

The Rye Centre Holywell Mead High Wycombe Buckinghamshire



Archaeological Watching Brief Report



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**Rye Centre,
Holywell Mead, High Wycombe, Buckinghamshire**

ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF REPORT

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SUMMARY

Between 12th May and 13th December 2005 Oxford Archaeology (OA) carried out an archaeological watching brief at the Rye Centre, Holywell Mead, High Wycombe, Buckinghamshire (NGR: SU 8745 9234). The work was commissioned by Wycombe District Council in advance of the extension of an existing car park and associated landscaping. The watching brief revealed the spread of demolition debris associated with the known Roman Villa and a possible continuation of the perimeter boundary wall 100 m south-east of the villa complex.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Scope of work

- 1.1.1 Between 12th May and 13th December 2005, Oxford Archaeology (OA) carried out an archaeological watching brief at the Rye Centre, Holywell Mead, High Wycombe, Buckinghamshire (NGR: SU 8745 9234). The work was commissioned by Wycombe District Council in respect of planning consent for the extension of an existing car park and associated landscaping work (Planning Application No. 04/8206/R9FUL).
- 1.1.2 A project brief was set by David Radford, Archaeological Officer for Buckinghamshire County Council, detailing the requirements for a mitigation strategy (BCAS, 2005).
- 1.1.3 OA prepared a Written Scheme of Investigation (WSI) detailing how it would meet the requirements of the brief (OA, 2005).

1.2 Location, geology and topography

- 1.2.1 The site is located on the south-east edge of High Wycombe (Fig. 1) and is situated on a level flood plain running up to the southern bank of the River Wye. The site lies at approximately 65 m above OD and occupies an area of 0.4 hectares. The underlying geology is alluvium overlying chalk (British Geological Survey sheet no. 255).

1.3 Archaeological and historical background

- 1.3.1 The archaeological background to the watching brief was prepared for the WSI for the project (OA, 2005) and is reproduced below.
- 1.3.2 An archaeological mitigation strategy was considered necessary for this site because the car park lies over part of the remains of an extensive 2nd - 4th century Roman Villa complex (CAS 380), with associated bathhouse, walled precinct and gatehouse.
- 1.3.3 The Rye Roman Villa has been previously excavated by Langley (1797); Payne in 1862-3 and Colmer in 1932 (VCH Bucks 2). The most extensive excavations were undertaken by Hartley in 1954 in advance of construction of the swimming pool at

the site. This exposed the extent of the villa building, ancillary bath house buildings, an impressive gated entrance and boundary wall (Hartley 1959).

- 1.3.4 The location of further ancillary buildings north-east of the main villa building has been suggested by the discovery of stacked tiles during the erection of a goalpost in 1995 (CAS 038005), and further confirmed by further recent resistivity survey. In addition, a watching brief undertaken during refurbishment works to the swimming pool located numerous possible archaeological features (Parkhouse 1996). The precise interpretation of these deposits was limited however by the restricted nature of the work and it remains possible that some of the deposits encountered were related to the possible demolition and back-filling of the villa following the 1954 excavation.
- 1.3.5 An evaluation in 2000 showed that Roman walls and other deposits still survive, at least in places, at a depth of 0.9 m beneath recent made ground (OAU 2000).
- 1.3.6 In 2001 Northamptonshire Archaeology conducted a series of geophysical surveys at The Rye. The surveys were concentrated to the north-east of the swimming pool complex. The surveys revealed a concentration of possible walls, although these had no cohesive plan and may represent a demolished building associated with the villa. Immediately north of the swimming pool the geophysical survey detected a series of linear anomalies that probably represented boundary walls. No geophysical survey was conducted in the area affected by the current development.
- 1.3.7 In 2002 a watching brief was carried out during the extension and conversion of a derelict building at the swimming pool complex. Groundwork revealed sections of the villa walls and a possible make up layer for the villa floor surface. Roman levels were sealed by modern deposits associated with the swimming pool complex built on the site in the 20th century (OA 2002).
- 1.3.8 The villa is not currently scheduled but has been identified as being potentially of national importance by English Heritage's Monuments Protection Programme.

