

~~SM~~ SMAR ✓
~~duplicate~~

Bicester Library Extension

Archaeological Watching Brief Report

NGR SP 5840 2230

OXFORD ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT

November 1995

BICESTER LIBRARY EXTENSION

NGR SU 584222

ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF REPORT

INTRODUCTION

The Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) maintained a watching brief at Bicester County Branch Library, Oxon, (SU 584222), during the excavation of footing trenches for an extension to the S elevation of the building. These trenches were sited between existing brick pillars of a verandah on the south side of the Library. The site lies within the N half of the precinct of St Edburga's Priory, an Augustinian monastery founded by Gilbert Bassett between 1182 and 1185.

The building work was managed by WS Atkins (Oxford), on behalf of Oxfordshire County Council. The Archaeological Brief was prepared by the County Archaeological Officer.

The watching brief took place between Nov 6th and 10th 1995, and the principal discovery was an E-W burial, probably contemporary with the Priory.

HISTORICAL & ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND (Fig 1)

The 12th century Priory was originally intended for a Prior and eleven canons, and, although it was never particularly wealthy, it maintained its status until the Dissolution. There were nine inmates to sign the Oath of Supremacy in 1534, in spite of an 'outbreak of sweating sickness in the previous decade' (Hinton 1968, 24). Within a few years of the Dissolution, the Priory had been demolished, the land reverting to gardens and orchards.

In 1819, rudimentary excavations were undertaken by John Dunkin, a local antiquarian, who found evidence of masonry foundations and tiled floors. Further observations by David Watts in 1962-64, and a small excavation by David Hinton in 1968 (Hinton 1968, 27-39 & 1969, 21-28), both in advance of the redevelopment of the area, established that significant archaeological deposits survived, and from their results a partial ground plan of the Priory has been compiled.

Inferred from this plan is that the W end of the Priory church could lie within ten metres of the E extent of the footing trenches of the library extension. It was therefore considered that there was a high potential that the proposed excavations could encounter significant archaeological deposits.

METHODOLOGY

The excavations were undertaken by the contractors, by hand, and where feasible, by a small tracked excavator. All excavation was monitored. Archaeological features and deposits were cleaned and recorded, and where necessary excavated, in accordance with standard OAU procedures (OAU Fieldwork Manual, ed. D Wilkinson 1992).

RESULTS (Figs 2 & 3)

Trench 1 (W-E 24.0 m)

Natural bedrock (118), consisting of a mix of compacted sandy silt and limestone pieces, was revealed in the bottom of the entire trench, with the exception of approximately two metres at the E end. The highest point of 118 was at the W end (68.60 m OD), and a slope downwards of approximately 0.40 m through the length of the trench was evident in section. Overlying 118 at the N end of the trench was a supranatural layer of mixed orange brown silty clay and small stone (106) up to 0.35 m deep. Sealing both 118 and 106 was a layer of fairly compact mid/dark brown silty clay (105), with few inclusions, averaging 0.30 m in depth. The surface of this layer sloped gently down to the E.

Three shallow gullies (107), (119), and (133), all oriented N-S, were cut from within this layer. Gully 107 contained an orange brown silty clay primary fill (116), from which a sherd of 12th century pottery and fragments of animal bone were recovered. The upper fill of this feature (115) contained large uncut blocks of limestone. Fill 115 and the fills of 119 and 133 were indistinguishable from 105. Also revealed, cut from within 105 down into the bedrock, was a small posthole (121).

At the W end of the trench a grave cut was revealed (110) partly truncated by the concrete footing of a modern pillar (cut 130) and the SW corner of another feature (114). The excavation of the footing trench completely removed the stratigraphic relationship between the grave and layer 105, but the visual impression during the operation suggested that 110 was cut from within 105. The grave contained a supine adult male skeleton, which was cleaned and recorded in situ. The skeleton was incomplete, the left leg having been removed by the cut of 114, and the lower right leg had evidently been truncated by 130. There was no evidence of a coffin, and no artifacts were found with the burial. One small potsherd, a very abraded piece dating possibly to the 2nd or 3rd century AD, was recovered from the grave fill. As the burial lay just beneath the maximum depth of the proposed foundations, the skeleton was not excavated, and once recorded, was sealed with a layer of clean gravel prior to the pouring of the concrete for the foundation.

Sealing layer 105 throughout the trench was a compact layer of mixed greyish brown silty

clay and small limestone rubble (104), averaging 0.15 m deep. As with 105, this layer sloped down to the E. by approximately 0.50 m over the length of the trench.

Cut through 104 at intervals were the concrete footings for the modern brick pillars (cuts 123 to 130 inclusive), all of which extended below the limit of the present excavation. Overlying 104 in the E half of the trench, and filling in above all the pillar footings, was a levelling layer of dumped stone and concrete rubble (108). Sealing 108 were two modern make up layers, (103), (102), a thin concrete screed (101), and the modern brick patio surface (100). These modern layers were removed prior to the recording of the section.

