

ST PETER'S CHURCH, BRACKLEY, NORTHAMPTONSHIRE  
SP 59163730

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION REPORT



OXFORD ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT

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## Summary

*The Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) undertook an archaeological evaluation of a proposed extension to the church of St Peter, Brackley, in February 1993. The evaluation showed that the area has been extensively disturbed by grave digging from the Saxo-Norman period onwards. A small quantity of prehistoric, Romano-British and Anglo-Saxon pottery, and Romano-British tile, may be indicative of earlier activity in the area. The quantity of burials encountered, however, precluded the possibility of extensive exposure of the natural surface. The limited exposure which was possible showed that several graves were cut through the natural surface.*

## 1 Introduction

### 1.1 Background

Brackley lies on the south-west border of the county of Northamptonshire. The town is recorded in Domesday Book, when Earl Aubrey held of the king two hides in *Hasou* (Hawes), two in *Sigresham* (Syresham), and one in *Brachelai* (Brackley) with a church and mill (VCH I, 330). Domesday lists a population of 24 (six serfs, ten villeins, and eight bordars). The Old Town of Brackley, centred around the parish church of St Peter, corresponds with this settlement. The church fabric is predominantly 13th century and later, but limited Norman features survive, including a fine doorway preserved in the south wall of the south aisle. St Peter's churchyard was originally ovoid; this is generally considered to be an indicator of a pre-Norman origin. A southward extension of the cemetery was added in the 19th century.

The medieval town was laid out before 1173 along the old road from Northampton to Oxford which forms the main street of the bypassed town (RCHM 1982, 21). The impetus for the shift was probably provided by the castle, which lay at the south end of the new settlement. The town was separately represented in the Assizes by 1202, but its rent of £66 18s 4d in 1173 demonstrates its existence by then. Burgesses are mentioned in the mid 13th century, when the name Old Town was already used to describe the vicinity of St Peter's (Beresford 1967, 468-9).

Various finds of Roman, Saxon, medieval and post-medieval date have been made around St Peter's, especially during housing developments to the south and east of the church. Some of these would suggest that a high-status site lies in the immediate vicinity. A number of chance finds of mid-late Anglo-Saxon artefacts have occurred within the town and parish. Unfortunately few are securely provenanced. Pottery of the 12th to 14th centuries has been found in the Old Town, including within the cemetery extension. Appendix 4 contains selected data from the Northamptonshire County Sites and monuments on finds from the Old Town around St Peter's Church.

## 1.2 Reason for the project

The Parochial Church Council of St Peters wishes to build an extension on to the south of the church. A planning application has been made to South Northamptonshire District Council, who required an archaeological evaluation to be undertaken. The proposed building design consists of a number of rooms resting on trench foundations. Access from the church would be by the Norman south door, which would be fully enclosed by the new building. The latter lies entirely within the original boundary of the churchyard.

## 1.3 Methodology

David Miles of the OAU was retained as Consultant Archaeologist by the Parochial Church Council. A brief was set for the evaluation by the Curatorial Section of the Northamptonshire Archaeology Unit (NAU) who also monitored the fieldwork. It was agreed that two trenches should be excavated within the footprint of the building. The trenches were to be 5 m long (north-south), and up to 3.5 m wide to allow for stepping in of the trench sides for deep excavation. Trench A lay to the east of the pathway out of the Norman south door; Trench B (only 3 m wide because of the constraint of a gravestone at the north-west corner) lay to the west of the path and further away from the church (Figure 1).

A small mechanical excavator was used to remove the topsoil and upper cemetery soil. Machining was stopped when articulated human skeletons were encountered at an average depth of 0.75 m below the current ground level. All excavation thereafter was by hand. The central 1 m - 1.5 m north-south strip was excavated beyond 0.75 m deep in each trench. The intention was to determine the potential for archaeology underlying the cemetery. It immediately became apparent, however, that the great density of burials in both trenches made such an approach impractical. It was therefore agreed with NAU (Curatorial) that excavation would concentrate on Trench A. Work continued on a strip measuring 2.5 m x up to 1 m at the north end of the trench. This was taken down to natural, encountered at a depth of 114.24 m.

