

(BU)

DORNEY
PARISH

BOVENEY COURT, DORNEY, BUCKS
ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT OF
AREA OF PROPOSED ETON COLLEGE
ROWING COURSE

David Miles
Tim Allen
Andrew Mudd

Oxford Archaeological Unit
January 1988

BOVENEY COURT, DORNEY, BUCKS

ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT OF AREA OF PROPOSED ETON COLLEGE ROWING COURSE

INTRODUCTION

The bend of the River Thames, south of Dorney Reach contains one of the most extensive areas of surviving cropmarks in the Middle Thames Valley. These were first noted in The Middle Thames Valley: an archaeological survey of the river gravels - Timothy Gates 1975, Map 28. This survey classified the complex as Grade 2 (excavation desirable in the event of development). However since 1975 aerial survey has revealed further evidence of Neolithic interrupted ditch enclosures, probable prehistoric barrows and prehistoric and/or Roman settlement.

These have been described in D R Wilson's report to Eton College: Archaeological Cropmarks between Boveney and Dorney (June 1986) and The Dorney Study: an archaeological implications report (March 1986) by P Carstairs of Buckinghamshire County Museum for Thames Water. The site is not a Scheduled Ancient Monument.

It is not possible for any Rowing Course of the proposed scale to avoid having an impact on the archaeological remains. However, on the evidence of the cropmarks, the proposed line appears to be the best option. The Oxford Archaeological Unit was asked by Eton College to assess the impact of the rowing course in order to provide information for future discussions with the local authorities and with the Historic Buildings and Monuments Commission (HBMC).

AIMS OF THE ASSESSMENT

The fieldwork was not a full-scale assessment of the kind normally carried out to draw up excavation proposals. In such circumstances the Oxford Archaeological Unit excavates a 2% - 2.5% random sample. At Dorney the aim was to clarify the following problems:

1 Chronology.

It is clear from the aerial photographs that there are multi-period cropmarks on the site. It can be assumed with a reasonable degree of confidence that to the north of the proposed Rowing Course there is a Neolithic interrupted-ditched enclosure (c. 3500-2500 BC) (Carstairs's Site D). West of the Rowing Course line Carstairs's Site G is a prehistoric enclosed settlement possibly of Iron Age date and Site I includes ring ditches, which on the basis of size and shape are probably the remains of Early Bronze Age barrows.

On the line of the Rowing Course are two major complexes of rectilinear enclosures. The importance of these depends upon their date: prehistoric fields are rare in the Thames Valley whereas Romano-British enclosure complexes are more common.

2 Distribution of Archaeological Features.

The central and northern areas of the course show few cropmarks. These areas were investigated to assess whether they were archaeologically negative.

3 Preservation.

This low-lying area of first-terrace gravel islands and flood-plain on the north bank of the Thames could be expected to contain waterlogged deposits in which palaeo-biological data were preserved. Buried plough-soils and alluvium might also mask and preserve prehistoric deposits. The value of the site as a whole for archaeology would be much enhanced by good preservation. This is a complex question as in pre-Iron Age periods much of the Thames Valley floor was relatively dry. Therefore shallow Neolithic and Bronze Age ditches would probably not contain organic material, in contrast to Later Iron Age and Roman features. The Thames Water bore holes to the north may also have lowered the water table in recent years, and once-waterlogged deposits might, therefore, be dessicated.

Alluvial Areas: The aerial photographs clearly show relict watercourses infilled with alluvium. Most alluvial deposition took place in the Thames Valley in Late Iron Age/Roman and Medieval periods. The assessment aimed to show whether earlier archaeological features were blanketed by alluvium.

THE EXCAVATION

A series of 21 trenches was excavated along or close to the Rowing Course line (Lettered A-V on Fig. 2). These were spread along the proposed course but clustered in the area of known cropmarks and alluvial deposits. These were cut with a JCB using a 1.6m toothless bucket. The intention was to inflict as little damage as possible to the site; to reveal archaeological features but to excavate the minimum sample compatible with the proposed aims.

All of the course has been sampled with the exception of the field adjacent to Boveney Court Farm which is still, at the time of writing, under crop and will not be available until March 1988.

In the area of the assessment north-east of Site G (as defined in The Dorney Study, P Carstairs, see Fig. 1) 7 trenches were excavated (Trenches A-G, Fig. 2).

TRENCHES A - G

These trenches were designed to span the proposed line and to run from the gravel island into the alluvial channel.

Under 20cm of modern ploughsoil in trenches A-D was 15-30cm of mid, slightly reddish brown, fine sandy, slightly loamy clay, comparatively gravel-free (A2, B2 etc). This contained flint and Roman and Medieval tile, and is a Medieval or later ploughsoil.

This overlay a very variable mixture of natural yellow-buff sandy clay, sand and gravel. Cut into this were a group of ill-defined irregular shallow hollows, features A4, A5 and A6, filled with soil indistinguishable from A2. A small sherd of coarse pottery came from A4 and flints from A5. Feature A7 was a shallow gully which cut the subsoil A2 and was filled with a slightly greyish brown fine, sandy gravelly clay. It contained some flint and tile, and is probably a relatively modern feature.

No features were found in trenches B or C. At the west end of trench D was a grey glazed clay silt where the natural gravel surface dipped away. It was at least 0.7m thick and became very light grey/off white in colour towards the bottom. Burnt flint was recovered from this layer and from the overlying ploughsoil. Although there were no features in this trench the flints suggest that there may have been prehistoric occupation in the vicinity, now ploughed out.

