

# Hopcrofts Holt Hotel, Steeple Aston

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## Archaeological Evaluation Report

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OXFORD ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT

May 1996

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April 1996

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**HOPCROFTS HOLT HOTEL, OXFORD ROAD,  
STEEPLE ASTON, OXON. (HNSA 96)  
NGR SP 251 466  
ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION REPORT**

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**HOPCROFTS HOLT HOTEL, OXFORD ROAD, STEEPLE ASTON, OXON.  
(HNSA 96)**

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**Summary**

*An archaeological evaluation within the grounds of Hopcrofts Holt Hotel on Oxford Road, Steeple Aston revealed evidence for a concentrated area of early Romano-British activity to the north west of the site. No significant archaeological deposits were present over the rest of the application site.*

**1.1 Introduction**

The Oxford Archaeological Unit was commissioned to undertake an archaeological evaluation within the grounds of Hopcrofts Holt Hotel, Steeple Aston, Oxon, on behalf of Gabriel Lewis Associates in relation to a proposal for alterations and extension to the existing hotel. Because of the proximity of this development to sites of archaeological interest, the need for archaeological investigation has been advised by the County Archaeological Officer in accordance with PPG 16.

**1.2 Geography and Topography Fig. 1**

The site lies on the junction of the A423 Oxford-Banbury Road and the B4030, on the eastern edge of the North Oxfordshire Heights immediately west of the River Cherwell. The geology of the area is mainly shallow, brashy calcareous brown earths over limestone, but the actual proposal area is located on a pocket of clay enriched ferruginous sand.

**1.3 Historical and Archaeological Background**

There are three records of archaeological discoveries from the area. The earliest is of a Roman 'villa' (PRN 1749) discovered in 1658 although its precise location is not known. Two other records date from 1866, the first, (PRN 1744), which gives no specific location of possible pre-Roman burials found at Hopcrofts Holt, the second, from 1898 in the first volume of the Berks, Bucks and Oxon Archaeological Journal which records that:

"About the year 1870, during some digging for gravel in the field immediately east of Hopcrofts Holt Inn, and north of the road from the Inn to Lower Heyford, several human skeletons were found, together with a quantity of very rude pottery of dark clay, and bones of animals, among which was deer."

These burials may be the same as those discovered in 1866 or could represent further burials.

## 1.4 Aims

The aims of the evaluation were to establish the presence/absence of archaeological remains within the proposal area, their date, character, extent, state of preservation and environmental potential.

## 1.5 Methodology Fig. 2

A total of nine trenches were machine excavated down to the natural geology or the first significant archaeological horizon using a JCB equipped with a 1.6m wide toothless ditching bucket. The trenches consisted of four 30m trenches, three 20m trenches and one 25m trench. An additional 10m trench was excavated towards the north west of the site to establish the extent of the activity located in Trench 2. The depth of excavation was slightly curtailed in Trench 8 by safety requirements. However this did not significantly hinder interpretation of the evidence.

Recording was carried out using standard OAU procedures (OAU Fieldwork Manual ed. D. Wilkinson 1990). All features and deposits were allocated unique context numbers on a trench-by-trench basis (ie. 2/15 = Trench 2, Context 15).

The fieldwork took place between Monday 15th and Thursday 18th April 1996 and the site was visited by Paul Smith, the County Archaeological Officer, on Wednesday 17th April.

## 2.1 Results (Figs 3, 4)

### General

A natural of very light yellow and brown silty clay with occasional small outcrops of limestone was located in all trenches with the exception of Trenches 5 and 6. Trench 5 was located on a deep purple and brown clay natural and Trench 6 was located on a loose limestone and brown earth.

### Trench 1 NW-SE 17.8m x 1.6m (Fig 4)

The natural was overlain throughout the trench by a greyish brown silty clay layer (1/4) 0.13m deep which was cut by a single linear feature (1/7) 0.75m wide and 0.48m deep

orientated E-W at the north western end of the trench. 1/7 was filled by 1/6 consisting of a mid-dark grey brown silty clay with coke inclusions. A sample of the finds from 1/6 included modern ceramics and metals which were recovered from this fill for reference.

A garden soil of dark grey and black compact clayey silt (1/3) up to 0.15m thick with coke inclusions sealed 1/6. This was cut by a modern service trench (unexcavated) running towards the hotel. The service trench was sealed by a modern make up layer of limestone rubble (1/2) 0.3m deep and the tarmac car park surface (1/1) 0.08m deep.

#### Trench 2 N-S 29.5m x 1.6m

The natural was cut by a number of features, some of which intercut each other, in the southern half of the trench. Due to the amount of activity in this trench, a additional extension 5m long was added to its eastern side 7.5m from the southern end. This extended out approximately at an angle 45 degrees on a NNW-SSE alignment.

