



# St Ebbe's Church Drainage Works

## Oxford

### Archaeological Watching Brief Report

June 2020

**Client: St Ebbe's PCC**

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## St Ebbe's Church Drainage Works, Oxford

### *Archaeological Watching Brief Report*

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## Summary

*Oxford Archaeology undertook an archaeological watching brief at St Ebbe's Church, Oxford, as part of the works to replace and install new drainage services. The watching brief, which was undertaken over three days during October 2019, consisted of a single trench measuring 11.30m long and 2.50m wide. The trench exhibited significant modern truncation from service trenches but nevertheless uncovered an undated cemetery soil that contained disarticulated human remains, as well as part of the stone foundation of the west wall of the church.*

## Acknowledgements

Oxford Archaeology would like to thank St Ebbe's PCC for commissioning the project. Thanks are also extended to David Radford, who monitored the work on behalf of Oxford City Council.

The project was managed for Oxford Archaeology by Ben Ford, MCIFA. The fieldwork was directed by Elizabeth Kennard. Digitizing was carried out by Caroline Souday and Magdalena Wachnik. Thanks are also extended to the team of OA staff that prepared the archive under the supervision of Nicola Scott.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Project details

1.1.1 Oxford Archaeology (OA) was commissioned by St Ebbe's PCC (Faculty No. 2018-024585) to undertake an archaeological watching brief as part of the works to replace and install new drainage services at St Ebbe's Church, Oxford (Fig. 1).

1.1.2 The work was undertaken as a condition of Planning Permission (planning ref: 18/02043/FUL). A written scheme of investigation was produced by OA (OA, 2018) detailing the Local Authority's requirements for work necessary to inform the planning process/discharge the planning condition. This document outlines how OA implemented the requirements of Oxford City Council and the Faculty of the Consistory Court of the Diocese of Oxford, outlined below:

1.1.3 Conditions by Oxford City Council (OCC 2018):

*No development shall take place until a written scheme of investigation (WSI) has been submitted to and approved by the local planning authority in writing. For land that is included within the WSI, no development shall take place other than in accordance with the agreed WSI, which shall include the statement of significance and research objectives, and*

- *The programme and methodology of site investigation and recording and the nomination of a competent person(s) or organisation to undertake the agreed work*
- *The programme for post-investigation assessment and subsequent analysis, publication & dissemination and deposition of resulting material. This part of the condition shall not be discharged until these elements have been fulfilled in accordance with the programme set out in the WSI.*

*Reason: Because the development may have a damaging effect on known or suspected elements of the historic environment of the people of Oxford and their visitors, including Late Saxon and medieval remains (Local Plan Policy HE2).*

1.1.4 Condition set by The Faculty of the Consistory Court of the Diocese of Oxford:

- *If any articulated human remains are discovered, they are not to be removed or otherwise disturbed, all work in the immediate area of the remains must cease forthwith and the applicants must apply to the Court for directions.*
- *If any disarticulated human remains are discovered, they must be reverently reburied in the churchyard as soon as reasonably practicable.*
- *No artefact or ecofact is to be removed from the church or churchyard without further Order of the Court or an order of the Archdeacon under Section 21 of the Care of Churches and Ecclesiastical Jurisdiction Measure 1991.*
- *Every contractor (including archaeologists) and architects engaged in respect of the works must be given a copy of this faculty and these conditions expressly drawn to their attention.*

- 1.1.5 All work was undertaken in accordance with the Chartered Institute for Archaeologists' *Standard and Guidance for Archaeological Excavation* (CIfA 2014) and local and national planning policies.

## 1.2 Location, topography and geology

- 1.2.1 The location of the drainage works was immediately west of St Ebbe's Church and centered on NGR SP 51188 06024 (Fig. 1). St Ebbe's Church is bordered by Pennyfarthing Place to the north, St Ebbe's Street to the east, Roger Bacon Lane to the west and the churchyard to the south. The site lies on relatively flat ground at approximately 61m above Ordnance Datum (aOD).
- 1.2.2 The underlying geology comprises Northmoor Sand and Gravel (the second gravel terrace) of Pleistocene age, overlying the Jurassic Oxford Clay Formation (BGS 2020).

