

MONGEWELL GRIMS DITCH
EVALUATION, MAY 1987

SUMMARY

1. The evaluation has confirmed the probable existence of a large ditch and the spread remains of a bank representing Grims Ditch. As expected the bank is not well preserved.
2. At least five stratigraphic phases are identifiable, these represent a Prehistoric or Roman field boundary and associated ploughsoils; Grims Ditch itself and evidence of further cultivation; Medieval truncation of Grims Ditch, possibly to create back gardens associated with Mongewell deserted medieval village; cultivation on both sides of Grims Ditch; and 18th century landscape gardening. It is likely that more periods of activity are represented within this sequence.
3. Although the surviving earthwork is badly denuded, enough stratigraphic and dating evidence survive to provide a good chance of dating Grims Ditch more securely, and of elucidating other parts of the sequence, including details and dating of the pre-existing boundary and cultivation traces. It is confirmed that environmental and economic evidence is available from snails, soils, animal bones and possibly charred plant remains. Radiocarbon and magnetic dating methods are likely to be applicable. There is no evidence of waterlogged deposits in the ditches.
4. The stratigraphy, especially the interrelationship of ploughsoils and bank material is complex, and relatively deep deposits survive, considering how very spread the visible earthwork is. If the road scheme proceeds extensive excavations along the affected section of Grims Ditch will be required to

ensure that the full potential of the stratigraphic and dating evidence is realised. At present the results of the evaluation if anything cast doubt on the current dating of Grims Ditch to the Iron Age.

5. Although Grims Ditch remains the most important element, the identification of what may be a back garden on the edge of Mongewell deserted medieval village is an additional complication. The village may well have been bounded by Grims Ditch on the north, in which case the road as presently proposed may have a greater archaeological impact than was formerly suspected between the river crossing and Grims Ditch itself. It is also now clearer that the road line cuts across surviving remains of 18th century landscape gardening including carefully designed paths and woodland walks. Although not of outstanding importance in themselves these add cumulatively to the scheme's impact.
6. Further assessment of the area between the river crossing and Grims Ditch is desirable.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this excavation was to assess the survival of archaeological deposits and their potential for providing useful information where the proposed southern route for the Wallingford By-Pass crosses Grims Ditch.

A 25m. trench was excavated roughly at right-angles to the presumed line of Grims Ditch and extending roughly equally far on either side, cutting the visible bank close to its intersection with the centre line of the proposed road. The topsoil was removed to a width of c. 1.5m. by machine, and a narrower trench c. half this width was then excavated by hand, mainly to natural, though in the northern part of the trench the bottom-most layers were investigated in a narrower slot.

The aims of the evaluation were to establish the following:

1. The extent and survival of archaeological stratigraphy.
2. The complexity and potential significance of the stratigraphic sequence.
3. The potential for environmental archaeology.
4. The density and range of finds and potential for dating the sequence.
5. The implications of the evaluation.

It is important to note that because of the very oblique angle at which the proposed road cuts Grims Ditch a length of c. 65m. is under threat. The evaluation trench represents only just over a 1% sample of the area and should not be taken as necessarily representative of the whole length. As far as possible indications of how conditions may differ east and west of the sample trench have been taken into account, and are set out below, but such variation is not fully predictable.

THE EXTENT AND SURVIVAL OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL STRATIGRAPHY

The earthwork at the point excavated is a low, obviously spread bank, about 18-20m. wide and 0.7m. high. To the west if anything it becomes slightly more prominent but not significantly so; to the east it becomes less pronounced but again not significantly so until c. 30m. from the trench. On the north side there is a marked step in the slope of the bank indicating the former extent of cultivation respecting a boundary along the top of the bank now marked by the northern-most line of large beech trees. There is no superficial sign of a ditch. The beech plantation originally consisted of three rows of trees. It is marked on Davis' map of Oxfordshire of 1797 and the Mongewell tithe map of 1840.

