

WYETH LABORATORIES, TAPLOW, BERKSHIRE

SU 932809

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION REPORT

PROJECT CODE TAWL 93

OXFORD ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT

NOVEMBER 1993

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SUMMARY

The Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) undertook a field evaluation on land adjacent to Wyeth Laboratories, near Taplow, Berks, between November 15th and 18th, 1993, on behalf of Wyeth Laboratories. An alignment of small field boundary gullies was identified, possibly dating to the Bronze Age. A more recent field boundary was located, but not dated.

INTRODUCTION

Wyeth Laboratories have proposed a new office development on a field adjacent to their existing offices. The field straddles the county boundary between Berkshire and Buckinghamshire. Berkshire County Council requested that an archaeological evaluation should be undertaken as a condition of the planning application. The purpose of the evaluation was to determine the presence/absence, extent, condition, quality and date of archaeological remains within the development area. A brief for the evaluation was provided by Mr P Fasham, Archaeological Consultant to Berkshire County Council. A written scheme of investigation was prepared by the OAU, and approved by Mr Fasham. The fieldwork took place between November 15th and 18th, 1993, and the site was visited by Mr Fasham on November 17th 1993.

The site lies in an area of general archaeological potential, on the first gravel terrace of the river Thames, approximately 1.5 miles E of Maidenhead. The gravel terraces of the Thames have been a favoured location for settlement and ritual activity from the early prehistoric period. The middle reaches of the Thames and its tributaries such as the Kennet are particularly known for Bronze Age activity.

The Thames runs within 2 km of the site to the SW. Huntercombe Manor and the site of Burnham Abbey lie immediately to the S of the proposed development area, which lies outside of the abbey's precinct. Little is known of the history of the site except that in recent years it was a market garden.

METHODOLOGY

The evaluation took the form of a four percent sample excavation, with the possibility of a subsequent geophysical survey, dependent upon the results of the

excavation. Eleven trenches were machine excavated (Fig.1), using a JCB equipped with a 1.6 m toothless ditching bucket. Ten trenches were 30 m in length, while one (Trench 11) was restricted to 18 m due to difficult access.

Each trench was machined down to the natural subsoil or gravel, except where modern services were located or archaeological features were identified in plan. Such features were manually cleaned, photographed, recorded in section and plan, and hand excavated. All features and deposits were assigned unique context numbers trench-by-trench. The trench number acts as a prefix to the context number (ie 4/1 = trench 4, context 1). All archaeological features were totally excavated due to the extreme scarcity of dating evidence.

It was agreed with Mr Fasham that geophysical survey was not required. Neither magnetometry nor resistivity would be responsive because of the depths of alluvium; Geophysical Surveys of Bradford have stressed at a recent seminar at the University of Oxford that such techniques are of little or no use on alluvial sites. Furthermore it was clear that a geophysical survey would be unlikely to add significantly to the information obtained by excavation.

RESULTS

General

All trenches revealed an overburden consisting of a silty loam topsoil /1, averaging 0.22 m in depth, overlying a silty clay soil /2, averaging 0.15 m in depth. With the exception of Trench 8, this overlay a light grey silty clay alluvial layer /3 with an average depth of *c.* 0.2 m and a maximum depth of 0.4 m. The modern N-S boundary shown as a dashed line on Figure 1 no longer exists, and no corresponding features were located during the evaluation.

Alluvial deposits of varying depths were noted below layer /3. These were generally deeper towards the N side of the site, and very deep at the W end of the site in Trench 11, where the underlying natural gravel could not be exposed because of the depth of alluvium. Occasional flint nodules were noted, both in the gravel, where exposed, and in the overlying alluvium. The alluvial layers sealed most features, the exceptions being restricted to Trench 8 where the alluvium was absent.

The following text summarises the results for each trench. Further details of every context are presented in Appendix 1. Figure 1 shows the location of all the trenches, while figures 2-4 provide plans, and sections where relevant, for those trenches which contained archaeological features.

