

**LAND ADJOINING
SWANTON MORLEY AIRFIELD,
BEETLEY & HOE
NORFOLK**

Archaeological Investigation



HERTFORDSHIRE ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRUST
Report No. 1260

**LAND ADJOINING SWANTON MORLEY AIRFIELD,
BEETLEY & HOE, NORFOLK**

Archaeological Investigation

Site Code: 37159.HZE

NGR: TF 9946 1881

Parish: Hoe

Matt Sutherland BA

Ben Roberts BSc. M. Phil.

January 2003

THE SEED WAREHOUSE, MAIDENHEAD YARD
THE WASH, HERTFORD SG14 1PX

TEL (01992) 558170

FAX (01992) 553359

E-mail: herts.archtrust@virgin.net

www.hertfordshire-archaeological-trust.co.uk

LAND ADJOINING SWANTON MORLEY AIRFIELD, BEETLEY & HOE, NORFOLK ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION

SUMMARY

During December 2002 and early January 2003, Hertfordshire Archaeological Trust carried out an archaeological 'strip and record' excavation on land adjoining Swanton Morley Airfield, Norfolk (NGR TF 9946 1881). This phase of investigation followed a series of earlier phases of work. It revealed an early Saxon cremation burial, an undated possible ring ditch, undated pits, and undated boundary/enclosure ditches.

The virtual absence of diagnostic finds meant that phasing relied on stratigraphy and the relationships of features to previously recorded evidence. Tentative dates of Late Romano-British and Early Saxon are assigned to three of the more substantial ditches.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 During December 2002 and early January 2003 Hertfordshire Archaeological Trust (HAT) carried out an archaeological 'strip and record' excavation on land adjoining Swanton Morley Airfield, Norfolk (NGR: TF 9946 1881, Figs. 1 & 2). The work was commissioned by Stephen M Daw on behalf of Barker Bros. Aggregates Ltd in advance of proposed mineral extraction on the site. The works were undertaken as part of a planning requirement by the local planning authority (based on advice from Norfolk Landscape Archaeology (NLA)).

1.2 The archaeological excavation was conducted in accordance with a brief prepared by NLA (dated 12/11/02) and a specification compiled by HAT (dated 03/12/02). The work complied with the NLA *County Standards for Fieldwork in Norfolk* (1998), and the Institute of Field Archaeologists' *Standard and Guidance for Archaeological Excavations* (revised 1999) and the Institute of Field Archaeologists' *Standard and Guidance for Archaeological Watching Briefs* (revised 1999).

1.3 The principal aims of the 'strip & sample' excavation were to determine the location and extent of the Romano-British enclosure ditches and Saxon cremation cemetery/occupation evidence revealed in earlier phases of work on the site (Wilkins and Wotherspoon 2002; Trimble 2002a & b), and to investigate and record any additional archaeological features in advance of gravel extraction.

1.4 The excavation was to recover as much information as possible on the origins, date, development, phasing, spatial organisation, character, function, status, and the nature of social, economic and industrial activities on the site.

1.5 Research issues include the characterisation of the post-Roman occupation of the immediate area, and specifically to establish any further evidence of early Saxon burial activity or occupation on the site. Earlier activity was also of interest, in particular Roman or later prehistoric activity, with relation to a concentration of ring ditches, a Roman road, bridge and fort and a large Roman settlement in the area.

2 SITE DESCRIPTION, TOPOGRAPHY, SOILS AND GEOLOGY

2.1 The site comprises an area of farmland, encompassing an overall area of some 11.6ha, located to the west of Swanton Morley Airfield, Norfolk. It comprises part of the more extensive Roostinghills quarry that lies to the west, and is accessed from the main quarry entrance on the B1110. A trackway associated with the perimeter of the airfield bounds the site to east. The land to the west of the site is in arable use. The disused Dereham-North Elmham railway line runs some 200m to the west of the site, parallel with Hoe Road.

2.2 The village of North Elmham lies approximately 2km to the north north west, with the village of Beetley c.2km to the south west. The small hamlet of Hoe lies some 1.5km to the south of the site. The site lies on a gentle incline, rising from c.35m AOD in the north west of the site to c.44m AOD in the south eastern part.