Archaeological deposits were recorded throughout the length of

the trench with between 4 and 8 deposits overlying each other at any one point. Natural subsoil was encountered at c. 45.80m. OD and except where interrupted by later features forms a more or less horizontal surface. The overlying deposits are between 0.5m. and 1.0m. deep, averaging 0.73m., excluding topsoil. Gressed up this would imply that the road would affect something like 805 cubic metres of archaeological deposit within the belt of 'trees' marking the line of Grims Ditch, to which must be added the volume of deposits in features dug into the natural, which was not fully determined by the present work but is estimated to be a further 270 cubic metres.

In the area examined root penetration was obvious but had not caused significant disturbance in terms of destroying the distinctions between deposits. No roots more than c. 10cm. thick were encountered and very few more than 4-5cms. Animal burrows had caused more disturbance, one relatively large ?badger run was found and a smaller burrow had happened to destroy the relationships between some layers on the northern side of the bank, and extended across the full width of the trench. Apart from these two examples, however, this form of disturbance was negligible and is clearly isolated in its occurrence.

THE COMPLEXITY AND POTENTIAL OF THE STRATIGRAPHIC SEQUENCE

Twenty-six separate deposits were identified. They represent ditches, bank deposits, a pit, a stake hole, ploughsoils and dumped soil. Their interrelationships are complex, representing processes of accumulation, disturbance and wholesale removal. It is not possible on the basis of such a small scale excavation to give a definitive interpretation, but very tentatively the following sequence may be put forward:

Phase 1. A very small ditch (F26) with bank (L20-23) on north side. Two phases of upcast indicate cleaning out and enlargement. A ploughsoil (L18) respects this boundary and is stratified between the two phases of bank. The alignment is slightly oblique to the presumed line of Grims Ditch.

Date: uncertain - one doubtfully stratified Roman sherd but otherwise only prehistoric finds.

Phase 2. A large ditch (F13 at south end of trench) with evidence of major bank on its north side. This probably represents Grims Ditch: although it was not possible to establish the profile of the Ditch in full, it is clearly a large feature, at least 3.5m. wide. This certainly extends 1.0m. below the original ground surface, and auguring failed to locate the bottom down to 3.0m. The auguring demonstrated the existence of fairly uniform sandy silts well below the water table.

When the ditch was excavated prior to road widening in 1974, 575m. east of the present trench, it was shown to be cut to 3m. below the original ground surface and would originally have been about 5 or 6m. wide at the top. These figures are entirely consistent with the findings of the limited excavation and auguring of F13 which suggest a very deep feature. There is a hint that it is also wide because medieval layers (L5 + 6) in the top are still dipping towards the middle of the feature at the end of the trench. The other edge of the ditch may well be on the line of the present fence 3m. further south.

The stakehole (F15) on the edge of the ditch could be part of a revetment supported by posts and stakes along the front of the bank. Such a revetment was hypothesised from the nature of the ditch sedimentation in 1974, but clearly this could only be established by further work.

The bank seems to have been largely dug away on the south side (possibly to backfill the ditch) and disturbed by ploughing on the north side (L8, 16, 17). It is not certain whether any of this represents undisturbed bank material or is disturbed by cultivation, but Layers 16 and 17 at least appear to be ploughsoils in which Roman pottery occurred. Although the bank's profile no longer survives it is possible to infer that it was substantial from the amount of additional soil spread by ploughing overlying the original phase of cultivation of the natural soil.

Date: uncertain - since it is unclear whether any of the deposits of this phase represent undisturbed *in situ* bank material, it is uncertain whether Roman sherds from ploughsoil at their base imply a post-Roman date for Grime Ditch or merely Roman and later disturbance of it.

Phase 3. Excavation of south side of bank (?to backfill ditch), digging of pit (F12) and levelling by dumping of dark soil (L9, 5, 6) containing domestic rubbish. These deposits may reflect extension of a back garden across the ditch and up to a boundary along the remains of bank.

Date: Medieval, 12th-13th century, probably associated with Mongewell medieval village which was deserted about the time of the Black Death (mid 14th century).

Phase 4. Ploughing both sides of the bank (L3, 7/1 and 7/2) leaving small unploughed baulk on line of present property boundary.

Date: later medieval and/or post-medieval.

Phase 5. Creation of path (F2) over former line of ditch and plantation of triple row of beech trees including an avenue for the path, south of boundary along top of bank. ?Continued cultivation of north side of bank. This represents part of the landscape gardening associated with

Mongewell House.