Excavation of the north end of Trench B was begun by hand because of its closeness to a lime tree. This is the subject of a Tree Preservation Order. Its roots therefore had to be protected from unnecessary damage. Roots were encountered at approximately 0.3 m below the current ground level.

All deposits (soil layers, graves, skeletons etc) were given unique numbers (contexts); numbers 1-96 were used in Trench A, and 101-135 in Trench B. All stratigraphic relationships were noted, and a matrix drawn. A trench location plan was drawn at a scale of 1:100. All other drawings were at a scale of 1:20. Spot heights were recorded in relation the Ordnance Datum. A bench mark of 116.59 m on the west front of the church was used for this purpose. Black and white negative and colour slide photographs were taken both of the site in general and of the excavations in progress. Full index lists were kept of all records.

Finds were collected by context for materials such as pottery and tile. Several coffin fittings were recorded separately. As far as possible human skeletons were left *in situ*. Those which had to be lifted so that excavation could proceed to a greater depth were removed from the site for temporary storage at the OAU's offices by permission of the Diocesan authorities. Such remains were reburied as close as possible to their original resting place during the backfilling of both trenches on 26 February 1993.

## 2 Results

### 2.1 Ground level and soils

The current ground level at the north end of Trench A is 115.60 m, sloping to 115.43 m at the south end. The south end of Trench B lies at 115.18 m. There is therefore a drop of 0.42 m in a distance of 11 m.

The topsoil (1, 101) was a medium grey-brown clay loam, typically 0.2 m thick. Two fallen gravestones (2, 74) were found immediately under the turf in Trench A. The topsoil overlay a mixed layer of light-medium brown sandy loam (2, 102) containing 10 % stone fragments. This represented the cemetery soil into which the graves had been cut. The soil was numbered as context 75 below a depth of 0.75 m for finds purposes. Disarticulated human skeletal remains were present throughout the layer. All graves had been cut into and backfilled with the same soil, and therefore grave cuts were often indistinguishable until the skeleton was revealed. This is a common problem in cemetery excavations. The natural subsoil (55) consisted of a chalky clay matrix.

### 2.2 Trench A

Thirty graves were identified in Trench A. Seventeen of these lay at a typical level of 114.85 m and formed the first (ie latest) level of burials to be encountered. These graves occupied approximately 70% of the surface area of the trench, and space was present for two unexcavated graves within this area. It is likely that the trench would originally have contained about 30 graves at this level.

At least four, and probably six distinct layers of burial (labelled 2a and 2 b, 3, 4a and 4b, and 5 on Fig. 2) were noted during further excavation. These layers were identified stratigraphically (ie according to the order in which graves were cut) and by depth below Ordnance Datum (relevant levels are given on Fig. 2). The earliest graves were cut into the natural subsoil by up to 0.15 m.

All of the graves, but especially the latest ones, had been carefully arranged in east-west rows. These were virtually contiguous to the north and south in the uppermost level (1). There was also some evidence in the area where excavation was taken down to natural for burial in specific plots (eg grave 17 overlay grave 56, which in turn overlay grave 71; and grave 59 overlay grave 68, which overlay

grave 77, which overlay grave 89). It is clear, therefore, that this area of the cemetery is densely packed with burials both horizontally and vertically.

All of the skeletons appeared to be supine. Most had the hands by the pelvis, although skeleton 64 in grave 62 and skeleton 83 in grave 81 had the hands lying over the pelvis. The right arm of skeleton 88 in grave 86 was strongly flexed and lay over the abdomen. Evidence for the use of coffins consisted of fixtures such as handles and nails from several graves (see section 2.4), but the general disposition of the skeletons suggests that most were buried in coffins, whether or not fixtures were recovered. A glassy substance (context 10) at the base of grave 7 which perfectly preserved the shape of the coffin may represent body decomposition deposits.

