An Archaeological Evaluation at

Meole Brace, Shrewsbury, Shropshire

by
H R Hannaford
and
Dr C Phillpotts

Archaeology Service
SHROPSHIRE
COUNTY COUNCIL
Leisure Services Department

CONTENTS

ILUSTRATIONS

SUMMARY

There is a proposal to construct a car park on land at Meole Brace, Shrewsbury, Shropshire. The proposed development would affect part of a known Roman roadside settlement (SA2), and lie within the line of a linear barrow cemetery of late neolithic/early Bronze Age date, approaching within 10 metres of a cropmark ring-ditch (SA14). It was therefore deemed necessary to undertake an archaeological evaluation of the site. The evaluation was to comprise documentary research, a geophysical survey, and trial excavation. The evaluation confirmed the existence of well preserved remains of the Roman settlement within the southern part of the study area, and established the location of the ring ditch immediately to the east of the proposed access road.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Meole Brace is a suburb of Shrewsbury, situated about 1.5km to the south of the modern town centre. The old core of the suburb, formerly a village in its own right, lay on the north bank of the Rea Brook, a tributary of the River Severn, where it was crossed by the Shrewsbury to Hereford road. Recent development in the form of housing and a retail park have spread to occupy the south bank of the Rea Brook.

1.2 There is currently a proposal to construct a 'Park and Ride' development on land at the southern edge of Meole Brace. The proposed development site is bounded to the south by the A5 Shrewsbury By-Pass, to the west by the A5112 Shrewsbury to Hereford road, to the east by the Shrewsbury to Hereford railway line and to the north by the Meole Brace Retail Park. The development will consist of a car park area at the south end of the proposed site, with an access road running north to link up with the retail park.

1.3 These proposals affect part of a known site, a Romano-British roadside settlement (County Sites and Monuments Record No. SA2), and impinges on a cropmark circular enclosure (SA14), probably representing the refilled quarry ditches surrounding the ploughed out remains of a neolithic or Bronze Age burial site. In view of the archaeological significance of the site, it was deemed necessary to undertake an archaeological evaluation of it.

2 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

2.1 Aims and Objectives of the Evaluation

2.1.1 A brief for this evaluation was prepared by M D Watson, Head of Archaeology, Leisure Services Department, Shropshire County Council.

2.1.2 The aim of this evaluation is to provide information enabling an informed and reasonable planning decision to be taken regarding the archaeological provision for the areas affected by the proposed development.

2.1.3 The objectives were, firstly, to locate any archaeological features and deposits likely to be affected, 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.

2.2 Methodology of the Evaluation

2.2.1 To achieve these objectives, the evaluation was required to comprise a number of different elements:

Documentary and Historical Research: A search of all the relevant documentary sources was to be undertaken; this research would include the cartographic and aerial photographic sources for the study area, and the primary and secondary sources held at the County Sites and Monuments Record and the County Records and Research Unit.
Geophysical Survey: A geomagnetic survey would be made of the proposed development site.
Field Evaluation: Sample excavations would be undertaken, based on the results of the documentary research and field survey. These excavations would be limited to the top of significant archaeological deposits, which would then be sampled only where essential for achieving the objectives of the evaluation. A full written, graphic, and photographic record would be made of the findings.

2.2.2 The Archaeology Service of the Leisure Services Department, Shropshire County Council, was commissioned by the County Surveyors Department to conduct this evaluation. The site investigations were undertaken in April 1994.

3 THE EVALUATION

3.1 The Documentary Research by Dr C Phillpotts

3.1.1 Introduction

The documentary research has covered the main printed, manuscript, cartographic and photographic sources for the history of the site. More work could be done on printed and manuscript sources to unravel the tangles of the tenurial history of the land, but this would provide little additional information about the use of the land or the impact of previous generations upon it. The emphasis of the research has been topographical in accordance with the requirements of an archaeological survey.

There is substantial evidence for prehistoric occupation of the area, in particular a late neolithic/Bronze Age barrow cemetery. On the south side of the Study Area there was a Roman roadside settlement, which was partly excavated by the Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit between December 1989 and May 1990. The descent of the medieval manors in the area is outlined below. In this tenurial framework field systems were laid out, some evidence of which is still visible. In more recent times industrial, transport and military developments have all had their impact on the landscape.

3.1.2 Prehistoric Occupation

Neolithic pottery, some possibly locally-made, has been found on a number of excavated sites in the vicinity of the Study Area (Barker et al, 1991, Hannaford, 1992, and Hughes and Woodward, in press). There is evidence of a Beaker settlement at Sharpstone Hill (Stanford 1980, 53, 56).

In the immediate vicinity of the Study Area, a number of ring-ditches, apparently from ploughed-out late neolithic or Bronze Age barrows, have been discovered by examining the cropmarks which appear on aerial photographs. To the north of the Study Area at SJ49231034 one of these ring-ditches (SA 2208) was excavated by BUFAU in 1990 in advance of the construction of the Retail Park. It proved to be the remains of a round barrow, originally about 4m high but ploughed flat, with a small satellite cemetery of cremations to its south-west. The central burial had been robbed. The pottery found dated the site to the late neolithic or early Bronze Age period, although the site remained in use as a cemetery until the late Bronze Age (Hughes and Woodward, in press). To the south of the Study Area another ring ditch (SA 4425) was discovered on aerial photographs at SJ48950967 during the excavation of the Roman settlement in 1990, being only a few metres from the excavation. A small inner ring, rather off centre, probably marks the position of the central grave.

The largest of these features in the area is a double ring-ditch (SA 14) which lies at SJ49020998, just to the east of the line of the proposed access road, on the edge of a scarp overlooking the Rea Valley and the Money Brook to the north. It is probably 40m in diameter. The inner ditch may be penannular. This feature was recognised from aerial photographs as early as 1969. Its position can be plotted from a combination of the oblique photographs held at the SMR

and the vertical photographs held at the Local Studies Library, especially the large Shrewsbury series no 190. This photograph also suggests the presence of a small ring-ditch at SJ48971001. This is probably no more than 10m across with a central burial. Immediately to the south of the large ring-ditch linear cropmarks were also noted on the aerial photographs (as part of SA 14). They are probably to be interpreted as the military trenches partially excavated by Jenks in 1992-3 (see below).

Bronze Age finds from the area include two palstaves and a trunnion chisel from Meole Brace, the precise location of the find unknown (Stanford 1980, 75). In 1948 a stone implement and an axe-hammer were found on Sharpstone Hill (Barker et al 1991, 51).

The Study Area is overlooked by an Iron Age hillfort at the Burgs, Bayston Hill (SJ48900875). To its north-east lies a double-ditched rectangular Iron Age enclosure (SA 15) at SJ49501040. This was first recognised as a cropmark on aerial photographs and partially excavated by Jenks in the 1960s. The depth of ploughing meant that no stratigraphy survived above the level of the natural deposits. The inner enclosure was protected by a palisade and contained a circular house-gulley 12.7m in diameter. This was superseded by a rectangular house. The outer ditch was apparently a later addition designed to channel water away from the site to the Money Brook. This enclosure was first occupied in the late Iron Age and continued in use into the Roman period. It was probably abandoned by the second century AD (Barker et al 1991, 31-6). Enclosures of this kind were farmsteads which each housed little more than a family unit (Stanford 1980, 85, 144). Other similar sites were excavated by Jenks on Sharpstone Hill and Lyth Hill in the 1960s and more recently by BUFAU at Preston, Calcott and Duncote Farms in advance of the construction of the A5 Shrewsbury By-Pass (Ellis et al, 1994).

3.1.3 The Roman Settlement

The site of the Roman settlement was originally noted on the SMR in 1976 as SA 2 because aerial photographs showed three converging linear cropmarks running from north-west to south-east across the field at the south end of the Study Area. Field walking of the site had produced quantities of Roman pottery and building materials (Jenks, pers. comm.). Evaluation trenches excavated in advance of the construction of the A5 By-Pass failed to elucidate these cropmarks, but did find the Roman settlement. This was fortuitous, as the settlement itself did not present any cropmark evidence for its existence. The course of the Roman road was previously assumed to run further to the north. The linear cropmarks probably represented military training trenches (see below) (Ellis et al, 1994).

The area of the settlement site affected by the Bypass was excavated in two stages by BUFAU between December 1989 and May 1990. Six distinct phases of activity within the Roman period were recorded, beginning with the construction in the mid 1st century AD of the military road from the legionary fortress at Wroxeter to the forts at Forden Gaer and Caersws. This was followed by the establishment of the roadside settlement in the mid 2nd

century through to its probable decline in the mid to late 4th century (Ellis et al, 1994, 89). The main occupation deposits were in a band 40m wide straddling the road, and included structural remains of timber buildings; these structures fronted onto the roadside, with associated cobble and pebble courtyards, floors, working areas, hearths, pits and postholes occurring to the rear of the building plots. Some posthole alignments indicated property boundaries between individual plots. The settlement did not extend quite as far west as the present Shrewsbury-Hereford road. Its eastern limit was not found, but it is likely that the whole settlement was about 190m long.

