

Land at Totternhoe Road, Dunstable, Bedfordshire

Archaeological Field Evaluation Report

NGR TL 0027 2162

Oxford Archaeological Unit

November 1997

Land at Totternhoe Road, Dunstable, Bedfordshire.

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Summary

In October 1997 the Oxford Archaeological Unit carried out a field evaluation at land at Totternhoe Road, Dunstable. The evaluation revealed an undated pit, a further small pit dating to the late Neolithic period, and slight evidence of a former ridge and furrow field system. An area of modern disturbance was located at the extreme eastern side of the site, probably associated with the construction of nearby school buildings.

*November 1997 Land at Totternhoe Road, Dunstable. Archaeological Evaluation
Report*

1 Introduction

1.1 In October 1997 the Oxford Archaeological Unit carried out a field evaluation at land at Totternhoe Road, Dunstable, in respect of a planning application for housing (Planning Application No.SB/TP/97/351). The work was commissioned by Hives Partnership Planning on behalf of Newton Commercial Ltd. A specification for the work was set by, and a WSI agreed with, Bedfordshire County Council. The fieldwork constituted the second stage of evaluation of this site, following a geophysical survey undertaken in September 1997 by Alister Bartlett of the Barlett-Clarke Consultancy (see section 3 below). Trenches were targeted on plotted anomalies and possible features found in the survey, as well as giving a general coverage of the rest of the evaluation site.

2 Location and Archaeological Background

2.1 The site covers an area of 3.28 ha located on the south-west edge of Dunstable at NGR TL 0027 2162 (fig 1). The geology is Upper Chalk. Topographically the site is part of the Chilterns Ridge, being situated on a north-west - south-east aligned ridge at a height of 155 m OD. Surrounded by the built-up area of Dunstable to the south, east and north, the site adjoins agricultural land to the west and has been used recently for horse pasture.

2.2 The site did not itself contain any known archaeological remains. However within the immediate area there is evidence for sites ranging in date from the prehistoric to medieval periods, reflecting continued occupation of the chalk downland from at least the Neolithic period onwards. This information has been summarised in the specification, but is repeated here for convenience.

2.3 A Neolithic enclosure is known at Maiden Bower c 1 km north of the present site. Further Neolithic activity is located at Five Knolls, 500 m south-east of the site, where it was succeeded by a Bronze Age barrow cemetery. A further ring ditch has been excavated at Marina Drive only 200 m to the south and further barrows and ring ditches are known from the ridge to the west. Evidence of Bronze Age occupation has been recovered in quarrying in Totternhoe Quarry to the west of Maiden Bower. Surface scatters of artefacts, principally flint, have also been found in the area at a number of locations.

2.4 An Iron Age hillfort is located at Maiden Bower, c 1 km north of the present site, and further Iron Age occupation was noted in the area of the quarry west of the hillfort. Roman activity is centred on the small town of Durocbrivis which lies beneath the modern town centre of Dunstable, c 1 km east of the site. West of the site, at Church End, Totternhoe, is a villa site apparently with associated settlement. Roman finds in the area are also known from surface scatters and from finds at Totternhoe Quarry.

2.5 A substantial Saxon cemetery was excavated in advance of housing development at Marina Drive, just south of the present site. Medieval activity is centred on the town of Dunstable itself (refounded in 1119) and to the west at Totternhoe, where there was a motte and bailey castle and stone quarries.

2.6 During excavations there was much local interest in the site and the information was proffered that a) there were bombs dropped in the area during WW2, with subsequent bomb disposal activity, and b) that there was construction access for nearby school buildings at the far eastern end of the site.

3 Geophysical Survey

3.1 The whole of the proposed development site was the subject of a magnetometer survey, supplemented by magnetic susceptibility testing of the topsoil (fig.2). This work was carried out by Alister Bartlett of the Bartlett-Clark Consultancy in September 1997 and a copy of his full report has already been submitted to Bedfordshire County Council. A summary of the principal results is repeated here.

3.2 There were very few anomalies which were likely to represent archaeological features. A number of strong magnetic anomalies represented modern disturbance, including a pipeline at the northern end of the site. Other areas of general disturbance likely to indicate relatively recent activity were concentrated in the southern part of the site. A number of linear anomalies exactly parallel to the north-east - south-west alignment of boundaries on the site are likely to represent plough marks, field drains of fairly recent origin, or possibly ridge and furrow.

3.3 Two faint linear anomalies, on an alignment slightly different from that just discussed, and some other isolated anomalies, were thought to represent possible archaeological features, though none were clearly of archaeological origin. One anomaly in the south-east corner of the site was suggested as a possible kiln-like feature, though it is also possible that this represents modern ironwork or something similar.

4 Objectives

4.1 In view of the fairly high potential of the site indicated by the background information, and notwithstanding the results of the geophysical survey, which suggested a very low density of archaeological features, more precise definition of the archaeological potential of the site was required. The second phase of the evaluation, consisting of trenching, informed by the geophysical survey, was therefore intended to provide information on the location, extent, nature and date of any archaeological features or deposits which may be present, and to assess the integrity and state of preservation of any such features or deposits.

5 Strategy

5.1 The evaluation was based upon a 2% sample of the site, and consisted of 11 trenches measuring 30 m long and 2 m wide (for location see fig 2). The overburden was removed by a 360° mechanical excavator under close archaeological supervision. The trenches were excavated and recorded in accordance with standard OAU guidelines. These are consistent with the standards set in Bedfordshire County Council's Procedures Manual for Archaeological Fieldwork and the Analysis of Fieldwork Records (1992).

