

**An Archaeological Evaluation  
By Test-pitting at  
Abbey Park,  
Leicester  
NGR: SK 58509 05984**

Donald Clark



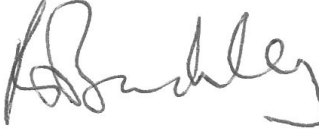
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**NGR: SK 58509 05984**

**Client: Leicester City Council**

**Author: Donald Clark**

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**University of Leicester**

Archaeological Services

University Rd., Leicester, LE1 7RH

Tel: (0116) 2522848 Fax: (0116) 2522614

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# **An Archaeological Evaluation by test-pitting At Abbey Park, Leicester**

## **Summary**

*University of Leicester Archaeological Services (ULAS) carried out an Archaeological Evaluation by test-pitting within the north-east corner of the former precinct of Leicester Abbey, Scheduled Monument No. 1012149, now Abbey Park, Leicester (NGR: SK 58509 05984), prior to proposed tree planting. The archaeological fieldwork was intended to provide preliminary indications of the character and extent of any archaeological features, structures, deposits, artefacts or ecofacts within a specified area.*

*Seven 2m x 2m test-pits were excavated within the proposed area. These test-pits produced a varying amount of re-deposited material, associated with the demolition of the Abbey buildings in the sixteenth century and with archaeological fieldwork which took place in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Six of the test-pits contained no in situ archaeological deposits but one contained an undisturbed human burial. All test-pits were photographed, measured and then backfilled.*

*The archive of the archaeological evaluation will be deposited with Leicester Museums under the accession number Y.A2.2018.*

## **Introduction**

An archaeological evaluation by test-pitting was undertaken between the 15th and 18th January 2018 by University of Leicester Archaeological Services (ULAS) on behalf of Leicester City Council within the north-east corner of the former precinct of Leicester Abbey, now Abbey Park, Leicester (Fig. 1). A Written Scheme of Investigation (WSI; Buckley 2018) had been produced by ULAS providing details of the aims, objectives and methodologies to be adopted during the course of the work. The fieldwork was intended to provide preliminary indications of the character and extent of any heritage assets in order that the potential impact of the development on such remains may be assessed by Historic England in accordance with the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act (1979).

All archaeological work was carried out in accordance with the Chartered Institute for Archaeologists (CIfA) *Code of Conduct* (2014) and adhered to their *Standard and Guidance for Archaeological Evaluation* (2014).

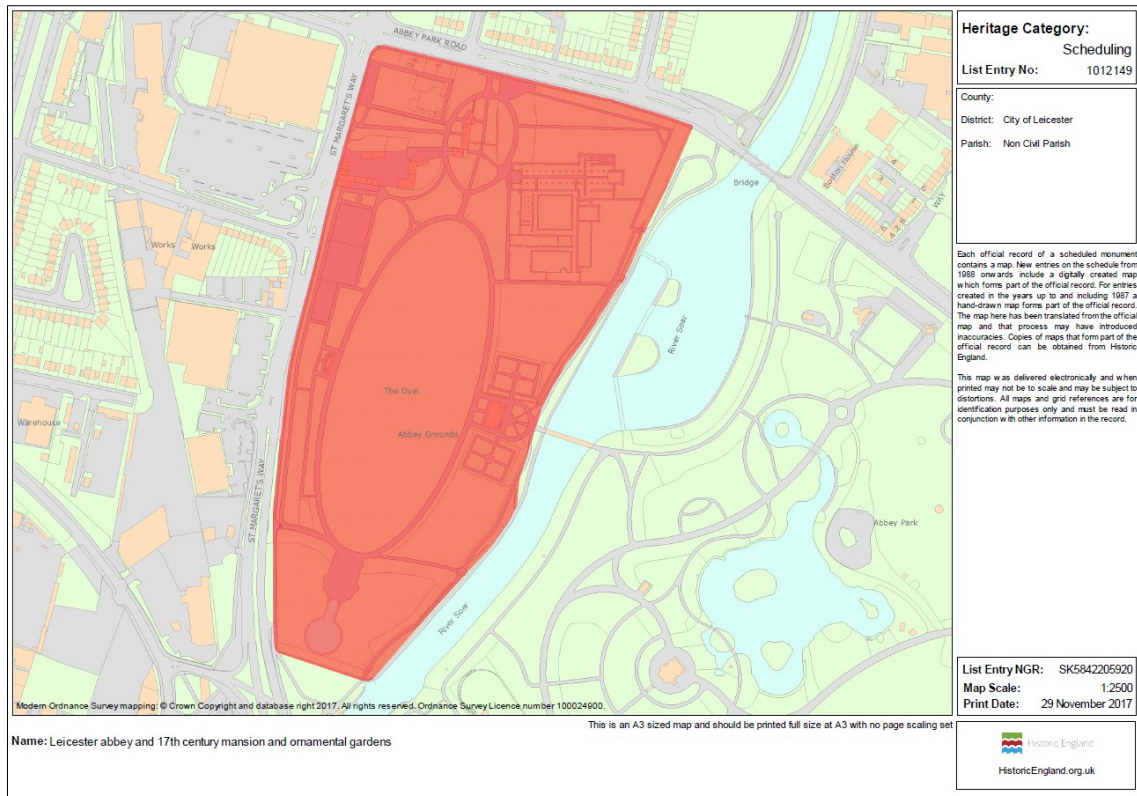


Figure 1: Abbey Park, Leicester

### Site location, Topography and Geology

Abbey Park lies to the north of Leicester city centre in Abbey ward at a height of between 52 and 55m above O.D. It is bisected by the River Soar and lies entirely within its floodplain. The geology is mainly alluvium and Mercia mudstone. The Abbey Grounds lie to the west of the river and contain the boundary walls and laid-out foundations of Leicester Abbey together with the ruins of Cavendish House, a mansion of the 16th - early 17th century (SMR Ref. 50NE.BG). In the north-west corner – the site of Leicester Abbey – the otherwise flat terrain is relieved by a gravel terrace forming an area of slightly higher ground.

### Historical and Archaeological Background

Lying on a terrace of the River Soar, just to the north-west of the Roman and medieval walled town of Leicester, the site shows evidence for occupation from the prehistoric and Roman periods, but is known principally as the site of the medieval abbey. The abbey was founded in 1143 (or possibly 1139) by the second earl of Leicester and by the time of the Dissolution, comprised a substantial church with cloister surrounded by the usual ranges of monastic buildings, an infirmary, guest facilities, a gatehouse with lodgings, farm buildings and a mill. With the exception of the precinct walls and probably the gatehouse, the Abbey was so thoroughly demolished after the Dissolution that the precise location of the church and cloistral buildings was lost until rediscovered through archaeological fieldwork in the 19th and 20th centuries. Although there had been minor excavations and chance finds in the 17th and 18th centuries, the first organised archaeological campaign was that led by George and Thomas Nevinson in 1845, when several trenches were cut, one of which revealed a tiled pavement in

the east cloister walk. In 1923, a major programme of excavation commenced under the supervision of T.H. Fosbrooke, W.K. Bedingfield and R. Bedingfield. This was interrupted by Fosbrooke's death in 1925 and resumed in 1929 under W.K. Bedingfield, who by now was the architect for the Abbey Park extension scheme (Liddle 1997). The date of the commencement of the excavations is in itself interesting – one year after the discovery by Carter of Tutankhamen's tomb in 1922, an event which surely must have provided some inspiration for the fieldwork, just as it proved to be a major influence on art and design of the period.

