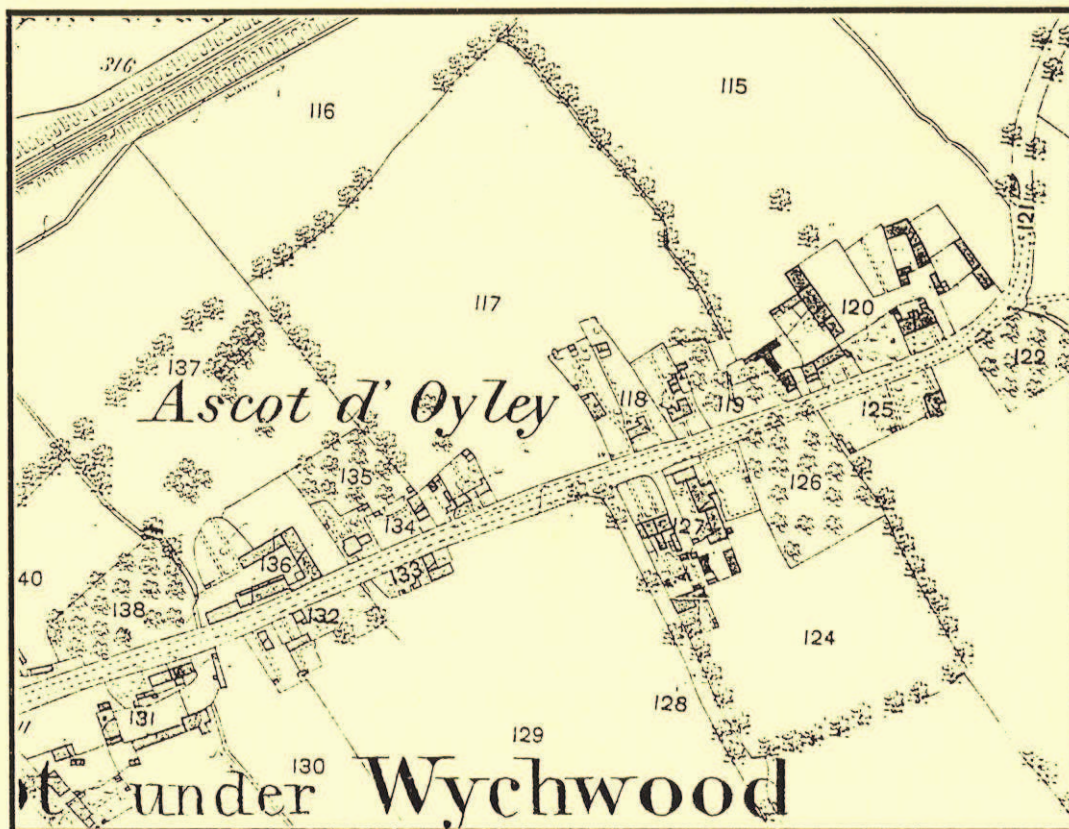


Land adjoining 21 High Street, Ascott-Under-Wychwood, Oxfordshire

NGR SP 3048 1882

Archaeological Watching Brief Report



Oxford Archaeological Unit

October 1996

**LAND ADJOINING 21 HIGH STREET
ASCOTT-UNDER-WYCHWOOD
OXFORDSHIRE
NGR SP 3048 1882
ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF REPORT**

1 SUMMARY

Medieval pottery of Wychwood type ware and post-medieval material was recovered from general soil horizons during the course of a watching brief during development at a site on the High Street in Ascott-Under-Wychwood. Part of a probable post-medieval stone building and associated yard surface were investigated during the work.

2 INTRODUCTION

The Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) carried out a watching brief at Land Adjoining 21 High Street, Ascott-Under-Wychwood in August 1996 (Fig. 1). The watching brief took place during groundwork associated with the construction of two dwellings. The land was developed by Cotswold Properties of Fairford, Gloucestershire. A formal programme of archaeological monitoring was required as a condition of the planning consent for the development in accordance with PPG 16, owing to the presence of known sites of archaeological interest within the immediate vicinity of the development.

3 TOPOGRAPHICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

The development area is located at NGR SP 3048 1882 on the north side of the High Street, Ascott under Wychwood, on a vacant plot east of number 21 and to the west of Yew Tree Farm. The site lies 500 m south of the River Evenlode and is on the south side of the main line railway. The site slopes progressively from north to south, and is located at approximately 95 m O.D. The underlying geology of the site is clay with outcrops of limestone.

The development site lies c 300 m south-east of the twelfth century castle of Ascott d'Oyley, partly excavated in the 1940s (Jope and Threlfall 1959). A series of ditched property boundaries, probably of medieval date, run south from the castle to the High Street. Domestic and light industrial activity in the area has been suggested by the discovery of medieval pottery kilns and the recovery of spindle whorls of the same date.

