

Reading Business Park: Axiom 4

Archaeological Evaluation



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Introduction

In 1985 a planning application was submitted to local planning authorities with proposals for the redevelopment of about 80 hectares of land at Smallmead Farm, to the west of Reading. The area falls within the three districts of Newbury, Reading Borough and Wokingham. Because of the known archaeology from the region the area has been defined as one of high archaeological potential (Kennet Valley Local Plan 1985, Fig. 4). Policy EN26 of the Review of Berkshire Structure Plans (1985), and policy A1 of the Kennet Valley Local Plan state that areas of high archaeological potential should be evaluated before relevant planning applications are decided in order to enable full consideration of development proposals. Accordingly the applicants for this development, Pucknell Brothers (Holdings) Ltd and Rickworth Securities Ltd., commissioned and sponsored the Trust for Wessex Archaeology to carry out an archaeological evaluation of the development area. This investigation took place between April and July 1986.

Archaeological background

The area is situated on the river gravels about 1km south of the river Kennet. The Foudry Brook which is a tributary of the river Kennet runs through the eastern part of the site. The Kennet, and its tributaries, has attracted settlement since about 10,000 B.C. The soils of the terrace gravels are suitable for farming while the river and floodplain provides a varied habitat which could be exploited for hunting and gathering. The rivers themselves would have provided the

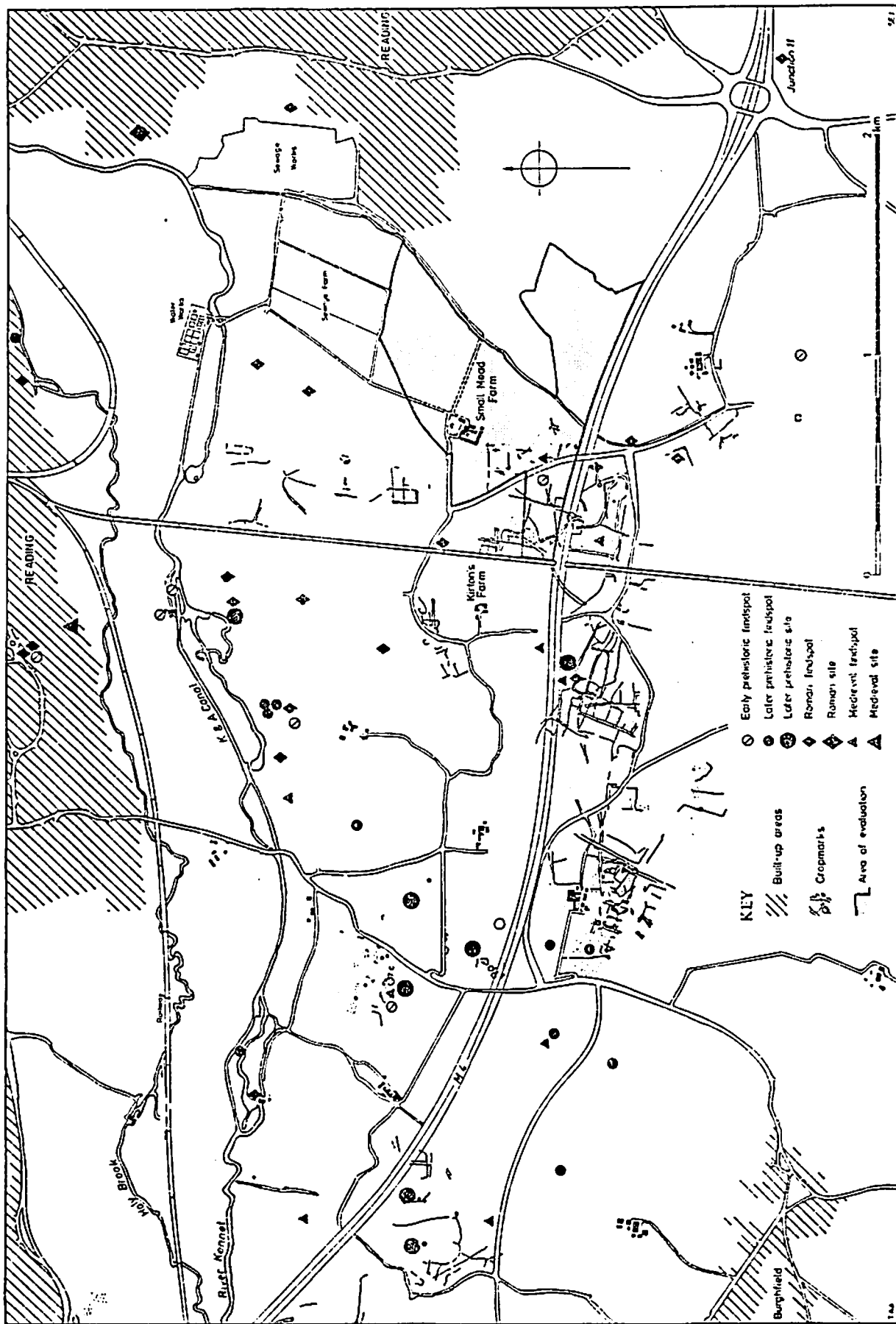


Fig. 1 Archaeological background

necessary water supply and acted as important waterways for colonization and trade.

Fig. 1 clearly demonstrates the wealth of archaeological information known in the Burghfield region. Aerial photographs have hinted at the survival of extensive buried archaeological landscapes while chance finds and various archaeological investigations have confirmed and amplified this suggestion. Clearly the area was densely occupied in the first millennium B.C., the Roman period (1st-2nd centuries A.D.) and in the early medieval period (12th-14th centuries A.D.), while occasional finds from the area indicate that occupation has been more or less continuous since about 10,000 B.C..

The Site (Fig. 2)

For ease of recording the site was divided into four separate areas: areas B and C comprising land belonging to Bucknell Brothers (Holdings) Ltd; areas A and D comprising land on which Rickworth Securities Ltd have an option. Aerial photographs of the site show a complexity of archaeological features in area A while further east, in the western parts of areas C and D, traces of archaeological features can be identified. The low lying nature and the land use of the remaining part of the site (area D has been largely down to pasture for many years) has provided unsuitable conditions for detection of archaeological features through aerial photography.