The excavations of the 1920s and early 1930s were undertaken as part of an overall scheme to transform the Abbey Grounds, then neglected and overgrown, into a public park, containing sports facilities and gardens. The excavation was the largest ever undertaken on the site, beginning as a series of exploratory trenches and finally expanding into a huge operation to uncover all the cloistral buildings of the Abbey. The work was not completed until 1931, or possibly even a little later. . At the time, techniques of archaeological fieldwork were still developing and unfortunately the excavations were not carried out to modern standards. Few records survive, consisting only of a tracing of the original site plan and a few clippings from the local newspapers. The low walls on the site today were laid out by Bedingfield and reflect his interpretation of the plan of the abbey based on the excavations and, particularly in the case of the church, his knowledge of architecture. Recent analysis by Peter Liddle of the tracing of the site plan shows that Bedingfield was only able to recognise solid masonry and not robber trenches. Hence, his published and laid-out plan was essentially a 'join-the-dot' exercise and although most of it accurately reflects excavated wall lines, in some areas – particularly the chapter house, kitchen block, guest hall and possible brewhouses – it seems to be mainly supposition based on analogy with other sites. Liddle was of the opinion (1997, 31) that the present walls are likely to incorporate medieval fabric, but that it is impossible to distinguish between genuine and reconstructed masonry.

### **Methodology**

Prior to the machining of the test-pits general photographs of the site area were taken. A total of seven, 2m x 2m test-pits were excavated and examined. These pits were positioned at each of the proposed tree locations. The trench plan (Fig. 3) shows the location of the trenches.

Excavation was carried out with a machine appropriate for the work and fitted with a flat-bladed bucket to expose the underlying strata. Topsoil and overburden was removed carefully in level spits, under continuous archaeological supervision.

The test-pits were excavated down to 1.2m where practicable. The test-pits were backfilled and levelled at the end of the evaluation.

