

Gifford and Partners

SLYPE WALL

NEW COLLEGE

OXFORD

**ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF
REPORT**

NGR SP 5180 0648

OXFORD ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT

FEBRUARY 1998

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Summary

During the summer of 1997 the Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) undertook a watching brief at New College, Oxford (NGR SP 5180 0648), during the excavation of seven pile positions and four soakaways by Gifford Consulting Engineers. The soakaways 1 and 2 between the city walls produced sequences of deposits and some cut features with associated stonework; soakaway 3 in the vegetable garden produced garden soils as seen here previously; soakaway 4 produced a shallow retaining wall running north-south, with made ground to the west and garden soils to the east. A stone-lined culvert was exposed at the base of the outer city wall in the drain run from soakaway 4. The pile positions showed details of the construction and periodic repair of the outer city wall and also showed the sequence of dumped deposits running between the walls to a depth of one metre. Pile position 1 (test pit 4 in the first watching brief) was the most interesting due both to the absence of the ledge in the wall at this point, and to the presence of a surface of limestone cobbling, seen here previously, which is believed to run between the two walls at a depth of 0.60m below modern ground surface. The full extent of this feature remains unknown at this time, however it was not seen in pile position 2 immediately to the east. It is therefore believed to be a localised feature, possibly related to the gateway in the inner city wall immediately to the south-west.

1 Introduction

The watching brief was commissioned by Gifford and Partners (Southampton) on behalf of New College, on the advice of the Oxford Archaeological Advisory Service (OAAS). A part of the retaining wall on the north side of the slype, which overlies the line of the outer defensive wall, was considered to be in some danger of collapse. The proposed solution of Gifford and Partners (Consulting Engineers) was to insert a concrete wall against the south side of the outer wall, link the two together with steel ties and anchor the ties by means of piles driven c. 8 m into the raised roadway between the two walls. It was also proposed to improve drainage in the lower-lying areas of the college grounds, with the provision of four new soakaways. This watching brief is further to the work done by the OAU in 1996 (OAU 1996), assessing the character of the existing wall foundations, and in April 1997 (OAU 1997), assessing the archaeological potential of the deposits to be removed and/or destroyed by the proposed works.

2 Background

The notion of a double wall protecting the north-east side of Oxford was first introduced by the Reverend H E Salter in his "Lecture on the Town Walls of Oxford"; it was established beyond doubt by subsequent documentary research and small-scale excavation (Palmer 1976; Durham et al 1983). The outer wall was probably built between 1280 and 1300 within the extant town ditch, and the resulting gap between the walls, now known as the slype, was infilled. By the late 14th century the city had little practical use for any kind of walled defence, and the maintenance of the outer wall was discontinued. It was fairly rapidly dismantled to the ground level now existing between the walls, and the town ditch was allowed to fill up. There is

some evidence, in Loggan's 17th-century map of Oxford, that the wall was rebuilt as part of the reinforcement of the city defences during the Civil War; however subsequent to this the infilling of the inter-mural ditch continued. The area immediately to the north of the line of the outer wall was infilled and, in the 19th century, was developed as gardens behind the new frontage of New College, along the south side of Holywell Street.

3 Aims

To record any archaeological remains exposed on site during the course of the proposed works to previously established standards (Wilkinson 1992), and to secure the preservation by record of any archaeology the presence and nature of which could not be established in advance.

4 Methodology

A constant presence was maintained on site during excavations in the slype; separate inspection visits were also made by prior arrangement with the contractor. Machine excavation of the soakaways and pile positions was by Kubota, and took place under close archaeological supervision. Within the constraints imposed by Health and Safety considerations the deposits and features exposed in section and plan were cleaned, inspected and recorded in plan, section and by colour slide and black and white 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 1 - 4)

Soakaway No. 1.

Soakaway 1 measured 2.80 m square on the surface. The earliest deposit seen here was (1009), a clean yellow/white subangular gravel with 10% fine-medium sand. This was sealed by (1008), a friable mid olive/brown silty coarse gravel with 10% silt and 5% small gravel. This underlay (1007), a friable mid orange/brown silty clay loam with 5% fine gravel and 5% medium-coarse gravel. This was sealed by (1006), a thin band of fine and medium gravels with 10% mid brown silty clay loam.

These deposits, with the exception of (1006), were cut by [1010], the base of which was not seen, but the northern side of which sloped steadily up at 45-50 degrees to a sharp break at the lower horizon of (1006). [1010] was filled by (1011)-(1014). (1014) was a tenacious dark brown/gray clay with 2% silt. This was sealed by (1013), a band of dirty redeposited natural (1009). This underlay (1012), a friable mid orange/brown silty clay loam with 5% coarse subangular gravel and 5% clay. This was sealed by (1011), a friable mid orange/brown silty clay loam with 1% fine gravel/silt and 10% medium-coarse gravels. (1011) was the latest, uppermost fill in cut [1010]. Immediately above [1010] was a recut [1003], the base of which sloped upward from the upper horizon of (1006) at a regular 45 degrees to break at the lower horizon of (1001). [1003] was filled by (1004), a friable dark gray/black silty clay loam

containing a high proportion of domestic rubbish. This fill was continuous, although very mixed and dirty, throughout the cut.

To the north, [1003] cut away (1005) which sealed (1006). (1005) was a friable mid brown silty clay loam, with 5% fine gravel and 5% medium/coarse gravels. This was sealed by (1002), similarly cut away to the south by [1003], a friable mid brown/gray silty clay loam with 5% fine gravel and 10% medium-coarse gravels. (1004), [1003] and (1002) were all sealed by (1001) a layer of hardcore and limestone fragments. This in turn was sealed by (1000), a thin skim of tarmac.

Soakaway No. 2.

Soakaway 2 measured 2.90 m square on the surface. The earliest deposit seen here was (1115), a clean yellow/white gravel with 10% fine-medium sand. This was sealed to the north by (1109) and to the south by (1114). (1109) was a friable mid olive/brown silty gravel with 10% silt and 5% fine gravel. (1114) was a friable mid orange/brown silty clay loam with 10% fine gravel and 1% silt. (1109) was sealed by (1116), a tenacious olive/brown silty clay loam with 2% fine silt and 10% fine and medium gravels. (1116) was sealed by (1108), a friable mid orange/brown silty clay loam with 5% fine gravel and 5% medium gravel.

