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ARCHAEOLOGICAL

S E R V I C E S

**Former Rivers Nightclub,  
St Helens Avenue, Benson,  
Oxfordshire**

**Archaeological Evaluation (Stage 2)**

by Jo Pine

Site Code SAB99/14

(SU61529155)

May 1999

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**Report 99/14-2**

### **Introduction**

This report documents the results of a second phase of archaeological field evaluation carried out at St Helens Avenue, Benson (SU 6152 9155). Four trenches were excavated within the area that was once occupied by the building of the former Rivers Nightclub. The nightclub was still standing at the time of the earlier evaluation (Pine 1999) and thus this area was not available to be evaluated by machine trenching.

Planning permission has been granted to redevelop the site for housing with the demolition of the Rivers nightclub building and the construction of 13 houses with associated car parks and services. The planning permission was subject to a condition which required the implementation of an archaeological evaluation of the whole site. This is in accordance with the Department of the Environment's Policy and Planning Guidance Note *Archaeology and Planning* (PPG 16 1990) and the South Oxfordshire District policies on archaeology. As this did not occur during the earlier phase of fieldwork, four additional trenches A-D (Fig 2) were excavated in the position of the demolished building. The field investigation was carried out to a specification approved by Paul Smith, County Archaeological Officer for Oxfordshire County Archaeological Service. The fieldwork was undertaken by Jo Pine and Jennifer Lowe on the 10th of May 1999 and the site code is SAB99/14.

### **Location, Topography and Geology**

Benson lies a short distance to the north of Wallingford and to the south-east of Oxford. The site is located on a L-shaped parcel of land 49 m above Ordnance Datum, which lies at the junction of the A423, St Helens Avenue and Church Road (Fig 1). The evaluated area occupies the western end of the site within the footprint of the demolished nightclub (Fig 2). The underlying Geology is river gravels and alluvium (BGS 1980)

## **Archaeological Background**

Benson is known to have been an important strategic settlement in Saxon times, lying on the border between the Kingdoms of Wessex and Mercia. A stone church was erected by Offa and dedicated to Helena around AD 779. An earlier church is thought to have been erected by St Birinus in AD 636.

The area around Benson contains numerous archaeological sites of prehistoric, Roman and Medieval date. Stray finds of pottery, coins, and flint have also been found within Benson. An undated enclosure and Neolithic cursus are located within Benson airfield. The earlier evaluation at the site revealed pits, ditches, and postholes, dating to the early Neolithic, Bronze Age, Iron Age, Roman, and Saxon periods (Pine 1999).

## **Objectives and Methodology**

The purpose of the evaluation was to determine the presence/absence, extent, condition, character, quality and date of any archaeological deposits within the area of development. Four trenches, A–D, were to be excavated within the area occupied by the Rivers Nightclub, located as near as possible to the footprints of the proposed new structures. In the event, the layout and widths of the trenches varied slightly from the specification due to the presence of buried concrete and modern wall foundations. The trenches were excavated using a 360° machine fitted with a toothless ditching bucket. This was under direct and continuous archaeological supervision. All spoilheaps were monitored for finds and all certain and possible features were hand cleaned and sufficient of these excavated to satisfy the aims of the brief.

## **Results**

### *Trench A (Fig 2)*

This was aligned north-east – south-west. It was 13.00 m long, 2.20 m wide and 0.40–0.70 m deep. No archaeological features were revealed. However, the natural geology sloped markedly from north to south. At the northern end of the trench overburden 0.20 m deep overlay a thin band of silty clay 0.10 m deep onto gravel. Whilst at the southern end overburden overlay alternate bands of dark silt and sand, onto a fine sandy gravel, to a depth of 0.70 m below the ground surface. This sequence would appear to represent the edge of an ancient river channel.

#### *Trench B (Figs 2 and 3)*

This was also aligned north-east – south-west. It was 10 m long, 2.20 m wide and 0.40 m deep. Overburden 0.20 m deep overlay a band of dark brown silty clay 0.20 m deep, which in turn overlay gravel. Nine archaeological features were recorded, two of which, posthole 34 and pit 36, were not excavated.

