

WELLINGBOROUGH (NH)

**Ditchford, Wellingborough
Northamptonshire**

SP 917 673

Archaeological Assessment

**Oxford Archaeological Unit
August 1989**

WELLINGBOROUGH: DITCHFORD

ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT

Background Information

An archaeological assessment was undertaken in July 1989 by OAU on behalf of ARC in advance of a proposed planning application for an extension to the gravel pit at Ditchford. The area is part of the valley bottom of the River Nene.

Archaeological Background

A linear earthwork traverses part of the proposed application area (Fig 1). Orientated NNW-SSE the earthwork is aligned to be on the Roman town of Irchester to the south. The logical use of such an earthwork would be as a causeway for a road across the valley floor which would be liable to seasonal flooding. Such a road would have to cross the Nene probably by a bridge. Several relic stream courses are visible on aerial photographs but which stream course was open in the Roman period is unknown.

A road and bridge of the Roman period crossing the Nene has been excavated at Aldwinckle further downstream (Jackson D.A. and Ambrose T.M., 1976, *Brittania* 7).

Strategy

The principle aims of the assessment were to establish

- a the form and function of the earthwork
- b its relationship to the various relic stream courses and
- c the stream course that was open in the Roman period.

The assessment was carried out by cutting 1.9m wide trenches using a 360° excavator. Limited excavation and cleaning was undertaken by hand.

Results

Trench 1 (Fig 2)

This trench was cut at right angles to and across the causeway. The causeway was made up of a bed of gravel overlying an original ground surface. The gravel bank was 6.1m wide and survived 10cm thick. The causeway was flanked by recut ditches serving as quarry ditches and probably to control drainage. The primary ditches were 5-6m wide and c.1.5m deep. They had infilled with heavy silts. The later ditch cuts were c.4m wide and c.1.3m deep. The filling of these were completely different, primarily filled with a sandy loam. The extreme eastern part of the causeway gravel bank had been overlaid by a sandy loam to widen or stabilise the eastern side of the causeway. The top of the

causeway had been ploughed at an indefinable time with the ploughsoil overlying the ditch fills and over part of the alluvium that lay to the west of the causeway. Further alluvium had accumulated above the ploughsoil. There was no evidence for a pre-alluvium ground surface to the west of the causeway.

The top of the causeway gravel bank lay 20cm below modern ground surface (mgs) while the top of the ditch fills were 60cm below mgs.

Trenches 2,3 (Fig 2)

Trench 2 cut across a relic stream channel identifiable on the aerial photographs. Two shallow (c.1.5m) stream channels running E-W were identified. The larger of the two appeared in Trench 3. There was no waterlogged material associated with these features.

Trench 3 was excavated to establish the relationship between the causeway and the relic stream channels. The causeway bank (3/6) was found in the extreme north-east corner of the trench overlying the natural gravel. From this point the natural gravel sloped down gradually to the edge of the larger relic stream course seen in Trench 2. The top of natural gravel had been heavily disturbed. At the same height as the top of the disturbed gravel was a layer (c.10cms thick) of gravel mixed with alluvium (3/3) overlying the relic stream course. This merged into a silty loam containing 40% gravel (3/7) on the south side of the stream course. This surface overlaid limestone cobbling surviving only and patchily on the south side of the relic stream course. The metalling layers were overlaid by buff alluvium.

The west ditch (3/4) was located cutting through the relic stream course. Again evidence of ploughing or erosion of the causeway bank was present in the form of a thin layer of gravel extending across the top of the ditch fill.

Trenches 4, 5, 6 (Fig 1, 3)

Trench 4 was cut to investigate another relic stream course visible on the aerial photographs. It revealed at least 5 different courses flowing E/W at this point. These courses must have swung sharply around the south end of the gravel ridge on which the causeway had been built.

Trench 5 was similar to Trench 3. Again the natural gravel sloped gently down towards the relic stream channels. At the southern end of the trench was a layer of large river pebbles (5/7) set in clay loam overlying alluvium. The cobbles were 1.20m below modern ground surface. Overlying the river pebbles was a layer (13cm thick) of metalling comprised of limestone fragments set in clay loam. The edge of the west ditch was located in this trench.

