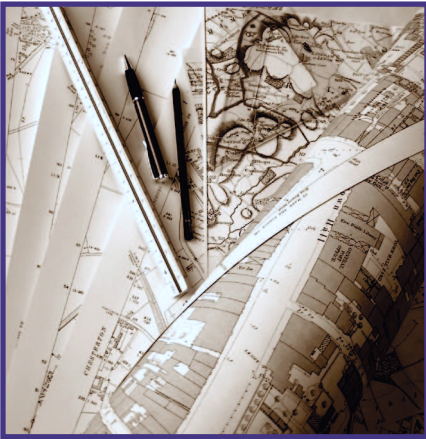


University Church of  
St Mary the Virgin  
High Street  
Oxford



Archaeological  
Watching Brief Report



October 2010

**Client: Confluence PCM**

Issue No: 1

OA Job No: 4632

NGR: SP 5158 0627



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Signed. 

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***University Church of St Mary the Virgin,  
High Street, Oxford  
ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF REPORT***

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## Summary

*In January 2010 Oxford Archaeology (OA) carried out an archaeological watching brief at the University Church of St Mary the Virgin, High Street, Oxford (NGR: SP 5158 0627). The work was commissioned by Confluence PCM in advance of the installation of two new toilets inside the church, which required access to the external drain beneath St Mary's Passage to the west of the church. The watching brief revealed three medieval pits, thought to be for gravel extraction associated with the construction of the church. All three pits contained human remains, none of which were articulated. No evidence for earlier phases of the church or lane surfaces were encountered.*

## 1 INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Location and scope of work

1.1.1 In January 2010, Oxford Archaeology (OA) carried out an archaeological watching brief at the University Church of St Mary the Virgin, High Street, Oxford (NGR: SP 5158 0627) (Fig. 1). The work was commissioned by Confluence PCM in advance of the installation of two new toilets inside the church requiring access to the external drain beneath St Mary's Passage to the west of the church.

1.1.2 A project design was agreed between OA and Confluence PCM prior to the commencement of the works.

### 1.2 Geology and topography

1.2.1 The site lies to the north of the Oxford High Street, between the west entrance to St Mary's Church and the adjacent properties to the west, at a level of approximately 63m above OD. The underlying geology is river gravels, second (Summertown to Radley) terrace deposits (Geological Survey of Great Britain, sheet no 236).

### 1.3 Archaeological and historical background

1.3.1 The following is summarised from *Churches, A History of the County of Oxford: Volume 4: The City of Oxford and Pevsner's The Buildings of England: Oxfordshire*

1.3.2 The church of St Mary the Virgin is recorded in 1086 as belonging to Aubrey, Earl of Northumbria. The church has been the university church from an early date. Congregation met there from at least 1252 until the building of the new convocation house in 1637.

1.3.3 The present day church comprises chancel, aisled and clerestoried nave, north tower flanked on the west by a north chapel of two bays and on the east by the two-storey 'old congregation house', south porch, and north-east vestry (formerly a chapel). A reference to the dedication of the church c. 1189 suggests that the church was rebuilt then, but most surviving fragments of the early medieval church are of the later 13th

century. The 13th-century church was probably cruciform, consisting of chancel, aisled nave, and transepts. The tower was added at the north end of the north transept between c. 1270 and c. 1310; it was planned to open on the east into a single-storeyed building, perhaps a chantry-chapel, which was not built. A small chapel, apparently St. Catherine's, was built at the end of the 13th century, opening east from the north transept.

- 1.3.4 Early in the 14th century the spire was added to the tower, and the chancel was completely rebuilt c. 1462 by Walter Lyhart, bishop of Norwich and a former provost of Oriel; the university rebuilt and enlarged the nave and aisles c. 1490, demolishing transepts and the south chapel, and c. 1510 remodelled the north wall of Adam de Brome's chapel and the old congregation house, inserting new windows to match those in the nave and chancel. At about that time the eastern end of the courtyard between the chancel and the congregation house was enclosed, probably to form St. Thomas's chantry-chapel; it was later used as a vestry.

## 2 PROJECT AIMS AND METHODOLOGY

### 2.1 Aims

- 2.1.1 To identify and record the presence/absence, extent, condition, quality and date of archaeological remains in the areas affected by the development.
- 2.1.2 To preserve by record any archaeological features or deposits that may be disturbed or destroyed during the course of the groundworks.
- 2.1.3 To make available the results of the archaeological investigation.

