

New Boundary Wall
St Mary's Church
Banbury



**Archaeological
Watching Brief Report**



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New Boundary Wall, St Michael's Church, Banbury, Oxfordshire

ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF REPORT

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Front cover: St Mary's Church viewed from Horsefair

SUMMARY

In August 2008, Oxford Archaeology (OA) carried out an archaeological watching brief at St Mary's Church, Banbury, Oxfordshire (NGR: SP 454 405). The work was commissioned by Cherwell District Council in advance of the reconstruction of a bowing boundary wall. The watching brief revealed several phases of churchyard soil deposits, an 19th-century brick built vault and 2 articulated burials probably dating to the 17th-century. No earlier deposits or features were observed.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Scope of work

1.1.1 In August 2008, Oxford Archaeology (OA) carried out an archaeological watching brief at St Mary's Church, Banbury, Oxfordshire (NGR: SP 454 405). The work was commissioned by Cherwell District Council (CDC) in advance of the reconstruction of a bowing boundary wall along the north-eastern edge of the churchyard.

1.1.2 A project design was agreed between OA and CDC prior to the commencement of works.

1.2 Location, geology and topography

1.2.1 St Mary's church is located centrally within the town of Banbury on a ridge of high ground running south-east to north-west overlooking the town cross (Fig. 1). The churchyard slopes gently down towards the east from the church. The bowed wall is located in the north-western corner of the churchyard at approximately 126 m above OD. The churchyard is bounded to the north and south by buildings and gardens, to the west by Horsefair Street and to the east by London Yard. A stone-built wall forms a boundary between the churchyard and London Yard with the churchyard being approximately 1.5 m higher. The bowed wall was constructed of brick and formed part of the northern boundary butting up to the stone wall.

1.2.2 The underlying geology is alluvium overlying Lower Lias (Geological Survey of Great Britain, sheet no. 201)

1.3 Archaeological and historical background

1.3.1 *The following is an edited history of Banbury taken from the Victoria History of the County of Oxford, volume X.*

1.3.2 The town origins lie in its siting at the point where routes crossed the limestone ridge dividing the Thames Basin from the Midlands Plain. The ridge formed an east-west route of great antiquity known as the "Jurassic Way", and a prehistoric origin has been suggested for Banbury Lane, which follows the ridge from Northampton to Banbury,

crossing the Cherwell and continuing to the south-west towards the Cotswolds. The position of the ford over the Cherwell determining the siting of the settlement.

- 1.3.3 No Palaeolithic or Mesolithic finds are recorded in the vicinity. Neolithic and Bronze Age flint implements including a Neolithic leaf-shaped arrowhead were found at Banbury Castle excavations (SMR 13672 and 13673). Two fragments of Neolithic flint are known from the Vicarage in the Horsefair, some 50 m west of the site (SMR 8751).
- 1.3.4 Iron Age finds are absent within the study area though a few Roman coins are noted, including a bronze coin of Sestersius of Gordianus III (AD 238-244) *c* 200 m to the south-west. Evidence of Roman occupation has been found within the area of Banbury including a substantial building at Wickham Park and a sub-Roman site at Broughton Road south-west of the church.
- 1.3.5 No major Roman roads come close to the town with the salt route from Droitwich to Princes Risborough crossing the Cherwell between Aynho and Adderbury to the south-east.
- 1.3.6 The name of Banbury dates from the early Saxon period and means the enclosed homestead of a man called Banna. The Saxon settlement probably originally lay in the vicinity of St Mary's Church or the east end of Castle Street East. Evidence for gullies or possible property boundaries, and an 11th-century pit have been found close to the church.
- 1.3.7 The castle was built between 1123-48 by Bishop Alexander of Lincoln, and recent excavations also revealed an earlier 11th-century structure. The foundation of St Mary's church also dates to this period. The castle was rebuilt in the 13th century.
- 1.3.8 In the early 13th century four bars or gates were constructed around the town's limits, to control traffic in and out of Banbury. The town probably expanded beyond the north gate in the 14th century.
- 1.3.9 During the late medieval and early post-medieval periods the towns prosperity grew with the trade in cheeses and later with the wool trade.
- 1.3.10 A third of the town and the castle were destroyed during the English Civil War in the 17th century. The castle was rebuilt and the moat infilled.
- 1.3.11 By the 18th century a few small factories within the borough were established although the town still relied mainly on the wool and weaving trades. Following the construction of the Oxford Canal, Banbury expanded in the late 18th century, later expanding further with the construction of the railways in the 1850s allowing Sir Bernard Samuelson to develop an existing foundry into an agricultural implements factory, the towns largest industrial enterprise.

