

# Dorchester Abbey Church Oxfordshire

## Archaeological Watching Brief Report



**Oxford Archaeology**

September 2003

**Client: Martin Ashley Architects**

Issue N<sup>o</sup>: 1

OA Job N<sup>o</sup>: 986

NGR: SU 579 943

**Client Name:** Martin Ashley Architects  
**Client Ref No:** N/A  
**Document Title:** Dorchester Abbey Church, Oxfordshire  
**Document Type:** Watching Brief  
**Issue Number:** 1  
National Grid Reference: SU 579 943  
Planning Reference: NN 0000 0000  
OA Job Number: 986  
Site Code: DORABB 99  
Invoice Code: DORABBWB  
Receiving Museum: Oxfordshire County Museums Service  
Museum Accession No: OXCMS 1999.200

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Document File Location \\server1\projects\DORABB\_Dorchester Abbey wb\OA  
Watching Brief Report Dorchester Abbey Church.doc  
Graphics File Location Server10/oaupubs/oaupubs\_A-H/D\_codes on server  
10\*DORABBWB\*Dorchester Abbey  
Church\*ACT04.12.02  
Illustrated by Amy Tiffany Hemingway & Amy Charlotte Tucker

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## SUMMARY

*In November 1999 Oxford Archaeology (OA) carried out an archaeological watching brief at Dorchester Abby Church, Oxfordshire (NGR SU 579 943). The work was commissioned by Martin Ashley Architects in advance of various works inside the church and outside in the graveyard. The watching brief revealed limited, but interesting archaeology, including evidence of possible Roman occupation on the site as well as a stone foundation which may represent the foundation to the nave wall of the north choir aisle of St Birinus's Chapel.*

### 1 INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1 Location and scope of work

- 1.1.1 In November 1999 Oxford Archaeology (OA) carried out an archaeological watching brief at Dorchester Abbey Church, Oxfordshire. The work was commissioned by Martin Ashley Architects in respect of various works both inside and outside of the church.
- 1.1.2 A project brief was set by Paul Smith, County Archaeological Officer for Oxford County Council.
- 1.1.3 OA prepared a Written Scheme of Investigation detailing how it would meet the requirements of the brief.

#### 1.2 Geology and topography

- 1.2.1 The proposed development is situated in the churchyard of the Abbey Church of St Peter and St Paul, Dorchester Oxon, as well as in the interior of the church. The church lies on the natural gravel of the Thames Valley at around 49 m OD.

#### 1.3 Archaeological and historical background.

- 1.3.1 The archaeological background to the watching brief was prepared for the WSI for the project (OA 1999). A more detailed history is included below.
- 1.3.2 Dorchester has been a centre of Christianity for nearly fourteen centuries. It came to prominence as a religious centre in 635 AD when Oswald of Northumbria, overlord of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms and a Christian king, met the Pagan king Cynegils of Wessex near Dorchester. The two kings not only celebrated the marriage of Cynegils' daughter to Oswald, but also Cynegils' baptism by a missionary bishop named Birinus. According to the eighth century historian Bede the two kings gave Birinus the city of Dorchester, then called Doric, for his episcopal see. Hence Birinus built a church in the city in the mid-7th century. It has been asserted that the present church is possibly situated on the site of Birinus' first Saxon Cathedral. Birinus was buried in Dorchester in 650 and had sainthood bestowed on him posthumously. However, in 660's, when war seemed imminent with the northern Kingdom of Mercia the episcopal see was moved to the relative safety of Winchester in the south. At a later point the relics of St Birinus were taken there.

