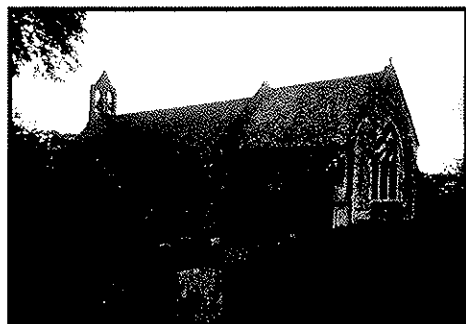


St Thomas Church Elsfield Oxfordshire



Archaeological Watching Brief



Oxford Archaeology

16th July 2002

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for Parochial Church Council**

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SUMMARY

In June and July 2002 Oxford Archaeology (OA) carried out an archaeological watching brief at St Thomas Church, Elsfield, Oxfordshire (NGR SP 5407 0998). The work was commissioned by Carden & Godfrey Architects for the Church Parish Council in advance of the construction of a new extension on the north side of the church. The watching brief revealed a minimum of ten burials, the earliest of which dated to the early medieval period, with inhumations continuing on the north side of the church until the early 20th century. All human bones excavated have been set aside safely inside the church, to be re-interred by the church authorities. Evidence in the form of construction debris was found for the mid-Victorian restoration.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Location and scope of work

1.1.1 In June and July 2002 Oxford Archaeology (OA) carried out an archaeological watching brief at St Thomas Church, Elsfield, Oxfordshire (Fig. 1). The work was commissioned by Carden & Godfrey Architects for the Parochial Church Council in respect of a planning application for an extension on the north side of the church at its west end with associated drainage.

1.1.2 Discussions were held between Julian Munby the Archaeological Advisor for the Diocese of Oxford, Paul Smith, County Archaeological Officer and OA as to the best form of archaeological mitigation for the development.

1.1.3 The conclusion reached was that an intensive watching brief was to be maintained during all groundworks likely to affect archaeological deposits and human remains. Any human remains excavated were to be set aside out of sight in the church, for reburial at a later date by the Church.

1.2 Geology and topography

1.2.1 The site lies on sand of Beckley Sand Member over sandstone of Temple Cowley Member at 105 m above OD (British Geological Survey, Thame, Sheet 237).

1.3 Archaeological and historical background

1.3.1 The archaeological background to the watching brief was prepared for the Archaeological Evaluation of the site of the proposed development (OAU 1999) and is reproduced below. The evaluation was undertaken to determine the extent and condition of burials and other archaeological features and deposits within the area of development, and revealed evidence of at least two inhumations.

1.3.2 The Church of St. Thomas of Canterbury is an aisle-less church with chancel, nave and a modern west bellcote. The church is thought to date to the 12th century, though the first reference to a church in Elsfield itself comes from a charter of Robert d'Oilley in the time of William the Conqueror.

- 1.3.3 Of the earliest identifiable structure, only the late 12th century chancel arch remains. The church was rebuilt and re-dedicated (to St Thomas) in the late 13th century. Its layout has remained essentially unchanged, although there is some historical evidence for a late medieval aisle or chantry chapel attached to the north side of the nave, suggested by the survival of elements of two large arcade arches and one small one incorporated into the fabric of the north wall of the nave. These remains were visible until the restoration of 1849. (See *de Vere* 1981, 1-2, and *Clark* 1957, 121-122.).
- 1.3.4 A full restoration was undertaken here in 1849, which endeavoured to restore the essential Early English character to the church. G.E. Street restored the floors and seats in 1859 (*Pevsner and Sherwood, 1974, 591-2*).

2 PROJECT AIMS AND METHODOLOGY

2.1 Aims

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

2.2 Methodology

- 2.2.1 The area of the extension was topsoil-stripped by a mini excavator to a depth of 0.3 m below the surface. Then five holes for concrete pad foundations were excavated and the concrete poured. After this, the shallow trenches between the pads for the concrete beams were excavated (Figs 2 & 3).
- 2.2.2 A service trench for drainage was excavated northwards from the extension to a manhole. The trench was extended to a large manhole in the north-west corner of the graveyard, from which the trench continued to join the main drain in the road. A trench for a French drain was excavated around the vestry and the extension. This then ran from a manhole northwards into two 3 m deep soakaways against the north boundary of the grave yard (Fig. 2 & 4).
- 2.2.3 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

3.1 Description of deposits

Excavations for Foundation Pads and Beams (Sections 1, 2, 3 and 4)

- 3.1.1 Following removal of a 0.3 m thick layer of dark greyish brown silty sand loam topsoil (1), a layer of yellowish brown silty clay loam (28) at the east end of site was

