

# Phyllis Court Club, Henley-on-Thames, Oxfordshire

NGR SU 7629 8306

Archaeological Watching Brief Report



Oxford Archaeological Unit

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### *Acknowledgements*

*Pottery assessment by Nigel Jeffries.*

## 1. SUMMARY

- 1.1. *The Oxford Archaeological Unit carried out a watching brief during construction of an extension at the Phyllis Court Club. No features or finds of archaeological significance were located.*

## 2. INTRODUCTION

- 2.1. Building work for the construction of an extension to the ballroom w.c.'s, bar/storage area and staff accommodation at the Phyllis Court Club, Henley-on-Thames, began in December 1996. From this date until January 1997 a watching brief was undertaken by the Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) during excavations for the foundations. This Archaeological Watching Brief was required, in accordance with PPG 16, because of the presence of known sites of archaeological interest in the immediate vicinity. The extension is to the south of Phyllis Court (see Figs 1 & 2), on land previously occupied by out buildings and landscaped gardens.

## 3. LOCATION AND BACKGROUND

- 3.1. Phyllis Court Club is situated on the west bank of the River Thames on the north-eastern edge of the town, and lies at approximately 34 metres above O.D. The geology of the site is Thames gravel. The site was considered to have archaeological potential due to the proximity of known archaeology sites, and the importance of Phyllis Court itself.
- 3.2. Evidence of prehistoric activity comes from the old ford, where stone, copper alloy and iron weapons were found in the river or nearby. Bronze Age pottery and bronze fragments were also found near Harpsden Heights. The presence of Roman coins and pottery from the town centre and from Westfield House are referred to, and a partly excavated Roman villa was situated at Harpsden, south of the town (Air et al., 1975, p 125). Additionally, work by the OAU at Waitrose on Bell Street revealed a palaeochannel sealed by a Roman building. This was sealed by a layer containing Saxon pottery (Moloney in prep).
- 3.3. A settlement at Henley is first referred to in 1179. Excavations by the OAU in the gardens of the rectory and at 12-16 Market Place (Durham et al.), corroborate this date for the establishment of a town at Henley. It is believed that the later settlement had shifted or expanded, as it was previously concentrated to the south of Phyllis Court. Henley was referred to as a hamlet with a chapel in the Hundred Rolls (1278) and as a town by 1284, when Henry 11 bought the land of Henley 'for making buildings'. By this time the rectilinear street plan had probably been established. This, along with the regularity of the house plots as revealed at the rectory excavations, reinforce the belief that Henley is one of only two genuine medieval towns in

the region. This is also supported by the central position of the church, originally a chapelry of Benson, which contrasts with other towns where the church becomes peripheral as a result of later urban growth (Airs et al., 1975, 125).

- 3.4. Henley flourished as a trading centre, taking full advantage of the Thames as a means of transporting goods. Many of the medieval and 16th century buildings survive, although most have been altered, particularly during the Victorian period. The edges of the settlement are still visible, despite losing definition due to 19th and 20th century expansion (Airs et al., 1975, 125).
- 3.5. Phyllis Court was the centre of the medieval manor, referred to in the 15th and 16th centuries, although the actual house of Phyllis Court is not mentioned until 1622. Here it was described as having a moat around it, and a drawbridge at the front. The house was rebuilt in 1648 after damage sustained during the civil war and was demolished again in 1788. The remainder was taken down in 1837, before the present house was built. A cellar structure discovered in 1966 could be associated with the 18th- and 17th-century building. On the north side of Phyllis Court a water filled channel has been interpreted as part of the medieval moat (Airs et al., 1975, 125). However, the original SMR card for 1960 states that this is a private harbour contemporary with the present house, thus making it 19th century.

#### 4. AIMS AND STRATEGY

- 4.1. The aims of the watching brief were to observe operations on site that might disturb or destroy archaeological deposits, and to hand-clean and sample excavate any significant features. It was hoped that evidence of the medieval manor house or the moat may have been discovered that would enhance our understanding of the property.
- 4.2. The excavation of foundation trenches for the extension were monitored, trench sections were examined for archaeological features and spoil heaps inspected for finds. The trenches were typically 1.5m wide and varied in depth from 2.5m to 2.7m (the depth of the water table).
- 4.3. No deposits of archaeological significance were noted and few finds recovered during the work, therefore recording was on a low level. However, sections were drawn to illustrate the large quantities and various layers of 18th, 19th and 20th century building rubble and context numbers assigned and photographs taken.

