

84 St Aldates Oxford



**Archaeological
Watching Brief Report**

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84 St Aldates, Oxford

Archaeological Watching Brief Report

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Summary

In April 2014, Oxford Archaeology was commissioned by Jonathan Ungar to undertake an archaeological watching brief during the excavation of six geotechnical pits and two boreholes at 84 St Aldates, Oxford (SP 5139 0584). The work was in advance of the re-construction of the recently dismantled rear wing of the property, which is likely to be of 17th century date. The watching brief revealed natural gravel of the floodplain terrace, overlain by a series of alluvial deposits potentially indicative of a channel of the Thames which later became the Blackfriars Mill stream. A number of the test pits also revealed a fairly homogeneous silty clay deposit, very similar to deposits identified elsewhere at the interface between the second terrace and the floodplain and interpreted as 12th-13th century land reclamation. This was overlain by a series of mixed, post-medieval deposits, which may represent construction debris from the recently dismantled structure. Evidence for the nature of the footings of the remaining standing walls of the structure and the associated southern boundary wall of the site was also revealed, together with a possible internal division within the structure.

1 LOCATION AND SCOPE OF WORK

1.1 Introduction

- 1.1.1 Oxford Archaeology was commissioned by Jonathan Ungar to undertake an archaeological watching brief on the site of a proposed housing development. The site is located at 84 St Aldates, Oxford (NGR: SP 5139 0584; Fig.1).
- 1.1.2 A brief for historic building recording and archaeological excavation, issued by David Radford of Oxford City Council (OCC, 2010), detailed the requirements of OCC in respect of planned alterations to the rear wing of the property (planning refs: 09/00753/LBD and 09/00754/FUL). The brief required that should any geotechnical pits be necessary as part of the scheme, that they be subject to an archaeological watching brief by an appropriately qualified archaeological contractor. A written scheme of investigation (OA, 2014) for the works was subsequently submitted to, and approved by, David Radford.

2 ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 General

- 2.1.1 St. Aldates is an axial street of the original Saxon planned street grid, and formed the primary southern approach into the 10th - 11th century Saxon Burh based on the traditional route of the Thames crossing (OA 2013, 5).

2.2 Past archaeological investigations

- 2.2.1 The greatest influence on the archaeological potential of the site arises from its situation on the edge of the second gravel terrace on the north bank of the River Thames. The current courses of the river and tributary streams are the product of deliberate 19th-century re-working, but the channels have developed and altered continuously from the beginning of the Holocene.
- 2.2.2 Much of the surrounding area has undergone major redevelopment since the middle of the 20th century and many archaeological investigations have been carried out as a

result. Many of these have been on properties adjacent to St Aldates. These sites include:

- 33 St Aldates, where a possible building of 11th to 12th century date was identified along with parts of the Norman Grandpont. Land reclamation may have begun on the site by the mid Saxon period.
- 56 - 60 St Aldates. Excavations on this site, adjacent and to the south of the proposed development demonstrated the possibility of late Saxon river bank strengthening. Above this were substantial reclamation deposits on which building had begun by the late 13th century.
- 65 St Aldates. Excavations identified a possible late Saxon paved ford overlain by flood and reclamation deposits. Again, mid to late Saxon bank strengthening was identified. Building appeared to begin on the site in the late 13th century.
- 79 - 81 St Aldates. Excavations on this site identified a clay bank that may potentially represent a causeway in use by 800AD. This was overlain by alluvial deposits with evidence for land consolidation. Building on the site appears to have begun in the 10th century. The possible causeway was also identified on the east side of St Aldates at the site of the former Linacre College.
- 83 St Aldates. Excavations immediately to the south of the site suggest that the area of proposed development lies on land reclaimed from marsh during the late 12th century and would have been utilised alternately as back yards or gardens used for refuse disposal and built up land for the construction of extensions to buildings fronting St Aldates (Durham 1977).
- 89 - 91 St Aldates. Excavations on this site identified the development history of the Trill Mill Stream from the early Holocene to the present day. Land reclamation and bank strengthening had begun on the site by the mid Saxon period and the earliest occupation dated to the 10th century. Permanent occupation of the site is recorded from the 13th century.
- Sites at the police station and land adjacent to the police station, St Aldates. Excavations on these sites demonstrated the presence of river bank consolidation by the 10th century with buildings present on reclaimed ground by the 13th century.
- St Aldates Telecom Tunnel. Recording of deposits during the placement of cabling beneath Thames Street and St Aldates identified Holocene channel deposits, including a possible pre-Bronze Age ford. This was overlain by flood deposits in which elements of a mid-Saxon bridge were recognised. Elements of the Norman Grandpont were also recorded. Settlement evidence was present from the 12th century onwards.
- Two phases of archaeological evaluation were undertaken at the Westgate car park to the west of the proposed development site (OA 2006; 2008). The data recovered allowed a site specific model for the hydrological and sedimentary development of the floodplain to be refined. The evaluation provided confirmation that the Trill Mill Stream crossed the centre of the site, and further evidence for the origin, development and orientation of the channel from a Devensian channel to a managed water course in the medieval period was recovered. Additional evidence for 13th- to 14th-century land reclamation, extending southwards from the second terrace, was also revealed.

