Thames Water Utilities

The Harwell Rising Main, Didcot, Oxfordshire

NGR SU 4785 8765/ SU 5120 8885

ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF REPORT

Oxford Archaeological Unit

November 1999

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Oxford Archaeological Unit

November 1999

Summary

In October and November 1999 the Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) undertook a watching brief on the line of the new Harwell Rising Main (NGR SU 4785 8765/ SU 5120 8885). No archaeology was seen; one residual heavily abraded fragment of Roman pottery was retrieved from the topsoil strip within the secure area of AEA Harwell.

1 Introduction

The development proposal comprised the construction of approximately 4.4 kilometres of new sewer main between the Atomic Energy Authority site at Harwell and Didcot in Oxfordshire. Thames Water adheres to the terms of the *Code of Practice on Conservation, Access and Recreation*, published as a result of the Water Act 1989, insofar as its activities may affect the historic landscape. The County Archaeologist required that Thames Water make provision for an archaeological watching brief during the construction period due to the possible presence of features of archaeological interest within the stripped easement.

The watching brief was commissioned by Lang Hall Archaeology on behalf of Thames Water Utilities. It was undertaken to a brief set by and a WSI agreed with the Deputy County Archaeologist for Oxfordshire.

2 Background

The study area lies on the interface between the North Wessex Downs and the Vale of the White Horse. From the Harwell Atomic Energy Establishment, at 120 m OD, the pipe corridor lies on Lower Chalk past Hagbourne Hill (136 m OD) before running onto the Upper Greensand and terminating south-west of Didcot at 70 m OD.

The pipe corridor was cut through open farmland, comprising both arable and pasture for dairy cattle. There were no known archaeological features likely to have been disturbed by the development; this was at least partially the result of the paucity of previous archaeological investigation in the area. Having said this, there are a number of substantial archaeological sites and monuments in the vicinity which suggest that historic activity was no less widespread between Didcot and the Downs than in similar areas both to the east and west.

3 Aims

The aims of the watching brief were to identify any archaeological remains exposed on site during the course of the works, and to record these to established OAU standards (Wilkinson 1992), in order to secure their preservation by record.

4 Methodology

The watching brief was undertaken by means of separate inspection visits; all topsoil stripping and trench excavation was undertaken by O C Summers, Thames Water's main subcontractor, using JCB mechanical excavators. Pipelaying took place in an

open trench, excavated subsequent to the stripping of a 15 m wide easement. Archaeological inspection took place both during and after stripping and during the excavation of the open trench.

Within the constraints imposed by health and safety considerations the deposits exposed were cleaned, inspected and recorded in plan, section and by colour slide and monochrome print photography. Written records were also made on proforma sheets. Soil description utilises standard charts for the approximation of percentage of inclusion types in soil deposits.

5 Results (Figs 1, 2 & 3)

Over the majority of the pipe corridor, beginning at the western edge of Harwell Field, the removal of the topsoil (on average 0.10 m of mid gray silty clay loam with 5% fine subrounded gravel) immediately revealed the chalky natural. The exceptions to this occurred over the final two-thirds of the pipe corridor which ran north-east towards Didcot. Along this stretch the level OD dropped from 136 m OD at the top of Hagbourne Hill to 70 m OD at the termination of the pipe corridor, immediately south-west of Didcot. Along this stretch of the corridor a subsoil was seen to seal the chalky natural; essentially an interface layer it consisted of a mixture of the natural and the topsoil and was thought probably to have resulted from solifluxion. With the exception of disturbance from existing field drains, no archaeological features were seen and no finds were retrieved.

To the west of Harwell Field, within the secure area of the Atomic Energy Authority site, the topsoil strip commenced in the vicinity of LPG and fuel tanks before diverting around an existing electricity substation, then proceeded south-east along the line of an existing trackway crossing the site until reaching the road separating AEA Harwell from Harwell Field. Here both the topsoil, a similar subsoil to that seen at the other end of the corridor, and the chalky natural had all been substantially disturbed by activity associated with the construction and use of the AEA site. As seen within the topsoil strip this comprised concrete platforms and buried pipework associated with the fuel tanks; concrete platforms and buried cabling associated with the substation and makeup for the existing trackway. One find, a Roman sherd, was retrieved from the subsoil in that stretch of the topsoil strip running between the substation and the existing trackway (see fig. 1). No further finds were retrieved; modern activity had been sufficiently invasive to truncate natural deposits across the study area, and no archaeological features were seen.

