

Proposed Mineral Extraction at Bridge Farm Sutton Courtenay Oxfordshire



Archaeological Evaluation Report



Oxford Archaeology

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Bridge Farm, Sutton Courtenay, Oxfordshire

NGR SU 521 941

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION REPORT

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SUMMARY

Oxford Archaeology (OA) carried out a field evaluation between 12 th and 13 th December 2002 on land adjacent to Bridge Farm, Sutton Courtenay, Oxfordshire on behalf of Hanson Aggregates Ltd. A brief was prepared by and a WSI agreed with Hugh Coddington the Deputy County Archaeologist for Oxfordshire. Three trenches were excavated. The evaluation revealed evidence for small scale quarrying of probable Roman date and a small pit filled with charcoal in Trench 1. A narrow gully was revealed in Trench 2 and three, east-west orientated ditches in Trench 3. No evidence for the Penn Copse Roman villa, presumed to be at the site location, was revealed.

1.1 Location and scope of work

- 1.1.1 Oxford Archaeology (OA) carried out a field evaluation between 12th and 13 th December 2002 on land adjacent to Bridge Farm, Sutton Courtenay, Oxfordshire on behalf of Hanson Aggregates Ltd. A brief was prepared by and a WSI agreed with Hugh Coddington the Deputy County Archaeologist for Oxfordshire.

1.2 Geology and topography

- 1.2.1 The proposed extraction site is located within the historic parishes of Sutton Courtenay and Appleford (NGR SU 521 941). The site is bounded by a field boundary to the north, which runs parallel to the River Thames and by the main line railway to the east. The village of Appleford lies *c* 200 m to the south-east. Sutton Courtenay lies *c* 1.3 km to the west. To the south of the proposed extraction site lies Bridge Farm and Appleford Field, a large quarry and the site of numerous archaeological excavations.
- 1.2.2 The site lies at *c* 45-50 m Ordnance Datum. The geology of the site is Pleistocene and Recent River Gravel (First Terrace) above Cretaceous Gault (BGS Sheet 253). The geology of the area to the immediate north of the proposal area is Pleistocene and Recent floodplain Alluvium. Excavations in Appleford Field to the south of the site in 1973 revealed over a metre of soil above the natural gravel, some of which was associated with the accumulation of occupational refuse (Hinchliffe and Thomas 1980, 12 and 17), the upper *c* 0.4 m of which was modern ploughsoil (*ibid.*, 29).

1.3 Archaeological background

- 1.3.1 The site has been subject to a desktop assessment (OA 2002), the results of which have only been summarised here. Therefore, the desktop should be read in conjunction with this document. It should be noted that since the production of the desktop assessment the proposed extraction area has been reduced. The northern part of the original proposal area, which lies adjacent to the Thames, is no longer to be included.

- 1.3.2 The desktop assessment identified nine archaeological sites within the area of proposed gravel extraction. These comprise a Roman settlement site, partly excavated in the 1960s (OA 27), a number of archaeological cropmarks that are probably associated with the Roman settlement but which also include a possible prehistoric ring ditch (OA 20, 27, 48, 60 and 62), and post-medieval tracks and field boundary (OA 46, 47, 49 and 50).
- 1.3.3 This evaluation was targeted at the site of the possible villa. Unfortunately, the results of the 1960s excavation were not published and no archive or plans produced, so very little is known of the work other than the information contained within the SMR. The detailed SMR entry (No. 2852) for the site has been reproduced below:

The occurrence of Roman sherds in the area of the recently cleared Penn Copse led Mr GD Leyland to undertake limited excavations in 1962-3. This revealed fragmentary remains of buildings and a stone-lined well or storage pit. A quantity of pottery extending from the 1st to 4th centuries AD was found, and one 1st century brooch. Penn Copse was cleared by bulldozing and this was found to have destroyed any reasonable chance of deducing the type and extent of habitation (source: GD Leyland pers. comm. in 1963).

The site was under crops in August 1963. It was revisited in April 1964, when the excavations had been completely filled in. Nothing was identifiable on the ground, but a farm worker pointed out the approximate site at SU 5200 9421. A few sherds of pottery including one sherd of Samian were found with oyster shells on the ploughed surface. The site is on a gravelly river terrace just above the present flood plain of the Thames. (source: NV Quinnell 30/4/64).

1.4 Evaluation Aims

- 1.4.1 To determine the extent, condition, nature, character, quality and date of any archaeological remains present, with particular focus on the previously identified Roman activity.
- 1.4.2 To establish the ecofactual and environmental potential of archaeological deposits and features and to make available the results of the investigation through a report.

2 EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

2.1 Scope of fieldwork

- 2.1.1 Three trenches were excavated in the area of the possible villa and associated settlement. Trenches 2 and 3 were 30 m x 1.6 m and Trench 1 was 40 m x 1.5 m (see Fig. 2). The 40 m long trench was excavated within the limit of the former wooded area known as Penn Copse in order to locate the position of any building remains. The two 30 m long trenches were excavated to investigate cropmarks to the east.