2.3 84 St Aldates

- 2.3.1 The following paragraph is reproduced from Vernacular Architecture, Volume 44 page 105:
- 2.3.2 The rear wing at 84 St Aldate's was built around 1637 by Thomas Seymour, manciple of Corpus Christi College, partly as additional domestic accommodation and partly as a business venture associated with the brewing or malting activities for which the area was noted at the time. Apart from possible alterations during the Civil War, the building underwent no major development thereafter. It was dismantled during 2012, and was recorded by the Oxfordshire Buildings Record. The building was five bays long, built against the pre-existing front range of no. 84 St Aldate's, and was of two storeys, entirely timber framed apart from the probably pre-existing single storey stone wall on the north side. The roof trusses had queen posts with high collars, and bays 1, 2 and 5 had attic floors. The south wall was built without storey posts, independently framed for each storey, the first floor being used as a platform from which to build the upper floors for which the pegs were inserted from inside. The building used a mixture of oak and elm, and samples from both the upper and lower levels of the building belong to the same construction period. Dating commissioned by the owner; building description provided by David Clark (Miles, 2013, p.105).

2.4 Significance of previous archaeological work

- 2.4.1 This archaeological work has led to a great deal of understanding about the formation of the watercourses associated with the River Thames to the south of Oxford during the Holocene period. The work has also shed light on the development of a crossing point of the Thames in line with St Aldates. The full sequences are not fully understood, but a hypothetical history has been produced by Mark Robinson based on the palaeoenvironmental evidence (Dodd 2003). This has added to the picture of human activity as well as showing the river's changes.

3 DESCRIPTION OF DEPOSITS

3.1 Reliability of the investigation

- 3.1.1 Given the very limited nature of the test pits and boreholes, the interpretation of the features and deposits encountered is necessarily tentative. The deposits encountered within the boreholes are described below but the depths at which these deposits were encountered is only very approximate.
- 3.1.2 Values of the ordnance datum levels shown below are based on the OS benchmark on the step by the main entrance to Christ Church college from Christ Church Meadow. These differ by approximately +0.1m from those shown on the structural engineers drawing (Sitech Surveying Services Survey Job No 2271), which are based on the benchmark on the buttress of Tom Tower on St Aldates. As such, it is possible that the levels given below are inaccurate by a margin of +0.1m.

3.2 Test Pit 01

- 3.2.1 Test Pit 01 (TP01) measured c 0.4 x 0.4m and was excavated to a maximum depth of 1.1m below ground level (bgl) in the north-western corner of the recently dismantled building (Fig. 2).
- 3.2.2 The earliest deposit encountered was a homogeneous mid brownish grey clay silt, the top of which was at 56.25m OD. This deposit was at least 0.4m thick and was overlain

by a very mixed deposit with brick rubble, mortar and re-deposited gravel throughout, which was in turn overlain by the existing concrete floor.

- 3.2.3 The test pit was excavated against the wall bounding Clarke's Row to the north. Below the top of the homogeneous deposit, the southern face of the foundation of this wall was very irregular, and although no construction cut was observed this may suggest that it was trench-built and therefore cut through the clay silt layer. The relationship between the wall and the mixed deposit was unclear, although the wall above the interface between the homogeneous deposit and the mixed layer was relatively well faced and it is possible that the deposition of the mixed layer post-dated the construction of the wall.

