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# HEADLAND

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## Wooperton gravel quarry Phase 1, Second strip Assessment report

*Client: Northern Aggregates Ltd*

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*November 1997*



# Wooperton gravel quarry Phase 1, Second strip Assessment report

## Contents

1. Introduction .....	p2
2. Method .....	p3
3. Excavated features .....	p3
4. Artefact record .....	p6
5. Environmental record .....	p6
6. Storage and Curation .....	p7
7. Statement of Potential .....	p7

## Bibliography

## Acknowledgements

## Illustrations

Appendix I: Archive Listings .....	p9
Appendix II: Context Summary .....	p10
Appendix III: Finds list .....	p13
Appendix IV: Sample assessment report .....	p14
Appendix V: Pottery assessment report .....	p16

## Summary

Northern Aggregates Ltd began developing a new quarry to the east of Wooperton, Northumberland in May 1997. The site had been identified as of potential archaeological interest by Northumberland County Council and all ground disturbance required archaeological monitoring. During the first topsoil strip of Phase 1 for the quarry development, archaeological features were identified; comprising pit alignments and ditches. Some of the pits contained Roman and Bronze Age pottery. The second strip revealed further pits relating to the pit alignment but in a different direction. The continuation of the ditches seen in the first strip was also revealed as well as new ditch and several isolated pits one of which contained Roman and another Bronze Age pottery. Environmental samples were taken from selected contexts.

### 1. Introduction

#### 1.1 Site location and topography

The site is located 350 m to the east of the village of Wooperton at NGR NU 049 204. The development comprises two fields which cover 26.5 ha and are bounded to the southwest by A697 and to the southeast by B6346 and a minor road. There is considerable topographical relief within the site. A comparatively flat and broad ridge runs down the centre of each field aligned northwest to southeast. The ground slopes steeply down towards the A697 to the southwest, dropping 14 m over a distance of 100 m. Phase 1 is located at the east edge of the site and was, until recently, under pasture. The geology of the area comprises a deep sequence of glaciofluvial sediments of gravels and sand down to fine sand and silt.

#### 1.2 Area investigated (Fig. 1)

The first strip of Phase 1 of the extraction programme involved the construction of a haul road, 15 by 250 m to the southwest leading up to the extracting area which is 30 m wide and some 310 m long. The second strip, the subject of this report, is confined to the extracting area to the north. It is located to the north-west of strip 1 and is 12 m wide and 280 m long, covering approximately 1/3 ha.

#### 1.3 Previous archaeological work

The supposed line of a Roman Road, the *Devil's Causeway* runs across the middle of the extracting area. The line is well established to the north and the south of Wooperton but it has never been recorded close to the quarry site.

A series of cropmarks has been seen in the southwest parts of the area of the development, some of which were believed to be caused by human activity in the past. In particular a possible ring ditch in the southern corner of the area was believed to be of considerable interest.

On the basis of these cropmarks the site was the subject of evaluations by Oxford Archaeological Associates (1994) and West Yorkshire Archaeological Services WYAS (1996). The OAA evaluation consisted of geophysical survey and test pitting while the

WYAS investigation consisted of trial trenching designed to investigate features identified in the southeast corner by OAA. With the exception of a ditch identified in both evaluations and a hearth identified in the 1994 investigation no archaeological features were identified in the trenching and most of the cropmarks seen previously were therefore attributed to geological processes, mainly ice wedges.

The cropmark photographs and the previous geophysical survey of the site did not indicate that there would be any archaeological features in the area affected by Phase 1 of the development. However, during the watching brief carried out by Headland Archaeology as the topsoil was removed from strip 1 in May 1997, a number of linear features and a line of pits were identified. These features were subsequently excavated by Headland Archaeology.

## **2. Method**

The work was carried out according to the specifications set out in the project design of 15/04/97 approved by Northumberland County Council Archaeology Section.

The topsoil was removed by a 360° tracked excavator with a six-foot toothless bucket. The topsoil stripping was overseen by archaeologists from Headland Archaeology Ltd. During this watching brief several archaeological features were noted. At the start of the excavation, the areas where features had been noted were cleaned by hand and all features were planned at 1:20 and 1:50. All pits were then half sectioned and the sections drawn at 1:10 and described. Colour transparencies and prints were taken of all sections. The pits were all fully excavated while 10% of all linear features were excavated. Samples for ecofactual/environmental remains were taken from contexts which were likely to contain such remains.

## **3. Excavated features**

Most features were concentrated in two areas:

- A) The south area which contained a pit alignment
- B) The north area which contained three ditches and a cluster of pits.