At the southern end of the trench the natural was cut by 2/32, a feature partially uncovered against the western baulk of the trench measuring 0.8m x 0.35m. This was filled by a dark brown silty clay (2/31) rich in charcoal. This feature remained unexcavated as a adequate number of features had already been sample excavated. A small flat based pit (2/18) with sloped sides 0.65m in diameter by 0.1m deep cut the natural 2.5m to the north of 2/32. This was filled by 2/17, a light mottled brown clayey silt. No finds were recovered from 2/17.

Pit 2/18 was cut on its eastern edge by another partially revealed feature (2/16) which appeared to be a large pit 0.2m deep with gently sloping sides and a flat base. It extended 1.2m to the west but its north-south extent was masked by overlying deposits. 2/16 was filled by a dark brown silty clay (2/15) with occasional charcoal flecking, fragments of burnt clay and contained a pottery assemblage dating to the early Roman period. At the point of intersection between 2/18 and 2/16 a shallow gully (2/12) cut the fill 2/15. The gully was aligned N-S with a total length of 5-5.5m, 0.45m wide and 0.15m deep. The fill (2/11) consisted of a dark grey brown silty clay with occasional charcoal flecking, lenses of yellow clay and 20% limestone pieces up to 0.1 x 0.1 x 0.05m in size. An early Roman pottery assemblage was also recovered from the fill.

At the junction of the main trench and the extension another cluster of features was exposed. A small posthole (2/28) with a rounded base 0.3m in diameter and 0.12m deep cut the natural at this point. This was filled by a single mid brown silty clay fill (2/27) and contained no finds.

Immediately to the north of 2/28 was a shallow rounded pit (2/26) 0.97m in diameter and 0.17m deep partially revealed in the trench. Pit 2/26 had a single light mottled brown clay and silt fill (2/25) with occasional inclusions of small limestone fragments and charcoal flecking. To the west of pit 2/26 was a similar feature (2/30) 0.7m in diameter with a fill (2/29) similar to 2/25. This possilble pit was not excavated but Roman pottery finds were retrieved from the exposed surface of the fill.

Fill 2/29 was cut by another pit (2/14) with a rounded base 0.9m in diameter and 0.24m deep containing a primary fill (2/19) and an upper fill (2/13). The primary fill (2/19) consisted of a light brown clay and silt 0.1m deep with a small amount of limestone pieces and contained a single sherd of Roman pottery. The upper fill (2/13) was a darker brown silty clay 0.13m deep with a similar amount of limestone inclusions but had a higher charcoal content. Fragments of bone and Roman pottery were recovered from this fill.

The linear gully (2/12) was situated next to pit 2/14 at this point where it was only 0.06m deep. There was no direct stratigraphic relationship between the two features.

The northern end of gully 2/12, pits 2/26, 2/30, 2/14 and posthole 2/28 were all sealed by layer 2/4. This was a mid brownish grey silty clay layer with a maximum depth of 0.1m present throughout the south-eastern extension to the main trench and running from this point across the main trench with a maximum width of 1.5m. This had a general inclusion of small fragments of limestone and occasional charcoal flecking with a concentration of large limestone slabs 0.4 x 0.4 x 0.05m. These were situated approximately 8 m from the southern end of the main trench lying flat within the layer. It is possible that they could have served as pad stones although they do not appear to have related to or served any obvious structural purpose. A total of 44 Roman sherds and an iron nail were recovered from layer 2/4 dating between AD 50-150.

At the southern end of the trench, pits 2/32, 2/18, 2/16 and the southern end of gully 2/12 were sealed by layer 2/5. This had a maximum depth of 0.1m and extended 7m to the north from the southern end of the trench. Layer 2/5 consisted of a dark brown and black silty clay rich in charcoal with occasional fragments of burnt stone and limestone and also contained pottery dating to AD 50-150. No relationship could be ascertained between the layers 2/4 and 2/5 although they occupy the same stratigraphic position in sealing the pits, postholes and gully. Both layers appear to represent surviving Romano-British occupational soils.

The northern limit of activity in Trench 2 was represented by a ditch (2/7) which cuts the natural half way down the trench. The linear ditch was oriented E-W 2.2m wide and 0.6m deep with a rounded base and sloping sides which were steeper towards the base. A shallow shelf to the south of the deepest part of the cut represents a possible earlier cut of the ditch. Three fills (2/20, 2/22, 2/23) all of a compact light yellowish brown clayey silt made up the primary erosion deposits in the ditch. 2/24 and 2/6 formed the main fills of the ditch, both being a mid grey brown compact silty clay up to 0.3m deep with occasional limestone inclusions up to 0.1m in diameter. 2/6 was the only fill of this ditch to contain finds, with 16 sherds retrieved dating to the early Roman period. The upper fill of the ditch (2/21) was a brown clayey silt 0.15m deep.

