



JOHN MOORE HERITAGE SERVICES

AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF

AT

ST. JAMES' CHURCH, CHURCH STREET,

SOMERTON, OXFORDSHIRE

NGR SP 4969 2863

DECEMBER 2009

REPORT FOR P R Alcock & Sons Ltd
On behalf of the Parochial Church Council
St James' Church, Somerton

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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	1
3 STRATEGY	3
3.1 Research Design	3
3.2 Methodology	3
4 RESULTS	3
4.1 Watching Brief Results	3
4.2 Reliability of Results and Techniques	5
5 FINDS	5
5.1 Human Remains	5
5.2 Pottery	6
5.3 Environmental Remains	6
6 DISCUSSION	6
7 ARCHIVE	7
8 BIBLIOGRAPHY	7
 FIGURES	
Figure 1 Site location	2
Figure 2 Plan and section	4
Figure 3 Photographs	8

Summary

John Moore Heritage Services carried out a watching brief at St James' Church graveyard, Somerton. One burial was located within the churchyard that was left in situ.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Site Location (Figure 1)

The Church of St James is located to the south of Church Street, Somerton (NGR SP 4969 2863). The underlying geology is considered to be Upper Lias Clay, but the site is close to the boundaries with deposits of Northampton Sands and Marlstone.

1.2 Planning Background

The Incumbent and Churchwardens of St James' Church, Somerton appointed P.R. Alcock & Sons Ltd. to oversee the improvements of the church including drainage on the northern side of the church, discharging into sewer on Church Street. As the alterations were likely to disturb human remains a programme of archaeological recording during groundwork was conducted that was approved by the Diocesan Archaeological Advisor.

1.3 Archaeological Background

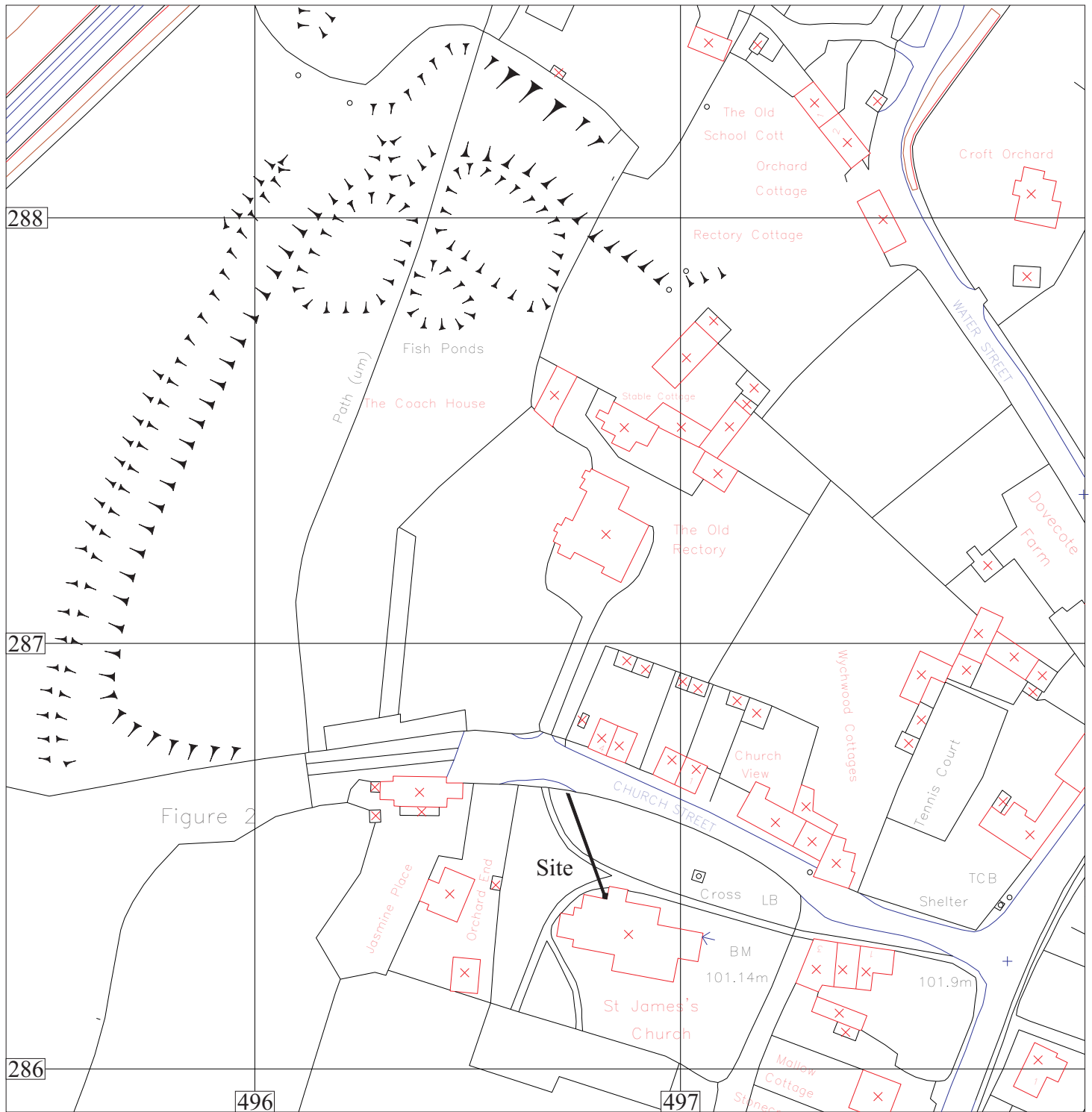
The Church of St James is located in the historic core of the medieval village. It dates from the 12th century and has a blocked Norman south door, but is predominately of 14th century date with a 15th century battlemented parapet round the nave, aisles and tower (Sherwood & Pevsner 1974, 767). There is a medieval cross shaft on a medieval base in the churchyard (County Sites and Monuments Record – SMR 5453).

