

St Radigund's Abbey Farm Hougham Nr. Dover Kent

Archaeological Watching-Brief Report

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Frontispiece Beginning of machine work cutting the trench, looking south. The trees follow the line of the North Bank

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Pipe-line watching-brief at St Radigund's Abbey Farm

1. Summary

A new water-main across dug across part of St Radigund's Abbey Farm, Hougham, near Dover (NGR 627608 141845 to 627707 141811), sectioned two sets of upstanding earthen banks and ditches, which form part of a more extensive complex of such earthworks surrounding the medieval abbey site. Each set of banks and ditches was carefully examined and recorded. The banks were found to be of simple dump construction with no evidence that any ever had an associated palisade or masonry wall. A previously infilled ditch was discovered on the north-western side of the North Bank. No datable finds were associated with any of the banks or ditches investigated. Three prehistoric struck flints recovered from topsoil between the earthworks provide further evidence for prehistoric activity hereabouts, as previously established by earlier fieldwork in the region.

2. Introduction

2.1 In connection with the laying of a new water-main across part of St Radigund's Abbey Farm at Bradsole, Hougham, near Dover, the Canterbury Archaeological Trust was engaged by the owner, Mr Peter Moynan, to maintain a watching-brief during the course of the machine trenching (Frontispiece). Close inspection of this work was undertaken by the writer and Paul Armour, throughout the period of trench digging on 3 December 2013, with some useful results.

2.2 The site lies high on the North Downs, between Dover and Folkestone. The ground here forms part of a level plateau standing at an elevation of about 135 metres above OD (Figs 1 & 2). The natural subsoil in this region is recorded as Clay-with-flints, resting on Upper Chalk. Special archaeological interest attaches to this entire area because it lies close to the ruins of the important twelfth-century Praemonstratensian abbey of St Radegund and a network of associated earthworks (Kent HER ref. TR 24 SW 1 & 45; Fig. 2). The entire monastic building and earthwork complex is scheduled as an Ancient Monument (No. 511688).

2.3 The pipe-trench began at the southern edge of the modern farmyard (Frontispiece), beyond the outer court of the abbey complex (NGR 627608 141845), and extended broadly south-eastwards, running for a total distance of about 111 metres before terminating at the edge of a farm track (NGR 627707 141811), close to the ruins of the medieval abbey's south gatehouse. Most the trench was cut across a field of permanent pasture. This field is delimited by earthen banks and ditches (Figs 2 & 3), which form part of a more extensive complex of such earthworks surrounding the abbey site (see below). The field, itself, has not been ploughed within living memory (Peter Moynan, pers com) and this is confirmed by the 1936 Land Utilisation Survey of Great Britain (map Sheet 117, accessed online 9.12.13).

3. Historical and archaeological background

3.1 In *c.*1192 a group of Premonstratensian monks arrived at Bradsole direct from their mother house at Prémontré in northern France, to establish a new abbey (St John Hope 1882). The isolated spot chosen, high on the chalk downs, some 4.5km west of the medieval town and Cinque port of Dover, was typical for this particular religious order. Existing dew ponds probably provided the abbey with its main source of fresh water and quite possibly also served as fish ponds. Although the abbey grew into a place of some importance, it was never a large house.

3.2 The abbey was dissolved in 1538 and substantial amounts of the stonework were then removed for use in Henry VIII's Kent coast defences. In 1590 the site was sold by the Crown and purchased by one Simon Edolph. The old Refectory in the South Range was converted into a farmhouse, a function which it still serves today. The great abbey church and the other ranges were abandoned and became ruinous, although the tower of the church was retained to form an impressive gateway to the new farmhouse. A large medieval building to the south of the main monastic complex, possibly originally the guest-house, was then converted into a barn.

3.3 The lands associated with the former abbey continue to be farmed today and substantial fragments of medieval masonry survive amongst more modern farm buildings. Of special interest in connection with the present work is the occurrence around the periphery of the monastic complex of a network of earthwork banks and ditches. These have previously occasioned much archaeological discussion and two were sectioned during the course of the 2013 trenching (see below; North Bank, Context 11; South Bank, Context 16; Figs 2 & 3).