- 1.3.3 The church at Dorchester became part of the diocese of Leicester, being served by secular canons for the next century or so, until the Danes invaded West Mercia. At this time the bishoprics of Leicester and Lindsey were dismantled and in 869 AD Dorchester again became the seat for a vast Mercian see, stretching from the Thames to the Humber.
- 1.3.4 The last Saxon bishop of Dorchester, Wulfwig died in 1067. He was succeeded by the only Norman bishop of Dorchester, Remigius who moved the seat of the see to Lincoln. The church at Dorchester was once again served by secular canons until 1140 when Alexander of Lincoln refounded the church as an abbey of Augustinian Canons. A new church was constructed in the transitional Norman style, a cruciform plan, without aisles. The west end of the Norman church is the nave of today's abbey church.
- 1.3.5 In 1225 the tomb of St Birinus was opened, making the abbey a popular place of pilgrimage. This initiated an extensive programme of rebuilding with the addition of the north choir aisle, which included an intricately carved marble shrine for the saint, added around 1320. Later this was moved westward to create the south nave aisle, now the People's Chapel. In the final phase of building, around 1340, the chancel was extended by one bay; this area is the present day sanctuary. The south porch was added in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and in 1602 a new tower was built incorporating older material.
- 1.3.6 The church flourished until 1536, during the reign of Henry VIII when the abbey was dissolved and the shrine destroyed. Richard Beauforest 'a great riche man' of Dorchester bought the monastic parts of the church so that the people of his parish could use them. The site has been the centre of worship for the inhabitants of Dorchester ever since.
- 1.3.7 Digging in the area west of the church in the 17th century is said to have uncovered several burial vaults. However, the only published modern excavation to have taken place was that of Cunningham & Banks in 1960-62, which took the form of three trenches cut into the open ground immediately to the north of the nave, attempting to define the extent of the abbey cloister. The excavation also located what could be Saxon burials, and significant deposits possibly relating to the Roman settlement.
- 1.3.8 In late 1999 and early 2000, Ground Probing Radar surveys (GPR) were carried out over the footprint of the proposed Pentice store, and over extensive parts of the interior. A considerable number of graves and vaults were identified together with probable wall foundations and areas of complex deposits likely to be archaeological in character. Some of these deposits may relate to parts of destroyed Saxon and Norman structures, predating the extant church building.

## **2 PROJECT AIMS AND METHODOLOGY**

### **2.3 Aims**

- 2.3.1 To identify and record the presence/absence, extent, condition, quality and date of archaeological remains in the areas affected by the development.
- 2.3.2 To make available the results of the archaeological investigation.

## 2.4 Methodology

- 2.4.1 The various works to be carried out consisted of renovations inside and outside of the church. These included the re-siting of the original pulpit and the examination of a stone slab in the south porch within the church. An archaeologist, digging by hand, carried out the excavation work.
- 2.4.2 A watching brief was also carried out to observe for archaeological remains in the trenches for cabling for external floodlighting in the church grounds.
- 2.4.3 All archaeological features were planned at a scale of 1:100 and where excavated their sections drawn at scales of 1:20. All excavated features were photographed using colour slide and black and white print film. A general photographic record of the work was made. Recording followed procedures detailed in the *OAU Fieldwork Manual* (Ed D Wilkinson, 1992).

## 3 RESULTS

### 3.3 Description of deposits

#### 3.3.1 Re-siting of the original pulpit

- 3.3.2 A small pit (Fig. 2, test pit 1) measuring 1.20 m x 1.20 m x 0.16 m was excavated for the repositioning of the pulpit. This uncovered the remains of a wall (context 2) running parallel to the line of the main wall of the nave. Only one course of the wall was identified, constructed of irregular fragments of flint and stone bonded with a light brown silty clay loam. This wall is thought to represent an offset foundation to the nave wall of the north choir aisle of St Birinus's Chapel, which had been demolished to provide access to the north transept (Fig. 4).

- 3.3.3 The wall was set into a dark brown soil (context 4), which yielded a number of sherds of Roman pottery. This indicated Roman activity on the site and could provide evidence of a truncation of the land surface as there do not seem to be any deposits intervening between the Roman and Norman activities.

- 3.3.4 Overlying these was a light brown clay slit (context 3) with building debris relating to construction work in the church in the last century, this was sealed below the floorboards.

