Windale First School and Nursery Blackbird Leys, Oxford

Planning Application No: 94/456/DF

Archaeological Watching Brief

NGR SP 5542 0245

OXFORD ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT

May 1995

Windale First School and Nursery,

Blackbird Leys, Oxford

Planning Application No: 94/456/DF

(NGR SP 5542 0245)

Watching Brief

Summary

Following an archaeological evaluation carried out by the Oxford Archaeological Unit in April 1994 a watching brief was carried out on groundworks for the construction of a new primary school.

The evaluation had established the presence of archaeological soils, finds and environmental material on the site. The environmental material is both prehistoric and Roman in date, the artefactual material is Roman. Evidence to suggest a possible prehistoric boundary aligned obliquely to Northfield Brook was uncovered (Allen 1994).

The aim of the watching brief was to record any archaeological features exposed by the groundworks, with particular reference to the suggested line of the possible prehistoric boundary.

The possible prehistoric boundary was exposed as a parallel ditches with a possible protected ground surface between the ditches. Fifty metres of a Roman trackway were also noted.

Introduction

The land is low-lying, dipping from S to N towards the Northfield Brook. The underlying geology is sand overlain by a thin calcareous gravel. This is overlain by alluvial deposits probably derived from the brook, within which were found tree-throw pits containing preserved waterlogged deposits. These were sealed by further alluvial deposits, within which a buried soil horizon probably of Roman date was preserved. The latest alluvial deposit was overlain on the upslope side by colluvial wash, and this was in turn sealed by the modern topsoil.

The area of Cowley, Littlemore and Sandford-on Thames contains many Roman pottery kiln sites. One of these lies immediately to the W of the site and another to the N (PRN 3845 and 6143 see Fig. 1). Pre-roman coins and pottery are recorded from S and SW of the site (PRN 1426 and 1427). The Roman road from Alchester to Dorchester-on-Thames is 1000 m to the E of the site.

The scope of the watching brief

The watching brief was designed to cover the foundation trenches for the school buildings (WSI 3.2). Due to ground conditions the buildings had to seated on a thick concrete raft with thicker edges; no foundation trenches were dug. The entire area to be covered by the buildings and associated paths, playgrounds and carparking was stripped including all the Roman alluvium and the peaty old ground surface located in the evaluation trenches (Fig. 2). This was a greater depth over a larger area than either the trigger level depth of 0.5 m or the foundation work envisaged by the WSI condition 3.1. The evaluation had only covered the area within the building footprints, thus archaeological deposits affected by the other groundworks were not detected in advance of development. These changes in building design were not communicated to the Oxford Archaeological Advisory Service or the Oxford Archaeological Unit, and hence no provision was made for increased monitoring of

the development for salvage recording.

Progress of the watching brief

The first briefing meeting arranged by the contractors (Laing Eastern) took place on 19/9/94, by which time the area stripping had been in progress for a week. Most of the entire area, apart from the carpark and access to the S, had already been stripped to the old ground surface (and in places through it) and this was inspected. Different areas were assigned blocks of context numbers (100, 200 and 300 numbers were used in the building area while 400 was used in the playground where the trackway was found and 500 for the carpark and access).

Subsequent short informal visits were made to monitor progress of the groundworks. The Roman Trackway was not scheduled for monitoring as it was to be left in situ. Due to an error in surveying at the time of the original site inspection this information was incorrect and by the time of the next site visit 2/3 of the trackway over had been removed over a 50 m length. Advance notice of this stripping operation was not given either to the OAAS or to the OAU so this activity was not monitored.

The removal of the peaty old groundsurface and the fills of the parallel prehistoric boundaries was monitored. Laings site agent allowed the excavation of hand-dug sections through the ditches and the trackway. This was less expensive in time and money than watching contractors plant and recovered more archaeological information. A section through the E ditch was recorded. This had not been recorded during the evaluation although it ran through Trench 4. Sections through the Roman Trackway were also recorded. The remnant of the trackway exposed in the area of the play ground was to be removed for foundations for seating, but this work was delayed and in the interval the area was badly churned up by contractor's plant rendering any further archaeological recording pointless.