3.4 Sussex archaeologist S.E. Winbolt seems to have been the first to make any detailed study of these earthworks (Winbolt 1931, 189–191). He considered them to have delimited the demesne lands of the Abbey and to have been of a 'semi-defensive character', although his theory that at least some constituted wet moats supplied from the adjacent dew ponds appears somewhat unlikely. Whether this complex of earthworks relates to the medieval abbey itself or to post-medieval activity remains less clear. Nor need they all be of the same date – several different phases could be represented. The fact that the south gate way of the abbey complex is neatly set into one of the banks (here the South Bank; Fig. 2) is suggestive and implies that these may, indeed, be the well-preserved remains of the monastic *vallum* complex. A careful modern survey of these earthworks would no doubt be very informative.

3.5 Field walking and watching-briefs previously undertaken in the fields around the abbey site have established the presence across the area of significant surface scatters of prehistoric flintwork. The bulk of these flints seem to belong to the Neolithic–Bronze Age period, with smaller amounts of Mesolithic material and a few items which are Palaeolithic (see Parfitt 2009 for further comments).

4. The recorded remains

4.1 The pipe-trench was excavated in two separate sections (North Arm and East Arm; Figs 2 & 3), giving it a roughly L-shaped layout. Following the line of an earlier (plastic) pipe, the trench was generally around 1 metre wide at the top and about 0.50m at the base, and varied in depth between 1.00 and 2.20m, getting progressively deeper from west to east. Towards the southern end of the short North Arm and the south-eastern end of the East Arm, the trench cut through upstanding bank and ditch earthworks (see above). For the purposes of the present fieldwork, these features were designated the North Bank and the South Bank, respectively (Fig. 3). They are described in more detail below.

4.2 Where unaffected by the earthworks, mainly along the East Arm, the exposed soil sequence was the same. The lower part of the trench was cut through a thick deposit of stiff, orange-red natural Clay-with-flints (Contexts 12 & 22). Above this was a finer clay deposit (Contexts 10 & 15), seemingly representing weathered material formed from the underlying clay. This upper clay was of variable thickness (0.20–0.50m) and appeared to be absent in a few places. Sealing Contexts 10 & 15 was a continuous layer of modern topsoil, consisting of between 0.20 and 0.30m of grey loam (Context 14). Three prehistoric struck flints were recovered from this layer but the deposit was generally devoid of pottery, peg-tile and farm refuse.

4.3 The natural chalk sealed by the Clay-with-flints was exposed in only one very small section of the East Arm of the trench, where a localised out-crop about 2 metres across was noted in the base of the trench (Fig. 3).

4.4 *The North Bank* (Context 11)

4.4.1 The somewhat eroded remains of this north-east–south-west aligned bank, fronted by a shallow depression representing a ditch on its south-eastern side, marks the southern limit of modern farmyard. It was cut through by the pipe-trench at an approximate right angle-angle, which provided a good cross-section through the earthwork (Figs 3 & 4). The trench also revealed the presence of a second, completely infilled ditch on the north-western side of the bank under the levelled area of the farmyard (F. 5, see below).

4.4.2 Reference to early maps of the site indicate that there had originally been a double bank and ditch arrangement here (Figs 2 & 3). In 1931 Winbolt described the feature as a ‘deepish fosse with a bank on either side’ (Winbolt 1931, 190). No trace of the second bank was visible in 2013 but if the visible ditch equates with Winbolt’s ‘fosse’, the missing bank would have lain on its south-eastern side. If so, this must have been subsequently levelled, leaving no trace today.

4.4.3 As revealed in the trench, the North Bank consisted of a single dump of yellow-brown clay containing occasional chalk specks and small flints. In section, it was 4.50m wide and survived to a height of 0.55m (Fig. 4, S. 1, Context 11). There had been a certain amount of root disturbance to its structure, caused by small hawthorn trees growing along its line (Frontispiece). It seemed that the bank been laid directly on the natural clay (Fig. 4, S. 1, Context 12), with the existing topsoil having been removed previously. There was no suggestion that there had ever been any associated palisade or masonry wall set either upon or within this bank and no datable finds were noted in its make-up.

4.4.4 On the south-eastern side of the bank, the still partially open ditch (F. 9) was recorded as being about 3.30m wide and at least 1 metre deep, with sloping sides. The base was not reached. The lower filling of the ditch consisted of a compact yellow-brown silty clay with small sub-angular flints (Fig. 4, S.1, Context 8). This was overlain by a fine brown silty loam containing very occasional charcoal specks and a few small flints (Context 7). No datable finds were recovered from either deposit.

