

# Old Timber Yard Historic Dockyard Chatham Kent



## Archaeological Watching Brief



**Oxford Archaeology**

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**OLD TIMBER YARD  
HISTORIC DOCKYARD  
CHATHAM, KENT**

NGR TQ 7614 6924

PLANNING REFS: MC2000/0021 AND MC2000/0202

***ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF REPORT***

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## SUMMARY

*During 2000 and 2001, Oxford Archaeology (OA) carried out an archaeological watching brief at the Old Timber Yard, Historic Dockyard, Chatham in Kent. The work was commissioned by David Hicken Associates on behalf of Try Homes in advance of the construction of new housing. This followed an archaeological evaluation of the site carried out in 1999 by the Oxford Archaeological Unit. The watching brief confirmed, as suggested by the earlier evaluation that much of the site had been subject to extensive truncation during terracing of the hillside to create building platforms for former industrial structures on the site. Profiles of the former land surface were seen to survive under College Road, as ground on the down-slope side of the terraces had needed to be made up.*

*Remedial works to the eastern perimeter walls showed the construction of the main perimeter wall with two subsidiary internal walls. Together these walls had two probable functions; firstly to assist retaining the ground up slope and outside the dockyard (where Dock Road currently runs), and secondly to provide access ways (possibly from Dock Road) to the newly acquired areas of the dockyard. All the walls are thought to be contemporary, (with some later alterations) and relate to the dockyards expansion eastwards in 1811, and the modernisation of the timber yards and timber conversion facilities at Chatham by the installation of Brunel's Steam Saw Mills between 1812 and 1814.*

## 1 INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Location and scope of work

- 1.1.1 During 2000 and 2001 Oxford Archaeology (OA - formerly Oxford Archaeological Unit, OAU) carried out an archaeological watching brief at the Old Timber Yard, Historic Dockyard, Chatham, Kent. The work was commissioned by David Hicken Associates on behalf of Try Homes, in respect of a planning application for new housing on the site (Planning Application refs: MC2000/0021 - a revision to ref. ME/97/0203 - and MC2000/0202).
- 1.1.2 An archaeological condition on planning consent was issued by Lis Dyson, the Archaeological Officer for Kent County Council, owing to the potential for the site to contain important archaeological remains. OA prepared a Written Scheme of Investigation detailing how it would meet the requirements of the project brief (OA, May 2000).
- 1.1.3 The proposed residential development is within the walls of the Historic Dockyard adjacent to College Road and Church Lane (Fig. 1). The dockyard is situated on the east bank of the Chatham Reach of the tidal River Medway, some 2 km downstream from Rochester Bridge at NGR TQ 7614 6924.

## 1.2 Geology and topography

- 1.2.1 The site lies on Upper Chalk, just above the first river terrace which consists of a gravel capped chalk ledge sealed by a layer of alluvial sediments. The River Medway makes a sharp northward bend around Brompton Hill at this point and the dockyard sits at the foot of the scarp on the east bank of the river.
- 1.2.2 Much of the earlier dockyard was built by reclaiming the chalk river terrace that had historically been subject to episodic flooding due to fluctuating sea levels. The site itself lies above the level of the former river terrace overlooking Chatham Reach in the River Medway, terraced into from a position on the lower part of the steep western slopes of Brompton Hill. Typically, the natural underlying chalk is covered by up to 1 m of clayey sub-soil and soil. Within the dockyard complex itself the site is located on the extreme eastern side adjacent to Dock Wall which forms the perimeter boundary.
- 1.2.3 The site lies between +13mOD and +18m OD, with local variations in topography, and is 0.57 hectares in area.

