

# Smallmead Farm, Reading Berkshire

## Archaeological Evaluation Report



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Smallmead Farm, Reading

Archaeological Evaluation

In February 1986 Hall Aggregates (Thames Valley) Limited applied to the local authorities for permission to extract gravel from 3.6 hectares of land adjacent to the River Kennet at SU698711. The application site lies within an area of the Kennet Valley that has been defined as one of high archaeological potential (Kennet Valley Local Plan 1985, Fig. 4). This potential is amply demonstrated by the discovery of a well-preserved riverside settlement, dating to about 800 B.C., at Anslows Cottages 300 metres to the west, and by the numerous stray finds from the immediate environs, including a Saxon logboat coffin from gravel workings to the south (Fig. 1). Aerial photographs of the application site indicate the presence of some possible archaeological features, including a ditched enclosure.

As a site of high potential but unproven archaeological importance it falls within Category 3 according to the classification of sites as defined by the Minerals Monitoring Report (Royal County of Berkshire 1986) which states that such sites will need to be evaluated prior to the application being determined. This policy is also reflected in Policy EN26 of the Review of Berkshire Structure Plans (1985), and Policy A1 of the Kennet Valley Local Plan. Accordingly the applicants Ready Mixed Concrete (UK) Ltd commissioned and sponsored the Trust for Wessex Archaeology to carry out the necessary archaeological evaluation at this site. This investigation was carried out late in August.

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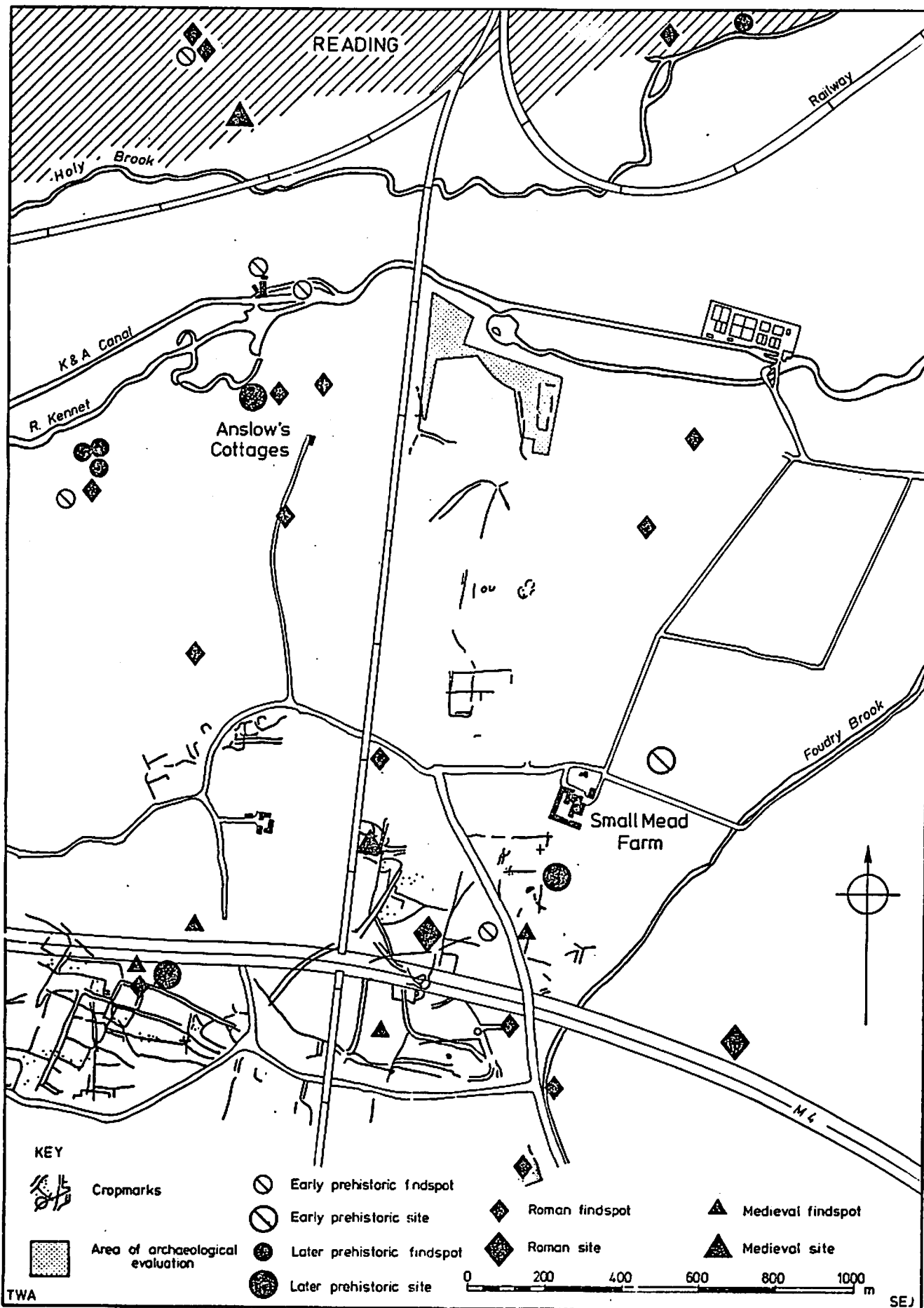