0.15m to the south of ditch 2/7, a very shallow gully terminal (2/10) cut the natural. This was 0.75m wide and 0.08m deep and filled by 2/9, a homogenous mid brown clayey silt. This contained no dateable finds.

The layers 2/4 and 2/5, ditch 2/7 and gully 2/10 were all sealed by a yellowish brown buried ploughsoil that was present throughout the trench to a depth of 0.35m and filled plough scars in the natural to the north of the trench. This ploughsoil was also present in the other trenches

excavated. A modern topsoil 0.25m deep sealed the buried ploughsoil.

#### Trench 3 N-S 20m x 1.6m

The natural was cut by a single feature (3/8), probably tree disturbance, irregular in shape and with uneven edges with a maximum width of 0.9m and depth of 0.16m. This was filled by a single homogenous fill (3/7) of a greyish brown silty clay. A similar 'fill' (3/6) was also present to the south of the trench but was not investigated further as this also appeared to be a natural feature. No dateable finds were recovered.

Sealing these features was the yellowish brown buried plough soil (3/5) 0.25m deep appearing as a more mixed and disturbed soil to the south (3/3). The modern topsoil (3/4) was present over these at the north end of the trench to a depth of 0.18m and was overlain by recent dumping of coal/coke (3/2) which had a maximum depth of 0.25m to the south, and a layer of crushed limestone rubble (3/1) 0.29m deep at the southern end.

#### Trench 4 E-W 32.2m x 1.6m

The natural was overlain throughout the trench by the yellowish brown buried ploughsoil (4/2) to a depth of 0.2m and the modern topsoil (4/1) 0.2m deep. The topsoil was cut by a modern sewer drain (4/5) backfilled with redeposited natural clay (4/4).

#### Trench 5 NW-SE 30m x 1.6m

A dark purple and brown natural clay was exposed in Trench 5. This was cut by a single irregular feature (5/4) filled by a reddish brown compact clay (5/3). This would appear to be a similar 'tree' feature as encountered in Trench 3. 5/3 was sealed by the yellowish brown buried ploughsoil (5/2) 0.4m deep, and the modern topsoil (5/1) 0.2m deep. No dateable finds were recovered.

#### Trench 6 NW-SE 31.5m x 1.6m

A loose limestone and brown earth natural with outcropping clay was exposed in Trench 6. This was overlain by the yellowish brown buried ploughsoil (6/2) to a depth of 0.2m which filled plough scars in the natural. The modern topsoil (6/1) had a maximum depth of 0.27m.

### Trench 7 N-S 19.8m x 1.6m

The natural was overlain by The yellowish brown buried ploughsoil (7/2) with a maximum depth of 0.2m and the modern topsoil (7/1) 0.2m deep.

### Trench 8 N-S 25.7m x 1.6m

This trench was limited in its full excavation due to safety limits of 1.2m in its depth. Natural was reached at the northern and southern ends of the trench where it was overlain by the yellowish brown buried ploughsoil (8/11) to a depth of 0.1m which filled plough scars in the natural. A disturbed greyish ploughsoil (8/10) overlay this to a depth of 0.1m and the buried modern topsoil (8/9) to a depth of 0.2m. A modern pipe trench (8/8) was cut through the buried topsoil and filled with a clay fill (8/7) which was sealed by a 0.4m deep modern limestone rubble dump (8/6) extending 8m from the southern end of the trench. Several layers of clayey modern dumping and rubbish, 8/5 (0.35m deep), 8/3 (0.45m deep) and 8/4 (0.1m deep), overlay the lower deposits. A thin layer of coke/coal (8/2) 0.03m deep sealed these and was capped by a greyish clay topsoil and turf (8/1) 0.42m deep.

### Trench 9 NW-SE 10.7m x 1.6m

This trench was opened to establish the extent to the E of Romano-British activity located in Trench 2. No features were located in this trench.

The natural was overlain by the yellowish brown buried ploughsoil (9/2) to a depth of 0.13m which filled plough scars in the natural. The modern topsoil had a maximum depth of 0.22m and contained a single sherd of post-medieval pottery.

## 2.2 Discussion

With the exception of the deposits in Trench 2, no significant archaeological remains were discovered.

The evidence from Trench 2 represents a small area of activity, with the earliest features consisting of pits, postholes and a gully and ditch. No structures were positively located in the trench although the amount of activity, represented mostly by pits, would indicate a close presence, most likely located to the west or south west of the trench. The main ditch (2/7) appears to act as a boundary ditch with all the archaeological activity located to the south,



with the lack of activity to the north possibly indicating associated agricultural fields. The orientation of the boundary ditch (2/7) at right angles to the current line of the modern road may be significant in defining a linear organisation of land off an already established route.

