

DIDCOT SEWERAGE SCHEME, DIDCOT,
OXFORDSHIRE

ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF
& EXCAVATIONS

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GLOSSARY

ARCHAEOLOGY

For the purposes of this project, archaeology is taken to mean the study of past human societies through their material remains, from prehistoric times to the modern era. No rigid upper date limit has been set, but AD 1900 is used as a general cut-off point.

CONTEXT

The simplest level of excavated archaeological data, i.e. a context could be the cut of a ditch (shown as - [1]), or its fill (shown as (2)).

MEDIEVAL

Taken here as the period from the Norman invasion in AD 1066 to approximately AD 1500.

NATURAL

Defined in archaeological terms this refers to the undisturbed natural geology of a site, e.g. Lower Lias clay, river terrace gravels etc.

NGR

National Grid Reference given from the Ordnance Survey Grid.

OD

Ordnance Datum; used to express a given height above mean sea level.

POT-SHERD

A fragment of a pottery vessel.

ROMANO-BRITISH

Term used to describe a fusion of indigenous late Iron Age traditions with Roman culture, often abbreviated as 'R-B.'

SETTLEMENT

An area of habitation, perhaps surrounded by associated closes, paddocks, approach ways and other features which together constitute a complex of earthworks or cropmarks distinct from fields.

SUMMARY

Between August 1997 and February 1998 Cotswold Archaeological Trust carried out a watching brief during the construction of a pipe trench from a sewage pumping station near Zulu Farm, Harwell to the north-western outskirts of Blewbury, Oxfordshire. During this watching brief a number of sites (Areas 1-6) of archaeological interest were discovered and examined prior to the laying of the pipe.

In Area 1 (NGR SU 520879) ditches and pits, belonging to a north-south aligned Romano-British settlement at least 45m across were excavated. Pottery of two distinct phases was recovered, namely the late 2nd-3rd and the 4th centuries AD.

In Area 2 (NGR SU 502897) a few features of Romano-British date, which may relate to a further settlement, were excavated. These features included a large pit which contained a late 1st century AD pottery assemblage.

In Area 3 (NGR SU 524863) a concentration of residual pottery ranging in date from Roman to post-medieval was recovered. However, no archaeological features which could be associated with this material were identified.

Three isolated linear features were also identified (Areas 4-6). In Area 4 (NGR SU 516869) a single ditch was excavated although Romano-British and later pottery was recovered from the topsoil for a distance of 200m north of the ditch. The linear feature at Area 5 (NGR SU 514889) was post-medieval in date and the linear at Area 6 (NGR SU 511891) was undated.

The discovery of these new sites has important implications for our knowledge of the archaeological resource in the area between Didcot and the Downs, often previously regarded as containing few archaeological sites. It certainly confirms the suspicion that the lack of archaeological knowledge of the area is due to the paucity of previous archaeological research.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

- 1.1.1 This report presents the results of a watching brief and subsequent small excavations carried out during the construction of the Didcot Sewerage Scheme pipeline which ran from a sewage station north-west of Zulu Farm (NGR SU 500899) to another on the north-western outskirts of Blewbury (NGR SU 530860, Fig. 1). The work was undertaken between August 1997 and February 1998 and was commissioned by Thames Water Utilities.
- 1.1.2 During the watching brief a number of sites were recognised as containing archaeological remains (Fig. 2). The first (Area 1) was located on the eastern side of a disused railway embankment east of West Hagbourne (centred on NGR SU 520879). A second site (Area 2) was located approximately 60m north-west of Zulu Farm, Harwell (centred on NGR SU 502897). To the north-west of the sewage pumping station at Blewbury (centred on NGR SU 524863), a concentration of residual pottery ranging in date from Roman to post-medieval was recovered (Area 3). However, no archaeological features which could be associated with this material were identified.
- 1.1.3 Three isolated linear features were also identified (Areas 4-6). Area 4 was located on the eastern side of the village of Upton (centred on NGR SU 516869). Area 5 was approximately 108m to the west of Park Road, (NGR SU 514889) and Area 6 approximately 200m south-east of Down Farm (NGR SU 511891).

1.2 *Geology and topography*

- 1.2.1 The pipeline cut through land which was predominantly under arable cultivation. For most of its length the underlying geology consisted of Upper Greensand, Gault and Chalk. The topography of the pipeline was generally flat apart from a downward slope between Zulu Farm and the pumping station at its north-western end.

1.3 *Archaeological background*

- 1.3.1 No archaeological sites were previously known along the route of the pipeline. However, this is probably the result of the paucity of previous archaeological investigation in the area. Indeed, there are a number of archaeological sites in the wider vicinity suggesting that historic activity was just as widespread between Didcot and the Downs as in similar areas known to the east and west.
- 1.3.2 A watching brief carried out on the route of a previous pipeline between South Moreton and Hagbourne Hill failed to establish the presence of any archaeological sites, although this was probably due to much of the wayleave for the pipe not being stripped to the natural substrate (Turner 1996).

