Theale Industrial Site, Station Road Theale, Berkshire

Archaeological Evaluation Report

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Theale Industrial Site, Station Road, Theale. Archaeological Evaluation, 1986.

Introduction

In May 1986 an application for industrial development of approximately 19.2 hectares of land north of Station Road, Theale (SU 650710) was submitted to the local authourities. The site lies on the flood plain of the River Kennet, an area which has been identified as being of high archaeological potential. Although aerial photographs showed no obvious evidence of archaeological activity, similar apparently sterile sites nearby have produced well-preserved archaeological material of prehistoric and Roman periods. In accordance, therefore, with the Berkshire Draft Replacement Structure Plan, policy EN26, archaeological evaluation was carried out by the Trust for Wessex Archaeology in November and December 1986, sponsored by the developers, W Cumber & Son (Theale) Ltd.

The site

The site consits of two fields immediately south of the M4/A4 interchange east of Theale and is some 160m north of the river Kennet at its nearest point. The ground falls very slightly from west (44.86m OD) to east (44.30m OD) and is generally slightly lower than the river bank (44.70m OD). The northern field was partially under crops providing fodder for sheep, the southern field ploughed and left fallow at the time of evaluation. Slight undulations and variations of soil type were observed in the two fields, probably indicating former river channels. In addition, several drainage ditches had been

backfilled in both fields, and although the position of these was not always still evident on the ground they could be traced from the Ordinance Survey map.

Strategy

Because of the large area to be examined and the anticipated depth of deposits it was decided that most trenches would be opened by machine, with additional small trenches dug by hand if time permitted. The trenches were located according to the noted irregularities of the field surfaces. Ten machine trenches were dug altogether, ranging in length from 10.30m to 18.40m, four in the southern and six in the northern field. In addition two trenches, each 2m square, were dug by hand in the southern field, in areas of very soft ground where the machine was unable to work. A total area of approximately 217.35m^2 was opened, *c.* 0.1% of the total application area, although as only the sections of the machine cut trenches were examined the actual area investigated was still further restricted.

Where possible the machine trenches were cut down to the top of the gravel, although it was only certainly reached in trenches A, B, J and K. Water was a problem in all of the machine trenches, entering rapidly in many of them and causing the sides to collapse in several. In some trenches (E, D, G and H) gravel was reached at depths of 2.50m and over, but it was impossible to examine and record the sections safely before the deepest parts of the trenches were backfilled by collapsed material.