A total of 132 early Roman pottery sherds were recovered from the features within the trench generally dated to the period AD 50-150. The character of the assemblage indicates a low status site with the total of 'fine and specialist' wares being no more than 3% of the sherd total, a figure typical of similar low status sites throughout the region. The lack of pottery typical of the mid 2nd century onwards is significant, indicating the termination of the assemblage in the second quarter of the 2nd century as has been observed at other sites across the region. The evidence as a whole may indicate the presence of a Romano-British Farm.

The presence of pits and an occupational layer in the eastern extension of the trench shows that the settlement does extend to the east of Trench 2. The position of Trench 9, however, indicates that this does not extend any more than 15m to the east of Trench 2. A yellowish brown buried ploughsoil was present in all the trenches, often filling plough scars in the natural and also over the features in Trench 2. No dating evidence was retrieved from the buried ploughsoil.

The raised bank along the eastern boundary of the property represents at least 1m of recent made earth as encountered in Trench 8 where these deposits were directly dumped over the modern topsoil and buried ploughsoil.

### 2.3 Conclusion

This site has a degree of archaeological potential. Few 'low status' rural settlements of this type have been examined in this part of the county. Although the area of apparent archaeological significance is small and confined to the NW corner of the site, the modest depth of overburden and the good condition of the features underneath, indicate that the area of the site in the vicinity of Trench 2 would be sensitive to any development.

Steve Lawrence  
Alan Hardy  
OAU 1996

Table of Contexts

CTX	TYPE	WIDTH (m)	DEPTH (m)	DESCRIPTION	NUMBER OF FINDS AND DATE
Tr 1					
1/1	LAYER	/	0.08	TARMAC CAR PARK	
1/2	LAYER	/	0.3	MAKE UP HARD CORE	
1/3	LAYER	/	0.15	MODERN GARDEN SOIL	
1/4	LAYER	/	0.13	YELLOWISH BROWN PLOUGHSOIL	
1/5	NATURAL	/	/	LIGHT YELLOW AND BROWN SILTY CLAY	
1/6	FILL	0.75	0.48	FILL OF 1/7	MODERN
1/7	SERVICE TRENCH	0.75	0.48	MODERN SERVICE TRENCH	
Tr 2					
U/S	UNSTRAT.	/	/	UNSTRATIFIED FINDS	2 sherds EARLY ROMAN
2/1	LAYER	/	0.25	MODERN TOPSOIL	
2/2	LAYER	/	0.35	YELLOWISH BROWN PLOUGHSOIL	
2/3	FINDS REF.	/	/	FINDS RECOVERED DURING HAND CLEANING	31 sherds ROMAN AD 50-150