In 1983 and 1984, as part of the Kennet Valley Survey funded by English Heritage, surface finds were collected from arable fields in area A and the western part of area C. It was not possible at the time to survey the other fields in the development area. The results of this survey have been plotted on Fig. 2. The spread of prehistoric, Roman

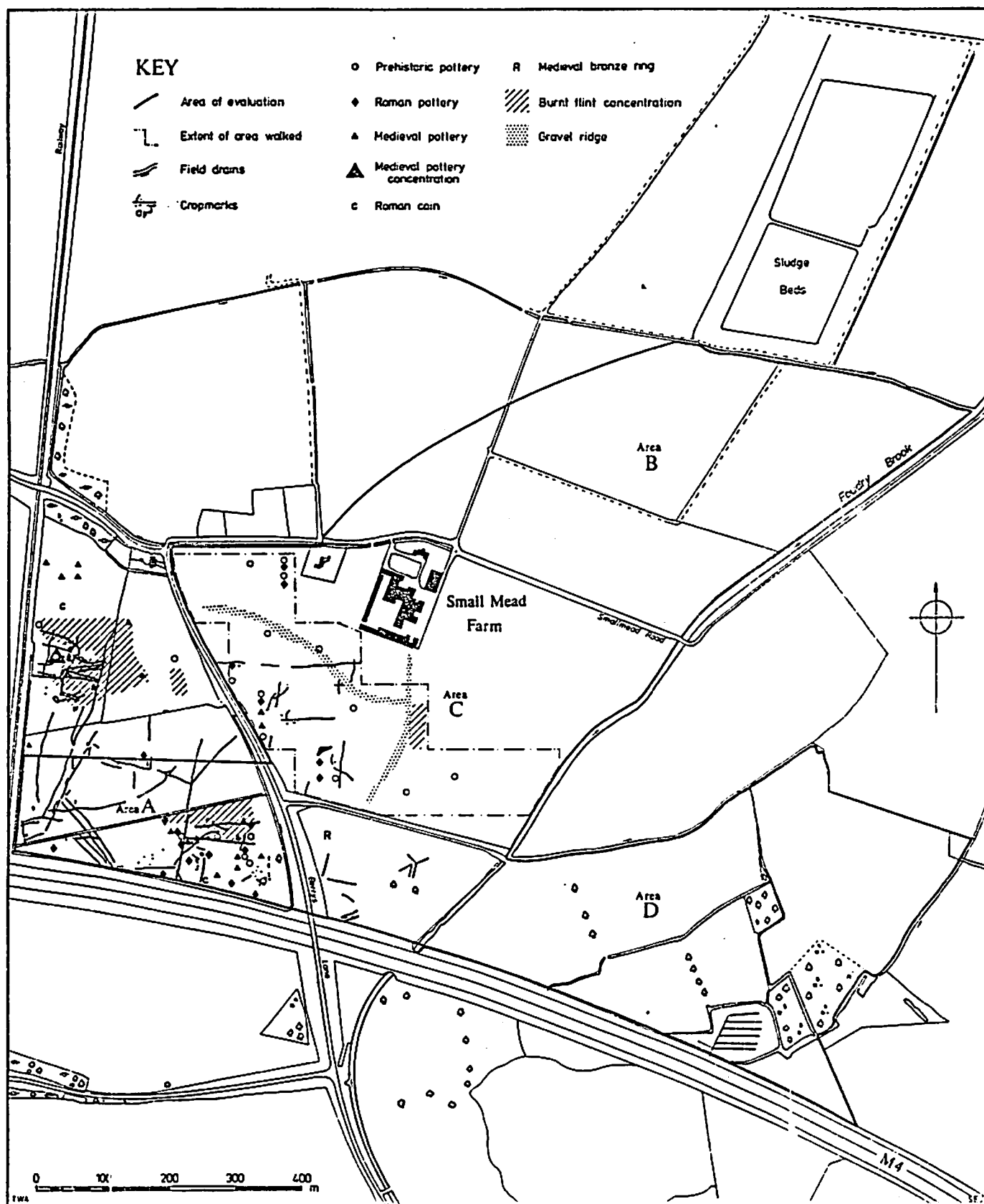


Fig. 2 The site showing known archaeological finds

and medieval pottery in the southern part of area A suggests multi-period occupation of the site, while the rectangular enclosure to the north of A appears to date back to the 12th century A.D. This general distribution clearly spreads eastwards into the western part of Area C. Several concentrations of burnt flint were identified, in area A and to the south east of Smallmead Farm. Burnt flint is often found in quantity, in this region, in association with Bronze Age activity and may be seen as a by-product of domestic and industrial activities of that date. Other stray finds from the site include two Roman coins from area A and a 14th century finger ring from area D.

Areas B and C were used as a sewage farm for many years until the beginning of this century when the ground was landscaped and reverted to agricultural land. Parts of the raised gravel tracks for the steam engines used at this time are still visible in area C.

Strategy

The aims of the evaluation were to establish the presence, or absence, of archaeological deposits over the whole site and to assess their date, nature and state of preservation. This would provide additional information to support the planning application and form the basis for decisions relating to the archaeology of the site.

Two levels of evaluation were proposed:

1. A broad assessment of the nature and distribution of archaeological levels over the whole site in order to identify areas of archaeological activity.
2. A closer evaluation of a) specific features visible on the aerial photographs; b) areas suggested by the broad survey as being of