4 METHODOLOGY

Areas of the site from which topsoil was to be removed were examined partly in the course of and partly after stripping. Trenches for foundations and for the principal foul drain were also inspected. A significant amount of topsoil had already been removed

from the site by a previous owner, with the result that some structural features and deposits, particularly in the central part of the site, lay very close to the modern ground level. Such deposits were especially vulnerable to damage by contractors' machinery.

The site was examined initially during topsoil stripping for the two driveways and within the areas of the two house plots (House Plot 1 occupied the western half of the site, with Plot 2 to the east). The trench for the principal foul drain, in the southern part of the site, was also examined at this point. Limited cleaning and small scale excavation was targeted in two areas of the site which revealed some structural and archaeological deposits. Finally the excavation of the foundation trenches, characteristically 0.50m wide and about 1 m deep, was monitored. However, this produced no additional data since the relatively shallow deposits had been largely removed in the topsoil stripping of the two house footprints. All features and deposits were issued with individual context numbers, and these are summarised in table form at the end of this report (Appendix 1).

5 RESULTS

5.1 SITE SOUTHERN MARGIN

Initial topsoil stripping for the driveways of both house plots, and the excavation of the trench for the principal foul service, revealed an extensive spread or spreads of limestone rubble along the southern margin of the site, which is bounded by a stone wall of uncertain date.

The rubble (Fig. 2) probably extended across the entire southern frontage of the site, with the possible exception of the extreme south-west corner. The northerly limit of the deposit was between 3 and 4 m from the extant boundary wall, as observed in the sewer trench and in the stripping for the driveways. The rubble varied from c 0.20 - 0.40 m in thickness and was overlain by the modern topsoil, which in places survived up to c 0.20 m in depth at the southern end of the site. There was no evidence for separate layers within the rubble band; it may therefore have formed a single deposit. No finds were directly associated but on the evidence of the character of the layer a relatively recent date seems likely.

5.2 HOUSE PLOT 1

After the topsoil had been removed, an area of approximately 45 square metres was hand cleaned in order to expose the underlying deposits in an area where considerable numbers of medieval pottery sherds were seen. Two sections were hand excavated down to the natural horizon (Fig. 3). The earliest deposit identified was a compact layer of limestone (1) which took the form of a linear outcrop aligned east-west extending for a length of 1.5 m. This outcrop of stone, and a larger outcrop partly exposed by the contractors in the north-west corner of the site, appeared to be natural deposits of limestone within the natural gravel (7), which rests upon the clay subsoil. Deposits 1 and 7 are therefore both natural.

To the south of deposit 1 and just overlying it was a layer of compact light reddish-brown clay loam (4) with occasional stone inclusions. The layer was 0.05 m thick, and overlaid the natural gravel (7). Layer 4 did not extend north of limestone outcrop 1. Above layer 4 was a layer of light brown clay loam (3) which included stones and several sherds of medieval pottery. This deposit was 0.02 m thick and was localised to the south of limestone outcrop 1.

To the north of limestone outcrop (1) a slightly different sequence was observed. In hand dug section 1 (Fig. 3) the natural gravel (7) was overlaid by layer 6, a compact layer of light reddish-brown clay loam which contained gravel and was 0.13 m thick. This layer was similar to layer 3 to the south, but was of greater thickness. Layer 6 contained three sherds of medieval pottery. Above layer 6 was a layer of loosely set limestone pieces and occasional rounded quartzite pebbles (5) which covered an area of c. 4 m by 2.5 m and was 0.10 m thick. The stones were mixed within a mid-dark brown loam soil, and perhaps represented a surface or yard area.

Above the stone spread (5) was a layer of grey-brown clay loam (2) which contained domestic debris including animal bone and medieval and post-medieval pottery. This layer extended up to and just overlaid layer 3 to the south. The layer was between 0.06 and 0.12 m thick. Layer 2 was sealed by the topsoil (9).

A second hand dug section (Fig. 3) was located 2.5 m to the west of the first section. At the base of the slot overlying the natural gravel was a 0.02 m thick layer of compact clay loam (8) which was stone free, and might have functioned as a surface. This deposit was sealed by layer 5 and the sequence thereafter was the same as in the first section.

5.3 HOUSE PLOT 2

During the initial visit to the site structural features were observed in the western part of the footprint of Plot 2. These included a possible wall line orientated east-west and associated areas of worn pitched limestone surfaces consistent with agricultural buildings. These deposits were associated with eighteenth and nineteenth century pottery and were removed without further record.

A second area of interest was investigated at the east side of the site, in the area of the proposed driveway (Fig. 4). The lowest deposit identified was a layer of compact grey-brown clay loam (12) which contained occasional pieces of limestone, and overlaid the natural (7). Layer 12 was similar in nature to deposits 3 and 4 to the west. Cutting layer 12 was the construction trench for a wall aligned north-west - south-east.

