

# NORTHMOOR: STONEHENGE FARM ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT WITHIN SCHEDULED MONUMENT OXON 141

## Summary

An assessment of the archaeological remains in an area which became part of Scheduled Monument Oxon 141 in November 1985 at Northmoor, Oxfordshire, was carried out in the context of an application for mineral extraction on behalf of ARC Ltd. The Scheduled site is part of a major coherent block of cropmarks mainly of Iron Age and Roman date. The main area of settlement extends further west than indicated by cropmarks. Beyond this area are extensive but fairly sparse remains of ditches associated with a field system, including 4 double ditched boundaries. There is some waterlogged preservation. Superficial stratigraphy has largely been destroyed by cultivation. In the discreet area of settlement finds are fairly numerous but otherwise very sparse, and in general are unexceptional in range, and almost exclusively Roman in date.

## Background

The assessment was carried out on behalf of ARC with the co-operation of the land owners. Proposals for the assessment strategy and layout of trenches were circulated to Oxfordshire County Council and English Heritage in advance. During fieldwork English Heritage requested the excavation of two additional trenches. While fieldwork was in progress part of the area was Scheduled as an Ancient Monument. Scheduled Monument Consent for backfilling trenches was obtained. Investigation of features exposed was largely completed prior to the Scheduling.

## Introduction

The assessment area is centred at SP411 022 (see Fig 1) within a large tongue of gravels and alluvium bounded by the Windrush and a major loop of the Thames which contains a rich variety of archaeological cropmark sites, in some cases adjacent to small areas of surviving earthworks. The most extensive coherent area of cropmarks has been Scheduled as an Ancient Monument (Oxon 141). An area of very dense cropmarks characteristic of late prehistoric or Roman settlements lies immediately north of, and extends into the assessment area.

In 1986 Air photographic survey by the RCHM recorded for the first time 4 distinct gently curving N-S 'trackways' and other marks extending from the southern limit of the main concentration of cropmarks north of the assessment area almost to the southern stream boundary (Fig 1). During the assessment this area was added to Scheduled Ancient Monument Oxon 141.

## Geology/Soils

The area is low lying first terrace gravel merging imperceptibly into the flood plain. A fall of only 1.5m occurs towards the south west from 64.38m at the north end to 62.83m. OD at Stonehenge Farm. At the north end of the 'trackways' and settlement ploughing is eroding the gravel surface and south of Trenches 18-20 gravel is overlaid by a variety of subsoils.

A largely gravel free subsoil, possibly of loessic and/or alluvial origin, cut by Roman ditches, was identified. Frequently a mid brown to grey brown silty to sandy clay, occasionally slightly shelly, with very little or no gravel, or a buff to yellow clay especially at the south end of the area was up to 25cms thick. The base of this layer, orange brown sandy or silty clay with up to 50% gravel, surviving in hollows etc, was seen in 15 trenches mainly in the northern part of the site. Curving pits and collapsed tree holes, filled partly with this Post Glacial silt were a common occurrence. These features sometimes contain evidence of burning i.e. fire cracked stones and charcoal and are a common element in the trenches but with no firm dating. It is not clear whether these reflect a distinct clearance episode.

Over a significant part of the area previous cultivation has cut deeper than present practice. Old ploughsoil overlying a normally horizontal interface truncating both subsoil and features was observed mainly at the southern end of the area (Trenches 22, 23, 25) It also occurred in the northernmost trench (44) and as patches in some of the others. Texturally this layer was usually slightly sandy or gravelly.

During the assessment (November/December 1988) the water table was high. Sections cut invariably rapidly filled to 5 cms below gravel surfaces and water was standing on the ground surface at the southern end of the area. Records of borehole monitoring provided by ARC covering September 1987 - July 1988 indicate fluctuations up to 80 cms difference, with water more than 50 cms below field surface for 3 month periods or more.

## OBJECTIVES

A sample was selected to give a broad over-view of archaeological preservation and potential of the area to:

- A Assess of the extent and quality of waterlogged preservation within ditches and other features.
- B Establish how reliably the Air photographs reflect the character and density of subsoil archaeology.

