

Godstow Abbey, Oxford,

Southern Electricity Board cable re-routing

NGR SP 4835 0914

Watching Brief



OXFORD ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT

October 1994

GODSTOW ABBEY, OXFORD
SOUTHERN ELECTRICITY BOARD
CABLE RE-ROUTING NGR SP 4835 0914

INTRODUCTION

In October 1993 the Southern Electricity Board excavated a trench parallel to the Godstow-Wytham road in order to re-route an 11,000 volt power cable which had run along the Isis riverbank. The need to re-route arose owing to the practise of boats being moored to the cable itself. The trench for the new cable followed the course of the existing road (Fig. 1) and was dug c 3-5 m from the roadside fence (Fig. 2), on the northern side of the road. To the southern side of the road lie the remains of Godstow Abbey, founded in AD 1133 by Benedictine Nuns, which survives as a standing structure. An excavation was carried out in 1959 at the point where the modern Wytham road crosses the Shire Lake ditch, however it was not felt that monastic buildings survived to the north of the current road.

SUMMARY

As a result of the trenching, and observation of the spoil heaps, a rapid watching brief was undertaken by the OAU, on behalf of the SEB. Elements of walls, mortar floors and likely robber trenches were observed in the cut trench section, and a substantial quantity of worked and unworked limestone found on the spoil heaps. The trench itself was narrow, c 0.50 m wide, and was cut to a general depth of 0.80 m. In places the natural gravel was exposed. The confines of space hampered the interpretation of the deposits, however it is clear that at least one former building lies beneath the current pasture land. The finds recovered were unstratified, but may give a useful date for the use of the building.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Note: this summary is based on a number of (mainly secondary) sources. The most important of these are Ganz 1972; RCHM 1939; VCH 1990.

Godstow Abbey stands in the NW corner of the parish of Binsey, Oxford. It was founded in 1133 by Edith, widow of Sir William Launceline, in honour of St. Mary and St. John the Baptist, for nuns of the Benedictine order. The church was consecrated in 1139. The Abbey was suppressed in 1539. The Abbey was considerably larger than the ruins that can be seen today. At its height the Abbey comprised an inner court (the walls of which still stand), a 'Sanctuary Field' to the W, a Guest Court to the N of the 'Sanctuary Field' and a church at the N of the site. The church had all but disappeared by 1660, though part of the NW tower survived into the 18th century. The Abbey buildings were converted into Godstow House by George Owen and used by him and his successors until the buildings were severely damaged during the Civil War in 1645. Thereafter the site became

derelict and was plundered for building stone.

The Abbey was entered via the Wytham-Godstow road through a two-storeyed gate-house at the NE side of the Guest Court. In 1959 traces of the original buildings within the Guest Court were excavated by R.E.Linington and the OUAS. On the site of the present Wytham-Godstow road he found walls of two timber buildings, which he dated to be contemporary with the construction of the abbey in 1133. Hearne is the only source for the description of a granary to the north of the ruins (Ganz 1972, 154), although the precise location is not clear. The building had large double doors on the west side surmounted by a carved panel and was demolished in 1720.

RESULTS

Observation of the trench section (Figs. 3,4) revealed a probable rectangular limestone built structure aligned east-west with an internal wall aligned north-south. In the south section of the trench a mortar floor (20), some 0.14 m thick, was seen to butt 13, a north-south wall. This wall seemed to return on a western alignment and is conjectured to form a building with a further wall aligned east-west, context 5. Inside the building and above the floor lay a distinct clay loam deposit (19) with dense charcoal inclusions, which may indicate that the building suffered a fire. This deposit was sealed by a sandy layer of gravel, 18, possibly a temporary floor. Demolition layers characterised by very sandy soils with frequent limestone inclusions were seen to be later than the walls, although evidence of robbing of the east-west wall (5) and the internal wall (23) slightly obscured these relationships.

To the north of this structure in the western section of the trench lay a further portion of limestone wall, 24. Five courses survive with a possible face on the NE side. It is possible that this represents the SE or SW corner of a structure to the west of the trench. Demolition layers of sand and limestone abutted 24, these in turn were sealed by topsoil. A stone spread, 31, lay to the north-east of 24. Interpretation was not possible, however it may have been a collapsed wall or stone yard surface, perhaps external.

