

**2 Abingdon Road, Sutton Courtenay,
Oxfordshire**

An Archaeological Watching Brief

For Sweetcroft Homes Ltd

by Andrew Muddin and
James McNicoll-Norbury
Thames Valley Archaeological Services Ltd

Site Code ARS 09/43

August 2009

Summary

Site name: 2 Abingdon Road, Sutton Courtenay, Oxfordshire

Grid reference: SU 5095 9445

Site activity: Watching Brief

Date and duration of project: 23rd July – 3rd August 2009

Project manager: Andrew Munding

Site supervisors: James McNicoll-Norbury, Jamie Lewis, Susan Colley

Site code: ARS 09/43

Area of site: 2200 sq m

Summary of results: Six ditches were identified cutting the natural geology, mostly in the central and eastern parts of the site. Three of the ditches were datable to middle Saxon times with the rare occurrence of 'Ipswich ware' pottery.

Monuments identified: Early-middle Saxon ditches

Location and reference of archive: The archive is presently held at Thames Valley Archaeological Services, Reading and will be deposited at Oxfordshire County Museum Service in due course.

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2 Abingdon Road, Sutton Courtenay, Oxfordshire An Archaeological Watching Brief

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Report 09/43

Introduction

This report documents the results of an archaeological watching brief carried out at 2 Abingdon Road, Sutton Courtenay, Oxfordshire (SU 5095 9445) (Fig. 1). The work was commissioned by Mr Glen Chapman, of Sweetcroft Homes Limited, 78 Cumnor Road, Boars Hill, Oxford, OX1 5JP.

Planning consent (SUT/4647/3) has been granted by Vale of White Horse District Council for the construction of two new houses, replacing the single occupancy on the original site. The planning consent includes a condition (14) relating to archaeology which requires the implementation of a programme of archaeological work, in this case a watching brief to take place during groundworks.

This is in accordance with the Department of the Environment's Planning Policy Guidance, *Archaeology and Planning* (PPG16 1990), and the District Council's policies on archaeology. The archaeological potential of the site was highlighted in a brief prepared by Oxfordshire County Archaeological Service (Coddington 2009). The field investigation was carried out to a specification approved by Mr Hugh Coddington, Deputy County Archaeological Officer, adviser to the District Council and the site work was undertaken by Andrew Munding, Jamie Lewis, James McNicoll-Norbury and Susan Colley, between 23rd July and 3rd August 2009. The site code is ARS 09/43.

The archive is presently held at Thames Valley Archaeological Services, Reading and will be deposited at Oxfordshire County Museum Service in due course.

Location, topography and geology

The site is located on the eastern side of the Abingdon road, on the northern edge of Sutton Courtenay. The river Thames and Culham cut are 200m to the north of the site. The crossing point of the Thames at Sutton Bridge is located just to the north. The site is bound by flat pastoral land to the east, which is reinstated ground after previous quarrying. The site before development contained a single private housing plot (Fig. 2). The site is situated on First Terrace sands and gravel (BGS 1971), at a height of approximately 50m above Ordnance Datum.

Archaeological background

The land immediately east, adjacent to the development site, was subject to gravel extraction during the 1940s. A Roman and Anglo-Saxon inhumation cemetery was identified, in which amber beads and a saucer brooch were found across three of the burials (Benson and Miles 1974, map 34) (Figure 3). Fifteen Roman cremation urns were laid out in a straight line. Aerial photography taken before the gravel extraction identified curvilinear features (possible hut circles) with central pits within, all contained within a field system (Fig. 3; Benson and Miles 1974, map 34). The extraction does not seem to have extended as far as the proposed re-development and the possibility exists that further features survive on the site (Coddington 2009).

In the medieval period, Sutton Courtenay was listed as a royal estate at the time of Domesday Book (William and Martin 2002, 140). A clear focus for medieval activity has not been found, with suggestions this is due to dispersed farmsteads existing in the local area during the period, such as investigated at Drayton (Challinor *et al.* 2004; Anthony and Taylor 2006). Archaeological evaluation and watching brief on the eastern side of the current village at Lady Place on the High Street, identified a collection of sparsely datable Early Medieval ditch features, but no structural features were identified (CAT 1995; Taylor, 1999).