At first the settlement consisted of timber-framed buildings with stone footings fronting onto the south side of the road, with pebble-surfaced courtyards and working areas, including a possible threshing-floor. In about 200 AD the early features were covered by layers of silt and occupation debris, reflecting a contraction of the settlement or its shift to a different focus. In the next phase (200-250 AD) a large rectangular building 12.5m long based on postholes was constructed on the south side of the road. This may have functioned either as a domestic aisled hall or a barn. After this phase the periodic resurfacing of the road ceased, and the large hall was succeeded by other timber structures (Ellis et al, 1994, 31-55). The settlement appears to have been abandoned by the mid fourth century, although some survival into the post Roman period is possible (ibid, 111).

The finds from the settlement included a particularly high proportion of amphora, imported and traded ceramic wares, as well as a number of weights and keys, suggesting a trading and commercial role. Its roadside location perhaps also indicates a function as a store or in-transit stopping point, and an informal resting and refreshment point for travellers to and from Wroxeter (ibid 53). There was also evidence for the type of small scale and short lived industrial activity, such as smithying, that might be associated with such a role.

3.1.4 Medieval Manors

The next evidence for human activity in the area dates from the eleventh century. By the time of Domesday Book (1086) there was a settlement established at Meole Brace called 'Melam'. Before 1066 it had been largely in the ownership of Edith, queen of Edward the Confessor. After the Conquest it was probably granted to William FitzOsbern, only to be forfeited by the rebellion of his son Roger de Breteuil in 1074. By 1086 the manor was in the possession of Ralph de Mortimer. It lay in Shrewsbury Hundred and was later to pass into the Liberty of Shrewsbury. The manor later absorbed the adjacent Mortimer vills of Edgebold and Lower Pulley. Upper Pulley in Condover Hundred was held by Theodulf as a tenant of Earl Roger of Shrewsbury. It later became a sergeanty held by the tenure of keeping the forest of Lythwood and passed to the Marescall family. The Bishop of Chester also had an unoccupied manor at 'Melam' (probably at Crowmeole and Monk Meole in the parish of St Chad), and St Mary's church in Shrewsbury held a virgate of land there in Mortimer's manor. Further east, the manor of Sutton was in the hands of Wenlock Priory. The inhabitants of these settlements were a mixture of villeins and bordars, slaves, freemen and radmen (Thorn, 1986, 1.3, 3c.12,

3d.3, 4.27.6, 6.30, 6.33; Eyton 6, 350; Blakeway 1897, 376).

The Study Area lay at the eastern edge of the manor of 'Melam' and its constituent vill of Pulley. Pulley lay partly in the parish of Meole Brace and partly in the parish of St Julian in Shrewsbury, the boundary running from southwest to northeast through the Study Area. A little further to the east, beyond the Money Brook stream, lay the manor and parish of Sutton.

The manor of 'Melam' had a complex and frequently disputed ownership in the medieval period. The Mortimers' tenants there were the Braci family, after whom the manor was renamed Meole Brace. As a result of a dispute between them early in the thirteenth century, half the manor came to be held by the Cantilupe family from the Mortimers, and the other half from them by the Bracis. The Cantilupe holding passed to the Zouche family. The Braci part of the manor passed to the Arthur family in 1418, and then to others, eventually coming into the hands of Richard Hussey by 1516. In 1524 the ownership of the manor was in dispute between Hussey and Lord Zouche, and was submitted to arbitration. Zouche's right was upheld and the loss of the Hussey claim was compensated by the payment of an annual rent. The Zouches therefore managed to acquire the whole manor and sold it in 1536 to Arthur Mackworth. The Mackworths sold it in 1598 to Thomas Edwards of Shrewsbury. In 1778 his descendant Lady Malpas sold it to John Bather of Shrewsbury. In the nineteenth century the Bathers were not only lords of the manor of Meole Brace, but often rectors of the parish church as well (Thorn, 1986, 6.33; Blakeway 1897, 317-339; Eyton 6, 356-7; SRO 1375/1; 4215/14; 4835/142).

Meanwhile the Pulley part of the manor had become detached and in the early eighteenth century was owned by Thomas Powys. It continued to be held by his descendants Thomas Jelf Powys of Berwick House and Henry Wentworth Powys last century (Blakeway 1897, 377; LSL tithe apportionments IR29/29/47 and 261; Railway maps R1 and R2; SRO 1011/Box 309.3; 112/5/15/13-16).

The manor of Sutton was held by Wenlock Priory probably from the seventh century until the dissolution of the monasteries in the 1530s, although the mill there was granted to Shrewsbury Abbey by Ivo Pantulf in the mid twelfth century. Shortly after the dissolution the manor was acquired by the Mackworth family. The Mackworths retained it until 1775 when it was sold to Thomas Hill of Tern Hall. His descendants had the title Lord Berwick and continued to hold the manor into the twentieth century (Morris 1915, 125-42; Eyton 6, 363; SRO 112/5/14/1-2, /4-5, /7-8, /15-16; 112/7/53).

3.1.5 Field Systems

An area of ploughed-out ridge-and-furrow lies to the south of ring-ditch SA 14 and extends southward into the Study Area. This is within a former field called The Knowles, and suggests medieval ploughing aligned east-west. To the east and north of it were fields called the Sutton Stitches, the name indicating the selions of the medieval common fields. To the south of the Study Area another

ridge-and-furrow pattern is visible on aerial photographs in the field formerly called Lower Hay Field (Fig. 2). It is always possible that these marks indicate post-medieval land drainage systems. All of these fields were under arable cultivation in the middle of last century (LSL tithe apportionments IR 29/29/47 and 261).

It is not clear at what time these fields were enclosed. An estate particular of Lady Malpas' property notes many new enclosures elsewhere in Pulley late in the eighteenth century (SRO 4835/142). Around the Study Area the fields were enclosed by the time of an estate map and survey of Thomas Powys' lands in 1722, though the pattern was to be slightly modified by the nineteenth century (SRO 112/5/15/16, notes and tracing from the original map and survey, which have not been located).

The Knowles and the Sutton Stitches in Meole Brace parish, and Upper and Lower Hay Field to their south and Fishpool Leasow (formerly Lower Hay Field) to their east in St Julian's parish, were all part of the Pulley estate owned by the Powys family. They were cultivated as part of Pulley Farm, where the farmhouse was formerly enclosed in a square moat. It was tenanted by William Hodges in the eighteenth century, succeeded by the Hiles family until the mid nineteenth (Blakeway 1897, 374; SRO 1011/Box 309.3; 112/5/15/13-20). To the north and west of the Sutton Stitches, adjacent to the road to Hereford, a series of fields called Moneybrook Meadows belonged to the Bathers, presumably in their capacity as lords of the manor. However, there was also glebe land in this area in 1607, so the ownership may have derived from their position as rectors (LSL MS 371 no 54; tithe apportionment IR 29/29/47).

The curving hedge-line marking the boundary between the parishes of St Julian and Meole Brace appears to have been straightened since 1902. It runs across the Study Area from south-west to north-east. The next old field boundary to the south, between Upper and Lower Hay Fields, is probably the steep-sided ditch located in the 1990 excavation as F49 and F105/129. If this identification is correct, this feature did not respect the north side of the Roman road as appeared in the excavation, but would have cut through its line further to the east and west, and the road could not have been used as a post-medieval trackway (Ellis et al, 1994, 52 and Fig. 28).

3.1.6 Coal-mining

An old shaft is marked on the 1925 6 inch Ordnance Survey map at SJ 49231030. This has been noted on the SMR as a possible eighteenth-century coal mine SA 73. However, there do not appear to be any documentary references to this mine.

The Study Area is on the line of a coal seam running from north-east to south-west, from Haughmond Hill to the Breidden Hills, which was exploited at various points along its course as the Hanwood Coalfield. To the north-east in Sutton there was an old shaft at SJ49631040. The Sutton coal-pits appear on the county maps by Rocque in 1752 and Baugh in 1808. Herbert Mackworth, who succeeded to the manor of Sutton in 1731, had been involved in coal

mining and copper smelting in south Wales, and may have continued these practices in Shropshire. The location of his pits is suggested by the names Coalpit Cottages at SJ49321010, Old Coalpit Piece and Pit Leasow. There are also references to mining further to the east in Sutton at Old Brick Kiln Hole near Weeping Cross in 1842-3 (Morris 1915, 136; LSL Sutton field name maps; SRO 1118/22).

The Bathers leased out coal-pits in Nobold in 1787, one of which was redundant in Old Coalpit Field by 1821 (SRO 4215/24 and 48). Lady Malpas leased out a coal-pit on Pulley Common at the same period (SRO 4835/142). Further to the west the Hanwood mine shaft at SJ436093 was sunk in the 1870s and operated until 1941. It was connected to the disused Cruckmeole mine nearby (Brown 1976, 80-1).

The coal seams exploited were (in descending order) Half-yard Coal, Yard Coal and Thin, Best or Deep Coal, each name indicating the thickness of the seam. They were associated with a 5 foot thick bed of limestone, which was mined and used for agriculture until the 1870s (Brown 1976, 80). All these seams were mined at Sutton Colliery in 1808-9 and 1842-3, where the old and new pits were between 34 and 41 feet deep down to the water table (SRO 1118/22; 1222/48).

