An Archaeological Evaluation at Oak Street Head, Belle Vue, Shrewsbury, Shropshire

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1. INTRODUCTION

Belle Vue is a suburb of modern Shrewsbury on the south side of the town. There is currently a proposal for a housing development off Oak Street Head, Belle Vue. The site of this proposed development is a meadow of about 0.8ha (about 2 acres), situated on a sand and gravel terrace on the north bank of the Rea Brook. The site is bounded to the west by Shrewsbury's cemetery, to the north and east by areas of residential development, and to the south by the Shrewsbury to Welshpool Railway. In 1880 two Roman cinerary urns were discovered in a sand pit in the eastern part of the proposed development site, suggesting the presence of a former Roman cemetery at this point.

Because of the archaeological significance of the area, it was deemed necessary to undertake an archaeological evaluation of the proposed development site prior to the determination of a planning application.

2. AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

A brief for the evaluation was prepared by M D Watson, Senior Archaeologist, Leisure Services Department, Shropshire County Council.

The aim of this evaluation is to provide information enabling an informed and reasonable planning decision to be reached with regard to any necessary archaeological provision for the site.

The objectives were, firstly, to locate any archaeological features and deposits likely to be affected by the proposed development, and to assess their survival, quality, condition, and significance. Options for the management of the archaeological resource, including any further archaeological provision considered necessary, would then be identified and recommended.

3. THE EVALUATION

The evaluation was required to comprise of two elements, a geophysical survey followed by trial excavations. The Archaeology Unit of the Leisure Services Department, Shropshire County Council, was commissioned to undertake the evaluation, and the work was carried out in September and October 1992.

The Geophysical Survey

The geophysical survey of the proposed development site was carried out on behalf of the Archaeology Unit by Geophysical Surveys of Bradford. A full report on the geophysical survey appears as a seperate document (Geophysical Surveys, Report Number 92/67), but the results of the survey will be drawn on below to supplement the evidence from the trial trenches, and to provide an integrated summary of the overall significance of the evaluation.

The presence of several sheds, vehicles and fences around the edges of the site, and of bonfire sites and ferrous debris in other parts of the site resulted in high levels of magnetic disturbance. Nevertheless, the geophysical survey detected a number of anomalies of possible archaeological significance, of which the most promising were a pair of parallel ditch-like features (Fig. 2; 1 and 2). Several other anomalies, indicating possible ditch lengths or linear pits, were also detected, and pit-like anomalies were detected throughout the site.

The Trial Excavations

Four trenches were so positioned as to intercept anomolies identified by the geophysical survey (Fig. 2). From each of the trenches, the topsoil was removed by a JCB mechanical excavator; the underlying deposits were then cleaned and sampled by hand. A full graphic, photographic, and written record was made of the features and deposits encountered and sampled.

Trench A: This trench was located to coincide with one of a group of anomalies (Fig. 2) in the western part of the survey area. The natural subsoil, which for the most part consisted of gravel in a coarse, sandy matrix, lay at a depth of 0.3m below the surface of the topsoil. No feature corresponding to the linear pit suggested by the geophysical survey was seen, although three small pits or postholes were revealed. One of these (Figs. 3 and 5, 1899) produced four small scraps of pre-Iron Age pottery.

Trench B: Trench B was designed to intercept the two parallel linear features, as well as a number of the smaller anomalies, identified by the geophysical survey. The excavation revealed two ditches (Fig. 3, 1856 and 1858) whose location and alignment corresponded precisely to those of the parallel linear features (Fig. 2; 1 and 2). A third ditch (Fig. 3; 1881) also corresponded in location and shape to an L-shaped anomaly. A number of pits and postholes of varying size were also revealed.

The southern of the two parallel ditches, 1858, was seen to be 1m wide by 0.4m deep, and to be U-shaped in profile. No dateable artefacts were recovered from the fill of this ditch. Immediately to the north of this ditch were a number of oval or sub-rectangular pits, ranging in size from about 1m to 1.5m in length by 0.3m to 1.25m in depth. Three of these pits were sampled, but the only artefact recovered was a fragment of possibly Roman tile from pit 1868.

A band of coarser natural gravel, containing a large proportion of pebbles and cobbles, separated these pits from the northern of the two parallel ditches (Fig. 3; 1856). Ditch 1856 was about 1.8m wide by 0.8m deep and was V-shaped in profile. One of its lower fills, 1890, produced a sherd of pre-Iron Age pottery associated with a deposit of charcoal and burnt bone; a bulk sample of this deposit was taken for environmental assessment. The upper fills (Fig. 4; 1859, 1888, and 1889), however, all produced Roman pottery. Fill 1859 in particular contained a substantial quantity of Roman pottery, mainly Severn Valley ware, but including some Black Burnished Ware, a fragment of Samian pottery, and a number of other coarse and fine wares. In addition, a fragment of quernstone was also recovered from this context.

