

Fringford Manor, Fringford, Oxfordshire

NGR SP 6068 2918

Archaeological Watching Brief Report

Oxford Archaeological Unit

October 1996

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Summary

Excavation of foundation trenches revealed three cut features, two of which were possibly part of a robber trench. The features were filled by rubbly soils which spread over the whole of the area examined. The third feature was of post-medieval date but the others could have been earlier. The rubbly deposits probably represent landscaping activity.

1. Introduction

An archaeological watching brief was carried out by the Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) on Thursday 3rd and Friday 4th September 1996 during the excavation of foundations for a new residence within the grounds of Fringford Manor, Fringford, near Bicester. The work was done on behalf of Mr and Mrs P Blakeman. The development lies on the north-eastern edge of the historic core of Fringford at grid reference SP 6068 2918. The watching brief was required as a condition of planning consent for the development (application CHS.313/91) in accordance with PPG16 (Planning and Archaeology). The site code was FRMN96; the project archive will be deposited with the Oxfordshire County Museums Service.

2. Topography and geology

Prior to the excavations the area of the site lay within landscaped gardens consisting of lawn, mature trees and shrubs. Immediately to the south-west of the excavations was a single large mature tree, the presence of which necessitated the deepening of foundation trenches to a maximum of 1.8 m.

To the north-west of the site a wall revets a drop to a former landscaped area. This is the location of former moated gardens and of the remains of a probable fish pond (see section 3 below).

The superficial geology of the area consists of clay enriched stagnogley soils - Drift over clays and gravel.

3. Archaeological background

The site lies within the area of the medieval village of Fringford (Fig. 1). The County Sites and Monuments Record (SMR) notes the presence of a moat ditch surviving to the

north-west of the present Manor House (SMR PRN 1126) at SP 6065 2922, while further north-west again are the remains of a probable fish pond (PRN 895) at SP 6060 2925. It is not certain whether these features are the vestiges of larger-scale medieval earthworks or part of a later, post-medieval landscape. However, the Victoria County History (Vol. 2, (1907) 329), points out that the name 'Moat Gardens' perpetuates the notion that these are probably earlier earthworks. The present house is a relatively modern one, but it is not known if any archaeological evidence indicating a medieval building on the site was found during its construction.

The present site also lies within about 50 metres of the medieval parish church of St. Michael. Previous work carried out by the Oxford Archaeological Unit in the centre of the village at SP 6045 2895 has produced not only evidence of the medieval settlement, but also of a Romano-British farmstead.

4. Methodology

The foundation trenches for the new building were excavated by machine and once open were cleaned, photographed and recorded in accordance with standard Oxford Archaeological Unit procedures. The trenches were c 0.6 m wide and generally 1.2 m deep, though locally they were up to 1.8 m deep (see section 2 above). The watching brief began on Thursday 3rd September and laying of foundations commenced early the following day. A total of five sections of the stratigraphic sequence within the opened foundation trenches were drawn.

5. Results (Fig. 2)

At the bottom of the observed sequence an orange very slightly loamy sand (7) was thought to be the undisturbed natural subsoil and contained no finds. This was located at varying depths within the trenches, from as little as 0.45 m below modern ground level at the north-eastern corner of the new building, to almost 1.5 m at the opposite corner.

Above the natural subsoil and having a slightly soily interface with it was a relatively clean orange-brown sandy loam (6), which yielded three sherds of medieval pottery. This layer was very uneven in profile and varied from c 0.15 m to a maximum of over 0.8 m in depth. It was initially thought to be a natural spread but the presence of pottery indicates that the layer had been at least partly disturbed.

Three probable pits (2, 3 and 4) were identified cutting layer 6. The cuts varied considerably in depth and profile. Feature 2 in the north-west of the site, about 1.5 m wide at its uneven top (the level from which it was cut was significantly different on each side) and very steep sided, was the deepest of the cuts, over 1.6 m. It is possible that this might have been the same feature as cut 3, located in the centre of the site, but this could not be determined. Neither the bottom of this feature, nor of cut 3, was found. There was little consistency in the appearance even of the same cuts in opposing faces of the foundation trenches. Cut 4, probably at least 2.3 m wide, was rather shallower than 2 and 3 and had much less steep edges except on one side as seen in section 4 (see Fig

2). Its maximum depth is not known, but for the most part it was a relatively shallow feature, not more than 0.70 m deep.