#### 3.3.5 Floor slab in the south porch

- 3.3.6 A large stone slab set in the floor of the south porch (Fig. 2) was examined to establish whether it could be an altar stone. Some cobbles adjacent to the southwest corner of this stone were lifted to expose a rough finish of the underside and a carved bevel. This suggested that the stone was a reused or unused lid from a table tomb.

#### 3.3.7 Cable trenches for external floodlighting

- 3.3.8 A series of trenches were excavated to the east, south and west of the church and along the pathways to the south and west. These were excavated by contractors and measured 0.30 m in width by 0.50 m in depth. At the south-east corner of the church where the trench cut through a relatively modern drainage trench a gravestone dating to 1671 was found in the backfill (Fig. 5, plan 2). To the south of the church a setting of stones was noted in the base of the trench, which appeared to be a kerb for a grave ledger stone. This is reasonable confirmation that the ground level to the south of the church has been raised by at least 0.5 m, probably in a deliberate episode of

clearance and make up, some considerable time after the church buildings were originally constructed. The rest of the trench was conspicuously devoid of finds, even bone, a fact that further supports the theory that much of this soil may have been imported.

- 3.3.9 As part of the cable works a pit was dug against the north wall of the church tower (Fig. 2, test pit 2) to feed the cables into the building. This allowed the examination of the tower wall elevation (Fig. 4). It was observed that the tower was built on an off set stone foundation (context 11) which protruded 0.35 m from the wall and was located at a depth of 1 m below present ground level. There was also a marked change 0.30 m below ground level, from large, irregular stone blocks to smaller, rectangular and evenly coursed blocks, which then continued above ground (contexts 12 and 13). The lower blocks are most likely to be a foundation which was always intended to be hidden and the mortar appears to be the same, arguing against the demolition of a possible earlier tower and reuse of its base to build the present structure, although the presence of earlier structural elements cannot be ruled out. Adjacent to the off set stones was an area of trampled mortar (context 10) indicating that the area had been 'open' at the time of construction and that the tower was not built in a narrow trench. The deposits against the tower wall (context 9) consist of mortar and stone debris probably the product of construction and either formed as the tower was built or dumped in a deliberate back filling exercise.

### 3.4 Finds

- 3.4.1 A total of eight sherds of Roman pottery were found, all within the same context (4). These were analysed and were dated to between AD 250-400. Three shards were identified to be Oxford colour coated ware, which was only made after c. AD 250. Three pieces of grey ware were also identified contemporary in date to the Oxford colour coated ware. There were two pieces of earlier grey ware, thought to be residual.

### 3.5 Palaeo-environmental remains

- 3.5.1 No environmental samples were taken from the site.

## 4 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

### 4.1 Re-sitting of the original pulpit

- 1.1.1 It is possible that that the stone structure that was revealed in test pit 1 was part of the nave wall of the north choir aisle of St Birinus's Chapel. This would concur with the diagram in *Dorchester Through The Ages* (Cook & Rowley, 1985) that indicates where the wall would have possibly existed. Although the wall found during the watching brief was situated slightly off the line of Cook and Rowley proposed wall this may simply indicate that the foundations for the wall were lot wider than the wall itself.
- 1.1.2 A number of sherds of Roman pottery were found in this trench that could be from the late Roman town inhabitation on the site, or from the later leveling of the site prior to the construction of the abbey.

## 4.2 Floor slab in the south porch

- 4.2.1 The large stone slab was investigated and thought to be possibly a reused or unused lid from a table tomb as, when lifted, the underside was seen to have a rough finish with a carved bevel edge.

## 4.3 Cable trenches for external floodlighting

- 4.3.1 In a relatively modern drainage trench, which was uncovered by the contractors a gravestone was found, which was inscribed with: 'Jonathan Lovegrove, August the 17<sup>th</sup> 1671'. It is probable that this gravestone was used to line the drainage ditch after being removed from its original setting when the churchyard was under development at some time since the 17<sup>th</sup> century. No other archaeological observations made as most of the works were within made up ground representing a raising of the original graveyard surface.



