

**Signal House, Letcombe Street,
Reading, Berkshire**

**An Archaeological Evaluation
for Speymill Contracts Limited**

by Sean Wallis
Thames Valley Archaeological Services
Ltd

Site Code LSR 06/113

January 2007

Summary

Site name: Signal House, Letcombe Street, Reading, Berkshire

Grid reference: SU 7165 7302

Site activity: Field Evaluation

Date and duration of project: 18th – 20th December 2006

Project manager: Steve Ford

Site supervisor: Sean Wallis

Site code: LSR 06/113

Area of site: c.2800 sq m

Summary of results: No archaeological deposits or finds were observed during the evaluation but a probable 19th-century well was recorded. The site was located on the sides of the valley and no alluvial deposits were encountered.

Monuments identified: None

Location and reference of archive: The archive is presently held at Thames Valley Archaeological Services, Reading and will be deposited with Reading Museum in due course.

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Report edited/checked by:	Steve Ford✓ 15.01.07
	Steve Preston✓ 15.01.07

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Report 06/113

Introduction

This report documents the results of an archaeological field evaluation carried out at Signal House, Letcombe Street, Reading, Berkshire (SU 7165 7302) (Fig. 1). The work was commissioned by Mr Robert Freeman of Ellis Williams Architects Limited, Wellfield, Chester Road, Preston Brook, Cheshire, on behalf of Speymill Contracts Limited, Mace House, Sovereign Court, Ermine Business Park, Huntingdon, Cambridgeshire.

A planning application (05/00761/FUL/SJH) had been made to Reading Borough Council to demolish the existing building, Signal House, and replace it with a new hotel. The consent gained was subject to a condition relating to archaeology, which required that the site be investigated prior to any groundworks, in accordance with the Department of the Environment's Planning Policy Guidance, *Archaeology and Planning* (PPG16 1990), and the Borough Council's policies on archaeology.

The field investigation was carried out to a specification approved by Mr David Thomason, Archaeology Officer with Berkshire Archaeology, who act as the Borough's advisers on archaeological matters. The fieldwork was undertaken by Simon Cass and Sean Wallis between 18th and 20th December 2006 and the site code is LSR 06/113. The archive is presently held at Thames Valley Archaeological Services, Reading and will be deposited with Reading Museum in due course.

Location, topography and geology

Although just south of the commercial centre of modern Reading, the site is located within the town's historic core, about 50m north of the suburban parish church of St Giles (Figs 1 and 2). The river Kennet, despite being much diverted in recent centuries, flows just to the north of the site with a (former) complex of channels present on the floodplain. The field evaluation was carried out following the demolition of Signal House, and the site was therefore relatively flat, apart from an area which had previously been occupied by a basement. According to the British Geological Survey, the underlying geology consists of Valley Gravel (BGS 1946). However, gravel was only encountered in two trenches (3 and 5), with the remaining trenches only revealing chalk. The site lies at a height of approximately 39.5m above Ordnance Datum.

Archaeological background

The archaeological potential of the site stems from its location within the historic core of Reading. In summary, the site lies just to the north of St Giles' Church which is first documented in the late 12th century, and is thought to lie in an area of suburban occupation of medieval date (Astill 1978; Preston 2005). A watching brief carried out during the construction of a warehouse immediately north-east of the current site, on the other side of Letcombe Street, recorded two Victorian wells. The majority of trenches observed consisted of made ground directly over chalk natural, although sand and gravel was noted in a small number of trenches, overlying the chalk (Gleave 1998). The area just to the north of the site lies on the floodplain of the river Kennet which has historically witnessed various water-management related activities, including milling, and which has been recorded by excavation during the Oracle redevelopment. A small watching brief to the north-west, however, recorded medieval rubbish pits suggesting occupation also in this zone (Saunders 1997). It is possible that for areas flanking the floodplain (which is approximately where the site is located) there may be further water management features, industrial activity or land reclamation in the medieval period. There is also a possibility of earlier prehistoric occupation on the terrace edge, as this was a preferred location for settlement in earlier periods.

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. The work was to be carried out in a manner which would not compromise the integrity of archaeological features or deposits which warrant preservation in-situ, or might be better recorded under conditions pertaining to full excavation.

