

Bath Main Post Office Broad Street Bath

Archaeological Monitoring of Temporary Enabling Works



Archaeological Watching Brief Report



Oxford Archaeology

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Bath Main Post Office, Broad Street, Bath. Archaeological Monitoring of Temporary Enabling Works.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF REPORT

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SUMMARY

In September 2005 Oxford Archaeology (OA) carried out an archaeological watching brief on six trenches dug for the foundations of temporary propping works prior to development at the rear of the Main Post Office in Bath (NGR: ST750649). The work was commissioned by Future Heritage Ltd as an archaeological evaluation of the site to inform a planning application. Five of the trenches, dug to between 1.3 and 1.5 metres below the modern ground level, revealed a deep build up of soils typical of urban back plots. These showed some variation in nature the deeper the excavation went, but were essentially the result of garden cultivation of largely organic urban dump layers. Dating evidence suggested a post-medieval date for the deposition of the contexts recorded. The sixth trench went through the fill of a demolished cellar, probably of late 18th century origin, infilled in 1923 when the current Post Office building was constructed.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Scope of work

- 1.1.1 The developers, Future Heritage Ltd., recognised that the site was archaeologically sensitive and arranged with, first Bath Archaeology, and latterly, Oxford Archaeology, to provide an appropriate archaeological response to the potential disturbances to the buried stratigraphy. In addition, the proposed development was designed to have a light footprint, including a very small number of piles and shallow slab foundations, pursuing a preservation *in situ* solution to mitigation. However, support for the northern boundary wall required the excavation by mini-digger of six trenches for the foundations of raking shores to an 18th century wall.
- 1.1.2 A series of WSIs were prepared but changes of plan rendered them obsolete. Eventually it was agreed that simple monitoring of the machine excavation of six pits for the foundations of temporary support works would be an appropriate response. This approach was agreed voluntarily with and approved by the acting Bath and North East Somerset Council Archaeological Officer.

1.2 Location, geology and topography

- 1.2.1 The site is on the lower slopes of the valley of the River Avon in the centre of the modern city of Bath. The underlying geology here is lias clay forming the valley floor. The site is above the expected range of fluvial deposits.
- 1.2.2 The site is now level but sits just above the steep drop down to the river itself and at the base of the rise to the upper town, the late 18th century development of Bath, whose old centre was then called the lower town.

1.3 Archaeological and historical background

- 1.3.1 The Post Office occupies the east end of the insula formed by New Bond Street, Broad Street and Green Street (Fig. 1). It is situated in the heart of the medieval suburb of Bath which sat outside the North Gate, clustered around the church of St Michael Without. The church was rebuilt in 1836 and Green Street and New Bond Street were new creations of 1717 and 1810 respectively. Broad Street, however, while certainly suffering encroachments on the western side from the early 17th century, is attested from documentary evidence as occupied back to the 13th century. The other part of the suburb, Walcot Street, branching off from Broad Street opposite the post office, likewise has historical evidence for occupation in the 13th century and pottery from the 11-12th centuries has been found in excavations (Davenport 2003).
- 1.3.2 There is every reason therefore to expect medieval remains on the site, unless removed by later cellaring or other disturbance. In addition, antiquarian and archaeological observations make it clear that Roman structural remains are to be expected at depths down to 4 metres (*inter alia*, Cunliffe 1969, 211).
- 1.3.3 The current building has deep cellars under the street frontage dating to the 1920s. These will have removed all medieval and probably some Roman deposits. The strip foundations will have removed all archaeological remains. They will also have removed all evidence of the cellars that undoubtedly existed under the predecessor building, the Old Castle Hotel, dating from the late 18th century.
- 1.3.4 The rear courtyard of the present building seems broadly to follow that of the inn and is uncellared. This was also thought likely to be the case for the northern range, where the prop pits were to be excavated.