3.3 Test Pit 02

- 3.3.1 Test Pit 02 (TP02) was located against the northern wall of the recently dismantled building (Fig. 2). It measured c 0.4 x 0.4m and was excavated to a maximum depth of 0.9m bgl. The earliest deposit encountered was a homogeneous deposit very similar in composition to that observed within Test Pit 01. The top of this deposit was at 56.14m OD and it was at least 0.25m thick.
- 3.3.2 The overlying layer was a 0.4m thick deposit which was very mixed with lenses and concentrations of mortar throughout, although noticeably less brick rubble than the mixed deposit in TP01. This was overlain by the 0.25m thick sub-base for the concrete floor.
- 3.3.3 At 0.65m bgl (56.14m OD), the foundation of the wall stepped southward approximately 0.1m; this step corresponded with the interface between the homogeneous deposit and the overlying mixed layer and possibly suggests that the wider foundation truncated the clay silt. Additionally, at the same level as the offset footing, the wall appeared to return to the south.

3.4 Test Pit 03

- 3.4.1 Test pit 03 (TP03) measured 0.4m x 0.5m and was excavated at the angle between the eastern wall of the fireplace and the north wall of the recently demolished structure (Fig. 2). At 0.9m below ground level, a very large stone was encountered which extended beyond the edges of the test pit. It is possible that this represented an offset footing for the wall, but if so it was significantly more substantial than that recorded in TP02.
- 3.4.2 The possible offset was overlain by a 0.2m thick layer of roof tiles in a mid brown clay matrix, which was in turn overlain by a mixed deposit with limestone rubble, mortar and brick fragments throughout.

3.5 Test Pit 04

- 3.5.1 Test Pit 04 (TP04) was excavated in the south-west corner of the concrete yard to the west of the recently dismantled structure against the potentially medieval wall, which marks the southern boundary of the site (Fig. 2). The test pit measured c 0.4 x 0.4m.
- 3.5.2 At 1m bgl, the footing of the standing wall stepped north approximately 0.1m, and a second step was apparent at 1.1m bgl. The top of the second step corresponded with the top of a layer of loose lime mortar, which may have represented a construction horizon for the wall. This was overlain by a mid brownish grey silty clay deposit approximately 0.55m thick which was overlain by 0.46m of limestone rubble and slag which lay directly beneath the concrete slab.

3.6 Test Pit 05

3.6.1 Test Pit 05 (TP05) was also excavated against the southern wall and measured 0.4m² x 1.1m deep (Fig. 2). A homogeneous silty clay deposit was encountered at 0.6m bgl (56.15m OD), which was at least 0.5m thick and was overlain by 0.3m of mixed sand and mortar. At the interface between these two deposits was a large flat fragment of limestone. The sand and mortar was overlain by the bedding deposit for the brick paviour surface of the passageway between the recently dismantled structure and the southern wall. The surface and bedding deposit were together 0.3m thick (Fig. 3).

3.7 Test Pit 06

3.7.1 Test Pit 06 (TP06) was the third of the test pits to be excavated against the southern wall (Fig. 2). The test pit was c 0.4 x 0.4m and 0.95m deep. At 0.65m bgl (56.07m OD) there was a mid brownish grey silty clay at least 0.3m thick. This was overlain by a deposit of similar composition, but with occasional lenses of mortar and brick fragments. This latter deposit was overlain by the bedding deposit for the brick pavements which together measured 0.25m (Fig. 3).

3.8 Bore Hole 1

3.8.1 Borehole 1 (BH1; Fig. 2) was 0.3m in diameter. The gravel of the floodplain terrace was encountered at c 3.35m bgl (54m OD) and was overlain in stratigraphic order by 0.65m of blueish grey clay, 0.35m of brown organic material and 0.5m of brownish grey clay. The last of these deposits was overlain by a homogeneous mid brownish grey silty clay, the top of which was at approximately 55.90m OD. The remaining deposits in the sequence comprised a 0.7m thick layer of mixed material composed predominantly of re-deposited gravel and overlain by 0.75m of very mixed post-medieval material lying directly beneath the concrete slab.

3.9 Bore Hole 2

3.9.1 Borehole 2 (BH2) was also 0.3m in diameter and natural gravel was encountered at c 3.5m bgl (53.29m OD). A similar sequence of deposits to borehole 1 was encountered, with 0.3m of blueish grey clay directly overlying the gravel and overlain by a brown organic deposit, although this last deposit was considerably thicker in this location (0.8m), and was directly overlain by a 1m thick layer of homogeneous silty clay. The top 1.4m comprised a very mixed post-medieval deposit with brick rubble and mortar throughout, and the sub-base and concrete of the existing floor.