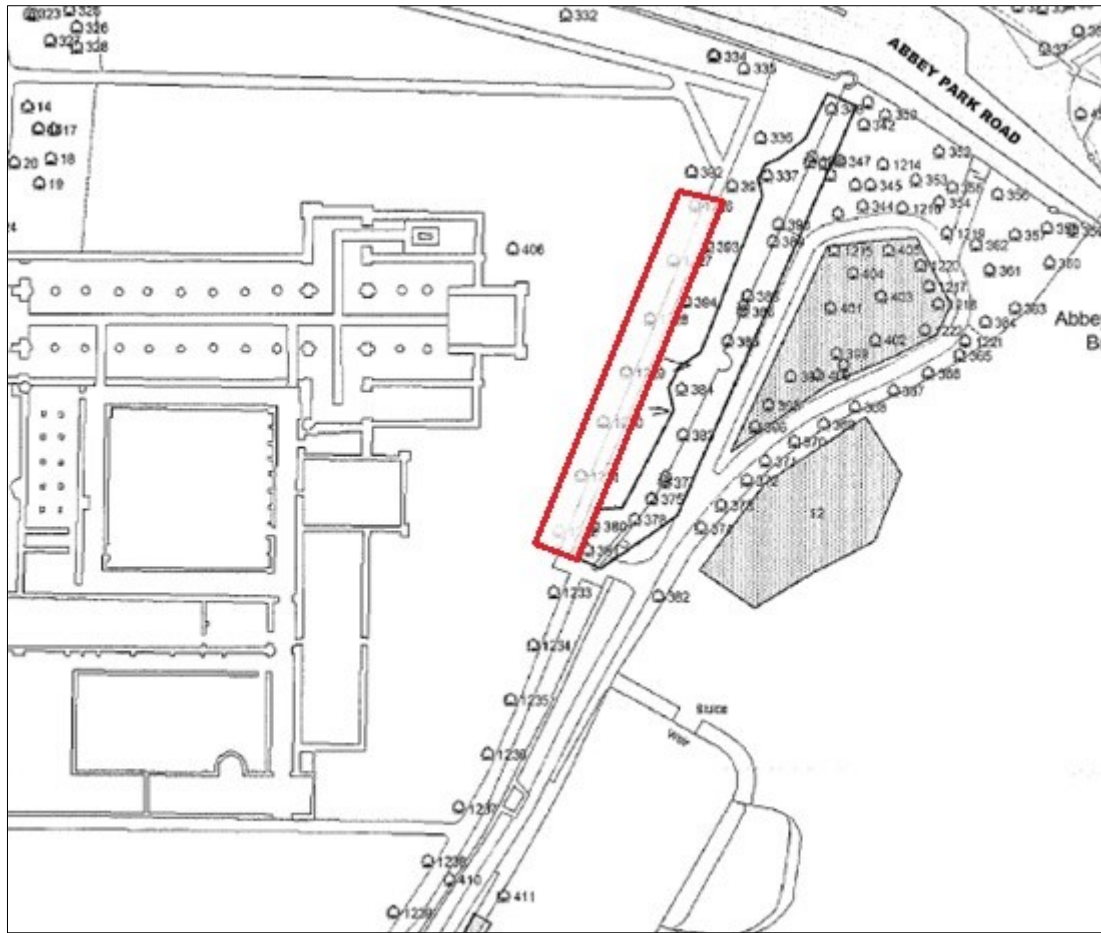


Figure 2: Area of test-pitting in red

## Results

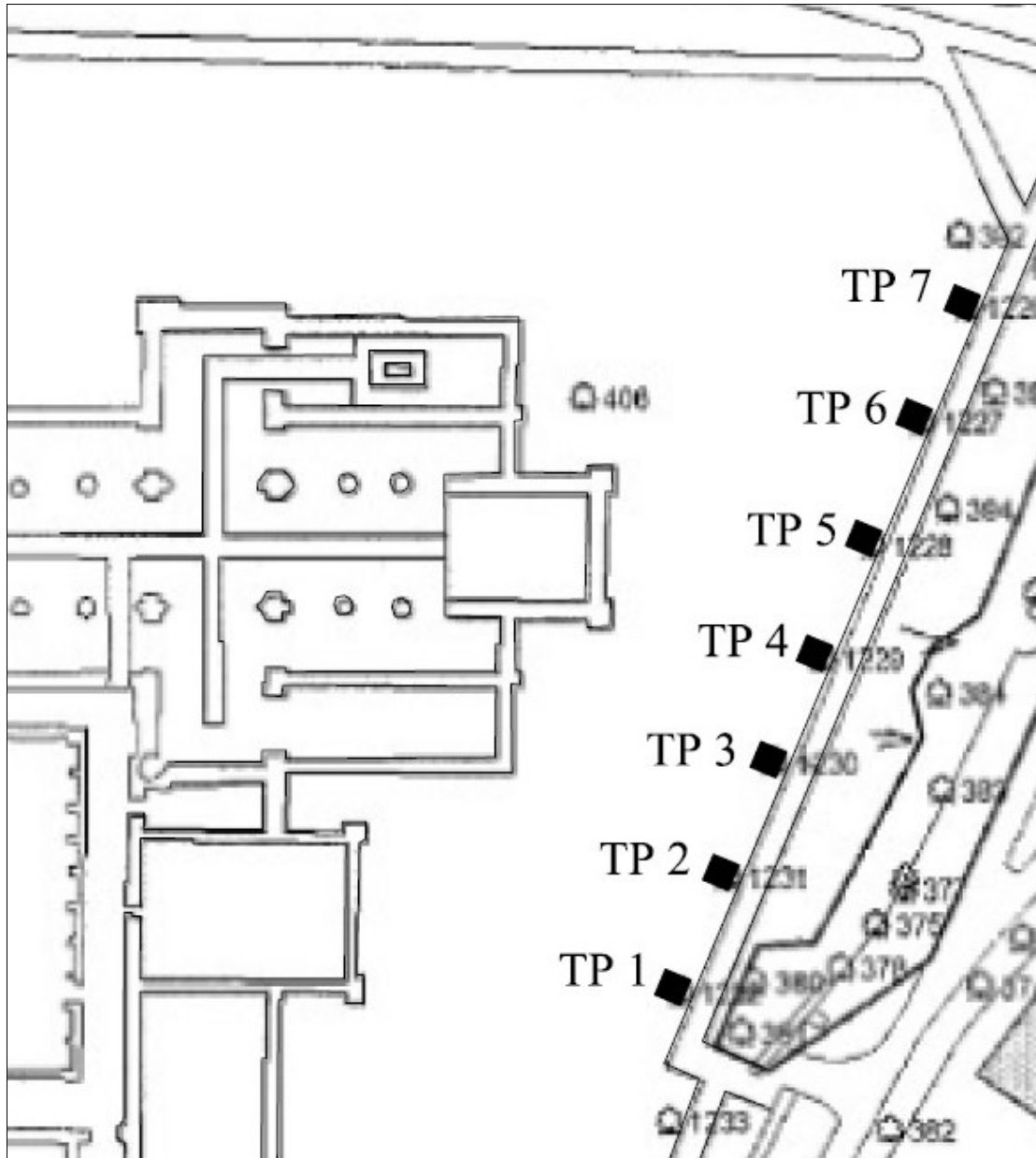


Figure 3: Position of test-pits

## Results

Seven 2m x 2m test-pits were excavated each described below

*Test-pit 1-* was excavated to a depth of 1m by machine, 15-20cm of this was topsoil and the remainder a mid-brownish grey mix of demolition rubble and sandy clay (4). At this level a distinct difference in the north eastern corner of the test-pit was investigated by hand, revealing a steep-sided sub-rectangular feature [1] and a shallow-sided sub-circular feature [3]. Neither of these features was cut directly into natural ground but into a pinkish brown mix of rubble and sandy clay (2) so it is unlikely they are contemporary with the use of the abbey, but may have been formed when the area was used as a nursery in the 19th century.



