

JOHN MOORE HERITAGE SERVICES

AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF

ON

COMBE MILL ELECTRICITY CABLING TRENCH,

COMBE, OXFORDSHIRE

SP 4174 1496

On behalf of

Blenheim Estates

APRIL 2008

REPORT FOR Blenheim Estates
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FIELDWORK 18th – 19th February 2008

REPORT ISSUED 7th April 2008

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Site Code COCM 08
JMHS Project No: 1904
Archive Location The archive will be deposited with Oxfordshire County
Museum Service under accession number 2008.18.

CONTENTS

	Page
<i>SUMMARY</i>	1
1 INTRODUCTION	1
1.1 Site Location	1
1.2 Planning Background	1
1.3 Archaeological Background	1
2 AIMS OF THE INVESTIGATION	3
3 STRATEGY	3
4 RESULTS	3
4.1 Agricultural field	4
4.2 Garden area	9
4.2 Reliability of Techniques and Results	9
5 FINDS	9
5.1 Pottery	9
6 DISCUSSION	9
7 BIBLIOGRAPHY	10
APPENDIX Archaeological Context Inventory	11
 FIGURES	
Figure 1 Site location	2
Figure 2 Plan of excavation	5
Figure 3 Plans of burials	6
Figure 4 Sections	8

Summary

John Moore Heritage Services concluded an archaeological investigation on 18th – 19th February 2008. This involved the inspection of an electricity cabling trench already partially dug prior to archaeological involvement. Archaeological intervention became necessary once human remains were uncovered.

Three inhumations, four wall foundations, a possible quarry pit and two unidentified stone filled features were discovered.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Site location (Figure 1)

The development site is located to the south east of Combe Mill, south of the railway line and south west of Blenheim Estate (NGR SP 4174 1496). It is situated at about 74m above Ordnance Datum and the underlying geology is shown as Cornbrash. The site is currently mostly in agricultural use.

1.2 Planning Background

A trench was being excavated along the northern bank of the River Evenlode for an electricity cable. The work did not require planning permission but encountered archaeological deposits in the form of walls and at least one burial. Oxfordshire County Archaeological Services (OCAS) visited the site and advised that further work should be carried out with an archaeologist present.

This was done due to the possibility of further archaeological deposits and burials being damaged or destroyed as a result of the trenching and to record those already encountered. An archaeological presence was also to help to ascertain any further possible mitigation strategies which might be needed such as changing the route of the trench should other significant archaeological deposits be encountered.

1.3 Archaeological Background

A Design Brief supplied by the Oxfordshire County Archaeological Services (Oram 2008) highlighted the further potential for the site.

The site is located immediately south of the site of the deserted medieval village of Combe (PRN 1057; NGR 4179 1499) and the field contains a number of earthworks believed to be house platforms. The site was surveyed in 1972 by D Benson, which recorded a raised platform and stone walls to the south west of the field. This is thought to be the probable location of the village church.

The antiquarian White Kennet visited the site in the late 17th century and reported seeing the foundations of a perimeter wall and of a building which he supposed to be a church. The site lay just above the river bank *c.* 100 m. south east of the mill, on a knoll covered with fragments of worked stone beyond which, on the north east and



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0 m 50 m

Figure 1. Site Location

south east, was the outline of a boundary wall. Ploughing has destroyed any plan, but it has uncovered ridge tiles, stone slates, part of a 13th-century tomb cover, and medieval mouldings of uncertain date.

Trenching for the electricity cable had already been started and encountered a series of possibly three walls and at least one skeleton. These were found at the start of the raised area believed to be the location of the village church. It was very likely therefore that further trenching would encounter further burials. The trench was to be re-routed in order to attempt to avoid further burials should it be necessary.

2 AIMS OF THE INVESTIGATION

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

- To identify and record any archaeological remains exposed during the development works

In particular:

- To record any remains relating to the church, graveyard and settlement of the medieval village of Combe.

3 STRATEGY

An archaeological Project Officer along with an archaeological technician were on site during the excavation of the rest of the electricity trench.

Any archaeological features or other remains i.e. concentrations of artefacts, were recorded by written, drawn and photographic record. All artefacts were collected.

Human remains were recorded as appropriate and re-interred within the pipe trench during backfilling. Articulated remains were re-interred at their original locations.

