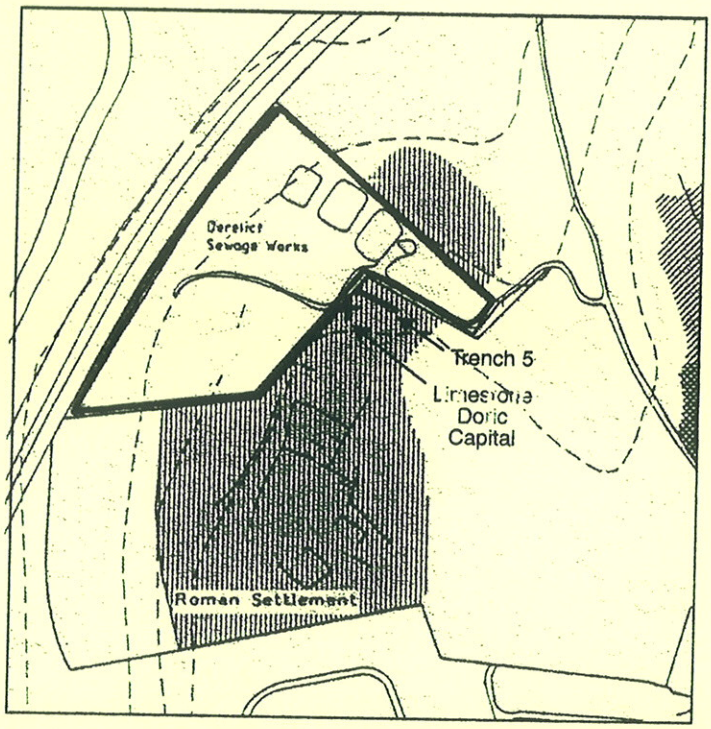
Duchy of Lancaster

Former Sewage Treatment Works Higham Ferrers, Northants

NGR SP 9545 6935

Archaeological Watching Brief Report



Oxford Archaeological Unit

March 2000

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Archaeological Watching Brief Report

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LIST OF CONTENTS

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SUMMARY

An archaeological watching brief was undertaken by Oxford Archaeological Unit during a geotechnical survey of the former sewage treatment works by Engineering Services Laboratory (consulting engineers) for the Duchy of Lancaster on the 21st-22nd March 2000. A total of sixteen geotechnical trial pits were excavated under archaeological observation and recorded prior to backfilling. No archaeological remains were observed in the trial pits.

1 Introduction

The area investigated by geotechnical trial pitting lies to the north of Higham Ferrers, Northants (Fig. 1). The site is located to the west of Kings Meadow Lane and east of the A45 Higham Ferrers bypass and situated on sloping ground between 50m and 39m OD on the edge of Northamptonshire sands and ironstone and Upper Lias clay geology.

The site is currently occupied by a working pumping station and the disused sewage treatment works. The sewage treatment tanks had previously been dismantled and removed. The Oxford Archaeological Unit was subsequently commissioned by the Duchy of Lancaster to undertake an archaeological watching brief of a trial pit survey.

2 Background

The area at the northern end of Higham Ferrers is known to be rich in archaeological remains dating from Prehistoric to the post-medieval period (Fig. 2). Excavations have previously been undertaken by OAU on Iron Age and Saxon sites to the east prior to the construction of housing as part of the same development project (OAU 1994, 1996a, 1996b). Of particular interest for the former sewage works site is a large Roman settlement in the field to the immediate south and north. This has been identified by fieldwalking surface scatters, geophysical survey and evaluation trenching carried out by the Northamptonshire Archaeological Unit between April 1989 and October 1990 as part of a larger investigation of the Duchy of Lancaster development area (NAU 1991).

The surface pottery scatter strongly suggests that the treatment works lies directly over the north-eastern end of the Roman settlement. Also a posthole building with *in situ* surfaces was discovered in a evaluation trench (NAU trench 5) to the immediate south-east of the works, whilst a limestone Doric capital was discovered in a similar location suggesting substantial Roman stone buildings may be present in the immediate vicinity. Cropmarks, evaluation trenches and a geophysical survey of part of this area suggest a series of buildings and enclosures located along a road or trackway defined by ditches aligned north-east to south-west through the scatter area.

