

PN 1812

**Wellhead Lane,
Perry Barr,
Birmingham**

**Archaeological
Excavation**

Wellhead Lane, Perry Barr, Birmingham

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATION

By

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SUMMARY

A proposed development at Wellhead Lane Sports ground in Perry Barr, Birmingham (centred on NGR SP 0727 9130) was likely to affect below ground archaeological remains. On instruction from Birmingham City Council, Birmingham Archaeology undertook an archaeological evaluation and subsequent excavation of the site between March and June 2008.

The site was considered to be of high archaeological potential as the western side of the development lay within the projected route of Icknield Street, a Roman Road which ran through Birmingham and possibly bisected the area.

The evaluation took place in March 2008 and involved the excavation of seven 50m long trenches across the site in order to assess the archaeological potential. Two of the trenches were positioned across the projected route of the Roman Road. A further five trenches were opened up to locate any archaeological features associated with Roman occupation or evidence of later periods of domestic or industrial activity. The two trenches positioned across the western side of the site successfully highlighted a northeast-southwest aligned ditch at the putative location of Icknield Street. There was no sign of any built road surface associated with the ditch. One of the evaluation trenches unearthed a second ditch, this being orientated east-west and located close to the eastern limit of the site.

The main aims of the excavation were to establish the date and extent of the east-west aligned ditch and to investigate the possible presence of any Roman roadside features across the eastern area of the proposed development site.

The excavation successfully proved that the east-west aligned ditch, which had been recut, was dated to the post-medieval period. The original and recut ditch apparently represented the remains of a field boundary dating to the 19th century. The excavation of a shallow gully, running parallel with the main ditches and a narrow north-south aligned ditch which respected them, served to illustrate that all the surviving archaeological remains were related to 19th century field systems.

Each of the archaeological features was sealed by a layer signifying a former topsoil. The layer was overlain by a deep levelling layer comprised of modern waste, notably vast quantities of broken and almost complete glass bottles from local breweries dating to the mid 20th century. The depth of the layer increased dramatically towards the east edge of the area as the level of the site had been reduced and subsequently built up during the 20th century prior to the development of the sports facilities.

WELLHEAD LANE, PERRY BARR, BIRMINGHAM: AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATION, 2008

1 INTRODUCTION

Birmingham Archaeology was commissioned by Birmingham City University to undertake an evaluation and excavation ahead of the construction of a sports hall, all weather pitch and associated parking and access road at land off Wellhead Lane, Perry Barr Birmingham (hereafter referred to as The Site, Planning Application Number N/00349/08/FUL).

This report outlines the results of an evaluation carried out in March 2008 and a field excavation which took place in June 2008. The report has been prepared in accordance with the Institute of Field Archaeologists *Standards and Guidance for Archaeological Excavations (IFA 2001)*.

An archaeological evaluation was carried out on the site (Duncan 2008) and a number of archaeological projects have taken place on land immediately adjacent to the site. The work included a desk-based assessment and a watching brief (Jones 1993) carried out to the south-west during the construction of halls of residence. To the north-east of the site a desk-based assessment (Halsted 2006) and an archaeological evaluation and excavation (Burrows and Halsted 2007) were completed.

The excavation conformed to a Written Scheme of Investigation (Birmingham Archaeology 2008) which was approved by the Local Planning Authority prior to implementation, in accordance with guidelines laid down in Planning Policy Guidance Note 16 (DOE 1990).

2 LOCATION AND GEOLOGY

The site is located off Wellhead Lane, Perry Barr, Birmingham (NGR SP 0727 9130 Fig. 1). The development area is bounded to the south and west by industrial and residential properties with sports fields to the north and east. The land is currently utilised as a grassed sport area.

The underlying geology of the area is boulder clay drift deposits situated within the loop of the River Tame (BGS MAP sheet 168) overlying solid sandstone from the Kidderminster Conglomerate. The sandstone was not exposed during the excavation, the natural subsoil deposits consisted of mixed sand and gravel of glacial origin.

3 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

A detailed analysis of the available archaeological evidence relating to the site and the immediate locality can be found in the desk-based assessment (Halsted 2006). The following paragraphs provide a background summary of this.

The proximity of the site, above the flood plain of the River Tame may have been a location conducive to prehistoric settlement. Mesolithic flint scatters have been recorded in association with the Tame to the west at Sandwell Valley, together with a Mesolithic radiocarbon date from Witton Hall and an Early Bronze Age macehead from Perry Common, although no prehistoric finds are known to have been discovered in the immediate vicinity of the site. Evidence of prehistoric activity in the Neolithic and Bronze Age periods was provided by environmental analysis of the fill of a prehistoric palaeochannel of the River Tame situated on land to the east of Aldridge Road, Perry Barr (Tetlow, et al, forthcoming).

The site lies on the projected course of the Roman Road, Icknield Street and close to a number of Roman coin find spots. A Romano-British Kiln site has also been recorded at Wellington Road, Perry Barr and c.0.5km to the south of the site (Hughes 1959). Romano-British settlement sites have been recorded and excavated elsewhere in Birmingham (Fig. 1). A significant Romano-British farmstead has been recorded at Longdales Road, Kings Norton, south Birmingham, in association with Icknield Street (Williams 2003a; 2003b). Romano-British activity has also been recorded at Parson's Hill, Kings Norton (Hodder 2002, 2) also in association with the Roman Road, and at the Roman Fort at Metchley, Edgbaston (Jones 2001 and 2005). The Roman Road has been demonstrated to be well preserved at Sutton Park (Margary 1967, 286; Hodder 2004, 61), and a further Roman pottery kiln has been recorded in the vicinity of Sutton Coldfield (Hodder 2002, 4). The proximity of the site at Holford Drive to the Roman Road, Icknield Street, may therefore indicate that evidence of Romano-British settlement survives here.