## 1.3 Archaeological and historical background

- 1.3.1 The Church of St Ebbe's is a Grade II\* Listed Building (NHL 1047355) and is situated within the Oxford Central (University and City) Conservation Area. The archaeological and historical background to the site has been described in detail in the 2018 watching brief report (OA 2018) and has been summarized below:
- 1.3.2 St Ebbe's Church is known to have been in existence by the early 11th century (Dodd 2003) as it is mentioned in the foundation charter for the Benedictine Eynsham Abbey of 1005 and remained with this abbey until the Dissolution. The 11th-century church was located on either side of Church Street and was given to Eynsham Abbey by its founder, Ealdorman Æthelmær, and identified as a church and thirteen houses in the Domesday Book (Blair 1994).
- 1.3.3 It appears likely that the 11th-century church was rebuilt c 1170 as this is the date of the earliest surviving fabric. The 12th-century church had a nave and north aisle under the same roof, a chancel and north chapel, with a tower and north and south porches. The 2004 excavation to the south-west of the church by John Moore Heritage Services found possible evidence of the 11th-century church to the north of the present church. This excavation also found early to middle Saxon pottery dating to the 5th–9th centuries (JHMS 2004).
- 1.3.4 Greyfriars Priory was established in 1224 and gradually acquired property south of Church Street from 1227, including the church of St Ebbe's, until it occupied most of the space between Church Street and the town wall. In the 14th century, the Greyfriars monastery dominated the St Ebbe's area and the associated graveyard extended up to Church Street (Hassall *et al.* 1984).
- 1.3.5 There are several sources which indicate the possible extent of the post-medieval churchyard of St Ebbe's Church. In 1570 a plot of land to the west of the church, held by Richard Pratt of Radley, was given to the church and may have been used as a churchyard (Hassall *et al.* 1984). Loggan's map of 1675 shows a large area of land around the church that must include the plot of land to the west acquired in 1570. A plan of St Ebbe's Church, based on the frontage survey of 1772, shows a north to south wall dividing up the churchyard, splitting off the plot of land to the west of the church (Hassall 1984). The church cemetery was extended (c 1840–50) by the purchases of



small pieces of extra land to the south, due to overcrowding brought on by outbreaks of cholera in 1832, 1849 and 1854 that occurred within the parish (Hassall 1984). When the new rectory building was constructed in 1971 the discovery of multiple human bones indicated that the Greyfriars cemetery extended at least this far (Hassall 1972).

- 1.3.6 During the post-medieval period, St Ebbe's Church was altered and substantially rebuilt. Part of the church tower fell down in 1648 and the whole church was thoroughly repaired in 1696. The condition of the medieval church deteriorated, and it was demolished in 1813 with the exception of the tower and south-west corner. A new church was built on the enlarged site, which took in the site of the rectory which had stood on the corner of St Ebbe's Street and Church Street (now Pennyfarthing Place). The church, designed by William Fisher, was completed in 1816 and paid for mainly by the Bishop and Oxford Colleges.
- 1.3.7 The present church is the result of major rebuilding in 1814 and 1816, enlarged again in 1862 and 1868. The enlargement between 1862 and 1868 was by G E Street, who added the south aisle, and the north aisle was created by inserting an arcade. At the same time galleries which had been added earlier to provide increased seating were removed.

## 1.4 Previous archaeological investigations

### *2004 excavation (John Moore Heritage Services)*

- 1.4.1 An archaeological investigation was carried out in 2004 on the foundation excavation for ground-beam slots below the parish rooms that form the current link building to the south-west of the church. The excavation results suggest that an earlier church may have existed slightly to the north of the present church as a number of 11th-century features including a possible 11th-century cellar pit were recorded. Several sherds of early to middle Saxon pottery were also recorded from the site dating to the 5th–9th centuries. At least 78 burials and a number of vaults were identified and impacted by the 2004 works. No burials earlier than the 12th century were noted, leading the excavator to suggest that the early church had no burial rights, these being reserved for St Frideswide's or St Aldate's. By the 12th century, St Ebbe's had its own churchyard, which was later extended and continued in use until the 20th century (JMHS 2004).

### *2017 watching brief (Oxford Archaeology)*

- 1.4.2 Between January and March 2017, Oxford Archaeology was commissioned by Quinlan & Francis Terry LLP Architects on behalf of St Ebbe's Church to undertake an archaeological watching brief during, and alongside, construction work for internal and external alterations at St Ebbe's Church, Oxford.
- 1.4.3 The watching brief revealed a possible curvilinear ditch at the base of a trench within the western end of the nave. The fills of the feature were derived from the post-glacial brickearth which overlies the second gravel terrace upon which central Oxford is located. Although no dating evidence was recovered, elsewhere in the city this composition of fills has been indicative of prehistoric or late Saxon features.

