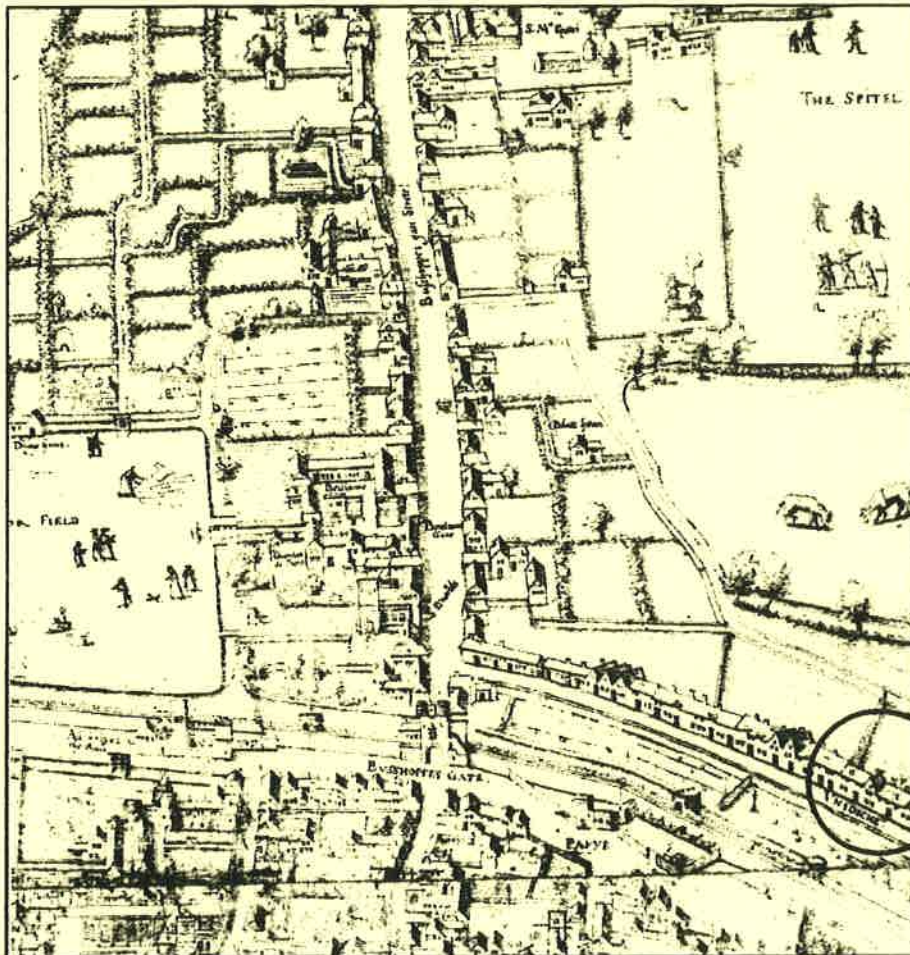


Northhill Properties Ltd

117 Houndsditch, EC3
Archaeological Watching Brief
Client Report

NGR TQ 3341 8137

Registered Plan 98/4022BR (1 December 1998)
Archaeological Condition 4



OXFORD ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT
1999

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Archaeological Condition 4**

Prepared by:	<i>Ben Deak</i>
Date:	<i>18/10/1999</i>
Checked by:	<i>R. Wellman</i>
Date:	<i>15/10/1999</i>
Approved by:	<i>R. Wellman</i>
Date:	<i>HEAD OF FIELDWORK 15/10/1999</i>

Cover Illustration:
Bishopsgate in 1560s, detail from Ralph Agas map,
approximate position of 117-119 Houndsditch circled

**OXFORD ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT
October 1999**

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Summary: an archaeological investigation of 117 Houndsditch confirmed that well preserved Roman burials can survive beneath basement floors in this area, also other archaeological features. The sequence and distribution of Roman burials in this area has been used as evidence in dating of the Roman town wall to around AD 200. On the present site burials were sparse, and because all the associated datable pottery is earlier than the argued date of the Roman wall, it is possible they represent localised burying at a time when this area was relatively accessible from the Roman city. One feature seemed to confirm late medieval development of the Houndsditch frontage, before a dramatic rise in modern ground level whose date was not defined archaeologically.