At the west end of the trench in the SW corner of the field run two parallel shallow streams. A slight raised bank still survives between the two. It is likely that the streams are the remnants of Shire Lake, the former county boundary.

THE FINDS

The pottery, all of which was unstratified and came from the spoil heaps, dates from C12 to early C17, representing a standard assemblage of Oxford and Brill wares. (See appendix 1). A number of roof tiles were recovered as well as inlaid floor tiles.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Despite the limited nature of the investigation it is clear that substantial structural remains lie on the north-west side of the Wytham-Godstow road, with a possibility of more than one building surviving partly *in situ*. It is known from Linington's excavation in 1959 that the line of the present Wytham-Godstow road passes through what was the Guest Court and that structural remains lie beneath the road. In the absence of detailed information relating to Linington's excavations the best evidence for the general layout of the northern part of the site comes from H. Hurst's archaeological map of Godstow Abbey compiled in the 1880s. The map shows the location of the church adjacent to the N wall of the Inner Court, its NW tower and the abbey gatehouse to the N. Hurst noted a Medieval road leading to the gateway of the Guest Court, at a depth of twenty inches. The map also shows the E-W aligned wall of the N side of the Guest Court (Fig.1).

The location of the features just described and of those identified in the watching brief suggest that the N side of the 'Guest Court' was defined not simply by a boundary wall but by an approximately E-W aligned range of buildings. The features located in the watching brief may have belonged to more than one component structure of such a range. The character and function of the buildings is uncertain, but the finds, though unstratified, suggest that the building(s) was substantial and well furnished, perhaps with a tiled floor and roof. The timber structures recorded by Linington may also have been part of such a range or perhaps more likely represented a precursor of it. The northward extent of the range is uncertain. It is clear, however, that parts of it remain relatively well-preserved within the field on the north side of the Wytham-Godstow road.

Jonathan Hiller and
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August 1994

REFERENCES

Ganz, D, 1972, The buildings of Godstow Nunnery, Oxoniensia 37, 150-159.

Royal Commission on Historical Monuments (England), 1939, An inventory of the historical monuments in the City of Oxford

Victoria History of the County of Oxfordshire, 1990, Volume XII, Wootton Hundred South

