

Archaeological Field Unit

Further Excavations at the Roman Settlement Site East of Tort Hill, Sawtry

J. Roberts MA

1995

Cambridgeshire County Council

Report No. A60

Commissioned By Fenland Hydrotech

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Editor T Reynolds, MA, PhD

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Archaeological Field Unit
Cambridgeshire County Council
Fulbourn Community Centre
Haggis Gap, Fulbourn
Cambridgeshire CB1 5HD
Tel (01223) 881614
Fax (01223) 880946

SUMMARY

During October and November 1994 the Archaeological Field Unit of Cambridgeshire County Council undertook an archaeological assessment along an easement stripped by Fenland Hydrotech to accommodate a water pipeline being diverted before widening of the A1 at Sawtry, TL1725/8480. The work was carried out on behalf of Anglian Water Services. A number of ditches were identified which contained a quantity of Roman pottery, a few fragments of prehistoric pottery, iron objects, coins and other domestic refuse. Cobbled areas and two ovens were also identified. The area probably represents plots to the rear of the Roman roadside settlement along Ermine Street.

1 INTRODUCTION

From 24th October to 11th November 1994 a team from the Archaeological Field Unit of Cambridgeshire County Council carried out an assessment along an easement to the east of the public weighbridge adjacent to the A1(T) at Tort Hill, Sawtry, TL 1725/8480 (see *Figure 1*). The work was carried out following the re-routing of a water pipeline in advance of the widening of the A1 at Sawtry. Desktop surveys (Evans and Shotliff 1990, Pelling and Leith 1992) and evaluation during 1993 (Welsh 1994) identified this as an area with high archaeological potential.

2 TOPOGRAPHY AND GEOLOGY

The assessment area lies to the east of the A1(T), just north of the village of Sawtry at approximately 5.7m OD. The site is situated on Boulder Clay, close to the Roman and medieval fen edge which lies a short distance (approximately 1km) to the east.

3 BACKGROUND

The route of the A1 (formerly the Roman road, Ermine Street) passes to the west of the site and is particularly rich in Roman remains. A Romano-British settlement (occupied between the second and fourth centuries) was partially excavated at nearby Tort Hill during work on the A1 in 1939. Various other Romano-British finds have been identified in the area to the east of the A1(T) and to the west of the current easement. Evaluation was carried out in 1993 (Welsh 1994) which suggests a limited area of Roman settlement at Tort Hill with the highest density of occupation under the present road and immediately to the east of the A1, and decreasing feature density to the north of the assessment area. The site was walked by Dr. Tim Reynolds of the AFU on 27th September after the pipeline diversion was noticed. Although the pipe had been laid and backfilled the weathered easement still yielded approximately 3kg of pottery and tile. Despite the disturbance significant archaeological materials remained and needed to be recorded.

4 METHODS AND CONSTRAINTS

The area to the east of the A1 at Sawtry has been identified as of high archaeological potential through earlier desktop studies and excavations. An easement through the area of potential archaeological interest had been stripped by Anglian Water Services to house a pipeline. The part of the easement which had not been damaged by trenching was mechanically cleaned and features were identified, recorded and sample excavated. The data collected during the assessment will be integrated with previous work on the site. The heavy clay and wet conditions meant that a large part of the trench was underwater during the assessment and it was not possible to identify features or work in the southern part of the trench at all.

