



# New Cable Trenches at Eltham Palace Borough of Greenwich London

## Archaeological Watching Brief Report



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## New Cable Trenches at Eltham Palace, Borough of Greenwich, London

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## SUMMARY

*In September 2002 and February 2003 Oxford Archaeology (OA) carried out an archaeological watching brief at Eltham Palace, London (NGR TQ 425 742). The work was commissioned by English Heritage in advance of excavation of new cable trenches in the grounds of the palace. The watching brief revealed a post medieval retaining wall to the moat and make up for the 1930s tennis courts.*

### 1 INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1 Location and scope of work

1.1.1 In September 2002 and February 2003 Oxford Archaeology (OA) formerly Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) carried out an archaeological watching brief at Eltham Palace, London (Fig. 1). The work was commissioned by English Heritage in respect of the excavation of new cable trenches in the grounds of the palace.

1.1.2 A brief for the project was discussed with Michael Turner of English Heritage.

#### 1.2 Geology and topography

1.2.1 Eltham Palace is located within the London Borough of Greenwich, on a prominent hilltop at 60m OD. The geology is Woolwich Beds, which comprises clays, sands and loams.

#### 1.3 Archaeological and historical background

1.3.1 The archaeological background to the watching brief was prepared from a Desk Based Assessment (OAU 1999) and is reproduced below.

1.3.2 The prominent hilltop on which Eltham Palace is located might have attracted settlement in the prehistoric or Roman periods. Evidence of Roman activity includes a small Roman farmstead c. 650 m to the north-east excavated in the 1920s by FC Elliston. The excavation produced the possible remains of a hut floor and finds of coarse pottery and an iron pin. The general area to the north of Eltham Palace has produced a chance find of two Roman cremation burial urns some time before 1950, although the exact location of these finds is not known (NMR No. 408055). Other chance finds include a Roman coin found near Eltham Green c. 850 m to the north-west of the palace in 1955.

#### *The Medieval Palace*

1.3.3 Although the first substantial stone-built remains on the site of the Palace belong to the late 13th century palace of Anthony Bek, the Bishop of Durham, settlement on the site from at least the eleventh century onwards can be demonstrated from archaeological and historical sources. Eltham is first mentioned in Domesday Book (1086) as being held by Alwold from Edward the Confessor before 1066. After the



Conquest it is recorded that the manor was held by Haimo, the Sheriff of Kent, on behalf of Odo, the Bishop of Bayeux and Earl of Kent. After the exile of Odo in 1088 the estate passed to the Earl of Gloucester and in 1216 passed to the De Clare family. In 1278 Gilbert De Clare granted the Eltham estate to John de Vesci and in 1295 his heir William conveyed the manor to Bishop Bek. The earliest recorded structure on the site, identified by Wood's excavations between 1975 and 1979 (Woods 1983 215-65) was a timber built building of uncertain size and function, dated by Woods to the late 11th century and considered by him to probably belong to the early Norman manor held by Haimo. Two further phases of wooden building, dating from the late 12th and early 13th centuries were identified on the site during Wood's 1970s excavations and these remains were sealed by a layer of mid to late 13th century soil suggesting that the area was under cultivation during the second half of the century. This soil was overlain by a layer of West Country blue roof slates, interpreted by Wood (1983 218) as probably coming from a substantial house, possibly the home of John de Vesci, which appeared to lie just to the north of the excavation area in the area later crossed by the northern arm of the moat. Little now remains of Bek's stone built manorial complex although the excavations in the 1950s revealed the western perimeter wall and two towers at its north-west and south-west corners and Woods 1970s excavations revealed remains of possible chapel and hall structures. Bek passed the newly built, and probably moated, stone manor house to Edward II in 1305 although he appears to have continued to live there until his death in 1311.