2.3 The drift geology of the area comprises areas of chalky till and glaciofluvial drift, on the terrace above the valley of the river Nar to the west. The natural drift on the site itself consists of coarse sands and gravels. Soils are the Burlingham 1 association of deep loamy soils with slowly permeable subsoils and slight seasonal waterlogging, associated with some deep well drained coarse loamy and sandy soils (Soil Survey of England and Wales, 1983).

3 ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

3.1 The site has been subject to archaeological evaluation (Trimble 2002a) (Fig.2), revealing evidence for a 5th - 6th century, possibly enclosed, cremation cemetery, enclosure ditches of probable late Iron Age/Roman and Saxon date, and a probable timber structure associated with the cemetery. Fieldwalking/metal detecting also revealed metalwork suggesting that the cemetery extends southwards from where it was identified in Evaluation Trench 16 for at least some 25m. Many of the enclosure ditches contained no dating evidence.

3.2 Subsequent to this, HAT carried out an archaeological 'strip, map & sample' excavation of an area to the immediate north west and east of the current site (Wilkins & Wotherspoon 2002) (Fig. 3). This revealed a ditched field system of Iron Age/Romano-British date. The south western corner of the site revealed an area of Romano-British settlement and industrial activity, with two or more kilns. Surface finds from one of the kilns suggested that they were producing Iceni Rusticated ware of the late first to early 2nd century AD. The eastern strip (along the perimeter of the airfield and to the immediate east of the current site, revealed widespread evidence of

ground disturbance and truncation, probably associated with the construction of the airfield during WWII, though some archaeological features did survive.

3.3 A further phase of evaluation on the current site and the site to the immediate south (carried out by NAU in September/October 2002) (Trimble 2002b) (Fig.2) further defined the Pagan Saxon cemetery (centred to the south of the current site), with the discovery of three more cremation burials and an inhumation burial (the latter richly furnished), with evidence of settlement of a similar period (including a probable *grubenhaus*).

3.4 The detailed local archaeological background is contained within previous excavation report by HAT (Wilkins & Wotherspoon 2002). It is summarised below:

3.5 The earliest evidence for human activity in Norfolk has been gathered from dispersed sites, but allows a generalised view of the area to be appreciated, and suggests that the area has been settled and exploited since the early prehistoric period. Although much of the evidence is ephemeral, consisting of Mesolithic (c. 8300 BC – 4300 BC) and Neolithic (c. 4300 – 3300 BC) flint scatters, it is likely that the area has sustained occupation since this time.

3.6 Regional studies on Boulder Clay environments have shown a marked increase in the exploitation of heavier soils during the Bronze Age (c. 2000 BC – 800 BC) for pastoral and arable cultivation (Hunter 1999). Within the immediate area two pits containing Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age pottery were recorded during the earlier phase of 'strip & sample' excavation on the site (Wilkins and Wotherspoon 2002) though there are few other signs of occupation. Surveys in the wider area have revealed numerous ring ditches, a burnt mound and pot boiler and part of a fen causeway.

3.7 The Iron Age remains a generally poorly-understood and under-represented period of prehistory at a national level, and evidence in Norfolk is particularly sparse. Any remains represent a considerable advance in local knowledge. The period is a long one (c.800 BC – 50 AD) though by the latter centuries an intensively exploited landscape is attested within a developed sociological environment. Roman sources write of the presence of a tribal grouping known as the Iceni occupying northern East Anglia, though apart from their last known tribal rulers they remain poorly known and are thought to have been culturally isolated. The same sources suggest division into a number of smaller groupings, but little can be deduced about settlement patterns and occupation from the evidence. A likely late Iron Age/ Early Roman field system was identified during the initial evaluation of the current site, orientated generally north west - south east. Further evaluation revealed a series of field ditches/enclosures of similar orientation consistently containing late Roman pottery (Wilkins and Wotherspoon 2002). Across the valley similar Late Iron Age and Roman enclosures and field boundaries identified at Spong Hill.

