

Heyford Road, Steeple Aston Oxfordshire

NGR SU 477 255

Archaeological Evaluation Report



Oxford Archaeological Unit

March 1997

Tay Homes (Midlands) Ltd.

Heyford Road, Steeple Aston, North Oxfordshire.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION REPORT

SP 477.255

CHN.511/94

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ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION

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SUMMARY

In March 1997 the Oxford Archaeological Unit undertook a field evaluation on land adjacent to Heyford Road, Steeple Aston in North Oxfordshire. The work was carried out for Tay Homes (Midlands) Ltd. ahead of a housing development.

Four trial trenches were positioned and excavated according to specifications agreed with the County Archaeologist.

Six ditches, one pit and one grave were found within the application area. One ditch, (211), is likely to be of Roman date, while the others may be Medieval as they cut a layer of hillwash. The single inhumation grave was oriented approximately east-west and was fully excavated. Although no other bodies were located the presence of other graves cannot be ruled out. At the eastern end of site a single pit was revealed containing burnt limestone and animal bone. The deposit probably represents the remains of domestic activity. In the north-west corner of the site a series of narrow, irregular gullies were found buried beneath a thick band of sandy colluvium (hillwash). The gullies were probably connected to cultivation of the field.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Location and scope of work

In March 1997 the Oxford Archaeological Unit carried out a field evaluation at Steeple Aston, North Oxfordshire on behalf of Tay Homes (Midlands) Ltd. in respect of a planning application for housing development (Planning Application CHN.511/94). Work was carried out according to a brief set by and a Written Scheme of Investigation agreed with the County Archaeologist for Oxfordshire. The development site lay adjacent to Heyford Road, Steeple Aston and is 0.7 hectares in area (Fig. 1).

1.2 Geology and topography

The site lies over oolite and marlstone beds capped by ferruginous, sandy and coarse loamy soils at 108 m above OD. The site is situated on a north-east facing slope and is currently being used as paddocks.

1.3 Archaeological and historical background

The site itself has produced limited archaeological evidence. There are a number of known sites of archaeological interest adjacent to the development site:

- (i) SP 478 253, (PRN 1749) - Probable Romano-British villa unearthed in 1658. Although never precisely located, one probable location is south east of Steeple Aston, near or under the allotments on Heyford Road, c. 150 metres to the south-east of the application area.
- (ii) SP 479 253 (PRN 4211) - An Iron Age habitation site.
- (iii) SP 477 52528 - A human skeleton found in 1926.

2 EVALUATION AIMS

- i) To establish the presence/absence of archaeological remains within the proposed area.
- ii) To determine the extent, condition, nature, character, quality and date of any archaeological remains present.
- iii) To make available the results of the investigation.

3 EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

3.1 Scope of fieldwork

Four trenches, 30 m long x 1.8 m wide, were excavated, representing a 3% sample of the application area (210 square metres) (Fig. 2). It was agreed that a contingency of a further 21 square metres could be used if required. In the event, two trenches were extended using approximately 10 square metres of the contingency.

The trenches were excavated using a JCB with a 1.5 m wide, toothless ditching bucket, down to the top of the first significant archaeological deposits, or in their absence to the top of the natural subsoil.

3.2 Fieldwork methods and recording

The trenches were cleaned by hand and the exposed features were sampled to determine their extent and nature, and to retrieve finds and environmental samples. All archaeological features were planned and where excavated their sections drawn at a scale of 1:20. All features were photographed using colour slide and black and white print film. Recording followed procedures laid down in the *OAU Fieldwork Manual* (ed. D Wilkinson, 1992).

3.3 Finds

Finds were recovered by hand during the course of the excavation and bagged by context.

3.4 Environmental data

Limited environmental sampling was carried out on the few contexts with potential for the preservation of plant remains, in an attempt to elucidate the domestic and economic aspects of the site.

4 RESULTS: GENERAL

4.1 Soils and ground conditions

The site was located on a moderate, north-east facing slope over a mixture of sand and clay deposits. The base of the slope was sealed by a thick layer of sandy colluvium which had banked against a mature hedgerow adjacent to Heyford Road. The sandy natural and the general topography of the site ensured that ground conditions remained relatively dry throughout the evaluation. Changes in soil pH over the site due to the nature of the underlying geology meant that the levels of bone preservation varied considerably over the site.

4.2 Distribution of Archaeological Deposits

Archaeological deposits were located in all four trenches and were relatively evenly distributed. The majority of the ditched features were located away from Heyford Road towards the crest of the hill. The inhumation grave was located just 12 m to the south-west of the hedgerow adjacent to Heyford Road. Signs of probable cultivation were sealed by colluvium in the north-west corner of the site.

5 RESULTS: DESCRIPTIONS

5.1 Description of deposits

5.1.1 Trench 1 (Fig. 3)

Trench 1 was oriented north-west to south-east, parallel to the line of Heyford Road. A circular pit (105) was located in the south-eastern end of the trench. The pit was well defined, relatively shallow and cut into a mixed natural of limestone and clay. Its upper fill (103), contained significant quantities of charcoal, burnt limestone and some animal bone and was sampled for carbonised plant remains. No dating evidence was recovered. In accordance with the site brief and WSI the pit was not fully excavated at this stage. A sandy silt deposit (108), immediately adjacent to the pit, was found to be an area of colluvium which had settled into a natural hollow. Towards the north-west end of the trench a large area of modern disturbance was machined out to reveal a small modern ditch which was not examined further. An extension was made to the north-west end of the trench to investigate a possible ditch (106), oriented east-west and 1.25 m wide. In plan, the ditch appeared to cut the colluvium at that end of the trench but this proved impossible to define in section. All features apart from the modern disturbance were sealed by ploughsoil 102, which in turn was overlain by the modern ploughsoil 100.

5.1.2 Trench 2 (Fig. 3)

Trench 2 (oriented north-east to south-west) was excavated at an angle of c. 75° from Heyford Road so that its south-western end pointed upslope. After initial machining the trench was extended at its south-west end in order to define the width of a substantial ditch (211), which proved to be some 3 m wide and 0.6 m deep. The upper fill of the ditch (210) contained considerable amounts of charcoal and burnt limestone and was sampled for carbonised plant remains. A single sherd of a Romano-British coarse ware was recovered from the very bottom of the ditch in deposit 209 along with a piece of worked animal bone. An anomaly in the south-eastern edge of the ditch could either have been an earlier pit or a re-cut of the ditch.

