

Sansomes Farm, Woodstock, Oxfordshire

NGR SP 4505 1899

Archaeological Evaluation Report



Oxford Archaeological Unit

October 1996

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Summary

An archaeological evaluation revealed shallow ditches of second-century AD date close to the line of Roman Akeman Street. No other features were located.

1 Introduction

- 1.1 In May 1996 planning permission was sought from West Oxfordshire District Council (Application W96/0731) to construct a new studio building at the Oxford School of Drama at Sansomes Farm, north of Woodstock. The site lies immediately adjacent to a Scheduled Ancient Monument and a major Roman road; therefore in line with PPG 16, an archaeological field evaluation was required to assess the archaeological potential of the site prior to determination of the application.
- 1.2 The County Archaeological Services on behalf of the Local Planning Authority prepared a Brief for the evaluation. In response to this the Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) submitted a Written Scheme of Investigation setting out the proposed methodology for fulfilling the conditions of the brief. This was accepted and the evaluation was carried out on behalf of the Oxford School of Drama on September 30th 1996. The site code was WOSAF96; the project archive will be deposited with the Oxfordshire County Museums Service.

2 Archaeological Background

- 2.1 Sansomes Farm is situated on the south side of Akeman Street, the principal Roman road between Verulamium and Cirencester, at a location which has long been known as a probable Roman settlement (Fig 1). The line of the Roman road is followed approximately by the modern Stratford Lane on which Sansomes Farm lies, and to the east, beyond the line of the B4027, is followed by a footpath. The site of proposed development is immediately adjacent to Scheduled Ancient Monument (Oxon SAM 150). In 1972 a gas pipeline was cut across the site to the south of Sansomes Farm. Archaeological work on the pipeline was confined to a watching brief, in the course of which a major Roman building was located at the point where the pipeline crossed the B4027. Five potential rooms with substantial wall footings were identified. They belonged to a building of considerable status with red and white painted wall plaster, fragments of box flue tile suggesting a hypocaust system, painted mortar floors and roof tiles. Artefactual evidence also included coins and pottery including samian ware. The site was interpreted as either a Roman villa or a substantial farm complex (Chambers 1978, 43) and was

subsequently scheduled at the end of 1972. There has been no subsequent field investigation of the site and its full extent is not known, though haphazard finds of surface material have been made, particularly to the south of the 1972 discovery towards Sansome's Platt, the name sometimes given to the Roman site.

- 2.2 In 1996 aerial survey by the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments (RCHM) revealed for the first time significant information on the plan of the Roman settlement. The photographs show that, rather than being centred along the frontage of the main road, as is normal in settlements of this type, Roman buildings were densely clustered on both sides of a minor road running away from the line of Akeman Street in a south-westerly direction. The identified buildings lie entirely within the field east of the B4027 and south of the line of Akeman Street, though it is possible that the settlement continued further to the south-west. The substantial building recorded in 1972 can now be seen as one of a row of buildings along the north-west side of the minor Roman road. The buildings now evident from the air include a Romano-Celtic temple of concentric circular plan within a walled enclosure.

3 Evaluation Aims and Strategy

- 3.1 The initial objective of the evaluation was to establish the presence or absence of archaeological remains within the proposal area. If archaeological features or deposits were present it was necessary to determine their extent, condition, nature, character, quality and date in order to allow the impact of the proposed development to be assessed. The ecofactual and environmental potential of archaeological deposits and features was also to be considered.
- 3.2 Background information on the site was examined in the Oxfordshire Sites and Monuments Record. Site work consisted of the excavation of a single trench, c 17 m long and 1.5 m wide, aligned roughly north-south within the footprint of the proposed building (Fig 2). Removal of topsoil was initially carried out with a JCB using a toothless ditching bucket; all subsequent cleaning and excavation was by hand.

