

Almshouses, Castle Street, Reading

**An Archaeological Watching Brief
For Reading General Municipal Charities**

By Andy Taylor

Thames Valley Archaeological Services Ltd

Site Code ACS 01/33

January 2002

Summary

Site name: Almshouses, Castle Street, Reading

Grid reference: SU 7123 7310

Site activity: Watching Brief

Date and duration of project: 6th, 12th and 19th September 2001

Project manager: Steve Ford

Site supervisor: Jo Pine, Andy Taylor and Sian Anthony

Site code: ACS 01/33

Area of site: Approximately 1720 sq m

Summary of results: No archaeological features were located. Remains of a cow skull and several horn cores were excavated from humic layers but not retained.

Monuments identified: None

Location and reference of archive: The archive is presently held by Thames Valley Archaeological Services, 47-49 De Beauvoir Road, Reading, Berkshire, RG1 5NR and will be deposited at Reading Museum in due course (accession code REDMG.2001.131).

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Almshouses, Castle Street, Reading An Archaeological Watching Brief

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Report 01/33

Introduction

This report documents the results of an archaeological watching brief carried out at Almshouses, Castle Street, Reading (SU7123 7310) (Fig. 1). The work was commissioned by Ms Anne Orton of Compton Lacey, 7 Grove Park, White Waltham, Maidenhead, SL6 3LW, on behalf of Reading General Municipal Charities.

A planning application (00/0494) has been made to Reading Borough Council to alter the Almshouses by demolition of 1960s extensions and the enlargement of some existing extensions. A condition attached to the consent required an archaeological watching brief during all works that might disturb archaeological deposits. This is in accordance with the Department of the Environment's Planning Policy Guidance *Archaeology and Planning* (PPG16, 1990) and the Borough's policies on archaeology. The field investigation was carried out to a specification approved by Mr Kev Beachus, archaeologist with Babbie Environmental, archaeological advisers to the Council. The fieldwork was undertaken by Jo Pine on 6th September, Andy Taylor on 12th September and Sian Anthony on 19th September 2001 and the site code is ACS 01/33. The archive will be deposited with Reading museum; the accession code is REDMG.2001.131.

Location, topography and geology

The site is located on the western edge of Reading town centre and is towards the western end of Castle Street itself. The site covers an area of approximately 1720 square metres and lies on ground that slopes from *c.* 45 to 40m above Ordnance Datum. The British Geological Survey (BGS 1946) indicates that the site lies relatively close to the junction of the valley gravel and upper chalk. Alluvium was encountered during a recent evaluation and excavation close by in Castle Street (Pine 2000) down towards the Holy Brook.

Archaeological background

A desk-based assessment of the area was undertaken, including a search of the Reading Sites and Monuments Record and cartographic study (Ford 1999). A recent archaeological excavation carried out by Thames Valley Archaeological Services on the land at the rear of 31-7 Castle Street showed medieval floor layers and domestic refuse pits dating from the 11th century onwards (Pine, in prep.). The earliest archaeological finds in this area

come in the form of four bronze objects dredged from the River Kennet. These comprise a middle Bronze Age rapier and two palstaves and a late Bronze Age sword (Pine 2000).

Reading was first mentioned in AD 871 when a Danish army set up a winter camp there. A mint and market show that Reading was a fairly important town during the late Saxon period. The boundary of the Saxon town is, at present, unknown. However, Astill (1978) believed the Saxon town to be located within the vicinity of St. Mary's Butts, lying at the junction of the Oxford to Winchester and London to Bath roads. The site also backs onto the Holybrook which has been an important stretch of water since the medieval period.

Objectives and methodology

The purpose of the watching brief was to record the presence/absence, extent, condition, character, quality and date of any archaeological deposits surviving in the demolition-exposed subsoil and within the foundation trenches and service trenches. The trenches to be dug varied between 0.85m and 1.20m in width and 0.74m and 1.50m in depth (Fig. 2). All spoilheaps would be monitored for finds.

Results

Trench A

This trench was not recorded because the foundation trench had already been shuttered.

Trench B

This foundation trench was situated at the northern end of the site and was dug approximately east-west. At the western end was the neighbouring garden's back wall. The trench was 1.20m wide, 3.00m long and 1.50m deep. The section showed 0.75m of made ground overlying 0.75m of humic soil containing fragments of red tile. Within this layer was a 1.40m wide area of post medieval disturbance. No archaeological deposits were found and the post-medieval finds were not retained.