- 2.1.2 The trenches were excavated by a mechanical excavator (JCB) under archaeological supervision, supplemented by limited hand excavation of archaeological deposits. The trenches were excavated to the top of the 'natural' or to the top of any significant archaeological level, whichever was the higher. The exposed archaeological horizon was cleaned by hand to clarify the remains and archaeological features were sampled to sufficiently characterise and date them.
- 2.1.3 All features were photographed using colour slide and black and white print film. Recording followed procedures laid down in the *OA Fieldwork Manual* (ed. D Wilkinson, 1992).

2.2 Finds

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

2.3 Palaeo-environmental evidence

- 2.3.1 A sample was taken from the fill (105) of a small pit [107] in Trench 1. This deposit was processed and found to be a cremation burial of unknown date (see Appendix 3).

3 RESULTS: GENERAL

3.1 Soils and ground conditions

- 3.1.1 The soils consisted of silty and organic sandy loams overlying thin, plough scored colluvial deposits and natural sandy gravel.

4 RESULTS: DESCRIPTIONS

4.1 Presentation of results

- 4.2.1 In the following sections the deposits are described by trench. There is additional comment on the finds and the reliability of the results. A context inventory, including finds lists, is included in Appendix 1. The stratigraphy of each trench is described individually and a discussion, interpretation and conclusions of the evaluation and there results then follows.

4.3 Description of deposits

Trench 1

- 4.3.1 Trench 1 was orientated east - west and was 40 m long. The Trench was excavated to a maximum depth of 0.75 m below ground level (bgl) within the possible quarry feature [104].
- 4.3.2 Natural sand and gravel (107) was encountered at a depth of 0.45 m bgl (47.68 OD).
- 4.3.3 The natural gravel (107) was overlaid by a reddish brown sandy subsoil (101) which was 0.10 m thick.

- 4.3.4 The subsoil (101) was cut by large shallow pit [104] which extended for 11 m along the trench and to north and south beyond the trench sides. The base of the feature was slightly irregular and the sides cut at a shallow angle. The feature was a maximum 0.55 m deep. It contained a single fill of dark yellowish brown silty clay (103) with faint tip lines falling towards the west. No finds were retrieved from the pit fill (103).
- 4.3.5 The natural gravel (107) was also truncated by a small pit [106] which was partially revealed against the southern baulk of the trench. The pit measured 0.50 m wide and was 0.50 m deep. It had a single fill of very dark grey clay silt containing charcoal and burnt bone (105).
- 4.3.6 The subsoil (101) was truncated throughout the trench by a considerable degree of tree disturbance. This consisted of irregular patches of a mid-reddish brown silt clay (102) containing root material.
- 4.3.7 The tree disturbance was overlaid by a dark greyish brown sandy loam ploughsoil (100) which was 0.42 m thick.

Trench 2

- 4.3.8 Trench 2 was orientated north-south and was 30 m long, 1.60 m wide and excavated to a maximum depth of 0.55 m.
- 4.3.9 Natural gravel (204) was revealed at 0.50 m bgl (c. 48.10 m OD). It consisted of mixed orange-brown sandy clay and gravel.
- 4.3.10 The natural was overlaid by a reddish brown clayey subsoil (201) which was 0.15 m thick.
- 4.3.11 The subsoil (201) was truncated by a great deal of tree disturbance (205) throughout the trench. The tree throw holes were filled with a reddish-brown silty clay with gravel (205).
- 4.3.12 The layer of tree throw disturbance (205) was overlaid by up to 0.30 m of sandy loam ploughsoil (200).
- 4.3.13 A linear feature [203] running NNE-SSW was revealed at the northern end of the trench. It extended 6 m across the trench and was 0.66 m wide and 0.35 m deep. It was filled with an orangey-brown silty clay (202) which was devoid of finds.

Trench 3

- 4.3.14 Trench 3 was 30 m long, 1.60 m wide and orientated north-south. It was excavated to a general depth of 0.50 m.
- 4.3.15 Natural gravel and sand (308) was revealed at a depth of 0.50 m bgl (c.48.09 m OD). This was overlaid by a 0.2 m thick layer of mid-brown sandy subsoil (301).
- 4.3.16 The subsoil (301) was truncated by three east-west running ditches [304], [307] and [311].

- 4.3.17 Ditch 311 truncated the subsoil (301) and was 2.75 m wide and 0.87 m deep. The ditch was 'V' shaped in profile and contained two fills. The primary fill (310) was of sandy clay with gravel to a depth of 0.25 m. This was overlaid by a 0.55 m thick fill of silty clay (309).
- 4.3.18 A further ditch [307] was located c. 4 m to the south of ditch 311. Ditch 307 was 0.87 m wide and 0.39 m deep. It was filled by two brown silty clays. The primary fill (306), was 0.27 m thick. This was overlaid by a 305 which was 0.30 m thick. A single sherd of sand tempered pottery dating to the middle Iron Age was retrieved from this fill.
- 4.3.19 The upper fill (305) of ditch 307 was truncated by a third ditch [304] which was 1.75 m wide and 0.62 m deep. It contained two fills (303, 302). The primary fill (303) consisted of orange-brown silty clay, 0.50 m thick. This was overlaid by a similar deposit 0.15 m thick. Both of these fills were devoid of finds.
- 4.3.20 All of the archaeological features were sealed by up to 0.32 m of sandy loam ploughsoil.

