

The Really Good Card Company

Land at Osney Mead Industrial  
Estate, Oxford

NGR SP 5040 0555

Archaeological Evaluation Report



The Really Good Card Company/Knowles and Son Ltd

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Date: 7/4/2000

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Date: 11 /4/2000

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HEAD OF FIELDWORK

Date: *12/4/2000*



## *Summary*

*The Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) undertook a field evaluation at land at Osney Mead Industrial Estate in March 2000. The work was undertaken in advance of new development for the Really Good Card Company on a derelict plot adjacent to the Bulstake Stream. The OAU were commissioned to do the work by Knowles and Son Design and Build Ltd. Three evaluation trenches were opened in the course of the work. No archaeological features were identified in any of the trenches; several features cut into the gravel were interpreted as tree disturbances.*

*The evaluation demonstrated the presence on the site of low lying gravel 'islands', bypassed by a relict watercourse filled with alluvial silts. Above the natural gravel in all three trenches were a series of alluvial clay layers that represent episodes of flooding on this low-level site. No artefactual evidence was recovered from the excavated alluvial silt deposits.*

*A possible plough/meadow soil horizon was identified above the alluvium that might represent the meadow depicted on the historic maps of the Osney Mead area; the soil horizon was, however, undated. Above lay a series of modern build-up layers that were deposited at the time the site was turned into a business estate, in the 20th century.*

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**1 Introduction**

Permission has been obtained from Oxford City Council to develop disused land at Osney Mead Industrial Estate, Oxford (Fig.1). A new building is to be constructed on the site for 'the Really Good Card Company'. Oxford City Council Planning, through the Oxford Archaeological Advisory Service (OAAS), requested that the site be archaeologically evaluated prior to redevelopment, owing to the presence of known archaeological find spots and sites within the immediate vicinity. On the advice of the OAAS and with reference to a desk-based study (Oxford Archaeological Unit, February 2000), a Written Scheme of Investigation (WSI) was prepared detailing how OAU would undertake the fieldwork at the site. Knowles and Son (Oxford) Ltd, acting on behalf of the Really Good Card Company, commissioned OAU to undertake the evaluation, which was carried out in March 2000.

**2 Site location, Geology and Topography**

The site is located in the south-east part of Osney Mead Industrial Estate (Fig. 1), within the ancient parish of St. Thomas. It is bounded to the south by Bulstake Stream, a branch of the River Thames or Isis. The site covers an area of c 1 ha. and lies at c 56 m OD. The underlying geology is River Thames Alluvium overlying river terrace gravels, beneath which lies the Oxford Clay. At the time of the evaluation the site was level and waste ground.

**3 Background**

The development site is located to the west of the medieval town of Oxford, adjacent to one of the numerous tributaries of the River Thames that extend south-eastward through Oxford. A desk-based study of the area was undertaken by OAU prior to the fieldwork, which concluded that within 100 m of the development site were several archaeological sites (Archaeological Desk based Assessment, OAU, February 2000). These included sites of Neolithic date (PRN3636), Iron Age (PRN6133), Roman (PRN3574), Saxon (PRN6125), while the site of the medieval abbey at Osney is situated to the north-east of the development area.

**3.1 Prehistoric**

A flint blade of Palaeolithic date has been found at Osney Lock to the north of the development area. Areas of Bronze Age settlement preserved beneath alluvium have been recorded from cropmarks and excavations at Port Meadow, Oxford while at the University Parks a linear barrow cemetery has been identified. A 'Beaker' period

settlement has been discovered at the Hamel, some 700 m to the north-east. The closest collection of Bronze Age material was recovered from the Minster Ditch in 1895-8; the ditch is c 200 m west of the development area. A prehistoric trackway, possibly as early as Bronze in date, crossed the Thames at North Hinksey ford and led to Banbury.

### **3.2 Iron Age**

Three farmsteads of middle Iron Age date are known on Port Meadow, and enclosures of Iron Age date have been found at University Parks. Part of a middle Iron Age settlement was discovered at Oxford City Football ground, formerly situated 900 m south-east of the development area.

### **3.2 Roman and Saxon**

Coins and pottery of Roman date were found at Osney Mill in 1897. The medieval causeway south-west of the development may have its origins in the Roman period. Roman activity tends to be concentrated to the north of Oxford and to the east of the city. An Anglo-Saxon 'buckle-urn' of 5th century date has been recovered from the area of Osney Abbey and North Hinksey is thought to have Saxon origins. Saxon spearheads were recovered from the Minster Ditch in the 19th century.