### **3.1 The south area (Fig. 2)**

The south area covered some 230 m<sup>2</sup> which was cleaned by hand. The main feature was an alignment of seven evenly spaced pits on a north-west to south-east alignment over a distance of some 12 m. The pit alignment spanned the entire area stripped of topsoil and is likely to continue in under the unexcavated area to the north-west. The pits were generally oval in shape orientated along the axis of the alignment and on average measured 0.8 m by 0.5 m and 0.15 m deep. All pits had gravelly fills with no inclusions. This pit alignment is on a different line from the one seen in strip 1, but the two are linked, as the westernmost pit in the first alignment, F2, can also be seen as the south-easternmost pit in the second alignment. The second alignment turns 55° towards north in relation to the first alignment. Generally, the pits in the second

alignment are more uniform and smaller, but the configuration of the pits strongly suggests that the two pit alignments are connected and probably contemporary.

A single pit lay 1.5 m to the north-east of the alignment (F35). It contained an upper fill dominated by medium to large stones in a loose sandy matrix over a lower gravelly fill. The size and fill of this pit was very different from the pits in the pit alignment and is not likely to be associated with the alignment. A second pit (F132) lay near the west corner of the south area, some 11 m to the south-west of the pit alignment. It contained a gravelly fill with some charcoal. None of these two pits contained any finds.

### 3.2 The north area (Fig. 3)

The main features in the north area were four ditches. Three of these were on the same alignment as the two parallel ditches seen in the previous strip, F45 and F48, aligned towards north-north-west and lying 20 m apart.

A ditch to the east, F103, spanned the entire width of the stripped area. It had a V-shaped profile and was from 0.7 to 1.1 m wide and up to 0.5 m deep. The ditch changed direction slightly towards west about half way across the strip. This is the same ditch as F45 seen in strip 1.

Two ditches to the west, F117 and F118, lie on the same alignment. F118 is the same ditch as F48 seen in strip 1. It continued some 7 m into strip 2 and was 0.9 m wide. At its north terminal it widened to 2 m and up to 0.7 m deep. A similar widening was seen in ditch F48 some 14 m to the south.

Ditch F117 lies at the northern edge of strip 2, on the same alignment as F118 with a 5 m gap between the two ditches. At its southern end it is very narrow and shallow, 0.3 m wide and 0.1 m deep, but widens out to 1.2 m wide and 0.17 m deep at the northern edge of the strip. The shape and cross section of F117 was different from ditch F48/F118 to the south, but it was only exposed over a distance some 3 m within the strip and when it is more fully exposed will it be possible to see if it is a significant difference.

The gap between F117 and F118 could be caused by truncation. However, it coincides with the eastern terminal of a fourth ditch F113 which may indicate that there is a genuine gap between F117 and F118. The ditch F113 starts in the middle of the gap, on the line of F117/F118, and runs off towards south-west at an angle of 77° to F117/F118. It is exposed over a distance of some 10 m and continues in under the edge of the stripped area. The ditch has a wide V-shaped cross section and is up to 0.8 m wide and 0.28 m deep. The position of the ditch in relation to F117/F118 suggests that these three features are contemporary.

The ditches F45/F103 and F48/F118/F117 lie on the same alignment as and only 15 and 35 m to the east of the projected line of the *Devil's Causeway* (Fig. 1). It

The continuation of the pit alignment seen in strip 1 was recorded but in a different direction. The pits contained only small amounts of charcoal, but sufficient for an AMS date.

The Roman Pot assemblage found in pit F115 is of the same nature as the assemblage recovered from the pit alignment in strip 1. It is therefore likely that this pit is roughly contemporary and associated with the pit alignment.

The continuation of ditches the two parallel ditches F45 and F48 in the north area were exposed. The ditch to the east was continuous, while there was a 5 m gap in the west ditch coinciding with the east terminal of a third ditch which runs off towards the west and into the unexcavated area. This ditch may mark the line of a boundary leading up to *Devil's Causeway*.

There is no clear relation between the ditches in the north areas and the pit alignment and ditches seen in the south. However the general orientation of the ditches and the pit alignments may indicate that they are parts of the same major boundary system. It is possible that if the ditch F113 continues for some considerable length westwards, it may eventually link up with the continuation of the pit alignment. If such a link exist, it lies some 40 m to 50 m to the north-west of the current quarry edge.

#### **4. Artefact record**

During the excavation of 215 potsherds were recovered from three different contexts all fills of pits on the south area. Six sherds were found while cleaning the surface, five of these were found in the vicinity of pit F115 and are likely to stem from this pit. The majority of the potsherds, about 190, came from pit F115. All sherds from this pit was of Roman date. The collection of Roman pottery appears consistent with that recovered during the excavation of strip 1.

