Archaeological Report

Nene Valley wetlands power line cable installation Irthlingborough Northamptonshire

Archaeological Excavation and Watching Brief Report

oxfordarchaeology south

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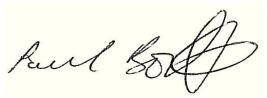
1	Andrew Simmonds (Project Officer)	Steve Lawrence Senior Project Manager	Paul Booth Senior Project Manager	

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Nene Valley wetlands power line cable installation, Irthlingborough, Northamptonshire

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Summary

Oxford Archaeology was commissioned by Western Power Distribution to undertake a watching brief (Trench 1) and detailed archaeological recording (Trench 2) during the excavation of a cable trench within the Nene Valley at Irthlingborough, Northamptonshire. The excavation Trench 2 exposed a transect across part of an extensive area of Iron Age-early Roman settlement that had been previously identified in this part of the valley.

Excavation was limited to the impact depth of the cable trench although features exposed at the base of this in Trench 2 below layers of alluvium were fully investigated where practicable. Trench 1 was excavated along the embankment of the disused branch rail line that had joined the former Ebbw Vale Iron Ore Works to the Peterborough-Northampton main line and revealed only layers of made ground associated with the construction of the embankment.

The Iron Age-early Roman settlement remains were characterised by ditches and pits, with a small number of features that may have been postholes. The ceramic evidence indicated that activity spanned the middle Iron Age to the early Roman period, with a peak in activity during the 1st century AD. There was no positive evidence for activity later than the 2nd century. A single pit was cut through the lower part of the alluvium that overlay the majority of the other features and provided evidence that there were at least two phases of activity, separated by an alluvial episode.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1.1 Oxford Archaeology (OA) was commissioned by Western Power Distribution to undertake an archaeological watching brief and detailed recording during the phased excavation of a cable trench at Irthlingborough, Northamptonshire. The trench was dug to replace existing overhead power lines in order to enhance the natural beauty of the Nene Valley. The work was undertaken under permitted development permissions.

1.1.2 A detailed formal brief was not issued by the local Planning Authority, but OA discussed the project directly with Liz Mordue (Archaeological Planning Advisor at Northamptonshire County Council) and agreed the scope of work required. All work was undertaken in accordance with a Written Scheme of Investigation (OA 2013) that was based on the content of these discussions and consistent with local and national planning policies.

1.2 Location, topography and geology

1.2.1 The site lies approximately 0.4km to the south of Irthlingborough, Northamptonshire, centred at NGR SP 9465 6960 (Figs 1 and 2). It is situated on the western side of the Nene Valley, overlooking the river and historic gravel workings to the east with the southern extent of Irthlingborough to the immediate west and the historic core of the town to the north. It is overlooked from the south by Higham Ferrers, which is situated on a ridge on the opposite side of the river. The cable trench is aligned south from the existing sub station across an open field before following the route of disused railway lines that run through an area of former gravel quarries. The field had previously been in arable agricultural use but had recently been left fallow and had been allowed to become a mixture of scrub and overgrown grassland. The disused railway lines took the form of embankments roughly 1.8m above the level of the surrounding land.

1.2.2 The topography of the area is roughly level at a height of *c* 37m aOD with a rise to 40m aOD at the northern end.

1.2.3 The solid geology is recorded as Mudstone of the Whitby Formation, deposited approximately 176 to 183 million years ago during the Jurassic Period (BGS website Geology of Britain Viewer). No drift geology was recorded over this on the higher elevations of the valley side although a Sand and Gravel terrace of the Ecton Member was present toward the base of the slope which was, in turn, overlain by silt and clay alluvial deposits on the valley floor.

1.3 Archaeological and historical background

1.3.1 The archaeological and historical background to the site had been described in the Historic Environment Desk-based Assessment (RSK 2012) and is summarised here.

1.3.2 While evidence from the immediate vicinity includes Neolithic and Bronze Age findpots, including finds of barbed-and-tanged and leaf-shaped arrowheads, scrapers, a polished flint axe (minus butt) and the butt of a greenstone axe, the archaeological and historical significance of the area falls within two main phases: the late prehistoric-Roman period and late 19th century industry.

1.3.3 The line of the cable trench passed through a large area of Iron Age and Roman settlement that has been identified from a combination of excavation, surface collection and aerial photographic evidence. Cropmarks in the southern part of the area of settlement have been interpreted as the remains of ditched enclosures, trackways, hut circles and pits, while closer to the line of the cable trench scatters of pottery and stone spreads interpreted as the remains of buildings have been recorded, as a result both of

fieldwalking and exposure during quarrying. Findspots from the immediate area vary from single coins up to an assemblage of *c* 300 unstratified pottery sherds (Dix 1986-87, 154).

1.3.4 In the immediate vicinity, fieldwalking recovered Romano-British pottery sherds in association with the stone of possible buildings. In addition, an iron horseshoe was found embedded under the foundation of a stone wall exposed in a quarry drainage trench. Fragments of smelted lead and some unidentified iron objects were found on the surface with a metal detector. These remains were interpreted as that of a possible Romano-British wall and possible contemporary lead working that potentially extended into the area of the cable trench (Brown 1982, 99).

1.3.5 The site is overlooked across the River Nene by the site of an Iron Age settlement and Roman town and temple at Higham Ferrers (Lawrence and Smith 2009)

1.3.6 The Irthlingborough Brick and Tile Works (also known as the Three Chimneys Brickworks), opened in *c* 1900, was located immediately north of the site and is now the location of the WPD primary substation. It closed about 1908 and the site was taken over as a tannery.

1.3.7 Ebbw Vale Iron Ore Works to the west of the cable trench included furnaces, wide-scale open cast quarrying and a tunnel to take miners to the face of the ironstone mine. Part of the cable trench was dug along the embankment of a branch line that had formerly linked the iron ore works to the Peterborough-Northampton main line, which ran along the valley. The branchline was constructed in 1919-20 and both the line and the works ceased operation during the 1970s. The quarries to the south of the town have since been built over by a modern housing estate.

1.4 Aims

General

1.4.1 It was the aim of the watching brief to:

1.4.2 (i) establish the presence/absence, extent, date, nature, function, and phasing of the archaeological remains present within the line of the cable trench and to preserve these by detailed archaeological records,

1.4.3 (ii) characterise the overall nature of any archaeological remains encountered and to understand the process of their formation,

1.4.4 (iii) identify priorities within any areas of exposed archaeological remains that may warrant more detailed investigation,

1.4.5 (iv) establish the relative archaeological value of any remains encountered and implement an appropriate archaeological recording response to these through agreement with the relevant Planning Archaeologist,

1.4.6 (v) determine the geo-archaeological potential of any archaeological deposits encountered,

1.4.7 (vi) recover evidence for the ecofactual and environmental potential of any archaeological deposits and features where this is considered appropriate,

1.4.8 (vii) make available the results of the investigation through appropriate publication and archiving,

1.4.9 (viii) to contribute in an appropriate manner to the updated East Midlands Research Agenda and Strategy (Knight, Vyner and Allen 2012).

Site specific

1.4.10 It was the aim of the watching brief to:

1.4.11 (ix) establish the extent and function of the settlement within the scope of the cable trench. This will specifically explore activities that may be represented such as crafts, industry, agriculture or domestic.

1.5 Methodology

1.5.1 The archaeological recording was undertaken in two parts (Fig. 2). During August 2013, a 425m length of trench (Trench 1) and associated test pits (Test pits 1-3) were excavated along the embankment of a branch line that had formerly joined the Ebbw Vale Iron Ore Works to the Peterborough-Northampton mainline. An isolated pit (Test pit 4) was also excavated adjacent to the substation to locate existing cables for jointing. This attendance required watching brief recording due to the presence only of disturbed or historic/recent made ground within the excavations. During November 2013 a 142m long trench was excavated across the field between the substation and the branch line (Trench 2). This trench passed through an area of high archaeological potential and was the subject of a detailed excavation.

1.5.2 For the watching brief attendance, excavation of the trench was undertaken by a machine fitted with a toothed bucket due to the compacted nature of the trackway deposits and limited archaeological potential. The whole trench was observed and recorded at intervals with all excavation limited to the trackway deposits and upper level of alluvial soil with no archaeologically significant horizons encountered.

1.5.3 For the excavation of Trench 2, all removal of the overlying turf, topsoil and other non-archaeologically significant deposits was undertaken by a machine fitted with a toothless bucket operating under constant archaeological supervision. The trench was excavated to a single bucket width (1.2m). The intended construction depth of the trench was 1.1m below the current ground level. In the event it was clear that the archaeological horizon existed at this level or just below. Due to the proximity of the archaeological level to that of the construction level, it was agreed with the client and the Northamptonshire planning archaeologist to reveal the surface of the archaeological horizon along the length of the trench. Subsequently the line of the trench and the exposed features were mapped using GPS survey equipment and an excavation strategy was agreed upon in consultation with the client and Northamptonshire planning archaeologist.

