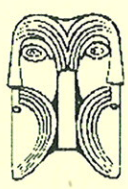
Lower Farm Barns, Sandford on Thames, Oxfordshire

NGR SP 5380 0064

Archaeological Watching Brief Report



Oxford Archaeological Unit

October 1996

LOWER FARM BARNS, SANDFORD-ON-THAMES
OXFORDSHIRE
NGR SP 5380 0064
ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF REPORT

1 SUMMARY

A watching brief carried out at Lower Farm Barns and during the construction of a new access road some distance to the east did not reveal any archaeological features or finds. A possible limestone surface observed in the grounds of the farm was probably of recent date. All of the deposits observed related to recent use and activity near the farm.

2 INTRODUCTION

The Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) carried out an archaeological watching brief at Lower Farm Barns, Sandford-on-Thames near Nuneham Courtenay (Fig. 1), during renovation work in 1996. The farm buildings were converted into modern housing which involved some reduction in ground levels within and outside the buildings. Service trenches and the construction of a new access road from the A423 to the existing farm track were monitored for the presence of archaeological features and finds. The renovation work was carried out by Malcolm Griffiths Renovations of Osney Island, Oxford. The watching brief was requested by the County Archaeologist in accordance with PPG 16, owing to the known presence of archaeological sites in the immediate vicinity of the development.

3 TOPOGRAPHY AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

Lower Farm is situated c. 400 m from the east bank of the River Thames, some 1.5 km south of Oxford. The farm is located at approximately 60 m O.D. The geology of the site is drift over Kimmeridge and Ampthill clays, and the farm buildings themselves are sited on an outcrop of marl and limestone. The land use of the farm is currently arable with some pasture.

The development site lies in an area particularly rich in archaeological remains. A Roman pottery production complex to the south of Lower Farm was partially excavated by the OAU in 1991 in advance of the construction of the Didcot - Oxford Thames Water Pipeline (Booth, Boyle and Keevill, 1993). Roman features and substantial quantities of pottery were recovered from the site. The site was occupied from the

second to fourth centuries A.D. Geophysical surveys carried out by the Ancient Monuments Laboratory supplemented by subsequent fieldwalking indicate that enclosures and associated pottery kilns and pottery scatters cover some 10 hectares of the Lower Field of the farm.

Lower Field is one of the four medieval open fields of the ancient parish of Nuneham Courtenay. The original Lower Field was divided into smaller land units in the late eighteenth century, at which time the current Lower Farm was established. The barn building itself is partly constructed in brick and presently has a tiled roof.

The north boundary of Lower Field forms part of the parish boundary between Sandford on Thames to the north and Nuneham Courtenay to the south. This boundary runs in a straight line from the River Thames to the Roman road from Dorchester to Alchester to the east. This boundary is mentioned in an Anglo-Saxon land charter of AD 1054.

4 METHODOLOGY

Site visits were made by OAU personnel throughout the course of the development, which began in March 1996 and was completed in August 1996, with work on the access road continuing until October 1996. Each deposit or feature was assigned a unique context number, and these are summarised in tabular form at the end of the report. Sections and plans were made of deposits and trench sections where appropriate.

5 RESULTS

The location of service trenches and pits dug by the contractors is shown as a plan of the farm buildings in Figure 2. Sample section profiles of deposits were drawn at various points along the service and foundation trenches (Fig. 3).

5.1 WITHIN THE BARN BUILDINGS

A foundation trench (Section 1, Fig. 3) at the north-east corner of the barn was dug to a depth of 0.6 m. The earliest deposit within the trench was a layer of dark grey-brown compact clay (1103), which was probably natural. Similar deposits were observed outside the building. Above 1103 was a layer of clean light yellow-grey silty clay (1102) which contained some limestone pieces. This layer was 0.36 m thick, and was probably a natural deposit. A 0.12 m thick layer (1106) of brick fragments mixed with cement and concrete lay above 1102. Layer 1106 was the make-up layer for the concrete floor surface (1105) which was 0.12 m thick. No finds or features were observed in the foundation trench.

Parts of the concrete floor were removed throughout the building, but no underlying features or finds were seen.

