

Osney Mill Mill Lane Oxford



Archaeological Watching Brief Report



June 2008

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Issue No: 1

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Mill Street, Oxford*****ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF REPORT*****CONTENTS**

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Front cover: Surviving building from the abbey range and the watergate

SUMMARY

In May 2008 Oxford Archaeology (OA) carried out an archaeological watching brief at Osney Mill, Mill Street, Oxford (Centred at NGR: SP 5040 0590). The work was commissioned by W.H. Munsey Ltd in advance of the partial demolition and conversion of existing mill buildings to new dwellings and the conversion of a scheduled monument building to offices (Planning references 03/02502/FUL and 03/02503/CAC). The watching brief revealed extensive 19th century brick foundations, a brick floor sealing an earlier stone cobble floor and details of the internal construction of the 19th-century mill building. The majority of the structures observed date to the 19th century, with only the stone cobbles predating this. No evidence for the continuation of the standing medieval range building was observed.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Scope of work

1.1.1 In May 2008 Oxford Archaeology (OA) carried out an archaeological watching brief at Osney Mill, Mill Street, Oxford (Centred at NGR: SP 5040 0590). The work was commissioned by W.H. Munsey Ltd in respect of planning applications for the demolition of single and two storey buildings, the conversion and extension of existing mill buildings to form 11 new dwellings and the conversion of a scheduled monument building into office accommodation (Planning references 03/02502/FUL and 03/02503/CAC).

1.1.2 A project brief was agreed between the client and OA, requiring that an archaeologist be present during the excavation of the geo-technical test pits as part of the archaeological mitigation.

1.2 Location, geology and topography

1.2.1 The site lies on the western edge of the city of Oxford (Fig. 1) straddling a mill race leading off the River Thames. The development area is sited on level ground at approximately 58 m above OD and is bounded to the south-west by the River Thames and by residential and industrial buildings on the other sides. A former flour mill and ancillary buildings together with the surviving part of the Osney Abbey range currently occupy the site. The underlying geology is alluvium over terrace gravels (Geological Survey of Great Britain, sheet no.236).

1.3 Archaeological and historical background

1.3.1 The archaeological background to the watching brief was prepared for the report using abridged public sources.

- 1.3.2 The development site lies on the site of the old Augustian Abbey founded in 1129 on the Island of Osney which lay between two branches of the Thames, with the city to the east and the water-meadows of Botley to the west.
- 1.3.3 By 1154, Prior Wigod had assumed the title and status of Abbot. The abbey grew rapidly in temporal power and enjoyed the patronage of several English kings and gained substantial banking and financial business. By the 13th-century the original buildings had been greatly enlarged, and as a centre of learning and influence Osney had become “one of the first ornaments of this place and nation”. Dugdale described the Abbey church as “a most beautiful and large fabric, second to none in the kingdom, not only the envy of other religious houses, but of most beyond the sea”.
- 1.3.4 After the Dissolution Osney Abbey church became the cathedral of the new diocese of Oxford, but this final florescence lasted only a few years. Superseded by St Frideswide’s priory church, Osney fell into decline and saw the decay, systematic destruction and final ruin of its buildings during the English Civil War. Only fragments of a gate, parts of 2 ranges and some ruined stone mouldings survive on the site. Most of the former precinct, including the church, lies under a cemetery and the railway embankment.
- 1.3.5 Between 1182 and 1189 Bernard of St Valery granted the canons of Osney a weir on the River Thames with the water course running to their mill. By 1225 there was more than one wheel, and by 1249 there was a fulling mill in addition to the earlier corn-mills.
- 1.3.6 At the Dissolution the Osney mills, described as fulling-mills, gig-mills (for raising the nap on cloth) and corn-mills passed, together with the abbey site, to Christ Church, which in 1547 leased the site, with the mills, to William Stumpe, a clothier. He assigned his lease to another clothier James Atwood whose sons held the site until the 1580s.
- 1.3.7 A grist mill was recorded on the site in 1611 and during the Civil War the mills were used as powdermills. In 1659 the tenant of Castle Mill planned to build new fulling-mills at Osney. In 1775 part of the buildings were used as a china factory, but the mill continued in use. Before 1829 the tenant had built saw-mills, while a bone-mill was added in 1844 and another in 1848. By 1876 the mill was described as a flour-mill. The present owners family purchased the site in 1895 and the flour-mill continued in use until its destruction by fire in 1945.

