Chapter 7: Prehistoric and Roman activity

INTRODUCTION

A number of features were found which predated the Anglo-Saxon cemetery. Some of these features have been ascribed a later Neolithic date on the basis of small quantities of pottery and worked flint found in a number of them (see specialist reports below). Other features have been assigned a Romano-British date. Several pits and possible postholes which produced no finds might also be prehistoric or Romano-British features, but cannot be confidently ascribed. In view of the density of later occupation, as well as the presence of probable tree-root holes, which are deceptively similar to some types of feature, their status is in some doubt and they are omitted from the discussion. Descriptions of the prehistoric features discussed below can be found in the archive.

THE PREHISTORIC FEATURES

(Figs 85 and 89)

by Andrew Mudd

The prehistoric features consist of the earlier possibly continuous ditches (37 and 60), and later segmented recuts (36, 11 and 25). There were also a small number of pits, probably contemporary with the recut ditches.

Primary ditches

The major prehistoric features were two ditches, one aligned NW-SE (contexts 37, 44, 57 & 89) (Fig. 89) and the other NE-SW (contexts 60 & 90), both of which were later recut. As recovered in excavation, ditch 37 was not continuous in the NW part of the site (context 89) but it is likely that this was the result of later ploughing and modern truncation. Ditch 60 was much shallower towards its SW end and petered out in an area much disturbed by modern use. Although contexts 60 and 90 were not physically connected — they were separated by the recut 25 — their alignment makes it likely that they were parts of the same ditch. Ditches 37 and 60 met at an approximate right-angle under the later SFB 38. The evidence for the relationship between the ditches was destroyed by the SFB and by the later recut of ditch 37. The near right-angle junction between ditches 37 and 60 strongly suggests that they were contemporary features. Neither ditch produced any finds.

Secondary ditches

Both primary ditches appear to have been recut adjacent to their junction. Ditch 37 was recut by feature 36 (Fig. 85) which was a short length of ditch, or a narrow elongated pit, on almost the same NW-SE alignment. Feature 36 was slightly displaced to the S of 37 and was only *c* 7 m long. Flints from the central fill of feature 36 are consistent with a Neolithic date. Ditch 36 also cut context 90, which formed part of the NE-SW primary ditch 60. It is possible that pit 56 (Fig. 85) (see below) was the NW terminal of ditch 36.

Feature 11 was an elongated pit, or length of ditch, parallel to context 89 (ditch 37) and within the area enclosed by the two primary ditches. It lay to the NW of 36 and was apparently on a similar alignment. It was probably a recut ditch comparable to 36. It produced a single sherd of Grooved Ware.

Ditch 60 was recut by feature 25 which was *c* 5 m long, and on the same alignment. Feature 25 yielded a single late Neolithic potsherd and was cut directly over ditch 60.

The recuts of both 37 and 60 were deeper than the original ditches.

Pits

Two pits produced prehistoric pottery and worked flint. These finds indicate late Neolithic activity which could be contemporary with the ditch recuts. One of these, pit 56 (Fig. 85), may have been the terminal of the recut ditch 36. The flint flakes from the pit cannot be closely dated (Bradley, this volume). Pit 20 contained both Grooved Ware sherds and flint flakes and lay in the angle formed by the primary ditches 37 and 60. A third pit, 24, is assigned a prehistoric date, although it produced no datable finds, because its fill was similar to other features thought to be prehistoric. It lay outside the area enclosed by the primary ditches (37 and 60) and was *c* 7.5 m to the SE of their junction and almost on a line with ditch 37. Pits 20 and 24 were both oval in plan.

Discussion

The site produced insufficient information to allow a totally convincing interpretation of the prehistoric occupation. The dating evidence is limited; the quantity of pottery and flint recovered is small, and could be readily explained as residual. The presence of a small quantity of later Neolithic material is worth noting, but its association with the ditches must be viewed with some scepticism.