- C Recover information on density and date range of artefacts occurring within features or in the ploughsoil.
- D Obtain information on the character of the linear 'trackways'.
- E Establish the potential for surviving earthworks associated with ditches and for preservation of earlier land surfaces covered by blanket alluvium, unaffected by destructive ploughing.
- F Indicate the potential extent and preservation of archaeological features in areas unsusceptible to air photography.

### The Excavation

Within the Scheduled area 32 30m trenches were excavated. Trenches were aligned North-South and East-West with the Ordnance Survey grid (Fig 1).

At the request of English Heritage two 60m trenches, 44 and 45 were cut across a proposed conveyer route westward, from a point 10m within the main settlement cropmarks, well beyond where they apparently abruptly end (Fig 1).

Trenches were placed to cover the landscape fairly evenly and to intersect cropmarks. It was not always possible to match excavated features with the cropmarks, especially in the denser area of settlement, because trenches give too limited a view to assess discrepancies of air photo transcription or surveying.

Machining was carried out with a JCB and 1.5m ditching bucket. Ploughsoil and subsoil were removed until potential archaeological horizons were identified. Where features were only seen at the level of the gravel sections were studied to determine the level from which they were cut, and depths are recorded from this level (i.e. surviving deposit depth) rather than from the gravel or present ground surface. Most positively identified features were hand excavated to natural where practical consideration permitted, and were described and drawn. Sampling was undertaken where visual inspection suggested potential organic preservation, usually when mid to dark grey silt had fibrous texture to rich black soft peaty silts. Clean peat was not encountered.

Observation of artefact spread was hampered by a well established broad leaf crops (rape/kale) though 4 fields were sown with autumn Barley. Two had tall mixed fodders for game cover. Except for the 4 cereal fields soil was 85% obscured making only random observation possible.

The assessment of the Scheduled area is divided into the following trench groups for the purpose of description.

- 1 Unproductive trenches
- 2 The south edge of presumed Roman domestic settlement north of the area Trenches 1-10, 16-20 and 60m trenches 44 and 45.
- 3 The distinctive curving N-S 'trackways', trenches 11-15 and 21-27

Figure 1 gives the overall plan, Figure 2 a representative sample of sections and Figure 3 plans of selected trenches.

- 1 Trenches 13, 17, 24, 28, 55. No archaeological features. Tree holes and traces of post glacial subsoil were recognised in some trenches. An area of root disturbance and tree hole in trench 13 may correspond to a Post Medieval ? boundary ditch 7 (Tr 11).
- 2 Trenches 5-8, 16, 18, 19 and 20 were cut to intersect known crop marks within the settlement and a presumed NW-SE track at the north end of the strip fields/trackways. Some of the cropmark evidence was not located in trenches. Trenches 1-4, 9 and 10 were cut in 'blank' areas all producing features. 26 features in total were found, mainly linear ditches ranging in depth from 18 to nearly 80 cms (only four over 50 cms); ranging from broad U to V profiles with little evidence of organics. Dating is mid to late Roman, but the number of sherds recovered was small, up to 3 to 5 per section.

In contrast to the mass of linear features, 2 circular features occurred in Trench 10, (81-82 and 83). Cropmarks of these are just visible suggesting that the Air Photos in this area give an almost complete record of subsoil archaeology. The features have unknown functions (diameters of approx. 5m). Roman pottery was recovered from them. A similar pair was uncovered in Trench 50.

A circular cropmark (90-91 Trench 16) approx. 15m diameter is one of at least 4 seen within the Northmoor cropmark complex. The feature, partly covered by later ploughsoil deposit, had at least 2 recuts of the subcircular ditch. It was not possible to bottom the ditch but 70 cms is anticipated. No organics were observed. 4 grey ware sherds were found in dark grey clay silt in recut 90. (Fig 2).

Pits 19-21 (Trench 6) were the only Romano-British pits encountered, situated adjacent to the stratigraphically later N-S curving 'track' ditch 22. They are possibly within a block of three rectangular paddocks. Pit 19, largest of three intercutting ovoid pits was not bottomed at 54 cms, augured to 1.18m with organics for the final 9 cms. 9 grey ware sherds were contained in upper layers. Pit 21 (cut 19) produced a cut down grey ware pot base 'counter', but was not fully excavated.

Trenches 44 and 45 located features along their entire length. Linear ditches were encountered on a variety of orientations. Ditch 129 (Tr 49) butt ended. Ditch (or ditches) 125, 126 and 127 may be extensions of NNE aligned 'paddocks'.