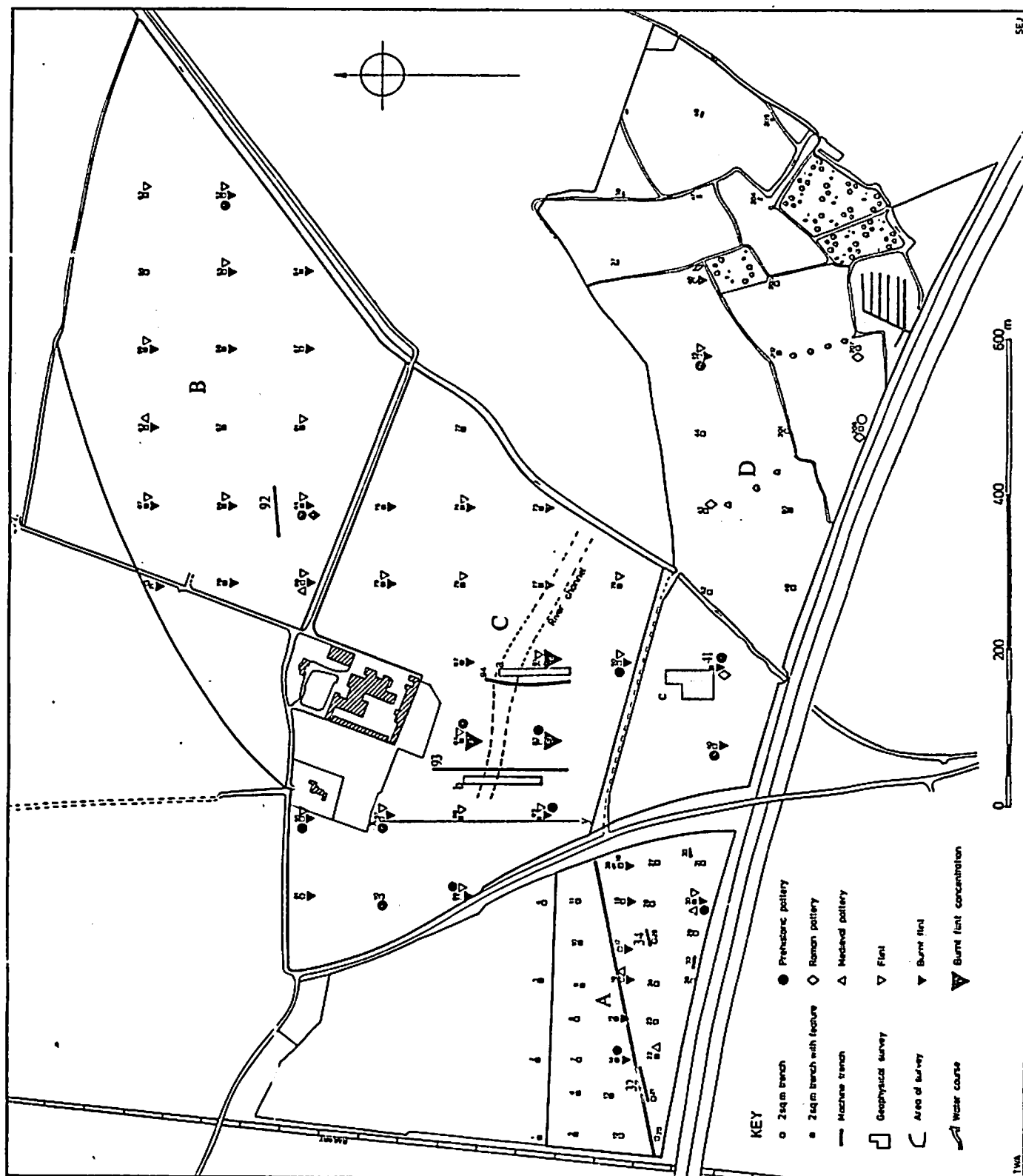


Fig. 3: Location of trenches showing archaeological finds

greater significance; c) an area within the course of the proposed flood relief channel.

Method (Fig. 3)

A systematic grid, based on the national grid was imposed over the whole site. Two metre square holes were excavated at 100 metre intervals over most of the site; a 50 metre grid was adopted in area A in an attempt to provide greater clarity in a part of the site where existing information suggested some complexity.

Subsequently larger trenches were opened up using a mechanical excavator in areas A, B and C. Several small trenches were also excavated by machine in the eastern part of area D where the low lying, wet nature of the site and the nature of the soils combined with the dry weather and time factors made excavation by hand difficult and slow.

In addition a geochemical survey was carried out over part of the site but proved to be of little interest because of the leaching of the soils. A geophysical survey was carried out in selected parts of the site to test the effectiveness of this method of survey and to provide additional information relating to archaeological features identified in excavation trenches. Soil samples were collected from suitable archaeological deposits for analysis of the survival and state of preservation of ecofacts.

Results

Area A

Aerial photographs of the area indicated the presence of a complex of ditches, pits, trackways and enclosures in this area. Surface finds suggested multi-period occupation in the prehistoric, Roman and medieval periods.

Two metre holes were excavated, by hand, on a 50 metre grid, instead of the 100 metre spacing proposed for the rest of the site, in order to cover a greater percentage of the ground and to provide a more precise definition of the archaeological levels as suggested by previous fieldwork. It was also designed to assess the general distribution of archaeological material in the field. Larger trenches were also excavated to investigate in more detail specific features identified on the aerial photographs and in the two metre squares.

A total of 31 two metre square test pits were excavated. It was not always possible to adhere to the regular grid because of the constraints of the growing crop. Furthermore some squares were deliberately moved off the grid to intercept features identified on the aerial photographs.

The holes were excavated through topsoil and subsoil down to the level of the gravel surface, and all potential archaeological features were fully excavated. In some areas the gravel was overlain by a yellowish silt into which many of the archaeological features had been cut; holes in these areas were therefore excavated to this level. The plough soil was generally between 0.23m and 0.28m deep, and the undulations in the gravel surface resulted in a variation of overburden depths of between 0.23m and 0.90m (in the south west corner of the field).

Twelve of the 31 test pits contained archaeological features but in only one case (Trench 22) was secure dating evidence obtained when 55 sherds of green-glazed pottery dating to 14th century were recovered from a ditch (Fig. 5, 805). Two knapped flints, dating to the prehistoric period, were recovered from an irregular depression in trench 30. Trench 13 produced large quantities of animal bone from the

fill of a ditch and a few fragments of iron objects from a ditch in trench 19.

Finds from the subsoil consisted mainly of post medieval material with a few notable exceptions. Sherds of Bronze age pottery were found in trenches 14 and 30 and medieval pottery was found in the subsoil of trenches 16 and 30. A single flint was found in trench 25.

Burnt flint recovered from 16, 18 and 19 is consistent with the concentration of burnt flint identified during fieldwalking (see Fig. 2). In addition burnt flint was found in association with bronze age pottery in trenches 14 and 30.

Five extended trenches were dug in area A. Trenches 32, 33 and 34 were excavated to investigate the features visible on aerial photographs while Trenches 35 and 36 were to investigate areas where the two metre squares indicated the presence of archaeological features.

Trench A32 (Fig. 4)

Trench 32 was approximately 2m wide and 47m long and was dug across several linear ditches visible on the air photographs. The topsoil and subsoil were removed by a JCB excavator to a depth of about 0.45m to expose 13 archaeological features cut into the natural gravel.

A complex of intercutting ditches (features 152, 159, 161 and 218) was identified towards the centre of the trench. All appear to date to the later bronze age. Most contained bronze age pottery, burnt flint and animal bones.

An oval pit (feature 222), predating ditch 218, was found to be a shallow grave containing the remains of a skeleton (Fig. 4). The skeleton was lying on its left side in a crouched position with its knees drawn up towards its chest. The position of the body is more