- exposed. This was the material spread out from the construction of the vestry and boiler room in the 19th century. The layer had been cut by two graves (17 & 18). Both graves were rectangular in shape with vertical sides and flat bases. Grave 17 measured 2.2 m x 0.64 m x 1.1 m and was filled with a dark brown silty sand (20) with patches of yellowish brown silty sand and clay, which overlay the remains of a coffin. Grave 18 measured 1.2 m x 0.55 m x 0.75 m and was filled with dark grey silty sand with yellow/brown clay and sand (19) overlying a coffin (Figs 3 & 5, sections 3 & 4).
- 3.1.2 Below the construction spread (28) and topsoil (1) was a 0.2 – 3 m thick layer of general graveyard soil comprising dark brown silty sand (14). It had been cut by a number of graves and also sealed a number of graves. This layer overlay the natural of dark yellowish brown silty sand (9).
- 3.1.3 The later dating graves cut through the old grave yard topsoil (14) and these consisted of graves 17 & 18 (see above) and grave 22. This grave was “coffin” shaped with vertical sides, the base of which lay below impact level. It measured 2.1 m x 0.5 m x 0.5 m and was filled by an orange brown silty clay (23). Also revealed was grave 12, which was observed in south side of foundation pad hole 2. It had vertical sides and flat base and measured 1.4 m x 0.1 m x 0.71 m. It was filled by a dark brown silty sand (13) (Figs 3 & 5, section 2) and contained the remains of one Elizabeth Clarke, who had died in 1914.
- 3.1.4 In the north side of pad hole 1 was a grave cut (4) with vertical sides and flat base. It measured 1.4 m x 0.2 m x 1.2 m and contained two fills. The upper fill was a mid-brown silty sand (2) over a dark brown silty sand (3) (Figs 3 & 5, Section 1).
- 3.1.5 The remaining graves noted in this stage of the excavations were sealed below the old topsoil (14) and some had been cut by the later graves. These consisted of grave 15 (which had been cut by grave 17) and which measured 1.1 m x 0.28 m x 1.3 m with vertical sides rounding to a flat base. It contained the lower half of a skeleton in a matrix fill of dark brown silty sand (16), from which a nail and two pieces of pottery were recovered. Grave 10 was a rectangular cut with vertical sides and flat base that measured 1.4 m x 0.54 m x 0.76 m. It was filled by a dark brown silty sand (11) with the remains of both a skeleton and a coffin. This grave cut through an earlier grave 26 (which had also been cut by grave 22).
- 3.1.6 Grave 26 was rectangular in shape with vertical sides and flat base and measured 1.2 m x 0.5 m x 0.5 m. It was filled with a dark reddish brown silty sand (27) and the remains of a skeleton (Figs 3 & 5).
- 3.1.7 Grave 24 had been cut by later graves (22 & 26) and had vertical sides, though the base lay below impact level. It measured 1.7 m x 0.4 m x 0.5 m. It was filled by dark brown silty sand (25) with fragments of charnel. It cut grave 5, which measured 0.5 m x 0.6 m x 0.7 m and was filled by a dark brown silty sand (6) the with remains of a skeleton. It was also cut by Grave (7), which was only seen in section to have vertical sides and flat base. It was filled by a mid brown silty sand (8) with remains of a

skeleton. In the north side of pad hole 1 was a grave cut (4) with vertical sides and flat base (Fig 3 & 5, section 1).

- 3.1.8 Where the new extension joined the north wall of the church a foundation hole 1.1 m x 0.9 m x 2 m was excavated. It cut through the 19th century drain and brick ducting for the former under floor heating system and also exposed the foundation trench for the church wall (21). The foundation trench had a vertical side and flat base and contained a footing of limestone rubble and coarse sandy mortar on which the upper part of the church wall was built (Fig 5, section 4).

Service Trench (Section 8)

- 3.1.9 A drain and service trench was excavated from the new extension north across the graveyard and along the boundary westwards to join the drain in the road. This was 0.4 m wide and cut to a depth of 0.75 – 0.9 m. It exposed two graves (30 & 32) with each having vertical sides and flat bases. Only 0.4 m of their lengths were exposed, but each grave was 0.6 m wide and 0.8 m in depth. They were filled by a dark reddish brown silty sand (31 & 33) with the remains of skeletons (Fig. 4).
- 3.1.10 Where the trench ran along the northern boundary of the graveyard it exposed a 0.2 m - 0.6 m thick layer of dark brown silty sand (29) subsoil with fragments of stone, which was thicker near the edge of the slope north-west of the church. This had been sealed below the old graveyard topsoil horizon (14) and overlay the natural (9) (Fig 5, section 8).

