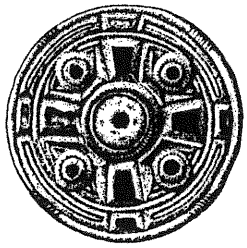

Archaeological Field Unit

Prehistoric Ditches on Land between Creek Road and Station Road, March: An Archaeological Evaluation

S Kenney

2003

Cambridgeshire County Council

Report No. A224

Commissioned by Construct Reason Ltd

Prehistoric Ditches on Land between Creek Road and Station Road, March: An Archaeological Evaluation (TL 4220/9765)

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June 2003

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Report No. A224

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SUMMARY

In June 2003, the Archaeological Field Unit of Cambridgeshire County Council conducted an archaeological evaluation on 4ha of land between Creek Road, Station Road and the railway sidings in March, Cambridgeshire (TL 4220/9765). This was in advance of a proposed housing development.

Seventeen trenches were opened by machine, and of these, nine contained archaeology. The total number of features was small, and consisted largely of ditches of varying sizes, although two pits were also identified. No dateable finds were recovered from any feature. An alluvial sequence interrupted by a peat formation episode was observed in most of the trenches in Area 1, the southern part of the site, and the features were divided into those that pre- or post-dated this inundation.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Between the 27th of May and the 6th of June 2003, the Archaeological Field Unit of Cambridgeshire County Council (AFU) conducted an archaeological evaluation on land between Creek Road, Station Road and the railway sidings in March, Cambridgeshire (TL 4220/9765). The work was carried out at the request of Construct Reason Ltd, in response to a brief set by Andy Thomas of the County Archaeology Office (CAO), and dated March 4th 2003. The evaluation was conducted in advance of a proposed housing development.

The site lies on the north-eastern side of March. It consists of three areas, all somewhat irregular in plan and roughly 4ha in total area. Other areas that form part of the forthcoming development could not be evaluated due to the presence of either gas-generating peat or contamination from the neighbouring railway sidings.

The presence of archaeological remains was considered possible by the CAO on the basis of information contained in the County Sites and Monuments Record (SMR). It records Prehistoric and Roman finds in the vicinity of the site.

Weather conditions during the fieldwork were fine, and there were no factors that are likely to have had an adverse effect upon context recognition. Accordingly, the confidence rating to be applied to the results is judged to be high.

2 GEOLOGY AND TOPOGRAPHY

According to the British Geological Survey, the site primarily lies on Quaternary glacial Boulder Clay; on the extreme west of the area, the March Gravels overlie this (BGS 1995). From the results of the evaluation, it appears that the Barroway Drove Beds, Nordelph Peat and Alluvium indicated to the east of the site also extend across the easternmost part of it.

The site predominantly lies at around 1.5mOD, being generally flat from Creek Road to the south, up towards the railway sidings that form the northern boundary of the subject area. The land then gently rises to the west towards Station Road, which is at around 3.7mOD.

