King's Meadow Retail Park Cirencester

An Archaeological Evaluation

NGR SP 03650058

OXFORD ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT

October 1994

KING'S MEADOW RETAIL PARK

CIRENCESTER

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INTRODUCTION

The Oxford Archaeological Unit excavated eleven evaluation trenches (Fig. 1) on behalf of Bannertown Developments Ltd in advance of a proposed retail development. The evaluation was carried out according to a written scheme of investigation approved by Gloucestershire County Council on behalf of the local Planning Authority. The original specified positions of the trenches had to be changed slightly due to obstructions. The evaluation revealed a sequence of palaeochannels (old river courses). Large glacial or post glacial channels filled with clay overlie the natural gravel subsoil. Smaller channels cutting into the clay and filled with peat and clay silting may be Roman or earlier. Horizons within the clays may reflect periods of dry climate and/or land use. These and gravel highspots are overlain by late Roman alluviation. Medieval alluviation may be present in the top of the Roman channels near the road (Fig. 2). Recent peat filled features were located which may be flax retting pits although there was no corroborating evidence for this.

There were no man-made features (pits, postholes structures etc.) located in any of the trenches on the site apart from two modern ?flax retting pits and an adjacent ditch.

No significant archaeological deposits were located. Palaeo-environmental samples were taken to elucidate the sequence of channels, horizons and the possible flax retting pits.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND (Fig. 3)

Before the evaluation the presence of archaeological deposits on the site was not certainly established, but the position of the site, next to a Roman road, close to the gates of the Roman town (600 m SE of the walls) and S of cropmarks, suggested that archaeological deposits would be present. There is Iron Age and early Roman activity near the site on the S flank of King's Hill and an Iron Age enclosure on top of the hill at the Nursery Field, Beeches, further to the N (Reece 1990, 39-45 and 9-26).

The site is on ground similar to, but slightly lower-lying than, parts of the floodplain of the river Churn enclosed within the city walls, where Roman buildings have been found (Glos PRN no 669-70 and McWhirr 1973, 203).

In particular the extramural location of the site suggests that evidence of Roman burials might be anticipated on the site. To the N, towards the walls of the Roman town, three Roman tombstones were found in 1835-6 (RIB Nos 108, 109 and 110, Collingwood and Wright, 1965, 32 and 33; Glos PRN nos 8979-81). The tombstone of Sextus Genialis is depicted on the cover. Other funerary deposits have been found as Cirencester has developed (Glos PRN nos 4950-3, 8899, 8975 and 9142-8). For example, in 1950, skeletons, pottery, iron fragments and a carved stone hand were found during construction of a water main outside the SE gate (Glos PRN no 8909). In 1765 a cremation in a fine glass vessel was found at King's Mead 'about half-a-mile from the Town Wall' in the centre of a paved and walled enclosure, and in 1764 an inscribed tombstone was found at Watermoor Common (RIB 111, Collingwood and Wright, 1965, 33). The presence of these Roman funerary deposits outside the SE gate, are thought to be indicative of a Roman cemetery at Watermoor (McWhirr et al 1982 205-7).

Earlier work, in November 1991, by the Oxford Archaeological Unit included the excavation of three small trenches at King's Meadow, Cirencester on behalf of Tesco Stores Ltd (immediately to the NW of the site, see Fig. 3). In the W of that site there was a cobbled surface sealed within Roman alluvial layers and a partially robbed wall footing aligned at right-angles to Ermin Street, the Roman road which links Cirencester to Silchester. In the E of the site an area of burnt material was sealed within the alluvium and overlay a palaeochannel. In the N there was a layer of silt with a few stones on a gravel ridge forming a ford aligned at right-angles to the line of Ermin Street. The evaluation located one, possibly two, cremations on the W bank of the palaeochannel indicating an area of early Roman burial. The evaluation on the Tesco site also detected a gravel island, slightly higher than the rest of the site, with Roman ditches and charcoal filled pits indicating Roman activity on less lowlying and wet areas.

