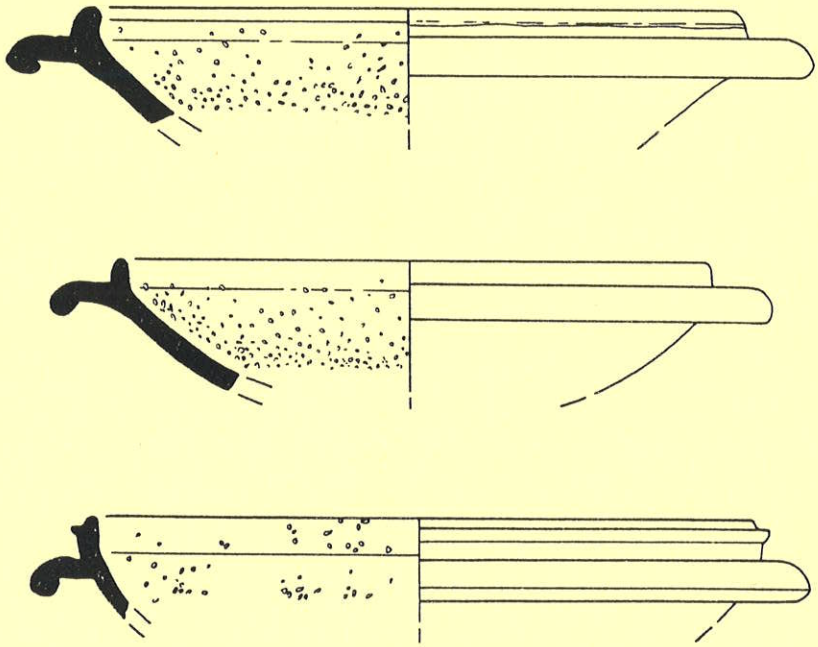
Blackbird Leys Peripheral Road, Oxford

NGR SP 555 020

Archaeological Watching Brief



OXFORD ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT

October 1995

BLACKBIRD LEYS, PERIPHERAL ROAD: WATCHING BRIEF

Abstract

The ground works associated with the construction of a new road at Blackbird Leys were monitored and in doing so recorded a Medieval fishpond, an old stream course and a spread of Roman pottery and kiln debris.

Introduction

During August 1995 the Oxford Archaeological Unit under took a watching brief which was requested by the Oxford Archaeological Advisory Service (OAAS) on behalf of the Oxford City Council for the Housing Association on the Blackbird Leys Peripheral Road. SP 555020

History and Archaeological Background

In an archaeological evaluation of the route an middle Bronze Age to middle Iron Age settlement, the periphery of a Roman pottery kiln area and a stone surfaced trackway were found (Peripheral Road and Housing Area C2, Blackbird Leys, Oxford, Archaeological Evaluation Report, August 1995). The areas of particular interest to be covered in the watching brief lay around the trackway and a spread of Roman pottery which was unaccompanied by features in trenches 11 and 10. The area around the late prehistoric settlement was excavated in advance of the road and the surrounding area was also observed in the watching brief.

A desktop study was required by the OAAS as a part of the evaluation report. However, due to the pressure of time only a discussion of the directly relevant elements was included. The desktop results are summarised here; The Oxfordshire County Sites and Monument Record was consulted and a search for historic maps of the area was conducted.

From the county SMR (which is discussed in more detail in the evaluation report) it is apparent that Roman sites/activity extend over 2 km in each direction from the road line and housing. Many Roman pottery kilns lie in the area. One lies to the N (PRN 3845) and another to the NE (PRN 6143). The only find spot indicated by an entry in the SMR on the course of the road was PRN 1426 which was targetted by evaluation Trench 13. The pottery and coins noted in the SMR were probably discovered in the course of digging the drain which found in the trench. These finds were probably assigned a position in the centre of the field by the compiler of the Sites and Monument Record.

There is no Inclosure map for the area and no Tithe map; the Victoria County History of Oxfordshire suggests that the parish of Sandford was enclosed very early. The first edition 6" O.S. map of 1876 and Davis' 1790 map were consulted. Three estate maps were found; a 1927 OS map with sand quarry and brickworks, a 'Plan of an Estate in the Parish of Wet Sandford in the County of Oxford in the Occupation of Mr Benjn Hazell 1826" and a 'Map of an Estate Situate in the Parish of Sandford in the County of Oxford belonging to James Morrell esq 1855'. The estate maps show the area to the S of the road line but do include field names such as 'Kiln Field' and 'Pottery Piece'. 'Pottery Piece' is also seen on an 1899 map of Oxford Corporation Sewage Farm.