4 Results (Fig 3)

- 4.1 The solid geology (cornbrash limestone) was encountered approximately 0.20 m below the existing ground surface. This was overlain by a thin (0.05-0.10 m) deposit of limestone building rubble (2), possibly derived from recent renovations on the farm. This deposit extended the length of the trench and at the north end formed the surface for the present use of the area as a car park. To the south layer 2 was overlain by a dark brown sandy loam topsoil (1) up to 0.10-0.15m thick.
- 4.2 The only archaeological features encountered were at the northern end of the trench close to the assumed course of the Roman road. These were two parallel ditches 0.70 m apart aligned roughly west-north-west - east-south-east. The

southernmost ditch [6] was 2 m wide and 0.16 m deep and filled with a light brown clayey loam (7). The northern ditch [4] was not fully exposed as only the southern edge was visible within the trench. It was approximately 1.65 m wide as seen and 0.18 m deep. The fill of this feature (5), was the same light brown clayey loam as in ditch [6]. Between the two features was an area of well weathered and worn small fragments of limestone (8), apparently the top of the bedrock, which was interpreted as a possible trackway surface.

5 The Finds

Finds were recovered from the two feature fills, 5 and 7. A small quantity of modern material from the topsoil was not retained. The principal finds category was pottery. Other material present consisted of 3 iron nails, 3 ceramic fragments of which one was clearly from a modern drain pipe and 28 animal bone fragments. Three joining fragments of human skull, from a child c 4-5 years old, came from feature fill 5. Only the pottery is discussed in further detail.

5.1 Roman pottery

Some 177 sherds of Roman pottery were recovered from contexts 5 and 7. The pottery was scanned briefly and recorded by context in terms of major ware group and vessel classes, using the standard OAU recording system codes. The most notable characteristic of the material was the extent to which it was fragmented; the total weight of 837 g gave an average sherd weight of c 4.7 g, a remarkably low figure. Apart from their generally small size, however, the sherds were in relatively good condition, with little evidence of abrasion and reasonable preservation of surfaces.

The breakdown of the assemblage by ware groups was as follows:

S20 (South Gaulish samian ware) ?1 sherd.
S30 (Central Gaulish samian ware) 4 sherds.
A10 (South Spanish amphora) 1 sherd.
M22 (Oxford white mortarium) 1 sherd.
W10 (Oxford fine white wares) 2 sherds.
O (Oxidised wares, source unspecified) 11 sherds.
O10 (?Oxford fine oxidised wares) 8 sherds.
O30 (Sandy oxidised wares) 2 sherds.
O80 (Coarse-tempered oxidised wares) 3 sherds.
O81 (Pink grogged ware) 3 sherds.
R (Reduced wares, source unspecified) 102 sherds.
R10 (?Oxford fine reduced wares) 3 sherds.
R30/37 (Fairly fine sandy reduced ware) 10 sherds.
R90 (Coarse-tempered reduced wares) 6 sherds.
C10 (Shell-tempered wares) 20 sherds.

Reduced wares were very well-represented (68.4% of all sherds), as would have been expected. They probably included a high proportion of the locally-dominant

fabric R37 found in large quantities at sites such as Wilcote and Asthall, but detailed examination of the fabrics would have been necessary to allow precise quantification of this fabric. Oxidised wares were also reasonably well-represented (15.3%) as were shell-tempered fabrics (11.3%), which seem to have been common in the region in the later 1st and 2nd centuries and are clearly distinct from the characteristic late-Roman shell-tempered fabric. Fine and specialist wares (ie samian, amphora, mortarium and white ware fabrics) only amounted to 5.1% of the assemblage.

The sources of the material lay almost entirely within the region, though only the probable Oxford fabrics can be ascribed to known production sites (the sources of R37 and the shell-tempered wares, both of which must have been relatively local, are unknown). A few of the sherds of the R90 group might have been Savernake ware from north Wiltshire, and fabric O81 is attributed to north Buckinghamshire or southern Northamptonshire on the basis of its distribution. The only imported fabrics were samian ware and the amphora A10, the single fragment of which was perhaps from a Baetican Dressel 20 (olive oil amphora).