The present site lies on the Forest Marble beds of Oolitic limestone, which are overlain by shallow deposits of river gravel and clay alluviation at a height of around 102 m O D. The site is bounded to the NE by Ermin Street (see Fig. 1). The road crosses the floodplain of the river Churn on which the site lies, at an angle of about 30° to the line of the river. Preston Bridge, to the S of the site, may be the site of Roman bridge carrying Ermin Street across the present course of the Churn. A Roman road joins Akeman Street to Ermin Street at this point.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL METHODOLOGY

The overall purpose of the evaluation was to establish the presence/absence of archaeological remains on the site and to determine, as far as reasonably possible, the location, extent, date, character, condition, significance and quality of any surviving archaeological remains and to establish the ecofactual/environmental potential of the site. The location of traces of Roman or earlier activity which may have been masked by the late Roman alluvium were particular aims. The sampling of alluvial layers to assess the quality of ecofactual and environmental assemblages was another goal.

The eleven trial trenches were excavated by a 360° excavator using a toothless bucket. The trenches were to have been 30 m long and 1.55 m wide. However, due to the lack of a machine bucket of appropriate size for the type of machine used, the trenches were wider at 1.8 m. Trench 2 was only 29 m long and Trench 11 was only 9 m long.

The trenches were machined to the horizon thought to predate human activity. Although this entailed the machining out of possible archaeological horizons this was conducted slowly and was constantly monitored. No archaeological artefacts or features were observed.

DESCRIPTION OF RESULTS

Details and depths of these layers are contained in Table 1. The sequence of the old river channels and alluvial layers can be described with confidence. No discrete features such as burials were observed in the evaluation trenches but their presence on the site should not be discounted.

General description

The description is based on Trenches 1 and 2 with reference to the other trenches which had similar deposits (see Fig. 2 for section of Trench 2). Gravel highspots were seen in Trenches 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10. The gravel was overlain in trenches 1, 2, 2b, 6 and 7 by a grey clay. This clay may be glacial or post-glacial and have formed a long term horizon or ground surface until the Roman alluviation. This clay layer is likely to have been disturbed as it filled shallow amorphous disturbances which may have been caused by tree-throw pits which were seen in the top of the gravel.

Part of a palaeochannel (old river channel) cutting into the gravel was seen in trench 1. This channel was filled with peat (108) which contained environmental evidence including the remains of Alder trees and is likely to be Bronze Age or earlier in date (Alder woods predominate in lowland river valleys until the Bronze Age farmers cleared them). The upper fill of this channel was overlain by a decayed peaty horizon (106) with environmental evidence suggesting wet grassland or hay meadow which is likely to date to the Roman or later period. This horizon contained the only find from the evaluation; a bone. Similar horizons were seen in the clays above the gravel in trenches 2, 2b, 3, 4, 9 and 10.

In Trench 2 this horizon (208, analogous to 106) was cut by a peat filled channel (Fig. 2, also seen in Trench 11, see Fig. 1). The peat (206) within this channel also contained environmental material suggesting a wet grassland or hay meadow similar to that of horizon 106. A similar palaeochannel was seen in Trenches 5 and 7. This channel is probably that seen silting up over the ford and covered by the burnt deposit at the Tesco's site to the NW.

In Trench 1 the decayed peaty horizon (106) was in turn under clay (105). Another slightly peaty horizon (104) overlaid this. A similar horizon was seen in Trenches 3 and 4. This horizon may represent a mid to late Roman period between the silting of the palaeochannel caused by the construction of Ermin Street and the late Roman alluviation. This was under the uppermost brown alluvium (?medieval/late Roman) capped by modern dumping adjacent to the road.

A ditch aligned N-S was seen in Trench 8 next to two rectangular pits. The peaty fill of these features was not overlain by the brown alluvium forming the topsoil and so these features post date the latest alluvium. A palaeochannel was seen in Trenches 6 and 10 which was not overlain by the upper alluvium. The topsoil of these, and Trench 9, was very peaty rather than clayey suggesting that it is derived from a different material. These features may be recent.

Deposit Survey

The current levels above sea level are shown on Fig. 1. The proposed development will consist of retail buildings and carparking with a service road and area at the E. The proposed impact of the development (information from A Hayes- Bailey, Johnson and Hayes

Engineers) is likely to be minimal. The development is to be raised some 1.5 m above the present level. The carparking will be on geotextile and the buildings will have concrete bases with a small amount of strip foundations. The service area will be stripped to gravel but the service road will not if this can be avoided. The envisaged impact will be around 15-20% of the area of the site.

Recommendations

After on site discussions with J Hunter of Gloucestershire County Council it is likely that a watching brief on groundworks to locate and record any Roman burials that may be disturbed would be recommended to mitigate the effects of the development.

