

Kings Meadow Lane Higham Ferrers Northamptonshire Area G



Archaeological Excavation Interim Report



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Kings Meadow Lane, Higham Ferrers, Northamptonshire Area G

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATION – INTERIM REPORT

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SUMMARY

Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) carried out an excavation at Kings Meadow Lane, Higham Ferrers, Northamptonshire on behalf of The Duchy of Lancaster. The excavation revealed two phases of Roman activity. Features identified included the stone foundations of a small building with an associated stone and clay lined pit, two wells, five inhumation burials, a cremation and numerous boundary or enclosure ditches. A small number of possibly pre-Roman ditches and a Saxon sunken feature building were also recorded.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Purpose of this interim report

- 1.1.1 It is intended that the results of this excavation will be fully published together with the evidence which will be collected from further investigations in this area as the development proceeds. This will bring the Roman evidence together in one volume. However, as the final report may not be produced for some time this interim report is intended to provide a brief outline of the work OAU has undertaken in Area G and a summary of the nature of the archaeological deposits recorded. Detailed analysis of the records and materials collected from the site will take place at a later date and any interpretations and phasing reported here should be regarded as provisional only.

1.2 Location and scope of work

- 1.2.1 In August and September 2001 OAU carried out an excavation at Kings Meadow Lane, Higham Ferrers, Northamptonshire (Fig. 1) on behalf of The Duchy of Lancaster in respect of a proposed residential and school development. The work was carried out to a brief agreed with Myk Flitcroft (Northamptonshire Archaeology Planning Officer). The excavation site is situated on arable land to the southwest of Kings Meadow Lane and north of Higham Ferrers modern town limits (Fig. 2). There is a water pumping station immediately to the west of the site. The part of the development covered by this work is known as Area G within the overall development plan and is centered at Grid Reference SP 9557 6940. It is 0.7 hectares in area.

1.3 Geology and topography

- 1.3.1 The underlying geology consists of Northamptonshire Sands and Ironstone. The site is situated at a height of 51-55 m OD at the top of a gentle northeast-facing slope, which then falls away more steeply to Kings Meadow Lane. The ground also slopes down to the River Nene to the west.

1.4 Project background

- 1.4.1 In October 1989 The Duchy of Lancaster was granted outline planning permission for a large scale residential and recreational development by East Northamptonshire

District Council on 42 hectares of land bisected by Kings Meadow Lane to the north of Higham Ferrers.

- 1.4.2 The planning approval predates PPG 16 and subsequently detailed discussions between The Duchy of Lancaster and English Heritage resulted in an agreement to fund a programme of archaeological work. Following a desk-top assessment, surface collection, magnetometer survey and selective trial trenching by Northamptonshire Archaeology Unit (NAU 1991) and further trial trenching by the Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU 1994) a project design was drawn up and approved (OAU 1995).
- 1.4.3 There then followed a series of targeted excavations on the Iron Age and Saxon sites identified to the north-east of Kings Meadow Lane and a further evaluation by trial trenching to the south-west of the lane (OAU October 2000).
- 1.4.4 Between April and July 2001 an excavation by the OAU immediately to the northeast of the lane largely completed the investigation of the Saxon elements of the development area and this phase of activity is now being prepared for publication.

2 ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

- 2.1.1 The archaeological and historical background for Higham Ferrers is outlined in a report forming part of the Northamptonshire Extensive Urban Survey and the Prehistoric and Roman elements relevant to this site are reproduced below.
- 2.1.2 This part of the Nene valley was intensively occupied in the Prehistoric and Roman periods. The permeable geology, especially the river gravel, shows extensive evidence of ritual activity in the Neolithic and Bronze Age with two main complexes, one including a long barrow and the other a long enclosure and long mound. There are also round barrows in a widely dispersed group over more than a square kilometre on both sides of the river. Other barrows are recorded in several locations on other geologies. It is to be expected that settlement evidence of these periods will also have existed extensively on the higher ground though little remains of such sites apart from flint scatters and occasional pits, as found adjacent to the Saxon settlement area immediately to the north of Higham.
- 2.1.3 There was intensive occupation of the permeable geology in the Iron Age and Roman periods, but by this time settlement also extended across the higher boulder clay areas. Most of the settlement is in the form of single farms but at Stanwick the Iron Age occupation appears to have been more nucleated in character and was succeeded by a nucleated villa settlement. The most intensive occupation in both periods is found on the permeable geologies, particularly the river gravel and on the ironstone. A pattern of dispersed Iron Age settlement is known from cropmarks, fieldwalking and excavated evidence throughout the area, most clearly defined within the Raunds Project which abuts Higham Ferrers on its northeastern side. Several Iron Age settlements lie in close proximity to the medieval town and others may be expected beneath or close to the town. However the major Iron Age settlement in the area is

the Irthlingborough hillfort which lies 2.5 km to the north on the other side of the river.