5.2 The disposition of trenches was intended to provide general coverage of the whole site but also targeted a representative sample of the different kinds of magnetic anomaly located in the geophysical survey. In particular, the most likely linear features and the possible kiln-like feature (located to the northern end of Trench 1) were all targeted.

5.3 Spoil heaps were monitored for finds. Modern artefacts were noted but not necessarily retained.

5.4 The site was deemed to be generally unsuitable for environmental sampling, although a single sample was taken from feature [5] a small pit within Trench 4.

6 Results: General

6.1 Soils and ground conditions

The general soil type was a loose clayey silt topsoil presently under grass pasture, which varied in depth between 0.08 m to 0.26 m across the site. This overlay a lighter, intermittently occurring friable former ploughsoil up to 0.35 m in depth. The natural Chalk subsoil occurred at a depth of between 0.2 m and 0.48 m across the site, this giving good drainage. No waterlogged deposits were found and ground conditions were dry.

6.2 Distribution of archaeological deposits

6.2.1 Generally there was a very low concentration of archaeological features or finds across the site, with the northern part of the site being particularly empty of past human activity. Shallow, archaeologically clean, dirty chalk spreads (i.e. chalk with a small amount of soil intermixed) intermittently occurred within trenches across the whole site. This, or a very similar material, also filled several irregularly shaped features that are assumed to be naturally occurring i.e. due to tree holes, root action or possibly periglacial activity.

6.2.2 Single small features, possibly postholes, were located within Trenches 2 and 4, and the truncated base of a possible furrow ran north-east to south-west across Trench 6. An area of modern disturbance was located to the extreme eastern end of the site within Trench 1.

7 Results: Descriptions

7.1 Description of deposits (an inventory of archaeological contexts is given in Appendix 1)

7.1.1 Trenches 3, 5, 7, 8, 9, 10 and 11

The natural chalk subsoil was encountered throughout the site. Above this, spreads of 'dirty chalk' occurred irregularly but widely beneath topsoil and former ploughsoil layers. A significant sample of these spreads was investigated but targeted features were shown to be irregular in shape and generally fairly shallow. None contained any dateable artefacts. No apparent archaeological features were found in any of these trenches.

7.1.2 Trench 2 (fig.3)

Trench 2 contained several spreads of dirty chalk. These were sampled to reveal the cuts of three irregular, probably natural features [2/12, 2/14, 2/16] and also the cut of a single pit [2/4] partly underlying the east baulk of the trench. This feature was circular in plan, and had vertical sides rounding fairly sharply to meet a slightly concave base (fig.4). Measuring 0.68 m. x 0.60 m. deep, its fills (2/5, 2/6, 2/7) contained large amounts of chalk, the uppermost fill (2/5) not being readily distinguishable from other sampled adjacent spreads, whilst its primary fill was only definable against the sides of this feature by a slightly softer texture than the very hard natural chalk surrounding. None of these fills contained any archaeological finds, therefore this feature was undated.

7.1.3 Trench 4 (fig.3)

A single feature [4/6] was partially revealed within Trench 4 at a depth of 0.30 m beneath the overlying former ploughsoil (4/2) and topsoil (4/1). This was sectioned against the eastern side of the trench to uncover a steep-sided cut with a flat base measuring 0.75 m across by 0.51 m deep (fig.4). The sides of this feature were slightly over-hanging in places, but well-defined in the natural white chalk. The fills were of mixed reddish brown and blackish brown clayey silt with a few small chalk fragments (4/4 and 4/5). The junction of the two fills appeared to be rather irregular, perhaps suggesting some mixing.

These fills contained scattered animal bone fragments, struck flint including a former flint core with evidence of re-use as a hammer stone (see flint analysis: Appendix 2), several small fragments of partially rounded stone foreign to the area - thought to be possible quernstone fragments, and three small sherd of Grooved Ware pottery. The finds within [4/6] indicate its final use as a rubbish pit and give a date to the late Neolithic period. The upper fill (4/4) was sampled for environmental remains, producing a small quantity of charcoal and a molluscan assemblage indicative of open country conditions (Appendix 3).

7.1.4 Trench 6

This trench contained spreads of 'dirty chalk' as seen elsewhere on the site. These were sectioned to reveal two shallow but irregular features [6/4, 6/6] which contained no finds and these were thought to be of natural origin. A slightly irregular north-east - south-west aligned linear feature [6/8] measuring up to 1.1 m across by 0.2 m deep,

running across this trench, was readily apparent from its fill (6/9), a light brown clayey silt, as opposed to the dirty chalk spreads found elsewhere.

7.1.5 Trench 1 (fig.3)

Trench 1 was targeted on a area of notable anomalies shown by the stage 1 geophysical survey of this site. One of the anomalies was initially interpreted as a possible kiln or as a metal object. When excavated this trench revealed several differing mixed spreads of soil and chalky soils which were sectioned to reveal irregularly shaped cuts [1/14, 1/17] containing no finds.

In the eastern part of Trench 1 a large irregularly shaped feature [1/8], measuring 6 m long x 3 m wide x 0.45 m + deep, was sectioned to reveal an uneven cut with two fills, (1/7) a light brown clayey silt laying to the North of the feature and underlying a more chalky mixed fill (1/6) which was found to contain the remains of a steel upright fencing post but was otherwise empty of finds (fig 4). Both these fills were cut by a modern pit [1/5] containing much brick and tile as well as mixed modern finds including pottery. A very shallow possible linear feature [1/10] was also sectioned but was found to be only 0.03 m deep and produced no finds.