5.2 SERVICE TRENCHES SOUTH AND WEST OF BARN BUILDINGS

A network of drainage trenches was dug by the contractors to the south and west of the barn buildings. The trenches were generally 0.3-0.4 m wide and c 0.5 m deep. The soakaway pits were considerably deeper. Records were made by OAU personnel of some of the trench and pit sections (sections 2-5, Fig. 3). These revealed broadly the same sequence and sections are therefore not described individually.

The earliest deposit seen in any of the excavated holes was the natural dark grey-brown clay (1103) which contained limestone pieces, and lay below a layer of yellowish-grey slightly silty clay (1102). This compact material was consistently clean and was also interpreted as a natural deposit. Above 1102 was a layer of ?redeposited limestone (1104) which was probably imported prior to the construction of the farm buildings in order to consolidate the ground level. A layer of roofing tile (1101) was observed above the clay subsoil in one of the deep soakaway pits. It is uncertain if this deposit related to the original construction of the barns or to a subsequent reroofing. A soil layer (1107) seen in one of the service trenches contained modern brick and tile and was therefore of recent origin. A deep sewage tank pit was also observed but revealed the same sequence of deposits as elsewhere, with no archaeological features.

No features or finds of any date earlier than the barns were observed south and west of the barn buildings.

5.3 SERVICE TRENCHES NORTH AND EAST OF BARN BUILDINGS

Further service trenches north and east of the barns were dug by the contractors. These trenches were 0.3 m wide and dug up to a maximum depth of 1 m. Sections of parts of these trenches were recorded (sections 6-10, Fig. 4). A similar sequence of deposits was noted along the length of the trenches, and each section recorded was assigned a different set of context numbers.

Section 6. At the base of the section was a layer of light grey limestone (105), which was the natural bedrock. Above this layer were two layers of natural clayey sand (104 below 103) with a combined depth of 0.45 m. A former topsoil or ploughsoil (102) consisting of loose brown loam lay above 103. Layer 102 was 0.2 m thick, and was sealed by the present topsoil. No archaeological features or finds were observed in the area of section 6.

Section 7. Above the natural clay sand (204) were two former topsoil or ploughsoil layers, 203 under 202 which were similar to layer 102. Layer 202 was sealed by the topsoil. No features or finds were recovered from the area of section 7.

Section 8. Two natural clay layers (304 over 305) were observed at the base of the section. Above 304 was a compact layer of limestone pieces (303) which may be part of a former yard surface. The layer was 0.13 m thick. No artifacts were associated with the layer. A mixed layer of tarmac, brick and limestone (302) lay above 303, and acted as a make-up layer for the present tarmac yard surface (301).

Section 9. The profile here was the same as section 8, except that the lowest layer (405) consisted principally of limestone.

Section 10. The lowest deposits were the same as in section 9. Above the ?yard surface (503) was a former ploughsoil or topsoil (502) which lay below the present topsoil, 501.

CONSTRUCTION OF NEW ACCESS ROAD

A new 'slip road' was constructed on a north-south alignment in the north-east corner of Lower Field adjacent to the present road, to improve access to the farm from the A423. Topsoil and underlying deposits were removed to a depth of 0.3 m by a small JCB machine. The stripped line was about 4.5 m wide and some 190 m in length. The lowest deposit observed was a layer of light grey clay loam (600) containing occasional quartzite pebbles. The layer was very compact, and was at least 0.2 m deep. Layer 600 did not appear to be a natural subsoil and perhaps derived from the excavation of the nearby roadside ditch. Topsoil 601 sealed layer 600 (section 11, Fig. 5). No finds were recovered from either 600 or 601.

6 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

There was little evidence for archaeological activity in the area of the barn buildings. All of the deposits above the level of the natural subsoil were apparently associated with the construction and use of the barns, and therefore date from the late eighteenth century or later. The substantial stone surface (303 = 403 = 503) located in all the sections observed close to the eastern side of the buildings was the primary deposit above the natural sequence in this part of the site. It may have been the same deposit as 1104 seen beneath the west side of the barn, suggesting that this layer perhaps formed a platform upon which the barn itself was constructed. The possibility that this was a natural rock outcrop was considered, but the very localised nature of the spread (it was not seen in sections 6 and 7, respectively north-east and north of the barn, nor in any of the soakaways west of the barn) suggests that it was a man-made deposit. It contained no dating material. It was separated from the horizontally-bedded limestone observed at the bottom of sections 6, 9 and 10 by a layer of clean buff clayey sand (104, 204, 304, 404, 504) which contained varying quantities of (but generally few) limestone fragments. This is interpreted as a natural layer. It seems unlikely that the overlying solid stone layer was also a geological deposit.