4.4 Finds

Pottery by Paul Booth

- 4.4.1 A single sherd of abraded sand and shell tempered pottery was recovered from the surface of ditch fill 305 in Trench 3. The pottery dates to the middle Iron Age.

Animal Bone by Bethan Charles

- 4.4.2 A fragment of animal bone was retrieved from ditch fill 305. This was the almost complete remains of the left innominate (pelvis) of a female bovid. No evidence of butchery was observed. This single piece of animal bone does not provide meaningful information regarding animal husbandary or the economy of the site other than indicating the presence of animals.

The cremation burial

- 4.4.3 The cremated bone was located in a pit [106] which was 0.5 m wide and 0.5 m deep. The single fill (105) with the burnt human bone also contained charcoal. The date of the cremation is uncertain but may be from the Roman period. The cremated bone was assessed for its potential of further analysis (see Appendix 3).

4.5 Palaeoenvironmental remains

- 4.5.1 A single soil sample from an undated cremation burial was taken during excavation for the recovery of charred remains (see Appendix 2).

5 DISCUSSION AND INTERPRETATION

- 5.1.1 In Trench 1, a shallow pit feature [104] was revealed. The irregular base and sloping

sides suggest that the feature represents a shallow quarry pit. No finds were retrieved from the fill of this feature (104) and it was not possible to date it as a result. A cremation pit [106], of possible Roman date, was also revealed in Trench 1.

5.1.2 Trench 1 was located in the centre of a distinct cropmark which forms a square enclosure. This was previously thought to be the site of a possible Roman villa partially excavated in the 1960s (see desktop report). No evidence for this structure was encountered during the evaluation.

5.1.3 In Trench 2 a single, NE-SW orientated ditch [203] was revealed. The ditch displayed a 'V' shaped profile and was filled with a reddish brown loam deposit (202). Three further ditches [304; 307, 311] were revealed in Trench 3. These too displayed a 'V' shaped profile and were filled with a similar colluvial deposit. The fill (305) of ditch [307] contained a single sherd of pottery dating to the middle Iron Age. The similarity between all of the ditches revealed in the evaluation suggests they are roughly contemporary and probably relate to field systems of mid-late Iron Age date. All of the archaeological features truncated the subsoil and were heavily disturbed by tree rooting.

5.2 Comment by Paul Booth

5.2.1 In the absence of detailed evidence from the 1960s excavation it is impossible to comment in detail upon the character of the site as it was then encountered. In particular the significance of 'fragmentary remains of buildings' is uncertain. If these are to be understood as buildings with stone foundations the identification of the site as a small villa *may* be justified, but the assumption that stone foundations were involved is no more than that. In terms of the local settlement pattern a site at Appleford Sidings some 1500 m south (approximately) of the present site was occupied by a rectilinear enclosure which possibly contained a proto-villa of early Roman date, comparable to the contemporary complex at Barton Court Farm, Abingdon (Henig and Booth 2000, 84-5). The Appleford site was not apparently occupied after the early-mid 2nd century (though associated field systems may have continued in use) and it is possible that it was succeeded as a settlement focus by the 'village green/trackway junction' site examined by Hinchliffe and Thomas (1980) which lay only *c* 700 m south of the present site and seems to have been occupied most intensively in the late Roman period. It is also possible, however, that Penn Copse, with its more regular enclosure system (as seen from the air), rather than the 'village green' complex, was the 'higher status' successor to Appleford Sidings. This is speculative, however, and it may be that a settlement spacing of as little as *c* 0.7 km was characteristic of this part of the Thames Valley in the Roman period.

5.2.2 One point about preservation can be made on the basis of the evidence from Appleford Sidings. Evidence of gullies, potentially of structural significance, was recovered from the rectilinear enclosure when that site was evaluated in 1993. When the area was subsequently stripped and examined in advance of gravel quarrying in 2000 these features were not seen. While it is possible that the machining of the site

in 2000 was more vigorous than in 1993 this is not thought to be the case and it is likely that these slight structural traces had been destroyed by intensive agricultural activity in the intervening period. A combination of a similar agricultural regime on light soils, in addition to the destructive effects of tree clearance by bulldozer in the 1960s, is likely to account for the loss of all but the most substantial archaeological features and explain the poor survival of features in the present evaluation.

5.3 Conclusions

5.3.1 The evaluation has produced evidence for the presence of ditches relating to a field system of middle-late Iron Age date together with small scale quarrying of unknown date. The complete absence of archaeological features relating to the possible Roman villa may be due to a combination of regular ploughing of the site over the past 30 years and the considerable amount of tree disturbance noted.

