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O X F O R D A R C H A E O L O G I C A L U N I T



BRACKLEY CASTLE, BRACKLEY

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION

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Summary

The OAU carried out a field evaluation on the site of Brackley Castle, a motte and bailey earthwork, on behalf of Mr B Sheppard. Three trenches were placed on the motte and a fourth was located in the bailey. The two trenches in the vicinity of the barn, located on the motte, revealed modern build-up which directly overlay natural limestone. Archaeological deposits were encountered in the trench in the centre of the motte; a sondage within the trench revealing upto 0.15 m of stratigraphy. The fourth trench in the bailey located no archaeological features.

Introduction

In November 1991 an evaluation was undertaken by the Oxford Archaeological Unit on behalf of Mr B Sheppard, in advance of a planning application to construct a bungalow and garden on the site. The site, called Castle Hill, is located to the SW of the town centre, at grid reference SP 58183645 and occupies an area of c. 0.33 ha. It contains the summit of the motte and approximately 15% of the area of the bailey.

Archaeological and Historical Background

The castle occupies an area of c. 1.9 ha (Fig. 1). It consists of a motte at its W end, approximately 4 m high and 40 m in diameter, with an outer bailey on its eastern side. The western and southern sides of the castle are demarcated by a stream, the eastern boundary is on approximately the same alignment as the current eastern boundary of the allotments, and the northern boundary is thought to follow the course of Hinton Road. The castle is located on a noticeable ridge, running E - W, the ground rising from the stream and falling away towards Hinton Road to the N (Fig. 4). This ridge may have been the principal access route to the motte, and may provide some indication as to location of the gateway on the eastern side of the bailey. It overlooks the main road from Northampton to Oxford and the crossing point of the stream.

The period during which the castle may have been used in its defensive capacity may have been relatively short. It seems to have been constructed soon after 1086 and may have gone out of use in 1173 (Pipe Roll; Diceto I, 404) when the estates of the Earl of Leicester, to whom the castle belonged, were seized by the crown. It had certainly ceased to have a military function by 1230-40 when the site of the castle was granted to the Hospital of St John (Mag. Coll. D119). In the sixteenth-century the antiquary Leland noted that the ditches of the castle were still visible, however, only the motte is discernable today.

- Excavations at Castle Lane in 1981-82 (Fig. 1) by the Northamptonshire County Council Archaeology Unit (Barcham 1982, 1983), outside the eastern end of the bailey, recorded a row of seven tenements aligned along the S side of Castle Lane. The buildings had several periods of development, the earliest timber phase is at present being redated on the basis of the pottery, while the stone phases appear to date from the 12th and 13th centuries. Occupation does not appear to have continued beyond the 13th century. The western side of the excavations located the eastern ditch of the bailey and one of the castle fishponds, both of which had gone out of use by the time of the major phase of settlement. The fishponds relating to the castle seem to have been extensive, including the great fishpond which extended to the W of the castle, and seems to have been created by the damming of the small valley.

At present the majority of the castle is given over to rough pasture and the western end of the motte is occupied by a barn with an associated hardstanding. The eastern half of the bailey is used as garden allotments. Local information suggests that during the Second World War the entire area of the castle was given over to cultivation.

Assessment Strategy

Four trenches were laid out to assess the archaeological impact of the proposed development (Fig 1). Two trenches were placed in the area of the barn where the proposed bungalow would be constructed, a third trench was located in the centre of the motte where the gardens would be laid out, and the fourth trench was positioned to assess the impact of screening which would be placed along the western allotment boundary. Eleven test pits 1 m x 1 m were hand-excavated within the limits of the designated trenches (2 in Trench 1; 3 in Trench 2; 3 in Trench 3 and 3 in Trench 4), prior to machining, in order to establish the level of surviving archaeological deposits. This enabled the extent of the overburden to be defined, which was then removed by JCB using a 1.55 m toothless ditching bucket. Features were then selectively excavated by hand in order to establish their date, preservation and type. All features were planned and sections were drawn of those which were excavated.