### 2.2 Methodology

- 2.2.1 The watching brief was undertaken as a continuous archaeological presence during those works that were likely to impinge or damage any potential archaeological deposits or features.
- 2.2.2 All archaeological features were planned at a scale of 1:20 and where excavated their sections drawn at scales of 1:20. All excavated features were photographed using digital colour photography and black and white print film. A general photographic record of the work was made. Recording followed procedures detailed in the *OAU Fieldwork Manual* (ed, D Wilkinson, 1992).

## 3 RESULTS

### 3.1 Description of deposits

- 3.1.1 The watching brief consisted of a trench measuring 2.1 m north-south and 2 m east-west located approximately 0.5m from the west door of the church (Fig 2). This was excavated to a depth of 2.7 m below current ground level (Fig 2, Section 1) using a 360' tracked excavator. The trench was originally situated directly above a backfilled



service trench (4) but due to the location of an electric cable the trench had to be shifted to the west causing it to truncate an approximately 0.5m wide strip of stratified archaeological deposits.

- 3.1.2 The undisturbed natural, a brown yellow, sand gravel (21) was encountered at a depth of 2.1 m below current ground level (Fig 2, Section 1). This was overlaid by a 0.25 m deep layer of a red-brown sandy clay (20), a probable layer of subsoil.
- 3.1.3 Cutting these deposits was a 1 m deep pit (6) (Fig 2, Plan 1 and Section 1). The shape in plan was not clear due to the limited nature of the trench and truncation to the north by pit (13) and to the south by pit (7). The pit measured 0.95 m north-south and 0.5 m east-west within the trench. The pit contained five fills. The lowest fill (17) was a 0.5 m deep layer of red-brown silt sand. This was a deliberate backfill consisting of redeposited natural mixed with surrounding soils. This contained human remains which had been disturbed by the original cutting of the pit. Overlying (17) was a 0.3 m deep layer of a similar red-brown silt sand, a well-mixed deposit also containing redeposited human remains (12). This was sealed below a 0.1 m deep layer of mortar and crushed stone (11), possibly associated with construction or demolition work associated with the church.
- 3.1.4 This was overlaid by a 0.1 m deep layer of red-brown silt sand (10), containing dis-articulated human remains. The top-most fill of (6) was a 0.12 m deep layer of pale grey mixed mortar deposit (9) similar to (11).
- 3.1.5 Truncating feature 6 to the north was pit (13). The exposed section of this feature measured 0.7 m north-south and 0.5 m east-west although projecting its curved edge would suggest that it was originally circular measuring in excess of 1.6 m in diameter (Fig 2, Plan 1). The base was found 2.6m below current ground level (Fig 2. Section 1). Pit 13 had been backfilled with four distinct deposits. The lowest 0.08 m deep layer of fill was a charcoal rich, grey-black deposit (23). This was a probable dump of charcoal and ashes thrown into the pit shortly after cutting, as there was no redeposited natural from the sides of the pit beneath it.
- 3.1.6 Overlying (23) was a grey brown sand silt deposit containing cess-like material (22) containing a series of lenses of charcoal and burnt clay measuring 0.55 m deep. This deposit contained dis-articulated human bone, probably burials disturbed by the initial cutting of the pit and dumped back in during backfilling. Above this fill was a 0.4 m deep layer of brown-grey sand silt (16). This also contained a quantity of human bone probably redeposited in the pit from the original cutting. The remainder of the pit was filled by a 0.6 m deep deposit of a grey-brown silt sand (14) also containing redeposited human bone and a large quantity of mortar and stone inclusions probably originating from construction or demolition of the church or other buildings in the vicinity.
- 3.1.7 To the south pit (6) was truncated by pit (7) (Fig. 2, Plan 1 and Section 1). The exposed section of this pit measured 0.58 m north-south and 0.5 m east-west and the

base was excavated to a depth of 2.4 m below current ground level. Projection of its edge suggests that it was a circular pit approximately 1.2 m in diameter.