2 PROJECT AIMS AND METHODOLOGY

2.1 Aims

- 2.1.1 To identify and record the presence or absence, extent, condition, quality and date of archaeological remains in the areas affected by the development.

2.1.2 To establish the extent and location of any continuations of the standing medieval range building.

2.1.3 To make available the results of the archaeological investigation.

2.2 Methodology

2.2.1 The watching brief was conducted as a continuous archaeological presence during the excavation of the four test pits. Two of these measured approximately 1 m square (Pits 1 and 2), while Pits 3 and 4 measured approximately 2 m by 1m. All the pits were hand dug, Test Pit 3 to a depth of 1.5 m. Test Pit 4 to a depth of 0.6 m and Pits 1 and 2 to a depth of 1 m.

2.2.2 All the test pits and any archaeological features were planned at a scale of 1:100 (Fig. 2) and their sections drawn at a scale of 1:20. All the test pits, any archaeological features and recorded sections were photographed using colour slide and black and white print film. A general photographic record of the work was also made. Recording followed procedures detailed in the *OA Field Manual* (ed D Wilkinson, 1992).

3 RESULTS

3.1 Description of deposits

Test Pit 1

3.1.1 This was located on the north-western edge of the site within the area of a range of outbuildings, demolished prior to the test pitting. The pit was dug within the internal corner of the old building.

3.1.2 A stone floor composed of rounded limestone blocks (15) was encountered at a depth of 0.7 m below the current ground level (Fig. 3, Section 1, Fig. 4, Plate 1). This feature butted up to the limestone block constructed wall (16) and may be contemporary.

3.1.3 The floor was overlaid by a 0.35 m deep layer of grey-brown silt (14). This deposit produced fragments of stone and also fragments of pottery. Laid directly upon this layer was a second stone floor (13). This was constructed using blocks of limestone measuring approximately 0.3 m by 0.25 m by 0.2 m with only the top face levelled and the rest as quarried. The surface of the floor was very smooth and polished indicating a high degree of wear.

3.1.4 Overlying this floor was a layer of dark grey-brown clay silt (12) measuring between 0.07 m and 0.12 m in depth. this deposit formed a bed for the brick floor (11). This was constructed using frogless machine-made bricks measuring 0.225 m by 0.105 m by 0.072m laid using a simple overlapping pattern and no bonding material.

Test pit 2

- 3.1.5 This was located on the southern edge of a demolished two-storey brick building, and measured approximately 1 m square.
- 3.1.6 A standing brick wall (21) constructed using machine made bricks measuring 0.22m by 0.102 m by 0.072 m laid using English Stretcher bond defined the northern edge of the pit (Fig. 3, Section 2, Fig. 4, Plate 2). A second wall (22) running parallel with wall (21) 0.4 m to the south of similar construction was encountered during the course of excavation. Filling the space between these two walls was a very dark grey sandy silt (25). This was encountered at a depth of 0.2 m below the current ground level and was excavated to a depth of 1.2 m below ground level without determining its full depth.
- 3.1.7 Laid directly onto deposit 25 and running over the top of Wall 22 was a brick floor (24). This was built using frogless bricks measuring 0.225 m by 0.105 m by 0.072 m. Overlying this floor and butting up to wall 21 was a 0.1 m deep layer of very dark grey-brown silt loam (23), an accumulation of leaf mould and organic debris.

Test Pit 3

- 3.1.8 This was located against the inside of the eastern wall of the main mill building, on the opposite side of the wall to the mill race channel (Fig. 3, Section 3, Fig. 4, Plate 3)
- 3.1.9 The eastern wall of the mill building (37) formed the eastern edge of the pit. Butting up to this wall at a depth of 1.5 m below the original floor level of the mill was a layer of large limestone boulders (38). This was constructed using as-quarried rocks laid adjacent to each other with no bonding material. Overlying this was a 1.1 m deep layer of imported yellow oolitic gravel (36). This was overlaid by a 0.15 m deep layer of dark grey-brown clay silt (35). Lying directly upon this deposit was a bed of lime mortar forming a base for the brick floor (34), built using machine made bricks measuring 0.22 m by 0.105 m by 0.072 m.
- 3.1.10 Cutting the eastern edge of this floor was a foundation trench (33), 0.2 m wide and 0.22 m deep and running parallel to Wall 37. This was filled by a weak lime concrete (32) forming the foundations for Wall 31, a brick built wall 9 courses high and a single bricks length wide, butting up against Wall 37. This formed a ledge supporting a later inserted wooden floor. Butting up to Wall 31 and overlying Floor 34 was a layer of black leaf mould and demolition debris (39), between 0.3 m and 0.5 m in depth.