(1114) to the south overlies (1115), (1109), (1116) and (1108); it is possible that this deposit lay in cut [1010], although the cut did not appear in the western section of soakaway 2. (1114) was sealed by (1113), a heavily rooted friable dark gray/black silty clay loam, containing a high proportion of domestic refuse, with 20% charcoal and 1% silt. (1113) was cut by [1110], which had a flat base with sides sloping up vertically to a sharp break of slope at the lower horizon of (1101). The cut was filled with rough-hewn limestone blocks bonded with a soft olive/yellow mortar. This structure, interpreted as a small retaining wall, appeared to be faced on its north and south sides, with a core of smaller blocks, but no rubble, between the faces. The largest block evident in the section measured 0.20 m by 0.20 m by 0.10 m; the smallest was 0.07 m by 0.08 m by 0.06 m. Both [1110] and (1113) also appeared to be in cut [1010], cutting the sequence of deposits (1102) - (1107) to the north.

(1107) was a thin band of fine and medium gravels with 10% mid brown silty clay loam, very similar to (1006), but as seen here it was packed with broken roofing slates and was angling sharply downwards, at approximately 35-40 degrees, to the north. (1107) was sealed by (1106), a friable mid brown silty clay loam with 5% fine gravel and 5% medium gravel. (1106) was sealed by (1102), a friable mid brown/gray silty clay loam with 5% silt and 10% medium gravel. Both (1102) and (1106) were cut by [1103], a vertical cut with a rounded base, cut from the lower horizon of (1101). [1103] contained (1105) a ceramic water pipe and (1104), a mid gray clay loam containing concrete and brick fragments in varying quantities. All the deposits and cuts in this section were sealed by (1101), a layer of limestone fragments and hardcore makeup. This in turn was sealed by (1100), a thin skim of tarmac.

Soakaway No. 3.

Soakaway 3 measured 3 m east-west by 6 m north-south on the surface. The earliest deposit seen here was (1304), a tenacious mid gray silty/gravelly clay with 10% silt and fine gravel and 10% medium gravels. This was sealed by (1303), a friable light brown/orange gravelly clay loam with 5% fine gravel and 10% medium gravels. This underlay (1302) a friable mid brown/orange silty clay loam with 5% fine gravel, 1% charcoal flecks and 2% medium gravels. This was sealed by (1301), a friable orange gravelly clay loam with 10% fine to medium gravels and 10% limestone rubble. This underlay (1300), a loose mid gray rich clay loam with 10% silt and fine gravel.

Soakaway No. 4.

Soakaway 4 measured 3 m east-west by 6 m north-south on the surface. The earliest deposit seen here was (1209), a tenacious mid gray gravelly/silty clay with 10% silt and fine gravel and 10% medium subrounded gravels. This was sealed by (1202), a friable light brown/orange gravelly clay loam with 5% fine gravel and 10% medium gravels. To the east, (1202) was sealed by (1201), a friable orange gravelly clay loam with 10% fine to medium gravels and 10% limestone rubble. (1201) partially overlay (1205), a roughly built retaining wall of rough-hewn limestone blocks seen to run north-south across the centre of soakaway 4.

After recording (1205) was removed in plan, although it remains in section. It was abutted to the west by (1208), (1207) and (1206). (1208) was a band of fine and medium gravels with 10% mid brown silty clay loam, and 10% fractured roof tiles. This was sealed by (1207), a friable mid brown silty clay loam with 5% fine gravel and 5% medium gravel. This was sealed by (1206), which also slightly overlay (1205) to the east, and was a friable dark gray/black clay loam with 2% silt. All the deposits seen within the soakaway excavation were sealed by (1200), a loose mid gray rich clay loam with 10% silt and fine gravel, bearing grass.

A small drainage trench was dug running south-east from soakaway 4 to the outer wall; 0.70 m wide and 0.70 m deep. In section it displayed (1202), (1201) and (1200). 0.45 m north of the wall, the section displayed a cut [1203] and fill (1204). The base of [1203] was not seen; its northern side rose vertically to the lower horizon of (1200). (1204) was very similar to (1200), but with a higher - 20% - silt content and 5% small subangular limestone pieces. The trench also revealed some large limestone slabs in plan, one of which had the stub of an iron spike driven into its centre. On removal, this slab revealed a stone lined culvert running parallel with the outer wall, 0.55 m deep below the slab level. The culvert was formed from rough-hewn limestone slabs. This feature was only seen within the confines of the drainage trench and its full extent remains unknown at this time.

Pile Position 1.

Pile position 1 was excavated in the same location as test pit 4, and measured 1 m deep by 1 m north-south by 1.25 m east-west. Backfilled material was removed south

of the *in situ* gas pipe to the level of the limestone pavement. This and its underlying limestone rubble makeup were then removed archaeologically and excavation proceeded to the contractor's cut-off point of 1 m depth. This revealed one further deposit (307) underlying the limestone rubble makeup. (307) was a general spread of very mixed, friable brown/gray clay gravel, with very occasional charcoal flecks and limestone pieces. The lower horizon of this deposit was not seen, however finds were retrieved from it.

Pile Position 2.

Pile position 2 measured 1 m deep by 1.46 m north-south by 1.27 m east-west. The ledge in the outer city wall (204) was seen here, projecting 0.22 m south of perpendicular; the material between the ledge and the base of the coping (flush with the modern tarmac) comprised uncoursed rubble slabs. There was no sign of limestone pavement (305).

The earliest deposit seen here was (405), a tenacious mid brown gravelly clay, very similar to (307), measuring 0.12 m to the base of the section. This was sealed by (404), a tenacious dark gray clay with 2% silt 0.04 m thick. This underlay (403), a layer of clean white gravel, mortar pieces and rough limestone pieces, 0.33 m thick. This was sealed by (402), a friable dark gray silty clay loam with 20% small-medium limestone pieces, 0.22 m thick. This underlay (401), a friable mid brown silty clay loam, 0.22 m thick, the upper 0.08 m of which contained a markedly higher proportion of small-medium stones than the rest of this deposit. This was sealed by (400), 0.05 m of modern tarmac.

Pile Position 3.

Pile position 3 measured 1 m deep by 1.90 m north-south by 1.26 m east-west. The ledge in the outer city wall (204) was seen here, projecting out 0.20 m south of perpendicular; composed of large, rough-hewn limestone blocks.

