Knowles & Son/Hertford College

Salter's Boatyard, Abingdon Road, Oxford

NGR SP 5144 0550

ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF REPORT

Planning Ref. No. 97/606/NFH

Oxford Archaeological Unit

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Date:	8/2/99
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Oxford Archaeological Unit

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Summary

In October and November 1998 the Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) undertook a watching brief at Salter's Boatyard, Abingdon Road, Oxford (NGR SP 5144 0550). Dumping and levelling deposits of 19th century date were identified.

1 Introduction

The development proposal (planning application no. 97/606/NFH) comprised piling, the excavation of trenches for ground beams and excavation for two large drainage pump sumps in advance of the construction of new residential accommodation. An archaeological watching brief was required in accordance with the planning consent granted under PPG 16.

The watching brief was commissioned by Knowles and Son on behalf of Hertford College. It was undertaken to a brief set by and a WSI agreed with the Oxford Archaeological Advisory Service.

2 Background

This watching brief is further to a desktop study (OAU April 1997) and an archaeological field evaluation (OAU January 1998) of the site, the results of both of which are summarized below.

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 and Bronze Age the development site probably fell within the river channel. A number of clay banks appeared in the early Saxon period, forming channels which remained stable into the mid-late Saxon period as a result of 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 road to Oxford was carried across a series of streams and islands, initially by means of a ford and from the late Saxon period via a timber bridge. The stone causeway is believed to have been built as 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 (SAM 21757).

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 north of the development site).

It is possible that the site was occupied in the Saxon period. In the 16th century, when the earliest cartographic source was produced, the site was either open land or was sparsely occupied.

Several excavations and monitoring exercises have been carried out in the immediate vicinity of the development site:

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

- Also across the Thames to the north of the site, evaluation work at the "Head of the River" Public House produced information relating to the processes involved in medieval land reclamation (OAU 1994).

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

In the November 1997 evaluation on the development site, three trenches were excavated by machine to a maximum depth of 1.25 m. The trench locations were limited by restricted working space and the presence of a large number of underground services. Trench 1 was 7.5 m long, trench 2 was 9 m long and trench 3 was 5 m long; all were machine dug with a toothless bucket to a width of 1.6 m. A single 2 m square trench, numbered as (4), was dug by hand. All four trenches were excavated to a depth of 1.25 m in order to determine the immediate impact of the development, with an allowance for a cushion between the groundworks and any archaeological deposits present.

The evaluation revealed the remains of a building dated to the 19th century or later by a small quantity of 19th-century pottery and clay pipe fragments; the building possibly was associated with the 19th-century timber wharf. Findings otherwise were limited to dumping and levelling deposits of 19th-century date; these were excavated to a maximum depth of 1.25 m and produced finds ranging in date from the 12th to the 20th centuries. The earliest deposit in trench 1 (100) produced a single sherd of Tudor Green ware and potentially could date from as early as the 16th century; however the same deposit produced a clay pipe stem, suggesting that a much later date for this deposit is probably more likely. All the medieval material seen derived from 19th or 20th century deposits of made ground, and do not necessarily derive from the site itself, or even the immediate locality.

The site lies on alluvial clays and gravels, overlying Oxford Clay, on the Thames floodplain at c. 57 m OD. The site consists of two islands in the River Thames, which probably are of natural origin although extensively built up and surrounded by river walls. The 'Folly Bridge' forms the western boundary of the site.

The development site has been used as a boat yard since c. 1858, prior to which it was used as a timber yard (OAU April 1997).

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

Groundwork commenced with piledriving, which was not archaeologically monitored. This was followed by the excavation of ground beam trenches and pits for the installation of the two drainage pump sumps. Separate inspection visits were made to site during the course of groundworks; all excavation was by 360° tracked mechanical excavator, fitted with a toothless bucket.

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 utilises standard charts for the approximation of percentage of inclusion types in soil deposits.

5 Results

The deposits encountered throughout the watching brief generally were very similar in the pump excavations and the ground beam trenches and consisted of variable and well-drained made ground deposits of 19th- and 20th-century date. The numbering sequence was begun at (1000) in order to avoid confusion with those numbers issued during the 1997 evaluation.

Pump 1 (Section 13, Fig. 6).

The reduced ground level here prior to excavation was c. 57.00 m OD, and the pit was dug to a level of c. 54.60 m OD, being between 2 and 2.5 m square in plan. The earliest deposit seen here was a redeposited alluvial clay, (1000); this was sealed by a deposit of clayey sand containing pieces of mortar and brick, (1001). This was sealed by five further clayey sand and gravel made ground deposits (1002)-(1006), raising the ground level by c. 1.10 m. A service trench [1007] was visible in the north section, slightly angled it was aligned almost exactly east-west; it was backfilled with gravel (1008) and sealed by a compacted mixture of coarse subangular sand and fine-coarse subangular gravel (1009). Prior to ground reduction the area had been sealed by a modern surface comprising a layer of clinker (1010), a layer of fine subangular gravel (1011) which was sealed by a layer of rolled concrete (1012).

Pump 2 (Section 14, Fig. 6).

Deposits of made ground seen here generally sloped downwards from west to east (away from the bridge); this slope was particularly noted in some of the lower deposits.