Test Pit 4

- 3.1.11 This was located straddling the projected alignment of the western wall of the medieval range adjacent to a standing two storey brick building.

- 3.1.12 The top of a demolished south-east to north-west aligned wall (44) was encountered during the excavation of the test pit 0.1 m below the current ground level (Fig. 3, Section 4, Fig. 4, Plate 4). The alignment showed it to be a continuation of the west wall of the standing building and probably originally extending to meet the brick frontage added onto the northern wall of the medieval range. Butting up to the western side of this wall was a brick built foundation plinth (43). Built using machine made bricks laid using cement mortar excavation showed it to be 0.48 m wide and at least 6 courses of bricks deep. examination of the bricks when removed showed signs of heating and burning on some of the bricks.
- 3.1.13 Butting up against this feature was a layer of black gritty silt (42). This deposit appeared to have a clinker and ash content consistent with the evidence of burning, possibly suggesting a hearth.
- 3.1.14 Butting up to the western side of wall 44 was a layer of concrete 0.15 m deep (45), which was left in situ. Overlying concrete 45, walls 43 and 44 and layer 42 was a 0.1 m deep layer of grey-brown clay silt (41), an accumulation of leaf mould and flood deposits.

3.2 Finds

- 3.2.1 Fragments of ceramics possibly associated with the pottery known to have existed on the site in the 18th and early 19th-century were recovered from Test Pit 1. Fragments of 19th-century brick were recovered from all the test pits. No earlier dating evidence was recovered.

3.3 Palaeo-environmental remains

- 3.3.1 No deposits suitable for palaeo-environmental sampling were encountered during the course of the watching brief.

4 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Test pit 1

- 4.1.1 Exposed within this pit was the base of a limestone constructed wall (16) which had been used as the foundations for the brick walls of the demolished out building. The stone floor (15) exposed in the base of the pit is probably associated with this wall. No direct evidence for the date of construction of these features was observed during the course of the excavation, however Layer 14 which contained fragments of 18th and 19th century pottery lay directly over Floor 15. The absence of any intervening deposits containing earlier dating evidence may indicate that both the floor and the stone wall are post-medieval in date (possibly reusing stone recovered from the abbey buildings). The later stone floor (13), Layer 12 and the brick floor (11) are all 19th-century or later, and probably relate to the later industrial use of the site.

Test Pit 2

- 4.1.2 The presence of the 19th-century brick walls (21) and (22) (dated by brick size) suggests that this area has been heavily disturbed. While Wall 21 appears to respect the alignment of the standing medieval building, no evidence for any earlier foundations was observed. As in Pit 1 the walls and the brick floor (24) probably relate to the 19th-century industrial use of the site.

Test Pit 3

- 4.1.3 This Pit exposed details of the initial construction of the main 19th-century mill building, together with later alterations.
- 4.1.4 Neither the foundations or base of the eastern external wall (37) were observed. The layer of limestone boulders (38) butting up to this wall were probably placed as a drainage layer to enable rising ground/flood water to drain quickly from the inside of the building when the river was in spate. The layer of gravel (36) has been imported both to raise the internal level of the building above the water table and also to aid drainage of any water ingress. The brick floor (34) probably represents the original floor level of the mill.
- 4.1.5 The brick stub wall (32) and (33) is part of a later refitting of the mill with a raised suspended wooden floor being inserted into the building. This work seems to be contemporary with the insertion of the substantial brick machinery plinths (not illustrated) still to be seen in the main mill building and is probably late 19th or early 20th-century in date.
- 4.1.6 Layer (39) has accumulated since the destruction of the mill by fire in 1945.