APPENDIX 1

FINDS SUMMARY

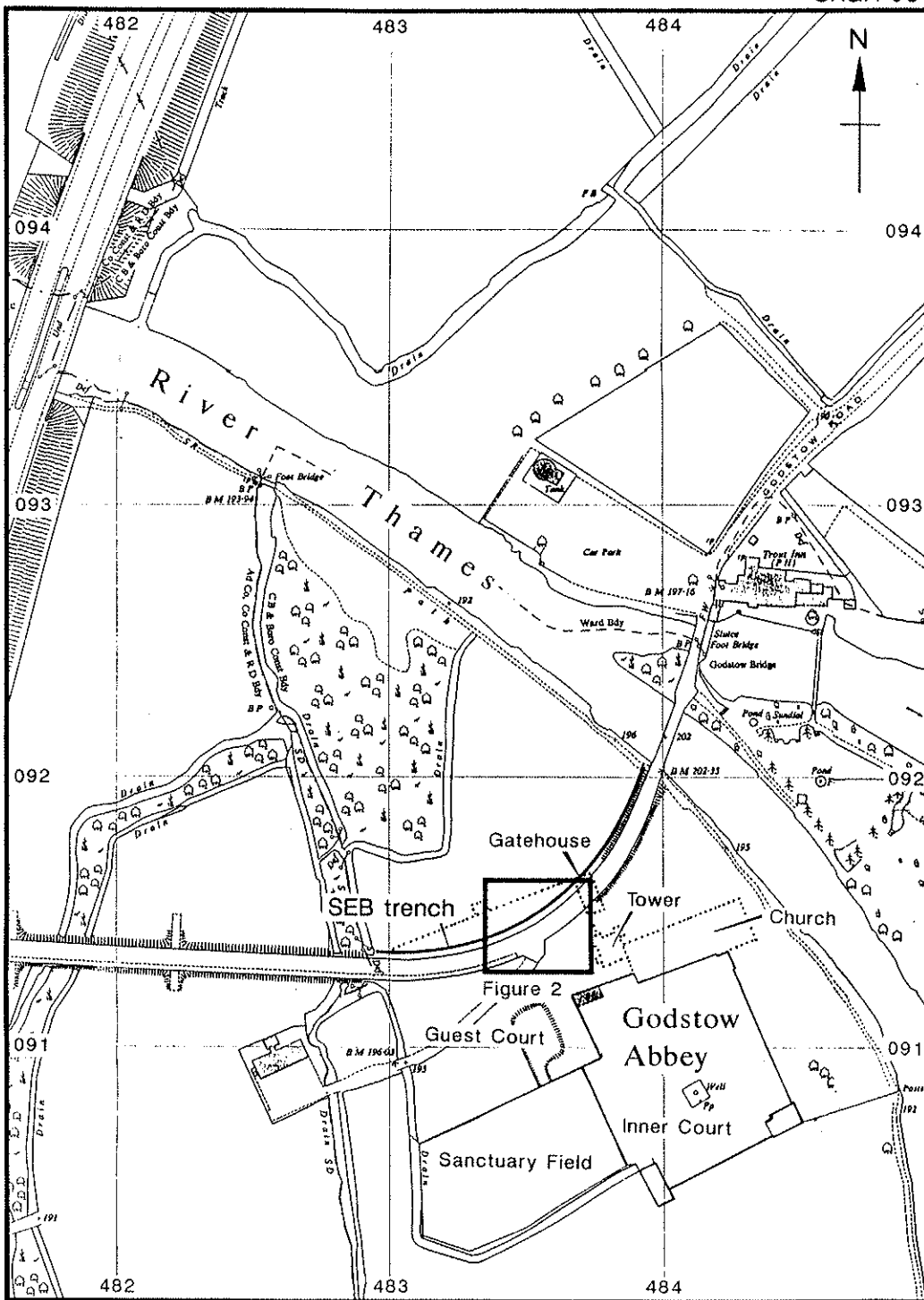
FABRIC	NO.	DATE FROM	TO	COMMENTS
OXAC	1	M C11	L C12	Tile, Early Oxford Medieval Ware
OXAQ	1	L C12	C 15	Cooking pot/jar
OXAM	2	L C13	15	Decorated Brill ware
OXAK	1	L C12	M C13	External glazed jug
GREW	1	L C15	E C17	Post Medieval red earthenware
	3	MED		Inlaid floor tile
	3	MED		Floor tile, green/yellow plain glaze
	1	MED		Brill made roof tile
	7	MED		Roof tile

APPENDIX 2

SUMMARY OF CONTEXT DATA

CTX	TYPE	WIDTH	DEPTH	COMMENTS
1	Layer	-	0.38 m	Topsoil
2	Layer	-	0.23 m	Former topsoil incorporating demolition debris
3	Layer	-	0.11 m	Demolition layer, butts wall 5
4	Cut	-	-	Foundation trench for wall 11, filled by 11
5	Wall	1.40 m	0.60 m	NE-SW aligned wall, limestone blocks
6	Layer	-	0.11 m	Sand, possibly surface make up
7	Layer	-	0.09 m	? Former turf line
8	Layer	-	0.12 m	Sand, either demolition deposit or surface make up
9	Layer	-	0.36 m	Former pasture soil
10	Layer	-	-	Natural sub-soil over gravel 29
11	Fill	-	-	Fill of construction trench 4
12	Fill	-	-	Fill of robber trench 14
13	Wall	0.62 m	0.22 m	N-S wall, limestone built, forms structure with 5
14	Robber Trench	0.68 m	0.44 m	Robbing of wall 13, which represented structure with wall 5
15	Layer	-	0.23 m	Demolition layer similar to layers 3 and 25

16	Layer	-	0.14 m	Layer of sand abutting wall 13
17	Layer	-	0.34 m+	Layer of former pasture soil, possibly same as layers 9, 21, 32 and 33
18	Layer	-	0.21 m	Layer of sand over burnt layer 19
19	Layer	-	0.14 m	Burnt clay loam layer with up to 50% charcoal inclusions, suggestive of a fire on the site
20	Floor	-	0.06 m	Mortar floor abutting wall 13
21	Layer	-	0.34 m+	Same layer as 17
22	Fill	-	-	Fill of robber trench 23, contains frequent limestone pieces, gravel and mortary sand
23	Robber Trench	0.79 m	0.62 m	N-S aligned robber trench, possibly a former internal wall between walls 13 and 5
24	Wall	0.58 m	-	Portion, perhaps a corner, of wall in north section of the trench only
25	Layer	-	0.22 m	Demolition layer
26	Layer	-	0.29 m	Same deposit as 18
27	Layer	-	-	Same as 19
28	Layer	-	-	Same as 21
29	Layer	-	-	Natural yellow-white sandy gravel
30	Layer	-	-	Same as context 25
31	Layer	2.60 m	0.42 m	Limestone spread, collapsed wall or stone surface
32	Layer	-	0.26 m	Perhaps former cultivation layer
33	Layer	-	0.14 m	Possibly former turf line
34	Layer	-	0.27 m	Loam layer abutting wall 5