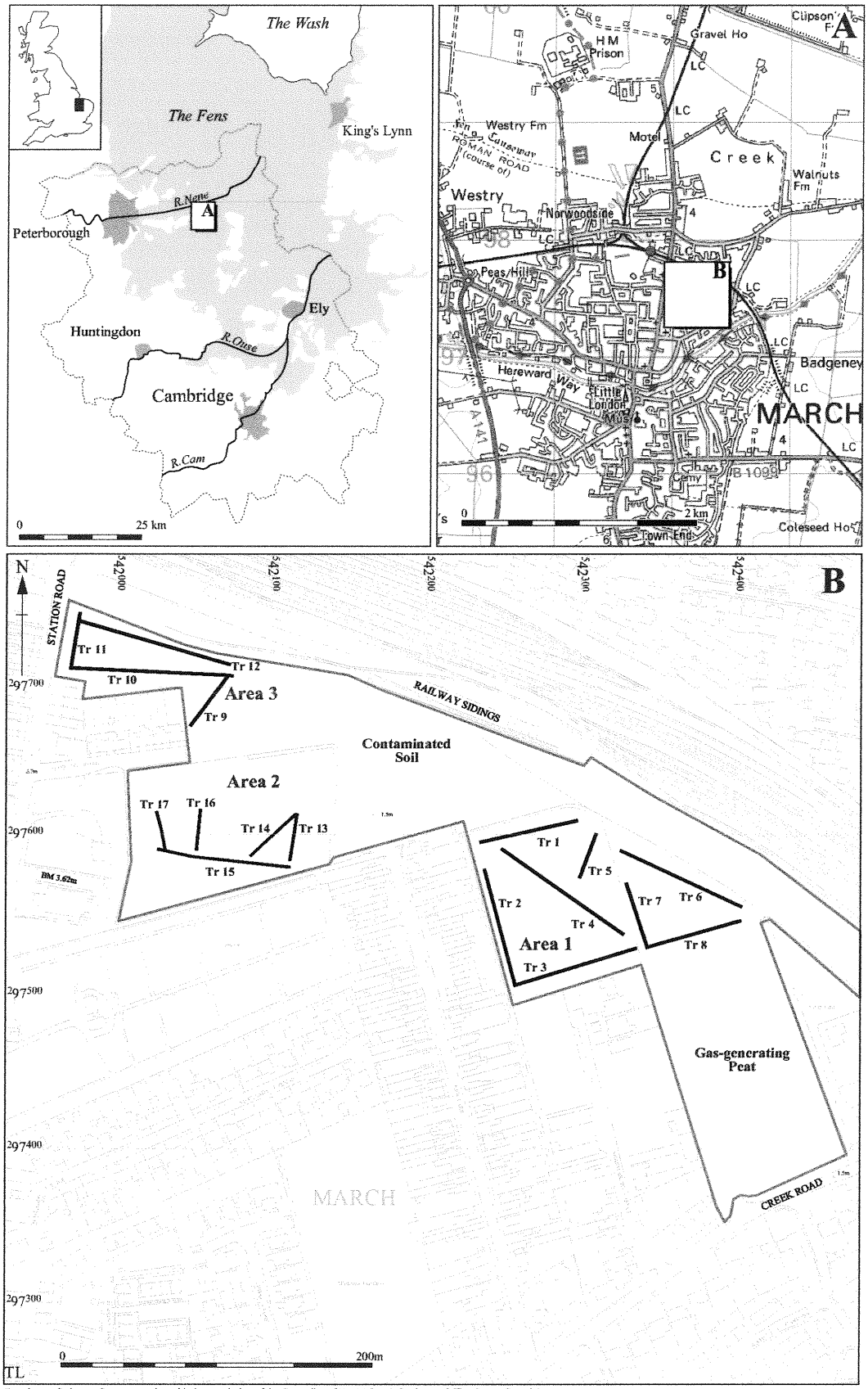

Figure 1 *Location of Development Area (red outline) and Trenches (solid black).*

3 ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Sites and Monuments Record (SMR) shows few archaeological remains within and immediately adjacent to the town of March. The archaeological evidence suggests a long period of dispersed activity around the island until the medieval and post-medieval development of the town. Records of Iron Age, Roman and medieval activity are most common on the island, whilst earlier prehistoric activity appears to lie close to the margins of March Island and adjacent to former rivers. Past investigations into the prehistoric settlement on the March Island have been restricted by the historic expansion of the town.

Areas of light soils (March Gravels) commonly favoured by early farming populations are entirely contained within the modern town and have therefore not been accessible to the extensive survey work undertaken by the Fenland Project (Hall 1987).

3.1 Palaeolithic, Mesolithic and Neolithic

Earlier prehistoric flint artefacts have been identified within the parish. These are concentrated to the west of the town (Barroway Drove roddon), far from the proposed development site (SMR 08455 and 05210).

3.2 Bronze Age

Bronze Age lithic scatters have been recorded on March Island. As with the earlier prehistoric artefacts, these are concentrated on the old roddons to the west of the town (SMR 04548 and 05007). A small urn with cross-hatched decoration (SMR 05924) was found to the north of March, under the modern railway line (north of March station). Bronze Age activity is also known some 1.5km north of the site on the fen edge of the island (SMR 08459) and at Estover (SMR 07936b).

350m to the west of the site, ditches and a burial dated to the Bronze Age have been found (SMR CB280 & O'Brien 2003)

3.3 Iron Age

During this period fen peat deposits developed around most of the island. There are currently three known Iron Age settlement sites on March island (SMR 08448a and 08451a; Cooper 2003), although other islands (e.g. Manea and Stonea) also have Iron Age settlement. Both sites (on March) are associated with the later Romano-British settlements and field-systems at Flaggrass. Similarly, excavations conducted at Estover, revealed a Late Iron Age/Early Romano-British droveway beneath the Fen Causeway (SMR

407936a), and ditched enclosures (aligned on the droveway and not on the Fen Causeway) that survived into the later Roman period (SMR 07936).

3.4 Roman

During the Roman period the dry land at March increased significantly to the northeast of the island, as marine flooding ceased. Extensive areas of cropmarks have been recognised in the northeast corner of March (around Estover (SMR 07936) and Flaggrass Hill Road, (SMR 08449) and these appear to have developed from earlier Iron Age settlements.

The Fen Causeway Roman Road runs through these settlements and across the north of March. The Fen Causeway connected Peterborough with settlements such as March across the fens to Denver in Norfolk. Most other Roman sites on the island are small and have been interpreted as farmsteads. These tend to date to between the second and fourth centuries AD. A number of sites lies on the silt roddons to the north of March and are thought to be associated with salt production (e.g. SMR 8446).

