

JOHN MOORE HERITAGE SERVICES

**09/02339 – COURT FARM, 75 THE AVENUE,
WORMINGHALL, BUCKINGHAMSHIRE**

ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF

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Summary

A watching brief was conducted by John Moore Heritage Services during ground works for two new house extensions and a soak-away at Court Farm, Worminghall. The area to be developed was adjacent to the medieval church of St Peter & Paul in the village.

Two medieval pits and an undated pit were found. An unexplained structure adjacent to the house was found.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Site Location (Figure 1)

The development site is located at Court Farm, 75 The Avenue, Worminghall (NGR SP 6419 0801) The area of the ground works form part of the garden of Court Farm. The underlying geology is Oakley Member Limestone with small pockets of river terrace gravels.

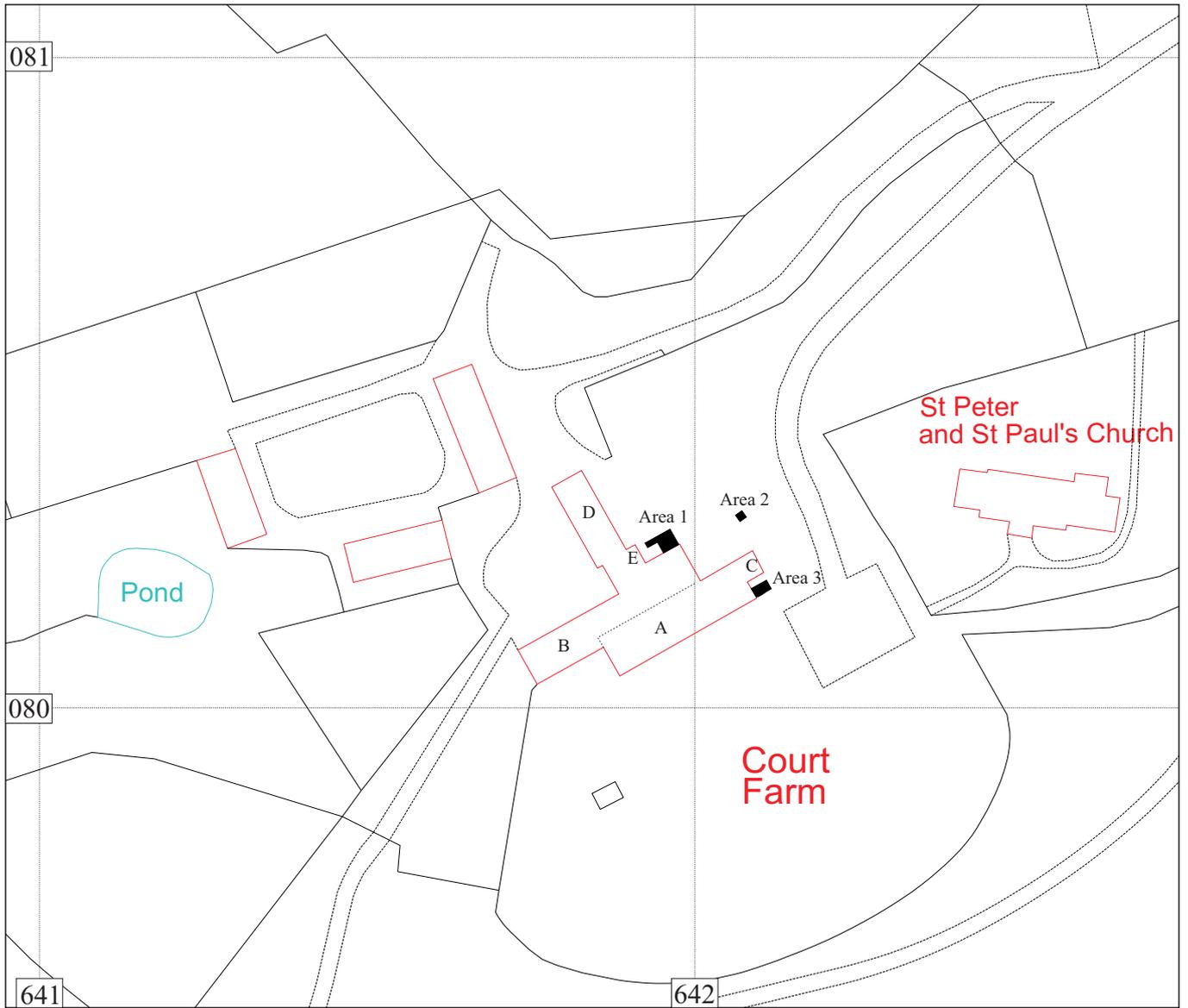
1.2 Planning Background

Aylesbury Vale District Council had granted planning permission under (09/02339/ALB) for the erection of a number of new extensions to the existing buildings. Due to the potential of the site to contain buried archaeological remains a condition was attached requiring that an archaeological watching brief be carried out during the period of ground works. This was in line with PPG 16 and Local Plan policies. Buckinghamshire County Archaeological Service (BCAS) prepared a *Brief* for such archaeological work. The *Written Scheme of Investigation* outlined the method by which the watching brief would be carried out in order to preserve by record any archaeological remains of significance.

1.3 Archaeological Background

This site is of interest because the development area lies within the historic core of the village and immediately adjacent the medieval church of St Peter & St Paul. Worminghall is mentioned in the Domesday Survey as a single manor under the ownership of the Bishop of Coutances. In 1304 the manor was granted the rights to two markets and two fairs to be held at the manor. Jeffries' late 18th century county map shows a nucleated green-based village plan.

At Worminghall a possible context for settlement re-organisation might be sought in the market grants of 1304 at which time the green might have been created as a planned extension including a market place. Thus Worminghall might be seen as an example of a failed attempt to create a medieval town. Place names associated with Worminghall include *la Porteweeye* already during the 13th century (Page 1927, 125), indicative of a market. Extensive earthworks recorded on the County's Historic Environment Record suggest earlier undocumented settlement reorganisation or shrinkage and aerial photographs indicate a number of house platforms and track ways around the parish church (HER 02041). The village has been assessed as



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Figure 1. Site location

potentially of national archaeological importance by English Heritage's Monuments Protection Programme.

