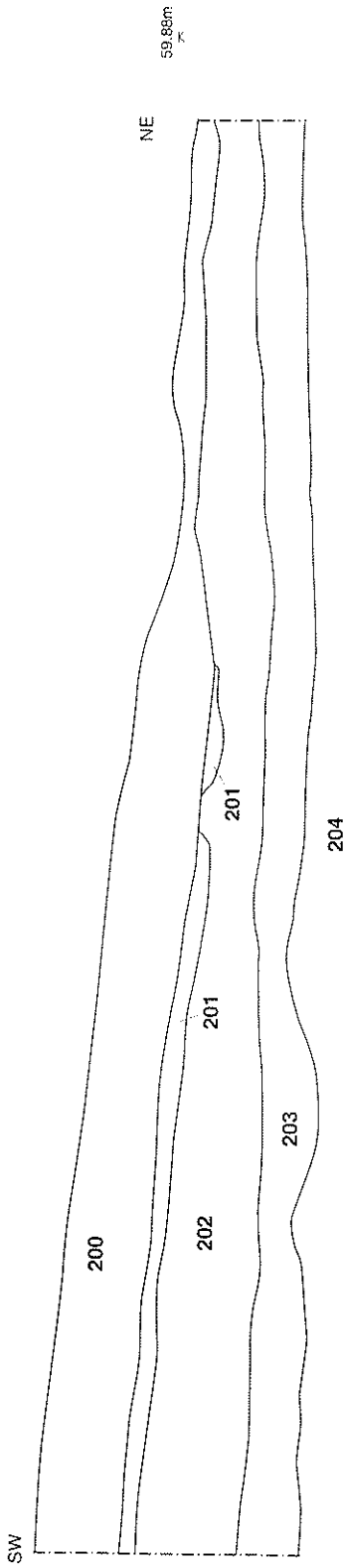


Figure 3: Trench 1, plan and section.

Trench 2  
Section 200



Trench 2  
Plan

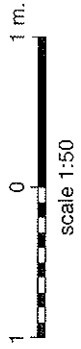
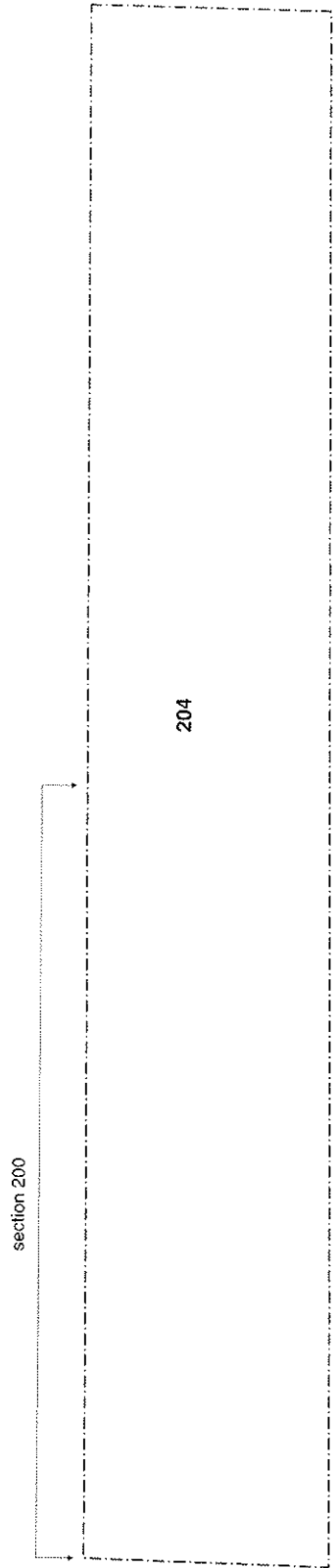


Figure 4: Trench 2, plan and section.



