Archaeological Investigations at

Sheinton, Shropshire

2004-5

by
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Archaeology Service

Shropshire
County Council

Archaeology Service Report Number 241

November 2005

ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS AT SHEINTON, SHROPSHIRE, 2004-5

by
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A Report for

SHEINTON HERITAGE GROUP

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SUMMARY

In 2004-5, 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. The cropmark feature was confirmed as a ditch which had silted up in the early Roman period. In the other field the geophysical survey indicated the presence of a couple of features which pre-dated the historic field pattern. Excavation to investigate one of these features close to the edge of the modern village recovered a quantity of Romano-British pottery from a feature suggesting occupation in this period close to the modern settlement.

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 is intended to run 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.

2.2 Objectives

The objectives of the year 1 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, the archaeological project would comprise a number of elements and activities. These would include field-walking, a controlled metal-detector survey, a geophysical survey, and trial excavations.

2.3.2 Field Walking The fields that had produced the metal detecting finds would be field-walked to recover and plot finds and artefacts from the site. Processing of the finds would be led by the Archaeology Service, and the results would be used to input into further field activities.

2.3.3 Controlled Metal detector survey A metal detector survey would be carried out under the supervision of the Portable Antiquities Officer for Herefordshire and Shropshire with assistance from the Archaeology Service in plotting finds using GPS survey equipment.

2.3.4 Geophysical Survey A geophysical survey would be carried out of the area of a cropmark enclosure in one of the fields and a sample area of a pasture field from which several concentrations of metal detecting finds had been recovered in the past.

2.3.5 Trial excavation.
Trial excavations would take place in the fields based on the location of the known metal detecting finds, and the results of the field-walking activity and the geophysical survey. One trench would be located to investigate the cropmark enclosure. This trench would be up to 15m long by 1.5m wide. A further trench (or trenches) would be located to investigate potential archaeological features highlighted by the geophysical survey and or field-walking.

All excavations would be carried out by hand to the top of significant archaeological deposits. Further sampling would be carried out to determine the nature, survival, quality, and significance of any features or deposits. A full written, drawn and photographic record would be made using the Archaeology Service's standard recording procedures. An illustrated written report would be produced on the findings of this work.

3 THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS

3.1 Archaeological and historical background

Man has been active in the area we know today as Shropshire since at least the latter stages of the last Ice Age some eleven thousand years ago. The earliest traces of human occupation belong to the hunter-gatherers of the Mesolithic period (or Middle Stone Age) of c. 10,000 BC to 4,500 BC. These hunter gatherers will have followed herds of big game migrating through the country from continental Europe of which the British Isles at that time were still part. The Severn valley and its terraces are likely to have been key migration routes for the big game. Until relatively recently Mesolithic people were not thought to have penetrated into any but the southeastern parts of Shropshire. However the recent discovery of flint-knapping and probable camping sites at Grinshill and Newport (Telford & Wrekin) have established these people's presence in the county. Sheinton's location on the river terraces overlooking the River Severn to the north and below the higher ground of Wenlock Edge to the south would place it firmly on the big game migration routes. The chances of finding evidence of Mesolithic human presence however are remote, and are likely to be confined to the chance-finding of stone tools. No Mesolithic finds have yet been recovered from the Sheinton area.

People probably first began to settle and farm in the area in the Neolithic period (or New Stone Age) about six thousand years ago. These early farmers have left traces of their presence in the form of chance finds of discarded stone tools. These include stone axes and other flint tools and scatters of flint tool-making waste; occasionally actual settlement sites have been hinted at by the discovery of fragments of Neolithic pottery, such as from The Roveries hillfort in southwest Shropshire and Belle Vue in Shrewsbury. In the Sheinton area a 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. These Bronze Age communities also left physical traces of their presence in the landscape in the form of the burial mounds or 'barrows' of the early Bronze Age (c. 2300- 1400 BC). These monuments are perhaps the earliest remains of man still to be found in the Shropshire landscape. Barrows are artificial mounds of earth or stone built up over one or more human burials. Large numbers of barrows can be seen in the hills of southwest Shropshire. In upland areas these burial mounds were often constructed wholly of stone and are more correctly termed cairns. In lowland areas barrows were usually built of earth excavated from a circular quarry ditch. On arable land, these have often been ploughed down, but their presence is sometimes revealed in the form of a type of cropmark known as a ring ditch. Ring ditches are formed by the in-filled quarry ditch surrounding the ploughed-down burial

mound, which produces marks in ripening crops that are visible from the air. Ring ditches can appear as single monuments but they tend to cluster in groups of two or more, perhaps representing cemeteries serving particular Bronze Age communities. Although no ring-ditches are known in Sheinton, half a dozen or so have been discovered from aerial photography in neighbouring Cressage parish, indicating the presence of a Bronze Age community in this general area.

