Land at Sutton Wick Abingdon, Oxfordshire

NGR SU 940 955

Archaeological Watching Brief

OXFORD ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT

October 1995

LAND AT SUTTON WICK, ABINGDON, OXFORDSHIRE
ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF REPORT
NGR SU 940 955

1 SUMMARY

Evidence of possible prehistoric land clearance and a post-medieval field boundary were observed during this watching brief. However, the absence of more intensive land use is explained by the substantial build up of alluvial deposits owing to this sites' close proximity to the River Thames.

2 INTRODUCTION

The Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) undertook a watching brief at Sutton Wick in the summer of 1995 [Fig. 1]. Sutton Wick is located c 1.5 km to the south of Abingdon. Topsoil stripping in advance of gravel extraction was monitored for the presence of finds and features by OAU personnel. Three areas (A, B, C) have been proposed for extraction, and the recent work was carried out in area A (Fig. 2). The groundwork was undertaken by J. Curtis and Sons Ltd. of Abingdon. The topsoil was stripped using a 360° Hymac machine over the course of several months and an access road was cut at the SE end of the site to link area A to area C.

3 ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

Extraction site A lies in a field to the SE of a sewage station and within 100 m of the River Thames (Isis). The site comprises c. 2 hectares of first terrace gravel which overlie the Oxford Clay. Topsoil is located at 48.50 m O.D.

Sutton Wick is located in an area particularly rich in archaeological activity. To the S of Sutton Wick is Scheduled Ancient Monument 248, a concentration of enclosures ranging from the Neolithic to the Saxon periods. The central feature of this group is the Drayton Curses, a substantial enclosure monument dated by radio-carbon samples to 2900 BC.

Cropmarks and enclosures are known in areas B and C. Extraction of gravel in area C is due to take place in 1997, although no further work will take place in area B. Medieval field ditches were identified in Area A in 1989 (OAU Archaeological Assessment).

4 METHODOLOGY

The site was stripped over a period of some four months by a single 360° excavator. This operation was discontinuous and unpredictable in timing. In view of these factors, and the extremely low density of features observed during the first few visits to the site, it was

felt that full time monitoring of topsoil removal was not practicable. However, the entire stripped area was examined in the course of a number of visits by OAU staff.

Topsoil and ploughsoil were stripped to the top of the gravel across the site. The combined depth of these deposits was c 0.25-0.30 m. At the west end of the site the ploughsoil directly overlay the gravel subsoil. In the eastern third of the site the ploughsoil overlay alluvial clay above the gravel subsoil. This increased in thickness to the east (towards the river). The alluvial material was stripped in a separate operation from the removal of the topsoil. This operation tended to remove the interface between the alluvium and the underlying gravel, but observation suggested that usually no more than about 0.05 m of gravel was stripped away in this operation. It is therefore thought most unlikely that any significant archaeological features were lost by this process.

As a consequence of the lower level of monitoring during the later part of the stripping process, however, part of the central area and the northeast corner were only inspected after stripping, at a stage when there had been some vehicle movement across the area. This did have an adverse affect on conditions for observation, since a N-S ditch line seen in the southern part of the site (see below) and in the 1989 evaluation could not be seen in its entirety, although cleaning along its length showed that it extended across the whole site.

5 RESULTS

A small area at the NW corner of the field was stripped in May 1995 and a deep sump dug to alleviate the problem of high water table. Observation of the sump revealed that Oxford Clay lay below 3.0 m of gravel.

The ploughsoil (2) was 0.12-0.15 m thick and consisted of a dark brown clay loam incorporating patches of silty clay. The clay probably derives from alluvium caused by flooding from the nearby river. Topsoil (1) was a dark grey-brown loam which was 0.14 m thick. Several pieces of clay pipe and modern pottery sherds were recovered from this layer.