2 PROJECT AIMS AND METHODOLOGY

2.1 Aims

- 2.1.1 To identify and record the presence or absence, extent, condition, quality and date of archaeological remains in the areas affected by the development.
- 2.1.2 To preserve by record any deposits or features that may be disturbed or destroyed during any of the proposed groundworks.
- 2.1.3 To take measures to preserve *in situ* significant archaeological deposits.
- 2.1.4 To make available the results of the archaeological investigation.

2.2 Methodology

- 2.2.1 The watching brief was conducted as a series of site visits during any works likely to disturb archaeological deposits. These works included ground reduction during the extensions to the car park and coach park, the excavation of a perimeter drainage run, excavation of service trenches for overhead lighting and associated landscaping including flower beds and tree planting pits.
- 2.2.2 A plan of these works was maintained at a scale of 1:500 (Fig. 2) and all recorded sections were drawn at a scale of 1:20. All excavations and sections 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

Extension to the Car Park

- 3.1.1 A total depth of 0.4 m was removed from the area of the new car park extension. An overall layer of mid brown silt loam (12) was encountered at 0.3 m below the original ground level. This layer contained charcoal flecking and brick fragments and probably represents a layer of earlier worked ground. The western extent of this deposit was overlaid with a 0.2 m thick spread of light brown silty sand (13), which contained modern hardcore and was a layer of made ground. A 0.2 m deep layer of dark grey brown silt loam (14), a modern landscaping deposit, sealed the area.

Extension to the Coach Park

- 3.1.2 The ground level was reduced between 0.4 m and 0.5 m in depth within the area of the coach park extension. A layer of mid brown silt loam was encountered at 0.25 m below the original ground level. This layer contained areas of crushed chalk and flint, stone chippings and hardcore and was a probable continuation of Layer 12. This was sealed by a 0.25 m thick layer of dark grey brown silt loam, a continuation of the modern landscaping layer 14.

The Perimeter Drainage Run

- 3.1.3 A total of 230 m length of 0.7 m wide trench was excavated along the northern edge of the access road with 2 branches running into the existing car park and the new car park extension. The depth of excavation ran between 0.7 m within the car parks, falling to 1.5 m deep as the pipe ran into the interceptor/separator tank.
- 3.1.4 Within the existing car park (Fig. 3, section 1) a light grey-brown silt clay (11), sloping down to the east was encountered at a depth of 0.3 m below the car park surface. This deposit contained brick and concrete fragments and represents a layer of modern made ground. This was overlaid by a 0.2 m thick layer of dark grey-brown

silty sand (10), a layer of redeposited topsoil. Overlying this was a 0.15 m deep layer of light brown silt clay (9). This contained fragments of concrete and also represents a layer of modern made ground. This was sealed by a 0.1 m thick layer of stone chippings (8), the hardcore base for the 0.2 m deep concrete surface of the pedestrian walkway (7).

- 3.1.5 Within the drain chamber at the terminus of the branch within the new car park extension (Fig. 3, section 2) a layer of very pale grey silty clay (6) was encountered at a depth of 0.8 m below the car park surface. This deposit contained weathered chalk, flint nodules and pockets of gravel and represents undisturbed natural. Overlying this was a 0.35 m deep layer of grey clay (5), which produced gravels, flints and brick fragments. This may represent a spread of demolition debris from the villa. This was overlaid by a layer of light grey silty sand (4), 0.15 m deep, which contained concrete fragments and represents a layer of modern made ground. This was sealed by a 0.08 m thick layer of orange brown sand (3), the base for the 0.17 m thick concrete slab (2). The stratigraphy was completed by a 0.05 m thick layer of tarmac (1).
- 3.1.6 The excavation for the interceptor/separator tank at the eastern end of the drainage run consisted of a 2.8 m long by 2.4 m wide by 4 m deep chamber (Fig. 3, section 3). A layer of light brown silty sand (17) was encountered at a depth of 1.2 m below the current ground level. This deposit contained many pebbles and represents an alluvial deposit which could be seen to be in excess of 2.9 m deep within the section. This was overlaid by a 0.38 m thick layer of dark grey brown silty loam (16). This contained charcoal flecking and probably represents a buried soil horizon. Sealing this was a layer of light yellow brown silty clay (15), a layer of modern made ground measuring between 0.25 m 0.65 m in depth. Overlying this was a 0.25 m thick layer of dark grey brown silt loam, a continuation of the modern landscaping Layer 14.

