

Belvedere Nurseries Fenny Stratford Nr Milton Keynes



Archaeological Evaluation



Oxford Archaeology

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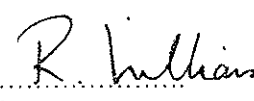
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Position: Director - Operations and Business Development

Date: 7th January 2002

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Illustrated by Roz Smith

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**Belvedere Nurseries, Fenny Stratford, Nr Milton Keynes,
Buckinghamshire**
ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION

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SUMMARY

In December 2001, Oxford Archaeology carried out a field evaluation at Belvedere Nurseries, Fenny Stratford, near Milton Keynes, Buckinghamshire (NGR SP 8874 3395). The work was undertaken on behalf of Conserve-A-Tree Ltd. The evaluation revealed features associated with a Roman field system, the plough soil of which was identified in each trench. These features included probable boundary ditches and associated pits.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Location and scope of work

1.1.1 In December 2001, Oxford Archaeology (OA) carried out a field evaluation at Belvedere Nurseries, Fenny Stratford near Milton Keynes on behalf of Conserve-A-Tree Ltd. This work was in respect of a condition for archaeological mitigation as part of the planning permission for the development of land to the south of the existing garden nursery (Planning Application No. MK/0035/94).

1.1.2 The brief was set by, and a Written Scheme of Investigation (WSI) agreed with Brian Giggins (Milton Keynes Archaeological Officer). The development site is situated at NGR SP 8874 3395 (Fig. 1) and is 0.216 hectares in area.

1.2 Geology and topography

1.2.1 The site lies on terrace gravels with underlying Oxford Clay and occasional alluvial deposits being present in the immediate area (British Geological Survey, Sheet 220) at c 67 m Ordnance Datum (OD). The site is currently used as grazing pasture for sheep. The land slopes gently to the south west, towards the River Ouzel, which lies c 80 m to the west of the development area.

1.3 Archaeological and historical background

1.3.1 The archaeological background to the evaluation has been included within the WSI (OA 2001), the results of which are summarised below. The site itself has produced limited archaeological evidence to date. There are several known sites with archaeological remains adjacent to the development site.

1.3.2 The site lies on the north side of Watling Street and immediately adjoining the site of the small defended Roman settlement of *Magiovinium*, which is a Scheduled Ancient Monument (SAM). The settlement was preceded by a fort and *vicus*, which lie approximately 700 m and 250 m, respectively, to the south-east of this development site. A considerable number of finds, including coin hoards, burials, iron artefacts have been recorded in the area from the 18th century onwards. In 1970, excavation at the north angle of the Galley Lane Crossroads (now the junction of A5 and A4146) revealed five phases of occupation, including a stone-built structure dating to the 4th century AD.

- 1.3.3 Most recently, excavations in advance of the construction of the A5 bypass have shown the presence of the extensive remains of roadside settlement and industry (Neal D, 1987). The closest of these excavations (Site 18) lay approximately 200 m to the east of the development area, to the north of Dropshort Farm. This excavation revealed a Roman road running north from Dropshort Farm, with allotments on either side dating from the latter part of the 1st century A.D (Neal D, 1987, 24).
- 1.3.4 A magnetometer survey carried out by the Department of the Environment Ancient Monuments Laboratory (now English Heritage) approximately 100m to the east of the development site, also produced evidence of significant archaeological activity (1979, A.David).
- 1.3.5 To the south of Watling Street and the site, Roman burials have been discovered, along with artefacts found during ploughing at Dropshort Farm immediately adjacent to the east (pers. comm. Brian Giggins, Milton Keynes Archaeologist).
- 1.3.6 Geophysical Surveys carried out in 1994 and 1999 revealed dense activity in the form of linear and circular anomalies mainly to the immediate north and north-west of the *Magiovinium* settlement and in the eastern half of the field of the development (1999, A.D.H. Bartlett). The new building is to be located to the west of these potential features, in an area indicated by the geophysics to have fewer anomalies of archaeological potential.
- 1.3.7 The site contains the remains of medieval ridge and furrow earthworks. These run on an approximate north-south alignment, and although they have undergone some truncation from modern agriculture, they are still clearly visible within the field.

1.4 Acknowledgements

- 1.4.1 OA extends its thanks to Mr. Peter Hewitson of Belvedere Nurseries for his great patience and understanding throughout the duration of the project. OA also extends its thanks to Brian Giggins, Milton Keynes Archaeologist.

1.5 Evaluation aims

- 1.5.1 To establish the presence/absence of archaeological remains within the development area.
- 1.5.2 To determine the extent, condition, nature, character, quality and date of any archaeological remains present.
- 1.5.3 To establish the exigency for a mitigation strategy.
- 1.5.4 To establish the ecofactual and environmental potential of archaeological deposits and features.
- 1.5.5 To make available the results of the investigation.