ASSESSMENT OF IMPORTANCE

There was no direct evidence for anything other than modern human activity located in the evaluation trenches on the site. However, the alluvial sequence is a record of nearby historic land use. The possible Bronze Age channel with its evidence of Alder woodland shows the virgin state of the site. The alluvium over this shows Roman or earlier agriculture upstream causing deposition of clay. The peaty palaeochannel in Trenches 2 and 11 was dated upstream, at the Tesco site, as Roman. This channel probably silted up after the construction of Ermin Way across the floodplain. The channel seen in Trenches 5 and 7 may be contemporary with this. The channel by the road left a hollow which was filled by late Roman alluviation again caused by agriculture upstream dispersing soil particles into the River Churn. The topsoil of Trenches 1, 2 and 11 may be derived from medieval alluvium, a process which was seen at the Tesco site. All these deposits provide environmental evidence of wet grassland or hay meadow. Thin horizons of pebbles seen in some of the alluvial layers may be a result of either ploughing or scouring by the river in flood and given the unbroken snail shells present in the environmental samples the latter is more likely. The placing of Roman burials in wet grassland or hay meadow along the line of a Roman road can be seen at the adjacent site and further towards Cirencester. Other than the clearance of the original Alder woodland and its subsequent use as hay meadow, the site seems to have had little human activity upon it. The ditch and pits are modern and of uncertain function.

This evidence presents a similar picture to that seen at the adjacent site (Tesco's). The most widespread change in the nature of King's Meadow was during the Roman period. The low-lying wet area with braided stream courses slowly silted up and became covered with alluvium. While the alluvium accumulated, the driest areas, the gravel islands, were used for agricultural purposes.

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ASSESSMENT OF SAMPLES FROM KING'S MEADOW RETAIL PARK, CIRENCESTER FOR MACROSCOPIC PLANT AND INVERTEBRATE REMAINS

Mark Robinson

A column of seven samples through alluvial sediments, two additional samples of alluvium and a sample from a pit were assessed for macroscopic plant and invertebrate remains.

The Samples: Column

Sample	1	Context	108	dark grey organic silt, bottom of column
	8		106	grey clay
	7		105	pale grey clay with iron panning
	6		104	pale grey / buff clay
	5		103	pale grey / buff silty clay with iron panning
	4		102	mottled grey / buff shelly silty clay with a little calcareous grit
	3		101	mottled dark grey / buff silty clay, top of column
Sample	2	Context	106	dark grey brown organic silty clay, a more organic equivalent of Sample 8
Sample	16	Context	206	grey organic silty clay alluvium
Sample	15	Context	802	dark brown highly organic silt from a recent pit

About 100-250 g of each sample was washed through a stack of sieves down to 0.2 mm and the sieve contents scanned under a binocular microscope for biological remains. Where remains could be identified, they have been listed in Tables 2 - 4, + recording present and ++ several too many.

The earliest sample in the sequence, Sample 1, contains numerous badly-preserved seeds of *Alnus glutinosa* (alder) and little else apart from a few female alder catkin fragments. They suggest an environment of dense alder woodland on the floodplain. The deposit is likely to be later Mesolithic, Neolithic or Bronze Age in date, although there is no reason why alder woodland could not have had a localised presence on the floodplain up to the present day. The presence of a larval case of the caddis *Ithytrichia* sp. suggests that the deposit was laid down under flowing water conditions, probably on the bed of a channel.

The molluscs from Samples 8 to 3, the inorganic part of the alluvial sequences, are mostly species of wet to marshy habitats, *Succinea* or *Oxyloma* sp. and *Trichia hispida* gp. being abundant in all the samples. The slum aquatic mollusc *Lymnaea truncatula* also occurs in all the samples. The species composition of the samples is characteristic of alluvial hay meadow (but not pasture) on the floodplain of the upper Thames basin (Robinson 1988) but this fauna could also live amongst tall vegetation alongside a channel. A similar snail assemblage was noted from the alluvium covering Roman features at the neighbouring Tesco site. Such assemblages are particularly characteristic of medieval alluvium in the region but there is no reason why they could not also be Roman in date because there was evidence for Roman hay meadow on the floodplain at Claydon Pike, Glos.

The calcareous grit in Sample 4 might have been transported to the site by a brief episode of ploughing, but there is no evidence of ploughing from the condition of the shells or species composition of fauna.

The preservation of seeds in Sample 2 is so poor that little can be said about the vegetation other than that conditions were probably wet and more open that the alder woodland.