Service Trenches and Associated Landscaping

- 3.1.7 A total length of 80 m of trenching for cable ducting was excavated along the southern edge of the site and within the new car park extension. This trenching measured 0.5 m wide by 0.5 m deep and failed to penetrate below the modern landscaping horizon.
- 3.1.8 Six areas of dug flower beds were monitored, these also failed to penetrate below the modern landscaping horizon.
- 3.1.9 A total of 19 tree planting pits were monitored. These were all machine dug using a mini-digger fitted with a 0.6 m wide bucket. The majority of these (Pits 7 to 19) were within the footprint of the made ground forming the embankment of the "Dyke" and these exposed only post-medieval deposits.
- 3.1.10 Pits 1 to 5 were excavated along the northern edge of the access road adjacent to the changing rooms (Fig. 2) and these produced significant results.

- 3.1.11 Pit 1 exposed a layer of yellow-brown clay silt (102) 0.12 m below the current ground level (Fig. 3, section 4). This was very similar to Layer 15 and represents a layer of modern made ground. Sealing this was a 0.12 m deep layer of dark brown silt loam (101), the modern topsoil.
- 3.1.12 Pit 2 encountered a layer of dark grey brown clay silt (104) 0.2 m below the current ground level (Fig. 3, section 5). This layer could be seen to be in excess of 0.2 m deep and contained many flints and fragments of brick including ones of Romano-British date. This layer probably represents the original topsoil and spread of demolition debris from the villa. This was sealed by a 0.08 m deep layer of orange sand (103), a layer of made ground. Overlying this was a 0.12 m thick layer of the modern topsoil 101.
- 3.1.13 Pit 3 encountered a layer of off white weathered chalk (105), at a depth of 0.38 m below ground level (Fig. 3, section 6). This layer represents the underlying solid geology. It was overlaid by a 0.25 m thick layer of dark grey-brown clay silt, a continuation of Layer 104. This produced fragments of Romano-British brick as well as fragments of post-medieval glazed stoneware pottery. This was sealed by a 0.12 m deep layer of the modern topsoil 101.
- 3.1.14 The stratigraphy exposed within Pits 4 and 5 was similar (Fig. 3, section 7) and comprised a continuation of the layer of dark grey-brown clay silt (104), in excess of 0.3 m deep. This layer produced fragments of Romano-British brick and pottery and fragments of 18th century clay pipe stem. It was overlaid by a 0.2 m thick layer of the modern topsoil 101 in both pits.
- 3.1.15 Pit 6 was excavated within the flowerbed adjacent to the western edge of the tennis court (Fig. 3, section 8). At a depth of 0.5 m below the current ground level a jumbled layer of Romano-British brick (106) was encountered, which may represent a demolition spread from a boundary wall. Because of the small area of the pit, approximately 0.8 m square, it was impossible to determine the extent or alignment of this feature. This was overlaid by a 0.3 m deep layer of dark grey-brown clay silt, similar to, and a probable continuation of, Layer 104. Overlying this was a 0.2 m deep layer of the modern landscaping Layer 14.

3.2 Finds

- 3.2.1 Fragments of Romano-British pottery and brick were recovered from Layer 104 together with post-medieval artefacts including fragments of glazed stoneware pottery, clay pipe stem and bottle glass. An almost complete example of a Romano-British brick was recovered from context 106. All these finds have been retained in case of the need for future analysis.
- 3.2.2 A number of modern finds such as plastic, bottle caps and bottle glass were recovered from the modern landscaping layers 14 and 101. These and obvious

modern building materials from other contexts were evaluated on site but were not retained.

3.3 Palaeo-environmental remains

- 3.3.1 No deposits suitable for palaeo-environmental sampling were encountered during the course of the watching brief.