Objectives and methodology

The purpose of the watching brief was to excavate and record any archaeological deposits affected by groundworks. This involved examination of areas excavated to a reduced level, undertaken with a small 360° mechanical excavator, fitted with a grading bladed bucket.

If any archaeological significant deposits were encountered, extended excavation of the deposits were to take place to identify date, character and evidence/potential of it being Roman/Saxon in date, or of any other significant date.

Results

Reduced levels

Two areas of ground reduction were viewed; the first was to the rear of the site (east) (Fig. 4; Pl. 1).

The 'ballast storage' strip removed 150mm of topsoil, and exposed natural sand and gravel geology. Five features cut the natural geology here: two curvilinear ditches, one linear ditch and two small post-holes.

Ditch 102 had 7m exposed, on a north-west to south-east axis, and was 0.85m wide. Slot 1 investigated its full profile and its relationship to Ditch 103 [2]. Within this slot a single fill was recorded [50] which was a

lightly bound brown chalky clay with frequent gravel inclusions. It was 0.47m deep. No pottery was recovered from this fill, though it was seen to cut Ditch 103. Only 8 pieces of animal bone were recovered from ditch 102. Ditch 103 was shallow sided, 0.28m deep and also contained a single fill [51] which was a loose brown silty clay with frequent round gravel inclusions. This contained a sherd of Early-Middle Saxon pottery. This ditch ran on a north - south axis.

Curvilinear ditch 101 was 0.9m wide and 0.2m deep. This was seen to terminate to the south and curved slightly westwards to the north, exiting the stripped area at its north western point. This feature contained a single fill of loose grey silty sand with gravel [slot 4, 53]. At the north-western corner, this ditch [5] was truncated by Ditch 103 [6]. A sherd of Early-Middle Saxon pottery was recovered from slot 5 (54), and a fragment of burnt daub from terminal 4.

Two undated post holes [3 and 7] were noted on the north-eastern side of Ditch 102. Only one of these [3] were excavated and uncovered no finds. Posthole [3] was noted to be 0.32 in diameter, was 0.2m deep and was filled with a dark grey brown silty clay which was bound by roots and small rounded gravel [52].

On the west side of the site, a road strip (Pl. 2) for a drive and new access to garages was created. This reduced level removed 0.28m to 0.5m of ground to create a formation level. This mostly uncovered truncated topsoil remnants and subsoil that had been truncated by the recently demolished building to the south and the east of this strip. One area seemed also to be filled with subsoil, probably from a tree hollow (Fig. 3). Further stripping linking the access to the main road (Abingdon Road) only uncovered the top of a live service (water main).

Footings

Plot 1

All footings on Plot 1 were dug exposing natural geology in and beyond the base. From ground level, most were excavated to a depth of 1.12m. At the interface with undisturbed subsoil and the natural geology a ditch (100), aligned NNW–SSE was noted throughout the footings. This was seen in section at 50.5m above OD, mostly a depth of between 0.5m and 0.65m. Five sections of the ditch were recorded (Figs 3 and 4), noting a light brown sandy gravel throughout its fill. Section [10] recovered one sherd of Early-Middle Saxon pottery.

Plot 2

Excavation for the footprint of this building mirrored plot 1. Part of the northern footing here uncovered a disturbed natural and subsoil base, as seen in the road. Two features were noted at the south end. Ditch 14 was

filled with a compact brown sandy silt with frequent rounded gravel inclusion (65). It contained no finds, and was 0.86m wide and 0.32m deep, and was only visible in the south-westernmost footing.

In the south-east corner of Plot 2, a curvilinear feature (105) was noted in two sections (15 and 16). This was truncated on its eastern edge by a sewer. This ditch was 0.95m wide and 0.26m deep, filled with compact brown sandy silt. It contained no finds, but could be a continuation of Ditch 102.

Finds

Pottery by Paul Blinkhorn

The pottery assemblage comprised just three sherds (5 fragments), two of which are early/middle Saxon hand-built wares. Both were in the same fabric, comprising moderate to dense fine quartz with rare larger rounded grains, and rare calcareous material up to 1mm. One sherd occurred in ditch 103 (slot 2,50), and weighed 2g, and the other from Ditch 101 (5,54), from the neck of a jar, weighed 33g. Both sherds appear likely to be from the same vessel. These two sherds are impossible to date confidently other than to within the broad early/middle Saxon period (*c.* AD450 – 850).

