

# Oriel College, Staircase 8 Test Pits Archaeological Watching Brief Report

March 2018

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**Oriel College, Staircase 8 Test Pits**  
***Archaeological Watching Brief Report***

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## Summary

In March 2018, Oxford Archaeology carried out an archaeological watching brief during the excavation of two small test pits within the existing cellar below Staircase 8 at Oriol College, Oxford. The work followed on from earlier test pitting and trenching carried out in 2015 and a borehole transect across Second Quad which was undertaken in 2017.

During the 2015 works, possible Oxford Clay was encountered at the base of the stratigraphic sequence, with the lack of overlying gravel suggesting that it had been truncated by a feature within the projected alignment of the putative ditch of the primary burh. However, terrace gravel was encountered in both test pits at approximately the same elevation as the top of the gravel observed during the borehole transect and the earlier test pits and trenching, which suggests that the feature encountered during the 2015 works is more likely to be discrete rather than linear.

No dating evidence was recovered from the fairly homogeneous silty clay deposits which overlay the gravel, but it is possible that they correspond with the sequence of medieval occupation observed in the previous phases of work. As with the earlier observations, no evidence for the post-glacial brickearth which overlies the gravel terrace was revealed, which may suggest that these deposits are filling negative features.

In one of the test pits, the silty clay deposit had been truncated by a deposit of limestone rubble in a sandy gravel matrix which may have represented the rubble core of an earlier wall, although the extent of this deposit was not revealed.





## 1 INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Scope of work

- 1.1.1 In March 2018 Oxford Archaeology (OA) was commissioned by Allies and Morrison on behalf of Oriel College, Oxford to undertake a watching brief during the excavation of two geotechnical test pits to establish the nature and depth of the foundations of the walls of the cellar beneath Staircase 8 of the college (Fig. 1).
- 1.1.2 The watching brief work follows on from other pre-application work at Oriel College (Fig. 2): archaeological desk-based assessment (DBA, OA 2015a); a trial trench evaluation (OA 2015b); a geophysical survey of all three college quadrangles, together with a E-W aligned borehole transect, located in the Second Quadrangle; and a watching brief on two small geotechnical pits, TP3 and TP 4, located to examine the foundations of the structures on the south and east sides of the development area, the boundary wall to Magpie Lane and the north wall of the Chapel respectively (OA 2018).
- 1.1.3 The work was designed to further inform the Planning Authority in regard to proposals to create a new basemented kitchen and other facilities on the site of the existing kitchen, and associated storage rooms, toilets etc.
- 1.1.4 The previous works were intended to assess the archaeological potential of the site and the likely impact of previous and proposed development on the survival of any archaeological remains. The scope of the 2015 evaluation was limited by on-site constraints (the kitchen supplies the college's meals and therefore is in constant use), and consequently David Radford, Oxford City Archaeologist for the Local Planning Authority, requested a further phase of archaeological investigation.
- 1.1.5 This document reports on the results of the watching brief, and should be read in conjunction with the report on the results of the geophysical survey, borehole transect and watching brief (OA 2018).
- 1.1.6 All work was undertaken in accordance with local and national planning policies.

### 1.2 Location, topography and geology

- 1.2.1 The historic centre of Oxford is located at the southern end of a north-south gravel promontory. This raised ground occupies an elevated position above the floodplains of the River Cherwell and the River Thames. The promontory is formed of two terraces: the Summertown-Radley (Second Terrace) Sand and Gravel Member and the Floodplain (First Terrace) Northmoor Sand and Gravel Member. The promontory is surrounded by Alluvium - Clay, Silt, Sand and Gravel associated with the floodplains of the rivers Thames to the west, and Cherwell to the east. The bedrock geology for the centre of Oxford is the Oxford Clay Formation and the West Walton Formation (undifferentiated) - Mudstone formed in the Jurassic Period (British Geological Survey 2015).
- 1.2.2 Ground level appears to slope gently downwards towards the south-west. This is demonstrated by a level of 60.07m OD south of number 4a Merton Street (Poore *et al.*

2007) which decreases to 59.4m OD c 57m west-south-west of number 4a at the crossroads of Merton Street and Magpie Lane (just south-east of the site).

- 1.2.3 Oriol College is located south of the High Street in Oxford and is located towards the southern edge of the sand and gravel promontory. As with the wider historic city of Oxford the area under the college is located upon Second Terrace and First Terrace formations as mentioned above. The gravels on this terrace are typically overlain by a 0.3m depth of red-brown loessic loam.

