


Osney Abbey Oxford



Archaeological Evaluation Report

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**Oseney Abbey Scheduled Monument, Mill Street, Oxford,
Archaeological Evaluation Report**

Written by Simon Underdown

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Osney Abbey Scheduled Monument, Archaeological Evaluation

Summary

In June 2009 Oxford Archaeology (OA) carried out an archaeological evaluation within a surviving building of Osney Abbey at Osney Mill, Mill Street, Oxford. (Centred at NGR: SP 5040 0590). The work was commissioned by W.H. Munsey Ltd in advance of works to the building which is a scheduled monument. Sympathetic conversion of the building to office use is proposed alongside residential development of the adjacent mill buildings.

The evaluation consisted of two small trenches designed to investigate whether any significant archaeological deposits exist within 0.4m of the present floor level, this specifically relates to proposed installation of a new floor and under floor heating within the building.

The evaluation encountered possible medieval dry mortar floor deposits and trample layers above them containing one piece of 14th or 15th century ceramic within 0.4m below the existing floor. These were cut by some late post-medieval features of unknown purpose and all overlain by a thick but loose organic silty layer containing some animal bones with butchery marks. This might relate to processing of carcasses for use in the adjacent bone mill in the early to mid 19th century. This deposit was cut by construction of the brick plinth for the present floor later in the 19th century.

Simon Underdown

August 2009





1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Scope of work

- 1.1.1 In June 2009 Oxford Archaeology (OA) carried out an archaeological evaluation within a surviving building of Osney Abbey at Osney Mill, Mill Street, Oxford centred at NGR: SP 5040 0590 (Fig. 1). The work was commissioned by W.H. Munsey Ltd in advance of works to the building which is a scheduled monument. Sympathetic conversion of the building to office use is proposed alongside residential development of the adjacent mill buildings.
- 1.1.2 The evaluation consisted of two small trenches (Fig. 2) designed to investigate whether any significant archaeological deposits exist within 0.4m of the present floor level, this specifically relates to proposed installation of a new floor and under floor heating within the building.

1.2 Location, geology and topography

- 1.2.1 The Abbey building lies on the western edge of the city of Oxford adjacent to a mill race leading off the River Thames. The building is sited on level ground at approximately 58 m above OD adjacent to a former flour mill and ancillary buildings. The underlying geology is alluvium over terrace gravels (Geological Survey of Great Britain, sheet no.236).

2 ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 Brief Historical background

- 2.1.1 The following is a brief history of the Abbey site, a fuller version with particular reference to the scheduled building can be found in the recent detailed survey of the building (OA, 2009 (1)).
- 2.1.2 The development site lies on the site of the old Augustian Abbey founded in 1129 on the Island of Osney which lay between two branches of the Thames, with the city to the east and the water-meadows of Botley to the west.
- 2.1.3 By 1154, Prior Wigod had assumed the title and status of Abbot. The abbey grew rapidly in temporal power and enjoyed the patronage of several English kings and gained substantial banking and financial business. By the 13th-century the original buildings had been greatly enlarged , and as a centre of learning and influence Osney had become “one of the first ornaments of this place and nation”. Dugdale described the Abbey church as “a most beautiful and large fabric, second to none in the kingdom, not only the envy of other religious houses, but of most beyond the sea”.
- 2.1.4 After the Dissolution Osney Abbey church became the cathedral of the new diocese of Oxford, but this final florescence lasted only a few years. Superseded by St Frideswide’s priory church, Osney fell into decline and saw the decay, systematic destruction and final ruin of its buildings during the English Civil War. Only fragments of a gate, parts of 2 ranges and some ruined stone mouldings survive on the site. Most of the former precinct, including the church, lies under a cemetery and the railway embankment.
- 2.1.5 Between 1182 and 1189 Bernard of St Valery granted the canons of Osney a weir on the River Thames with the water course running to their mill. By 1225 there was more than one wheel, and by 1249 there was a fulling mill in addition to the earlier corn-mills.