Recently an archaeological excavation 350m to the west of the site has identified Roman droveways, field systems and possible settlement in the Roman period to add to the extensive Roman remains known to lie to the north and west of the development area (O'Brien 2003). Another recent site at Wimblington Road has also revealed Roman settlement evidence (Cooper 2003).

3.5 Saxon, Medieval & Post-Medieval

The exact location of the Saxon and medieval settlements of March is unknown at present, although the cross stump and church of St Wendreda are commonly thought to represent the core of the Saxon settlement. In Saxon times March was a hamlet dependent on Doddington, which may have been an ecclesiastical centre with a Minister church (Haigh 1988). Documentary references to March suggest that it was an important fishing centre with valuable land, of financial interest to the abbeys of Ely and Bury St Edmunds. Various charters dating to AD955 to 1010 refer to exchanges and leases of fisheries at Wimblington and Stonea (Hart 1996). The town is identified as early as 1086 as *Merc*, meaning "boundary" (Reaney 1926).

During the medieval period land in March north of the River Nene seems to have been meadows or shallow fen on the basis of place names (Hall 1987). Historic maps indicate a similar pattern of low lying land which may have been used for pasture or small scale arable cultivation dating back to at least the 1680s.

The modern development of March has extended the urban growth in all directions and the development site lies on the south-western edge of the modern town (Page et al, 1974).

4 METHODOLOGY

Several factors identified in the brief and specification influenced the placement of trenches, including contaminated ground and gas-generating peat, which were flagged as areas to avoid. Additionally, it was determined on site that Area 2, which contained trees protected by Tree Preservation Orders was unsuited to opening the full amount of trenching specified. Accordingly, an increased amount of trenching was opened in Area 3 to compensate.

Seventeen trenches were opened under the supervision of an archaeologist (see Fig 1). Trenches 1-12 were dug by a 360° using a flat-bladed 1.8m wide ditching bucket, while trenches 13-17 were dug by a JCB using a flat-bladed 1.5m wide ditching bucket. The total length of trenching opened was 1039m and the total area was 1807m². This constitutes a 4.5% sample of the portions of the development area that were available for investigation.

The trenches were cleaned by hand where appropriate, planned, photographed, and recorded using the AFU's single context recording system. The trenches were tied in three-dimensionally to Ordnance Survey mapping.

5 RESULTS

5.1 Trench 1

Trench 1 was 65m long and oriented WSW-ENE. It contained three ditches and two pits. Up to 0.35m of dark greyish brown sandy silt topsoil overlay 0.4m of makeup containing crushed brick, which in turn overlay 0.57m of alluvial/peat sequence.

Ditch **32** was 0.3m deep, 0.4m wide and at least 3m long, with a round-based V profile. It was straight in plan and oriented NE-SW. The fill 65 was a pale greyish brown silt. No finds were recovered from this fill.

Ditch **30** was 0.44m deep, 2.54m wide and at least 3m long, with a round-based V profile. It was straight in plan and oriented NE-SW. The fill 31 was a pale greyish brown silt with occasional fine gravel. No finds were recovered from this fill.