The seeds in Sample 16, however are well preserved and are suggestive of alluvial hay meadow. *Rhinanthus* sp. (yellow rattle) and *Leucanthemum vulgare* (ox-eye daisy) are particularly characteristic of grassland cut for hay. This vegetation is entirely appropriate to the snail fauna from the column and similar comments apply to the likely date of this deposit as were made for the column.

The insects from Sample 16 are mostly water beetles which favour stagnant or slowly moving conditions.

The seeds from Sample 15 are from reedswamp-type vegetation and give no indication as to the purpose of the pit.

The results from this site agree well with the environmental sequence which has been established for the floodplain of the upper Thames basin: earlier prehistoric alder woodland followed in the Roman or medieval period by hay meadow receiving clay alluviation. No further work is recommended on the samples.

Robinson, M.A 1988 Molluscan evidence for pasture and meadowland on the floodplain of the upper Thames basin in Murphy, P. and French, C. eds, *The exploitation of wetlands*, 101 - 112. BAR 186.

TABLE 1

CONTEXTS

Trench	CTX	Type	Depth (m)	Comments
1	100	landfill	0.4	
1	101	buried topsoil	0.12	
1	102	?ploughsoil	0.12	
1	103	light orange-brown alluvial clay	0.34	
1	104	dark grey-brown buried topsoil	0.1	wet grassland ?horizon
1	105	mid orange-brown alluvial clay	0.16	
1	106	dark brown peaty organic clay	0.1	wet grassland ?horizon
1	107	mid blue-grey alluvial clay	0.2	
1	108	mid grey-blue alluvial clay fill of channel	0.15	?Bronze Age channel
2	200	topsoil		
2	201	subsoil	0.05	derived from ?medieval alluvium
2	202	reddish brown with blue grey mottling alluvial clay	0.2-.025	?late Roman alluvium
2	203	brown with red-brown and blue grey mottling alluvial clay	0.2	?late Roman alluvium
2	204	brownish red with blue-grey mottling alluvial clay	0.15	horizon- top of silting of channel, ?early/mid Roman
2	205	mid grey alluvial clay	0.02-0.1	horizon- top of silting of channel
2	206	brownish grey alluvial silt	0.2-0.4	peat in channel- wet grassland (inc wild Iris)
2	207	reddish brown with blue-grey mottling alluvial clay	0.2	horizon- top of silting of channel, ?early/mid Roman
2	208	brownish red with bluish grey mottling alluvial clay	0.1	horizon- ?pre-Roman surface
2	209	bluish grey alluvial clay	0.1	Glacial clay
2	210	silty gravel	-	
2b	200	topsoil	0.2	
2b	201	subsoil	0.2	
2b	202	reddish brown with blue grey mottling alluvial clay	0.2	
2b	203	brownish red with some blue grey mottling alluvial clay	0.12	
2b	204	bluish grey with brownish red mottling alluvial clay	0.06	
2b	205	brownish red with occasional bluish grey mottling alluvial clay	0.15	
2b	206	silty gravel	-	
2b	207	sandy pale/mid grey alluvial clay	0.1	
2b	208	sandy buff/grey/orange alluvial clay	0.1	

Trench	CTX	Type	Depth (m)	Comments
2b	209	dark grey peaty clay channel fill	0.2	
3	300	topsoil	0.11	
3	301	?ploughsoil	0.14	
3	302	reddish brown/grey alluvial clay	0.08	?med/late Roman alluvium
3	303	mid dark blue grey, red-brown mottles organic alluvial clay	0.09	horizon
3	304	reddish brown alluvial clay	0.06	?Roman alluvium
3	305	light grey with reddish brown mottles alluvial clay	0.14	horizon
3	306	reddish grey-brown alluvial clay with charcoal/roots	0.15	Glacial clay
3	307	sandy gravel	-	
4	400	topsoil	0.22	
4	401	subsoil	0.2	
4	402	reddish brown with grey mottled alluvial clay	0.1	med/late Roman alluvium
4	403	mid reddish brown with blue/grey mottles alluvial clay	0.15	horizon
4	404	reddish brown alluvial clay	0.1	?Roman alluvium
4	405	reddish brown with blue/grey mottles alluvial clay	0.07	horizon
4	406	blue/grey with reddish brown mottles alluvial clay	0.2	Glacial clay
4	407	sandy gravel	-	
4	408	reddish brown with blue/grey mottles alluvial clay	0.1	
5	500	topsoil	0.18	
5	501	subsoil	0.17	
5	502	grey reddish brown mottles sandy alluvial clay	0.12	?med/late Roman alluvium
5	503	dark grey organic alluvial clay	0.07	channel fill
5	504	light yellowish brown grey mottles alluvial clay	0.38	Glacial clay
5	505	mid dark blue/grey reddish brown alluvial clay	0.12	channel fill
5	506	dark grey organic alluvial clay	0.09	organic channel fill
5	507	light grey alluvial clay	0.06	channel fill
5	508	sandy silt gravel	-	
5	509	'event' filled by alluvial clays 503, 505, 506 and 507, channel		
6	601	topsoil	0.25	
6	602	buff shelly alluvial clay	0.18	

