

T H A M E S V A L L E Y

ARCHAEOLOGICAL

S E R V I C E S

**St Birinus School, Queen Street,
Dorchester-on-Thames, Oxfordshire**

Archaeological Watching Brief

by Tim Dawson and James McNicoll-Norbury

Site Code: SBD10/80

(SU 5789 9438)

**St Birinus School, Dorchester-on-Thames,
Oxfordshire**

An Archaeological Watching Brief

For St Birinus School

by Tim Dawson and
James McNicoll-Norbury
Thames Valley Archaeological Services
Ltd

Site Code SBD 10/80

September 2010

Summary

Site name: St Birinus School, Dorchester-on-Thames, Oxfordshire

Grid reference: SU 5789 9438

Site activity: Watching Brief

Date and duration of project: 4th–12th August 2010

Project manager: Steve Ford

Site supervisor: Tim Dawson

Site code: SBD 10/80

Area of site: c. 40 sq m

Summary of results: Two possible late Roman pits and one possible late Roman ditch were recorded. It is possible that the ditch is a part of the defences of the town. A single sherd of 5th century pottery tentatively suggests the presence of sub-Roman occupation on or near the site

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

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St Birinus School, Dorchester-on-Thames, Oxfordshire An Archaeological Watching Brief

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Report 10/80

Introduction

This report documents the results of an archaeological watching brief carried out at St Birinus C of E School, Queen Street, Dorchester-on-Thames, Oxfordshire (SU 5789 9437) (Fig. 1). The work was commissioned by David Fergus, of Mouchel, Stratton Court, Kimber Road, Abingdon, OX14 1SG on behalf of St Birinus School.

Planning consent (R3.0235/09) has been granted by Oxfordshire County Council and Scheduled Monument Consent issued by the Department of Culture Media and Sport for the construction of a new single-storey infill extension at St Birinus C of E School, Queen Street, Dorchester-on-Thames. The consents are subject to conditions relating to archaeology which require a watching brief to be carried out during the works.

This is in accordance with the *Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act*, the Department for Communities and Local Government's Planning Policy Statement, *Planning for the Historic Environment* (PPS5 2010), and the County's policies on archaeology. The field investigation was carried out to a specification based on a brief provided by Mr Richard Oram of Oxfordshire County Archaeological Service (Oram 2010) and approved by him and by English Heritage on behalf of the DCMS. The fieldwork was undertaken by Tim Dawson and James McNicoll-Norbury between 4th–12th August 2010 and the site code is SBD 10/80.

The archive is presently held at Thames Valley Archaeological Services, Reading and will be deposited at Oxfordshire Museum Service in due course.

Location, topography and geology

The site is located on Queen Street in the centre of Dorchester-on-Thames (Fig. 1), in the grounds of St Birinus School along the northern boundary of the Scheduled Ancient Monument (Fig. 2). The site is currently occupied by school buildings, grassed areas and hardstanding areas. The underlying geology is described as first (flood plain) Terrace Deposits (BGS 1980) and lies at 50m above Ordnance Datum.

Archaeological background

The site lies within an area of high archaeological potential (Munby *et al* 1975). The site is partially located within the Scheduled Monument of the Roman town of Dorchester (SM 116). The site itself is located on the

northern edge of the scheduled area but much evidence of Roman extra-mural suburbs has been recorded, especially on the school site itself during a major building project (Torrance and Durden 1998). Various excavations around the site have produced extensive evidence of Roman and medieval occupation with complex urban archaeological stratigraphy present.

Objectives and methodology

The purpose of the watching brief was to excavate and record any archaeological deposits affected by the works. This was to involve examination of all areas of intrusive groundworks, in particular the digging of the foundation trenches. A full list of features excavated forms Appendix 1.

Results

Two test pits were hand dug in order to locate services (Figs 4 and 5, Pl. 1). Test pit 1 measured 0.75m by 0.80m and was 0.90m deep, the stratigraphy comprised 0.20m topsoil (50) overlying 0.03m dark grey brown silt (51) which in turn overlay 0.67m dark orange brown silt (52) and the foundations of the existing building were seen in section also. Pottery, bone and oyster shell were recovered from deposit 52.

Test pit 2 measured 0.60m by 0.50m and 0.60m deep, the stratigraphy of which comprised 0.14m topsoil, 0.09m made ground (footing packing) and 0.37m dark black brown clay silt (54) containing pottery, coal and ceramic building material.

The footings were dug using a mini-digger fitted with a toothless bucket and were 0.60m wide to a depth of 1.10m. The stratigraphy here comprised of 0.11m Tarmac over 0.12m crushed Tarmac above 0.37m black-brown silt (55), which overlay 0.25m of dirty dark brown orange silt (56) overlying 0.25m clean dark brown orange silt (57) (Figs 4 and 6). In the south-eastern footing a shallow depression (1, possibly a pit) was located beneath deposit 55. Pit 1 was 1.95m wide and 0.04m deep and was filled with dark orange brown clay silt and contained fragments of pottery. Beneath this and almost entirely truncated by pit 1, a possible posthole (2) was filled by dark red brown silt with no finds.

