Lower Farm
Greenham, Berkshire

Archaeological Evaluation Report

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LOWER FARM, GREENHAM

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION, 1987

Introduction

In 1986 a planning application was submitted to the local authorities for permission to extract sand and gravel from an area of approximately 47.2 hectares at Lower Farm, Greenham (SU 501600). The application area lies within the Kennet valley, an area of high archaeological potential. The western part of the site is known to contain a number of archaeological features visible on aerial photographs, including ring ditches, a ditched field system and possible pit group. Roman pottery has been found at the eastern end of the site. Evidence of mesolithic activity has also been found nearby, including an occupation site immediately opposite Lower Farm, to the north of the Kennet. In accordance with Berkshire County Council's Minerals Local Plan and policy EM26 of the draft Replacement Structure Plan 1986 which requires archaeological evaluation of application sites before determination, the Trust for Wessex Archaeology carried out evaluation work sponsored by the applicants, Newbury Sand and Gravel Co Ltd., in January and February 1987.

The site (Fig. 1)

The site comprises nine fields (about 47.2hectares) lying along the floor and rising up the lower southern slope of the Kennet valley east of Newbury racecourse. The river runs alongside the site at the eastern end of the application area, although elsewhere it is up to 450m further north. The site can be conveniently divided into two sections by the lane running down to Lower Farm from Bury's Bank Road. The wider western area falls quite steeply from a maximum height of 85.92m OD at

