Mercia Way, Warwick

NGR SP 2963 6528

Archaeological Evaluation Report

Oxford Archaeological Unit

August 1996

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Summary

An archaeological evaluation close to the site of a known Anglo-Saxon cemetery produced evidence of sand and gravel quarrying. This is likely to have destroyed all traces of ancient features of any date. No pre-modern finds were recovered.

Introduction

Allocation of land for five dwellings at the east end of Mercia Way, Warwick, Warwickshire for housing (Ref.H3.2) has been proposed in the Warwick District Local Plan (Deposit Draft). The proposal area is also the subject of a planning application for 10 dwellings which has been submitted to the Local Planning Authority (Ref. W960632). The current proposals are thought to lie on the site of an Anglo-Saxon cemetery discovered during gravel extraction in the 1850s and 1920s. Since the exact location of these finds was slightly uncertain the Warwickshire Museum requested that an archaeological evaluation of the site be carried out prior to determination of the application. This work was undertaken by the Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) for Crosbee and Atkins (Construction) acting on behalf of John Brindley Limited, in August 1996.

Location (Fig 1)

The site is centred around NGR SP 29636528 in the parish of Warwick and is situated on the north bank of the River Avon with the centre of the site only c 40 m from the river. The total area of the current proposal affects some 0.5 hectares, which is presently vacant but has a flood defence bank running through it. The underlying geology is first terrace river gravels. In the western part of the site these consisted of clean sand and further east of more mixed sand and gravel deposits (see further below).

Archaeological Background

The proposed development lies on or very close to the site of an Anglo-Saxon cemetery (Warwickshire Sites and Monuments Record No. WA 1983). Six or seven poorly preserved burials with grave goods including spearheads, shield bosses and brooches were encountered by workmen excavating for gravel in the 1920s (Chatwin 1928, 39). An earlier find, made in 1852, consisted of part of a single burial with a bead, a ring fragment and a fine brooch, confusingly sometimes known as the Myton Brooch (Smith 1904, 258). This burial was apparently located

a short distance north-east of the 1920s discoveries, and may itself have been associated with further burials (ibid). The exact extent of the cemetery was not known and evaluation work undertaken on the Power Station site to the north-east in 1994 failed to encounter any evidence for settlement of the Anglo-Saxon period, although this may have been due to the high level of disturbance caused by cut and fill operations over much of the site. It was thought that there was still potential for further burials associated with the Anglo-Saxon cemetery to be disturbed by the development.

Apart from the potential Anglo-Saxon interest of the site, nearby isolated finds of Palaeolithic and Neolithic/Bronze Age flintwork (SMR WA 6035 and 1354 respectively) indicate prehistoric activity on the gravels in the area. The relatively little known deserted medieval village of Myton (SMR WA 1981) lies only about 400 m south-east of the present site, but on the other side of the river.

Aims and Strategy

The initial aim of the evaluation was to establish the presence/absence of archaeological remains within the area of the proposed development. Further to this, to determine the extent, condition, nature, character, quality and date of any archaeological remains present, and their ecofactual/environmental potential. In the light of this information the likely impact of the development proposals on any archaeological deposits located was to be assessed.

Background material relevant to the site, particularly that relating to the various discoveries of Anglo-Saxon remains, was examined in the Warwick Sites and Monuments Record. Site work consisted of the excavation, principally by a mechanical excavator, of six trenches distributed across the site to provide a sample coverage of all parts of the proposed development area. These consisted of five short trenches (1-5) and one long trench (6), together comprising a sample of just over 3% of the site, in accordance with a brief prepared by Warwickshire Museum.

The Excavation

The six trenches (Fig 2) were all excavated by a JCB machine using a toothless ditching bucket with a width of 1.55 m. In every case excavation was to the top of the natural subsoil where there were no significant archaeological deposits. Some difficulty was experienced with identification of the appropriate level for machine excavation since clean sand and gravel layers located in parts of Trenches 1, 3 and 5 and parts of Trench 6 were later revealed not to be natural deposits. For the most part they were then removed by further machining to reveal the sand subsoil. One long section of each trench was drawn and the contexts recorded. Not all of the latter are mentioned in the following site description, but all are listed in a summary table of contexts (Appendix 1) at the end of this report.