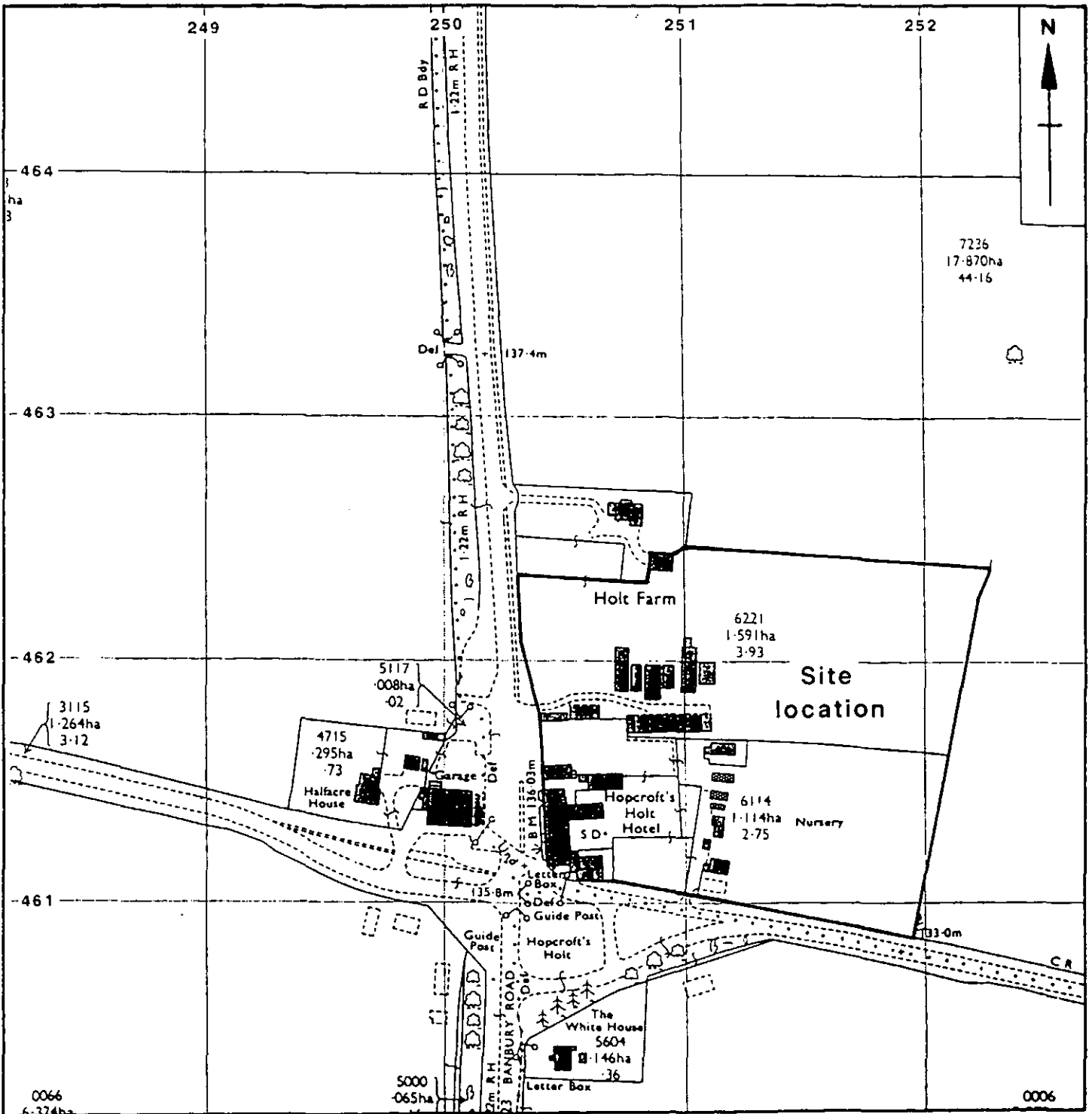
CTX	TYPE	WIDTH (m)	DEPTH (m)	DESCRIPTION	NUMBER OF FINDS AND DATE
2/4	LAYER	/	0.1	OCCUPATION LAYER	44 sherds ROMAN AD 50-150
2/5	LAYER	/	0.1	CHARCOAL RICH OCCUPATION LAYER	16 sherds ROMAN AD 50-150
2/6	FILL	1.6	0.36	SECONDARY FILL OF DITCH 2/7	16 sherds ROMAN AD 50-150
2/7	DITCH	2.2	0.6	POSSIBLE BOUNDARY DITCH	
2/8	NATURAL	/	/	LIGHT YELLOW AND BROWN SILTY CLAY	
2/9	FILL	0.8	0.08	FILL OF 2/10	
2/10	GULLY	0.8	0.08	POSSIBLE GULLY	
2/11	FILL	0.45	0.15	FILL OF 2/12	6 sherds ROMAN AD 50-150
2/12	GULLY	0.45	0.15	LINEAR GULLY	
2/13	FILL	0.9	0.13	UPPER FILL OF 2/14	9 sherds ROMAN
2/14	PIT	0.9	0.24	CIRCULAR PIT	
2/15	FILL	/	0.2	FILL OF 2/16	6 sherds ROMAN
2/16	?PIT	/	0.2	POSSIBLE LARGE PIT	
2/17	FILL	0.65	0.1	FILL OF 2/18	

CTX	TYPE	WIDTH (m)	DEPTH (m)	DESCRIPTION	NUMBER OF FINDS AND DATE
2/18	?POSTHOLE	0.65	0.1	POSSIBLE POSTHOLE	
2/19	FILL	0.9	0.1	PRIMARY FILL OF 2/14	1 sherd ROMAN
2/20	FILL	0.6	0.15	PRIMARY FILL OF DITCH 2/7	
2/21	FILL	2.6	0.15	UPPER FILL OF DITCH 2/7	
2/22	FILL	0.5	0.05	SECONDARY SILTING FILL OF DITCH 2/7	
2/23	FILL	0.7	0.05	SECONDARY SILTING FILL OF DITCH 2/7	
2/24	FILL	0.6	0.3	SECONDARY FILL OF POSSIBLE RE- CUT IN DITCH 2/7	
2/25	FILL	0.9	0.17	FILL OF 2/26	
2/26	PIT	0.9	0.17	CIRCULAR PIT	
2/27	FILL	0.3	0.12	FILL OF 2/28	
2/28	POSTHOLE	0.3	0.12	SMALL POSTHOLE	
2/29	FILL	1.0	/	FILL OF 2/30	1 sherd ROMAN
2/30	?PIT	1.0	/	POSSIBLE PIT. UNEXCAVATED	
2/31	FILL	0.75	/	FILL OF 2/32	
2/32	?PIT	0.75	/	POSSIBLE PIT OR POSTHOLE. UNEXCAVATED	
Tr 3					