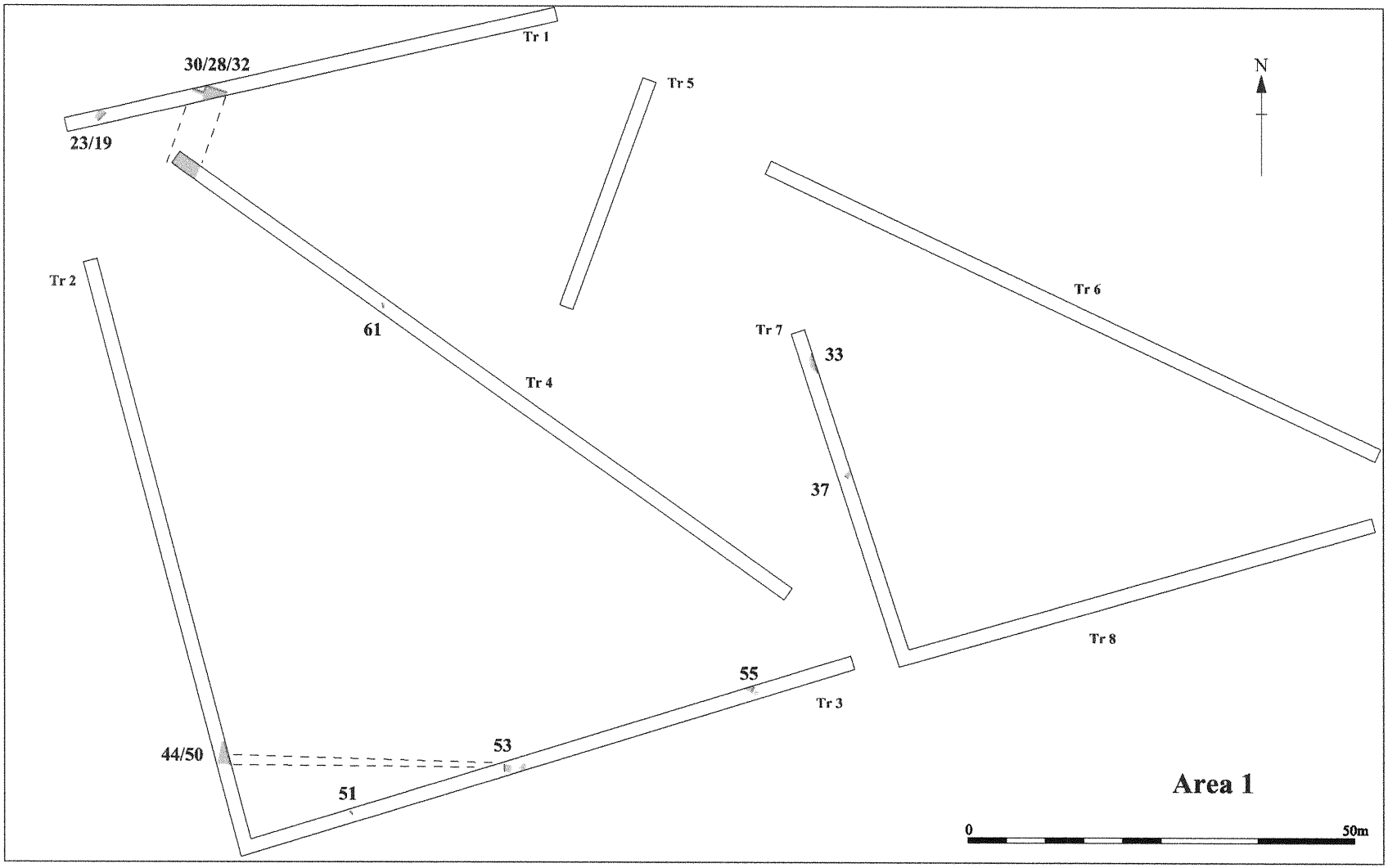

Figure 2 *Area 1 trenches showing features*

Ditch **28** was 0.3m deep, over 0.6m wide and at least 3m long, with a flat-based V profile. It was straight in plan and oriented NE-SW. The fill 29 was a greyish brown silty clay with frequent gravel. No finds were recovered from this fill.

Pit **23** was 0.29m deep, 0.84m wide and at least 2m long, with a round-based V profile. It was subrectangular in plan and oriented NW-SE. It contained three fills. Upper fill 20, was a grey silty clay. Below this was 21, a strong brown silty clay. The lower fill 22 was a dark greyish brown silty clay. No finds were recovered from these fills. Pit **23** cut the upper fill of pit **19**.

Pit **19** was 0.24m deep, 0.65m wide and at least 1.8m long, with a round-based V profile. It was subrectangular in plan and oriented NW-SE. The upper fill 17 was a greyish brown sandy clay with rare small rounded stones. Lower fill 18 was a dark greyish brown silty clay No finds were recovered from these fills.

5.2 Trench 2

Trench 2 was 79m long and oriented NNW-SSE. It contained two ditches. Up to 0.5m of dark greyish brown sandy silt topsoil overlay 0.4m of grey clay subsoil.

Ditch **44** was 0.4m deep, 2.5m wide and at least 3m long, with an irregular, stepped profile. It was straight in plan and oriented WNW-ESE. Upper fill, 46, was a dark brown and black peat. Lower fill 74 was a dark greyish brown silty clay. No finds were recovered from these fills. Ditch **44** cut the fill of ditch **50**.

Ditch **50** was 0.2m deep, 1.2m wide and at least 3m long, with an irregular profile. It was straight in plan and oriented WNW-ESE. The fill, 45, was a grey silty clay. No finds were recovered from this fill.

5.3 Trench 3

Trench 3 was 83m long and oriented WSW-ENE. It contained two ditches and a possible pit. Up to 0.5m of dark greyish brown sandy silt topsoil overlay 0.3m of alluvial/peat sequence.

Pit **51** was 0.22m deep, 0.53m wide and 0.65m long. Its overall shape in plan was irregular. The fill, 52, was a greyish brown clay silt. No finds were recovered from this fill.

Ditch **53** was 0.12m deep, 1.14m wide and at least 4m long, with a flat-based wide shallow V profile. It was roughly straight in plan and oriented NW-SE, although the sides were somewhat irregular. The fill, 54, was a brown clay silt with moderate fine gravel. No finds were recovered from this fill, although a single piece of fossilised shell was recognised, probably derived from the underlying Boulder Clay.