The construction trench (15) was 1.04 m wide and 0.34 m deep. The trench had near vertical sides and a gently undulating base. It was filled by a wall (10) constructed of medium sized limestone blocks with average dimensions of 0.2 x 0.15 x 0.07 m. Two courses of un-mortared stonework were observed. The upper course of the wall was 0.95 m wide. It was not exactly straight, and while the east face was well-defined the west face was not clearly seen. Both sides of the construction trench were clearly defined, however. The masonry may have formed the east wall of a building.

Wall 10 probably extended further south than its recorded extent. Approximately in line with the south end of the wall as seen was a second portion of masonry, immediately to the west of wall 10. This structure (13) consisted of a rectangular arrangement of flat limestone blocks with a reasonably clear east face. The stones were roughly hewn and were bonded with a yellow mortar. The stonework extended north-west - south-east for a length of 1.8m. The structure may have been associated with the building represented by wall 10, though this could not definitely be proved. If so then it may have been a threshold for a doorway.

East of wall 10 and adjacent to the eastern boundary of the building site was a distinct layer of compact dark grey clay loam (14). The deposit was noted for the high concentration of medieval pottery recovered, consisting almost entirely of Wychwood-type ware. It was unclear if deposit 14 was a feature fill or a general layer. Stratigraphically it lay above layer 12 and appeared to be sealed by a general layer of grey-brown clay loam (11) which extended to the west to cover stonework 10 and 13. Layer 11 was 0.06-0.1m thick and contained pottery, glass and bone. The pottery was a mixture of medieval and post-medieval material, whilst the glass was of post-medieval date. Layer 11 was sealed by the present topsoil (9).

6 THE FINDS

6.1 The pottery by Paul Blinkhorn

Table 1: Pottery Occurrence by Context by Number and Weight of sherds (gm)

| Context | Medieval Coarsewares | Wychwood-type Ware | Medieval Glazed Wares | Post-Medieval Earthenwares | Misc. 19/20th C Wares |
|---------|----------------------|--------------------|-----------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------|
| 2 | 25 (294) | 4 (27) | | 1 (40) | |
| 3 | 18 (254) | 1 (4) | | | |
| 4 | 2 (22) | | | | |
| 5 | 1 (6) | | | 13 (165) | 4 (8) |
| 6 | 3 (14) | | | | |
| 10 | | 3 (46) | | 5 (152) | 1 (6) |
| 11 | | 68 (658) | 1 (24) | 1 (9) | 2 (24) |
| 12 | 5 (28) | 10 (85) | | 1 (8) | |
| 13 | | | | 1 (4) | |
| 14 | 1 (3) | 48 (424) | 1 (7) | | |
| U/S | 4 (42) | | | 12 (248) | 1 (12) |
| TOTAL | 59 (663) | 134 (1244) | 2 (31) | 34 (626) | 8 (40) |

Wychwood-type Ware

It seems very likely that the quantities of Wychwood-type ware (Oxfordshire fabric OXCX -Mellor 1994, 106-11) are wasters from a nearby kiln. The contexts which produced the largest quantities of the material, 11 and 14, also contain significant quantities of tile fragments, but little refuse such as animal bone. This would suggest that the deposits are not domestic in origin, particularly as no other medieval pottery types are present in any quantity, despite occurring in other contexts at the site. Also, none of the sherds from the features are smoked or sooted, suggesting that they had not been used before deposition. Ascot-under-Wychwood has produced evidence of pottery production in the past, with a probable kiln discovered in the 1930s in an area to the south of the western end of the High Street (Jope and Threlfall 1959, 246 and fig 1). It would therefore appear that Ascot-under-Wychwood was one of the numerous pottery-producing villages which are known from the medieval period in England (cf McCarthy and Brooks 1988, 68-81). The presence of large quantities of tile is not unusual, as medieval potters often made such objects, and the fabric of the tile from this site is virtually indistinguishable from that of the pottery.

The pottery found during the course of this excavation appears typical of the Wychwood tradition, although some features are worthy of comment. Few feature sherds were present, except for rimsherds from five jars and two jugs, and a plain thumb-grooved strap handle. The jar rims, which were consistently high, flaring and everted, are not directly paralleled in Mellor's form-series (Mellor 1994, fig. 45). Both jug rims have a thumb-applied strip just below the rim-bead, a feature which rarely occurs on vessels of the tradition (ibid.: 109). Some shoulder sherds have fine horizontal grooving, another feature which is not mentioned by Mellor, and appears unique to this assemblage. Otherwise, the pottery is typical of the tradition. The fabric is generally pinkish- to greyish orange, with sparse to moderate oolitic limestone and sparse quartz and ironstone. A small proportion of sherds have patches of a poor-quality, green glaze, and many sherds have a few small splashes. One of the jug rims has what may be a failed attempt at decoration with slip-stripes.

