

ABINGDON (OX)

ABINGDON VINEYARD REDEVELOPMENT

ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT 1988

Area 5: The Church Hall, Council Parks  
Department, Cattle Market & Buildings  
to the North of the Cattle Market

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AREA 5: THE CHURCH HALL, COUNCIL PARKS DEPARTMENT, CATTLE MARKET AND BUILDINGS TO THE NORTH OF THE CATTLE MARKET

IMPORTANT: This report replaces pages 11-13 of the ABINGDON VINEYARD REDEVELOPMENT: ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT 1987 report, and the folded plan Fig. 1 shows important amendments to the large folded plan accompanying the 1987 report.

Summary

The western part of Area 5 contains Iron Age settlement features including storage pits. Occupation continued into the Roman period when part of the area was used for an inhumation cemetery. North and south of the cemetery occupation appears to have continued throughout the Roman period.

Area 5 lies within the area occupied by the abbey and overlies the western part of the extensive lay cemetery which was the principle cemetery for the medieval town. The area could contain part of the 7th century monastery which holds a position of prime importance in the history of the English church.

Location, Historical and Archaeological Background

Area 5 includes the houses and gardens to the north of the former cattle market and land to the south of the market abutting Abbey House and including the Church Hall. To the east of the market Area 5 includes the District Council Parks Department Depot.

The cattle market lies in a shallow east-west trough previously interpreted as the former course of the Stert which has now been shown to lie further to the north.

It appears that much of the landscape in the Thames Valley had already been shaped and organised by the end of the Iron Age, the period which preceded the Romanisation of Britain. In the past elements of Iron Age activity have been discovered from beneath the core of the present town and from the site of the former railway station (Rodwell; Assessment 1987).

Much of present day Abingdon occupies the site of an extensive Romano-British settlement. Indeed it is probably more

accurate to describe the Roman period settlement as a town but without walls. Settlement extended northwards beneath the railway station and the Vineyard (Wilson et al).

Following the decline of Roman Britain it is likely that Abingdon became a centre for an early Saxon unit of royal administration, possibly a reflection of the importance of the preceding Roman settlement (Lambrick). A monastery was established at Abingdon through a gift of land by king Cedwall in c. 675 AD. After falling into decay the monastery was refounded c. 954 and grew into one of the largest abbeys in England. The early Saxon monastery at Abingdon is one of the earliest Christian monastic foundations in England and central to the development of monastic life and Christianity in this country. It is also well documented and the unusual alignment of property boundaries suggest that the 7th century monastery may lie beneath Area 4 and the eastern part of Area 5.

The whole of Area 5 lies within the area previously occupied by the medieval abbey. The western edge of Area 5 follows the boundary of the abbey precinct and to the east the Parks Department lies above part of the monastic lay cemetery. Because the main parochial church of the town had no burial rights throughout most of the medieval period, the majority of the population of medieval Abingdon was buried in this cemetery.

The abbey was dissolved in 1534. By the 18th century the area was open land (Roque's map 1761) and the area remained principally an orchard and garden gradually encroached upon by buildings to the north and south (OS 1st ed. 1874). The encroachment was completed by the post-war construction of a new livestock market to replace that then held in the centre of the town.