Trench 2. (N-S 3.6 m)

The trench was excavated to an average depth of 1.2 m. Natural bedrock was not revealed. The lower 0.40 m of the section consisted of a layer of mid/dark brown silty clay, with frequent inclusions of lenses of small stone rubble and redeposited natural sandy silt (131). A small sondage was dug into the bottom of the trench, to an additional depth of 0.30 m, but the bottom of layer 131 was not reached. Two sherds of 13th century pottery and a few fragments of redeposited human bone were recovered from this layer.

Sealing 131 was layer 104, as identified in Trench 1, and subsequent deposits also correspond to those in Trench 1.

Trench 3 (N-S 3.6 m)

The deposits in this trench corresponded with those identified in the W end of Trench 1.

DISCUSSION

The fact that no in situ structural remains were found lends weight to Hinton's conclusion as to the location and size of the Priory church. The burial itself is a further indicator that the E end of the present library lies over what was probably a cemetery outside the W end of the church. The abraded Roman pottery sherd found within the grave is almost certainly residual.

In broad terms, cemeteries in this location within a monastic house were usually for the burial of servants or tenants of that house, or occasionally canons of a low rank. The majority of the canons would be buried in a cemetery to the E of the church. The interior of the church and the cloister walk would be reserved for the burial of the Head of the House, the most senior canons, and the wealthiest benefactors. (Greene 1992, 159).

The feature (114) in Trench 1, and the deep deposit (131) in Trench 2 probably represent further intercutting graves, all apparently deeper than 110.

The gullies and posthole to the W of the grave possibly represent nominal boundary markers within the cemetery. Ditch 107 may have defined the W edge of the cemetery, and on the basis of a single 12th century sherd in its fill, could have been approximately contemporary with the foundation of the Priory.

The stoney layer 104 could be the residue of the demolition of the church, the larger or more worked stone having been removed for re-use elsewhere. The presence of large stone blocks tipping into the top of ditch 107 is consistent with this interpretation.

CONCLUSION

The excavation in 1968 found that the surviving remains of the Priory were sealed under at least 0.60 m of demolition material and later infilling (Hinton 1969). The ground immediately around the Library has clearly been levelled up to a platform, but to the S and E of the present building this is not necessarily the case, implying that sensitive archaeological deposits may lie within 0.30 m of the present ground level. This will clearly have implications for any future development in the area.

Alan Hardy
OAU
November 1995

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Greene, J P, 1992 Medieval Monasteries (Leicester University Press)

