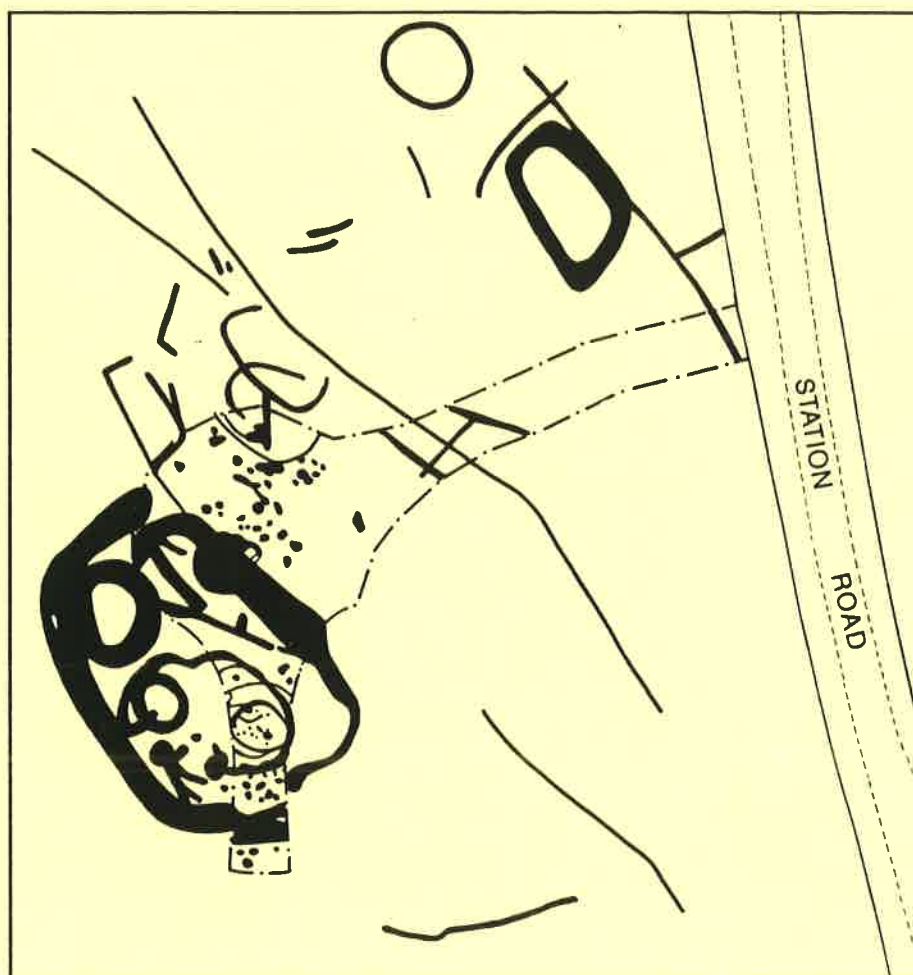


Land between Station Road and Stanwick Road, Higham Ferrers, Northamptonshire

NGR SP 9605 6965

Archaeological Evaluation Report



Oxford Archaeological Unit

February 1997

**LAND BETWEEN
STATION ROAD AND STANWICK ROAD,
HIGHAM FERRERS, NORTHANTS
(SP 9605 6965)**

Archaeological Evaluation

LIST OF CONTENTS

Summary

- 1 Introduction**
- 2 Background**
- 3 Methodology**
- 4 Results**
 - 4.1 Trenches 1-4, 6 and 7
 - 4.2 Trench 5
- 5 Finds**
 - 5.1 The Pottery by A. Barclay
 - 5.2 The Bone
 - 5.3 The Fired Clay by A. Barclay
 - 5.4 The Metal Objects
 - 5.5 The Flint
- 6 Palaeo-environmental Potential**
- 7 Discussion**
- 8 Bibliography**
- 9 Archaeological Context Inventory**

List of Figures

- Fig. 1 Site Location Plan
- Fig. 2 Evaluation Area, Cropmarks and Fieldwalking Scatters
- Fig. 3 Iron Age Cropmarks and Trench Location Plan
- Fig. 4 Trench 5: Plan and Sections

LAND BETWEEN STATION ROAD AND STANWICK ROAD, HIGHAM FERRERS

Archaeological Evaluation

SUMMARY

An archaeological evaluation was undertaken by the Oxford Archaeological Unit for the Duchy of Lancaster on land lying between Station Road and Stanwick Road on the northern outskirts of Higham Ferrers between 3rd-5th February 1997. Seven evaluation trenches 30m x 1.5m were excavated covering an area of 2.3ha. The only significant archaeological remains were uncovered in Trench 5 which contained several pits and shallow linear ditches and gullies dating to the middle-late Iron Age. These probably represent occupation ephemeral to the main area of Iron Age enclosures and settlement that lie immediately to the west of Station Road.