The specific research aims of the project were;

To determine if archaeologically relevant levels have survived on this site.

To determine if archaeological deposits of any period are present.

To determine if any medieval occupation is present on the site.

To determine if any medieval land reclamation is present on the site.

To determine if there is any prehistoric occupation on the site.

It was proposed to dig 5 trenches, each 5m long and 1.6m wide, using a JCB type mechanical excavator, fitted with a toothless ditching bucket, under constant archaeological supervision. The trenches were located within the

footprint of the proposed new development, although care was taken to avoid those areas which were most affected by the foundations of previous structures.

The full depth of archaeological deposits above the natural geology was to be established, with the trenches being shored or battered to facilitate access to deep deposits, if necessary. Where archaeological features or deposits are certainly or probably present, the stripped areas were to be cleaned using appropriate hand tools and sufficient of the features or deposits sampled to satisfy the project aims mentioned above.

Results

Due to the presence of made ground the ends of each trench had to be slightly battered to prevent collapse. As such the trenches varied in length from 5.4m – 8.5m at ground level, and between 4.6m – 5.9m at their base. A complete list of trenches giving lengths, breadths, depths and a description of sections and geology is given in Appendix 1.

The former building on the site, Signal House, had recently been demolished. The grubbing out and removal of the concrete floor slab and foundations of this building had disturbed the ground to a degree, so that the first deposit recorded in each trench consisted of a fairly loose layer of soil and demolition rubble. The one exception to this was Trench 3, which was located in an area previously occupied by a basement. On site monitoring was carried out by Mr Michael Lang Hall of Berkshire Archaeology.

Trench 1 (Pl. 1)

This trench was aligned approximately north west - south east, and was 5.3m long at its base. The southern end of the trench was not excavated to its full depth, as a void filled with water was encountered, the excavation of which would have flooded the rest of the trench. Disturbed soil and demolition rubble (50), up to 1.0m thick, was removed to reveal a layer of re-deposited gravel (51) which lay above terram sheeting. This deposit was encountered in all the trenches, apart from Trench 3, and presumably represents a bedding layer associated with the construction of the previous building on the site. In Trench 1 this deposit (51) was about 0.3m thick and lay above up to 1.2m of dark greyish brown sandy silt (52), which contained frequent fragments of brick and tile (not retained) (Fig. 3). Once again this layer was recorded in all trenches, apart from Trench 3, and seems to represent a reclamation deposit which, based on the brick and tile fragments, dates from the 19th century at the earliest.

This made ground deposit lay directly above up to 1.4m of light greyish brown sandy clay with frequent chalk and flint inclusions (55), which in turn lay above about 0.4m of mid brownish grey sandy clay with similar

inclusions (56). These sandy clay layers probably represent a deposit of head material, resulting from the natural erosion of the underlying chalk to the south. Natural chalk was encountered immediately below the lower sandy clay layer, although the trench had begun to flood with ground water shortly before this deposit was reached.

Beneath the 19th century made ground layer (52), a well cut through the sandy clay deposits and into the natural chalk. It was lined with slightly curved bricks, which seem to have been specifically produced for the purpose. These bricks would seem to date the well to the second half of the 19th century, as few 'specials', as they are known, were made before 1850 (Hammond 1990).

Trench 2

Trench 2 was 4.7m long at its base, and aligned north east- south west. Up to 0.7m of disturbed soil and demolition rubble (50) was removed to reveal a compact layer of gravel (51), about 0.7m thick, which lay above terram sheeting. This sealed the 19th century made ground layer (52), which was up to 2.7m thick in this trench (Fig. 3). Clean chalk natural was encountered immediately below layer 52, suggesting that the area had been truncated prior to the made ground deposits being dumped. It is possible that the area may have been quarried, for either chalk or gravel, or both.

Trench 3

This trench was aligned approximately north - south, and was located in part of the site which had previously been occupied by a basement. As a result, the existing ground level was nearly 2m lower than any of the other trenches, and the area had been quite badly disturbed by the removal of the concrete slab floor of the basement. The trench measured 4.6m long at its base, and consisted of 1.7m of disturbed soil and demolition rubble (50), which lay directly above clean sand and gravel. This is believed to be the natural geology, although it was not possible to confirm this in section, as the trench flooded.