Trench Descriptions

Trench 1 (Figs. 2 and 3)

This trench was 5 m long and was located in the barn on an ENE-WSW orientation (Fig. 2). At the western end of the trench the barn's thin concrete floor (1/1) overlay a substantial amount of brick and limestone rubble make-up (1/2) which was upto 0.5 m thick and thinned progressively to the E. Underneath the rubble a layer of fine clean orange sand (1/3) had been laid down, which in turn overlay a dark grey silty clay loam (1/4). This layer (1/4) came down onto natural limestone (1/6), except in the western end of the trench where a thin lens of highly compacted buff silty clay (1/5) interposed between the natural and layer 1/4. The natural sloped from E-W, demonstrating that the original contours of the slope had been considerably altered, in order to provide a level platform for the construction of the barn. The barn floor had an average height of 109.28 m OD, while the natural limestone had a height of 108.47 m OD at the western end of the trench and 109.02 at the eastern end of the trench. Only modern finds were recovered from the trench, with 19th century pottery being found throughout layer 1/4.

Trench 2 (Fig. 2)

The trench was 12 m long and was positioned on the hardstanding to the E of the barn, on a NNW-SSE orientation. A layer of modern humus (2/1) overlay the modern make-up layer (2/2) of the hardstanding consisting of bricks, slates and rubble in a matrix of dark grey silty loam, upto 0.23 m thick, which directly overlay limestone natural (2/5). The hardstanding (2/2) layer did not extend the full length of the trench, being replaced by a less dense rubble layer (2/3), c. 2.5 m from the southern end of the trench, which also contained modern material. Underlying layer 2/3 in the southern end of the trench there was a layer of dark grey silty loam (2/4), very similar to layer 1/4 in trench 1, containing 19th century pottery, which directly overlay the natural. The average height of the modern ground surface (MGS) was 109.17 m OD, while the average height of the natural limestone was 108.99 m OD

Trench 3 (Figs. 2 and 3)

This trench was 10 m long, it was orientated ENE-WSW and was placed in the approximate centre of the motte. The topsoil (3/1) varied in depth between 0.16-0.20 m, and in the eastern half of the trench there was a subsoil (3/2) upto 0.2 m deep. These soils sealed a series of archaeological features which consisted of thin rubble spreads (3/10, 3/13 and 3/16), layers (3/7-3/9, 3/11, 3/12, 3/14, 3/15, 3/17) and a linear gully (3/3).

Only limited excavation was carried out on these features. The linear gully (3/3) was sectioned (Fig. 3) revealing a shallow cut with a depth of 0.15 m and a width of 0.28 m, and the section was extended to include the rubble patch 3/5. A pottery sherd of possibly 12th century date was recovered from the gully (3/3).

At the eastern end of the trench, a sondage was placed through the rubble spread 3/13 to assess the potential depth of stratigraphy. Underneath the rubble spread or cobble area (3/13) a layer of slightly silty clay (3/15), upto 0.15 m deep, overlay a layer of densely packed rubble (3/16) and a layer of silty clay (3/17).

The MGS had an average height of 109.47 m OD, while the average height at which the archaeology was defined was 109.20 m OD. Medieval pottery ranging in date from c.1100-1250 was recovered from the subsoil 3/2 and the cleaning layer 3/4, which was removed in order to clearly define the archaeological features after the trench had been machine-excavated.

Trench 4 (Figs. 2 and 3)

The trench was 20 m long and was located parallel to the western boundary of the allotments, on a NNW-SSE orientation. It contained no archaeological features. The topsoil (4/1) consisted of a dark grey/ black silty loam upto 0.3 m deep, which contained 19th-century pottery throughout its profile. In the central 10 m of the trench a subsoil (4/2), upto 0.4 m deep, filled a depression in the natural, and consisted of a mid-brown clay loam. The natural consisted of a yellow-brown clay with an outcrop of limestone protruding through the clay at the southern end of the trench. The ground sloped from S to N, so that the MGS at the S end of the trench was 108.26 m OD, while at the N end the MGS was 107.42 m OD. The underlying natural reflected this slope, its height at the S end of the trench being 107.96 m OD, while at the N end of the trench it had a height of 107.09 m OD.

