Archaeological Field Unit

The Cycle Way Bridge at Eaton Socon, St. Neots: An Archaeological Evaluation

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May 2005

Cambridgeshire County Council

Report No. 808

Commissioned by Atkins Consultants Ltd on behalf of
Cambridgeshire County Council Environment and Transport Division

The Cycle Way Bridge at Eaton Socon, St. Neots: An Archaeological Evaluation

(TL 517465 259027)

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SUMMARY

Between 5th and 21st April 2005 an archaeological evaluation was undertaken on a site between Eaton Socon Cricket Pitch and Ernulf Community School, Eynesbury, (TL 517465 259027). The proposed development is for a cycleway, running across the River Great Ouse, including the construction of two bridge supports, which were the focus of this evaluation.

There was no indication of intrusive features related to land management or building. No disturbance of any archaeological features is likely to occur due to development of the site.

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Cut Number 118

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Ordnance Datum 18.45m ODN

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Limit of Excavation

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Intrusion/Truncation

Sondages/Machine Strip

Illustrated Section S.14

Cut Number 118

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1 INTRODUCTION

Between 5th and 21st April 2005 an archaeological evaluation was undertaken on a site between Eaton Socon Cricket Pitch and Ernulf Community School, Eynesbury (TL 517465 259027). The proposed development is for a cycleway and footpath to cross the River Great Ouse, including the construction of two bridge supports, which were the focus of this evaluation.

The project was commissioned by Atkins Consultants Ltd on behalf of Cambridgeshire County Council Environment and Transport Division. Staff of the Cambridgeshire County Council Archaeological Field Unit (AFU) undertook the evaluation. The work was carried out in accordance with a specification prepared by the AFU in response to a Brief issued by Atkins Consultants Ltd.

There was no indication of intrusive features related to land management or building. No disturbance of any archaeological features is likely to occur due to development of the site.

2 GEOLOGY AND TOPOGRAPHY

The site lies between 14 and 16m OD in a broad meander of the River Great Ouse between Eaton Socon and Eynesbury in Cambridgeshire.

The British Geological Survey map (BGS 1975) showes the local geology consisting of 2nd terrace river gravels immediately to the west and river borne alluvium directly to the east of the present course of the River Great Ouse. Beyond the alluvium 1st terrace river gravels extended to Ernulf School.

Earlier investigations (Bailey 2004) showed that the alluvium extended for a few metres to the west of the river, immediately below a steep bank. Beyond this the land slopes gently up to the inhabited part of Eaton Socon. The western side of the river valley had a comparable bank and slope.

