IVEL FARM, SANDY QUARRY, BEDFORDSHIRE, ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS ON HAUL ROAD NORTH AND EXTRACTION PHASE 2 (2003)

INTERIM REPORT

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 General Background

Albion Archaeology was commissioned by The Guildhouse Consultancy on behalf of RMC Materials Ltd (Eastern) to carry out a programme of archaeological observation, investigation and recording, ahead of gravel extraction at Ivel Farm, near Biggleswade in Bedfordshire. The investigations described in this interim report are as follows:

- The northern section of the haul road created in 2003 (Figures 1 and 2)
- Extraction Phase 2 of the quarry (Figures 1 and 3)

Archaeological works within the course of the northern section of the *haul road (2003)* took place between 24th April and 16th May 2003. Works in extraction *Phase 2 of the quarry* were carried out between 4th July and 29th August 2003. This interim report has been prepared by Joe Abrams (Project Manager); with contributions by Reuben Thorpe (Project Manager) and Ian Beswick (Archaeological Supervisor).

1.2 Terminology

Assessment groups (AG **) is the term used to describe a feature, or group of features, which have been interpreted as being broadly contemporary and/or sharing a similar function. For example, a circle of postholes interpreted as the remains of a circular structure would be assigned a single AG number in order to simplify reference to the entire group. This avoids unnecessarily complex discussions of multiple features by context numbers.

Assessment groups may be altered, or removed altogether, during the subsequent analysis phase of the project. It should be noted that AG references run consecutively through all phases of work.

Haul road north and extraction Phase 2 (2003) refer to AG 1-9 and AG 29-33.
AG 10-28 refer to haul road south and extraction Phase 3a (2004).

2. AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The aims of the observation, investigation and recording in both Phase 2 of the quarry and haul road (2003) were:

- By continuous observation to locate surviving archaeological remains revealed during topsoil and subsoil removal.
- By excavation and recording to enable a permanent record appropriate to the significance of the archaeology.

3. HAUL ROAD (2003)

3.1 Results

The stretch of haul road investigated in 2003 was 250m long and 8m wide. As the inset on Figure 2 illustrates the haul road curves north from the north-eastern edge of Phase 2, and is aligned north-south for most of its length.

3.2 Topsoil, subsoil and undisturbed geological deposits

The location of the haul road resulted in a variety of geological and topographical changes being revealed along its course. The southern end of the haul road was located on the relatively higher land which characterises the western part of the quarry. The undisturbed geological deposit in this part of the site was gravel. This extended for *c.*50m from the western tip of the haul road.

However, the majority of the road was located to the east of this and cut across the lower lying eastern part of the site. Undisturbed geological deposits in this area comprised bands of interleaved gravel and silt beds. These were overlain by relatively deep (0.10m to 0.40m deep) layers of organic, peaty material.

The haul road crossed a recent dyke at its southern end and towards its northern tip (Figure 2). Immediately adjacent to these dykes, and lying mainly to the east, a significant increase in the depth and number of organic layers was noted. The most recent of these contained post-medieval material and had several lenses of re-deposited natural gravel within it.

The majority of archaeological features in this part of the site were sealed by subsoil (501). This was a *c.*0.20m deep light reddish brown silty clay which contained moderate amounts of small and medium sized pebbles and occasional charcoal flecks.

The topsoil (500) was a *c.*0.20m deep mid red/brown silty clay, with moderate quantities of small stones.

3.3 Iron Age

3.3.1 AG1 (part only) - Pits (Figure 3)

Assessment Group 1 (AG1) comprised seven pits within the southern part of the haul road cut. These were located approximately 25m west of the existing north-south aligned dyke. They were slightly ovoid in shaped, between 1.20m and 2.00m in diameter and 0.10m 0.70m deep.

Further pits, belonging to the same cluster, were identified following the stripping of Phase 2. Therefore, these features are discussed collectively in Section 4.1.2 (below).

3.3.2 AG2 – Cremations (Figure 2)

Seven cremations were recorded. Each was 100% sampled revealing that each cremation shared similar proportions and morphology. They were circular in plan and *c.*0.35m in diameter and *c.*0.15m in depth.