Results

Other than the layers noted in the evaluation the following were noted

Parallel ditches (Figs 2 and 3)

The first visit noted the upper fills of two parallel ditches aligned roughly N-S. These had been recorded in evaluation Trenches 3 and 4 (Allen Fig.2) but were interpreted as tree-throw pits. The W ditch was excavated (evaluation Fig. 2). A section was drawn of the E ditch (Fig. 2). The ditches were 1.4 m wide and 0.3 m deep. The bottoms of the features were very irregular which would account for their mis-interpretation as tree-throw pits in the evaluation trenches; only when seen in plan over a large area were the ditches obvious.

Roman Trackway (Figs 2 and 3)

As far as could be determined from the small excavated sections and the observations of the stripped area the trackway (404) was formed of a compact grey sand (0.2 m thick) containing large pieces of limestone (0.3x0.2x0.2 m). This layer extended for 50 m and generally 4 m wide (6 m wide at most). It lay on a hard layer of similar

sand where it was excavated but at its W end was on a red-brown peat. The relationship of 404 to the peaty groundsurface (403) was not clear but the alluvium (402) overlay it.

Finds

evaluation
A total of 22 sherds of pottery was recovered from the evaluation, comprising 18 Roman sherds and 4 post-medieval sherds. The Roman sherds came from the buried soil (one sherd from /3 and seven sherds from 2/3) and from the alluvium overlying this (three sherds from 3/3 and seven sherds from 4/2). The breakdown of the Roman material was as follows:

Samian (Central Gaulish)	1
White Mortarium	1
Oxidised wares	7
Reduced wares	8
Grog and quartz	1

All of the sherds were abraded. The more diagnostic pieces, the Samian and two barbotine-decorated reduced wares, are dateable to the second century, and the grog- and sand-tempered sherd is probably of 1st or early 2nd century date. The mortarium sherd, a tall bead, is not closely dateable as it occurs on a number of types dated from the 2nd to the 4th centuries. Two oxidised ware rims were perhaps both from the rim type O41 (Young 1977), dated AD 100-300, but probably most common in the 2nd century. The evidence suggests a predominantly 2nd century date for the material, perhaps contemporary with the earlier use of the Sandford kilns 200 m to the west.

The post-medieval sherds comprise a pearl ware of the earlier 19th century (from 4/2) and three fragments of a willow patterned vessel of the 19th or early 20th century (from 2/1 and 3/1).

watching brief
Ten Roman sherds were found in the watching brief with 11 post-medieval sherds. One sherd was recovered from the trackway and which was of white ware Mortaria M14 (Young 1977). All but one of the other Roman sherds were local products including colour-coated wares, of which mortaria sherds (types C97 and C100 Young 1977) were represented. The single non-local sherd was a rim of an Alice Holt industry jar from Farnham.

Environmental plant remains

evaluation
Three bulk samples were taken for analysis, two from the buried soil (from contexts 3/4 and 4/3) and one from 3/6, the lower fill of waterlogged feature 3/7. Sample 4/3 was floated and sieved for charred plant remains, but none were found. Samples 3/4 and 3/6 were sub-sampled for waterlogged plant remains and were assessed by Dr Mark Robinson of the University Museum, Oxford, who provided the following

comments:

Sample 3/4, a humic clay contained many rootlets and several decayed ancient earthworm cocoons. Seeds of Juncus articulatus (rush) and a single seed of Eupatorium cannabinum (Hemp agrimony) were observed, plus the head of a Philanthus beetle.

This is likely to represent a wet grassland environment. The waterlogged remains were not well-preserved, and the sample is not worthy of further work.