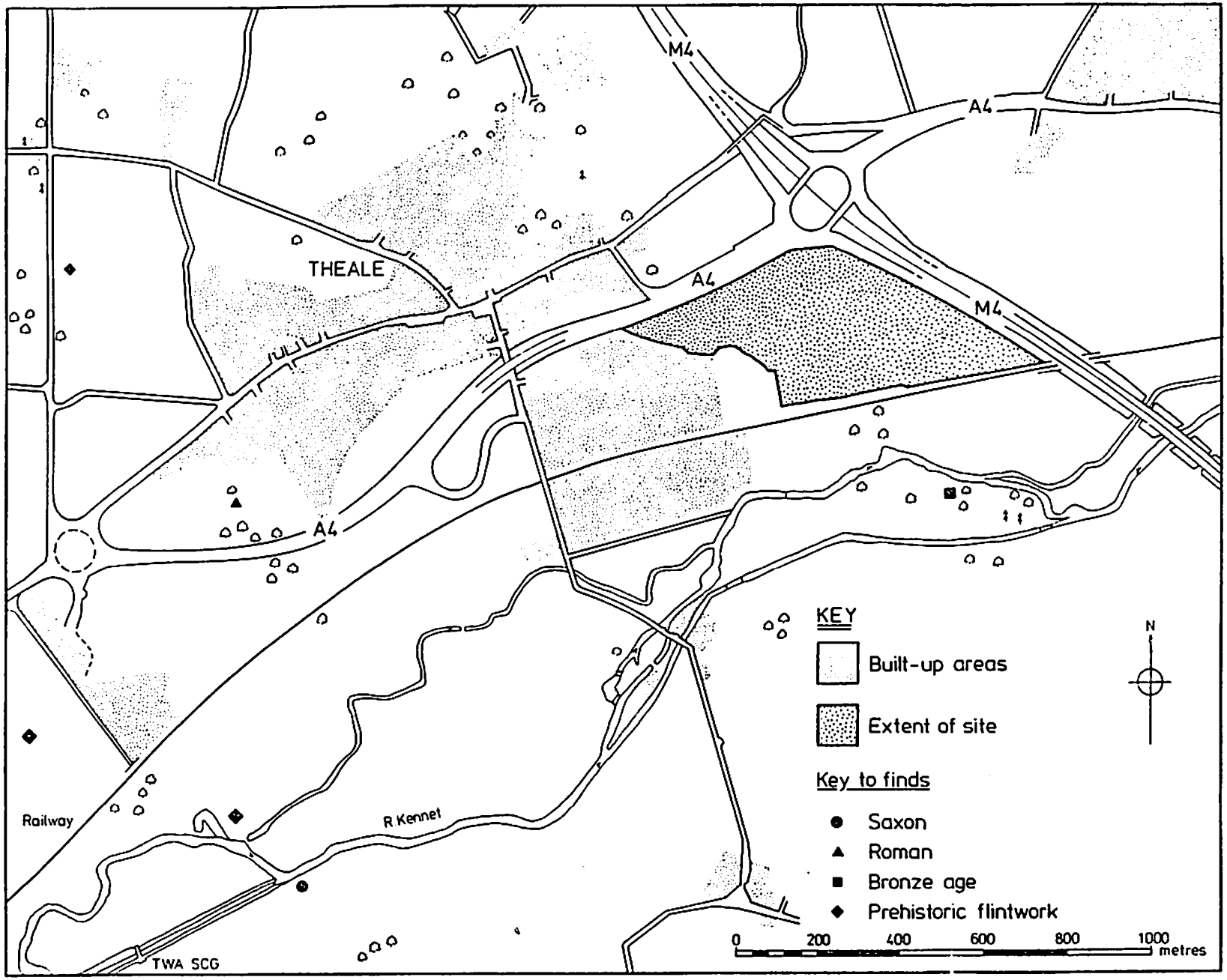

Fig. 1: Site Location

Results

All trenches except trench L and part of trench D contained clay and silt deposits, ranging in depth from 0.25m to at least 2.50m, sometimes with layers of peat and occasionally with fine redeposited tufa. Trench L and the southern end of trench D contained very mixed silts, sands and gravels, often with organic debris including occasional large pieces of timber. Both types of deposit lay directly beneath c. 0.25m of topsoil, except in trench D where the mixed silt, sand and gravel was sealed by up to 0.35m of clay below the topsoil. Occasionally but not consistently within the silts and clays, layers of very dark grey clay up to 0.13m in thickness occurred, between 0.80m and 0.90m below the present ground surface (in trenches C, K and M). These layers may represent former ground surfaces which developed during periods of relative dryness and stability.

Peat occurred in trenches A, B, D, G, J and M in deposits varying in thickness from 0.04m to 0.50m and in depth from between 0.80m and 1.30m below the existing ground surface. In trenches A, G and M and probably in trench D the peat lay between silt or clay deposits; in trench J, although sealed by clay, the peat lay immediately above the gravel. In trench A the peat and underlying clay were cut by a shallow depression (not more than 0.60m deep) at the northern end of the trench. This was filled with silty clay containing occasional sand lenses and some traces of organic material, and may represent a slowly silted up pond or cut-off section of river channel.