- 2.1.4 Roman dispersed settlement similar to that of the Iron Age extends across the area. There are also villas distributed along the valley, the two in Stanwick parish lie within 1.5 and 2 km to the north east of Higham Ferrers. There is also evidence for roadside occupation along the Roman road running along the valley.
- 2.1.5 Immediately to the north west of the medieval town is the site of a large nucleated Roman settlement of perhaps 5-10 hectares. At least half of this site was built over in the 1960s while part of the northern end of the settlement was probably lost beneath the sewage works. There was small-scale excavation in 1961 of circa 400 m² (Meadows 1992) while other trenches and observation of development wall footings revealed a burial and scatters of Roman material. The occupation dates from the late 1st to at least the mid 4th century. Crop mark, magnetometer survey and evaluation trial trenching in the northern part of the settlement (NAU 1991, OAU 2000) suggests a rectilinear layout with metalled roads and ditched enclosures. The settlement also appears to contain a major Roman building as evidenced by the discovery of a stone capital (Woodfield 1978). Fieldwalking has also revealed further early-mid Saxon pottery in association with the Roman.

3 EXCAVATION METHODOLOGY

3.1 Scope of fieldwork

- 3.1.1 The fieldwork consisted of an open area excavation of circa 0.7 ha. It was undertaken using a 'strip, map and sample' methodology where the aim was to characterise and understand the archaeological deposits by targeted sample excavation. While all features were investigated, priority for more detailed excavation was given to those features which could not be adequately understood from a sample excavation or because of their nature were of greater importance to the interpretation of the site as a whole.

3.2 Fieldwork methods and recording

- 3.2.1 The overburden was removed to the level of the highest significant archaeological horizon. This was done under close archaeological supervision using a 360° mechanical excavator fitted with a toothless bucket. The area was cleaned by hand and the revealed features were sampled to determine their extent and nature, and to retrieve finds. All archaeological features were planned and where excavated their sections were drawn at scales of 1:20. Features were photographed using colour slide and black and white print film. Recording followed procedures laid down in the *OAU Fieldwork Manual* (ed D Wilkinson, 1992).

3.3 Finds

3.3.1 Finds were recovered by hand during the course of the excavation and generally bagged by context. Metal detectors were used as additional aids to screen spoil and identify finds that could then be safeguarded by immediate removal from site. Finds of special interest were given a unique small find number.

3.4 Palaeo-environmental evidence

3.4.1 Environmental samples were taken from a range of features including waterlogged wells in order to inform discussion on the ancient environment, farming and subsistence as well as providing a fine screen for small finds in particular features.

4 RESULTS: GENERAL

4.1 Soils and ground conditions

4.1.1 The site is located at the top of a gentle northeast-facing slope at a height of 51-55 m OD. The underlying geology consists of Northamptonshire Sands and Ironstone and is reasonably well drained.

4.2 Distribution of archaeological deposits

4.2.1 The majority of the archaeological deposits were situated in the central and eastern parts of the site. A structure with stone foundations and a well were found just to the north-west of the centre of site and a sequence of enclosure ditches were mainly sited to the east of this with a further well to the north-east. A major boundary ditch was noted to the south. To the west of the structure a number of stone spreads of indistinct character were recorded and an isolated sunken-featured building was found. Two inhumation burials were found to the north of the central structure and three in the south east part of the site aligned on the northeast side of the major boundary ditch.

4.3 Preservation of archaeological deposits

4.3.1 Ploughing has extensively disturbed the site, as evidenced by the truncation of the stone structure. The lack of post holes and similar features may be a result of this although the scarcity of pits which might be expected to be more robust indicate that the quantity of features lost may be low. It is likely therefore that the distribution of archaeological deposits is a good indication of the level of past activity although the finer resolution has been lost, in particular the floor surfaces and other deposits related to the structure.

5 RESULTS: DESCRIPTIONS (FIGURE 3)

- 5.1.1 The natural sand and ironstone (8002) was overlain by 0.25-30 m of mid orangey brown sandy clay (8001) which was in turn overlain by 0.25-30 m of sandy clay topsoil (8000). These deposits were seen across the whole site area.

Phase 1 – Prehistoric / Early Roman

- 5.1.2 A number of linear features, largely undated, have been allocated to the first phase of identified activity by their alignments and stratigraphic relationships to other features. Ditches 8298, 8299 and 8176 in the eastern half of the site are relatively shallow and have a north-south orientation. Ditches 8051 and 8053 are similar in nature and were noted over a distance of 10 m on an east-west orientation close to the western edge of the site.
- 5.1.3 Ditch group 8300 consists of a shallow u shaped ditch linked to a number of inter-related linear ditches. Also undated, this group may not be directly contemporaneous with the other features in this phase.
- 5.1.4 The above features are not substantial in nature and have been truncated by ploughing; their full extent is therefore not clear.

