

**Wantage County Primary School, Garston Lane,  
Wantage, Oxfordshire**

**An Archaeological Evaluation  
for Oxfordshire County Council**

by Erlend Hindmarch  
Thames Valley Archaeological Services Ltd

Site Code GLW 02/86

**November 2002**

## Summary

**Site name:** Wantage County Primary School

**Grid reference:** SU 4006 8803

**Site activity:** Evaluation

**Date and duration of project:** 22nd–25th October 2002

**Project manager:** Erlend Hindmarch

**Site supervisor:** Erlend Hindmarch

**Site code:** GLW 02/86

**Area of site:** 0.6ha

**Summary of results:** A number ditches and gullies were located on the site which showed some correlation to the previous geophysical survey, along with a small number of postholes. All appear to be medieval.

**Monuments identified:** Medieval ditches gullies, post holes.

**Location and reference of archive:** The site archive is currently held by Thames Valley Archaeological Services Ltd, 47-49 De Beauvoir Road, Reading, Berkshire, RG1 5NR. It is anticipated that the complete archive will be deposited with the Oxfordshire County Museums Service, given that permission is received to deposit the artefacts.

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Report edited/checked by:	Steve Ford✓ 11.11.02
	Steve Preston✓ 18.11.02

# Wantage County Primary School, Garston Lane, Wantage, Oxfordshire An Archaeological Evaluation

by Erlend Hindmarch

**Report 02/86**

## **Introduction**

This report documents the results of an archaeological field evaluation carried out at Wantage County Primary School, Garston Lane, Wantage, Oxfordshire (SU 4006 8803) (Fig. 1). The work was commissioned by Mrs A P Parker, of WS Atkins Asset Management, Chilbrook, Oasis Business Park, Eynsham, Oxford OX29 4AH on behalf of Oxfordshire County Council.

The Wantage County Primary School at Garston Lane, Wantage, is soon to close and it is proposed that the site be redeveloped for commercial or residential use. Owing to the possibility of archaeological deposits being damaged or destroyed by ground works for such a scheme, a field evaluation has been requested.

This is in accordance with the Department of the Environment's Planning Policy Guidance, *Archaeology and Planning* (PPG16 1990), and the County's policies on archaeology. This evaluation will help to provide information for a mitigation strategy to be put in place to minimise the effects of redevelopment on any archaeological deposits that may be present.

The field investigation was carried out to a specification approved by Mr Hugh Coddington, Deputy County Archaeological Officer, Oxfordshire County Council. The fieldwork was undertaken by Erlend Hindmarch and Pam Jenkins from 22nd to 25th October 2002. The site code is GLW 02/86. The archive is presently held at Thames Valley Archaeological Services, Reading and will be deposited with Oxfordshire County Museum Service in due course.

## **Location, topography and geology**

The site is located on the west side of Seesen Way (A338) and the south side of Garston Lane. The area of investigation is currently used as school playing fields and as such is relatively flat. The underlying geology of the site is mapped at the boundary of the Upper Greensand, with Head and Younger Coombe deposits (Fig. 1) (BGS 1971). The Greensand was observed in all trenches. The site lies at a height of approximately 91m above Ordnance Datum.

## **Archaeological background**

In the wider vicinity an early Roman settlement was located during an archaeological investigation on both sides of the Letcombe Brook. During the Anglo-Saxon period, Wantage was a royal manor, and pottery of this date has been found in pits west of the Letcombe Brook. Wantage is also known as the birthplace of King Alfred in AD849.

The investigation area itself was subjected to a geophysical survey in 1999 (Barker and Mercer 1999). The survey located a number of anomalies, some of which may relate to levelling of the playing field, but others may be of archaeological interest.

## **Objectives and methodology**

The purpose of the evaluation was to determine the presence/absence, extent, condition, character, quality and date of any archaeological deposits within the area of development. A more specific aim was to try to determine if the geophysical anomalies are of archaeological origin.

In order to achieve these aims, a total of five trenches, each 20m long, were dug across the site (Fig. 2). Trenches were located to investigate a sample of the anomalies recorded in the geophysical survey; these anomalies have been labelled on Figure 3 to match the identifications given previously (Barker and Mercer 1999). The trenches were dug using a 360<sup>0</sup>-type excavator fitted with a 1.6m toothless ditching bucket. All machine excavation was carried out under the direct supervision of an experienced, qualified archaeologist. Machine digging removed the overburden to a point where the top of the natural geology was encountered, or onto the top of any levels that may be of archaeological value. Where archaeological levels or deposits were encountered these were cleaned, and sampled by hand, and recorded, to meet the aims of the brief. Spoil heaps were also monitored for finds. A complete list of trenches giving lengths, breadths, depths and a description of sections and geology is given in Appendix 1.

## **Results**

### Trench 1

This trench was located to sample a group of linear geophysical anomalies in the north-east corner of the site. These anomalies appear as R4, R5 and R11 in the survey report and appear as high and low resistance. It was thought that R5 and R11 might represent the edge of a building or bank-and-ditch enclosure. However, no trace of these anomalies or any other significant deposits were located within this trench. Pottery was, however,

recovered from the topsoil (50) and subsoil (51, a brown clay loam), dating from the medieval period (12th–15th century) to the post-medieval period (17th century and later).

### Trench 2 (Fig. 4 and Pl. 1)

The placement of this trench was due to the location of two linear geophysical anomalies (R2 and R3) seen on the eastern edge of the site aligned parallel to each other, north–south. Removal of the topsoil and subsoil showed two linear features crossing the trench confirming the geophysical results. Excavation showed both features to be substantial ditches, differing in depth and profile.

