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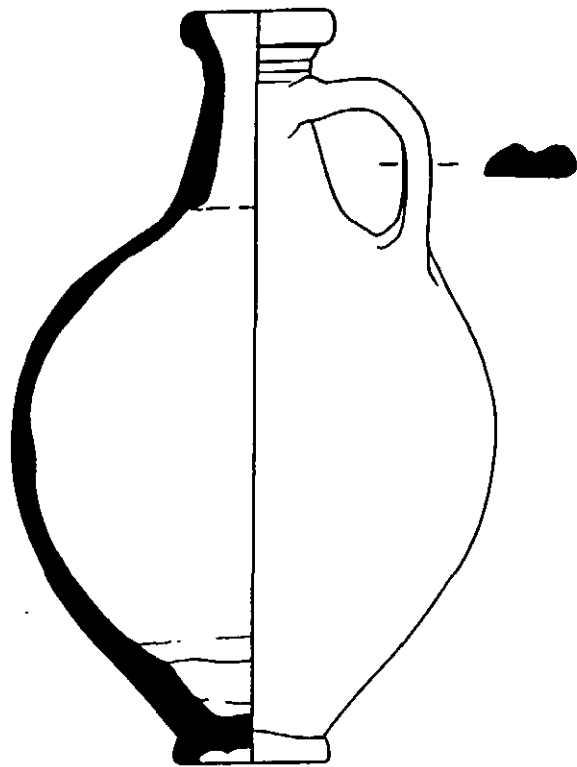
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North Hertfordshire District Council

Archaeological Investigations
at 39b High Street,
Baldock, Hertfordshire.



Report 13

ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS
AT
39b HIGH STREET, BALDOCK,
HERTFORDSHIRE

by

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with

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Commissioned by Ladvent Builders

North Hertfordshire District Council Museums

Field Archaeology Section

Department of Engineering and Leisure Services

February 1992

Report 13

39b High Street, Baldock,

N.H.D.C. Site Code: Bal-53.

National Grid Reference: TL 2466 3372.

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Illustrations

Cover Illustration: Late second/early third century AD pink-ware flagon from a square, shaft-like pit (A495) site-A, from the Baldock excavations, 1968-72 (Stead, I.M., and Rigby, V.1986). A similar flagon was found within one of the square pits excavated at 39b High Street.

Fig. 1: Site location.

Fig. 2: Location of excavated features.

Acknowledgements

The Field Archaeology Section would like to express its thanks to Ladvent Builders for funding the excavation and especially to Mr. Paul Draper of Ladvent Builders for his cooperation on site and for machining off the topsoil under our supervision.

Thanks are also due to the staff who conducted the excavations: Paula McCarroll, Tony Offord and Faith Pewtress.

The excavation was supervised and this report written by A.D.W. Richmond, Assistant Site Supervisor with the North Hertfordshire Field Archaeology Section. G.R. Burleigh, Keeper of Field Archaeology, had overall responsibility for the project and edited this report.

Illustrations were drawn by F.A. Pewtress and A.J. Offord.

The Fabric series used in this report is from the North Hertfordshire Museums Pottery Fabric Series, compiled by H. Ashworth, 1990.

NB. The views expressed in this report are those of the authors, who take full responsibility for them. They are not necessarily the views of the North Hertfordshire District Council.

1. Introduction

1.1 The property, the investigation of which is reported here, was the subject of a number of planning applications and changes of ownership during the period 1987 to 1991. In 1991 planning permission was granted for the conversion of the 17th century timber-framed barn to residential use and for the construction of a detached house and garage block in the associated yard. Attached to the grant of planning permission was a condition for archaeological investigation in advance of new construction.

1.2 Archaeological interest stems from the fact that the property is situated on the east side of the Medieval High Street in an area of burgage plots. At least as significant is the fact that the site is on the western edge of the Iron Age and Romano-British settlement and its investigation was expected to help define more precisely the extent of the settlement area. The eastern limit

of the property is formed by an 18th century brick wall marking the boundary with the adjacent recreation field known as Baker's Close. This is an area of grassland which appears never to have been ploughed, and it is known from aerial and geophysical surveys that it includes well preserved and important archaeological remains. In consequence the whole field is legally protected as a Scheduled Ancient Monument.