- Conclusions

No medieval deposits were recorded in trenches 1 and 2, in the vicinity of the barn, however, these trenches are not without interest as they demonstrate that the motte consists at least partially of a natural limestone hill or ridge. Examination of the local topography of the site suggests that the motte is only predominantly man-made in a segment from the N through to the E, thereafter especially along its western and southern edges the motte would appear to be a largely natural feature. This exploitation of a natural feature provides a clear reason for the precise location of the castle, which it had previously been speculated may have been effected by plans for the construction of tenements or a second bailey between the castle and the Oxford to Northampton road.

In trench 2 any medieval deposits may have been eroded by the use of this area as a trackway to the barn; an eroded area is noticeable from the access trackway continuing along the eastern side of the barn. The height of the natural in trench 2 was 108.99 m OD, which was lower than the level of preserved archaeology in trench 3, which had a height of 109.20 m OD. A similar argument cannot be used in trench 1, however, before the construction of the barn it is apparent that the edge of the summit of the motte was further to the E, with the construction of the barn necessitating substantial levelling up of the motte along the western side of the barn.

Local information that the land had been used for allotments during the Second World War, suggested that the castle's archaeological deposits may have been disturbed by cultivation. The evidence from trench 4, in the bailey, implies that this area had been extensively cultivated, with a rich loam topsoil which was upto 0.3 m deep. However the evidence from trench 3, indicates that any cultivation on the top of the motte had only been shallow, and it was apparent that it had not substantially disturbed the archaeology.

It is not possible to provide a comprehensive interpretation of the archaeological deposits found within trench 3, which seem to range in date from the 11th to the 13th century. However the presence of the linear gully indicates that archaeological features are preserved, while the number of layers recorded, in addition to the evidence from the sondage, demonstrate that there is at least, in certain places, upto 0.15 m of preserved archaeology on top of the motte.

References

- Barcham R 1982: Brackley Castle Close Excavations in CBA Regional Group 9 Newsletter No. 12, 31-32.
Barcham R 1983: Brackley - Castle Lane Excavations, 1982 in CBA Regional Group 9 Newsletter No.13, 23-26.