- 1.3.12 The medieval church that stood on the present site of St Mary's was demolished in 1790 because it was judged to be beyond repair. The Gentlemen's Magazine reported "The fine old church here is now shut up, and devoted to destruction!". Advertisements were issued asking for plans and estimates for rebuilding the church and tower, "so that they shall be capable of containing three thousand persons, and the work completed in a handsome and most substantial manner!" The successful architect was Mr Samuel Pepys Cockerill. He designed the church as a perfect square with sides ninety feet long; it is in the strict classical style of architecture and the great dome is supported by twelve Corinthian columns. The church was subject to much alteration in the middle of the nineteenth century when the east gallery was taken down and a new Italianate style chancel erected.
- 1.3.13 Previous work by OA in 2002 during the installation of sewer pipes between the church and Horsefair exposed details of the foundations of the current church but no evidence for the earlier church structure was observed (OAU, 2002).

2 PROJECT AIMS AND METHODOLOGY

2.1 Aims

- 2.1.1 To identify and record the presence or absence, extent, condition, quality and date of archaeological remains in the areas affected by the development.
- 2.1.2 To preserve by record any archaeological features or deposits that may be disturbed or destroyed during the course of any groundworks.
- 2.1.3 To make available the results of the archaeological investigation.

2.2 Methodology

- 2.2.1 The watching brief was undertaken as series of site visits during works that were likely to impinge or damage any potential archaeological deposits or features. These works included the excavation of wider foundations for the new wall which entailed cutting back into the churchyard approximately 0.6 m
- 2.2.2 A plan showing the extent of the excavations was maintained at a scale of 1:100 (Fig. 2, Site plan) and any recorded sections were drawn at a scale of 1:20. All excavations, any features and any recorded sections were photographed using digital photography, colour slide and black and white print film. A general photographic record of the work was also made. Recording followed procedures detailed in the *OA Field Manual* (ed D Wilkinson, 1992).