Later prehistoric activity in the vicinity of the study area is more certainly attested by a cropmark enclosure, of a type which has been demonstrated by excavation to represent the remains of farmsteads occupied during the late Bronze Age, Iron Age, Romano-British, and early medieval periods. Although quite large numbers of people could have lived in the hillforts, most of the Iron Age population probably lived in small villages or farmsteads. Many of these farmsteads would have been enclosed by defensive ditches, banks, and palisades or hedges. Although few of these survive as earthworks today, aerial photography has revealed the remains of the silted up enclosure ditches of many of these farmsteads. Excavations carried out on some of these enclosures elsewhere in Shropshire and the Welsh borders have shown that they were occupied variously during the late Bronze Age, Iron Age, Romano-British, and early medieval periods. However, although an analysis of the distribution and form of these cropmark sites in the Welsh Marches was carried out in the early 1990s (Whimster, 1991) only a few sites have been even sampled archaeologically. One of these cropmark enclosures (SMR No. 00310) lies in Sheinton 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.

There are 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, though 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 whom 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). The church and churchyard stand on a mound at the northwest corner of a promontory overlooking the River Severn to the north, and a stream, the Sheinton Brook, to the west. The mound may be a natural glacial feature, but there is a possibility that it may be at least in part artificial, and just possibly be the site of a motte and bailey. The Old rectory, formerly the site of the manor house, occupies the highest point of this mound and may be on the site of the motte. Although motte and baileys are less common in this part of Shropshire than in the western parts of the county, there are the remains of a motte and bailey at Cressage (on the south bank of the ford). The location of the settlement at Sheinton on the promontory gives it a key strategic location with its extensive views across and particularly along the Severn valley both to the east and west.

3.2 The site evaluation

3.2.1 The study area

The study area for the first year's investigations comprised three fields all situated to the north of Sheinton Hall Farm. In the first field (Fig. 1; shp field 10) lay the cropmark enclosure (SMR No. 00310). This field had been under arable cultivation, and a wheat crop had been harvested in August 2004. The second field (shp field 7) lay to the north of the railway and had also been under arable cultivation in 2004. The third field (shp field 9) lay immediately to the west of field 10 and was under pasture in 2004/5 (although it has also been used for arable cultivation in the past). A number of metal detector finds had been made in this field in recent years.

3.2.2 The Field Walking

The western parts of two fields (fields 10 & 7) were walked systematically looking for distributions of finds that might be associated with the cropmark enclosure (00310) or other unknown features. The fields were divided into grid squares 50m x 50m in size aligned on the national grid. The squares were then systematically walked up and down with walkers spaced about 3m apart.

Conditions for walking field 10 were poor; the field had not been ploughed although the stubble left from the summer's wheat crop had been cut short. A scatter of Romano-British pottery was recovered amongst the brick and tile and post-medieval pottery collected from this field, although there was no particular concentration of this material.

Field 7 had been ploughed and sown before being walked. The results here were similar a small quantity of Romano-British pottery sherds came from across the field, but in an insufficient quantity to show any concentration of material.

3.2.3 The Geophysical Survey

A geophysical survey was carried out of the cropmark enclosure and an area of the adjacent field (Fig. 1; field 9) where concentrations of metal detecting finds had been reported. The survey was carried out according to a specification provided by the contractors, Archaeophysica Ltd, to a brief prepared by the writer. A full report on the geophysical survey is published separately (Roseveare & Roseveare 2005). The main findings of the survey are summarised below.

In the eastern field (field 10), the site of the cropmark was associated with a strong magnetic anomaly probably caused by the fill of a ditch (Fig. 2; 18). Crossing the anomaly was a series of features which probably represented relict cultivation furrows or drainage ditches between strip holdings.

The survey within the western field (field 9) identified a number of features associated with the former field layout, including the ploughed down remains of two field boundaries (Fig.2; 1 & 2) and a recently-filled holloway (4).

Two sets of weak linear anomalies related to cultivation at a different

orientation from the relict furrows in the eastern field. To the west of the holloway they survived as broad weak anomalies at approximately 8m centres. To the east they appear on a slightly different alignment as weak negative magnetic anomalies and may be gravel-filled drains.