### 1.3 Archaeological and historical background

- 1.3.2 A comprehensive summary of the archaeological and historical background of the site can be found in the DBA (OA 2015a). This summarised the archaeological potential of the site and was also reproduced in the report detailing the results of the earlier phase of works (OA 2018).

### 1.4 Previous archaeological works

#### *Proposed kitchen extension, archaeological evaluation, 2015*

- 1.4.1 The evaluation undertaken in 2015 (OA 2015b) consisted of two small archaeologically excavated trenches (Trench 1 and 2) and two smaller monitored geotechnical pits (Test Pits 1 and 2).
- 1.4.2 The upper horizon of the natural gravel terrace, where encountered, was at a relatively consistent elevation of c 58.50m OD. No *in-situ* loess soils overlay these gravels. This truncated height was consistent with results from archaeological work in the surrounding area which recorded the gravel at between 58.29m and 58.72m OD.
- 1.4.3 The gravel had been truncated by negative features (such as pits/ditches/wells etc) probably dating to the 12th-14th century occupation of the site, and perhaps related to medieval tenements pre-dating the construction of the Front Quadrangle in the mid-14th century (rebuilt in the first half of the 17th century, and now called First Quadrangle).
- 1.4.4 Of note was a deep negative feature within Trench 2 (full depth recorded by hand-auger only). This feature had removed the loess and natural gravel and oxidised Oxford Clay was found at 57.27m OD. The clay was overlain by water-lain (fluvial) organic silt deposits, with the only dating evidence coming from deposits c 1m above these, dating to the 12th-14th centuries.
- 1.4.5 The top of the sequence of deposits associated with the 12th-14th centuries was between 58.76m OD (Trench 1) and 59.25m OD (Trench 2).
- 1.4.6 A number of structures were revealed which appeared to truncate the 12th-14th century horizon. The earliest of these may relate to a building fronting Merton Street, possibly part of St Martin's Hall which preceded the 17th century remodelling.
- 1.4.7 A second structure was revealed running parallel to the eastern boundary wall of the college along Magpie Lane. Outbuildings are shown in this area of the college on cartographic sources from the 16th century onwards, although the fact that this

structure appeared to truncate a deposit which produced 17th century artefactual material would imply that it related to a later phase of construction.

- 1.4.8 The third structure revealed was the foundation for an extant pillar base which dates from the 17th century rebuild of the Front Quadrangle, and a series of rubble-rich deposits overlying the foundation are probably contemporary with this phase of construction.
- 1.4.9 The remaining deposits and structures encountered related to modern reconfigurations of the kitchen area and former back yard to the west of Magpie Lane.

#### ***Kitchen project, geophysical survey, archaeological borehole and watching brief, 2017-2018***

- 1.4.10 The 2017 works consisted of a geophysical survey (GPR and ERT) of all three college quadrangles, together with a E-W aligned borehole transect, located in the central quadrangle of the college. Additionally, a watching brief was conducted in January 2018 on two small geotechnical pits, TP 3 and TP 4, located to examine the foundations of the structures on the south and east sides of the development area, the boundary wall to Magpie Lane and the north wall of the Chapel respectively. The work was designed to further inform the Planning Authority in regard to the archaeological potential of the kitchen site, specifically any evidence pertaining to putative late Saxon defences for a primary burh.
- 1.4.11 The GPR did not penetrate to depths beneath c 1.0m below ground level, and therefore did not give any useful information about the archaeological remains within the three quads. The ERT technique was hampered by interference in the northern quad, but more successful within the central and southern quads, and an eastwards dipping horizon to the natural gravel topography was identified in the southern quad.
- 1.4.12 The borehole transect in the central quad revealed a complex sequence of occupation deposits dating to the medieval period. Samples from occupation deposits directly overlying the gravel in two boreholes produced dates spanning the 12th to 13th centuries (1165–1265 cal AD and 1225–1300 cal AD). The medieval sequences measured between 1–2.2m thick and were highly variable in composition. It is highly likely that some of these deposits represent the fills of intercutting archaeological features (such as pits, and possibly cellars for buildings) resulting in the truncation of the natural loess and gravel deposits in this area. Multiple thin layers may equate to internal floor surfaces and occupation deposits. No large N-S feature was logged. No deposits such as limestone or gravel surfaces that may be interpreted as possible roadways and no significant redeposited brickearth or gravel indicating an earthen bank were identified.
- 1.4.13 Considering this evidence along with previous archaeological work both at Oriol and neighbouring colleges, a c 10–13m wide N-S ditch can be suggested to have run directly below the east ranges of the central and southern quads at Oriol. A parallel extramural road would have probably lain beyond the ditch to the east. The suggested alignment of ditch and road does not follow Magpie Lane. It does however follow the alignment of the eastern ranges of the central and southern quads of Oriol College,