Dating the assemblage is somewhat problematic, but a case can be made for it being twelfth century in date. The total lack of Brill/Boarstall ware at this site, whilst perhaps being simply coincidence, may have chronological significance. Wychwood ware has been found in association with Brill pottery at several sites in the area (ibid, 110), giving a *terminus post quem* of the 13th century. However, a few sherds of Wychwood Ware are known from 12th-century deposits at Witney (ibid.), and Wychwood types were the major ware in the 12th century levels of Ascot Doilly Castle (Jope and Threlfall 1959, 246). The fact that no vessel forms of the later medieval tradition (eg bunghole cisterns) were present amongst this assemblage, would add support to it being datable to the earlier part of the medieval period.

Medieval Coarsewares

The medieval coarsewares are all typical of the range of fabrics found on sites in northern Oxfordshire, with oolitic- and shelly-limestone wares present.

Glazed Wares

- 1) Context 11. Abingdon type? Uniform pale grey fabric. Dense, sub-rounded greyish quartz up to 0.5 mm, giving a very rough texture to the unglazed surface. Mottled green external glaze.
- 2) Context 14. Sparse to moderate sub-angular limestone up to 2 mm, rare to sparse rounded red ironstone up to 1 mm and sub-rounded quartzite up to 0.5 mm. Thin, patchy green external glaze.

6.2 Tile

Some 186 fragments of roofing tile weighing c 4.5 kg were recovered. The great majority of this material came from layer 11, with a reasonable amount also from 14. The fabric has been commented on, above: the majority if not all the fragments were in a very similar (local) fabric to that of the pottery and may be assumed to be of medieval date. The material was not examined systematically, but it contained ridge as well as flat tiles, and a small number of fragments were glazed. Production of this material alongside that of the pottery seems almost certain.

6.3 Other finds

Post-medieval glass fragments were recovered from contexts 2, 11 and 12. A total of seventeen fragments of animal bone came from layers 2, 5 and 10-14. No other finds categories were noted.

7 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Evidence for medieval occupation on the site was represented most clearly by the pottery and tile recovered from a number of contexts in both Plots 1 and 2. Only four deposits, however, contained medieval material unassociated with later pottery and other finds. These were 3, 4, 6 and 14. A possible surface (8) was identified above the natural in Plot 1, but its extent was not clear. No structural features of medieval date were identified, however and despite the presence of wasters there was no other evidence for the pottery kiln or kilns from which they derived. It is likely that those layers containing medieval pottery represent generalised soil horizons. Layer 12 at the east side of the site may have been such a deposit; the single post-medieval sherd from this layer probably being intrusive. Layer 11, which produced the bulk of all the medieval finds, was also contaminated, to the extent that it is unclear if this was in origin a medieval layer or simply contained a very high proportion of redeposited material. Overall, the importance of the medieval finds is to add another location to the distribution map of such material in the village, but the significance of such material for the exact location of medieval kilns remains speculative.

Layer 12 was cut by the foundation trench for wall 10, which formed part of a building which was probably demolished in the Victorian period. The exact date of the structure

was unclear, but if it was contemporary with the probable agricultural building in the western part of Plot 2 it may perhaps have dated to the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries. It is possible that the yard surface (5) to the west was in use during the lifetime of these buildings. Along the southern margin of the site a substantial stone spread may indicate the position of a further yard surface or surfaces or possibly, but less likely, an east-west range of buildings fronting onto the road. No traces of wall lines were associated with the rubble, however. It is also possible that the stone spread represents demolition debris from a former boundary wall along the High Street.

The first edition of the 25 inch Ordnance Survey map, dated 1881, shows no trace of any structures or other features on the present site. The buildings identified in the watching brief must therefore all have been demolished by that time. The remains are sufficiently incomplete to make it uncertain if they represented a complete farmstead or were merely outbuildings for another farm nearby. The relatively low quantities of post-medieval material could be consistent with agricultural use rather than permanent domestic occupation.

