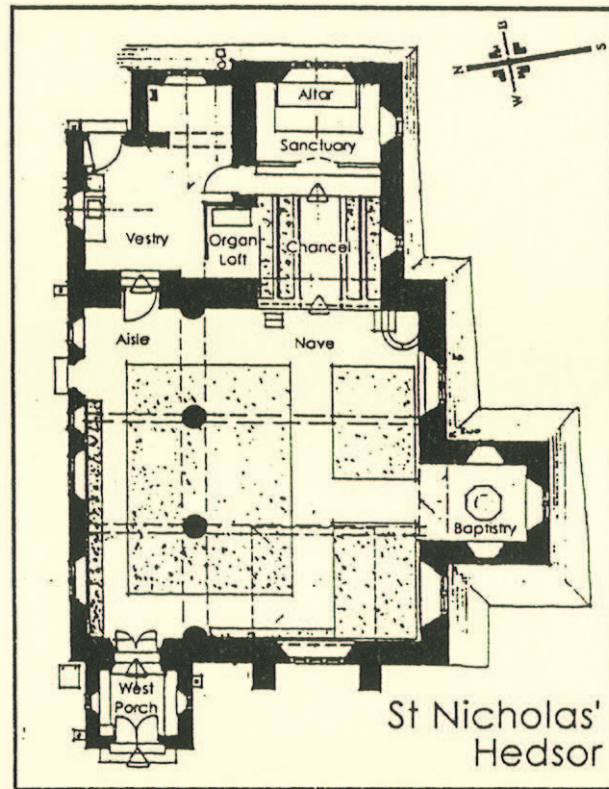


St. Nicholas' Church, Hedsor, Buckinghamshire

NGR SU 907 862

Archaeological Watching Brief Report



Oxford Archaeological Unit

June 1996

ST. NICHOLAS' CHURCH, HEDSOR, BUCKINGHAMSHIRE
NGR SU 907862
ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF REPORT

1 SUMMARY

Post-medieval soil horizons and a Victorian grave were observed during the course of the watching brief. The foundations of the church walls were seen to be constructed upon the natural bedrock. The soil layers at the east side of the church have been extensively disturbed by the insertion of modern service pipes and drainage gullies.

2 INTRODUCTION

The Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) carried out a watching brief at St. Nicholas' Church, Hedsor, Bucks (Fig. 1), in the parish of Hedsor, which borders on the River Thames near Bourne End. The installation of a new drainage system was monitored. This work was required owing to persistent problems of damp in the Chancel and Altar, caused by an inefficient drainage gully surrounding the south and east walls of the building. The existing brick-built drainage gully was removed by the contractors and a new drainage trench was excavated, which led to a soakaway pit to the north-east of the church.

The excavations were carried out by Richard Vickerman Building Projects of Uckfield, East Sussex. The plans for the work were devised by architects Patricia Brock Associates, of Delancey Street, London. The OAU visited the site on two occasions during the course of the work. This report summarises the details of the work and the finds. Each deposit or feature was assigned an individual context number, and these are listed in table form at the rear of this report (Appendix 1).

3 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The original date of the church of St. Nicholas is unknown, although it may have been founded by one of the Lords of the Manor of Wallingford soon after the Norman Conquest. The earliest reference to the church is from the ancient land record, the Liber Antiquus, in about 1218. It is also not known if any of the original building remains, although the chancel is thought to date to the medieval period. The church was extensively renovated in the mid-Victorian period, starting in 1859 with the work of architect Montagu Hepworth. The north aisle was added in 1862. Further internal refurbishment took place in the 1950s.

4 RESULTS

The brick built gully (4) surrounding the south and east walls of the church was removed by the contractors. The base of the gully lay c. 0.9 m below the present ground level at

the south side of the church.

A new trench was excavated alongside the south and east walls of the church (Fig. 2), and was routed away from the north-east corner of the east wall to a soakaway pit. At the south side of the building the new trench was excavated to a depth of 1.8 m below the present ground level. The depth of the trench shallowed progressively around the east wall of the church, where the ground surface slopes to the north. At the north-east corner of the building, the base of the trench was 0.86 m below the ground surface. The section of trench leading to the soakaway pit was 0.5 m deep.

The base of the church walls (2, Fig. 3) were observed to have been constructed upon the natural chalk bedrock (3). The walls are covered with a mix of flint pieces set in mortar, with the corners built of well dressed ashlar blocks.