A linear ditch (203), located close to the centre of Trench 2, was cut by a second ditch (205). The ditches were of similar dimensions, 1.8 m x 0.25 m deep and 1.6 m wide x 0.3 m deep respectively and had very similar silty clay fills. Their orientations were, however, quite

different. Ditch 203 was oriented north-east to south-west whereas 205 was oriented north-west to south-east.

A single inhumation grave (208) was located 2.5 m to the north-east of 205. The grave cut was oriented east-west and contained an extended adult inhumation (207). The body was supine with its head to the west. Although in a reasonable state of preservation the bones did appear to have been disturbed by the plough. The fronts of the ribs were not present and the skull had been damaged. The arms of the skeleton were extended over the pelvis, with the hands positioned between the legs. Two pieces of unworked limestone covered the hands. Whilst it is possible that the position of the stones was coincidental they did appear to have been deliberately placed. The feet had sustained some plough damage and were only partially present. No grave goods were recovered and no coffin nails or fittings were located.

The north-eastern end of Trench 2 dipped away noticeably towards the hedge line where a sandy colluvium had collected up to a maximum depth of 0.26 m. The colluvium was sealed by a thin ploughsoil 201 (maximum depth 0.12 m) which, though present throughout the trench, was considerably thinner upslope. Layer 201 was overlain by the modern ploughsoil 200.

5.1.3 Trench 3 (Fig. 5)

Trench 3 was oriented parallel to Heyford Road approximately 6 m south of the current hedge line. The trench contained a number of narrow grooves which have been interpreted as plough marks. The plough marks were sealed beneath a layer of colluvium (0.20 m deep) which was in turn overlain by ploughsoils 302 and 301. The colluvium also sealed two narrow gullies of identical dimensions (0.22 m wide x 0.16 m deep), both filled by the same mid brown silty clay. The gullies ran parallel to each other, approximately 2.5 m apart, on a north-west to south-east alignment.

5.1.4 Trench 4 (Fig. 6)

Trench 4 was excavated at an angle to Heyford Road with its south-western end upslope. A linear ditch (419) oriented north-east to south-west was located at the south-western end of the trench. The width of the ditch was not ascertained since the trench could not be extended due to the extant remnants of an apple orchard. No dating evidence was recovered from the ditch, which was excavated to a depth of 0.60 m. The north-west end of the trench was characterised by four linear grooves 0.10 - 0.40 m wide x 0.10 - 0.20 m deep. These features were excavated but only two produced any dating evidence. Features 403 and 405 each produced a single sherd of pottery. The pot was extremely abraded however and its validity as dating evidence should therefore be viewed with caution. Feature 403 also produced a small iron nail. Adjacent to the grooved features was a sub-rectangular feature (417) which could either have been a pit or a squared-off ditch terminal. The feature produced no dating evidence.

5.2 Finds

5.2.1 *The pottery, by Paul Booth & Paul Blinkhorn*

Generally, pottery sherds were extremely small and very abraded. This would suggest that they had been subject to plough action and the potential for re-deposition is high. Their usefulness in terms of dating should therefore be viewed with caution.

5.2.2 *Iron Age*

A single sherd of pottery, recovered from the fill of gully 412, may date to the Iron Age. The sherd was small and extremely abraded and is most likely to be residual.

5.2.3 *Romano-British*

A single sherd of coarse shelly ware was located in the bottom of ditch 211. The sherd was extremely fragile and fragmented into several pieces on lifting. Although the sherd could be Iron Age it is more likely to be Roman in date.

5.2.4 *Medieval*

A total of three sherds of Medieval pottery were recovered. All three were recovered from cultivation marks in Trench 4 at the north-west corner of the site. A sherd recovered from gully 403 is undiagnostic but is Medieval in date. A burnt sherd of Brill red earthenware was recovered from gully 405 and North Oxfordshire sandy ware was recovered from Gully 412.

5.2.5 *Metalwork*

A single iron nail c. 1.5 cm in length was recovered from feature 403 (Trench 4).

5.2.6 *Animal Bone, worked and unworked, by Bob Wilson*

Bones from two features, fill 103 of pit 105 and fill 202 of ditch 203, were examined and the overall results are given in tabular form below. A further sieved soil sample from context 103 yielded 7 unidentified fragments of bone and fragments of a sheep tooth. A piece of worked bone, a rounded-off cattle rib, was recovered from context 209.

The bones are moderately well-preserved, though any interpretation of these results is not possible due to the small size of the sample.

Species/context	103	202
cattle	1	13
sheep/goat	-	1
pig	-	2
dog	-	1
total identified	1	17
total unidentified	23	46
Total	24	63

5.2.7 *Human remains*, by Angela Boyle

A single supine extended skeleton (207) was recovered from a grave, from which the only other finds were fragments of limestone. Preservation was poor and there were very few surviving complete bones. The remains were those of an adult male of advancing age. Stature was calculated using the regression formula of Trotter and Gleser (Brothwell 1981) and the individual was 1.84 m in height (approximately 6'). Two out of the surviving seven teeth were carious. Indications of trauma were seen to affect the right humerus, the right fifth metatarsal and two mid thoracic vertebrae. The lateral edge of the right humerus immediately above the elbow had suffered a heavy knock causing damage to the cortex and a periosteal reaction. The distal end of the right fifth metatarsal had been affected by trauma and this had resulted in some joint remodelling with associated infection or degeneration. A probable middle thoracic vertebra had suffered a crush or compression fracture which resulted in some wedging of the vertebral body which was displaced slightly to the right and had become fused on the right side to the vertebra below it. This is a very common site for compression fractures. Degeneration of the articular facets of the cervical vertebrae was also noted.