It seems likely that there were coal-pits of this type in or near the Study Area, but this cannot be proved. The pits on the west side of the Knowles near the junction of Pulley Lane with the A49 which are visible on the tithe map and aerial photographs are marked as gravel pits on a map of 1836 (SRO 1011/Box 309.3).

3.1.7 The Coming of the Railway

The railway line from Shrewsbury to Hereford was built on an embankment on the east side of the Study Area between 1850 and 1852 (Morriss 1991, 15). This cut off the east part of Big Sutton Stitches and most of Fishpool Leasow from the rest of Pulley Farm. Accordingly Henry Wentworth Powys sold this land to Lord Berwick in 1852 (SRO 112/5/15/3-4, 13, 20).

3.1.8 Military Exercises

Parallel linear cropmarks visible on aerial photographs across the Study Area were interpreted in 1992 by Jenks as a possible cursus. However, excavation of the northern of these cropmarks by Jenks in 1992-3 proved them to be vertically-sided trenches 1.4m wide and 1.3m deep, containing modern pottery and primitive barbed wire. They were interpreted as military exercise trenches of the late nineteenth or early twentieth centuries (Jenks 1993). A local source has revealed that the study area was used as a camp site and training ground by local Territorial Army units in the 1920s and 1930s, (Mr E. Jones, pers. comm.). The two parallel lines of trenches both cross the Study Area. Two similar features F16 and F104 were found in the excavation of 1990 (Ellis et al, 1994, 52). They probably gave rise to the cropmarks which noted on the SMR as SA 2.

3.1.9 The Race-course

Earlier this century the southern part of the study area was the site of a race-course (Jenks, 1993).

3.1.10 Conclusion

The use of the area appears to have been entirely agricultural in the medieval and post-medieval periods, with some possibility of industrial use in the form of coal mining. Arable cultivation is likely to have inflicted a great deal of plough-damage on the prehistoric structures, as at SA2208 and SA15. However, the negative features such as the ring-ditches and the burial pits are likely to have survived.

3.2 The Geophysical Survey

3.2.1 A geophysical survey 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 separate document (Geophysical Surveys, Report No. 94/34), but the results of the survey will be drawn on below to supplement the evidence from the documentary research, and to provide an integrated summary of the overall significance of the evaluation.

3.2.2 The geophysical survey recorded a number of magnetic anomalies interpreted as being of archaeological origin and representing pits and short ditches. The majority of these were confined to the southwestern part of the study area, and are thought to be associated with the Roman roadside settlement, SA2. Further pit type responses were encountered throughout the area surveyed; however, the random pattern of these anomalies suggests that they may have been due to geological effects.

3.2.3 The survey also recorded a number of weak linear responses interpreted as 'cultivation trends', and a former field boundary. An area of ferrous disturbance corresponded to the location of a former building (the race-course grandstand) adjacent to this boundary (Geophysical Surveys, 1994, **4.2**, Figs.1 and 4).

3.3 The Trial Excavations

3.3.1 Based on the results of the Documentary Research and the Geophysical Survey, a total of nine trial trenches were marked out over the study area (Fig. 3, A - I). The topsoil was removed by mechanical excavator down to the top of the subsoil or to a level where significant archaeological deposits were encountered. The trenches were then cleaned by hand, and any archaeological features and deposits were sampled (where necessary), and a written, graphic and photographic record made.

3.3.2 Trenches A, B, and C

Trenches A, B, and C were located along the southern edge of the study area in order to determine the extent and quality of the remains of the Roman roadside settlement in this part of the site.

At the south end of **Trench A**, significant archaeological deposits were encountered 0.2m below the top of the present ground surface. These deposits

took the form of the uppermost of a visible sequence of cobble and pebble surfaces (Fig. 4, 1109) which extended northwards for about 4m from the southern end of the trench (ie about 12m north of the southern boundary of the study area). The cleaning layer over the top of this surface produced a considerable quantity of Romano-British pottery, mainly locally produced Severn Valley wares, but including significant proportions of imported wares (ie amphora and Samian pottery), imported regional wares (Black Burnished and Colour Coated wares), and mortaria. A key of Roman type of bronze and iron and an undatable coin were also recovered from this cleaning layer. At least two post holes (1199 and 1201) were respected by this surface, indicating the presence of associated structures. Furthermore, two areas within this surface (1198 and 1202) consisted of areas worn and compacted pebble surfaces and probably represented floors rather than yards. Together, these surfaces are likely to have belonged to structures fronting onto the Roman road.

The cobble and pebble surfaces overlay a layer of silty sand (1147) which extended northwards for a further 8m. A number of post holes and a small pit (1111, 1114, 1116, 1118, 1140, 1144, and 1146), were cut into this layer, which in turn was seen to partially seal a small hearth (1108).

These stratified deposits petered out to the north, where the natural gravel subsoil appeared at a depth of 0.4m below the present ground surface.

27m north from the southern end of the trench, the natural gravel subsoil rose up sharply by about 0.2m to form a bank running at a slight angle across the line of the trench. This feature corresponded in position to the line of the parish boundary and former field boundary which crosses the study area from the southwest to northeast (Figs. 2 and 3).

No other significant archaeological features were encountered in this trench.

In **Trench B**, significant archaeological features and deposits were detected at the southern end of the trench at a depth of 0.25m below the present ground surface. Two medium sized pits (Fig. 4, 1125 and 1127) and three postholes (1156, 1158, and 1160) cut through a layer of pebbly silty sand (1154). Although not sampled, the charcoal rich fills of the pits 1125 and 1127 could be seen to contain fragments of Romano-British pottery. A patch of sandy clay (1152) and a cobble surface (1151) overlay layer 1154 on the western side of the trench. In turn, 1154 overlay a cobble surface (1150) on the eastern side of the trench. The northern edge of both these cobble surfaces (1150 and 1151) were partially sealed by a sandy clay layer (1134). This layer was cut by a large pit (1129), again with a charcoal rich fill containing Romano-British pottery, and the butt end of a ditch (1133). This latter feature corresponds in position though not in alignment to a linear feature identified by the geophysical survey.

These features and deposits constituted the uppermost of what is clearly a complex stratified sequence, presumably representing intensive back-plot

activity associated with the Roman roadside settlement. About 12 metres north from the southern end of the trench, these deposits tail away to expose the natural gravel subsoil. Nevertheless, the occasional isolated feature was still present cut into the natural gravel at a distance of about 20 metres from the southern end of the trench.

Beyond this point however, no archaeological features were seen, with the exception of a shallow linear hollow (1131) at the northern end of the trench. This feature also corresponded in position to the line of the parish boundary and former field boundary (Figs. 2 and 3).

At the southern end of **Trench C**, the butt end of a linear ditch (1186) running to the southwest was revealed at a depth of 0.62 metres below the present ground surface. This feature was 0.8metres wide by 0.3metres deep and was u-shaped in profile; its silt sand fill however contained no datable finds. The ditch was sealed by a layer (1184) up to 0.16 metres thick of silty sand with pebbles; this layer produced a single sherd of locally made Romano-British coarse pottery. Layer 1184 in turn was sealed by the topsoil.

A shallow u-shaped ditch (1136) was revealed cut into the natural gravel at the northern end of the trench. The ditch was about 0.7 metres wide by 0.12 metres deep, and aligned southwest/northeast, corresponding to the line of a 'cultivation trend' identified by the geophysical survey (see above, section **3.2.3**).

3.3.3 Trenches D, E, F, and G

These trenches were located in the rest of the study area to investigate a representative sample of the anomalies of possible archaeological origin identified by the geophysical survey in this part of the site.

The only feature revealed in **Trench D** was the butt end of a linear cut 0.35m deep at the westernmost end of the trench. Only the eastern half of this feature lay within the trench. The feature corresponded to an anomaly of possible archaeological origin identified by the geophysical survey, although the fill of the feature produced no dating or other diagnostic evidence. Other features suggested by the geophysical survey to occupy this area were not revealed by excavation, with only the unbroken surface of the natural gravel subsoil visible after the topsoil was removed.

In **Trench E**, a large post hole (Fig. 6, 1174) cut into the natural gravel at the northern end of the trench likewise corresponded to an anomaly identified by the geophysical survey. Although the backfill of this post hole contained a significant quantity of charcoal, no other dating material was recovered from its fills.

Another possible post hole (Fig. 6, 1167), of similar size, was revealed in **Trench F**. Although the uppermost fill of this feature did produce a single small sherd of Black Burnished ware Romano- British pottery, there had been considerable animal disturbance to this fill, thus the dating of this feature must

remain uncertain. In the central part of the trench, a shallow u-shaped ditch (Fig. 6, 1165) 2.1 metres wide by 0.5 metres deep corresponded in position and alignment to the former field and parish boundary (Figs. 2 and 3) identified by the documentary research and the geophysical survey (see above, sections **3.1.5** and **3.2.3**). The fill of this feature produced a tiny sherd of probable medieval pottery and a small sherd of post-medieval slipware pottery.

