

Archaeological Field Unit

**Prehistoric Ditches and Saxo-Norman Structural Evidence
at 177 High Street, Offord Cluny:
An Archaeological Evaluation**

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**Prehistoric Ditches and Saxo-Norman Structural Evidence
at 177 High Street, Offord Cluny:
An Archaeological Evaluation
(TL 2200/6720)**

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SUMMARY

In May 2002, the Archaeological Field Unit of Cambridgeshire County Council conducted an archaeological evaluation on 0.33ha of land at 177 High Street, Offord Cluny, Cambridgeshire (TL 2200/6720). This was in advance of a proposed housing development.

Four trenches were opened by machine and all were found to contain archaeological remains. The features located included ditches, both large and small, gullies, pits, postholes and a pond or possible well. Three ditches were believed to have been of Bronze Age origin, while many of the other features were provisionally dated to the Saxo-Norman period, including seven postholes in a linear arrangement that may have formed part of a building. There is some uncertainty inherent in placing features into periods due to the lack of datable artefactual material recovered from the site.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Between the 27th and 28th of May 2002, Graeme Clark and Scott Kenney of the Cambridgeshire County Council's Archaeological Field Unit (AFU) conducted an archaeological evaluation on land at 177 High Street, Offord Cluny (TL 2200/6720). The work was carried out at the request of Bewick Homes Ltd, in response to a brief set by Andy Thomas of the County Archaeology Office (CAO), and dated April 23rd 2002. The evaluation was conducted in advance of a proposed housing development.

The site lies on the northeast side of the village. It is roughly rectangular in plan and 0.33ha in area, with two narrow extensions westwards for access to the High Street.

The presence of archaeological remains was considered likely by the CAO on the basis of information contained in the County Sites and Monuments Record (SMR). It records Roman and medieval finds in the immediate vicinity of the site.

Weather conditions during the fieldwork were generally fine, and there were no factors that are likely to have had an adverse effect upon context recognition. Accordingly, the confidence rating to be applied to the results is judged to be high.

2 GEOLOGY AND TOPOGRAPHY

According to the British Geological Survey, the site lies on Pleistocene First/Second Terrace River Gravels. In this area, the River Gravels overlie Boulder Clay, which in turn overlie Upper Jurassic Oxford Clay (BGS 1975).

The site lies at around 14.5mOD at its highest point away from the road, falling to around 13.6mOD on the High Street to the west.