Hinton D A, 1968 Bicester Priory, Oxoniensia xxxiv 22-52

Hinton D A, 1969 Excavation at Bicester Priory 1968 Oxoniensia xxxiii 21-28

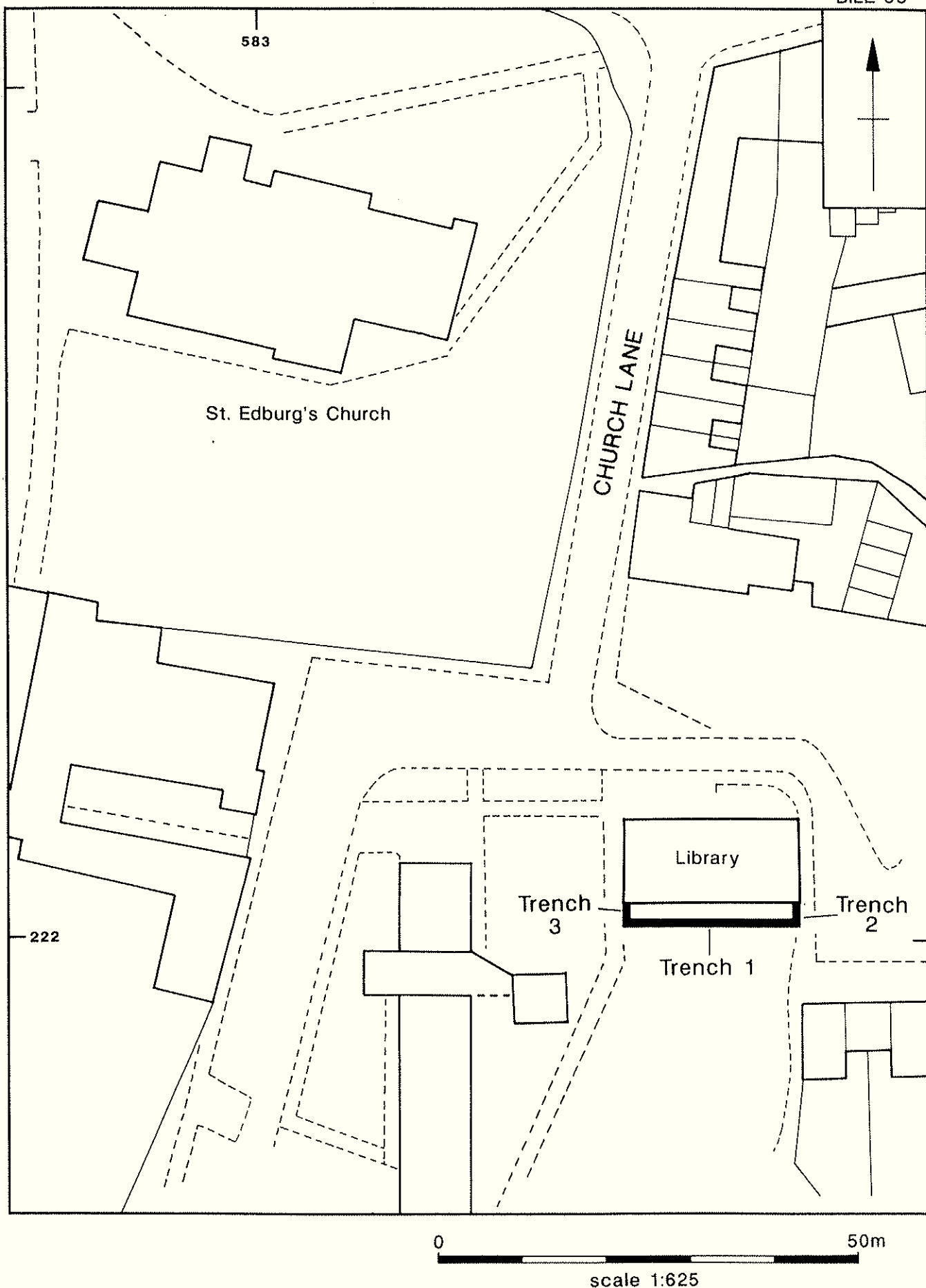


Figure 1

BILE 95

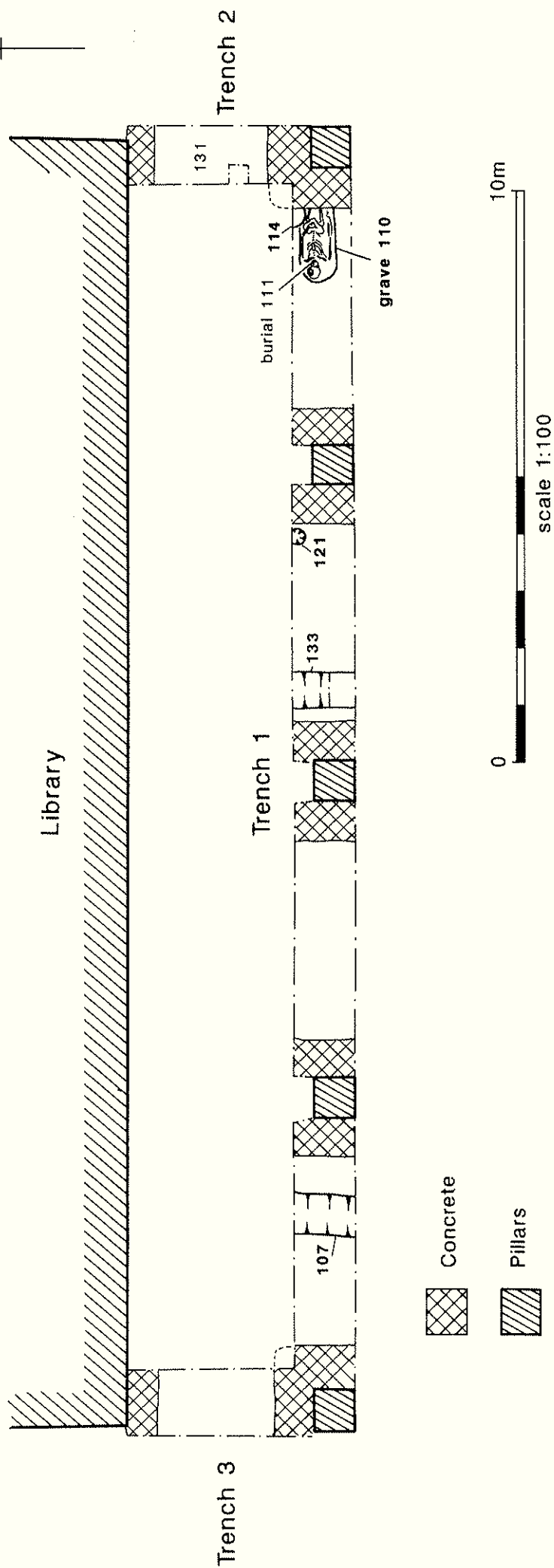
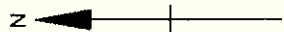