5.4 Reliability of field investigation

5.4.1 The integrity of the archaeological evidence encountered during the evaluation is believed to be good.

APPENDICES

Appendix 1 Archaeological Context Inventory

<i>Trench</i>	<i>Ctxt No</i>	<i>Type</i>	<i>Width. (m)</i>	<i>Thick (m)</i>	<i>Comment</i>	<i>Finds</i>	<i>No./wt</i>	<i>Date</i>
001	100	Layer		0.25	Ploughsoil			
001	101	Layer		0.12	Subsoil			
001	102	Layer		0.25	Tree disturbance			
001	103	Fill		0.40	Quarry pit fill			
001	104	Cut	6.00	0.40	Quarry Pit ?			
001	105	Fill		0.30	Pit fill			
001	106	Fill		0.30	Cremation Pit			
001	107	Layer			Disturbed natural			
002	200	Layer		0.28	Ploughsoil			
002	201	Layer		0.10	subsoil			
002	202	Fill		0.35	Ditch fill			
002	203	Cut		0.35	Ditch			
002	204	Layer			Natural gravel			
003	300	Layer		0.35	Ploughsoil			
003	301	Layer		0.15	Topsoil			

<i>Trench</i>	<i>Cxxt No</i>	<i>Type</i>	<i>Width. (m)</i>	<i>Thick (m)</i>	<i>Comment</i>	<i> Finds</i>	<i>No./wt</i>	<i>Date</i>
003	302	Fill		0.15	Ditch fill			
003	303	Fill		0.50	Primary fill			
003	304	Cut		0.65	Ditch			
003	305	Fill		0.28	Ditch fill	Pot Bone		M. I. A
003	306	Fill		0.18	Alluvium			
003	307	Cut		0.48	Ditch			
003	308	Layer			Natural			
003	309	Fill		0.55	Ditch fill			
003	310	Fill		0.22	Ditch fill			
003	311	Cut		0.80	Ditch			

Appendix 2 Assessment of the charred plant remains and charcoal

by Dana Challinor

The flot (from fill 105 in pit 106) was small in size with lots of comminuted wood charcoal; only a small quantity of which was identifiable (>2mm in transverse section). The charcoal assemblage was dominated by *Quercus* sp. (oak), with smaller amounts of Maloideae (apple, pear, hawthorn etc.). Non-wood charred remains included a couple of abraded cereal grains, *Triticum spelta/dicoccum* (spelt/emmer wheat), occasional weed seeds and a reasonable quantity of charred tubers. Some modern contamination, in the form of roots and seeds, was also present and both cremated and unburnt bone fragments.

The predominance of a single charcoal taxon in prehistoric cremation assemblages, indicating the use of a single tree or specifically selected species in ritual activities, has been noted at Radley Barrow Hills (Thompson 1999, 352) and at Rollright Stones (Straker 1988). In addition, the relationship between Bronze Age cremation deposits and *Arrhenatherum elatius* (onion couch) tubers has been demonstrated at several sites (Robinson 1998). It would be of interest to confirm the identification and composition of the charcoal and to identify the tubers in the sample from Bridge Farm, if the material can be firmly dated by radiocarbon.

Appendix 3 The Cremation Burial

by Annsofie Witkin

Introduction

The cremated bone was located in a pit [106] which was 0.5 m wide and 0.5 m deep. The single fill (105) with the burnt human bone also contained charcoal. The date of the cremation is uncertain but may be from the Roman period. The cremated bone was assessed to determine its potential for further analysis.

Methodology

In excavation, the cremation contexts were subject to 100% recovery as whole-earth samples and subsequently wet sieved. The cremated remains were retained as unsorted residue. These have been subdivided into 10-4mm and 2-4mm categories. The residues were weighed and scanned to ascertain the quantity of bone present and their suitability for sorting of cremated bone fragments and analysis.

Quantification

Cremation number 105 consisted of 122 grams of bone. None of the bones were abraded and they were generally white and well calcified though some fragments were black. The largest fragment measured 40.16 mm but the majority (99 grams) were less than 10 mm. Fragments that could be identified included roots of teeth, cranial vault, tibia, the navicular bone, a metatarsal, fibula and rib fragments. It was not possible to determine the sex of this individual but since the sutures were open it is likely this was a young adult individual.

An average adult cremation can weigh between 1000-2400 grams if complete (McKinley 1997,68). This cremation deposit was therefore very small and does not represent the entire remains of any one individual. The small quantity of bone and the presence of charcoal suggests that this might have been a deposit of pyre debris.

Due to the very small deposits of bone present within the residue samples, there is no potential for further analysis.