Ditch 1 was approximately 11.5m from the west end of the trench. In profile the ditch was ‘V’ shaped and measured 2.1m wide at the top and 1.06m deep. The primary fill (60) ran down the eastern side of the ditch and filled the base of the ditch to a depth of 0.4m. This was green-grey silty clay. Pottery and bone were recovered from this layer. The pottery consisted of one (residual) Roman sherd and three medieval sherds (12th–13th century). The secondary fill (53) was black-brown silty clay with a thickness of 0.4m. Animal bone, a possible iron nail head and 13th/14th-century pottery was recovered. The uppermost fill of this ditch (52) was dark brown silty clay and contained pottery and animal bone. The pottery has been dated to between the 11th and 12th centuries. This date would seem to suggest that this pottery is residual.

The second feature (3) was seen at the eastern end of the trench. Again it appeared to be a ditch but in this case showed evidence of being re-cut. In profile the whole feature was 2m wide, with the first 1.1m representing the re-cut (4) and the final 0.9m being the remnants of the original ditch (3). Ditch 3 had straight, near-vertical sides with a flat base while the re-cut (4) was a wide ‘V’ shape removing the eastern edge of 3. The primary fill (56) occupied the western side and filled the bottom of ditch 3 to a depth of 0.39m. This first deposit in the ditch was grey sandy clay similar to the natural geology. Only one piece of pottery was recovered from this fill and this has been dated to the Roman period. The secondary fill (54) was a loose black silt deposit containing much charcoal. It contained a small amount of animal bone and produced pottery from the medieval period (11th–12th century).

Both these fills had been truncated by the re-cut ditch (4). Despite the presence of a single Roman sherd from the base of the ditch, it is likely that this is residual and it seems most probable that this ditch is of medieval date. The later ditch (4) had only one fill (55), mid grey silty clay 0.5m deep, which contained only animal bone. An iron knife with bone handle was found in topsoil.

### Trench 3 (Fig. 4)

Trench 3 was placed on the eastern edge of the site to try to determine the nature of geophysical anomalies R2 and R3 which appeared to continue down the east side of the site from Trench 2. Unlike the other trenches, no subsoil was present for the first 7m from the west end. Beyond this point the subsoil was a grey sandy clay (59) which reached a depth of 0.35m below the topsoil. It was assumed that this layer was redeposited natural and may be due to the construction work during the building of garages at this end of the site. One sherd of Saxon pottery came from this layer and is assumed to be residual. Only one of the anomalies was seen (24) and this was at the western end of the trench. This would appear to be the continuation of R3. It was a 'U' shaped ditch measuring 1.6m wide at the top with steeply angled sides to a flat base where hard rock was reached. The ditch was filled with brown-black clay silt, which contained animal bone and pottery dating from the 12th to 14th century.

A second feature (6), which was not apparent on the geophysical survey, was seen protruding from the northern section in the west end of the trench. This took the form of half a sub-circular cut. It had gentle sloping sides converging on a centre point directly by the section. It is not clear whether the feature is the remains of a shallow pit or the terminus of a ditch. It had a single fill (58) 0.15m deep. Only one piece of animal bone was retrieved from this brown-black clay silt. No dating evidence was found.

No indications for the continuation of R2 were observed but this may be due to the close proximity of the anomaly to the edge of the site where it was not practical for the machine to operate.

### Trench 4 (Fig. 4)

Trench 4 was located in order to find the origins of the geophysical anomalies R4 and R10. After removal of the topsoil, the subsoil was seen to have changed to a black silty clay (62) containing charcoal flecks. Residual pottery dating from the 11th to the 14th century was recovered from this layer. Once this had been removed a number of intercutting features were seen. Initially, it appeared that there were three linear features. Two were aligned east-west, one at the northern end (6) and one at the southern end (9). The third (11) ran along the western side of the trench. It appeared to be cut by (9) and continued until it merged into the side of (6).

The section dug at the junction of 6 and 11 showed two ditches. The earliest of these (7, part of 11) had a north-south alignment and terminated at the junction with 6, which truncated it slightly. Ditch 6 seems to match the anomaly recorded as R10. It was 1.5m wide, 0.45m deep and filled by a compact dark grey clay silt (63)

which contained two sherds of medieval pottery, a large lump of iron slag and a small collection of animal bones.

On investigation, the southern end of the trench turned out to be more complex than initially envisaged. Ditch 9 was 0.80m wide and varied from 0.50m to 0.80m deep. It extended the full width of the trench and cut across ditch 11. Although not visible in plan, feature 16 may have been an earlier cut of 9, or a pit underlying it. Feature 16 appeared to have been cut into a 0.15m thick layer of degraded blue-grey sandstone (83) which also contained grey clayey silt; this may have been the weathered surface of the natural or a redeposited dump. A lens of similar material overlay the fill of ditch 9; it is not impossible this represents material from an upcast bank.

Ditch 11 at this end of the trench was represented by cut 10, a gentle U-shaped ditch with a single silting fill (69). This was cut by ditch 9 and also by circular, bowl-shaped pit 17 (=13), filled with 68, a mix of firm yellowish-grey clay and dark brownish-grey silty clay with occasional charcoal.

Further features (14, 23, and 84) appeared only in section (poor weather hindering visibility in plan). Their interpretation is uncertain. Feature 12 was probably a posthole, but could also have been a continuation of 23, which had been cut away by ditch 11 leaving little for a certain interpretation.

Nothing matching the position of geophysical anomaly R4 was observed in this trench, while ditch 11 (comprising cuts 7 and 10) was not seen in the geophysical survey.