- 1.3.4 In 1311 Edwards Queen Isabella took up residence, staying there frequently during the reigns of Edward II and of their son Edward III. It was used extensively as a royal palace for the next 200 years with much rebuilding and many additions and there are accounts for many royal buildings (now gone) put up in the 14th century. The principal surviving late medieval building on the site, the Great Hall, was begun by Edward IV in 1475. Edward probably also built the stone moat bridge and is known to have built a range of new lodgings at the west side of the Great Court. Henry VII added further buildings (now gone) and Henry VIII rebuilt the chapel, whose foundations now lie beneath the North Lawn. At the end of the 16th century the palace consisted of the Great Court, containing the royal apartments and the Great Hall, by the moat from the two outer courtyards, Green Court and Outer Court, which were divided by the gatehouse between them.

### *The Medieval Park*

- 1.3.5 During the medieval occupation of the Palace the lands to the south formed part of the Royal Park, which was probably used primarily for hunting and was almost certainly heavily wooded. The parkland at this time was divided into three separate areas: Horn Park to the west, Middle Park to the south and Great Park to the east. To the north of the Palace lay the main road and what would appear to be the medieval focus of settlement. This relict medieval field pattern is probably most clearly marked on Holmes' 1749 map of Eltham which shows both Middle Park and Horn Park still retaining their characteristic round shape, girdled by roads. The 18th century boundary between Middle Park and Great Park, which may reflect the

medieval boundary between sections of park runs along the track that leads down to Chapel Farm. The names of both Middle Park and Horn Park are still retained in the names of the post-war housing developments that now occupy their sites. The site of Great Park is now occupied by the Blackheath Royal Golf Course.

### *The Post-Medieval Palace and Landscape*

- 1.3.6 From the middle of the 16th century onwards the importance of the palace declined and by the end of the century it appears to have become little more than a hunting lodge for the still extensive parks that surrounded it on three sides. The palace fell into disrepair in the early 17th century: James I last stayed in it in 1612 and after this date it appears to have suffered much neglect. The account for 1617-18 mentions a number of rooms either collapsed or about to collapse and by 1627 the house was being propped up in various places. In 1632 parts of it are recorded as having blown down and a parliamentary survey of 1649 declared the house to be 'much out of repair and so not tenantable'. During the Commonwealth the manor and palace were sold to Colonel Nathaniel Rich who appears to have demolished most of the buildings with the exception of Great Hall. During this period the parks were also heavily plundered with much of the timber going to Cromwell's shipyards: the 1649 survey records that Middle Park contains '333 acres of woodland, the trees marked for the navy being 1000, the rest, old and fit only for the fire being 324'. In April 1656 the diarist John Evelyn wrote: 'Went to see his Majesty's house at Eltham, both Palace and Chapel in miserable ruins, the noble wood and park destroyed by Rich the rebel'.
- 1.3.7 With the resumption of the monarchy the land returned to the ownership of the king and in 1663 Charles II leased the palace and its land to Sir John Shaw, a supporter of the king during his exile. Shaw did not use the old palace as his residence but rebuilt the old Lodge in the centre of Great Park to its east and laid out large and ornate gardens to the south. The palace continued in great disrepair with the Great Hall, by now the only substantial remaining building, used as a barn and the former parkland in use as farmland.
- 1.3.8 The first detailed maps of the area, Rocque's 1746 survey of London and Holmes' 1749 survey of Eltham, show the decline of the old palace eloquently. Rocque's map clearly shows the elaborate avenues, gardens and pools of Shaw's new house while to the west of it lies the old palace set among rough meadows and orchards. Holmes' 1749 survey, which gives the names and holdings of the tenants (the land is still nominally in the possession of the King) also demonstrates this and shows that the land around the palace is divided into a number of separate holdings at this time.
- 1.3.9 The second half of the 18th century and the early 19th century saw an increasing interest in the 'romantic ruins' of the site and this period has produced a wealth of prints, sketches and watercolours of the site, including notable ones by Turner and Sanby, as well as a number of contemporary descriptions. This interest does not appear to have led to an immediate improvement in the condition of the hall, which at this time appears to have still been in use as a barn. In 1827 the building is



recorded as having become so dilapidated that it was recommended by the Crown that it be demolished and the hammerbeam roof moved for re-use at Windsor Castle, which was being rebuilt at the time. Only a spirited campaign, culminating in a debate in the House of Lords, prevented this action from being undertaken.

