THEALE (BR)

ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT

HOLY BROOK FARM, BERKSHIRE

NGR SU ~~711~~ 664 711

Assessment undertaken and report written by
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April 1988

INTRODUCTION

Background information

The archaeological assessment of the site was undertaken by the Oxfor Archaeological Unit at the behest of Amey Roadstone Company in advance of a application for planning permission to Berkshire County Council.

The area, some 1,200m E-W by 200m N-S is on the south-western outskirt of Reading and is bounded by: a railway line; the Holy Brook; the M4; th River Kennet; and the double ditches between it and the farm to the eas (Figs 1 and 2). The area is low lying and consists of small interconnectin fields, separated by ditches with long-established tree lines; other silte ditches within the fields connect with those on the perimeter. It is a present used as a hay meadow and there is every indication that it has ha this use for a very long time. At the time of the assessment the grass wa short and numerous linear and more amorphous declivities and sligh elevations were apparent.

Strategy

The poles of an electricity transmission line running the length of th site were used as a convenient base-line. Offsets were taken from this at 40m intervals and a grid system of trenches was surveyed in. The strateg thus far was the 2% sampling technique favoured by the Oxford Archaeologica Unit where there is only moderate overburden and where the presence o archaeological remains is considered at least possible.

In the field it quickly became apparent that: the overburden to grave could be up to three metres; that the water table was as little as half metre below the surface (trenches flooding as dug); and that there was th possibility that the area had always been too wet for human habitation.