To the north of ditch 1856 were a number of small, circular scoops, perhaps representing the truncated remains of postholes, and a number of larger pits. One of these, 1891, produced several of sherds of later neolithic pottery of Peterborough-Mortlake type, with probably two vessels being represented (Gibson, pers. comm.).

At the northern end of the trench was a third linear feature, an L-shaped ditch (Fig. 3; 1881). This ditch was about 1.7m wide by 0.7m deep and was again V-shaped in profile, although the eastern arm of the ditch slackened into a shallower profile towards the east. The upper fill of this ditch (1882) produced a single sherd of Romano-British coarseware pottery, and a piece of modern glass.

Trench C: In this trench, archaeological features and deposits were sealed not only by 0.3m depth of topsoil, but by a further depth of 0.3m of a reddish brown sandy clay (Fig. 5; 1861/1885). At the southern end of the trench was a single small posthole, and an L-shaped ditch (Fig.3; 1897). This ditch was about 0.8m wide by 0.25m deep and was U-shaped in profile (similar to ditch 1858 at the southern end of Trench B). The fill of this ditch (1898) produced a number of sherds of pre-Iron Age pottery, including two small fragments of neolithic Peterborough-Mortlake ware, and a rim sherd of Beaker to mid-Bronze Age date (Gibson, pers. comm.). A single waste flake of flint was also recovered from this context. The fill contained some charcoal flecks, and bulk samples were collected for environmental assessment.

In the middle of Trench C, a further V-shaped ditch was revealed running on a northeast/southwest alignment, cut into the natural gravelly clay. This ditch was 1.8m wide by 0.8m deep (in this case resembling ditch 1856 from Trench B), with a stepped platform on its northern edge (Fig. 5). No finds were

recovered from the fills of this feature.

At the northern end of the trench was a modern feature, a ditch or linear pit of post-medieval date running on an east/west alignment.

Trench D: In marked contrast to the rest of the site, which occupies a level plateau, the northern part of the meadow slopes up sharply to the footpath which forms its northern boundary. In this area the natural sand and gravel subsoils were much closer to the surface than elsewhere, lying at a depth of only 0.2m beneath the ground surface. The geophysical survey had suggested the presence of a possible archaeological feature in the middle of the area covered by Trench D, but the only significant feature encountered was the northern edge of a large linear cut of modern date at the southern end of the trench.

The Environmental Evidence

A number of samples were sent for environmental assessment by the County Archaeological Service of Hereford and Worcester County Council. The results of this assessment are published as a separate report (de Rouffignac, 1992), but will be summarised below and drawn upon in the following discussion.

Charcoal samples were taken from the features from which the later neolithic pottery was recovered in order to assess the potential for radio carbon dating. The amount of charcoal recovered, however, was too small to be accurately dated by conventional means and would require accelerator dating.

Bulk samples were also taken from ditch 1897, whose fill had produced neolithic to early Bronze Age material for palaeobotanical analysis. These samples produced only a small quantity of charcoal, but significantly did contain a quantity of charred fragments of hazelnut shell. Hazelnut shell have proved to be the most commonly found charred plant remains from within neolithic contexts, and suggest that gathering of wild food formed an important part of the neolithic economy.

A further bulk sample was taken from the lower fill of the Roman ditch 1856, including as much of the burnt bone and charred plant remains as possible. The charred plant remains recovered from this sample were considered typical of the late Iron age/Romano-British periods. They were more varied than the samples from the neolithic contexts, and included at least two species of cereal, barley and spelt wheat. The burnt bone was identified as human.

The significance of this site may be appreciated when it is considered that there are only two other sites in this region, and only twenty-six in England and Wales as a whole, where neolithic environmental remains have been recovered. Thus the finds from this evaluation can be considered to be of national significance.

The Roman environmental assemblage is not considered to be significant in either national or regional terms.

4. DISCUSSION

Three distinct phases of occupation can be discerned on the site, each of them widely seperated in time.

Phase 1 (Prehistoric): The earliest phase of activity dates from the later neolithic to early Bronze Age periods. Four individual features produced prehistoric pottery from this date range; three of these features (pits 1891 and 1899, and ditch 1897) which produced pottery of this period were uncontaminated with later material. The presence of these features indicates occupation of this period in the immediate vicinity. Whilst it is not possible from such a small sample to determine the nature or size of this prehistoric occupation, later neolithic impressed wares, such as the Peterborough-Mortlake ware recovered from pit 1891 and ditch 1897, is generally found on domestic sites (Gibson, 1986).

