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Bullcroft Park, Wallingford Oxfordshire

NGR SU 6061 8949

Archaeological Watching Brief Report



Oxford Archaeological Unit

March 1997

Summary.

In March 1997 the Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) undertook a watching brief at Bullcroft Park, Wallingford, Oxfordshire (NGR SU 6061 8949) on behalf of ComTel (Oxford Cable Ltd) during the excavation of a service trench for multi-media cables and an associated junction cabinet. Several pieces of animal bone and roof tile were recovered from the service trenches; a massive flint foundation and a large quantity of encaustic tiles were seen and recovered from the junction cabinet pit, immediately behind 55b High Street.

1. Introduction.

Bullcroft Park is a Scheduled Ancient Monument (AM Oxon 182), the proposed works thus requiring scheduled monument consent (SMC), a condition of which was that a watching brief be maintained. The watching brief was also necessitated through PPG 16, on the advice of the County Archaeological Officer, as the site is of considerable archaeological importance.

2. Background.

Wallingford is located in an area containing some of the most important archaeological complexes in the Thames Valley. The town may possibly have had a Roman precursor, and the presence of a Saxon cemetery predating the 9th century defensive works may indicate a settlement in this area. Wallingford Castle was built after the Norman Conquest, eight properties being destroyed in order to do so. The 1086 Domesday survey records 491 houses in Wallingford with a mint, a market and a guildhall. Wallingford was the second largest burh in Berkshire and played a prominent role in the conflict between King Stephen and the Empress Mathilda. The town was extremely prosperous until the 13th century after which it began a slow and steady decline, reaching its lowest point in the 16th century. The town's fortunes revived in the 19th century, after the opening of the canal to Bath and Birmingham.

Complexes of prehistoric funerary monuments lie at Dorchester to the north and South Stoke to the south. While few monuments are known from Wallingford itself, a middle Neolithic double ring-ditch, located 300m south of the Plough Public House, and containing the burial of a middle-aged female, was excavated in 1959. Cropmarks indicating the possible existence of further ring-ditches are located 1km to the south of this feature (Case and Whittle, 1982, 55-9). Excavations in advance of the construction of the Wallingford bypass located both Neolithic and Bronze-Age riverside settlements. Both Neolithic pottery and Bronze-Age metalwork hoards have been recovered from the river itself. A rectangular enclosure, tentatively dated to the Iron-Age, containing a cropmark which may represent a Roman villa, was also excavated in 1959 (Case and Whittle, 1982, fig. 28). Two Iron-Age settlement sites have also been excavated to the south of the town (Rodwell, 1975).

Bullcroft Park lies within the defences of the Saxon burh. A small excavation through the defensive earthworks was carried out, c100m south of the site, in 1973 which

dated the bank to the 9th century (Durham, cited by Rodwell and Asthil in Haslam, 1984). The town's rectilinear street pattern was laid out at the burh's foundation and at least one street formerly existed within the Bullcroft. It has been suggested that in the 12th century the town occupied all of the interior of the defences (Rodwell, 1974, 157). The Benedictine Priory of the Holy Trinity, founded after the Norman Conquest, occupied most of the Bullcroft. In the 19th century massive flint foundations were uncovered just outside the Bullcroft, together with inhumations, a small stone coffin, an ornamental seal and encaustic tiles. In 1982-83 a mediaeval ditch and a sequence of ashy deposits were recorded during redevelopment on the frontage site at 56 High Street. The rear of this property had apparently been disturbed by the graveyard of the priory. One to two sherds of Roman pottery were also recovered from here.

3. Aims.

The preservation by record of any archaeological remains, the presence and nature of which could not be established in advance of the works, to previously established standards (OAU Fieldwork Manual, First Edition, 1992).

4. Methodology.

A constant presence was maintained on site during the course of the works. The works consisted of; the excavation of a trench running north from the south entrance to the park, which terminated at a subterranean junction box. From this box a second trench was dug to the north-west, terminating at the south eastern corner of the offices of the Citizen's Advice Bureau. A third trench was dug to the east from the junction box, crossing both grassed areas and metalled pathways. This trench entered the council storage depot and thence proceeded to Castle Street to rejoin the main conduit. A pit was also dug to the rear of 55b for the insertion of a junction box cabinet. For ease of reference the trenches are labelled 1,2 and 3 (see fig. 2).

The pit for the junction box cabinet was hand-dug in a flower bed. Where the trenches crossed grassed areas they were dug by hand, with a great deal of care taken to avoid the disturbance of tree roots. Where the trenches crossed metalled pathways a pneumatic drill was initially used to break up this material; however, when this proved to be impractical, due to the compacted nature of the underlying deposits, a Top Cutter was brought in to complete the work.