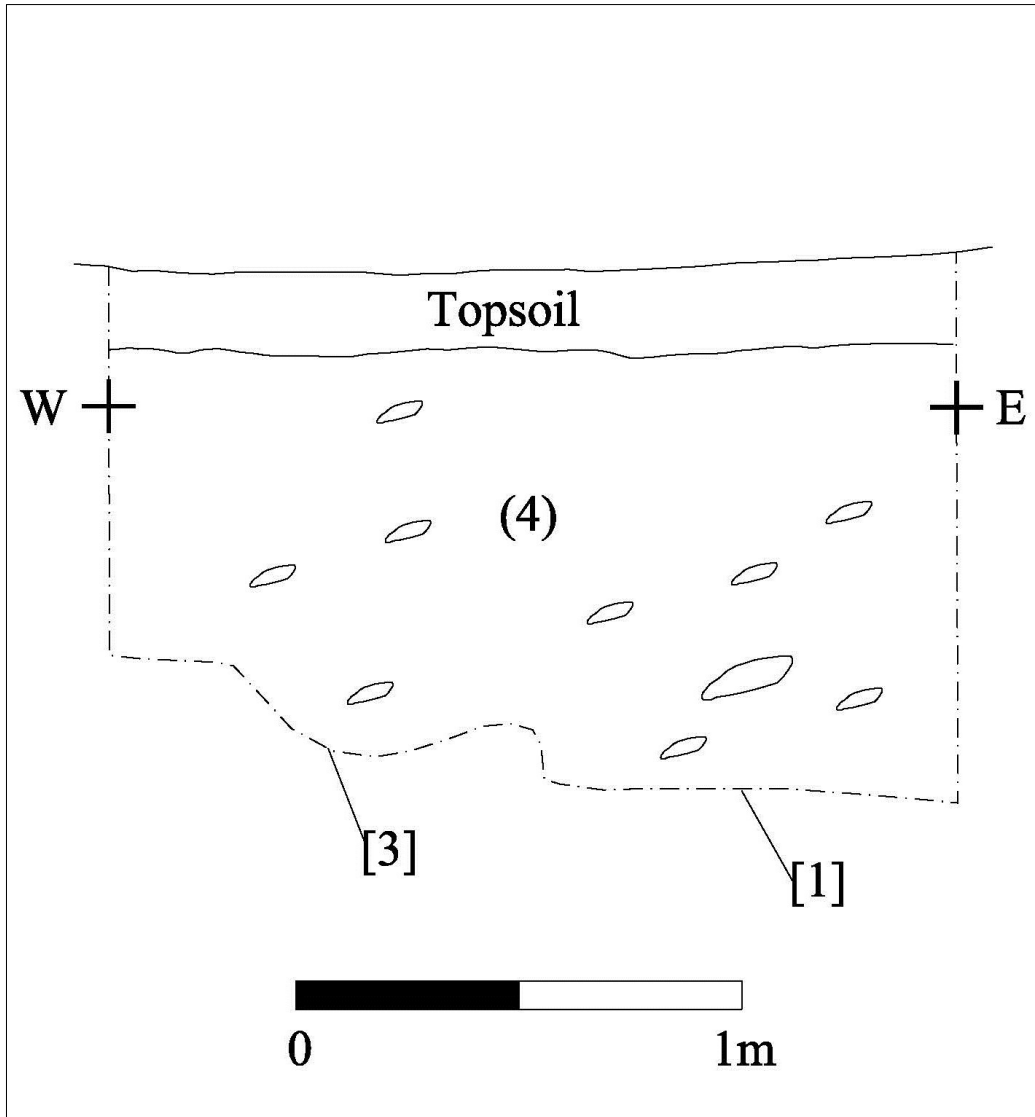


Figure 4: South facing section of test-pit 1

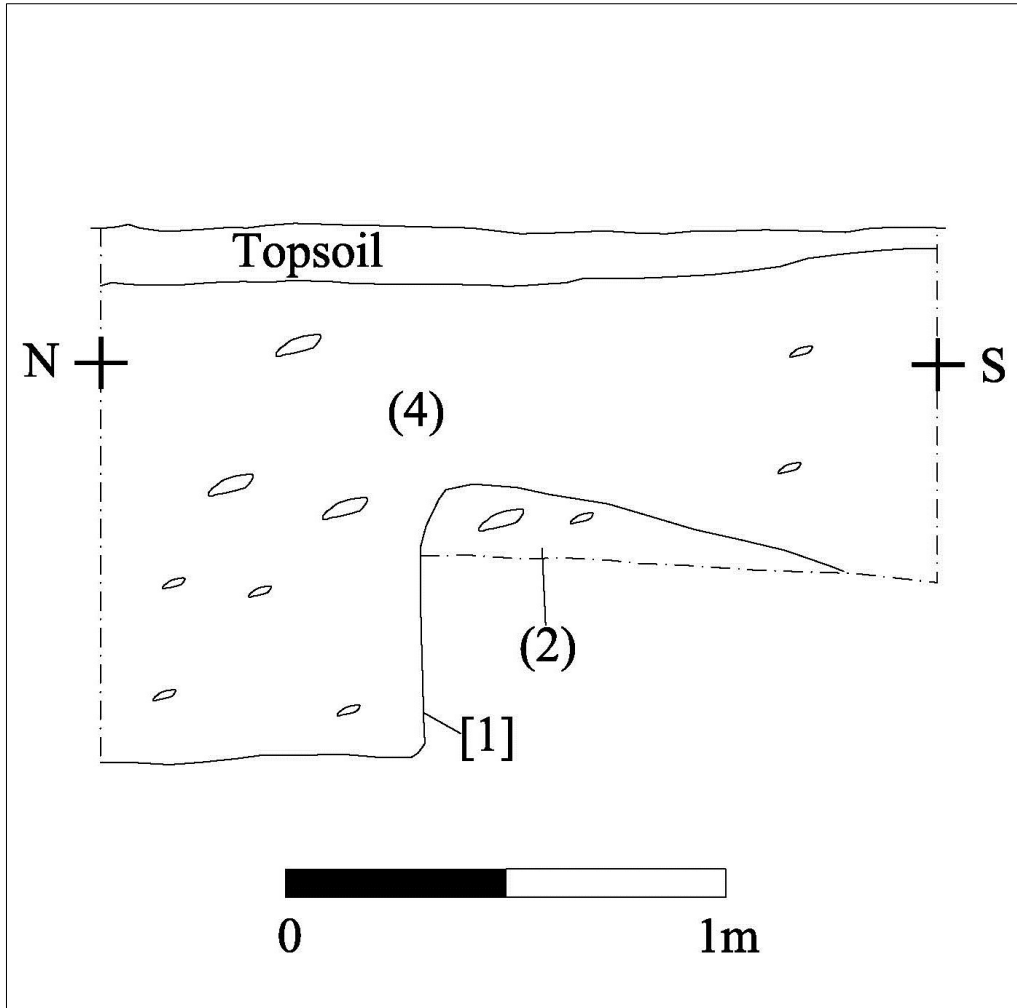


Figure 5: West facing section of test-pit 1

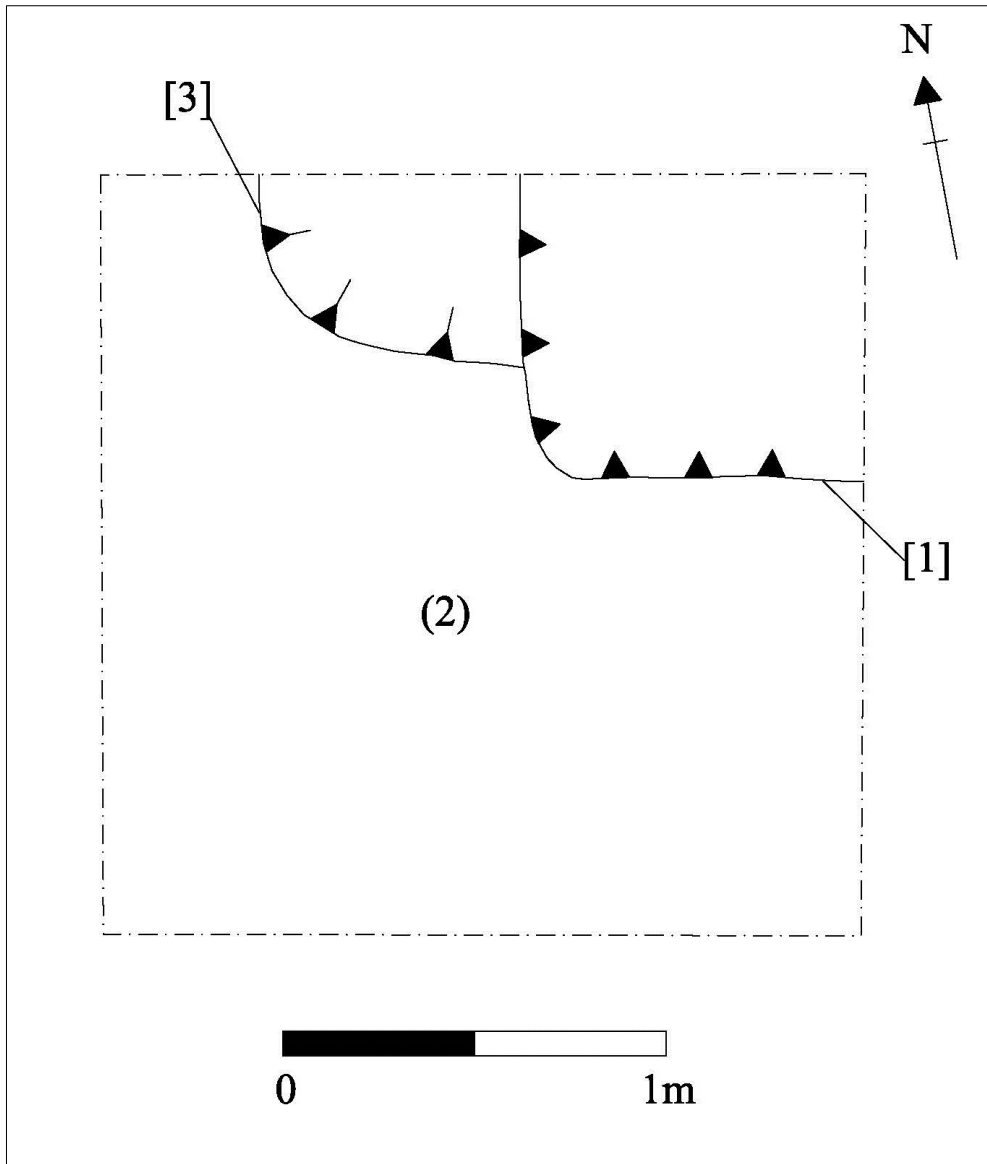


Figure 6: Plan of test-pit 1



Figure 7: An oblique view of test-pit 1, with [1] and [3] visible, looking north-east

*Test-pit 2* - was excavated to a depth of 1m by machine, 15-20cm of this was topsoil and the remainder was a series of tipping layers. Tipping layer (5) was a brownish red sandy clay, layer (6) a brownish yellow silty sand and layer (7) a mid-grey brown soil and rubble mix, similar to (4).