### 2.3 Trench B

Trench B was not excavated as extensively as Trench A. Nevertheless it seems clear that the density of burials was the same. Eleven graves were identified at level 1 within the 1.4 m wide central strip. It is clear that more burials would have been revealed at this level had excavation continued. Excavation was not taken below level 1 in Trench B, but the deeply cut grave 134 revealed that the cemetery soil continued down to the natural subsoil. There is every reason, therefore, to expect an equivalent density of burial to that in Trench A. The results were consistent with those from Trench A in all other respects; the graves were laid out in closely spaced east-west rows, with the body laid supine, probably in a coffin. A coffin plate was found over the chest of skeleton 134 in grave 132; the plate was very fragile, however, and was left *in situ*.

### 2.4 Finds

A small assemblage of 31 pottery sherds weighing 0.205 kg was recovered from excavated contexts. The earliest pottery consists of a late Bronze age/early Iron age coarse limestone and grog tempered sherd from context 15. A coarse shelly Iron age sherd is also evident in context 93. The majority of the assemblage consists of redeposited Roman Grey wares and Oxidised wares dated to the second to fourth century. Late Saxon shelly wares related to St Neots types are also evident in contexts 15 and 75. Early Medieval oolitic limestone tempered fabrics are present in contexts 75 and 132. An early Medieval Bedford sandy ware sherd was noted in context 120. High Medieval material is also present in small quantities in contexts 35 and 128, consisting of a Scarborough type jug sherd and a Coventry/Nuneaton type jug sherd.

Thirty one fragments (1.2 kg) of ceramic brick or tile were recovered from six contexts (15, 54, 75, 102, 129 and 133). Most of the material was Roman, mainly consisting of roof tile; however, at least three fragments of box flue tile were also found. At least six fragments were identifiably medieval in date, including decorated examples.

Most small finds consisted of burial furniture. Two graves (7 and 106) contained shroud pins, while coffin handles were recovered from graves 11 (one), 34 (one), 116 (one), 119 (two), and 132 (three). Two unstratified coffin handles were also found. Six contexts (41, 51, 54, 78, 102 and 133) contained iron nails, all probably from coffins. Two copper alloy objects and three iron objects were also found.

## 2.5 Human skeletal remains

Most of the human skeletal material was in fair or good condition. Some graves had been truncated by later burials, but otherwise there had been no obvious loss of skeletal elements. It was notable that patellae (knee caps) were present in many graves. The ratio of adults or sub-adults to infants was 23:5 in Trench A, and 7:3 in Trench B.

## 3 Discussion

### 3.1 Dates of burials

The earliest graves in Trench A may be of Saxo-Norman date (11th-12th century). Long bones were extracted from burials 84 and 92 in case radiocarbon dates are required for these skeletons in the future. Pottery of late Saxon and early Norman date was found in several later graves in both trenches, while such material was also present in the lower cemetery soils in Trench A. Burial thereafter continued throughout the medieval and post-medieval periods into the 19th century. Some of the latest graves contained iron coffin handles, while one (grave 132) also had a thin white metal coffin plate. Fallen gravestones of 19th century form and/or lettering were found within the topsoil in Trench A (contexts 2 and 74).

### 3.2 Quantity of burials

The cemetery has obviously been used intensively over a considerable period of time. It is estimated that each trench would contain about 30 graves at the latest level of burials (1). Four to six levels of burial were identified below this in Trench A. If each level had an equivalent density of burial (and the evidence from Trench A would suggest that this is the case) each trench would contain between 150 (five levels) and 210 (seven levels) burials. The cemetery as a whole would clearly contain many thousands of burials.

### 3.3 Potential for pre-cemetery archaeology

No pre-cemetery features were identified in Trench A or in the sides of the deeply cut grave, 132, in Trench B. Only a limited exposure of the natural subsoil was possible, however, and early features could be present elsewhere. Prehistoric,

Roman and early Saxon pottery was found, and the Roman brick and tile included some box flue tile fragments. These would normally be associated with a hypocaust or bath suite. Most potsherds and tile fragments were small, however, and need not be derived from the immediate vicinity of the excavations. Nevertheless the finds are consistent with the evidence from previous excavations and chance discoveries in indicating the presence of a high status Roman site in the Old Town area.