4.4.5 On the northern side of the bank another, completely infilled, ditch was revealed (F. 5). This was smaller than F. 9, and as recorded, it was about 2.70m wide and 1.05m deep, with sloping sides and a rounded base. The primary filling (Fig. 4, S. 1, Context 13) was excavated by hand and consisted of a thin deposit of light yellow-brown slightly sandy clay containing a quantity of medium and large flint lumps but no datable material. The overlying main fill of the ditch (Fig. 4, S. 1, Context 4) consisted of a pale grey-yellow silty clay with flints and very occasional charcoal specks. Again, no datable finds were recovered.

4.5 *The South Bank*

4.5.1 This was visible as an upstanding earthwork, running almost parallel with the north bank around 50 metres to its south-east (Figs 2 & 3). The bank survives to a height of almost 1 metre, with traces of a shallow ditch fronting its south-eastern side. Overall, the bank extends for a distance of about 285 metres south-westwards from the remains of the abbey’s south gateway (Fig. 2). About 30 metres west of this gate the bank has previously been cut through by a recent farm track. The 2013 pipe trench cut the bank at an oblique angle, around 10 metres to the west of the track (Fig. 3).

4.5.2 As seen in the excavated trench, the bank was about 0.80m high, composed of dumps of clean clay containing quantities of natural flint and very occasional flecks of charcoal (Fig. 4, S. 3, Context 16 & 17). It extended for some 8 metres along the length of the trench and, as with the North Bank, appeared to have been laid directly on the natural clay (Context 22). Again, there was no suggestion that there had ever been any associated palisade or masonry wall set either upon or within the bank.

4.5.3 Immediately to the south-east of the bank, the pipe-trench sectioned the associated ditch, which had probably originally provided the material to construct the bank. As seen in the trench, the ditch (F. 20) appeared to be about 2.50m wide and 0.75m deep with sloping sides and a rounded base. Beyond the bank, it was cut through a deposit of early topsoil consisting of a light grey-brown silty loam (Fig. 4, S. 3, Context 21).

4.5.4 The ditch was filled with a single deposit of light yellow-grey silty clay (Fig. 4, S.3, Context 19), containing a moderate amount of small sub-angular flint but no datable finds. Sealing the infilled ditch and the topsoil through which it was cut was a mixed dump of orange and grey clay (Fig. 4, S. 3, Context 18). This probably represents spoil derived from the cutting away of the bank to allow passage of the adjacent farm track.

5. Finds

5.1 No datable finds were recovered from either of the banks and ditches sectioned and the only artefacts found were three prehistoric struck flints. These were discovered in the topsoil (Context 14) of the East Arm of the pipe trench, between the North and South Banks. They are all waste flakes but include a good blade-like piece, still fresh and sharp.

5.2 The high downland in this region of east Kent is known for regularly producing items of prehistoric flintwork, ranging in date from the Palaeolithic to the Neolithic and Bronze Age periods. A significant quantity of such material was recovered during field walking of the area by the Dover Archaeological Group in the 1970s and more recently, in 2009, during the construction of a new agricultural building a short distance further to the south (Parfitt 2009).

6. Conclusions and discussion

6.1 Giving the somewhat enigmatic status of the earthworks surrounding the abbey ruins, the absence of any useful dating evidence from the banks and ditches sectioned by the present pipe-trench is disappointing. Nevertheless, a few useful structural details about these earthworks were recorded.

6.2 It was established that both banks consisted of simple clay dumps, without any significant internal structure (Fig. 4). Both appeared to have been laid directly on the surface of the natural clay, the overlying topsoil having first been removed.

6.3 The material from which the banks are built is fairly certainly derived from the ditches that lay immediately adjacent. Along the North Arm, the pipe-trench was, unfortunately, not sufficiently deep to reach the bottom of the ditch, so it was not possible to check for the presence of water-laid sediments to further test Winbolt's unlikely claim that this had once been a wet moat (see above). At best, some of the ditches around the abbey could have served as overflows to the ponds in periods of very wet weather but as John Leland comments during the sixteenth century (just prior to the Dissolution), fresh water could

sometimes be in short supply at the abbey site (Chandler 1993, 252).