Trench 1 (Fig 3)

Trench 1 was situated in the north-west corner of the site and aligned c east-west. It had a maximum depth of 1.60 m.

The clean, compact, yellow-brown sand subsoil (109) was encountered across the trench at c 46.75 m OD, 1.20-1.25 m below the top of the trench. It was immediately overlain by a layer of grey lias clay incorporating some irregular fragments of lias limestone (108), which extended over all but the extreme west end of the trench. This was sealed by a layer of brown sand and gravel (107) which contained some flecks of the same clay as layer 108, but was otherwise clean and was initially thought to be the subsoil at the base of the trench. These two layers had a very consistent combined depth of 0.20-0.22 m. Layer 107 was sealed by a further grey clay layer (106) up to 0.30 m thick, incorporating gravel and occasional stone fragments, overlain at the west end of the trench by a loose grey silt containing charcoal (105). These layers were sealed by deposits of modern building rubble, sand and gravel (104-102) beneath a thin and patchy topsoil (101).

Trench 2 (Fig 3)

Trench 2 lay in the north-east corner of the site and was aligned c east-west. It was excavated to a maximum depth of c 0.85 m.

The subsoil (207), which was a very loose yellow brown sand and gravel, sloped up from a level of c 47.40 m OD at the west end to c 47.80 m OD at the east. The subsoil was locally disturbed by roots, but no features were seen cutting it. It was overlain directly by a loose grey-brown sandy loam topsoil (201), ranging from c 0.36-0.45 m in thickness.

Trench 3 (Fig 3)

Trench 3 lay just south-east of Trench 1 on a similar alignment. It had a maximum depth of 1.90 m.

The subsoil (307), identical to 109 in Trench 1 at the west end but containing considerably more gravel to the east, was encountered at c 46.90 m OD at the western end of the trench, rising to c 47.00 m OD at the east. It was sealed by a dark grey brown silty sand (306) up to 0.52 m thick, which included some gravel and a few stone fragments. This layer had a compacted upper surface beneath a clean orange-brown sandy gravel (308), analogous to layer 107 in Trench 1 but only encountered in the eastern two-thirds of the trench. Layers 308 and 306 both underlay a compact, mixed deposit (304), principally of very dark grey clay, containing building material and having a maximum depth of 1 m. This in turn was sealed beneath a layer of bricks and other building debris, overlain by the topsoil.

Trench 4 (Fig 3)

Trench 4 was situated towards the south-east corner of the site and aligned roughly east-west. It had a maximum depth of 0.54 m.

The subsoil (402) was of loose sand and gravel as in Trench 2. Its upper surface sloped down slightly from east to west, from c 47.54 m to 47.42 m OD. One possible archaeological feature was identified within the trench (404) but on examination this appeared to represent a colour variation (405) in the top of the subsoil, resting in a poorly-defined hollow no more than 0.15 m deep. A modern service trench (403) also cut the subsoil. The latter lay directly beneath the loose sandy topsoil which ranged from 0.26-0.32 m in thickness.

Trench 5 (Fig 4)

Trench 5 lay towards the south-east corner of the site and was aligned c north-west - south-east. It was up to 1 m deep.

At the north-western end of the trench the subsoil, of compact yellow brown sand (507), was found at c 47.26 m OD. It sloped up to c 47.58 m OD at the south-east end, at which point it became slightly more gravelly. Above the subsoil was a fairly uniform sequence of layers extending the length of the trench. The lowest of these was a dark grey silty sand with a little gravel up to 0.32 m thick (505), sealed by dumped building material (504), redeposited sand and gravel (502) and topsoil (501). The building material layer contained a significant quantity of 19th century blue bricks at its south-eastern end.

Trench 6 (Fig 4)

Trench 6, aligned roughly east-west, extended across the centre of the entire site and provided the only complete section through the flood defence feature. Its maximum depth was 2.20 m.

