

Barratt Maidenhead

**Smith's Yard, Mill Street
Wantage
Oxfordshire**

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION REPORT

NGR SU 3975 8820

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September 2001

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SUMMARY

The Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) carried out a field evaluation at Smith's Yard in Wantage on behalf of Barratt Maidenhead. The evaluation revealed a sequence of modern made ground sealing a modern buried topsoil which in turn overlies gravel, clay and silt river terrace deposits. Three possible linear archaeological features and two irregular features (possibly tree throws) were encountered on site. No dateable artefacts were retrieved from these features.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Location and scope of work

1.1.1 In August 2001 OAU carried out a field evaluation at Smith's Yard, Wantage on behalf of Barratt Maidenhead in respect of a planning application for residential development. The work was carried out to the specifications contained in a brief set by, and a Written Scheme of Investigation (WSI) agreed with Hugh Coddington the Deputy County Archaeological Officer for Oxfordshire. The development site is situated on the North-Western outskirts of Wantage at NGR SU3975 8826 and is approximately 2.5 hectares in area.

1.2 Geology and topography

1.2.1 The site lies on Gault and Upper Greensand formations overlain by River Terrace Gravels at c.85 m above OD. The site is currently a working scrap yard.

1.3 Archaeological and historical background

1.3.1 The proposed development site is located within an area of considerable archaeological potential. To the west an evaluation by Wessex Archaeology in 1993 (Heaton, Seager-Smith & Allen 1993) identified Romano British and early Anglo-Saxon deposits. The evaluation recovered twelve early Anglo Saxon annular clay loomweights suggesting a settlement nearby. A full excavation by the Cotswold Archaeological Trust (November 1993 - March 1994; Holbrook & Thomas 1997) revealed a series of early field boundaries. A small, second century, timber granary and a rectangular domestic building were found to have been demolished and replaced by an early fourth century square stone building, thought to have been a tower granary. A series of contemporary curvilinear ditches were located within the floodplain of Letcombe Brook. It is suggested that the excavated area lay to the rear of linear settlement along the Roman road forming part of a small Roman town or villa estate. A supposition supported by the identification and partial excavation of a small villa just west of Denchworth Road in 1998.

1.3.2 To the south an evaluation revealed second and third century ditches indicative of floodplain agricultural activity similar to the Mill Street excavations (Thomas 1995). Anglo Saxon ditched enclosures on a different alignment to those of the Romano-

British period indicated new patterns of land organisation associated with agricultural production.

- 1.3.3 An Oxford Archaeological Unit evaluation on land adjacent to Mill Street revealed no archaeological features (Roberts 1996). However, some Romano-British pottery was identified, including pieces of high status southern Spanish amphora and Samian ware.
- 1.3.4 Romano-British activity was identified immediately east of Letcombe Brook (Wessex Archaeology 1997). Ditches containing Romano British pottery, including tablewares and mortaria, were identified. It is thought that domestic activity took place nearby.
- 1.3.5 There is little evidence of late Anglo Saxon activity in the vicinity of the proposed development area. King Alfred was born at Wantage in 849 AD, Ethelred summoned a council at Wantage in 990 and in 997 the Witan met there. There are no other recorded royal visits to Wantage. It is highly probable that the later Saxon settlement of Wantage was destroyed by the Danish raid on Berkshire in 1006, perhaps explaining the absence of later Anglo Saxon evidence.
- 1.3.6 The west side of the proposed development area formed the basin for a canal. This was a branch of the Berkshire and Wiltshire Canal that ran into Wantage supplying coal to the vale towns and villages and transporting agricultural produce. The canal opened in 1810 and closed in 1906 and has since been infilled. Early maps of the area, including the 1st edition Ordnance Survey, show the development area being used as an orchard.

1.4 Evaluation Aims

- 1.4.1 To establish the presence/absence of archaeological remains within the proposal area.
- 1.4.2 To determine the extent, condition, nature, character, quality and date of any archaeological remains present.
- 1.4.3 To establish the ecofactual and environmental potential of archaeological deposits and features.
- 1.4.4 To make available the results of the investigation.
- 1.4.5 To define any relevant research priorities if additional archaeological investigation proves necessary.