7.2 Finds

Very few finds were recovered from the site with most contexts being noticeably free of archaeological inclusions. The only exception of significance was the small pit [4/6] mentioned above (see section 7.1.3.).

7.2.1 Worked flint

A total of 15 pieces of struck flint (and a further 31 fragments from a sieved sample) were recovered from pit [4/6], including a flake core with surface crushing indicating re-use as a hammerstone. The flint may have been imported to the site and is thought to date to the late Neolithic (see Appendix 2).

7.2.2 Prehistoric pottery (based on comments by Alistair Barclay)

Three small sherds of prehistoric pottery (weight 9 g) came from pit [4/6]. These were all in a fairly fine, shell-tempered fabric. Two had grooves and the third had part of a raised cordon. These can be identified as Grooved Ware, probably of the Woodlands sub-style, assigned to the later 3rd millennium BC.

7.2.3 Other stone

Fill (4/5) of pit [4/6] produced several small partially rounded fragments of stone (up to 0.04 m) which seem to be foreign to the site. These were fire cracked.

7.2.4 Animal bone

Fill (4/5) contained many small fragments of scattered animal bone, including a partial jawbone. These do not appear to have been deposited in any particular pattern.

7.2.5 Modern finds

A low density of modern finds was noted in topsoil across the site but these were not retained. A higher concentration of such material was present in Trench 1. A modern rubbish pit [1/5] was partially sectioned here and found to contain brick, tile, modern

pottery etc. A sample of this material included post-medieval and modern pottery and building material (7 and 10 fragments respectively), a small fragment of modern glass and a single piece of slag. The topsoil in Trench 1 also contained a single abraded sherd (4 g) in a sandy reduced fabric, of uncertain (Roman or medieval) date.

7.3 Environmental Remains

7.3.1 A single sample for environmental remains was taken from the late Neolithic pit fill 4/4 and examined by Dr Mark Robinson of the University Museum, Oxford. This produced a few small charcoal fragments and a range of open country molluscs consistent with a Neolithic date (see further Appendix 3).

8 Discussion and Interpretation

8.1 Reliability of field investigation

On-site conditions were good and archaeological features were readily identifiable. It is thus very unlikely that significant features were missed. Irregularities in the upper surface of the chalk subsoil were encountered widely. A significant number of these were examined, however, so that their non-archaeological character is clear and they were sufficiently well-characterised to permit their confident distinction from genuine features of archaeological origin. Some earlier activity, including probable traces of medieval agriculture (ridge and furrow), may have been damaged or partly truncated by more recent ploughing. This activity is unlikely to have removed substantial features, however.

8.2 Overall interpretation

8.2.1 Throughout the site spreads of 'dirty chalk' overlay a harder clean white chalk natural and filled irregular features, many of which were investigated. Definition of edges was often poor and no finds were evident with the exception of a small amount of mollusc shell and a single bone fragment within (2/9), the upper fill of an irregular cut [2/12] in Trench 2. This fill was darker than surrounding chalky spreads and could possibly have been associated with the upper fill of nearby pit [2/4], i.e. a small patchy soil spread derived from this. Generally, the lack of finds and the indefinite, irregular nature of these chalky spreads suggests that they are not deliberate deposits and may represent a lower ploughsoil/subsoil interface and/or partial root disturbance.

8.2.2 The single feature [4/6] within Trench 4 is dated to the late Neolithic by the assemblage of struck flint and three sherds of Grooved Ware pottery found within its fills. Scattered small animal bone also found suggests that this feature had a final use as a mixed rubbish pit.

8.2.3 The medium sized pit excavated within Trench 2 had very clean fills and is hence undated beyond being covered by a later probable ploughsoil horizon (2/2).

8.2.4 A shallow north-east - south-west aligned linear feature [6/8] within Trench 6 had a distinctive light brown soil fill (6/9). This appears to correspond with a linear

anomaly plotted in the geophysical survey of this area and may be a remnant of a former ridge and furrow field system suggested by this survey.

8.2.5 Within Trench 1 a spread of dirty chalk (1/11) was partially truncated by machining. Other irregular deposits (12) (15) (16) revealed possible irregular cuts [1/14] and [1/17] respectively when sectioned. Both features were devoid of finds which suggests that they are natural features as found elsewhere. The large irregular feature [1/8] at the eastern end of Trench 1 similarly had fills containing no finds other than a piece of well embedded upright modern fencing post, therefore it is difficult to determine whether this feature is earlier or resulted from modern disturbance and backfilling. A later, modern rubbish pit [1/4] also cuts the fills (1/6) and (1/7) of this feature and was cut from beneath the present topsoil. This pit probably accounts for the higher than average distribution of modern finds from topsoil (1/1) and subsoil (1/2) in the environs of Trench 1. The modern metal post found within (1/6) almost certainly accounts for the magnetic anomaly originally thought to represent a possible kiln or a piece of metalwork.

8.3 Summary conclusion

A single, small, isolated pit of late Neolithic date was the only archaeological feature of any significance identified on the site.

