

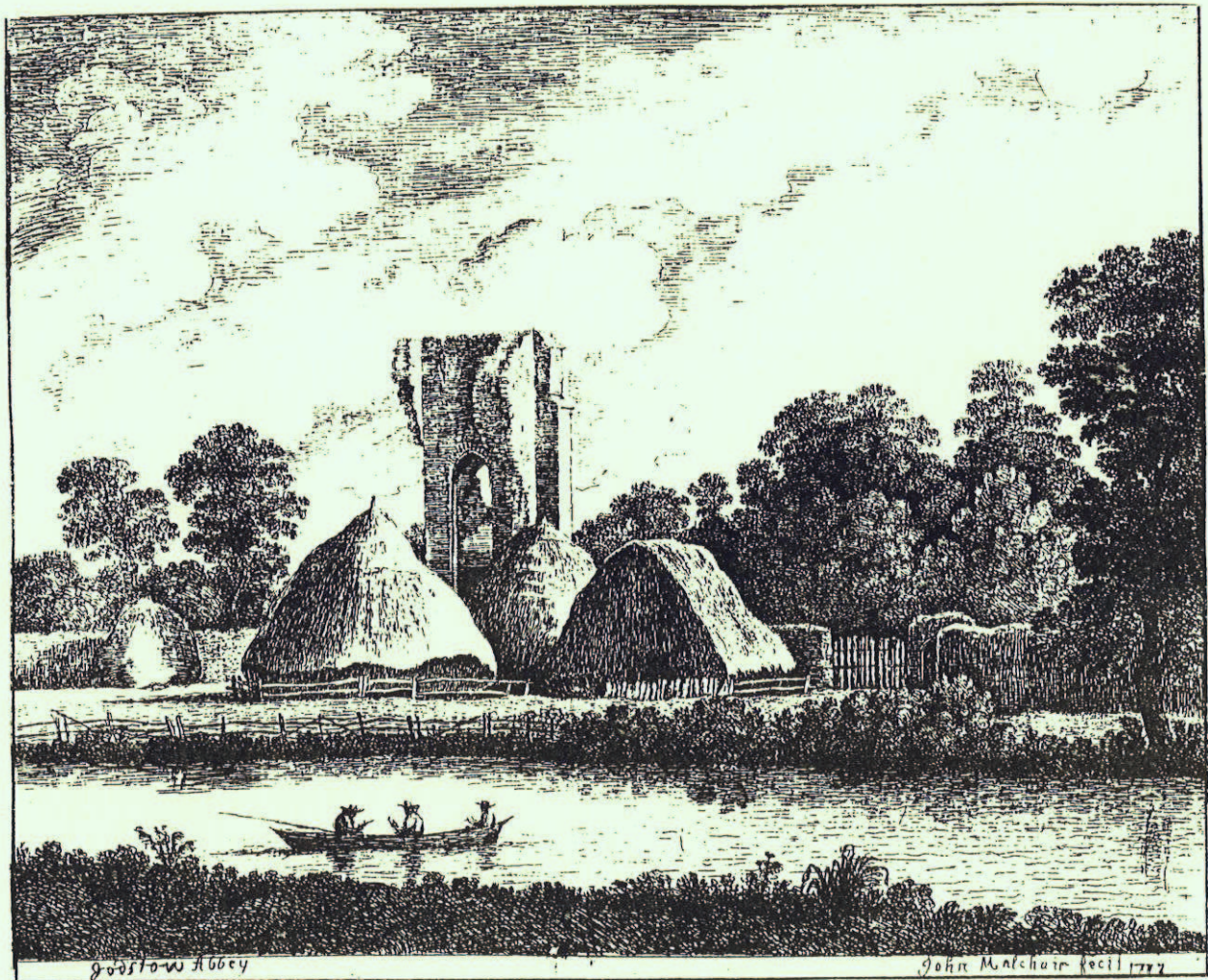
Environment Agency (EA)

## Godstow Weir Reconstruction Godstow, Oxford

NGR SP 484 091

### ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF REPORT

Planning Ref. No. 95/789/NF



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Prepared by: J Dalton/J Hiller

