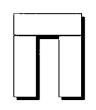




(Wendleburg Pan'sh)
Archaeological Watching Brief

Document Ref. 45600.1



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OUR REF:

MNR/HBY/05.99/45600

5 May 1999

Mr H Coddington

- County Archaeological Services
 - Department of Leisure and Arts
- Centre for Oxfordshire Studies Central Library Westgate OXFORD OX1 1DY

Dear Mr Coddington

11 Kv Refurbishment, Alchester, Oxon - Archaeological Monitoring

Please find enclosed a bound copy of the report on the watching brief undertaken at this site. Further copies have been supplied to Rob Perrin at English Heritage and to Southern Electric. I have also sent a copy to Eberhard Sauer with regard to his recent work at Alchester on behalf of the OUAS.

If you have any comments or queries concerning this report please do not hesitate to contact me at this office.

Yours sincerely

MICK RAWLINGS Project Manager

Encl.

OXFORDSHIRE
COUNTY
REGISTERED
- 6 MAY 1929
ARCHAEOLOGICAL
SERVICES

11KV REFURBISHMENT, ALCHESTER NEAR BICESTER, OXON

Archaeological Watching Brief

Report No. 45600.1

May 1999

Prepared for:

Strategic Projects Group Southern Electric plc · PO Box 38 Totton SOUTHAMPTON Hampshire SO43 7PH

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11KV REFURBISHMENT, ALCHESTER NEAR BICESTER, OXON

Archaeological Watching Brief

SUMMARY

Wessex Archaeology was commissioned by Southern Electric plc to carry out an archaeological watching brief during the laying of an underground cable at the site of the Roman 'small town' of Alchester, near Bicester, Oxon (centred on NGR SP 572 199). The site is designated as a Scheduled Ancient Monument (County Monument 18).

During the course of the watching brief, three ditches of Romano-British date were recorded in the cable trench section. All of these were aligned north/south as far as was possible to discern in the narrow cable trench. Two of the ditches were 5.9m apart, and appear to represent one element of a rectilinear pattern of roads or trackways recorded on aerial photographs of the area. These particular ditches were part of a north/south road located to the south of the 'small town' of Alchester. An undiagnostic sherd of Romano-British pottery was recovered from the eastern ditch of the pair.

Two sherds of central Gaulish Samian pottery of early 2nd century AD were recovered from the fill of a ditch in the eastern extent of the trench. This feature is probably the northernmost roadside ditch of a road also recorded on the aerial photograph plot, running perpendicular to the roadside ditches to the west, although it appeared to aligned more north/south when seen in section. No evidence of any road surfaces were found, either *in situ* or 'slumped' within any of the ditch sections. A number of unstratified Romano-British potsherds and fragments of animal bone were recovered from the topsoil\subsoil horizon along the trench. The pottery is predominantly of local (Oxfordshire) manufacture although imported wares from central Gaul and Spain were also present, all indicative of settlement activity in the area from the 1st-3rd centuries AD. This date conforms with the recognised date of the establishment and major developments of the settlement at Alchester derived from previous archaeological investigations in the area.

A further visit was made to the site to observe the drilling of two sockets for replacement overhead cable support poles, located at the eastern and western ends of the earlier cable trench. The eastern socket was excavated through the disturbed backfill of the existing support pole. The western socket revealed natural deposits identical to those recorded in the adjacent cable trench section.

The archive is currently stored at the offices of Wessex Archaeology at Old Sarum, Salisbury, under the project code **45600**, but will be deposited in due course with the Oxfordshire County Museum Service.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The work was commissioned by the Strategic Projects Group of Southern Electric plc, and the co-operation of Calvin Eales, Wayleaves Officer is duly acknowledged. Thanks are also due to Dick Hill and the trenching crew (M.P. Burke plc) for their assistance and general interest in the archaeological works during the watching brief.

The project was managed on behalf of Wessex Archaeology by Mick Rawlings. The watching brief was carried out by Chris Ellis, who also compiled this report. The illustrations were prepared by Karen Nichols.