1 Introduction

Following the application by the Duchy of Lancaster to East Northamptonshire Council for outline planning permission (EN96/0443/OUT) for a residential development on 2.3 hectares of land on the northern outskirts of Higham Ferrers (Fig. 1), the Oxford Archaeological Unit were commissioned to undertake an evaluation of the area. The work was undertaken over a period of three days in February 1997, according to a detailed Archaeological Evaluation Brief prepared by Northamptonshire Heritage, and a Written Scheme of Investigation prepared by Oxford Archaeological Unit and subsequently approved by Northamptonshire Heritage.

The site occupies an area to the east of the A6 between Station Road and Stanwick Road (Fig. 2) on a gentle north facing hillslope, between 62-55m OD, with extensive views over and along the Nene valley. The northern part of the evaluation site was occupied by an arable field under a winter crop at the time of the fieldwork, whilst the southern part of the site towards the top of the hill lay within a paddock area and garden. The underlying geology of the site was made up of Upper Esturaine Series silts and clays and Great Oolitic Limestone.

2 Background

The area to the north of Higham Ferrers has long been known to be rich in archaeological remains dating from the Roman to medieval period. Aerial

photographs of the area show an extensive range of cropmarks dating from the Iron Age, Roman and Saxon periods to the west of the evaluation area (Fig. 2), although no such features have been identified within the investigation area itself. Subsequent intensive fieldwalking confirmed the date range of the cropmarks in the adjacent fields and showed a general sparse scatter of finds from the investigation area (NAU 1991).

Some prehistoric activity has been recorded in the area with a sparse flint scatter covering the evaluation area. A larger localised flint scatter located to the north-west of the Saxon enclosure was encompassed within part of the 1995 OAU excavation (Fig. 2). Limited excavation revealed several pits containing pottery and flints dating from the Late Neolithic to Early Bronze Age (OAU 1996a). Given the proximity of the extensive prehistoric funerary landscape covered by the Raunds Area Project (RAP) along the Nene valley, and the research potential of associated occupation along the valley sides, any remains of this date may be of significance.

The cropmarks in closest proximity to the evaluation area consist of three enclosures of varying size, associated pitting and probable field systems covering an area of up to 3 hectares (Fig. 3). Partial excavation of the main enclosure and a limited area running east towards Station Road by OAU in 1995 defined this as an Iron Age enclosure with internal circular and pennanular ditches, posthole structures and pitting dating largely to 150-50 BC (OAU 1996a). Although no pottery of Iron Age date was recovered from the evaluation area during the 1989/90 fieldwalking survey, this does not exclude the possibility of the Iron Age site extending into the evaluation area, given its proximity of less than 60m from the closest cropmark. This is substantially confirmed by a similar absence of Iron Age pottery over the main cropmark site from the fieldwalking survey (NAU 1991). The discovery of finds and features of Iron Age date from the same field as the evaluation area (Fig. 2), during the construction of a gas pipeline in 1967, also suggests that less substantial ephemeral features may be present (NAU 1991).

Of particular importance is the extensive early-late Saxon settlement in the field to the west of the evaluation area. Although it should be noted that this settlement is located over 200m to the south-west of the evaluation area. The settlement was partially excavated by the OAU in October-December 1995 and proved to be a high-status site of national importance (OAU 1996a). This consisted of a large oval enclosure and associated settlement. The extensive evaluation trenching of this settlement (NAU 1991, OAU 1994) and subsequent trenching during the 1995 excavations suggests that there was no settlement located within the enclosure, and the foci of settlement was located around the outskirts of the enclosure to the south and west. The only archaeological deposits contemporary with or post-dating the enclosure identified around its eastern side were located in the extreme south-eastern corner of the field. Here the early-middle Saxon enclosure ditch was overlain by late Saxon and medieval occupation (OAU 1996b).

3 Methodology

A total of seven trenches 30m x 1.6m were excavated using a JCB mechanical excavator providing a 1.5% sample of the application area (Fig. 3). All the trenches were excavated to the uppermost archaeological level or, where absent, the natural geology. All the trenches were subsequently hand cleaned where appropriate and any features sample excavated. Recording was completed in accordance with the OAU fieldwork manual (Wilkinson 1992) and a photographic record was made of the archaeological features uncovered in the trenches.

Five of the trenches were situated in an arable field currently under a winter crop and the southernmost two were located within a garden and paddock area. All effort was made to keep the movement of the JCB around the field to a minimum to avoid unnecessary destruction of the crop and backfilling of the trenches was completed before leaving the site.

The spoil and the features uncovered in the trenches were scanned by a metal detector and all metal objects were retrieved.

4 Results

4.1 Trenches 1-4, 6 and 7

Trenches 1-4 and 7 produced no archaeological remains with the modern topsoil in the garden and paddock areas and the ploughsoil in the arable field overlying a thin light brown lower ploughsoil/colluvial subsoil. Shallow furrows cutting the natural Limestone were present in three of these trenches.

Trench 6 produced a similar sequence with a furrow truncating the natural limestone at the eastern end of the trench and a lower ploughsoil present only at the western end of the trench. This overlay a series of narrow linear field drains running south to north down slope parallel to each other and the furrow.