CTX	TYPE	WIDTH (m)	DEPTH (m)	DESCRIPTION	NUMBER OF FINDS AND DATE
3/1	LAYER	/	0.29	LIMESTONE RUBBLE DUMP	
3/2	LAYER	/	0.25	COKE/COAL DUMP	
3/3	LAYER	/	0.15	DISTURBED SOIL	
3/4	LAYER	/	0.18	MODERN TOPSOIL	
3/5	LAYER	/	0.25	YELLOWISH BROWN PLOUGHSOIL	
3/6	?FILL	0.4	/	TREE ROOT DISTURBANCE	
3/7	FILL	1.0	0.2	FILL OF 3/8	
3/8	TREEHOLE	1.0	0.2	TREE ROOT DISTURBANCE	
3/9	NATURAL	/	/	LIGHT YELLOW AND BROWN SILTY CLAY	
Tr 4					
4/1	LAYER	/	0.2	MODERN TOPSOIL	
4/2	LAYER	/	0.2	YELLOWISH BROWN PLOUGHSOIL	
4/3	NATURAL	/	/	LIGHT YELLOW AND BROWN SILTY CLAY	
4/4	FILL	0.7	/	FILL OF 4/5	
4/5	PIPE TRENCH	0.7	/	MODERN SEWER PIPE TRENCH	
Tr 5					
5/1	LAYER	/	0.2	MODERN TOPSOIL	

CTX	TYPE	WIDTH (m)	DEPTH (m)	DESCRIPTION	NUMBER OF FINDS AND DATE
5/2	LAYER	/	0.4	YELLOWISH BROWN PLOUGHSOIL	
5/3	FILL	1.2	0.16	FILL OF 5/4	
5/4	TREEHOLE	1.2	0.16	TREE DISTURBANCE	
5/5	NATURAL	/	/	BROWN AND PURPLE CLAY	
Tr 6					
6/1	LAYER	/	0.27	MODERN TOPSOIL	
6/2	LAYER	/	0.2	YELLOWISH BROWN PLOUGHSOIL	
6/3	NATURAL	/	/	LOOSE LIMESTONE AND BROWN EARTH	
Tr 7					
7/1	LAYER	/	0.25	MODERN TOPSOIL	
7/2	LAYER	/	0.2	YELLOWISH BROWN PLOUGHSOIL	
7/3	NATURAL	/	/	LIGHT YELLOW AND BROWN SILTY CLAY	
Tr 8					
8/1	LAYER	/	0.42	TOPSOIL COVERING TO DUMPING LAYERS	
8/2	LAYER	/	0.03	COKE/COAL LAYER	
8/3	LAYER	/	0.45	MADE EARTH	

CTX	TYPE	WIDTH (m)	DEPTH (m)	DESCRIPTION	NUMBER OF FINDS AND DATE
8/4	LAYER	/	0.1	MADE EARTH	
8/5	LAYER	/	0.35	MADE EARTH	
8/6	LAYER	/	0.4	LIMESTONE RUBBLE DUMP	
8/7	FILL	2.4	0.4+	FILL OF 8/8	
8/8	PIPE TRENCH	0.85	0.4+	MODERN PIPE TRENCH	
8/9	LAYER	/	0.2	BURIED TOPSOIL	
8/10	LAYER	/	0.1	DISTURBED SOIL	
8/11	LAYER	/	0.1	YELLOWISH BROWN PLOUGHSOIL	
8/12	NATURAL	/	/	LIGHT YELLOW AND BROWN SILTY CLAY	
Tr 9					
9/1	LAYER	/	0.22	MODERN TOPSOIL	1 sherd POST-MED
9/2	LAYER	/	0.13	YELLOWISH BROWN TOPSOIL	
9/3	NATURAL	/	/	LIGHT YELLOW AND BROWN SILTY CLAY	