5. Results.

Trench 1 was dug to a depth of 0.45m; the section displayed a mid gray stony/silty clay loam with 10% silt and pea gravel, 1% charcoal flecks and was numbered (1). It also contained lenses of (2), a patchy deposit of pea grit and sand, which also appeared at irregular intervals along the base of the trench. (1) produced several pieces of red roof tile, one with an apparent nail hole, and a small amount of very fragmentary animal bone.

Trench 2 was dug to a depth of 0.36m; the section displayed a mid gray silty clay loam with 10% silt and pea gravel, 1% charcoal flecks; a continuation of (1) with a lower percentage of stone inclusions. (2) was not seen in this trench; several pieces of similar red roof tile were also recovered from here.

Trench 3 was dug to a depth of 0.42m; the section displayed 0.17m of dark brown clay loam, with 10% silt and 10% flint pieces, numbered (5), under 0.15m of mid brown clay loam, also with 10% silt and 10% flint pieces, numbered (4), under 0.10m of tarmac, numbered (3). No finds were recovered from here.

A rectangular pit 1.70m by 1.80m was dug prior to the insertion of the junction box cabinet, measuring 0.80m in depth. The section displayed; (2) as a solid deposit 0.43m thick under (1) as described elsewhere. The south eastern corner of the pit revealed a massive foundation wall (6) constructed of large flint pieces and mortar. A large quantity of encaustic tiles were found in close association with the stonework, which lies at 0.37m below the modern ground surface. The full thickness of the wall was not seen, however it measured 0.74m from its north-west edge to the baulk. The relationship between the stonework and (2), in which it appeared wholly to be contained, is unknown at this time. Both the stonework and (2) were sealed by (1). Approximately 0.08m of material was removed from the top of the wall, after recording had taken place, to allow for the insertion of the concrete foundation for the junction box pit. Otherwise the wall was left in-situ.

6. Discussion.

The deposit (1) as seen in trenches 1,2 and the junction box pit is a rich loam, underlying the grassed areas and contained within the flower beds of the park. (2) appeared both as lenses within (1) in trench 1 and as a solid deposit in the junction box pit; the provenance of this deposit is unknown at this time, however it could possibly represent a general spread of destruction debris, given both its close association with the stonework and its general character. The foundation wall (6) is believed to be either a part of, or contemporary with, the stonework seen during the 19th century excavations. That stonework was located just outside the Bullcroft; however, it was similar in nature and size, and also was found in close association with a large quantity of encaustic tile. Taken together they may indicate the presence of substantial buried stonework over a fairly wide area at a relatively shallow depth.

Deposits (5) and (4) are thought to represent an earlier surface, and a build-up of material prior to the deposition of the existing surface. No finds were recovered from this trench, possibly indicating the type of disturbance associated with the works involved in laying and relaying metallised surfaces, and the repeated excavation of service trenches. Both (5) and (4) were characteristic of deposits which repeatedly have been disturbed.

John Dalton
OAU
March 1997.