In the southwest corner of the survey, a thin arc of ditch-type feature (7) was apparent as a weak positive anomaly. It did not appear to have been a field boundary and was interpreted as a possibly being a prehistoric feature. Another feature had the appearance of a wide ditch (8). A prehistoric origin for this feature was also considered to be not impossible .

3.2.4 The Metal Detector Survey

A metal detector sweep of the western field (Fig. 2 field 9) was organised by the Sheinton Heritage Project to be carried out under the supervision of the Portable Antiquities Liaison Officer. The finds were plotted by the writer using sub-meter GPS survey equipment.

The more interesting of the metal-detecting finds from the 11th December included:

1 token 1790 John Wilkinson (Ironmaster), probably of halfpenny value
1 halfpenny, Victoria, 1861
1 farthing, c 1820
1 coin/token - unidentifiable
20 musket balls and 1 pistol ball
2 buckles (post-medieval/modern)
Several unidentifiable scraps of iron and lead.

The majority of the finds recorded consisted of musket balls, with a particular concentration being located in a short band immediately blow a break in the slope of the promontory. The sheer number of musket and pistol balls that have come from this area suggest that the site may have been the site of target butts possibly used by local militia at any time between the Civil War and the Napoleonic Wars.

The Wilkinson token is of local interest. Wilkinson was one of the leading ironmasters in the region (if not country) at the end of the 18th century. Tokens would have been given to his workforce as pay to spend in the company shop. A temporary shortage of copper coinage between 1787 and 1797 led to the production of tokens by many firms at this time. Unlike 17th-century and earlier trade tokens, these late 18th-century tokens could in fact be exchanged or redeemed more widely than just in the company shop and although not "legal tender" they were widely circulated and accepted.

3.2.5 The Trial Trenches

Two trenches were located and laid out on the basis of the results of analysis of the cropmark evidence, the fieldwalking and metal detector sweep, and the geophysical survey. 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.

Trench A: Trench A (Fig. 2) was located in the field to the east of the track leading from Sheinton Hall Farm across the former Severn Valley Railway. It was intended to investigate the site of the southwestern arm of the ditch of the cropmark enclosure (SMR No. 00310). The field has been under arable cultivation for some considerable time. The trench was 15m in length by up to 2.5m wide.

The natural subsoil (Figs. 3 & 4; 5 & 6) was encountered at a depth of 0.4m – 0.5m below the existing ground surface and comprised rounded gravel in a brown silty matrix. The subsoil had been cut in the centre of the trench by a linear feature (Fig. 3; 7) about 3.5m wide. The feature ran at right angles to the line of the trench and its sides tapered down in a V-shape to a depth of 1.5m (2.0m below the present ground surface). This feature was identified as the southwestern arm of the enclosure ditch. The ditch was filled with a series of sandy and sand-silt deposits with varying amounts of gravel present which appeared to represent gradual silting of the ditch. There was no trace of any re-cutting of the ditch. No finds were recovered from the lower fills of the ditch. The fills were not waterlogged and the lack of charcoal inclusions suggested that their potential for environmental analysis would be low. The lowest fill (Fig. 4; 18) of the feature that produced any finds lay on the northeastern (inner) side of the ditch. The finds comprised the fragmentary remains of a Severn Valley Ware vessel embedded in a deposit of yellowish clay (12) that may have represented decayed organic waste, possibly even a cess deposit. The upper fill (8) of the ditch comprised a dark brown sandy loam and produced a few small sherds of Romano-British pottery, including a sherd of white-coated pottery of possible1st century date.

The ditch fills were sealed by a layer of gravely loam (4) and turf and ploughsoil (1) about 0.45m in depth. These layers produced further amounts of Roman pottery and four prehistoric worked flint flakes.

Trench B: Trench B (Fig. 2) was located in the field 9 to the west of the track leading from Sheinton Hall Farm across the former Severn Valley Railway, and was intended to investigate a feature identified by the geophysical survey as being a ditch of possible prehistoric origin.

The natural subsoil (Fig. 5; 106) comprised a light brown sand. The subsoil appeared to have been disturbed possibly by tree roots and no trace was seen of a feature corresponding with the geophysical anomaly. At the southern end of the trench an irregular-shaped pit (108) produced a few large sherds of a jar in a very hard-fired pottery with an orange fabric. A further piece of this pottery was found with three conjoining fragments of Black-Burnished Ware pottery on the surface of the natural 0.5m north of this pit.