Archaeological methodology (for scope of investigation see Fig. 1)
The watching brief consisted of 16 visits with an almost daily inspection of the ground works associated with the road construction. The aim was to determine the extent, condition and dating of any archaeological remains. The area of road construction was 1700 m long and 30 m wide and 80% of the route was walked and observed. Stripped areas, spoil heaps, pipe trenching, structural soil test pits and the general road construction was investigated. Any archaeological deposits or features were sampled and hand excavated to retrieve dating evidence. The standard Oxford Archaeological Unit recording system was used for recording. Recording while road construction was difficult due the speed and scope of the engineering works. However, significant archaeological deposits were located.

Description of results
The topsoil varies along the road line from a compacted light brown grey sandy loam in the west to a tenacious brown clay loam in the east. An old plough soil was seen to the east and to the middle of the road line, with a subsoil seen in the west.

? Medieval fishpond (location on Fig. 1, section on Fig. 2)
A peaty deposit was observed in drainage trenching and in the extreme west of the road construction, close to Minchery Farm. The peaty deposit 2310 2314 2319 is most certainly related to a medieval fishpond associated with the former Nunnery at Minchery Farm. The extent of the peaty deposit seen measured 50 m in length, 20 m in width and 0.90 m in depth. The peaty deposit was sealed by a modern build up of rubble. This deposit was not seen in the evaluation as there were no trenches in this area as it was thought that the rubble, which was detected in the geophysical survey, was disturbance from a contractors yard and that construction activity would have truncated any archaeological deposits.

Trackway
The Post-medieval trackway is about 100 m to the east of the peaty deposit. The trackway was seen in evaluation trench 14 aligned N/S consisting of a stone surface 1410 and ditches 1402 and 1404 on either side. It was not seen in the road construction. The trackway was removed when sub-soiling took place. The trackway can be seen on an 1899 map of Oxford Corporation Sewage Farm.

Peaty deposit/old stream course (location on Fig. 1)
Traversing eastward along the line of the road and about 40 m from the W end of trench 11 was another peaty deposit 2321 and possible stream course material 2322 was observed aligned N-S. This was sampled and recorded. The old ploughsoil 2301 in the area seals both deposits. A faint depression was observed in the field to the south suggesting the continuation of the old stream course. This was not seen in the evaluation (information from Tempus Reparatum indicates that this deposit survives to a considerable extent to the N).

Pottery spread and ditch (location on Fig. 1, ditch section on Fig. 2)
Trenches 11 and 10 are 40 m and 80 m respectively to the E of the old stream

course. The evaluation trenches 11 and 10 had a pottery scatter within the old plough soil 1101 and 1001. A similar spread was observed and collected from an old plough soil 2301 close to trench 10 and 2325 close to trench 11. The old plough soil is tenacious light grey, a silty clay with inclusions of pebbles, grit and sand and varying in depth 0.15 m to 0.25 m and contained 24 sherds of pottery.

The top soil/modern plough soil 2300 also contained a high concentration of pottery (336 sherds) and pottery and kiln debris was also seen to the south of the road line and south east of trench 10; and especially in the freshly ploughed field to the south. A linear ditch 2304, 1.2 m wid and 0.5 m deep aligned NW/SE was located and a section 2.50 m in length was hand excavated, recovering a large amount of pottery and kiln debris. The old ploughsoil 2301 had truncated the linear ditch which made it difficult to locate. The ploughsoil contained 3003 sherds of pottery. The linear ditch 2304 cut natural clay and chalk. The fill 2303 was a tenacious brown grey clay with inclusions of grit, pebbles, limestone, snails and flecks of charcoal. There were 1632 sherds of pottery from the ditch fill.

Pottery

Summary
A little over 35 kg of pottery was recovered in the course of the watching brief, mostly from a limited area adjacent to Trenches 10 and 11 of the evaluation. The overwhelming majority of the material was of Roman date, with its emphasis probably on the 3rd century AD, and represents debris from immediately-adjacent pottery production.