Court Farm is an 18th century remodelling of a 16th -17th century Grade II listed building, and altered several times in the 19th and 20th centuries (HER 00227). There is a good potential for medieval or post-medieval archaeological evidence relating to the manor house at this location. The building is also located adjacent to the Grade II* 14th century parish church.

Previously, archaeological interventions have been carried out at along The Avenue, Worminghall with mixed results. Evaluations by Thames Valley Archaeological Services (TVAS) at The Old Rectory, The Avenue in 2003 (HER 08040) and next door at 18 The Avenue in 2004 (HER 08385) – both sites located c. 250m northeast of the development site – revealed undated gullies and a ditch which may well indicate the presence of small enclosures here, away from the core of the historic settlement. The Old Rectory site (HER 08040) also yielded a possibly Roman gully, although as only a single sherd was recovered it may be later, and a possibly post-medieval pit. Trench 2 was characterised by a spread of buried plough soil with medieval pottery through it, sealing the gully in the trench (Taylor 2003). More recently at 1 The Avenue (HER 02808), northeast of the TVAS sites, four trenches excavated by ASC Ltd were negative (Rouse 2006).

Some of the above information is drawn from the BCAS *Brief*

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 characterise any evidence for medieval occupation and identify the potential for deposits that contribute to our understanding of how Worminghall developed as a village and the hypothesis that Worminghall represents a 'failed town'.
- To establish the potential for archaeological evidence relating to the former manor house

3 METHODOLOGY

An archaeologist was present on site during the course of all excavations that had the potential to disturb or destroy archaeological remains. This involved the observation of footings, services and any ground reduction associated with the extensions.

All archaeological features or other remains i.e. concentrations of artefacts, were recorded by written, drawn and photographic record. The recording was carried out in accordance with the standards specified by the Institute for Archaeologists (1994).

4 RESULTS (Figures 2 and 3)

All features were assigned individual context numbers. Context numbers in () show feature fills or deposits of material.

Excavation of the foundation trenches for the house extension up to a depth of 1m revealed several discreet archaeological layers and a brick-built structure which, when taken together, reflect the changes in occupation and utilisation of the building over time.

The natural geological deposit in this area consisted of Oakley Member Limestone with some pockets of River Terrace Gravels. At a depth of 0.5m it was these Gravels and some alluvial clay (6a) that were encountered rather than the Limestone (6b). At the full depth of the foundation trenches (1m), the depth of the standing water table was discovered. Soon after the excavation of the trenches water was visible seeping through the surface.