#### Trench 5 (Fig. 4 and Pl. 2)

Trench 5 was located in order to find the origins of the geophysical anomalies R8, R9 and R12. After removal of the topsoil, the subsoil (62) was seen to be black silty clay containing some ironstone. Once this had been removed several features were seen, including four linear features (2, 18, 21, 22) and three posthole-sized features (8, 19, 20). Gully terminal 2 butted or cut posthole 8 and was of medieval date. Linear feature 21 formed a near right angle in plan and may represent two features or a rectilinear structure such as an animal pen or a building foundation trench. Posthole 8 produced a single sherd of Roman pottery but this is likely to be a residual find. Feature 18 ran across the north end of the trench in a north-south direction. The dark subsoil was very similar to the fill of (18) and due to the bad weather at the beginning of the excavation this difference was not spotted and in effect a section was dug through this feature by machine. This feature was subsequently also excavated by hand. Feature 18 was seen to be a ditch of large proportions which was never bottomed. Two fills were apparent the upper (76) being a black silt which overlay a dark grey silty clay. Both these fills contained large amounts of animal bone and similar pottery of 11th-12th (81) and 12th-13th (76) century date. Due to the

alignment of this ditch it is unlikely that it represents either of the two anomalies (R9 and R12) that appeared in this area of the geophysical survey. However, another possible ditch (25) which was seen in the western section at the machined part of 18 is the likely cause of one or other of these anomalies. This new ditch was seen to have been cut by 18 but it is not known if it carried on beyond this intersection, as the geophysics results would suggest. It contained three fills: the primary fill (86) was a dark grey silty clay which was overlain by (87), a similar type of fill but which contain a higher percentage of natural stone fragments. The final fill (88) was light grey clay silt, which had been cut by (18). No finds were retrieved from any of these deposits.

## **Finds**

### *Pottery by Jane Timby*

The evaluation resulted in the recovery of 87 sherds of pottery weighing 1138g dating to the Roman, Saxon, medieval and post-medieval periods. The individual fabrics were quantified by sherd count and weight for each recorded context and the resulting data summarized in Appendix 3. Pottery was recovered from all five trenches investigated with the highest density of material coming from Trench 2, closely followed by Trenches 4 and 5. The assemblage was moderately well preserved with an overall average sherd weight of 13.5g, fairly typical of urban rubbish deposits. The Roman material was, not surprisingly, the most degraded.

### *Roman*

Six sherds of Roman date were present, mainly redeposited in later contexts. Of specific note are two sherds from feature 2 (fill 61): a sherd of Oxfordshire colour-coated ware and a sherd of later Roman shelly ware, indicating activity in the vicinity dating to the later 4th century AD. A further sherd of Oxfordshire colour-coated ware came from Trench 3 (59). The only incidence of a Roman sherd unaccompanied by later material is a rim of an Oxfordshire whiteware flagon from posthole 8 (fill 66) probably of 2nd–3rd century currency. However, a single sherd cannot be taken as a reliable indicator of a Roman date for the feature.

### *Saxon*

Two bodysherds of Saxon date are present. One is from a handmade densely organic-tempered ware from Trench 3 (59); the other with less organic temper is redeposited in ditch 10 (69). Such wares are typical of the 6th to 9th century AD and although again redeposited, these sherds can be taken as indicative of Saxon activity



in the locality. Considerable evidence for Saxon occupation in Wantage has been identified from other recent excavations in the town.

### *Medieval*

Medieval wares account for 87% by sherd count of the recovered assemblage. A variety of wares are represented including Newbury fabrics A, B and C, all from relatively local sources in the Kennet Valley and surrounding areas; Minety ware from Wiltshire, Brill-Boarstall ware from Buckinghamshire, sandy wares from the Abingdon/ Wallingford areas and Cotswold oolitic-limestone-tempered ware from the west country. Feature 3 (54) would appear to be the earlier in the sequence, containing exclusively sherds of Newbury fabric A and Cotswold ware, dating to the 11-12th century although the number of sherds are quite low. Similarly early material from 1 (52) and 17 (68) is residual. The remaining groups with sherds of Newbury B and other sandy wares suggest a date from the 12th-14th centuries.

### *Post-medieval*

Three sherds of post-medieval glazed red earthenware were recovered from (51) probably dating to the 17th century or later.

### *Animal bones by Sian Anthony*

A total of 391 animal bones were recovered from the site, a reasonably large collection, all in good condition. A small number of bones showed signs of weathering indicating exposure before disposal and burial. Almost equal numbers of sheep and cattle were found indicating no preference for a species, although only small numbers of pig bones were found.

The dog remains were from a medium-size animal and may be modern as they were from the topsoil of Trench 1 or 2. The rat mandible from the topsoil of Trench 2 is also probably residual. However, the cat remains, of a mandible, scapula, ribs and radius from a gully terminus (context 2) are of an earlier, medieval date. The cat was a young adult from the lack of wear on the remaining teeth. The bird remains were both domestic chickens and also represent an unexpectedly small proportion.

Few butchery marks were found on the bones considering the good preservation: only four cut marks and two chop marks. Ageing information shows a wide range of variation in age of animals at death; pig remains included two younger (<2 years) animals and one large tusk indicating a much older animal. Sheep/goats also

show a range through the ages with both lambs (<1 year) and bones with arthritic changes and one mandible of over 8 years of age. The cattle ages also are interesting with some younger animals but with two examples in the very old/ senile age range (contexts: 18, 3/54). One of these was an articulated spine fused over the spinous processes with severe arthritis and one Schmorl's node indicating a possible use of cattle for heavy work, probably traction. The range of animals indicate that all species were being used for a number of purposes and not exclusively for any one use. Young animals were killed for meat but only small proportions, most seem to have been kept for breeding, wool production and traction. The small quantity of bones found in this evaluation will not give a full indication of the usage of animals on the site but does indicate good survival and a high potential for this type of data to survive.