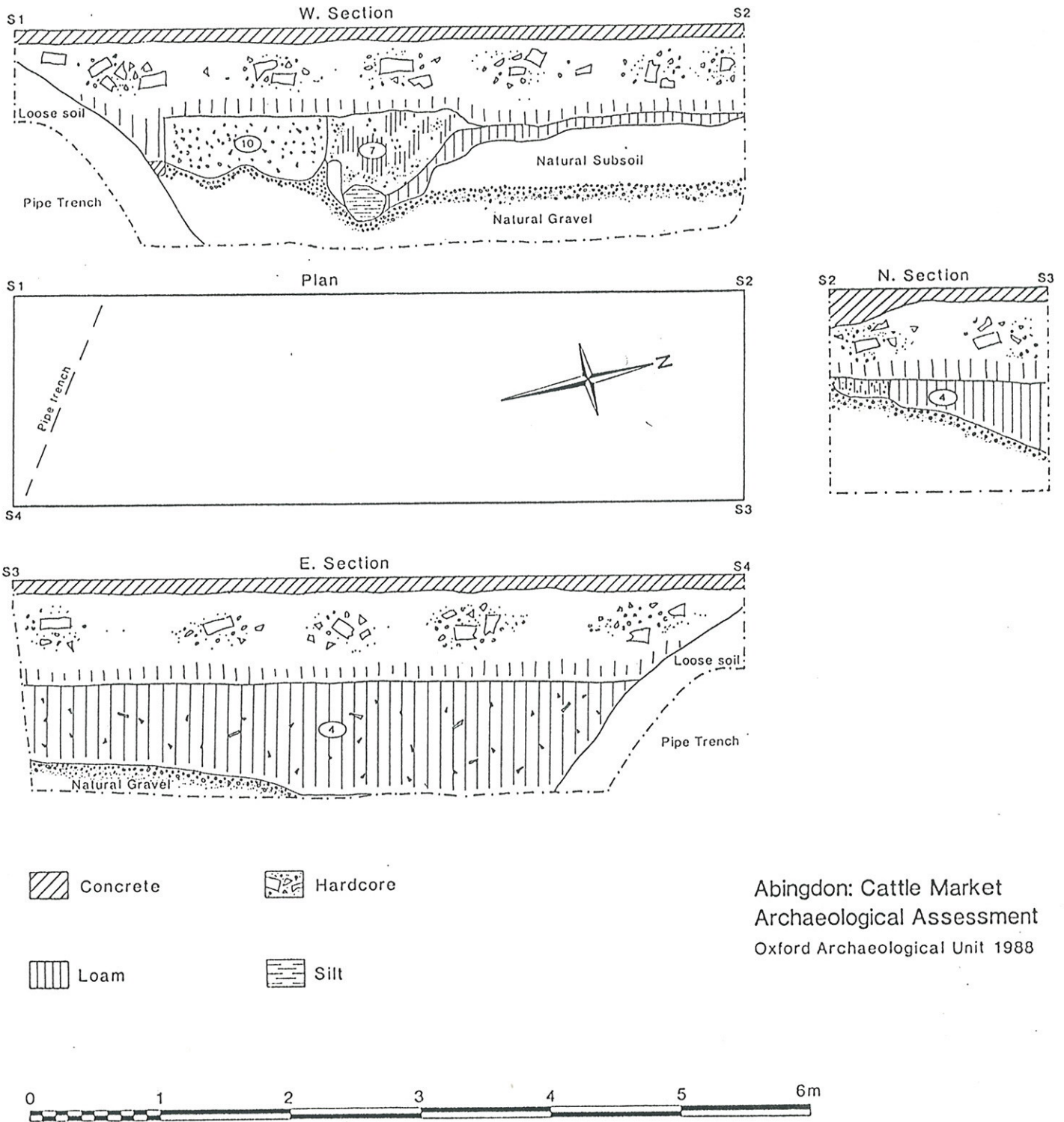
### The Assessment Trenches

In 1987 the only part of Area 5 to receive an assessment trench was the higher ground to the south of the cattle market as the market and the Parks Department remained in use. In June 1988 six trenches were cut through the reinforced concrete of the cattle market (Fig. 1, trenches XX-XXV) and the hardcore and post-medieval soils were removed by machine (JCB 3c). The Romano-British and earlier deposits were left intact where possible. To facilitate a more accurate assessment of the depth and quality of the archaeological deposits present, excavation was carried deeper in trench XXV and at the northern end of trench XXIII.