1 Introduction

1.1 Northhill Properties Limited are rebuilding the derelict property of 117 Houndsditch, involving demolition and extension to the basement. The work began in May 1999. Because of potential archaeological impacts projected from adjoining sites, the Corporation of London had required an archaeological impact assessment, which was carried out by OAU in 1998. A report including fieldwork results from seven test pits was submitted to the Corporation (OAU, 1998), and the Corporation subsequently attached an archaeological Condition 4 to Registered Plan 98/4022BR (1 December 1998) requiring arrangements for an archaeological 'watching brief' to monitor development groundworks. Following approval of an additional Written Scheme of Investigation for this work, the Corporation monitored the watching brief.

2 Archaeological Background

2.1 Houndsditch is a street which runs outside and parallel to the line of the Roman city wall, which continued in use as the wall of medieval London. The street takes its name from the ditch which formed the outer defensive line, along whose outer edge it appears to run (Fig 1 shows the presumed line of the ditch after Lobel 1989, Fig 4). A previous excavation and watching brief at the adjoining 123-125 Houndsditch (site code CCT90) had identified Roman quarry pits, medieval cess pits and post-medieval wells.

2.2 The general area was extensively investigated during the 1970's and 80's, mostly by the Museum of London Department of Urban Archaeology (DUA). The Greater London Sites and Monuments Record (GLSMR) indicates that in excess of 200 archaeological sites (from Prehistoric to Post-medieval) lie within a 200 m radius of the present site. These were assessed against the results of seven test pits excavated by OAU, reported in the *Archaeological Impact Assessment* (OAU, 1998).

2.3 The *Archaeological Impact Assessment* concluded that underneath the basement floors the natural geology was relatively intact. It showed in one location a deposits of human remains which were at a level higher than those found at the site at the adjoining CCT90 site (Cutlers Court) on the south east.

2.4 The presence of human remains is part of a pattern in this area, which was described in the desk-based report. It is repeated here for its relevance to the new finds as follows:

It was the Roman custom, enforced by law, to dispose of their dead outside the inhabited area, often near the roads. Two of the main cemeteries were located to the north of Bishopsgate and to the east of Aldgate. Excavations within 350 m of the development site at the corner of Mansell Street and Alie Street identified in excess of 100 inhumations and cremations.

The 16th century Agas map of London (Fig. 2) shows that the Houndsditch street frontage was occupied but the area to the north was still open fields.

The area around Houndsditch itself has produced significant archaeological evidence. A study of the Greater London Sites and Monuments Record (GLSMR) produced 268 sites within a 300 m radius of the site. There are several known sites with archaeological finds in the immediate vicinity of the development site (see Fig 1):

(i) SMR reference: 042507, Site code: CCT90. Excavations and watching briefs at 20-26 Cutler Street and 123-125 Houndsditch (NGR TQ 3344 8138) were undertaken by the Department of Urban Archaeology. The work identified three phases of occupation:

The earliest deposits were Roman quarry pits, probably for gravel extraction. A 'mortar' burial was identified within one of the pits. The preservation of the bones was poor; only the thorax (ribs and spine) survived. Medieval cess and quarry pits often truncated the Roman deposits. Many of these contained human bone. These were mostly re-deposited Roman remains disturbed by the later pitting but some of the remains appeared to have been deliberately re-interred. Christian reburial was not uncommon in the medieval period. Post-medieval activity was evidenced by industrial waste i.e. slag, brick, crucibles and several moulds. Natural geology was identified at 10.1 m OD (SD 45.42).

(ii) SMR reference: 041936, Site code: HSD89. Excavations at 58-60 Houndsditch (NGR TQ 3332 8140) revealed eight burials of late Roman date. These comprised seven adults and one child. The bodies were extended and orientated in different directions. These lay directly in front of the Roman city wall and partly in the backfilled ditch.

(iii) SMR reference: 041594, Site code: OPS88. Excavations at 158-164 Bishopsgate (NGR TQ 3330 8154) revealed a sequence of Roman quarry pits and gravel surfaces. These were possible tracks connecting with the line of the Ermine Street Roman road. Medieval remains were typically domestic rubbish pits truncating a dark soil, suggesting nearby occupation.