## **Conclusions**

The evaluation has been successful in demonstrating the presence of significant archaeological deposits on the site and confirming the results of the earlier geophysical survey. The deposits revealed are certainly or probably of medieval date and point to occupation of this date on the site, with evidence of Roman and Saxon activity nearby. In terms of previous work in Wantage the pottery assemblage presents no great surprise in terms of the range of wares and their chronology although it does provide an important contribution to the detailed pattern of activity. Evidence of Roman and Saxon occupation has been attested from the north-west area of the town around Mill Street and Denchworth Road and the presence of two Saxon sherds in this group may extend the potential area of Saxon occupation to within this site.

## **References**

- Barker, P and Mercer, E, 1999, 'A report for WS Atkins –Oxford on a Geophysical Survey carried out at Wantage CP School, Garston Lane, Wantage', Stratascan rep 1388, Upton Upon Severn  
BGS, 1971, *British Geological Survey*, 1:50.000, Sheet 253 Drift Edition, Keyworth  
PPG16, 1990, *Archaeology and Planning*, Dept of the Environment Planning Policy Guidance 16, HMSO

**APPENDIX 1: Trench details**

0m at S or W end

<i>Trench</i>	<i>Length (m)</i>	<i>Breadth (m)</i>	<i>Depth (m)</i>	<i>Comment</i>
1	16.9	1.6	0.70	0-0.3m topsoil; 0.3-0.6m subsoil; 0.6m+ sand natural.
2	18.2	1.6	0.50	0-0.32m topsoil; 0.32-0.47m subsoil; 0.47m+ sand natural. [Plate 1]
3	19.7	1.6	0.30 (W) 0.55 (E)	0-0.3m topsoil; 0.3m+ sand natural.
4	20.0	1.6	0.45m	0-0.25m topsoil; 0.25m+ sand natural.
5	19.0	1.6	1.2m	0-0.3m topsoil; 0.3-0.6m subsoil; 0.6m+ sand natural. [Plate 2]

## APPENDIX 2: Feature details

<i>Feature.</i>	<i>Fill</i>	<i>Trench</i>	<i>Type</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Comment</i>
1	52, 53, 60	2	Ditch	medieval	Plate 2
2	61	5	Gully terminal	medieval	
3	54, 56	2	Ditch	medieval	
4	55	2	Ditch recut	medieval	
5	58	3	Pit or terminal	medieval	
6	63	4	Ditch	medieval	
7	64, 65	4	Ditch	medieval	Same as 10, Part of 11
8	66	5	Posthole	Roman?	
9	67	4	Ditch	-	
10	69	4	Ditch	medieval	Same as 7, Part of 11
11	-	4	Ditch	medieval	Group number for ditches 7 and 10
12	72	4	Posthole	-	
13	73	4	Posthole	-	
14	70, 71	4	Ditch	-	
15	74	4	Posthole	-	
16	75	4	Ditch	-	
17	68	4	Pit	medieval	
18	76, 81	5	Ditch	-	
19	77	5	Ditch	-	Not dug
20	78	5	Posthole	-	Not dug
21	79	5	Ditch	-	Not dug
22	80	5	Gully	-	Not dug
23	82	4	Gully	-	
24	57	3	Ditch	-	
	83	4	sandstone dump	-	Natural?
	84	4	Sandstone layer	-	Natural?
25	86, 87, 88	5	Ditch	-	

### APPENDIX 3: Pottery quantification by context

<i>Tr</i>	<i>Cut</i>	<i>Fill</i>	<i>Roman</i>	<i>Saxon</i>	<i>Med</i>	<i>Postmed</i>	<i>Tot No</i>	<i>Tot Wt (g)</i>	<i>Date</i>
1-2		51	0	0	2	3	5	108	17th+
0	spoil		0	0	2	0	2	21	12-14th
1		50	0	0	4	0	4	85	12-15th
2	1	52	0	0	2	0	2	20	11-12th
2	1	53	0	0	2	0	2	15	13-14th
2	1	60	1	0	3	0	4	25	Roman/12-13th
2	3	54	0	0	4	0	4	99	11-12th
2	3	56	1	0	0	0	1	4	Roman
2		50	0	0	8	0	8	67	12-14th
3	5	57	0	0	5	0	5	46	12-14th
3		50	0	0	1	0	1	5	12-15th
3		59	1	1	3	0	5	43	C4/Saxon/12-13th
4	6	63	0	0	2	0	2	26	12-14th
4	7	64	0	0	2	0	2	52	12-14th
4	7	65	0	0	7	0	7	190	11-12th
4	9	67	0	0	5	0	5	66	12-13th
4		62/67	0	0	1	0	1	13	12-14th
4	10	68	0	0	2	0	2	5	12-13th
4	10	69	0	1	4	0	5	74	12-14th
5	1/2	61/62	0	0	1	0	1	3	11-12th
5	us	us	0	0	1	0	1	3	12-13th
5	2	61	2	0	8	0	10	97	C4/12-13th
5	8	66	1	0	0	0	1	6	Roman, C2+
5	18	76	0	0	5	0	5	28	12-13th
5	18	81	0	0	2	0	2	37	11-12th
<i>TOT</i>			6	2	76	3	87	1138	