The other sherd, from Ditch 100 (10, 61) is of middle Saxon Ipswich ware (5g), *c.* AD725–850 (Blinkhorn in prep.), in the Group 2 fabric: hard, sandy and mostly dark grey in colour. The most prominent feature is a scatter of large quartz grains (up to *c.* 2.5mm) which either bulge or protrude through the surfaces of the vessel, giving rise to the term ‘pimply’ Ipswich ware. This is, given the importance of the locale in the Anglo-Saxon period, a highly significant find. It is the first sherd of this type from Sutton Courtenay, and is not only evidence of middle Saxon activity, but is likely to indicate a site of high status. Almost all the finds of the material in the Thames Valley to the west of the Strand settlement in *Lundenwic* are from sites which appear to be of this type.

For example, at Broad street, Reading (Blinkhorn in prep), a single sherd was found, at a site which was located within 100m of the reputed location of a ‘royal settlement’ mentioned in Asser’s *Life of Alfred* (Astill 1978, 77). The other Berkshire finds are from Old Windsor a Saxon royal estate centre, and Thatcham, which appears to have been an administrative centre in the late Saxon period (Astill 1978, 87), if not before. Elsewhere in the Thames Valley, it occurred at Eynsham Abbey, Oxon., an important Saxon minster church (Blinkhorn 2003), Lake End Road, Maidenhead (Blinkhorn 2002), and Yarnton, Oxon. (Blinkhorn 2004). The last two named sites may have been of lesser status, while the Maidenhead site is something of an enigma. It is not impossible that it was the site of seasonal fair, as continental imported pottery and some high-quality metalwork occurred at the site, and the Yarnton settlement appears to be a little out of the ordinary, as the main structure

was sited within a large enclosure ditch. The ware has also been found in excavations around the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford (Blinkhorn 2001); the city was an important river-crossing in the Saxon period, and likely to have been some sort of market-centre. It is one of the few sites in the region to have produced continental imported wares (Mellor 1994).

Ipswich ware has also been found at Lechlade in Gloucestershire, at the junction of the Thames and a major overland route to Winchester (Blinkhorn in archive). The excavated material has never been fully analysed, but is a likely location for some sort of trading centre and/or toll-station.

A find from ditch 101 (4, 53) may be very under-fired daub.

Animal bone by Andrew Mundin

Ten fragments of animal bone, weighing 66g in total were recovered from two contexts (Appendix 3). The surface preservation of the pieces was generally poor, and hindered identification. Though most pieces could be identified as coming from a larger animal, such as a cow, only three teeth could be recognized to body part level. Two more fragments seemed to be from a mid-sized bone, such as a metacarpal or metatarsal. The mid-section splitting of this bone could be an indicator of butchery practice, for the accessing of the bone marrow within.

Conclusion

A surprising wealth of archaeology has been discovered on this site. Anglo-Saxon deposits have survived to a similar density as seems to have been present in the nearby quarry, though no human burial or structural remains were discovered here. Although the dating evidence is slight, it is consistent and the presence of a substantial ditch containing rare middle Saxon pottery (Ipswich ware), suggests high status occupation of this site at this time, which corresponds with what is known from documentary sources for the medieval period. The curvilinear ditches at the south of the site correspond very closely the aerial photographic evidence (Fig. 3); the existence of a further ditch was unexpected.