- 1.5.6 To define any relevant research priorities if additional archaeological investigation proves necessary.

2 EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

2.1 Scope of fieldwork

- 2.1.1 The evaluation consisted of three trenches each measuring 40 m long x 1.8 m wide (Fig. 2). The overburden was removed under close archaeological supervision by a JCB mechanical excavator fitted with a toothless ditching bucket.

2.2 Fieldwork methods and recording

- 2.2.1 The trenches were located by using digital survey defined by a computer scan of the architects plans for the building development. They were placed in locations so as to avoid a large service or pipeline running north-south across the site which was located during the geophysical survey (Fig. 2).
- 2.2.2 The trenches were cleaned by hand and where the water table allowed, the revealed features were investigated to ascertain their character and to retrieve finds. All archaeological features were planned and sample sections were drawn of the stratigraphic profile within each trench at a scale of 1:20. All features were photographed using colour slide and black and white print film. Recording followed procedures laid down in the *Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) Fieldwork Manual* (ed D Wilkinson, 1992).

2.3 Finds

- 2.3.1 Finds were recovered by hand during the course of the excavation and were bagged by context.

2.4 Palaeo-environmental evidence

- 2.4.1 Due to the high level of the water table at this site, palaeo-environmental sampling was not possible.

2.5 Presentation of results

- 2.5.1 The results are discussed in the following sections with the stratigraphic sequence and then interpretation described trench by trench.

3 RESULTS: GENERAL

3.1 Soils and ground conditions

- 3.1.1 The site is located on fairly free draining plough soils overlying gravels and clays. However, the level of the ground water was encountered at such a height (c 65.70 m OD) as to make archaeological investigation under the defined parameters of the evaluation WSI almost impossible. The extraction of the water within each trench was

attempted but was not successful at attaining a suitable level to enable continued excavation below c 65.90 m OD.

3.2 Distribution of archaeological deposits

Trench 1 and Trench 2

- 3.2.1 No archaeological features were identified within Trench 1, with archaeological deposits being limited to the historic plough soils encountered within all trenches. Trench 2 did include a probable linear feature, which was not investigated due to the influx of ground water that rose to a constant depth of c 0.50 m.

Trench 3

- 3.2.2 Trench 3 was found to contain several archaeological features of both circular and linear form and although the water level did remain low for a short period, the trench was flooded after a few hours making detailed characterisation impossible.
- 3.2.3 The majority of the archaeological deposits encountered during the evaluation were located at the eastern extreme of the area of investigation.

4 RESULTS: DESCRIPTIONS

4.1 Description of deposits

Trench 1

- 4.1.1 Trench 1 (Fig. 2) was aligned approximately east-west and contained four deposits that could be identified (Fig. 3). The earliest of these was the natural sandy gravels of the river terrace (103). The gravel was a moderately fine and very loose yellow brown micaceous material of glacial origin.
- 4.1.2 The natural was overlain by a dark brown clay silt deposit (102) with a >5% gravel content. This deposit was only briefly observed to its full depth and was seen to have a thickness of c 0.38 m.
- 4.1.3 Layer 102 was overlain by an orange brown clay silt (101), which was not a consistent deposit as it undulated slightly in section. This deposit had a maximum thickness of 0.16 m.
- 4.1.4 Overlying this deposit was the uppermost layer in the stratigraphic sequence which was the topsoil (100). This was a loose silty loam that had a thickness of c 0.25 m.

Trench 2

- 4.1.5 Trench 2 (Figs 3 and 4) was found to contain the same sequence encountered within Trench 1, and therefore the descriptions are as above.
- 4.1.6 The single difference in the deposits encountered was that shortly before flooding, the southern end of the trench revealed a probable linear feature (205) that was c 1.50

m wide. It appeared to be cut through deposit 202 (equivalent to 102, Trench 1) although it was identified as it cut the gravel layer 203. This feature was aligned NE - SW and was filled by 204, a moderately compacted reddish brown clay silt. The only find recovered from this context was a bovine humerus.

