YARNTON - WORTON RECTORY FARM

SP 47301130

AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT

SEPTEMBER 1989

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AN ASSESSMENT BY THE OXFORD ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT

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INTRODUCTION

An archaeological assessment was undertaken by the Oxford Archaeological Unit in September 1989 at Worton Rectory Farm, Yarnton, on a site which forms part of ARC's new Cassington pit. Planning permission for gravel extraction at the Cassington pit has already been obtained without archaeological conditions being imposed. The assessment site is required by ARC for plant, and prior stripping and extraction is due to commence this autumn, 1989.

This work was done as a matter of urgency, on a field with obvious archaeological potential. However, it is only one of a number of problems which will arise as extraction progresses (see fig. 1). For example, waterlogged prehistoric deposits survive in the area of the pit on the Thames floodplain, as demonstrated by finds made in the pit while we were on site, and a Roman villa probably lies to the E of Worton Rectory Farm. Further assessment is required so future work can be planned and a coherent strategy devised.

The assessment site is on second gravel terrace, on the top of a small rise which slopes down to the S onto alluvium and clay of the Thames floodplain. It lies in the western 2 hectares of a field previously used as arable land, to the S of the Oxford to Worcester railway line. Further E the field was not under immediate threat and had been ploughed.

THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND (figs. 1 and 2)

Cropmarks in the E part of the field can be seen clearly on aerial photographs taken in the 1960's. The variety and density of features shows that the site is of great archaeological interest. Two circular features (possible double concentric ring ditches), ditches of circular, curving and rectangular enclosures and linear features and a mass of pits and possible gullies were all visible.

The Cassington/Yarnton area is well-known for the extent, variety and quality of its archaeological remains. Sites ranging from the Neolithic to the Saxon period have been uncovered. Immediately N of this field, beyond the old railway line, two Bronze Age beakers, an Iron Age settlement and an Anglo-Saxon cemetery were discovered in gravel workings between 1851 and 1876.

Sadly, however, many of these sites were destroyed by road and rail building and gravel extraction in the last century and more particularly, from the 1930s to 1950's, before full-time archaeological cover was available. The recording of these sites was necessarily piecemeal, not always competent and sometimes non-existent. Compared with other parts of the Thames Valley the area of Thames/Evenlode confluence is not well understood or researched.

STRATEGY (fig. 3)

The assessment was undertaken to assess the nature, date and state of preservation of the archaeological remains. Trench location was, to a large extent, dictated by the aerial photographs. The questions raised were the nature and age of the cropmarks, their exact position on the ground, whether the features seen were representative of the true density and distribution of archaeological contexts and what survived below the alluvium or hillwash lower down the field? The trenches were also positioned to give a representative sample of the assessment area.

Nine trenches were excavated by JCB machine giving a 3% sample of the area available:

Trench 1 ran N-S in the NW of the field to cut across the N arc of the double concentric feature and to explore the possible pits N of this.
Trench 2, 3 and 4, ran N-S through the alluvium/hillwash in the SE, from the edge of the hillwash to the bottom of the field.
Trench 5, in the E, ran E-W to cut across a N-S linear feature.
Trench 6, in the centre N of the field running N-S to examine an area of ditches and dense occupation activity.
Trench 7, in the NE, running E-W parallel to the field boundary near the finds in the old gravel pits to the N.
Trench 8, in the SW, through hillwash/alluvium and
Trench 9 to cut across the S arc of the ? double concentric ring ditch in the centre.

A representative sample of individual features was excavated by hand to assess the state of preservation of the features, condition of the finds, the presence of waterlogging or other conditions favourable for acquiring environmental data, as well as to obtain dating evidence.

THE RESULTS

SUMMARY

All nine trenches excavated contained archaeological contexts. The densest occupation activity was on the highest part of the gravel terrace as indicated by the aerial photographs. Archaeological features were less frequent not only at the bottom of the field, where conditions are wetter, but also on the E.

Occupation activity on the site dated from the early Iron Age to the late Roman period (700 BC to AD 400), although it must be stressed that time permitted the excavation of only a small proportion of the features uncovered.

An early Iron Age settlement was located on the top of the rise and this settlement gradually shifted to the E in the mid and later Iron Age (300 BC - AD50). In the Roman period the site seems to have been in agricultural use, with field and paddock boundaries surviving, as well as a roadway running along the edge of the floodplain.

THE EARLY AND MID IRON AGE SETTLEMENT (figs. 4 & 5)

An early Iron Age settlement was sited on the top of the natural rise. Features of this date were fairly densely packed in Trench 1 and their nature suggests that this was near the centre of occupation. Further E, in Trench 6, fewer finds and only one definite feature of this date were discovered, although only a large ditch system was sectioned here. The spread of deep storage pits, visible on the aerial photographs, suggests, however, that activity of this date spread along the N of the field to the edge of the area immediately under threat.

Early Iron Age gullies, pits and post holes were all located and sampled (fig. 4). One area of post holes in Trench 1 with profiles which were deep and had little apparent truncation (eg sect. 3, fig. 6), suggested that plans of structures are present and recoverable. A series of gullies lay to the S of the post holes. A large number of pits of this date were observed; some shallow and flat-bottomed and others deep. The deep pit excavated (1/4) had undercutting sides and was clearly for grain storage. The lower fills contained reasonable quantities of charcoal.

Some features in Trench 1 had finds of early to mid Iron Age transitional phase.

Mid Iron Age pottery was recovered from both circular? double-ditched enclosures (Trenches 1, 1/1 + 9, 9/4 and 9/5), which were, at first, thought to be Bronze Age ring ditches. At least one pit in Trench 6 (6/17) was mid Iron-Age in date.

THE LATE IRON AGE SETTLEMENT

The settlement shifted to the E and a large number of late Iron Age features were found in Trench 6. The features excavated in this trench were mostly enclosure ditches but pits and post holes were located.