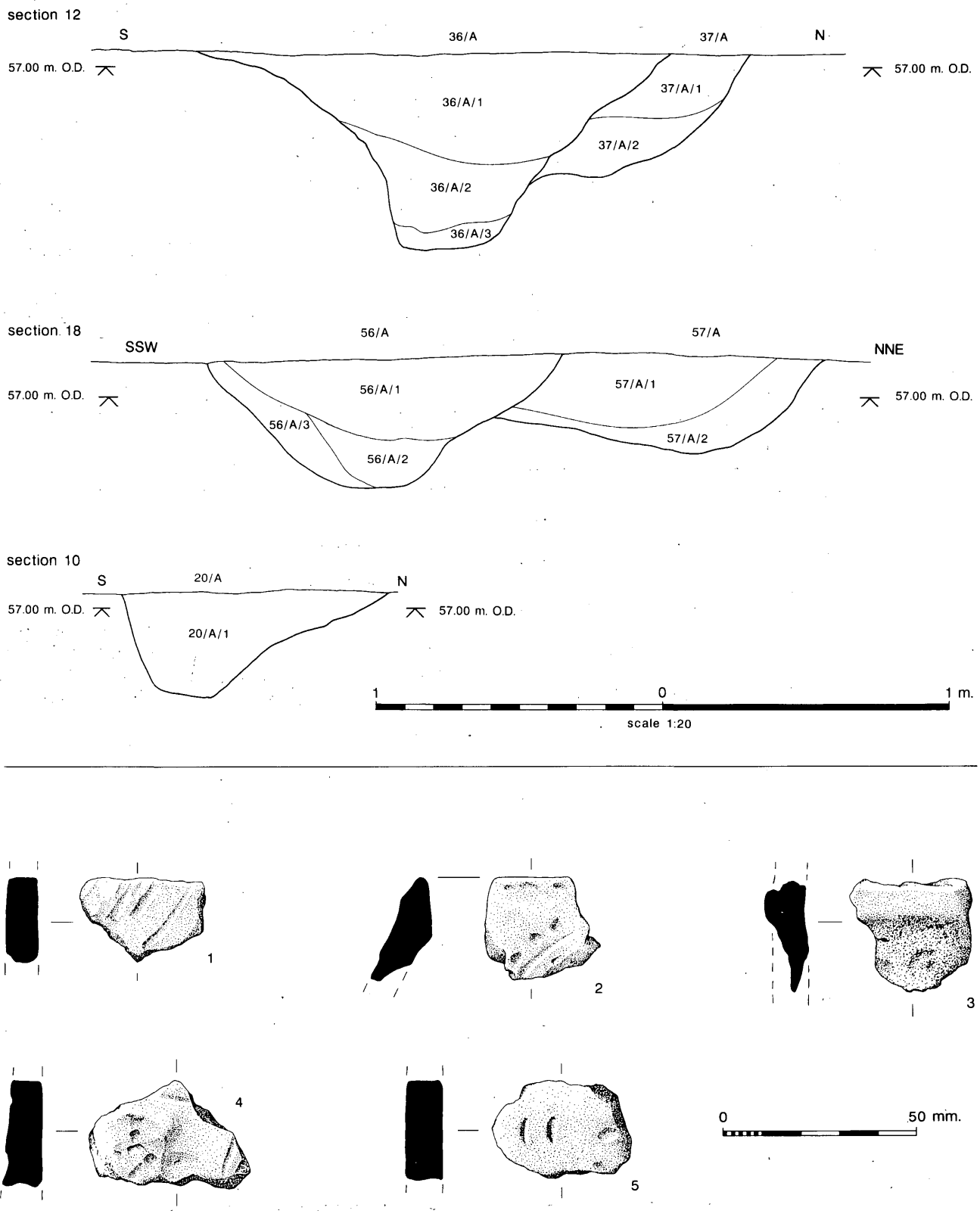

Figure 85 Sections of features 20, 36, 37, 56 and 57; pottery sherds from features 11 (85.1) and feature 20 (85.2-5)

The primary ditches form an L-shaped arrangement which was possibly part of an enclosure system. The NW end of the NW-SE arm (ditch 37) extended beyond the area of the excavation, and the NE-SW arm (ditch 60) petered out in an area of modern disturbance at its SW end. The primary ditches are not dated by finds, but were recut by ditches which produced finds of later Neolithic date. The recuts followed the line of the primary ditches so closely that it can be suggested that they preserve the same arrangement and therefore may not be much later in date, notwithstanding the fact that the primary ditches clearly silted up before the recuts were made. The primary ditches were probably dug as a single feature. There was no evidence for a bank associated with the ditches.

The finds of pottery and flint all belong to the later phase of recutting which can be seen to redefine the already established boundary, or more specifically the corner of that boundary. The dating evidence for this activity consists of a sherd of pottery from the recut ditch segment 25, another from segment 11, worked flint consistent with that period from ditch segments 36 and 56, and late Neolithic pottery from pit 20. Pits containing late Neolithic Grooved Ware sherds are not uncommon features on the Second Gravel Terrace, but the pits from this site need not be seen as Grooved Ware pits 'proper', because these generally contain charcoal, burnt soil, animal bones and carbonised plant remains as well as Grooved Ware sherds (Thomas 1991, 60).