3 RESULTS

3.1 Description of deposits

- 3.1.1 The underlying natural, a yellow-brown silt clay with lias inclusions (22) was encountered at a depth of 1.5 m below the current ground level of the churchyard (Fig. 4, Section 1). At the western end of the excavation this was overlaid by a 0.12 m deep layer of dark grey clay silt (21) containing lens of yellow and blue grey clay suggesting a layer of disturbed ground. Overlying this and running the full length of the section was a layer of grey-brown clay silt (18) measuring between 0.3 m and 0.65 m in depth. The layer contained inclusions of yellow-brown clay and charcoal flecking and probably represents an earlier phase of churchyard soil.
- 3.1.2 Cutting this deposit was a 0.55 m deep flat-bottomed cut estimated at approximately 1.8 m long (20). This was filled with a yellow-brown silt clay (19) which sealed an adult male skeleton (101) who was aged roughly 45 years old at the time of depth.
- 3.1.3 Also cutting layer 18 was a 1.9 m long by estimated 0.6 m wide grave cut (27) (Fig. 3, not shown in section). This contained a skeleton of an adult male (100), also aged approximately 45 years who displayed scoliosis of the spine, probable rickets and symptoms of Pagets disease on his skull. The left arm and left femur had been truncated by a later foundation cut (25), but were recovered from the backfill of the foundation trench. The grave was backfilled with a yellow-brown silt clay (26) which contained fragments of post-medieval brick, possibly 17th-century in date.
- 3.1.4 The graves were sealed by a layer of dark yellow-brown silt clay (17) measuring between 0.3 m and 0.6 m in depth. This deposit ran the full length of the section and contained charcoal flecking, abraded brick fragments and yellow clay inclusions suggesting that it is a second phase of churchyard soil. This layer was cut by a 2.6 m long cut (16) with very steeply sloping sides whose depth was in excess of 1.1 m. Built within this excavation was a rectangular brick-built structure 2.3 m long, over 1.1 m in height and with 0.6 m width exposed in plan (15). This was built using hand-made unfrosted bricks measuring 0.225 m by 0.105 m by 0.063 m and lime mortar. This structure represents a family vault or shaft burial. Examination of the church records showed that it contained the bodies of Thomas Abbots and Keziah Abbots who died on the 12th January 1824 and 28th April 1828 respectively. Observed within the section on the top of the brickwork was a small stone round topped object, possibly a headstone, but no inscription was visible. The space between the vault and cut 16 was backfilled with a yellow-brown silt clay (14) containing small fragments of brick and blue-grey clay inclusions.
- 3.1.5 Overlying layer 17 and the backfill of cut 16 was a 0.2 m deep layer of grey-brown clay silt loam (13) containing abraded brick fragments and charcoal flecking. This probably represents another phase of churchyard soil. Cutting this layer was a steeply sloping excavation (12) leading directly on to the top of the brick vault 15. This event may have occurred when the body of Keziah Abbots was interred in the vault or

possibly when a monument which may have stood on the brickwork was removed. This void was filled by a dark yellow-brown clay silt (11).

- 3.1.6 Sealing this intrusion and running the full length of the section was a 0.35 m deep layer of dark grey silt clay loam (10) containing brick fragments and bottle glass. This represents the last phase of churchyard soil.
- 3.1.7 This was cut by the east-west running foundation trench (25) which also truncated the left hand side of skeleton 100. Built within this trench was a brick retaining/boundary wall (23) composed of 14 courses of 19th-century machine made bricks topped with limestone coping stones and iron railings. This was keyed into the earlier stone retaining wall bounding London Yard.

3.2 **Finds**

- 3.2.1 Fragments of abraded brick were recovered from layers 10, 13 and 17 and from fills 14 and 26. Its presence was recorded but was not retained.
- 3.2.2 Fragments of 19th/early 20th-century bottle glass were recovered from Layer 10. These finds probably represent disturbance of the upper layers both during the 1850s restoration of the church and from later inhumations. Their presence was recorded but they were not retained.

3.3 **Palaeo-environmental remains**

- 3.3.1 No deposits suitable for palaeo-environmental sampling were encountered during the course of the watching brief.

4 **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

- 4.1.1 The excavation of the new foundation trench allowed a complete stratigraphy of that area of the churchyard to be compiled.
- 4.1.2 This showed that there were 4 distinct phases of churchyard soil observable, layers 10, 13, 17 and 18. The probable 17th-century burials 20 and 27 cut layer 18 suggesting that it predates the 17th-century and may be medieval in origin, although no dating evidence was recovered to confirm this.
- 4.1.3 Layer 17 sealed the probable 17th-century graves and was cut by the early 19th-century shaft burial (15) suggesting that it dates to the 18th-and 19th-centuries. Layer 13 overlies 15 and is probably late 19th-century in origin. Layer 10 represents the current churchyard soil.
- 4.1.4 The dating of the brick wall (23) to the 19th century shows that the north-western area of the churchyard had been disturbed in this period, possibly showing that the churchyard had been encroached upon.