Lying on the west side of the village are Somerton Village Earthworks (SMR 5614). These are a Scheduled Monument (Oxon SAM 261) and lie between the postulated castle to the north and the church to the south-west. The clearest features to be seen from the ground are the curving holloway of a former village street, which joined Church Street and a group of fishponds (SMR 5080). Pottery recovered from features to the east of the holloway ranged from the 11th century to early 13th century. A watching brief during the laying of a pipe in 1973/4 recorded stone foundations beneath the bank of the holloway (SMR 4476). This showed that the holloway which runs approximately south-west was banked up on the village side in the later medieval period at least in the area seen at its southern end. The fishponds resemble old pits and hollows of which one is probably a fishpond (SMR). The north ditch could probably be associated with the castle nearby.

2 AIMS OF THE INVESTIGATION

The aims of the investigation were as follows:

- to record and lift any burials encountered during the course of the work



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Figure 1. Site Location

- to excavate and record any archaeological features identify within the churchyard
- to provide a report and ordered archive on the investigation.

3 STRATEGY

3.1 Research Design

John Moore Heritage Services carried out the work to the standards required by the Diocesan Archaeological Adviser. 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 and possible.

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

3.2 Methodology

An archaeologist monitored the excavation of the trench running from the church towards northwest. Where the human remains were encountered limited investigations were conducted. The remains were left *in situ* and the depth of the groundwork was altered to accommodate this.

4 RESULTS (Figure 2)

4.1 Watching Brief Results

All features were assigned individual context numbers. This number covered both the feature cut and the fill for pits, unless the feature was sample excavated by hand. Context numbers in () show feature fills or deposits of material.

The drainage trench was not of a uniform depth; by the Church it was roughly 0.4m deep and sloped down to the north to approximately 1.2m deep.