The earliest deposit seen here was (505), a friable mid brown gravelly clay measuring 0.27 m to the base of the excavation. This was sealed by (504), a tenacious dark gray clay with 2% fine silt, 0.06 m thick. This underlay (503), a deposit of clean white medium subrounded gravel, mortar lumps and small-medium rough limestone pieces, 0.12 m thick. This was sealed by (502), a friable dark gray silty clay loam with patchy mortar lenses, 0.18 m thick. This underlay (501), a friable mid brown silty clay loam, 0.11 m thick. This was sealed by (500), a thin skim of modern tarmac 0.04 m thick.

Pile Position 4.

Pile position 4 measured 1 m deep by 1.20 m east-west by 1.90 m north-south. The ledge in the outer city wall (204) was seen here, projecting 0.10 m south of perpendicular at a depth of 0.60 m below the tarmac. At this point the wall is composed of large fairly rough limestone blocks, the joints of which show fragments of a decayed lime mortar.

The earliest deposit seen here was (605), a tenacious dark brown clay gravel 0.13 m thick to the base of the excavation. This was cut away to the south by [606], a linear cut extending beyond the boundaries of the excavation to the east, west and south. It was filled by (607), very similar to (1006) and [606], and may well be the same as [1003]. The cut was cleaned and recorded in plan but not excavated below the 1m point. This was sealed by (604), 0.05 m of tenacious mid gray clay with 2% fine silt. This underlay (603), a deposit of yellow/white medium subrounded gravel, small mortar pieces and small-medium rough limestone fragments, 0.30 m thick. This was sealed by (602), a friable dark gray/brown silty clay loam with 20% small-medium limestone pieces, 0.23 m thick. This underlay (601), a friable brown silty clay loam with 10% small subangular stones, 0.23 m thick. This was sealed by (600), the modern tarmac 0.05 m thick.

Pile Position 5.

Pile position 5 measured 1 m deep by 1.20 m east-west by 1.85 m north-south. The ledge in the outer city wall (204) was not seen here. Below tarmac, the wall still comprises large patchily mortared limestone blocks.

The earliest deposit seen here was (702), a loose mid brown silty clay loam with numerous lumps of tarmac, 0.88 m deep. It continued unbroken to the base of the section. This was sealed by (701), a thin layer of pinkish medium-coarse subangular gravels, 0.05 m thick. This was sealed by (700), a layer of rolled concrete 0.07 m thick.

Pile Position 6.

Pile position 6 measured 1 m deep by 1.20 m east-west by 1.90 m north-south. The ledge in the outer city wall (204) was seen here, projecting 0.17 m from perpendicular to the south at the east end of the excavation. At the west end this distance had narrowed to 0.07 m, at a depth of 0.85 m below tarmac. At this point the ledge is composed of flat limestone slabs; between this and the coping the wall is composed of large limestone blocks and flat slabs with a patchy soft mortar bond as before.

The earliest deposit seen here was (806), a mid brown silty gravelly clay, measuring 0.07 m to the base of the section. This was sealed by (805), a thin band of patchy yellow mortar, 0.05 m thick. This was sealed by (804), 0.28 m of mid gray silty clay loam with occasional oyster shell fragments. This underlay (803), a thin band of brown silty gravel 0.09 m thick. This was sealed by (802), a friable mid brown silty clay with 2% charcoal inclusions, 0.28 m thick. This underlay (801), 0.18 m of thick mid yellow/brown sand and gravel. This was sealed by (800), 0.05 m of tarmac.

Pile Position 7.

Pile position 7 measured 1 m deep by 1.25 m east-west by 1.85 m north-south. The ledge in the outer city wall (204) was seen here, albeit in a slightly different form from that seen elsewhere. As seen here it takes the form of three 'steps', projecting out

from the wall 0.50 m southwards at its furthest extent, 1 m below tarmac. The second step projects 0.25 m to the south at a depth of 0.90 m, and the third step projects 0.18 m at a depth of 0.78 m. The wall itself is composed of large rough-hewn limestone blocks as seen elsewhere, except for the steps which once more are formed from slabs.

The earliest deposit seen here was (906), a mid brown silty gravelly clay, measuring 0.07 m to the base of the excavation. This was sealed by (905), a patchy, thin band of mortar, 0.05 m thick. This underlay (904), a mid gray silty clay loam with occasional oyster shell fragments, 0.28 m thick. This was sealed by (903), a thin band of brown silty gravel, 0.09 m thick. This underlay (902), a friable mid brown silty clay with occasional charcoal inclusions, 0.28 m thick. This was sealed by (901), 0.18 m of thick yellow/brown sand and gravel. This was sealed by (900), 0.05 m of modern tarmac.

6 Discussion

The Soakaways

Natural gravel, sloping down to the north, was seen in soakaways 1, 2 and 4. It is thought likely that this slope represents the southern edge of the ditch in which the outer city wall was initially constructed. Soakaway 3 was of little archaeological interest, producing only garden soils overlying natural; it is therefore not discussed further.

Soakaways 1 and 2, in the slype, produced sequences of deposits indicating deliberate infilling of the space between the walls, and evidence for construction in the slype in the 18th and 19th centuries; the limestone retaining wall (1112) is possibly a remnant of the cottages and workshops that filled the slype at this time. It is thought likely that most of the deposits seen here relate to the construction and/or demolition of these properties and the subsequent remodelling of the slype behind the new frontage of New College.

The deposits seen in soakaways 1 and 2 are very similar to those seen in pit 3 during the previous watching brief (OAU 1997), the general paucity of finds suggesting that they are not the result of a gradual accumulation of soil, but rather represent the deliberate importation of material from elsewhere for use as fill. The lack of any construction cut for the wall through any of the deposits seen would also support this argument.

Soakaway 4 produced two different sections on its east and west sides, separated by a shallow unmortared retaining wall. To the east were garden soils identical to those seen in soakaway 3; to the west made ground very similar to that seen in the slype, abutting the wall. It is thought likely that this represents an earlier layout of the sunken garden area, possibly related to the structures in the slype, with gardens to the east and a reduced area to the west. Artefactual evidence from the made ground would appear to indicate that it was filled in at approximately the same time as the slype. The excavation of soakaway 4 did not proceed any further westwards, nor any deeper, and it is therefore not possible to speculate on what may have been here prior to its infilling.