1.3 A preliminary period of monitoring was undertaken and four areas where building work was to take place were machine cleared of topsoil down to the chalk natural; it soon became obvious that a small scale excavation would have to take place, as several features, of a probable Romano-British date were seen to exist. The excavations took place in January 1992 and were funded by the developer.

2. Archaeological Background

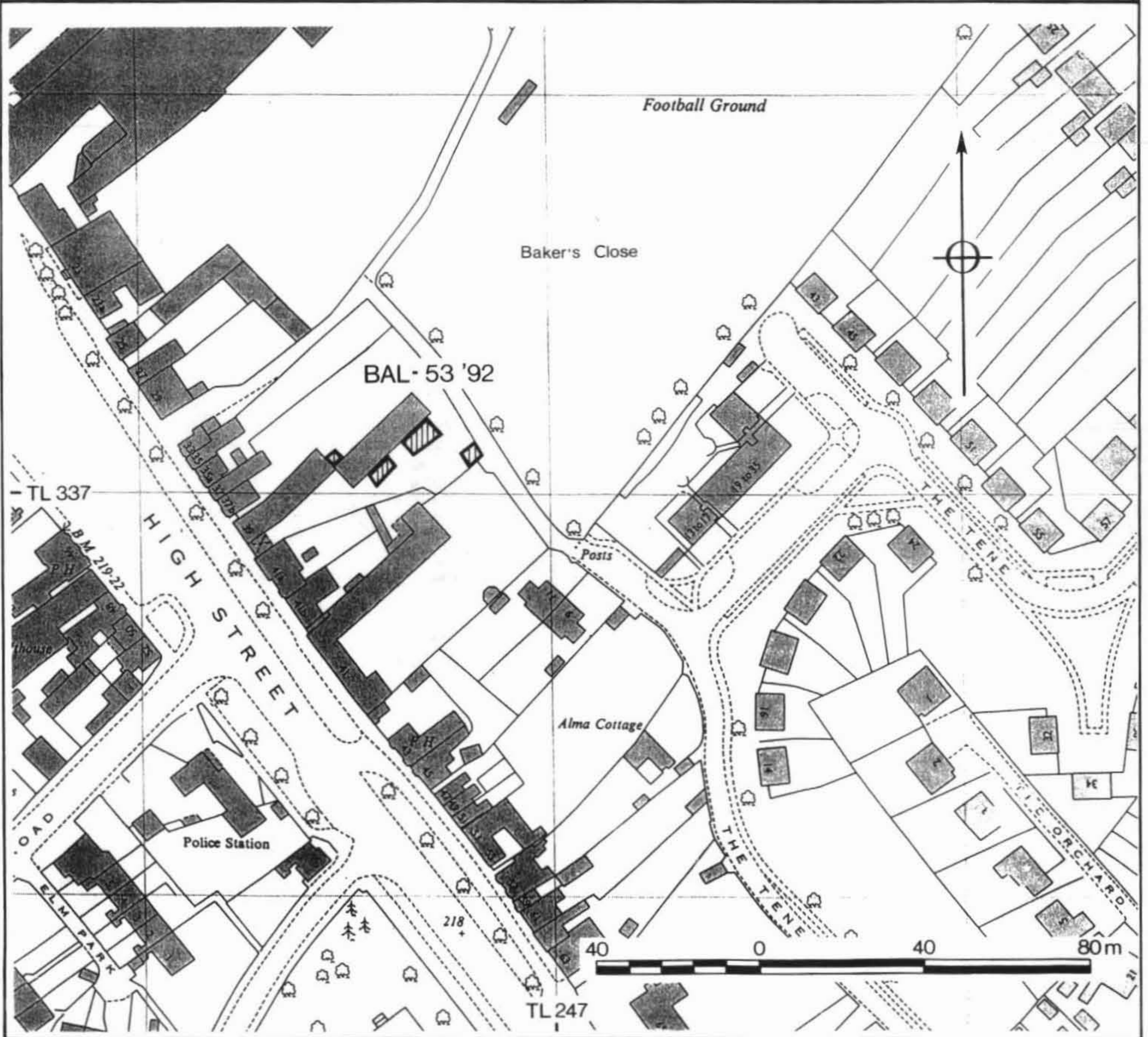
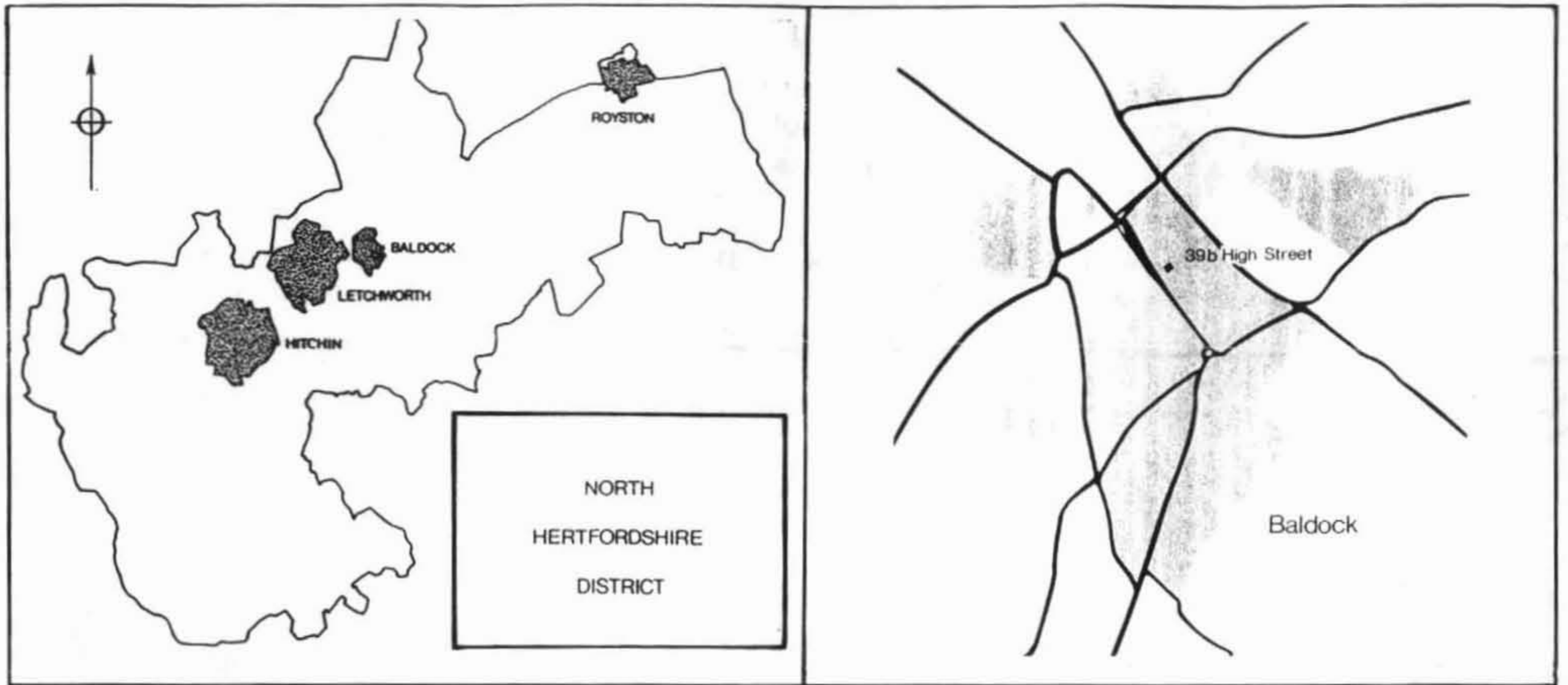
2.1 The present-day small town of Baldock in North Hertfordshire is known to have started its life as a new town in the Middle Ages. It was a deliberate foundation in the middle of the twelfth century by the Knights Templar who were granted the rights for a market and a fair by King Richard in 1189 (Beresford, M. 1967.452). The town, at the point where the Great North Road crosses the Icknield Way appears to have been well sited for a market and the settlement prospered, being based on the existence of two market places, one along the present day High Street and the other along White Horse Street.