THE ROMAN SITE

Roman features were located in all the trenches to the E and S of the assessment area (Trenches 2, 3, 4, 5, 7 and 8). Traces of Roman occupation were found in Trench 6 but seemed to be absent from Trench 1. The finds indicate that the site was used throughout the Roman period.

It has long been suspected that a Roman villa lies to the NW of the assessment area and within the extraction area. The ditches found in the trenches are consistent with a field and paddock system attached to such a site. Features further E in the field appear to be more complex but these have not, so far, been assessed on the ground.

The gravel terrace scarp, now covered by hillwash, was much more pronounced in Roman and earlier periods and parts of the Roman field system were certainly laid out respecting it. Traces of a cobbled surface in Trenches 4 (4/7) and 8 (8/6) (figs. 4 and 5) suggest that a road once ran along the edge of the lower terrace, between it and an earlier stream course. An occupation layer existed S of the cobbling.

POST ROMAN LAND USE

There was no evidence of post-Roman occupation on the site. The field probably continued in agricultural use and there is evidence of ploughsoils below the modern level in Trenches 3, 5, 8 and 9. The field boundary was originally N of its present position and a deep build-up of hillwash accumulated between the edge of the gravel terrace and the field boundary to the S. There is some evidence of deep or steam ploughing in the centre of the field (Trenches 6 and 9).

WOOD IN THE GRAVEL PIT

During the assessment wood was found preserved in an ancient river channel within the present gravel pit. One worked, upright stake was seen in situ in a section and a mass of wood, including worked pieces, lay horizontally next to it. The wood we were able to observe covered an area 24m x 14m but had originally been more extensive. We were not able to undertake detailed excavation but it could have formed a platform or trackway. Two flakes, several hazelnut shells and animal bones were found on the surface and a soil sample was taken. This chance find demonstrates the potential for recovering waterlogged material in this area.

PRESERVATION OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL REMAINS

In general the features seem to be well preserved.

Suprisingly, on the top of the rise (Trench 1), little truncation appears to have taken place and even slight features such as post holes and gullies, have survived well.

In Trenches 6 and 9 there is evidence of deep or steam ploughing mixing the tops of features, though not entirely destroying them.

The conditions for artefact survival are good and large, fresh sherds of pottery were found. Only one storage was sampled for carbonised plant remain and charcoal. These were found to be well preserved.

The soils were all fairly dry and even at the bottom of the field there was little waterlogged material. However, wells were often dug on the slope off the terrace, as at Barton Court Farm. Statistically, we would have been unlikely to pick these up in a 3% assessment sample.

THE AIR PHOTOGRAPHS

The air photographs give a fairly clear and representative indication of the distribution of contexts in the upper part of the field. Obviously many more features were observed on the ground and the cropmark plot has mapped features too far to the E, but only in Trench 7 were we unable to match a substantial feature with the cropmarks.

Features do, however, survive beneath the area obscured by hillwash and particular attention should be paid to this, and the absence of a feature from Trench 7, when the E part of the field is assessed.

TRENCH SUMMARIES

See below, page 8.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

THE IRON AGE SITE

The preservation of an Iron Age settlement in an area much blighted by gravel extraction and road and railway construction gives us a rare opportunity to examine the nature of Iron Age activity in this area.

The gradual settlement drift established in the assessment indicates the potential for isolating separate but interstratified phases of occupation and investigating the environmental and economic reasons for change. The condition of the features and finds is favourable for producing maximum information.

Excavation here would enable us to understand more fully the chance discoveries made in the area in the past and create a more coherent reconstruction of the Iron Age in the Evenlode/Thames confluence area. Were its cultural affinities with more advanced communities downstream, around Dorchester, or did it lie in the relative backwater of the Upper Thames area? An opportunity is also present to examine a settlement close to a traditional late Iron Age tribal boundary of the Dobunni/ Catuvellauni, along the river Cherwell, and close to Oxford itself.

Comparisons also need to be made with contemporary second terrace sites in the Thames Valley. Was its economy like Gravelly Guy or Ashville, Abingdon? What is the significance of the ditched enclosures in an area normally associated with arable agriculture? The excavation of two apparently double ditched enclosures will help to interpret other such cropmarks.

It is recommended that an excavation be mounted in the area of the settlement, that is, the N part of the field. The area should be stripped by Hymac or similar machine under archaeological supervision . It is not envisaged that it will be possible to excavate all features. Parallels with other sites will enable us to execute a rigorous sampling strategy. The site is obviously very complex, however, and area stripping followed by an initial programme to deal with stratification and phasing will be needed in order to devise a sampling policy. It is estimated at this stage that a period of 12 weeks with a team of 15 people will be required to complete the work.

THE ROMAN SITE

The Roman features on the site form part of the rural landscape of that period and are a rare example of Roman field systems in the Thames Valley. They are probably part of the estate of a villa which is threatened by the extraction scheme and, whereas they are not of great intinsic value on this site, their recording will be vital in reconstructing the layout of the estate and the economic life of the villa.

It is recommended that salvage work be undertaken on the Roman material in this part of the field. Further assessment is needed, however, in the E of the field where probable Roman features appear more complex.

SUMMARY

An area of approximately 130 metres E-W x 100 metres N-S in the NW of the field should be stripped with care and excavation undertaken on the basis of the contexts exposed. ARC could continue to strip the rest of the field as planned and archaeological contexts should be recorded in a salvage operation.

The developers, ARC, have planning permission for this site and are pressing to begin work immediately. Whereas it is possible for them to commence stripping in the less sensitive part of the field, if we can salvage the archaeology exposed, this will not fully satisfy their need for land to site plant. It is vital to reach a decision soon in order to negotiate with ARC over the timing of the excavation and access to the site.

TRENCH SUMMARIES

TRENCH 1 (figs. 4 and 6)

This trench, 32m long and 3.50m wide, was positioned to cut across the north arc of a possible double-concentric ring ditch and various pit-like features, all visible as cropmarks, in the NE corner of the field.

0.25 - 0.30m of modern ploughsoil directly overlay gravelly, iron-stained natural which was cut by numerous features.