Trench 3

- 4.1.7 The earliest deposit in the trench was the natural (303), encountered at *c* 65.50 m OD (Figs 3 and 4).
- 4.1.8 Overlying the gravel was layer 302 (equivalent to 102, and 202), which was a clay silt with *c* 15% gravel inclusions.
- 4.1.9 Five features were identified within Trench 3 (Fig. 4) and were found to cut through the layer 302. These included two possible pit features (307 and 315), circular in plan located to the southern end of the trench. These features were both *c* 2 m in diameter and were filled with a reddish brown clay silt of moderate compaction (306 in pit 307 and 316 in pit 315). Roman pottery was recovered from both of these fills. The depths, profiles and true character of these pit features were not ascertained due to the high level of the water table.
- 4.1.10 Three linear features were also identified (305, 310 and 312). These were all aligned NW-SE and were adjacent to one another. Ditch 305 (Figs 3 and 4) was *c* 0.5 m wide and was filled by 304, a clay silt with occasional pea gravel inclusions. Roman pottery was recovered from this feature. Ditch 312 was *c* 0.8 m wide and was filled with 313, a deposit similar to 304. Ditch 310 was filled with deposit 311, which was of the same type as the fills of the other linear features. This feature was *c* 1.3 m wide. None of the above features were fully excavated although a small incomplete section through linear 305 was begun to gain dating evidence and the upper profile of the feature (Fig. 3).
- 4.1.11 Sealing these fills and layer 302 was an orange brown clay silt (301) which was equivalent to deposits 101 and 201 in Trenches 1 and 2. This deposit in turn was overlain by the topsoil (300).

4.2 Finds

Pottery

- 4.2.1 Pottery was recovered from the plough soils and from several identified features giving good dating evidence from sealed contexts.
- 4.2.2 Although the pottery assemblage was quite small due to the inability to undertake detailed sample excavation of features, the majority of sherds recovered do seem to be in good condition and do not appear to have been badly abraded and damaged by plough action.
- 4.2.3 The pottery recovered did include two sherds of samian ware from South Gaul, indicating importation and trading patterns. This is hardly surprising due to the

proximity of the main route of Watling Street to the south of the site and the settlement of *Magiovinium* to the south-east.

- 4.2.4 The limited collection of ceramic dating evidence does not enable a suggestion of status for the site. With no associated structures found with the field system, it is not possible at this juncture to suggest any status links with the pottery recovered.
- 4.2.5 The majority of the finds recovered from the site are from Trench 3 and these are of secure Roman dates. However, they are not closely dated. A date range of later 1st to 2nd century is likely for all the Roman pottery, but the fabrics identified were known to have been in continuous use into the later Roman period.
- 4.2.6 Modern/post-medieval pottery was recovered from the topsoil but was not retained.

Animal bone

- 4.2.7 A single example of a bovine humerus was recovered from ditch fill 204 (Trench 2). The bone had received some post-excavation damage, but was in good condition. The feature was apparently undated, but was cut through a datable Roman context and was sealed by the deposit 201, associated with the ridge and furrow plough soil. The find is probably therefore contemporary with the Roman phase of the site.

4.3 Palaeo-environmental remains

- 4.3.1 No samples for the examination of palaeo-environmental remains were taken as the amount of water present over each feature/archaeological deposit of interest was detrimental to the sampling process of the preservation and the overall recovery of material.

5 DISCUSSION AND INTERPRETATION

5.1 Reliability of field investigation

- 5.1.1 The stratigraphic evidence encountered on this site was well sealed and therefore any information gained from these deposits was deemed reliable.
- 5.1.2 The one significant problem encountered during this evaluation was the remarkably high level of the water table. This limited the field investigation to a very basic level of identifying the archaeological potential of the development area. The exact typology and character of the archaeology could not be fully ascertained, but the general depth and type of deposits were identified reliably.

5.2 Overall interpretation

Summary of results

- 5.2.1 As the 1999 geophysical survey had indicated a specific concentration of archaeological anomalies in the south-east corner of the field, the development area had been moved to the western edge of these anomalies in order to avoid them.

Trench 3 was located on the periphery of the concentration identified during the geophysical survey.

- 5.2.2 From the differing height of the water table and the natural gravel it would appear that the site is located over two terraces, with Trench 3 situated over the upper river terrace and Trenches 1 and 2 being situated over the secondary.
- 5.2.3 All features cut through the deposit that was identified in Trench 3 as a Roman plough soil (302, which relates to layers 102 and 202). This deposit in turn was stratigraphically sealed by a medieval plough soil (101, 201 and 301) making these features contemporary and certainly associated with the agrarian development of this site during the established occupation of *Magiovinium* to the north.
- 5.2.4 The linear features located within Trench 3 are likely to represent field boundaries in the Roman period. The three gullies or ditches shown in Figure 4 are similarly aligned but it is unclear at this stage whether these form separate features or represent the re-use of a single ditch line. The depth of ground water has made the more accurate interpretation of these features difficult.
- 5.2.5 To the south of these linear features were two probable pits. These had large diameters and this may suggest possible use as rubbish pits though there is no artefactual evidence to support this.
- 5.2.6 It is possible that further features were located within Trench 3 but were unable to be seen due to the rapid increase in the water table.
- 5.2.7 Trench 2 contained one possible feature (205), which was seen at the southern end of the trench. It is possible that other archaeological features may be present in this location but were not seen, again due to the influx of the ground water.
- 5.2.8 The feature located here was a possible NE-SW orientated ditch that appeared to be aligned at a right-angle to those ditches located within Trench 3. Although this feature revealed no datable finds, it was cut from the ploughsoil 202 (equivalent to 302) and was stratigraphically related to those features identified in Trench 3.
- 5.2.9 The findings of this evaluation suggest that a Roman field system existed here between *Magiovinium* and Watling Street to the south. The ditches identified represent a gridded field system consistent with the Roman date.
- 5.2.10 It is quite probable that the field boundaries identified in the development area can be associated with the gullies and ditches identified in David S. Neal's excavation in the late 1980's (Site 18) which was located to the north-east of Belvedere Nurseries. The features located on David Neal's Site 18 linked to a main drainage ditch running parallel with Watling Street and these were interpreted as being part of a sequence of allotment areas associated with the peripheral settlement.

