

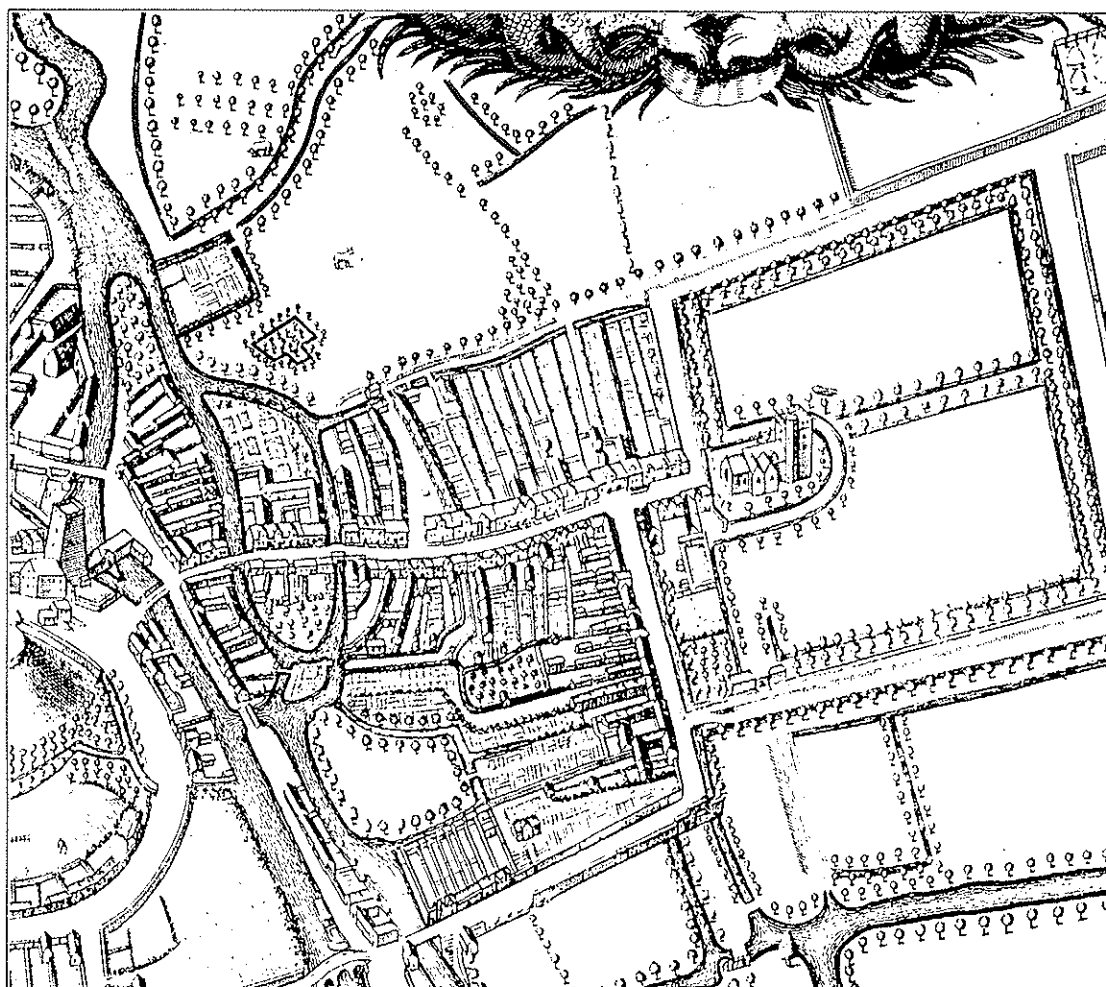
Railtrack PLC

Railtrack Car Park, Becket Street, Oxford

NGR SP 5054 0615

ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF REPORT

Planning Ref. No. 97/1038/NF



Oxford Archaeological Unit

July 1998

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Planning Ref. No. 97/1038/NF

Prepared by:

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14/7/98

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24/7/1998

Oxford Archaeological Unit

July 1998

Summary

In April/May 1998 the Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) undertook a watching brief at Becket Street, Oxford (NGR SP 5054 0615), during the construction of a new Railtrack car park. No archaeological features were seen; finds were noted but not retained. Post-1850 landfill was identified in a general spread across the site, to a depth greater than 2 metres in places.