Grove Lane and the eastern college ranges at Corpus Christi (perhaps later echoes of earlier boundaries/land divisions).

- 1.4.14 An intramural N-S road has been suggested running parallel with the inside line of a probable bank inside the line of the ditch. No evidence of an earthen bank or a road structure was found within the borehole transect, but evidence from Corpus Christi confirmed a probable late Saxon road surface in this location (OA 2015c), and perhaps this intramural road is similar to the current alignment of Oriel Square and Oriel Street.

## **2 PROJECT AIMS**

### **2.1 General**

2.1.1 The general aims of the work were to:

- i. determine the character of any remains present;
- ii. ensure that deposits were removed (where appropriate and practicable) by proper controlled archaeological methods;
- iii. determine or estimate the date range of any remains from artefacts or otherwise;
- iv. determine the potential of the deposits for significant palaeo-ecological information.

### **2.2 Specific aims and objectives**

2.2.1 The work was designed to try and establish the presence/absence of the putative N-S orientated eastern defences (assumed to take the form of a bank and ditch perhaps with a stone retaining wall) of the earliest phase of the late Saxon burh (c 900 AD).

## 3 RESULTS

### 3.1 S8TP1

- 3.1.1 Natural gravel (100) was encountered at approximately 1m below the cellar floor level (58.43m OD) and was overlain by a 0.16m-thick layer of tenacious mid brownish grey silty clay with c 5% charcoal inclusions (101) (Fig. 3, section 100). Deposit 101 was in turn overlain by a c 0.7m-thick deposit of limestone rubble in a predominantly mid yellowish brown gravelly sand matrix (102). This had been truncated by what was presumably the construction trench (103) for the standing wall, although the footing appeared to comprise limestone rubble rather than a well-faced foundation.
- 3.1.2 The fill (104) of the construction cut and the rubble-rich layer (102) were overlain by the bedding deposits (107) for the existing flagstone floor of the cellar. The bedding deposits had been truncated by the construction cut (105) for a concrete skirt encasing an iron service pipe. The fill (106) of the construction cut contained fragments of pottery with a printed mark of W. Adams & Sons which is likely to post-date 1950 (John Cotter pers. comm.; <http://www.thepotteries.org/mark/a/adams2.html>).

### 3.2 S8TP2

- 3.2.1 Natural gravel (200) was encountered at 0.85m below the cellar floor (58.58m OD) and was overlain by a c 0.55m-thick layer of fairly homogeneous silty clay (201), which was in turn overlain by a layer of brick rubble and mortar (202) which acted as bedding for the existing concrete slab which forms the floor of the cellar in the location of the test pit (Fig. 3, section 200).
- 3.2.2 Deposits 201 and 202 butted the eastern face of the limestone foundation (203) for the upstanding brick wall (204), the latter of which was abutted by the concrete slab.

## 4 DISCUSSION

### 4.1 Interpretation

- 4.1.1 Terrace gravel was encountered in both test pits at between 58.43m and 58.58m OD, which broadly corresponds with the average height of the top of the gravel observed during the borehole transect in Second Quad (58.30m OD), and the test pits and trenching carried out in 2015 (58.45m OD).
- 4.1.2 In Trench 2 of the 2015 work, possible Oxford Clay was encountered at 57.27m OD, with the lack of overlying gravel suggesting that it had been truncated by a feature within the projected alignment of the primary burh ditch. However, the broadly consistent elevation of the top of the gravel observed within Second Quad, Trench 1 of the 2015 trenching and the Staircase 8 test pits would suggest that the feature encountered within Trench 2 of the 2015 works is more likely to be discrete than linear.
- 4.1.3 Although no dating evidence was recovered, it is possible that the homogeneous deposit(s) overlying the gravel correspond with the sequence of medieval occupation observed in the previous phases of work (OA 2018, 6.1.6). As with the earlier observations, no evidence for the post-glacial brickearth which overlies the gravel terrace was revealed, which may suggest that these deposits are filling negative features. Samples of these deposits were retained but not processed.
- 4.1.4 The rubble-rich deposit in Test Pit S8TP1 may have represented the core of a stone-built structure, although the extent of the deposit was not revealed.