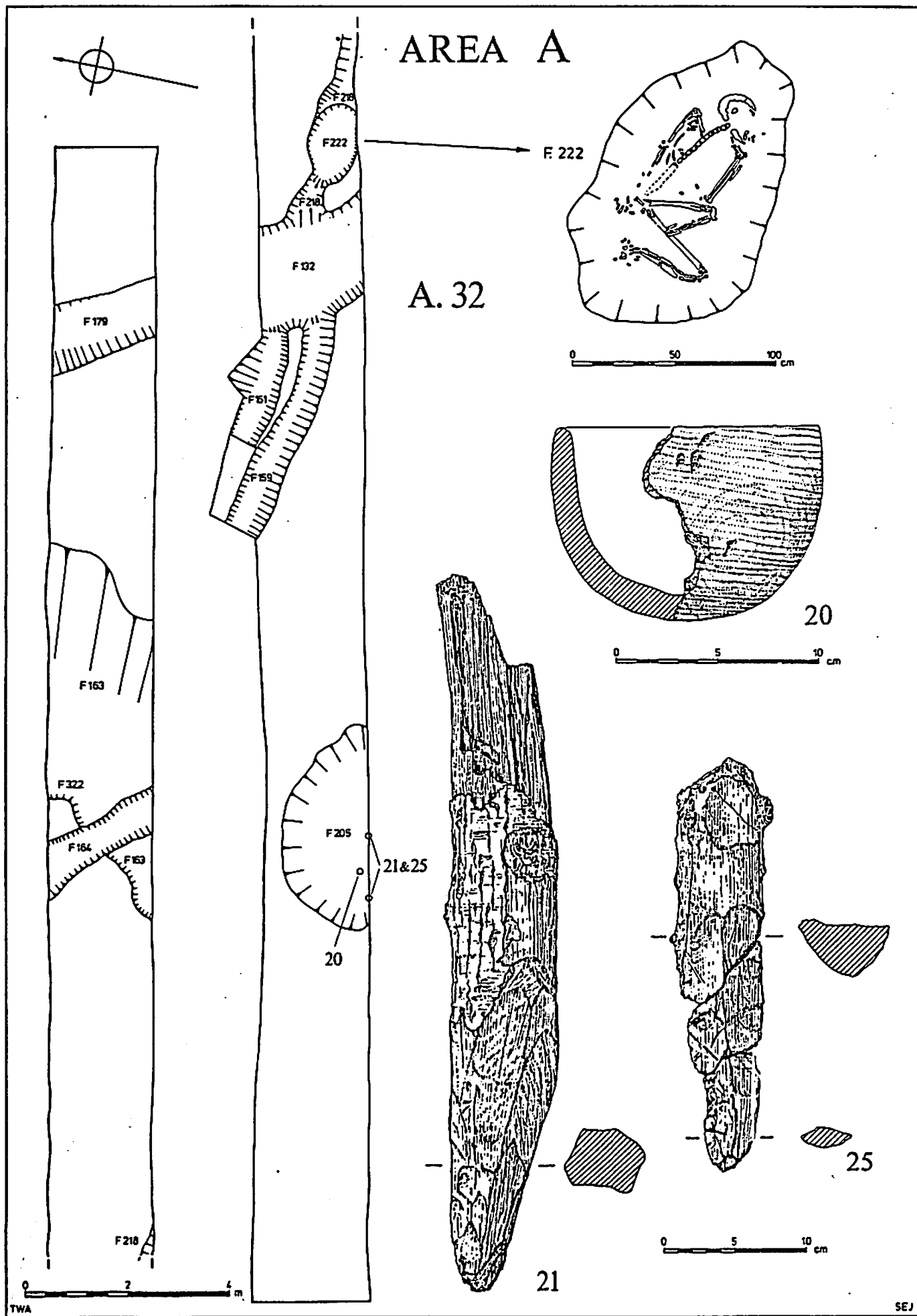


Fig. 4 Archaeological features and finds from Area A
Trench 32

typical of an earlier period and may suggest a date of about 1,500-2,000 B.C.

A large roughly round pond was identified in this trench (Feature 205). The primary fill of this pit was waterlogged providing ideal conditions for the preservation of organic remains. A small circular wooden bowl was found together with two sharpened wooden stakes which had been driven into the gravel perhaps suggesting a well structure (Fig. 4). In the layers above quantities of burnt flint and animal bone were found possibly suggesting a subsequent use of this feature as a rubbish pit.

Two other undated ditches were also excavated in this trench.

Trench A33 (not illustrated)

Trench 33, 15m wide and approximately 2.1m long, was excavated to a depth of 0.23m, to the top of the silt, by a JCB. Two ditches, which can be seen on the aerial photographs were examined. Ditch 171 contained 17th/18th century pottery and animal bone. Ditch 307 is of unknown date but is earlier than ditch 171 and may be considerably older.

Trench A34 (Fig. 5)

Trench 34 was about 22m long and 2m wide. 0.30 m of topsoil and subsoil was removed by a JCB and the surface cleaned, using trowels, to reveal the features. Three ditches were located in this trench, two of which dated to the Roman period. Ditch 166 was of particular interest as it contained the remains of a cremated child placed inside a Roman pot (Fig. 5, 27). Two other large Roman pots were found in the ditch; although broken, many of the sherds were still present making it possible to reconstruct their profiles (Fig. 5, 18 & 25).