### Trench III (1987)

The present land surface to the south of the cattle market

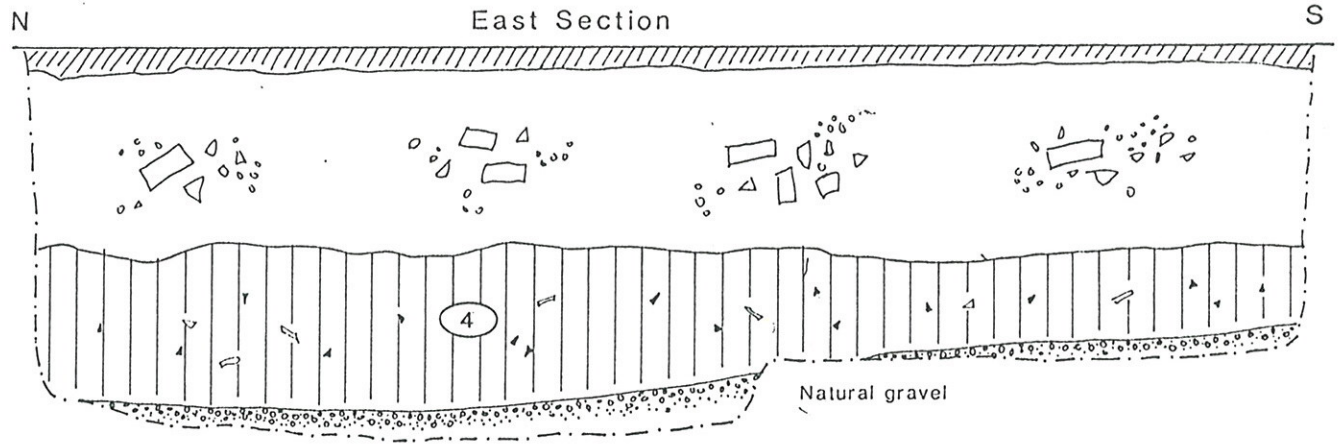
Abingdon: Cattle Market Trench XX



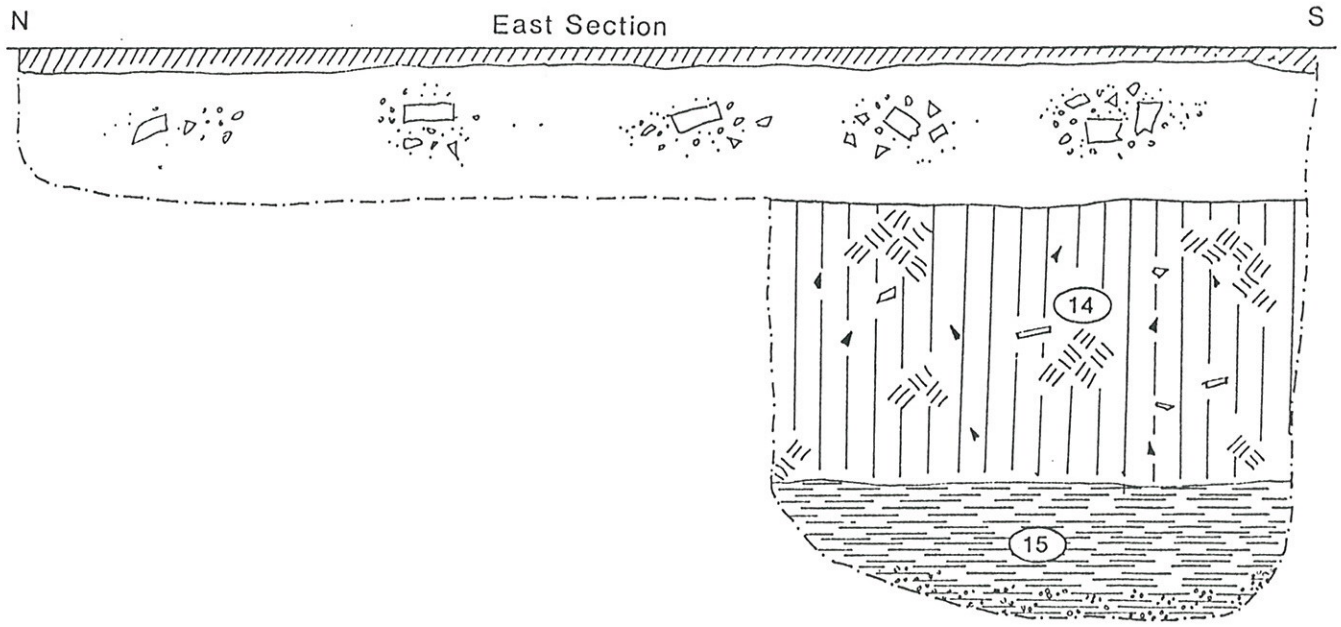
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Fig. 2.

