

# St Mary's Church Bampton Oxfordshire

## Archaeological Watching Brief



**Oxford Archaeology**

11th June 2002

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**Saint Mary's, Bampton,**  
**Parochial Church Council**

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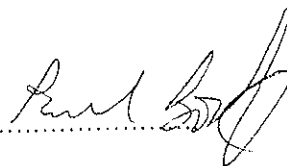
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## St. Mary's Church Bampton, Oxfordshire

### *ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF REPORT*

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## SUMMARY

*In April 2002 Oxford Archaeology (OA) carried out an archaeological watching brief at St. Mary's Church, Bampton Oxfordshire (NGR SP 312 033). The work was commissioned by J Alan Bristow and Partners on behalf of St. Mary's Parochial Church Council in advance of the excavation of a foul water drainage pipe alongside the path leading to the south door of the church and through the churchyard entrance.*

*The watching brief revealed a number of grave cuts in the natural gravel. On analogy with previous excavations in the churchyard, it is possible that these graves date to the Saxon period, although no dating evidence was recovered. The graves were overlain by a general churchyard soil, which was cut by later burials. Several graves cut from just below the present topsoil are probably of relatively recent date, though none were dated.*

*Of note was the presence of several inter-cutting ditches just outside the limit of the churchyard. These appear to be medieval re-cuts on the line of the original Saxon Minster ditch. Portions of two demolished walls, separated by a small gap and situated in the area of the present churchyard entrance probably represent the remains of a former entrance to the churchyard. A further section of walling inside the churchyard could represent a landscaping feature, though no dating for the wall was established. A former path leading to the church was also identified.*

## 1 INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Location and scope of work

1.1.1 In April 2002 Oxford Archaeology (OA) carried out an archaeological watching brief at St. Mary's Church, Bampton Oxfordshire (Fig. 1).

1.1.2 The work was commissioned by J Alan Bristow and Partners of Charlbury, on behalf of St. Mary's Parochial Church Council in respect of a proposal to excavate manholes and connecting trenches for a drainage pipe from the church across the churchyard (Fig. 2) to a main sewer pipe. The works formed part of a scheme to install a toilet and coffee making facility in the South Transept of the church.

1.1.3 Dr John Blair of The Queen's College, Oxford, who also provided drawn plans of the site, provided advice about the project and its archaeological implications to the architects and the PCC.

### 1.2 Geology and topography

1.2.1 The site lies on the second gravel terrace at 71 m above OD. The church is located at NGR SP 312 033.

1.2.2 The majority of the site of the new drainage trench was situated within the boundary of St Mary's Church churchyard. The churchyard exhibits several earthworks and mounds and contains many extant gravestones and burial monuments.

### 1.3 Archaeological and historical background

- 1.3.1 The church consists of a central tower and spire, chancel, transepts, nave and aisles. The base of the tower incorporates the remains of an early nave, apparently of two phases, of which the earlier may be pre-Conquest. The second phase incorporates herringbone work and a chancel arch with chip carved ornament of *c* 1100.
- 1.3.2 The church was enlarged in *c* 1170 by the raising of the tower and the addition of the chancel and transepts; a fine south doorway with chevron ornament survives from this phase. The nave was rebuilt around 1320 (Blair *pers. comm*).
- 1.3.3 The church was the highest Minster above sea level on the Thames and was built on a gravel promontory in a bend of the Shill Brook that feeds into the main river. The church is first mentioned in the 950s (Blair 1994, 63).
- 1.3.4 The main church occupies one corner of a large oval enclosure that excavation has shown to be of Anglo-Saxon date. To the west, a late 11th century chapel (Deanery) was built within the circuit of a Bronze Age barrow-ditch (Blair, 1994, 64). Another prehistoric ditch is sited beneath the south side of the church and has been identified by excavations in 1996 extending into the south part of the churchyard (Blair 1999, 2).
- 1.3.5 Anglo-Saxon burials have been recovered from the churchyard (from for example Trench XXX1, Blair, 1999, 15 and see Fig. 2, this document, for trench location) together with later medieval inhumations, while an *in situ* medieval churchyard tomb was found during superficial cleaning near the south-east corner of the South Transept (Blair 1999, 16-23). Excavations and investigations have shown continuous interment in the churchyard for over 1000 years.

### 1.4 Acknowledgements

- 1.4.1 OA is grateful to J Alan Bristow and Partners, Hinkins and Frewin, the site contractors and Dr John Blair for their assistance during the watching brief, which was undertaken by Tim Haines of OA who drafted an early version of this report.