A possible ditch (4) was observed aligned WNW-ESE parallel to the line of the walls (Figs 4 and 6, Pl. 2) extending the full length of the footing trench and in width extending beyond the north of the foundation trench. Two fills were identified: 0.76m of dark brown black silt (60) overlying 0.10m of dark brown yellow silty sand (59). The profile suggests that this ditch may have been terminating towards the WNW end.

Subsequent digging of drainage trenches, 0.60m wide and 0.76m deep, adjacent to the footings (Fig. 4) revealed 0.09m Tarmac over 0.20m crushed Tarmac above 0.36m dark grey silt (61) overlying a dark orange brown silt (62) from which a single sherd of pottery was recovered. This bottom layer (62) was truncated by a concrete slab on which rested previous service pipes. Considering the location of the drainage trench it is likely that the fills identified (61 and 62) are the same as those seen in ditch 4 (60 and 59).

An additional drainage trench 0.35m wide and 0.30–0.70m deep was dug across the centre of the new build area SW-NE. No finds were recovered and the stratigraphy observed was similar to that seen in foundation trenches.

Finds

Pottery by Jane Timby

The archaeological work resulted in the recovery of 153 sherds of pottery weighing *c* 2.47 kg accompanied by three fragments of ceramic building material (Appendix 2). The assemblage dates almost exclusively to the Roman period with the emphasis on material of 4th-century date with two possible late 4th-5th-century pieces.

Pottery was recovered from seven contexts plus a few unstratified sherds. The assemblage was in moderately good condition with an overall average sherd weight of 16g. There were a few instances of multiple sherds from single vessels.

The assemblage was scanned to determine the form and fabrics and the likely date of the pieces. These were quantified by sherd count and weight for each context. The fabric codes used for known wares are those found in the National Roman fabric reference collection (Tomber and Dore 1998).

Roman

Most of the assemblage dates to the later Roman period with the majority of wares coming from local Oxfordshire industries. In particular 30.7% of the group by sherd count comprises Oxfordshire colour-coated ware (OXF RS) and 41.2% belong to the various local greyware industries (OXF RE). A single sherd of Central Gaulish samian and a piece of Baetican olive-oil amphora from Southern Spain represent the only continental imports. The only obvious regional import is a sherd of South-west black burnished ware jar.

Most of the wares appear to belong to the mid 3rd -4th century but there are one or two earlier, residual sherds present. Of particular note is a sherd of fine white ware rouletted butt beaker from context 57 which would originally been from a 1st-century AD vessel. Context 56 superficially looks earlier in date with sherds typical of the 2nd century but it is stratigraphically later than context 57 which dated to the mid 3rd-4th century, indicating that the material in 56 is likely to be redeposited.

Possible ditch 4 produced the largest group of material, some 119 sherds. Amongst this are 36 pieces of OXF RS including examples of *mortaria* (Young 2000, form C97) and bowls (forms C75 and C81) and 17 sherds of late Roman shelly ware (ROB SH). This latter ware usually indicates a date after around AD 370. Also of particular note in this group is a pale brown, handmade, base sherd with a slight foot. The paste is micaceous with a moderate frequency of rounded quartz sand and inclusions of limestone; the latter visible as voids particularly in the interior surface of the vessel. This sherd could potentially date to the sub-Roman period and it is possible that the ditch fill dates to the 5th rather than 4th century.

Another late sherd worthy of note is a small grey ware piece from Test Pit 2 (54) with burnished line decoration of the interior and a small applied boss. This probably comes from a shallow dish with similar examples known from very late Roman or immediately post-Roman contexts from elsewhere in Dorchester-on-Thames (e.g. May 1977, fig.8.1) and further afield in a late grog-tempered ware at Silchester associated with a Theodosian coin (AD388–92).

Test Pit 2 (52) produced several large fresh sherds from an OXF RS bowl (Young 2000, form C51) and from (54) a bowl (form C81) both likely to date to the 4th-century.

The pottery recovered from Birinus School complements that recovered from previous work in the immediate area and from Dorchester-on-Thames as a whole. The emphasis is on material dating to the end of the Roman period and the presence of two possible sub-Roman sherds is of interest and adds to the evidence found elsewhere of post-Roman activity in Dorchester.

Animal bone by Ceri Falys

A small assemblage of animal bone was recovered from four contexts. A total of 146 fragments of animal bone were present for analysis, weighing 2168g (Appendix 3). In general, the surface preservation of the remains was good, although all elements were fragmented to varying degrees. Non-descript long bone shaft fragments were the most commonly occurring pieces of bone.

Initial analyses roughly sorted elements into categories based on size, not by species, into one of three categories: 'large', 'medium', and 'small'. Horse and cow are represented by the large size category, sheep/goat and pigs are represented in the medium size category, and any smaller animal (e.g. dog, cat etc.) were designated to the small category. Wherever possible a more specific identification to species, and side of origin was made. The minimum number of animals present within this assemblage was five: two cattle, one sheep/goat, one pig and one small-sized animal, of indeterminate species. Context 60 contained the majority of bone recovered from site, including the evidence for all five individuals. Two cattle were represented by two right metacarpals, both

the sheep/goat and pig individuals were identified through portions of mandibulae with *in-situ* teeth, while the small animal was represented by small portions of ribs and small portions of long bone shafts.