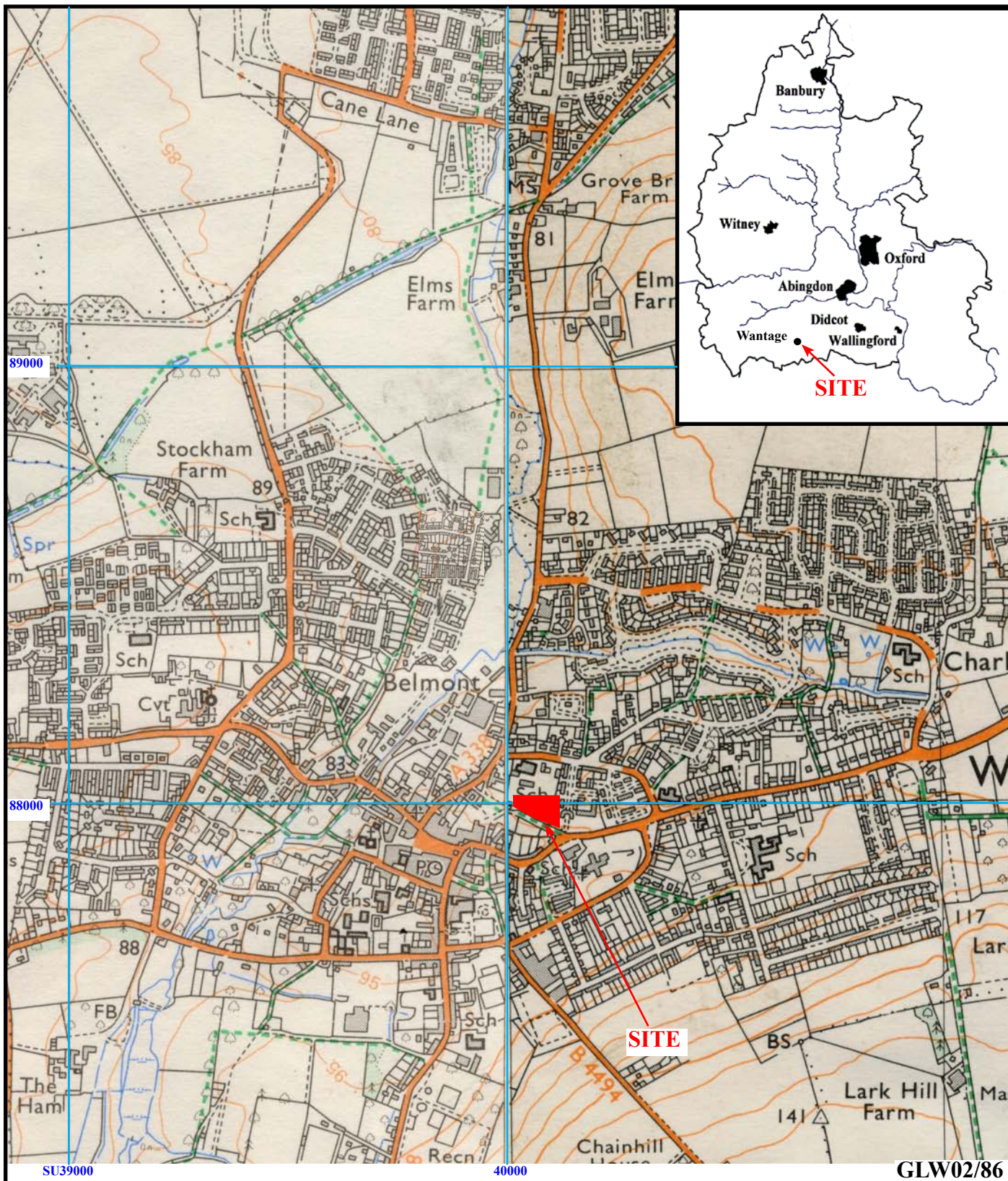
**NB** Dates assigned are dates of the pottery, not necessarily of the context.

**APPENDIX 4. Animal bone**

<i>Feature</i>	<i>Fill</i>	<i>Cow</i>	<i>Cow sized</i>	<i>Sheep/ Goat</i>	<i>Sheep sized</i>	<i>Pig</i>	<i>Horse</i>	<i>Dog</i>	<i>Bird</i>	<i>Cat</i>	<i>Rat</i>	<i>Unid</i>	<i>Total</i>
1	52	8	2	4			1						15
1	53		1	1									2
1	60			1	1								2
2	61	2	7	4	13					4		20	50
3	54	1											1
3	56			1								2	3
4	55		4									1	5
5	57	3	8	2					1				14
6	58			1									1
6	63	6	6	2	4	2	1						21
7	64	2	2									1	5
8	66			4									4
9	67		4	2	14	2						8	30
10	68		15	5	7				1			7	35
10	68	7	4	2	1							7	21
10	69		2										2
18	76	23	7	2	7				1				40
18	81			59									59
Tr 2	50	3	9	4	1		2				1		20
	50		6										6
	51		6	4									10
	51			13				7					20
Tr3	59	3	5	7	2	2						1	20
Tr 3	50		4	1									5
<i>Total</i>		58	92	119	50	6	4	7	3	4	1	47	391

**APPENDIX 5. Other Finds**

<i>Trench</i>	<i>Feature</i>	<i>Fill</i>	<i>Type</i>	<i>Comments</i>
2	1	53	Iron fragment	Possible small nail head
4	6	63	Large lump iron slag	
4	10	69	Small fragment of brick or tile	
2	-	50	Badly corroded bone-handled iron knife (3 pieces)	Top soil
		51	Small brick fragment	Subsoil