Date: July 2000

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Date: July 2000

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Date: 31/7/00

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## *Summary*

*During 1998 & 1999 the Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) undertook a watching brief at Godstow Weir, Godstow, Oxon (NGR SP 484 091). Deposits and features associated with the construction of the existing weir and the creation of the navigation cut and periodic dredging works were identified and recorded. The topography of deposits excavated at the north end of the island adjacent to the weir appeared to indicate that a greater volume of dredged material from the river had been redeposited on the west side of the island than on the east side, an event that may have occurred at the time of the construction of 'New Cut' in 1780 or during subsequent works. Clay and gravel river bed deposits were observed during the breaking out of the existing weir structure. No further archaeological evidence was recovered relating to the abbey buildings or grounds and no human remains were encountered.*

### **1 Introduction**

- 1.1 The development proposal (Planning Reference 95/789/NF) comprised the demolition and removal of the existing weir and the construction of a more substantial base and weir structure. The project formed part of the Environment Agency's rolling programme of improvements across the country.
- 1.2 The watching brief was commissioned by Peter Brett Associates on behalf of the Environment Agency (EA). It was undertaken to a brief set by and a WSI agreed with the Oxford Archaeological Advisory Service (OAAS) and English Heritage. The brief for the work was prepared on behalf of the City Council both in respect of the Planning Application and the Water Act of 1989 (Code of Practise for Conservation, Access and Recreation).

### **2 Background**

Note: this summary is based on a number of (mainly secondary) sources. The most important of these are Ganz 1972; RCHM 1939; VCH 1990.

- 2.1 Godstow Abbey stands in the north-west corner of the parish of Binsey, Oxford. It was founded in 1133 by Edith, widow of Sir William Launceline, in honour of St. Mary and St. John the Baptist, for nuns of the Benedictine order. The church was consecrated in 1139 and suppressed in 1539.
- 2.2 The original Abbey was considerably larger than the ruins that can be seen today. At its height the Abbey comprised an inner court (the walls of which still stand), a 'Sanctuary Field' to the west, a Guest Court to the north of the 'Sanctuary Field' and a church at the north of the site.
- 2.3 The Abbey was entered via the Wytham-Godstow road through a two-storeyed gate-house at the NE side of the Guest Court. In 1959 traces of the original buildings within the Guest Court were excavated by R E Linington and the Oxford University Archaeological Society. On the site of the present Wytham-



Godstow road he found walls of two timber buildings, which he dated to be contemporary with the construction of the abbey in 1133. Hearne is the only source for the description of a granary to the north of the ruins (Ganz 1972, 154), although the precise location is not clear. The building had large double doors on the west side surmounted by a carved panel and was demolished in 1720.

- 2.4 The church had all but disappeared by 1660, though part of the north-west tower survived into the 18th century. The Abbey buildings were converted into Godstow House by George Owen and used by him and his successors until the buildings were severely damaged during the Civil War in 1645 when they were burnt down in order to prevent them falling into the hands of the advancing Parliamentary Army. Thereafter, the remaining buildings fell into disrepair, with the exception of an outbuilding, which became the present Trout Inn Public House.
- 2.5 The existing ruins of the Abbey consist of a greatly rebuilt small rectangular enclosure, possibly representing the inner court of the Abbey, with a small chapel in the corner that is probably of 16th century date. These represent only a small part of the Abbey buildings. A description of the Abbey as purchased by Robert Owen in 1539 mentions "...the church, chapels, cloister, chapterhouse, misericord, two dormitories, convent kitchen, garner, the atrium and other houses and lodgings". The precise locations of all of these buildings, many of which were destroyed during the 17th century, is unclear although a combination of the study of early maps and prints, and a limited amount of excavation, has enabled a partial reconstruction of the site.
- 2.6 The earliest plan of the ruins was produced by Wood in 1666 and depicts the buildings as a single walled enclosure, with the site of the church lying to its north and stretching down towards the river. To the north lay the gatehouse with the main residential buildings and cloisters lying to the west. Generally, this layout is also shown on a number of plans and prints from the 18th and 19th centuries.
- 2.7 In 1780 the new Navigation Channel (New Cut) was cut through the site of the Abbey, to the west of the Trout Inn, in order to accommodate the passage of 80 ton barges; the lock was opened in 1790. Between 1885 and 1886 the channel was widened to provide flood relief. The construction of the navigation channel appears to have affected the remains of the Abbey as they stood at that time. There was no systematic monitoring of the work, but a number of stone coffins were reported as having been found (Gentleman's Magazine, 1791, 986). Subsequent reports of the finding of tiles and masonry in the river bank would also seem to indicate that the new channel may have been cut through the remains of a building, possibly the Chapter House or a subsidiary chapel.
- 2.8 Further coffins were found during the 1885 widening works, which were visited 'every 2 or 3 days' by Henry Hurst. Approximately 25 stone and elm coffins were recovered, some of which appeared to be in their original positions and some of which either had been reburied or pushed to one side by the 18th century workmen. Some of the coffins were then reburied further