Additionally, the upper fill was sealed by a layer of buried soil which produced late Saxon pottery. It is possible that the feature represents the western extent of a prehistoric ring ditch, potentially associated with the Bronze Age barrow cemetery known to occupy the gravel terrace and focused on a henge monument identified during recent works undertaken within the Kendrew Quadrangle of St John's College.

- 1.4.4 Several walls relating to earlier configurations of the church were revealed. These included a substantial east–west aligned wall which was present beneath each of the pillars of the south aisle. It is likely that this wall is part of the early 19th-century rebuild, as the south aisle itself was added as part of the 1860s extension utilizing the earlier foundations to carry the pillars. The trench backfills contained large quantities of charnel, suggesting that they had truncated numerous graves (OA 2018).

## 2 AIMS AND METHODOLOGY

### 2.1 Aims

2.1.1 The aim of the watching brief was to ensure that any archeological remains were not adversely impacted by the works and to determine and understand the nature, function and character of any revealed remains in their cultural and environmental setting. Other general aims included:

- i. to determine or confirm the approximate date or date range of any remains, by means of artefactual or other evidence,
- ii. establish the presence/absence of archaeological remains and burials within the impact depth of the ground works,
- iii. determine and confirm the character of any remains present,
- iv. determine or estimate the date range of any remains from artefacts or otherwise,
- v. establish the ecofactual and environmental potential of archaeological deposits within the site and to take samples where appropriate,
- vi. to generate an accessible and useable archive which will allow future research to be undertaken if appropriate,
- vii. to disseminate the results of the work in a format and manner proportionate to the significance of the findings.

### 2.2 Specific aims and objectives

2.2.1 The specific aims and objectives of the watching brief were:

- i. to identify any structural remains that may help locate the earlier church in relation to the current church,
- ii. to record and respectfully collect human remains for reburial on site.

2.2.2 The programme of archaeological investigation was conducted within the general research parameters and objectives defined by *Solent-Thames Research Framework for the Historic Environment Resource Assessments and Research Agendas* (Hey and Hind 2014).

### 2.3 Methodology

2.3.1 A single trench was located adjacent to the west facing elevation of St Ebbe's Church. The trench was orientated N–S and measured 11.30m x 2.5m (Fig. 2, Plates 1 and 3), and was hand excavated to a maximum depth of 0.80m below ground level (60.20m OD) by the principal contractor, monitored by an archaeologist.

2.3.2 Archaeological deposits were recorded by the attending archaeologist and scale drawings were produced.

2.3.3 Where disarticulated human remains were seen they were left *in situ* and re-covered with soil. Discussions between the contractor and archaeologist ensured a revised path for the new drainage allowing for no further impact upon the human remains present.

### 3 RESULTS

- 3.1.1 The results of the watching brief are presented below and include a stratigraphic description of the trench. The full details of the trench, with dimensions and depths of all deposits, can be found in Appendix A.
- 3.1.2 The earliest feature encountered within the trench was the limestone foundation (10) for the external west facing wall of St Ebbe's church (14; Figs 2 and 3). The face of the foundation was exposed to a depth of 0.60m below ground level (60.40m aOD; Plate 4). The foundation (10) was abutted by a dark greyish brown sandy silt cemetery soil (5). This contained disarticulated human remains (3), encountered at a depth of 0.60m below ground level (55.18m aOD; Fig. 3 and Plate 2).
- 3.1.3 The human remains (3) were located within the cemetery soil (5) and appeared to be disarticulated. This was a concentration consisting of a skull, part of a radius, vertebrae and small miscellaneous fragments. All remains were recorded *in situ* and reburied.
- 3.1.4 The cemetery soil (5) was truncated by various service runs (4, 6, 8 and 11). Service run 11 also truncated part of the foundation wall (10) before extending south along the church wall. The service trenches were in turn overlain by modern deposits consisting of concrete and the existing paving.

## 4 DISCUSSION

- 4.1.1 The watching brief confirmed the presence of significant archaeological deposits in the form of a cemetery soil which contained disarticulated human remains. Where skeletal remains were present, they were left *in situ* and re-covered with soil. A revised alignment for the new drainage was put in place allowing for no further impact upon the human remains present within the trench. However, the cemetery soil was heavily truncated by modern services. Whilst the remains observed in this trench were disarticulated the potential for undisturbed graves within the area remains high.