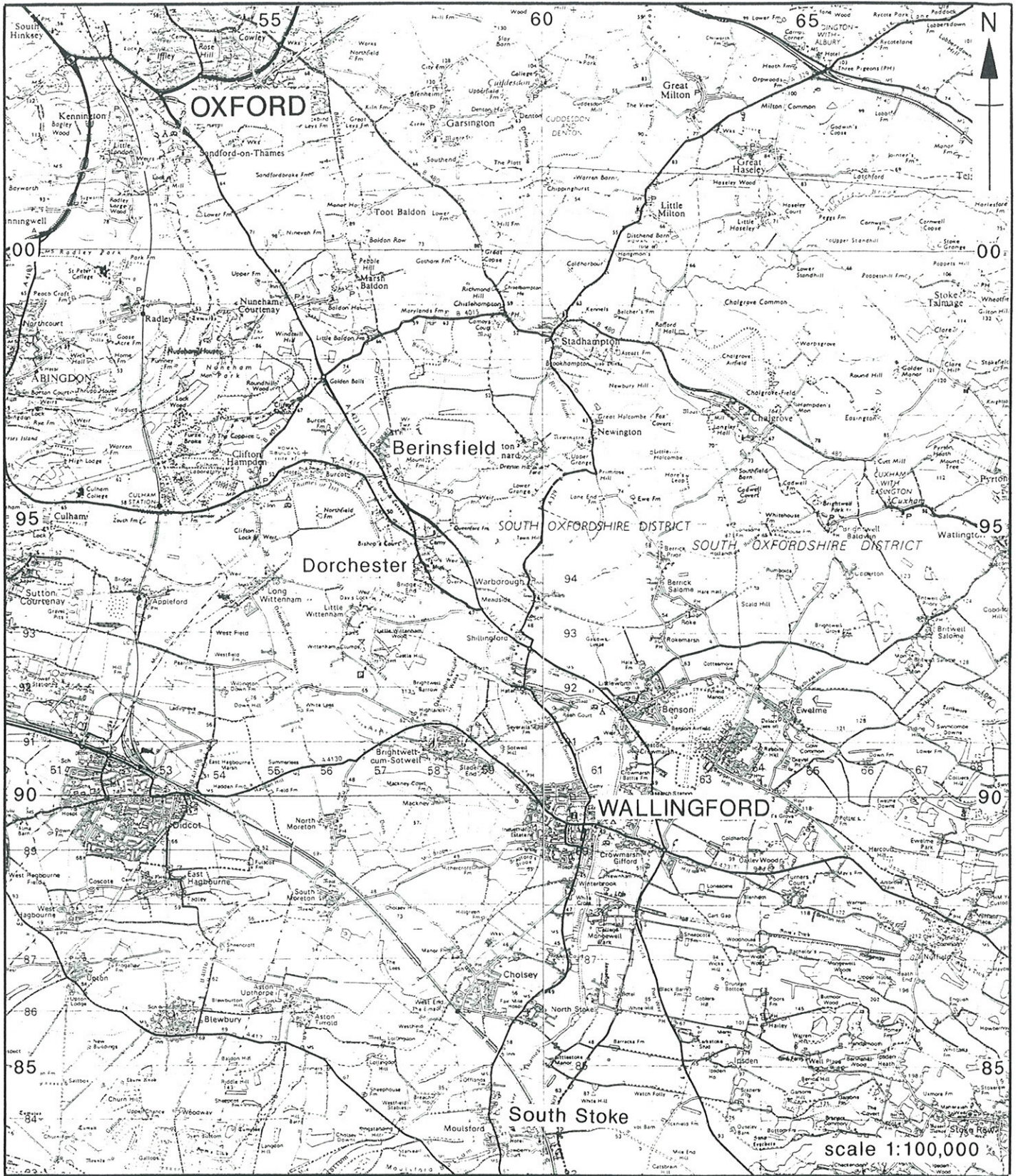
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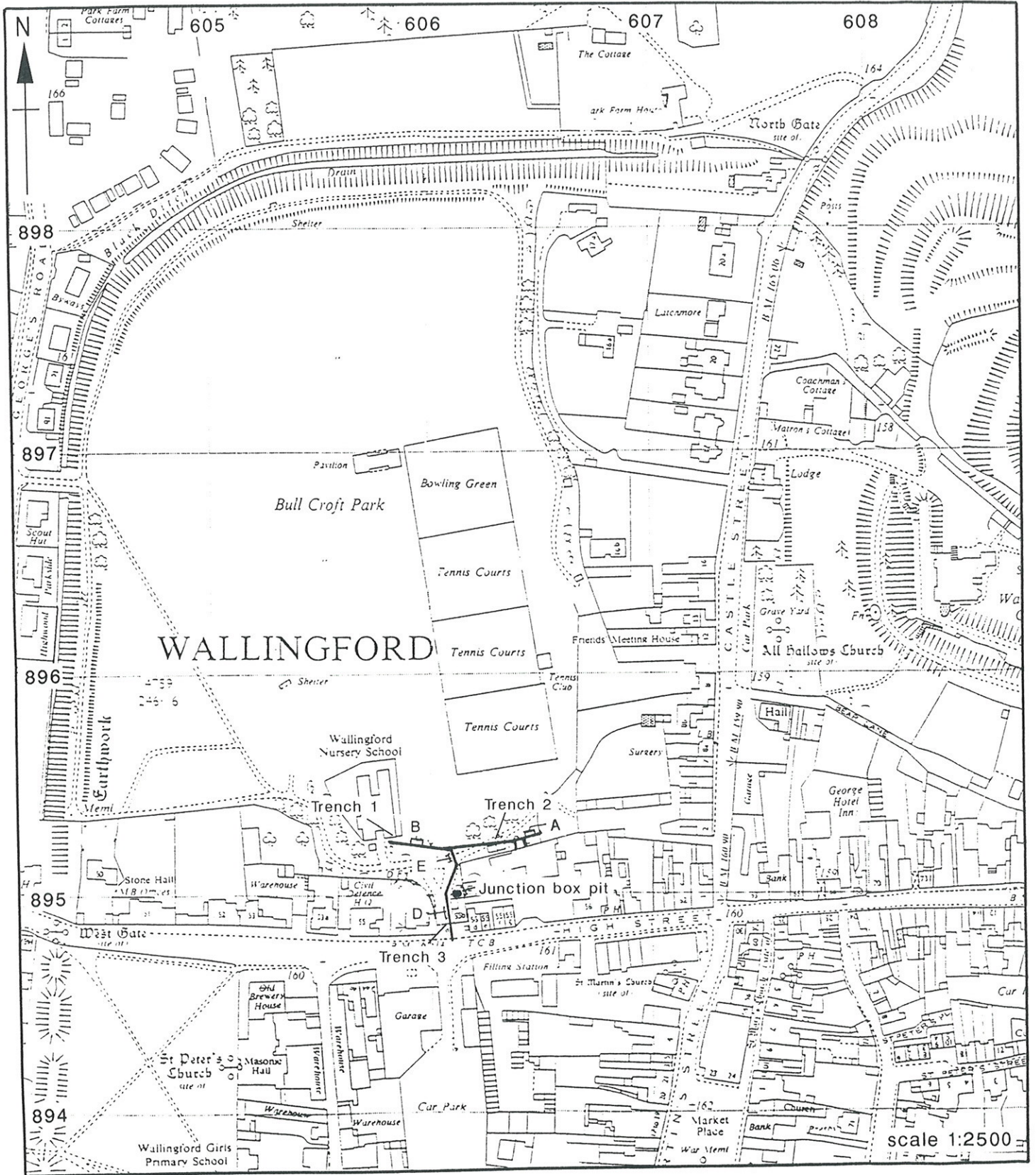
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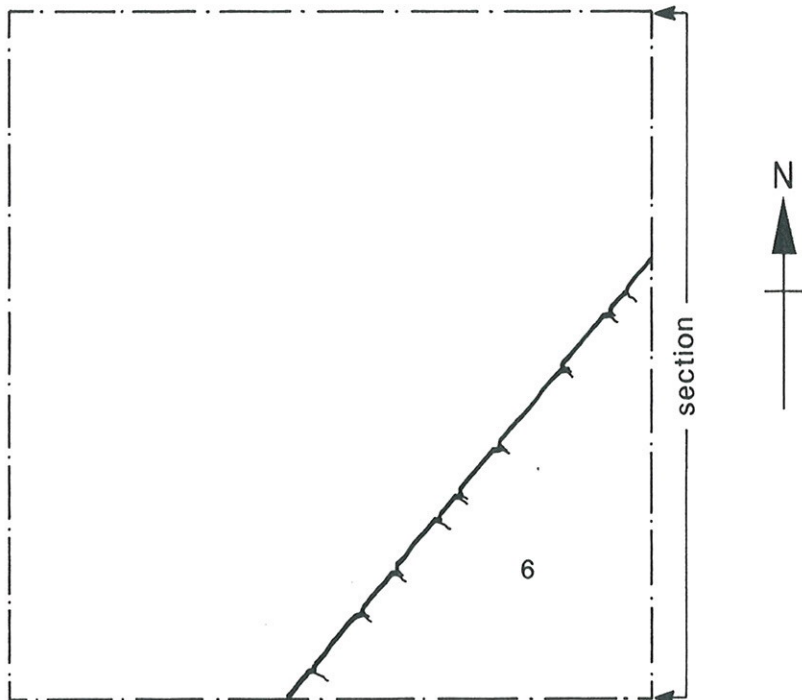
Figure 1