## APPENDIX A TRENCH DESCRIPTIONS AND CONTEXT INVENTORY

S8TP1						
General description					Orientation	n/a
Gravel overlain by possible medieval deposit in turn overlain by rubble-rich layer which may have represented a structure.					Length (m)	0.8
					Width (m)	0.6
					Avg. depth (m)	1.00
Context No.	Type	Width (m)	Depth (m)	Description	Finds	Date
100	Layer			Natural gravel		
101	Layer		0.16	Possible medieval deposits?		
102	Layer		0.70	Possible rubble core of earlier wall?		
103	Cut			Construction cut for cellar wall		
104	Fill			Fill of construction cut		
105	Cut			Construction cut for concrete skirt		
106	Fill			Fill of construction cut		1950s+

S8TP2						
General description					Orientation	n/a
Trench devoid of archaeology. Consists of topsoil and subsoil overlying natural geology of silty sand.					Length (m)	0.6
					Width (m)	0.4
					Avg. depth (m)	0.9
Context No.	Type	Width (m)	Depth (m)	Description	Finds	Date
200	Layer			Natural gravel		
201	Layer		0.55	Possible medieval deposits?		
202	Layer		0.16	Bedding deposit for concrete slab		
203	Structure			Stone foundation		
204	Structure			Standing brick wall		



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## APPENDIX B      BIBLIOGRAPHY