In trench E topsoil directly overlay natural gravel; in trenches F and G it overlay the earlier ploughsoil, in F sealing a heavy mid-brown clay occupying a natural depression in the gravel. There were no archaeological features or finds in these trenches.

TRENCHES H, I, J AND J EXT (fig 3)

These were cut across an area of cropmarks apparently consisting of a ditched field system, trackway and D-shaped enclosure (Carstairs's Site F). There was also a dark tongue on the cropmark which was thought likely to be alluvium. The trenches failed to locate any specifically identifiable cropmarks, but established that the dark cropmark was a silt-filled hollow of Late Pleistocene origin.

The topsoil in this area contained considerable numbers of worked flints. Beneath topsoil was a layer of slightly reddish brown sandy clay loam, moderately gravelly, subsoil c. 15cm deep. This contained flint, pot and tile and was a Medieval or later ploughsoil. The Pleistocene hollow was filled with I3, a slightly sandy, light yellowish-brown clayey silt. Small pits, ditches and one or two postholes were found cut into both the silt and the surrounding gravel; recent ploughing had truncated the features considerably, and ditches only survived up to 30cm deep. Where features cut into the silt they tended to be dug deeper, and were thus better-preserved. Relatively few finds were recovered from the features; prehistoric flints and a little flint-tempered

pottery. All the available dating evidence would suggest a prehistoric (Neolithic or Bronze Age) date. There was also a scatter of flints and pottery in the top of the silt hollow outside features, which are probably worm-sorted from higher up the soil profile. In trench J ext. two lengths of ditch in line J20 and J21), which produced flint-tempered pottery and flints and were on the same alignment as the cropmark ditches, were probably part of the cropmark field system.

TRENCHES K, L AND N (fig 4)

These were dug across another more extensive area of cropmark field system, and were laid out to cut across an apparent enclosure in the corner of one of the fields which contained marks suggesting pits and waterholes inside. Both trenches K and L were also laid out to cut into dark areas thought to be either alluvial hollows or stream channels. The ditch on the eastern side of the enclosure and field ditches east of it were excavated, as was a large deep pit and several small gullies inside it. There was a mixed area of soil and gravel, possibly containing a ditch, where the cropmarks indicated that the western side of the enclosure should be, but here features were difficult to see in very dirty gravel. Trench N ran across the line of the south limit of the enclosure, but no ditch was found. None of the features produced pottery, but flints suggest that they were prehistoric; the relative lack of finds also suggests that there was no domestic focus close by.

The deep pit N3 was filled with soils like those in the cropmark field-system ditches, and like them also contained a few flints. Despite its depth (cut 1.45m into flint gravel) it contained no preserved organic remains, suggesting that while the field system was in use the water table was low and the site dry. This points to a prehistoric date before the widespread flooding and alluviation of the middle Thames valley. At the east end of the trench there were large deep hollows containing decayed organic remains and layers of clay and of gravel. These hollows contained charcoal and some bone, but no dateable finds, and the organic remains were too poorly preserved to be of value.

At the very east end of trench L however a slightly shallower feature L5 contained clay fills with a layer of peat at the bottom, which from preliminary examination indicates a very open landscape. This deposit is not dated, but is clearly not contemporary with N3, and is probably later; there was sufficient charcoal to make a C14 date possible if more of the feature is excavated. The feature lies at the edge of a broad dark band on the air photographs, which was to correspond to clay subsoil in this area.

Further along trench L were two sizeable ditches, the more westerly (L7) undated, the other (L6) Romano-British. L7 was possibly the continuation of the field system ditch K6; there was no stratigraphic relationship between the Roman ditch and the field system.

TWO TRENCHES M AND P

These were dug across the very end of the Rowing Course line, in fields under pasture and hence without cropmarks. Just to the north-west are the concentric ditches of a possible Neolithic interrupted ditch enclosure or causewayed camp, and it was hoped to pick up the continuation of this and associated features. Trench P was completely sterile, ploughsoil of medieval or post-medieval date coming down onto clean gravel. Trench M produced one or two flint tools in the ploughsoil, and its north end, where the subsoil changed from gravel to a mixture of silt and gravel, there were several large hollows running across the trench which contained charcoal and flints in their fills. These hollows were filled with silty clays, both gleyed and oxidised, possibly alluvially derived. Within this narrow trench it was not possible to say whether these hollows were dug features, but they may well have been related to the use of the adjacent cropmark enclosure.

TRENCHES Q, R, S, T AND V (fig 5)

At the south-east end of the proposed course is a field containing the cropmarks of 4 ring-ditches or Bronze Age barrows and a few very long boundary ditches, and running between the two pairs of barrows a darker band which it was thought might represent an alluvially filled channel. It was decided not to cut into the barrows, as this might disturb burials or other complications, but to investigate the area around them for evidence of associated activity, and also to cut through the adjacent linear boundary ditch into the 'alluvial' band.

In trench R two parallel post-medieval lines of grey silty clay-loam appear to correspond to the linear boundary seen as a cropmark, and are probably associated with a group of circular pits of identical fill at the junction of Trenches R and S. South of this boundary the dark band proved to be an area of yellow silt, in the top 20cm of which was a large quantity of pottery, flintwork and animal bone. This would appear to have been an open hollow when this material, probably derived from activity associated with the adjacent barrow, was deposited. Cut into the bottom of this accumulation was a posthole, and other postholes, small pits or gullies, probably of the same date, were found on the gravel just south of the silt.