Each contained a relatively small amount of bone, all of which was in a very friable state. It has not been possible to ascertain whether or not these are pieces of human bone and no dateable artefactual evidence was recovered from any of these features.

However, cremation of human burials became increasingly common during the late Iron Age. Also, the existence of two four-post structures (AG 5) and possibly ritual pits (AG1) discussed below suggest that this area was a focus of activity during the Iron Age. The presence of these feature types suggest that these are likely to have been human cremations rather than the remains of animals.

3.4 Undated archaeological features

3.4.1 AG3 – Ditches in northern part of haul road (Figure 2)

Six ditches were revealed at the northern end of the haul road. The existence of these features was established following careful machine excavation to remove several layers of organic material.

The northernmost of these ditches were [672] and [710]. Both were too close to the existing dyke to allow safe hand excavation. Despite this, it was possible to record certain details of their character. Ditch [672] was located on the northern side of the dyke, it was aligned north-south and was sealed by 1.30m of later deposits.

Ditch [710] was located to the south of the dyke and was aligned north-west to south-east. It was sealed by a similar depth of later, organic layers.

Ditches [642] and [624] were located to the south of the existing dyke. Both were similar in morphology, character and alignment, suggesting they may have been in use at the same time, for a similar purpose. Both were 1.50m wide, 0.60m deep and contained very organic deposits.

Ditch [626] was aligned perpendicular to [642]/[624] and appeared to have been truncated by both of these parallel ditches.

No artefactual evidence was recovered from any of the above ditches making accurate dating of them impossible. However, it seems likely that they were in use no later than the early post-medieval period in view of their stratigraphic relationship with a series of organic deposits which overlies, and thus seals all of them. The depth of this material (1.30m) was substantial and is likely to have built up episodically over a period of several hundred years.

Ditch [510] was exceptional in its stratigraphic relations, as it truncated subsoil (501). This suggests it was considerably later than the above ditches. It also contained a very organic deposit, confirming that this piece of land remained wet throughout the post-medieval period.

3.4.2 AG4 – Ditches in southern part of haul road (Figure 2)

Six ditches were also recorded in the southern part of the haul road immediately adjacent to the Phase 2 observation area.

Again several later layers were removed in order to reveal these features suggesting they were of considerable antiquity; and a date no later than the early post-medieval period seems probable.

Following the removal of peat layer (555) and alluvium (566), three parallel east-west aligned ditches were observed. Ditch [560] was located 4.00m south of [573] and truncated a third ditch [708]. None of these produced any dateable artefactual material.

Approximately 10m south of [560], two relatively narrow ditches [663]/[667] formed a cross pattern. Ditch [667] clearly truncated [663] confirming it was in use at a later date. A single sherd of early to middle Iron Age pottery was recovered from a deposit within [663]. No firm date can de attached on the basis of one sherd of pottery which may be residual within a later feature.

Located immediately east of the Phase 2 area of observation was a sixth ditch [686]. This was sealed by alluvial layer (677). This had a relatively shallow V-shaped profile and was aligned north-south. Again, no dateable artefactual evidence was recovered from this feature.

4. EXTRACTION PHASE 2 OF THE QUARRY

4.1 Results

The Phase 2 observation area was 2.6ha in size and as Figure 1 illustrates, it was broadly rectangular in shape.

4.1.1 Topsoil, subsoil and undisturbed geological deposits

The undisturbed geological deposit in this part of the quarry varied from light orange/brown sandy gravel with lenses of light clay to a distinctive strip of hard calcareous stone (1026).

The majority of archaeological features in this area were sealed by a mid grey reddish/brown sandy silt subsoil layer. This contained moderate amounts of small and medium pebbles and occasional charcoal flecks.

In the eastern side of Phase 2 the subsoil was sealed by a layer of alluvium. This extended for approximately 10m from the eastern edge of the area. It was a light red/brown sandy silt with occasional small stones.

The topsoil was mid grey brown sandy silt, with moderate small stones. Its average depth was 0.20m.

4.2 Iron Age

4.2.1 AG1 (part only) – Pits - (Figure 3)

A cluster pits containing artefactual material dating to the Iron Age was located towards the northern end of Phase 2. These features were circular in plan with distinctively vertical sides and flat bases. They varied in depth from 0.10m to 1.00m.