6 Finds

One highly abraded white mortarium fragment, dating to the 2nd century, was retrieved from the topsoil strip within the secure area of AEA Harwell. This piece derived from the subsoil rather than a cut feature and was found in association with fragments of breezeblock and red housebrick, and thus clearly was not in-situ. However, its presence here may indicate Roman archaeology somewhere in the vicinity.

7 Environmental results

Full consideration was given to soil sampling, however due to the absence of any significant archaeology, no environmental soil samples were taken.

8 Reliability of the Investigation

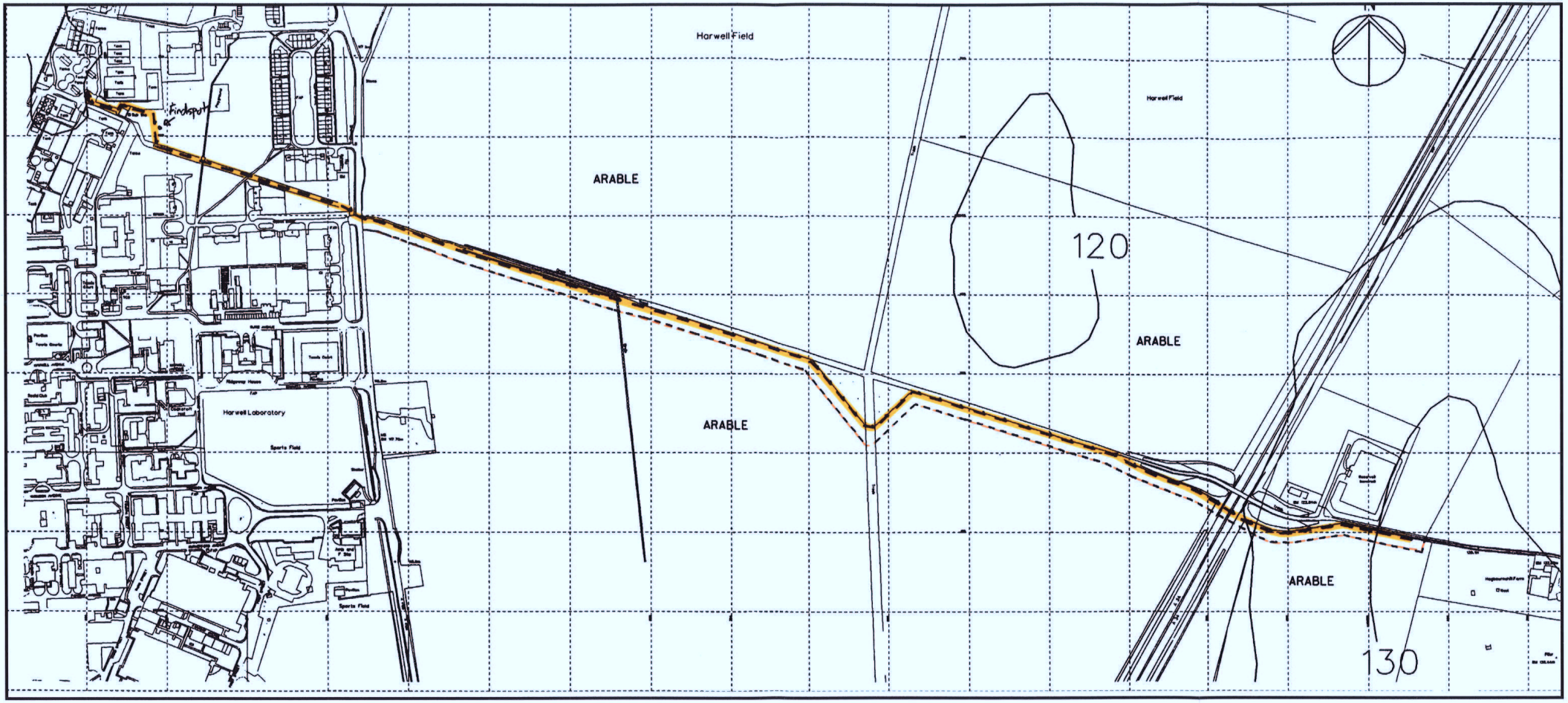
The topsoil strip for the pipe corridor was a relatively small area and the absence of cut features or archaeological deposits from within either the subsoil, where it was seen, or the natural is not thought to be especially significant. Monitoring took place both during and after the topsoil strip and during the excavation of the pipe trench. If present, archaeological traces would have been identified.