Trench 1 N-S 29.5 m long Figure 2

Two shallow gullies were identified, both sealed by the light grey silt layer 1/3. Gully 1/6 was oriented SW-NE curving very slightly to the N, and gully 1/10 was oriented NW-SE, curving very slightly to the S. The fills of both gullies were indistinguishable from the overlying layer 1/3. No finds were recovered from either feature.

Trench 2 W-E 30.0 m

No archaeology.

Trench 3 N-S 30.0 m

No archaeology.

Trench 4 W-E 30.0 m Figure 2

A NE-SW gully 4/5 was identified, approximately mid way along the trench, sealed by the grey silt layer 4/3, and containing a very similar fill. No dating evidence was recovered.

Trench 5 N-S 30.0 m

There was no archaeology in this trench, but it was noted that the natural gravel horizon was considerably lower in the N part of the trench, up to 1.3 m below the present ground surface, and sealed by silty clay layers 5/5 and 5/6, both containing lenses of fine sand.

Trench 6 N-S 30.0 m

No archaeology.

Trench 7 W-E 30.0 m Figure 3

Near the W end of the trench a shallow gully 7/5 was identified, oriented NNW-SSE, and apparently sealed by soil layer 7/2 but cutting layer 7/3. No finds were recovered from the fill of 7/5, which was a mid brown sandy silt, similar to layer 7/2.

At the approximate mid point of the trench a sub-rectangular feature 7/8 was fully revealed, measuring 1.50 m x 0.60 m x 0.20 m deep. It was sealed by

layer 7/3. The light grey silt fill produced four pieces of struck flint and a burnt quartzite pebble.

Further E a ENE-WSW line of three modern postholes were noted during machining, each containing brick packing and cut from within the topsoil 7/1.

Trench 8 W-E 30.0 m Figure 3

The grey silt layer was not apparent in this trench. Two features were identified. A small NNW-SSE gully, 8/7, cut layer 8/2 and contained a sandy silt fill which was very similar to 8/2. A shallow gully (8/4) oriented NE-SW at the E end of the trench was sealed by 8/2. The fill was a light grey silt. Neither feature produced any dating evidence.

Trench 9 N-S 30.0 m

No archaeology.

Trench 10 W-E 30.0 m Figure 4

At the E end of the trench the topsoil had been covered by a recently dumped layer of gravel and building debris. In the W half of the trench the gravel surface dropped to beyond the excavated depth of 1.20 m, and was sealed by a gravelly clay alluviation 10/11, into which were cut two shallow gullies.

10/6 was oriented NE-SW and contained a light grey silty fill, indistinguishable from the overlying layer 10/3. 10/8 was oriented NW-SE, and contained a light grey/brown silty clay fill, again overlaid by 10/3. Neither fill produced any dating evidence.

Trench 11 N-S 18.0 m Figure 4

The trench contained no archaeology, but layer 11/2 overlay a succession of grey and grey/brown silty clay alluvial deposits, extending beneath the limit of excavation of 1.30 m. The water table was also located at this depth.

FINDS, by Philippa Bradley

A small assemblage of four pieces of struck flint and a burnt quartzite pebble were recovered from the fill 7/7 of feature 7/8. The flint consists of two hard-hammer struck flakes, a piece of irregular waste and a badly damaged end scraper. The flint is good quality, mid to dark brown in colour with a thin light brown cortex,

and may have been available locally in the gravels. The material is not diagnostic although a Neolithic/Early Bronze Age date would not be out of place.

INTERPRETATION

The topsoil sealed a homogenous but archaeologically sterile silty clay (layer /2). This did not contain any finds, and did not appear to incorporate soil fractions from the underlying deposits. There would appear to have been little truncation of underlying layers and features, even in Trench 8 where layer 8/2 directly overlay feature 8/7 and the natural gravel. It is difficult, therefore, to interpret layer /2 as a ploughsoil. It may be a water meadow deposit. Certainly it overlay alluvial deposits in all but Trench 8, suggesting that the site had previously been in or on the edge of the floodplain.