This feature and the subsoil were sealed by a layer of brown sand (105) 0.3m deep and topsoil (101-3) 0.35m deep. No other significant features or deposits were located in this trench.

4 CONCLUSIONS

The field-walking of the fields north and south of the railway containing the crop-mark enclosure produced inconclusive results. Both fields produced a certain quantity of Roman pottery, with a slightly higher concentration over and immediately around the site of the enclosure. Conditions for walking the southern field were not ideal however, and better results might be obtained here in the future.

The geophysical survey confirmed the existence of a feature corresponding to the crop-mark enclosure, whose nature was not certainly apparent from the aerial photographs. In the western field, the survey identified a number of former landscape features (a trackway, former field boundaries, and possible cultivation ridges) and also suggested two further features which might represent archaeological features.

One of these features in the western field was investigated by trial trenching. No sign of the feature was located, but a number of sherds of Roman pottery were recovered from the surface of the sub-soil and further large sherds from a small pit cut into the subsoil.

In the eastern field, a section was excavated across the line of the enclosure ditch. The feature was found to have very accurately located by the geophysical survey, and proved to be a V-shaped ditch 3.5m wide by 1.5m deep. The size of this feature, compared with other excavated examples from the region, suggested a probable Iron Age rather than Romano-British date for the feature. The only finds from the ditch came from its upper (latest) fills, and these were of Roman pottery of 1st-2nd century date. This and the lack of finds from the lower ditch fills would also suggest that the enclosure ditch might have had its origins in the later Iron Age. The enclosure has been bisected by the former Severn Valley Railway line; to the north of the railway the site of the enclosure occupies a gravel spur projecting from the river terrace. The precise extent of the enclosure has not been determined here and further work is possible. To the south of the railway, the enclosure ditch was shown to be well preserved and the ground conditions suggested that there is a possibility that some deeper-cut internal features might also survive here.

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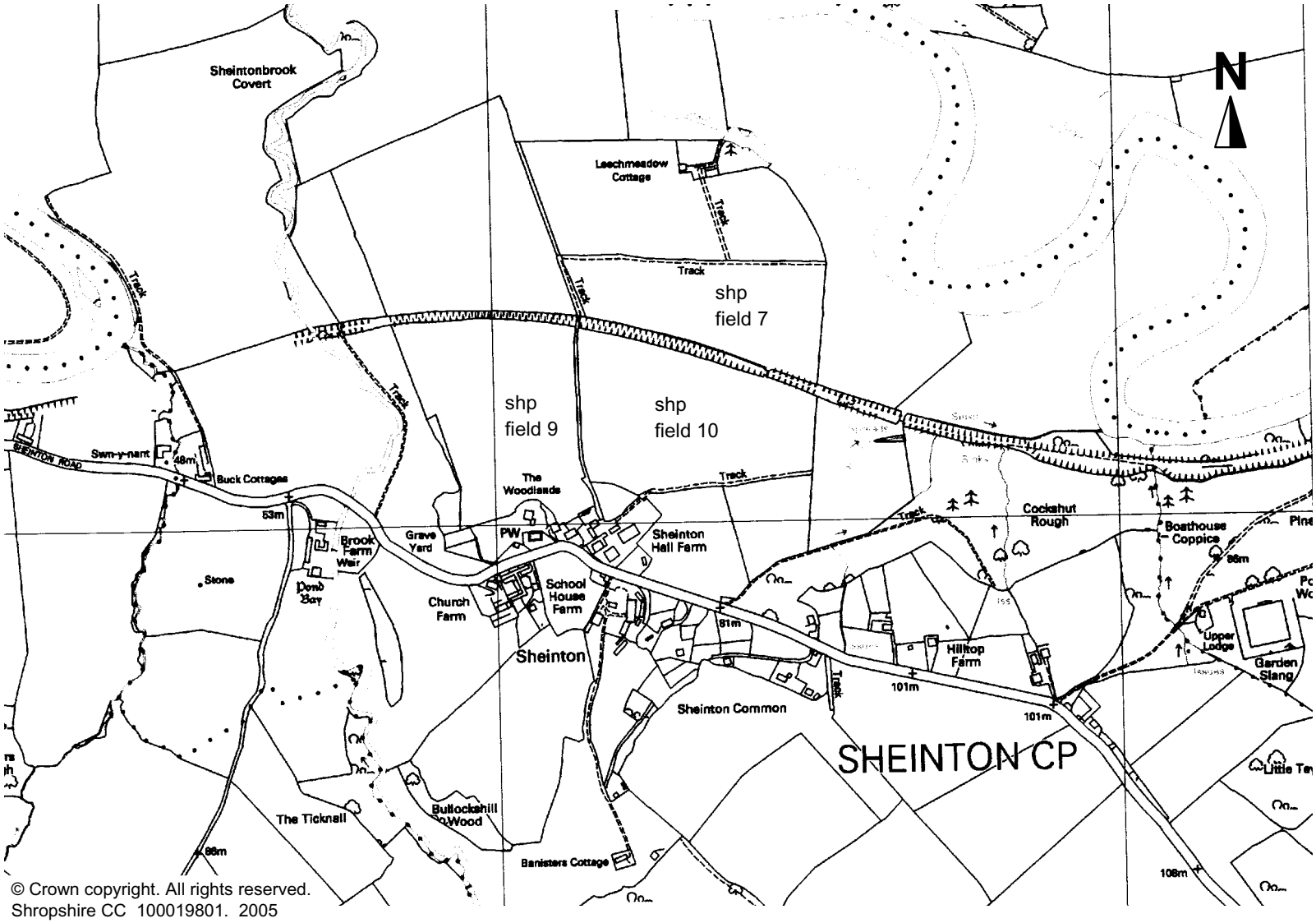
ABBREVIATIONS