Phase 2 – Roman

- 5.1.5 Crossing the extreme western corner of the site was substantial ditch 8280. This was only partly visible in the site area but appears to be in the region of 4.5 m wide and 1 m deep. It seems to be on a north south orientation possibly curving slightly to the northeast although its limited exposure made confirmation of this difficult.
- 5.1.6 Ditches 8288-93 form a number of rectangular enclosures in the eastern half of the site. These ditches are orientated northeast southwest.
- 5.1.7 At the intersection of ditches 8291 and 8292 well 8278 was recorded. This consisted of a liner constructed of roughly faced limestone blocks forming a square with an internal dimension of 0.4 m. This was set in a circular construction cut with a concave profile which at the surface was 3.4 m in diameter. At a depth of 1.2 m it narrowed to 0.65 m where it then dropped vertically as a square shaft with the lining stones pressed directly into the underlying blue clay natural. The well was machine excavated to a depth of 5.2 m but was not bottomed.

Phase 3 – Later Roman

- 5.1.8 The ditches in this phase were generally more substantial in nature and contained greater quantities of pottery and bone finds than those in phase 2
- 5.1.9 Ditch 8294 ran in a straight northwest southeast line for the whole length of the site with an apparent curve to the west at the western corner of the site where it cut ditch 8280. There is a contemporaneous ditch (for the purposes of this report considered as

- part of Ditch 8294), which ran on a southwest alignment from this ditch in the south-east corner of site.
- 5.1.10 Ditches 8295, 8296 and 8297 are reaffirming or remodelling the ditches from phase 2. In particular ditch 8295 reused part of the line of ditch 8288 and formed an enclosure associated with structure 8019.
- 5.1.11 Structure 8019 was a rectangular building just northwest of the centre of site and orientated northeast southwest. Only a single course of stone foundation remained and this was truncated at the north-east end by heavy ploughing although enough evidence was seen in OAU evaluation Trench 14 (OAU 2000) to demonstrate its north-east extent. The building would have measured approximately 10 x 6 m with a possible 3 x 3.5 m extension or annex at the southwest end. The foundations were 0.75 m in width. A number of more ephemeral internal features may indicate the line of later or less substantial elements of the building.
- 5.1.12 Feature 8035 (Plate 1) was a circular pit situated within the area of structure 8019. It had an external diameter of c. 2 m but was lined with packing of stone and clay creating a flat-bottomed, vertically sided pit c. 1.5 m in diameter and 0.4 m in depth. The impression of a piece of timber and a number of nails were noted in the base of the pit
- 5.1.13 Also associated with structure 8019 was a second well 8032. Situated at the building's southern corner this was similar in overall construction method to well 8278 except that it was constructed with a circular rather than a square shaft and used limestone blocks with a shaped inner surface to achieve this. The well was excavated to a depth of 3.7 m but was not bottomed.
- 5.1.14 Also included in this phase of activity are a number of burials. 8006 was a possible cremation, heavily truncated and situated to the immediate southeast of structure 8019. To the north of the structure were two inhumation burials 8018 and 8155. A further three inhumations (8012, 8128 and 8131) were found respecting the line of ditch 8294 in the southeast area of the site. The burials were generally in poor condition having suffered various degrees of decay and truncation by ploughing. The graves were orientated northwest-southeast but there were variations in the nature of the burials. Burial 8131 was a decapitation with the head placed between the knees.
- 5.1.15 A number of rubble spreads were investigated in the western half of the site and although these may reflect the existence of buildings, yards or trackways in the vicinity nothing structurally significant could be discerned from them.

Phase 4 - Saxon

- 5.1.16 A single sunken-featured building measuring 3.12 x 2.87 m and 0.28 m in depth with two postholes set in the base was identified in the western part of the site.