The compact yellow-brown sand subsoil (603) was exposed in the western half of the trench. At the west end it was at 46.86 m OD, rising gently to c 47.02 m OD some 28 m east of this point, beyond which it rose more steadily to a level of c 47.65 m OD at the east end of the trench. Here the subsoil was closely comparable in character to that in Trenches 2 and 4, with more gravel and much looser sand than further east. In the eastern half of the trench the subsoil was overlain by a layer of dark grey-brown silty sand (609) which extended over a distance of about 10 m and was up to 0.15 m thick. This in turn lay beneath a fairly loose red-brown sand and gravel layer (602) which extended the length of the trench and was up to 0.50 m deep. At the east end of the trench this material was almost indistinguishable from the more gravelly subsoil 603 and was initially confused with it. The effect of this was to mask the full eastward extent of the clean compact sand which constituted 603 in the western half of the trench. This was eventually shown to extend to within c 8-10 m of the east end of the trench, below layer 609, at a point where machine excavation of the full depth of the trench was not possible because of the presence of a modern electricity cable running obliquely across the line of the trench. The presence of this feature undoubtedly hindered understanding of the true nature of the sequence in this part of the trench for a while. Fragments of post-medieval/modern pottery, brick and tile were found stratified in layer 602.

For much of the length of the trench, with the principal exception of the easternmost 9 m, layer 602 was sealed by a deposit of compact dark grey brown sandy loam containing brick rubble (605), overlain by a further similar rubble deposit in the western half of the trench (607). Both these were sealed by a grey brown sandy topsoil-like loam (612) also containing rubble, but in smaller quantities. This layer was up to c 0.90 m thick in the middle of the trench but was only c 0.15 m thick at the east end, where it directly underlay the topsoil (601) from which it was not readily distinguished. In the western third of the trench a further layer of building debris (608) up to 0.50 m thick intervened between 612 and 601 before the former layer faded out some 10 m short of the end of the trench.

The Finds

Only small quantities of finds were recovered. The majority, if not all of the excavated deposits were probably of 20th century date and most contained modern building material, samples of which were not kept. There were few other post-medieval or modern finds, however. Those which were retained are listed in Appendix 1.

There were no datable finds of any period earlier than the 18th-19th centuries (an unstratified pottery sherd from Trench 2 was of this date). One bone fragment was recovered from the spoilheap of Trench 6, but on examination it proved not to be human. There was thus no artefactual or other evidence for the presence of the Anglo-Saxon cemetery.

Discussion and Conclusions

There were initially problems of understanding the sequence of deposits on site relating to the identification of the natural subsoil. These problems, and the whole question of the location of the putative Anglo-Saxon cemetery, are bound up with the use of the site for gravel quarrying, the significance of which has not received sufficient attention hitherto.

From the published account (Chatwin 1928, but relating to a meeting held in 1925) it is clear that P B Chatwin actually spoke to a workman involved in the 1920s discoveries. There is no reason, therefore, to dispute the very precise grid reference for the latter (SP29606527) recorded in the Warwickshire SMR as deriving from Chatwin's information. This would locate the discovery under the houses immediately west of the present site. The location of the 1852 finds, also derived from Chatwin's information, is understandably more vague, but its position adjacent to the railway embankment may not be coincidental given that the Birmingham and Oxford railway was completed in 1852 (Christiansen 1983, 70).

Gravel quarrying provided the context for both the 1852 and 1920s discoveries. The evidence of the present evaluation is consistent with the extension of the area of sand and gravel extraction across the western part of the site. Subsoil levels at the

eastern and southern margins of the site (in Trenches 2 and 4, at the east end of Trench 6 and the south-east end of Trench 5) are all in a range between 47.42 and 47.80 m OD, in all cases on the loose sandy gravel characteristic of these parts of the site. At a lower level a compact, smooth sand was widely encountered in the western part of the site (across Trenches 1 and 3 and much of Trenches 5 and 6) at levels from 46.75 m OD in Trench 1 to c 47 m at the east end of Trench 3 and in the centre of Trench 6.