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

6 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The writer would like to thank Malcolm Corrie and John and Peter Taylor for providing access to the site at Sheinton Hall Farm. The geophysical survey was undertaken by ArchaeoPhysica Ltd. Also thanks to all the members of the Sheinton Heritage Group for their enthusiastic participation in the fieldwork. Thanks too to the Belvidere School GCSE Archaeology students for their work on site, and to Matthew Allen Gareth Bowen, and Alison Hosker (Work Experience Students) for their help with the finds processing.



SHEINTON HERITAGE PROJECT 2004-5
Figure 1: Sheinton village; 1:10,000 scale

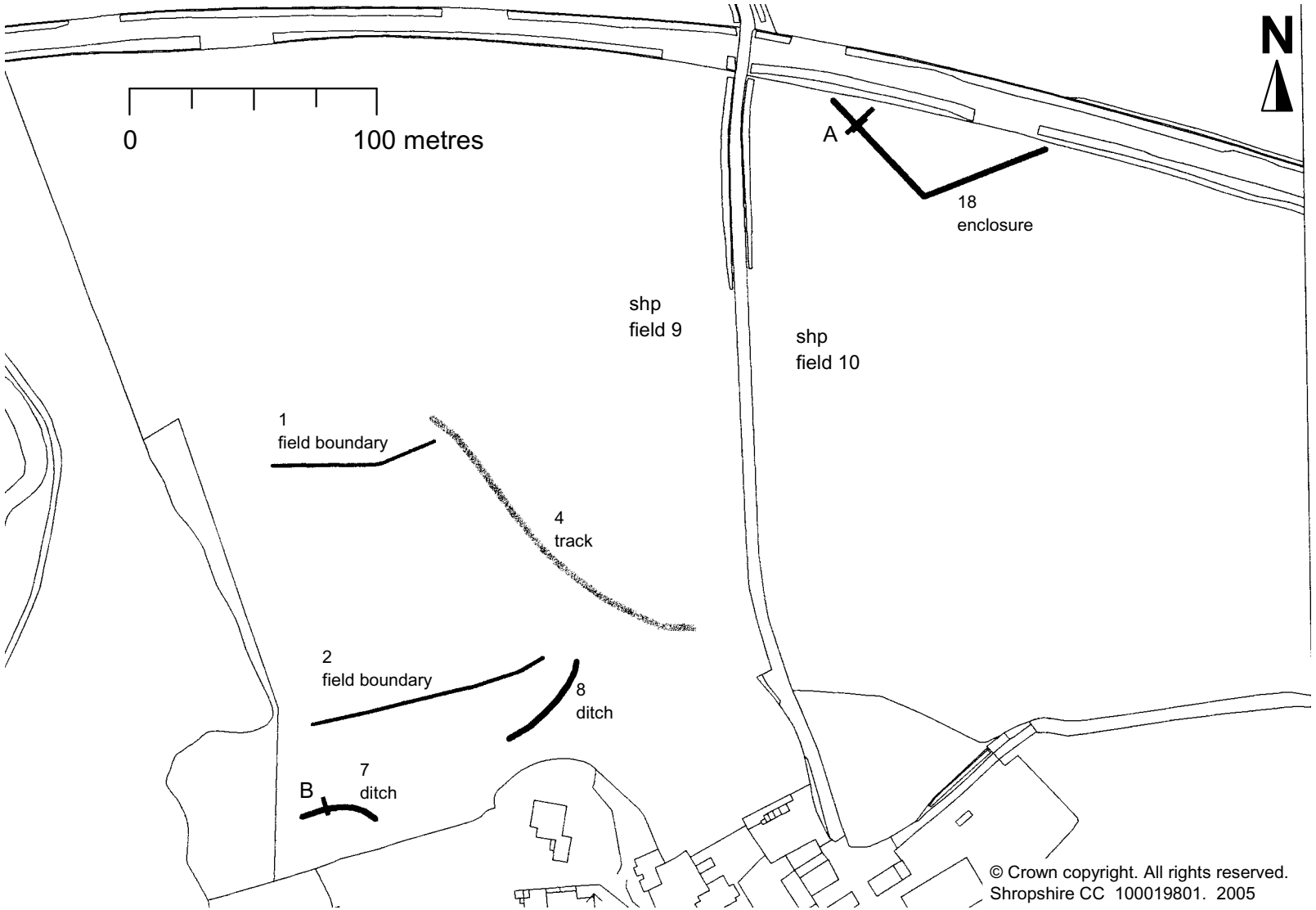


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Figure 2: The study area, showing pricipal features identified by the geophysical survey and the location of the excavation trenches; 1:2,500 scale