6.4 The few struck flints recovered from the topsoil removed during the trenching are suggestive of prehistoric activity in the area and there is ample other locally collected lithic material to support this. The bulk of these flints appear to be of late Neolithic–Bronze Age date (Parfitt 2009; see above).

6.5 Whilst no further study of the information recorded during the present operation is required, this work has re-focussed attention on the unusual complex of earthworks surrounding the abbey ruins. No critical examination of this bank and ditch system seems to have been undertaken since Winbolt's study over eighty years ago (Winbolt 1931). A new detailed survey, perhaps with some selective excavation, would be of considerable interest.

7. Bibliography

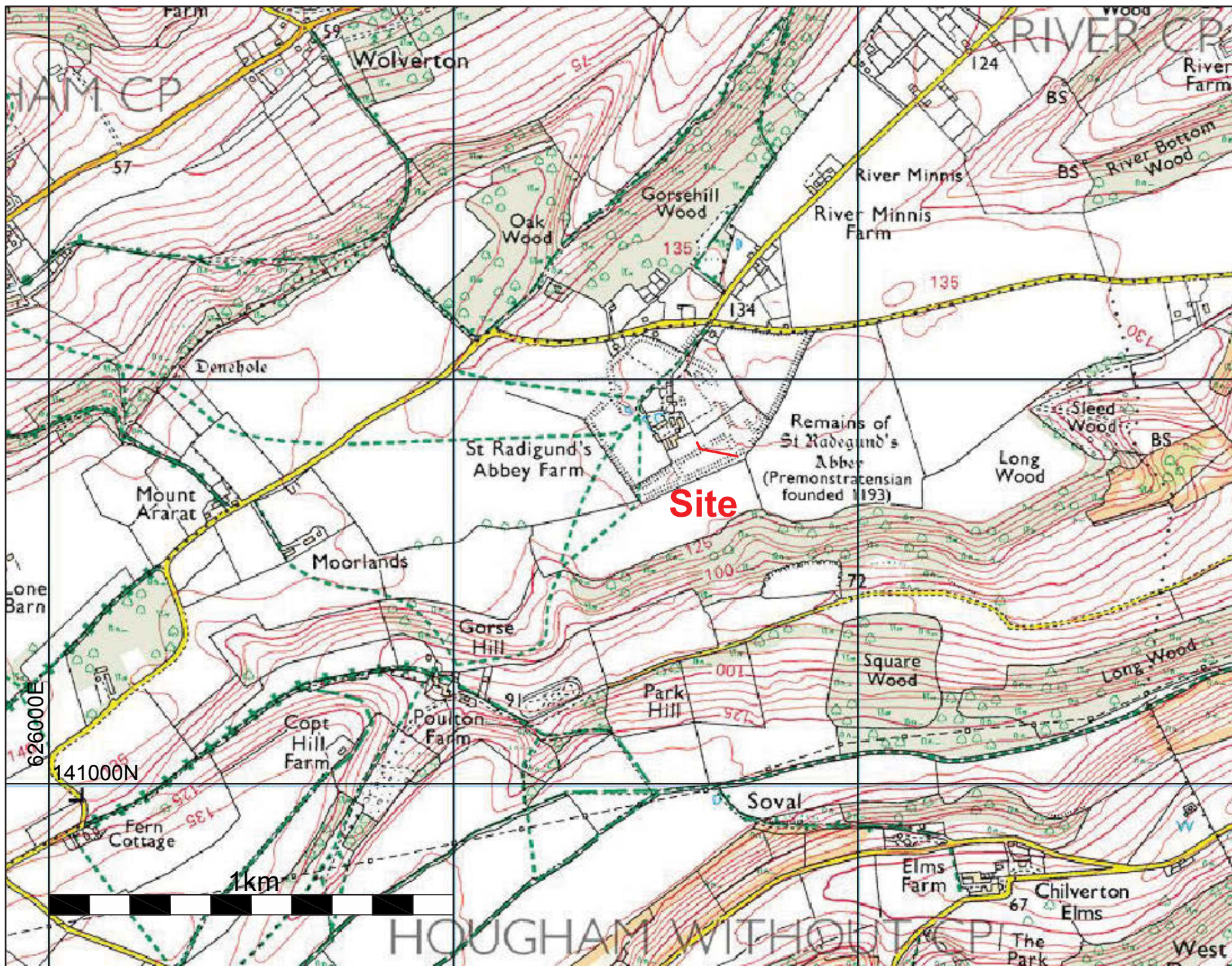
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Fig.1