### 3.4 Implications for building design

The potential for pre-cemetery archaeology in the area of the proposed new building must remain questionable. It is clear, however, that a trench foundation design would inevitably disturb a very large number of burials. The architect's drawings of the proposed construction would indicate that approximately 80 m of foundation trench would be dug, to a typical width of 0.6 m. This does not include any provision for service trenches. It would be reasonable to assume that approximately 15 graves would be encountered in each metre length of trench (two at each of six levels, plus three at random). This would imply that up to 1200 burials could be disturbed.

Report by Graham D Keevill MIFA  
Ceramics by Catherine Underwood-Keevill AIFA

The OAU is very grateful to Paul Blinkhorn of NAU for viewing the pottery from the evaluation, and to Christine Addison of NAU for assistance with regard to the County Sites and Monuments Record.

### **Bibliography**

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Appendix 1 Table of contexts

Trench A

Context	Type	Comments
1	Layer	Turf/topsoil
2	Gravestone	Immediately under turf
3	Layer	Cemetery soil
4	Grave	Cuts fill of grave 7
5	Fill	Of grave 4
6	Skeleton	Infant, in grave 4
7	Grave	Cuts fill of grave 11
8	Fill	Of Grave 7
9	Skeleton	Adult, in grave 7
10	Fill	Preserved coffin shape under 9
11	Grave	Cuts fill of grave 56
12	Fill	Of grave 11
13	Skeleton	Adult, in grave 11; skull + upper spine only
14	Grave	Cuts fill of grave 56
15	Fill	Of grave 14
16	Skeleton	Adult, in grave 14
17	Grave	Cuts fill of grave 56
18	Fill	Of grave 17
19	Skeleton	?Sub-adult, in grave 17
20	Grave	Cuts fill of grave 43
21	Fill	Of grave 20
22	Skeleton	Adult, in grave 20
23	Grave	Cuts fill of grave 40
24	Fill	Of grave 23
25	Skeleton	Adult, in grave 23
26	Grave	Cuts fill of grave 29
27	Fill	Of grave 26
28	Skeleton	Adult, in grave 26
29	Grave	Cuts fills of graves 62, 65
30	Fill	Of grave 29
31	Skeleton	Adult, in grave 29

32	Grave	Cuts fill of grave 34
33	Fill	Of grave 32; skeleton not revealed
34	Grave	Cuts fill of grave 37
35	Fill	Of grave 34
36	Skeleton	Adult, in grave 34
37	Grave	Cuts fill of grave 40
38	Fill	Of grave 37
39	Skeleton	Subadult, in grave 37
40	Grave	No further excavation below this grave
41	Fill	Of grave 40
42	Skeleton	Subadult, in grave 40
43	Grave	Cuts fill of grave 29
44	Fill	Of grave 43
45	Skeleton	Adult, in grave 43
46	Grave	No further excavation below this grave
47	Fill	Of grave 46
48	Skeleton	Adult, in grave 46
49	Grave	Cuts fill of grave 46
50	Skeleton	Adult, in grave 49
51	Fill	Of grave 53
52	Skeleton	?Adult, in grave 53
53	Grave	Cuts fill of grave 49
54	Layer	Cleaning layer within 75
55	Layer	Natural chalky clay
56	Grave	Cuts fill of grave 71
57	Fill	Of grave 56
58	Skeleton	Adult, in grave 56
59	Grave	Cuts fill of grave 68
60	Fill	Of grave 59
61	Skeleton	Infant, in grave 59
62	Grave	Cuts fill of grave 81
63	Fill	Of grave 62
64	Skeleton	Adult, in grave 62
65	Grave	Cuts fill of grave 95

66	Fill	Of grave 65
67	Skeleton	Adult, in grave 65
68	Grave	Cuts fill of grave 77
69	Fill	Of grave 68
70	Skeleton	Adult, in grave 68
71	Grave	Cuts fill of grave 68
72	Fill	Of grave 71
73	Skeleton	Adult, within grave 71
74	Gravestone	In north section of trench; left <i>in situ</i>
75	Layer	Lower part of cemetery soil (3)
76	Fill	Of grave 49
77	Grave	Cuts fill of graves 86, 89
78	Fill	Fill of grave 77
79	Skeleton	Infant, in grave 77, buried with 80
80	Skeleton	Infant, in grave 77, buried with 79
81	Grave	Cuts fill of grave 84
82	Fill	Of grave 81
83	Skeleton	?Subadult, in grave 81
84	Grave	Cuts through cemetery soil into natural
85	Fill	Of grave 84; right humerus only survived
86	Grave	Cuts fill of grave 92
87	Fill	Of grave 86
88	Skeleton	?Adult, in grave 86
89	Grave	Cuts fill of grave 92
90	Fill	Of grave 89
91	Skeleton	Infant, in grave 89
92	Grave	Cuts through cemetery soil into natural
93	Fill	Of grave 93
94	Skeleton	?Adult, in grave 92
95	Grave	Cuts through cemetery soil into natural
96	Fill	Of grave 95; skull and left humerus only seen