Pit 3 had a localised (possibly primary) fill of light reddish brown gravelly sand (8), but otherwise the pits were all filled with a brown silty clay loam containing limestone rubble, generally indistinguishable from a general spread or spreads of rubbly material (5 and 9) which extended across the site beneath the topsoil. Only at one point did it seem that layer 9 might have been overlaid by the fill within pit cut 4, which produced finds and was numbered 10 to distinguish it from the otherwise identical material of layer 5. Layer 5/9 was shallowest and contained less stone towards the east of the site, where it was only 0.2 m deep. The rubbly spreads deepened unevenly towards the western side of the site, with a maximum thickness of c 0.5 m in the north-west corner. The limestone rubble within contexts 5, 9 and 10 varied in size from small to very large fragments; none appeared to be worked.

The finds from fill 10 of the possible pit cut 4 consisted of animal bone and pottery and brick/tile of post-medieval date. Animal bone and a single sherd of medieval pottery were recovered from layer 5. These deposits were sealed by dark brown clay loam topsoil (1) which ranged from 0.12-0.30m in depth.

6. Finds

Finds from the site were scarce. In total they consisted of three fragments of animal bone (one from 10 and two from 5), a single piece of post-medieval brick or tile from pit fill 10 and six sherds of pottery. Of these, one was a white-glazed earthenware fragment from fill 10 and one a modern plant pot fragment from topsoil (1). The other four sherds were all from the Brill/Boarstall industry (Oxford medieval pottery fabric OXAM), datable after c AD 1220 but not otherwise closely assignable to date. Three of these sherds (one glazed) were from layer 6 and a further glazed fragment came from layer 5.