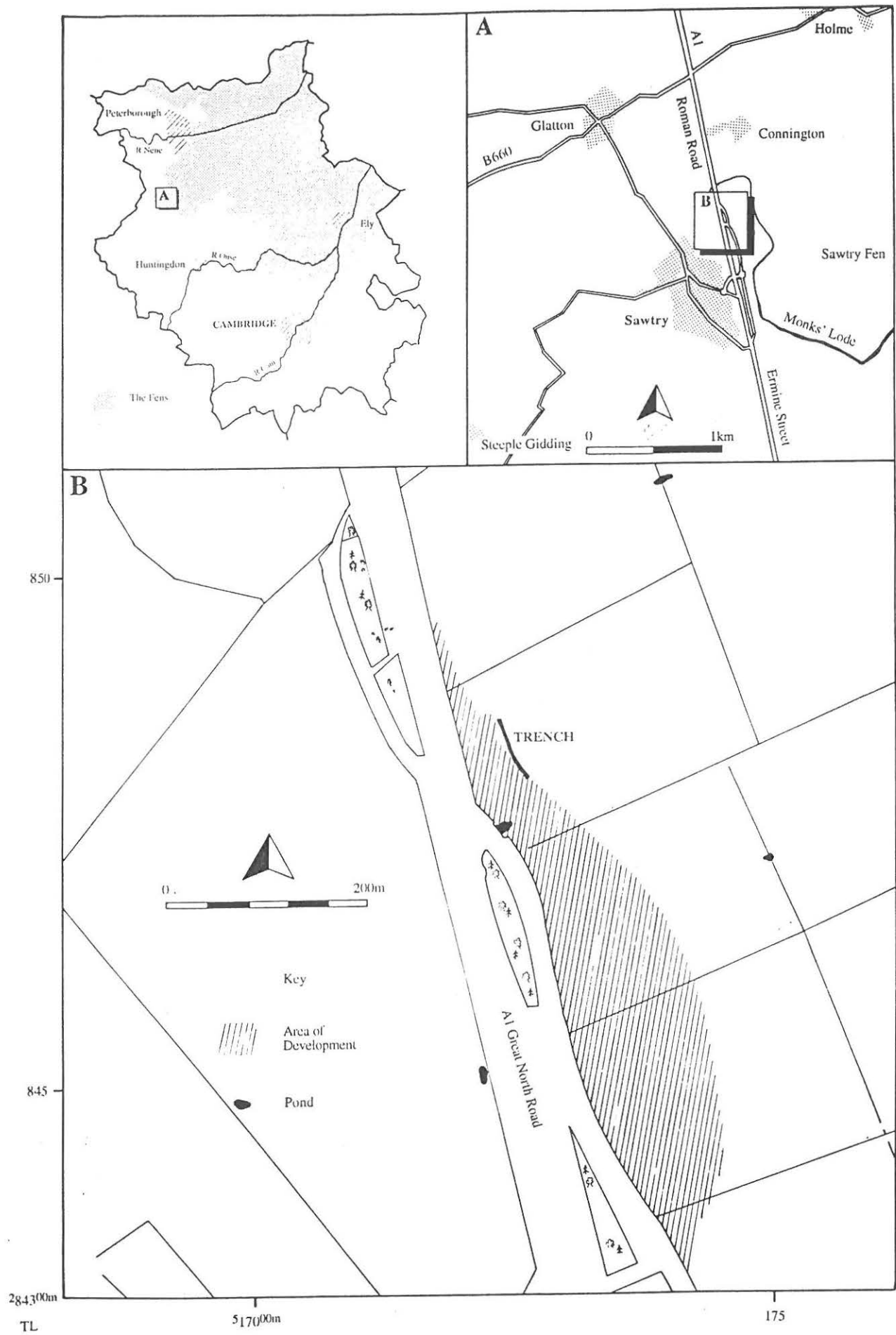


Figure 1 Location map and site plan of trench location

Agricultural 'subsoiling' and laying of field drains had considerably disturbed the archaeological remains and added to the waterlogged conditions of the trench. The low angle of the sun at this time of year made feature recognition and photographic recording difficult, thus reducing the ability to interpret individual features or groups of features across the site.

5 RESULTS

At the northern end of the trench (*Figure 2*) there appeared to be at least four small cobbled areas (cuts **102-105**) which may have acted as footings for a structure. This area was cleaned and recorded but not excavated because of pressure of time. To the south of this area were several superimposed/intercutting linear features (cuts **15, 30, 32, 37, 39** and **41**). These were sample excavated to determine their relationship to each other and recover dating evidence.

