

**Patricia Newman Practice**

**GREENACRE, CASTLE STREET, WALLINGFORD, OXFORDSHIRE**

*NGR SU 6075 8990*

**ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF REPORT**

**Oxford Archaeological Unit**

**May 2001**

Patricia Newman Practice

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## **Summary**

*In May 2001, Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) undertook a watching brief at Greenacre, Castle Street, Wallingford. A number of potentially Saxon occupation deposits and possible quarry pits of indeterminate date were recorded.*

### **1. Introduction**

The proposal site lies to the west of Castle Street (Fig. 1) and immediately south of the Saxon town defences (SU 6075 8990). The site is located at 50 m OD and the underlying geology is gravel terrace deposits. The development area stands within the garden of the residential property of Greenacre.

### **2 Background**

Wallingford is situated on a gravel terrace by an important ford over the River Thames. South of the town the river passes through the Chilterns via the Goring Gap. This strategic position has made it a meeting point of ancient routes and contributed to its importance as a town. The decline of the town in later medieval periods has ensured that late Saxon and early medieval levels are unlikely to be deeply stratified beneath or destroyed by later archaeological deposits as they frequently are in Oxford, the only other late Saxon walled town in the region.

The development site is located in an area of archaeological potential. The site lies immediately east of Scheduled Ancient Monument (SAM) 182, the scheduled portion of the Saxon town. It also lies immediately south of SAM234, the Saxon town defenses, and west of SAM176, Wallingford Castle.

The site lies in the north west quarter of the town (as defined by the Anglo-Saxon defences) which is the site of the Benedictine Priory of Holy Trinity, founded shortly after the Norman Conquest, probably by Robert d'Oilly. The precise location of the Priory buildings is uncertain, but in the 19th century substantial flint foundations were found on the south side of Bull Croft (c250 m south of the development site) and there are also references to encaustic floor tiles, skeletons and a child's stone coffin (Hedges, 1881).

While the impact of the development is limited, the proximity of the Saxon defences, castle, Priory and Saxon town combined with the lack of post medieval and modern development, suggests a potential for the presence of well preserved Saxon, or medieval Priory deposits.

### **3 Aims**

The aims of the watching brief were to identify any archaeological remains exposed on site during the course of the works, and to record these to established OAU standards (Wilkinson 1992), in order to secure their preservation by record.

## 4 Methodology

The watching brief was undertaken by means of separate inspection visits.

Within the constraints imposed by health and safety considerations the deposits exposed were cleaned, inspected and recorded in plan, section and by colour slide and monochrome print photography. Written records were also made on proforma sheets. Soil description utilised standard charts for the approximation of percentage of inclusion types in soil deposits.

## 5 Results (Fig. 3 and 4)

Following the demolition of the existing building, the watching brief monitored the general reduction of the development area and the subsequent excavation of the strip foundation trenches and three 1 m<sup>2</sup> 'trenches' excavated for the supporting pillars at the southern frontage of the building. The general reduction was on average 0.40 m below the present ground level.

The general stratigraphic sequence revealed appeared to be natural gravel overlain by a mixed deposit of silty sand and gravel (2), overlain by a deposit of similar composition although with a higher concentration of gravel (3). This was in turn overlain by a mixed deposit of old topsoil, leaf mould and construction / demolition debris associated with the demolished building (12).

However, underlying deposit 3 and overlying the gravel - and in places deposit 2 - were localised silty clay deposits and lenses of charcoal rich and scorched material. A number of these deposits appeared to represent pit fills, whilst others seemed to be general spreads of material.

### *The Localised Deposits*

In the north-east corner of the site, overlying the natural gravel, a number of deposits were observed. These consisted of a lense of burnt flint and limestone (6) which was on average 0.07 m thick. This was overlain by a layer of charcoal in a silty clay matrix (5) which was approximately 0.12 m thick and was in turn overlain by a 0.06 m thick layer of mid red-brown silty clay (9) which appeared to be scorched. This scorched deposit underlay a 0.05m thick lense of re-deposited gravel natural in a silty matrix (10) which was also overlain by a charcoal rich deposit (11), similar in composition to deposit 5 although considerably thinner at an average of 0.03 m. Deposit 3 appeared to seal all these deposits.