Area I (Figure 2)

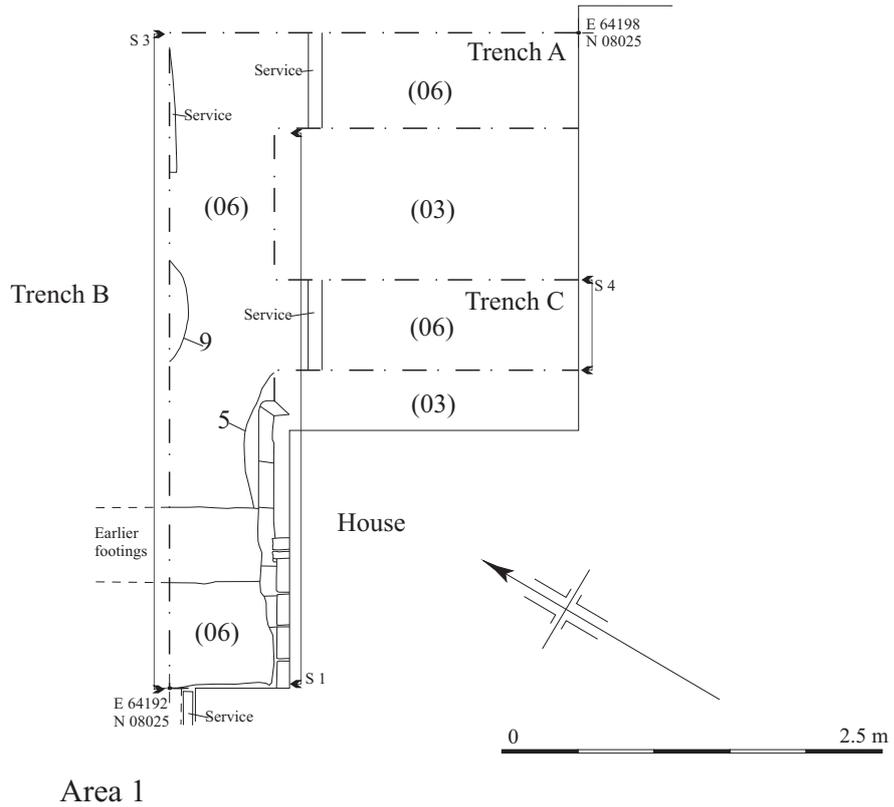
In Foundation Trench B two pits or ditches were seen to cut this natural in both plan and in the vertical sections. However, it was difficult to ascertain their true form, as they were both truncated and visible only in the narrow confines of the foundation trench. The pit 5 to the south had been subsequently cut by the building of extension 'E'. The pit's fill (4) contained a dark-brown silty-clay and yielded a sherd of 12th to 13th century pottery and a couple of fragments of animal bone. Adjacent to it a slightly larger pit comprised of two fills; a darker, charcoal rich silty clay (08) and a mid brown-grey silty clay (07) (Fig. 2, Sections 1 & 3). No finds were recovered from this feature.

The house itself, or rather the north range extension 'B' - against which the extension was built - appeared to have been built upon a layer of compacted dark brown-grey silty-clay which was heavily mottled with inclusions of charcoal, flecks of lime mortar as well as fragments of limestone and ceramic building materials which included tile and brick, and a sherd of Brill/Boarstall ware pottery (03). This appears to represent a terraced or levelled building platform for the construction of this extra range. Six fragments of ceramic building material were recovered from this layer. This layer and the shallow nature of the foundations of Range B suggest that it was a later addition to the core of the original building 'A'. A similar situation was latterly encountered in Area III where, on the southeastern side of Extension C similar shallow footings and the same 'levelling' layer were seen in Fig. 3, Section 8. These both stood in stark contrast to the foundations of the main body of the house 'A' which were 1m in depth but which is explained in detail later on.

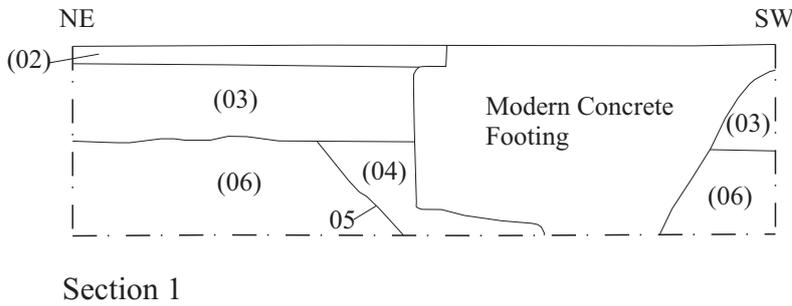
Above context (3) was a bed of sand and gravel (2) for the overlying garden turf (1).