A variety of artefactual material was recovered from these features. One contained a canine skeleton (1357) while others produced significant quantities of Iron Age pottery sherds, animal bone and burnt stone. Such material is indicative of nearby settlement activity as yet unlocated.

4.2.2 AG5 – Four-post structures (Figure 3)

A pair of four-post structures were identified in the eastern part of the site. These square structures are of a type commonly identified as being Iron Age in date. They form a broadly square pattern *c.*2.00m in width and *c.*2.00m in length.

4.2.3 AG 30 – Symmetrical ditch (Figure 3)

A U-shaped symmetrical ditch feature was recorded in the centre of the site. Pottery sherds recovered from this feature were dated to the early/middle Iron Age period. Their presence within the backfill of the feature suggests it was in use during the first half of the Iron Age.

4.2.4 AG 31 – Pit cluster (Figure 3)

AG 31 was one of two pit clusters found in association with AG 30. Cluster AG 31 was located on the north-western arm of ditch feature AG 30. Sherds of early/middle Iron Age pottery were recovered from backfill within several of these pits suggesting they are contemporary with AG 30.

4.2.5 AG 32 – Pit cluster (Figure 3)

AG 32 was the second pit cluster associated with ditch AG 30. This pit group was located on the south-western arm of AG30. Sherds of early/middle Iron Age pottery were recovered from backfill within several of these pits suggesting they are contemporary with ditch AG 30 and pit cluster AG 31.

4.3 Late Iron Age/Early Roman

4.3.1 AG6 – Enclosure ditches and pits (Figure 3)

An impressive series of enclosure ditches representing several phases of activity were identified in the southern part of the site. These were dated to the late Iron Age period by artefactual material recovered from them.

It is suggested that they may have functioned as animal enclosures, particularly as several of them almost converge to form a funnel shape in the eastern part of the site. Such a ditch formation would have been useful in guiding livestock towards the narrow (2.00m wide) gap between these ditches. The lack of any significant quantities of finds (especially pottery) tends to suggest that these were not settlement enclosures.

A large posthole was located in this putative entrance, which could have supported a gate.

A series of pits were also identified in this part of the site. These may form a continuation of the pitting pattern already discussed above (AG1). One of these pits contained animal bone.

4.4 Roman

4.4.1 AG7 – Drainage/boundary ditches (Figure 3)

Several ditches containing artefactual material dating to the Roman period were located in the northern part of the site.

One of these was aligned north-south, parallel to a palaeochannel. This may have been a drainage ditch or minor 'flood defence' deliberately placed next to the palaeochannel.

The other ditches were aligned broadly east-west and appear to be draining into a large circular feature, possibly a pond, located immediately east of them. The pond is also believed to date to this period.

4.5 Anglo-Saxon

4.5.1 AG8 – Sunken-Featured Buildings (Figure 3)

Three good examples of sunken-featured buildings (SFB) were identified. In all cases these were constructed on the boundary between the harder calcareous geological deposit and the gravel which dominated the area.

Significantly, these structures appear to respect the earlier late Iron Age enclosures AG6, suggesting these may have survived as earthworks into the Saxon period. However, the ditches do not appear to have been re-used in this later period.

A possible fourth SFB was identified in the northern part of the site. It was located to the west of Roman ditches AG7.

4.5.2 AG 33 – Pit (Figure 3)

A single pit containing sherds of Saxon pottery was recorded in the centre of the site. This feature truncated the Iron Age ditch enclosure AG 30 and was located relatively close to pit cluster AG 31.

4.6 Post-Medieval

4.6.1 AG9 – Quarry pits (Figure 3)

The western part of the site had been extensively quarried (AG9). This activity is thought to date to the 19th century.

4.6.2 AG 29 – Ditch and postholes (Figures 3)

A single ditch and a series of 10 postholes were recorded in the centre of the site. These features were all post-medieval in date and are thought to represent the remains of a boundary/drainage ditch and an associated post-built fence.

5. CONCLUSIONS

5.1 Synthesis of the Results

5.1.1 Iron Age

Remains dating to this period provide the most numerous, and probably the most significant archaeological remains encountered within Phase 2 and the haul road north (2003).

