ST MARY'S CHURCH
RUSHDEN
HERTFORDSHIRE

ARCHAEOLOGICAL FIELD EVALUATION

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28th October 2003

Produced for:

John Glanfield & Partners

on behalf of
The Parochial Church Council

Contents

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Preface

Every effort has been made in the preparation of this document to provide as complete an assessment as possible, within the terms of the specification. All statements and opinions in this document are offered in good faith. Albion Archaeology cannot accept responsibility for errors of fact or opinion resulting from data supplied by a third party, or for any loss or other consequence arising from decisions or actions made upon the basis of facts or opinions expressed in this document.

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Albion Archaeology would like to acknowledge the assistance of Bruno Hooker (architect) and Adrian Havercroft (Diocesan Archaeological Advisor).

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Structure of this report

The introductory section of the report presents background information on the project, including documentary and architectural historical information on the church. Section 2 presents a summary of the results of the archaeological field evaluation. Section 3 synthesises the results of the trial excavation and the available background information. All figures referred to in the text are bound at the back of this report.

Key Terms

Throughout this report, the following terms or abbreviations are used:

DAA	Diocesan Archaeological Advisor
IFA	Institute of Field Archaeologists
Procedures Manual	*Procedures Manual Volume 1 Fieldwork*, 2nd edn, 2001 Albion Archaeology

Non-Technical Summary

It is proposed to construct a French drain along the north side of St Mary's Church, Rushden, Hertfordshire (NGR: TL 30540, 31765.) Given the archaeological sensitivity of the area, the DAA issued a brief for an archaeological field evaluation prior to construction. The evaluation comprised the excavation of five test pits against the outside wall of the church. The fieldwork was carried out by Albion Archaeology between Friday 3rd and Tuesday 7th October 2003.

The results from the test pits demonstrate the presence of well preserved archaeological deposits relating to the earliest surviving parts of the church. The construction cut for the foundations of the chancel, nave and tower were identified at a high level in the soil profile. This demonstrates that the ground adjacent to the north wall of the church has not been subject to significant later disturbance.

Pottery dated to the 12th or 13th century was found in a soil layer which appears to pre-date the construction of the nave and also in the fill of the construction trench for the foundations of the nave. In terms of dating evidence, this only proves that the earliest remains of the church found cannot be older than sometime in the 12th or 13th century.

The excavation did not recover any conclusive evidence on the relationship between the nave and chancel. However, on the basis of the pattern observed at other churches, it would appear likely that, together, these formed the original building.

The test pits demonstrated that the buttresses of the nave were a later addition. It is likely that they were added during a late 15th century phase of construction. At this time the walls were increased in height and weakened by the insertion of larger windows.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Project Background

In response to proposals to construct a French drain along the northern side of St Mary's Church, Rushden, the DAA, Adrian Havercroft, requested an archaeological field evaluation.

The architect, Bruno Hooker of John Glanfield & Partners, commissioned Albion Archaeology to carry out the evaluation. The work was done between 3rd and 7th October 2003.

1.2 Fieldwork Details

The brief issued by the DAA specified the excavation of five test pits along the north wall of the church (Figure 1). One was situated at the junction of the chancel and nave, three along the length of the nave and one beside the tower. The test pits were between 0.6m x 0.8m and 0.85m x 0.9m in plan and up to 0.6m deep. They were excavated by hand to the projected maximum depth of the French drain (0.6m), with the exception of Test Pit 5 which was excavated to a depth of 0.3m, where chalk bedrock was encountered.

All structural stonework was cleaned and recorded without further disturbance. The base and sides of each test pit were cleaned and recorded. The record comprises plans and sections drawn at a scale of 1:10, photographs and context records completed on *pro formae* recording sheets. All work was undertaken in accordance with the brief and Albion Archaeology's *Procedures Manual.* In the following des

1.3 Site Location and Description

The small village of Rushden is situated in the northern part of Hertfordshire, approximately 6km to the east of Baldock. The church lies at the north end of the village, centred on Ordnance Survey grid reference TL 30540, 31765, at a height of approximately 128m AOD. The solid geology consists of Chalk, overlain by Boulder Clay.

1.4 Architectural and Documentary Background

The following section is derived largely from information contained in the Victoria County History for Hertfordshire[1] (VCH).

