

Abingdon Vineyard, Area 6

Summary report of excavations 1990 & 1991

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Summary of archaeological excavation results

1 Introduction

1.1 In 1986 an evaluation of the Vineyard Action Area was undertaken for the Vale of White Horse District Council by the Oxford Archaeological Unit. At this time Vineyard Area 6 was not included in the development proposals, and so was not evaluated.

1.2 Subsequently this area was designated for office development. The proposed development involved the erection of buildings around the N and NW boundary of the site, with access at the S end of the W side and car parking on the E and S of the site.

1.3 Area 6 is thought to include part of the medieval vineyard of Abingdon Abbey (Preston 1929, Figure 1). The site fronts onto the Vineyard road on the N, and the 1875 Ordnance Survey, the Christ's Hospital map of 1841 and Rocque's map of Berkshire of 1761 show that this frontage was built up from at least the mid-18th century. Amyce's survey of Abingdon also indicates tenements in this area in the mid-16th century. The boundaries of the parish of St. Nicholas, which adjoined the abbey precinct on the N, indicate that the boundary of the abbey precinct ran along the southern boundary of the site (Preston 1929 Figure 1).

1.4 Excavations in Vineyard Area 1 in 1988 (Figure 1) showed that there had been medieval tenements on that site from the later 12th century, with zones of intercutting medieval and post-medieval pits at the rear of the properties. There were indication of possible medieval industrial activity predating the tenements. Iron Age and Roman ditches and pits were also discovered, but were largely truncated by later features.

2 Aims

2.1 To establish whether medieval tenements existed along the N frontage, and if so, at what date they were established.

2.2 To investigate the character of medieval occupation, whether evidence of structures was present, whether activity was domestic or not, and whether there was evidence of the occupations of the inhabitants.

2.3 To look for evidence of the former Vineyard, its extent and period of use.

2.4 To establish the character of the putative abbey precinct boundary, its date of origin and development.

2.5 To investigate whether Iron Age and/or Roman occupation was present on this site, and if so, to establish its date, extent and character.

3 Strategy and Methods

3.1 Based upon the information gained from Vineyard Area 1, this site was thought likely to contain dense intercutting medieval and post-medieval pits and other features, resulting in a high degree of disturbance and mixing of archaeological deposits. The strategy adopted was therefore to dig several wide trenches, rather than large open areas.

3.2 In the summers of 1990 and 1991 the Oxford Archaeological Unit excavated four trenches for the Vale of the White Horse District Council in advance of the proposed redevelopment scheme (see Figure 1). The position of the trenches was determined by three factors:

- a) to investigate those areas most likely to be disturbed by the development (Trenches 1 and 2)
- b) to obtain the widest possible coverage of the site (Trenches 3 and 4)
- c) to provide a N-S section running back from the Vineyard frontage (Trenches 1, 2 and 4)

3.3 The original proposal had suggested longer trenches than those actually excavated; the size of the trenches was limited by a number of active underground services, and by the need to stack soil within the site for backfilling. All the trenches were excavated by machine using a toothless bucket down to archaeological levels, after which excavation continued by hand. Where the archaeological deposits extended below 1.2 m in depth (Trenches 1 and 2), the sides of the trenches were stepped in.

3.4 Recording was carried out according to the then current OUA system (Wilkinson 1991).

4 Summary of results (Figure 2)

4.1 Trench 1 began just over 2 m from the N site boundary and ran S for 19.5 m. The trench was 4 m wide. At the very N end of the trench the SE corner of a post-medieval stone building was found robbed almost to the bottom. A post-medieval well lay just E of the corner of the building.

4.2 Natural gravel occurred just below the make-up of this building at a depth of c. 1 m. Cut into the gravel below the building, and extending back for the full length of the trench were dense intercutting medieval pits (see Figure 2). These varied, some being circular, some rectangular and some linear, and they ranged in date from the later 12th century to the 16th-17th century. The pits and the rear wall of the post-medieval building show that the medieval and later frontage extended beyond the present N limits of the site under the pavement. The S limit of the intercutting pits was not found within the excavated trench.

4.3 In the area of dense pits gravel was not reached until well over 2 m down. The depth of the stratigraphy meant that the trench had to be stepped in, reducing the width to 2.6 m. Towards

the S end of the trench a small area of subsoil was found undisturbed by medieval and later pits. This contained Roman finds and a small patch of Roman cobbling, and came down onto gravel at a depth of just under 2 m.