## Trench B

Context	Type	Comments
101	Layer	Turf/topsoil = 1
102	Layer	Cemetery soil = 2
103	Grave	Cuts cemetery soil 102
104	Fill	Of 103
105	Skeleton	?Adult, in grave 103
106	Grave	Cuts fills of graves 109, 112
107	Fill	Of grave 106
108	Skeleton	Infant, in grave 106
109	Grave	Cuts cemetery soil 102
110	Fill	Of grave 109
111	Skeleton	Infant, in grave 109
112	Grave	Cuts cemetery soil 102
113	Fill	Of grave 112
114	Skeleton	Infant, in grave 112
115	Layer	Lower level of cemetery soil = 75
116	Grave	Cuts cemetery soil 102
117	Fill	Of grave 116
118	Skeleton	?Adult, in grave 116
119	Grave	Cuts fill of grave 116
120	Fill	Of grave 119
121	Skeleton	?Adult, in grave 119
122	Grave	Cuts cemetery soil 102
123	Fill	Of grave 122
124	Skeleton	?Adult, in grave 122
125	Grave	Cuts cemetery soil 102
126	Fill	Of grave 125
127	unused	Skeleton not revealed in grave 125
128	Grave	Cuts cemetery soil 102
129	Fill	Of grave 128
130	Skeleton	Adult, in grave 128
131	Grave	Cuts cemetery soil 102
132	Fill	Of grave 131
133	Skeleton	Adult, in grave 131
134	Grave	Cuts fill of grave 128
135	Fill	Of grave 134
136	Skeleton	Adult, in grave 134

Appendix 2 Table of pottery

Context	Number	Weight	Fabric/comments
3	1	10	Roman Grey ware bowl, flat top rim
8	1	11	Roman jar sherd with groove on shoulder
15	1	14	Roman Grey ware sherd
15	1	4	Post-medieval red earthenware C18+
15	1	5	Medieval sandy ware C12/C13
15	1	5	Roman oxidised ware
15	1	2	LSSL Late Saxon/Early Medieval shelly ware
15	1	28	Prehistoric coarse limestone and grog ware late Bronze age/early Iron age
35	1	3	Scarborough type ware jug sherd C13+
54	1	2	Stamford type C12+
54	1	1	Roman grey ware
75	2	10	Roman oxidised ware butt beaker rim Roman oxidised ware jar everted rim
75	3	7	LSSL Late Saxon/Early Medieval shelly ware
75	1	3	LSQL Late Saxon quartz and oolitic limestone. Similar to Oxford fabric OXAC
75	1	1	Roman Grey ware
75	1	5	Post-medieval red earthenware
93	1	5	Rounded Prehistoric base sherd. Coarse shelly ware.
102	1	4	Surrey/Tudor green type cup rim C16+
102	2	53	Roman Grey ware jar base Roman Grey ware bodysherd
102	1	2	Roman oxidised ware sherd
117	1	1	Roman Samian sherd
117	1	4	MDL early Medieval shelly ware
117	1	2	Roman Grey ware burnished sherd
120	1	14	Bedford Sandy ware. Early Medieval
128	1	1	Coventry/Nuneaton type sandy glazed sherd late C13
132	1	8	Cotswold type limestone tempered sherd C11/C12
132	1	3	ASLM Early Saxon fabric type with fine to medium limestone temper and silty matrix.
TOTAL	31	205	