1.5.4 Due to the relatively small area (*c* 250m²) of the settlement that was impacted upon by the trench, it was agreed that all features should be sample excavated. This comprised the 50% sample of discrete features such as pits and postholes. All ditches exposed were aligned across the trench, rather than along it and so a single section through each ditch was considered to be appropriate. Excavation of deep features was limited by safety issues within the narrow trench and by the presence of high ground water levels. However, all effort was made to excavate the full profile ditches where this was practicable.

1.5.5 All excavation and recording followed procedures laid down in the OA *Fieldwork Manual* (Wilkinson 1992) and in accordance with IfA standards and local and national planning policies.

2 SITE DESCRIPTION

2.1 Trench 1

2.1.1 The trench was excavated entirely within the embankment of the branch line that had formerly joined the Ebbw Vale Iron Ore Works to the Peterborough-Northampton main line (Figs 2 and 3).

2.1.2 The trench revealed a sequence of layers relating to the construction of the embankment but did not penetrate deep enough to expose earlier, underlying deposits. The lowest deposit that was encountered, in the lower 0.25m of the trench, was a layer of dark reddish brown silty clay containing occasional small angular stones (9). Overlying this was a 0.75m deep layer of orange-brown sandy clay silt (8). Contained within this deposit were large lenses of grey clay that were up to 0.15m thick. Discrete dumps of broken brick and stones were observed at several locations at the interface between layers 8 and 9. Above layer 8 was a thin (0.07m) layer of very dark grey clinker and ash (7) that had been covered by an accumulation of mid brown silty loam (6) forming the present day topsoil and turf.

2.1.3 This sequence of layers was interrupted at two points: by a brick-built culvert that crossed the embankment and was cut into layer 9, and by a wide channel (18) measuring 8.4m across that may have been cut through the embankment after the line was decommissioned in order to prevent floodwater building up behind it.

2.2 Trench 2

2.2.1 The trench was dug through a substantial depth of alluvial deposits, with probable colluvial layers also present in the northern part. In the 60m length at the northern end of the trench, the alluvial deposits were between 0.9 and 1.1m thick overlying the natural geology. No archaeological features or finds were encountered within this part of the trench.

2.2.2 In the southern part of the trench natural geology was exposed at a height of 36.2-36.8m aOD, typically 0.9-1.1m below the current ground surface. It was cut by a large number of Iron Age and Roman features (Fig. 4). Possibly in part due to the limited nature of the excavation, the finds assemblages from individual features were rather small and in many instances no finds were recovered at all.

Middle Iron Age

2.2.3 The only feature that may have dated from the middle Iron Age was pit 159 (Fig. 5 section 124), although it contained only a few very small fragments of pottery and it is possible that this material was residual. The pit was only partly exposed and extended beyond the eastern baulk of the trench. As exposed, it measured 1.2m N-S and at least 0.45m E-W. It had steep sides and a flat base and was 0.24m deep. It contained a single fill of grey silty clay with occasional charcoal flecks (160).

2.2.4 In addition to pit 159, a rim sherd of characteristic middle Iron Age form was recovered from the fill of ditch 176, although the feature was thought to be of late Iron Age-early Roman date (below).

Late Iron Age-early Roman period

2.2.5 A total of ten features contained pottery dating from the late Iron Age-early Roman period but additional features could be assigned to this period on the basis of stratigraphic relationships or shared alignments.

Early boundaries in the northern part of the trench

2.2.6 A group of three ditches (180, 181, 183) defined the northern extent of archaeological features within the trench. These may have been of relatively early date, as they were aligned ENE-WSW rather than lying on the NW-SE and NE-SW alignments that were more typical, and were cut by one of the NW-SE aligned ditches (176, Fig. 5 section 131). Ditch 180 was the most northerly of the group. It measured 0.54m wide and 0.34m deep and produced no artefactual evidence, its date being assigned on the basis of its parallel alignment to ditches 181 and 183. Ditch 183 was the largest of the ditches in this group, measuring 1.34m wide and 0.38m deep with gently sloping sides and a slightly concave base. A sherd of shell-tempered pottery was recovered from its only fill (184). The southern edge of ditch 183 was cut by ditch 181, which extended on a parallel alignment but had a more V-shaped profile and was rather less substantial, with a depth of only 0.28m. Ditch 181 was cut by the NW-SE aligned ditch 176.

Rectilinear boundary ditches in the northern part of the trench

2.2.7 Ditch 176 formed part of a group of ditches in the northern part of the trench that were aligned NW-SE and NE-SW and whose rectilinear arrangement suggested that they may have defined a series of related boundaries, perhaps representing a group of enclosures. It was the most northerly of a group of three ditches (with ditches 170 and 172/174) that extended across this part of the trench on parallel NW-SE alignments and may have represented successive phases of a single boundary. It was 2.54m wide and more than 0.51m deep, although it was not excavated to its full depth as it extended well below the impact depth of the cable trench and into the ground water level (Fig. 5 section 131). This was one of the few features that had more than one fill, a lower fill of grey clay silt (177) being overlain by an upper fill of grey clay silt (178). Ditch 174 (Fig. 5 section 132) was situated 3m south of ditch 176 and was similarly substantial. It was at least 1.50m wide and was excavated to a depth of 0.60m without encountering the base of the ditch. The northern side of the ditch had been removed by a recut (172) that was similarly deep and contained pottery of possible 2nd century date. Ditch 170 lay on a parallel alignment a short distance south of ditch 174. It was 0.92m wide and 0.32m deep and contained no artefactual material.

2.2.8 Ditch 168 extended south-westwards from an intersection with ditch 170. The relationship between the two was not investigated, but their fills were very similar, both consisting of a single deposit of dark brownish grey clay silt, and it is possible that they were contemporary. If this were the case, ditch 168 may have branched off ditch 170 to form a subsidiary boundary.

2.2.9 Ditches 140 and 144 extended across the trench on NE-SW alignments and may have defined boundaries that were parallel to ditch 168. Ditch 140 was 1.2m wide and 0.42m deep and ditch 144 was smaller, with a width of 0.62m and a depth of 0.17m.

2.2.10 In addition to ditches, several discrete features were identified in this part of the trench. Feature 162 was the most extensive of these features, extending for 7m N-S, and may have been a large pit or quarry hollow. The archaeological horizon at this point was just below the impact depth of the trench and the ground water was at this level. Therefore, the feature was not excavated, but a small assemblage of pottery, including some quite large sherds, was recovered from the surface of its fill (163).

2.2.11 Three smaller pits (146, 148, 166) to the south of pit 162 contained small quantities of late Iron Age-early Roman pottery. Pit 148 had a diameter of 0.45m and was only 0.07m deep and was cut by pit 146, which was oval in plan and measured 1.45 x 1.10m and 0.12m deep. Pit 166 was oval in plan, measuring 0.36 x 0.24m and was only 0.12m

deep. It is possible that the small size of pits 146 and 166 indicates that they were postholes, but no evidence for posts was observed.

2.2.12 Ditch 154 extended on an E-W alignment that suggested that it was not associated with the other ditches in this part of the trench and may not have been contemporary with them. It was a relatively substantial feature with a width of 1.18m and was excavated to a depth of 0.50m without reaching the base. No finds were recovered.

Features in the southern part of the trench

2.2.13 The southern part of the trench contained a slightly denser concentration of features, but the varying alignments of the ditches made it more difficult to postulate a pattern and few yielded any artefactual material.

2.2.14 A buried soil layer (157/161) overlay the natural geology at the southern end of the trench (Fig. 6 section 112 and 123; Figs 9, 13 and 14). It extended southward for at least 12m from ditch 125, which clearly cut its northern edge (Fig. 6 section 112), and was up to 0.36m thick. Apart from ditch 125, its relationships with other features in this part of the trench was not established. A monolith sample was taken from this part of the trench in order to characterise the soil layer and overlying deposits and a full description of the layer, based on analysis of the monoliths, can be found in Section 4.3 (below). No artefactual material was observed.

2.2.15 Ditches 105, 113, 121 and 127 extended across the trench on alignments that varied between NNE-SSW and E-W. They were all insubstantial features, none measuring more than 0.3m deep, and the only finds recovered were a small sherd of later prehistoric pottery and two small pieces of animal bone, which were recovered from ditch 113 (fill 114).