Pit 26 was 1.00 m wide, 1.40 m long and 0.38 m deep. It contained three sherds of prehistoric pottery, one sherd of Bronze Age (residual), and some animal bone. Single sherds of Roman, Saxon and prehistoric pottery were recovered from the surface of the pit. Pit 26 cut gully 28, from which no pottery was recovered. Gully 27 was also cut by pit 26. It was very shallow at 0.07 m deep and contained one sherd of Roman pottery and fragments of animal bone.

Pit 31 was partially exposed in the trench. It was 0.11 m deep and contained two rims and a body sherd of probable early Neolithic pottery. Pit 32, also not fully revealed, was 0.09 m deep but contained no datable finds. Two undated postholes, 29 and 30, were also half-sectioned.

#### *Trench C (Figs 2 and 3)*

This was aligned north-west – south-east. It was 10.50 m long, 2.20 m wide and 0.40 m deep. Overburden 0.20 m deep overlay a thin layer of dark silty clay 0.20 m deep, which overlay gravel. Four archaeological features were recorded.

Part of gully 24 was exposed in the trench (1.60 m). It was 0.40 m wide and 0.20 m deep and contained a flint blade core of Mesolithic or early Neolithic date. A section through ditch 25, which crossed the trench, showed it to be 1.00 m wide and 0.40 m deep. An undiagnostic flint flake was found on its surface. Posthole 23 was 0.30 m in diameter and 0.09 m deep but contained no datable finds. The possible posthole 35 was not excavated.

#### *Trench D (Figs 2 and 3)*

This was aligned north-east – south-west. It was between 2.20 m and 3.10 m wide and 0.30–0.40 m deep. The trench had to be staggered due to the presence of a modern wall. Overburden 0.20 m deep overlay a thin band of dark silty clay 0.10 m deep. A single undated posthole, 33, was recorded. This was 0.40 m in diameter and 0.10 m deep.

## The Finds

### Pottery

Eleven sherds of pottery were recovered, ranging in date from early Neolithic to Saxon. These are listed in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Pottery

<i>Trench</i>	<i>Context</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Fabric</i>	<i>Date</i>
B	26 (79)	1	Flint gritted	Bronze Age
		1	Sand	Prehistoric?
		1	Gritless	Prehistoric?
B	27 (80)	1	Sand	Roman
B	31 (84)	3	Vesicular and grog (rim)	Early Neolithic
B	26 surface	1	Micaceous greyware	Roman
		2	Flint gritted	Prehistoric
		1	Flint/grass	Saxon

### Worked flint

Just two pieces of worked flint were recovered during the evaluation. These are listed in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Worked flint

<i>Trench</i>	<i>Context</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Date</i>
C	Gully 24 (77)	Blade core	Mesolithic/early Neolithic
C	Ditch 25 surface	Broken flake	Undiagnostic

### Faunal remains

A small collection of fragmented animal bone was recovered from pit 26 and gullies 27 and 28.

## Conclusion

Archaeological features were revealed in three of the evaluation trenches (B-D). These took the form of postholes, pits, a gully, and a ditch. Good dating evidence was sparse but the features appear to represent a range of periods: early Neolithic, Bronze Age, and Roman. The presence of Saxon pottery as a surface find may indicate Saxon activity in the vicinity. These findings add to the distribution of deposits located by the earlier evaluation on the eastern part of the site (Fig 2). Interim indications from the on-going excavation of the latter has shown that these mainly comprise early Neolithic and early Saxon deposits. The results of this evaluation suggest that these deposits extend into the newly evaluated area.