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APPENDIX 1: Feature index

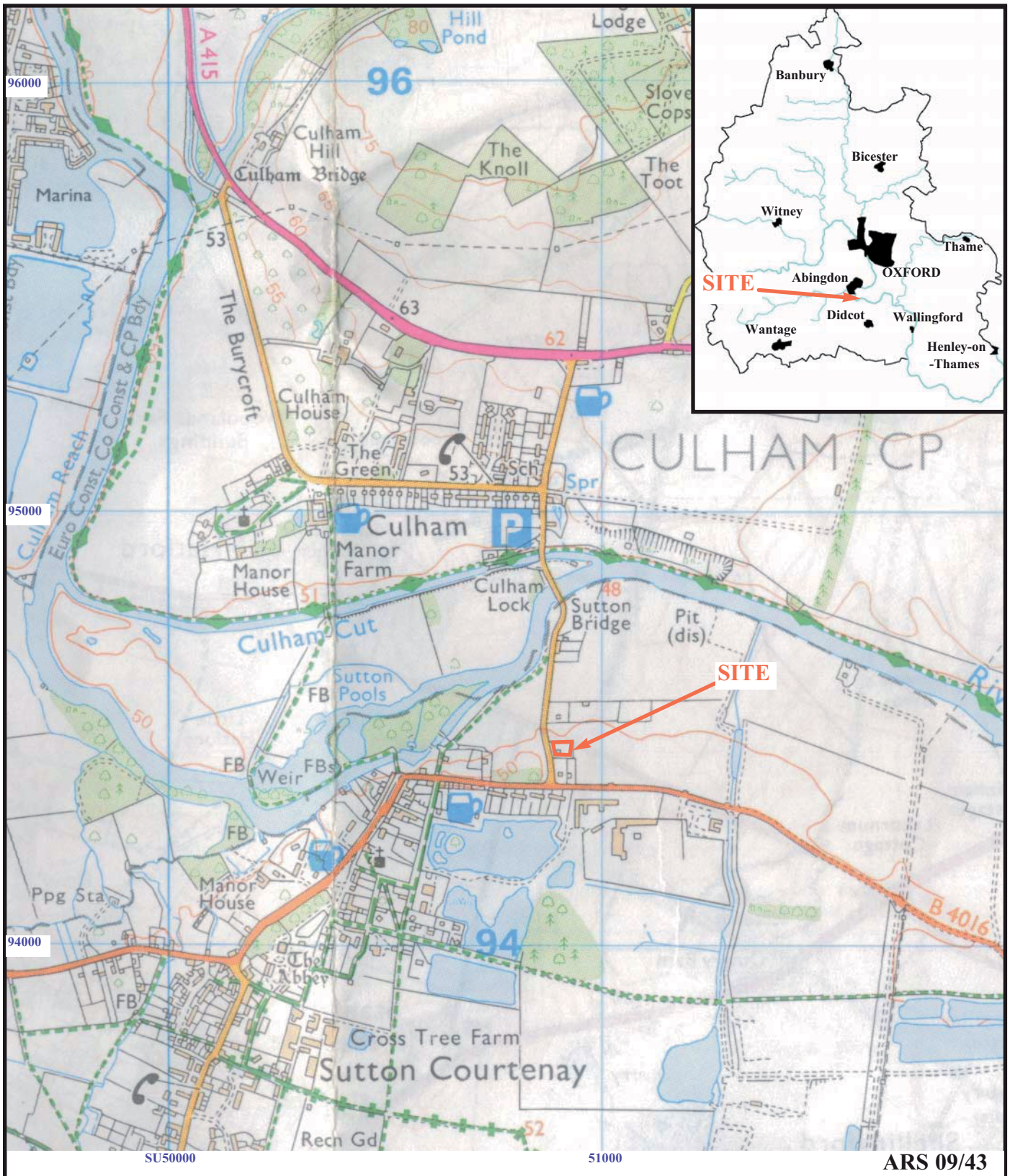
<i>Cut</i>	<i>Deposit</i>	<i>Group</i>	<i>Type</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Dating evidence</i>
1	50	102	Ditch	Undated	-
2	51	103	Ditch	Early-Mid Saxon	Pottery
3	52	-	Post-hole	Undated	-
4	53	101	Ditch terminus	Early-Mid Saxon	(Pottery from 5)
5	54	101	Ditch	Early-Mid Saxon	Pottery
6	55	103	Ditch	Early-Mid Saxon	Pottery from 2
7	68	-	Post-hole	Undated	-
8	56	100	Ditch	Mid Saxon	(Pottery from 10)
9	57	-	Ditch	Modern truncation	Stratigraphy
10	61	100	Ditch	Mid Saxon	Pottery
11	62	100	Ditch	Mid Saxon	(Pottery from 10)
12	63	100	Partial ditch section	Mid Saxon	(Pottery from 10)
13	64	100	Partial ditch section	Mid Saxon	(Pottery from 10)
14	65	104	Ditch	Undated	-
15	66	105	Ditch	Undated	-
16	67	105	Ditch (truncated)	Undated	-