Trench XXI



Trench XXII



- |  |  |
|--|--|
|  Concrete |  Hardcore |
|  Loam     |  Silt     |

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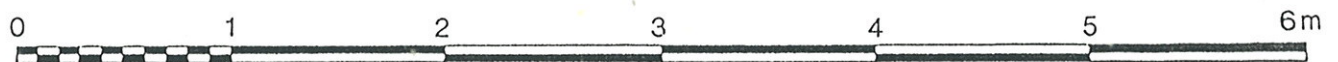


Fig. 3

is 0.7m higher than the concrete surface of the market area. Trench III was located by the north-east corner of the Church Hall. Excavation was by hand and revealed 2.5m of accumulated occupation material above natural gravel. Post-medieval deposits including hardcore and concrete had accumulated to a maximum depth of 1.2m above some 0.6m of medieval soils and urban refuse. At a depth of 1.8m the medieval deposits gave way to well preserved Roman period ditches and pits. The depth of the post-medieval deposits revealed in this trial trench demonstrated that although the cattle market is at a lower level than the present land surface to the south, the cattle market has not unduly affected a substantial area of archaeological material from both the medieval abbey and the Roman settlement.

#### Trench XX and XXI (Figs. 2 & 3)

Arranged north-south and parallel to the boundary with the Parks Department two trenches were excavated down to gravel. Each trench measured 6m x 1.65m. The west sections of each trench were similar with post-medieval soils capping undisturbed natural subsoil or the terrace gravel. In particular the west section of trench XX displayed two cess pits of which the earlier, context 7, yielded 18th century pottery.

However, both east sections revealed the dip of a substantial ditch, indicated in blue on Fig. 1, that had been infilled during the 18th and 19th centuries with night-soil. This may have been filled during the 18th century as 19th century pottery only occurred at the top of the filling immediately beneath the hardcore.

