

HENRT (OX)
847/93

MILL LANE SPORTS GROUNDS,
READING ROAD,
HENLEY-ON-THAMES

Archaeological evaluation

November 1993

OXFORD ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT

**MILL LANE SPORTS GROUNDS, READING ROAD,
HENLEY-ON-THAMES:**
**Archaeological evaluation of the site of a proposed new Tesco
development.**

Planning Ref. P92/50515/0

Summary

Trial trenching on the above site revealed that the site had been badly disturbed by post-medieval quarrying associated with the construction of the Reading Road. Only two of the nine trenches contained definite archaeological features. These were located on the east and west sides of the all weather pitch and probably represent part of a system of field boundaries.

Introduction

The site (centred at NGR SU 76858145) covers an area of 8.5 ha at the south east edge of Henley. Approximately 500 m to the west of the River Thames, the site is bounded to the west by the Reading Road, to the north by Mill Lane and to the east by the Henley to Twyford railway line. Only the northern 3 ha is threatened by the development and as this area was most likely to contain archaeological deposits it was decided by the County Archaeologist that the evaluation should be concentrated here. The evaluation took the form of nine trial trenches. The work was carried out by the Oxford Archaeological Unit on behalf of Tesco Stores Ltd. The project was supervised by Colm Moloney and Paul Hutchins and the site code was HENRT93.

Topography

The site is situated on the Thames floodplain and the underlying geology consists of Thames gravel. The ground is level at about 34 m OD over most of the area but rises up at the western perimeter towards the Harpsden Heights.

The land is presently used as playing fields, an all weather games court, a car park and related amenities.

Archaeological Background (Fig 1)

Although no known sites of archaeological interest have been identified within the development area, two cropmark sites have been identified to the east of the site. A sub-rectangular enclosure with an entrance on the NE side and with associated linear features and pits (centred NGR SU 771814), was published in Gates, T. 1975, 'The Middle Thames Valley: an archaeological survey of the river gravels', p.42; Map 22 from Oxfordshire County Council Sites & Monuments Record (PRN 9701). Another small incomplete

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rectangular enclosure (centred SU 770816) was also published by Gates (PRN 9702). The date or function of these features has not been determined. A find of Bronze Age pottery and bronze fragments (PRN 2209) is recorded approximately 500 m to the west of the development area at Harpsden Heights. Harpsden Roman Villa lies 1.5 Km to the south west.

Evaluation Objectives

The evaluation objectives were to gather sufficient information to establish the presence/absence, extent, condition, character, quality and date of any archaeological deposits within the sample area.

Evaluation Strategy (Fig 1)

A series of 9 trenches was excavated down to the natural gravel by a JCB Sitemaster with a toothless ditching bucket. The trenches were then cleaned by hand and investigated for archaeological activity. The position of the trenches was dictated by the location of the cropmarks, the present land use and the footprint of the development. The trenches measured 30 m in length and 1.6m in width and the total sample measured 432 sq m. One further trench is to be excavated in the area of the all-weather pitch prior to development.

Evaluation Results

Trench 1 had an east to west orientation and was located in the playing field to the east of the all weather sports ground. The topsoil and alluvium were removed mechanically down to the natural gravel. The topsoil, consisting of dark brown silty loam, was approximately 0.20 m thick and was directly over the light red-brown alluvial silt subsoil. Beneath the alluvium, which was 0.50 m thick, a substantial linear feature cut the natural gravel. The feature had a north to south orientation and measured 16 m in width by 0.60 m in depth at maximum. In profile the break of slope from the surface was gradual, with concave, gently sloping sides meeting a fairly flat base with a sharp break of slope on the north side. The fill consisted of light brown silty sand which contained no inclusions or finds. The nature of this fill indicated that it acted as a water course. Whether it is natural or a canal cannot be determined from such a small sample. The natural gravel also sloped down slightly northwards.