3 Methodology

A total of sixteen geotechnical trial pits averaging surface dimensions of 0.75m x 2.5m were excavated to a depth of 0.8m - 3.2m (Fig. 3). All the pits were excavated under archaeological supervision and the deposits encountered were recorded following standard OAU procedures before each pit was backfilled.

4 Results

No archaeological remains were encountered within any of the trial pits. Trial pits 1 - 6 were all located within areas of former treatment tanks across the southern half of the site. Observation of these and the surrounding topography all suggest considerable disturbance through terracing into the slope to create level surfaces for the installations. Of these only trial pit 2 had a relatively undisturbed soil sequence with topsoil and subsoil overlying the solid geology.

Trial pits 7 - 16 were located in and around the former sludge beds across the northern and eastern portion of the site. Trial pits 7, 12 and 16 were located on the banks surrounding the sludge beds and demonstrated that these had been built up with clay sealing the topsoil horizon of the natural hill slope topography. Trial pits 8, 10 and 13, located within the sludge beds, each had a layer of decomposed sludge up to 1m deep directly overlying solid clay geology.

Located to the east and south of the sludge beds, trial pits 11 and 15 clearly demonstrated that no truncation had occurred in these areas with an undisturbed soil sequence present from the surface. Similarly trial pit 9 suggested minimal intrusion into the hill slope with only made ground overlying the natural subsoil. The remaining trial pit 14 was excavated into the upper part of a tip and encountered various rubbish and construction debris although this was not excavated deep enough to show if any truncation of the hill slope had occurred prior to the dumping.

6 Discussion

Although no archaeological remains were encountered in the trial pits the observations made did give a good indication to the extent of truncation or survival that may be expected across the area. The trial pits located across the northern and eastern area of the site occupied by the sludge beds suggested truncation was limited to the base of the beds which had been partially terraced into the hill slope and levelled to the top of the solid clay geology. The surrounding embankments consisted of made ground of redeposited clay sealing the former topsoil level. Also areas to the immediate east and south of the sludge beds not previously occupied by any former installations suggested no truncation or disturbance has affected this area.

The southern half of the site occupied by the former treatment tanks (now removed) had witnessed more terracing and truncation into the hill slope making archaeological survival unlikely across this area. However, trial pit 2 suggests that a small area of relatively undisturbed ground may exist towards the south-eastern corner of the site.

It should also be noted that trial pits were carried out in order to determine the contamination on the site and were located accordingly. This is reflected in the disturbed and truncated results of the majority of the trial pits. Areas not previously occupied by installations were avoided and it is these areas that are most likely to present undisturbed ground levels and archaeological survival. Consequently the apparent absence of any archaeological features or deposits must not be taken as evidence that the area of the former sewage works is devoid of any archaeological potential. Depending on the proposed future use of the area, a limited purposive archaeological evaluation exercise may be appropriate to conclusively establish whether any significant Roman settlement evidence remains between the disturbed areas.

Steve Lawrence
Oxford Archaeological Unit
March 2000

7 Bibliography

NAU 1991 — Archaeological Evaluation on Duchy of Lancaster land at Higham Ferrers, Northants. (unpublished client report, Northamptonshire Archaeology Unit Contracts Section), March 1991.

OAU 1994 — Kings Meadow Lane, Higham Ferrers, Northants. Archaeological Evaluation. (unpublished client report, Oxford Archaeological Unit), August 1994.

OAU 1996(a) — Kings Meadow Lane, Higham Ferrers, Northants. Archaeological Evaluation. (unpublished client report, Oxford Archaeological Unit), January 1996.