Ditches of the NE arc of a circular enclosure were distinguishable occupying most of the S of the trench, where they were interstratified with several other features. A section across them (section 6) revealed that there were two parallel ditches (1/11 and 1/14) which are likely to be those seen on the aerial photographs. The evidence was too inconclusive to be certain that they were contemporary and related features. They both contained pottery that was Mid-Iron Age in date. They cut a pit (1/12) and a ditch (1/16) and were cut by two gullies (1/10 and 1/17).

Further N features indicated intense occupation in this area. Groupings of features could be seen, through the significance of this could not be assessed in such a narrow trench.

N of the ditches three gullies ran E-W across the trench. A section excavated through one (1/9, section 5) yielded Early Iron Age pottery.

Lying N of the gullies was a group of post holes. The trench was too small to discern any structural plan. The section excavated through post-hole 1/8 (section 3) showed it was deep and had suffered little truncation. A mass of intercutting pits with some post holes and two possible gullies was present in the N of the trench. One of the pits excavated (1/4, section 1) was a deep storage pit with undercutting sides and this is probably one of a large number of such features which are visible as cropmarks. Charcoal survived in the lower fills of this pit, although all that was seen was wood. Four shallow concave pits with flat bottoms were also examined (1/3, 1/5, 1/6 and 1/15). One cut a post hole (1/2). All the pottery found in the pits and post holes was Early Iron Age in date with some indicating Early to Mid Iron Age transition.

TRENCH 2

Trench 2 was only 18m long and 2m wide. It was started as part of an investigation into the existence of features below the hillwash/alluvium which obscured any features on the aerial photographs. It was abandoned over an area of deep hillwash, when it was unclear whether this was a feature or not, in favour of a longer, deeper trench parallel to it (trench 3).

Roman pottery was found in the top of a possible ditch in the N of the trench.

TRENCH 3 (figs. 4 and 6)

Trench 3 was excavated to locate features on the lower slope of the hill, obscured on the air photograph by hillwash and/or alluvium, to establish density and date of occupation and investigate possible waterlogged deposits in the S. Features did exist on the lower slopes, though not as densely as on the ridge. They appeared to be exclusively Roman.

The trench was 47m long x 2m wide and ran from about halfway down the slope, near the E limit of the area available in this assessment.

The modern ploughsoil was 0.30m deep and completely covered the edge of the gravel terrace, which ran E-W across the trench. On the upper terrace, a layer of earlier ploughsoil (3/2) was visible 0.09m - 0.12m deep, but on the lower terrace a thick post-Roman hillwash had accumulated up to 0.50m deep. It overlay a slightly mixed layer c 0.10m deep, below which features cutting natural sandy clay were clearly visible.

On the upper terrace a large feature running E-W across the trench was found, on excavation, to be a series of re-cut ditches (3/4, 3/5, 3/6, and 3/7, section 7), many of which terminated within the trench. Finds from these features were Roman. The trench location on the cropmark plot (fig 1) suggests that this could be part of a rectangular feature.

Immediately S of this feature was a curving ditch and pit (not excavated).

A ditch ran E-W along the bottom edge of the terrace. Another ditch ran N-S down the full length of the trench and at least six features ran E-W into it.

All the soils seemed fairly dry and are unlikely to produce waterlogged material.

TRENCH 4 (fig. 4)

Trench 4 was on the same line as trench 3, at the bottom of the slope. It was 17.50m long and 2m wide. 0.3m of ploughsoil directly overlay alluvium. There was no hillwash, suggesting that the hillwash had collected up to the old field boundary, extant on the OS map (see fig 2), which separated arable from more waterlogged land.

Three distinct horizons of alluvium could be seen, the lowest of which (4/4) contained Roman pottery. To the S 4/4 overlay the dark blue clay of an old stream course.

To the N was natural gravel on which there seemed to have been a cobbled roadway. Traces of the cobbling (4/7) were found surviving in hollows below silty accumulations (4/5 and 4/6) containing Roman pottery. Between the cobbling and the stream course were traces of an occupation layer (4/8): dark silty soil with shell, charcoal and some burnt limestone inclusions.

TRENCH 5 (fig. 4)

Trench 5 ran E-W from the E limit of the land available in the assessment and was positioned to cut across a linear N-S feature seen as a cropmark on the aerial photograph. It was 22m long and 2m wide.

Beneath the modern ploughsoil (5/1) (0.30m deep) were traces of up to 0.08m of earlier ploughsoil (5/2). This seemed to overlie the features. Two definite ploughmarks were visible at right angles to each other.

The N-S ditch (5/3) was exposed but was not excavated. Several sherds of Roman pottery were collected from its surface. Another feature (5/4) ran at right angles to it along the S edge of the trench. It, too, seemed to be Roman. One other possible pit was located.

TRENCH 6 (figs. 5 and 6)

Trench 6 ran from the top of the slope in the centre of the field. It was planned to uncover an area with the greatest cropmark density on the aerial photographs. It was 39m x 2.60m.

The modern ploughsoil was 0.30m - 0,35m deep and, in the N 10m of the trench, this overlay natural cut by features. Further S there was evidence of some deep ploughing, possibly steam ploughing, which had cut up to 0.30m across the tops of the features, mixing the soils and obscuring relationships without entirely destroying feature positions.

This trench was such a mass of features that it was hard to make much sense of it. In a section 8m long and 1m wide, eleven separate features were isolated (6/4 - 6/15, sect 8). These were mostly ditches (running in all directions) but some could have been pits. Other pits and post holes were visible in the trench. It is impossible to say which features show as cropmarks.

Mid Iron Age pottery came from the tops of one of the pits (6/17). Finds from the section through the ditches suggest that these were mostly Late Iron Age in date with some later Roman activity.

TRENCH 7 (fig. 5)

Trench 7 was dug next to and parallel to the N field boundary. It was 27m long and 2m wide and ran from the E limit of the area available for assessment. The purpose of the trench was three fold:
1.to examine an area as close as possible to an Anglo-Saxon cemetery (discovered during gravel extraction in the last century) on the N side of the present railway, for possible graves in this field,
2.to test an area with few cropmarks on the air photographs and
3.to give a representative spread of trenches over the field.