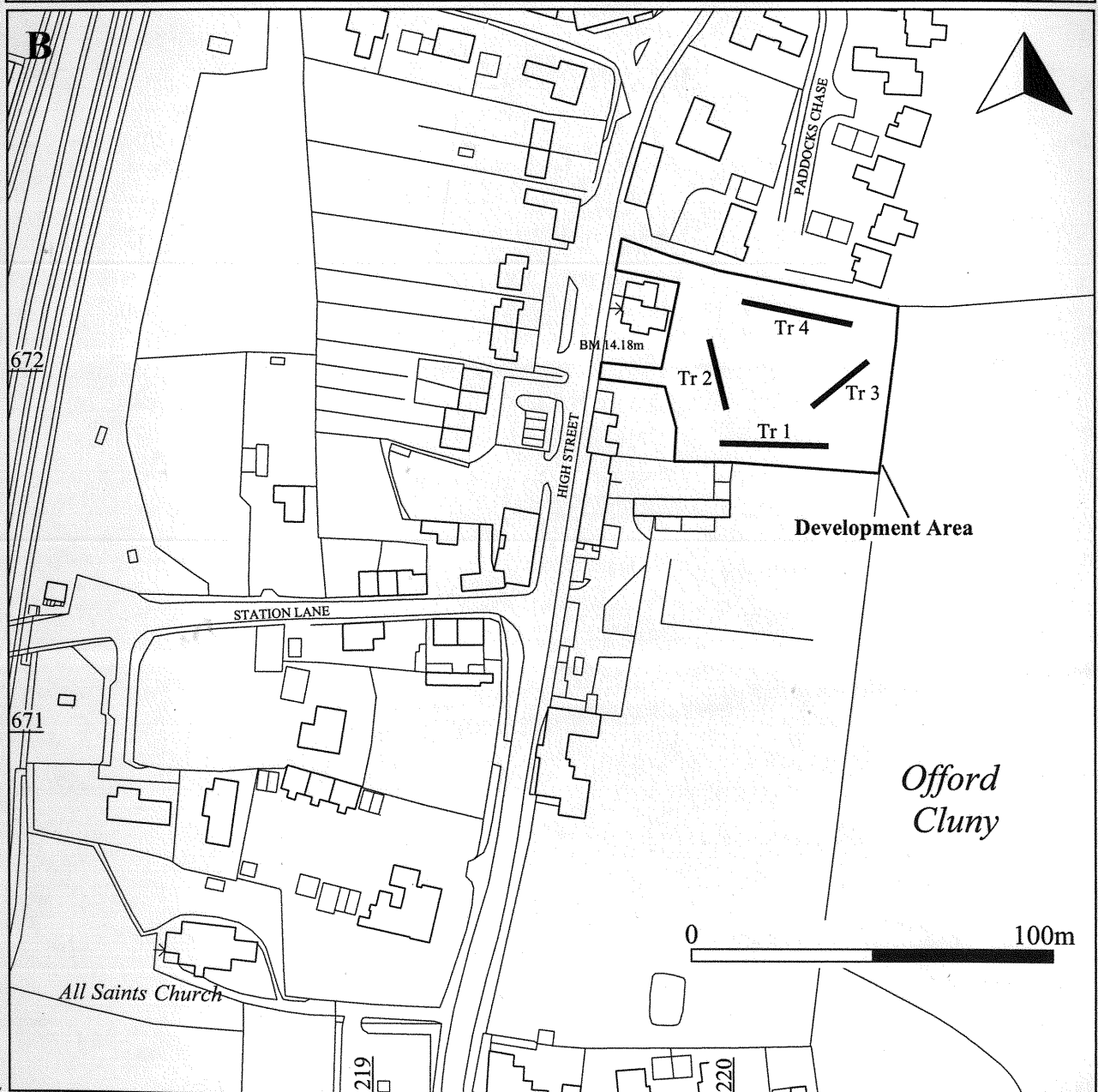
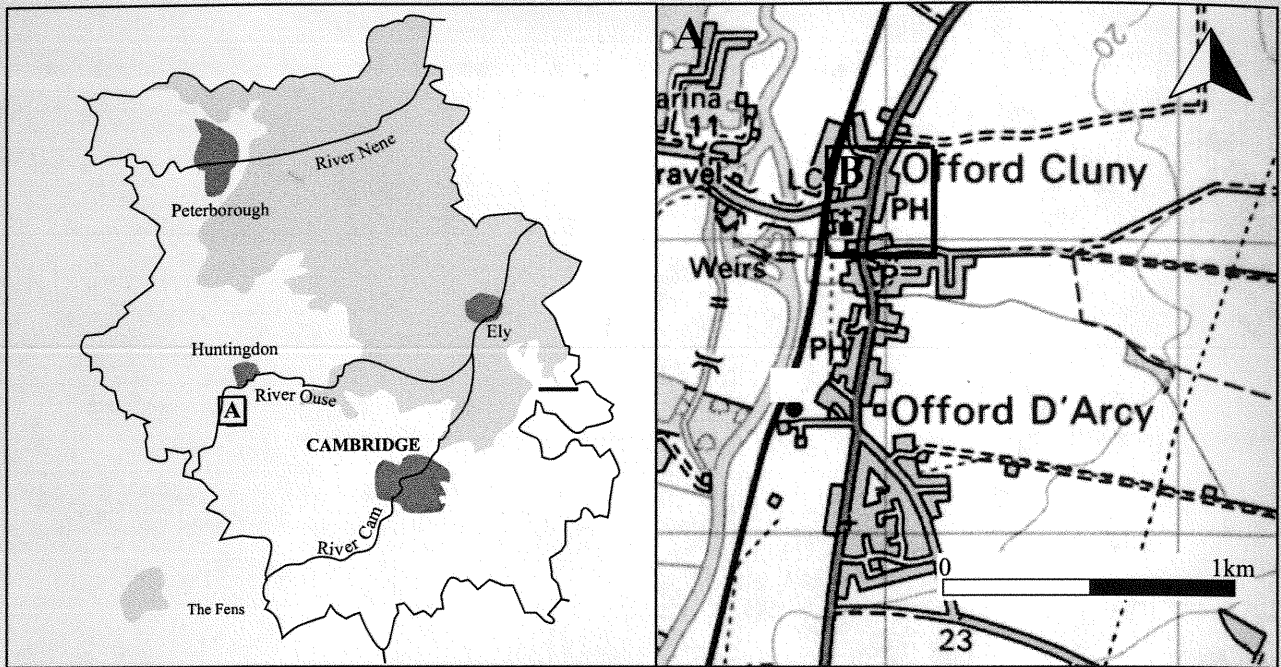


Figure 1 Site location

3 ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

3.1 Palaeolithic

An unidentified tool was found just to the north of the village (SMR 02539).