3.8 During the four centuries of Roman occupation, the landscape, social environment and infrastructure developed considerably, and material culture becomes more visible in the archaeological record with the use of coinage, pottery, buildings of masonry and other durable materials. Several military forts were constructed in the

area as part of the conquest and subjugation of the tribe, particularly after the rebellion of Boudicca (AD 60), together with a network of military and civilian roads. The partial excavation of two kilns in a previous evaluation (Wilkins and Wotherspoon 2002) corresponds to an early Roman kiln identified at Spong Hill. In addition, a large Roman settlement, road and coins have been identified to the north east.

3.9 The collapse of Roman administration and economic cohesion in the late 4th and early 5th century ensured the eventual abandonment of all major centres of urban population across Western Europe, even if a few managed to struggle on for several generations into the 5th century as religious centres. The post-Roman and early Anglo-Saxon development of East Anglia remains poorly understood, even though the area lay in the primary zone of new colonisation by Germanic settlers. However, the excavation of the early Saxon settlement and cremation cemetery at Spong Hill containing approximately 2,300 cremations, 57 inhumations, two ring ditches and a small number of *grubenhauser* and timber halls dating to the 5th and 6th centuries (McKinley, 1994) has been of immense importance in furthering understanding. It is probable that the cemetery served a large territory of central Norfolk, rather than a few settlement sites such as those at Billington (Wade, in Glazebrook, 1997, 49). The presence of several cremation urns and one inhumation recovered from the south east of the site means that entry was not entirely inclusive (Trimble 2002b). Curvilinear ditches in the proximity may also represent ring ditches or barrows associated with funerary activity. Accompanying the cemetery was evidence of settlement activity in the form of post built and sunken featured buildings, pits and postholes (Trimble 2002b).

3.10 The area was clearly very important in the later Saxon period. North Elmham, north north west of the assessment site, was a Saxon bishopric until the 11th century, although it was abandoned for a century in the mid-ninth century during the Danish occupancy. The Saxon Cathedral, the seat of the Bishops of East Anglia, now survives as ruins. It is not clear when the area became important ecclesiastically, although a copper-alloy hanging censor found on the site was dated to the mid-ninth century. This date fits with a mid/late Saxon inhumation cemetery associated with the cathedral. Settlement of the site is first represented by middle Saxon buildings, boundary ditches and two timber-lined wells. In 1075 the first Norman Bishop of Elmham moved to Thetford, and later his successor moved to the Cathedral in Norwich. The Saxon Cathedral was converted into a double-moated castle in the fourteenth century.

3.11 After the mid-7th century an economic and settlement transformation took place with the re-emergence of activity on navigable rivers or coastal areas. These trading centres or *emporia* have been identified at Ipswich and latterly Norwich, though other important centres of pottery production at Thetford and elsewhere suggest that the picture is more complex. The handful of sites which have been excavated around the country as a whole suggest a gradual re-emergence of nucleated settlement between the 7th and 10th centuries. It is believed that the occupation of the Norfolk uplands was completed during this period, though large areas may still have remained under-exploited. The chronology and course of this development is almost completely unknown. Worthing church tower and door at Elmham to the north survive from this period suggesting that the area was of some importance.

3.12 The earliest surviving verified source is Domesday Book, compiled in 1086, which reveals both the presence of estates in the landscape and the cultural and tenorial idiosyncrasies of Norfolk. The site itself lay in the agricultural hinterland of the villages of Hoe, Beetley and Worthing ensuring that, with the exception of moated manorial sites at Beetley, Spong Hill, Hoe and Worthing, mediaeval evidence from the area is limited to pottery sherds and brick fragments.

3.13 Little in the way of post-mediaeval activity is known in the immediate vicinity, other than the reference to an old road on Bryant's 1826 map to the north west of the site and the 19th century construction of the Wymondham-Wells railway.

3.14 Swanton Morley airfield was constructed in 1940, together with a number of pillboxes, spigot mortar bases and other concrete fortifications, and is now the largest surviving grass airfield of WWII date in the country. One of the pillboxes was recorded as part of the first phase of archaeological works on the current site (NAU 2002b).