## 2 PROJECT AIMS AND METHODOLOGY

### 2.1 Aims

- 2.1.1 To identify and record the presence/absence, extent, condition, quality and date of archaeological remains in the areas affected by the excavation of a foul water drain.
- 2.1.2 To make available the results of the archaeological investigation, and to contribute to the ongoing programme of research on the church and its environs.

### 2.2 Methodology

- 2.2.1 The contractor's excavations were monitored by the attending archaeologist with care taken to check the spoil heaps for finds. The trench was excavated to a depth of 0.6- 0.8 m and it was variable width, from 0.25 m wide for the length of trench from the south door of the church to the site of a manhole near the church entrance, but widening to 0.4 m wide where the trench extended to the south-east and outside of

the churchyard. The whole length of trench comprised 44.95 m, including excavations for manholes.

- 2.2.2 All archaeological features were planned on site at a scale of 1:20 (for the purposes of Fig. 3 this scale has been reduced) and lengths of the trench sections were also drawn at a scale of 1:20. All exposed features and structures were photographed using colour slide and black and white print film and a general photographic record of the work was made. Recording followed procedures detailed in the *OAU Fieldwork Manual* (ed. D Wilkinson, 1992).

### 3 RESULTS

#### 3.1 Description of deposits

##### *North-west stretch of trench to manhole junction - Fig. 3 and Fig 4, Section drawing 1*

- 3.1.1 The north section of the trench (length 26.5 m) leading south-south-east east from the south door of the church and extending to the site of a new manhole proved archaeologically sterile. A general churchyard soil (101) was visible in both sides and at the base of the trench. The trench deepened progressively from 0.4 m to the site of the manhole, where it was 0.7 m deep.
- 3.1.2 Some 5 m north of the new manhole, the earliest deposit exposed at the base of the trench was the natural gravel (102) that lay 0.65 m below the present ground level.
- 3.1.3 The gravel was cut by an east-west aligned grave (113) containing a silty soil with gravel (114). The feature was 0.8 m wide and extended beyond the limits of the trench. A human skull was seen in plan at the top of the exposed fill and was thought to be *in situ*. Just east of the grave, separated by a small island of gravel natural was a further grave cut (111), filled by a brown silty gravel (112) and aligned east-west.
- 3.1.4 This grave was 0.33 m wide and its size could suggest a child burial, though no bones were visible in plan or in the soil in the grave. Immediately south was the east end of a grave (109 filled by 110) that terminated in the middle of the trench. Some 1.14 m to the south of this was a further grave cut (105) aligned east-west and filled by a brown gravelly silt (106), containing occasional human bones. No further grave cuts were identified south of grave 105 to the point where the manhole area was opened.
- 3.1.5 All four graves were sealed beneath the general churchyard soil 101. No dating evidence was obtained from any of these features, which have been left undisturbed and *in situ* beneath the level of the new drainage pipe. Soil 101 contained a patch of redeposited human bone (118), probably a charnel deposit from the excavation of other graves nearby.
- 3.1.6 The general churchyard soil (101) was cut by a late grave (107). The grave was aligned east-west and was filled by a mid-brown silt with frequent gravel, with a few fragments of human bone (108). Above lay a further fill (117) comprising similar material but with more gravel.

- 3.1.7 North of this grave was a further cut feature (115) cutting 101. No bones were observed in the fill (116), but it too possibly represents another late grave. The present topsoil of the churchyard (100) sealed the fills of the late graves.

*Area of new manhole - Fig. 3 and Figs 4 & 5 - Section Drawings 1 and 2*

- 3.1.8 Natural gravel (102) was exposed in the trench sides of the new manhole and was higher here than elsewhere, suggesting that a ridge of gravel existed at this point. The gravel was cut by a grave (103) with a clear south edge cut into the higher ridge of gravel and the northern edge cutting the shallower gravel here. The feature was 0.84 m wide and 0.46 m deep where it had been truncated by the contractor's excavations. The fill (104) was a mixed dark red-brown silt with some fragments of human bone. Fill 104 was sealed by a soil layer similar to 101, as seen elsewhere in the trench.
- 3.1.9 This soil was overlain by a north-west/south-east aligned wall (126) that was 0.2 m wide and survived to a height of 0.2 m and constructed of un-bonded limestone. A length of 1.05 m was exposed in plan and section at the south-west edge of the manhole trench and the wall presumably extended to the north-west and to the south-east outside the trench limits. No dating evidence was recovered for the wall, which lay below a gravel bedding layer (128) for the present tarmac surface (127) in the churchyard.

