

Ambleside Health Care Group

Foxholes, Pirton Road, Hitchin, North Hertfordshire

Archaeological Evaluation Report

NGR T L 17252896

Planning Ref No. 94/0143/1

Oxford Archaeological Unit
September 1996

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Date:	15 September 96
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Foxholes Nursing Home, Hitchin

Archaeological Evaluation

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Summary

The Oxford Archaeological Unit carried out a field evaluation at Foxholes, Hitchin in North Hertfordshire on behalf of Ambleside Health Care Group. The evaluation revealed several features nearly all of which related to the Victorian kitchen garden or the landscaping of the grounds of the Victorian House. Two other undated features were discovered towards the North East corner of the Victorian kitchen garden. No evidence of the Romano-British Cemetery was encountered. Apart from one sherd of possible medieval pottery from a post medieval context, all finds were post medieval. No human bones were found.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Location and scope of work

In August 1996 the Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) carried out a field evaluation at Foxholes, Hitchin on behalf of Ambleside Health Care Group in respect of a planning application for the extension of the existing nursing home, and the construction of a new 36 bed unit. (Planning Application No 94/0143/1) and a brief set by and a WSI agreed with Gil Burleigh, Keeper of Field Archaeology for North Hertfordshire District Council (NHDC). The development site lies to the West of Hitchin town along the Pirton Road on the site of a Victorian walled garden to the North of the Foxholes House and the area immediately to the south of the main house.

1.2 Geology and Topography

The site lies on chalk at 90m above OD. The site is situated on a slight hill. The area of the kitchen garden slopes gently downwards from South to North, by roughly 1-1.5m over the length of the walled garden. The existence of the Victorian kitchen garden is still very evident with the North, East and West walls still intact. The heated North wall still has the frames of the greenhouses built against it. At the South West corner of the kitchen garden lies a small, un-used warehouse which was constructed on a concrete raft. The area between the warehouse and the West wall of the kitchen garden was very overgrown and inaccessible by JCB.

1.3 Archaeological and Historical Background

1.3.1 The exact location of the cemetery site and the circumstances of its discovery are not entirely clear and OAU was therefore commissioned, as the first stage of the assessing the perceived need for large scale excavation, to address three issues:

- to attempt to locate more accurately the possible site of the cemetery;
- to consider any evidence for what previous disturbance may already have

affected the preservation of the site;

- to consider the extent and scale of the impact that would arise from the development.

- 1.3.2 The sources consulted in attempting to locate more exactly the site of the Roman cemetery located in the 19th century included archives relating to the Lucas family of Hitchin, 19th and 20th century maps of the area and other archive sources held by the Hertfordshire Record Office, Hertford, Hertfordshire Local Studies Centre, Hertford and the Bodleian Library, Oxford. In addition the Letchworth Museum and the Hitchin Museum were consulted on the telephone to attempt to locate any archives relating to the site. The National Buildings Record was consulted to discover whether it held any information relating to the house. The Archaeological information on the site held by Hertfordshire Sites and Monuments Record (Hertfordshire County Council) and the National Archaeological Record held by the Royal Commission on the Historic Monuments of England was consulted.
- 1.3.3 Consideration of the impact of the development has been based on examination of the architect's plans and discussion with the architect on site.
- 1.3.4 There is some slight disagreement in the sources about the exact location, circumstances and date of the discovery. There are three fairly contemporary mentions of the discovery: the earliest of these, Cussans writing in 1881, is the most detailed. He describes the cemetery as having been found in the kitchen garden of Mr Francis Lucas in 1878 although the circumstances of the discovery are not given. This is the most detailed description of the discovery located: it describes 'a great number of cinerary urns' disposed in a curved line between east and west and surrounded by many pieces of samian ware together with a bronze bracelet and two knife blades. At the eastern extent of the line was an inhumation, apparently unaccompanied while twenty yards to the south lay another skeleton, scarcely a foot from the surface and lying north-south. Still further south lay another skeleton, possibly accompanied by the remains of an iron weapon. No further mention of this weapon has been located and it does not appear in Westell's 1929 discussion of the grave goods held by Letchworth Museum.
- 1.3.5 The exact circumstances of the discovery are unclear, though its date (in the year following the construction of the house) and the location of the site in the kitchen garden, may indicate that the site was discovered during the initial construction of the garden. Double- or treble-digging of the garden in the manner typically used at that time to create new gardens may well have been the circumstances leading to the discovery of the burials. Judging by this description of what was found the area appears to have been fairly thoroughly dug over, allowing the relative positions of the burial urns, inhumations and accompanying grave goods to be described. It would also appear that the area affected was reasonably large as the third skeleton lay considerably more than 20 yards south of the southernmost cremation. From the detail of the descriptions of the burials and the location of the grave goods it would also appear that where archaeological remains were noted they were excavated with sufficient care to allow basic recording. It is not clear whether the remains were the shallowest present and others remains unexcavated, or whether