## 1.3 Archaeological and historical background

- 1.3.1 Oxford Archaeology carried out a desktop assessment of the site in 1998 (OAU, 1998), which is summarised below.
- 1.3.2 The Medway Valley has produced evidence of activity from the prehistoric period onwards. Hand axes and other Palaeolithic flint implements have been found within the Medway Gravels, and the area also contains potential occupation sites at Aylesford and Swanscombe. In the Neolithic period, finds include flint implements and polished stone axes, while a group of Neolithic tombs, the Medway Megaliths, lie south of the dockyard. Bronze Age activity is suggested by barrows and finds of high status metalwork, some dredged from the river.
- 1.3.3 Rochester is thought to have developed as a late Iron Age *oppidum* complete with its own mint. This became the important walled Roman town of *Durobrivae*, sited where Watling Street crosses the Medway. Roman settlements and cemeteries are known at Cuxton, Strood and Gillingham, and Roman pottery kilns have been found on the Hoo peninsular.
- 1.3.4 A 5th-century Germanic inhumation at Chatham suggests early Saxon settlement and pagan Saxon cemeteries are known in Rochester and its environs. In AD 604 Rochester was the site of an early Christian church and became the centre of the second oldest diocese in England. Charters suggest that Rochester was a prosperous town by the 9th century. After the Conquest a large cathedral and an imposing castle were built to guard the Medway crossing. The town increased its strategic importance after the dockyard was founded in the mid-16th Century. In 1768 the dockyard was protected by the building of the 'Brompton Lines'. These defences were added to with the construction in the nineteenth Century of the Napoleonic forts of Clarence and Amherst and the later Chatham Ring fortresses.



- 1.3.5 The development site lies outside the earliest part of the historic dockyard being partly encompassed during expansion of the complex in 1715, and the site only then became fully incorporated in the early nineteenth century. As part of the dockyard complex it has seen 3 main phases of activity: timber storage and ancillary uses associated with pit-sawing and conversion of ship's timbers (1716-1814), storage of steam-sawn timber (1814 to c.1930) and various uses until closure in 1984. Immediately adjacent to the development site are the scheduled Modeller's Tower of c.1716 and vaults of Brunel's Sawmill (1814).
- 1.3.6 The 1999 evaluation recorded parts of the 18th century dockyard wall, which runs through the centre of the site, and recorded the upstanding remains of the converter's Pound (c.1780). No significant pre-dockyard archaeology was discovered, though undisturbed subsoil was noted in places, which had not been truncated by terracing activity. Features comprised a large 18th century chalk pit, a posthole associated with a timber shed dated 1817- 1843, foundations and surfaces of post-WW II buildings, and modern services.

#### 1.4 Acknowledgements

- 1.4.1 OA extends its thanks to OA's Lee Martin and Mike Simms who carried out the watching brief fieldwork.

## 2 PROJECT AIMS AND METHODOLOGY

### 2.1 Aims

- 2.1.1 The aims of the watching brief were to establish the presence or absence of significant archaeological remains, and to record their extent, condition, nature, character, quality, date and dimensions.
- 2.1.2 Particular reference was to be made to remains from all periods pre-dating the construction of the historic dockyard, dockyard remains of all periods, specifically, details of the AD 1717 dockyard extension perimeter wall, details of 18th century dockyard structures associated with the Old Timber Yard (including Dock Wall) and other retaining walls and details of structures associated with Brunel's Saw Mill.
- 2.1.3 To make available the results of the archaeological investigation.

### 2.2 Methodology and scope of work

- 2.2.1 The works undertaken within the development area subjected to the watching brief consisted of demolition of existing structures on the site and the phased construction of new residential buildings (Fig. 2). An archaeologist from OA was in attendance during the several phases of construction work.
- 2.2.2 Demolition included the total or partial removal of existing above ground structures, and the removal of all hard-standing and sub-ground foundations to a depth of 1 m below the existing ground level. The construction phase comprised a general ground reduction and the removal or remediation of contaminated landfill deposits, the

excavation of foundations, basements, lift-shafts, landscaping and new carriageways. In addition, re-routing of existing services and the installation of new services was to be undertaken.

- 2.2.3 An overall site plan was drawn at a scale of 1:100 and sections drawn at scales of 1:20 of available strata. A general photographic colour slide and black-and-white print record was made during the watching brief. Recording followed procedures detailed in the *OAU Fieldwork Manual* (ed. D Wilkinson, 1992).

### 3 RESULTS

#### 3.1 Description of deposits

- 3.1.1 The majority of the site had already been terraced to provide level platforms for the construction of the previous structures that had occupied the site, thus confirming conclusions suggested in the evaluation report (OAU, 1999).