### **3.3 Medieval**

The main settlement of the parish of St Thomas in the medieval period was Osney Island, which included the Hamel and formed the west suburb of the medieval city. Osney Mill which lies to the north of the development area is the only remaining building of Osney Abbey (SAM 79), an Augustinian Priory that was elevated to abbey status in 1154. The land west of the abbey was meadows and low-lying marsh, and remained so through to the post-medieval period, when came the development of the industrial estate in the 20th century.

## **4 Aims**

The original project aims were outlined in the project WSI and are summarised below:

- To establish the presence or absence of archaeological remains within the proposed development area.
- To determine the extent, condition, nature, character, quality and date of any archaeological remains present.
- To establish the ecofactual and environmental potential of archaeological deposits and features.
- To make available the results of the investigation in the form of a written report.

## **5 Strategy**

The original proposal for the evaluation was to open a maximum of three trenches, the last of which would be dependent on the ground conditions and archaeological potential of the first two trenches. In the event the third trench was positioned at a

right angle to the east end of Trench 1 (Fig. 2), rather than adjacent to Bulstake Stream as originally agreed with the developer and OAAS. The three trenches were excavated using a JCB mechanical excavator equipped with a toothless ditching bucket. Excavation proceeded by machine down to the level of the first significant archaeological horizon or the natural gravel, whichever proved to be the higher level.

Features and deposits were inspected, and where necessary were manually cleaned and recorded in accordance with standard OAU procedures (OAU, 1992). Section drawings were made at a scale of 1:20 at selected points along the trenches, and overall plans of the trenches were drawn at scales of 1:50. All deposits, structures and features were assigned unique context numbers and records made on *pro forma* context sheets. Black and white and colour photographs were taken. All of this information can be found in the project archive, held by the Oxfordshire Museums Service.

The water table was reached within all three trenches owing to the proximity of the site to Bulstake stream. Water pumps were used to remove surplus water from the Trenches, with water directed away from the trenches, while excavation and recording were in progress. Temporary baulks were also employed within the trenches to control the water.

## 6 Results

### *Trench 1* (Fig. 3)

This trench was located at the north-east corner of the development site, to the west of the present course of the Bulstake Stream (Fig. 2). The Trench measured 30 m x 1.6 m at the base, and reached a maximum depth of 2.8 m at the west end, shallowing to the east. The Trench width was widened at the top to allow the sides of the Trench to be 'stepped' to a distance of 1.2 m on each side. This was in order that excavation could proceed safely down to the predicted level of the natural gravel.

At the base of the trench two irregular shaped features were cut into the gravel. Features 113 (filled by clay silt 114) and 117 (filled by clay silt 118) were interpreted as tree throw holes. These were located in a perceptible rise in the gravel to the east, which probably represents a raised gravel 'island'.

A series of superimposed layers of alluvial clay formed the sequence at the base of the trench (Fig. 3). These layers (101 beneath 102, then 103, 119, 104, 112 and lastly 105) were generally light grey-to grey brown silty clays, with a maximum combined thickness of 0.9 m. The alluvial layers at the west end of the trench were of greater depth and were interpreted as filling in the course of a relict stream channel (Fig. 3), presumably either a precursor to the present stream to the south, or a divergent channel from it. The full width of the relict channel was not established within the confines of the trench. The alluvial deposits were devoid of archaeological features and artefactual material and were excavated in spits down to the natural gravel deposits.

At the level of alluvial layer 105 was a slightly compacted dark grey-brown clay loam (106) containing charcoal flecks, generally 0.25 m in thickness, that may represent the

previous plough or meadow soil of the site. No artefacts were recovered from the layer, which extended fully along the length of the trench. At the level of 106 was a cut feature (115 filled by 116), which represented a modern drain. Above the level of the drain backfill (116) were a series of superimposed 'dumped' layers of sand and hardcore (107, 108, followed by 109, 110 and lastly 111) that represent raising and levelling of the ground prior to its use as an industrial site.

### **Trench 2** (Fig. 3)

This Trench was located at the west side of the site (Fig. 2). The trench measured 15 m by 1.6 m at the base, and was also stepped in order to allow safe access to the base; the trench was a maximum of 2.7 m deep. The deposits located in this trench were of similar nature to those found within Trench 1.

At the base of the trench the natural gravel was overlain by a layer of alluvial clay (210) that was sealed beneath a dark grey-near black deposit of humic clay silt (209) containing organic material (Fig. 3). The layer was 0.25 m thick and is interpreted as a former reed bed, located on a corresponding rise in the gravel to the side of a relict watercourse to the west; this was probably a continuation to the south-west of the watercourse revealed in Trench 1.