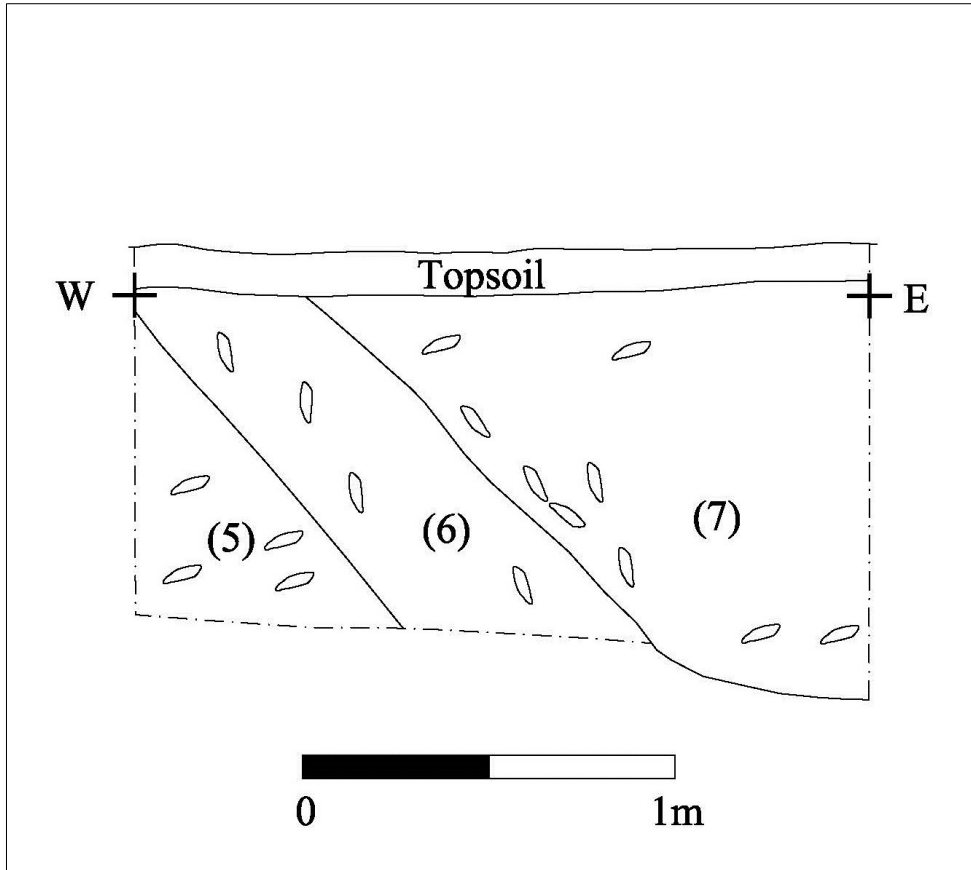


Figure 8: South facing section of test-pit 2

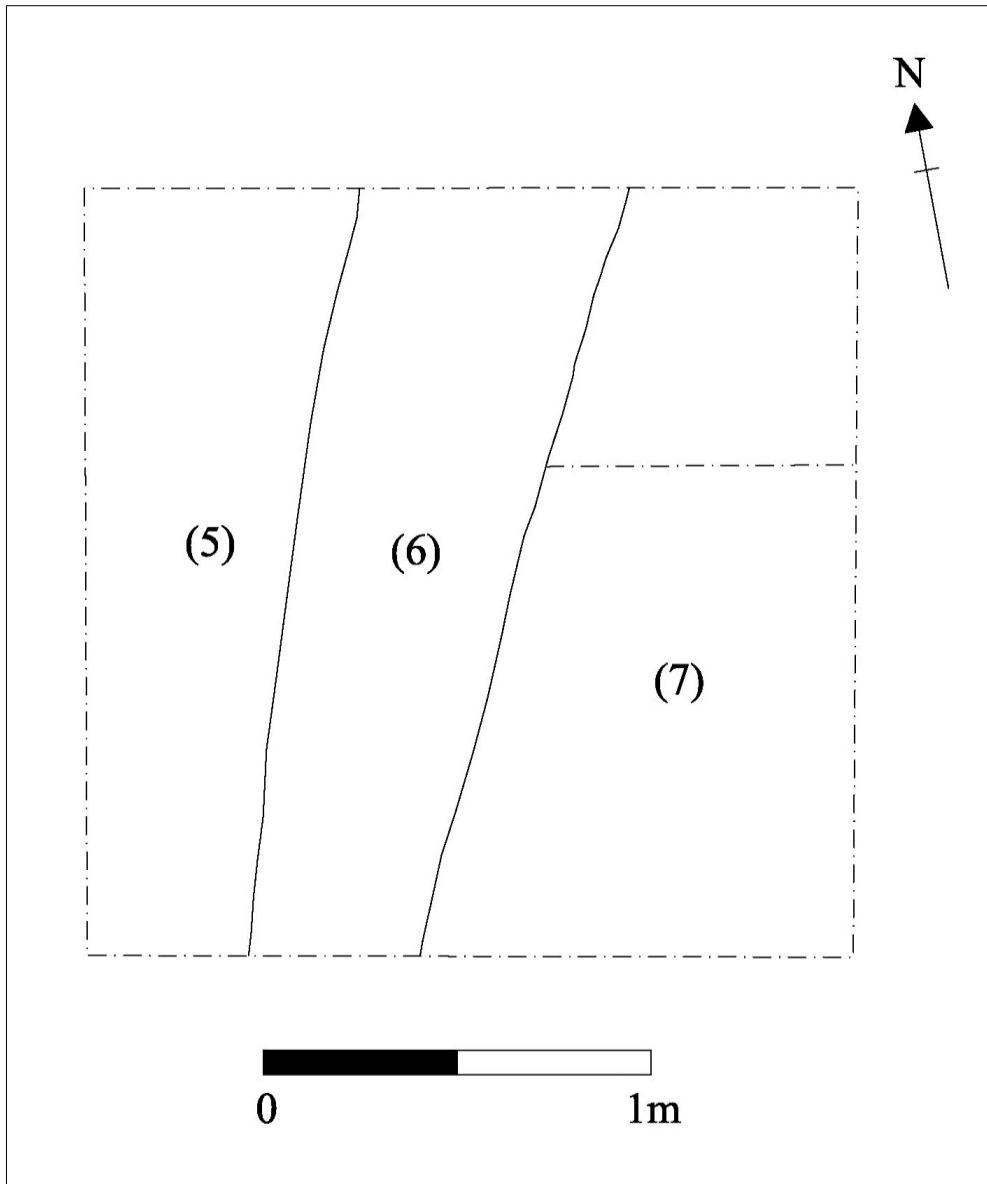


Figure 9: Plan of test-pit 2



Figure 10: Test-pit 2 looking north

*Test-pit 3* - was excavated to a depth of 1.20m by machine. 15-20cm of this was topsoil and the remainder a homogeneous deposit of light grey brown silty sand which contained a quantity of light grey sandstone fragments (8).

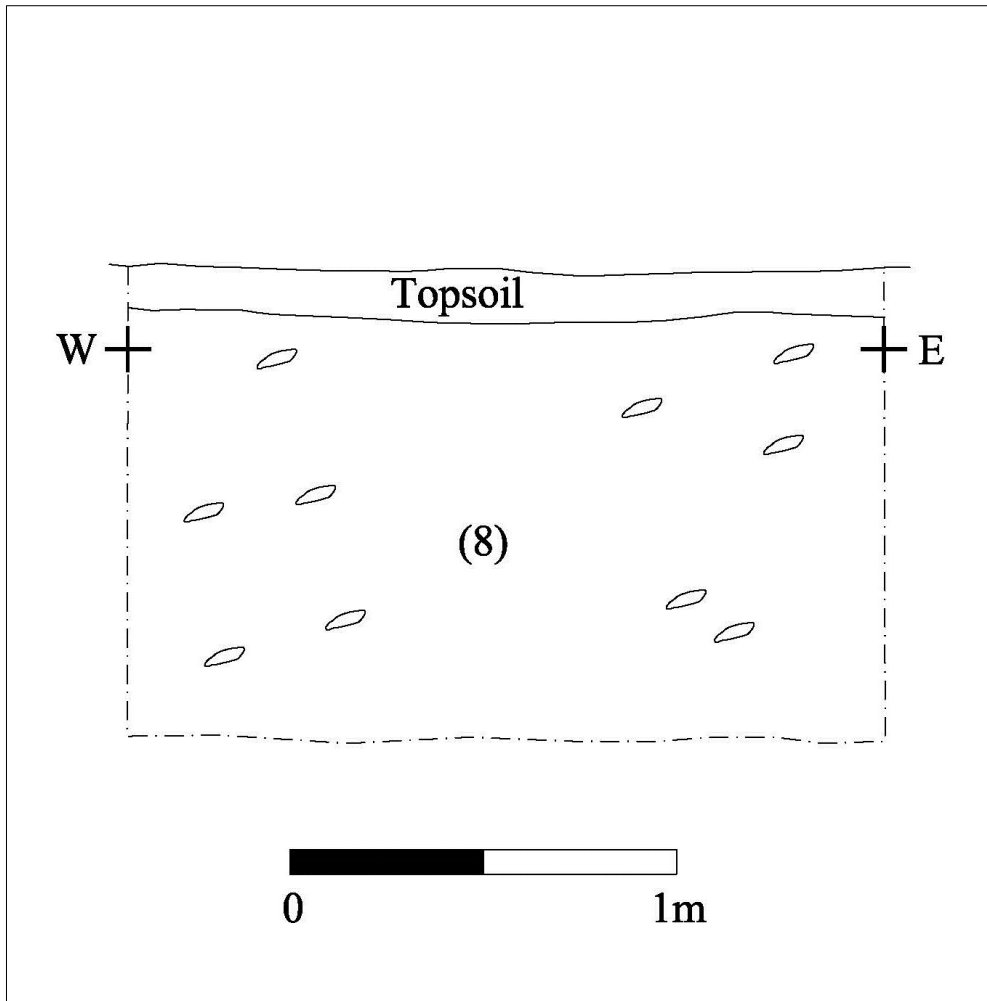


Figure 11: South facing section of test-pit 3

*Test-pit 4* - was excavated to a depth of 1.20m by machine. 15-20cm of this was topsoil and the remainder a homogeneous deposit of light grey brown silty sand which contained a quantity of light grey sandstone fragments (9). This deposit was the same as deposit (8) in test-pit 3 and would have been created during the excavations of the 20s and 30s.