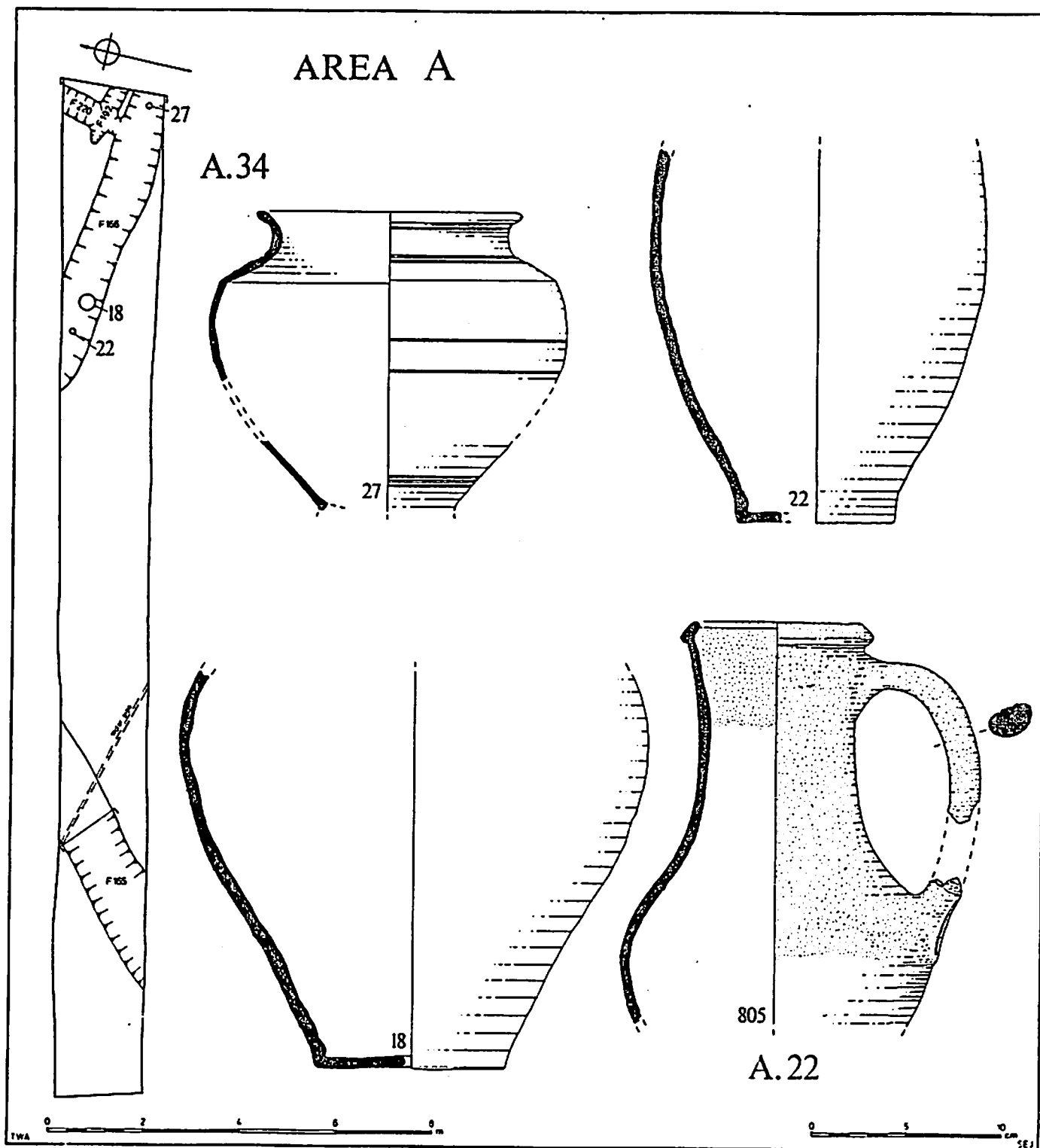


Fig. 5 Archaeological features and finds from Area A

Trenches A35 and A36 (not illustrated)

Two other smaller trenches were excavated in area A, to investigate areas where two metre square holes had located ditch features. Trench 35 contained features dug into the natural gravel at a depth of 0.40m below the surface. A ditch 0.95m wide and 0.33m deep, was excavated but contained no finds while interpretation of two other features remains unclear.

Trench 36 contained two parallel ditches which were dug into the natural silt 0.63m beneath the ground surface. Feature 210 was 0.70m wide and 0.68m deep while ditch 211 was slightly larger being 1.30m wide and 0.52m deep.

Area D

Although collection of surface finds was not possible in this area some archaeological features are visible on aerial photographs. Twelve two metre square test pits were excavated, by hand, at 100m intervals. The topsoil and subsoil in this area varied in depth between 0.27 and 1.07m although in general tended to be very shallow. A JCB excavator was used to investigate the eastern edge of this area because of the depth of the overburden; the nature of the soils, which were largely clays, and the low lying position would have made the excavation by hand arduous and very slow. Three two metre square trenches in area D contained features, the most notable of these trenches being trench 41.

Trench D41 (Fig. 6) contained a complex of intercutting ditches cut into the gravel sealed by a clay subsoil. The limited nature of the area exposed however did not allow positive interpretation of these ditches.

AREA D

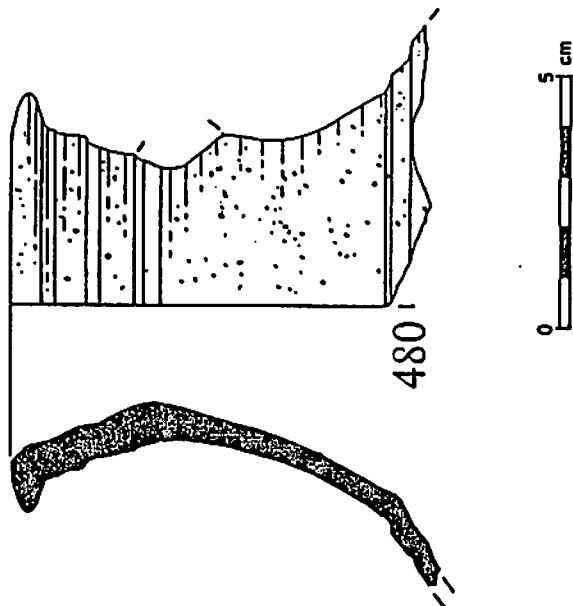
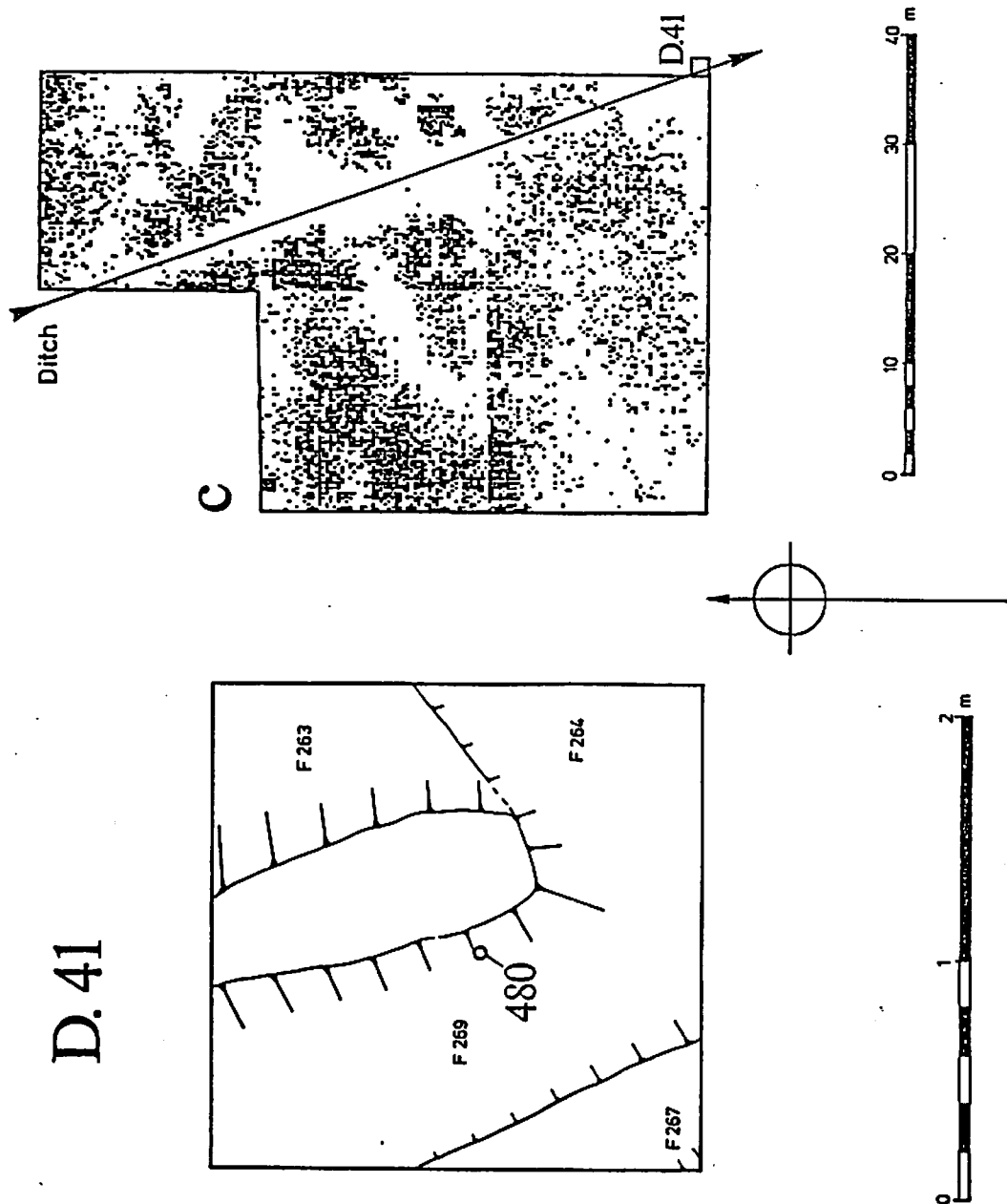