Sample 3/6, a silty clay, contained many root fragments and some twigs, plus a thorn of the hawthorn/blackthorn variety. Several seeds, catkins and a bud of Alnus glutinosa (alder) were observed. Other seeds were: Mentha cf. aquatica (water mint), Prunella vulgaris (selfheal), Eupatorium cannabinum, Viola sp. (violet), Carex spp. (sedges) and Lycopus europaeus (gypsy wort).
Two species of water beetle: Limnebius and an aquatic hydrophilid, and a fragment of an elaterid beetle, were also observed. No charred plant remains were seen.

On the basis of the limited assessment the sample may represent either an open fen woodland or scrubby wet grassland environment, and is tentatively considered likely to be of Bronze Age date. The preservation of the sample offers some potential for further information.

Interpretation of the archaeology

The evaluation revealed a sequence of alluviation adjacent to the Northfield Brook, within which were found features of probable prehistoric date. The latest of these, 3/7, contains charcoal fragments indicating human activity, and its approximately linear nature suggested a boundary of some sort. The watching brief positively identified these as parallel ditches. No tree-throw pits were seen anywhere on the site. The date for the ditches is provided by the environmental material (tentatively indicating a Bronze Age date at the latest) and by analogy with other similar sites across S England [Lambrick 86 and 88].

The Roman Trackway did not have a relationship with the ditches which as far as could be determined did not cross the line of the trackway. Perhaps this is where the boundary stops before running into the Northfield Brook. The Roman trackway was very similar to that found during the excavations on the Didcot to Oxford pipeline and where old ground surfaces were also found (Booth *et al* 1993 111).

The Roman pottery from the site in general is sparse, and is unlikely to indicate domestic activity in the immediate vicinity. This material probably represents the very periphery of the area of Roman occupation centred upon the kilns found 200 m to the W. It is possible, especially considering the abraded character of the Roman sherds, that all of the Roman pottery is redeposited on the Windale School site, but the only other dating evidence in the stratigraphic sequence is the single creamware sherd in the overlying alluvium. The watching brief recovered 11 post-medieval sherds from the old ground surface but these are likely to have been introduced to

the earlier layers by the contractors plant while stripping.

Conclusions

Prehistoric boundaries have been located 1-2 km to the S in association with Roman trackways (Booth *et al* 1993 106-115). Landscape boundaries and field systems become more common towards the late Bronze Age as intensified use of the landscape occurs. The earlier, presumably Bronze Age, boundary at Windale School is a remnant of the earlier landscape. Keevill discusses the possibility of a side road at right angles to the N-S Roman road from Alchester to Dorchester serving the Kiln site at Lower Farm, Nuneham Courtenay 1200 m to the S of Windale School (Booth *et al* 1993 212-215). Using this site as a model the trackway at Windale School may well join the kiln sites to the W with the Roman main road to the E. Both these trackways are associated with streams. These trackways are also followed by the later parish boundaries. These E-W routes are not on the alignments of the prehistoric boundaries and so *may* reflect a Roman realignment of the countryside (this Late Iron Age/early Roman or 2nd-century shift in the landscape is discussed in connection with agriculture by Lambrick 1992, passim and 105).

Bibliography

Allen T G, 1994, Windale School, Blackbird Leys, Oxford Archaeological Evaluation OAU client report

Booth P, Boyle A and Keevill G D, 1993, A Romano-British Kiln Site at Lower Farm, Nuneham Courtenay, and Other Sites on the Didcot to Oxford and Wootton to Abingdon Water Mains, Oxfordshire. Oxoniensia lvii, 87-219

Lambrick G The development of Late Prehistoric and Roman Farming on the Thames Gravels in Developing Landscapes of Lowland Britain. The Archaeology of the Gravels: A Review Fulford M and Nichols E (eds) Society of Antiquaries Occasional Paper 14 London, 78-105

Concordance table of contexts (NB due to conditions of the watching brief not all context numbers were fully recorded)

