

Orchard House, Asthall, Oxfordshire

NGR SP 2885 1109

Archaeological Watching Brief Report



Oxford Archaeological Unit

June 1996

ORCHARD HOUSE, ASTHALL, OXFORDSHIRE

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ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF

Summary

A watching brief carried out during building work revealed a number of features, probably of Roman date, at the south-west periphery of the major Roman settlement.

Introduction

An archaeological watching brief was carried out by the Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) at Orchard House, Asthall, in May 1996 during construction work. This was required as a negative condition on the planning permission for the construction, which consisted of a substantial extension on the east side of the existing house (Planning reference /1669/95) and a separate single garage (Planning reference W96/0638) slightly to the north. The work was commissioned by the Horner Allen Partnership (architects) on behalf of Martin Macleod, Esq. The description presented below is a summary of the features recorded. The full records can be found in the project archive.

Archaeological Background (Fig 1)

Orchard House lies just south of the village of Asthall and is probably situated close to the south-western edge of the major Roman settlement of Asthall. This settlement lies astride Akeman Street, the principal Roman road from St Albans to Cirencester, which here runs on a north-east to south-west alignment, passing only c 70 m to the north-west of Orchard House.

The Roman settlement was known only from surface finds and small-scale excavation (none since 1947) until 1992, when larger scale excavation was carried out in advance of the construction of a Thames Water pipeline. This work, in two areas, Area A c 70 m north of Orchard House and Area B c 140 m east of it, produced evidence for a complex sequence of structures fronting Akeman Street (in Area A) throughout the Roman period and important indications of 2nd-3rd century iron-smithing and part of a late Roman cemetery at some distance from the line of the Roman road (in Area B). The publication of these excavations, which will also summarise other evidence for the Roman settlement, is in preparation (Booth forthcoming).

Despite the improved understanding of the roadside settlement resulting from the 1992 excavations, the extent of the site away from the line of Akeman Street remains uncertain. The present development therefore provided an opportunity to examine this question, the principal objective being to establish the presence or absence of Roman features.

Methodology

The site was visited on three occasions, during which all the excavations for footings were examined. These were all carried out by the building contractors using a small 360 machine with a 0.60 m wide bucket. The trenches were of variable depth, generally between 0.90-1.20 m. The only significant earthmoving operation not observed was the excavation of two soakaway pits on the east side of the house extension. These would have been about 1 m square, and it was felt that they were unlikely to produce evidence which would have added significantly to the picture obtained from examination of the other trenches.

Geology

Asthall lies in an area of fairly level bedded limestones and clays of Middle Jurassic age, in part cut through by the action of the predecessors of the River Windrush. The village itself is sited on, and the high ground to south-west and east and south-east of the present site consists of, a succession of strata, of which the lowest are Stonesfield Slate/Sharps Hill Beds, overlain successively by Taynton Stone, Hampen Marly Beds and (localised) White Limestone (Horton and Cornwall 1982). The village is surrounded to the west, south and east by a band of alluvium which marks the course of a former meander of the Windrush, which returned northwards towards its present line through the area of the Roman settlement. A topographical consequence of the presence of this meander is that the ascent of the southwest side of the Windrush valley is easier at this point than elsewhere in the vicinity. It is possible that this had some bearing on the siting of the Akeman Street crossing here.

There was great variation in the natural subsoil encountered in the site, even within very small areas. Deposits included sandy clays, gravelly clays, sandy gravels, limestone with gravel and even clean sands. As a result of this variety it was not always easy to determine which deposits were of natural and which of anthropogenic origin, particularly as artefacts were scarce and some deposits probably caused by human agency were relatively clean.

The House Extension (Fig 2)

The extension was sited on the east side of the existing house and was aligned north-south. Initial inspection of the foundation trenches for the extension showed a generalised sequence of three principal deposits (1-3) above the probable natural

horizon (layer 4). Above the latter was a red brown loamy clay (3) overlaid by very dark grey brown loamy clay (2) and a similar, slightly lighter, deposit (1) forming the recent topsoil. This sequence was recorded in the east face of the east trench. Here layer 4 was only encountered in the very bottom of the trench, a situation which prevailed generally across the eastern side of the extension. In the south and south-west trenches, however, this layer was never seen and in the latter trench, in particular, material similar to layer 2 was present to the bottom of the observed sequence. It is unclear whether this represented undifferentiated feature fills or a more substantial build-up of general layers.

