

# Gas Main Replacement Whitchurch-on-Thames, Oxfordshire - Pangbourne, West Berkshire



Archaeological  
Watching Brief Report



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## Gas Main Replacement

### Whitchurch-on-Thames, Oxfordshire – Pangbourne, West Berkshire

*Archaeological Watching Brief Report*

*Written by Mike Sims*

*and illustrated by Markus Dylewski*

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## Summary

*Between July and November 2011, Oxford Archaeology, conducted an archaeological watching brief during the laying of a replacement gas main across the River Thames east of Whitchurch Bridge (NGR: SU 6390 7719 to SU 6365 7676).*

*The watching brief observed a sequence of alluvial deposits on either side of the River Thames. No evidence for any activity connected with river traffic was observed. Some evidence for cultivation was observed on the northern bank, but the stratigraphy observed on the southern bank is indicative of flood meadows/seasonal grazing with some evidence of modern recreational use. No evidence for earlier phases of the bridge construction or ferry traffic was observed.*

## 1 INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Scope of work

- 1.1.1 As part of their ongoing programme of improvements, Southern Gas Networks (part of the Scotia Gas Networks Group) proposed to install a new gas main across the River Thames at a point approximately 300 m east of Whitchurch Bridge on the edge of Whitchurch-on-Thames. As part of this work a series of entry pits were dug in order to allow for insertion of directional drilling equipment. This work started on the north, South Oxfordshire side of the river Thames in an area known as Mays Field. The gas main was then mole drilled under the river emerging at Pangbourne Meadows, West Berkshire on the southern bank of the Thames where a further series of insertion pits were dug running up to Whitchurch Bridge (NGR: SU 6390 7719 to SU 6365 7676).
- 1.1.2 Because of the potential for disturbance to any archaeological deposits or features within the area of the excavations, it was been proposed by Duncan Coe of West Berkshire Heritage Service that an archaeological watching brief be maintained during the excavation of the initial three entry pits located approximately 20m from the northern bank of the Thames.
- 1.1.3 Although a brief was not produced, discussions with Duncan Coe determined the scope of work required. Oxford Archaeology (OA) then produced a written scheme of investigation (WSI) detailing how OA would implement the requirement for a watching brief during the excavation of the entry pits and any further ground works requiring monitoring (OA 2011).

### 1.2 Location, geology and topography

- 1.2.1 The site is located on the eastern edge of Whitchurch-on-Thames, falling into the districts of both South Oxfordshire (on the north side of the Thames) and West Berkshire (on the south side of the Thames) (Fig. 1).
- 1.2.2 On the north side of the Thames, the site is located in open roughly level farmland known as Mays Field situated between Eastfield Lane and the River Thames (Fig. 2). Now one open field it was originally two, separated by a drainage ditch (still visible) and presumably a fence or hedge. There is a noticeable step in field levels (approximately a 0.3 m drop) between the field fronting Eastfield Lane and the field adjoining the River Thames.



- 1.2.3 On the south side of the Thames, the site is located within Pangbourne Meadow, to the east of Whitchurch Road.
- 1.2.4 The superficial geology is recorded as Alluvium over Valley Gravel (British Geological Survey, Sheet 268).