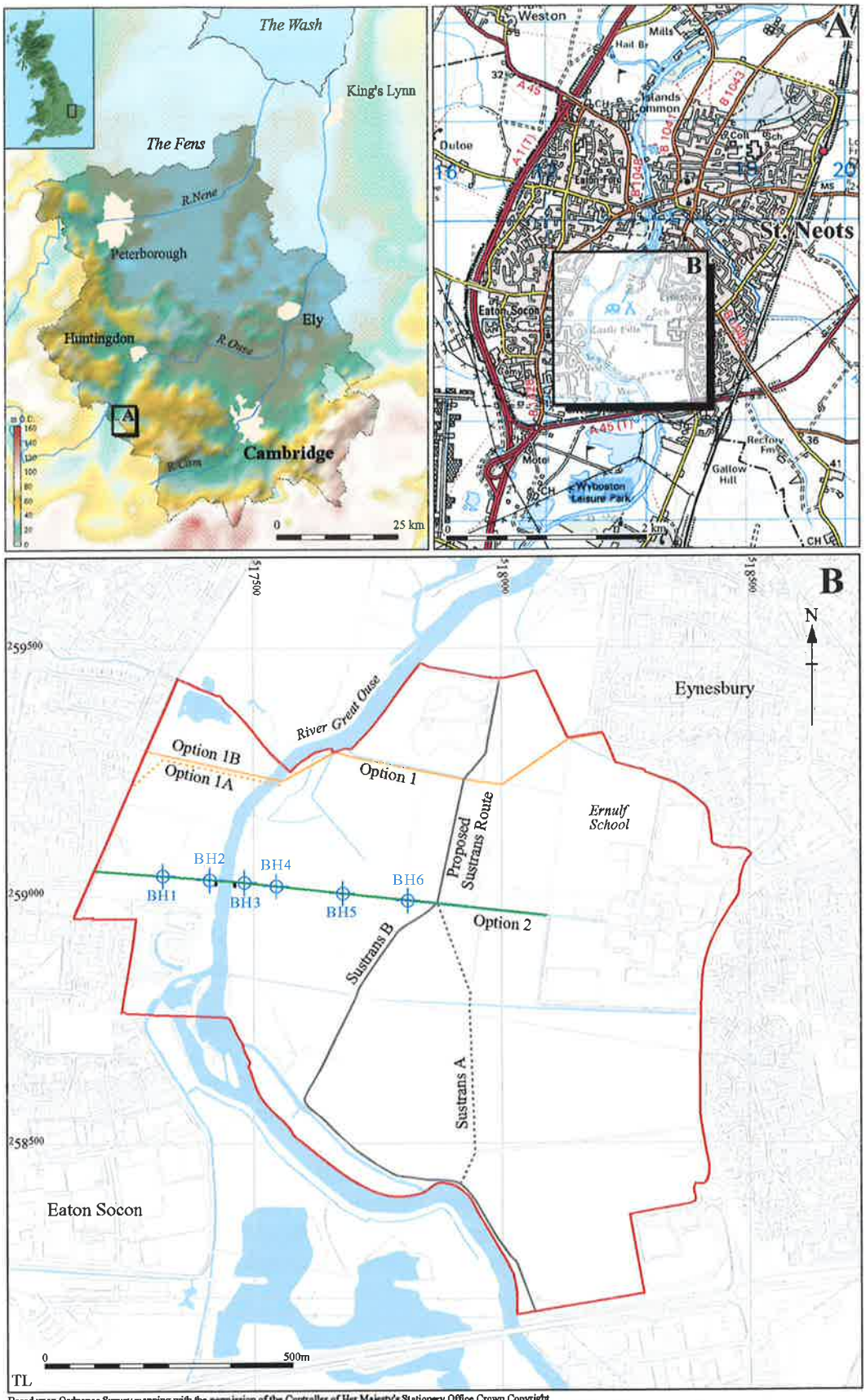

Figure 1 *Location of evaluation trenches (black) and development area (red) with boreholes (blue).*

3 ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

A desk-top assessment of the archaeological potential for several proposed routes for the cycleway was carried out by the AFU (Atkins 2003). This concluded:

'Within the development area there are the remains of a Scheduled Norman castle (SAM No. 20434). There is also part of a regionally and nationally important ritual prehistoric landscape dating from c.4000BC to c.700BC, which included ritual structures within an area of at least 700m by 300m. The landscape, on the south side, has mostly been excavated although elements may extend into the central part of the assessment area. Romano-British settlement remains (covering an area of more than c.400m by c.300m) extended on to the north and north-eastern part of the site. In addition, the settlement's associated field systems and trackway extend through most, if not all, of the rest of the assessment area to the east of the River Great Ouse. Parts of two, or possibly three, different Anglo-Saxon settlements are known to infringe upon the southern, western and possibly the northern areas of the assessment area. There are former river channels (palaeochannels) within the assessment area. It is also possible that the River Great Ouse was previously bridged within the assessment area and there may also be remains of Anglo-Saxon and medieval mill(s).

'It is known from excavations in the eastern and southern parts of the assessment area that archaeological remains survive between 0.26m and 0.5m below the present ground level. Here there were no major alluvial deposits - where there were areas of alluvium these were restricted to scour channels. In areas not archaeologically evaluated, more alluvium may be expected nearer the river in the northern area where documentary and map evidence indicates that there was flooding and former meadows. The survival and extent of any archaeological remains in these areas are not certain. Evidence from documentary sources, maps and archaeological work show that nineteenth century gravel quarrying may have affected a small area of ground in the north-western part of the site though the exact location of this quarrying is unknown.'

