BIDDLESDEN, ABBEY HOUSE
BUCKINGHAMSHIRE

WATCHING BRIEF

OXFORD ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT

MAY 1994

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SUMMARY

In 1978, during grading operations and the cutting of stanchion pits for a milking complex, at least four Roman pottery kilns and associated kiln debris were located to the north of the farmyard. Several ditches, one of which contained a human burial and another which produced an important fitment of a late Iron Age tankard, were also recorded. Under a condition attached to the planning consent for the construction of another agricultural building to the north of the earlier discoveries, a two day watching was carried out by Oxford Archaeological Unit. No more kilns were located, although much residual topsoil remained over much of the site and the existence of more kilns in the area cannot be entirely discounted. The only significant discovery was a single ditch, containing pottery probably produced in the nearby kilns, and a deeper deposit of possible Roman date whose exact nature and extent could not be determined.

INTRODUCTION

Under a condition attached to the planning consent for the construction of a large agricultural barn at Abbey House Farm, Biddlesden, Oxford Archaeological Unit was commissioned to undertake a watching brief during the topsoil stripping operation and the excavation of twenty-two stanchion pits. The new barn was sited *c.* 6 m to the north of the building and yards, constructed in 1978, which exposed at least four Roman pottery kilns and associated features (Wood *et al.* 1981).

The aims of the watching brief were:

i. To establish the presence/absence of archaeological remains in the development area.

ii. To investigate and record any remains present.

iii. To identify features and structures related to the pottery kilns previously recorded (*ibid.*).

iv. To establish the date of any remains and to determine if the pottery was in existence during other periods than those already confirmed.

v. To identify other Iron Age features in order to characterise the activity on the site.

vi. To publish the results.

It had also been pre-arranged that (and a contingency action plan agreed) if significant discoveries were made during the initial watching brief a programme of further works, agreed with the County Archaeologist following a site visit, would be undertaken. In the event, only very limited additional work was required to investigate a localized area of burning, and this was undertaken as part of the preliminary watching brief.

The following is a brief summary of the results of the watching brief to which is attached a short conclusion. A full and illustrated description is contained in the archive.

RESULTS

An area *c.* 42 x 24 m across was partially stripped of topsoil by the ground contractors using a JCB 3cx excavator fitted with a 1.60 m wide toothless ditching bucket. The spoil was removed using a 3 tonne wheeled dumper and deposited in a narrow bank, aligned east to west, to the immediate north of the site of the new building.

The ground surface sloped slightly from north to south across the width of the building, and it was found that much of the topsoil from the construction of the earlier barn had been spread across the area of the new building. Consequently it was unnecessary to remove the entire thickness of the topsoil, particularly across the southern half of the building, to produce a level surface for the laying of the concrete floor. Only on the very northern side of the stripped area was the subsoil exposed over no more than *c.* 15% of the total stripped area.

The only visible feature was a small area of fire-reddened clay. At the request of the Assistant County Archaeologist this was investigated further, but was found to have been a localised amorphous area of fire reddening, *c.* 6 m long and no more than 1 m wide, which had not penetrated any deeper than 1 cm into the sandy clay subsoil. The only associated finds were one Roman greyware pottery sherd and a post-medieval iron-glazed sherd.

Following the topsoil strip, twenty-two stanchion pits were excavated by the JCB 3cx using a 0.75 m wide toothless bucket. These were dug to between 0.8 and 1.0 m deep and ranged from 1.2 x 1.8 m across to 0.75 m square depending on their position and the load carrying capacity of the steel stanchions they were to support. The underlying geology consisted of a frost-shattered Blisworth limestone, the upper surface of which undulated and contained pockets of orange sandy clay head deposit.

One pit (for stanchion 12) in the south side of the building, sited 12 m to the east of the south-west corner, revealed the side of a Roman ditch. Although only partially exposed in the south and west facing sides of the pit, the ditch appeared to be aligned approximately NNW to SSE with a V-shaped cross section 0.56 m deep and up to 1.50 m wide. Apart from several fragments of animal bone it contained the broken lower body of a jar in a buff-coloured sandy oxidized fabric, almost certainly a product of the adjacent pottery. Although the ditch was not exposed in any of the other stanchion pits, a small hand-dug 'sondage' (Pit23) in the north-west corner of the building may have been dug into the fill of the ditch. This produced a base sherd in an identical fabric to that found in the ditch although it had been reduced during firing.