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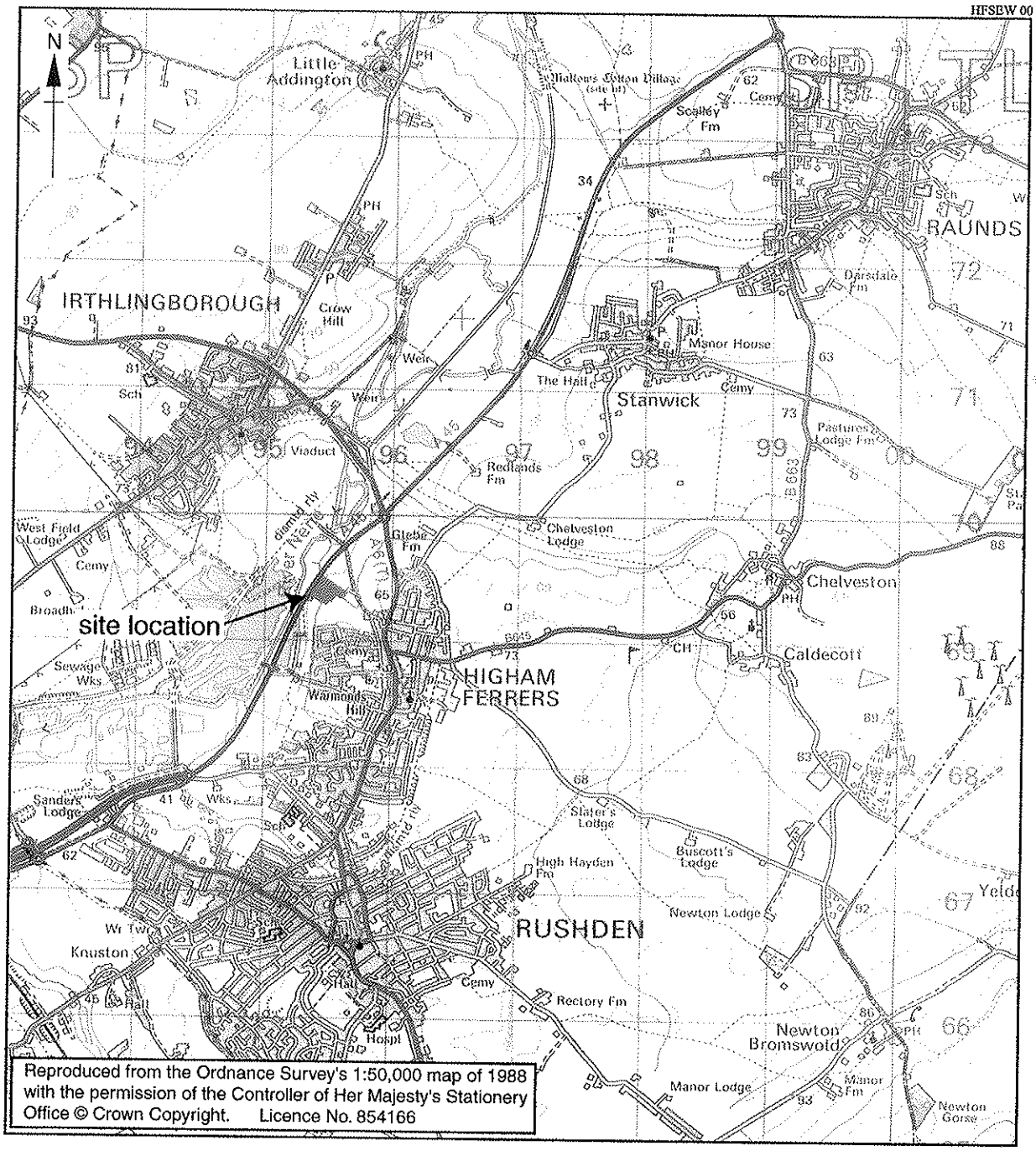