3.2 Mesolithic

Numerous flint flakes and tools were found in the Buckden gravel pits to the northwest of the village (SMR 02531).

3.3 Neolithic

No finds of this period have been made from the parish.

3.4 Bronze Age

Several finds of Bronze Age pottery and flints have been made both close to the church of All Saints (SMR 2025, 2540) and slightly further to the south (SMR 2486). West of the village across the River Great Ouse, the remains of a Barrow Cemetery have been seen in aerial photographs (SMR 08158).

3.5 Iron Age, Roman and Anglo-Saxon

No finds of these periods have been made from the parish, however, Iron Age pottery was recovered from the Buckden gravel quarries to the northwest of the village (SMR 00859, 01790, 02060, 02508a, 02508b).

3.6 Medieval

The churches of St Peter (Offord Darcy) and All Saints (Offord Cluny) date from the 13th Century; although the latter is mentioned in Domesday, nothing now stands from that period. A medieval moat survives at Grove Farm in Offord Darcy

3.7 Post-Medieval

The Manor House and Manor Farm date from the 18th and 16th Centuries respectively (SMR 2444, 2446).

3.8 Previous Archaeological Work

There have been no previous archaeological investigations carried out within the village of Offord Cluny, and this work has been the first opportunity to examine the historic core of the settlement.

3.9 Historical Background

Lying some 6km north of St Neots and 5km south of Huntingdon, the villages of Offord Cluny and Offord Darcy, which form one continuous settlement, lie on the east bank of the River Great Ouse. The name Offord is first recorded in the Domesday Book of 1086 as *Opeforde*, meaning 'Upper Ford', perhaps referring to the village as the first point above Huntingdon that the River Great Ouse is crossed. *Cluny* is appended to the name before 1257 to indicate the ownership by the monks of Cluny in Burgundy.

At Domesday, the manor of Offord Cluny had a church, a priest and two mills.

4 METHODOLOGY

Four trenches with a total length of 100m were opened by a JCB using a flat-bladed 1.6m wide ditching bucket, under the supervision of an archaeologist (see Fig 1). This constitutes a 5% sample of the development area.

The trenches were cleaned by hand, planned and photographed, and the features recorded using the AFU's single context recording system. The trenches were tied in three-dimensionally to the Ordnance Survey mapping.

5 RESULTS

5.1 Trench 1 (Fig 2)

Trench 1 was 30m long and was oriented E-W. It contained two short gullies and a pit. Up to 0.3m of topsoil 1 overlay up to 0.2m of strong brown silty sand and gravel subsoil 2, which in turn sealed the archaeology.

Gully 59 was 0.04m deep, 0.3m wide and 1.1m long, with a shallow concave profile. It was straight in plan with rounded ends, oriented N-S, and contained a single fill, 58, which was a very dark greyish brown sandy silt containing moderate subangular stones. No finds were recovered from this fill.

Gully 57 was 0.05m deep, 0.5m wide and 1.75m long, with a shallow concave profile. It was straight in plan with rounded ends, oriented E-W, and contained a single fill, 56, which was a very dark greyish brown sandy silt containing moderate subangular stones. No finds were recovered from this fill. Both 59 and 57 may once have formed part of the same continuous narrow gully, their present disconnected state being the result of truncation.

Pit 55 was 0.6m deep, 1.6m wide and at least 1.6m long. Its shape in plan was subrectangular, while the sides were steep and slightly concave, becoming a much gentler slope at the top. Upper fill, 52, was a dark yellowish brown silty sand and gravel. Middle fill 53 was a very dark greyish brown clay silt with occasional charcoal flecks and lumps. Lower fill 54 was a brownish yellow silty clay with occasional subangular stones up to 30mm. Animal bone, freshwater mussel shells and a single sherd of medieval pottery was recovered from fill 53.