5.3 Environmental data

5.3.1 *Carbonized plant remains, charcoal and mollusca*, by Greg Campbell

In order to evaluate the preservation of environmental indicators, samples were taken from two of the deposits: the middle fill 210 of the ditch 211, possibly of Roman date; and the sole fill 103 of the pit 105, possibly of prehistoric date. The samples (both of 10 litres volume) were processed in a modified Siraf machine with the flot collected on 0.25 mm mesh. The flots were assessed by Ruth Pelling of the English Heritage Environmental Archaeology Unit, University Museum, Oxford.

The charred remains from the ditch fill 210 were entirely wood charcoal, and the vast

majority of this charcoal was from oak (*Quercus*); hawthorn type charcoal (Pomoideae) was noted in low concentration. There is little potential for radio-carbon dating.

The pit fill 103 produced a very small amount of charred remains, dominated by wood charcoal. Most of this was too small to be identifiable, but that which could be was entirely oak. The only other material which could be seen was four grains of barley (*Hordeum*). There is nothing diagnostic of a particular period in the remains.

Snails were present in both the flots and the residues, indicating that this form of environmental evidence can be used to reconstruct land use, water quality and water flow rates.

Very little can be said about the nature of the site based on these samples, other than that charred material and snails are preserved and should be included as an element in any further investigations. Nothing recovered would indicate that the site merits further excavation solely on the grounds of good preservation or unusual elements in the environmental indicators.

6 DISCUSSION AND INTERPRETATION

6.1 Reliability of field investigation

There were very few finds recovered from the site and in terms of dating and interpretation the evidence is, therefore, relatively poor. The ceramic evidence, which might have provided the best indication of date, is extremely limited and generally of poor quality. The majority of sherds were recovered from ploughmarks and show signs of considerable abrasion. There is, however, scope for relative dating of some features. Presumed Medieval ploughing has undoubtedly truncated and damaged some features on site, such as the pit in Trench 1 and the inhumation grave in Trench 2, but the majority of features are still relatively well preserved.

6.2 Overall interpretation

6.2.1 *Summary of Results*

Prehistoric period

No features of certain prehistoric date were located by the evaluation. A late prehistoric habitation site has been recorded nearby, however, and Pit (105) in Trench 1 may date from this period. The lack of ceramic evidence, combined with the burnt composition of the fills, is quite typical of prehistoric activity. If the pit is of this date, then it appears to be isolated. The pit is, however, the most easterly feature on site and it could be that further prehistoric activity is located beyond the boundary of the application area.

Romano-British period

The recovery of a sherd of coarse shelly ware in the bottom of Ditch 211 (Trench 2) suggests a Roman origin for the ditch. The ditch itself was quite substantial and would not have been easy to dig through the stiff clay and limestone natural. The function of the ditch remains problematic. Only one small section has so far been located and without further investigation it is impossible to say whether the ditch remains linear or forms one side of an enclosure. Based on the limited evidence available, the ditch would seem a little too wide to be a field boundary and if an enclosure, its location towards the crest of the slope may be significant in terms of visibility. The ditch appeared to truncate a second feature (Pit/Ditch 213) which was undated.

Although also undated, the inhumation burial in Trench 2 is thought to be Roman in date. The skeleton is supine and oriented east-west which is typical of Roman burial, and also not far from Heyford Road. If the road is of any antiquity then this too would be typical of a Roman burial. Although apparently on its own, it is quite possible that other burials exist either side of the evaluation trench.

Medieval period

Landuse in the Medieval period seems to have been one of arable cultivation. A number of grooved features excavated in Trench 4 are believed to be scars left by Medieval ploughing (403-409 & 421). The marks remained visible only where they had been gouged into the natural clay. Although the stratigraphical relationship between the ploughscars and the colluvium found at the bottom of the site is uncertain, it seems likely that the colluvium was created as a direct result of the Medieval ploughing. Undated ditches 106 (Trench 1), 203 & 205 (Trench 2) are most likely field boundaries. Given their very similar fills and orientation, it is quite likely that 106 and 203 are part of the same ditch. Ditch 205 is seen to cut 203 in section and is therefore of a later date. Since 106 appears to cut through the colluvium in Trench 1 it is likely to date to the later Medieval or even post-Medieval period and could represent sub-division of the site into paddocks. Ditch 419 remains undated. Its relationship to the ploughsoil 402 is obscured but is likely to post-date it.

Post Medieval

It seems the site was used for grazing animals in the post Medieval period and part of the site at least was converted to an apple orchard (several apple trees are still upstanding). The remains of modern farm buildings can be traced in the north-west corner of the site and a large area of modern disturbance was located in Trench 1.

6.2.2 Significance and conclusions

The evaluation has shown that the site at Steeple Aston was clearly of some local significance in pre-Medieval times at least. Ditch 211 and the Iron Age sherd found in the Medieval ploughscars at the base of the hill are a hint that archaeological remains of the Prehistoric or

Roman period may exist in the vicinity. On the other hand, the paucity of finds within the colluvium and ploughsoils indicates that if any such sites did exist they were ceramically unproductive. The environmental evidence, however, is a little more informative and suggests some form of domestic activity nearby. The inhumation burial found in Trench 2 is also of considerable significance. Although the burial seems to have been isolated there is every chance that there were others which were not located by the evaluation. Generally, features were truncated by ploughing but otherwise well-preserved.

Bibliography and references

Brothwell, D 1981 *Digging up bones*, British Museum (Natural History) London

Wilkinson, D (ed) 1992 *Oxford Archaeological Unit Field Manual*, (First edition, August 1992)

Appendices:

Appendix 1 Archaeological Context Inventory

Trench 1

Trench	Ctxt	Type	width (m)	thick. (m)	Comment	Finds	No.	Date
001								
	100	layer		0.16-0.23	modern ploughsoil	-	-	modern
	101	layer		-	modern disturbance	glass jar	1	modern
	102	layer		0.18	earlier ploughsoil	-	-	later med. p - med. ?
	103	fill		0.10	fill of pit 105	animal bone, burnt limestone	-	undated
	104	fill		0.08	fill of pit 105	burnt limestone	-	undated
	105	cut	0.90	0.18	pit	-	-	undated
	106	cut	1.40	-	possible ditch	unex.	-	-
	107	layer	-	-	natural	-	-	-
	108	layer	-	0.20	colluvium	-	-	later med. p- med. ?