Within approximately 12m of the church the lowest deposit recorded was a yellow-orange sandy-clay (03) that was up to 0.4m thick, further to the north this was seen to overlie a compact pale brown-yellow clay-sand (04). Both deposits are thought to be geological in origin and maybe related to the Northampton Sand know to the west of the site.

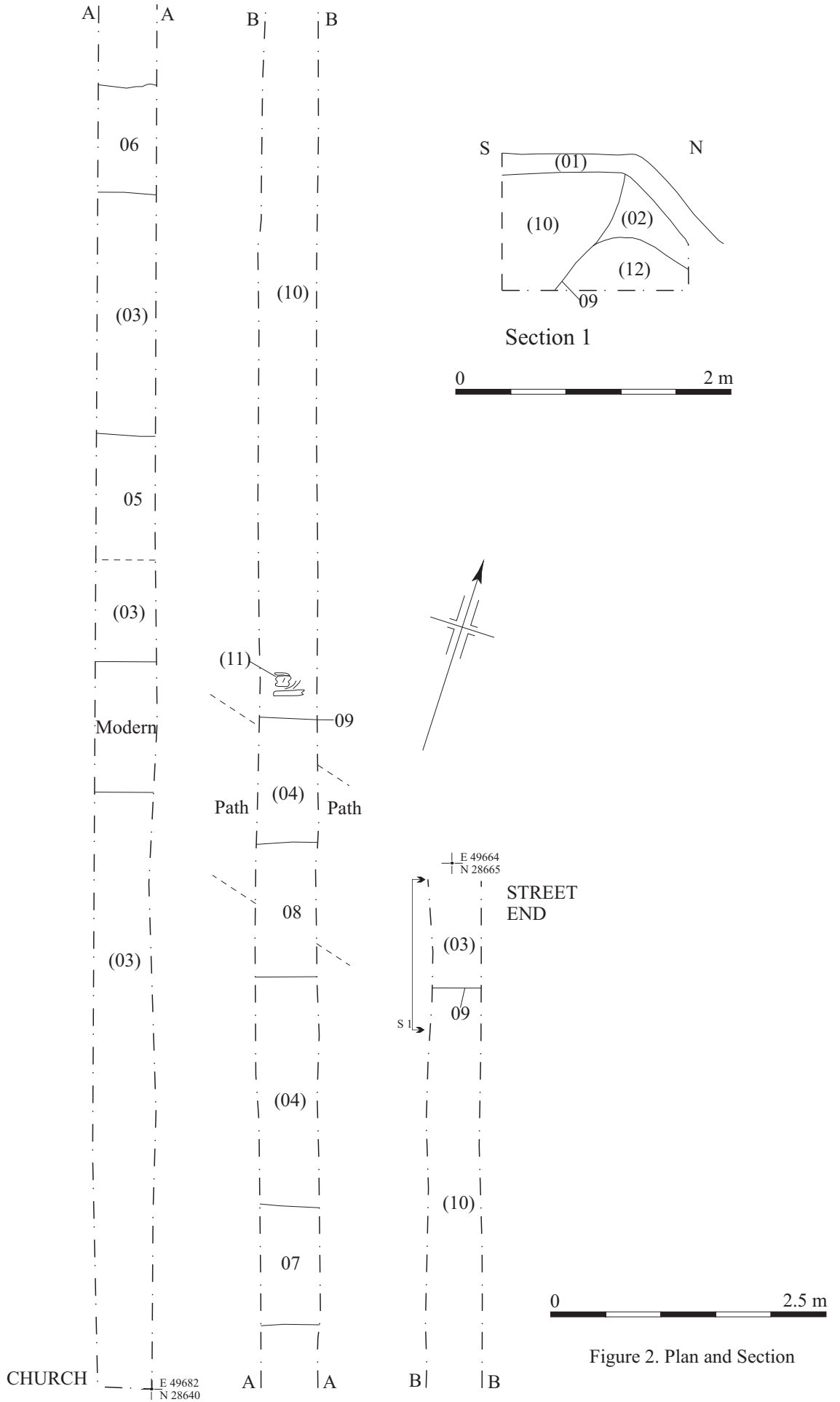


Figure 2. Plan and Section

Overlying the upper layer (03) was a subsoil of brown-orange sandy clay (02) containing small quantities of stone and the rare animal bone. This was up to 0.5m thick

Cut into this was what was thought to be a soak-away 5m from the Church (marked 'Modern' on Fig. 2). This cut was filled with stone and a ceramic pipe lead out of it.

