

Watching Brief on Drainage Works at Isleham Priory Cambridgeshire



Archaeological Watching Brief Report



June 2011

Client: Cambridgeshire County Council
(East Highways)

OA East Report No: 1250

OASIS No: oxfordar3-102767

NGR: TL 6420 7435

Watching Brief on Drainage Works at Isleham Priory, Cambridgeshire

Site Code: ISLPDR 11

CHER No.: ECB3549

Date of Works: 14th-16th March 2011

Report No: 1250

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Client: Cambridgeshire County Council (East Highways)

Report Date: June 2011

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Summary

Between 14th and 16th March 2011, Oxford Archaeology East carried out an archaeological watching brief at Isleham Priory, Isleham, Cambridgeshire (TL 6420 7435).

The watching brief was undertaken to monitor the excavation of a pipe trench and manhole pit for a new drainage scheme along the boundary of Isleham Priory, a Scheduled Monument (SM27101) with an extant Romanesque church (Listed Building 48821).

During the ground works two undated pits and a single post-hole were observed, sealed by a dumped deposit containing late medieval/post-medieval finds. The features may be contemporary with the priory whilst the dumped deposit may derive from demolition material from one of the later monastic buildings.

1 GEOLOGY AND TOPOGRAPHY

- 1.1.1 The village of Isleham lies at the south-eastern Fen edge, at a height ranging from 18m OD in the southern part of the parish to 3m OD towards the northern Fen edge. It sits on the Lower Chalk ridge of south Cambridgeshire. The far north of the parish has a basal peat overlain by 'fen clay', a grey clayey marine deposit (Hall 1996, 82; Gallois 1988).
- 1.1.2 The subject site is located at the northern edge of the village of Isleham and is situated on 'zig -zag' chalk formations at an average height of 5m OD.

2 ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

- 2.1.1 The alien Benedictine priory at Isleham was founded in c.AD1100 and is notable for the survival of its small Romanesque church dedicated to St Margaret of Antioch, which unusually has never been extended and is little altered from its original form. The scheduled site comprises the priory church (Listed Building 48821; CHER 07529; Plate 1) and associated earthworks (SM27101; CHER MCB14478; Plate 2; Figs 1 and 2). It is likely that the features that underlie these earthworks, which are interpreted as fishponds, channels, building platforms, a hollow way and a pillow mound associated with the priory, also extend beyond the scheduled site and possibly within the watching brief area.
- 2.1.2 There have been a number of archaeological investigations within and around the historic core of Isleham, including a site at No.12 West Street, which identified ditches and earthworks associated with the priory (Knight 1997).
- 2.1.3 An evaluation and watching brief was undertaken on land 100m south-west of the site (TL 6400 7405) (ISLWS99; Macaulay 2000) where a large boundary ditch and a number of smaller medieval property boundary ditches were recorded. In addition, several horticultural beds and/or terraces were observed, but there were notably no remains of definite monastic origin.
- 2.1.4 An evaluation comprising five trenches was carried out c.600m south-west of the site (TL 6392 7384; Kenny 2001) and revealed only a single pit of undetermined prehistoric date.
- 2.1.5 Medieval features, including a quarry pit and later post-medieval levelling deposits were, however, uncovered during an evaluation undertaken c.500m south of the site (TL 6439 7391; Kenny 2004). Taken together the quarry pit and associated post-holes probably indicate that the plot of land was in use as a croft in the early medieval period, similar to examples seen further north of the village.

3 METHODOLOGY

- 3.1.1 The archaeological watching brief was undertaken in accordance with a brief issued by Dan McConnell of Cambridgeshire County Council, dated 26th January 2011, supplemented by a specification prepared by OA East (Mortimer 2011).

