

# Spring Road Cemetery, Abingdon, Oxon

Archaeological Evaluation Report

Oxford Archaeological Unit  
1990

# ABINGDON, SPRING ROAD CEMETERY, 1990

## ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION

### INTRODUCTION.

The Oxford Archaeological Unit carried out an archaeological evaluation in February 1990 at Spring Road cemetery in Abingdon, Oxon. The project was funded by English Heritage and by Abingdon Town Council. The aim was to establish the nature and extent of archaeological remains within the modern graveyard.

### ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

The cemetery at Spring Road lies north-west of Abingdon town centre (Figure 1). Abingdon has been the focus of occupation and development for approximately five and a half thousand years, originating from a Neolithic settlement in 3500 BC. At Radley, north-east of Abingdon, lay a Neolithic causewayed camp with an earthen long barrow adjacent (Case and Whittle 1982; Bradley 1984), and south-west of Abingdon there was another complex of monuments, a cursus, long mortuary enclosure and another long barrow (Benson and Miles 1974 61-2 map 33; Ainslie and Wallis 1988; Gledhill and Wallis 1989; Barclay forthcoming). These ritual complexes became the foci for Bronze Age cemeteries, best known of which is the line of Bronze Age burial mounds known as 'Barrow Hills' (Barclay and Halpin 1999). Settlements dating to the Iron Age have been located and have been excavated within the town at The Vineyard (Allen 1990), east of the town at Barton Court Farm and at Thrupp (Miles 1986; Wallis 1981) and west of Abingdon at Ashville Trading Estate and Wyndyke Furlong, both just W of the Larkmead stream close to the Spring Road site (Parrington 1978; Muir and Roberts in press).

Roman occupation dating from the 1st to 5th centuries AD has been found in the town. Defended in the late Iron Age with two or three ditches and an internal bank, the site was clearly a native 'oppidum', and continued as a market-centre in the early Roman period. In the 2nd century it developed into a small town with substantial buildings (R.Thomas thesis unpublished; Allen 1990). The later Roman levels have been more severely truncated by medieval and more recent housing development within the town, but the quantity of pottery and coins show that it continued to flourish until the very end of the 4th century.

The historical evidence for the town begins with the founding of a nunnery on the site of St Helen's church and of the abbey of St Mary by Hean in 675 (Abingdon Chronicle). The accounts of this foundation however mention that there was already a pre-existing Saxon settlement at Abingdon. Within the town pagan Saxon occupation is rare due to later disturbance, but two grubenhauser or sunken huts of 5th century date have been found during excavations in The Vineyard (Allen 1990; Allen forthcoming). Outside the town at Radley, Barrow Hills a large settlement consisting of sunken huts and posthole timber buildings has been excavated (Chambers and Halpin 1986; Chambers in prep), and a smaller settlement of the same type was excavated at Barton Court Farm (Miles 1986). This was probably an outlier of the Barrow Hills settlement. West of Abingdon and just south of the river Ock at Saxton Road a large Saxon cemetery containing over 200 mixed inhumations and cremations was excavated in 1934

(Myres 1968). This may have been the burial-place of a Saxon community at Corporation Farm, Drayton (Benson and Miles 1974, 61-3 map 33) but must also belong to the pre-Abbey settlement mentioned in the documents at Abingdon. The cemetery begins in the fifth century, evidence of early penetration by the Anglo-Saxons up the Thames similar to that at Dorchester close by (Frere 1968).

The early abbey and the nunnery of St. Helens were established within the late Iron Age defences, which had largely survived the Roman occupation (Allen 1997). If the Chronicles can be believed, the nunnery was apparently shortlived, but in any event the church survived as a minster serving a very large area (Blair 1994, ). The mid-Saxon abbey was sacked by the Danes, and in the 10th century the buildings were in ruins. The abbey was however refounded by Ethelwold, later Bishop of Winchester, and became one of the main centres of the Late Saxon monastic revival. Documents mention a Late Saxon royal vill on Andersey Island, but no evidence of this has yet been found by excavation. Domesday Book refers to ten traders outside the Abbey gate, implying the existence of a market place in the 11th century, but recent excavations suggest that the core of the street plan only crystallised in the 13th century. Tenements and gardens extended along Ock Street towards the Ock bridge and Spring Road during the late 12th and 13th centuries (Roberts 1998).

Spring Road was one of a network of lanes leading to adjacent settlements such as Shippon and Marcham. A small medieval cemetery, possibly belonging to one of Abingdon's many documented medieval chapels, has been found just to the north-east at the junction of Spring Road and Faringdon Road (Wilson 1981). The area of the site was part of the open fields of the town, and fortuitously survived beneath a headland alongside the Larkhill stream (Figure 1). The environs of the site have only recently been affected by modern suburban housing.

