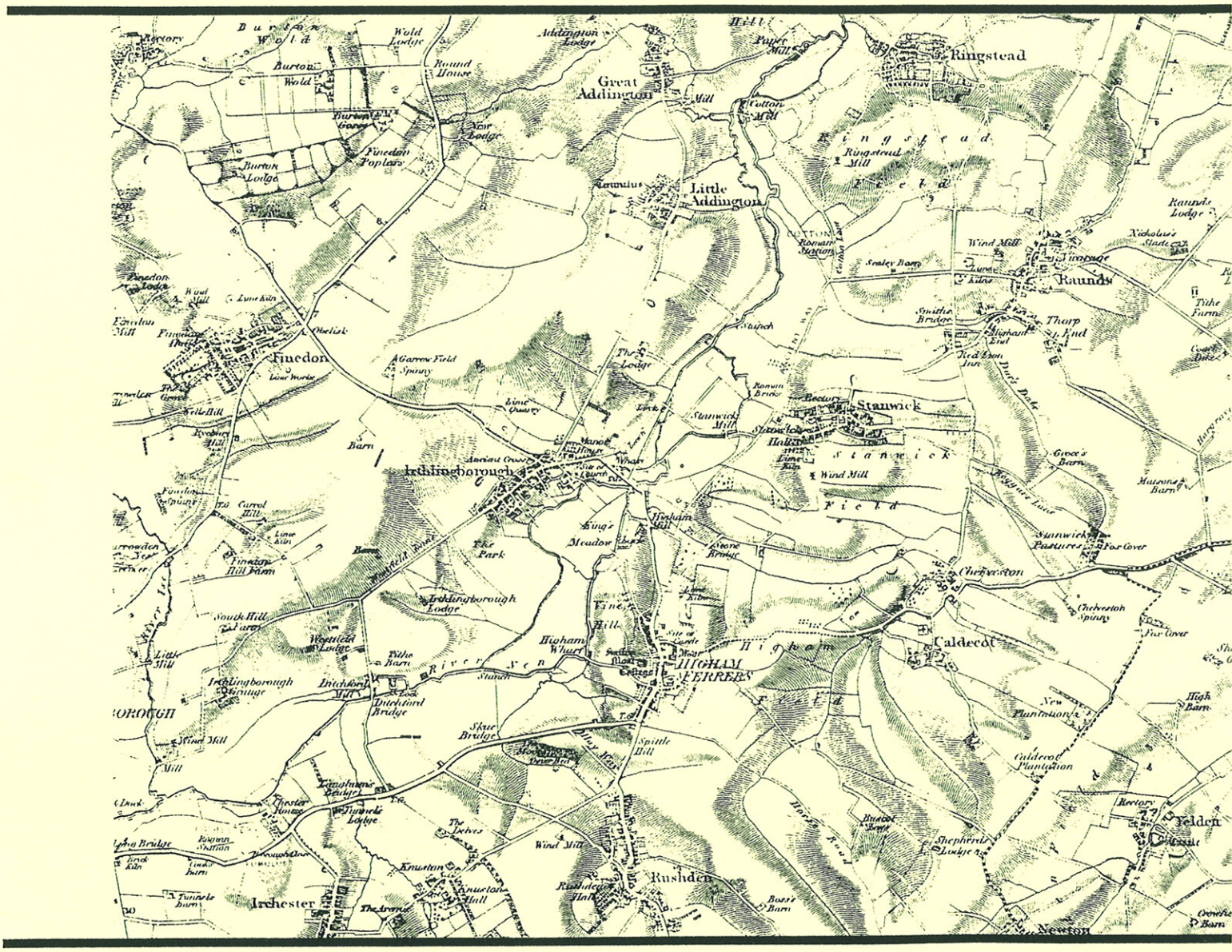
IRTHLINGBOROUGH, NORTHHANTS: LAND SOUTH OF A6

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION REPORT



OXFORD ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT

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INTRODUCTION

The Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) was commissioned by ARC (Central) Ltd to assess the archaeological potential of land south of the A6 at Irthlingborough, Northants (Fig. 1), to a brief prepared by Northamptonshire Archaeology Unit (NAU). ARC propose to submit a planning application for the extraction of gravel from an area of floodplain bounded by two channels of the R Nene south-east of Irthlingborough. The pit would form an extension to the current workings at Stanwick. The land is virtually flat at 36m above OD, with a steep slope up to Irthlingborough village to the west.