inland between the standing buildings and the edge of New Cut. Hurst produced a plan showing the locations of all of the coffins, and some of the archaeological remains.

- 2.9 Godstow Weir and the weir cut (the subject of this report) appear to have been constructed during the 1885 works, as they do not appear on the 1876 OS map. Hurst's plan shows the weir and its cut within the area of new works. There is no indication that any archaeological remains were encountered during their construction.
- 2.10 The erosion of the riverbank has continued to produce chance finds associated with the Abbey. A stone coffin containing 'the bones of a female adult' was discovered by children playing on the river bank in 1943 and according to local tradition, bones have been collected from the river bank ever since.
- 2.11 On 13th May 1971 a small trench was dug by the Oxford Archaeological Excavation Committee to observe a line of mortar first seen in the riverbank. Portions of a pavement were uncovered, consisting of two groups of tiles; however it remains unclear exactly what form of building these remains represented.
- 2.12 A watching brief undertaken by the OAU in 1993 on the northern side of the Wytham-Wolvercote Road, indicated the presence of a number of substantial stone buildings on the north-west side of the Wytham-Godstow road, with a possibility of more than one building surviving partly *in situ* (OAU 1994). It is known from Linington's excavations in 1959 that the line of the present Wytham-Godstow road passes through what was the Guest Court and that structural remains lie beneath the road.
- 2.13 In the absence of detailed information relating to Linington's excavations the best evidence for the general layout of the northern part of the site comes from H. Hurst's archaeological map of Godstow Abbey compiled in the 1880s. This map depicts the church adjacent to the north wall of the Inner Court, its north-west tower and the abbey gatehouse to the north. Hurst noted a medieval road leading to the gateway of the Guest Court, at a depth of twenty inches. The map also shows the east-west aligned wall of the north side of the Guest Court.
- 2.14 The location of these features and of those identified in the 1993 watching brief suggest that the north side of the 'Guest Court' was defined not simply by a boundary wall but by an approximate east-west range of buildings. The features located in the watching brief may have belonged to more than one component structure of such a range. The timber structures recorded by Linington may also have been part of such a range or perhaps represented a precursor of it.

### 3 Aims

- 3.1 The aims of the present watching brief were to record any archaeological remains revealed as a result of intrusive groundwork. The work was undertaken in accordance with established OAU standards (OAU 1992), in order to secure the preservation by record of any archaeological remains.

- 3.2 To make available the results of the investigation in the form of a written report.

#### **4 The project**

The project involved the archaeological monitoring of three elements of the scheme.

- 4.1 The demolition of the existing weir structure, and its flanking (wing) walls, and the construction of a new weir. This entailed the construction of a temporary cofferdam around the existing weir, prior to the draining of that section of the river. This constituted the major potential impact on site, as the construction of a new base took place at a depth of approximately 2 m below the existing weir apron, which generally was at the level of the riverbed.
- 4.2 The strengthening of the riverbank walls downstream from the weir. In practice these works intruded into neither the riverbank nor the riverbed, and thus had no archaeological impact.
- 4.3 The construction and demolition of a temporary contractor's compound and mooring pontoon to the north of the Abbey ruins. The pontoon was to be moored to pre-filled 'Gabion' baskets laid on the riverbed, to avoid the need for piling into any sensitive areas. The contractor's compound was located within the limits of the Scheduled Ancient Monument; the OAU attended during construction to advise on the best way to avoid ground disturbance, which was minimal and restricted to the removal of turf and topsoil.
- 4.4 Overall the archaeological impact of the scheme was thought to be minimal, and the number of site visits made during the extended length of the project reflects this.