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11KV REFURBISHMENT, ALCHESTER NEAR BICESTER, OXON

Archaeological Watching Brief

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Project background

- 1.1.1 Wessex Archaeology was commissioned in January 1998 by the Strategic Projects Group of Southern Electric plc to maintain an archaeological watching brief during trenching for the laying of an underground cable within the site of the Roman 'small town' of Alchester, to the east of Wendlebury, and the south-west of Bicester, Oxon (centred on NGR. SP 572 199).
- 1.1.2 The site has been designated as a Scheduled Ancient Monument (County Monument 18) under the terms of the *Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act* (as amended) 1979. Section 2 of the 1979 Act requires that Scheduled Monument Consent must be granted prior to any ground disturbance works.
- 1.1.3 Following discussions with the relevant English Heritage Inspector of Ancient Monuments and the submission of a written specification for the proposed scheme of works (Wessex Archaeology 1998), Scheduled Monument Consent was issued in January 1998 by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport.
- 1.1.4 Observations were carried out on the 13th 14th October 1998 and 28th April 1999. Full details of the visits are available in the project archive.

1.2 Site location, geology, topography

- 1.2.1 The trench and pole holes were located in a triangular-shaped field to the south of the town of Bicester (Figure 1). The field was bounded by a hedgerow to the west, a railway embankment ditch to the east, and a forded stream to the north. The cable trench was positioned to link two overhead cable poles located at the eastern and western edges of the field. It was c. 5.6m north of the current line of the overhead cables for safety reasons, and cut through the hedgerow and ditch of the western boundary before turning to link with the western cable pole. The pole holes were located at the east and west ends of the cable trench.
- 1.2.2 The ground is relatively low-lying at c. 63m above Ordnance Datum (aOD) sloping gently upwards to the north and north-east. The current land-use over the trench route is permanent pasture. The underlying solid geology of the area comprises Oxford Clay with Kelloway Beds (BGS 1957).

1.3 Archaeological background

- 1.3.1 The site of the Roman settlement of Alchester was first recorded in 1724 by Stukeley (cf. Burnham and Wacher 1990, 97) who noted its defences and a major north/south road along with various earthworks to the north-east of the town which he interpreted correctly as extra-mural settlement associated with the town. Stukeley also recorded that the town defences were protected with four towers (ibid, 103).
- 1.3.2 The town lies c. 300m to the south of a junction of two major Roman roads; an east/west road (Akeman Street?) running between Cirencester and Verulamium, and a north/south road running between Dorchester and Towcester. This latter road also served as the central axis through the town (Figure 1). The present Langford Lane enters the eastern entrance to the town and was part of the main east/west road through the settlement. The defences of the town enclose an area of approximately 10.5 hectares, making Alchester the largest Roman town in Oxfordshire. The town contained at least six insulae, as recognised from aerial photographs, as well as extra-mural settlement recorded to the north and south of the town (ibid, Fig. 24).
- 1.3.3 Archaeological investigations have been undertaken both within and outside the town since the mid-18th century, mainly concentrating on the defences and settlement remains within the town.
- 1.3.4 These investigations have revealed that some early settlement activity occurred along the eastern side of the later Roman settlement, where drainage ditches were recorded in 1929 (Iliffe). These were filled with sticky grey (alluvial) clays indicative of wet conditions in the area. The low-lying nature of the ground and the prevailing high (c. 1m deep) groundwater level point to the need for drainage in the area. These ditches dated to the mid-1st century AD and eventually silted up in the early 2nd century AD (Burnham and Wacher 1990, 97).
- 1.3.5 The town defences were quite substantial (Figure 1) and date from no earlier than the 2nd century AD, based on analysis of material recovered from the rampart (*ibid*, 102). A later re-cut of the defensive ditch contained material of the 4th century AD (*ibid*). The defences comprised a c. 6m wide rampart made of sand and gravel with a possible timber revetment to the rear. The rampart was fronted with a limestone wall c. 2.5m wide. In front of the wall was a c. 7m wide ditch (Young 1975).
- 1.3.6 Excavations in the northern suburbs in 1937 and 1983 revealed no structural evidence, although Stukeley mentions extensive evidence in the area of the major road junction. Foreman and Rahtz point to a 3rd century AD decline in activity in the northern suburbs (1984, 45-46).
- 1.3.7 Several structures have been excavated in the town, near the major crossroads and in the north-eastern area. These were stone-built structures post-dating timber precursors and dated from the 2nd 4th centuries AD, representing workshop structures fronting the roads of the town. Two large square buildings to the west and east of the main town crossroads, very noticeable in