North of the barrows in Trenches T and V was another area of gullies and pits showing as soilmarks in the gravel (Fig. 5). Only one of these (T3) was investigated, and did not produce any dating evidence, but the red-brown silt fill of these features suggests that they are prehistoric.

A trench, Q, was also dug in the field to the east. The ground level of this field is c. 0.5m higher than that of the fields further west, and below topsoil and post-medieval ploughsoil there was found a deep deposit of silty clay, completely sterile, over the natural gravel or clay. The origin of this soil is unknown, but no features were found either cut into or beneath it.

CONCLUSION

Chronology

The site proved particularly difficult to date with any great degree of accuracy. Most of the finds came from ploughsoil rather than from stratified features. The pottery caused a particular problem. A scatter of flint-gritted pottery was found across the site with a concentration at the southern end. The most distinctive and widespread sherds from Trenches H, I, J and K, L, N were heavily flint-tempered and hand-made; two decorated sherds (Fig. 6 Nos. 1 and 2) from Trench H/2 are probably Late Neolithic, of Peterborough Ware. However three rim sherds from Trench R layer 3 in a very similar fabric (Fig 6 Nos. 3-5) are possibly Silchester ware of the first century BC or AD. All the other sherds in this fabric were body sherds, hence undiagnostic. In the area of Trenches H, I, J only hand-made and flint-tempered pottery and worked flints were found, and it is therefore likely that the enclosures here are prehistoric in date.

In the northern area (Trenches K, L, N) small quantities both of hand-made flint-tempered pottery and wheel-thrown Roman fabrics were found. The deep features with their varying levels of organic preservation certainly indicate more than one phase of activity here, including Romano-British. It is uncertain, however, on present evidence, at what period the field system here began, though the soils are similar to those in Trenches H-J. The enclosures and trackway bear a close similarity to dated Bronze-Age fields at Fengate and Peterborough and to a possible prehistoric system at Northfield Farm, Long Whittenham, Oxon. (Excavations at the latter site in 1972 failed to produce any dating evidence).

In order to clarify the dating of the northern enclosure system at Dorney further larger-scale work would be required.

Distribution of Archaeological Features

The sampling exercise suggested that the cropmarks provide a reasonably representative picture of the archaeological deposits. The small trenches make precise comparisons difficult. However it is clear that the cropmarks cluster are low-lying islands and tongues of sandy gravel. The hollows between them are in-filled with alluvium and do not contain settlement features in the areas sampled (eg Trenches A-D). Further sampling could usefully be carried out south-east of Trenches K, L, N, but there was insufficient time during this exercise.

Preservation

At present the cropmark area is under arable. There is clear evidence that it has been ploughed heavily since the Late Medieval period. Over the main cropmarks the topsoil is very thin and the plough has cut into the archaeological levels. There is, for example, no trace of the mounds which probably originally marked the site of the barrows.

The site is drier than expected. None of the archaeological features of depths up to a metre shows any sign of waterlogging. Only in feature L5 deep was there a preserved, waterlogged deposit. Analysis of its content indicates an open, unwooded environment. The feature could not be dated, but the environmental evidence is compatible with a Roman or late prehistoric date. Continued ploughing will further damage the archaeological deposits.

Alluvial Areas

Deposits of alluvium are clearly visible on the aerial photographs and are indicated on Fig. 1.

On the ground these areas are apparent as infilled Pleistocene hollows. The excavation evidence suggests that the alluvium was deposited in the late prehistoric /Roman and Medieval periods.

Prior to the deposition of the alluvium the gravel islands would have been more prominent in the floodplain and ancient settlement, as the cropmark evidence suggests, was concentrated on them. The low lying areas beneath the alluvium may have been exploited in prehistoric times, probably as pasture, but the small-scale assessment work did not produce any evidence for it, other than the indirect evidence of the waterlogged biological sample.

SUMMARY

This small scale assessment had limited aims. It confirmed the concentrations of Neolithic, Bronze Age or Roman activity in three areas of the proposed Rowing Course. The dating evidence was not sufficiently precise to confirm the construction date of the enclosure systems in Area F.

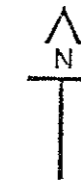
The archaeological deposits are poorly preserved, having suffered from ploughing for several centuries, an activity which still continues to erode the site. The site is drier than might have been expected and only the deepest features (over one metre) might contain waterlogged evidence.

The alluvial filled hollows produced no concentrations of archaeological activity but larger scale sampling would be necessary for the results to be statistically meaningful.

DORNEY, BOVENEY COURT.

