

JOHN MOORE HERITAGE SERVICES

AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF

AT

OLD COACH HOUSE, WILLOW BANK,

4 OXFORD ROAD, EYNHAM, OXFORDSHIRE

SP 4347 0919

On behalf of

Mr. M. Nightingale

MAY 2004

REPORT FOR

Mr. M. Nightingale
Willow Bank
4 Oxford Road
Eynsham
Oxfordshire
OX8 1HG

PREPARED BY

John Moore

FIELDWORK

19 January to 9 February 2004

REPORT ISSUED

12 May 2004

ENQUIRES TO

John Moore Heritage Services
Long White Cloud
Waterperry Road
Holton
Oxfordshire OX33 1PW

Telephone/Fax 01865 876637

Email: jmhs99@hotmail.com

Site Code;

EYWB 04

JMHS Project No:

1397

County Museums Accession No.

2004.3

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Summary

A watching brief was conducted by John Moore Heritage Services during the excavation of foundation and drainage trenches for an extension to the old Coach House during conversion to a dwelling. This trenching revealed a series of pits and a possible ditch. One pit was dated to the 15th century while the other features were of unknown date. A sherd of Roman greyware was retrieved from the overburden above the features.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Site Location (Figure 1)

The development site was located on the south side of Oxford Road, Eynsham in the grounds of Willow Bank (NGR SP 4347 0919). The geology was limestone gravel overlying Oxford Clay and the site lay at approximately 64m OD. The development area was within the domestic garden of Willow Bank.

1.2 Planning Background

West Oxfordshire District Council granted planning permission for the conversion of the old Coach House into a residential dwelling, which involved an extension to the south of the building. Due to the potential presence of below ground archaeological deposits a condition was attached to the planning consent that required the implementation of an archaeological watching brief during the course of the groundworks in order to preserve by record any archaeological remains of significance. As the Coach House abuts the boundary of a Scheduled Ancient Monument (SAM 118), Scheduled Monument Consent had also been obtained (HSD/9/2/5876, dated 5/1/04).

1.3 Archaeological Background

The development site abuts the boundary of the Scheduled Ancient Monument (SAM 118) of the Benedictine Abbey of Eynsham, which was founded in 1005 towards the end of the period of late Saxon monastic reform. King Aethelred granted authority to Aethelmaer, one of his elder statesmen, for the establishment of a Benedictine House. The new foundation replaced an existing Minster Church. The uncertainty of the Norman Conquest affected Eynsham Abbey and it was deserted for about fifty years. In 1109, Henry I confirmed a Charter of Foundation, which led to a complete rebuilding of the Abbey. Thereafter Eynsham Abbey prospered becoming the third richest religious house in Oxfordshire.

After the Dissolution, the Abbey and all its lands passed into private hands. No trace of the Abbey complex survives above ground. Archaeological excavations by the Oxford Archaeological Unit in the area of St Peters Church and the adjacent graveyard have established that well preserved archaeological features relating to the Abbey survive below ground (Keevil, 1995).

An archaeological field evaluation was undertaken in the grounds of the ‘Shrubbery’ by Oxford Archaeology in 1992, just west of the development site. A prehistoric subsoil was cut by several early Anglo Saxon features, which included ditches and postholes. The subsoil was overlaid by a thick medieval ploughsoil sealing the Anglo Saxon features at depths of 650 and 800mm. This suggests that the Shrubbery grounds are located within a field system providing produce for the Abbey.

The Oxford Archaeological Unit undertook a watching brief in 1975, nearby, during the construction of a swimming pool. Stake and postholes and a possible sunken feature building were located. These features contained early Anglo Saxon pottery.

2 AIMS OF THE INVESTIGATION

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

- To make a record of any significant remains revealed during the course of any operations that may disturb or destroy archaeological remains.
- In particular:
 - to record any evidence relating to the known Anglo Saxon occupation in the area.
 - to record any evidence associated with the Abbey.
- To make the results of the investigations public.

