

JOHN MOORE HERITAGE SERVICES

AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION

AT

MANOR HOUSE NURSING HOME,

MERTON, OXFORDSHIRE.

SP 5788 1794

On behalf of

Turley Associates

JUNE 2004

REPORT FOR

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Summary

An archaeological field evaluation took place as part of the consideration of a planning application for close care accommodation, access and parking on land to the north-east of Manor House nursing Home, Merton, Oxfordshire. Several pits, two lines of post holes and a recut ditch were present. Three phases of activity are present. Firstly pottery indicates an early-middle Saxon phase of activity on the site followed by medieval occupation. The site then appears to have been abandoned, perhaps during the 14th century, when the land was used for agricultural purposes.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Site Location (Figure 1)

The site of the proposed development is located at the eastern end of the village of Merton, off the main street at Manor House Nursing Home (NGR SP 5788 1794). The site currently is used as parking and a garden with a garage block for a residential dwelling. The geology is Cornbrash close to the boundary with Oxford Clay and the site lies at approximately 67m OD.

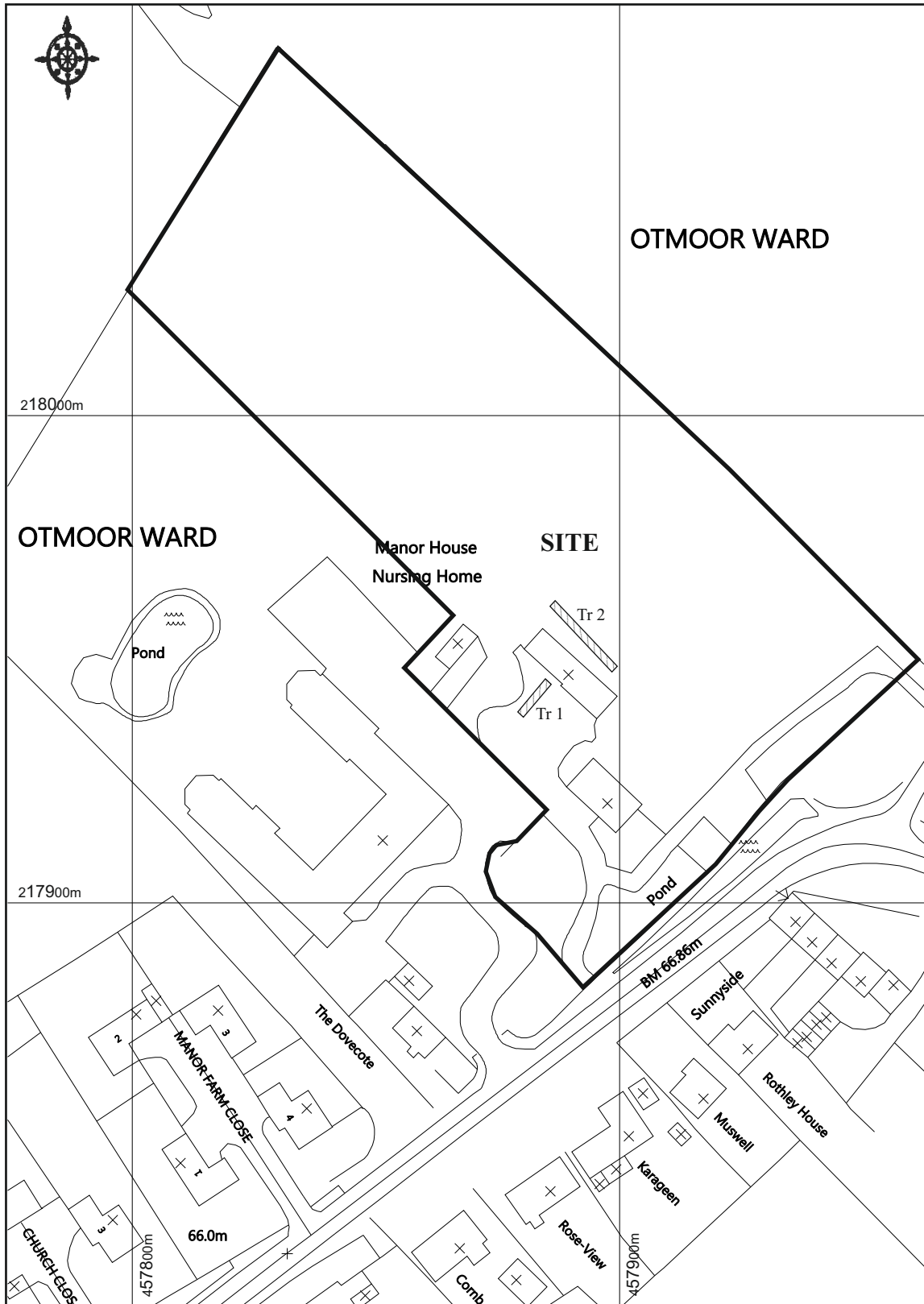
1.2 Planning Background

An application submitted to Cherwell District Council proposes the construction of two 2-story blocks to provide nine units of close care accommodation, access and parking (03/01169/F). As part of the consideration of the application Cherwell District Council required that an archaeological evaluation be undertaken prior to determination in accordance with PPG16 and Local Plan Policies. Oxfordshire County Archaeological Services (OCAS, 2004) prepared a brief for such an evaluation.

John Moore Heritage Services (JMHS), in accordance with a Written Scheme of Investigation (JMHS, 2004) approved by OCAS, carried out the works.

1.3 Archaeological Background

The proposal site is located in an archaeologically sensitive area with earthworks relating to the medieval settlement at Merton to the north and west of the site c. 50m away, and a cropmark indicating a possible Knights Templar's preceptory/grange only 30m to the northeast of the site. The Knights Templar (otherwise known as 'The Poor Fellow-Soldiers of Jesus Christ and the Temple of Solomon', 'The Knights of the Temple of Solomon', 'the Templars' or simply 'The Temple') was founded in Jerusalem in 1119. The knights took vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience and devoted themselves to the recovery of Palestine from the Muslims. They played an important part in the Crusades of the 12th and 13th centuries. The enormous wealth of the order aroused the envy of Philip IV of France, who arranged for charges of heresy to be brought against its members in 1307. The order was suppressed in 1308-12 with its holdings, excepting those in Aragon, Castile, Portugal and Mallorca, being transferred by a papal bull issued on 2 May 1311 to the Hospitallers.



The original manor house building itself dates from the mid 16th century, although it was extensively altered in the 18th and 19th centuries and very little remains above ground of the original fabric. Archaeological evaluation in 1998, 30m northwest of the proposal site, revealed walls and stone surfaces possibly relating to the 16th century manor house although no dateable material was recovered.

The application site lies within the historic core of Merton as shown on the Davis map of 1797. Merton is recorded in the Domesday Book of 1086.

2 AIMS OF THE INVESTIGATION

The aims of the investigation as laid out in the Written Scheme of Investigation were as follows:

- To establish the presence/absence of archaeological remains within the site.
- To determine the extent, condition, nature, character, quality and date of any archaeological remains encountered.
- To assess the ecofactual and environmental potential of the archaeological features and deposits.
- In particular:
 - to determine whether any remains associated with the 16th century manor are present
 - to determine whether any remains associated with the possible Knights Templar's preceptory/grange are present
- To make available to interested parties the results of the investigation subject to any confidentiality restrictions.

3 STRATEGY

3.1 Research Design

In response to a *Brief* issued by OCAS, a scheme of investigation was designed by JMHS and subsequently agreed with OCAS and the applicant. The work was carried out by JMHS and involved the excavation of two trenches.

Site procedures for the investigation and recording of potential archaeological deposits and features were defined in the *Written Scheme of Investigation*. The work was carried out in accordance with the standards specified by the Institute of Field Archaeologists (1994).

3.2 Methodology

The field evaluation comprised of the excavation of two trenches. Trench 1 was 9.2m in length, while Trench 2 was 20m long. Each was 1.60m wide. The trenches were positioned in the footprints of the proposed blocks with Trench 1 orientated northeast-southwest within the existing drive and Trench 2 orientated northwest-southeast to the rear (northeast) of the extant garage block (Figure 1).