Trench 4

Trench 4 was 5.0m long at its base, and aligned approximately north west - south east. Disturbed soil and demolition rubble (50), up to 0.6m thick, was removed to reveal the layer of deposited gravel (51) found elsewhere, which lay above terram sheeting. Beneath this was the 19th made ground deposit (52), which was about 1.1m thick and lay directly above the chalk natural. The ground seemed to slope slightly towards to northern end of the trench, where a natural channel filled with sand was noted. As with Trench 2, it seems likely that the area had been truncated prior to the made ground deposit being laid down.

Trench 5 (Pl. 2)

This trench was aligned approximately east -west, and was 5.9m long at its base. Disturbed soil and demolition rubble (50), about 0.4m thick, was recorded directly above up to 0.4m of re-deposited gravel (51), which lay on terram sheeting. Beneath this was a layer of 19th century made ground (52), approximately 0.3m thick, which

lay above a possible buried soil horizon, consisting of dark greyish brown sandy silt with occasional brick and tile fragments (53). This lay above up to 0.6m of mid orange brown sandy silt (54), which may represent a subsoil horizon (Fig. 3). Chalk natural was recorded immediately below layer 54, although sand and gravel was noted at the eastern end of the trench, suggesting perhaps that the trench was located on a slight chalk ridge.

Conclusion

Apart from foundations, and the basement area recorded in Trench 3, it appears that the previous building (Signal House) did not badly disturb the underlying deposits on the site. Made ground deposits, dating from the 19th century, were recorded across the site, quite often occurring immediately above the natural geology. This would suggest that the area had been truncated, possibly by quarrying, and that the dump layers of made ground were used to raise the level of the site perhaps to prevent flooding, or to provide level ground for building. Only Trench 5 contained any trace of a buried soil horizon. It is interesting to note that the stratigraphic sequence is very similar to that recorded during the watching brief to the north-east of the current site (Gleave 1998).

Except for a late 19th-century well, no archaeological features were recorded during the evaluation, and no finds of material earlier than the 19th century were noted. As regards the specific aims of the project, it is important to note that there was a complete absence of medieval finds, either from occupation or reclamation deposits.