Soakaway and pipe trench (Sections 5, 6 and 7)

- 3.1.11 A drain was excavated from the vestry and around the limit of the new extension. From the extension it went across to a soakaway at the north boundary of the graveyard. The trench was 0.4 m wide and varied in depth from 0.3 m to 1.1 m and cut through layers 1, 28, 14, and 29. No grave cuts were visible except where the pipe trench entered the soakaway hole. The soakaway hole measured 1.5 m x 2 m x 3 m and contained two concrete soakaways (Fig. 2).
- 3.1.12 In the south-east corner of the hole a grave (34) was exposed. This grave had a vertical side and flat base (measuring 1.2 m x 0.3 m x 1.2 m) and was filled by an orange brown silty sand (35) with a skeleton remains in grave base. It had been cut by a later grave (36) seen in the section of the pipe trench, which had vertical sides and flat base and was 0.5 m wide and 0.9 m deep. It was filled by a dark reddish brown silty sand (37) with skeleton remains in the base (Figs 4 & 5, sections 5 & 7).

New Doorway

- 3.1.13 A new doorway was cut through the north wall of the church into the new extension. It was 2.8 m high and 1.4 m wide and cut through the wall which at this point consisted of a rough sandstone block face with rubble core, bonded with a light brown sandy mortar. The inside of the wall was covered with a 0.02 m thick layer of plaster (Fig. 3).

3.2 Finds

- 3.2.1 The finds from watching brief were limited and consisted of two fragments of pottery and a nail from the fill of grave (15), the coffin handles from grave 10 and the coffin handle and a copper plaque from grave 12.
- 3.2.2 The coffin handle from grave 10 dates from the early to mid 19th century (Reeve and Adams 1993). The coffin handle from grave 12 is dated by association with the plaque from grave 12, which read as follows:

ELIZABETH CLARKE

BORN

1st MAY 1825

DIED

21st FEBRUARY 1914

- 3.2.3 The pottery comprised two sherds with a total weight of 7g. Both occurred in context 16, and are plain bodysherds in early medieval Oxford ware, classified as fabric OXY in the Oxford type series (Mellor 1994). The material is dated to the later 11th – mid 14th century.

3.3 Palaeo-environmental remains

- 3.3.1 No environmental samples were taken during the watching brief.

4 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

- 4.1.1 The results from the watching brief exposed a number of graves dating from the early medieval period up to the early 20th century. This has confirmed that the area of new development had historically been used for burials from the early medieval period and onwards. The presence of inter-cutting graves indicates that pressure for space in the churchyard posed problems for successive generations of grave diggers.
- 4.1.2 There was no construction or structural evidence on the site for a late medieval aisle or chantry chapel attached to the north side as Pevsner has speculated based on the documentary and structural evidence. It may be that any such structure was removed wholesale by the Victorians, to accommodate more burials north of the church.
- 4.1.3 The fact that graves were cut into the construction deposit associated with 19th century rebuild indicates that burials on this site continued up to the turn of the last century, further confirmed by the coffin plate of 1914.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX I ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXT INVENTORY

| <i>Context</i> | <i>Type</i> | <i>Depth</i> | <i>Width</i> | <i>Length</i> | <i>Comments</i> | <i> Finds</i> |
|----------------|-------------|--------------|--------------|---------------|--|----------------------------------|
| 1 | Layer | 0.30 m | | | Topsoil of site | |
| 2 | Fill | | | | Upper fill of grave 4 | |
| 3 | Fill | | | | Lower fill of grave 4 | |
| 4 | Cut | 1.20 m | 0.20 | 1.40 m | Grave cut | |
| 5 | Cut | 0.70 m | | | Grave cut | |
| 6 | Fill | | | | Fill of grave 5 | |
| 7 | Cut | 0.9 m | 0.50 m | 0.30 m | Grave cut | |
| 8 | Fill | | | | Fill of grave 7 | |
| 9 | Natural | | | | Natural | |
| 10 | Cut | 0.76 m | 0.54 m | 1.40 m | Grave cut | |
| 11 | Fill | | | | Fill of grave 10 | Coffin handles |
| 12 | Cut | 0.71 m | 0.10 m | 1.40 m | Grave cut | |
| 13 | Fill | | | | Fill of grave 12 | Coffin fittings |
| 14 | Layer | 0.20 – 30 m | | | Old graveyard topsoil horizon | |
| 15 | Cut | 1.30 m | 0.28 m | 1.10 m | Grave cut | |
| 16 | Fill | | | | Fill of grave 15 | Two sherds of pottery and a nail |
| 17 | Cut | 1.10 m | 0.64 m | 2.20m | Grave cut | |
| 18 | Cut | 0.75 m | 0.55 m | 1.20 m | Grave cut | |
| 19 | Fill | | | | Fill of grave 18 | |
| 20 | Fill | | | | Fill of grave 17 | |
| 21 | Cut | 0.50 m | 0.20 m | 0.90 m | 13 th century Foundation cut for church | |
| 22 | Cut | 0.50 m | 0.50 m | 2.20 m | Grave cut | |
| 23 | Fill | | | | Fill of grave 22 | |
| 24 | Cut | 0.50 m | 0.40 m | 1.70 m | Grave cut | |
| 25 | Fill | | | | Fill of grave 24 | |
| 26 | Cut | 0.50 m | 0.50 m | 1.20 m | Grave cut | |
| 27 | Fill | | | | Fill of grave 26 | |