The large sized animal fragments (i.e. ribs and long bone shafts) did display some butchery cut marks.

Worked bone by Ceri Falys

A single small fragment of worked bone was recovered from context 60. This gently curving piece of bone measures approximately 14.9mm long by 7.9mm wide and is 1.7mm thick. It displays some copper alloy staining, and is likely a small portion of a bone bracelet.

Metalwork by Steven Crabb

Three iron nails were recovered from this watching brief. These are all of different types. One is a small square cross-section square-headed nail (Cat. No. 3); The second is , a longer square cross-section and square-headed nail (Cat. No. 1) which has evidence of mineralized wood at the head and mid shaft; and the third is a small hobnail (Cat. No. 2) which has a square cross section shaft and a rounded head.

Oyster shell by Tim Dawson

A total of 29 oyster shells were recovered from contexts 52, 53, 55 and 60. These varied from small fragments to complete shells and weighed a total of 592g. The highest concentration of shells was found in context 60, the upper fill of possible ditch 4, with 24 fragments and complete shells (504g) being recovered from this context.

Conclusion

Several possible features and a large number of finds were recorded in, and recovered from, the groundworks undertaken at St Birinus School. These nearly all date to the late Roman period and consisted of a possible shallow pit and posthole and a possible ditch all of which were cut into a layer dating to the mid 3rd to 4th centuries AD. As with previous work on this site (Torrance and Durden 1998), the nature of the groundworks has meant that features can be recognized but not fully interpreted as only a very small amount is exposed and the cross-section is not necessarily perpendicular to the feature itself. Because of this, possible ditch 4 could be interpreted as a narrow gully, a wide ditch running roughly parallel to the line of the town walls or even a large (?quarry) pit.

The dates provided by the pottery found in each context confirm the rough chronology for the site with the only anomaly being possible shallow pit 1 which contained mid-late 2nd century pottery but is clearly cut into a

mid 3rd-4th century layer (57). In this case it is assumed that the pottery from 1 is residual, but it may indicate earlier occupation on the site. Possible ditch 4 appears to be the last activity on the site with the pottery found providing a date of late 4th century, although it is unclear how it relates to layer 55 due to the unfortunate placement of a modern service trench which runs straight through the area where 4 and 55 should intersect.

The features and material found during this project between them shed limited new light on the occupation of Roman Dorchester-on-Thames. A large selection of general household waste was recovered with no signs of specific industries or activities.

If the latest pottery is 5th century as suggested, this reinforces the importance of Dorchester as an area for the study of immediately 'sub-Roman' Britain, as very few sites of this date are known nationally (and they are notoriously difficult to date); but it must be stressed that the evidence here is limited to a single sherd. Dorchester was the location for a number of the earliest Saxon cemeteries, but settlement evidence remains elusive and Dorchester is one of the few places where it can even be suggested (Burnham and Wachter, 119–22; Frere 1962).

While the interpretation of feature 4 must remain uncertain, it is very close to the projected line of the town wall (as reflected in the boundary of the Scheduled area). The late 4th-century defences at Dorchester seem to have included a wide flat-bottomed ditch (Hogg and Stevens 1937) and the best known parts of the defences do include a wide ditch outside the walls: it is possible that feature 4 is part of this, and if so its late infilling date is especially significant. The alignment of this feature would, however, suggest the defences headed towards the river rather than forming the classic playing-card shape normally posited for Dorchester; there is as yet no evidence for the eastern side of the defences.

An alternative might be to see this ditch (if that is indeed what it is) as part of the boundary of the precinct around the Abbey, which would also probably be in this position, although in that case all the pottery must be redeposited; there seems to be enough pottery, however, and in good enough condition, to discount this as unlikely.