Significance

- 5.2.11 The evaluation has identified the remains of a Roman field system, situated to the north-west of *Magiovinium* and at a point to the east of where Watling Street crosses the River Ouzel.
- 5.2.12 Whilst, some assumptions and interpretative details may be quite tentative considering that the identification of the archaeology was limited by high water levels, the general interpretation is relatively clear. The features represent further activity of the same nature to that recorded in Neal's excavations in 1978-80, namely a field system orientated around roadways. The pottery evidence also corresponds, indicating no occupation earlier than the Flavian period. All but one off the features revealed during the evaluation were in Trench 3, indicating that activity is focused to the east and south of the site confirming the results of the geophysical survey.

6 IMPACT OF THE DEVELOPMENT

- 6.1.1 The part of the site on which the development is planned lies on the western side of Trench 3 towards the extant access road to Belvedere Nurseries off Watling Street. It is here that the evaluation did not identify archaeological remains except for the probable ditch located at the southern end of Trench 2. Whilst it is likely that some archaeological features will be present to the west of Trench 3, the potential for more significant deposits lies to the south and east of this trench.
- 6.1.2 Therefore, it is important to be aware of this potential when considering the foundation proposals for the development strategy of the new garden centre.
- 6.1.3 It is the developer's intention to create a car park area to the south of the site with a main building block located on the north-western side of the site. The nature of the car park would mean stripping the top 0.30 m (maximum) of soil and laying the car park platform over this on a raised area. Although this maximum depth does not unconditionally protect the archaeology below, it does minimise truncation.
- 6.1.4 The area that has been specified for the construction of the main centre building is located over deeper soil horizons than exist to the east. The depth of the modern plough soil and the medieval plough soil reach approximately 0.40m and then the Roman plough soil is also up to c 0.40 m thick. Therefore, excavation for foundation trenches, service trenches, or general site stripping below 0.40 m from the existing ground surface may impact on the surviving archaeological deposits and features. The likelihood of disturbance increases to the south-east and decreases to the north-west. The current proposal locates those works which will have the greatest impact into the ground in the areas where disturbance of archaeological deposits is least likely.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1 ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXT INVENTORY

| Trench | CTX No | Type | Width (m) | Thick (m) | Comment | Finds | No/Wt (g) | Date |
|--------|--------|-------|-----------|-----------|----------------------|-------------|-----------|------|
| 1 | 100 | Layer | | 0.24 | Topsoil | | | |
| 1 | 101 | Layer | | 0.16 | Medieval plough soil | | | |
| 1 | 102 | Layer | | 0.4 | Roman plough soil | | | |
| 1 | 103 | Layer | | | Natural gravels | | | |
| 2 | 200 | Layer | | 0.24 | Topsoil | | | |
| 2 | 201 | Layer | | 0.12 | Medieval plough soil | | | |
| 2 | 202 | Layer | | 0.42 | Roman plough soil | | | |
| 2 | 203 | Layer | | | Natural gravels | | | |
| 2 | 204 | Fill | | unknown | Fill of 205 | Animal Bone | | |
| 2 | 205 | Cut | >1 | | Ditch? | | | |
| 3 | 300 | Layer | | 0.31 | Topsoil | | | |
| 3 | 301 | Layer | | 0.17 | Medieval plough soil | | | |
| 3 | 302 | Layer | | >0.35 | Roman plough soil | Pottery | | |
| 3 | 303 | Layer | | | Natural gravels | | | |
| 3 | 304 | Fill | | unknown | Fill of 305 | Pottery | | |
| 3 | 305 | Cut | >0.6 | | Ditch? | | | |
| 3 | 306 | Fill | | unknown | Fill of 307 | Pottery | | |
| 3 | 307 | Cut | >2.5 | | Pit? | | | |
| 3 | 310 | Cut | 1.5? | | Ditch? | | | |
| 3 | 311 | Fill | | unknown | Fill of 310 | | | |
| 3 | 312 | Cut | >1 | | Ditch? | | | |
| 3 | 313 | Fill | | unknown | Fill of 312 | | | |
| 3 | 314 | Layer | 0.5 | 0.15 | Redeposited gravel | | | |
| 3 | 315 | Cut | >3.5 | | Pit? | | | |
| 3 | 316 | Fill | | unknown | Fill of 315 | Pottery | | |