- 1.3.10 Eltham Palace was however becoming more gentrified: in 1818 Moat Court, a large 'modern house' incorporating part of the old gatehouse was constructed in the inner courtyard just to the south of the moat. The 1844 tithe map shows the increasing development of the site. The area of the palace is now occupied by the new Moat Court, its gardens and outbuildings while to the south lie the buildings of Court Farm. The Great Hall is still marked as a barn. The land to the north and east is now occupied by gardens and pleasure grounds associated with houses that have begun to spring up along Court Road and Court Yard Road. In 1859 Court Farmhouse was improved and extended, it is recorded at this time that the old Court Farmhouse contained portions of the Tudor lodgings, and was converted into a private house (Eltham Court). It was at this time that the livestock were finally moved from the Great Hall and the hall was cleared and converted to a tennis court. By the time of the 1st edition OS 25" (1864) the division of the area within the moat into two separate holdings (Eltham Court and Moat Court) can be clearly seen. This map also shows the continuing development of the area to the east of the moat with the construction of a house and further gardens. By the time of the OS 2nd edition (1897) the area had become further built up with houses within the triangle formed by Court Yard, Court Road and Tilt Yard Approach and almost complete development of the west side of Court Road. This basic pattern is also reflected on the 1916 OS 25", the last detailed map of the palace and its surroundings before the changes undertaken by Stephen Courtald in the 1930s.
- 1.3.11 In 1933 Stephen Courtald obtained the lease of Eltham Palace and its remaining grounds from the Crown. He completed the restoration of the Great Hall, already begun by renovations by the crown in 1822 and 1912, swept away the 19th century tenements to construct new Eltham Hall, extended the moat (then confined to the north side) along the east and part of the west sides and laid out new gardens, tennis courts and greenhouses.

## 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 development.
- 2.1.2 To make available the results of the archaeological investigation.

## 2.2 Methodology

- 2.2.1 The route of the trench was set out by the palace gardener to reduce damage to the garden and flower beds. It was hand dug to a depth of 0.3 - 0.4 m and the trench was 0.2 m wide (Fig. 2).
- 2.2.2 All archaeological features were planned at a scale of 1:100 and where excavated their sections drawn at scales of 1:20. All excavated features were photographed using colour slide and black and white print film. 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

#### *Tennis court area*

- 3.1.1 The trench cut into a disturbed natural (5) of light brown silty clay loam. This had been overlain and cut by a number of features. These consisted of a 0.23 m thick layer of compacted brick and rubble (6) sealed below a 0.10 m thick layer of topsoil. This was the base of the 1930's hard court of the palace's tennis courts (Figs 2 & 3, Section 3). For most of its length the trench cut through a 0.3 m thick topsoil (1) overlying the disturbed natural (5).

#### *Top of moat*

- 3.1.2 Where the trench entered into the moat of the palace, it exposed more of disturbed soil layer (5), which had been overlain by a mortar and brick rubble spread (4). This had been dumped as part of some form of landscaping (Figs 2 & 3, Section 2). Further to the west on the lip of the moat, a section of a brick retaining wall (3) was observed. It measured 0.3 m x 0.5 m x 0.25 m standing four courses high and bonded with white sandy mortar. This was overlain by a layer of yellowish brown silty loam (2) with occasional brick, tile and stone which was seen from the top of the moat and down its slope (Figs 2 & 3, Section 1). This layer appears to be upcast from the landscaping along the edge of the moat. These were all overlain by a 0.16 - 30 m-thick layer of topsoil (1).

#### *Forecourt inside the moat*

- 3.1.3 Where the new cable trench was excavated on the south-west side of the bridge over the moat, it was cut along the outer edge of the turning circle in front of the palace. The trench was 0.35 m deep and cut into garden topsoil (1), except where the cable was to go along the back north-west side of the parking area. The trench was abandoned as a 0.20 m thick concrete base was found below the surface. This is thought to be from a building noted on the 1916 map of the palace.