Figure 1: Site location

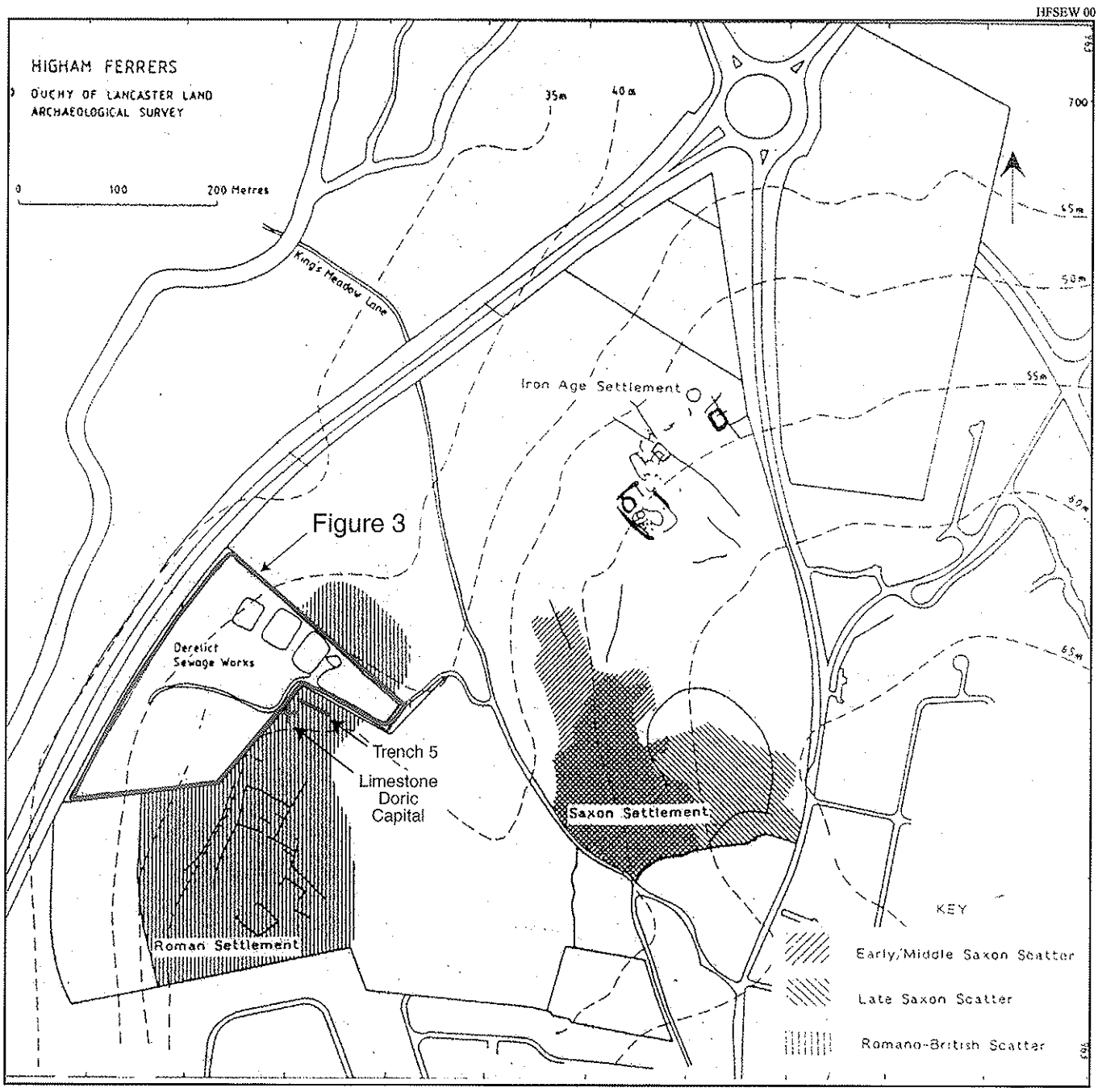


Figure 2: Area of Watching Brief, Cropmarks, and Fieldwalking scatters (after NAU 1991).