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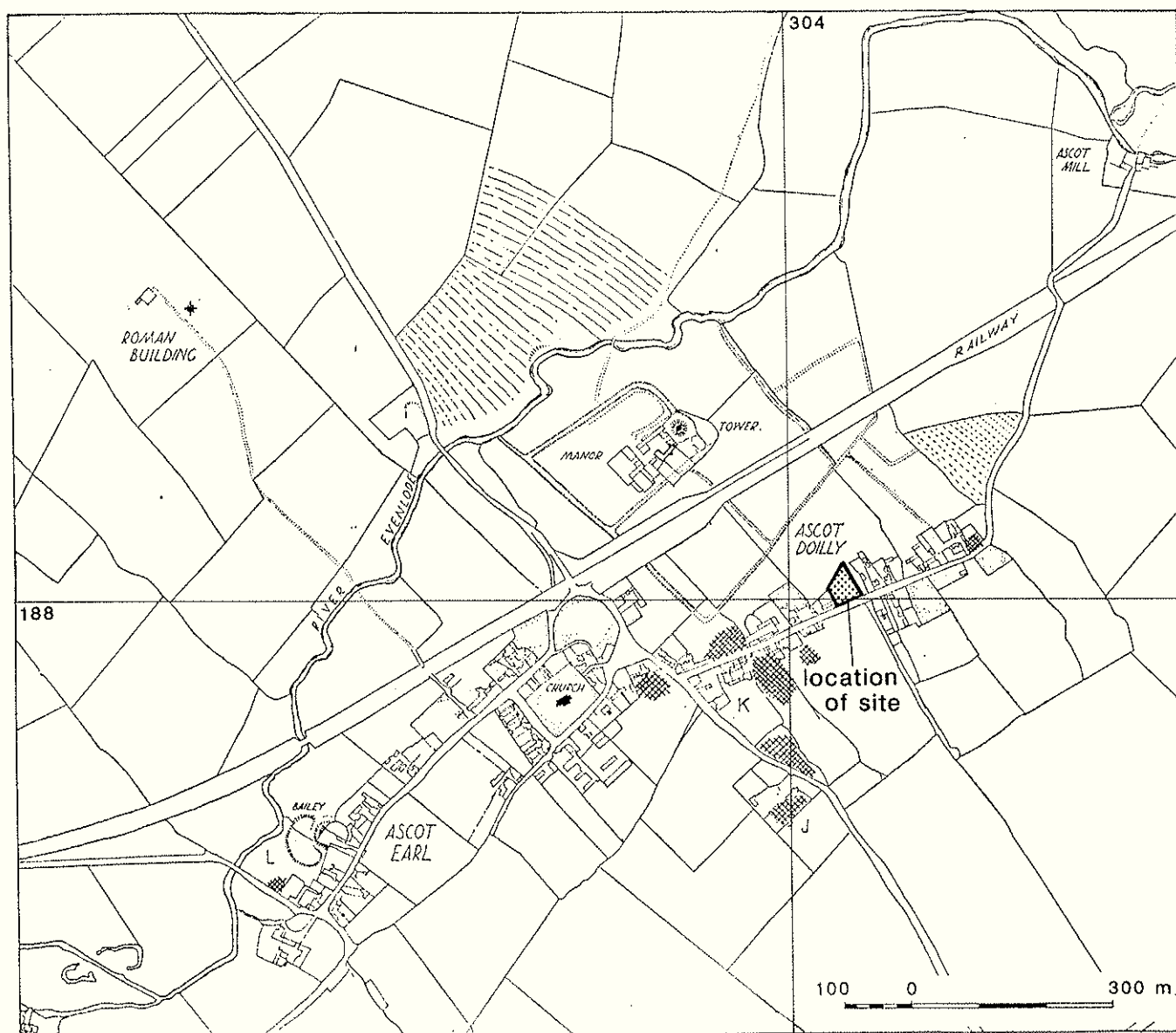
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APPENDIX 1: TABLE OF CONTEXT INFORMATION