APPENDIX 2 POTTERY ASSESSMENT/ SPOT DATING

By Paul Booth

Six sherds of Roman pottery (85 g) and a fragment of Roman tile (148 g) were recovered in the evaluation. These were scanned rapidly and the pottery recorded using codes in the Oxford Archaeology Roman pottery recording system.

The following pottery fabrics were represented:

- S20. South Gaulish samian ware. 2 sherds, 15 g.
- O80. Coarse- (grog and sand-) tempered oxidised ware. 1 sherd, 40 g.
- R10. Fine reduced 'coarse' ware. 1 sherd, 7 g.
- R30. Moderately sandy reduced coarse wares. 2 sherds, 21 g.

The South Gaulish samian sherds, in the same context (304), were from two separate vessels probably of form 18/31, dated c AD 90-110. One sherd had a small hole for a repair. The coarse ware sherds were not diagnostic in terms of source and included only one feature sherd which was a base fragment in the fine reduced ware fabric R10. They are therefore not closely dated. A date range of later 1st to 2nd century is possible for all the Roman pottery, but a wider range is also possible.

The single tile fragment was a flat piece 27 mm thick. This was possibly from a *tegula* but the thickness might suggest that it was from a brick form such as a *bessalis*.

APPENDIX 3 BIBLIOGRAPHY AND REFERENCES

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APPENDIX 4 SUMMARY OF SITE DETAILS