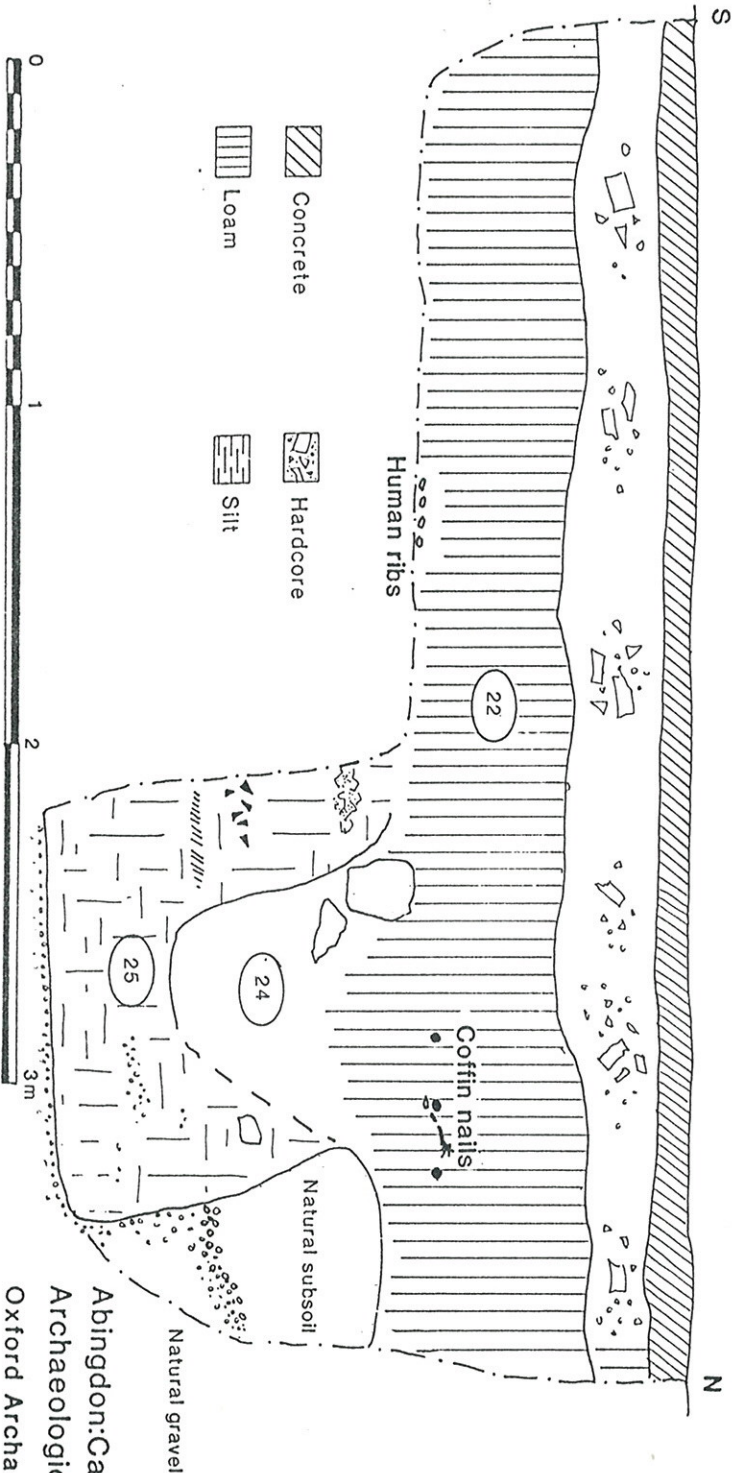
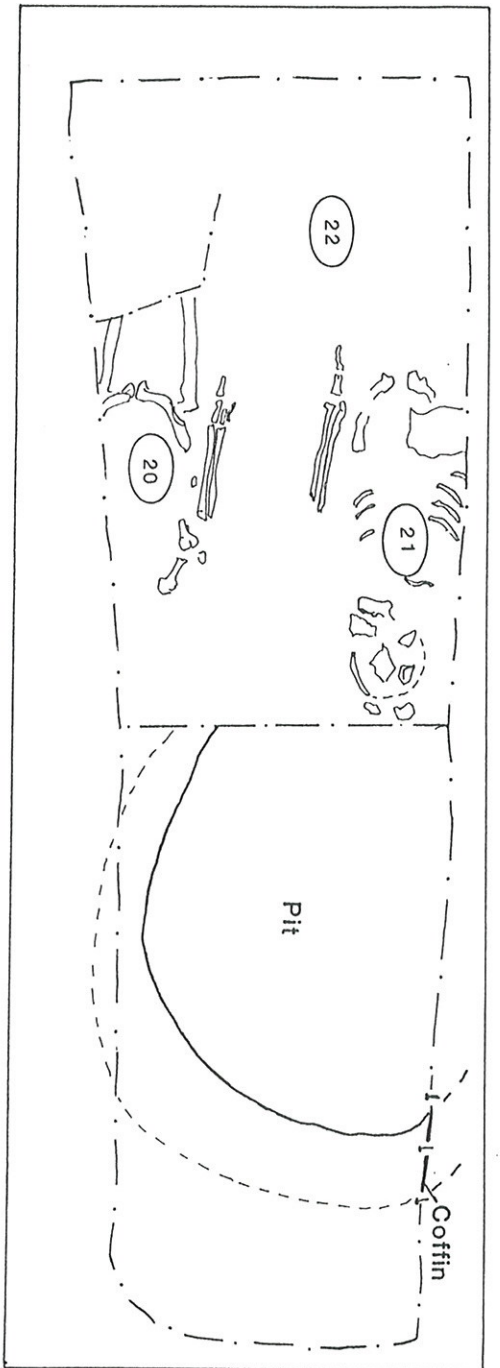
#### Trench XXII (Fig. 3)

This trench 6m x 1m x 2.6m deep was sited to the north of trenches XX and XXI. Excavation was entirely by machine. Beneath 0.7m of concrete and hardcore lay 1.3m of chiefly 18th and 19th century debris in a dark grey gravelly loam (Fig. 4). This gave way at 2m to a black waterlogged silt (14) with preserved organic material chiefly roots and 18th century pottery sherds. This layer marked the water table and although at 2.6m gravel appeared in the silt suggesting that the bottom of the channel was close below, the pit was not excavated any further because of the danger of collapse. Layer 14 was consistent with the infilling of the water course revealed trenches IX and VII in 1987.