4 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

4.1 Alluvial Sequence

4.1.1 The floodplain alluvial sequence recorded during the Westgate evaluations consistently comprised a layer of brown organic material directly overlying the gravel, which is associated with the formation of a reed swamp on the floodplain during the Iron Age, and was in turn overlain by a sequence of alluvial clays. The sequence recorded in both the boreholes at 84 St Aldates may be more indicative of channel fills rather than the general sequence of alluvial deposits, which would be consistent with the location of the site in relation to reconstructive models of the floodplain (Dodd, 2003, 71-76). These models show a north-south aligned channel in this location between the Trill Mill Stream and the Lake Stream to the south. By the 12th century this channel had narrowed to become the Blackfriars Mill stream which ran to the west of the site.

4.2 Land Reclamation

- 4.2.1 The homogeneous silty clay layer present in a number of the test pits and both bore holes was similar in composition to the land reclamation deposits identified at the Westgate (see above). Where present, the elevation of the interface between this deposit and the overlying post-medieval mixed deposits (see below) was relatively consistent (with the exception of BH2 - see table below):

OD levels at top of ?land reclamation deposit

Test Pit	TP01	TP02	TP05	TP06	BH1	BH2
Top of Deposit	56.25	56.14	56.15	56.07	55.9	55.39

- 4.2.2 This is broadly consistent with the elevation of the top of this deposit where it was seen during the Westgate evaluation (55.80m - 56.20m, OA, 2008, Fig. 3), and although it is far from conclusive, it is possible that the deposit seen within the test pits is of similar origin.

4.3 Structures

- 4.3.1 It is possible that the return of the offset footing of the north wall revealed in TP02 represents an internal division within the structure.
- 4.3.2 The possible offset footing in TP03 was significantly more substantial than that seen in TP02, which may reflect the proximity of the former to the eastern wall of the fireplace.
- 4.3.3 It is feasible that the large flat stone in TP05 represents an earlier (flag-stoned?) version of the passageway running between the southern boundary wall and the south wall of the recently demolished building. However, no bedding deposit was observed, and no equivalent "surface" was seen within TP06 to the east, and consequently this can be no more than conjectural.
- 4.3.4 The southern boundary wall itself appeared to be of relatively consistent construction within test pits 05 and 06. However, no indication of the double offset footing seen in TP04 was apparent in the two Test Pits to the east. This possibly indicates more than one phase of construction for this structure.
- 4.3.5 The build of both the upstanding structure of the north wall, and that of its foundation was noticeably different at the western 4.5m of the structure, reflecting the fact that the western end of the recently dismantled structure was a ?19th century addition.

4.4 Post-medieval truncation

- 4.4.1 It is possible that the mortar deposit at the base of the excavated sequence in TP04 represents a construction horizon. Given that this is at approximately the same elevation as the interface between the possible land reclamation deposits and the overlying mixed post-medieval material (56.30m OD), it is possible that this interface represents the construction horizon for the recently dismantled building and that the mixed layer represents construction debris/levelling. The apparent lack of *in-situ* floor surfaces associated with the use of the building suggests that these have been truncated during the laying of the existing concrete floor.