5.2 Trench 2 (Fig 2)

Trench 2 was 20m long and was oriented NW-SE. It contained three pits and an infilled pond or well. 0.25m of topsoil 1 overlay up to 0.2m of strong brown silty sand and gravel subsoil 2, which in turn overlay the archaeology.

Pit 14 was 0.28m deep, 1.2m wide and at least 1.4m long. Its shape in plan was difficult to determine from the remaining part, but it may have once been oval. There is also the possibility that it may have been the butt end of a ditch. The fill, 13, was a very dark grey clay silt with moderate angular gravel. A single sherd of Saxo-Norman St Neots type pottery was recovered from 13.

Pit 12 was more than 0.5m deep, 0.6m wide and 1.25m long. Its shape in plan was subrectangular. The fill, 11, was a very dark greyish brown clay silt with moderate angular gravel. Animal bone, bottle glass, brick, tile and 18th century pottery were recovered from 11.

Pit 10 was 0.2m deep, 1.45m wide and 1.45m long. Its shape in plan was subcircular. The fill, 9, was an olive brown clay silt with occasional gravel. No finds were recovered from 9.

Pond/Well 8 was more than 1.5m deep, at least 1.6m wide and over 7m long. Its shape in plan was difficult to determine due to the extremely limited sample excavated. In section, the upper part of the cut had a very gentle slope. Upper fill, 3, was an olive brown clay silt with moderate gravel. Below this was 4, a dark olive brown silty clay with frequent strong brown flecks. Below this was 5, an olive grey clay with occasional gravel. Below this was 6, a dark bluish grey clay with a strong organic smell. Below this was 7, a strong brown silty sand and gravel with thin clay lenses. Within 7, two waterlogged worked wooden 'planks' arranged at right angles were observed which may be structural elements, possibly of a wood-lined well. Excavation was abandoned

