

Royal Naval Air Station (RNAS) Yeovilton Somerset



Archaeological Watching Brief Report



December 2007



Client: Defence Estates

Issue N^o: Final report

OA Job N^o: 3510

NGR: ST 551 243

Client Name: Defence Estates

Client Ref No:

Document Title: ROYAL NAVAL AIR STATION (RNAS) YEOVILTON,
SOMERSET :ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING
BRIEF REPORT

Document Type: Watching Brief

Issue Number: Final Report (1)

National Grid Reference: ST 551 243

Planning Reference: NA

OA Job Number: 3510

Site Code: TTNCM:213/2006

Invoice Code: YEORAFEX

Receiving Museum: Somerset County Museum Service

Museum Accession No: TTNCM 213 2006

Prepared by: Alan Marshall

Position: Supervisor

Date: 16th March 2007

Checked by: Tim Haines

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Date: 17th December 2007

Approved by: Edward Biddulph

Signed .

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Date: 18th December 2007

Document File Location X:\YEORAFEX_MOD_RNAS

Yeovilton_EXC\002Reports\YEORAF Yeovilton

Watching Brief ReportTH 171207.doc

Graphics File Location

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ROYAL NAVAL AIR STATION (RNAS) YEOVILTON, SOMERSET

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SUMMARY

In January 2007 Oxford Archaeology (OA) carried out an archaeological watching brief at Royal Naval Air Station (RNAS) Yeovilton, Somerset (NGR ST 551 243) The work was commissioned by the Ministry of Defence (MOD), Defence Estates (DE), in advance of construction of an all-weather sports pitch. The watching brief was carried out on service runs associated with the pitch and floodlight foundation pads around its perimeter. This revealed evidence of Roman occupation in the form of two stone wall foundations and a number of probable ditches. Post-medieval layers overlay these in places and modern landscaping was present throughout. The project was to have included surface stripping and mapping of the pitch area prior to agreed areas of excavation but after topsoil removal it became clear that the pitch would not impact on archaeological deposits due to modern landscaping. As a result only small areas were excavated under archaeological supervision and revealed no archaeology.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Location and scope of work

- 1.1.1 In January 2007 Oxford Archaeology (OA) carried out an archaeological watching brief at Royal Naval Air Station (RNAS) Yeovilton, Somerset, NGR ST 551 243 (Fig. 1). The work was commissioned by Defence Estates prior to construction of an all-weather sports pitch.
- 1.1.2 A project brief was set by Martin Brown of Defence Estates Environmental Support Team. In 2000 Wessex Archaeology (WA) undertook archaeological excavation to the west of the site, which revealed evidence of later Prehistoric and Romano-British settlement and agriculture. In the light of this the recommendation was that an archaeological excavation be carried out ahead of construction works.
- 1.1.3 OA prepared a Written Scheme of Investigation (OA 2006) detailing how it would meet the requirements of the brief.

1.2 Geology and topography

- 1.2.1 The site lies on river terrace deposits overlying undifferentiated clay with some limestone (British Geological Survey, Sheet 296) at 20 m above Ordnance Datum (aOD). The site is situated on levelled ground, which is currently grassed for use as a sports field. The air station dates from World War II with the site area having been used for various purposes since, including a group of buildings and pathways identified on aerial photographs from the late 1940s and is 0.6 hectares in area.

1.3 **Archaeological and historical background**

1.3.1 The archaeological background to the watching brief was prepared for the WSI (OA 2006) and is summarised below.

1.3.2 The site has not been subject to a desk-based assessment (DBA) or prior evaluation.

1.3.3 The site of the proposed sports pitch lies within an archaeologically sensitive area. Analysis of aerial photographs (WA 2005) has shown the presence of extensive enclosures and field systems and enclosures in the vicinity of the development. This has been supported by the Wessex Archaeology excavation.

Middle-late Bronze Age

1.3.4 Bronze Age activity is recorded immediately to the west of the site (WA 2005). Curvilinear gullies of the middle to late Bronze Age date may represent the presence of a small settlement or agricultural enclosures.

