

Ranton Abbey Estate Staffordshire



Archaeological Investigation Report



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Illustrated by Hannah Brown

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Ranton Abbey Estate, Staffordshire

NGR SJ 838 242

Archaeological Investigation Report

Written by Rowan McAlley

Illustrated by Hannah Brown

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Summary

In September and October 2008, Oxford Archaeology (OA) undertook a field investigation at Ranton Abbey Estate, Staffordshire (NGR SJ 838 242) for CgMs Consulting on behalf of Grainger PLC. The work was carried out as a condition of an existing Scheduled Monument Consent (SMC). A desk-based assessment (CgMs 2008) and a geophysical radar survey (Stratascan 2008) had previously been commissioned. The three-trench investigation revealed make-up deposits formed during landscaping of the site in the 18th century. A single posthole was discovered during the works, though no certain structural remains of the abbey were observed. Some worked stone and medieval glazed floor tile were recovered from the trenches but had been redeposited in later landscaping layers. No in situ deposits associated with the abbey were identified in the trenches.



1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Location and scope of work

- 1.1.1 In September and October 2008, Oxford Archaeology (OA) undertook a field investigation at the Ranton Abbey Estate, Staffordshire for CgMs Consulting on behalf of Grainger PLC as a condition of an existing Scheduled Monument Consent and planning permission.
- 1.1.2 The site is located west of Stafford in Staffordshire (NGR SJ 838 242) and is 0.23 hectares in extent (Fig. 1).

1.2 Geology and topography

- 1.2.1 The geology of the site is Mercian Mudstone, consisting of Mudstone and Halite that is a blue/grey colour. Slow formed water-logged soils that are a red clay in appearance also lie on the site.
- 1.2.2 The investigation area was on sloping the eastern edge of an otherwise flat platform which fell from 118.65 m OD in the west to 116.95 m OD in the south-east. The remains of a moat survive to the north-east and this, together with the Priory tower (Plate 1) to the west, represents all that remains of the medieval abbey structures.

1.3 Archaeological and historical background

- 1.3.1 The archaeological and historical background is detailed in the desk-based assessment and in the Written Scheme of Investigation for the project (CgMs 2008a and b). The following is a brief summary.
- 1.3.2 The current site of Ranton Abbey Estate comprises of the remains of the Priory church tower (Grade II*) and the remains of a Georgian house situated south of the tower and to the west of the proposed development footprint (Plate 1). To the north-east of the Priory tower is an 'L'-shaped converted stable block, which now serves as an office for the estate. The remains of a moat that once surrounded the Priory are located to the north-east and east.
- 1.3.3 Historic maps suggest that the majority of the Priory buildings were removed and the site landscaped in the 18th century, with just the Priory's tower left standing. A large lake to the south-east was probably enlarged during the landscaping but may date to the medieval period. In the 1940s a fire broke out and gutted the inside of the Georgian house. The whole site is now classed as a Scheduled Ancient Monument (SAM 21516).
- 1.3.4 A Geophysical Radar Survey (Stratascan 2008) and two watching briefs (English Heritage 1994-5 and Meeson, 2003) have previously been carried out on the site. The geophysical survey revealed discrete anomalies in the western that suggested structural remains and anomalies to the east that were thought might indicate inhumations (Stratascan, 2008, 8–9).

1.4 Acknowledgements

- 1.4.1 OA extends its thanks to Cathy Patrick (CgMs) for her advice, Steve Dean of Staffordshire County Council and English Heritage Inspector Ian George for giving approval for features and sondages to be excavated. The Ranton Estate Manager John Braithwaite also provided assistance. Rowan McAlley ran the fieldwork and was assisted by Mark Gibson and Conan Parsons. The report was illustrated by Hannah Brown and the project was managed by Tim Haines.



2 INVESTIGATION AIMS AND METHODOLOGY

2.1 Aims

2.1.1 The aims of the project were:

- (i) To determine, where possible, the date and character and depth of those anomalies identified in the geophysical survey.
- (ii) To locate, determine and date any surviving remains of the Priory and associated buildings.
- (iii) To establish and confirm the extent to which previous demolition or the development of the 18th century house and associated landscaping had affected or truncated remains associated with the Priory.
- (iv) To identify the depth of any archaeological remains that might be impacted upon by the new build and to provide relevant information so that a suitable design solution could be drawn up for the approval of English Heritage and the Local Authority.