Trench 2

Trench	Ctxt	Type	width (m)	thick. (m)	Comment	Finds	No	Date
002								
	200	layer	-	0.20	modern ploughsoil	-	-	modern
	201	layer	-	0.12	earlier ploughsoil	-	-	later med. p - med. ?
	202	fill	-	0.25	fill of ditch 203	-	-	undated
	203	cut	1.80	0.25	ditch	-	-	undated
	204	fill	-	0.30	fill of ditch 205	-	-	undated
	205	cut	1.60	0.30	ditch	animal bone	-	undated
	206	fill	-	0.14	fill of grave 208	-	-	Roman ?
	207	deposit	-	-	skeleton	-	-	Roman ?
	208	cut	0.40-0.48	0.14	grave cut	-	-	Roman ?
	209	fill	-	0.40	fill of ditch 211	pot, animal bone	1	Roman ?
	210	fill	-	0.25	fill of ditch 211	burnt limestone	-	Roman ?
	211	cut	-	3.00	ditch	-	-	Roman ?
	212	fill	-	0.25	fill of pit/ditch 213	-	-	undated
	213	cut	-	0.40	pit/ditch	-	-	undated
	214	layer	-	0.26	colluvium	-	-	later med. p. med. ?
	215	layer	-	-	natural	-	-	-

Trench 3

Trench	Ctxt	Type	width (m)	thick. (m)	Comment	Finds	No	Date
003								
	301	layer	-	0.22	modern ploughsoil	-	-	modern
	302	layer	-	0.14	earlier ploughsoil	-	-	later med. p. med ?
	303	layer	-	0.19	colluvium	-	-	later med. ?
	304	cut	0.22	0.16	gully	-	-	med. ?
	305	fill	1.21	0.16	fill of gully 304	-	-	med ?
	306	cut	0.12	0.08	ploughmark	-	-	med ?
	307	cut	0.16	0.04	ploughmark	-	-	med ?
	308	cut	0.10	0.10	ploughmark	-	-	med ?
	309	fill	0.12	0.08	fill of ploughmark 306	-	-	med ?
	310	fill	0.16	0.04	fill of ploughmark 307	-	-	med ?
	311	fill	0.10	0.10	fill of ploughmark 308	-	-	med ?
	312	layer	-	-	limestone natural	-	-	-
	313	layer	-	-	sand natural	-	-	-
	314	layer	-	-	clay natural	-	-	-
	315	cut	0.22	0.16	gully	-	-	med ?
	316	fill	0.22	0.16	fill of gully 315	-	-	med ?

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Trench 4

Trench	Ctxt	Type	width (m)	thick. (m)	Comment	Finds	No	Date
004								
	401	layer	-	0.24	modern ploughsoil	-	-	modern
	402	layer	-	0.16	earlier ploughsoil	-	-	later med. p. med. ?
	403	cut	0.34	0.20	gully/ploughmark ?	-	-	med. ?
	404	fill	0.34	0.20	fill of gully 403	pot, iron nail	1	med. ?
	405	cut	0.10-0.40	0.16	gully/ploughmark ?	-	-	med. ?
	406	fill	0.10-0.40	0.16	fill of gully 405	pot	1	med. ?
	407	cut	0.10-0.25	0.12	gully/ploughmark ?	-	-	med. ?
	408	fill	0.10-0.25	0.12	fill of gully 407	-	-	med. ?
	409	cut	0.22	0.10	gully/ploughmark ?	-	-	med. ?
	410	fill	0.24	0.08	fill of gully 409	-	-	med. ?
	411	layer	-	0.22	colluvium	-	-	later med. p. med. ?
	412	cut	0.24	0.12	gully	pot	2	med. ?
	413	fill	0.24	0.12	fill of gully 412	pot	2	med. ?
	414	layer	-	-	clay natural	-	-	-
	415	layer	-	-	sand natural	-	-	-
	416	fill	0.30	0.44	fill of pit 417	-	-	undated
	417	cut	0.30	0.44	pit	-	-	undated
	418	fill	0.40 +	0.20	fill of ditch 419	-	-	undated
	419	cut	0.40 +	0.60	ditch	-	-	undated

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	420	fill	0.40 +	0.40	fill of ditch 419	-	-	undated
	421	cuts	0.10- 0.30	unex.	ploughmarks	-	-	med. ?
	422	fills	0.10- 0.30	unex.	fill of ploughmarks 421	-	-	med. ?