Cut **15**, 0.8m wide, 0.11m deep and at least 3.5m long, orientated north-east/south-west, contained two fills (16 and 17) and a posthole or stakehole (**20**) whose fill (21) was similar to 17, indicating the stake was removed whilst the ditch was still in use. The upper fill (16) was a dark grey silty clay which contained bone (including some burnt bone) and oyster shell, pottery and burnt clay, whilst the lower fill (17) was a mottled grey/green clay containing animal bone only.

Cut **30**, 0.85m wide and 0.18m deep, orientated east/west, contained a single fill (29) which was a very dark silty clay containing pottery and bone.

Cut **32**, a 1m wide and 0.10m deep flat-based linear feature orientated east/west, with cobbles from context 14/35 spreading over the southern edge, contained a single fill (31) of fine silty sandy clay with pottery and animal bone together with fragments of a slag produced when repairing implements rather than during original smelting.

Cut **37** with its associated fill (36) was noted after cleaning and was planned but was not excavated; it appears to be a continuation of the shallow linear **32**.

Another linear feature in this area, **39**, was similarly shallow (0.19m deep) and 1.3m wide, and was cut to the east by **15**. It had a single fill (38) of grey/green silty clay with chalk flecks and flint fragments. Cut **39** cuts fill 40 and cut **41**, which was a linear feature with its butt end just north of the intersection with **39**. The single fill was a dark olive brown weathered clay and contained iron slag, Romano-British pottery, animal bone and burnt clay.

A possible posthole, **18**, was recorded after cleaning. This was adjacent to **15** and cut into the natural but was not excavated. Other postholes in this area include **34** and **45**, both of which were partially excavated. Posthole **34** was approximately 0.35m wide and 0.07m deep with steep sides and a flat base with flint packing and a fine silty clay fill (33) containing iron slag. Posthole **45** was approximately oval in plan, being 0.43 by 0.3m, and shallow (0.04m deep) with a flat base. The fill (46) was a dark greyish-brown sandy clay with some pebbles but no artefacts.

To the south of the complex of ditches and postholes was a large cobbled area (context 14/35) containing rounded pebbles and patches of larger stones. From this area a hippo sandal was recovered, together with other iron fragments, pottery and animal bone. A north/south slot was put through the cobbles to determine their depth. The cobbles were no more than 5-10cm in thickness at the edges and approximately 20cm deep with slightly larger stones overlying smaller pebbles

towards the centre. Underlying the central portion of this area was an east/west orientated ditch (96) which contained two fills, 97 and 93; the dark grey silty upper fill (93) contained large quantities of pottery and animal bone and a *nummus* of Constantine I (AD337-341), the lower silty clay fill (97) contained only animal bone.

South of the cobbled area an insubstantial curved linear feature (0.48m wide and 0.7m deep), possibly a ring ditch (10), was sample excavated but contained no dating evidence and there was no obvious relationship with surrounding features. At its western extremity it formed a butt end which had shallow root disturbance in its western edge. To the west of this feature was a shallow (0.15m deep) north/south orientated linear feature (26), 0.8m wide, with a gently sloping eastern edge. This cut contained a single dark grey brown silty clay fill (25) with fragments of pottery, bone and iron. This feature had been truncated by the pipeline trench but was interpreted as a possible beam or timber slot. Another feature, 28, (0.36m wide and 0.10m deep) on a similar alignment just to the south, contained a single compact silty clay fill with fragments of shell-tempered prehistoric pottery.