The reduced ground level here prior to excavation was c. 56.80 m OD, and the pit was dug to a level of 54.25 m OD, being between 2 and 2.5 m square in plan. The earliest

deposit seen here was a redeposited alluvial clay, (2000); this was sealed by a deposit of clayey sand containing fragments of mortar and brick, (2001). This was sealed by six further clayey sand and gravel made ground deposits (2002)-(2007), raising the ground level by c. 1.5 m. These deposits were overlain by a compacted mixture of coarse subangular sand and fine-coarse subangular gravel (2008); prior to ground reduction the area had been sealed by a modern surface comprising a layer of clinker (2009), a layer of fine subangular gravel (2010) which in turn was sealed by a layer of rolled concrete (2011).

Ground Beams (Figs. 3, 4, & 5).

The ground beam trenches were dug to an average depth of 1 m and were cut through a variety of fills, none of which formed a definite surface. The similarity of these deposits allows for a general description across the site obviating the need to describe areas individually. Generally speaking the ground beam trenches were cut through deposits similar to those exposed in the drainage pump sump pits.

The earliest deposit seen was a very mixed and dirty deposit of coarse subangular charcoal stained gravel with occasional lumps of gray silty clay, (3000). This was overlain by a mixed deposit of sand and clay with occasional loamy lenses (3001), which in turn was sealed by a deposit of fine-coarse yellow/white subangular sand and medium-coarse subangular gravel with occasional lenses of charcoal-stained gray clay, (3002).

6 Finds

Working methods on site meant that finds were retrieved from spoil which had already been dug out. Excavated material was sorted by hand for finds before its removal from site. Spoil was removed from site on a regular basis due to very limited working space. The paucity of finds retrieved is thought at least in part to be due to the working method, and all the finds that were retrieved are unstratified. Three small fragments of 19th- or 20th-century window glass were retrieved together with a small quantity of highly abraded pottery. The lack of diagnostic sherds of pottery means that no firm dates can be assigned; the pottery spans a date range from the late-medieval to post-medieval, with material also from the 19th and 20th centuries. It is thought likely that the medieval and post-medieval material was redeposited in the 19th or 20th centuries, as a part of the various dumped deposits on the site.

Various small fragments of animal bone were also retrieved, but were not identifiable due to their high degree of fragmentation.

7 Environmental results

Due to the absence of any significant archaeology, no environmental soil samples were taken.

8 Discussion

Neither the ground beam trenches nor the drainage pump sump excavations penetrated below the substantial quantities of made ground present on both islands. Nothing was

found during the watching brief to contradict the findings of the evaluation, that the site has been substantially raised and levelled since the 19th century; all of the medieval finds were in redeposited material, not necessarily derived locally, dumped in the 19th-century. No evidence was seen which would shed light on the history of the site prior to its use as a timber wharf and boat yard in the 19th century, and similarly nothing was seen relating to the pre-19th century extent of the islands.

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Campbell, G E forthcoming 'Excavations at Thames Street, St Aldate's, Oxford', tss draft for OAU monograph *Oxford before the university*

Mudd, A 1993 'Excavations at Whitehouse Road, Oxford, 1992', *Oxoniensia* LVIII (1993), 33-85

OAU 1994 41-43 St Aldate's & The Head of the River, Oxford. Archaeological Evaluation Report, July 1994.

OAU 1997 Salter's Boatyard, Folly Bridge, Abingdon Road, Oxford. Archaeological Desktop Study.

OAU 1998 Salter's Boatyard, Folly Bridge, Abingdon Road, Oxford. Archaeological Evaluation Report, January 1998.

Wilkinson, D (ed) 1992 Oxford Archaeological Unit Field Manual, (First edition, August 1992).