Geotechnical test pits along the rout of the proposed cycle way were monitored by an archaeologist in August 2004 (Bailey 2004).

Although the surrounding area has a high potential for archaeology, the monitoring showed negative results for any archaeological features. The artefacts that were recovered were either in the topsoil and undateable, or of a relatively modern date, i.e. 18th century onward.

4 METHODOLOGY

Two evaluation trenches (each approximately 10m by 5m) were excavated using a mechanical excavator with a toothless ditching bucket. The position of the trenches was determined by Atkins Consultants Ltd (Drawing number 5011839/BR/DV/006) (Fig. 2). Following machining the evaluation trenches were cleaned, recorded, drawn and photographed to the standards of the AFU. Vertical soil profiles were drawn for each side of the trenches. The spoil heaps were scanned visually and by metal detector for artefacts.

5 RESULTS

Site A

Site A was on the western bank (Eaton Socon side) of the River Great Ouse. The deposits observed in this trench (Fig. 3) were associated with the meandering of the river. The present bank, situated approximately 10m west of the current course of the river reflects that observed in section (S.1). There were observable expressions of the silting-up and subsequent drying out of this part of the river bank throughout Site A. The deposits that overly this (clay) bank was believed to be either a result of stabilisation of the bank (highly organic siltly clay from vegetation build-up) and an infilling of a previously open waterway. The site is dominated by a gravel deposit, in-filling what was probably a pool or ox-bow lake below the existing bank. Post-medieval artefacts (brick and tile fragments) were recovered from the main gravel deposit. The gravel deposit may have resulted result from dredging of the river to aid navigation to the mills and housing upstream.

Site B

Site B (on the eastern bank) revealed flood deposits overlying undisturbed clay (Fig. 3). The majority of the deposits were of unstratified alluvial silt. The noticeable exception to this is a gravel horizon lying directly below the present topsoil. This gravel extends less than two metres from the westernmost point of the trench and defines a potential flood or dredging event. A gully to deal with the run-off from the nearby footpath cut through the topsoil.

