

Archaeological Investigations at
Sheinton,
Shropshire
2006

by
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Archaeology Service



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**ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS AT
SHEINTON, SHROPSHIRE, 2006**

by
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A Report for the

SHEINTON HERITAGE GROUP



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SUMMARY

In 2004-6, the Sheinton Heritage Group carried out a community archaeology project to investigate two sites at Sheinton, Shropshire. One site comprised a cropmark believed to represent part of a ditch from an Iron Age or Romano-British farmstead enclosure. The other site was in an adjacent field where a number of metal detector finds of Roman date had been found in recent years. A programme of fieldwalking, geophysical survey, and trial excavation was carried out by the Group with help from the Archaeology Service, Shropshire County Council. In 2004-5, geophysical survey and trial trenching confirmed the cropmark feature as a ditch which had silted up in the early Roman period. Close to the edge of the modern village geophysical survey indicated the presence of a couple of features which pre-dated the historic field pattern. Excavation to investigate one of these features recovered a small quantity of Romano-British pottery. Further detailed geophysical survey was carried out in this area in spring 2006 was followed by more extensive trial trenching. A linear feature, though poorly defined and truncated, nevertheless produced a significant quantity of well-preserved Romano-British pottery of 3rd – 4th century AD date, and several pieces of Roman roof tile, suggesting the presence of a Roman domestic settlement of some status in the immediate vicinity.

1 INTRODUCTION

Sheinton is a small village in central Shropshire situated about 14km southeast of Shrewsbury. The village is situated on a river terrace overlooking the River Severn to the north. There has been a settlement at Sheinton since late Saxon times at least, and because of the lack of large-scale modern housing development, there is a strong probability that the archaeology of the early settlement here is well-preserved. Outside the confines of the modern village, cropmark evidence and find spots of artefacts have provided evidence for human activity and settlement in the prehistoric and Roman periods.

The village of Sheinton and its surroundings therefore contain a potentially rich archaeological resource that can be graphically and imaginatively used to help tell the story of this Shropshire parish from prehistory to the present day. It was recognised that there was an opportunity for the local community to be involved in the process of investigation, discovery, and researching of this resource, 'reading the clues' to tell the story.

A local community group, the Sheinton Heritage Group was established by a group of local people in January 2004 to promote an interest in the rich heritage of Sheinton and the surrounding area. In July 2004 it was successful in obtaining a Local Heritage Initiative grant for the Sheinton Heritage Project, whose aim was to investigate the history, archaeology, geology, and natural history of the parish of Sheinton.

Recent research by local historians and finds by metal detectorists had highlighted a number of sites around the village where there was the potential for the local community to discover their own heritage, with professional archaeological guidance and specialist input. One component of the Sheinton Heritage Project was a community archaeology project, which comprised a number of elements including archaeological fieldwork (geophysical survey, field-walking, trial excavation). This archaeological project has been led by the Archaeology Service, commissioned by the Sheinton Heritage Group.

2 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

2.1 Aims

The Sheinton Heritage Project ran for two years from 2004 to 2006.

The archaeological component of the project was intended to:

- enable the local community to explore and investigate some aspects of the development of settlement at Sheinton.
- enable the local community to explore and investigate their heritage and environment.
- provide first-hand experience of practical archaeological and historical research to the local community, and provide training for local community volunteers in a range of archaeological skills and techniques.

The specific aim of the first year of the archaeological component was to research an area immediately to the north of the modern village, in particular a group of three fields where a significant number of finds had been made by metal-detectorists in recent years. The aim in year 2 was to further investigate the area of the field immediately adjacent to the north side of “The Woodlands” where the year 1 investigations had suggested the presence of possible prehistoric or Romano-British features and where a small quantity of Romano-British pottery had been recovered.

2.2 Objectives

The objectives for the year 2 activities were to:

- (a) To locate archaeological features and deposits within the study area.
- (b) To assess the survival, quality, condition and relative significance of any archaeological features, deposits and structures within the study area.

2.3 Methodology

2.3.1 To meet these aims and objectives in year 2, the project’s archaeological activity comprised a geophysical survey and trial excavations.

2.3.2 Geophysical Survey A geophysical survey was carried out of an area of the pasture field north of “The Woodlands” where the previous year’s work had indicated further detailed survey might produce results. The lawns and cemetery extension on the west side of “The Woodlands” were also included in the geophysical survey.

2.3.3 Trial excavations.

Trial excavations took place in the pasture field based on the results of the geophysical survey. Trenches were located to investigate a potential archaeological features highlighted by the geophysical survey. A series of small test-pits were also excavated to provide samples in the vicinity.

All excavations were carried out by hand to the top of significant archaeological deposits. Further sampling was carried out as necessary to

determine the nature, survival, quality, and significance of features or deposits. This report outlines the findings of this work.

3 ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

People probably first began to settle and farm in the Sheinton area in the Neolithic period (or New Stone Age). A Neolithic flint axe (Sites and Monuments Record No. 00319) has been found at Sheinton Hall Farm near Sheintonbrook Covert. Communities living in the area in the succeeding Bronze Age also left traces of their presence in the form their tools and weapons, recovered in recent years as a result of agricultural activity or metal detecting. Such finds from the Sheinton area include a fragment of a mid-late Bronze Age copper alloy axe (Portable Antiquities Scheme no. HESH-2E7020) and a bronze chisel. Bronze Age burial sites also survive locally in the form of ploughed-out barrows or “ring ditches”, half a dozen or so of which have been discovered from aerial photography in neighbouring Cressage parish.

Later prehistoric activity in the Sheinton area is attested by a cropmark enclosure, of a type which has been demonstrated by excavation elsewhere to represent the remains of farmsteads occupied during the late Bronze Age, Iron Age, Romano-British, and early medieval periods. This enclosure (SMR No. 00310) lies on the edge of the river terrace near Sheinton Hall Farm. The cropmark enclosure has been cut through by the former Severn Valley Railway, and only the southern half appears on the aerial photographs available at the Shropshire SMR. Nevertheless, the enclosure appears to be sub-rectangular and about 85m by 70m in size. Excavation by the Sheinton Heritage Project in 2005 of a section of the enclosure ditch found that the ditch had silted up by the early Roman period, suggesting a late Iron Age to early Roman date for this farmstead.