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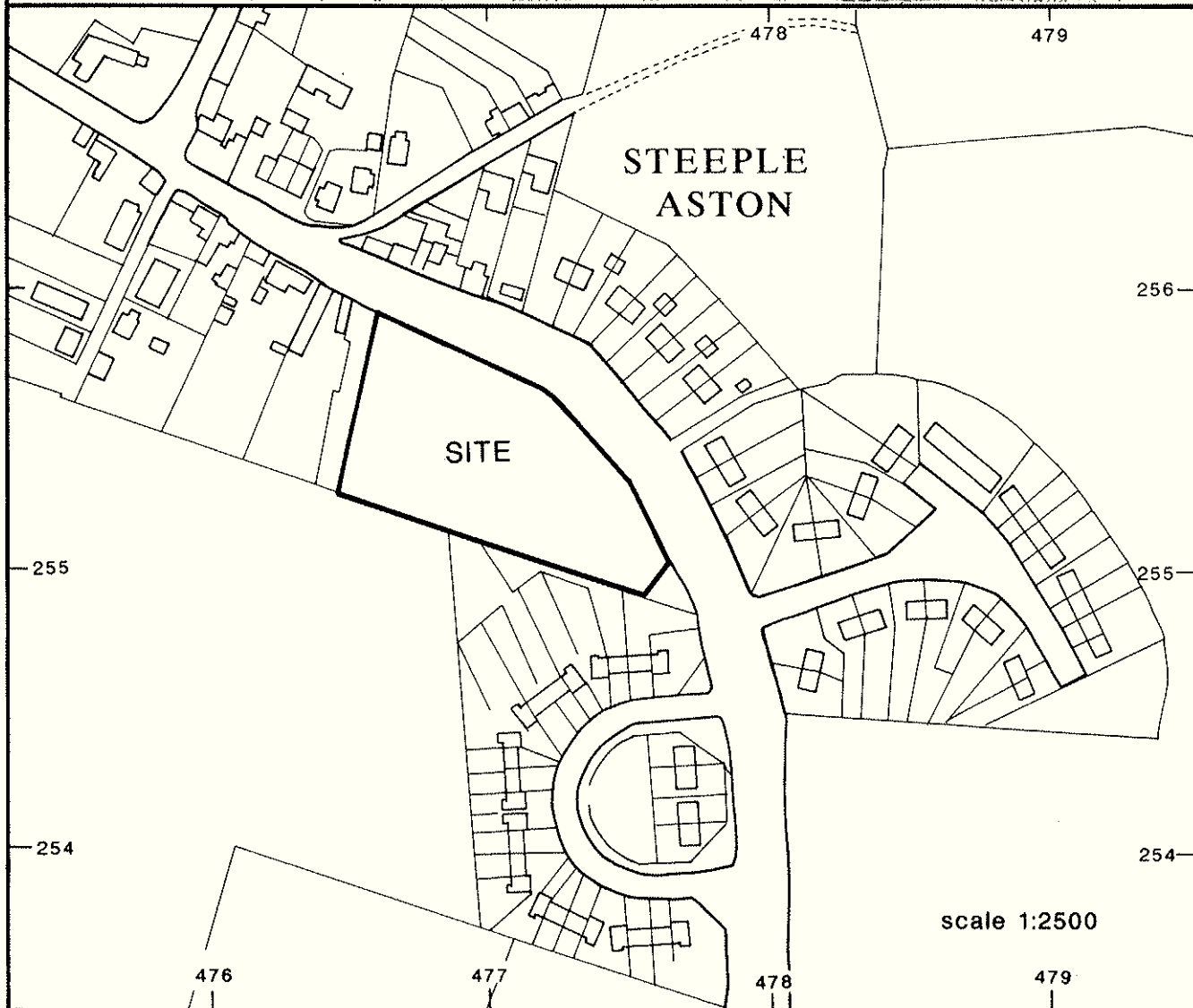
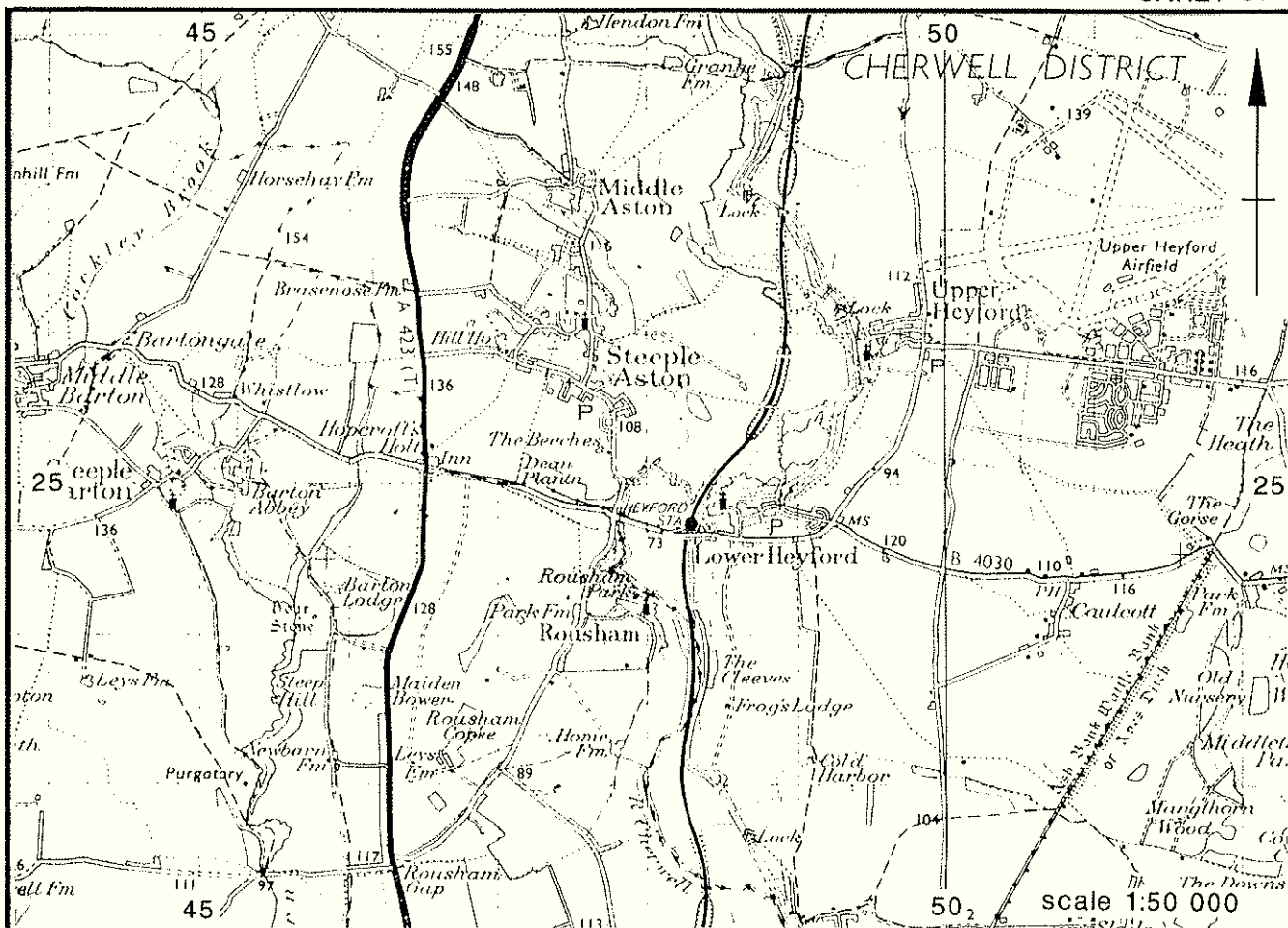