### 3.2 Finds

3.2.1 A number of finds were recovered from the watching brief and consisted of the following:

Context 2	1 x Stone Fragment
	1 x CBM Tile Fragment
Context 3	1 x Brick
Context 4	2 x CBM Fragments (Brick and Tile)
	1 x Fragment of Glass

### 3.3 Palaeo-environmental remains

3.3.1 No deposits suitable for environmental sampling were identified during the watching brief.

## 4 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

4.1.1 The results from the watching brief revealed that the trench did not penetrate much through the thick cultivated layer of topsoil. Only in three areas were other features recorded. One was along the north edge of the tennis court where material was laid to make up the base for the courts. The second was where the trench went over the eastern lip and into the moat, where the top of a post medieval retaining wall was uncovered together with a layer of material related to landscaping of the edge of the moat. On the inside of the moat, in the forecourt area, a thick layer of topsoil and the concrete base to a outbuilding were observed of relatively recent date.

## APPENDICES

## APPENDIX 1 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	Layer				Topsoil	
2	Layer				Make up layer	Stone and Brick Fragments
3	Wall	0.40 m	0.50 m	0.25 m	Retaining wall	Brick
4	Layer				Rubble spread	Glass and CBM Fragments
5	Layer				Disturbed natural	
6	Layer				Tennis Court make up	

## APPENDIX 2 BIBLIOGRAPHY AND REFERENCES

Camilla Beresford, 1995 ELTHAM PALACE Some Notes on the Implications of the Proposed Car Park on the Historic Landscape

OAU, 1996 Eltham Palace, Borough of Greenwich, London Archaeological Evaluation

OAU, 1999 The Gatehouse, Court yard, Eltham Palace Archaeological Desk Based Assessment

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

OAU, 1996 Eltham Palace, London, Borough of Greenwich *Written Scheme of Investigation for an Archaeological Evaluation*

Woods H, 1983 Excavations at Eltham Palace, 1975-9 LAMAST 3 1983 215-65

## Appendix 3 GLSMR/RCHME NMR Archaeological Report Form

## 1) TYPE OF RECORDING

Evaluation, Excavation, Watching Brief, Building Recording, Survey, Geoarchaeological  
Evaluation, Fieldwalking, Other

## 2) LOCATION

Borough: Greenwich

Site address: Eltham Palace

Site Name: Cable Trenches, Eltham Palace, London. Site Code: ELPCT 02

Nat. grid Refs: centre of site: 424,740

Limits of site: N 42395,74130 S 42450,73818

E 42655,73985 W 42285,73965

## 3) ORGANISATION

Name of archaeological unit/company/society: Oxford Archaeology

Address: Janus House, Osney Mead, Oxford OX2 OES

Site director/supervisor: James Mumford

Project manager: Jon Hiller

Funded by: English Heritage

## 4) DURATION

Date fieldwork started 11th September 2002 Date finished: 17th February 2003

Fieldwork previously notified? YES/NO

Fieldwork will continue? YES/NO/NOT KNOWN

## 5) PERIODS REPRESENTED

Palaeolithic, Mesolithic, Neolithic, Bronze Age, Iron Age, Roman, Saxon (pre-AD 1066),  
Medieval (AD 1066-1485), Post-Medieval, Unknown

## 6) PERIOD SUMMARIES

Post medieval landscaping of the grounds with retaining wall for moat and ground make up  
for tennis court. Most of trench in thick cultivated topsoil.

## 7) NATURAL

Type: Woolwich Beds, which comprises clays, sands and loams.