Date: by 1797, probably mid to late 18th century.

The most difficult part of this sequence to interpret is Stage 2, the probable creation of Grims Ditch itself. This is because it was not possible to investigate the ditch fully, and because what must have been a large bank has clearly undergone substantial modification, the extent of which is uncertain because of the difficulty of distinguishing in a narrow trench between layers of disturbed soil representing material dumped to make a bank, and further disturbance of such material caused by ploughing. The evidence nevertheless points very strongly to the existence of a very substantial ditch and bank.

THE POTENTIAL FOR ENVIRONMENTAL ARCHEOLOGY

The soils are mainly calcareous except for the original topsoil and its derivatives which tend to be somewhat decalcified. Bone preservation is good. Snail shells survive in the more calcareous soils and in the ditch sediments. The fragmentation of snail shells together with their ecological indications may be important in interpreting the origin and subsequent disturbance of dumped bank material. A sample from soil which formed part of, or was derived from the presumed bank of Grims Ditch (Phase 2) has a snail fauna characteristic of disturbed ground or arable. Although the large ditch of Phase 2 extends below the water-table there was no indication of organic preservation in the augur hole. Terrestrial snail fragments were found in it. Soil micromorphology would elucidate the history of land use. Charcoal flecks in Phase 1 and Phase 3 deposits suggest some potential for other charred plant remains.

THE DENSITY AND POTENTIAL OF FINDS AND OTHER DATING EVIDENCE

The following quantities of finds were recovered:

- 54 pieces of prehistoric flintwork. Of these 8% are implements; 12% utilized flakes; 58% knapping waste; 12% burnt pieces.
- 6 sherds of later prehistoric pottery, probably late Bronze Age or Iron Age.
- 6 sherds of Romano-British pottery.
- 1 possible sherd of Saxon pottery.
- 2 sherds of late Saxon pottery.
- 46 sherds of later 12th century to early 13th century medieval pottery.
- 1 sherd 13th-14th century pottery.
- 1 sherd 17th century pottery.
- 24 sherds of tile.
- 6 nails.
- 1 piece of worked stone, probably post-medieval.

The prehistoric flintwork and pottery and the Roman pottery mainly come from the Phase 1 and 2 ploughsoils with a small amount from later deposits. The density of flints suggests pre-Iron Age domestic activity. The medieval pottery and tile comes from Phase 3 and 4 deposits. The stratigraphic interpretation is not sufficiently clear cut for these to provide clear dating evidence for Grims Ditch on the basis of the trial assessment alone. It is clear however that sufficient artifacts are present to assist such dating, if substantially larger areas were uncovered. The medieval pottery is sufficient to provide evidence that the change from Phases 3 to 4, when it appears that a back garden may have been taken into arable fields, may have happened 100 years or so before the village at Mongewell is recorded to have been shrinking.

Other methods of dating, using special scientific techniques

may well also be viable. The large Phase 2 ditch contains fine sediments which may be suitable for magnetic dating, and small quantities of charcoal occur in some of the earliest deposits and could be used for radiocarbon dating if more concentrated patches were found. The quantity of prehistoric pottery and flintwork is sufficient to suggest some domestic activity nearby for which more evidence might well be found in a larger excavation. If so, bones might also be available for C14 dating from the earliest phases.

THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE EVALUATION

The stratigraphy revealed by the evaluation trench is more complex than had been expected from the very low profile of the standing earthwork. The deposits either side of the bank are also deeper than expected.

Starting from the top down, the discovery of the path associated with the beech avenue shows that the beech plantation was not just a shelter belt or landscape feature, but an integral part of the pleasure grounds of Mongewell House. Other aspects of this survive in the high bank (possibly a raised walk or parallel raised and sunken walks?) alongside the paved path running north from Mongewell House. It should be noted that the Ridgeway Path runs exactly parallel to these original features, although both stretches are now overgrown and their precise lines are not followed. The beech avenue has suffered from trees dying back and falling, a process which is clearly continuing. The 18th century layout respects pre-existing features. The proposed road cuts across these.