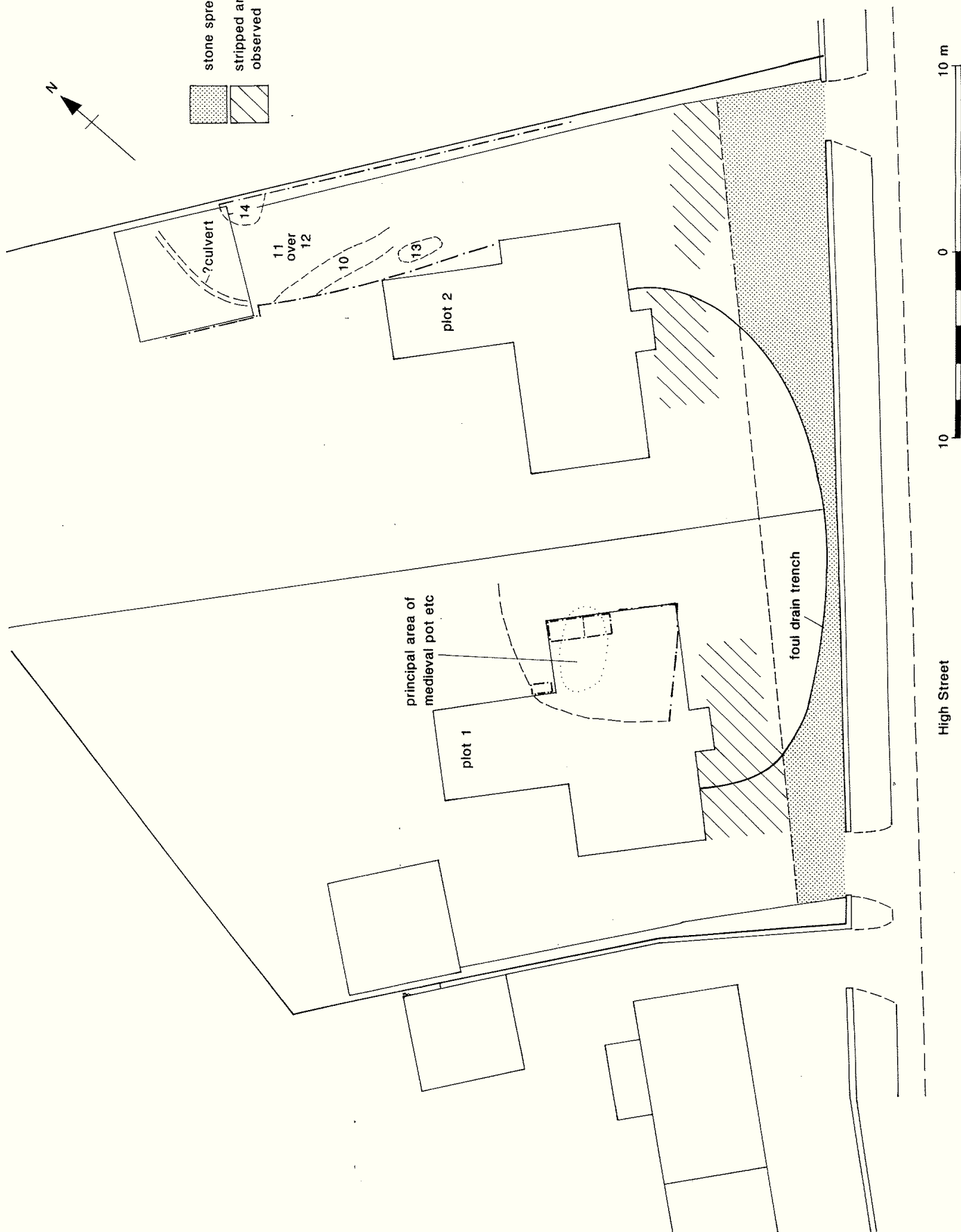
| Context | Type | Depth | Width | Comments |
|---------|-------------|------------|--------|--|
| 1 | Layer | 0.32 m | 0.80 m | Natural outcrop of compacted limestone |
| 2 | Layer | 0.06-0.12m | - | Layer of post-medieval soil over stone surface 5 |
| 3 | Layer | 0.02-0.1m | - | ?Medieval soil horizon |
| 4 | Layer | 0.05 m | - | ?Medieval soil layer |
| 5 | Layer | 0.1 m | 2.5 m | Stone yard surface ?post-medieval |
| 6 | Layer | 0.13 m | - | ?Medieval soil horizon below stone surface 5 |
| 7 | Layer | - | - | Natural gravel |
| 8 | Layer | 0.02 | - | Compact soil, ?surface below stone layer 5 |
| 9 | Layer | 0.15 m | - | Present topsoil removed by the contractors |
| 10 | Structure | 0.34 m | 1.04 m | Large limestone wall. East wall of demolished building |
| 11 | Layer | 0.06-0.1 | - | 'Demolition ' layer formed after demolition of the building 10 |
| 12 | Layer | - | - | Layer, general ?medieval soil horizon |
| 13 | Structure | - | 0.80 m | Structural feature associated with building, ?threshold for entrance |
| 14 | Layer/ fill | 0.08-0.14m | - | Localised deposit, at east side of site - ?pit fill, contains substantial quantities of pottery of medieval and post-medieval date |
| 15 | Cut | 0.34 m | 1.04 m | Construction trench for wall 10. |