Stratigraphically, the two latest archaeological features (ie excepting the various modern services and postholes) are 7/5 and 8/7. These may represent the same gully extending NNW-SSE across the site. It should be noted, however, that 7/5 was apparently sealed by layer 7/2, while 8/7 cut layer 8/2. 7/2 and 8/2 appeared to be equivalent layers, although they need not be of the same date. Gully 7/5 - 8/7 does not align with any existing property boundary, so it presumably pre-dates the present land division. The absence of dating evidence precludes a more exact estimate of its age.

The other linear features (1/6, 1/10, 4/5, 8/4, 10/6 and 10/8) displayed a number of common characteristics. All were of a broadly similar size, and were aligned either NW-SE or NE-SW. All contained a light grey silty alluvial fill, and all were sealed by a very similar light grey alluvial layer (/3) except 8/4, where this deposit was not present in the trench. The natural gravel in Trench 8 is relatively close to the surface, so that any vestigial layer of grey silt overlying it was probably incorporated into the later soil (8/2). It is possible to follow some features through more than one trench (see Fig. 1), although the distance between some of the features makes caution necessary.

The function of pit 7/8 is unknown, but it did produce the only dating evidence recovered from the archaeological features. Significantly, the fill of 7/8 was virtually identical to that of linear features 1/6, 1/10, 4/5, 8/4, 10/6 and 10/8. The later features (7/5 and 8/7), however, had quite different fills. It seems reasonable to conclude that the gullies are contemporary with the pit, and together represent a rudimentary field boundary or drainage system, possibly dating to the Late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age.

EVALUATION OF THE METHODOLOGY

The fieldwork was carried out in generally good weather conditions. Archaeological features were clearly visible in plan and section. All archaeological features were totally excavated, and yet finds were only present in pit 7/8. Virtually all features were sealed by alluvial deposits, except in Trench 8 where the slightly higher level of the gravel meant that such deposits were absent. Nevertheless pit 7/8 did not show any sign of significant truncation. A high degree of confidence can therefore be assigned to the results.

The paucity of finds represents an obvious and important check on the confidence level. This presents significant problems of dating. Only one feature, 8/7, contained finds. These were not strongly diagnostic, but were probably of Neolithic or early Bronze Age date. Features 1/6, 1/10, 4/5, 8/4, 10/6 and 10/8 appear to be contemporary with the pit stratigraphically and by the soil characteristics of their fills.

DISCUSSION

Recent work has linked hydrological change and periods of alluviation in the Upper Thames floodplain with changes in agricultural practice in the catchment (Robinson 1992). It is suggested that the clearance of woodland in the Cotswolds in the Bronze Age led to the rise in the water table and extensive and prolonged flooding in the river basin.

It seems likely that a similar hydrological sequence occurred in the middle Thames. The light grey silt layer covering most of the site and filling most of the features is typical of an alluvial layer deposited under standing water, in anaerobic conditions. Such a hypothesis is at least not inconsistent with the possible Bronze Age date of the finds.

The East Berkshire Survey (Ford 1987) does not cover Taplow, as it lies within Buckinghamshire. Maidenhead and Slough, to the W and E of the site respectively, are included, however, as are finds from the Thames. The distribution of Neolithic and Bronze Age finds and sites in the area is strongly concentrated on the Thames (Ford 1987, 62-77, Figs 24 and 27). This is especially marked in the Bronze Age, although there are numerous Neolithic finds further from the Thames (up to c. 3.5 km). The OAU located a Neolithic pit, an area of middle Bronze Age settlement, and an area of late Bronze Age or (more likely) Iron Age activity at Cippenham, Slough, within 2 km to the ESE of the site in 1991 (OAU 1991).

There appears to have been little or no later activity on the site until the present century. The total absence of later finds, even from the upper soil layers, would certainly suggest that the site was not extensively utilised from the later prehistoric period onwards.