Archaeological Assessment 1987

Line of proposed rowing course
in relation to cropmarks



Excavated trenches ———

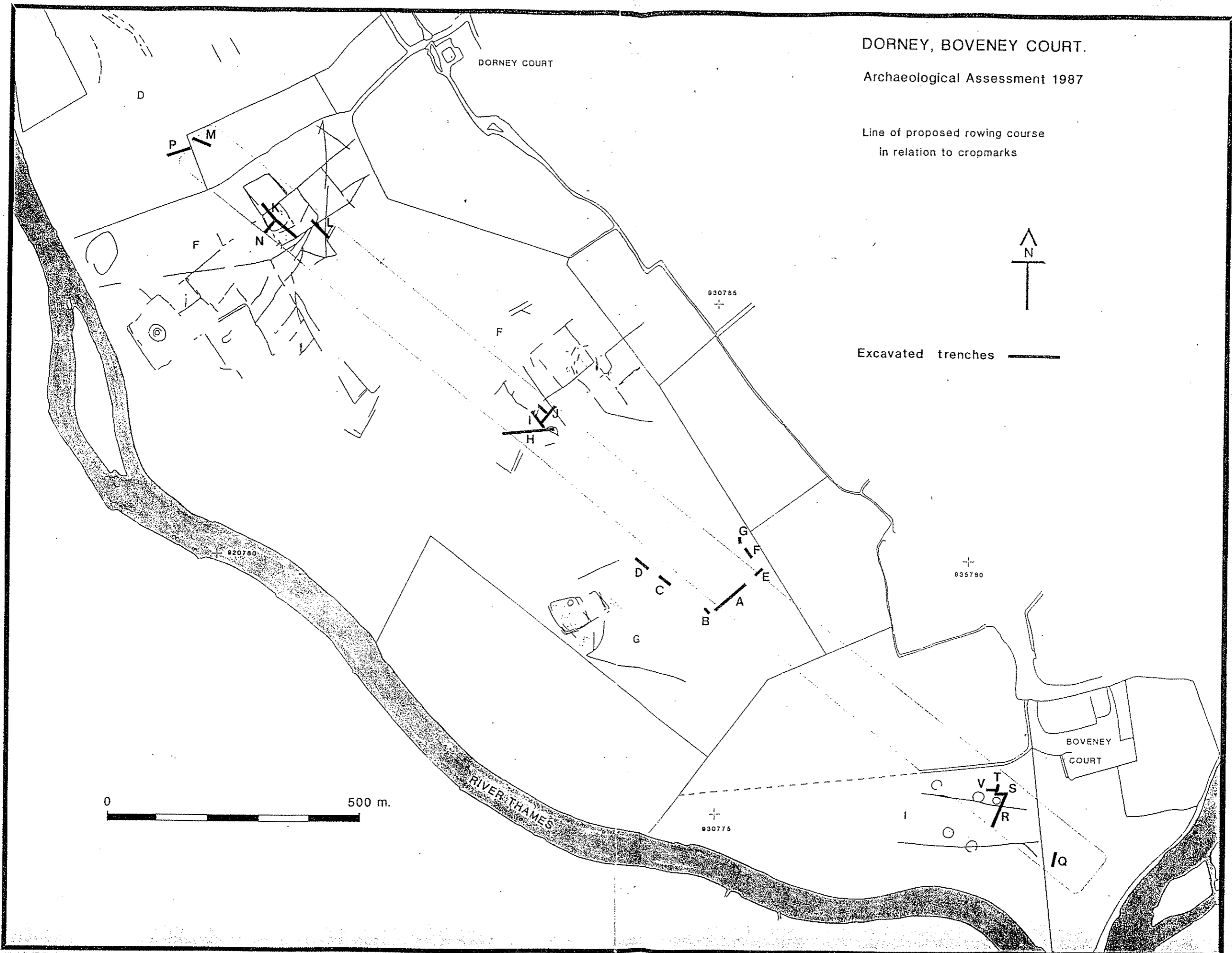
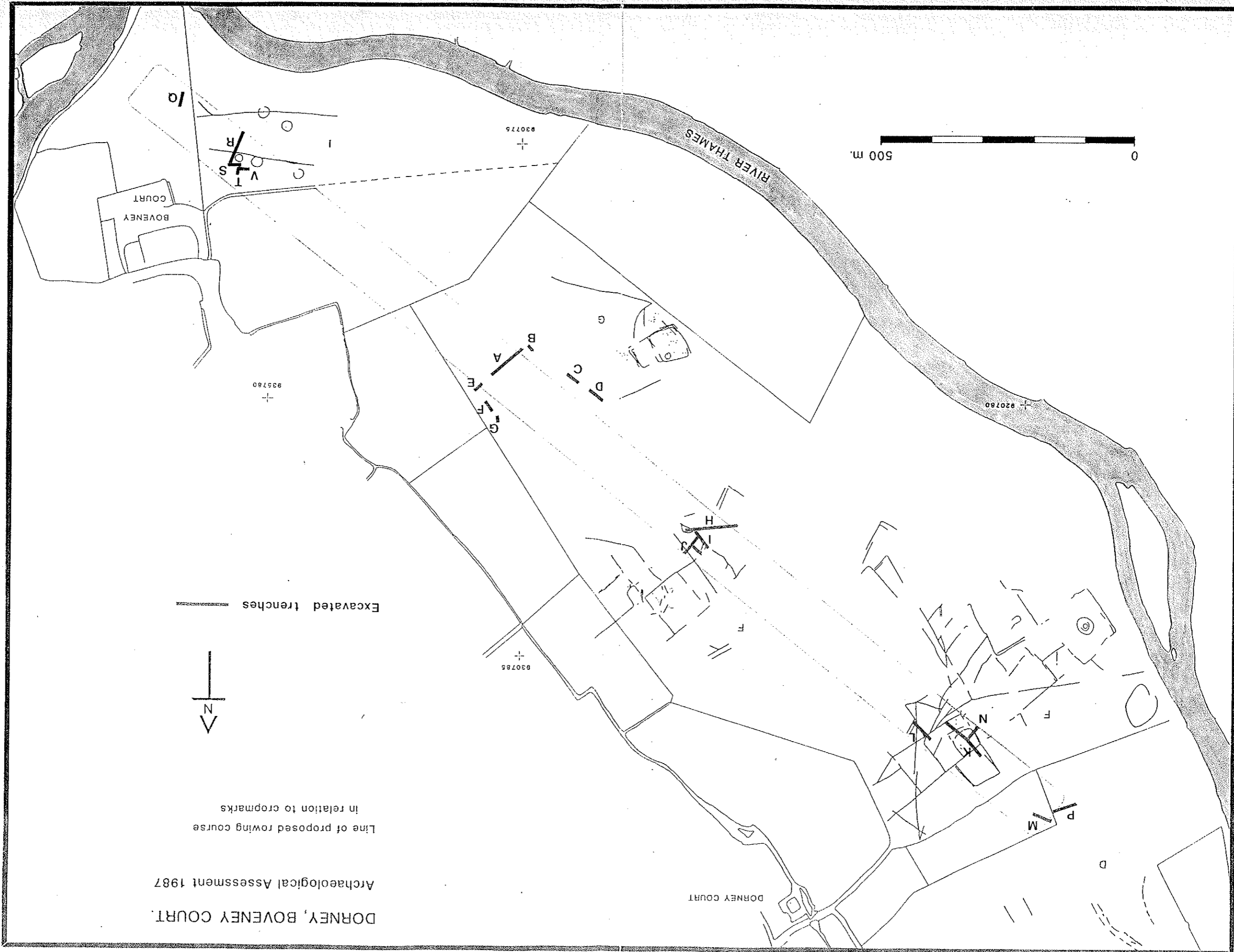