2.2 The Medieval town, however, was not the first settlement at Baldock. It appears that the development in the twelfth century was on a site to the west of a "long-deserted but perhaps not quite obliterated Roman settlement" (Stead,

I.M. and Rigby, V. 1986.29). Knowledge of the Roman occupation of Baldock was scant until excavations in the 1920's/30's by Mr.W.P. Westell, Curator of the Letchworth Museum, and excavations in the 1960's and early 70's by Dr. I.M.Stead (1986). Recent extensive excavations under the guidance of G.R.Burleigh, Keeper of Field Archaeology for the North Hertfordshire Museums have also added considerably to the picture of development of the Roman occupation of Baldock (reports forthcoming).

2.3 The Roman settlement of Baldock was largely defined by cemeteries which exist to the north, east, south and south-west of Clothall Road. It appears to have developed on the site of a spring-line and here a Romano-British small town emerged at the junction of several major roads, revealing an element of organisa-

39b High Street, Location Plan



tion demonstrating the early interaction between native and Roman traditions (Burnham, B.C.1987.168). The Icknield Way, an important prehistoric route along the edge of the Chiltern chalk escarpment runs south-west to north-east through Baldock. Joining with this, just to the north of Clothall Common, was another important communications route in Roman times which ran southwards to the large provincial town of Verulamium (St.Albans), and northwards to Godmanchester, Lincoln and beyond. A third road led south-east, to Braughing and ultimately to Colchester, doubtless the source of much trade during the period of Roman occupation. It was around these communication systems that the town developed and grew. Recently suggestions have been forwarded which also view Baldock as an important local cult centre from the Late Iron Age onwards, with aristocratic chieftains being buried here, thus adding to the prestige of the town's cemeteries, (Burleigh, G.R.et.al.in press).

2.4 Numerous large and small-scale archaeological excavations and other investigations have been conducted in and around Baldock in the last twenty five years. These have been prompted by the continuing threat and sub-

sequent opportunities offered by redevelopment in the Medieval town area, and by new development expanding onto greenfield areas around the town where the Roman and pre-Roman settlements largely lay, especially to the east of the Clothall Road.

Extensive excavations on the ancient settlement were undertaken by Dr. I.M.Stead for the Ancient Monuments Inspectorate between 1968 and 1972. These excavations were prompted by the discovery in December 1967 of a rich La Tène III burial only a couple of hundred metres to the south-east of the present site (Stead, I.M. and Rigby, V. 1986). Since 1980 North Hertfordshire Museums has carried out extensive excavations on Upper Walls Common (Clothall Common), and elsewhere in Baldock. Both settlement evidence and a number of cemeteries have been investigated (Burleigh, G.R. et.al. in preparation). Within the last year the Field Archaeology Section has investigated in Baldock sites including a Roman quarry near the present day British Rail station (Atkinson, M. and Burleigh, G.R. 1992), and roads and settlement evidence at Hartsfield School (Colley, C. et.al. in preparation).

3. The Archaeological Investigation

Methodology

3.1 Of the four areas designated for construction, (A,B,C and D), three produced features, mainly pits, which warranted investigation. These features have been numbered and plotted (Fig.2), classified and dated and a general account is given below. The excavated areas had a thin soil cover above natural chalk and this was removed using a mechanical excavator with a 1.2m. toothed bucket attached to its back actor. The exposed surfaces were then cleaned using the smooth blade on the front of the machine, and subsequently cleaned by hand to reveal the full extent of the archaeological features. It became evident that all the features

which were cut deep into the underlying chalk were Man-made; however, no structural evidence was found. Indeed continuous use of the yard area since Medieval times appears to have removed all archaeological evidence above the level of natural chalk, (approximately 67m above sea level in the subject area).

3.2 The actual excavation of the deposits and features discovered during the evaluation was carried out by a team of four archaeologists who methodically removed the accumulated layers and fills by hand in a stratigraphic sequence until the chalk natural was reached.

4. Results. (see figure 2).

Area A

4.1 Area A was located in the extreme eastern corner of the plot of land under development (Fig.2), and was seen to back onto the archaeologically important area of land known as Baker's Close where field surveys have located the existence of several Romano-British buildings. The area measured 3.20 metres by 4.0 metres and within this two archaeologically cut features were located, both seen to be probable pits.