The trenches were excavated using a JCB equipped with a 5 foot wide ditching bucket. Trenches were excavated down to the natural geology under direct archaeological control. Features present were sampled by hand excavation.

Standard John Moore Heritage Services techniques were employed throughout, involving the completion of a written record for each deposit encountered, with scale plans and section drawings compiled where appropriate.

Hannah Fluck of OCAS monitored the works.

4 RESULTS

Deposits and fills are referred to in the text and figures in brackets: (02), cut features are numbered in square brackets: [04].

Geology and overburden

The top of the Great Oolite Cornbrash was reached in both trenches. In Trench 2 it (22) comprised small and medium sub-angular limestone pieces within orange-yellow clay, while in Trench 1 a similar geology (05) was present in the northeastern 3m. Elsewhere in this trench the natural took the form of dull orange-brown friable clay (04).

In Trench 1 a 290-340mm thick topsoil deposit of mid/dark grey-brown silty clay with occasional small sub-angular stone (03) overlaid the Cornbrash. Above the topsoil in Trench 1 was a 300mm thick deposit of roadstone (02) as a base for a 20mm thick shingle drive surface (01). The topsoil was 180mm thick in Trench 1 (100). The topsoil deposit (03) had been disturbed by the construction works for the garage block and the laying of an electrical cable.

The Cornbrash in Trench 2 was overlaid by a layer of moderately compact dark grey brown slightly clayey silt with moderately fine and occasional medium sized limestone pieces (21). This 240mm thick deposit contained building debris from the construction of the garage block and in turn was overlaid by 240mm of topsoil and turf (20).

Several features were cut into the top of natural in both trenches.