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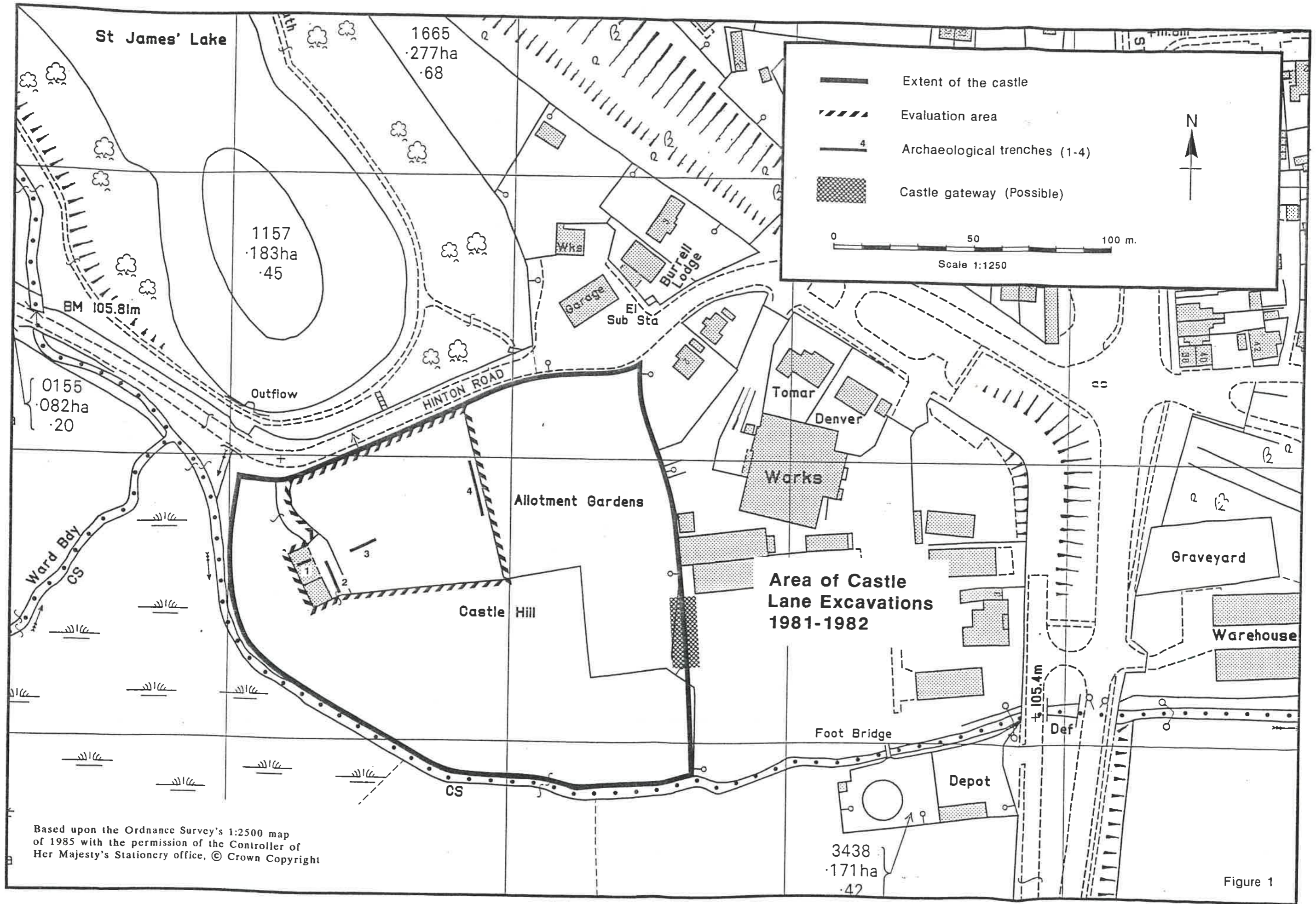
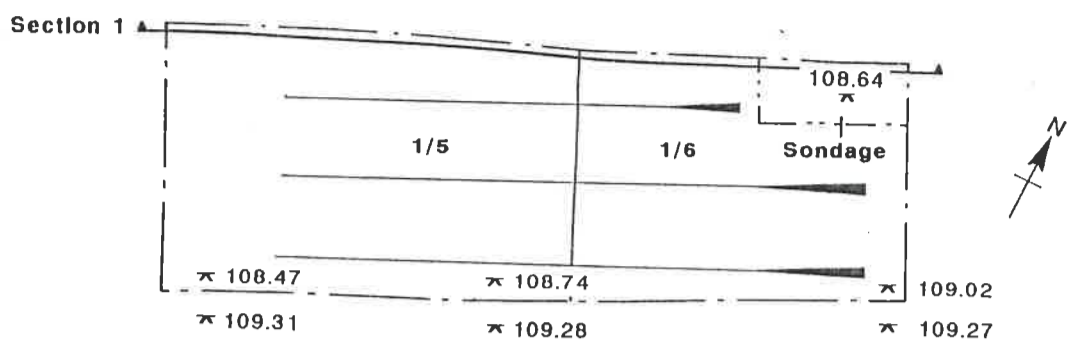
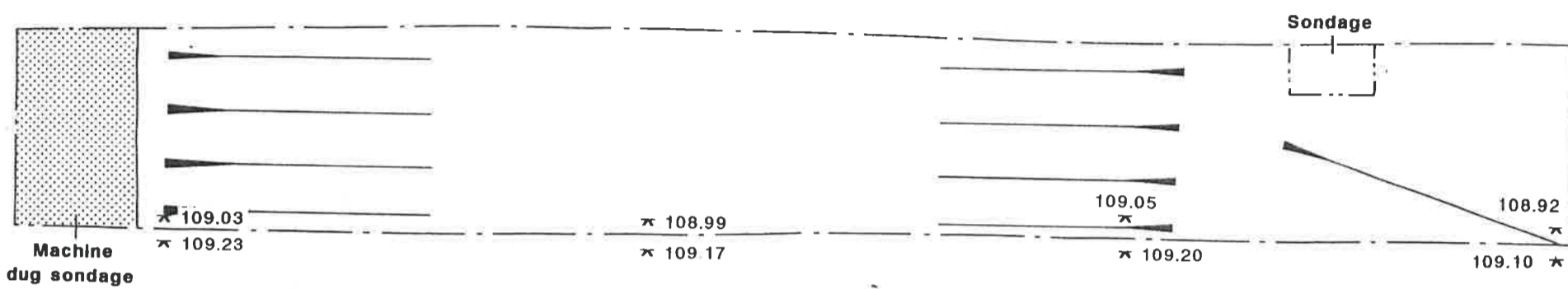