Trench C

This trench was situated slightly further south than Trench B and was again aligned east-west with the western end against the neighbouring back wall. The trench was 1.00m wide, 3.00m long and 0.74m deep. The section showed 0.29m of made ground overlying 0.45m of humic soil, again containing tile fragments. A horn core was

recovered from the south-western corner of the trench but was not retained. No archaeological features were present.

Area D

These trenches were situated behind Almshouses 9 and 10 at the middle of the almshouse block but towards the south of the area being developed. The trenches formed a cross shape 4.50m across with the two trenches measuring 0.85m and 0.90m across and 1.40m in depth. The section showed the same stratigraphy as the two previous trenches. Remains of a cow skull were found, as were three horn cores, but these were not retained. A piece of late post-medieval green glazed pottery from the foundation cut with the skull was not retained.

Finds

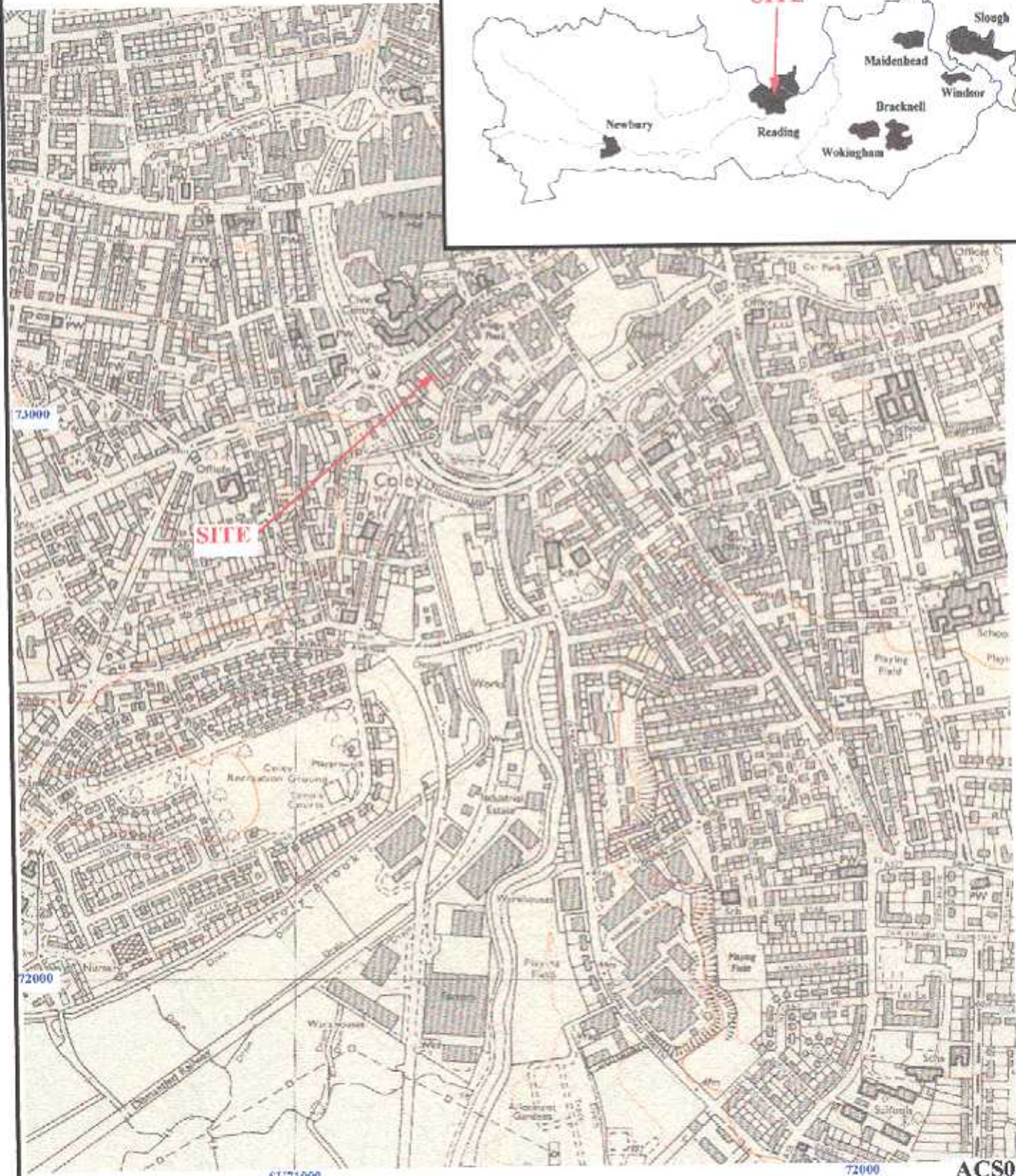
Four horn cores were recovered from Trenches C and D but were not retained, nor were the skull fragments from Trench D. A piece of post-medieval green glazed pottery, also from Trench D was not retained.