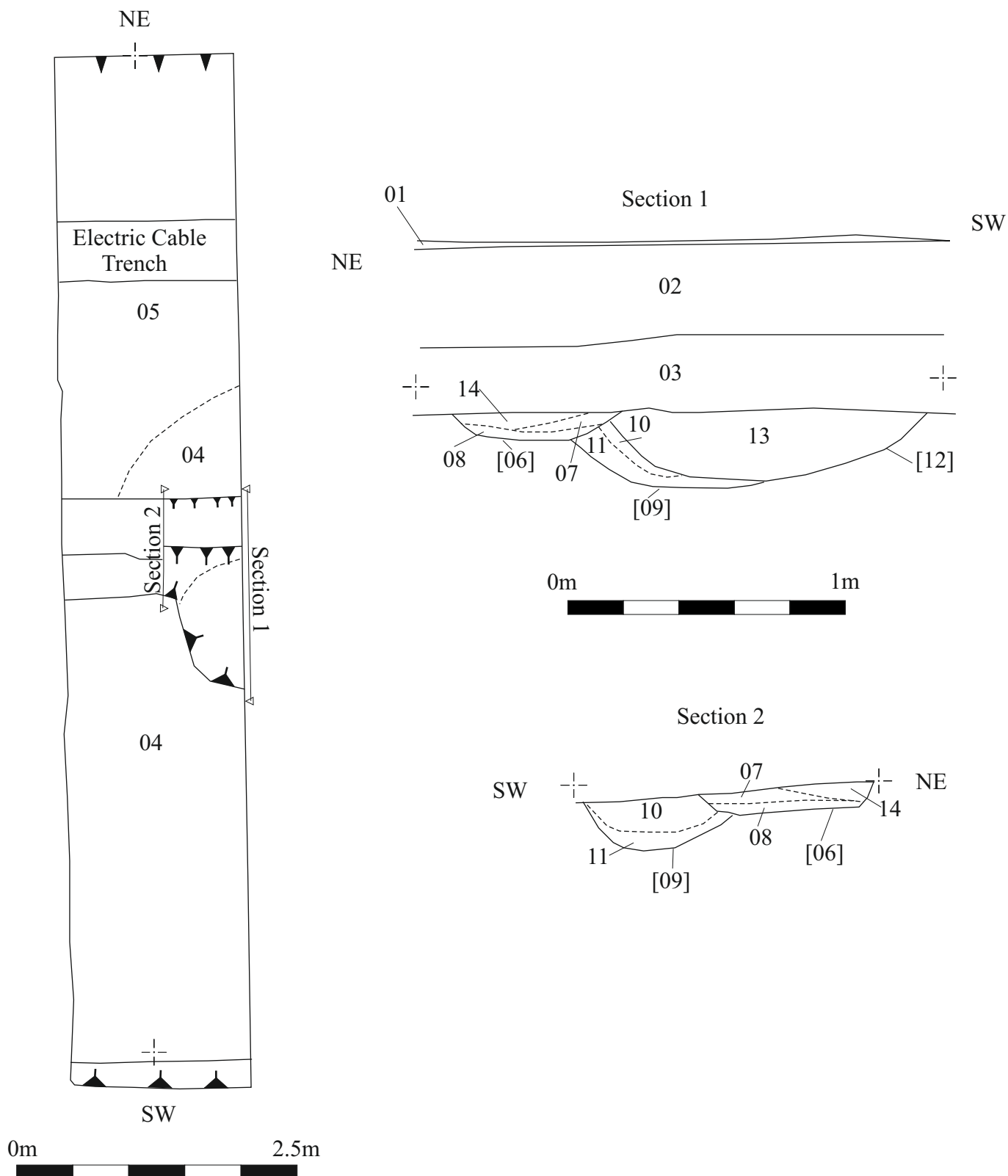


Figure 2. Trench 1 plan and sections

Trench 1 (Figure 2)

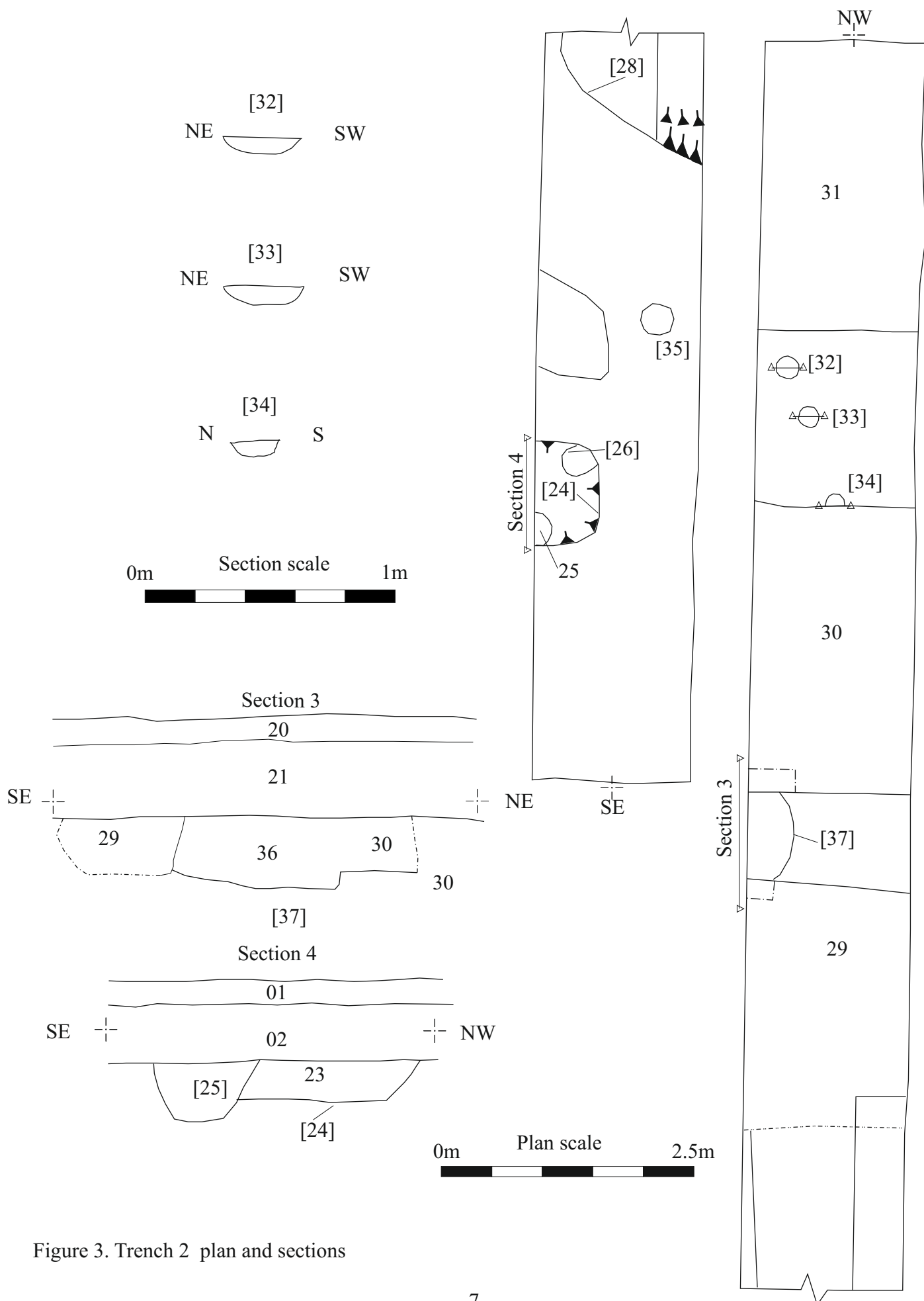
A ditch [09] orientated northwest-southeast crossed the trench. This feature was 590mm wide and 200mm deep with sides of 60° from the horizontal and a slightly rounded base. The primary fill of the ditch was a 60mm thick compact deposit of pale grey-brown and yellow-orange (50:50) silty clay (11). This material was eroded natural mixed with silt from either the existing topsoil or bank material. The upper fill of the ditch was soft mid grey-brown clayey silt with occasional small stone (10). Following the silting up of the feature, the ditch was redug slightly to the east. This recut [06] was 520-580mm wide and shallower at 100mm deep. The northeast side was at 60° while the southwest side was at an angle of 45°. This recut had a flat base. The 60mm thick primary fill was a soft mid grey-brown silty clay with occasional small fragments of angular limestone pieces (08). The secondary fill was a compact deposit of small and medium stone with orange-yellow gritty clay (07) some 30-50mm thick. This was only on the southwest side of the ditch and in turn was overlaid by mid grey-brown silty clay with occasional small angular stone (14) which filled the surviving top 50mm of the ditch.