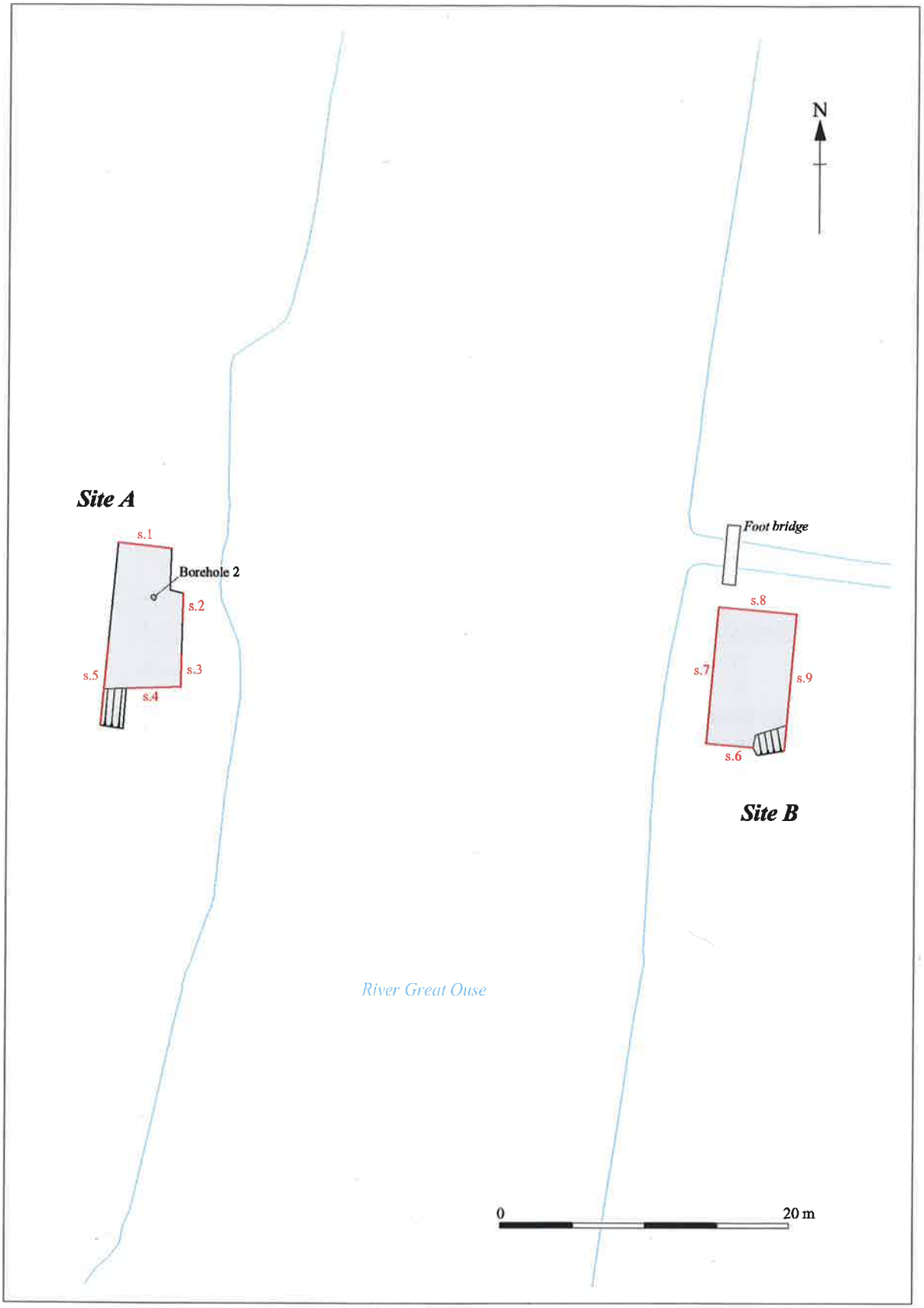

***Figure 2** Evaluation trenches*

6 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Although the surrounding area has a high potential for archaeology, the evaluation failed to reveal any archaeological features. The artefacts that were recovered were either in the topsoil and undateable, or of a relatively modern date – i.e. 18th century onward.

Further excavation may show some indication of previous land use. The presence of earthworks to the south of the site, part of an extensive defensive structure, may have precluded the development of any buildings or other structures in close proximity to the river. The defensive merit of the castle would have been compromised had a building or even low wall been in place during its use.

The evaluation of the footprint of the proposed bridge supports did not change the overall conclusions from the borehole monitoring carried out previously.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to thank Atkins Consultants Ltd (Tony Lee) who advised and monitored the evaluation on behalf of Cambridgeshire County Council's Environment and Transport Division who commissioned and funded the archaeological work. The evaluation was also monitored by Andy Thomas (Development Control Archaeologist) The author was assisted on site by Spencer Cooper, Steve Hickling, Dennis Payne and Sam Whitehead and in the office by Carlos Silva who prepared the illustrations. The project was managed by Judith Roberts.

