Lower Way, Thatcham
Berkshire

Archaeological Evaluation Report

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Introduction

Archaeological discoveries and research over the past sixty years have clearly demonstrated the importance of the river Kennet between Hungerford and Thatcham for the wealth of sites dating to the Mesolithic period. In particular several finds and two occupation sites have been recorded between Newbury and Thatcham. Excavations of the mesolithic site at SU 511668 south of Lower Way, carried out in advance of gravel extraction in 1957/8 produced evidence for occupation typified by a rich assemblage of bone and flint working associated with a radio carbon date of 8415+ 170 bc (Q659). The occupation material was largely to be found on the top of the gravel sealed by a thin covering of tufa or peat.

Because of these important finds in the Thatcham vicinity the area must be considered one of high archaeological potential.

In 1985 Hills Aggregates submitted a planning application to extract gravel from a small area at Thatcham at SU 496672, north of the river, about 400 metres west of the mesolithic occupation site excavated in the late 1950's. Because of the high archaeological potential of the area the County Council requested that archaeological evaluation of the site should be carried out before the application was determined. This work was carried out over a two week period in April 1985 and was funded by English Heritage with machinery and pumps supplied by Hills Aggregates Ltd.

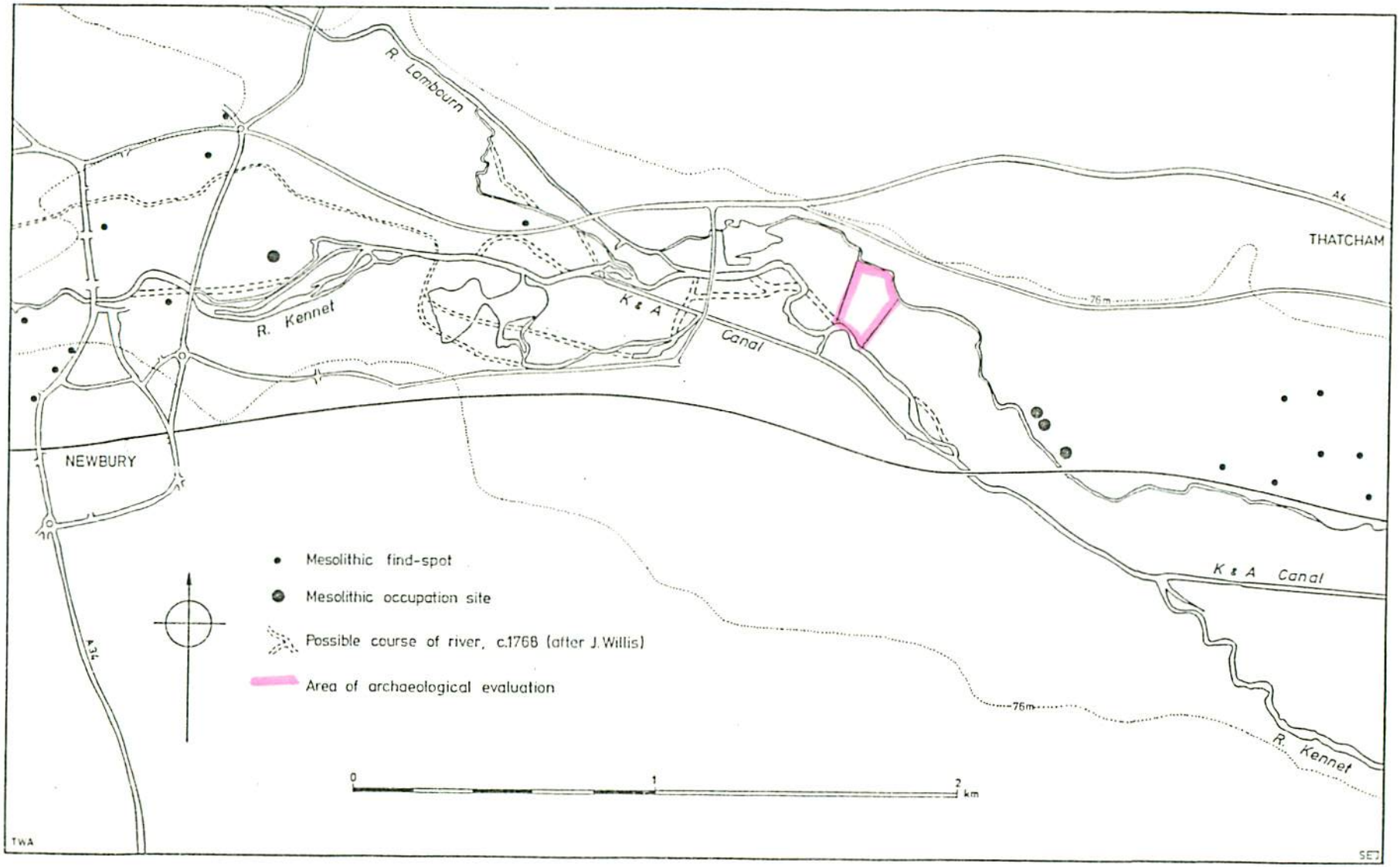

Fig. 1: Site location

The Site

The application area comprised approximately 2.5 hectares of land to the south of the Moor Ditch and north of the river Kennet. The area was fairly level and lowlying, about 69.7 metres O.D. The water table was clearly not far below the surface and the whole area was covered in thick reed growth with some willow trees. Test pits excavated by Hills Aggregates indicated a depth of overburden of generally between 0.70m and 1.60m, including both peat and tufa, although in one instance a depth of 2.50m was recorded.

Excavation strategy

Although this site was apparently below the level of the terrace on which the Thatcham occupation site was found, the discovery of artefacts in deposits below the terrace found during the same excavations, and the existence of other known sites in a similar lowlying position, such as at Greenham Dairy Farm, encouraged the suggestion that mesolithic levels might exist at this site. This was further supported by the apparent existence of peat above the gravel, suggesting a similar sequence to that observed at the occupation site to the east. The aim of the evaluation, then, was to investigate this archaeological potential of the site in order to consolidate the archaeological information and allow informed comment on the planning application.

Because of the wet nature of the site it was decided that excavation by machine, followed by some excavation by hand where appropriate, would be the most practical method. The ground surface was very boggy and the excavator provided had to be moved around the site on mats. This meant that progress around the site was slow and mobility very restricted. Consequently the location of the trenches excavated was determined by