The organic/peat layer was overlain by a layer of alluvial clay (211), between 0.18 - 0.2 m thick, that extended for a length of 2.2 m and had compacted and preserved the reed bed *in situ* (Fig. 4). This deposit was overlain by three superimposed silt clay alluvial deposits (201, 202, then 203), none of which contained finds or evidence of archaeological activity. A layer of 'made-ground' including building debris, sand and stone (204) overlay the uppermost alluvial deposit (203). Three further make-up layers (206, 207 and lastly 208) completed the layer sequence in Trench 2

### **Trench 3** (Fig. 4)

This trench was aligned north-south and was positioned at the east end of Trench 1, forming a broken 'L'-shaped area of investigation (Fig. 2). This Trench was designed to further elucidate the nature of the gravel 'island' located at the eastern end of Trench 1.

This gravel island was again identified at the south end of Trench 2; the gravel profile sloped to the north and also eastward toward Bulstake Stream. Above the gravel (318) lay a mixed gravel and clay layer (317) that formed the lower surface of the gravel island. Above had formed a series of alluvial clay layers (316, 319, then 315 and 313=314). At the level of 313=314 were two irregular cut features. Feature 309 (filled by clay silt 310) was interpreted as an animal burrow, and feature 311 (filled by clay silt 312) was interpreted as a tree throw hole. Neither feature fill contained finds.

Above the fills of these features was a layer of sandy gravel (308), above which was a slightly compacted dark grey-brown clay loam (307) containing charcoal flecks, generally 0.25 m in thickness, that is probably the same plough/meadow soil recorded in Trench 1. Above 307 was a series of six modern make-up deposits comprising sand, stone, brick and general industrial debris similar in nature to that found in



Trench 1. No archaeological features were found within Trench 3, and no finds were recovered.

## 7 The Finds

No finds were recovered from any of the trenches although it was noted that the make-up deposits appeared to be of recent 20th century date; the modern finds (bricks etc) were not retained for further analysis.

## 8 Conclusions

Trench 1 showed evidence of a watercourse running on an approximate north-south alignment with a raised gravel island located on its east side. This corresponded with the evidence recovered from Trench 2, where a similarly aligned watercourse was identified. It is possible, even likely that the two exposed sections of channel were part of the same feature.

The gravel island in Trench 1 had two tree-throw holes cut into the gravel. The corresponding gravel island identified in Trench 2 had what appeared to be a compressed layer of reeds, suggesting that although quite waterlogged, these areas could have been capable of containing archaeological evidence.

The watercourse was part of the Bulstake Stream, and whether it was a diverging fork of the stream or a split in the course where a meander had formed to rejoin the original stream elsewhere, is uncertain. It seems more than likely that this course represents a brief split in the Bulstake course, with two channels then flowing around a raised gravel island (identified in all three trenches). This gravel island was evidently capable of sustaining of vegetation, with a wetter level to the south (in Trench 2) containing reed beds where the river splits into two channels, and larger vegetation (small trees represented by the tree holes) to the north, as seen in Trench 1. The overlying alluvial deposits indicate a slow moving Riverine environment depositing thick layers of silty clay over the gravel and filling up the relict channel over several seasons. It is due to this and seasonal flooding activity that the diverging channel located on site eventually completely silted up, to leave a single channel.

Trench 3 was excavated to reveal more of the gravel island found at the eastern end of Trench 1. The information gained from this trench was limited but it did show that the gravel sloped away again towards the present course of the Bulstake Stream supporting the interpretation that this was a central raised gravel island between two courses of the same river, and that it was also susceptible to seasonal flooding and therefore heavy silting.

Although no evidence of human activity on this site was found, it remains possible that prehistoric activity on the gravel islands could be preserved beneath the alluvium.