### **1.3 Archaeological and historical background**

- 1.3.1 The site is located in the Thames Valley, which has been identified as an area of high archaeological potential due to the large number and variety of archaeological sites.
- 1.3.2 No direct evidence for Neolithic activity within the area of Whitchurch itself has been recorded, but a burial of a woman together with a large Abingdon Ware bowl and animal bone dated to the period have been recorded at Pangbourne, on the opposite side of the river (Hey and Robinson 2011, p284).
- 1.3.3 A looped and socketed copper alloy axehead was recovered from the Thames at Whitchurch Bridge in 1922 and an early Iron Age settlement was located at Bozdown to the north-east of Whitchurch.
- 1.3.4 Two burials have been recorded at Whitchurch, one of which was possibly Roman, and assorted Roman finds have been recovered from within the area (Booth, Dodd, Robinson and Smith 2007, p 98). A cemetery containing evidence suggesting a Romano-British date with use continuing into the Anglo-Saxon period was found during the 19th century at Pangbourne (ibid). To the south of Pangbourne, a large corridor villa together with an aisled building and corndryers were excavated at Maidenhatch Farm (Booth, Dodd, Robinson and Smith 2007, p 59).
- 1.3.5 The modern settlement of Whitchurch began with the Saxon construction of "Hwiturke", a flint and rubble church, from which the village took its name. By 844AD a charter declared its sovereignty over land on both sides of the Thames. Whitchurch has had jurisdiction over the full width of the River ever since, and on some lands on the further bank until recent years.
- 1.3.6 By the time of Domesday, the entry for Whitchurch exceeded that of its larger neighbour Pangbourne.
- 1.3.7 During the medieval period, the village gained an important mill and the church was grandly rebuilt in typical Chiltern style, together with the rise of an inland port and construction of a royal manor with its residence near to the present lych gate, from which twenty of King Edward II's state proclamations were made.
- 1.3.8 Robert Peberdy (1996) has identified a series of 25 mill weirs on the Thames between Oxford and Maidenhead during the late medieval period, including one at Whitchurch (Booth, Dodd, Robinson and Smith 2007 p 327).
- 1.3.9 Whitchurch was also served by an ancient terrace route, the Tuddingway, between Caversham and Wallingford, passing along the present Hardwick Road. Until a royal inquisition of 1479 banned wheeled vehicles from crossing the Mapledurham and Hardwick Estates, it had provided a 'land bridge' from the lower Thames (mainly Henley) for goods to be loaded at a quayside in Whitchurch (the present Mill Drive) onto smaller boats for the upper river. Agricultural estates now took over but there was a shortage of good land at Whitchurch Hill, leading to stagnation.
- 1.3.10 Decline was arrested in 1792 by the decision of a number of local landowners and gentry to build a bridge, which led to renewed prosperity, the construction of the Coombe Park Estate and the establishment of various genteel retirement residences.



The present iron bridge of 1902 replaced two previous wooden tollbridges ([www.whitchurchonthames.com](http://www.whitchurchonthames.com)).

- 1.3.11 Following the construction of the railway in the 1840s, commuters appeared and many village people went into domestic service or were squeezed out altogether. From the 1940s some village families moved with recent Polish exiles into Manor Road. Big houses were divided and the 1960s and 70s saw a spate of private development in the Hardwick Road area, since when growth has greatly slowed ([www.whitchurchonthames.com](http://www.whitchurchonthames.com)).

## 2 PROJECT AIMS AND METHODOLOGY

### 2.1 Aims

2.1.1 The aims of the watching brief were to:

- (i) preserve by record any archaeological deposits encountered during the course of ground intrusions;
- (ii) seek to establish the extent, nature and date of any archaeological deposits encountered within the scope of the ground intrusion;
- (iii) secure the analysis, conservation and long-term storage of any artefactual/ecofactual material recovered from the site;
- (iv) disseminate results through the production of a grey literature report.

### 2.2 Methodology

- 2.2.1 This watching brief was maintained as a continuous archaeological presence during the groundworks that had the potential to affect or reveal archaeological deposits. These works included the machine excavation of eight pits to allow the insertion of the directional drilling equipment.
- 2.2.2 All features and deposits were issued with unique context numbers, and context recording was in accordance with the established OA Field Manual (OAU 1992). Black-and-white negative and colour digital photographs were taken of all excavations and archaeological features.
- 2.2.3 Site plans were drawn at an appropriate scale (normally 1:50 or 1:100) with larger scale plans of features as necessary. Section drawings of features and sample sections of trenches were drawn at a scale of 1:20.

## 3 RESULTS

### 3.1 Introduction

- 3.1.1 As an alternative to open trenching it was planned to insert the pipe by directional drilling. This involved the use a "Mole" drill pulling the pipe behind it. In order to insert the mole and where the pipe route changed direction it was necessary to dig a series of pits (Fig. 2). As part of the watching brief, the stratigraphy was recorded in each pit. The digging of the pits was completed in two separate phases. Pits 1 to 3 were dug on the northern side of the Thames within Mays Field and Pits 4 to 8 were dug on the southern bank within Pangbourne Meadows.