Fig. 1: Site location and archaeological background

### The Site

The site lies on the southern floodplain of the river at a height of 39.00 metres O.D. The area is bounded to the west by the railway, the north by the river and to the east and south by areas where gravel has already been extracted. A drain, possibly reflecting an earlier river channel ran east west through the site, dividing it into two main areas; the northern area being pasture, the southern area having recently been under crop. The northern field had undulations possibly indicating former river channels. No such features could be observed in the southern field due to the height of the grass and residual crops.

### Strategy

Because of the expected depth of deposits and the large area to be covered it was decided to open several trenches by machine (Fig. 2). These trenches were positioned to investigate undulations in the northern field and possible archaeological features indicated on aerial photographs in the southern field. In all, eleven trenches were excavated either side of the drain, all by machine (see Fig. 2). The depth of deposits above the gravel varied from 0.72m to 2.05m and problems with rapid water seepage were encountered in the deeper trenches. Archaeological investigations were mostly limited to examination of the sections. In all 332 square metres were excavated by machine, comprising a 1 percent sample of the total area; however this figure is misleading in that only the sections could be fully recorded and studied making the real percentage sample much lower.

### Results

All the trenches except for H, Q, R and V were located within an apparent large river channel which was filled with layers of bedded

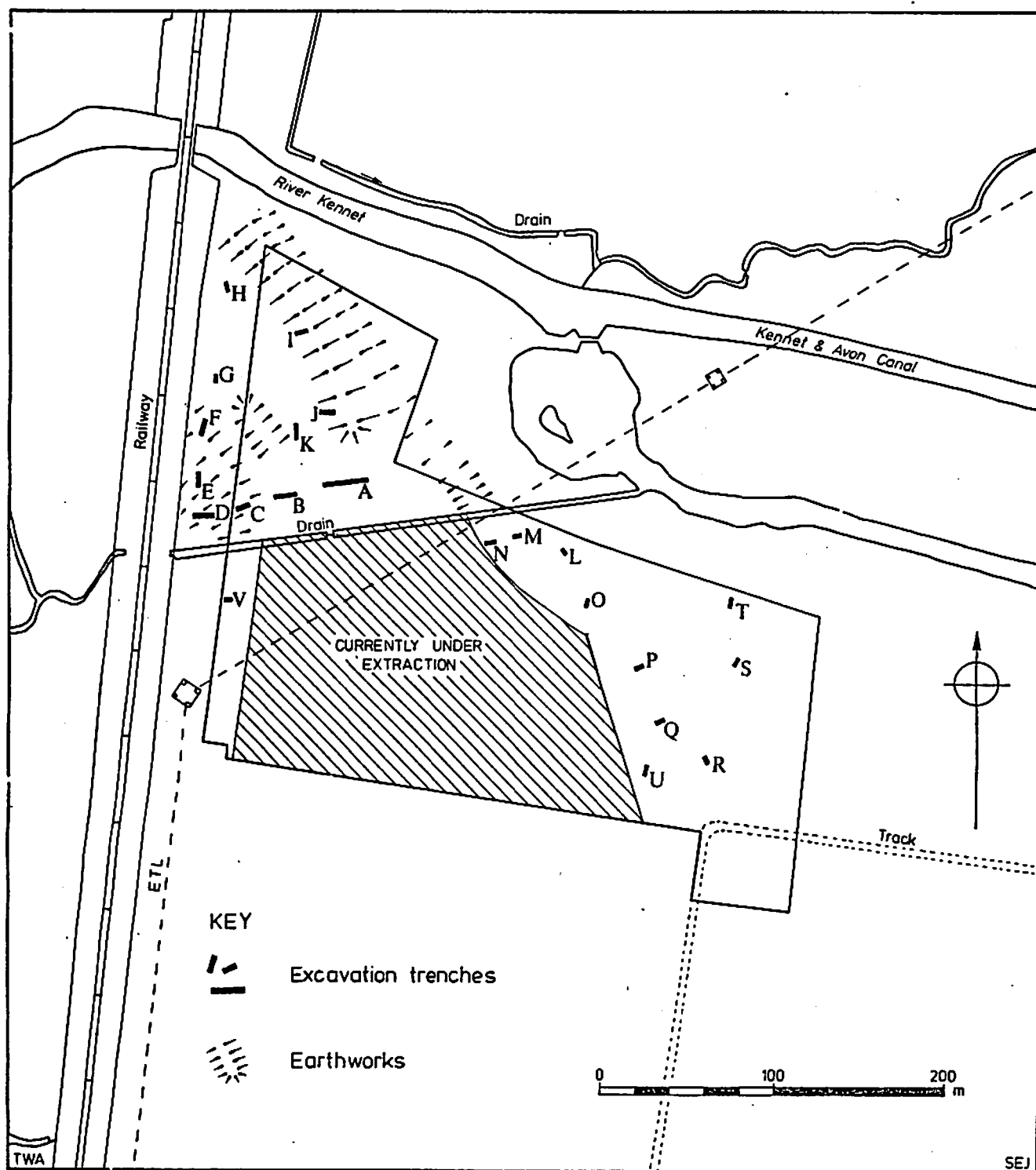


Fig. 2: Location of archaeological trenches

sands and silts as well as some organic deposits. These deposits were buried by topsoil and clays varying in depth from 0.25m (Trench M) to 1.15m (Trench T).