The very mixed organic silt, sand and gravel deposits in

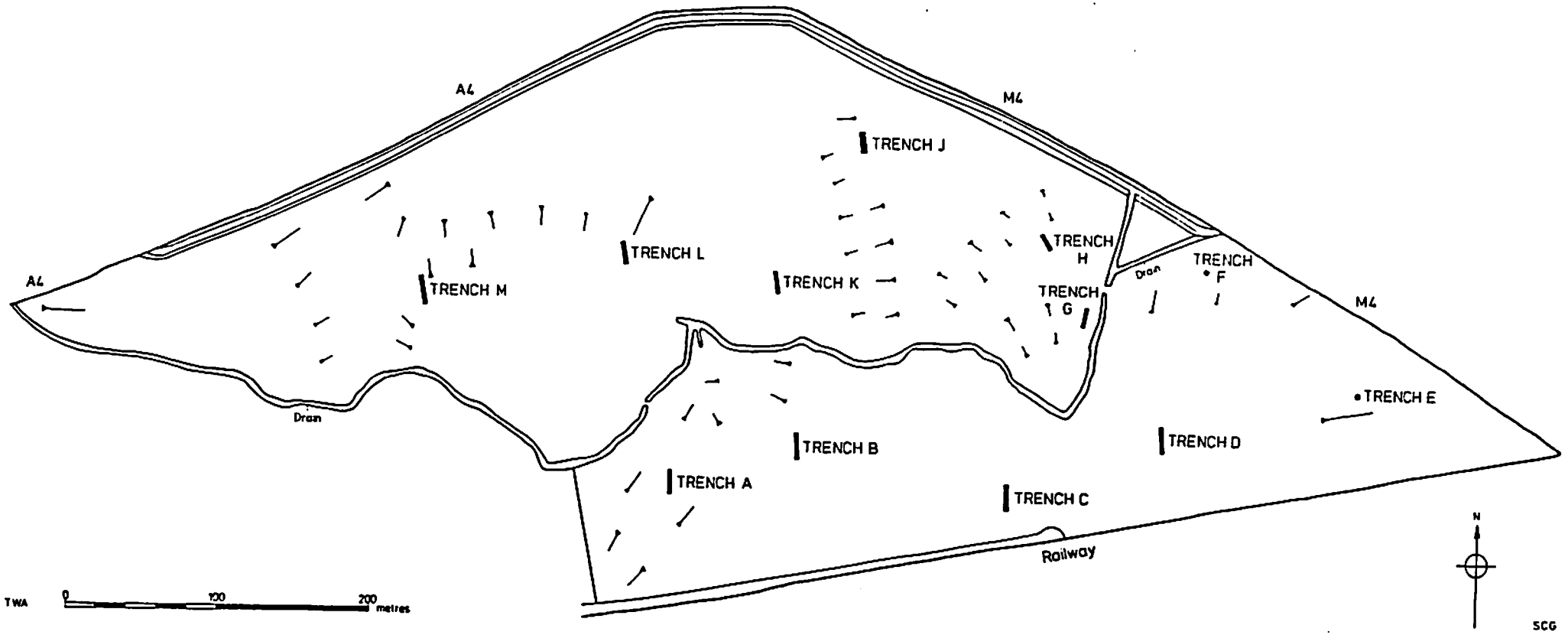

Fig. 2: Location of archaeological trenches

trenches L and D indicate the positions of former river channels, both probably running west-east. The channel in trench D was up to 7.50m wide and cut through earlier clay and peat layers; that in trench L would have been considerably larger, the sides not being apparent within the 14m length of the trench. The bottom of neither channel was reached; in trench L c. 1.30m and in trench D c. 0.85m of deposits were excavated.

There were some signs of possible archaeological activity in trenches A, L and M, but very little datable evidence was recovered. In trench A a ditch 1.30m wide and 0.55m deep crossed the trench from south west - north east. It was filled with brown slightly organic silty clay, sealed by a shallow clay layer beneath topsoil and cut further silty clays. In trench M two possible ditches were recorded at the northern end of the trench, aligned west - east. The later ditch was c. 1.65m wide and 0.40m deep; it cut the northern edge of an earlier ditch at least 1.20m wide and 0.34m deep. Both ditches cut silty clays immediately beneath the topsoil. The ditch fills were predominantly greyish brown loams and clays, with some organic material in the lower fill of the earlier ditch. Further south in trench M, a considerably earlier possible feature, sealed by clays and a thin layer of peat, cut the clay at the base of the eastern section some 1.10m below the present ground surface. It was 0.35m wide and 0.24m deep, filled with apparently charcoal flecked silty clay. A wooden stake (Fig.3) was recovered from the channel fill at the northern end of trench L; a second stake was noted nearby, but could not be excavated because of the angle at which