## 3.2 Description of deposits

### *Pit 1*

- 3.2.1 The underlying natural, a light brown alluvial clay (14) was encountered at a depth of 1.2m below ground level (Fig. 3). This was overlaid by a 0.3m deep layer of blue-grey clay (13), also an alluvial deposit. Covering this clay was a 0.45m deep layer of light olive-brown silt clay (12). This deposit contained iron panning, increasing with depth, and occasional sub-angular flint nodules.
- 3.2.2 Overlying context 12 was a layer of yellow-brown clay silt (11) measuring up to 0.25m in depth. This deposit contained chalk flecking and became lighter in colour with depth. A 0.2m deep layer of mid brown silty loam (10) completed the section.

### *Pit 2*

- 3.2.3 The natural exposed within this pit was a light grey alluvial clay (24) which was encountered at a depth of 1.15m below ground level (Fig. 3). Overlying this was a 0.2m deep layer of purplish grey-brown silt clay (23). It was unclear if this colouration was due to iron panning or organic deposits.
- 3.2.4 Overlying this clay was a 0.5m deep layer of greyish orange-brown silt clay (22). This deposit also contained occasional sub-angular flint nodules and iron panning whose density increased with depth.
- 3.2.5 Covering 22 was a layer of dark orange-brown clay silt (21), 0.2m in depth. This deposit contained chalk flecking together with occasional abraded fragments of brick and charcoal suggestive of ploughing.
- 3.2.6 This was overlaid by a 0.2m deep layer of orange-brown silty loam (20), the present day topsoil and turf.

### *Pit 3*

- 3.2.7 The natural clay was encountered at a depth of 1.15m below ground level (Fig. 3). This deposit was similar to layer 24 but contained a large percentage of chalk flecking and numerous small sub-angular flints (34). Overlying this was a 0.15m deep layer of purplish brown silt clay (33), a probable continuation of layer 23.
- 3.2.8 This was sealed by a 0.45m deep layer of greyish orange-brown silt clay (32). This deposit also contained occasional iron panning and small to medium sub-angular flints.
- 3.2.9 Covering 32 was a layer of dark orange-brown clay silt (31), 0.25m in depth. A probable continuation of layer 22, this deposit also contained abraded fragments of brick, chalk flecking together with charcoal which is suggestive of ploughing.
- 3.2.10 This was overlaid by a 0.2m deep layer of orange-brown silty loam (30), the present day topsoil and turf.

### *Pit 4 (South Bank)*

- 3.2.11 This pit was located 20m south of the southern river bank in the open grassland (Pangbourne Meadow).
- 3.2.12 A layer of undisturbed blue-grey alluvial clay (44) was encountered at a depth of 0.95m below ground level (Fig. 3). Overlying this was a band of light reddish brown silt clay, 0.15m in depth (43). Above 42 was a 0.45m deep layer of light grey fine silty clay (42), both these layers were undisturbed and are probable alluvial deposits. Sealing 42 was



a layer of fine reddish brown clay silt (41), 0.22m in depth which contained many flecks of chalk.

- 3.2.13 This was overlaid by a 0.2m deep layer of grey-brown silty loam (40), the present day topsoil and turf.

#### ***Pit 5 (South Bank)***

- 3.2.14 This pit was located approximately 50m south of the river bank and measured approximately 4m by 3m.
- 3.2.15 A layer of stiff blue-grey clay (54) was encountered at a depth of 0.9m below ground level (Fig. 3). Overlying this was a light brown silt clay, 0.4m in depth (53). covering this layer was a 0.18m deep layer of light reddish brown fine silty clay (52). These three layers are all probable alluvial deposits. Sealing 52 was a layer of fine reddish brown clay silt containing many flecks of chalk, 0.08m in depth (51).
- 3.2.16 This in turn was overlaid by a 0.18m deep layer of grey-brown silty loam (50), the present day topsoil and turf.

#### ***Pit 6 (South Bank)***

- 3.2.17 This pit was sited roughly 90m south of the river bank and was excavated in the form of a "L" shape as the pipe run changed direction.
- 3.2.18 A layer of stiff blue-grey clay (64) was encountered at a depth of 0.95m below ground level (Fig. 3). This was overlaid by a layer of light brown silt clay (63), 0.45m in depth. Above this layer was a layer of light reddish brown fine silty clay (62), 0.18m deep. As with the previous two pits these three layers are all probable alluvial deposits. Sealing 62 was a layer of fine reddish brown clay silt containing many flecks of chalk, 0.08m in depth (61), also a probable alluvial deposit.
- 3.2.19 This in turn was overlaid by a 0.2m deep layer of grey-brown silty loam (60), the present day topsoil and turf.