3.15 The development site itself appears to have undergone little change since the mediaeval period at least, until the creation of the airfield, perimeter and fortifications to the immediate east of the site which is likely to have caused a certain degree of truncation. The Saxon urns recorded during the evaluation showed some evidence of truncation by plough-damage, though this may have been due to more recent deep ploughing of the site.

4 METHODOLOGY

4.1 Topsoil and undifferentiated overburden were excavated mechanically under close archaeological supervision, thereafter all further excavation was undertaken by hand. A programme of metal detecting was undertaken before, during and after topsoil stripping. All deposits revealed were cleaned by hand, recorded using *pro forma* recording sheets, drawn to scale and photographed as appropriate. In addition, the excavated spoil and excavation was scanned with a metal detector.

5 DESCRIPTION OF RESULTS

5.1 The excavations revealed a series of undated linear ditches, an undated ring ditch and an early Saxon cremation, the latter disturbed by ploughing. Few finds were recovered, other than surface finds.

5.2 The linear ditches can be divided by orientation into those aligned broadly east-west (F2002, F2004, F2006) and those on a broadly north-south axis (F2008, F2014, F2016, F2018) (Figs.4 – 5). The previous excavation immediately to the west (Wilkins and Wotherspoon 2002) recorded a series of mainly late Romano-British ditches, some of which clearly continue into the current area (Fig.3).

5.3 The long linear ditch (F2002) corresponds in plan, section and fill to the undated ditch (F1070) that cut a late Roman ditch (F1160) (Fig.5). Its alignment deviates significantly from the dated Romano-British features suggesting that it may possibly be closer in date to the early Saxon cremations. It did not yield any diagnostic pottery but did contain animal bone (4g) and struck flint (13g). The ditch (F2002) turns abruptly south at the eastern end of the site suggesting that it formed part of an enclosure. The relationship of ditch (F1070/F2002) to ditch (F2004) is not clear. The shorter linear ditch (F2006) is a continuation of late Roman ditch (F1027) recorded to the west, though the former contained no finds.

5.4 The short lengths of north-south linear ditches, F2008, F2014, F2016, F2018, were with the exception of F2008 less substantial than the east-west ditches and did not yield any finds (Fig.4). Their preservation was patchy. The apparently isolated ditch, F2008, in the northern part of the site may have formed part of a parallel enclosure ditch corresponding to F1016 recorded to the west (Wilkins and Wotherspoon 2002) (Fig.4).

5.5 A plough-damaged cremation burial, F2050, was located. It comprised two, early Saxon vessels, comparable to those excavated during the evaluation (Trimble 2002b). A small quantity of cremated bone was contained in one vessel (2049). The grave pit fill was a dark yellow/brown redeposited sand (L2051).

5.6 Several undated features were located in the southern part of the excavation (Fig.5). An undated ring ditch (F2036) encompassed two undated pits (F2038, F2046). Adjacent was an undated post hole, F2034. Westwards was a group of amorphous 'features', F2020, F2022, F2026, F2030 and F2032. Some, F2020 and F2036, contained fired clay (9g; 1g), and F2022 contained tile (212g). The features likely represent areas of differing geology/subsoil or are the result of more recent ground disturbance. An isolated undated pit, F2010, was also excavated in the northern part of the site (Fig.5).

6 CONFIDENCE RATING

6.1 It is not thought that any factors hindered the identification of archaeological features or finds during the excavation

7 DEPOSIT MODEL

7.1 The sandy silty topsoil (L2000) overlay the gravel drift (L2001). The latter comprised differential areas of orange brown silty sand. The topsoil overlay archaeological features of Romano-British and early Saxon date.

7.2 Archaeological features were recorded throughout the excavation, with particular concentrations in the southern and eastern areas of the site.

8 DISCUSSION

8.1 The excavation revealed lengths of field and enclosure ditches, that correspond partially in orientation and size to those previously recorded (Trimble 2002a & b; Wilkins and Wotherspoon 2002) and thus allow tentative dates of late Romano-British to be assigned to the most substantial ditches. Ditch F2002 may be associated with the early Saxon cemetery.

8.2 The undated ring ditch located in southern part of the site appeared to be isolated. Although there is a noted concentration of Bronze Age ring ditches in the area, no firm evidence dates this feature to this period.