The modern ploughsoil was 0.30m deep and directly overlay features cut into natural. A substantial ditch (7/2) with signs of several re-cuttings ran NNW-SSE across the trench. This was not visible on the air photographs. Roman pottery was recovered from the surface of the ditch. At the W end of the trench the N arc of a curving gully (7/3) was present. No dating evidence came from this feature. At the E end of the trench was the terminal of a gully running N-S and two possible post holes. These features were not excavated.

TRENCH 8 (fig. 5)

Trench 8 ran N-S in the SW corner of the field. It was 12.50m long and 1.60m wide and lay in an area obscured by hillwash or alluvium on the air photographs.

As in trench 3, soil build-ups covered the gravel terrace which would have been fairly pronounced in Roman and earlier periods. The modern ploughsoil (c 0.25m in depth) overlay an earlier plough horizon (8/2) on the upper terrace and a deep deposit of hillwash (up to 0.60m) on the lower slope.

On the upper terrace a shallow, linear ditch (8/4) ran parallel to the terrace edge. One other ditch ran into it and a possible feature (8/3) was partly exposed in the NE corner. These features were Roman in date.

On the lower terrace slight remains of a cobble surface (8/6) were discovered (see also 4/7) and, S of this, was a dark soil with gravel and charcoal (8/5) possibly occupation material.

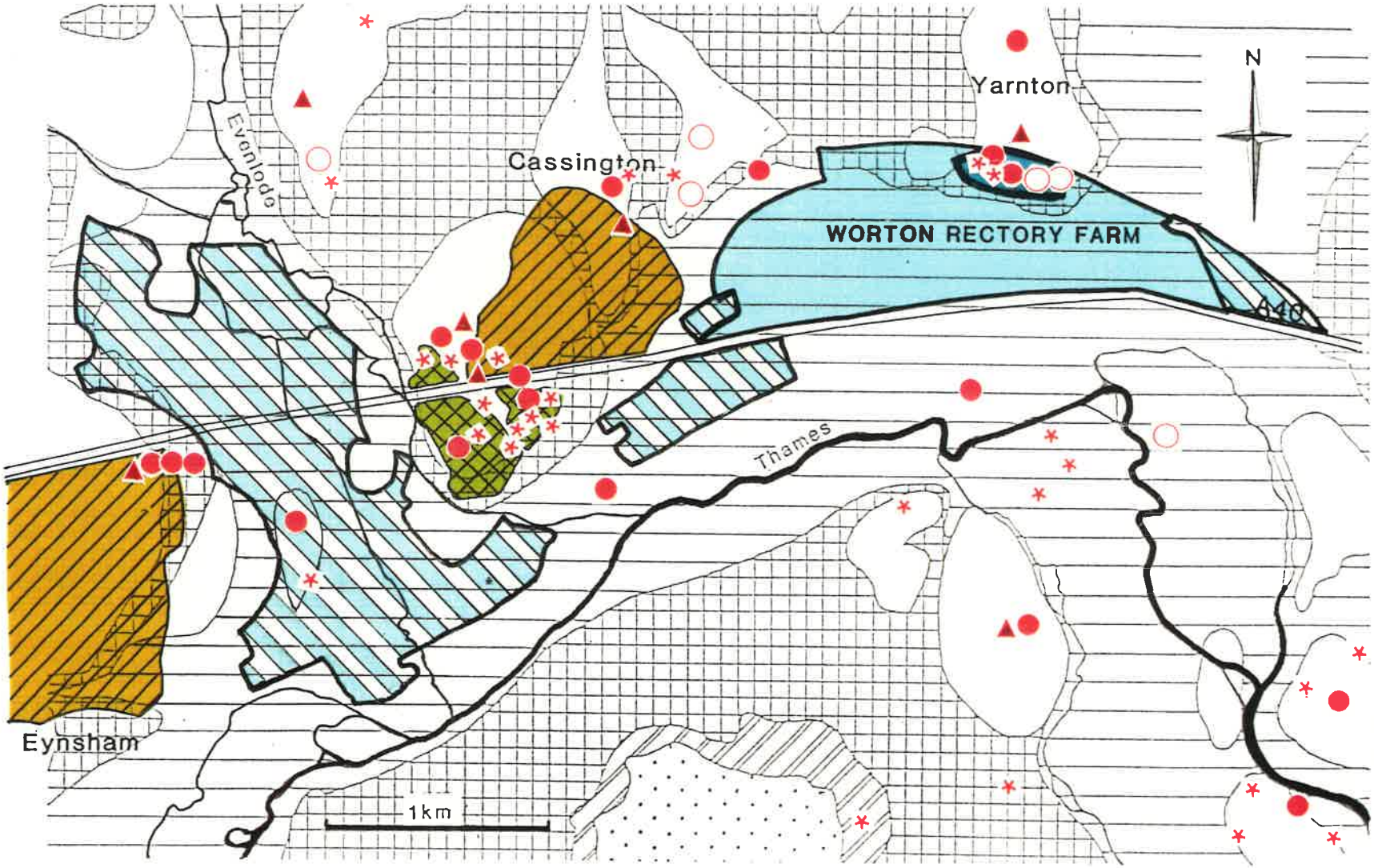
TRENCH 9 (fig. 5)

Trench 9 was placed to cut across the S arc of a possible double concentric ring ditch, observed as a cropmark. It ran 27m N-S and was 3m wide with a 38m x 3m extension to the E.

The modern ploughsoil (0.30 - 0.35m deep) overlay an earlier plough horizon up to 0.20m deep (9/2). Beneath 9/2 the tops of features were very mixed to a depth of 0.20m (9/3) (as in trench 3) suggesting deep or steam ploughing had taken place on a few occasions.