- 2.1.6 At the Dissolution the Osene mills, described as fulling-mills, gig-mills (for raising the nap on cloth) and corn-mills passed, together with the abbey site, to Christ Church, which in 1547 leased the site, with the mills, to William Stumpe, a clothier. He assigned his lease to another clothier James Atwood whose sons held the site until the 1580s.
- 2.1.7 A grist mill was recorded on the site in 1611 and during the Civil War the mills were used as powdermills. In 1659 the tenant of Castle Mill planned to build new fulling-mills at Osene. In 1775 part of the buildings were used as a china factory, but the mill continued in use. Before 1829 the tenant had built saw-mills, while a bone-mill was added in 1844 and another in 1848. By 1876 the mill was described as a flour-mill. The present owners family purchased the site in 1895 and the flour-mill continued in use until its destruction by fire in 1945.

2.2 Previous Archaeological Investigations

- 2.2.1 A number of archaeological investigations have been carried out close to the area of proposed development, within the accepted extent of the precinct of Osene Abbey. Trial borings in Osene Cemetery c 100 m east of the site in 1951 found wall foundations. In 1962-3 construction trenches 60m south-east of the site produced medieval worked stone and other building material.
- 2.2.2 An extended programme of work was carried out by Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) between 1975-83 when the marina and housing on the south-east side of the area of proposed development were built (Sharpe, 1985). The work indicated that 'much of the site lies on what was at the time of the priory foundation still an island with a channel running to the E. This seems to have been infilled and the abbey precinct extended to the W at some time in the 13th century' (OA unpublished).
- 2.2.3 'The work of Sharpe indicated that after the westward expansion of the abbey precinct the site was occupied by a range of buildings running roughly N-S parallel to the line of the medieval and modern mill stream, the edge of which was revetted with a substantial wall. Within the SW corner of the expanded precinct, formed by the mill stream and a new E-W aligned wall, situated a little to the S of the southern limit of the present site, was a complex sequence of structures, the plans and sequence of which cannot be resolved on present evidence' (OAU (Booth, P) 1994).
- 2.2.4 Further work in this area was carried out by OAU in 1994. When the site immediately south of the surviving building was developed. 'This produced evidence for a complex and well preserved sequence of buildings mostly relating to the western (river side) range of the outer courts of the abbey. The earliest structural traces were probably of 13th century date.
- 2.2.5 At the south end of the site two buildings perhaps with an industrial function were separated by a narrow paved area. Further north a north-south wall line which can be related to', the former south range adjoining, 'the extant late medieval fragment of the abbey (and was not removed until the 18th century) superseded two earlier structures, the earliest again of 13th century date. Outside these structures to the west was an area used for pit digging' (OA unpublished).
- 2.2.6 A watching brief following the 1994 evaluation work included a trench which revealed the robber trench for the east wall of the former south part of the range, the wall was estimated to have been about 1m wide.
- 2.2.7 Four test pits were excavated in 2008 in connection with the proposed development and a watching brief was undertaken on these (OA 2008).



- 2.2.8 Pit one was excavated in the far north-east corner of the demolished outbuildings east of the scheduled monument and revealed two limestone floors. The second pit was dug on the south side of the south wall of the former outbuildings about five metres south of the abbey building and revealed brick walls and floors of the former buildings.
- 2.2.9 Pit three was located inside the brick built mill, against the east wall, and revealed the construction of the footings and floor bedding of that building. There was a layer of large limestone boulders 1.5m below the mill floor with 1.1m of oolitic gravel laid above it, above the gravel was a layer of clay silt with a bed of lime mortar and then the brick mill sub-floor above it.
- 2.2.10 The fourth pit was situated about five metres north of the north-west corner of the abbey building adjacent to the standing brick extension to the old mill range. This was designed to straddle the projected line of the western wall of the lost northern continuation of the abbey range. The remnants of a brick wall and footings of the demolished Victorian buildings were encountered and a deposit of clinker and ash from burning, possibly connected with one of the two chimneys contained within those buildings. No deposits relating to the medieval range were found.
- 2.2.11 A detailed survey and investigation of the scheduled Abbey building was undertaken by OA in 2008-9 (OA, 2009 (2)) which included rectified photographic survey of the wall masonry and metric survey of the historic roof timbers. The work also included historic research and the report includes comprehensive sections of history, description and interpretation of the existing structure.

3 EVALUATION AIMS AND METHODOLOGY

3.1 Aims

- 3.1.1 The primary aim was to establish whether any significant archaeological deposits exist within 400mm below the present floor level of the Scheduled Ancient Monument by excavating the overburden to the top of any such deposits without excavating the deposits themselves.
- 3.1.2 The further aim was to record any such significant archaeological deposits that were revealed and identified by the work and to make the results of the archaeological investigation available.