Conclusion

No archaeological deposits were noted during the watching briefs and the only finds were the post-medieval items previously mentioned.

References

- Astill, G G, 1978, *Historic Towns in Berkshire*, Berkshire Archaeol Comm Publ 2, Reading
BGS, 1946, *British Geological Survey*, 1:63360, Sheet 268, Drift Edition, Keyworth
Ford, S, 1999, 'Land at the rear of 31-37 Castle Street, Reading, An Archaeological Desk Based Assessment', Thames Valley Archaeological Services Ltd Rep, Reading
Pine, J, 2000, 'Land at the rear of 31-37 Castle Street, Reading, An Archaeological Evaluation', Thames Valley Archaeological Services Ltd Rep, Reading
Pine, J, in prep, 'Excavations at land at the rear of 31-37 Castle Street, Reading', Thames Valley Archaeological Services Ltd
PPG 16, 1990, *Archaeology and Planning*, Dept Environment Planning Policy Guidance 16, HMSO



**Castle Street Almshouses, Castle Street,
Reading, Berkshire, 2001**

Figure 1. Location of site within Reading and Berkshire.

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Almshouses Castle Street, Reading, Berkshire, 2001

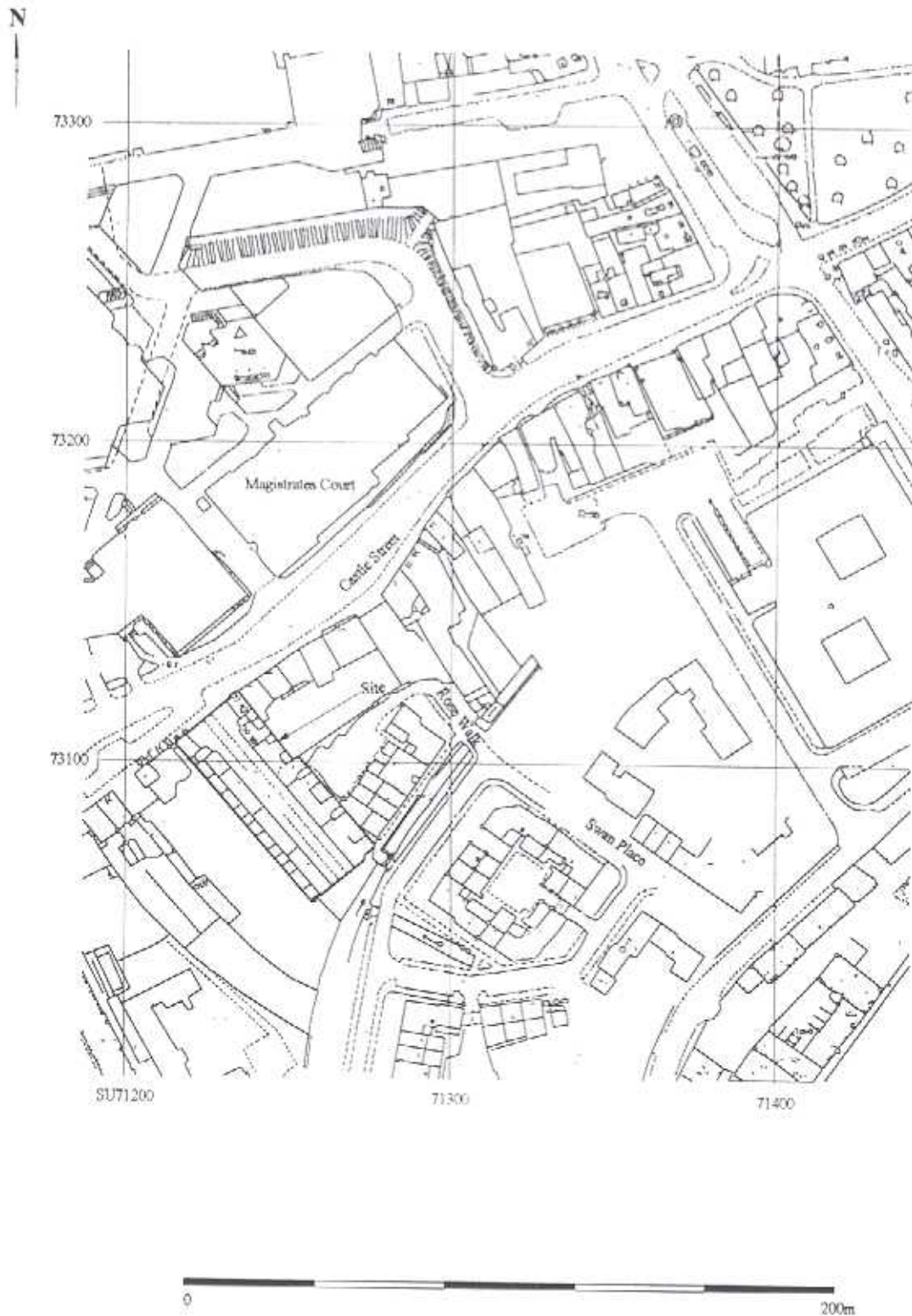


Figure 2. Location of site.