4.2 These pits are seen to be of two types. The first, which appears to have been badly truncated was of an oval form with vertical walls [06]. This pit must have been relatively shallow as it only existed to a depth of approximately 0.20 metres along its southern edge. The single fill of this feature [01], apart from a thin weathered region of chalk on the lowest interface, was of a mid-reddish brown earth with a varying admixture of chalk. Fragments of animal bone were recovered from this context as well as several sherds of dark burnished pottery of a style used during the first and second centuries A.D.

4.3 The second feature ran up to the eastern wall of the property and was seen from the outset to be roughly square in plan, approximately 1.0m across [26]. The upper calcareous fill of this feature, [02], did seem to have been disturbed by what appeared to represent a post-Medieval cut. It is thought that this represents the remains of activities associated with the construction of the boundary wall, although no finds were located within the associated chalk rich fill. Fill [02] continued to a depth of about 0.50m, (67.18m. OD), and over lay a similar, though visibly more chalk rich fill [018] which was sampled for analysis. Both of these fills contained pottery sherds of a typically Roman style. The upper context [02], although containing several apparent sherds of a Medieval date, and possibly post-Medieval

date, was largely dominated by distinctive black-burnished wares, shell-tempered wares and fine sand-tempered grey wares, probably Fabric 11 or 12, known to have been in use from the late first to the fourth century A.D. A fragment of moratorium, a coarse gritted mixing bowl, was also located in this deposit, together with a large quantity of butchered animal bone. The context below, [18], contained less animal bone but did produce a quantity of typical Roman pottery sherds, including black-burnished, shell-tempered and samian varieties. The samian pottery is a distinctive variety known to have been manufactured at several production centres throughout Gaul, and imported to Britain. Several pieces of roof tile, (tegulae), were also found. These were coarse-grained with occasional large worn inclusions.

The lowest fill excavated, before safety conditions forced a halt, was a mid-grey brown chalky silt [25]. This friable fill contained similar artifacts to the two fills above, and is thereby dated to the early centuries of the first millennium A.D. This layer was removed to a depth of approximately 0.50m and overlay an unexcavated silt fill, [29], which, via probing, is known to continue to a depth exceeding 1.3m.

We appear therefore to have a large square shaped pit, or possibly a well which was at least 2.70m in depth and contained domestic refuse indicating a period of deposition in the late second or third century AD; without supporting the boundary wall near by it was deemed unsafe to excavate the feature beyond this limit.

The cut itself was most interesting, [26]. This feature was square in plan with rounded corners, measuring approximately 1.0m across. The sides were all near vertical and foot-holds were seen to exist on the south-west and

north-eastern faces. These were of similar dimensions, approximately 0.12 x 0.25 x 0.15m in depth, with flat bases. Their presence suggests that the feature had a continued, utilitarian function, and may be seen as either a well, as known to have existed in this form elsewhere in Roman Baldock (see Stead, I.M. and Rigby, V., 1986.45. Wells A 68, 463 and 489) or possibly a cesspit which also required the use of foot-holds, though no square-shaped varieties are known from Baldock (ibid.47). Samples from the features fills taken for analysis may clarify a number of the above views. During excavation a region of dark earth with charcoal flecks, [27], possibly representing staining was seen to exist around the lowest fill reached, [29] and it is possible that this represents remnants of a timber lining. If this is the case the feature would more likely represent a pit of some variety and not a well.

4.4 The actual cut of this feature was seen to have truncated an earlier feature, [37,36,38], a shallow gully orientated east-west which extended under the compound wall and presumably into the area known as Baker's Close. The single, large sherd of pottery from these contexts is from a dark, grog-tempered ware, possibly Fabric 2, known to have been in use during the late pre-Roman Iron Age, though continuing in use into the later first century A.D.

Area B

4.5 Area B was approximately 5.0m x 8.0m, adjoining the south-eastern corner of the timber-framed barn (Fig.2). Initial clearance exposed the fills of four square-shaped cuts, [13,22,24 and 35], and one larger, rather irregular cut which upon further investigation turned out to be a nineteenth of early twentieth century soak-away. All the square-shaped pits were half-sectioned enabling the archaeologists to view the stratigraphic make-up of the features following excavation. The deepest of the square pits, [24], only travelled to a depth of 0.7m, whilst the others were shallower all approximately 0.5m. In plan, however, they

were all generally similar being between 0.9m and 1.20m across.