2.2 Methodology

- 2.2.1 Three trenches measuring 10 m by 1.8 m were positioned where there had been good geophysical responses, in order to investigate these.
- 2.2.2 All trenches were excavated by a mechanical excavator equipped with a toothless ditching bucket. Machining was supervised by a qualified archaeologist and banksman. All trenches and spoil heaps were metal-detected during and after machining.
- 2.2.3 Due to the status of the site as a Scheduled Ancient Monument, machining stopped at the first archaeological horizon. This horizon was subsequently cleaned and recorded before approval was granted from English Heritage and the Staffordshire County Archaeologist for further archaeological investigation to take place.
- 2.2.4 Subsequent archaeological levels were excavated by hand and recorded appropriately. All sections were recorded at a scale of 1:20. All trench plans were recorded at a scale of 1:50. All features and trenches were photographed digitally and using colour and black and white print film. Recording followed procedures detailed in the OAU Fieldwork Manual (1st Edition, 1992).

3 RESULTS

3.1 Introduction and presentation of results

- 3.1.1 The results presented in the main text of the report provide an overview of the findings from the work. Individual trench descriptions and context data can be found within Appendix A.
- 3.1.2 All finds recovered are in the specialist reports (Appendix B).

3.2 General soils and ground conditions

- 3.2.1 Topsoil was present in two of the three trenches (Trench 2 was placed in an area of tarmac). Where present, topsoil was a loose mid grey/brown silt. In Trench 1, a former topsoil layer consisted of mid brown-grey clay silt to an average depth of 0.4 m.

3.3 General distribution of archaeological deposits

- 3.3.1 Trenches were targeted at anomalies revealed by the geophysical survey (Fig. 2). The geophysical data suggested that there was potential for structural remains and possible burials (Stratascan, 2008, 8-9). Trench 1 was positioned on an east-west alignment south-east of the stable block/office and north-west of the Georgian house. Trench 2 was to the east of the Georgian house aligned south-east to north-west. Trench 3 was aligned south-east to north-west, near to the remains of the moat.

3.4 Trench 1

- 3.4.1 Trench 1 was located to the east of the Priory tower, south of the office block (Fig. 3) and measured 10 m by 1.8 m. The trench was positioned over geophysical anomalies that were thought to be structural remains. During initial machining, some mixed rubble deposits were noted within the former topsoil layer (102) that consisted of soil and crushed brick material. At the west end of the trench a single posthole (106) was located and was heavily disturbed by roots. It had a single fill (107) which consisted of mid grey-brown clay silt that was undated. The function of the posthole was unclear and no other structural features were revealed within the trench.
- 3.4.2 A 2 m by 1 m sondage was excavated at the northern side of the trench to investigate a mixed soil with a high density of small-medium rounded stones (104). Excavation suggested that this was a naturally formed colluvial deposit over natural that was observed at a depth of 0.65 m below ground level.
- 3.4.3 The only finds and dating material found within Trench 1 were recovered during machine excavation of the trench. These were found in the former topsoil layer (102) and comprised medieval glazed floor tiles, pieces of flagstones and a probable Victorian button.

3.5 Trench 2

- 3.5.1 Trench 2 was located close to the Georgian house and was aligned south-east/north-west within an area of tarmac (Fig. 3). According to the geophysical data, there was a strong signal at the south-east end of the trench, suggesting possible structural remains.
- 3.5.2 Machine excavation of the tarmac (201) and the aggregate bedding for the tarmac (layers 202, 203 and 204) revealed a mixed rubble deposit (214 - Fig. 3, section 201). This deposit consisted of mixed mortar and crushed brick rubble with charcoal flecks and was white-brown in colour, probably formed from demolition debris from the Georgian house and used as make-up for the tarmac surface. A sondage was excavated at the upper north-west end to see whether

archaeological remains might exist under rubble layer 214. The sondage revealed a thin layer of mortar and rubble (208), which was part of the re-landscaping phase.