Site procedures followed IFA guidelines (1994), MAP2 (English Heritage 1991) and the requirements of the OCAS brief.

The work was carried out to a Written Scheme of Investigation approved by the Oxfordshire County Archaeological Services.

4 RESULTS

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

Preliminary inspection of the electricity cable trench previously dug before archaeological intervention revealed two inhumations, some charnel deposits and two possible walls. Following some discussion it was decided to extend the trench slightly to see if further inhumations would be disturbed on the trench's original course. This would also provide the opportunity to ascertain if the trench line needed to be re-routed. A further skeleton was uncovered and the trench was abandoned. A new route was adopted curving around and as far away from the initial discoveries as was possible. The new trench was dug under continuous archaeological supervision up to and including digging through the garden of property No.1.

The cabling trench was typically 1.3m deep and 0.6m wide.

4.1 Agricultural field (Figures 1&2)

South East Section and Abandoned trench

The area where the inhumations were revealed was hand cleaned and recorded. From observations made during recording it could be seen that the natural had not been reached. Instead, a friable mid orange/brown slightly silty clay (1/02) was noted. This was 0.80m thick and continued beyond the depth of the trench. Cutting into this were two grave cuts [1/13] and [1/06]. [1/13], the furthest north west, was approximately 1.06m in width, 0.70m in depth and contained the legs of an adult, possibly male skeleton (1/03) in an extended supine position lying approximately NE-SW (Fig. 3); the unexposed head being towards the NW. The grave backfill, a mid orange/brown silty clay (1/14) was very similar to (1/02) and contained a single sherd of medieval pottery dating to the late 11th – 12th century.

Slightly further SE a single grave cut [1/06] 1.32m wide and 0.70m deep appeared to contain two inhumations, (1/04) and (1/05). Both were in extended supine positions and were buried side by side with their upper torso regions exposed in the trench (Fig. 3). The size of the skeletal remains observed suggests that both were juvenile in age. Both of these burials were revealed before any archaeological involvement on the site and showed damage caused by the digging bucket during machining. (1/04) was missing the entire skull whilst (1/05) was missing part. Again, both were orientated approximately NE-SW. The grave backfill (1/07), a darkish orange/brown silty clay contained occasional fragments of Cornbrash and charnel bone but no dating evidence.

Even further SE on the line of the abandoned trench cutting through a decayed Cornbrash natural (1/12) were two additional features, [1/08] and [1/10]. [1/08] was 1.50m wide and 0.74m deep whilst [1/10] was 1.50m wide and 1.00m deep. Both of these were originally thought to be walls or wall foundations but closer inspection cast doubt on this assumption. Both appeared in the SW facing section but [1/08] was not as obvious in the NE facing section suggesting that the feature was perhaps petering out, or was in fact more discrete. Both seemed to have very steep cut sides containing large inverted slabs of Cornbrash (1/09) and (1/11)) packed closely together with no obvious bonding material. Footings for dry stonewalls usually contain square shape boulders placed together in two parallel rows, the square ends facing outwards and the space between filled with irregular stones which bind together under pressure, completely different to observations made in the section. The features were also cut far too deep. The inverted nature of the stone, unlike the horizontal Cornbrash natural