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APPENDIX 1: Feature details

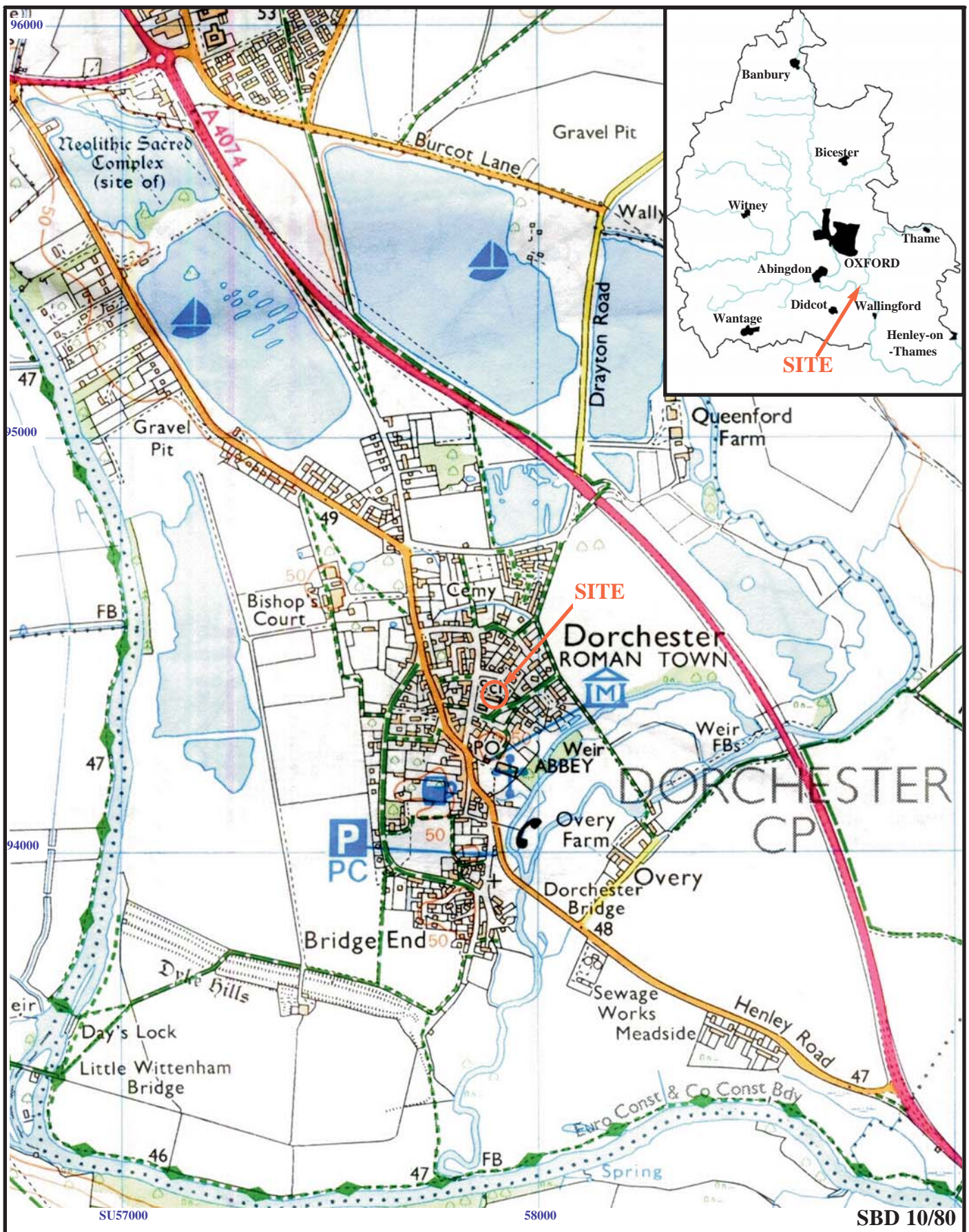
<i>Cut</i>	<i>Fill (s)</i>	<i>Type</i>	<i>Date (century AD)</i>	<i>Dating evidence</i>
	55	Layer	4th	Pottery
1	56	Shallow Pit	later than 57	Stratigraphy
	57	Layer	Mid 3rd-4th	Pottery
2	58	Posthole	unknown	
3	53	Wall cut	Modern	Modern school wall
4	60	Ditch	Late 4th or later?	Pottery
4	59	Ditch	unknown	

APPENDIX 2: Pottery catalogue

<i>Cut</i>	<i>Context</i>	<i>SAMIAN</i>	<i>AMP</i>	<i>OXFRE</i>	<i>OXFRS</i>	<i>ROBSH</i>	<i>OTHER</i>	<i>Tot No</i>	<i>Tot Wt (g)</i>	<i>cbm</i>
	55	-	-	2	4	-	3	9	147	1
1	56	-	-	2	-	-	4	6	81	
	57	-	-	2	2	-	3	7	28	
4	60	1	-	52	36	17	13	119	1840	3
drain	62	-	-	1	-	-	-	1	6	
TP1	spoil	-	-	2	-	-	1	3	60	
TP1	53	-	1	-	-	-	-	1	114	
TP2	52	-	-	1	4	-	-	5	193	
TP2	54	-	-	1	1	-	-	2	8	
TOTAL		1	1	63	47	17	24	153	2477	

APPENDIX 3: Animal bone catalogue

<i>Context</i>	<i>Wt (g)</i>	<i>No. Frags</i>	<i>Large</i>	<i>Medium</i>	<i>Small</i>	<i>Unidentified</i>
u/s	72	2	2	-	-	-
55	103	11	11	-	-	-
57	18	6	4	-	-	2
60	1975	127	56 (cow)	20 (s/g, pig)	14	40
Total	2168	146	73	20	14	42