It is the combination of feature types dating to this period which provides the most intriguing questions for any future publication or research on the material recovered. The existence of a pair of four post structures (AG 5) represents a well known feature from this period. Such features have been variously interpreted as granaries (designed to keep the grain off the damp ground), exhumation platforms and cremation pyres. The fact that both four post structures were located within 140m of a series of cremations (AG 2) may indicate that they functioned as exhumation platforms since no burning was associated with either.

In the northern part of the site a series of circular pits (AG 1) containing apparently random deposits of animal bone, burnt stone and pottery are interpreted as being the remains of storage pits which have subsequently been used for rubbish disposal. However, in recent years a different interpretation has begun to emerge (Hill 1995, Hinman 2001). This asserts that these pits have been the subject of deliberate ritual deposition practices. It has become apparent that the animal bones occurring within these pits were often the prime, edible parts of livestock; and the pottery sherds were carefully and repetitively selected. The case for this interpretation of remains recorded within haul road north and extraction phase 2 will be considered during the main analysis phase of this project.

Such an interpretation remains contentious, although it is worthy of mention here, particularly given the topographical and environmental setting of Ivel Farm. It has already been suggested (Albion Archaeology 1998), that this site would have been a series of islands and paleochannels located adjacent to the Ivel River, an area rich in the remains of early prehistoric ritual activity.

The fact that six of these cremations were located within an area of 4m² suggests that they are broadly contemporary, as does their shared morphology and size. Interestingly it raises another, more obscure question. Why are they located in such a small area? Is it possible that this was a specially selected island location, close to, although not inside the river?

Rivers, lakes, springs and other water sources have long been connected with prehistoric religious and funerary activity in the British Isles. Ivel Farm quarry may be adding to that rich body of evidence.

5.1.2 Late Iron Age/Roman

No less significant are the impressive enclosure ditches (AG 6) recorded in the southern part of the site. These presumably relate to nearby contemporary settlement,

most likely the putative settlement that is thought to lie to the east within extraction Phases 3c and 4a.

In the northern part of the site a relatively small number of drainage ditches dating to this period were recorded.

5.1.3 Anglo-Saxon

Three definite examples of sunken-featured buildings (AG 8) all lying in close proximity were investigated; whilst a fourth (AG 8) may lie *c.*200m to the north. This provided significant evidence of settlement activity during the Saxon period which continued a ? north-south pattern of activity first identified in phase 1b on the western side of a ? watercourse now marked by the recent dyke.

The potential for additional examples of settlement and other land use from this period will be considered during forthcoming works at the site.

5.1.4 Depth of archaeological remains

A second stage of machine excavation was required in the northern part of the haul road and the north-eastern part of Phase 2. Only through this careful use of plant were the hidden archaeological features revealed. This complexity of deposits should be recognised in forthcoming stages of work in order ensure no remains are missed due to masking layers of organic deposits or alluvium.

5.2 Summary

Important remains from two periods were encountered during this phase of the works at Ivel Farm. These related specifically to the following topics both of which will be explored during the main analysis and publication works:

- Evidence for settlement and possible ritual and funerary practice during the Iron Age. This includes pits, four post structures, settlement remains and funerary activity in the form of cremations.
- Evidence for possible stock rearing during late Iron Age/early Romano-British period as suggested by the enclosure ditches located in the southern part of extraction Phase 2.
- Evidence of Saxon settlement and other land-use activity. Three sunken-featured buildings located within and maybe even using the late Iron Age/early Roman enclosure located in the southern part of extraction Phase 2.

