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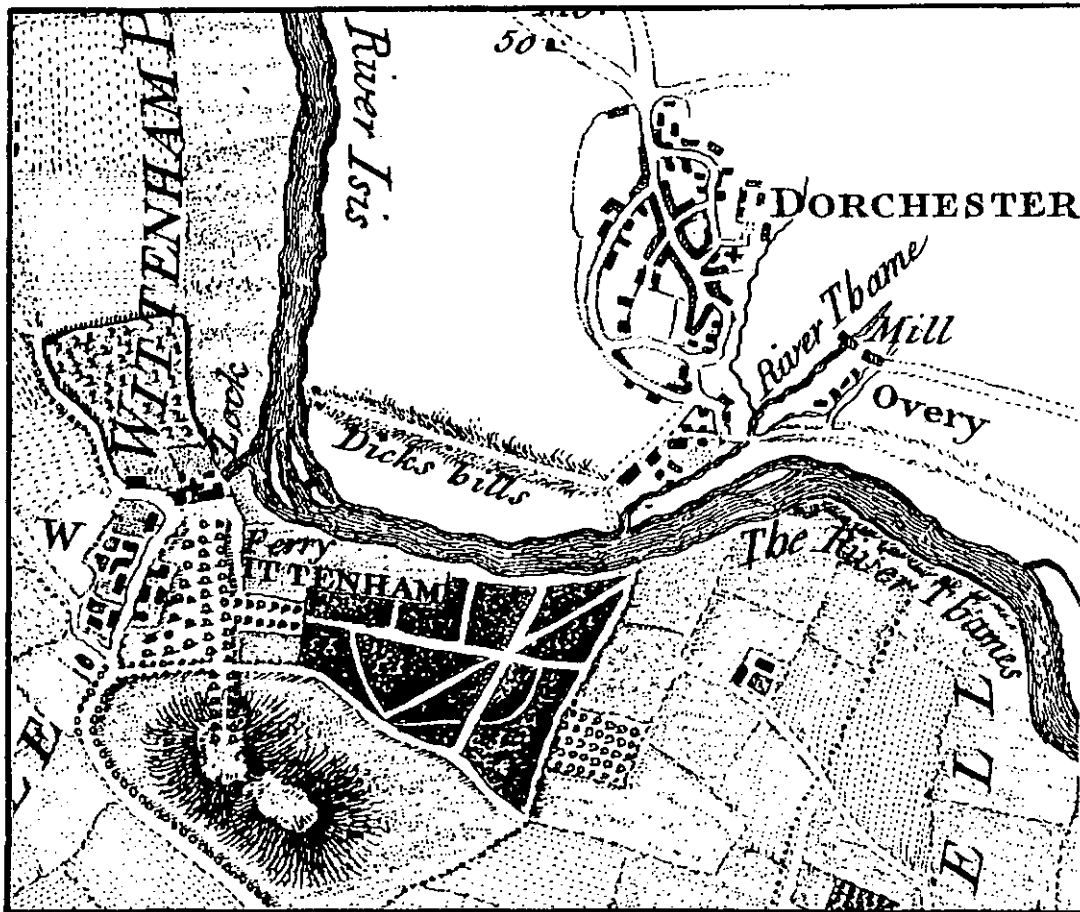
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Oxfordshire County Council

Watling Lane, Dorchester-on-Thames, Oxon.

Watching Brief during construction work, April 1994.



Oxford Archaeological Unit
May 1994

Watching Brief at Watling Lane, Dorchester-on-Thames, Oxon.

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Watching Brief at Watling Lane, Dorchester-on-Thames, Oxon.

Summary

The remains of several inhumation burials (probably representing a maximum of seven individuals) were exposed during the digging of foundation and service trenches for a new dwelling at 14 Watling Lane, Dorchester-on-Thames, Oxon. (NGR: SU 5763 9434) during April 1994. The location of these burials immediately outside the known defences of the walled Roman town and the presence within the service trenches of 3rd - 4th century pottery imply that the burials probably represent the remains of a Roman cemetery. The limits of the cemetery were not defined within the excavated area.