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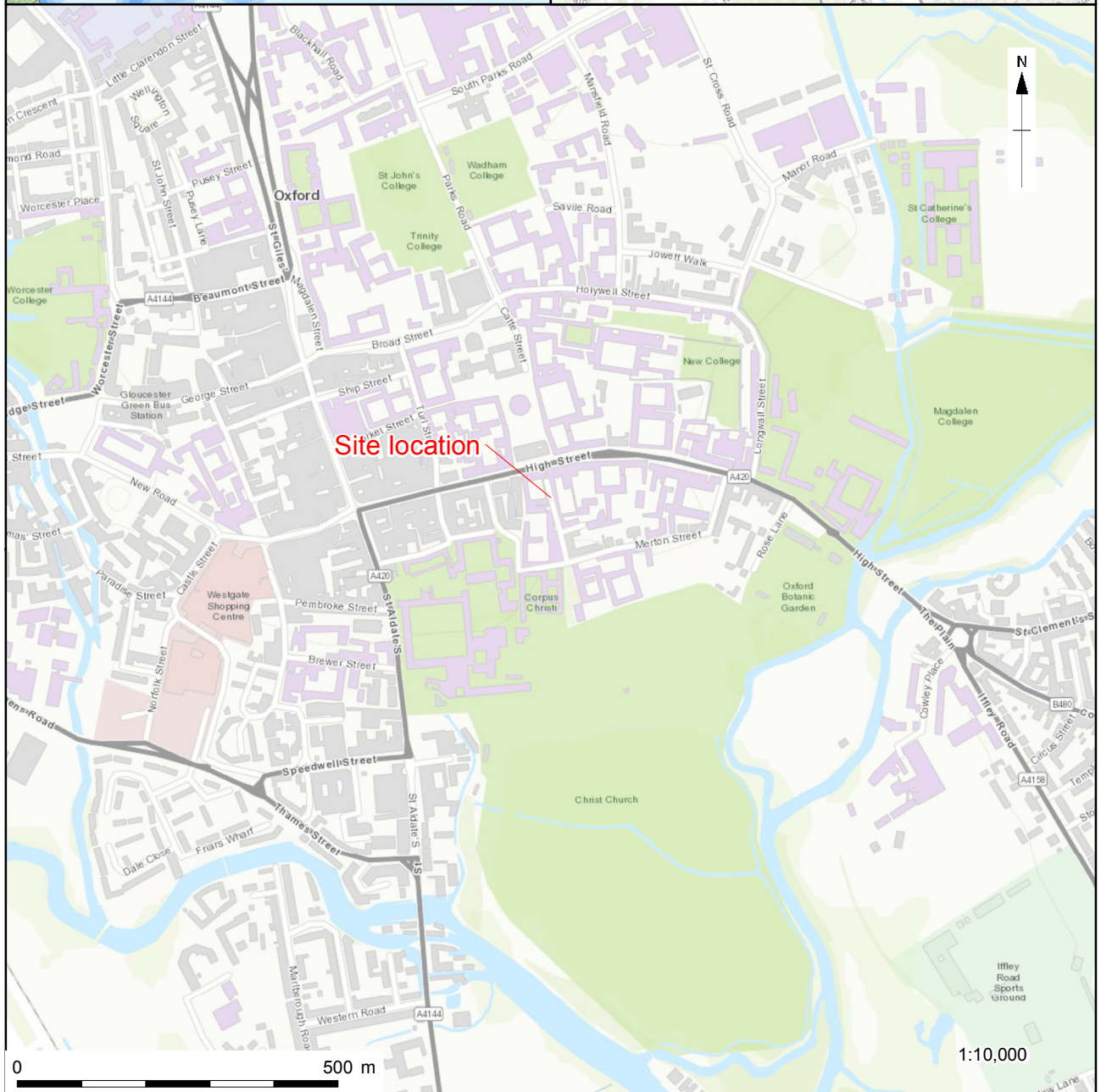
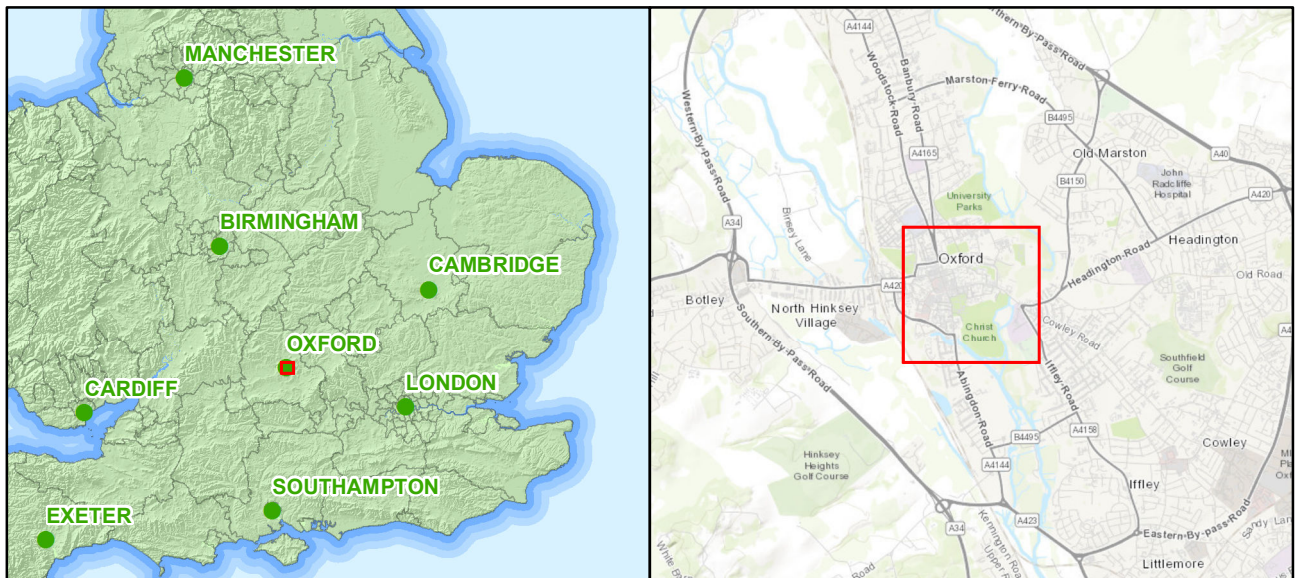
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**APPENDIX C****SITE SUMMARY DETAILS**