Figure 1

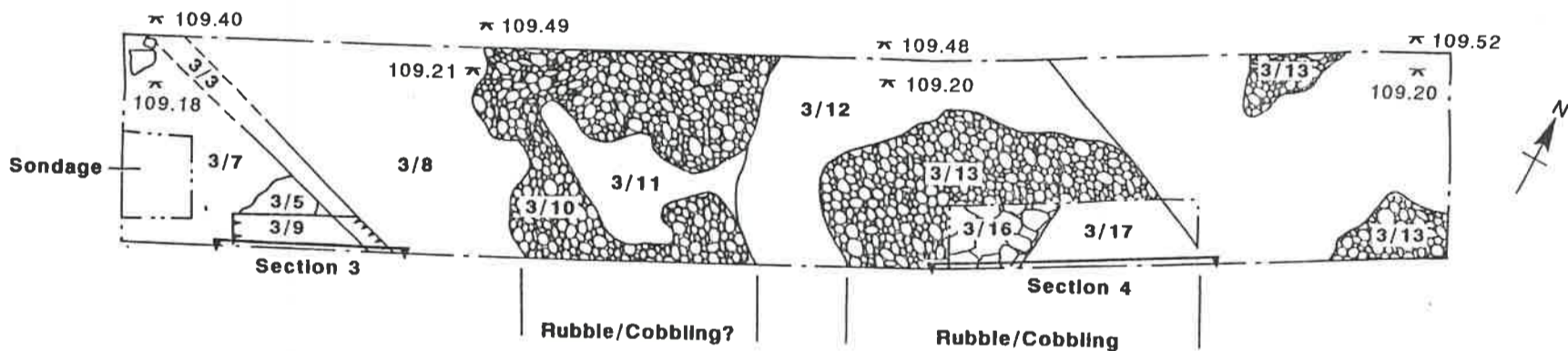
Trench 1



Trench 2



Trench 3



Trench 4