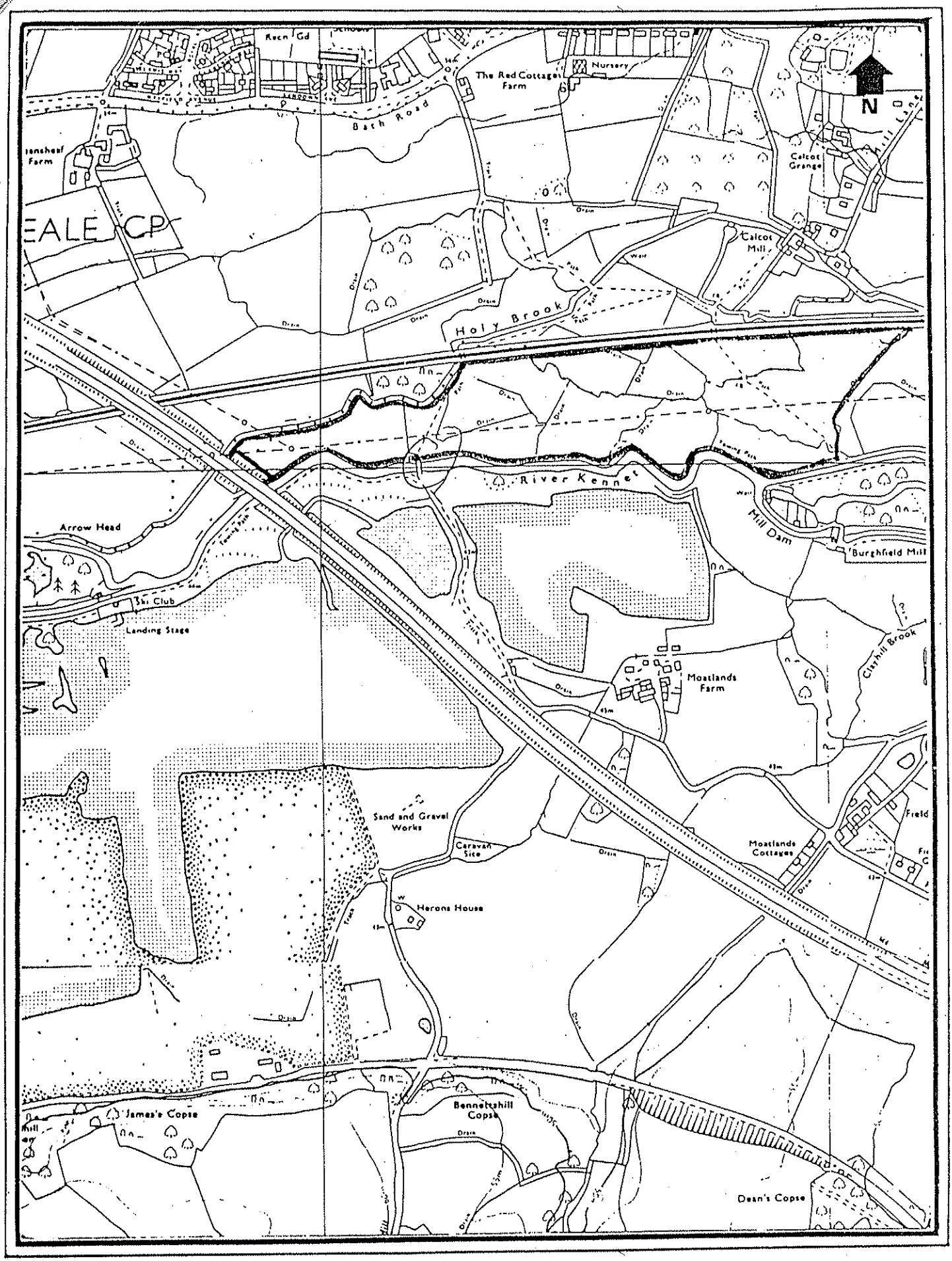

Fig 2 Assessment area 1:10,000

Fig 1 General location 1:50,000

With these factors in mind, and after discussion with Paul Chadwick, County Archaeologist, the areas of interest were defined as follows:

1. An assessment of the long-term environmental history of the area. This to involve on-site corroboration of findings by a specialist.

2. An assessment of human presence in the environmental history of the area.
In practical terms this meant looking for and investigating ground surfaces and attempting to discover or discount the possibility of there being gravel elevations intruding from the terrace to the immediate north.

3. Investigation of changes in the course of the Holy Brook and Kennet.
Both natural and managed alterations might be anticipated. The most suitable area of inquiry was decided to be the western end of the site where there was a near confluence of both rivers.

4. Investigation of recent land management.
It was decided that this would be best approached as a separate and specific project which should start with contouring and documentary research. This notwithstanding, the opportunity was to be taken of sectioning a few surface features.

Using the established grid, 0.75m wide trenches were dug systematically across the site using a JCB with toothless ditching bucket (Fig 3). Those to the south tended to be pits, since this area had always been wet; those to the north were longer and were sometimes supplemented, this being the area where human habitation was more possible. The two most western trenches were made of sufficient length to investigate changes in river course, while a few trenches were placed across surface features which were not intersected by the grid.

THE RESULTS

1. An assessment of the long-term environmental history of the area.

(Written following on-site discussion with Mark Robinson of the University Museum.)

A. Gravel left by glaciation

B. Post-glacial sedge swamps with encroaching trees.
Rounded wood indicates some water movement but there was very little mineral deposition. Though no archaeological objects were recovered it is probable that the swamp was in existence in the mesolithic period.

C. River deposits of sand.
The coarseness of grain indicates that initial flow was quite fast

and that the river (the Kennet or a subsidiary) tracked across the area. This left an irregular surface of banks with lower areas between them.

D. Formation of ground surfaces on the banks of sand.
These vary, being sandy or silty, and having a greater or lesser vegetation and snail content. It was common for vertical rooting, apparently from this surface, to be preserved in the sand below. Interleaving of sand lenses; water snails; and rounded wood all indicate that these surfaces were at least seasonally flooded. The area between the banks was typically found to contain fine blue compact silt - very clay-like. There are some archaeological indications that this landscape was in existence in the neolithic and/or Bronze Age.

E. Alluviation through annual flooding.
Parallels suggest that this could have started in the later Bronze Age. In the upper levels the molluscan fauna looks to be that appropriate for a hay meadow. There were colour horizons in the alluvium - varying intensities and mixtures of orange and grey - but these were felt to reflect soil processes rather than being of archaeological significance.

F. The present use.
This probably differs little from that in the more recent past except that alluviation has been curtailed by river banking. The topsoil is generally thin (0.10 - 0.15m) and the subsoil is little-modified alluvium.