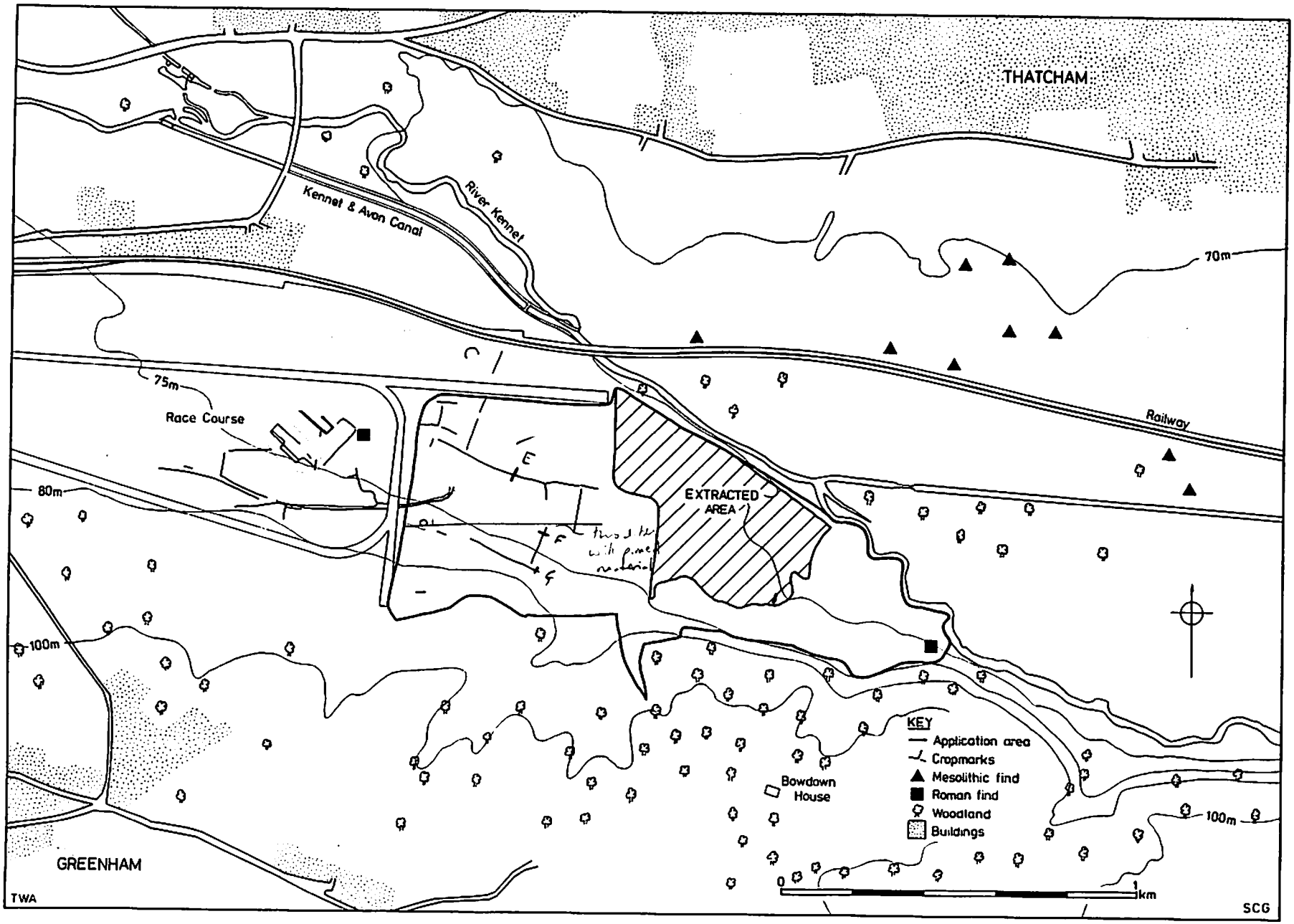

Fig. 1: Site location

almost the midpoint of the southern boundary to 72.27m OD in the centre, before rising slightly again to 73.07m OD near the northern boundary. At the western side of this area the valley side slopes less steeply (dropping from 84.75m OD to 72.08m OD) and is interrupted by a noticeable terrace almost midway between northern and southern boundaries; the terrace dwindles to the east until it becomes part of the general slope. (A second but less pronounced terrace lies slightly further east again). Shallow undulations can be seen in the lower area to the north and a lagoon persisted throughout the time of the evaluation in the lowest-lying part of these fields, the result of an overflow from an east-west ditch crossing the site higher up the slope. This probably represents an old river channel.

The area east of the lane, where the valley slopes more closely to the river, varies in height from 74.58m OD at the southern boundary to 69.38m OD where the northern boundary meets the river Kennet. The extreme eastern corner of the site (partially separated from the rest of the area by a ditch) is slightly higher at c.69.70m OD. Again minor undulations are visible, especially in the area closest to the Kennet; these (and those in the western area) are probably the result of changes in the river's course. Two low positive lynchets and a possible third, all running approximately north-south and between 100-125m apart were also noted. All the fields are currently under pasture.

Strategy and method (Fig. 2)

The aims of the evaluation were threefold; to examine the features already indicated by the aerial photographs and to try to establish their dates and extent where this was uncertain; to investigate the nature and extent of the Roman activity; to identify other areas of archaeological activity within the application area.