1.4.1 Historical

The manor of Rushden is recorded in the Domesday survey suggesting settlement in the area from at least the late Saxon period. The patronage of the church was originally vested in the lord of the manor with the earliest recorded presentation being made by William Basset in 1220.

[1] The Victoria History of the Counties of England, Hertfordshire. Volume 3, 1912, reprinted 1971.

1.4.2 The Church fabric

The church consists of a chancel, nave, west tower and south porch. In its earliest form the building would probably have comprised simply a nave and chancel. The VCH gives a date for the construction of the nave as approximately 1340 to 1350, probably based on the mid-14th century date assigned to the south door of the nave. Another door in the north side of the nave, now blocked, is dated to late 14th century.

The tower was added to the church *c.*1400, the window in its west side dates from the late 14th century.

In the 15th century, the church underwent a major phase of rebuilding. The three windows of the nave and the chancel arch date from the late 15th century. The nave formerly had lower walls and a much steeper pitched roof, demonstrated by the earlier roofline which is visible on the east face of the tower. It is likely that the roof was remodelled when the windows and the chancel arch were replaced.

The chancel was rebuilt using brick in 1849. The chamfered stone plinth of the medieval structure is still visible at the base of the chancel wall on the south side of the church.

2. RESULTS OF THE FIELD EVALUATION

In the following section bracketed numbers represent the context numbers issued during recording of the test pits. Each test pit was allocated a block of numbers, so that 100s are from Test Pit 1, 200s from Test Pit 2 *etc*.

2.1 Modern Deposits

2.1.1 Gravel

A surface layer of loose, clean gravel was recorded in Test Pits 2 (**200**) and 3 (**300**), between 80mm and 130mm deep (Figures 2-3). Although not shown on the section drawings of the remaining test pits, this layer extends along the length of the northern side of the nave and chancel. It is the result of an earlier attempt to improve the drainage when the ground level in this area was lowered slightly and the surface covered with gravel.

2.1.2 Concrete apron

A concrete apron was recorded in Test Pit 5 (**500**), extending 700mm out from the wall at the base of the tower (Figure 4). Its surface sloped gently downwards from the wall. The concrete was set into a construction cut [**510**], 180mm deep, the base of which was covered by a layer of hardcore or levelling material (**502**) composed of a mixture of large flint nodules and mortar. This apron was probably added to improve drainage of water away from the base of the tower.

2.1.3 Pit

A cut [**503**] was observed in the north-eastern corner of Test Pit 5, close to the tower. Its full extent was obscured by the limits of the test pit but its sides were nearly vertical, rounding out to a flat base. The loose soil fill of this feature (**504**) included a large proportion of modern occupation and building debris comprising, brick, tile, ceramic drain pipe, earthen ware and glass vessels. These artefacts, dateable to the late 19th or early 20th centuries were not collected.

2.2 Geological Strata and Soils

2.2.1 Chalk

Chalk bedrock was observed towards the western end of the church in the base of Test Pit 5 (506) where it occurred only 300mm below the ground surface.

2.2.2 Boulder Clay

In Test Pits 1 and 4, undisturbed geological strata (**101**) and (**405**) were located approximately 0.55m below the ground surface. They consisted of bright red brown or orange Boulder Clay containing occasional flint pebbles and frequent small fragments of chalk. The presence of Boulder Clay in these Test Pits demonstrates that the chalk bedrock lies much deeper below the surface than it does at the west end of the building in Test Pit 5.

2.2.3 Soil layers possibly pre-dating construction of the church

Soil layers observed in Test Pits 1, 2 and 4 were cut by the foundation trenches for the church walls, suggesting that they may pre-date the construction of the church. The layers, (**103**) (**207**) (**209**) (**404**), consisted predominantly of mid brown clay silt or clay, interrupted in Test Pit 2 by a thin lens of light grey clay (**208**). Five sherds (14g) of abraded, sand tempered pottery recovered from (**207**) date from the early medieval period, *c*.1150-1250 AD.

2.2.4 Soil layers post-dating construction of the church

The upper part of the soil profile included layers that abutted the walls or overlay the foundations, showing clearly that they post-date the construction of the church. These deposits, (**201**) (**203**) (**301**) (**400**) (**501**) and (**505**), consisted predominantly of dark grey brown silty loam containing small stones and fragments of chalk, mortar and ceramic building material. A single flake of struck flint was recovered from (**505**).