The ground level of the site is currently c 1.5m higher to the north than next to the present course of the Kennet. It is clear from the sections seen that this has been the situation throughout the site's environmental history (Fig 4). Thus the typical layering - topsoil over alluvium / ground surface on sand or river silt / peaty material over gravel - is seen in its full form along the centre of the site. To the north, the early swamp horizon is entirely absent or vestigial; to the south, the later phase of sand and river channelling is either missing or very truncated.

2. An assessment of human presence in the environmental history.

B. Post glacial sedge swamps with encroaching trees.
All of this material was under water and at great depth. It was, however, looked at as it came out of the trenches. An animal bone (SF 9) was recovered and some pieces of apparently water-worn wood but there were no certain indications of human activity.

D. Formation of ground surfaces on the banks of sand.
Such indications of human activity as there were came - as would be expected - from the northern half of the site where the ground level would have been higher. From west to east:

Trench 52 Calcined flint (SF 5); two flint cores (SF 6); charcoal.

HOLY BROOK FARM, BERKS.

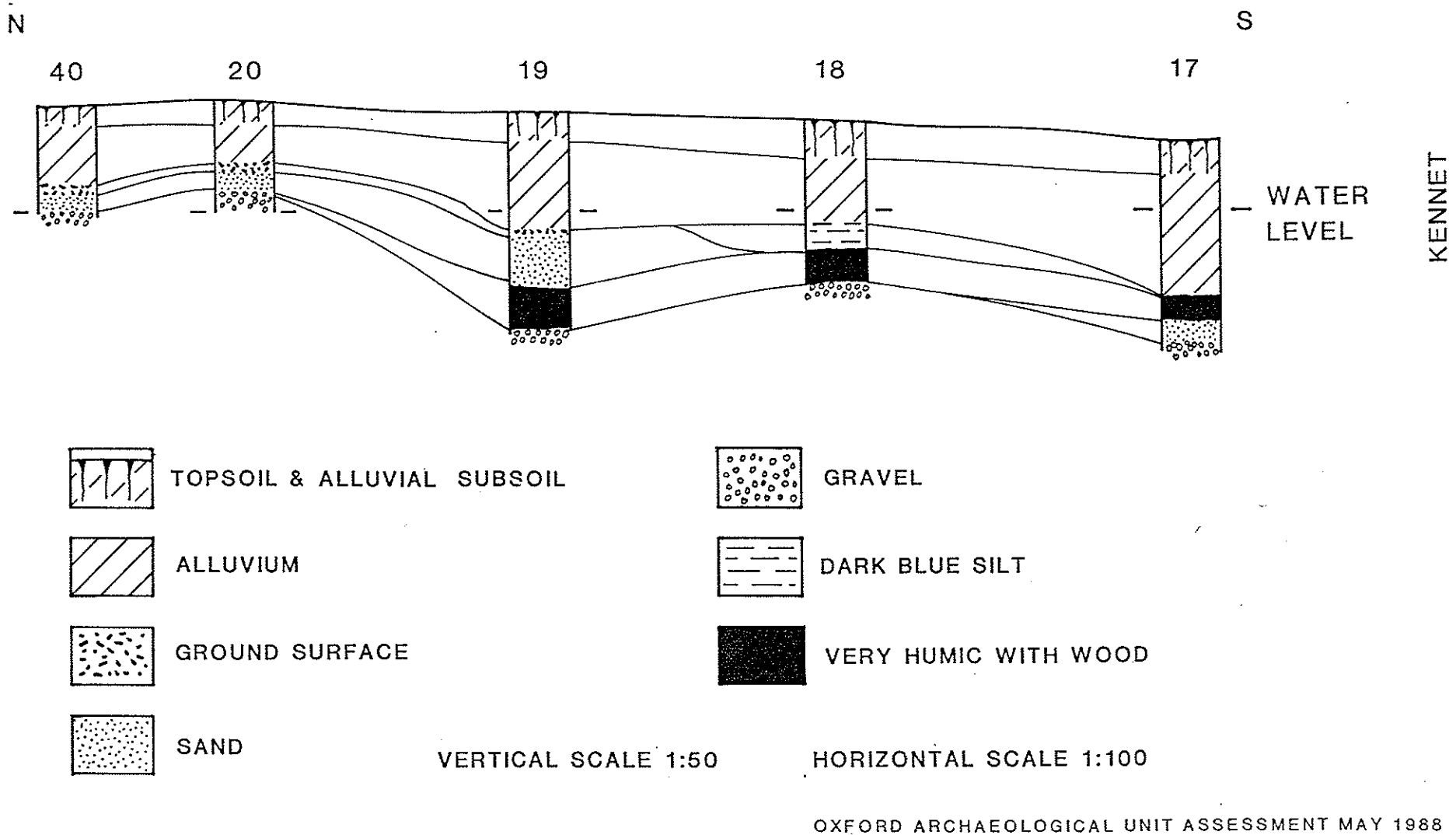

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Fig 4: Diagramatic section across site

Trench 51	Charred wood point (SF 7); charcoal.
Trench 18	Struck flint flake (SF 1); charcoal.
Trench 19	Charcoal.
Trench 20	Animal bone (SF 2); charcoal.
Trench 40	Charcoal.
Trench 34	Animal bone (SF 3); Calcined stone (SF 4).
Trench 35	Charcoal.
Trench 45	Charcoal.

As has been mentioned, this gound surface was variable and showed clear indications of seasonal flooding. Such light activity as evidenced was probably in the neolithic period of Bronze Age.

E. Alluviation through annual flooding.
Although specks of charcoal were noted on occasion at different levels in the alluvium, not one artefact was recovered.