#### Trench XXIII (Fig. 4)

This trench was located in the south-west corner of the

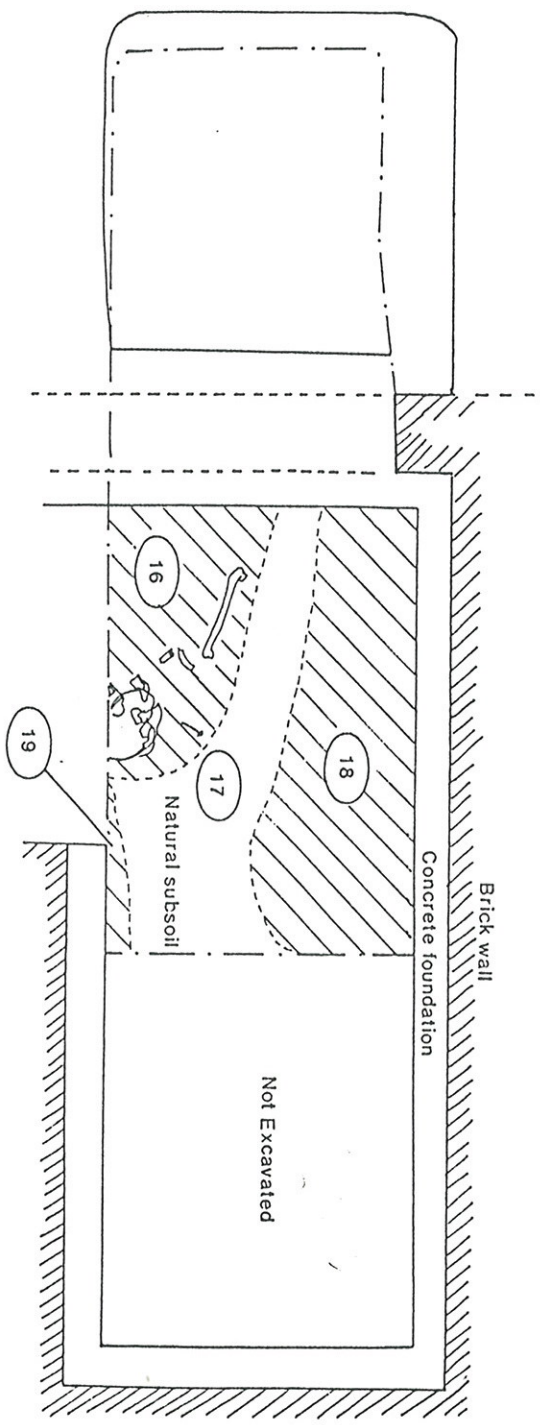
Trench XXIII




-  Concrete
-  Hardcore
-  Loam
-  Silt

Fig. 4

Trench XXIV



 Loam

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Fig. 5.



cattle market. Removal of 0.4m of concrete and hardcore revealed 0.5 m. of grey-brown loam (Fig. 4, 22) which comprised accumulations of Iron Age, Romano-British and medieval settlement material. The northern half of this trench was excavated to a depth of 1.9 m. and revealed an Iron Age storage pit with ash, burnt clay, limestone, pottery and domestic animal remains in a filling of fine, soft loams (Fig. 5, layer 25). The upper filling of the pit had been recut at a later date (layer 24).

Occupation appears to have continued into the early Roman period after which part of the site became an inhumation cemetery. The inhumations, some in coffins, were buried north-south. By analogy with other well excavated sites this cemetery was probably laid out parallel to a nearby major topographical feature such as a road or boundary (cf. McGavin). Trench XXIII revealed graves cutting into the earlier Romano-British soil with the grave pit bottoms only 0.8 m. from the surface of the cattle market. In keeping with the principally alkaline soils of this area, the skeletons were well preserved. There was no direct dating evidence for any of the graves. The burials were left in situ.