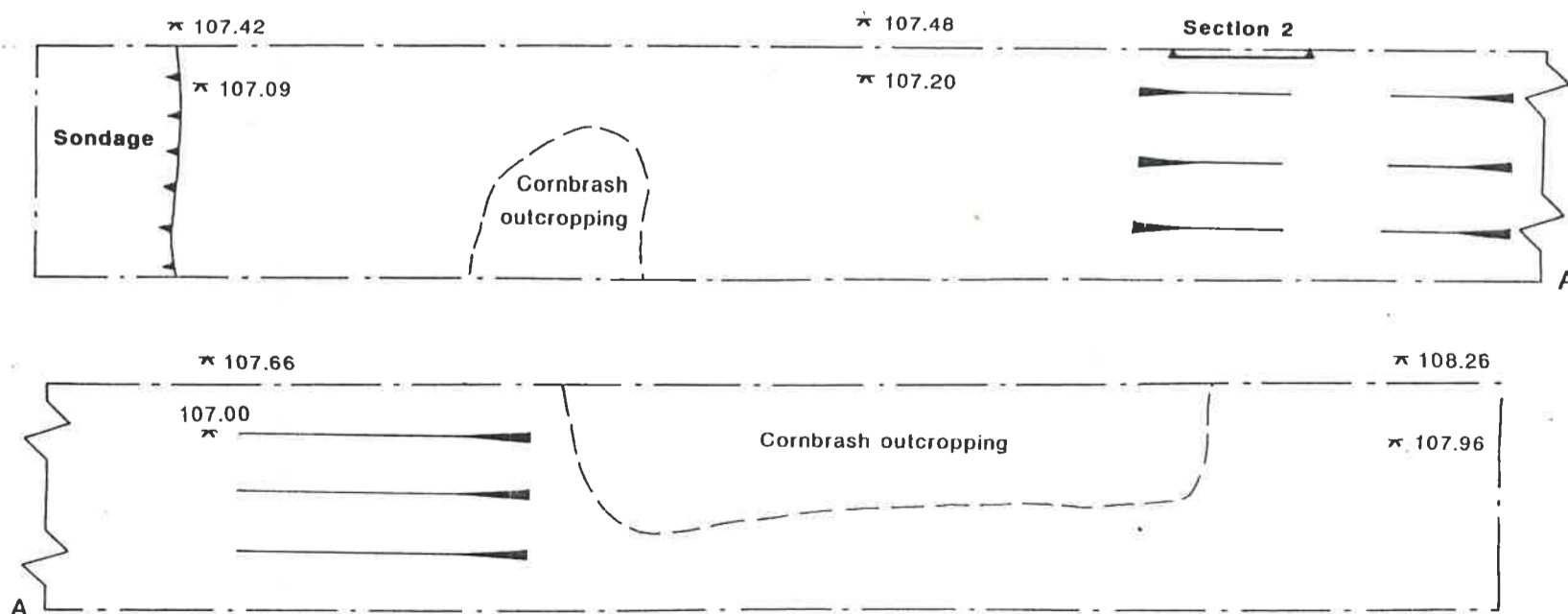
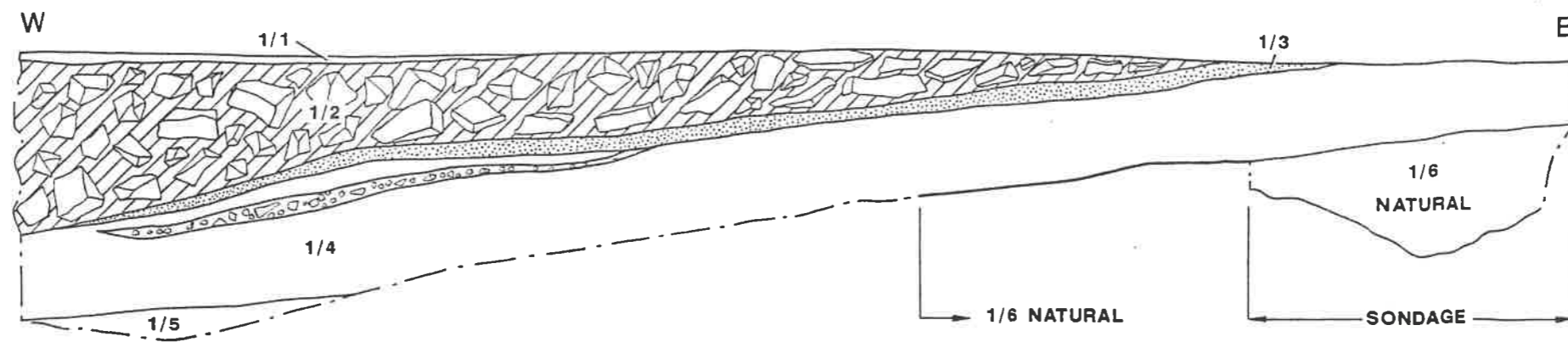
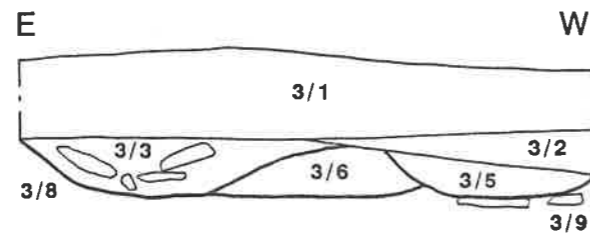