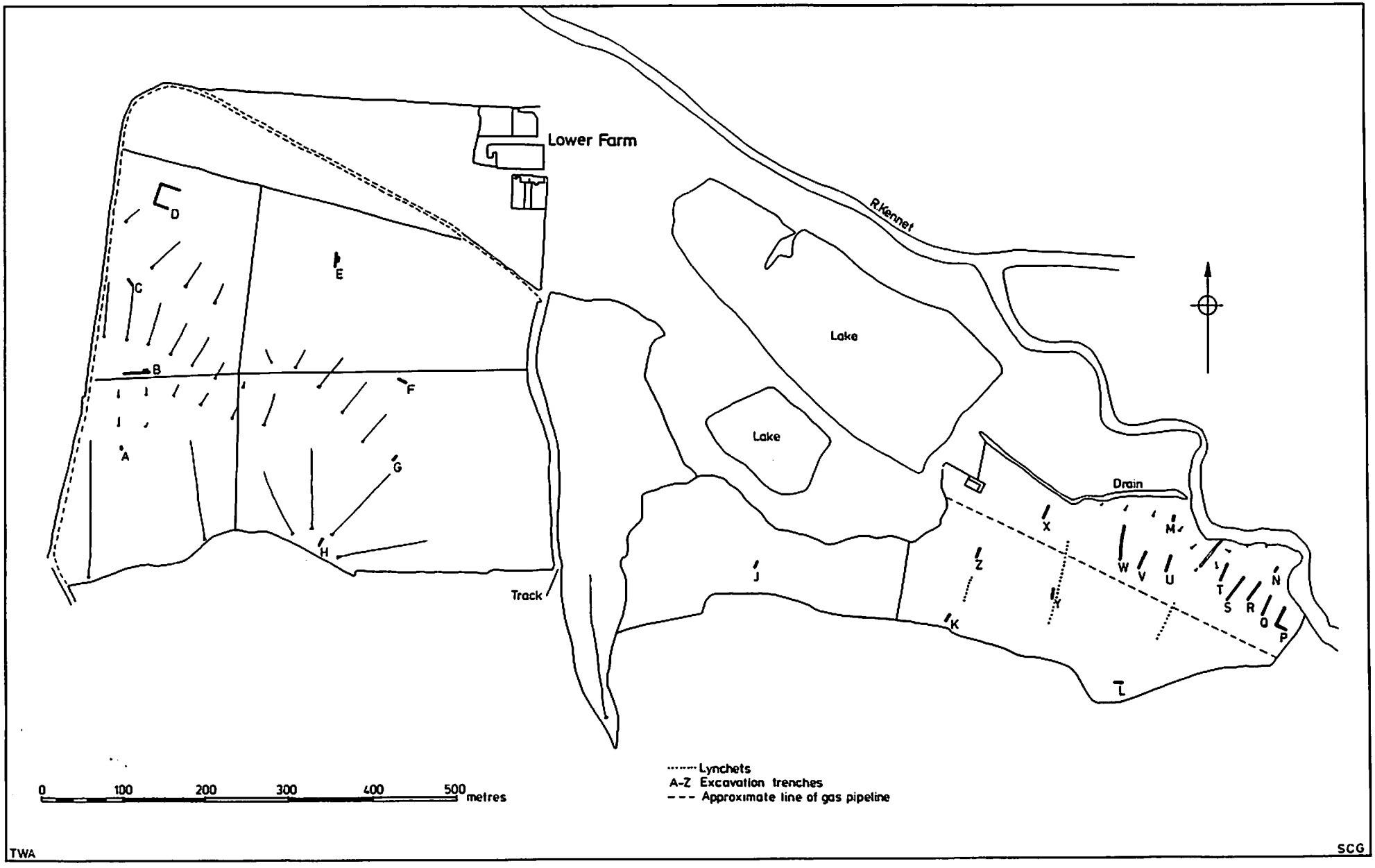

Fig. 2: Location of archaeological trenches

Because of the size of the area to be examined and the limited time available, all of the trenches were opened initially by machine, after which further excavation of features was done by hand where possible (many of the features, especially in the eastern trenches, were both shallow and difficult to see and were almost wholly machined away, surviving only as a few centimetres of unexcavated fill and in section). Twenty four trenches were dug in all, eight (A-H) in the western area, sixteen (J-N, P-Z) in the eastern one. In eighteen of the trenches, in both areas, at least one part of the trench was excavated down to the top of the gravel. Only one of the trenches (M) filled with water after being opened, although water did not seep into the lowest section of other trenches nearby. Altogether about 780m^2 was opened, c.0.16% of the whole area.

Results

Of the eight trenches in the western area, five (B, D-G) were placed to intercept features visible on the aerial photographs. Of the remaining three trenches, one (H) was dug near the highest point of the evaluation area and the other two (A, C) by the western boundary. Horses were turned out in the northernmost field on this side and no trenches were excavated there, although cropmarks have been recorded.

The soil profile in trenches A & C followed a similar pattern: dark greyish brown loam topsoil overlay lighter yellowish brown sandy silty clay and gravel was reached only some 0.36-0.45m below the ground surface. Trench C was in an area thought to have suffered some disturbance during the second world war when buildings were temporarily erected by the army, but there was no evidence that the disturbance had been other than superficial in this or any of the other trenches. Trench H had a thin brown clay loam topsoil over at least 2.50m of