| Context | Type | Depth | Width | Length | Comments | Finds |
|---------|-------|---------------|--------|--------|--|-------|
| 28 | Layer | 0.40 m | | | 19 th century construction material layer | |
| 29 | Layer | 0.20 - 0.60 m | | | Sub soil below 14 and along north and west edge of graveyard | |
| 30 | Cut | 0.80 m | 0.60 m | 0.40 m | Grave cut | |
| 31 | Fill | | | | Fill of grave 30 | |
| 32 | Cut | 0.80 m | 0.60 m | 0.40 m | Grave cut | |
| 33 | Fill | | | | Fill of grave 32 | |
| 34 | Cut | 1.20 m | 0.30 m | 1.20 m | Grave cut | |
| 35 | Fill | | | | Fill of grave 34 | |
| 36 | Cut | 0.95 m | 0.50 m | 0.10 m | Grave cut | |
| 37 | Fill | | | | Fill of grave 36 | |

APPENDIX 2 BIBLIOGRAPHY AND REFERENCES

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J Reeve and M Adams, 1993 *The Spitalfields Project Volume 1-The Archaeology Across the Styx*. CBA Research Report

Mellor, M, 1994 Oxford Pottery: A Synthesis of middle and late Saxon, medieval and early post-medieval pottery in the Oxford Region, *Oxoniansia* 59, 17-217

APPENDIX 3 SUMMARY OF SITE DETAILS

Site name: St Thomas Church, Elsfield, Oxfordshire.

