

Former Ambulance Station Wantage Oxfordshire



Archaeological Evaluation Report



December 2009

Client: Builders EDE Ltd

Issue No:1

OA Job No: 4599

NGR: SU 3999 8776

Planning Ref: WAN/7521/3

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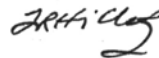
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Former Ambulance Station, Wantage, Oxfordshire

Archaeological Evaluation Report

Prepared by Robin Bashford

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Summary

In December 2009, Oxford Archaeology (OA) carried out a field evaluation at the former Ambulance Station, off Ormond Street, Wantage, Oxfordshire. The work was undertaken on behalf of Builders EDE Ltd, in advance of new residential development.

The site was previously occupied by Wantage Ambulance Station, which has recently been demolished. The focus of the evaluation was within the footprint of the proposed new build, and comprised two trenches. Trenches 1 and 2 were respectively 20 m and 15 m in length.

The evaluation revealed one east-west aligned ditch and two intercutting ditches on a roughly north-south alignment. The dimensions and profile of the earlier of the north-south aligned ditches suggested a possible correlation with the east-west aligned ditch, as did the similarity between the composition of the fill of the east-west aligned ditch and the upper fill of the earlier north-south aligned feature. A single small sherd of pottery from the upper fill of the latter suggested a possible late Saxon date for this feature – although the suggested correlation between the two ditches remains tentative. The second of the north-south aligned ditches may have represented a re-cut of the earlier feature, although no dating evidence was recovered.

Three modern trenches were also revealed, which almost certainly represent the grubbed out foundation trenches of the recently demolished ambulance station. Within the footprint of the demolished building, the natural geology was directly overlain by a deposit of similar composition to the fills of the foundation trenches, and likely to have originated from the recent phase of demolition. Outside the footprint of the former building, this demolition deposit overlay a buried soil horizon which in turn overlay the natural geology. This deposit was cut by a linear configuration of modern post-holes, and is likely to represent the ground surface which pre-dates the construction of the ambulance station, and has been truncated within the footprint during the construction of same.



1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Location and scope of work

- 1.1.1 Oxford Archaeology (OA) were commissioned by Builders EDE Ltd to undertake an archaeological evaluation in response to a condition on the planning consent (ref. no. WAN/7521/3) for the demolition of the existing ambulance station and the erection of a new building comprising of 8x2 bed and 3x1 bed apartments.
- 1.1.2 Richard Oram (Planning Archaeologist, Oxfordshire County Council (OCC)) produced a Design Brief for an Archaeological Evaluation at the site, which formed the basis for a Written Scheme of Investigation (WSI) detailing how Oxford Archaeology (OA) would implement and complete the work in accordance with the Brief.
- 1.1.3 The scope of the work comprised the excavation and recording of one 20m evaluation trench and one 15m trench.

1.2 Geology and topography

General

- 1.2.1 Wantage is located under the chalk scarp of the Ridgeway, on the southern side of the Vale of the White Horse. The town lies on a strip of Greensand that runs east-west along the foot of the Berkshire Downs. To the south, the geology is predominantly of Chiltern Stone, before progressing to chalk downland, and to the north lies the clay of the Vale.
- 1.2.2 Wantage is one of a string of settlements located along the spring line formed by the geology of the area. In a number of locations within the town, springs rise forming natural ponds and water courses which drain into larger streams. The present day town straddles the Letcombe Brook, which runs north-south in a sloping sided valley. The Humber Ditch is a smaller stream with a less steeply defined valley, running east-west from Charlton and draining into the Letcombe Brook. A third water course known as Bryan's Brook is now all but lost, but was historically important and ran westwards from a spring-fed pond below Stirlings to drain into the Letcombe Brook.
- 1.2.3 The historic town centre is sited on level ground with a gentle descent to the west into the Letcombe Brook valley, which rises more steeply to higher ground to the east. To the south-east of the town, the land rises steeply at Chain Hill and to the south-west at Windmill Hill.
- 1.2.4 Within this landscape setting, Wantage is located on the boundary between two differing ecological zones; the Vale of the White Horse, suited to dairy farming and arable crop cultivation; and the chalk downland, historically dominated by sheep grazing. It is likely that this potential abundance and diversity of resources was a factor in the origins and location of the settlement, and in its prosperity and evolution (OA, 2007).