A long sinuous ditch cropmark is possibly 110 and 132 in trench 45, at this point NW orientated. 8 additional features were ditches. A possible structure is represented by post holes 111, 132, 133, 4.50m apart, one cutting ditch 110.

Generally features had no accompanying earthworks, ploughing had also removed any trace of land surfaces and had already truncated ditch tops.

Finds were few, only one or two per ditch section or none at all. Few finds were seen in ploughsoil.

Several of the features had not been dug when the scheduling notice came into force, but depths of ditches were similar to those in the other trenches where they were excavated.

### 3 Trenches 11-15, 21-27. 'Trackways'

1986 Air cover shows 4 double ditched 'trackways' on a curving N-S alignment abutting a 'major' NW-SE 'road'. Two are traceable for 700m the others 75m before fading. They are not perfectly parallel and spaced 100m, 75m and 180m W-E. Ditch pairs are also not consistently parallel, as little as 2m between ditches (Tr 15) up to 4.50 (Tr 23), generally broad U profiles with grey silty clay fills and no earthworks. Ditch 67 (Tr 21) and Ditch 71 (Tr 14) produced 2 RB sherds. A tree hole and root disturbed gravel between ditches in Trench 26 may indicate a hedge. There is no evidence for their use as 'trackways', and their general narrowness is consistent with field boundaries. The depth of the ditches varied from c. 20cms to c. 50cms. In Trench 25 a series of gullies occurred on the line of the trackway cutting undisturbed subsoil. At the west end of the trench was a broad hollow with bands of gravelly clay and silt overlying the gravel. This could represent a track next to the boundary.

## Conclusions

- 1 All the dated features including the main focus are Romano-British, very largely mid to late Roman.

The range of finds is limited and would seem typical of native Romano British farming settlements with few pretensions, as is common for sites of the period on the Thames gravels.

- 2 80% of the trenches produced evidence of archaeological features, the density and significance of which vary considerably. In the areas where air photographs are reasonably clear very shallow features, with depths as

little as 0.18m are visible. In these areas the cropmarks appear to be give a good general impression, suggesting marked contrast in density of subsoil archaeology between of the Roman settlement and field system, although, as on any cropmark site additional shallow features were located. Some features apparent on the air photographs were not located on the ground.

- 3 The main RB settlement extends further west than indicated by cropmarks. The combination of a high water table and relatively thick subsoils, together with unfavourable crop conditions appear to be the reason for the absence of cropmarks in this area.
- 4 There is no evidence of undisturbed blanket alluvium protecting archaeological deposits.

In general no trace of banks associated with ditches survived, nor is there any trace of in situ land surfaces associated with fields or paddocks in the vicinity of the trackways/boundaries, or any evidence of in-situ occupation horizons within the settlement area.

- 5 Within the RB settlement area waterlogged preservation occurs in some of the deepest features, usually over 1m below ground surface. Mostly preservation is poor to medium but it is likely that pockets of good preservation occur along some of the deepest ditches and in wells etc. No features investigated outside the settlement area were deep enough to allow waterlogged preservation. In particular there was no sign of waterlogging in the long parallel ditches which potentially might have provided an environmental transect stratigraphically linked to the main settlement. The potential for natural waterlogged deposits in stream channels etc, contemporary with the RB occupation, is less obvious than on some low-lying sites. The apparent relict stream intersecting with the 'trackway' in Trench 22 was shown stratigraphically to be later.

Judged by the Secretary of State's non-statutory criteria for Scheduled Monuments this part of the Northmoor complex can be rated thus:

i Survival/condition

Generally poor as regards stratigraphic deposits; poor to moderate as regards organic deposits.

ii Period

A single period (Romano-British) possibly fairly restricted in time (300 years?).

iii Rarity

Most of the types of feature within the complex are generally common. The association of these elements are fairly common in Thames gravel cropmark sites. There are

major complexes at Fairford, Lechlade, Kelmscott, Clanfield Cote, Standlake and Long Wittenham, and several less extensive examples. A number of these include narrow double ditched boundaries, of which those at Claydon Pike, Lechlade have been investigated by means of salvage excavation under an English Heritage grant.

iv Fragility/vulnerability

Though they are 'soft' types of deposit and therefore easily disturbed, truncated subsoil features tend to retain a reasonable depth of deposit. The organic preservation in the deepest features is fragile, and can be affected beyond the limits of actual physical disturbance.