The Pile Positions

The area of limestone cobbling identified during the previous watching brief was seen again but proved to be a discrete feature; the fact that it does not extend eastwards between the walls may indicate that it represents a localised surface in the vicinity of the gate immediately to the west, possibly the refurbishment of a heavily used access road into the city. Its extent to the south remains unknown at this time. It was suggested (OAU 1997) that the northern kerbed edge of the cobbling might coincide with the southern edge of the ledge in the outer city wall, thus making (305) contemporary with the earliest phase of the outer city wall. The discovery of several pieces of glass, tentatively dated to the 16th century, immediately below the rubble makeup for (305) makes this unlikely, however.

The absence of the ledge here is not felt to be of any significance in relation to the pavement; the ledge is absent from several other places along the wall, due to periodic phases of robbing, and also repair and refurbishment of varying quality.

The excavation of the seven pile positions and the shallow trench for the new concrete retaining wall have given a valuable insight into the construction and periodic repair of the city wall.

John Dalton
OAU
February 1998.

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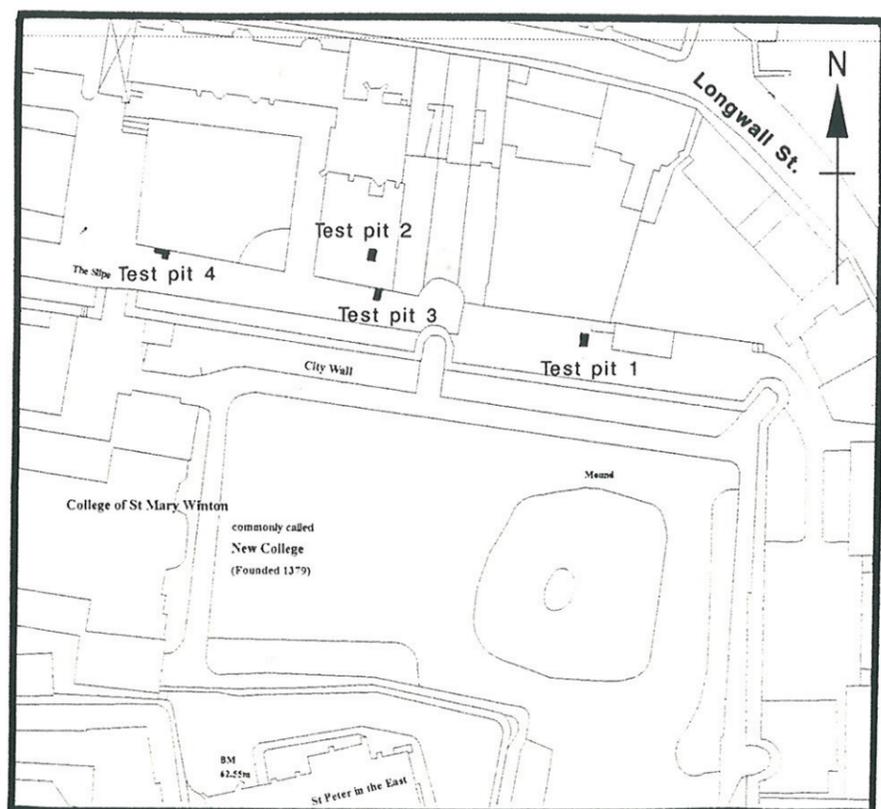
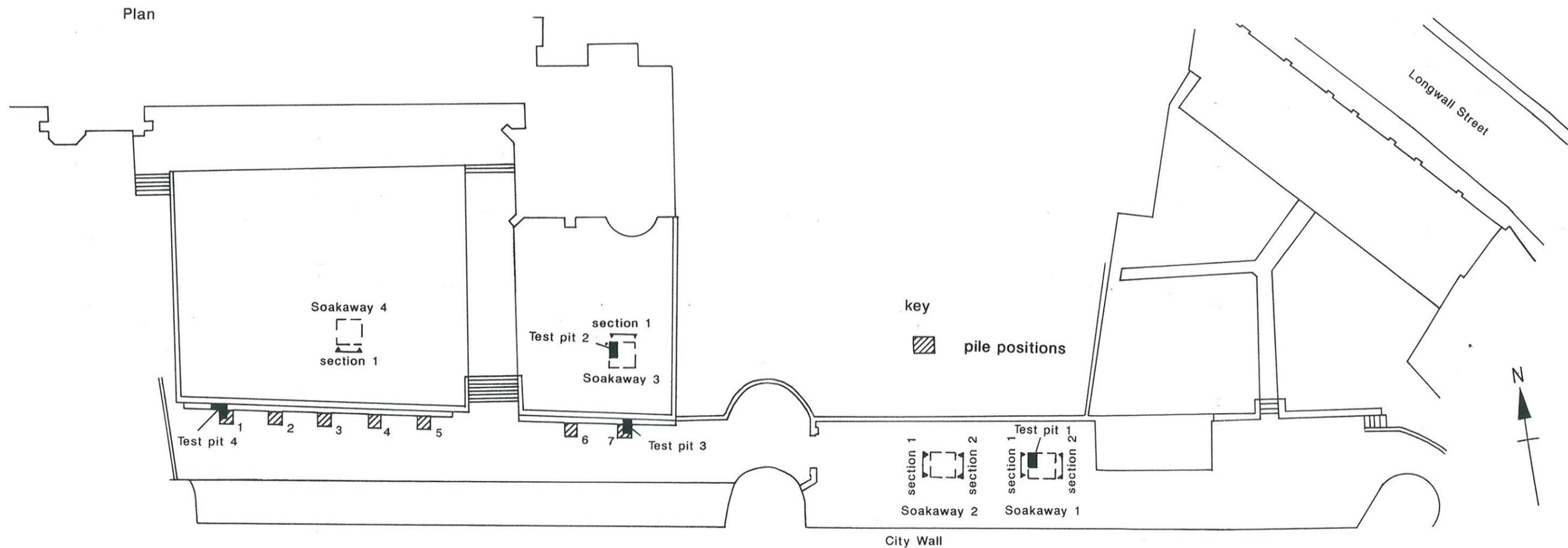
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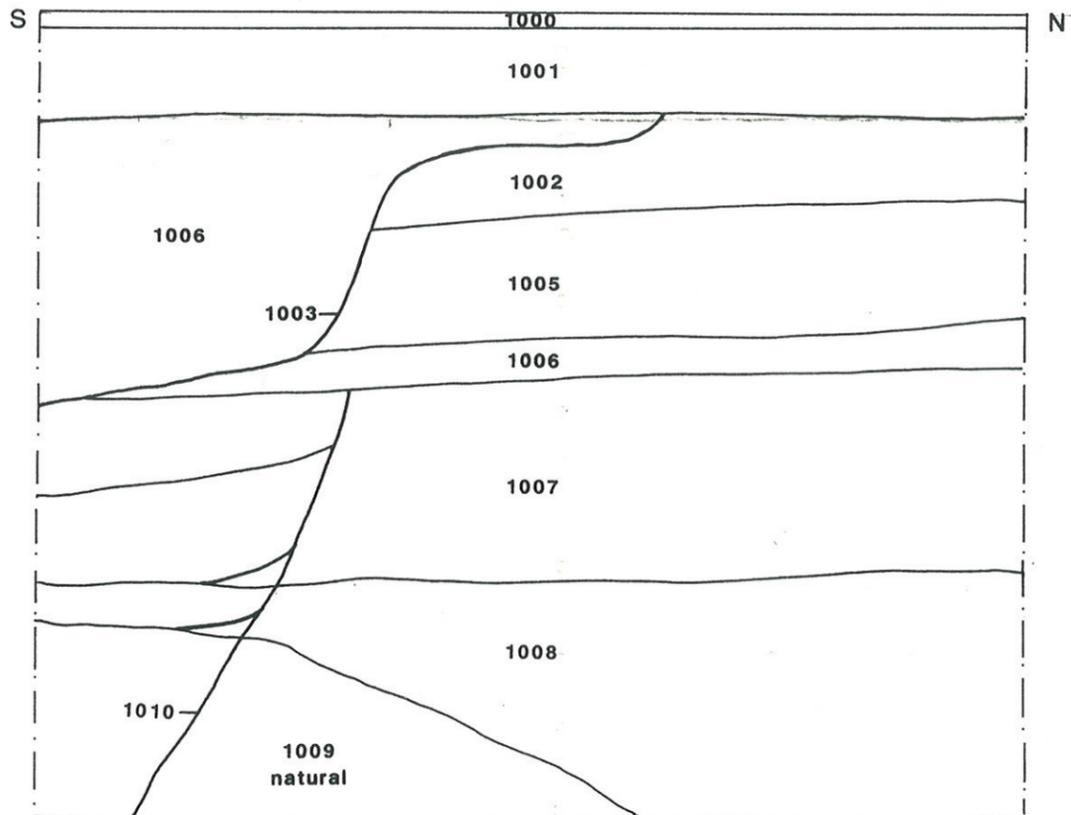
Location of test pits