2 EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

2.1 Scope of fieldwork

- 2.1.1 The evaluation consisted of nine trench locations. Originally a 30 m trench was to be excavated at each location. However due to the extreme depth of modern overburden it was agreed during an on-site meeting with Hugh Coddington that the trenches

would be targeted over areas where borehole reports had indicated 'gravel highs' and that in areas of deep alluvium only test pits would be excavated at the end of each trench. This would result in mapping the underlying deposits and focusing on the areas of highest archaeological potential.

2.2 Fieldwork methods and recording

2.2.1 The overburden was removed under close archaeological supervision by a 360° mechanical excavator fitted with a toothless bucket.

2.2.2 All archaeological features were planned and where excavated their sections drawn at scales of 1:20. All features were photographed using colour slide and black and white print film. Recording followed procedures laid down in the *OAU Fieldwork Manual* (ed D Wilkinson, 1992).

2.3 Finds

2.3.1 Finds were recovered by hand during the course of the excavation and bagged by context.

2.4 Palaeo-environmental evidence

2.4.1 No samples were processed for this evaluation. The complete lack of datable artefacts negates the information that could be added to the report by the presence of environmental indicators.

2.5 Presentation of results

2.5.1 Section 4 includes individual context descriptions, with archaeological deposits and features described from earliest to latest. Context information is summarised in the context inventory (Appendix 1).

3 RESULTS: GENERAL

3.1 Soils and ground conditions

3.1.1 The site is located on Gault and Upper Greensand formations overlain by gravel and silt river terrace deposits. The ground surface was covered either in dense undergrowth or dumped material relating to the current use of the site as a scrapyard.

3.2 Distribution of archaeological deposits

3.2.1 Three definite and two possible man-made features were observed. These were all situated on the 'gravel high' to the north-west of the site. The evaluation was partially biased in that the greater part of the trenching was targeted to this area.

4 RESULTS: DESCRIPTIONS

4.1 Description of deposits

(See Figs. 2 and 3)

Trench 1

- 4.1.1 The primary deposit located within the sequence encountered in Trench 1 was the bluish-grey brown silty-clay deposit (102). This deposit was encountered at 81.53m OD, 1.85m below the surface level. Excavation ceased at a level of 80.66m OD, 0.87m into alluvium.
- 4.1.2 This deposit was overlain by the buried modern soil 101 which was a dark greyish brown silt loam horizon *c* 0.30m thick. This deposit in turn was overlain by 1.40m of modern dump material (100).

Trench 2

- 4.1.3 Trench 2 was located approximately perpendicular to Trench 1 to the North of the site. At a depth of 79.2m OD, a very firm dark grey fissured clay horizon (205) was encountered. This was identified as the Gault Formation, the geology underlying the whole site. Overlying 205 was a second mid greyish-brown alluvial clay-silt layer (204), which contained occasional small sub-angular pebbles and was *c* 1.00m thick.
- 4.1.4 At a level of 80.46m OD a chalky, angular, fine gravel (203) supported in a grey clay matrix was observed. Four sections were dug across the 30m length separated by 3 narrow baulks to allow satisfactory drainage across this horizon.. This allowed the greatest possible clear observation of the gravel surface. At the southern end of Trench 2, a gravel horizon was observed at a depth of 80.20m OD, demonstrating that this surface dipped downwards toward the south. Here this deposit was only 0.23m thick.
- 4.1.5 Deposit 203 was overlain by a mid-greyish brown alluvial clay-silt (202) at a level of 81.0m OD. A dark greyish brown silt loam horizon (201) overlay 202. This was identified as a modern buried soil. This deposit was 0.60m thick.
- 4.1.6 As in Trench 1 the made ground (deposit 200) was of considerable depth (approx. 0.9m here). This was the last deposit in the Trench 2 sequence.

Trench 3

- 4.1.7 Trench 3 was located in the North-West corner of the site approximately 6m west of Letcombe brook. Deposits in Trench 3 were similar to those observed further west in Trench 1, with archaeologically sterile alluvial silts and clays (302) to a depth of 80.34m OD. Deposit 302 was overlain by a modern buried topsoil (301) at a depth of 80.94 m OD. Made ground of maximum thickness 1.5m comprising mixed dump and backfilling deposits (300) overlay all deposits in Trench 3.

Trenches 4 and 5

- 4.1.8 The sediment profile observed in these test pits was similar to that observed in Trenches 1 and 3, with made ground (400 and 500) down to modern buried topsoil (401 and 501) at 81.51 and 81.4 m OD respectively. The buried soil overlay alluvial silts and clays (402 and 502) at 81.2 and 81.1m OD respectively. Excavation was discontinued below 80.41m OD in Trench 4 and 81 m OD in Trench 5.