Figure 2

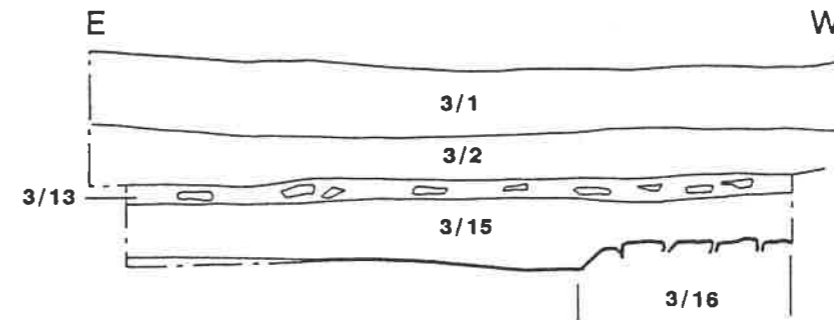
Trench 1 section 1



Trench 3 section 3



Trench 3 section 4



Trench 4 section 2

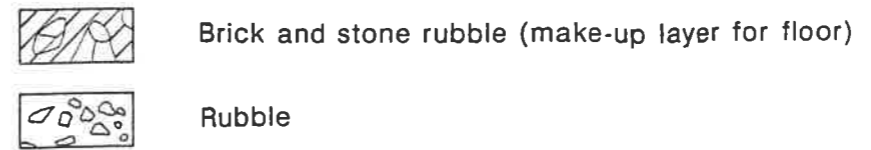
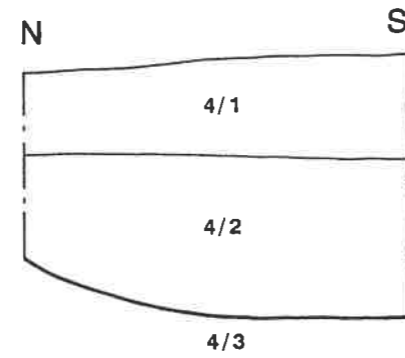
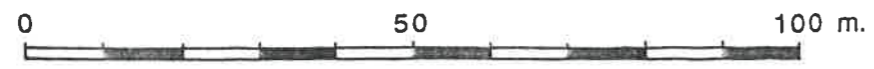