There is now evidence that the road line may also be very close to, and possibly truncating the edge of part of the Mongewell deserted village. The extent of the village has never fully been established, and has in the past been assumed to be largely in the area of Mongewell House. It now seems possible that part of the

village may be under the field immediately south of Grims Ditch, and north of the lake (originally a millpond). Close to Grims Ditch at least, it would seem that only the back gardens of some village houses may be affected, but there is still no direct evidence of where the medieval houses stood or how many of them might have backed onto Grims Ditch. An intact ball of soil uprooted by a fallen tree suggests that similar stratigraphy to that excavated exists 18m. east of the trench within the south side of the plantation. 50m. west and outside it there is no obvious medieval material uprooted with other fallen beeches, but this may be misleading.

There is evidence of a substantial ditch and a large bank substantially denuded by various episodes of ploughing and also by deliberate levelling in relation to the medieval back garden thought to be represented in Phase 3. There is clear evidence that at this particular point medieval interference has already destroyed the relationship between the ditch and its bank. The picture is further complicated by the sequence of ploughsoils on the north side of the bank, and by the earlier field boundary apparently running at a slightly oblique angle to the line of Grims Ditch. It is likely however that these factors will vary along the relatively long stretch of ground affected by the proposed road: more *in situ* bank may be preserved where it is not overlying the earlier boundary as the two diverge; and the degree of medieval disturbance may vary considerably if, as suspected, it is reflecting activity at the back of individual plots.

The field boundary and ploughsoil representing the first stratigraphic phase in the recorded sequence is of interest because very few prehistoric and Roman fields and their boundaries in the Thames Valley have survived later agricultural disturbance. In this case it is likely that a reasonable length of one boundary survives and that cross-divisions between fields may also be represented within the length of the area affected.

The proposed road line thus affects the physical remains of

several periods of human activity, two of which (the construction of Grims Ditch and the 18th century landscaping) have left visible features in the landscape. Although relatively poorly preserved here, Grims Ditch is a monument of National importance, and it is clear that archaeologically valuable remains still survive. The other elements in the sequence are of regional or local importance and add to the site's archaeological value.

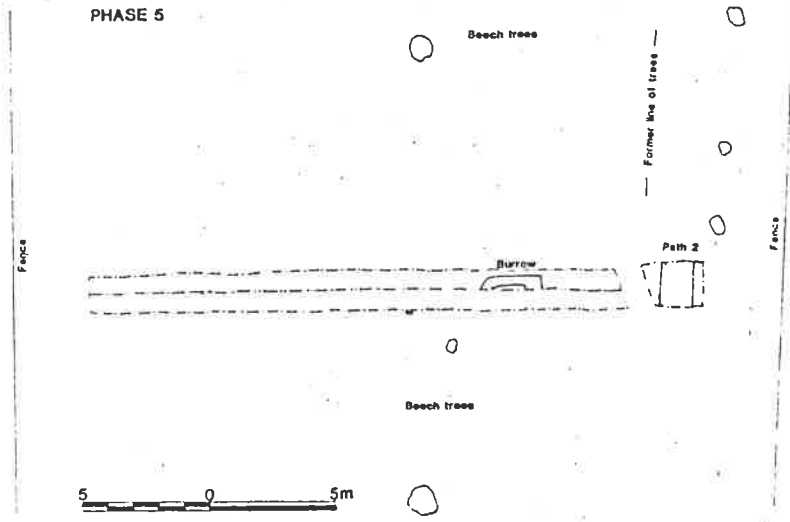
If the road does proceed on the line planned, an excavation will certainly be required. It would not be necessary to excavate totally the whole area within the trees, but it is clear that enough stratigraphy and dating evidence survives to warrant sufficient investigation to understand the sequence and date it firmly. It is evident from the complexity of the stratigraphy and the definite but relatively thin scatter of pottery from the earlier deposits, that at least in critical areas extensive excavation will be required to achieve these objectives. It may well be possible to deal with much of the medieval stratigraphy on the basis of sampling. It will be necessary to fully excavate wide strips across the full width of the road at several points along the stretch of Grims Ditch affected to ensure that the stratigraphic sequence is properly understood. Between such areas more selective excavation would be possible away from the bank itself, but the bank should if possible be fully excavated to ensure recovery of the best stratified material from beneath or within it. At present the evaluation has if anything cast doubt on the dating of Grims Ditch rather than confirming it.