Two features were revealed at the southern end of **Trench G** which corresponded approximately in location to an anomaly detected by the geophysical survey. The first of these was a shallow ditch (1183), 0.5 metres wide by 0.24 metres deep, u-shaped in profile and aligned east/west, located 1m north from the southern end of the trench. The fill of this ditch was then cut by an irregular shaped pit (1181) 1.4 metres long by 0.95 metres wide by 0.35 metres deep. Neither the fill of the ditch nor that of the pit contained any datable or otherwise diagnostic material.

3.3.4 Trenches H, and I

The precise line of the access road from the Meole Brace retail park to the proposed park and ride was not determined until after the site investigations had been completed. Trenches H and I were located along the general line of the access road in the vicinity of the cropmark double ring ditch SA14 and the possible satellite ring ditch discovered by the documentary research.

Following the topsoil stripping of **Trench H** a number of features were apparent cut into the natural gravel and sand subsoils. On investigation, however, all of these features proved to be either probable tree boles (hollows caused by uprooted trees) or to be of natural periglacial origin. No sign of the newly discovered ring ditch was seen in this trench, and it must be presumed that if this feature exists it lies to the west of the line of this trench.

Trench I was excavated at right angles across the line of the access road for a distance of 20 metres, and was extended for a further 22.5 metres to the east by a team from The Field Archaeology Unit of Birmingham University, who were carrying out an evaluation of the double ring ditch SA14 as a prelude to a possible research exercise later in the year. Both the outer and inner ditches (Fig. 5, 1210 and 1212) of SA14 were revealed at the eastern end of the trench, almost exactly in the position indicated by the re-plotting of this feature undertaken as part of the documentary survey (Figs. 2 and 3). The inner ditch, 1212, was about 2 metres wide and filled with a clean clay sand. The outer ditch was about 3.5 metres wide and filled with a slightly darker and stonier soil. A small sub-circular feature (1214), possibly a post hole, was visible just inside the inner edge of the inner ditch.

At the central part of the trench, the ground surface formed a slight hollow crossing the break of slope from the plateau occupied by the study area down to the lower lying ground of the valley of the Rea Brook to the north. On excavation, the hollow proved formerly to have been much more pronounced, with the gravel subsoil dipping steeply down from the eastern end of the trench, and the sandy subsoil dipping equally sharply on the western side (Fig.

8). A close packed cobble surface (1208) lay at the bottom of the hollow. This feature may have represented a surfacing of a former trackway up the hillside, in which case the hollow would represent the remains of a holloway crossing the break in slope; such a feature is likely to predate the post medieval period, and it would be tempting to associate it with the Roman settlement to the south. However, a lack of firm dating evidence makes this association uncertain. Another possible interpretation is that it represents material which had eroded down into the hollow from the former barrow mound of the double ring ditch to the east. Further up the eastern side of the hollow was a band about 3.5 metres wide of pebbly silty sand (1206) which rested directly over the natural gravel and which may also have derived from the barrow mound. Partially overlying both 1206 and 1208 was a band about 1 metre wide of stone-free silty sand flecked with charcoal (1207).

The cobble surface 1208 and deposit 1207 were sealed by a layer 0.25 metres thick of silty sand with a high proportion of cobbles and large pebbles (1189), which produced two very small and abraded sherds of Romano-British pottery. This layer was in turn sealed by a similar though less stony deposit 0.5 metres thick (1188). This layer produced half a dozen abraded sherds of medieval and Romano-British pottery, a fragment of tile, and a small triangular iron object. These two layers, together with a 0.2 metres depth of topsoil, had the effect of reducing the depth of the hollow to its present configuration.

3.4 Discussion

3.4.1 The evaluation has confirmed the survival of the refilled ditches of the cropmark double ring-ditch SA14, as well as indicating the possibility of internal features. The documentary survey has also produced aerial photographic evidence suggesting the existence of a second, smaller ring-ditch 35m to the west. These two ring-ditches form part of a linear group of similar features occupying the southern side of the Rea Valley in the Meole Brace/Sutton area. The group originally consisted of at least twelve ring ditches; four (SA84 and 85), of which three were excavated, were lost to housing development in the 1960s (Barker et al, 1991), a fifth (SA2208) was also excavated prior to retail development 1990 (Leach and Hughes, forthcoming). Thus nearly half of this group of monuments, which had its origins in the late neolithic period, have been destroyed in the last 30 years. A recent survey of ring ditches in the upper Severn Valley recommended that "a policy of preservation [of these features] should be actively pursued, with a particular emphasis being placed on the protection of groups of ring-ditches and those examples which are associated with other cropmark features" (Watson, 1991, p14).

3.4.2 Whilst it would appear that the line of the proposed access road passes between the two ring-ditch features of SA14, it will clearly pass close to each. Care should therefore be exercised to avoid disturbance to these monuments. Cremation cemeteries were associated with the ring ditches excavated in the 1960s and that in 1990. Whilst the present configuration of the ground surface would suggest that if such a cemetery is associated with SA14 it will lie outside the corridor of the proposed access road, the possibility must remain

that cremations associated with the ring ditches may be encountered. Provision should be made for the sampling and recording of any such features revealed during construction of the access road (see below).

3.4.3 The discovery of the existence of a Roman settlement at Meole Brace was only made after the preferred route of the A5 Shrewsbury Bypass had been selected, designed, and confirmed. Preservation in situ was therefore not an option for that part of the site threatened by the road scheme, and preservation by record of the threatened remains was the best of the available options. Moreover, the full nature, extent, and quality of the settlement remains only became apparent once excavations were underway. The availability of resources in terms of both time and funds meant that the threatened part of the site could only be sampled. In considering the extent and level of recording of the Roman settlement to be undertaken in advance of the construction of the Shrewsbury Bypass, the principal factor influencing English Heritage's decision to fund a sampling strategy rather than total excavation of the threatened deposits was that a substantial part of the settlement appeared to lie outside the Bypass road corridor (English Heritage correspondence with Shrops.C.C., A5 Archive file A5SB/18, 14/03/1990).

3.4.4 Thus an area of about 4000 m^2 was stripped of topsoil of which 1600m^2, ie just over 25%, was sampled in detail by the 1989/90 excavations (Hughes, 1994). The excavations were able to define the probable western and southern limits of the settlement, and predict the extent of the settlement beyond the Bypass road corridor to the north and east. The Roman settlement was thus shown to have occupied an area of about 190 metres in length and up to 70 metres wide, ie about 13,000m^2, of which about 9000m^2 is likely to have been lost to road construction. Whilst the excavators selected their sample areas to coincide with areas of intensest visible activity, a considerable proportion of the settlement remains within the Bypass road corridor must have been lost without record during road construction.

3.4.5 The current evaluation has confirmed the survival of remains of the Roman roadside settlement within the southern part of the study area. These remains were shown to extend northward into the study area for about 25 metres at the southwestern corner of the site. It is likely that about 3,000m^2 of the settlement lie within the limits of the proposed park and ride. Thus the area within the park and ride represents about 25% of the total original area of the settlement and about 75% of what now remains.

3.4.6 The 1989/90 excavations (see above, section **3.1**) revealed that the preservation of the remains on this site were unusually good for a rural settlement of this type on arable land, particularly so given the proximity to the ground surface of the remains. The evaluation has demonstrated that the survival of deposits within the study area is at least as good as that encountered by the 1989/90 excavations. The 1989/90 excavations suggested that the southern side of the road was the principal occupied area (Ellis et al, 1994, 53); however, this evaluation has shown that the settlement was probably as intense on the north side of the Roman road as the south.

3.4.7 Such roadside settlement sites of Roman date are rare in the region - there is only one other similar site known from within the county, at Heath Road, Whitchurch. Here again, a significant part of the site has been lost to roadworks within the last 25 years, with only limited sample excavation of a small proportion of the lost deposits having taken place (Hannaford and Mason, 1991).

3.4.8 Wroxeter played a key role in the conquest of Wales and the Marches, and it subsequently achieved a status as one of Roman Britain's principal cities and capital of the Cornovii. The position of the site at Meole Brace within the settlement hierarchy of Wroxeter's hinterland, and particularly the trading associations of the settlement, means that it holds crucial evidence regarding the relationship between the civitas capital and its rural base. Because of the geographical situation of the settlement and its roadside location, changes in its fortunes will relate to those of the road's destinations, the military complex at Forden Gaer to the west and the lead mining region of the Stiperstones to the southwest, and of course to Wroxeter itself to the east. The 1989/90 excavations have already demonstrated the potential of the remains at Meole Brace in regard to current regional and national research aims (Ellis et al, op.cit.); given the loss that the site has already sustained with only a relatively small percentage being subjected to detailed excavation, the need to preserve the remaining part of the site is of prime importance.

4 RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 Because of the national and regional importance of the surviving part of the Roman roadside settlement, it is recommended that the remains of this settlement be preserved in situ. The area affected lies in the southwestern part of the study area (Fig. 7). The plans for the proposed park and ride scheme indicate that most of this area has been set aside for landscaping, with the ground level at this point being raised and planted with trees. It is recommended that in this case, there should be no disturbance of the existing ground surface. The existing ground surface should be marked with an appropriate geotextile material; the tree species should be selected and the mounding should be of sufficient proportion so as to ensure that there is no penetration by their roots below the present ground surface. The southern end of the future car park extension area should be moved to the north to avoid this area.