##### *Section 1: adjacent to Dock Road Wall*

- 3.1.2 At the base of the Dock Road Wall a 3 m wide section showing stratigraphic deposits was available for inspection between two walls that formed the boundary of the east side of the site (Figs 2 and 3, section 1). The natural chalk (02) was cut by a general leveling action (03) prior to the original construction of the site boundary wall (23). The wall was abutted on its west side by a 0.85 m thick layer of grey-brown silty clay (04) with chalk inclusions. Layer 04 was cut by a near vertical construction cut (17) for a further wall. The cut was 1.6 m deep within which had been constructed a 0.9 m wide wall comprising three separate structural phases (Group No. 24).
- 3.1.3 The core of the brick wall (20) was faced with bricks on either side (19 and 21). It had originally stood to a greater height, but it had been leveled to the height of the ground it retained. The construction cut was infilled with clay and chalk, with occasional limestone blocks. The wall may have served as one side of a walkway constructed adjacent to the outer perimeter dockyard wall (23).
- 3.1.4 Make-up layer 04 was cut by two service trenches (07, 10) containing iron pipes, probably for water. The backfill of the construction trench for wall 24 and the fill of service trench 10 were cut by large deep service trench (12) filled by two '4-channel' ceramic pipe, electric cable conduits c. 1900-1930 (13 and 15), that lay below the fill that was covered by the present topsoil. The services are all of Victorian or later date.

##### *Section 2: Base of walkway wall*

- 3.1.5 Part of the demolished brick wall 24 was further exposed to the south (Fig. 3, section 2). Adjacent to it at this point was a hardwood post. The wall was capped with a concrete slab (22) and a hand rail made of wrought iron ran along its length.

##### *Section 3: Adjacent to College Road*

- 3.1.6 A section of stratigraphy (Fig. 3, section 3) was visible between house plots 45-50 and 51-56. At the base was a 1 m thick layer of mixed chalk and flint with pockets of

yellow-brown clay silt (31). This was overlain by a 0.3 m thick layer of yellow-brown clay silt with pebbles and chalk flecks (30). This was sealed by a thin layer of grey silt with charcoal (29), possibly a remnant of former topsoil. This was overlain by a 0.2 m thick layer of silt with frequent brick inclusions (28), possibly a landscaping deposit. A layer of silt loam and chalk (27) covered this and lay below present day construction material (26).

### *Other observations*

- 3.1.7 A third brick wall (25), (Fig. 2) was noted extending south-west away from the south portion of wall 24. Traces of an earthen ramp were observed between walls 24 and 25, suggesting that there was a formal ramped exit from the site here.

### 3.2 Finds

- 3.2.1 No finds were recovered in the course of the watching brief. Modern material was not retained.

### 3.3 Palaeo-environmental remains

- 3.3.1 No samples were taken in the course of the watching brief.

## 4 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

- 4.1.1 Conclusions from the earlier evaluation were confirmed, showing that much of the site had clearly been truncated, removing the upper horizon of the natural geology and any archaeological features that may have been present. Limited archaeological results were obtained during this watching brief therefore.
- 4.1.2 Former terracing was seen to have been made effective by not only cutting into the natural geology but also by ground raising. Section 3 adjacent to College Road shows an example of this 'made-up' ground sequence. College Road and Church Lane to its north-west are at the edge of these pre-existing terraces, and it is probable that the old ground surface is still preserved under them.
- 4.1.3 Probable colluvial deposits were noted in Section 3, where a clay silt layer with pebbles (30) may represent hillwash deposition over an unspecified length of time. This activity could not be dated. Traces of an undated former topsoil were also recorded, sealed beneath recent construction material that could relate to any phase of activity at the site. No archaeological features pre-dating the expansion of the dockyard into this area, were found.
- 4.1.4 Of note were the three walls observed on the eastern boundary of the historic dockyard. These walls were probably constructed during the Napoleonic expansion of the dockyard to the east. The outermost of the walls, wall (23), forms the main perimeter wall that marks the limit of this eastern expansion. It was in this newly enclosed ground that Marc Brunel's new steam powered sawmills were constructed. Inside the line of the outermost wall were observed walls (25) and (24).