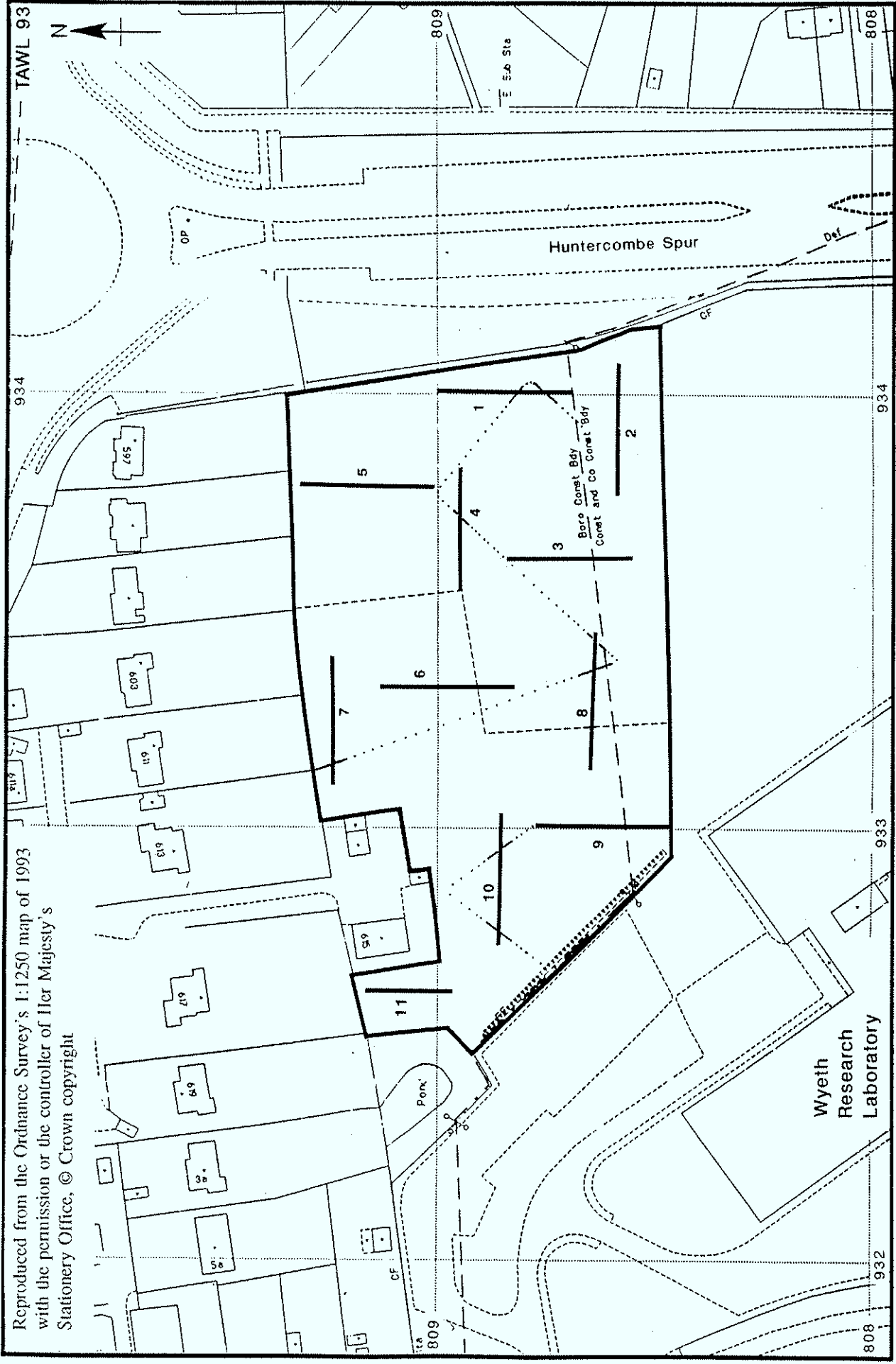
CONCLUSION

The excavation demonstrated that there is only a small amount of archaeological activity on the site, which is of uncertain, but possibly Bronze Age date. A number of linear features were found, some of which appear to continue through more than one trench. As such they may represent field boundaries or enclosures. The former appears to be more likely on the available evidence. A single pit in Trench 8 is the only evidence for settlement activity, which may lie to the N of the development area. It appears that the development proposals do not imply a threat to any significant archaeology in the area.