## APPENDICES

## APPENDIX 1 ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXT INVENTORY

<i>Context</i>	<i>Type</i>	<i>Comments</i>	<i> Finds</i>
1	Structure	Line of 7 roughly shaped building stones and 1 possibly reused gravestone.	None
2	Structure	Stone/ flint wall or foundation.	None
3	Layer	Compacted clay silt floor surface.	None
4	Layer	Loose clay silt layer with sparse inclusions of shell, charcoal fragments, small pieces of stone and a few shards of pot	3 shards of Roman pot, identified as: Oxford Colour Coated ware. 6 shards of grey ware Roman pottery.
5	Surface	Tarmac surface	None
6	Fill	Friable silty clay with a few pieces of small flint and brick pieces.	None
7	Cut	Trench cut for a drainage pipe.	None
8	Layer	General 'topsoil' spread, immediately under the tarmac surface.	None
9	Layer	Construction debris/ make up layer.	Ceramic Building Material
10	Surface	Compacted surface layer.	None
11	Structure	Stone/ mortar foundation for wall on the north side of the tower.	None
12	Structure	Stone/ mortar wall, irregular course of stones, running east - west sits on top of context 11.	None
13	Structure	Stone/ mortar wall, running east-west sits on top of context 12	None
14	Layer	General 'topsoil' type layer under the tarmac path.	None
15	Layer	Sand make-up layer for the tarmac path	None
16	Layer	General 'topsoil' type layer	None
17	Layer	Dark brown topsoil layer.	None
18	Structure	Gravestone, redeposited as part of the back fill in the drainage pipe trench.	Gravestone

## APPENDIX 2 BIBLIOGRAPHY AND REFERENCES

OA 1999 *Dorchester Abbey Church, Dorchester on Thames Written Scheme of Investigation*

D. Wilkinson, 1992, *OAU Fieldwork Manual*

Edward Clarke, 1990, *Dorchester Abbey, Oxfordshire*

Jean Cook & Trevor Rowley, 1985, *Dorchester Through The Ages*

**APPENDIX 3 SUMMARY OF SITE DETAILS****Site name:** Dorchester Abbey Church**Site code:** DORAB 99**Grid reference:** NGR SU 579 943**Type of watching brief:** Excavation of the new site for the re-sitting of the original pulpit. Examination of the stone slab in the south porch. Observation for archaeological remains in the trenches for cabling for the external floodlights.**Date and duration of project:** 15<sup>th</sup>, 16<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup>, 22<sup>nd</sup>, 25<sup>th</sup>, November 1999, 6<sup>th</sup> December 1999, and 26<sup>th</sup> January 2000.**Area of site:****Summary of results:** Discovery of a section of wall foundation possibly relating to the nave wall of the north choir aisle of St Birinus's Chapel. Several shards of Roman pottery were also discovered.**Location of archive:** The archive is currently held at OA, Janus House, Osney Mead, Oxford, OX2 0ES, and will be deposited with Oxfordshire County Museums Service in due course, under the following accession number: OXCMS 1999.200