### *The 'Pit' Fills*

A number of potential features were also observed cutting both deposit 3 and the deposits described above.

Feature 15 cut layer 3 but was poorly defined. The feature was approximately 0.85 m wide and 0.90 m deep. The poor definition was as a result of the fills which comprised a mixture of re-deposited 3 and calcified gravel (17 and 16 respectively). The feature

appeared to cut down to the charcoal rich deposit (5) at the western extent of the deposit.

Feature 18 also cut layer 3 but was vertically sided and flat based and measured approximately 0.90 m in width and 0.90 m deep. The primary fill was a silty sand material which had been scorched a mid-red (19) and was overlain by a charcoal rich silty sand with occasional lenses of scorched clay (20). The sand and gravel natural around the base of feature 18 was scorched a reddish brown (21).

Both 15 and 18 were truncated by an irregular feature (13) which was at least 3.5 m in width but only 0.40 m in depth. This was filled by a mid-grey silty sand and gravel deposit (14).

Feature 29 was at least 3.20 m wide and 0.90 m deep and was truncated by feature 30 (see below). The lower fill (27) appeared to be a re-deposited mixture of the layers observed in the north-east corner of the site, whilst the upper fill (28) was composed of material perhaps re-deposited from layer 3 and re-deposited gravel.

Feature 30 was at least 3 m wide and at least 0.70 m deep. The fills were very similar to those of feature 29 with a layer of re-deposited 3 (22) overlain by a re-deposition of layers 6-11 (23, 24 and 26) which are in turn overlain by a further deposit which is probably a re-deposition of material from layer 3 (25).

The deposit observed to the west of section 1 also appeared to be a mixture of re-deposited gravel and deposit 3, and may have represented the fill of another large feature - although the deposit was very similar in composition to deposit 3 and may have been a loosely compacted variation of the same.

### *The Pillar Support Trenches*

These are identified on plan (Fig.3) as 1, 2 and 3.

#### *Trench 1*

Trench One was excavated to a depth of 1.47 m below ground level. A dark grey layer was observed in the northern and western sections at the base of the trench and was overlain by a possible re-deposition of deposit 3.

#### *Trench 2*

Trench two was excavated to a depth of 1.68 m below ground level and appeared to be excavated through deposit 3 and natural gravel.

#### *Trench 3*

Trench 3 was excavated to a depth of 1.40 m and revealed a sequence of deposits very similar to those observed in section 2 and is probably the southern extension of the same feature (29).

## 6 Finds

### *Pottery by Paul Blinkhorn*

The pottery assemblage comprised 9 sherds with a total weight of 127 g. All the material was of early medieval date, with no evidence for activity later than the 11th - 12th centuries.

The pottery was recorded utilising the coding system and chronology of the Oxfordshire County type-series (Mellor 1984; 1994), as follows:

OXY: *Medieval Oxford Ware*, AD1075 - 1350

OXBF: *North-East Wiltshire Ware*, AD1050 - 1400

WA27: *Wallingford Ware*, AD1050 - 1250

The pottery occurrence by number and weight of sherds per context by fabric type is shown in Table 1. Each given date should be regarded as *terminus post quem*.

Table 1: *Pottery occurrence by number and weight (in g) of sherds per context by fabric type*

Context	OXY		OXBF		WA27		Date
	No	Wt	No	Wt	No	Wt	
3	1	33					M-L11thC?
5					1	10	M-L11thC?
11			1	19			M-L11thC?
22	1	5			1	18	M-L11thC?
28	3	35			1	7	M-L11thC?
Total	5	73	1	19	3	35	

## 7 Environmental results

Although full consideration was given to various sampling strategies, due to the absence of any suitable deposits and the tight constraints of the excavation, no environmental soil samples were taken.

## 8 Discussion

Although the limited nature of the foundation trenches made characterisation of the features and deposits observed problematic, a number of suggestions as to their origins are made below.

The earliest deposit observed was deposit 2 which may represent a buried ploughsoil.

The overlying deposits (6-11) may represent occupation deposits associated with the mid-late 11th-century occupation of the town as the high concentration of charcoal together with the pottery recovered from deposits 5 and 11 would suggest.