Bryan Matthews OAU November 1997

APPENDIX 1 : Summary of Stratigraphy

Context number	Type of context	Interpretation / Comments	Depth of deposit (m.)	Width (and length) of deposit (m.)	Findings
1/1	Layer	Topsoil	0.24		modern pottery, glass, tile & brick
1/2	Layer	former ploughsoil	0.35		CBM
1/3	Natural	white chalk	unknown		none
1/4	Fill	modern pit fill	0.80 +		modern pottery, bone, metal pin, CBM
1/5	Cut	modern pit	0.8	0.8 (x 1.4+)	
1/6	Fill	mixed soil/chalk fill	0.45		metal fence post
1/7	fill	fill of 1/10	0.42		
1/8	Cut	irregular	0.45	3.00 (6.0+)	
1/9	Fill	fill of 1/10	0.03	0.40	
1/10	Cut	shallow linear	0.03	0.40 (6.0+)	
1/11	Layer	dirty chalk spread	unknown		
1/12	Fill	fill of 1/14	0.35		
1/13	fill	"	0.4		
1/14	Cut	irregular feature	0.6	2.0+ (7.0 approx)	
1/15	Fill	fill of 1/17	0.18		
1/16	Fill	"	0.25		
1/17	Cut	irregular feature	0.25	2.3 (1.6+)	
2/1	layer	topsoil	0.26		
2/2	layer	former ploughsoil	0.16		
2/3	layer	degraded chalk?	0.16		
2/4	cut	pit	0.68	0.60	
2/5	fill	fill of 2/4	0.18		
2/6	fill	"	0.29		
2/7	fill	"	0.29		
2/8	layer	chalky soil	0.18	2.0 (9.0)	
2/9	fill	natural?	0.10		1 fragment of animal bone, mollusc shell

Context no.	Type	Description / comments	Depth (m.)	Width (m.) (& length)	Findings
2/10	fill	degraded natural chalk?	0.22	1.30 (1.60)	
2/11	fill	fill of 2/12	0.12		
2/12	cut	natural feature	0.30	1.60 (1.65)	
2/13	natural	white chalk	unknown		
2/14	cut	natural feature	0.10	1.50+ (1.70+)	
2/15	fill	natural fill	“	“	
2/16	cut	natural feature	0.13	1.0 (1.0)	
2/17	fill	natural fill	“	“	
3/1	layer	topsoil	0.15		
3/2	layer	subsoil	0.20		
3/3	natural	white chalk	unknown		
4/1	layer	topsoil	0.2		
4/2	layer	subsoil	0.14		
4/3	natural	white chalk	unknown		
4/4	fill	fill of 4/6	0.28		animal bone ,flint, 3 sherds of Grooved Ware pottery
4/5	fill	fill of 4/6	0.32		
4/6	cut	pit	0.51	0.75	
5/1	layer	topsoil	0.26		
5/2	layer	subsoil	0.10		
5/3	natural	white chalk	unknown		
5/4	layer	disturbed natural?	0.16		
6/1	layer	topsoil	0.17		
6/2	layer	subsoil	0.20		
6/3	natural	white chalk	unknown		
6/4	cut	natural feature?	0.07	0.26 (0.5)	
6/5	fill	fill of 6/4	0.07	“	
6/6	cut	natural feature?	0.24	0.75 (0.75+)	
6/7	fill	fill of 6/6	“	“	
6/8	cut	furrow	0.21	2.10 (2.5 +)	
6/9	fill	fill of 6/8	“	“	
6/10	natural ?	beneath 6/8	unknown		
7/1	layer	topsoil	0.22		
7/2	layer	subsoil	0.20		
7/3	layer	disturbed chalk	unknown		
7/4	natural	white chalk	unknown		

Context no.	Type	Description / Comments	Depth (m.)	width (and length) (m.)	Finds
8/1	layer	topsoil	0.15		
8/2	layer	subsoil	(typically) 0.13		
8/3	natural	white chalk	unknown		
8/4	cut	natural feature	0.25	1.49	
8/5	cut	irregular-natural?	0.26	0.98	
8/6	fill	fill of 8/4	0.1		
9/1	layer	topsoil	0.1		
9/2	layer	subsoil	0.18		
9/3	natural	white chalk	unknown		
9/4	cut	tree-bole ?	“		
9/5	cut	tree-bole ?	“		
10/1	layer	topsoil	0.1		
10/2	layer	subsoil	0.2		
10/3	natural	white chalk	unknown		
10/4	cut	natural feature	0.34	1.36	
10/5	fill	fill of 10/4	0.24		
10/6	cut	natural feature	0.07	0.60 (0.80)	
10/7	fill	fill of 10/7	“	“	
10/8	fill	fill of 10/4	0.24		
11/1	layer	topsoil	0.2		
11/2	layer	subsoil	0.18		
11/3	natural	chalk	unknown		
11/4	natural	chalk	unknown		
11/5	cut	natural feature	0.14	0.85	

APPENDIX 2: The Flint by Theresa Durden

A total of 15 pieces of struck flint were recovered in excavation, all from a single context, 4/4. The flint is corticated white and two pieces of Bullhead flint (also corticated white but identified on the basis of the orange band present under the cortex) were present. This flint is often found in Sussex and Kent in the Bullhead Beds (Rayner 1981, 357; Shepherd 1972, 114), but it also occurs at the base of the Reading Beds (Dewey and Bromehead 1915, 2), which outcrop in East Berkshire. It may also occur in a derived state in the river gravels of the Kennet (Healey et al 1992, 48). This flint may, therefore, have been imported to the site.