*South-eastern length of trench - Fig. 3 and Fig. 4, Section 1*

- 3.1.10 Just south-east of the manhole area was a north-east/south-west aligned grave cut (124) filled by a brown-yellow silt with gravel. The grave was 1.06 m wide and had a revealed depth of 0.54 m, though the base of the feature was not observed. No finds were recovered to date the feature. To the south-east were two further grave cuts (122 filled by silt 123 and 120 filled by silt 121) of similar width and exposed depth and likewise undated.
- 3.1.11 The fills of these features were sealed beneath a layer of limestone cobbles (119) set on edge in a matrix of sand. This formed part of an (undated) pathway leading to the church door, sealed beneath the present tarmac (127).

*Length of trench through Churchyard entrance - Fig. 3 and Fig. 4, section 1*

- 3.1.12 It was apparent that deposits and features at the entrance of, and just outside the churchyard, were of a completely different character to those within it. The trench sections were recorded after machine excavation to the depth required for the new pipe. This work was technically outside the original brief for the project and the results obtained reflect limited salvage recording during these works.
- 3.1.13 An approximately east-west aligned feature (131), interpreted as a ditch, cut the natural gravel (102). The ditch was 0.68 m deep and 1.3 m wide and it was filled by light brown sandy silt (132) that contained a sherd of North-East Wiltshire ware pottery dated broadly from AD 1050-1400. The south side of the ditch was cut by a later east-west ditch (133), also approximately aligned east-west. The ditch was 2.05 m wide and 0.85 m deep and it was filled with a dark-brown silt with gravel (134) containing occasional bones and some angular cobble stones. The fill (134) contained a single piece of Cotswold-type pottery with a broad date range of AD

975-1350. Ditch fill 134 was cut to the south by a further ditch (137) that was 0.62 m deep and filled with a brown silt with gravel (135).

- 3.1.14 Some 4 m further south and cutting the gravel was another ditch (140) aligned approximately east-west. The ditch was 0.48 m deep and 0.75 m wide, and the feature extended outside the trench limit that was observed at the time. No dating evidence was recovered from the two fills (144 and 141).
- 3.1.15 Ditch fills 135 and 140 were cut by a broad ditch feature (138) that was at least 4.9 m wide and 0.65 m deep and aligned approximately east-west. The earliest fill (139) was a dark brown silt loam sealed beneath a fill of compact mid-brown silt with gravel (136) including fired clay, occasional limestone cobbles and a sherd of Brill/Boarstall ware dated AD 1200-1600. Fill 136 was cut by an undated shallow ?ditch or gully (142 filled by ashy clay deposit 143) that extended beyond the trench limits.
- 3.1.16 The fill of 131 was cut by the construction trench (146) for the remains of a demolished wall (129) composed of small angular limestone rubble arranged in random courses. The wall was 1m wide and survived to a height of 0.42 m and was aligned NNE-SSW.
- 3.1.17 A little over 1 m to the south-east was a further section of walling (130) on the same alignment. The construction trench for the wall (147) was cut from the level of the fill (135) of ditch 137. Wall 130 was made in a similar fashion to 129 and but was only 0.4 m wide and survived to a height of 0.4 m.
- 3.1.18 Wall 130 and the ditch fills 136 and 143 were sealed beneath a modern gravel hardcore make-up layer (145) for the tarmac surface 127. Wall 129 was abutted by a pitched layer of thin limestone pieces (119) extending towards the south door of the church and which represent an earlier path surface. The stones partially overlay the fill of ditch 131, so the surface is of medieval or later date

### ***Manhole outside the churchyard - Fig. 5, Section 3***

- 3.1.19 Additional observations were made during excavations for a manhole at the south-east end of the trench. The natural gravel here was cut by a flattish-based ?ditch (148) that may be an extension to the south-east of ditch 140. The limits of the ditch were not established within the confines of the manhole trench. It was filled by brown silty gravel (149) overlain by a darker ashy deposit (150) in turn beneath a reddish-brown silty gravel (151). None of these deposits produced dating evidence.
- 3.1.20 The south-east edge of the feature proved difficult to discern, but may be represented by a noticeable peak in the gravel (about halfway along Section 3). The gravel at this point was overlain by a layer of dark brown clay silt (152), in turn overlain by a loose very dark grey deposit of charcoal and ash (153) seen during excavation of the manhole but not apparent in the trench section. This deposit is possibly evidence of a fire.
- 3.1.21 This lay below further deposits of mixed ash and silt (154 then 155, 156 and 157) that represent deliberate dumped layers. Above 157 lay a compacted layer of



limestone (158) to a depth of 0.43 m. This formed a surface that may be contemporary with surface 145 within the churchyard. Surface 158 was overlain by the topsoil and turf (159) outside the churchyard

### 3.2 Finds

#### *The pottery - by Paul Blinkhorn*

3.2.1 The pottery assemblage comprised five sherds with a total weight of 88 g. All of the material was medieval, with the range of fabric types present indicating that the features from which the pottery was recovered spanned the 11th–13th centuries. The pottery occurrence by number and weight of sherds per context by fabric type is shown in the table below. Each date should be regarded as a *terminus post quem*.