- aerial photographs (Burnham and Wacher 1990, Fig. 26) may be temple complexes.
- 1.3.8 A total of 28 burials were recorded to the east of the town in 1848. The burials were all aligned east-west, with no burial goods, which might suggest they are Late Roman in date, although they have not been positively dated (Burnham and Wacher 1990, 103; cf. Marshall and Brown 1858).
- 1.3.9 Coins and pottery evidence from the site suggests occupation continuing into the early 5th century AD (although as yet no later Saxon settlement evidence has been found on the site (Rowley 1975).
- 1.3.10 Recent fieldwork at the site, following aerial photographic surveys in 1990, has revealed a large double-ditched 'playing card' -shaped enclosure to the north-west of the town (Figure 1) which may be an extension of the town's defensive ditch system (Sauer 1998). Another playing card-shaped enclosure was also recorded to the east of the current Site, south-east of the town. This contained a later 'parade ground' within it, which re-used the earlier enclosure's southern ditch (*ibid*, 34). No military installation, thought to be the precursor to the town, has yet been recorded from excavations in the area.
- 1.3.11 There were few finds recovered during preliminary examination of both this larger (possible fort) enclosure, and the possible 'parade ground' within it. The proportion of earlier Romano-British finds from the assemblage is however very high (*ibid*, 35) and suggests a date of construction for both the 'training ground' and 'marching camp' enclosures in the 40's 70's AD. The sites were ideally located for military logistical reasons as they were on the border of the territories of the Catuvellauni and Dobunni tribes.
- 1.3.12 No settlement activity of pre-Roman date has been recorded previously in the area. However, recent aerial photographic and field surveys by both the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England (RCHME) and the Oxford University Archaeology Society (OUAS) have located a 'banjo' enclosure to the north-west of the town (Sauer 1998, 37). Relatively few examples of these monuments have been excavated, but they seem to date from at least the Middle Iron Age (400–100 BC). They contain few settlement remains, mainly pits around the periphery, and the suggestion is that they were for the collection, selection and temporary corralling of cattle (Cunliffe 1991, 220).

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Cable trench

2.1.1 The cable trench was excavated using a small, tracked mechanical excavator with a toothless bucket. The trench was approximately 0.3m wide and up c. 1-1.2m deep.

2.1.2 The cable trench was recorded following the standard Wessex Archaeology numerical context system of complementary written, drawn and photographic records. No soil samples were taken.

2.2 Overhead cable support pole sockets

- 2.2.1 The pole sockets were excavated using a c. 0.30m diameter drill bit driven from a JCB, resulting in holes c. 0.50m diameter and c. 1.50m deep.
- 2.2.2 The spoil was examined for artefacts from both sockets, and the stratigraphy recorded, although access to measure the depths of layer interfaces was restricted, resulting in approximate measurements.