- 4.1.5 There is a substantial drop from the level of Dock Road to that of the threshold to Brunel's saw-mill. The resulting depth of earth would require a monumental single retaining wall, therefore it is possible that one of the functions of walls (24) and (25) were to act as subsidiary or secondary retaining walls. Effectively the change in height from outside the dockyard to inside was made possible by using a sequence of retaining walls, allowing the level to be stepped down in a series of level changes. Thus all the walls act to retain the dramatic terracing that was needed to provide relatively flat ground for construction within the dockyard.
- 4.1.6 As well as acting as retaining walls in themselves the strips of elevated ground in between the walls are wide enough for some form of access way. Between walls (25) and (23) an access-way can be suggested. This splits into two to the north; firstly the space between walls (24) and (25) may have been ramped allowing access to the ground south-west of Brunel's Saw Mills (the presence of iron hand rail and post at the top of the ramp (see para.3.1.5) supports this interpretation) whilst the space between walls (24) and (23) allowed access alongside the saw-mills. No opening or evidence for a former opening onto Dock was observed in wall (23), (although the wall was partly obscured by foliage).

## APPENDICES

## APPENDIX I ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXT INVENTORY

| <i>Context</i> | <i>Type</i> | <i>Depth</i> | <i>Width</i> | <i>Height</i> | <i>Comments</i>  | <i> Finds</i> |
|----------------|-------------|--------------|--------------|---------------|--|---------------|
| 1              | Cut         | 1.80m        | 3.3 m        | -             | Water and gas trench                                   | None          |
| 2              | Layer       | 0.80m        | -            | -             | Natural chalk  | "             |
| 3              | Cut         | c. 1 m       | -            | -             | Cut made for construction of dockyard perimeter wall   | "             |
| 4              | Layer       | 0.90m        | 2.2 m        | -             | Layer of made ground between walls 23 and 24           | "             |
| 5              | Layer       | 0.20m        | -            | -             | Topsoil  | "             |
| 6              | Service     | 0.12 m       | -            | -             | Modern iron pipe                                       | "             |
| 7              | Cut         | 0.80m        | 0.5 m        | -             | Modern service trench                                  | "             |
| 8              | Fill        | 0.70m        | -            | -             | Fill of trench 7                                       | "             |
| 9              | Service     | 0.09 m       | -            | -             | Modern service pipe                                    | "             |
| 10             | Cut         | 0.60m        | 0.4 m        | -             | Modern service trench                                  | "             |
| 11             | Fill        | 0.60m        | -            | -             | Fill of service trench 10                              | "             |
| 12             | Cut         | 0.70m        | -            | -             | Modern service trench                                  | "             |
| 13             | Service     | 0.24 m       | -            | -             | Modern service pipes x 4 (Ceramic electricity conduit) | "             |
| 14             | Fill        | -            | -            | -             | Fill of trench 12                                      | "             |
| 15             | Service     | 0.24 m       | -            | -             | Modern service pipes x 4 (Ceramic electricity conduit) | "             |
| 16             | Fill        | 0.50m        | -            | -             | Fill of trench 12                                      | "             |
| 17             | Cut         | 1.60m        | 0.3 m        | -             | Construction trench for wall 19, 20, 21                | "             |
| 18             | Fill        | 1.60m        | -            | -             | Fill of trench 17                                      | "             |
| 19             | Wall        |              | -            | 1.4 m         | Wall facing to 20                                      | "             |
| 20             | Wall        |              | -            | 1.6 m         | Wall core with 19, 21                                  | "             |
| 21             | Wall        |              | -            | 1.6 m         | Wall facing to 20                                      | "             |
| 22             | Structure   | 0.20m        | 0.2 m        | -             | Concrete support for hand rail                         | "             |
| 23             | Wall        |              | -            | -             | Perimeter wall of site                                 | "             |
| 24             | Group       |              | -            | -             | Walls 19, 20, 21                                       | "             |
| 25             | Wall        |              | -            | -             | Third perimeter wall                                   | "             |
| 26             | Layer       | 0.20m        | -            | -             | Modern construction debris                             | "             |
| 27             | Layer       | 0.32m        | -            | -             | Redeposited topsoil                                    | "             |
| 28             | Layer       | 0.20m        | -            | -             | Imported dump. landscaping layer?                      | "             |