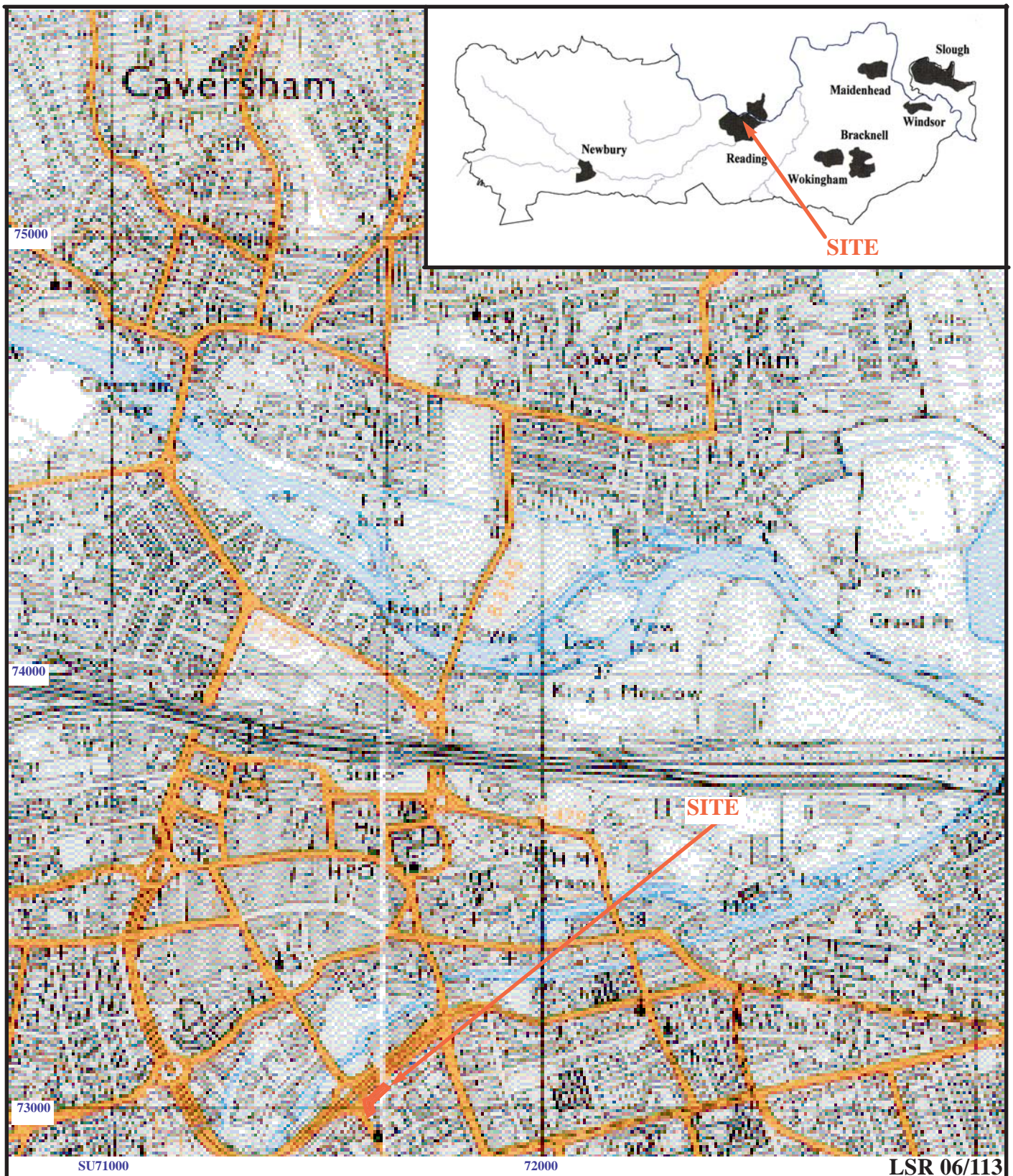
Based on the results of the evaluation, it seems that the archaeological potential of the site is quite low, and that there is little chance of archaeological deposits being destroyed during the groundworks for the new development.

References

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APPENDIX 1: Trench details

<i>Trench</i>	<i>Length (m)</i>	<i>Breadth (m)</i>	<i>Depth (m)</i>	<i>Comment</i>
1	5.3 (base) 7.0 (top)	1.6	4.3 (N) 2.7 (S)	0-1.0m disturbed soil and demolition rubble (50) onto 1.0-1.3m re-deposited gravel and terram (51) onto 1.3-2.5m 19th century made ground deposits (52) onto 2.5-3.9m light greyish-brown sandy clay natural (55) onto 3.9-4.3m mid brownish-grey chalky clay natural (56) onto chalk natural. Late 19th century well noted but not recorded in detail. [Plate 1]
2	4.7 (base) 7.6 (top)	1.6	4.1	0-0.7m disturbed soil and demolition rubble (50) onto 0.7-1.4m re-deposited gravel and terram (51) onto 1.4-4.1m 19th century made ground deposits (52) onto chalk natural. No archaeology.
3	4.6 (base) 5.4 (top)	1.6	1.9	0-1.7m disturbed soil and demolition rubble (50) onto natural sand and gravel. No archaeology.
4	5.0 (base) 8.5 (top)	1.6	3.3 (NW) 2.3 (SE)	0-0.6m disturbed soil and demolition rubble (50) onto 0.6-1.2m re-deposited gravel and terram (51) onto 1.2-2.3m 19th century made ground deposits (52) onto chalk natural. No archaeology.
5	5.9 (base) 7.3 (top)	1.6	2.0 (W) 2.9 (E)	0-0.4m disturbed soil and demolition rubble (50) onto 0.4-0.8m re-deposited gravel and terram (51) onto 0.8-1.1m 19th century made ground deposits (52) onto 1.1-1.4m dark greyish brown sandy silt (53) onto 1.4-2.0m mid orange brown sandy silt onto chalk natural, with sand and gravel at east end of trench. No archaeology. [Plate 2]



**Signal House, Letcombe Street, Reading,
Berkshire, 2006**
An archaeological evaluation

Figure 1. Location of site within Reading
and Berkshire.