It is possible that the lower level of subsoil at the western end of the site is simply a consequence of natural variation in that level, but as topographical logic would suggest a rise rather than a drop in this level with increasing distance from the river this seems unlikely. Moreover, the character of the material overlying all the lowest subsoil deposits is consistent with dumping of relatively recent date. The only possible exceptions to this are the dark silty sand layers 306 and 609 which may represent more gradual accumulations immediately above the sand subsoil, though of these 609 was of relatively limited extent. Even in these cases the abrupt nature of the interface between these layers and the subsoil does not indicate a naturally developed soil profile. Truncation of the subsoil and overlying deposits, prior to their replacement by dumped material, seems the most likely explanation for the sequence in all trenches except 2 and 4, the only ones where a 'normal' topsoil was seen above subsoil. Such truncation would be consistent with sand and gravel extraction.

The limited dating evidence indicates that the dump layers have a *terminus post quem* of the 19th century (based on finds from 602) and some of the upper deposits are composed largely of building material which presumably derived from the construction of the adjacent housing estate in the 1960s. Other dumps containing earlier material (eg the blue bricks in layer 504 in Trench 5) may also have accumulated at the same time. There may have been an evident hollow in the western part of the site up to the time of the 1960s building. Landscaping of the rubble dumps then formed the north-south aligned ridge through the middle of the site which acts as a flood defence for the existing houses.

No traces of any features predating the probable quarrying activity were discovered, nor were any residual artefacts earlier than the 18th-19th centuries identified. If the Saxon cemetery had ever extended into the present site it is almost certain to have been completely destroyed by the quarrying activity. A combination of this with railway construction and associated earthmoving operations to the north, suggests that it is very unlikely that any traces of the eastern part of the cemetery survive, always assuming that the 1852 and 1920s finds were from parts of the same cemetery. It is perhaps possible, depending on its size, that remnants of the cemetery may still exist to the west of the present site.

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August 1996

References

Chatwin, P B, 1928, Saxon discoveries at Emscote, Warwick, *Trans Birmingham Archaeol Soc* **51** (for 1925 and 1926), 39-41

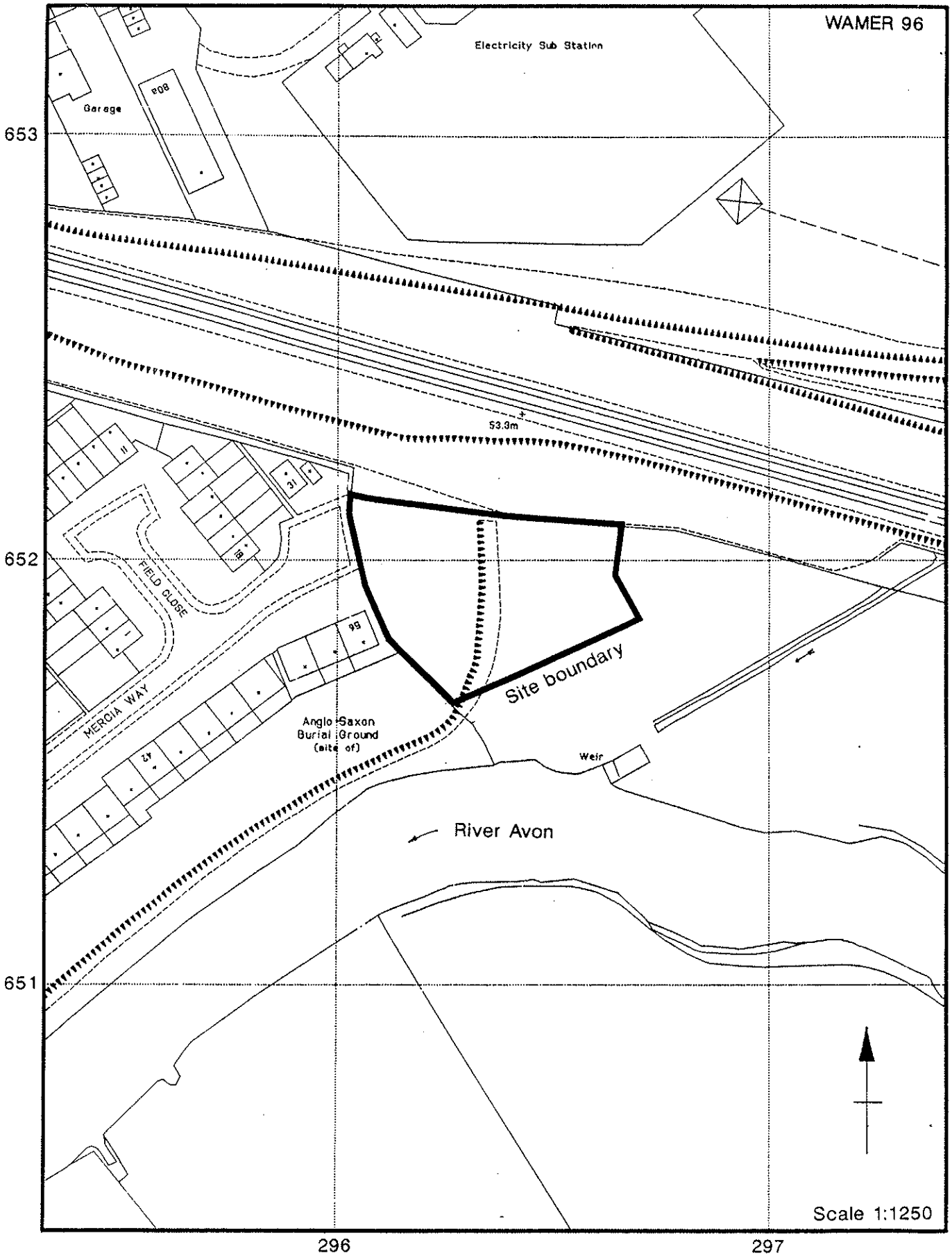
Christiansen, R, 1983, *A regional history of the railways of Great Britain, Volume 7 The West Midlands* (Revised edition)