Two cut features were observed in the bottom of the east foundation trench, but their nature was uncertain. To the south, cut 8 was c 2.30 m from north to south and filled with a brown loamy clay (6). Further north a further cut feature (7) was probably c 1.10 m north-south. This had a straight, roughly east-west aligned northern edge, but its southern edge was not well-defined. It was filled with brown loamy clay (5) which produced a single fragment of Roman pottery (black-burnished ware). No cuts could be seen in the sides of the verandah support foundation pits to the east of this trench, but the material observed in the bottoms of these pits, similar to 5 (above), might have been feature fill(s) rather than the lower part of a sequence of general layers. In the constricted space of these holes it was impossible to be certain.

In the north (east-west aligned) foundation trench the character of the sequence was clearer (Fig 3). Here the top of the subsoil, of gravel with limestone fragments, was only 0.70 m beneath the modern ground surface and cut features were more clearly seen in the lower part of the north section of this trench. At the west end was a series of shallow intercutting pits (25, with probable recuts 27 and 26) with mixed fills of dark brown or red brown loamy clays with variable gravel content. The initial version of this feature, cut 25, was well-defined and steep-sided, up to c 0.32 m deep. Further east, however, a slight downslope in the top of the subsoil may have reflected the presence of a further, less well-defined pit (28). This suggestion is supported by the occurrence of loose fill-like material in the bottom of the trench at its north-east corner, immediately south of the deepest point of the possible hollow seen in section, indicating that the feature lay principally to the south of the section. The possible extent of these fills to the south and east, as identified in the bottom of the appropriate foundation trenches, is indicated on the plan (Fig 2). The fills of 28 as recorded in the north trench section were similar to those of 25, 26 and 27 and, like them, produced no finds. The material seen in the trench bottom to the south was also similar but contained the occasional block of limestone up to c 0.20 m long.

The sequence of pit fills recorded in the north section was overlaid by general dark grey brown clay loam deposits, 11 and 10, the same as layers 2 and 1 respectively. At the interface of layer 11 and pit fill 18 were two small lenses of gravel (16 and 17), which may have derived from disturbance of the top of the adjacent subsoil.

A stone-built well structure was revealed in a hole dug for the support of a new

porch just north-east of the existing door on the north side of the house. This feature (context 50) had an internal diameter of c 0.55 m and was built of fairly irregular limestone blocks. The top of the structure was only c 0.20 m below the modern ground surface and a metal pipe projected from its dark loamy fill. There is little doubt that the well was in use relatively recently and it was therefore not examined in detail.

The Garage (Figs 2 and 3)

The new garage was situated some 12 m north of the house extension, with its long axis from east to west. Here the top of the subsoil occurred fairly consistently at about 0.50-0.55 m below the modern ground surface so it was possible to observe features clearly in section, as in the northern trench of the house extension.

The earliest archaeological deposit may have been a layer of brown loamy clay (116) up to c 0.12 m thick seen in the south foundation trench, but in the east trench this was not readily distinguished from the underlying red brown clay (123) which was probably a natural deposit. In the south section of the south trench 116 was cut by a shallow feature, 120, some 1.30 m across (east-west) and up to 0.28 m deep. This feature was only just present in the north face of the trench and clearly terminated just beyond there. It was presumably a pit rather than a linear feature, and had a single fill of dark brown clay loam (119).

In the north trench were two further, adjacent cut features, 108 and 124. These were respectively 1.65 m and 1.40 m wide and 0.40 and 0.35 m deep, with very gently sloping sides. Their single fills of brown loamy gravel (107 and 109) were identical. 109, the fill of 124, the more easterly of the two features, was continuous with and indistinguishable from a gravel layer up to 0.15 m thick (110) which extended c 1.80 m further east. This layer may have been analogous with a further gravel layer (104) seen at the extreme west end of the north trench. The gravel surface(s) did not extend very far south of the north trench. In particular, 110 was cut at the angle of the north and east trenches by a possible pit (125) but did not appear in the east section south of the edge of this feature, c 0.50 m south of the corner. Equally there was no clear evidence in the south face of the north trench for the southward continuation of features 108 and 124.

The gravel surfaces were cut in the north trench by two probable postholes, 106 to the west and 112, 4 m distant to the east. Both were small features, c 0.14-0.16 m across and 0.16-0.20 m deep. A block of limestone adjacent to the top of 106 on the gravel layer 104 could indicate the use of stone packing in this posthole. A further possible posthole (118) occurred at the east end of the south trench. This was slightly larger than the other two but of generally similar character.