Trench 6

- 4.1.9 Trench 6 was located approximately to the west of the centre of the site, on the southern side of an earth bund .
- 4.1.10 The primary deposit in the Trench 6 sequence was a chalky, angular gravel (603) in a grey clay matrix at 81m OD. The gravel horizon was considered to have good potential for containing archaeological features, and was stripped back to as much of the 30m extent as possible. As in Trench 2 rapidly rising ground water again presented a problem, and this trench was likewise excavated as 4 sondages and 3 narrow baulks to counter this problem.
- 4.1.11 Cutting through layer 603 was a northeast-southwest aligned linear feature (604), which was filled by 605, a very dark grey brown silty deposit. The feature was recorded from the trench edge due to health and safety constraints. A section was dug by machine through the centre of this feature giving dimensions of 0.4m wide by 3m long (running the whole length of the easternmost sondage). No finds were recovered. This feature may represent a field boundary or other land partition, although the fact that the feature was cut into very poor draining gravel in clay may suggest some drainage function.
- 4.1.12 Further features (606), (608) and (610) were also found to be cutting through the layer 603. Cut 606 was a possible curvilinear feature, which had a depth of c 0.5m, and a 5m extent. This was filled by a dark brown compacted silt (607). Adjacent to feature 606 was an irregular feature (608). This feature was filled by deposit 609, a layer of identical typology to fill 607. Cut 610 was a linear feature, aligned northeast-southwest, and was similar to feature 604. This feature was not excavated due to the instability of the trench sides. The final, westernmost sondage in Trench 6 revealed a very irregular feature interpreted as bioturbation.
- 4.1.13 A modern buried topsoil horizon (601) overlay these deposits and a red ceramic land drain segment was recovered from this layer. Deposit 601 was in turn overlain by the modern dump layer 600.

Trench 7

- 4.1.14 Trench 7 was located to the south-east of the site in the centre of the scrap yard. The same stratigraphic sequence was observed in Trench 7 as in the other trenches, but the deposits here were encountered at a lesser depth from the ground surface due to

the absence of the deep deposits of made ground observed elsewhere. The primary deposit in the sequence recorded within Trench 7 was the natural gravel horizon (703). This was encountered at 81.9m OD at the south end of Trench 7, and continued for approximately 14m north along the trench before being overlain by the alluvial deposit 702.

- 4.1.15 The alluvial deposit 702 was a tenacious blue-grey silty clay found at c 82.40m OD. This deposit had a thickness of 0.50m and contained occasional degraded chalk flecks.
- 4.1.16 Alluvium 702 was cut by a linear feature (704) (Fig. 4) approximately aligned east-west and c 0.5m deep and 1m wide. This was filled by a dark bluish-grey, charcoal-flecked deposit (705). One piece of burnt flint was retrieved from this deposit.
- 4.1.17 Overlying the alluvium and the linear feature cutting it was deposit 701. This was the buried modern horizon equivalent to 101, 201, 301, 401, 501, and 601. This deposit was a silty-loam, 0.30m thick. This was overlain by the previously encountered modern dump deposit 700, which had a maximum thickness of 0.70m at this location.

Trenches 8 and 9

- 4.1.18 Deposits in Trenches 8 and 9 corresponded to the pattern observed in Trenches 6 and 7. The gravel horizon (803 and 903) was encountered at 81.14 and 81.25 m OD and was overlain by alluvial silts (802 and 902). Modern buried topsoil (801 and 901) graded into alluvial silts and clays (802 and 902) at 81.34 and 81.39m OD. The top of the buried soil (801) in Trench 8 appeared to be partially overlain by a rough tarmac surface, possibly corresponding to a former yard surface for the Tram depot known to have been in existence at the site prior to its use as a scrapyard. This was overlaid with made ground (800 and 900).

4.2 Finds

- 4.2.1 Five pieces of flint were retrieved from deposit 705 as possible artefacts. Only one piece which had been burnt could convincingly be interpreted as impacted on by human activity. No other finds were recovered.

5 DISCUSSION AND INTERPRETATION

5.1 Reliability of field investigation

- 5.1.1 The evaluation has focused on the area of highest archaeological potential on the site through the use of boreholes, test pits and trenches carried out as part of these evaluation and in previous intrusive studies. The evaluation has clearly demonstrated that the stratigraphic horizons which could contain archaeological deposits and remains are still intact and that the site has been subject to dumping episodes rather than cut and fill events. However the density of potential archaeological features outlined in this report (three linear features and two possible tree throws) can be

taken as a reasonable indication of the low level of archaeological features likely to be present across the site.

