

Jowett Walk, Balliol College Master's Field, Oxford

An Archaeological Evaluation

OXFORD ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT

November 1994

BALLIOL COLLEGE, THE MASTERS FIELD

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1 Summary

- 1.1 At the beginning of November 1994 The Oxford Archaeological Unit undertook a field evaluation on the site of Balliol College Masters Field, Jowett Walk, Oxford, in respect of a condition attached to a planning consent for new student accommodation.
- 1.2 The only archaeological feature to be found was a large NE-SW aligned ditch. It is suggested that the ditch was possibly related to Oxford's Civil War Defence. However, the ditch's position, and its stratigraphic relationships to other deposits, both cast doubt about its date and function.
- 1.3 Apart from modern disturbances, the only other deposits to be located were buried ploughsoils, indicating that this was a traditional area of cultivation.

2 Introduction

- 2.1 It is the intention of Balliol College, Oxford, to build new student accommodation blocks on the site of The Masters Field, Jowett Walk, Oxford. As part of a condition attached to planning consent for the proposed new building, Balliol College commissioned The Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) to undertake an archaeological evaluation of the development area, in order to determine the presence/absence of archaeological remains. The construction work, and associated landscaping, would disturb, or possibly destroy any archaeological remains on the site. The aim of the evaluation was therefore to establish the presence, degree of preservation, and extent of any archaeological remains, so the need for excavation, or other mitigation strategies could be determined.
- 2.2 The particular concerns of the evaluation were to locate any ditches relating to Oxford's Civil War Defence and to observe whether medieval ridge and furrow ploughing and associated field boundaries survive.
- 2.3 Three trial trenches were positioned and excavated according to specifications agreed with The Oxford Archaeological Advisory Service and the field work took place over a period of 4 days at the beginning of November 1994.

3 Archaeological and historical background

- 3.1 There is evidence for extensive prehistoric activity in the area to the north in University Parks. Aerial photographs show a range of features from Bronze Age barrows to a Roman field system and this picture has been confirmed by excavations in the science area.

- 3.2 On David Loggan's map of 1675 the site is shown as consisting of cultivation strips extending northwards from plots on the Holywell frontage. It is likely that the area was used for agriculture throughout the medieval period, though whether the land was divided into strips, or was open fields is unknown.
- 3.3 150 m to the north of the site is a break of slope which follows the line of an inner defence from the Civil War which appears on de Gomme's map of 1646. De Gomme's map also appears to show a different trace of the defence, designed to exclude much of the manor of Holywell. The exact position of this defence, which would have consisted of a substantial ditch and bank, is uncertain. It has been suggested that it ran on the line of the former Love Lane, which ran just to the north of the site, but it possible that it could in fact run through the area of the proposed development.
- 3.4 During the 18th century the land became part of Shaw's Close (1758, Merton Coll. Archive) and was converted into its present use as a sports ground in the 1890's.
- 3.5 Excavation by the OAU on the south side of Jowett Walk in 1993 located a number of medieval buildings and pits, dating from the 12th to 14th centuries, along with post-medieval pits and a garden wall.

4 Topography and Geology

- 4.1 The site of the proposed development consists of an area of flat land immediately to the north of Jowett Walk (NGR SP 518 066), which is presently used as a sports field. The site lies within the parish of Holywell, in the area to the north of the old city wall, but within Oxford's Civil War defence.
- 4.2 The underlying geology is gravel terrace and the land exists at a height of 62 m O.D.

5 Methodology and Strategy (see Fig. 1 for trench locations)

- 5.1 Three trial trenches, 15 m long x 1.55 m wide, were excavated within the area of the proposed new building. The trenches were excavated down to the top of the first significant archaeological deposits, or in their absence to the top of the natural gravel, using a mechanical excavator with a 1.55 m toothless ditching bucket. The trenches were then planned and photographed, and a representative sample of features was excavated and sections were drawn where appropriate.