Fig. 2



DORNEY, BOVENEY COURT.
 Archaeological Assessment 1987

Line of proposed rowing course
 in relation to cropmarks



Excavated trenches

DORNEY, BOVENEY COURT

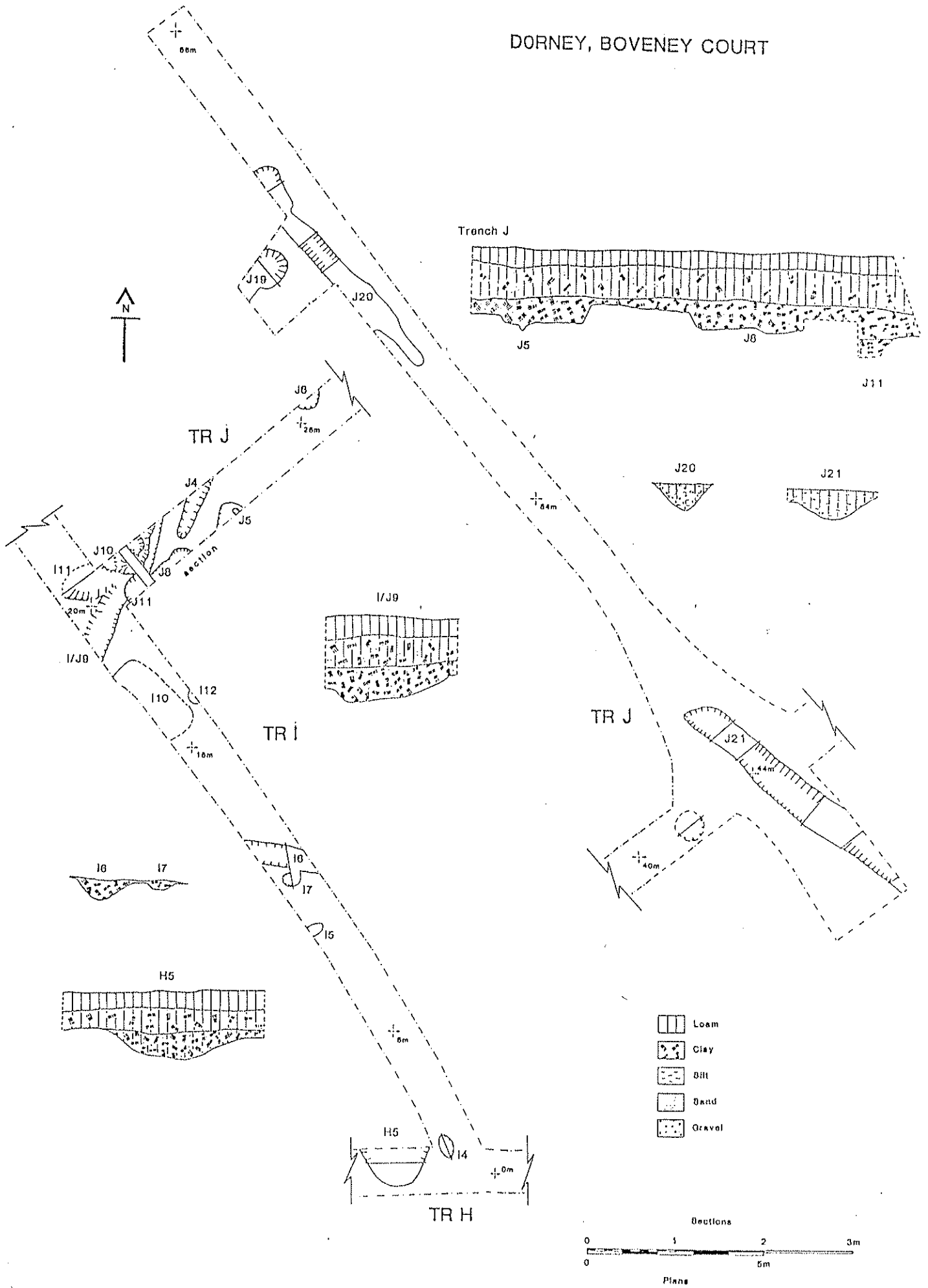
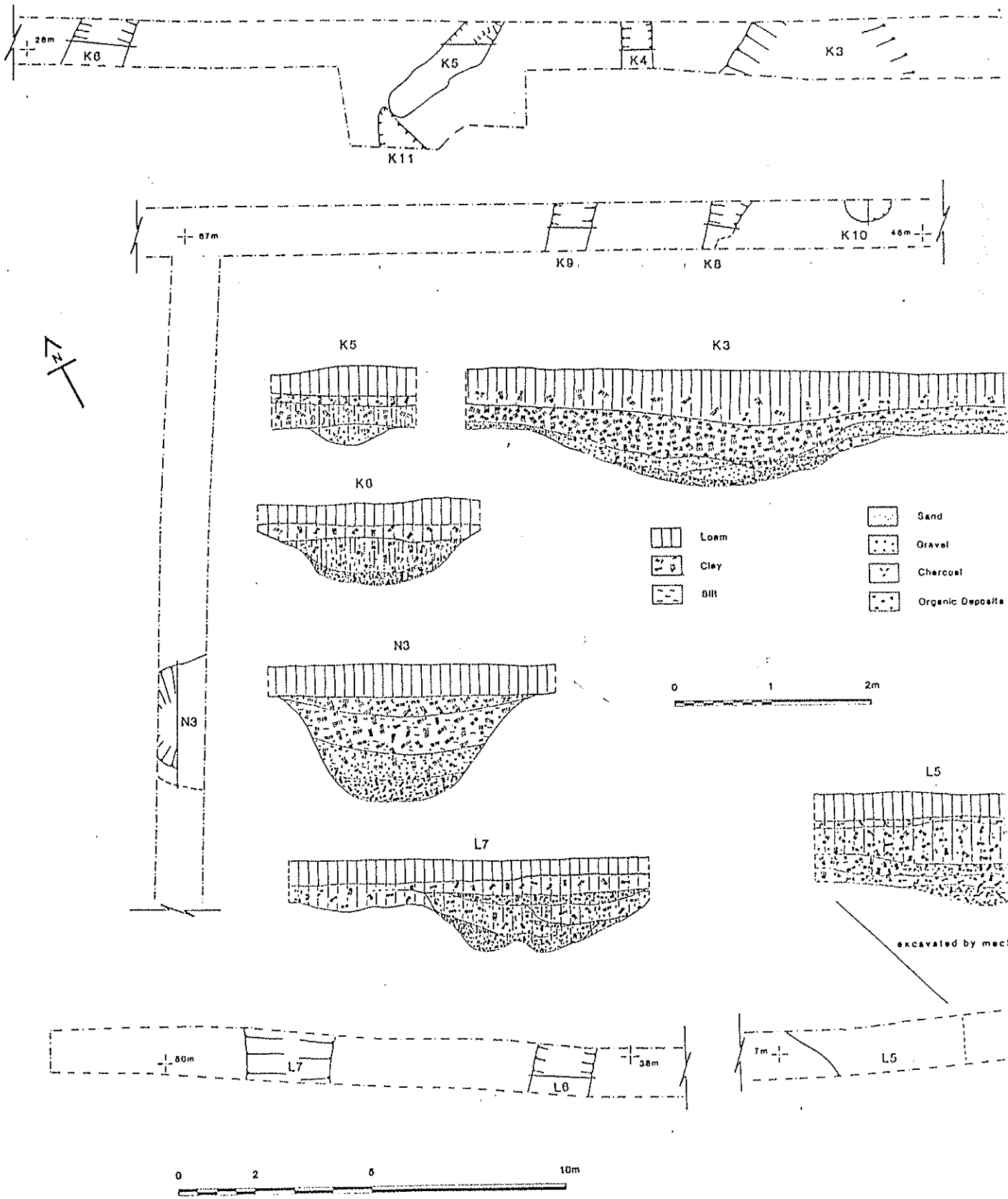