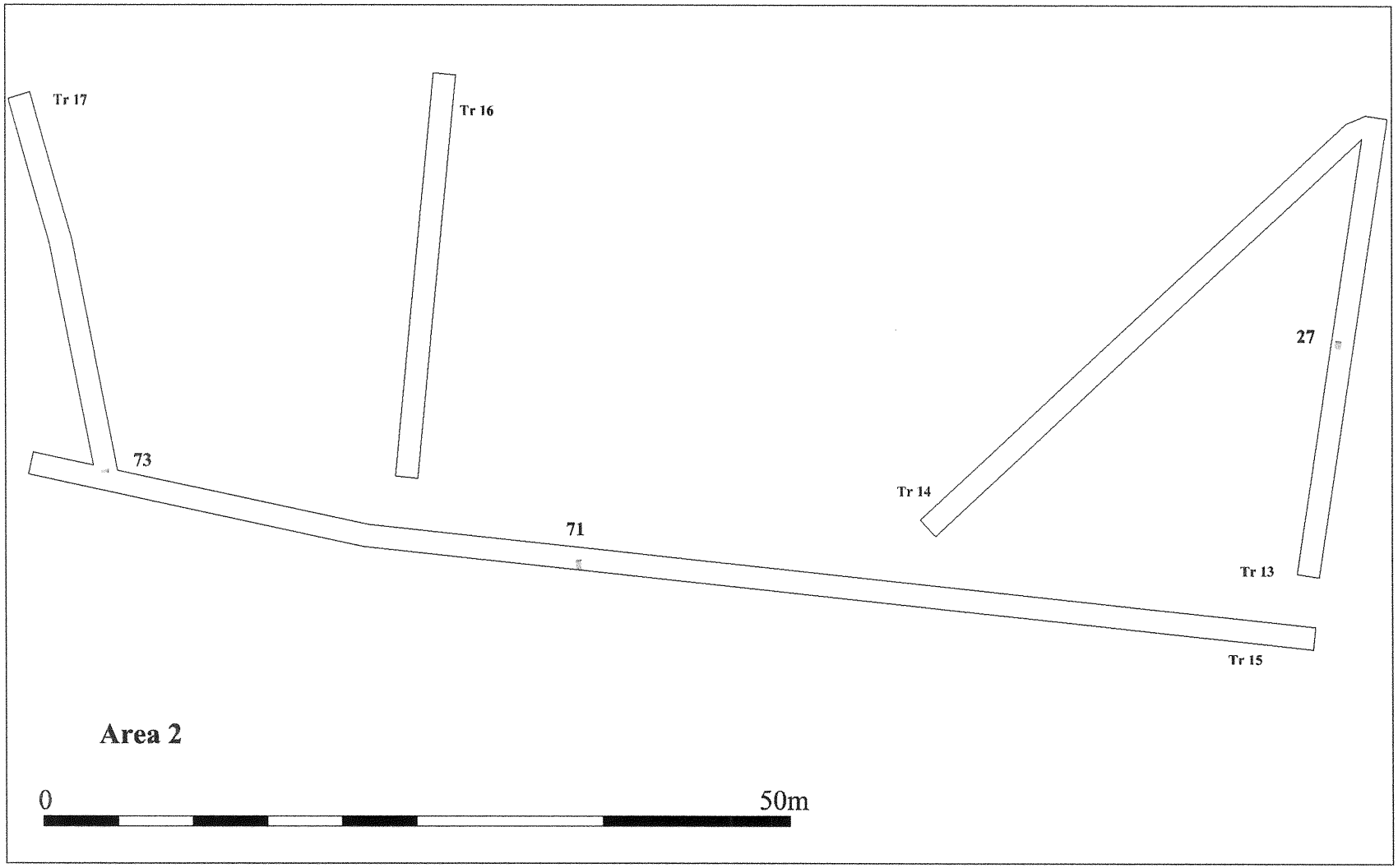

Figure 3 *Area 2 trenches showing features*

Ditch **55** was 0.12m deep, 0.74m wide and at least 4m long, with a flat-based wide shallow V profile. It was roughly straight in plan and oriented NW-SE. The fill, 56, was a brown clay silt with occasional fine gravel. No finds were recovered from this fill, although a single piece of fossilised shell was recognised, probably derived from the underlying Boulder Clay.

5.4 Trench 4

Trench 4 was 97m long and oriented NW-SE. It contained a ditch and a pit. Up to 0.35m of dark greyish brown sandy silt topsoil overlay 0.35m of alluvial/peat sequence.

The ditch observed at the far north-western end of the trench was thought to be the same feature seen as **30** in trench 1. The full profile was not fully observed and it was not separately numbered.

Pit **61** was 0.25m deep, 1.2m wide and at least 1.1m long. Its overall shape in plan was subcircular. The fill, 62, was a pale grey silty clay. No finds were recovered from this fill.

5.5 Trench 5

Trench 5 was 31m long and oriented NE-SW. It contained no archaeology. Up to 0.35m of dark greyish brown sandy silt topsoil overlay 0.35m of alluvial/peat sequence.