3.2 Methodology

- 3.2.1 The methodology was agreed in advance with English Heritage and set out in the WSI produced by OA. The site specific methodology was as follows;
- 3.2.2 The evaluation comprised 2 trenches each 1m square in plan and not more than 400mm deep (For trench locations see figure 2, Trench 2 was extended during the work).
- 3.2.3 Trench 1 was located in the North-east corner of the scheduled monument where floorboards are already missing and this did not require removal of any boards.
- 3.2.4 Trench 2 was located against the internal rear (south) wall of the Scheduled monument approximately 2.5m from the South-east corner. This trench required the removal of some of the 19th-century floorboards to enlarge an existing hole to the required dimensions.
- 3.2.5 The loose rubbish and overburden was removed carefully by hand either until the required depth of 400mm was reached or until significant archaeological deposits were encountered.

- 3.2.6 Recording of the archaeological deposits was undertaken in accord with OA's standard methodology as set out in the WSI.

3.3 Finds

- 3.3.1 Finds, consisting of pottery and some animal bone, were recovered by hand during the course of the excavation and bagged by context. The pottery and bone were rapidly assessed by OA finds specialists and their comments incorporated into this report.

4 RESULTS

4.1 Description of deposits

Test Pit 1 (Fig. 3)

- 4.1.1 This was located against the centre of the south wall of the building.
- 4.1.2 At approximately 0.4m below the present floorboards there were two patches of a dry limestone mortar deposit (1010 and 1012) which may be remnants of a mortar floor surface. The depth of these is unknown as they were not excavated further.
- 4.1.3 Above the mortar deposits was a layer of mid-brown silt (1009) which probably represents accumulated dirt trampled into the floor surface during usage. The full depth of this was not seen but it appears to have consisted of only 0.01-0.02m thickness over the mortar. No finds were recovered from either the mortar or the overlying silty deposit.
- 4.1.4 Overlaying 1009 were two similar deposits of silt and organic matter (1000 & 1006) totalling 0.3m in thickness. Both contained animal bone and two sherds of pottery were recovered from the upper deposit (1006). These consisted of a fragment of a dish or saucer in blue transfer-printed Pearl ware probably of the 1830s or 40s and a jug body-sherd in black-glazed Staffordshire type coarseware of the 18th or early 19th century.
- 4.1.5 The lower deposit was clearly cut by the construction trench (1001) for the brick dwarf wall (1002) of the existing floor, it was not clear as to whether the upper deposit was also cut by this but it seems likely that it was as this deposit is physically below the floor and it would seem unlikely either that this accumulated below the floorboards or without a floor being in place when the dwarf walls for it were in place.

Test pit 2 (Fig. 4)

- 4.1.6 This was located in the north-west corner of the building where floorboards and joists had already been removed in the past. During the investigation the trench was extended by a further metre to the east at the request of English Heritage.
- 4.1.7 The earliest deposits in this trench were a light yellow-brown clayey silt (2014) and above it a dry lime mortar layer which, almost certainly, represents a floor surface above a levelling or bedding layer. The full depth of 2014 was not seen, 2013 was on average 2cm thick. These deposits were not excavated as such but seen in section where cut by later features; they had been largely truncated by post-medieval features across the extent of the test pit but were visible in the south and west sections which partially coincided with the edges of the later features which were excavated to formation depth.
- 4.1.8 On the south side of the trench mortar layer 2013 was encountered at approximately 0.35m below the existing floorboards. In the west section the mortar sloped up to the north to a point where it was about 0.2m below the floorboards. It also split into two layers to the north with a lens of soft mid-grey silty sand between them. It was not



possible to ascertain whether the two layers were contemporary but it seems more likely that the upper layer was a later addition.