3.2.2 The pottery was recorded utilizing the coding system and chronology of the Oxfordshire County type-series (Mellor 1989; 1994), as follows:

OXAC: Cotswold-type ware, AD 975-1350. 3 sherds, 76 g.  
OXBF: North-East Wiltshire ware, AD 1050-1400. 1 sherd, 11 g.  
OXAM: Brill/Boarstall ware, AD 1200-1600. 1 sherd, 1 g.

3.2.3 Table of pottery occurrence by number and weight (in g) of sherds per context by fabric type

Context	OXAC		OXBF		OXAM		Date
	No	Wt	No	Wt	No	Wt	
132			1	11			11thC?
134	1	44					11thC?
136					1	1	13thC?
150	2	32					11thC?
<i>Total</i>	3	76	1	11	1	1	

### 3.3 Palaeo-environmental remains

3.3.1 Although full consideration was given to various sampling strategies, due to the absence of any suitable deposits and the tight constraints of the excavation, no environmental soil samples were taken

## 4 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

4.1.1 Though limited in extent, this watching brief has revealed important evidence relating to the medieval enclosure surrounding the site of the church, has added more information about the possibility of further Saxon burials on the site and provided tentative evidence for a former entrance to the churchyard in the form of the two walls situated in a similar position to the current entrance.

4.1.2 The major discovery was the number of ditch cuts outside the present churchyard. These appear to be medieval re-cuts, presumably on or near the line of the original Saxon Minster ditch that has been identified in previous excavations and is conjectured to have passed along the south side of the present churchyard (cf. Blair

1999, 2). The dating of these features relies on a limited amount of pottery, though it can be suggested that the boundary ditch was being maintained into the 13th century and arguably later, given the level from which ditch 138 had been cut (just 0.25 m below present ground level - see Fig. 4). There was no direct evidence for a primary ditch from this watching brief. Of note is the width of ditch 138, which accords well with John Blair's conjectured plan of the feature (*ibid*).

- 4.1.3 Though undated, the grave cuts into the natural that were sealed by later churchyard soil (101) could be of Saxon date. Previous excavation has demonstrated the presence of Saxon burials in the churchyard cut into the gravel (see Blair 1999, 15, Trench XXXI). The later burials cut from just below the present topsoil are probably of post-medieval, or more likely, Victorian in date, and have been dug quite deep into the gravel as no human remains were observed.
- 4.1.4 Walls 129 and 130, with the gap of c 1 m between them, suggest the site of an earlier entrance to the churchyard, with an associated pathway of pitched limestone leading to the church's south door. Since both walls overlie medieval ditch fills they clearly are of a later date than these features, though a precise date for construction and demolition could not be ascertained within the limits of this watching brief.
- 4.1.5 A further section of walling (126) inside the churchyard could represent a landscaping feature, though no dating for the wall was established. The wall appears to underlie the line of present tarmac path, so it may have flanked an earlier pathway in the churchyard at some time.

## APPENDICES

## APPENDIX 1 ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXT INVENTORY

Trench	Ctxt No	Type	Width (m)	Thick. (m)	Comment	Finds	No./wt	Date
001								
	100	Layer		0.16	Topsoil			
	101	Layer		0.56	Subsoil			
	102	Layer			Natural			
	103	Cut	0.84		Grave			
	104	Fill			Fill of 103			
	105	Cut	0.59		Grave			
	106	Fill			Fill of 105			
	107	Cut	0.45		Grave			
	108	Fill			Fill of 107			
	109	Cut	0.15		Grave			
	110	Fill			Fill of 109			
	111	Cut	0.33		Grave			
	112	Fill			Fill of 111			
	113	Cut	0.8		Grave			
	114	Fill			Fill of 113			
	115	Cut	0.52		Grave			
	116	Fill			Fill of 115			
	117	Fill	0.65		Fill of 115			
	118	Fill		0.16	Fill of 101			
	119	Layer	0.25	0.22	Cobble path			
	120	Cut	0.41		Grave			
	121	Fill			Fill of 120			
	122	Cut	0.7		Grave			
	123	Fill			Fill of 122			
	124	Cut	1.06		Grave			
	125	Fill			Fill of 124			
	126	Structure	0.2	0.05	Wall			
	127	Layer			Tarmac path			
	128	Layer		0.07	Leveling layer for 127			
	129	Structure	1.0	0.42	Stone wall			
	130	Structure	0.4	0.4	Stone wall			