Test pit 4

- 4.1.7 This pit was located on the projected alignment of the west wall of the standing medieval building, although no evidence for the continuation of the building was exposed. There is the probability that the building material, including the foundations, had been robbed out leaving no positive evidence. The construction of the 19th-century brick wall (44) on the same alignment would have disturbed or destroyed any evidence of a robber trench.
- 4.1.8 The brick-built structure (43) probably represents the base of a hearth or fireplace; its substantial construction would have allowed it to support the weight of a chimney stack. The presence of the clinker within deposit (42) would support this conclusion.

Overall Discussion

- 4.1.9 The watching brief has observed a quantity of evidence for the 18th and 19th-century industrial use of the site, although evidence for the medieval abbey ranges has been negligible. This may be explained by robbing out of building material and by later construction of buildings on the same alignment. There is also the possibility that the

medieval ground level has been sealed by deposits that have built up since the Dissolution and also by the deliberate raising of the site to avoid flooding and was not encountered during this phase of work. Consequently the test pits may not have been deep enough to encounter any medieval stratigraphy.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1 ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXT INVENTORY

| <i>Context</i> | <i>Type</i> | <i>Depth</i> | <i>Width</i> | <i>Comments</i> | <i>Finds</i> | <i>Date</i> |
|----------------|-------------|--------------|--------------|-------------------------------------|--------------|-----------------|
| Test Pit 1 | | | | | | |
| 11 | Structure | 0.07 m | - | Brick floor | Brick | C19th |
| 12 | Layer | 0.07 m | - | Bed for brick floor | - | C19th |
| 13 | Structure | 0.28 m | - | Stone cobble floor | - | C19th |
| 14 | Layer | 0.35 m | - | Made ground | Pottery | C19th |
| 15 | Structure | - | - | Stone cobble floor | - | - |
| 16 | Wall | > 1 m | 0.6 m | Stone wall/ foundations | - | - |
| Test Pit 2 | | | | | | |
| 21 | Wall | > 1.2 m | 0.22 m | Brick wall | Brick | C19th |
| 22 | Wall | > 1.2 m | 0.22 m | Brick wall | Brick | C19th |
| 23 | Layer | 0.12 m | - | Leaf mould etc. | Brick | C20th |
| 24 | Structure | 0.07 m | - | Brick floor | Brick | C19th |
| 25 | Layer | > 0.8 m | 0.4 m | Infill between walls | Brick | C19th |
| Test Pit 3 | | | | | | |
| 31 | Wall | 0.8 m | 0.22 m | Brick stub wall | Brick | C19th/ C20th |
| 32 | Structure | 0.25 m | 0.22 m | Concrete foundations for wall 31 | Brick | C19th/ C20th |
| 33 | Cut | 0.25 m | 0.22 m | Foundation trench | - | C19th/ C20th |
| 34 | Structure | 0.07 m | - | Original brick floor | Brick | C19th |
| 35 | Layer | 0.18 m | - | Bed for floor 34 | Brick | C19th |
| 36 | Layer | 1.1 m | - | Gravel infill | - | C19th |
| 37 | Wall | > 10 m | 0.6 m | Main east wall of mill | Brick | C19th |
| 38 | Layer | - | - | Stone drainage layer | - | C19th |
| Test Pit 4 | | | | | | |
| 41 | Layer | 0.1 m | - | Accumulated silts | - | C20th |
| 42 | Layer | 0.55 m | - | Clinker | - | C19th |
| 43 | Structure | > 0.6 m | 0.6 m | Hearth/ Chimney base | Brick | C19th |
| 44 | Wall | > 0.8 m | 0.22 m | Brick wall | Brick | C19th |
| 45 | Layer | 0.15 m | - | Concrete surface | - | C20th |

APPENDIX 2 BIBLIOGRAPHY AND REFERENCES

- IFA, 2001 *Standards and Guidelines for Archaeological watching Briefs*
- Jonathan Sharpe, 1985 *Oxenicensia Vol 50 (1985): Oseney Abbey, Oxford -
Archaeological investigations, 1975 - 1983*
- OA, 1992 *Fieldwork Manual, (Ed. D Wilkinson, first ed, August 1992)*

APPENDIX 3 SUMMARY OF SITE DETAILS

Site name: Osney Mill, Mill Lane, Oxford

Site code: OXOSNE 08

Grid reference: Centred at SP 5040 0590

Type of watching brief: Hand digging of geo-technical test pits

Date and duration of project: 15th may 2008, half day

Area of site: c2400 m²

Summary of results: The watching brief encountered extensive evidence of 19th -century brick foundations, a brick floor sealing an earlier stone floor and details of the internal construction of the 19th-century mill building. No evidence for the continuation of the standing medieval range building was observed.