6 Description of Archaeology

6.1 Trenches 1 and 3

Apart from modern disturbances, no archaeological features were observed in either of these two trenches. In both trenches the top of the natural gravel was located some 0.65 m to 0.70 m below the present ground surface and was overlaid by a thick

(0.28 m) deposit of reddish brown sandy silt (102 and 303). Above this deposit was a layer of gravelly loam (101 and 302).

In trench 1 the loam was directly overlaid by the present topsoil, but in trench 3 a discontinuous modern dump layer (301) existed between the loam and the topsoil.

The only finds retrieved from these two trenches consisted of a small quantity of 18th and 19th century pottery and clay pipes which came from deposits 101, 301, 302 and modern disturbance 305.

6.2 Trench 2 (see fig. 2 for plan and section)

A large NE-SW aligned ditch (210), which was some 2 m wide and 1.50 m deep, was cut into the natural gravel towards the south end of the trench. An extension was made to the west side of the trench so that more of the ditch could be observed. The ditch was mostly filled by deposits of 'sterile', and very compacted, gravel and silt.

The gravelly nature of the fills made it difficult at first to find the true edges of the ditch, though once they were finally located the edges were well defined. The ditch had a slightly irregular 'U' shaped profile, with the NW side of the ditch being much steeper than the SE side.

The only finds to be retrieved from the ditch came from the slightly softer fills at the top (213 and 215), and these consisted of two small sherds of mid to late 17th century pottery, a fragment of horse shoe and a single piece of animal bone.

The ditch was sealed beneath the same sequence of deposits that were seen in trenches 1 and 3. A layer of reddish brown sandy silt (208), which in this trench produced a single sherd of medieval pottery, overlaid by a gravelly loam (202) and a modern dump layer (207). There were also a number of modern deposits and disturbances in this trench. These included a NNE-SSW aligned linear deposit of gravel, which overlay layer 202 at the south end of the trench, concrete foundations, and services trenches and a pit at the north end of the trench (204) containing 19th century pottery.

7 Discussion

- 7.1 The layer of reddish brown silt, which overlay the natural gravel in all of the trenches (102, 208 and 303), and the layer of gravelly loam (101, 202 and 302), both appeared to be buried ploughsoils. The finds from the gravelly loam clearly suggested that it was a post-medieval ploughsoil, but the date of the reddish silt is less certain. The only find to come from this layer was a single sherd of medieval pottery (12/13th century). However, in trench 2 the silt was clearly overlaying the large ditch (210), which contained two sherds of 17th century pottery. The relationship between the ditch and the ploughsoil could not be mistaken as the fills of the ditch were pale coloured, and compacted, were as the dark reddish silt was soft in texture and could be observe as an undisturbed even band above the ditch.

- 7.2 This apparent problem of dating could be the result of a number of possibilities. Firstly, it is possible that the medieval pot sherd in the silt was simply residual and that this ploughsoil is also post-medieval in date, or it could be due to the small post-medieval sherds in the top of the ditch being intrusive (i.e. contamination by root or worm action).

This last explanation seems unlikely as the fills of the ditch were fairly compacted, and one of the 17th century pot sherds was located 0.20 m down into the ditch. There were also no other sherds of post-medieval pottery found anywhere else in the layer of reddish silt.

It also seems unlikely, however, that the reddish silt was post-medieval ploughsoil as this suggests that no medieval ploughsoil survives and that there has been a very large build up of soil since the 17th century.

Therefore a third possibility exists, and that is that the ditch was cut through ploughsoil, but quickly filled in (as the fill suggests) or was deliberately backfilled with the land reverting to agriculture and was then ploughed over again.

