

# Bellword, Newbury Berkshire

## Archaeological Evaluation Report



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Archaeological evaluation 1985

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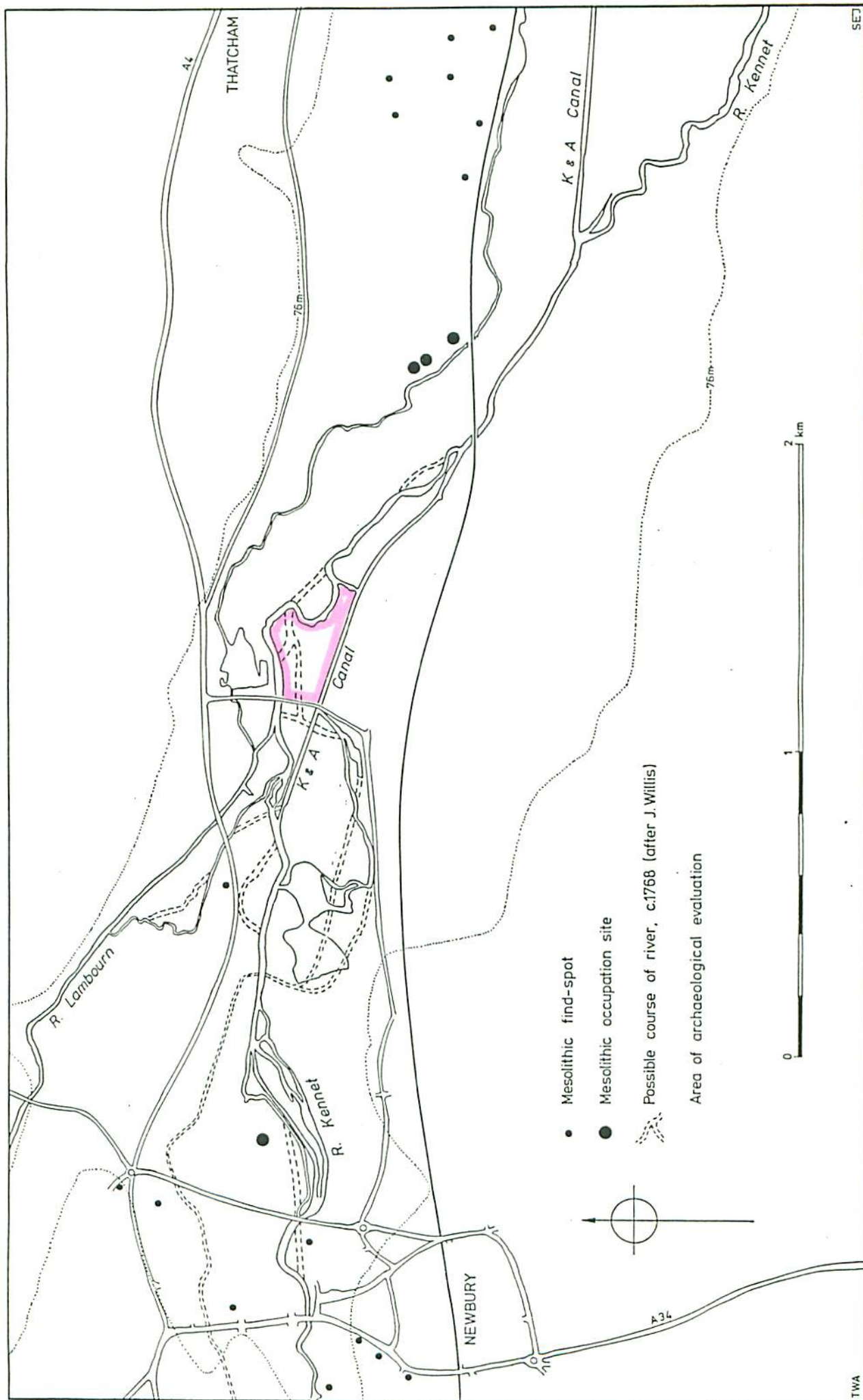
### **Archaeological Evaluation**

#### **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 Newbury Sand and Gravel Co Ltd submitted a planning application to extract gravel from a small area at Thatcham at SU 493671, south of the river, about 400 metres south 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 in accordance with the Minerals Monitoring Report, Berkshire County Council 1986, and policy EN26 of the Review of Berkshire Structure Plans 1985. This work was carried out over a two week period in June 1985 and was funded by English Heritage and Newbury Sand & Gravel Co Ltd.