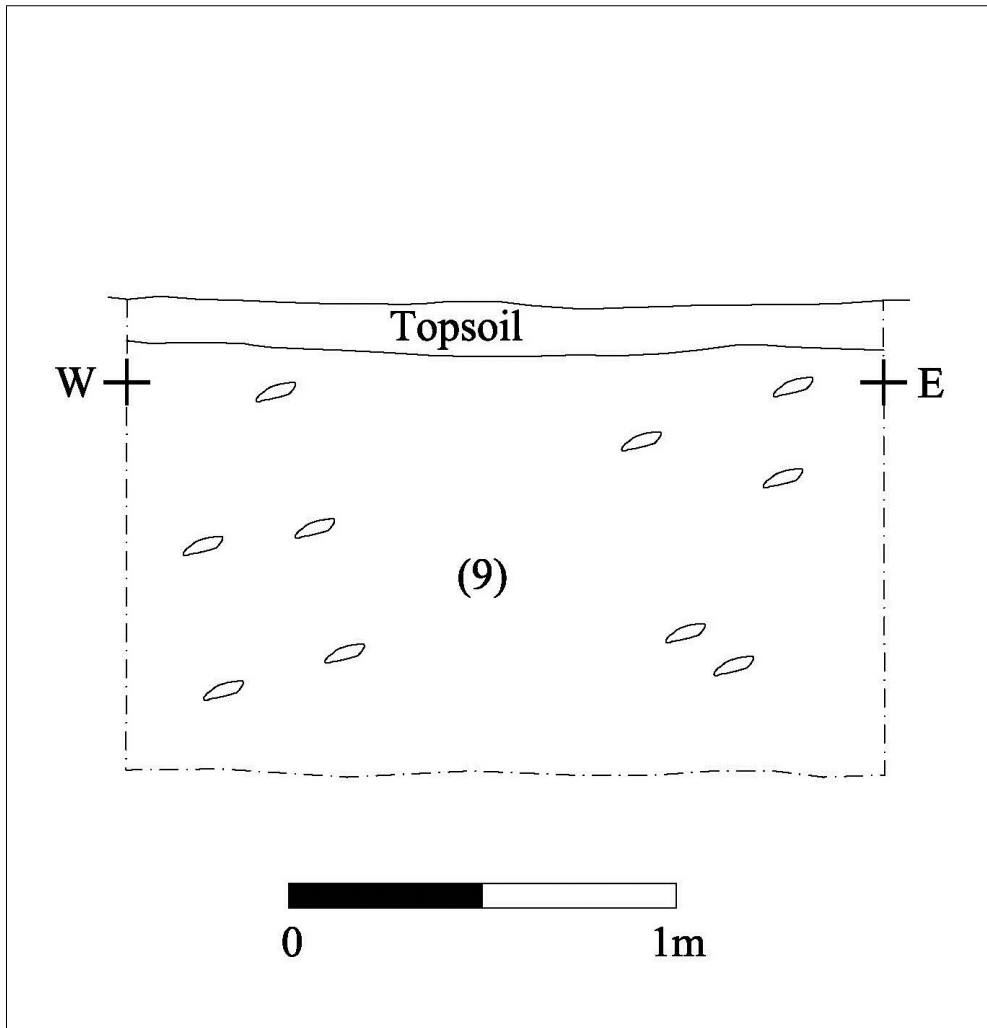


Figure 12: South facing section of test-pit 4

*Test-pit 5* - was excavated to a depth of 1.20m by machine. 15-20cm of this was topsoil and the remainder made up of two distinct deposits. Deposit (10) a light yellow brown mix of rubble and crushed mortar and deposit (11) a homogeneous deposit of dark grey brown silty sand mixed with rubble. These deposits would have been created during the excavations of the 20s and 30s.

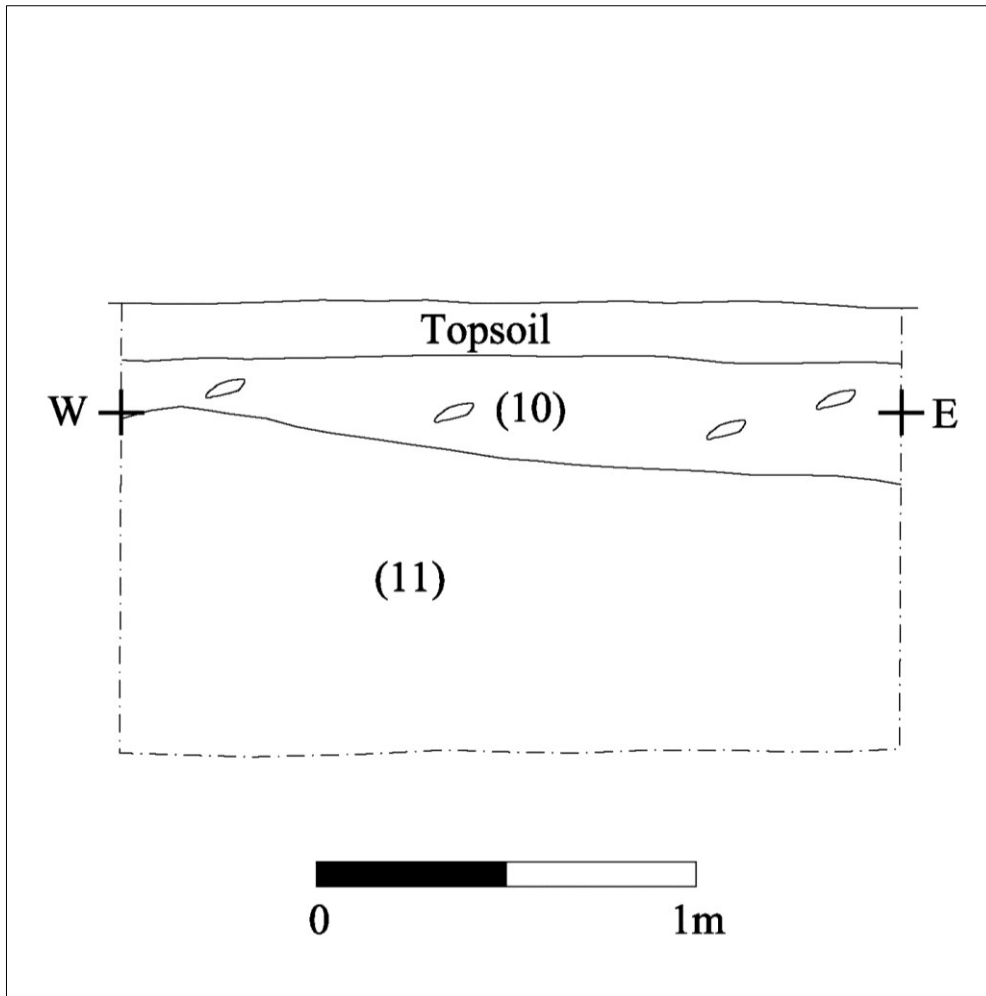


Figure 13: South facing section of test-pit 5

*Test-pit 6* - was excavated to a depth of 1m by machine. 15-20cm of this was topsoil and the remainder made up of two distinct deposits. Deposit (12) a homogeneous deposit of dark grey brown silty sand mixed with rubble and deposit (13) an orange brown gravel which may be a redeposited amount of natural sub stratum. Deposit (12) would have been created during the excavations of the 20s and 30s.