## ASSESSMENT STRATEGY

Both the previous and present superintendents of the cemetery (Mr W Skellington and Mr J Bell respectively) have in recent years recovered substantial amounts of pottery from the site during grave digging. Pottery and other finds indicate Neolithic to Saxon occupation on the site, concentrated in the late Neolithic, Early Iron Age and Pagan Saxon periods. Fragments of stamped Saxon pottery and part of a bone comb were found within a possible sunken hut (see Figure 5).

The modern burials cover the south and west sections of the graveyard; when the evaluation was undertaken the north and east sides were largely unaffected. Six assessment trenches were excavated, a standard 1.6 m wide but of varying length. The topsoil and medieval ploughsoils were removed by machine to the top of subsoil or gravel, or down to intact areas of stratigraphy, where these survived.

Trenches A and F were positioned to investigate the southern and northern limits of occupation (Figure 2). Trenches B, D and E were placed to provide sections west - east through the medieval headland, and Trench C at right angles close to graveyard plot 3, which contained a known Roman pit (Figure 2).

## ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESULTS

In all six trenches modern topsoil overlay a considerable depth of medieval ploughsoil. In trench F and over part of trenches A and C ploughing had removed subsoil down to gravel; in the other trenches pre-medieval stratigraphy was unevenly preserved beneath the headland.

At the western end of Trench A immediately below topsoil were the foundations of a 19th century rubble path. Below the rubble was a post-medieval square pit 1.0 m deep. The medieval ploughsoils survived to a depth of 0.5 m on the east, but were shallower on the west beneath the edge of the headland, where the subsoil survived to a higher level. The best preservation is likely to occur west of Trench A.

There were no features cut into the subsoil beneath the medieval ploughsoils, but dotted across the underlying gravel were patches of orange, slightly clayey loam. These patches are most probably periglacial in origin, and were found in most of the assessment trenches.

Trench B cut through the middle of the medieval headland. Ploughing beneath the later headland had truncated earlier stratigraphy, but a dark humic loam 0.05 m thick survived upon the sandy silt subsoil over the gravel. Two Roman pits, both 0.60m deep with steep sides, cut from the truncated loam. One contained coarse pottery dating to the early Roman period and was probably a domestic rubbish pit, the other a single sherd of Roman pottery. The feature had a concreted lining, probably a secondary carbonate deposit.

Three post holes 0.32-0.34 m in diameter and 0.13 m deep, were cut from the occupation layer. A shallow ditch 0.30 m deep, aligned north-south at the eastern end of trench B, may be a continuation of ditch D4 and E4 (Figure 4). This feature, also cut from the occupation layer, yielded small abraded fragments of Roman pottery, but these may be residual and the ditch contemporary with the Saxon posthole activity (see Trenches C and D below). Subsoil beneath the occupation horizon was thin and patchy.

Trench C and trench D contained the most archaeological features. In trench C no trace of the occupation horizon had survived ploughing, but a thin layer of subsoil covered the gravel. Cut from the top of the subsoil were twelve postholes, with two phases of a shallow gully alongside, and a large pit (Figure 4 trench C). Another gully was cut by one of the postholes. The large pit had steeply sloping sides and an uneven base. The pit had five separate fills, each one capped by a thin layer of gravel, indicating that after each dump of refuse within the pit the feature was left open for a short period of time. Several small fragments of Saxon pottery came from the fill.

Eight evenly spaced postholes formed a north-south line, which continued beyond the limits of the trench. Three additional postholes ran south-south-eastwards from the south end of this line, parallel to a shallow gully C15 running just to the west. The posts, between 0.30 and 0.38 m in diameter and from 0.15 to 0.21 m deep, were set 0.60 m apart. One of the additional postholes had been repositioned (Figure 4). All of the postholes had the same fill, a red-brown silt flecked with charcoal and fired clay (compare the postholes in trench D below). West of the posts was C15, a shallow gully of two phases. This contained no finds, but was so closely aligned upon the posts as to suggest that both posts and gully were contemporary.

Trench D contained the greatest depth of subsoil over the gravel, and as in trench B this was overlaid by a dark occupation layer 0.05 m deep (Figure 3). Two sherds of Saxon pottery were recovered from this layer. Nine circular postholes set at irregular distances apart ran north-eastwards across the trench. They ranged in diameter from 0.22 m to 0.43 m and in depth from 0.18 m - 0.39 m; one post had apparently been repositioned twice (Figure 4). All the posts were cut from the occupation level, and all had a red-brown silt fill flecked with charcoal and fired clay.