Fig. 6 Archaeological finds from Area D Trench 41 including the results of the geophysical survey

Feature 269 contained Roman pottery (Fig. 6, 480), while the presence of bronze age pottery suggests earlier occupation in the area. This ditch was subsequently cut by Feature 265 which dated to the Roman period, as did Feature 264.

Features 265 and 263 were sealed by a layer which contained 36 sherds of Roman pottery. All the features were sealed by a grey clay layer which contained 88 sherds of Roman pottery and may represent an occupation layer.

A geophysical survey was carried out in an area adjacent to trench 41. This produced a rather confused picture probably due to the profusion of archaeological features. Linear ditches are clearly visible as low resistance anomalies. It is possible that some of the high resistance anomalies are archaeologically significant but it would be necessary to survey a larger area before these anomalies could be interpreted with confidence.

Roman pottery was also recovered from the topsoil of trench 206 and the subsoil of trenches 43 and 207. Evidence for bronze age activity in the area was suggested in trench 45 where 42 sherds of bronze age pottery were found with 13 flint flakes and 53 fragments of burnt flint. Trench 50 contained a feature which did not contain any datable finds but appears to predate the later bronze age.

Area B

There was no previously known archaeology in this area. 17 two metre square holes were excavated by hand at 100 metre intervals. The soils in this area are varied but, predominantly, a silty clay subsoil is sealed by a mixed organic topsoil. In some areas no subsoil survives and the topsoil immediately overlies the gravel. In general the

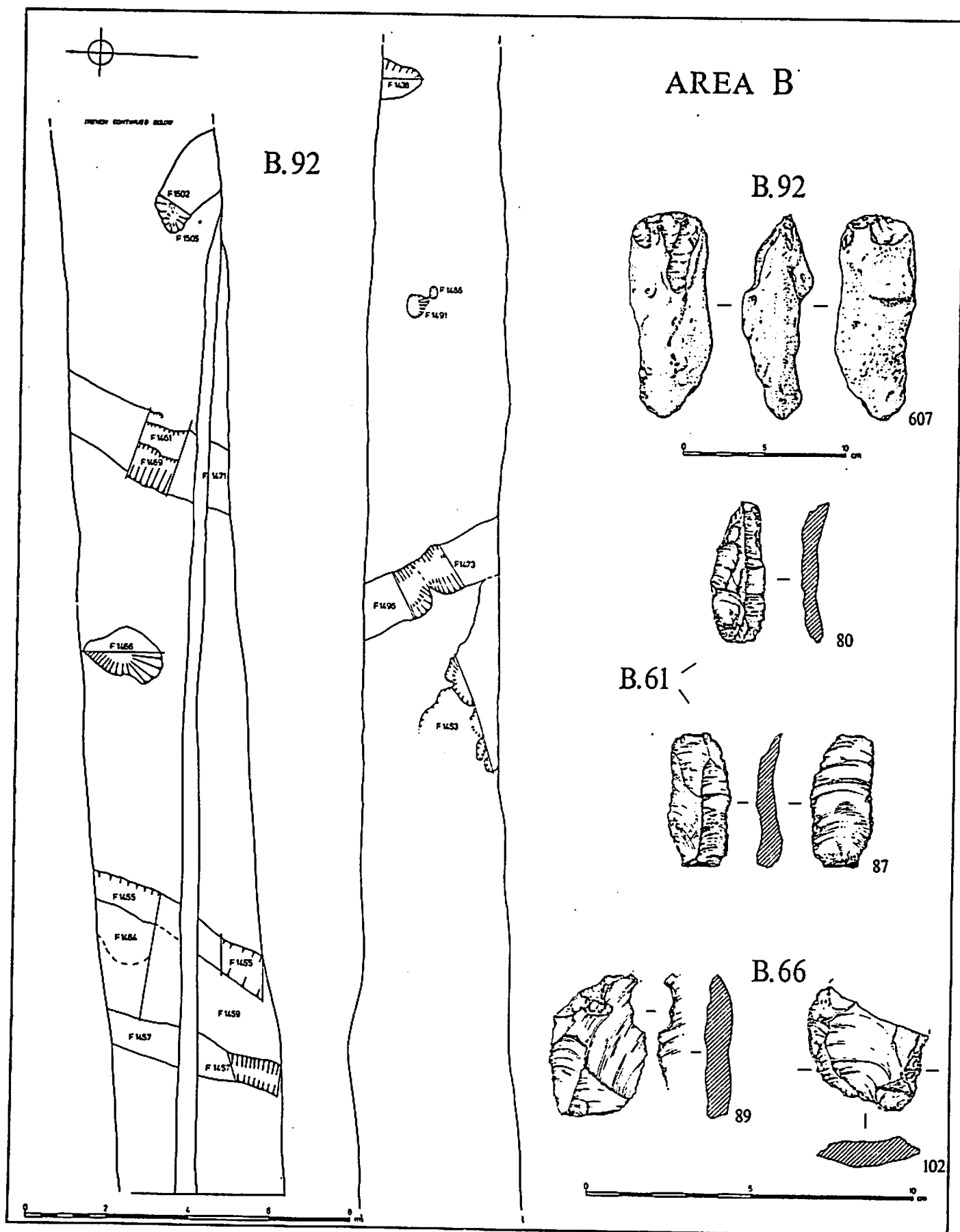


Fig. 7 Archaeological features and finds from Area B

overburden was about 0.30m deep rising to a maximum of 1.56m in the north-east part of the site where the gravel surface drops down alongside the Foudry Brook. This probably is due to the presence of old river channels.

A total of 21 features was recorded in nine of the two metre square trenches (see Fig. 3). (One of the more interesting was trench 66 where a ditch containing 20 knapped flints was recorded, amongst which two tools were identified (Fig. 7, 89 & 102). Trenches 54, 55, 57, 58, 59, 65 and 67 produced knapped or burnt flint stratified within the subsoil. Flint artefacts were also recovered from the topsoil in many of the trenches including two tools from B61 (Fig. 7, 80 & 87).