Figure 1

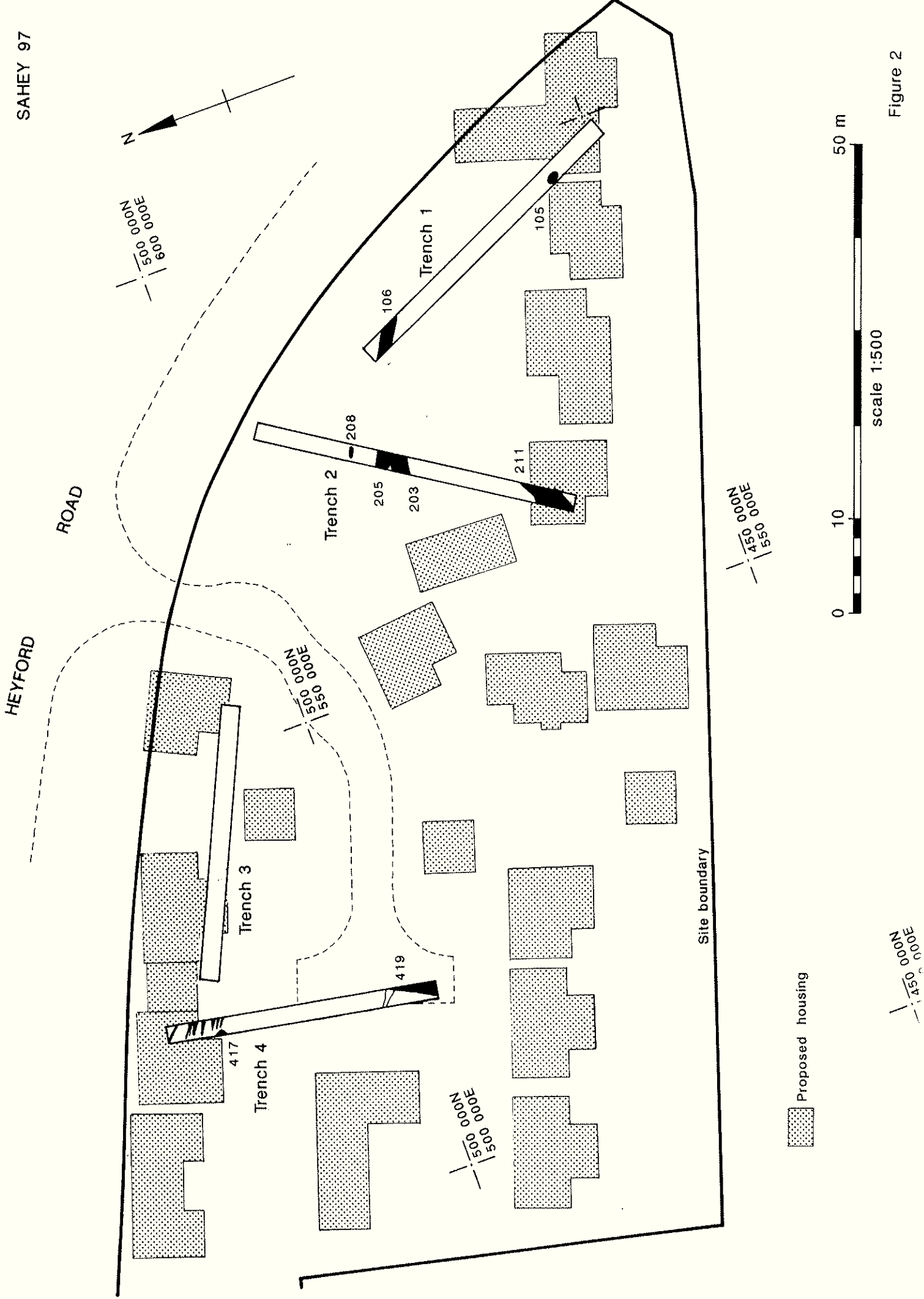


Figure 2

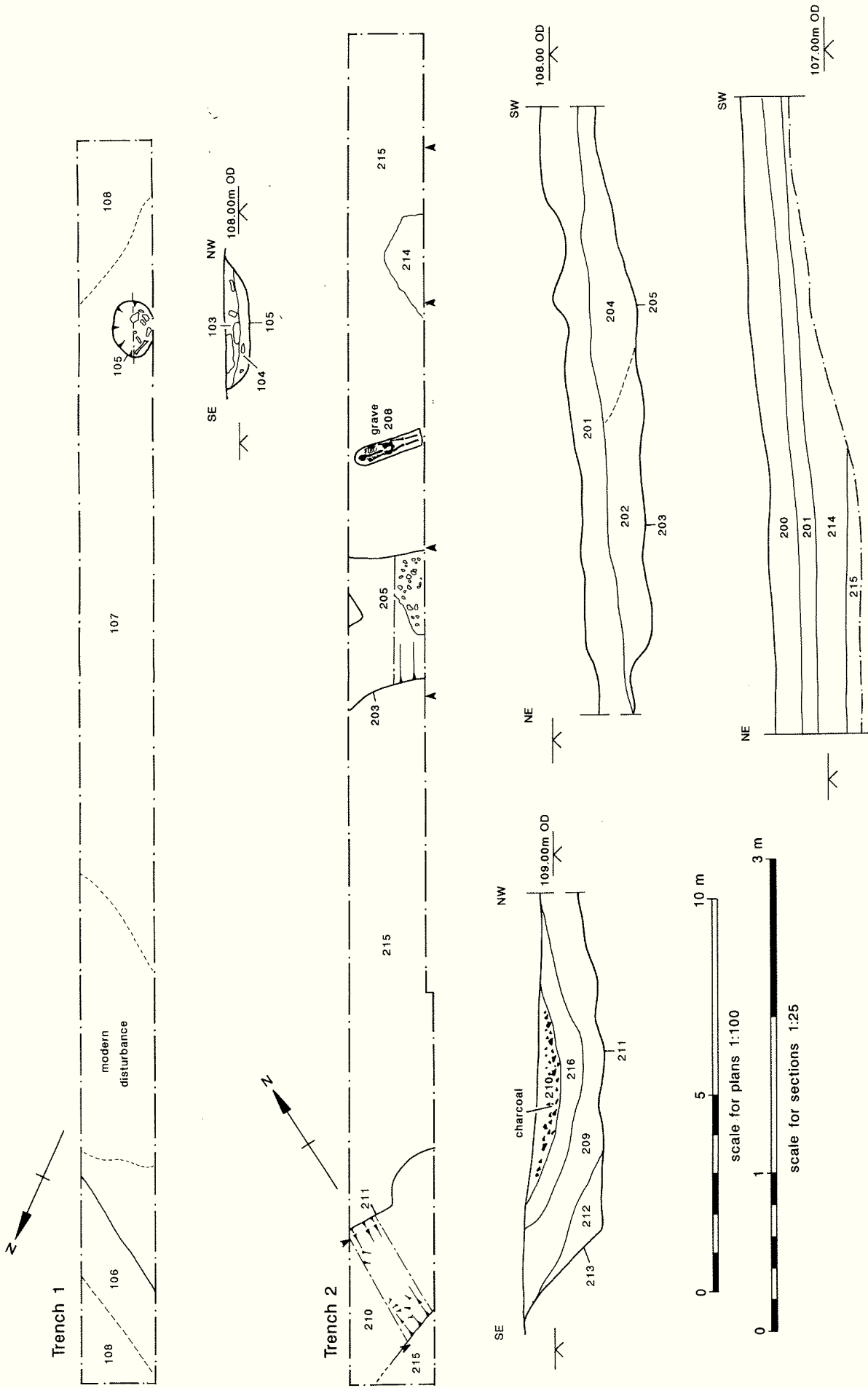