## 5. RESULTS

- 5.1. The site was initially stripped to a depth of 0.3m, revealing 18th, 19th and 20th century building material covering virtually the whole site. A broadly similar sequence of deposits was observed in most of the foundation trenches, with some localised variations (see Table 1 for details).
- 5.2. The sequence was as follows. The natural gravel was observed in all the foundation trenches. This was overlain by a dirty mixed deposit consisting of gravel, sand and unworked flint, which varied in thickness from 1-2m, and was generally noted as being much deeper towards the north, as seen in the central trench running N-S (see Fig.). This layer yielded a rib bone probably belonging to a cow. Above this deposit the stratigraphy across the site varied.
- 5.3. Area 1 (see Fig. 2) covers most of the site. Here the dirty gravel layer is overlain by one deposit 0.8-1.2m thick, and containing brick and tile. Generally the area contained greater quantities of the building rubble to the east.
- 5.4. Area 2 (see Figs 2 and 3) was slightly more complex. The layer containing brick and tile was thinner here at 0.4 m and was overlain by a silty layer 0.2m thick also containing some brick and tile. Above this was a gravel layer 0.08m thick containing small fragments of ceramic building material (CBM) and a white glazed bowl base of early 19th-century date (identified by Nigel Jeffries). The silt layer in this area suggests that this is the location of part of the landscape garden that previously occupied part of the site.
- 5.5. Area 3 (see Figs 2 and 4). Overlying the dirty gravel was one layer up to 0.7m thick which contained 19th- to 20th-century CBM mixed with modern cement and plastic. An early 20th-century brick drain runs through the site from E-W towards the river at a depth of approximately 1 m. This cuts into the dirty gravel and is overlain by the modern rubble layer.
- 5.6. Area 4 (see Figs 2 and 5). The section of the drainage trench furthest east running N-S, had a layer of chalk 0.16m thick lying between two layers containing CBM material.
- 5.7. Several charcoal lenses up to 1m wide and 0.20m deep mixed with brick and tile were also observed in the foundation trenches. Brick and tile of 18th, 19th and 20th century date was present across the site. The only other finds not mentioned above are two unstratified large sherds of thick green-glazed pottery of 19th- or early 20th-century date.

## 6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

- 6.1. The natural gravel was observed in all the foundation trenches. The overlying layer appeared to be 'natural' in origin, yet its mixed nature and the presence of an animal rib bone suggests it was washed in perhaps during floods, or could even be a palaeochannel, although this is not clear as observation was limited. The proximity of the river supports this, together with the fluctuating depths of the natural. The presence of several layers of building material in the eastern and western sides of the site suggests that several stages of building activity have occurred here from the 18th century. This is probably associated with the demolition and rebuilding of Phyllis Court during the 18th and 19th centuries as described in documents. In the centre of the site these layers appear to have been mostly removed due to modern activity, as a mixed deposit including concrete and plastics overlies an earlier layer. This modern rubble is associated with the construction of the concrete hut still standing.
- 6.2. In conclusion, no traces of significant archaeologically detectable activity exist before the 18th century. Since this time the site has been disturbed many times by building activity, by the laying of an early 20th-century drain, and features associated with the landscaped garden. The depth to which the building rubble exists and the fact that it directly overlies the mixed palaeochannel(?) gravel, suggests that if any archaeology existed prior to the 18th century it was completely destroyed by these later activities.

Cheryl Bishop.  
January 1997.