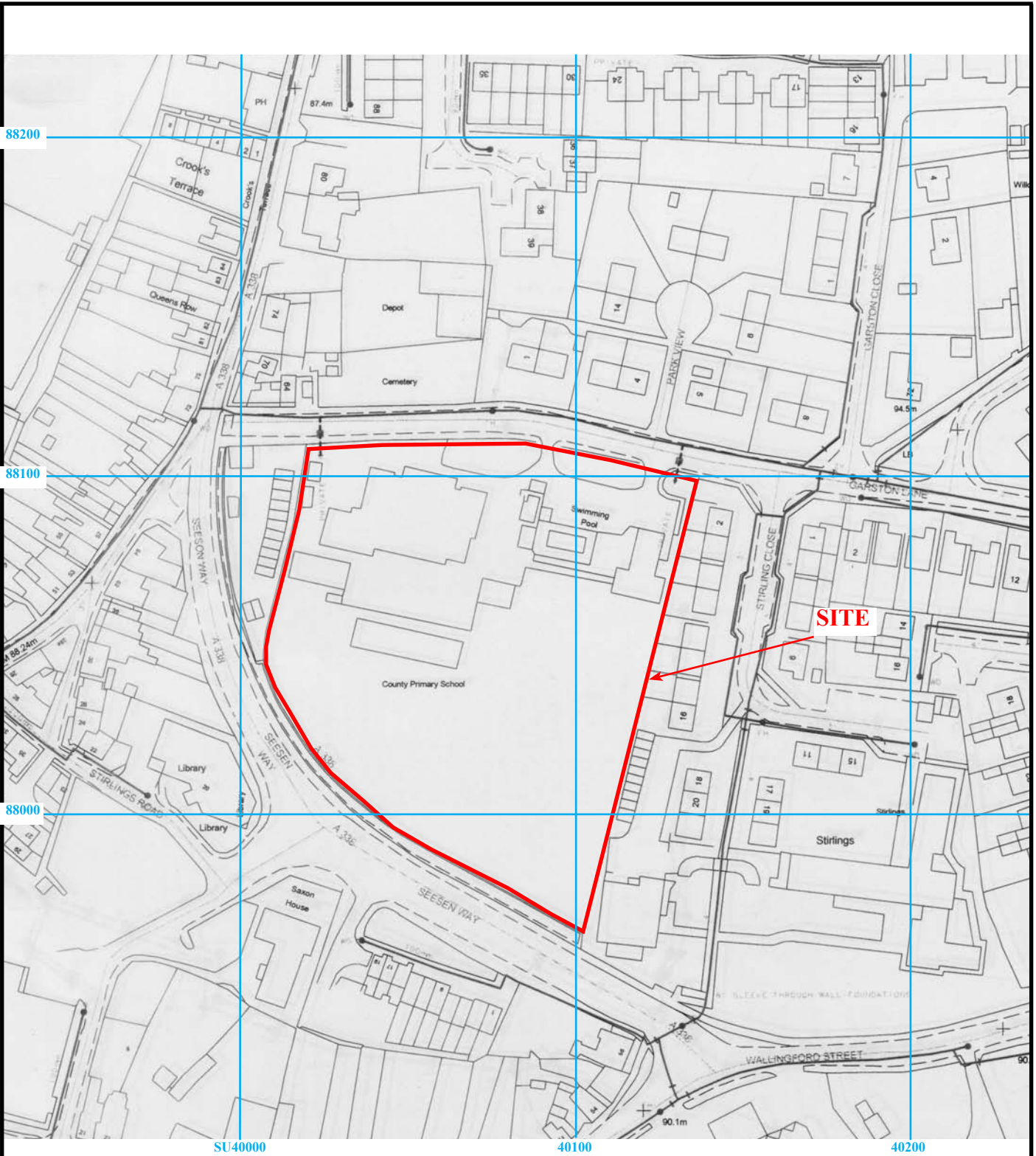


**Wantage County Primary School, Garston Lane,  
Wantage, Oxfordshire, 2002**

Figure 1. Location of site within Wantage and Oxfordshire.

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**Wantage County Primary School, Garston Lane,  
Wantage, Oxfordshire, 2001**

Figure 2. Location of site within Wantage.