In Trench 10, however, two ditches were noted in the alluvium, both running SW-NE. The preserved top of the more easterly was sealed under an orange horizon in the alluvium at a depth of 0.30m from the surface. It was open-v-shaped in section, c 0.5m wide, and c 0.25m deep. The fill was of dark brown earth including snails and some charcoal and wood fragments. Though it was capped by a horizon in the alluvium and was at such depth, it was interesting to note that the line of the ditch could be seen as a slight linear declivity in the present ground surface.

The preserved top of the more westerly was in the alluvium at a depth of c 0.6m from the present surface. It was open-v-shaped in section, c 1.0m wide, and c 0.40 m deep, and had been cut through alluvium and dark blue clayey silt to the underlying gravel. The fill was light brown/grey silty with snails, charcoal and one piece of burnt gravel.

The discoveries in Trench 10 obviously imply ditching in the area over a span of time well before the present. It is peculiar that no other such ditches were noted in any other trench.

3. Investigation of changes in the course of the Holy Brook and Kennet

This matter was looked into by two long N-S trenches at the western end of the site (Trenches 52 and 51) where there is a near confluence in the present course of the two rivers. Though the other trenches were not specifically intended to shed light on the subject, a river course was seen in Trench 42, to the east, where its bank could be traced into the sub-soil.

Trench 52
Three changes in the course of the Holy Brook were noted (Fig 5). The earliest, and more northerly, related to the lowest manifestation of the ground surface on sandbank phase and clearly demonstrated how blue silt had built up over a more organic fill in its lower course. There had then been a deposit of silty sand over the old stream bed and adjacent area and a ground surface had formed on this. A second river course cut the first and related to