4.2 Trench 5 (Fig. 4)

The only trench to reveal any significant archaeology was Trench 5. Removal of the ploughsoil (501) revealed a geology of silts and clays overlain by a thin light brown subsoil (502) truncated by several archaeological features (Fig. 4). These consisted mostly of pits and linear gullies, although a shallow gully/trench and substantial posthole located at the eastern end of the trench may represent part of a posthole structure.

A total of three pits of varying dimensions were uncovered in the trench. Pit 519 was a large circular feature with a diameter of 1.6m but with a maximum depth of only 0.26m. A thin primary silting layer (520) filled the base of the pit. The majority of the pit was backfilled with a mixed deposit of a brown silt

and distinctive mixed clay inclusions (521). This fill also contained a large amount of heavily burnt limestone slabs and pebbles with frequent charred plant remains. A reasonably large bone and pottery assemblage was recovered from this fill.

An oval steep-sided pit 1.6m x 0.85m (Pit 517) was located 2.5m to the east of Pit 519. This contained a single fill (518) 0.4m deep containing only a few pottery and bone finds. Despite the lack of finds, this type of regular oval pit was common on the main Iron Age site excavated in 1995.

Pit 511 was the most substantial of all the three pits excavated. This consisted of a deep circular flat-based pit 1.25m in diameter and 0.8m deep with vertical sides. The pit contained a 0.14m thick primary silt (512) in its base and a more substantial main silty backfill (513) filling the rest of the pit. A thick square piece of unworked ironstone was found placed in the bottom of the pit although its purpose is unclear.

Three linear gullies ran across the centre of the trench. Two of these (507 and 509) run parallel to each other on a south-west to north-east alignment to the east of Pit 511. The third gully (514) was aligned perpendicular to the others on a north-west to south-east alignment to the west of Pit 511. Both Gullies 509 and 514 share broadly similar dimensions and may actually represent two sides of the same gully forming a corner and enclosing pit 511. However, Gully 514 contained three silting fills (515, 516, 522) and Gully 509 only one (510). The more substantial ditch/gully (507) had a width of 0.75m and depth of 0.64m.

The posthole and trench located at the eastern end of Trench 5 follow a common alignment as defined by Gullies 507 and 509. The posthole (505) was quite substantial with a width of 0.46m and a depth of 0.6m and contained a single dark fill with charred plant inclusions. This would appear to be related to a shallow trench 0.45m wide with a U-shaped profile (503), filled by a single silty fill (504). The trench may represent a beam slot suggesting the presence of a reasonably substantial structure, although caution must be exercised in this interpretation from the exposure of only a 2.5m of this feature in the evaluation trench.

5 The Finds

5.1 The Pottery by Alistair Barclay

A total of 107 sherds (1863g) of Iron Age pottery were recovered from six excavated contexts with most of the pottery assemblage deriving from the upper fill of a large pit (521). The assemblage includes a small number of rim forms and body sherds with scored decoration that are likely to be of middle and late Iron Age in date. The entire assemblage, with the exception of a few amorphous fragments (context 513), is manufactured from fine shell-tempered fabrics.

Most of the material was in a fair condition with pit context 521 containing a number of relatively large sherds, some refitting, from the same vessels.

The exclusive use of shell tempered fabrics is a common occurrence on Iron Age sites in Northamptonshire. The surfaces of most sherds were well finished with at least one example of burnish. Decoration was almost totally absent, although a small number of sherds from contexts 518 (single example) and 521 have simple shallow linear decoration and, or scored lines. The four rims recovered from contexts 518 and 521 include flattened, bead, everted and necked forms. The latter is likely to be of late Iron Age date. The other rims could be of late middle or late Iron Age date and the body sherds with scored decoration could be of either middle or late Iron Age date (David Knight pers comm).

Pottery Quantification

<i>Context</i>	<i>Number, weight</i>	<i>Comment</i>
504	1, 7g	
506	1, 12g	
513	1, 17g	Abraded amorphous lumps. Probably fired clay rather than pottery.
516	1, 3g	
518	6, 74g	Rim, base and scored sherd.
521	97, 1750g	Includes rims, bases, a small number of scored sherds and some refitting sherds.
Total	107, 1863g	Middle-late Iron Age

The date range for the assemblage is likely to be late middle to late (pre-Belgic) Iron Age (150-50 BC) making it comparable to the major period of settlement located to the west of the evaluation area (Jackson 1996). In regional terms it fits within Knight's IA2 phase which spans the later 5th-later 1st centuries BC (Knight 1984, 99).

5.2 The Bone

A small assemblage of bone was recovered from six excavated contexts with over 70% of the assemblage deriving from a single pit context (521). Bone preservation was generally good although only small scraps were present in four of the six contexts. The larger pieces in contexts 516 and 521 both had evidence of butchery marks on the bones. A small amount from 521 was also burnt. Further identification at evaluation level is unnecessary although the

presence of sheep in the assemblage was noted fitting with the predominance of sheep over other domestic species from the main enclosure area.