Running across the easement was a linear cut (70) filled with weathered clay which contained an alignment of postholes (52, 55, 56, 59 and 61) and was abutted by a ditch 43 containing two fills (42 and 47). This feature was orientated north-east/south-west and was 0.8m wide and 0.45m deep with gently sloping sides. Fill 42 was a dark grey silty clay with a few pebbles (increasing in number towards the base), flints and charcoal flecks with a shallow (possibly recut) ditch (64) on its south-eastern edge. Attempts were made to identify a continuation of this ditch but it appeared to terminate with this band of clay. A further ditch (49) was identified but its south-western extent was not determined. A section was put through this feature and it was apparent that it had at least one posthole cut into its base and was possibly some form of fence line. There was considerable shallow modern disturbance in this area caused by either pipe trenching or agricultural activities.

Further linear features were identified to the south of this area but conditions did not allow full investigation. This area was also cut by a modern field drain. Immediately south of the field drain was an area with an extremely dark surface fill. A slot was put through this area to determine the depth and extent of the deposit. It appeared to fill a shallow depression with a possible linear feature (76) at the southern end. Further investigation was not possible. The dark silty fill contained a quantity of slag, pottery and bone, and substantial particles of charcoal.

Further ditches, one (5) running roughly east/west, and two more (71 and 99) running south-west/north-east were noted. It was not possible to investigate the relationship between these ditches as their possible intersection occurred further east, beyond the edge of the easement. Two further features were identified during machine cleaning; these appeared as areas of burnt clay. One extended beyond the edge of the easement (22); the other (2) was excavated and appears to have been some form of hearth or oven with a flue extending south-eastwards into the section. This feature contained two fills (3 and 24), the upper fill (3) being a dark grey silty clay with some fine sand and grit together with flecks of charcoal. The lower fill was similar but much more compact, with a high density of charcoal and fragments of burnt bone. A sample was taken from the fill of this feature to determine its use.

Beyond this point the easement was waterlogged and it was not possible to investigate further.