	131	Cut	1.3		Ditch			
	132	Fill		0.68	Fill of 131	Pottery	1, 11g	?C11th
	133	Cut	2.08		Ditch			
	134	Fill		0.82	Fill of 133	Pottery	1, 44g	?C11th
	135	Fill		0.61	Fill of 137			
	136	Fill		0.65	Fill of 138	Pottery	1, 1g	?C13th
	137	Cut	1.08		Ditch re-cut			
	138	Cut	4.9		Ditch re-cut			
	139	Fill		0.15	Fill of 138			
	140	Cut	0.75		Ditch			
	141	Fill		0.38	Fill of 140			
	142	Cut	0.25		Unknown			
	143	Fill		0.32	Fill of 142			
	144	Fill		0.16	Fill of 140			
	145	Layer	0.26		Hardcore levelling layer			
	146	Cut	1.0		Foundation cut for 129			
	147	Cut	0.4		Foundation cut for 130			
	148	Cut	1.02		Ditch			
	149	Fill	0.46	0.09	Fill of 148			
	150	Fill	0.64	0.02	Fill of 148	Pottery	5, 88g	?C11th
	151	Fill	0.68	0.08	Fill of 148			
	152	Layer		0.06	Natural gravel			
	153	Layer		0.05				
	154	Fill	1.2	0.2	Fill of 148			
	155	Layer		0.02				
	156	Layer		0.29				
	157	Layer		0.32				
	158	Layer		0.43	Leveling layer			
	159	Layer		0.25	Topsoil and turf			

## APPENDIX 2 BIBLIOGRAPHY AND REFERENCES

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## APPENDIX 3 SUMMARY OF SITE DETAILS

**Site name:** St. Mary's Church, Bampton

**Site code:** BAMSM 02

**Grid reference:** SP312 033

**Type of watching brief:** Observation of new drainage trench and manhole excavations

**Date and duration of project:** April 2002, 4 days

**Area of site:** 0.1 ha

**Summary of results:** Evidence for ditch re-cuts along the line of the Minster ditch. Possible Saxon graves identified beneath later churchyard soil; walls relating to ?earlier churchyard entrance; Victorian graves identified; former paved surfaces of the churchyard also observed.

**Location of archive:** The archive is currently held at OA, Janus House, Osney Mead, Oxford, OX2 0ES, and will be deposited with Oxfordshire County Museums Service in due course.