The collection of Roman pottery from this site is unusual (see Appendix V). Some has military associations and some seems related to the indigenous tradition. There seems little doubt that the collection has a ritual significance given the morphology of the site, its Roman date and its very curious assemblage. The composition of this group is not what one might expect to find on a 'normal' rural site.

Fifteen base and body sherds of a decorated Bronze age beaker came from pit F91 at the northern part of the site. A single prehistoric base sherd was retrieved from pit F89.

#### **5. Environmental record**

Bulk samples were collected from fourteen deposits considered to have a high potential for the preservation of carbonised plant remains. These samples were floated and wet-sieved and then assessed by Dr. T G Holden (see Appendix III).

Only one sample, Context 112, contained anything other than wood charcoal. A number of grains of poorly preserved cereals (potentially oat, wheat and barley) were noted and a more accurate identification of these would be possible once the sample has been fully sorted. This assemblage was recovered from the same pit as large quantities of Roman pottery and may have some bearing on the nature of that context. Of the fourteen sampled deposits, thirteen contained sufficient charcoal for a radiocarbon date.

## **6. Storage and Curation**

The written, drawn and photographic records are currently held by Headland Archaeology, as are the finds and environmental material. Where appropriate these materials are stored in controlled environments. It is anticipated that the site archive including finds will be deposited at the Museum of Antiquities, University and Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle upon Tyne following the completion of post-excavation analysis.

## **7. Statement of Potential**

### **7.1 The excavated features**

The major features investigated, including a pit alignment of Roman date possibly connected to a Roman road, are of high significance and worthy of publication in an appropriate regional or specialist journal.

### **7.2 Potential for Artefactual Analysis**

The collection of Roman pottery is clearly of national significance and should be published in full. The site is rare if not unique in producing what appears to be a ritual focus in an apparently Roman period pit alignment. The site has also produced large parts of two decorated Bronze Age vessels worthy of publication.

### **7.3 Potential for Environmental Analysis**

Floatation of the soil samples produced low concentration of carbonised seeds and cereal grains. However, identification of the charred cereal grain from Context F112 would help to characterise what is an otherwise enigmatic structure and may offer some suggestions regarding its function.

Charcoal was obtained from 13 different contexts. In some cases, namely the pit alignment at the western end of the strip, a species identification of the charred timbers might also provide useful evidence relating to the nature of any super-structural elements.

### **7.4 Dating**

Dating material was obtained from 13 different pits. Pit F115 with its high content of Roman pottery, is likely to be dated precisely by the Roman pot sherds. The other dateable features are mainly isolated pits with no finds. Dating these features may be

used in the phasing of the site, but it is not likely to contribute significantly to its understanding and interpretation. The only exception is pit F91 which contained large fragments of a Bronze Age vessel. It may be useful to obtain a date from the charcoal retrieved from the fill of this pit to produce a precise date for this type of vessel.

## **Bibliography**

Wright, R P 1938 'The South-western section of the Devil's Causeway', *Archaeologia Aeliana 4th Series*, 15, 351-361

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## **Acknowledgements**

### ***Project management***

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## **Illustrations**

Figure 1 Location plan

Figure 2 Plan of excavated features. South Area

Figure 3 Plan of excavated features. North Area

## Appendix I

### Archive listings

<b>Description</b>	<b>No</b>
Drawing record	1 sheet
Drawings	8 sheets
Post-excavation plans	2 large sheets
Location map	1 sheet
South area plan	1 sheet
North area plan	1 sheet
Context sheets	61 sheets
Photographic record	2 sheets
Colour print films	3 films
Colour slides	72 slides