Trench continues 9m to north

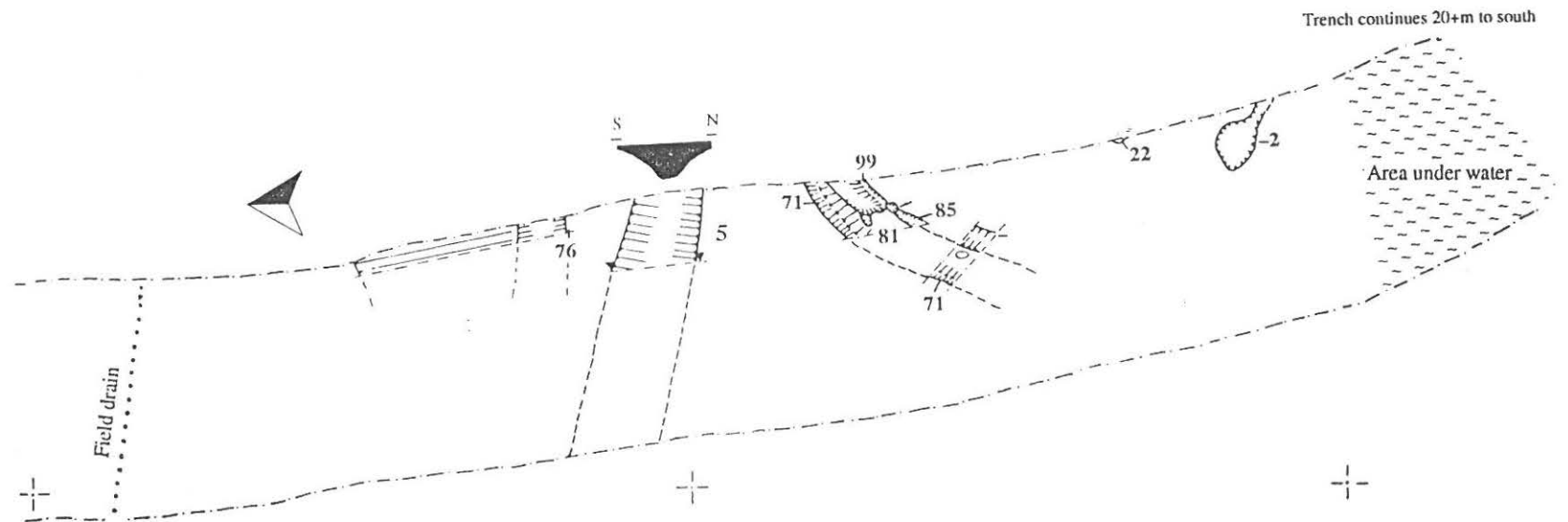
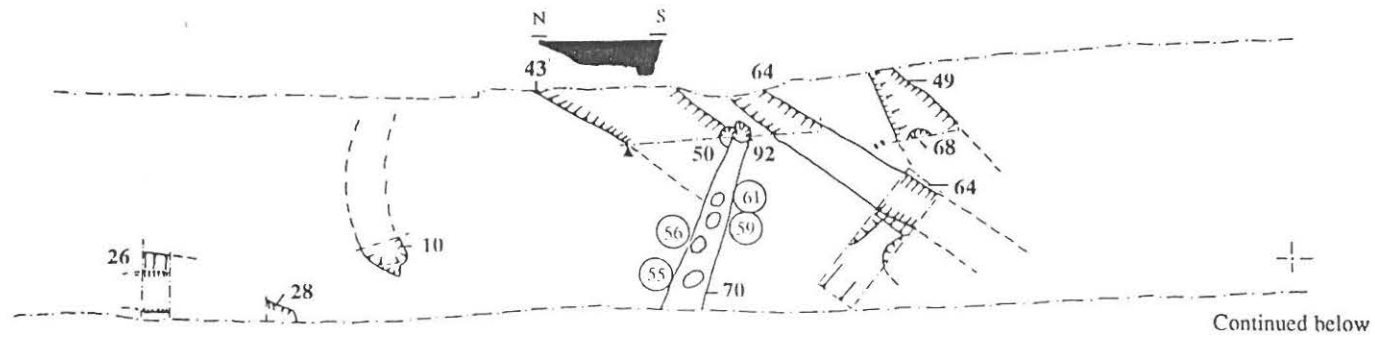
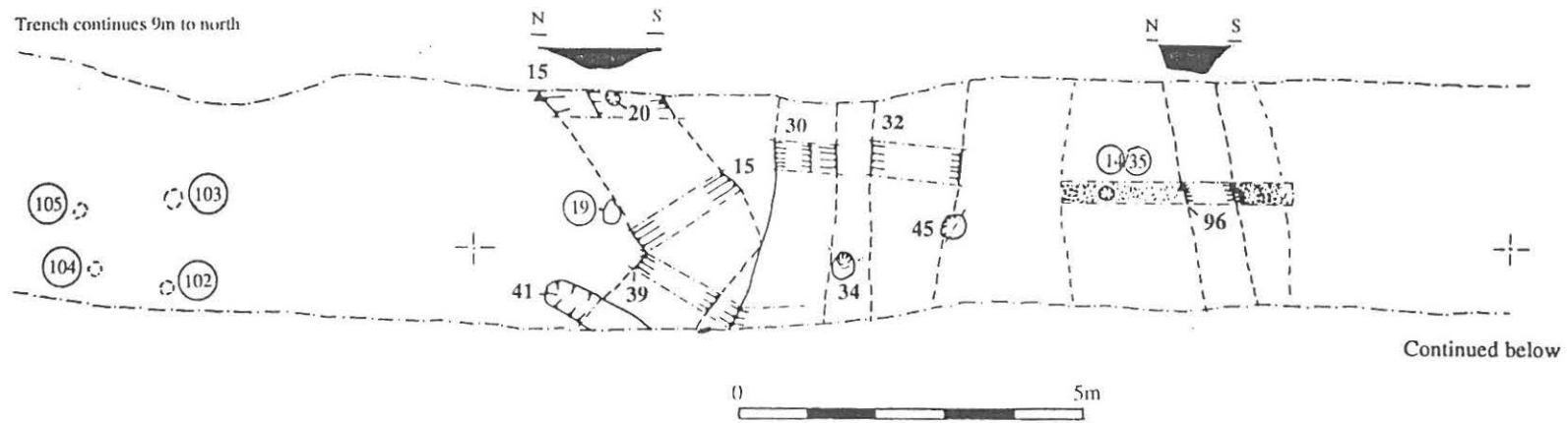