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APPENDIX 4 SUMMARY OF SITE DETAILS

Site name: Bridge Farm, Sutton Courtenay, Oxford

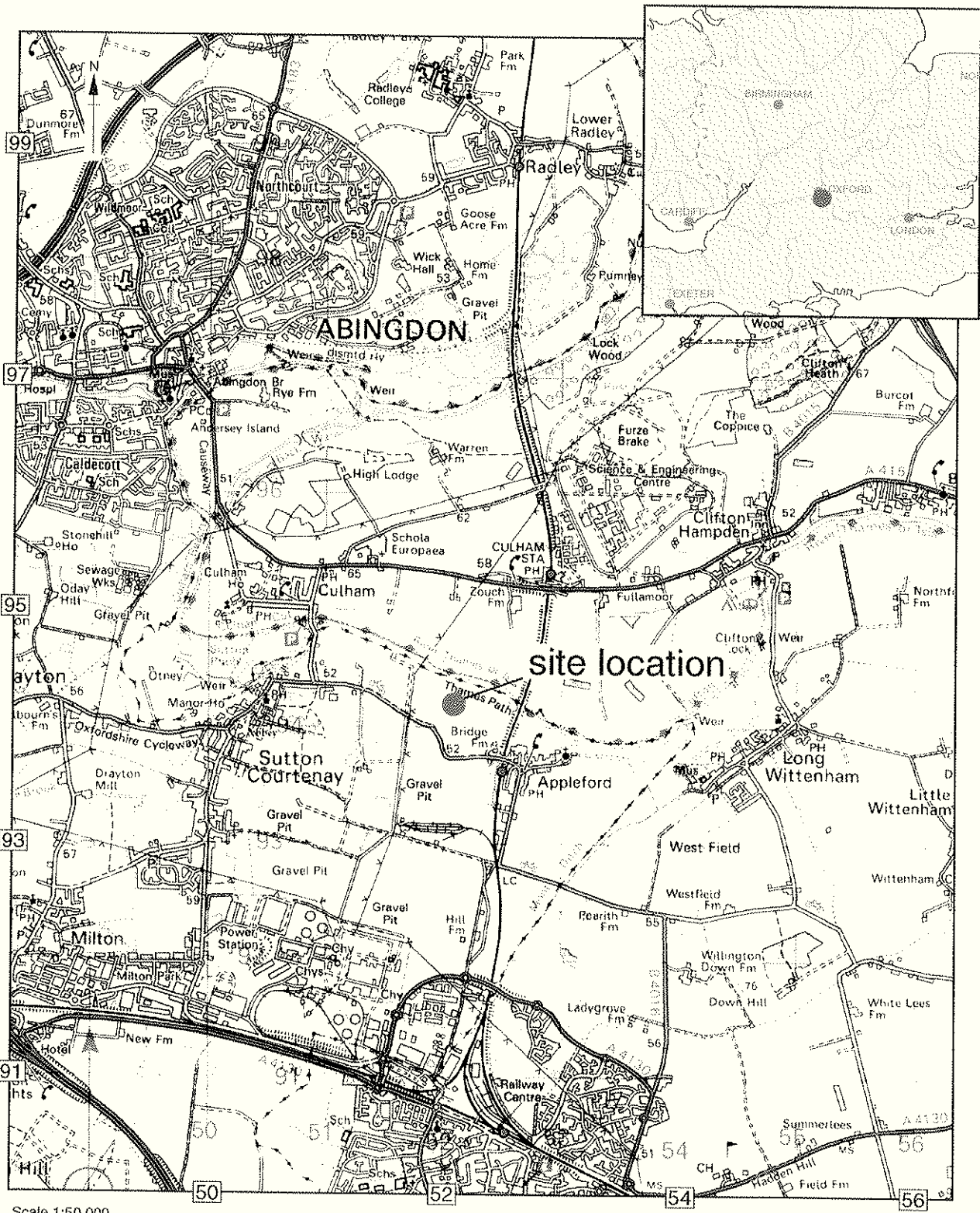
Site code: SUBRF02

Type of evaluation: Three trenches

Date and duration of project: 11-13/12/02

Summary of results: Possible Quarry pit and 4 ditches relating to field system of Iron Age/Roman date.