Before the current investigations, there were no known Roman period sites in Sheinton, with the possible exception of the cropmark farmstead enclosure (SMR No. 00310). However, the parish lies close to a ford across the River Severn at Cressage, whose importance in the Roman period was marked by the presence of a fort, thought to have been occupied in the 1st – 2nd centuries AD and several marching camps on the north side of the crossing at Eaton Constantine. Numerous finds of Roman period metalwork, including coins and brooches, have come from the parish, particularly from the Sheinton Hall Farm area (these have been registered with the Portable Antiquities Scheme).

Sheinton is first mentioned in the Domesday Survey of 1086, but there was probably a Saxon settlement here. It used to be thought that the name Sheinton derived from the Old English *scēne* and *tun*, meaning “beautiful settlement”; recent research (Gelling, 1990, p260-1) suggests that the first element of the name might derive from a personal name, *Scēne*. In the late Saxon period the parish of Sheinton comprised three manors held by Azor, Algar, and Saewulf. By the time of the Domesday Survey, these seem to have become a single estate, held from Roger of Montgomery, Earl of Shrewsbury, by Ralph of Mortimer. The manor was in turn held from Ralph by Helgot, from who were descended the Lords of Castle Holdgate. The manor then was 2 hides in size and was worth 20 shillings. There were 2 slaves and land for 1½ ploughs in lordship, and a Frenchman and 9

smallholders had a further 2 ploughs. There was also a mill on the manor and woodland for fattening 100 pigs. (Thorn and Thorn, 1986, 4,11,1 and notes)

The church at Sheinton (Sites and Monuments Record [SMR] No. 13377) is not mentioned in the Domesday Survey. St Peter and St Paul's Church is a medieval building of limestone rubble construction. The church was partly rebuilt in the 1660s and subsequently thoroughly restored in 1854. The church has a timber-framed belfry which is probably 17th-century in date (though considerably restored).

4 THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS

4.1 The study area

The study area for the investigations in 2006 comprised part of the field north of “The Woodlands”, the lawn to the west of “The Woodlands” and the cemetery extension. Geophysical resistivity surveys were carried out in all three areas, and were supplemented by excavations in the field north of “The Woodlands”. This field (shp field 9) was under pasture in the period 2004-6 (although it has also been used for arable cultivation in the past and was due to be ploughed again later in 2006). A number of metal detector finds had been made in this field in recent years, and the southwestern corner of the field was targeted for geophysical survey and a small trial excavation in the first phase of the project (Hannaford, 2005, and Roseveare & Roseveare, 2004).

4.2 The Geophysical Survey

A geophysical survey carried out in 2004 by ArchaeoPhysica Ltd in the field to the north of “The Woodlands” (Roseveare & Roseveare 2004) identified a number of features associated with the former field layout. The survey also revealed two linear features in the southwest corner of the field. Small-scale trial excavation in May 2005 failed to positively locate one of these features, but did recover a number of shards of Romano-British pottery. The 2004 survey recommended that this area might merit more detailed survey.

As part of the second year’s activities, the SHG decided to follow up these recommendations and carry out a more detailed resistivity survey of the field to the north of “The Woodlands”, and the lawns and cemetery extension to the west of “The Woodlands” (see Figure 2). The 2006 geophysical survey identified a number of features. A full account of these results appears in the full survey report (Roseveare, M, 2006), and a summary appears below.

“The Woodlands” lawns

A roughly rectangular area of low resistance (Figure 2; 1) within the lawns may possibly represent the remains of a former structure here; the relationship with the remains of walls seen nearby (12) is unclear. These walls are visible as occasional bricks in the lawn and as low earthworks in the garden, and seem to continue beneath the landscaping of the present garden. Another feature, possibly a wall footing or path (14) seems to terminate or divide the enclosure defined by walls 12. A possible pit (13), with possible disturbed material north and west of it, may also be associated with these features.

A strong low resistance anomaly (2) would appear to be the fill of a large ditch. This may have been a continuation of a feature (11) located in the field north of the “The Woodlands”, which may once have enclosed this part of the hilltop.

The cemetery extension

The extremely small size of the survey area in the cemetery extension made identification of any context nearly impossible. A possible large pit (3) was tentatively identified, but an area of low resistance (4) may just be natural damp ground. The remains of a path (5) laid out in the form of a cross when the cemetery extension was created were also located. It has since been partially lost but evidently survives below the grass.

Field north of “The Woodlands” (shp field 9)

The geophysical survey indicated that the natural subsoil on the hilltop (8) comprises an accumulation of firm sand, meeting (is overlain?) by gravel on the slope in the field to the north of the church. Pit-type anomalies (9) in the gravel off the edge of the sand may be natural or may be perhaps former quarry pits.

In the field the geophysical survey located and further defined a ditch (7 & 10) previously located by the 2004 survey. Alongside the feature a second similar anomaly was noted that might indicate the feature was recut. A large ovoid anomaly (6) between the ditch and the field edge is likely to be the site of a sand pit.

An area of low resistance (11) in the southern edge of the field continued south into the garden (see 2 above) where it had sharply defined edges suggesting an artificial nature. The abrupt west edge though is probably water retained against the east face of wall 14 which demonstrates feature 14 has appreciable depth extent. Its northern part may mask or be a continuation of ditch fill 2.

Discussion

The geological substrate has influenced the result by improving the clarity of features on the top of the hill where the high resistance of the sand contrasts better with the fills of negative archaeological features.

There would appear to be a host of buried features of different dates beneath the lawn and over the top of this hill. Some are apparently contemporary with the excavated Roman activity, others are probably post-medieval. The rectangular structures beneath the lawn offer the best evidence for the location of an earlier house but unfortunately there are too many superimposed anomalies to be sure of its exact shape or size.

4.3 The trial excavations

4.3.1 Two trenches were located and laid out on the basis of the results of analysis of the geophysical survey (see Fig. 3). Two trenches A and E were laid out across the linear anomaly located by the geophysical surveys in 2004 & 6. A third trench (D) and a series of 1m square test pits were excavated to examine deposits inside the curve of this feature. The topsoil and overburden were removed from all three trenches by hand. The underlying deposits were then cleaned before being sampled and recorded as appropriate.

4.3.2 Trench A: The natural subsoil (Fig. 4; 41) was encountered at a depth of 0.65m below ground level and comprised a light brown sand mottled with irregular darker patches, giving an appearance of having been disturbed - possibly by tree roots and/or animal burrowing.