1 Introduction

The development proposal (planning application no. 97/1038/NF) comprised the construction of a 500 space surface car park, with associated services, and a cycle track along the west side of Becket Street.

The watching brief was commissioned by Railtrack PLC. It was undertaken to a brief set by, and a WSI agreed with, the Oxford Archaeological Advisory Service.

2 Background (Fig. 1)

The archaeological and historic background to this project has been the subject of a separate desk-based report (OAU 1994), the findings of which are summarised below. Figure 1 is taken from this report and shows the various features of historic and archaeological interest in the immediate vicinity of the site.

The development site lies within the Parish of St Thomas the Martyr and is situated on Osney Island, an island in the Thames between the mill stream of Castle Mill to the east and the stream which forms the main navigation channel of the Thames to the west. The area is well documented as approximately two thirds of it belonged to Osney Abbey and then to Christ Church, for whose properties large numbers of deeds, rentals, modern leases and surveys survive.

A search of the Oxfordshire Sites and Monuments Record (SMR) revealed that there is no known archaeological activity within the development area itself. However, a number of archaeological sites and historic features were noted within the environs of the development area which may have been of relevance to the proposed development. These features relate predominantly to the development of the medieval suburb of St Thomas's, and of the road system to the west of the medieval city. The possibility of encountering the City's western Civil war defences was also a factor.

The site is bounded to the east by Becket Street and to the west by the limits of Railtrack land along the line of the main Oxford-London route. To the north it is bounded by the Botley Road and to the south by Osney Lane.

The site comprises an area of circa 10 000 square metres, and lies at an elevation of between 57.24 m OD at the southern end of the site and a maximum of 58.80 m OD at the northern limit of the site. It lies entirely within the limits of the Thames floodplain and the geology is alluvial clay overlying sands and gravels. The solid geology below the gravel terrace is Oxford clay.

The ground level within the development area is at an elevation of between 57.75 m OD and 59.00 m OD, an average of circa 1 – 1.5 m above the surrounding ground level (spot heights taken on Becket Street range from 56.87 m OD to 57.30 m OD). This is due to the artificial build-up of the land surrounding the railway line, an activity also noted on the northern side of the Botley Road; within the old station yard (OAU 1998), immediately adjacent to the main line into Oxford from the north (OAU 1998a) and below the Persimmon Homes housing development (OAU forthcoming).

The amount of made ground appeared to be more substantial at the northern end of the site tapering towards the footbridge at the southern end. Excavations at the Rewley Road site (OAU 1993) suggest an average build-up of between circa 1 – 1.2 m of made ground. Excavations at the Hamel (Palmer 1980) revealed archaeological horizons at a level of circa 55.20 m OD, with an overlying build-up of circa 1.20 m of alluvium; whereas, at the former Halls Brewery site (OAU 1989) masonry was encountered at a level of circa 57 m OD. It was clear that a substantial deposit of made ground existed within the development area, principally at the northern end.

3 Aims

The aims of the watching brief were to record any archaeological remains exposed on site during the course of the works to established OAU standards (Wilkinson 1992), in order to secure the preservation by record of any archaeology, the presence and nature of which could not be established in advance.