<b>Site name:</b>	Oriol College Staircase 8 Test Pits
<b>Site code:</b>	OXOS8K18
<b>Grid Reference</b>	SP 5162 0611
<b>Type:</b>	Watching brief
<b>Date and duration:</b>	20/03/18, 1 day
<b>Area of Site</b>	n/a
<b>Location of archive:</b>	The archive is currently held at OA, Janus House, Osney Mead, Oxford, OX2 0ES, and will be deposited with Oxfordshire County Museum Service in due course.
<b>Summary of Results:</b>	<p>In March 2018, Oxford Archaeology (OA) carried out an archaeological watching brief during the excavation of two small test pits within the existing cellar below Staircase 8 at Oriol College, Oxford. The work followed on from earlier test pitting and trenching carried out in 2015 and a borehole transect across Second Quad which was undertaken in 2017.</p> <p>During the 2015 works, possible Oxford Clay was encountered at the base of the stratigraphic sequence, with the lack of overlying gravel suggesting that it had been truncated by a feature within the projected alignment of the putative ditch of the primary burh. However, terrace gravel was encountered in both test pits at approximately the same elevation as the top of the gravel observed during the borehole transect and the earlier test pits and trenching, which suggests that the feature encountered during the 2015 works is more likely to be discrete rather than linear.</p> <p>No dating evidence was recovered from the fairly homogeneous silty clay deposits which overlay the gravel, but it is possible that they correspond with the sequence of medieval occupation observed in the previous phases of work. As with the earlier observations, no evidence for the post-glacial brickearth which overlies the gravel terrace was revealed, which may suggest that these deposits are filling negative features.</p> <p>In one of the test pits, the silty clay deposit had been truncated by a deposit of limestone rubble in a sandy gravel matrix which may have represented the rubble core of an earlier wall, although the extent of this deposit was not revealed.</p>