Dave Thomason  
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April 2000

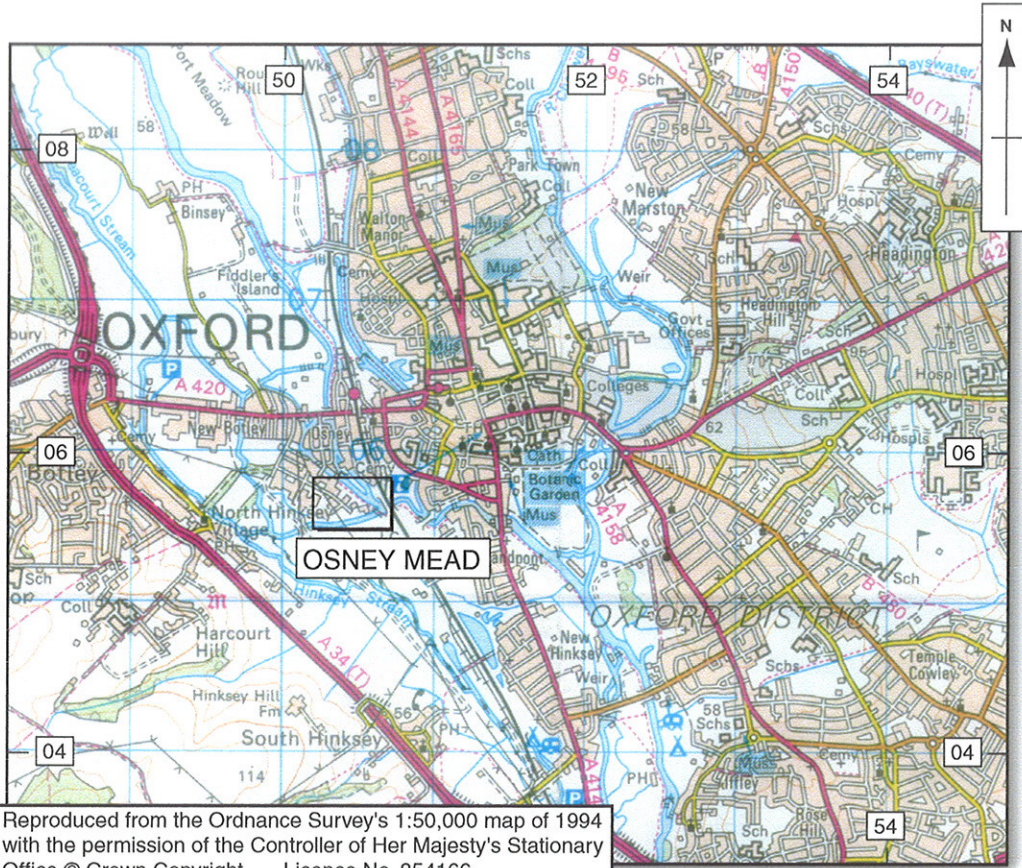
**Appendix: Table of context information**

Trench	Context	Type	Depth (m)	Width (m)	Comments
1	100	Layer	-	-	Natural gravel
1	101	Layer	0.34	>1.6	Alluvium
1	102	Layer	0.32	>1.6	Alluvium
1	103	Layer	0.46	>1.6	Alluvium
1	104	Layer	0.08	>1.6	Alluvium
1	105	Layer	0.1	>1.6	Alluvium
1	106	Layer	0.18	>1.6	Old top soil
1	107	Layer	0.22	>1.6	Make-up
1	108	Layer	0.38	>1.6	Make-up
1	109	Layer	0.3	>1.6	Make-up
1	110	Layer	0.14	>1.6	Make-up
1	111	Layer	0.26	>1.6	Make-up/demolition level
1	112	Layer	0.11	>1.6	Alluvium
1	113	Cut	0.2	>0.75	Tree hole
1	114	Fill	0.2	>0.75	Tree hole fill
1	115	Cut	0.3	0.7	Drainage cut
1	116	Fill	0.3	0.7	Drainage fill
1	117	Cut	0.15	0.5	Tree hole
1	118	Fill	0.15	0.5	Tree hole fill
1	119	Layer	0.18	>1.6	Alluvium
2	200	Layer	-	>1.6	Natural gravel
2	201	Layer	0.28	>1.6	Alluvium
2	202	Layer	0.21	>1.6	Alluvium
2	203	Layer	0.2	>1.6	Alluvium
2	204	Layer	0.4	>1.6	Make-up
2	205	Layer	0.3	>1.6	Make-up
2	206	Layer	0.38	>1.6	Make-up
2	207	Layer	0.16	>1.6	Make-up
2	208	Layer	0.29	>1.6	Make-up/demolition layer
2	209	Layer	0.2	>1.6	Organic silt - reed bed?
2	210	Layer	0.26	>1.6	Alluvium
2	211	Layer	0.14	>1.6	Alluvium
3	300	Layer	0.3	>1.6	Make-up/demolition layer
3	301	Layer	0.22	>1.6	Make-up/sub soil
3	302	Layer	0.4	>1.6	Make-up
3	303	Layer	0.2	>1.6	Make-up
3	304	Layer	0.55	>1.6	Make-up
3	305	Layer	0.3	>1.6	Make-up
3	306	Layer	0.02	>1.6	Make-up
3	307	Layer	0.3	>1.6	Buried top soil
3	308	Layer	0.3	>1.6	Make-up
3	309	Cut	-	-	Root/animal disturbance
3	310	Fill	-	-	Root/animal disturbance
3	311	Cut	-	-	Root/animal disturbance
3	312	Fill	-	-	Root/animal disturbance
3	313	Layer	0.4	>1.6	Alluvium
3	314	Layer	0.34	>1.6	Alluvium
3	315	Layer	0.8	>1.6	Alluvium
3	316	Layer	0.3	>1.6	Alluvium
3	317	Layer	0.2	>1.6	Alluvium
3	318	Layer	-	>1.6	Natural Gravel
3	319	Layer	0.2	>1.6	Alluvium