In the belief that the postholes might belong to a Saxon longhouse, a 4.50 m x 2.50 m extension to the S of the trench was excavated in the hope of discovering a second line of posts, but none was found. One large feature was however encountered up against the west section, D36. This proved to be ovoid with shallow sloping sides and an irregular base. It contained three postholes, one on the south edge, a second mid-way along and the third at the north end on the edge.

Just east of the postholes was ditch D4, 1.15 m wide and 0.45 m deep, with straight sides and a flat base (Figure 3). The feature was aligned north-west to south-east, and is probably continuous with gully B10 and E3. It had two fills, both silty humic deposits. Cutting these was a shallower gully D5, 0.80 m across and 0.30 m deep on the east side. A further gully parallel to the first, D33, lay 1.20 m to the east. This gully is probably a continuation of E5 (see Figure 4). D5 appeared to be cut through the occupation horizon, the edges of the other features were much less clearly defined.

Trench E contained the same sequence of stratified deposits as in the other trenches across the headland, though only faint traces of the occupation horizon survived. The trench contained two ditches. Ditch E4 had been substantially recut, but survived 0.60 m across and 0.20 m deep. It was cut on its southern edge by a larger ditch E3, 1.30 m across and 0.60 m deep. Both had dark silty loam fills, and are probably continuations of B4 and D10. 1.60 m east of this was a smaller gully, E5, 0.60 m wide and 0.20 m deep. This is probably a continuation of gully D33 (Figure 4).

In Trench F no features were found beneath the medieval ploughsoils, though areas of subsoil survived. The gravel was striated with calcareous deposits and periglacial hollows.

## DISCUSSION

The stratigraphy in all the assessment trenches consisted of topsoil, ploughsoil, silt subsoil and gravel. Beneath the medieval headland, which runs north-south down the centre of the cemetery, a thin occupation horizon survives. The headland is some 30 m wide, and in total c 2600 square metres of occupation associated with archaeological features appears to be preserved. Outside the headland the subsoil is truncated, but features survive cut into gravel.

The density of archaeological features, reflecting the recurrent use of this area for occupation, is due to its situation on a shallow plateau of gravel close to the junction of the Larkhill stream and the river Ock. Finds recovered by graveyard staff indicate late Neolithic activity (Figure 5); two

crouched skeletons found without grave goods on the west edge of the cemetery may be of this date, or may alternatively belong to the Early Iron Age settlement. Evidence from graves for Iron Age activity is concentrated in the south and west parts of the cemetery (Figure 2), and no features of this date were found in the assessment trenches. It is therefore possible that the limit of the Early Iron Age settlement may have been reached, the focus of activity lying closer to the Larkhill stream, but the limited evaluation makes this uncertain. Another contemporary settlement has been excavated at Ashville and Wyndyke Furlong west of the Larkhill stream (Parrington 1978; Muir and Roberts forthcoming), but occupation on that site intensified in the middle Iron Age, whereas no evidence for middle Iron Age activity has yet been found at Spring Road. This could however lie farther west.

Three Roman pits, two found in the assessment and one by Mr Skellington, indicate occupation in the vicinity, but features are thinly spread and there is no evidence, for instance of building materials, to suggest domestic occupation within this site. Findspots of Roman material are sparse along the western part of Ock Street, and this has encouraged the belief that the Roman town did not extend this far. Local reports however speak of Roman masonry found in the area of St. Helens School, immediately to the north, and of similar material found during Victorian gravel quarrying in an area now covered by housing immediately to the east of the graveyard.

Finds from the graveyard and the features from assessment trenches B, C, D and E demonstrate a substantial settlement of Saxon date. Although only partially excavated, feature D36 (Figure 4) is probably a Saxon Grubenhaus, and another is suspected from recording made during grave digging (Figure 2). Also cut from the Saxon occupation horizon in trench D is a line of substantial postholes. The postholes of a second line in trench C, where the occupation layer did not survive, are however of identical fill to those in D, and are thus assumed to be Saxon as well. The postholes are regularly spaced and of even size, and are very similar to those of timber longhouses at Barrow Hills and Barton Court nearby (Chambers in prep; Miles 1986). The sets of postholes in trench C and D may thus belong to large Saxon timber buildings, and gully C15, which runs parallel to the posts in trench C, could have served as a drip gully for the roof. The posthole line in trench C appears to consist of two elements (Figure 4); possibly the straight line belongs to a building, the additional posts belonging to a fence. It is also possible that the posts in trench D belong to a fence line surrounding the sunken hut. A similar fence line of 17 posts spaced 0.7 m apart formed two sides of a square and enclosed a single sunken hut at Barton Court Farm north-east of Abingdon (Miles 1986, 17-18 and Figure 13). Such fences would indicate that the settlement was divided into separate compounds.