A small quantity of bronze age pottery was found in area B from the subsoil in trench 65 and from the base of the subsoil in trench 52. Trench 65 also contained one sherd of Romano British pottery. Three sherds of medieval pottery were also found in trenches 65 and 69. In addition a significant quantity of bronze age pottery which may have once formed a complete pot was found in one of the features in this trench.

Area C

A few features in the western part of this area were visible on aerial photographs. Surface finds, collected over a small area to the south west of Smallmead Farm suggested bronze age and Roman dates for these features. A significant quantity of burnt flint was recovered to the south of Smallmead Farm buildings.

Nineteen two metre square holes were excavated by hand at 100m intervals, through topsoil and subsoil to the gravel or equivalent

natural surface. Two more extensive trenches were opened up using a machine to remove the topsoil and subsoil.

Fourteen of the 2 metre square trenches excavated revealed archaeological features cut into the natural surface and sealed by about 0.40m of topsoil and subsoil. Burnt flint was recovered from all but three of the holes, but the greatest concentrations were found in the central part of the field, in trenches 81, 83 and 84 (see Fig. 3). This concentration of burnt flint had already been suggested by the surface collection survey. In trench 81 the burnt flint was found in association with bronze age pottery; 8.60kg of burnt flint was recovered from this trench together with 65 sherds of bronze age pottery and 7 knapped flints. The fall off in density of burnt flint in trench C93 suggests a western limit to the concentration while a survey of the surface suggested that the concentration extended at least 10 metres to the east. Trenches 83, 84, 85, 87, 88, 89 and 90 all contained bronze age pottery and other artefacts in the topsoil and subsoil. In trench 84 one of the ditches contained bronze age pottery, flint artefacts and a worked bone object (Fig. 8, 218 & 233).

Trench C93 (Fig. 8)

Trench 93 was approximately 175 metres long and 3 metres wide. A depth of 0.40m of soil was removed to expose the surface of the gravel into which many archaeological features were cut. A buried river channel, probably relating to the river Kennet system running in an east/west direction, provided a significant focal point in this trench. 87 features were recorded in this trench representing the remains of occupation features, although a few may be natural in origin. Most of the archaeological features occur on the south side of the river

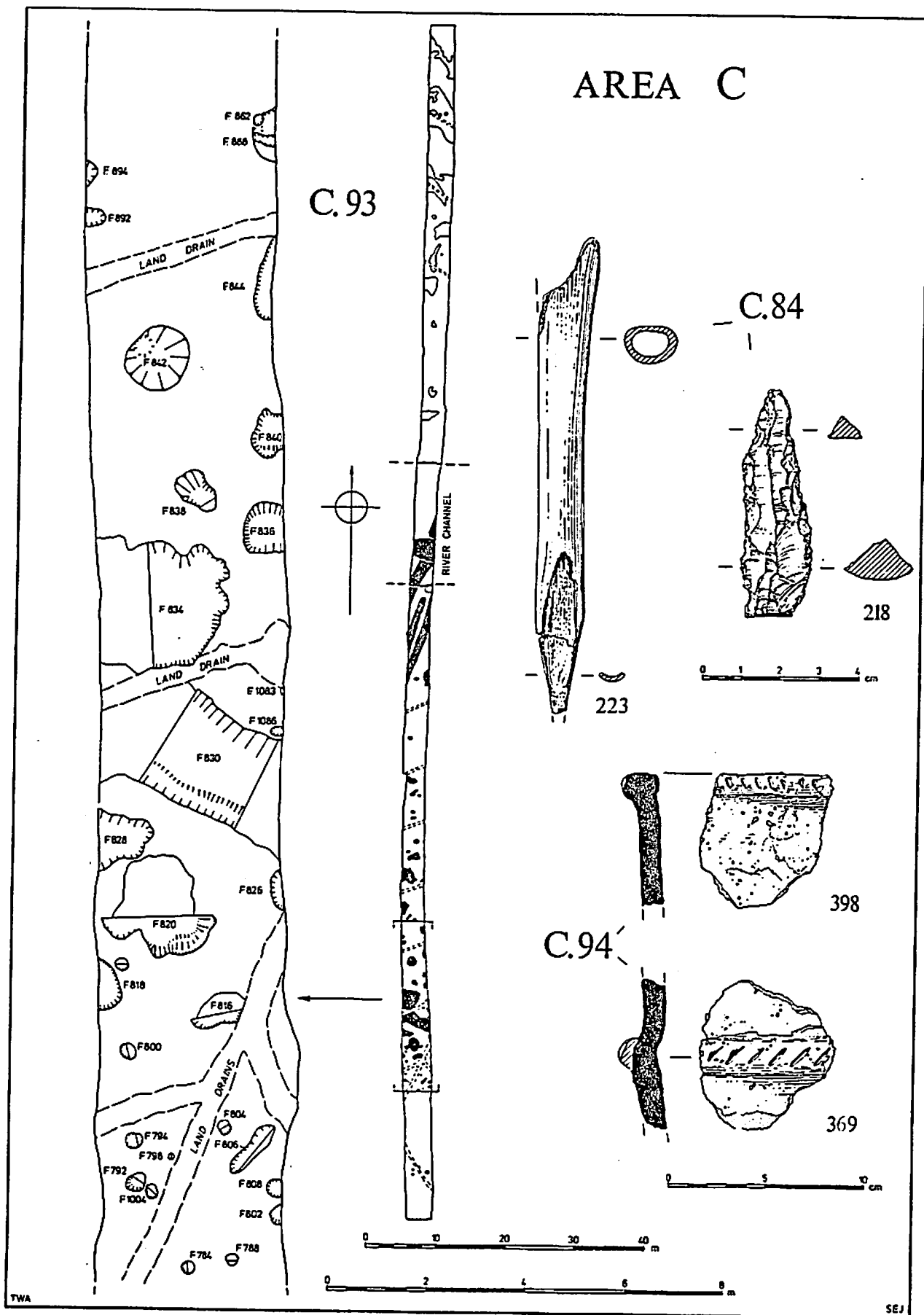


Fig. 8 Archaeological features and finds from Area C

channel, although a few features were noted to the north (see Fig. 8). Many post holes were identified which may be the remains of wooden structures, the shape of which could not be suggested because of the narrow width of the trench. Other features include pits, ditches and shallow hollows. Although many features were undated, a date in the later bronze age is suggested by the occurrence of bronze age pottery, burnt flint and other occupation debris.

Three ditches had been cut across the top of the silted-up channel roughly following a SW/NE alignment. The function and date of these features remains unclear, although it does appear that they were deliberately kept clean. Possibly they represent attempts to drain a boggy area of the field. This appears to have continued until fairly recent times when a large pit or pond containing two iron plough shares was excavated.