other deposits may have been destroyed without being noticed.

- 1.3.6 The other two descriptions are less detailed and it may be that both of these are merely recapitulations of Cussans description. Seebohm writing in 1884 does not more than list the more important grave goods and speaks of the site as being found 'on top of a hill in a part of the open fields called 'The Foxholes'. Ransom, writing in 1888, again lists the major grave goods and indicates that they were found at 'the house of W T Lucas'.
- 1.3.7 Later references do not add to our knowledge of this site: most of them merely echo the salient points of Cussans 1881 description. The finds, which were held in the vaults of Barclays Bank in Hitchin for many years were donated to Letchworth Museum in 1924. In his description of the material in 1928 W P Westell, the curator of Letchworth Museum stated that 'no detailed information is available concerning these ... discoveries'. Letchworth Museum was nevertheless consulted in connection with this project in case any paperwork that might enable the more exact location of the cemetery to be established had subsequently come to light, but it was confirmed that the museum held no further material.
- 1.3.8 The house appears to have been constructed in the late 1870's. According to the brochure issued by the estate agents Knight, Frank and Rutley, who sold the house in 1984, Foxholes was constructed 'about 1877': this date could not be verified specifically, although it was established that the house does not appear on the 1844 Tithe Map or OS 1:528 survey (1852), which shows the site occupied by fields. An examination of the tithe map and award indicates that in 1844 the site was occupied by 8 small strip fields, all in arable cultivation and all farmed by the Lucas Family (although ownership of the land was divided between William Lucas, Frederick Lovell and William Wilshire MP, who was the principal local landowner and lord of the manor).
- 1.3.9 No deeds survive to indicate when William Tindall-Lucas purchased the land or began construction of the house. The first map to show buildings on the site is the OS 1st edition 25" (1882). This map dates from after the discovery of the cemetery, which appears to have occurred in 1878 (see below) and also after its first mention in print in 1881. This map shows that the main building and the Lodge had been constructed by this time but does not show the coach house and not mark the kitchen garden as walled. At this point, the garden is shown as an open area, divided by paths into four quadrants and bounded on three sides by trees. To the north of the kitchen garden lie a row of greenhouses and two small buildings.
- 1.3.10 By the date of the 2nd edition (1898) the coach house has been constructed and it appears that the garden is now walled on all sides. The stable block to the north-west of the walled garden has now been constructed. If the construction of the stable block, coach house or kitchen garden walls produced further finds their discovery has not been recorded.
- 1.3.11 By 1923 the main house has been slightly enlarged but otherwise there has been no change in the general layout of the buildings. This layout had not changed in 1960.

However the 1980 map shows that an additional building, described, by Knight, Frank and Rutley in 1984 as a modern Meeting Hall and further described as 'an Atcost Building constructed on concrete and brick' has been constructed in the former kitchen garden: there is no record of any burials or finds from this site. The 1984 sales catalogue indicates that this building has both sewerage and full services including heating. It is therefore possible that further damage to the site may have been caused by the laying of services, drains and sewerage. In addition the 1994 Brief prepared by North Hertfordshire District Council (ref no: RS22 B12) suggests that the site was also damaged during the late 1970's and early 1980's by the activities of unsupervised metal detectorists and indicates that some objects from this site may have been sold in Hitchin market at this time.

2. EVALUATION AIMS

- 2.1 To establish the presence/absence of archaeological remains within the proposal area.
- 2.2 To determine the location, extent, depth below ground surface, condition, character, quality and date of any archaeological remains present, and their significance.
- 2.3 To establish the ecofactual and environmental potential of archaeological deposits and features.
- 2.4 To make available the results of the investigation in a suitable form to facilitate judgements to be made about the likely impact of the development and whether further mitigation is necessary; and also to provide the basis for the development of specifications for any further investigation or preservation of deposits.

3. EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

3.1 **Scope of Fieldwork and Sampling Strategy**

The evaluation was based upon 6 trenches, between 8-10m long and 3.5m excavated within the walled garden covering the proposed location of the new building, and 2 test pits dug to the South of the main house. A third test pit was to be dug in the area between the disused warehouse and the west wall of the kitchen garden. This was abandoned by agreement with Mr Burleigh due to inaccessibility caused by the excess of overgrowth and the presence of a concrete foundation raft. Test pits were dug and backfilled completely by hand; the trenches were excavated to the bottom of modern topsoils by JCB equipped with a toothless ditching bucket.

3.2 **Fieldwork methods and recording**

The trenches were cleaned by hand and the revealed features were sampled to determine their extent and nature, and to retrieve finds. All archaeological features were planned and excavated their sections were drawn to a scale of 1:20. All features were photographed using colour slide and black and white print film. Recording followed procedures laid down in the OAU Field Manual (ed D. Wilkinson, 1992).

3.3 **Finds**

Spoil heaps were scanned closely in order to pick up any unstratified finds such as bone, which may have been disturbed previously.

3.4 **Environmental data**

No spoil samples were taken as all deposits related to the Victorian kitchen garden.

3.5 **Monitoring**

The work was monitored by Mr G. Burleigh on behalf of North Hertfordshire District Council.

4. **RESULTS: GENERAL**

4.1 **Soils and Ground Conditions**

The general soil types were clay loams and make up deposits. Ground conditions were dry.

4.2 **Distribution of Archaeological Deposits**

The features were located mostly in the centre and the North East corner of the site.

4.3 **Presentation of Results**

The trial trenches and test pits are described individually, giving their precise measurements, location and any features discovered within them. The trenches were numbered 1-6 and the test pits 100 (abandoned) 200 and 300 the trench/pit number being used as a prefix to the context number. A continuous, unique numbering system operated in each trench and test pit only. The individual contexts are listed in appendix 1.

5. RESULTS: DESCRIPTIONS

5.1 Description of deposits

5.1.1 Trench 1

Trench 1 was 10m long and 1.3m wide. It was located at the southern end and highest point of the Victorian kitchen garden. There were no features of archaeological significance in this trench. The deposits all related to either the track leading to the disused warehouse or the remains of the Victorian kitchen garden soils.

5.1.2 Trench 2

Trench 2 measured 10m long and 3m wide and was located towards the southern end of the kitchen garden. Three narrow linear features (2/5, 2/6, 2/7) running East to West were revealed at the South end of the trench. They were all filled by a poorly sorted tenacious mid orangey brown clay loam (2/7) which contained a layer for the length of the trench. An irregular oval feature (2/8) was also encountered just to the North of the linear features. All these features cut into the chalk natural. The north half of the trench revealed no deposits of archaeological significance.

5.1.3 Trench 3

This trench was 3.5m wide and 9.5m long, located just to the North east of a disused warehouse. A mid orangey brown poorly sorted clay loam (3/8) overlaying the chalk natural. The clay loam (3/8) was cut by a wide trench (3/5) for a small lead pipe which was filled by redeposited chalk (3/7) and a compact sand and gravel deposit (3/6). Overlying both (3/8) and the upper fill of the pipe trench (3/6) was another clay loam (3/4) which was dark brownish grey and again poorly sorted with inclusions of flint pebbles, chalk flecks and charcoal flecks. Several dump layers containing modern material overlying the clay loam (3/4).

5.1.4 Trench 4

Trench 4 was 10m long and 3.5m wide, located in the middle of the kitchen garden. Cutting the natural chalk were several shallow linear features (4/5, 4/7, 4/9 and 4/11) all Southeast to Northwest aligned. They were all filled by a mid slightly orangey brown silty loam with chalk, charcoal and flint inclusions (4/6, 4/8, 4/10 and 4/12). These features were cut by a service trench for a water pipe similar to that in trench 3. The remaining deposits comprised of the two clay loams seen in trench 3 and the modern topsoil.