3 STRATEGY

3.1 Research Design

John Moore Heritage Services carried out the work to a Written Scheme of Investigation agreed with Oxfordshire County Archaeological Services, on behalf of the local planning authority and English Heritage (acting on behalf of the Department for Culture, Media and Sport). 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.

The recording was carried out in accordance with the standards specified by the Institute of Field Archaeologists (1994).



Figure 1. Site location.

3.2 Methodology

An archaeologist monitored the excavation of the foundation trenches for the new extension. Part of trenches had been excavated prior to the arrival of the archaeologist. The trenches were 650-750mm wide and generally 1000-1150mm deep. A trench for new drainage was inspected on two visits. The trench was to the east of the Coach House. As the depth of this trench was within the topsoil, the excavation of it was not monitored. The spoil derived from the service trench was sorted in order to recover any significant artefacts.

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

4 RESULTS (Figures 2 and 3)

All deposits and features were assigned individual context numbers. Context numbers in [] indicate features i.e. walls, pit cuts; while numbers in () show feature fills or deposits of material.

The lowest deposit comprised compact pale yellow sand and gravel (09). This constituted the natural of the site and was seen to be *c.* 600-750mm below the present ground level. Cut into the top of the sand and gravel deposits was a series of features. Sealing the features was a topsoil deposit of loose dark grey slightly sandy silt with 5%, by content, of small and medium sized gravel (01). Within the topsoil were lenses of loose medium grey brown very sandy silt and lenses of sand and gravel. These lenses may have derived from landscaping and the construction of the Coach House.

Northern foundation trench

A small pit or posthole [11] was partly within the trench and partly under the coach house. It was sub-circular, 330mm in diameter and 240mm deep with sides at 70° from the horizontal and a rounded base. The feature was filled by pale grey sandy silt with 60% small/medium gravel (10). A large pit [08] was dated to the 15th century. This pit was *c.* 1.60m in diameter and survived 1.5m deep with a generally flat base and undercut (collapsed) east side. The fill (07) was mainly dark brown grey silt with *c.* 30% gravel in lower fill and only 2-5% gravel in the upper fill. The upper fill (700mm) appeared to be a deliberate backfilling with a large lens of gravel (06) on the west side (Fig. 3). The nature of the pit and filling sequence were indicative of a cess pit.

Near the north end of this foundation trench was a small posthole [03] seen in the north side of the trench. This feature was either sub-circular or rectangular with vertical sides and a flat base. The posthole was 180mm wide and 120mm deep and was filled by moderately compact dark grey brown sandy silt with 20% fine and small gravel (02).