Bone Quantification

<i>Context</i>	<i>Number, weight</i>	<i>Comment</i>
510	10, 20g	
513	3, 5g	
516	2, 65g	Chop mark on one piece.
518	10, 25g	
520	2, 7g	1 burnt piece
521	74, 410g	12 burnt pieces (25g) Mixed assemblage with butchery marks present.
Total	102, 532g	

5.3 The Fired Clay by Alistair Barclay

A total of two pieces of fired clay were recovered from the fills of two pits. An amorphous lump of fired clay/very abraded pottery was recovered from pit context 513. Pit context 521 produced a probable piece of daub with smoothed edges and a single wattle impression.

5.4 The Metal Objects

A total of eleven iron objects were recovered from the metal detecting survey of the spoil from each trench. All were of modern or post-medieval date consisting mostly of nails. The only identifiable object of any interest was part of a iron Whittle tang knife fragment with a bolster. Bolsters were first introduced on knives during the 16th century (Goodall, 1990).

5.5 The Flint

Three flints were recovered from two pit contexts (513 and 521). All consist of broken blades that are probably residual finds in the pits.

6 Palaeo-environmental Potential

Given the palaeo-environmental sampling of the main enclosure site during the 1995 excavations the potential of further sampling of features of the same date would be limited. However, the potential for the recovery of charred plant remains from the features uncovered during the evaluation was good with frequent charred remains observed from the fills of Pit 519 and Posthole 505. This is the most significant point of interest following the results of the post-excavation assessment of the 1995 excavation. This indicates the potential of identifying associated activities taking place around the structures in the main

Iron Age enclosure from the presence of cultivated barley in the charred plant remains from the associated postholes (OAU 1996a). Further sampling of the more ephemeral features and structures may identify localised differences between activities taking place around the enclosure site and those taking place on the outer limits of the settlement.

No molluscs were identified within the fills of the Iron Age features during the evaluation. This suggests that, as with the 1995 excavation, the conditions for the survival of molluscs were not favourable. Palaeo-environmental reconstruction based upon mollusc remains is therefore unlikely.

7 Discussion

The results of the trenching confirm an absence of Saxon and medieval archaeology from the evaluation area as suggested by earlier fieldwalking. However, the absence of pottery of Iron Age date from the fieldwalking across the evaluation area proved to be a false indicator and Iron Age features were located in Trench 5. This confirmed the presence of Iron Age features that had previously been noted during the construction of a gas pipeline in 1967. The pottery from the features in Trench 5 fall within a contemporary date range to those from the middle to late Iron Age site and related extensive cropmarks located to the west. The presence of pits, gullies and, more significantly, probable posthole structures appear to indicate ephemeral occupation to that of the main structures within the enclosure as identified by the 1995 excavations.

The limits of this outlying occupation may also be more extensive than previously expected as the location of the features discovered during the laying of the gas pipeline lie some 100m to the north. Also a more detailed inspection of the ploughsoil surface surrounding Trench 5 recorded the presence of several Iron Age sherds and scatters of burnt limestone and pebbles extending in all directions for up to 10m around the trench. A further single abraded base sherd of shell tempered Iron Age pottery was recovered 5m to the east of Trench 6 up slope from Trench 5. Combined with the absence of Iron Age features from the other trenches, the surface scatter and recorded finds indicate that the Iron Age activity is concentrated in the north-western corner of the application area.

The depth of the overlying ploughsoil and the survival of a subsoil which the features were cut through suggest good survival of the archaeology. Any significant truncation by modern ploughing would appear to be limited at the northern end of the site due to an increasing depth of the ploughsoil.

Steve Lawrence
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February 1996