Localised disturbances of the soil sequence were noticed in the section of the trench possibly indicating the presence of four grave-cuts 05, 06, 07 and 08. All appeared to be approximately 1.2-1.3m wide. All were filled with a similar mottled brown-grey sandy clay. None of these graves was fully excavated and no inhumations disturbed.

At approximately 18m from the Church was a recognisable cut 09 for a grave, however, as the trench was extended it became apparent that an area roughly 10m wide had been the subject of multiple inter-cutting burials. This area was filled with a dark grey-brown-orange mottled sandy clay (10) that was at least 1.1m thick. It was flecked with charcoal and contained small quantities of disarticulated human bone.

Located within deposit (10) was one human inhumation (11). The inhumation was located at the lowest limit of the excavation depth for the trench. The profile of the trench was altered slightly to accommodate preservation *in situ*. The exact location of the inhumation was recorded, and the burial itself left intact and covered by 0.10m of soil.

At the far end of the trench, roughly 26m from the Church the northern side of the cut for this area of burial was seen. It cut through the subsoil of brown-orange sandy clay (02).

Here the subsoil (02) was seen to be sitting on what might have been a remnant bank (12), but equally could be a natural geological deposit similar to layer (03). This appeared to have a rounded profile in section (Fig. 2 & 3), although this could be the effect of the cut for the burials 09 and the ground level falling towards the street. This fall in ground level could be explained by a cut to facilitate the construction of the boundary wall and subsequent landscaping.

4.2 Reliability of Results and Techniques

The work was conducted during a period of heavy rain showers this caused some instability to trench edges, and made working condition within a deep and narrow trench very difficult.

5 FINDS

5.1 Human Remains

The watching brief located one human inhumation (11) within deposit (10). The skeleton was only partially uncovered. The right humerus, ribs and several thoracic and lumbar vertebrae were recorded. It would appear to be of a young or small adult.

Small amounts of disarticulated human remains were also been found in deposit (10). Disturbed, disarticulated skeletal material is of limited scientific value, it is difficult to date and secondly - most scientific work involves relating different types of data to one another at the individual level and with disarticulated material it is not possible to combine data in this way. For these reasons the disarticulated bone is usually not considered worthy of study and regarding the time constrained nature of this watching brief this material was not analysed *in situ*.

No remains were removed from the Churchyard.

5.2 Pottery

A single sherd of medieval pottery occurred in the graveyard soil (10). It was a base sherd from a jar, classified as fabric OXAC in the Oxfordshire County type-series (Mellor 1984; 1994). The ware has a general date-range of c AD975-1350. The sherd was in very good condition. It was not removed from the Churchyard.

5.3 Environmental Remains

No environmental samples were taken due to the nature of the deposits encountered.

6 DISCUSSION

A wall along Church Street forms the northern boundary of the Churchyard. There is a difference of approximately 2m in ground level from the lower street to the Churchyard. Indeed there is a further rise in ground level within the Churchyard from the top of this wall to the level of the path by roughly 0.6m.

This second rise in levels has traditionally been explained by centuries of burials in the cemetery having raised the level of the ground surrounding it and the general rise by the postulation of a medieval Holloway along the line that is now Church Street.

It is evident that only certain areas of the churchyard have seen a high amount of burial activity, certainly not enough to explain the rise in ground level above the wall. The presence of the subsoil (02) at this point also points to no artificial rising of the ground level.