Scale 1:25,000

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Figure 1: Site location



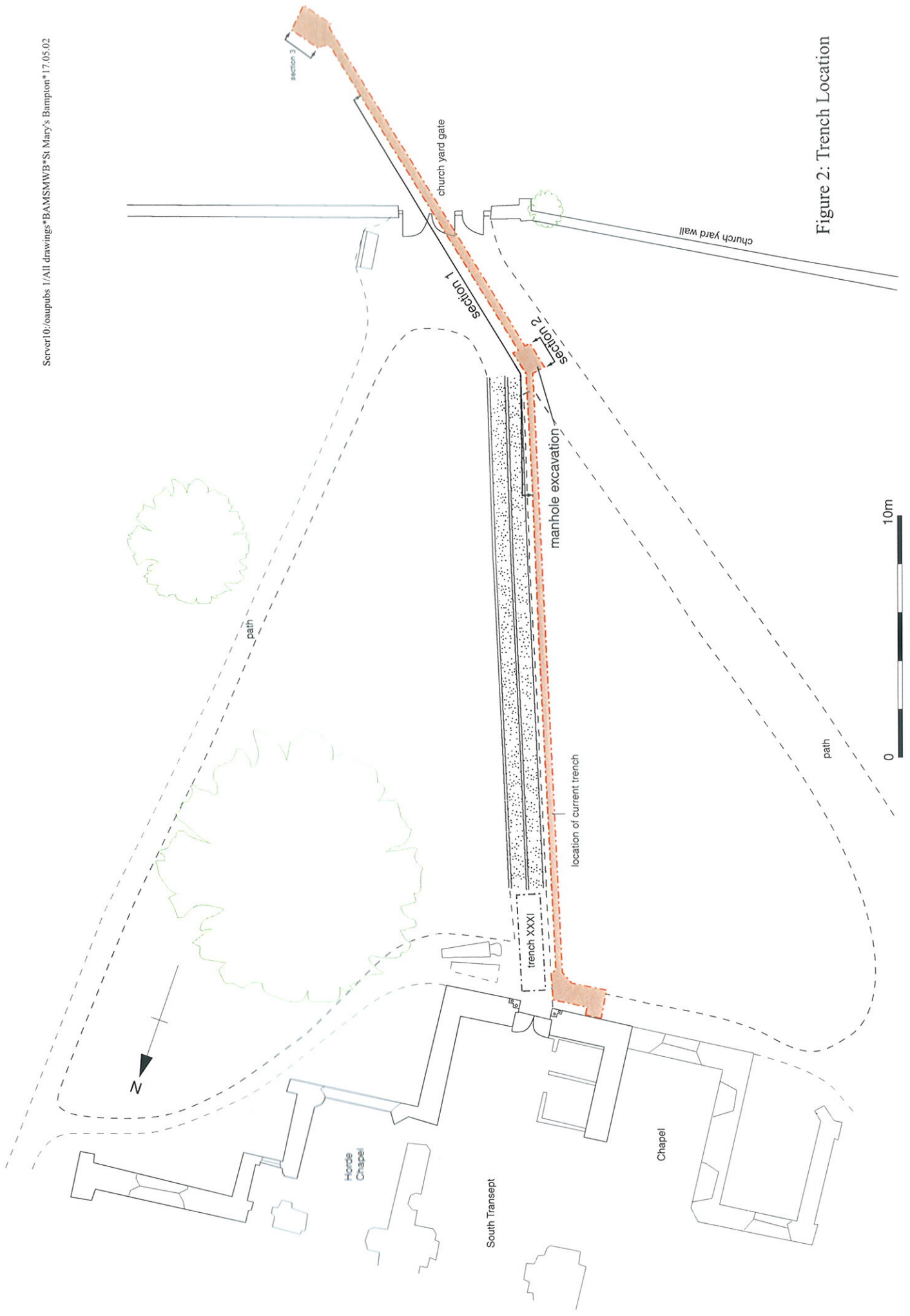


Figure 2: Trench Location