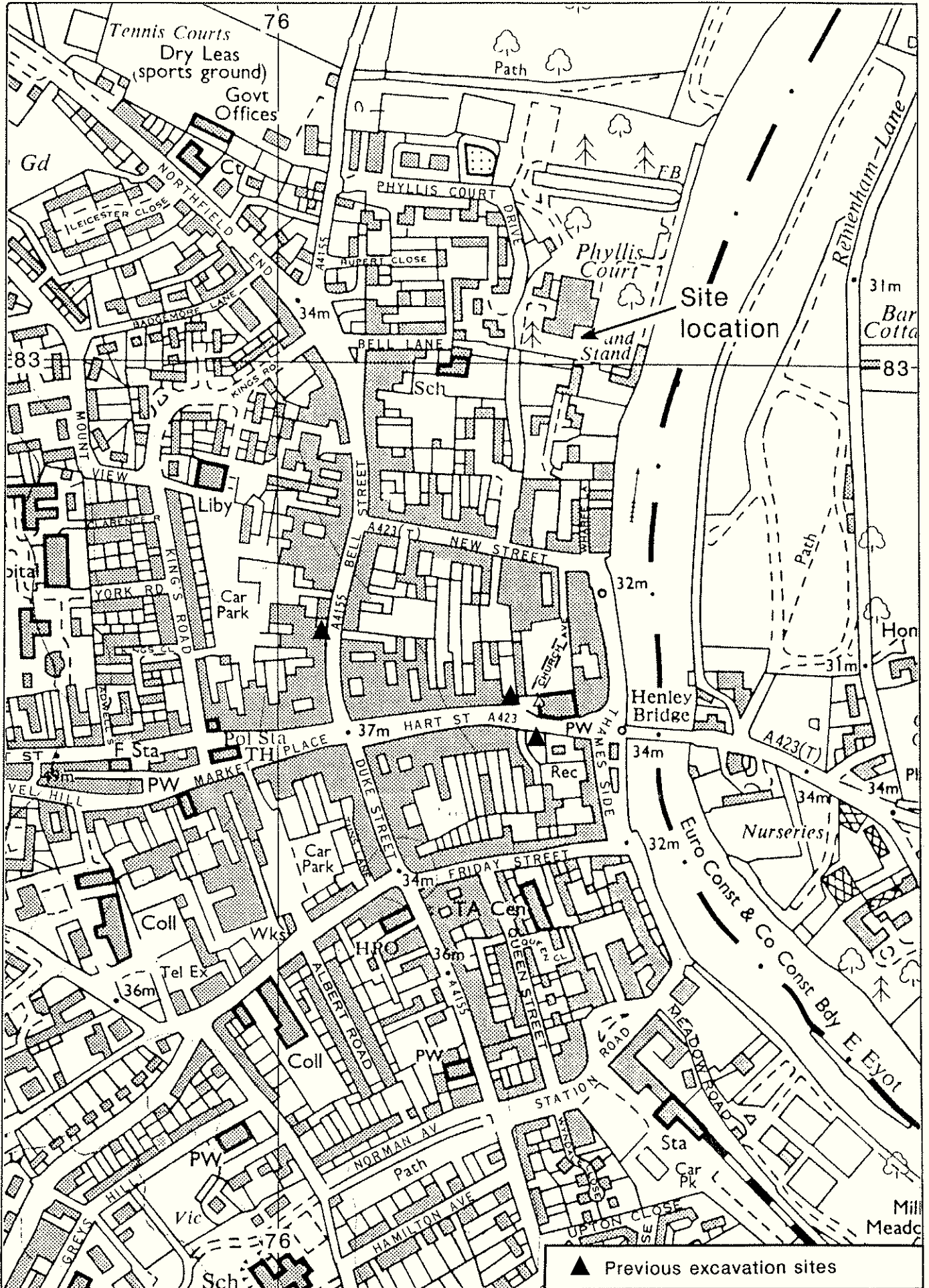
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## Appendices

### Appendix 1 Archaeological Context Inventory

Area	Ctx	Type	width (m)	thick . (m)	Comment	Finds	No	Date
2	1	layer		0.08	topsoil			
	2	layer		0.08	gravel layer	pot CBM	1	early 19th century 18th/ 19th/ 20th c
2	3	layer	1.2	0.20	silty layer			
2	4	layer		0.4	mixed layer containing CBM rubble	CBM		18th/19th/ 20th c
2	5	layer		1-2	mixed gravel	rib bone	1	
2	6	deposit			Thames gravel			
All	7	layer		0.68	modern rubble			
All	8	fill	1.8	0.6	mixed gravel and rubble			
3	9	cut	1.8	0.8	cut for early 20th c brick drain			
3	10	layer		0.4	mixed layer containing CBM	CBM		18th/ 19th/ 20th c
3	11	layer		0.16	chalk			
4	12	layer		1	mixed layer containing CBM			



▲ Previous excavation sites

scale 1:5000

Reproduced from the Ordnance Survey's 1:10,000 map of 1990 with the permission of the Controller of Her Majesty's Stationery Office, Crown Copyright. Licence No. AL 854166