1.4 *Methodology*

- 1.4.1 The watching brief was carried out in accordance with a brief prepared by Oxfordshire County Council and a subsequent project design prepared by CAT. The watching brief was also carried out in accordance with the *Standard and Guidance for Archaeological Watching Briefs* (IFA 1994) and the excavations in accordance with the *Draft Standard and Guidance for Archaeological Excavations* (IFA 1994).
- 1.4.2 Prior to the laying of the pipe a 10m wide area was stripped of topsoil for the entire length of the pipeline. This was carried out by a mechanical excavator

using a toothless grading bucket under archaeological supervision. The mechanical excavator generally removed approximately 300mm of topsoil. However, the variation in the depth of the topsoil inevitably left areas of subsoil which could have masked archaeological features. Where this occurred the cutting of the pipe trench was monitored for archaeological deposits. Where a quantity of archaeological features were identified the wayleave for the pipe was excavated to the natural substrate.

- 1.4.3 All of the archaeological sites were exposed during the topsoil strip and were examined prior to the laying of the pipe. The excavation conditions on Areas 1 and 2 were poor as the natural clay had baked in the hot sunshine. This made the recognition and excavation of features difficult, particularly in Area 2. All recording was carried out in accordance with the CAT Technical Manual 1: *Site Recording Manual*.

2. RESULTS

2.1 *Area 1*

- 2.1.1 Area I was located on the eastern side of a disused railway embankment just to the east of the village of West Hagbourne. Three ditches and five pits, which probably relate to a Romano-British settlement, were identified (Fig. 3).

Ditches

- 2.1.2 Ditch [118] was aligned east-west, 1.6m wide and 0.62m deep. It had been recut at least once [126] and the fill (119) of this recut produced a small assemblage of late 2nd - 3rd century pottery (Fig. 4, section 1).
- 2.1.3 Approximately 30m to the north were two parallel ditches [106] and [103], which were just 1.8m apart. One of these ditches may have formed the north-south aligned return to ditch [118]. Ditch [106] was flat-bottomed, 1.25m wide and 0.5m deep. It contained two fills (107 & 108) both of which produced small assemblages of Roman pottery. A prehistoric flint awl and a possible flint core were also found in fill (108), suggesting prehistoric activity within the immediate vicinity. Ditch [103] was also flat-bottomed, 1.6m wide, 0.75m deep with two fills, the secondary of which (104) produced a small 4th century pottery assemblage (Fig. 5, sections 4-5).

Pits

- 2.1.4 Within the area defined by ditches [118] and [106] five pits were identified.
- 2.1.5 Pit [121] was 1.62m in diameter, 0.88m deep and vertically sided. Traces of a clay lining (124) suggests that this was originally a storage pit, the fill of which (122) contained a single Roman potsherd. However, the pit had been recut once, and the fill of this recut (123) produced a large 4th century pottery assemblage with residual late 2nd-3rd century wares together with animal bones. This suggests that in its final phase the pit was used for the disposal of rubbish (Fig. 4, section 2).
- 2.1.6 Pit [109] was 1.2m in diameter, vertically sided and excavated to a depth of 1m. It was then augured for a further depth of 0.55m to its base. A small assemblage of late 2nd - 3rd century pottery was recovered from its fill (111) together with a burnt flint. This pit had been cut by a shallow 0.09m deep pit or scoop [125] which contained 2 Roman potsherds and a broken flint flake within its fill (110).

2.1.7 Immediately to the north of pit [109] were three small pits [112], [114], and [116] which were 0.1m, 0.35m and 0.3m deep respectively. It was not possible to ascertain the relationship between pits [114] and [116] because of the similarity of their fills. However, pit [114] was cut by pit [112]. The fill (115) of pit [114] also produced a single sherd of Roman pottery and a flint flake (Fig. 5, section 3).

2.2 *Area 2*

2.2.1 Area 2 was located approximately 60m to the north-west of Zulu Farm, Harwell. Four archaeological features, two of which produced Romano-British pottery, were identified. These features possibly belong to a late 1st century Romano-British settlement (Figs. 6 & 7).

2.2.2 Pit [205] continued under the south-western edge of the trench but within its confines measured 6m x 1.8m across and 0.72m in depth. The two fills (206 & 213) of this pit contained a total of 47 potsherds which can be assigned a late 1st century date. A worked burnt flint was also found in fill (206). The function of this pit is uncertain.

2.2.3 A narrow flat-bottomed north-south aligned gully [207] was 0.52m wide and 0.23m deep. Its fill contained a single Roman potsherd (Fig. 7).

2.2.4 Two small pits or post holes [203] and [209] were also excavated. These were 0.3m and 0.09m deep respectively and produced no dating evidence (Fig. 7).

2.3 *Area 3*

2.3.1 Area 3 was located between the pumping station at Blewbury and a field boundary to the north-west (Fig. 2). No archaeological features were

identified but a quantity of artefactual material was recovered from the topsoil. This material was evenly distributed along the length of the field and ranged from Roman to post-medieval in date. Investigation of the field to either side of the trench also revealed more potsherds. It is possible that this material is derived from the manuring of cultivated fields.