Methodology and quantities
The pottery was scanned very briefly. Overall quantities per context were calculated, but no attempt was made to quantify the material by fabric and form at this stage. The principal fabrics and forms present were noted for each context, along with an assessment of the date of each group.

The total quantity of pottery was c 35.630 kg, or some 5039 sherds. The latter figure is based on the rough count of the material made by the finds department staff for administrative purposes. Such totals do not take account of new breaks and are therefore somewhat inflated. Despite this it is clear that in most context groups the average sherd weight was small. This probably reflects the slightly disturbed character of some of the deposits from which the pottery was recovered.

Fabrics
The pottery consisted almost entirely of locally produced fabrics, as would be expected with production derived material. Most of the major products of the Oxfordshire industry were present: white and white and red-slipped mortarium fabrics (the two last of these were very scarce), white wares, red colour-coated wares, white-slipped ware and oxidised and reduced coarse wares. Parchment ware was absent, as were the scarce early Roman fine ware fabrics.

The pottery was often in poor condition, some sherds being small (see above) and many having very poorly preserved surfaces. Because of this it was very difficult to assess the proportion of colour-coated ware, but it is likely that many sherds in this fabric had lost all traces of their surfaces. Despite this problem it is likely that colour-coated wares, as well as white mortaria and oxidised and reduced coarse wares, were all well-represented, with the other fabrics mentioned above occurring only scarcely. Constraints of time and the problem of confident identification of the colour-coated fabric means that an exact assessment of the relative proportions of these fabrics is not possible at present. Very small quantities of non-local fabrics, samian ware, black-burnished ware, Nene Valley ware and pink grogged ware, also occurred, and c 12 medieval and post-medieval sherds were present.

Forms
The range of vessel forms represented appeared to be quite limited. The principal mortarium types were M17, M18 and M20, with occasional examples of types such as M10/11, M12, M15 and M19 and possible fragments of 2nd century types such as M2. The balance of these types is clearly in the 3rd century, with a few earlier pieces. Other mortarium types present were C97 and WC7.

The range of colour-coated types was if anything even more restricted. The

most common types were C45 and C47, with occasional instances of C9, C40 and C51. Many of these types occurred as sherds from which all traces of colour-coat were missing. There were three examples of name stamps on bases, probably all from bowls of type C45. These complement the examples found nearby and in Trench 6 of the evaluation.

White ware forms included W9 and a W57 variant, but W33 was much the most common type. Flagons appeared to be scarce. There were very few recognisable vessels in oxidised fabrics, lending support to the view that many of the sherds in these fabrics were in fact originally of colour-coated ware. Rims were, however, fairly common in reduced wares, but almost all were of common jar forms.

Discussion and Conclusions

The great majority of the pottery consists of waste from production. The presence of a kiln or kilns within a very few metres of the findspot of the principal concentration of pottery may be predicted with confidence. The material contained very few obvious wasters, but in this respect it closely parallels the assemblage from the production site at Lower Farm, Nuneham Courtenay, only c 1.5 km distant to the SSW. A very few distinctly overfired and distorted sherds were seen at Blackbird Leys. The character of the rest of the material may suggest under rather than overfiring. The proportions of the fabrics and the character of the sherds, together with the almost total absence of non-local fabrics, all indicate production material. Moreover, large quantities of fired clay consistent with kiln debris were found associated with the pottery.

The range of the material indicates some activity in the area in the 2nd century, but the great majority of the pottery could be accommodated within the 3rd century. This is indicated in particular by the mortarium types; the absence of the characteristic 4th century type M22 must be significant. The colour-coated ware types present were all common in the 3rd century, though they could indicate continuation of production here into the 4th century. The presence of the name stamps, a rare feature within the Oxford industry as a whole, is considered to indicate a later 3rd century date.

With its chronological emphasis on the 3rd century the assemblage is reminiscent of some aspects of that from Lower Farm, though the 2nd century component there was more pronounced. Points of similarity include the emphasis on mortarium types M17 and M18, the presence of stamped colour-coated bowls and the absence of parchment ware.