Holford Mill to the northeast of the site may have origins in the 14th century. The mill appears to have been in use as a hammer mill in the 16th century and as a blade grinding mill from the 17th -19th century (Pelham and Watts 1964). Possible industrial features dating to the 18th century in the form of a pebble surface, ditches and iron slag, have also been recorded to the south of the site (SMR 01153).

Archaeological remains of probable post-medieval date, consisting of a pebbled surface, ditches and iron slag, were identified during fieldwork immediately to the east of the application area (Linnane 1999). Further work to the north-east of the site (Burrows and Halstead 2006) identified a substantial undated ditch and several post-medieval features including fence lines and post-holes.

An archaeological evaluation of the proposed development site was undertaken in March 2008, involving the excavation of seven trenches. A ditch was located in two of the trenches (Fig. 2), aligned northeast-southwest, at the putative location of the Roman Road, Icknield Street (Duncan 2008). It was not possible to date the ditch and there was no sign of any built road surface associated with the ditch.

A further ditch was encountered close to the eastern limit of the site corresponding to the line of a field boundary illustrated on some of the earliest detailed maps of the area (Fig. 2). The ditch appeared to have silted up through natural processes and no finds were recovered. It had been sealed by 1.80m of modern debris, in particular broken glass bottles dating to the mid 20th century. The material probably represented a levelling deposit which had been brought in for the purpose of levelling the site prior to the development of the sports facilities.

4 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The principle aim of the excavation was to investigate the ditch found on the eastern side of the site in one of the evaluation trenches.

More specific aims were to:

- Establish the date, form and extent of the ditch found during the evaluation
- Establish the date, form and extent of any features associated with the ditch
- Investigate remains of past environmental conditions
- Investigate the remains of past industrial activity, indicated by features or residues

5 METHODOLOGY

The evaluation had involved the opening up of seven 50m long by 1.6m wide trenches in order to assess the archaeological potential of the site. Two of the trenches (numbered 1 and 7) were positioned across the proposed route of the Roman road, the remainder were located in order to expose any associated evidence of Roman occupation or signs of post-medieval archaeological activity.

The ensuing archaeological excavation concerned an area which measured 30m by 30m (900 m²) and was located on the eastern side of the development site (Figs 2 and 3).

All topsoil and overburden was removed by a 360° excavator equipped with a toothless ditching bucket, working under continuous archaeological supervision. Machining ceased once the uppermost archaeological horizon or the top of the subsoil was reached. All subsequent excavation and cleaning was carried out by hand.

All stratigraphic sequences were recorded, even where no archaeology was present. Features were planned at a scale of 1:20 or 1:50, and sections were drawn through all cut features and through all vertical stratigraphy at a scale of 1:10 or 1:20. A comprehensive written record was maintained using a continuous numbered context system on pro-forma context and feature cards. Written records and scale plans were supplemented by photographs using monochrome, colour slide and digital photography.

Environmental samples were taken from datable archaeological features. The environmental sampling policy followed the guidelines contained in the Birmingham Archaeology Guide to On-Site Environmental Sampling. Finds were cleaned, marked and remedial conservation work was undertaken as necessary. Treatment of all finds conformed to guidance contained within 'A strategy for the care and investigation of finds' published by English Heritage.

The full site archive includes all artefactual remains recovered from the site. The site archive will be prepared according to guidelines set down in Appendix 3 of the Management of Archaeology Projects (English Heritage, 1991), the Guidelines for the Preparation of Excavation Archives for Long-term Storage (UKIC, 1990) and Standards in the Museum Care of Archaeological collections (Museum and Art Galleries Commission, 1992). Finds and the paper archive will be deposited with the appropriate repository subject to permission from the landowner.

6 RESULTS

The most significant results of the evaluation related to the two trenches (numbered 1 and 7) situated towards the western side of the site, across the proposed route of the Roman road (Fig 2).

Trench 1 was aligned east-west and excavated to a depth of 0.75m below the modern ground surface. The natural subsoil consisted of mixed pockets of sand and coarse gravel (1005) which sloped downwards towards the east. The natural was encountered at 99.40m AOD at the western end of the trench and 98.65m AOD at the eastern end. Truncating the natural subsoil at the western end of the trench was a ditch (1004). This appeared to be aligned northeast-southwest and had a gently curved profile, 1.5m wide and 0.5m deep (Fig 4). The ditch was filled by a sand rich silt deposit (1003) with occasional small pebbles. Overlying the ditch was a layer of subsoil rich in silt (1002) up to 0.35m deep. This in turn had been sealed by the

topsoil (1001) which was overlain by a layer of turf (1000). No dating evidence was retrieved from this trial trench.

Trench 7 was located at the northwestern corner of the site and was aligned roughly east-west and excavated to a depth of 0.8m

The natural subsoil consisted of mixed sand and gravels (7004) and sloped downwards towards the east end of the trench at 98.92m AOD rising to a level of 99.56m AOD at the western end. The natural subsoil had been cut by a linear ditch (7003) aligned roughly north-south, which was located around 20m from the western end of the trench (Fig. 2). The ditch was 1.45m wide 0.5m deep and the fill consisted of beige sandy silt (7002 Fig 4). This was sealed by a layer of brown silt and sand subsoil (7001) which had a maximum depth of 0.4m. Cut into this was a small pit or posthole (7005) that was 0.2m in diameter and 0.08m deep filled by dark brown silt (7006). This was sealed by the topsoil (7000) which had a depth of 0.4m. Truncating this at the very western end of this trench were two cuts for electric services these were not excavated for reasons of health and safety.

The three trenches positioned across the central area of the evaluation site (numbered 2, 5 and 6) produced very little archaeological evidence; the only possible feature was a small and shallow pit located in trench 2 (2004) which was undated.