Cut 125, located at the north-east corner of the foundation trenches (see above) may have been an even later feature. Its western edge was almost vertical, with a brown sandy loam fill (113) piled against it, but the principal fill appeared to be a very dark grey brown clay loam (103) indistinguishable from the overlying

general layer 102. The latter is likely to be at least in part of relatively recent date. 103 was, however, the only context in this part of the site to produce finds - four fragments of Roman pottery (one black-burnished ware, three reduced coarse wares) and a single piece of animal bone. Layer 102 was up to 0.36 m deep and was overlaid by modern turf and topsoil.

Finds

The only artefacts recovered were nine sherds of Roman pottery. These were recorded using the ware codes etc established by the standard OAU pottery recording system. The material present was as follows:

Fabric F51 (Oxford colour-coated ware). 1 rim sherd (bowl form, probably Young (1977) type C75, dated c AD 325-400).

Fabric R30 (moderately sandy micaceous grey ware). 3 sherds; 1 jar rim.

Fabric R37 (moderately sandy grey ware). 3 sherds; 1 large jar rim.

Fabric B11 (black-burnished ware category 1 - Dorset). 2 sherds.

All the fabrics and forms present are characteristic of material found elsewhere at Asthall. The sources for the grey wares are not known in detail but probably lie within the region (ie within a radius of c 30 miles). None of the stratified material was particularly diagnostic of date, but the general character of the group as a whole is consistent with a later (3rd-4th century) rather than an earlier Roman date.

There was a striking absence of post-medieval material from the vicinity of the house. Occasional unstratified fragments of 19th-20th century pottery and roof slate were noted, but were not recovered.

Discussion

The contrasting depths of natural subsoil in the garage and house extension trenches suggests that Orchard House is situated in an area which was originally a more pronounced dip than is now apparent. The present ground surface slopes up quite steeply from the house to the modern road to the west; east of the house the continued slope is much more gradual. The greatest depth of undistinctive dark loams was seen in the west trench of the south end of the house extension, suggesting that the subsoil was deeper here than elsewhere, unless this material represented the upper part of feature fills, but this does not seem particularly likely.

The majority of the recorded features, and all of those from the house extension area, appear to have been cut features of varying degrees of size and regularity. The extent of most is unclear, but they seem for the most part more likely to have been pits than anything else, though it is possible that feature 7, with a fairly straight northern edge, was a linear feature. The character of these features is

broadly consistent with that of pit 120 in the garage area, though the gravel-filled features 108 and 124 at the north of that area are less easily interpreted. In the garage area, however, surfaces and structural traces are present, as well as simple cut features. The apparent similarity of feature fill 109 and the adjacent gravel surface 110 suggests that they formed a single deposit, and it may be that gravel was laid across the whole of the northern part of the garage area, perhaps to provide a yard surface or even the floor of a structure. The three probable postholes recorded here all probably post-dated the gravel deposit, though it is impossible to say if they represented a building, or external features such as fences.

The principal difficulty in interpreting the recorded features lies in dating them, owing to the relative scarcity of diagnostic material. The total absence of modern material from stratified contexts, however, supports the inference drawn from the few Roman sherds that the majority if not all of the features noted were probably of Roman date.

If this chronology is accepted it suggests a spatial context for the recorded features. The site can be seen as lying at the margin of the Roman small town of Asthall. The absence of domestic material indicates that this was not an area which was directly occupied, nor was it used for rubbish disposal, unless almost exclusively of organic material. In this case the best explanation of the pit features is that they were dug for the extraction of raw materials; not so much stone for building as gravel and clay for surfaces. Floors of compacted small stone fragments and gravel, exactly like some of the material encountered within these trenches, occurred at several points in Area A of the 1992 excavations, for example. The area of Orchard House would have been very conveniently located for the digging of such material and the absence of occupation debris supports the suspicion that the site was just too far from the line of Akeman Street to have been within the main part of the settlement. That this might only just have been the case, however, is indicated by the presence of a probable surface and structural features in the garage area. It is possible, but unprovable, that these developments represent consolidation of the margin of an extraction area for settlement related activity, broadly speaking within the later Roman period. Alternatively, these features could have been related to the business of extraction itself, though this would tend to imply that such extraction was carried out on more than just a haphazard basis.