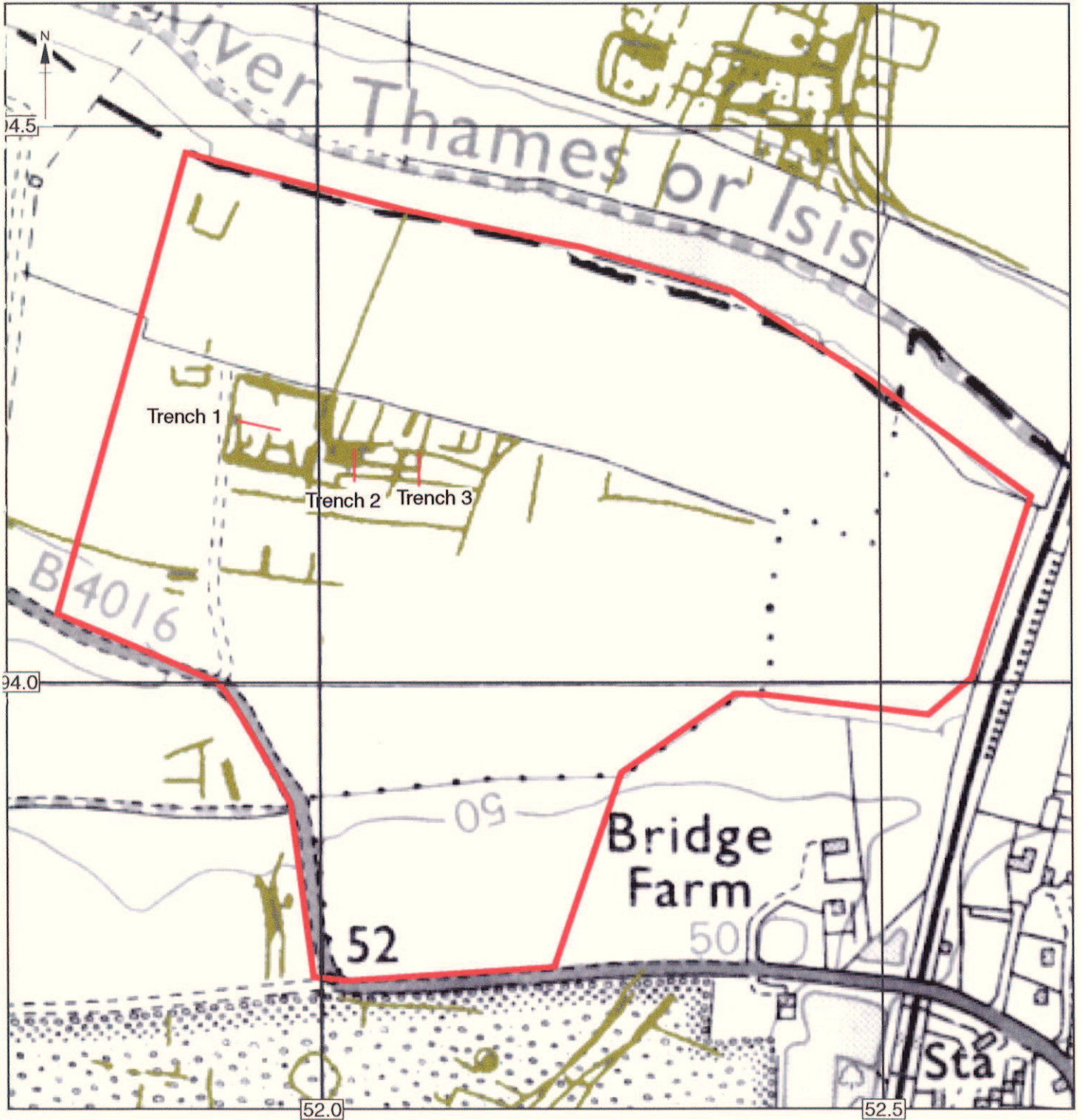
Location of archive: The archive is currently held at OA, Janus House, Osney Mead, Oxford, OX2 0ES, and will be deposited with the Oxfordshire County Museum in due course.



Scale 1:50,000

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Figure 1: Site location



Scale 1:5,000

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Figure 2: Trench location showing cropmark plot