4 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

- 4.1.1 The watching brief has shown that the demolition debris from the Roman villa has been dispersed over a wide area to the east and south of the villa site. No definitive evidence for the villa's construction and extent was encountered during the course of this watching brief, however it is unclear whether this was due to either the depth of impact failing to penetrate down to any significant archaeological horizon or to the absence of archaeological deposits.
- 4.1.2 The distance (100 m) between the known villa structures and the discovery of a concentration of Romano-British brick (106) adjacent to the tennis courts suggests that this was not part of the villa complex and may indicate a boundary wall.
- 4.1.3 The presence of post-medieval artefacts within the buried soil horizons Layers 5, 12, 16 and 104 suggest that the area had been under cultivation during this period and possibly that imported material was being used to raise the ground level.
- 4.1.4 The work done during this phase of development has not posed significant risk to the archaeological potential of the site and there was no need to develop *in situ* strategies to protect areas of the site. The subsequent maintenance work needed, such as digging of flower beds, should pose little risk to archaeological deposits.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1 ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXT INVENTORY

<i>Context</i>	<i>Type</i>	<i>Depth</i>	<i>Width</i>	<i>Comments</i>	<i>Finds</i>	<i>Date</i>
1	Surface	0.05 m	-	Modern tarmac carpark surface	-	C20th
2	Layer	0.17 m	-	Concrete slab	-	C20th
3	Layer	0.08 m	-	Sand, made ground	-	C20th
4	Layer	0.15 m	-	Modern made ground	Concrete	C20th
5	Layer	0.35 m	-	Buried soil horizon, similar to 12 and 104	Brick	C18th/ C19th
6	Layer	> 0.4 m	-	Natural, alluvial deposit	-	-
7	Surface	0.2 m	-	Pedestrian walkway	-	C20th
8	Layer	0.1 m	-	Stone chippings	-	C20th
9	Layer	0.15 m	-	Modern made ground	Concrete	C20th
10	Layer	0.2 m	-	Redeposited topsoil	Concrete	C20th
11	Layer	> 0.2 m	-	Modern made ground	Concrete	C20th
12	Layer	> 0.2 m	-	Buried soil horizon	Brick	C18th/ C19th
13	Layer	0.2 m	-	Made ground	Concrete	C20th
14	Layer	0.25 m	-	Modern landscaping layer of topsoil	Plastic, glass bottles	C20th
15	Layer	0.2 m - 0.6 m	-	Modern made ground	-	C20th
16	Layer	0.38 m	-	Buried soil horizon, similar to 5, 12 and 104	Brick	C18th/ C19th
17	Layer	> 2.9 m	-	Natural, alluvial deposit	-	-
101	Layer	0.2 m	-	Modern landscaping layer of topsoil	Plastic, glass bottles	C20th
102	Layer	> 0.3 m	-	Modern made ground	-	C20th
103	Layer	0.08 m	-	Made ground	-	C20th
104	Layer	> 0.3 m	-	Buried soil horizon, similar to 5, 12, 16 and 104	Brick, pottery, glass, clay pipe stem	C18th/ C19th
105	Layer	> 0.1 m	-	Natural chalk	-	-
106	Structure	> 0.1 m	> 0.8 m	Spread of Romano-British brick	Brick	C2nd - C4th

APPENDIX 2 BIBLIOGRAPHY AND REFERENCES

- BCAS 2005 *Brief For an Archaeological Mitigation Strategy*
- IFA 2001 *Standard Guidance for Archaeological Watching Briefs*
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- Langley, T. 1797 *History and Antiquities of the Hundred of Desborough*, p29
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- NA 2001a *Geophysical Survey at The Rye, High Wycombe, Buckinghamshire*
- NA 2001b *Geophysical Survey at The Rye, High Wycombe, Buckinghamshire*
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- OA 2000 *The Rye Environmental Centre, High Wycombe, Buckinghamshire. Archaeological Evaluation Report.*
- OA 2002 *Rye Environmental Centre, High Wycombe, Bucks. Archaeological Watching Brief*
- OA 2005 *Holywell Mead, High Wycombe, Buckinghamshire : Written Scheme of Investigation for an Archaeological Watching Brief.*
- VCH Bucks 2 p17-18