Whilst a number of stone axes and flint implements of neolithic date have been found as chance finds in Shropshire, less than a dozen sites in the county have produced pottery of this period, and none in any quantity. Moreover, in several of these cases the pottery has come from inadequately defined or stratified contexts, or were residual material within later features (Barker et al, 1991). Thus the appearance on this site of later neolithic material from stratified contexts uncontaminated with later material is of the greatest importance from the point of view of its rarity alone. When the environmental evidence recovered by the evaluation is also considered, the significance of this site must be considered in terms of national, let alone regional importance.

Phase 2 (Roman): The occupation of the site in the Roman period is attested by the finds recovered from the fills of ditch 1856, Trench B. The charred plant remains recovered with the cremated bone from the sample taken from the lower fills of this ditch contained species typical of the late Iron Age or Roman period (de Rouffignac, op.cit.). The cremation represented by the fragments of burnt human bone within this context is likely to date to the Roman period. However, the bone was disbursed throughout this context, and the close association of a sherd of pre-Iron age pottery with the cremation leaves open the possibility that it originally belonged to the earlier occupation of the site and had been disturbed by the cutting of the ditch in the Roman period. Moreover, the Romano-British pottery, dateable to the 2nd-3rd centuries a.d., and other finds (such as the fragment of quernstone) from the upper fills of this feature are stongly suggestive of the presence of a domestic settlement.

A number of the pits revealed in Trench B may belong to the Roman occupation of the site; the L-shaped ditch (1881) at the northern end of this trench and ditch 1893 in Trench C may also date to this period. Firm dating evidence, however, was lacking for these features.

Further evidence for the occupation of the site in the Roman period is provided by the 19th century discoveries. Although the urns found on the site

in 1880 were recorded as "cinerary" urns, there is no evidence for them ever having contained cremation remains (Chitty, 1953), and they are as likely to have derived from deposits associated with domestic activities.

Such unenclosed rural settlements of Roman date are uncommon in this region, and indeed only two others are known from Shropshire, at Heath Road, Whitchurch (Hannaford and Mason, 1991) and at Meole Brace, Shrewsbury (Hughes, forthcoming). Thus again, a settlement of this type and date is of importance by reason of its rarity alone. The location of this site within the Wroxeter Hinterland (Ellis, forthcoming) gives it an added importance in terms of the limited corpus of excavated data from this area and consequently our relative lack of knowledge of the workings of the rural economy and the interaction between the Roman town and its hinterland (Watson, 1989 and Carver, 1991b). In this context, and particularly in the light of the indifferent environmental evidence from recent excavations on Iron Age and Romano-British sites in the Wroxeter hinterland (Heath in Ellis et al), the importance of the well preserved environmental remains from the Roman contexts on this site should not be underestimated.

Phase 3 (Post-medieval): The proposed development site was formerly known as "Gallows Croft", and was by tradition the site of the town gibbet before its removal c1591 to Old Heath, Ditherington (Auden, 1948). The later 19th century 6" (Sheet XXXIV S W.) and 25" (Sheet XXXIV.14) Ordnance Survey maps locate the former sand pit on the eastern edge of the site, although by the time of the 1927 edition of the 25" the pit had been filled in. The post-medieval features located during the evaluation at the northern end of Trench C and in Trench D may well be contemporary with the 19th century sand quarry.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

In view of the importance of the archaeological resource as evidenced by the evaluation over the main part of the site, it is recommended that these remains should be preserved in situ (Fig. 6). If, however, development of the archaeologically significant area was to be permitted, then it is recommended that the appropriate archaeological response would be preservation by record. This would require full-scale archaeological excavation of the threatened archaeological resource. Such excavation should precede any groundworks associated with the proposed development.

The lack of archaeologically significant remains from the higher slopes at the northern edge of the site would indicate that for this area archaeological requirements would be satisfied by a watching brief to accompany any ground disturbance (Fig. 6). Provision should be made for the adequate recording of any archaeologically significant remains revealed during the course of the watching brief.

H R Hannaford November 1992

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7. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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OAK STREET HEAD, BELLE VUE, SHREWSBURY,
SHROPSHIRE