It is quite clear that this trench lies within an area of Iron Age to early Romano-British settlement. This occupation was overlain by a mid-Roman period cemetery laid out parallel to a boundary, probably a road. This road which would have led to a bridging point across the Stert, may have remained in use into the post-Roman period and provided a boundary later followed by The area was not subsequently disturbed by later settlement although medieval pottery and indicated occupation in the immediate vicinity of trench XXIII. The majority of the medieval and post-medieval top soil appears to have been scraped off during the construction of the cattle market.

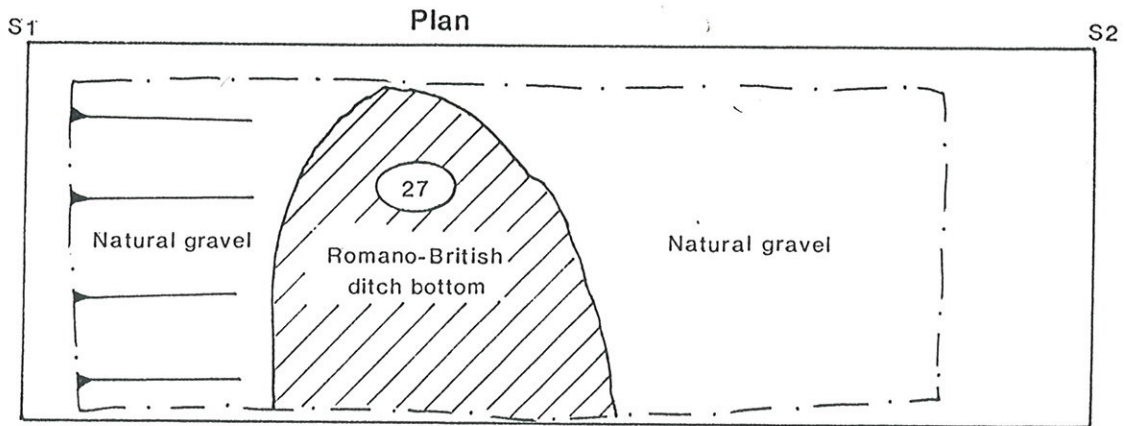
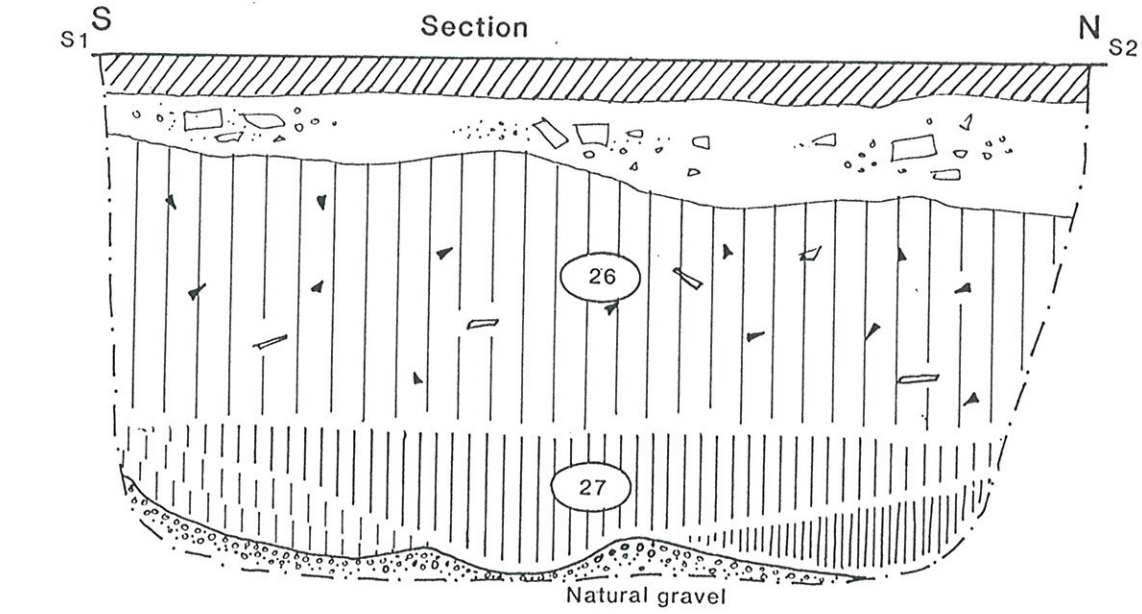
#### Trench XXIV (Fig. 5)