7. Discussion

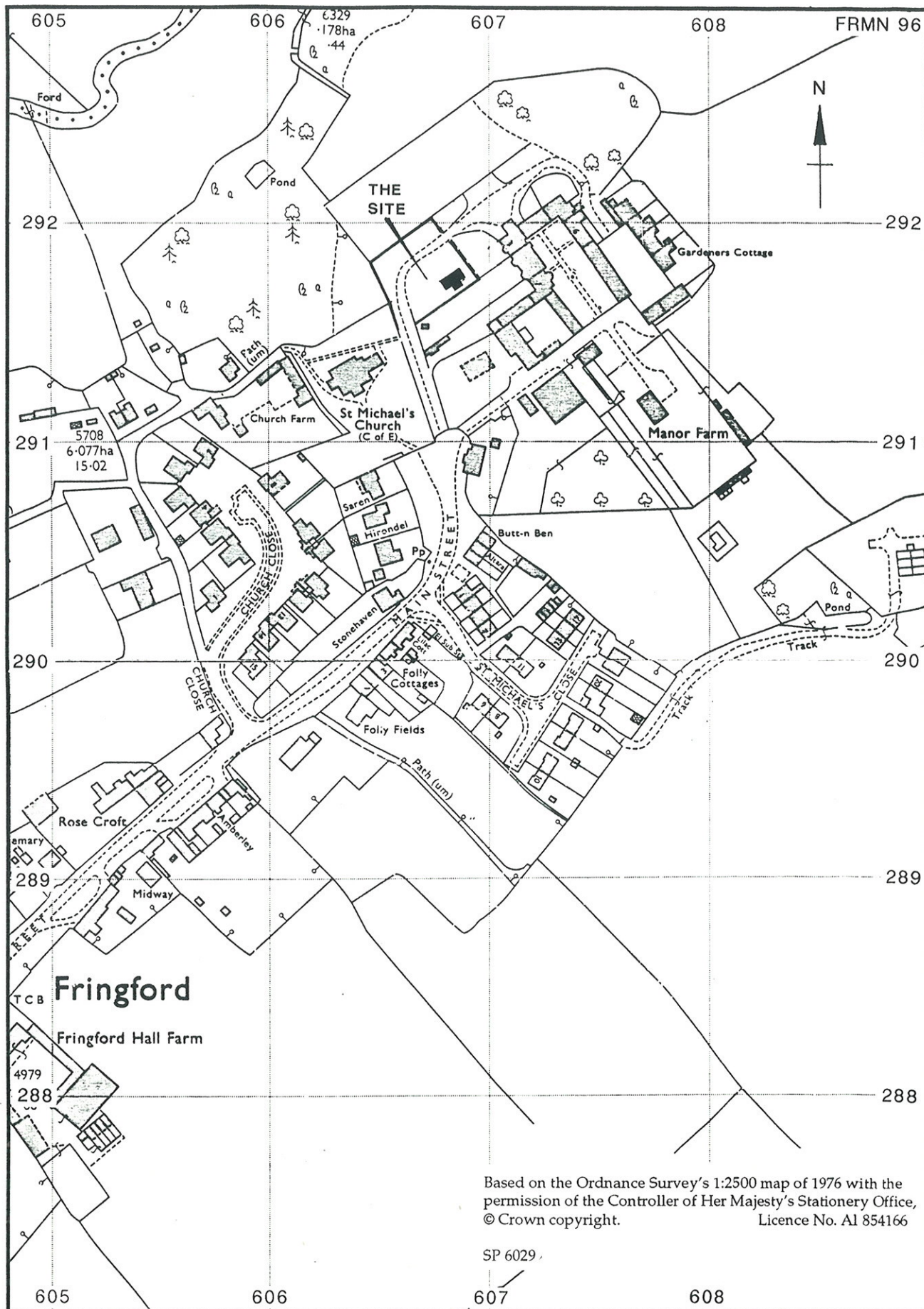
Layer (6), a brownish-orange loamy sand, contained three fragments of medieval pottery but otherwise appeared archaeologically clean. The presence of pottery here indicates that this layer had been at least partly disturbed. The uneven depth of the layer is difficult to explain, but it is possible that it represents not only a general layer, perhaps of medieval date, above the subsoil, but also a series of shallow irregular hollows in the subsoil filled with the same material. No definite cut features were assignable to the medieval period.

The general rubbly layer 5 contained a single medieval sherd. It is therefore possible that this was a medieval deposit. The similarity of this layer to the fills of cut features 2-4 and the limited finds evidence from fill 10 of feature 4 could be taken to indicate that the rather irregular and seemingly unconnected cuts (2-4) were of relatively recent date and do not suggest the presence of any structural remains within this area. Other interpretations are possible, however. Cuts 2 and 3 could be seen as parts of the same

feature, in which case their steep sided profiles might suggest that they were structural features and possibly even represent the robber trench of a wall. Moreover, if fill 10 of feature 4 really did overlie layer 9 it would be possible to see this feature as cutting 9 (and being backfilled with the same material) and therefore not necessarily of the same character or phase as cuts 2 and 3. It is even conceivable, since the only post-medieval dating material comes from fill 10, that the earlier layers and pit fills (5 and 9) were of medieval date, though this seems unlikely.

The deepening profile of the rubbly layer (5), from east to west, suggests that it was intended to produce a level surface. The source of this material is unknown, but if features 2 and 3 really were a robber trench then the rubble of layer 5 could logically have derived from the wall, whether it was a free standing feature or part of a building. The low density of finds and absence of identifiably worked stone here might argue against the derivation of the material from areas of intensive occupation, and perhaps supports the interpretation of the possible wall as a single feature such as a garden wall. The levelling up of this area was presumably a landscaping operation, but its date is uncertain. The contents of pit fill 10, perhaps of 19th century date, may provide a *terminus ante quem*.