However trench 4 which was located close to the eastern boundary of the site contained evidence of possible archaeological activity. The trench was aligned north-south (Fig. 2) and was excavated to a depth of 2m. It was necessary to step the trench for safe entrance. The natural subsoil (4003) consisted of mixed sand and gravel lenses, located towards the southern end of the trench at a depth of 96.882m AOD rising to a level of 97.015m AOD at the northern end. The natural subsoil had been cut by a ditch (4005, Fig. 2). The ditch was aligned east-west and was 1.1m wide and 0.2m deep. It was filled by beige silt and sand with very few inclusions (4004) and no finds were recovered. To the north of the ditch was a tree bole (not illustrated). Both (4005) and the tree bole were sealed by a layer of soil (4002) 0.3m deep. This, in turn, had been sealed by a layer of mixed refuse including building rubble, ash, clinker, metal, and especially glass bottles up to 1.8m deep (4001). This and the area of the trench were sealed by a layer of turf (4000).

The results of the main excavation illustrated that the eastern side of the site had been dramatically cut away and subsequently levelled off. The natural sand and gravel subsoil (8020) was exposed at a depth of 97.85m AOD along the eastern limit of the excavation area. However across the western edge of the excavation area the natural sand was recorded at a depth of 99.05m AOD.

The natural sand and gravel (8020) had been cut by a ditch (8006) (Fig 3), which represented the linear feature exposed during the evaluation in Trench 4 (4005, Fig 2). The ditch ran right across the site on an east-west alignment. Three further sections were excavated through the ditch (8010/8032/8015), the northern side of which sloped quite gradually, revealing a slightly rounded base. The ditch had been less truncated by ground levelling activity as it continued westwards and measured a maximum of 0.62m in depth; ranging in width between 1.80-2.10m. It had been filled with mid grey-brown silty sand (8009/8031/ 8014) which contained pieces of pottery dating to the 18th and 19th centuries. The southern edge of the original ditch had been cut by a second smaller ditch (8004/ 8008/ 8030/ 8013) which ran parallel to it (Figs 3 and 5). The later ditch measured a maximum of 1.15m in width and 0.36m deep and had quite steeply sloping sides with a 'U'-shaped profile. It was filled with distinctive dark grey-brown silty clay sand (8003/8007/8029/8012) which contained a number of pottery sherds also dating to the 18th and 19th centuries.

A third east-west aligned linear feature, a shallow gully (8028/8034/8017), was situated approximately 0.25m to the south of the aforementioned ditch (Figs 3 and 5). The gully measured 0.35- 0.50m in width and a maximum of only 0.10m in depth and was not visible at all towards the eastern edge of the excavation. The gully had a dark silty sand infill and one of the sections (8027) produced glass, clay pipe, tile and a sherd of pottery dated to the 18th/19th centuries.

The butt end of a northeast-southwest aligned curvi-linear gully (8044) was exposed approximately 0.50m to the south of one of the excavated sections through the gully (8034). The curvi-linear gully (Fig 3) measured 0.44m wide and 0.28m deep and was filled with dark grey-brown silty clay sand (8043) which contained pottery dating to the late 18th century. Two more sections (8036/8026) were excavated across the gully at regular intervals further to the south-west. The gully had been cut by two small and shallow sub-circular pits (8038 and 8024) which did not contain any datable evidence. A shallow pit (8019) which measured 1.10m in diameter and contained fragments of post medieval brick was excavated to the west of the gully. To the east of the aforementioned gully an irregularly shaped shallow feature (8040) with a sterile sandy fill and traces of roots was interpreted as the impression of a tree bole. Another irregularly shaped shallow feature (8022) appeared to be the remains of rodent activity.

All the excavated ditches, gullies and pits were overlain by a layer of mid grey-brown sandy silt (8002) which measured 0.30m deep and contained occasional small stones but no datable finds. The layer apparently represented the original topsoil prior to the area being levelled off. It had been sealed by a deep levelling layer (8001) which measured a depth of between 1.60 and 2.30m towards the extreme eastern edge of the area of excavation (not illustrated). The grey-brown silty clay sand layer notably contained vast quantities of glass bottles from local breweries, many of which were almost complete. The layer was overlain by the topsoil (8000) measuring 0.30m in depth.

7 FINDS

The pottery by Stephanie Rátkai

The small assemblage of pottery (Table 1) contained nothing which was earlier than the 18th century and it is most likely that all the pottery was deposited after c 1750. The most complete vessels came from a very late deposit, context 8001 and consisted of stoneware drinks bottles, two of which were complete, and a gallon jar, with black-printed 'Holt Brewery Co Ltd, Wine & Spirit Merchants, Birmingham' on the shoulder.

A further stoneware bottle was marked 'Thack[ery] EXC[ELSIOR?] WORKS WARWICK'. Other paraphernalia associated with a public house were an Ansell's Brewery ashtray and the plinth from a figurine promoting White Horse whisky. Also found in this context was a complete crucible, fairly small in size, possibly associated with copper alloy working. It is likely to be relatively modern.

Table 1

context	feature	ware	quantity	weight	Form	date
4001	eval	brown stoneware	1	746	bottle	late 19th-20th c
4001	eval	light-bodied stoneware	1	313	jar	late 19th-20th c
4001	eval	earthenware	1	124	vase	late 19th-20th c
8001		brown stoneware	1	722	bottle	late 19th-20th c
8001		brown stoneware	1	584	bottle	late 19th-20th c

8001		light-bodied stoneware	1	3800	flagon/gallon jar	late 19th-20th c
8001		earthenware?	1	130	ashtray	20th c
8001		earthenware?	1	167	figurine base	20th c
8001		brown stoneware	1	548	bottle	late 19th-20th c
8001		light-bodied stoneware	1	125	bottle	late 19th-20th c
8001		crucible		875	crucible	?
8003	8004	white salt-glazed stoneware	2	6	plate	c 1720-1770
8003	8004	creamware	1	2	shell-edge plate	1760s-1770s
8003	8004	coarseware	1	7	jar?	18th c
8003	8004	waster/overfired coarseware	1	8	?	?
8007	8008	creamware	2	3	?	1770s-1780s
8007	8008	mottled ware?	1	9	mug	18th c
8007	8008	slip-coated ware	1	2	hollow ware	18th c
8007	8008	pearlware	1	<1	plate	early 19th c
8009	8010	coarseware	1	23	bowl?	18th-19th c
8012	8013	coarseware	1	5	?	18th-19th c
8014	8015	blue transfer-printed ware	1	2	?	post 1850
8014	8015	brown transfer-printed ware	1	11	?	post 1850
8027	8028	coarseware	1	24	jar?	18th-19th c
8029	8030	creamware	1	12	chamber pot?	1780s-1790s
8029	8030	white salt-glazed stoneware	1	10	rope-edge plate	c 1720-1770
8029	8030	slip-coated ware	1	5	bowl	18th c
8031	8032	coarseware	1	16	bowl	18th-19th c
8043		creamware	1	<1	?	later 18th c
8045		creamware	1	<1	?	later 18th c
8045		pearlware?	1	<1	plate	early 19th c?