5.1.5 Trench 5

Trench 5 was 8m long and 3m wide, situated towards the North East corner of the

site. The natural chalk was cut by several features: A sub-rectangular pit (5/5) filled with three deposits, only the uppermost of which (5/9) provided any finds. Another rectangular feature (5/12) which continued into the South baulk section, also had three fills (5/13, 5/14, 5/15). Both features were 0.45m - 0.6m deep with almost vertical sides and flat bases. All the fills were variations of yellow brown silty clays. Feature (5/3) was a narrow gully with a single of yellow brown loam (5/11). On the East side of the rectangular feature (5/12) was a very irregular overlaid filled with a single deposit of dirty chalk (5/17). All these features were sealed by a layer of orange brown clay loam with chalk, flint and charcoal inclusions (5/2). A further clay loam and the modern topsoil overlay (5/2).

5.1.6 *Trench 6*

Trench 6 measured 3.6m wide and 12m in length and was located towards the North West corner of the site running parallel to the greenhouses. No features were discovered. Deposits related to the Victorian kitchen garden including the remains of an orangey brown clay loam with chalk, flint and charcoal inclusions (5/4). This had been overlain by a pathway consisting of redeposited chalk (6/4), a compact sand and gravel (6/3) and a decorated ceramic tile used to mark path borders (6/7). This was overlain by a greyish brown clay loam (6/2) and the modern topsoil.

5.1.7 *Test Pit 2*

Test pit 2 was 2m wide by 2m long and was located just off the South West corner of the main house on the highest point of the garden terracing. The natural was of chalk and sand which was overlain by three make-up layers. The first was a mid yellow brown clay sand with pebbles and chalk flicks, the second a dark orangey brown sandy clay with chalk and flint fragments. The uppermost of the dump layers was a yellow brown clay sand with chalk, flint and charcoal. This was sealed by a turfed sandy loam topsoil.

5.1.8 *Test Pit 3*

A 2m square test pit on the South side of the main house. The deposits revealed chalk and sand natural with a post-medieval curvilinear feature (303) which had steep sides and a flat base. It was filled by a mid brown silty loam. This was sealed by a light brown silty loam with flint was sealed by a light brown silty loam with flint and chalk inclusions as well as modern brick and tile fragments. The topsoil was a turfed sandy loam.

5.2 **Finds**

5.2.1 The artefacts have been identified by Paul Booth PhD MIFA OAU's Roman pottery specialist and Leigh Allen, OAU Finds Manager; the bones were examined by Angela Boyle, OAU's human bone specialist.

5.2.2 All the ceramic material recovered (pottery, building material etc) is post-medieval except for 1 sherd (c 5g), hard buff-grey sandy fabric from Trial Pit 200, context

3 which is medieval. The sherd is slightly abraded and occurs with one small post-medieval sherd (2 fragments) and two tiny fragments of brick/tile. All the bone recovered was of domestic animals. No human bones were found. There was one worked bone object, a bone scale with four rivet holes for attachment to a scale tang implement. There were 7 metal objects comprising an undecorated discoidal blazer button plated with non ferrous metal, probably tin, a copper alloy strip, an iron strip and 4 iron nails.

5.2.3 All the bone recorded was of domestic animals. No human bones were found.

6. DISCUSSION AND INTERPRETATION

6.1 Reliability of Field Investigation

The results provided no further insight into the location of the Roman-British cemetery or to the existence of a related settlement. Any deposits relating to the cemetery appear to have been destroyed by the creation of the Victorian kitchen garden as all the features, except perhaps the two rectangular pits in Trench 5, are post-medieval in date. It is possible that the Roman-British features survive elsewhere on the site, outside the area of construction. The construction of the now disused warehouse is likely to have also destroyed or truncated any archaeological deposits in the South West corner of the site.

6.2 Overall Interpretation

6.2.1 *Summary of Results*

The results relate almost entirely to the Victorian kitchen garden and the landscaping of the area to the South of the main house. No earlier archaeological deposits were encountered and no further indication to the location or existence of the Romano-British cemetery or any related settlement was indicated.

