A GEOARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF AT JAMES COURT, BATH ROAD, READING, BERKSHIRE (SU 6977 7250)

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Summary

A geoarchaeological watching brief was undertaken on 16th-18th May 2011, at James Court, Bath Rd, Reading, in order to comply with the requirements of PPS5. The watching brief showed that no remains of palaeoarchaeological significance were present within the development area, despite an intensive program of monitoring, recording and sampling. A series of colluvial deposits were, however, recorded, which add to geological knowledge of the Lynch Hill sequence surrounding the site. No further fieldwork or monitoring is recommended in relation to this development scheme.

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Date of fieldwork	16th-18th May 2011
Date of report	16th June 2011
NGR (centre of area)	SU 6977 7250
Client	Crest Nicholson South
Consultants	Archaeological Services & Consultancy Ltd & Quaternary Scientific (QUEST)

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1. Introduction

1.1 Between the 16th and 18th May 2011 a geoarchaeological watching brief was carried out by staff of the Surrey County Archaeological Unit (SCAU) on the site of the new development at James Court, Bath Road, Reading, Berkshire (figs 1 and 2). The work was undertaken on behalf of Crest Nicholson South, and was commissioned by Archaeological Services & Consultancy Ltd and Quaternary Scientific (QUEST), University of Reading. The work was requested by Berkshire Archaeology, on behalf of Reading Borough Council, in order to fulfil the requirements of Planning Policy Statement 5 (PPS5), and was monitored by Mary O'Donoghue, Archaeological Officer for Berkshire Archaeology.

1.2 The watching brief took place following the recommendations of a desk based assessment (Fell 2010), and both archaeological and geoarchaeological evaluations of the site (Shane and Fell 2011, and Allen and Green 2011). These revealed that the site was located on the Lynch Hill gravel, which has high potential for artefacts and associated evidence relating to the Palaeolithic periods.

1.3 A project design for the conduct of a geoarchaeological watching brief was prepared by Archaeological Services & Consultancy Ltd (Fell 2011), which highlighted the need for geoarchaeological monitoring of the basement footprint of the new building (see figs 2 and 3). Consequently the aim of the watching brief was to sample and record the geological sequence, and establish the nature and extent of any artefact scatters and associated horizons that might be revealed during machining (see Fell 2011: 8).

2. Methodology

2.1 The watching brief took place over three days in May 2011, in warm, dry weather conditions. The removal of soil was carried out by a JCB mechanical excavator fitted with a 1.8m toothless bucket, which gradually reduced the level of the ground in shallow spits, across the area of the new basement. The machining process was carefully watched for the occurrence of any artifacts or deposits of geological or archaeological interest, which might relate to ancient activity in the immediate vicinity.

2.2 Sequential stratigraphic units from selected areas (see fig 3), were deposited by the machine on a clean tarpaulin, where they could be closely inspected, and 100 litre samples hand sieved through a 1cm mesh. The samples were sieved by a flint specialist (Nick Marples of SCAU), to identify any purposefully struck flints among the many natural and machine struck chips occurring in the machined deposits.

2.3 It was originally proposed that the sampling should take place in the corners of the main building footprint (Fell 2011: 8-9), however it quickly

became apparent that a large part of the site had suffered previous disturbance, in particular from the foundations and basement of the former building (see figs 2, 3 and 5a). Sampling and recording therefore only took place in areas where it was clear that an intact profile was present (see figs 3 and 4). Despite the high levels of disturbance, a total of five samples were examined, and 13 different natural stratigraphic units identified (see appendix 1).

3. Results

General observations

3.1 The watching brief took place after the demolition of the former building. The area was levelled out and covered with a layer of 'crush' prior to commencement of the fieldwork. Some of the upper layers at the northern end of the site had been removed prior to the arrival of the field team, but none of the intact natural stratigraphic layers had been encroached upon.