The range of vessel types was limited and unremarkable. Owing to the extent of fragmentation of the material few rim sherds could be assigned confidently to specific types. Forms represented by rims included probable or possible jars (six examples in reduced fabrics), two small jars or jar/beakers, probably both Oxford products in a fine reduced fabric (R10), six bowls or dishes (all but one in fine oxidised wares) and single examples of a decorated samian hemispherical bowl (Drag 37), a 2nd century hook-rimmed mortarium (the exact type is uncertain) and a lid (in fabric R37).

The chronological range of the assemblage also appears to have been quite restricted. The argument is based in part on negative evidence. The range of fabrics indicates that there is no very early Roman material present and none would be out of place in 2nd century contexts. While fabrics such as R37 are not chronologically diagnostic (it was probably in production from about the mid 1st century AD to at least the end of the 3rd century) the range of forms present is again consistent with a 2nd century date. Fine oxidised and reduced wares from the Oxford industry, particularly the possible jar beakers in the latter, would be most likely to occur in the first half of the 2nd century, while the Central Gaulish samian suggests a date of at least c AD 125 for the context in which it occurs. At the upper end of the date range late-Roman fabrics such as Oxford colour-coated ware are completely absent. Even more significant, however, is the total absence of black-burnished ware, generally a common component of assemblages in the region from c AD 120 onwards, and particularly by the later 2nd century AD. This absence strongly suggests that the present groups are not later than the late 2nd century at the latest, and might well be earlier. The two context groups are very similar in composition and both may be assigned to about the middle of the 2nd century AD.

The range of fabrics and forms is quite typical for the region. The assemblage is probably too small to allow assessment in terms of settlement status based upon the representation of fine and specialist wares (see above). Recent analysis of a

larger collection from Asthall, a settlement of broadly comparable character to this, showed that in the 2nd century the material was subtly but not radically different from that found in contemporary low-status rural settlements. A rather larger group would be required to demonstrate that the Sansomes Farm settlement fitted the same 'ceramic assemblage profile' as Asthall, though this is very likely.