The environmental results by Rosalind McKenna

All of the samples contained root/rootlet fragments, charcoal fragments and sand. Plant macrofossils were present in SN1 and SN2 but those remains encountered were probably modern contaminants due to their preservation and colour. Charred plant macrofossils of several weed seeds were recovered from SN2 but in single numbers, and were of no significance or interpretable value.

The full environmental report can be found in Appendix 1.

8 DISCUSSION

With reference to the archaeological implications of the proposed development site, the results relating to the evaluation work at Wellhead Lane had particular significance. The northeast-southwest aligned undated ditch (1005 and 7003) which was identified in Trenches 1 and 7 (Duncan 2008) was in the correct location to represent the eastern ditch at the side of the Roman Road (Figs 2 and 5). The evidence to support the theory (Duncan 2008) that the feature was related to the Roman Road was provided by descriptions of the surviving road where it had been recorded along the route, notably in Sutton Park. Attention was drawn to the fact that the road surface was not well made and certainly not paved. The construction of the surface was dependent on the availability of materials (Hodder 2004, 61).

Survey work in Sutton Park suggested that the ditches on either side of the roadway were likely to be associated with surveying the route, rather than a part of the construction (ibid 62). It has been suggested (Duncan 2008) that the character of the road observed to the north of the Wellhead Lane site compares with that observed in the evaluation trenches. The surviving evidence was thought to relate to the road construction and it has been assumed that the actual road surface had been completely eroded over the course of time. The fact that the remains of the ditch which was located in the evaluation trenches was sealed by 0.40m of subsoil and 0.40m of topsoil suggested an accumulation of deposits over some time (Fig. 5).

The excavation successfully addressed the questions concerning the date, form and extent of the linear ditch which had been located in the evaluation Trench 4 (4005, Fig. 2). The original ditch and smaller re-cut ditch which traversed the entire site on an east-west alignment probably represented the remains of a field boundary dating to the 19th century (Figs 3 and 4). Both of the other archaeological features which were uncovered during the excavation, namely a north-south aligned gully and an east-west aligned gully, appeared to respect the field boundary. The aforementioned ditch corresponded with the location of a boundary illustrated on the majority of the historic maps (Fig 9-10 and 12-16 in Halsted 2006) and still surviving on the edge of the crown bowling green and tennis court through which the evaluation Trenches 1 and 2 were excavated. Therefore the archaeological evidence from the excavation related to the remains of post-medieval field systems.

The results of the evaluation and excavation served to illustrate the absence of Roman settlement adjacent to the line of the Roman Road, perhaps suggesting that the area was used for agricultural purposes such as the grazing of livestock and not associated with permanent settlement.

9 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The excavation was commissioned by Birmingham City University. Thanks are due to Brian Rance of BCU Estates and Joe Turner of Turley Associates for their help throughout the project and to Dr Mike Hodder for monitoring the project on behalf of Birmingham City Council. The project was supervised by Bob Burrows, assisted by Phil Mann and Sam Hepburn. The specialists are thanked for their contributions. The illustrations were prepared by Nigel Dodds and the text was edited by Sam Paul who also managed the project for Birmingham Archaeology.

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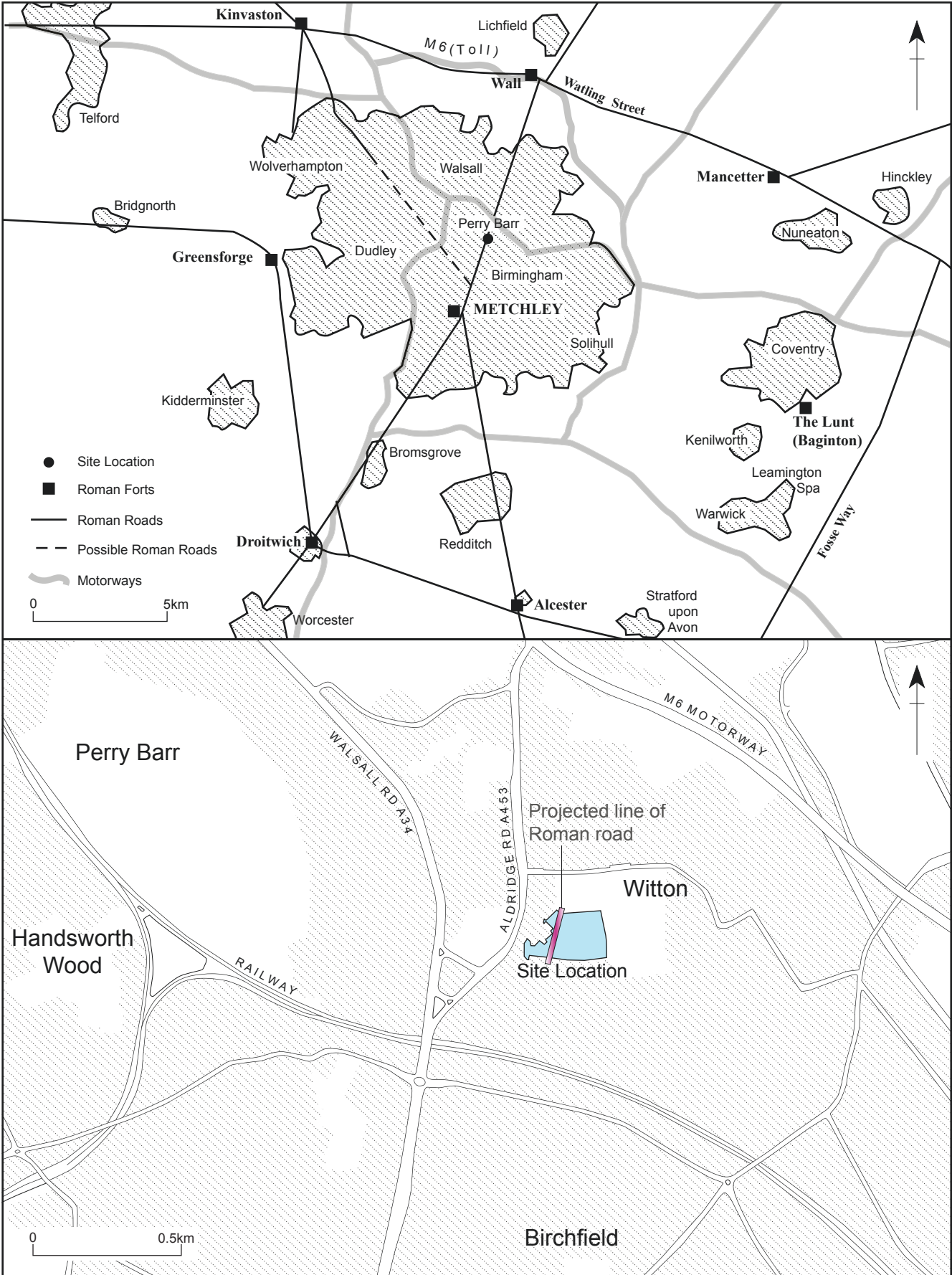