4.6 Cut [24] contained four fills, the upper most was predominantly of a chalky nature and contained sherds of pottery of a characteristic Medieval style. Several green-glazed pieces suggest an earlier, rather than a later Medieval date, however a number of Roman sherds were also found indicating the probable disturbance factor associated with this fill. It is possible that this context represents a phase of infilling or levelling of an earlier feature which had subsided in antiquity. Below [24] was a more silty fill, [19], which contained a quantity of finds more characteristic of the Romano-British period including shell-tempered, samian and grey ware fragments. Animal bone was absent from this fill however.

The next, and deepest of the fills, [20], was far more calcareous, of a rich yellow/red-brown colour and contained relatively few coarse components. The most notable finds from the context were 19 iron hob-nails representing the probable remains of one or more leather boots or shoes, and a largely intact typical Romano-British flagon, Fabric 20. This was of a cream or off-white colour and sand-tempered. The most likely source for such a vessel would have been the workshops of the Verulamium region, with the Upper Nene Valley and Oxfordshire Potteries as possibilities. Occasional black-burnished and grey ware sherds were also found together with a small collection of animal bones including the skull of a small rodent. The lowest fill of the cut, [23], produced no finds and largely consisted of weathered chalk surrounded by a grey-brown silt matrix. The pit, although relatively shallow, had been cleanly and symmetrically cut to produce a feature which one would suppose performed a function other than that for refuse disposal. This neatness suggests a function more plausibly associated with storage.

4.7 Cut [22] was similar to the above feature, though was visibly more weathered, especially on the western face, suggesting that the pit may

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have been disused and exposed for a period of time prior to the build up of fills, which can by and large be seen as refuse deposits. Again the fills reflect those discovered in the pit described above, and the associated finds, including a piece of Roman glass, sherds of fine grey wares and a sherd from a samian vessel suggest the pit went out of use and silted up sometime around the first or second centuries A.D.

4.8 Cut [35] was slightly less deep than the others and appears to have been truncated, possibly when outbuildings were added to the barn in the last century. It also contained only a single fill, [35], which appeared to be of a post-Medieval, and not Romano-British date. The cut, however, appeared to be in keeping with the others described and may well be of Roman origin. It seems probable, therefore, that when construction work took place to build the outbuildings, the original fill of the feature was removed, perhaps out of curiosity, and largely replaced with fairly modern material.

4.9 The final pit within Area B, [13], again appears to conform to the style outlined above. Here, however weathering has been more severe, giving the feature a sub-square appearance on the surface, though the base conforms to the square category. The three silty fills all contained sherds of Roman pottery, ranging from black-burnished rim pieces in the upper most fill, [05], together with samian fragments, to more coarse, sand-tempered sherds (Fabric 16) in the lowest fill, [12].

4.10 These relatively shallow pits were all of a similar, square-shaped style, and in my opinion represent features providing a specific function. They are all rather close to one another and although no clear alignment is seen to exist between them there is the possibility that three of the features, [13,22,24], radiate out at right angles to the ancient road known to exist under Baker's Close. Such pits may therefore be associated with local land boundaries. It is probable, however, that the features represent storage pits, which were abandoned sometime

during the late first or second centuries A.D. on the basis of the finds located throughout the fills of each. Buildings which may have been associated with these features do not appear to have survived. No post-holes were located, although if the structures existed on a series of rafters (which only required a shallow gully for support), evidence would be minimal and could have been removed by later activities on the site.

Area C

4.11 The cleared Area C measured 11.5m x 5.0m and butted upto the southern side of the timber barn. This area, however, showed no archaeological features.

Area D

4.12 A further single pit was located in the final area under investigation. Area D was located on the northern side of the timber barn where the topsoil was of a greater depth, approximately 0.4m (Fig.2). The trench here measured 3.0m x 1.5m and exposed an oval shaped feature cut into the chalk natural. The cut, [33], contained two fills, [30] and [32], both of a silty matrix, with the lower, and considerably larger fill, [30], containing a high percentage of chalk inclusions. Within this fill were several pieces of tile of a late Medieval date and a single sherd of a green-glazed vessel, similar to Fabric C.33, from the Bedfordshire series. This fabric had a dull-orange core with a pale surface, the outside being coated with a bright olive-green glaze (Baker, E. et.al. 1979.176). The date of such styles are seen to fall between the 14th - 16th centuries.