2.3 The Church Fabric

2.3.1 Chancel

The construction of the chancel was examined in Test Pit 1, which was situated in the angle between the north wall of the chancel and the east end of the nave (Figure 2). The foundations of the medieval chancel (**105**) were made of flint nodules set in a light yellow brown mortar and continue more than 0.6m below the modern ground level. The foundations were set within a wider construction cut [**102**], suggesting that they had been built up within a trench rather than being deposited into one. The construction cut extended between 0.3m and 0.4m from the north face of the foundation. Following the construction of the wall, the trench had been backfilled with material (**104**) largely derived from construction debris.

It was hoped to examine the relationship between the foundations of the chancel and the nave in Test Pit 1. Large flint nodules (**106**) at the base of the nave wall appeared to be part of its foundation. However, lower down in the test pit nothing was found of the foundation for the nave. It was impossible to examine the relationship further without undermining the wall of the nave.

The present chancel was built in 1849 and its footings (**107**) were laid directly on top of the foundations of the demolished medieval chancel. The outside of the 19th century construction was stepped in from the edge of the medieval foundations, leaving approximately 0.3m of the original foundations visible in the test pit.

2.3.2 Nave

The foundations of the nave were built within a construction trench measuring between 0.3m and 0.6m wide [**204**] [**401**] (Figures 2, 3). The backfill within the construction cut (**205**) (**402**) (**403**) consisted of either brown clay with few stones or orange/yellow clay material containing construction debris. One of these deposits (**402**) contained a pottery sherd (24g) dating from the 12th or 13th centuries. The sherd is in a sand tempered fabric, recognisable as Hertfordshire-type greyware. The foundations (**206**) (**307**) (**406**) were constructed of large roughly coursed flint nodules that continued to a depth of more than 0.6m below

the modern ground surface. The line of the wall above (**407**) (**306**) was offset a short distance (50mm) from the face of the foundation. A mortar fillet (**202**) (**308**) (**412**) had been formed over the offset to create the effect of a chamfered plinth.

In Test Pit 3, the construction trench was not recognized. It may be that the foundation trench was wider at this point, with the northern edge lying beyond the limit of the test pit. A series of layers lay against the foundations of the wall at this point. Two comprised material probably derived from construction activity, redeposited Boulder Clay (**304**) and light yellow brown clay mixed with stone, flint and chalk debris (**302**). These were interleaved between mid grey brown silty clay (**303**) and (**305**), possibly derived from topsoil. These layers may have been related to something other than the nave wall, particularly as the test pit lay directly outside a former access to the church in the form of a blocked door.

In Test Pit 4 it was possible to examine the base of one of the buttresses that support the wall of the nave. The foundation of the buttress (**409**) consisted of randomly arranged flint nodules with occasional fragments of clunch set in a fine grained light yellow or cream coloured mortar. The foundation filled the full width of its construction cut [**408**], cutting across the construction cut for the foundations of the nave. The construction and composition of the buttress foundation contrasted with that of the nave and it was clearly a later addition to the nave.

2.3.3 Tower

At the base of the tower, roughly coursed flint nodules (**509**) in mid orange brown sandy clay (**508**) filled a construction cut [**507**] to form a foundation that projects 0.15m beyond the plinth at the base of the tower. Directly above the foundation a few courses of flint nodules in mortar lie beneath a carefully constructed chamfered plinth of large limestone blocks.

3. CONCLUSIONS

3.1 Survival of Archaeological Deposits

The results from the test pits demonstrate the presence of well preserved archaeological deposits relating to the earliest surviving parts of the church. The construction cut for the foundations of the chancel, nave and tower were identified at a high level in the soil profile. This demonstrates that the ground adjacent to the north wall of the church has not been subject to significant later disturbance.

There was no evidence of grave cuts or human bone from the test pits. This may be a result of deliberate avoidance of the north side of the church, reflecting a belief that it was an unfavourable location for burial.

3.2 Constructional Sequence and Chronology

Interpretations of the sequence and dating of churches based on the upstanding remains are generally based on the stylistic dating of architectural elements such as windows and doors. This does have inherent problems as such elements can be inserted into existing walls, often leaving no evidence that this has happened. Archaeological examination of the foundations and associated deposits can recover both complementary and contradictory information about the constructional sequence and dating of a building.

In the absence of other evidence it is most likely that the church began as a simple nave and chancel. Therefore, the foundations observed in Test Pits 1 to 4 are believed to belong to the earliest phase of construction. On the evidence of architectural elements it has been suggested that the nave and chancel date from the mid-14th century (see section 1.4.2). Documentary evidence for the church goes back to at least the early 13th century. However, it is possible that this may refer to a previous structure.