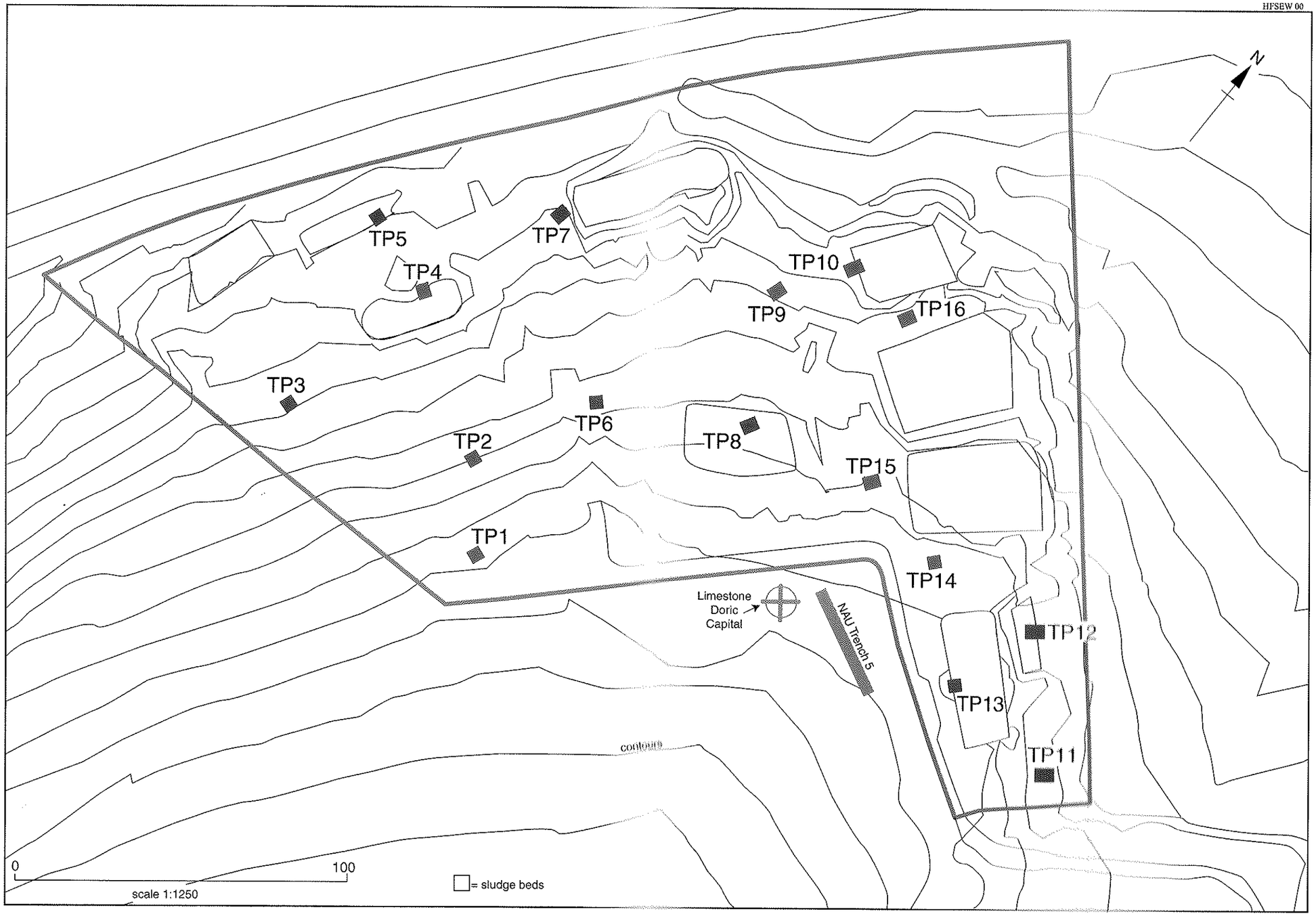
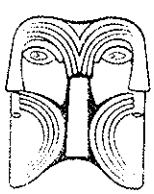


Figure 3: Trial Pit location plan.



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