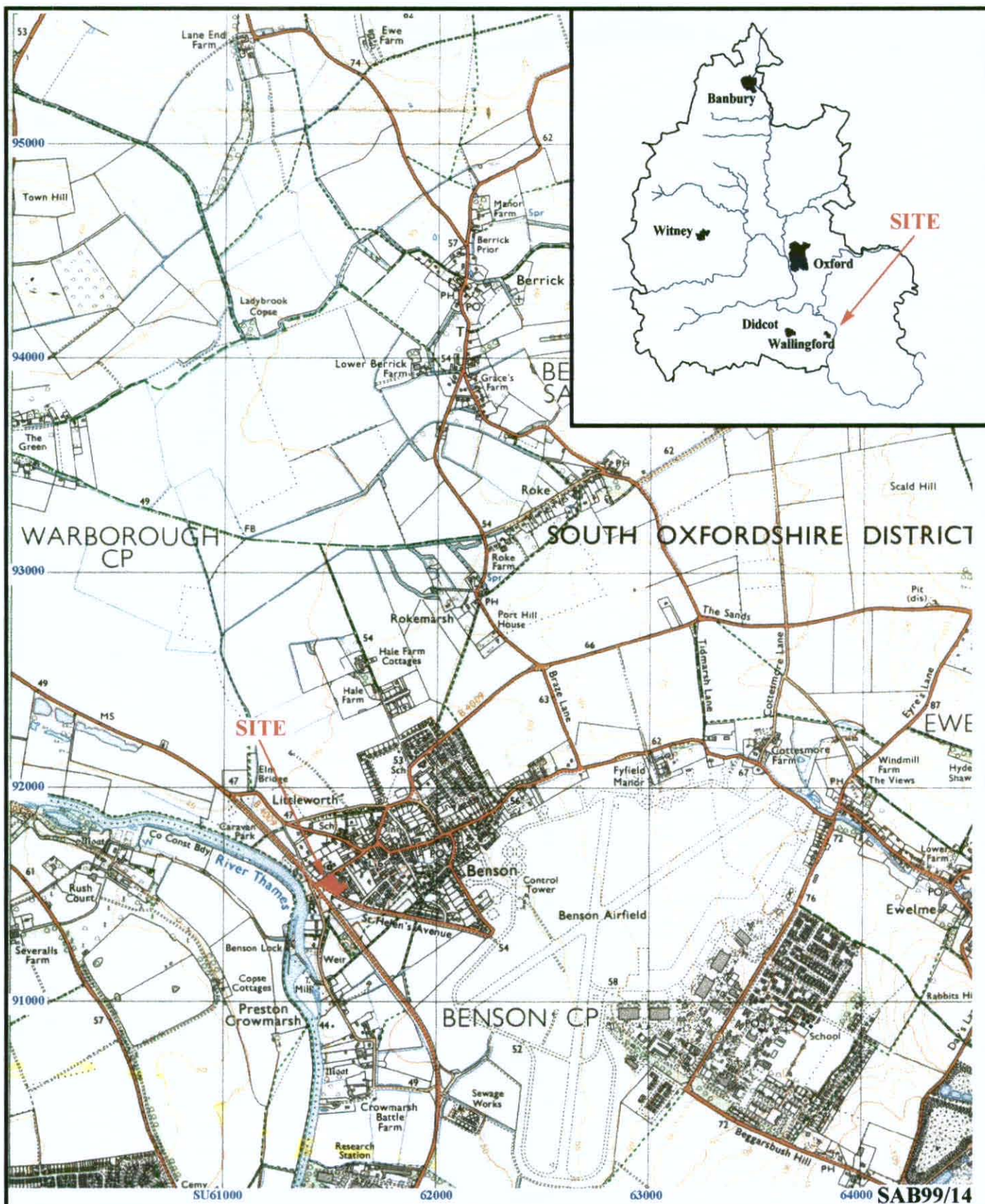
## References

BGS, 1980, *British Geological Survey*, 1:50 000, Sheet 254, Solid and Drift Edition, Keyworth

PPG 16, 1990, *Archaeology and Planning*, Department of the Environment Planning Policy Guidance Note 16, HMSO

Pine, J, 1999, St Helens Avenue, Benson, Oxfordshire, An Archaeological Evaluation, Thames Valley Archaeological Services Report 99/14, Reading





**St. Helen's Avenue, Benson, Oxfordshire, 1998**

Figure 1. Location of site within Benson and Oxfordshire.

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# St. Helens Avenue, Benson, Oxfordshire, 1999



Figure 2. Trench location plan showing all archaeological features and footprints of proposed new houses, stage 2 evaluation labelled A - D.