The only deposit identified above the natural chalk at the south side of the church was a layer of dark brown loam (1) about 0.9 m thick. On the east side of the church, the earliest deposit identified above the bedrock was a layer (9) of loose grey-brown loam and chalk fragments 0.4 m thick. Several modern service pipes (4, 5, 6, 7, 10) for gas, water, and electricity were set into layer 9. A ceramic pipe encased with brick which extended along the length of the east wall was thought to be part of the gully drainage structure (4). Further to the east, a linear brick and tile structure (8) aligned north-south was removed by the contractors within the trench leading to the soakaway.

The upper 0.50 m of the fill of stone-covered grave (14) was excavated by the contractors in order to route the trench into the soakaway pit. It was decided to lift the gravestone and excavate the upper 0.3 m of grave fill under close archaeological supervision (Fig. 3). The lowest excavated fill (13) within the cut was a deposit of loose chalk fragments and sandy loam. Overlying this fill was a single course of red bricks (12) bonded with a brownish-yellow sandy mortar. A large rectangular stone grave slab (11) rested upon the brickwork. The inscription on the stone bore the name of Fanny Elizabeth Grantham, who died in April 1887 (see Appendix 2). No human remains were seen and the grave slab was replaced in its original position.

The bedrock was observed at the base of the soakaway pit (Fig. 3), which was c 1 m deep. It was overlain by a mixed layer of loam and chalk, thought to be layer 9, c 0.40-0.45 m deep. Recent vegetation mixed with loose topsoil up to c 0.38 m deep overlaid layer 9 at this point.

5 THE FINDS

Objects of iron, ceramic and glass were recovered from layer 9 along with three fragments of disarticulated human bone.

The objects were as follows:

Iron spike with looped end, length 200 mm.

Two fragments of heavily fired floor tile 25 mm and 27 mm thick.

Two fragments of roof tile, 13 mm and 15 mm thick, one with peg hole.

Fragment of clear window glass.

Two further small roof tile fragments came from context 4. None of this material is likely to be earlier than 19th century in date. Two flint fragments were recovered from context 9, but neither was struck.

6 CONCLUSIONS

The thick soil layer at the south side of the church is characteristic of the build up of soil that occurs in graveyards, when the excavated soil from the digging of graves is evenly redistributed around the churchyard. No further layers or features were observed within the new drainage trench to the south of the church.

At the east side of the church the churchyard soil has been mixed by the installation of several service pipes and structures, whose backfilled construction trenches contain a mixture of soil and natural chalk. The brick and tile structure (8) is probably a drainage culvert, suggesting that damp has been a problem for some time. The date of the construction of the culvert is not known, although the bricks and tiles appeared to be of recent origin.

The large slab uncovered along the line of the trench was an 'in situ' gravestone which had been laid flat. This churchyard is unusual in that all of the grave stones are laid flat and before work commenced it was unclear if the stones were in their original position. The siting of the soakaway, constrained by the location of graves and trees, meant that superficial disturbance of at least one grave was almost inevitable. At the point where the gravestone was encountered the trench was only 0.5 m deep and it is clear that human remains were not disturbed by the excavation of the trench.

The floor and roof tiles recovered from layer 9 probably represent debris associated with the Victorian restoration. No pottery of any date was recovered from the excavated material from the trench. The discovery of loose human bones is not unusual in churchyards, where graves are often intercut and bones are therefore moved from their original position. It is possible that a grave containing a body lay below the route of the present trench immediately east of the chancel wall, and had been previously disturbed by the insertion of the service pipes revealed during these excavations.

7 SOURCES

Pevsner, N, 1994. *Buckinghamshire, The Buildings of England*, 2nd Ed rev E Williamson