Only Saxon body sherds from plain vessels were found in the assessment, but a variety of decorated sherds have been recovered from earlier grave-digging. The designs are not exactly paralleled in Myres' Corpus, and cannot be closely dated, but similar motifs are common on the pottery from local sites, e.g. Barrow Hills (Radley), Saxton Road cemetery (Abingdon), Frilford and Long Wittenham (Myres 1974) and at Butler's Field (Lechlade) (Miles and Palmer in prep).

## CONCLUSIONS

Due to the depth and close spacing of modern graves, the settlement will be entirely destroyed over the next 10 to 15 years. Since the evaluation was carried out burial has filled most of the

north end of the cemetery, and is just moving into the remaining two undisturbed blocks on the east side (Figure 7). An area of c 3200 sq m is at present still surviving.

No early prehistoric features were found in the assessment trenches, but the distribution of finds from graves (Figure 2) shows that activity of this date extends over the whole cemetery, and further features are likely to exist in the undisturbed areas. Because of the manner of discovery, the character of early prehistoric activity is still unknown. Early Iron Age settlement may be concentrated outside the surviving part of the cemetery (see above), but since the assessment an Iron Age pit has been found in a grave just south of trench B (Figure 2), and it is likely that the occupation will extend into the undisturbed area.

The wide distribution of the finds (Figure 2) indicates that the Saxon settlement is large. Both posthole and sunken structures have been identified, and over much of the site are associated with a preserved occupation horizon, which offers the possibility of recovering structural detail at ground level and of studying finds distributions *in situ*. The preservation of this site is much better than that of other excavated sites in the area. The existence of Saxon posthole structures was not recognised when Leeds excavated at Sutton Courtenay (Leeds 1934), but a large corpus has been found around Abingdon at Barton Court Farm and in greater numbers at Barrow Hills. On both sites, however, the evidence was truncated, and this site offers the possibility of extending our understanding of such structures, and in the process illuminating these other excavations.

In the wider landscape an understanding of this site is important both in prehistory and in the Saxon period. To understand the context of the early prehistoric monument complexes at Radley and Drayton it is necessary to investigate the settlements that must lie in the area in between beneath the modern town. The Spring Road site is one of these. The Saxon settlement is important for its relationship with the Saxon Road cemetery to the south, to the pagan Saxon settlement within the defences of Abingdon, and to the settlements east of the town. The Saxon settlement of Abingdon has been studied through a number of important excavations, and as a group the sites offer one of the best chances to study the development of Saxon settlement around a late Roman small town, and how that dispersed settlement pattern evolved into the mid-Saxon town. Without substantive evidence from Spring Road, however, a key element of this pattern will be missing.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

This land is already earmarked for burials, and since part of the site has already been destroyed preservation would be both unpopular and inappropriate. The Town Council does not have funds sufficient to carry out excavation on any scale, but the significance of the archaeology justifies preservation by record ahead of destruction.

The fieldwork can be carried out in a single summer (8-9 weeks). One section of the graveyard will be stripped and excavated at a time, the remainder being used for storage of spoil. While excavation is in progress the spoil heap will have to be screened, in order not to offend visitors, and backfilling will need to be accompanied by compacting and by re-seeding. The work could be completed to post-excavation assessment stage at an estimated cost of £42000.