Phase 5 - Modern

5.1.17 A number of service trenches and intrusions were noted within the site area.

5.2 Finds

Provisional Pottery spot dating by Edward Biddulph

- 5.2.1 The site yielded a good collection of Roman pottery. Condition was invariably good, with many rims and large sherds represented. A few contexts contained very large groups, particularly 8040 (fill of ditch 8288), 8047 and 8048 (fills of the construction cut for well 8032). The pottery mainly dated from the 2nd century onwards, with the emphasis on the 3rd century. As might be expected, the Nene Valley industry supplied much of it. The site received grey ware during the 2nd and 3rd centuries, and colour-coated ware from the later 2nd to late 4th century. The latter fabric was initially responsible for drinking vessels, but soon supplied jars, dishes and bowls that were originally available in grey wares. The industry also supplied mortaria and, to a lesser extent, flagons. Shell-tempered ware, which was current throughout the Roman period, was well represented. This derived from local and regional manufacturing sites. Pottery also arrived from central and east Gaul in the form of samian. There were no obvious amphora sherds, probably reflecting the later Roman emphasis of occupation (amphora exportation generally ceases by the first half of the 3rd century). Local potters were responsible for a relatively small amount of pottery.
- 5.2.2 Notes on the dating: It hasn't been possible to finely tune the ceramic dates, so it's not immediately clear that there's any difference in date between the 'earlier' Phase 2 and 'later' Phase 3 Roman ditches. My feeling is that the Phase 2 ditches are, in fact, earlier. The dates congregate around the 2nd and 3rd centuries, but don't need to continue into the 4th century. The Phase 3 ditches contained some definitely 4th century pottery. There is some chronological overlap.
- 5.2.3 The burials are indicating a 2nd/3rd century date, and the pottery associated with both the wells dates from the late 2nd or early 3rd century. I've dated 8156 (the fill of burial 8155) as 4th century because it contained a Nene Valley jar (jars tend to be late Roman from this source). However, I couldn't find a parallel for this particular vessel, so I'm not certain about its date.
- 5.2.4 There's plenty of scope for revision of dating in general - the dates I've come up with are rather more impressionistic than actual. I had time to pick out the immediately datable sherd, but no doubt missed pottery that may have given the date a different slant.
- 5.2.5 A full analysis will follow in due course during the post-excavation process.

Bone

- 5.2.6 The animal and human bone from the site is awaiting analysis.

Small Finds

5.2.7 The 106 small finds from the site which include 43 coins, numerous nails and objects such as a bronze loom weight, a pair of tweezers and a quern stone fragment are awaiting analysis.

Other finds

5.2.8 Two stone column pieces (Plate 2) were recovered from well 8278. Column 401 was found in the lower fills excavated and Column 402 came from the upper backfill deposits.

Palaeo-environmental remains

5.2.9 Samples of deposits were taken from ditch and well features and these are waiting to be processed for carbonised and waterlogged plant remains. The potential of these samples is unknown at present but macro remains were observed in the deposits from the lower backfills of the wells.

6 DISCUSSION AND PROVISIONAL INTERPRETATION

Phase 1 Prehistoric / Early Roman

6.1.1 Dating this phase is problematic but it seems to represent fairly insubstantial boundary or drainage ditches with Ditch Group 8300 possibly forming part of a system of small stock enclosures. The high level of truncation makes a full interpretation difficult.

Phase 2 Roman

6.1.2 A phase of Roman rectilinear field boundaries and enclosures with an associated well. These follow a distinctly different alignment from those in phase 1. The substantial ditch 8280 in the western corner of the site could well be the major boundary, possibly also associated with a trackway, which can be seen on the geophysical survey skirting the western edge of the main focus of activity to the southwest.

Phase 3 Later Roman

6.1.3 This phase of activity is modelled on the same alignment as Phase 2 and the chronological definition between the two may be somewhat blurred. It is likely that the lines of the earlier ditches and in some cases the ditches themselves were still extant when the elements of this phase were introduced.

6.1.4 Ditch 8294 is a substantial boundary and may reflect an expansion of the settlement from the southwest. The burials aligned on its northeastern side indicate that this may have been regarded as the limit of the main settlement at this time.

6.1.5 Phase 2 ditch 8291 was deliberately backfilled in order to build structure 8019. The stones that formed the fill of this ditch specifically at the places where walls crossed

it evidence this. The exact form of structure 8019 is not clear, as there appear to have been various, more ephemeral walls also playing a part both internally and externally in the layout of the main building. The structure is outside the main focus of settlement, has an associated enclosure and its own well. Floor levels have been truncated and the function of the structure is unclear. It may have a ritual, domestic or industrial function but at present there is no positive evidence to support any one theory. Further light may be shed on this question when the site record and finds are fully analysed.

- 6.1.6 The clay-lined pit 8035 may help in the interpretation of the building's significance but at present its function is also unknown. The clay lining indicates a probable liquid-holding purpose and the association with the well supports this hypothesis.

Phase 4 – Saxon

- 6.1.7 The sunken-featured building demonstrated a continued use of the area into the early Saxon period and this evidence will be incorporated into the publication of the Saxon material from the development as a whole. This is currently in preparation.

General

- 6.1.8 Area G appears to represent an area on the periphery of the main focus of activity as defined by the geophysical survey. The features revealed show this survey to be a fairly good reflection of the archaeology and there is no reason to suppose that this will not also be the case further to the southwest.
- 6.1.9 **Location of archive:** The archive is currently held at OA, Janus House, Osney Mead, Oxford, OX2 0ES, and will be deposited with Northamptonshire County Museums Service in due course.

7 APPENDICES

7.1 Appendix 1 Archive Quantification

CONTEXTS (No's 8000 - 8300)

Void – 8119, 8157, 8160, 8161, 8247, 8248, 8249, 8250

293 contexts listed on 10 context register sheets.

Recorded on 293 context sheets and 11 additional sheets.