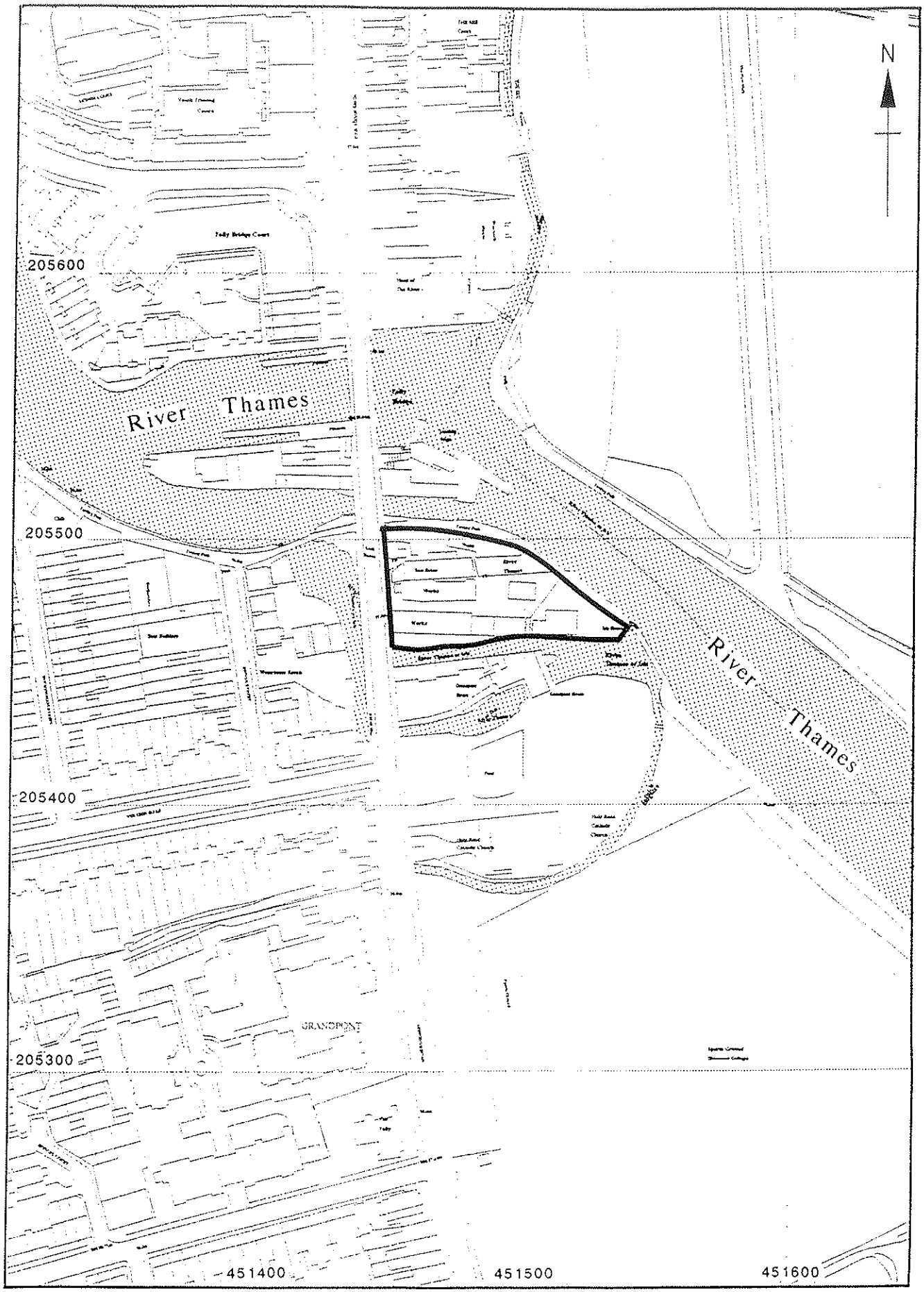


FIG 1 Site location plan scale 1:1250

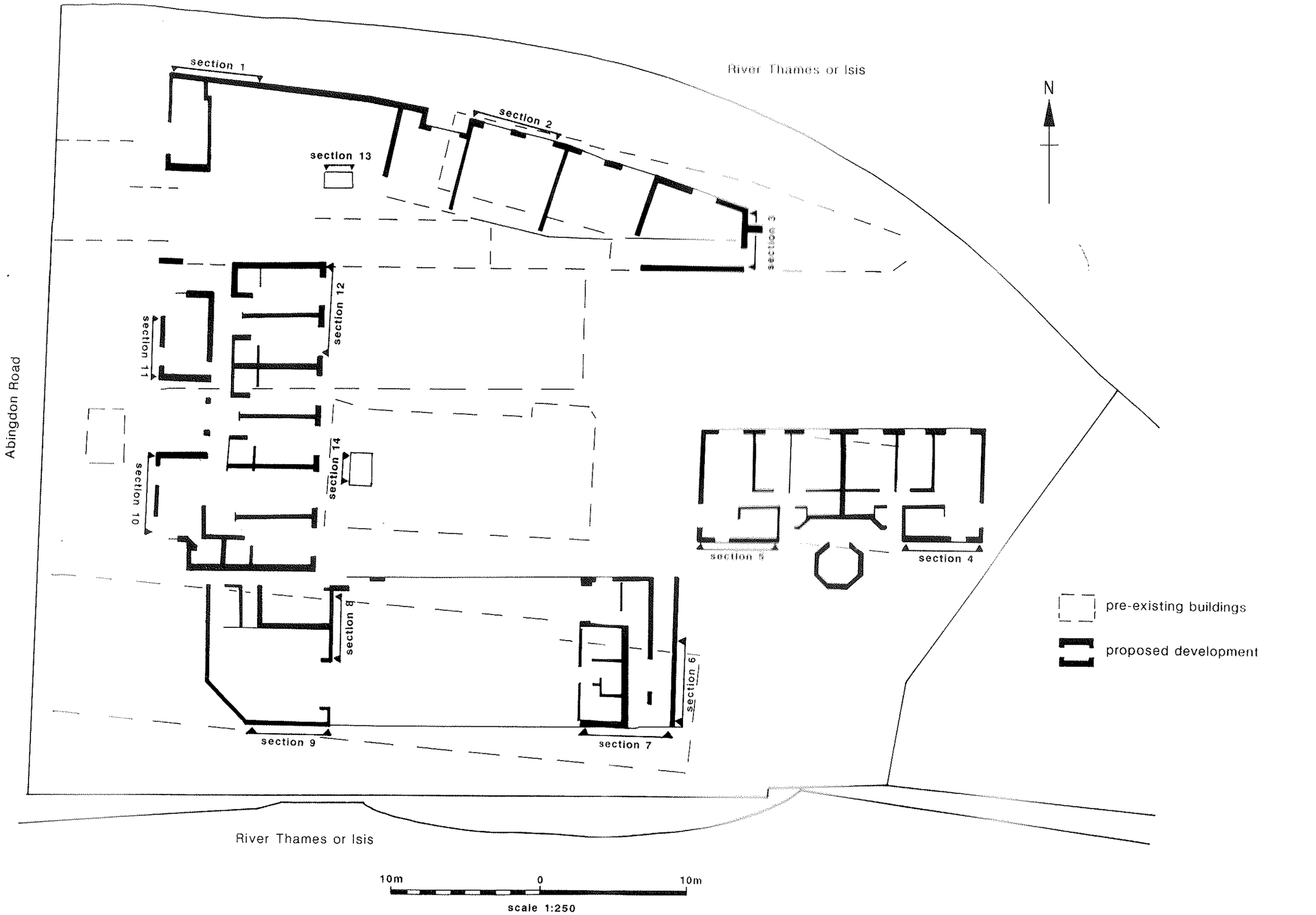
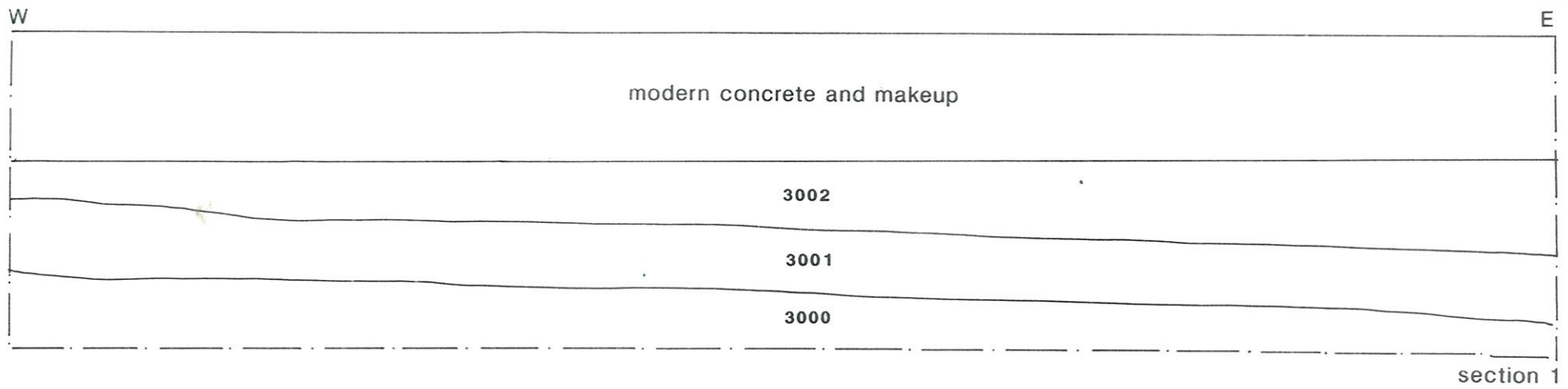