APPENDIX 2: Pottery catalogue

<i>Cut</i>	<i>Deposit</i>	<i>No. frags</i>	<i>Wt (g)</i>	<i>Identification</i>
2	51	2	4	Early/Mid Saxon
4	53	1	11	Daub
5	54	2	35	Early/Mid Saxon
10	61	1	7	Middle Saxon

APPENDIX 3: Animal bone catalogue

<i>Cut</i>	<i>Deposit</i>	<i>No. frags</i>	<i>Wt (g)</i>	<i>Animal</i>
1	50	8	58	Cattle
4	53	2	8	Unclassified

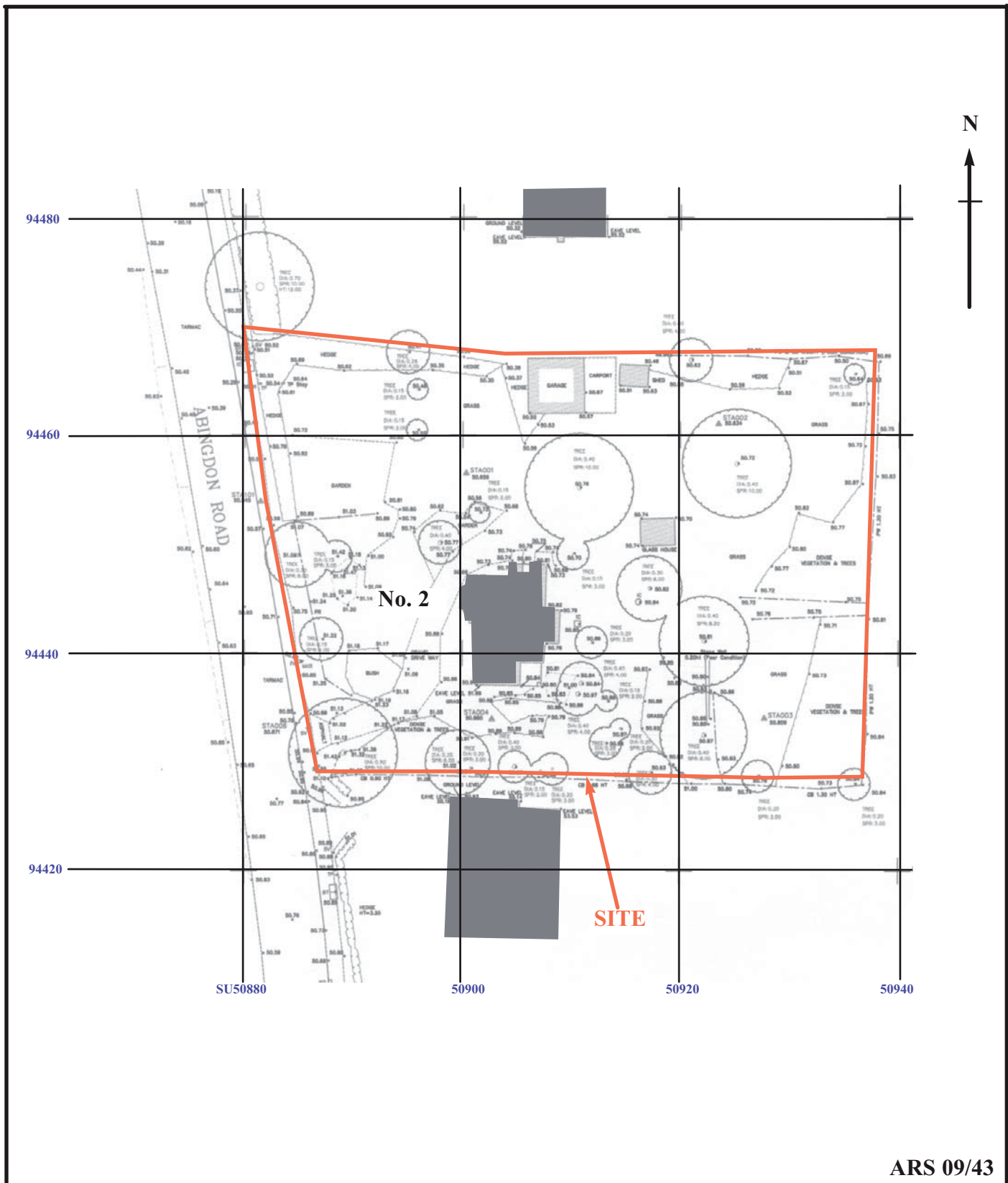


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Figure 1. Location of site within Sutton Courtenay and Oxfordshire.