In the centre of the trench a wide shallow feature (09) 2.3m wide by 0.3m deep was cut into the natural subsoil. The lower fill (32) of the feature comprised a mottled orange-brown sand, containing some Romano-British pottery and some decayed animal bone. The upper fill (10) was a dark brown sandy loam and produced a significant quantity of well preserved large fragments of Romano-British pottery, including BBII ware, Severn Valley ware and other red wares (see Fig. 8), and a small copper-alloy dragonesque brooch in the form of a dolphin. The pottery was similar to that recovered from the trial trench the previous year, which in fact had just encountered one edge of the ditch.

The ditch was sealed by a layer of brown sandy loam, excavated in 2 spits (05 & 08) 0.15m and 0.2m in depth respectively, which in turn lay below a topsoil layer of sandy humic loam (04) and turf (02).

4.3.3 Test pit B: The natural subsoil comprised a buff silty sand (Fig. 7b; 18); it lay beneath a deposit 0.15m thick of a brown sandy loam (17) with some pebbles, which in turn lay below a topsoil layer (16) 0.25m deep and turf (15).

4.3.4 Test pit C: The natural subsoil comprised an orange brown sand (Fig. 7c; 22), which lay beneath a deposit 0.18m thick of dark brown humic sandy loam (21), in turn below topsoil (20) 0.24m deep and turf (19).

4.3.5 Trench D: The natural subsoil in trench D as elsewhere comprised an orange brown sand (Figs. 6a & 7a; 26). A shallow hollow (40) in the natural was filled with a soil (39) indistinguishable from the topsoil (25) a dark greyish brown sandy loam (25) 0.40m deep which sealed it. The topsoil (25) was and turf (24). This trench was later extended by a further 2m to the south by the Group;

4.3.6 Trench E: The observed sequence of deposits in Trench E was

similar to those in Trench A. The natural subsoil (Fig. 5; 42) was encountered at a depth of 0.65m below ground level and comprised a light brown sand mottled with irregular darker patches.

In the centre of the trench a wide shallow feature (36) was cut into the natural. This appeared to be a continuation of the feature encountered in trench A, although the edges were less well defined. The fill (37) of the feature again comprised a mottled orange-brown sand, containing some Romano-British pottery.

The ditch was sealed by a layer of brown sandy loam (14); this deposit as well as producing Romano-British pottery, also produced a number of fragments of a coarse earthenware pottery which appears to be of early medieval – possibly Saxon – date. This layer in turn lay below a topsoil layer of sandy humic loam (12) and turf (11).

4.3.7 Test pit F: The natural subsoil comprised an orange brown sand (Figs. 6b & 7d; 35); the subsoil was cut by the arc of a feature (34), filled with a dark greyish-brown sand (33). This feature may have been the edge of a pit identified by the geophysical survey. The pit was sealed by a layer 0.30m thick of dark greyish- brown sandy humic loam (29), below a further layer of topsoil (28) 0.25m deep and turf (27). This pit was later extended to the east, west and south by one metre by the Group; no further features were revealed but a number of finds were made from the (soil layer 29), including post-medieval pottery, animal bone, and an iron spur. A time-capsule was buried by the Group in one corner of the excavated area.

5 CONCLUSIONS

The geophysical survey has confirmed the survival of a complex of features of probable Archaeological origin on the hilltop at the centre of the village.

The features located in the gardens of “the Woodlands” clearly pre-date the current layout of the house and gardens. Some of the features seem to be structural, but whether they relate to former garden features or buildings which pre-date the current house is uncertain and would probably need to be tested by excavation. In the field to the north of “The Woodlands”, the 2004 and 2006 geophysical surveys have revealed a number of features that are earlier than the present field pattern.

The trial excavations of one of these features have shown it to be a wide shallow ditch of mid- to late Roman date. There is a considerable depth of modern and historic ploughsoil on the hilltop – doubtless a product of the light sandy subsoil here – and this has probably truncated the top of the ditch. At the same time it has protected the finds from the bottom of the ditch from physical and chemical abrasion. In particular, the segment of the ditch sampled in the western of the two main trenches produced a considerable quantity of very well preserved Roman domestic pottery of late 3rd – 4th century AD date. Finds of a couple of fragments of Roman roof tile suggest that these pottery and tile fragments may have come from a high status settlement on the hill-top. A tiled roof suggests that this settlement may have included a well-built farmhouse or even a small villa.

In 2004-5 the Project investigated a cropmark farmstead enclosure (SMR no. 00310) located on the edge of the river terrace at the bottom of the hill (some 300m northeast of the 2006 excavations). The trial excavation of the enclosure ditch suggested that this site may have been abandoned in the early Roman period (the enclosure ditch seems to have silted up by the late 1st early 2nd century AD). It is possible that the settlement on the hill top superseded this settlement.

There must also be a possibility at Sheinton of continuity of occupation of this hill top site from the Roman into the Saxon period. The alternative scenario is abandonment at the end of the Roman period, with the site being re-occupied at some time in the Saxon period. The possible Saxon pottery from the current excavations at Sheinton – and the pottery has yet to be positively identified or dated – would provide archaeological support for the place-name evidence for a pre-Domesday book period settlement.