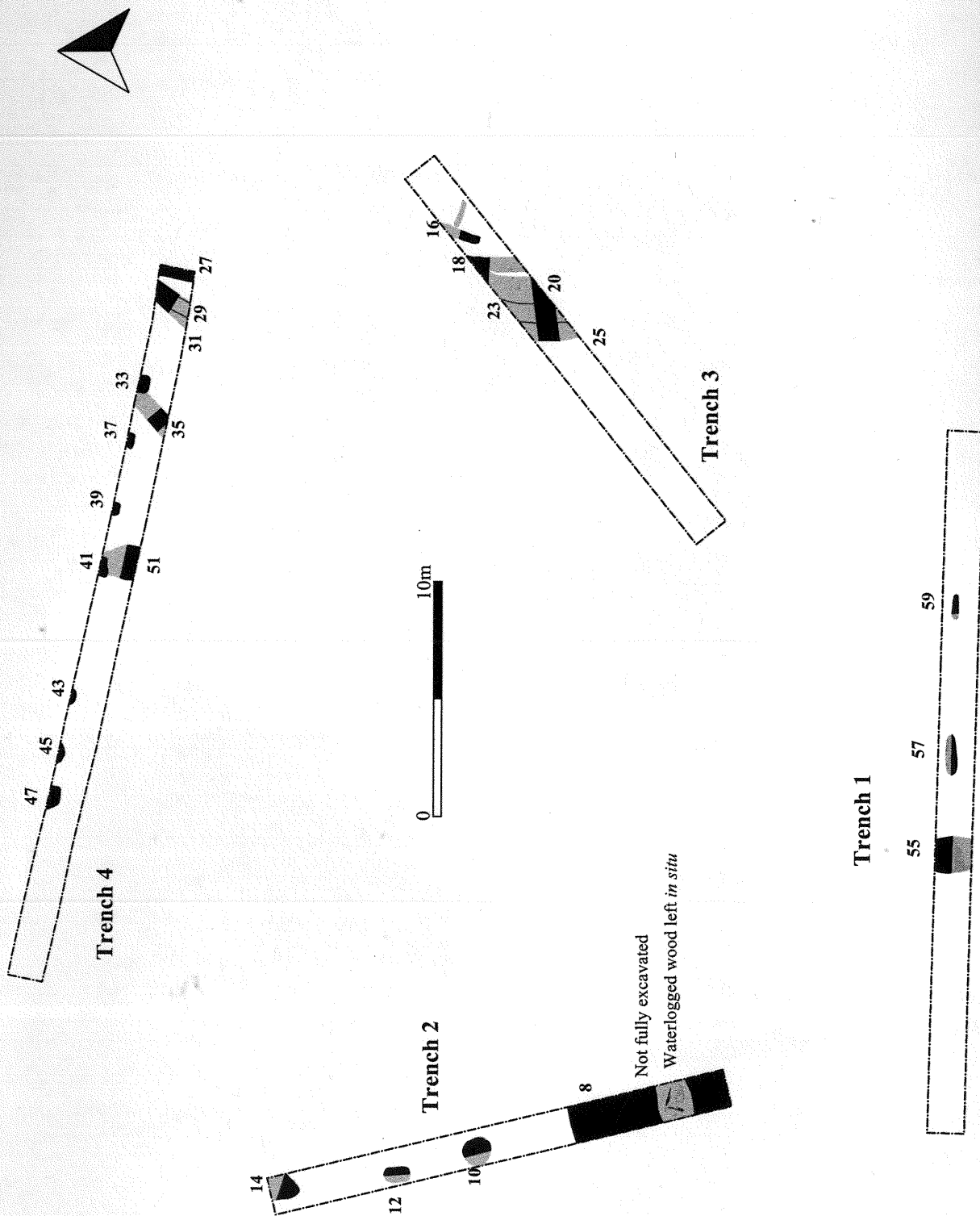


Figure 2 Trench plans

at this depth due to safety concerns and rising water, and this feature was backfilled by machine. Brick, tile and 18th century pottery were recovered from 3.

5.3 Trench 3 (Fig 2)

Trench 3 was 20m long and was oriented NE-SW. It contained five ditches, one of which was quite large, and a gully. 0.1m of topsoil 1 overlay up to 0.5m of strong brown silty sand and gravel subsoil 2, which in turn overlay the archaeology.

Ditch 23 was 0.4m deep, 1.4m wide and at least 2.5m long, with a wide concave profile. It was slightly curved towards the north in plan, oriented N-S and cut the fill of ditch 25. The fill, 22, was a very dark greyish brown clay silt with moderate gravel.

Ditch 20/25 was 0.22m deep, 2.75m wide and at least 3.5m long, with a wide concave profile. It was slightly curved towards the north in plan, oriented N-S and cut the fill of ditch 18. The fill, 19/24, was an olive brown clay silt with moderate gravel, and was cut by ditch 23. No finds were recovered from 19/24.

Ditch 18 was 0.12m deep, 1.05m wide and at least 2.5m long, with a wide concave profile. It was straight in plan and oriented N-S. The fill, 17, was an olive brown clay sandy silt with moderate gravel, and was cut by ditch 20. Animal bone was recovered from fill 17.

Ditch 16 was 0.16m deep, 0.5m wide and at least 1.75m long, with a wide concave profile. It was straight in plan, oriented N-S and terminated to the south in a slightly square butt end. The fill, 15, was an olive brown clay silt with frequent gravel. No finds were recovered from fill 15.

A faint trace of a narrow linear feature perpendicular to 16 on its north side was observed, however, this was so insubstantial that it was not numbered.

5.4 Trench 4 (Fig 2)

Trench 4 was 31m long and was oriented E-W. It contained five ditches and seven postholes. 0.25m of topsoil 1 overlay up to 0.7m of strong brown silty sand and gravel subsoil 2, which in turn overlay the archaeology.

Ditch 27 was 0.25m deep, more than 0.35m wide and at least 1.6m long, with a wide flat-based U-shaped profile. It was straight in plan, oriented N-S. The fill, 26, was a dark yellowish brown silty sand and gravel.

Ditch 29 was 0.2m deep, 0.65m wide and at least 2.0m long, with a wide concave profile steeper on the southern side. It was straight in plan, oriented