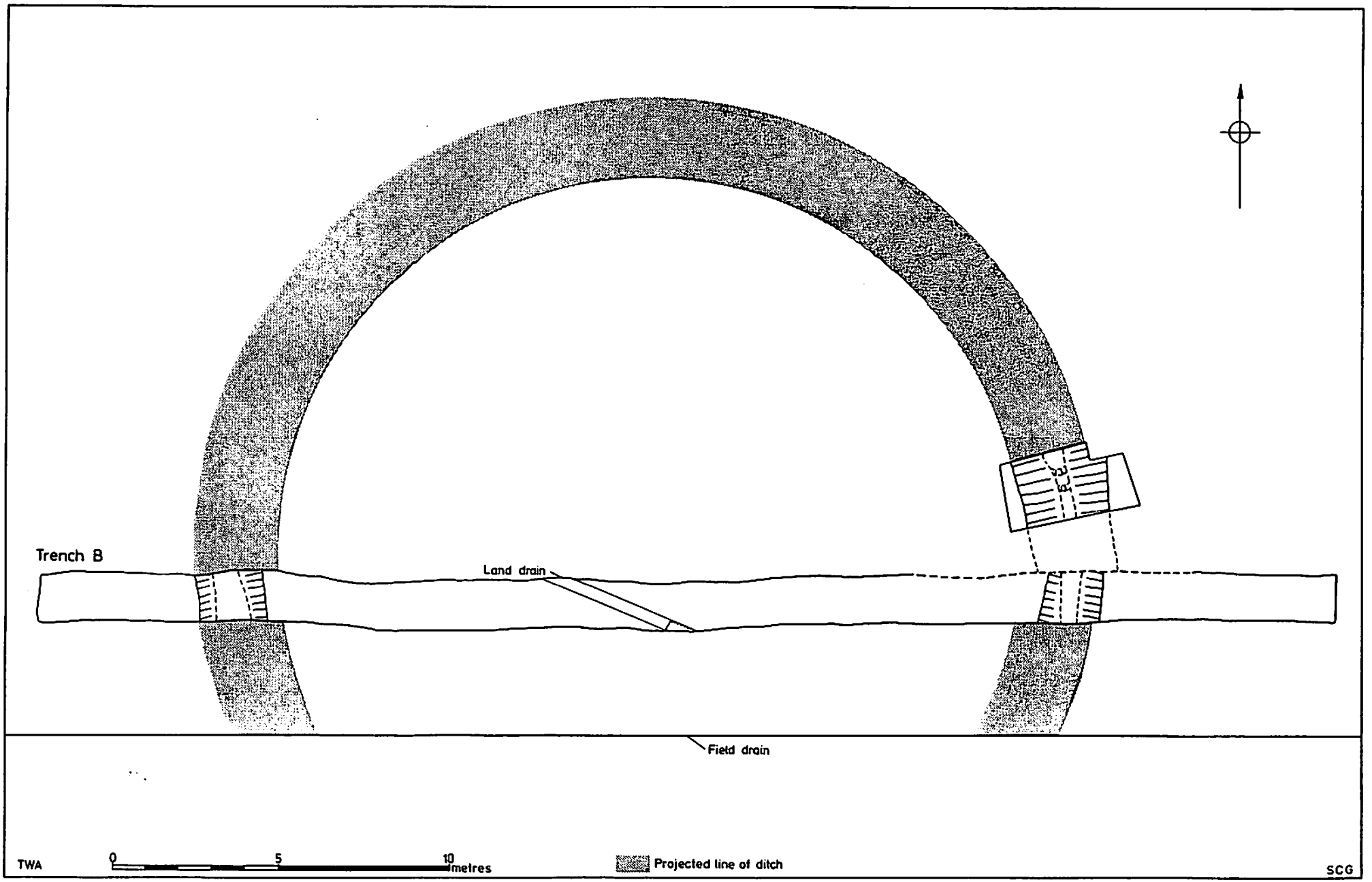

Fig. 3: Trench B. Excavated features

compact yellowish brown clay; gravel was not reached. No features were recorded in these three trenches and no finds were recovered.

Trench B was dug on the western terrace described above to investigate the largest ring ditch. In aerial photographs the ditch is shown as almost complete except for a section of the southern arc which has been damaged by the excavation of a drainage ditch running from west-east. The trench, which was aligned with this drain and almost exactly bisected the ring ditch, was 38m long and 1.40m wide with an irregular extension of c.32.80m^2 from the northern edge to allow more of the ditch to be examined (see Fig. 3). Most of the trench was machined to a maximum depth of 0.90m, although the extension was only c.0.40m deep. Gravel in a dark yellowish brown sandy silty clay matrix lay between 0.20-0.50m below ground surface, in some places directly beneath the topsoil but elsewhere below an intermittent and uneven silty loam subsoil. The ring ditch was cut into the gravel from beneath the subsoil.

The ditch had an internal diameter of c.21.80m, a maximum depth of 1.15m and width of 2.70m. The fills were noticeably more gravelly in the eastern sections, where it was difficult to distinguish the fill from the higher 'dirty' gravel through which the ditch was cut. There was no evidence of an internal mound, nor of banks either inside or outside the ditch. One possible feature beneath the subsoil was seen in the section through the interior but was not excavated.

Burnt flint, forty knapped flints and over fifty sherds of pottery were found in the ditch fills, including a group of almost forty sherds from one vessel, probably of early-middle bronze age date, from the primary fill of one of the eastern excavated sections.

Trench D, towards the north west corner of the site, was intended to examine an area of possible pits visible on the aerial photographs.

Although no pits were found, a number of ditches or gullies were examined. The trench formed roughly three sides of a square and was approximately 95.9m². Features were only recorded in the two almost parallel north west-south east arms of the trench. Most of the trench was machined to a depth of between 0.50-0.60m, through topsoil into the yellowish brown silty loam subsoil; gravel, where reached, was 0.40-0.70m below ground surface.

Two ditches, almost parallel and running north-south, were recorded in the southern arm of trench D; both appeared to cut the subsoil. A ditch on a similar alignment but sealed by the subsoil in the northern arm of the trench, may be a continuation of one of the southern pair. Also excavated in the northern trench was another ditch curving slightly from east-south west and a shallow linear feature c. 3.50m long. No datable finds and only a few pieces of burnt flint were recovered from any of the features in trench D.

Trenches E, F & G were all placed to allow investigation of the possible ditched field system visible on the aerial photographs.

Trench E, aligned almost exactly north-south, clipped the southern edge of a slight positive lynchet running north west-south east, apparently coincident with the crop mark. The trench was 20m long and 1.40m wide with an extension 5.5 x 3m from the eastern side. The long trench was machined to between 0.50-1.05m deep, although in the extension only 0.30-0.4m of soil was removed. Gravel was reached 0.48m below ground surface at the southern end of the trench and at c.0.90m at the northern end.

A sequence of at least three ditches was recorded, all on similar but not identical alignments (Fig.4). The latest southernmost one, the primary fill of which contained fragments of 19th century bottle glass, was cut from immediately beneath the topsoil (ie, from within 0.25m of