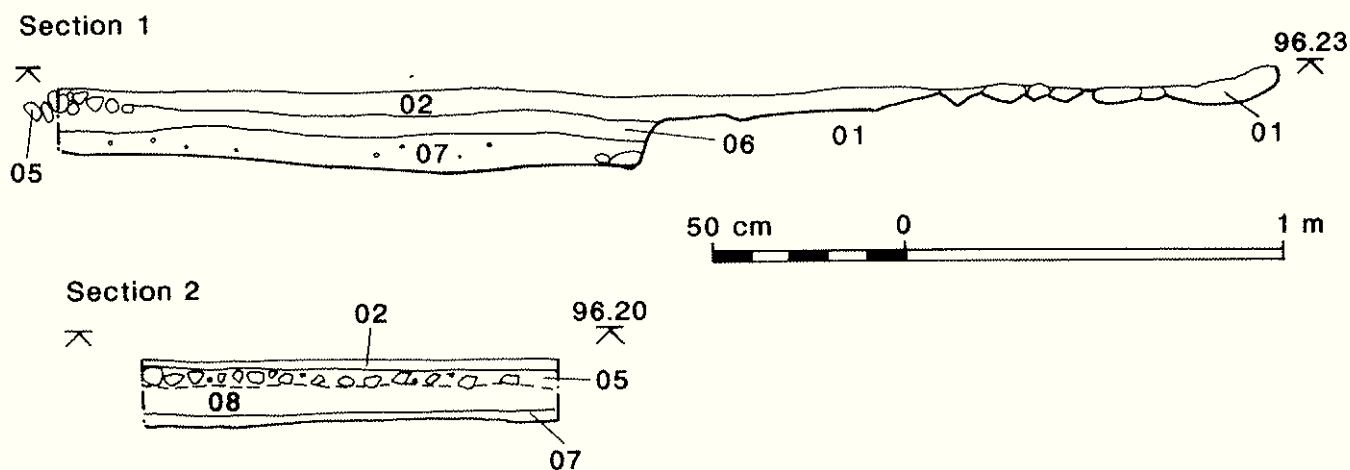
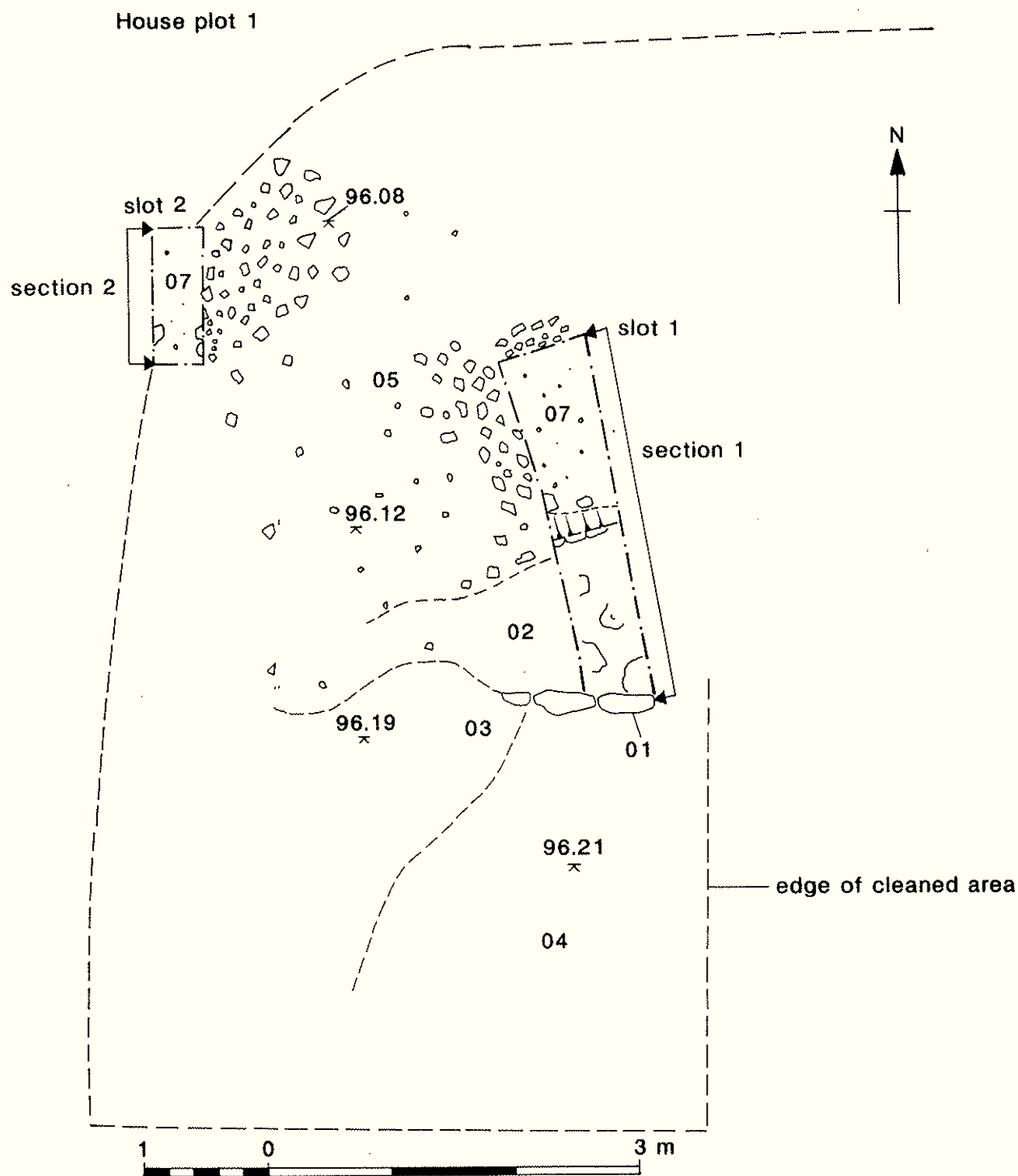
Based on the Ordnance Survey 1:2500 Oxon. sheets xx.14 and xxv.2 by permission