Site code: ELFTC 02

Grid reference: NGR SP 5407 0998

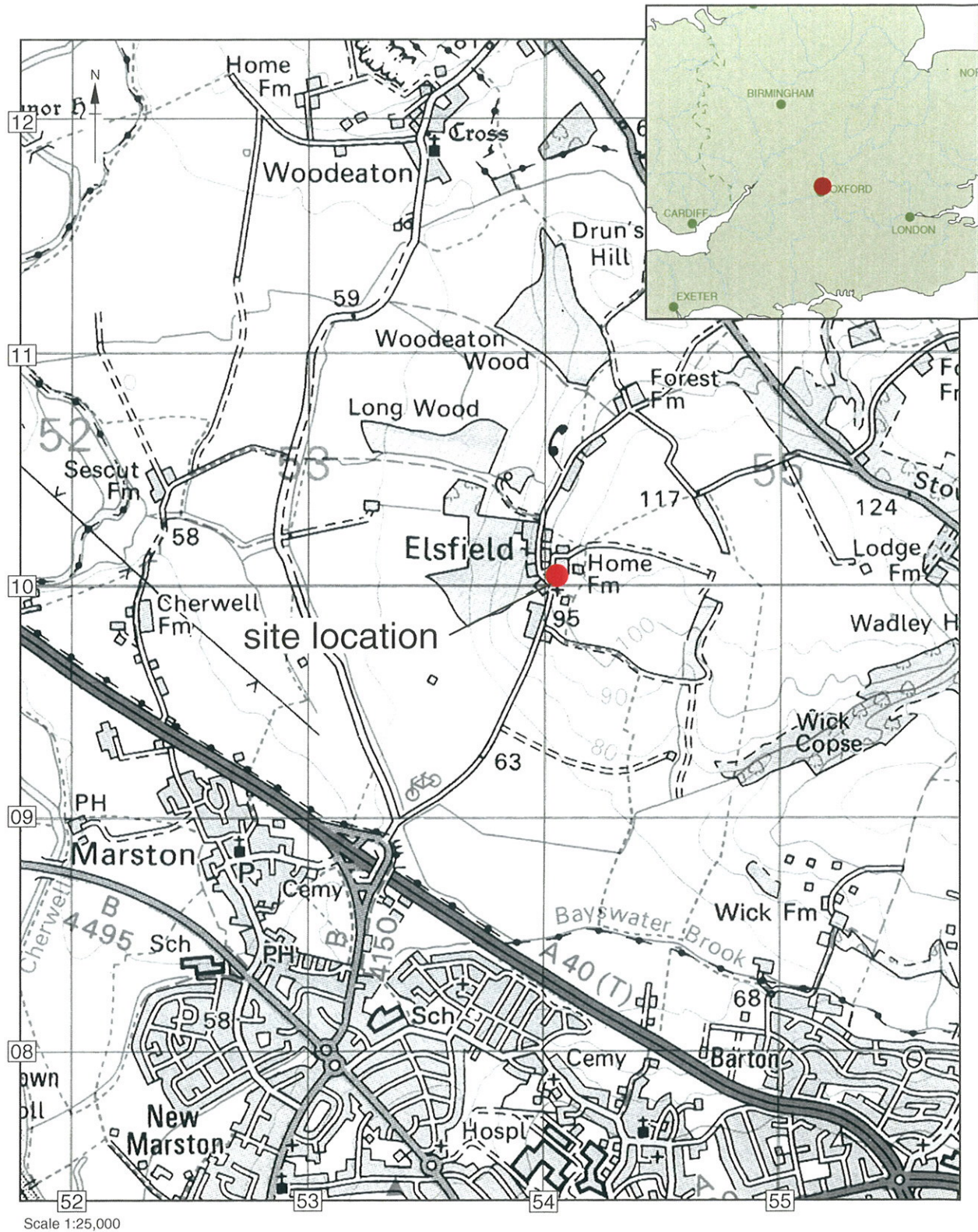
Type of watching brief: Ground work for the construction of new extension on north side of church and services.

Date and duration of project:

Area of site: A total twelve of site visits from 10/6/2002 to 12/7/2002.

Summary of results: The watching brief revealed continued burial activity from the early medieval period to the early 20th century.