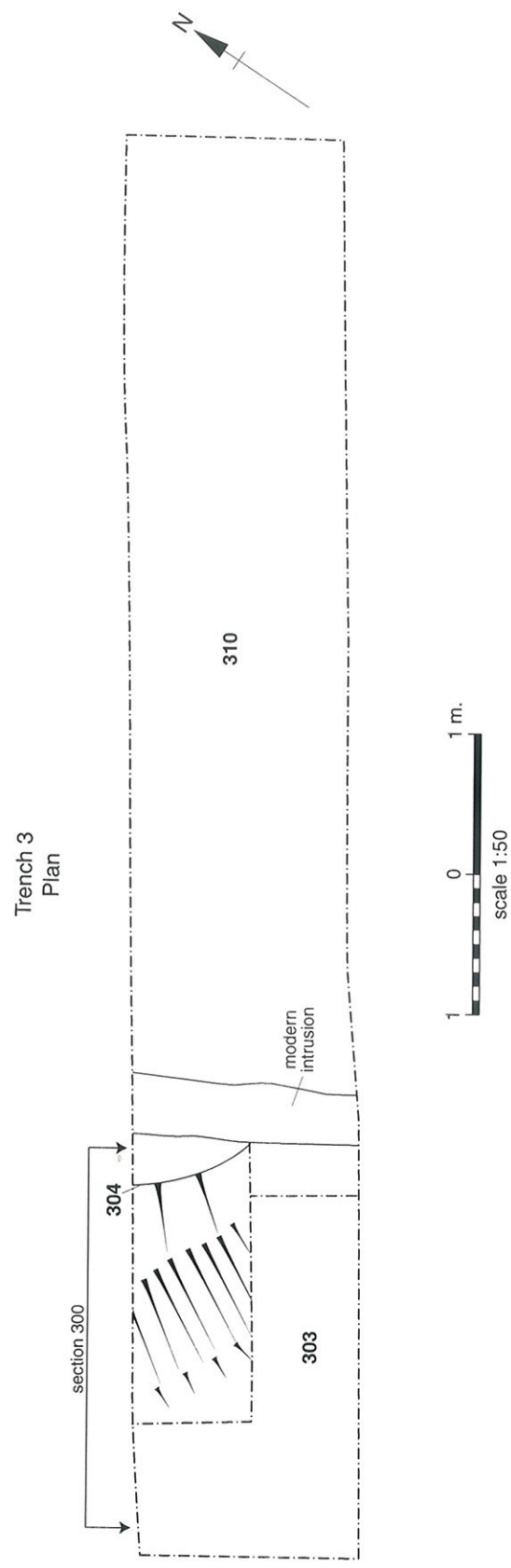
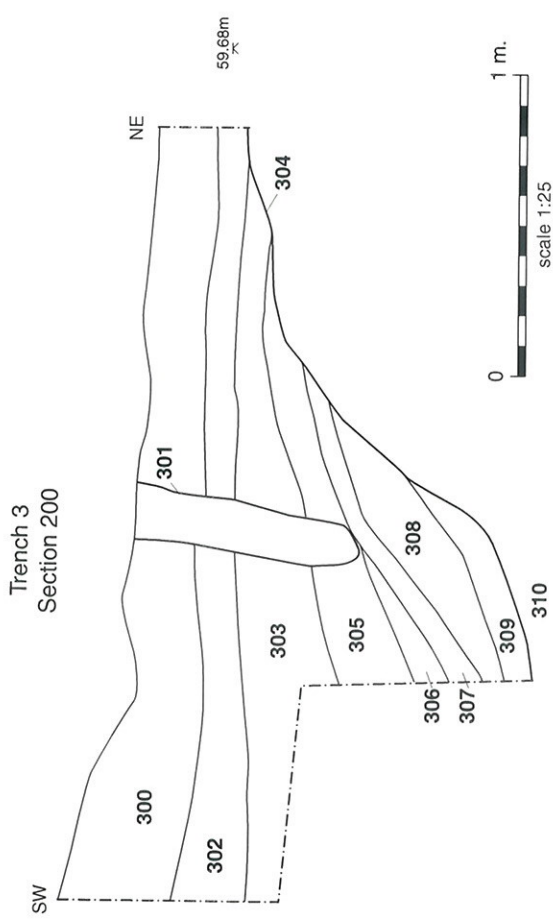


Figure 5: Trench 3, plan and section.



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