The flint comprised 14 flakes which were generally broad, with two of slightly narrower proportions, and one multi-platformed flake core. The flakes had broad plain butts, though a few linear butts were also present. The flakes were regular and relatively thin. One of the narrower flakes appeared to have a utilised edge. A soft hammer seems to have been used on most of the flakes, and the core appears to have been used as a hammerstone as there is surface crushing in one area. The core weighs 114 g and bears scars of broad flake removals.

A further 31 pieces were recovered from a sieved soil sample from context 4/4. These consisted of four flakes, two more bladelike flakes and seven largish chips, most of which appeared to be broken pieces from larger flakes. A further 18 small chips were recovered from the sieved fraction 2-4 mm. Only six of these were complete, and these were not diagnostic of any particular activity. The relative lack of chips does not suggest any *in situ* knapping activity. The character of the larger pieces recovered from the sample is entirely consistent with those from the hand excavation.

A later Neolithic date would be appropriate for this small assemblage.

References

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- Rayner, D H, 1981, *The stratigraphy of the British Isles*, second edition, Cambridge
- Shepherd, W, 1972, *Flint. Its origin, properties and uses*, London

APPENDIX 3: Assessment of Charred Plant Remains and Molluscs from a Late Neolithic Pit at Totternhoe Road, Dunstable, Beds by Mark Robinson

A sample of about 12 litres from the upper fill of a late Neolithic pit (context 4/4) was floated onto a 0.5 mm mesh to recover charred plant remains. The flot was scanned under a binocular microscope. The only charred plant remains present were a few small fragments of *Alnus/Corylus* (alder/hazel) type charcoal and a single fragment of cf. *Prunus* (sloe type) charcoal. However, mollusc shells are also present. these are listed below:

<i>Carychium</i> sp.	+
<i>Pupilla muscorum</i>	++
<i>Vallonia costata</i>	+
<i>V. excentrica</i>	++
<i>Discus rotundatus</i>	+
<i>Aegopinella pura</i>	+
<i>Helicella itala</i>	+
<i>Trichia hispida</i> gp.	+
<i>Cepaea</i> sp.	+

+ present, ++ many

Shells of the burrowing species *Cecilioides acicula* were ignored.

The molluscs suggest open country conditions predominated. Although entirely appropriate to a Neolithic date, the charred plant remains and mollusc shells do not give any additional dating evidence. No further work is necessary on this sample.