Trench 6 was cut 50m south of the end of the earthwork and at right angles to the line of the causeway. Both ditches were located while the road had four recognized metalled surfaces overlying a relict stream course. The eastern edge had eroded with limestone fragments overlying the eastern ditch fill. The road was partly overlaid by a layer of sand and by deep deposits (80-90cm) of alluvium. The uppermost metalled surface lay 1.40m below mgs.

A sample of the waterlogged deposits in the relic stream course was taken. Preliminary identification of the seed remains has been undertaken by Mark Robinson. The remains were not well preserved but the type of sediment was such that not much organic material would have been present at the time of accumulation. The presence of flowing water bivalves indicate the stream was flowing through an open landscape. Whilst most seed remains are consistent with a pre-Roman date the presence of corn cockle, an introduction in the Iron Age/Roman transition period and 1 seed of *Bupleurum rotundifolium* indicates a later date for the stream course. The *Bupleurum rotundifolium* has not been found associated with deposits dated to before 8th century AD in this country.

Earthwork Survey

The earthwork was surveyed and the results are in the archive, currently with the OAU.

Summary

The earthwork was proven to be a causeway for a road with gravel metalling making use of a natural gravel ridge in the valley bottom. Where the road crossed old stream courses the road was constructed from river cobbles and limestone fragments. Ditches were present along both sides of the causeway.

The date of the road is unproven. While it seems likely that it is of Roman origin as it is aligned on the Roman town of Irchester, the environmental evidence suggest later usage. The differing fill of the primary and recut ditches suggests a change in environmental conditions between the two phases. It is possible that the road was reused and refurbished in the late Saxon/early Medieval period.

A road of similar composition (limestone fragments) near Stanwick crossing a relict stream course and heading towards the Roman Villa has been dated to the Medieval period (D Neal *pers comm*). At Aldwincle further downstream at a Roman bridge has been excavated. Here again the road surface was comprised of limestone chippings and gravel flanked by parallel ditches (D A Jackson and T M Ambrose, 1976).

The open course of the Nene in the Roman period was not identified. Therefore the position of a bridge remains unknown. The state of preservation of timbers associated with such a structure is likely to be very good (Mark Robinson *pers comm*) from the evidence of the surviving waterlogged deposits examined. The way of locating the bridge, if it falls within the application area, is a destructive method. This would involve machining along the length of the road until a timber structure was encountered. For this reason the archaeological assessment was halted. If the crossing of the Nene in the Roman period is to the north of the present river course then extraction and the resulting draw down of water would have a detrimental effect on any timber structure even if this lay outside the actual extraction area.