Fig.1

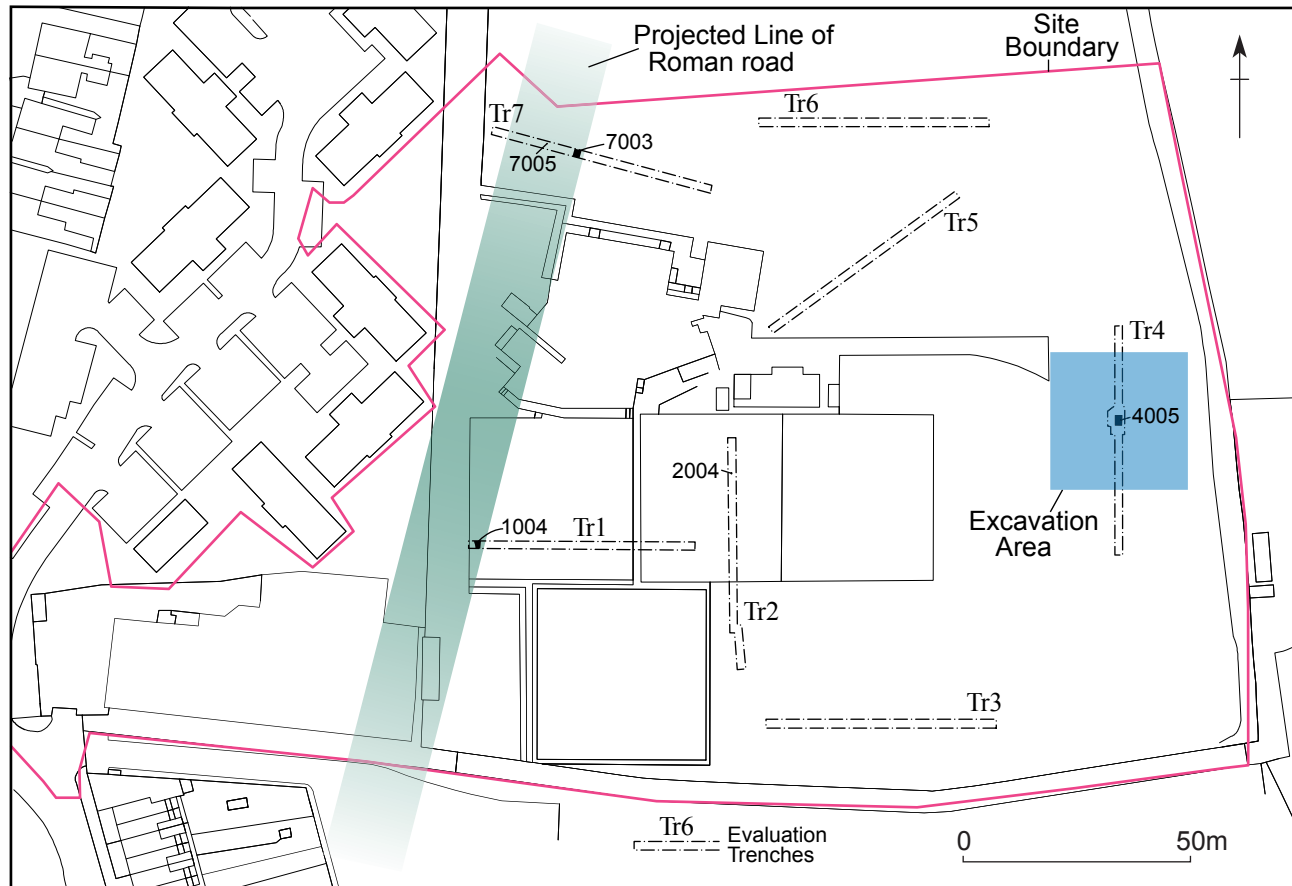


Fig.2

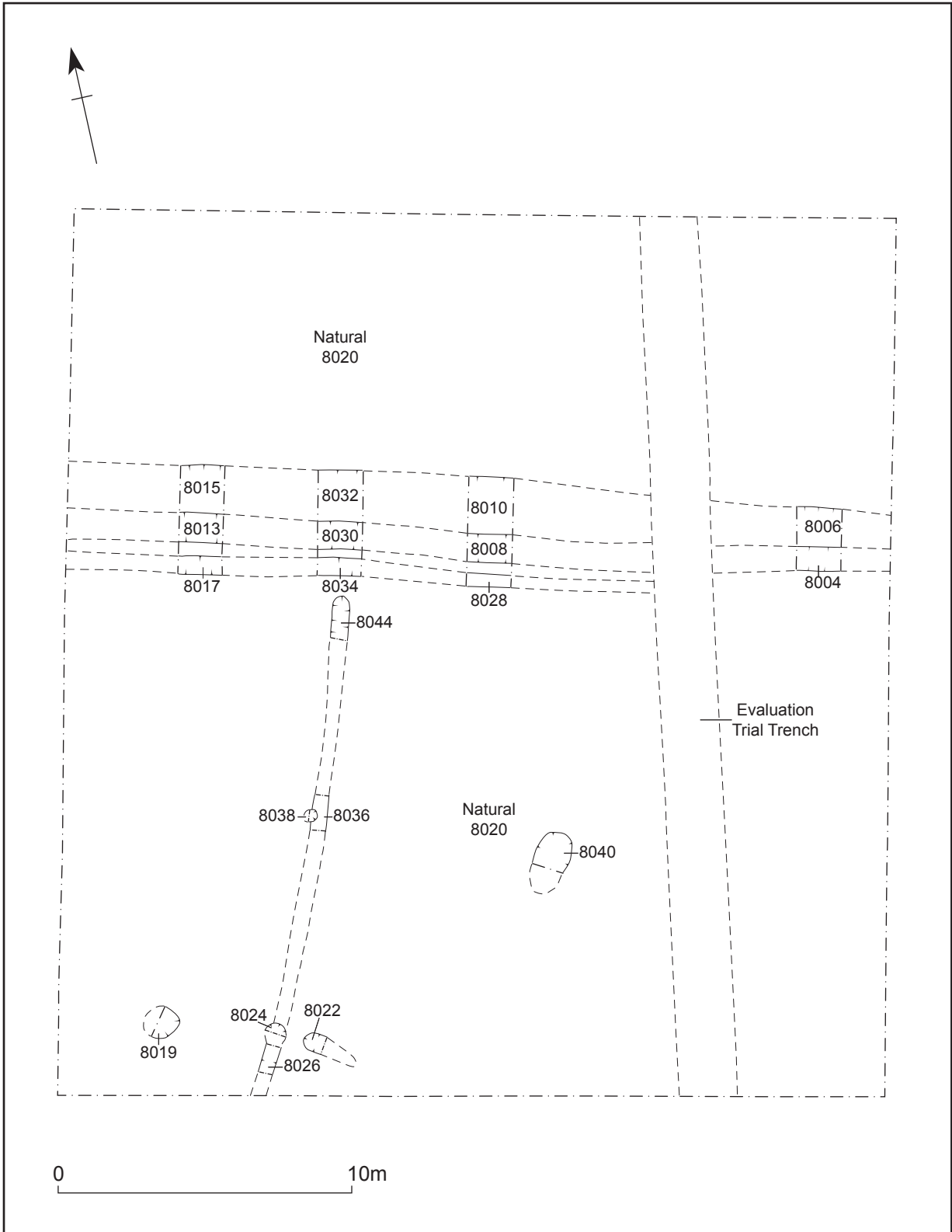


Fig.3

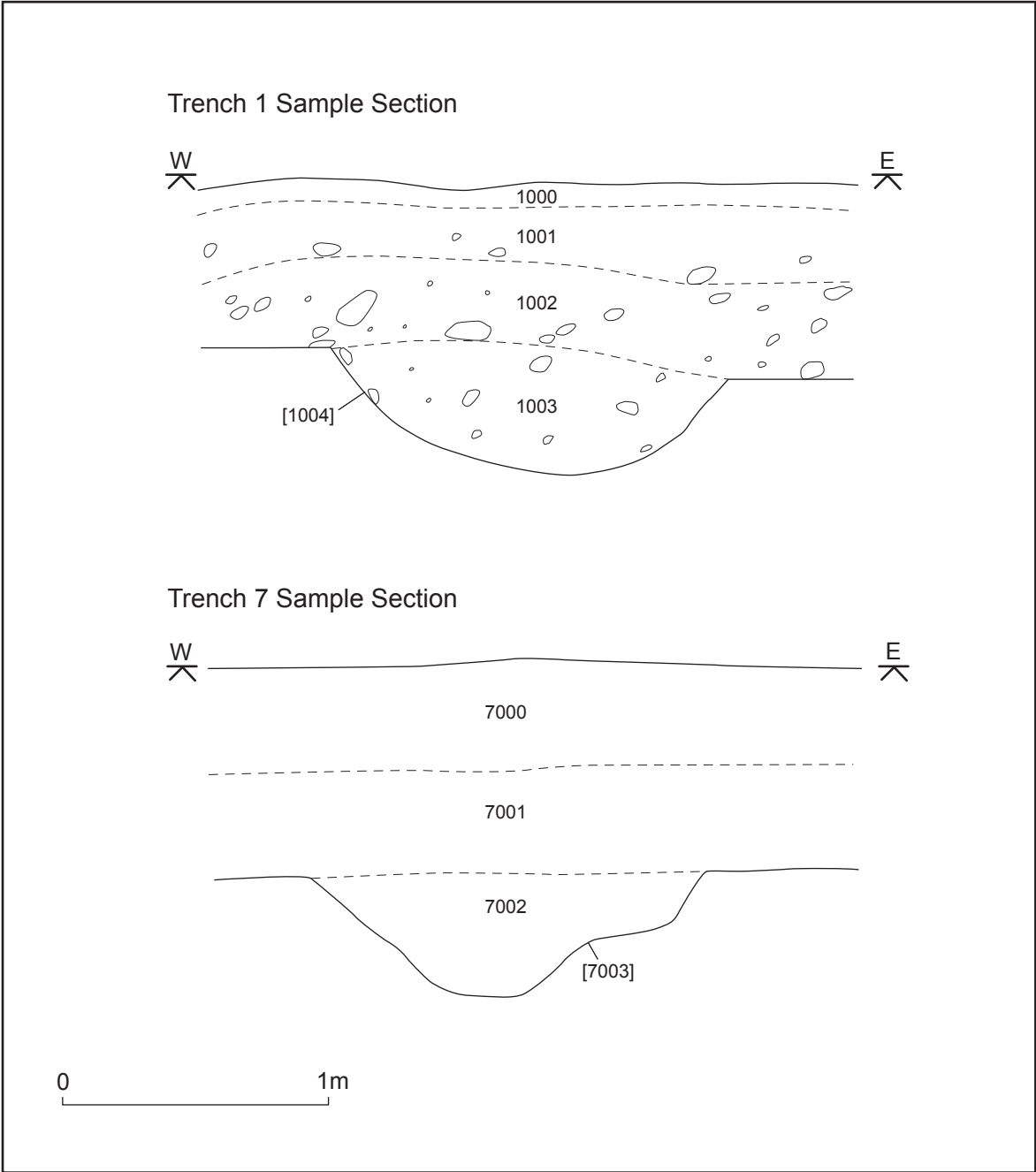


Fig.4

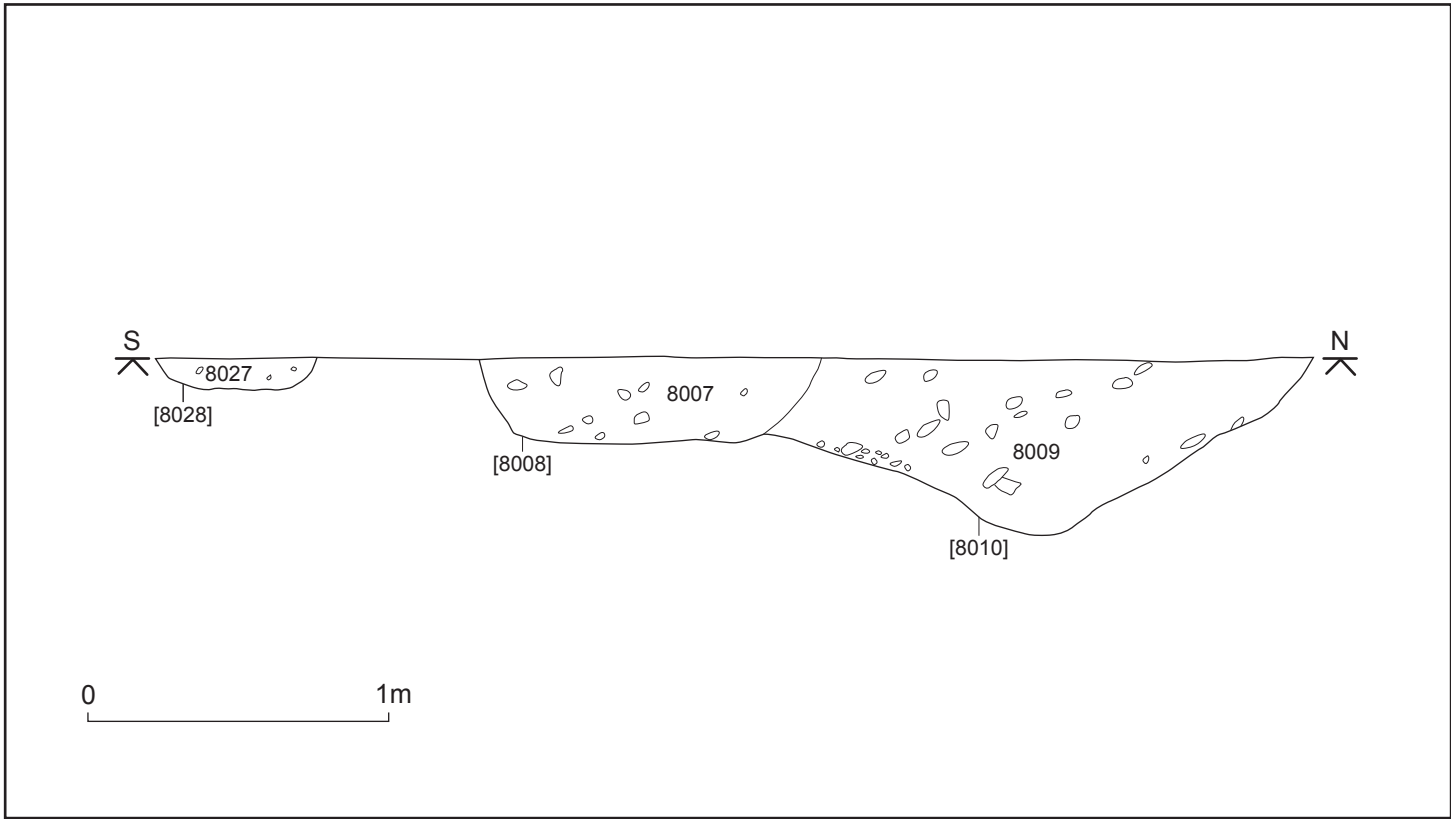


Fig.5

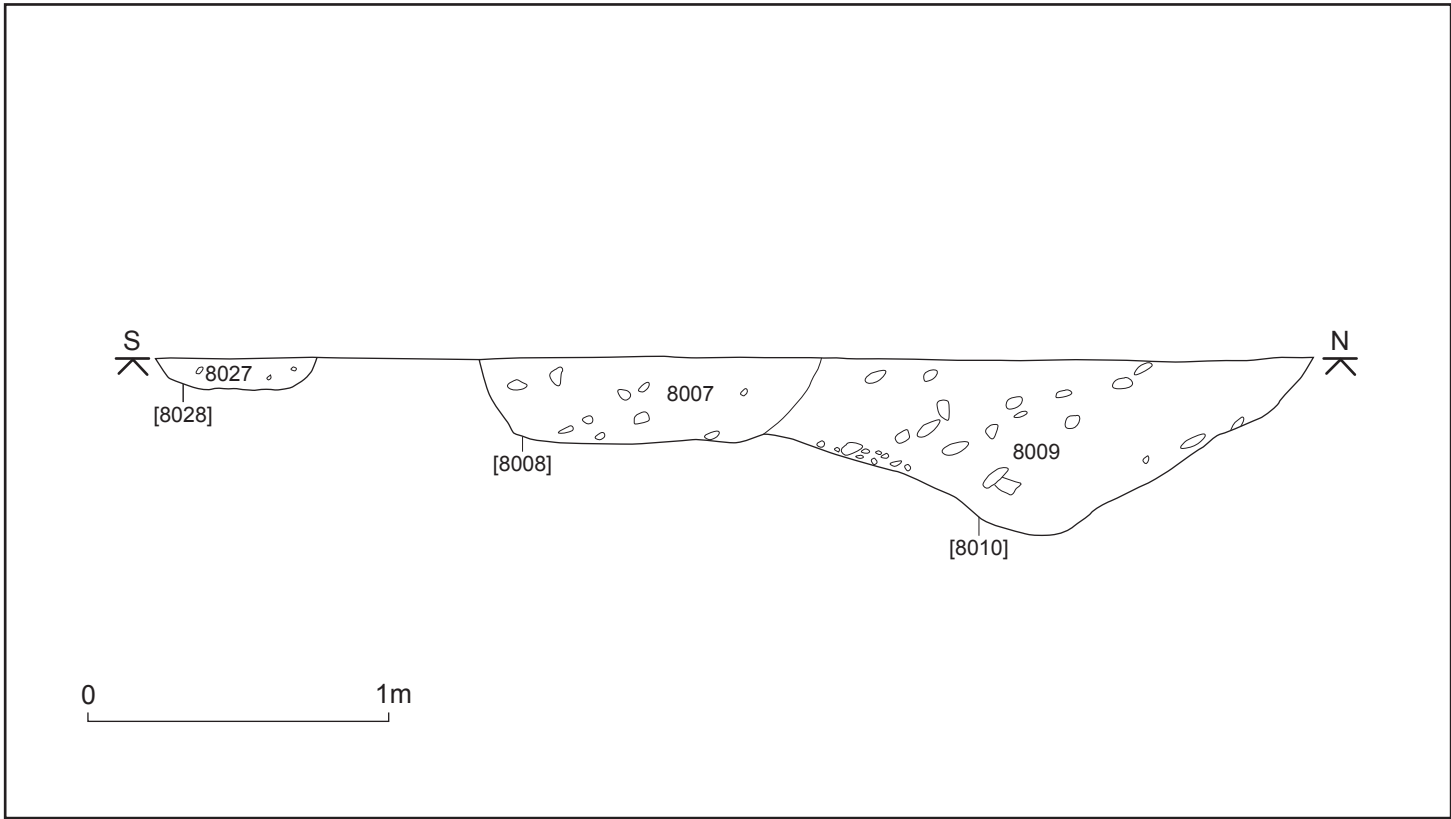


Fig.5



Plate 1



Plate 2



Plate 3

11 APPENDIX 1

The environmental results by Rosalind McKenna

Introduction

A series of three samples – SN1 (8009), SN2 (8012) and SN3 (8043) from deposits excavated at Wellhead Lane sports field, Perry Barr, Birmingham were submitted for an evaluation of environmental potential. The excavation was carried out by Birmingham Archaeology in June 2008. The samples came from two ditches and a gully.

A programme of soil sampling from sealed contexts was implemented during the excavation. The aim of the sampling was to assess the type of preservation and the potential of the biological remains in the reconstruction of:

- Any human activities undertaken on the site
- The environment of the surrounding area

Methods

The material was processed by staff at Birmingham Archaeology using their standard water flotation methods. The flot (the sum of the material from each sample that floats) was sieved to 0.5mm and air dried. The heavy residue (the material which does not float) was not examined, and therefore the results presented here are based entirely on the material from the flot. The flot was examined under a low-power binocular microscope at magnifications between x12 and x40.

A four point semi quantitative scale was used, from '1' – one or a few specimens (less than an estimated six per kg of raw sediment) to '4' – abundant remains (many specimens per kg or a major component of the matrix). Data were recorded on paper and subsequently on a personal computer using a Microsoft Access database.

Results

All of the samples contained root/rootlet fragments, charcoal fragments and sand. Plant macrofossils were present in SN1 and SN2 but those remains encountered were probably modern contaminants due to their preservation and colour. Charred plant macrofossils of several weed seeds were recovered from SN2 but in single numbers, and were of no significance or interpretable value.

Recommendations

No further interpretable proxy evidence such as archaeological charred or waterlogged plant remains and insects were recovered from the remaining samples, hence further environmental analysis on these samples is not recommended. Taphonomic and post-depositional processes at the site clearly preclude the preservation of identifiable or interpretable, site-specific proxy evidence.

Any sediment that remains from these samples and others from the site can be discarded with the agreement of the project manager and the county archaeologist.

Any material recovered by further excavations should be processed to 0.3mm in accordance with standardised processing methods such as Kenward *et al.* 1980, and the English Heritage guidelines for Environmental Archaeology.

Archive

All extracted fossils and flots are currently stored with the site archive in the stores at Birmingham Archaeology, along with a paper and electronic record pertaining to the work described here.

References

English Heritage 2002 *Environmental Archaeology: A guide to the theory and practice of methods, from sampling and recovery to post-excavation*. English Heritage Publications. Swindon.

Kenward, H.K., Hall, A.R. and Jones A.K.G. 1980 *A tested set of techniques for the extraction of plant and animal macrofossils from waterlogged archaeological deposits*. *Science and Archaeology* 22, 315.