#### **5 Methodology**

- 5.1 An archaeological supervisor was in attendance during groundwork likely to affect archaeological deposits.
- 5.2 Within the constraints imposed by Health and Safety considerations the deposits and features exposed were cleaned, inspected and recorded in plan, section and by colour slide and monochrome print photography. Written records were also made on pro-forma sheets. Soil descriptions were compiled using estimated percentages using standard charts for the approximation of percentage of inclusion types soils.

#### **6 Results**

- 6.1 The first phase of work included the monitoring of a team of divers attempting to locate a coffin believed to lie on the river bed in the vicinity of the location of a planned pontoon. No coffin was located, although some modern metal debris was; work then proceeded on the construction of the pontoon.

- 6.2 A trench was excavated immediately north of the lock keeper's hut at the north end of the island adjacent to the weir. The trench was excavated using a hydraulic grab mounted on a dredger. At the base of the trench was a 0.5 m thick layer of medium-to-coarse sandy gravel (3) interspersed with lenses of grey silty clay (4). Above this layer was a 0.48 m thick layer of mixed orange gravel and mid-brown silty clay loam containing pebbles (2). At the top of the trench was the topsoil. The clay (4) became thicker and rose up at the east end of the trench to meet the lower horizon of layer 2.
- 6.3 A watching brief was maintained during the construction of the cofferdam and the insertion of sheet piles prior to the breaking out and removal of the existing wing walls of the old weir structure. This exposed sections on both the east and west sides of the weir, revealing the following sequence of deposits. At the base was a 0.25 m thick layer of fine-coarse sub-rounded white gravel (5). Above lay a 1.1 m thick layer of brown-grey silty clay (6) in turn sealed by a layer of sandy yellow/white gravel that was 0.15 m thick (7). Above lay a 0.5 m thick mixed layer of white gravel and grey silty clay that contained smooth rounded pebbles (8). This layer lay immediately below the topsoil (1), which here was a mid-grey clay loam.
- 6.4 The former weir structure was broken out by the contractors. Following the removal of demolition rubble from the floor of the weir, the base was inspected before, during and after works to reduce the level to the base of dig. On the west side of the weir structure the concrete overlying the original piles was observed. On the east side, the gravel bed of the channel was observed sealed beneath a 1 m thick layer of grey silty clay, probably a combination of layers 6 and 7 seen during the construction of the cofferdam. Aside from the original construction cut for the defunct weir structure, no archaeological features or finds were observed.
- 6.5 No results were forthcoming from the construction of the contractor's compound and the installation of the temporary trackway east of the abbey buildings.

## **7 Finds**

- 7.1 No finds were recovered during any of the phases of the watching brief. No human remains were encountered, and the suspected stone coffin reported in the immediate vicinity of the works was not located.
- 7.2 Modern materials present in the area of the weir including metal debris were not collected or retained for further analysis.
- 7.3 There was no further evidence of any structural remains associated with abbey.

## **8 Environmental results**

- 8.1 Full consideration was given to various sampling strategies, however, owing

to the absence of any significant archaeological remains, it was agreed by all parties that no environmental soil samples were to be taken.

## **9 Discussion**

- 9.1 The watching brief did not reveal any significant archaeological remains. Deposits on the north end of the island adjacent to the weir probably relate to the re-deposition of material dredged from the river.
- 9.2 The topography of the deposits excavated at the north end of the island adjacent to the weir appear to suggest that a greater volume of dredged material from the river had been redeposited on the west side of the island than on the east, an event that may have occurred at the time of the construction of New Cut in 1780 or during subsequent works.
- 9.3 Clay and gravel river bed deposits were observed during the breaking out of the existing weir structure. The clay and gravel layers were interspersed, and probably represent periods when silting is heaviest and may also derive from periods of river dredging.
- 9.4 The limited exposure of deposits in the river bank sections means that little can confidently be stated about the likely preservation or otherwise of any further remains associated with the abbey. It remains most likely, however, that the construction of 'New Cut' in 1780 and subsequent widening and maintenance of the channel here has greatly reduced the prospect of survival of any further archaeological remains at the east side of the abbey.