9 Discussion

The watching brief produced only negative evidence for the vast majority of the pipe corridor, which was not entirely unexpected. The single piece of Roman pottery recovered from AEA Harwell had been redeposited, and its provenance remains unknown at this time, although it possibly is indicative of Roman archaeology elsewhere in the vicinity.

References.

Wilkinson, D (ed) 1992 Oxford Archaeological Unit Field Manual, (First edition, August 1992).



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KEY

WORKING WIDTH LIMITS

LINE OF PROPOSED MAIN

Figure 1

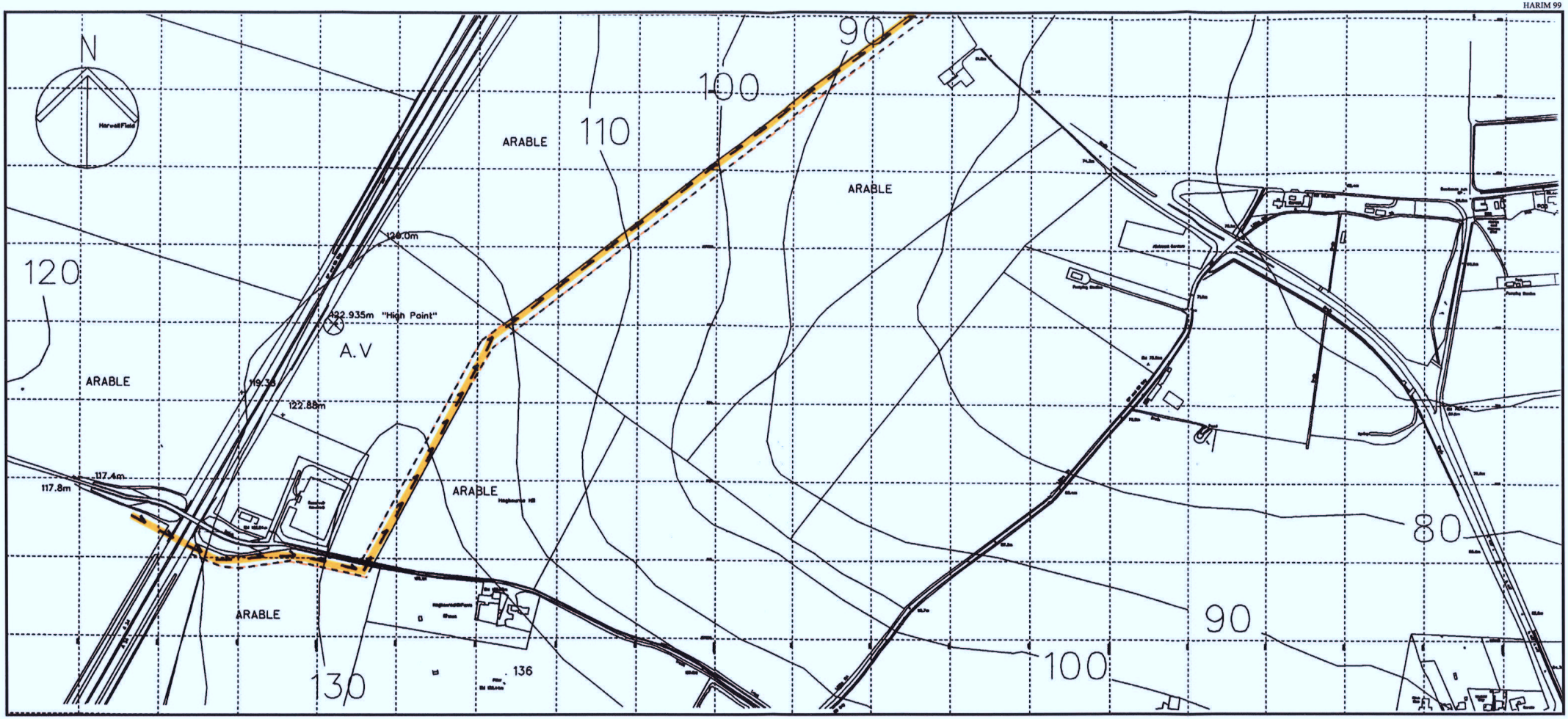

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Figure 2

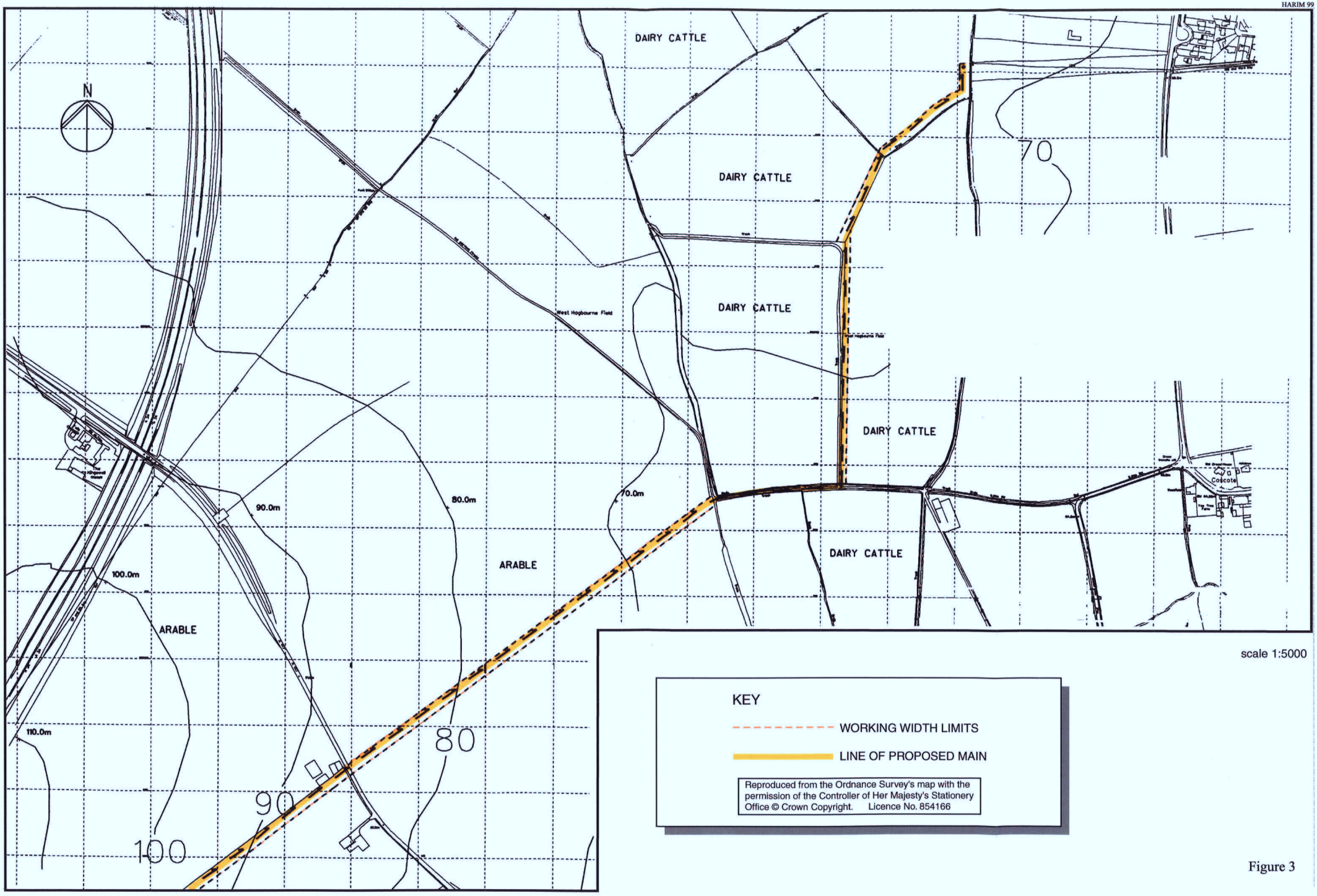

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Figure 3

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