Figure 1



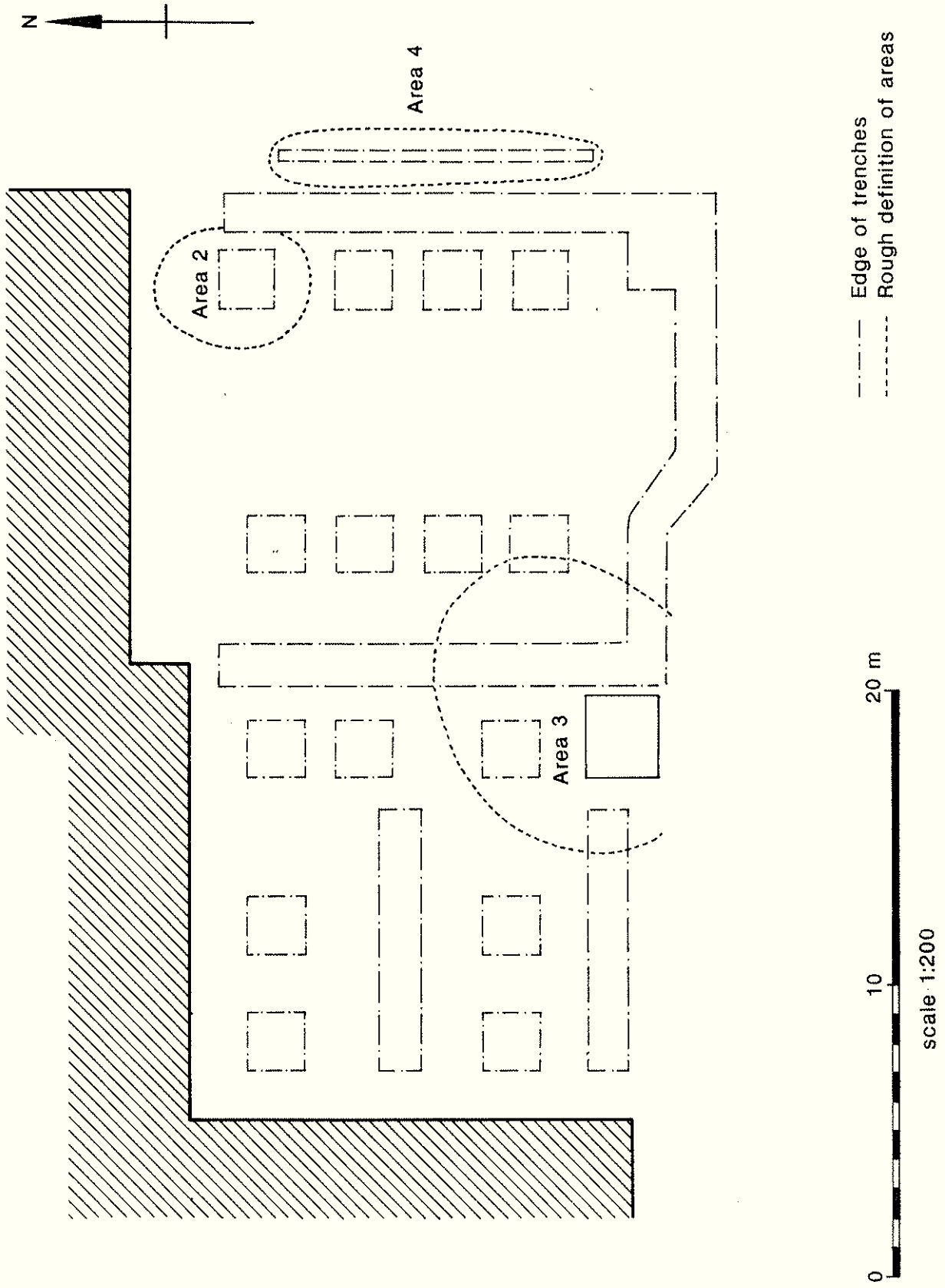


Figure 2

Area 2: West facing section

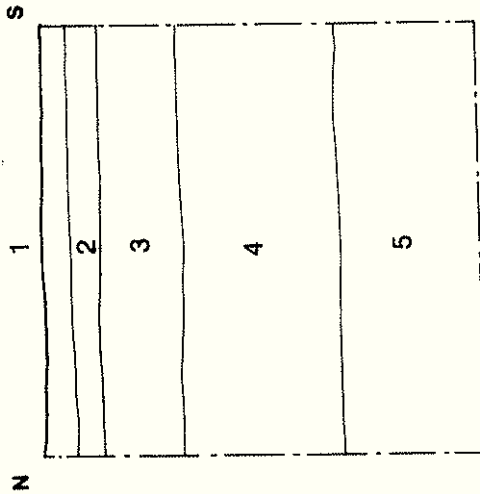


Figure 3

Area 3: West facing section

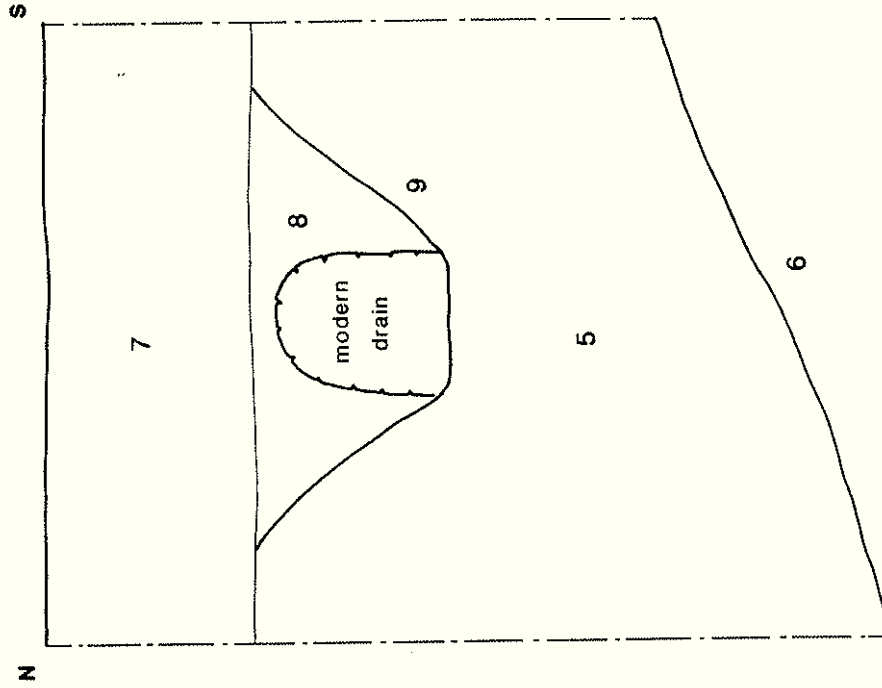