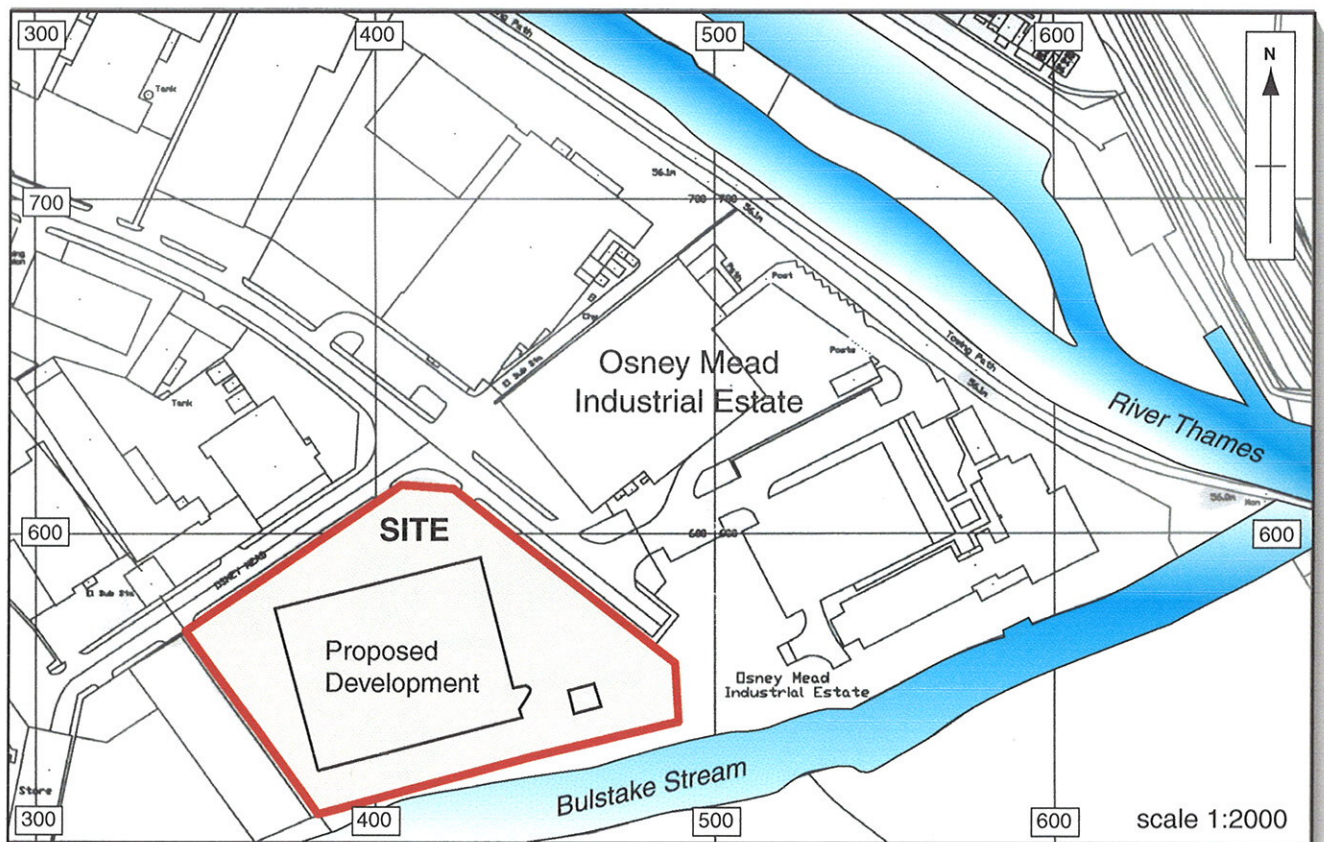
## References

- OAU, 1992 *Oxford Archaeological Unit Fieldwork Manual* (ed. D Wilkinson)
- OAU, 2000 *The Really Good Card Company, Osney Mead, Oxford. Archaeological Desk Based Assessment. Client Report.*