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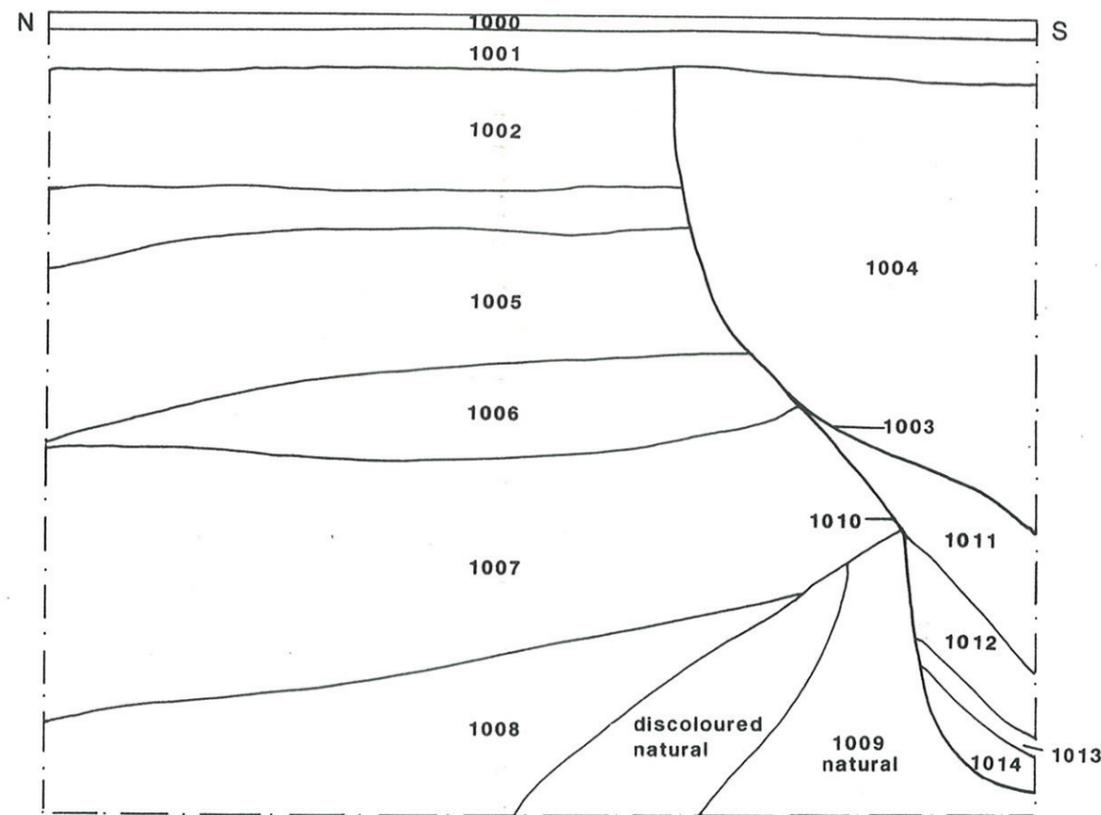
Figure 1