Figure 2 Plan of Trench

6 DISCUSSION

The exact nature of the roadside settlement at Sawtry is not evident from this or previous studies, but indications are that it may have been based on agricultural activities with other, small-scale, subsidiary activities being carried on. Most roadside settlements of this period took the form of ribbon development with the plots extending approximately 40m from the road (Smith 1987). It is likely that the Roman road lies further west (under the present A1) and that the evaluations have revealed the rear of the roadside plots, and further plots which extended eastwards. The features excavated, and their contents, are consistent with the current evaluation area being peripheral to the roadside settlement. The greatest density of occupation would have been alongside the road with secondary activities carried on at the rear of those properties. The metal slag and ovens together with the made-up/cobbled surfaces suggest that this area was used for a variety of secondary activities (small-scale pottery production, agricultural processing, bone and/or leather working, metal working, tool repairing, etc.) and rubbish disposal. The ditches are suggestive of property boundaries extending eastwards from the road and being the boundaries to plots at the rear of the primary roadside settlement. Pottery from the site is being examined but no report is available at present. The pottery closely resembles that from the previous evaluation and gives a possible date range for the settlement between the 1st and 4th century. A full pottery report will be lodged with the archive when it becomes available.

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CONTEXT LIST

Ctxt	Description	Nature	Finds	Above	Below
001	Cleaning layer				
002	Cut of burnt area (hearth)				
	024 and 003				
003	Fill of 002	Grey silty clay	Pot and bone	024	001
004	Fill of 071	Olive brown silty clay	Pot	071	95 and 106
005	Cut of e-w linear			007	066
006	Fill of 005	Dk olive brown silty clay	Pot and bone	065	001
007	Deposit over 100 and 101	Dk grey brown silty clay	Pot, bone, slag	100,101	001
008	Natural feature	Not excavated			
009	Natural feature	Not excavated			
010	Cut of curved linear	Linear			011
011	Fill of 10	Brown silty clay		010	001
012	Linear feature	Machine damage			013
013	Fill of 012	Machine damage			001
014	Cobbled area	Medium/large cobbles	Pot, bone, iron	093	001
015	Cut of linear	Linear		038	017
016	Fill of 015	Dark grey silty clay	Pot and bone	017	001
017	Fill of 015	Grey/green clay	Bone	017	016
018	Cut of posthole	Not excavated			
019	Fill of 018	Not excavated			
020	Cut of stakehole	Stakehole		015	021
021	Fill of 020	Grey/green clay		020	001
022	Cut of burnt area (hearth)	Not excavated			
023	Fill of 022	Not excavated			
024	Fill of 002	Dark grey silty clay	Burnt bone	002	003
025	Fill of 026	Dark grey brown silty clay	Bone, pot, iron	026	001
026	Cut	Linear			025
027	Fill of 028	Olive grey silty clay	Prehistoric pot	028	001
028	Cut	Linear			027
029	Fill of 030	Dark brown silty clay	Pot and bone	030	001
030	Cut	Linear			029
031	Fill of 032	Dark grey brown silty clay	Pot,bone,slag	032	035
032	Cut	Linear			031
033	Fill of 034	Dark olive brown silty clay	Slag	034	001
034	Cut				033
035	Cobbled spread	Same as 14 - cobbles		031	001
036	Fill of cut 037	Not recorded			
037	Cut	Not recorded			
038	Fill of cut 039	Grey green silty clay	None	039	015
039	Cut				038
040	Fill of cut 041	Grey green clay	Bone, pot,slag	041	039
041	Cut				044
042	Fill of cut 043	Dark grey silty clay	Bone and pot	047	001
043	Cut				047
044	Fill of cut 041	Yellow brown	None	040	041
045	Cut	Posthole			046
046	Fill of 045	Dark greyish brown clay	None	045	001
047	Fill of cut 043	Dark grey/brown silty clay	Bone and pot	043	042
048	Fill of cut 049	Olive silty clay	Pot	049	068
049	Cut of linear	Linear			048
050	Cut of posthole	Posthole		042	062
051	Fill of posthole 050	Yellowish brown silty clay	None	062	001
052	Fill of posthole 092	Dk yellowish brn silty clay	None	053	050
053	Fill of posthole 092	Dark grey silty clay	None	092	052
054	Cut of post trench	Unexcavated			
055	Fill of cut 054	Unexcavated			
056	Fill of posthole 057	Unexcavated			
057	Cut of posthole	Unexcavated			
058	Cut of posthole	Unexcavated			
059	Fill of posthole 058	Unexcavated			
060	Cut of posthole	Unexcavated			
061	Fill of posthole 061	Unexcavated			