Site name: Belvedere Nurseries, Fenny Stratford, Milton Keynes

Site code: FESTBN 01

Grid reference: SP 8874 3395

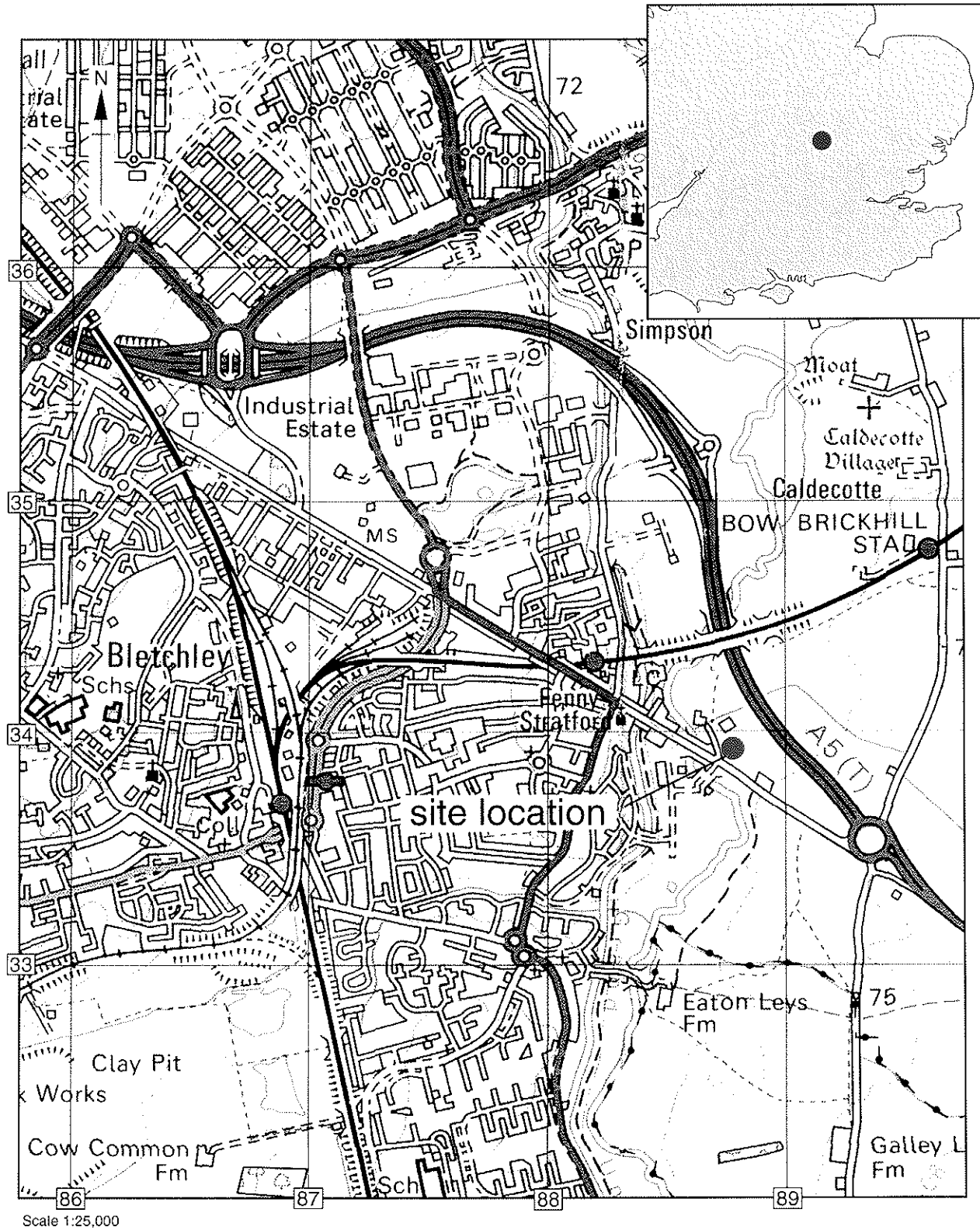
Type of evaluation: Three 40m trenches

Date and duration of project: 10.12.01 - 12.12.01

Area of site: 0.216 ha

Summary of results: Historic plough soils were identified with linear features and possible pits located - associated with the Roman agricultural horizon.

Location of archive: The archive is currently held at OA, Janus House, Osney Mead, Oxford, OX2 0ES, and will be deposited with Milton Keynes Depository Store in due course, under the following accession number: AYBCM:2000:24