SECTIONS (No's 1000 - 1078)

Void – 1069, 1032, 1033, 1035

75 sections listed on 3 section register sheets.

Recorded on 43 A4 permatrace sheets

PLANS (No's 400 - 418)

19 plans listed on 1 plan register sheet.

9 recorded on A4 permatrace sheets.

10 recorded on A1 permatrace sheets.

LEVELS (Sheet no's 50 - 57)

Levels listed on 8 level register sheets.

PHOTOGRAPHS (Film no's 70 - 83)

14 Black and white print films.

14 Colour slide films.

ENVIRONMENTAL SAMPLES (No's 400 - 415)

16 Environmental samples listed on 3 environmental sample register sheets.

MASONRY SAMPLES (No's 400 - 403)

4 Masonry samples listed on 1 masonry sample register sheet.

SMALL FINDS (No's 600 - 705)

106 Small finds listed on 4 small find register sheets.

7.2 Appendix 2 Pottery spot dating

Context Date	Context Date	Context Date
6160 Roman	8085 M2-4th	8209 M2-4th
6713 Roman	8089 L2-M3	8212 Roman
6746 Roman	8092 M2-4th	8217 Roman
7250 Roman	8095 E/M3	8218 3rd/4th
7256 Roman	8097 Roman	8220 3rd/4th
8003 M/L3	8098 Roman	8221 M2-4th
8006 Roman	8101 E/M4	8223 L3-4th
8009 M2-4th	8103 M3-M4	8234 3rd/4th
8011 2nd/3rd	8104 M2-4th	8236 Roman
8012 2nd/3rd	8106 Roman	8240 Roman
8013 2nd cent	8107 M2-4th	8256 M2-4th
8015 L2-L3	8108 3rd/4th	8257 M2-4th
8017 3rd	8109 Roman	8274 3rd cent
8021 4th cent	8112 2nd-4th	8276 M/L2
8022 4th cent	8116 M/L2	8279 4th cent
8025 M2-4th	8118 E/M3	8281 M2-4th
8027 3rd/4th	8121 M2-4th	8282 4th cent
8028 4th cent	8123 L2-E3	8285 L3-E4
8030 M2-E3	8125 1st-3rd	8287 L3-4th
8031 4th cent	8129 M/L2	
8033 4th cent	8130 L2-L3	
8034 M2-4th	8133 Roman	
8037 M/L3	8135 Roman	
8038 4th cent	8139 L1-M2	
8039 1st/2nd	8140 2nd/3rd	
8040 L3-E4	8143 1st-3rd	
8041 L2-M3	8145 2nd/3rd	
8043 M2-4th	8147 2nd-4th	
8044 M2-4th	8151 L2-4th	
8046 2nd	8156 4th cent	
8047 L3-E4	8158 M/L3	
8048 L2-M3	8159 L2-M3	
8050 M3-E4	8159 Roman	
8052 M2-4th	8161 M2-4th	
8054 M2-4th	8167 ??LIA or Saxon	
8058 L2-E3	8167 Roman	
8063 3rd cent	8171 L3-M4	
8064 M2-4th	8173 2nd/3rd	
8067 L2-4th	8175 M2-L3	
8069 M2-L3	8191 3rd	
8074 L2-M3	8195 L2-M3	
8078 4th cent	8196 1st/2nd	
8084 L2-4th	8197 Roman	