Soakaway 1 Section 1



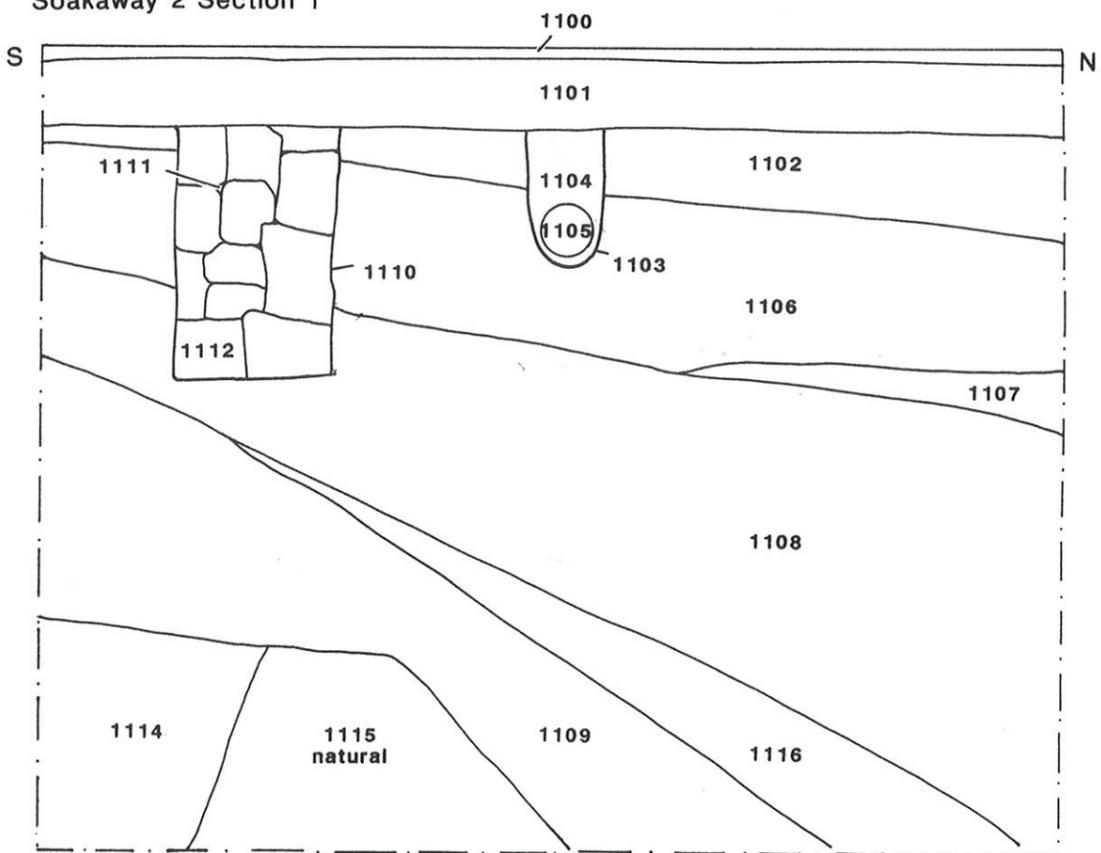
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Soakaway 1 Section 2



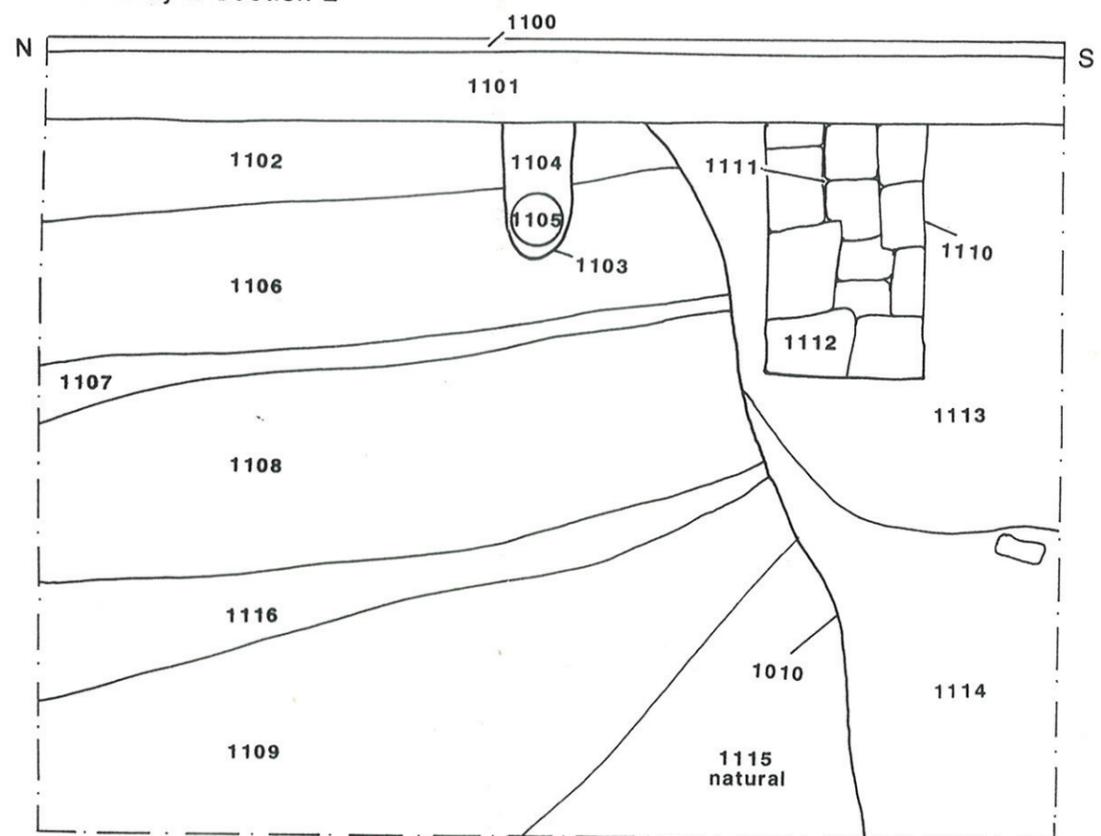
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Soakaway 2 Section 1