#### ***Pit 7 (South Bank)***

- 3.2.20 This pit was sited roughly 80m south of the river bank and 40m east of Dolphin House. As with Pit 6 this was excavated in the form of a "L" shape as the pipe run changed direction.
- 3.2.21 A continuation of the stiff blue grey clay (76) was recorded at a depth of 1.15m below the current ground level (Fig. 3). Overlying 76 was a 0.62 m deep layer of clean pale brown silt clay (75). This in turn was overlaid by a 0.25m deep layer of light reddish brown (74), in turn sealed by a 0.08m thick band of reddish brown silt clay containing numerous chalk flecks (71).
- 3.2.22 Cut into this layer in the south-east and north-east corners of the pit was a steep sided, 0.3m deep feature (73). Filling this feature was a loose mix of demolition debris including a broken up concrete slab, modern frogged bricks and short sections of scaffold pole mixed with a grey-brown silt loam (72). The feature and layer 71 was covered by the topsoil and turf layer (70).

#### ***Pit 8 (South Bank)***

- 3.2.23 This pit was located 30m south of the river bank and 10m east of Whitchurch Bridge. It was excavated in the form of a "L" shape as the pipe run changed direction to run under the southern embankment leading up to the bridge.



- 3.2.24 The underlying natural blue-grey clay (84) was encountered at a depth of 1.1m below ground level (Fig. 3). This was covered by a probable continuation of the light brown silt clay alluvial deposit, 0.45m in depth (83). Above this layer was a layer of light reddish brown fine silty clay (82), 0.18m deep. As with the previous two pits these three layers are all probable alluvial deposits. Sealing 62 was a layer of fine reddish brown clay silt containing many flecks of chalk, 0.08m in depth (81), also a probable alluvial deposit.
- 3.2.25 Layer 81 was overlain by a 0.2m deep layer of grey-brown silty loam (80), the present day topsoil and turf.

### 3.3 Finds

- 3.3.1 Many abraded fragments of bricks, provisionally dated as 19th century, were observed within the layers of subsoil on the northern side of the Thames, and a iron spanner (19th/20th century) was recovered from layer 30 (topsoil). Fragments of bottle glass and tin cans of a similar date were recovered from the topsoil on the southern bank of the river. The artifacts were evaluated on site but were not retained. No earlier dating evidence was recovered.

### 3.4 Environmental remains

- 3.4.1 No remains considered suitable for palaeo-environmental sampling were encountered during this investigation.

## 4 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

### *Work on the north side of the Thames*

- 4.1.1 The majority of the deposits observed appear to be alluvial in nature and were probably deposited by glacial action during the last ice age. The Thames has subsequently cut a channel through these deposits.
- 4.1.2 Layers 14, 24 and 34 are undisturbed alluvial clays. However layer 34 has been pervaded by a quantity of weathered chalk and flint washed down from the hills to the north. This mostly likely happened between the end of glaciation and the establishment of vegetation stabilising the slope.
- 4.1.3 Layers 33 and 23 are heavily stained but it is unclear whether this was due to organic debris such as from a buried soil horizon, debris deposited into shallow slow flowing water, or from iron panning.
- 4.1.4 Layer 13 was a much finer cleaner clay whose composition suggests deposition within deeper water.
- 4.1.5 Layers 12, 22 and 32 are all alluvial in nature, and probably represent flood deposits. Layers 11, 21 and 31 are probable layers of earlier worked soil or ploughsoil as evidenced by the inclusions of abraded brick fragments and charcoal flecking. The fragments of bricks have been provisionally dated as 19th or 20th century in date. Layers 10, 20 and 30 are all modern layers of topsoil and turf.
- 4.1.6 Whilst the presence of charcoal and brick fragments suggest that the area has been previously ploughed there was no visible ridge and furrow working in either of the fields, which may suggest that the ploughing occurred recently. There were fewer brick fragments in the southern, more low lying field. It is probable that the amount of brick fragments is related to manuring practises. The northern, marginally higher, field has been ploughed together with associated manuring, while the lower field, possibly more



prone to flooding, is more likely to have been permanent pasture, with little or no manuring having taken place.

