

SULHAMSTEAD ABBOTS  
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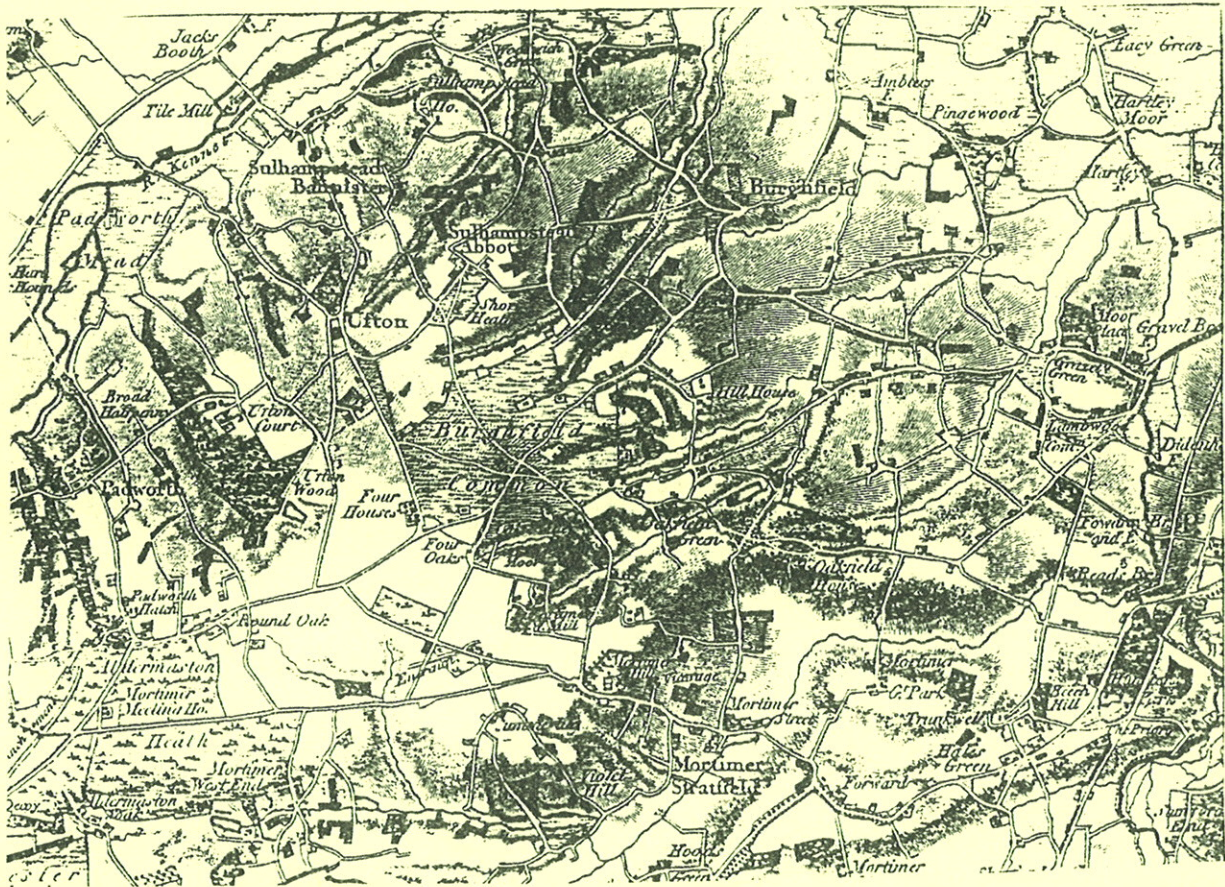
The Whiteley and Beach Partnership

Parish Church of St. Mary, Sulhamstead Abbots, West Berkshire

NGR SU 6450 6792

Archaeological Field Evaluation Report

Planning Application No. 153724



The Whiteley & Beach Partnership

Parish Church of St Mary, Sulhamstead Abbots  
West Berkshire

*ARCHAEOLOGICAL FIELD EVALUATION REPORT*

SU 6450 6792

Planning Application No: 153724

Prepared by: J.R. HILLER
Date: 7/4/99
Checked by: J.P. Scott
Date: 7th May 99
Approved by: R. Williams
HEAD OF FIELDWORK
Date: 12/5/1999

OXFORD ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT

May 1999

**Parish Church of St. Mary, Sulhamstead Abbots, West Berkshire**  
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**1**      *Summary*

The Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) undertook an archaeological field evaluation at the Parish Church of St. Mary, Sulhamstead Abbots, West Berkshire in May 1999, on behalf of The Whiteley & Beach Partnership, Chartered Architects of Theale, Reading. The evaluation was commissioned as part of a conditional planning permission in advance of the construction of a new parish room in the churchyard, to the north-west of the church. Two test pits were excavated within the area of the footprint of the proposed building: four graves were revealed in Test Pit 1 and a single grave found in Test Pit 2. Articulated human remains were uncovered c 1 m below the present ground level in two of the graves within Test Pit 1. The graves were undated, but are likely to be of post-medieval date. No other archaeological features or deposits were observed during the excavations.

**2**      **Introduction and Background**

2.1      The Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) undertook an archaeological field evaluation at the Parish Church of St. Mary, Sulhamstead Abbots, West Berkshire (Fig. 1) on the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> of May, 1999. The evaluation was carried out as part of a conditional planning permission for the construction of a new parish room within the churchyard. The Diocesan Advisory Committee's archaeological advisor had recommended that an archaeological evaluation should be carried out before the foundation design for the new building is finalised, owing to the risk of disturbing articulated human remains or other significant archaeological remains during construction. Condition 7 of the conditional planning permission required that adequate opportunity be granted to the West Berkshire Council's Archaeological Advisor to "investigate, record and remove any archaeological remains to the satisfaction of the Local Planning Authority". The OAU was commissioned to undertake the evaluation by The Whiteley & Beach Partnership, Chartered Architects of Theale, Reading. The investigation was carried out in accordance with a Written Scheme of Investigation (WSI) prepared by OAU (OAU, March 1999), and approved by West Berkshire Council's Archaeological Advisor. This report details the methodology used in the evaluation and presents a description and discussion of the results. Illustrations and tables of appendices detailing the information recovered from the fieldwork can be found at the end of the report.

2.2      The Church of St. Mary, Sulhamstead Abbots is situated in the north-west corner of this small village. The church is built predominantly of flint, with a timber bell turret, and is believed to have been built c 1200 AD. The chancel windows, the north arcade and the font are Norman, though the remainder of the church is later in date (*Pevsner, 1966, 232*). The older part of the graveyard lies to the south and west of the church, the northern part possibly being a later extension. The underlying geology of the site is river terrace gravel; the river Kennet (and the Kennet and Avon

Canal) runs from the south-west to the north-east, and lies *c* 2 km to the north-west of the church.

### 3 Investigation Aims

The aims of the investigation were as follows:

3.1 To establish the presence or absence of archaeological remains within the proposed area of the new building: specifically the presence of articulated human remains (other than those known from 19<sup>th</sup>-century gravestones) or other significant archaeological remains that might be encountered during construction work.

3.2 To determine the extent, condition, nature, character, quality and date of any archaeological remains.

3.3 To establish the artefactual potential of any archaeological features and deposits.

3.4 To define any relevant research priorities in advance of any further possible investigation.

3.5 To make available the results of the investigation, in the form of a written report, within three weeks of the end of on-site work.

### 4 Strategy

4.1 Two Test Pits were excavated within the area proposed for the new building (Fig. 2). Test Pit 1 was excavated in the south-west corner of the building footprint. Test Pit 2 was excavated in the north-east corner of the building footprint. Both pits measured 2 m by 1 m. Excavation proceeded to natural gravel, in order to establish the level of load bearing ground. In accordance with the WSI, articulated remains were left *in situ*.

4.2 All recording was carried out in accordance with the OAU Fieldwork Manual (Wilkinson, 1992) using the single context recording system. A fully cross-referenced drawn, written and photographic record was made of the excavations, details of which can be found with the site archive.

### 5 Results (Appendix 1)

#### 5.1 Test Pit 1

This Test Pit measured 2 m by 1 m and was excavated to a maximum depth of 1.08 m (Fig. 3). Natural gravel (13) was identified at a depth of 8.31 m OD, 0.9 m below the top of the trench. At the south end of the trench the gravel (13) was cut by an east-west aligned feature (5), interpreted as a grave. The grave contained the poorly preserved remains of an adult human skeleton (4), of which the left femur and part of the pelvis were exposed. The bones were not removed from the grave. The femur lay at 8.24 m OD, 1 m below the top of the trench. The skeleton was overlain by the grave fill (3), comprising a loose mix of reddish-brown loam and gravel. A second

grave (12) cut into the gravel was observed in the west facing section of the trench. The west end of the grave was seen in section to contain a poorly preserved human skull (11), which lay at 8.31 m OD, 0.93 m below the top of the trench. The fill (10) of the grave was a loose mix of grey-brown loam and gravel.