2.4 *Area 4*

- 2.4.1 Area 4 was located on the eastern side of the village of Upton and consisted of a single linear ditch aligned approximately east-west [304]. It had a flat-bottomed profile and was 0.6m wide and just 0.12m deep. Its fill (303) produced 2 Roman potsherds. For a distance 200m north of this ditch sherds of Roman and later pottery were recovered from the topsoil (Figs. 8 & 9).

2.5 *Areas 5 & 6*

- 2.5.1 Two linear features were encountered along the stretch of the pipeline route between Park Road, south-west Didcot and Down Farm (Fig. 2).
- 2.5.2 Linear feature [401], some 108m west of Park Road (Area 5), was 0.5m wide with near-vertical sides, flat bottomed and approximately 0.8m deep. It contained two fills, the primary of which (403) produced sherds of post-medieval pottery and pieces of corroded iron, possibly nails.
- 2.5.3 Linear feature [407], some 200m south-east of Down Farm (Area 6) was 0.55m wide, with irregular, concave sides and a concave base, and survived to a maximum depth of 0.15m. It contained a single fill (406) which produced no datable material. Its use is unknown.

3. THE FINDS

3.1 *The pottery (by Jane Timby)*

3.1.1 A small collection of 231 potsherds weighing 3,550g. was recovered from the watching brief and excavations. Details are to be found in Appendix III. With the exception of the unstratified material from Areas 3 and 4, which included sherds of medieval and modern date, and linear feature [401] which contained post-medieval material, the entire assemblage dated to the Roman period. The sherds were relatively well preserved with sharp edges but of mixed size, typical of redeposited rubbish material.

3.1.2 The assemblage includes wares representative of the complete Roman period, with wheelmade grog-tempered necked bowls typical of the 1st century AD, possibly continuing into the 2nd, through to Midlands shelly ware typical of the last quarter of the 4th century AD. Other wares include Dorset black burnished ware, Midlands grog-tempered storage jar, samian and a variety of Oxfordshire wares, in particular white, reduced and oxidised ware and colour-coated vessels typical of the later phase of the industry.

3.2 *The animal bone (by Tracey Stickler)*

3.2.1 Details of the animal bone are given in Appendix IV. In Area 1 bone fragments were recovered from six features and included cattle, sheep/goat, pig, deer, and dog. A high percentage of butchery was found in the bones from ditch [103] and butchery was again evident on the sheep bones from pit [109]. A burned bone fragment was also recovered from pit [121]. Animal bone was recovered from two features in Area 2 and consisted of pig and red deer.

3.3 *The flint (by Graeme Walker)*

- 3.3.1 Twelve flints were recovered from the watching brief, five of which were unstratified. Details are given in the table in Appendix V. Post-deposition damage was present on much of the assemblage. There were no diagnostic pieces but a later prehistoric date is possible.

4. DISCUSSION

Prehistoric

- 4.1 The recovery of prehistoric flints, found residually in Romano-British features, is of interest. Although no features could be assigned a prehistoric date the recovery of the six flints from Area 1 may suggest prehistoric activity within the vicinity. A single flint was also found residually in Area 2 and unstratified flints were found in Areas 3 and 4. However, in isolation these cannot be viewed as indicators of prehistoric activity.

Romano-British

- 4.2 The watching brief has identified three hitherto unrecognised Romano-British sites. However, the 10m width of the pipeline trench and the nature of the topsoil stripping has reduced the ability to interpret the limited information gained from these sites.
- 4.3 Few features were found on Area 2 and as such it is difficult to interpret their function. It is also not possible to estimate the size of the site with which they are associated. However, it is the earliest of the sites recognised with the pottery suggesting a date in the late 1st century AD. Indeed, the amount of artefactual material in the form of pottery found in pit [205] is suggestive of a

late 1st century settlement within the immediate area. This pottery was particularly unabraded suggesting that the pit was in close proximity to the settlement.

- 4.4 The site identified on Area 1 was at least 45m across and on a N-S to E-W alignment. All three of the ditches were flat-bottomed and as such form either boundary or enclosure ditches. However, given their proximity it is doubtful whether ditches [103] and [106] were contemporary. It is possible that the site at Area 1 consisted of a single rectilinear enclosure containing pits indicative of domestic settlement. At least one of these pits [124] was probably intended for storage, given its clay lining. However, it had been recut as a possible rubbish pit.
- 4.5 The amount of artefactual material recovered from Area 1 is also indicative of this site being a domestic settlement. The pottery also suggests that this site was of at least two phases, namely the late 2nd-3rd centuries AD and the 4th century AD indicating continuity of settlement throughout much of the Roman period.
- 4.6 The Romano-British pottery and later pottery found on Area 3 is probably residual and dumped as part of the manuring process. The origins of the Romano-British pottery are not known, although it is possible that it derived from the manuring of fields associated with the settlements on Areas 1 or 4. Alternatively it may have derived from a further unknown site within the locality.
- 4.7 The nature and extent of the site at Area 4 is difficult to assess given the limited nature of the remains. However, the single ditch, together with the artefactual material recovered nearby, points to the presence of a further Romano-British site in the immediate vicinity. Alternatively, it may just be part of a field system associated with such a site.