Figure 2 : site plan showing section locations



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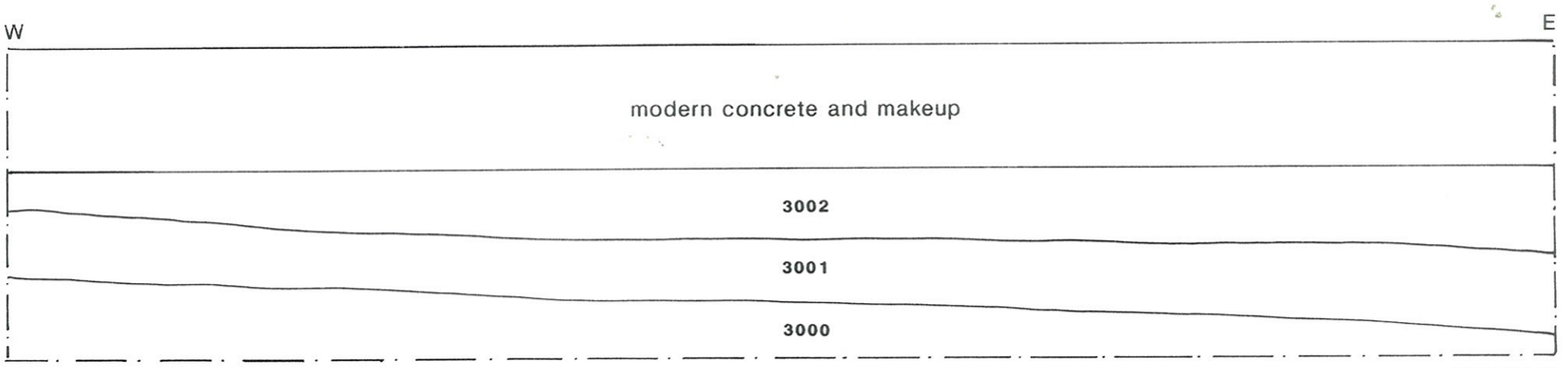

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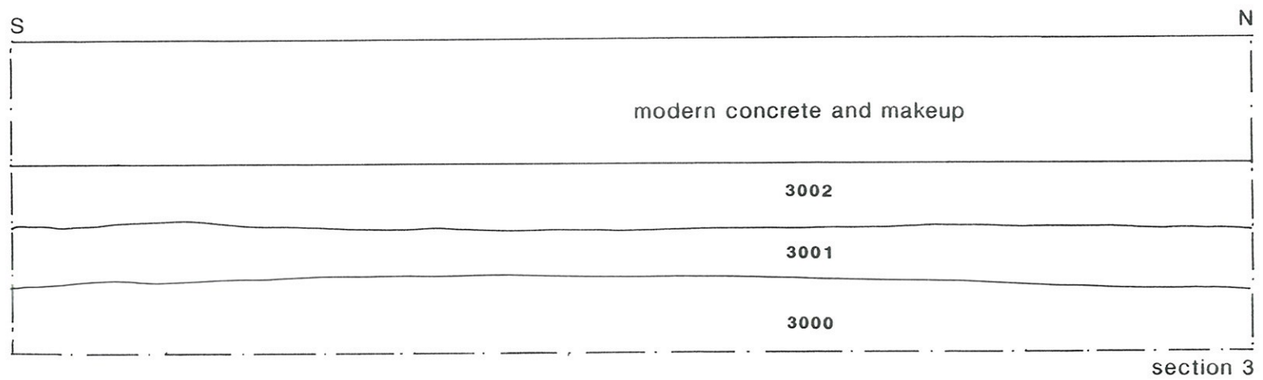