4.4 Trench 2 lay SW of Trench 1, and overlapped slightly with it at the N end. This trench was 30 m long and generally 5.5 m wide, stepping in to between 3 m and 3.4 m at a depth of 1.2 m. At the N end the trench was 4.5 m wide and gravel at 1.8 m down.

4.5 The northernmost 6 m of the trench contained dense intercutting medieval and post-medieval pits, presumably a continuation of the pit zone seen throughout Trench 1 (Figure 2). The S limit of the area of pits may have been marked by a shallow E-W ditch, whose line was also followed by a post-medieval wall, perhaps showing a long-lived boundary representing the back of the medieval tenements.

4.6 S of this line medieval and post-medieval features were few, and the preservation of vertical stratigraphy was much better. There were extensive horizontal soil spreads, and this was presumably the area occupied for much of the medieval period by the abbey vineyard. Within this part of the trench was a limestone oval oven surviving 0.67 m high fed from the N. This probably dates to the 13th century. Just S of the oven was a narrow E-W gully.

4.7 Sealed beneath medieval cultivation soils were a series of 2nd -4th century Roman ditches and gullies running approximately E-W (Figure 2). Two of the ditches were cut by Late Roman pits, and the southernmost ditch was cut into a layer of cobbling which had slumped into an earlier, Iron Age ditch. Patches of cobbling were also evident between and N of the Roman ditches; although there were no clear relationships with the ditches the cobbling was presumably earlier.

4.8 The Iron Age ditch at the S end of the trench was over 3 m wide, and nearly 1 m deep into gravel, and contained a few small sherds, possibly of Middle Iron Age date. Gravel was found at just over 2 m down at this end of the trench.

4.9 Trench 3 (Figure 1) was 15 m long by 4 m wide, and contained a succession of post-medieval rubble and garden soils interstratified with intercutting pits and other features. Gravel was found at a general depth of 1.2 m. Unlike Trench 1 the pits were shallow, and mostly post-medieval in date. One N-S stone-lined and stone-capped drain was found on the W side of the trench.

4.10 A series of shallow hollows were found in the gravel on the E side of the trench, some of which were filled with soil similar to that containing Roman finds in the other trenches. There were however very few Roman finds in this trench, and the subsoil appears to have been truncated in the medieval period.

4.11 Machining of a fourth trench was begun in the SE corner of

the site, but this encountered a brick-filled post-medieval cellar at least 1.5 m deep, and was abandoned (Figure 1 Trench 4).

5 Overall conclusions

5.1 The excavations demonstrated that pits, and thus presumably tenements, existed on the site from the later 12th century, a pattern similar to that on Vineyard Area 1 adjacent.

5.2 Only the very back of the tenement buildings lay within the site, and structural evidence was poorly preserved. As in Vineyard Area 1, a dense zone of pits was found immediately behind the buildings, with ancillary structures (in this case an oven) at the very back of the property. The finds have not provided evidence of any specialised occupations, being a mixture of domestic rubbish of a general nature.

5.3 The N limit of the Vineyard is almost certainly marked by the southern limit of the pit zone, S of which medieval features are few and preservation of earlier deposits much better. The vineyard would appear to have already been in existence in the 12th century when the tenements were created, and to have remained in use throughout the medieval period.

5.4 Due to existing underground services and to uncertainties about the depth of disturbance likely to be caused by the development, the S part of the site was not excavated, and thus the character of the abbey precinct boundary remains unknown. It should be noted that despite the brick cellar encountered in Trench 4, which had removed archaeological deposits to a depth of c.1.6 m, archaeological deposits may be preserved beneath the floor of this, since natural gravel lies over 2 m down in this area.

5.5 Both Roman and Iron Age features have been found in the excavations. In the N part of the site medieval and later disturbance has clearly all but obliterated earlier archaeological deposits, but within the area of the vineyard preservation is much better, including areas of cobbling. The date range of Roman material appears to be 2nd to 4th century, as in Vineyard Area 1, but the limited extent of the trenches not allowed the character of the occupation to be clarified. Ditches on similar alignments are present in Vineyard Area 1, but these are much disturbed by medieval activity.