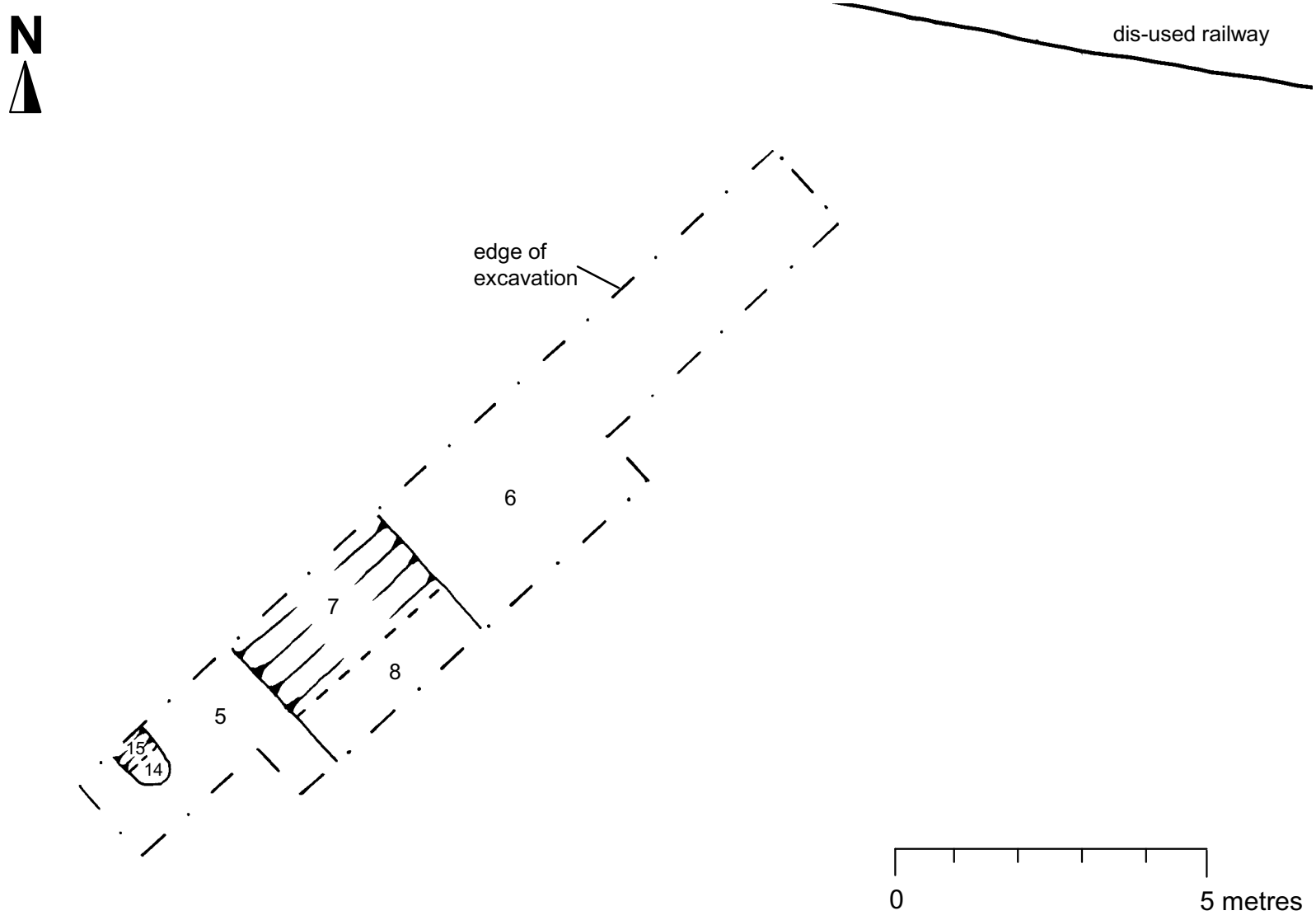

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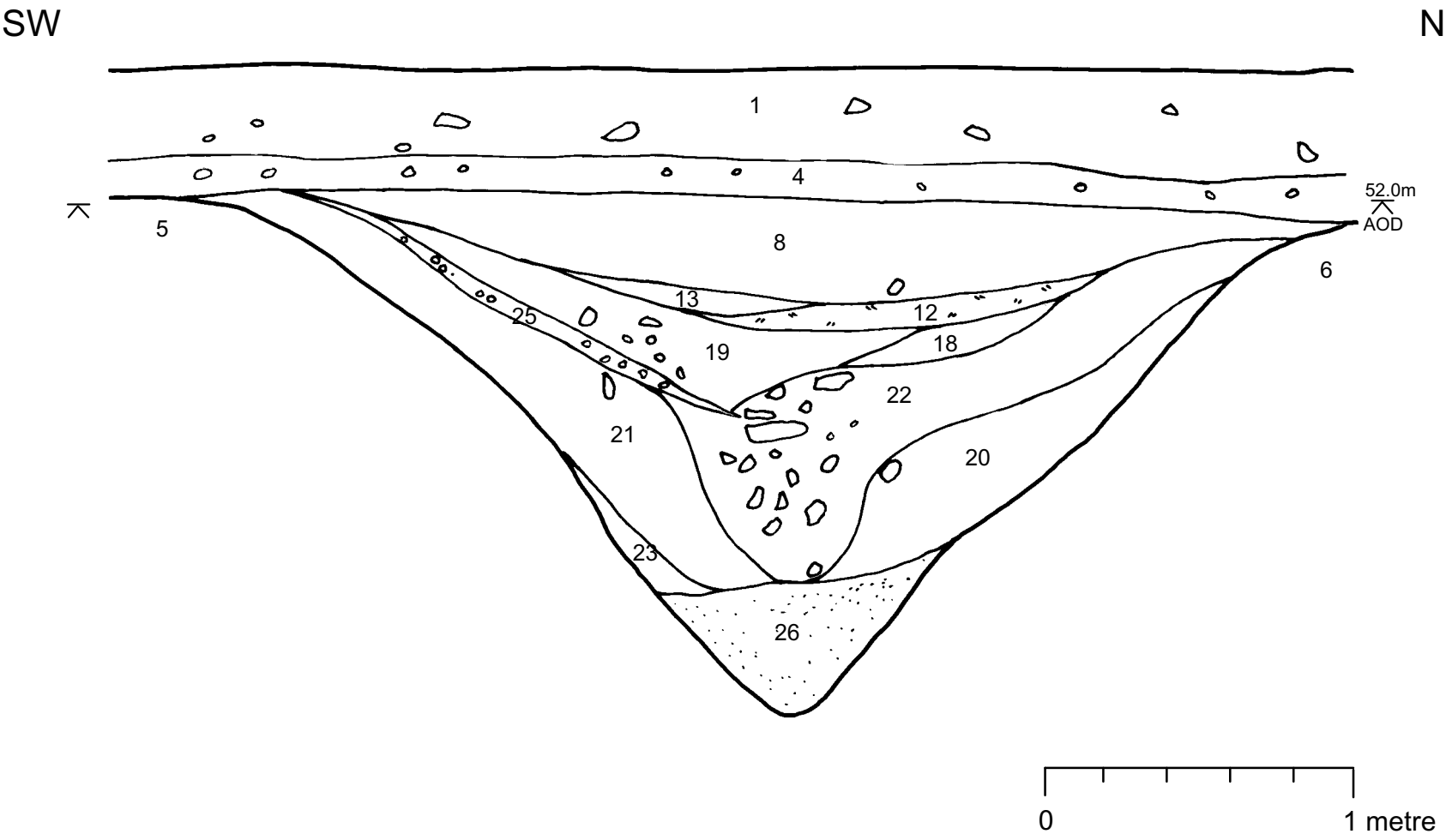