2.2.16 Ditch 125 (Fig. 6 section 112 and Fig. 9) was significantly more substantial than the other ditches in this part of the trench, with a width of 2.0m. It extended across the trench on a NE-SW alignment but appeared, even within the constraints of the trench, to be distinctly curved. It extended well below the impact depth of the trench and into the ground water level, as a result of which only the upper 0.25m could be excavated, resulting in the recovery of two sherds of late Iron Age-early Roman pottery.

2.2.17 Ditch 133 also lay on a NE-SW alignment. It was 1.50m wide on the western side of the trench but narrowed to only 0.65m wide on the eastern side, a discrepancy that may indicate that it followed a curving alignment similar to that of ditch 125, from which it was separated by a distance of a little over 3m. It was 0.3m deep and no finds were recovered from the section that was excavated through it.

2.2.18 Features 111, 119 and 135 all extended partly into the trench and may have been either ditch terminals or pits of oval or elongated form. All three features were very shallow, respectively measuring 0.14m, 0.24m and 0.10m in depth, and none contained artefactual material.

2.2.19 Feature 102 within the southern limit of the trench was also the largest and it may have been a pit or quarry hollow similar to pit 162 (Fig. 7 section 111). Its full extent was not established, as it continued beyond the southern end of the trench, but within the trench it was exposed for a length of 4.5m. The depth of this feature and the ground water level only allowed the upper 0.35m of fill to be excavated and the base was not encountered. A lower fill of greyish clay silt with frequent charcoal flecks (103) was recorded at the edge of the feature and was overlain by an upper fill of dark brown clay silt (104). Neither fill produced artefactual material. The pit cut a shallow, undated

feature (131) that was seen only in the section of the trench, and which was also cut by ditch 105.

2.2.20 Four small discrete pits or postholes were uncovered (107, 117, 123, 129). They ranged from 0.21-0.36m in diameter and were 0.06-0.16m deep. None contained definite evidence for a post pipe and none yielded any finds.

Alluvial layer 150

2.2.21 A layer of reddish brown alluvium extended throughout the trench. It was a substantial deposit that ranged in thickness from 0.3m at the southern end of the trench to 0.6m at the northern extent of the archaeological features. It appeared to seal most of the features, but since the composition of the layer was similar to that of a large proportion of the feature fills this relationship was in many instances rather ambiguous.

Pit 164

2.2.22 Pit 164 was the only feature that demonstrably cut alluvial layer 150 (Fig. 8 section 127 and Fig. 10). The pit was 0.7m deep with very steep sides. Its fill (165) contained two small fragments of late Iron Age-early Roman pottery, although this material may have been residual.

Alluvial layer 101

2.2.23 An orange-brown alluvial layer (101) was recorded throughout the extent of the trench. It overlay alluvial layer 150 and sealed the fill of pit 164 (Fig. 8 section 127). It was between 0.1-0.40m thick and was overlain by the modern topsoil (100).

2.3 Test pits

Test pits 1-3

2.3.1 Three test pits were excavated on the embankment that had formerly carried the Peterborough-Northampton railway. Test Pit 1 was located on the western side of the embankment, adjacent to the buttress of a steel bridge that spanned a water course linking two gravel pits. The test pit measured 4.0 x 2.5m and was excavated to a depth of 1m. Test Pit 2 (Fig. 11) was dug to locate existing underground cables. Test Pit 3 was dug at the eastern end of the cable trenching in order to connect the new cable with the existing underground cables.

2.3.2 A consistent sequence of deposits was recorded throughout all three test pits. At the base of each trench a layer of reddish brown silty clay containing lenses of dark reddish brown sandy clay silt and gravels was encountered (5). Above this was a 0.35m deep layer of dull orange brown silty clay mixed with gravels (4). In Test Pit 3 layer 4 was overlain by a 0.07m deep band of dark purple-brown crushed stone in a silty clay matrix (3). These deposits were overlain by a thin 0.22m deep layer of dark reddish brown clayey silt containing a quantity of angular small stones and occasional fragments of concrete (2). This had been covered by a layer of mid brown clayey silt, the present day topsoil and turf (1).

Test Pit 4

2.3.3 Test Pit 4 (Fig. 12) was located at the base of the terrace on which the existing substation is situated and was excavated in order to expose existing underground cables to which the new cable was to be joined. The pit measured *c* 4 x 2m and was excavated to a depth of 0.7m.

3 FINDS REPORTS

3.1 Pottery

By Paul Booth

3.1.1 The watching brief produced a small assemblage of 59 sherds (1562g) of pottery of later prehistoric and Roman date from 14 separate contexts. The pottery was scanned quite rapidly and quantified by period for each context group (Table 1). The fabrics of hand-made later prehistoric pottery (probably all of middle to late Iron Age date) were recorded in terms of the principal inclusions present. General ware codes were noted for the late Iron Age and Roman material, using the standard OA recording system terminology (Booth 2011), cross-referenced to the national Roman pottery fabric codes (Tomber and Dore 1998) where appropriate. An assessment of the ceramic date of each context group is also presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Quantities of pottery by broad period and context

	Later prehistoric		Roman			
Context	**No. sherds**	**Weight (g)**	**No. sherds**	**Weight (g)**	**Ceramic date for context**	**Comment (fabrics etc)**
114	1	6			Later Preh	Also ceramic disc
126			2	118	LIA/ERB	O80, C11
139	1	50	13	744	2C	W14, E80, O80, R20, R46, C10, C11
141	9	32	8	183	LIA/ERB	E80, C10. IA sherds from SS100
147			2	16	LIA/ERB	E80, C10
149			1	9	LIA/ERB	E80
160	3	4			MIA?	From SS101
163	1	14	8	235	LIA/ERB	E20, E40, E80, O80, C10, C11
165			2	6	LIA/ERB	C10
167			1	3	LIA/ERB ?	C10
173			3	69	2C?	W14, R46, C10
175			1	4	LIA/ERB ?	C10
178	2	42			MIA	Jar rim. Fill of Roman feature
184			1	27	LIA/ERB ?	C10
Total	17	148	42	1414		

3.1.2 The condition of the material was mostly good. The most obvious characteristic is a relatively high mean sherd weight (MSW; 26.5g). It should be noted, however, that the MSW of the 17 sherds assigned a later prehistoric date was only 8.7g, but 12 of these sherds were from two soil samples (100 (context 141) and 101 (context 160)), so the MSW of the other later prehistoric material was a little over 22g, albeit still a bit lower than that of the specifically late Iron Age-Roman sherds. The surfaces of the sherds were generally well-preserved and did not indicate extensive erosion as a result of redeposition.

3.1.3 The later prehistoric pottery, a total of 17 sherds (148g) was all in quite hard-fired shell-tempered fabrics, with sparse sand inclusions in a few cases (inclusion types identified by letter codes, here S and A respectively). The shell inclusions were typically up to 2-3mm in length. There was only a single feature sherd amongst this material - a simple upright rim from a slack-shouldered jar or bowl from context 178. This form is

characteristic of the middle Iron Age. The other shell-tempered fabrics in this group are assigned to a similar period on the basis of their general character, but the shell-tempering tradition continues into the late Iron Age and Roman periods in this region and it is possible that some of these fragments were of later date. This suggestion may be supported by the fact that shell-tempered sherds considered to be of Iron Age character occurred in contexts 139, 141 and 163, all of which contained later pottery, but there do seem to have been slight differences which usually allow the middle Iron Age and later shell-tempered pottery to be distinguished.

3.1.4 The Roman pottery was recorded in terms of major ware categories, with individual fabric codes used in some cases. The codes used (sherds count in brackets) were:

W14 Nene Valley white ware (2, 45g)

E20 'Belgic type' fine sandy ware (1, 11g)

E40 'Belgic type' shell and grog-tempered ware (1, 20g)

E80 'Belgic type' grog tempered wares (9, 178g)

O80 Coarse grog/sand tempered oxidised storage jar fabrics (4, 431g)

R20 Abundant medium sand reduced coarse ware (1, 40g)

R46 Nene Valley sandy reduced coarse ware (3, 181g)

C10 Late Iron Age-early Roman shell-tempered wares (16, 349g)

C11 ?Harrold shell-tempered ware (4, 132g)

3.1.5 The assemblage was dominated by shell-tempered fabrics and 'Belgic type' and related coarse wares, the latter probably including sherds recorded as ware group O80. These fabrics (particularly the C10 group) included both hand-made and wheel-thrown examples. More clearly 'Romanised' fabrics were scarce, consisting essentially of Nene Valley sandy reduced wares (fabric R46 and perhaps also R20) and white ware (fabric W14). All the pottery is likely to have derived from local or relatively local sources. Imported pottery is completely absent.