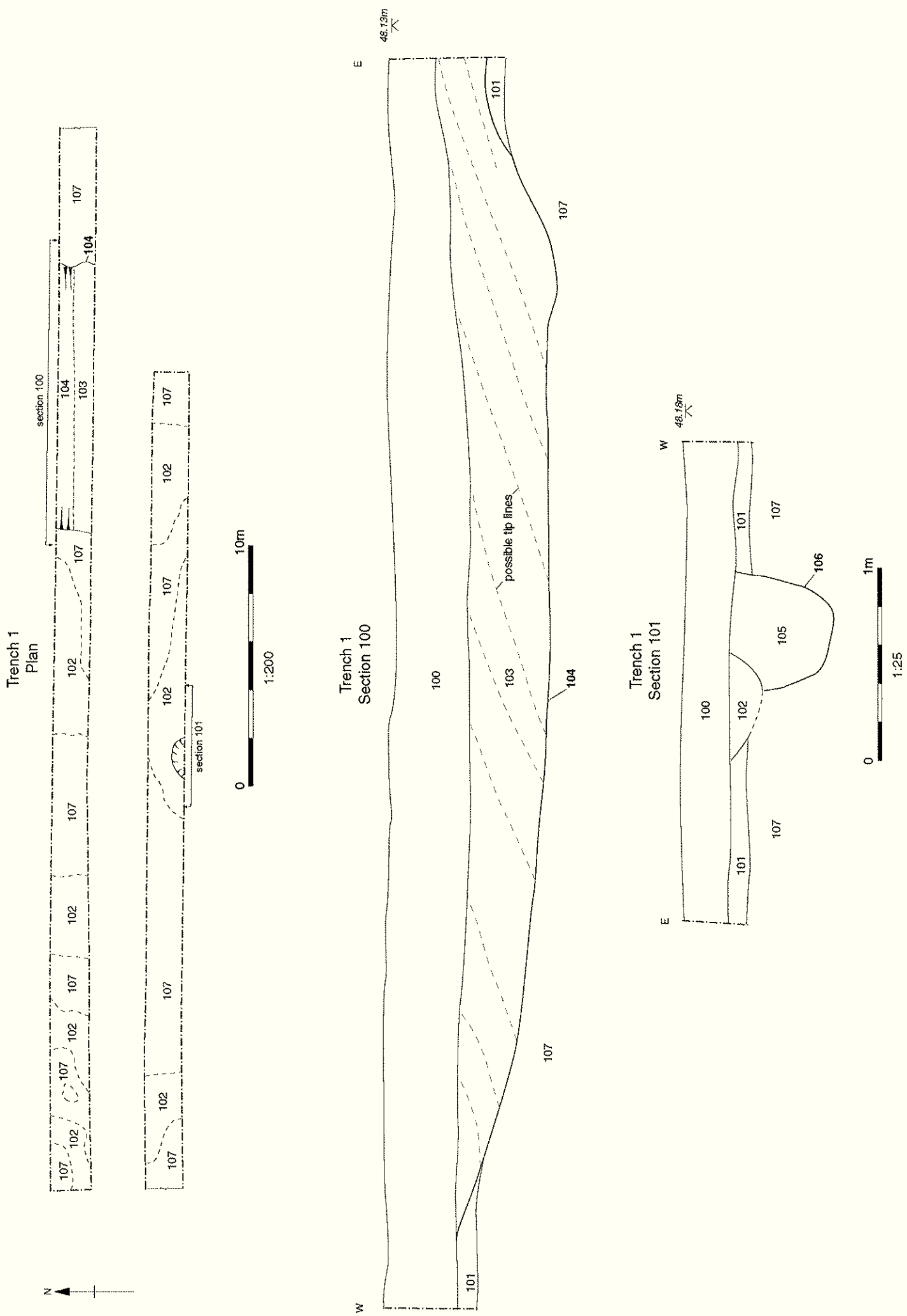
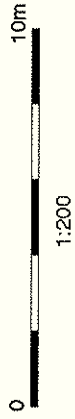
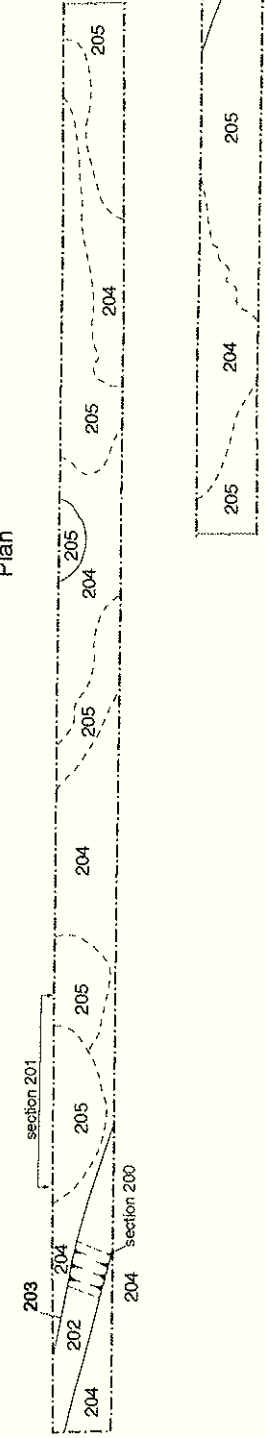
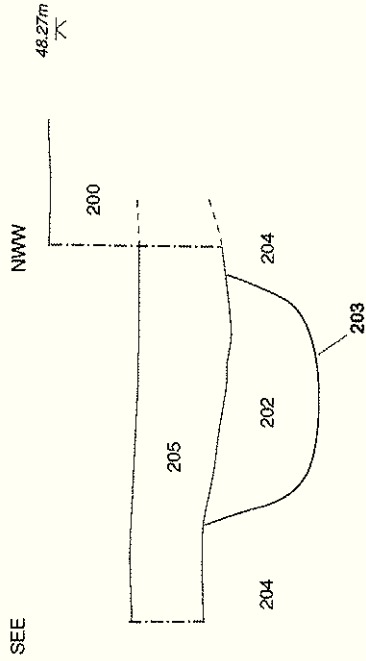