- 4.1.9 Above the mortar layer was a deposit of compact light grey-brown sandy silt which varied in thickness from 2-6cm (2012). This may have been a deliberately created earth floor but it is perhaps more likely that it is a trample layer representing an accumulation through usage of the floor. This deposit contained one piece of ceramic material which has a pale buff sandy fabric with speckled green glaze, this may be part of vessel such as a sub-rectangular dripping pan but might be a fragment of a glazed ridge tile. Whatever the original form was the nature of the fabric and glaze suggest this dates from the 14th-15th centuries.
- 4.1.10 The piece of ceramic may be redeposited but its presence in this layer suggests that the mortar floor and the trample layer may well date from the late-medieval pre-dissolution monastic use of the building.
- 4.1.11 Overlying 2012 was deposit 2011 which was a very clean and consistent soft mid grey-brown silt layer with fine striations in section. This might represent an accumulation of deposits such as airborne dust and silt during a post-medieval period of disuse or little use. This layer was cut by features 2004 in the south-west part of the trench and feature 2008 in the north-east corner. Neither of these features was seen in their entirety nor fully excavated; the backfills 2005 and 2008 respectively seemed to consist largely of the material that was removed (contexts 2011-2014) redeposited and mixed. The nature and function of 2004 is uncertain, 2008 has a curving south edge and a piece of decaying timber of about 0.2m diameter within the fill so may have been a posthole with post *in situ*. Fill 2005 contained a piece of cylindrical bottle glass that is probably late 18th or early 19th century in date and would not be earlier than about 1750. The relationship between the two features is uncertain but it looks as though 2008 cuts the fill of 2005 and is later.
- 4.1.12 Fill 2005 was overlain by a random deposit (2016) of several loose limestone rubble stones at the west end of the trench, these clearly originate from the abbey buildings and may relate to the phases of demolition and subsequent repair that were taking place in this range in the late 18th and early 19th centuries.
- 4.1.13 2005 was also cut by feature 2006 in the south-east corner of the trench this was not fully excavated and contained a similar mixed redeposited backfill (2007) to those in features 2004 and 2008. The feature was sub-square in shape and measured about 0.7m north to south and east to west. The fill contained a piece of blue transfer-printed Staffordshire white ware dating from c1820-1850.
- 4.1.14 Overlying 2007 and 2016 was deposit 2010 consisting of a loose dark brown silt which appeared to have a high organic content and contained a large number of animal bones with butchery marks and a piece of deer antler that appears to have been partially worked (crudely cut, marrow removed and hole drilled through one side) then abandoned. This deposit probably dates from the early 19th century and the butchered bones may indicate waste from preparing animal carcasses for grinding in the former bone mill which in 1845 was situated where the large ruinous brick built roller mill now stands. A sherd of post-medieval red earthenware from this context could date to any time from the late 17th to the early 19th centuries.
- 4.1.15 A construction cut (2015) for the west brick plinth (2002) supporting the current floor (2000) cuts this deposit. The west plinth is abutted by the north floor plinth (2001) which suggests the north plinth was inserted later when the current north wall was built and the floor may previously have extended further north and may therefore have been inserted



when the building was repaired and a lower roof built over the now lost bay with the arch in the early to mid 19th century.¹

Truncation of Deposits by Existing Floor

- 4.1.16 The current oak floor joists are aligned north to south and these are supported on brick plinths or dwarf walls. As seen in the excavation the base of the dwarf walls at the edges of the building coincided with the extent of excavation at 0.4m below the present floor and their construction cuts truncate earlier deposits.
- 4.1.17 Probing through the decayed floor revealed that there are also several parallel east to west dwarf walls running across the building supporting the ends of the joists and it is therefore probable that the construction of these has also truncated earlier deposits including the late-medieval floors and associated layers.

5 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

- 5.1.1 Both test pits revealed a broadly similar succession of deposits but in test pit 2 later features had truncated the earlier deposits; this however afforded a greater opportunity to examine those deposits in section where they had been truncated.
- 5.1.2 At about 0.4m depth in trench 1 and 0.35m in trench 2 mortar deposits that might represent late medieval floor surfaces were encountered. One section of mortar layer in trench 2 sloped up to the north to a depth of about 0.2m below the floor; this might have been a later addition and may have sloped up to an entrance or exit in a partition or simply to a different floor level in the former bay with the open arch. Also in trench 2 a clayey silt deposit was seen below the mortar which probably represents bedding or levelling for the floor and is the earliest deposit encountered.
- 5.1.3 In both trenches a trampled earth layer overlay the dry mortar and would seem to represent late medieval activity. In trench 2 this context contained a small piece of green glazed medieval ceramic of 14th-15th century date that might be part of ridge tile or otherwise from a vessel such as a dripping pan.
- 5.1.4 In both trenches also the trample layer was overlain by loose silty deposits, the upper one especially containing decayed organic matter and animal bones with butchery marks. The lower of these deposits in trench 2 was clean, loose and striated and may represent an accumulation of largely airborne material during a period of low use or relative disuse.
- 5.1.5 The deposit in trench 2 was cut by two late post-medieval features of uncertain function though one may have been a posthole with decayed post still in situ. A third feature cutting one of the others contained pottery of c1820-1850.
- 5.1.6 The upper deposit in both trenches, which in trench 2 overlay the latest cut feature, contained pottery sherds indicating a probable early 19th century date and also several animal bones with butchery marks. It seems plausible that this deposit might therefore contain refuse from the processing of carcasses in preparation for use in the bone mill which existed on the site in the early 19th century in the location of the present burnt out shell of the later Victorian brick built mill.
- 5.1.7 The present floor was simply built over these deposits. It appears to have possibly extended further north originally as the present north plinth abuts that to the west it may therefore date to the repair and partial re-roofing of the building after a phase of gradual