2 PROJECT AIMS AND METHODOLOGY

2.1 Aims

- 2.1.1 To identify the presence or absence, extent, condition, character, quality and date of archaeological remains in the areas affected by the development.
- 2.1.2 To preserve by record any archaeological remains (if present) that the development may remove or damage within the impacted area.
- 2.1.3 To monitor all groundwork that may affect or reveal archaeological deposits. This included in the present phase of work only the six prop foundation pits.
- 2.1.4 To establish the eco-factual and environmental potential of archaeological deposits and features.
- 2.1.5 To make available the results of the investigation.

2.2 Methodology

- 2.2.1 The watching brief was conducted as two full day visits monitoring the progress of work. The trenches were cut out of the concrete with a breaker and then the fills beneath excavated to the required depth by mini-digger under constant supervision.
- 2.2.2 Spoil was scanned for finds and the exposed faces of the trenches cleaned and inspected.
- 2.2.3 Plans showing the location of all intrusive groundworks were prepared at a scale of 1:2500 (Figs. 1 and 2) and selected exposed sections were drawn at a scale of 1:20 (fig 3). Sections and any excavated features were photographed using colour slide and black and white print film. A general photographic record of the work was also made Recording followed procedures detailed in the *OA Field Manual* (ed. D Wilkinson, 1992).

3 RESULTS

3.1 Description of deposits

- 3.1.1 Trenches 1, 2, and 6, next to each other in the western room, were essentially identical, both in size and character, in that they were all cut through a similar very dark grey, almost black, gritty clay silt, the colour of which seemed to come mostly from coal dust and flecks (Fig. 3). These deposits, reaching 1.5 m and more were interpreted to be mostly garden soil and domestic rubbish, with increasing proportions of grit and coal nearer the present surface. They were otherwise remarkable for their homogeneity.
- 3.1.2 Trench 3 and 4 had similar fills but less gritty, and with an upper phase of the silts, about 0.3 m in thickness, being browner and also a little less gritty (Fig. 3). Trench 4 had a lens of darker grey silt in the brown layer on the north west side. These trenches were only taken down to 1.3 m below the concrete floor.
- 3.1.3 Trench 5 was cut down at the east end of the series and was very different in nature (Fig. 3). The series of horizontally laid deposits were a deliberate backfill, probably of a cellar, although no walls or floors were encountered. Judging by the bricks in the fill being similar to those in the 1920s Post Office walls, it was judged that the backfill dated to the time of the construction of the Post Office and was probably a filled in cellar of the preceding building, one of the 18th century cellars of the Castle Hotel.

3.2 Finds

- 3.2.1 A small amount of post-medieval pottery was observed and some brick fragments. Animal bones occurred in the deposits, and the sample recovered (but not kept) was mostly large mammal, butchered. The lack of smaller fragments is not surprising given the method of recovery. The lack of clay pipe fragments was rather odd, although some sherds of 17th and 18th century tin and greenglaze bowls and suchlike were noted. The lack of the distinctive clay tobacco pipe fragments from the mid 17th century onwards usually indicates a deposition date of pre-1640, but it was clear that later pottery was present.