- 4.8 The date of the isolated ditch in Area 6 is not known but without further fieldwork in this area a Romano-British origin cannot at this stage be ruled out.
- 4.9 The ditch in Area 5 is clearly of post-medieval origin and of no archaeological significance.
- 4.10 The discovery of three Romano-British sites along a relatively short route indicates that the pipeline cuts across a landscape relatively rich in remains dating to this period. It is difficult to interpret the function and status of the sites within this landscape without further archaeological fieldwork, although the impression gained from the watching brief is that they are small rural farmsteads.
- 4.11 The discovery of this archaeological landscape is extremely significant as the area between Didcot and the Downs has long since been regarded as containing few archaeological sites. However, it has also been suspected that this is due to the lack of archaeological research in the area and the recognition of these new sites confirms this point of view.

5. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Cotswold Archaeological Trust would like to thank Peter Dela and Scott Jago of Thames Water Utilities for their assistance throughout the project. The watching brief and excavations were monitored by Hugh Coddington, County Archaeological Services, Oxfordshire County Council.

The watching brief was carried out by Nick Turner, Mark Brett and Franco Vartuca. The excavation of Areas 1 and 2 was carried out by Alan Thomas, Tim Harvard and Julie Martin. The report illustrations were prepared by Rick Morton.

6. BIBLIOGRAPHY

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APPENDIX I LIST OF RECORDED CONTEXTS

Area 1

[118] Linear ditch cut. Uneven base although with a relatively flat-bottomed profile. It measured 1.6m in width and approximately 0.62m in depth and contained a fill (120) which consisted of a greyish-brown silty clay. The ditch had been recut [126] to a width of 0.9m and a depth of approximately 0.34m. This recut contained a similar fill (119) but with a lesser percentage of redeposited natural clay.

[106] Linear ditch cut. It had a flat-bottomed profile and measured 1.25m in width and 0.5m in depth. It contained a primary fill (108) of a greyish-brown silty clay and a secondary fill of a charcoal smeared silty clay (107).

[103] Linear ditch cut. It had a flat-bottomed profile and measured 1.6m in width and 0.75m in depth. It contained a primary fill (105) of redeposited natural and a secondary fill (104) of a greyish-brown silty clay.

[121] Pit cut. Probable storage pit with vertical, slightly undercut sides. It measured 1.62m in diameter and was approximately 0.88m deep. It contained traces of a blue-grey clay lining (124). The primary fill consisted of a mid brown silty clay (122). The pit had been recut [127] and the fill of this recut (123), consisted of a dark grey-brown silty clay with frequent charcoal flecks and small fragments of burnt stone.

[109] Pit cut. Probable storage pit with slightly vertical, slightly undercut sides. It measured 1.2m in diameter and was excavated to a depth of 1m. It was augured for a further 0.55m before reaching the bottom. It contained a fill (111) of a greyish-black silty clay with frequent charcoal flecks. This pit had been cut by a shallow pit [125] or scoop which was 2.5m x 1.9m across, flat-bottomed and just 0.09m deep. It contained a fill of a grey clay (110).

[112] Pit cut which measured 0.45m x 0.4m across and 0.1m deep. It contained a fill (113) of a mid-brown clay.

[114] Pit cut which measured approximately 2.5m x 1.15m across and 0.35m in depth. It contained a fill (115) of a mid- brown silty clay.

[116] Pit cut which measured 1.8m in diameter and 0.3m in depth. It contained a fill (117) of a mid-brown silty clay.

Area 2

[205] Pit cut running under the NW edge of the trench. Within the confines of the trench it measured 6m x 1.8m across and was 0.72m deep. The edges were very difficult to establish because of the very dry conditions. It contained a primary fill (213) of a yellowish-brown redeposited clay natural and a secondary fill (206) of a grey silty clay.

[207] Gully cut which had a flat-bottomed profile and which measured approximately 0.52m in width and 0.23m in depth. It contained a fill (208) of a yellowish-brown redeposited natural clay.

[203] Pit cut running under the SE section. Within the confines of the trench it measured 0.64m x 0.25m across and was 0.3m deep. It contained a fill (204) of a yellowish-brown redeposited natural clay.

[209] Pit cut which measured 0.45m in diameter and which was 0.09m deep. It contained a fill

(210) of a grey clay.

Area 4

[304] Linear ditch cut which measured 0.6m in width and 0.12m in depth. It contained a fill (303) of a light brownish-grey sandy clay.