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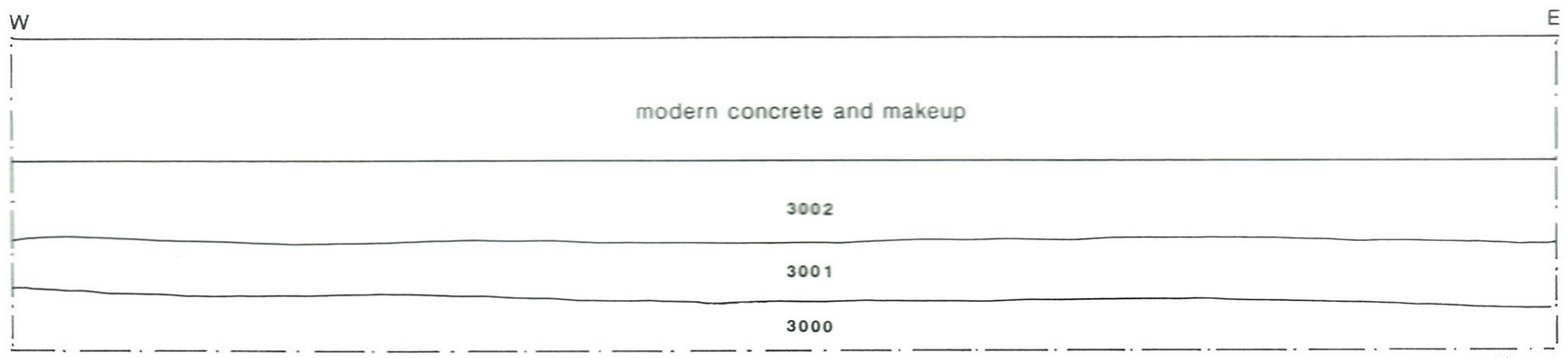

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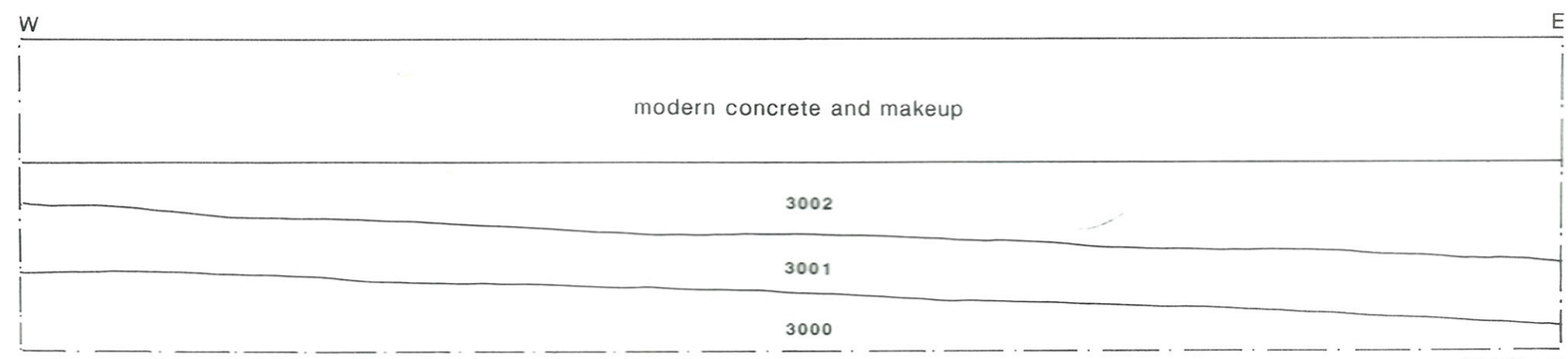

section 5

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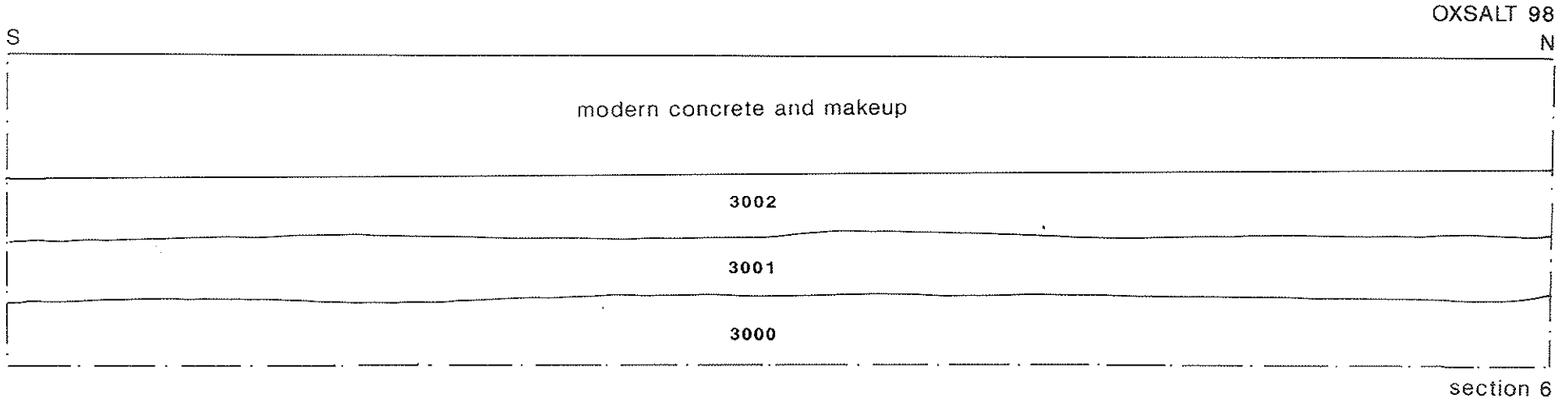
Figure 3: sections 1 to 5