4.13 The actual cut, [33], was roughly oval in shape and appeared to have been truncated as it only survived to a depth of approximately 0.2m. It had an undulating base and rough sides, suggestive of weathering activity. This feature does not seem to relate to the features located in the other trenches which all appear to be of a Romano-British origin.

5. Conclusion

5.1 The excavations carried out at 39b High Street, Baldock were necessary due to the proposed new building works in an archaeologically sensitive area. Baker's Close which backs onto the site being investigated has long been known as an area of archaeological importance, and has therefore been Scheduled as an ancient monument. Any work therefore which may threaten elements of this relict landscape would require close archaeological monitoring and investigation.

5.2 Work carried out by the Field Archaeology Unit of the North Hertfordshire District Council identified a series of small Romano-British pits and a more substantial feature possibly representing a deep storage facility or a well. The pits were by and large neatly cut and appear to represent efforts to create features to provide a specific function other than that of refuse disposal. Following their disuse, however, the features appear to have been utilised as refuse pits, as the finds suggest. This activity appears to have taken place sometime around the late first and second centuries AD.

Similar features have been discovered throughout Baldock, which all add to the growing picture of settlement nature and development in the past. The lack of material evidence for structures, however, of a Romano-British or

even Medieval date tells more about the intensive reuse of this plot of land in Medieval and modern times rather than the density of buildings which might be expected to have been considerable so close to the centre of the town. The difference in ground level between this plot of land and Baker's Close on the other side of the boundary wall is approximately one metre. This is a reflection of the intense use of this Medieval burgage plot since the Roman period, whereas Baker's Close has been maintained as unploughed pasture.

5.3 The investigations conducted in January 1992 have provided us with further information concerning the extent and use of Romano-British Baldock. The results obtained are of importance in the wider setting of the Roman town since even small scale excavations such as this add to our understanding of the Romano-British, and later settlement.

5.4 The investigation reported here completes the archaeological work, other than a watching brief, required to allow the conversion of the barn and construction of the garage block to proceed. At a later date, it is planned to construct a house to the north-east of the barn, against the eastern boundary wall. This will require further archaeological investigation in advance of construction.

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39b High Street, Baldock
Location Of Features, January 1992

Area of excavation ———
Archaeological feature ———
Projected extent of feature - - -

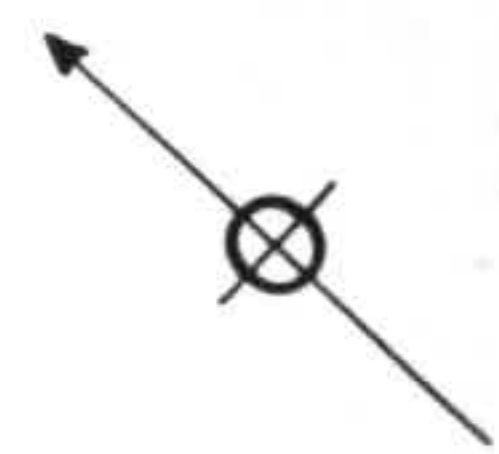
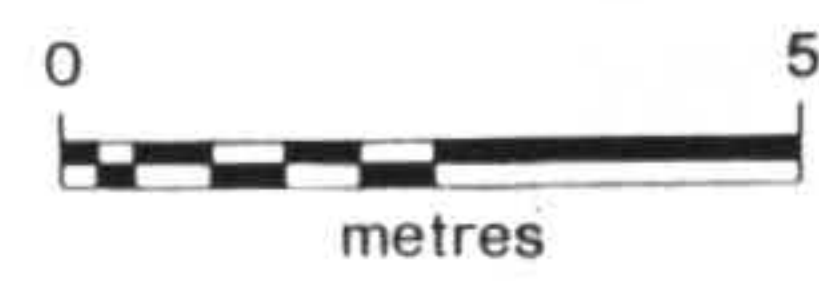


Figure 2

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