# Wantage County Primary School, Garston Lane, Wantage, Oxfordshire, 2002

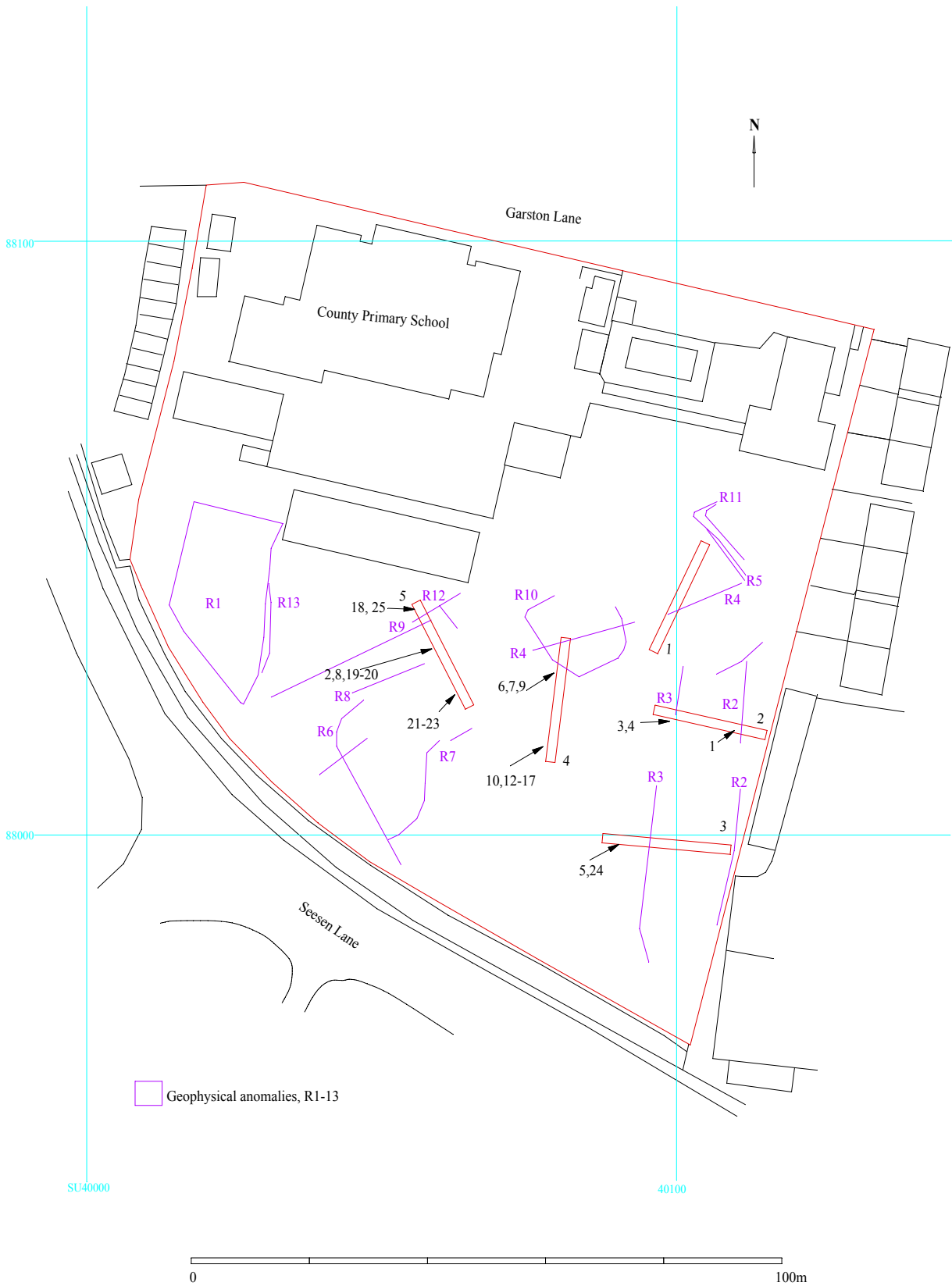


Figure 3. Detailed location of trenches and geophysical anomalies investigated.