Rushworth, J, 1996. *St Nicholas' Church Hedsor, A History and Guide*

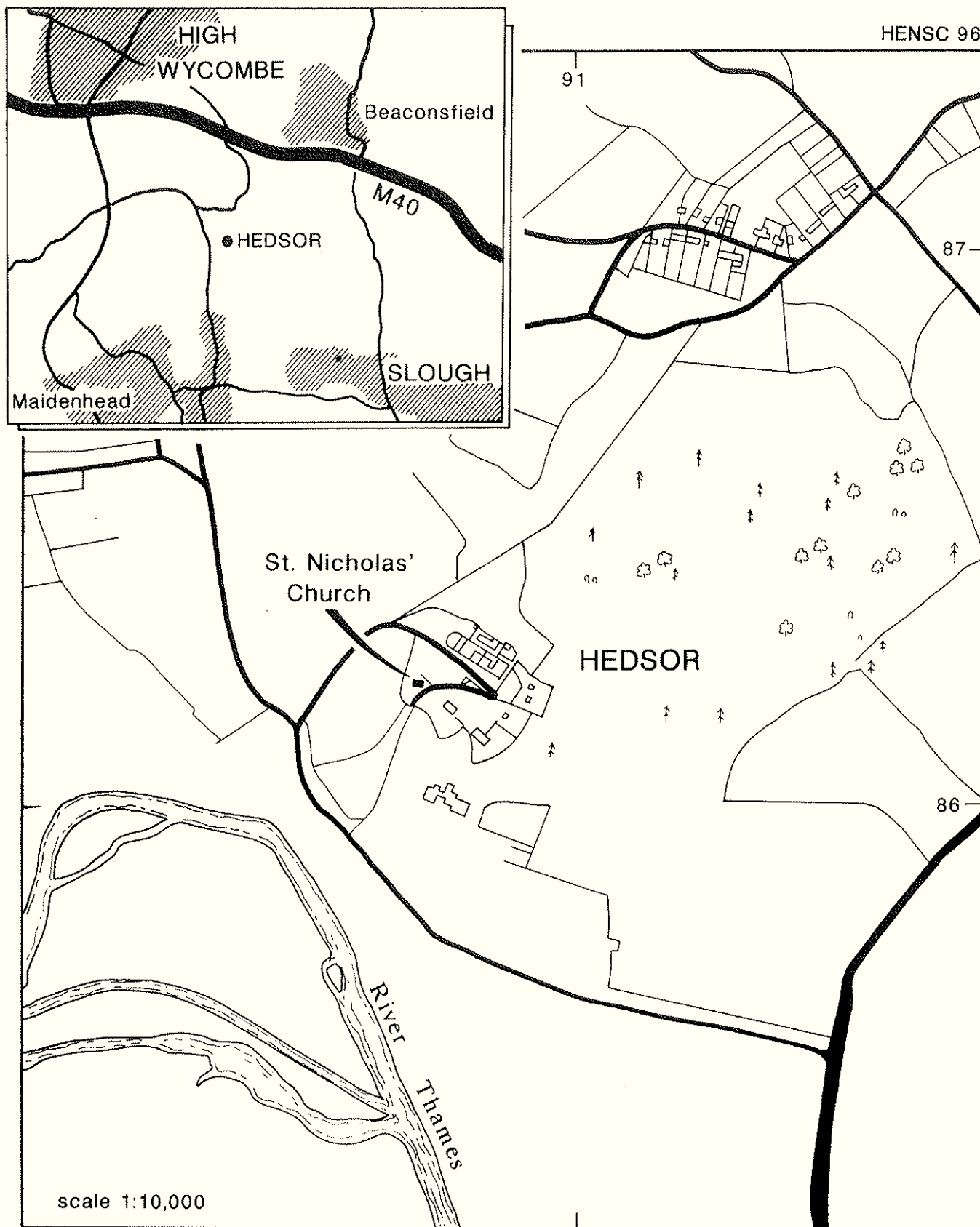
J. Hiller
Oxford Archaeological Unit
June 1996

APPENDIX 1: TABLE OF CONTEXT INFORMATION

CONTEXT	TYPE	COMMENTS
1	layer	Topsoil and churchyard soil at S side of the church
2	structure	Church wall
3	layer	Natural chalk bedrock
4	structure	Brick built drainage gully incorporating drainage pipe, around S and E walls of the church
5	service	Modern service pipe
6	service	Modern service pipe
7	service	Modern service pipe
8	service	Brick and tile drainage culvert aligned N-S at the E side of the church
9	layer	Mixed loam and chalk layer below the topsoil formed by the installation of service pipes at the E side of the church
10	service	Modern service pipe
11	structure	Victorian inscribed gravestone (see appendix 2)
12	structure	Single layer of bricks bonded with sandy mortar, beneath 11 and sealing 12
13	fill	Upper fill of gave 14, mixture of loose chalk fragments and sandy loam, under 12
14	cut	E-W aligned grave cut covered with inscribed gravestone

APPENDIX 2: Full inscription on gravestone

*In
 Affectionate Memory
 Of
 Fanny Elizabeth Grantham
 4th Daughter of the late
 Revd. John Foyster Grantham
 Vicar of Cookham
 Who died April 8th. 1887*



Based on the Ordnance Survey's 1:10 000 map with the permission of the Controller of Her Majesty's Stationery Office, © Crown copyright. Licence No. A1 854166