Trench	CTX	Type	Depth (m)	Comments
6	603	reddish brown alluvial clay	-	?med/late Roman alluvium (similar to top fill of channel)
6	604	light grey alluvial clay	-	channel fill
6	605	modern drain	-	
6	606	recent geotechnical test pit	-	
6	607	buff/grey alluvial clay	-	Glacial clay
6	608	gravel	-	
7	700	topsoil	0.08	
7	701	subsoil	0.08	
7	702	grey with reddish brown mottles alluvial clay	0.13	
7	703	mid dark g/b alluvial clay	0.14	?med/late Roman alluvium
7	704	buff alluvial clay	0.18	?Roman alluvium
7	705	orange alluvial clay with twigs/roots etc	0.08	organic channel fill
7	706	blue/grey alluvial clay	-	channel fill
7	707	as 509		
7	708	buff alluvial clay	0.12	Glacial clay
7	709	gravel	-	
8	800	topsoil	0.11	
8	801	subsoil	0.16	
8	802	brown organic pit fill	0.35	
8	803	cut for pit	-	
8	804	brown organic ditch fill	0.24	
8	805	grey ditch fill	0.11	
8	806	cut for ditch	0.42	
8	807	buff alluvial clay	0.58	Glacial clay
8	808	gravel	-	
9	901	topsoil	0.28	
9	902	buff alluvial clay	0.1	?med/?late Roman alluvium
9	903	orange alluvial clay	0.2	?Roman alluvium
9	904	grey alluvial clay	0.2	Glacial clay/horizon
9	905	gravel	-	
10	1001	topsoil	0.25	
10	1002	buff alluvial clay	0.25	?med/late Roman alluvium
10	1003	brown peaty alluvial clay	-	organic channel fill
10	1004	reddish brown alluvial clay	0.1	Glacial clay/horizon
10	1005	gravel	-	
11	1100	topsoil	0.14	

Trench	CTX	Type	Depth (m)	Comments
11	1101	fill	0.5	
11	1102	fill	0.12	
11	1103	cut for drainage ditch	0.6	
11	1104	upcast from 1103	0.46	
11	1105	brown grey alluvial clay	0.22	?med/late Roman alluvium
11	1106	grey alluvial clay	0.17	?Roman alluvium
11	1107	mid blue/grey alluvial clay	0.25	channel fill
11	1108	dark brown humic clay channel fill	0.05	channel fill
11	1109	'event' channel		
11	1110	light blue/grey alluvial clay	-	Glacial clay
11	1111	gravel	-	
11	1112	grey silty clay fill of 1103	0.2	

Table 2:		**Sample**			
SEEDS		**1**	**2**	**16**	**15**
Ranunculus acris	meadow buttercup			+	
Thalictrum flavum	meadow rue			+	
Viola sp.	violet		+		
Cerastium cf. *fontanum*	mouse-ear chickweed			+ +	
Chenopodium album	fat hen			+	
Prunus spinosa	sloe	+			
Rumex conglomeratus	dock			+	
Urtica dioica	stinging nettle			+	
Alnus glutinosa	alder	+ +			
Rhinanthus sp.	yellow rattle			+	
Prunella vulgaris	self-heal			+	
Senecio cf. *aquaticus*	marsh ragwort			+	
Eupatorium cannabinum	hemp agrimony		+		
Leucanthemum vulgare	ox-eye daisy			+ +	
Leontodon sp.	hawkbit			+	
Alisma sp.	water plantain				+
Juncus effusus gp.	tussock rush			+	
J. articulatus gp.	rush		+ +	+	
Carex sp.	sedge				+
Glyceria sp.	reed grass				+ +
Gramineae indet.	grass			+	