Middle-late Iron Age

1.3.5 Evidence for middle to late Iron Age activity was recorded within the eastern part of the Wessex excavation (WA 2005). The activity included possible structures, ditches and enclosures.

Late Iron Age-early Romano-British

1.3.6 There was little structural evidence for late Iron Age or early Romano-British settlement within the area excavated by WA. However, the pottery recovered during the excavation suggests occupation on or close to the site.

Late Romano-British

1.3.7 The density of late Romano-British features within the adjacent Wessex excavation reflects a greater intensity of occupation and land-use than in previous periods. Structures were concentrated to the east of the excavation area, immediately to the west of the current development with paddocks, fields and associated droveways and trackways to the south and west. Two wells were found during the excavation and watching brief. One of these wells went out of use during the 3rd-4th century, while the other appears to have been filled with rubble during the past 50-100 years. Several burials were also recovered and are thought to have dated to this period.

Post-Roman

1.3.8 There is very little evidence for anything but agricultural use after the late Roman period and into the medieval period.

1.3.9 No post-medieval evidence exists for the site although there may be previous, more recent development of the site relating to its use as an RAF base.

1.4 Acknowledgements

- 1.4.1 All fieldwork was undertaken by Alan Marshall, formerly of Oxford Archaeology. The project was managed by Tim Haines, Senior Project Manager, and the report prepared by Kate Brady, post-excavation project officer.

2 PROJECT AIMS AND METHODOLOGY

2.1 Aims

- 2.1.1 To identify and determine, within the constraints of the budget, the character, function, form and longevity of any occupation or other human activity on the site and place it within its local, regional and national context.
- 2.1.2 To examine the ecofactual and environmental potential of archaeological deposits and features.
- 2.1.3 To make available the results of the investigation.

2.2 Methodology

Drainage Trench A

- 2.2.1 This service trench was excavated by AP Thompson under archaeological supervision using a 3-tonne mechanical excavator with spoil monitored to retrieve finds. Given the restraints due to the excavated trench width, features revealed were cleaned by hand to ensure they were properly defined and to collect finds. Recording was carried out as excavation progressed.

Electric Cable Trench B

- 2.2.2 The excavation methodology for trench B was identical to trench A.

Pitch Area Strip (Fig. 2 and 3)

- 2.2.3 The surface stripping of the pitch area was carried out by AP Thompson under archaeological supervision using a 20-tonne mechanical excavator fitted with a toothless bucket. Topsoil was monitored to retrieve finds. After removal of the topsoil layer, that trial pits were excavated into the modern material to gauge its depth. Areas of the pitch that would impact on the underlying natural layer and potential archaeological deposits were then stripped using a 20-tonne mechanical excavator fitted with a toothless bucket. Stripped material was monitored to collect finds.

Floodlight Foundation Bases (Fig. 2)

- 2.2.4 Six foundation bases 1m x 1 m x 1 m were excavated, three each side of the pitch. In all cases natural was observed at c 0.6 m below ground level. In no foundation base was archaeology observed.

3 RESULTS

3.1 Description of deposits

Drainage Trench A (Fig. 2 and 3)