- 4.1.5 No evidence for earlier phases of the churchyard's use or for earlier occupation by the settlement of Banbury were observed during the course of the watching brief.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1 ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXT INVENTORY

<i>Context</i>	<i>Type</i>	<i>Depth</i>	<i>Width</i>	<i>Comments</i>	<i>Finds</i>	<i>Date</i>
10	Layer	0.35m	-	Current churchyard soil	Pottery, brick, bottle glass	C19th/ C20th
11	Fill	0.25 m	3 m	Backfill of later excavation of the shaft burial 15	Brick	C19th/ C20th
12	Cut	0.25 m	3 m	Re-excavation of shaft burial 15	-	C19th/ C20th
13	Layer	0.25 m	-	Earlier churchyard soil	Brick	C19th
14	Fill	1 m	3.5 m	Backfill of shaft burial 15	Brick	C19th
15	Structure	>1 m	2.3 m	Brick built burial vault	Brick	C19th
16	Cut	> 1 m	3.5 m	Excavation for shaft burial 15	-	C19th
17	Layer	0.5 m	-	Earlier churchyard soil	Brick	C18th ?
18	Layer	0.5 m	-	Earlier churchyard soil	-	C16th/ C17th
19	Fill	0.6 m	-	Fill of grave 20	Brick	C17th
20	Cut	0.6 m	-	Grave cut, contained skeleton 101	-	C17th
21	Layer	0.1 m	-	Possible undisturbed soil	-	-
22	Layer	> 0.2 m	-	Natural clay	-	-
23	Structure	1.3 m	0.5 m	Brick built boundary wall	Brick	C19th
24	Fill	1.3 m	0.3 m	Backfill of foundation trench	Brick, bottle glass	C19th
25	Cut	1.3 m	0.6m	Foundation trench for boundary wall 23	-	C19th
26	Fill	0.6 m	-	Fill of grave 27	Brick	C17th
27	Cut	0.6 m	-	Grave cut, contained skeleton 100	-	C17th
100	Skeleton	-	-	Adult male, 45+	-	C17th
101	Skeleton	-	-	Adult male, 45+	-	C17th

APPENDIX 2 BIBLIOGRAPHY AND REFERENCES

IFA, 2001 *Standard and Guidance for Archaeological Watching Briefs*

OAU, 1992 *Field Manual* (ed. D Wilkinson)

OAU, 2002 St Mary's Church, Banbury, Oxfordshire: Archaeological Watching Brief report

Pevsner, N, 1970 *The Buildings of England: Oxfordshire*

Victoria History of the County of Oxford Vol.X (ed. R.B.Pugh, 1972)

APPENDIX 3 SUMMARY OF SITE DETAILS

Site name: St Mary's Church, Banbury, Oxfordshire

Site code: BASTMC 08

Grid reference:

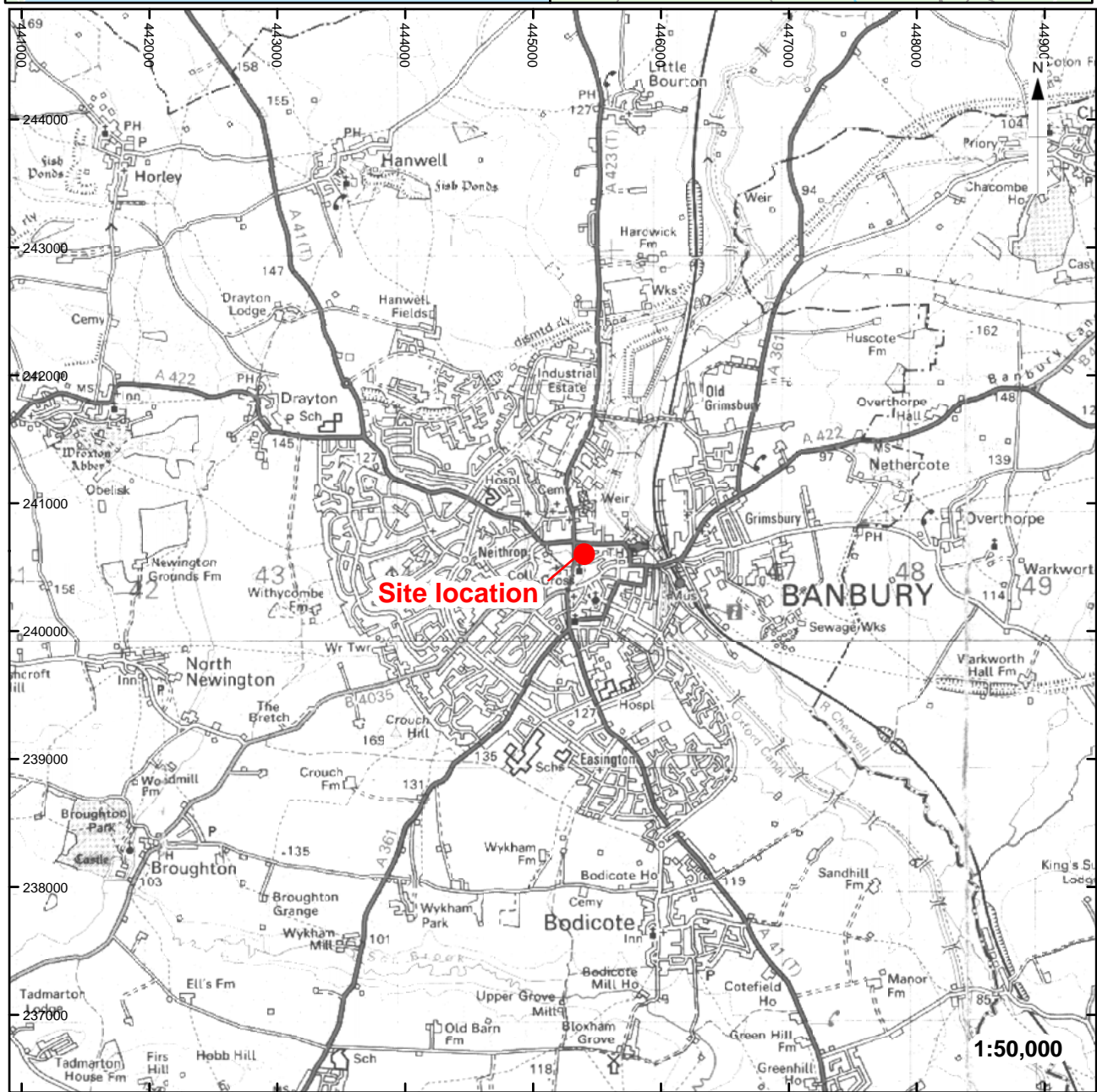
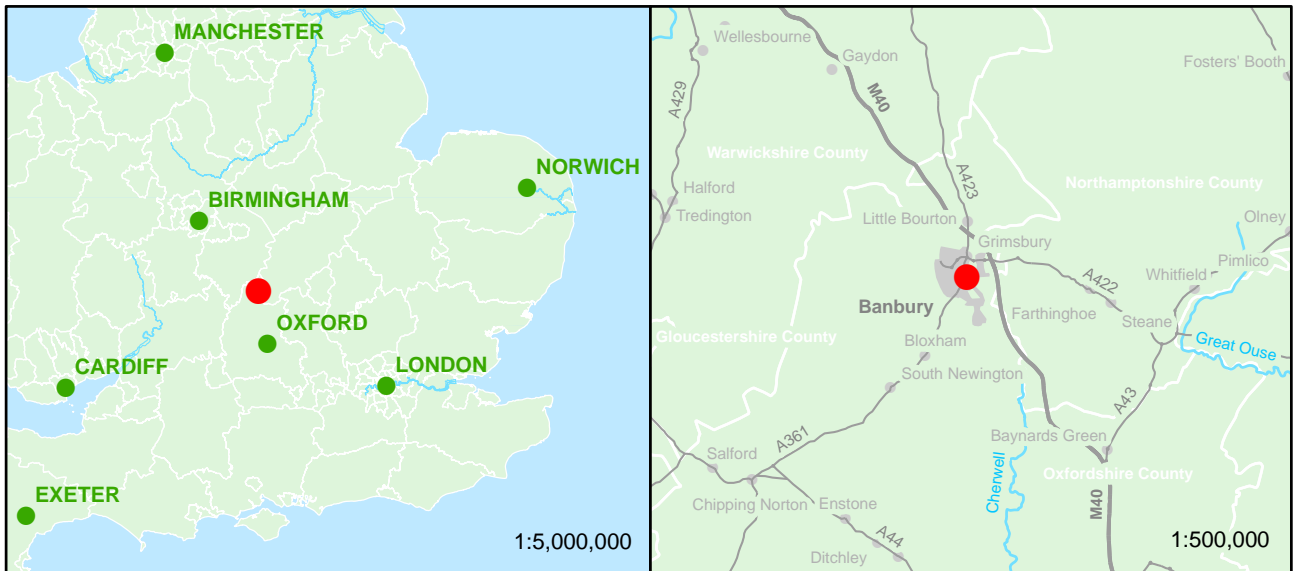
Type of watching brief: Hand excavation of new foundation trench