Table 3:	**Sample**		
INSECTS	**1**	**16**	**15**
Ithytrichia sp. - larval case	+		
Trichoptera indet. - larva		+	
Agabus bipustulatus		+	
Helophorus aquaticus		+	
Hydrobius fuscipes		+	+
Anacaena sp.		+	
Ochthebius sp.		+	
Silpha sp.		+	
Aphodius sp.		+	

Table 4:	**Sample**						
MOLLUSCA	**8**	**7**	**6**	**5**	**4**	**3**	**16**
Carychium sp.	++	++	+	+			
Lymnaea truncatula	+	+	+	+	++	+	
Anisus leucostoma	+						
Succinea or *Oxyloma* sp.	++	++	++	++	++	++	
Cochlicopa sp.			+				
Vertigo pygmaea					+		
Vallonia pulchella		+	+		+		
Arion sp.	+	+	+	+	+	+	
Trichia hispida gp.	++	++	++	++	++	++	+
Pisidium sp.							+

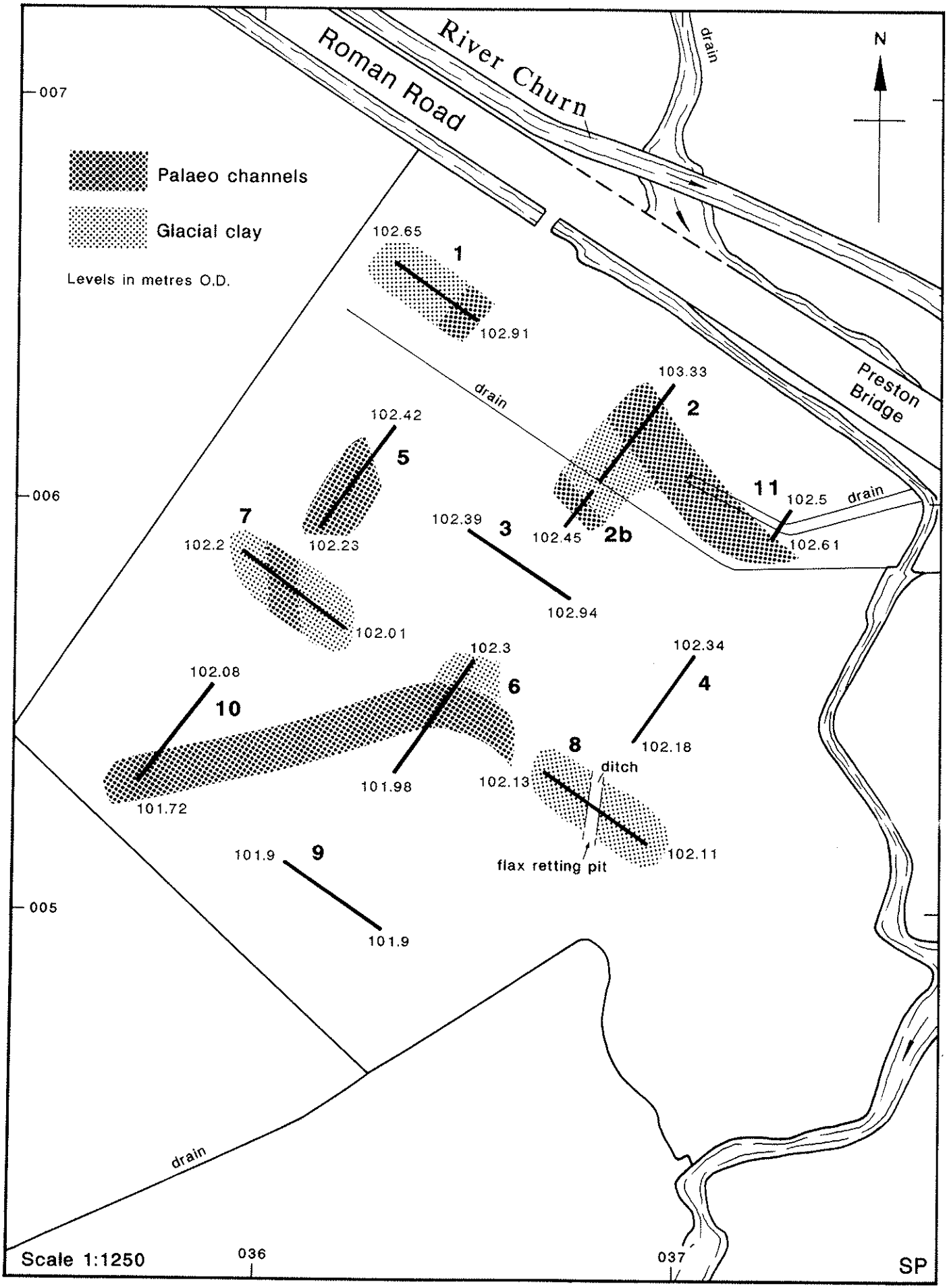
River Churn
Roman Road
drain
N
007
006
005
Palaeo channels
Glacial clay
Levels in metres O.D.
102.65
1
102.91
drain
103.33
2
102.42
5
102.23
102.39
3
102.94
102.45
2b
11
102.5
drain
102.61
Preston Bridge
7
102.2
102.01
102.3
6
101.98
102.08
10
101.72
102.34
4
102.18
8
ditch
102.13
102.11
flax retting pit
101.9
9
101.9
drain
Scale 1:1250
036
037
SP