4.2 Although the geophysical survey indicated possible archaeological features scattered over the entire study area, the evaluation has demonstrated that many of these appear to be natural features, and that where they do represent archaeological features, many of these have been truncated. Moreover, those features examined were generally lacking in diagnostic remains, either artefactual or environmental. It is recommended that adequate archaeological provision for this area (Fig. 7) would be met by an extended watching brief, viz. the topsoil stripping of the area should be undertaken under archaeological supervision, and an inspection made of the subsoil at the appropriate level. There should be adequate provision within the construction programme in terms of time and resources for the recording of any significant archaeological remains exposed during the topsoil stripping.

4.3 At one point the access road from the present retail park to the park and ride passes close by (within 10 metres) the eastern edge of a known archaeological site, the double ring ditch feature SA14. At the same point, the documentary research has indicated the presence of a second, previously unsuspected ring ditch on the western edge of the line of the proposed road. It is recommended that the road be located to avoid both these features.

4.4 The trial trenching in this area (Trench I) revealed significant archaeological deposits at this point at a depth of 0.75 metres below the present ground surface (Fig. 8). The preferred option is for these remains to be preserved in situ. It is recognised that there is limited flexibility in the alignment and construction profiles of the access road, and that if it proves to be impractical to preserve these deposits intact, then they should be archaeologically recorded prior to their destruction.

4.5 It is further recommended that, as with the area of the main park and ride, the topsoil stripping of the access road corridor be carried out under archaeological supervision, and the subsoil examined prior to any further excavation. Adequate provision in terms of time and resources should be allocated within the construction programme for the archaeological recording of any significant archaeological features revealed.

5 REFERENCES AND SOURCES CONSULTED

Barker, P A, Haldon, R, and Jenks, W E, 1991: "Excavations on Sharpstone Hill near Shrewsbury 1965-71" in Carver (ed) 1991

Blakeway, J B, 1897: History of the Shrewsbury Hundred or Liberties

Brown, I J, 1976: The Mines of Shropshire

Carver, M O H, (ed), 1991: "Prehistory in Lowland Shropshire", TSAHS LXVII (1991)

Ellis, P, Evans, J, Hannaford, H, Hughes, G, and Jones, A, 1994: "Excavations in the Wroxeter Hinterland 1988-1990: the Archaeology of the A5/A49 Shrewsbury Bypass" TSAHS LXIX (1994), 1-119,

Eyton, R W: Antiquities of Shropshire

Geophysical Surveys of Bradford, 1994: Meole Brace, Report on Geophysical Survey, Report number 93/124, Bradford

Hannaford, H R, and Mason, D J P, 1991: An Excavation at the Roman Roadside Settlement at Heath Road, near Whitchurch, 1991: Site Narrative, Gifford Archaeological Service/Shropshire County Council

Hannaford, H R, 1992: An Archaeological Evaluation at Oak Street Head, Belle Vue, Shrewsbury, Shropshire, Archaeology Unit Report No. 21, Shropshire County Council

Hughes, E G, and Woodward, A, in press: "A Ring Ditch and Neolithic Pit Complex at Meole Brace, Shrewsbury", TSAHS LXX, forthcoming

Jenks, W E, 1993: "Excavations near Meole Brace, Shrewsbury" Shropshire Archaeology and History Newsletter 35

Morris, J A, 1915: "Sutton near Shrewsbury" TSAS 4th series 5

Morriss, R K, 1991: Railways of Shropshire, Shropshire Books, Shrewsbury

Stanford, S C, 1980: The Archaeology of the Welsh Marches

Thorn, F and C (eds), 1986: Domesday Book: Shropshire, Phillimore, Chichester

Watson, M D, 1991: "Ring Ditches of the Upper Severn Valley", in Carver (ed) 1991

Abbreviations

BUFAU Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit
DB Domesday Book xxv Shropshire ed F and C Thorn, 1986
LSL Local Studies Library, Castle Gates, Shrewsbury
OS Ordnance Survey
SMR County Sites and Monuments Record, Shire Hall, Shrewsbury
SRO Shropshire Record Office, Shire Hall, Shrewsbury
TSAHS Transactions of the Shropshire Archaeological and Historical Society
TSAS Transactions of the Shropshire Archaeological Society

6 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The writers would like to thank William Fletcher, Doug Murphy, Greg Price, Heather Sugden, Paul Williams, Nat Davies, Emma Williams, and Kate Bain for their assistance with the site investigations, and Heather Sugden and Paul Williams for assisting with the post-excavation analysis. The illustrations for this report were prepared by Heather Sugden and Paul Williams.

Surveying Equipment was supplied by Survey Supplies Ltd, Wolverhampton; heavy plant was supplied by Greyhound Plant Services, Knockin Heath, Oswestry, and the site accommodation by Harvey Mobile (Cheshire) Ltd, Oswestry.

AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION AT MEOLE BRACE, SHREWSBURY, SHROPSHIRE

by
H R HANNAFORD
and
DR C PHILLPOTTS

A REPORT FOR
THE COUNTY SURVEYOR'S DEPARTMENT,
SHROPSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

The
Archaeology Service

Leisure Services Department
Report Number 48 May 1994
Winston Churchill Building, Radbrook Centre, Radbrook Road, Shrewsbury , Shropshire SY3 9BJ Tel. (0743) 254018