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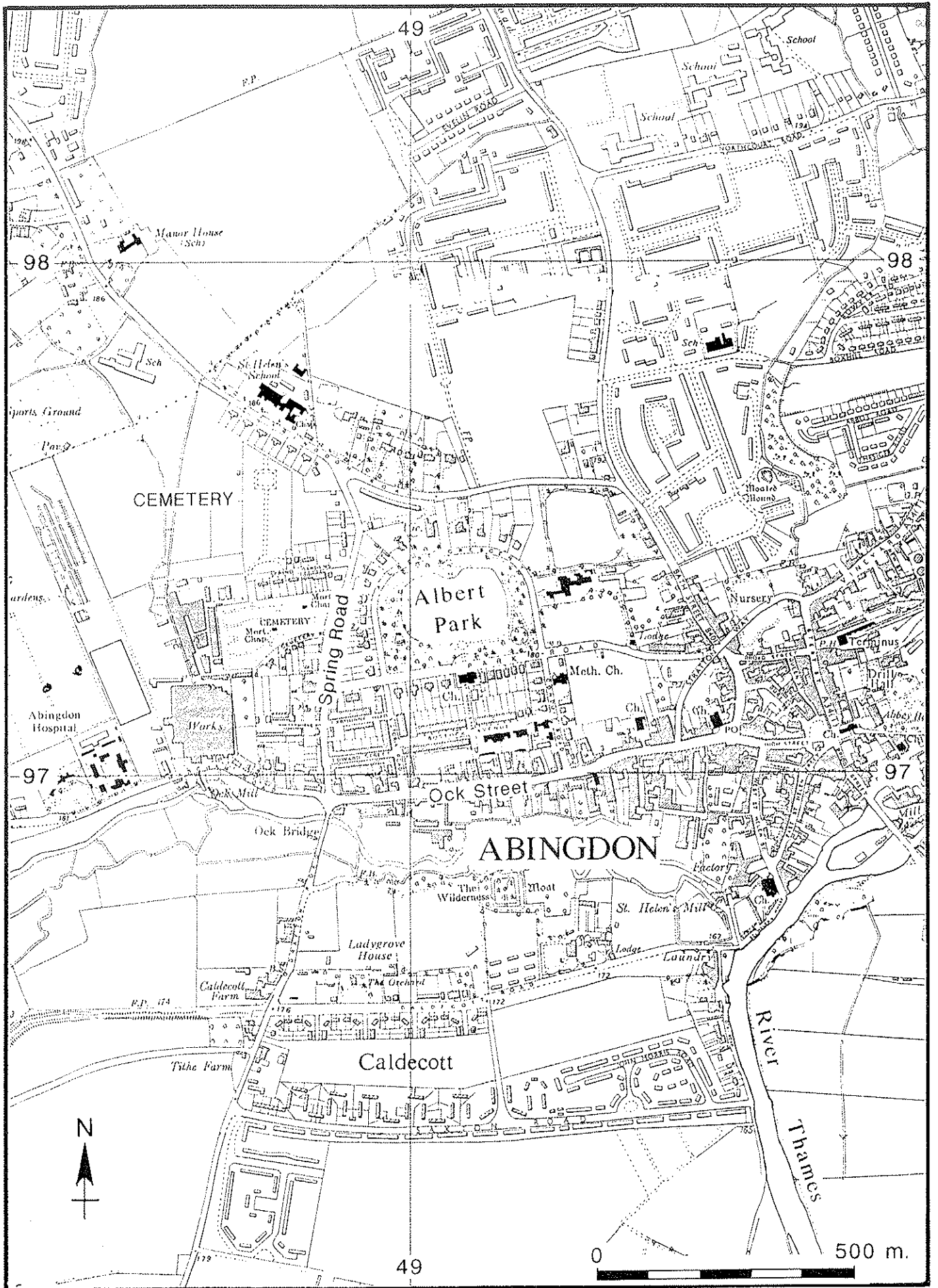