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Signal House, Letcombe Street, Reading, Berkshire, 2006

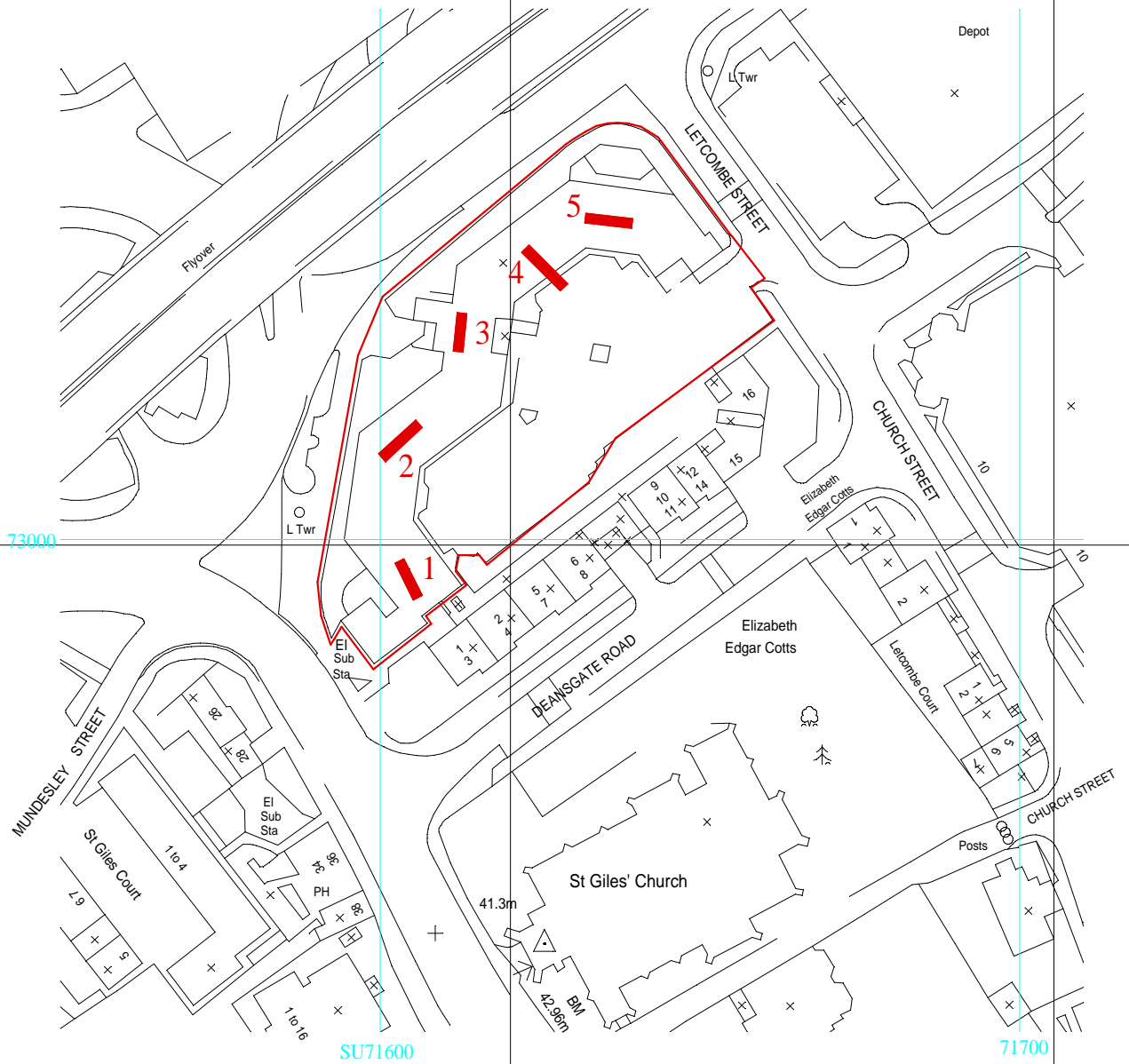


Figure 2. Location of Trenches

LSR06/113

Signal House, Letcombe Street, Reading, Berkshire, 2006