5.6 Trench 6

Trench 6 was 87m long and oriented NW-SE. It contained no archaeology. Up to 0.3m of concrete rubble overlay 0.2m of dark greyish brown silty clay topsoil, which in turn overlay 0.4m of alluvial/peat sequence.

5.7 Trench 7

Trench 7 was 45m long and oriented NNW-SSE. It contained a pit and a ditch. Up to 0.4m of concrete rubble overlay 0.2m of dark greyish brown silty clay topsoil, which in turn overlay 0.5m of alluvial/peat sequence.

Ditch **37** was 0.15m deep, 0.65m wide and at least 2m long, with a round-based V profile. It was straight in plan and oriented NE-SW. The fill, 38, was a pale greyish brown clay. No finds were recovered from this fill.

Pit **33** was 0.28m deep, at least 0.7m wide and 2.48m long. Its original overall shape in plan was difficult to determine but the remaining part was irregular. Upper fill 36 was a dark greyish brown clay silt with moderate coarse sand.

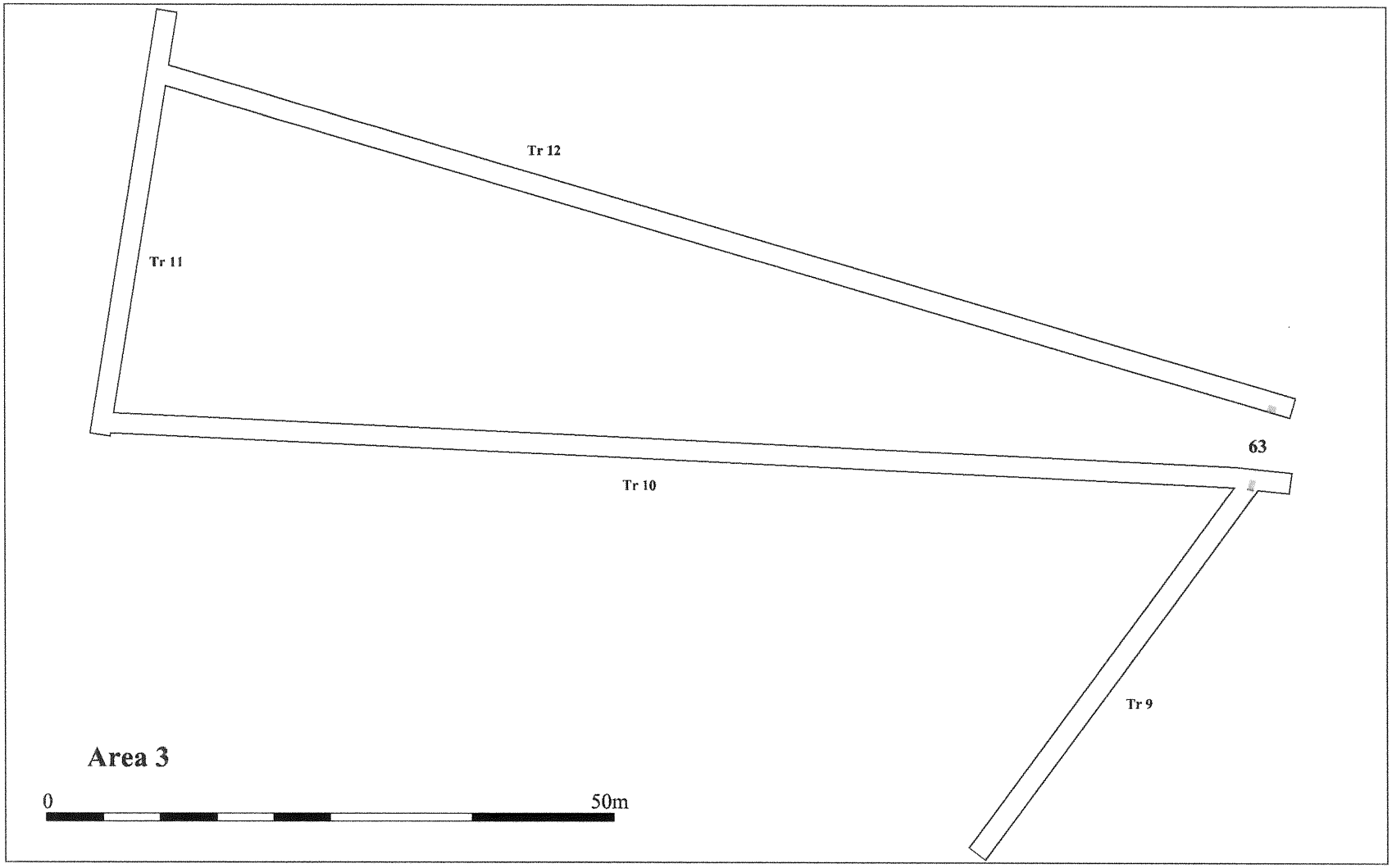

Figure 4 *Area 3 trenches showing features*

Below this was 35, a thin black peat layer. Lower fill 34 was a pale greyish brown clay silt with occasional manganese flecks and small stones. No finds were recovered from any of these fills.