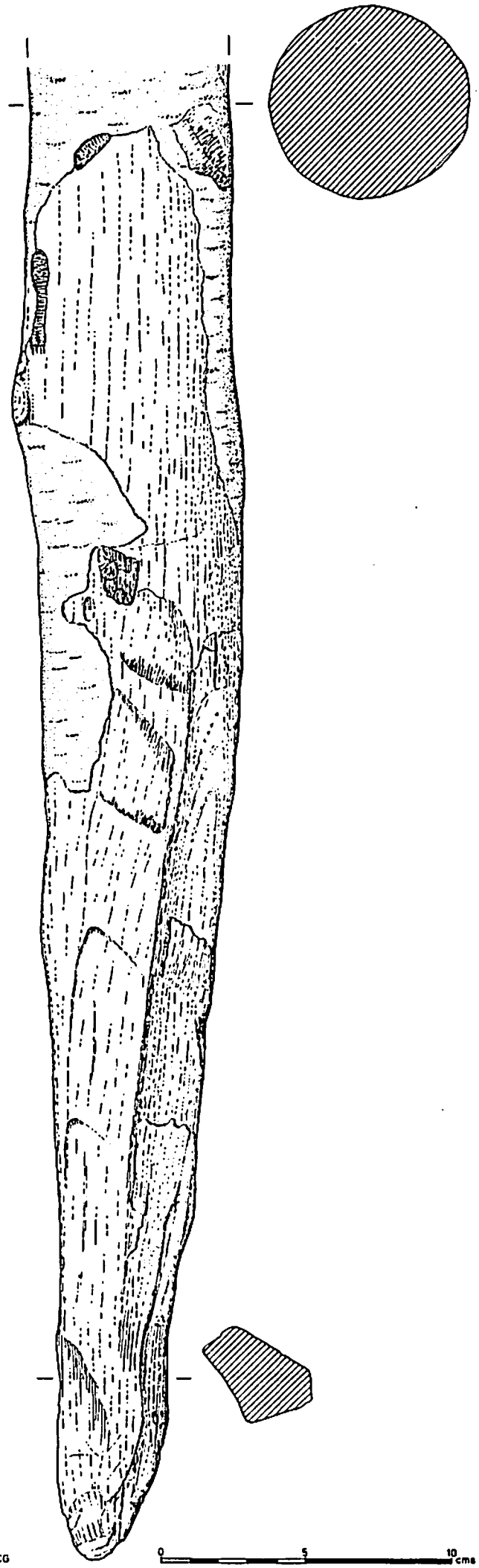

Fig. 3: Wooden stake

it entered the section. Both stakes were apparently in situ, almost vertical, penetrating the channel fill to a depth of c. 1.20m below the ground surface, and may form part of a more extensive structure of undetermined function and date. A sample of the timber stake will be submitted for dating by radio carbon determination. Four sherds of Roman and medieval pottery on the surface and in the plough soil of the southern fields; these probably reflect agricultural practices associated with nearby settlement.

Summary

The trenches examined show a substantial but uneven spread of alluvial soils across the whole site, truncated by the courses of former river channels. Apparently isloated episodes of peat development have occurred in some areas, as have possible 'islands' of relatively dry, stable ground and it is possible that either of these may provide useful environmental or other archaeological evidence. Well-preserved timber within the former river channels, or indeed elsewhere on the site, could also provide useful information. Features identified during the evaluation, despite their lack of datable evidence, have shown the potential survival of archaeological activity on the site, although the low-lying, wet nature of the land may have precluded any intensive archaeological use.

The results of the evaluation suggest that this area has been an active flood plain until fairly recent times. The timber stakes recovered from one of the river channels clearly suggest that the site was exploited by man at some stage but it is

unlikely that this represents extensive occupation. Observation during development may yield important evidence relating to the date and nature of this occupation and it is suggested that some consideration should be given to the provision of facilities for an archaeological watching brief once development begins.

Acknowledgements

We should like to acknowledge the invaluable assistance of Mr Cumber and Mr Bishop who provided a tractor for use in transporting the pump around the site. Messers Cumber and Sons also provided a machine for excavating the trenches, at reduced cost. Mr I Fenwick provided useful comments about the nature of the soils. The fieldwork was carried out by Christine Farwell and Julie Lancley and this report has been prepared in the offices of the Trust for Wessex Archaeology.

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