6 REFERENCES AND SOURCES CONSULTED

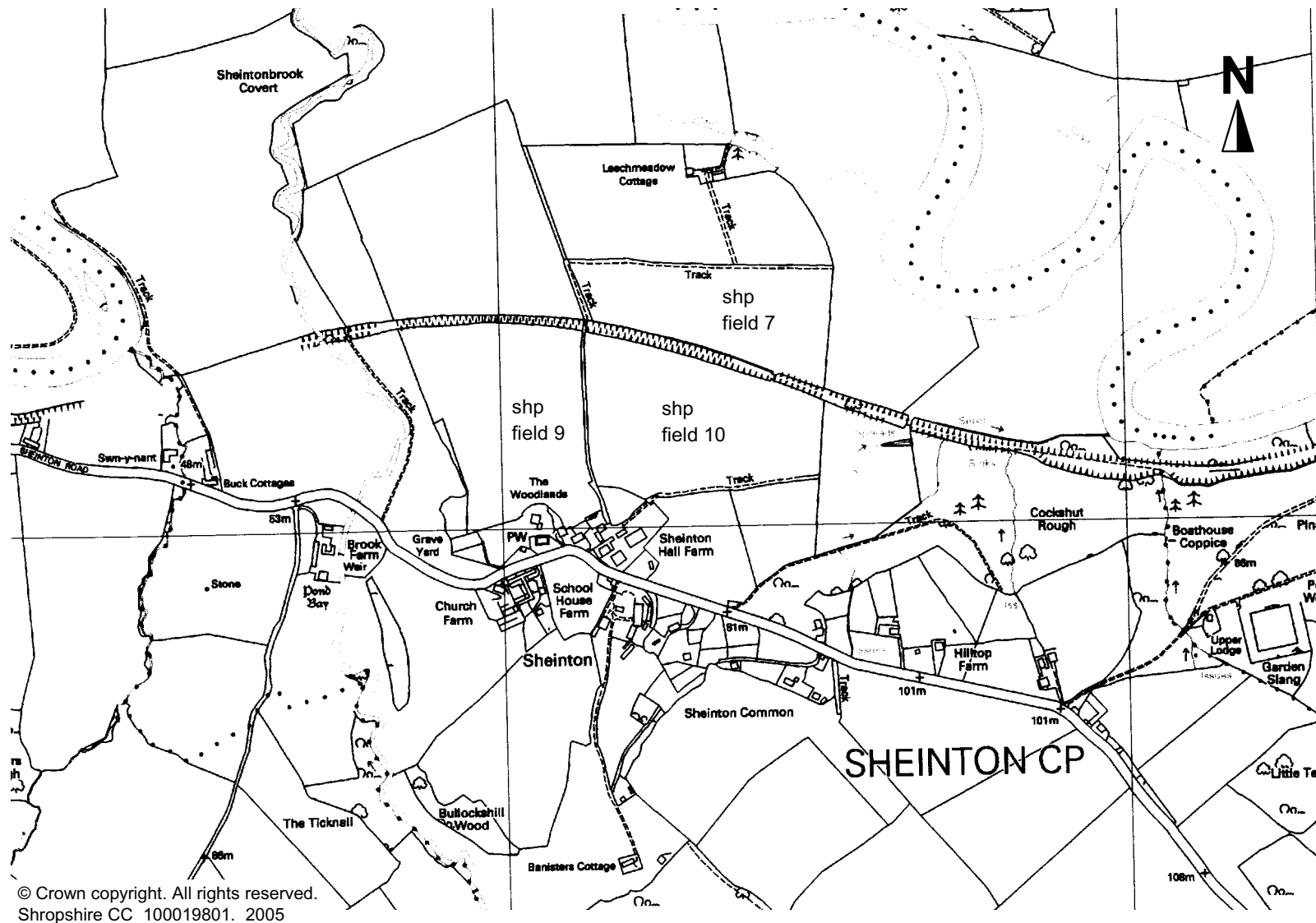
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ABBREVIATIONS

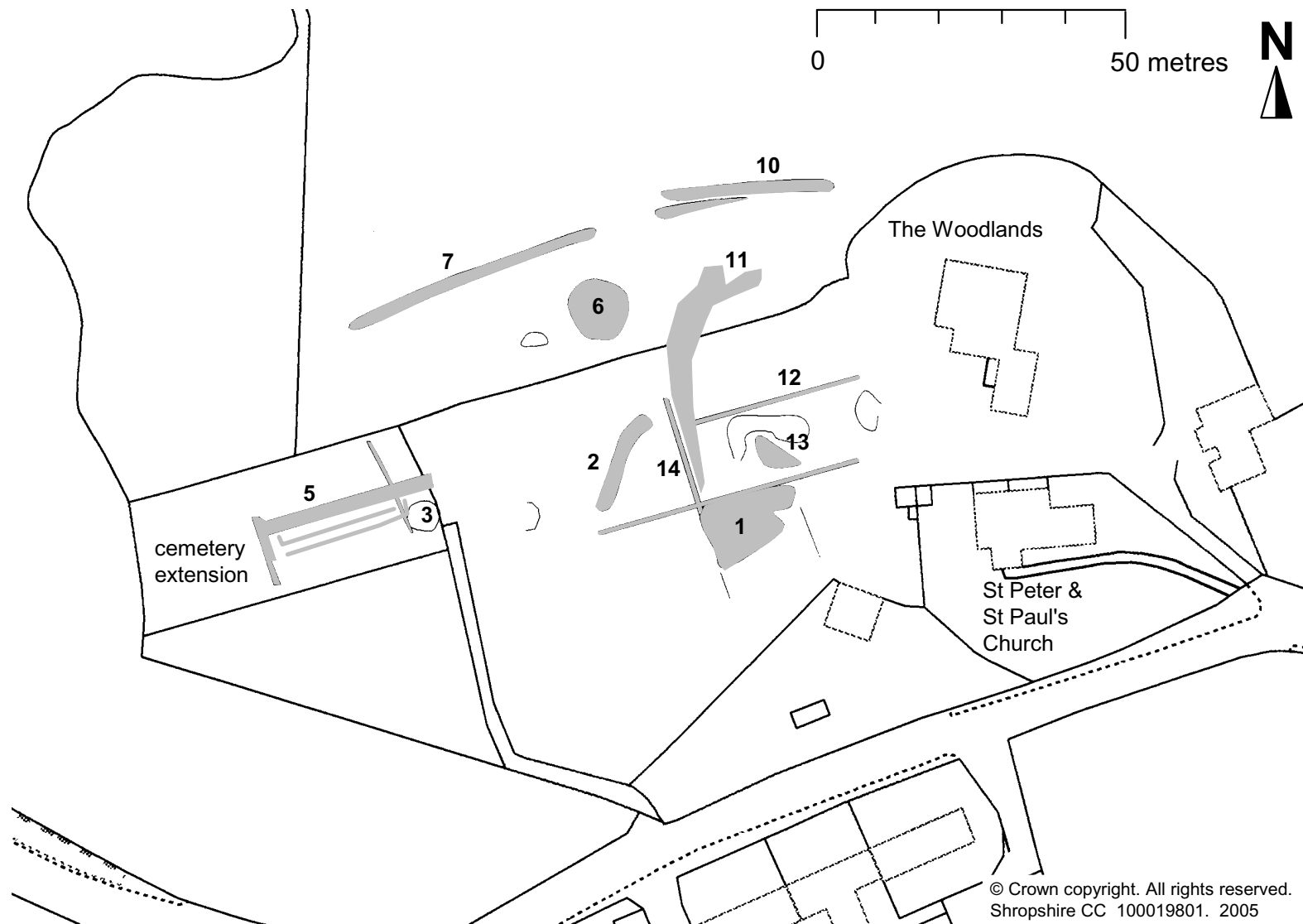
ASD	Above Site Datum
DoE	Department of the Environment
OS	Ordnance Survey
PRO	Public Record Office
SMR	County Sites and Monuments Record, Shirehall, Shrewsbury
SRRC	Shropshire Records and Research Centre, Castle Gates, Shrewsbury
TSAHS	Transactions of the Shropshire Archaeological and Historical Society
TSAS	Transactions of the Shropshire Archaeological Society

7 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The writer would like to thank Malcolm Corrie and John and Peter Taylor for providing access to the site at Sheinton Hall Farm, to Dr & Mrs Ian Lawrence for "The Woodlands" garden, and Sheinton PCC for access to the graveyard extension. The geophysical survey was undertaken by ArchaeoPhysica Ltd. Thanks to Tony Hanna, site supervisor, and Grace Thompson (Work Experience Student) and Ros Jefferies who provided invaluable help with the finds processing and analysis. Ros Jefferies also produced the finds illustrations (for Figs 8 & 9). Finally thanks must go to all the members of the Sheinton Heritage Group for their support for the project and enthusiastic participation in the fieldwork.