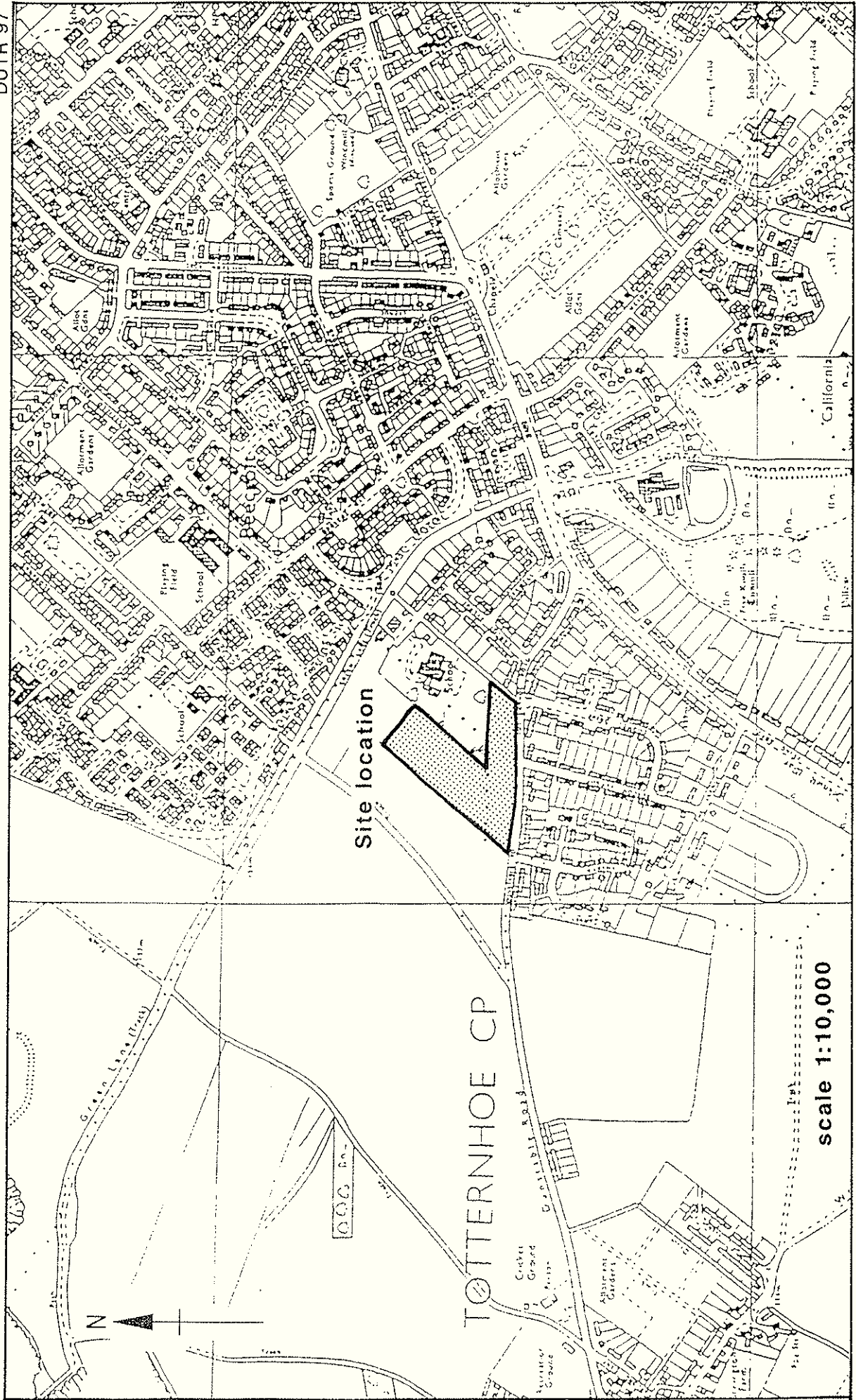
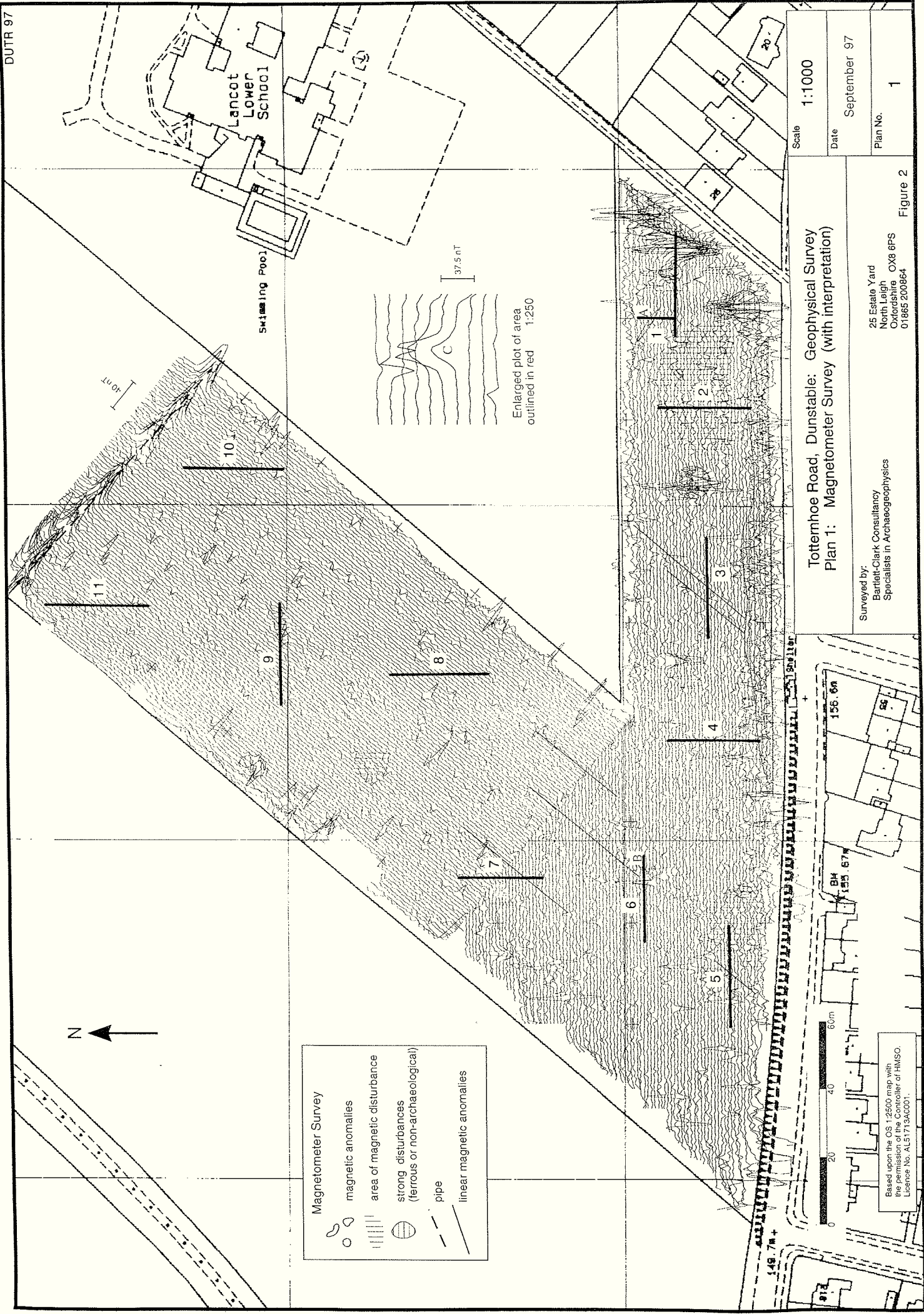
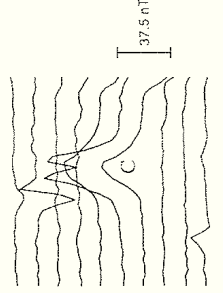


Figure 1



- Magnetometer Survey**
- magnetic anomalies
 - area of magnetic disturbance
 - strong disturbances (ferrous or non-archaeological)
 - pipe
 - linear magnetic anomalies