Height above Ordnance datum: 59.5 m OD



## 8) LOCATION OF ARCHIVES

- a) Please provide an estimate of the quantity of material in your possession for the following categories:

NOtes	4	PLans	4	PHotos	13	NGtives	13
SLides	13	COrrrespondence		MScripts (unpub reports, etc)			
BULk finds		SMall finds		SOil samples			
OTher							

- b) The archive has been prepared and stored in accordance with MGC standards and will be deposited in the following location:
- c) Has a security copy of the archive been made?: YES/NO

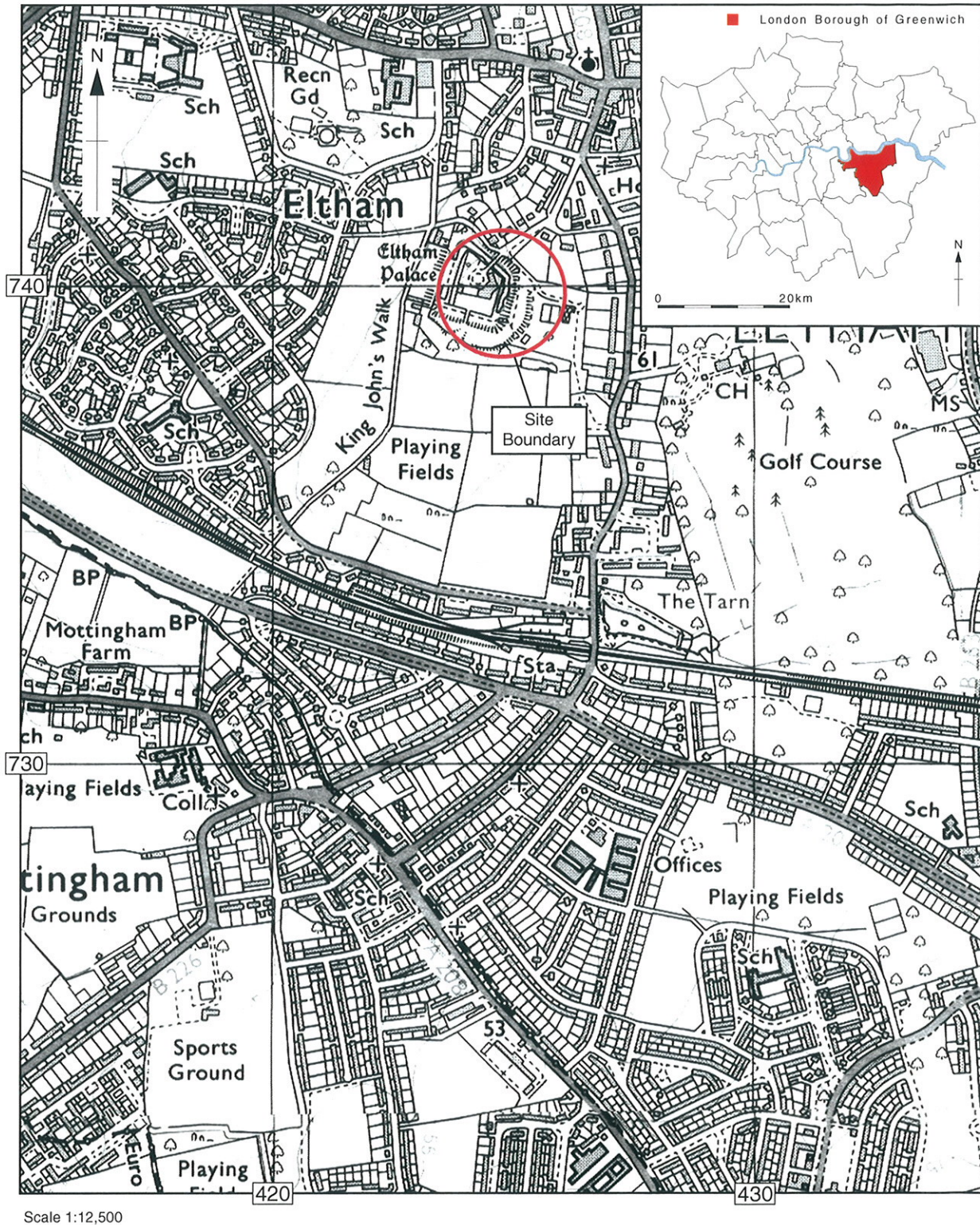
## 10) BIBLIOGRAPHY

See Appendix 2 Bibliography and references

SIGNED:

DATE:

NAME :



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Figure 1: Site location



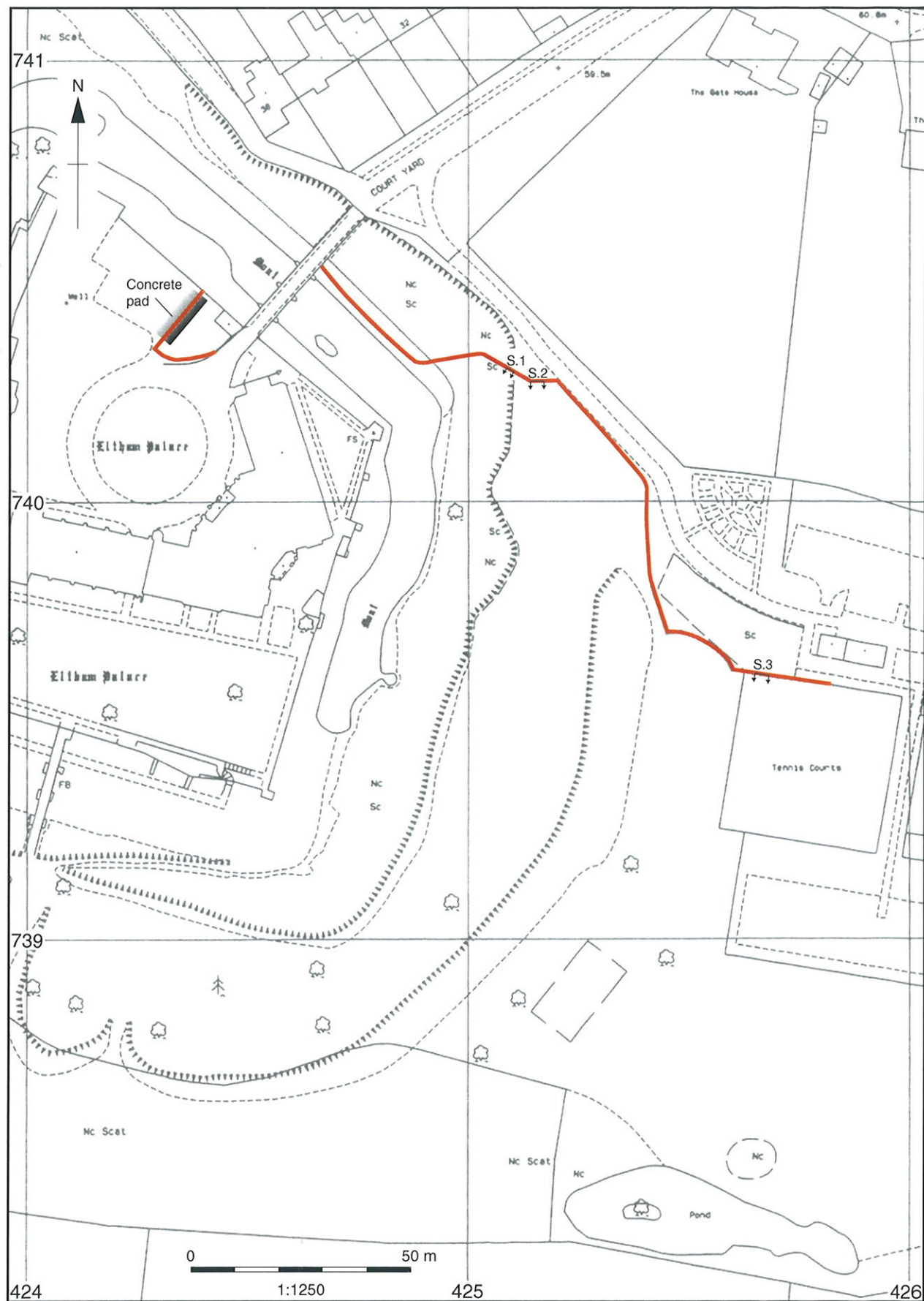