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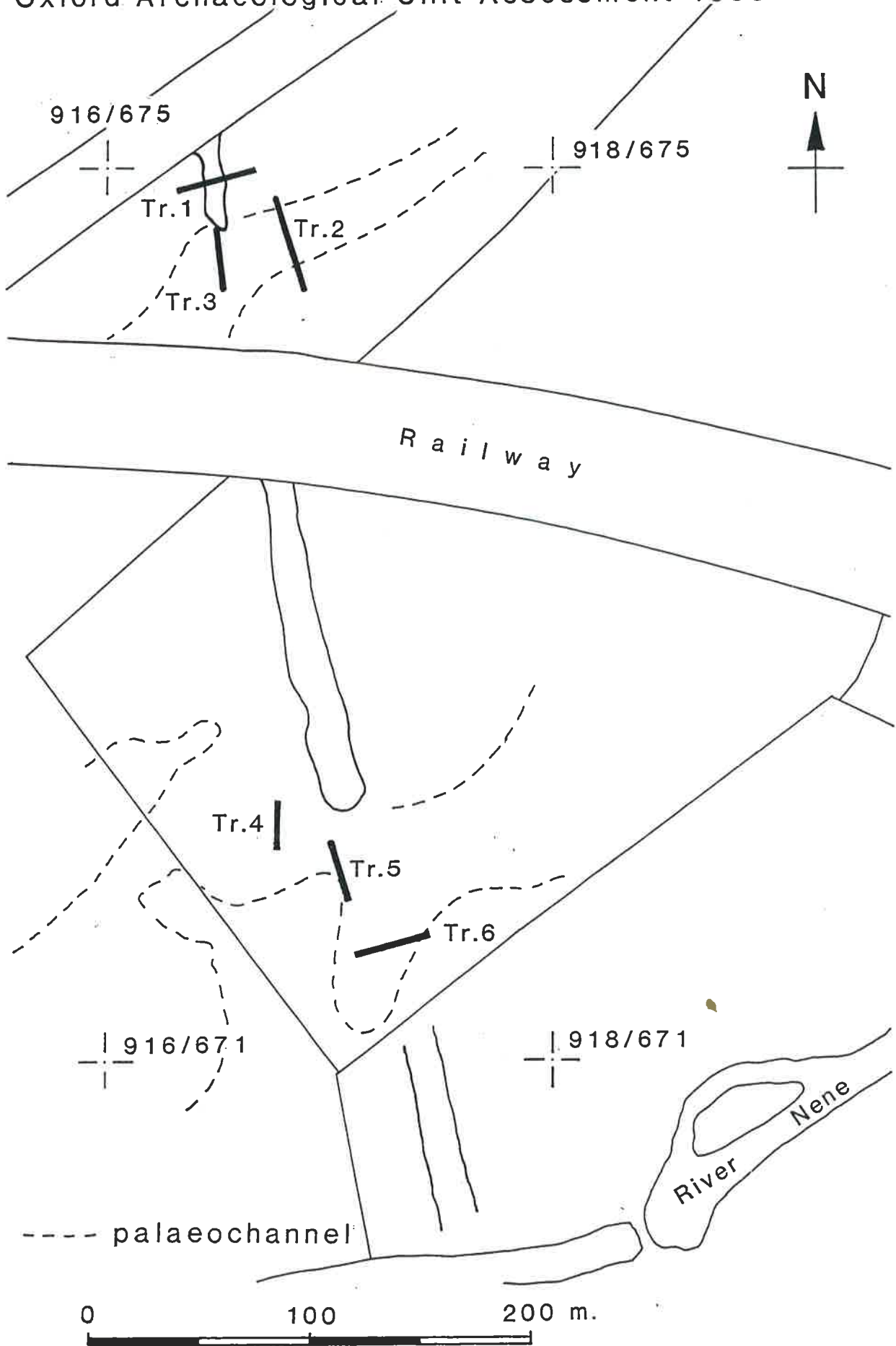