Area 5

[401] Linear feature, 0.5m wide and 0.8m deep. It had near-vertical sides and a flat base. It contained a primary fill (403) of light grey-green silty sand, and a secondary fill (402) of mid green-brown silty sand which contained occasional charcoal flecks.

Area 6

[407] Linear ditch cut, 0.55m wide and 0.15m deep with irregular concave sides and base. It contained a single fill (406) of mid grey-green silty sand with very occasional charcoal flecks.

APPENDIX II TABLE OF RECORDED FINDS

APPENDIX III POTTERY TABLE

APPENDIX IV THE ANIMAL BONE

Context	Feature	Species identified	Comments
(104)	ditch [103]	cattle, sheep/goat	high percentage of butchery
(107)	ditch [106]	cattle, LAR	
(108)	ditch [106]	deer	
(119)	ditch [118]	unidentified	butchery evident
(110)	pit [109]	sheep	
(111)	pit [109]	unidentified	
(115)	pit [114]	dog	burned fragment
(123)	pit [121]	pig, dog	
(206)	pit [205]	red deer	
(208)	ditch [207]	pig	

LAR = large artiodactyle.

APPENDIX V

FLINT TABLE

Context no	Type
108	1 ?core 1 awl 1 burnt flint
110	1 broken flake
111	1 burnt flint
115	1 flake
206	1 burnt, worked flint
unstratified	1 flake 1 broken flake 1 burnt, worked flint 2 flakes with retouch