by

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A Report for

STATUS HOMES

THE ARCHAEOLOGY UNIT, LEISURE SERVICES DEPARTMENT,

SHROPSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

Report No. 21

November 1992

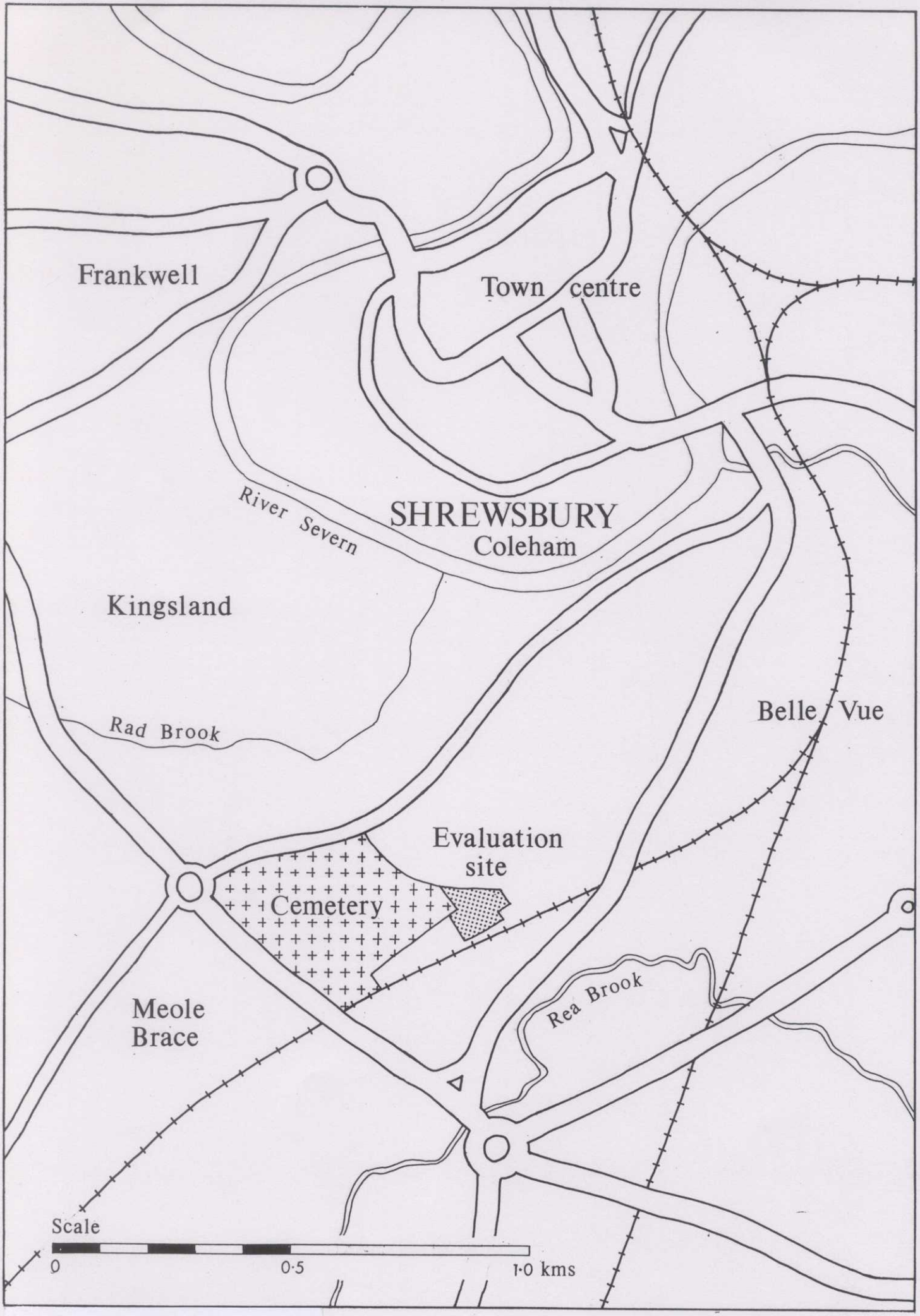


Fig. 1: Location map

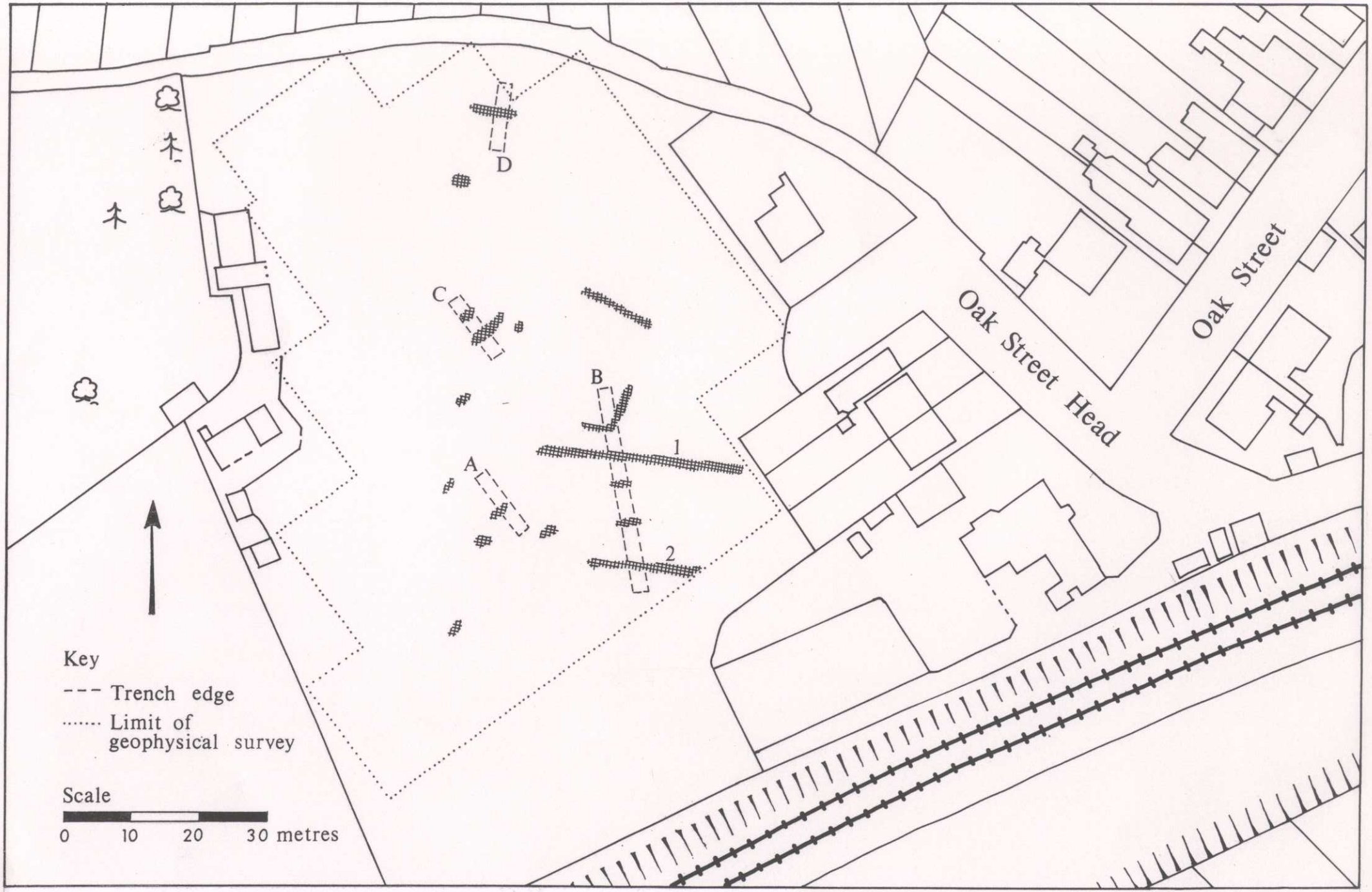


Fig. 2: Trench plan plotted against results of geophysical survey.