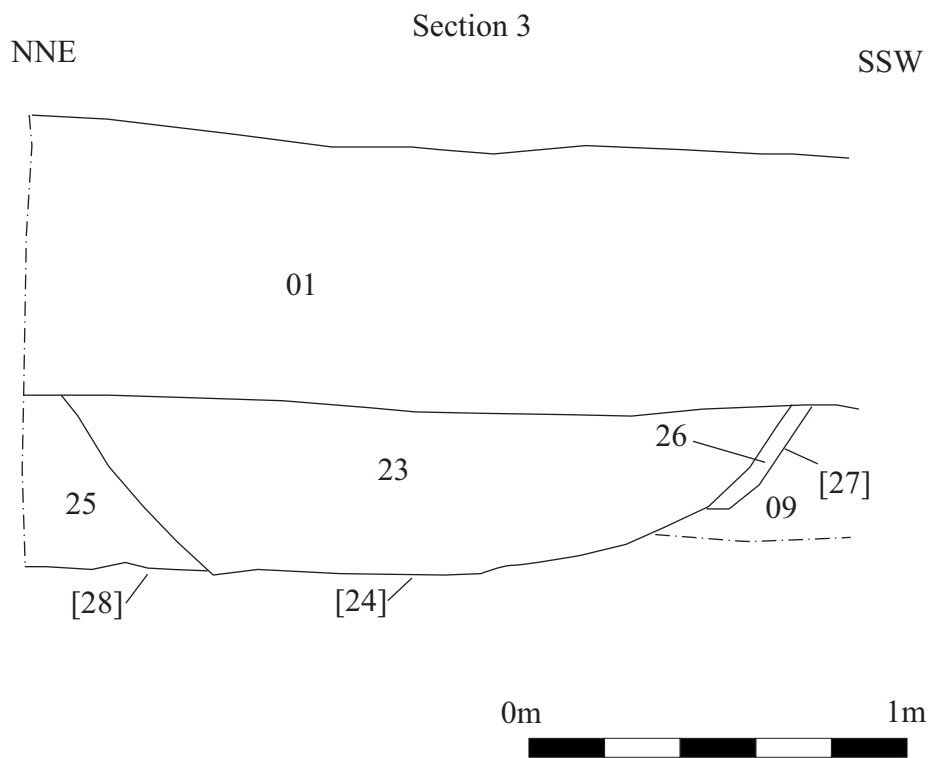
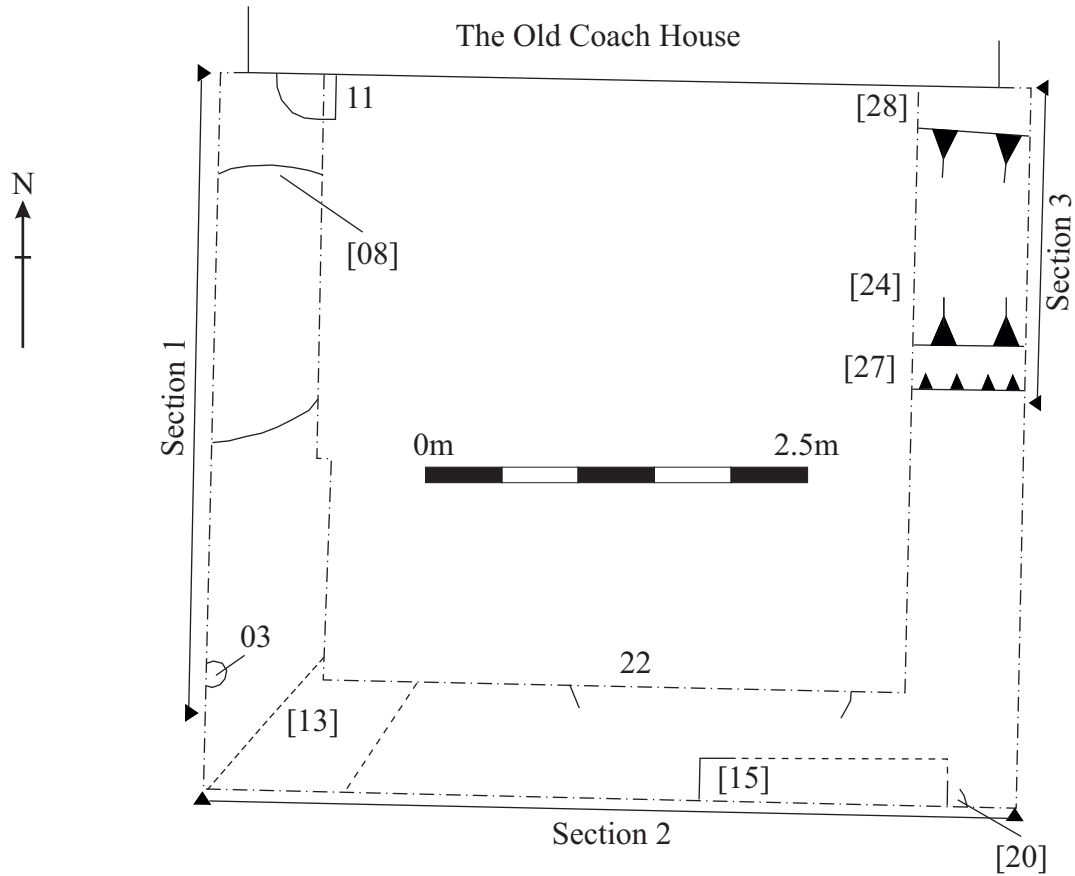


Figure 2. Plan of Features and Section 3

West foundation trench

A NW/SE orientated ditch [13] was seen in both the west and east sides of this foundation trench. The estimated width at the top was 700mm and it was 260mm deep. The NE side was at an angle of 30-35° while the SW side was at 45°. The base was slightly rounded. The ditch was filled with mid/dark grey very sandy silt with 10-15% fine and small gravel and large lenses of gravel (12).