Alluvial deposits were identified in the eastern part of the field. They increased in thickness to the east. At their deepest, in the area of the access road, where the underlying gravel was not exposed, alluvial layers 15 and 16 were 0.34 m+ thick.

Several tree-throw pits (Fig. 3), characterised by their irregular shape, were revealed beneath the ploughsoil. These are summarised in the table at the end of this report. The fills of the tree holes were all dark silty clays, and contained burnt flint and stones, fired clay and charcoal flecks.

A 20 m length of a large ditch (14), c 1.75-2.20 m wide and aligned roughly N-S, was observed running from the southern edge of the stripped area. This almost certainly represents the continuation of a ditch on the same alignment identified during the 1989 evaluation and thought to be of ?medieval date. The ditch was observed in two sections, one dug by the OAU at the S end of the site, the other by the contractors as they began

to extract the gravel at the north end of the site. This section was photographed.

The section dug at the S end of the site (Fig. 4) revealed that the ditch was 2.31 m wide and 0.48 m deep with a flattish base and 75° sloping sides. The ditch contained three fills, the lowest of which (18) was a mix of gravel and silty grey clay. Fill 18 was sealed by 17, a dark grey loam with patches of grey silty clay. Fill 17 contained one sherd of glazed post-medieval pottery. The upper fill of the ditch, 13, was a loose grey-brown clay loam with gravel inclusions. The ditch was cut through alluvial layer 15, and its upper fill sealed by the present topsoil.

6 THE FINDS

A number of fossils and two pieces of animal bone were recovered from the Oxford Clay. The other finds were post-medieval and modern, and are summarised by context in the table below.

CTX	NUMBER OF PIECES	TYPE AND DATE
1	4	Post-medieval clay pipe
1	3	Post-medieval white china (1x) and red glazed modern pottery
12	7	Geological fossils
12	2	Geological/prehistoric bone
15	3	Post-medieval glazed pottery
15	2	Post-medieval clay pipe
17	1	Single sherd of glazed C17-18 pottery

7 CONCLUSIONS

The dark fills of the tree holes with associated charcoal and burnt flint inclusions suggests that the trees were burnt *'in situ'* and subsequently removed as part of a deliberate land clearance. This clearance may have occurred in the late Neolithic/early Bronze Age, in common with other sites in the Oxfordshire region. The tree holes were only encountered in the northwest corner of the field.

The large N-S ditch (14) was thought in the 1989 evaluation report to belong to a medieval field system. This conclusion was on the basis of a single sherd of green-glazed pottery. However, the presence of a post-medieval sherd of pottery dates this ditch to perhaps the C17-18, making the sherd found in the 1989 evaluation residual.

That so little of consequence was found on this site is probably due to its close proximity to the river. Part of the Thames known as Culham Reach passes the site to the east. In periods of high water table the river would overflow, making human occupation

impossible. The thickness of alluvial deposits 15 and 16 at the east end of the site would support this suggestion. Additionally it can be suggested that the N-S ditch (14) represented an attempt to restrict the extent of the flooding, or draining the field, thereby enabling the field to be reclaimed for agricultural use. This took place in the post-medieval period, based on the post-medieval pottery sherd found in the middle fill of ditch 14.

8 REFERENCES

Benson, D and Miles, D, 1974, *The Upper Thames Valley: an archaeological survey of the river gravels, Oxford*