A deposit of brown loam and gravel (14) seen in the east facing section of the trench may represent grave fill or a general layer of graveyard soil build-up. Deposit 14 was cut to the south by an east-west aligned grave (7), which also cut the fill (3) of the earlier grave (5) to the south. The grave (7) was 0.64 m wide and at least 0.8 m deep, and was filled with an equal mix of loose light grey loam and gravel (6). The skeleton was not revealed, and it must be presumed to have been buried deeper than the adjacent skeletons (4 and 10). At the north end of the trench was a further cut feature aligned east-west, also interpreted as a grave (9). The grave cut deposit (14) on its south side, and was filled with loose grey-brown loam and gravel (8). The skeleton was not exposed within the grave.

The fills of all the graves and deposit 14 were sealed by a layer of loose grey sandy loam (2) mixed with gravel, which varied in depth between 0.2 m and 0.4 m. Human skull fragments were found within this layer; all the bones were re-interred within the trench. Topsoil (1) covered layer 2, and was 0.08 m thick.

## 5.2 *Test Pit 2*

Test Pit 2 measured 2 m by 1 m and was excavated to a maximum depth of 1.18 m (Fig. 4). Natural gravel (27) was revealed at 8.5 m OD, 0.88 m below the top of the trench. The gravel was overlain by a loose mix of grey loam and gravel (26), which was 0.5 m deep. This layer was cut by an east-west aligned feature (22), interpreted as a grave. The grave was at least 0.8 m deep, though no skeleton was revealed. The lowest exposed fill of the grave was a mixture of gravel and grey-brown sandy silt (23), in turn sealed by a fill predominantly of gravel (24). The upper fill of the grave was a mix of gravel and brown loam (25). Fill (25) and layer 26 were overlain by a mixed layer of sandy loam and gravel (21) which contained fragments of human bone; the bones were re-interred within the trench. Layer 21 lay beneath the present topsoil (20).

## 5.3 *The Finds (Appendix 2)*

A single re-deposited prehistoric flint flake was recovered from graveyard soil, context 2, though precise date of the flake is unclear. A single brick tile of probable Roman date was recovered from the same context, and two further tiles, possibly of Roman date, were recovered from context 21.

A single sherd of glazed post-medieval pottery was found in context 2. Post-medieval roof tiles were present in contexts 2, 21, 23 and 25, and a single iron nail, possibly from a wooden coffin, was recovered from context 2. None of the other finds require further comment.

## 6 Discussion and Conclusions

The presence here of the single flint tool, though re-deposited, indicates that there has been prehistoric activity on this part of the River Kennet Floodplain. A prehistoric flint hand axe has previously been recovered from soil excavated from a grave within the churchyard (Revd Jonathan Sibley, *pers comm*).

The extant church walls incorporate brick tiles - possibly Roman - in their fabric and this may account for the presence of Roman brick tile in the graveyard. It is possible that building materials for the church were brought here from the ruined Roman town of Silchester, which is situated to the south-west of the village.

Graves were identified in both test pits; the presence of four graves within the limit of Test Pit 1 may be taken as a general indication of the density of graves likely to be present within the proposed area of the new building. The two skeletons were exposed *c* 1 m below the present ground level of the churchyard, while the remaining burials in their respective graves were interred at a greater depth. These depths may indicate a general level for the interring of burials in this churchyard, though it is possible that others may not be buried as deep. In general, though, the evaluation indicates that human remains may be expected from a depth of *c* 1 m below present ground level.

Precise dating of the burials was not possible within the limited scope of the investigation. No dateable artefacts were recovered from either of the graves containing visible remains; the skeletons appear to have been interred without any grave goods or elaborate coffin fittings. Indeed the recovery of just one coffin nail from both test pits suggests that these were simple burials, perhaps pauper burials, which are usually interred wrapped only in a shroud. Grave 5 in test pit 1 was cut by a later grave (7), indicating that graves have been dug over a length of time. Deposit 14 may be the remnants of another grave, cut on both sides by graves 7 and 9. There is potential therefore for further earlier graves elsewhere in the graveyard. Fragments of human bone found within the general graveyard soils (layers 2 and 26) are indicative of earlier burials being cut by later burials, which leads to the redistribution of the bones around the graveyard, and therefore confirms that the churchyard has been in use for some time.