2.5 The evaluation and impact assessment identified human remains in Test Pit 1 (see Fig. 3), and reported as follows:

The area to the north of 117-119 Houndsditch appears to have been disturbed by the construction of the existing property and the surrounding buildings. Although medieval and post-medieval material can be identified in the backfill it is no longer in its original context, and therefore of little archaeological significance.

2.6 The impact assessment concluded that:

Monitoring of the groundworks would..... be an appropriate level of mitigation. The presence of limited surviving archaeological material cannot be precluded.....

2.7 Following approval of the AIA, there was some refinement to the engineering, so that the new slab formation level would be identical to the top of the preserved deposits, which tended to protect surviving archaeology. Surviving deposits would however be impacted by thickenings of the new slab and other proposed substructures, some of which were in areas unaffected by the existing substructure, over about 20% of the area of the existing basement footprint.

3 Aims of the fieldwork

3.1 To preserve by record the presence, extent, condition, character and date of any archaeological remains (if present) which will be removed by excavation for foundations and for a basement extension. Specific aims as per 2.4 above.

4 Results (Figs 3-4)

4.1 In the area of the existing basement, following removal of the slab and hardcore, the exposed deposits were cleaned archaeologically. As predicted, the least disturbed area was on the eastern side (areas previously damaged to below archaeological levels are shown stippled on Fig 3). The undamaged areas happened to coincide with those threatened by slab thickenings for the new building, and it was apparent that inhumations and other features were present here.

4.2 The earlier of the two burials was the more complete. Its grave cut (1009) was roughly E-W, 0.65 m wide, and the coffin (1010) lay off-centre on the south side. Most of the lower coffin nails were *in situ*, and showed an asymmetrical construction, those of the N edge having been inserted from the base, those of the S edge having been inserted from the side, and in greater numbers; asymmetrical construction is not uncommon at this period (pers comm A Boyle). The coffin contained the skeleton 1002 of an ageing male (see report below) showing slight curvature of the spine (Fig. 4), which could result from post-mortem effects.

4.3 The later grave (1003) had disturbed the cut of the earlier grave, but without disturbing the earlier coffin. The coffin contained the head and upper thorax of an adult male (1001). Vertebral degenerative effects were noted (see report below).

4.4 *Other features:* To the north of the two burials was an irregular pit (1015) cut into the loam which caps the gravel ('brickearth'). Pits on the adjoining Cutlers Court site are dated to the Roman period and later (see above). In the present case two substantial sherds of medieval pottery suggest that this was quarrying activity relatively late in the development of the site, perhaps gravel digging in connection with the establishment of suburban development along Houndsditch depicted on Agas' map (cover). The only other feature was a pit (1016) containing finds of Victorian date.

4.5 The required extension of the basement to create the enlarged footprint of the building was achieved within a retaining wall formed of a king-posts (instead of driven sheet-piles as projected). Archaeological investigation therefore progressed along the N side in sequence. The first bay (NW corner) represented 55% of new archaeological impact, an area 4m square. It was excavated in shallow spits from the weathered surface of the brickearth down to the gravel, with no human remains identified. A similar picture was gained when this process was repeated in the narrow extension to the remainder of the N side of the basement. This seemed to confirm the results from the basement floor that the cemetery was thinly spread, and that graves 1003 and 1009 were not simply the deepest tier of a densely used cemetery.

4.6 These observations in the N extension therefore confirmed the results of Test Pit 7, ie weathered natural brick-earth deposits are immediately overlaid by modern fill (at OD 11.95; SD 47.27), surviving to a level 1.8 m higher than that on the adjacent Cutler St/Houndsditch site. This higher survival level may be an effect of the natural topography sloping to the east. However it is also possible that the present site is generally less disturbed than Cutler St/Houndsditch site. The date at which the ground level was raised was not defined, although the consistency of the fill could suggest it was a single event, perhaps a period of abandonment for disposal of domestic or demolition refuse.