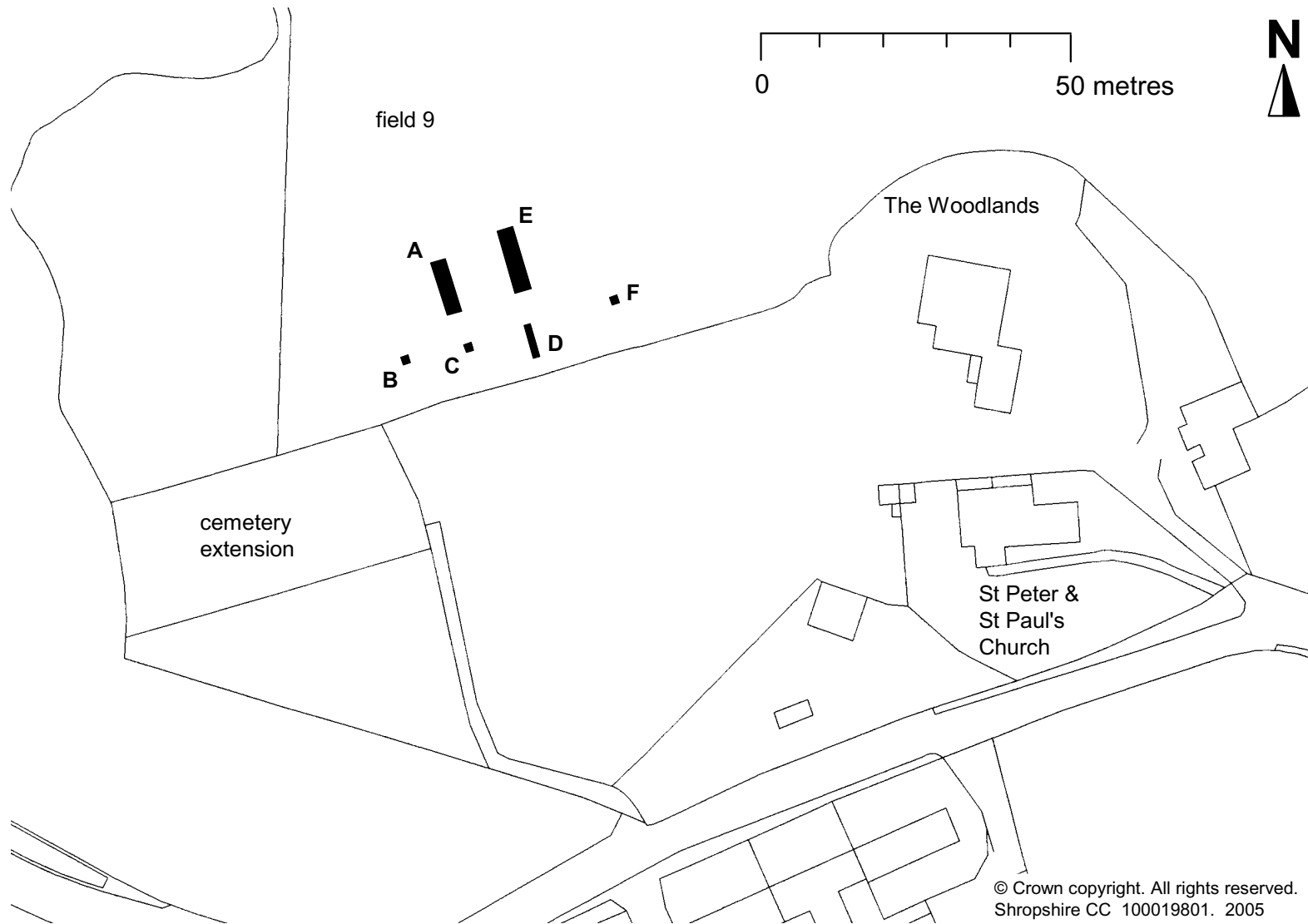


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Figure 1: Sheinton village; 1:10,000 scale