1 See image on front cover and OA, 2009 (1)



demolition/collapse in the early to mid 19th century as witnessed by contemporary prints and drawings.

- 5.1.8 In summary it can be said therefore that significant archaeological deposits probably representing medieval floors and use of the building survive within 0.4m of the existing floor at both ends of the building and probably extend with varying levels of survival across the floor area. These deposits are overlain by post-medieval and 18th/19th century deposits and truncated in places by 18th/19th century features including the brick walls for the present floor reflecting later phases of activity.



APPENDIX 1 ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXT INVENTORY

<i>Context</i>	<i>Type</i>	<i>Thickness</i>	<i>Comments</i>	<i>Finds</i>	<i>Date</i>
<i>Test Pit 1</i>					
1000	Deposit	-	Accumulated silt and decayed organic matter	Pottery, bone	C19th
1001	Cut		Construction cut for brick plinth	-	C19th
1002	Structure	-	Brick plinth supporting floor	-	C19th
1003	Deposit	0.15m	Fill of construction cut	-	C19th
1004	Deposit	0.8m	Sillbeam for floor	-	C19th
1005	Structure	0.68m	Bricks on sill	-	C19th
1006	Deposit	0.24m	Accumulated organic matter and dirt	Pottery, bone	C19th
1007	Structure	0.1m	Floor joists	-	C19th
1008	Structure	0.022m	Floor boards	-	C19th
1009	Deposit	unknown	?Earth floor or trample	-	?Post-Medieval
1010	Deposit	unknown	Mortar patch, possible floor remnant	-	?Late Medieval
1011	Deposit	0.05m	Decayed organic matter	-	?Late Medieval
1012	Deposit	unknown	Mortar patch, possible floor remnant	-	?Late Medieval
1013	Deposit	unknown	Bitumenisitic damp course	-	C19th
<i>Test Pit 2</i>					
2000	Structure	0.105 m	Timber floor	-	C19th
2001	Structure	>0.30m	North brick plinth for floor	-	C19th
2002	Structure	0.40m	West brick plinth for floor	-	C19th
2003	Structure	>0.15m	Small square brick structure, possibly a post housing	-	C19th
2004	Cut	>0.18m	Cut of unknown purpose	-	?C18th/C19th
2005	Deposit	>0.18m	Fill of 2005	Pottery	?C18th/C19th
2006	Cut	>0.15m	Small sub-square feature	-	? early to mid C19th



<i>Context</i>	<i>Type</i>	<i>Thickness</i>	<i>Comments</i>	<i> Finds</i>	<i>Date</i>
2007	Deposit	>0.15m	Fill of 2006	Pottery	C19th
2008	Cut	>0.30m	Possible post-hole	-	?C18th/C19th
2009	Deposit	>0.30m	Fill of 2008	-	?C18th/C19th
2010	Deposit	0.22m	Silty layer with decayed organic matter	Pottery, bone	C19th
2011	Deposit	0.10m	Accumulation containing fine striated silt layers	-	?C17th-18th
2012	Deposit	0.06m	?Earth floor or trample layer	Pottery	?Late medieval
2013	Deposit	0.02-0.02m	Dry mortar floor surface	-	?Late medieval
2014	Deposit	>0.06cm	?Levelling/bedding for floor 2013	-	?Late medieval
2015	Cut	0.22 m	Construction cut for west floor plinth	-	C19th
2016	Deposit	-	Redeposited stone rubble	-	?C18th/C19th
2017	Deposit	0.15m	Fill of 2015	-	C19th