2.3 Report preparation and archiving

2.3.1 This report presents a summary of observations recorded during the course of the cable trenching programme. The paper records have been compiled to form an indexed and internally cross-referenced archive, currently stored at the offices of Wessex Archaeology at Old Sarum, Salisbury, under the project code W5600. The archive will be deposited in due course with the Oxfordshire County Museum Service.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Natural stratigraphic sequence

- 3.1.1 The natural stratigraphic sequence was relatively consistent along the whole length of the cable trench. The topsoil (001) was characterised by an homogenous and uniform c. 0.20m thick deposit of dark sandy clay loam containing occasional small angular fragments of stone (Figure 2). The subsoil (002) comprised a 0.15m thick deposit of mid-brown sandy loam.
- 3.1.2 Below the subsoil were a number of natural deposits (004, 005, 010) which comprised differing layers of natural clayey sand or sand defined through colour, texture and varying amounts of coarse components (gravel). These deposits were recorded below the subsoil, at a depth of c. 0.35m, and continued down to the base of the trench at c. 1.20m depth.
- 3.1.3 The eastern pole socket was excavated through the disturbed backfill of the existing pole. The western pole socket revealed natural deposits identical to those recorded in the adjacent cable trench section.

3.2 Archaeological features\deposits

3.2.1 In the eastern part of the trench a 1.50m wide and 0.35m deep ditch (015) with a moderate 'U-shaped' profile was recorded in both trench sections, oriented approximately north/south (Figure 2). This feature was cut into the basal sand (004) and was sealed by the subsoil (002). It was filled with 003, a very dark grey sandy loam deposit that contained occasional flecks of charcoal as well as Romano-British pottery and fragments of animal bone fragments. A similar deposit (016) 0.15-0.25m thick was also recorded below

- 002 to the west of the ditch for a distance of c. 8m. Most finds ascribed to context 017 were probably derived from this Romano-British soil horizon (003/016) below the subsoil.
- 3.2.2 In the western part of the trench two further ditches (011, 012) were recorded. These were also aligned approximately north/south and were c. 5.9m apart, with 011 to the east of 012 (Figure 1). They were both cut into basal sand deposits (005 and 010 respectively) and were sealed by the subsoil. Both contained grey (slightly gleyed) clay fills, with a 'peaty' clay lens (009) at the base of 011. However, this ditch contained fill 007 just below the subsoil, which was identical to the archaeological deposits recorded in the eastern part of the trench (003/016). Ditch 011 was 2.60m wide whilst 012 was 4.20m wide. Both had steep straight sides and in neither case was the base of ditch reached within the cable trench (Figure 2).

4. FINDS

Table 1: Finds by context and number\weight(g)

Context	Description	Animal Bone	R-B pottery
003	Fill of ditch 015	-	2\35
006	Unstrat – from mid-east of trench	9\51	5\14
007	Fill of ditch 011	-	1\12
016	Romano-British soil layer		6\52
017	Unstrat – from east end of trench	3\47	29\328
TOTAL		12\98	43\441

4.1 Pottery

- 4.1.1 A total of 43 sherds (441g) of Romano-British pottery was recovered during the watching brief, of which 99g (22.4% of total weight) was from stratified contexts (003, 007, 016). The assemblage was comprised of local and imported wares, the local component comprising 162g (36.7% of total weight) was made up of Oxfordshire sandy grey wares and undiagnostic oxidised body sherds.
- 4.1.2 The sandy grey ware component included an everted rim-sherd from a jar Type R-52 (Young 1977, 222), a beaker base, and a bead rim from a jar in an imitation black burnished—ware fabric (all from 017) which can all be dated to the 1st 3rd centuries AD. Two sherds of white-ware mortaria (017), Types M2 (*ibid*, 68) and M17-21 (*ibid*, 72-76) date to the 2nd-3rd centuries AD. Some Romano-British oxidised and grog-tempered sherds were also present, but undiagnostic.
- 4.1.3 The imported component of the assemblage included Samian sherds from a Drag.31 platter (003), a Drag.18\31 platter (003) and a Drag.33 cup (016). These are all central Gaulish imports dated to the early-mid 2nd century AD.

- Two flakes of Dressel 20 amphorae from Spain (017, 006) were also recovered, these date from 1st century BC to 3rd century AD
- 4.1.4 Overall, the assemblage dates from the 1st-3rd centuries AD and is characteristic of domestic wares in use in towns at this time. The access to imported goods, both regional and international, was facilitated with the location of the town so close to a major crossroads. The mean sherd size of 10.26g would indicate that the material was rapidly incorporated into the soil horizon before abrasion occurred.