- 3.5.3 A sondage at the south-east end of the trench was excavated in order to clarify a geophysical anomaly and establish the depth to natural. The sondage (measuring 2 m by 1 m) was hand excavated to a depth of 1.2 m. The section (Fig. 3, section 201) revealed successive tip lines of dumped materials incorporating redeposited natural mudstone (layers 206-209 and 210). Layer 209 contained a single sherd of 18th century pottery.
- 3.5.4 A large spread of sandstones (212) was located at the north-west edge of the sondage. The stones measured on average 0.4 m by 0.38 m. Some appeared to be roughly hewn so could have derived from the original Priory buildings. The remainder of the sondage was excavated by machine due to health and safety reasons and reached natural bedrock at a depth of 2.3 m. The only finds/dating evidence came from layer 209 and consisted some fragments of glazed floor tiles of medieval origin.
- 3.5.5 The sondage at the north-west end of Trench 2 revealed traces of terracing and associated construction of the platform (Fig. 3, section 202). Below rubble 214 was a succession of tipped layers 215, 216, 217 and 218. The majority of the layers were clay, probably sourced locally for the construction of the platform with the exception of layer 216, which consisted of a layer of mixed crushed brick rubble and mortar.

3.6 Trench 3

- 3.6.1 Trench 3 was located close to a group of trees on the eastern half of the new build footprint. The trench was aligned north-west/south-east in order to transect a geophysical anomaly (interpreted as a possible grave cut) at the south-eastern end of the trench.
- 3.6.2 A concentration of large stones (303) below the topsoil had a linear appearance and it was agreed with English Heritage that the stones should be examined to determine whether they represented a burial. A sondage was also to be excavated at the north-west end of the trench in agreement with EH. The stones (303) were interpreted as the backfill of a tree throw hole (302) and included a worked stone (see Plate 2), possibly associated with the Priory.
- 3.6.3 The sondage at the north-west end of the trench revealed no archaeology, only natural soils.
- 3.6.4 After the backfilling of trenches 2 and 3 geotechnical core samples was taken by Ground Investigation and Piling Ltd (GIP). This established the depth of the natural bedrock at approximately 4 m.

3.7 Finds summary

- 3.7.1 Finds were recovered from Trenches 1 and 2. In Trench 1 these were all found within the buried topsoil (102) and consisted of medieval floor tiles, flagstones fragments, pieces of iron drain pipe and a Victorian button. They all presumably derive from the terracing activities and perhaps demolition materials from the Priory buildings during the landscaping and development of the Georgian house in the 18th century.
- 3.7.2 Finds from layer 209 in Trench 2 consisted of medieval glazed tiles, brick and a single pottery sherd of 18th century date. These appeared within a dump layer which was part of the platform and terracing construction. Finds from 216 consisted of medieval floor tiles, whereas in 217 the finds consisted of animal bones and brick.

3.8 Palaeo-environmental samples

- 3.8.1 No deposits suitable for palaeo-environmental sampling were encountered during the course of the investigation.



4 DISCUSSION

4.1 Reliability of field investigation

- 4.1.1 It was possible to excavate all the proposed trenches and these were not affected by any ground water or adverse weather conditions. The results of the investigation revealed the extent of terracing and landscaping that had taken place on the site, and established that there are no certain remains of the Priory within the trenches excavated within the proposed new build footprint.
- 4.1.2 The investigation successfully located the geophysical anomalies, however, investigation of these revealed that they were either naturally formed or were associated with the landscaping phase of the site.

4.2 Investigation objectives and results

- 4.2.1 The investigations were unsuccessful in locating *in-situ* remains of the Priory or associated structures but have demonstrated the extent and depth of impact of past development associated with the Georgian period house and landscaping.
- 4.2.2 Taking these past impacts into account it can be determined that the proposed new building is unlikely to impact upon substantial archaeological remains. The top of the undisturbed natural deposits was revealed sloping to the south-east at between 118.09 m and 115.08 m OD (at a depth of approximately 0.5 m BGL in Trench 1, between 1.1 m and 1.9 m BGL in Trench 2 where there was significant truncation, and 0.3 m in Trench 3) by the excavation of sondages and by taking of core samples (see results above).