5.2 Overall interpretation

Summary of results

- 5.2.1 The evaluation has shown a low density of what are likely to be field system or drainage features of probable historic origin. The general absence of artefactual material in any of the trenches (one piece of burnt flint from Trench 7) supports the suggestion that the site saw only relatively low level activity of rural character before recent times.

6 IMPACT OF THE DEVELOPMENT

- 6.1.1 Barratt Maidenhead have indicated that the larger part of construction work will involve the use of piled foundations. Should this be the case the only major impact to potential archaeological horizons could be from drainage runs and manhole cuts. No information has been made available for this report on the possible depth of these constructions.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1 ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXT INVENTORY

<i>Trench</i>	<i>Ctxt No</i>	<i>Type</i>	<i>Width (m)</i>	<i>Thick. (m)</i>	<i>Comment</i>	<i>Finds</i>	<i>No./wt</i>	<i>Date</i>
001								
	100	Layer			Made Ground			
	101	Layer			Buried modern topsoil			
	102	Layer			Alluvial clay			
002								
	200	Layer			Made Ground			
	201	Layer			Buried modern topsoil			
	202	Layer			Clay silt alluvium			
	203	Layer			Gravel spread			
	204	Layer			Alluvial clay			
	205	Layer			Gault clay natural			
003								
	300	Layer			Made Ground			
	301	Layer			Buried modern topsoil			
	302	Layer			Clay slit alluvium			
004								
	400	Layer			Made Ground			
	401	Layer			Buried modern topsoil			
	402	Layer			Clay slit alluvium			
005								
	500	Layer			Made Ground			
	501	Layer			Buried modern topsoil			
	502	Layer			Clay slit alluvium			
006								
	600	Layer			Made Ground			
	601	Layer			Buried modern topsoil			
	602	Layer			Alluvial silt			
	603	Layer			Gravel natural			
	604	Cut			Linear feature			
	605	Layer			Fill of 604			

	606	Cut			Irregular feature			
	607	Layer			Fill of 606			
	608	Cut			Irregular feature			
	609	Layer			Fill of 608			
	610	Cut			Linear feature			
	611	Layer			Fill of 610			
007								
	700	Layer			Made Ground			
	701	Layer			Buried modern topsoil			
	702	Layer			Clay slit alluvium			
	703	Layer			Gravel natural			
	704	Cut			Linear feature			
	705	Layer			Fill of 704	One piece of burnt flint		
008								
	800	Layer			Made Ground			
	801	Layer			Buried modern topsoil			
	802	Layer			Clay slit alluvium			
	803	Layer			Gravel natural			
009								
	900	Layer			Made Ground			
	901	Layer			Buried modern topsoil			
	902	Layer			Alluvium			
	903	Layer			Gravel natural			

APPENDIX 2 BIBLIOGRAPHY AND REFERENCES

- CL Associates 2000 Site Investigation, The Scrapyard Wantage
- Heaton M, Seager - Smith R & Allen MJ 1993 *Mill Street, Wantage, Archaeological Site Investigations*, Wessex Archaeology Report **W603**
- Holbrook N, & Thomas A 1997 *The Roman and Early Anglo Saxon settlement at Wantage, Oxfordshire. Excavations at Mill Street p109-179 1993-94. Oxoniensia LXI*
- Roberts M 1996 *Land adjacent to 58 Mill Street, Wantage, Archaeological Evaluation, OAU WAMST96*
- Thomas A 1995 *Land south of Mill Street, Wantage, Archaeological Evaluation. CAT TS Report 95233*
- Wessex Archaeology 1997 *Limborough Road Development, Wantage, Archaeological Evaluation, 35662a*