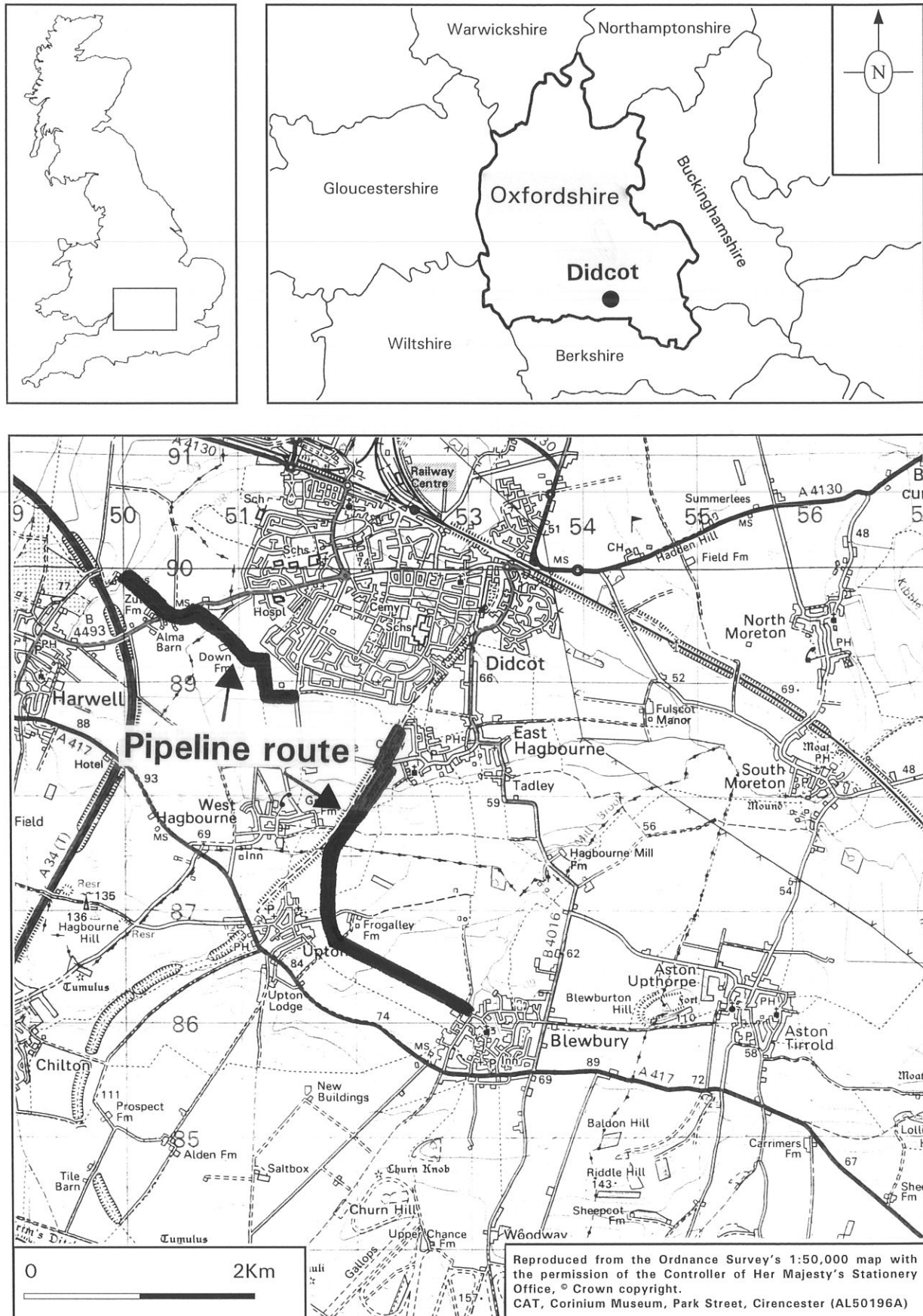


Fig. 1 Location plan

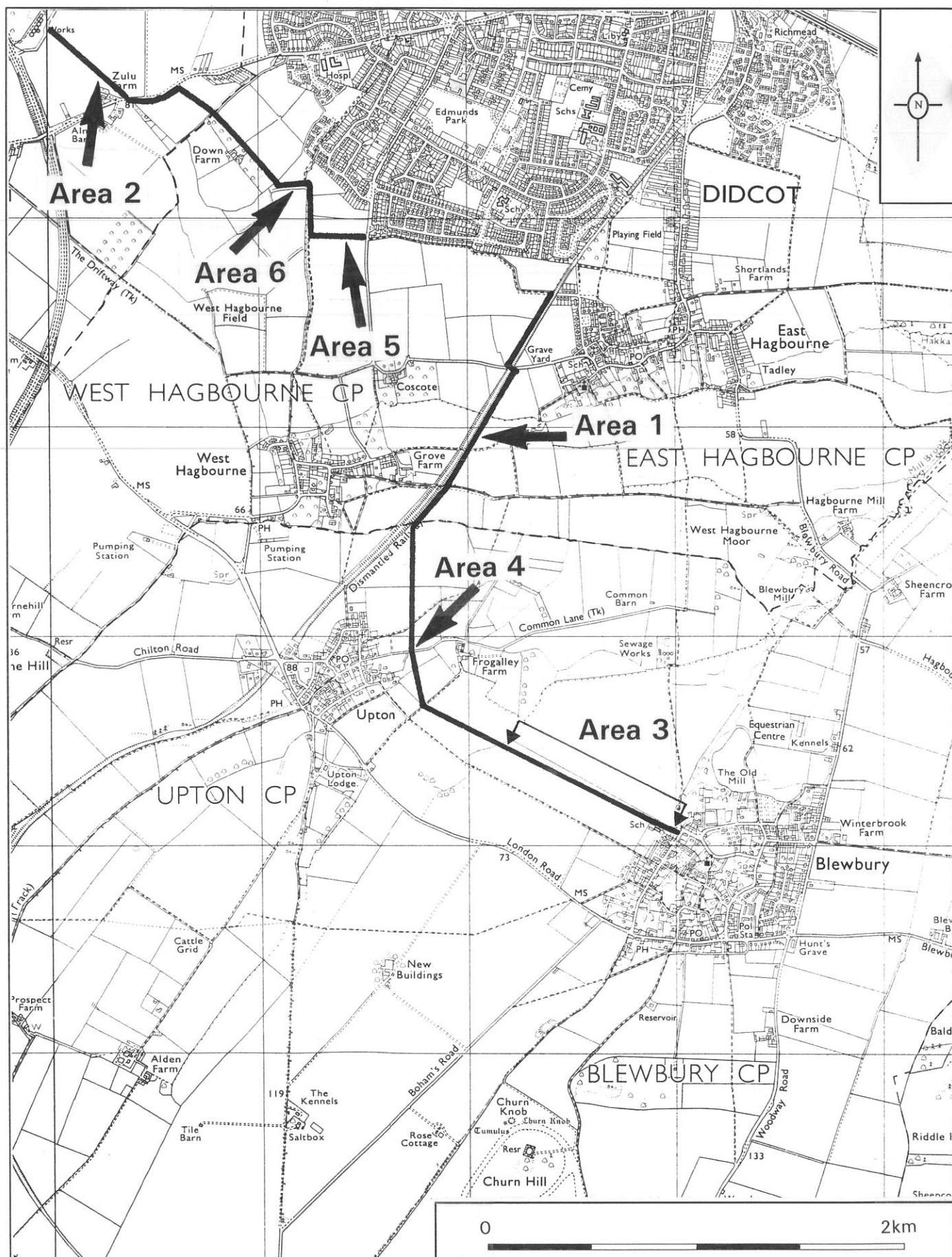