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|    |       |       |   |   |             |   |
|----|-------|-------|---|---|-------------|---|
| 29 | Layer | 0.05m | - | - | Buried soil | " |
| 30 | Layer | 0.34m | - | - | Colluvium?  | " |
| 31 | Layer | 1.0m+ | - | - | Colluvium   | " |

## APPENDIX 2 BIBLIOGRAPHY AND REFERENCES

OAU, 1998, *Old Timber Yard, Historic Dockyard, Chatham, Kent. Combined Archaeological Assessment and Desktop Report.*

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Wilkinson D (ed), 1992, *Oxford Archaeological Unit Field Manual* (First edition, August 1992, unpublished)



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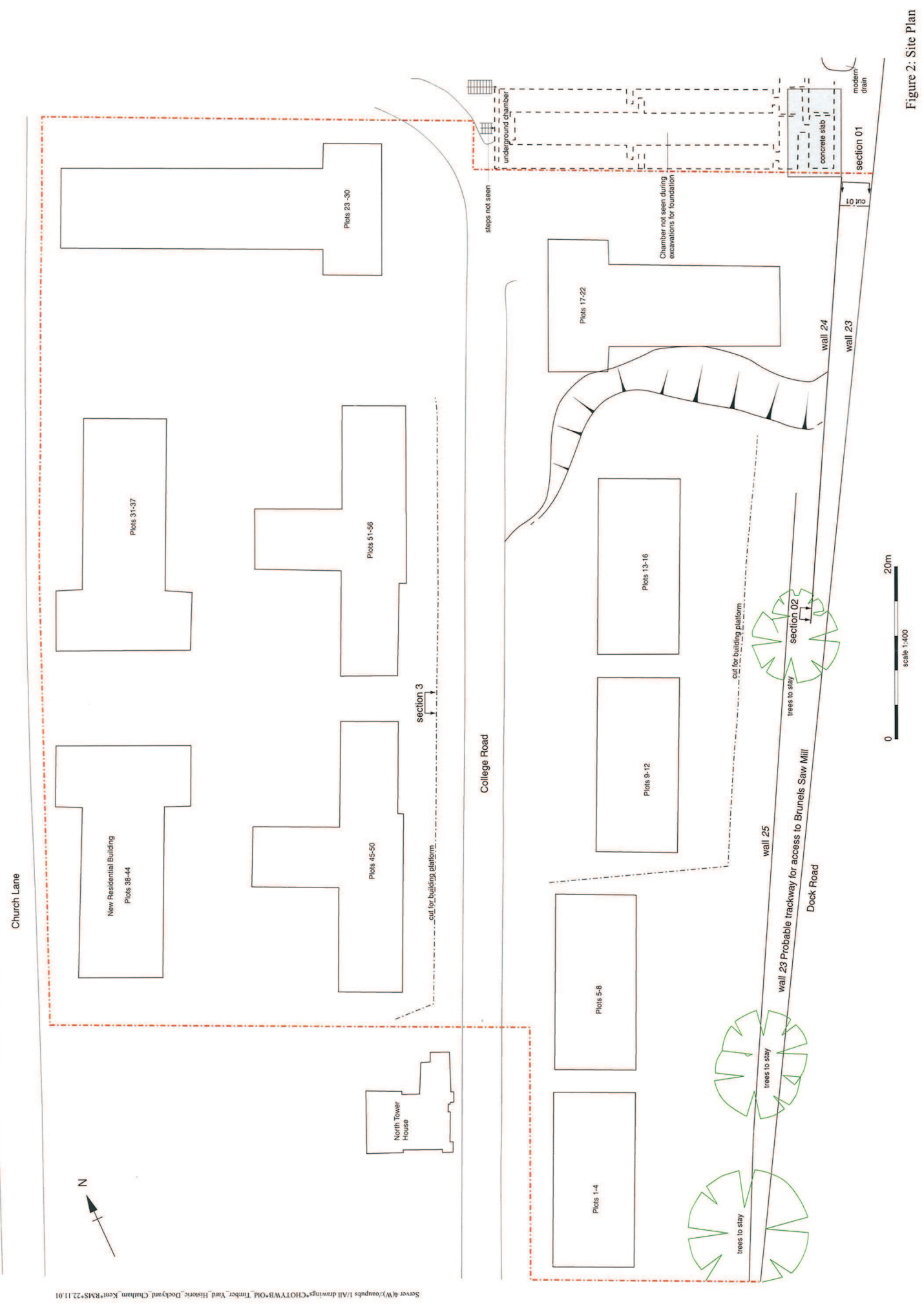


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Figure 1: Site location.