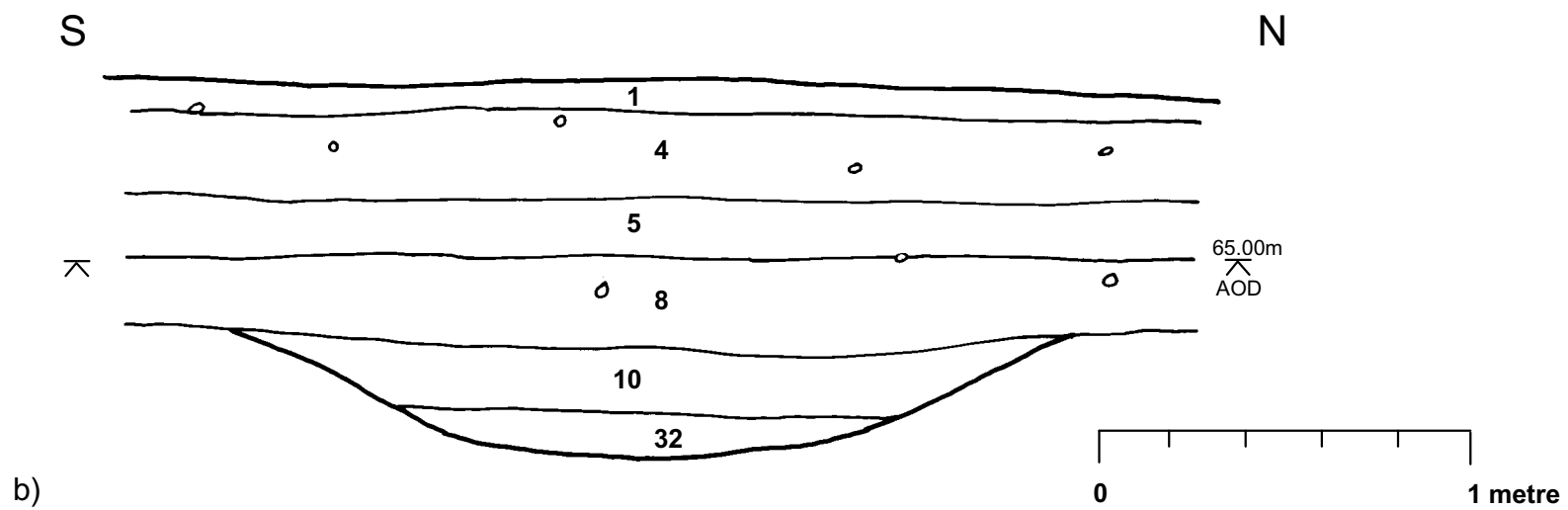
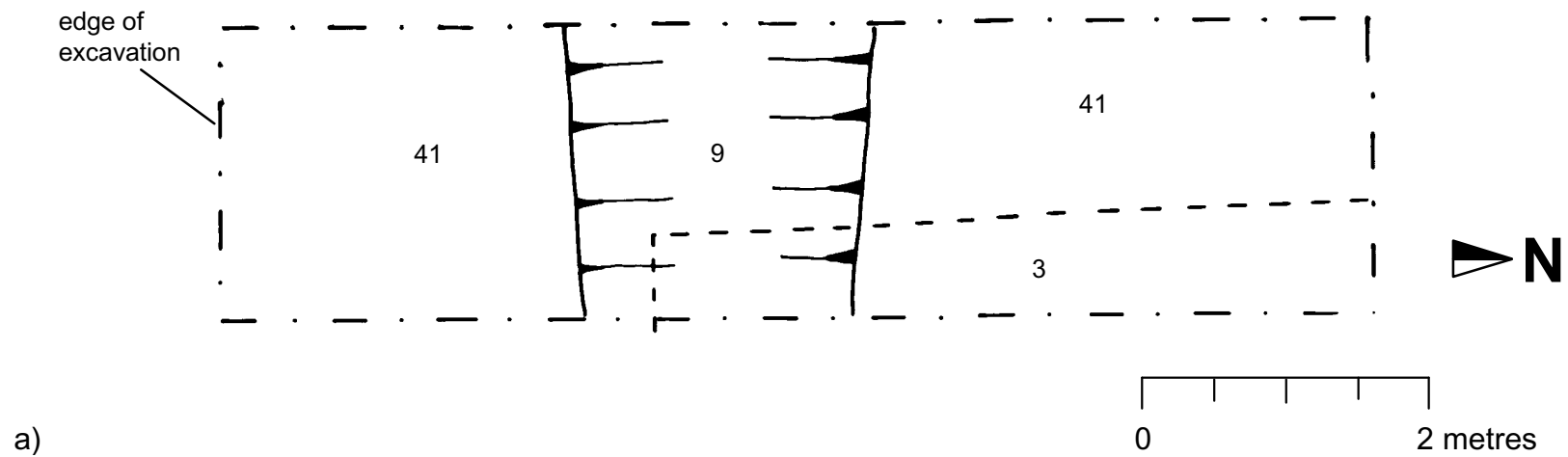
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Figure 2: The study area, showing principal features identified by the geophysical survey; 1:1,000 scale



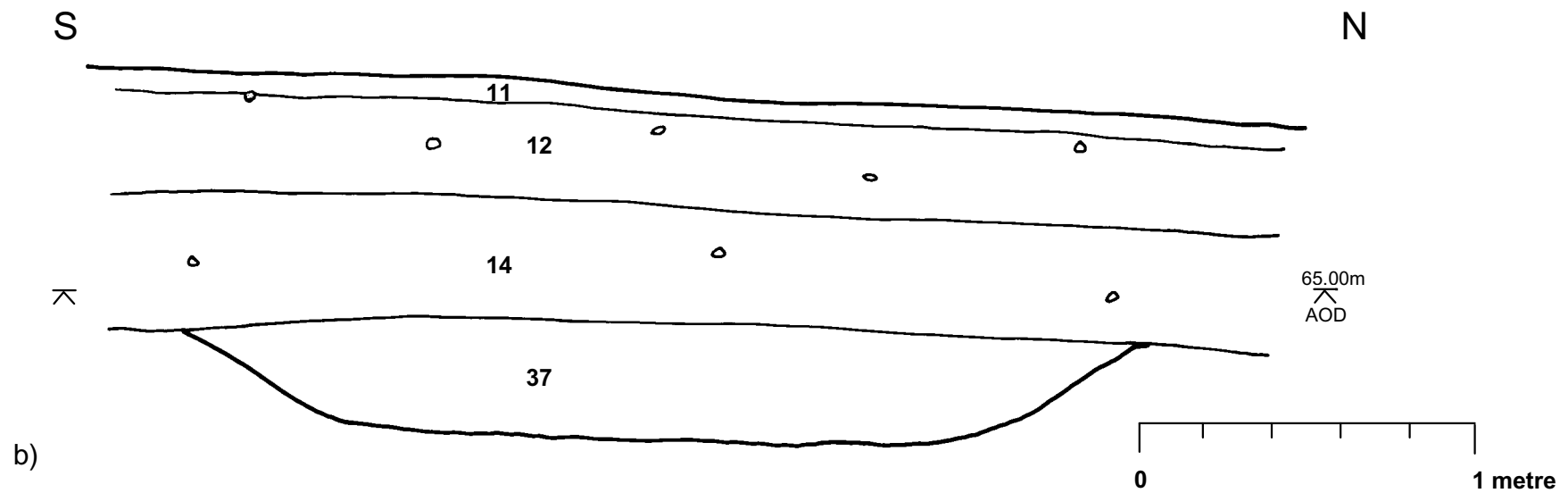
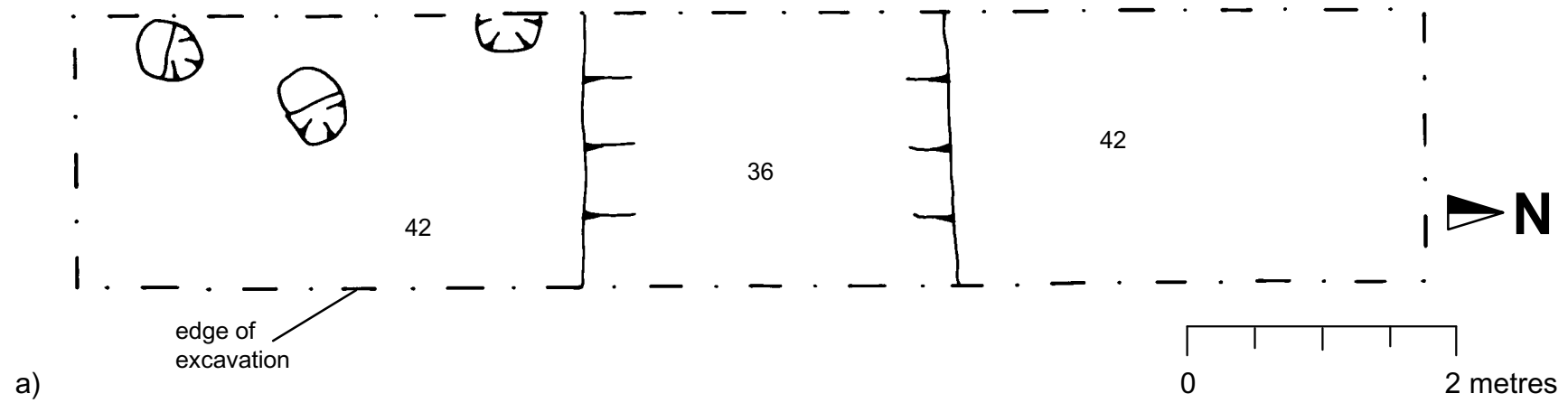
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Figure 3: The location of the trial trenches (A, D & E) and test pits (B, C & F); 1:1,000 scale