Trench 2 had a north to south orientation and was located in the playing field to the east of the all weather sports ground. The topsoil, consisting of dark brown silty loam, was 0.20 m thick and overlay about 0.80 m of light red-brown alluvial silt. Beneath the silt only one feature was identified. This consisted of a shallow linear feature with an east to west orientation and a dark brown silty loam fill. However, finds evidence indicates that the feature was modern and that the alluvium had been redeposited to level the ground when the playing field was laid out.

Trench 3 had a north to south orientation and was located in the playing field to the east of the all weather sports ground. The topsoil, consisting of dark brown silty loam, was 0.20 m deep and overlaid 0.70 m of red-brown alluvial silt. Beneath the silt a series of pits and two linear features were identified.

Context [14], a linear feature, aligned east to west, was located 6m from the north end of the trench. This had dimensions of 2.8 m in width by 0.35 m in depth. In profile the cut broke sharply from the surface on the south side while the break of slope was more gradual on the north side. The sides were flat and irregular and the base was concave. The fill consisted of loose, mid-grey, coarse sandy silt with c.20% coarse gravel inclusions. The feature had a smaller later recut.

Context [7] was located 2 m to the south of [14] and had an east to west orientation. In profile the cut was irregular with a gradual break of slope from surface, concave sides and a concave base. It measured 1m in width by 0.30 m in depth and was filled with loose, orange-brown sandy silt which contained c.20% gravel.

Three pits were identified to the south of feature [7]. All three were circular in plan with gradual breaks of slope from surface, concave sides and concave bases. The fill of all of these features consisted of orange-brown coarse sandy silt with c. 20% gravel inclusions. They ranged in depth between 0.15 m and 0.30 m.

No dating evidence was recovered from any of the features in this trench.

Trench 4 had a north to south orientation and was located in the car park to the north of the all weather sports ground. The surface of the car park consisted of tarmac on a foundation of hardcore which was 0.35 m thick. Beneath the hardcore two large gravel quarry pits had removed all deposits down to a depth of at least 2.5m. The backfill of the quarry contained fragments of Roman tile indicating the presence of a Roman settlement in the vicinity.

Trench 5 was aligned north to south and was located between the all weather pitch and the Mill Lane sports centre. The topsoil, consisting of dark brown silty loam, was 0.20 m deep and overlaid 0.70 m of red-brown alluvial silt. Three features were identified beneath the alluvium. A probable river course, context [31], measured 13 m across by 1m deep, and ran east to west across the northern end of the trench. This was concave in profile and filled with loose, orange-brown, coarse sandy silt. At the extreme southern end of the trench another linear feature, context [29], was investigated. This consisted of a substantial ditch, again running from east to west, which had been recut. Originally the ditch would have measured 2.3 m across by 1m deep. The feature would appear to have been deliberately backfilled with light grey-brown sandy silt which contained chalk flecks and fragments and occasional flint nodules. Subsequently the feature was recut measuring 1m across by 0.60 m deep. This phase of the ditch would appear to have been allowed to silt up naturally and contained fragments of bone and tile. Most of the tile dated to the medieval period, although one fragment of Roman tile was also present. A pit, context [21], was excavated adjacent to the northern edge of the ditch. Only the western corner of this feature was within the trench. This indicated that the feature was 3.2 m wide although only 0.30 m deep. The feature had a concave profile and was filled with orange brown sandy silt.

Trench 6 was aligned east to west and was located in the playing field to the south of the club house. No archaeological features were identified in this trench.

Trench 7 was aligned north to south and was located in the playing field to the south of the clubhouse. The topsoil, consisting of dark brown silty loam, was 0.20 m deep and was directly on top of the natural gravel. A large quarry pit had removed the southern 21 m of the gravel down to chalk which was 3.2 m below surface. This was probably extracted during the construction of the Reading road which runs parallel to the trench c.15 m to the west. No archaeological features were recovered from this trench.

Trench 8 was aligned east to west at the southern end of the all weather pitch. No archaeological features were identified in this trench.