The land was not thought to have high archaeological potential, except that features associated with a medieval watermill might occur in the north-west corner of the site. Documentary sources suggest that the mill itself lay outside of the application area on a subsidiary channel (probably the mill leat) west of the river. There is no trace of the mill or other structures on the ground at this point; modern terracing and drainage features have caused extensive damage. Mr Paul Brightwell, of Hall Farm, Irthlingborough, informed OAU that the channel/leat has been regularly dredged at least since the 1950s. The evaluation was concerned solely with the archaeological potential of the application area. The survival or otherwise of the mill and/or associated structures to the west was not addressed.

Two possible features were visible in the application area: an exposed area of the river embankment contained a scatter of limestone fragments; and a very slight depression in the ground was noted to the south-east of this. Neither feature was substantial. No other features were observed.

METHODOLOGY

In the first instance two trenches were excavated (Fig. 1). Trench 1, examining the stone scatter, was 15m long oriented north-west to south-east. Trench 2, examining the shallow depression, was 18m long, oriented north-east to south-west. Both trenches were 1.6m wide. The results in Trench 2 led to its extension to the east and west, and to the cutting of a further small trench, 3. Topsoil and other non-archaeological layers were removed by machine. Trench plans were drawn at a scale of 1:100. Colour transparency and black-and-white negative photographs were taken.

Weather conditions were extremely poor throughout the assessment, with constant and often heavy rain. This made it difficult to clean exposed features manually, and dimensions could often only approximated. It was agreed with NAU that the of minimum disturbance should be caused to the archaeological deposits, but that their limits should be defined.

RESULTS

Trench 1

No archaeological features were encountered in Trench 1. The embankment consisted of redeposited soil, probably derived from channel dredging and/or pushing up topsoil from the surrounding area.

Trenches 2 and 3 (Fig. 2)

The topsoil (1, 0.15m thick and containing post-medieval and later pottery) sealed a lens of pale brown silty sand up to 0.05m thick. This covered a layer of silty clay (5), varying from red-brown to yellow-brown in colour and containing abundant fresh-water snail and mussel shells. An abraded Roman rimsherd was recovered from this layer. The layer was no more than 0.1m thick at the ends of the trench, but in the central 8m it was much more substantial, being up to 0.4m thick. It was initially thought that the layer represented the silting-in of a pond in the top of the alluvium (3, up to 2.5m thick), thereby accounting for the slight depression in the ground surface. A machine-dug sondage in the central area, however, revealed stonework in the top of the alluvium. Further trenching revealed the extent of the stone and its plan, which is described below.

Building 12 consisted of walls 6-10. The north wall (6) was c. 11.5m long and 0.7m wide, and was built of large cobbles and limestone fragments; one large limestone block found at the end of the western extension of the trench appeared to be a cornerstone, although it was not in situ. The wall was curved in plan, although this probably represents construction in a series of short, straight lengths. The east end was extended by a wall/foundation (8) 1.25m long; the full width of this feature was not exposed, but it was of different construction to wall (6), consisting of small cobbles and limestone fragments.

Wall (9), 2.3m x 0.5m, defined the south side of the building. This gives internal and external widths of 2.8m and 4m respectively. A poorly-defined wall (7) was interpretted as an internal partition. The west wall (10) was revealed in the north-east corner of Trench 3. A wall (11, 4.4m x 0.45m) running north-westwards appeared to be associated with building 12.

The alluvium (3) butted against the external faces of building 12. The latter was entirely constrained within the slight depression noted above. This could not be traced west of the building. No waterlogged deposits were encountered in building 12 or elsewhere. The water table was encountered at a depth of approximately 2.5m at the south end of Trench 2.