APPENDIX 3 SUMMARY OF SITE DETAILS

Site name: Rye Centre, Holywell Mead, High Wycombe, Buckinghamshire

Site code: HICICP 05

Grid reference: SU 8745 9234

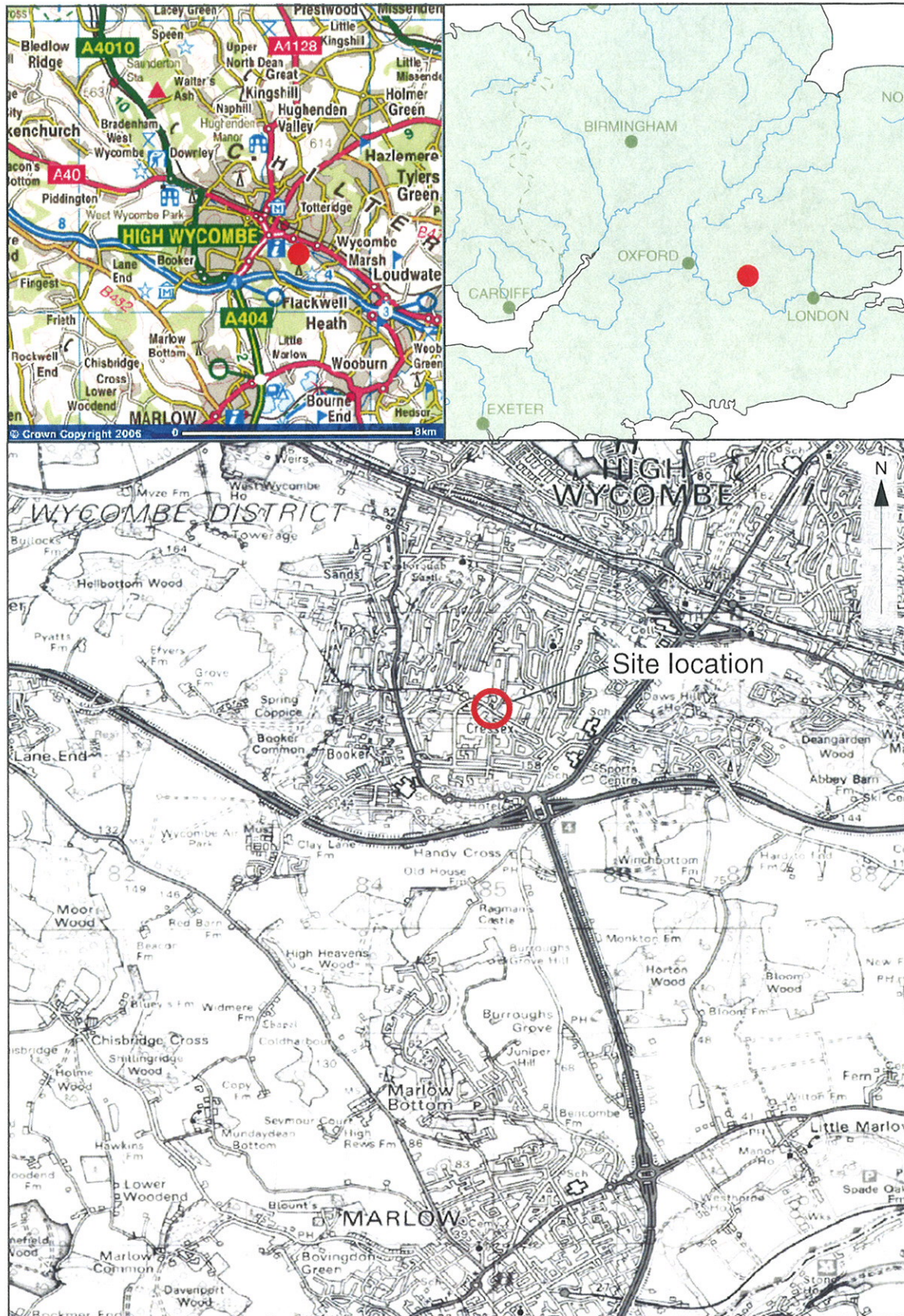
Type of watching brief: Machine excavation of service trenches, ground reduction and tree planting pits.