Post-medieval roof-tile fragments recovered from fill 23 in grave 22 give a broad date for this burial. A single sherd of glazed post-medieval pottery and the small quantity of post-medieval roof tile found within both test pits suggests that activity here has been of comparatively recent date. It seems likely on balance that the burials are of post-medieval date, though given the date of the construction of the church, an earlier medieval date cannot be entirely ruled out. Other than the burials, no other archaeological features or deposits were identified in either of the trenches.

The presence of roof tile within the soil around the graveyard suggests that the roof of the church was repaired or re-tiled; the material suggests that this was carried out in the post-medieval period, perhaps in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

## 7 Site Archive

The site archive including the finds will be deposited with the West Berkshire Museum.

Jonathan Hiller  
Oxford Archaeological Unit  
May 1999

### References

- |                   |  |
|-------------------|--|
| OAU 1999          | <i>Written Scheme of Investigation</i>     |
| Pevsner, N 1966   | <i>The Buildings of England: Berkshire</i> |
| Wilkinson, D 1992 | <i>OAU Fieldwork Manual</i>                |

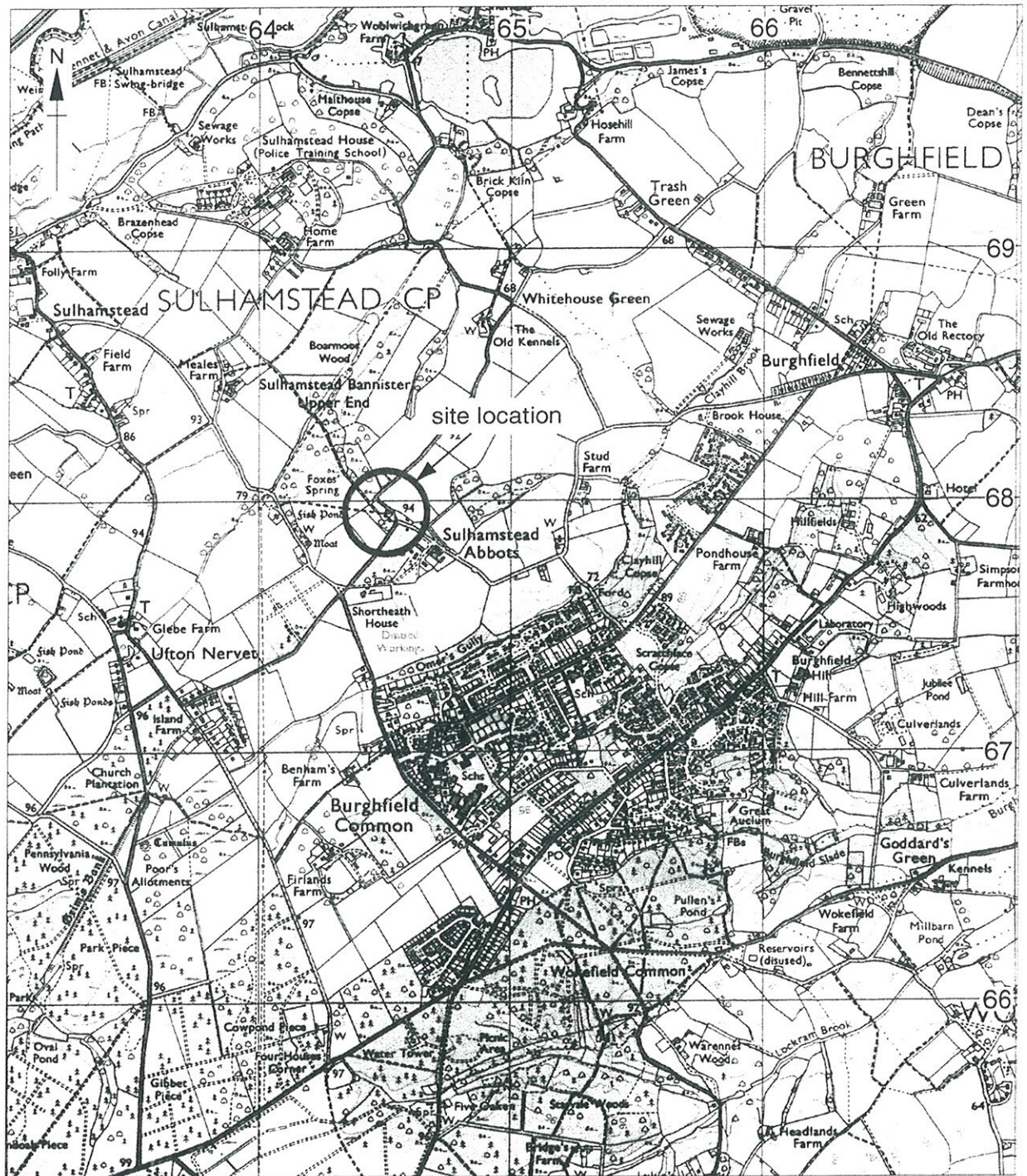
**Appendix 1: Table 1 - Context Information**