These deposits are in turn overlain by deposit 3 which may be a later buried ploughsoil and / or may represent the erosion of the bank to the north.

The sterile nature of their fills suggests that features 13 and 15 almost are almost certainly tree throw pits.

The function of feature 18 is unclear although the substantial evidence of scorching from the fills and the surrounding natural suggest either a fire pit or a rubbish pit specifically dug for the disposal of burnt material.

Features 29 and 30 and the potential feature to the west of section 1 may represent gravel quarry pits as the fills appear to be exclusively a re-deposition of the material through which the features are cut, suggesting that they were backfilled almost immediately. Pottery recovered from deposits 22 and 28 suggests a mid-late 11th century date for these features although it is likely that the pottery is residual as it is a component of the re-deposited fills (it is possible that these features, if they do represent quarry pits, are associated with the construction of the castle which lies to the east of Castle Street).

The deposits revealed by the three trenches excavated for the supporting pillars were also difficult to interpret. It would appear that Trench 3 revealed the southern extension of the potential quarry pit revealed by the southern trench of the strip foundations. Trench 2 appeared to be cut through undisturbed geology and Trench 1 was possibly excavated through a feature similar to those observed to the east.

It should be stressed that all these interpretations are tentative as the relationships between most of these deposits were uncertain due to the constrictions of the foundation trenches.

### **Acknowledgements.**

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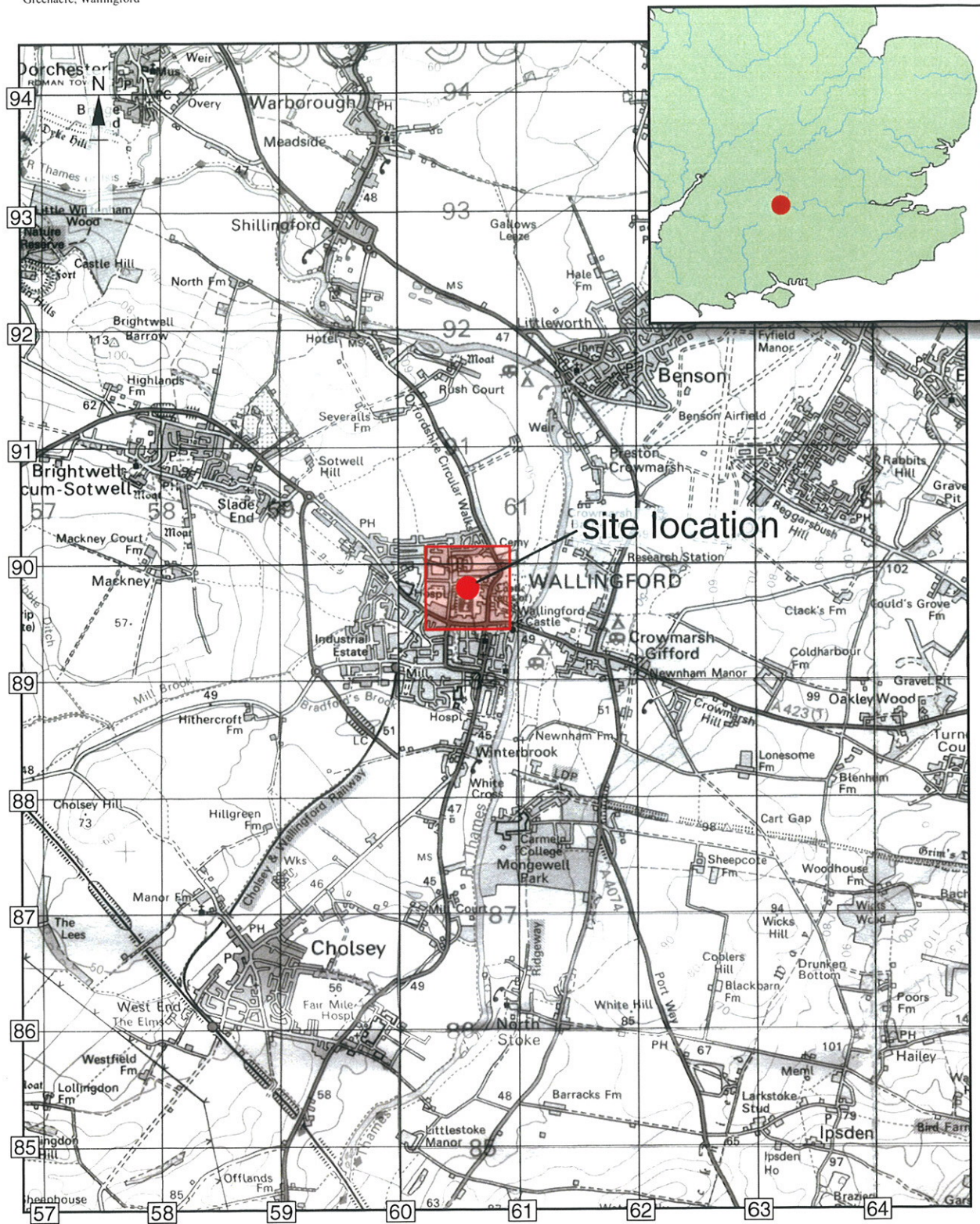
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Scale 1:50,000