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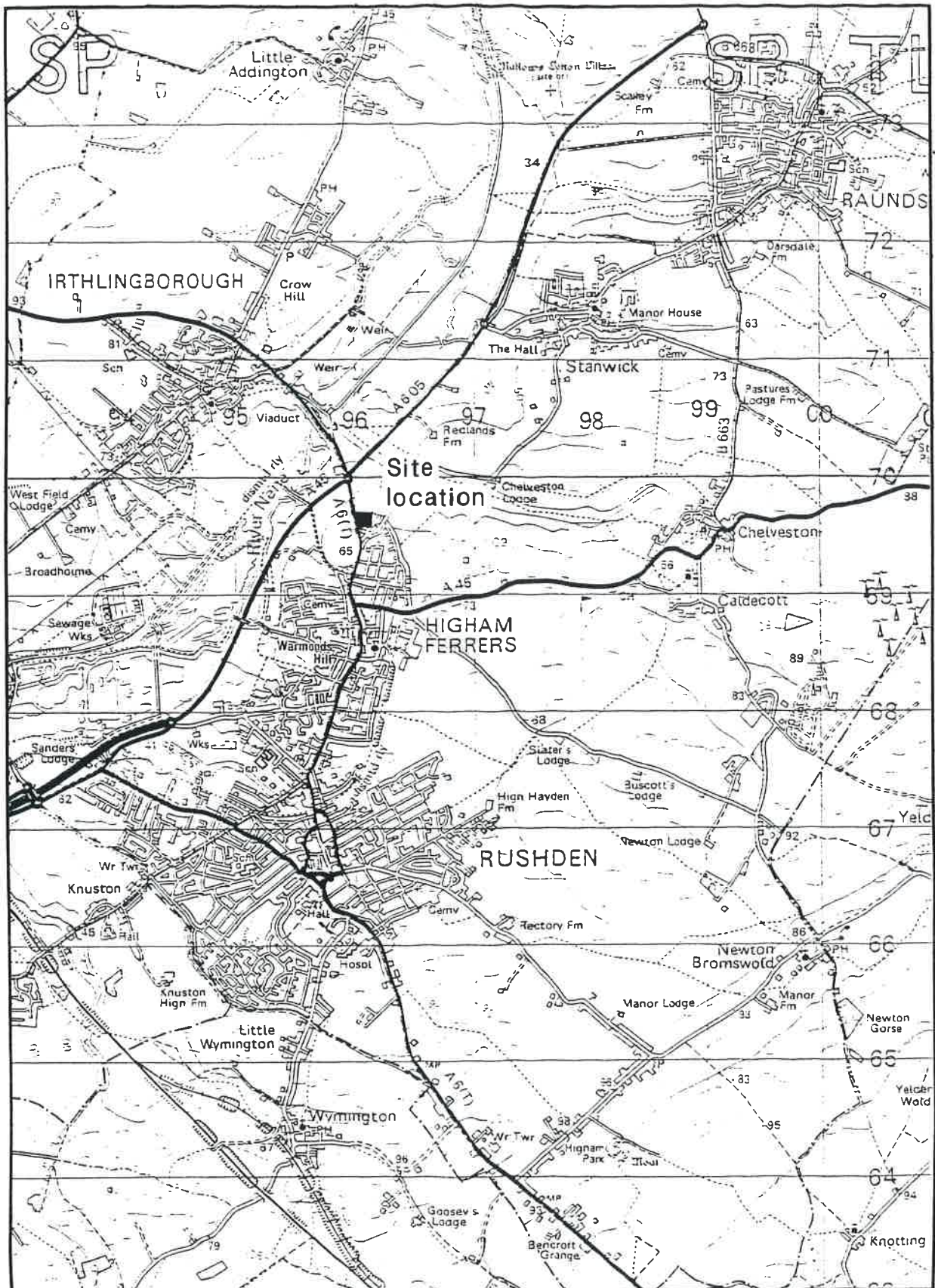
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9 Archaeological Context Inventory

<i>Trench and Context No.</i>	<i>Context Type</i>	<i>Width (m)</i>	<i>depth (m)</i>	<i>Comments</i>
Trench 1				
101	Layer		0.18m	Topsoil and turf
102	Layer		0.30m	Buried former topsoil
103	Layer		0.20m	Subsoil/buried ploughsoil
104	Natural			Oolitic Limestone
Trench 2				
201	Layer		0.28m	Topsoil and turf
202	Layer		0.10m	Buried ploughsoil
203	Fill	1.2m	0.08m	Furrow fill
204	Cut	1.2m	0.08m	Furrow
205	Fill	2m	0.10m	Furrow fill
206	Cut	2m	0.10m	Furrow
207	Natural			Oolitic Limestone
Trench 3				
300	Layer		0.30m	Ploughsoil
301	Layer		0.15m	Buried ploughsoil filling the furrows
302	Cut	1m	0.06m	Furrow
303	Cut	1m	0.16m	Furrow
304	Natural			Oolitic Limestone
Trench 4				
400	Layer		0.25m	Ploughsoil
401	Layer		0.10m	Colluvial subsoil or buried ploughsoil
402	Natural			Upper Esturaine Series silts and clays
403	Fill			Natural silt
404	Cut			Variation in the natural
405	Fill			Natural silt
406	Cut			Variation in the natural
407	Fill			Natural silt
408	Cut			Variation in the natural
Trench 5				
501	Layer		0.40m	Ploughsoil
502	Layer		0.20m	Colluvial subsoil
503	Cut	0.45m	0.20m	Gully/Beam slot
504	Fill	0.45m	0.20m	Silty fill of slot 503

<i>Trench and Context No.</i>	<i>Context Type</i>	<i>Width (m)</i>	<i>depth (m)</i>	<i>Comments</i>
505	Cut	0.46m	0.6m	Posthole
506	Fill	0.46m	0.6m	Fill of Posthole 505 containing single I.A sherd
507	Cut	0.75m	0.64m	Ditch running NE-SW
508	Fill	0.75m	0.64m	Single silty fill of ditch 507
509	Cut	0.25m	0.26m	Gully running NE-SW
510	Fill	0.25m	0.26m	Single silty fill of gully 509
511	Cut	1.25m	0.80m	Deep circular pit
512	Fill	0.90m	0.14m	Primary fill of pit 511
513	Fill	1.25m	0.66m	Main backfill of pit 511 containing scraps of bone and fired clay
514	Cut	0.45m	0.36m	Gully running NW-SE
515	Fill	0.22m	0.06m	Primary fill of gully 514
516	Fill	0.45m	0.24m	Upper fill of gully 514
517	Cut	0.85m	0.40m	Oval pit
518	Fill	0.85m	0.40m	Single silty fill of pit 517
519	Cut	1.60m	0.26m	Shallow pit containing a large assemblage of mid-late I.A pottery and butchered/burnt bone
520	Fill	1.60m	0.21m	Primary silty fill of pit 519
521	Fill	1.25m	0.05m	Upper fill of pit 519 with charcoal and clay inclusions
522	Fill	0.31m	0.1m	Secondary fill of gully 514
523	Natural			Upper Esturaine Series silts and clay
Trench 6				
601	Layer		0.30m	Ploughsoil