APPENDIX 2 BIBLIOGRAPHY AND REFERENCES

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APPENDIX 3 SUMMARY OF SITE DETAILS

name: Osney Abbey, Osney Mill, Mill Lane, Oxford

Site code: OXOSABEV

Grid reference: SP 5050 0590

Type of Evaluation: Hand digging of shallow test pits in standing building

Date and duration of project: 16-17th June 2009

Area of site: interior of building is approximately 45 m²

Summary of results: The evaluation encountered possible medieval dry mortar floor deposits, with levelling or make-up below and trample layers above them. These were cut by some post-medieval features of unknown purpose and all overlain by a thick but loose organic silty layer containing some animal bones with butchery marks. This might relate to processing of carcasses for use in the adjacent bone mill in the early to mid 19th century. The earlier deposits were also cut by construction of the brick plinth for the present floor in the 19th century.



Scale 1:25,000

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Figure 1: Site location

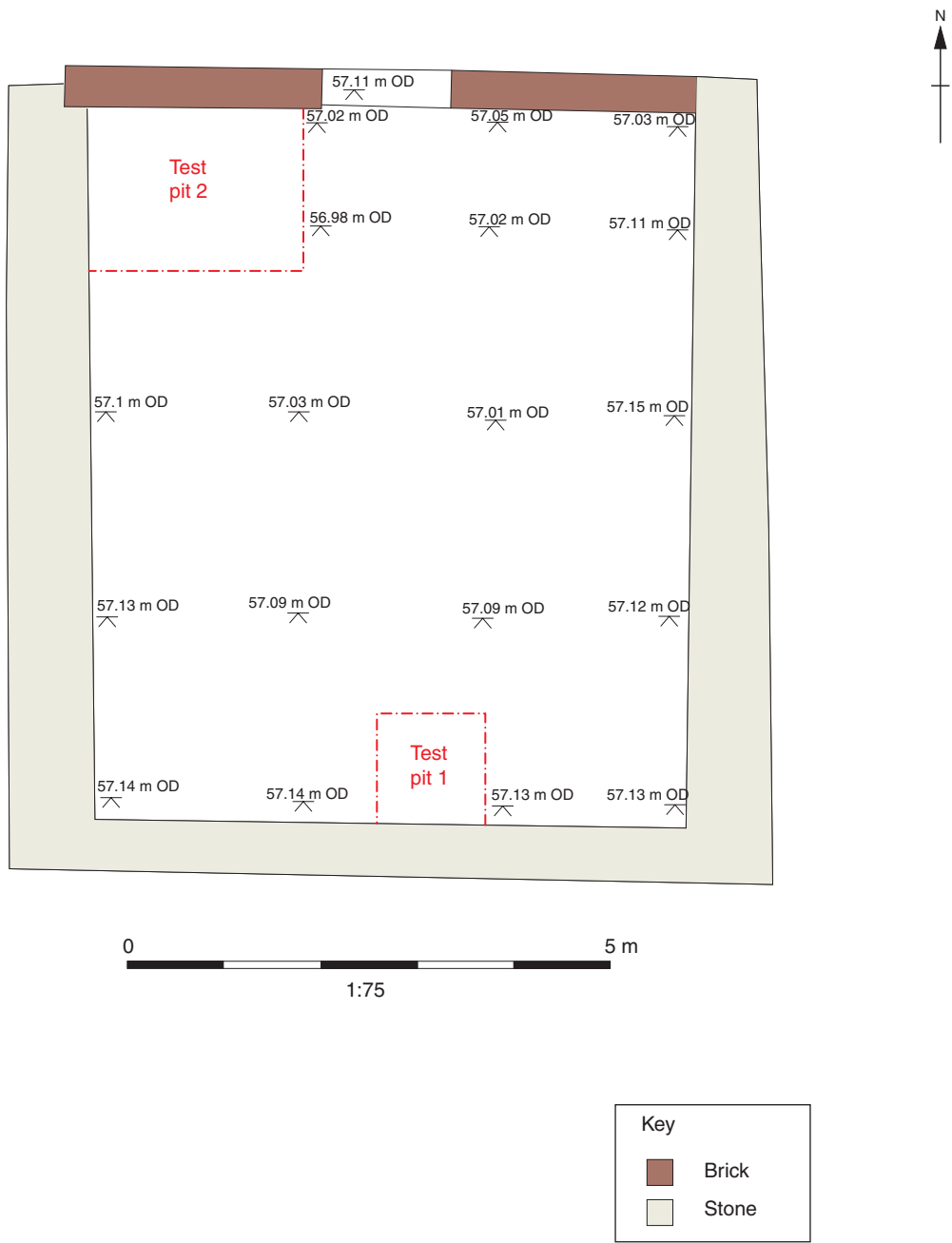


Figure 2: Location of Test pits and floor levels, within the scheduled monument

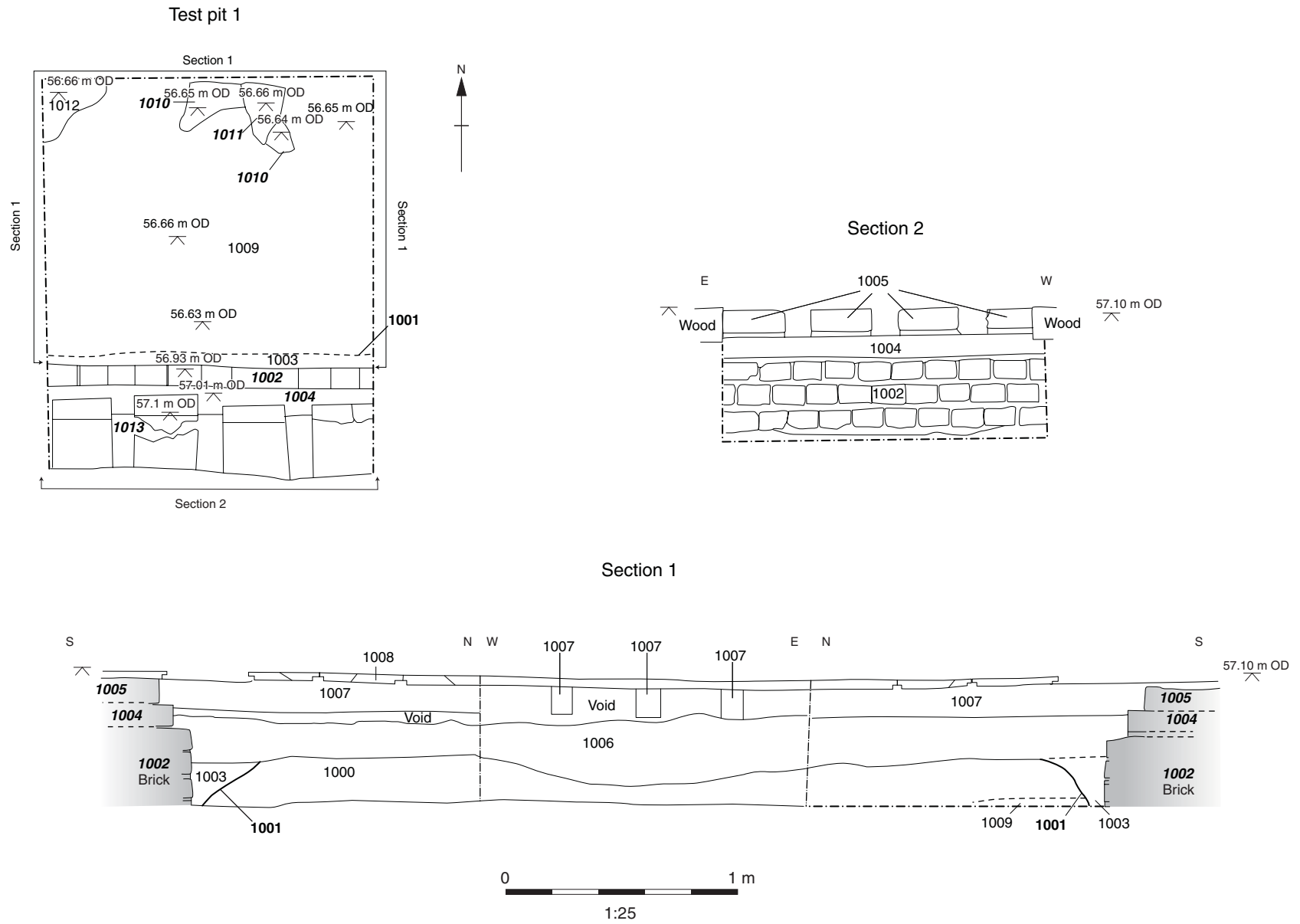


Figure 3: Test pit 1, plan and sections

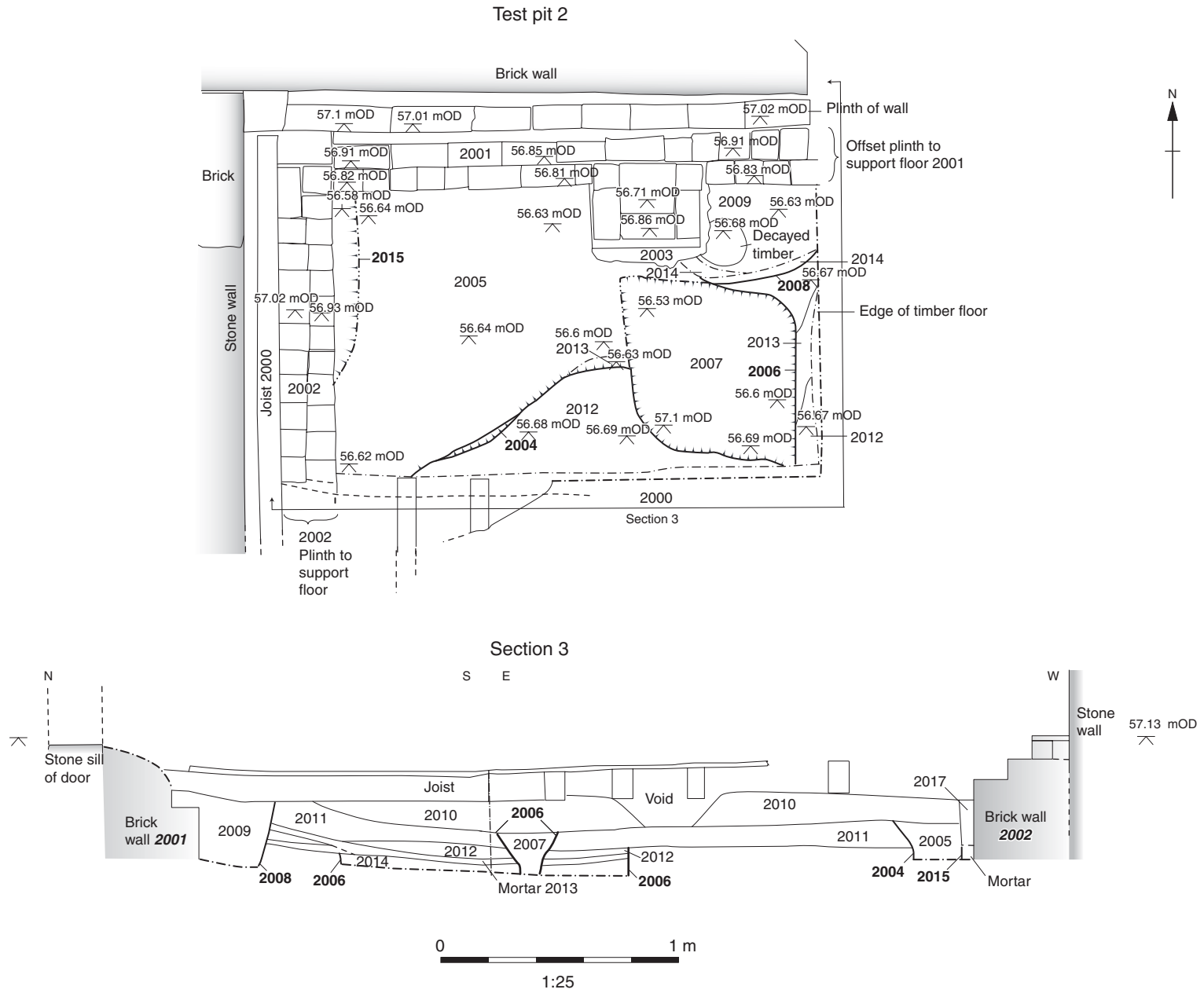


Figure 4: Test pit 2, plan and sections



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