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Figure 2

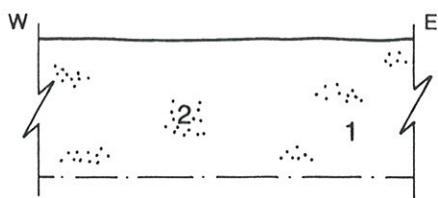
Plan of junction box pit



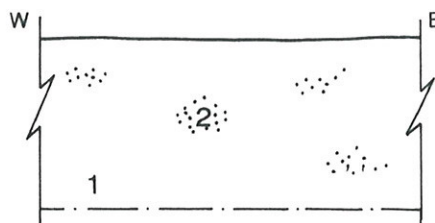
Section



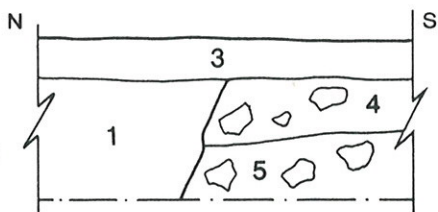
section A



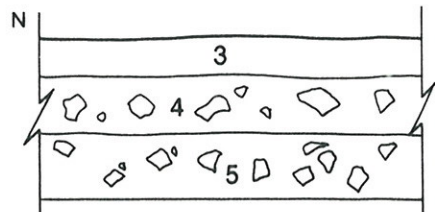
section B



section C



section D



scale 1:20

Figure 3



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