- 7.3 The fills of the large ditch, which was located in trench 2, were mostly sterile gravels, which had formed in quite unusual shapes. This appears to indicate that the steep sides of the ditch had collapsed in (and it was filled in ?) fairly quickly, before natural silting up could occur.
- 7.4 Although there were two sherds of 17th century pottery from the top of the ditch there were no finds from any of the lower fills, and the ditch also appeared to be overlaid by a medieval ploughsoil, as has been described. Therefore the date of the ditch must remain in some doubt. However, the oblique alignment of the ditch does make it unlikely that it is of medieval or post-medieval date, as any boundaries from these periods would almost certainly be orientated N-S or E-W. This seems to leave two likely possibilities, either that the ditch is prehistoric, or that it is indeed 17th century and was part of the Civil War defence. Its curious alignment (NE-SW) could then be due to the fact that it is part of a bastion, or simply a kink in the defence line, similar to those which exist in the defence further to the north.
- 7.5 Although the reddish silt layer was slightly undulating there was no clear evidence of any ridge and furrow ploughing, and there were no signs of any field, or plot boundaries. However, as the layer directly above also appears to be a ploughsoil it is possible that any ridge and furrow, along with any ephemeral plot boundaries could have been truncated by the later ploughing.
- 7.6 The linear deposit of gravel which was observed towards the upper sequence of trench 2 would appear to be the remains of a path, apparently dating to the 19th century.