3.1.6 The range of vessel types is restricted. Five vessels (four from a single context, 139) were represented by rims, all jars except for a ring-necked flagon in fabric W14 from context 139. Three of the five jars were in fabric C11, possibly a product of the Harrold industry (Brown 1994). These comprised a simple everted rim vessel and two 'channel rim' jars, a type particularly characteristic of the region (Friendship-Taylor 1999). The fourth jar was a large storage vessel in coarsely tempered oxidised fabric O80. Amongst the other sherds the single piece of fabric E40 was from a wheel-thrown high-shouldered jar.

3.1.7 There is insufficient pottery for its distribution across the site to form any meaningful patterns. A particular constraint is the limitation of the impact depth of the excavation trench, which means that in a number of cases pottery was only recovered from the upper fills of features and the significance of this material for determining the date at which features were initially dug is therefore quite uncertain, particularly as it is clear that some of the later prehistoric pottery was redeposited in later features.

3.1.8 The overall chronological range of the pottery is from the middle Iron Age to the early Roman period. The later prehistoric material is not closely datable on intrinsic criteria (and is not helped by the fact that the only diagnostic sherd occurs in a Roman feature). However, the consistency of fabric of all this material, and the indication that it belongs to a ceramic tradition which remained important through the transition into the early

Roman period, might suggest that it did not derive from activity on site over a very extended period of time. Activity need not have commenced before the 3rd or 2nd century BC, although this is speculative on present evidence. What is more clear is an absence of late Roman pottery, although again the quantity of relevant material is very small. There is nothing that needs date after the 2nd century AD. The evidence for domination of the assemblage by shell-tempered and 'Belgic type' fabrics, albeit based on a very small sample, might suggest that the peak period of activity in the samples area was in the middle of the overall date range identified from the pottery, ie in the 1st century AD. The period of production and use of both the 'Belgic type' and the shell-tempered fabrics will have spanned the time of the Roman conquest. Later 2nd-century and later activity, if present within the area at all, was presumably located at some little distance from this later Iron Age/early Roman focus of occupation.

3.2 Metalwork

By Ian Scott

3.2.1 A single fragment of copper alloy was recovered from the topsoil. It was a small, sub-circular fragment, tapering to a point, with raised decoration on one surface. It may be part of a hook or spring. It is not possible to date this single metal find.

3.3 Flint

By Geraldine Crann

3.3.1 A single hard hammer struck flake was recovered. It had abraded edges and the distal end had been snapped in antiquity. A later prehistoric date is possible given the irregular nature of the flake and the use of hard hammer, but as a solitary find the single flint simply attests to human presence in the area during the prehistoric period.

3.4 Fired clay

By Cynthia Poole

3.4.1 A single fragment (17g) of fired clay in micaceous clay fabric with organic inclusions was recovered. One smooth surface survived. The fragment is possibly part of a fired clay disc of late Iron Age or Roman date.

4 ENVIRONMENTAL REPORTS

4.1 Charred plant remains and wood charcoal

By Sharon Cook

Introduction

4.1.1 This report describes samples taken from the watching brief at Irthlingborough, Northamptonshire in November 2013.

4.1.2 Sample <100> (141) was taken from a ditch, sample <101> (160) was from a pit and sample <102> (104) was taken from a ditch. All were taken from within the cable trench.

Aims and Methodology

Aims

4.1.3 Sampling was undertaken in order to:

- Determine whether ecofacts and environmental evidence (such as plant remains, animal bone, human bone and molluscs) are present;
- Determine the quality, range, state and method of preservation of any ecofactual evidence;
- Recover any small artefacts.

Methodology

4.1.4 The samples were processed for finds retrieval and charred plant remains by water flotation using a modified Siraf style flotation machine. The flot was collected on a 250µm mesh and the heavy residue sieved to 500µm; both were dried in a heated room, after which the residue was sorted by eye for artefacts and ecofactual remains.

4.1.5 The CPR flots were scanned for charred plant remains using a binocular microscope at approximately x10 magnification.

4.1.6 Seed identifications were made with reference to Oxford Archaeology's reference collection. Nomenclature for the plant remains follows Stace (2010).

Results

4.1.7 Sample <100> (141) was a 40l sample of dark greyish brown (10YR 4/2) sandy clay loam. Mammal bone and pottery were retrieved from the residue. The sample yielded 50ml of flot material of which 100% was scanned. The flot from this sample contains a large quantity of fine modern roots. Charcoal is present and in good condition with a number of fragments being >4mm and potentially suitable for species identification Grain is also present within this flot, but it is fairly abraded and in poor condition. The majority of the grains could not be further identified although six grains are most probably wheat (*Triticum* sp.) and five grains are probably oat (*Avena sativa*). A number of glume base fragments indicate that the wheat is probably a glume wheat type. Oat awns were also noted. A variety of charred seeds from wild plants were also present within this flot. A number were in poor condition and therefore not identifiable, however dock (*Rumex sp*.), goosefoot (*Chenopodium album*), cleavers (*Galium aparine*), black bindweed (*Fallopia convolvulus*), blinks (*Montia fontana*), mouse-ears (*Cerastium sp*.) and a number of grass seeds were positively identified. In addition, sixteen small legume seeds are present although these have not been further identified.

4.1.8 Sample <101> (160) was a 40l sample of brown (10YR 4/3) sandy clay loam. Mammal bone and pottery were retrieved from the residue. The sample yielded 40ml of flot material of which 100% was scanned. The flot from this sample contains fine modern roots and plant material. Charcoal is present and in good condition although the majority was <4mm and not suitable for species identification. A small amount of grain including four examples that could be positively identified as barley (*Hordeum vulgare*) was present together with a small amount of glume wheat chaff. A single rachis from a free threshing wheat was noted and two fragmented oat (*Avena sativa*) grains. A small number of charred seeds from wild plants are present. These are mostly cleavers (*Galium aparine*), although a few grass seeds and two goosefoot (Amaranthaceae) seeds were also noted.

4.1.9 Sample <102> (104) was a 40l sample of dark brown (10YR 3/3) sandy clay loam. No finds were retrieved from the residue. The sample yielded 30ml of flot material of which 100% was scanned. The flot from this sample contains fine modern roots. Charcoal is present and in good condition although the majority of fragments are <4mm. A small amount of grain was noted although this could not be identified to species. The wild plant seeds consist of a single cleavers (*Galium aparine*), two grass seeds and a single stitchwort (*Stellaria sp*.). A fragment of fruit stone was observed, but is too small to identify further.

Discussion

4.1.10 While the condition of the grain within these samples was generally poor, this is more a result of the burning process than the potential of the site for the preservation of charred plant remains. On the whole, both the charcoal and wild plant seeds are in good condition and show that this site has potential for the preservation of charred remains. In addition, the bone and pottery are in generally good condition.

4.1.11 Sample <100> (141) contained the seeds of a number of persistent weed plants and may be evidence for clearance and destruction of weeds from an arable area.

4.2 Animal bone

by Lena Strid

4.2.1 A total of 61 animal bone fragments were recovered. This included 35 fragments (57%) which came from sieved soil samples. The majority of the assemblage came from features dated to the Iron Age/Roman periods (Table 2).

4.2.2 The bone condition was generally good to fair. Gnaw marks from carnivores, probably dogs, were found on three bones. Burnt bones were absent.

4.2.3 The assemblage contains bones from domestic animals (cattle, sheep/goat and pig) and commensal microfauna (field vole, mouse and frog/toad). The presence of these domestic taxa are common for Iron Age and Roman assemblages, although due to the small sample size it is not possible to extrapolate on the frequency of cattle, sheep/goat and pig and their contribution to the economy and diet.

4.2.4 Generally in the Iron Age and Roman periods cattle and sheep/goat were kept for a variety of products, where surplus animals were killed for meat after their first few winters and the rest of the herd used as providers of wool, milk and manure, and as draught animals. Wool production became more important in the Roman period, resulting in adult sheep being kept for a few more years before slaughter. Pigs were on

the other hand raised solely for meat and due to their high fecundity and growth rate they were mostly killed as sub-adults after reaching maximum size.

4.2.5 A small number of bones could be assigned a minimum age at death. They comprise a fused cattle distal tibia (>2.5 years), an unfused cattle proximal femur (<3.5 years), a fused sheep/goat distal humerus (>3-4 months) and a sheep/goat mandible with an estimated age at death of 6-8 years (Grant 1982; Habermehl 1975, 104-105, 121; Payne 1973). A rib from a juvenile large mammal and a long bone from a juvenile medium mammal may be indicative of infant mortalities or of the utilization of veal/lamb/suckling pig.