Site specific

- 1.2.5 The site is located on the north side of Ormond Road, to the south-east of the Market Square and north of the junction with Chain Hill (Fig. 1). It is bounded to the west by Eagles Lane (formerly Harding's Lane) and the former St Mary's School; to the south by the Fire Station; to the north by the back yards of Eagles Almshouses, and to the east by 20th century bungalows. Following the demolition of the ambulance station, the majority of the site now stands empty, although a structure housing a generator for the



former building currently remains standing. The site is centred on NGR SU 3998 8776 and lies at c 94 m OD.

1.3 Archaeological and historical background

- 1.3.1 The following two paragraphs are reproduced from the brief (OCC, 2009). A comprehensive study of the origin and development of the town is presented in an Historic Environment Assessment undertaken by OA for OCC (OA, 2007).
- 1.3.2 Wantage appears to have been a centre of at least local importance from the Romano British period onwards. The Romano British activity appears to have been concentrated around the Letcombe Brook, Mill Street and Denchworth Road. Until recently there has been little material evidence of Saxon settlement in Wantage. However given that it was the birth place of Alfred the Great, it contained a Minster Church, a meeting place for the Royal Council in 990 and the Witan in 997, and it was sacked by the Danes in 1006 it has always been identified as an important Saxon settlement. It was a Royal manor in the Saxon period and remained as such until 1199. In 1213 a fair was granted and whilst no written grant for a market has been found the prosperity of the town and presence of a market place during the medieval period strongly suggests that one was held regularly (OCC 2009). An OA Desk-based Assessment (for Crab Hill, Wantage) shows the site to be c 200m to the south-east of the focus of the Roman settlement and within the historic settlement core of Wantage (OCC 2009).
- 1.3.3 In March 2006 an archaeological evaluation was undertaken at St Mary's School to the west of the site. This revealed a spread of features including post holes, pits and ditches dating from the early Saxon period to the early medieval period. Features within trenches 1, 2, and 3 (located c fifty metres from the ambulance station) all contained early and middle Saxon pottery (John Moore Heritage Services. St Mary's School, Wantage. Archaeological Evaluation. 2006). This is the strongest material evidence that has been found to date for Anglo Saxon activity in central Wantage and the density of the evidence suggests that settlement during that period took place in this area.

Cartographic Sources

- 1.3.4 The 1806 enclosure map and the OS maps from 1866 onwards show the site as open ground, with no significant development until the construction of the ambulance station. The exception to this is a north-south aligned terrace against the eastern boundary of the site, and a large circular structure, both of which are shown on the 1912 and 1937 editions. Brick built footings were observed in the south east corner of the ambulance station site during the evaluation, and may relate to the possible terracing. The nature of the circular structure is uncertain. No corresponding symbol is listed in the Indexes to the 1/2500 and 6-Inch Scale Maps (OS, 1991), although similar symbols have been annotated as "Fountains" on OS maps from elsewhere (e.g. Harley, 1964, p. 27).



2 EVALUATION AIMS AND METHODOLOGY

2.1 Aims of the investigation

General

2.1.1 The aims and objectives of the evaluation were as follows:

- To determine the existence or absence of archaeological remains and, if archaeological remains were present, to assess their general nature and significance.
- To determine or confirm the approximate date or date range of any remains, by means of artefactual or other evidence.
- To determine or confirm the approximate extent of the remains.
- To determine the condition and state of preservation of the remains.
- To determine the degree of complexity of the horizontal and/or vertical stratigraphy present.
- To assess the associations and implications of any remains encountered with reference to the historic landscape.
- To determine the implications of the remains with reference to economy, status, utility and social activity.
- To determine or confirm the likely range, quality and quantity of the artefactual evidence present.
- To determine the potential of the site to provide palaeo-environmental, geo-archaeological and/or economic evidence.

2.2 Methodology

2.2.1 The evaluation consisted of two trenches within the area of the proposed buildings. Trench 1 measured 20m in length and was aligned approximately north-south. Trench 2 measured 15 m in length and was aligned approximately east-west (Fig. 2). The trenches were re-located slightly from the proposed position put forward in the Written Scheme of Investigation due to the presence of a standing building in the southern part of the site, and live services around the perimeter of the former Ambulance Station.

2.2.2 Trenches were machine excavated using a JCB fitted with a toothless ditching/grading bucket to the level of the natural geology. All machining of deposits was undertaken under the direction of the site Project Supervisor. Care was taken not to damage archaeological deposits through excessive use of mechanical excavation and no identified archaeological deposits were excavated by machine without the prior consent of Hugh Coddington (Deputy County Archaeological Officer, OCC).