scale 1:25,000



Location of Site

Figure 1



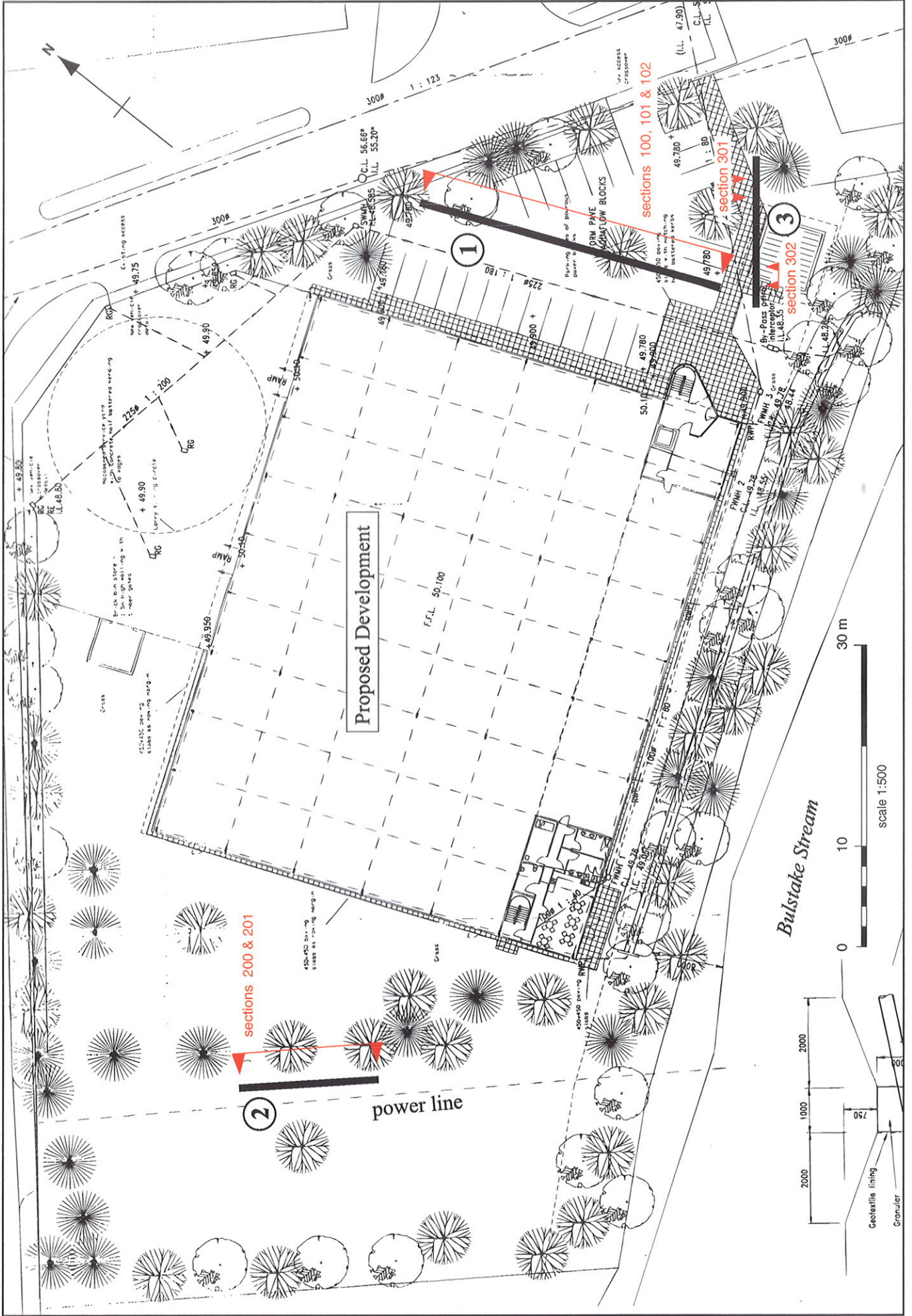