Figure 1

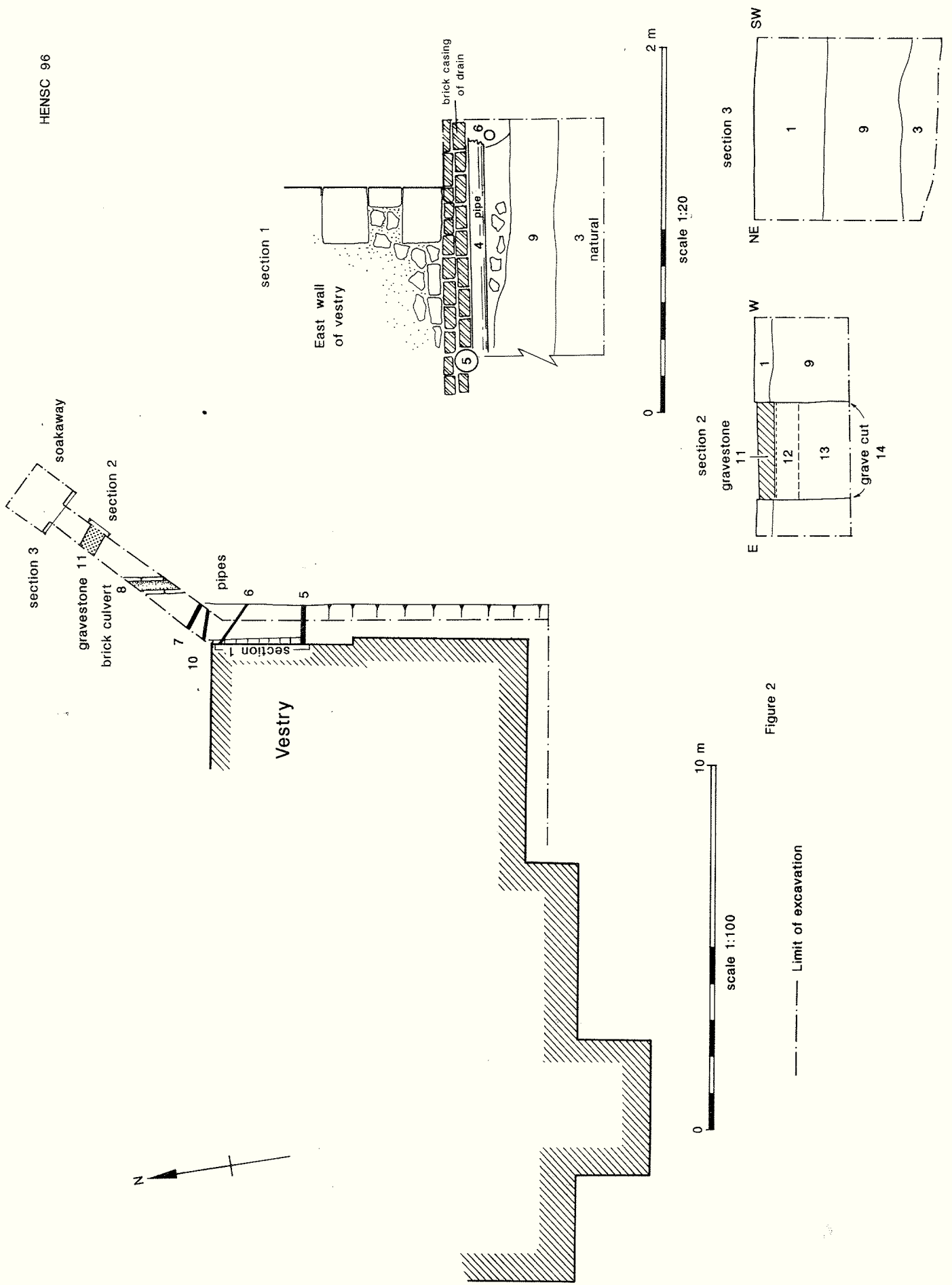


Figure 2

Figure 3



OXFORD ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT

46 Hythe Bridge Street, Oxford, OX1 2EP
Head Office Tel: 01865 243888 Fax: 01865 793496
Post-Excavation Tel: 01865 204642 Fax: 01865 204637



Director: David Miles B.A., F.S.A., M.I.F.A.

The Oxford Archaeological Unit Limited. Registered Charity Number: 285627
Private Limited Company Number: 1618597 Registered Office: 46 Hythe Bridge Street