- 3.1.1 This trench extended for approximately 100 m and was 0.4 m wide and 0.7 m deep following the curve of the adjacent running track and security fencing. The route was relatively flat with a slight fall to the north. Ground level was at 9.5 m aOD with natural orange clay and gravel (101) reaching a depth of approximately 0.7 m below this. Below a thin 0.1 m topsoil layer (100), a thick deposit of clay loam soil (102) made up most of the trench depth for the entire route and contained modern building debris and plastic along with some Romano-British pottery. This layer probably represents landscaping when the air station was constructed or altered during the last 60 years. The disturbance that this layer represents possibly truncated the natural (101) and may have removed or heavily disturbed some archaeological layers. Along the route of the drain trench various features were revealed which are discussed below.
- 3.1.2 A concentration of loose limestone rubble within modern layer 102 surrounded a 1 m wide wall foundation cut (105) which was aligned N-S. This survived to a high enough level to jut upwards into 102 suggesting it was reduced in height when the landscaping was carried out. The wall itself (103) was constructed of loosely stacked limestone and siltstone rubble with no visible mortar or bonding and was largely destroyed by modern activity. The wall continued below the base of the service trench.
- 3.1.3 A second wall construction cut (106) was located 5 m east of the feature described above. This 1.3 m wide NE-SW aligned cut contained a similar loose rubble wall foundation (104) but with larger stones up to 0.2 m x 0.2 m x 0.3 m in size. The stones in this foundation also appeared to be more consistently stacked, although the upper part was destroyed presumably by landscaping. This wall was also probably reduced in height during the deposition of layer 102. This feature may be related to wall 103.
- 3.1.4 Feature 107 was 1.5 m wide and aligned E-W. The drainage trench was deep enough to expose part of the profile in section of a steep straight-sided ditch narrowing slightly towards the west. Ditch fill 108 was a dark silty clay with mottled patches of white/grey clay. A small collection of Romano-British pottery was recovered from the spoil. It is possible this ditch represents a field boundary or enclosure, but due to the narrow section exposed it is difficult to be certain.
- 3.1.5 Feature 110 was similarly in the lower part of the trench section but was truncated by landscaping (102) above, and on the south edge by a modern service trench. It was therefore difficult to be certain of the nature of this feature. In width it was similar to ditch 107 but fill 111 seemed more like a refuse pit fill. The deposit was mixed silty loam containing burnt clay and charcoal fragment and a single iron nail.

- 3.1.6 Feature 112 was most likely a pit, 1.3 m in diameter with steep straight sides. This was again only visible below 102 in the bottom 0.15 m of the trench. A dark silty fill (113) with some stone contained sherds of Romano-British pottery and stone gravel.
- 3.1.7 Towards the southern extent of the drainage trench a 0.15m deep layer of dark silty clay was uncovered (114). This contained frequent burnt clay fragments, but these were generally too friable and small to collect. The few sherds that were found appear to be of Romano-British date. Although this deposit extended over more than 13 m, it is impossible to interpret in such a narrow trench. It is possibly a levelling layer or merely a remnant of a deposit that had not been truncated by modern activity when (102) was deposited.

Electric Cable Trench B (Fig. 2 and 3)

- 3.1.8 This trench stretched for approximately 175 m and was excavated to 0.2 m wide and 0.7 m deep in a grassed area between current buildings and security fencing. The route was relatively flat with a slight rise to the north. Ground level was at 10.2 m aOD with the natural orange clay and gravel natural (301) reaching a depth of approximately 0.5 m below the surface. Below a thin 0.15 m topsoil layer (300) a thick deposit of clay loam soil (302) made up most of the trench depth at both ends of the route and was present throughout. Like trench A this contained modern building debris and plastic along with some Romano-British and potentially prehistoric pottery. This layer probably represents landscaping, as discussed above, and possible truncation of the natural 301. Features revealed along the cable trench route are discussed below.
- 3.1.9 At the very base of the trench deposit 303 was revealed. This was a blue grey silt/clay and was distinctly different to the natural orange clay. It extended for 1.43 m along the trench. It is uncertain what this deposit represented as it contained no finds, but it appears to be a natural outcrop of blue clay below layer 301.
- 3.1.10 For a width of 30 m adjacent to the pitch, a deposit of limestone rubble (304) was found in between layer 302 and natural 301 at a depth of 0.15 m from the ground surface. Although this layer was largely sterile, a small piece of tarmac was found among the stones. It is suggested that this layer is a modern road base from the 1940s air station, as it lines up roughly with road and building debris on the pitch area, where it was masked by topsoil.
- 3.1.11 For a large portion of the route, natural clay (301) was not reached at the trench base, and a thick layer of dark grey silty clay was uncovered. This was more than 0.4 m deep and was overlain by modern layer 302. This appears to be a levelling layer and may even equate with layer 114 found in Drainage Trench A. From pottery sherds recovered it is possible that the deposit is post-medieval, possibly filling a natural hollow and thus surviving the truncation associated with building the air station.