Appendix 3 Table of human skeletal remains

Skeleton no.	Age	Sex	Preservation
13a	adult	M	skull only
13b	subadult	-	pelvis only
16	adult	M?	very good, virtually complete
19	?	?	arm bones only
22	adult	?	condition good, skeleton near complete
31	adult	M?	pelvis and sacrum, only
36	young adult	F?	condition good, skeleton near complete
39	subadult	-	condition good, skeleton near complete
42	subadult	-	lower legs only
46	adult?	?	arms and torso only
50	adult	M?	condition good, near complete
58	adult	M?	condition good, skeleton near complete
61	infant	-	condition fair
64	adult (30+?)	F?	condition good, skeleton near complete
67	adult	F	condition good, skeleton complete
70	adult (30+?)	F?	condition good, skeleton incomplete
75	adult and subadult		skull fragments only; cemetery soil
79	infant	-	condition fair
80	infant	-	condition fair
91	infant	-	condition fair
108	infant	-	condition fair
111	infant	-	condition fair
114	subadult	-	condition fair
130	adult	M?	condition good, missing skull
133	probable adult	?	condition good, left and right leg only

Appendix 4 Selected entries from Northamptonshire County Sites and Monuments Record

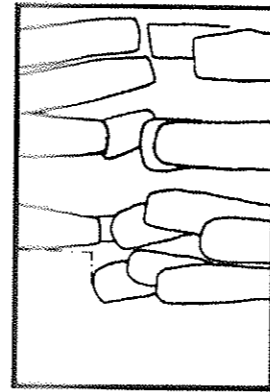
SMR No.	FINDS	GRID REF
130/0/1	12th-14th century sherds	5890/3730
130/0/4	North of church: medieval sherds	5841/3649
130/0/11	12th-14th Century sherds	5910/3720
130/0/12	Roman finds	5920/3710
130/0/13	4th century coin	5720.3730
130/0/14	Roman stone wall, sherds, building materials	5938/5723
130/0/20	Saxon/medieval/post-medieval, mostly post-medieval	5910/3935
130/6/0	Roman pot, building materials, tesserae, flints	5910/3700
150/0/1	Roman pot, buiding materials	5940/3700
150/0/2	Roman pot	5923/3722
150/0/4	Roman Coin, pot, building materials, walls, floors	5920/3730
150/0/5	Late Iron Age/Roman pots, boundary ditch	5940/3695
151/0/1	Late Saxon/medieval/post-medieval finds	5940/3695