***Work on the south side of the Thames***

- 4.1.7 The stratigraphy observed on the south bank of the Thames within the open land known as Pangbourne Pastures was subtly different to that observed on the northern side. The deposits of alluvial material were similar throughout the pits and also to that observed on the north bank. All these deposits represent different phases of flood deposition and are most likely to be post-glacial in origin (Layers 41, 142, 43,44, 51, 52, 53, 54, 61, 62, 63, 64, 71, 74, 75, 76, 81, 82, 83 and 84).
- 4.1.8 The present day layers of topsoil and turf (Layers 40, 50, 60, 70 and 80) show no evidence of having been ploughed and it is probable that the area being within the floodplain has remained as permanent pasture or a lea. The shallow pit and demolition debris (72 and 73) are relatively modern in date and appear to be the result of the demolition of a small area of hardstanding, possibly from a small hut or boathouse.
- 4.1.9 No evidence for earlier bridge structures, ferry crossings or wharfage associated with the medieval river trade noted in the historical background was observed.



## APPENDIX A. ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXT INVENTORY

Context	Type	Depth	Width	Comments	Finds	Date
<b>Pit 1</b>						
10	Layer	0.2 m	-	Topsoil and turf	-	C20th
11	Layer	0.25 m	-	Alluvial clay	-	-
12	Layer	0.45 m	-	Alluvial clay	-	-
13	Layer	0.3 m	-	Alluvial clay	-	-
14	Layer	> 0.3 m	-	Alluvial clay	-	-
<b>Pit 2</b>						
20	Layer	0.25 m	-	Ploughsoil	-	C20th
21	Layer	0.25 m	-	Earlier ploughsoil	-	C19th/ C20th
22	Layer	0.55 m	-	Alluvial clay	-	-
23	Layer	0.18 m	-	Alluvial clay	-	-
24	Layer	> 0.4 m	-	Alluvial clay	-	-
<b>Pit 3</b>						
30	Layer	0.2 m	-	Ploughsoil	Iron spanner	C20th
31	Layer	0.25 m	-	Earlier ploughsoil	Brick	C19th/ C20th
32	Layer	0.45 m	-	Alluvial clay	-	-
33	Layer	0.15 m	-	Alluvial clay	-	-
34	Layer	> 0.5 m	-	Alluvial clay	-	-
<b>Pit 4</b>						
40	Layer	0.18 m	-	Topsoil and turf	-	C20th
41	Layer	0.2 m	-	Alluvial clay	-	-
42	Layer	0.45 m	-	Alluvial clay	-	-
43	Layer	0.18 m	-	Alluvial clay	-	-
44	Layer	> 0.5 m	-	Alluvial clay	-	-



Context	Type	Depth	Width	Comments	Finds	Date
<b>Pit 5</b>						
50	Layer	0.18 m	-	Topsoil and turf	-	C20th
51	Layer	0.1 m	-	Alluvial clay	-	-
52	Layer	0.18 m	-	Alluvial clay	-	-
53	Layer	0.4 m	-	Alluvial clay	-	-
54	Layer	> 0.2 m	-	Alluvial clay	-	-
<b>Pit 6</b>						
60	Layer	0.2 m	-	Topsoil and turf	-	C20th
61	Layer	0.1 m	-	Alluvial clay	-	-
62	Layer	0.2 m	-	Alluvial clay	-	-
63	Layer	0.4 m	-	Alluvial clay	-	-
64	Layer	> 0.4 m	-	Alluvial clay	-	-
<b>Pit 7</b>						
70	Layer	0.22 m	-	Topsoil and turf	-	C20th
71	Layer	0.1 m	-	Alluvial clay	-	-
72	Fill	0.3 m	> 2 m	Demolition debris	Concrete, brick, iron piping	C20th
72	Cut	0.3 m	> 2 m	Rubbish pit, possible reuse of construction cut	-	C20th
74	Layer	0.25 m	-	Alluvial clay	-	-
75	Layer	0.62 m	-	Alluvial clay	-	-
76	Layer	> 0.2 m	-	Alluvial clay	-	-
<b>Pit 8</b>						
80	Layer	0.18 m	-	Topsoil and turf	-	C20th
81	Layer	0.1 m	-	Alluvial clay	-	-
82	Layer	0.33 m	-	Alluvial clay	-	-
83	Layer	0.45 m	-	Alluvial clay	-	-
84	Layer	> 0.5 m	-	Alluvial clay	-	-