Context	Type	Depth	Width	Comments
1	Layer	0.08 m	-	Topsoil
2	Layer	0.2-0.4 m	-	Graveyard soil
3	Fill	0.8 m+	-	Fill of grave 5
4	Fill	-	-	Human skeleton in grave 4
5	Cut	0.8 m+	0.47 m+	Grave cut containing 3, 4
6	Fill	0.8 m+	-	Fill of grave 7
7	Cut	0.8 m+	0.64 m	Grave cut filled by 6
8	Fill	0.7 m+	-	Grave fill in 9
9	Cut	0.75 m+	0.5 m+	Grave cut filled by 8
10	Fill	0.6 m+	-	Grave fill in 12
11	Fill	-	-	Skeleton in grave 12
12	Cut	0.6 m+	0.4 m	Grave filled by 10, 11
13	Layer	0.19 m+	-	Natural gravel with flints
14	Deposit	0.65 m	-	Layer/ grave fill
20	Layer	0.16 m	-	Topsoil
21	Layer	0.2 m	-	Graveyard soil
22	Cut	0.85 m	0.4 m+	Grave cut filled by 23, 24, 25
23	Fill	0.45 m	-	Lower fill of grave 22
24	Fill	0.18 m	-	Middle fill of grave 22
25	Fill	0.3 m	-	Upper fill of grave 22
26	Layer	0.5 m	-	Graveyard soil
27	Layer	-	-	Natural gravel

**Appendix 2: Table 2 - Finds Information**

Type	Context	No. pieces/ Sherds	Comments/dating
Flint flake	2	1	Flint flake
Brick Tile	2, 21	3	1 x probably Roman, 2 x possibly Roman
Roof Tile	2, 21, 23, 25	22	Post-medieval roof tile
Metal object	2	1	Possible coffin nail, ?post-medieval
Pottery	2	1	Post-medieval glazed earthenware vessel sherd
Other	2	1	Slate. ?roofing material. undated