Date and duration of project: 12th to 19th August 2008, 4 site visits

Area of site: 300 m²

Summary of results: The watching brief exposed 4 phases churchyard soil and 2 17th-century burials. No evidence for the earlier medieval church or occupation was observed.

Location of archive: The archive is currently held at OA, Janus House, Osney Mead, Oxford, OX2 0ES, and will be deposited with Oxfordshire County Museums Service in due course.



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Figure 1: Site location

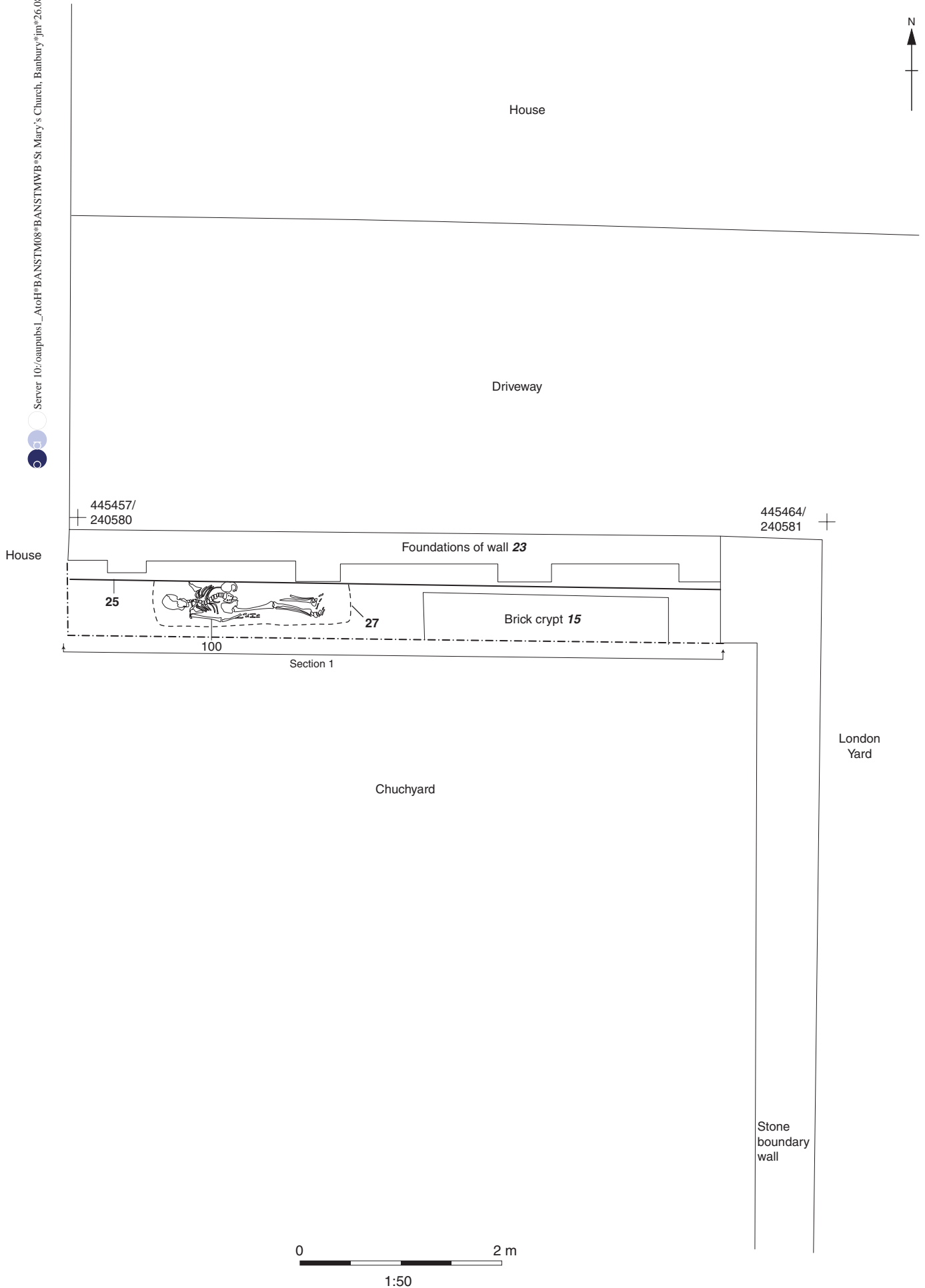
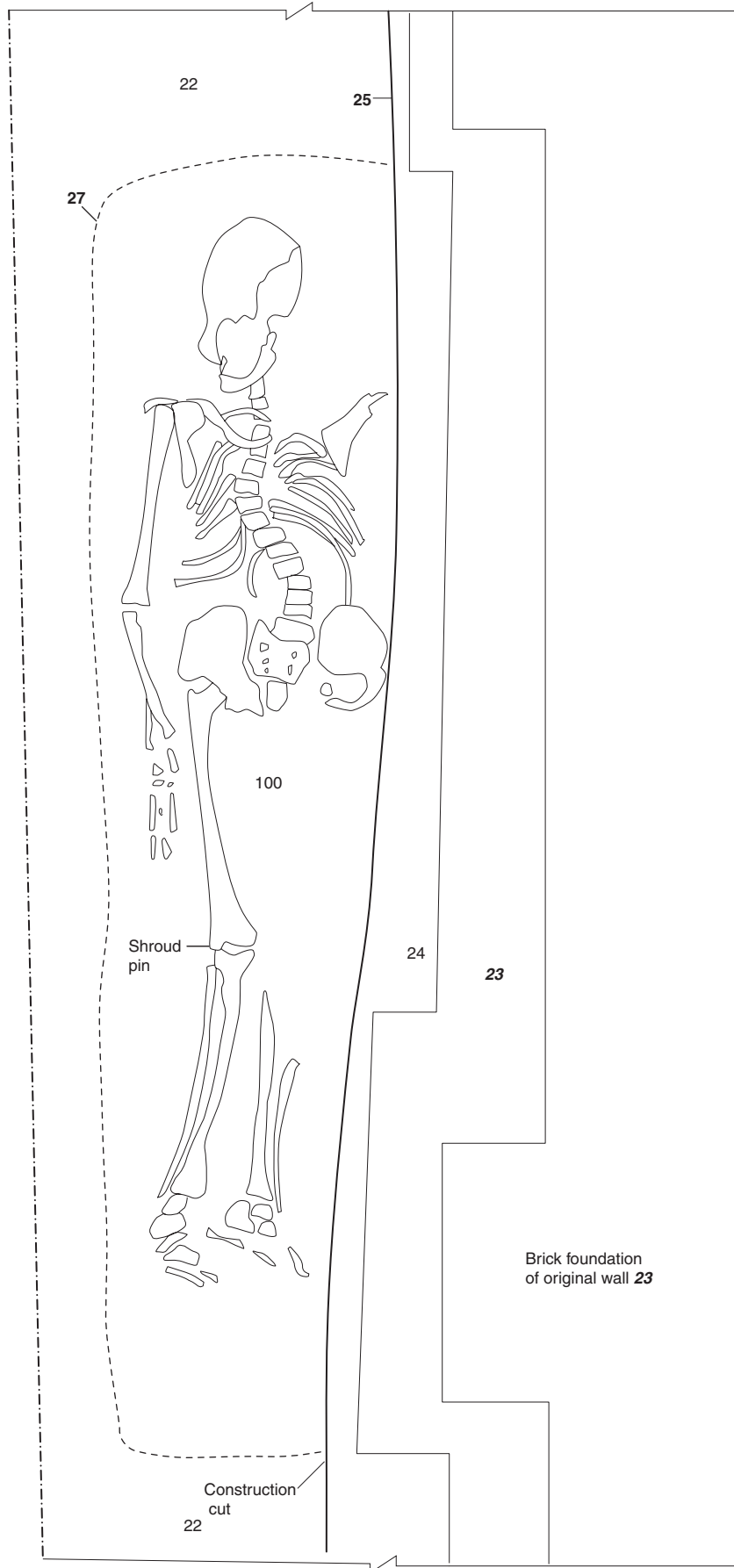