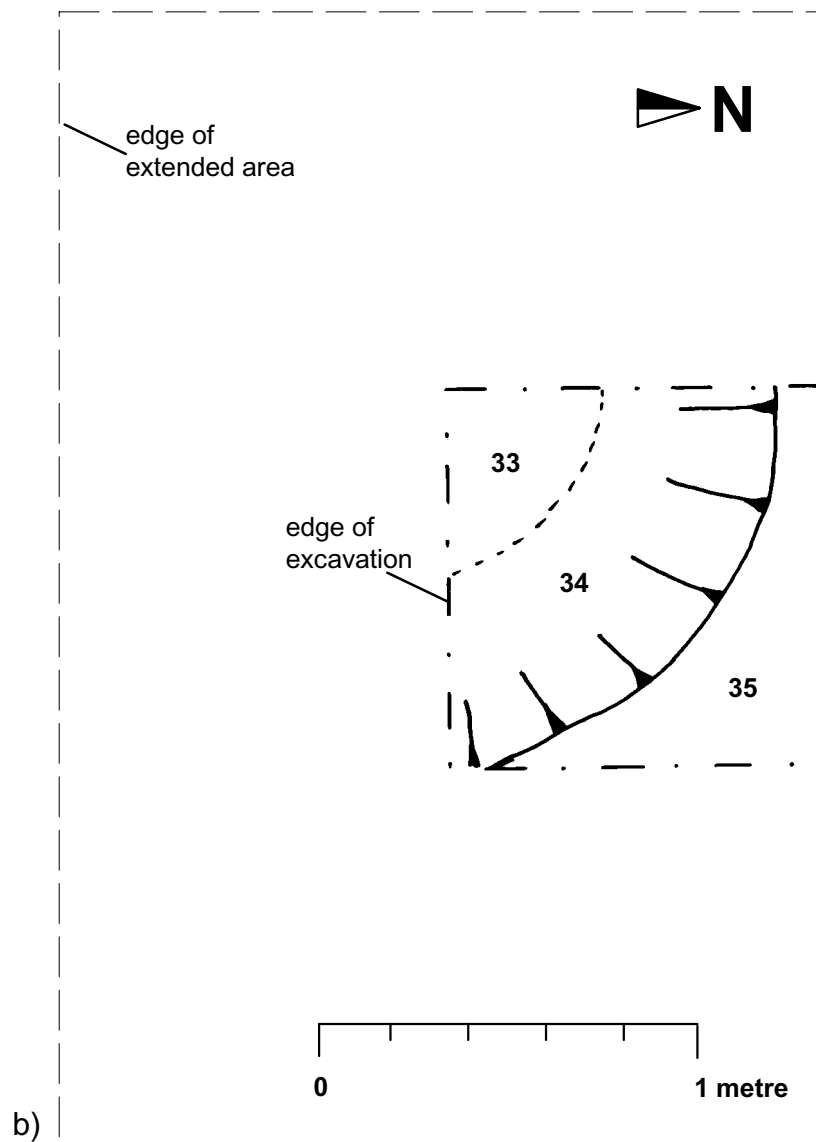
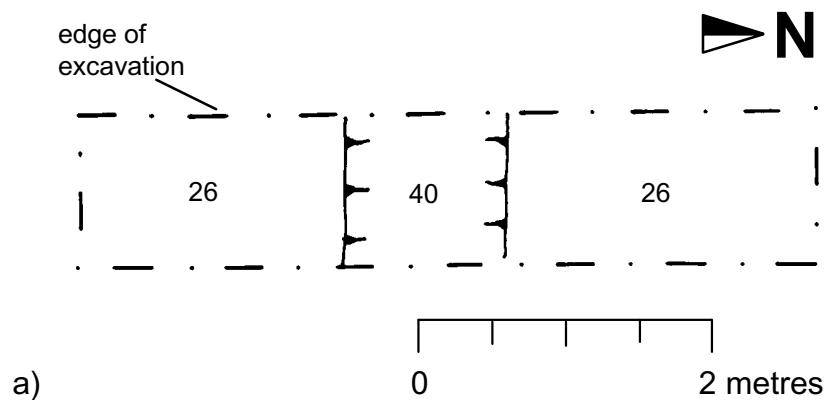
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Figure 4: Trench A; a) plan view, 1:50 scale; b) east-facing section, 1:20 scale