The trench exposed the E arc of the ditches, necessitating an extension to the E to locate the extent of the feature in this direction. The NE and SE limits were also observed. The feature (9/4 and 9/5) appeared to be a circular enclosure of (?Mid) Iron Age date which had been recut many times. None of these cuts was very substantial (averaging 0.80m wide and 0.70m deep). Nine separate cuts were identified in an E-W section cut through them; 7 cuts in an outer ring and 2 cuts in a discrete inner feature. Whether it ever existed as a double concentric enclosure is unknown.

Oxford Archaeological Unit
October 1989



● Settlement ▲ Cemetery ○ Undated cropmark * Other archaeological feature

Cropmark area

Proposed gravel extraction (planning permission granted)

Proposed gravel extraction Oxfordshire Minerals Policies (proposed Feb. 1989)

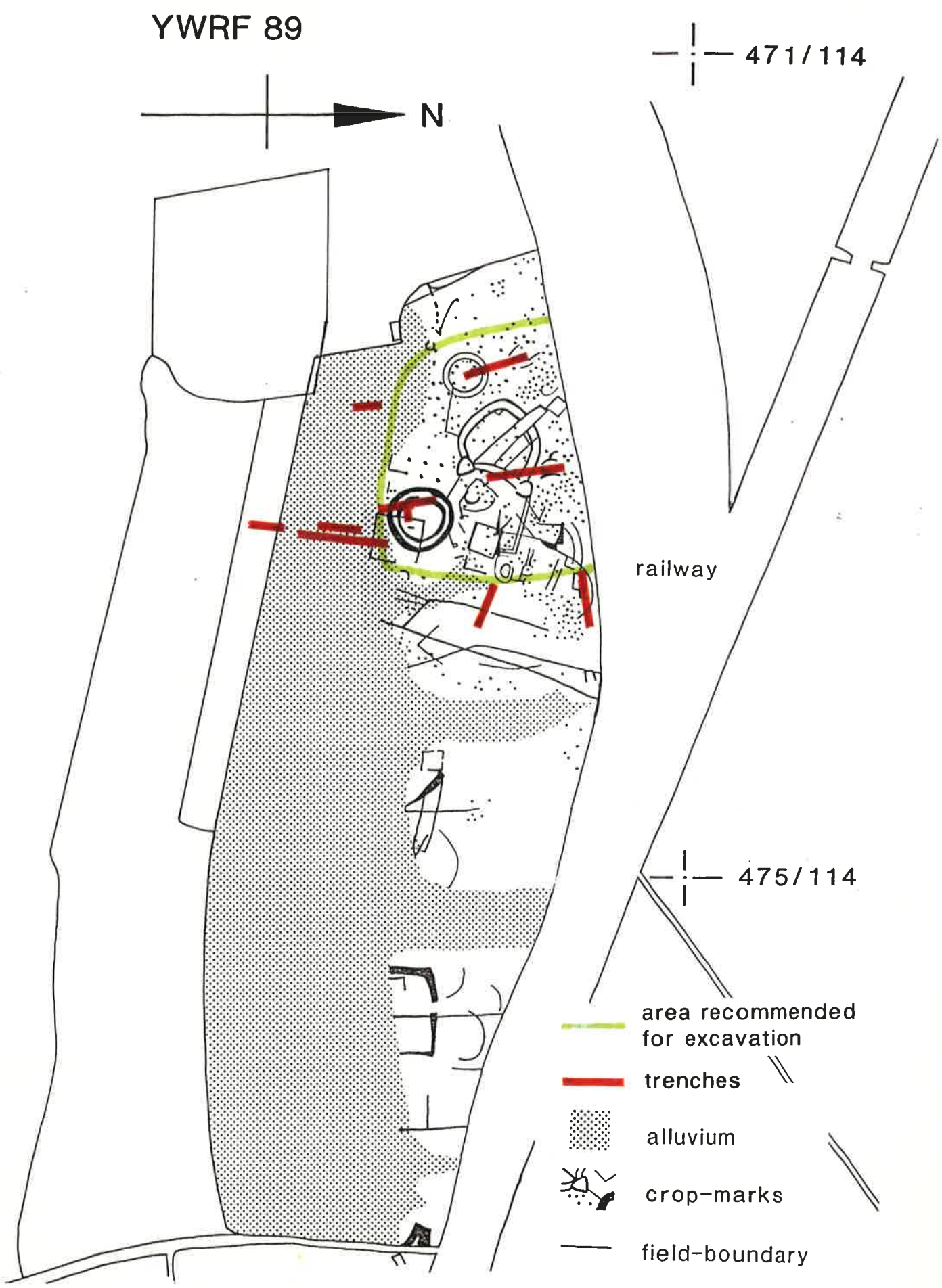
Area subject to development

Area extracted

The Evenlode Confluence: Impact of the proposed development.

