

Mesolithic Trial Pit Evaluation Park Way Newbury



Archaeological Evaluation Report


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Mesolithic Trial Pit Evaluation, Park Way, Newbury

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Site plan with palaeotopographical background
Representative Section 1030 Trial Pit 3

SUMMARY

Oxford Archaeology undertook a trial pit evaluation within the current excavation areas at Park Way, Newbury to establish the potential for Mesolithic remains within the boundary of the redevelopment area. No significant artefactual remains were encountered and a palaeotopographical model of the potential Mesolithic land surface suggests that much of the site lies below that which would have been suitable for occupation within the early Mesolithic period.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Location and scope of work

1.1.1 As part of the ongoing archaeological mitigation preceding the redevelopment of Park Way, Newbury, Oxford Archaeology (OA) undertook an evaluation to assess the Mesolithic potential within the current excavation areas.

1.2 Geology and topography

1.2.1 The development site lies *c* 130 m to the north of the River Kennet and is bounded by Northbrook Street to the west, Park Way to the east, and Park Street to the north and is centred on SU 471673.

1.2.2 The geology map shows the underlying geology as alluvium which lies approximately 1 m below the modern ground level and has an average thickness of 1 m. The waterlogged nature of the ground near the river to the south has produced layers of peat in many areas and this has been confirmed as extending across the site by the previous evaluation (OA 2005). The peat deposits lie between *c* 1-2.3m below the ground surface and is up to 2 m thick. The peat seals Pleistocene Gravel deposits overlying the solid geology of the Reading Beds and Chalk.

1.3 Archaeological and historical background

1.3.1 The detailed background to the archaeological investigation has been previously stated in the desk-based assessment and 2005 evaluation and these should be consulted for detail.

1.3.2 The Mesolithic potential for the site and surrounding area is considered as very high due to the numerous sites exhibiting *in situ* flint scatter preservation that have been identified along the Kennet Valley. Those centred upon the Newbury and Thatcham area date from the Upper Palaeolithic and Early Mesolithic periods and are sealed below a sequence of peat and alluvial deposits that have preserved the early post-glacial horizons in an unusually excellent state. The quality of preservation of these horizons warrants the status of national importance for this period within the area.

1.3.3 The Mesolithic potential of the site has been assessed on two prior occasions utilising different methods. In the first instance a series of samples were taken from

the surface of the gravel deposits during the 2005 evaluation by OA and sorted for flint artefacts. Due to the depth below the modern ground surface and limited physical space of the trenches, these samples were recovered by machine and had limited precise archaeological control. No artefacts were recovered from these samples.

- 1.3.4 As part of the Borehole Geotechnical Investigation (Cundall August 2007) OA also retained grab samples from measured depths at each location. These were sorted to recover artefacts and numerous small 'struck' flints were recovered. The provenance of these flints was not certain due to the recovery manner and many appear to be the result of 'smashing' during the cable percussion method of recovery rather than actual Mesolithic artefacts.

2 EVALUATION AIMS

- 2.1.1 The primary aim was to establish the presence or absence of Mesolithic deposits and artefacts under controlled archaeological conditions. Without the presence of associated artefacts or scientific dating techniques, the presence of Mesolithic deposits can only be assessed through the recorded soil sequence. However, this is critical in the overall assessment for the potential of the site if artefact remains are absent.
- 2.1.2 The trial pit evaluation also aimed to map the palaeotopography of the gravel surface to aid the interpretation of the Mesolithic potential.

3 EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

3.1 Scope of fieldwork

- 3.1.1 The evaluation comprised eight trial pits each measuring 1 m by 1 m in plan and excavated to the necessary depth to encounter the surface of the gravel deposits underlying the peat sequence. Four pits were excavated within Area 1000, one in Area 2000, two in Area 3000 and one in Trench 103 (see site plan illustration).

3.2 Fieldwork methods and recording

- 3.2.1 The trial pits were hand excavated and samples retrieved from each deposit throughout the sequence for the recovery of artefacts. Sections were recorded from each trial pit in detail by a qualified geoarchaeologist.