4 Methodology

The watching brief was maintained on all invasive groundworks; in practice this comprised the creation of new entrance and exit ramps and associated wing walls for the car park, excavation for the base of plant related to the parking control system, associated drainage and the creation of a new cycle track. All excavation was by 360 mechanical excavator. This creation of the cycle track involved the breaking out and removal of the existing 20th century wall which ran the length of the eastern side of the site, the creation of the cycle track and the subsequent rebuilding of the wall further to the west, forming the boundary between the car park and the cycle track. Separate inspection visits were made by prior arrangement with Bideem Construction, the main subcontractor.

Within the constraints imposed by Health and Safety considerations the deposits exposed were cleaned, inspected and recorded in plan, section and by colour slide and monochrome print photography. Written records were also made on proforma sheets. Soil descriptions use *estimated* percentages based on the use of standard charts for the approximation of percentage of inclusion types in soil deposits.

5 Results (Figs 2, 3 and 4)

The Cycle Track (Fig. 3: sections 1 and 2)

The major impact associated with the construction of the cycle track consisted of the removal of the standing wall on the eastern side of the site. This revealed a section of

the eastern side of the site down to c. 0.10 below the present level of Becket Street; this comprised one deposit:

(1) – 0.70 m of very mixed brown/gray/orange silty clay loam with various lenses of coarse orange sand and gravel; this material also contained high percentages of modern housebrick, white china, rotted sleepers and various pieces of ironwork. None of this material was retained due to the high levels of diesel contamination apparent within this deposit.

The Parking Control System (Fig. 3: sections 3, 4, 5 and 6)

The base of plant for the parking control system required the excavation of four pits, approximately 2 m by 1 m in plan and c. 0.75 m in depth. In practice these excavations took place wholly within deposit (1) as described above.

The Drainage Trench (Fig. 4: sections 7 and 8)

The deepest excavation undertaken was a trench for the provision of new drainage, connecting to the existing interceptor at the southern end of Becket Street. This was dug to a mean depth of 2 m, entering the site at its southern end. Once more, these excavations took place wholly within deposit (1), as described above, showing it to be over 2 m deep at this point.

6 Discussion

Post-1850 buildup in the vicinity of the main line where it crosses the floodplain is considerable both in depth and in plan; the archaeological watching brief undertaken in the Old Station Yard during geotechnical test-pitting prior to construction of the Said Business School noted that “Post-1850 activity appears to have been particularly invasive...on the western side of the site, closer to the line itself”. This would appear to have been confirmed at Becket Street where post-1850 activity has clearly been highly invasive; all excavation took place within post-1850 deposits.

All of the artefactual evidence seen was confined to the 19th and 20th centuries; i.e. post-1850 onwards. The interface between railway buildup and pre-1850 deposits is notoriously difficult to ascertain in this area; the 1994 evaluation recorded the upper horizon of alluvium lying at between 55 and 57 m OD, and this is a useful guide. This was confirmed by observations made during the excavation of some of the access headshafts during the West Oxford Sewer Project; in others the alluvial deposits had been heavily truncated as at Becket Street. Typically, the upper levels of the post-1850 deposits are characterised by black staining and high percentages of housebrick and general debris, with the lower deposits being extremely mixed dumps of loams, clays and assorted Victoriana, and this is typical of what was seen at Becket Street.

All of the deposits seen are thought to relate to the post-1850 buildup of the area prior to the coming of the railway. The western route out of Oxford and the City's Civil War defences, both thought partially to lie within the site opposite St Thomas's Church, were not seen; either they lie at levels not reached by the groundworks or were removed during the creation of the railway embankment.

References.

- OAU 1989 Former Halls Brewery, Park End Street, Oxford. Archaeological Assessment, September 1989.
- OAU 1993 Rewley Road, Oxford. Archaeological Evaluation, October/November 1993.
- OAU 1994 Land at Becket Street, Oxford. Desk-based Appraisal of Archaeological Impacts.
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- OAU forthcoming The Persimmon Homes Housing Development at Rewley Abbey, Oxford. Archaeological Watching Brief Report.
- Palmer, N 1980 A Beaker Burial and Medieval Tenements in The Hamel, Oxford *Oxoniensia* Vol. XLV 1980, 123-225
- Wilkinson, D (ed) 1992 Oxford Archaeological Unit Field Manual, (First edition, August 1992).