Figure 2: Site plan

Plan 2
Skeleton 100



0 500 mm

1:10

Figure 3: Burial 100

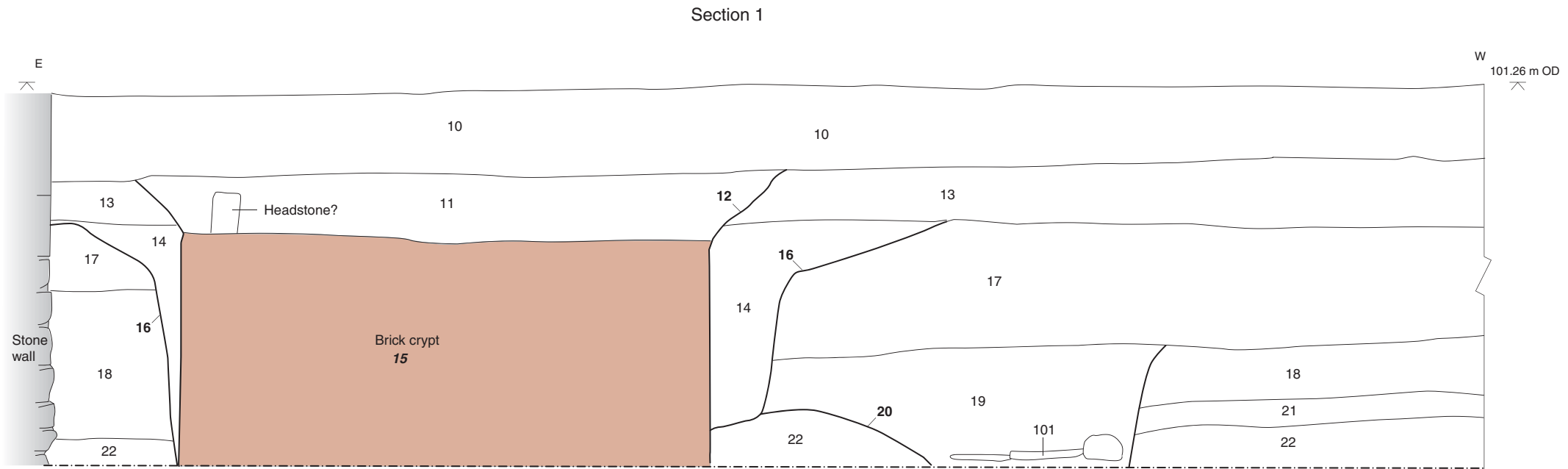


Figure 4: Section 1