The post-Roman development of the area is unclear. In particular it is uncertain if the general layers overlying the fills of probable Roman features are of late Roman or early post-Roman date or represent much later activity. A possible interpretation of the small gravel deposits 16 and 17 in the north house extension trench is that they represent disturbance, perhaps by some agency such as ploughing, either of a laid surface or of the top of the adjacent subsoil. If this is the case, such an event is unlikely to have occurred within the Roman period. Disturbance of the upper part of all the observed sequence, perhaps in the medieval period, may be implied. A probable plough-disturbed horizon was observed in Area B of the 1992 excavations and was there thought to be of medieval date on the basis of a very few sherds incorporated within it. As already noted in relation to the occurrence of artefacts, however, post-medieval and

modern disturbance of the site appears to have been on a very small scale and was effectively limited to the immediate vicinity of the present house. Domestic rubbish from the house may have been dumped to the south, beyond the area affected by the present work.

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References

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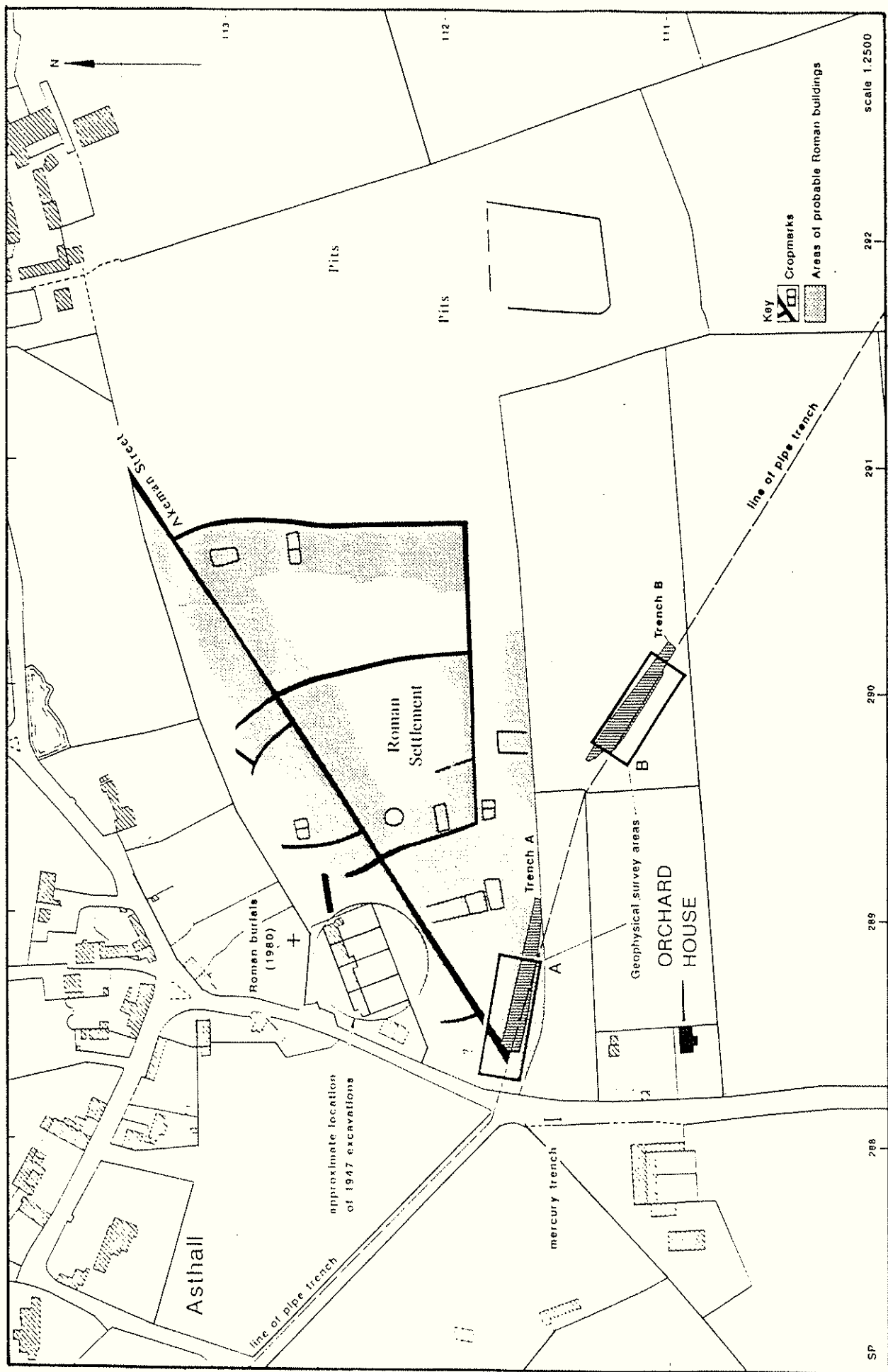