Two intercutting features were present near the centre of the trench. From observations during the mechanical excavation it is thought that pit [15] cut, and was later than, pit [22]. Pit [15] was rectangular with only the eastern 400mm of it extending into the trench. The pit was 2.1m long N/S and 420mm deep with vertical sides and a flat base. The pit was lined with a 120mm thick layer of compact pale yellow/blue grey clay (18) on the base and the lower side (Fig. 3). Lying on the base of this lining was a layer of moderately compact orange brown and mid/dark grey (60:40) clayey silt with 1% small gravel (17). This was 70mm thick, in lens as opposed to a continuous layer. Above the last was a further layer of clay (16) similar to (18). This was 60mm thick but did not survive as a continuous layer. It appeared to be in large lumps with small gaps between. The pit was finally filled with mid grey brown silt with 2% gravel which survived in the top 200mm of the pit (14). It is probable that most of the height of the sides of the pit were lined with clay, which had mostly collapsed. This collapse would be the upper clay layer (16) lying onto top of material accumulating as silt when the feature was left open after disuse.

The above pit cut a large pit of unknown plan [22]. It had near vertical sides and a flat base and was 1.2m wide where it was visible in section. The pit was 350mm deep and was filled with pale grey pale brown clayey silt with 2% gravel and large lenses of gravel (21). The large clay lined pit (15) also cut a further feature to the south. This feature [20] only survived 140mm long N/S. It had a depth of 150mm with a near vertical south side and a flat base. The feature was filled by mid/dark grey slightly clayey silt with 1% fine gravel content.

South foundation trench

Three intercutting features were recorded in the east end of this trench. The features extended across the trench. The latest feature [24] was 1.75m wide and 440mm deep with sides of 60° and a flat base sloping up slightly from east to west. This feature was filled by mid grey brown sandy silt with 5% gravel (23). This feature cut on its west side (Fig. 2, Section 3) a further feature [27], which only survived 300mm wide and 300mm deep. The base, as seen, was slightly rounded and the west side of the feature was at 80°. It was filled with dark grey brown slightly sandy silt with 20% gravel content (26). To the east of the later feature was a further feature predating feature [24]. This [28] had a flat base and was 450mm deep and at least 500mm wide, continuing under the coach house. This was filled by pale grey brown 20:80 sandy silt with 30% gravel (25).

These three features appeared to be linear extending across the foundation trench. If so, then they are elements of a recut ditch with 24 being the last in the sequence. The features did not extend across the area of the extension. If they belong to a ditched boundary sequence then the north foundation trench cut across a gap in the boundary.