7.3 Appendix 3 Bibliography and References

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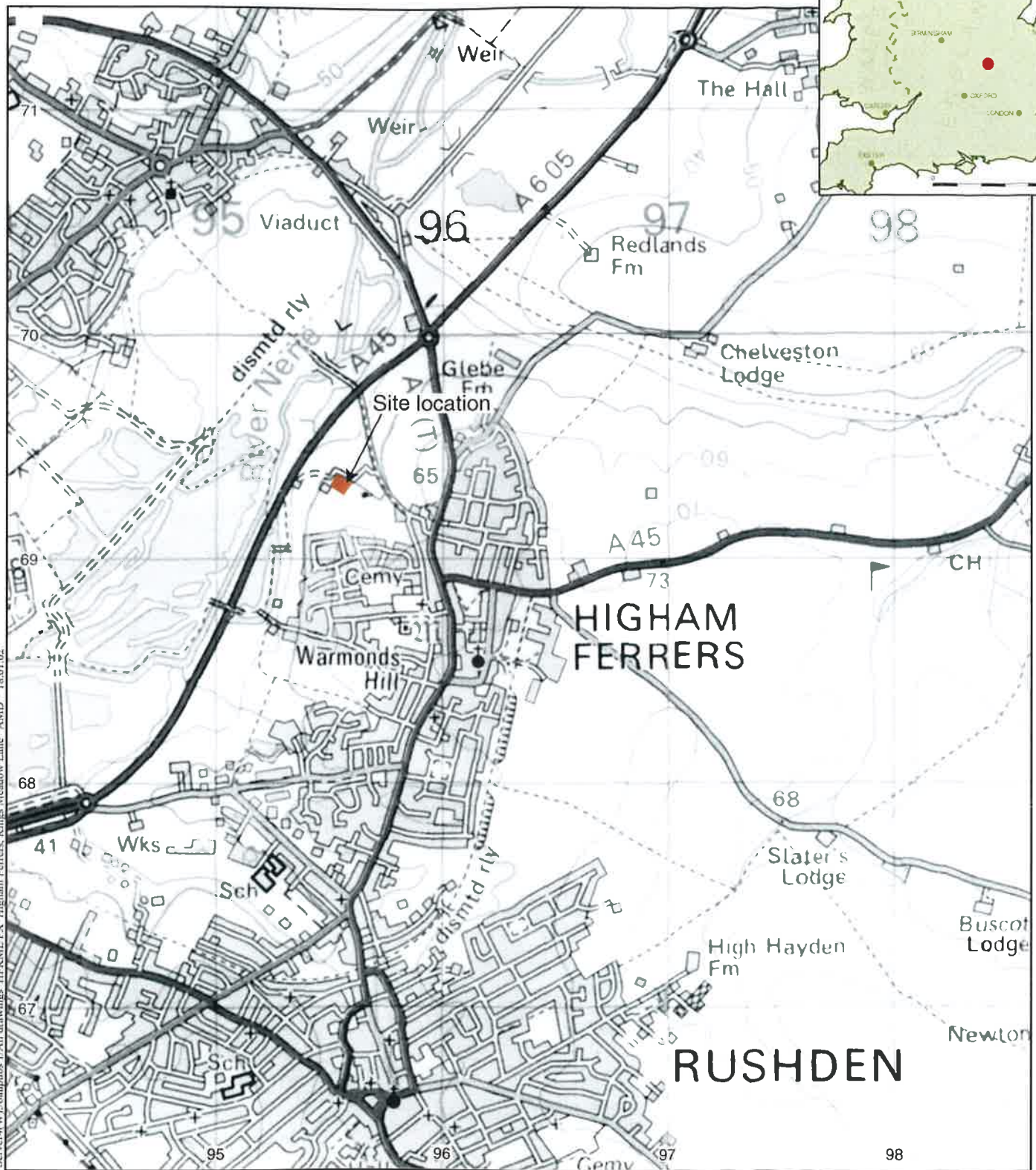
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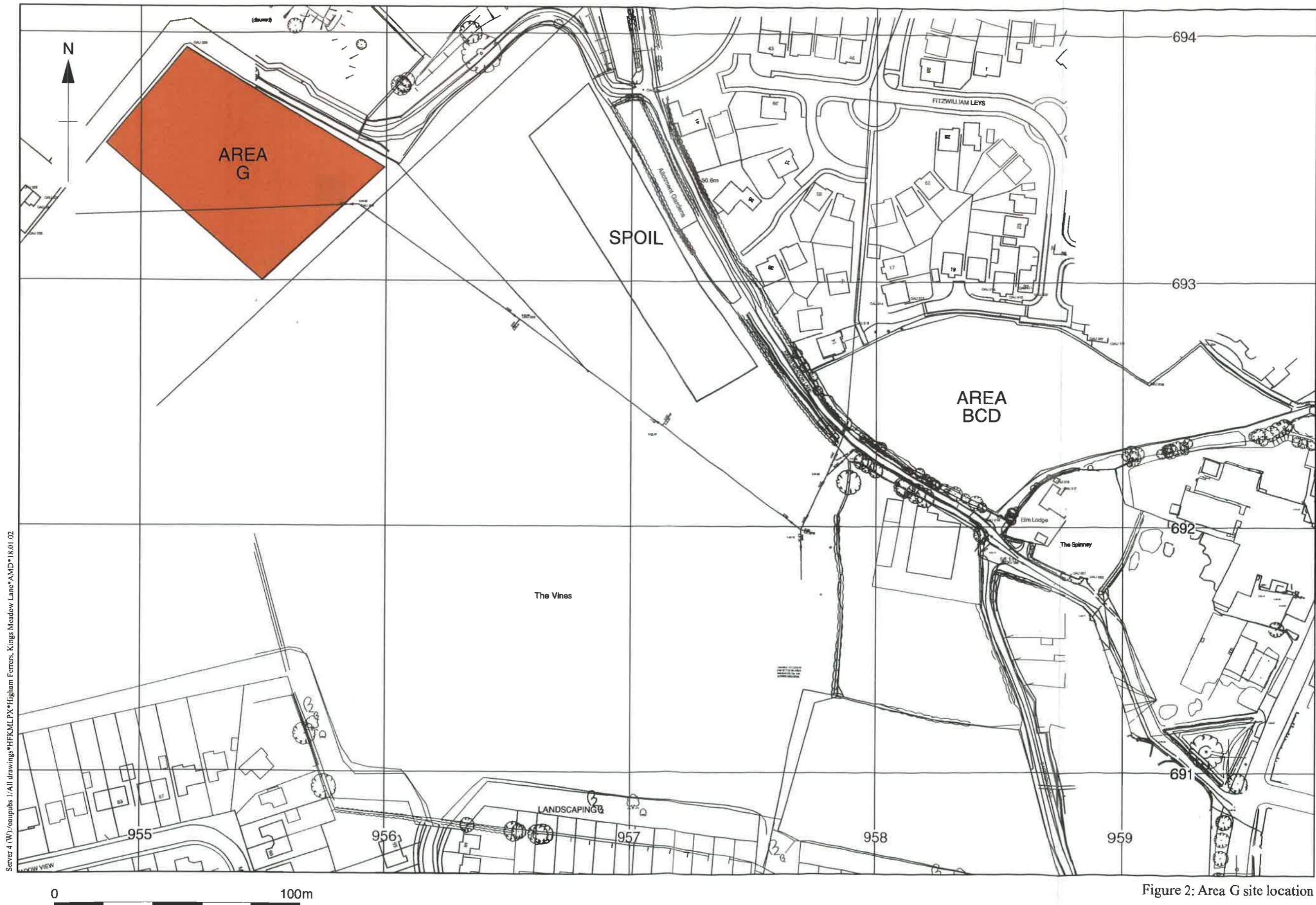