Area II Figure 3

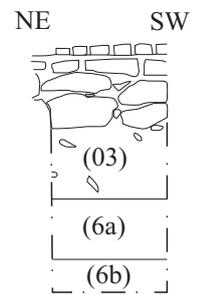
The area for the soak-away, several metres from the house to the northwest, revealed a slightly different sequence of layers which now make up the garden. The natural was cut by a small pit or ditch 15 but whose fill (14) failed to yield any finds. The feature was 0.56m wide and 0.52m deep although rather unclear in plan. This feature



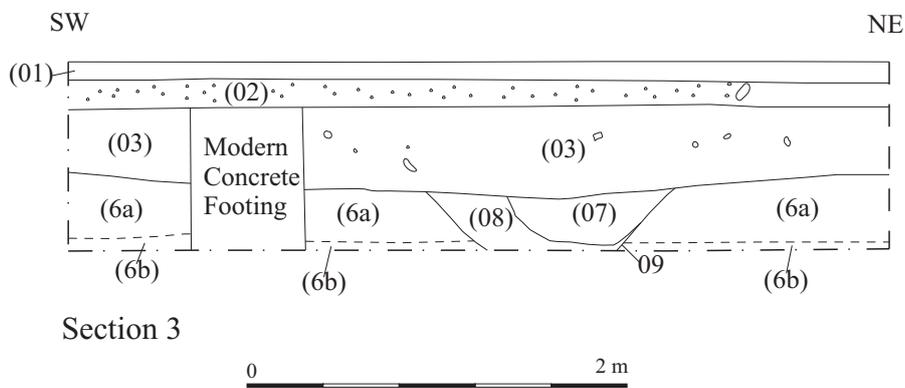
Area 1



Section 1



Section 4



Section 3

Figure 2. Area 1. Plan and sections

was overlain by a layer of 'made ground' (11) comprising of lenses of loose building material and mortar in a matrix of silt up to 0.22m thick. This in turn this was overlain by a layer of mid brown-greyish silt (10) lain to facilitate the turf lawn (01).

Area III Figure 3

In this area a new foundation trench was cut for the extension in the angle between the main building 'A' and the existing extension 'C.' This trench revealed the true depth of the foundations for the core of the main house 'A' which had been excavated into the natural to a depth of 1m. Fig. 3, Section 6 illustrates the sequence from the large, roughly hewn limestone blocks at the base (26) to the irregular courses of smaller limestone blocks and the 'levelling' courses of fragmentary tile (27) to the first five courses of brickwork (28) visible beneath the render which covers the main body of the building. The coating of render was probably applied both as a protection against the weather but also for aesthetic purposes as it provides some visual unity to the building as a whole as it hides the mix of underlying building styles and materials. Extension C has been numbered 32 -34.

As mentioned previously, the footings to extension 'C' revealed in Section 8 were noted as being a similar depth as those previously seen as belonging to Range 'B.' However, there was a slight constructional difference as here a brick course of stretchers had been set upon a levelling layer of tile used to create a horizontal surface upon the roughly hewn limestone blocks underneath. This discrepancy could be explained by either extension 'C' was built slightly out of phase to the larger range of 'B' or by the possibility that a different building gang, trying to overcome the difficulty of laying bricks upon the irregular limestone block base, utilised a slightly different construction method.

The trenches in Area III also revealed a rectangular; brick built structure 21 and 22 measuring approximately 2.10m x 1.6m representing a small 'cell,' 'room' or 'adjunct' to the main buildings. It consisted of a single 'skin' of bricks - with the exception of the southeast facing wall which was double skinned. The structure did not display any other architectural features which may have hinted as to its purpose. Furthermore, it was only partially revealed, partly destroyed through the process of trench digging and not entirely excavated to its total depth.

A small sondage at the southwest end closest to building 'A' revealed that the wall 21 had been built upon re-used, hand made roofing tiles (with peg holes present) 23 upon a layer of fragmentary ceramic building material (24) which may have represented the wall's foundation – or possibly a crushed hardcore surface. The brick structure had been constructed by cutting into the natural to create a foundation trench 31 which was subsequently backfilled with garden soil (30) following the completion of the structure. When the building went out of use it was back-filled by re-deposited natural (20) and building rubble (19). Finally, it was sealed when the bricks from its upper courses were re-used to create a flat-laid garden path or surface (17) next to the house bedded directly onto a soil layer (18).