figure 1

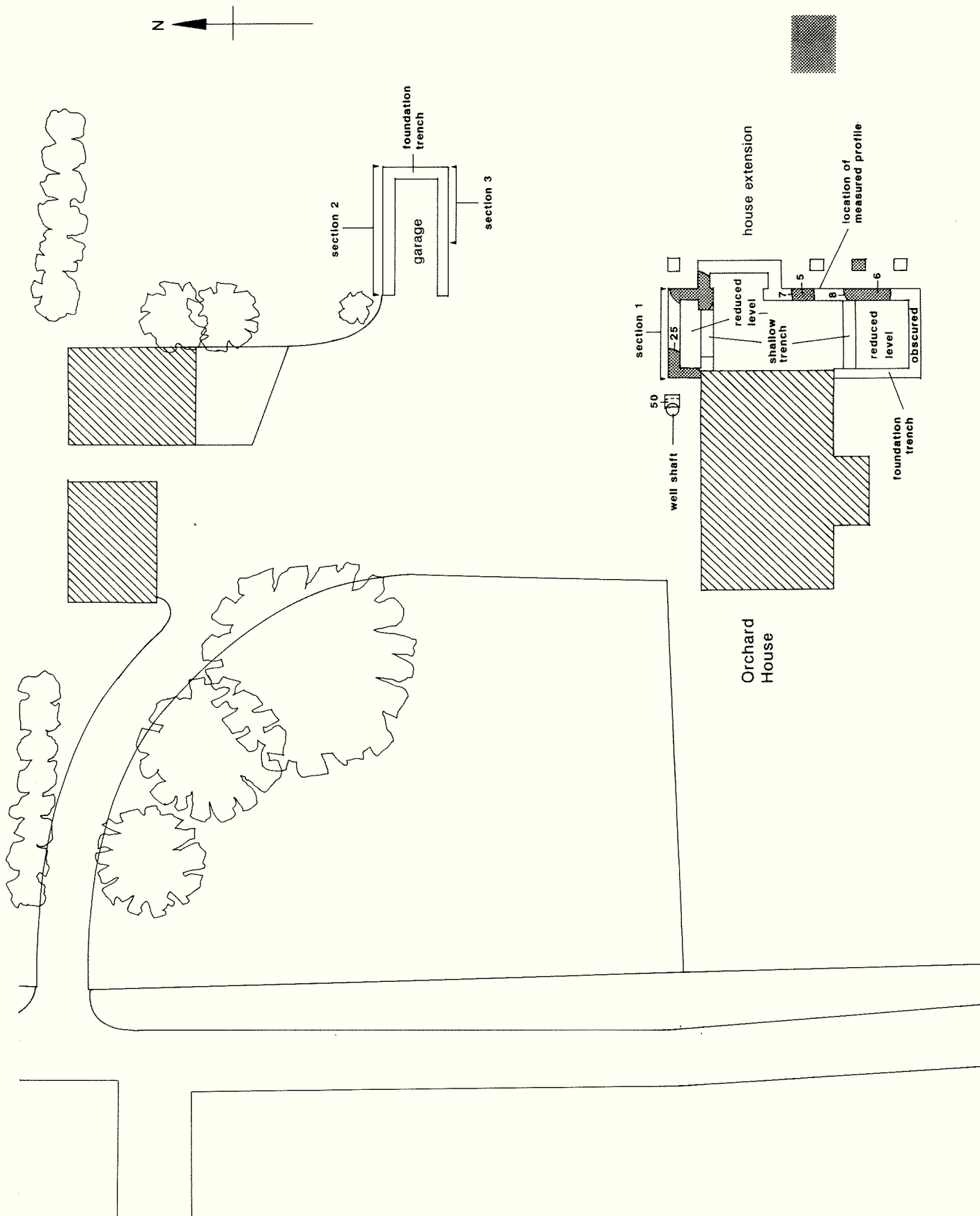
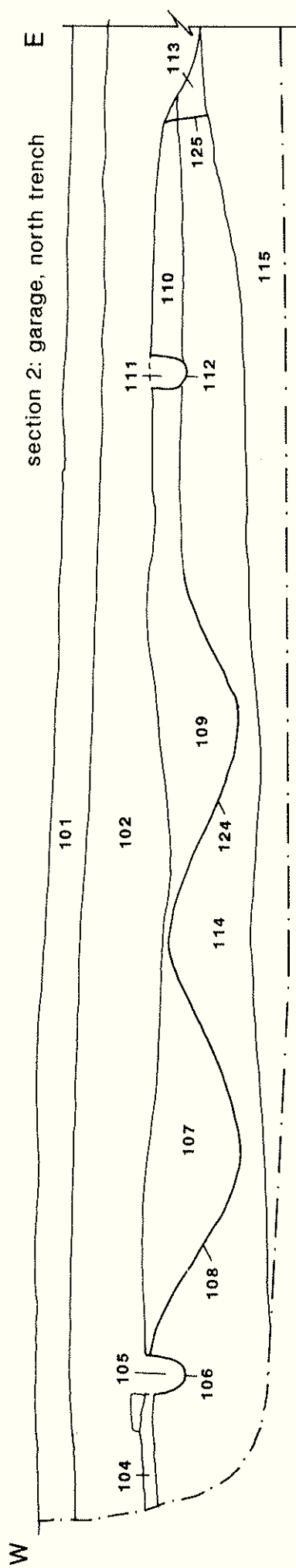
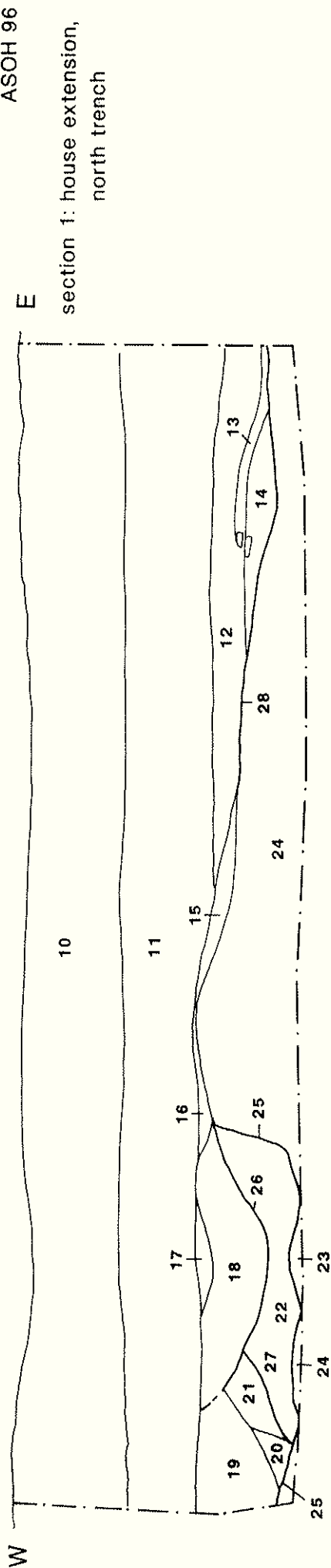