PRN15,838

1 Introduction

The Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) was commissioned by Oxfordshire County Council to undertake a watching brief at 14 Watling Lane, Dorchester-on Thames, Oxon. (NGR:SU 5763 9434) during the excavation of foundation trenches for the construction of a new dwelling and subsequently to monitor the excavation of related service trenches(see fig.1). The site was visited on 12th April 1994 to observe remains exposed during the digging of foundations and again on 29th April 1994 when the digging of all service trenches was monitored. The site is located immediately outside the north-western edge of the defences of the Roman walled town (see fig.2).

2 Background

2.1 Dorchester-on-Thames is located on a gravel terrace c.1km north of the confluence of the River Thames and the River Thame. The surrounding area appears to have been a focus for the region since prehistoric times. There was a Neolithic and Bronze age ceremonial complex located to the north-west of the town, a hill fort south of the river at Wittenham Clumps and an Iron Age promontory fort to the south of the town at Dyke Hills. It is possible that a conquest period Roman fort existed on the site of the present town which was superseded by a later earth bank and ditch defended town in the 2nd century. A stone wall was added in the 3rd century and the bank extended. Major cemeteries of the Roman period are known at Queensford Mill, 700m north-east of the fortified town and at Church Place, Warborough over 1km away to the west-north-west. Later Roman occupation is attested to by the high percentage of Theodosian coinage implying as it does the continuing arrival of new batches of coins for official payments of some form right up to the end of the 4th century and possibly into the early 5th century.

2.2 One of the most interesting aspects of the town is the evidence it has yielded for the

period of transition from Roman Britain to Anglo-Saxon England. Three notable early pagan Saxon burials have been discovered close to the town, at Dyke Hills to the north and at Minchin recreation ground. Two were females and contained late Roman objects in association with early north German brooches. The third burial was of a male and contained late Roman belt fittings of a type associated with Germanic mercenaries, and these finds have been interpreted as evidence for the presence of Germanic troops in the area in advance of the main Saxon settlements. Later Saxon sunken featured buildings (SFBs) have been excavated within the limit of the walled town, in one case respecting the line of an earlier Roman street, a fact which has been used as evidence for continuity of occupation throughout the 5th and 6th centuries. A major factor in favour of continuity of occupation is the establishment of the first see of Wessex at the town in c.635 AD, which though short-lived (the see was removed to Winchester due to the threat of Mercian activity in the 660s) argues for the presence in the town of a sizeable population and possible royal connections. In the late 9th century Dorchester became the seat of a Mercian Bishopric though the town seems to have declined in importance during the later Saxon period, reflected in the fact that it was not fortified as a Burh and was superseded as a regional centre by Oxford and Wallingford.

- 2.3 At the time of Domesday the manor was in the hands of the Bishop and valued at £30. In 1070 the see was again removed, this time to Lincoln, and as a replacement a house of Augustinian canons was formed in the former cathedral c.1140. At the dissolution the manor passed from ecclesiastical control and the abbey church was turned over to parochial use. By 1728 Dorchester was described as a poor town without trade. A period of prosperity in the later 18th and 19th centuries was derived from the coaching trade from London to the west, with a number of inns being established. The towns economy was otherwise agricultural.

3 Observations

- 3.1 During the excavation of foundation trenches a number of east-west orientated inhumation burials were exposed representing a maximum of six individuals. They were located at a depth of approximately 0.80m below ground surface, slightly above the level of clean natural sand. Due to the circumstances of discovery it was not possible to record these burials in detail.
- 3.2 Subsequent to the exposure of burials during the excavation of the foundation trenches a fuller watching brief was maintained during the digging of the service trenches in an attempt to more closely define the nature and date of the remains.
- 3.3 The service trenches were dug by mechanical excavator to a maximum depth of 0.70m below current ground surface to facilitate connection of drainage pipes to an existing man-hole at the eastern edge of the site. The soil removed was a homogenous dark brown silty gravelly loam. Subsoil levels were not reached within the excavated trenches. No complete burials were encountered during the digging of the service trenches although a small quantity of bone was collected from spoil. This

assemblage represented previously disturbed deposits and were recovered principally from an area of former building (shown on OS 1:2500 1972 ed. sheet SU 5693-5793) slightly to the east of the new foundations (see fig. 3). The remains of a possible articulated burial (part of rib cage and long bone) were exposed in the southern section of the main east-west service trench (see fig. 3) at a distance of c.4.2m east of the new hose footings and at a depth of some 0.40m below ground surface. However, as these remains were not directly threatened by the insertion of the drainage pipes, further investigation was not necessary and so their precise nature was not defined. No grave cut was detectable.