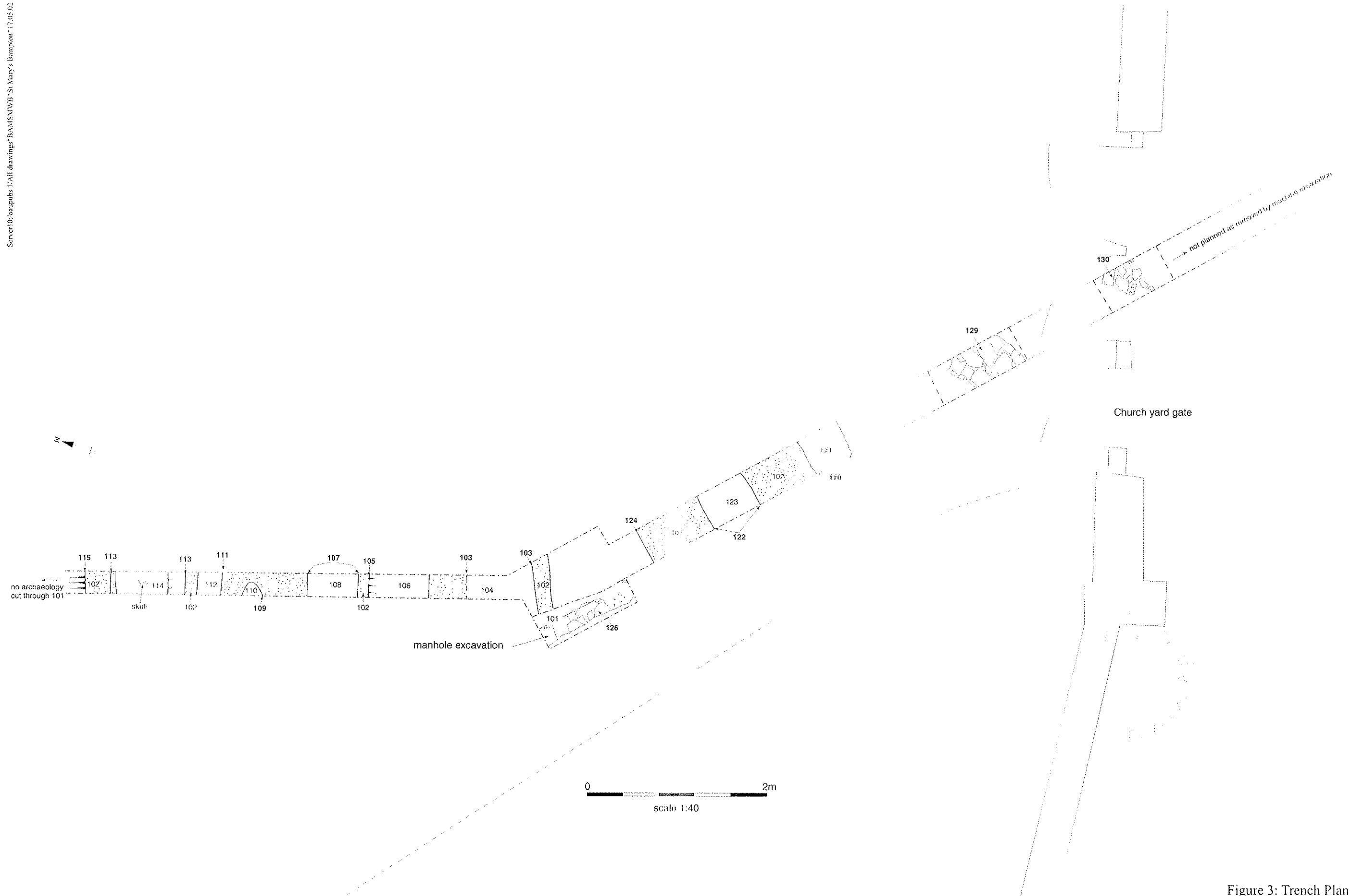


Figure 3: Trench Plan



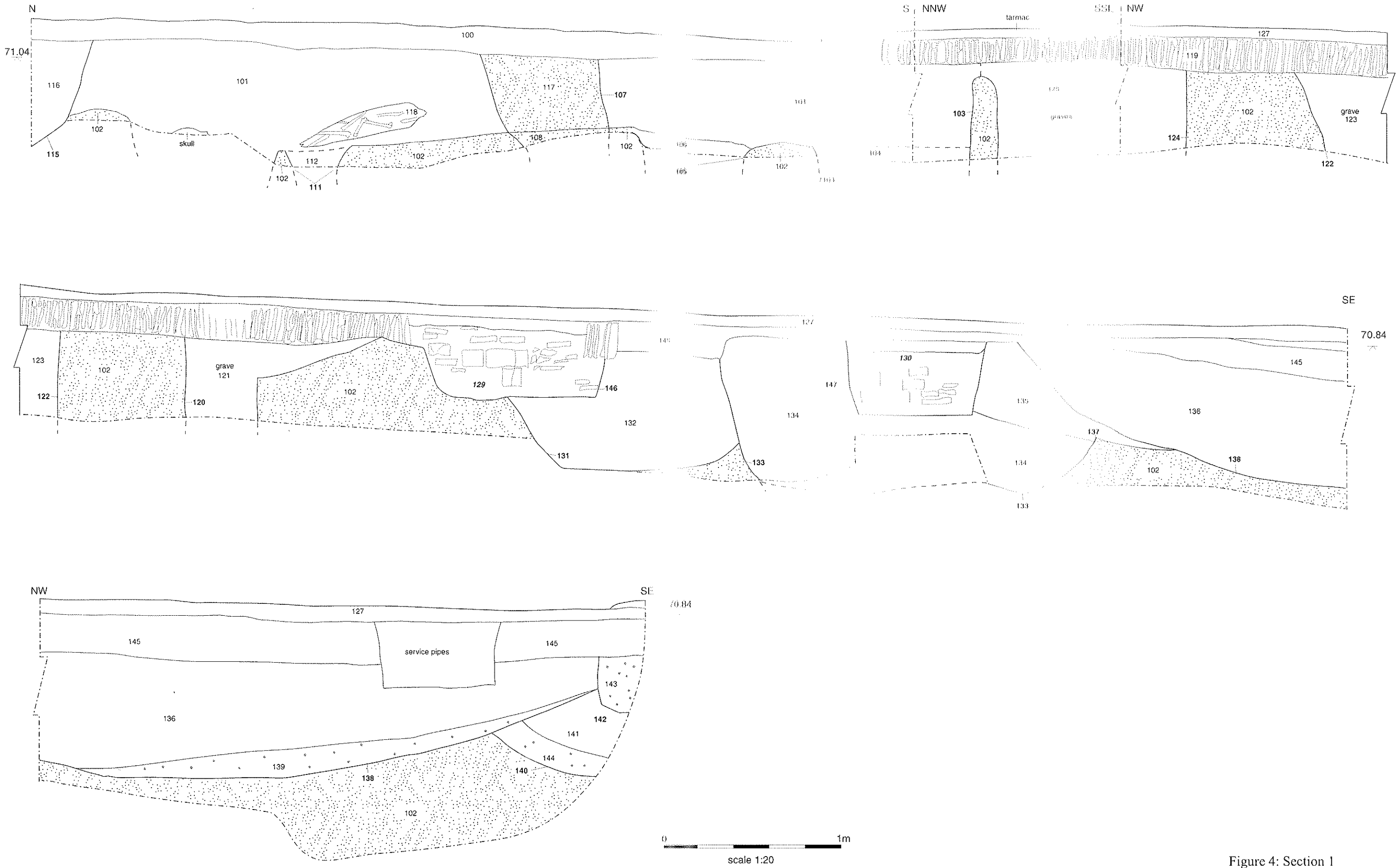
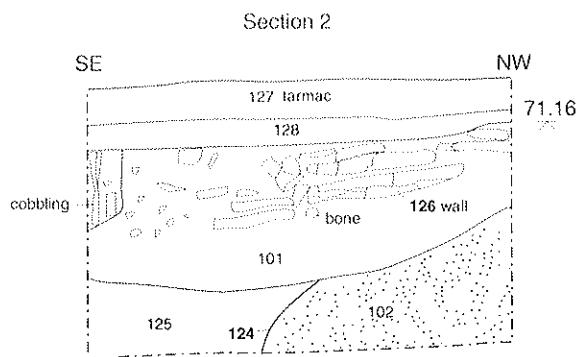