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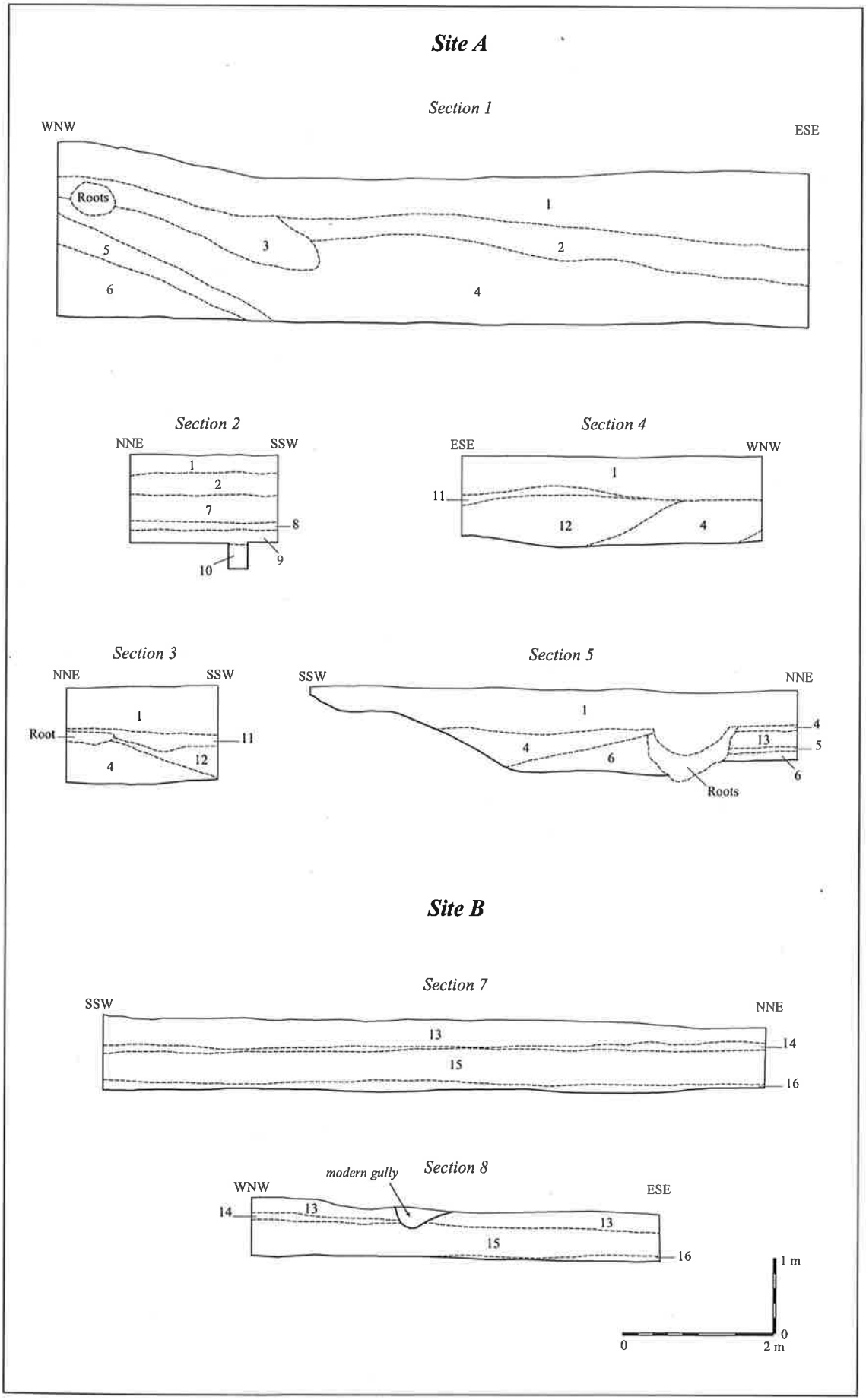

Figure 3 *Section drawings*

APPENDIX 1 Context list

Context number	Site	Description
1	A	Topsoil - decreasingly organic and increasingly silty to the east
2	A	Subsoil - stony silty gravel
3	A	Bank material
4	A	Dark yellow brown silty gravel
5	A	Silty gravel clay
6	A	Pale orange/grey clay
7	A	Mid grey brown silty gravel
8	A	Mid brown orange gravel
9	A	Firm fine pale grey clay with no inclusions
10	A	Firm dark organic clay with high organic content
11	A	Yellow clay subsoil
12	A	Dark silty gravel
13	A	Pale silty clay
13	B	Topsoil - soft, dark grey brown gritty silt
14	B	Soft pale grey brown silty gravel
15	B	Brown/mid orange gritty clay silt
16	B	Pale yellow/brown soft clay

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