4 RESULTS

4.1 Sequence of deposits

- 4.1.1 A broadly consistent sequence of deposits was recorded throughout the trial pits. This is represented within this report by section 1030 and the associated context numbers for reference. Pleistocene gravels (1237) were encountered at the base of

each pit. Above this a diffuse gravel and peat contact horizon was recorded which is believed to represent the early Mesolithic horizon (1236). Within Area 1000 the 'Mesolithic' layer was sealed by distinct tufa deposits providing clear evidence that this had become inundated at an early stage by slow-moving low energy water. This was interspersed with thin peat deposits reflecting fluctuating water levels and marshy conditions (1235 and 1234). Thicker peat deposits interspersed with thin tufa deposits continued the sequence (1233 to 1229) before the tufa deposits diminish in frequency and dense peat deposits continue to accumulate (1228 to 1225) through to the medieval horizon. The upper sequence (not covered in this report or section illustration) comprises reclamation deposits to raise the ground level before being replaced by garden soils directly below the various modern hard surfaces.

4.2 Palaeotopographical model

- 4.2.1 The surface heights of the Pleistocene gravel have been collated from each of the available sources of investigation (boreholes and evaluations). These have been plotted into Rockworks software to produce a contour map of the potential Mesolithic ground levels. The site plan illustration shows this as a background to the Ordnance Survey outline with a colour variation from blue to green representing relative low to high ground. All stated heights are in relation to m OD.
- 4.2.2 It should be noted that the palaeotopographical plan is limited by the available height data and the distribution of the points affect the final model. However, a reasonable coverage has been provided by the current data and this suggests a variation of contours that would indicate high and low ground within the probable early Mesolithic landscape. A broad pattern is visible with the lowest contours of 71.70 m through to 72.20 m present along the eastern part of the site with a further low-lying area in the extreme northwest corner.
- 4.2.3 Higher ground is concentrated around the central west portion of the site from 72.50 m to a high point of 74.72 m recorded for the location of the 2005 evaluation Trench 3.

4.3 Finds

- 4.3.1 Each potential Mesolithic deposit was bulk sampled and the resulting residues were sorted to 2mm for worked flint artefacts (Table 1). A scan of the bulk residues and a more detailed analysis of the sorted items has revealed these to be almost entirely of natural origin. The vast majority comprises rolled and battered nodule fragments. Within this is a significant number of items resembling microdebitage/shatter and some of this may be real although it is impossible to be totally certain. However, the assemblage lacks classic elements such as regular flakes, identifiable tools, blades or cores, but there are three pieces that are arguably genuine examples of struck flint. These consist of an inner flake from context 1049 and a slightly rolled secondary flake and a possible snapped/failed blade-like form from context 1224. None of those are diagnostic or indeed typical of the Early Mesolithic period. The lack of

recognisable larger items amongst the potential micro debitage strongly points to the latter being entirely of natural origin. This view is further strengthened by the rolled and chipped appearance around the edges of the 'micro debitage' items.