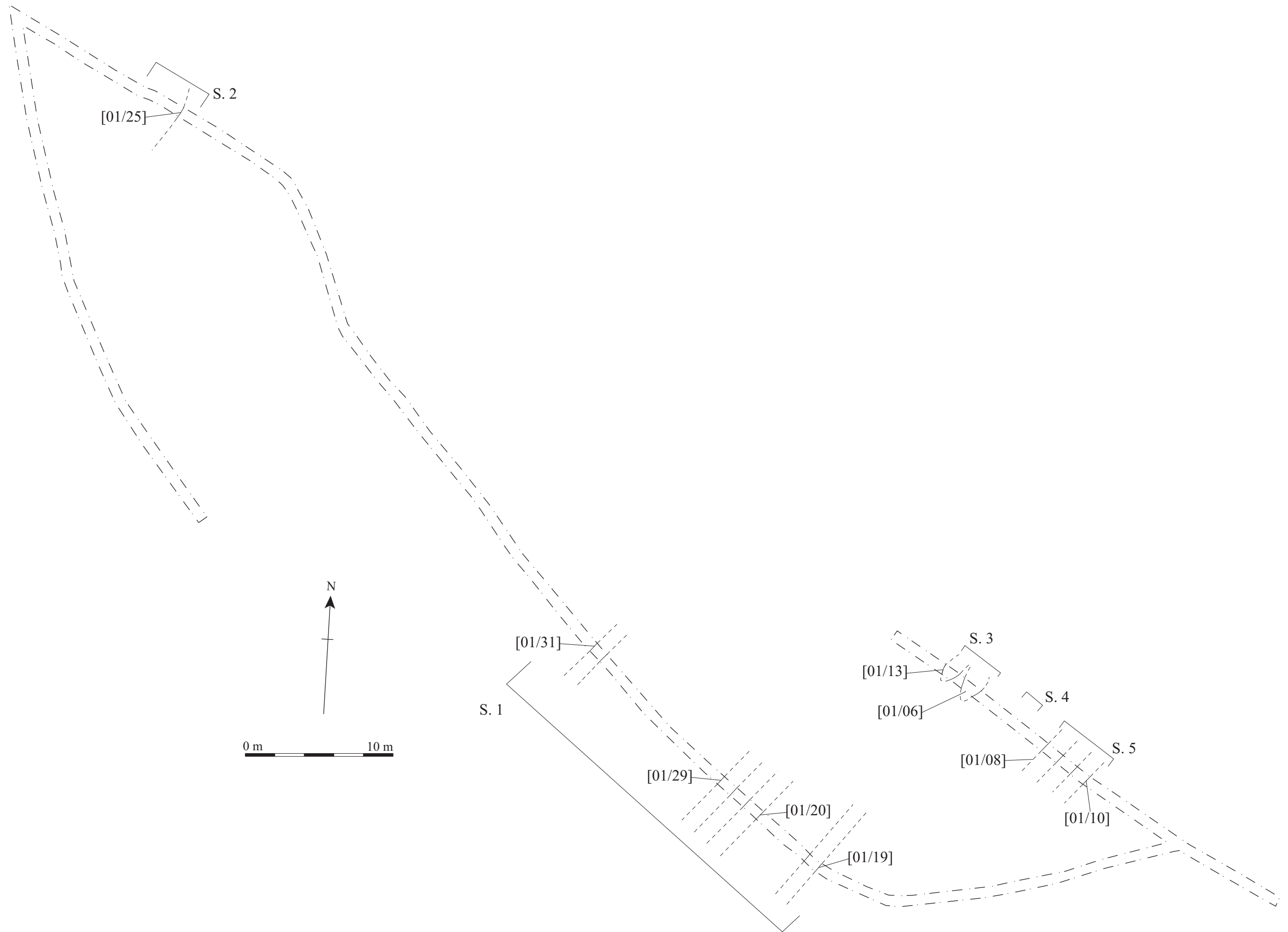


Figure 2. Plan of excavation

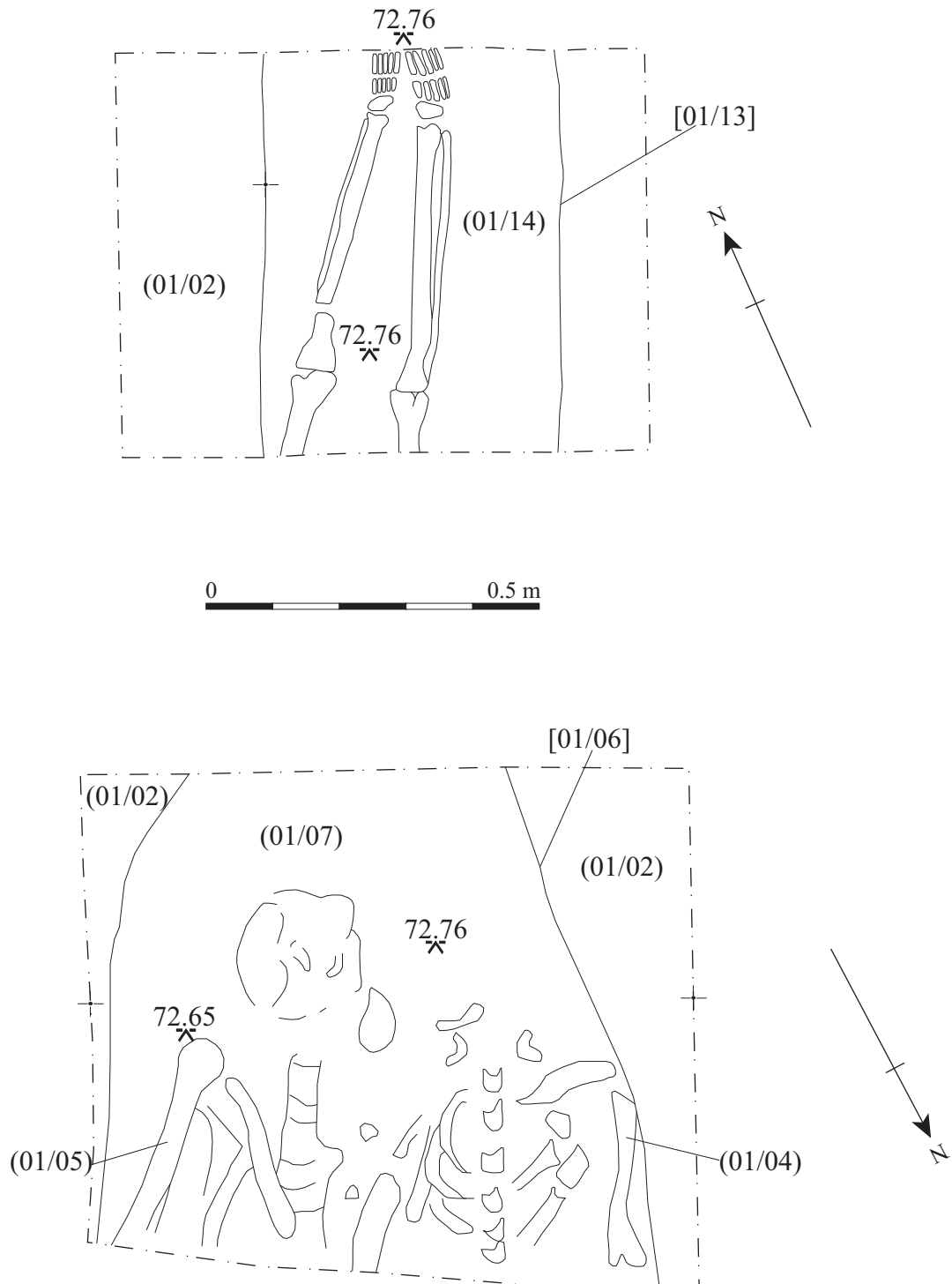


Figure 3. Plan of burials

observed elsewhere, suggests the stone had been dumped in the cut and not carefully placed.

A first edition Ordnance Survey map of the area shows three parallel rectangular features thought to be planting beds (watercress?) in the same field as [1/08] and [1/10] but further to the southeast. They appear much wider (c.4.00m) than both but are on the same alignment. It is possible that these two unusual features are earlier examples of this activity but on a smaller scale. The map also shows that the area is liable to flooding so it is also plausible that these stone filled features acted as a form of drainage perhaps diverting floodwater away from the vicinity.

Above (1/09) and (1/11) stratigraphically was a light yellow/white clay/limestone deposit (1/15), noted to be mixed with (1/02) elsewhere in the trench.

Sealing all these deposits was (1/01), a dark grey/black silty loam topsoil 0.25m thick.

Two sherds of pottery dating from the early medieval period (late 11th-12th century) were recovered from the spoil heap.