Alan Hardy and Graham Keevill
Oxford Archaeological Unit
26 November 1993.

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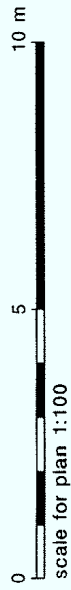


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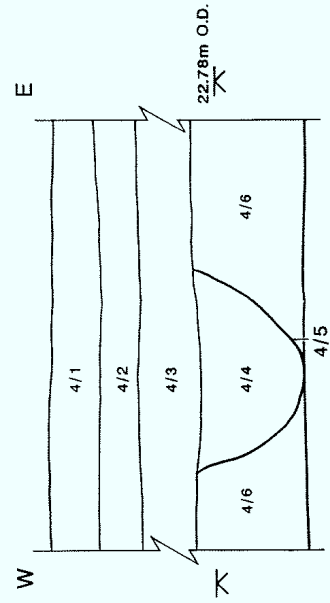
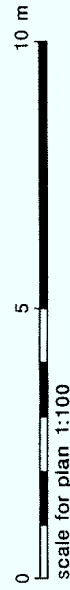
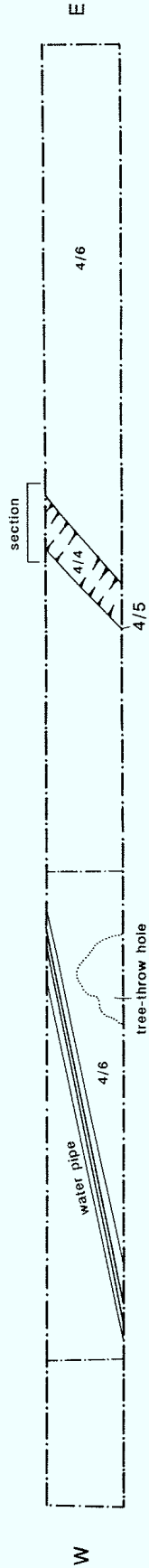
figure 1

Trench location plan @ 1:1250 with features projected

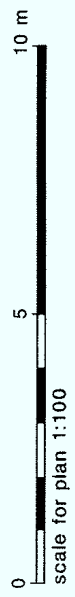
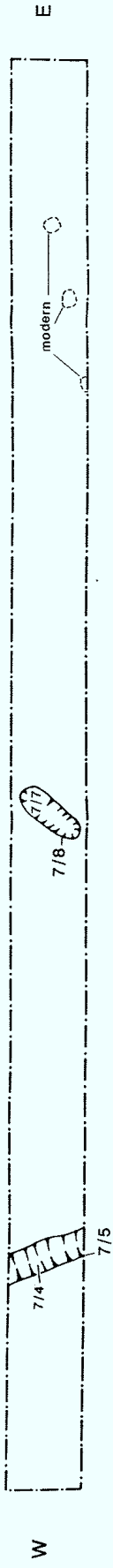
Trench 1



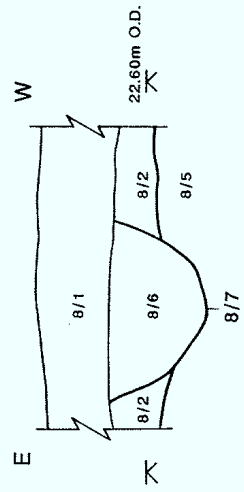
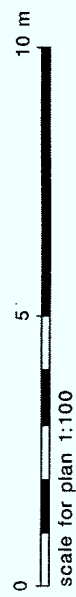
Trench 4