## APPENDIX A TRENCH DESCRIPTIONS AND CONTEXT INVENTORY

Trench 1						
General description					Orientation	N-S
Trench revealed the stone foundations for St Ebbe's church (10) which was abutted by cemetery soil (5) including associated disarticulated human remains (3). This was truncated by modern services (4, 6, 8, and 11) which were in turn overlain by concrete bedding and concrete paving (1)					Length (m)	11.30
					Width (m)	2.50 – 0.40
					Avg. depth (m)	0.60
Context No.	Type	Width (m)	Depth (m)	Description	Finds	Date
1	Layer		0.60	Modern concrete bedding and concrete paving	-	-
2	Fill	>0.40	>0.80	Modern backfill of service trench 4	-	-
3	Human remains	-	-	Disarticulated human remains within cemetery soil (5). Skull, vertebrae, rib, long bone, finger bone and misc fragment spread across N end of trench	-	-
4	Cut	>0.40	>0.80	Service trench – N/S drain. Filled by (2)	-	-
5	Layer	>2.50 x >11.30	>0.20	Cemetery soil associated with St Ebbe's graveyard. Soft dark grey brown sandy silt with human remains (3), charcoal, CBM, slate, and limestone fragments	-	-
6	Cut	0.40	0.20	Service trench (N/S), filled by (7)	-	-
7	Fill	0.40	0.20	Service trench backfill. Fill of 6	-	-
8	Cut	0.70	0.20	Service trench (N/S), filled by (9)	-	-
9	Fill	0.70	0.20	Service trench backfill, fill of 8	-	-
10	Structure	-	>0.60	Stone foundation for Western wall of St Ebbe's church.	-	-
11	Cut	>0.50	0.60	Cut for services through 10, filled by 12	-	-
12	Fill	>0.50	0.60	Mortar fill of service cut through foundations 10	-	-
13	Cut	-	-	Construction cut for church foundations 10. Not seen in trench	-	-

14	Structure	-	-	Western wall of upstanding St Ebbe's church	-	-
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Faculty: The Faculty of the Consistory Court of the Diocese of Oxford, 2018 No. 2018-024585. Church of Oxford: St Ebbe