Trench 9 was aligned east to west in the centre of the car park. The tarmac and hardcore surface, which was 0.35 m thick, overlay a heavily compacted red-brown silt. The western 22 m of the trench had been excavated by a quarry pit to a depth of at least 2 m. No other archaeological features were recovered from this trench.

Discussion

The principal archaeological remains identified during trenching were confined to trenches 3 and 5. The linear features identified in these trenches may relate to a medieval field system as indicated by the medieval tile in fill 28. the two ditch 14 and 29 area on the same alignment although their sizes and profiles are dissimilar. Ditch 7 may have been a ditch on the other side of a hedge from ditch 14. The position of the pits in trench 3 is unexplained.

The site appears to have been quarried extensively during the construction of the Reading Road especially in the area of the car park and the playing field to the south of the clubhouse.

Archive

The site archive including finds (subject to the landowners consent will be deposited with the County Museum.

Colm Moloney
OAU
November 1993

Appendix: Table of evaluation trench contexts

CXT	TRENCH	TYPE	WIDTH	DEPTH	FINDS	COMMENTS
1	1	Layer	-	0.20 m	-	Topsoil
2	1	Layer	-	0.50 m	-	Alluvium
3	1	Layer	-	-	-	Natural
4	3	Fill	1 m	0.25 m	-	Fill of [5]
5	3	Cut	1 m	0.25 m	-	Pit
6	3	Fill	1 m	0.30 m	-	Fill of [7]
7	3	Cut	1m	0.30 m	-	Ditch
8	3	Fill	0.60 m	0.15 m	-	Fill of [9]
9	3	Cut	0.60 m	0.15 m	-	Pit/posthole
10	1	Cut	16 m	0.50 m	-	Water course
11	3	Fill	1.20 m	0.30 m	-	Fill of [12]
12	3	Cut	1.20 m	0.30 m	-	Pit/posthole
13	3	Fill	2.80 m	0.30 m	-	Fill of [14]
14	3	Cut	2.80 m	0.30 m	-	Ditch
15	4	Fill	-	0.60 m	1 sherd of medieval pot. 3 fragments of Roman tile.	Backfill of a gravel quarry.
16	4	Cut	-	2.45 m	-	Gravel quarry
17	6	Layer	-	0.20 m	-	Topsoil
18	6	Layer	-	0.60 m	-	Alluvium
19	4	Cut	1.50 m	0.50 m	-	Quarry pit
20	4	Fill	1.50 m	0.50 m	-	Backfill of [19]
21	5	Fill	3.10 m	0.30 m	-	Fill of [22]
22	5	Cut	3.10 m	0.30 m	-	Pit
23	7	Layer	-	0.30 m	-	Topsoil
24	7	Layer	-	0.05 m	-	Alluvium

25	7	Cut	-	3.2 m	-	Quarry pit
26	7	Fill	-	3.2 m	-	Fill of [25]
27	5	Layer	-	0.60 m	-	Alluvium
28	5	Fill	1.10 m	0.51 m	3 fragments of medieval tile 1 fragment of Roman tile 1 fragment of bone.	Secondary fill of [29]
29	5	Cut	2.30	0.70 m	-	Ditch
30	5	Fill	12.60 m	1.22 m	-	Fill of [31]
31	5	Cut	12.60 m	1.22 m	-	Water course
32 ;	4	Layer	-	0.35 m	-	Car park surface
33	4	Fill	-	0.50 m	-	Fill of [16]
34	5	Fill	1.20 m	0.80 m	-	Primary fill of [29]