4 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

- 4.1.1 It did seem probable, simply on the basis of comparative levels, that the dark soils probably pre-dated, or did not much post-date the houses on Green Street, immediately to the north, whose early 18th century construction level is at about this height. On the other hand, the ground level of the 16th century 3, Broad Street 50 m or so to the north, suggests that deposition of these silts took place pre-1600 and perhaps their modification and only slight augmentation took place after that date, providing the opportunity for the intrusion of later material.
- 4.1.2 This is supported by the existence of a stone structure, probably the corner of a wall footing, in the north west corner of Trench 1, of a building to the north west (Fig. 3, context 5). This cuts through all the silt layers and is loosely bonded with lime putty. It does not seem to tie in with any of the boundaries shown on the 1886 OS map of Bath and, while seeming to run west and north from the trench is rather too close to the early 18th century boundary wall to have been contemporary with it, so may predate it. This takes the silts earlier too, although the argument is inconclusive.
- 4.1.3 The footing was of Bath stone blocks, roughly squared, and very roughly laid, horizontally, but not in courses.
- 4.1.4 The test pits were, with the exception of Trench 5, cut through deep garden soils of early post-medieval to late medieval origin. This is not surprising, as the area was behind the street frontage of Broad Street as early as it is possible to see on map evidence (Savile and Speed *c.*1600). The medieval Frogg Lane was to the south, along the south side of New Bond Street and the site was on the north and west fringe of the medieval and later suburb. Nothing structural was seen, except for the footing in Trench 1 which was probably early post-medieval, but strictly, undated.
- 4.1.5 Trench 3 and 4 had an upper phase that might suggest leaching, or perhaps less dumping of domestic debris - because it was nearer the buildings perhaps? Its looser ped structure might suggest more recent cultivation, as in gardening.
- 4.1.6 The trenches were placed in what were, historically, the outbuildings of the Old Castle Hotel. On the 1886 map, a cellar is indicated by steps down from the yard, and Trench 5 fell within its outline. The other trenches fell within the outline of two adjacent buildings, one of which is indicated as open-fronted and therefore, presumably, a carriage or wagon shed. These are usually uncellared and this is clearly the case here.
- 4.1.7 While the results of the monitoring were fairly unexciting they have shown that the archaeological deposits at the rear of the Post Office are largely undisturbed and that medieval and early medieval strata have a high likelihood of survival in the two to three metres of post-Roman soils that other evidence suggests is likely to exist. While the extent of robbing cannot be predicted, there is every reason to suppose that well-preserved remains of the Roman period would be met with below this depth (and possibly higher - a Roman wall

over two metres high was encountered at 134, Walcot Street surrounded by medieval dark soils).

- 4.1.8 These deposits are thick enough to act as a buffer to protect deeper and more interesting deposits from development. Under the main building and the Georgian buildings on the south, no medieval remains are to be expected and Roman remains will be heavily truncated, but should exist.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1 ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXT INVENTORY

Trenches 1, 2 and 6. Concrete at 29.20mOD

Context	Description	Thickness	Depth
1	Concrete (not reinforced)	12cm	0cm
2	Hard core makeup, rubble, brick and gravel	4-6cm	12cm
3	Loose rubble	18-28cm	18cm
4	Changing downwards from dark grey sandy silt to black clayey silt	>105cm	37-46cm
5	Footings of coursed rubble in soft lime putty mortar	28cm	137cm

Trenches 3 and 4 Concrete at 29.20mOD

Context	Description	Thickness	Depth
1	Concrete (not reinforced)	7-13cm	0cm
2	Hard core makeup	4-15cm	7-13cm
3	Mid-to dark pinkish brown loam	16-28cm	16-23cm
4	Changing downwards from dark grey sandy silt to black clayey silt	>78cm	33-41cm

Trench 5. Concrete at 29.14mOD

Context	Description	Thickness	Depth
1	Concrete (not reinforced). Is made up of an upper layer of concrete 10cm thick, a layer of broken bricks and small rubble 10cm thick and another layer of concrete, all over a plastic membrane.	30cm	0cm
2	Another layer of concrete (an earlier floor) with a hard core make up of rubble and brick	12cm+10cm	30cm
3	Pinkish grey, gritty, coarse silty sand with fine and comminuted mortar, brick and rubble	10	52cm
4	Very dark grey to black, gritty sand, much coal dust	30cm	62cm
5	Modern brick fragments (mostly red homogeneous but also some beige brown like the ones in the upstanding building) in lime mortar dust	10cm	92cm
6	Grey clayey silt with charcoal, brick, Bath stone fragments	30cm	122cm
7	Rubble in lime mortar and stone dust (sandy) some wood frags- unrotted.	10cm	152cm
8	Larger rubble in gritty dark grey silt	unknown	162cm

APPENDIX 2 BIBLIOGRAPHY AND REFERENCES

- Cunliffe, B. W. 1969 *Roman Bath* (Soc of Antiqs. Research Report)
- Davenport 2003 *Medieval Bath* (Stroud)
- Forsyth, M. 2004 *Bath* (Pevsner Architectural Guides)
- IFA, 2001 *Standard and Guidance for Archaeological Watching Briefs*
- OAU, 1992 *Field Manual* (ed. D Wilkinson)

The following maps were referred to:

- Speed. Vignette of Bath from the corner of the map of Somerset in his *Britannia* 1610
- Savile. Engraved map of Bath in private collection, probable source of Speed dated 1603-1610.
- Gilmore. Map of Bath commissioned for Guidot's Bath Guide in 1694.
- G. P. Manners' map of the Parish of St Michael's Without 1818.
- Cotterell's large scale survey of Bath 1852
- OS large scale map of Bath 1886

APPENDIX 3 SUMMARY OF SITE DETAILS

Site name: Main Post Office, Bath

Site code: BAPO05

Grid reference: ST750649

Type of watching brief: Machine excavation of pits for temporary support works

Date and duration of project: 08.09.05 to 09.09.05, 2 site visits

Area of site: 0.05 hectares

Summary of results: Post-medieval cultivation soils; poss early post-med. foundation.

Location of archive: The archive is currently held at OA, Janus House, Osney Mead, Oxford, OX2 0ES, and will be deposited with The Roman Baths Museum in due course with the accession number to be arranged.

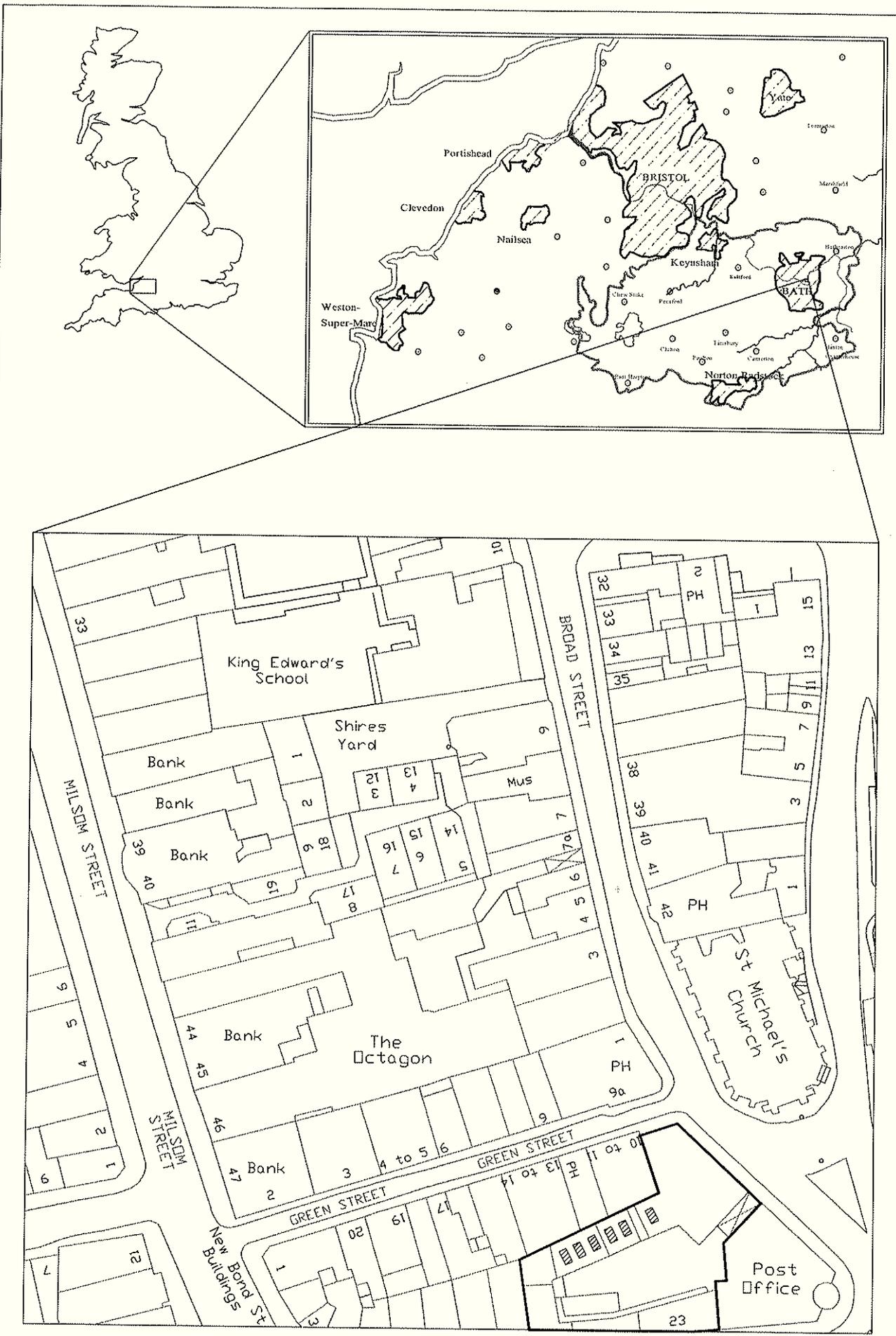


Figure 1: Location map. The study area is shown in heavy outline, prop pits hatched

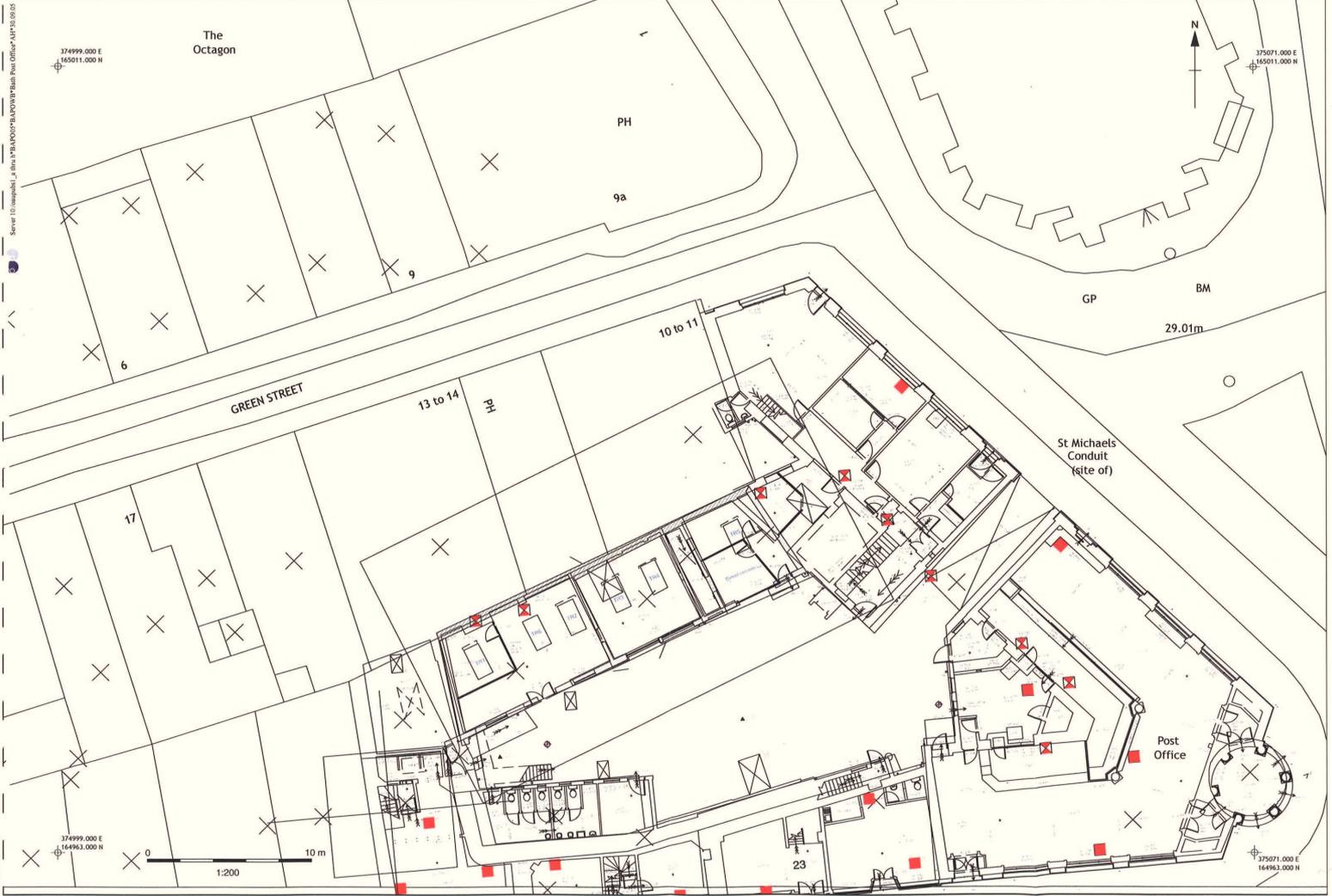
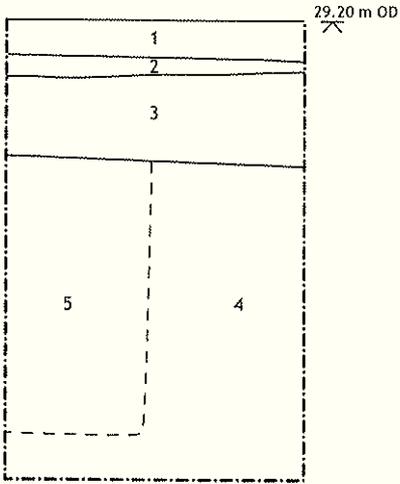