The deposits from the trenches show the existence of the Victorian kitchen garden. A gravel path and border existed at the North end of the garden, running parallel to the greenhouses. The linear features in Trench 4 appear to be a vegetable patch. There are two garden soils. The southern part of the kitchen garden has itself been destroyed by the now disused warehouse and its related trackway. The linear features in trench 2 probably relate to drainage or services to the warehouse, as they run alongside the trackway. The other feature in Trench 2 is a natural solution hole. The two rectangular features in Trench 5 may pre-date the kitchen garden but no dating evidence was found. The test pits provided evidence of landscaping during the Victorian period or later.

6.2.2 *Impact of development*

The evaluation has not located any significant archaeological deposits that would be damaged by the development. The evaluation has shown that any features cut in

to the natural chalk are likely to have been truncated or destroyed. Particularly in the area of the walled garden the relatively high percentage of the area of the development footprint exposed makes it very unlikely that there are extensive remains of a Roman Cemetery. Although it is conceivable that a few isolated burials might exist between the trenches excavated, the absence of any unstratified human bone or any Roman pottery or other finds reinforces the lack of any indication of the putative cemetery.

It is important to note that there is no direct evidence of where the 19th century finds of burials came from. While the walled garden or the site of the house itself are possibilities, it may also be noted that there is extensive terracing to the west of the house, and the area to the east may also have been levelled. Other 19th century ground disturbance may have taken place at Foxholes which could have been the source of the original finds.

The ground disturbance required for construction of the main new extension to the nursing home in the walled garden involves area excavation of the footprint of the southern end of the new building and excavation of conventional strip foundations at its northern end to achieve an internally level floor on the sloping site. One or more service trenches will be excavated across the Southern end of the site, but at the northern end services will probably be located within present topsoil or above where ground around the building will be built up.

While the ground disturbance involved in the construction of the development could thus have an impact on any archaeology that was present, on the basis of this evaluation there is no evidence that there is any significant archaeology which might be disturbed.

Gregory Pugh
George Lambrick
30 September 1996

<i>Trench</i>	<i>Ctxt</i>	<i>Type</i>	<i>width (m)</i>	<i>thick (m)</i>	<i>Comment</i>	<i>Finds No. of fragments</i>	<i>Date</i>
<i>001</i>							
	1	layer		0.10	trackway		modern
	2	layer		0.05	topsoil		modern
	3	layer		0.05	make-up		modern
	4	layer		0.05	make-up		modern
	5	layer		0.16	old soil		modern
	6	layer			natural		
	7	layer		0.11	old garden soil		Victoria

<i>Trench</i>	<i>Ctxt</i>	<i>Type</i>	<i>width (m)</i>	<i>thick (m)</i>	<i>Comment</i>	<i>Finds No. of fragments</i>	<i>Date</i>
<i>002</i>							
	1	layer		0.05	trackway		modern
	2	layer		0.05	gravel layer	Pottery(2), animal bone(5), worked bone object, building material (4), shell(3), glass(2), flint(2) and iron nails(4)	modern
	3	layer		0.2	buried topsoil	Pottery(5) and building material(5)	modern
	4	layer		0.2	subsoil	Animal bone(7), and building material (12)	Victorian
	5	cut	0.7	0.13	gully		Victorian
	6	cut	0.75	0.14	gully		
	7	cut	0.7	0.14	gully		
	8	cut	1.2	0.35	solution hole		
	9	fill		0.25	fill of 2/8		
	10	fill		0.10	fill of 2/8		

<i>Trench</i>	<i>Ctxt</i>	<i>Type</i>	<i>width (m)</i>	<i>thick (m)</i>	<i>Comment</i>	<i>Finds No. of fragments</i>	<i>Date</i>
	11	nat layer			natural		
	12	layer		0.05	redeposited topsoil		modern
	13	layer	0.10	0.10	dump deposit		modern

<i>Trench</i>	<i>Ctx</i>	<i>Type</i>	<i>width (m)</i>	<i>thick (m)</i>	<i>Comment</i>	<i>Finds No. of fragments</i>	<i>Date</i>
003							
	1	layer			topsoil mod		modern
	2	layer			make-up		modern
	3	layer			redeposited natural		modern
	4	layer			old soil	Clay pipe(1), slag(2), shell(1), iron strip(1), iron nail(1) and a copper alloy blazer button.	post-med
	5	cut			service trench		modern
	6	fill			fill of 3/5		modern
	7	fill			fill of 3/5		modern
	8	layer			garden soil		post-med
	9	layer			natural soil		
	10	layer			dump		modern