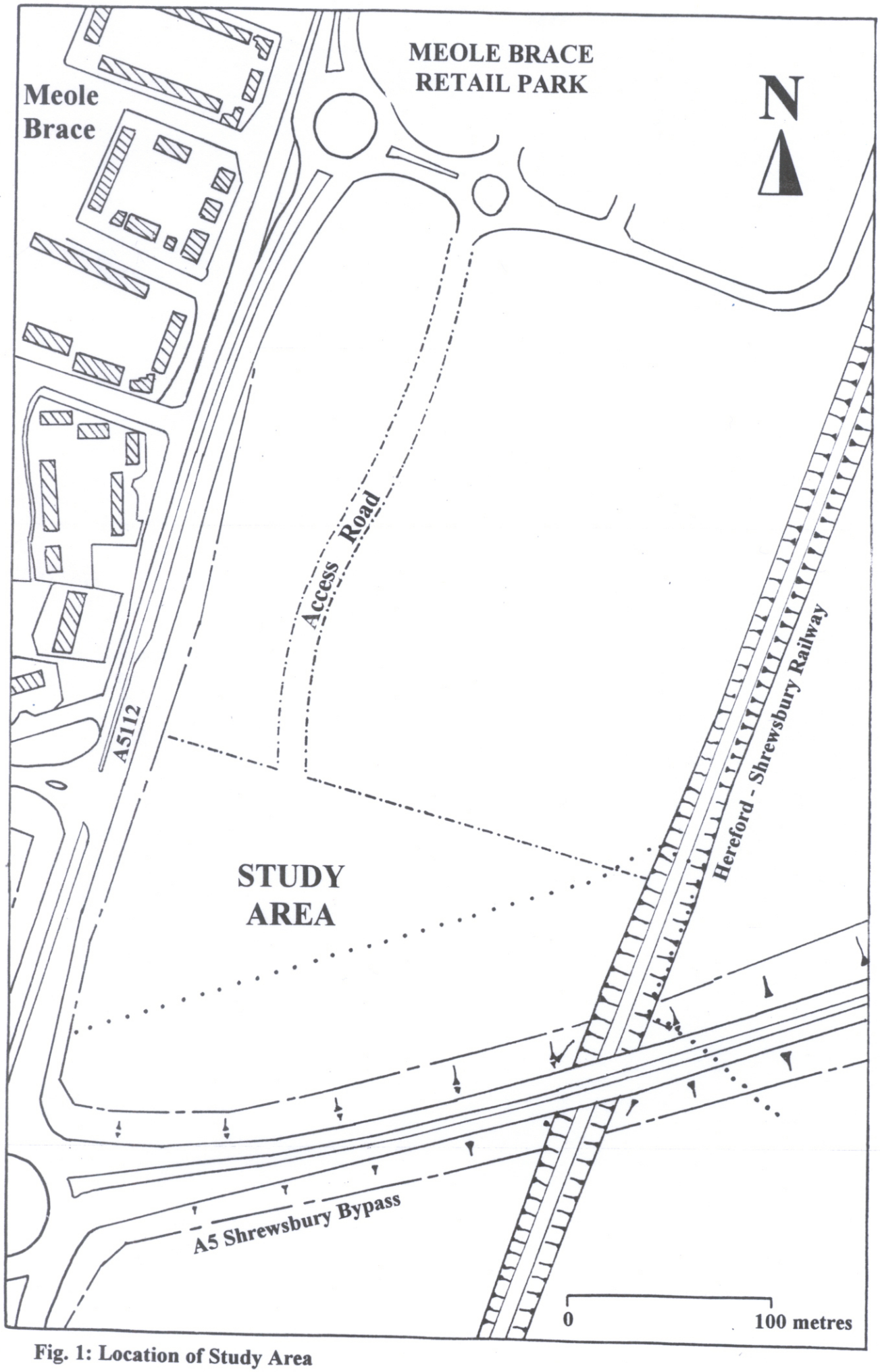

Fig. 1: Location of Study Area

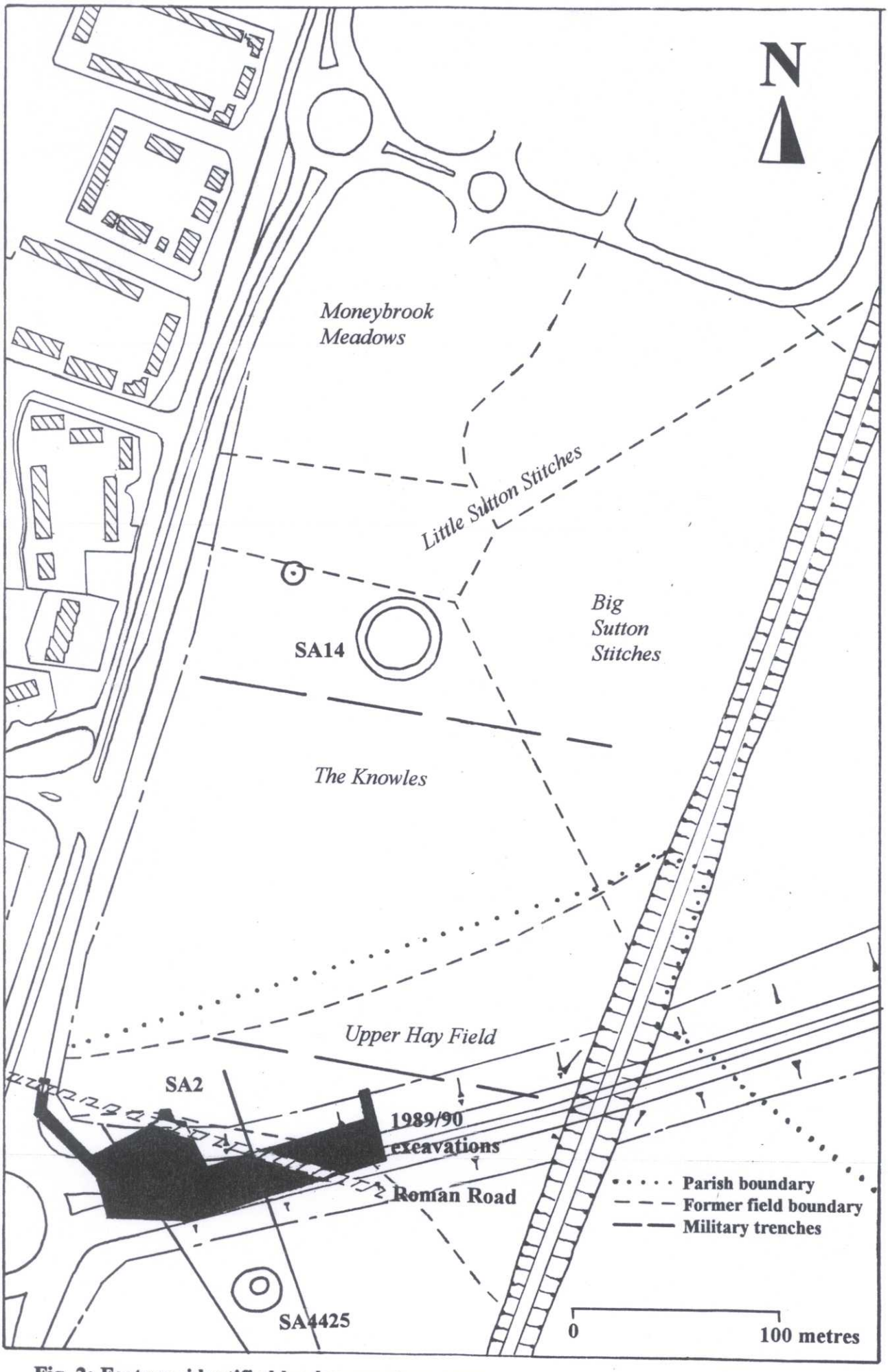

Fig. 2: Features identified by documentary survey

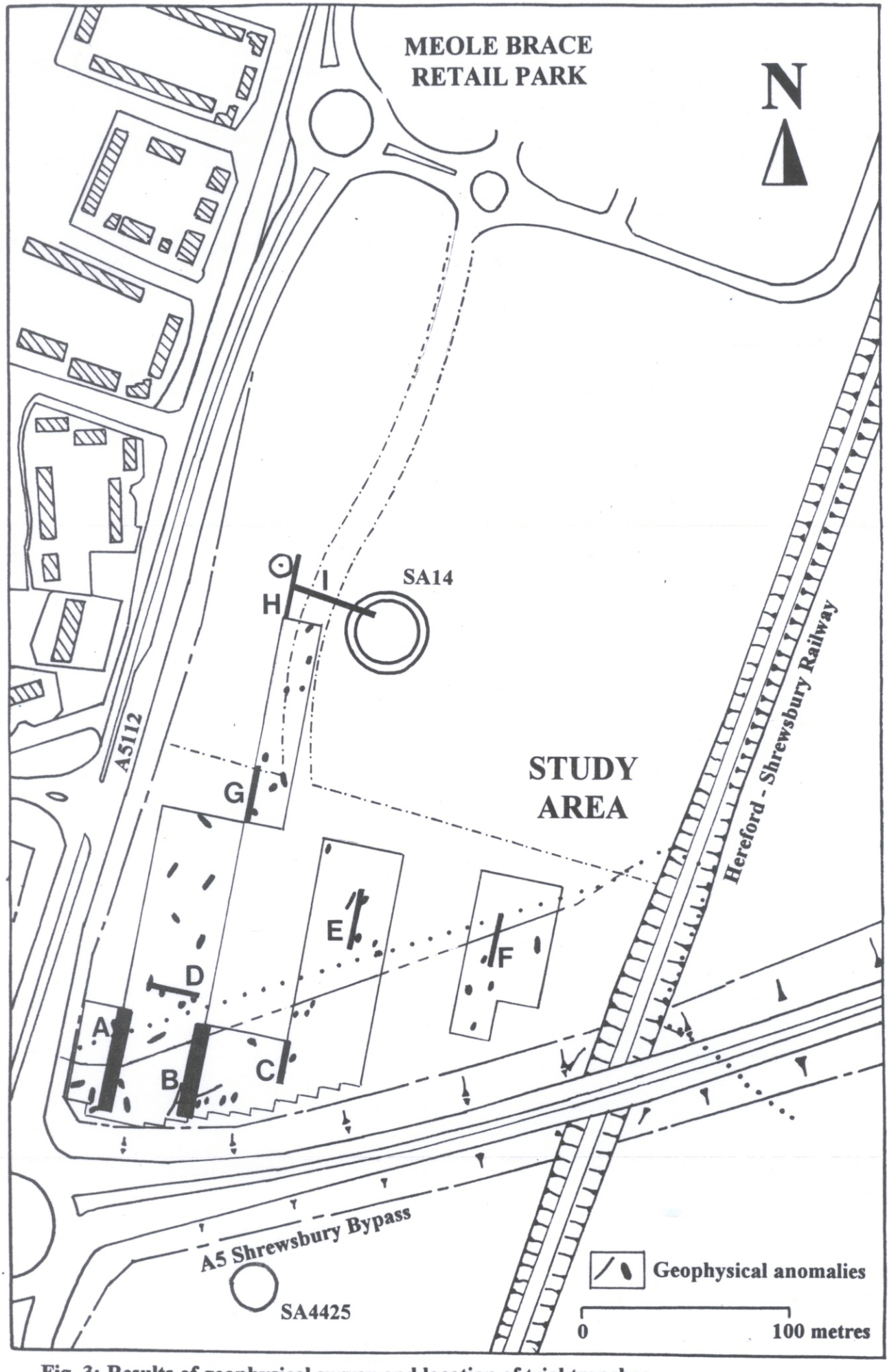

