

BANNER HOMES PLC

88 UNION STREET, DUNSTABLE, BEDFORDSHIRE

NGR TL 0127 2205

ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF REPORT

Oxford Archaeological Unit

July 2001

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Prepared by: Robin Bashford

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Checked by: J.R. HILLER *JRH*

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Approved by: R Hillier ASSISTANT DIRECTOR

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Summary

Between December 2000 and May 2001, Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) undertook a watching brief at Union Street, Dunstable (planning ref: SB/TP/98/0710). An evaluation carried out by OAU in May 2000 identified two Iron Age or early Roman ditches, which ran from east to west across the site and may have defined a trackway. Both these ditches were observed during the watching brief, together with a probable pit and a well, both of which were of unknown date.

1. Introduction

The site lies in a built up area to the north west Dunstable town centre (Fig. 1) in south Bedfordshire. It is centred at TL 0127 2205 and is 6500 m² in area. The geology of the site is middle chalk. The site is situated on a disused engineering works built in the 1950s and lies at 150 m OD.

2 Background

The following archaeological background is taken directly from the evaluation report OAU, 2000.

A barrow, described as Neolithic long barrow, is recorded from the development site. It was first quoted in reliable antiquarian sources in the mid to late 19th century. It was described as an east-west orientated mound some 100 ft long. There are reports of human bones from the site and finds of flint artefacts. By the mid 20th century the earthwork had disappeared, probably as a result of building the engineering works. It has also been suggested that the mound was used for the site of a windmill during the post-medieval period.

Other prehistoric barrows, mainly Bronze-Age have also been recorded in the area. One located c 900 m north west of Union Street was excavated in the early 1970s and another is reported 300 m to the east.

A late Iron-Age ditch was excavated during the early 1970s c 800 m to the north west.

There is an extensive pattern of prehistoric settlement in the Dunstable area. It includes the Iron-Age hillfort and possible Neolithic enclosure at Maiden Bower, Five Knolls round barrow cemetery to the south of the town and the extensive occupation at Puddlehill to the north.

The Union Street site is on the edge of the Roman town of Dunstable (*Durocbrivis*), and lies at the edge of the medieval town that was founded in the early 12th century by Henry I.

The evaluation revealed two late Iron Age or early Roman ditches, which ran from east to west across the site and may have defined a trackway; a small pit of unknown date was also found.

3 Aims

The aims of the watching brief were to identify any archaeological remains exposed on site during the course of the works, and to record these to established OAU standards (Wilkinson 1992), in order to secure their preservation by record.

4 Methodology

The watching brief was undertaken by means of separate inspection visits.

Within the constraints imposed by health and safety considerations the deposits exposed were cleaned, inspected and recorded in plan, section and by colour slide and monochrome print photography. Written records were also made on proforma sheets.

5 Results (Figs 2 and 3)

The watching brief monitored the excavation of the strip foundations for each plot (which were excavated in groups of 2, 3 and 4 (Fig. 2)) and the associated services. The results are presented below.

Plots 1-6, 10, 11, 16-18, 21, 22, 23-25 and 27

No archaeological features or deposits were observed within these plots. The natural chalk was observed at an average depth of 0.5 m. The deposits overlying the chalk varied, with *c* 0.6 m of topsoil and subsoil to the west of the site and between 0.3 m and 0.6 m of made ground / demolition rubble to the east of the site. This reflects the previous use of the eastern half of the site as an engineering works.

Plots 7-9, 12-15, 19 and 20

The strip foundations for these plots revealed a similar stratigraphic sequence but also confirmed the presence of two parallel ditches running south-west to north-east across the site. It was not considered necessary to record the ditches in section as the dimensions and date of each had already been established during the evaluation. However, the location of the ditches in relation to the new development can be seen in plan in Figure 2. It should be noted that the ditch recorded in Trench 6 during the evaluation was not observed during the watching brief. It is possible that the feature recorded in Trench 6 was not the continuation of the ditch and that the line of the ditch lies further to the north.