DISCUSSION

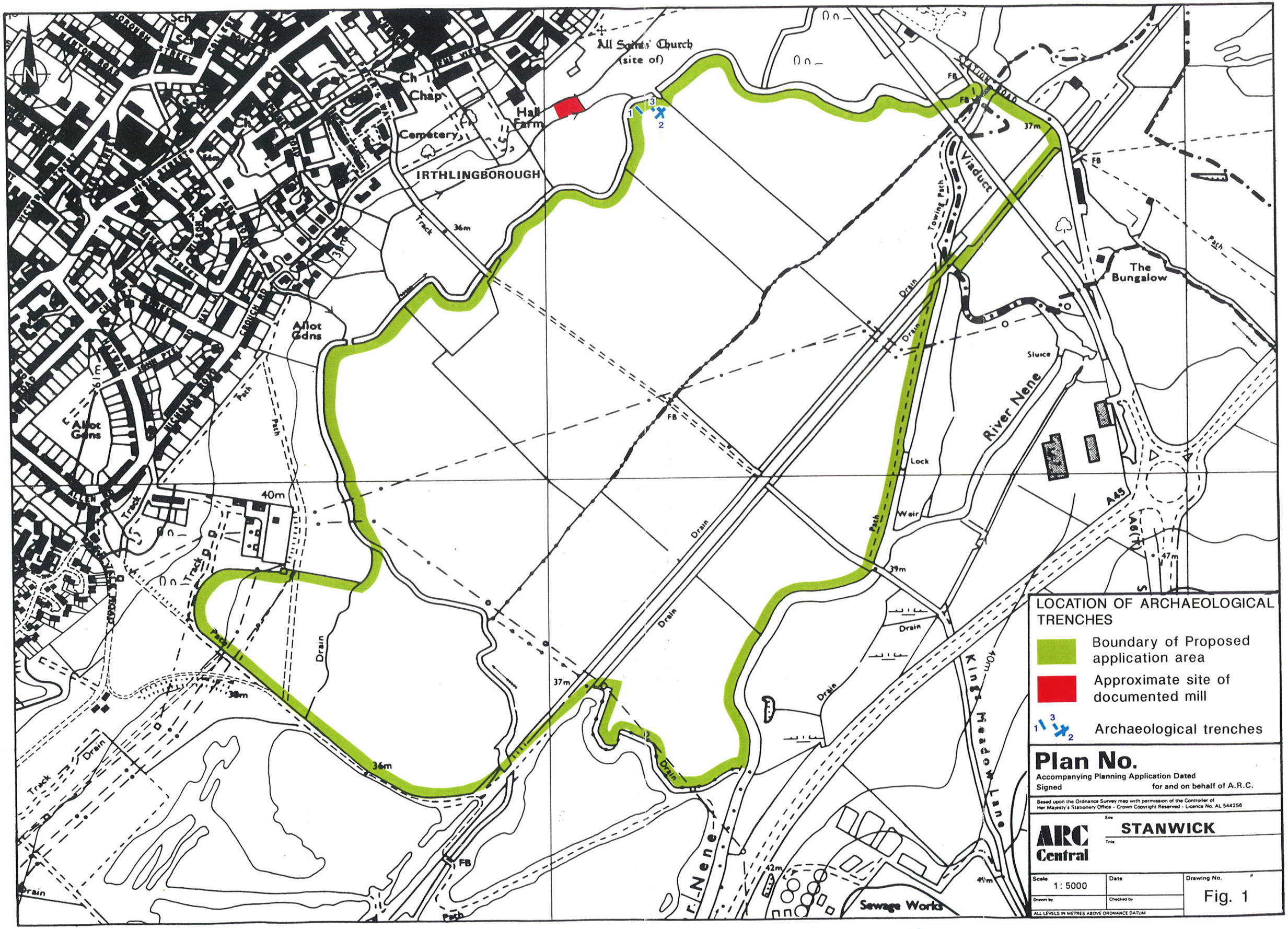
No dating evidence was recovered from building 12 itself. The snail-rich layer which seals it contained a Roman potsherd, but this is likely to be residual. It seems likely that the building is of medieval origin. It occurs late in the alluvial sequence, with alluvium butting against the external wall faces. The final alluvial phase in the Nene floodplain is dated to the later medieval period (information from M Robinson).