APPENDIX 3 SUMMARY OF SITE DETAILS

Site name: Smith's Yard Wantage

Site code: WASY01

Grid reference: SU 3975 8820

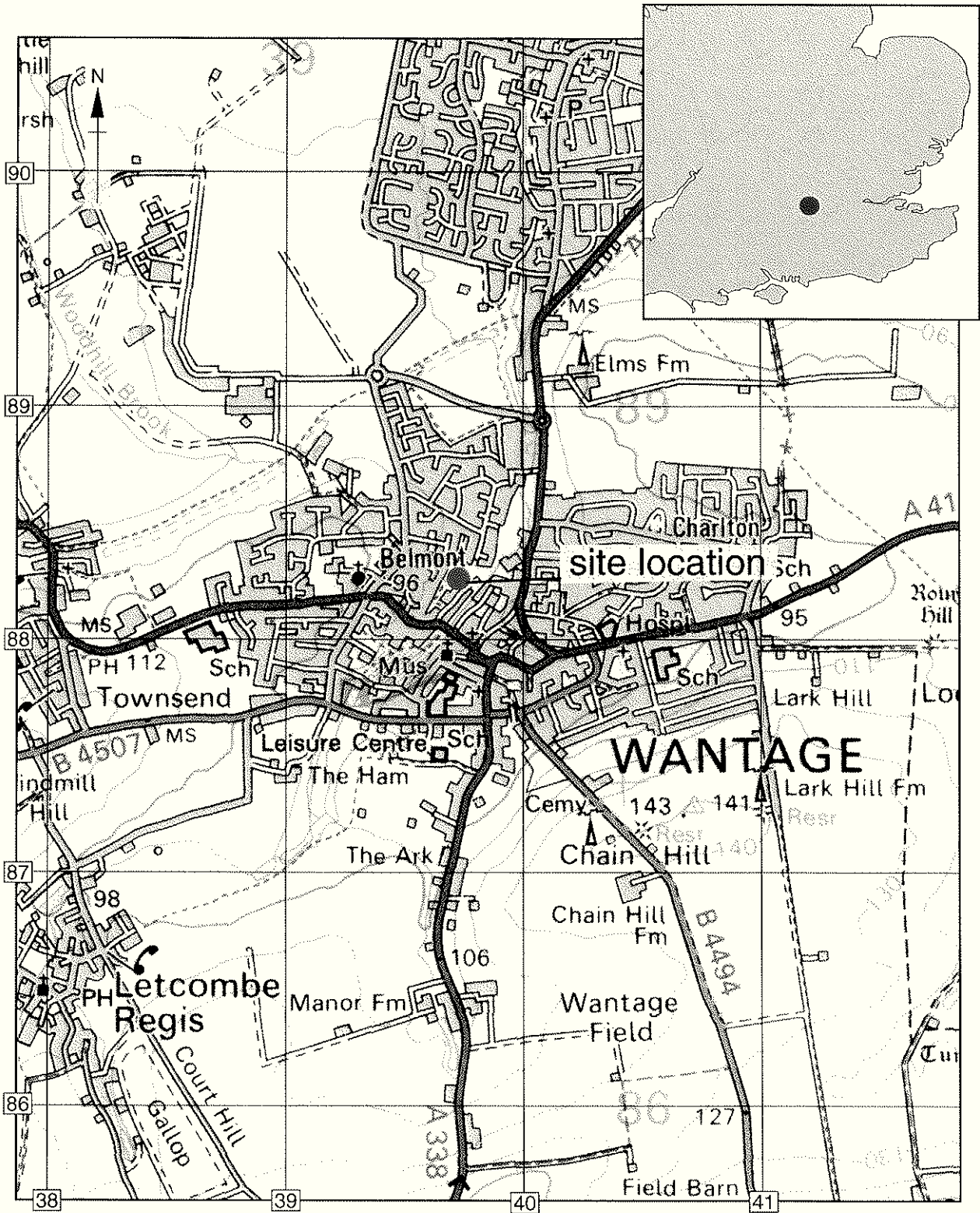
Type of evaluation: Trenching

Date and duration of project: 13.08.01/seven days

Area of site: 2.5ha

Summary of results: Three undated linear features, two probable tree throws

Location of archive: The archive is currently held at OAU, Janus House, Osney Mead, Oxford, OX2 0ES, and will be deposited with Oxfordshire County Museums Service in due course.