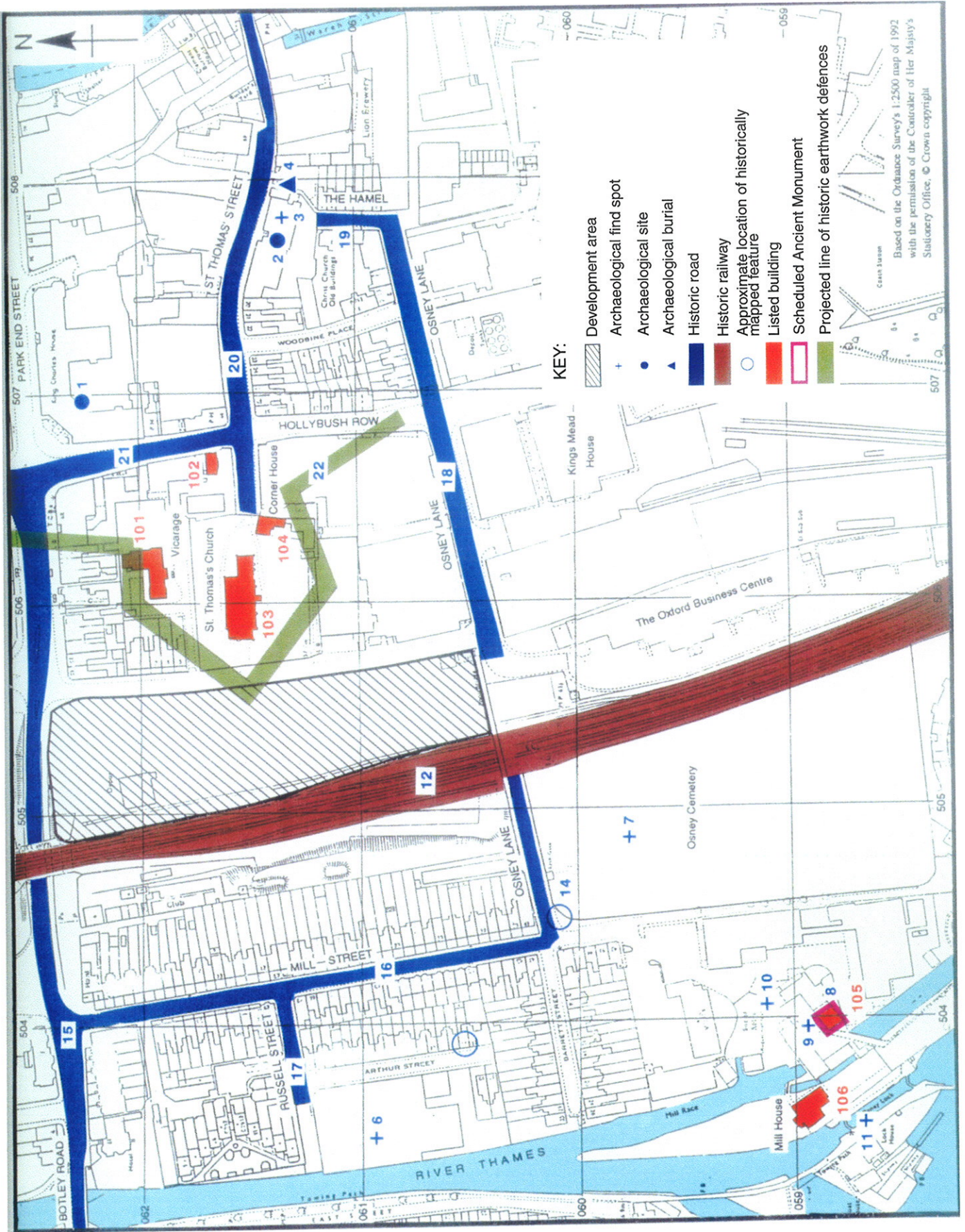


Figure 1: Site location plan

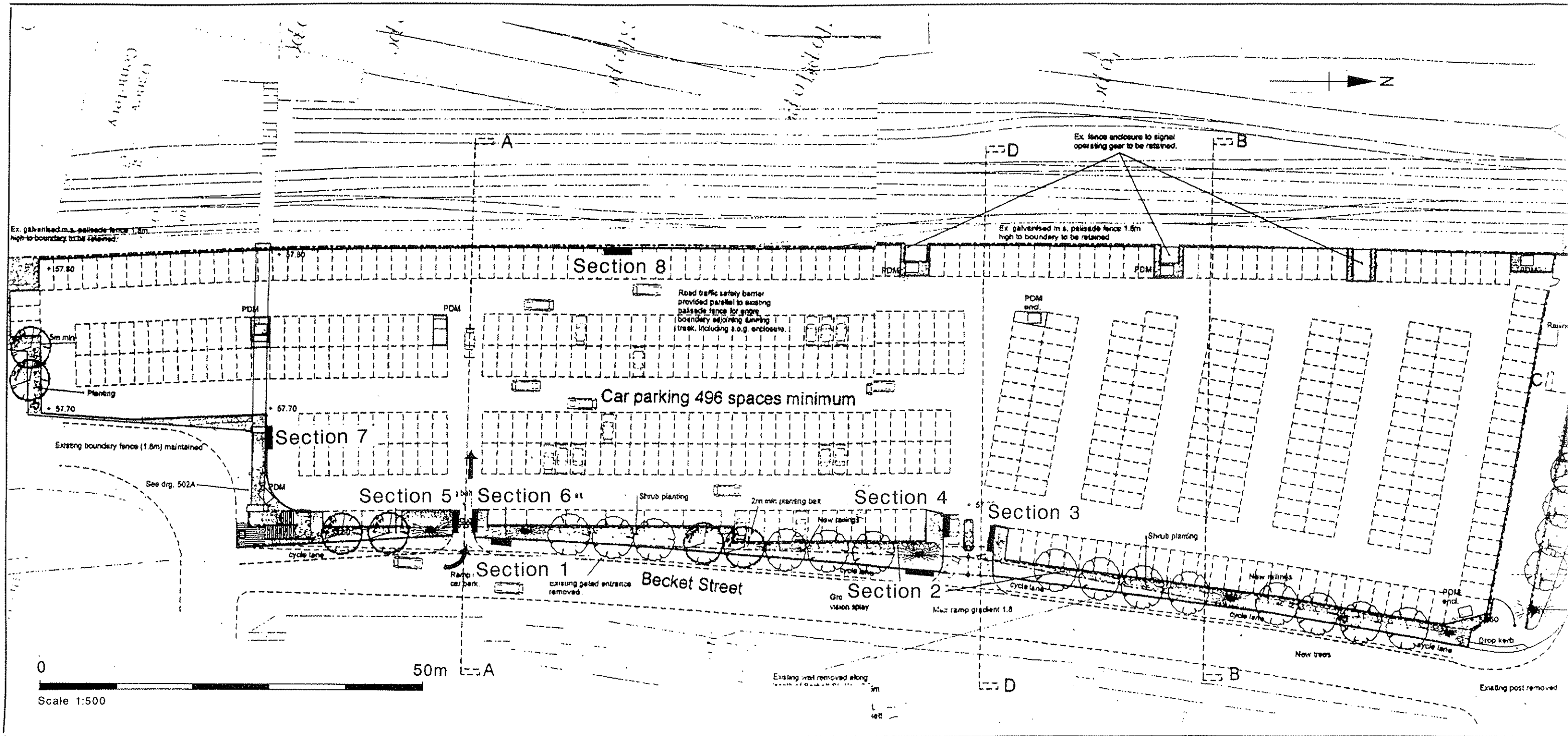
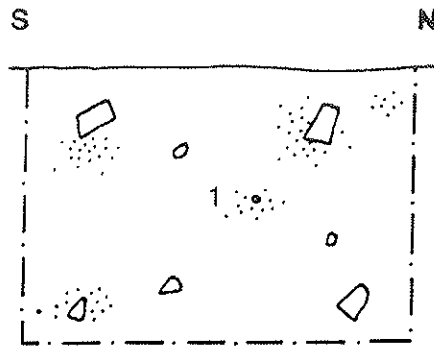
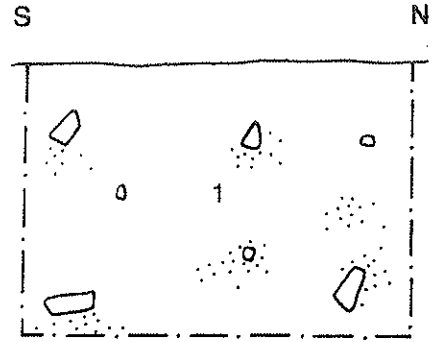