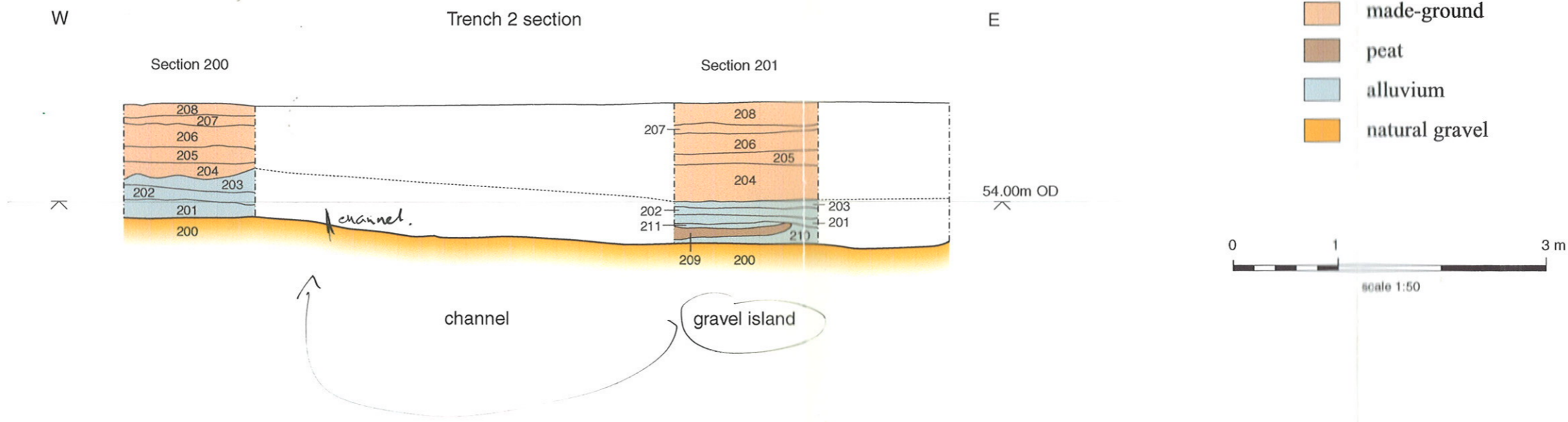
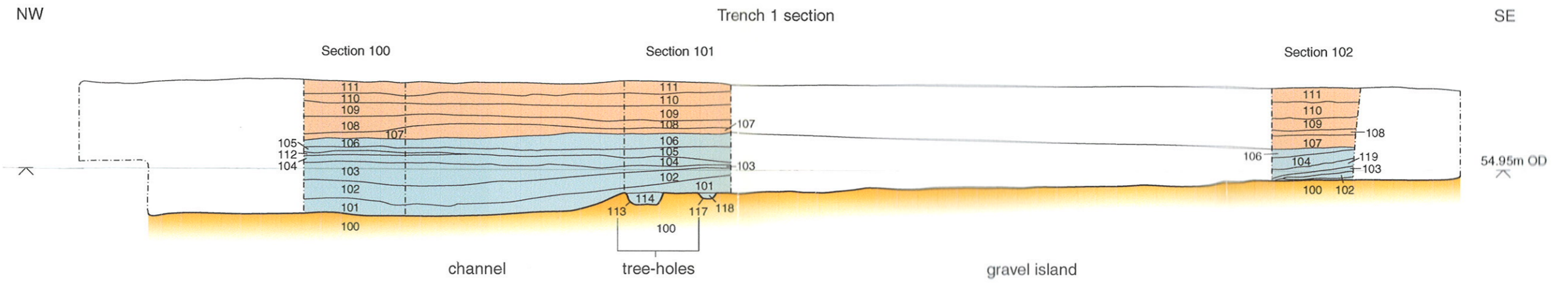