Smith, R A, 1904, Anglo-Saxon remains, in *Victoria County History of Warwickshire Vol I*, 251-268

APPENDIX 1: TABLE OF CONTEXT INFORMATION

CONTEXT	TYPE	LENGTH	MAX. DEPTH	FINDS	DATE	COMMENT
Trench 1						
101	Layer	10 m +	0.14 m		Modern	Topsoil
102	Layer	10 m +	0.40 m		Modern	Rubble dump
103	Layer	2 m +	0.20 m		Modern	Dump
104	Layer	10 m +	0.50 m		Modern	Dump
105	Layer	4.60 m +	0.20 m		Modern	Dump
106	Layer	10 m +	0.30 m		Modern	Dump
107	Layer	10 m +	0.22 m		Modern	Dump
108	Layer	7.50 m +	0.20 m		Modern	Dump
109	Layer	10 m +	?			Natural subsoil
Trench 2				1 sherd post-medieval pottery		
201	Layer	10 m +	0.45 m		Modern	Topsoil
202-206						NOT USED
207	Layer	10 m +	?			Natural subsoil
Trench 3						
301	Layer	10 m +	0.20 m		Modern	Topsoil
302	Layer	10 m +	0.50 m		Modern	Rubble dump
303						NOT USED
304	Layer	10 m +	1 m		Modern	Dump
305						NOT USED
306	Layer	10 m +	0.52 m		Modern	?Dump
307	Layer	10 m+	?			Natural subsoil
308	Layer	7 m +	0.24 m		Modern	Dump
Trench 4						
401	Layer	10 m +	0.32 m		Modern	Topsoil
402	Layer	10 m +	?			Natural subsoil
403	Cut	0.40 m wide	0.18 m		Modern	Service trench
404	??'Cut'	1 m	0.15 m			Natural 'feature'
405	'Fill'	1 m	0.15 m			Fill of 404
Trench 5						
501	Layer	10 m +	0.22 m		Modern	Topsoil
502	Layer	10 m +	0.32 m		Modern	Dump
503						NOT USED
504	Layer	10 m +	0.30 m		Modern	Rubble dump

505	Layer	10 m +	0.32 m		?Modern	?Dump
506						NOT USED
507	Layer	10 m +	?			Natural subsoil
Trench 6				Animal bone frag, Fe nail		
601	Layer	45 m +	0.25 m		Modern	Topsoil
602	Layer	45 m +	0.50 m	1 ?19th century pottery sherd, brick, tile, slate and lead frags	Modern	Dump/fill
603	Layer	45 m +	?			Natural subsoil
604	Layer	1.10 m	0.12 m		Modern	Mortar dump
605	Layer	32 m +	0.32 m		Modern	Rubble dump
606						NOT USED
607	Layer	22.50 m +	0.42 m		Modern	Rubble dump
608	Layer	14.50 m +	0.48 m		Modern	Rubble dump
609	Layer	c 10 m	0.15 m		?Modern	?Fill
610	Cut	0.46 m wide	?		Modern	Service trench
611	Fill	0.46 m wide	?		Modern	Fill of 610
612	Layer	32 m +	0.90 m		Modern	Dump etc