Figure 4

Area 4: East facing section

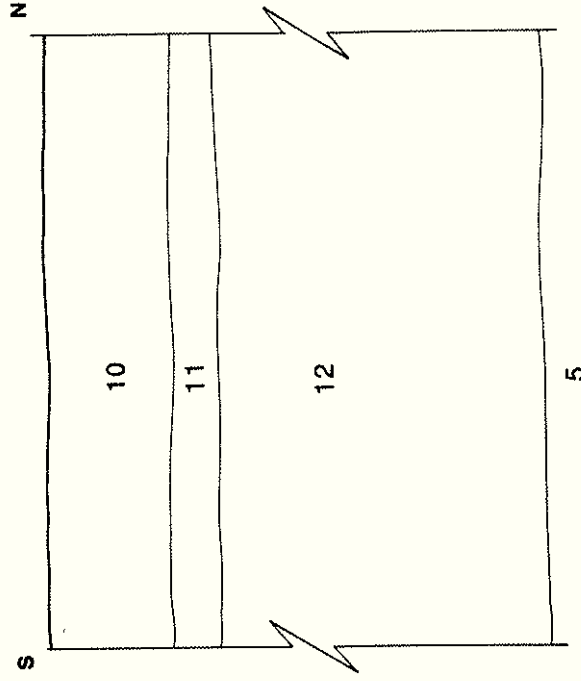
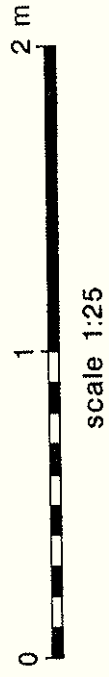


Figure 5





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