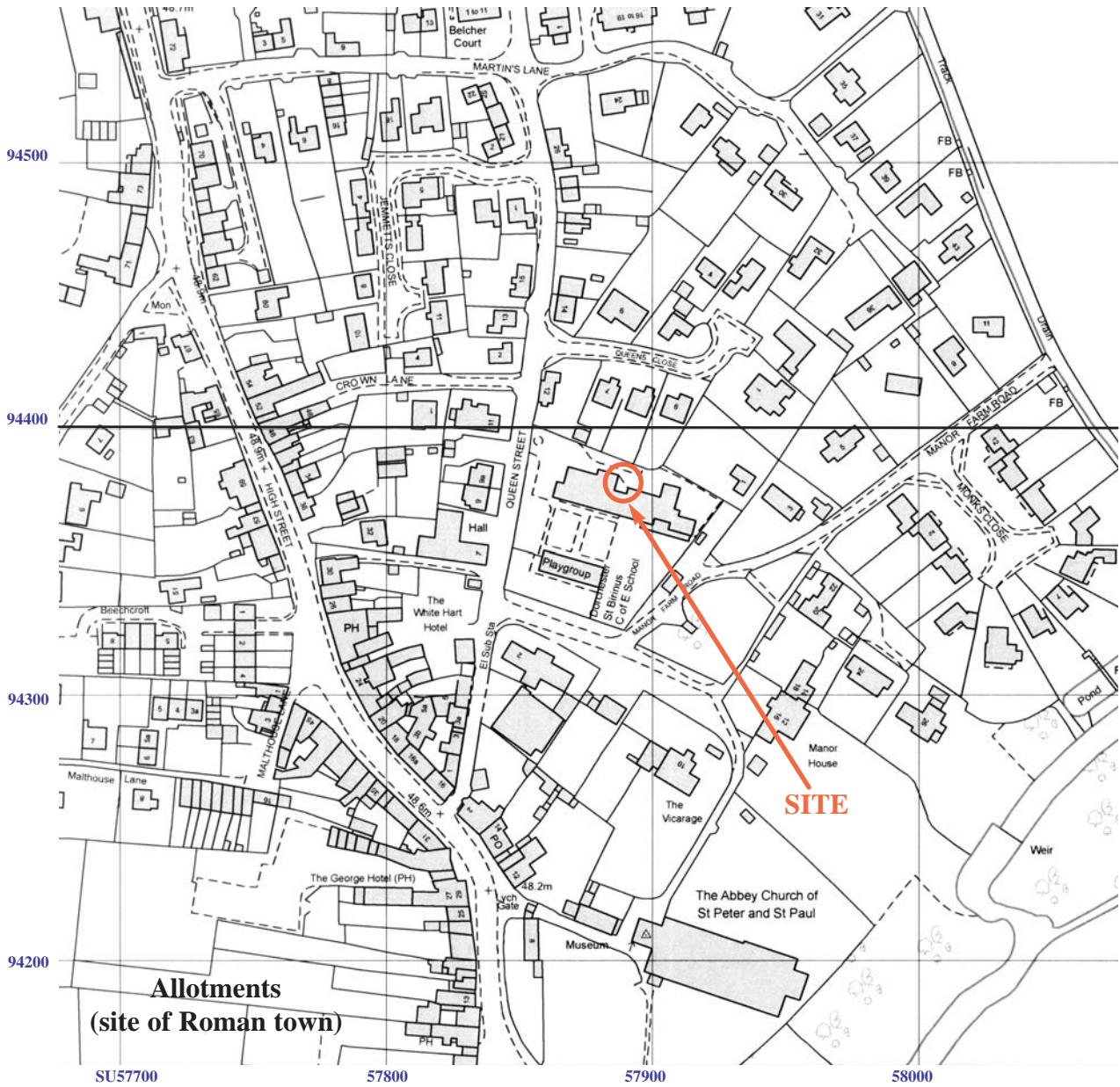


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Figure 1. Location of site within Dorchester and Oxfordshire.