Fig 3



DORNEY, BOVENEY COURT

Fig 4

DORNEY, BOVENEY COURT

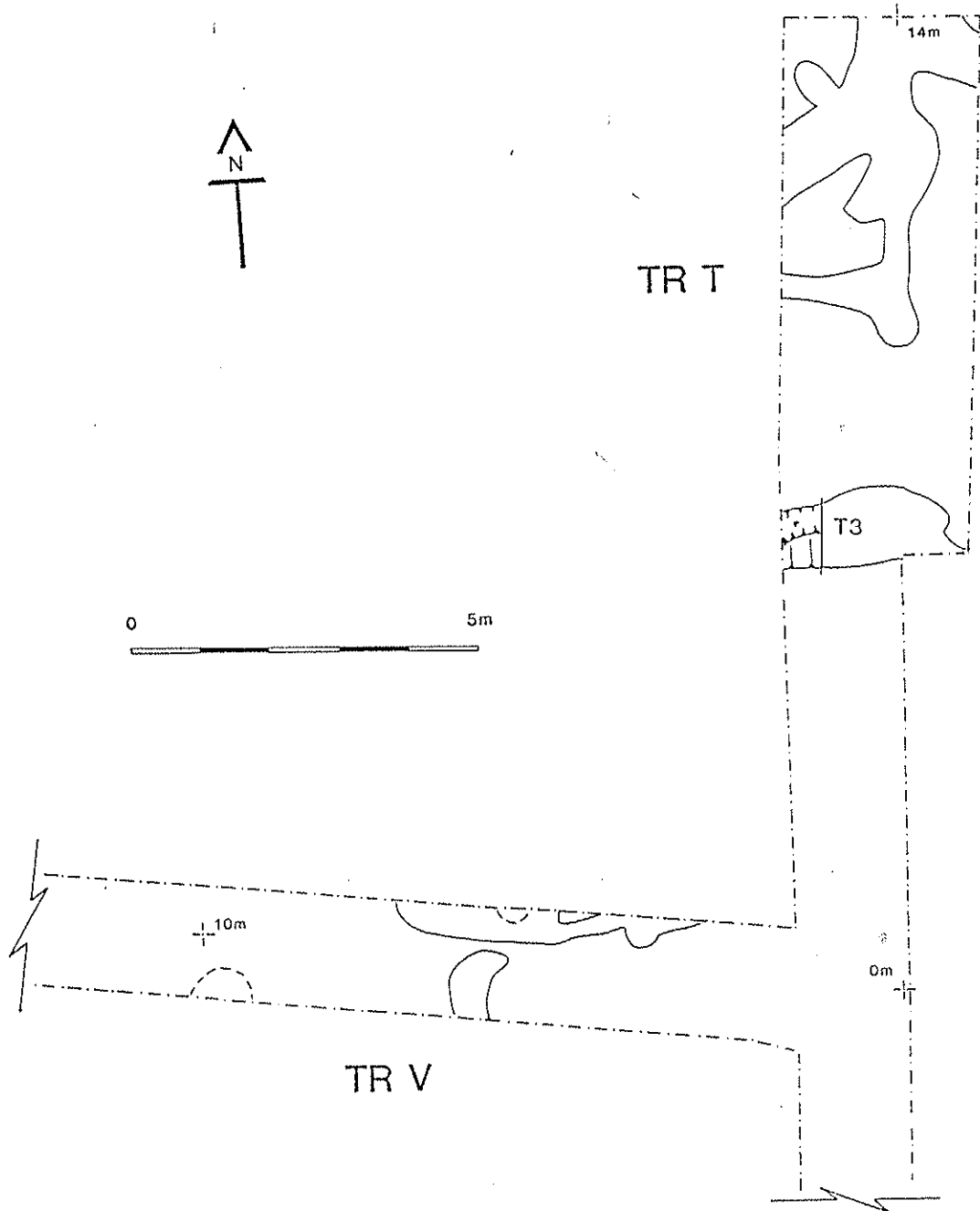


Fig 5

FINDS FROM DORNEY (fig 6)

A representative sample of finds from Dorney are illustrated.

1 and 2: Context H2. Decorated sherds of flint-gritted pottery, probably Late Neolithic Peterborough Ware.

3-5: Context R3. Flint-gritted rim sherds, possibly first century BC/AD Silchester Ware.

6: Context R3. Rim sherd of hard, quartz tempered fabric, ? Late Bronze Age or Iron Age barrel jar.

7-10: Worked flints: Context - all from topsoil or earlier ploughsoil.

End scraper, retouched blade, arrowhead and broken thumb scraper all compatible with Neolithic/ Early Bronze Age activity.