Fig. 2 Location of pipeline route

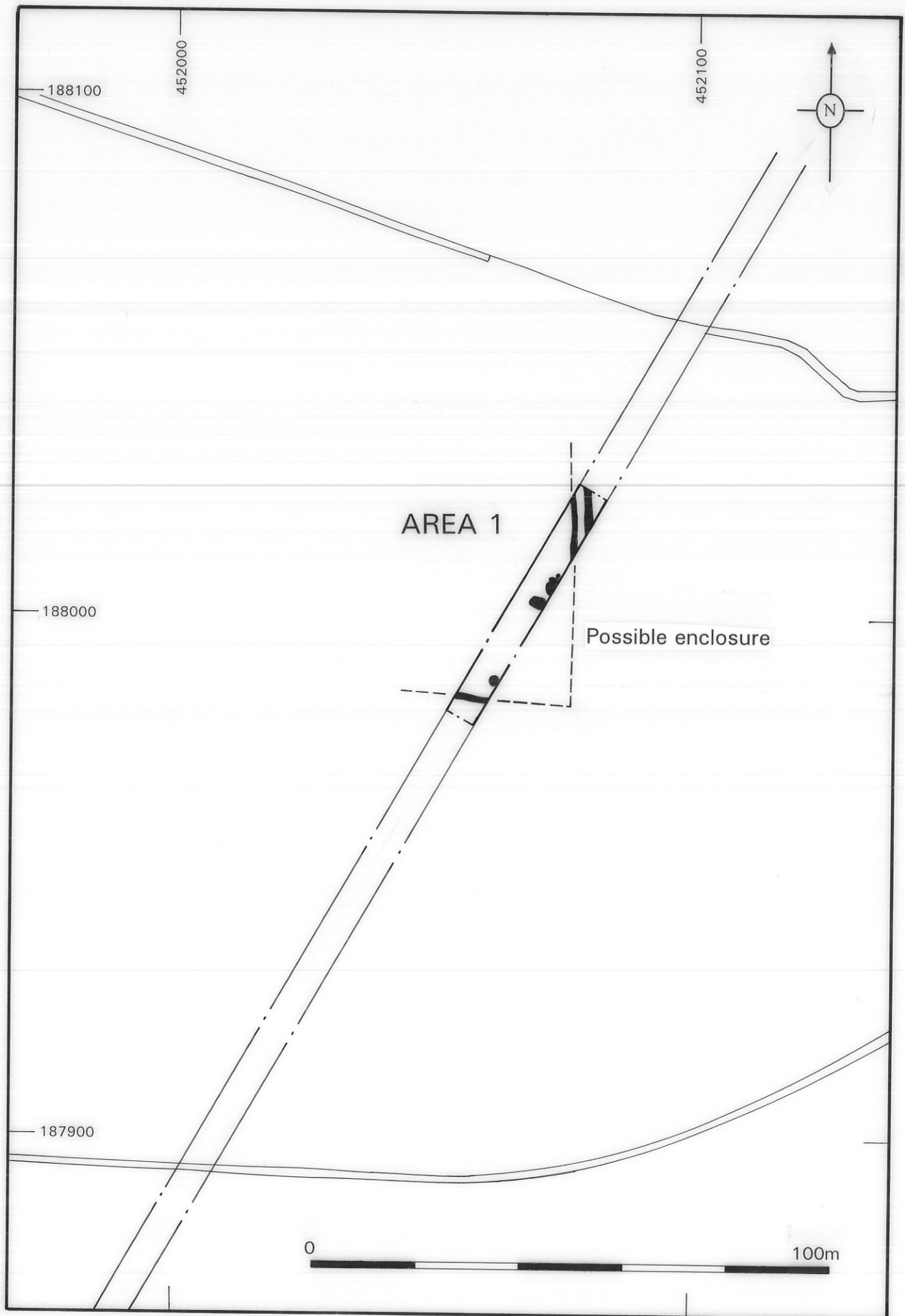


Fig. 3 Location of Area 1 (*archaeological features in black*)