3.2 Observation in the northern area of the site showed a large amount of previous disturbance had taken place (see fig 5a), presumably during the construction of the former building. The disturbance extended across much of the northern and eastern areas of the site, and the building contractors showed the field staff a plan indicating that the building had previously had a basement covering its east and central areas (see fig 3).

3.3 During the monitored strip it was clear that a large part of the site had suffered modern truncation within the footprint of the former building, however, the western half of the new build footprint, which extended beyond the former building (see fig 2), still had an intact natural stratigraphic sequence. Sampling and recording therefore focussed on the western half of the site, and no further monitoring was conducted to the east.

Stratigraphy

3.4 The stratigraphic sequence of the site was recorded in six locations around the perimeter of the new basement area (see fig 3), adjacent to where samples had been taken. The exception to this was sample area C, which lay in the centre of the site, and was immediately below a series of modern demolition deposits, giving no opportunity for recording an intact sequence. The detailed descriptions of individual layers are included as appendix 1, and summaries of each stratigraphic sequence are presented in part 3.6, and figures 4 and 5a-g.

3.5 In general, the stratigraphy of the site consisted of a series of modern demolition or made ground layers, overlying remnant subsoil or colluvial deposits, then gravel and sand interspersed both vertically and horizontally across the site. Some of the lower layers of sand and gravel showed bands of iron panning, presumably caused by fluctuating water levels. It was clear that natural deposits had been reached, and the sands and gravels are believed to be part of the upper levels of the Lynch Hill sequence. No horizons relating to human occupation, or organic deposition, were identified, though six probable colluvial deposits were recorded.

3.6 **Section 1 (Sample area A)** Sequence of modern deposits (100A-101), overlying two silty-clay-sand layers (102 and 103), which may be truncated remnant subsoils or colluvial deposits, similar to those identified previously within the geoarchaeological evaluation test pit (see Allen and Green 2011: 2-4). These deposits overlay sand and gravel deposits (104).

Section 2 (Sample area B) Sequence of modern deposits (100A-101), overlying the remnant subsoil/colluvial deposit (102) identified in sequence 1. This overlay coarse sand (105), which appeared to be a localised deposit in the north and central areas of the site.

Section 3 Sequence of modern deposits (100A and 106-7), overlying a subsoil remnant (108), over natural sand and gravel (104 and 109).

Section 4 (Sample area D) Sequence of modern deposits (100A and 106), overlying a subsoil remnant (108), and a series of silty-clay-sand layers (110, 111 and 113), interpreted as colluvial deposits. Layer 115 may also belong to this group. A layer of clay-with-flints (112) is also likely to be colluvial, and appears to have been deposited after truncation of the natural sand and gravel (104).

Section 5 Identical sequence to 4. Sequences 4 and 5 indicate that colluvial deposits 110-113 were localised deposits in the south-west corner of the site, which appeared to fill a shallow depression, possibly a former hollow or channel.

Section 6 (Sample area E) Sequence of modern deposits (100A and 106), overlying a subsoil remnant (116), which was similar to 108. No colluvial deposits were present, and 116 lay directly over the natural sand and gravel (104 and 114).

Samples

3.7 Samples of the natural geological sequence were taken from five locations in the western half of the site (see fig 3 A-E, and appendix 1). All the samples were sieved by hand to enable detailed observation of the deposits and any artefacts within them. None contained any artefacts, ecofacts, or other organic material, indicating the horizons were sterile, natural deposits.

4. Conclusions

4.1 Despite the high level of modern disturbance on the site, and consequently, the need to alter the locations of recording and sampling areas, the fieldwork was successful in achieving the aims specified in the project design (Fell 2011: 8).

4.2 The fieldwork showed that no remains of palaeoarchaeological significance were present within the development area, despite an intensive program of monitoring, recording and sampling. A series of colluvial deposits

were, however, recorded, which add to geological knowledge of the Lynch Hill sequence surrounding the site.