- 7.7 The concrete footings and services seen in trench 2 are almost certainly associated to a series of Nissen huts which existed on the site during the second World War.

8 Conclusions

- 8.1 The evaluation appears to have shown that the land usage of the development area was very different from that seen on the south side of Jowett Walk. The uniform ploughsoils observed throughout the area evaluated, and the lack of medieval or post-medieval features, suggest that this land has always been used purely for agricultural purposes. Even though Jowett Walk was not built until the 1870's the character of the deposits to either side of the road appear to be very different. This suggests that the road was built on the line of an existing boundary, though this may simply have been the limit of the plots projecting from Holywell Street.
- 8.2 The size, character and the apparent date of the large ditch located (210) seem to make it most likely that it is related to Oxford's Civil War defence. However, the position of the ditch appears to be further to the south than any of those which appear on de Gomme's map of the defence and the lack of finds from the lower fills of the ditch still cast uncertainty about its date.
- 8.3 Further observation of the ditch in plan during the ground work for the proposed development could possibly confirm its function. This would be best achieved during any initial stripping of the site, as the ditch's gravelly fills would make it very difficult to observe in foundation trenches or other fragmentary ground work.

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Pottery identification by C. Underwood-Keevill

Sources consulted

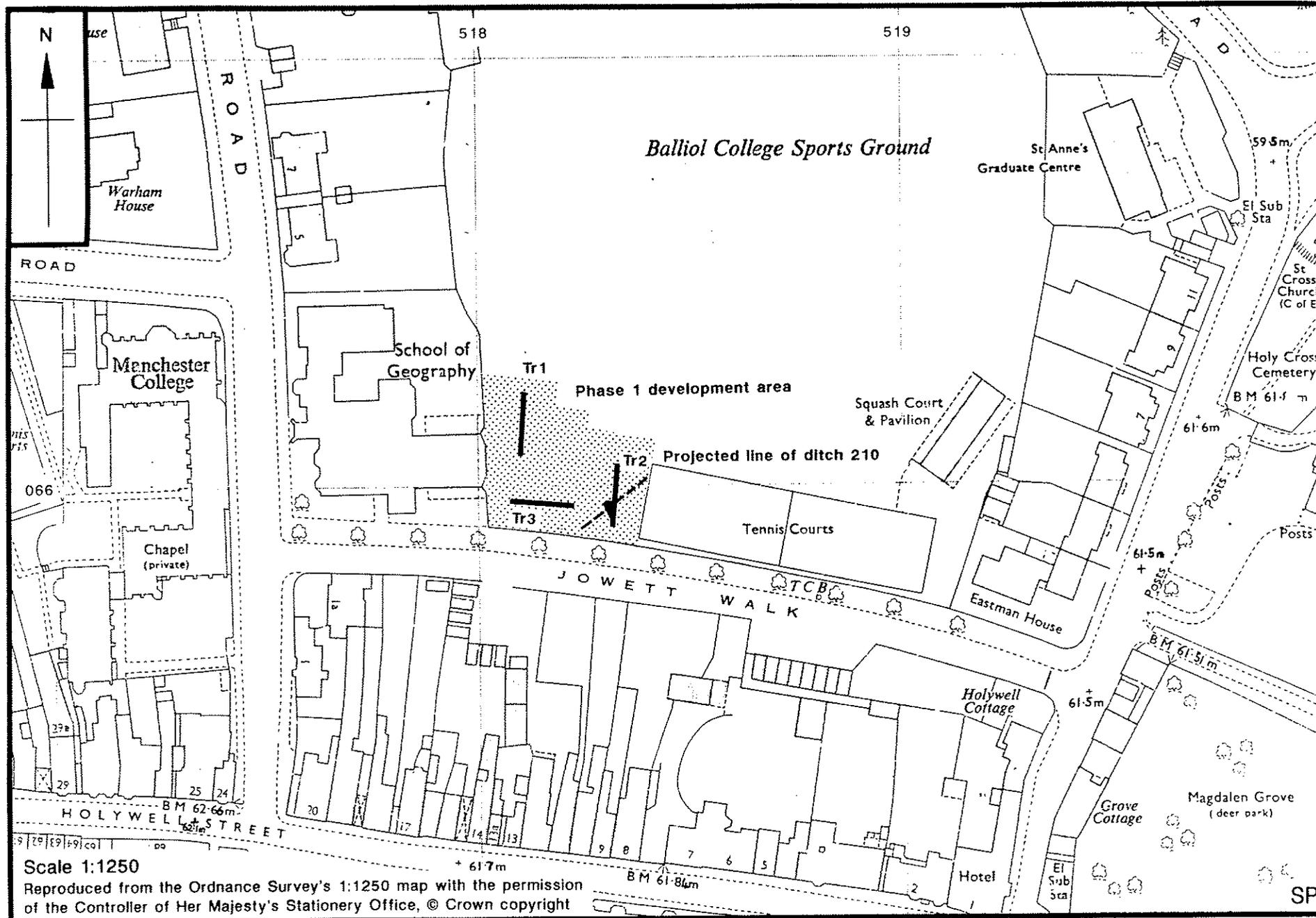
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Loggan's map of Oxford 1675