Revised trench line

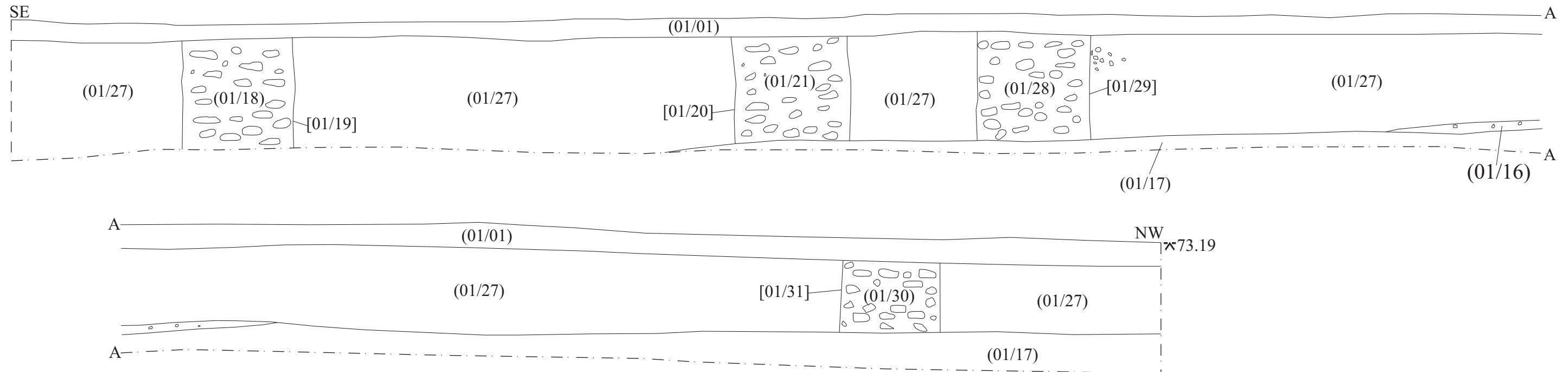
Although dug under continuous archaeological supervision, it was not possible to enter the trench once fully dug due to the unstable nature of the sections. Instead detailed notes were taken from the surface.

This area typically revealed a pale yellow/white Cornbrash natural (1/17) approximately 0.90 m thick in section underlying (1/01), a dark grey/black silty loam ploughsoil 0.30m thick. However, towards the area directly to SW of the abandoned original trench line, the stratigraphy changed. Cornbrash natural (1/17) was noted rising towards NW underlying a mid orange/grey/brown clay silt (1/27) with a maximum depth of 1.10m. A thin lense of mid reddish brown sandy silt (1/16) approximately 0.08m in thickness and 6m in length was observed between the natural (1/17) and (1/27) in part of the trench. This is perhaps indicative of in-situ burning.

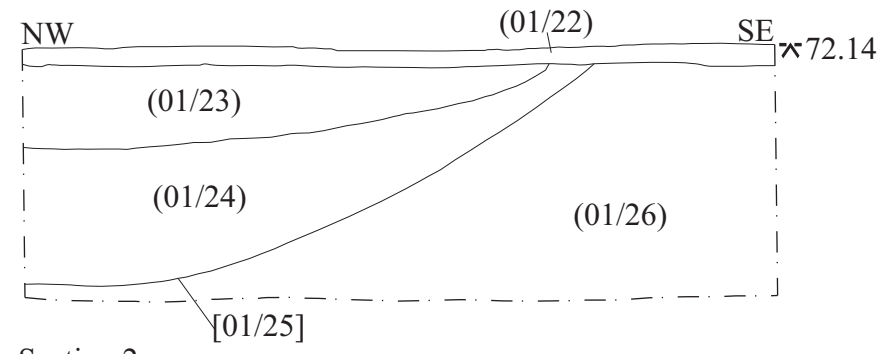
(1/27) was cut by features, [1/19], [1/20], [1/29] and [1/31], all of which contained wall foundations. No gap was noted between the foundation trench and the foundation itself.

[1/19] containing (1/18) was the furthest SE and measured 1.10m wide by at least 1.10m deep. 4.30m further NW was [1/20] containing (1/21). This was also 1.10m wide but only 1.00m deep. 1.5m further NW still was [1/29] with wall foundation (1/28), again 1.10m wide and 1.00m deep. [1/31] was the furthest northwesterly wall cut identified being 12.30m away from [1/29]. It measured 0.90m in width and 0.70m in depth and was noted to contain foundation (1/30). The last three were founded on the natural Cornbrash and it is realistic to assume that the deeper foundation [1/19] was similarly founded.