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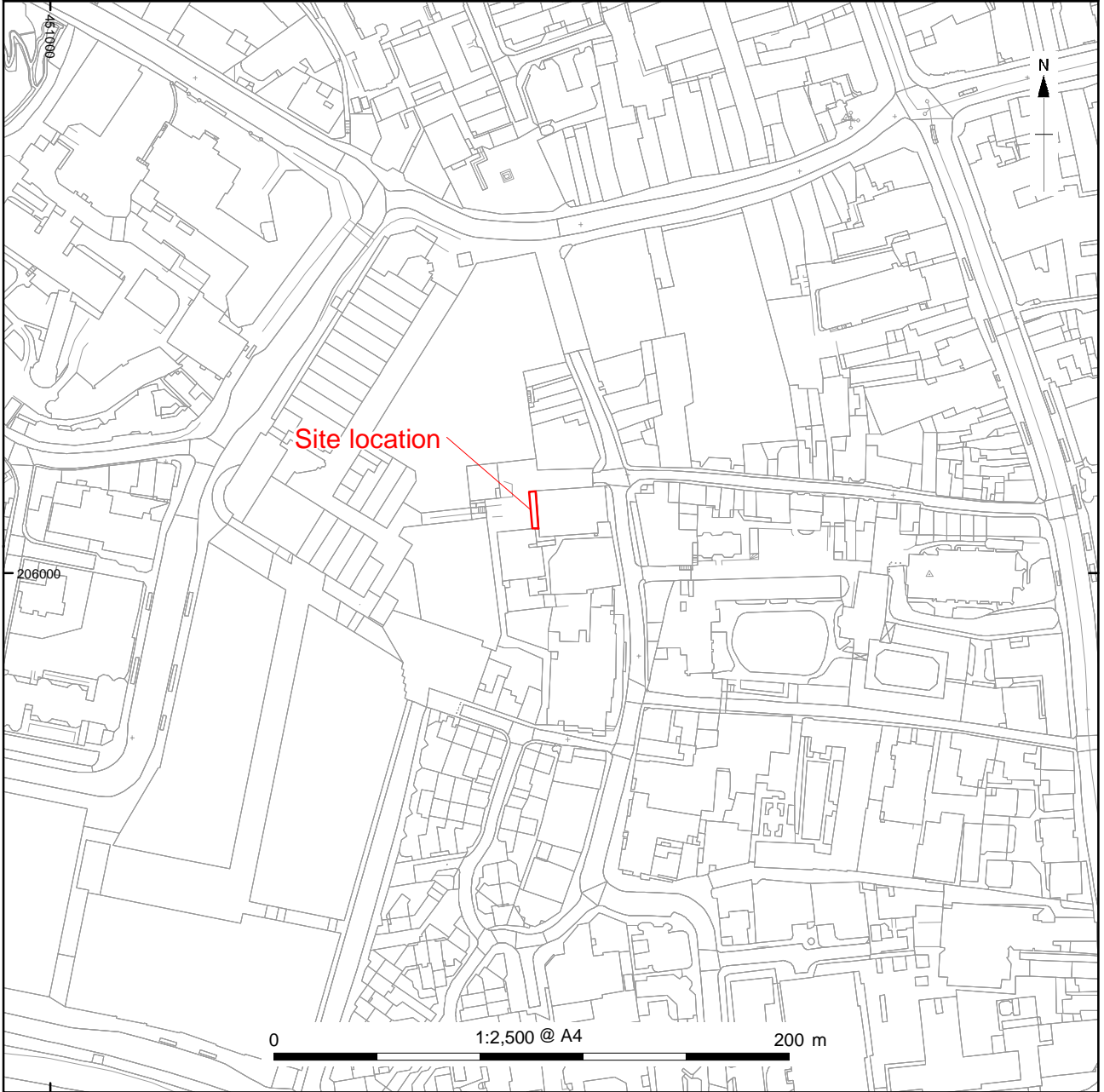
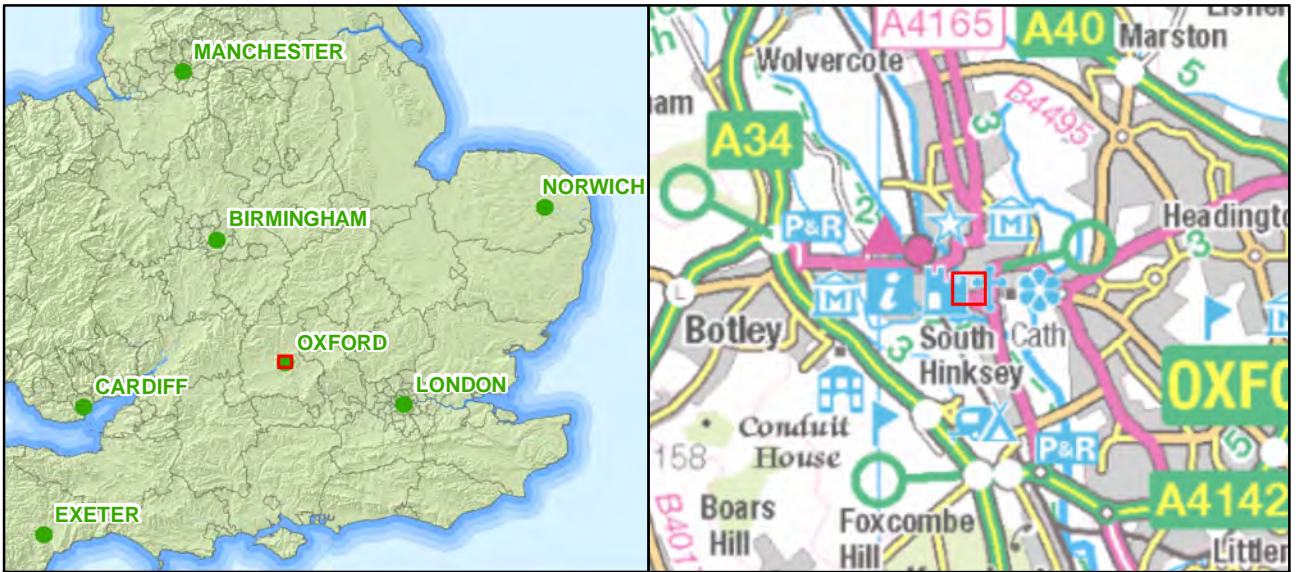
**APPENDIX C      SITE SUMMARY DETAILS / OASIS REPORT FORM**