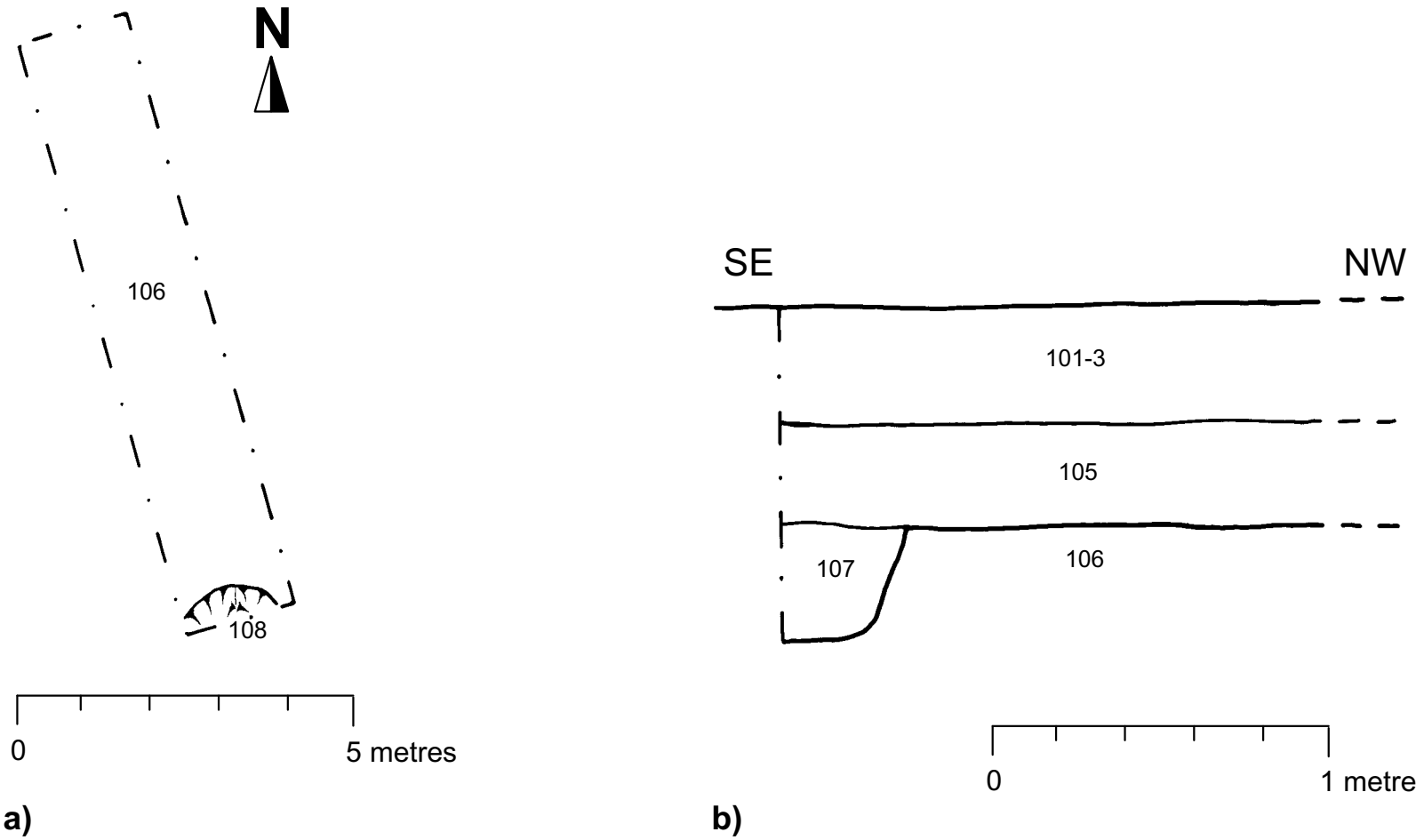
Figure 3: Trench A (plan view); 1:100 scale



SHEINTON HERITAGE PROJECT 2004-5
Figure 4: Trench A, enclosure ditch (south-east facing section); 1:20 scale



SHEINTON HERITAGE PROJECT 2004-5
Figure 5: Trench B; a) plan view 1:100 scale; b) northeast-facing section 1:20 scale