Figure 3: Trench 1 plan and sections

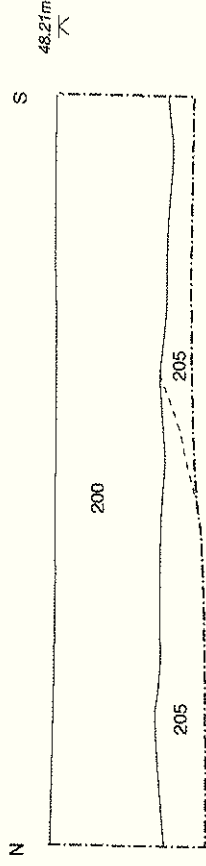
Trench 2
Plan



Trench 2
Section 200



Trench 2
Section 201



Trench 2
Section 202

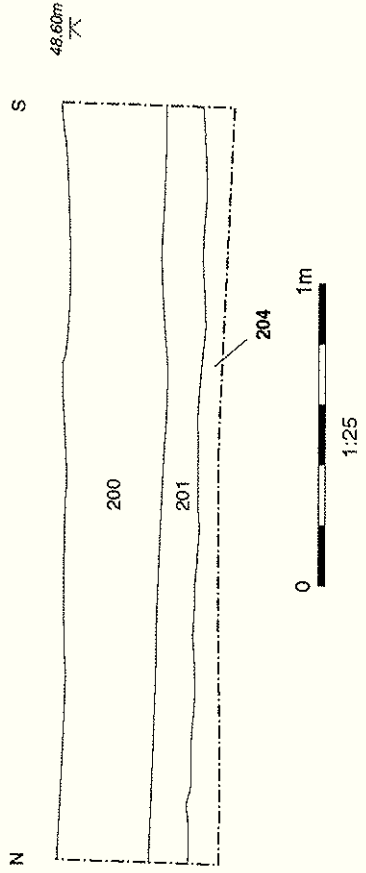
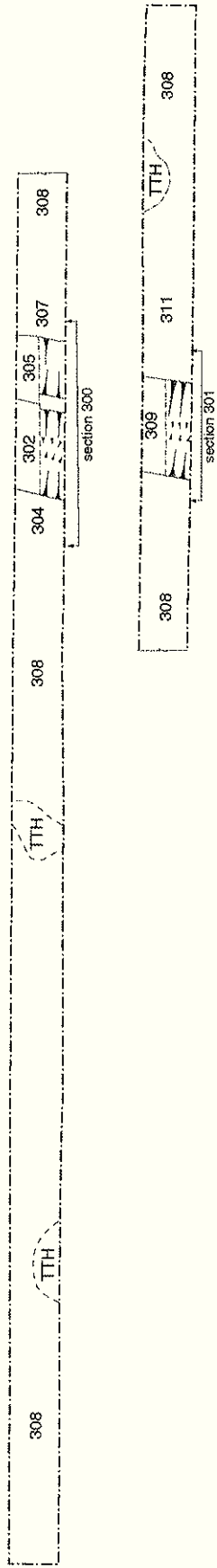


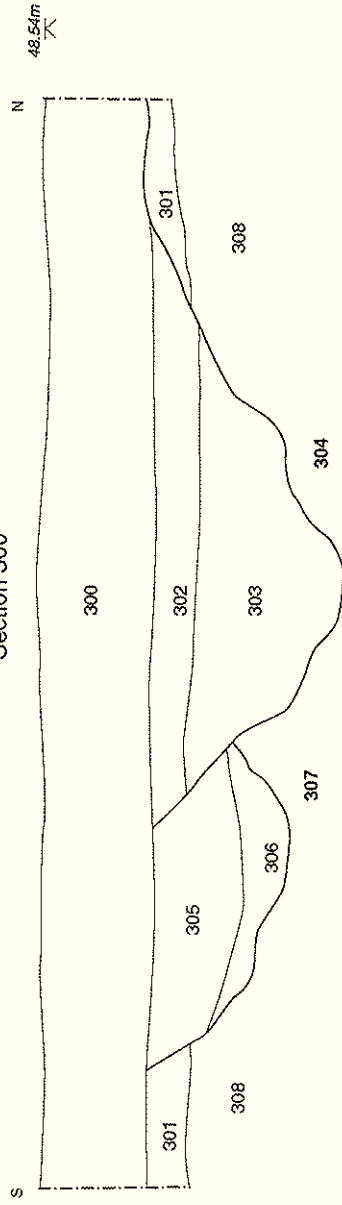
Figure 4: Trench 2 plan and sections

Trench 3
Plan

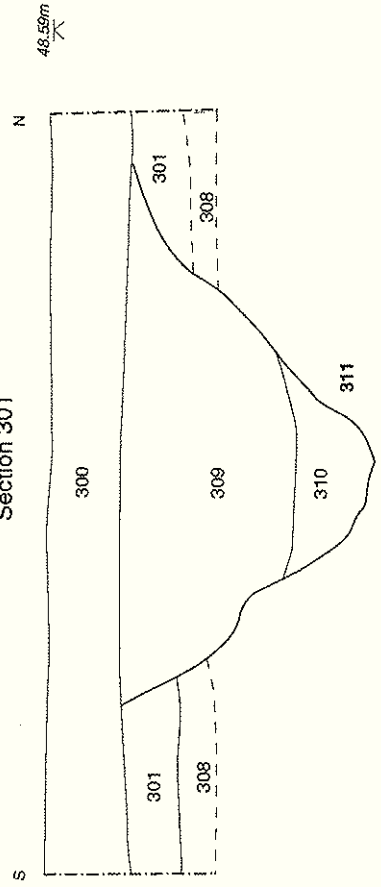


1:200

Trench 3
Section 300



Trench 3
Section 301



1:25

TTH = tree throw hole

Figure 5: Trench 3 plan and sections



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