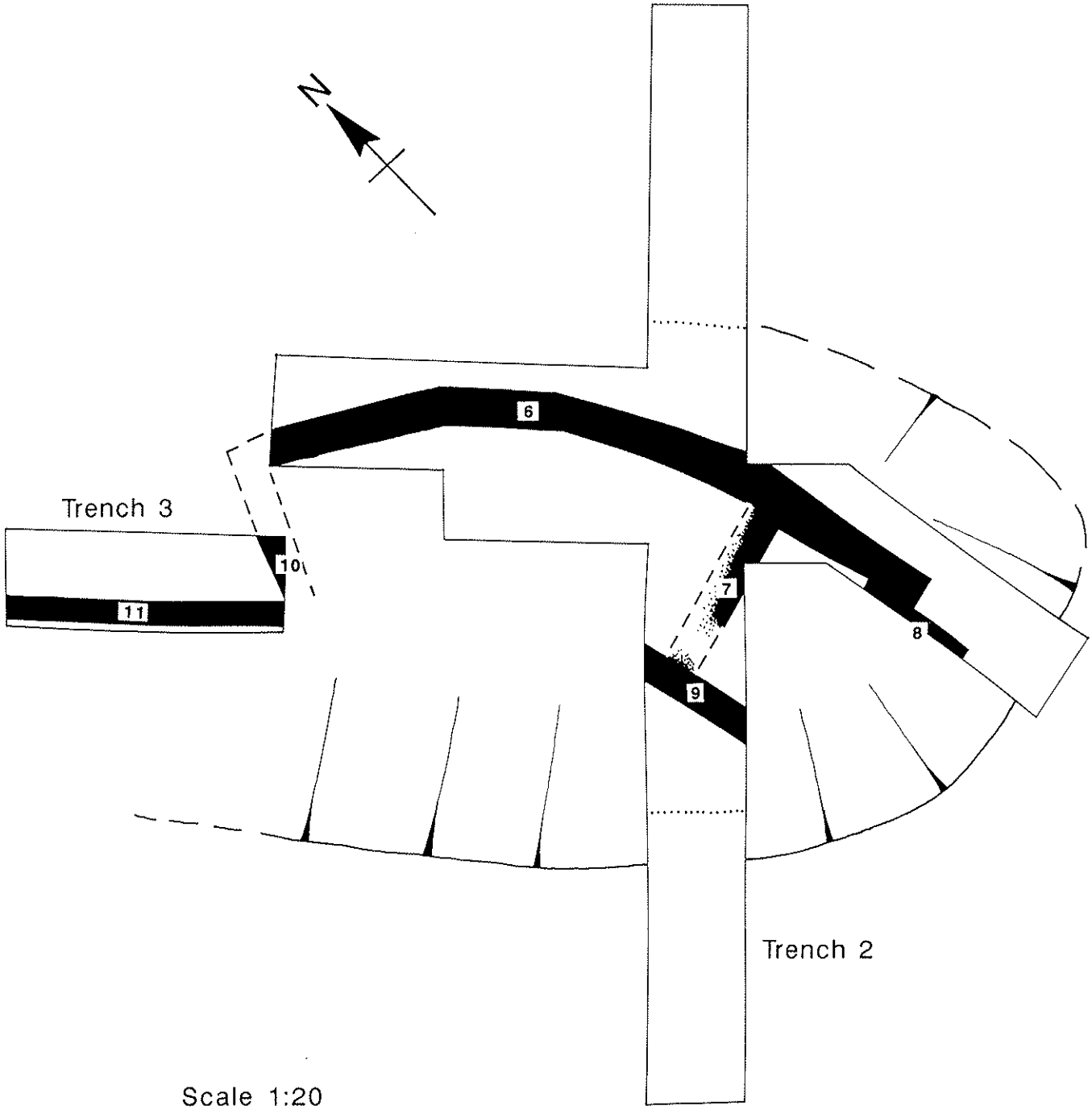
Much of the limestone which occurs in the topsoil in the field and on the river embankment is likely to derive from building 12. This suggests that it was allowed to become ruinous. Eventually, when the walls had been reduced almost to foundation level, a slight hollow had been formed in the surrounding alluvium. This must have attracted standing water, which in turn became a habitat for fresh water mollusca. The slight depression visible today, therefore, is a reflection of the depositional sequence in and above building 12.

The function of the building could not be determined with certainty. The north-westward extension wall (11) might imply a connection with the river channel, but this could not be proved. The wall could equally be a boundary feature; buildings were commonly placed against such boundaries in medieval settlements. Certainly building 12 did not resemble the mill structures at West Cotton, Northants, although structural timbers will not have survived at Irthlingborough because of the lack of waterlogged deposits. Building 12 does, however, resemble the malting-house in Tenement C at West Cotton (see Windell et al 1990, *From Barrow to Bypass: Excavations at West Cotton 1985-1989,* Plate 11).

CONCLUSION

The evaluation established that the slight depression noted in the field marked the position of a masonry building, probably of medieval date, and lying at the extreme east edge of the medieval village of Irthlingborough. The exact function of the building could not be determined, although it does not appear to be the documented mill. A parallel has been drawn with a malting house excavated at West Cotton, Northants. After the desertion of the building, its position survived as a hollow in the surrounding ground level.


All Saints' Church (site of)
Ch
Chap
Cemetery
Hall Farm
IRTHLINGBOROUGH
Track
36m
Allot Gdns
Path
FB
Drain
Towing Path
Viaduct
37m
The Bungalow
Sluice
River Nene
Lock
Weir
A45
39m
47m
40m
Track
38m
Kings Meadow Lane
42m
Sewage Works
LOCATION OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRENCHES
Boundary of Proposed application area
Approximate site of documented mill
Archaeological trenches
Plan No.
Accompanying Planning Application Dated
Signed
for and on behalf of A.R.C.
Based upon the Ordnance Survey map with permission of the Controller of Her Majesty's Stationery Office - Crown Copyright Reserved - Licence No. AL 544256
ARC Central
Site
STANWICK
Title
Scale
1 : 5000
Date
Drawing No.
Fig. 1
Drawn by
Checked by
ALL LEVELS IN METRES ABOVE ORDNANCE DATUM



Scale 1:20

Layer 5 - main concentration

Earthwork - clearly / poorly defined

6 Walls

Fig. 2

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