5 The Pottery by Kayt Brown

5.1 A total of 18 sherds of pottery (c. 430 g) were recovered representing material from the late Iron Age/early Roman, Roman, Medieval and Post-medieval periods. A single bead-rim jar sherd in a sandy fabric from grave fill (1011) appears to be late Iron Age/early Roman in date. Characteristic Roman reduced sandy coarse wares, and a single shell-tempered sherd were recovered from 1004 and 1015 alongside south and central Gaulish Samian. A single sherd of central Gaulish samian was recovered from context 1004. The Samian from 1015 comprises a sherd of a south Gaulish cup (Dragendorff 33) dated to the late 1st -2nd century AD and a sherd from a central Gaulish dish (Dragendorff 18/31R) of early to mid 2nd century AD date. Both these contexts also contained medieval and post-medieval material. In the case of 1004, these later sherds are very small and could easily represent contamination. In the case of 1015 these were a sherd of Surrey whiteware and a redware handle, consistent with a late medieval or early Post-medieval date (pers comm M Mellor). Single sherds of Medieval/post-medieval date were also recovered from contexts 105 and 204.

6 Human bone by Angela Boyle

6.1 *Summary:* The remains of four individuals were recovered during archaeological evaluation and a watching brief. A single redeposited partial inhumation (105) was located within test pit 1 directly below the basement slab floor during evaluation. A further two individuals (1001 and 1002) were buried in wooden coffins within graves. A fourth individual (1015) was represented by a single bone from a quarry pit.

6.2 *Results:* Skeletons 1001 and 1002 are thought to be Roman. The date of the human bone in pits 105 and 1015 is uncertain, however, they are most likely to be the partial remains of redeposited Roman burials. The results of the skeletal analysis are presented in Tables 1 and 2. Skeleton 1001 exhibited vertebral degeneration which was represented by eburnation of the anterior odontoid surface, Schmorl's nodes and mild lipping of the thoracic vertebral bodies. Only skeleton 1001 had any surviving dentition. Alveolar resorption was advanced and may be suggestive of periodontal disease. Calculus was severe: the occlusal surface of the third left mandibular molar was completely obscured while that of the second left mandibular molar was partially so. This suggests that either the corresponding maxillary dentition had been lost antemortem or was affected by dental disease which made occlusion painful.

Table 1: Summary of skeletal analysis

Context	Preservation and completeness	Age	Sex	Stature	Comments
105	Skull and long bones	Ageing adult	Female		Redeposited
1001	Skull and torso only, preservation fair	Adult (26-35 y)	Male		Vertebral osteoarthritis

1002	Preservation good, missing skull and mandible	Ageing adult	Male	1.69 m	
1015	Right humerus only	Subadult (4-5 y)	-		

Table 2: Dental data

Context	Antemortem loss	Caries	Abscess
1001	0/16	0/6	0/16

7 Roman building material by Leigh Allen

7.1 A total of 9 fragments of Roman tile, weighing 1807 gms were recovered from three separate contexts. All the fragments from contexts 1004 and 1015 were small abraded fragments without any complete measurable dimensions. The large fragment from context 204 is from a *tegula* (roof tile), it has a thickness of 24mm and a flange height of 50mm. There is a cut-away at the end of the flange where the *tegula* would have overlain the tile below. Although small, the assemblage has represented within it at least 4 distinct fabric types.

8 Discussion of findings from the assessment and watching brief

8.1 Significant results for London from this work are the confirmation that there are burials on this site just outside the landward defences of Roman London, that they seem to be distributed thinly, and therefore that they need not be part of an intensive formal cemetery. The assumption that they are Roman seems reasonable, because the later finds are all small, and could have been introduced when the existing basement slab was constructed immediately above the burials.

8.2 Early burials in this area could have been outliers of a known cemetery, that at Aldgate 200m to SW being the largest to include Flavian burials (See Fig 2, after Maloney 1983, Fig 92). Alternatively dispersed burials at No 117 could belong to a period when it was relatively accessible, ie before the construction of the adjoining defences made it one of the most remote locations for access from the town gates (the landward wall is dated between AD 193-197, Maloney 1983, 104). This possibility is corroborated by the absence of any diagnostic pottery of the 3rd or 4th centuries from either the grave fills or from the medieval pit alongside; but it needs to be confirmed by careful analysis of dating from neighbouring graves in relationship to their accessibility from within the walls.

8.3 The relatively undisturbed nature of the front of the site may arise from its being sealed by medieval and later buildings, and in pit 1015 we may be seeing quarrying for materials to construct later medieval housing as shown by Agas (cover). It should be noted that Lobel (1989) identified a message called *The Scomer* on the Houndsditch frontage in the late 15th century, but its depiction on the 117 Houndsditch site may have no historical significance. Otherwise we are perhaps seeing the effect of backyard activity in the fragment of Victorian pit with brick and ceramic finds 1016, and in the disturbance 105 recorded in the evaluation.