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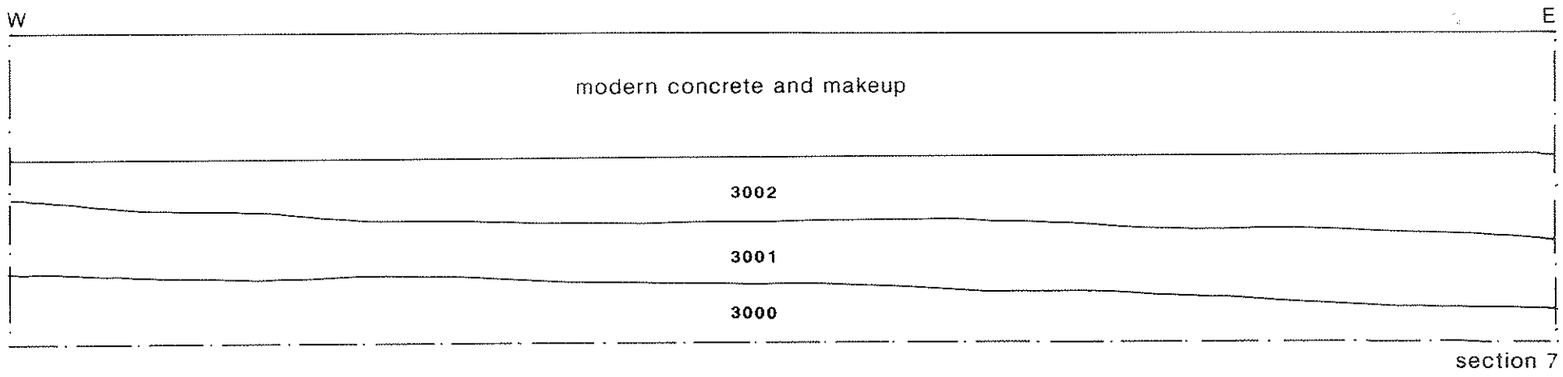

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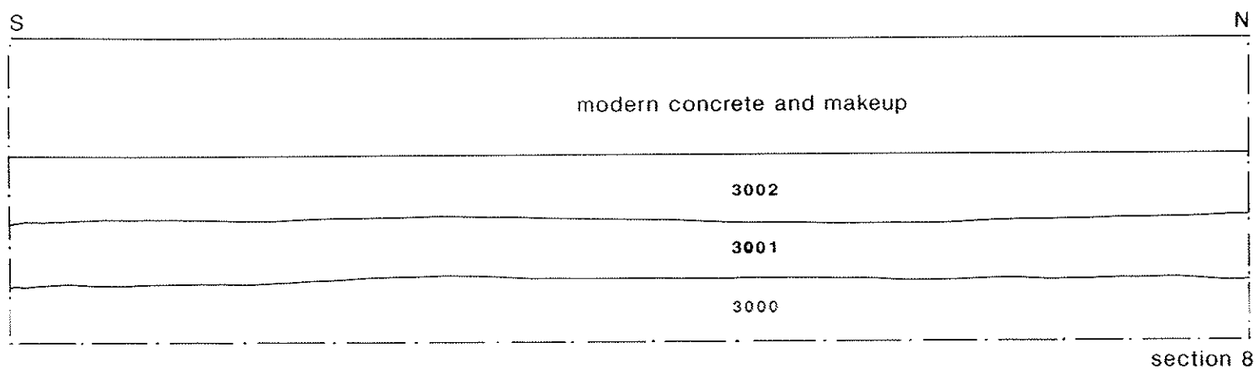

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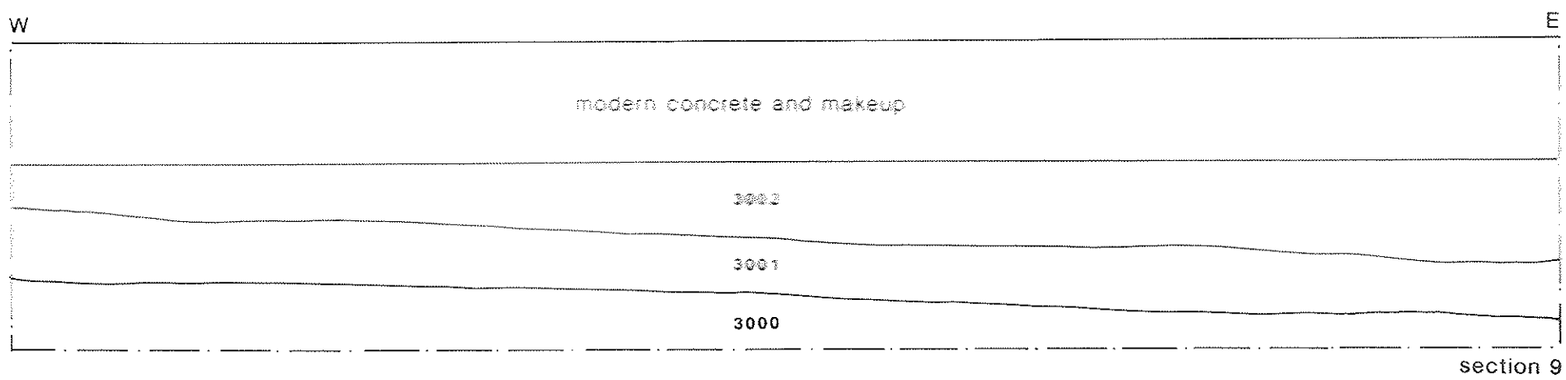