The field south of the evaluation trench, especially its north-west corner, together with the field next to the river should be assessed before the route is finally settled, to establish whether evidence of medieval and any possible prehistoric settlement is likely to be affected.

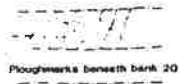
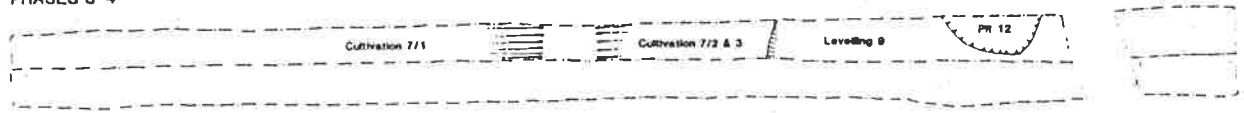
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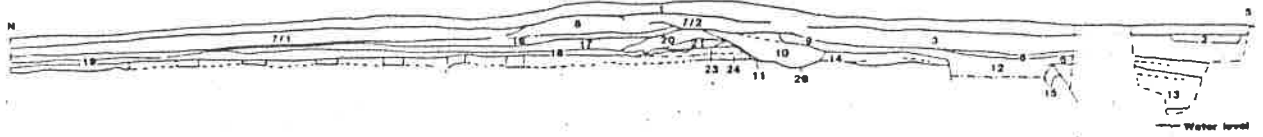
PHASE 5



PHASES 3-4



PHASES 1-2



- NATURAL TOPSOIL
- BURROW
- ▨ PHASE 1
- ▧ PHASE 2
- ▩ PHASE 3
- ▦ PHASE 4
- ▤ PHASE 5



Mongewell: preliminary archaeological assessment of proposed Wallingford by-pass route on east bank of the river (SU 609 881; Field No. 0005).

Two trenches were excavated, one close to the eastern edge of the field (I), the other (II) on the top of a pronounced scarp above the narrow strip of low-lying floodplain next to the river.

The eastern trench (I) revealed a build-up of ploughsoils up to 75cm deep (L2) overlying the very thin remnants of original soil cover in places. No archeological features were detected.

The western trench (II) on the slope above the scarp running parallel to the river similarly revealed a build-up of ploughwash (L2) which became thicker towards the river (up to 0.85m thick). Part of the pronounced scarp may thus be attributable to ploughwash.