Fig. 1

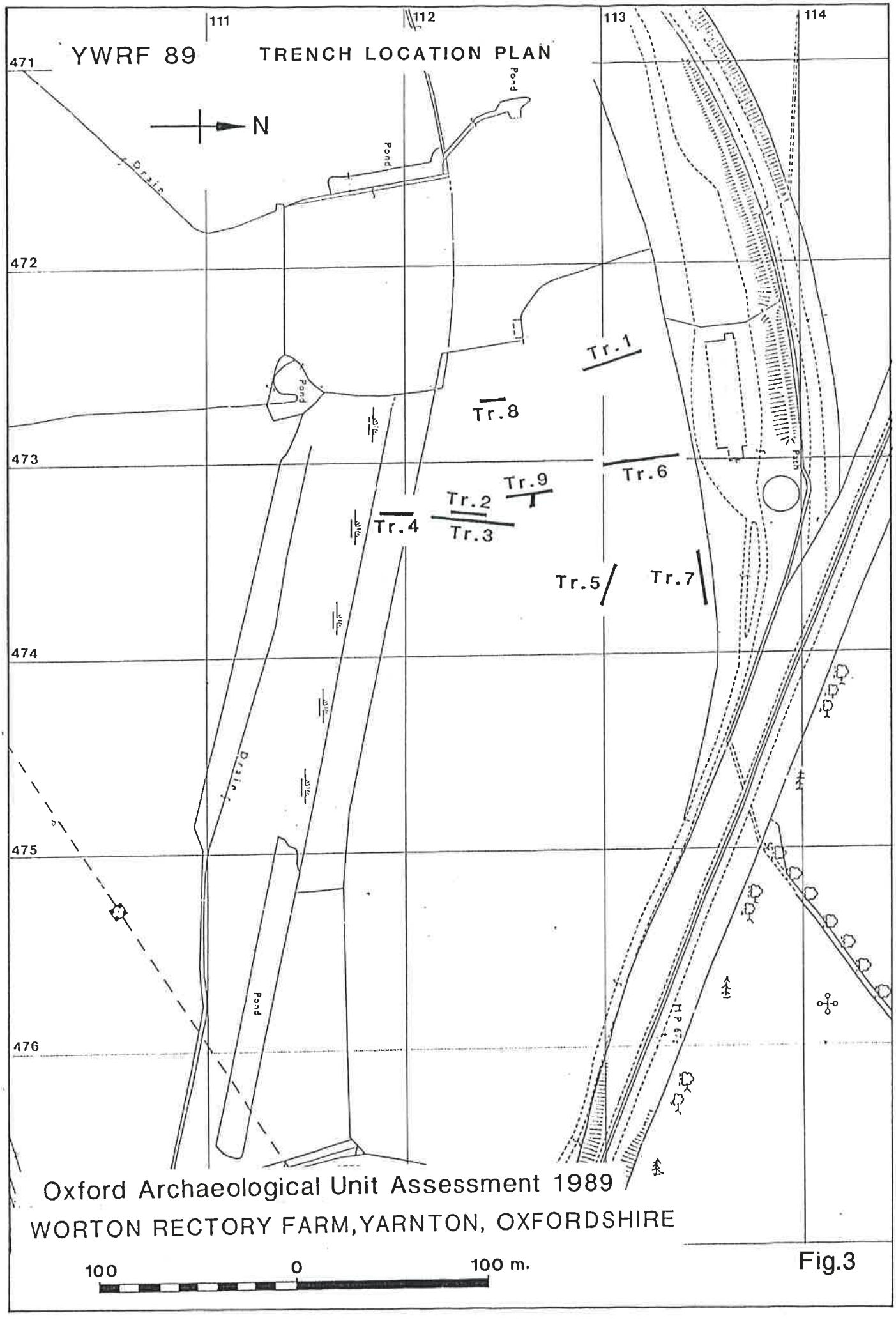
(revised version)



Worton Rectory Farm, Yarnton, Oxfordshire. Crop-mark plan

Fig.2

100 0 100 m.



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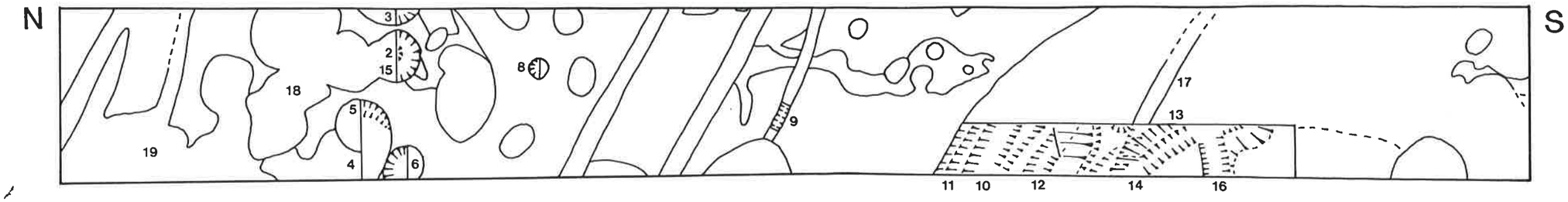
WORTON RECTORY FARM, YARNTON, OXFORDSHIRE

Fig.3

TRENCH 1



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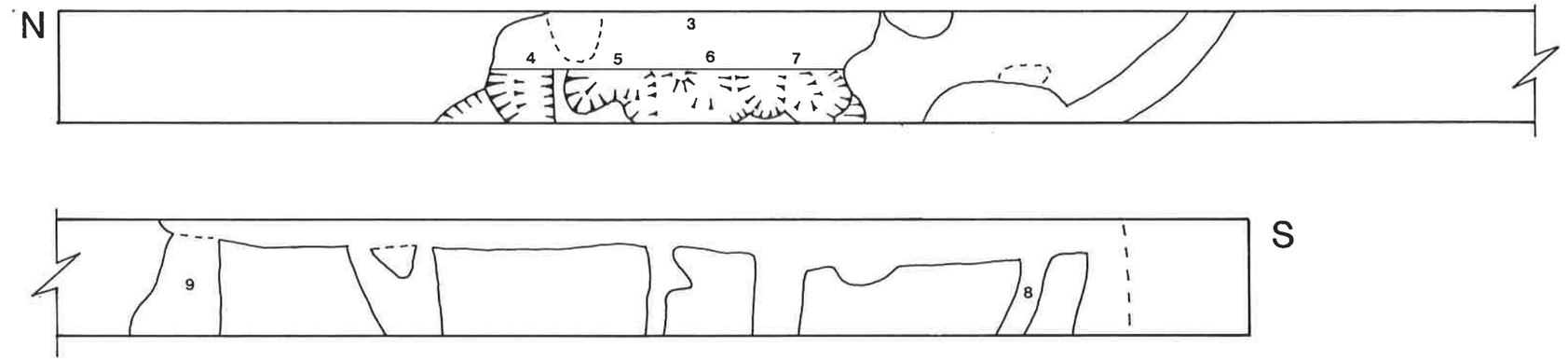