In the southern section of the test-pit an undisturbed grave was identified (Figs. 15 and 16). The grave was orientated east-west and had been covered by thin stone slabs. The western-most slab was removed by the machine in the process of excavation, which allowed the confirmation that the grave was undisturbed. The grave was left in situ and the removed stone replaced prior to backfilling.

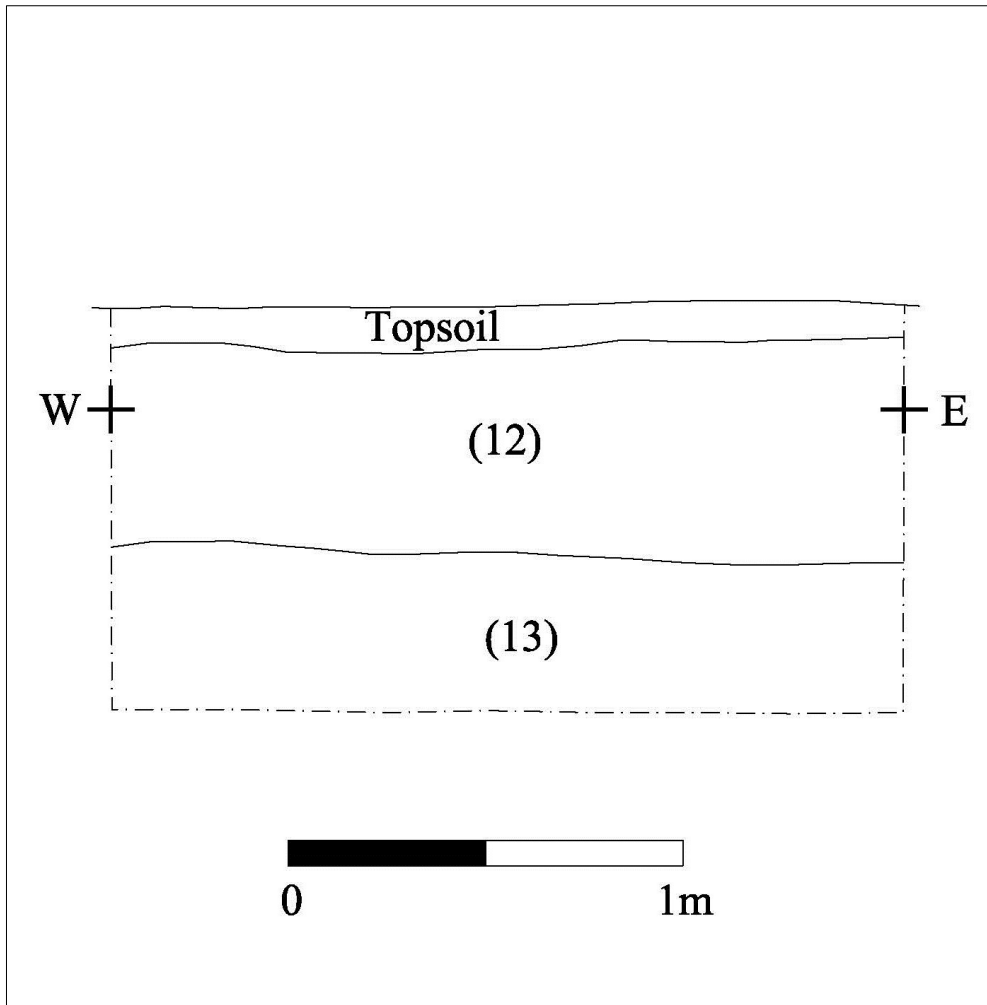


Figure 14: South facing section of test-pit 6

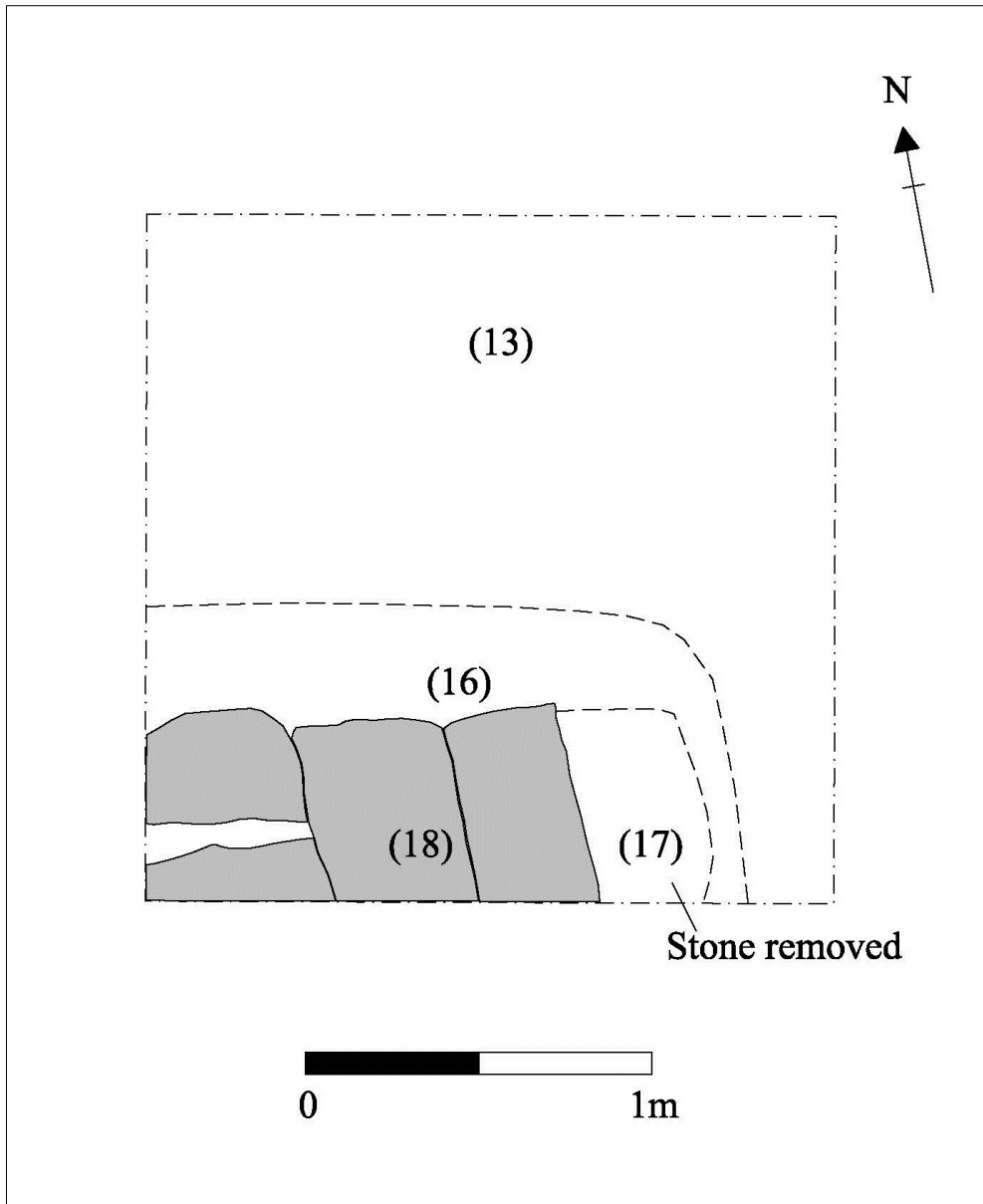


Figure 15: Plan of test-pit 6 with grave



Figure 16: Position of grave within test-pit 6, looking west

*Test-pit 7* - was excavated to a depth of 1.40m by machine. 15-20cm of this was topsoil and the remainder made up of two distinct deposits, (14) a homogeneous deposit of dark grey brown silty sand mixed with rubble and (15) a mix of grey brown silty sand and orange brown gravel.