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Figure 1: Site location.



Figure 2 : Location of excavated area.

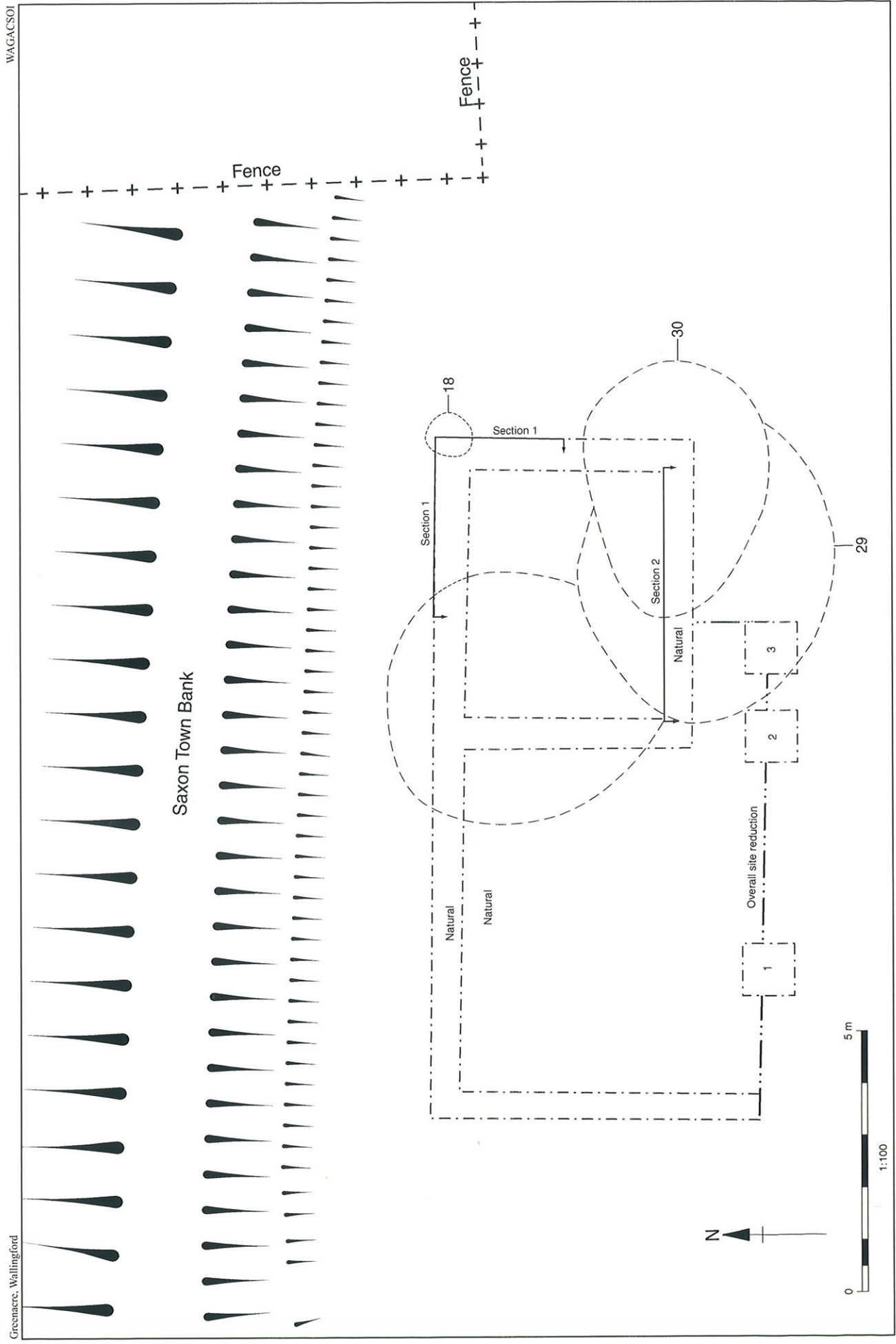
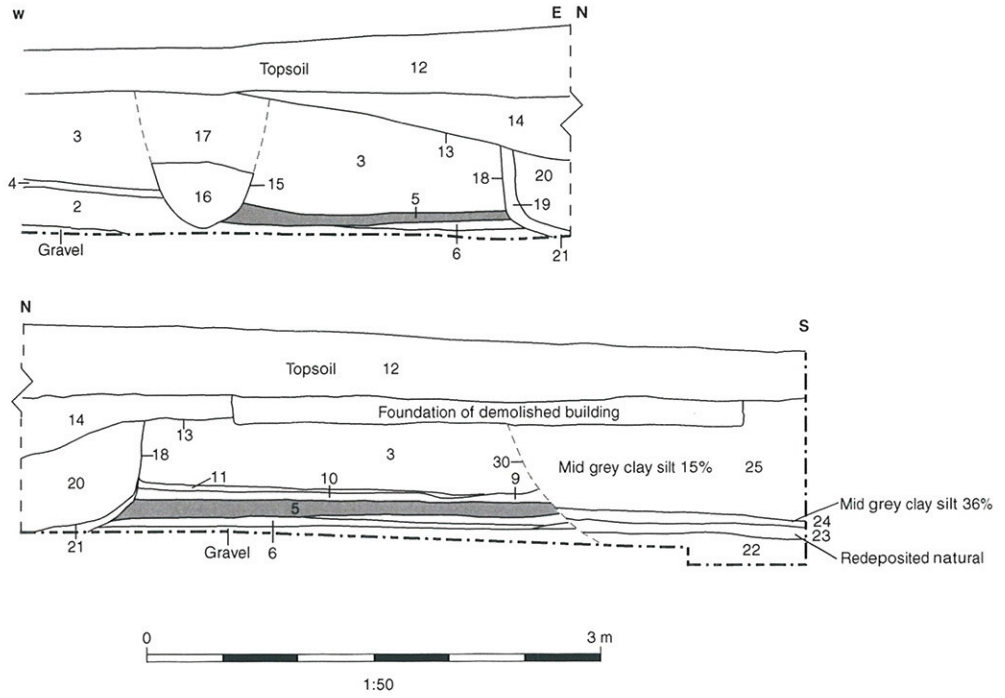


Figure 3 : Site plan.

Section 1



Section 2

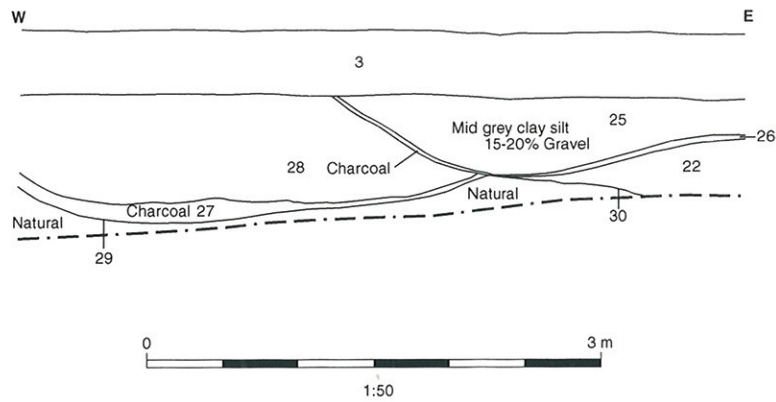


Figure 4 : Section 1, section 2.



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