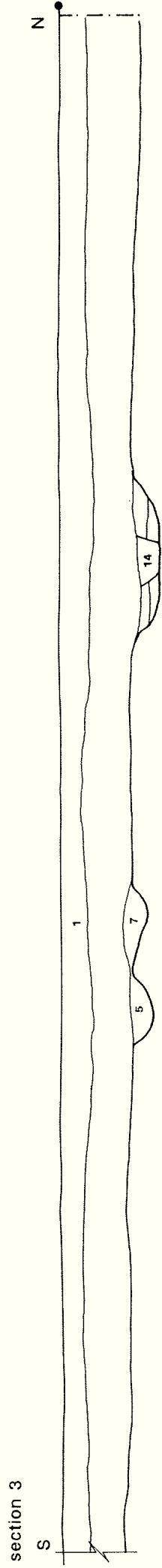
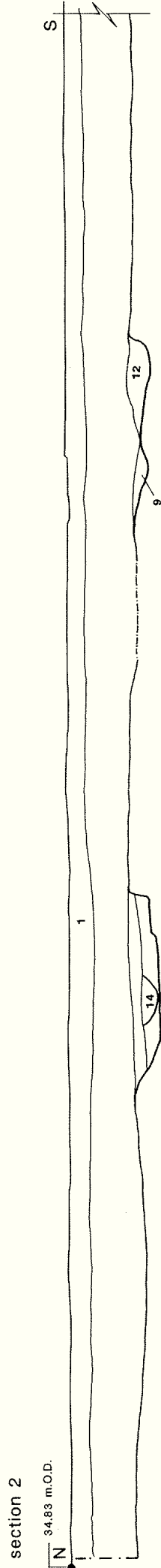
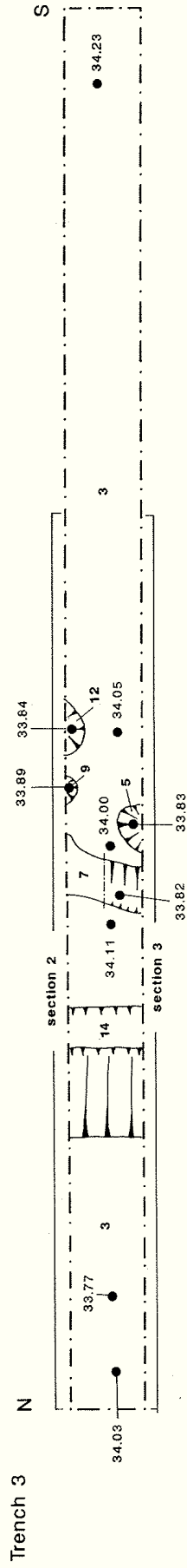