062	Fill of cut 050	Not recorded		051	062
063	Fill of cut 064	Dk greyish brn silty clay	Pot	064	001
064	Cut of linear feature	Linear		042	063
065	Upper fill of cut 005	Yellowish brown silty clay	Bone and pot	066	006
066	Lowest fill of cut 005	Dark grey clay silt	Bone and pot	005	065
067	Upper fill of cut 068	Pale olive silty clay	Pot	069	001
068	Cut of posthole	Posthole			048
069	Lower fill of cut 068	Olive brown silty clay	None	068	067
070	Linear feature - master number for gully				
071	Cut	Linear			094
072	Cut	Unexcavated			
073	Fill of cut 072	Unexcavated			
074	Fill of cut 075	Unexcavated			
075	Cut	Unexcavated			
076	Cut	Unexcavated			
077	Cut to north of cut 076	Unexcavated			
078	Fill of cut 077	Unexcavated, truncated by field drain			
079	Fill of cut 080	Unexcavated			
080	Cut	Unexcavated			
081	Cut of stakehole	Posthole			082
082	Fill of cut 081	Dark brown sandy clay	None	081	004
083	Cut of stakehole	Stakehole			084
084	Fill of cut	Dark brown sandy clay	None	083	004
085	Cut of stakehole	Stakehole			086
086	Fill of cut 085	Dark brown sandy clay	None	085	004
087	Fill of 071	Yellow brown clay sand	None	088	001
088	Fill of 071	Yellow brown gritty sand	Bone and pot	071	087
089	Modern plough damage				
090	Context number not used				
091	Context number not used				
092	Cut of posthole			042	053
093	Fill of 096	Dark grey silty clay	Bone and pot	097	014
094	Fill of cut 071	Dark brown sandy clay	Bone and pot	071	004
095	Fill of cut 099	Olive grey clay	Bone and pot	099	001
096	Cut of ditch	Linear			097
097	Fill of cut 096	Dark grey silty clay	Bone	096	014
098	Context number not used				
099	Cut of linear	Linear			095
100	Fill of cut 076	Olive brown silty clay	Bone, pot, slag	076	007
101	Fill of cut 076	Olive brown silty clay	Bone, pot, slag	076	007
102	Cobbled area SW	Unexcavated			
103	Cobbled area SE	Unexcavated			
104	Cobbled area NW	Unexcavated			
105	Cobbled area NE	Unexcavated			
106	Upper fill of cut 071	Olive clay	Bone and pot	006	001
107	General number used for finds from 005				
108	Cut	Not recorded			