4.2.6 Butchery marks were noted on one cattle femur (context 178) and one large mammal long bone (context 141). The cut marks on the femur suggest disarticulation of the hip joint, possibly including filleting, whereas the cut mark on the long bone would have derived from filleting.

Table 2: Quantification of the animal bone assemblage by taxon and context

	Total	114	126	141	149	160	163	165	169	175	178	179
Cattle	5		1	1			1				2	
Sheep/ goat	7	1		3			1	1			1	
Pig	2			1		1						
Field vole	1			1								
Mouse sp.	1											
Frog/toad	1			1								
Micro-mammal				1								
Small mammal	1					1						
Medium mammal	10			6		2		1	1			
Large mammal	8			3	1	1			1	1		1
Indeterminate	24	1	1	13	1	6		1	1			
Total	61	2	2	30	2	12	2	3	3	1	3	1
Weight (g)	525	28	98	103	15	11	34	6	22	8	188	7

4.3 Monolith samples

By Carl Champness

Introduction

4.3.1 A series of four monolith samples were taken during a specialist site visit to the excavation. The monoliths were targeted on a possible buried soil layer, thick alluvium and topsoil. The buried soil layer was undated but was cut by a series of Late Iron Age-Early Roman features that were investigated as part of the excavation.

4.3.2 This report outlines the results of the geoarchaeological site visit and monolith assessment.

Aims

4.3.3 The main aims of the assessment were to confirm the field observations and provide samples suitable for further palaeoenvironmental and sedimentary analyses. The assessment had the following aims:

i. Determine the geo-archaeological potential of any archaeological deposits encountered during the excavation;

ii. Recover evidence for the ecofactual and environmental potential of any archaeological deposits and features where this was considered appropriate to investigate;

iii. Investigate the site formation processes

Methodology

4.3.4 A series of sample sections along the trench excavation were cleaned, recorded and sampled during the site visit. Four monolith samples were taken from two of these sections for further study (Fig. 6 section 123 and Fig. 8 section 125). The monoliths were examined and recorded in the laboratory as part of the geoarchaeological assessment.

4.3.5 Each of the monoliths was examined, photographed and logged in detailed (Figs 13 and 14). The sediments were recorded following the guidelines set out by Jones *et al.* 1999, to include information about depth, texture, composition, colour, clast orientation, structure (bedding, ped characteristics etc), and contacts between deposits. Note was also made of any visible ecofactual or artefactual inclusions e.g. pottery, daub or charcoal fragments.

Results

4.3.6 The following stratigraphic units were identified based on the site recording and the logging of the monolith samples:

Weathered bedrock (151)

4.3.7 The bedrock was encountered at the base of the cable trench, between 1.1m-1.2m below ground level, as a soft mid-yellow clayey silt with rare grit inclusions. Numerous archaeological features including ditches, pits and possible post holes were recorded dug into the surface of the weathered mudstone bedrock.

Buried occupation surface/rural dark earth deposit (157/161)

4.3.8 A soft 0.20m thick blackish brown clayey silt with frequent coarse inclusions of animal bone and pebble gravel was identified at the base of the sample section overlying the weathered mudstone. This unit was quite variable across the trench with areas of more humic black deposits towards the southern end of the trench. There was a certain degree of stratification recorded within this unit, consisting of a more blackish basal buried disturbed soil horizon overlying a less humic and more diffuse layer.

4.3.9 This unit appears to represent a potential buried land surface that has been sealed by floodplain alluvial silts. The soil has a darkish colour because humus appears to be mixed with fine charred and amorphous organic matter. It is relatively rich in anthropogenic inclusions, coprolitic material, charcoal and burned mineral material. This could represent settlement middening waste or *in situ* occupation debris. A number of Iron Age and Roman features were dug into this surface and filled with similar types of deposit. In places it was not possible to establish the relationship between the buried land surface and the archaeological features.

Alluvial deposits (101)

4.3.10 Overlying the buried surface was a sterile homogeneous soft to friable mid yellow brown silty clay deposit with frequent poorly sorted coarse inclusions including animal bone, chalk and pebble gravel clasts. The majority of the deposit most likely derives from overbank alluvial silt that may have partially stabilised with floodplain vegetation during the dryer times of the year. The coarse grained inclusions within the deposit may

also indicate that colluvial in-wash of material was occurring from the higher ground to the north of the site.

Topsoil (100)

4.3.11 The topsoil was recorded as a friable dark brown clayey silt with rare coarse pebble gravel and frequent modern rooting. The topsoil was a 0.35m thick homogeneous deposit that was heavily mixed. The silty clay nature of the deposit indicates a predominantly alluvially-derived deposit that has been disturbed by later ploughing.

Discussion and conclusion

4.3.12 The monolith assessment confirmed the presence of an *in situ* occupation or midden debris deposit that reflected significant Iron Age and Roman activity within the area of the site. The buried prehistoric soil horizon appears to have been significantly disturbed by the settlement activity in the area of the excavation trench. The humic land surface and feature fills indicate a humic-rich environment associated with decaying organic and burnt material, most likely midden remains and organic building remains. The thickness of the overlying humic deposit indicates a possible abandonment phase similar to the development of dark earth deposits recorded at Great Casterton (Condron 1995, 116).

4.3.13 The overlying alluvial silts indicate over-bank alluviation from the nearby River Nene in the post-Roman period on the floodplain. The evidence for rising ground water-table on the floodplain suggests that this area became increasingly prone to flooding and less suitable for settlement activity. A significant depth of alluvial silt is recorded overlying the Roman deposits, which suggests that this remained the situation for most of the medieval and early post-medieval periods. The thickness and homogeneous nature of the topsoil indicates that the site was ploughed at some time in the past.

5 Discussion

5.1.1 The excavation of Trench 2 exposed a transect across part of an extensive area of Iron Age-early Roman settlement that had been previously identified in this part of the valley south of the sub-station. The features were confined to the southern part of the trench with a considerable depth of alluvium sealing the fills of the features. Excavation of Trench 1 was generally limited to the impact depth of the cable trench at 1.1m below the current ground level which coincidentally corresponded to the main archaeological horizon. Features were investigated below this level where possible although this was limited by the depth of the trench and the high ground water conditions at the time of the excavation.

5.1.2 Trench 1 that was excavated along the embankment of the disused branch rail line that had joined the former Ebbw Vale Iron Ore Works to the Peterborough-Northampton main line revealed only layers of made ground associated with the construction of the embankment and did not penetrate deep enough to expose any earlier deposits that may be sealed beneath it. This was also the case for the associated test pits.

5.1.3 The archaeological remains were characterised by ditches and pits, with a small number of smaller features that may have been postholes. Two particularly large features (102 and 162) may have been quarry pits. Most of the ditches were aligned either NE-SW or NW-SE and may have defined the boundaries of an arrangement of rectilinear enclosures. Their alignments were presumably derived from that of the river, which flows NE-SW along the far edge of the valley, some 750m from these features.

5.1.4 In contrast to locations to the south, where stone buildings have been identified, no definite evidence for structures was found during the investigation. A few small features were uncovered whose dimensions were consistent with their identification as postholes but none had definite evidence for the former presence of posts and within the confines of the cable trench it was not possible to be certain whether they formed parts of coherent structures. The humic character of buried soil layer 157/161, in the southern part of the trench, was consistent with a topsoil layer associated with *in situ* occupation or middening.

5.1.5 The artefactual and environmental evidence was limited, although this may be due as much to the restrictions imposed on excavation by the groundwater levels and the feature and trench depths as to the character of the activities represented. The ceramic evidence indicated that activity spanned the middle Iron Age to the early Roman period, with a peak in activity during the 1st century AD. There was no positive evidence for activity later than the 2nd century. The evidence from the charred plant remains indicated that wheat and possibly oats were grown, while the animal bone represented the usual domesticates of cattle, sheep/goat and pig.

5.1.6 Pit 164 was cut through the lower part of the alluvium that overlay the majority of the archaeological features. It was the only feature that was recorded as doing so, but it was possible that similar relationships elsewhere had not been recognised, since the composition of the alluvial layer was similar to some of the feature fills. At a minimum, this feature provides evidence that there were at least two phases of activity, separated by an alluvial episode. Unfortunately the pottery recovered from the fill of the pit was insufficient to provide a definite date for the later phase of activity.