The silted original ditch [09] was cut by a pit [12], apparently prior to the recutting of the ditch (Figure 2, Section 1). This was not recorded as such except in the section drawing. This may be an error in the section drawing. The drawn relationship between the recut ditch [06] and the pit [09] was not apparent during excavation. The pit [12] was sub-circular 1080mm wide within the trench. At least half of the feature was under the southeast baulk. The pit survived 200mm deep with sides at 45° and a flat base. The pit was filled mid-dark grey-brown silty clay (13) similar to the topsoil (03). The pit contained a sherd of pottery of similar fabric to that within the original ditch.

Trench 2 (Figure 3)

Three furrows [29-31], from ridge and furrow cultivation, crossed the trench. These varied in width from 2800mm to 3100mm with furrow [31] 120-150mm deep. The spacing between [29] and [30] was 4200mm (centre to centre) and 4700mm between [30] and [31]. The fills were dense stone (small and medium sized) with mid/dark brown-grey silty clay. The density of stone increased with depth.

Towards the southeast end of the trench was a sub-circular pit [24] that extended 700mm into the trench. The pit was 1120mm wide and 200mm deep. The angle of the side of the pit varied from 50° to near vertical. The pit had a flat base and was filled by a compact deposit of mid brown grey silty clay containing 25% small stone and occasional medium sized stone (23). Cut into the fill of the pit (Figure 3, Section 4) was a post hole [25]. This was partly within the excavated trench and appeared to be sub-circular, 330mm across and 250mm deep. The sides were near vertical and its fill was mid brown-grey silty clay with 5% small stone. 850mm to the north was a further post hole [26] on the edge of pit [24]. No relationship with the pit was noticed during the excavation of the pit but it is presumed that the post hole is later than the pit. This post hole [26] was oval in shape; 320mm north-south and 180mm east-west. It was 250mm deep with near vertical sides. The lower part was filled with brown grey clayey silt with 5% small stone. A further 1600mm to the north was a further post hole [35] in line with post holes [25 and 26]. This last post hole was 300mm in



diameter and at least 130mm deep. It was not fully excavated as it was filled by densely packed small medium sized stone in a matrix of mid brown-grey silty clay.