The primary and secondary ditches may have formed part of a pattern of late Neolithic land division. The size of the primary ditches is close to that of the smaller examples from Fengate, which date to the second millennium BC and are interpreted as defining droveways and enclosures for livestock management (Pryor, 1980). However, this would be unusual since examples of late Neolithic land division have not been identified in the Upper Thames valley. At Yarnton two parallel ditches 60 m apart were found on the Thames floodplain. These had been recut two or three times and contained Peterborough ware. Subsequently they were back-filled and the back-fills contained Grooved ware (Hey 1994). These ditches seem to have been elements in a ritual enclosure rather than parts of a scheme of land division. At Yarnton the earliest evidence for land division dates to the late Bronze Age.

The earliest certain evidence for enclosures and land division in the Upper Thames valley dates to the middle Bronze Age and examples have been found from Dorchester (Site IX) and Mount Farm, Berinsfield (Bradley and Chambers 1988). The evidence for middle to late Bronze Age farming and land use has been considered by Lambrick (1992, 86–88 and Fig. 29). It is possible that the slight dating evidence from Didcot is misleading, and that the ditches are of Bronze Age or later date and the small quantity of Grooved Ware was redeposited from late Neolithic pits.

THE ROMANO-BRITISH FEATURES

(Figs 86 and 89)

by Andrew Mudd

The Romano-British features comprised two pits and four shallow ditches organised on a rectilinear pattern. The main features appear to be ditches 3 (contexts 3 and 12), 39 and 87. Ditch 3 was orientated

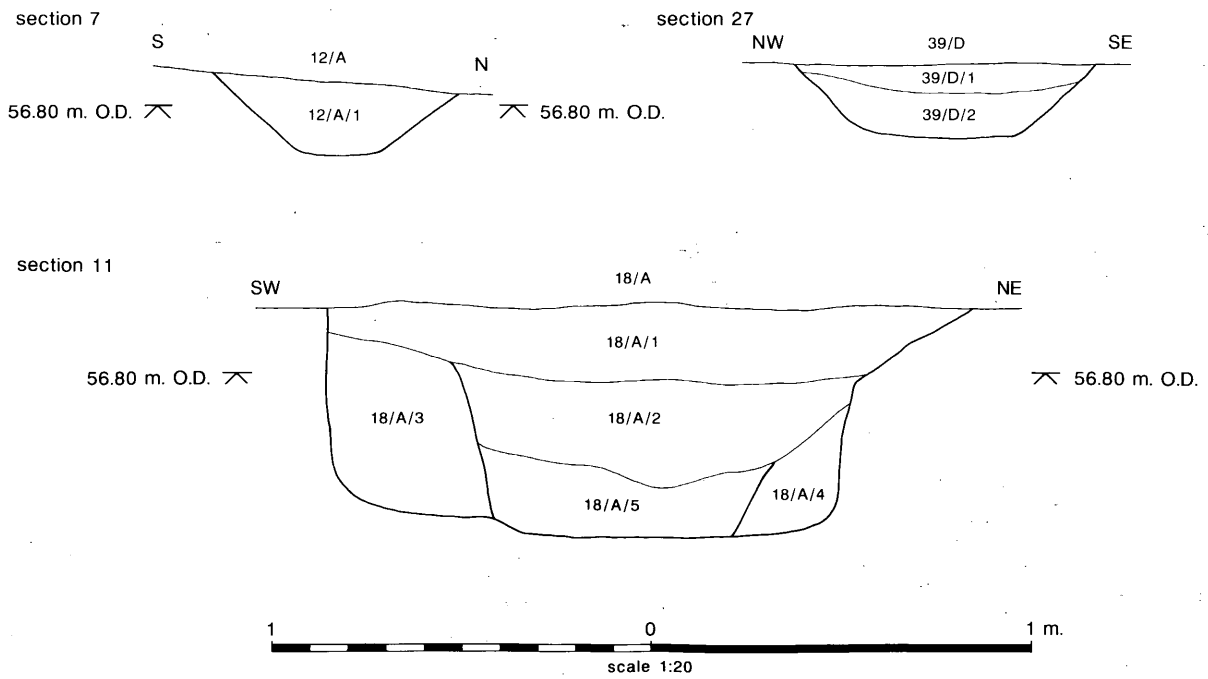

Figure 86 Sections of features 12, 18 and 39

WNW-ESE and appeared to cut ditch 39 which was aligned NNE-SSW. Both ditches extended beyond the limits of the excavation trenches, and produced sherds of Romano-British pottery. Ditch 87 was parallel to ditch 3, and approximately 22 m to the SW. Between them ditches 3, 39 and 87 appear to have defined three sides of a rectilinear field. Very close to ditch 39 and parallel to it was a small ditch or gully (context 61). Its orientation, and the fact that it terminates short of ditch 3 which cuts across 39, suggest that it is part of the same rectilinear scheme.