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Appendix B. Summary of Site Details

Site name: Nene Valley wetlands power line cable installation, Irthlingborough, Northamptonshire

Site code: IRNVW 13

Grid reference: SP 9465 6960 (centred)

Type: Watching Brief

Date and duration: 1st August and 19th-25th November 2013

Area of site: 750m^2

Summary of results:

Oxford Archaeology was commissioned by Western Power Distribution to undertake a watching brief (Trench 1) and detailed archaeological recording (Trench 2) during the excavation of a cable trench within the Nene Valley at Irthlingborough, Northamptonshire. The excavation Trench 2 exposed a transect across part of an extensive area of Iron Age-early Roman settlement that had been previously identified in this part of the valley.

Excavation was limited to the impact depth of the cable trench although features exposed at the base of this in Trench 2 below layers of alluvium were fully investigated where practicable. Trench 1 was excavated along the embankment of the disused branch rail line that had joined the former Ebbw Vale Iron Ore Works to the Peterborough-Northampton main line and revealed only layers of made ground associated with the construction of the embankment.

The Iron Age-early Roman settlement remains were characterised by ditches and pits, with a small number of features that may have been postholes. The ceramic evidence indicated that activity spanned the middle Iron Age to the early Roman period, with a peak in activity during the 1st century AD. There was no positive evidence for activity later than the 2nd century. A single pit was cut through the lower part of the alluvium that overlay the majority of the other features and provided evidence that there were at least two phases of activity, separated by an alluvial episode.

Location of archive: Currently no receiving museum is available to accept material from this part of the county, although the issue is being actively addressed and it is hoped that a suitable storage facility will be available within the next few years. Therefore the archive will temporarily be stored at Janus House, Osney Mead, Oxford and the written records made available at http://library.thehumanjourney.net/ until alternative arrangements are made by the relevant responsible curatorial body.

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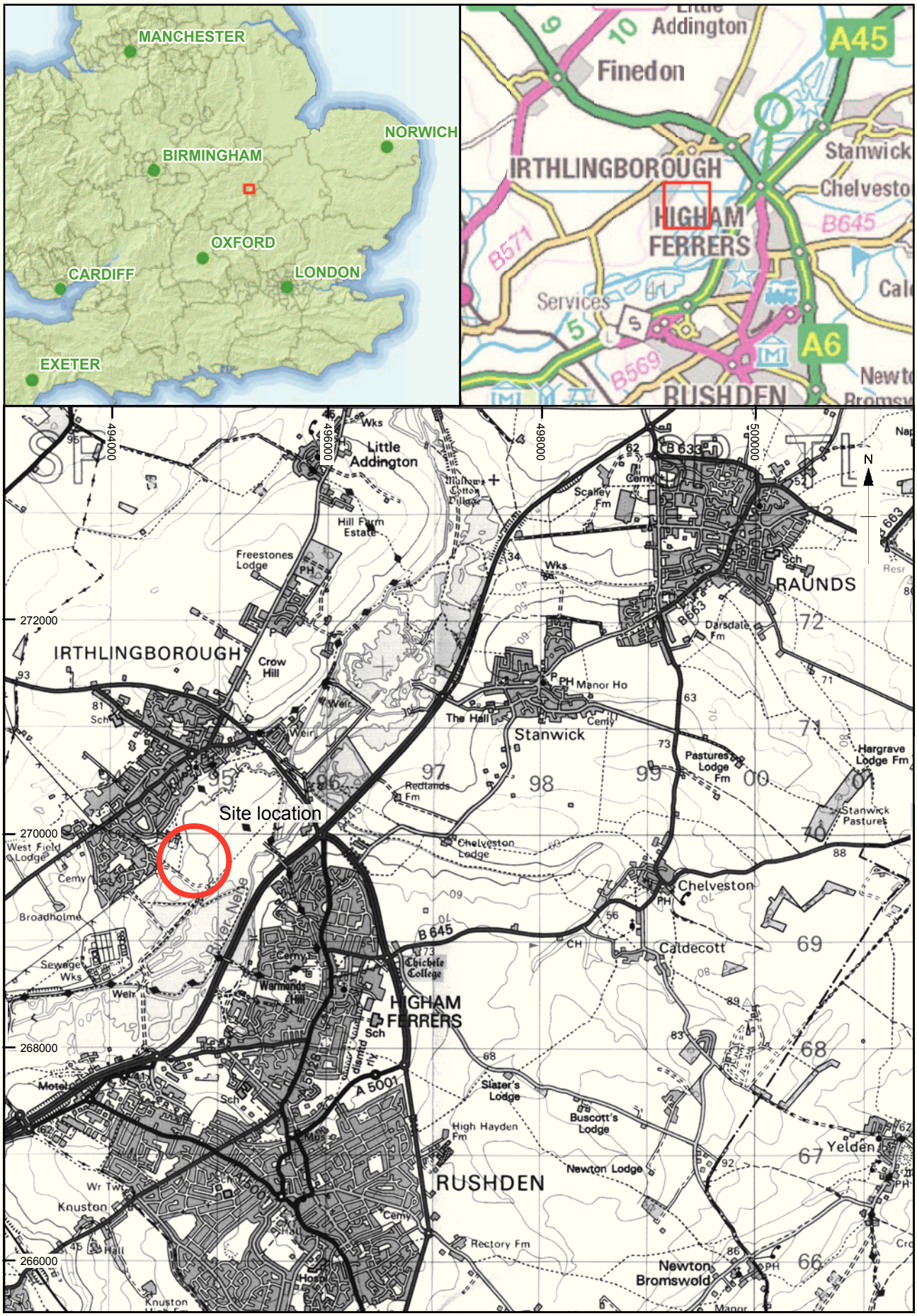