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Fig. 1 General site location map

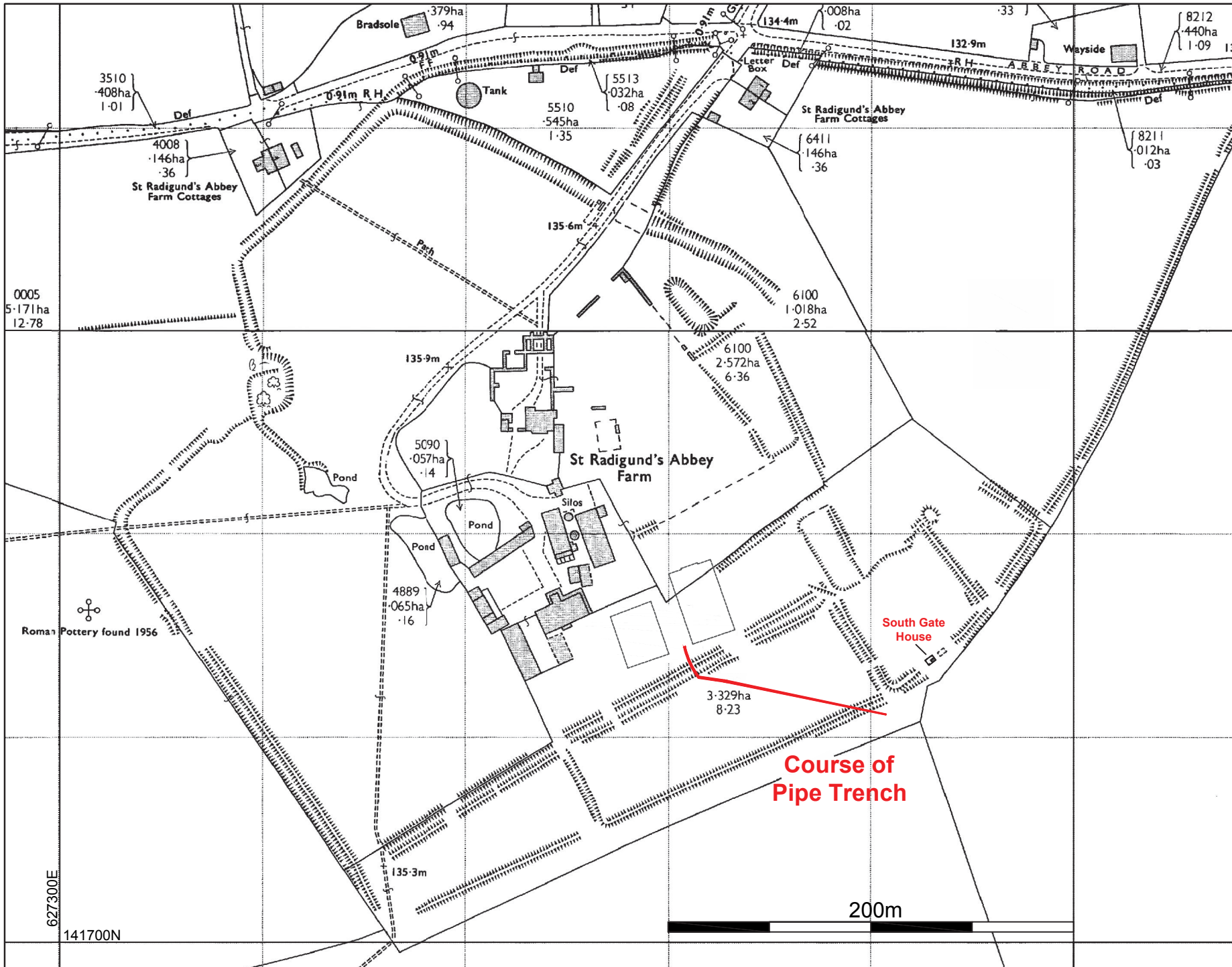


Fig.2

Recent Farm Buildings

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