9 Conclusions

9.1 The investigation has recovered evidence of localised burying, consistent with a date before the construction of London's Roman landward defences around the end of the 2nd century AD, and may indicate that the area became less attractive for burying after having thereby become relatively isolated from the city gates. This tentative conclusion needs however to be confirmed by critical analysis of dating from other sites in this area, including any results which may come from current archaeological work on the adjoining telephone exchange site by the Museum of London.

Bibliography

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- Maloney, J., 1983 'Recent work on London's defences' in Maloney, J and Hopley, B., *Roman urban defences in the West*, CBA Research Report No 51
- OAU, 1998 *117 119 Houndsditch, London EC3, Archaeological Impact Assessment*, for Northhill Property Limited

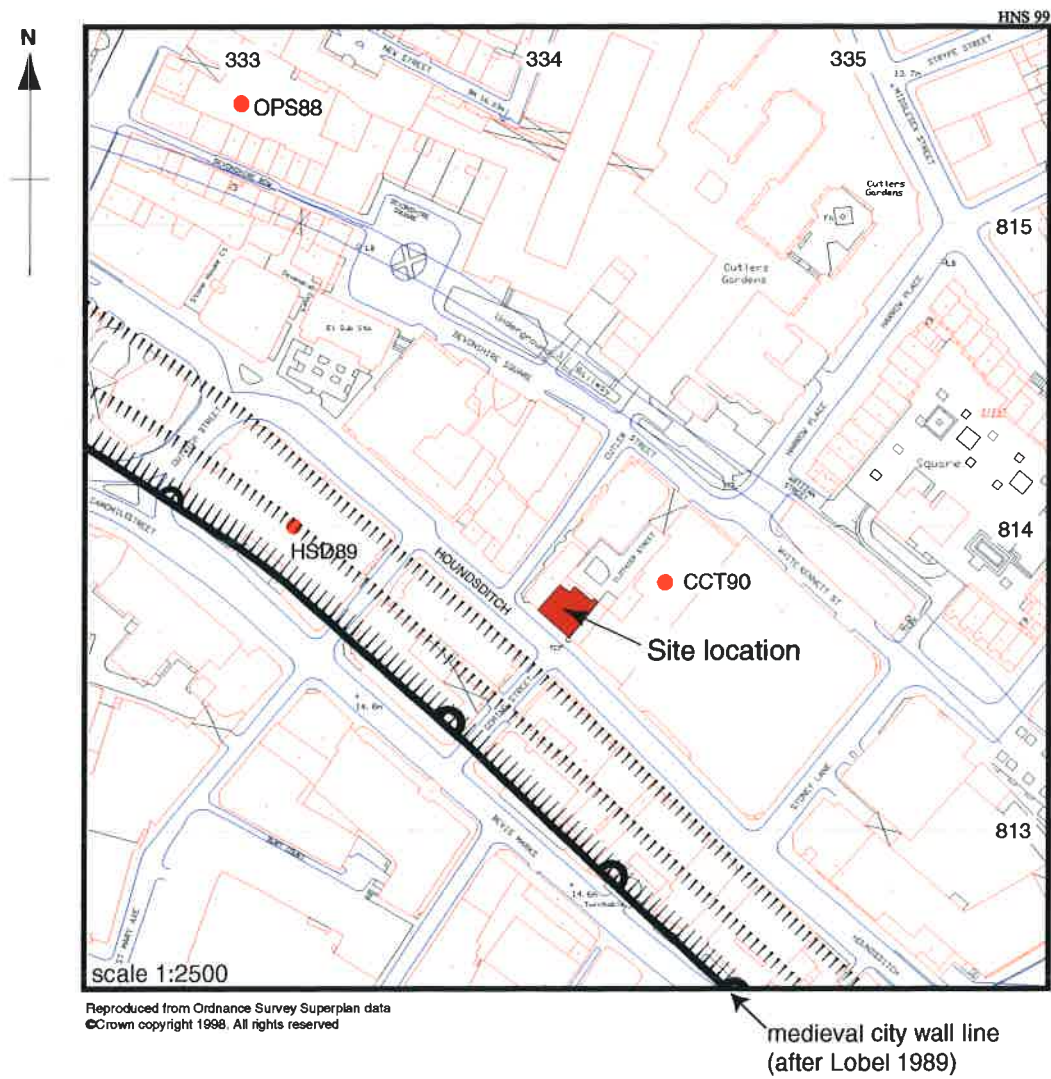


Figure 1: Site location

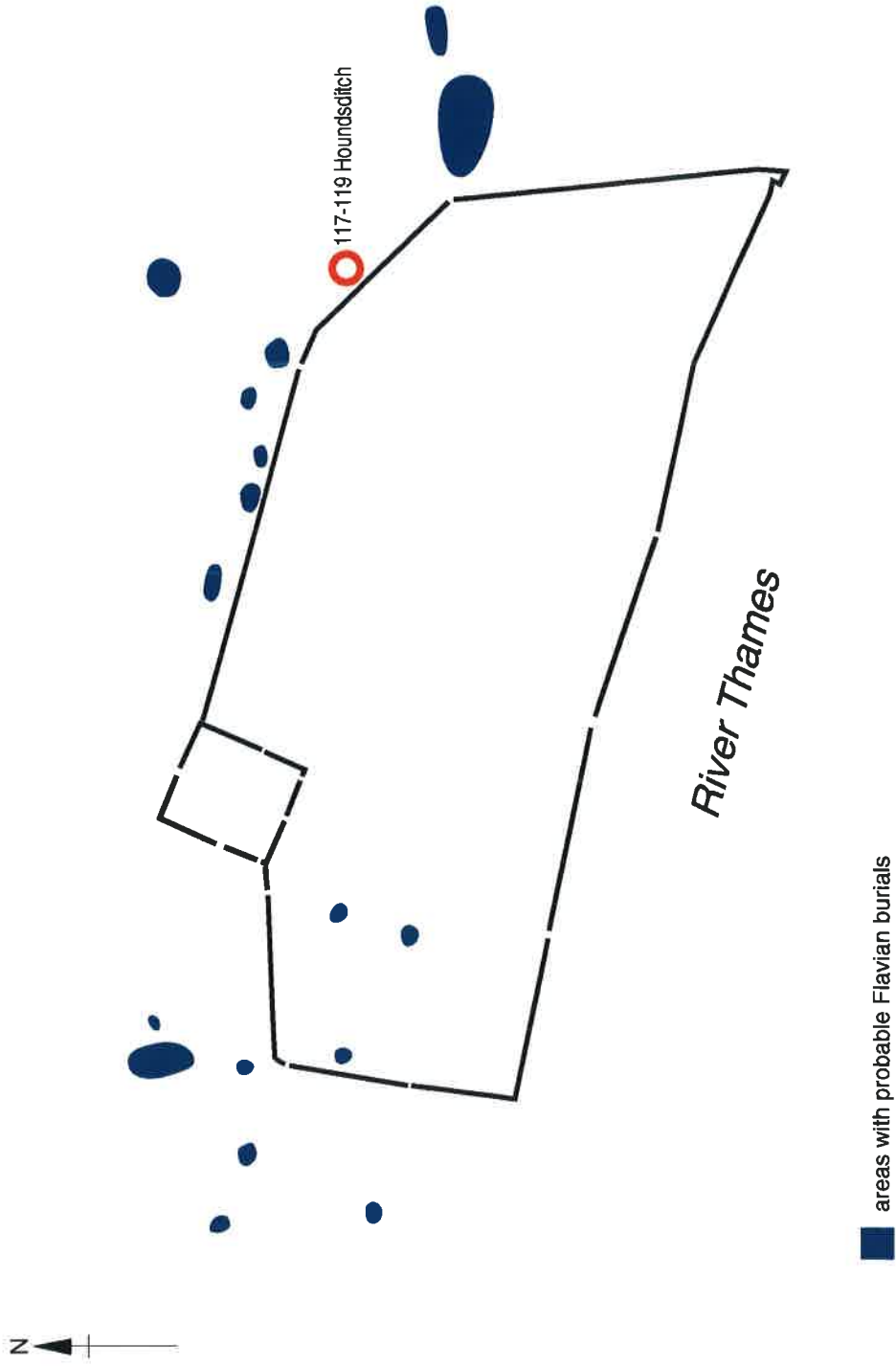


Figure 2 :extent of Roman London after AD 200 (after Maloney 1983)