5.8 Trench 8

Trench 8 was 64m long and oriented WSW-ENE. It contained no archaeology. Up to 0.2m of concrete rubble overlay 0.2m of dark greyish brown silty clay topsoil, which in turn overlay 0.5m of alluvial/peat sequence.

5.9 Trench 9

Trench 9 was 39m long and oriented SW-NE. It contained a single ditch, at the far eastern end of the trench. Up to 0.4m of dark greyish brown silty clay topsoil overlay up to 0.3m of brown silty clay subsoil.

Ditch **63** was 0.27m deep, 0.7m wide and at least 12m long, with a round-based V profile. It was straight in plan and oriented NE-SW. The fill, 64, was a greyish brown silty clay with occasional small stones. No finds were recovered from this fill.

5.10 Trench 10

Trench 10 was 101m long and oriented E-W. It contained a single ditch, at the far eastern end of the trench, the same feature as in Trench 9. Up to 0.5m of dark greyish brown silty clay topsoil overlay up to 0.3m of brown silty clay subsoil.

5.11 Trench 11

Trench 11 was 37.5m long and oriented N-S. It contained no archaeology. Up to 0.5m of dark greyish brown silty clay topsoil overlay up to 0.3m of brown silty clay subsoil.

5.12 Trench 12

Trench 12 was 101m long and oriented WNW-ESE. It contained a single ditch, at the far eastern end of the trench, the same feature as in Trenches 9 and 10. Up to 0.5m of dark greyish brown silty clay topsoil overlay up to 0.1m of brown silty clay subsoil.