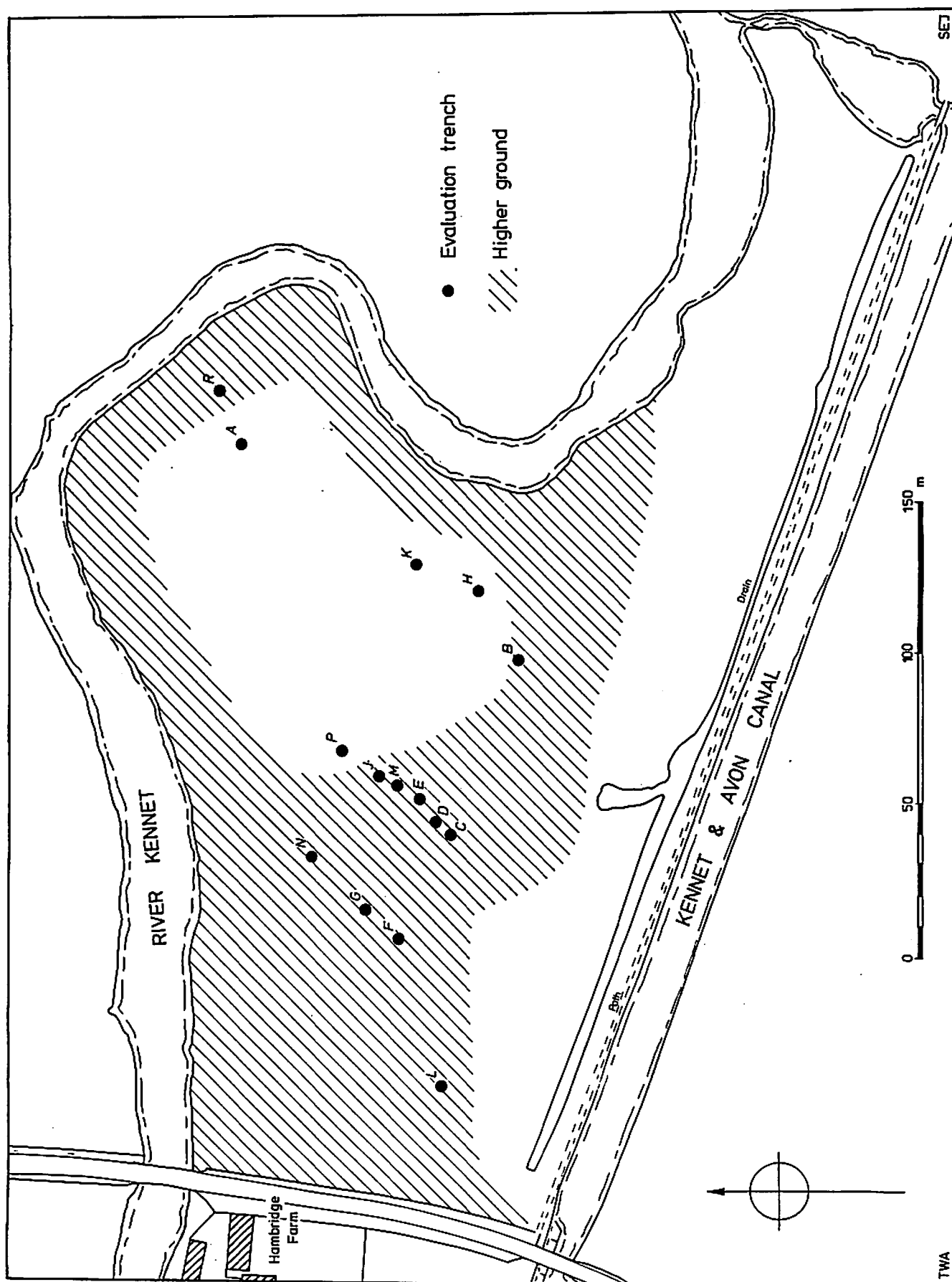
The application was subsequently approved and the site has been visited on three occasions during gravel extraction operations.