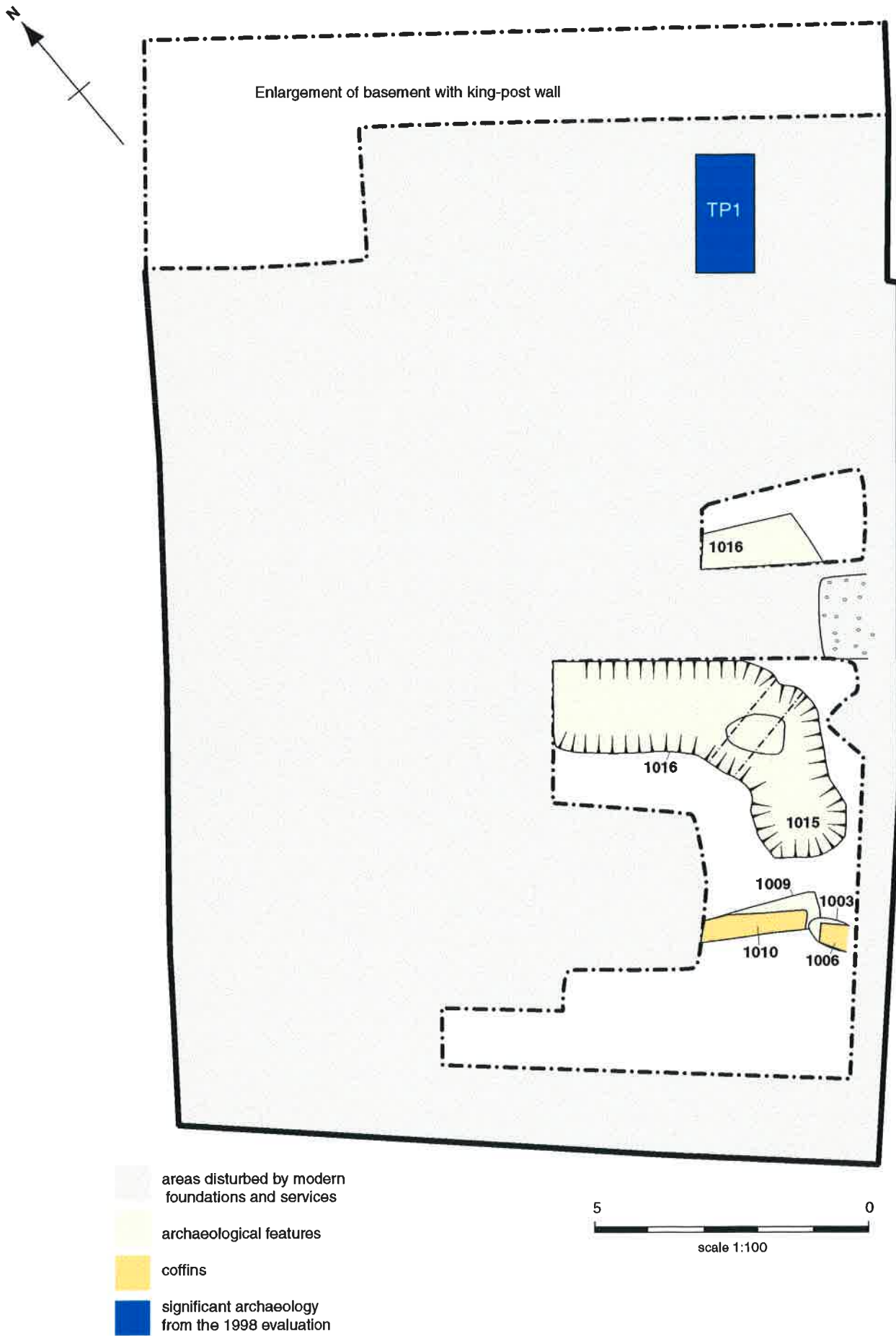


Figure 3: 1999 Watching brief results

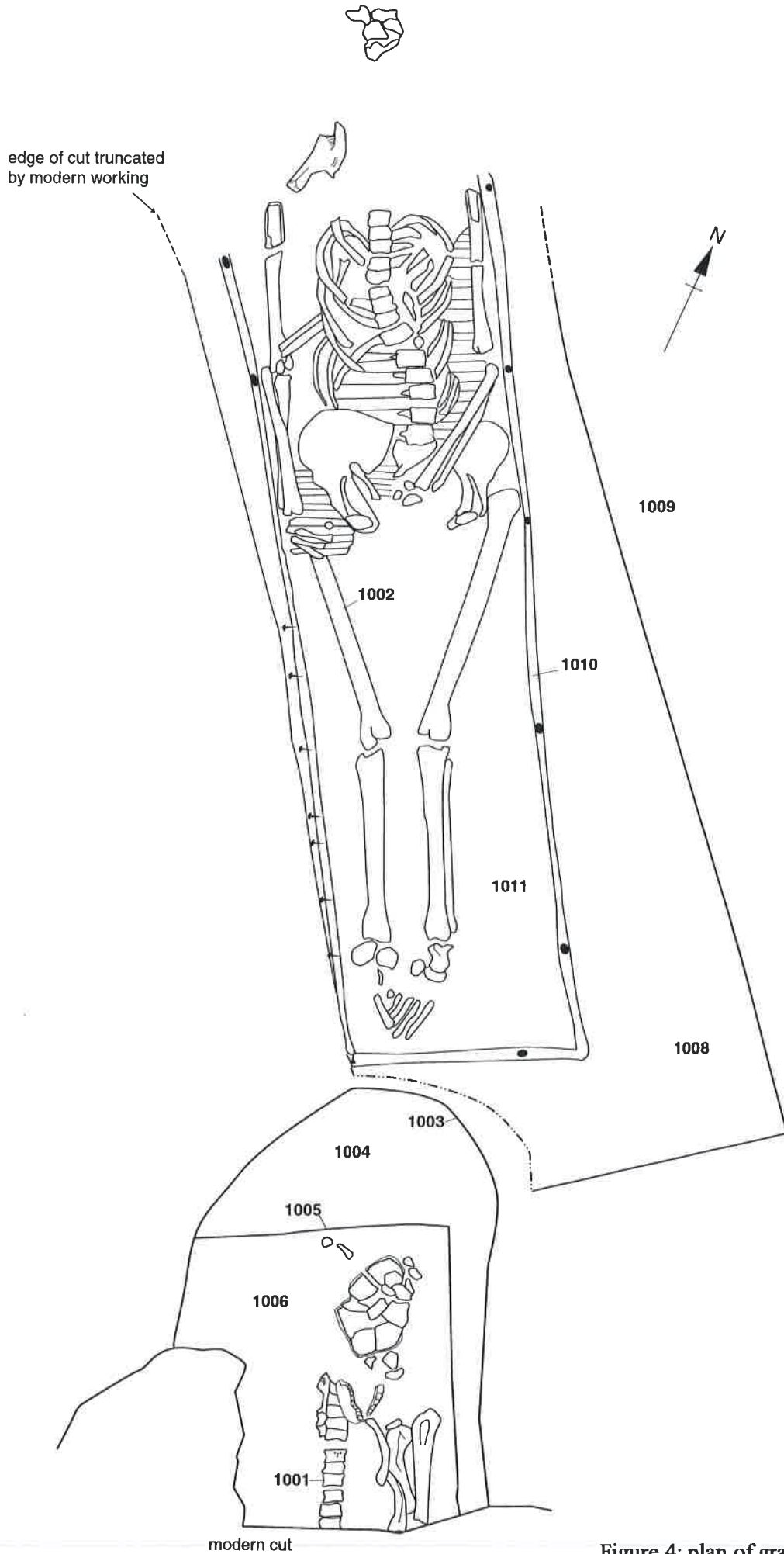


Figure 4: plan of graves 1003 and 1009



OXFORD ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT

Janus House, Osney Mead, Oxford, OX2 0ES

Tel: 01865 263800 Fax: 01865 793496

email: postmaster@oau-oxford.demon.co.uk



Director and Chief Executive: David Jennings B.A., M.I.F.A. Oxford Archaeological Unit Limited.
Private Limited Company Number: 1618597 Registered Charity Number: 285627.
Registered Office: Janus House, Osney Mead, Oxford OX2 0ES