The pottery was not from particularly well-stratified contexts, but the group from 2303 stands out as having a well above average sherd weight (for this assemblage) and also in not being contaminated with later material, as was the case with the substantial associated context groups 2300 and 2301. Even in these groups, however, the intrusive material is sparse and readily identified and does not significantly compromise the integrity of the assemblage as a whole, which is a significant addition to the body of material known from this part of the Oxford industry.

Paul Booth

27.9.1995

Environmental

Seven soil samples were taken during the watching brief, four for charred plant remains and artefacts and three for waterlogged plant remains

Charred plant remains- Ditch 2304

The four charred plant remains samples (Samples 2300-2303) were all from context 2303, the fill in ditch 2304 containing waste from Roman pottery production. These samples were taken for the recovery of artefacts and charred plant remains, with the larger pottery pieces and bones, if any, removed. Each was floated mechanically onto a 0.25 mm mesh with the sample suspended on 0.5 mm mesh. The flot was air-dried and the residue and the 10-4 mm residue fractions were sorted for artefacts and the mineral material discarded. The 4-0.5 mm fraction was air-dried and stored. In total 56 litres of the deposit was processed in this way.

These flots were assessed by Gillian Campbell of English Heritage's Environmental Archaeology Unit, University Museum, Oxford. All contain small pieces of wood charcoal in low concentrations. Sample 2301 also contained a single seed of a species of wheat (*Triticum sp.*) and one unidentifiable cereal grain. Molluscs are preserved in the deposit, but the potential of the charred remains in this sample is negligible beyond this assessment.

Waterlogged material

Each of the three waterlogged samples had a 1.0 kg sub-sample extracted which was floated by hand on to 0.2 mm mesh and the residue from the sub-sample discarded. These flots were assessed by Dr Mark Robinson of English Heritage's Environmental Archaeology Unit, University Museum, Oxford.

?Medival fishpond

Deposit 2319 (sample 2304) from the medieval fishpond is almost entirely the decayed roots of herbaceous and woody plants which have grown through the deposit. A single bud of willow (*Salix*) was observed, but the sample has no further potential.

Stream course

The other two deposits were both from a possible relict stream course. The waterlogged plant tissue in deposit 2321 (Sample 2305) is poorly preserved. Most of it is decayed woody plant debris. A wet bankside environment maybe indicated by the few plant seeds observed, such as sedge (*Carex sp.*), water plantain (*Alisma sp.*), and celery-leaved crowfoot (*Ranunculus sceleratus*), and the water beetle (*Colymbetes fuscus*). A single dung-beetle (*Aphodius sp.*) shows only that domestic animals were nearby at the time the deposit formed. A subsequent dry period has allowed the sedge seed to be nibbled by invertebrates. The sample's potential for answering further questions is low.

The other stream course deposit, 2322 (sample 2306), is very badly preserved. As in the fishpond deposit 2319, virtually all the waterlogged plant tissue is decayed roots of herbaceous and woody plants which have grown through the deposit. A single seed of a waterside plant was seen, but the sample has no further potential.

Conclusions

While the individual samples are not rich in interpretable material, they do demonstrate that charred plant remains, molluscs and waterlogged plant tissue are preserved in some parts of the site.

DISCUSSION

The most important discovery of the watching brief was the location of the ditch (2304) and the pottery spread in and around it which indicates the presence in the immediate vicinity of a Roman pottery kiln. The production from this kiln seems to lie mainly in the late 3rd century. This kiln can be seen as a part of the major pottery industry which lies to the E of Oxford. This would be the third kiln known in the immediate area of the proposed development. As the kiln appears to lie to the S of the road line it is probably distinct from the kiln area found by Tempus Reparatum to the N of the roadline (A Richmond pers. comm.). A further area of Roman pottery production was found in the N of the site partly in OAU evaluation trench 6 and partly to the W in the Tempus Reparatum evaluation. The total number of kilns in the area may be rather higher than appears at present, and with their ancillary features acivity associated with pottery production could have covered a considerable part of the area. It should be noted that the pottery recovered from the watching brief was only scanned. Full analysis of this material is required to establish the part this kiln played in the pottery industry of Oxford as a whole. Due to the similarity with elements of the material from Lower Farm, Nuneham Courtenay some of the published material from this site is illustrated on the cover.