Fig. 1

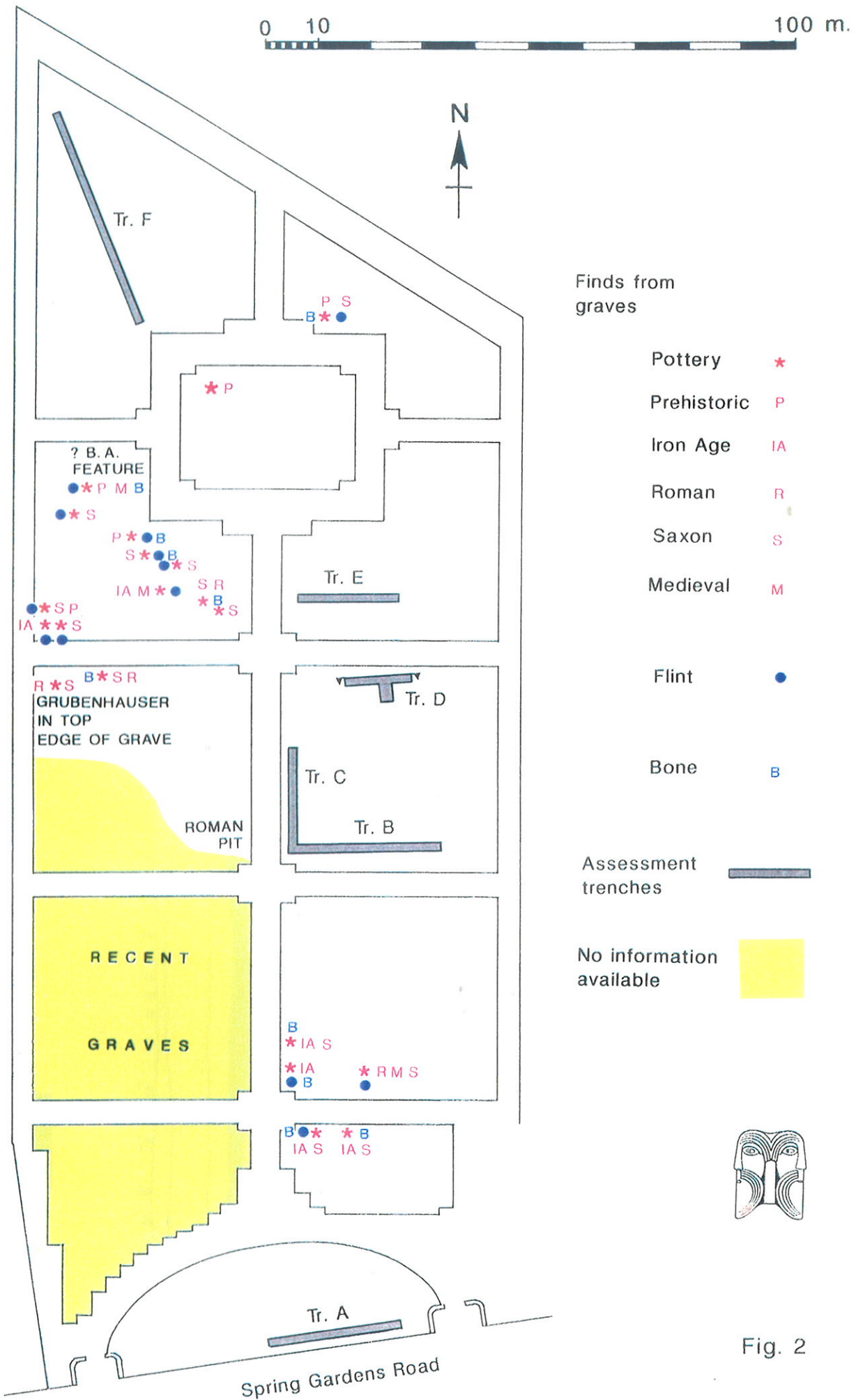


Fig. 2

AB SRC 90

Trench D

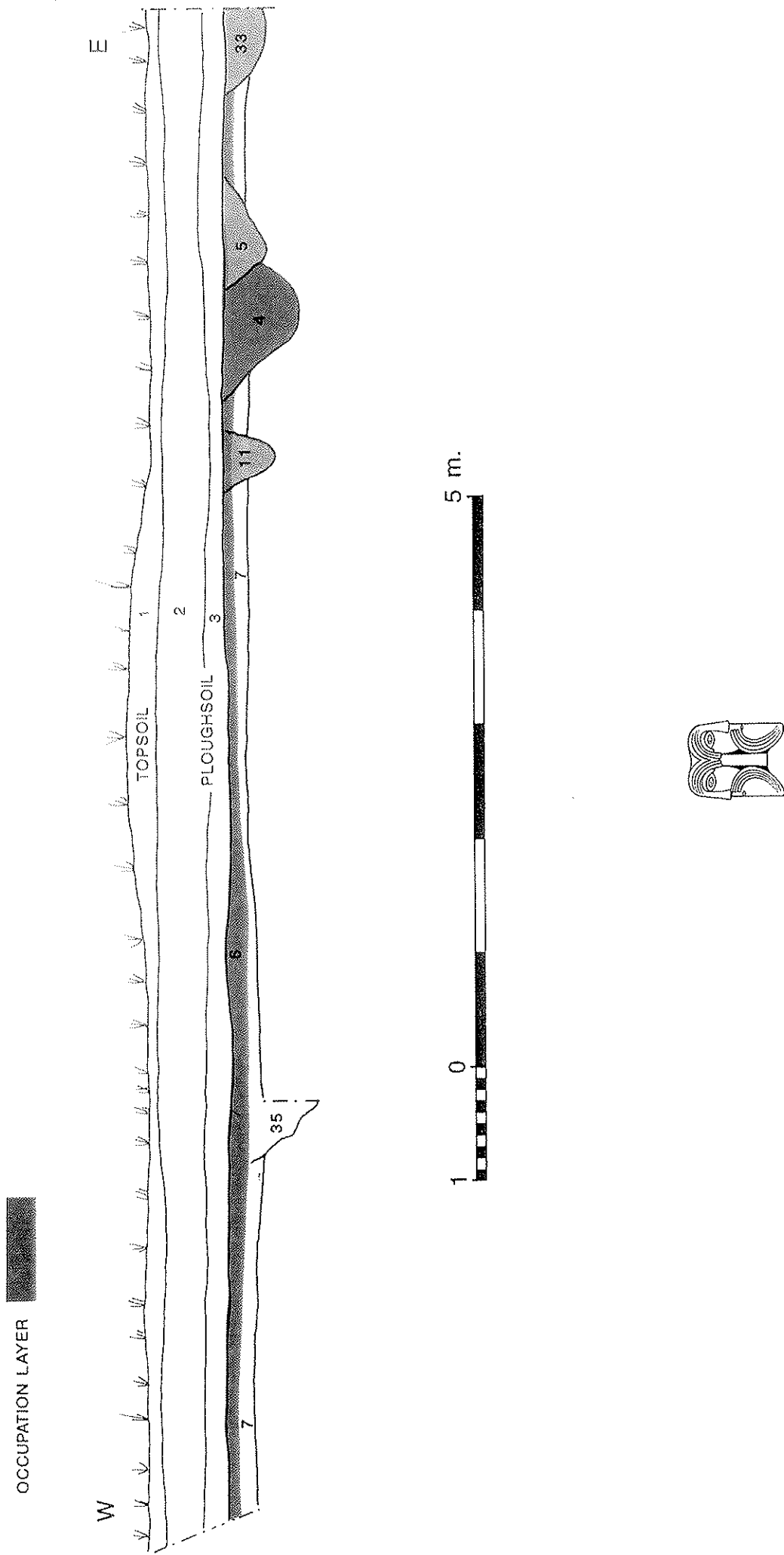


Fig. 3

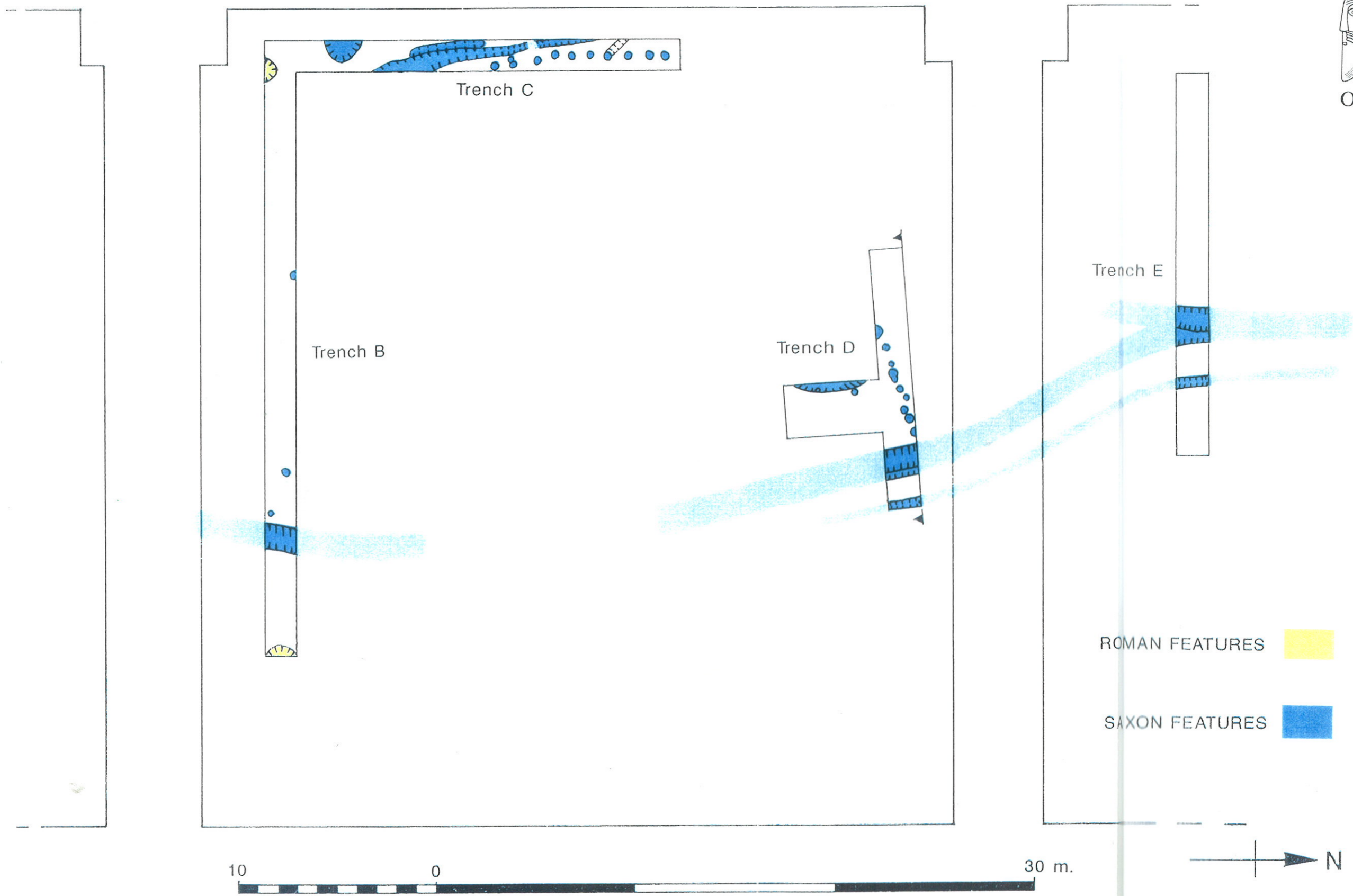


Fig. 4