8.3 Further evidence of the Saxon cremation cemetery was recorded in the form of an urned cremation to the north of the original cluster. The cremation cemetery is located on the plateau of a low hill, with the land sloping down to the north, south and west. The topography is similar to that on the opposite side of the valley, where the Spong Hill cemetery is situated, also c.500m from the Black Water. The sites are in what has been recognised as a classic location for a Saxon cemetery, being cited on prominent ground and near to rivers and streams. Hill (1980) has argued that Spong Hill, due to its size, may have served several communities in the region or formed a focal point for the neighborhood, whereas the smaller cemeteries probably served a local community or individual settlements as revealed in the previous evaluation (Trimble 2002b). It may be that the cemetery identified on this site served the local community, whereas Spong Hill received people from a wider community. The relationship between the cemetery and the one at Spong Hill is unclear and provides a focus for future research.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

HAT is grateful to Barker Bros Aggregates for their co-operation and funding of the excavation. HAT would also like to thank their agent, Mr Stephen Daw

HAT is also pleased to acknowledge the input and advice of Mr Andy Hutcheson of Norfolk Landscape Archaeology.

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Concordance of finds by feature

Feature	Context	Segment	Description	Spot Date	Pottery	Building material	Animal Bone	Struck Flint	Human Bone
2002	2003	G	Ditch Fill				1g	13g	
"	"	I	Ditch Fill				3g		
2020	2021		Pit Fill			Fired Clay, 9g		27g	
2022	2023		Ditch Fill			Tile, 212g			
2036	2037	2	Ring Ditch Fill					10g	
"	"	3	Ring Ditch Fill			Fired Clay, 1g			
2048	2049		Cremation						Cremated Bone, 47g
"	2050		Cremation Vessel*	Early Saxon	1006g				

*There is more than one vessel within the cremation

The Pottery

By Andrew Peachey.

Roman Pottery

Nine sherds of pottery, weighing 147 grams, were recovered during the archaeological investigation at Swanton Morley. Six were surface finds. All the sherds are very abraded and poorly preserved. Context 2025 contained three sherds of Late Romano-British shell-tempered ware from the same vessel, probably a jar with a slightly everted rim. One of the surface finds is a body sherd of mortaria. The fabric is probably an Oxford product (similar to mortaria fabric M16 at Brancaster), but it is also possible that the sherd is from Hadham. Other surface finds comprise two very small sherds of oxidised ware, probably of Hadham origin.

Early Saxon Pottery

Context 2050 contained 57 sherds, weighing 1006 grams. Two vessels account for all of the pottery, almost certainly the remains of a cremation.

One vessel has an everted rim with a plain shoulder cordon, below which is a horizontal row of small bosses. It is probably a sub-biconical jar. The fabric contained common medium quartz (<0.5mm), sparse large quartz (0.5-2mm), sparse, soft black inclusions that may be organic temper (0.5 – 3mm), and common elongate voids (<0.7mm). The latter may also represent organic, or possibly grog, temper burnt out during the firing process. There is no vesticulation on the surface of the vessel so it is unlikely that the fabric was shell tempered. The fabric is not dissimilar to the Romanising grey ware fabrics, but it is not as well fired. The form is simple and almost certainly associated with a cremation burial of early Saxon date.

The second vessel is preserved as a base and lower body, of which 15 sherds cross join to give a lower body profile. The vessel was probably an ovoid jar with a poorly defined foot-ring, and with the base rising in the centre. The fabric contains common fine and medium (<0.2mm, and 0.2-0.5mm) quartz, sparse black iron ore, and occasional fragments of flint (<2mm). The fabric is hard, well fired, and displays interior and exterior rilling from being wheel thrown. The base was probably made using a coil of clay. It is typical of the sandy grey wares associated with the late Roman period, however these traditions continued into the early Saxon period.

Both of the vessels are probably of early Saxon date, and accord with the Anglian traditions of pottery found at nearby sites, such as Spong Hill, Norfolk. The vessels are simple and lack the more elaborate decoration and shell-tempering associated with Saxon vessels of later date.