Pitch Area Strip

3.1.12 The pitch excavations covered an area 65 m x 103 m with 4 m x 10 m extensions for goal returns at either end. The pitch area was relatively flat with a slight rise to the north. Ground Level was at 9.55 m aOD with orange clay and gravel natural (201) reaching a depth of approximately 0.6 m. Below a thin 0.1 m topsoil layer (200) lay a thin layer of modern debris and demolition rubble (202). This is probably a combination of material from the demolition of wartime buildings on the site and levelling for use as a sports field. Following the topsoil removal, road bases showed up clearly within the layer, matching the aerial photographs of 1944. A thick deposit of clay loam soil (203) made up most of the material encountered below this. This contained modern building debris and plastic along with some Romano-British pottery. This layer probably represents landscaping when the air station was constructed or altered during the past 60 years. The disturbance that created this layer possibly truncated the natural (201) and may have removed or heavily disturbed any archaeological layers. It was apparent after removal of the topsoil from the area that any surviving archaeology would be masked by 203 and trial pits were excavated through the modern deposits to gauge natural depth and the impact level. The vast majority of the pitch was discovered to be within layer 203, and only the lowest corner and goalmouth would reach natural (201). This area was stripped under archaeological supervision and revealed no archaeological features.

Floodlight Foundation Bases

3.1.13 Six foundation bases for floodlights were excavated. No archaeological remains were revealed. The natural clay (201) was overlain by a layer of modern levelling (202) for the pitch construction. This was overlain by topsoil (203).

3.2 Finds

Pottery

- 3.2.1 One sherd of redeposited prehistoric pottery was recovered from the modern made ground in electric cable trench B. It was extremely abraded and residual.
- 3.2.2 Roman pottery was recovered from various contexts but as an assemblage it appears to be of similar date and fabric. Most of the Roman pottery is Dorset-made black burnished ware, often abraded. One notable sherd is a strap handle from a flagon which, although found in the spoil heap of drainage trench A, is most likely to be from pit 110. A single base sherd of Central Gaulish samian was also unstratified. Amongst the pottery are also a number of Severn Valley ware sherds. Features 108, 113, and layer 114 can be dated to 2nd century by their pottery. The assemblage is consistent with a farmstead such as the one excavated to the west (WA 2005). The location, adjacent to a known Roman road means that imported wares were relatively common.

- 3.2.3 Within the modern layers, tin glazed pottery and other post medieval pottery sherds were recovered, although most were not retained.

Metalwork

- 3.2.4 A single nail was recovered from 111, which appears to be Roman in date.
- 3.2.5 Numerous metal finds were recovered from layer 202, but were not retained as they were all modern.

Bone

- 3.2.6 A single bone (sheep?) was recovered from modern layer 102.

Ceramic building Material

- 3.2.7 Nine fragments of ceramic building material CBM were recovered from six contexts. All contexts were modern made ground; no further analysis was undertaken.

3.3 Palaeo-environmental remains

- 3.3.1 No deposits suitable for environmental sampling were observed and no samples taken.

4 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

- 4.1.1 It is clear that the areas of the site that were investigated have been heavily truncated by construction of RNAS Yeovilton and its adaptation over the past 60 years. The modern overburden certainly dates from the last thirty to forty years and was present across the whole site. It is likely that any archaeological deposits have been mixed with recent made ground. There is irrefutable evidence of Roman activity on the site and it appears to be consistent with the outer reaches of the settlement found to the west by Wessex Archaeology in 2005. Features 105 and 106 are the closest the current excavation came to the settlement area and accordingly revealed the most substantial archaeological remains. Ditch 107 may even represent the division between settled areas and the related fields. Unfortunately due to the depth of modern deposits over the site, archaeological remains were only occasionally seen, and then in narrow service trenches that hindered any clear understanding of the features. As no wider area was opened, the more ephemeral features, such as the prehistoric field systems found to the west, were not apparent. One sherd of pottery suggests that prehistoric farming may have occurred in the area, and it seems likely given its proximity to known prehistoric features. There is a possibility that modern deposits were made up of imported material from elsewhere. However, the presence of 2nd-4th century pottery and the absence of any medieval sherds (which fits perfectly with the Wessex excavation assemblage), suggests that the material was redeposited close to its source.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1 ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXT INVENTORY