4.3 It is possible that the lack of palaeoarchaeological evidence may be due to the fact that only the uppermost levels of the Lynch Hill sequence (up to 1m in depth) were investigated. Both artefactual and ecofactual evidence have previously been discovered within this geological terrace, but these have generally come from much deeper levels, for example at Grovelands Pit, *c.*0.5km to the west of the site, where lenses of chalky material and vertebrate fauna, were discovered towards the base of the sequence, at *c.*4m (Fell 2010: 9).

4.4 In view of the above information, it is recommended that no further geoarchaeological work is required in respect of the James Court development site.

References

Allen, P, and Green, C, 2011 *James' Court, Bath Road, Reading: fieldwork report.* Client report prepared by Quaternary Scientific (QUEST).

Fell, D, 2011 *Addendum to project design for continuous geoarchaeological watching brief on behalf of Crest Nicholson South.* Client report prepared by Archaeological Services and Consultancy Ltd.

Fell, D, 2010 *Project design for archaeological evaluation on behalf of Crest Nicholson South.* Client report prepared by Archaeological Services and Consultancy Ltd.

Shane, G, and Fell, D, 2011 *Archaeological evaluation: James Court, Bath Road, Reading, Berkshire.* Client report prepared by Archaeological Services and Consultancy Ltd.

Figure 1: James Court, Reading; general site location (scale 1:25,000)