Gravel extraction would cause total destruction and associated works causing ground disturbance would be damaging, or destructive in the areas affected. Uncontrolled dewatering could destroy organic preservation over time.

v Diversity

The range of features and deposits encountered is limited and typical of gravel sites of the area, being mainly subsoil ditches, pits and post holes.

There is diversity in the contrasting density, location and probable function of the features observed. The range of finds is fairly limited.

vi Documentation

Air photographic evidence is good for those parts of the site susceptible to producing cropmarks.

vii Group Value

Group value is high because of the overall association of trackways or paddocks with settlement and the general complexity of the Northmoor area which includes a few areas of surviving earthworks. The importance of the Group Value of the area concerned is diminished by the considerations relative to rarity and preservation within the area investigated.

viii Potential

The potential in terms of archaeological remains not revealed by air photography does not seem high in the areas where air photography has proved applicably in that air photographs of these areas give a good overall impression of the subsoil archaeology. The site's potential in terms of preservation is less than might have been expected, and for example offers little possibility of detailed analysis of land use from in situ ground surfaces or waterlogged deposits associated with fields separate from the settlement area. There is nothing to suggest that the settlement has

potential as unusual types.

The Northmoor complex as a whole is of undoubted importance but preservation in this area at Northmoor is not as good as some other recently investigated sites in the area. At Gill Mill, Ducklington, Oxon, a settlement and Roman road is largely sealed under an undisturbed blanket of alluvium; there are extensive RB earthworks at Ashton Keynes, Gloucestershire; and at Drayton, Oxon, there was a Roman field system with in situ banks and associated ploughsoils and ploughmarks sealed within the alluvium. At Northmoor there has not been a sufficient alluvial blanket to protect valuable superficial deposits in the same way from the ravages of cultivation. The extent of waterlogged deposits also seems somewhat limited outside the area of occupation.

#### Appendix 1

Northmoor: Stonehenge Farm Finds

The only flint recovered (Tr 20 Ditch 15) is a tertiary blade from a twin platform core, soft hammer struck, Late Mesolithic - Early Neolithic.

Most site finds are sherds of Roman pottery. 'Oxford' wares predominate, 50% grey ware jars; 20% red colour coat Samian imitations, flagons; 10% white mortaria and parchment ware; 10% coarse ware shelly fabrics; 10% more local 'other' wares. Mid 1st cent AD Samian is the only presence of other than late 2nd-4th century sherds. A 'giant' coarse ware rim of a storage vessel is unusual (Ploughsoil) as is a sandy fabric skillet handle (22 Tr6) medieval contamination?

Condition: 80% of sherds are leached, abraded and very fragmentary; small groups of less abraded, but still very fragmentary material were noted.

Bones were generally sparse and highly fragmented.