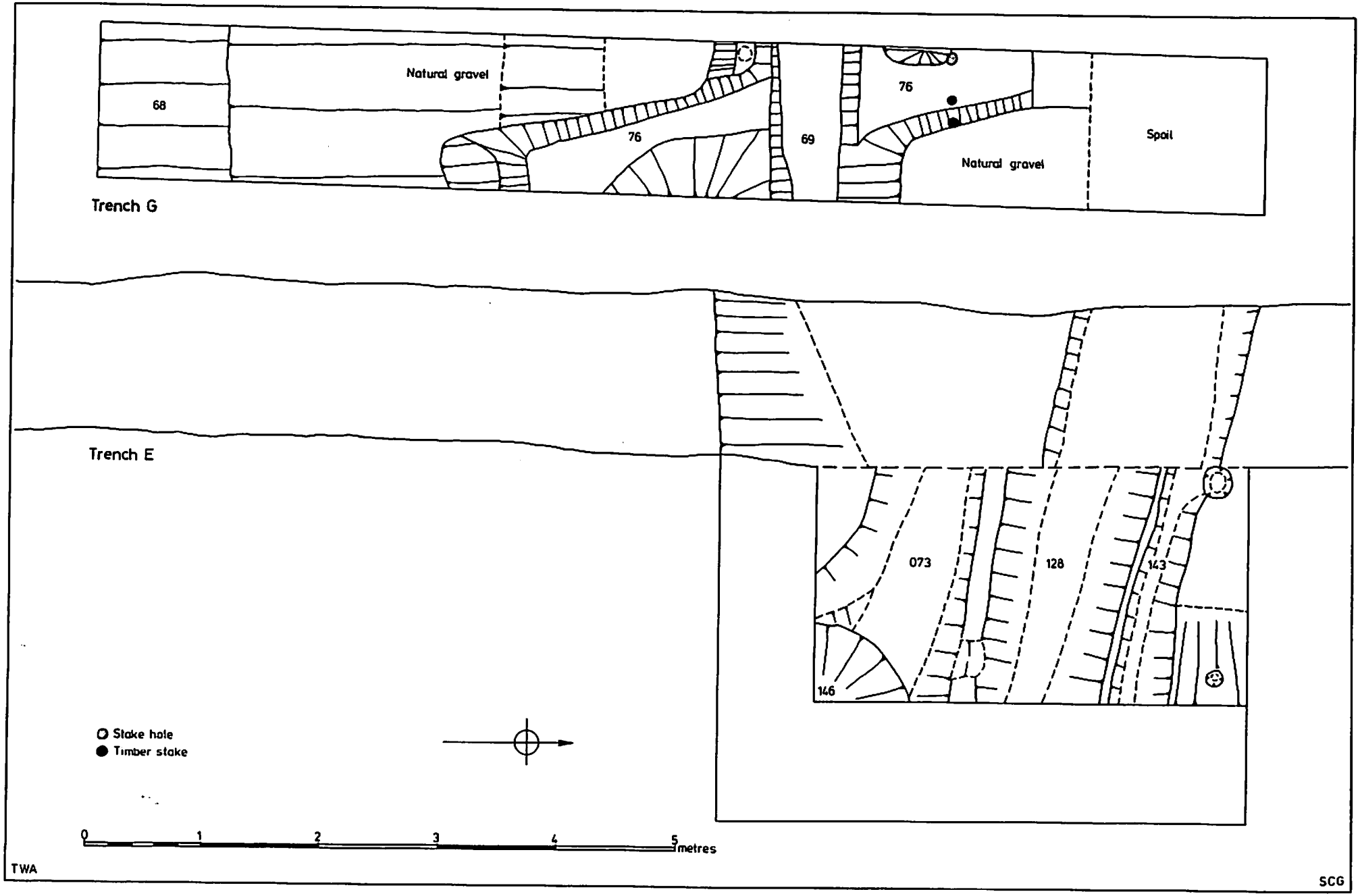

Fig. 4: Trenches E and G. Excavated features

the ground surface) to a depth of 0.75m. To the north of this, and cut by it, was the second ditch, cut to approximately the same depth but from a lower level; this ditch in turn cut the earliest ditch further to the north again. One sherd of Roman pottery was recovered from the earliest ditch. A thin layer of gravel, possibly the result of ploughing, sealed both of the earlier ditches and was itself sealed by a loose gravelly bank towards the northern end of the trench. There did not appear to be a ditch contemporary with this bank, although an earlier ditch could have been totally removed during excavation of the latest one.

Trench F, aligned north west-south east and towards the southern edge of the valley floor, was 11m long and 1.40m wide. It was machined through topsoil and the underlying compact light yellowish brown silty clay to a depth of 0.35m; gravel was not reached. Two ditches crossed the trench from north east-south west, both cut from directly beneath the topsoil, the later one, partially filled with pieces of concrete pipe and other modern debris, cutting the fill of the earlier and larger one. The earlier ditch was 0.92m deep and 3.70m wide at the top; a few pieces of slag were found in the top 0.40m of fill and two pieces of tile recovered from near the bottom.

Trench G, aligned north east-south west on the lower slope of the valley, was excavated to between 0.38-0.52m in depth. Topsoil 0.25m deep directly overlay gravel and two features cutting it. The later of these, a ditch running from north west-south east (probably the course of the cropmark), produced no datable finds. It cut across an earlier ditch or gully aligned north-south; this either terminated or turned a corner just short of the south eastern side of the trench. A single sherd of Roman pottery and fragments of two poorly-preserved wooden stakes were found during the excavation of this feature; both of the

stakes were set upright in the gravel and across the line of the gully (Fig. 4).

Sixteen trenches were excavated in the fields east of the lane, ten of these concentrated in the north eastern corner of the site, ranging out from the area where the Roman pottery had been found previously. Some restriction was placed on the position of these trenches by a gas pipeline crossing the easternmost field from north west-south east, either side of which a safe clearance had to be left. The remaining six trenches were dug randomly across the area.

Three of these trenches, J, K & L, were excavated on the lower slope of the valley near the southern site boundary. These trenches and three further north, X, Y & Z, contained similar soil profiles; a heavy brown clay loam topsoil 0.20-0.25m deep overlay yellowish brown compact silty clay. Gravel was only reached in trenches X & Z, 0.55 & 0.80m below ground surface respectively.