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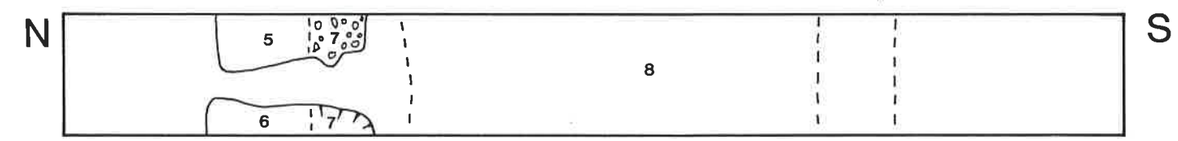

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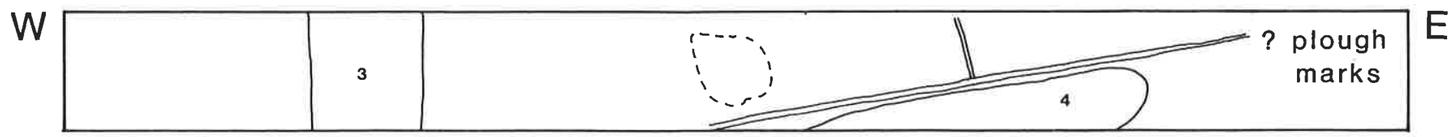

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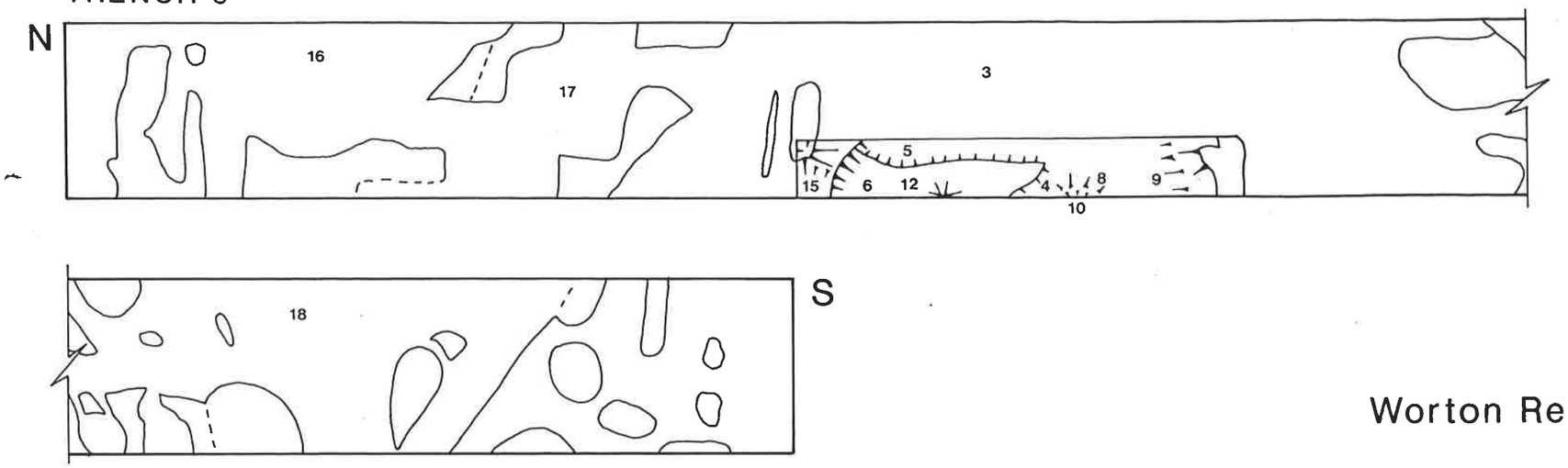
Worton Rectory Farm, Yarnton.
Oxfordshire.