Site Location

Figure 1

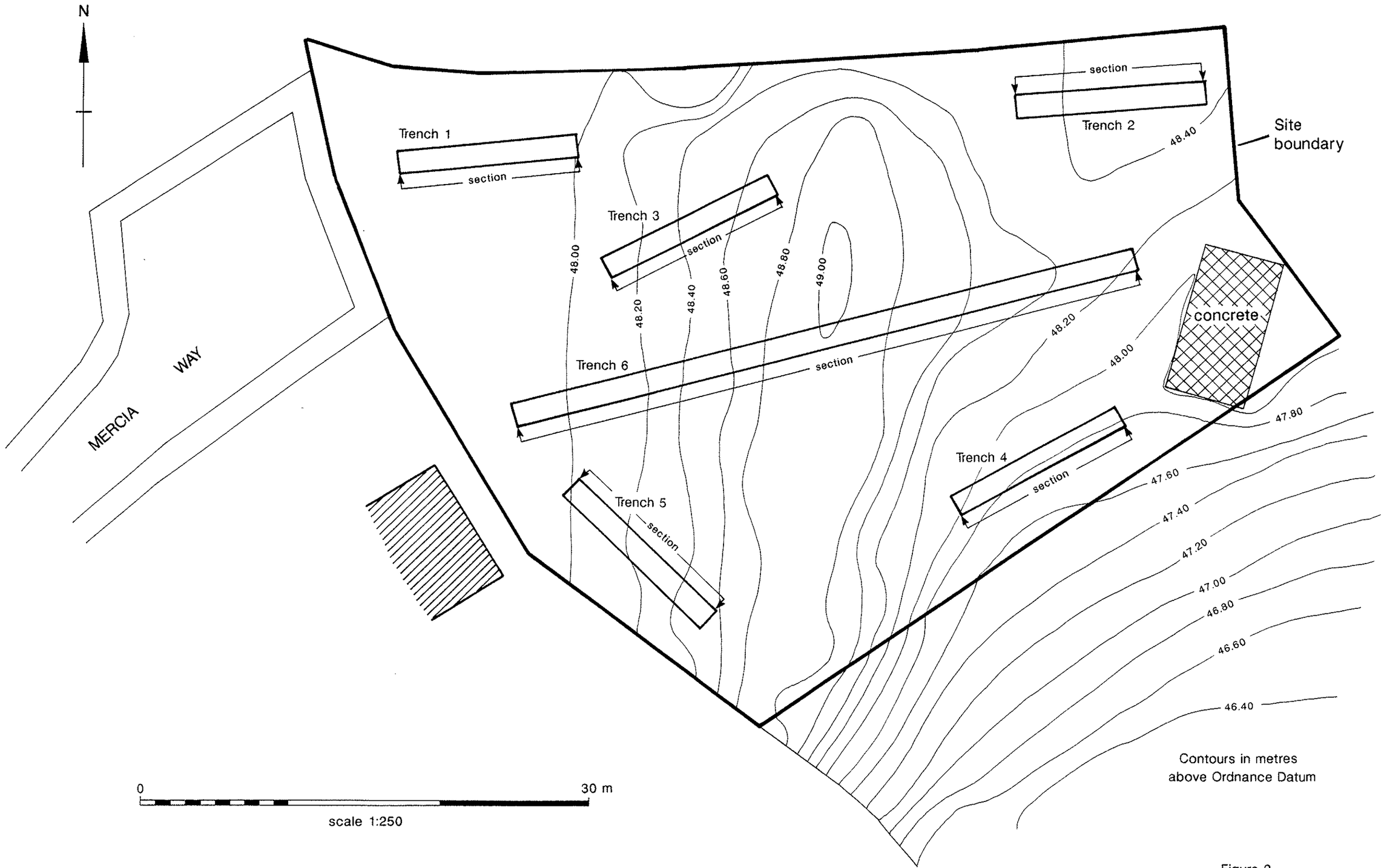

N
MERCIA WAY
Trench 1
section
Trench 2
section
Trench 3
section
Trench 4
section
Trench 5
section
Trench 6
section
Site boundary
concrete
48.00
48.20
48.40
48.60
48.80
49.00
48.40
48.00
47.80
47.60
47.40
47.20
47.00
46.80
46.60
46.40
0
30 m
scale 1:250
Contours in metres above Ordnance Datum