Scale 1:20

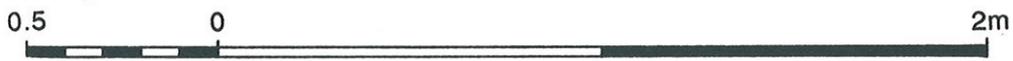
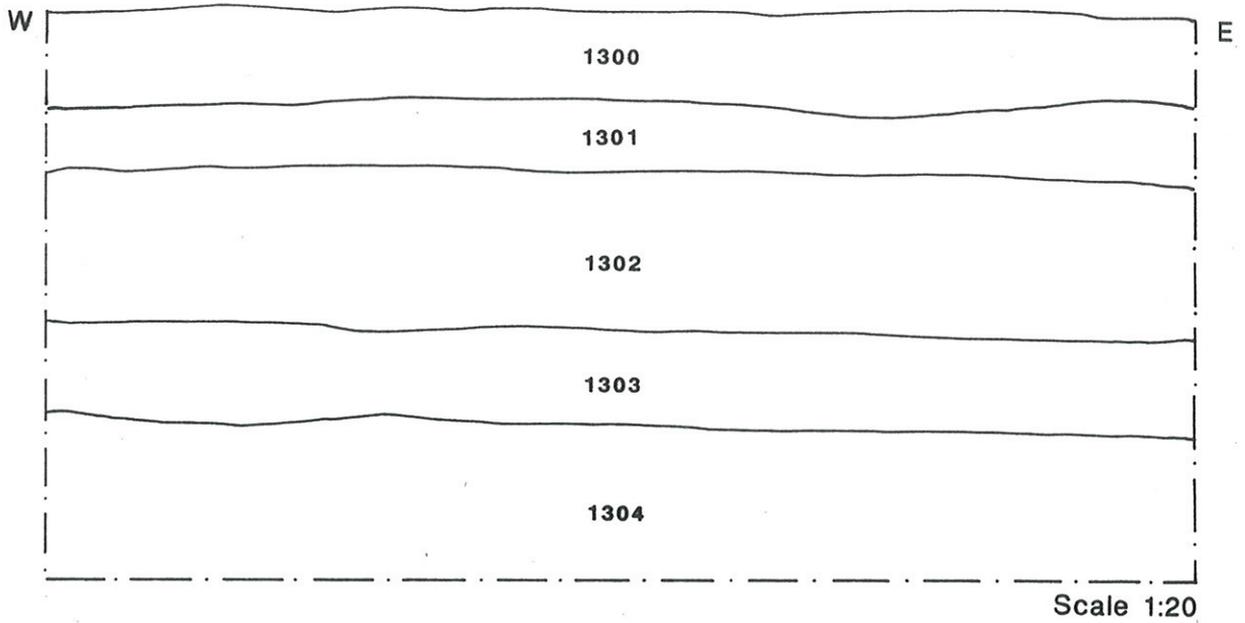
Soakaway 2 Section 2



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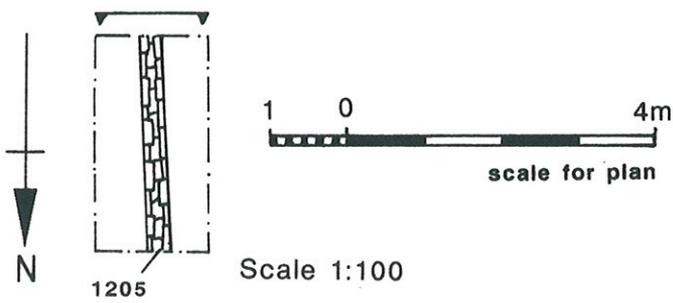


Figure 2



scale for sections

Soakaway 4 Plan



Soakaway 4 Section 1

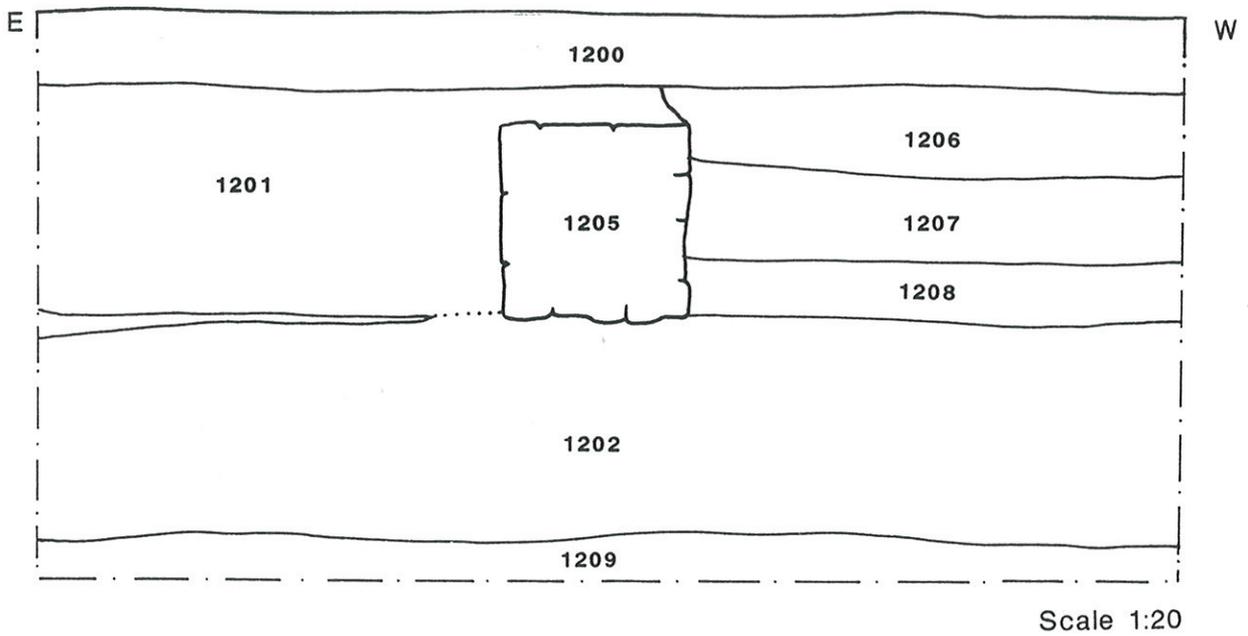
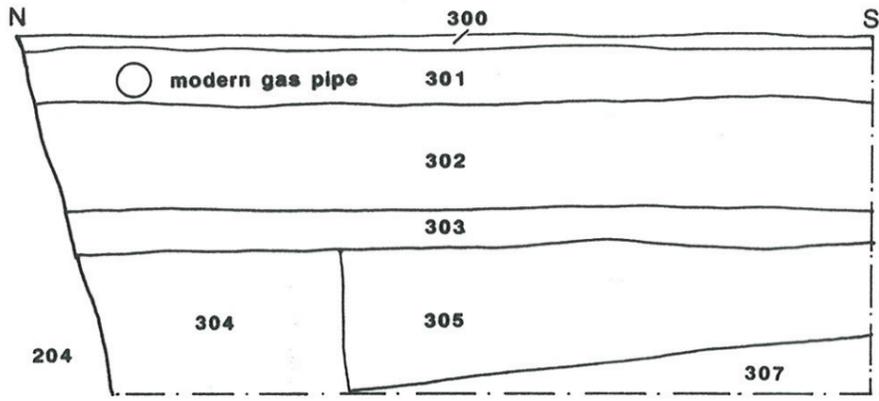