- 3.1.8 The base of the pit was sealed by a 0.05 m deep layer of dark grey silt (19), containing a heavy concentration of charcoal flecking. This was overlain with (18), a 0.1 m deep layer of yellow-brown sandy gravel, probably redeposited natural originating from the collapse of the sides of the pit. Overlying (18) was a 1 m deep homogenous brown grey clay silt (15), containing charcoal and dis-articulated human remains. These probably originated when the pit was first excavated, and were redeposited during the backfilling of the pit. The uppermost fill was a 0.3 m deep layer of a green grey, silt sand (8). This layer of fill also contained a large quantity of human bone. These were again redeposited and not articulated, although the concentration would suggest that the top of the pit had been used as a charnel pit.
- 3.1.9 Pits (6), (7) and (13) were all truncated by the service trench (4) (Fig.2 Plan 1 and Section1). This was the service trench that was originally meant to be re-excavated but due to the realignment of the trench, stratified archaeology had to be disturbed to the west. The service trench (4) was a long straight cut measuring at least 2.1 m north-south and 1.2 m east-west. The base of the trench was beneath the level of archaeology at 2.6m below current ground level. It had been backfilled with a grey brown silt sand (5) which contained human remains, possibly disturbed when the service trench was originally cut. The human remains were limited to only a few small pieces and it is likely that the other remains were reburied elsewhere at the church at the time.
- 3.1.10 The service trench and the pits were sealed by approximately 1 m depth of modern overburden (Fig. 2. Section 1). This was a grey brown, sand silt deposit containing modern brick and rubble and had been truncated by several modern services and storm drains. This was excavated using the mechanical digger to the level of archaeology seen in the pre-excavation plan and photographs.
- 3.1.11 A second service trench cut (2) was not recorded on a plan or section as it cut above (4) and only truncated the modern overburden (1). The cut was unclear as it had been rapidly backfilled with the same material through which it was cut, a grey brown, silt sand. This was a linear, straight sided cut containing a modern gas pipe visible in the site photos.

## 3.2 Finds

- 3.2.1 Finds were recovered from deposits (8) and (16). Fill (8) contained 2 sherds of C13th Brill Ware pottery, while fill (16) contained a single sherd of C10th-C13th pot, probably Thetford ware, although it is possible that it was a French or Flemish ware import. No other finds were recovered.
- 3.2.2 Human and animal bones were recovered from (5), (8), (10), (12), (14), (15), (16), (17) and (22). All the human bone was disarticulated and probably originated from

burials disturbed when pits, 6, 7 and 13 were dug. This bone was examined and a specialist report produced (See Appendix 2).

### 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

4.1.1 The watching brief highlighted a continuous use of the area to the west of the church, prior to establishment of St. Mary's Passage. All three pits are thought to have been used for the extraction of natural gravel deposits associated with the construction or rebuilding of the church and have all been filled in a similar manner. The quantity of human bone reinterred in these pits demonstrates that it is likely that at sometime human remains were interred to the north of the church, although any dating for this is circumstantial. The pits in all likelihood predate the extant west wall of the church, believed to have been built around 1500. The 3 sherds of pot recovered all indicate a early medieval date with the possible sSxon sherd being redeposited when the pits were backfilled.

## APPENDICES

## 5 APPENDIX 1 ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXT INVENTORY

<i>Context</i>	<i>Type</i>	<i>Depth</i>	<i>Width</i>	<i>Comments</i>	<i> Finds</i>
1	Layer	1m	1.9m	Modern overburden	-
2	Cut	0.8m	c.1m	Modern service cut	-
3	Fill	0.8	c.1m	Modern service fill	-
4	Cut	3m	1.9m	Modern service cut	-
5	Fill	3m	1.9m	Modern service fill	Bone
6	Cut	1.08m	0.95m	Probable gravel extraction pit	-
7	Cut	1.5m	0.6m	Probable gravel extraction pit	-
8	Fill	0.38m	0.5m	Pit fill	2 x C13th/C14th Pot and Bone
9	Fill	0.16m	0.22m	Pit fill	-
10	Fill	0.1m	0.4m	Pit fill	Bone
11	Fill	0.2m	0.7m	Pit fill	-
12	Fill	0.45m	0.9m	Pit fill	Bone
13	Cut	1.7m	0.7m	Probable gravel extraction pit	-
14	Fill	0.63m	0.7m	Pit fill	Bone
15	Fill	1.1m	0.4m	Pit fill	Bone
16	Fill	0.42m	0.6m	Pit fill	1 x C10th/C13th Pot and Bone
17	Fill	0.5m	0.9m	Pit fill	Bone
18	Fill	0.12m	0.33m	Pit fill	-
19	Fill	0.05m	0.45m	Pit fill	-
20	Layer	-	-	Subsoil, possibly alluvium	-
21	Layer	-	-	Natural gravel	-
22	Fill	0.6m	0.5m	Pit fill	Bone
23	Fill	0.1m	0.5m	Pit fill	-