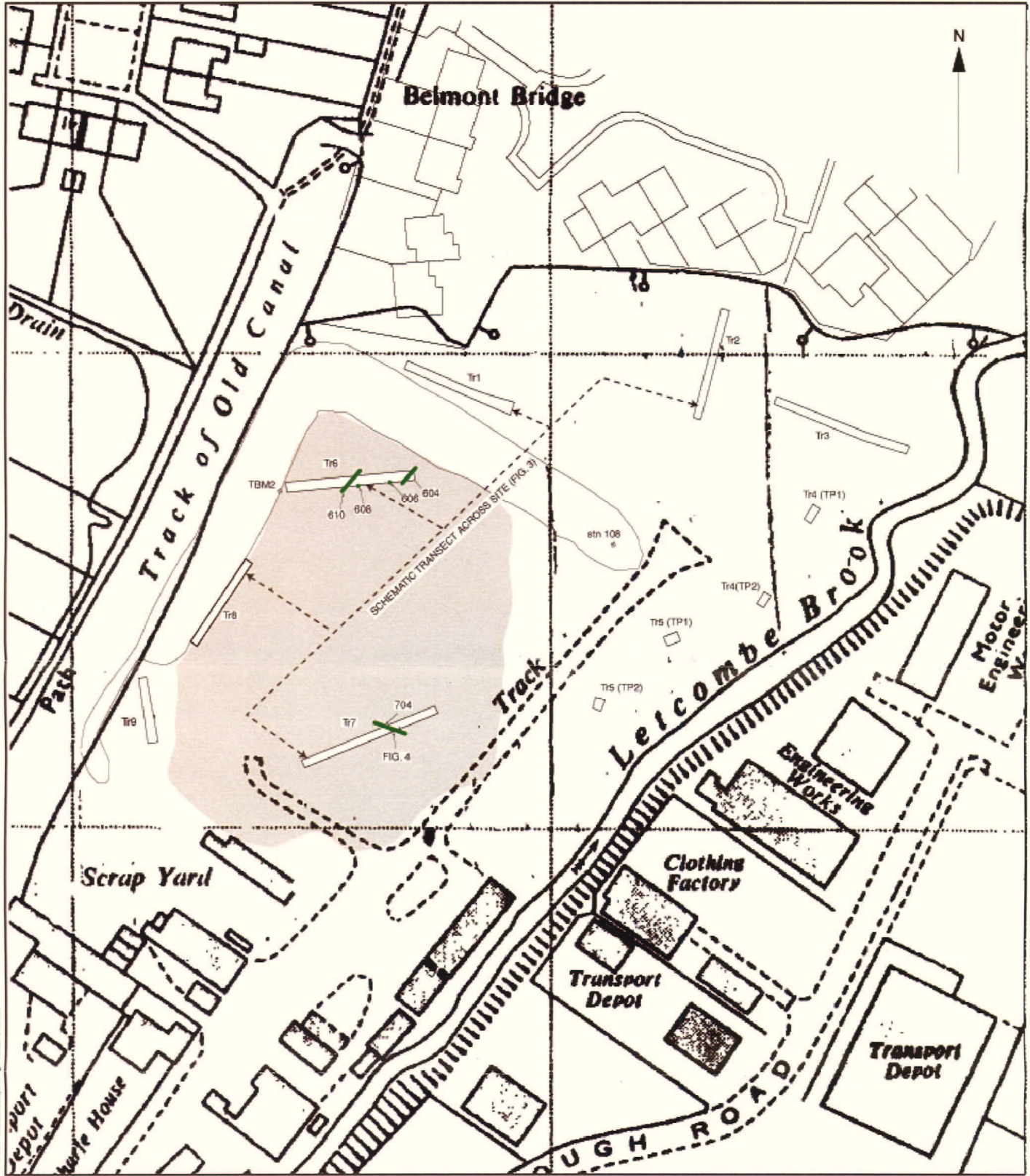


Scale 1:25,000

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Figure 1: Site location.