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: 2002.121



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Figure 1: Site location

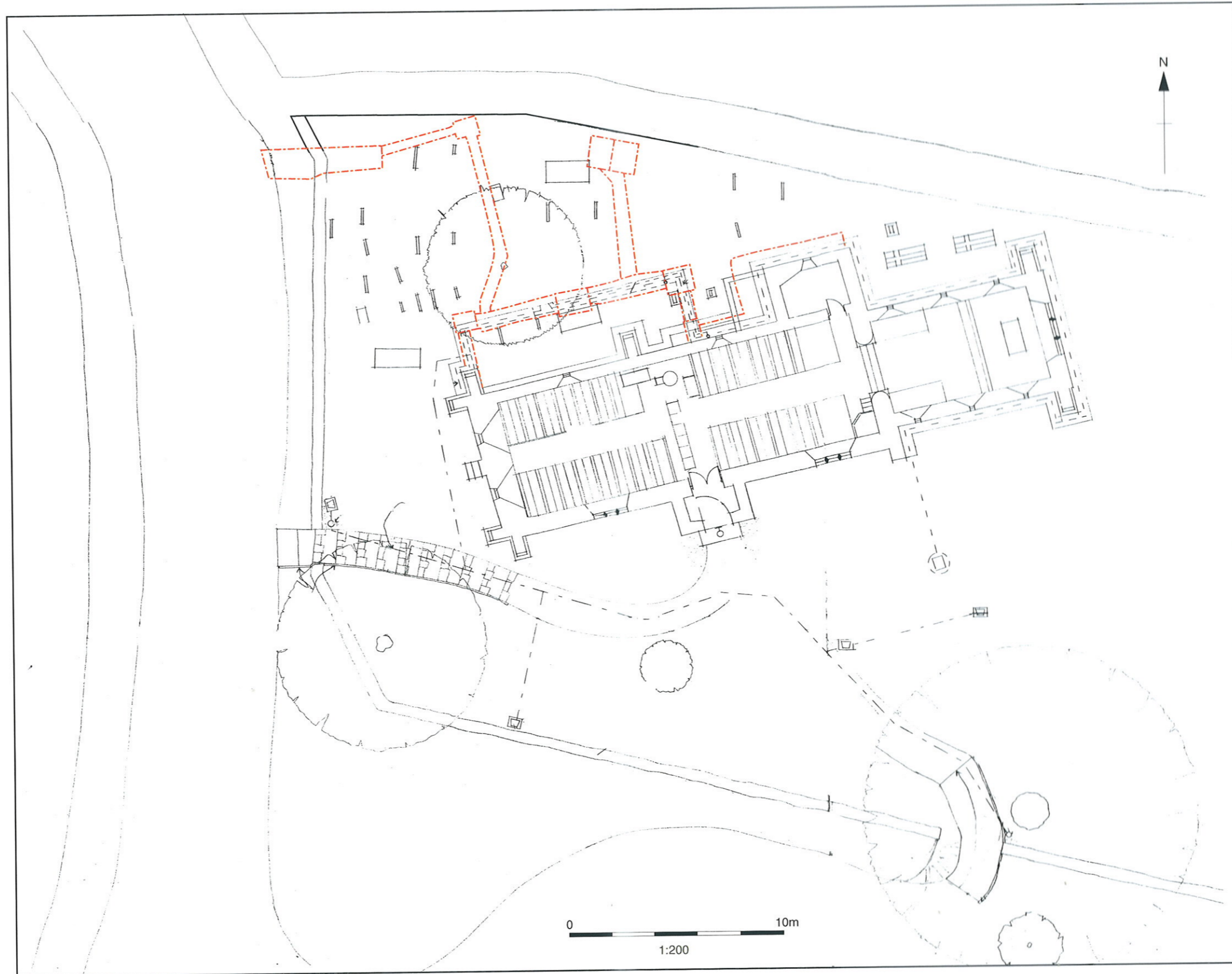
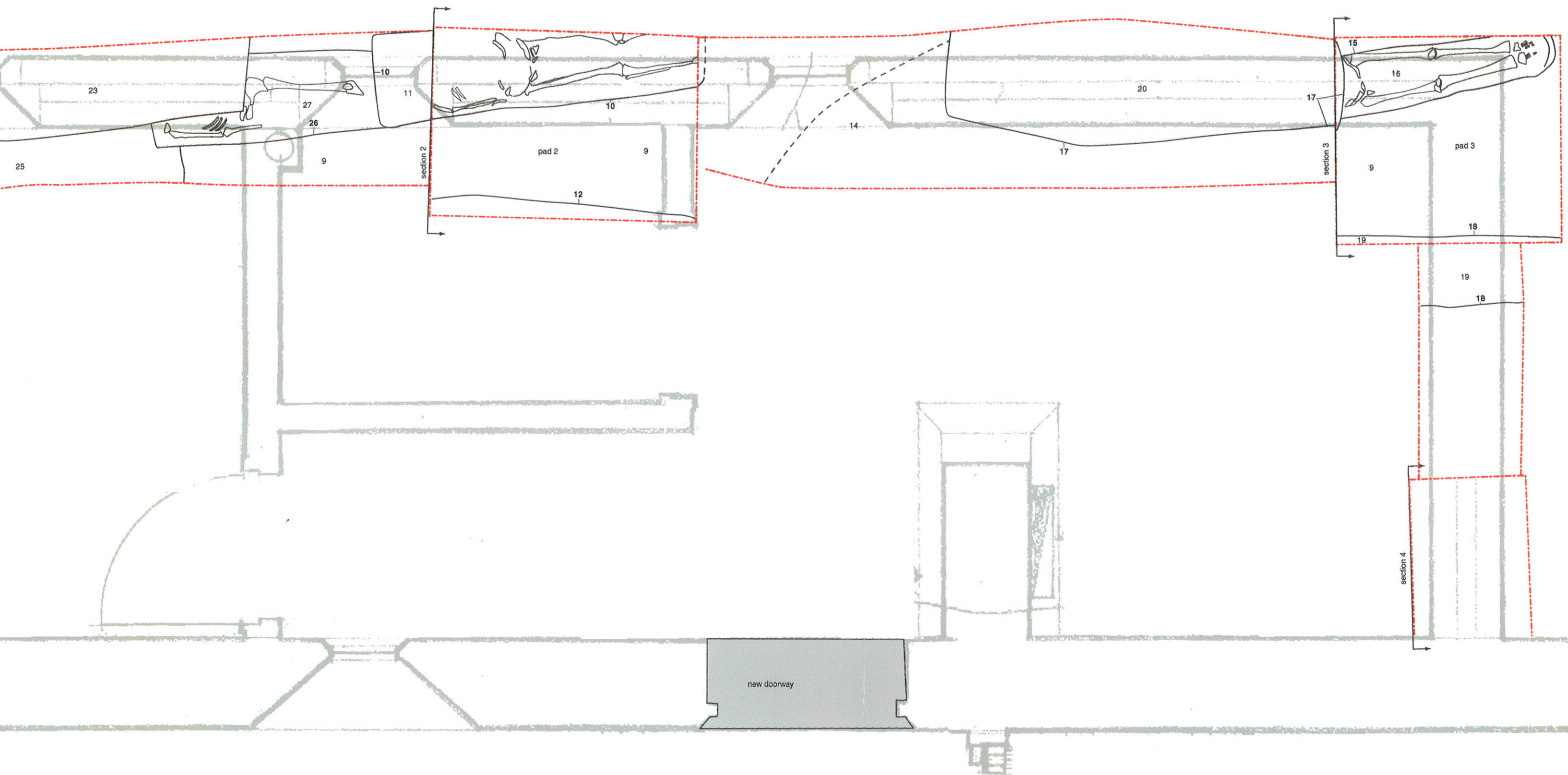