Figure 2: Site plan and location of sections



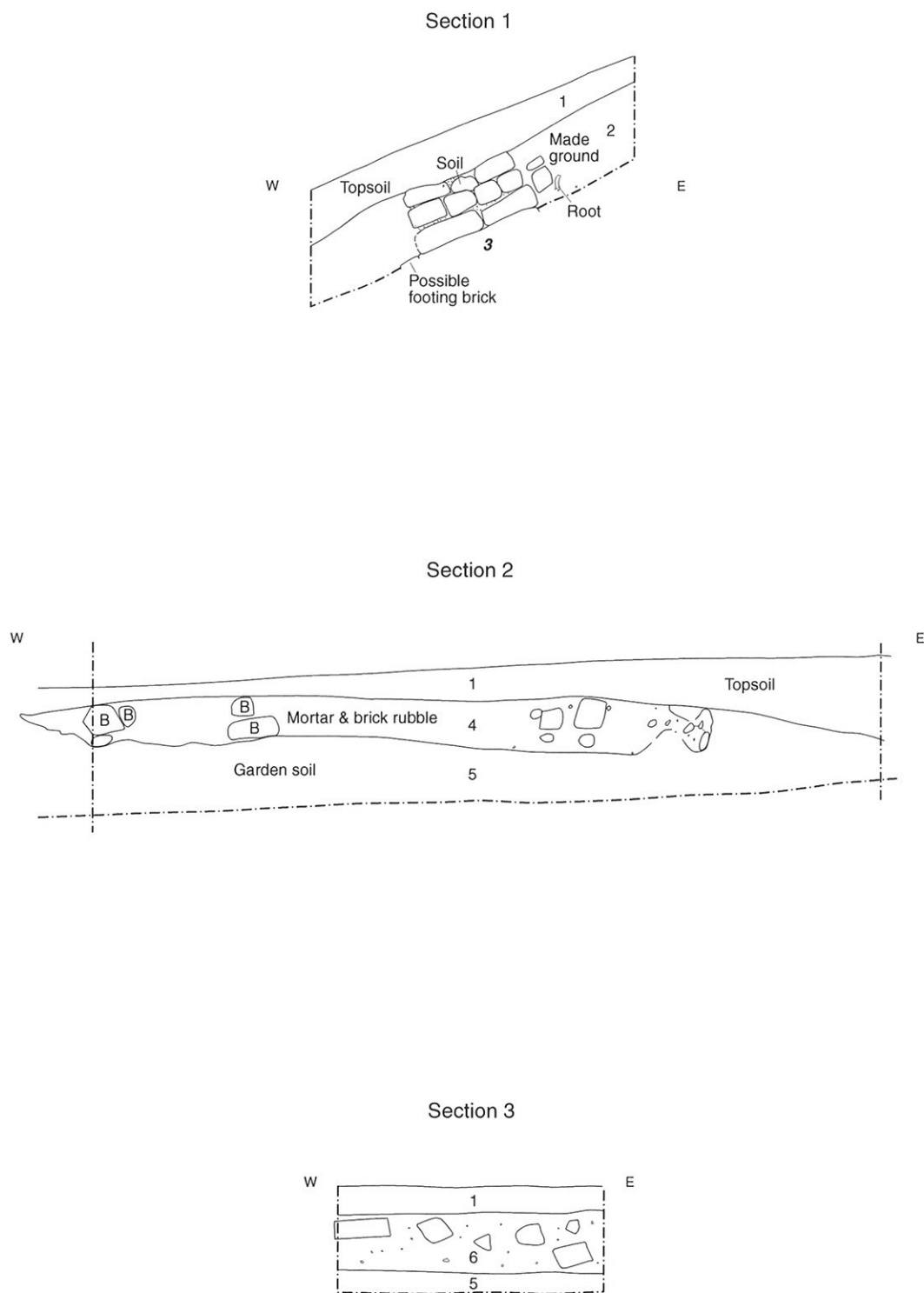


Figure 3: Sections 1-3



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