No archaeological features were seen in the area of the access road. It is possible that the soil observed was dug out from the adjacent modern roadside ditch, in which case any features or finds would have been buried beneath this soil and not observed.

This watching brief has (in part) confirmed the results of recent field-walking by OAU. The density of finds (pottery) recovered by the fieldwalkers to the south and to a lesser extent to the east of the site declined markedly in the vicinity of Lower Farm itself. Both surface collection evidence and the geophysical survey results suggest that the Roman pottery production site, while very substantial, did not extend quite as far as the farm

itself, a conclusion which appears to be supported by the negative evidence of the watching brief. While Roman deposits could have been truncated by activity relating to the construction of the barns this would not have removed all traces of cut features and residual artifacts would still have survived to be recovered. The fact that this did not happen suggests that the north-western margin of the pottery production complex is quite sharply defined. The comparable absence of features and finds in the stripped area of the new access road suggests, in line with the field walking evidence, that a similar situation prevailed along the northern edge of the Roman complex.

J Hiller
Oxford Archaeological Unit
October 1996

REFERENCE

Booth, P, Boyle, A and Keevill, G, 1993, A Romano-British Kiln Site at Lower Farm, Nuneham Courtenay, and Other Sites on the Didcot to Oxford and Wootton to Abingdon Water Mains, Oxfordshire, *Oxoniensia* **58**, 87-218.

APPENDIX: TABLE OF CONTEXT INFORMATION

CONTEXT	TYPE	DEPTH	COMMENTS
101	Layer	0.35 m	Topsoil
102	Layer	0.2 m	Ploughsoil or former topsoil
103	Layer	0.23 m	?Natural clayey sand with limestone inclusions
104	Layer	0.22 m	Natural clayey sand.
105	Layer	-	Natural limestone bedrock
201	Layer	0.3 m	Topsoil
202	Layer	0.11 m	Former topsoil/ploughsoil
203	Layer	0.22 m	Clay loam with pebbles and stones - ?ploughsoil
204	Layer	-	Natural clay sand and limestone
301	Layer	0.12 m	Tarmac surface
302	Layer	0.13 m	Mixed make-up layer for 301
303	Layer	0.13 m	Compact layer of limestone pieces - ?former (recent) yard surface
304	Layer	0.22 m	Red-brown silty sand with limestone pieces, ?natural
305	Layer	0.1 m+	Light brown sandy clay and limestone = natural layer
401	Layer	0.16 m	Tarmac yard surface
402	Layer	0.09 m	Mixed make-up for 401
403	Layer	0.36 m	Compact layer of limestone pieces - ?former yard surface or natural outcrop
404	Layer	0.12 m	Natural clay and sand
405	Layer	0.05 m+	Natural brown clayey sand, with horizontal blocks of limestone
501	Layer	0.3 m	Topsoil
502	Layer	0.18 m	Brown sandy loam, former topsoil or ploughsoil
503	Layer	0.27 m	Compact grey limestone, as 403 and 303
504	Layer	0.15 m	Light brown sand and limestone - natural
505	Layer	-	Same as 405
600	Layer	0.20 m	?Ploughsoil/redeposited soil from roadside ditch
601	Layer	0.10 m	Topsoil in field next to A 423 road
1100	Layer	0.2 m	Topsoil in area of yard to east of buildings
1101	Layer	0.12	Isolated layer of tiles, formed when roof was tiled
1102	Layer	0.3-0.4m	Light yellow-grey silty clay, natural subsoil
1103	Layer	0.7 m+	Dark grey brown natural clay with occasional limestone pisces
1104	Layer	0.4 m+	Redeposited, or natural limestone layer raising ground level below farm buildings
1105	Layer	0.12 m	Internal concrete floor, removed in places
1106	Layer	0.1 m	Make-up for floor 1105
1107	Layer	0.29 m+	Dark brown clay loam, brick and tile - recent layer but not closely dateable