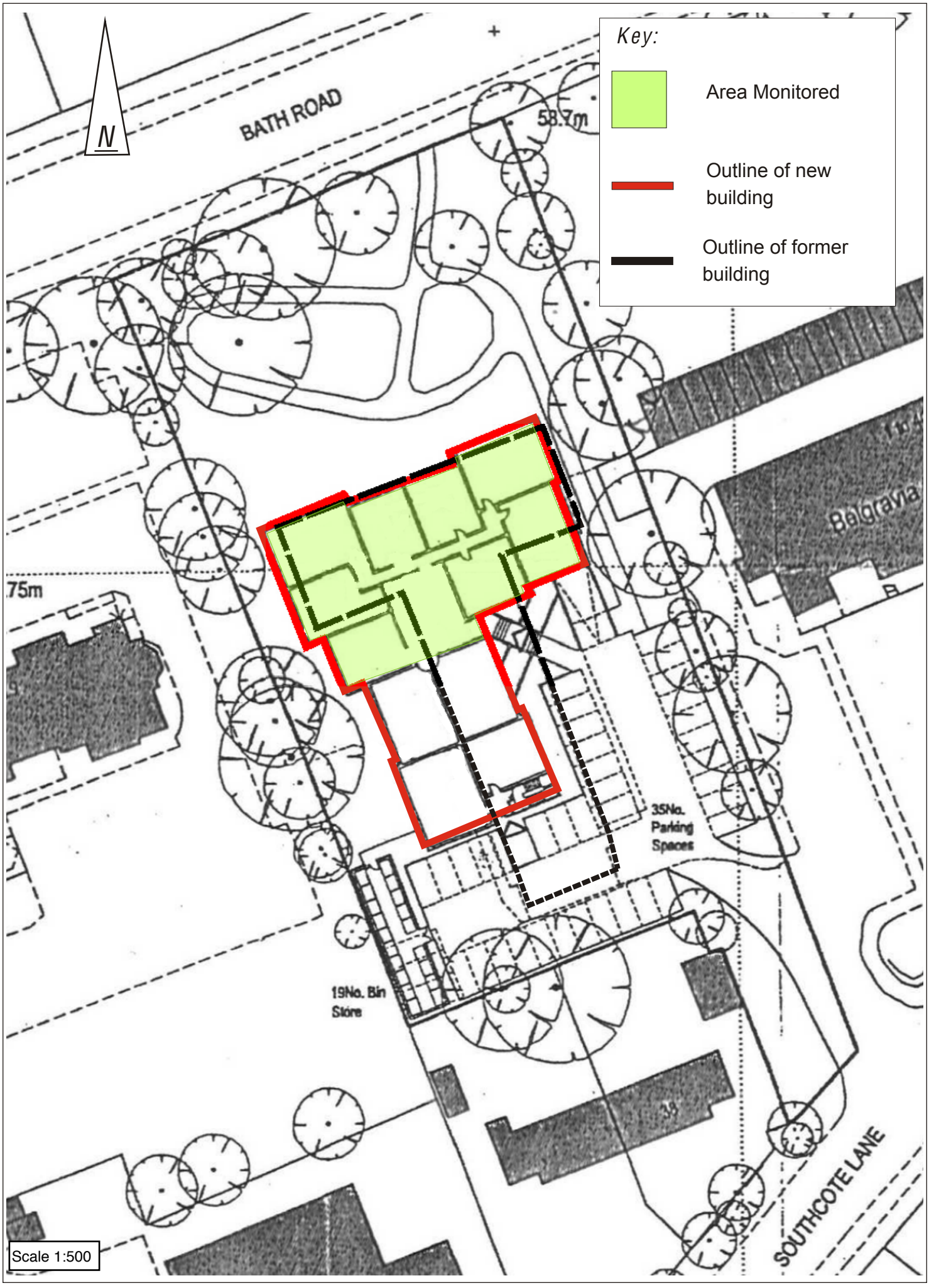

Figure 2: James Court, Reading; plan showing site layout and area of monitoring