Plot 26

A well was observed in the southernmost foundation trench of plot 26, which had been cut through the chalk to a depth of approximately 12 m. The well was open and had been sealed by a concrete slab. The date of the well was uncertain as no dating evidence was recovered and no obvious relationship with securely dated deposits was observed.

Services

No significant archaeological features were observed during the excavation of service trenches across the site. However, a 3.5 m² test pit was excavated below the new access road (Fig. 2), which revealed a feature approximately 2 m wide and 1 m deep. Although the profile of the feature suggested a potential north-south aligned ditch, no evidence of the ditch continuing to the north or south was observed in the adjacent foundation trenches. It therefore seems likely that this feature probably represents a pit. No dating evidence was recovered although the fills were similar in composition to the fills of the ditches observed during the evaluation, comprising a mid brown silty clay overlying re-deposited natural chalk.

6 Finds

No finds were retrieved during the watching brief.

7 Environmental results

Although full consideration was given to various sampling strategies, due to the absence of any suitable deposits and the tight constraints of the excavation, no environmental soil samples were taken.

8 Discussion

Although the excavation of the strip foundations was closely monitored, no evidence was observed to suggest that the two ditches recorded during the evaluation were part of a larger system of ditches. It seems likely that the original supposition put forward in the evaluation report was correct, and that the ditches probably represent the line of an Iron Age or early Roman trackway. The pit observed beneath the new access road was undated and it is not possible to determine whether or not it is contemporary with the ditches, despite the similarity of the fills.

References.