Bryan Matthews/Paul Booth
Oxford Archaeological Unit
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Scale 1:2500

Site Location

Figure 1

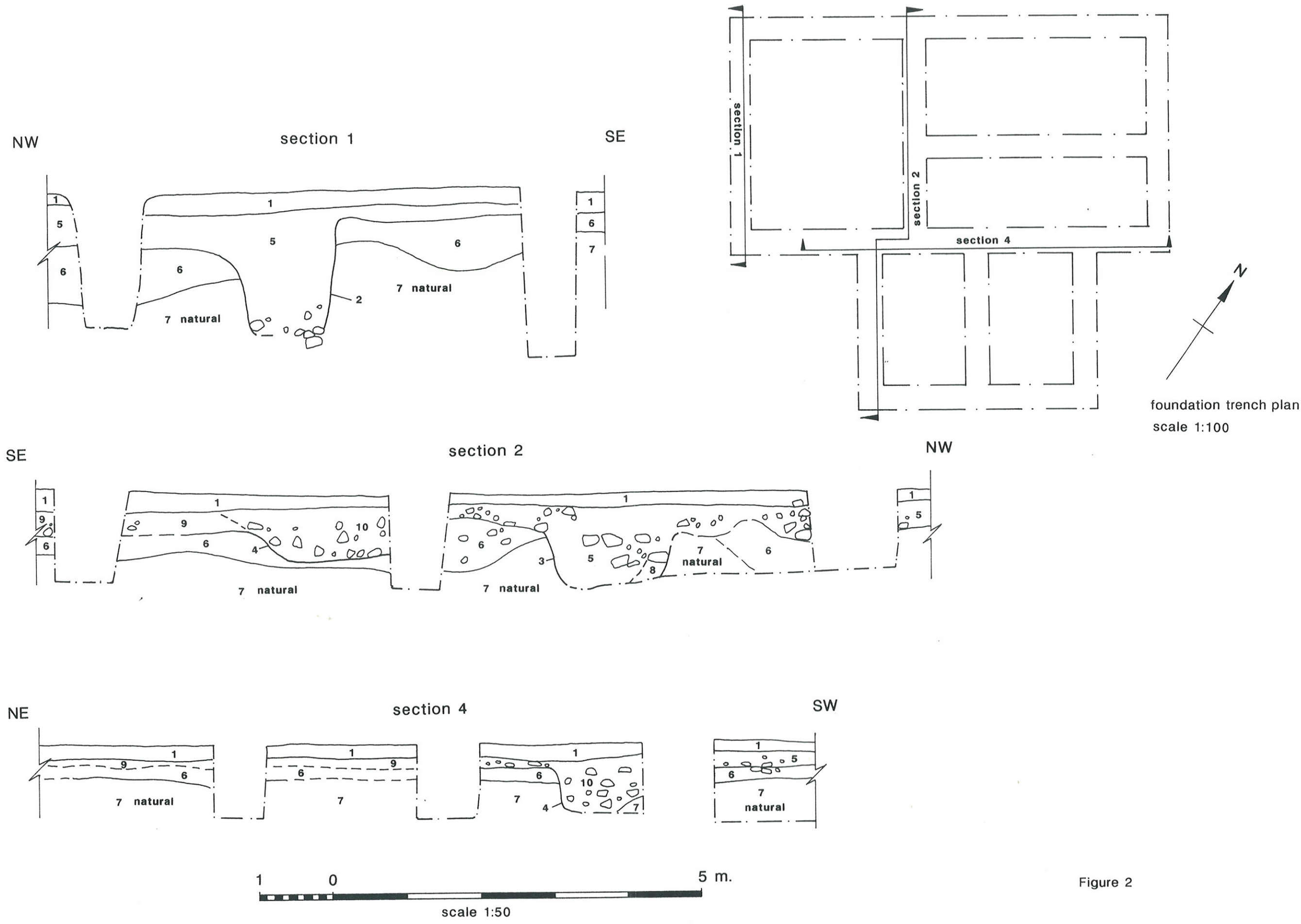


Figure 2



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