Location of archive: The archive is currently held at OA, Janus House, Osney Mead, Oxford, OX2 0ES, and will be deposited with Oxfordshire County Museums Service in due course.



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Figure 1: Site location

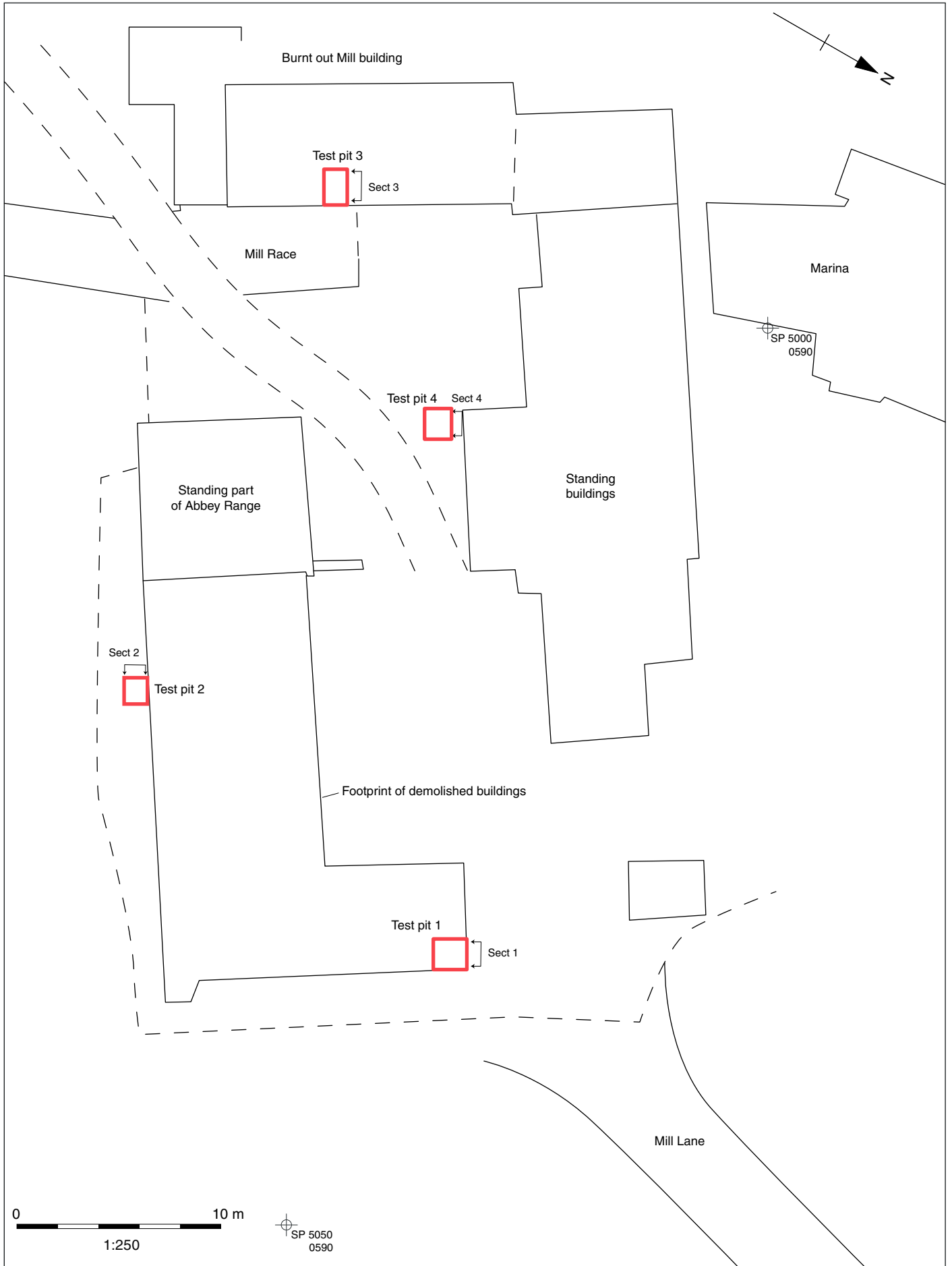


Figure 2 : Site plan

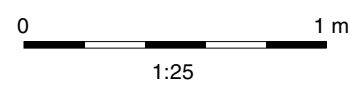
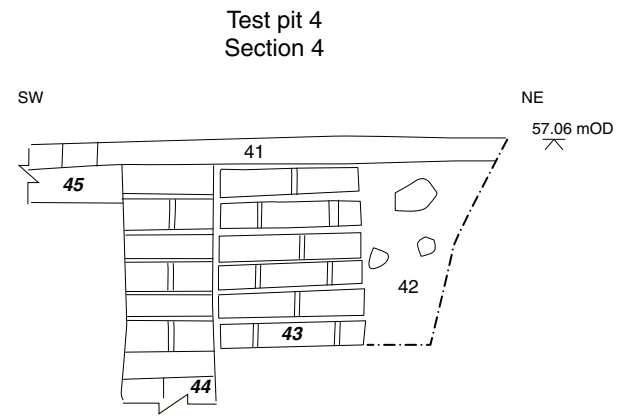
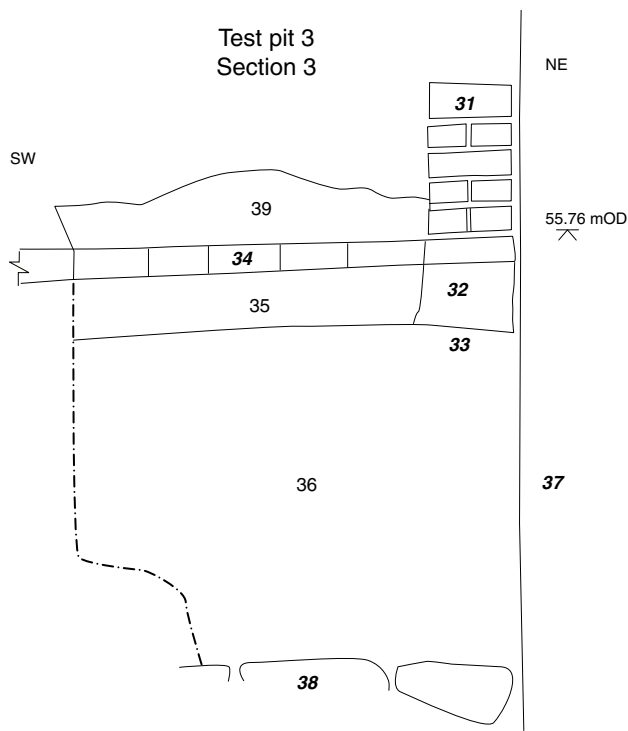
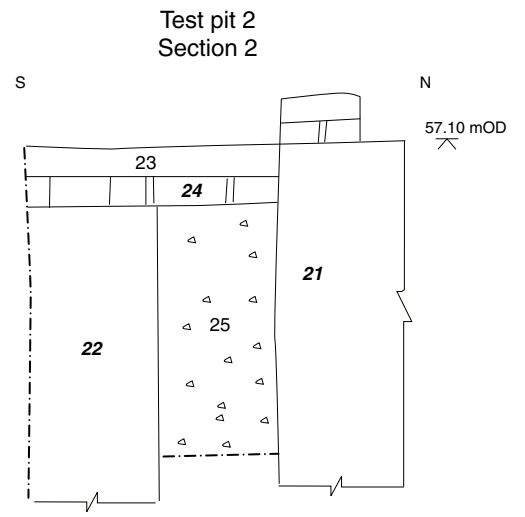
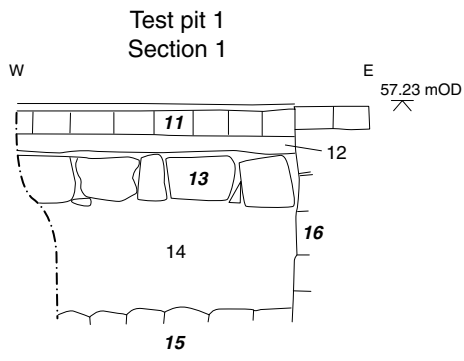