4.3 Interpretation

- 4.3.1 No *in-situ* structural evidence of the Priory, or of any associated buildings were revealed in the three investigation trenches. The single posthole in Trench 1 might have had a structural function, but no similar features were found in the trench to suggest it formed part of a more substantial structure.
- 4.3.2 Suggested evidence of the Priory comprised small pieces of ceramic glazed floor tiles and occasional pieces of worked stone, all apparently redeposited. The terracing and construction of the present visible platform is best shown in Trench 2, with tipped layers of clay and mudstone being used.
- 4.3.3 Despite some worked stone finds, it is suggested on the evidence from these results that the remains of the Priory have either been completely removed, or lie outside of the investigation area.



APPENDIX A. TRENCH DESCRIPTIONS AND CONTEXT INVENTORY

Trench 1						
General description				Orientation	E-W	
Trench contained single post hole (106) in western end of trench. Trench consisted of topsoil and mixed subsoil demolition layer overlying a subsoil layer. This in turn overlay a mixed natural soil stone layer, which overlay natural soils. Top of trench: 118.65 -118.23 m OD Base of trench to natural: 118.09 -117.72 m OD				Avg. depth (m)	0.42	
				Width (m)	1.8	
				Length (m)	10	
Contexts						
context no	type	Width (m)	Depth (m)	comment	finds	date
101	Layer	-	0.12	Topsoil	-	-
102	Layer	-	0.4	Former mixed topsoil and make-up layer	Pot, glazed floor tiles, flag stones, metal drain pipe fragments	Mixed late C14th-C20 th
103	Layer	-	0.12	Mixed subsoil/demolition layer	-	-
104	Layer	-	0.42	Mixed natural/stone layer	-	-
105	Layer	-	0.42>	Natural soil	-	-
106	Cut	0.51	0.21	Post hole	-	-
107	Fill	0.51	0.21	Fill of post hole	-	-

Trench 2						
General description				Orientation	NW-SE	
Trench contained landscaping deposits dating to the 18th century, seen in sections 201 and 202. Trench consisted of tarmac and a series of hardcore bedding layers, overlying a demolition rubble layer. Natural soils found in sondage at south-east end of trench. Sondage at north-west end of trench to examine potential archaeological remains under layer 214 Top of trench: 117.11 -116.95 m OD Base of trench to natural: 116.03 – 115.08 m OD				Avg. depth (m)	2.3	
				Width (m)	1.8	
				Length (m)	10	
Contexts						
context no	type	Width (m)	Depth (m)	comment	finds	date
201	Layer	1.6>	0-0.05	Tarmac	-	-
202	Layer	-	0.08	Upper aggregate	-	-
203	Layer	-	0.1	Lower aggregate	-	-
204	Layer	-	0.2	Gravel levelling bed	-	-
205	Layer	-	0.62>	Clay levelling layer	-	-



206	Layer	-	0.80>	Clay levelling layer	-	-
207	Layer	-	0.84>	Levelling layer	-	-
208	Layer	-	0.88>	Mixed rubble deposit	-	-
209	Layer	-	0.92>	Clay tipping deposit	Glazed floor tile, pottery sherds, CBM	Late C14th-C20 th
210	Layer	-	0.92>	Mudstone tipping deposit	-	-
211	Layer	-	0.72>	Clay tipping deposit	-	-
212	Layer	-	1.05>	Stone dump layer	-	-
213	Layer	-	1>	Clay levelling layer	-	-
214	Layer	-	0.4>	Rubble layer	-	-
215	Layer	-	0.78>	Clay levelling layer	-	-
216	Layer	-	0.8>	Rubble layer	Glazed floor tile,	Late C14th-Early C16 th
217	Layer	-	1>	Clay levelling layer	Animal Bone, Nail	-
218	Layer	-	1.2>	Clay levelling layer	-	-
219	Layer	-	2>	Clay levelling layer	-	-
220	Layer	-	2.3>	Natural	-	-

Trench 3							
General description				Orientation		E-W	
Trench contained single tree throw (302) at south-eastern end of trench. Consists of soil, overlying a natural of red sandy clay. No finds/dating evidence recovered. Top of trench: 118.11-117.69 m OD Base of trench to natural: 117.80-117.42 m OD				Avg. depth (m)		0.30	
				Width (m)		1.8	
				Length (m)		10	
Contexts							
context no	type	Width (m)	Depth (m)	comment	finds	date	
301	Layer	-	0.	Topsoil	-	-	
302	Cut	1.76	0.22	Tree throw	-	-	
303	Fill	1.76	0.22	Fill of tree throw	-	-	
304	Layer	-	0.16>	Natural	-	-	



APPENDIX B. FINDS REPORT

Floor tile by Ruth Shaffrey (OA)

A total of two pieces of floor tile, from the same context, were recovered from the site.