- 3.1.2 The objective of this watching brief was to determine as far as reasonably possible the presence/absence, location, nature, extent, date, quality, condition and significance of any surviving archaeological deposits within the development area.
- 3.1.3 The Brief required that no ground penetration could take place without a suitably qualified and experienced archaeologist present. The area of investigation was located immediately west and north-west of the priory church (Fig. 1).
- 3.1.4 The watching brief entailed monitoring of the excavation of a single pipe trench measuring 67m long, 0.5m wide and 0.9-1.3m deep. In addition, a 2m x 1m and 1.30m-deep manhole pit, located at the southern end of the trench and to the west of the church, was also investigated (Fig. 2; Plate 3).
- 3.1.5 During the groundwork excavations a series of sections (Fig. 3, S1-11) were recorded along the length of the trench. The trench was excavated from north-west to south-east for 55m, before turning southwards for 12m towards the entrance to the field next to an existing manhole (Fig. 2).
- 3.1.6 All archaeological features and deposits were recorded using OA East's *pro-forma* sheets. Trench locations, plans and sections were recorded at appropriate scales and digital photographs were taken of all relevant features and deposits.
- 3.1.7 Site conditions were generally fine; the trench was located within a slightly undulating pasture field.

4 RESULTS

- 4.1.1 The broad stratigraphy of the trench comprised natural chalk (3, 6, 9, 13, 17, 21, 25, 31 and 39) recorded at a depth of 0.45-0.80m, overlain by a 0.20-0.50m thick subsoil (2, 5, 8, 11, 15, 19, 23 and 29). Above this, in the northernmost (0-55m) section of the trench, was a 0.15-0.2m-thick turf/topsoil layer (1, 4, 7, 10, 14, 18 and 22), whilst in the southernmost 55-67m of the trench this changed to a 0.2-0.35m-thick mixed turf/hardcore layer (28 and 36).
- 4.1.2 Two pits (**26** and **32**) and a post-hole (**34**) were investigated that cut the natural chalk towards the southern angle of the trench. All contained single mid-pale brown silty clay fills that were devoid of finds. Pit **26** (Fig.3, S.8; Plate 4) measured 0.95m wide and 0.25m deep and was revealed at a depth of 0.68m below ground level. Pit **32**, 0.58m wide and 0.18m deep, and post-hole **34**, 0.25m wide and 0.42m deep, were recorded at a depth of 0.72m (Fig. 3; S.9, Plate 5).
- 4.1.3 At 20m along the trench a spread of material 0.18-0.38m thick (contexts 12, 16, 20, 24, 30 and 38) was encountered at a depth of 0.45-0.55m. This deposit, which sealed the pits and post-hole, contained a large quantity of fragmented roof tiles of late medieval to post-medieval date and occasional sherds of pottery. This may represent a levelling material which is backfilling a possible sunken feature or natural hollow (Fig. 3, S.3; Plate 6).
- 4.1.4 A redeposited natural chalk (37; Fig. 3, S.11) overlaid the levelling deposit at the southern end of the trench, close to the existing gateway/entrance into the field. Above this were hardcore deposits (28 and 36), all presumably laid to stabilise the ground for farm vehicle access.

Finds Summary (Appendix A)

- 4.1.5 A very small assemblage of finds was recovered, all of which has been quantified. The assemblage comprises 0.06kg of pottery (mostly medieval and late medieval to post-medieval but generally the sherds are too small to be diagnostic, Carole Fletcher *pers. comm.*), 2.14kg of CBM (late medieval to post-medieval roof tile, Rob Atkins *pers. comm.*), 0.3kg of animal bone (largely from subsoil and dumped layer) and 0.003kg of oyster shell.

5 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

- 5.1.1 The watching brief revealed a small number of undated, but probably medieval, features that could be contemporary with the priory given their proximity to the extant church. The demolition layer sealing the features contained a mixture of late and post-medieval finds, largely roof tile fragments, and may represent tile dumped from a demolished building or buildings associated with the priory which may backfill a natural hollow or feature. The nature of this deposit and the presence of late medieval or post-medieval building material indicates that this is a post-Reformation demolition or levelling layer.

6 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to thank Gavin Wiseman and Cambridgeshire County Council, Highways who commissioned and funded the archaeological work. The project was managed by Richard Mortimer.

The site contractor W S Atkins were very helpful, in particular Mike Flanders, Billy Gipp and all their site staff.

The brief for archaeological works was written by Dan McConnell, Cambridgeshire Archaeology, Cambridgeshire County Council, Planning & Countryside Advice.