Figure 2

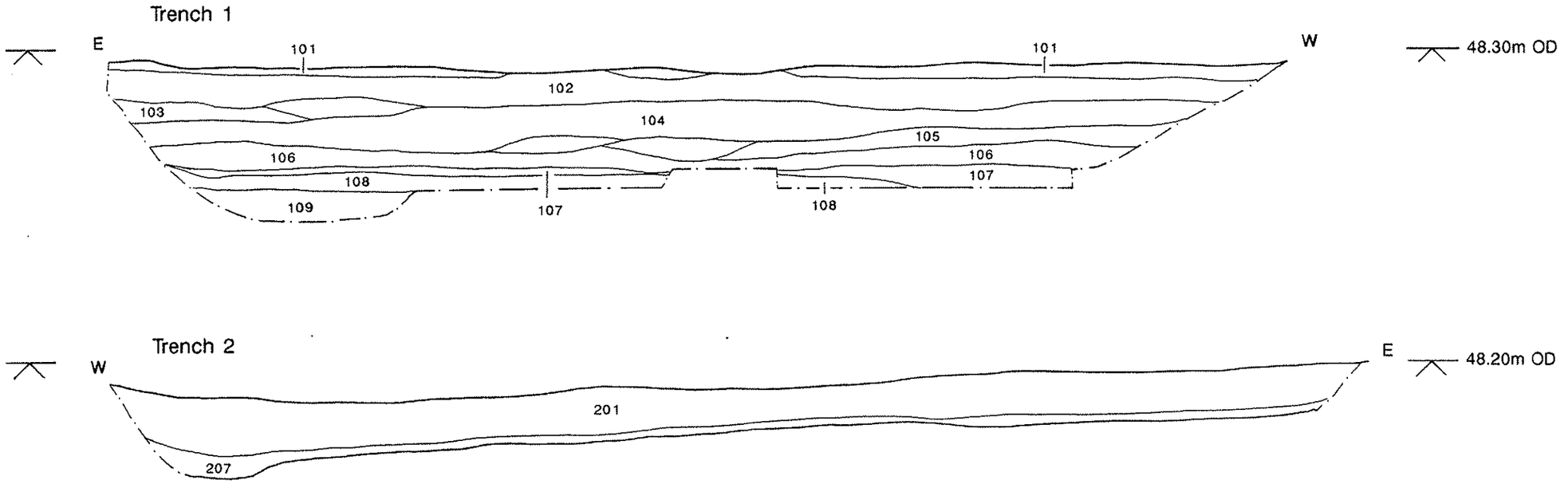
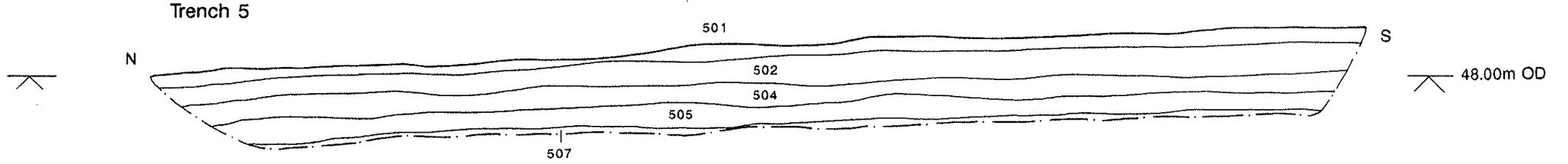