Figure 4: Section 1

Section 2



Section 3

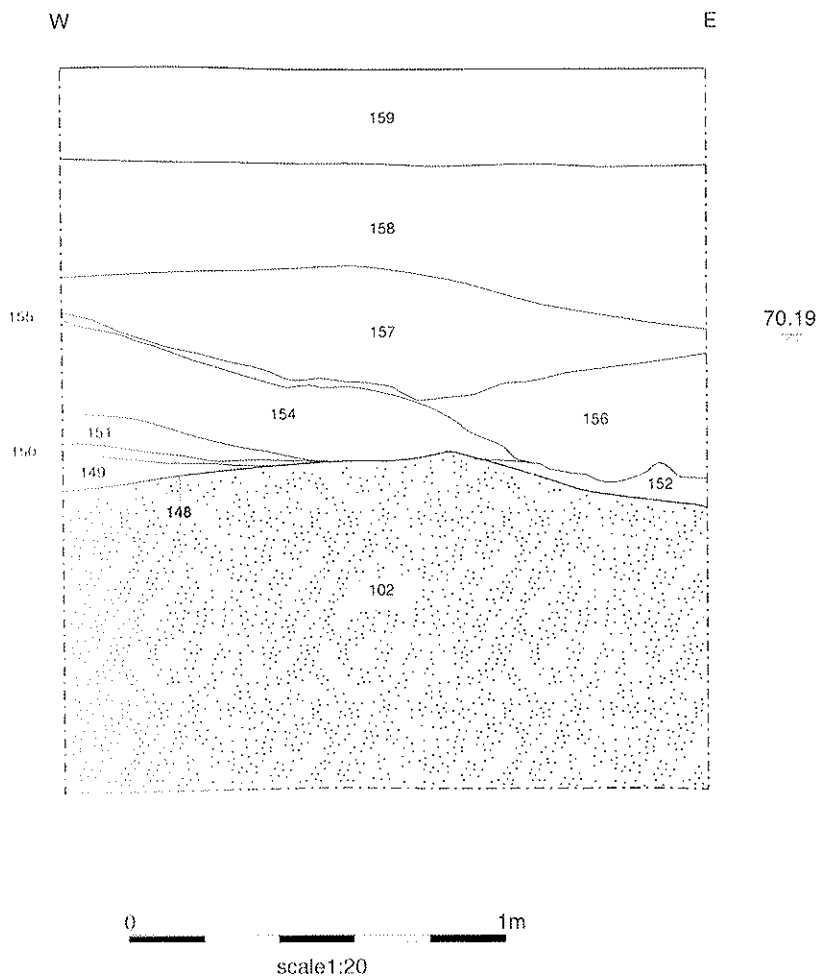


Figure 5: Sections 2 and 3



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