Figure 2 : Site Location, Route of Service Trench and Drain to Soakaway



1:20
1m

Figure 3 : Site Plan of Pads and Beams



section 1

pad 1

6

24

22

25

23



1:20

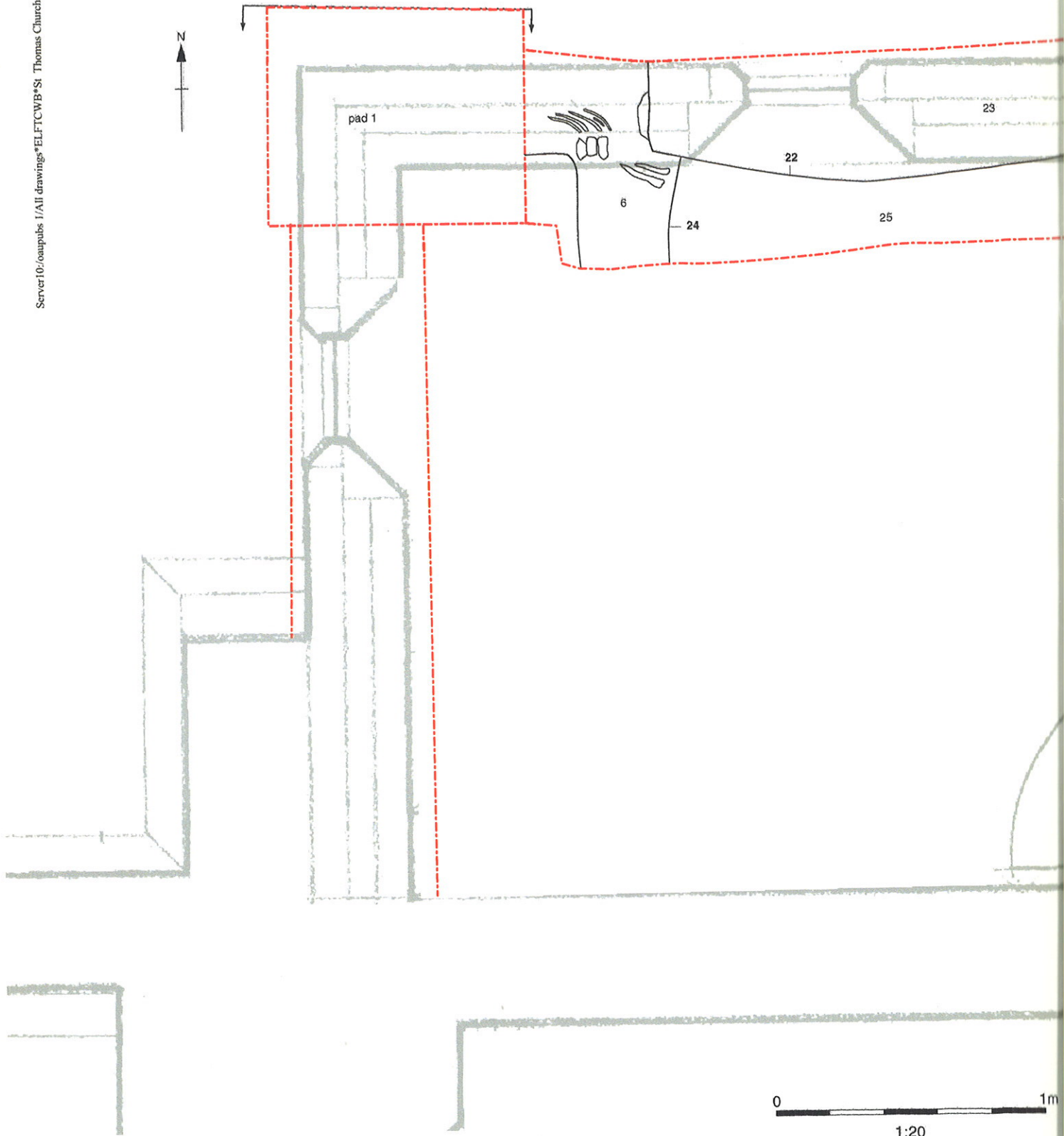