Otney, Sutton Courtenay, OAU, October 1989, Archaeological assessment

J. Hiller
Oxford Archaeological Unit
September, 1995

Table of context information

CTX	TYPE	DEPTH	WIDTH	COMMENTS
1	layer	0.14 m	-	topsoil
2	layer	0.12 m	-	former ploughsoil , incorporating alluvial deposits
3	layer	3.0 m	-	natural gravel
4	cut	0.27 m	0.95 m	tree hole
5	fill	0.27 m	-	silty clay fill of 4
6	cut	-	1.10 m	unexcavated irregular tree hole
7	cut	-	1.95 m	unexcavated tree hole
8	fill	0.52 m	-	mixed burnt clay fill of tree hole 9
9	cut	0.52 m	1.85 m	irregular shaped tree hole
10	fill	-	-	fill of unexcavated tree hole
11	fill	-	-	fill of unexcavated tree hole
12	layer	2.0 m+	-	dark blue-grey Oxford Clay
13	fill	0.14 m	-	upper fill of ditch 14
14	cut	0.50 m	2.31 m	N-S post-medieval ditch
15	layer	0.24 m	-	alluvial layer seen in access road cut in SE corner of the site
16	layer	0.10 m+	-	alluvial clay layer in SE corner of site below 15
17	fill	0.23 m	-	dark-grey clay loam fill of ditch 13, produced one sherd of post-medieval pottery, beneath fill 13
18	fill	0.10 m	-	base fill of ditch 14 mixed gravel and clay, no finds

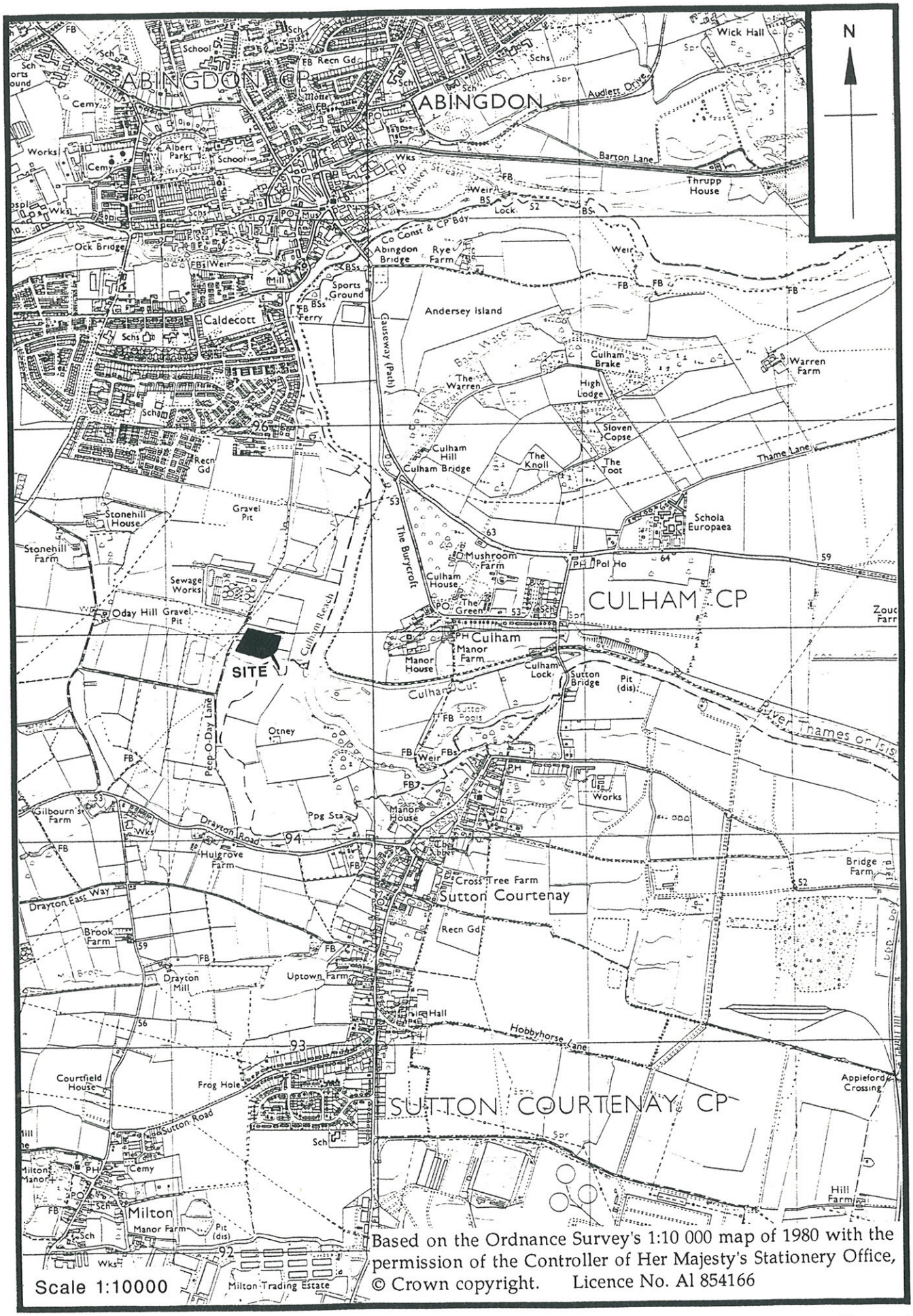
N
ABINGDON CP
ABINGDON
CULHAM CP
SUTTON COURTENAY CP
SITE
Abingdon Bridge
Caldecott
Andersey Island
Culham Bridge
Culham
Sutton Courtenay
Milton
Drayton
Barton Lane
Thame Lane
Hobbyhorse Lane
Drayton Road
Sutton Road
Drayton East Way
Oday Hill Gravel Pit
Gravel Pit
Sewage Works
Milton Trading Estate
Scale 1:10000
Based on the Ordnance Survey's 1:10 000 map of 1980 with the permission of the Controller of Her Majesty's Stationery Office,
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Figure 1