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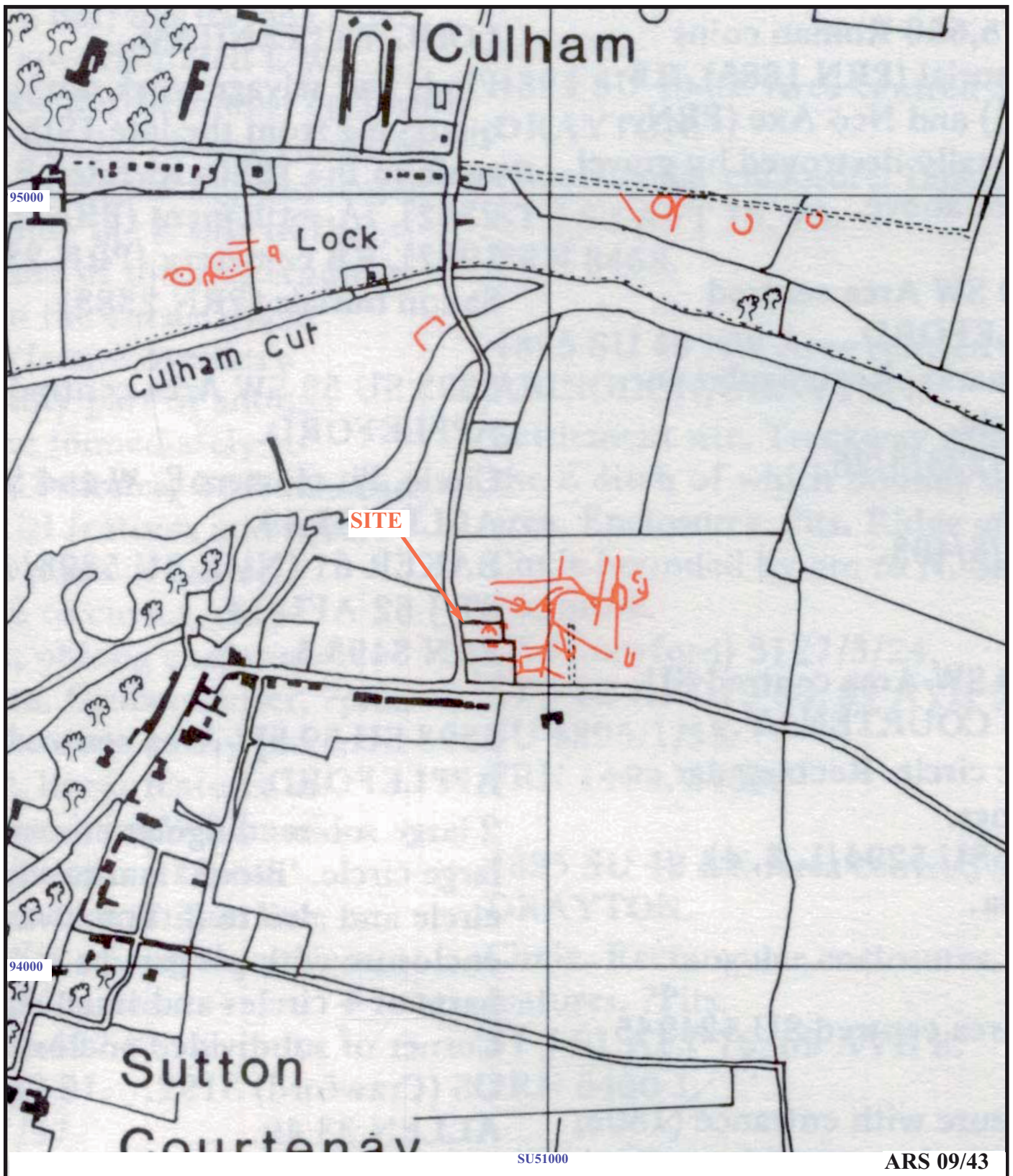


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Figure 2. Detail of site off Abingdon Road prior to site clearance.