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Figure 1: Site location

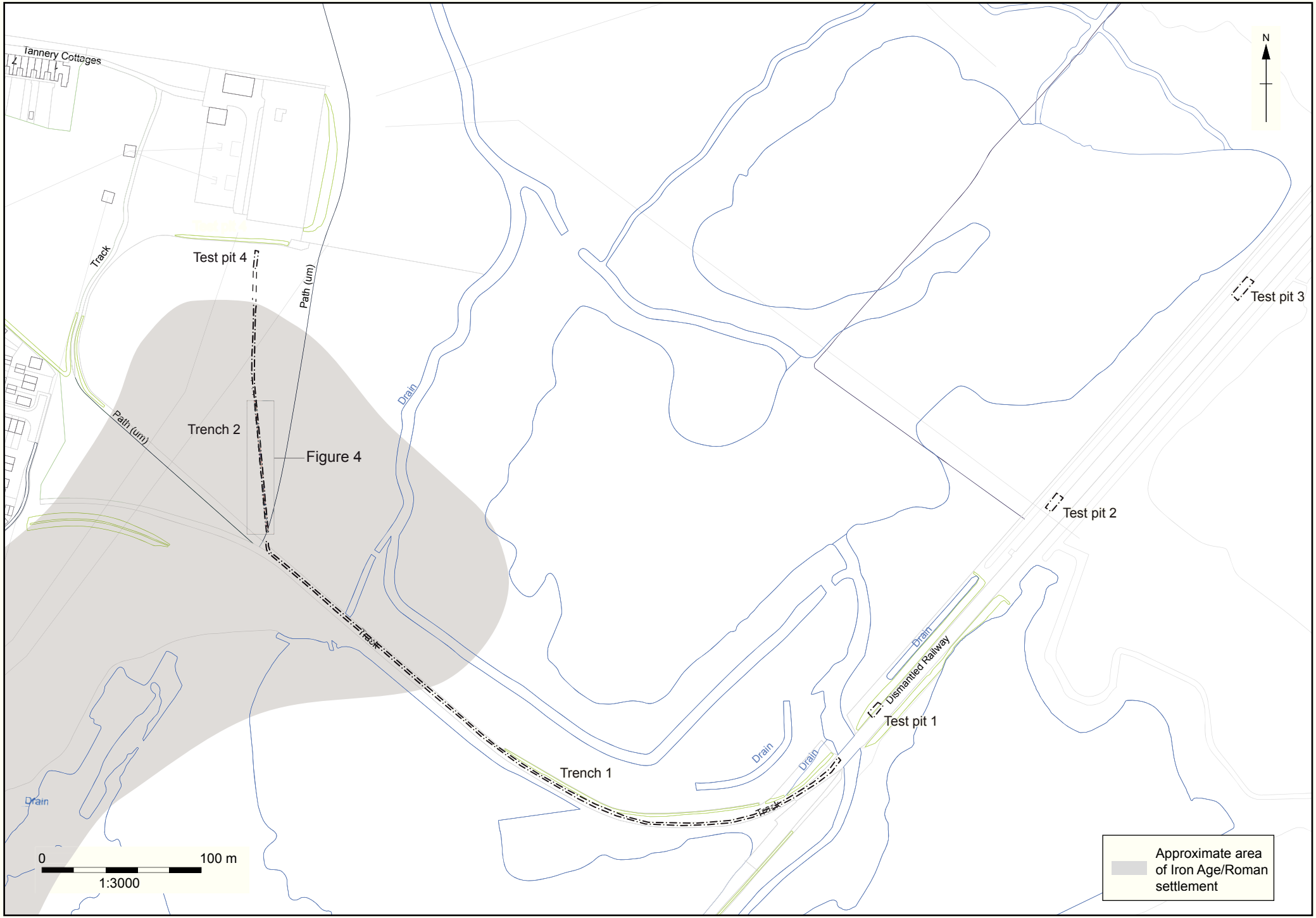


Figure 2: Plan of the cable trench and test pit locations

Figure 3: View SE along Trench 1

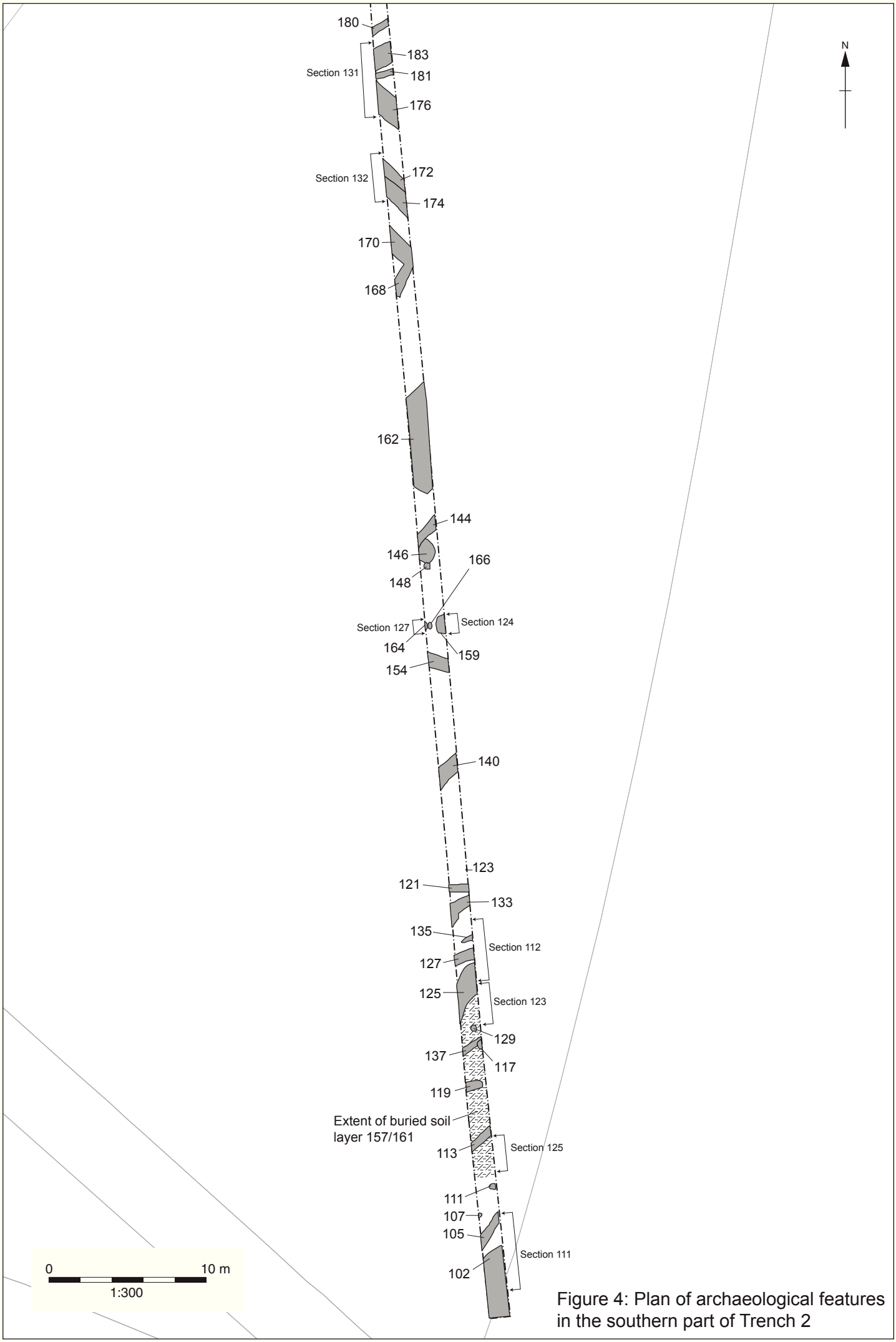


Figure 4: Plan of archaeological features in the southern part of Trench 2

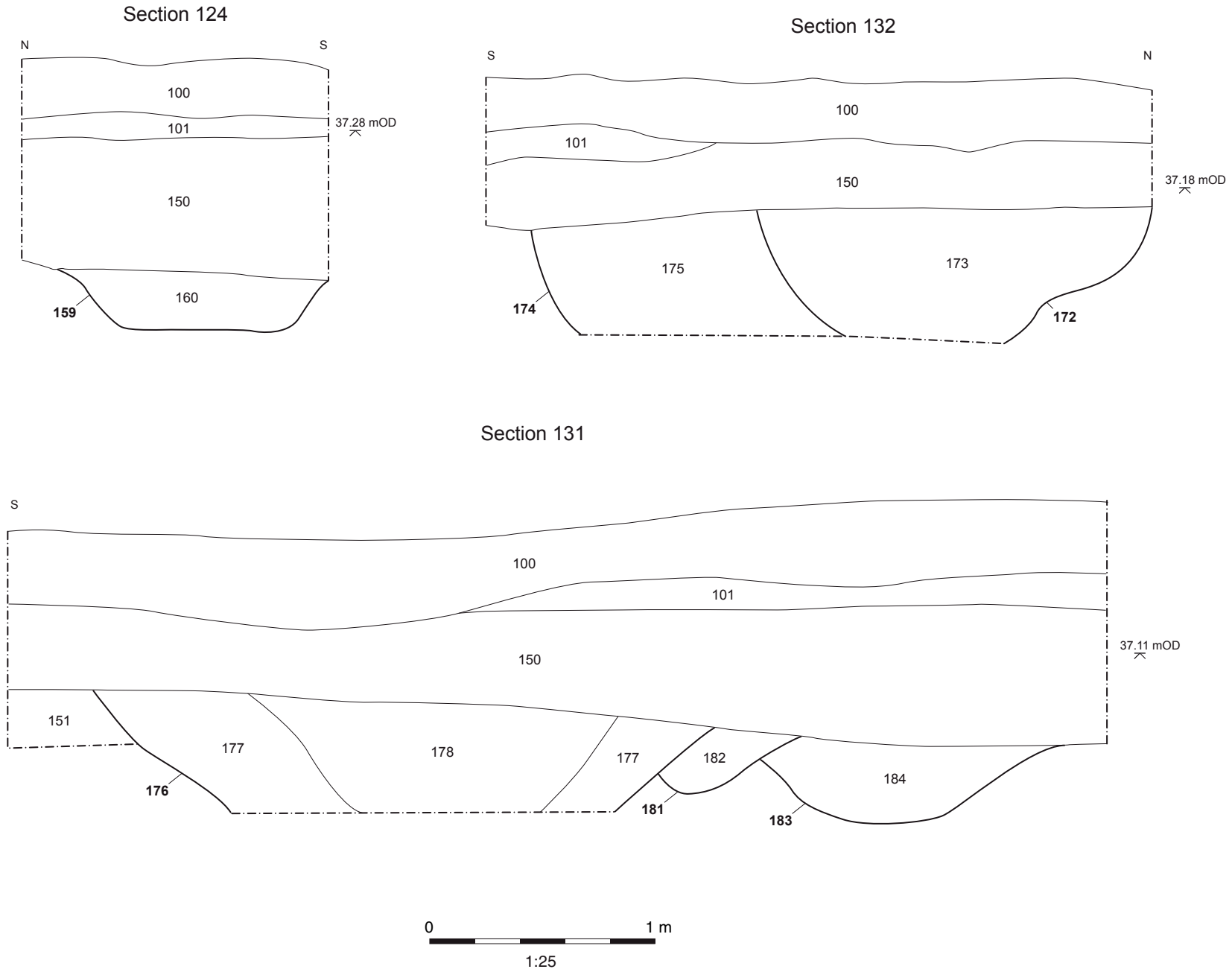


Figure 5: Sections 124, 131 and 132

Figure 6: Ditch 154 and overlying sediments

Figure 7: Section 123

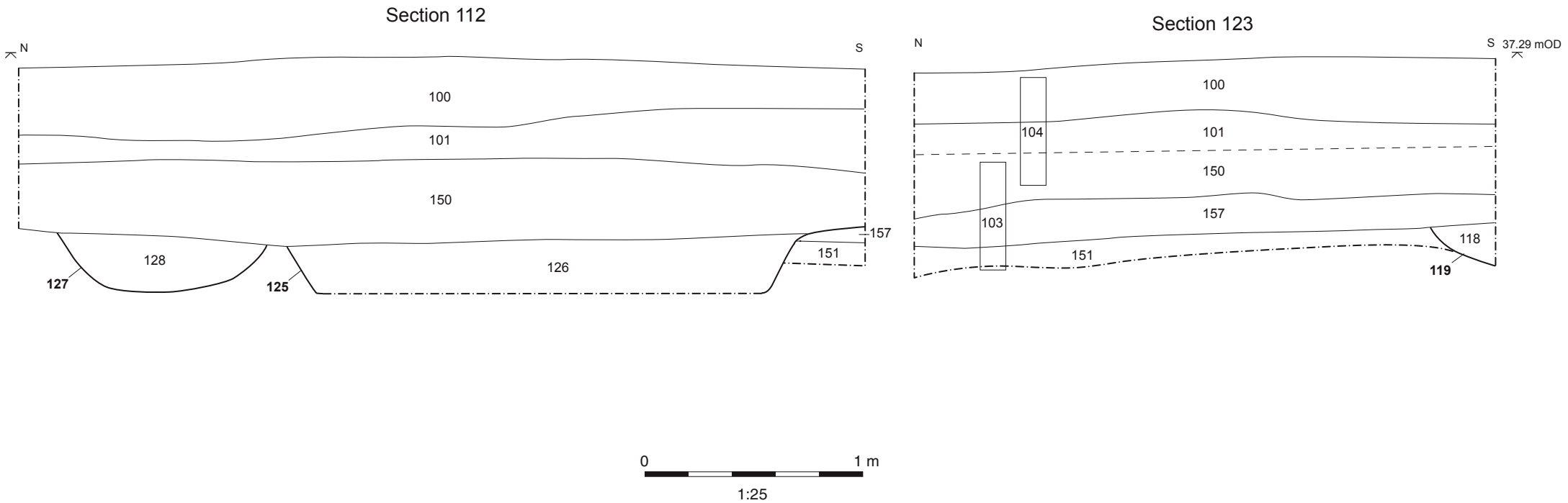


Figure 8: Sections 112 and 123

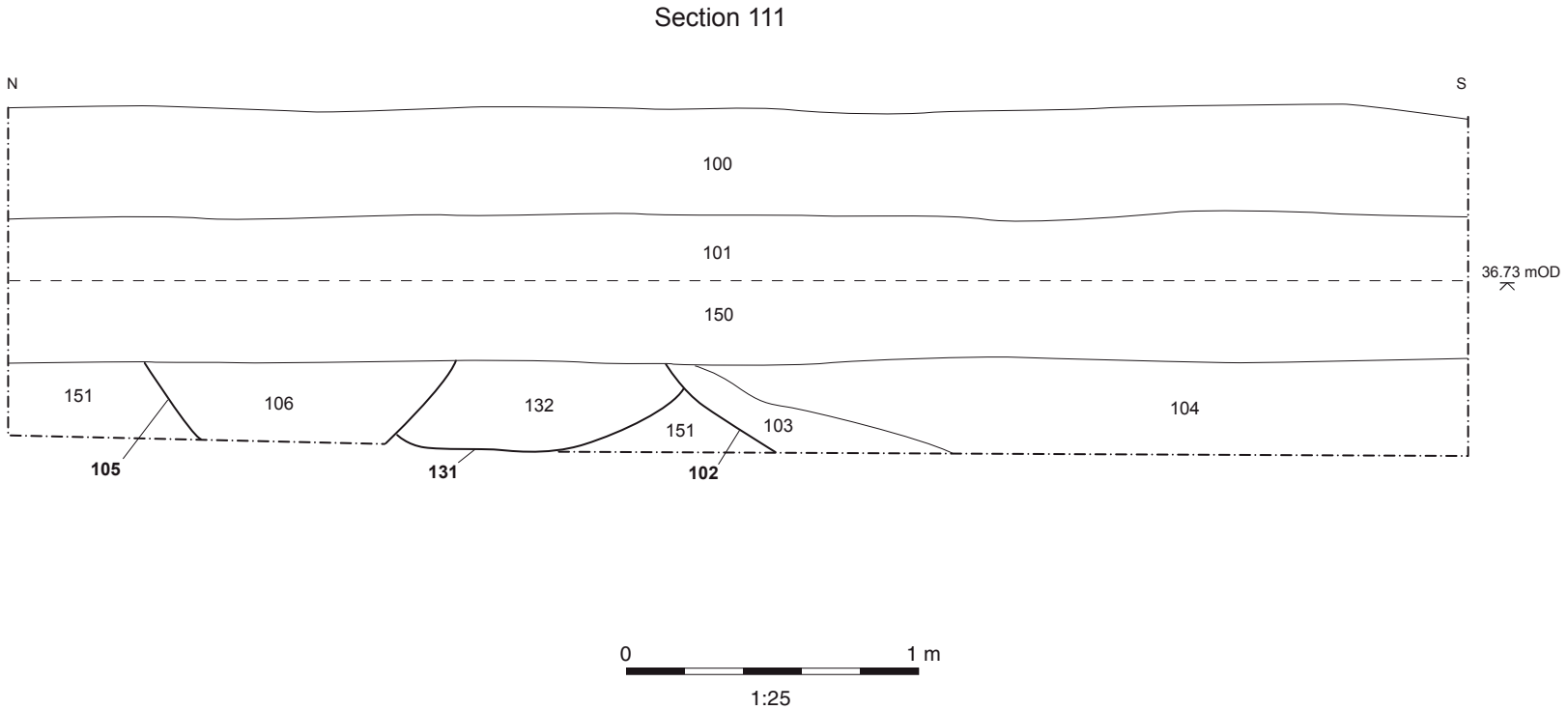
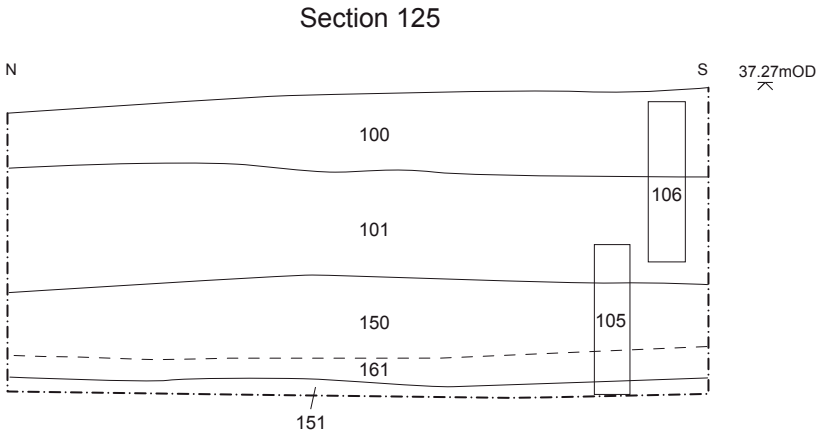


Figure 9: Section 111



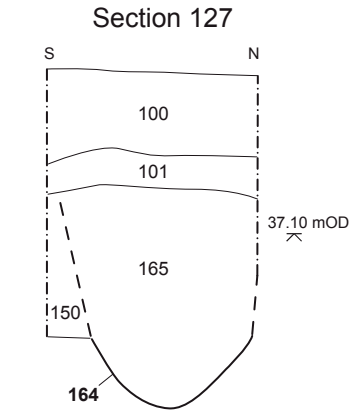


Figure 10: Sections 125 and 127

Figure 11: Ditch 125 cutting buried soil layer 157

Figure 12: Pit 164 cutting through alluvial layer 150

Figure 13: Test Pit 2, view NW

Figure 14: Test Pit 4, view S

Figure 15: Monoliths taken through buried soil layer 157 (161) and overlying alluvial deposits:
top: Cleaned and sampled representative section (0.5m and 1m scale);
bottom: Monolith sample 103 (0.5m scale)

Figure 16: Monoliths taken through buried soil layer 161 (157) and overlying alluvial deposits:
top: Cleaned and sampled representative section (0.5m and 1m scale);
bottom: Monolith sample 105 (0.5m scale)

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