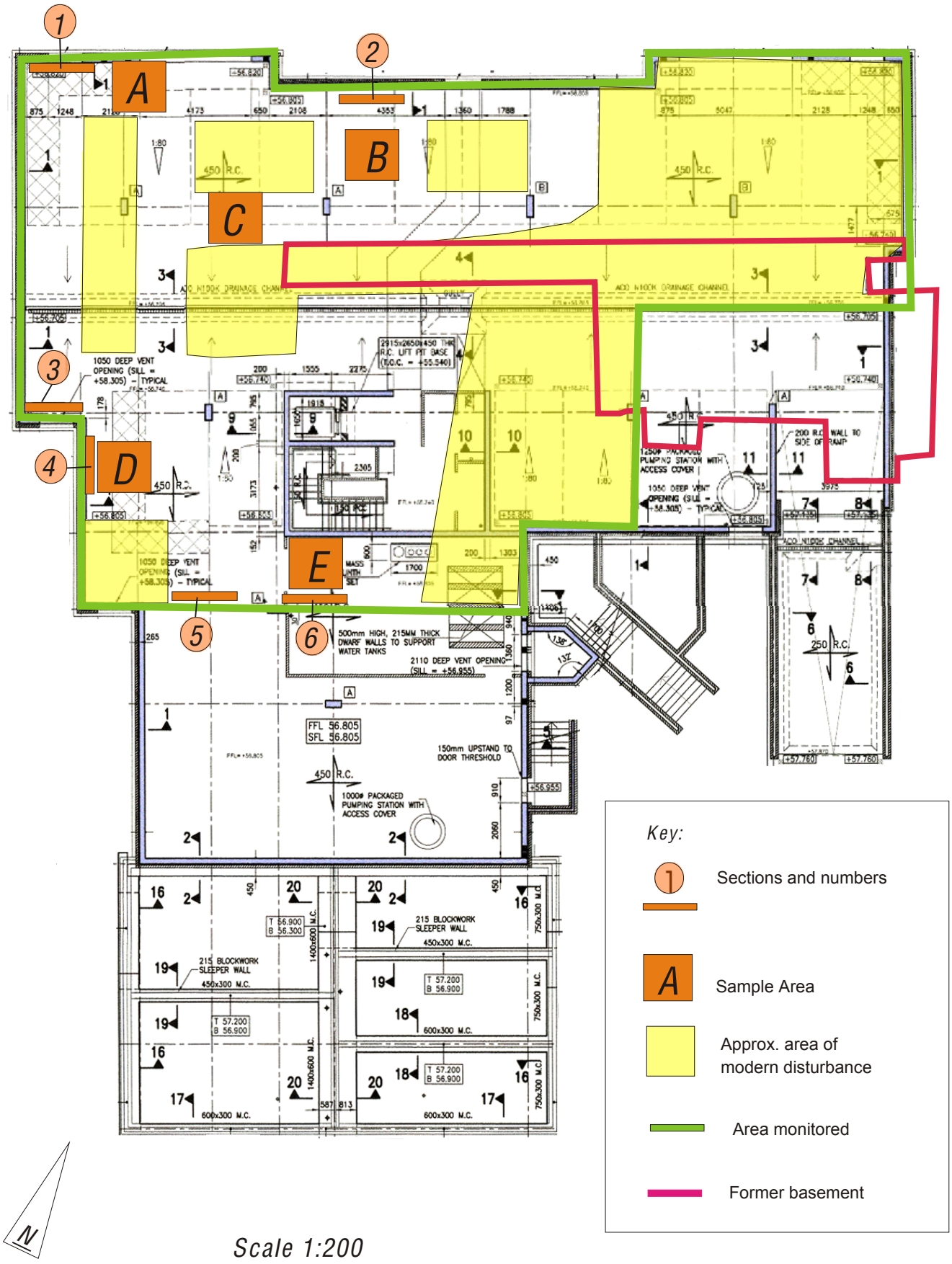

Figure 3: James Court, Reading; plan showing monitoring area, sample sites, and section locations.