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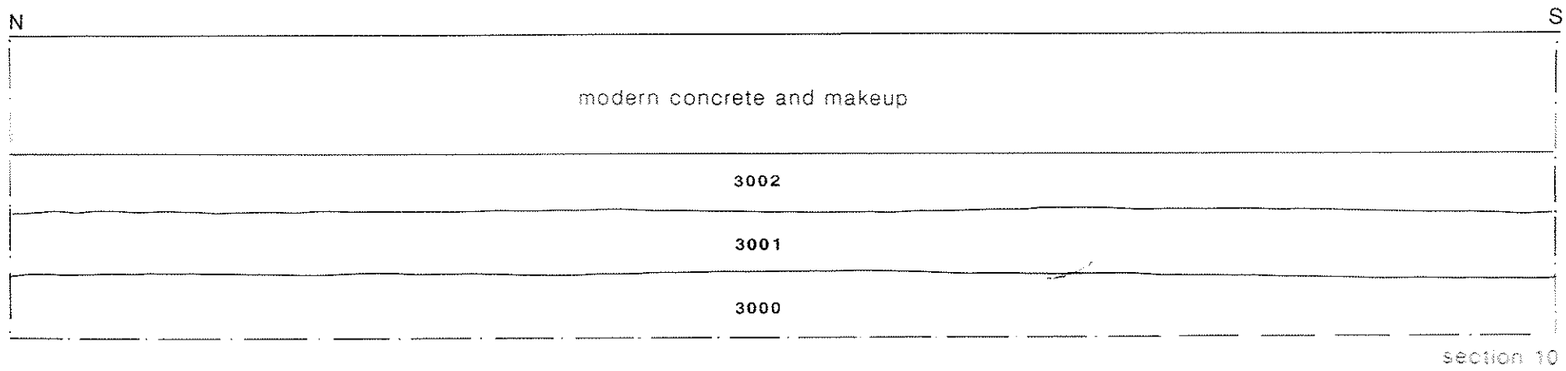

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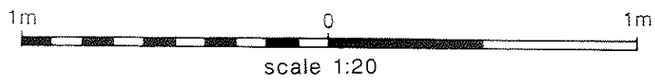