Appendix II

Context Summary

Context	Type	Colour	Texture	Inclusions	Comments
F1-F88	See strip 1 assessment report, May 1997				
F89	Deposit	Dark brown	Sandy loam and gravel	Pot sherd, charcoal flecks	Fill of pit F90
F90	Cut	-----	-----	-----	Pit F90, sub-rhombic, 0.45 m by 0.4 m and 0.1 m deep
F91	Deposit	Dark brown	Sandy loam and gravel	Pot sherds, charcoal flecks	Fill of pit F92
F92	Cut	-----	-----	-----	Pit F92, sub-triangular, 0.55 m by 0.4 m and 0.1 m deep
F93	Deposit	Dark brown	Sandy loam	Common charcoal flecks	Fill of pit F96
F94	Deposit	Dark brown	Loamy sand	Occasional charcoal flecks	Fill of pit F95
F95	Cut	-----	-----	-----	Pit F95, sub-oval, 0.9 m by 0.4 m. 0.12 m deep
F96	Cut	-----	-----	-----	Pit F96, sub-oval, 0.6 m by 0.4 m. 0.1 m deep
F97	Cut	-----	-----	-----	Pit F97, sub-rectangular, 1.3 m by 0.8 m. 0.4 m deep
F98	Deposit	Orange brown	Sand with grit	None	Basal fill in pit F97
F99	Deposit	Black	Sandy loam	Charcoal	Lower fill of pit F97
F100	Deposit	Orange brown	Sand and gravel	None	Middle fill of pit F97
F101	Deposit	Orange brown	Sandy loam	None	Top fill of 97
F102	Deposit	Dark reddish brown	Sandy loam	None	Fill of ditch F103
F103	Cut	-----	-----	-----	Ditch F45, V-shaped, 0.7 to 1.1 m wide, 0.4 m deep. Same as F45 in strip 1. Steeper side to the NE
F104	Cut	-----	-----	-----	Circular steepsided cut, 0.3 m across, 0.06 m deep. sat in shallower pointed oval cut 0.8 m by 0.4 m. 0.12 m deep
F105	Deposit	Dark brown	Sandy loam	Charcoal	Middle fill of pit F104
F106	Deposit	Orange brown	Sand and gravel	None	Outer fill of pit F104
F107		-----	-----	-----	Abandoned

Context	Type	Colour	Texture	Inclusions	Comments
F108	Cut	-----	-----	-----	Shallow sub-oval pit, 0.6 m by 0.4 m. 0.05 m deep
F109	Deposit	Black	Sand	Some charcoal	Fill of pit F108
F110	Cut	-----	-----	-----	Shallow depression, 1.7 m by 1.2 m, 0.1 m deep. Three smaller deeper
F111	Deposit	Dark grey	Sandy loam	Charcoal	Fill of cut F110
F112	Deposit	Dark grey	Sandy loam	Charcoal and frequent fragments of Roman pot	Fill of pit F115
F113	Cut	-----	-----	-----	Ditch F113, V-shaped, 0.3 to 0.75 m wide, 0.25 m deep
F114	Deposit	Orange brown	Sandy loam	None	Fill of ditch F113
F115	Cut	-----	-----	-----	Sub-rectangular pit, 1.4 m by 1 m. 0.3 m deep. Sloping sides rounded base.
F116	Deposit	Mid brown	Sandy loam	None	Fill of ditch F117
F117	Cut	-----	-----	-----	Ditch F117. On same alignment as ditch F48 in strip 1. From 0.3 m wide.
F118	Cut	-----	-----	-----	Ditch F118. Same as ditch F48 in strip 1. From 0.9 m to 2.1 m wide at the N terminal. Up to 0.7 m deep.
F119	Deposit	Yellow brown	Stony sand	None	Basal fill in ditch F118
F120	Deposit	Yellow brown	Stony sand	None	Top fill of ditch F118
F121	Deposit	Mid brown	Loamy sand	None	Fill of pit F122
F122	Cut	-----	-----	-----	Sub-circular pit, 0.75 m across, 0.35 m deep.
F123	Deposit	Mid brown	Loamy sand	None	Fill of pit F124
F124	Cut	-----	-----	-----	Oval pit, 0.8 m by 0.5 m. 0.2 m deep
F125	Deposit	Mid brown	Loamy sand	None	Fill of slot F126
F126	Cut	-----	-----	-----	Slot. 0.8 m long, 0.2-0.3 m wide, up to 0.2 m deep
F127	Deposit	Mid brown	Loamy sand	None	Fill of pit F128
F128	Cut	-----	-----	-----	Sub-circular pit, 0.95 m across, 0.4 m deep.
F129	Cut	-----	-----	-----	Sub-circular pit, 0.75-0.65 m across, 0.25 m deep.
F130	Deposit	Dark grey-brown	Sandy loam	Charcoal and firecracked stones	Fill of pit F129
F131	Deposit	Mid brown	Loamy sand	Charcoal	Fill of pit F132