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Figure 1: Site location

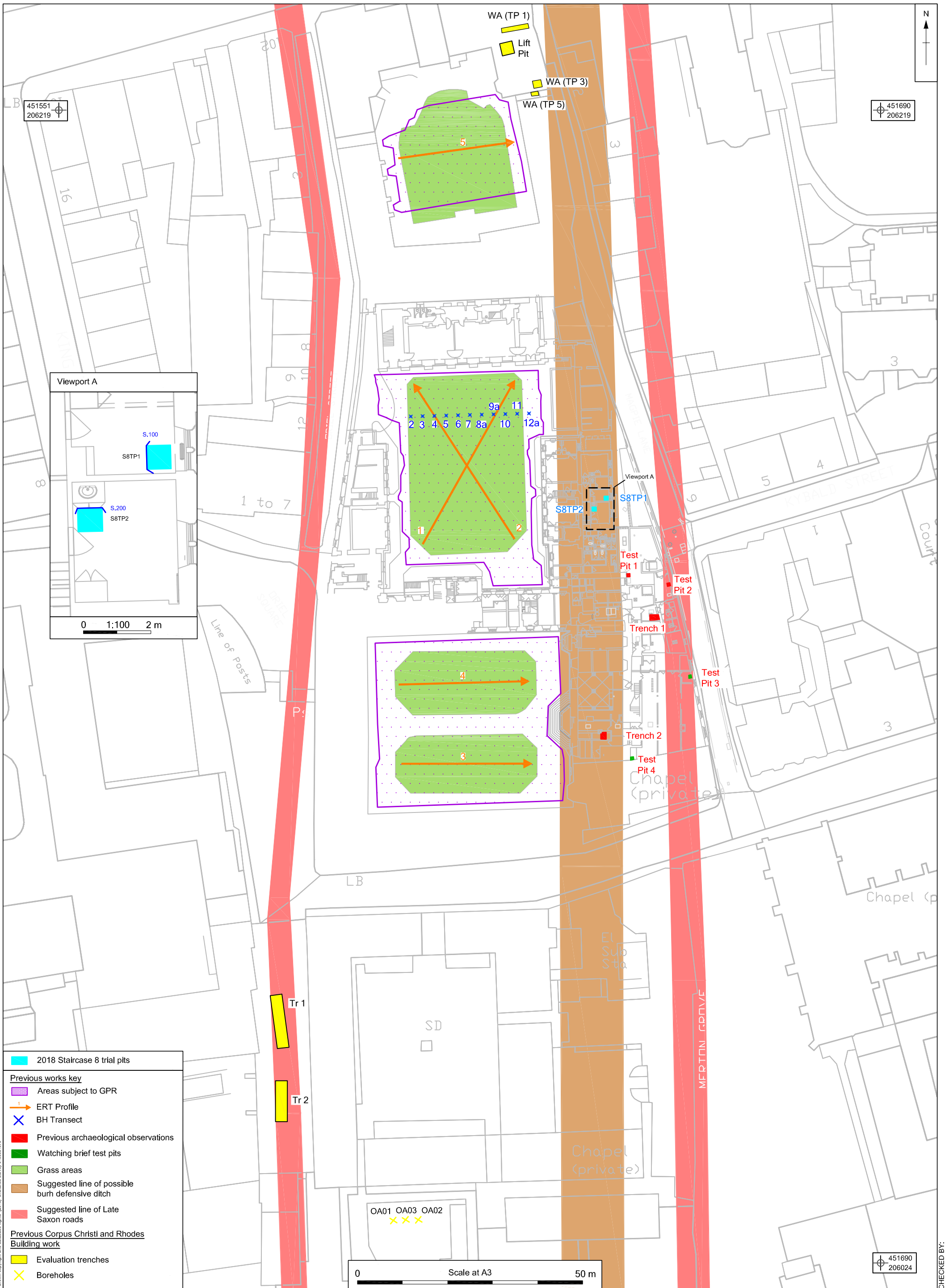


Figure 2: Interpretative plan showing all previous works

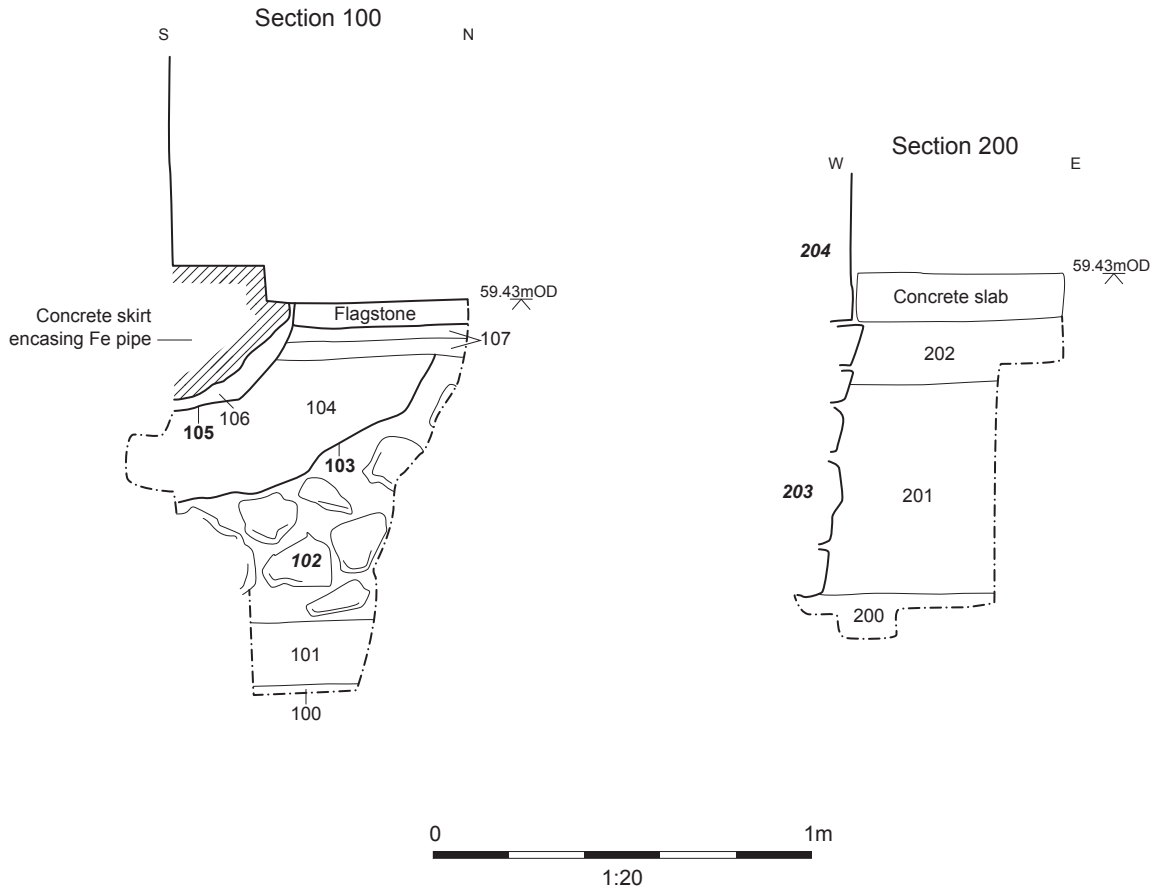


Figure 3: Test pit sections





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