The thickness of river channel deposits varied from 0.22m in Trench G to 1.30m in Trench C. The pattern of deposit thicknesses would seem to imply a major river channel running west-east along the line of the modern drain, turning gradually to the south east. Trenches G, P and S would appear to be on the edges, whilst trenches H, Q, R and U would seem to be away from the river channel. Deposits in Trenches I and J, the latter including a channel edge, may represent another such river channel running north-south. The relationship of such a river channel with the east-west river channel being unclear. Clearly these channels represent multiple phases of river activity.

Sealing the river channel deposits are several layers of clays which extend over the entire site varying in depth from 0.3m in Trench R to 0.8m in Trenches D and S. Included within these clay layers are possible old ground surfaces represented by layers of dark brown loamy clay. There is a consistent surface at c.0.5m depth below the present surface in Trenches B, E, G, J, K, L, N, S, T and V, varying in thickness from 0.05m in Trench G to 0.20m in Trench J. There is another possible ground surface at a depth of c.1.00m below the present ground surface in Trenches D, G, L, S and T, varying in thickness from 0.05m to 0.12m. These two possible ground surfaces would seem to represent stable periods in between the deposition of the clays. There was no artefactual evidence to date these deposits.

Peat deposits were found in Trenches B, C and D, in all cases being sealed by clay at a depth of c.0.5m, the peat being c.0.45m thick except

in the case of Trench B where it was only 0.15m thick. In all cases the peat overlaid river channel deposits.

There was evidence of some possible archaeological activity: Trench B contained a possible pit in its north western corner. The feature, 0.8 metres deep and 0.7m wide, was sealed by two clay layers at a depth of 0.52m. It had a single fill and was cut into river channel deposits, also truncating one of the suggested old land surfaces. No artefactual material was recovered.

Trench C contained a sharp sided flat bottomed feature in its south section which did not continue through the trench. The feature was sealed by a clay layer at a depth of 0.47m, and was 3.45m wide and 0.40m deep. It had a single fill of dark organic peat and was cut into river channel deposits. There were no associated artefacts. Trench H, outside of the possible river channel deposits, showed possible signs of cultivation, the upper 0.42m being blended together with even distribution of pebbles between the upper layers. Trench J had a shallow 'U' shaped ditch 0.2m deep and 2.00m wide running north-south through the trench. The ditch must have been open for a considerable time for a ground surface respected its line at a depth of c.1.00m. The ditch was eventually filled by an undatable subsoil which contained no artefactual evidence.

In the southern field two post medieval ceramic pipe field drains were found (Trenches Q and L), both running northwest/southeast probably into the drain bisecting the site. Trenches R and U were positioned so as to try and investigate the feature visible on aerial photographs. Trench R had 0.72m of deposits above gravel, the top two layers to a depth of 0.6m had ill defined interfaces and there was an even

distribution of pebbles in the section. This may imply cultivation in the past. Trench R also produced five knapped flints from the disturbed layers. Trench U displayed none of these signs being undisturbed with no finds.

#### Summary

It would appear that much of the site has been subject to erosion through the action of the river cutting channels since the early post glacial period. The river channel associated with Bronze Age finds to the west of this site clearly extended into this area but no evidence for activity of this date was found in the evaluation trenches at this site. This means that either the Bronze Age site did not extend into this area or, more probably, it has already been destroyed by gravel extraction to the south. However, at least two stable periods can be suggested by the two old land surfaces identified. These surfaces contain some archaeological potential but are essentially undated on present evidence. Several subsoil features were identified within the upper levels of the natural stratigraphy described below, which may be archaeological, but, in view of the lack of dating evidence, their potential cannot be discussed. The features visible on aerial photographs were not located but this may be due to the difficulties of surveying in this area where gravel extraction has already removed fixed points. However Trench R which was excavated in the area of the enclosure visible on the aerial photographs produced five prehistoric flint artefacts which may represent some archaeological activity in this area. Undoubtedly there are archaeological levels present on the site but the evaluation results would suggest these are of low density. It is likely therefore that this land will be reclassified as a category 4

site (Minerals Monitoring Report 1986) and provision should be made for a watching brief to be maintained during initial site clearance prior to gravel extraction.

Acknowledgments

The field work was carried out with the assistance of Lorraine Mephram and this report has been prepared by the staff of the Trust. Subject to negotiation the finds and records will be placed in Reading Museum.

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