In trench M, near the river and the lowest-lying and wettest of the trenches in this area, a similar sequence was recorded, although here some organic material was preserved in the wet clay. Gravel was c.1.15m below the ground surface. No features were recorded nor were finds recovered from trenches J-M or X-Z.

Evidence of archaeological activity was present in all of the other trenches in the north eastern corner of the site, although actual features were not recorded or excavated in all of them (Fig. 5). Six of the trenches (N, P-T) were on slightly higher ground east of a short drain leading north eastwards toward the Kennet; eight of them (N, P-V) were similarly but not identically aligned from north east-south west; trench W was almost directly north-south and trench P was L-shaped with an additional short trench running south eastwards from its southern end. The trenches ranged in length from N, c.9m, to W at 44.50m and

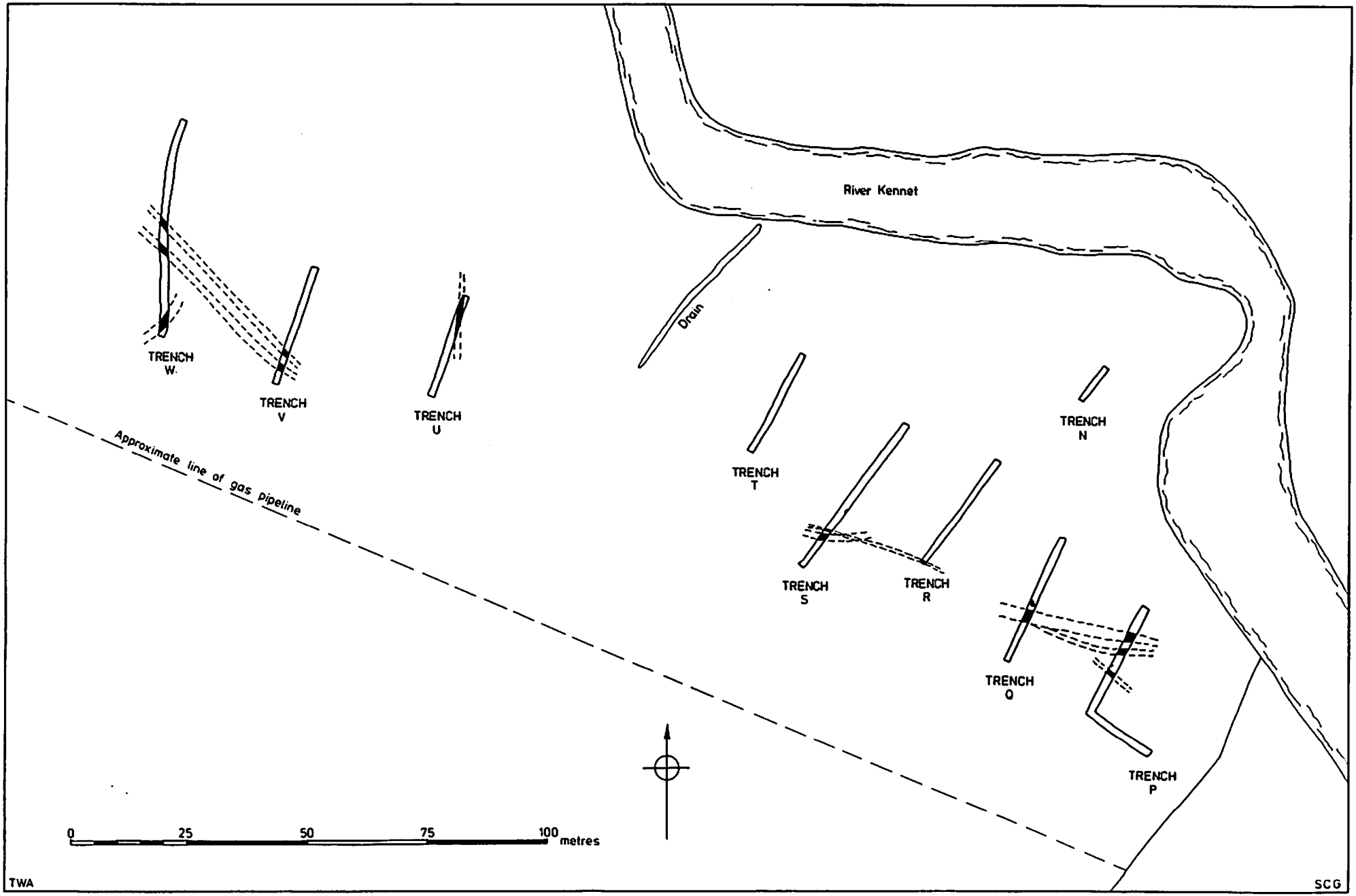

Fig. 5: Eastern area. Extent of Romano-British features

were all 1.40m wide; they were machined to depths of between 0.30-1.05m. Clay loam topsoil and a lighter coloured more clayey subsoil were distinguishable in almost all of the trenches, apart from trench V where the two layers merged. Gravel was reached in all of the trenches except trench P, at depths of between 0.40-1.05m.