- 3.4 A small assemblage of Roman pottery was recovered from spoil in the area immediately around the exposed ?burial described above (3.2). The sherds were all of a standard reduced coarseware fabric. One sherd of particular intrinsic interest was a flagon neck, a reduced ware copy of a well known colour-coated ware form (Young 1977, type C8) which can be dated to the range 240 - 400 AD, though it is probable that this sherd belongs to the middle of this range as opposed to the earlier or later limits.

4 Conclusions

- 4.1 The location of the burials immediately outside the limits of the Roman town, combined with the finds of 3rd-4th century pottery in the vicinity leads to the conclusion that the remains are of Roman date. The extent of the cemetery was not defined within the area of the excavated trenches.

Oxford Archaeological Unit
 May 1994

List of Sources

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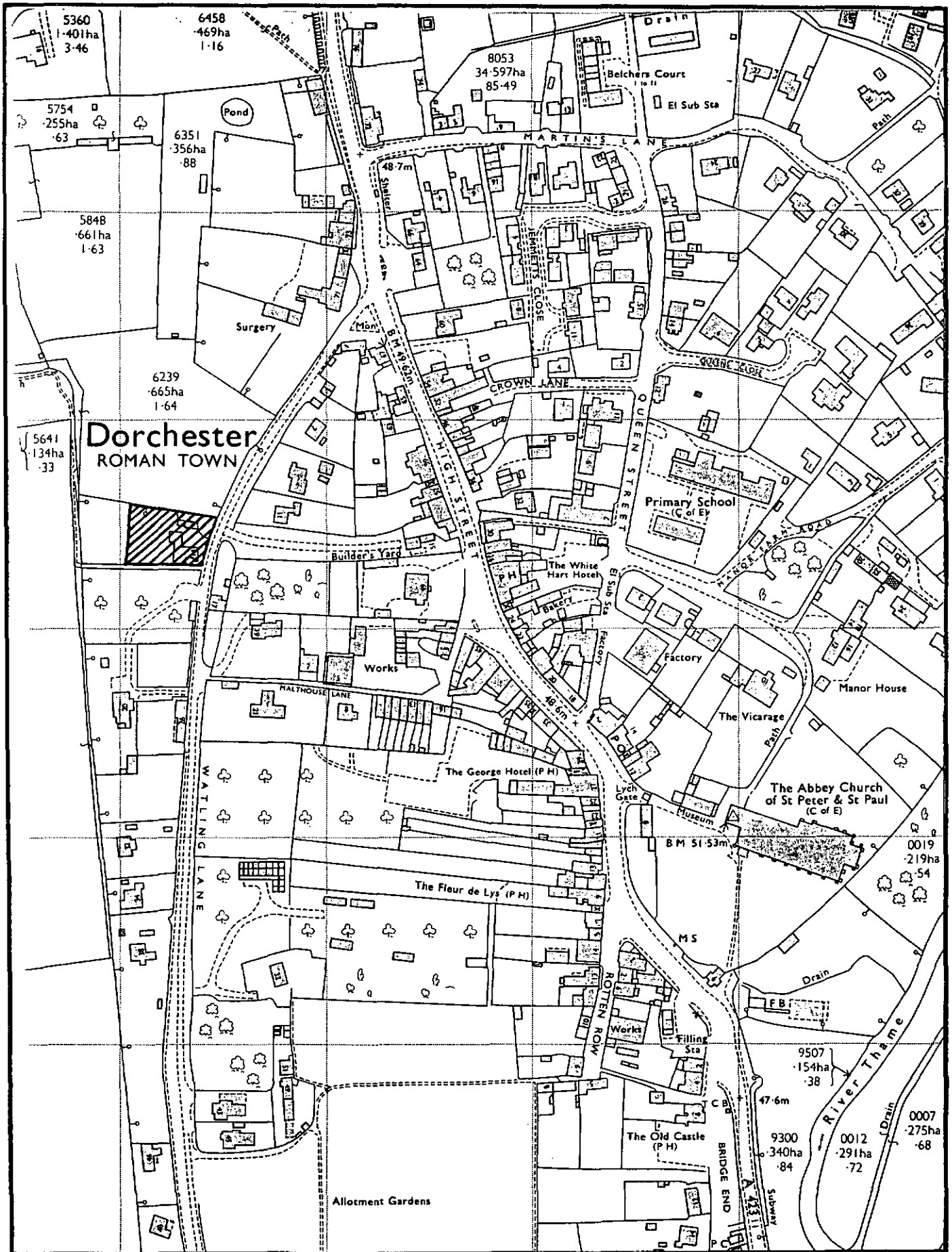


Fig. 1: Site location plan.