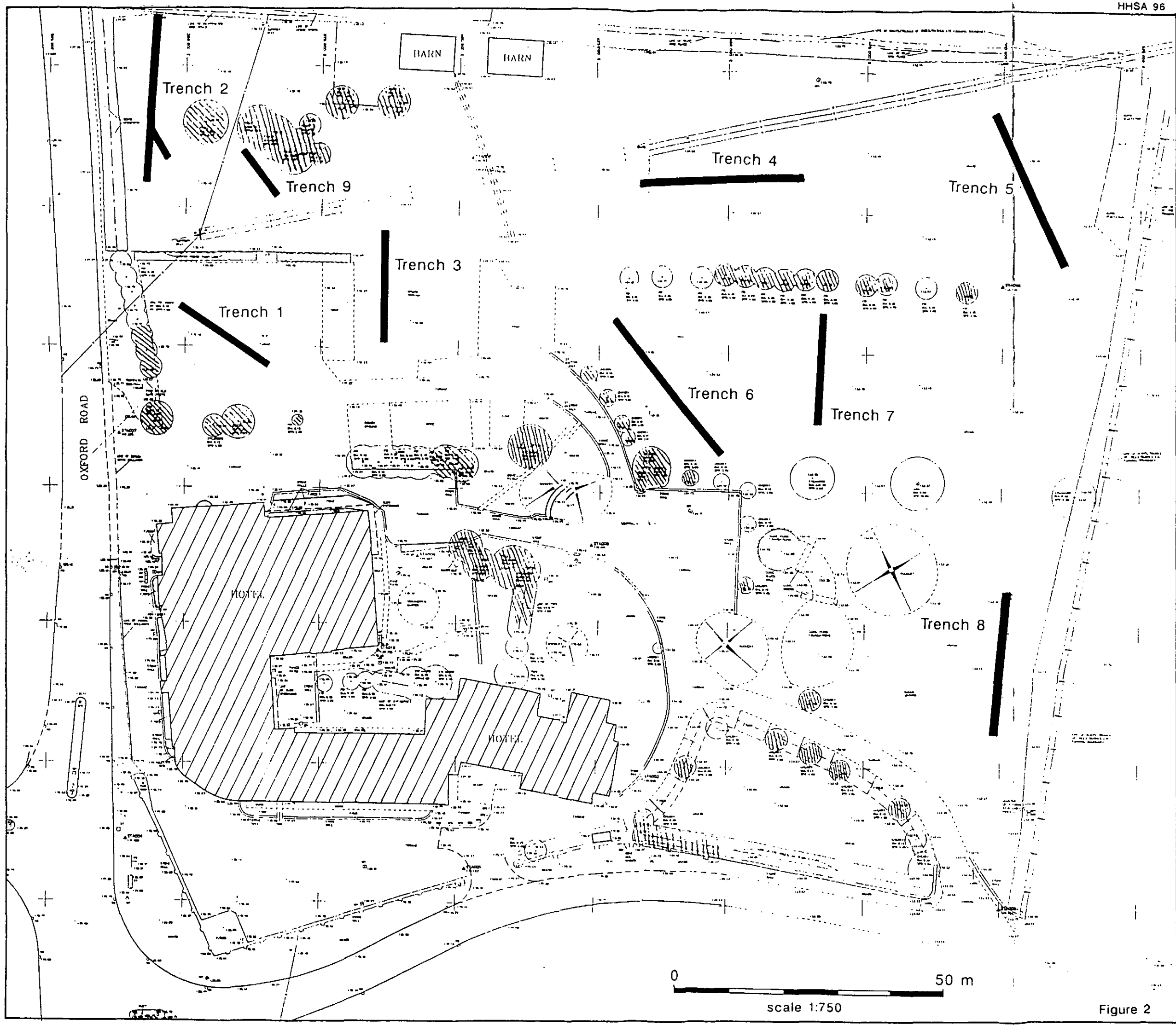


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0 150m  
scale 1:2500

Figure 1



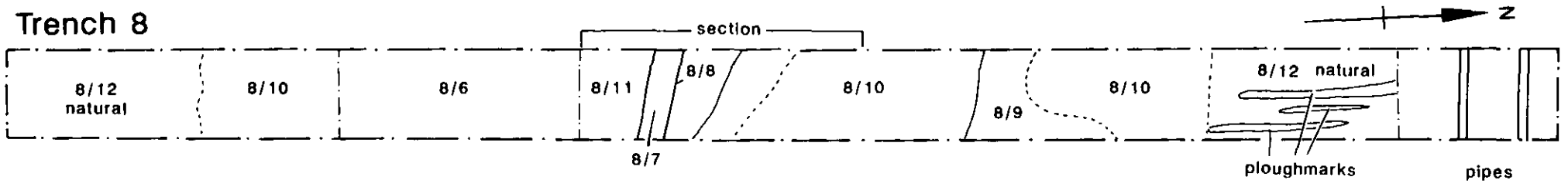
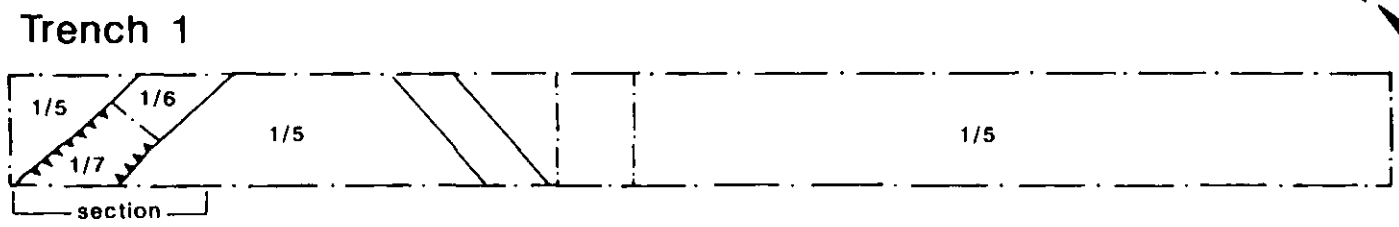
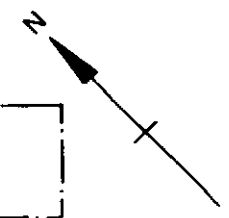