All features in trench P were sealed by the subsoil. Three possible ditches crossed the longer arm of the trench, the northern one continuing across trench Q c.19m to the north west. The southern one, deeper (0.72m) but narrower than the other two, ran from north west-south east; the other two were aligned north east-south west and west-east. The latter two features produced large quantities of Roman pottery, together with tile and brick fragments, animal bone and oyster shell, as did a shallow gravel spread cut by one of the ditches at the northern end of the trench. Lesser amounts of pottery, again Roman, were also recovered from the southern ditch and a small, shallow feature just north of it. In addition, twenty knapped flints were found in the ditches and gravel spread, together with moderate amounts of burnt flint.

In trench R a considerable amount of Roman pottery was again recovered from the excavated section of the ditch previously examined in trench P, although additionally in this trench at least twenty four sherds of medieval pottery and some possible Iron Age sherds were found. Knapped flints and burnt flint were also present. Part of a smaller feature cut by the southern edge of the ditch produced a single sherd of Roman pottery. A larger pit or ditch terminal just north of the ditch contained ten sherds of Roman pottery, six knapped flints and some burnt flint. Another feature, cut from directly beneath the topsoil, was seen to cross the northern end of the trench in section, but had been entirely machined away; no finds were recovered.

No features were successfully excavated by hand in trench R, although a shallow, poorly-defined ditch was recorded at the extreme southern end of the trench. It continued in trench S, 15.50m north west of trench R. Nebulous suggestions of other features were seen in this trench, but excavation did not confirm their presence.

The ditch noticed in trench R crossed into and through trench S on a north west-south east alignment. It appeared to be sealed by both the subsoil and an underlying dark grey clay (although this may have been subsoil stained by the action of water on minerals in the soil) and was less than 0.20m deep. Most of the shallow fill was removed by machine, but fifty six sherds of Roman pottery, oyster shell and animal bone were found in the few centimetres remaining. Less than one metre south of this feature a second possible ditch, slightly deeper than the first and sealed by subsoil, crossed the trench from west-east; it produced some burnt flint but no datable finds. A smaller feature, perhaps a pit, was partially excavated against the eastern trench section, but no finds were recovered. At the southern end of the trench, over the last c.4m south of the ditches, a bank of mixed silty tufa and thin lenses of wood and other finer organic material were present 0.25m below the ground surface. This formation did not occur in any of the other trenches and may represent material deposited by the river in a period when its course took it further south than at present.

Trench T, c.19.5m north west of trench S, did not have any clearly recognisable features, although one possible pit was recorded below the subsoil at the southern end of the western section; no finds were associated with it. Two unstratified sherds of Roman pottery were found when the trench was cleaned after machining.

Trench N, the last trench in the slightly higher area separated by a short ditch from the rest of the north eastern corner of the field and

the trench closest to the river, contained no cut features. However, a layer of dark brown friable clay loam, c.0.10m deep and 0.30m below the present ground surface may represent a former plough soil or possibly an occupation layer. It was not noticed in other trenches, although isolated patches of similar deposits may have occurred. One unstratified sherd of Roman pottery probably derived from this layer.

Trench U, 68m west north west of trench T, contained a single feature, a shallow ditch crossing the trench obliquely from north-south. It was almost wholly removed during machining and no finds were recovered from it.

In trench V, 29m west of trench U, a single ditch and, 1.80m further south, a pair of ditches, one probably a recut, all aligned north west-south east were recorded. One knapped flint was recovered in each case from the single ditch and the earlier ditch of the southern pair.

A similar pattern of a single ditch just to the north of a recut pair occurred in trench W, about 30m west of trench V, and these were probably continuations of the ditches in that trench. An additional linear feature apparently aligned north north east-south south west, shallow irregular and poorly-defined, was excavated at the southern end of trench W. No datable finds were associated with these features. At the northern end of the trench two knapped flints were found in a shallow feature excavated against the eastern trench section.

Discussion

This evaluation has shown that archaeological features and deposits survive in some density over the western side and in the north eastern corner of the application area. Only three trenches were excavated beyond the anticipated sites of air photo features in the western area and in most of the eastern area the trenches were few and widely spaced, so that the apparent lack of archaeological evidence from parts of the