Figure 2

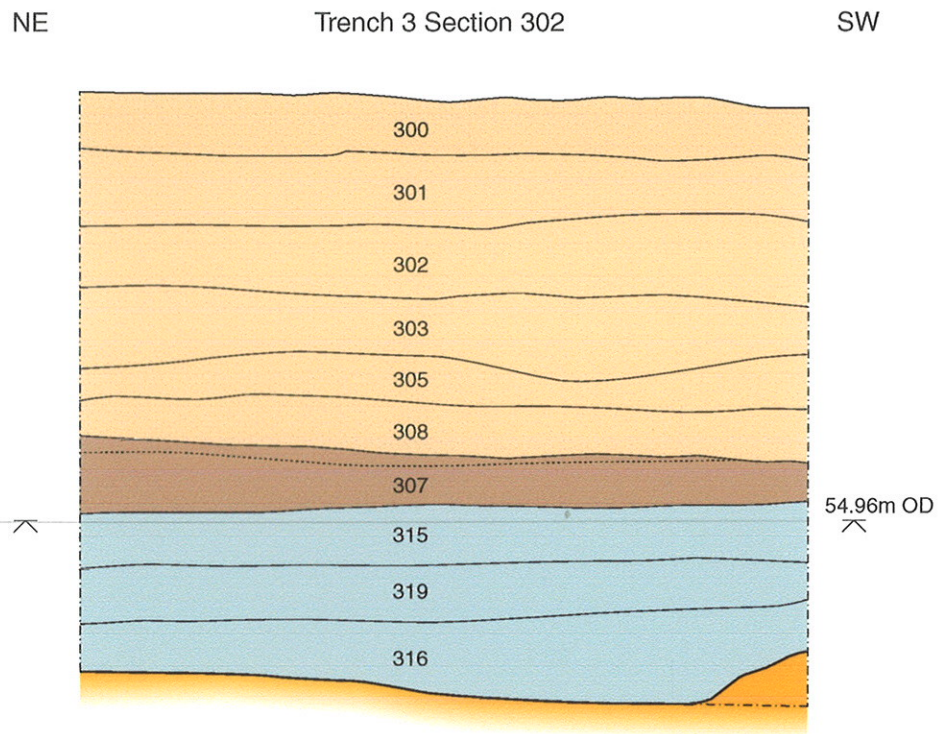
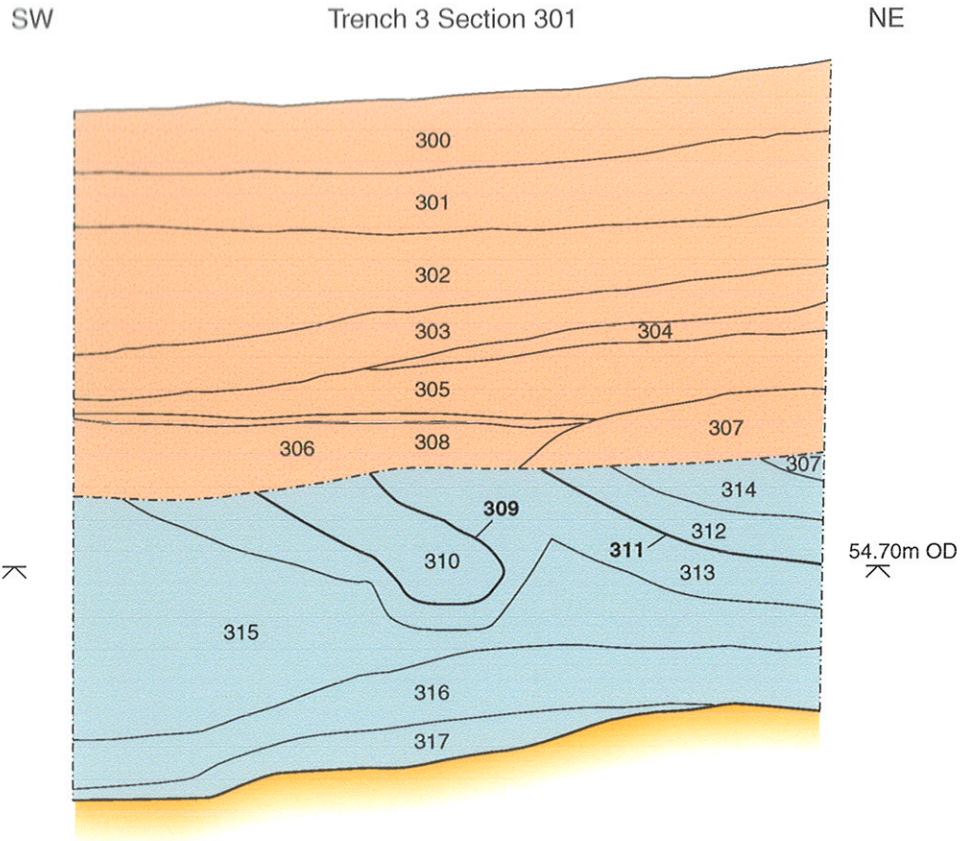
Location of Trenches







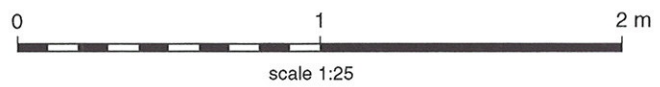
Trenches 1 and 2 sections

Figure 3





-  made-ground
-  plough soil
-  alluvium
-  natural gravel



Trench 3 sections

Figure 4



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