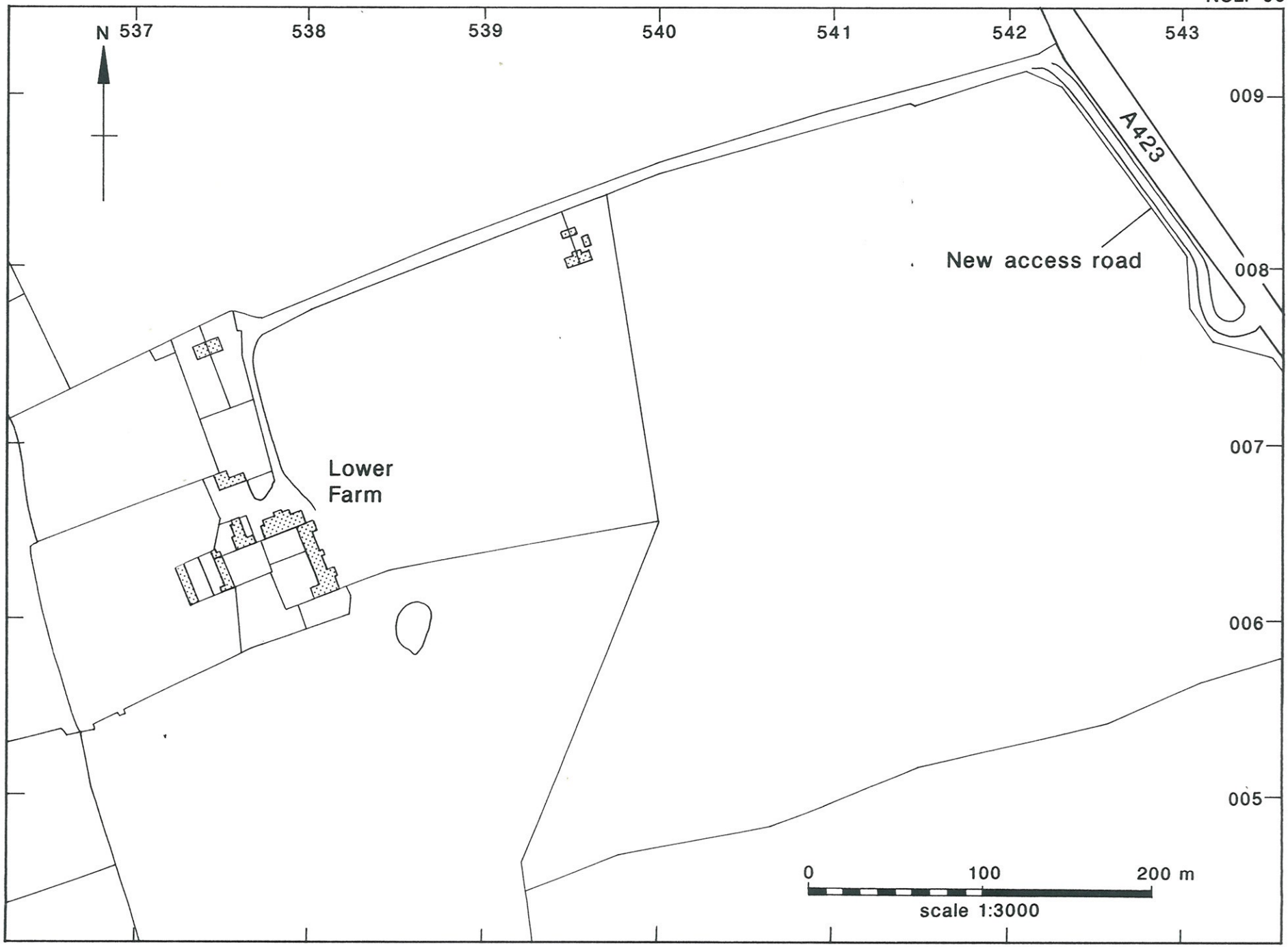

NCLF 96
N
537
538
539
540
541
542
543
009
008
007
006
005
A423
New access road
Lower
Farm
0
100
200 m
scale 1:3000