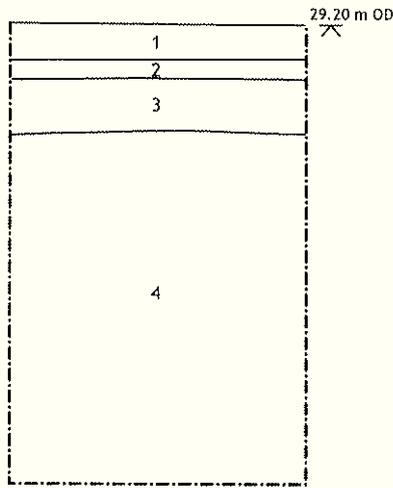
Figure 2 : Plan of proposed pits on north side of Post Office yard



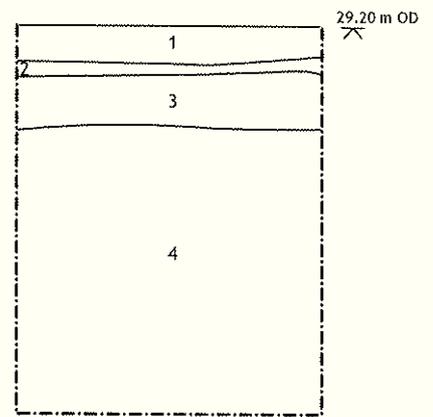
Section 1



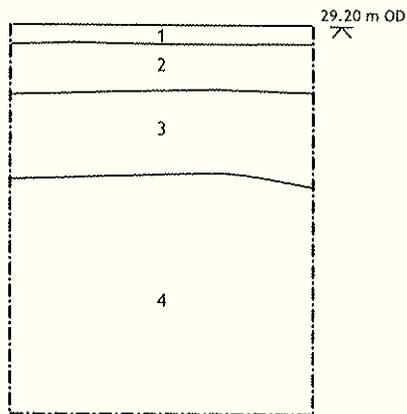
Section 2



Section 3



Section 4



Section 5

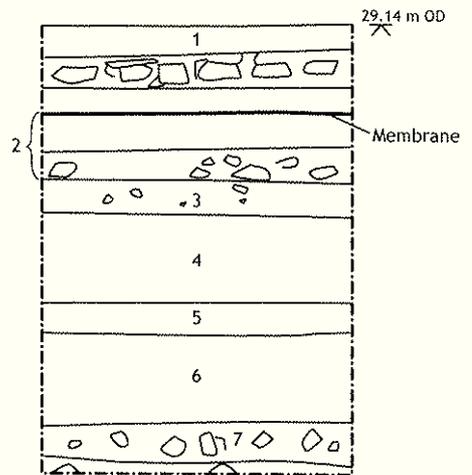


Figure 3 : Sections 1 - 5



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