Location of Archaeological Evaluation Trenches

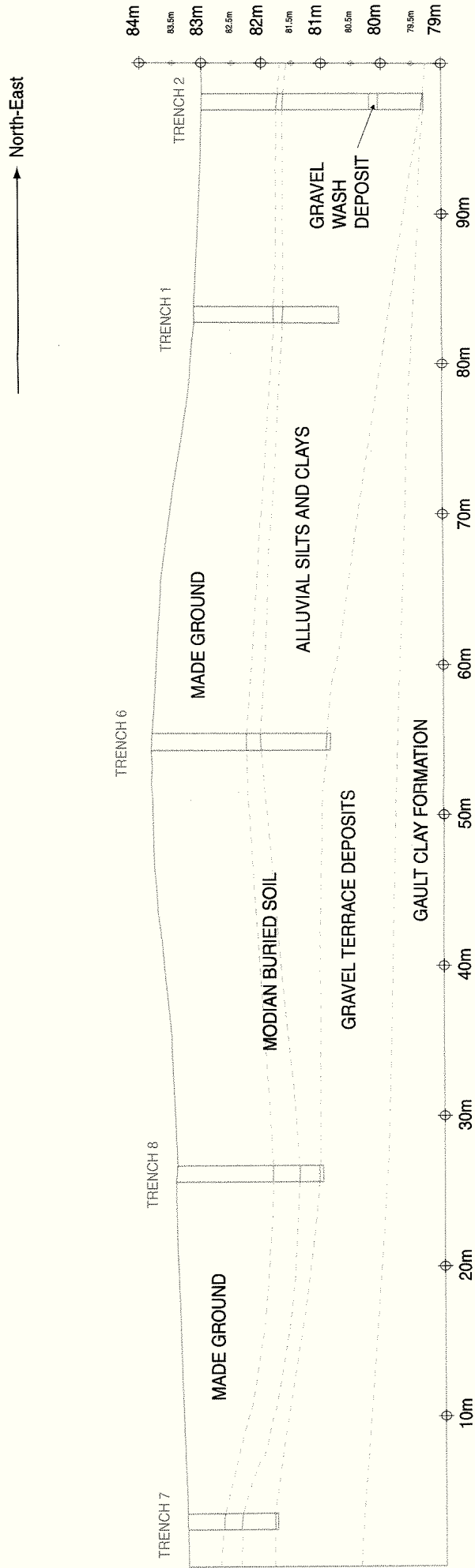


- Area of 'Gravel High'
- Undated Linear Feature
- Undated Irregular Feature

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Figure 2: Trench Location

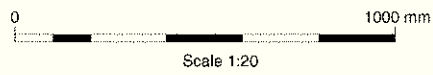
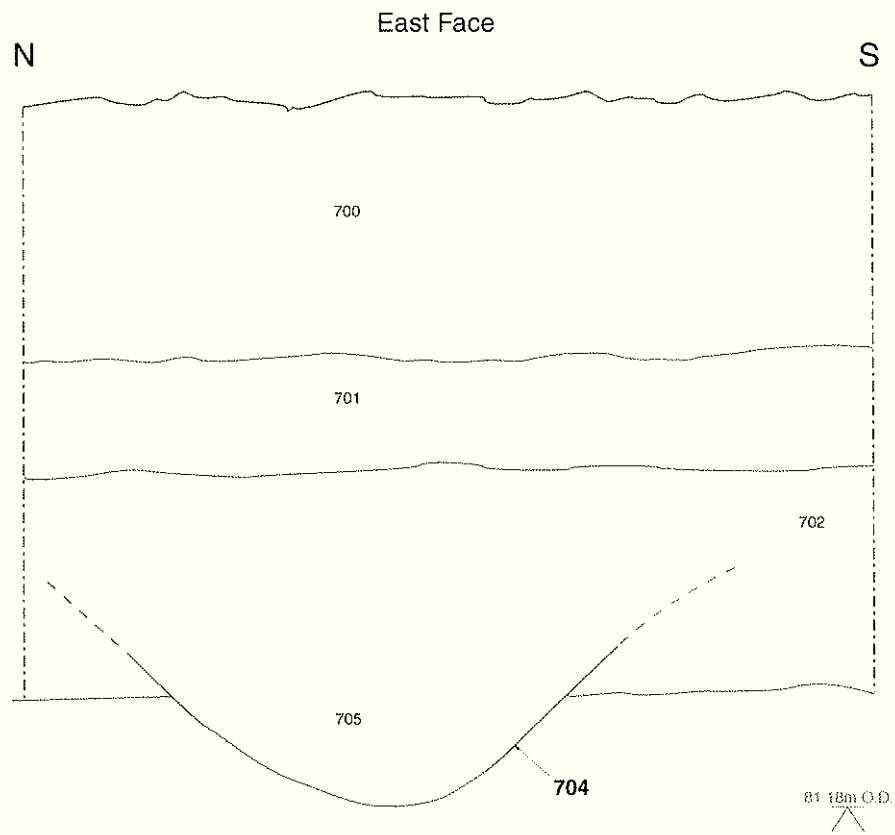
Schematic Profile of Stratigraphic Sequence Across Site
(See Figure 2 for Location)



DO NOT SCALE

Figure 3: Site Profile

Feature 701



WASY EV*Smith's Yard, Wantage*AMD*05.09.01

Figure 4 : Section



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