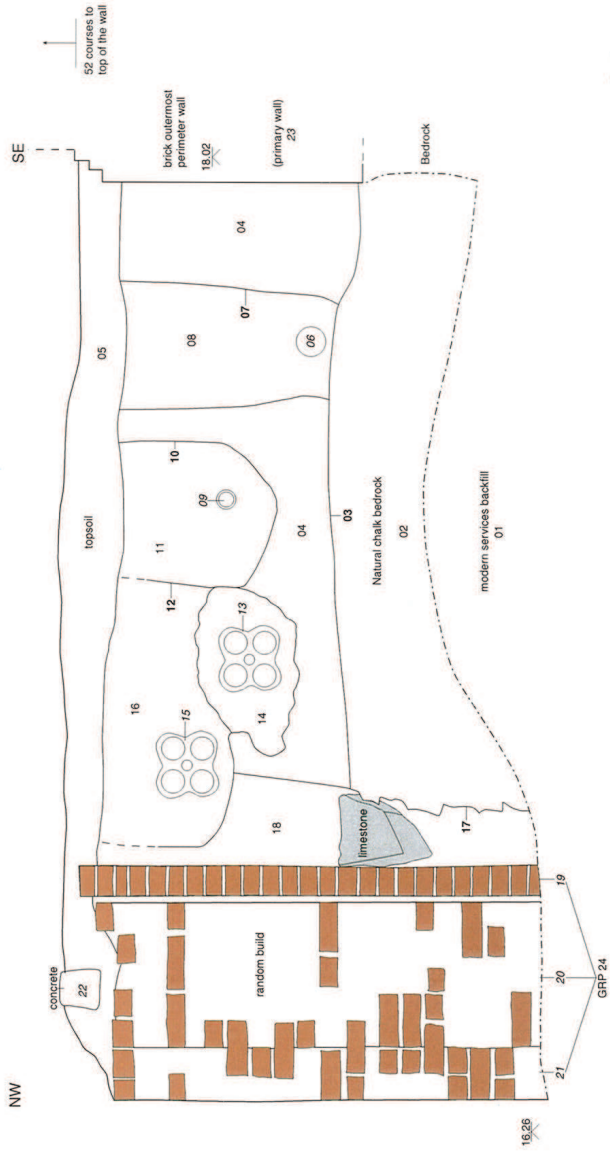




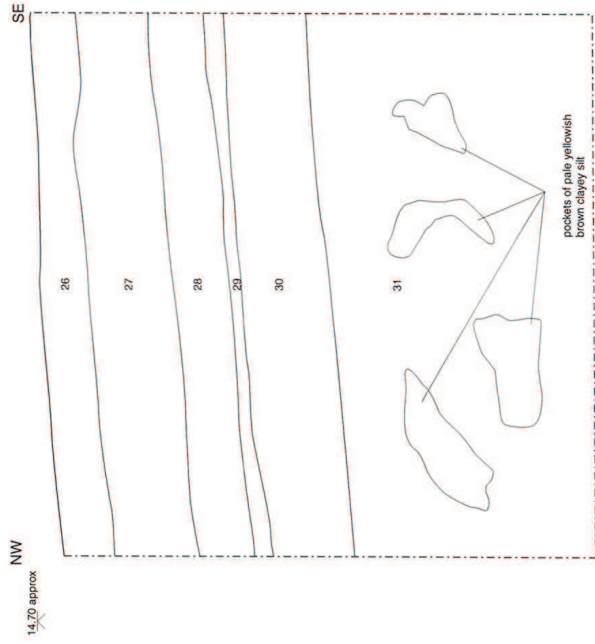
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Figure 2: Site Plan

Section 1



Section 3



Section 2



Figure 3 : Sections



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