The two pits assigned a Romano-British date lay to the S and E of the ditched field or enclosure. Pit 18 was located just E of gully 61; there is a single sherd of Romano-British pottery, and this could be residual. The second pit (context 88) lay just S of ditch 87 where it petered out. A sherd of Romano-British pottery was found near the top of its fill.

Discussion

The Romano-British ditches, presumably related to agricultural activities, indicate a rectangular arrangement of land division on the gravel terrace. It appears that this pattern would have extended away from the site in all directions. Such patterns are extremely common on the gravels of the Upper Thames region generally and excavated examples occur locally at Appleford (Hinchliffe & Thomas 1980, 62–66) and Ashville (Parrington 1978, 3, Fig. 3), while air-photographic evidence suggests that they are particularly common in the area between Abingdon and Dorchester (Benson & Miles 1974, Maps 31–32, 36–37).

There is no evidence to suggest a settlement here, and the pits (if indeed they are Romano-British) are clearly related to peripheral activities associated with the fields. However, there is extensive evidence for Romano-British settlement in the Abingdon-Dorchester area, and it is likely that a settlement existed not far away. One candidate is located about 800 m to the N (Benson & Miles 1974, Map 34, SU 5092).

At first sight it appears that the larger ditches define the later Anglo-Saxon cemetery on its northern and eastern sides, but two factors warn against such an interpretation. Firstly, the known Saxon graves are not closely clustered, and therefore it would be quite possible for the cemetery to have extended to the N and E of the ditches, with graves occurring beyond the excavation trenches without a significant alteration to the density of the grave distribution. The second point, linked with the first, is that the excavations to the N and E of the Romano-British ditches were limited in extent.

THE LATER NEOLITHIC POTTERY

by Alistair Barclay

A small assemblage P1–8 of prehistoric pottery (22 sherds, 58 g), was recovered from pits 11 and 20 and ditch 25.

Fabric

Examined under a binocular microscope (x20) and sub-divided by characteristic inclusions.

GA Sparse-common grog (>3 mm) and quartz grit in a fine micaceous matrix

A Fine-medium sub-rounded quartz (white, colourless) and black opaques.

Catalogue (Fig. 85)

P1 11/A/1 Oblique groove decorated body sherd (5 g). Th 92 mm. Colour: ext: pale orange brown/ core: medium grey/ int: light grey. Fabric GA(Fig. 85.1).

P2 20/A/1 Seven sherds (10 g), plain with recent breaks. Th 8 mm. Fired inverted: ext: pale orange brown/ int: dark grey. Fabric GA (not illustrated).

P3 20/A/1 Seven body and base sherds from a thin walled vessel (20 g). Th 5 mm. Colour: ext: medium orange brown/ core: dark grey/ int: medium orange brown. Fabric GA (not illustrated).

P4 20/A/1 Three sherds, two from a pointed rim with an internal deep vertical bevel (6 g). Th 10 mm. The exterior is decorated with a diagonal groove and angular jab impressions. Colour: ext: pale pinkish-orange/ core: medium grey/ int: pale pinkish orange. Fabric GA (Fig. 85.2).

P5 20/A/1 Decorated with a plain horizontal cordon (5 g). Th 9 mm. Colour: ext: dark greyish-brown/ core: medium grey/ int: pale brown. Fabric GA (Fig. 85.3).

P6 20/A/1 Has a pinched vertical cordon separating possible panels, one decorated with bone impressions, the other with grooved strokes (6 g). Th 8 mm. Colour: ext: pale brown/ core: medium brown/ int: pale pinkish brown. Fabric GA (Fig. 85.4).

P7 20/A/1 Decorated with vertical impressed finger-nail (4 g). Th 9 mm. Colour: ext: medium brown/ core: dark grey/ int: medium brown. Fabric GA (Fig.85.5).

P8 25/A/1 Body sherd. 2 g. Th 7 mm.
Colour: ext: medium brown/ core: dark grey/ int: medium brown. Fabric A (not illustrated).

Firing and manufacture

All the sherds derive from vessels constructed out of sandy, and sometimes micaceous, clays. The quartz grit and black opaque inclusions may well occur naturally but the angular grog (crushed fired clay) has been deliberately added to the paste. Grog tempered pastes were predominantly used in the production of late Neolithic/early Bronze Age ceramics in the Upper Thames region.