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Figure 1: Site location

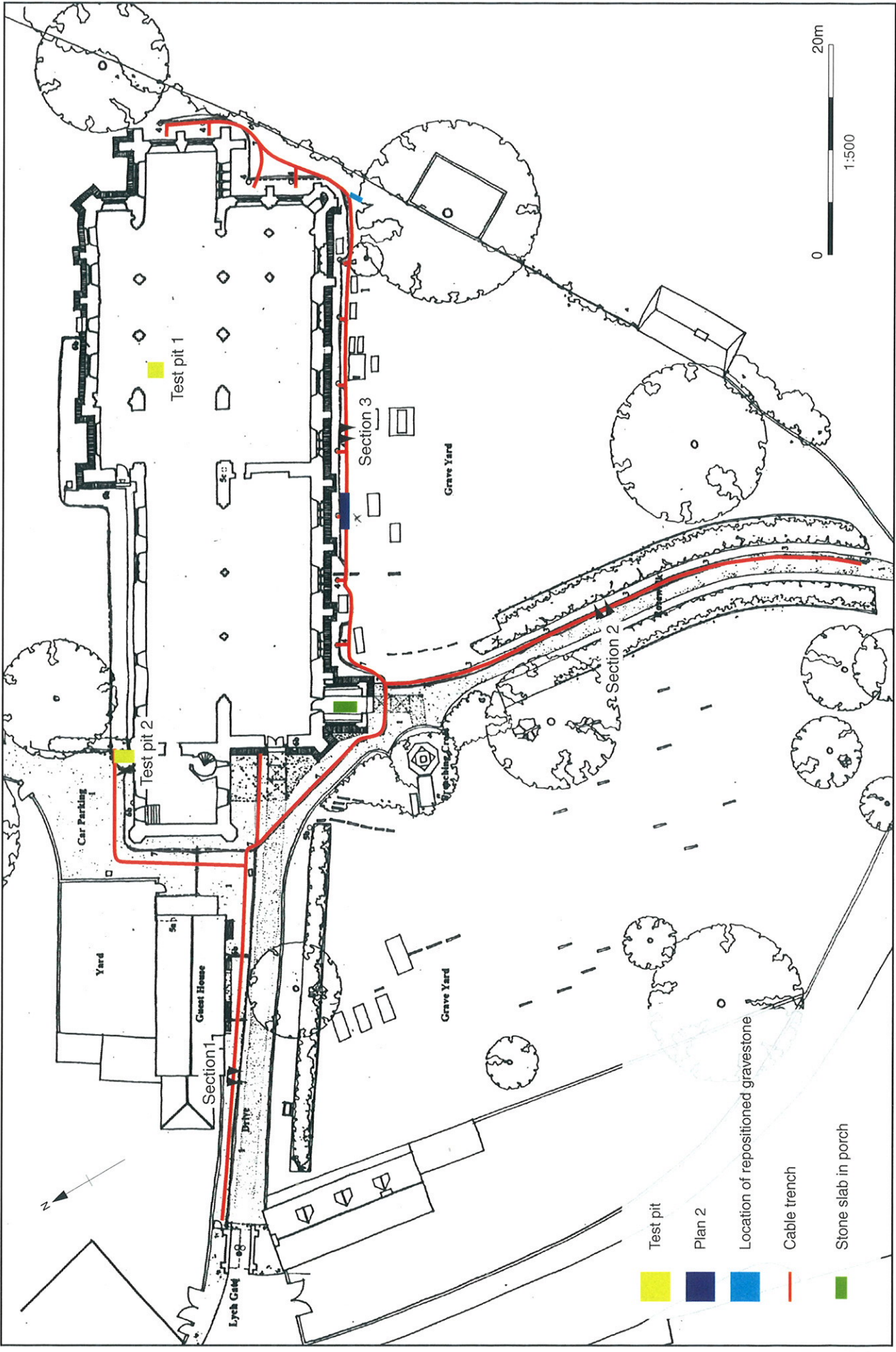
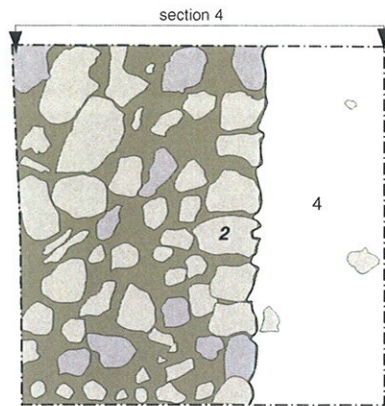
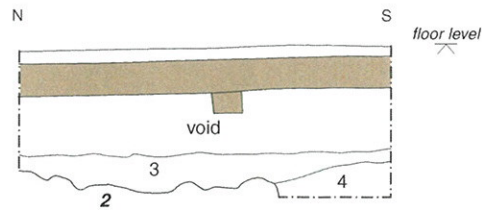