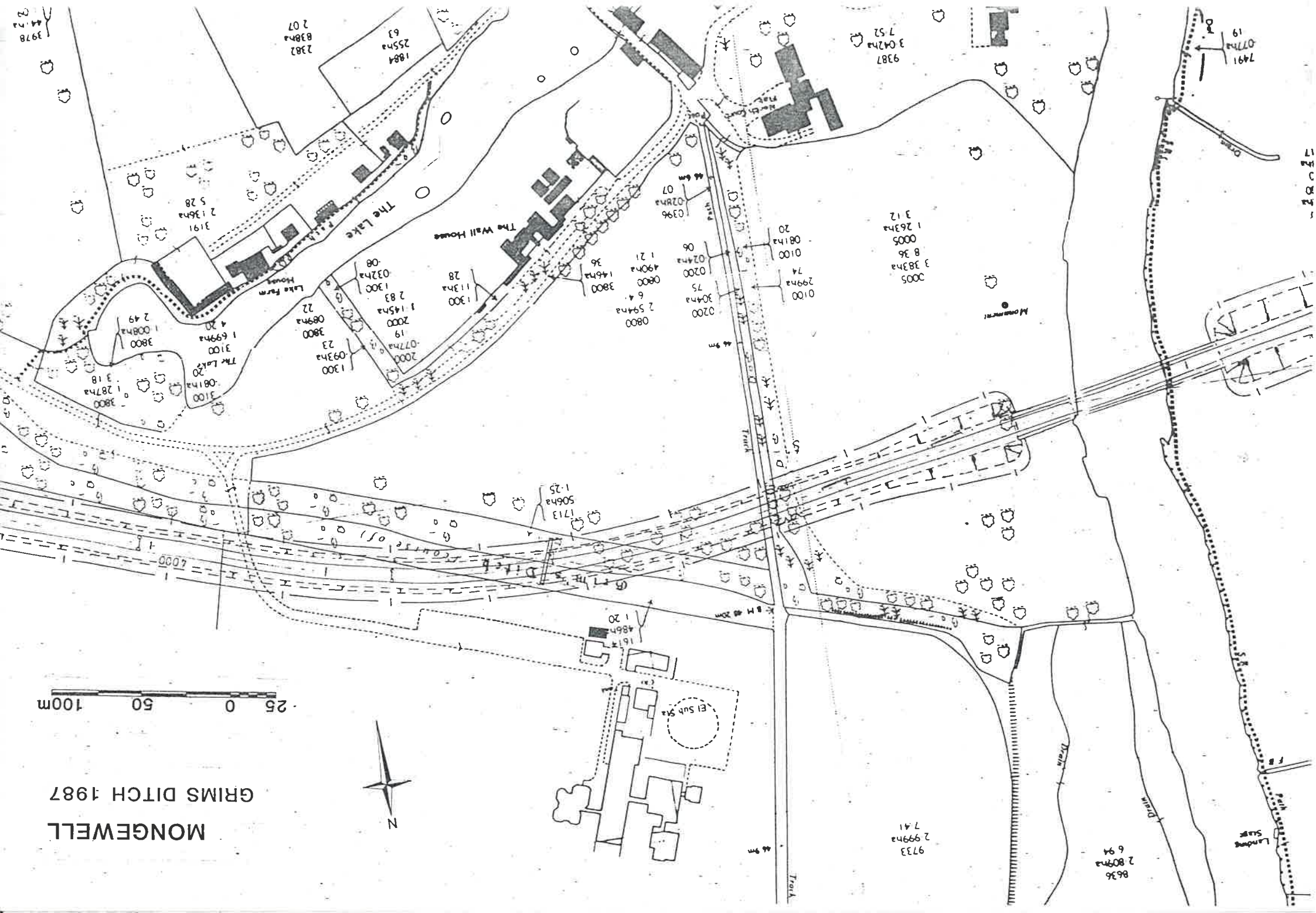
Beneath L2 at the west end of the trench was a silty loam layer, greyish in colour and containing burnt flint, animal bones and a fairly sparse amount of flint tempered late Bronze Age pottery similar to that from the opposite bank of the river. A neolithic leaf shaped arrowhead and two flint blades are evidence of an earlier presence.

Layer 3 was more or less indistinguishable from the fill of a ditch (F5) which terminated within the trench and ran at a very oblique angle to its line. Beneath its fill to the east was a sandy loam (L8) over more orange sandy subsoil (L9) overlying the gravel. To the west the ditch cut a layer of yellow clay (L4) which became thicker towards the river. It was devoid of finds and may represent alluvium (which seems surprising at this height which is well above the level of the floodplain of the present river) or dumped fluvial clay. It is not derived from the natural subsoil since it overlay a very dark brown loamy natural soil horizon (L6) on the surface of the gravel.

The evidence of prehistoric occupation including man-made features (represented by Ditch 5) indicates the existence of a definite site. The pottery suggests that it is contemporary with the important late Bronze Age settlement on the opposite bank of the river. The presence of occupation material in a layer surviving beneath later ploughwash and not obviously truncated severely by cultivation, suggests relatively good preservation. The present assessment which was entirely exploratory (there being no prior evidence of archaeological features) was designed only to establish the presence or absence of archaeological features. It was not possible to establish in more detail the full extent of the site, nor its relationship to the deposits on the floodplain immediately adjacent. The narrow band of floodplain on this side of the river is lower lying than the west bank, and may represent a buried river channel, which could be directly related to this site. The potential importance of the site is greatly enhanced by its probable contemporaneity with the late Bronze Age settlement on the island now buried in the opposite bank of the river here. Together the two could represent an important crossing-point of the river and/or a settlement connected with the control of river navigation and the exchange of prestige goods. The present work has thus identified a prehistoric site with clear potential whose extent, nature and quality of preservation needs further evaluation in order that the archaeological impact of this part of the proposed road can be assessed.

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25 0 50 100m



Mongewell 1988

Trench II