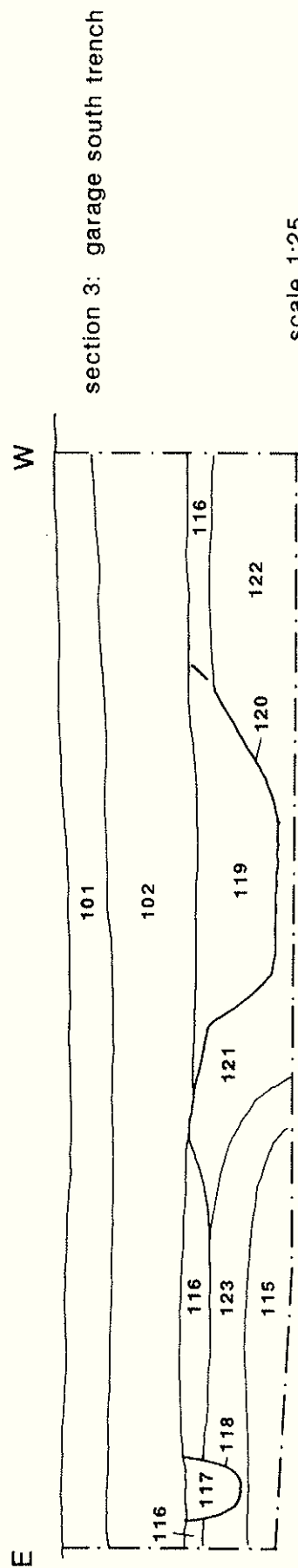


figure 2



end of section
0.5m east →



scale 1:25

figure 3



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