Date and duration of project: 12th May 2005 to 13th December 2005, 7 months

Area of site: 0.4 hectares

Summary of results: Spread of demolition debris from the villa site, possible boundary wall, evidence for post-medieval cultivation of area

Location of archive: The archive is currently held at OA, Janus House, Osney Mead, Oxford, OX2 0ES, and will be deposited with Buckinghamshire County Museums Service in due course, under the following accession number: AYBCM:2005.48



Scale 1:50,000

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Figure 1: Site location



Figure 2: Area of watching brief

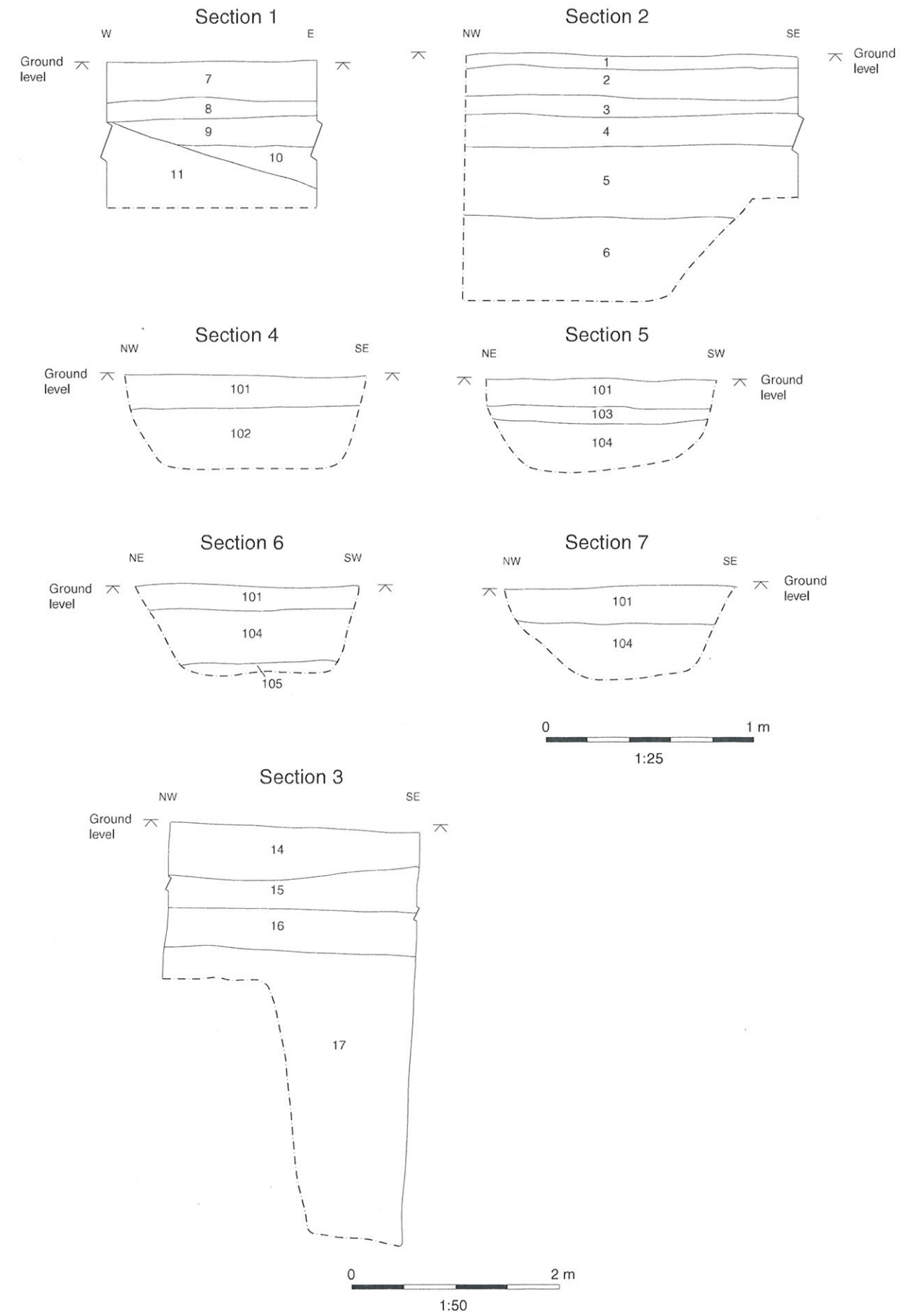


Figure 3: Sections 1-7