2.2.3 The nature of the deposits encountered negated the necessity to store soil separately as it predominantly comprised deposits associated with the construction and subsequent demolition of the Ambulance Station. OA backfilled all trenches after approval was given by Hugh Coddington.

2.2.4 Where archaeological features were present, they were sampled by hand excavation to attempt to ascertain their date, nature and degree of survival and to address the aims outlined above. No discrete features such as pits and post holes were encountered



(with the exception of a linear configuration of modern post holes). Linear features were sectioned but produced little datable material. Consequently, following consultation with Hugh Coddington, further rapid excavation of the fills of the features was undertaken in an attempt to retrieve further datable artefactual evidence, and met with limited success. No complex features such as kilns or burials were encountered. No deeply stratified deposits were encountered. No features or deposits were encountered which would have been better excavated under the conditions of open area excavation.

- 2.2.5 Plans and sections of all features were produced. The site archive includes plans and sections at an appropriate scale, a photographic record, and full stratigraphic records on recording forms/context sheets or their electronic equivalent. Appropriate written and drawn records were be maintained even where no archaeological deposits are encountered.
- 2.2.6 The record of the extent and vulnerability of features is sufficiently detailed to facilitate discussions regarding the need for preservation beneath any future potential development, or any other mitigation measures including further excavation or recording.
- 2.2.7 Flooding did not affect the works.
- 2.2.8 Recording was undertaken in accordance with the guidance given by the Institute of Field Archaeologist's Standard and Guidance for Archaeological Field Evaluations (as amended 1999), and in accordance with established OA practices as detailed in the OA Fieldwork Manual (OA 1992).
- 2.2.9 Site procedures were as defined in the OA Standard Fieldwork Appendix and OA Fieldwork Manual.



3 RESULTS

3.1 Presentation of results

- 3.1.1 Detailed context descriptions are presented in the context inventory (Appendix A), and within the descriptive text in Section 3.2 where they are integral to the interpretation of the context in question. Information on finds is also presented in Section 3.2
- 3.1.2 A discussion and interpretation of this evidence can be found in Section 4.

3.2 Distribution of archaeological deposits

Trench 1

- 3.2.1 Trench 1 was orientated north-south and measured 20 m x 1.8 m (Figs 2 and 3).
- 3.2.2 Natural geology was encountered at approximately 94.40 m OD and was cut by a single ditch on a roughly east-west alignment (1). The ditch measured 0.60 m wide and was between 0.25 m and 0.35 m deep, although had almost certainly been subject to a degree of truncation (see below).
- 3.2.3 To the north of this feature were two modern trenches, which almost certainly represent the grubbed out foundation trenches of the recently demolished ambulance station. The fills of these modern features were similar in composition to the deposit (12), which directly overlay the natural geology, and is likely to have originated from the recent phase of demolition.

Trench 2

- 3.2.4 Trench 2 was orientated east-west and measured 15 m x 1.8 m.
- 3.2.5 Natural geology was encountered at 94.57 m OD in the eastern end of the trench, and at 94.39 m OD in the western end. In the eastern end of the trench, the natural geology was cut by a roughly south-east/north-west aligned linear ditch (3). Ditch 3 was approximately 0.63 m wide and up to 0.45 m deep, and was cut by a second linear feature on a north-south alignment (6).
- 3.2.6 In the western end of the trench, the natural geology and the fills of the above features were directly overlain by Deposit 12 (see above). However, outside the footprint of the recently demolished ambulance station, these deposits were overlain by a buried soil deposit (10). This would suggest that - prior to the construction of the ambulance station - the ground within the footprint has been reduced prior to the excavation of the strip foundation trenches for the footings of same.
- 3.2.7 Deposit 10 was overlain by a thin lens of dark grey clay silt (11), which may represent residual topsoil which has been truncated during the recent demolition and/or construction of the ambulance station. Alternatively, this deposit may represent a layer of trample/disturbance during the same event(s). Deposit 10 was also cut by a row of three post-holes (see Fig. 3), one of which still contained the base of a square cut post, and also produced a fragment of modern glass (not retained). Deposit 11 was overlain by Deposit 12.