Almshouses, Castle Street, Reading, November 2001

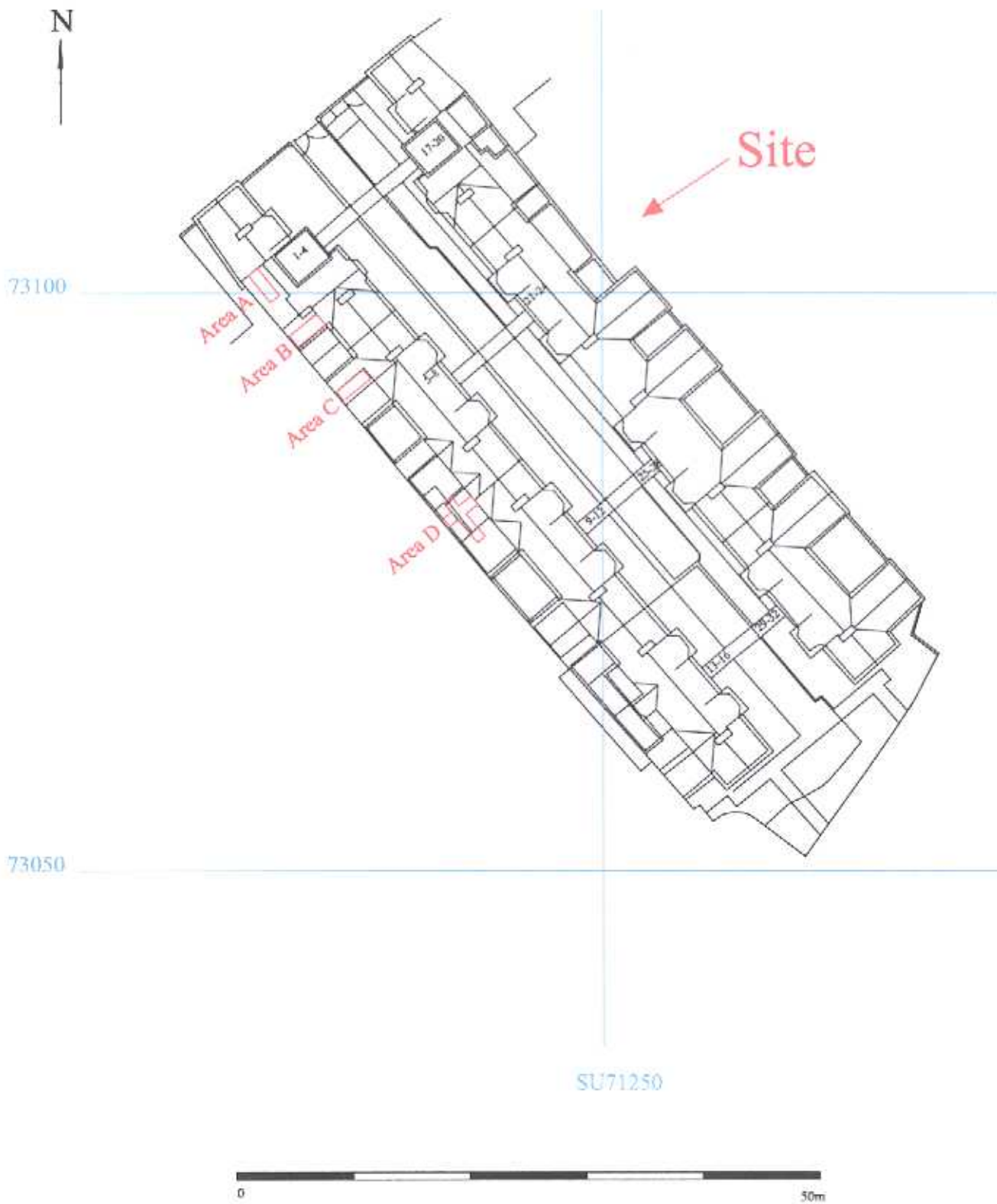


Figure 3. Plan of the site showing the location of the trenches