Context	Type	Colour	Texture	Inclusions	Comments
F132	Cut	-----	-----	-----	Circular pit, 0.4 m in diameter, 0.15 m deep
F133	Deposit	Mid brown	Sandy loam	None	Upper fill of pit F135
F134	Deposit	Mid brown	Loamy sand	None	Lower fill of pit F135
F135	Cut	-----	-----	-----	Circular pit, 0.9 m in diameter, 0.55 m deep
F136	Deposit	Mid brown	Sandy loam	None	Fill of pit F137
F137	Cut	-----	-----	-----	Oval pit, 0.6 m by 0.45 m. 0.1 m deep
F138	Deposit	Mid brown	Sandy loam	None	Fill of pit F139
F139	Cut	-----	-----	-----	Oval pit, 0.7 m by 0.45 m. 0.1 m deep
F140	Deposit	Mid brown	Sandy loam	None	Fill of pit F141
F141	Cut	-----	-----	-----	Oval pit, 0.85 m by 0.55 m. 0.18 m deep
F142	Deposit	Mid brown	Sandy loam	None	Fill of pit F143
F143	Cut	-----	-----	-----	Oval pit, 0.85 m by 0.45 m. 0.17 m deep
F144	Deposit	Mid brown	Sandy loam	None	Fill of pit F145
F145	Cut	-----	-----	-----	Oval pit, 0.7 m by 0.45 m. 0.15 m deep
F146	Deposit	Mid brown	Sandy loam	None	Fill of pit F147
F147	Cut	-----	-----	-----	Oval pit, 0.8 m by 0.4 m. 0.12 m deep
F148	Deposit	Mid brown	Sandy loam	None	Fill of pit F149
F149	Cut	-----	-----	-----	Oval pit, 1 m by 0.65 m. 0.25 m deep

### Appendix III

#### Finds list

Find no	Context	Material	Qty	Comments
1-33	See strip 1 assessment report, May 1997			
34	91	Pot	15	Pale brown decorated base and body sherds (from same vessel?)
35	112	Pot	8	Pale grey thin-walled body and rim sherd
36	112	Pot	1	Red thick-walled body sherd
37	112	Pot	1	Red sherd fragment
38	112	Pot	1	Red abraded pot fragment
39	112	Pot	146	Coarse thick-walled body sherds
40	112	Pot	1	Coarse fabric body sherd
41	US	Pot	5	Thick-walled, coarse fabric, light grey body sherd (found near F112)
42	US	Pot	1	Red abraded thin-walled decorated body sherd
43	112	Pot	35	Coarse thick-walled body sherds, one handle sherd. (Amphora)
44	US	Tile	1	Red fabric tile sherd
45	89	Pot	1	Coarse base sherd
46	US	Pot	1	Coarse pot sherd (found near linear cut F118)

## Appendix IV

### ASSESSMENT OF SAMPLES FROM WOOPERTON, PHASE 1, STRIP 2

*Dr. T.G. Holden*

*November 1997*

#### METHOD

The samples were subjected to a system of flotation in a Siraf style flotation tank. The floating debris (the flot) was collected in a 300 $\mu$ m sieve and, once dry, scanned by the author using a binocular microscope (see Table 1). Residues were wet-sieved down to 1 mm and the remainder sorted by a trained technician.

#### RESULTS

With the exception of small fragments of pottery, which have been added to the hand collected samples, no finds of any note were recovered from the retents. The results from the flots are presented in Table 1. Wood charcoal was recovered from all samples although only occasional small fragments were present in Contexts 102 and 140. Those identified by an asterisk in Table 1 contain large enough fragments for a single entity AMS date. Those which also have a value of '+++' or '++++' in the charcoal 'QTY' column would, however, offer best chances of obtaining a reasonably large charcoal sample for dating purposes. Identification of the species of wood represented would need to be undertaken prior to dating.

Only one sample, Context 112, contained anything other than wood charcoal. A number of grains of poorly preserved cereals (potentially oat, wheat and barley) were noted and a more accurate identification of these would be possible once the sample has been fully sorted. This assemblage was recovered from the same pit as large quantities of Roman pottery and may have some bearing on the nature of that context.

#### POTENTIAL

In the absence of other dating evidence the charcoal-rich pits will provide sufficient material for radiocarbon dating. In some cases, namely the pit alignment at the western end of the strip, a species identification of the charred timbers might also provide useful evidence relating to the nature of any super-structural elements.

Identification of the charred cereal grain from Context 112 would help to characterise what is an otherwise enigmatic structure and may offer some suggestions regarding its function.

**Table 1 - Composition of the flots**

Context no.	Total flot	Cereals	Charcoal		Comments
			QTY	AMS	
F89	<250 ml		++++	*	
F91	<250 ml		++++	*	
F93	>20 ml		++++	*	
F94	<100 ml		++++	*	
F99	< 10 ml		++++	*	
F102	>100 ml		+		
F105	>250 ml		++++	*	
F109	<100 ml		+++	*	
F111	>500 ml		++++	*	
F112	>250 ml	++	++++	*	cf. Oat ++, wheat/barley ++
F129	>500 ml		++++	*	
F131	<250 ml		++++	*	
F133	>250 ml		++++	*	
F140	<100 ml		+	*	

Key : + = rare, ++ = common, +++ = common, ++++ = abundant  
 \* = sufficient for an AMS date.