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Figure 1: Site Location

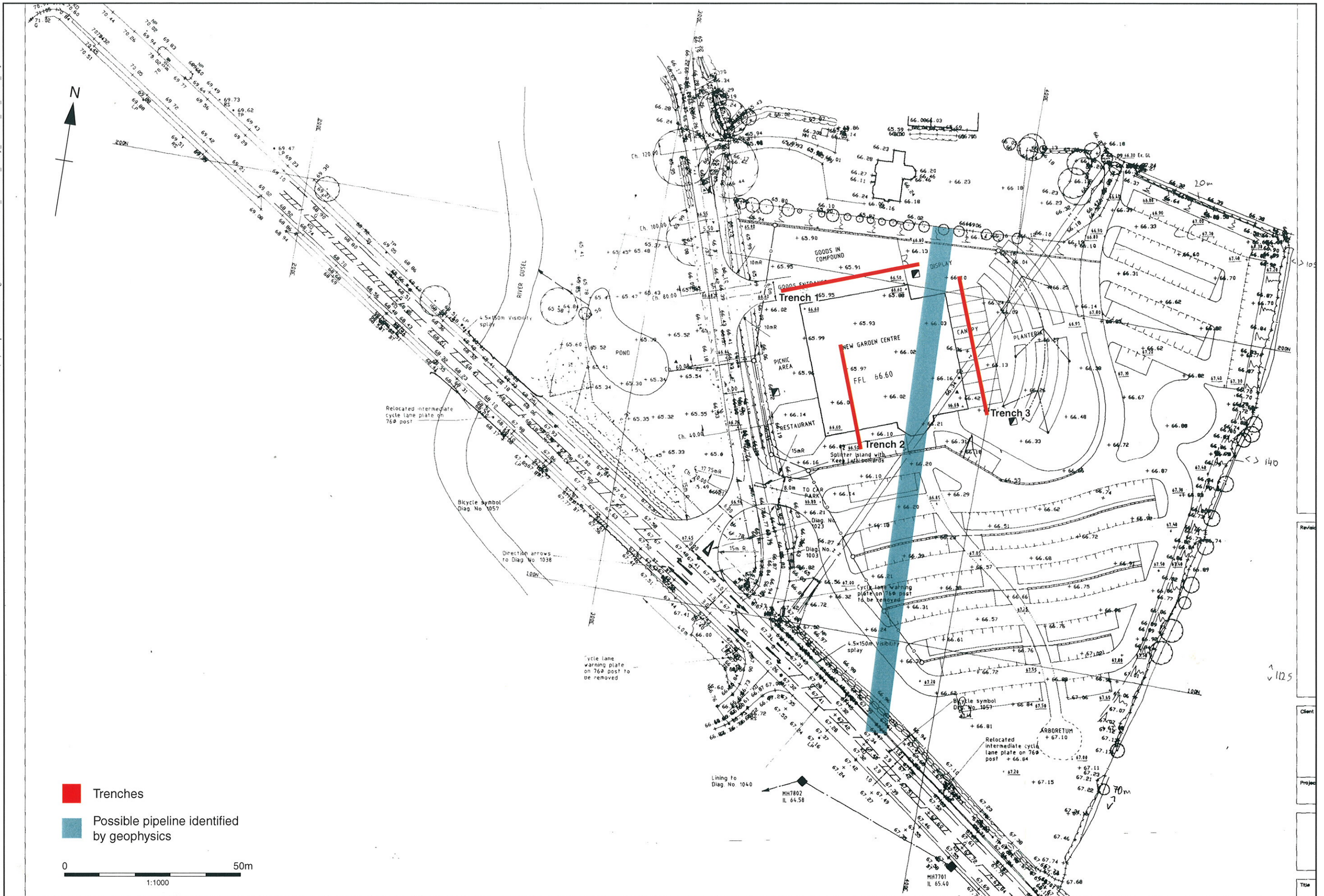
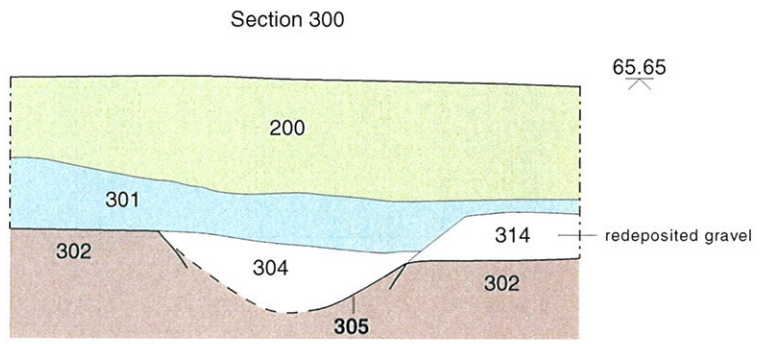
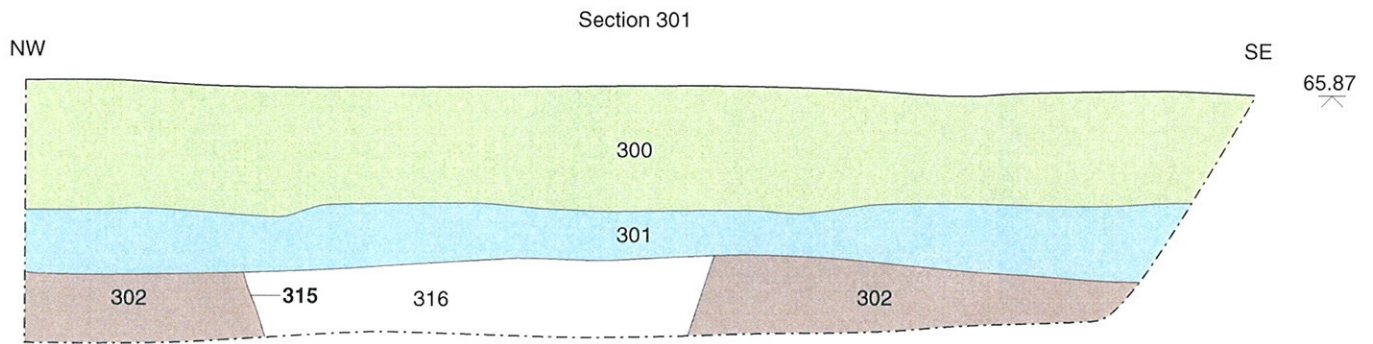
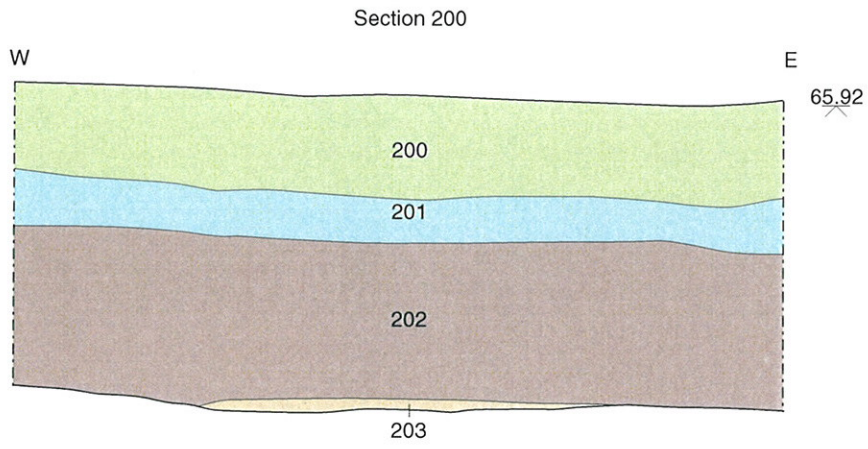
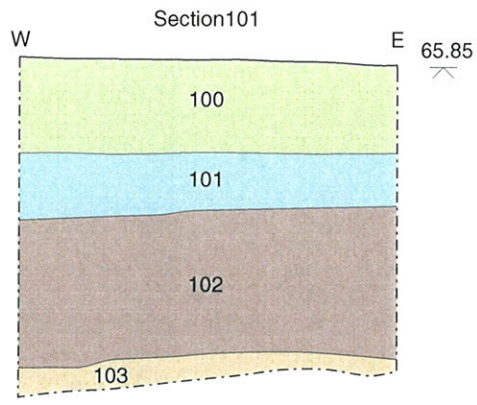