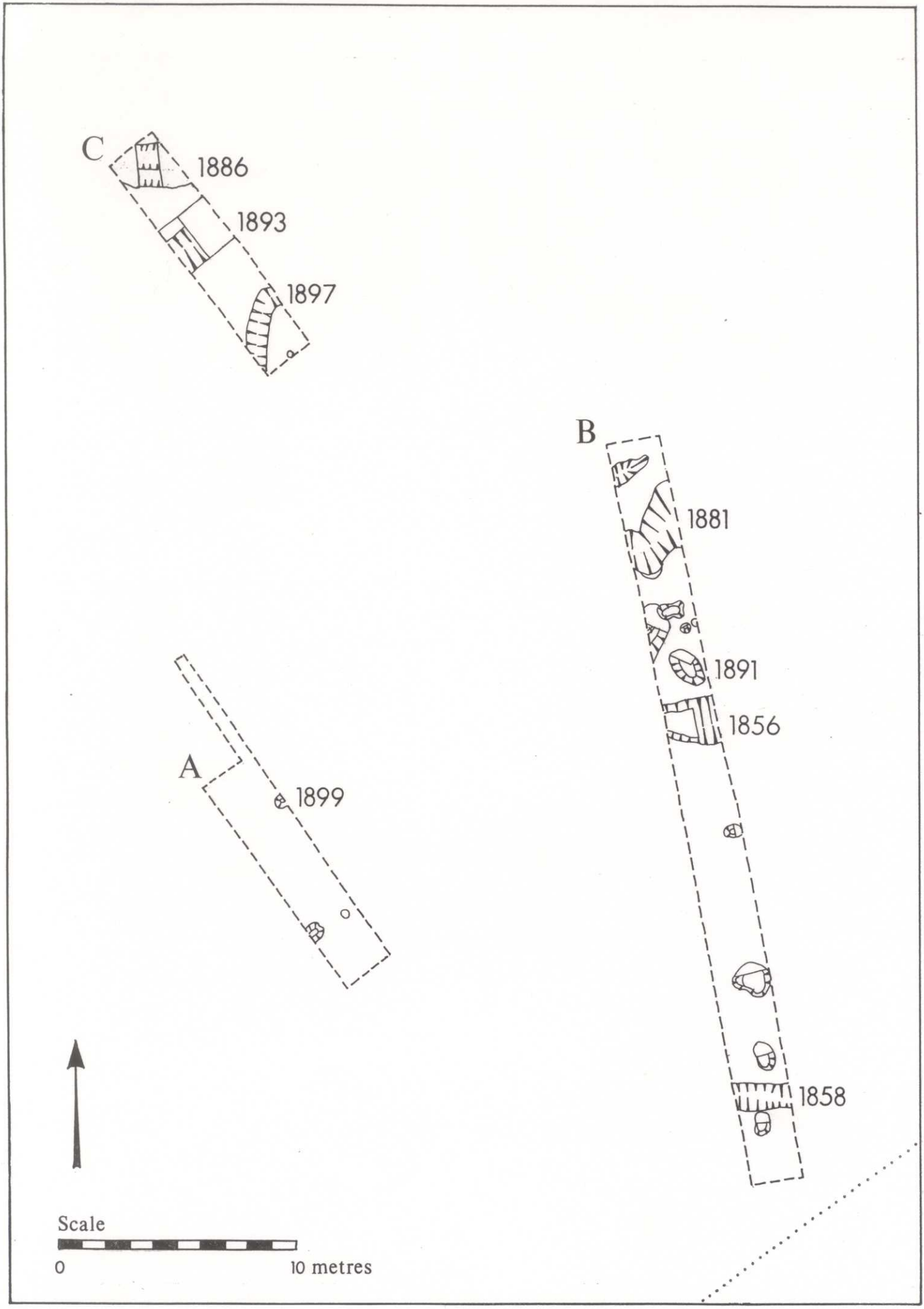
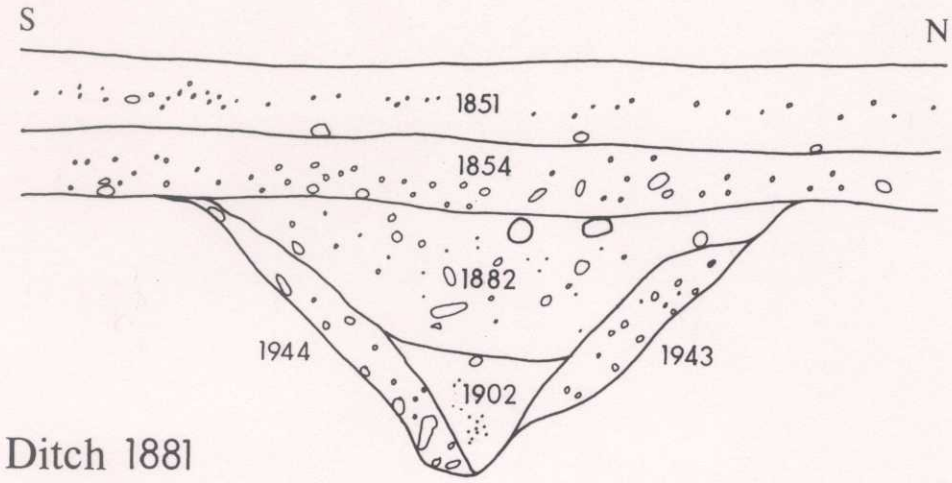
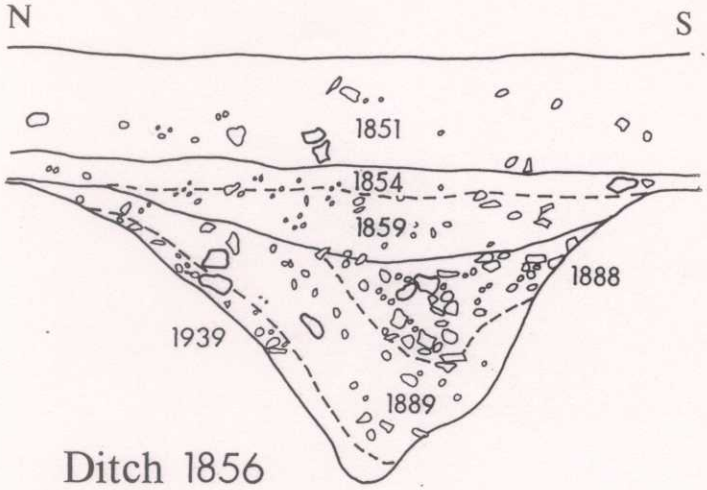