During the topsoil stripping operation a machine-dug 'sondage' (Pit 24) in the south-west corner exposed a 0.30 m thick deposit of brown silty clay. At the time of excavation this was interpreted as a possible late Roman or medieval buried soil, which it was thought extended across the entire site. However, with the subsequent excavation of the stanchion pits several days later this interpretation was found to have been partially incorrect. It was discovered that the deposit, which was clearly visible in most of the stanchion pits along the west end and south side of the building, became shallower towards the north and east directions. The layer was at its deepest, up to 0.40 m thick, in the south-west corner stanchion. Where visible in the other pits the interface between the bedrock and the deposit was even with only a very shallow gradient. Consequently it is unlikely, given its considerable extent and uniformity of slope, that the deposit was a large ditch or pit. It is more likely to have been a build up of soil of Roman or even medieval date. However, since the deposit was not exposed within the interior or exterior of the building interpretation must remain inconclusive.

CONCLUSIONS

Since the subsoil was only exposed over a comparatively small proportion of the total stripped area, it was impossible to establish the likely presence or absence of archaeological features over most of the development area. The corollary must be that, since residual topsoil obscured much of the area, the presence of further kilns or associated features cannot be discounted. However, the discovery of only one Roman ditch and one small area of burning, with most of the stanchion pits containing no visible archaeological levels or artefacts, may indicate that this building lies beyond the main occupation/activity area located in 1978. Furthermore, this view is supported by the small amount of pottery found in the topsoil, most of which was of later Roman date.

Unlike the building operations in 1978, which consisted of considerable grading of the subsoil to produce a level surface, the present work has caused very little disturbance of the subsoil, with the exception of the stanchion pits. Consequently any archaeological features within the interior of the building should remain undamaged beneath the concrete floor of the new building.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Woods, P., Turland R. and Hastings, R. 1981
'A Romano-British Pottery at Biddlesden, Buckinghamshire' *in* Anderson, A.S and Anderson, A.C. (eds) 'Roman Pottery Research in Britain and North-West Europe, *Brit. Archaeol. Rep.* **123**, 369-395.

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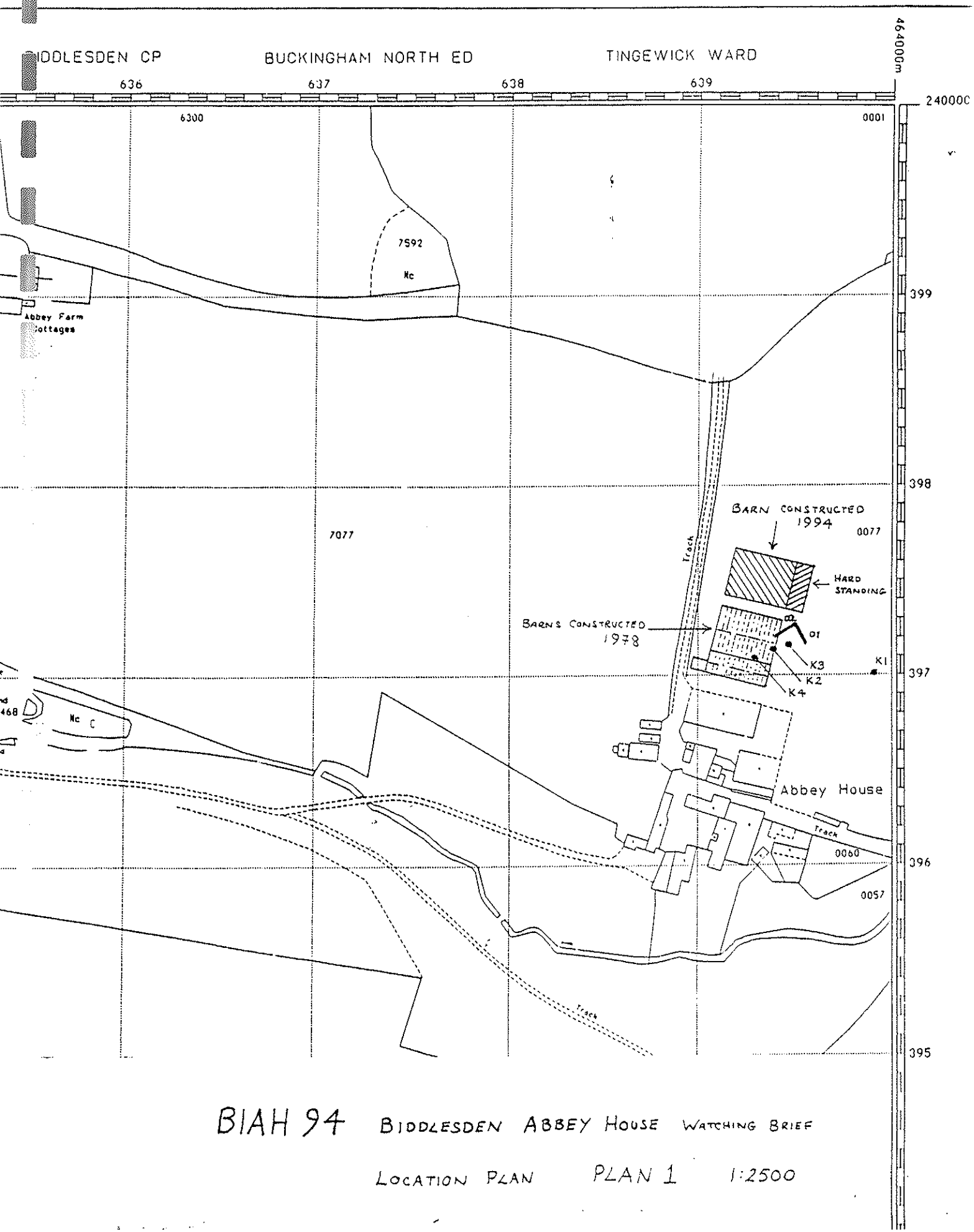