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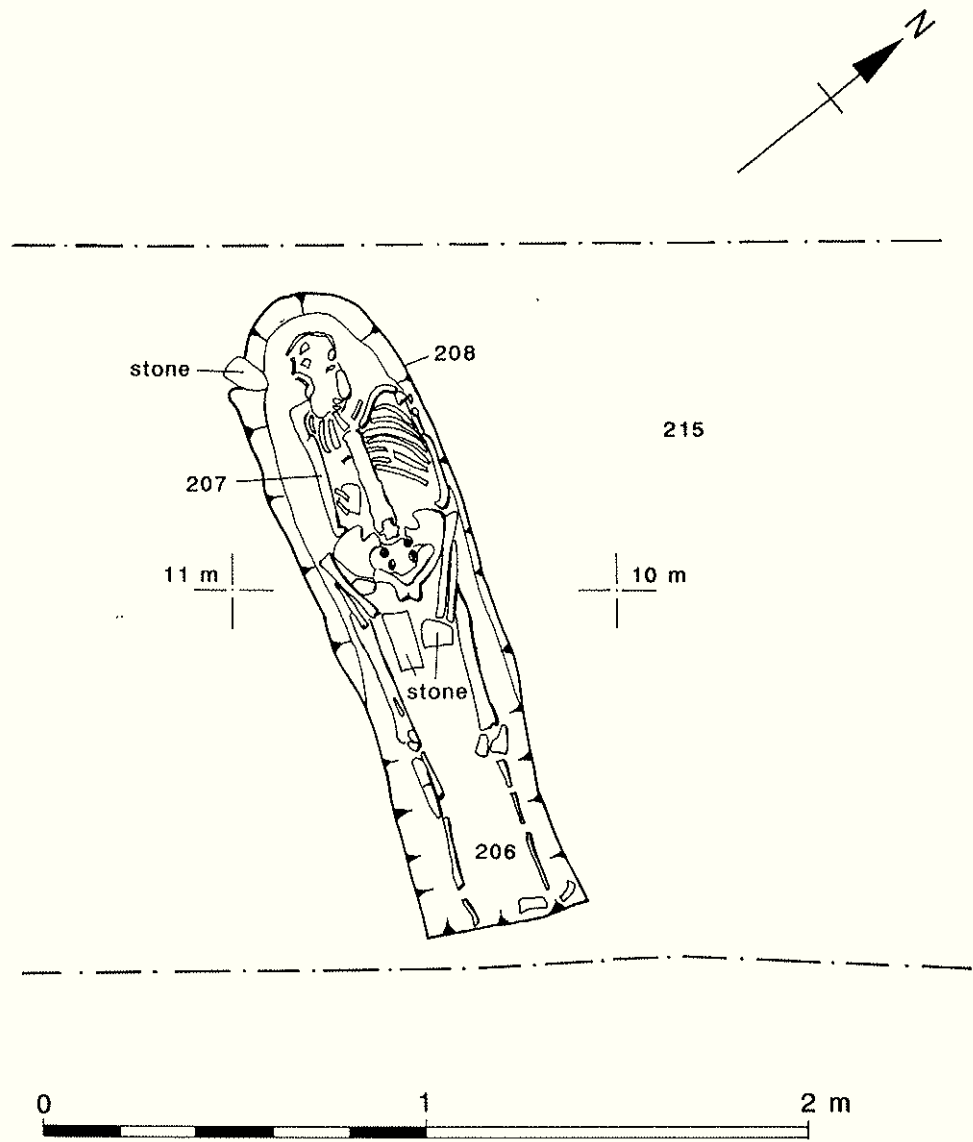