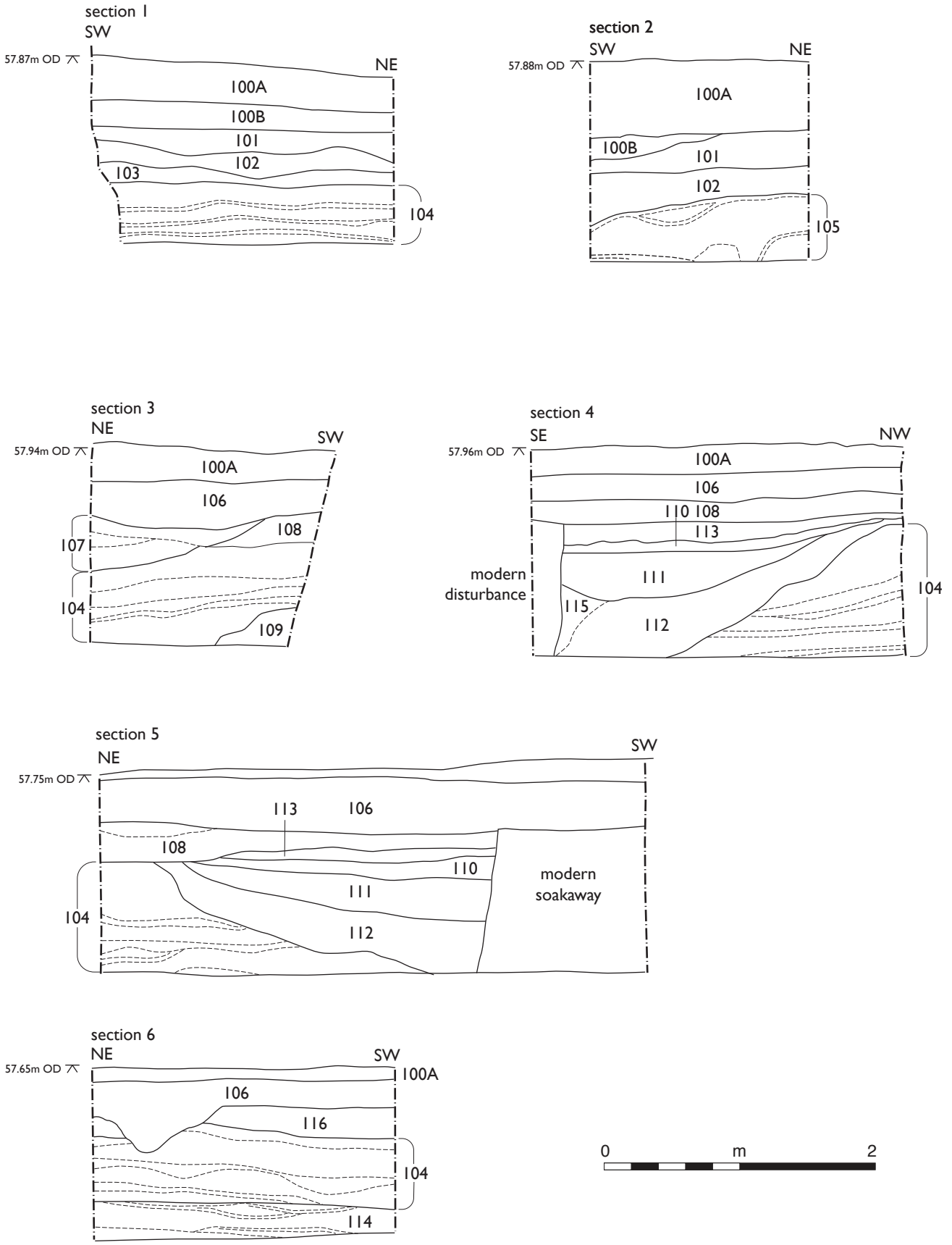

Figure 4: James Court, Reading; recorded sections

Figure 5a: General view of the site, looking north east; showing high levels of modern disturbance, and pockets of natural gravel.

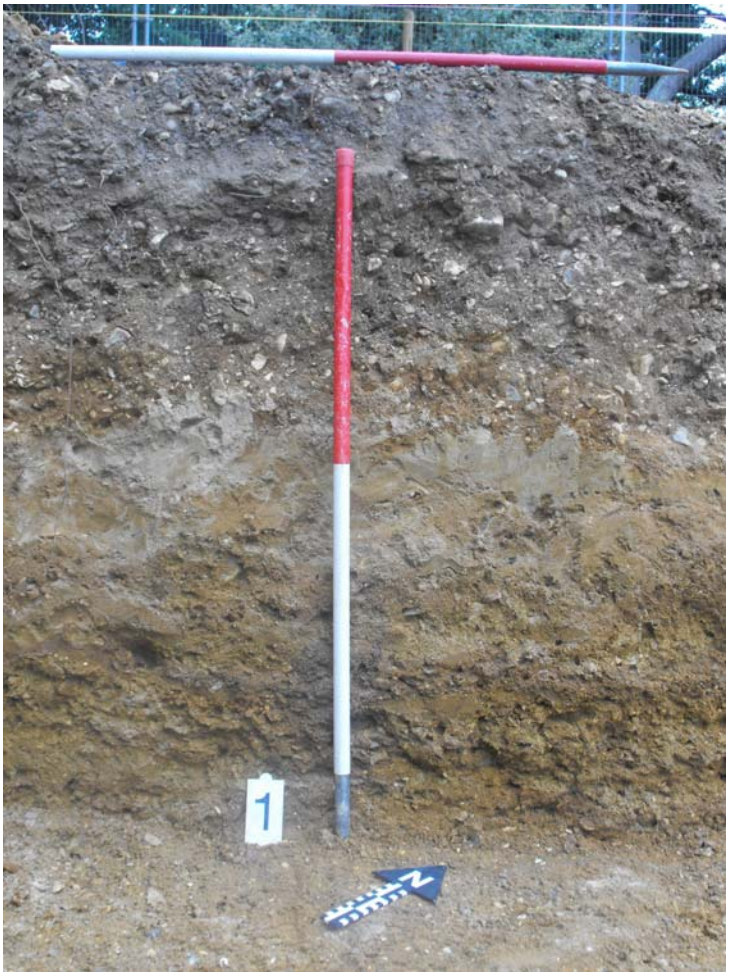

Figure 5b: Detail of section 1, looking north west.