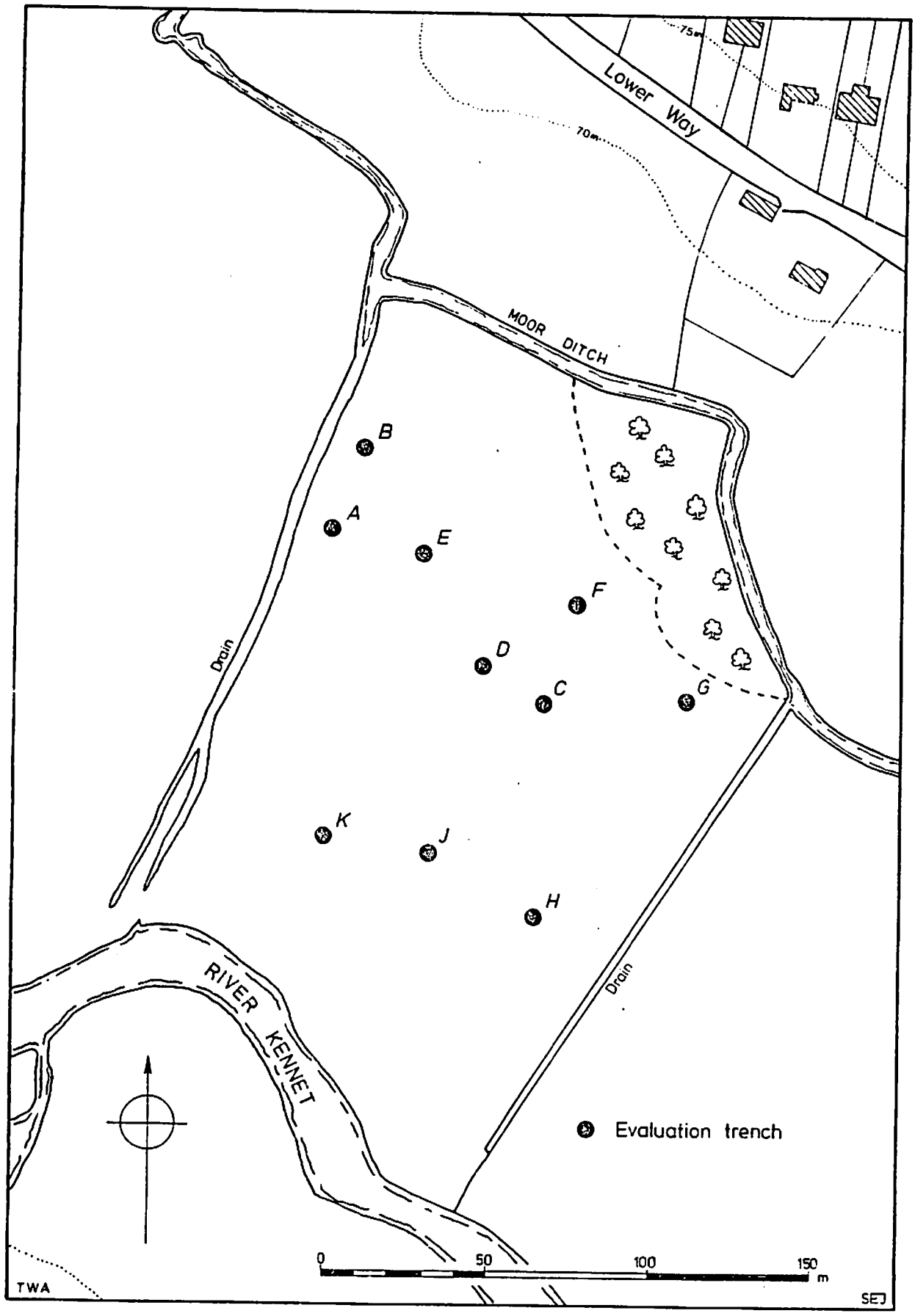

Fig. 2: Location of evaluation trenches

the route taken by the machine around the site and the presence of tree cover. Ten small trenches were excavated by machine. The sections were then cleaned by hand and recorded. Trenches B, D and H were extended by hand excavation.

Results

The depth of deposits overlying the natural gravel varied generally from 0.53 metres in trench E to 1.00 metres in trench J and 1.24 metres in trench F. In trench G, which had been excavated previously by Hills Aggregates, the gravel surface was encountered at a depth of about 2.50 metres. While the ground surface appeared to be fairly level across the site the gravel surface appeared to be higher in the central area, around trenches A, E, D and C, about 69.25m O.D., dropping away both towards the Moor Ditch to the north and the river Kennet to the south. In all trenches except F and G, peat was found immediately above the gravel although this varied in nature and depth. In trenches F and G the overburden consisted of tufaceous layers interleaved with mixed silty and sometimes organic layers. Tufa was also noted in trenches A and C where it overlay the peat. The uneven junction between the two deposits indicated that the tufa was deposited over the peat in very wet conditions. In general the tufa can be seen as a river channel fill.

In those areas where the gravel is deeper, probably representing former river channels, a longer sequence of peat formation is apparent, displaying some variation throughout its depth, tending to be dark black and very compact at the base of the sequence. In those areas where the peat is very shallow and near the surface the consistencey is much looser with many roots indicating modern sedge growth. In trench H one or two small branches were noted in the basal peat. In trench B two

episodes of peat formation were noted separated by a lense of silt although the upper layer was very shallow. In all trenches in the upper level of the sequence there was a change from organic peats to a mineral soil indicating a change in land use probably representing a period of arable agriculture.