## Appendix V

### ASSESSMENT OF ROMAN POTTERY FROM WOOPERTON, PHASE 1, STRIP 2

*Jeremy Evans*

*October 1997*

There are around 202 sherds of pottery from these excavations making the total recovered from the site to date around 252 sherds. All the pottery is or may be of Roman date, the single Iron Age tradition sherd possibly being earlier but more probably contemporary with the rest. All the pottery comes from pit F112 or its vicinity.

It contains a considerable quantity of Dressel 20 amphora, lower wall sherds from which suggest burning in its interior. One amphora bodysherd appears to bear part of a *post-cocturam* graffito. Some 189 amphora sherds come from this part of the site, weighing 5.650 kg and comprising the vast majority of the assemblage. This is not a group that would be found on any 'normal' Romano-British rural site in the 'highland zone'.

There are four oxidised bodysherds each from a separate vessel. The single rimsherd, accompanied by seven bodysherds from the same vessel, comes from a thin-walled bowl in the reeded rimmed carinated flanged bowl tradition, probably oxidised, although, if so, mainly burnt grey. This should have a Flavian-Trajanic date. The jar from pit F27 (SF31) from the excavation of strip 1, appears to be of Usk type 13 (Greene 1993), rarely found on British sites, the continental prototypes for which are given an Augustan to Flavian date range. The collection from this excavation appears consistent with that previously recovered and a Flavian-Trajanic date range seems appropriate, which presumably narrows to a Flavian date at this location.

The collection of Roman pottery from this site is very odd, some has military associations and some seems related to the indigenous tradition. There seems little doubt that the collection has a ritual significance given the morphology of the site, its Roman date and its very curious assemblage. The composition of this group is not what one might expect to find on a 'normal' rural site.

The collection is clearly of national significance and should be published in full. The site is rare if not unique in producing what appears to be a ritual focus in an apparently Roman period pit alignment.

#### Bibliography

Greene, K 1993 The fortress coarsewares, in Manning, W H, Report on excavations at Usk 1965-1976: the Roman pottery, 3-126.