Table 1

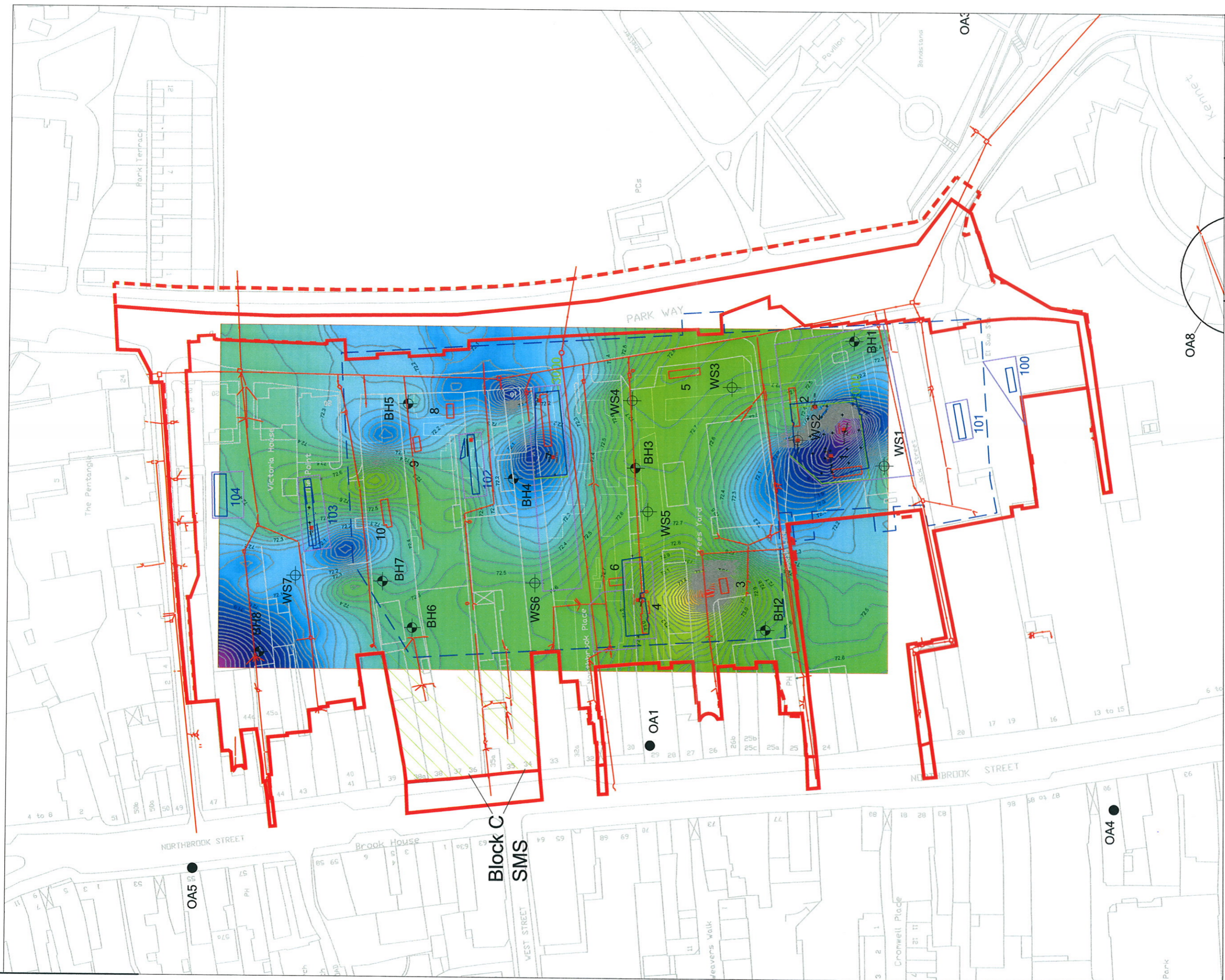
Area	Trial Pit	Mesolithic Soil Context No.	Section No.	Sample No.	Flint
1000	1	1049	1006	1011	a single inner flake, some possible microdebitage and some burnt natural flint
1000	2	1224	1029	1029 1030 1031	single snapped bladelet, a rolled secondary flake, and some possible microdebitage
1000	3	1236	1030	1042	some possible microdebitage, 8 pieces of burnt natural flint
1000	4	1247 1248	1033a	1045 1046	
2000	5	2068	2011	2010	some possible microdebitage
3000	6	3145 3146	3134	3094	
3000	7	3134 3135	3033	3092 3093	
Trench 103	8	5016 5017	5004 5005	5004 5005	

5 DISCUSSION AND INTERPRETATION


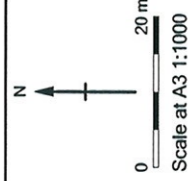
5.1.1 The trial pit evaluation has produced negative artefact results for each location sampled. This is in concurrence with the 2005 evaluation results suggesting, at the very most, limited Mesolithic activity within the boundaries of the development area. The current results have also confirmed that the small spall-like flakes recorded in quantity from the Borehole samples are of natural origin resulting from the rolling and bashing of larger flint nodules.

5.1.2 The artefact results should be viewed alongside the palaeotopographical model evidence and against the surrounding known sites to fully understand the potential for a Mesolithic presence within the site boundary. Other sites along the Kennet Valley have shown that the significant flint remains can be concentrated and localised. These can exist as very dense artefact scatters such as at Faraday Road c. 500 m to the east of Park Way where over 2030 flint artefacts and over 2000 animal bone fragments were recovered from an excavation area less than 10 m by 15 m. It should also be noted that very limited or negative results can result from areas only short distances from the core of such dense scatters meaning that the current results from small trial pits do not necessarily exclude the possibility of remains existing close by.