Figure 1

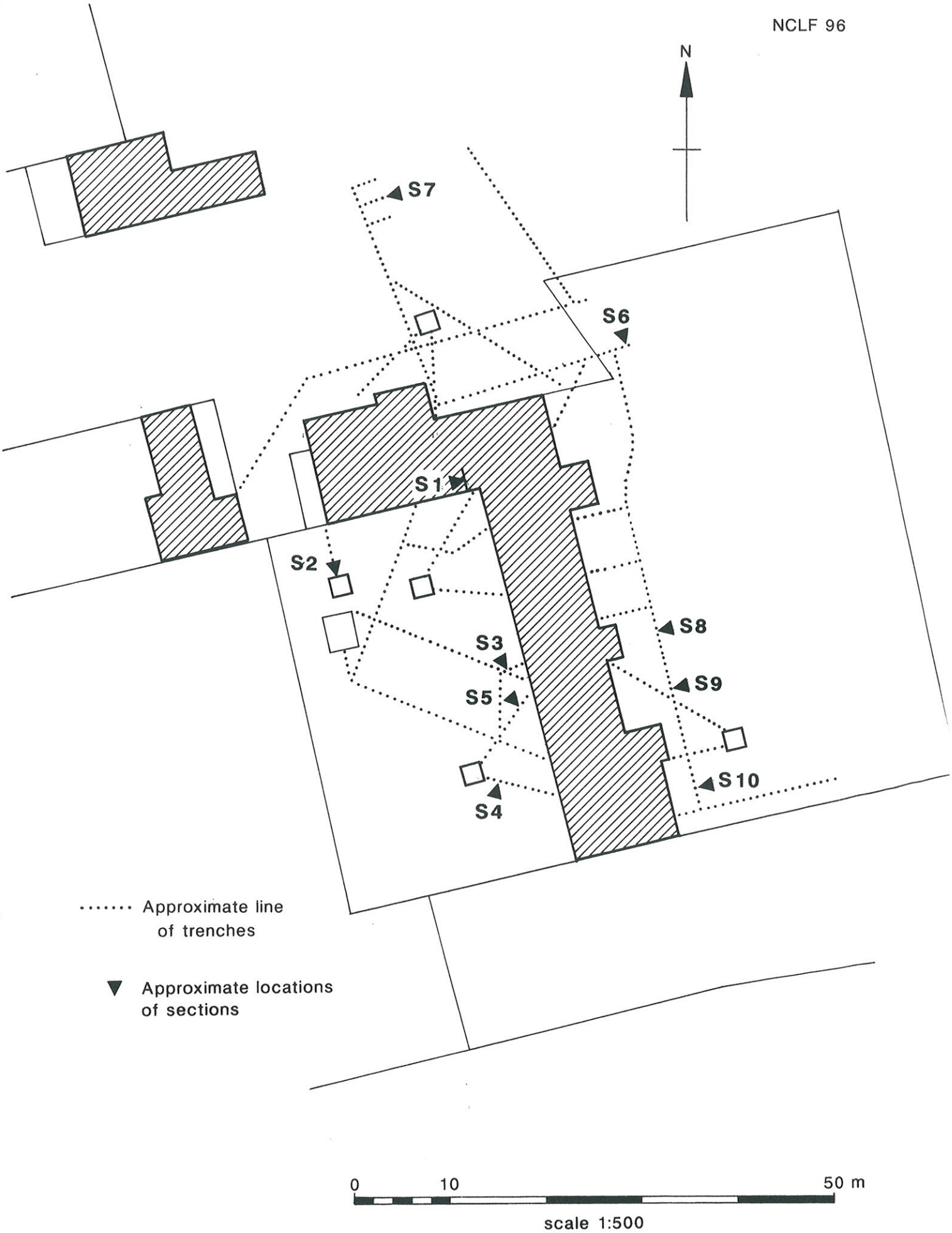

NCLF 96
N
S7
S6
S1
S2
S8
S3
S9
S5
S10
S4
Approximate line of trenches
Approximate locations of sections
0
10
50 m
scale 1:500