Fig. 3: Results of geophysical survey and location of trial trenches

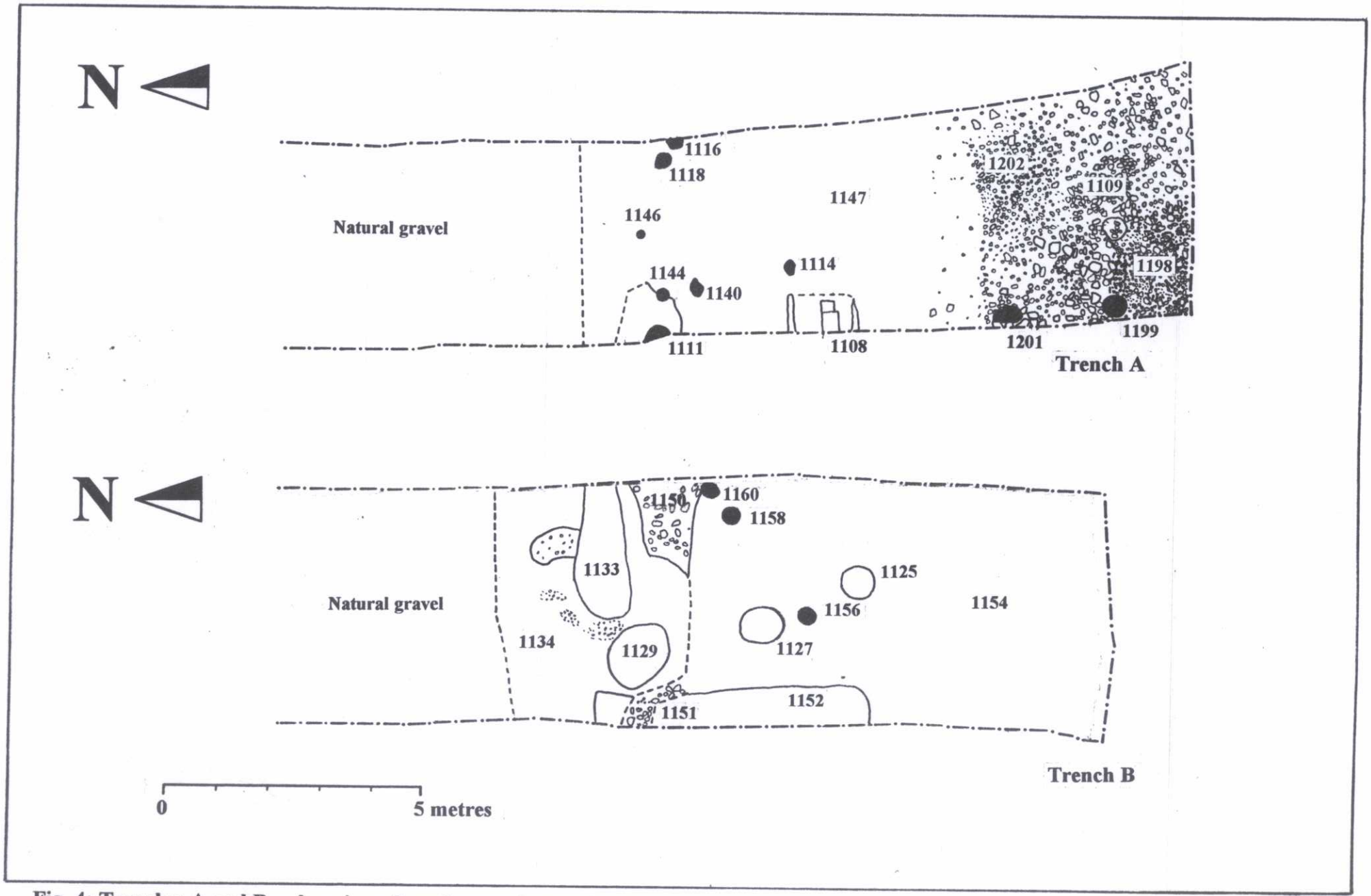

Fig. 4: Trenches A and B - plan view of southern ends showing Roman settlement remains