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APPENDIX A. FINDS SUMMARY

Context	Material	Object Name	Weight in kg	Comments
2	Bone	Bone	0.03	
2	Shell		0.00	
5	Bone	Bone	0.05	
5	Shell		0.01	
5	Ceramic	Vessel	0.01	Medieval
8	Bone	Bone	0.11	
8	Ceramic	Ceramic Building Material	0.03	roof tile (late med/post-med)
11	Ceramic	Ceramic Building Material	0.13	late medieval to post-medieval
11	Ceramic	Vessel	0.01	
11	Bone	Bone	0.01	
20	Bone	Bone	0.00	
20	Ceramic	Ceramic Building Material	0.37	Roof tile- late medieval to post-medieval
24	Ceramic	Vessel	0.03	late medieval to post-medieval
24	Ceramic	Ceramic Building Material	0.61	Roof tile - late medieval to post-medieval
24	Bone	Bone	0.02	
24	Ceramic	Vessel	0.03	late medieval to post-medieval
24	Stone		0.02	
24	Ceramic	Ceramic Building Material	0.24	Roof tile- late medieval to post-medieval
29	Bone	Bone	0.10	
30	Shell		0.01	
30	Ceramic	Ceramic Building Material	0.36	late medieval to post-medieval
99999	Bone	Bone	0.01	From 12/16/20
99999	Ceramic	Ceramic Building Material	0.40	late medieval to post-medieval

APPENDIX B. OASIS REPORT FORM

All fields are required unless they are not applicable.

Project Details

OASIS Number	oxfordar3-102767		
Project Name	Watching Brief on land at Islam Priory		
Project Dates (fieldwork) Start	14-03-2011	Finish	16-03-2011
Previous Work (by OA East)	Yes	Future Work	Unknown

Project Reference Codes

Site Code	ISL PDR 11	Planning App. No.	N/A
HER No.	ECB 3549	Related HER/OASIS No.	

Type of Project/Techniques Used

Prompt: Scheduled Monument Consent

Please select all techniques used:

<input type="checkbox"/> Field Observation (periodic visits)	<input type="checkbox"/> Part Excavation	<input type="checkbox"/> Salvage Record
<input type="checkbox"/> Full Excavation (100%)	<input type="checkbox"/> Part Survey	<input type="checkbox"/> Systematic Field Walking
<input type="checkbox"/> Full Survey	<input type="checkbox"/> Recorded Observation	<input type="checkbox"/> Systematic Metal Detector Survey
<input type="checkbox"/> Geophysical Survey	<input type="checkbox"/> Remote Operated Vehicle Survey	<input type="checkbox"/> Test Pit Survey
<input type="checkbox"/> Open-Area Excavation	<input type="checkbox"/> Salvage Excavation	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Watching Brief

Monument Types/Significant Finds & Their Periods

List feature types using the [NMR Monument Type Thesaurus](#) and significant finds using the [MDA Object type Thesaurus](#) together with their respective periods. If no features/finds were found, please state "none".

Monument	Period	Object	Period
Pit	Medieval 1066 to 1540	Bone/Shell	Post Medieval 1540 to 1901
Pit	Medieval 1066 to 1540	Pottery	Post Medieval 1540 to 1901
Post Hole	Medieval 1066 to 1540	CBM	Post Medieval 1540 to 1901

Project Location

County	Cambridgeshire	Site Address (including postcode if possible)
District		Isleham Priory Church Street Isleham
Parish	Isleham	
HER	ECB 3549	
Study Area	66.50X0.60M Pipe Trench	National Grid Reference
		TL 6420 7435

Project Originators

Organisation	OA EAST
Project Brief Originator	Dan McConnel Cambridgeshire County Council
Project Design Originator	Richard Mortimer OA East
Project Manager	Richard Mortimer
Supervisor	Michael Webster