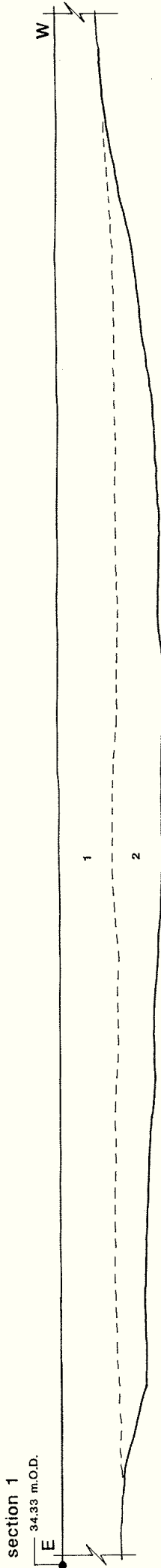
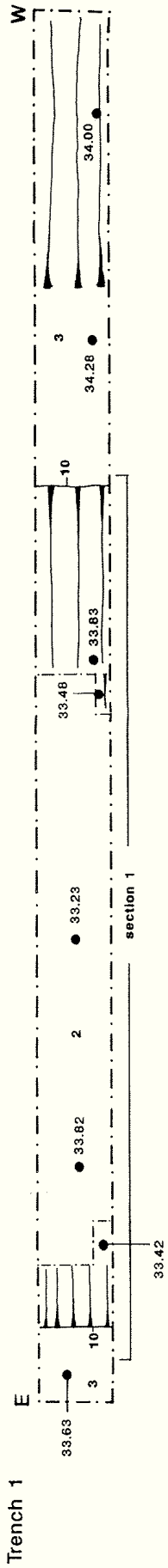
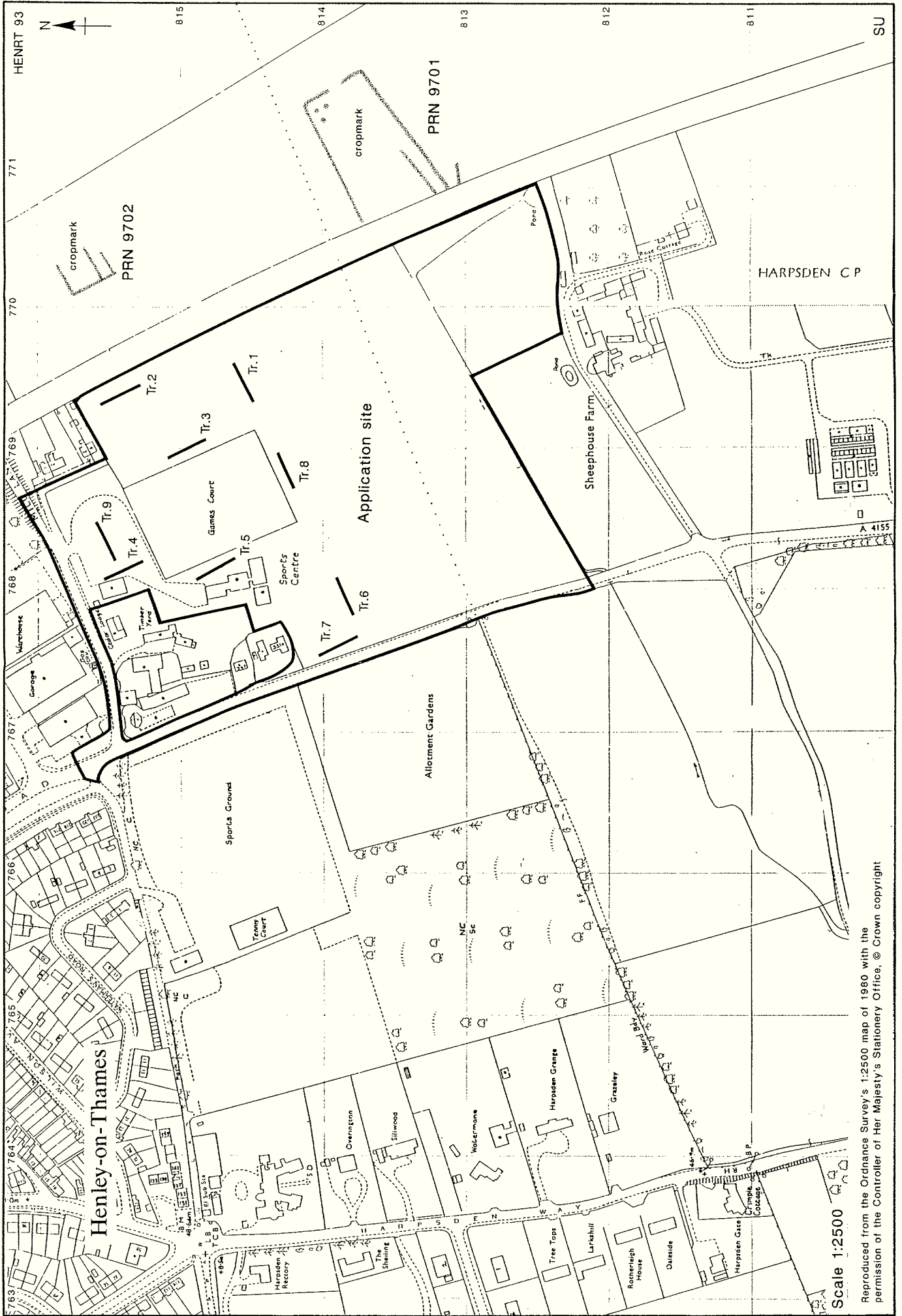