<i>Trench and Context No.</i>	<i>Context Type</i>	<i>Width (m)</i>	<i>depth (m)</i>	<i>Comments</i>
602	Layer		0.22m	Buried ploughsoil present at western end of the trench
603	Fill	2m	0.15m	Clayey silt fill of 604
604	Cut	2m	0.15m	Furrow
605	Cut	0.22m	0.07m	Field drain
606	Fill	0.22m	0.07m	Clayey silt fill of 605
607	Cut	0.30m	0.10m	Field drain
608	Fill	0.30m	0.10m	Clayey silt fill of 607
609	Fill	0.25m	0.06m	Clayey silt fill of 610
610	Cut	0.25m	0.06m	Field drain
611	Cut	0.30m	0.15m	Field drain
612	Fill	0.30m	0.15m	Clayey silt fill of 611
613	Fill	0.35m	0.18m	Clayey silt fill of 614
614	Cut	0.35m	0.18m	Series of linear field drains
615	Natural			Oolitic Limestone and Clay
Trench 7				
700	Layer		0.36m	Ploughsoil
701	Layer		0.10m	Buried ploughsoil
702	Fill	1.25m	0.25m	Furrow fill
703	Cut	1.25m	0.25m	Furrow
704	Natural			Oolitic Limestone



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Figure 1

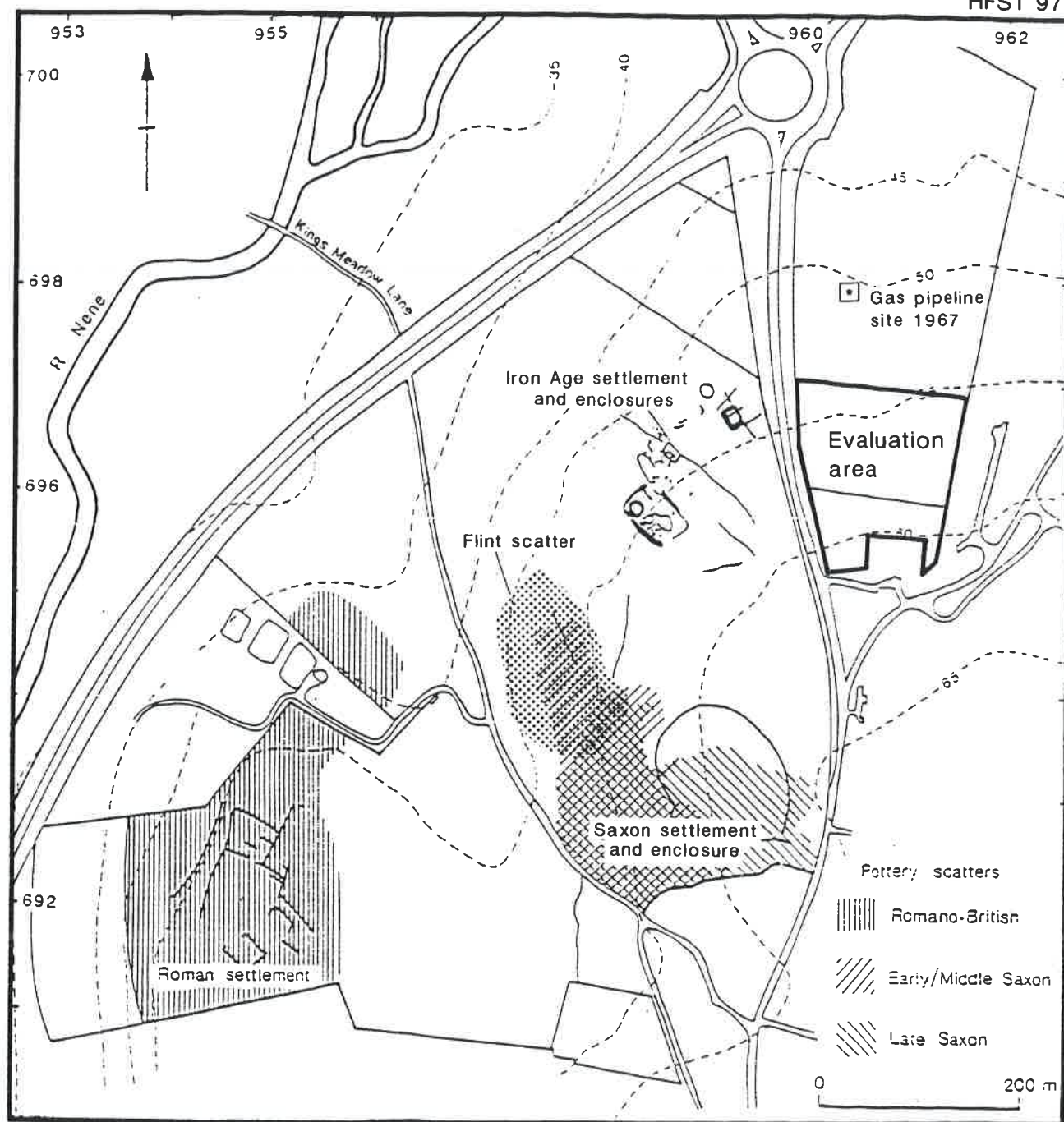


Figure 2

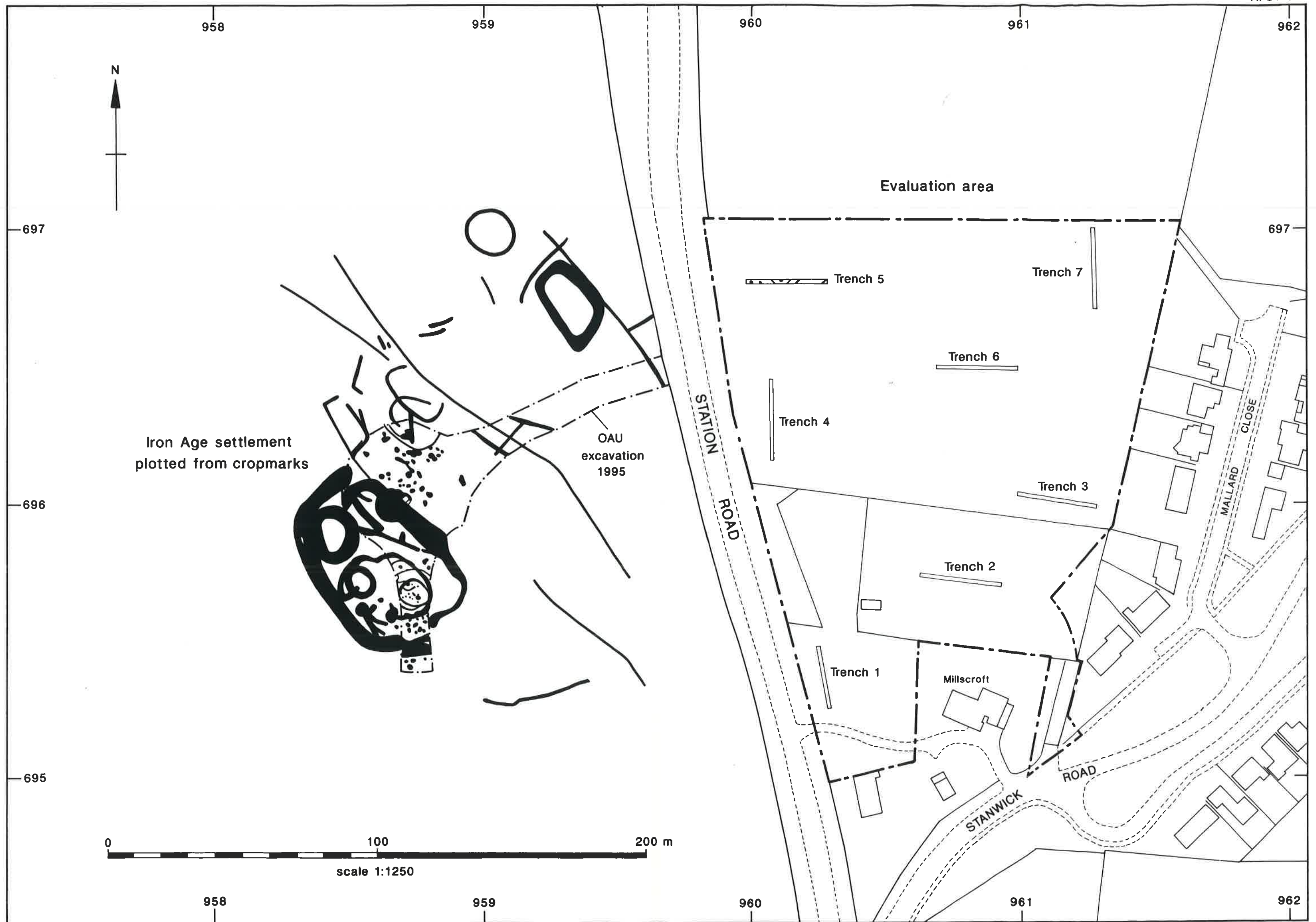
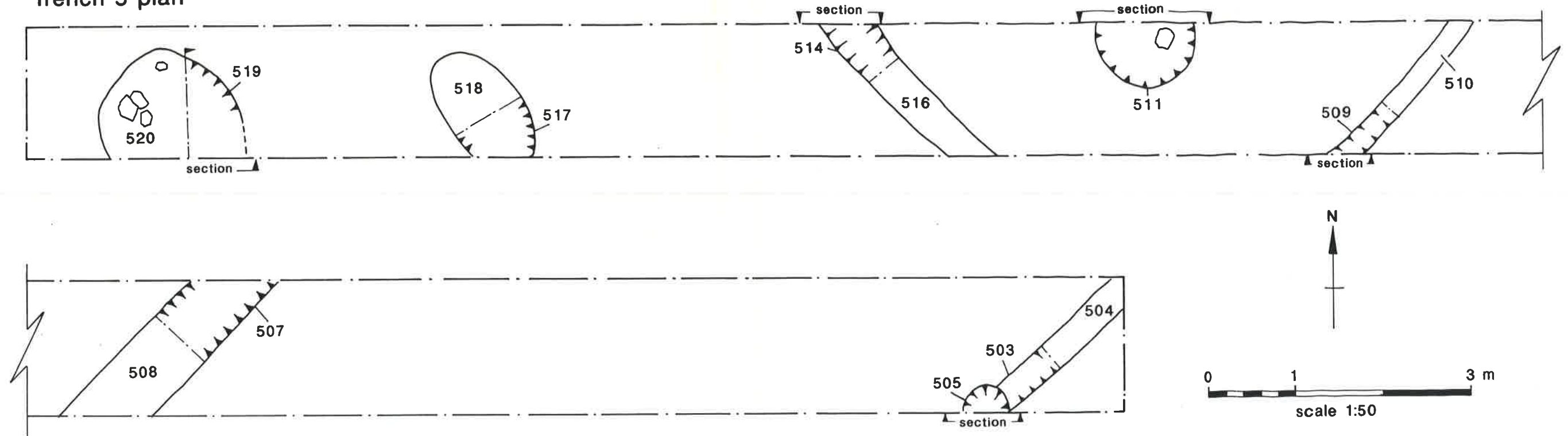