Figure 2: Site plan

### Plan 1



### Section 4



-  Flint
-  Stone
-  Mortar
-  Timber floor structure



Figure 3: Plan 1 and Section 4

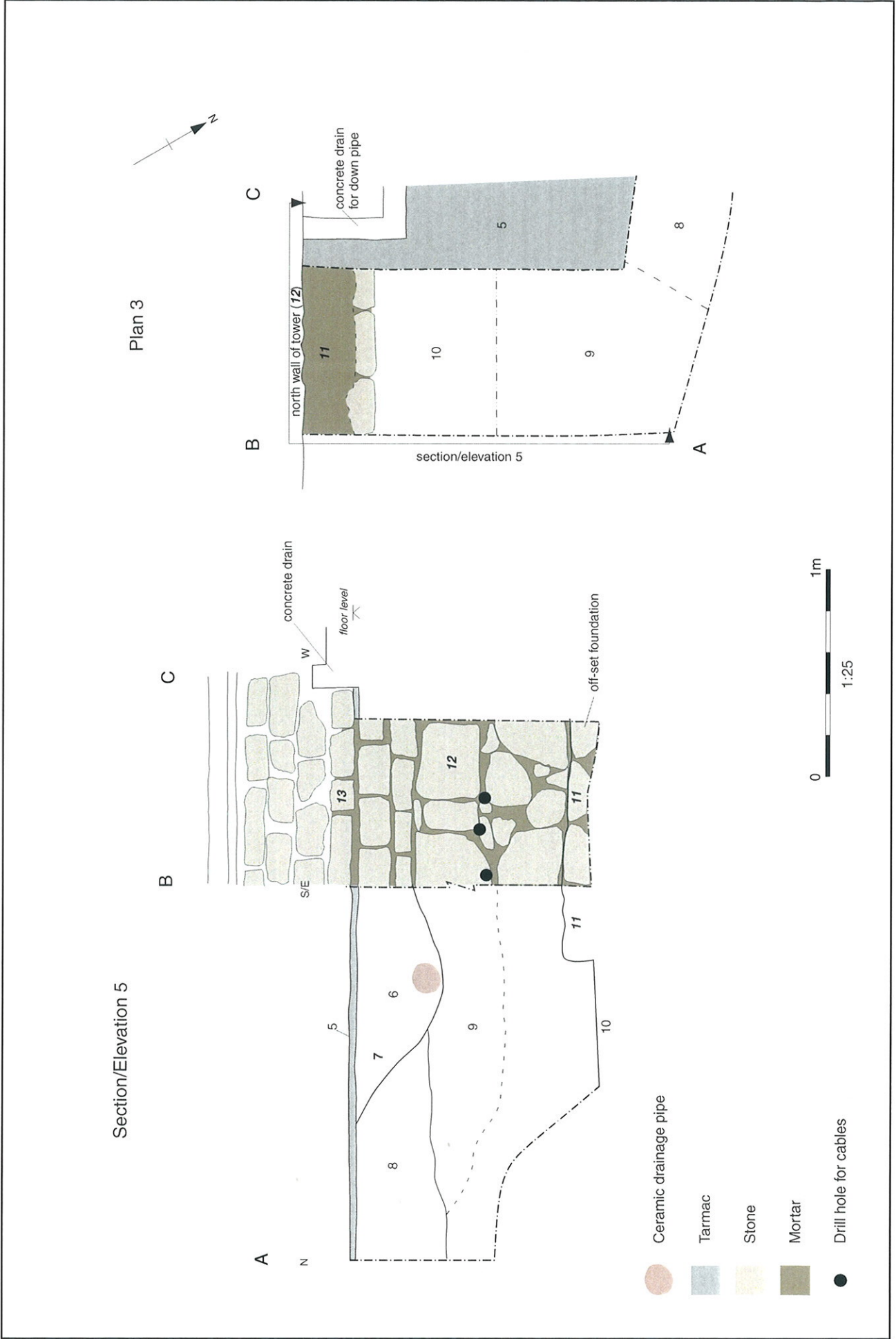


Figure 4: Section/Elevation 5 and Plan 3

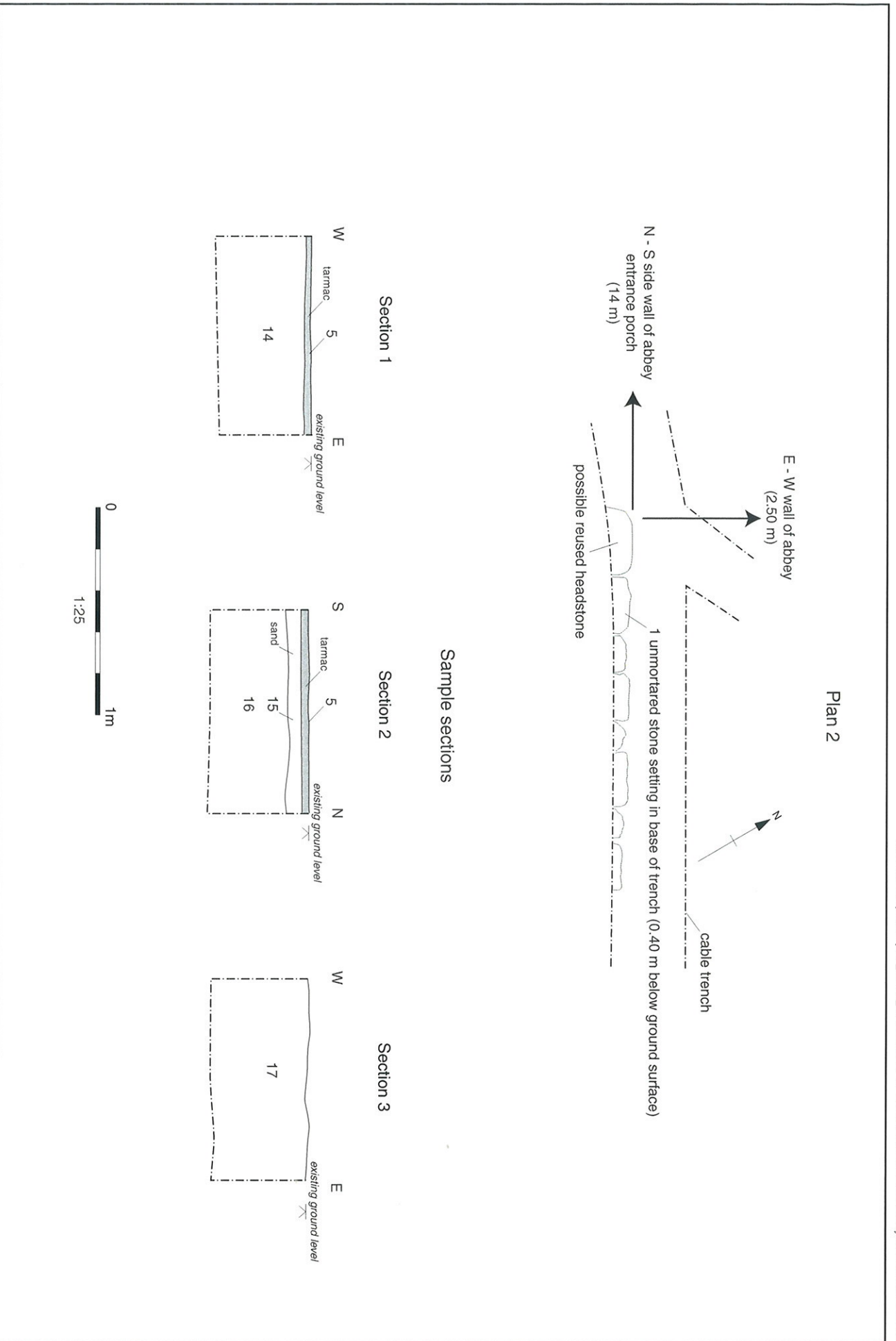














Figure 5: Plan 2 and sample sections 1 - 3

	Section line and number
	Interior section line and number
	Limit of excavation
	Sondage / Interior limit of excavation
	Fill line and number
	Cut line and number
	Structure number
	Unclear boundary
	Stones
	Hachures indicate inclination of slope inside excavated feature
	Levels
	Grid point





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