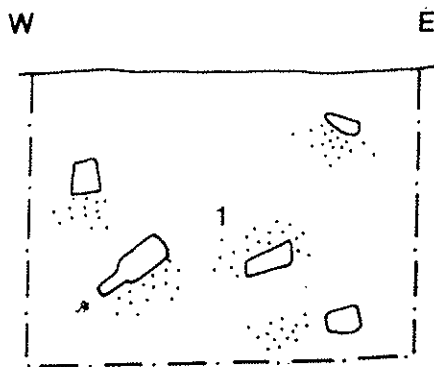
Figure 2: Site plan with location of sections



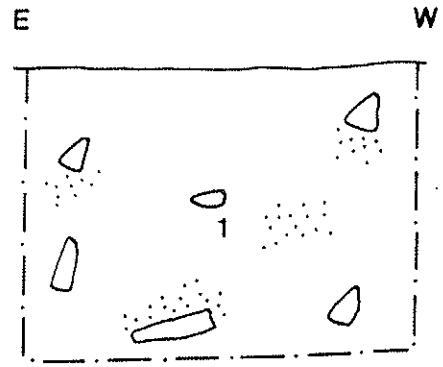
Section 1



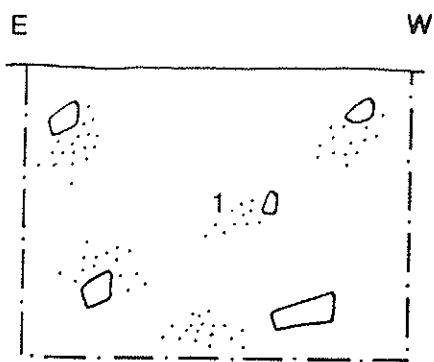
Section 2



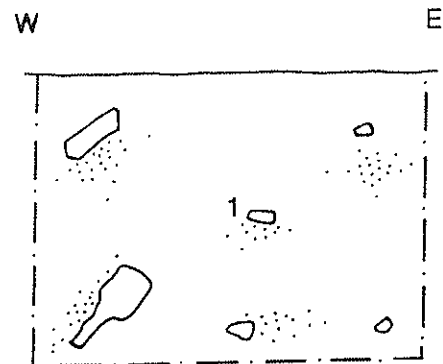