# Wantage County Primary School, Garston Lane, Wantage, Oxfordshire, 2002

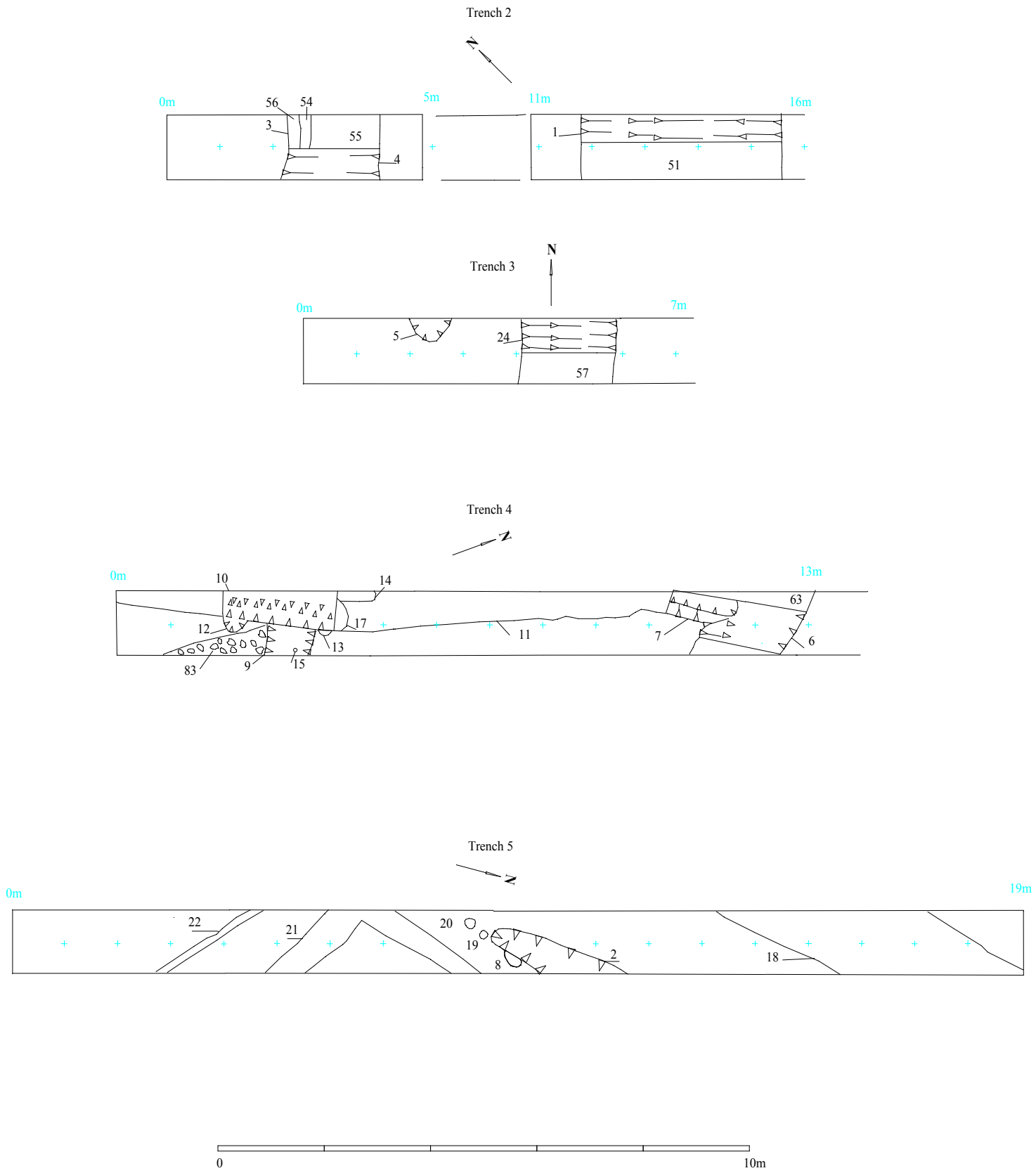


Figure 4. Trench plans

# Wantage County Primary School, Garston Lane, Wantage, Oxfordshire, 2002

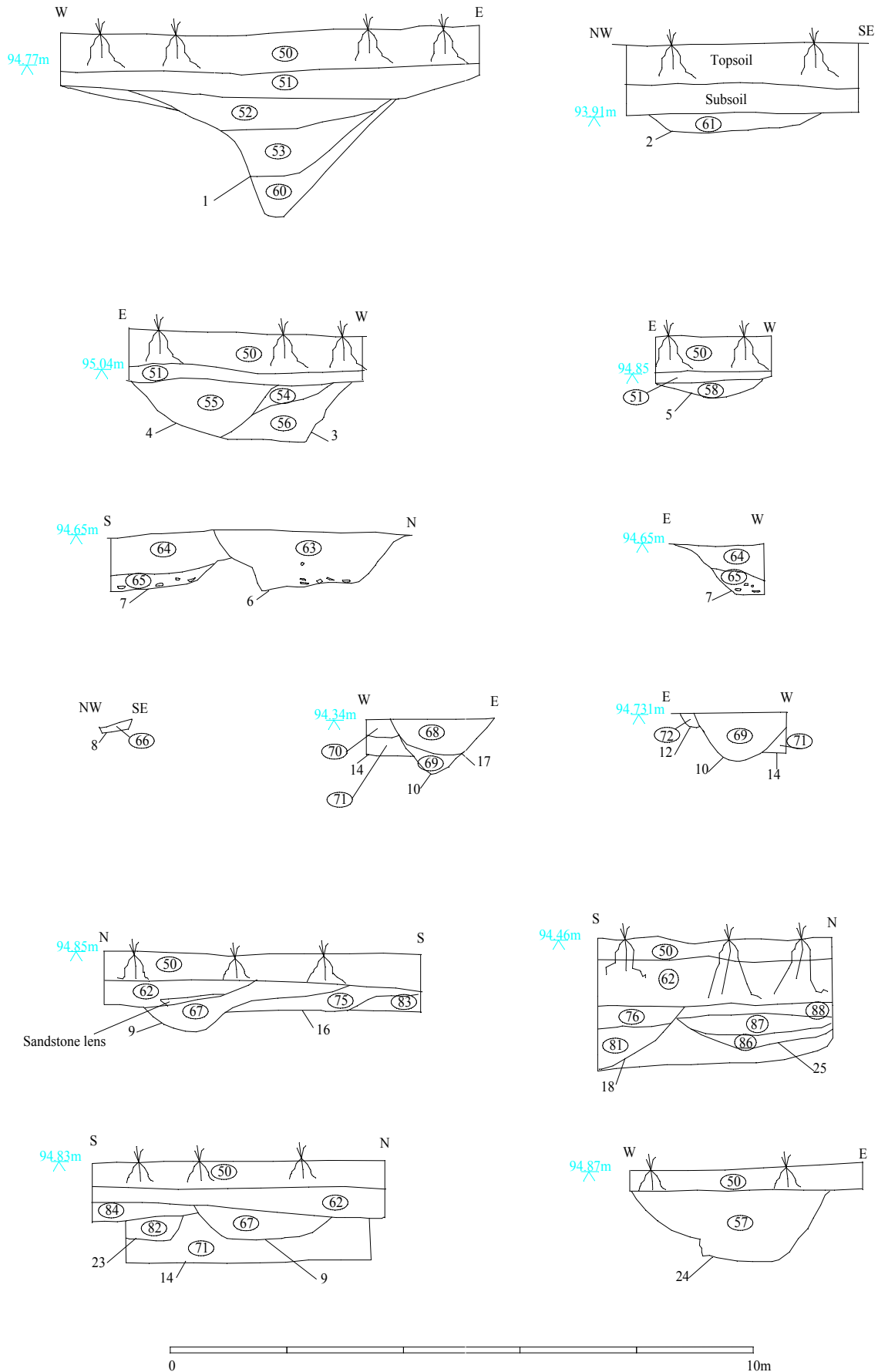


Figure 5. Sections



**Plate 1. Trench 2 Ditch 1 looking north-west. Scales: 2m and 1m**



**Plate 2. Trench 5 looking north-west. Scales: 2m and 1m**