Further northwest it was unclear whether feature [28] was a large pit or a ditch. The southwest side of the feature was curved while the other side was obscured by furrow 29. The fills of the feature and furrow were very similar. The fact that feature [28] was not seen the other side of the furrow suggests that it is a pit. Where excavated the feature was 230-280mm deep with an irregular slightly rounded base and a 45⁰ angled southwest side. The feature was filled by compact mid/dark brown grey silty clay with 5% Small stone. On the other side of furrow [29] was a small pit [37], which was only partly within the trench. The pit was 900mm wide and 250mm deep with vertical sides and an irregular but generally flat base. The pit was filled by very compact mid/dark brown grey silty clay with moderate amounts of medium-small stone and the occasional lump of pale yellow-orange clay (36). The pit was cut by furrow [29] while the relationship with furrow [30] was indeterminable.

A line of three post holes [32-34] lay between furrows 30 and 31. They had the following characteristics:

Context	Diameter	Depth	Sides	Base
32	300mm	60mm	45 ⁰	Slightly rounded
33	280-300mm	60mm	45 ⁰	Slightly rounded
34	240mm	60mm	45 ⁰	Rounded

All three post holes were filled with a similar material; mid grey-brown silty clay with occasional to moderate amounts of small stone. Centre to centre the post holes were 550mm apart (32 to 33) and 900mm (33 to 34). Post hole 34 was truncated by furrow 30.

5 FINDS

The Pottery

by Paul Blinkhorn

The pottery assemblage comprised 18 sherds with a total weight of 136g. The assemblage comprised a range of wares including early-middle Saxon, Saxo-Norman and medieval types.

Fabric

The pottery was recorded utilizing the coding system and chronology of the Oxfordshire County type-series (Mellor 1984; 1994), as follows:

OXZ: Stamford ware, 850-1100. 1 sherd, 27g.

OXAC: Cotswold-type ware, AD975-1350. 3 sherds, 29g.

OXY: Medieval Oxford ware, AD1075 – 1350. 4 sherds, 18g.

OXCX: Shelly Coarseware, AD1100-1400. 3 sherds, 12g.

OXAM: Brill/Boarstall ware, AD1200 – 1600. 3 sherds, 23g.

In addition, a small assemblage of early-middle Saxon (AD450-850) handmade material was noted, as follows:

F1: Chaff-tempered. Moderate to dense chaff voids up to 10mm, few other visible inclusions. 3 sherds, 25g.

F2: Sand-tempered. Moderate to dense sub-angular quartz less than 0.5mm. 1 sherd, 2g.

The pottery occurrence by number and weight of sherds per context by fabric type is shown in Table 1. Each date should be regarded as a *terminus post quem*.

The early-middle Saxon pottery is typical of that found in the region, and can be paralleled at a number of sites, such as Eynsham Abbey (Blinkhorn 2003). It cannot be dated other than to within the broad period. The Stamford ware sherd is a rim from a jar or pitcher, and is an early form 4 collared vessel which most likely dates to the second half of the 11th century (Kilmurry 1980, 136).

The rest of the assemblage is typical of medieval sites in the region, although the range of fabric types indicates that there was little significant activity after the 13th century.

Table 1: Pottery occurrence by number and weight (in g) of sherds per context by fabric type

	E/MS		STAM		OXAC		OXY		OXCX		OXAM		
Context	No	Wt	No	Wt	No	Wt	No	Wt	No	Wt	No	Wt	Date
10					2	26							11thC
13					1	3							11thC
23							1	4	3	12	1	3	13thC
27	3	25	1	27			2	13					L11thC
29							1	1			2	20	13thC
36	1	2											E/MS?
Total	4	27	1	27	3	29	4	18	3	12	3	23	

Other

Animal bone was retrieved from several contexts (see Appendix 1). However no context held significant assemblages with two fragments being the largest assemblage from a single context. The bone was in good condition.