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

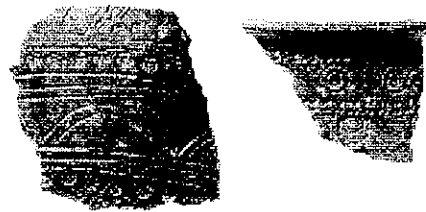


Late Neolithic

1 2 3 4 5



Iron Age



1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Saxon

Fig 5

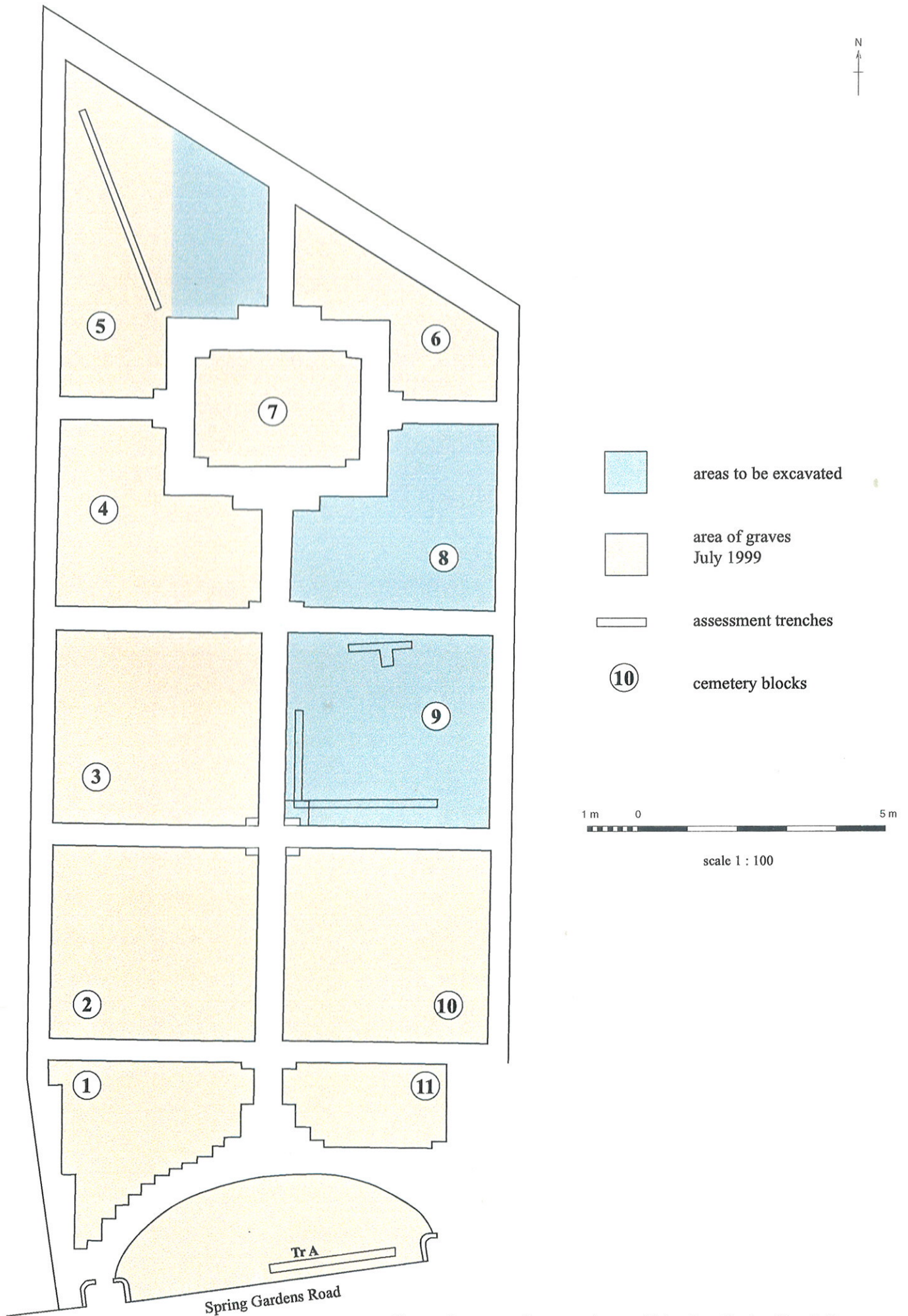


figure 6: areas of excavation at Abingdon Spring Road Cemetery



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