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

Land Adjacent to 88 Union Street, Archaeological Evaluation Report, OAU 2000

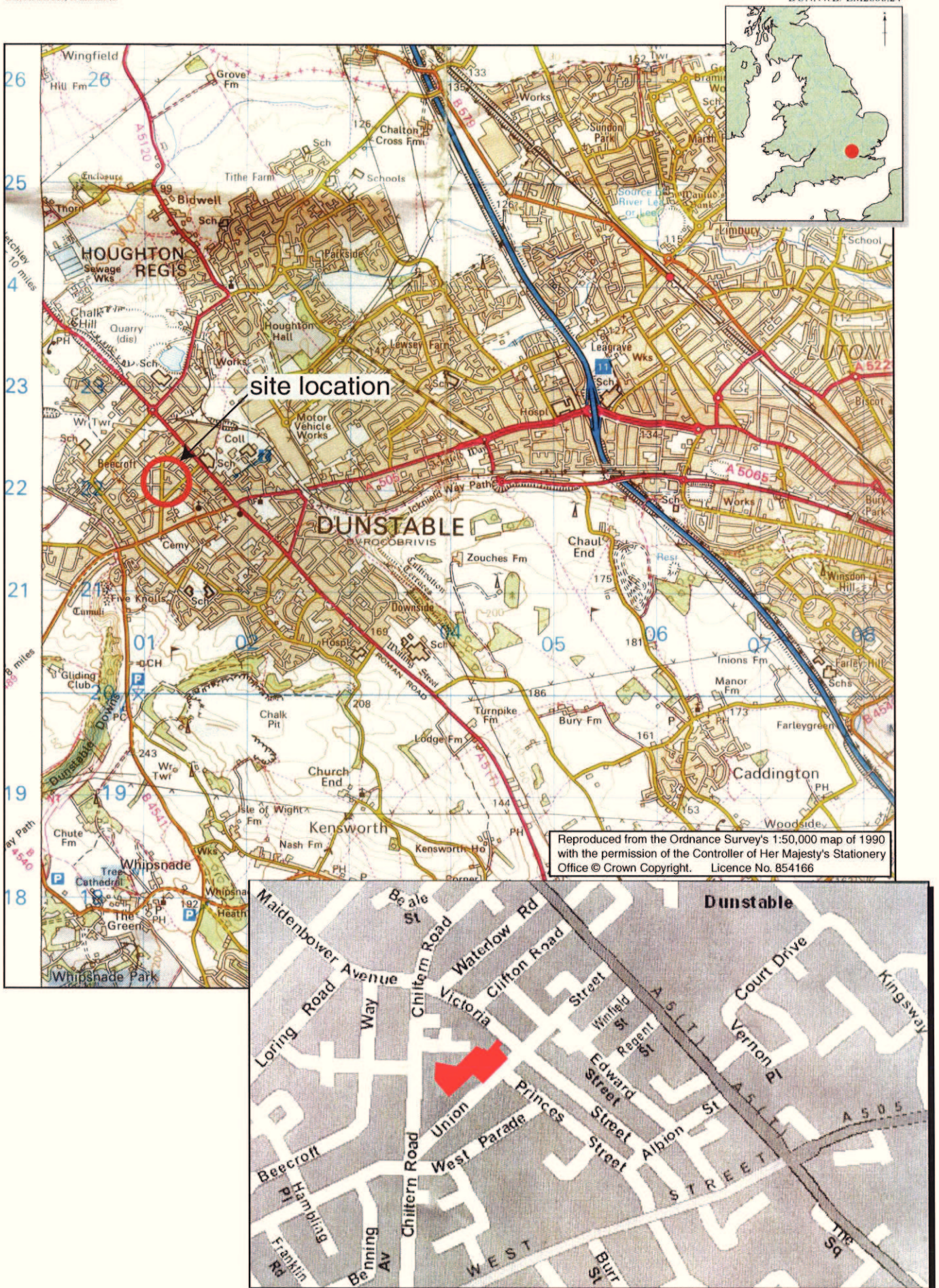


Figure 1: Site location.