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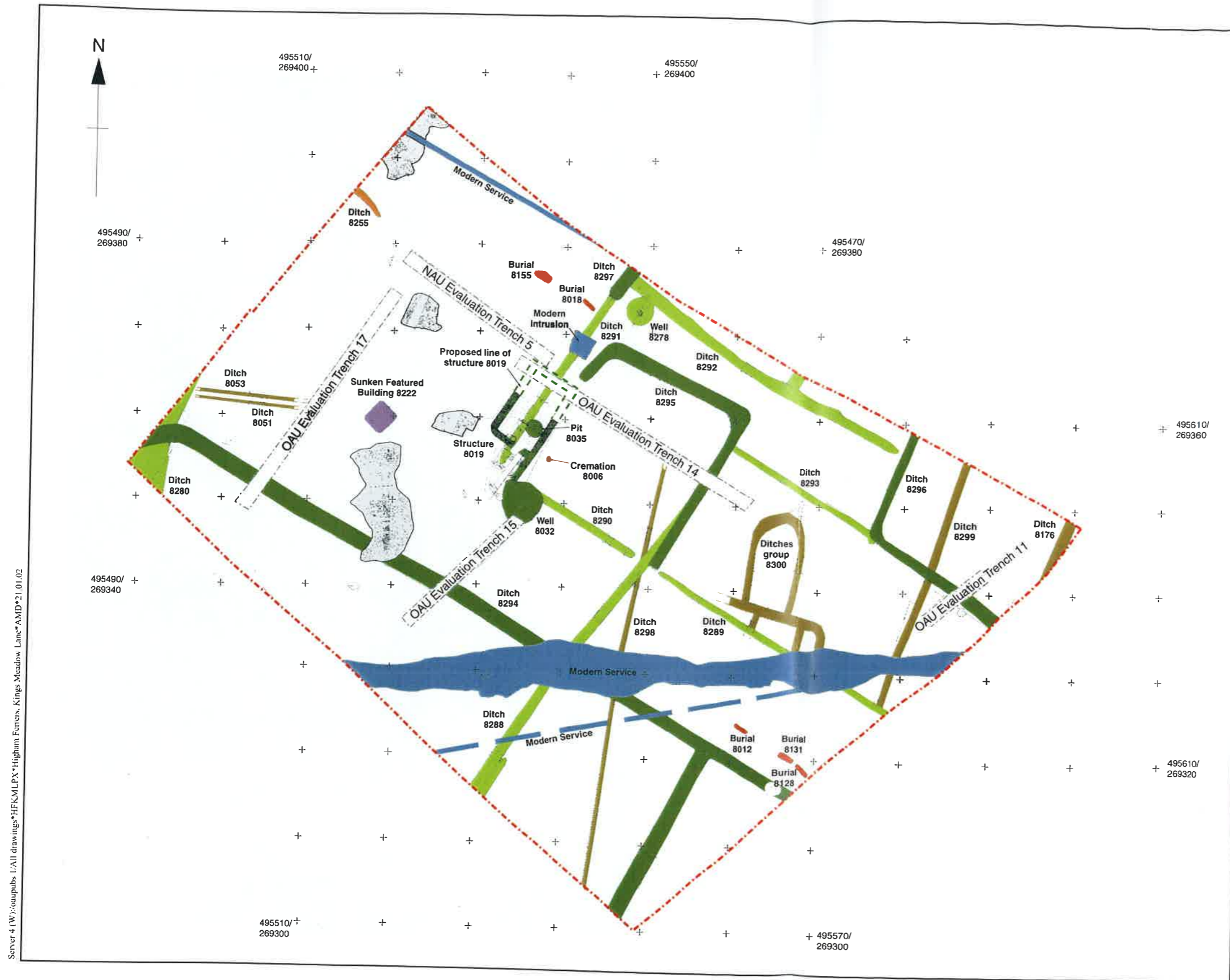
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Figure 1: Site location