Trench 1
E
W
48.30m OD
101
101
102
103
104
105
106
106
107
108
109
107
108
Trench 2
W
E
48.20m OD
201
207
Trench 3
E
W
48.50m OD
301
302
304
308
306
306
307
307
Trench 4
E
W
48.00m OD
401
402
0
5 m
scale 1:50

Figure 3

Trench 5



Trench 6

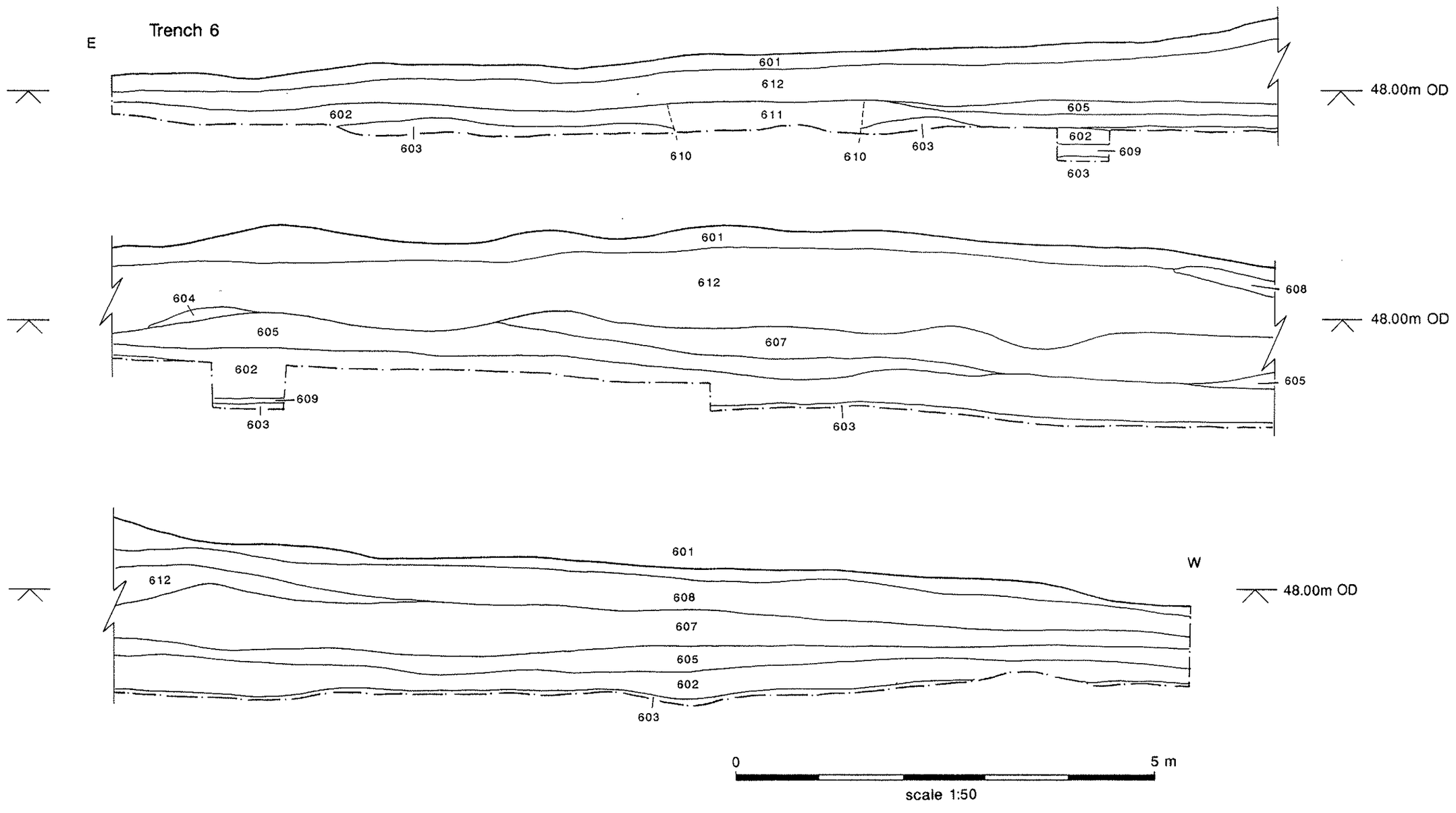


Figure 4

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