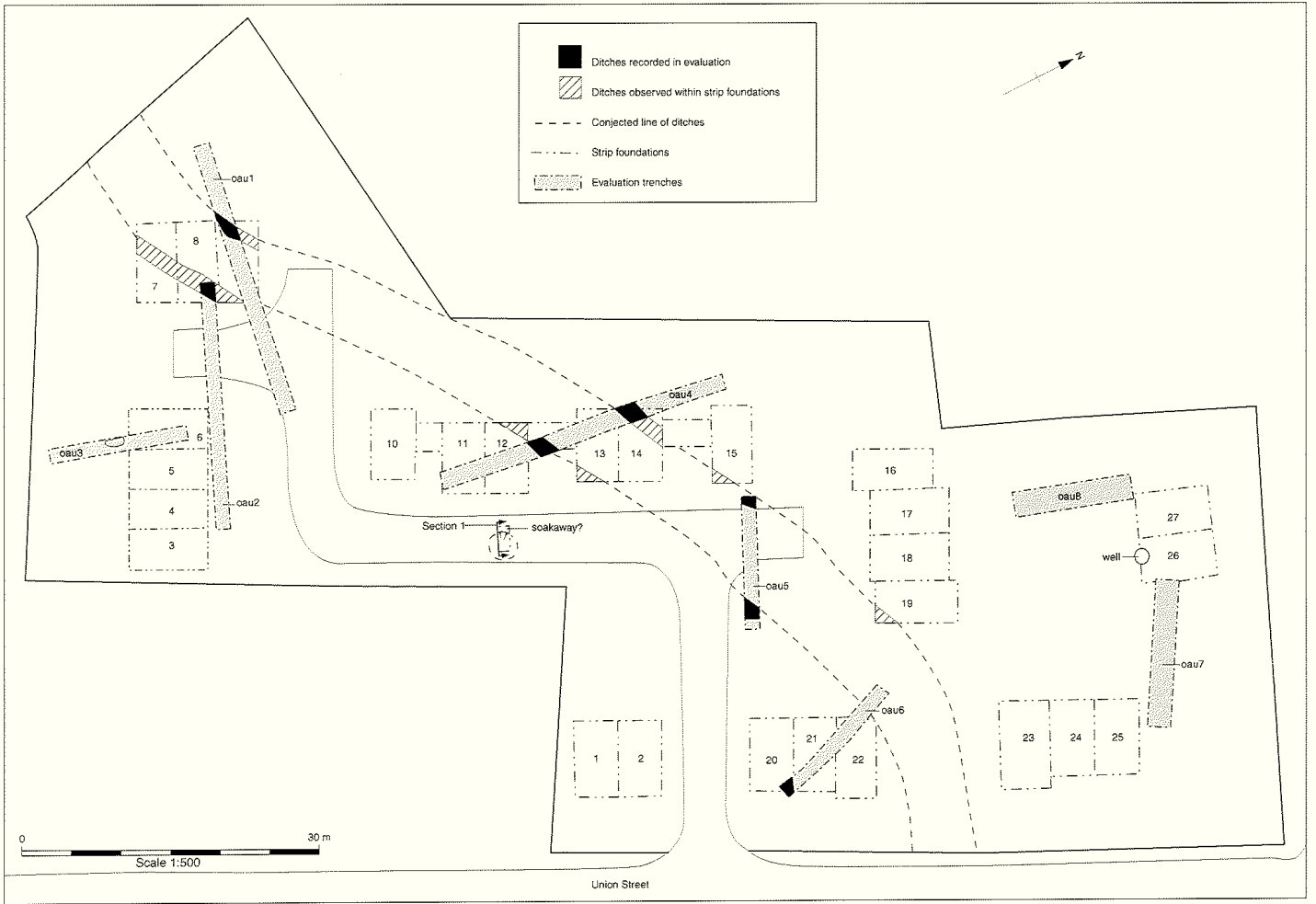


Figure 2: Site Plan.

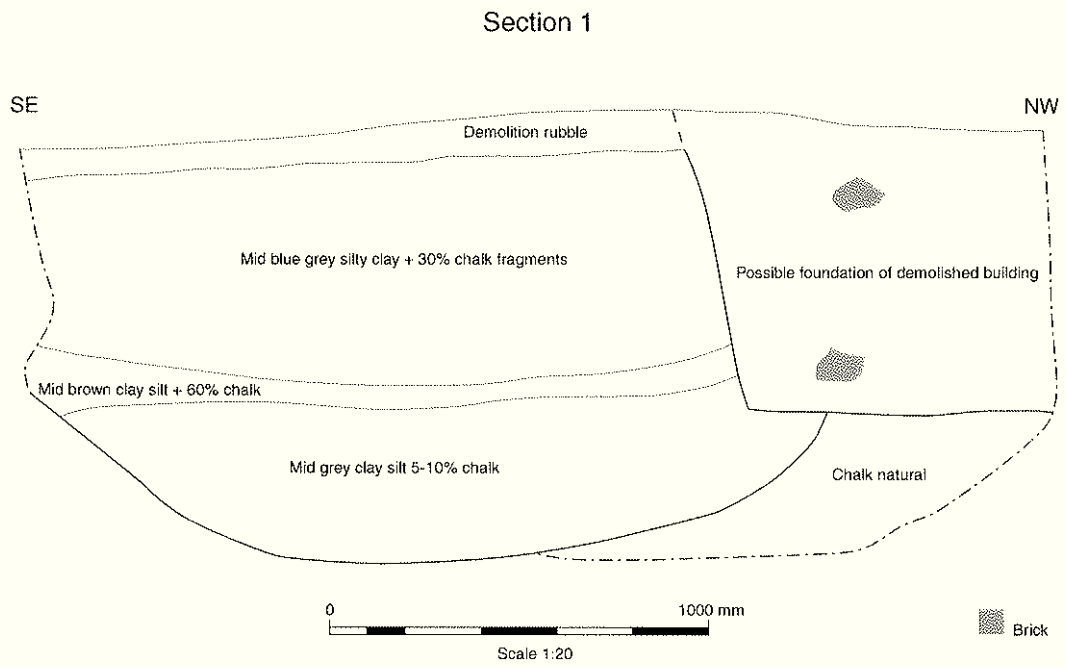


Figure 3 : Section 1



OXFORD ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT

Janus House, Osney Mead, Oxford, OX2 0ES

Tel: 01865 263800 Fax: 01865 793496

email: postmaster@oau-oxford.com www.oau-oxford.com



Director and Chief Executive: David Jennings B.A., M.I.F.A. Oxford Archaeological Unit Limited.
Private Limited Company Number: 1618597 Registered Charity Number: 285627.
Registered Office: Janus House, Osney Mead, Oxford OX2 0ES