	Tr 1	Tr 2	Tr 3	Tr4	100	200	300	400	500
Topsoil	1	1	1	1	100	201		400	
Colluvium	-	-	2	-				401	
Alluvium	2	2	3*	2*		202		402	
Buried turf	3*	3*	4	3&4		203		403	
Alluvium	4	4	5	5			304		
Ditch	-	-	10&6	-					
Alluvium	4	4	8	5					
Gravel	-	-	-	7&8					
Trackway	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	404*	-

* indicates the presence of Roman pottery

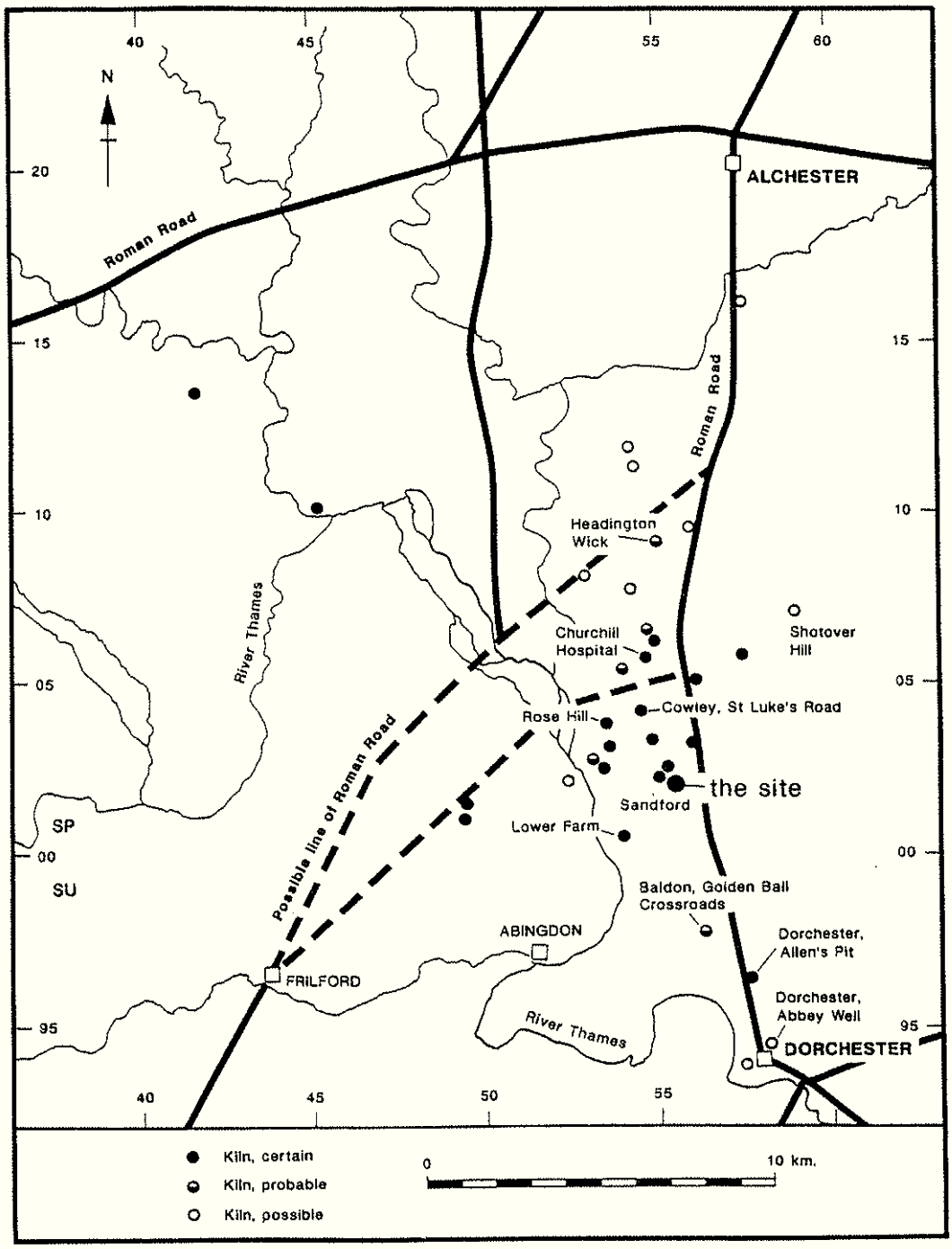
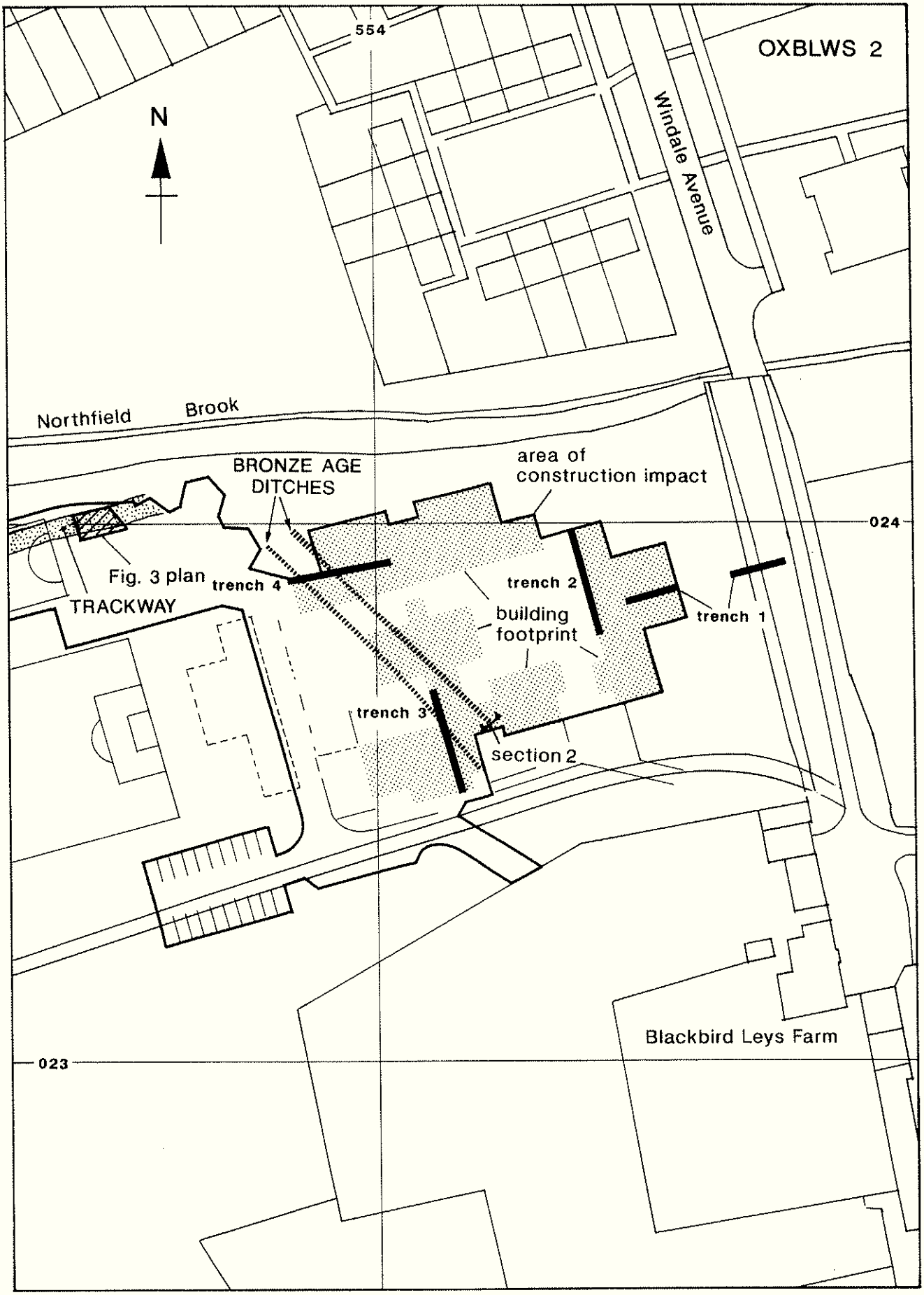
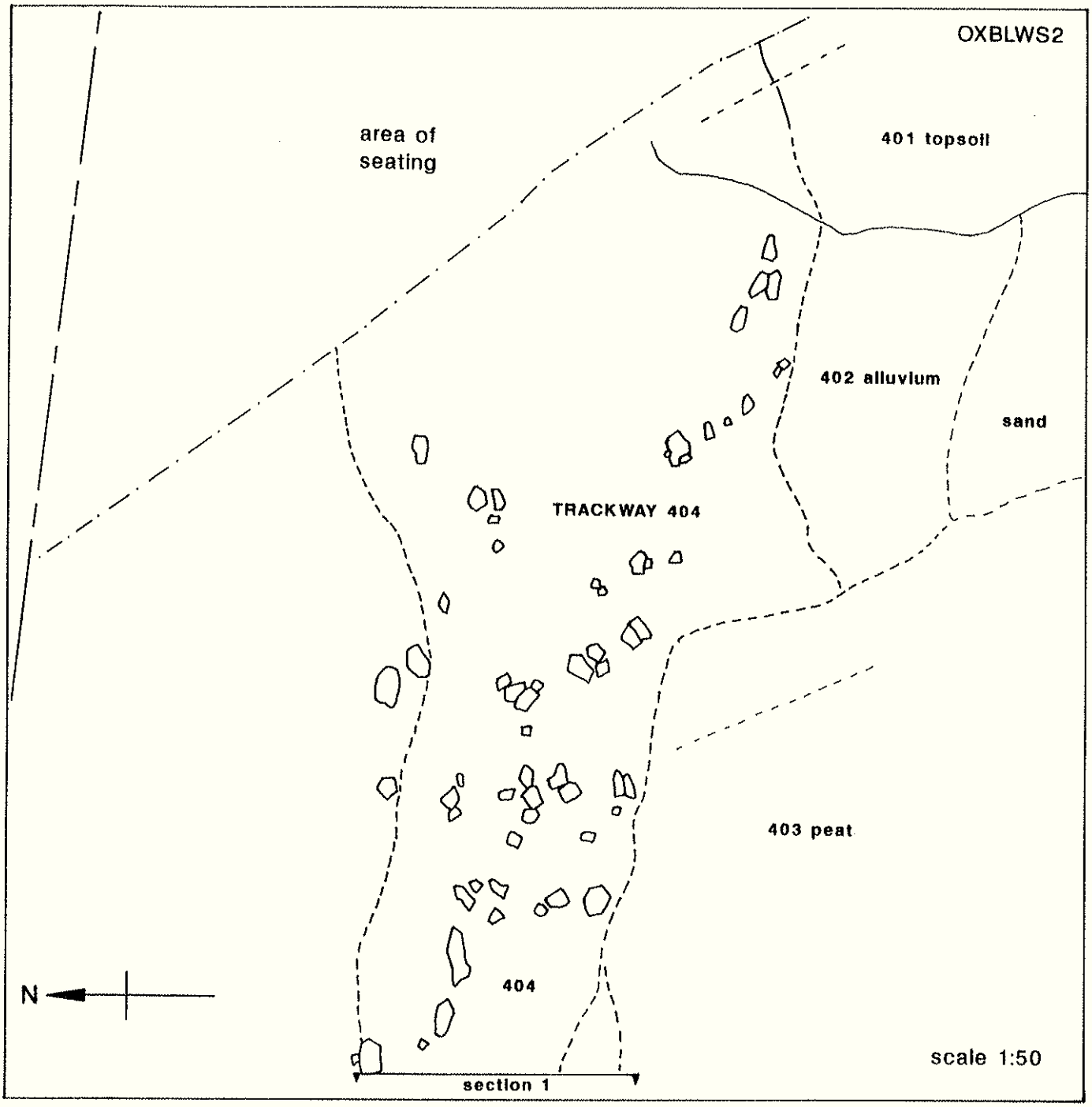