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TF
319100 + 599300

+ 599400

+ 599500

+ 599600



319000 +

318900 +

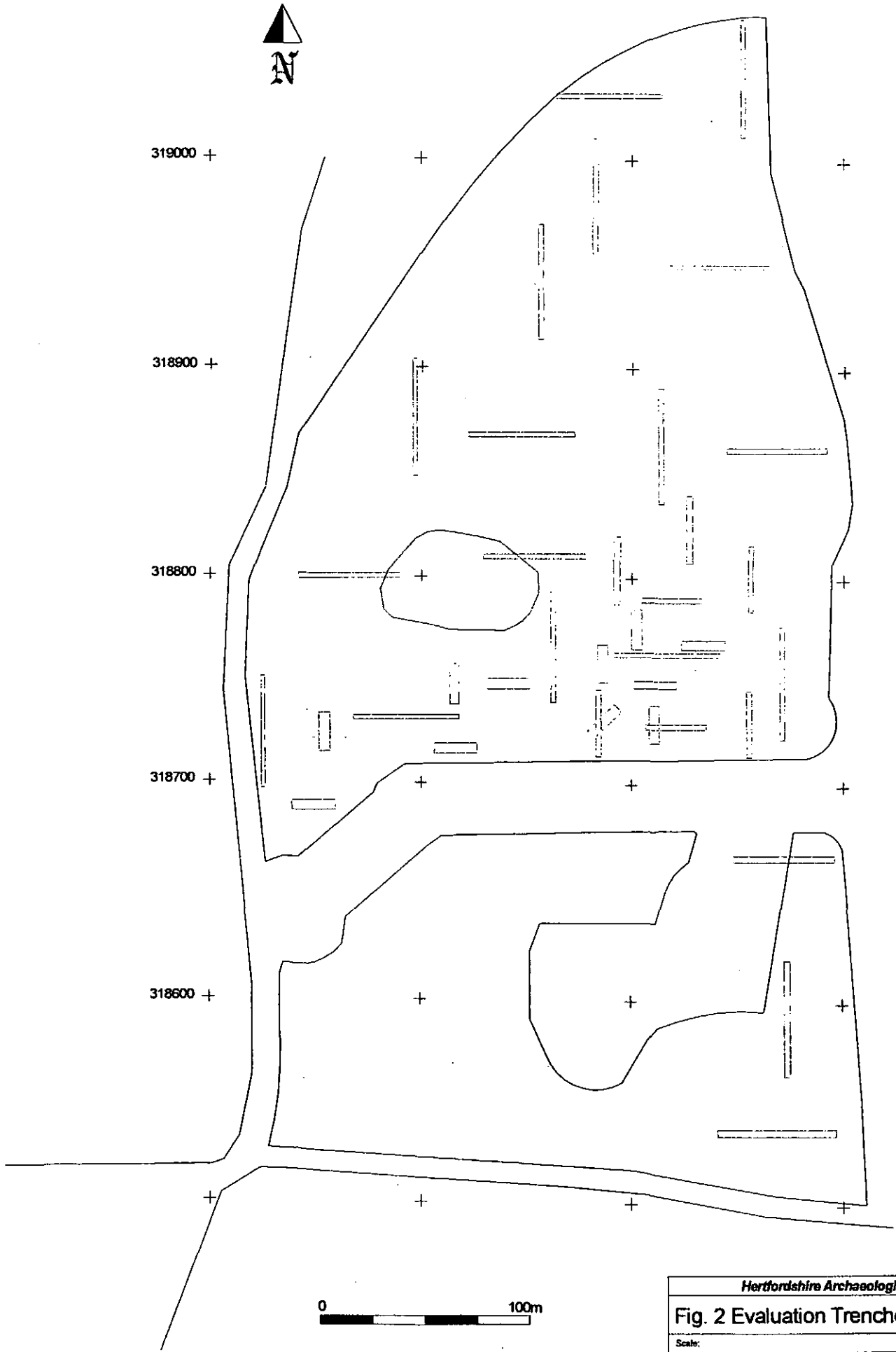
318800 +

318700 +

318600 +



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Fig. 2 Evaluation Trenches
Scale:



TF
319100 + 599300

+ 599400

+ 599500

+ 599600



319000 +

318900 +

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318600 +

Cremation

Kilns

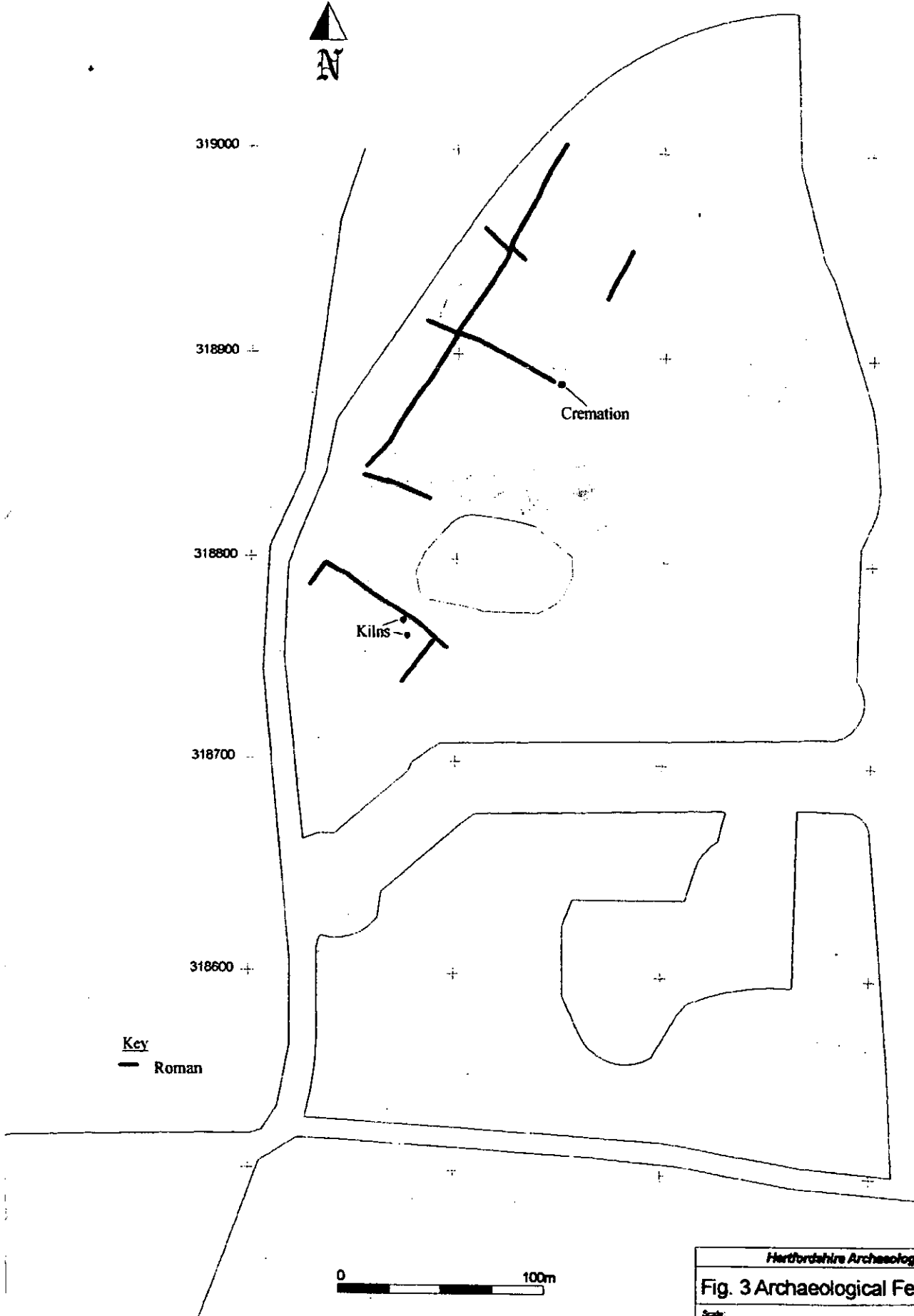
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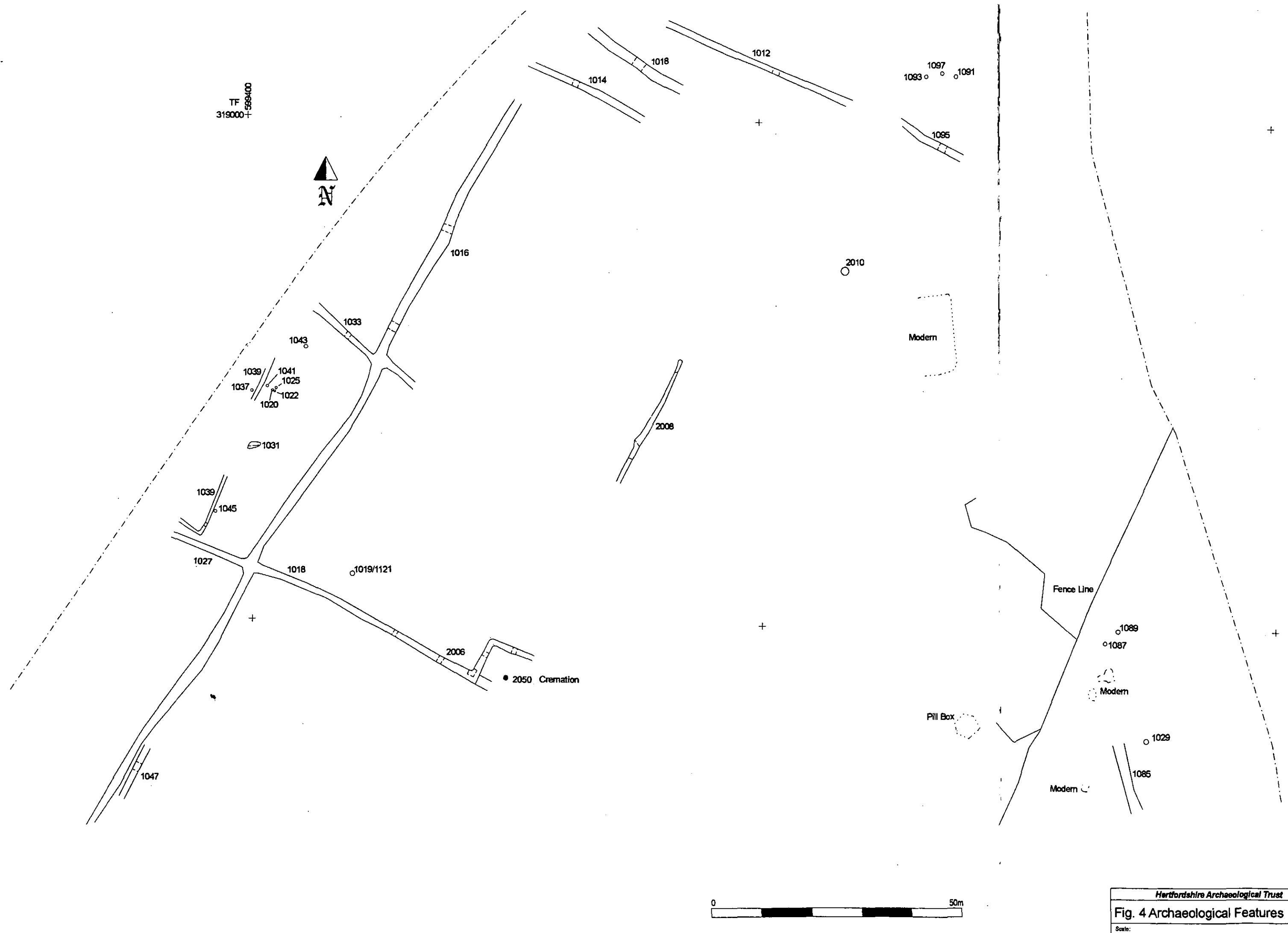
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Fig. 3 Archaeological Features

Scale:





TM 599400
318900 +



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Fig. 5 Archaeological Features

Scale:



The Seed Warehouse • Maidenhead Yard • The Wash • Hertford • SG14 IPX
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