Finally the whole sequence was sealed by an organic layer supporting modern sedge growth. One or two silted up ditches were visible on the surface and further ditch cuts were visible in the sections in trenches A, B and D. The remains of a brick culvert were noted in trench G. These probably formed part of a regular water meadow system which is clearly visible in the adjacent field to the west, probably dating back to the early part of this century and continuing in use until fairly modern times.

Two very rolled flint flakes and a small fragment of burnt flint from trench B were recovered from the subsoil. More significant, perhaps, were the finds of two fragments of burnt flint from the peat in trench D and a fragment of a horse skull (New Forest pony size) from beneath the peat in trench H. Samples were taken through the soil sequence for pollen analysis but, without clear dating evidence, it has not been possible to process these.

Discussion

The shallow depth of overburden and relatively high gravel level in some areas was perhaps surprising. There appear to have been at least two river channels crossing the site, along the northern and southern edges, and the central area may have been an island in a fairly wet landscape. This is the type of site which might have attracted temporary occupation in the mesolithic period. However no positive

evidence for occupation was noted in any of the evaluation trenches, although the burnt flint and bone fragment recovered from near the base of the peat may indicate some human activity in the vicinity. The evaluation produced clear evidence for a change in landuse from a fenland landscape, in which peat was forming, to agricultural use but the date at which this took place is unknown.

The site was visited on three occasions following this evaluation, during overburden removal in advance of extraction, but no additional evidence was noted. Despite the advantages that this site might have provided in a wet environment it does not appear to have supported occupation in the mesolithic period. It may well have been used on a very temporary basis but subsequent erosion will have removed whatever slight traces of this activity there may have been.

Acknowledgments

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Sue Lobb 1986

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