4.2 Animal bone

4.2.1 A total of twelve fragments (98g) of animal bone was recovered during the watching brief, none of which were derived from stratified contexts. The material was all from cattle (or cattle-sized animals where not diagnostic) and included 3 ribs, 1 tibia fragment, 1 skull fragment and 1 long-bone fragment. The assemblage is too small to draw any broad conclusions. The surface condition and condition of breaks as well as the lack of tooth marks on the bone all indicate the relatively rapid incorporation of this material into the Romano-British soil horizon (006) before significant degradation could take place.

4.3 Summary

- 4.3.1 The small (mainly unstratified) artefactual assemblage from the watching brief would indicate activity in the area during the 1st-3rd centuries AD.
- 4.3.2 The overall condition of the pottery and bone assemblages recovered during the watching brief indicate the incorporation of this material into the Romano-British soil horizon and the features before much degradation could occur. This would seem to indicate settlement activity in the vicinity which would include features of Romano-British date being sealed below the prevailing subsoil in the area. The nature and condition of the material does not indicate that it was derived from manuring of fields in the southern extent of settlement outside the area of the town.

5. CONCLUSIONS

- 5.1 The observations during the watching brief have confirmed the existence of features and deposits of Romano-British date in this field, within the southern extent of extra-mural settlement. The artefactual assemblage suggests settlement activity in the area between 1st-3rd centuries AD, corresponding to the establishment and development of the defended town of Alchester. The fills of the roadside ditches are very similar in character to 1st- 2nd century AD drainage ditches which have been recorded to the east of the town (Burnham and Wacher 1990, 97).
- Aerial photographs of the area to the south of the town indicate a north/south alignment of roadside ditches to the south of the town (*ibid*, fig. 24). The

ditches recorded in the mid-west of the trench probably represent a short section of such roadside ditches. The ditch in the east of the trench is probably the northernmost roadside ditch of a probable east/west road seen in the same aerial photograph plot, although in the filed the alignment of the ditch was felt to be more north/south than this.

5.3 A Romano-British soil horizon (c. 0.35m thick) is preserved under the subsoil in this area of the field. It contains pottery and animal bone along with occasional mollusc shells and charcoal flecks. The artefactual material is in relatively good condition and is probably derived from Romano-British settlement activity nearby.

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APPENDIX 1: CONTEXT SUMMARY

All archaeological features\deposits are shown in bold.

Depth means below current ground level, (+) means the context was not fully excavated