J Dalton/J Hiller  
Oxford Archaeological Unit  
June 2000



### Context Information

<i>Context</i>	<i>Type</i>	<i>Depth</i>	<i>Comments</i>
1	Layer	0.1 m	Topsoil on Trout Inn Island
2	Layer	0.48 m	Gravel and clay, dumping from dredging
3	Layer	0.5 m	Sandy gravel, dumping from dredging
4	Layer	0.1 m	Lenses of clay, redeposited from dredged materials
5	Layer	0.25 m	Gravel, ?river bed material
6	Layer	1.1 m	Silty clay, river deposit
7	Layer	0.15 m	Sandy gravel
8	Layer	0.5 m	Grey clay and pebbles
9	Layer	0.12 m	Topsoil of the riverbank

### References

Ganz, D, 1972 The buildings of Godstow Nunnery, *Oxoniensia* 37, 150-159.

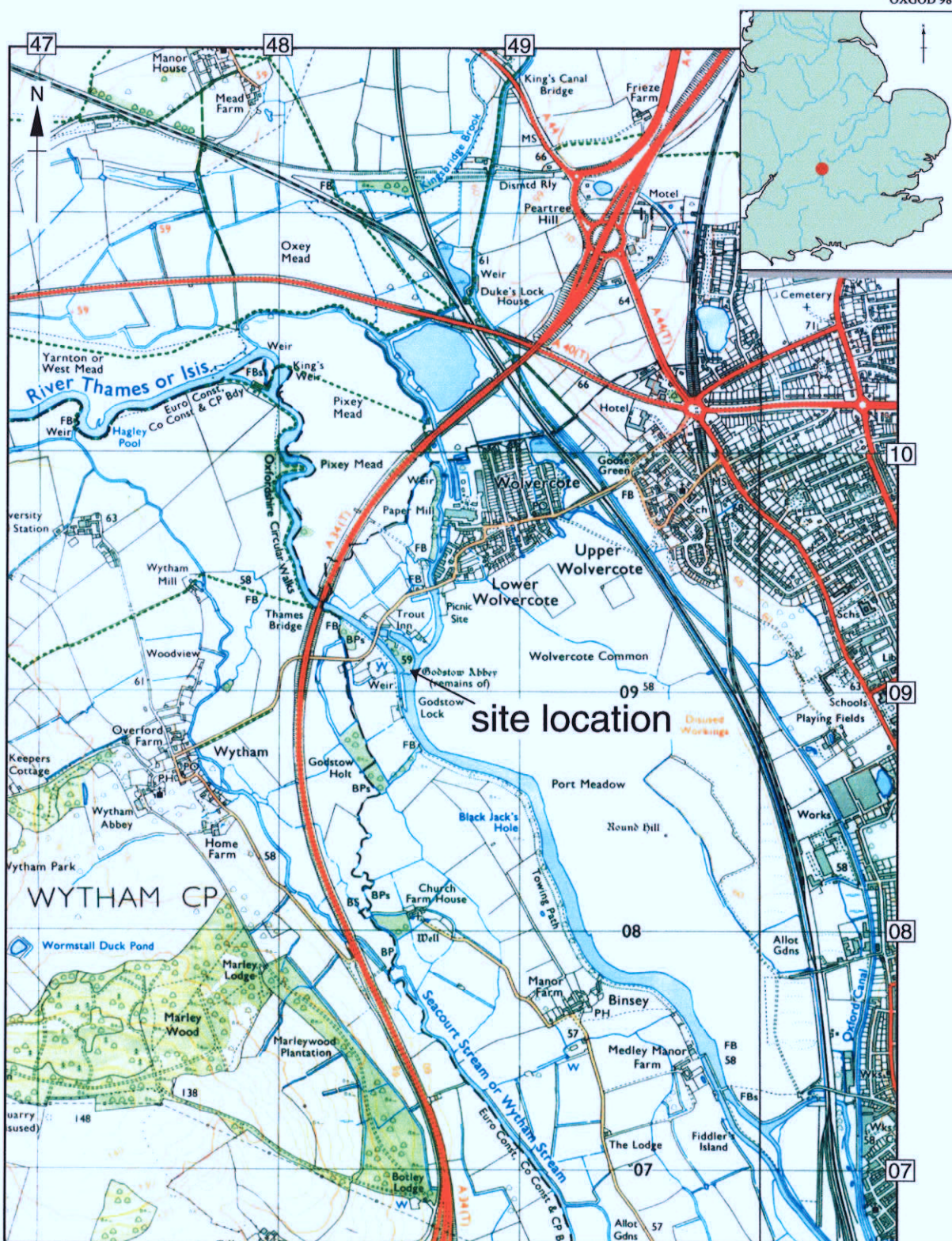
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Victoria History of the County of Oxfordshire, 1990, *Volume XII, Wootton Hundred South*