40
45
55
60
N
20
15
10
05
00
95
ALCHESTER
Roman Road
Roman Road
Headington
Wick
River Thames
Churchill
Hospital
Shotover
Hill
Rose Hill
Cowley, St Luke's Road
the site
Sandford
Possible line of Roman Road
Lower Farm
SP
SU
Baldon, Golden Ball
Crossroads
ABINGDON
Dorchester,
Allen's Pit
FRILFORD
Dorchester,
Abbey Well
River Thames
DORCHESTER
40
45
50
55
Kiln, certain
Kiln, probable
Kiln, possible
0
10 km.

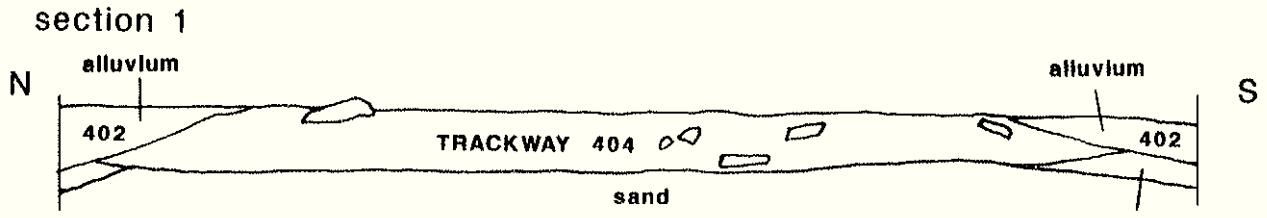
figure 1



scale 1:1000

figure 2


OXBLWS2
area of seating
401 topsoil
402 alluvium
sand
TRACKWAY 404
403 peat
404
N
section 1
scale 1:50


section 1
N
alluvium
402
TRACKWAY 404
sand
alluvium
402
S
peaty old ground surface

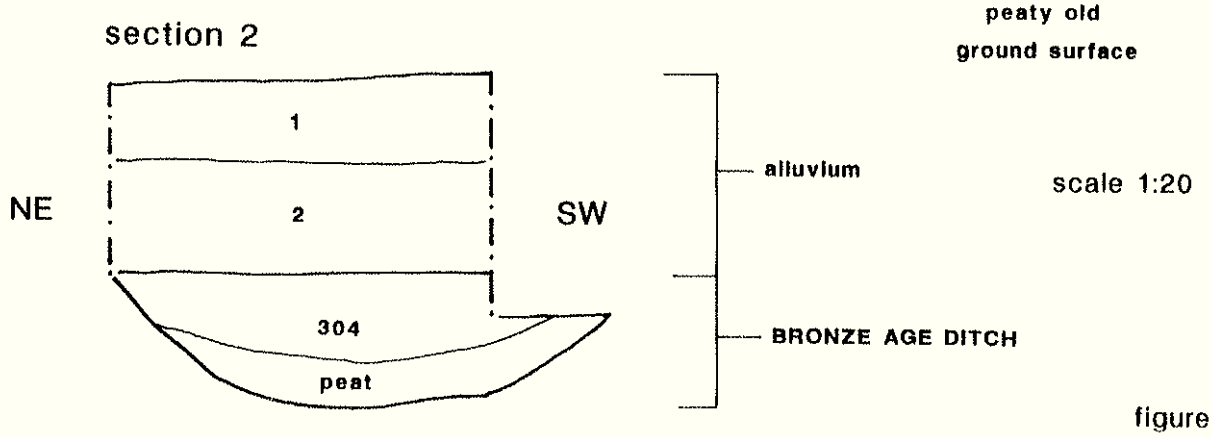

section 2
NE
1
2
304
peat
SW
alluvium
BRONZE AGE DITCH
scale 1:20

figure 3

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