Figure 2

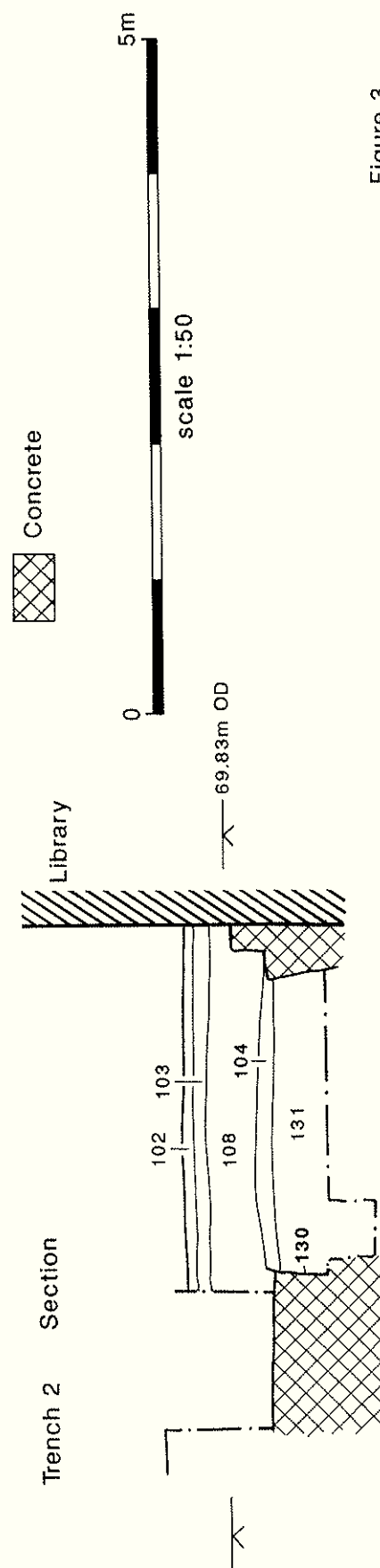
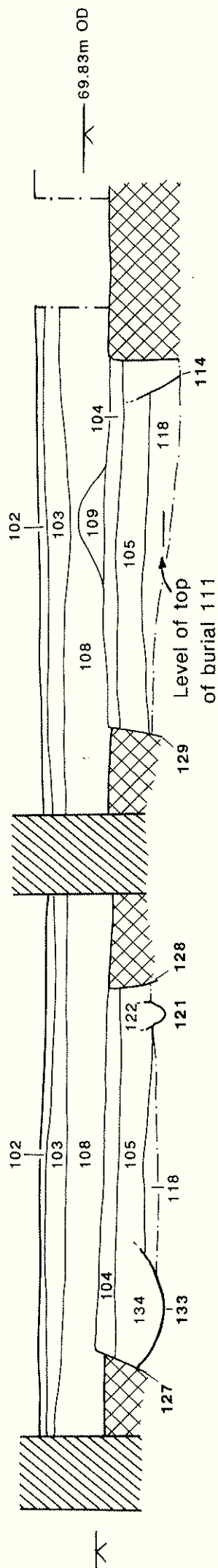
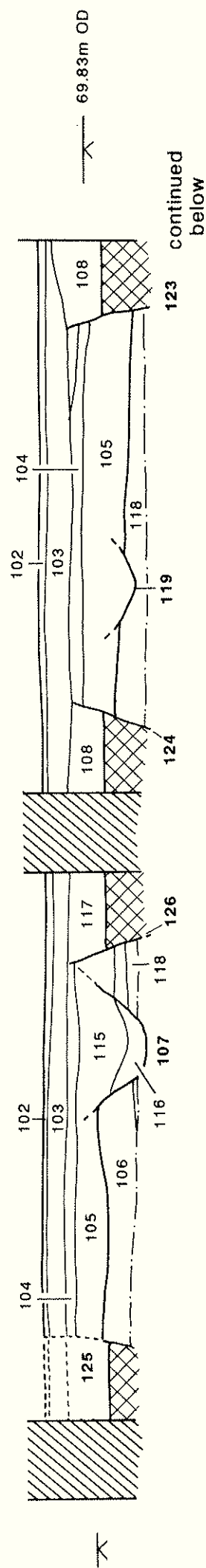


Figure 3



OXFORD ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT

46 Hythe Bridge Street, Oxford, OX1 2EP

Head Office Tel: 01865 243888 Fax: 01865 793496
Post-Excavation Tel: 01865 204642 Fax: 01865 204637



Director: David Miles B.A., F.S.A., M.I.F.A.

The Oxford Archaeological Unit Limited. Registered Charity Number: 285627
Private Limited Company Number: 1618597 Registered Office: 46 Hythe Bridge Street