Church of St.Peter with St.James

a

TRENCH A



TRENCH B

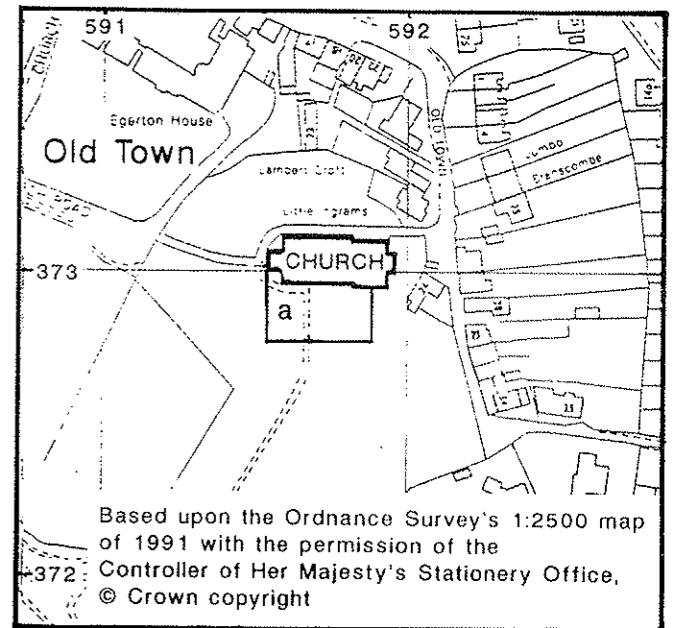
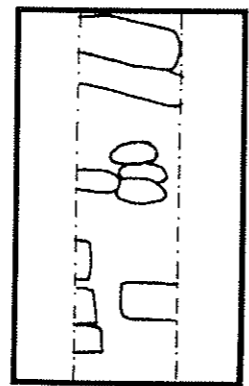
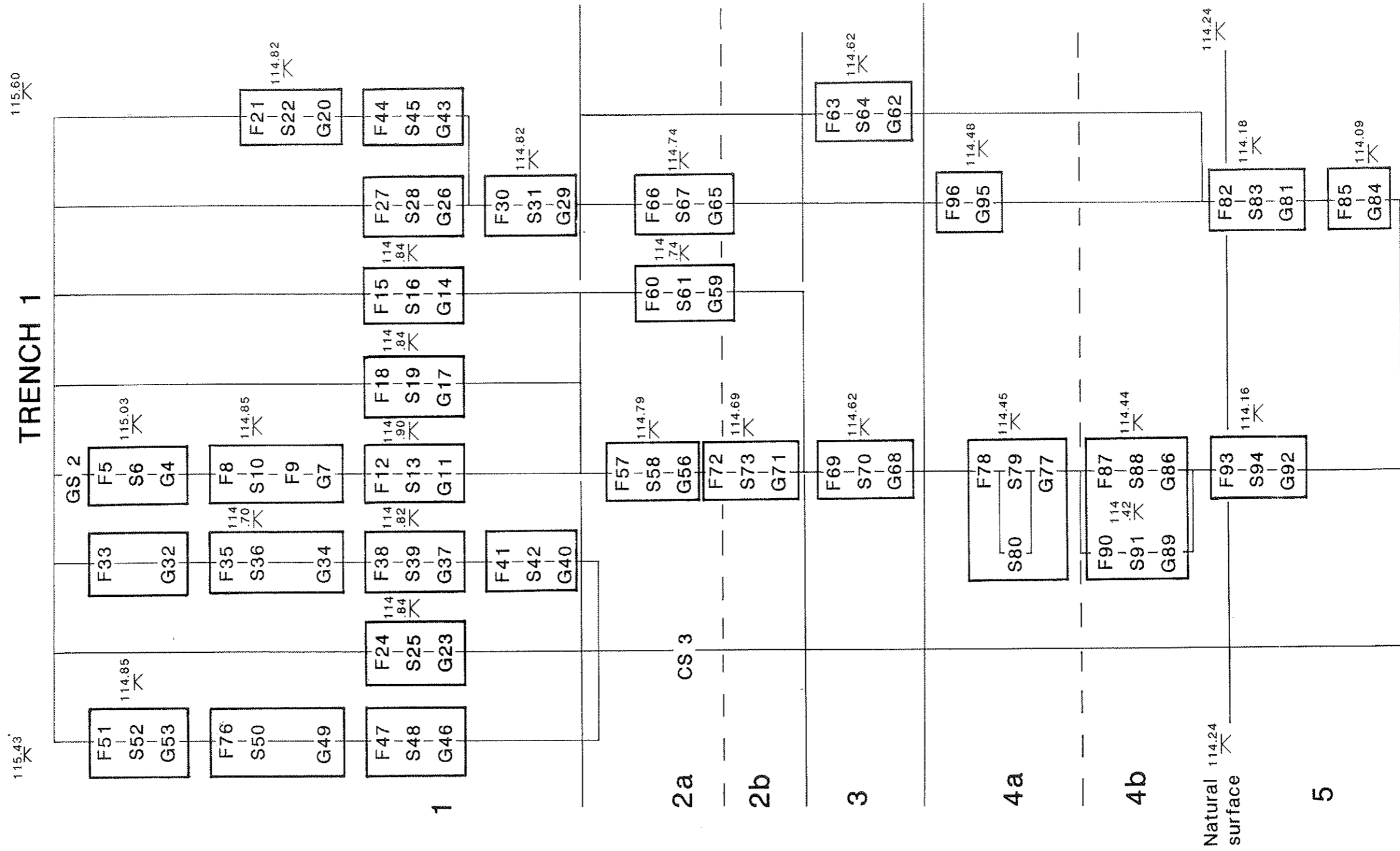


figure 1

# TRENCH 1



CS75

F Grave Fill  
S Skeleton  
G Grave  
T Topsoil  
GS Gravestone  
CS Cemetery Soil



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