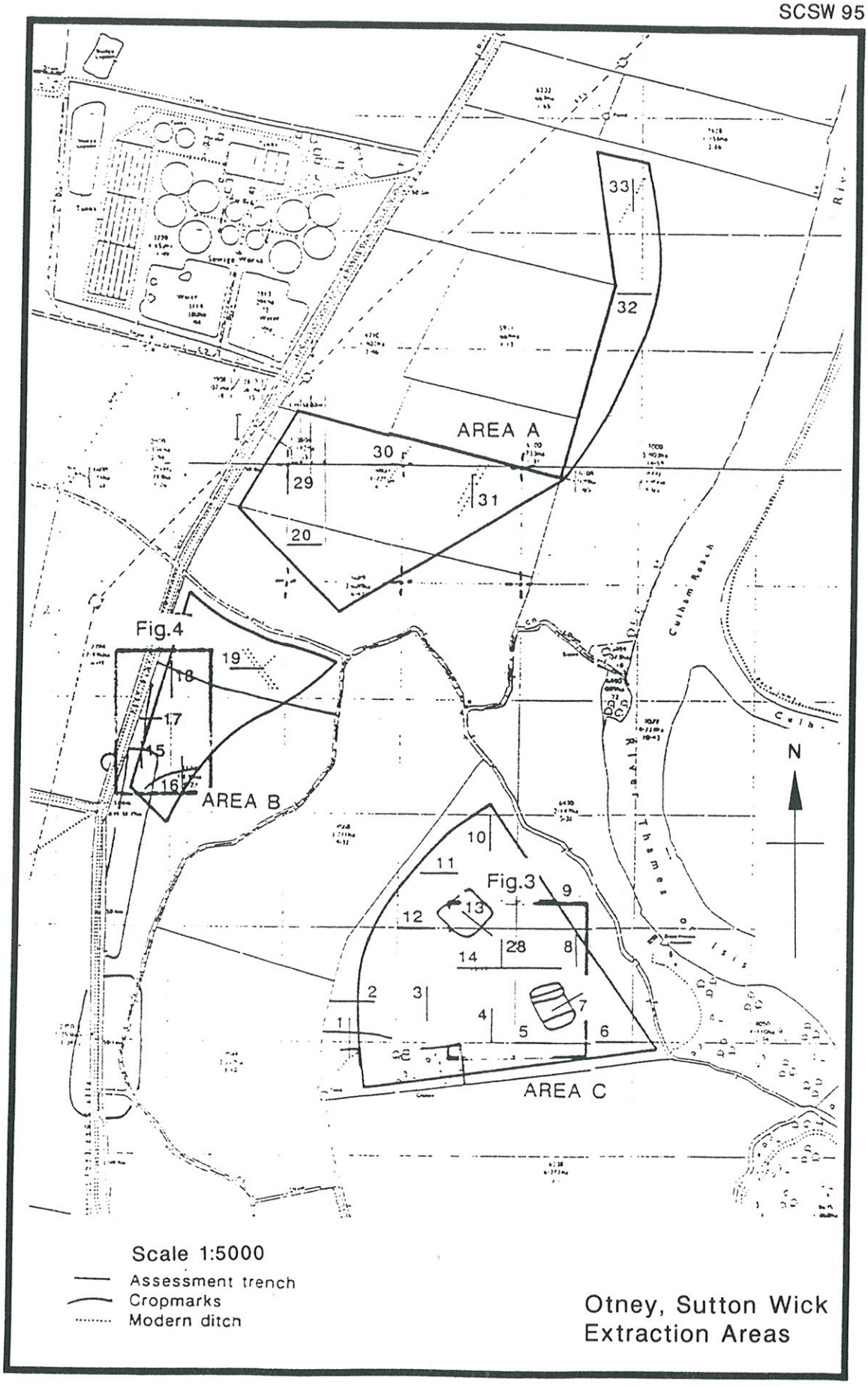

AREA A
AREA B
AREA C
Fig.3
Fig.4
N
Thames
Culham Reach
Scale 1:5000
Assessment trench
Cropmarks
Modern ditch
Otney, Sutton Wick
Extraction Areas