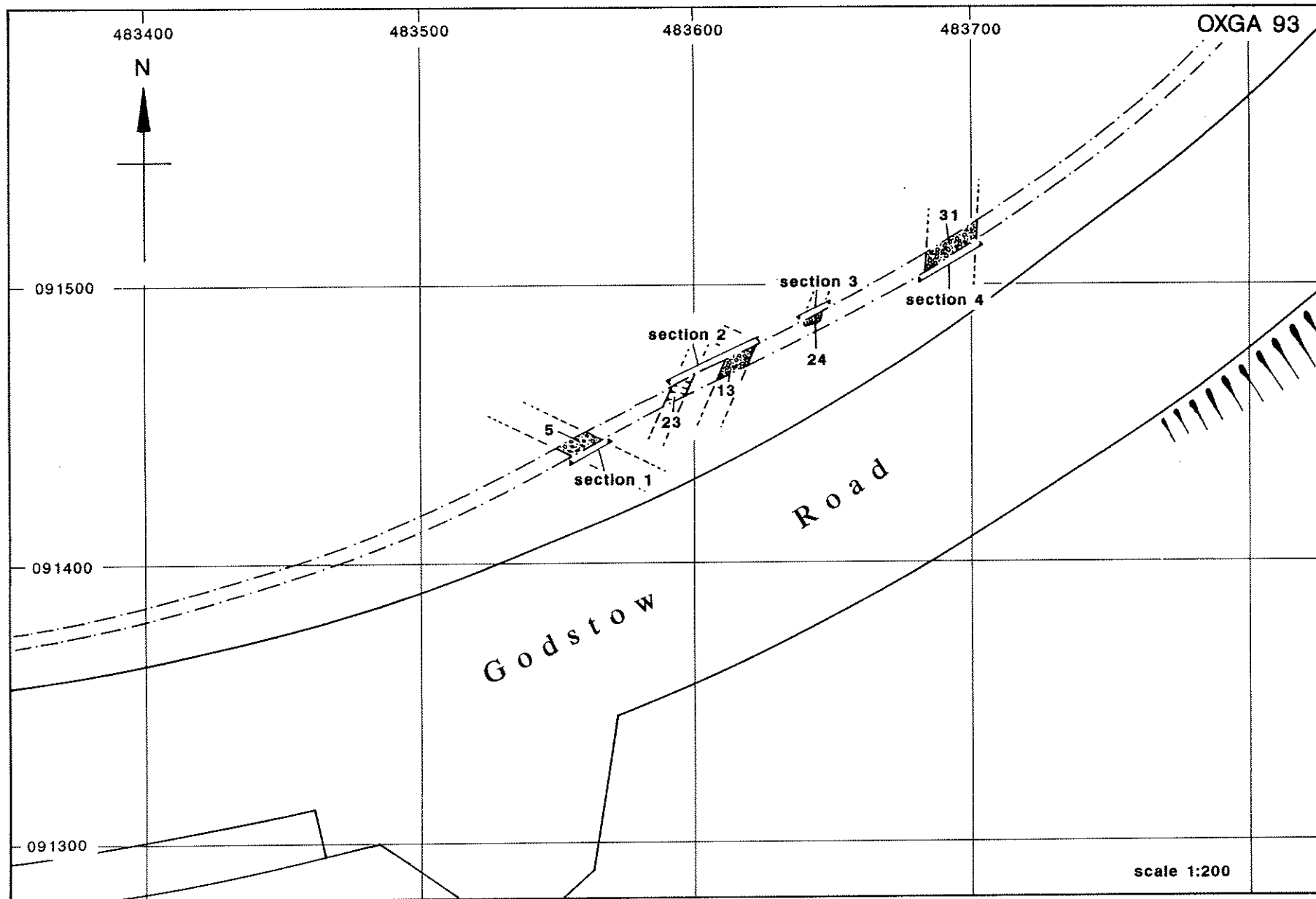


Based on the Ordnance Survey's 1:1250 map of 1965
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scale 1:2500