The possible fishpond found adjacent to Minchery Farm and while not closely dated is likely to be medieval. The importance of eating fish both as a religious observance and for dietary reasons is discussed by Bond (BAR 182(i) 1988, passim). Monastic fishponds are known from Eynsham, Abingdon, Rewley and Osney Abbeys in the immediate environs of Oxford. Given the construction activity around the possible fishpond in it not possible to identify the typology of this particular pond or its water supply according to the types indicated by Chambers (BAR 182 1988, 360-4).

The stream course was open while domestic animals were nearby (as evidenced by the dung beetle from the environmental sample). Generally the tree cover of Britain was cleared from river valleys (generally Alder) by the late Bronze Age and so the stream course is likely to have been open after this date. Animals may have been introduced slightly earlier as the settlement to the E may be middle Bronze Age. Parallel ditches which might be mid to late Bronze Age (from the evidence of waterloged Alder material) were found at Windale School to the NE and these might also indicate the clearance of the woodland and the division of the area for agriculture either for pastoralism or arable production.
However, there is no reason to suggest that the stream course might have been filled before the Middle Ages.

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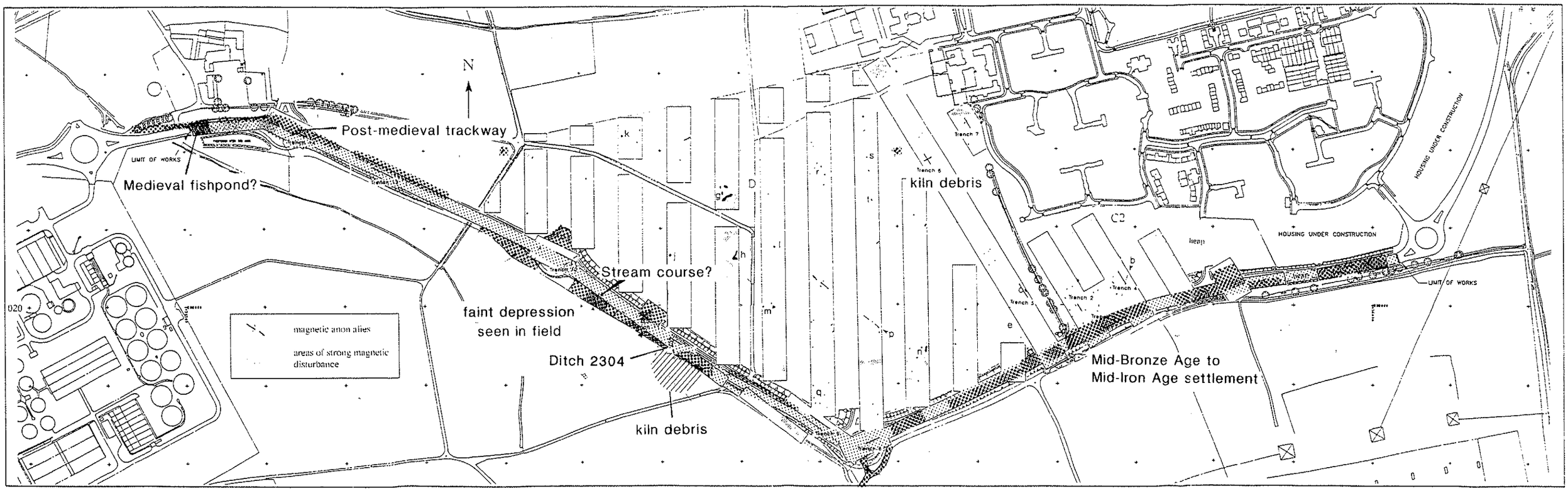