A piece of tile was recovered from context (27), the fill of feature [28].

Survival of carbonised material is very poor. No charcoal was noticed in any deposit.

6 CONFIDENCE RATING

The work was carried out in sunny conditions. Cut features were easily observed truncating the natural geology. However the presence of the furrows may have obscured earlier features.

7 DISCUSSION

The shallowness of the features is probably a reflection of the degree of difficulty of digging through the underlying geology. In addition to this, the tops of features have been truncated by later cultivation.

From the pottery and stratigraphy it appears that there were three periods of activity represented by the features found during the course of the evaluation. A pit [37] in Trench 2 is dated by a sherd of early-middle Saxon pottery while two further sherds of this date were present in a later feature. While pit [37] could be later with the sherd being residual, the presence of three sherds of the early-middle Saxon period shows that there was activity of this date in the close vicinity.

Ditch [09] is dated to the 11-13th century as is pit [28]. Slightly later medieval material is present in pit [24] and furrow [29]. The material in the furrow probably is residual and the fact that furrow [30] truncates post hole 34 shows that agriculture replaced settlement in this area, probably in the latter medieval period. This may reflect a shrinking in the village caused by the Black Death. This area appears to have been on the outskirts of the medieval village and therefore it would be expected that it would be abandoned for a more central location. Alternatively the medieval activity may be connected with the possible Knights Templar's preceptory/grange just to the northeast and the abandonment may be connected with the suppression of the Order in the early 14th century.

The form of the early-middle Saxon occupation is unknown as only one possible pit can be assigned to this period. The medieval occupation would appear to include small and large pits, a recut boundary ditch and rows of post holes possibly forming fence lines. The two lines of post holes are not at right angles but lie at an angle of 50° to each other. It is of interest that that ditch lies on the edge of a change in geology.

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APPENDICES**APPENDIX 1 ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXT INVENTORY**

Context	Type	Description	Depth (mm)	Width (mm)	Length (mm)	Finds	Date
Trench 1							
01	Deposit	Drive surface	20	Trench	Trench	None	Modern
02	Deposit	Drive base	300	Trench	Trench	None	Modern
03	Deposit	Buried topsoil	290-340	Trench	Trench	Modern bricks	Pre-dwelling
04	Deposit	Natural	-	Trench	3000	-	
05	Deposit	Natural	-	Trench	6000	-	
06	Cut	Ditch	100	520-580	1600+	-	Medieval
07	Deposit	Fill of 06	30-50			None	
08	Deposit	Fill of 06	60			None	
09	Cut	Ditch	200	590	1600+	-	
10	Deposit	Fill of 09	120			Pot, bone	
11	Deposit	Fill of 09	60			None	
12	Cut	Pit	200	1080		-	
Context	Type	Description	Depth (mm)	Width (mm)	Length (mm)	Finds	Date
13	Deposit	Fill of 12	200			Pot, bone	
14	Deposit	Fill of 06	50			Bone	
Trench 2							
20	Deposit	Topsoil	100	Trench	Trench	None	Modern
21	Deposit	Subsoil	240	Trench	Trench	Breeze block, tile	Modern
22	Deposit	Natural	-	Trench	Trench	-	
23	Deposit	Fill of 24	200			Pot	
24	Cut	Pit	200	1120	700+	-	
25	Feature	Post hole	250	330	180+	None	
26	Feature	Post hole	250	180	320	None	
27	Deposit	Fill of 28	230-280			Pot, bone, cbm	
28	Cut	Pit?	230-280	1700+	?	-	
29	Feature	Furrow	?	3100		Bone	Medieval
30	Feature	Furrow	?	2800	?	None	Medieval
31	Feature	Furrow	120-150	2400+	?	None	Medieval
32	Feature	Post hole	60	300	300	Bone	
33	Feature	Post hole	60	280	300	None	

34	Feature	Post hole	60	240	170+	None	
35	Feature	Post hole	130+	300	300	None	
36	Deposit	Fill of 37	250			Bone	
37	Cut	Pit	250	900	450+	-	

cbm = ceramic building material