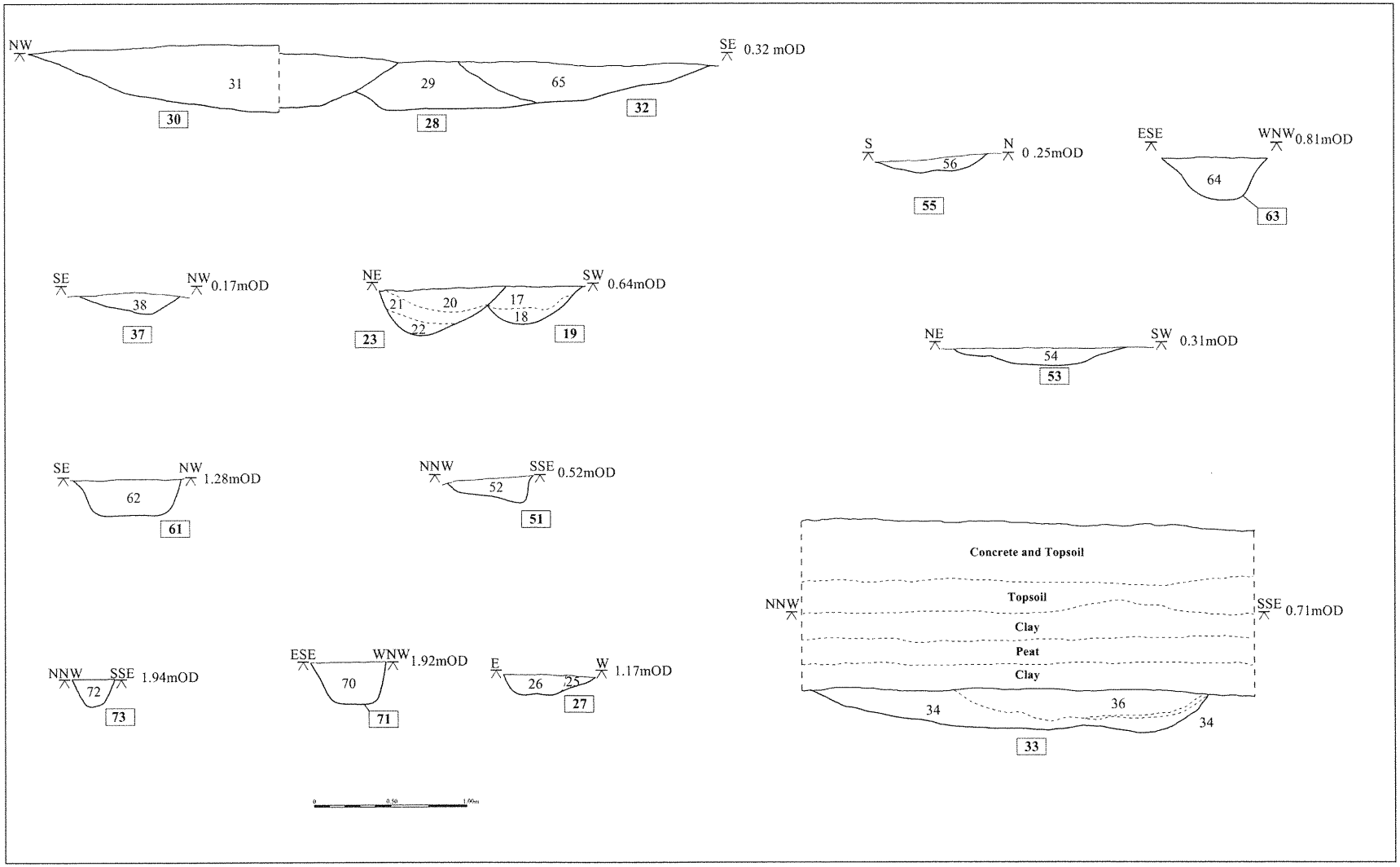

Figure 5 *Sections*

5.13 Trench 13

Trench 13 was 31m long and oriented N-S. It contained a single pit-like feature. Up to 0.4m of dark greyish brown silty clay topsoil overlay up to 0.35m of brown silty clay subsoil.

Pit **27** was 0.12m deep, 0.6m wide and 2.03m long. Its shape in plan was subrectangular, narrowing in the middle, and with rounded ends The upper fill, 26, was a dark grey silty clay with rare rounded flints up to 80mm. The lower fill was a light brownish gre, strong brown and greyish brown mottled sandy clay. No finds were recovered from these fills.

5.14 Trench 14

Trench 14 was 39m long and oriented NE-SW. It contained no archaeology. Up to 0.4m of dark greyish brown silty clay topsoil overlay up to 0.35m of brown silty clay subsoil.

5.15 Trench 15

Trench 15 was 87m long and oriented E-W. It contained two small ditches. Up to 0.3m of dark greyish brown silty clay topsoil overlay up to 0.2m of brown silty clay subsoil.

Ditch **71** was 0.28m deep, 0.5m wide and at least 1.5m long, with a round-based V profile. It was straight in plan and oriented roughly N-S. The fill 70 was a pale greyish brown silty clay. No finds were recovered from this fill.

Ditch **73** was 0.18m deep, 0.25m wide and at least 7m long, with a round-based V profile. It was straight in plan and oriented roughly E-W. The fill 72 was a pale greyish brown silty clay. No finds were recovered from this fill.

5.16 Trench 16

Trench 16 was 27m long and oriented N-S. It contained no archaeology. Up to 0.4m of dark greyish brown silty clay topsoil overlay up to 0.2m of brown silty clay subsoil.

5.17 Trench 17

Trench 17 was 25m long and oriented NNW-SSE. It contained no archaeology. Up to 0.4m of dark greyish brown silty clay topsoil overlay up to 0.2m of brown silty clay subsoil.

6 DISCUSSION

Given the proximity of extensive known archaeological remains of Romano-British date, it is perhaps surprising that no artefacts of this period were recovered during the evaluation. Even the topsoil, which had been sealed in place by more modern deposits, contained no artefacts of this period. When the topography is taken into account, however, the reason behind the lack of occupation on the Creek Road site is quite apparent. Most of the area east of Station Road is below 2mOD and has been subjected to repeated inundations during the Late Neolithic, Bronze Age and Iron Age, with the last of these episodes occurring as late as 300AD. Bronze Age remains were found to the west of Station Road, and again, this is on land higher than 2mOD. It appears that the site represents a cross-section across the local Fen Edge, where the deposits lap against the March island and that early activity is limited to the very margins. Even then, the activity is sparse and the features minor, with no finds to give a clue as to the cultural identity or lifestyle of the people who made them. The small ditches observed in trenches 3 and 7 appear to be roughly perpendicular to one another, and they may represent part of a coaxial field system. Similarly, the small ditches in trench 15 also appear to be at right angles, but do not appear in trench 16, which seems to discount the theory, at least for these examples. All that can be said for certain is that the features sealed by these deposits are probably late Neolithic or early Bronze Age, and that those post-dating the inundations are probably later than 300AD. All of the features encountered during this evaluation were probably to do with drainage in one form or another, and a boundary function was probably secondary. The complete lack of finds implies that any settlement related to these features was not close by.

7 CONCLUSIONS

The objective of the project was to establish the character, date, state of preservation and extent of any archaeological remains within the site in advance of development. Information from the evaluation will allow an assessment of the proposed development's archaeological implications and to inform an appropriate mitigation strategy.

The minimal amount of archaeology found on this site clearly indicates that the area was marginal, barely occupied land for most of Prehistory and the Roman period. Saxon and later settlement is known to be elsewhere on the March island, and this evaluation adds further to the definition of the development of the town itself.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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The brief for archaeological works was written by Andy Thomas of the CAO, who also visited the site and monitored the work.

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