#### Appendix 2

Northmoor; Stonehenge Farm soil sample environmental evidence

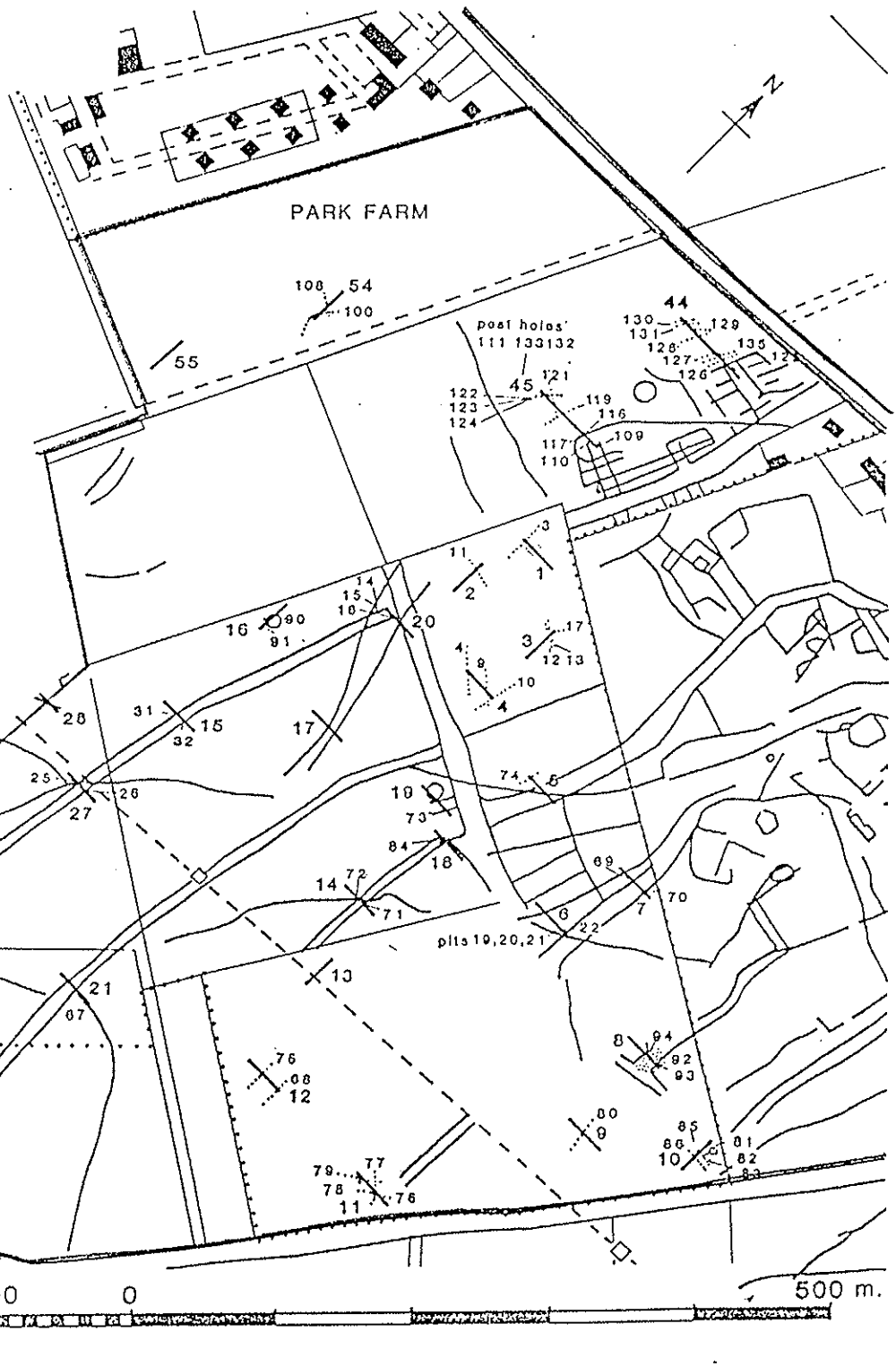
Sample 5 Trench 45 Ditch 121 Clay silt. Very few seeds. 5 species of plant identified but sparse and poorly preserved. Mollusca include 4 aquatic and 3 terrestrial species. Organic preservation poor because not properly waterlogged.

Sample 6 Trench 45 Ditch 119 Dark grey silty clay. 13 plant species and 1 insect species identified. Typical waterfilled ditch with hedgerow and nettles (forming after abandonment of settlement?). No annual weeds of disturbed ground. No major grassland component. Possible further work informative.