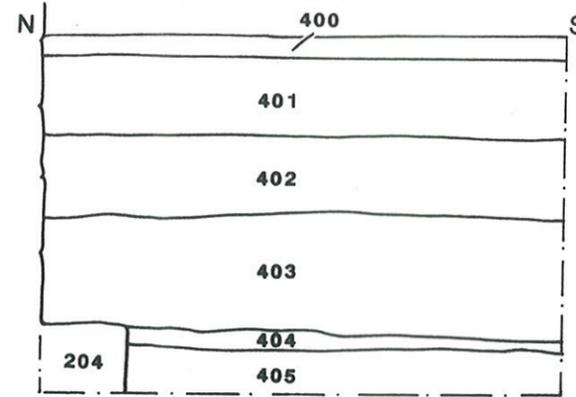
Figure 3

Pile Position 1



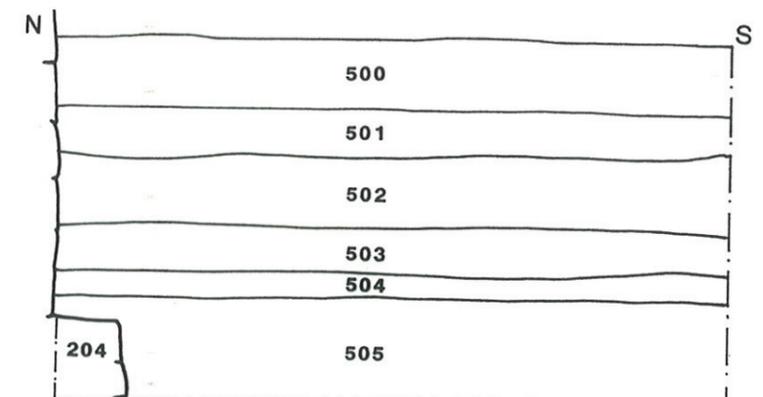
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Pile Position 2



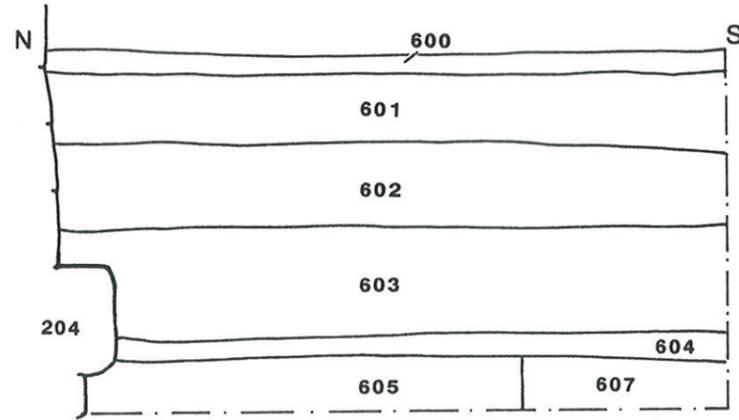
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Pile Position 3



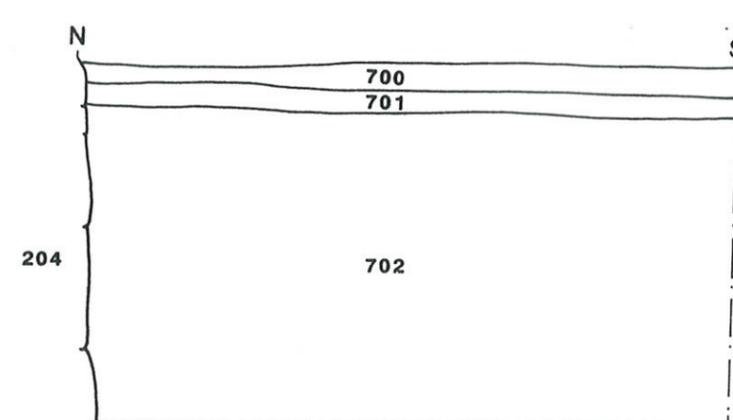
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Pile Position 4



Scale 1:20

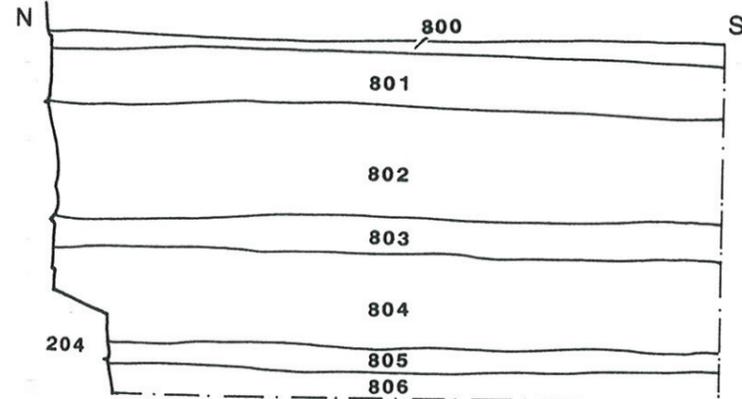
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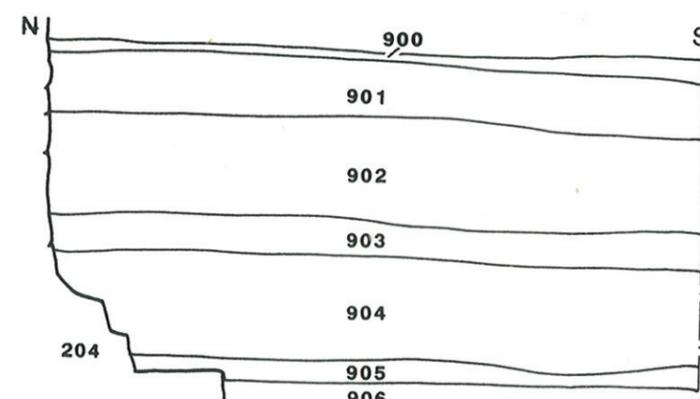


Pile Position 6



Scale 1:20

Pile Position 7



Scale 1:20

Figure 4