R-B = Romano-British

Context	Depth (m)	Description
001	0 – 0.20	Topsoil – very dark brown sandy clay loam with occasional angular stone <10mm (limestone?). Occasional large (<0.20m) sub-angular
002	0.20 – 0.35	stone. Abundant fine root disturbance. Identical to 006. Subsoil – mid-brown sandy loam with rare angular\sub-angular stone
	<u> </u>	(<0.10mm). Occasional fine root disturbance.
003	0.35 - 0.70	Fill of 015. Below 002, identical to 007 and 016. A very dark grey sandy loam with occasional sub-angular stone (<10mm). A Romano-British soil horizon sealed below the subsoil.
004	0.35 – 1.00(+)	Natural – strong yellowish-brown clayey sand with common small (<10mm) well-sorted gravel. Some occasional rare mottles of very pale grey sand derived from 005. Seen at east end of trench. Cut by 015.
005	0.90 – 1.20(+)	Natural – mixed layer of very pale grey\ very pale yellowish-grey medium sand with common small gravel (<10mm). Below 004.
006	0 - 0.25	Unstrat, ascribed to an area c. 26.5m from east end of trench from which a small concentration of artefactual material was collected. No subsurface features discernible in the area.
007	-	Latest fill of 011, identical to 003 and 016, below 002. Very dark grey sandy loam with rare sub-angular stone (<10mm). Contains R-B pottery.
008	-	Fill of 011, below 007. Mid-grey (gleyed) clay with common dark orange\brown mottles.
009	-	Fill of 011, below 008. Mid to dark grey (gleyed) 'peaty' clay with common organic material (<5mm, <1-2mm diameter). Not fully excavated, at prevailing groundwater level.
010	0.90 – 1.20(+)	Natural – strong yellow\orange medium sand with common sub- angular gravel (<50mm) moderately sorted. Below 005.
011	0.44 – 1.20(+)	Ditch 2.60m wide x 0.76m(+) deep, with moderate\steep 'U-shaped' profile. Filled with 007-009, cuts 005. Eastern ditch of two parallel ditches in mid-west of trench, oriented N/S.
012	0.36 – 1.10(+)	Ditch 4.20m wide x 0.74(+) deep, with steep, flat sides. Filled with 013-014, curs 010. Western ditch of two parallel ditches in mid-west of trench, oriented N/S.
013	-	Fill of 012, below 002. A mid grey silty clay (gleyed) with very common dark orange\brown mottles (<5mm) and occasional angular stone (<10mm and < 50mm).
014	-	Fill of 012, below 013. A mid-dark grey clayey (fine) sand with occasional sub-rounded stone (<10mm) and rounded sand grains.
015	-	Ditch 1.50m wide and 0.35m deep, filled with 003, cuts 004, with moderate 'U-shaped' profile. Located in east end of trench, oriented N/S.
016	0.35 - 0.60	Identical to 003, a discrete but discontinuous layer containing R-B pottery and occasional mollusc shells between 9-16m from east end of trench. Represents sealed R-B soil horizon below the subsoil 002.
017	-	Unstrat – context number allocated to group of unstratified finds from between c. 0-16m from the east end of the trench. Finds probably derived from 003 and 016.