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Figure 1: Site location

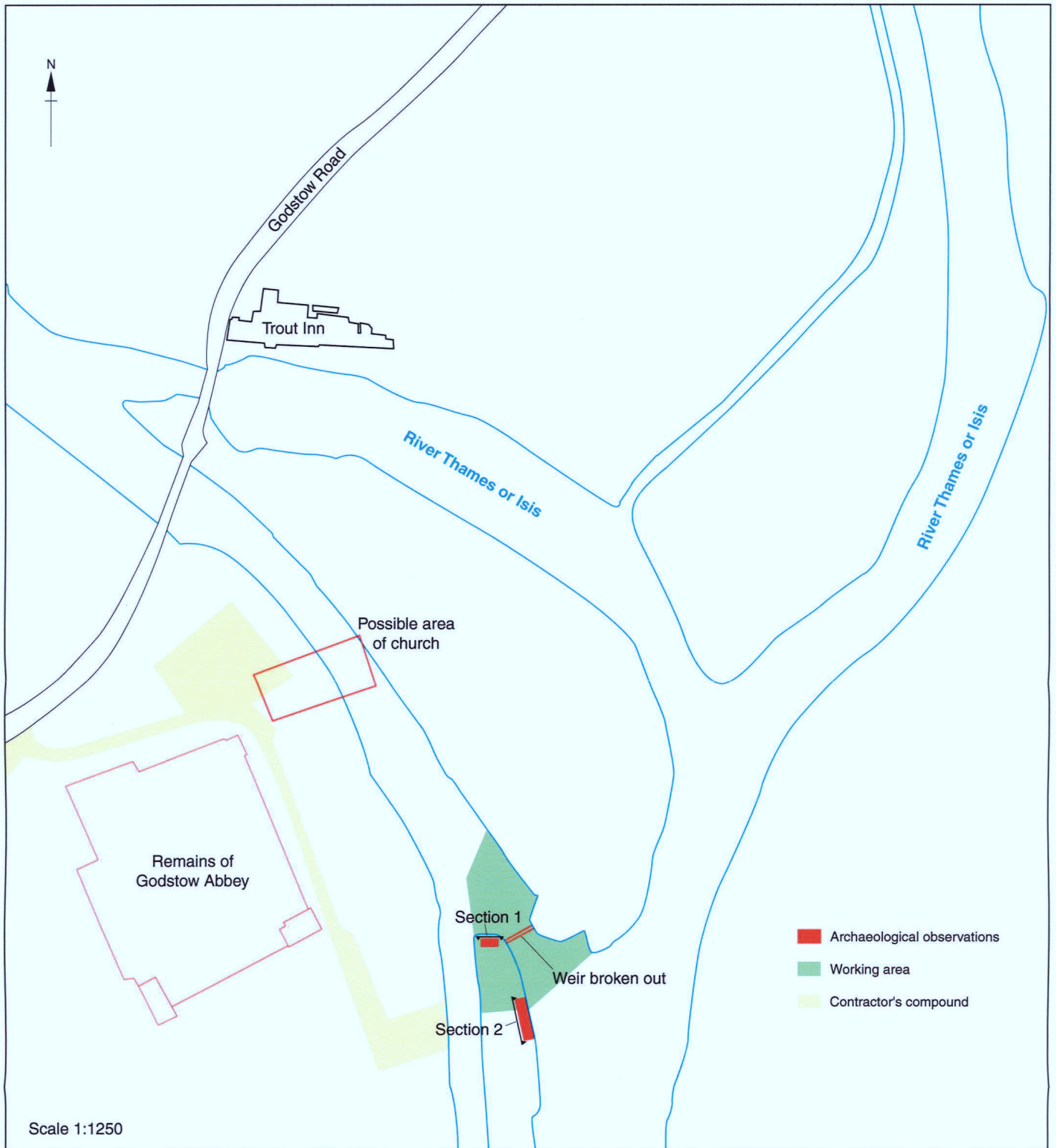


Figure 2: Site plan