Figure 5c: Detail of section 2, looking north west.

Figure 5d: Detail of section 3, looking south-east.

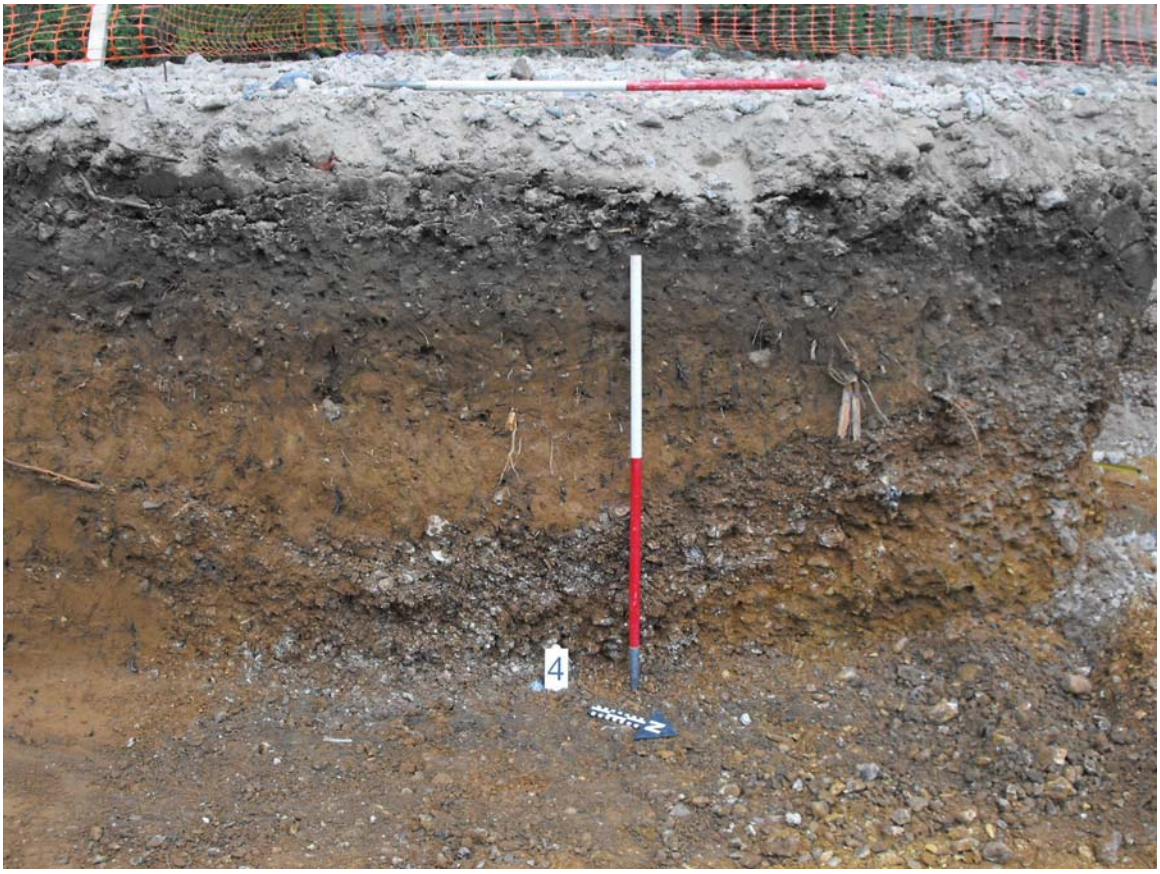

Figure 5e: Detail of section 4, looking south west.