site location plan

Figure 1



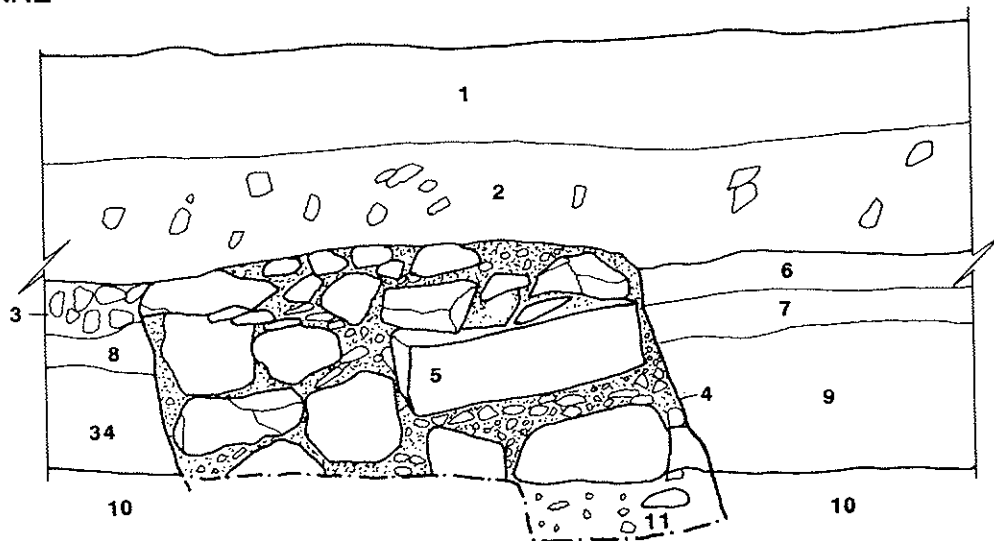
Trench plan detail

Figure 2

section 1

NNE

SSW



section 2

NNE

SSW

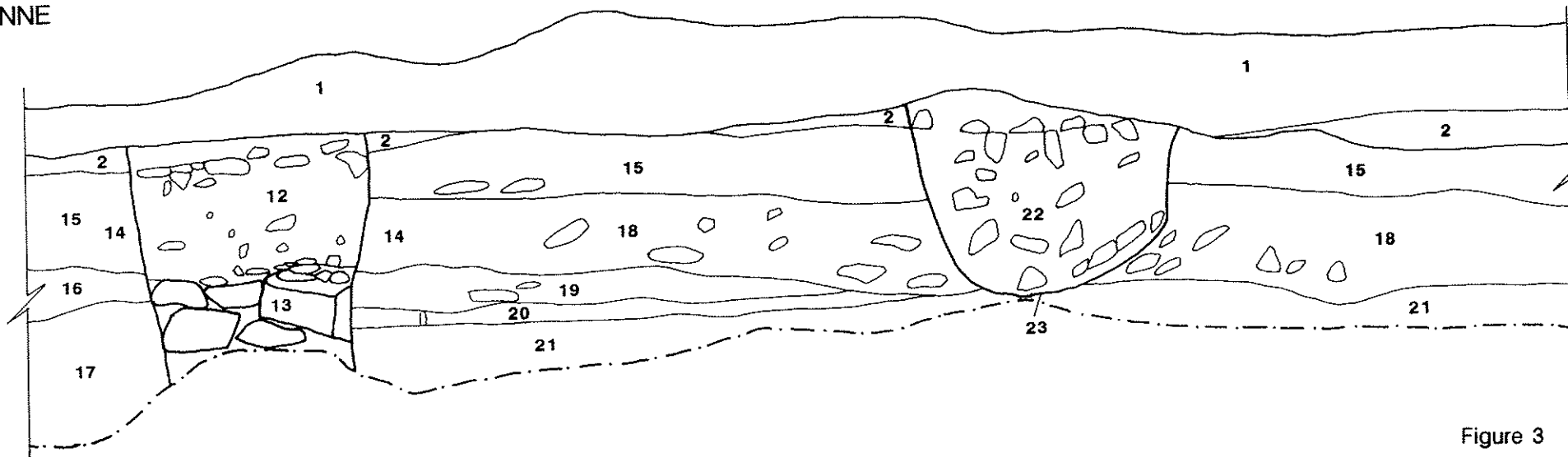
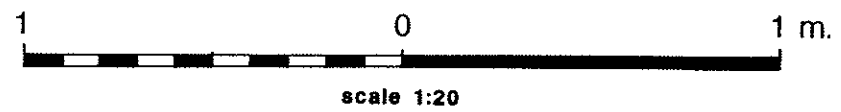
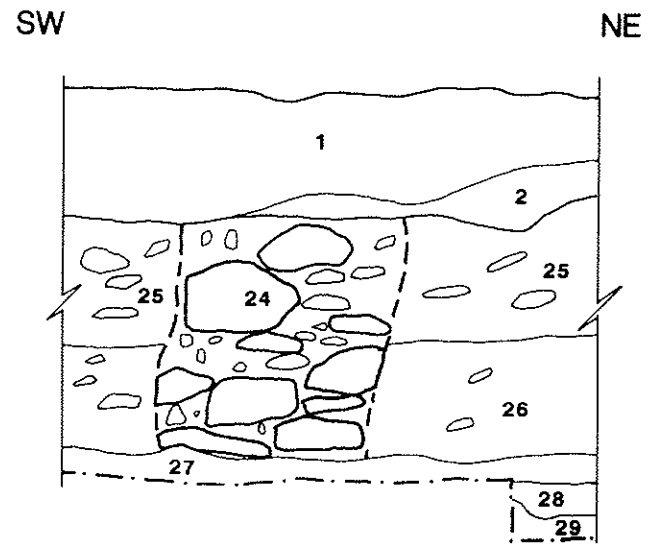