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Figure 4: sections 6 to 10

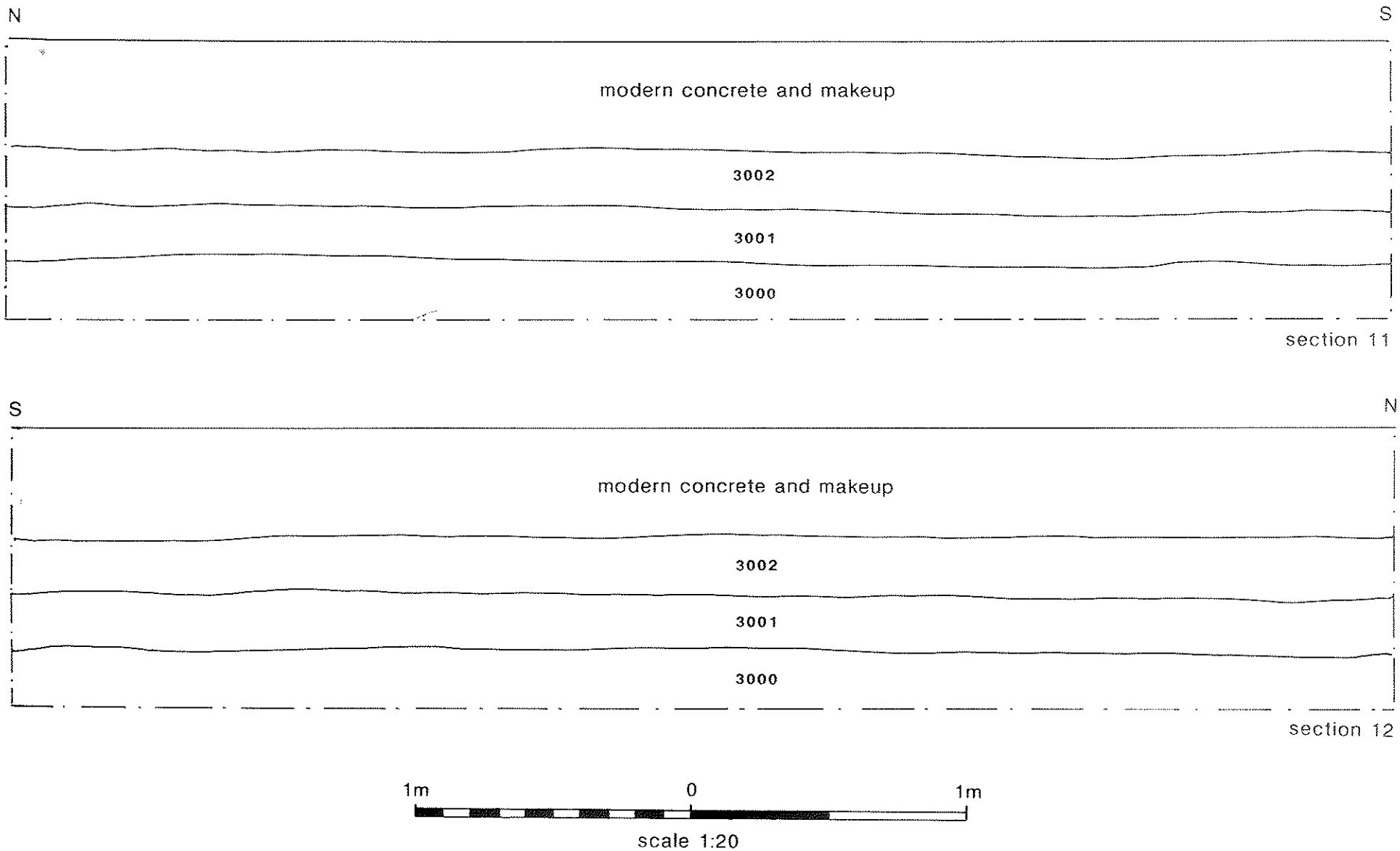

Figure 5: sections 11 and 12

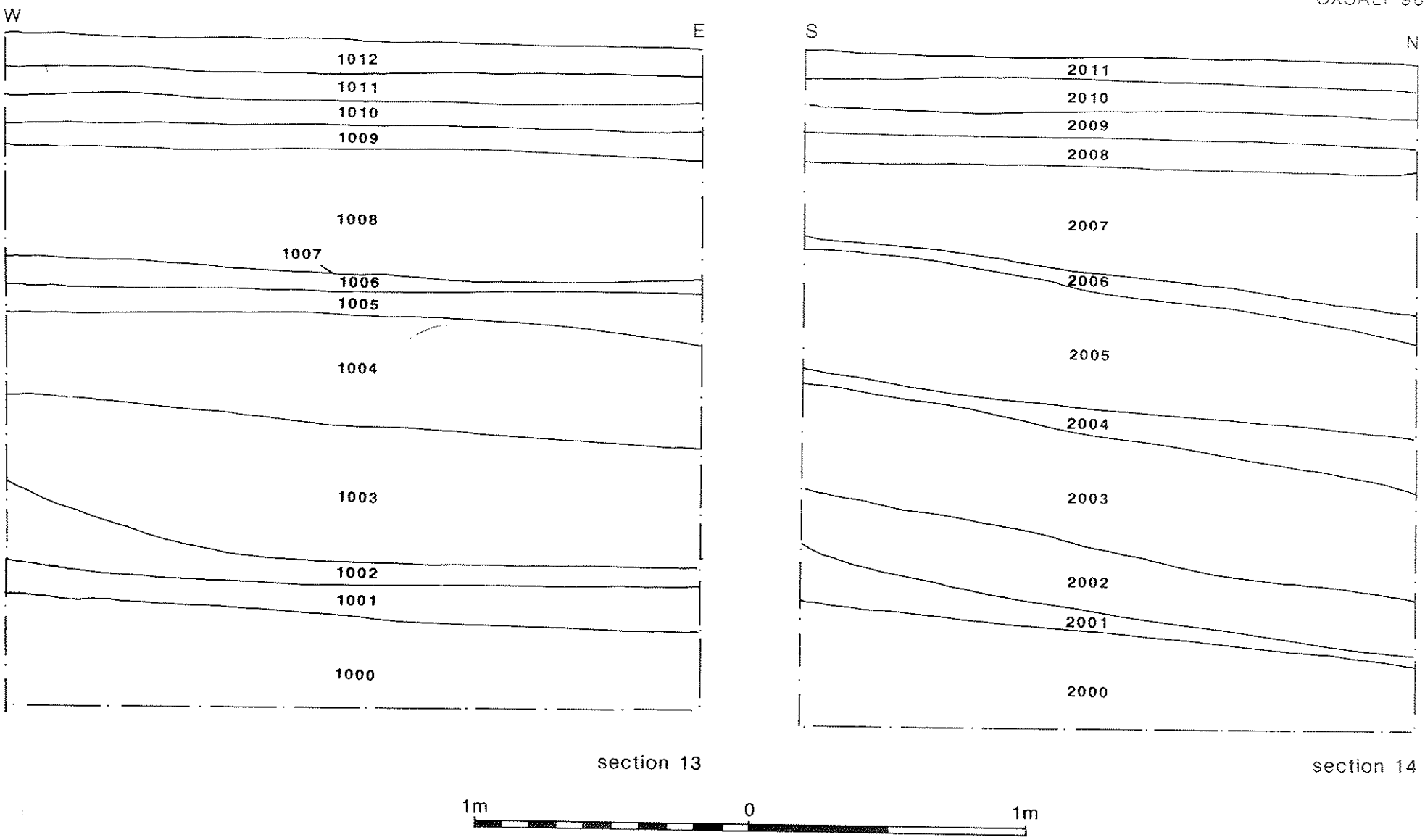

Figure 6: sections 13 and 14

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