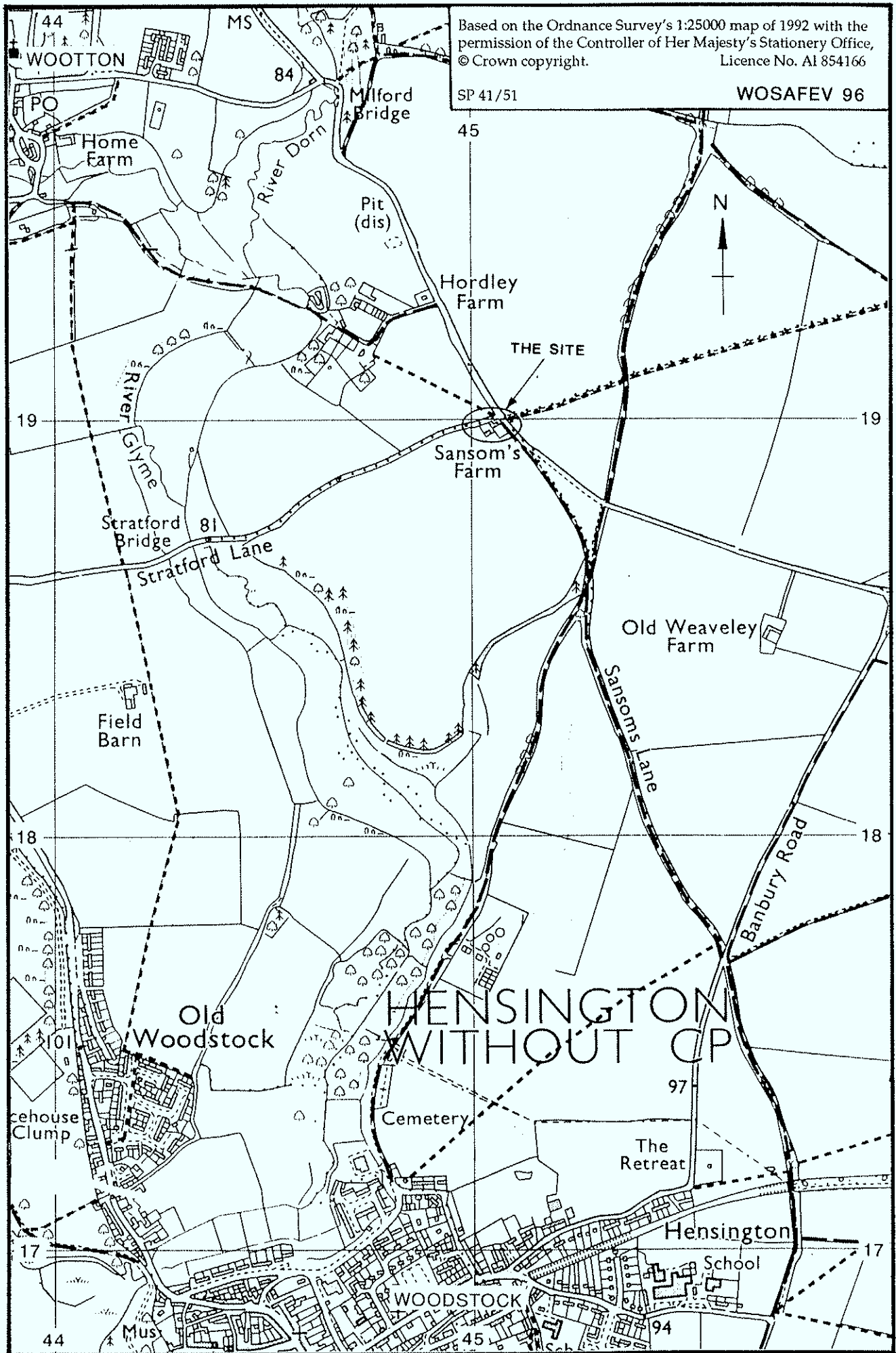
6 Discussion and Conclusions

- 6.1 Archaeological remains on the site consisted solely of two shallow cut features, the fills of which were directly beneath a modern surface. The sequence of deposits on the site appears therefore to have been quite badly truncated, but it is unclear if erosion has taken place over a considerable period of time, through continual ploughing, or whether it has occurred relatively recently as a result of a single levelling operation. There are no irregularities in the profile of site which would indicate selective recent earthmoving and on balance, therefore, it seems that extended attrition is more likely to have produced the sequence now visible.
- 6.2 The excavated features were perhaps aligned approximately parallel to Akeman Street, but insufficient is known of the detailed course of the road for this to be certain. It is unknown if these were actually roadside ditches, but this is possible. The relatively large quantity of finds within the ditch fills is consistent with the immediate proximity of settlement, and their degree of fragmentation could suggest that they derived from their initial point of deposition via trampled surfaces. The strip of worn bedrock between the two ditches is too narrow to have been a road surface, but could perhaps have served as a path adjacent to the road edge. The occurrence of human remains in a road margin context would not be unusual. The skull fragments recovered could have belonged to an inhumation within the ditch fill or have been redeposited from another nearby location.
- 6.3 The likelihood that deposits have been truncated means that the significance of the absence of late Roman features and material is uncertain. Either such features have been completely removed or they never existed here. A possible explanation for the latter scenario is that there was some shift of settlement focus during the Roman period, with activity initially concentrated along the frontage of Akeman Street (as at Wilcote to the west) and later diverted to the alignment of the south-west running minor road, the ultimate destination of which is unknown.