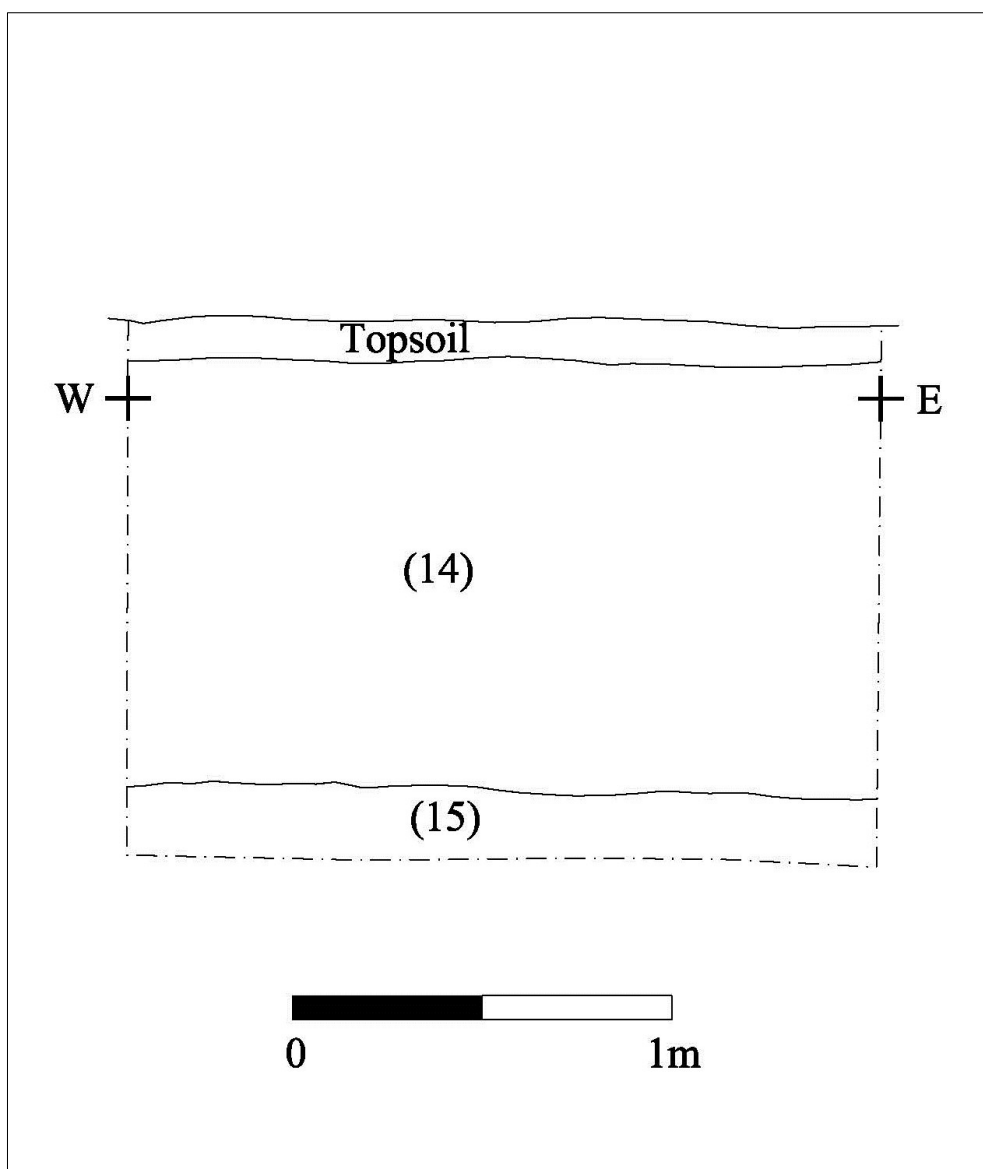


Figure 17: South facing section of test-pit 7

## Conclusion

Following the excavation and inspection of each of the test-pits it was possible to establish that six of the seven test-pits would not be affected by the tree planting scheme, however test-pit 6 contained an undisturbed grave at the depth of 1m below the surface and this would be affected by the planting and future root disturbance. The surviving plans from Bedingfield's excavations in the 1920s and early 1930s indicate a number of burials to the east and south-east of the church and it is likely that this area was the abbey's principal graveyard.

## Publication

ULAS supports the Online Access to the Index of Archaeological Investigations (OASIS) project. The online OASIS form at <http://ads.ac.uk/project/oasis> will be completed detailing the results of the project (Appendix 1). Once the report has become a public document following its incorporation into the HER it may be placed on the web-site.

### **Acknowledgements**

The author wishes to thank Lee, machine operator, and Naomi Cooper, archaeological site assistant, for their help during the fieldwork and to Richard Buckley for managing the project.

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## Appendix 1 OASIS Information

<b>PROJECT DETAILS</b>	<b>Oasis No</b>	universil-		
	<b>Project Name</b>	An Archaeological Evaluation by test-pitting at Abbey Park, Leicester.		
	<b>Start/end dates of field work</b>	15-1-2018/18-1-2018		
	<b>Previous/Future Work</b>	Excavations/continuous		
	<b>Project Type</b>	Evaluation test-pitting		
	<b>Site Status</b>	None		
	<b>Current Land Use</b>	Public Park		
	<b>Monument Type/Period</b>	Site of former Abbey		
	<b>Significant Finds/Period</b>	Medieval grave/Medieval		
	<b>Development Type</b>	Tree planting		
	<b>Reason for Investigation</b>	NPPF		
	<b>Position in the Planning Process</b>	Pre-planning enquiry		
	<b>Planning Ref.</b>	Pre-planning enquiry		
<b>PROJECT LOCATION</b>	<b>Site Address/Postcode</b>	Abbey Park, Leicester		
	<b>Study Area</b>	11.6 hectares		
	<b>Site Coordinates</b>	SK 58484 06022		
	<b>Height OD</b>	55m OD		
<b>PROJECT CREATORS</b>	<b>Organisation</b>	ULAS		
	<b>Project Brief Originator</b>	Leicester City Council		
	<b>Project Design Originator</b>	ULAS		
	<b>Project Manager</b>	R. Buckley		
	<b>Project Director/Supervisor</b>	D. Clark		
	<b>Sponsor/Funding Body</b>	Leicester City Council		
<b>PROJECT ARCHIVE</b>		<b>Physical</b>	<b>Digital</b>	<b>Paper</b>
	<b>Recipient</b>	Leicester Museums	Leicester Museums	Leicester Museums
	<b>ID (Acc. No.)</b>	Y.A2.2018	Y.A2.2018	Y.A2.2018
	<b>Contents</b>	Finds	Photos	Records Field Notes
<b>PROJECT BIBLIOGRAPHY</b>	<b>Type</b>	Grey Literature (unpublished)		
	<b>Title</b>	An Archaeological Evaluation by test-pitting at Abbey Park, Leicester		
	<b>Author</b>	D. Clark		
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## Contact Details

Richard Buckley or Vicki Score  
University of Leicester Archaeological  
Services (ULAS)  
University of Leicester,  
University Road,  
Leicester LE1 7RH

**T:** +44 (0)116 252 2848

**F:** +44 (0)116 252 2614

**E:** [ulas@le.ac.uk](mailto:ulas@le.ac.uk)

**w:** [www.le.ac.uk/ulas](http://www.le.ac.uk/ulas)



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