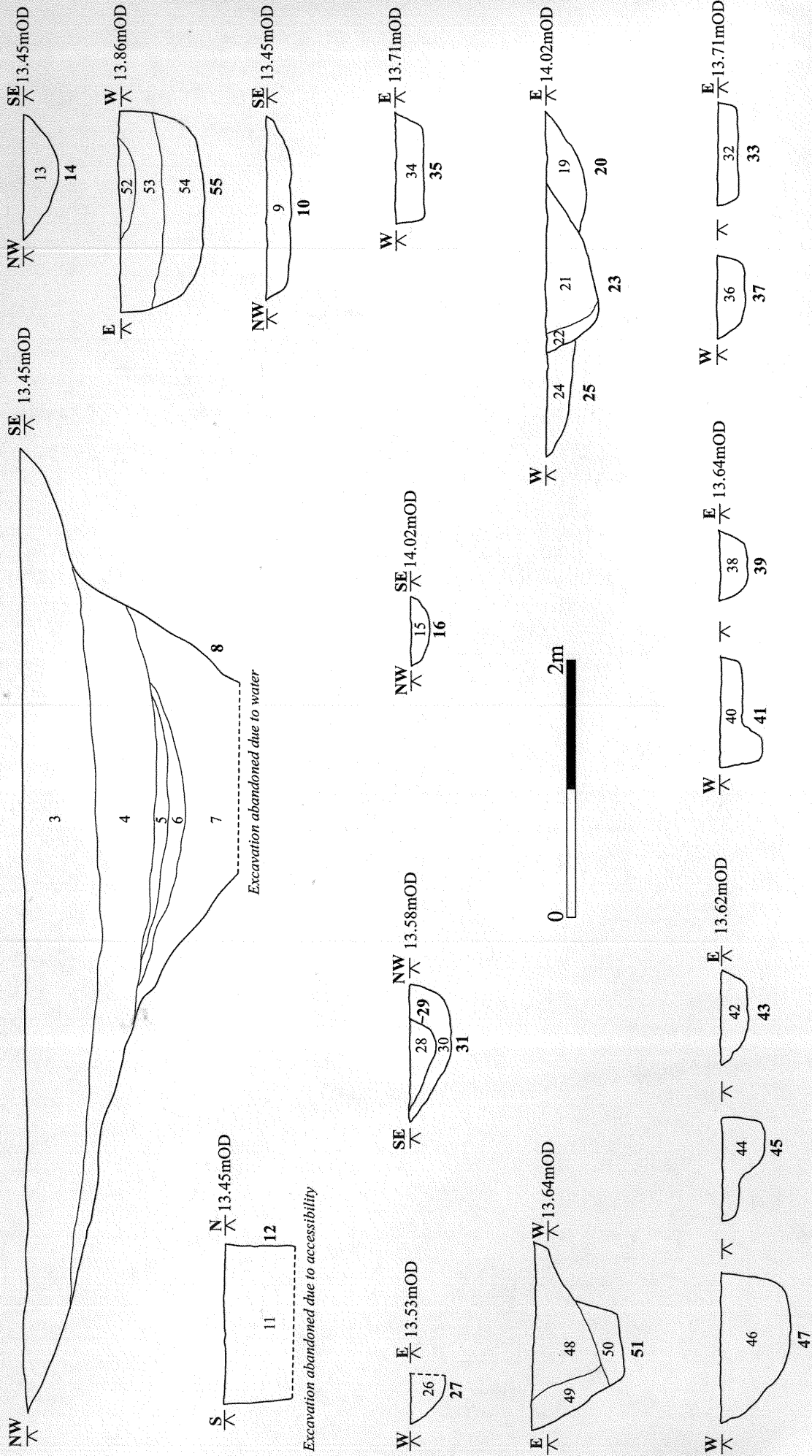


Figure 3 Sections

NE-SW and cut the fill of ditch **31**. The fill, **28**, was a very dark grey sandy silt with frequent gravel. No finds were recovered from **28**.

Ditch **31** was 0.3m deep, 1.0m wide and at least 2.5m long, with a wide concave profile steeper on the southern side. It was straight in plan and oriented NE-SW. The fill, **30**, was a brown silty sand and gravel. No finds were recovered from **30**.

Posthole **33** was 0.15m deep, 0.7m long, at least 0.3m wide and cut the fill of ditch **35**. Its shape in plan was probably subrectangular. The fill, **32**, was a very dark grey sandy silt with frequent gravel. No finds were recovered from **32**.

Ditch **35** was 0.2m deep, 0.8m wide and at least 2.5m long, with a wide flat-based U-shaped profile. It was straight in plan, oriented NW-SE. The fill, **34**, was a yellowish brown clay silt with occasional gravel. No finds were recovered from **34**.

Posthole **37** was 0.2m deep, 0.7m long and at least 0.3m wide. Its shape in plan was probably subrectangular. The fill, **36**, was a very dark grey sandy silt with frequent gravel. No finds were recovered from **36**.