4 DISCUSSION

4.1 Interpretation

- 4.1.1 The similarity in the dimensions and profile of the earlier of the north-south aligned ditches in Trench 2 (3) and the east-west aligned ditch in Trench 1 (1) suggested a possible correlation between the two, as did the similarity between the composition of the fill of the Ditch 1 (2) and the upper fill of Ditch 3 (5), although this suggested correlation is necessarily tentative.
- 4.1.2 As regard the date of the feature(s), the provenance of the single pottery sherd from fill 5 (Ditch 3) was unclear. Following an initial examination of the sherd, two possible fabric types were suggested (John Cotter, pers. comm. (fabric codes referred to are those of the Oxfordshire type series (Mellor 1994))).
- 4.1.3 The most likely is fabric type OXAQ; an east Wiltshire ware with flint and algal limestone inclusions, dating from between c 1150 and 1350. Alternatively, given the course nature of the fabric, it is feasible that it is type OXBF; a south-west Oxfordshire ware with flint and sand temper, in production between c 875 and 1250. However, the latter is normally characterised by larger inclusions than were observed within the sherd from fill 5.
- 4.1.4 The only other datable artefactual material recovered from the ditch (fill 14) was a small sherd of wheel thrown pottery, which was potentially Roman in origin, but was not particularly diagnostic. Given its association with the sherd from fill 5, it is equally likely that this sherd is also early medieval in date (Paul Booth, pers. comm.).
- 4.1.5 The second of the north-south aligned ditches (6) may have represented a re-cut of the earlier feature, although no dating evidence was recovered, and no corresponding re-cut of Ditch 1 was observed. This would imply that either the re-cut is confined to the north-south section of the ditch; or that the later ditch is unrelated to the earlier feature(s) (assuming that the suggested correlation between Ditches 1 and 3 is correct).
- 4.1.6 The function of the ditches is also unclear. Whilst some animal bone was recovered from the ditch fills, together with the pottery discussed above, the general lack of artefactual material may suggest that the site is on the periphery of any settlement activity, and that the ditches may therefore represent the boundaries of outlying field systems.
- 4.1.7 The modern trenches revealed almost certainly represent the grubbed out foundation trenches of the recently demolished ambulance station. Within the footprint of the demolished building, the natural geology (13) was directly overlain by a deposit (12) of similar composition to the fills of the foundation trenches, and likely to have originated from the recent phase of demolition. Outside the footprint of the former building, this demolition deposit overlay a buried soil horizon (10) which in turn overlay the natural geology. This deposit was cut by a linear configuration of modern post-holes, and is likely to represent the ground surface which pre-dates the construction of the ambulance station, and has been truncated within the footprint during the construction of same. A single sherd of post-medieval pottery was recovered from Deposit 10.



APPENDIX A. TRENCH DESCRIPTIONS AND CONTEXT INVENTORY

Trenches 1 and 2						
General description				Orientation		
Upper Greensand cut by 3 ditches. Remaining features and deposits relate to recently demolished ambulance station				Max exc depth (m)		N-S
						E-W
				Width (m)		1.05
				Length (m)		1.8
						20
						15
Contexts						
context no	type	width (m)	depth (m)	comment	soil description	date
1	cut	0.6	0.25-0.35	ditch cut		
2	fill		0.25-0.35	ditch fill	mid-dark brownish grey clay silt with c2% greensand fragments	
3	cut	0.63	0.45	ditch cut		
4	fill		0.24	ditch fill	mixed, but predominantly re-deposited greensand fragments in mid-dark grey clay silt matrix	
5	fill		0.2	ditch fill	Mid-dark brownish grey clay silt	
6	cut	1.6	0.32	ditch cut		
7	fill		0.28	primary ditch fill	mid greenish grey clay silt with c25% greensand fragments	
8	fill		0.2	secondary ditch fill	mid-dark brownish grey silty clay	
9	fill		0.2	tertiary and top ditch fill	mid greenish grey sandy silt with 5-10% greensand fragments	
10	deposit		0.22	buried soil	mid-dark greenish grey clay silt	
11	deposit		0.06	trample/truncated topsoil	dark grey silty clay	
12	deposit		0.20 – 0.60	demolition/ construction debris – made ground	mixed	
13	layer			natural geology	greensand	
14	finds ref			same as 5	number allocated to finds retrieved from upper fill of ditch 3	



APPENDIX B. BIBLIOGRAPHY AND REFERENCES

- | | | |
|-------------------------------------|------|---|
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Historic Environment Assessment |

Websites:

http://www.wantage.com/museum/Local_History/

<http://ww2.berkshirenclosure.org.uk/>



APPENDIX C. SUMMARY OF SITE DETAILS

Site name: Former Ambulance Station, Wantage, Oxfordshire

Site code: WABUL'09

Grid reference: SU 3998 8776

Type: Evaluation

Date and duration: December 2009

Summary of results: The site was previously occupied by Wantage Ambulance Station, which has recently been demolished. The focus of the evaluation was within the footprint of the proposed new build, and comprised two trenches. Trenches 1 and 2 were respectively 20 m and 15 m in length.