Figure 2

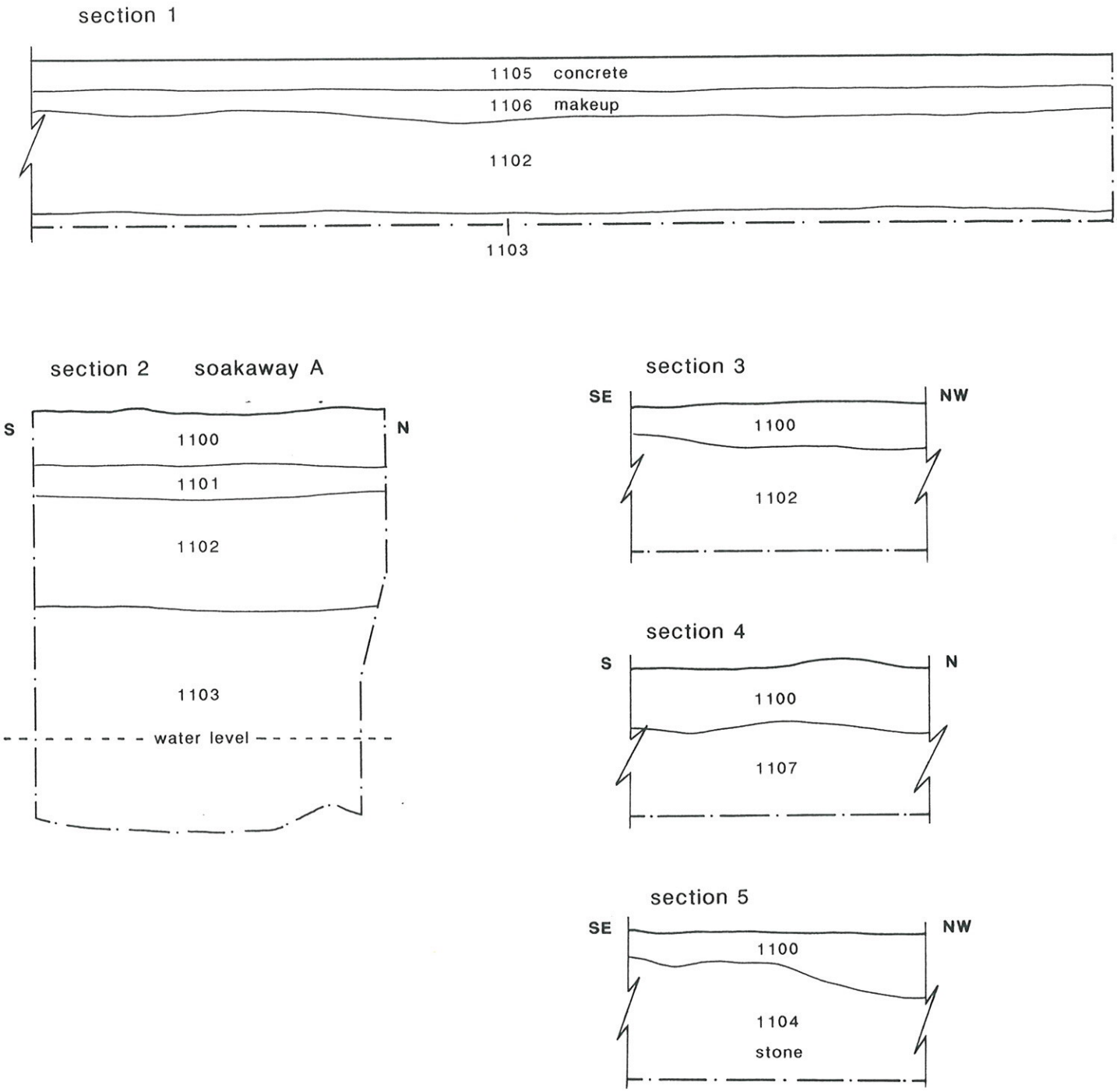

section 1
1105 concrete
1106 makeup
1102
1103
section 2 soakaway A
S
N
1100
1101
1102
1103
water level
section 3
SE
NW
1100
1102
section 4
S
N
1100
1107
section 5
SE
NW
1100
1104
stone
0
1
2 m
scale 1:20