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Figure 2: Area G site location



Key
Provisional phasing

- Phase 1: Prehistoric / Early Roman
- Phase 2: Roman
- Phase 3: Later Roman
- Phase 4: Saxon
- Phase 5: Modern
- Unphased
- Roman Burial (Phase 3)
- Rubble Spread
- Evaluation Trench
- Edge of Excavation



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Figure 3: Site plan of Area G showing provisional phasing

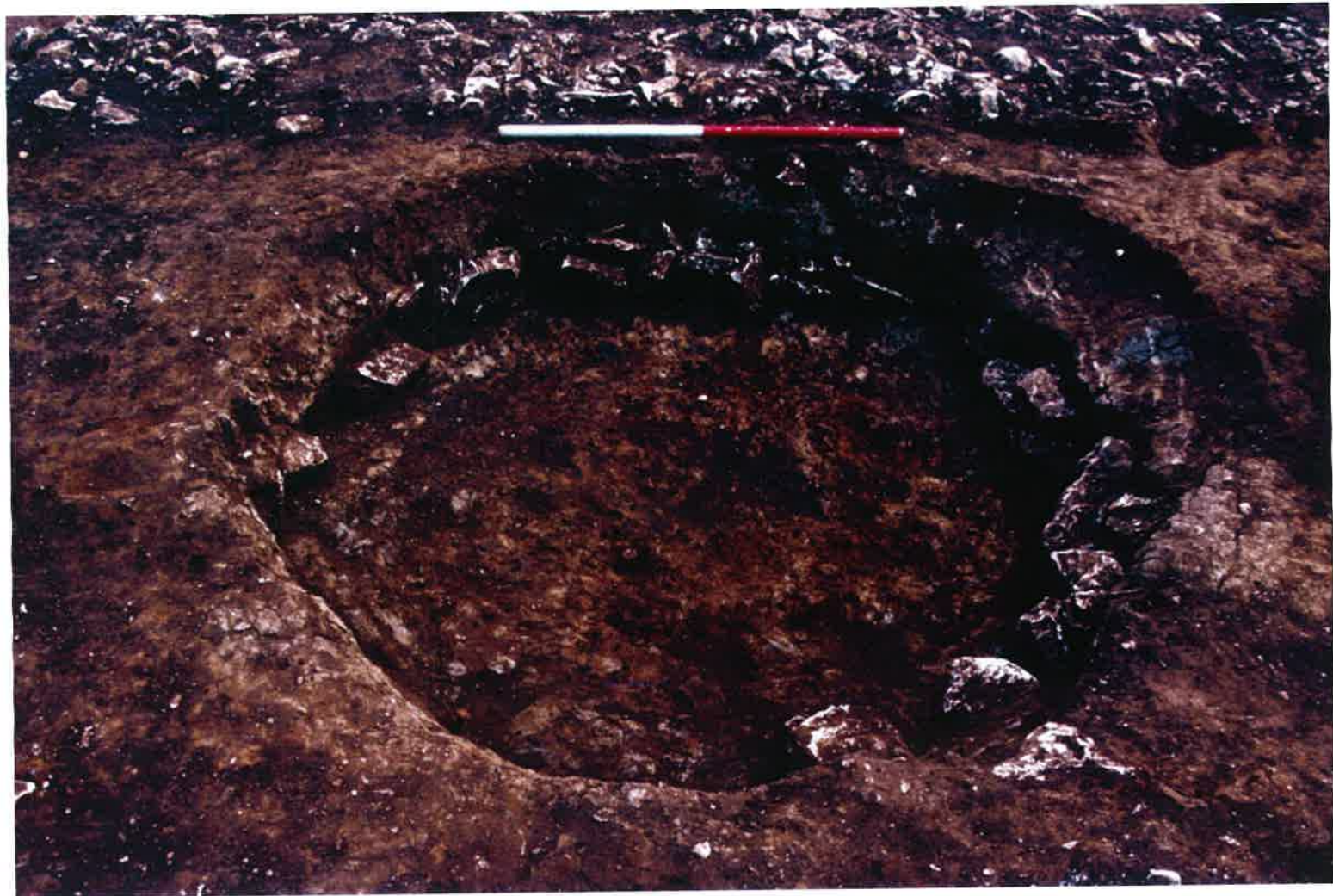


Plate 1: Stone and clay lined pit 8035



Column 401



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