Project Archives

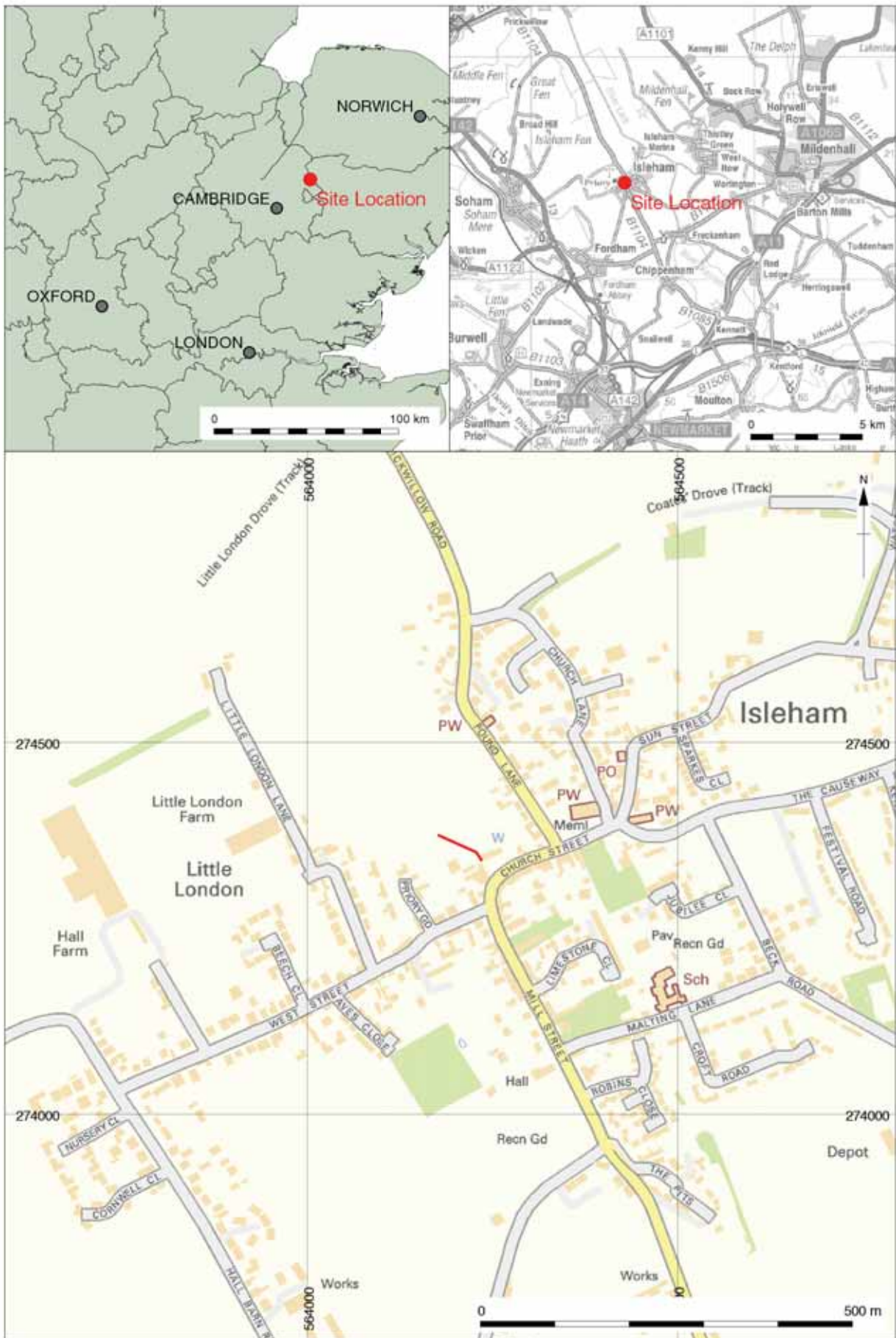
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County Council Store	Location OA East...Bar Hill Cambridge	Location ...County Council Store
Accession IISLPDR 11	Accession ID ISLPDR 11	Accession ID ...ISLPDR 11

Archive Contents/Media

	Physical Contents	Digital Contents	Paper Contents
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Ceramics	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Environmental	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Glass	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Human Bones	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Industrial	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Leather	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
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Stratigraphic		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
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Wood	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Worked Bone	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Worked Stone/Lithic	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
None	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Digital Media	Paper Media
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<input type="checkbox"/> GIS	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Context Sheet
<input type="checkbox"/> Geophysics	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Correspondence
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Images	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Diary
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Illustrations	<input type="checkbox"/> Drawing
<input type="checkbox"/> Moving Image	<input type="checkbox"/> Manuscript
<input type="checkbox"/> Spreadsheets	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Map
<input type="checkbox"/> Survey	<input type="checkbox"/> Matrices
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Text	<input type="checkbox"/> Microfilm
<input type="checkbox"/> Virtual Reality	<input type="checkbox"/> Misc.
	<input type="checkbox"/> Research/Notes
	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Photos
	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Plans
	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Report
	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Sections
	<input type="checkbox"/> Survey