## 6 APPENDIX 2 DISARTICULATED HUMAN BONE ASSESSMENTS

### A Comment on Disarticulated Bone from St. Mary's University Church, Oxford (Site Code: OXMARY10)

By Róisín McCarthy  
Heritage Burials Services, Oxford Archaeology South

#### 6.1 Introduction

6.1.1 Disarticulated human bone representing the redeposited remains of disturbed inhumation burials was recovered from three charnel pits (Cuts 6, 7 and 13) located adjacent to the western wall of St. Mary's Church, Oxford (Site Code: OXMARY10). A total of seven contexts contained bone (Fills 8, 12, 14, 15, 16, 17 and 22). The human bone was representative of both adult and non-adult individuals and was provisionally dated to the medieval period (c. AD 1500) based on the stratigraphic relationship of the pits to the associated church wall foundation. A quantity of animal bone was also recovered in association with this material.

#### 6.2 Preservation

6.2.1 The skeletal material submitted for analysis was unwashed with significant quantities of soil adhering to the bone surfaces. The condition of the bones at the time of analysis therefore inhibited osteological assessment. Despite this, all bones appeared to be in a good state of preservation and qualified (according to the Brickley and McKinley preservation grade system; Brickley and McKinley 2004) as Grade 0: *'bone surfaces morphology clearly visible with fresh appearance to bone and no modifications'* or Grade 1: *'slight patchy surface erosion'*. The majority of bones were greater than 75% complete, although frequently broken. An assessment of bone fragment edges revealed the occurrence of both recent and ancient post-mortem breaks indicating disturbance of these bones had taken place prior to archaeological excavation.

#### 6.3 Minimum Number of Individuals (MNI)

6.3.1 Quantification of the minimum number of individuals was calculated using the 'Zonation Method' (Knüsel & Outram 2004), whereby each bone fragment is assigned a bone type, side and zone. A minimum number of six adults and four non-adults were calculated for the St. Mary's dis-articulated assemblage.

6.3.2 Observations of morphological variations and/or similarities (*i.e.* size, articulating surfaces, comparable age) between skeletal elements in each context highlighted a number of incidences of articulating elements from a single individual and therefore most probable from a single burial. These cases are listed in order of context in Table 1 below.

**Table 1. List of possible cases of articulating skeletal elements belonging to single individuals**

Context	AGE	Sex	Skeletal Elements
8	MA- OA	M	Left and right pelvis
8	AA	M?	Left and right pubic symphyses
8	AA	M?	Left and right femur
8	AA	F?	Left and right femur
12	I	N/R	Left and right humerus; left and right radius; right ulna; left and right pelvis; left and right femur
14	AA	M?	Left and right femur
14	YA- MA	?	Left and right pubic symphyses
22	AA	?	CV1, CV2 and CV3

**\*Key:**

AA= Adult 18+ years; YA-MA= young-mature adult; MA-OA= mature-older adult; I= infant; M= Male; M?= Probable Male; F?= Probable female; ?= Unknown; N/R= Not recordable

**6.4 Estimation of age**

6.4.1 Estimations of sub-adult age-at-death were informed by diaphyseal long bone using methods developed by Fazekas and Kósa (as adapted in Scheuer and Black 2000; Maresh 1970), dental eruption (Mooreess *et al.* 1963a and b) and stage of epiphyseal fusion (Scheuer and Black 2000).

6.4.2 Adult age-at-death estimates were derived via observations of the stages of degeneration of the auricular surface of the pelvis (Lovejoy *et al.* 1985), the sternal end of the ribs (İşcan and Loth 1986 a and b) and the pubic symphysis (Brooks and Suchey 1990; Todd 1921a and b). Stages of epiphyseal fusion of the medial clavicle (Scheuer and Black 2000), dental attrition (Miles 1962) and cranial suture obliteration (Meindl and Lovejoy 1985) were also observed to assign age estimates to suitable bones.

6.4.3 Of the six adult individuals, five were assigned an ‘adult; 18+ years’ age category, whilst a further one individual was categorised as ‘mature to older adult; 36-45 years’. Of the four non-adult individuals represented, two were assigned a ‘young-older child; 2-12 years’ age category, with the remaining two individuals classified as ‘infant; 0-1 years’.