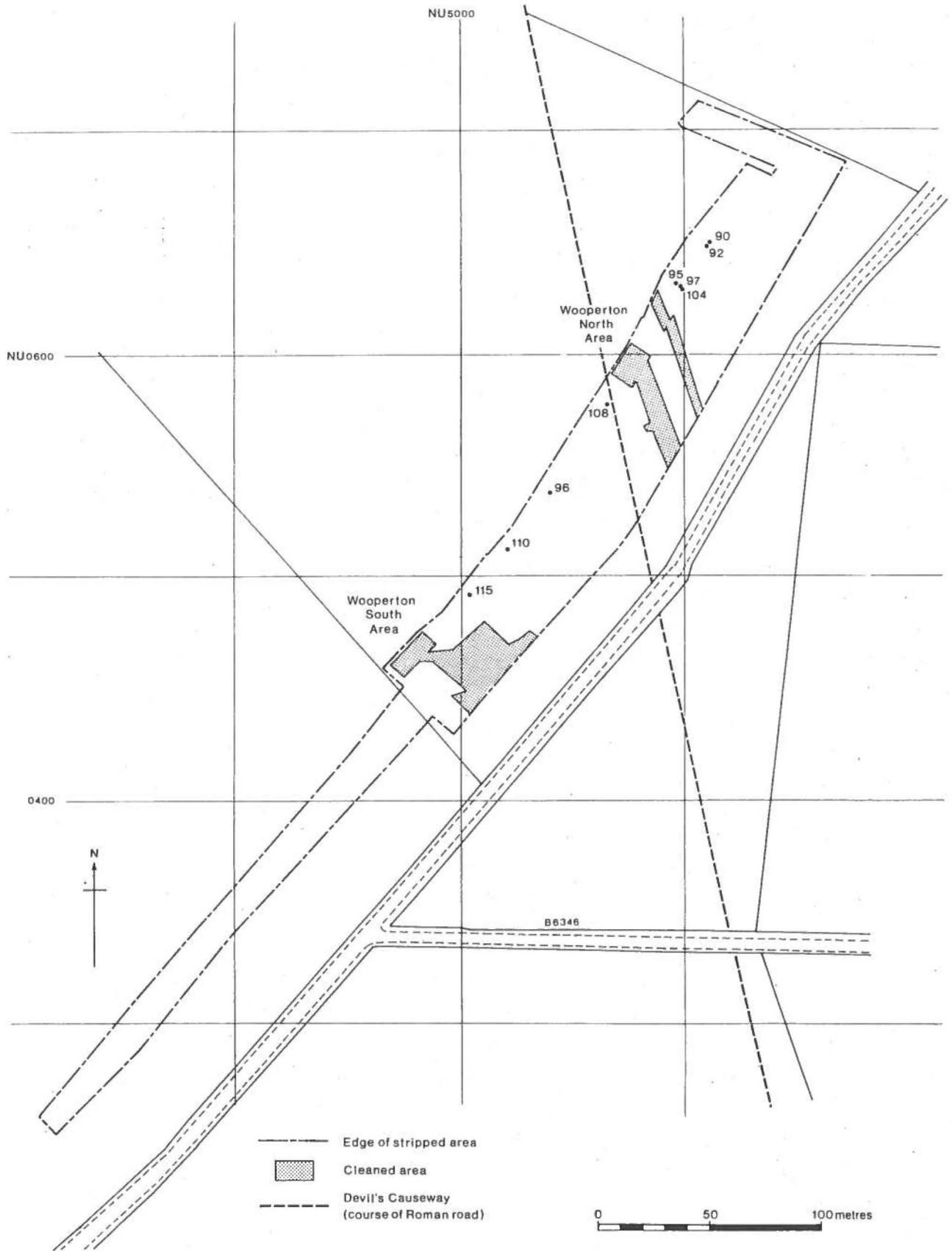


Figure 1 Location plan

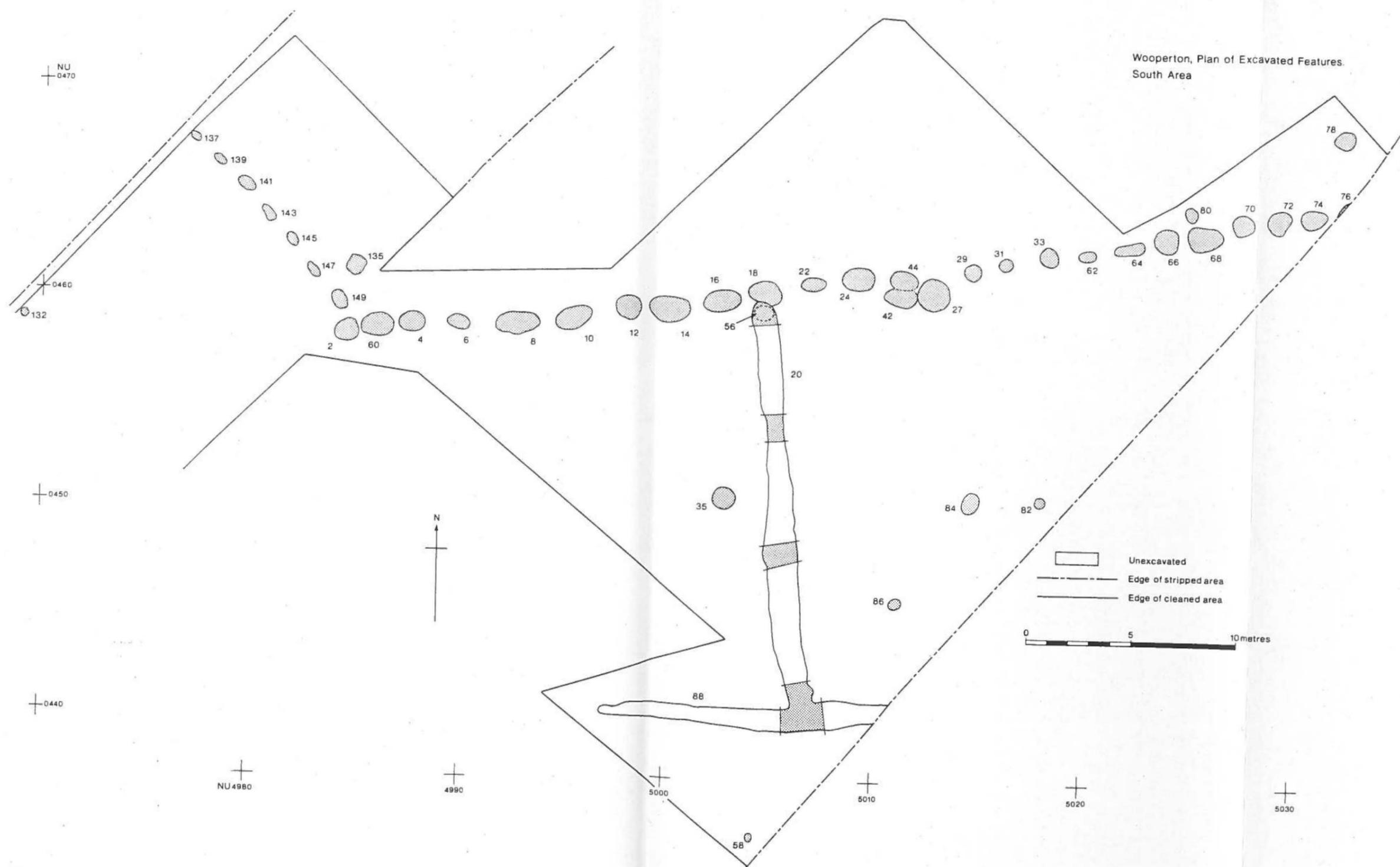