Figure 3 : Sections

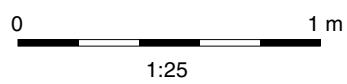
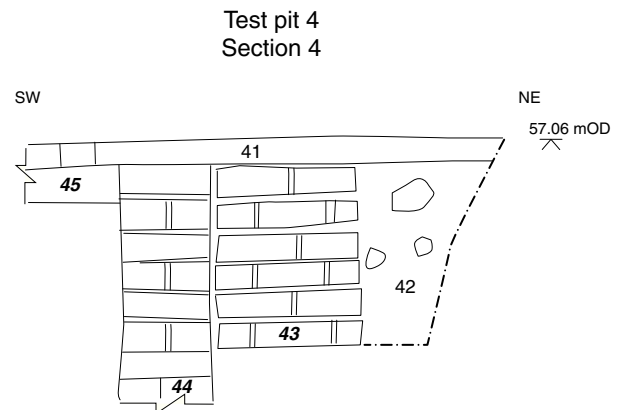
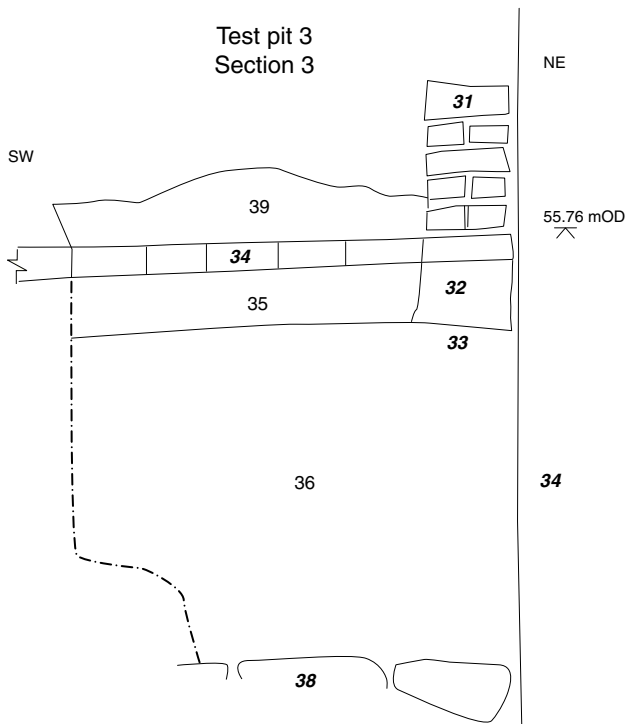
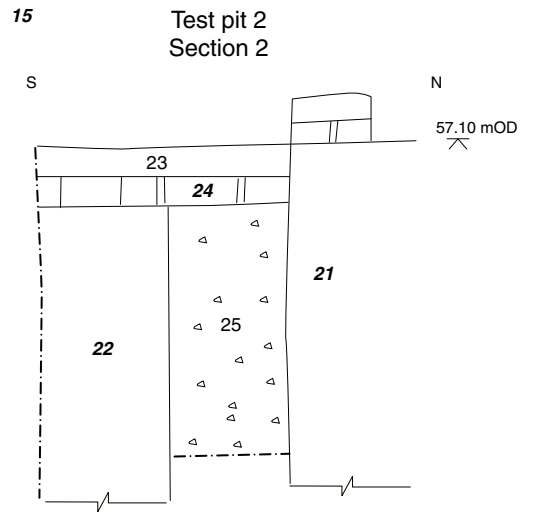
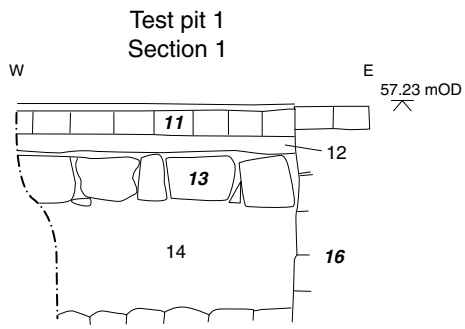


Figure 3 : Sections



Plate 2 : Test pit 2



Plate 1 : Test pit 1



Plate 4 : Test pit 4



Plate 3 : Test pit 3