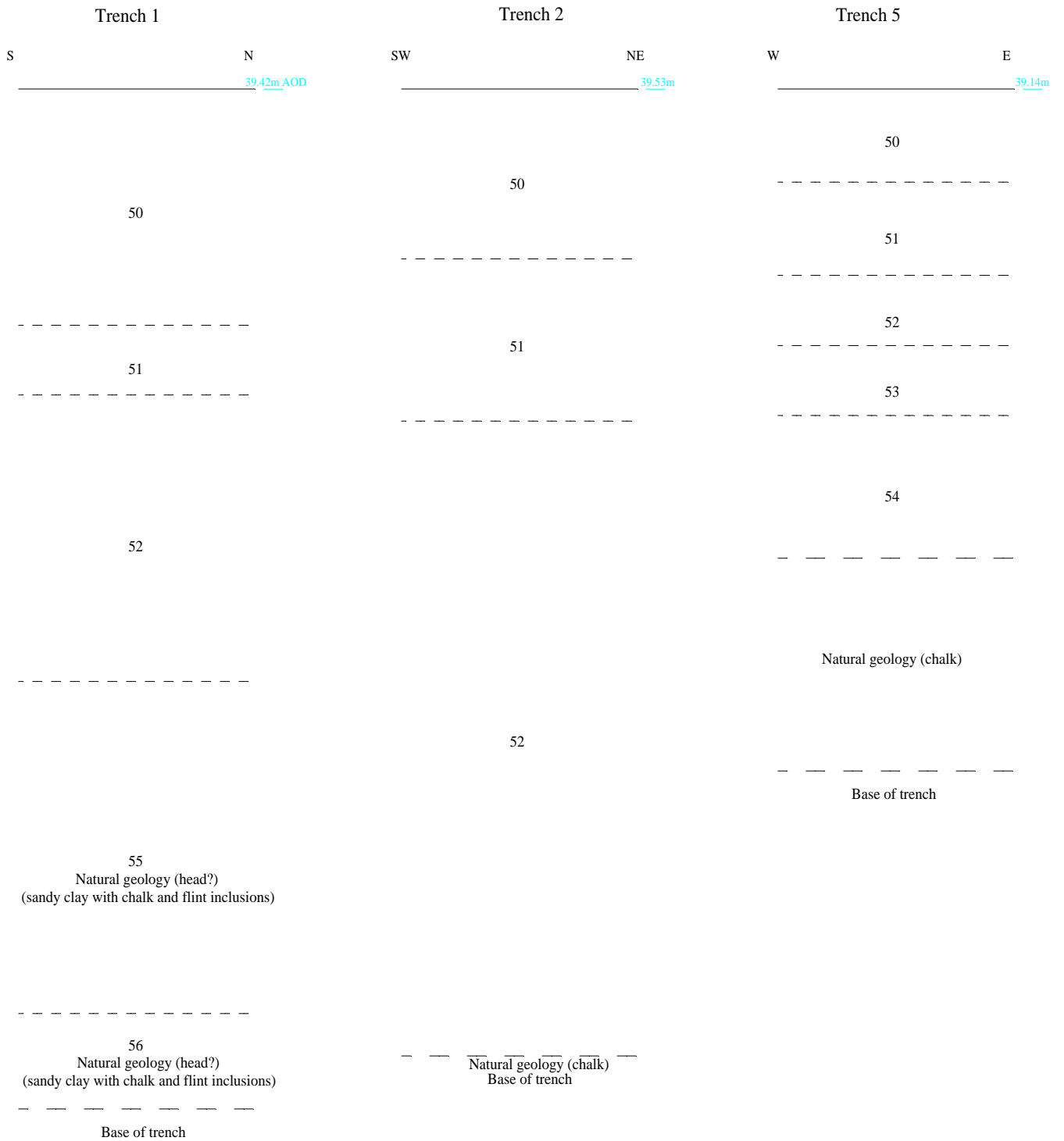


Figure 3. Representative Sections



Plate 1. Trench 1 looking north, showing Victorian well ; 1m and 2m scales.



Plate 2. Trench 5 looking west; 1m and 2m scales.