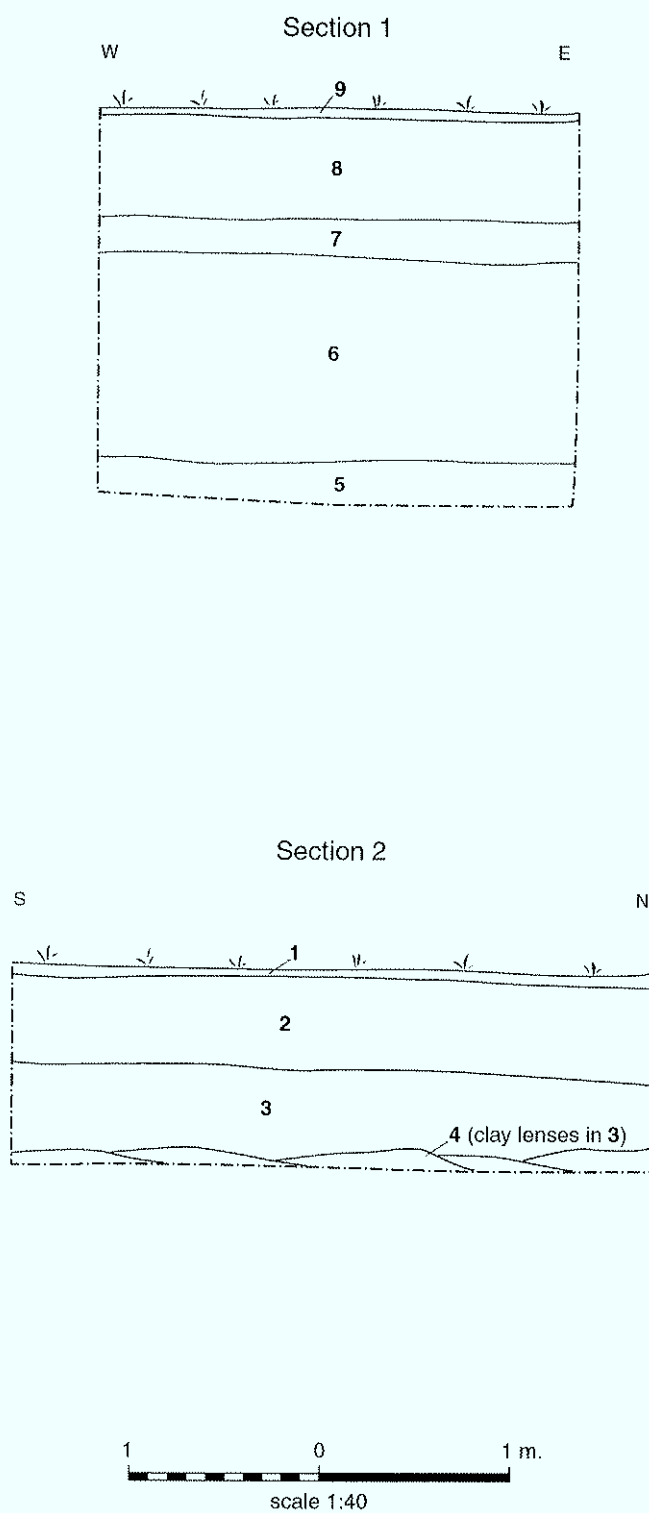


Figure 3: Sample sections





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