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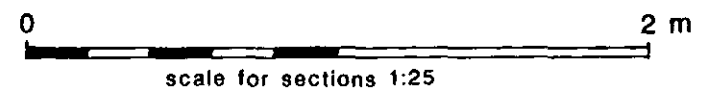
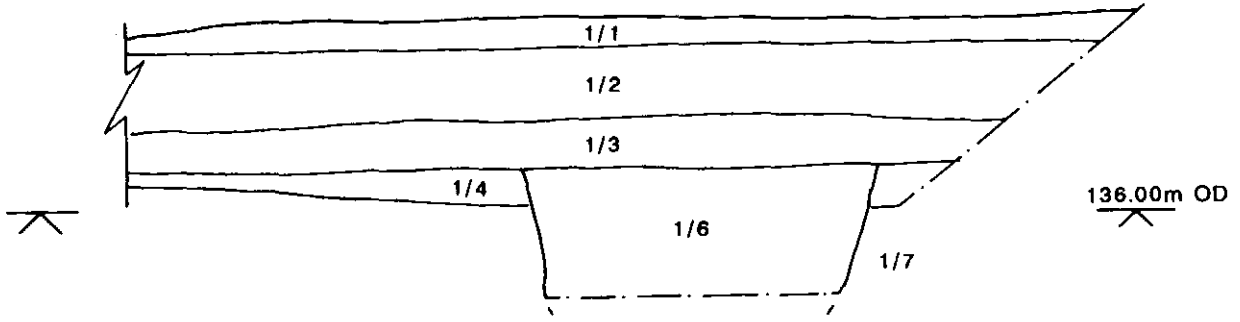
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Figure 2





### Trench 1 section



### Trench 8 section

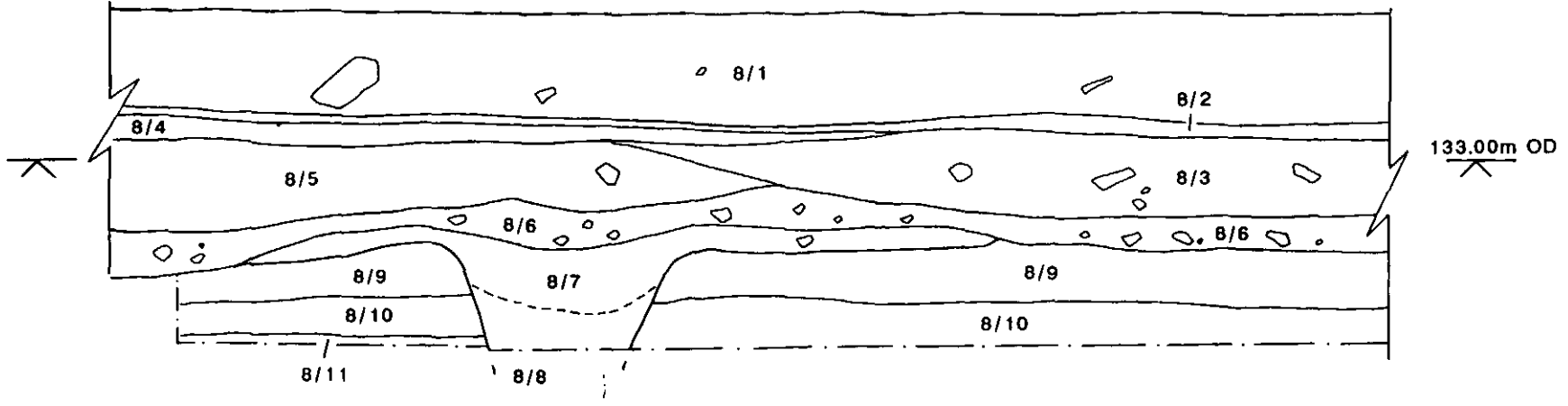


Figure 4



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