#### The Site

The application area comprised approximately 3.5 hectares of land bounded to the north and east by the river Kennet and to the south, by the Kennet and Avon Canal, which appears to follow the course of a previous river channel. The land was generally higher (70.62m O.D.) than the water courses although there was a lowlying area within the loop of the river which was considerably wetter with abundant reed growth; the higher ground around the edge was covered in fairly mature trees and bushes. It is possible that this may be the result of peat cutting in the last century, although Willis's map of 1768 suggests that, in the 18th century, the river followed a much straighter course passing through the lowlying area of this site (see Fig. 1).

#### Excavation strategy

Because of the tree cover on the site, some of which it was proposed to retain, and the wet and boggy area in the middle of the site, the trenches were located on a subjective basis in areas where there was sufficient space and dry ground for the machine to operate. Twelve trenches were excavated by machine, down to the top of the gravel and the sections subsequently cleaned by hand. Three trenches (B, M and R) were excavated entirely by hand. In three cases (trenches A, H and K), because of the wet conditions, it was not possible to carry out further excavation and trenches were backfilled immediately.



## Results

Apart from the lowlying area in the middle of the site, the soil sequence above the gravel was generally the same across the site, averaging 1m in depth:

- 1) A compact dark brown/black peat had formed above the gravel (to a maximum depth of 0.50 metres).
- 2) This was overlain by a coarse sand and gravel layer often with a high admixture of reworked tufa. In some cases lenses of silt, clay and, nearer the base of the layer, organic lenses, were observed. This layer probably represents the fill of old river channels deposited during flood conditions.
- 3) A silty clay layer had been deposited above the coarse sand and gravel and filled depressions in the surface of the underlying layer.
- 4) The topsoil consisted of a dark brown silt loam.

In trenches G, N and P layer 2 was missing but this may have been removed during peat cutting as in trenches G and P the compact peat had been clearly truncated, and modern sedge growth was evident.

The topsoil and subsoil (layers 3 and 4) in trenches B, C and D contained small quantities of building material, clay pipe fragments, glass, post-medieval pottery and fragments of what appears to be daub. The coarse flood deposit (2) contained 1 fragment of roof tile, (trench D), one small fragment of a lead object (trench E), a few brick fragments (trench F) and two sherds of 12th century pottery. Large quantities of animal bone were recovered from this layer in trenches B, F and C, and include fragments of cattle, sheep and dog, with cat and pig being represented by single bones. One of the bones had a cut mark which is thought to be relatively modern and several of the bones were from

very large animals suggesting a post-Roman date. An almost complete loomweight was found by the quarry workers during gravel extraction operations.

A single sherd of pottery dating to the Roman period was found beneath the peat in trench D.

### Discussion

Despite the obvious potential for mesolithic occupation at this site no evidence for this was recovered. Because of the obvious mobility of the river course in relatively recent years it is possible that occupation levels of this date may have been eroded away, but equally the area may have been too marshy and unattractive to mesolithic settlers.

If a single sherd of pottery can be considered sufficient evidence for dating, then it would appear that the peat at this site was deposited in the post Roman period which is perhaps later than might be expected. Elsewhere in the Kennet it is suggested that the deposition of peat on the floodplain had largely ended in the late-Boreal period (9th millenium B.C.) (Holyoak, 1980). However, because of the small sample excavated at this site, and the lack of other relative dating evidence such as pollen and molluscan analyses, further discussion of this matter would be unwise.

The coarse sandy layer with gravel or reworked tufa is most likely to have been a flood deposit. The finds indicate that this occurred in the post-medieval period with finds deriving from a site which had been occupied since at least the 12th century A.D. The finds all came from the higher ground at the western part of the site and their unabraded



condition suggests that they have not travelled any great distance perhaps originating from Hambridge Farm or Ham Manor and mill.

#### Acknowledgments

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Sue Lobb 1986



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