6. BIBLIOGRAPHY

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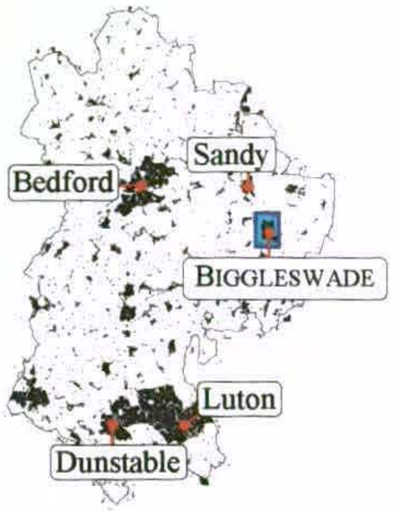

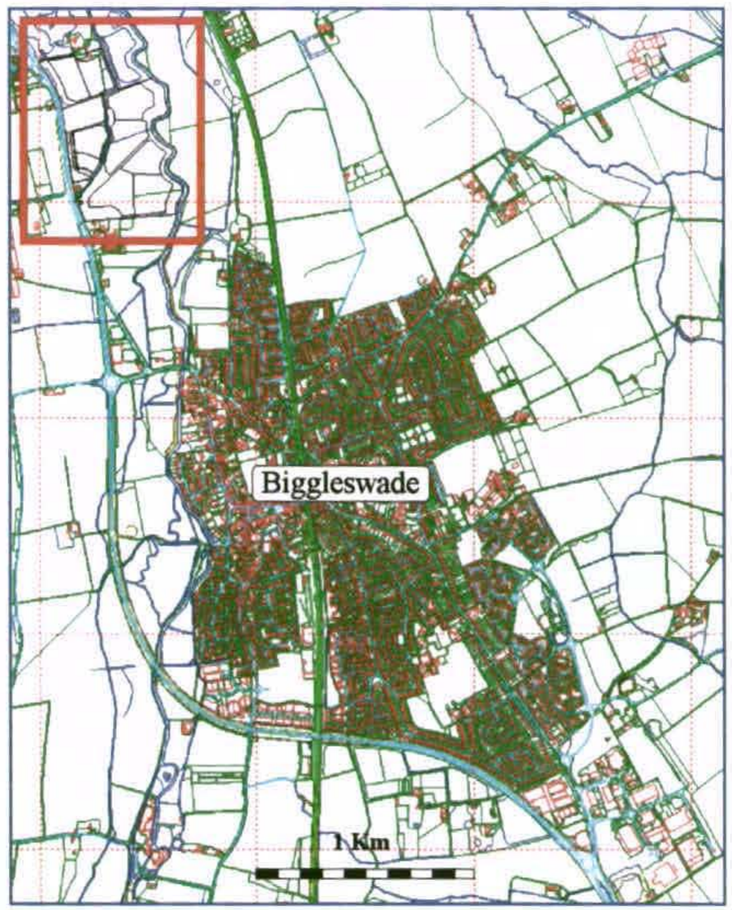