Posthole **39** was 0.2m deep, 0.55m long and at least 0.35m wide. Its shape in plan was probably subrectangular. The fill, **38**, was a very dark grey sandy silt with frequent gravel. No finds were recovered from **38**.

Posthole **41** was 0.3m deep, 0.8m long, at least 0.3m wide and cut the upper fill of ditch **51**. Its shape in plan was probably subrectangular. Compared to the other postholes in this trench, **41** had an unusual profile, which appeared to consist of a shallow post pit with a circular posthole 0.3m in diameter at the western end. The fill, **40**, was a very dark grey sandy silt with frequent gravel. No finds were recovered from **40**.

Ditch **51** was at least 0.6m deep, 1.65m wide and 3.2m long, with a wide concave profile. It was straight in plan, oriented N-S and cut the fill of pit **28**. Upper fill **48** was a dark brown clay silt with occasional strong brown flecks and rare gravel, and was cut by posthole **41**. Middle fill **49** was a brownish yellow clay silt with occasional chalk flecks and small stones. Lower fill **50** was a yellowish brown silty sand and gravel. No finds were recovered from any of the fills. This feature appeared quite straightforward in plan before excavation, and had been assumed to be a straight ditch. Upon excavation, greater complexity was revealed, with the profile shown to have a shallow step on the west side. Weathering also revealed what may be a termination to the feature to the north.

Posthole **43** was 0.2m deep, 0.7m long and at least 0.25m wide. Its shape in plan was probably oval or D-shaped. The fill, **42**, was a very dark grey sandy silt with frequent gravel. No finds were recovered from **42**.

Posthole 45 was 0.3m deep, 0.75m long and at least 0.25m wide. Its shape in plan was probably oval or D-shaped and the profile was similar to that of 41. The fill, 44, was a very dark grey sandy silt with frequent gravel. A single sherd of Saxo-Norman St Neots type pottery was recovered from 44.

Posthole 47 was 0.5m deep, 1.1m long and at least 0.5m wide. Its shape in plan was probably subrectangular. The fill, 46, was a very dark grey sandy silt with frequent gravel. No finds were recovered from 46.

6 DISCUSSION

Given the location of the site within the medieval core of the village, the discovery of Saxo-Norman and Medieval remains within the development area is not surprising. Since this is the first intrusive archaeological investigation to take place within the village, these findings will greatly enhance the picture of the development of Offord Cluny.

Three broad phases of activity have been uncovered on the site. The first phase, although undated, probably represents prehistoric activity on the site, and consists of the ditches in Trench 4, the shallow circular pit 10 in Trench 2, and potentially the easternmost ditch 16 in Trench 3. All of these features had leached fills that appeared distinctly different than those of the pits and ditches known to be later in date. The second phase includes the seven postholes in Trench 4, pit 14 in Trench 2, pit 55 in Trench 1, and probably the stratigraphically later ditches in Trench 3, and is broadly datable to the 11th or 12th centuries. The third phase is post-medieval in date, probably 18th century, and includes the pit and pond/well in Trench 2.

The first phase appears to consist of evidence for land division and this may relate to possible nearby occupation close to All Saints Church, where Bronze Age pottery was found. The second phase is more substantial, indicating not only boundaries and disposal of rubbish, but also the suggestion of a structure which may have been a barn, the gap between postholes 41 and 43 perhaps indicative of a wide doorway. By the 18th century, the site has become almost solely a backplot for the disposal of rubbish, and the existence of the pond suggests that it may have become a farmyard.

The dearth of datable artefactual material recovered from the site makes this phasing speculative, however, it has been extrapolated from the known archaeological resource in the vicinity of the development area. In particular, the location of the Manor immediately to the southwest of the site makes a good case for Late Saxon occupation in this area, perhaps in the form of barns.

7 CONCLUSIONS

The objective of the project was to establish the character, date, state of preservation and extent of any archaeological remains within the site in advance of development. Information from the evaluation will allow an assessment of the proposed development's archaeological implications and to inform an appropriate mitigation strategy.

The project has been successful in achieving its objectives. Significant Prehistoric and Saxo-Norman archaeology has been identified that would appear to be present across the entire site. These remains seem likely to form part of the original settlement of the area, and in particular the Saxon remains may date almost to the foundation of the village as it exists today.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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The brief for archaeological works was written by Andy Thomas of the CAO and Jeremy Parsons of that office visited the site and monitored the evaluation.

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