The evaluation revealed one east-west aligned ditch and two intercutting ditches on a roughly north-south alignment. The dimensions and profile of the earlier of the north-south aligned ditches suggested a possible correlation with the east-west aligned ditch, as did the similarity between the composition of the fill of the east-west aligned ditch and the upper fill of the earlier north-south aligned feature. A single small sherd of pottery from the upper fill of the latter suggested a possible late Saxon date for this feature – although the suggested correlation between the two ditches remains tentative. The second of the north-south aligned ditches may have represented a re-cut of the earlier feature, although no dating evidence was recovered.

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Location of archive: The archive is currently held at OA, Janus House, Osney Mead, Oxford, OX2 0ES, and will be deposited with the Oxford County Museum Services in due course, under the following Accession Number: OXCMS: 2009.109



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Figure 1: Site location

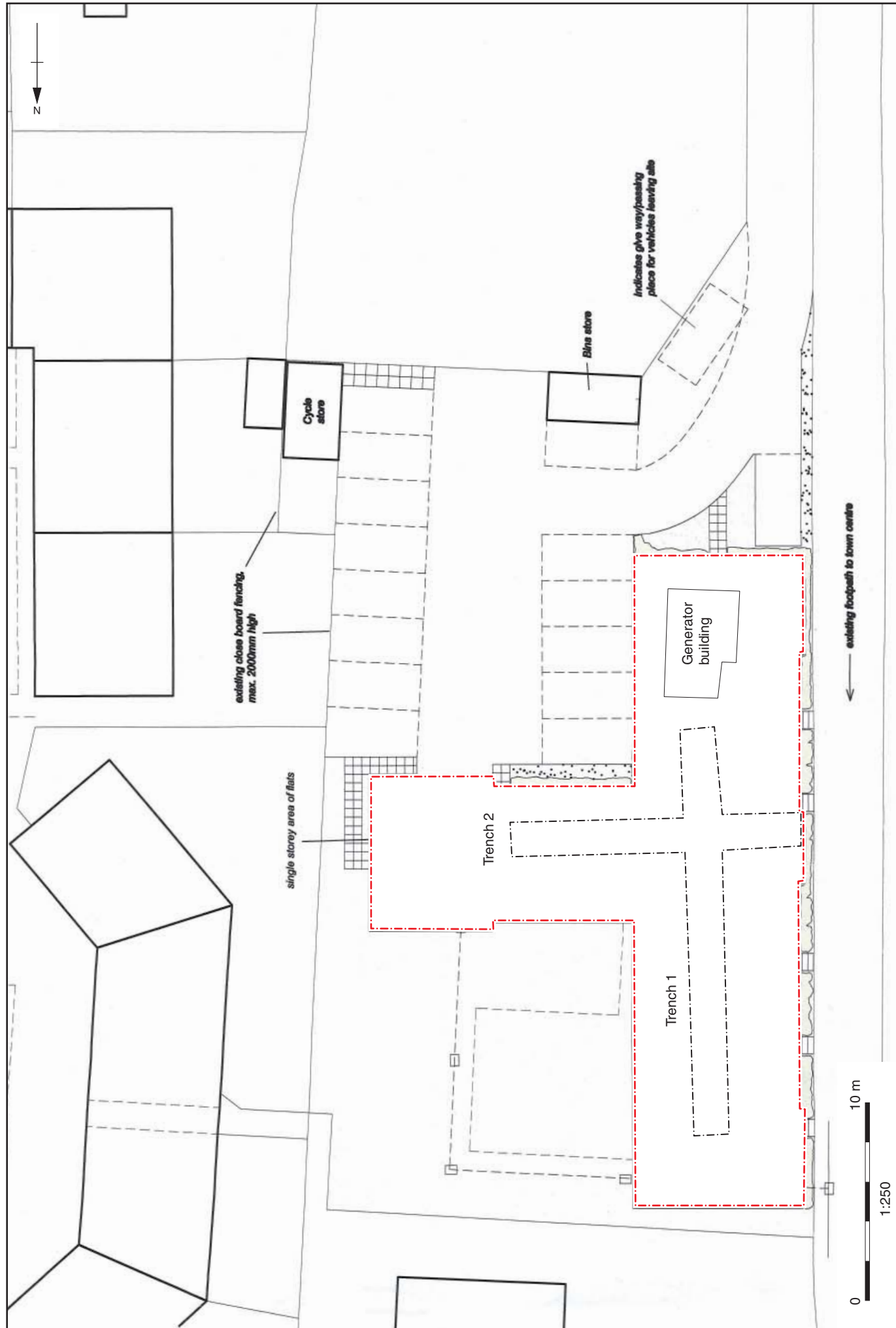


Figure 2: Trench location plan

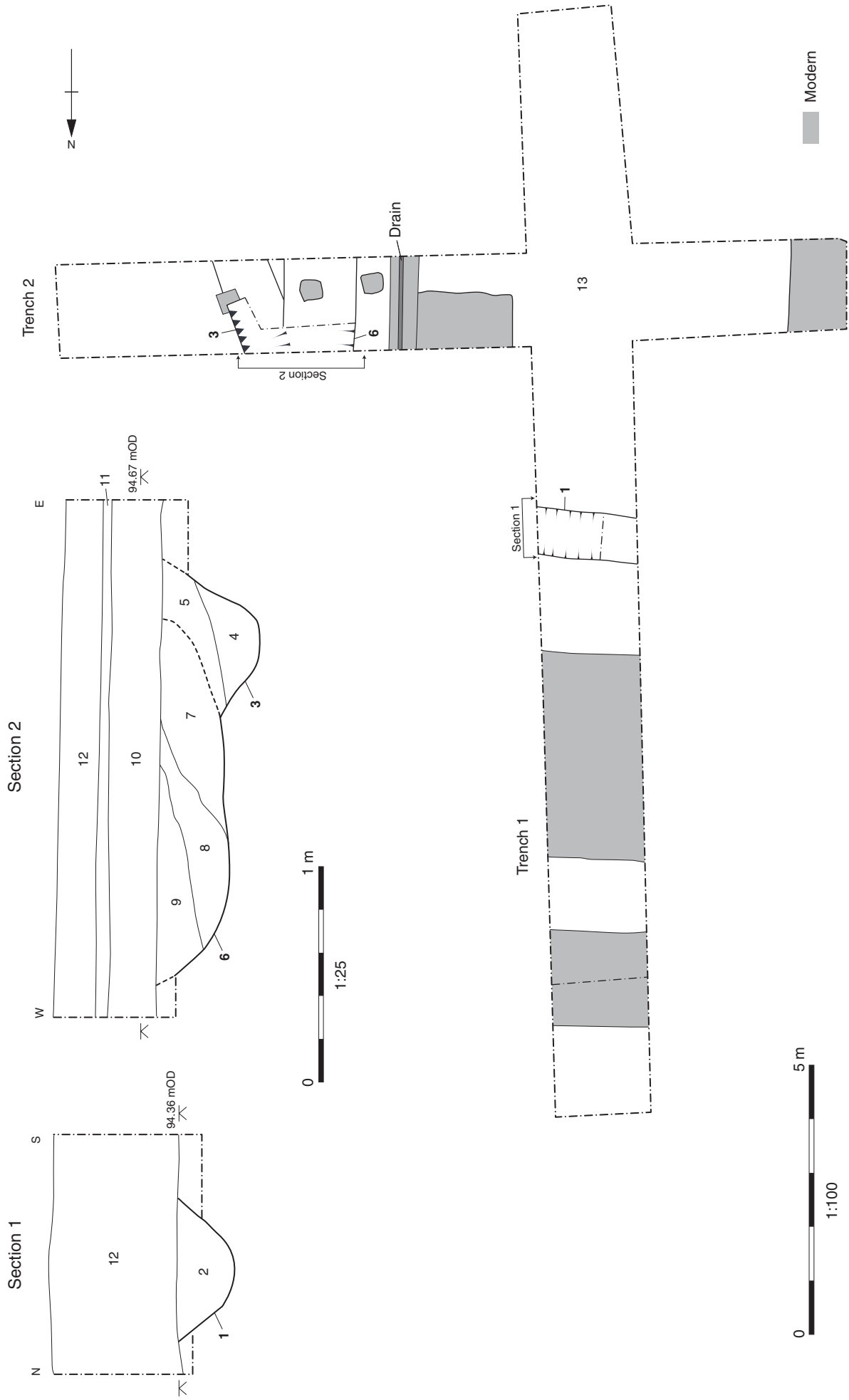


Figure 3: Trench plan and sections



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