Road route walked and inspected

Stripped and dug areas observed

scale 1:5000

Figure 1

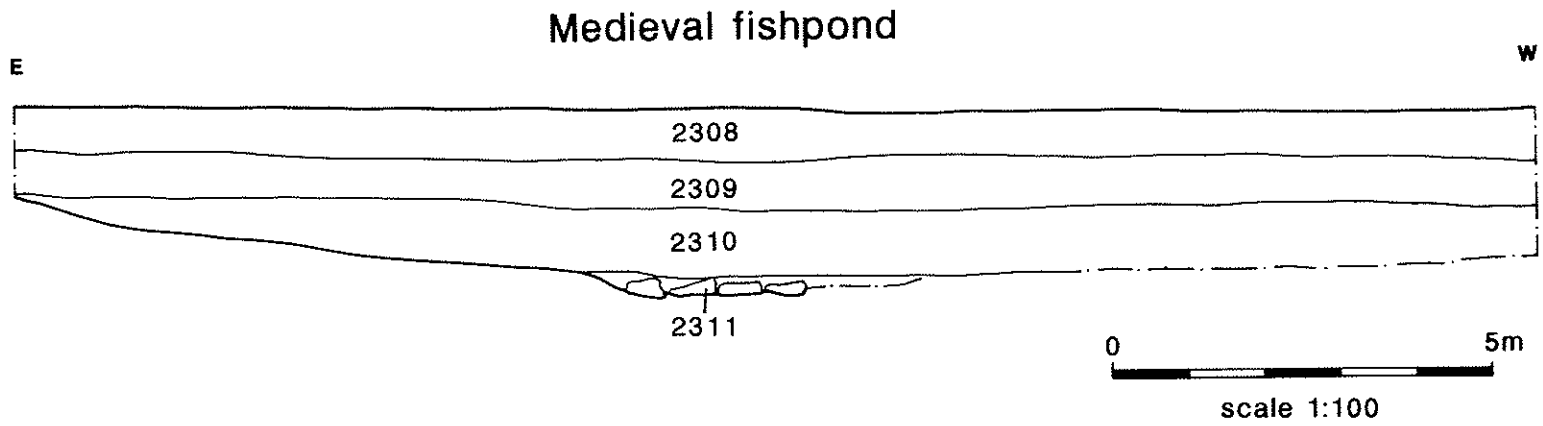

Figure 2

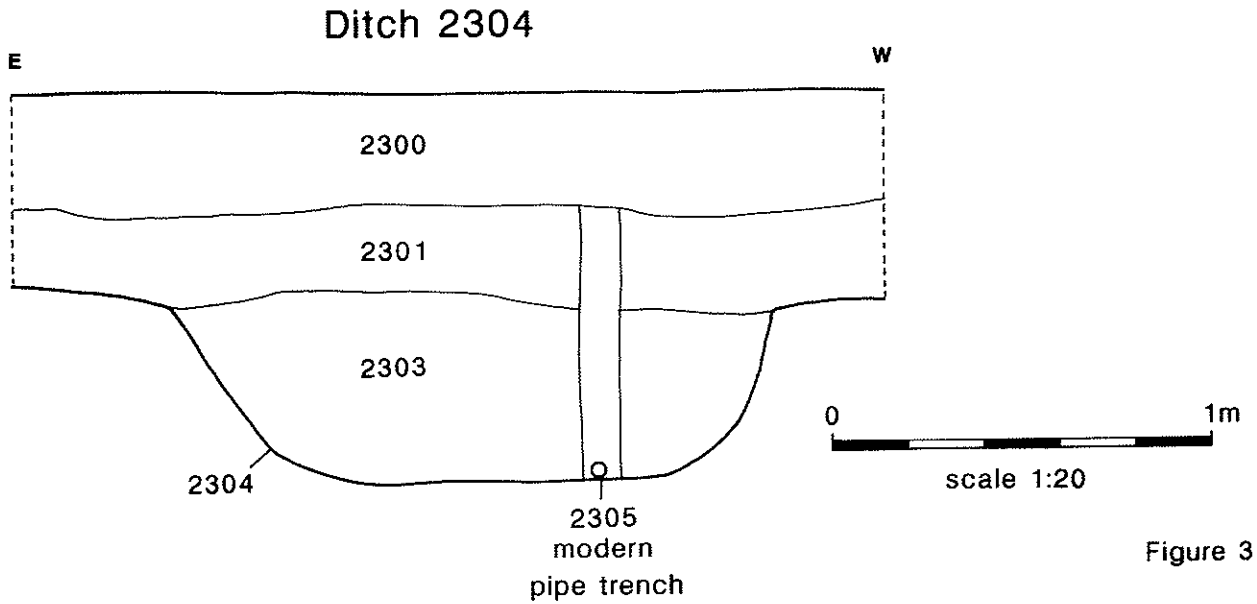

Figure 3

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