Figure 2

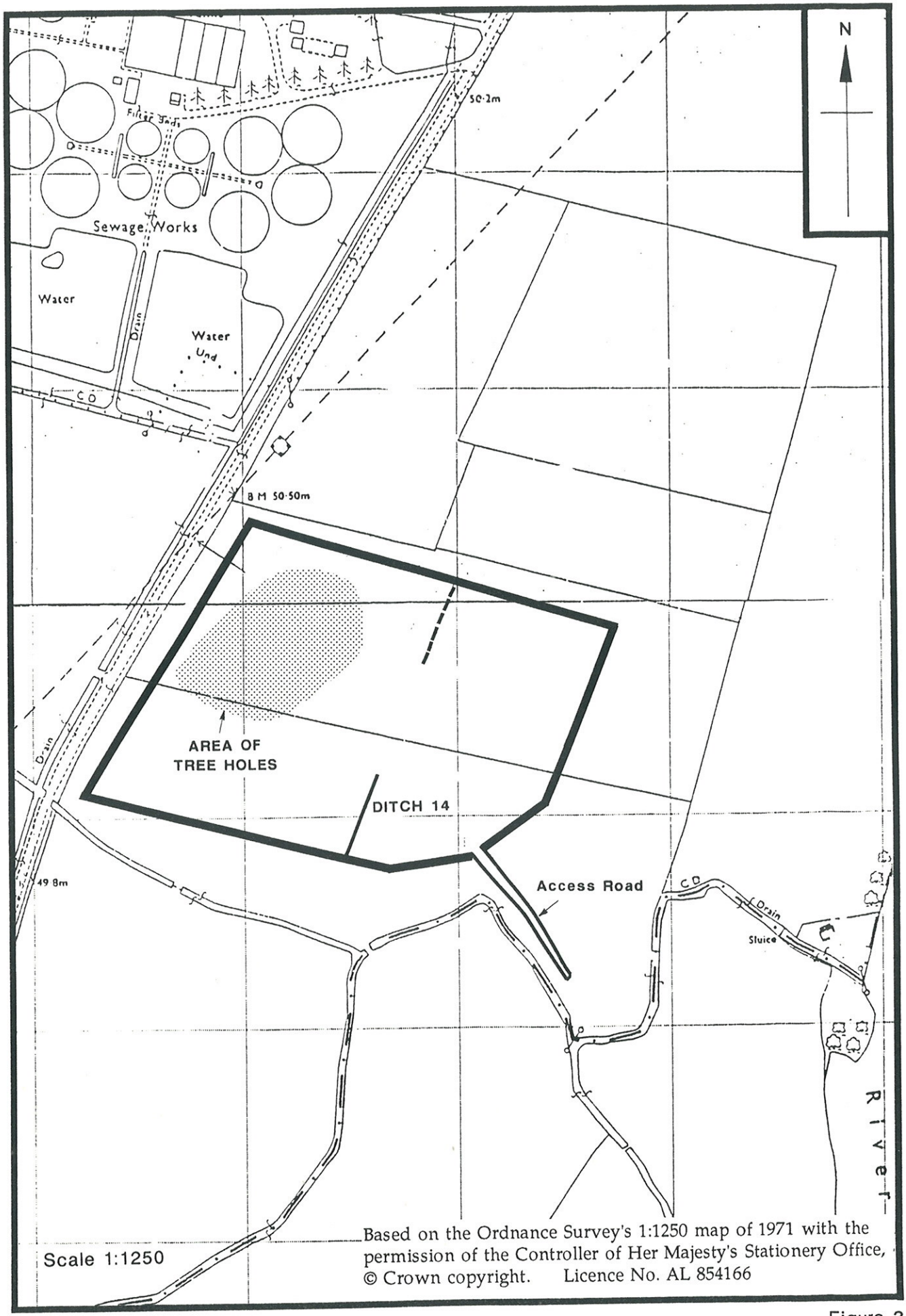
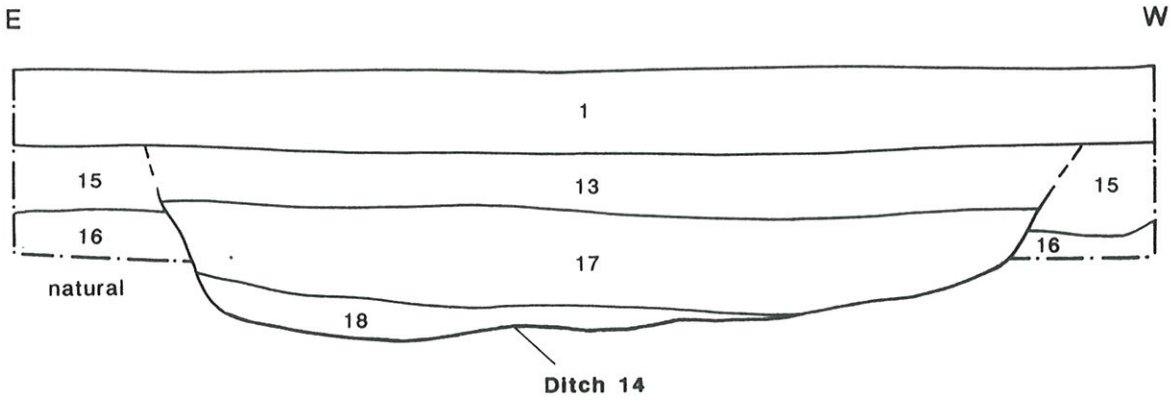

N
50·2m
Sewage Works
Water
Drain
Water
Und.
C D
B M 50·50m
AREA OF
TREE HOLES
DITCH 14
Drain
49·8m
Access Road
C D
Drain
Sluice
River
Scale 1:1250
Based on the Ordnance Survey's 1:1250 map of 1971 with the permission of the Controller of Her Majesty's Stationery Office, © Crown copyright. Licence No. AL 854166

Figure 3



Scale 1:20

Figure 4

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