Figure 2: Trench Location



- Top soil
- Medieval plough soil
- Roman plough soil
- Gravels

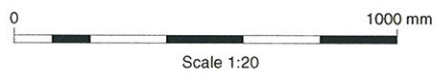


Figure 3 : Sections

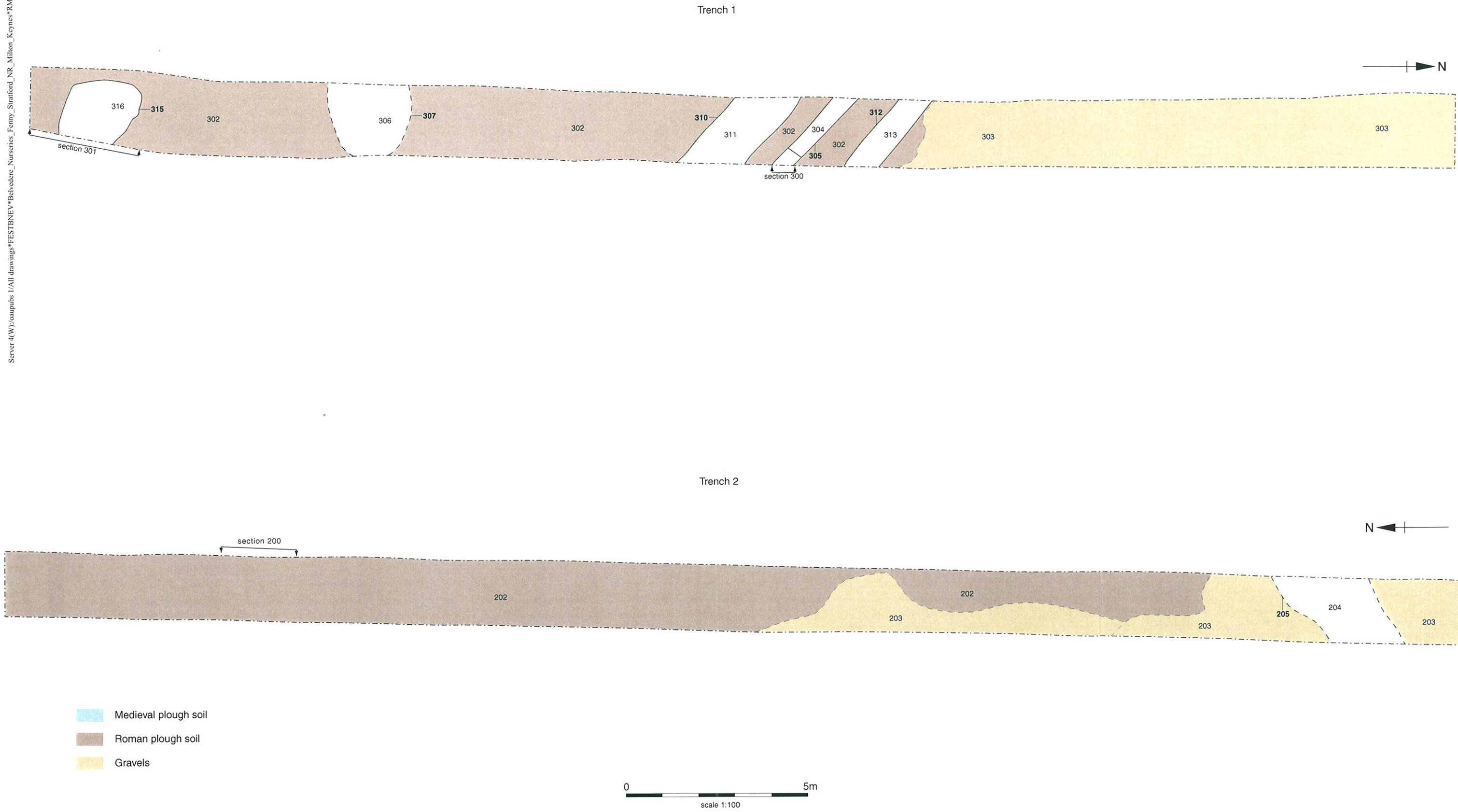


Figure 4: Trenches 2 and 3 Plans



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