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Figure 1 : site location

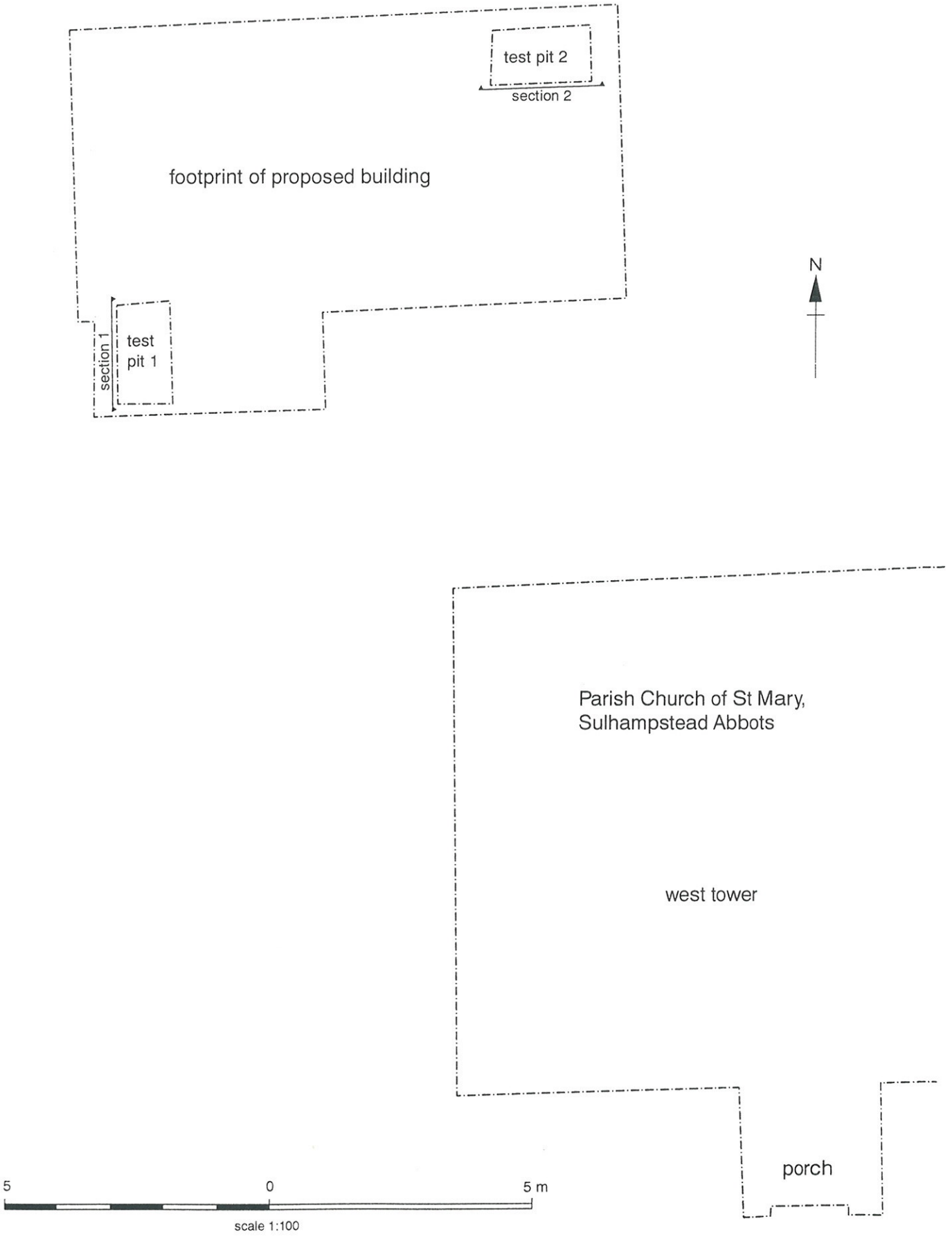


Figure 2 : location of test pits within proposed building footprint

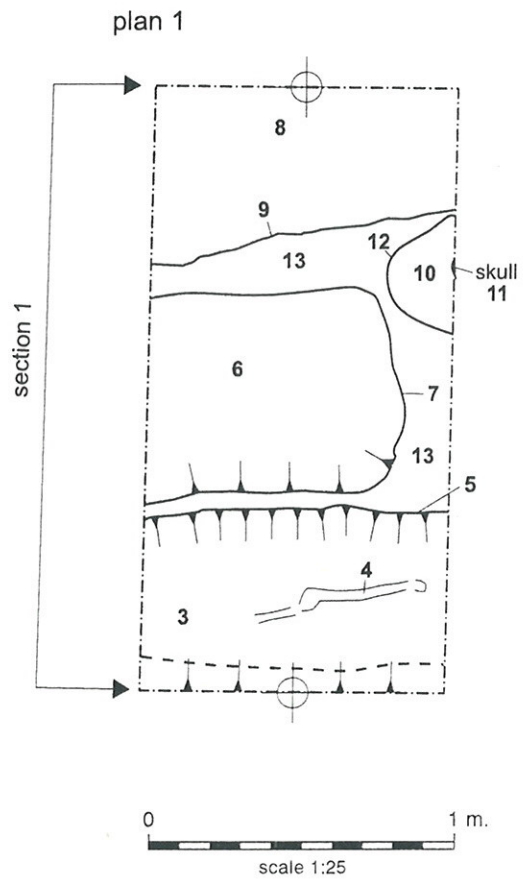
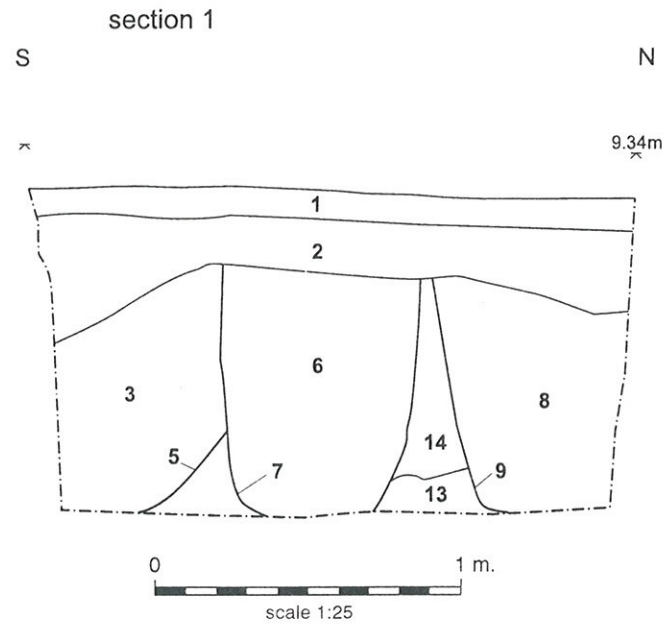
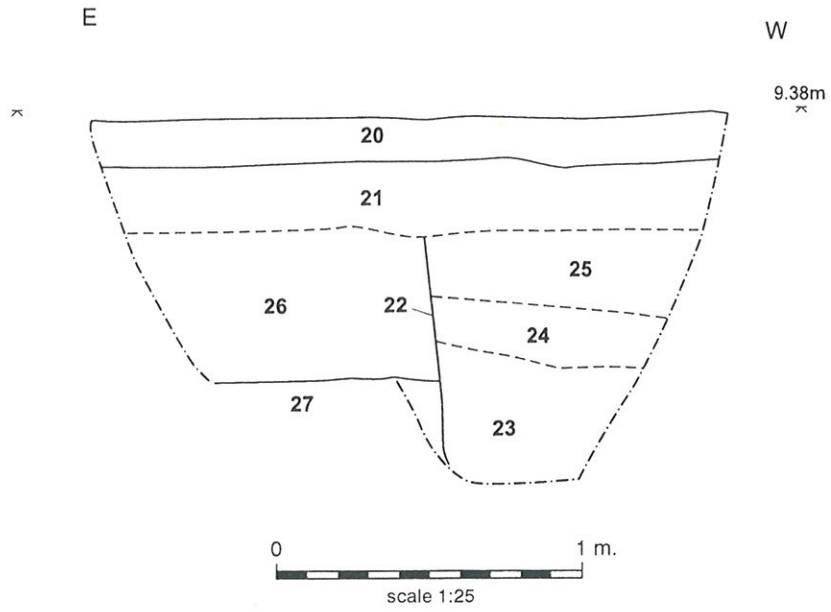


Figure 3 : trench 1, plan and section

section 2



plan 2

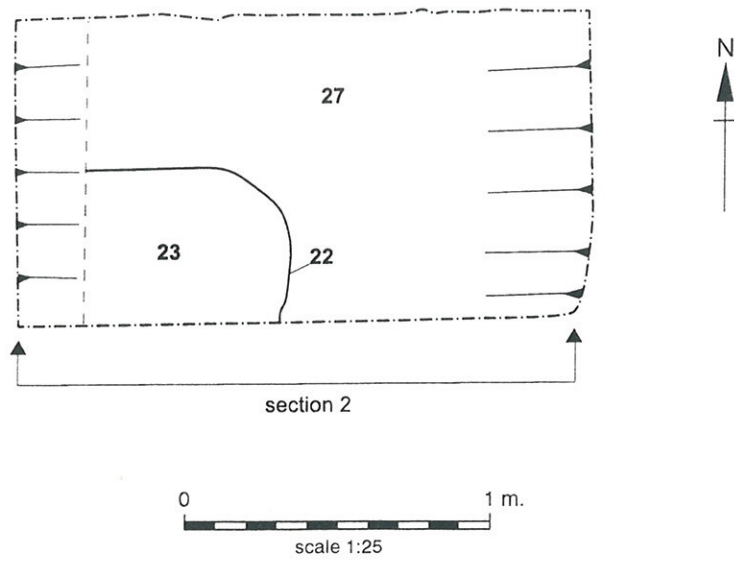


Figure 4 : trench 2, plan and section



## OXFORD ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT

Janus House, Osney Mead, Oxford, OX2 0ES

Tel: 01865 263800 Fax: 01865 793496

email: [oau-oxford.demon.co.uk](mailto:oau-oxford.demon.co.uk)



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Director: David Miles B.A., F.S.A., M.I.F.A. Oxford Archaeological Unit Limited.  
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Registered Office: Janus House, Osney Mead, Oxford OX2 0ES