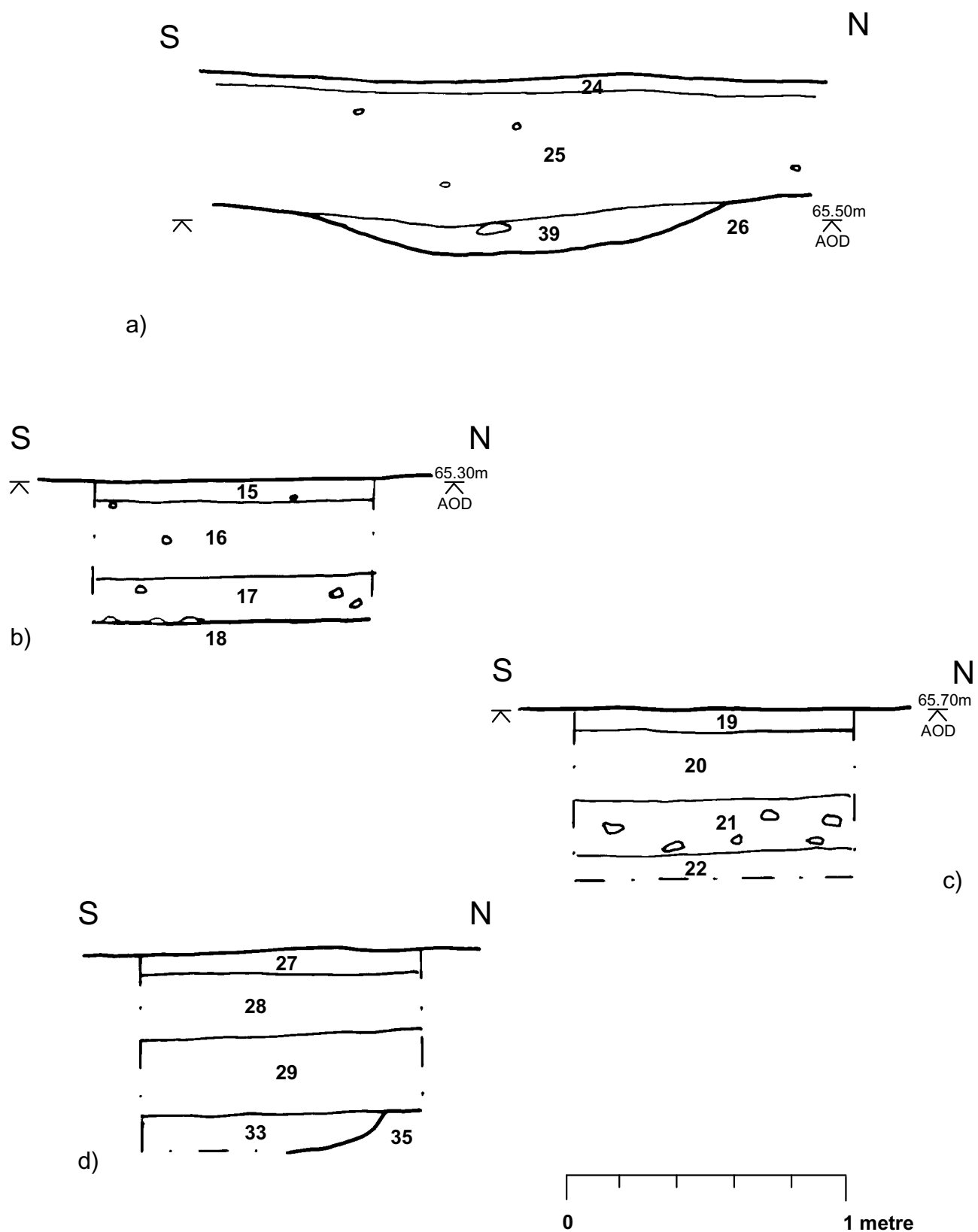
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Figure 5: Trench E; a) plan view, 1:50 scale; b) east-facing section, 1:20 scale



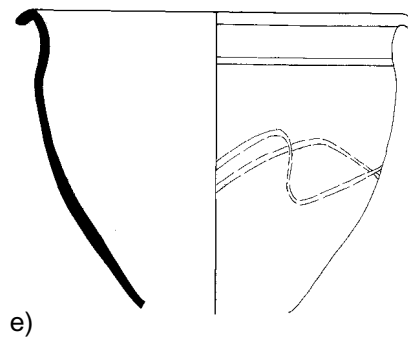
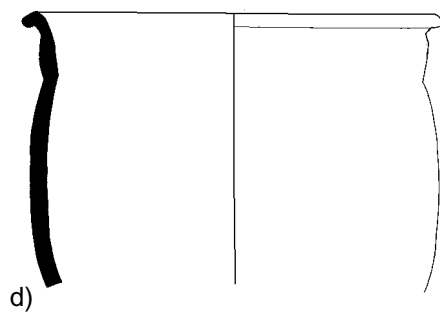
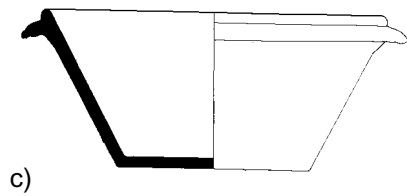
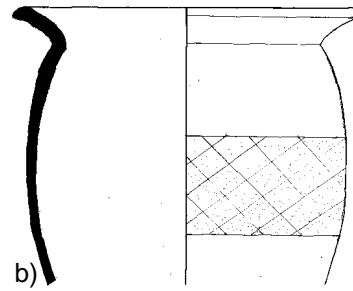
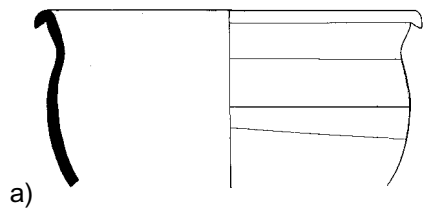
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Figure 6: a) Trench D, plan view, 1:50 scale; b) test-pit F plan view, 1:20 scale



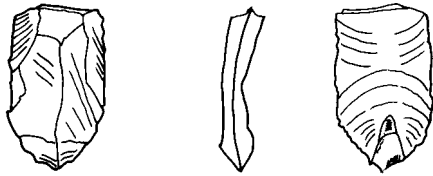
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Figure 7: a) Trench D, b) test-pit B, c) test-pit C, d) test-pit F, east-facing sections, 1:20 scale



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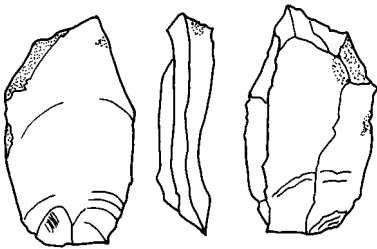
Figure 8: Roman pottery (late 3rd-4th C AD) from trench A; a) - c) BBII ware, d) & e) red wares;
1:4 scale



shp05 1002



shp05 1010



shp06 1007



shp06 1013

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Figure 9: Flint objects from the 2005 - 2006 excavation, actual size