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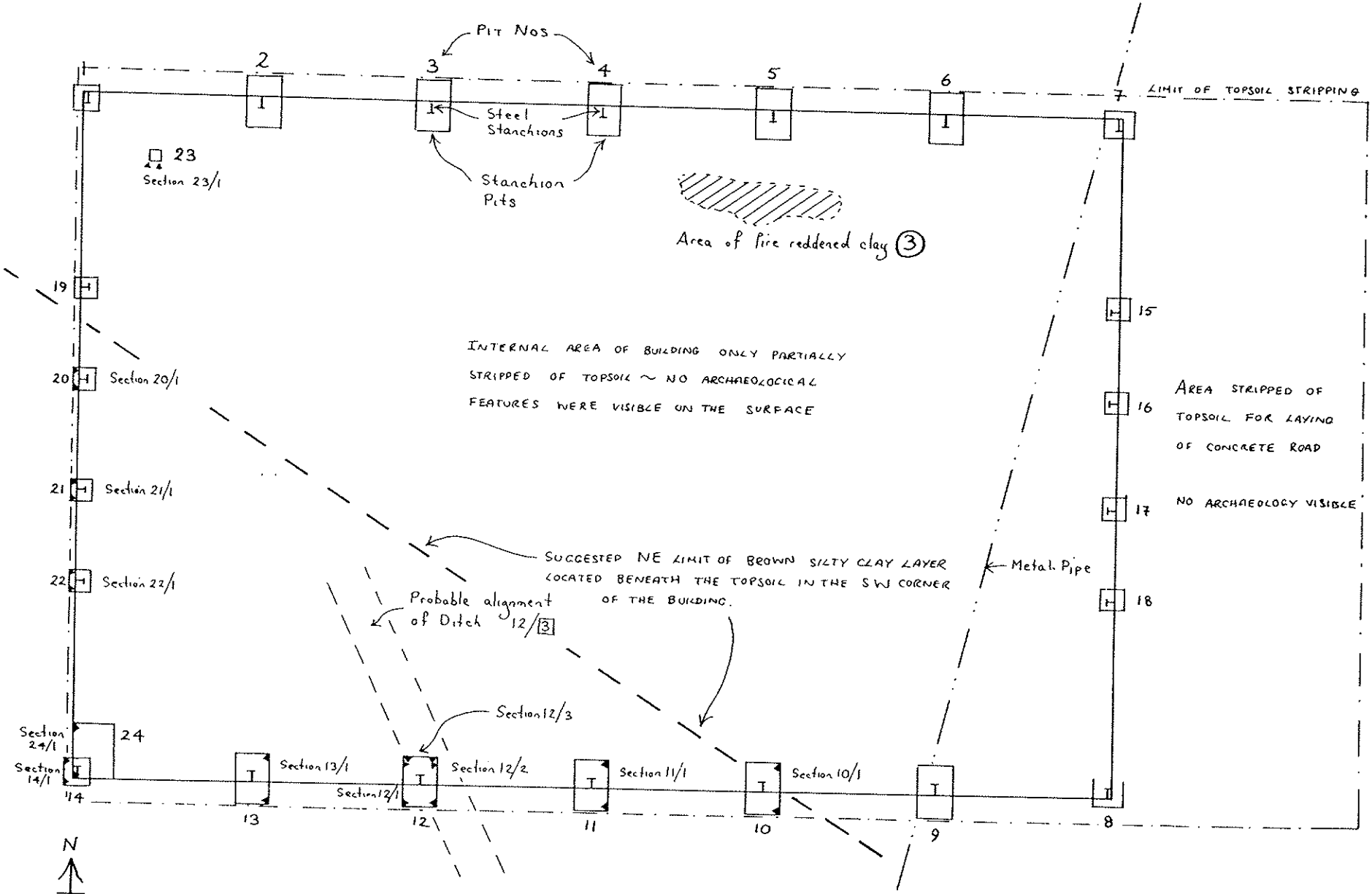
LOCATION PLAN PLAN 1 1:2500



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R.J.W 20/5/94