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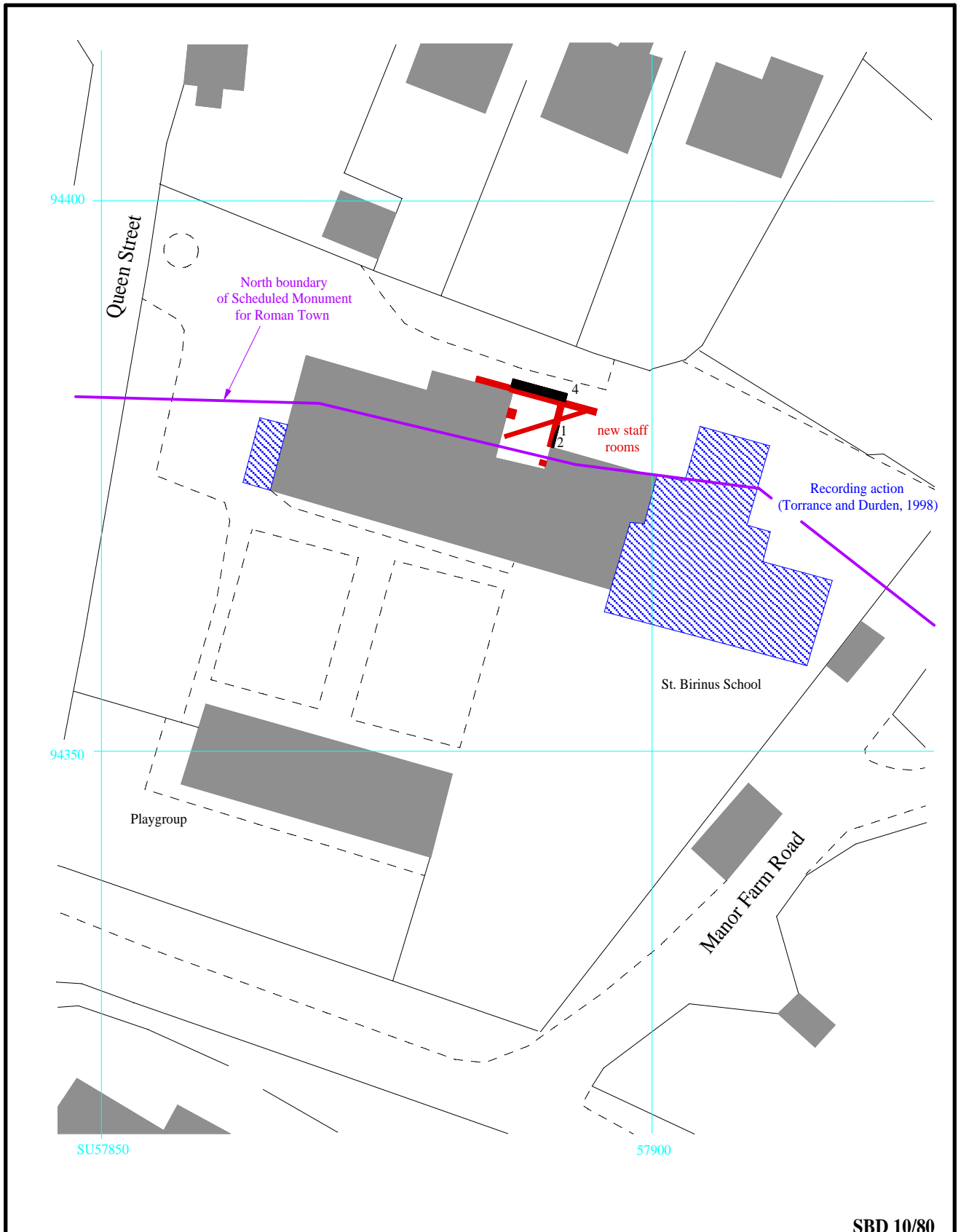
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Figure 2. Detailed location of site.

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Figure 3. Location of watching brief.



94385

Drainage Trench

Footings

4

TP1

94380

Boundary of scheduled monument

1

2

TP2

94375

94370

SU57885

57890

57895

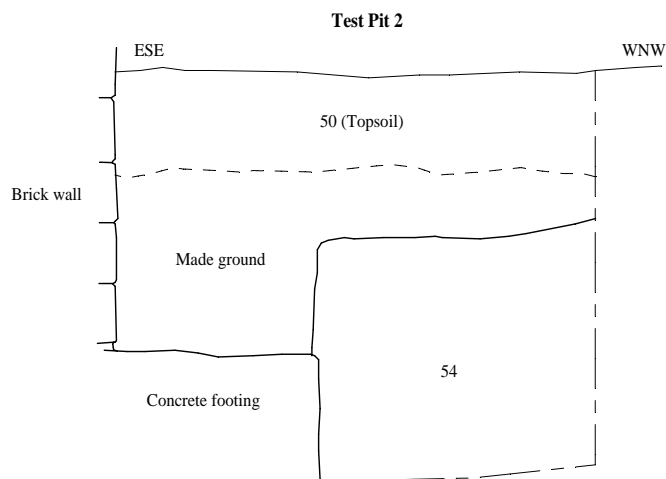
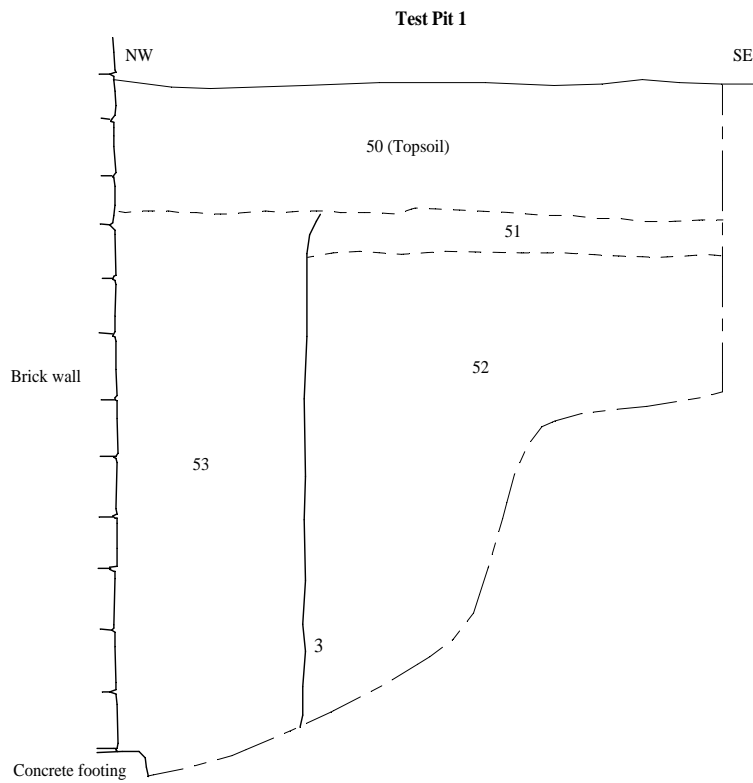
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Figure 4. Excavated areas