Section 3



Section 4



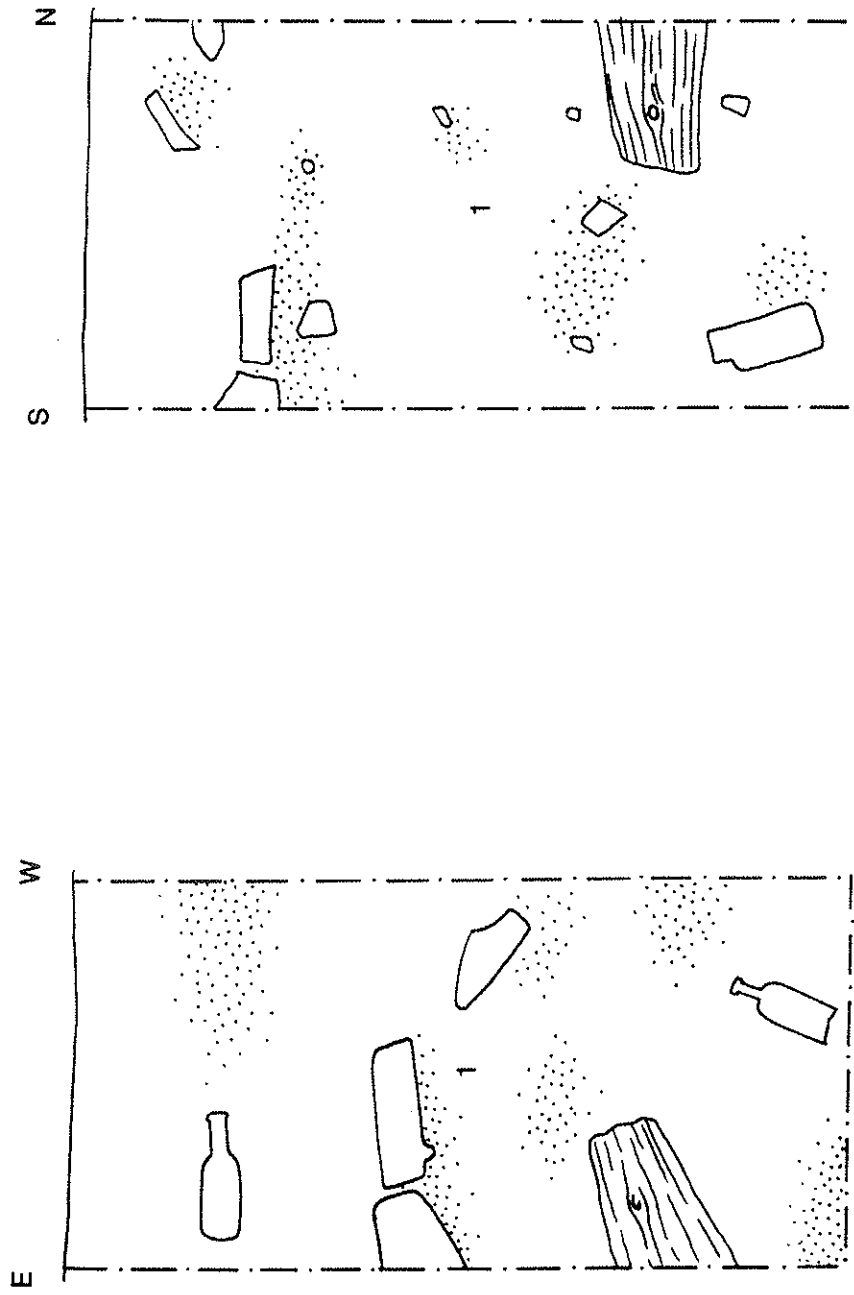
Section 5



Section 6



Figure 3: Sections 1-6



Section 8

Section 7

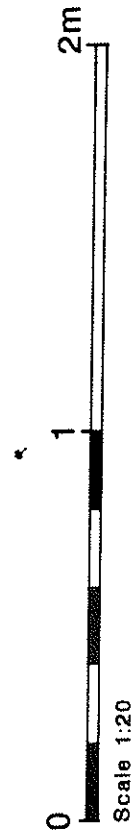


Figure 4: Sections 7 & 8