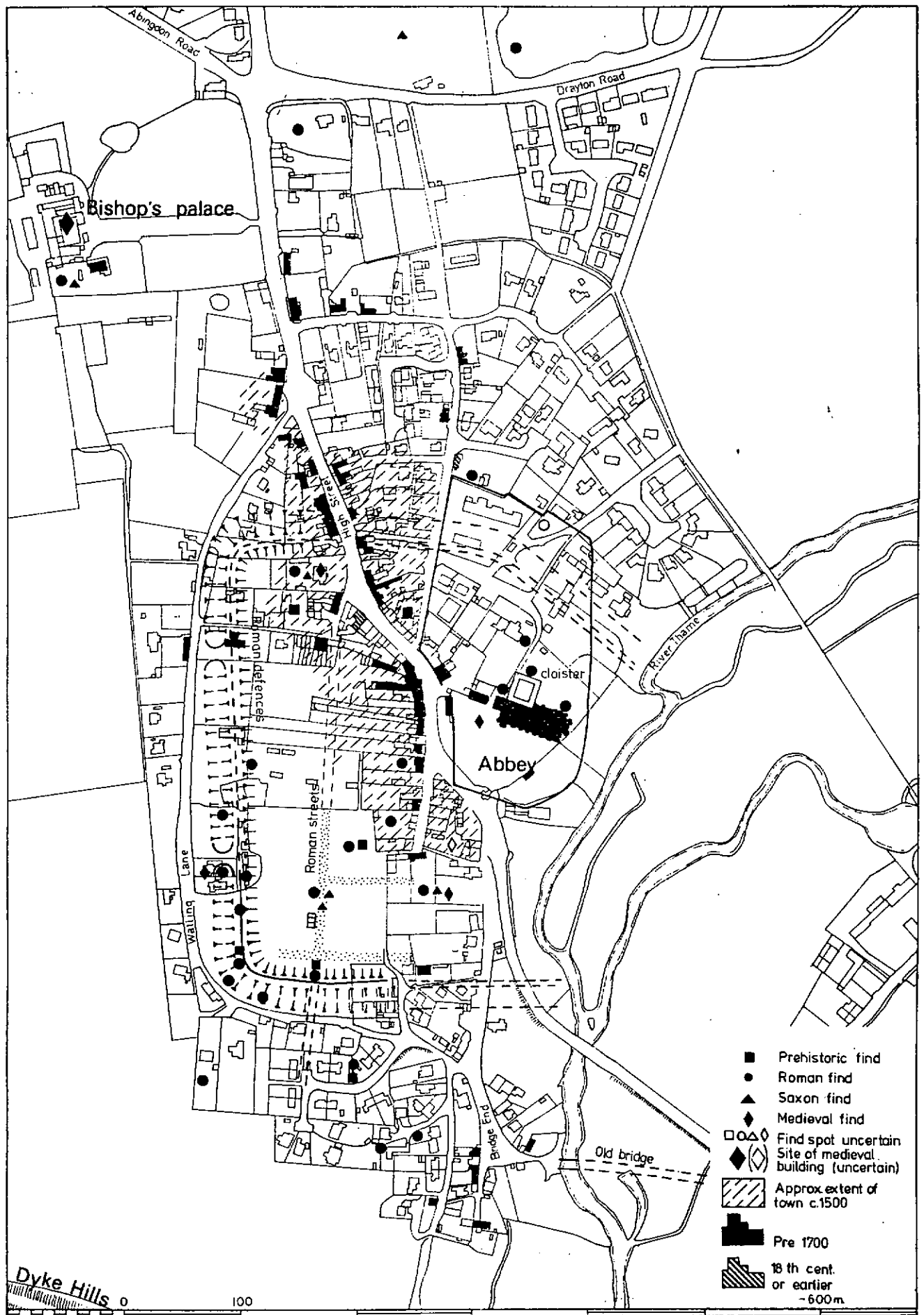


Fig. 2: Dorchester: Archaeology and Topography.