Form and decoration

The sherds are too fragmentary to reconstruct vessel forms but the rim and decoration are diagnostic. Applied plain and pinched cordons and vertical bevels are traits commonly associated with the Durrington Walls style of Grooved Ware (Wainwright and Longworth 1971, 240–2). The impressed decoration is not however exclusive to this sub-style.

Discussion

Sherds P3–7 are characteristic of local Grooved Ware, the decorative traits being diagnostic of the Durrington Walls sub-style. Some of the sherds are, however, extremely thin walled (P3: 3–6 mm) and are tentatively suggestive of the Woodlands sub-style (Wainwright and Longworth 1971, 238–40). The indeterminate sherds P2 are in a grog fabric typical of local late Neolithic/early Bronze age ceramics. Grooved Ware of these two styles has been found in the Upper Thames Region at Barton Court Farm (Whittle 1986, Microfiche 3:A 12–3:B), Barrow Hills, Radley (Cleal forthcoming b), Cassington (Case 1982, 124–5) and Stanton Harcourt (Cleal forthcoming a).

THE FLINT ASSEMBLAGE

by Philippa Bradley

A small assemblage of 19 pieces of struck flint was recovered from both prehistoric and later features. Additionally two unstratified pieces of burnt unworked flint were found in evaluation Trench 2. The assemblage is summarised in Table 39.

Raw material

The material used is mainly quite good quality flint with few cherty inclusions. The flint is generally heavily corticated. The cortex where present is fairly thin and white, cream or grey in colour, exhibits some red staining and is often of a chalky texture. There are three pieces which would appear to be gravel flint (from context 4/-/1 and 18/A/2), being heavily stained and abraded with thin cortex. The majority of the material therefore possesses quite good knapping qualities and is probably chalk flint or flint from derived deposits. The flint would have been brought to the site probably from the Chilterns to the NE.

Table 39 Summary of the flint assemblage

Context	Flakes	Retouched Forms	Core Fragment
4/-/1	1	–	–
10/A/1	–	1 retouched flake	–
13/-/-	–	–	1
18/A/2	1	1 retouched flake	–
20/A/1	6 (inc. 1 core rejuvenation flake)	–	–
grave 4	1	–	–
36/-/2	3 flakes (1 utilised)	–	–
38/C/1	1	–	–
56/A/1	2	–	–
84	–	1 leaf-shaped arrowhead	–
Total	15	3	1

Technology and dating

The size of the assemblage and the lack of diagnostic artefacts, with the exception of the leaf-shaped arrowhead, preclude any firm dating, but some guide may be gained from a study of the technology employed.

Generally the unretouched flakes from Didcot were short and squat, both hard and soft hammers were used. Butts are generally wide although there are a few linear examples. Several flakes have hinge fractures. The flintwork, apart from the leaf-shaped arrowhead, is fairly crude with little attempt to produce regular flakes. Platform edge abrasion was noted on a utilised flake from context 36/-/2 and the core fragment from context 13/-/-. Some of the flakes are considerably larger than the largest surviving flake scar on the fairly small extant fragments, which indicates that the cores were worked down until no further useful flakes could be removed.

The leaf-shaped arrowhead is finely pressure flaked, both faces, the tip and the base are broken. The other retouched pieces, two retouched flakes, are not particularly diagnostic although they would not be out of place in a Neolithic or Bronze Age context.

Discussion

In view of the size of the assemblage and the associated problems of dating, the results must be treated with caution although a Neolithic or Bronze Age date would not be out of place for the majority of the assemblage. The leaf-shaped arrowhead indicates early Neolithic activity. Further work in the future may produce more material with which clearer dating may be achieved.

THE ROMAN POTTERY

by Paul Booth

The 11 sherds (weight 145 g), all in locally produced Oxfordshire fabrics, comprised seven reduced wares, two oxidised and two white wares (full details are contained in the excavation archive). Three vessels, two jars and a flagon, were represented by rims. Only the flagon, in a fine white ware of Young type W5, was at all datable with a range of *c* AD 100–240 (Young 1977, 100). Most of the sherds were moderately abraded, but this could be accounted for by adverse soil conditions rather than wear.

The sherds occurred in ditches 3, 12 and 39 and pits 18 and 88, with four sherds in Anglo-Saxon contexts (graves 7 and 14, SFB 38 and posthole 58). The material presumably indicates a Roman or later date for part of the ditch system, but its quantity and character does not suggest that there was an immediately adjacent settlement.

A single fragment of Roman tile came from a modern feature, 9.