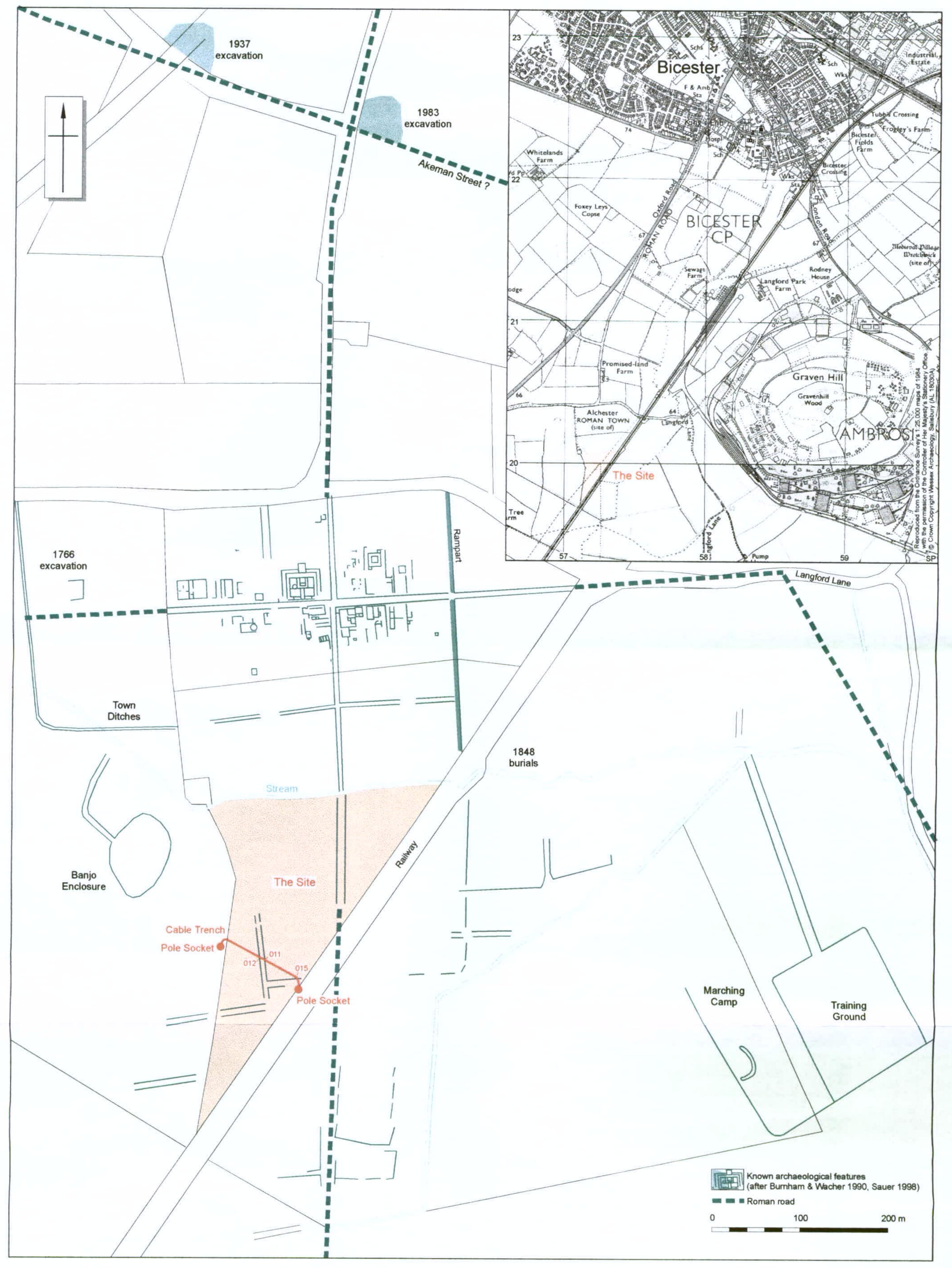


Figure 1

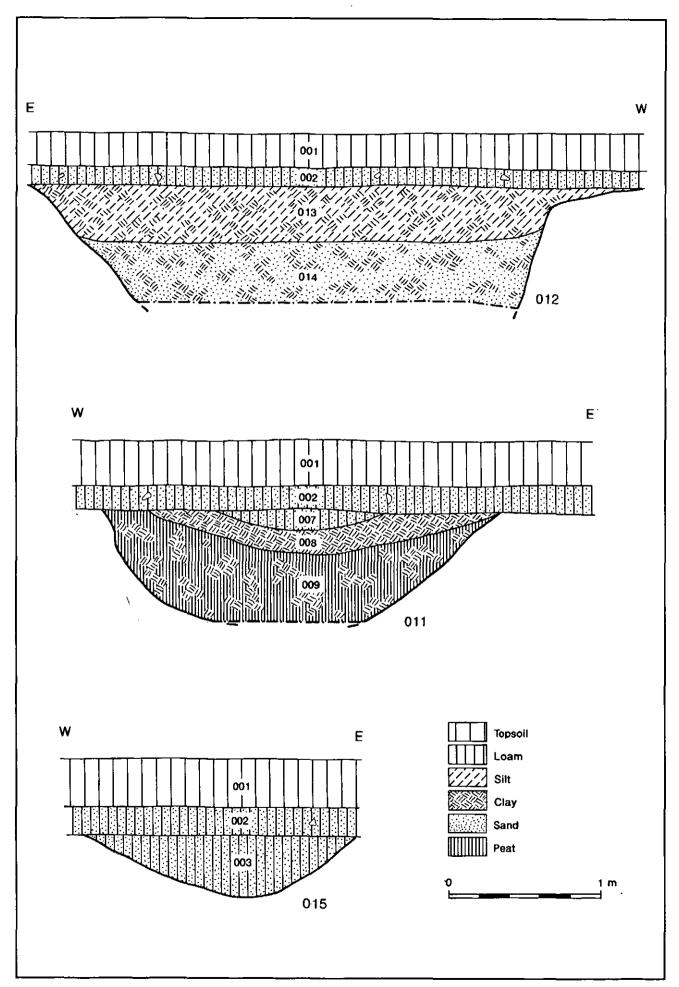


Figure 2