Some 14 m. to the north of trench XXIII this trench was excavated through the floor on the north side of the sale hall.

This trench revealed the outlines of two dark, loam filled graves (16 & 18) cutting into the natural brown earth subsoil (layer 17) above the gravel. Layer 19 was modern disturbance. At a depth of 1.2 m. grave 16 revealed the skull and right upper arm of a supine, north-south inhumation burial with one coffin nail to the right of the head. The nail retained traces of wood preserved through becoming mineralised with iron corrosion products. Grave 18 was not excavated. Grave 17 was left in situ. These graves indicate the extent and concentration of burials within the Roman cemetery.

The contemporary Roman period ground surface had been destroyed to a depth of 1.05 m., 0.15 m. above the skeleton in grave 16. No part of this trench was excavated any deeper.

Trench XXV



- |  |  |
|--|--|
|  Concrete |  Hardcore |
|  Loam     |  Silt     |



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Fig. 6

### Trench XXV (Fig. 6)

0.3 - 0.4 m. of concrete and hard core sealed the irregular surface of a dark loam 0.6 - 0.8 m. deep. This loam (layer 26) provided post-medieval domestic refuse from the top 10 - 20 cm. which merged into medieval occupation debris at 0.6 m. from the surface (concrete). Below the medieval lay a mixture of medieval and Romano-British wares, representing a Roman occupation layer disturbed during the medieval period. This layer sealed a sequence of east-west Roman period ditches cutting into the natural terrace gravel 1 - 1.6 m. below the concrete. This trench was not excavated to the bottom of the deepest and latest ditch (layer 27) as no shoring was available. This well-maintained east-west boundary may mark the northern edge of the mid-Roman cemetery to the south.

### Conclusions

Areas 4 & 5 occupy the prime position in the archaeology of Abingdon. The archaeology beneath both areas is complex. Within Area 5 the archaeology may be broadly divided into two halves either side of a north-south dividing line.

The western half of the cattle market overlies Iron Age settlement remains. Occupation appears to have continued into the mid-Roman period when the area was used for a cemetery which appears to contain upwards of 200 burials. The presence and initial organisation of the cemetery suggests the presence of a contemporary road or track along the west edge of the cattle market, possibly leading to a bridging point over the former course of the Stert.

In the later 7th. century a monastery was founded at Abingdon, probably close to the site of the later Anglo-Saxon church. In Areas 4 and 5 surviving property boundaries may reflect the 7th century circular precinct, a feature emphasised by the boundary ditch in trenches XX and XXI. This ditch appears to mark the western limit of the monastic lay cemetery.

### Recommended Action

Following the clearance of the area of all buildings and hard standings the following should be examined and recorded by archaeological excavation.

Iron Age and Roman Period

Excavate and record the entire Roman cemetery. Complete excavation is important to establish the character, nature, date range, internal organisation, status, burial and religious practices, and to obtain a statistically viable sample of the population.

Excavation of an area around and beneath the Roman cemetery to examine the nature and character of the Iron Age settlement and to examine the physical effects of continuity into the Roman period.

Limited excavation to the north and south of the cemetery to establish settlement duration and character.

To establish if possible the existence of a road along the line of the later abbey precinct wall.

#### Anglo-Saxon

Establish continuity of settlement into the early Saxon period in this part of the town and any other contemporary land use.

Establish the presence and plan of the 7th century monastery and date the lay cemetery boundary ditch (possibly originally Anglo-Saxon).

#### Medieval

Remove the medieval lay cemetery which overlies the earlier archaeology of the eastern part of Area 5.

## Sources

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