Trench 7



Trench 8



Trench 10

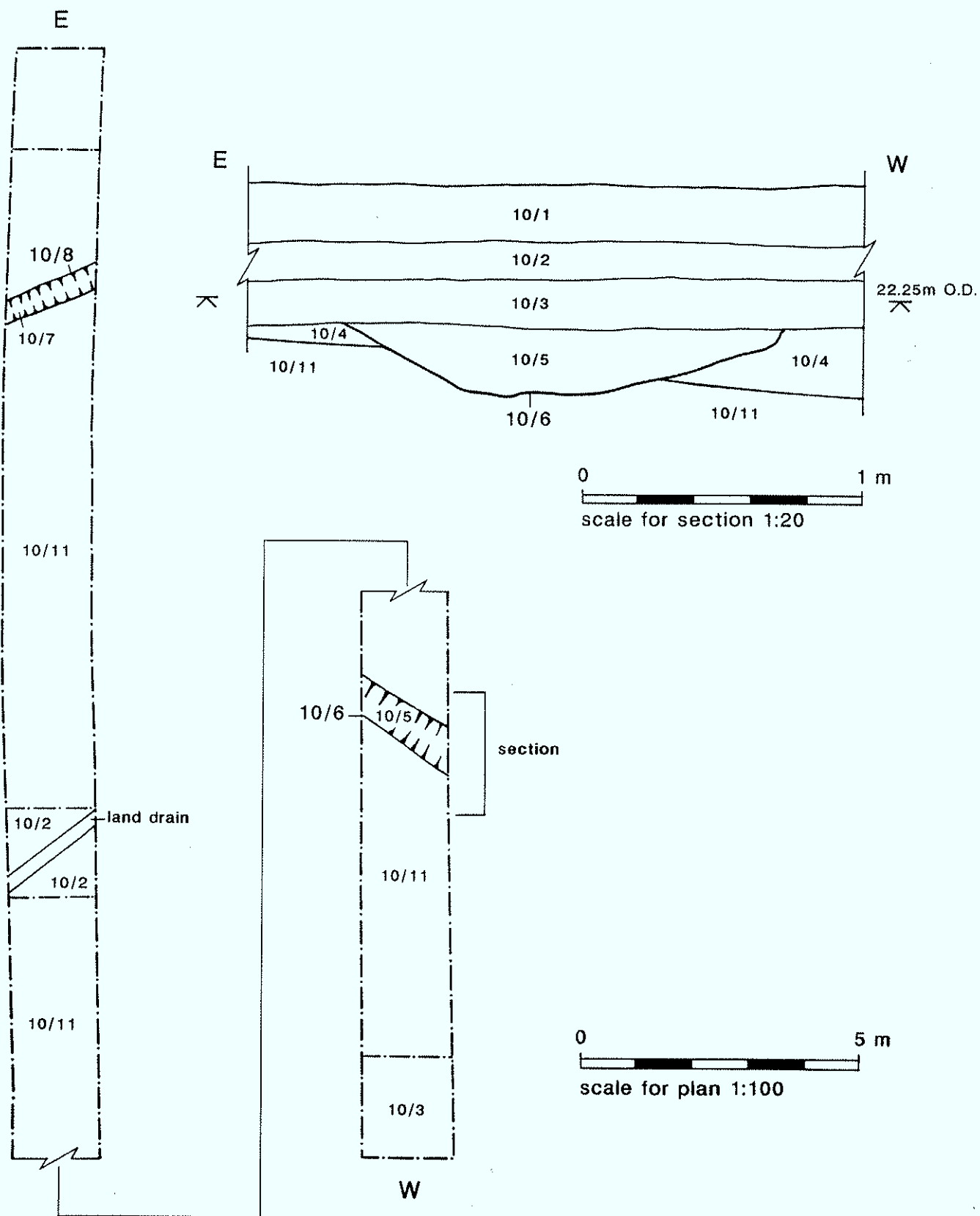


figure 4