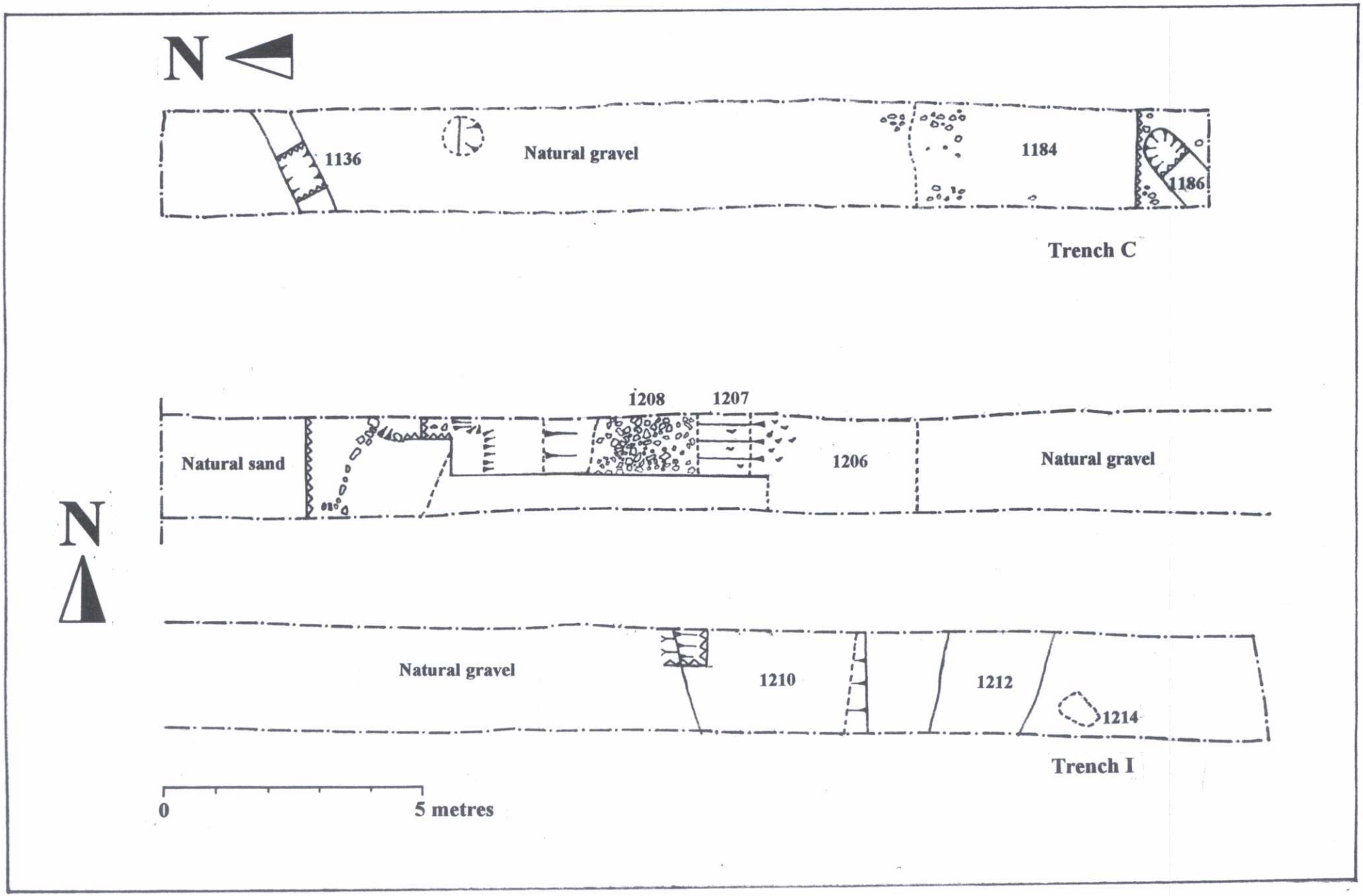

Fig. 5: Trenches C and I - plan views

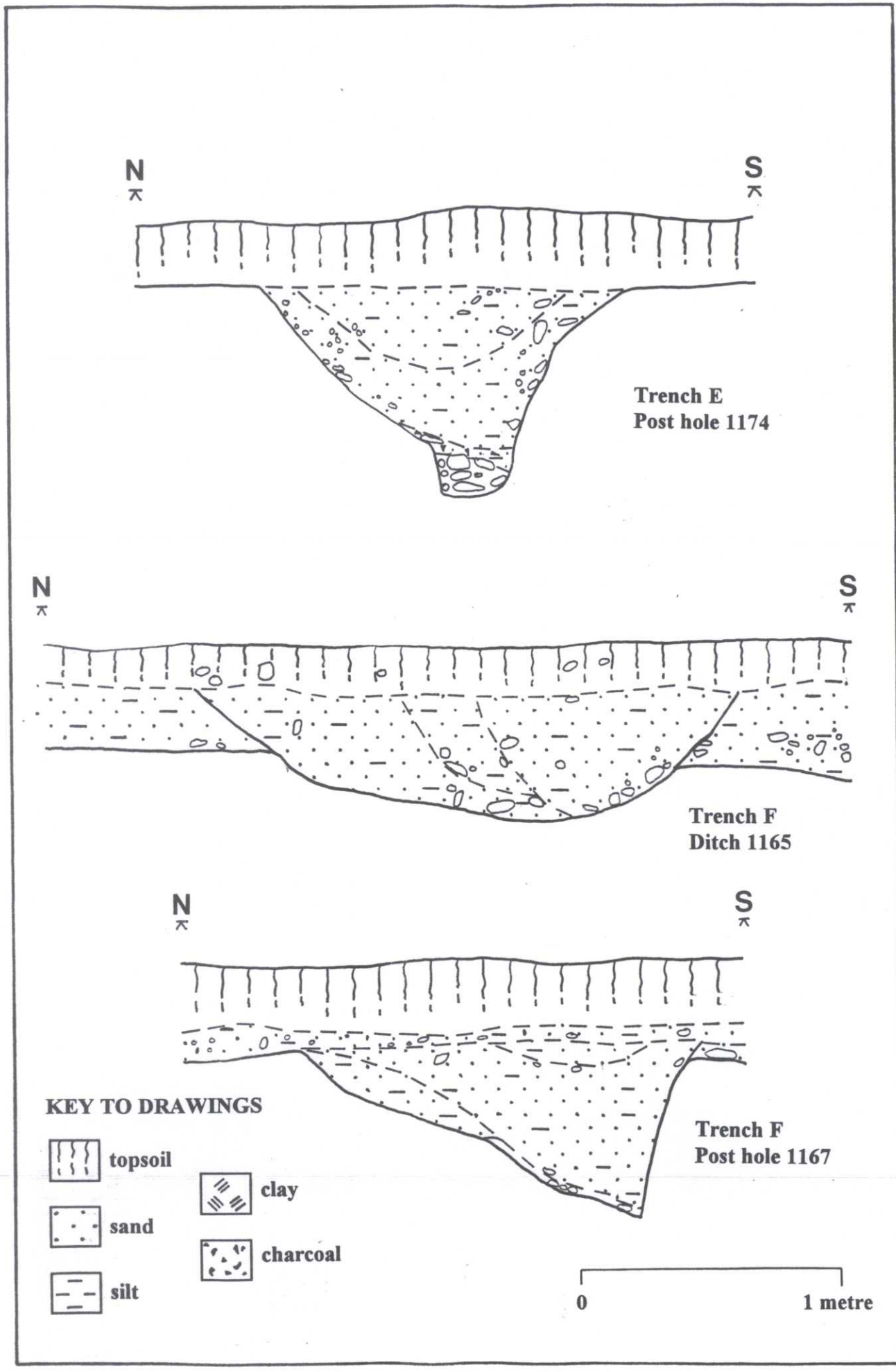

Fig. 6: Trenches E and F - sections through principal features

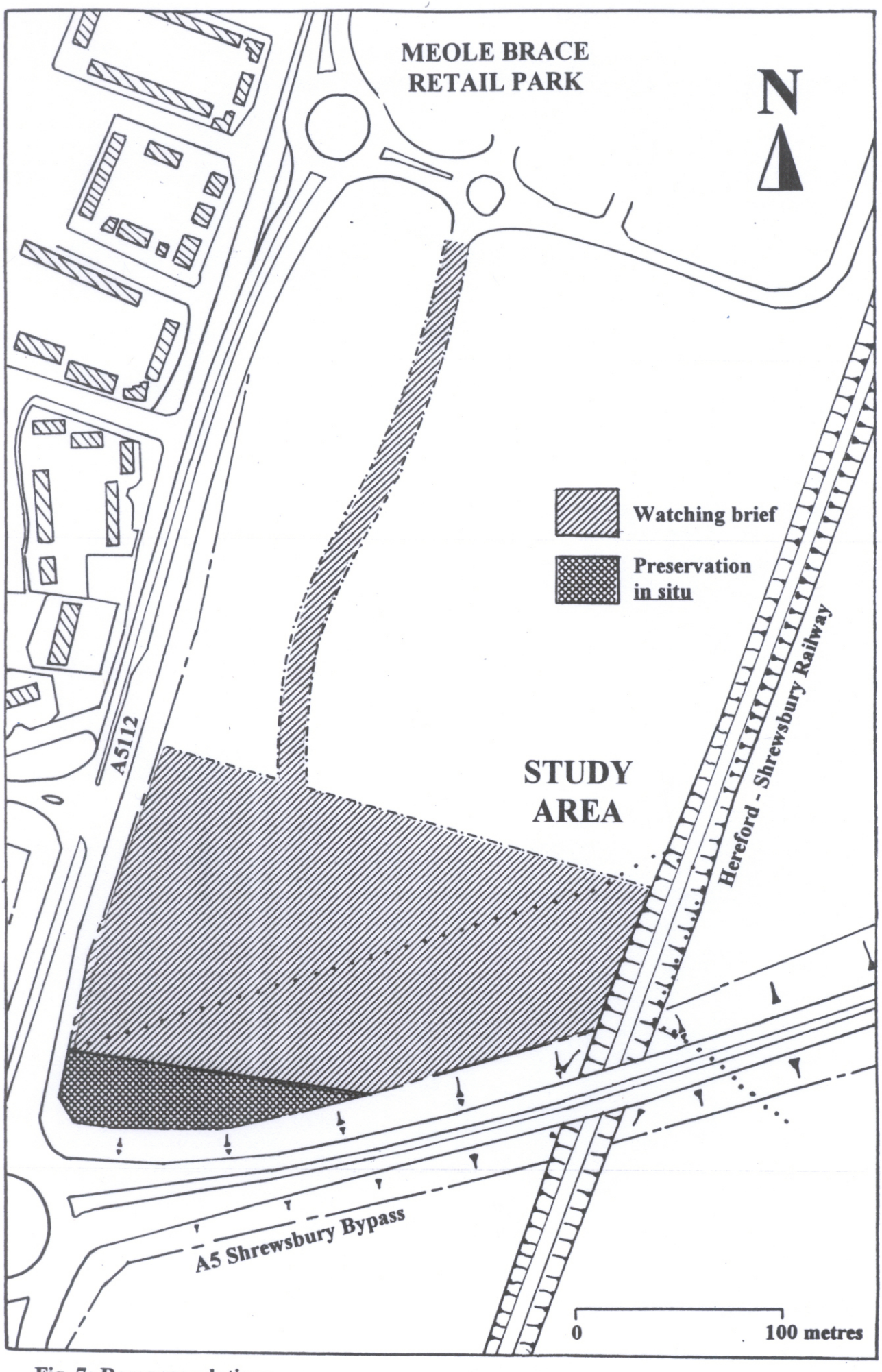

Fig. 7: Recommendations

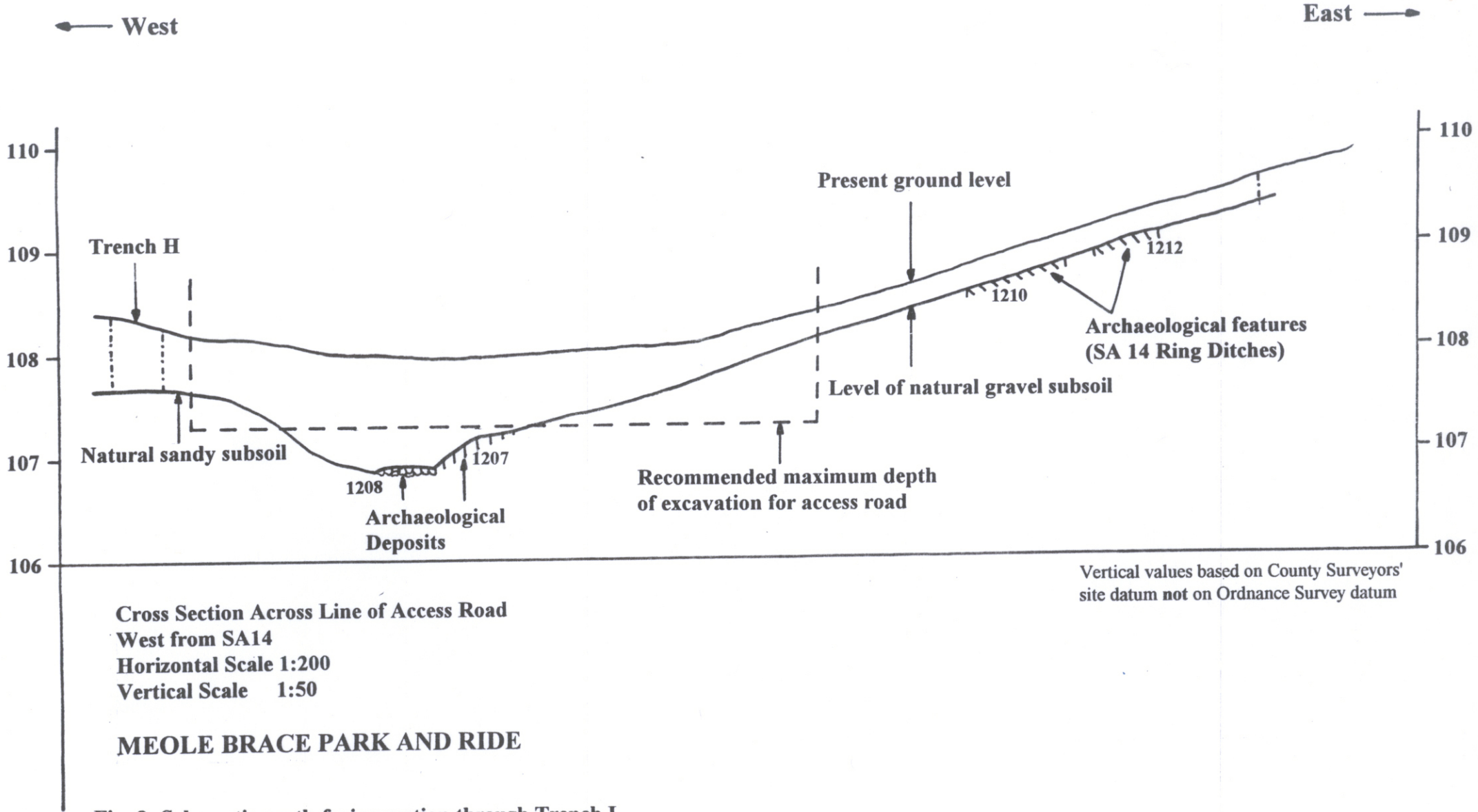

Fig. 8: Schematic south-facing section through Trench I