Figure 3

section 3



section 4

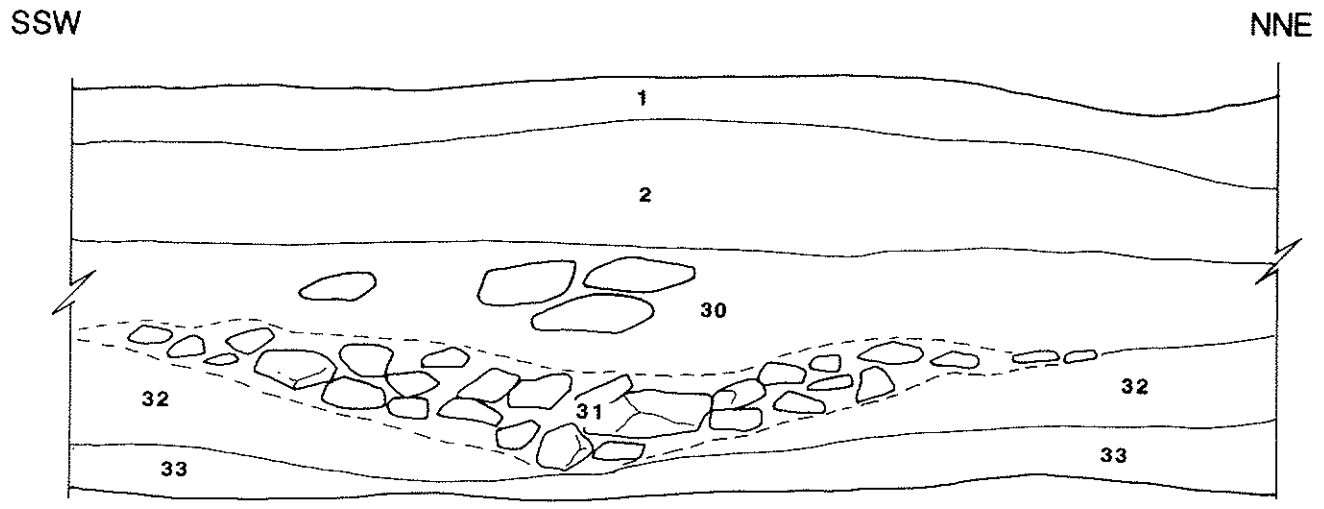


Figure 4

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