Figure 3

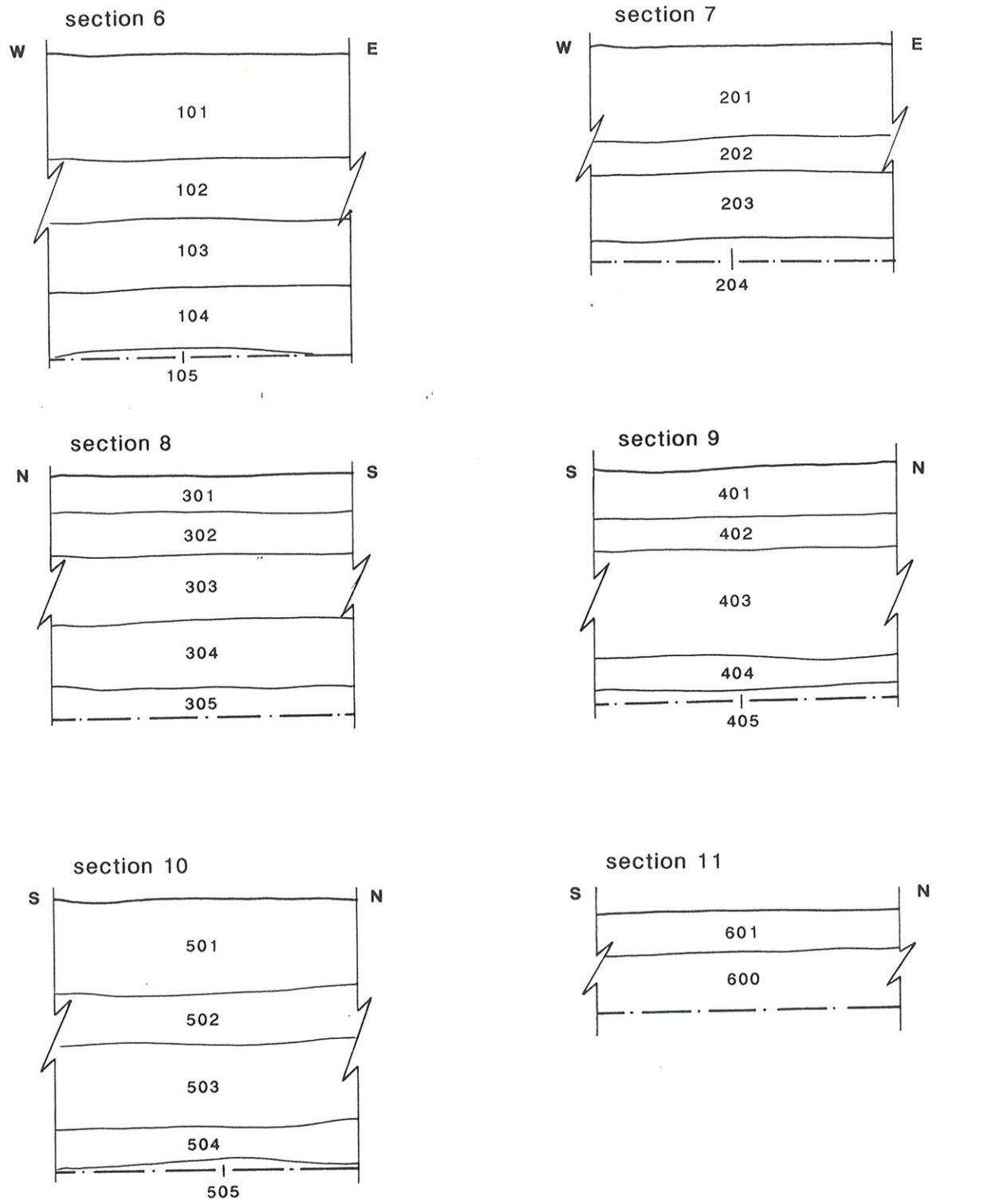

section 6
W
E
101
102
103
104
105
section 7
W
E
201
202
203
204
section 8
N
S
301
302
303
304
305
section 9
S
N
401
402
403
404
405
section 10
S
N
501
502
503
504
505
section 11
S
N
601
600
0
1
2 m
scale 1:20

Figure 4

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