# Saint Helens Avenue, Benson, Oxfordshire, 1999

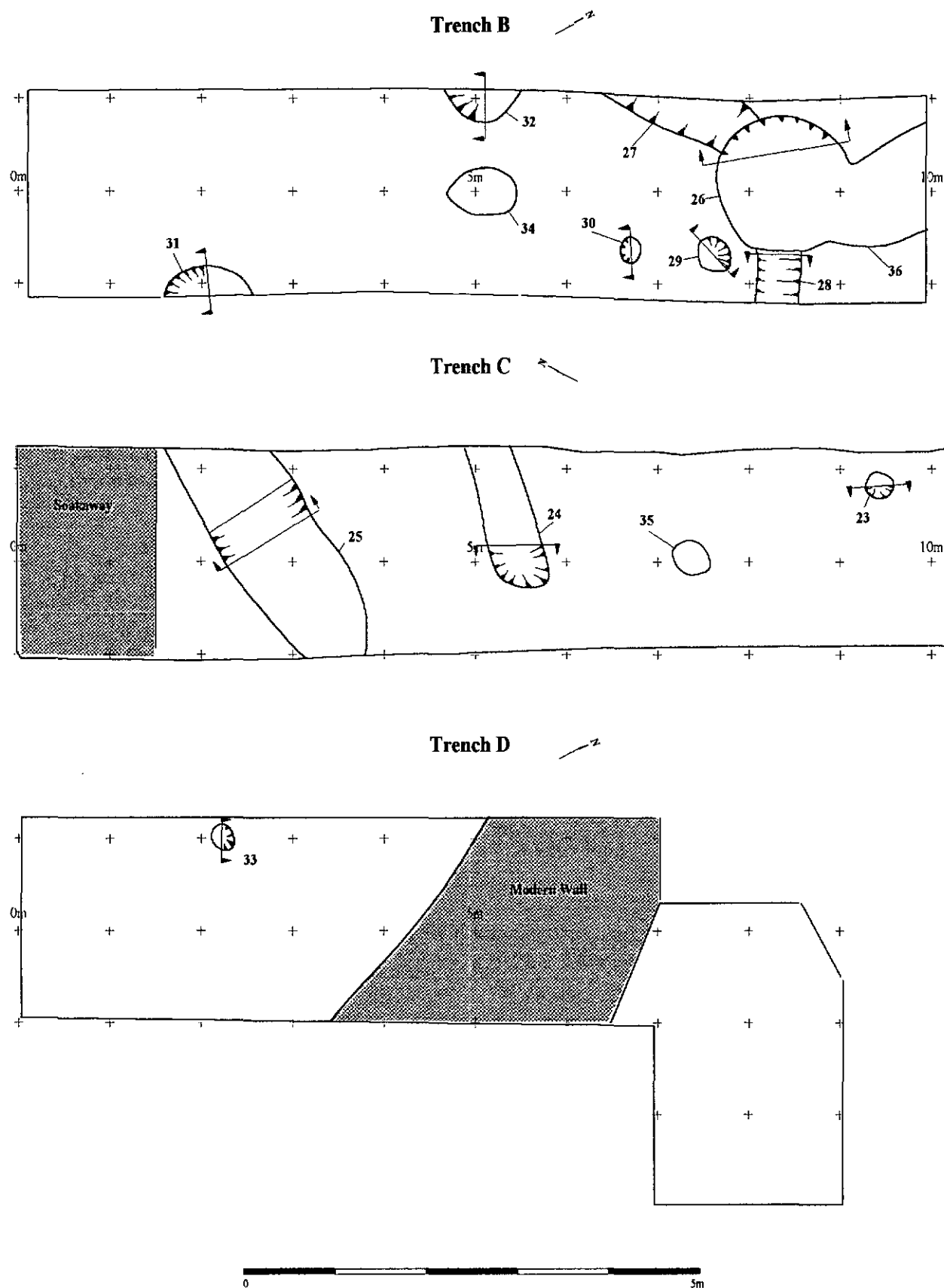
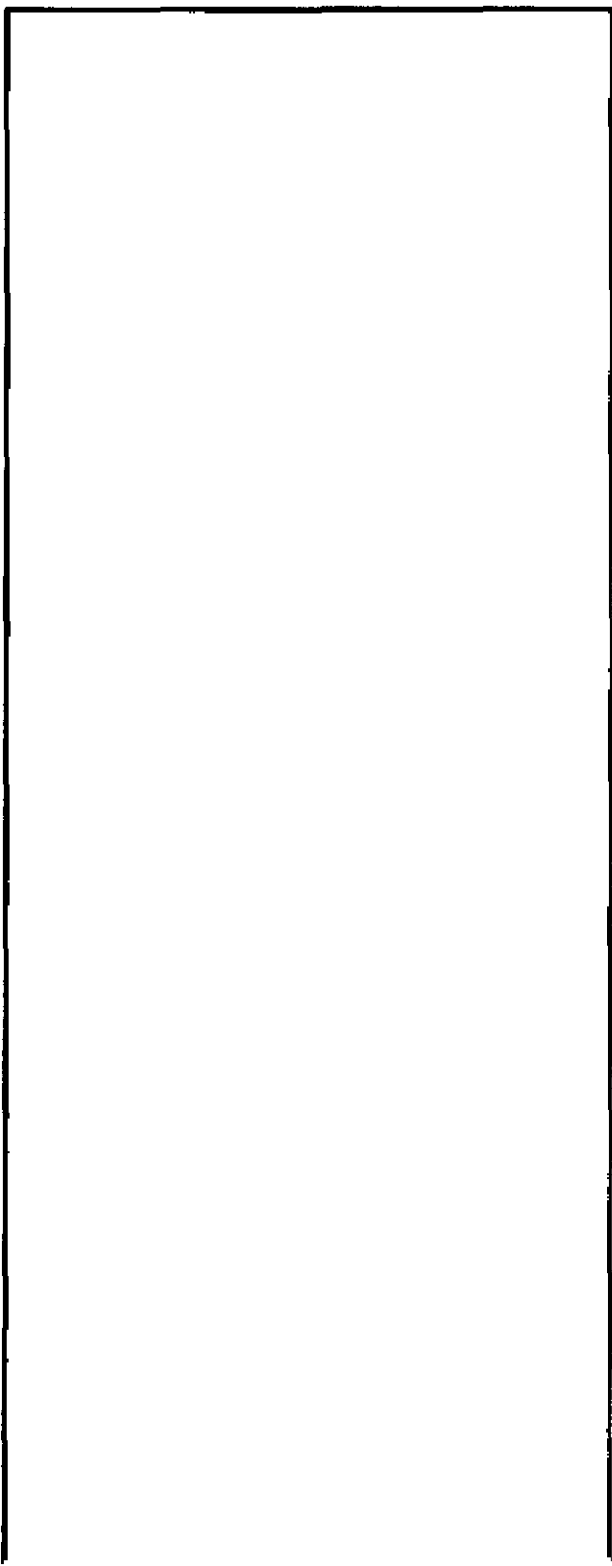
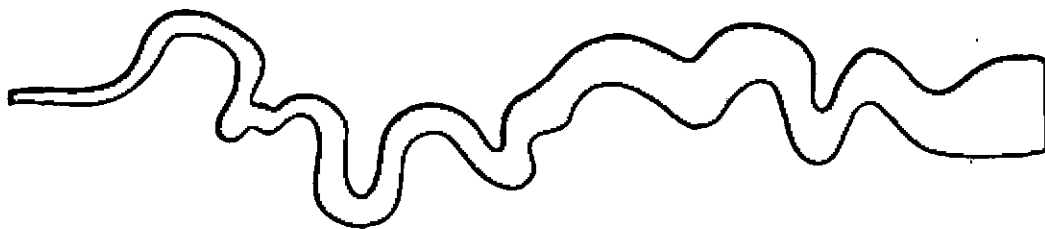


Figure 3. Trench plans showing all archaeological features.

## TIME CHART

	Calendar Years
Post Medieval _____	AD 1500
Medieval _____	AD 1066
Saxon _____	AD 410
Roman _____	AD 43
	AD 0 BC
Iron Age _____	750 BC
 Bronze Age: Late .....	 1300 BC
Bronze Age: Middle .....	1700 BC
Bronze Age Early .....	2100 BC
 Neolithic: Late .....	 3300 BC
Neolithic: Early .....	4300 BC
 Mesolithic: Late .....	 6000 BC
Mesolithic: Early .....	10,000 BC
 Palaeolithic: Upper .....	 50,000 BC
Palaeolithic: Middle .....	70,000 BC
Palaeolithic: Lower .....	2,000,000 BC





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