Figure 5f: Detail of section 5, looking south east.

Figure 5g: Detail of section 6, looking south east.

APPENDIX 1: JAMES COURT, READING: DETAILED CONTEXT LISTING - SOIL DESCRIPTIONS

CONTEXT	AREA	CONTEXT TYPE	COLOUR	TEXTURE	DEPTH	SOIL STATE	INCLUSIONS	FREQUENCY	SIZE	SHAPE	SORTING	SAMPLES
100A	ALL	Modern made ground - crush	Grey	Sandy-clay	35cm	Very dry/compact	Modern material and gravel	-	40-50mm	sub-angular	-	-
100B	ALL	Modern made ground - crush	Grey	Sandy-clay	15-20cm	Dry and crumbly	Flints and pebbles	-	all sizes	sub-angular and rounded	-	-
101	NW	Modern made ground	Orange brown	Sand	20cm	Dry and crumbly	Flints	-	20-50mm	sub-angular	-	-
102	NW	Natural layer - colluvial or subsoil?	Pale grey, orange veins	Silty-clay-sand	10-15cm	Dry and compact	Charcoal flecks and flints	10%	<25mm	sub-angular	poor	-
103	NW	Natural layer - colluvial or subsoil?	Orange-brown	Silty-sand	12cm	Firm	Flints	15%	20-50mm	sub-angular and sub-rounded	moderate	A
104	ALL	Natural layer	Orange-yellow patchy	Coarse sand and gravel	>45cm	Loose and free-flowing	Flints and pebbles	50%	all sizes (inc large nodules)	sub-angular and sub-rounded, occ. rounded	poor	A,D,E
105	N	Natural layer	Orange-yellow patchy	Coarse sand and gravel	>45cm	Soft	Flints and pea gravel	10%	<5mm and 20-40mm	sub-angular and sub-rounded	poor	B, C
106	SW	Modern demolition layer	Dark grey-brown	Humic sandy-clay	35cm	Loose	Modern material and gravel	-	all sizes	sub-angular and sub-rounded	-	-
107	SW	Modern foundation backfill	Dark grey and yellow	Sandy clay and sand with gravel	35-40cm	Loose	Modern material and gravel	-	all sizes	sub-angular	-	-
108	SW	Natural layer - subsoil remnant	Buff-brown	Silty-sandy-clay	15-20cm	Firm	Flint	10%	<20mm	sub-angular and sub-rounded	poor	-
109	SW	Natural layer	Yellow	Coarse sand	>25cm	Soft and moist	None	-	-	-	-	-
110	SW	Natural layer - colluvial?	Mid brown	Sandy-clay	10cm	Firm and sticky	Charcoal flecks, flints, pebbles	15%	20-50mm	sub-angular and sub-rounded	poor	-
111	SW	Natural layer - colluvial?	Orange-brown	Silty-sandy-clay	>35cm	Firm	Flints	5-10%	<25mm	sub-angular and sub-rounded	poor	D
112	SW	Natural layer - colluvial?	Grey-brown	Clay with flints	>45cm	Loose and moist	Flints, pebbles and gravel	90%	20-80mm	sub-angular and sub-rounded	poor	D
113	SW	Natural layer - colluvial or subsoil?	Buff-brown	Silty-sandy-clay	15cm	Firm	Flints	10%	<25mm	sub-angular and sub-rounded	poor	-
114	S	Natural layer	Red-orange and yellow	Coarse sand	>30cm	Firm, crisp and moist	Flints	<5%	<20mm	sub-angular and sub-rounded	poor	E
115	SW	Natural layer	Orange-brown	Sandy-clay	50cm	Soft and crumbly	Flints	50%	all sizes	sub-angular and rounded	poor	-
116	S	Natural layer - subsoil remnant	Buff-brown	Silty-sandy-clay with flints	20-25cm	Soft and sticky	Flints	80%	50-80mm	sub-angular and sub-rounded	poor	-