Notes:



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Figure 1: Site location with position of trench (red)

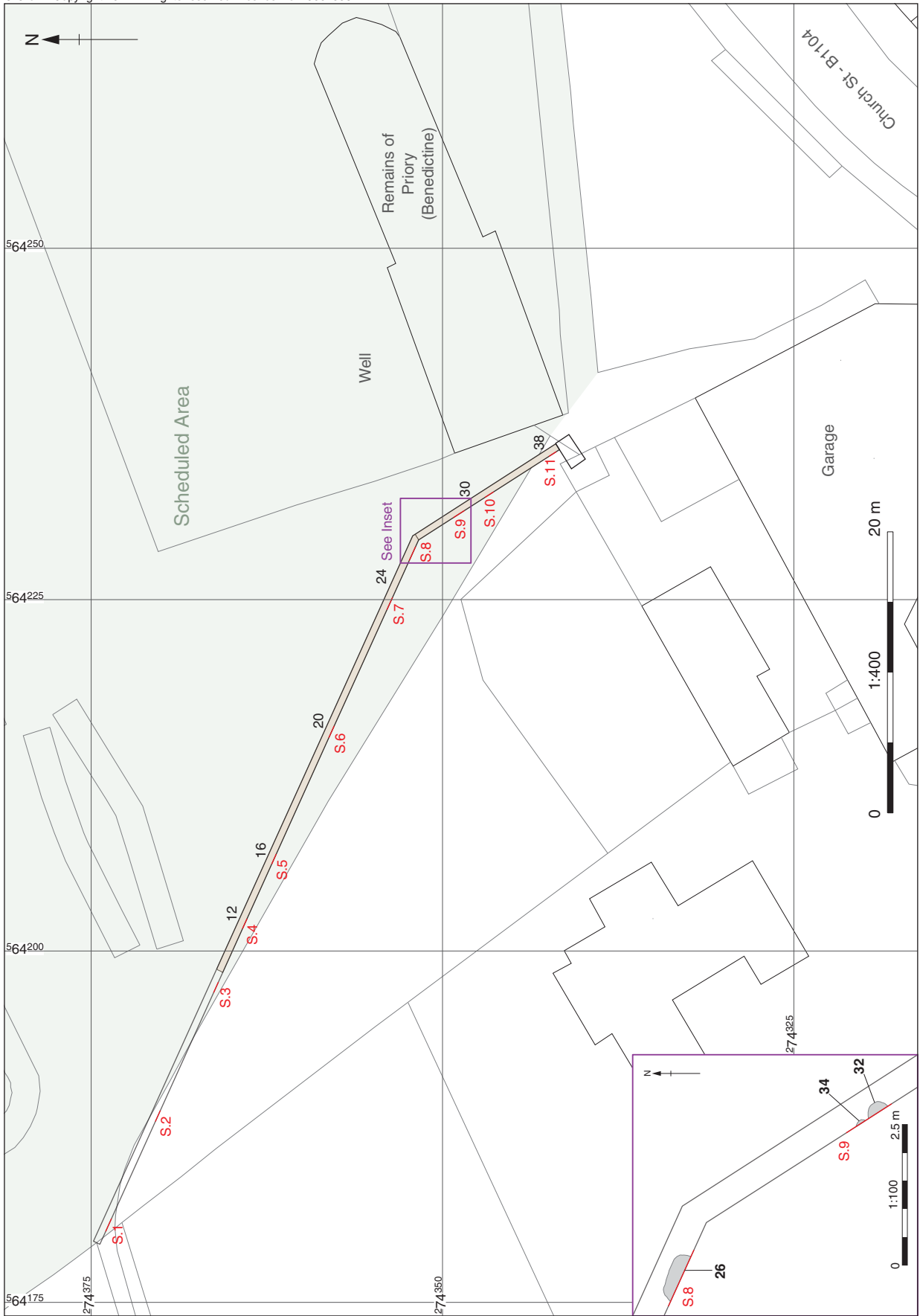


Figure 2: Trench plan

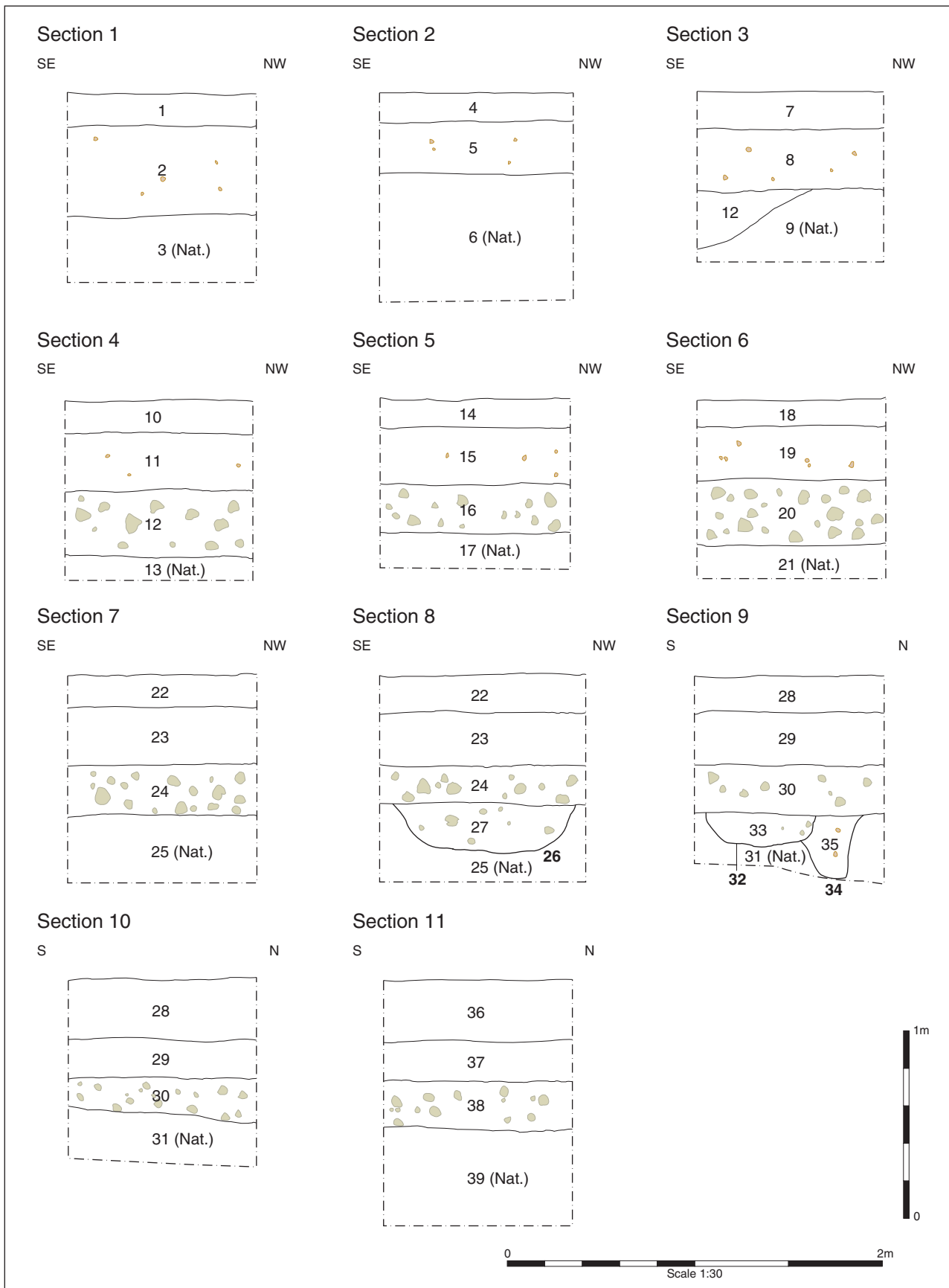


Figure 3: Section drawings



Plate 1: General shot of the priory church



Plate 2: General shot of earthworks



Plate 3: Part of excavated pipe trench



Plate 4: Section 8, Pit 26



Plate 5: Section 9, pit 32 and post-hole 34



Plate 6: Section 3, north-west edge of spread 12



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