Figure 3



4
Archaeological trenches (1-4)

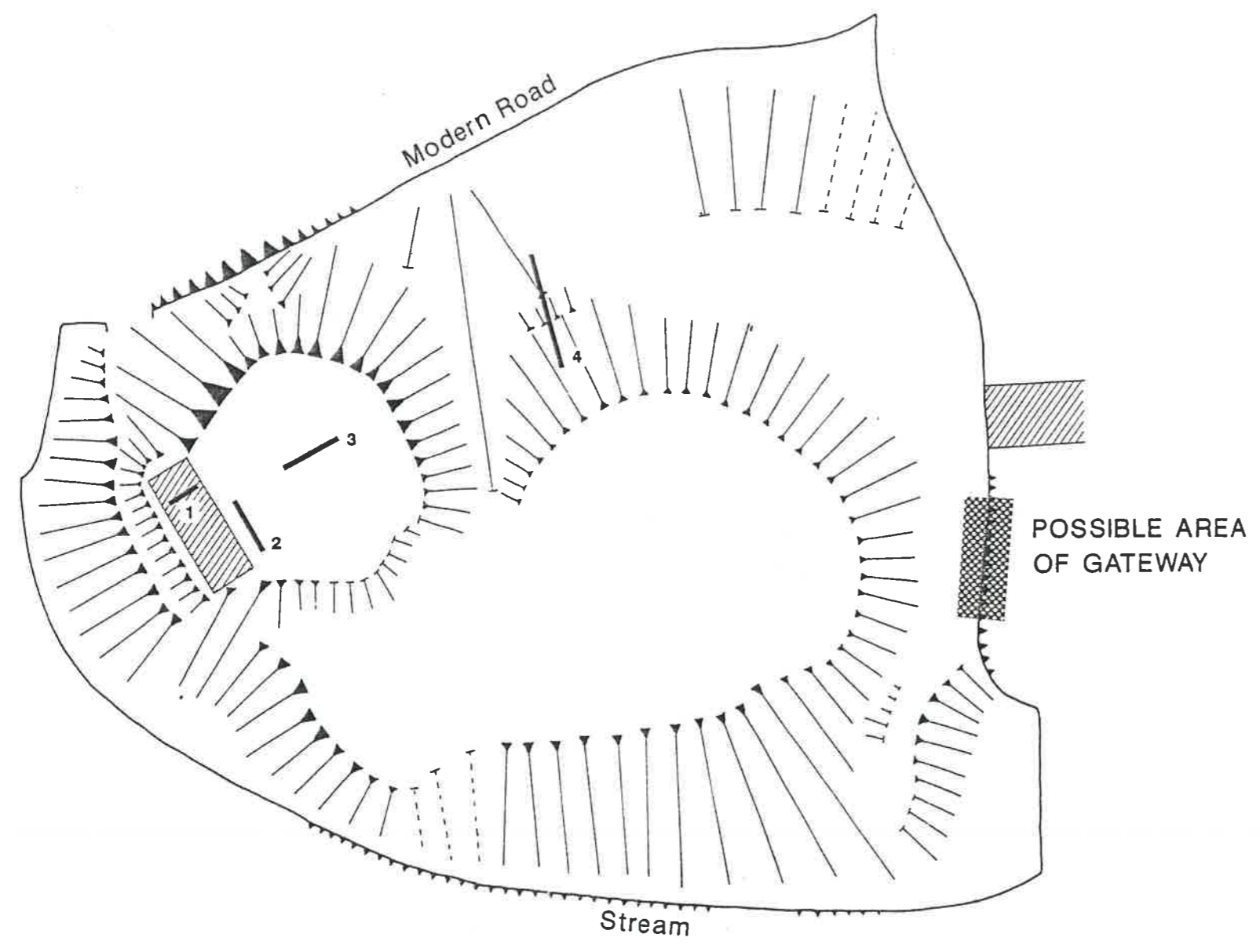


Figure 4

BRACKLEY CASTLE, NORTHANTS.

SP 58183645

by D Jennings

In November 1991 the OAU carried out a small field evaluation on the site of Brackley Castle, a motte and bailey earthwork, on behalf of Mr B Sheppard. On documentary evidence the castle, which is located to the SW of the town centre, seems to have been constructed soon after 1086 and may have gone out of use in 1173 (Pipe Roll; Diceto I, 404) when the estates of the Earl of Leicester, to whom the castle belonged, were seized by the crown. It had certainly ceased to have a military function by 1230-40 when the site of the castle was granted to the Hospital of St John (Mag. Coll. D119). In the sixteenth century the antiquary Leland noted that the ditches of the castle were still visible, however, only the motte, which is approximately 4 m high and 40 m in diameter, is discernable today.

Three trenches were placed on the motte and a fourth was located in the bailey. The two trenches in the vicinity of the modern barn, located on the motte, revealed modern build-up which directly overlay natural limestone, demonstrating that the motte consists at least partially of a natural limestone hill or ridge. Examination of the topography suggests that the motte is only predominantly man-made in a segment from the N through to the E, thereafter especially along its western and southern edges the motte would appear to be a largely natural feature. This exploitation of a natural feature provides a clear reason for the precise location of the castle, which it had previously been speculated may have been effected by plans for the construction of tenements or a second bailey between the castle and the Oxford to Northampton road. Archaeological deposits, which consisted of several layers of cobbling, were encountered in the trench in the centre of the motte; a sondage within the trench revealing upto 0.15 m of stratigraphy. Pottery recovered from this trench dated from AD 1100-c.1250. The trench in the bailey located no archaeological features.

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