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Scale: 1:500

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Figure 3. Cropmark interpretation (after
Benson and Miles, 1974, map 34)

2 Abingdon Road, Sutton Courtenay, Oxfordshire, 2009

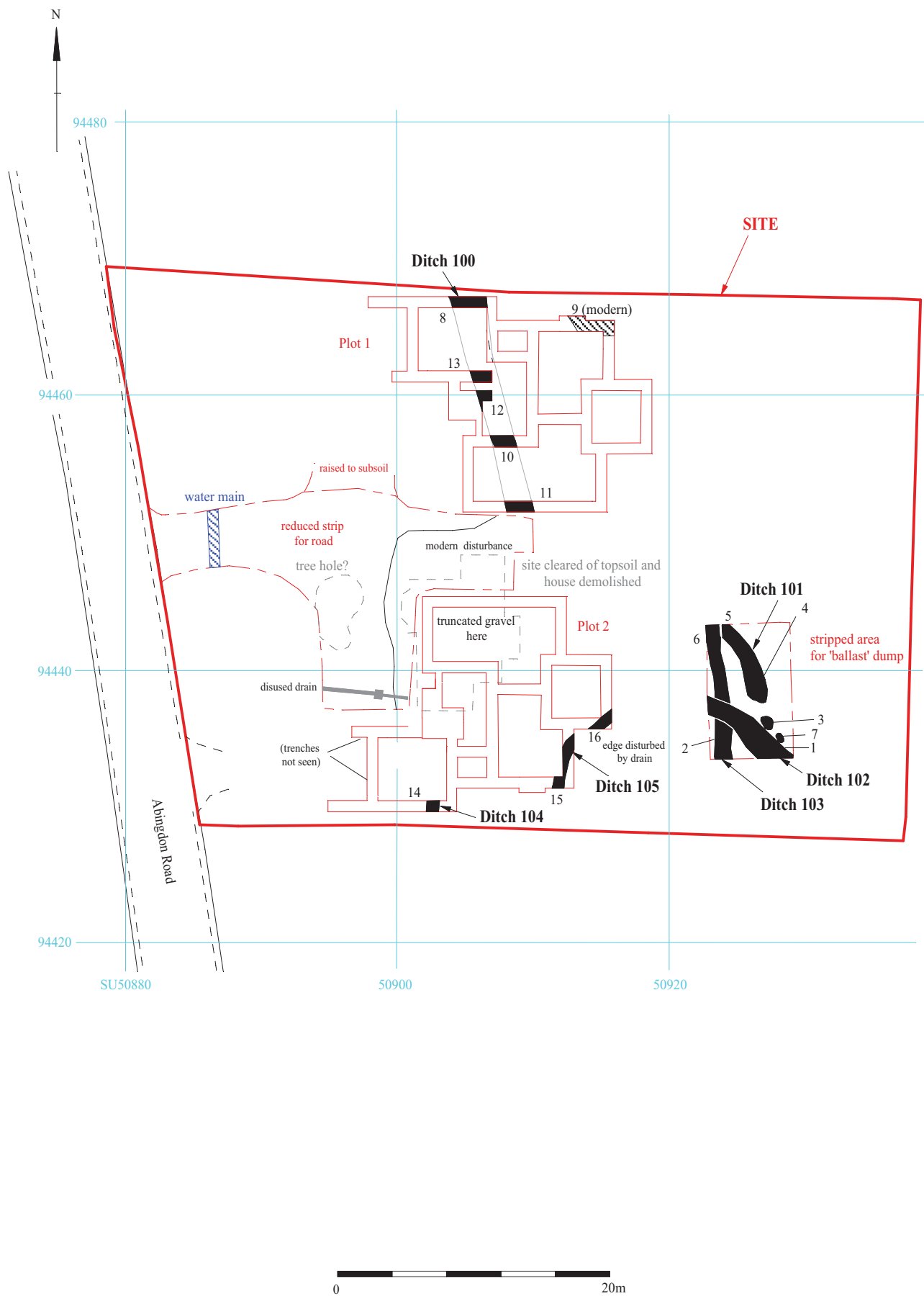


Figure 4. Location of areas observed during watching brief.