Figure 4 : Services Showing Cuts and Sections

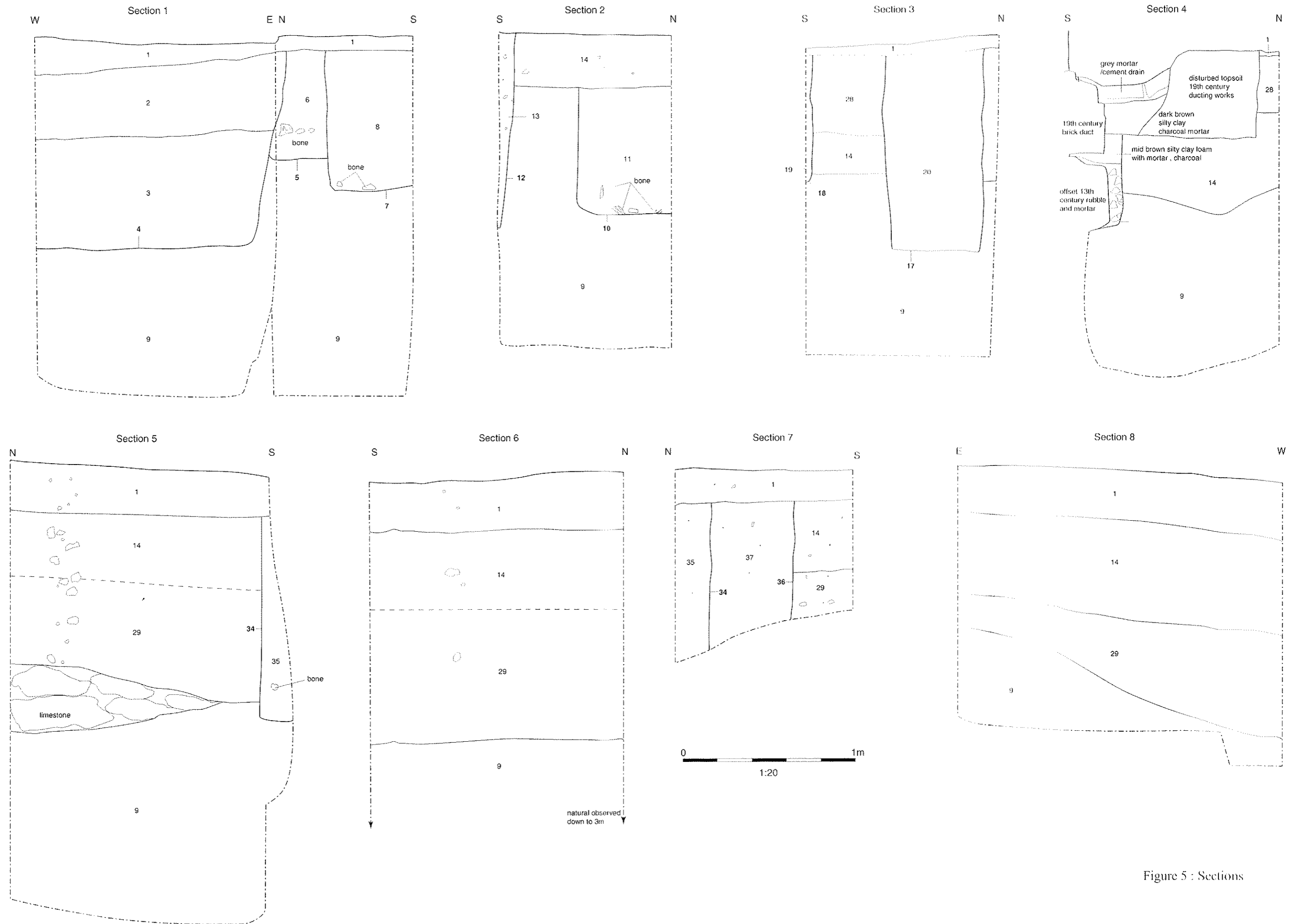
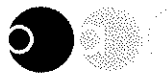


Figure 5 : Sections



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