fig. 1

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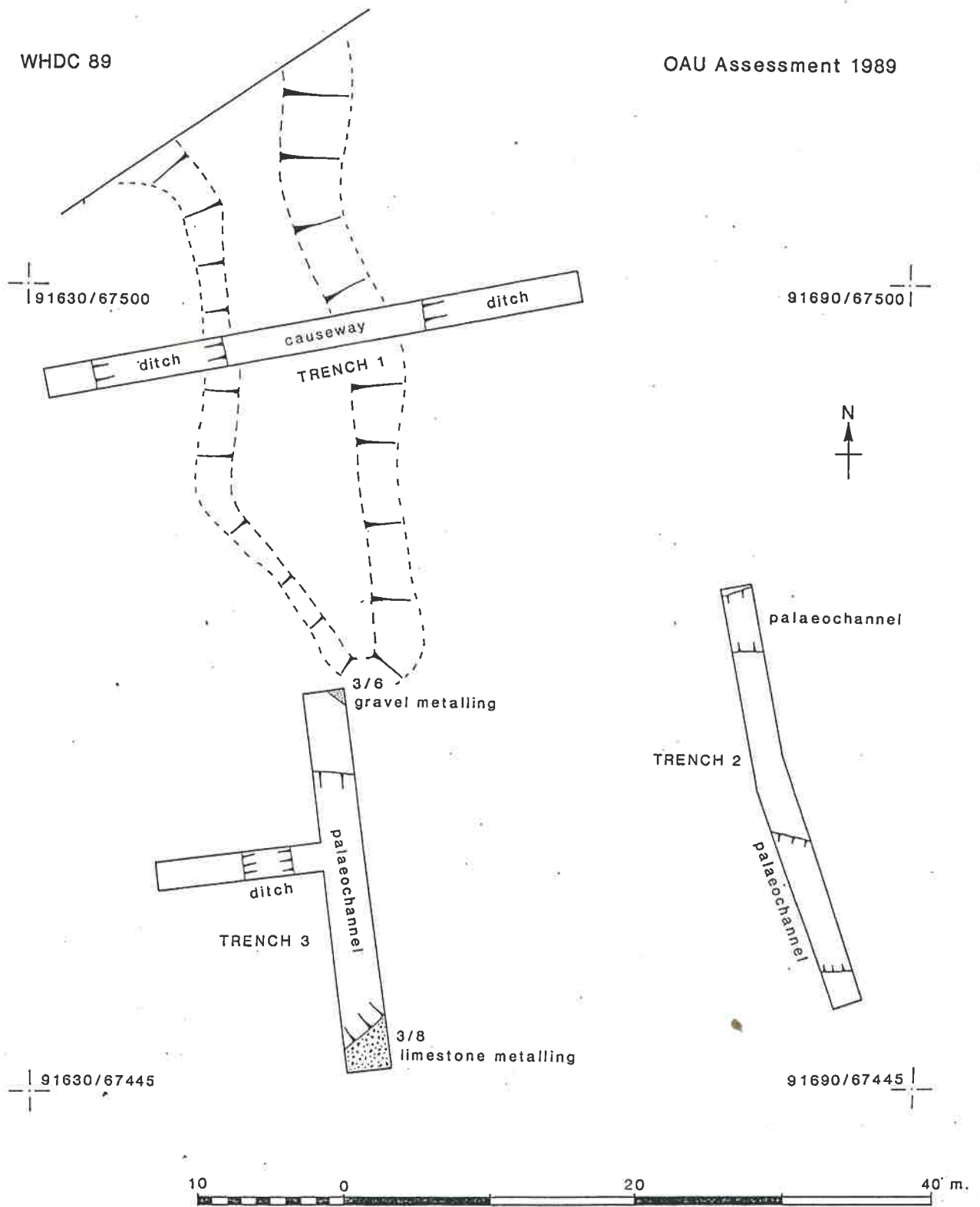
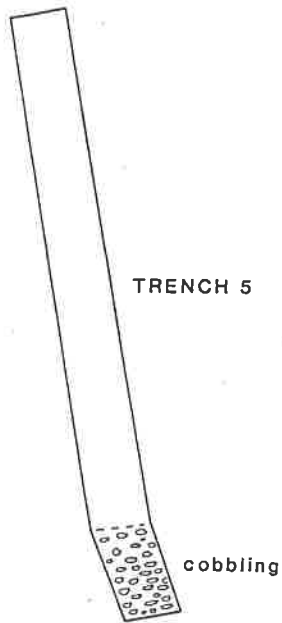
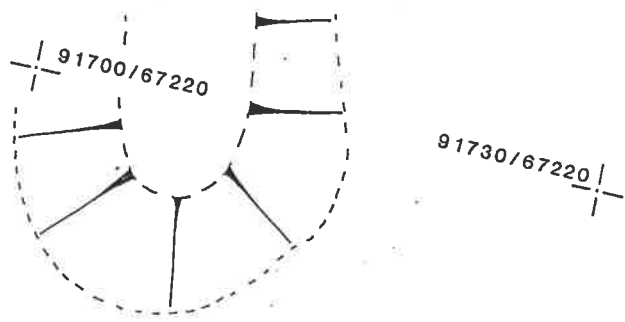
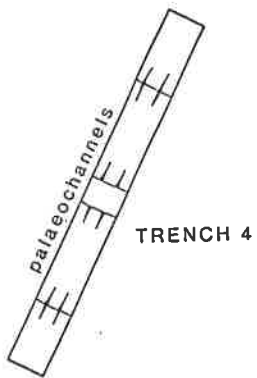


fig. 2



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