Context No.	Description
102	Two fragments of floor tiles of Pennant sandstone/old red sandstone - a type of stone commonly occurring in the west of the country. One 58mm thick, one 55mm thick.

Brick, pottery and glazed floor tiles by John Cotter (OA)

A single piece of brick was recovered from context 209 on the site.

Context No.	Description
209	A nicely made unfrosted brick, with fairly sharp arrises and skintling on one side, measuring 200mm x 70mm x 116mm. Likely to be C18th.

A total of one pottery sherd, four fragments of roof tile and six fragments of floor tile were recovered from three contexts from the site.

Context No.	Description
102	3 tile fragments, weighing 84g, 37g and 51g, from a single nibbed roof tile in a modern industrial-looking reduced dark grey-brown fired clay-type fabric, probably C19th to C20th.
102	2 fragments glazed late medieval floor tile. One of these is a corner fragment 25mm+ thick, weighing 82g, in a dense red sandy fabric. Upper surface has late medieval-style relief moulded decoration comprising - in the corner- a quarter segment of a radial rosette or wheel-like motif (part of a 4 tile design) with traces of another motif in the centre of the tile - possibly part of a fleur-de-lys etc. The whole tile is covered in a white slip (showing yellow) under a clear glaze. Probably Late C15th-C16th. The other tile fragment is a corner fragment in a hard red sandy fabric. The tile is 27mm thick, weighing 92g, has markedly bevelled edges and is covered on its upper surface by a thick dark brown glaze. Very similar to late medieval Flemish plain floor tiles in style but probably local. Date probably C15th-C16th.
209	Tile. 4 fragments. 1 fragment of late nibbed tile (as in 102) C19th-C20th, weighing 74g. 3 fragments medieval floor tile in same fairly fine red sandy fabric with grey core, all 23-24mm thick, weighing 113g, 172g, 87g. Two are corner fragments with the upper surfaces completely worn away by use but with traces of clear and greenish glaze on the sides. The smallest piece is an edge fragment with all-over white slip on the upper surface under a clear glaze. This tile shows evidence of pre-cutting so that it could be broken into smaller, probably triangular, tiles. Date of all these possibly late C14th-early C16th?
209	Pot: 1 sherd coarse Midlands blackware-type jar with thick black internal glaze, weighing 25g. C17th-early C19th.
216	Medieval floor tile. Corner fragment 24mm thick, weighing 97g. Same red fabric as (209) tiles above. Upper surface covered in white slip under very worn clear greenish-brown glaze. Underside partially glazed and with traces of white mortar adhering. The tile has been bisected diagonally by pre-cut mark allowing it to be broken into smaller triangular tiles. Date possibly late C14th-early C16th?



Iron objects by Leigh Allen (OA)

A total of two pieces of drainpipe, from the same context, were recovered from the site.

Context No.	Description
102	Two fragments of cast iron drainpipe (169g and 40g).



APPENDIX C. BIBLIOGRAPHY AND REFERENCES

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APPENDIX D. SUMMARY OF SITE DETAILS

Site name:	Ranton Abbey Estate
Site code:	RANABEV
Grid reference:	SJ 838 242
Type:	Investigation
Date and duration:	September 25 th - 2 nd October 2008
Area of site:	0.23 ha

Summary of results: The investigation revealed areas of landscaping dating to the 18th century. No Prioory remains were seen in any of the three investigation trenches, though some worked stones and medieval glazed tile could suggest activity in the vicinity.