<i>Context</i>	<i>Type</i>	<i>Depth</i>	<i>Width</i>	<i>Comments</i>	<i>Finds</i>
100	Layer	0.1m	Site	Topsoil	
101	Layer	N/K	Site	Natural	
102	Layer	0.65m	Site	Modern make up	Pottery, Bone, CBM
103	Structure	0.5m	1m	Wall foundation	
104	Structure	0.4m	1.3m	Wall foundation	
105	Cut	0.5m	1m	Construction cut	
106	Cut	0.4m	1.3m	Construction cut	
107	Cut	>0.3m	1.5m	Ditch	
108	Fill	>0.3m	1.5m	Ditch fill	Pottery
109	-	-	-	Un--stratified finds	Pottery
110	Cut	>0.2m	1.3m	Pit (?)	
111	Fill	>0.2m	1.3m	Pit (?) fill	Iron nail
112	Cut	>0.1m	1.3m	Pit	
113	Fill	>0.1m	1.3m	Pit fill	Pottery
114	Layer	>0.15m	>13m	Dark soil make up	CBM
200	Layer	0.1m	Site	Topsoil	Pottery, Bone
201	Layer	N/K	Site	Natural	
202	Layer	0.2m	Site	Modern overburden	Glass, Metal, CBM, Wood, Unexploded shell
203	Layer	0.4m	Site	Modern make up	Pottery
300	Layer	0.15m	Site	Topsoil	Glass, Metal, CBM
301	Layer	N/K	Site	Natural	
302	Layer	0.4m	Site	Modern make up	Glass, CBM
303	Layer	N/K	1.4m	Dark silty clay	
304	Layer	0.3m	30m	Rubble spread	Tarmac
305	Layer	0.4m	Site	Dark soil make up	CBM

APPENDIX 2 FINDS ASSESSMENTS**Pottery**

Context	Sherd No.	Weight (g)	Fabric/Form	Spot Date
102	12	186	R20 (sandy grey ware), B11 (black-burnished ware 1), R90 (grog-tempered ware), O40 (Severn Valley ware), 1 tankard, post-medieval	p-med
108	6	38	B11 (black-burnished ware 1), R30 (medium sandy grey ware), fired clay	120-400
109	4	60	B11 (black-burnished ware 1) 1 flagon handle, S30 central Gaulish samian 1 base sherd	120-200
113	5	50	R20 (sandy grey ware) 1 handle B11 (black-burnished ware 1)	120-400
200	4	102	post-medieval, medieval?, O40 Severn Valley ware	p-med
203	1	1	medieval/post-medieval	med/p-med
302	3	36	B11 (black-burnished ware 1) 1 cooking jar rim sherd, fired clay	120-400

APPENDIX 3 BIBLIOGRAPHY AND REFERENCES

DE, 2006 Brief for Archaeological Recording: *Creation of All-weather sports pitch, RNAS Yeovilton, Somerset*

Lovell, J, 2005 Excavation of a Romano-British Farmstead at RNAS Yeovilton *Somerset Archaeology and Natural History* 7-70 **149**

Wilkinson, D (ed.) 1992 OAU *Fieldwork Manual* (1st edition)

OA, 2006 RNAS Yeovilton, *Written Scheme of Investigation*

WA, 2005 Excavation of a Romano-British Farmstead at RNAS Yeovilton

APPENDIX 4 SUMMARY OF SITE DETAILS

Site name: Royal Naval Air Station (RNAS) Yeovilton, Somerset.