figure 1

Trench 2: section

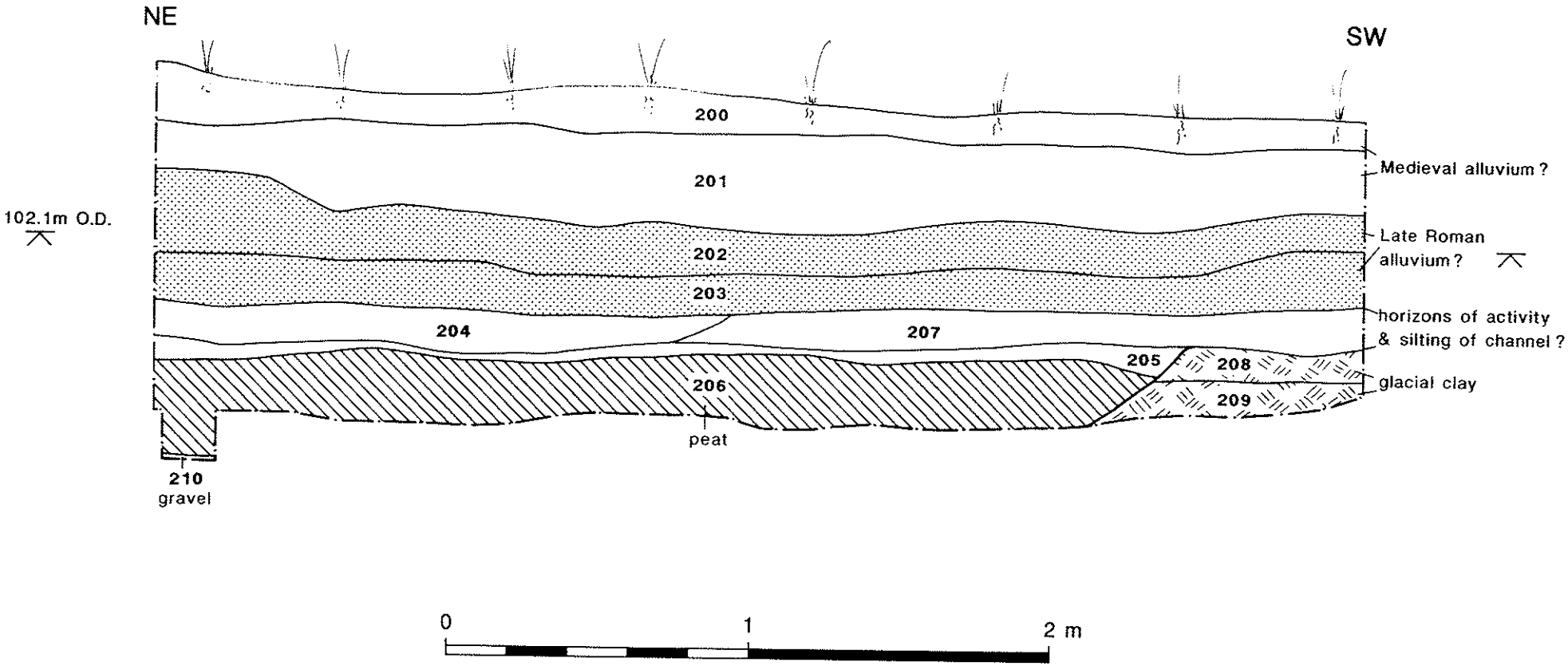

figure 2

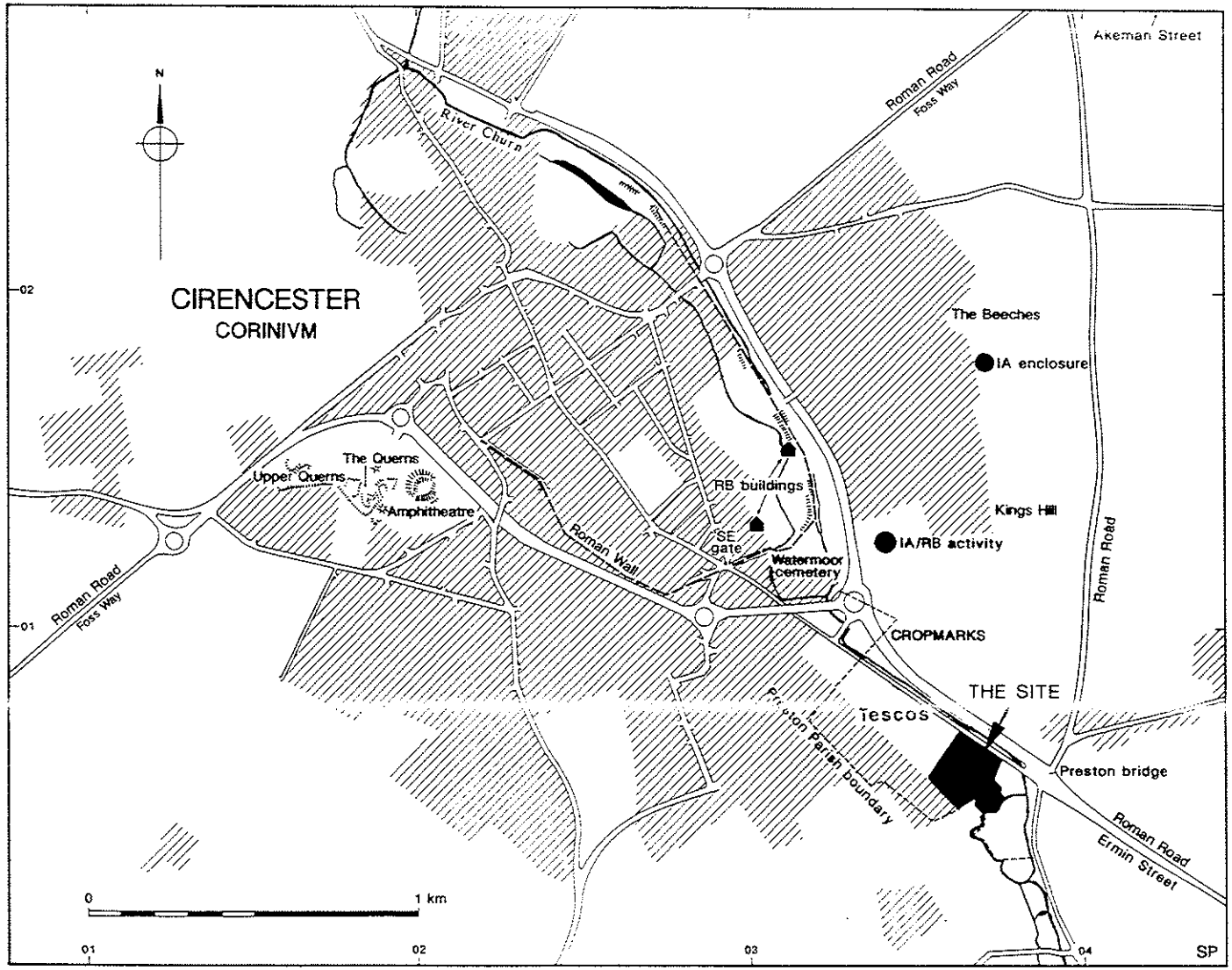
N
CIRENCESTER
CORINIVM
Akeman Street
Roman Road
Foss Way
River Churn
The Beeches
IA enclosure
Kings Hill
IA/RB activity
The Querns
Upper Querns
Amphitheatre
RB buildings
SE gate
Roman Wall
Watermoor Cemetery
Roman Road
Foss Way
CROPMARKS
THE SITE
Tescos
Preston Parish boundary
Preston bridge
Roman Road
Ermin Street
0
1 km
01
02
03
04
SP

figure 3

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