Figure 2 Plan of excavated features. South Area

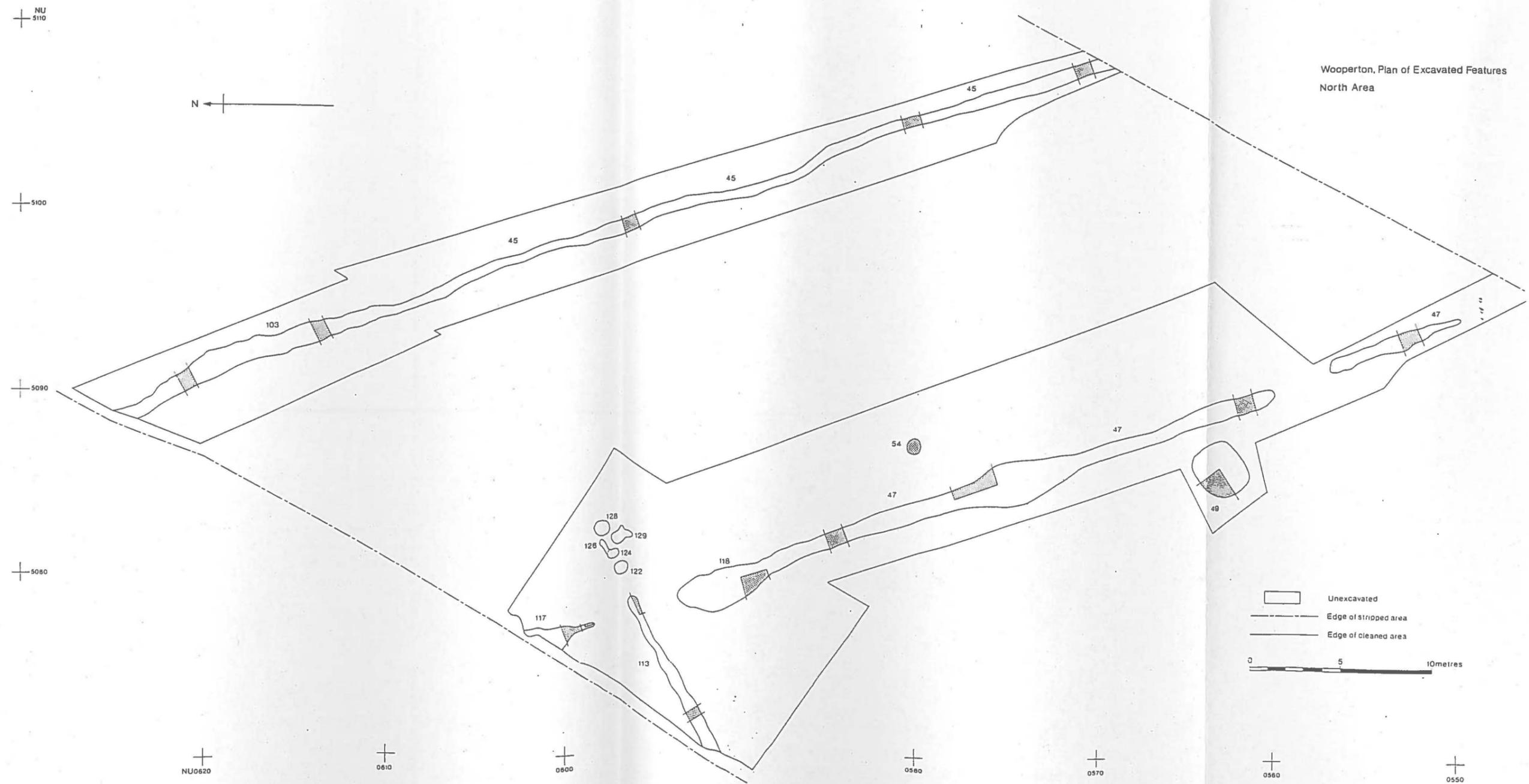


Figure 3 Plan of excavated features. North Area