## APPENDIX B. BIBLIOGRAPHY AND REFERENCES

- Booth, P, Dodd, A, Robinson, M and Smith, A, 2007 Thames Through Time; Volume 2: The Early Historical Period: AD1 to 1000
- Hey, G and Robinson, M, 2011 Thames Through Time; Volume 1: Early Pre-history to 1500BC
- OA, 2011 Whitchurch Gas Main Replacement Project, Whitchurch-on-Thames: Written Scheme of Investigation
- OA, 1992 OA Field manual (Edited D. Wilkinson)



## APPENDIX C. SUMMARY OF SITE DETAILS

Site name:

Site code: WHITBR 11

Grid reference: NGR SU 6403 7719 to SU 6365 7676

Type of watching brief: Machine excavation of 8 pits

Date and duration of project: Between July and November 2011, 5 site visits.

Area of site: Approximately 2 hectares

Summary of results: The watching brief observed a sequence of alluvial deposits on either side of the River Thames. No evidence for any activity connected with river traffic was observed. Some evidence for cultivation was observed on the northern bank, but the stratigraphy observed on the southern bank is indicative of flood meadows/ seasonal grazing with some evidence of modern recreational use. No evidence for earlier phases of the bridge construction or ferry traffic was observed.

Location of archive: The archive is currently held at Janus House, Osney Mead, Oxford, OX2 0ES and will eventually be deposited with West Berkshire Heritage Service under the following accession number: NEBYM:2012.8