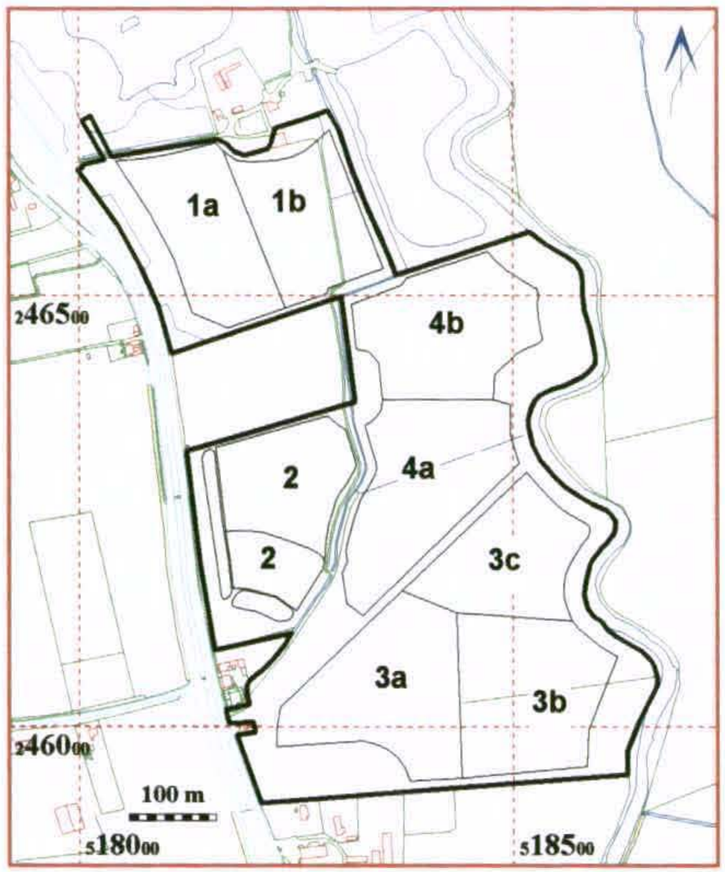

Figure 1: Site location, showing extraction phases

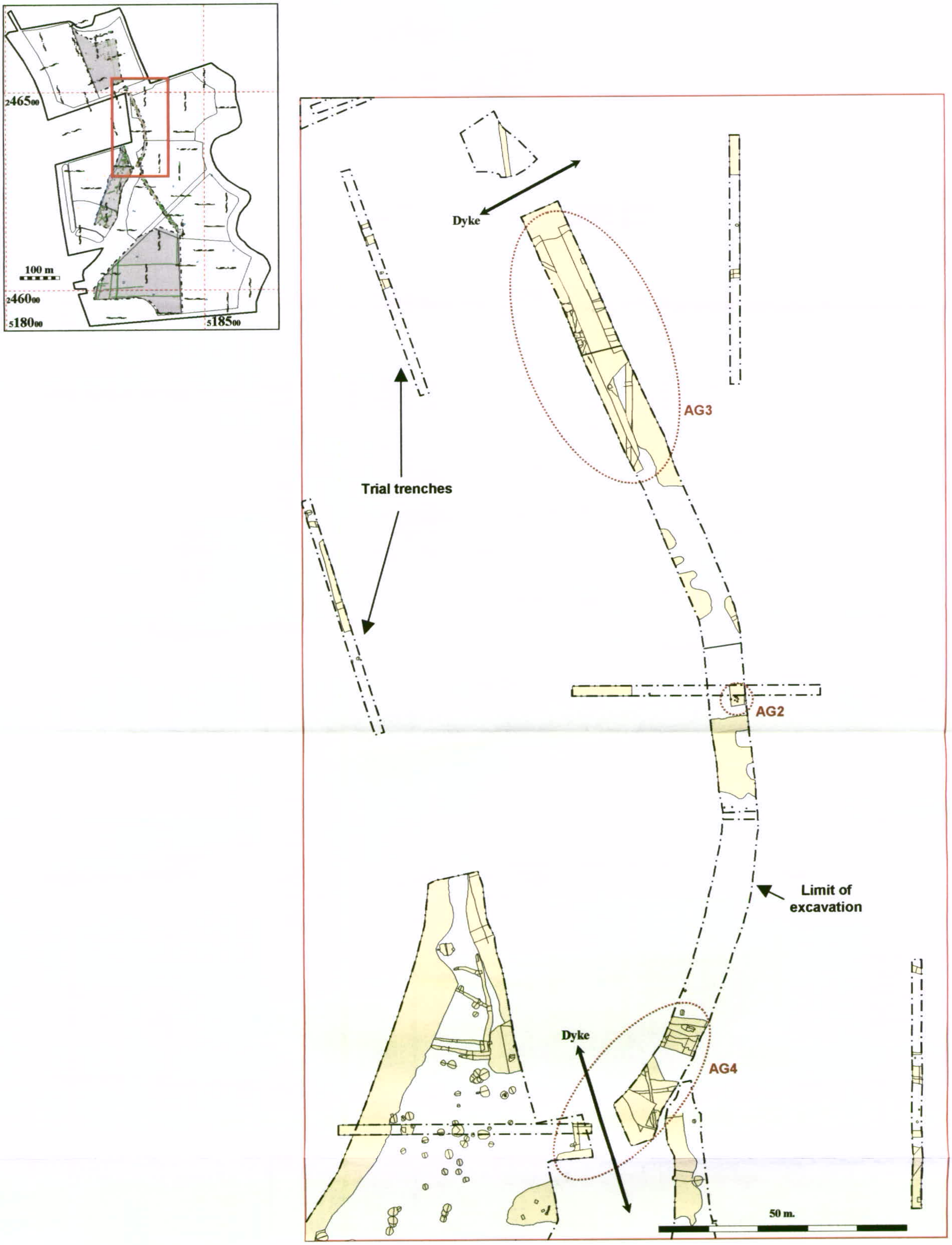

Figure 2: Haul Road (2003)