figure 2

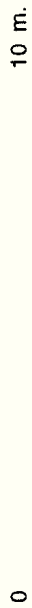
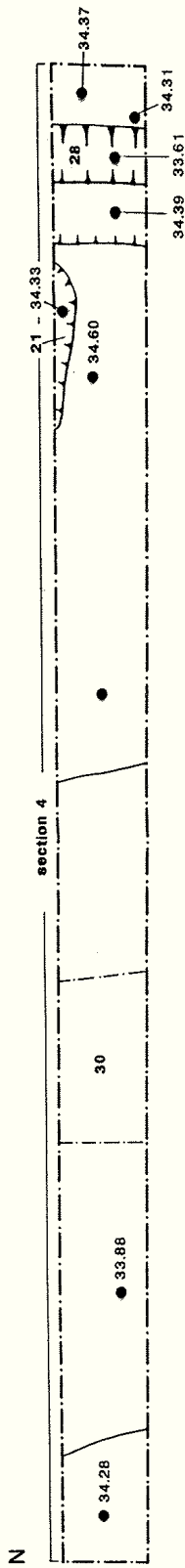


Scale 1:2500

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figure 1

Trench 5



Levels in metres Ordnance Datum

section 4

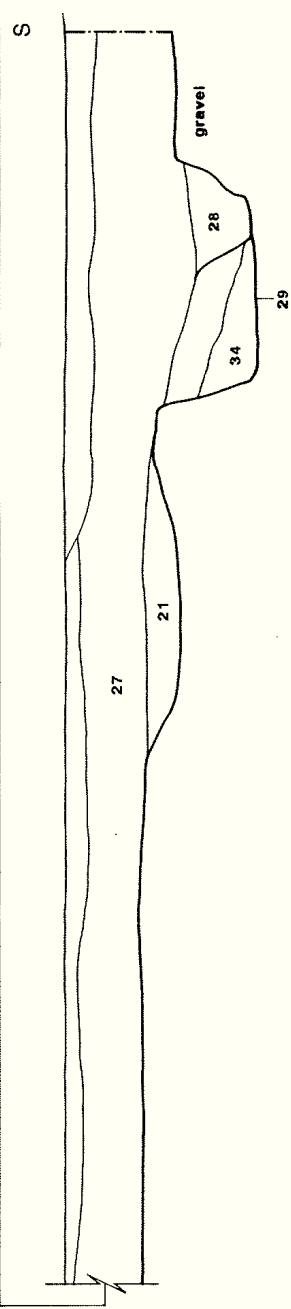
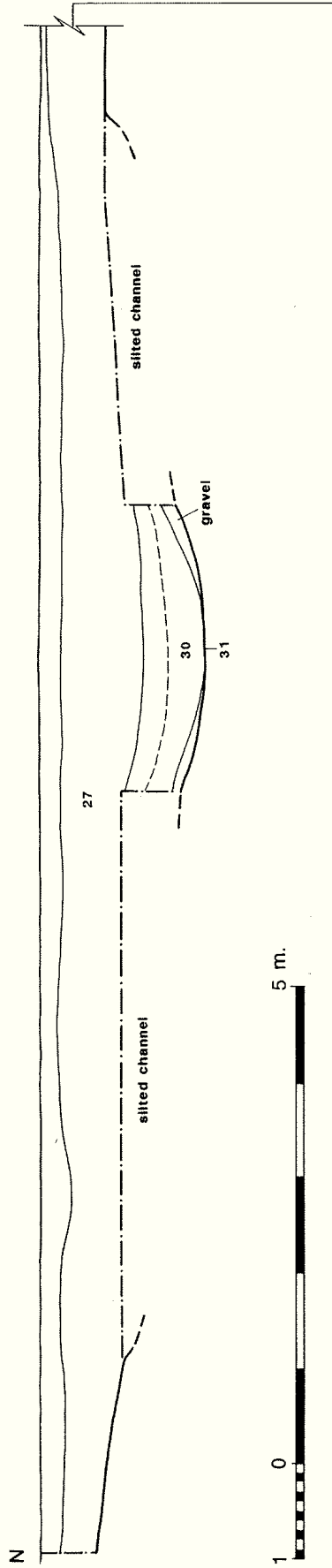


figure 3

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