Enlarged plot of area 1,250 outlined in red

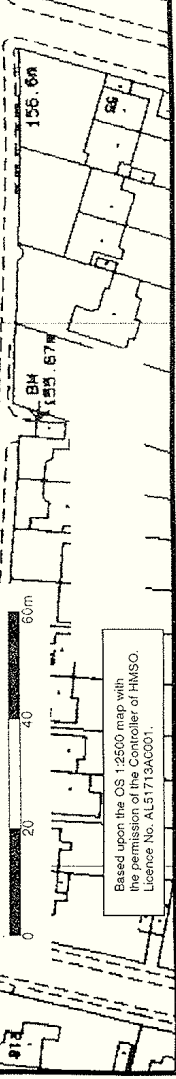
Scale	1:1000
Date	September 97
Plan No.	1

**Totterhoe Road, Dunstable: Geophysical Survey
Plan 1: Magnetometer Survey (with interpretation)**

Surveyed by:
Bartlett-Clark Consultancy
Specialists in Archaeogeophysics

25 Estate Yard
North Leigh
Oxfordshire OX8 6PS
01865 200864

Figure 2



Based upon the OS 1:2500 map with the permission of the Controller of HMSO. Licence No. AL51719ACC01.

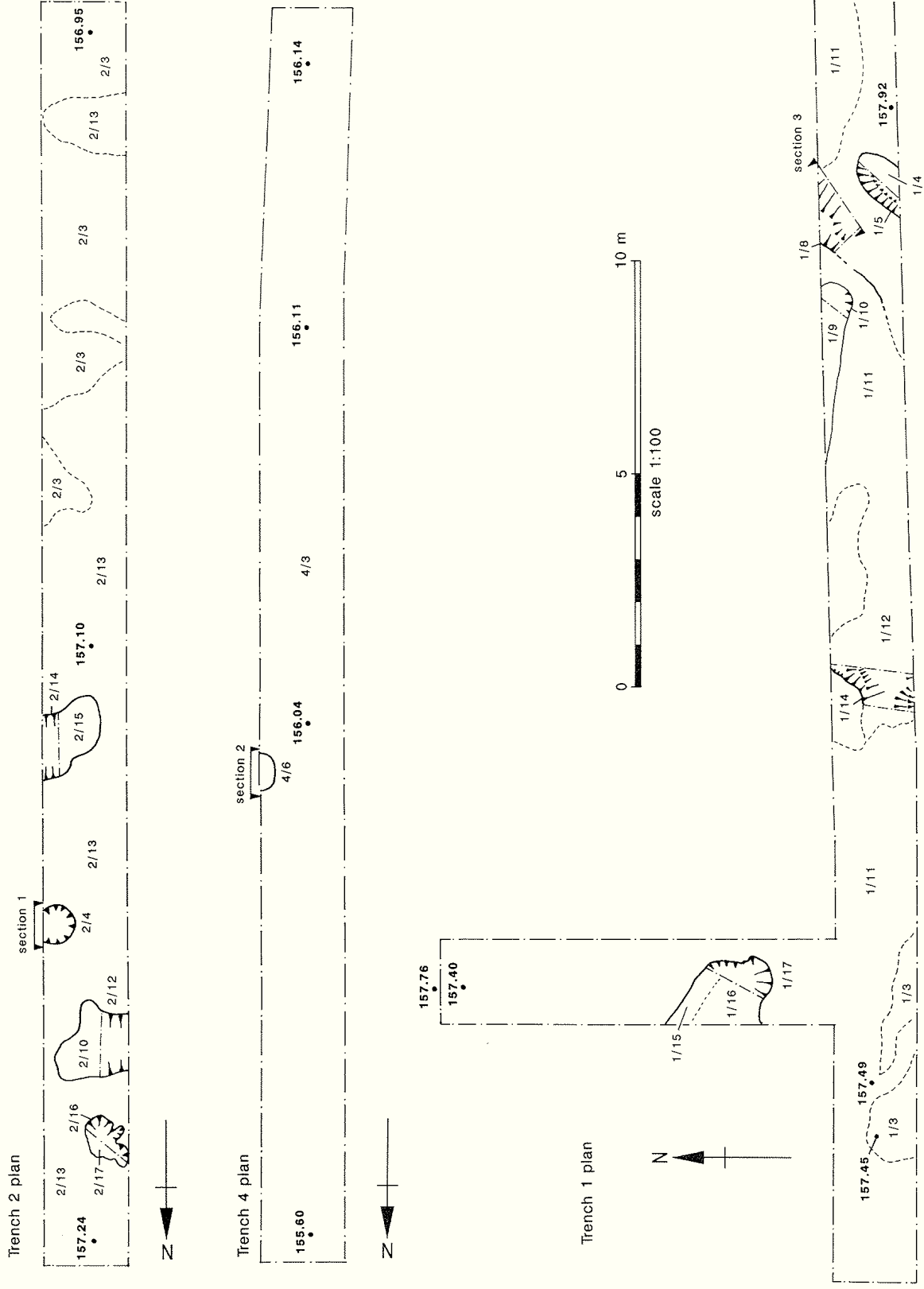


Figure 3

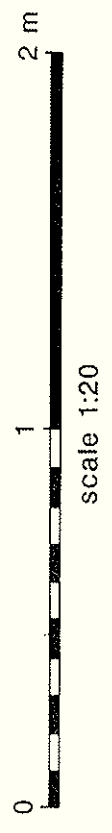
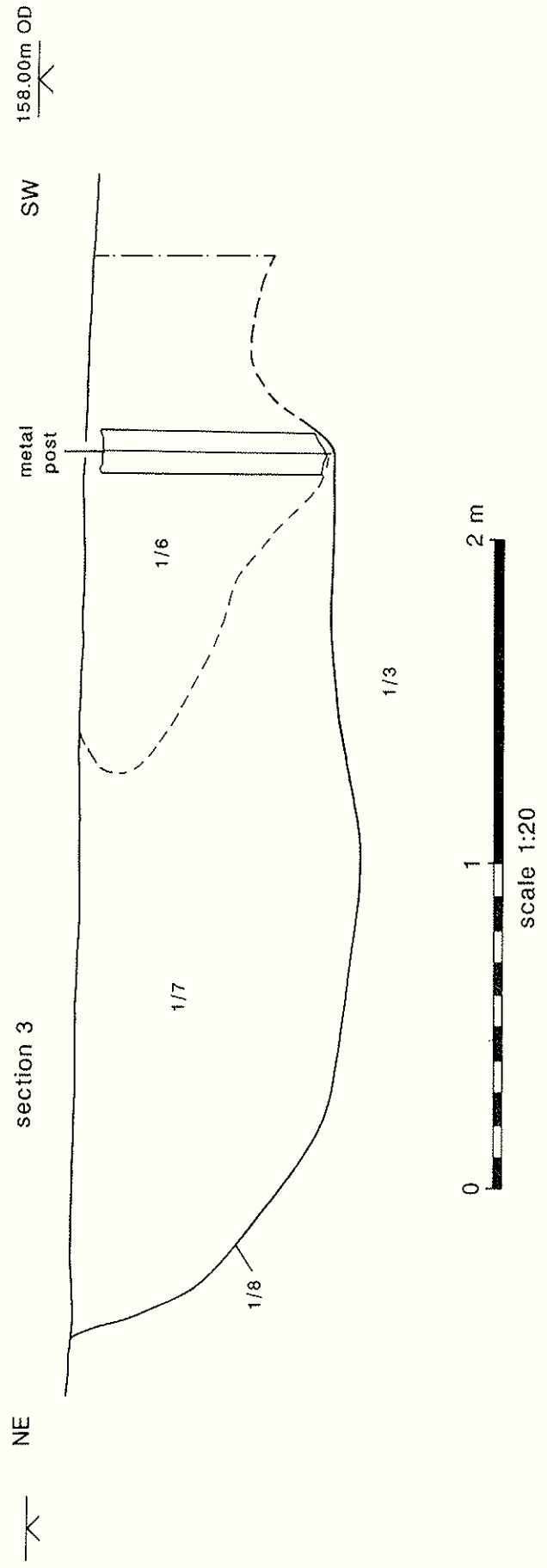
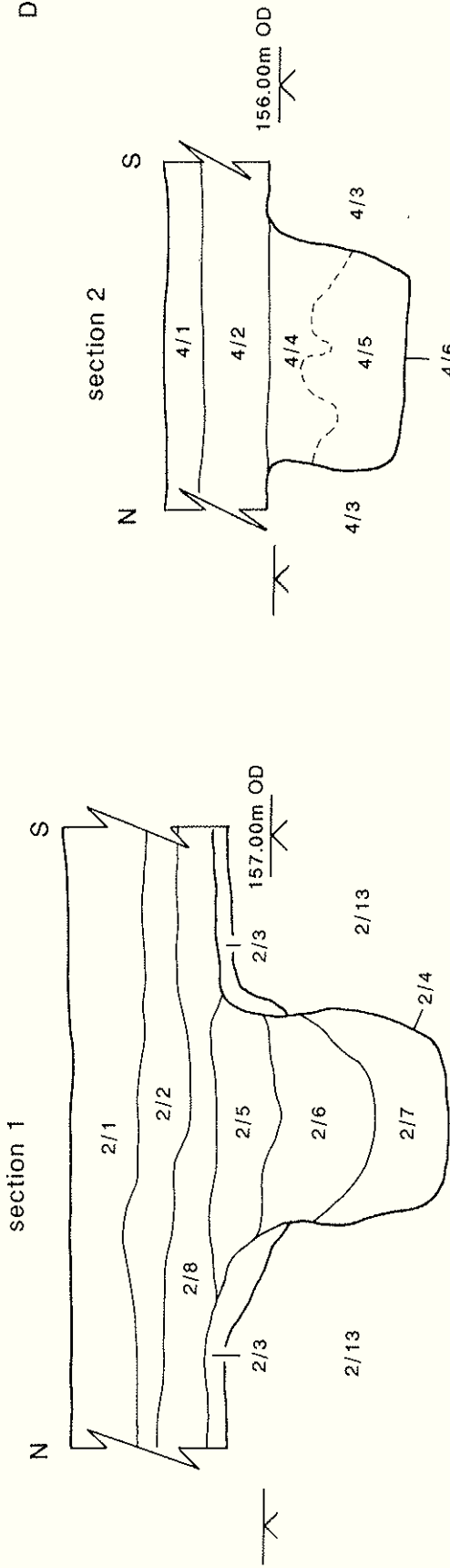


Figure 4



OXFORD ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT

Janus House, Osney Mead, Oxford, OX2 0ES

Tel: 01865 263800 Fax: 01865 793496

email: oau-oxford.demon.co.uk



Director: David Miles B.A., F.S.A., M.I.F.A. Oxford Archaeological Unit Limited.
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