Location of site: plan of Ascot-Under-Wychwood
showing position of pottery waste dumps (hatched)
after Jope and Threlfall, 1958

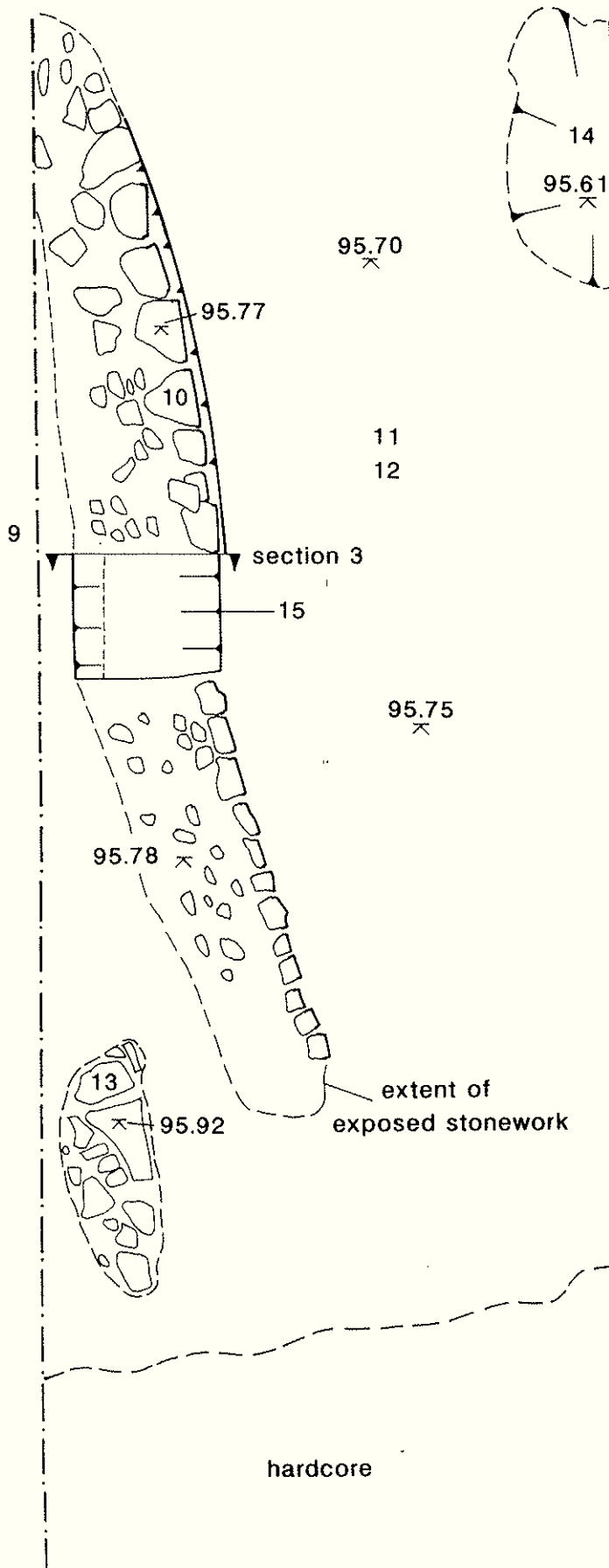
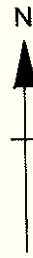
figure 1



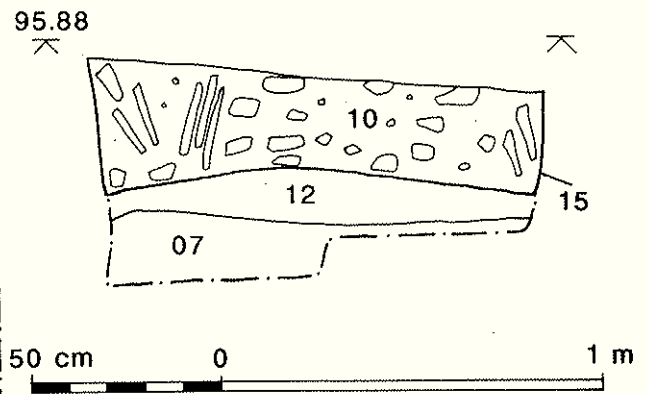
Trench location plan



House plot 1: plan and sections



Section 3



contractor's peg:
corner house



House plot 2: plan and section

figure 4



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