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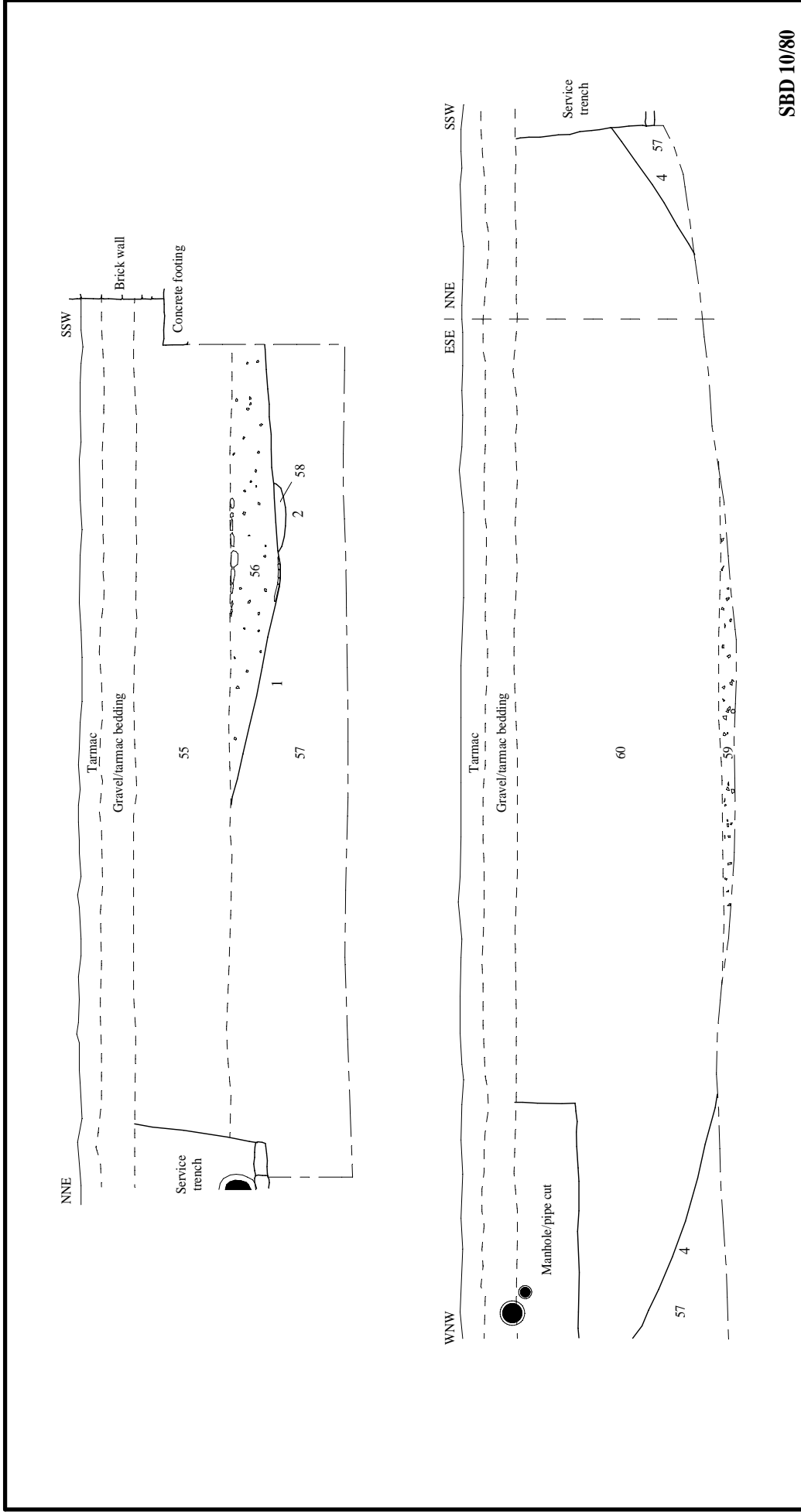
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Figure 5. Test pit sections.

0 1m

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Figure 6. Sections.





Plate 1. Test pit 2, looking south; horizontal scale 1m, vertical 0.3m.