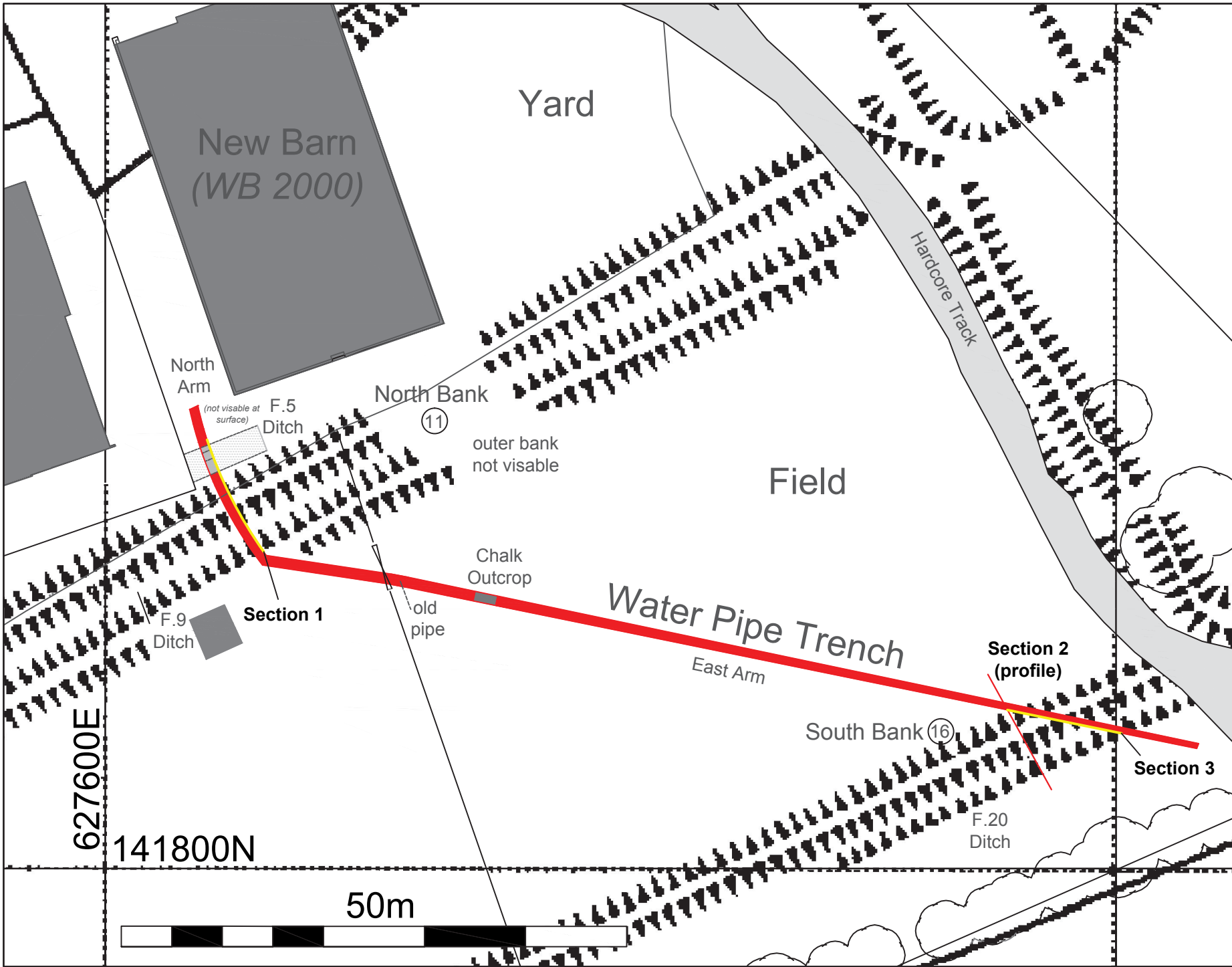
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Fig. 2 Location of excavation in relation to earthworks and St Radigunds Abbey Farm as recorded on the Ordnance Survey map 1956-1972