5.6 The Iron Age ditch may also be a continuation of a ditch seen in Area 1, but is much better preserved here. The finds from the small exposure of Iron Age deposits were too few to date it within the Iron Age securely. The nature of Iron Age occupation N of the defences in Areas 2 and 3 is unclear, and understanding of this would greatly enhance our understanding of the overall development of Abingdon in later prehistory.

6 Recommendations

6.1 The general sequence in the N part of the site is fairly well-understood, but the two separate N-S trenches did not establish the width of the individual tenement blocks. A watching brief on the development might recover further structural remains, and establish how many properties there were along the Vineyard frontage on this site.

6.2 The S part of the site offers good preservation of Roman and Iron Age remains. Excavation for any services running through this area should be carried out archaeologically, and should the access cause disturbance to any depth area excavation is recommended in advance.

T Allen
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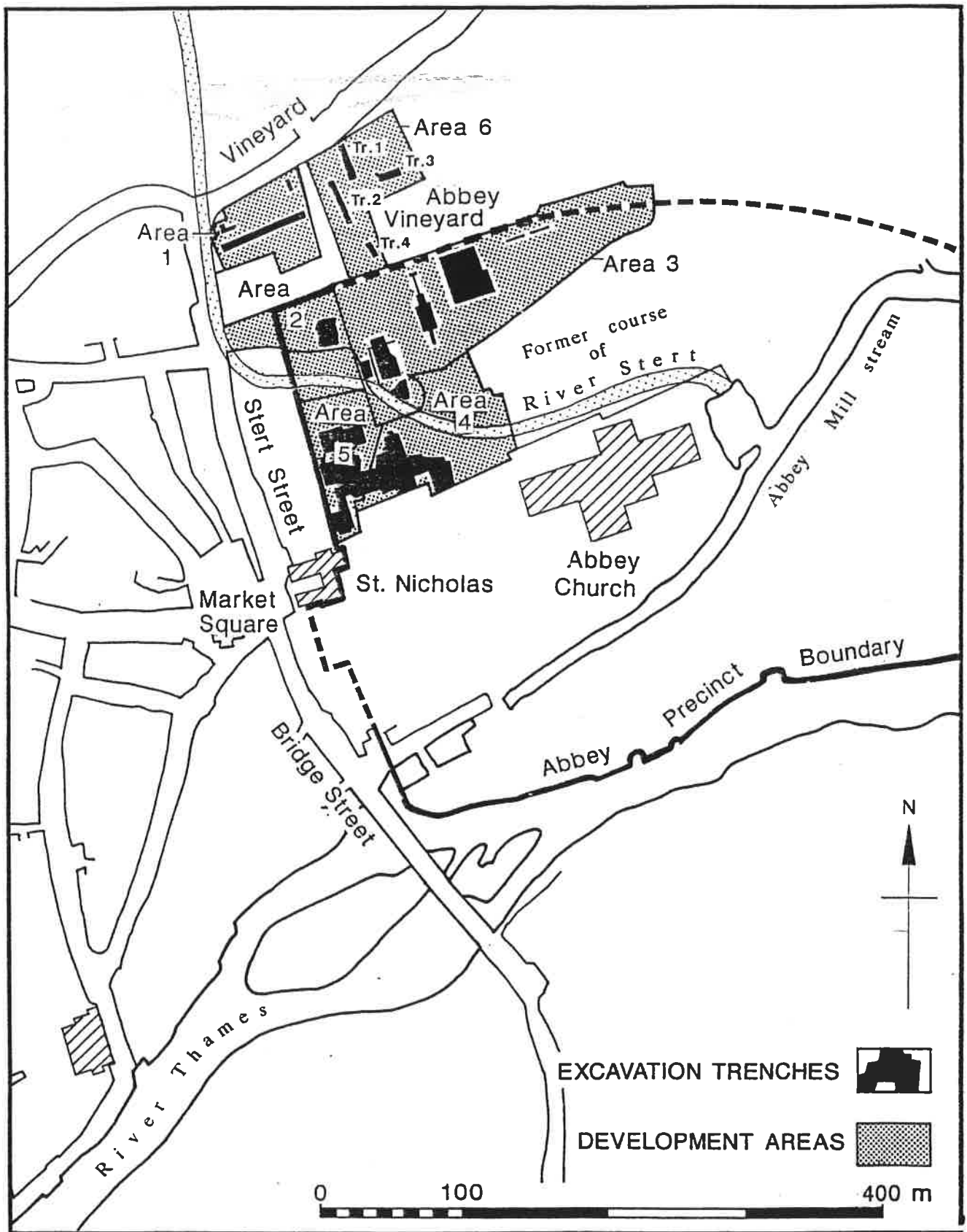
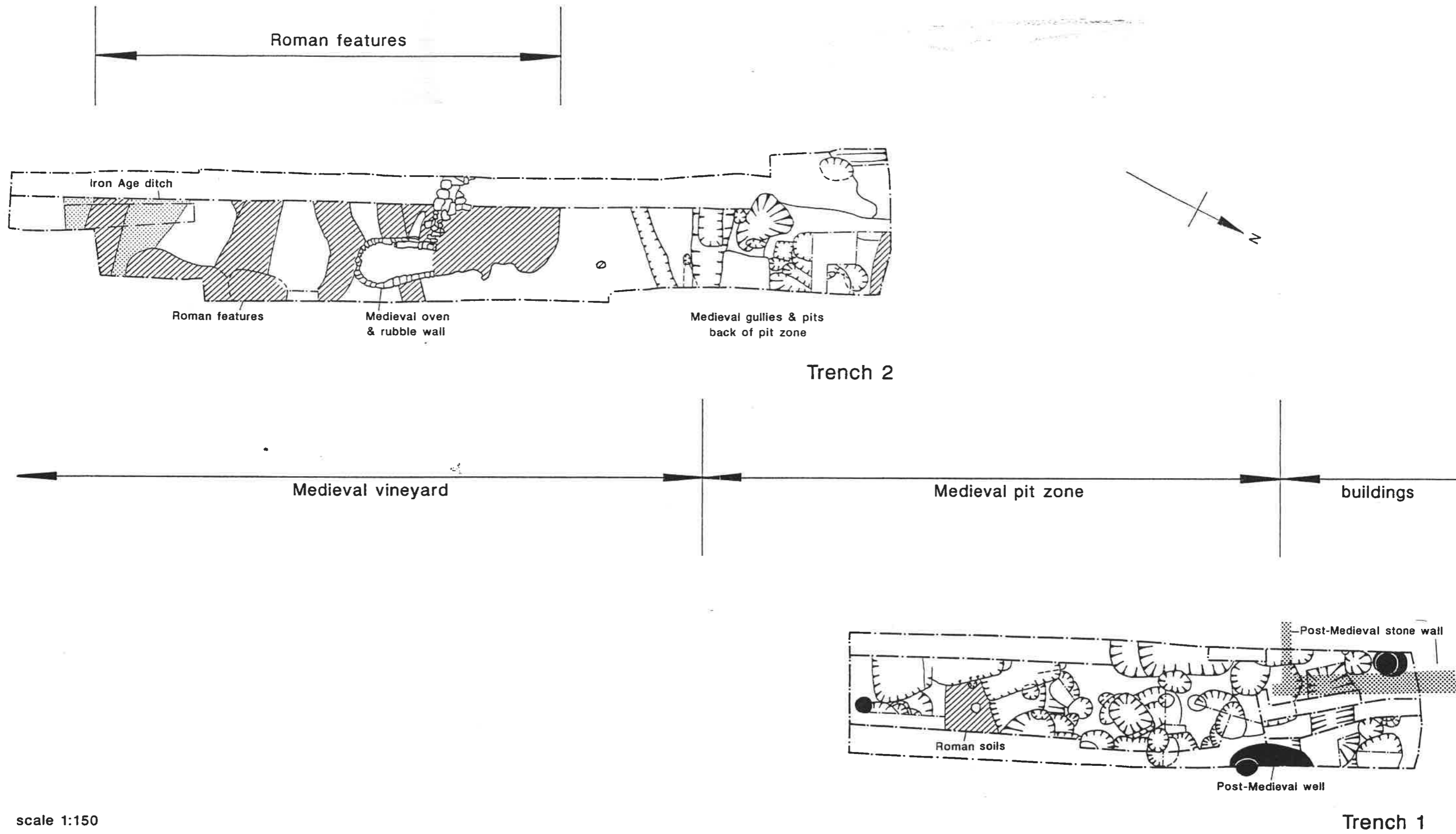


figure 1



scale 1:150

Trench 1

figure 2

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