Plate 2. Eastern end of northern footing, looking north-east; horizontal scale 2m (1.5m shown) vertical 1m

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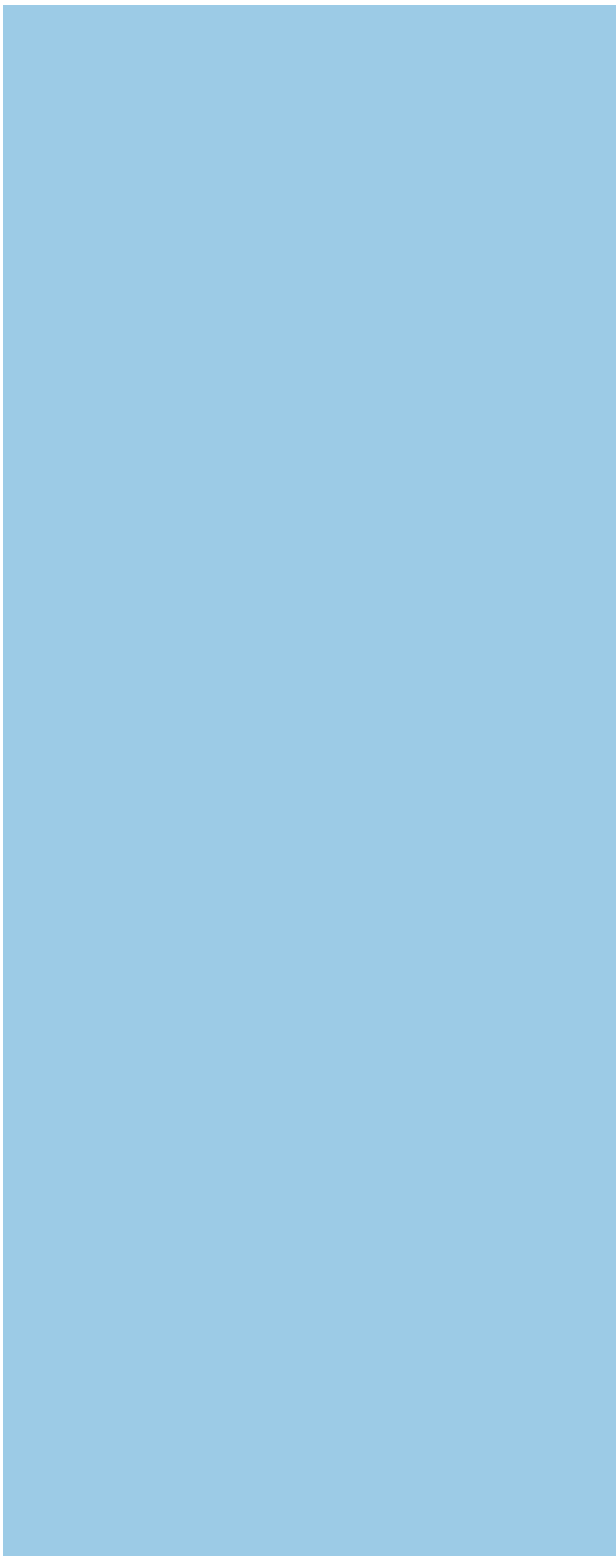
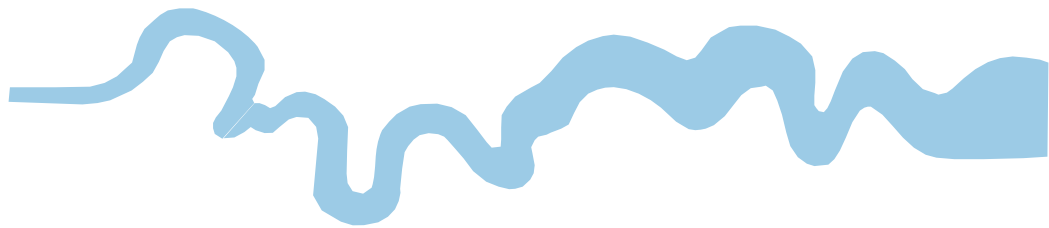
**St Birinus School, Dorchester-on-Thames,
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Plates 1 and 2**

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TIME CHART

	Calendar Years
Modern _____	AD 1901
Victorian _____	AD 1837
Post Medieval _____	AD 1500
Medieval _____	AD 1066
Saxon _____	AD 410
Roman _____	AD 43
Iron Age _____	BC/AD 750 BC
Bronze Age: Late -----	1300 BC
Bronze Age: Middle -----	1700 BC
Bronze Age: Early -----	2100 BC
Neolithic: Late	3300 BC
Neolithic: Early	4300 BC
Mesolithic: Late	6000 BC
Mesolithic: Early	10000 BC
Palaeolithic: Upper	30000 BC
Palaeolithic: Middle	70000 BC
Palaeolithic: Lower	2,000,000 BC





**Thames Valley Archaeological Services Ltd,
47-49 De Beauvoir Road, Reading,
Berkshire, RG1 5NR**

**Tel: 0118 9260552
Fax: 0118 9260553
Email: tvas@tvas.co.uk
Web: www.tvas.co.uk**