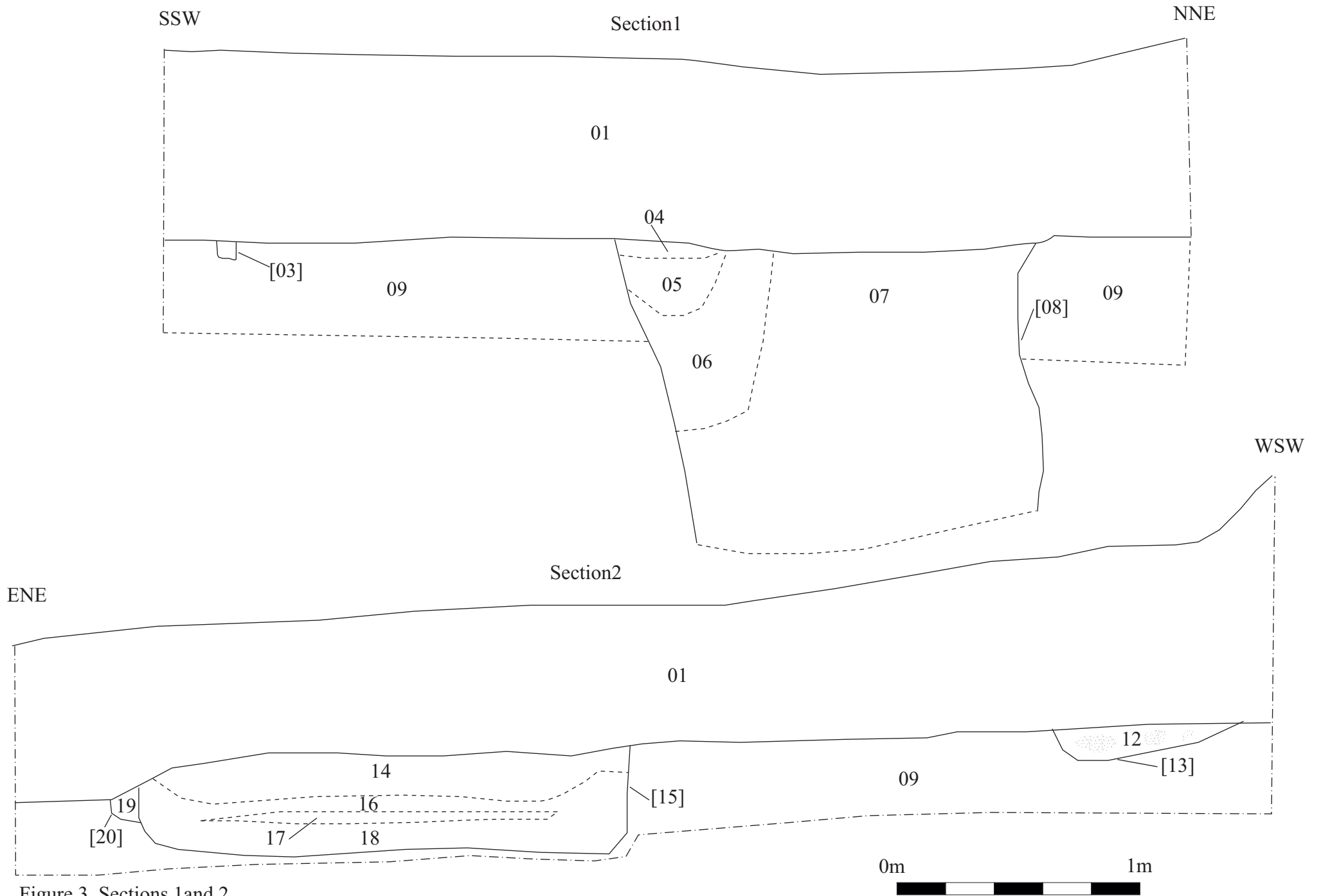


Figure 3. Sections 1 and 2

Alternatively the features could be parts of large pits. The impression in the field however, was that they were ditches.

5 FINDS

Pottery by Paul Blinkhorn

Two sherds of pottery were noted, one from context (7) the fill of pit [08]. It is a fabric which is somewhat unusual for the region, being fine and slightly sandy with few visible inclusions apart from sparse black ironstone, and an external white slip. It cannot be paralleled in the large assemblage from Eynsham Abbey (Blinkhorn 2003), and appears more typical of the late medieval transitional earthenwares noted at large middle Thames Valley towns such as Reading or Windsor. On stylistic grounds, it seems most likely to date to the 15th century.

The other sherd is a grey-ware sherd of Roman date.

Other finds

Animal bone was seen in the large medieval cess pit [08] but was not retained. No other finds were seen.

6 DISCUSSION

While numerous features were present the lack of finds makes interpretation of the results difficult. The only dateable feature is the cess-like pit [08] of the 15th century. This indicates that a building was present on this plot during this period. Some of the other features may well belong to this period. However, with the finding of Anglo-Saxon features some 60m to the west it cannot be ruled out that features of this date may be present. It is also possible that one or more of features could be of Roman date given the presence of a sherd of pottery of this date.

The clay-lined pit [15] suggests industrial/craft activities and may well have been used for tanning. As stated above, it is not possible to determine the date of this type of activity.

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