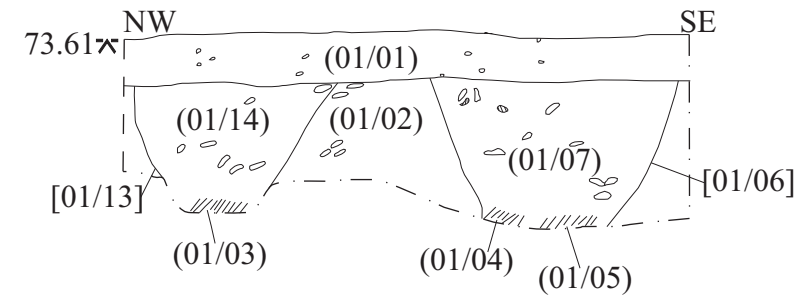
All of the wall foundations were constructed using roughly hewn and randomly coursed limestone pieces with a compact mid orange-brown slightly clayey sand



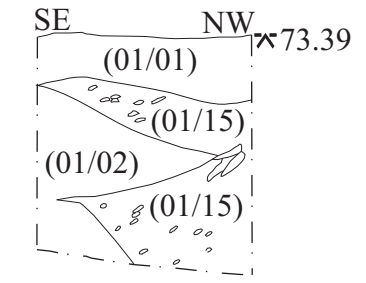
Section 1



Section 2

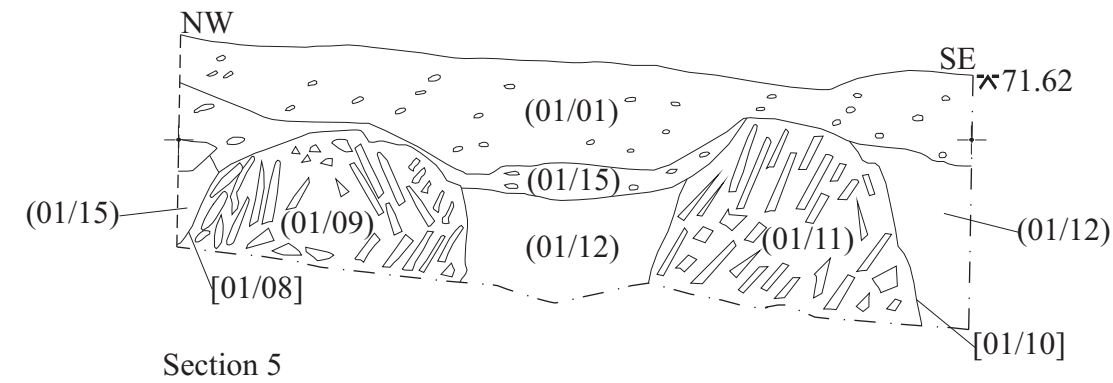


Section 3



Section 4

 Bone



Section 5



Figure 4. Sections

bonding material and appeared in section to be aligned NE-SW. None of them appeared to be on an obvious alignment with the two stone filled features [1/08] and [1/10] seen in the abandoned area. (1/30) appeared to be the most poorly constructed of the four. No dating evidence was recovered from these features.

Overlaying and sealing the stratigraphic sequence was (1/01), a dark grey/black ploughsoil 0.20m thick also noted in the abandoned trench

4.2 Garden area (Figure 1&2)

From observations made during the excavation of the trench through the garden, it could be seen that a Cornbrash natural (1/26) was overlain by a dark grey-black clay/silt topsoil (1/22) noted to be irregular in depth but typically 0.10m in thickness. Within this area feature [1/25] was noted cutting through the natural. [1/25] appears to be the cut for a large pit, possibly dug for quarrying. It contained two fills, the primary fill (1/24) consisted of a mid grey-brown silty clay containing moderate Cornbrash fragments 0.60m thick whilst the secondary fill (1/23) consisted of a mid orange-yellow sandy gravel 0.40m thick. No finds were recovered from this feature.

4.3 Reliability of Techniques and Results

The reliability of results is considered to be good. The archaeological investigation work took place in conditions varying from dry, cold and overcast to dry, cold and sunny.

5 FINDS

5.1 Pottery by Paul Blinkhorn

The pottery assemblage comprised 3 sherds with a total weight of 63g. It was all early medieval.

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

OXAC: Cotswold-type ware, AD975-1350. 2 sherds, 55g.

OXY: Medieval Oxford ware, AD1075 – 1350. 1 sherd, 8g.