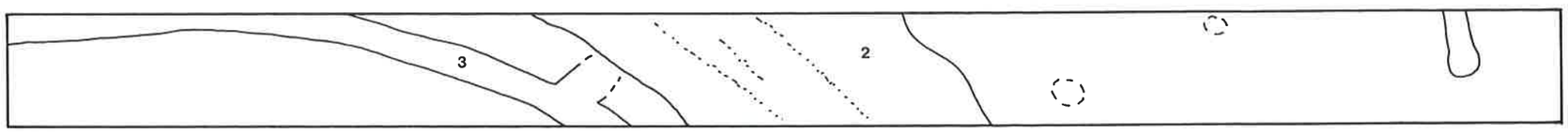
Fig.4

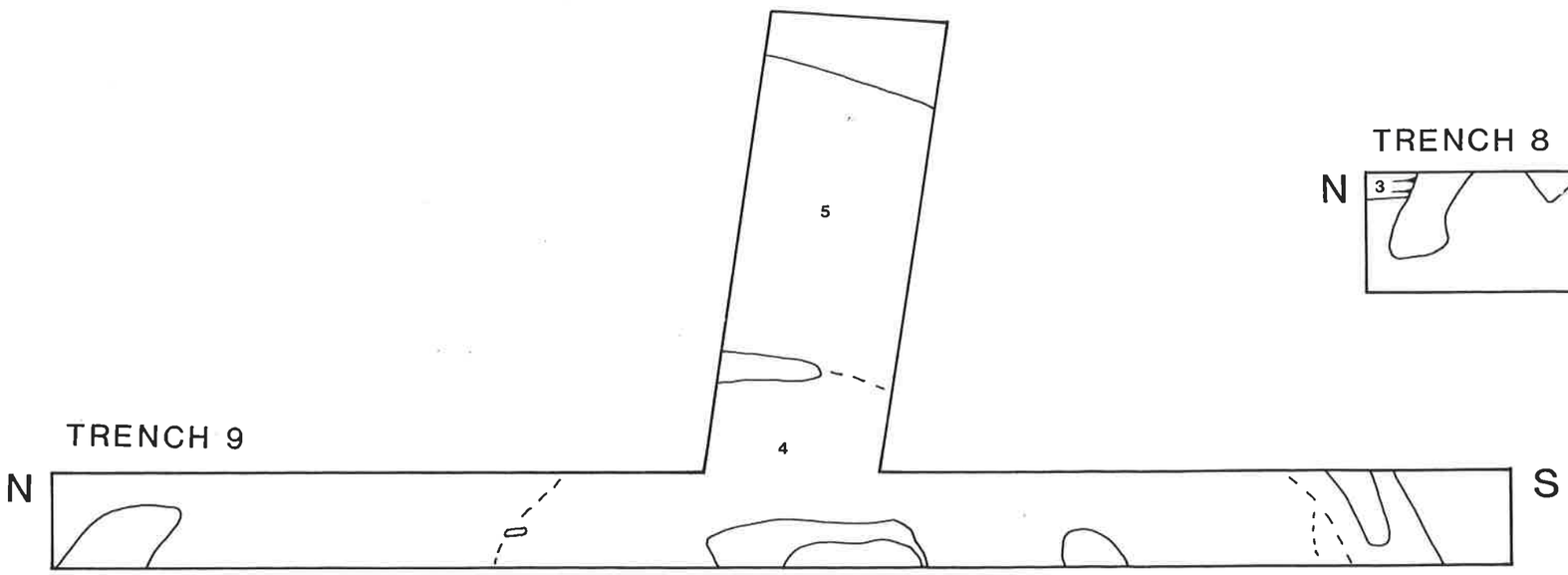
TRENCH 6



YWRF 89
Worton Rectory Farm, Yarnton.
Oxfordshire.
Fig.5

TRENCH 7





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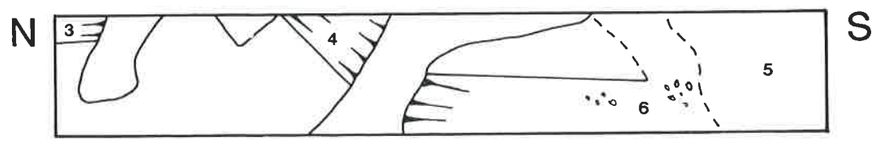

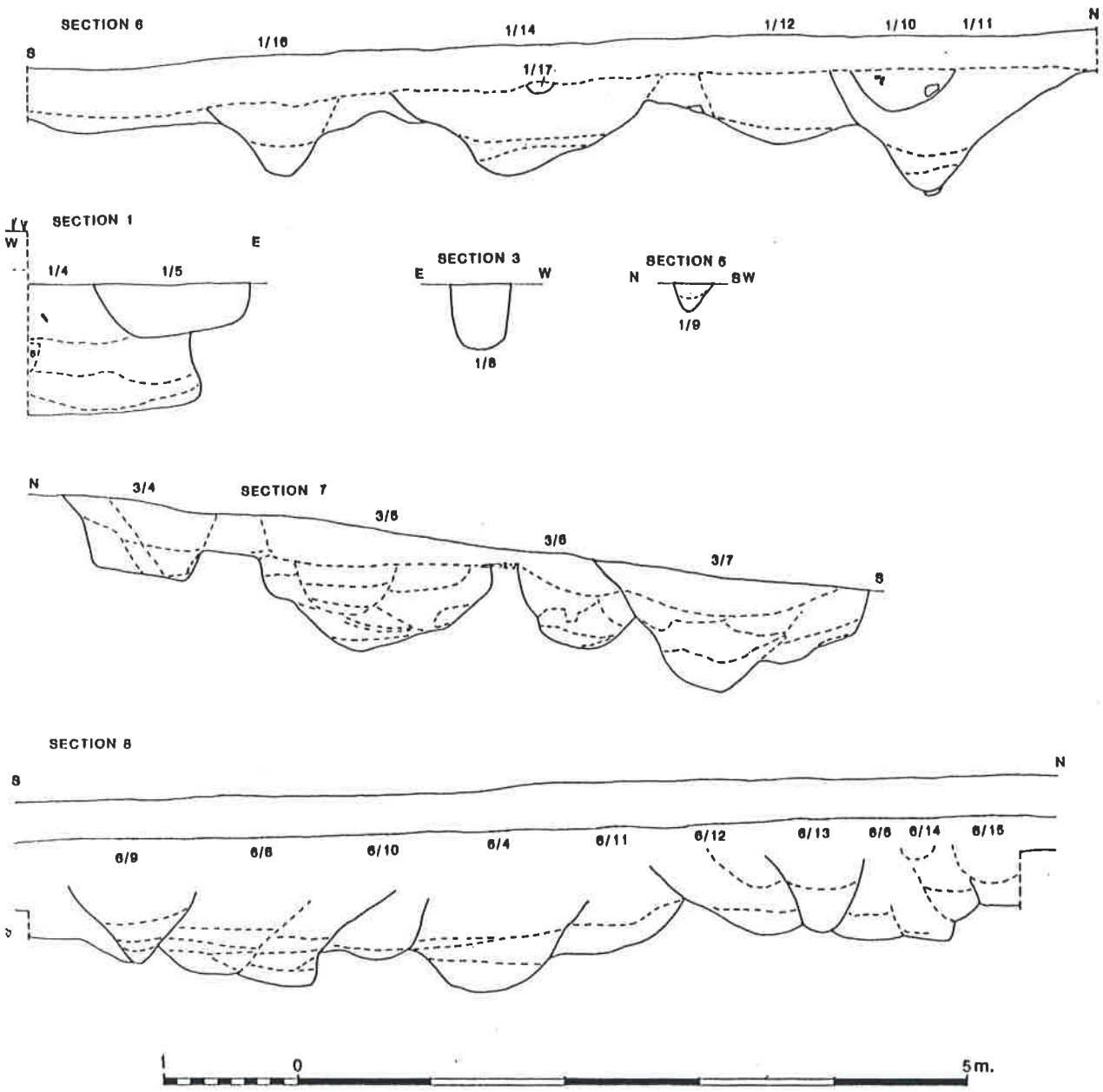

Worton Rectory Farm, Yarton, Oxfordshire. YWRF 89

Fig.6 Oxford Archaeological Unit Assessment 1989