Archaeological dating evidence for the origin of the church consists of a small amount of pottery recovered from the test pits. Five abraded sherds of 12th or 13th century pottery were found in a soil layer which appears to pre-date the construction of the foundations of the nave (see section 2.2.3). A single sherd of 12th or 13th century pottery was found in the fill of the construction trench for the foundations of the nave (see section 2.3.2). This evidence shows only that the foundations of the nave date from a period not earlier than the 12th century. The combined archaeological and architectural evidence, allowing for the possibility that the south door might be a later addition, shows that the nave could date from sometime between the 12th or 13th century and the mid-14th century.

The excavation did not recover any conclusive evidence on the relationship between the nave and the chancel. It does, however, seem likely on the pattern observed in other churches that these together formed the original building.

The test excavation did demonstrate that the buttresses were not part of the original design of the nave (see section 2.3.2). It is likely that the buttresses were added during the late 15th century phase of construction in order to support the

increased height of the walls which were now further weakened by the insertion of larger windows.

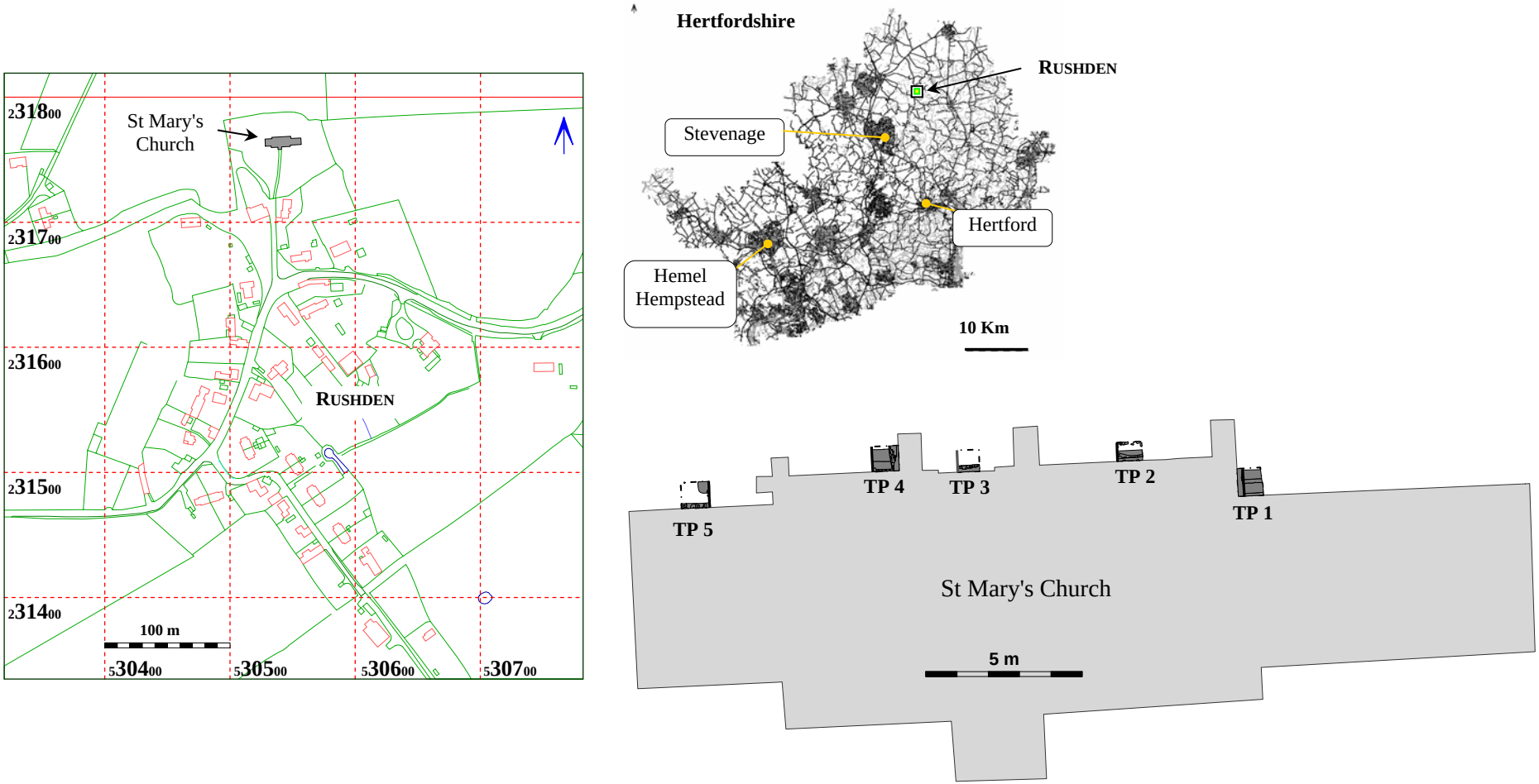


Figure 1: Location plan

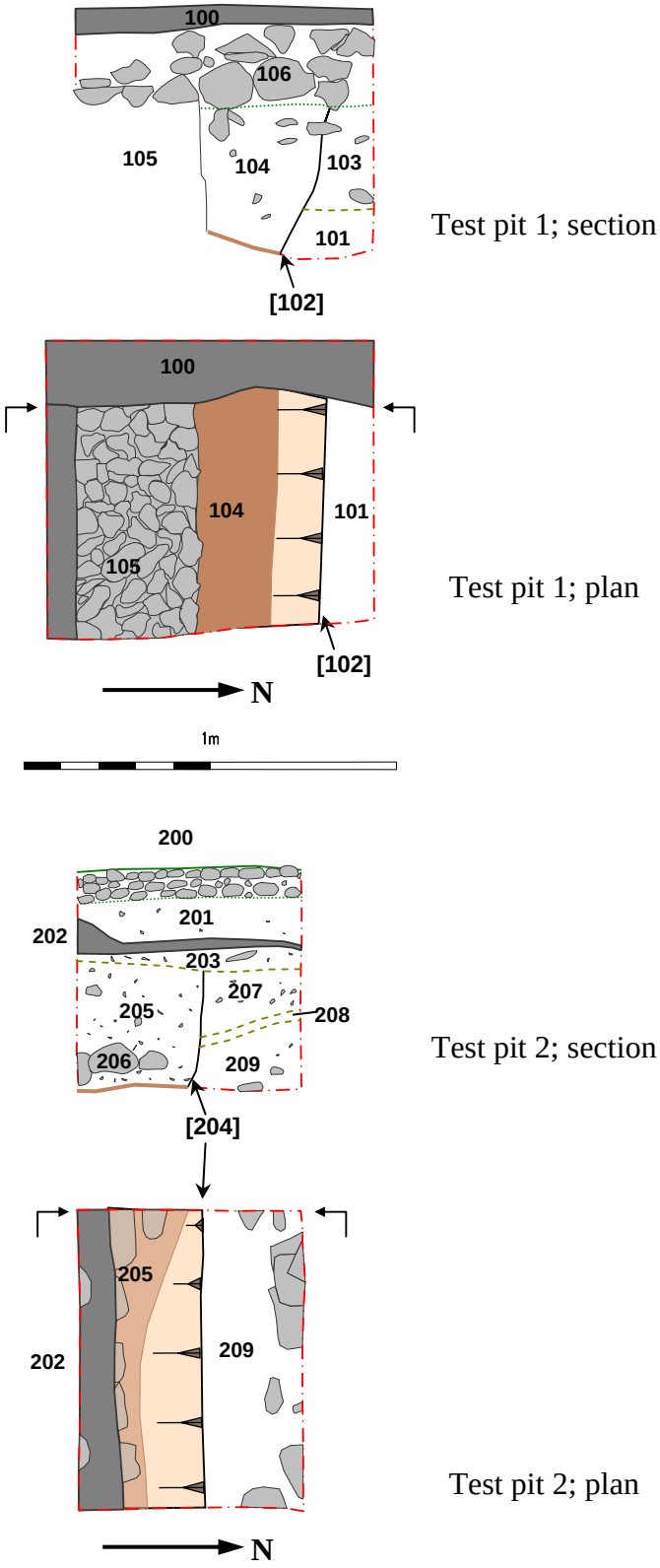


Figure2: Test pits 1 and 2; plans and sections
see figure 4 for key

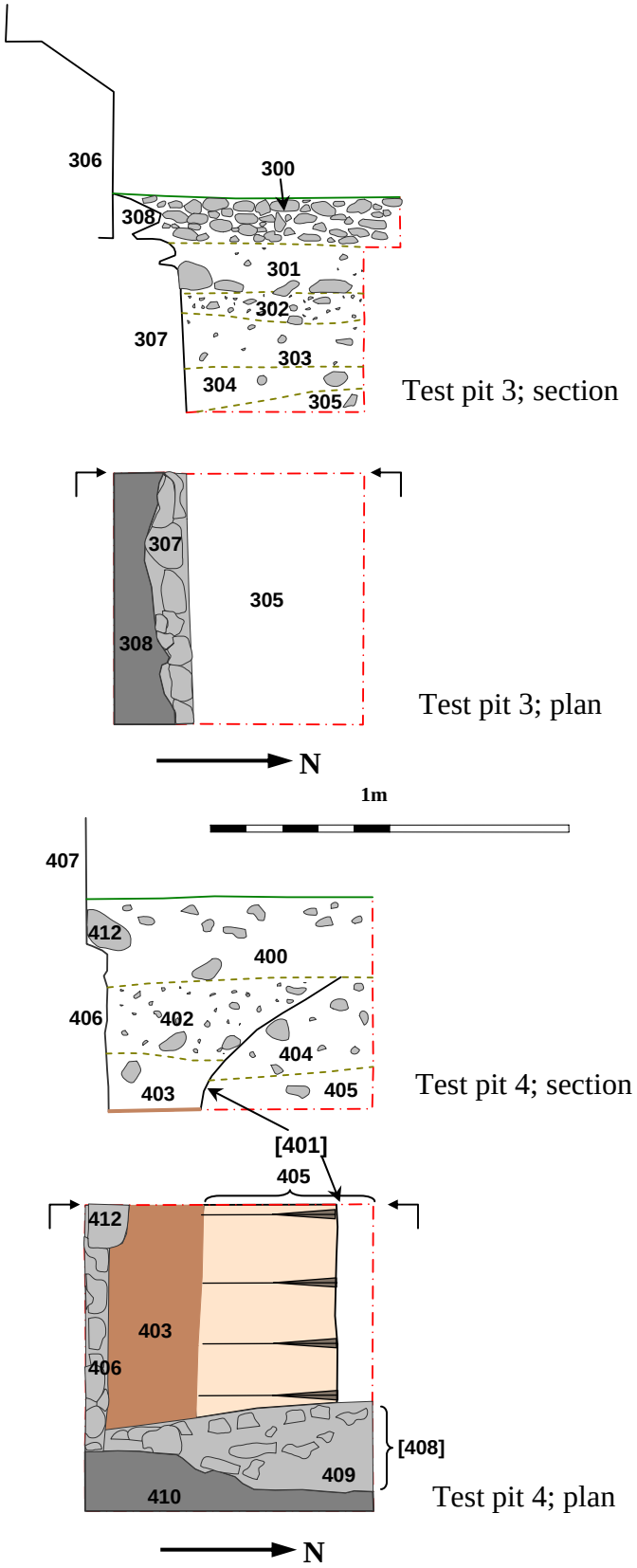
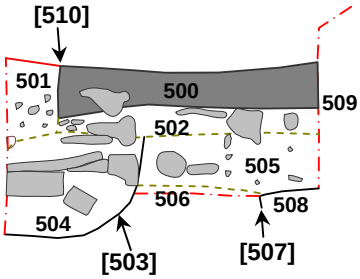
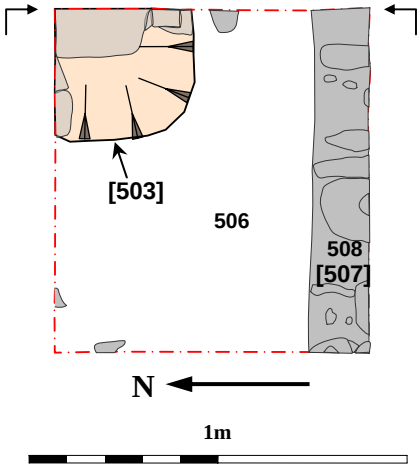


Figure 3: Test pits 3 and 4; plans and sections
see figure 4 for key



Test pit5; section



Test pit 5; plan

Figure 4: Test pit5; plan and section.

Key

- Concrete
- Stones/bricks
- Limit
- Layer/fill boundary
- Feature boundary
- Slope
- Unexcavated fill
- Excavated feature
- Section location