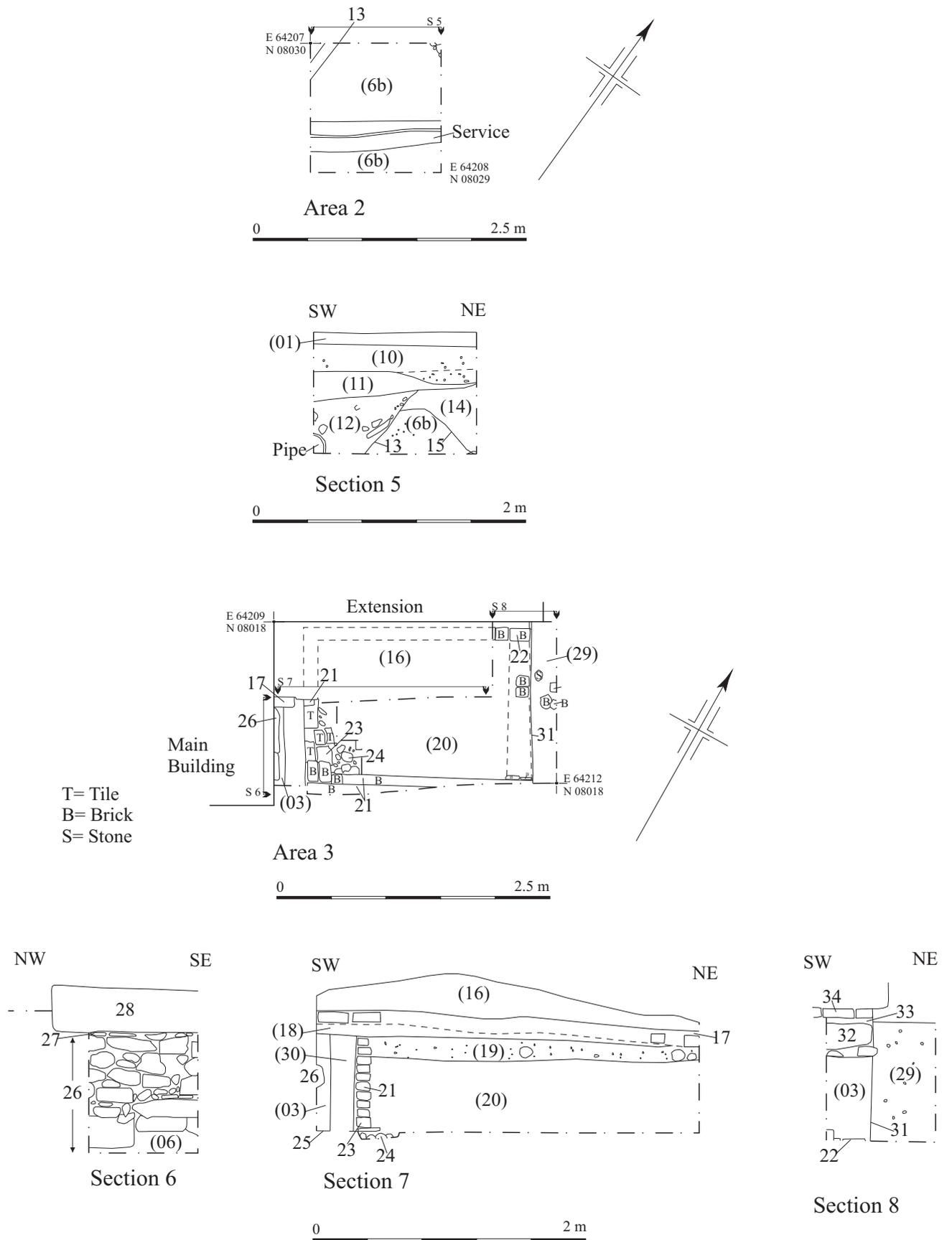


Figure 3. Areas 2 & 3 Plan and sections

5 FINDS

5.1 Pottery by Paul Blinkhorn

The pottery assemblage comprised 2 sherds with a total weight of 24g. One sherd occurred in each of two contexts, as follows:

Context [3]. Milton Keynes fabric MS9, *Brill/Boarstall Ware*. 1200-?1600 (Mynard and Zeepvat 1992). 1 sherd, 3g.