Trench C94 (not illustrated)

Trench 94, approximately 110m x 3m in size, was excavated 20m to the west of trench 81 which produced significantly large quantities of burnt flint and bronze age pottery and in the area of the concentration of burnt flint suggested by surface collection. The river channel already noted in trench C93 crossed the northern end.

A JCB removed approximately 0.35m of overburden to expose 26 features cut into the gravel. These included post holes, pits, ditches and other irregularly shaped features. Several contained sherds of bronze age pottery, burnt and knapped flint and quantities of animal bone.

Ditch 1323 to the south of the river channel contained significant quantities of bronze age pottery, worked flint, burnt flints and some

clay weight fragments. Significantly one shallow ditch and a post hole was recorded running parallel to the northern edge of the river channel. On the southern bank of the channel an occupation layer sealed by the topsoil containing large quantities of bronze age pottery, burnt flint, a fragment of quernstone, fragments of broken clay weight and many animal bones was examined. Interestingly an occupation layer sloped down into the southern edge of the river channel and contained up to 50% burnt flint suggesting the channel must have been open at this time.

Discussion

This evaluation has clearly demonstrated that archaeological features and deposits are to be found over most of the development area. Only in the east part of area D and in the extreme north east corner of area B were no indications of archaeological activity encountered. This may be due to the fact that the ground level falls away in these areas and the soils consist of very sticky clays. These areas are also very low lying and wet. However as only a small percentage of these areas was examined it is possible that archaeological levels exist but not in the same density as encountered elsewhere on the site.

In area A the excavations have indicated a greater complexity in the density of features and chronological sequence than is suggested by the aerial photographs. Features in trench 32 appear to date predominantly to the bronze age while in trench 34 the pottery suggests a Roman date. The fieldwalking evidence suggests that activities dating to both periods are more widespread across the whole area. Features dating to the medieval period were also recorded and these appear to be associated with the rectangular enclosure visible on the aerial photographs to the north of this area. Although most features are sealed by only 0.40m

topsoil and subsoil many are deeply cut and are waterlogged at the base. Where this occurs preservation is obviously excellent and organic objects such as the wooden bowl from trench 32 will be preserved.

The archaeological features in this area clearly form part of a more extensive landscape largely visible on aerial photographs in the surrounding areas. Most of this, to the south and west has now been destroyed. The features in area A form an integral part of a whole complex visible on the aerial photographs in the fields to the west of Berry's Lane (including the area to the north of A). If the northern part is to be included in the development at a later date, the whole area should perhaps be treated as a unit and any decision relating to the archaeology in Area A, should take into consideration the whole of the area to the west of Berry's Lane.

In areas B and C archaeological features were recorded over most of the area supported by the distribution of archaeological finds from topsoil and subsoil layers. Unlike the other areas, relatively large numbers of knapped flints were recovered representing the earliest activity on the site. In trenches C93 and especially B92 flintwork was associated with archaeological features. It is suggested that the main nucleus of this activity lies in the western part of area B and the north eastern part of area C although contemporary features undoubtedly occur in other parts of the site, as demonstrated by the discovery of the skeleton in area A which may date to this period. The sample excavated was too small for detailed analysis but suggests a date for this activity of around 2000 B.C. with hints of earlier occupation. Settlements dating to this period are rare in southern Britain and

almost unknown in Berkshire and the discovery of this site in the area of the business park therefore assumes some importance.

In area C to the south of the Smallmead Farm buildings the evidence suggests the existence of a late bronze age settlement straddling the banks of a stream, now silted up. Trench C94 passes through a dense concentration of burnt flint and other occupation debris which appears on the surface to extend for about 150 metres along the southern bank of the stream. However similar concentrations also appear to exist on the north side of the stream, demonstrated by the field survey evidence and the concentrations found in the two metre square C84. Burnt flint occurs in smaller quantities in the topsoil and subsoil as well as in stratified deposits over most of the suggested development area suggesting widespread activity. The burnt flint concentration associated with bronze age activity suggests that this part of the settlement was used for one particular function while occupation features are apparently more extensive. Bronze age features were recorded in trench C93 and further afield in trench B92 and in areas A and D. Clearly a large settlement of this date exists within the area of the proposed Business Park. The high water level and the apparent deliberate curation of the river channel suggests that preservation may be good with organic artefacts such as wooden objects surviving intact. Furthermore the landscaping process following the closure of the sewage farm appears to have had little damaging effect on the archaeological stratigraphy. In view of the discovery of the important bronze age riverside site at Anslows Cottages about 1km to the north of this site and the apparent similarities, and possible association, between the two

sites, special consideration must be given to this bronze age settlement within the area of the proposed business park.

In area D Roman features predominate although Bronze age settlement activities clearly extend into this area as well. The main density of features appears to extend over the western part of this area where traces of subsoil features are visible on aerial photographs. This is further supported by the geophysical survey carried out in the area of trench D41, which suggested a profusion and complexity of subsoil features. Excavation in trench D41 indicated that some horizontal occupation layers exist suggesting a high level of preservation. Roman activity clearly extends into area A and it is likely that all these features are associated with the landscape features largely identified on the aerial photographs, lying beneath and to the south of the motorway. Much of this archaeological landscape has been destroyed without record. The recovery of Roman pottery to the east of the Foudry Brook suggests that settlement activities extended on both sides of the stream, which must have been crossed by means of a bridge somewhere in this area. The Foudry Brook skirts the edge of the Roman town at Silchester before turning south towards the Kennet. This stream may well have been important in relation to communications between the town with its market and the outlying farming communities, as well as trading relations further afield.

The evaluation of the archaeological potential of the area proposed for development as Reading Business Park has highlighted several phases of occupation over a long chronological period at the site. Less than 1% of the area proposed for redevelopment was examined which means that detailed interpretation and precise description of density and extent of

features is made difficult. Only general trends have been suggested. Clearly preservation and/or further investigation needs to be considered for most of the site if the application is approved especially in the area of the suggested bronze age settlement to the south of Smallmead Farm. Further investigation may also be necessary if any work on the banks of the Foudry Brook is proposed.

Acknowledgments

We gratefully acknowledge the co-operation of the many people who have provided information and help. The general archaeological information for the area was provided by the Berkshire Sites and Monuments Record maintained by the County Council. The landowners, Bucknell Brothers (Holdings) Ltd and the Englefield Estate, and the tenant farmers Mr J Bucknell and Mr D Hewison kindly allowed access to the land and tolerated the disruption. A site office was generously provided by Bucknell Brothers (Holdings) Ltd within the Smallmead Farm buildings. It is hoped that the finds and records will be placed in Reading Museum.

The excavations were supervised by Christine Farwell with the assistance of Martin Trott and Lorraine Mephram, as well as the many site workers and volunteers who carried out the necessary hard work. The geophysical survey was carried out by John Gaiter and an additional area was surveyed by the students from the archaeology department at the University of Reading. The plant remains were analysed by Wendy Carruthers. The drawings were done by Liz James.

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