Figure 4

Trench 3 sections

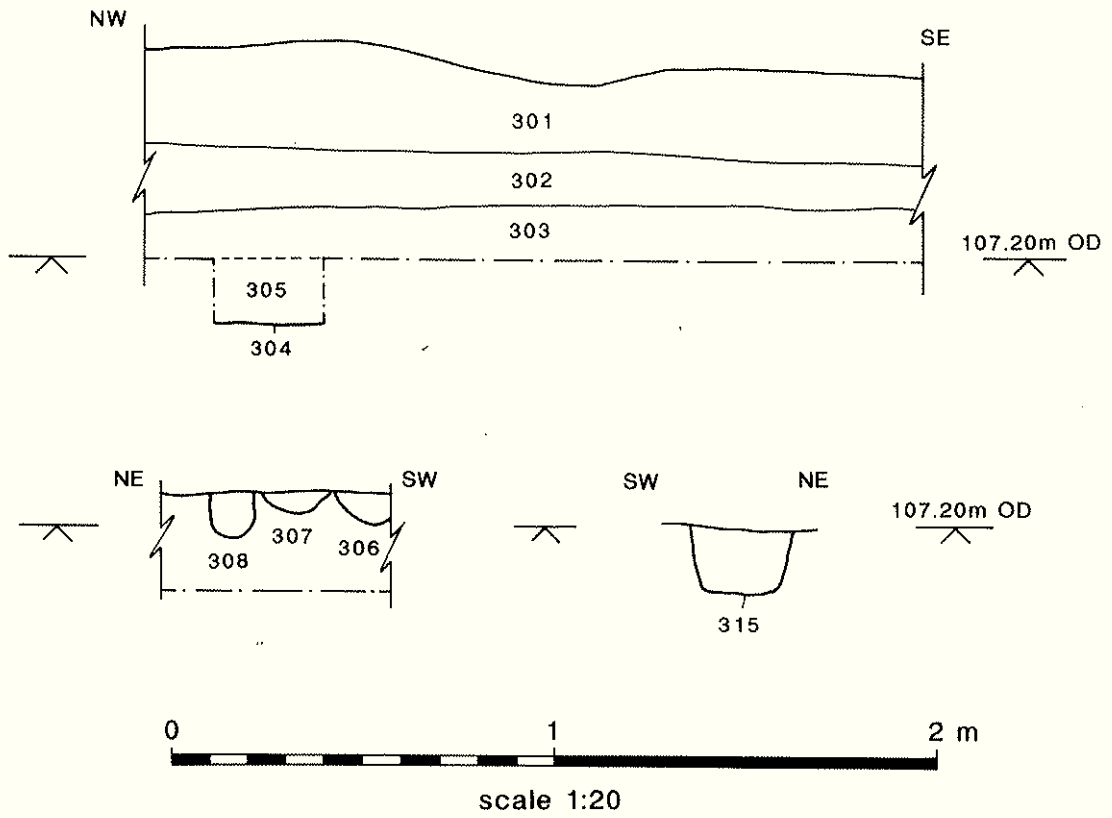


Figure 5

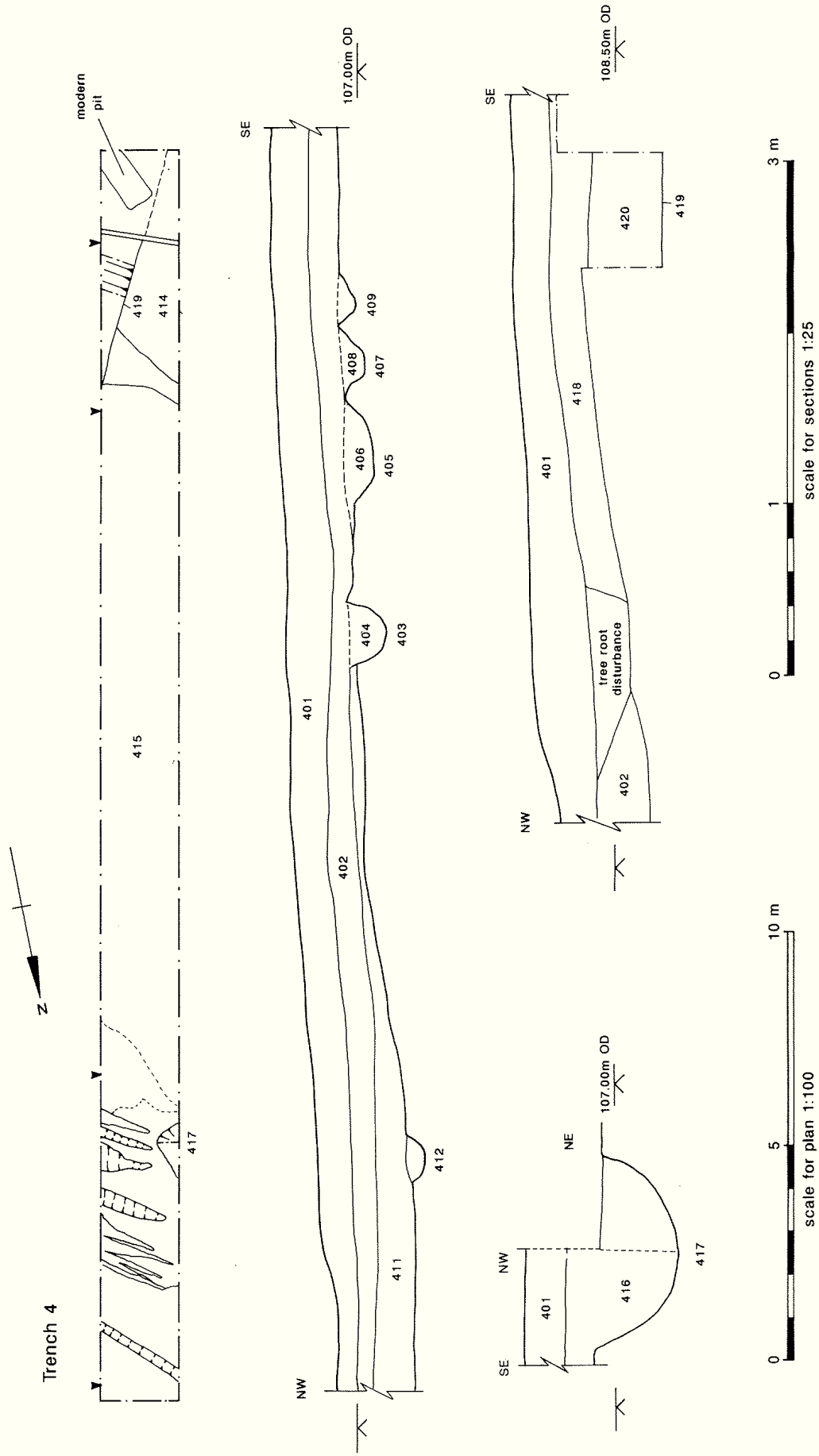


Figure 6



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