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Figure 1: Site location

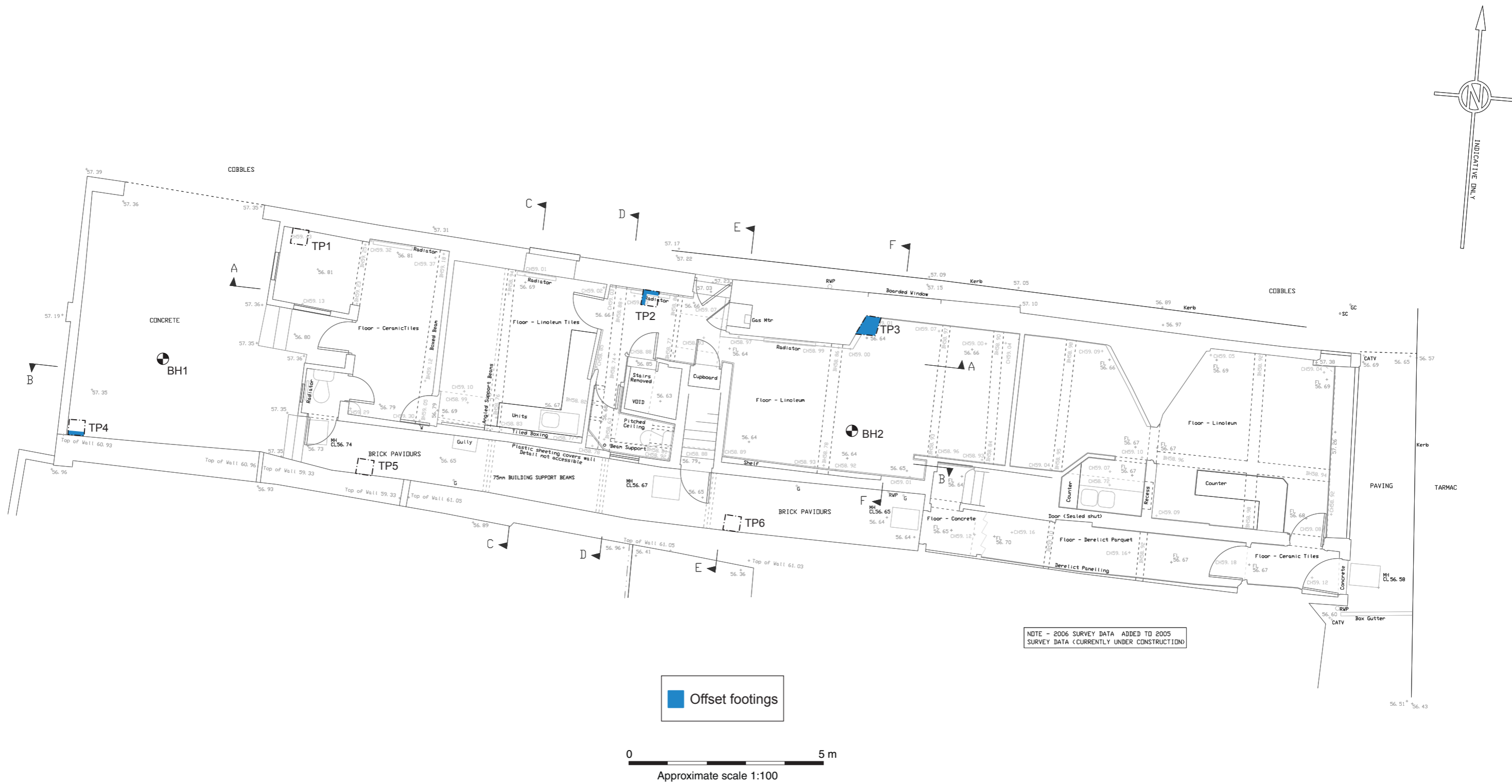


Figure 2: Test Pit and Borehole Locations

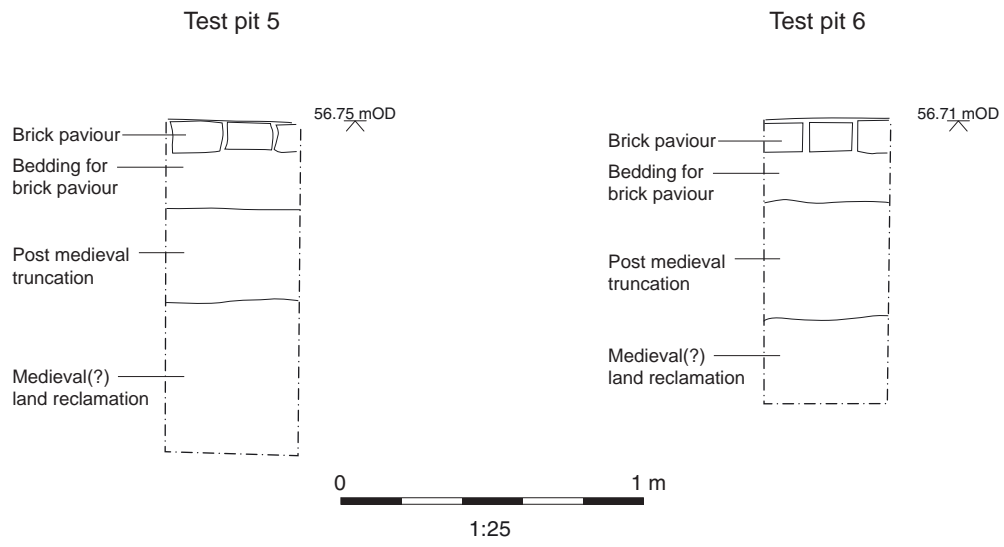


Figure 3: Sections, Test Pit 5 and 6



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