Taylor's map of Oxford 1750

Davis's map of Oxford 1797

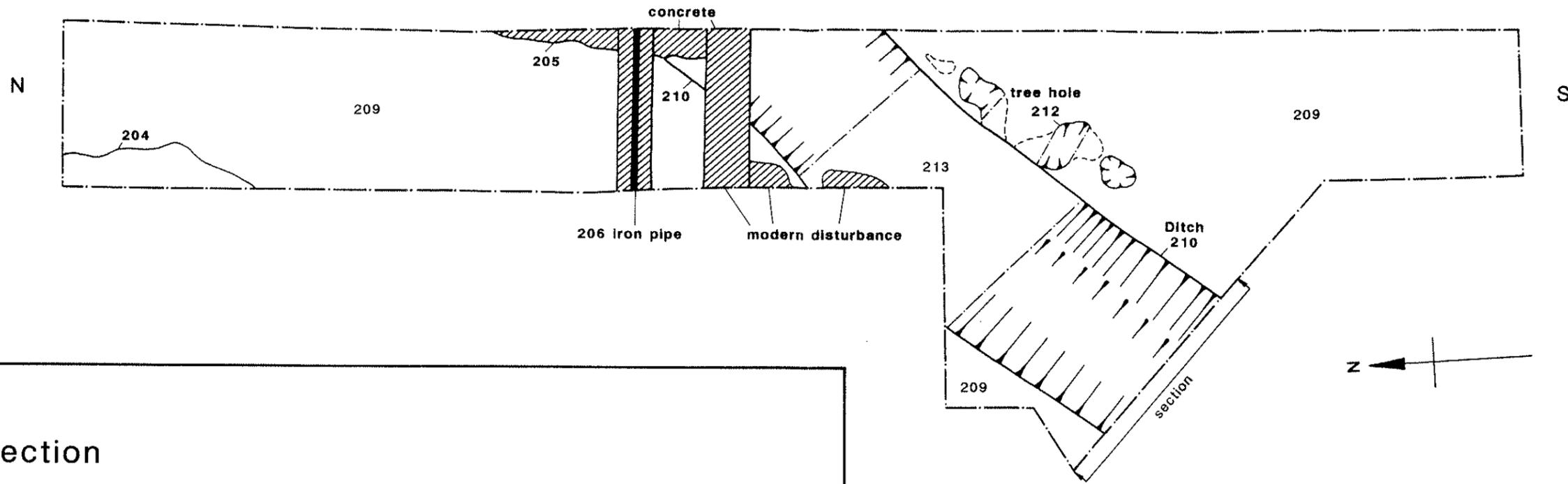
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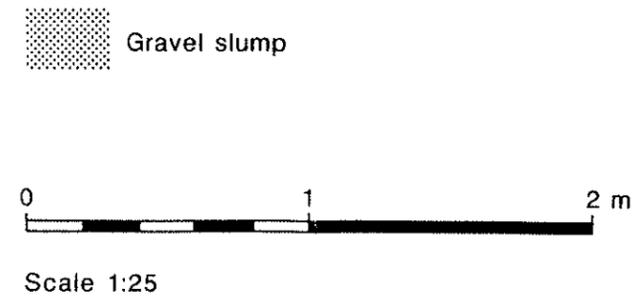
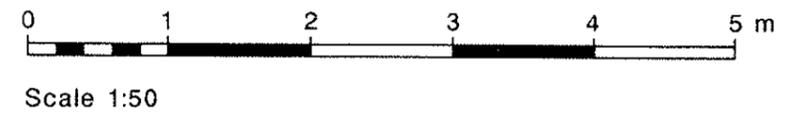
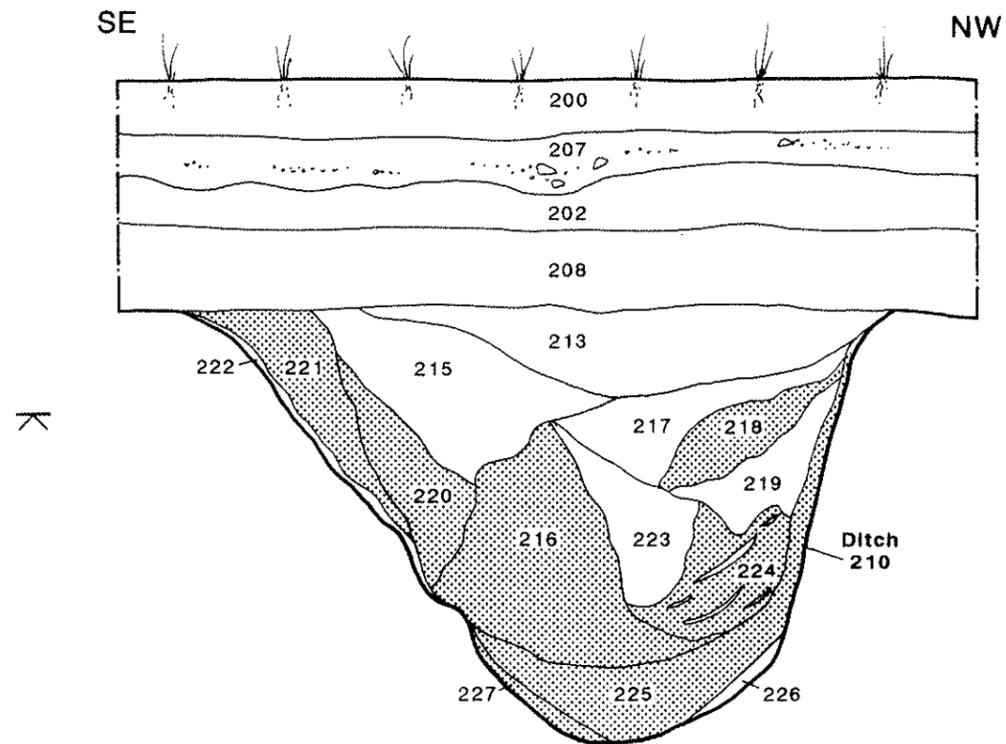
Trench location with phase 1 development area

figure 1

Trench 2: Plan



Section



Trench 2 plan and section

figure 2

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