Mick Parsons/Paul Booth
Oxford Archaeological Unit, October 1996

References

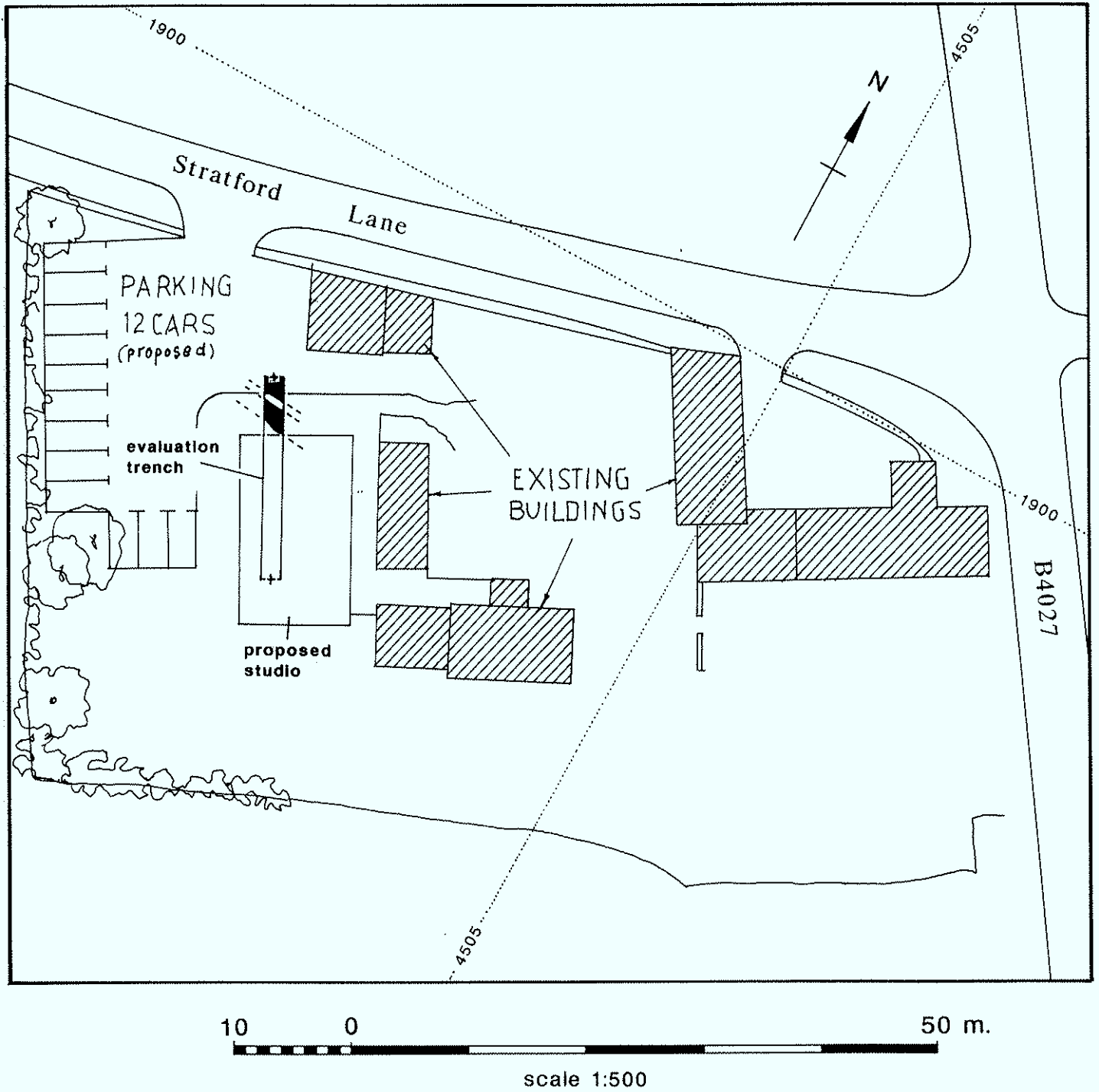
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