The two sherds of Cotswolds ware are both jar rims, and were unstratified. The sherd of OXY (context 1/14) is glazed, and is from the neck of a tripod pitcher, a typical early medieval product of the tradition. The whole assemblage is typical of sites of the late 11th – 12th century in the region.

6 DISCUSSION

Due to the change of direction adopted with the digging of the cable trench, it was possible to leave the exposed inhumations in-situ without the need for removal. All of the disturbed bone was re-interred as close as possible to the position it was exposed from after the investigation.

The three inhumations uncovered were typical Christian burials, extended with the head to the west. These burials were found in a raised area thought to be the location of a former church and are therefore highly likely to be from a graveyard associated with this medieval place of worship.

The purpose of the two stone filled features within the abandoned trench is unclear but they might have performed some type of drainage function or be evidence of deep planting beds rather than actually be part of a wall construction.

The four wall foundations noted in the diverted trench are substantial in both width and depth. Their exact function is unknown and no dating evidence was recovered. They are on the same alignment as the stone filled features in the abandoned trench but unlike those features, the stone is bonded. All the features are at right angles to the track to the mill and also to the river. It is possible that they are part of the former church with the church on a NE – SW axis. However the closeness of the two walls [1/21] and [1/28] is difficult to explain. The proximity of the walls to the graves does however suggest that they are part of the church. One possibility is that the original church was a simple nave with walls [131] and [1/29], enlarged creating a wider nave [1/31] and [1/20] with a chapel or aisle added to the south side [1/19].

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APPENDIX – ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXT INVENTORY

Context	Type	Description	Depth (m)	Width (m)	Length (m)	Findings	Date
1/01	Layer	Topsoil		Tr.	Tr.		Modern
1/02	Layer	Friable mid orange/brown silty clay	0.80+	Tr.	10+		
1/03	Skeleton	Supine, extended. Aligned NE-SW	-	-	-		
1/04	Skeleton	Supine, extended. Aligned NE-SW	-	-	-		
1/05	Skeleton	Supine, extended. Aligned NE-SW	-	-	-		
1/06	Cut	Grave cut	0.7	1.32	Tr.		
1/07	Fill	Dark brown/orange silty clay	0.7	1.32	Tr.		
1/08	Cut	Drainage feature (?)	0.74	1.5	Tr.		
1/09	Fill	Pale yellow/white Cornbrash inverted slabs	0.74	1.5	Tr.		
1/10	Cut	Drainage feature (?)	1	1.5	Tr.		
1/11	Fill	Pale yellow/white inverted Cornbrash slabs	1	1.5	Tr.		
1/12	Natural	Decayed Cornbrash					Natural
1/13	Cut	Grave cut	0.7	1.06			
1/14	Fill	Friable mid orange/brown silty clay	0.7	1.06		Pottery	Medieval
1/15	Layer	Pale yellow/white clay/Cornbrash	0.9 max	5.5	Tr.		
1/16	Layer	Mid red/brown sandy silt	0.08	6	Tr.		
1/17	Natural	Pale yellow white Cornbrash					
1/18	Wall foundation	Roughly hewn, randomly coursed limestone	1.1	1.1	Tr.		
1/19	Cut	Foundation wall cut	1.1	1.1	Tr.		
1/20	Cut	Foundation wall cut	1	1.1	Tr.		
1/21	Wall foundation	Roughly hewn, randomly coursed limestone	1	1.1	Tr.		
1/22	Layer	Topsoil	0.1	Tr.	Tr.		Modern
1/23	Fill	Mid orange/yellow sandy gravel	0.4	Tr.	15 (?)		

Context	Type	Description	Depth (m)	Width (m)	Length (m)	 Finds	Date
1/24	Fill	Mid grey/brown silty clay	0.6	Tr.	15 (?)		
1/25	Cut	Large Pit?	1	Unknown	Unknown		
1/26	Natural	Cornbrash					Natural
1/27	Layer	Mid orangey grey/brown clay/silt	1	Tr.	25+		
1/28	Wall foundation	Roughly hewn, randomly coursed limestone	1	1.1	Tr.		
1/29	Cut	Wall foundation cut	1	1.1	Tr.		
1/30	Wall foundation	Roughly hewn, randomly coursed limestone	0.7	0.9	Tr.		
1/31	Cut	Wall foundation cut	0.7	0.9	Tr.		