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Figure 1: Site location

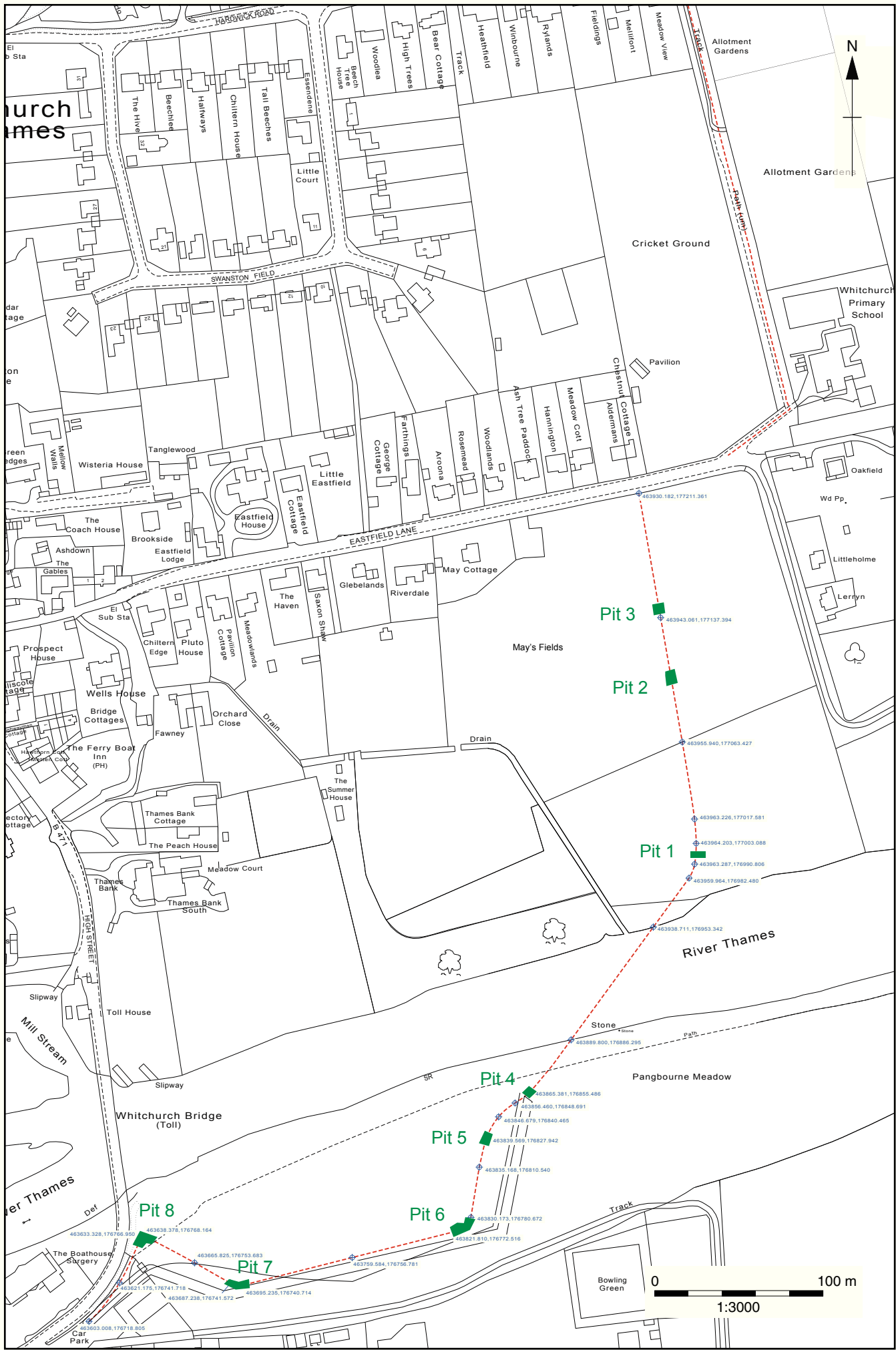


Figure 2: Site plan

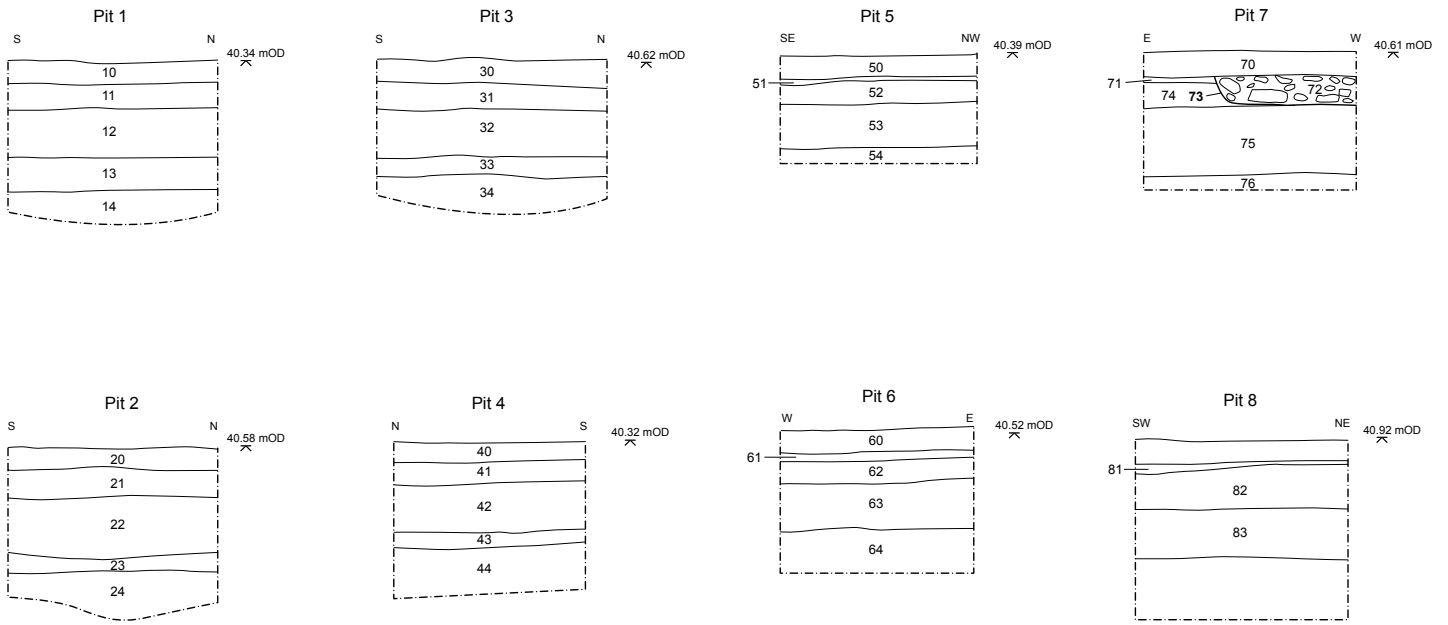


Figure 3: Sections





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