Location of archive: The archive is currently held at OA, Janus House, Osney Mead, Oxford, OX2 0ES, and will be deposited with the Pottery Museum and Art Gallery, Staffordshire in due course, under the following accession number: 2008.LH.51



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Figure 1: Site location



Figure 2: Trench location plan

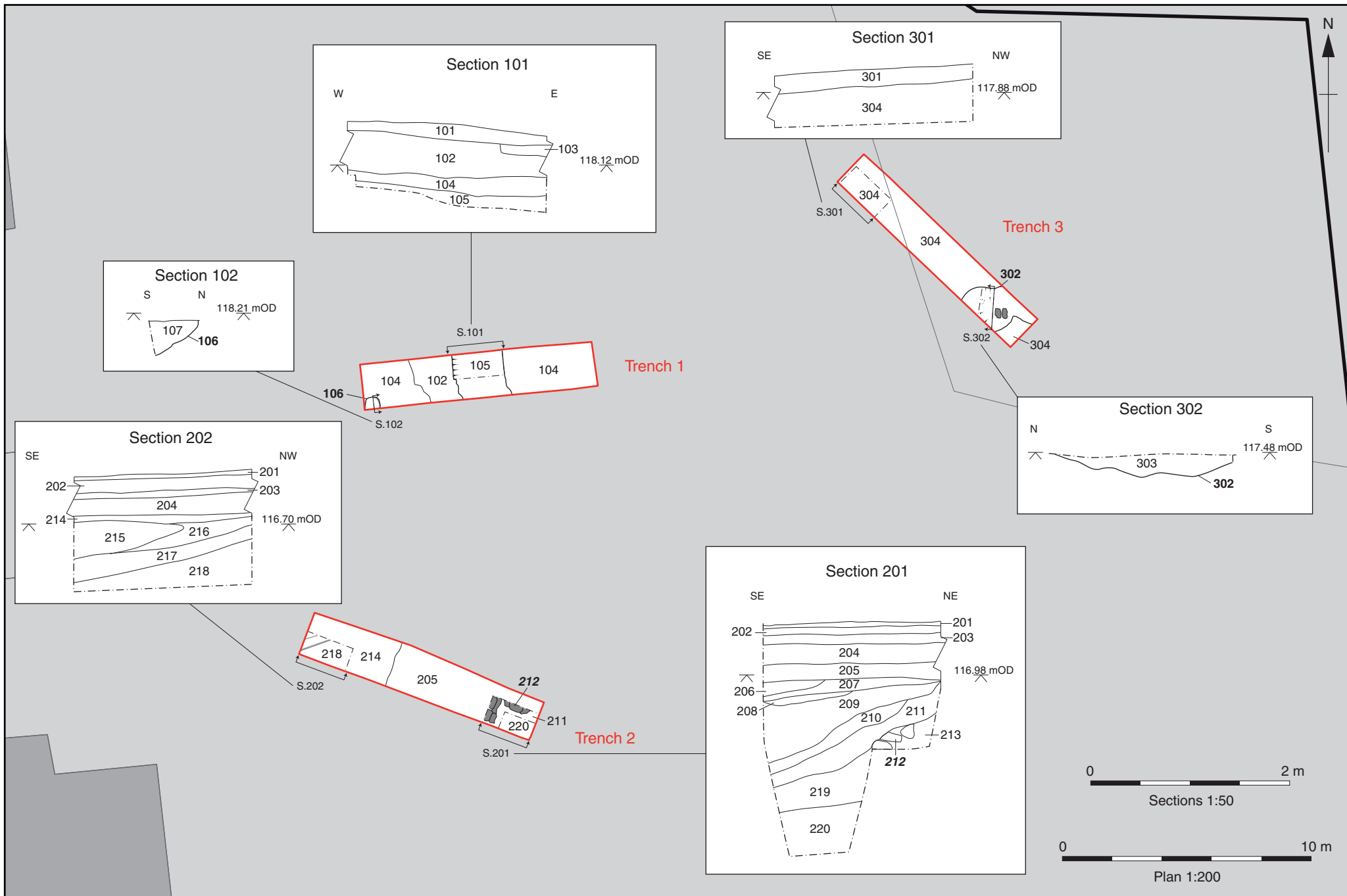


Figure 3: Trench plans



Plate 1: View of Ranton Estate from Priory tower



Plate 2: Worked stone from context 303



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