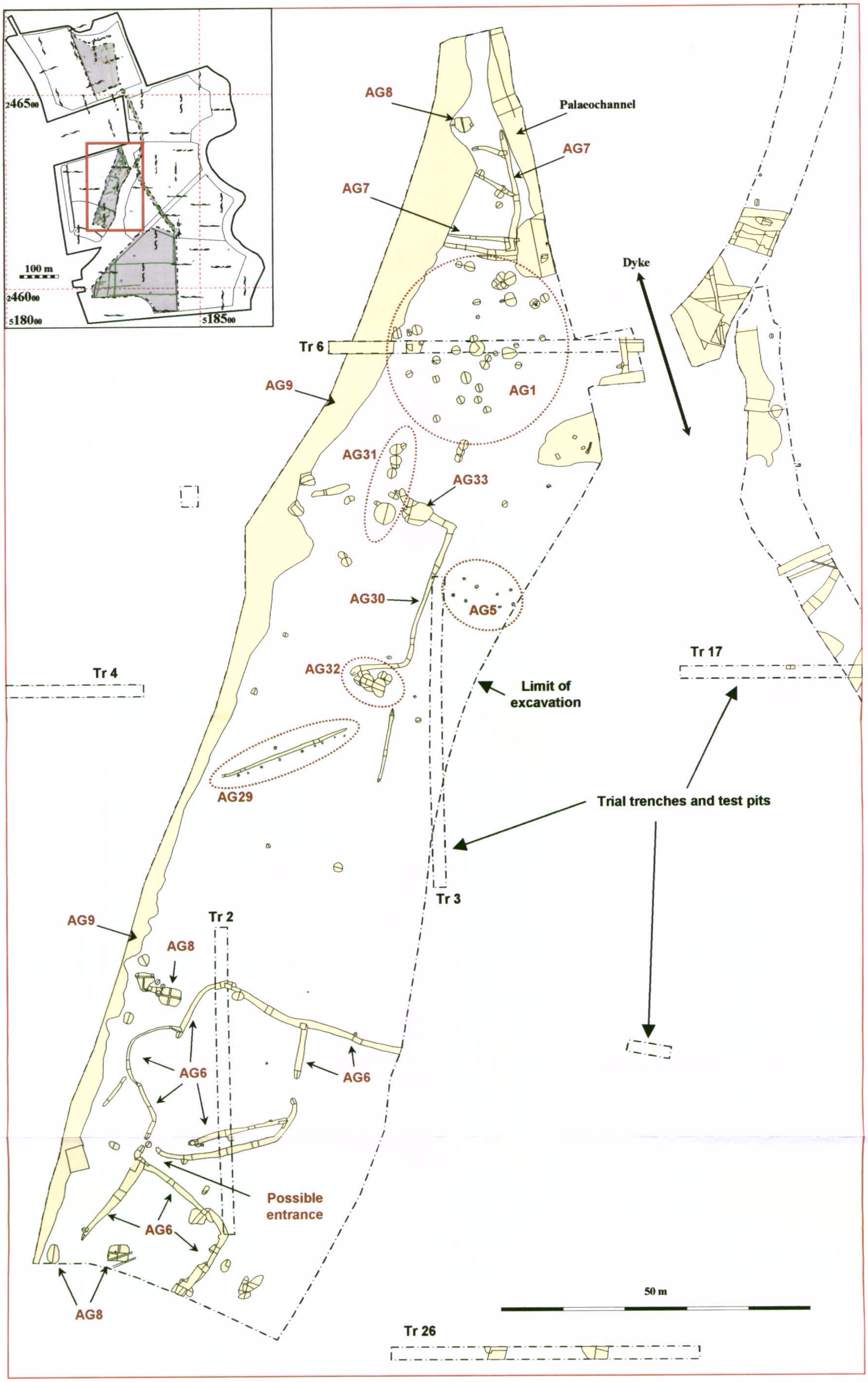

Figure 3: Phase 2