Context [4]: MS29: *Flint-gritted ware*, 12th – 13th century (ibid.). Appears to be the same as the so-called ‘M40 ware’ (Hinton 1973). The sherd has a fragment of scoring which is typical of pottery of the latter tradition. 1 sherd, 21g.

Both sherds are in good condition, with no obvious abrasion, and appear reliably stratified.

5.2 Animal Bone

Two bone fragments were recovered from the pit fill (04), Area I.

5.3 Ceramic Building Material.

Six assorted fragments of ceramic building material were recovered from the land terracing layer (03), Area I. These consisted of two fragments of roof tile (with attendant peg hole) and several fragments of hand-made brick.

6 DISCUSSION

Area I

The two pits, located through the trench excavation, appeared as though they had been sealed by landscaping/terracing layer (03) which in turn may have been created to provide a building platform for range ‘B’ of the building. Subsequently, the features had been truncated by the later house extension ‘E.’ The likelihood is that they are indeed pits containing domestic refuse and are of medieval date.

Area II

A few metres from the house the character of the underlying soil layers changed but both (10) and (11) retained fragmentary ceramic building materials characteristic of much of the features on this site, as well as lenses of sand and mortar. These no doubt attest to ongoing building works and the remodelling of the house stated to have taken place ‘several times’ in the 19th and 20th centuries. Pit fill (14) provided no dating material so its function and date remains unknown but is likely to be just one of numerous receptacles for domestic waste ranged around the house and now under the garden.

Area III

This trench excavation in this area uncovered the 1m deep foundations of the original building 'A' and provided a model from which it could be differentiated from the shallower and less substantial foundations of the range 'B' and extensions 'C' and 'E.'. It would appear the foundations for the main building were dug through the natural geology until a point where they reached the water table in the compacted gravels of (6b) but below the lenses of clay above belonging to (6a). The exposed foundations also provide a salutary lesson in the practice of the re-use and recycling of building materials which can still be seen today in modern reclamation yards and building projects. The precise dating of the structures may prove difficult, as re-used materials do not reveal the date for its construction even if they provide a date for the construction of the materials themselves!

The date and purpose of the brick-built structure 21/22 is also unknown as it too utilises recycled materials. Furthermore, its function is somewhat ambiguous as the investigation of the structure was limited to the impact depth of the new foundation trenches at 1m. The structure was only partially revealed, had been partly destroyed by the mechanical excavator and appeared to exceed the depth of its backfill (20) at the 1m mark. Due to this combination of factors an interpretation of the building is difficult. It can be seen from its plan that it was built parallel and square to the existing exterior walls of both the main building 'A' and the extension 'C' so it must be later than both of them; something which is borne out from its sole constructional element being brick whilst the others utilise large limestone blocks as well as other elements. Furthermore, it was neither tied into either of the buildings nor does it abut them - which would have provided some constructional stability. Rather, it has been conceived as a freestanding structure so there must have been a reason for this.

The structure itself is fairly insubstantial so that air raid shelter seems unlikely; Anderson shelters of the Second World War, constructed mainly of corrugated iron sheets would have been surrounded by concrete. However, other types of shelters and 'blast walls' built across house entrances were built of brick. It is this lack of 'insulation' – concrete or otherwise -which would seem to preclude it being an icehouse. Contrarily, it could be suggested that the surrounding soil and the depth of the structure itself may have been sufficient for it to function in this way. However, the lack of an obvious entrance or of a staircase (or any other architectural features for that matter) may suggest that access was not a major concern. Finally as the excavation was not deep enough to see if the structure had a drain (or a floor) but it would appear that at this depth-on the water table- even if it had one the water would have had nowhere to drain to.

Finally, its function, possibly as a 'pit' or a cistern- so that it could function as either for retaining rainwater or acting as a soak-away are unlikely - it lacks a sealing agent, such as an interior plaster or render for the former and is too close to the house to be the latter. This leaves the possibility of it being a brick-built garderobe constructed prior to modern drainage or septic tanks.

7 ARCHIVE

Archive Contents

The archive consists of the following:

Paper record

The project brief
Written scheme of investigation
The project report
The primary site record

The archive currently is maintained by John Moore Heritage Services and will be transferred to the County Museums' Store under museum accession number 2010:89.

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