2 Abingdon Road, Sutton Courtenay, Oxfordshire, 2009

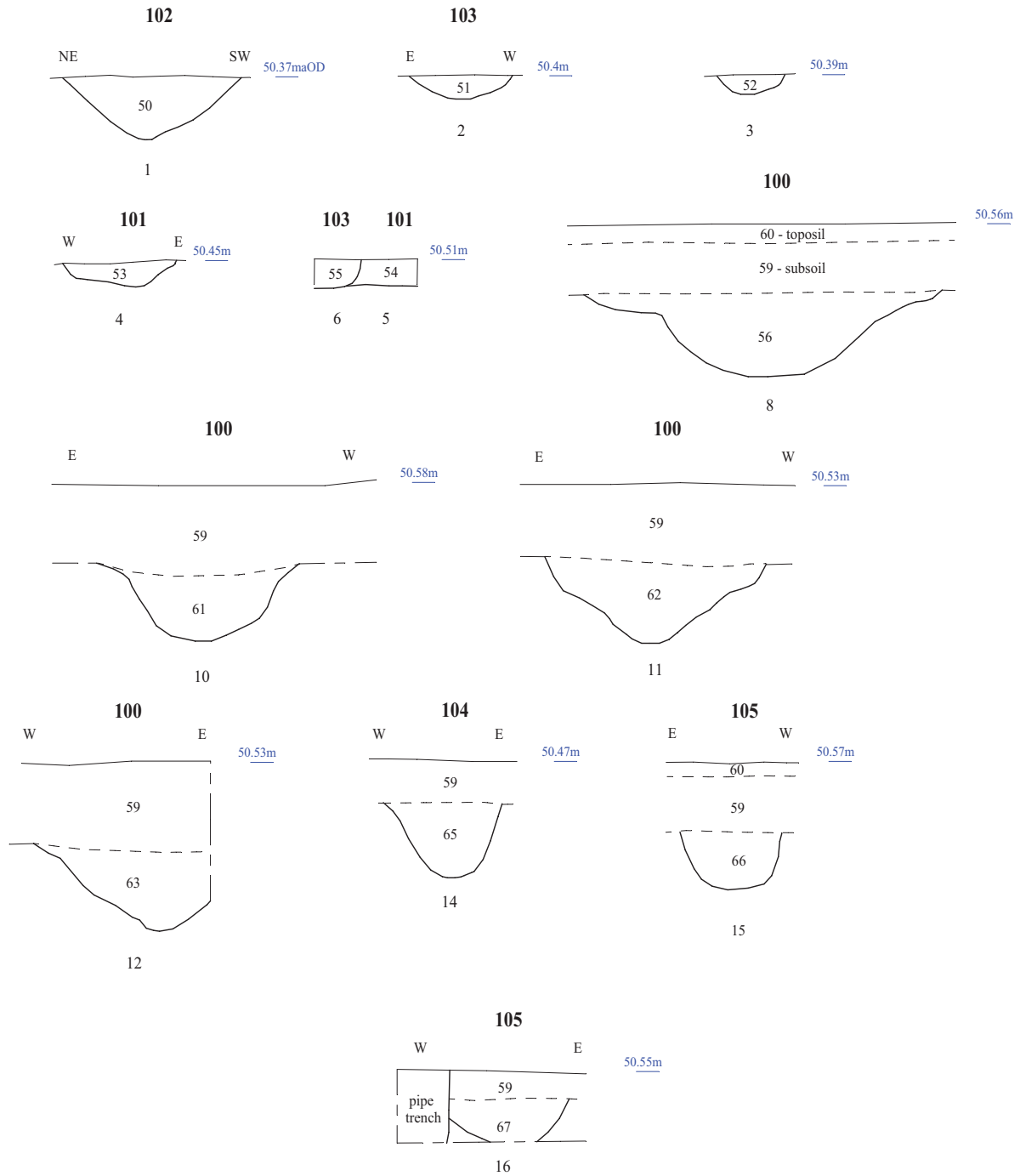


Figure 5. Sections.



Plate 1. 'Ballast dump' strip, looking north, scales: 2m and 1m.



Plate 2. Road formation strip, looking west, scales: 2m and 1m.



Plate 3. Ditch 1, looking south east, scales: 1m and 0.4m.



Plate 4. Footing 1, Ditch 11, looking south, scale: 2m.