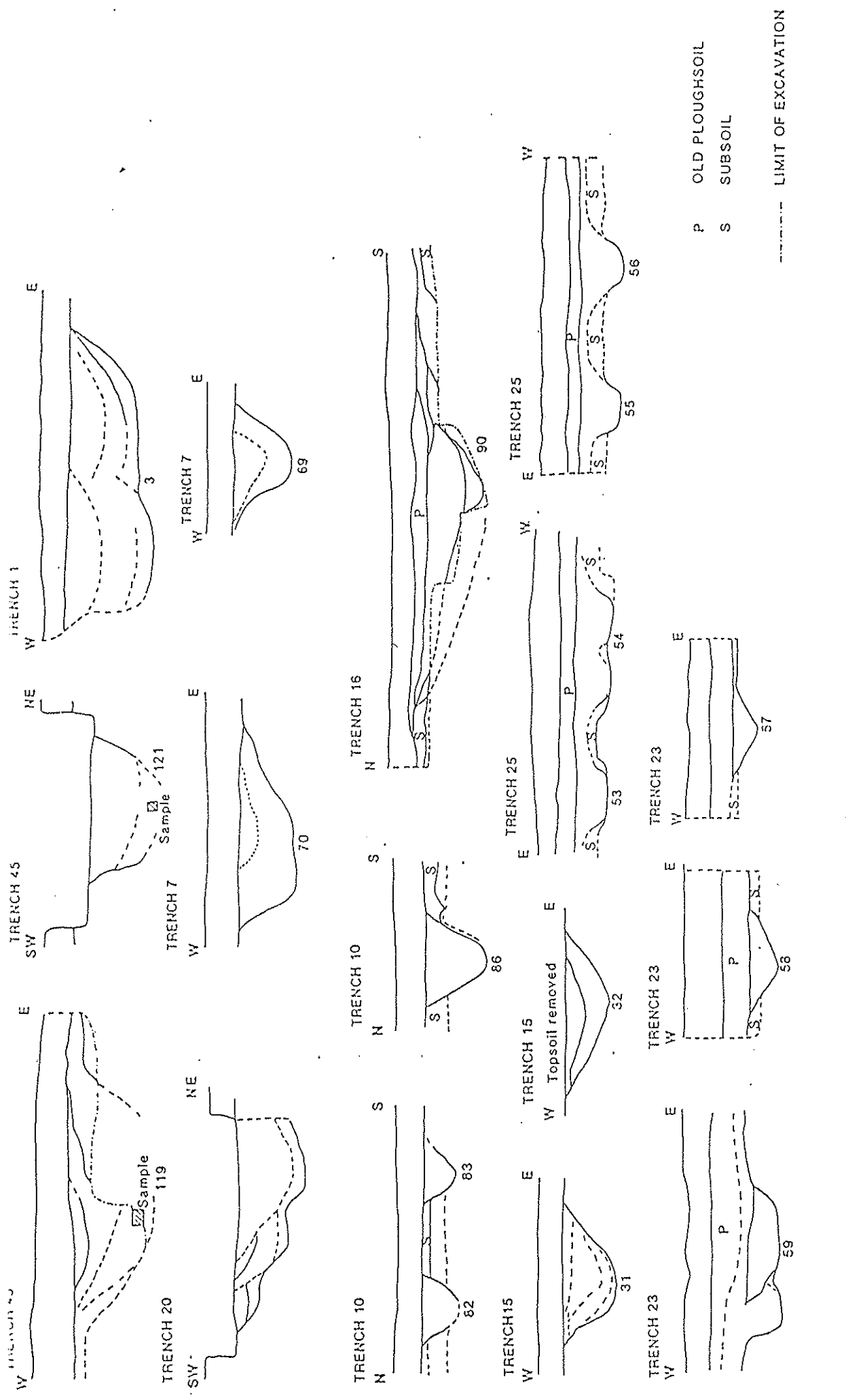
NORTHMOOR  
STONEHENGE FARM

assessment



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STONEHENGE FARM, NORTHMOOR  
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SECTIONS

Fig 2



P OLD PLOUGHSOIL  
S SUBSOIL  
----- LIMIT OF EXCAVATION



THE EARTHWORKS AT PINNOCKS FARM

SP 413029

A, B, and C are likely areas of former gravel quarrying defined by sharp breaks of slope away from the river. All three areas have been backfilled and levelled to some extent during the last 30 years and the land D next to the river still reflects its recently disturbed nature.

E is an artificial platform defined by an old banked ditch boundary to the south on the quarried areas to the east and west.

F is a boundary ditch with a bank on its east side and is probably contemporary with the similar ditched boundary which defines the southern edge of area E.

G cut by boundary ditch F, G appears to be an old meandering surface water drainage channel and probably has a natural origin.

H & I on a different alignment to the other major features, two parallel ditches flanking a low 4-6 m wide bank. This appears to be a roadway. A trackway on this alignment is visible on our air photographs of cropmarks South of the road. A similar earthwork at nearby Church Farm is now known to be 1st-2nd century AD. On present evidence this may be the most significant archaeological features.

J & K are a low right angled bank and a low platform respectively. Either man made or two islands left by part flood drainage.

L a flat area devoid of any earthworks.

STONEHENGE FARM

NORTHMOOR, OXON

ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT

DECEMBER 1988