The natural deposits (03 and 04) were seen to gently slope down towards the north. They are, however, different to the geological deposits seen under the present street (JMHS 2005)

It would seem most likely that deposit (12) does not represent a bank, but is in fact a remnant of the natural geological deposits of the area, which have been cut into by human activity.

The presence of a Holloway along what is now Church Street is the most likely cause of the change in ground level. Unfortunately no direct evidence was ascertained for this during the watching brief.

7 ARCHIVE

Archive Contents

The archive consists of the following:

Paper record

The project brief
The primary site records
The project report

The archive currently is maintained by John Moore Heritage Services. The archive will be transferred to:

Oxfordshire Museums Resource Centre, Cotswold Dene, Standlake, Witney OX29 7QG

8 BIBLIOGRAPHY

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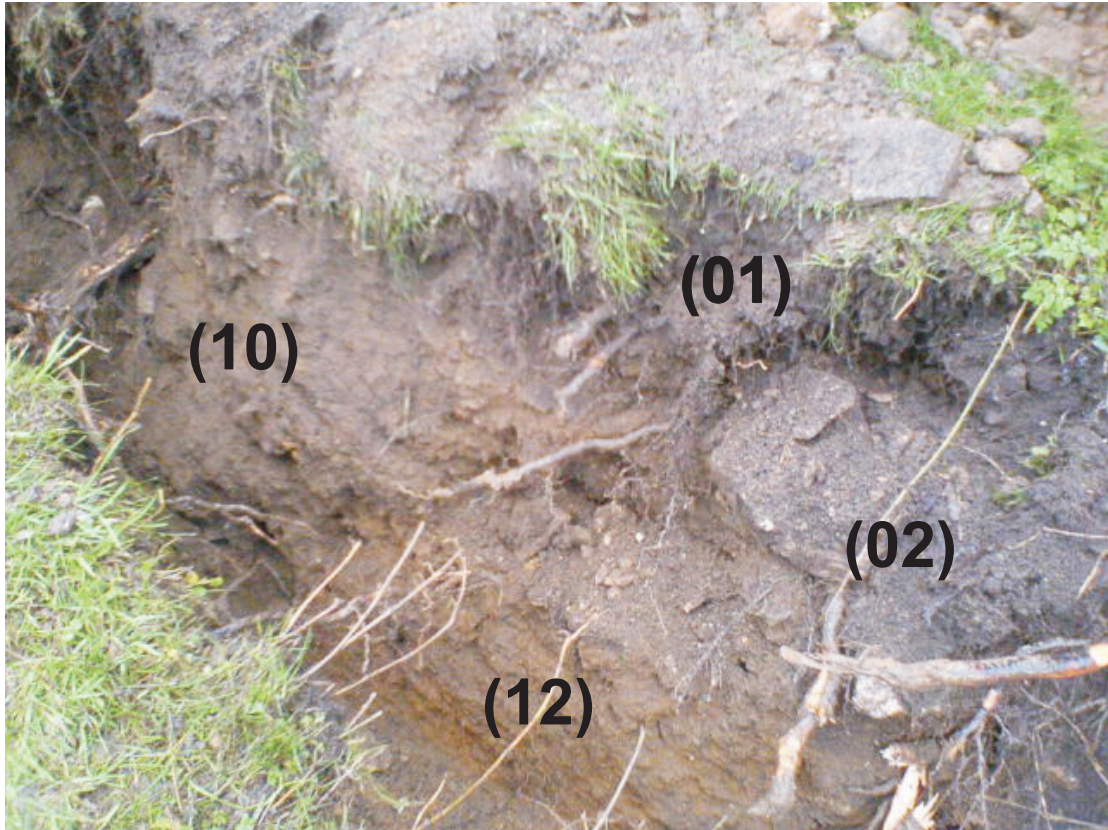


Plate 1. Section 1



Plate 2. Overview