**Site name:** St Ebbe's Church Drainage Works, Oxford  
**Site code:** OXEBCH19  
**Grid Reference** SP 51188 06024  
**Type:** Watching brief  
**Date and duration:** October 2019, 3 days

**Location of archive:** The archive is currently held at OA, Janus House, Osney Mead, Oxford, OX2 0ES, and will be deposited with Oxfordshire County Museum Services in due course, under the following accession number: OXCMS:2019.16

**Summary of Results:** Oxford Archaeology undertook an archaeological watching brief at St Ebbe's Church, Oxford, as part of the works to replace and install new drainage services. The watching brief, which was undertaken over three days during October 2019, consisted of a single trench measuring 11.30m long and 2.50m wide. The trench exhibited significant modern truncation from service trenches but uncovered an undated cemetery soil that contained disarticulated human remains, as well as part of the stone foundation of the west wall of the church.





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Figure 1: Site location

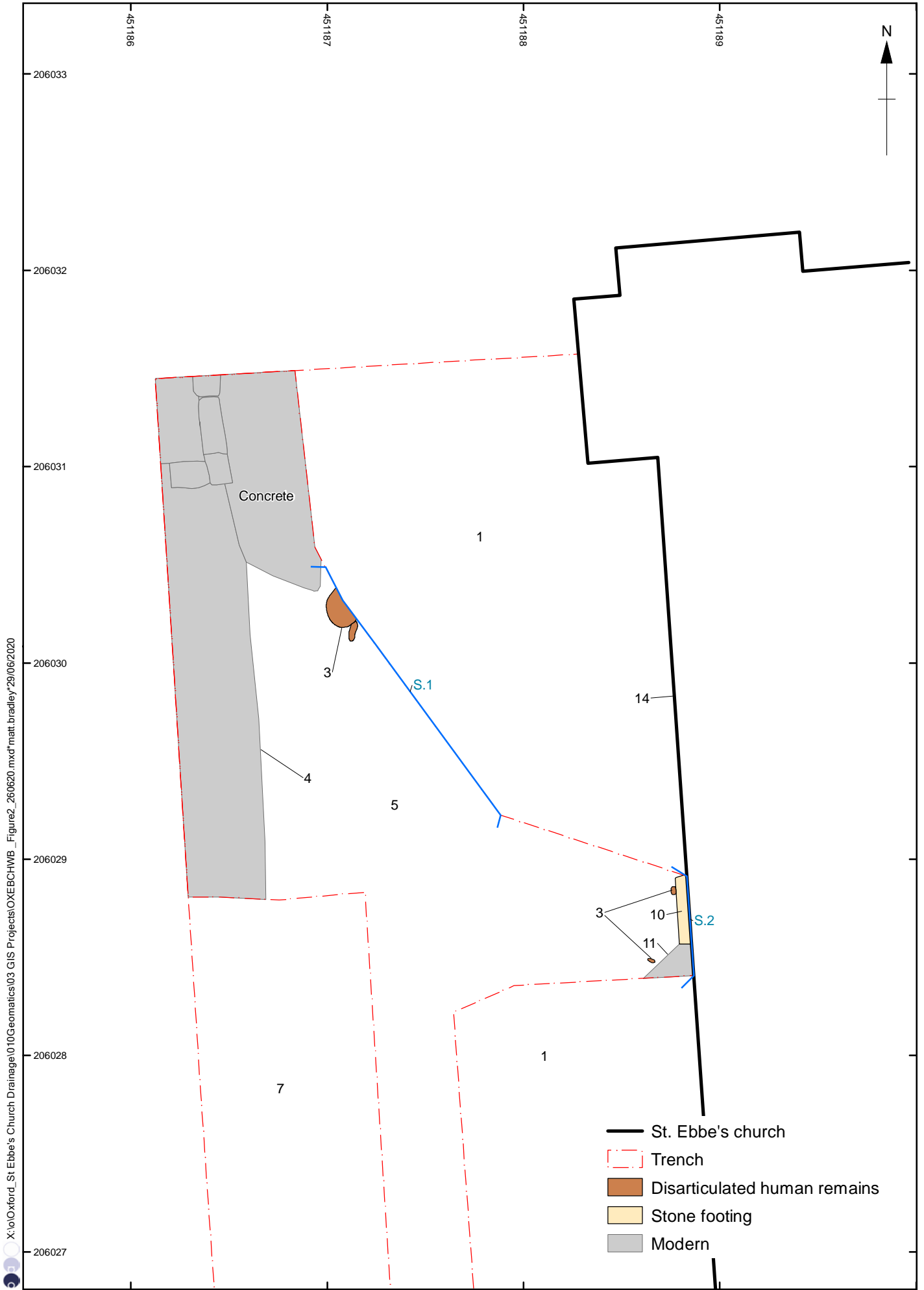


Figure 2: Trench plan

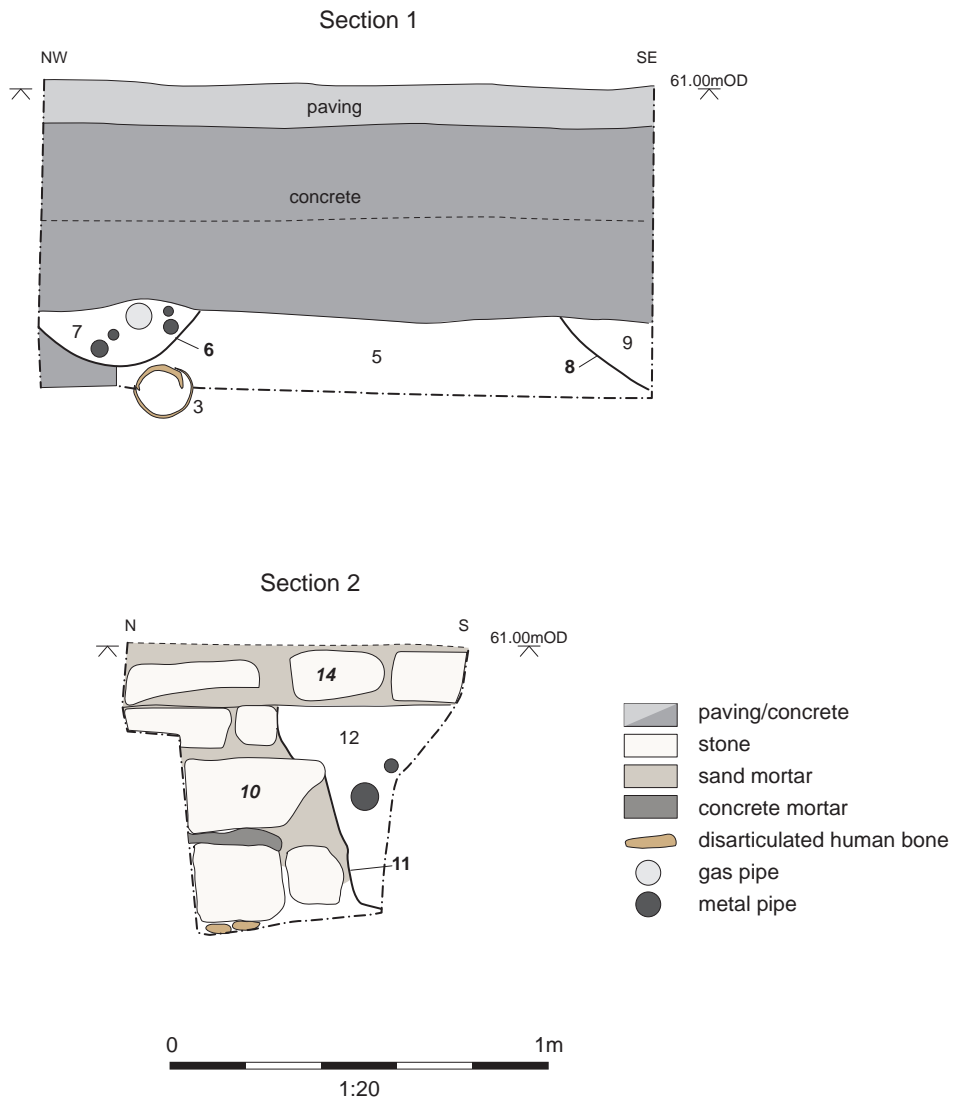


Figure 3: Sections 1 and 2



Plate 1: North end of drainage trench, showing location of human remains



Plate 2: Human remains



Plate 3: South end of drainage trench



Plate 4: West-facing section 2



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