Site code: TTNCM 213 2006

Grid reference: ST 551 243

Type of watching brief: 2 service runs. The first was 0.4m wide x 100m long x 0.7m deep
The second was 0.2m wide x 175m long x 0.7m deep

6 floodlight foundation bases 1.5m x 1.5m x 1.2m deep

Stripped area of all weather pitch reaching natural approximately 150 m square

Date and duration of project: January 3rd 2007 - January 30th 2007

Area of site: 0.6 ha

Summary of results: 2 wall foundations. 1 ditch. 2 pits all of Roman date. Overlain by post medieval and modern landscaping layers

Location of archive: The archive is currently held at OA, Janus House, Osney Mead, Oxford, OX2 0ES and will be deposited with Somerset County Museum Service in due course under the following accession number: TTNCM 213 2006



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Figure 1: Site location

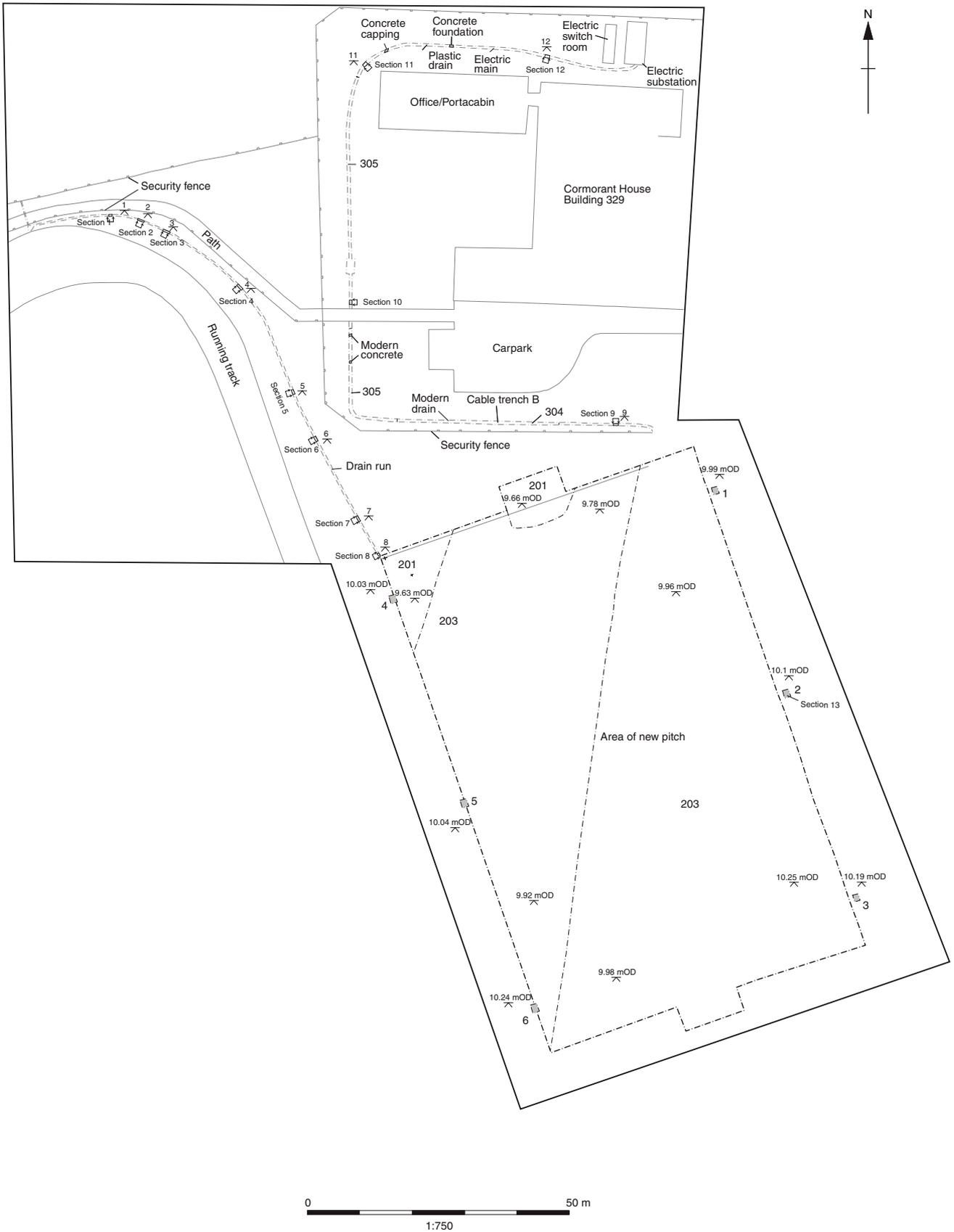


Figure 2: Watching brief trenches

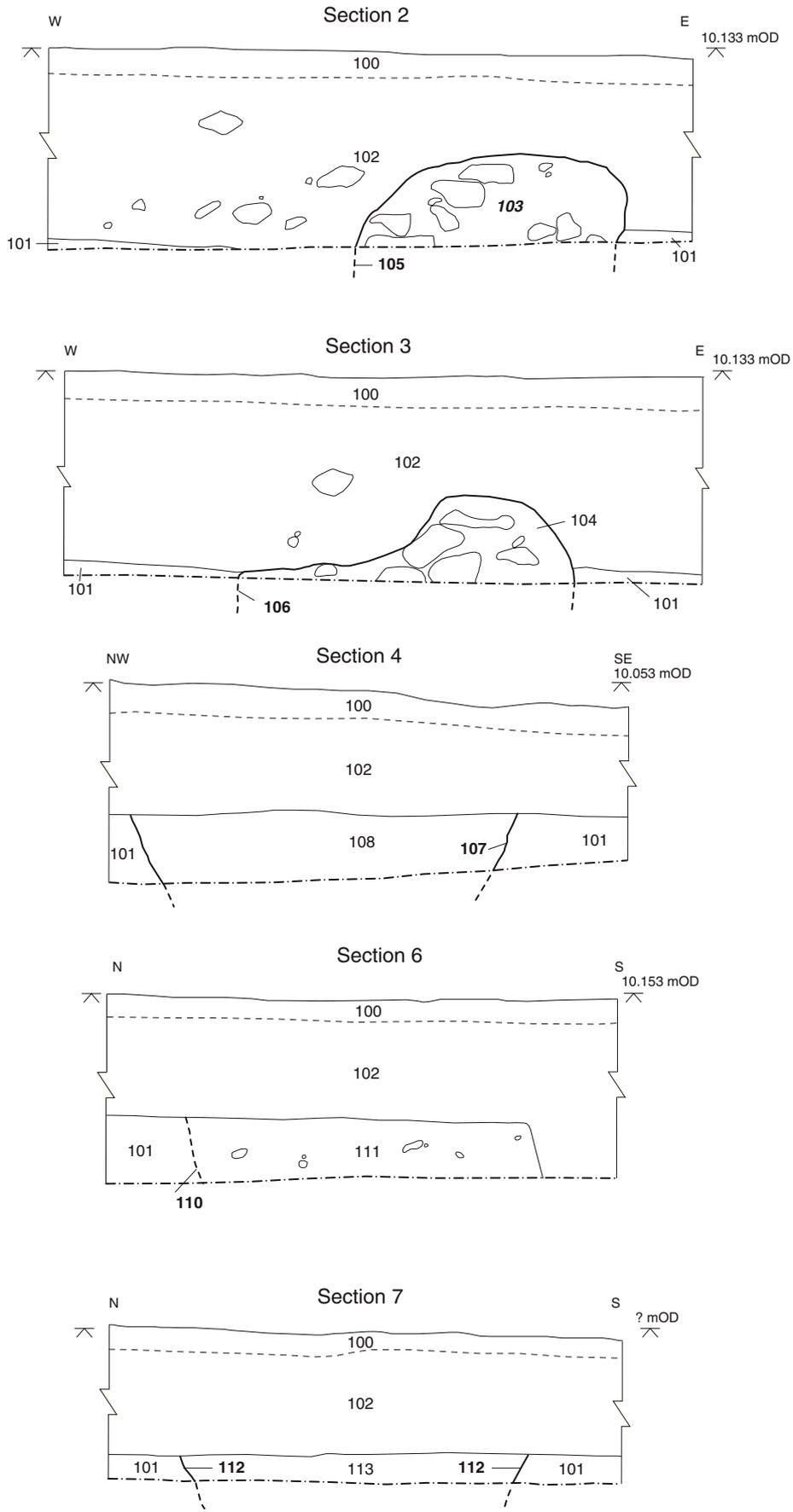


Figure 3: Sections



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