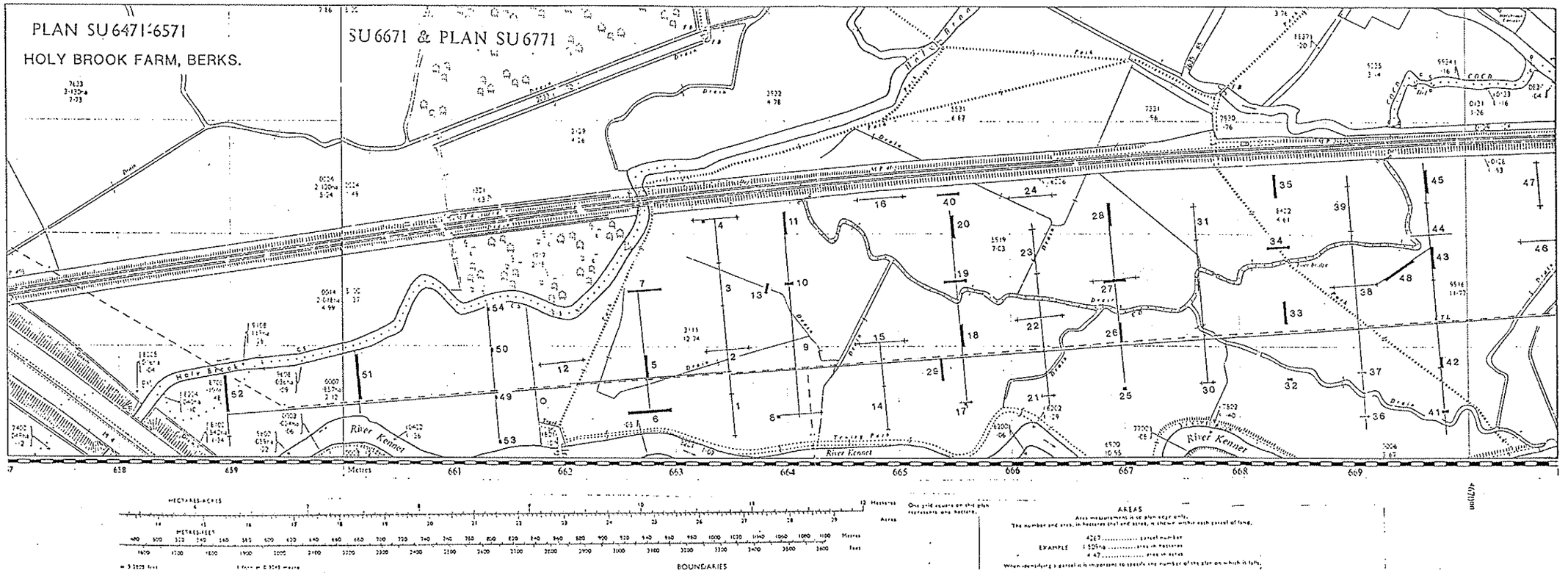

Fig 3: Layout oftrenches 1:2000

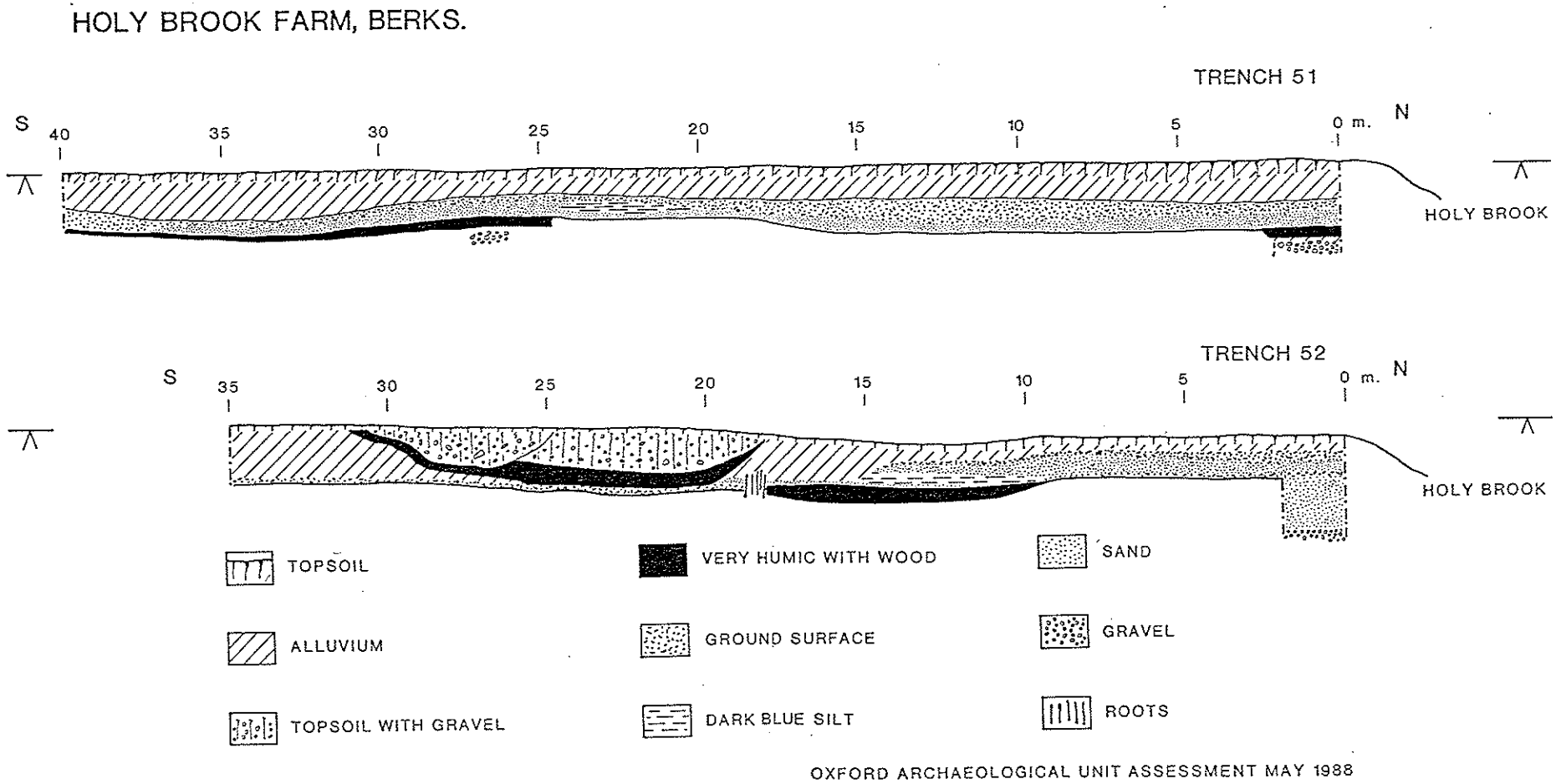

Fig 5: Sections of trenches excavated between Holy Brook and Kennet 1:200

the highest manifestation of the ground surface and sand banl phase. The alluvium fill of this had a third river cours through it, which went to the surface and could be seen as declivity running back into the Holy Brook to the east. Thi latter course had an organic lining to its base and had been fille in with gravel and topsoil, probably intentionally, and in th recent past.

Trench 51
There was evidence here for a water course in the ground surface o sand bank phase but no observed river courses in the subsequen alluviation (Fig 5).

4. Investigation of recent land management

Trenches 49, 13 and 33 cut existing silted ditches.
In each case the surface declivity was some 0.2m deep and c 1.25 wide with slight banking to one or both sides. The ditches wer open-v-shaped, c 1m deep, and contained redeposited alluvium twigs, charcoal, snails and the occasional bone. No databl objects were recovered. It is to be noted that on the surface th water course in Trench 42 was indistinguishable from the ditches.

Trench 29
This cut through the middle of an oval/sub-rectangular rise of 0.3m in the field surface. The cause of the elevation proved to b a thickening in surface alluvium, though it is possible that it ha been redeposited.

Trench 48
This was cut across a nettle patch c 25m E-W by 15m N-S situated o an island measuring c 90m E-W and 65m N-S which was bounded by straight existing ditch to the north and by a curved silted ditc elsewhere. The nettle patch proved to relate to very recen agricultural activity and excavation of the alluvium in the trenc gave no indication of archaeological activity.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Environmental

The environmental preservation on the site is extremely good and thi evidence would be destroyed by gravel extraction. It is recommended tha the environmental history of the site be looked into as a separate project. This would require the excavation of a few sampling trenches (in the ligh of the present assessment); their accurate recording and sampling (with pump working continuously); and the analysis of samples taken of vegetation. snails, and silts and sands.

2. Archaeological

The assessment has shown archaeological activity on the site to b minimal. It is not recommended that there be an excavation on the basis o

present evidence, though anything of archaeological interest that came to light in subsequent working of the site would, of course, need to be notified and recorded.

3. Changes in the course of the Holy Brook and Kennet

This has been adequately looked at for the crucial area, the west end of the site.

4. Recent land managment

The whole area is a hay meadow/ water meadow system of long standing. There is a clear case for it to be recorded and investigated. This must be done as a distinct project and should start with an EDM contour survey and documentary research. It is possible that some supplementary archaeological and enviromental work would be required.