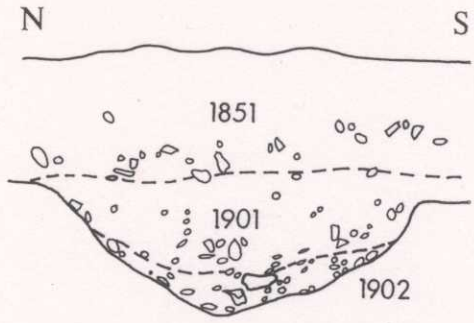
Fig. 3: Plan of trenches A - C



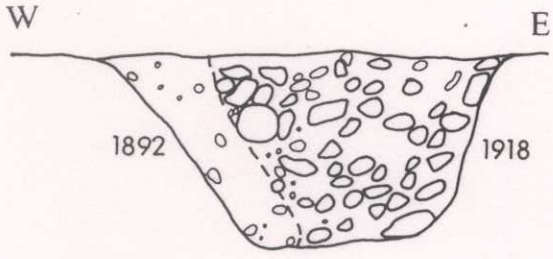
Ditch 1881



Ditch 1856



Ditch 1858



Pit 1891

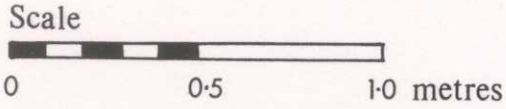