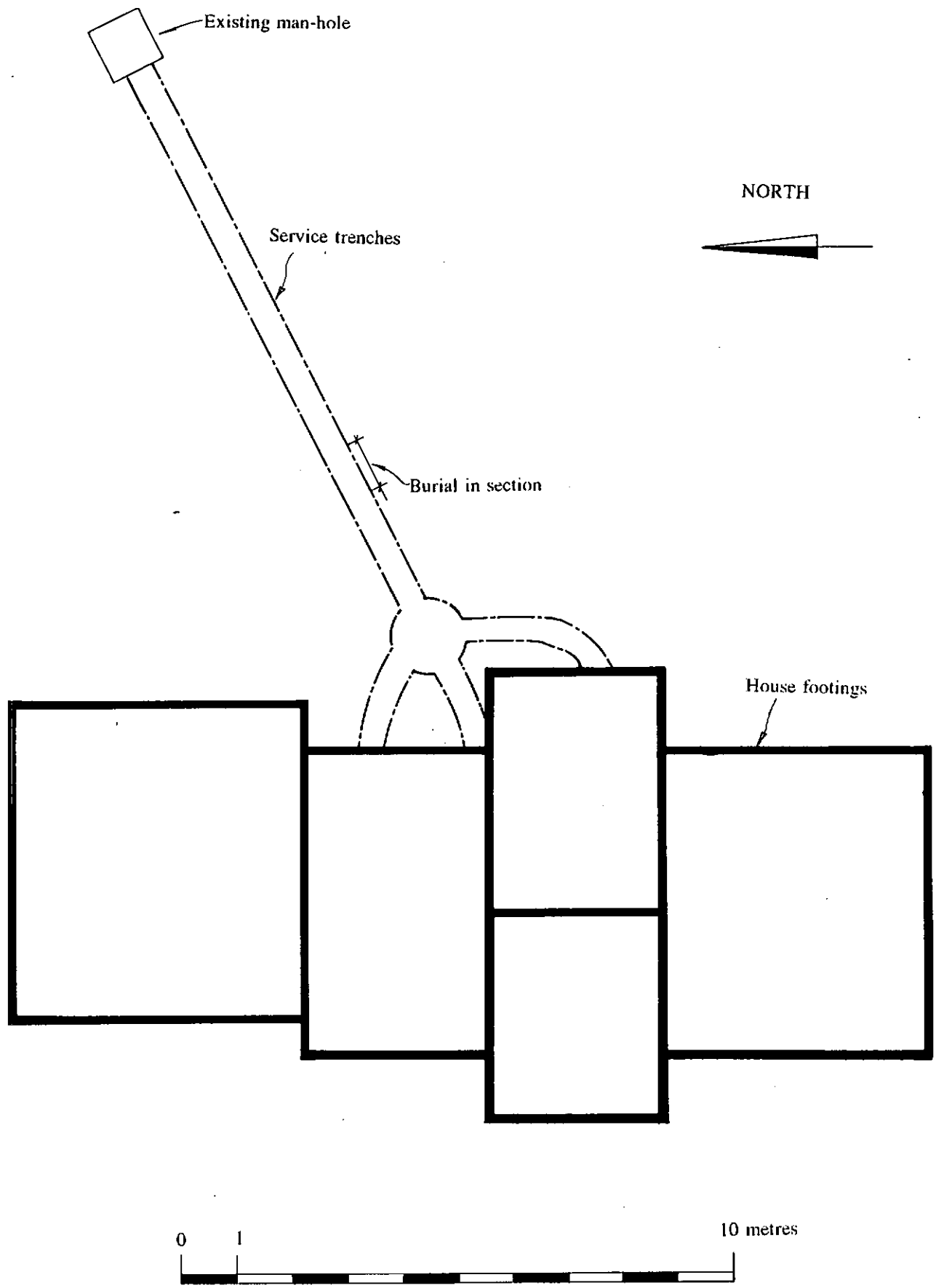


Fig. 3: Plan of service trenches.

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