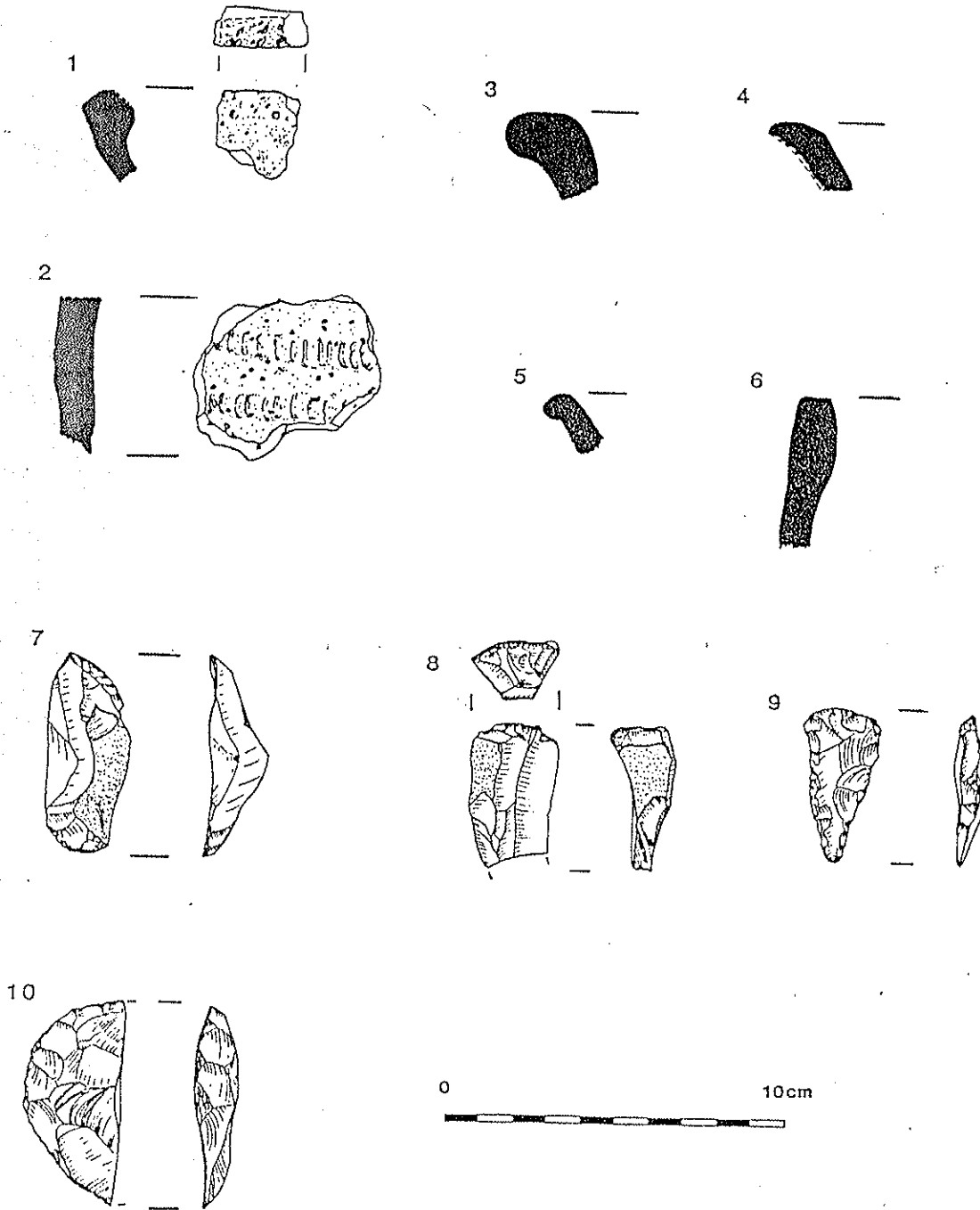
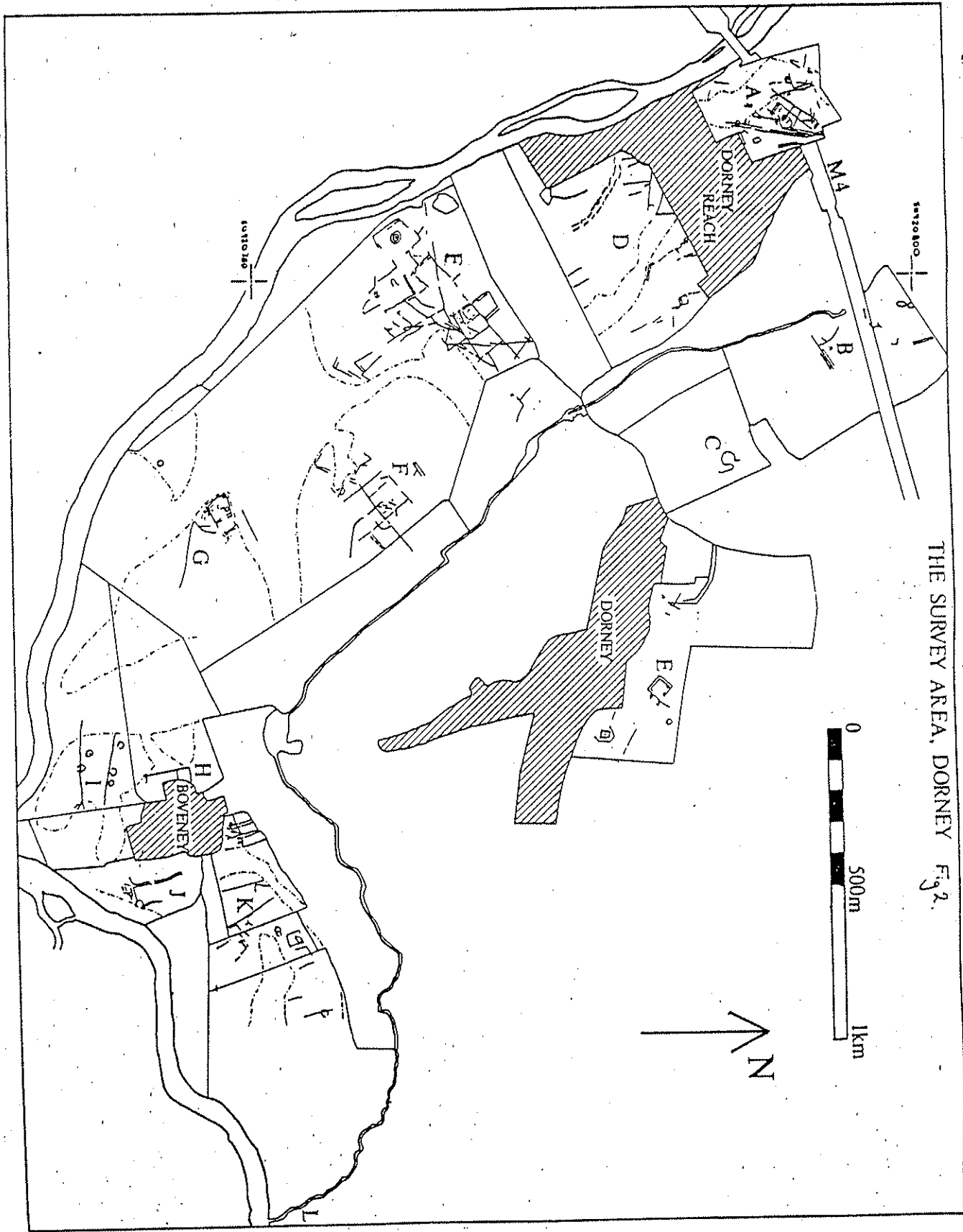


Fig 6



THE SURVEY AREA, DORNEY Fig. 2.