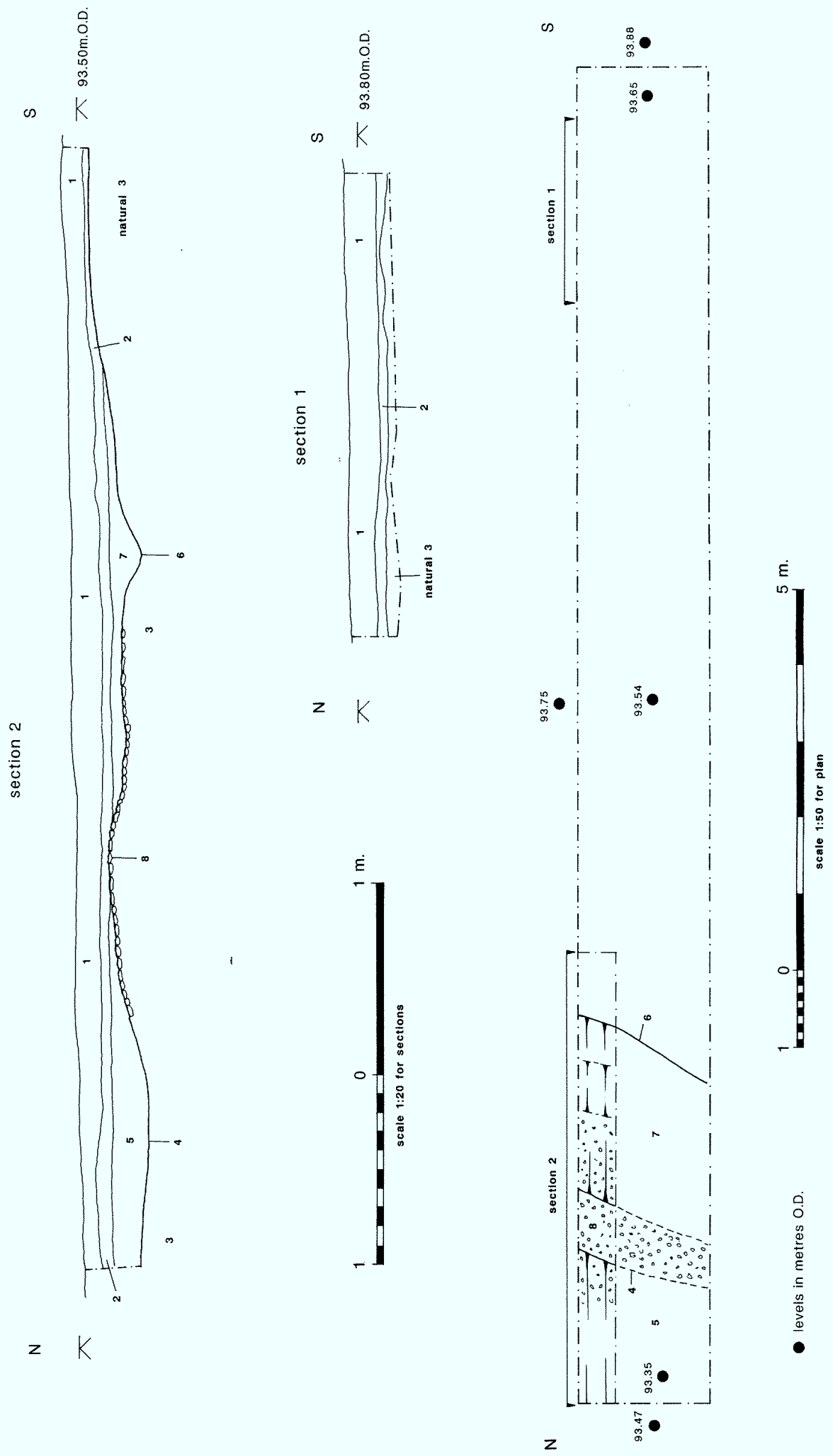
Site Location

Figure 1



Site Plan

Figure 2



Sections and Plan

Figure 3



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