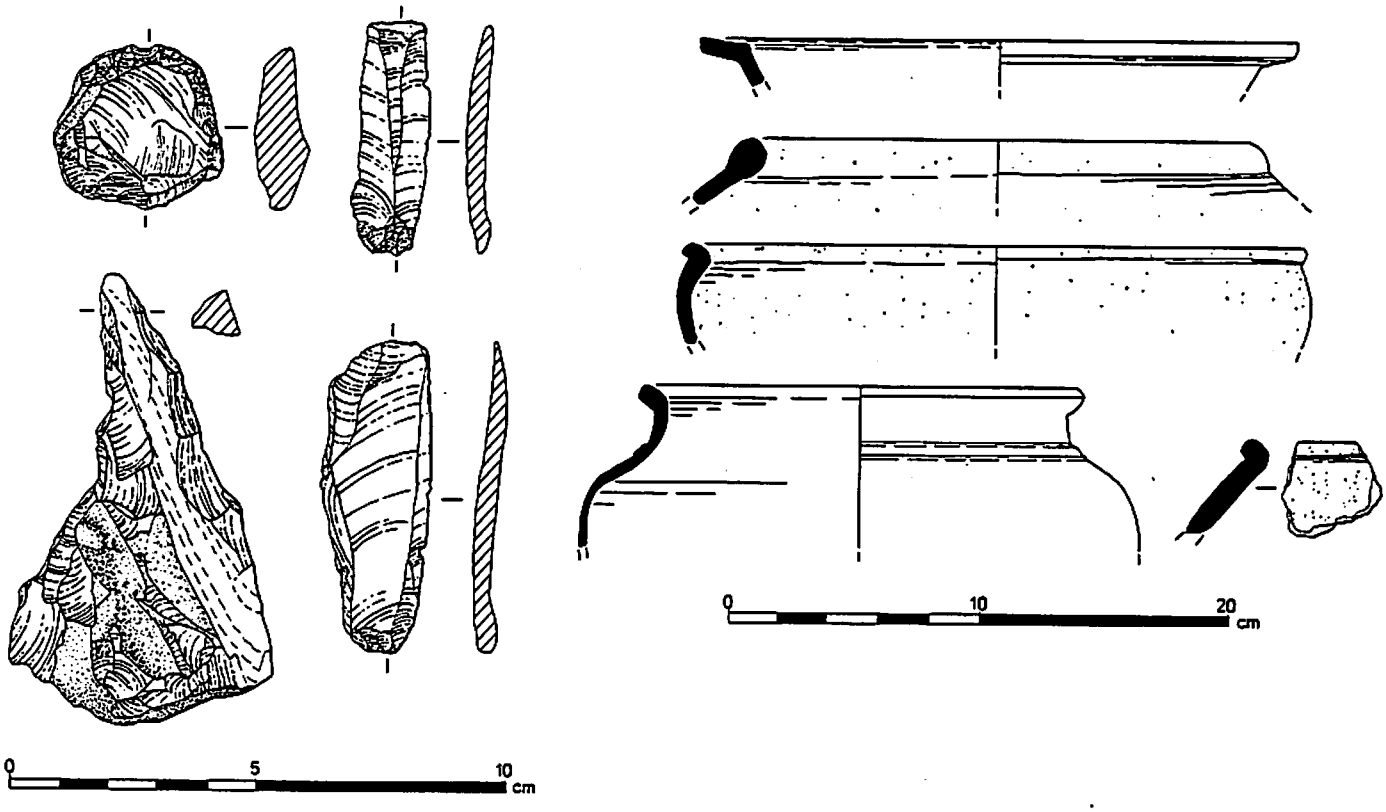

Fig. 6: Sample of prehistoric flint artefacts and Romano-British pottery

site may not be a true indication of its absence but only of comparatively low density; less than 1% of the western area has been investigated during the evaluation.

Several of the trenches in the western area demonstrate a higher density and greater complexity of features than that suggested by the aerial photographs. The presence of the ditched field system was confirmed and what little dating evidence was recovered suggests a Roman date; however in some trenches more than one phase of ditch-cutting was identified. The ring ditch examined is clearly well preserved and dated by the early-middle bronze age pottery from the base of one of the ring ditch sections in trench B.

In the eastern area, of previously unknown potential, a high density of features has been recorded and a Roman date confirmed by the large quantity of pottery recovered. Analysis of this pottery suggests an initial occupation in the late iron age (1st century B.C.) with a major phase of occupation in the early Roman period (1st century A.D.). Moderate quantities of early medieval pottery (12th/13th century A.D.) were also recovered from this part of the site but its significance is not clearly understood. The extent of the site was not positively identified but the fall-off in density of features suggests that it is largely confined to the north east corner (Fig. 5). Interpretation of these features is not possible from such a small excavated sample but it is clear that some complex stratigraphy survives.

The presence of knapped flint, mainly from the eastern part of the site, is noteworthy. Despite the lack of apparently contemporary features in the eastern trenches, the quantity and suggested date of the flint recovered is important and suggests that evidence of much earlier activity dating to the mesolithic or early neolithic (in the 4th milleaium B.C.) may survive. In addition it is clear that the high

water table has preserved more organic remains, such as the timber stakes, than generally survives at such sites. This has important implications for the preservation of all types of environmental evidence at this site.

If the application is approved it is clear that preservation of some parts of the site and further investigation both before and during topsoil stripping must be considered.

Acknowledgments

The landowners and farmers, Messrs R & P Fidler kindly allowed access to the land and tolerated the resultant disturbance. A machine for excavating the trenches and a pump were kindly provided by the applicants, Newbury Sand & Gravel Co Ltd. Thanks are also due to the site assistants: Sophie Jackson, Phil Mason, Brett Scaife & James Wright who survived some of the winter's coldest weather and to Julie Lancley and Lorraine Mepham who almost missed it. We are grateful to the Wessex Archaeology Group for washing most of the finds which Julie Lancley subsequently analysed and identified. The drawings were produced by Serena Garrett and this report has been produced in the offices of the Trust for Wessex Archaeology. It is hoped that, subject to negotiation, the finds and records will be deposited in Newbury Museum.

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