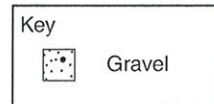
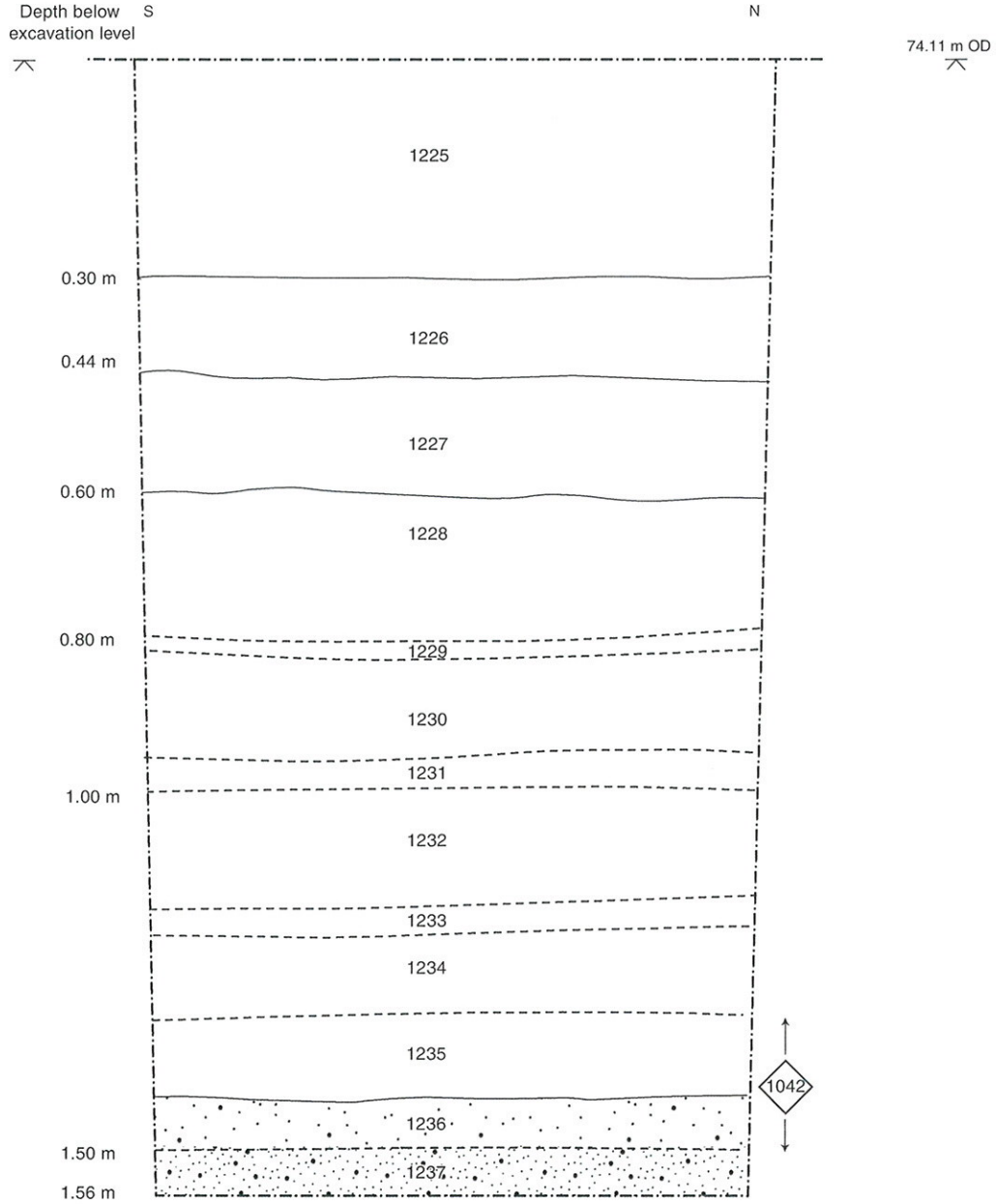
- 5.1.3 The palaeotopographical model, however, tends to support the artefact representation suggesting that much of the development area lies below the level expected to be suitable for Mesolithic occupation. At Faraday Road, the closest and most significant comparison site, the Mesolithic land surface and artefact assemblages were recorded at between 73.30 and 73.50 m overlying earlier channel silts. The eastern and northern portion of the Park Way development lies c. 1 m below this level and the recorded soil sequence appears to confirm that this was inundated at an early stage with tufa and marls overlying the gravel surface and interspersed with peat deposits. This suggests that this area was too wet and low lying to be suitable for either home, temporary or hunting camps during the early Mesolithic period.
- 5.1.4 The tufa and marl deposits recorded within Areas 1000 were absent from the trial pit excavated within Area 2000 suggesting that this was not subject to the early low energy water inundation. The data from evaluation Trenches 3, 4 and 6 and Trial Pit 5 define an area of high ground between 72.70 m and 74.72 m suggesting that the habitats with the suitable potential for activity are most likely to exist within this part of the site. However, an oxidised soil horizon comparable to that of the Mesolithic soil recorded at Faraday Road was not encountered at any point within the trial pits further limiting the likelihood for significant remains to be present.



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Section 1030





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