Figure 3

Trench 5 plan



sections

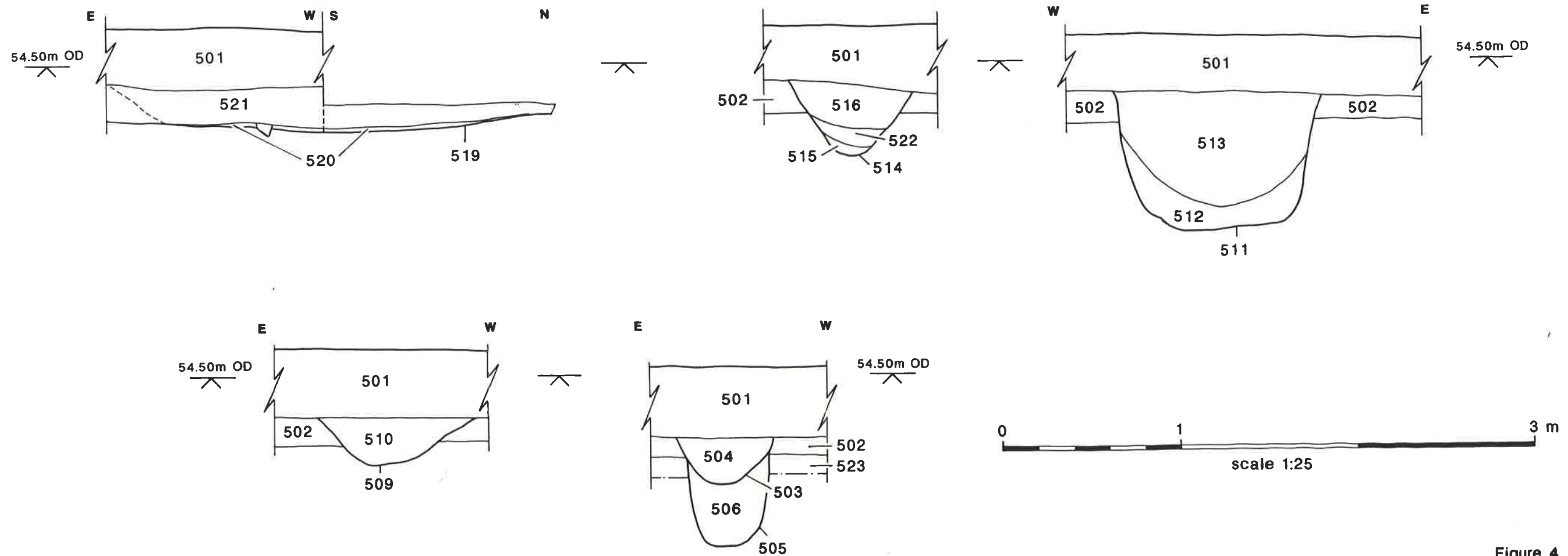


Figure 4



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