**6.5 Estimation of biological sex**

6.5.1 Sexually dimorphic features of the pelvis and cranium were used to diagnose osteological sex based on standards set out in Buikstra and Ubelaker (1994) and Schwartz (1995). Osteometrics were used as secondary sexual indicators. An estimation of biological sex was possible for five of the six adult individuals represented by the assemblage; specifically two probable females and three probable males.

## 6.6 Pathology

6.6.1 The left femur of an adult probable female exhibited lateral bowing indicative of rickets or vitamin D deficiency in childhood (Aurderheide and Rodriguez 1998). In the absence of articulating skeletal elements, however, this diagnosis cannot be substantiated.

## 6.7 Animal Bone

6.7.1 Animal bone fragments representative of medium-sized (*i.e.* sheep/goat) to large mammals (*i.e.* horse and/or cow) were present. These bones were not assessed in detail, however a rapid visual assessment showed that skeletal elements from both the cranial and post-cranial regions were present.

### *Summary of Results*

- The skeletal material submitted for analysis largely consisted of disarticulated human bone representing a minimum number of ten individuals. Both adult and non-adult individuals were represented.
- Morphological comparisons between bones from the same contexts highlighted incidences where articulating bones from a single grave had been disturbed and most likely redeposited in the charnel pit feature. A significant quantity of articulating elements from the thorax region of an infant recovered from context 12, for example, almost certainly represent a single burial, the majority of which had been disturbed in a single event and redeposited in charnel pit 6.
- The condition of the bone submitted for analysis largely inhibited detailed osteological assessment. Age-at-death estimates were possible, within limits, for all of the individuals represented. A biological sex estimate was possible for five of the six adult individuals represented. The vast majority of bone fragments were 'healthy' in appearance, although the unwashed condition of the bone greatly inhibited an assessment of pathology. A femur belonging to an adult probable female exhibited bowing possibly indicative of vitamin D deficiency / childhood rickets.

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**APPENDIX 4 SUMMARY OF SITE DETAILS**

**Site name:** University Church of St Mary the Virgin, High Street, Oxford

**Site code:** OXMARY10

**Grid reference:** SP 5258-0627

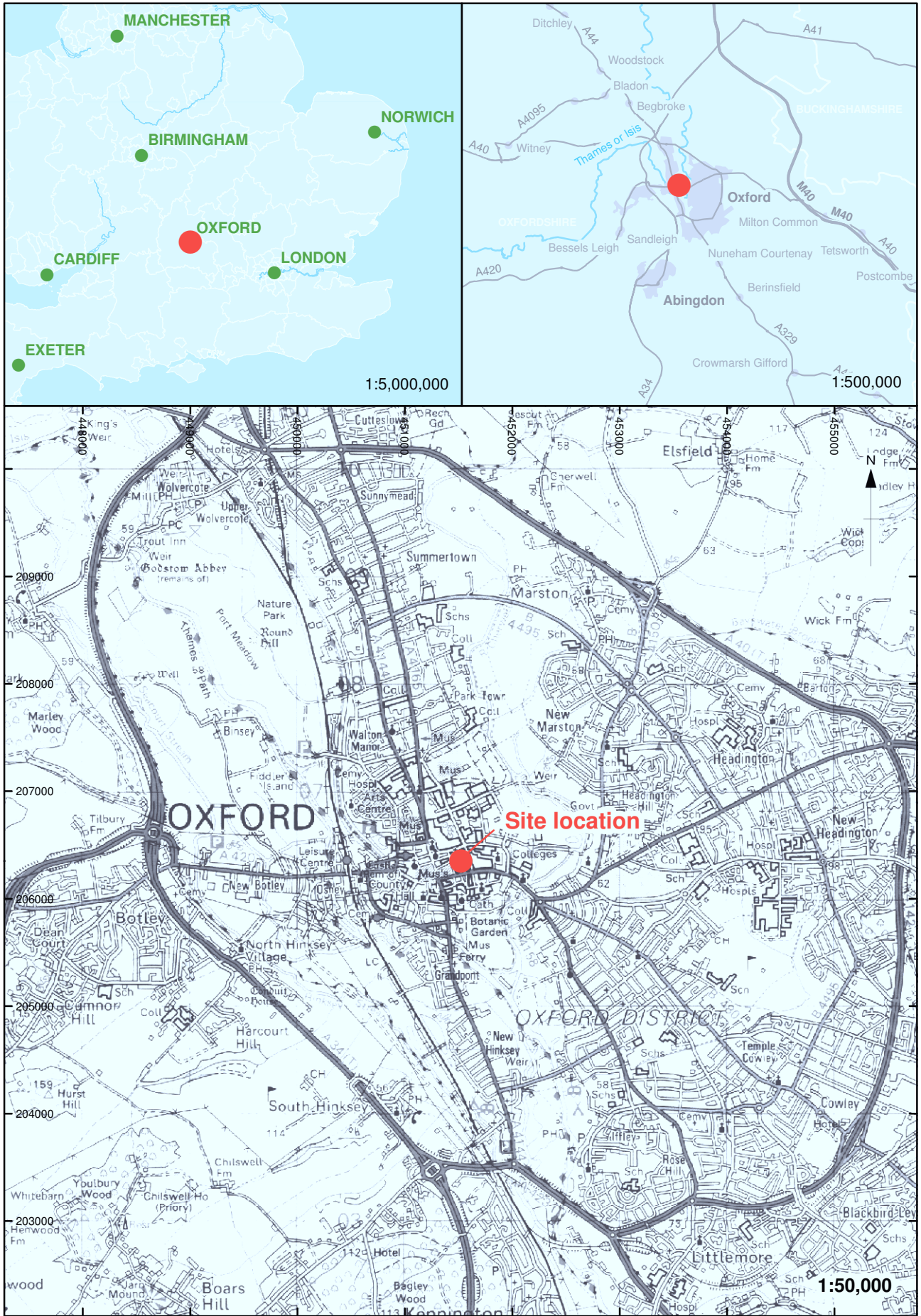
**Type of watching brief:** Hand and machine excavation of existing services