<i>Trench</i>	<i>Ctx</i>	<i>Type</i>	<i>width (m)</i>	<i>thick (m)</i>	<i>Comment</i>	<i>Finds No. of fragments</i>	<i>Date</i>
004							
	1	layer			natural chalk		
	2	layer		0.2	topsoil		
	3	layer		0.25	subsoil		
	4	layer		0.3	old soil		post-med
	5	cut	0.8	0.13	gully		

<i>Trench</i>	<i>Ctx</i>	<i>Type</i>	<i>width (m)</i>	<i>thick (m)</i>	<i>Comment</i>	<i>Finds No. of fragments</i>	<i>Date</i>
	6	fill		0.13	fill of 4/5	Pottery(6), building material(7) and shell(1).	
	7	cut	0.7	0.12	gully		
	8	fill		0.12	fill 4/7	Building material(13), clay pipe(1) and an iron nail.	
	9	cut	0.8	0.11	gully		
	10	fill		0.11	fill 4/9	Pottery(5), building material (10) and a copper alloy strip.	
	11	cut	0.6	0.12	gully		
	12	fill		0.12	fill 4/11	Building material (9).	
	13	cut	1.7	0.3	pipe/service		
	14	fill		0.3	fill 4/13		
	15	fill		0.2	fill 4/14		

<i>Trench</i>	<i>Ctx</i>	<i>Type</i>	<i>width (m)</i>	<i>thick (m)</i>	<i>Comment</i>	<i>Finds No. of fragments</i>	<i>Date</i>
<i>005</i>							
	1	layer		0.3	topsoil		
	2	layer		0.35	subsoil		
	3	cut	0.75	0.25	gully		
	4	cut	0.5	0.08	gully		
	5	cut	1.1	0.45	pit		
	6	fill		0.08	fill of 5/4		
	7	fill		0.2	fill of 5/5		
	8	fill		0.23	fill of 5/5		
	9	fill		0.2	fill of 5/5	Building material (3)	
	10	layer		0.2	garden soil		

<i>Trench</i>	<i>Ctx</i>	<i>Type</i>	<i>width (m)</i>	<i>thick (m)</i>	<i>Comment</i>	<i>Finds No. of fragments</i>	<i>Date</i>
	11	fill		0.25	fill of 5/3		
	12	cut	0.8	0.6	pit		
	13	fill		0.2	fill of 5/12		
	14	fill		0.5	fill 5/2		
	15	fill		0.15	fill 5/12	Animal bone(1), and building material(2).	
	16	cut			natural feature		
	17	fill			fill 5/16		
	18	void		0.15	fill 5/12		
	19	layer			chalk natural		

<i>Trench</i>	<i>Ctx</i>	<i>Type</i>	<i>width (m)</i>	<i>thick (m)</i>	<i>Comment</i>	<i>Finds No. of fragments</i>	<i>Date</i>
<i>006</i>							
	1	layer		0.28	topsoil		
	2	layer		0.55	garden soil	Pottery(4) and animal bone(1).	post-med
	3	layer		0.1	path		post-med
	4	layer		0.1	redeposited natural		post-med
	5	layer		0.1	garden soil	Pottery(2).	post-med
	6	layer			natural chalk		
	7	structure			ceramic border		Victorian

<i>Test pit</i>	<i>Ctx</i>	<i>Type</i>	<i>width (m)</i>	<i>thick (m)</i>	<i>Comment</i>	<i>Finds No. of fragments</i>	<i>Date</i>
200							
	201	layer		0.25	topsoil		
	202	layer		0.2	make-up		
	203	layer		0.25	make-up		
	204	layer		0.15	make-up		
	205	layer			natural chalk		

<i>Test pit</i>	<i>Ctx</i>	<i>Type</i>	<i>width (m)</i>	<i>thick (m)</i>	<i>Comment</i>	<i>Finds No. of fragments</i>	<i>Date</i>
300							
	300	layer			natural chalk		
	301	layer			topsoil		
	302	layer			subsoil	Pottery(4), building material(2) and glass(2).	
	304	fill			fill of 305	Pottery(11), animal bone(17),building material(5) and glass(2).	
	305	cut			landscape feature		

Figure 1
Trench Location