Fig.3




Banks and Ditches as recorded on the 1956-1972 OS maps


Water pipe trench


F.5 Ditch



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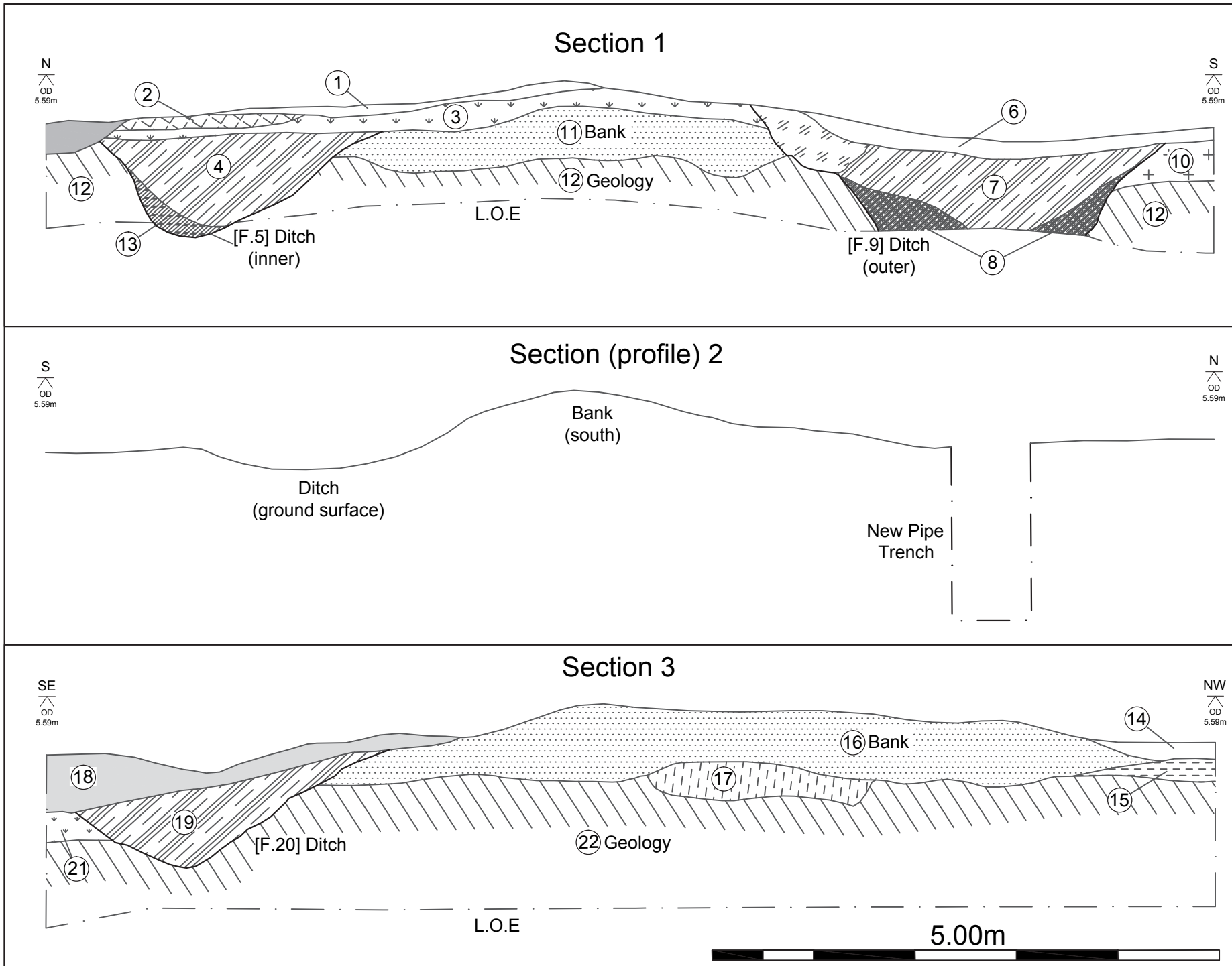
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Fig. 3 Location of Trench in relation to the recorded banks and ditches

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Fig.4



- Modern Intrusion
- (1) Modern disturb.
- (2) Chalk Rubble
- (3) Old Topsoil
- (4) Silty Clay
- (6) Modern Topsoil
- (7) Silty Clay
- (8) Compact Silty Clay
- (10) Upper Geology
- (11) Bank- Clay
- (13) Sandy Clay
- (14) Modern Topsoil
- (15) Subsoil
- (16) Bank- Clay
- (17) Clay
- (18) Modern Dump
- (19) Silty Clay
- (21) Buried Topsoil

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Fig.4 Sections across the North Bank (S.1) and South Bank (S. 2 and 3)