**Date and duration of project:** 20th -27th January 2010

**Area of site:** 4.4m<sup>2</sup>

**Summary of results:** Excavation and recording of 3 medieval gravel extraction pits, reused as Charnel Pits, to the west side of St Mary's Church

**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, under the following accession number: OXCMS:2010.10



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Figure 1: Site location



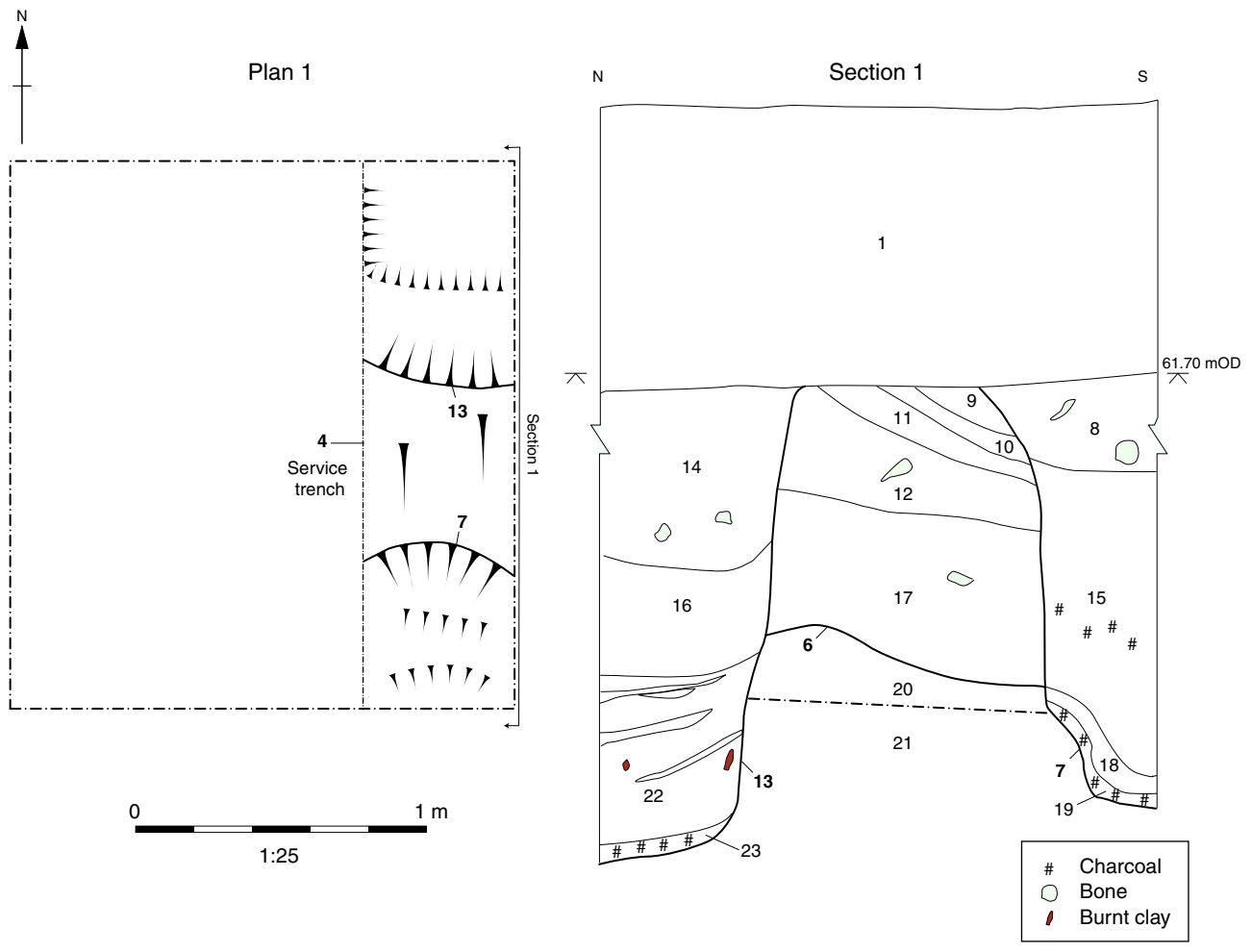
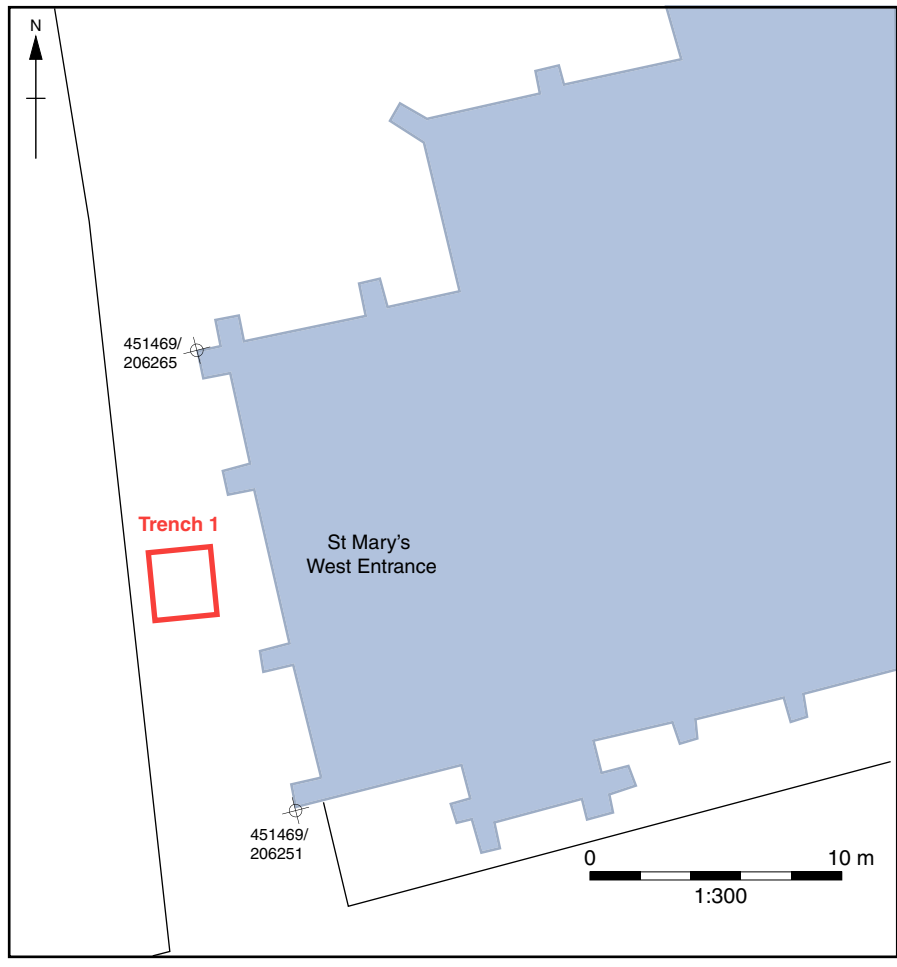


Figure 2: Location plan of trench, trench plan and section 1





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