Fig. 4: Trench B: section drawings

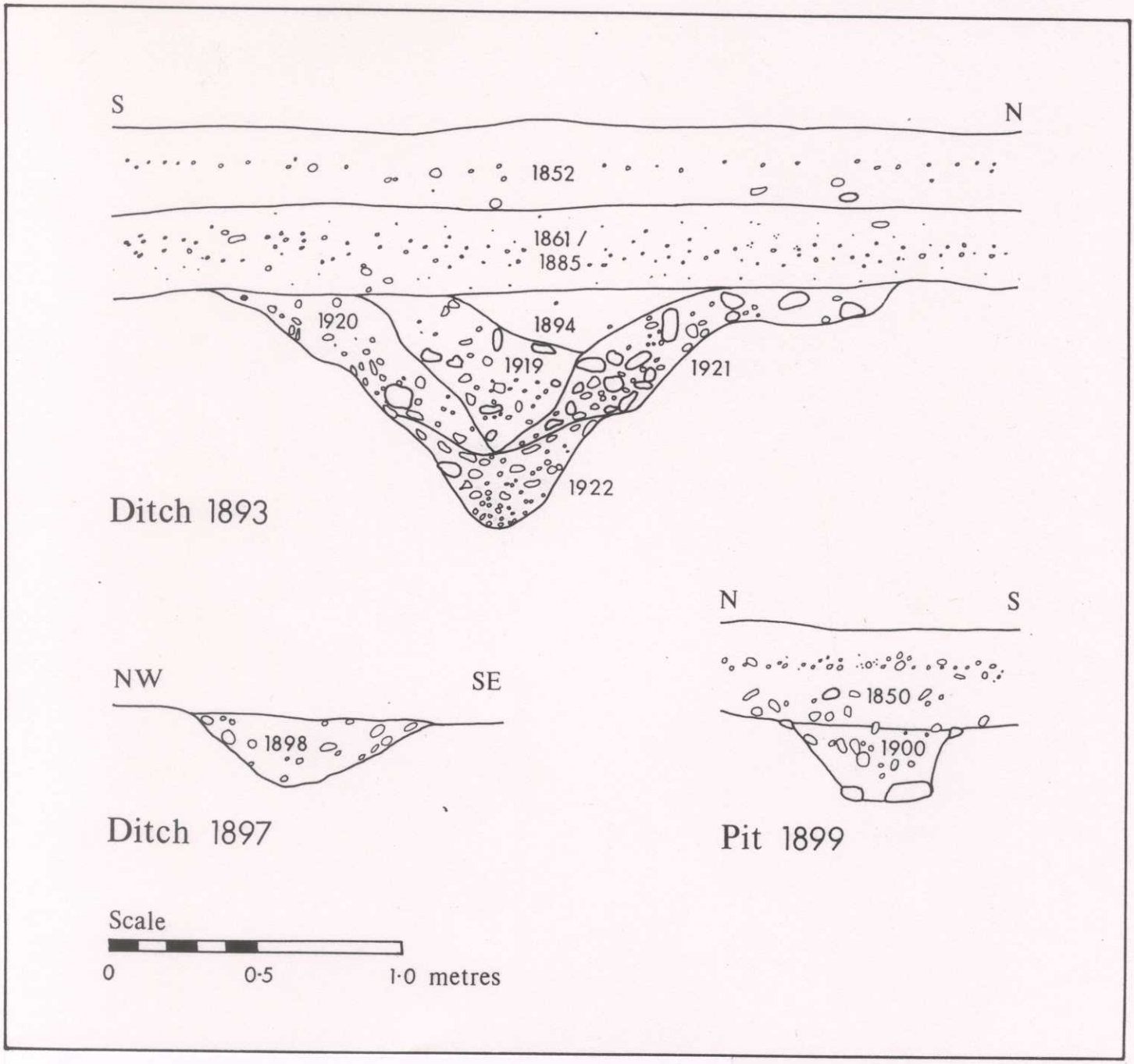


Fig. 5: Trenches A and C: section drawings

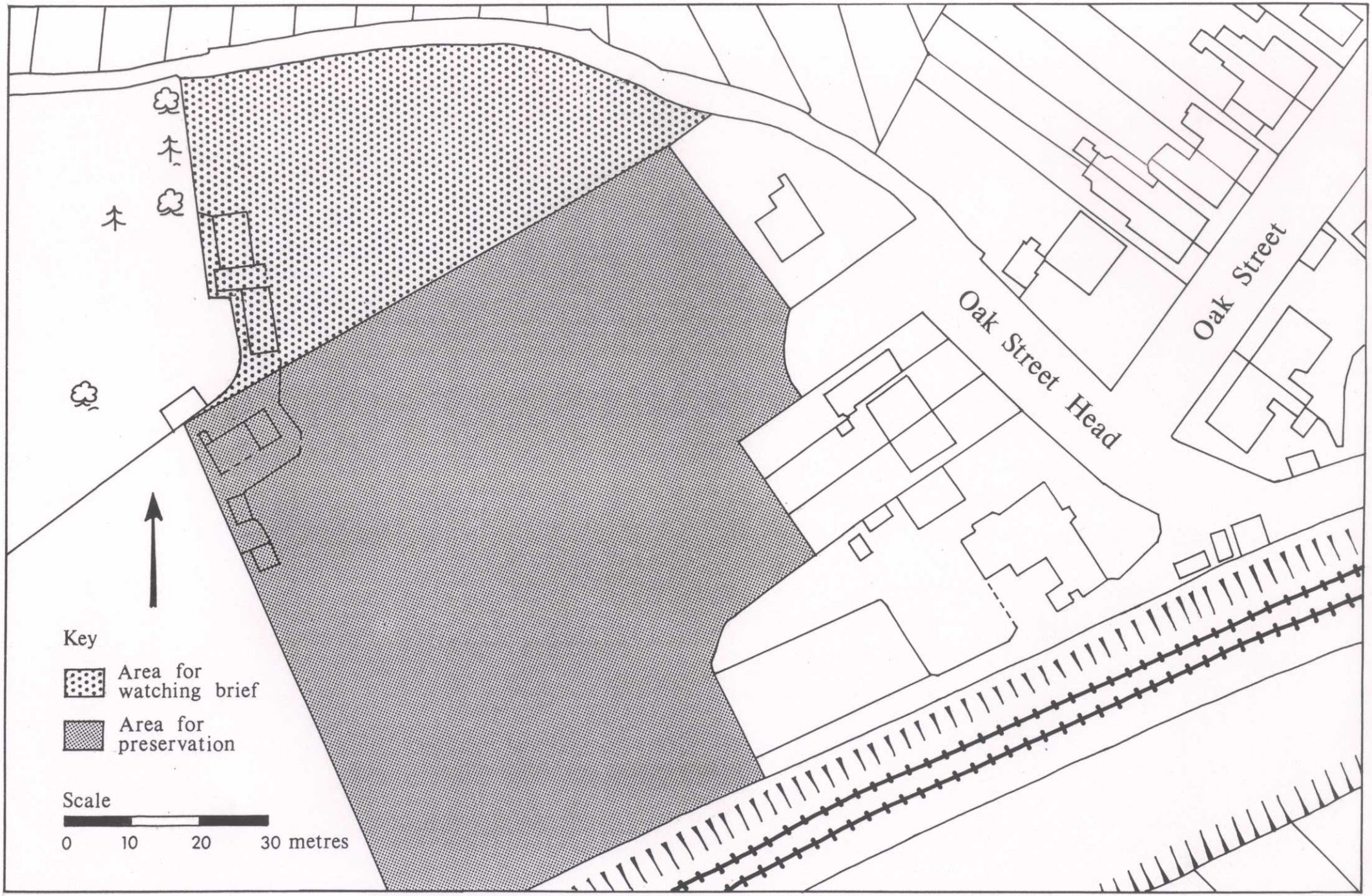


Fig. 6: Recommendations