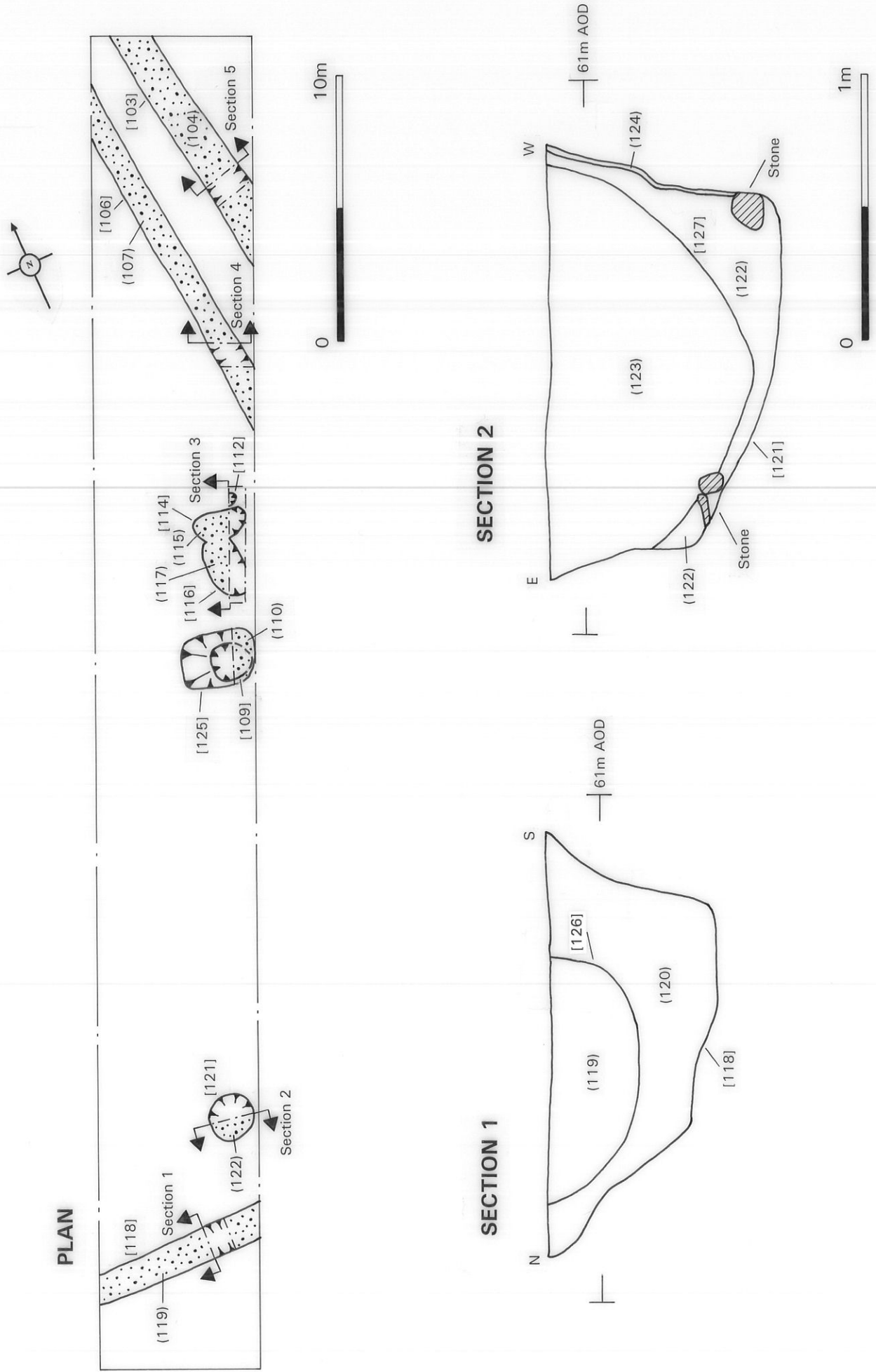
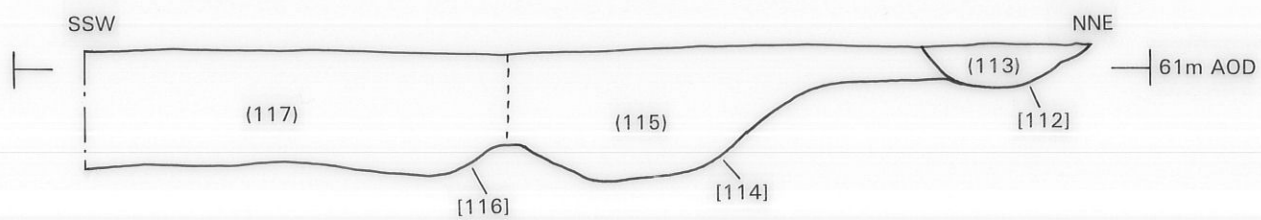
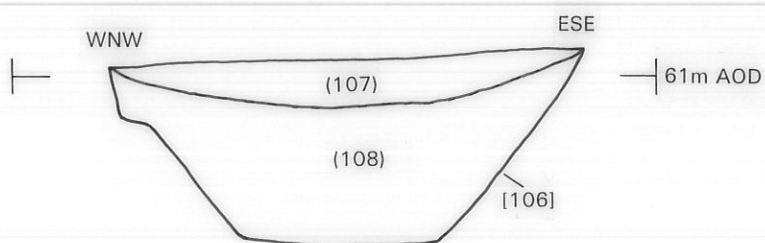


Fig. 4 Plan and sections, Area 1

SECTION 3



SECTION 4



SECTION 5

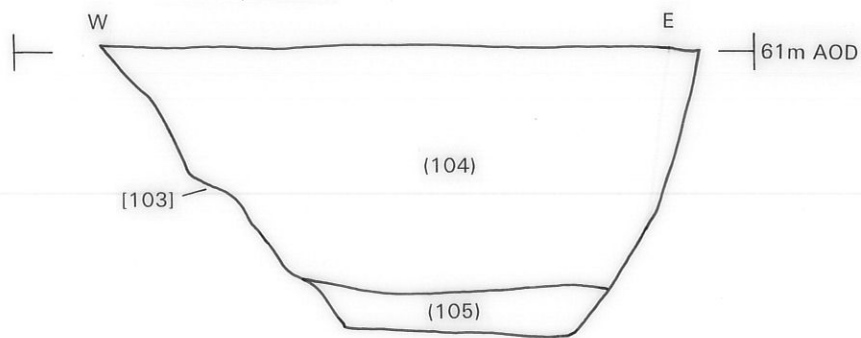


Fig. 5 Sections, Area 1

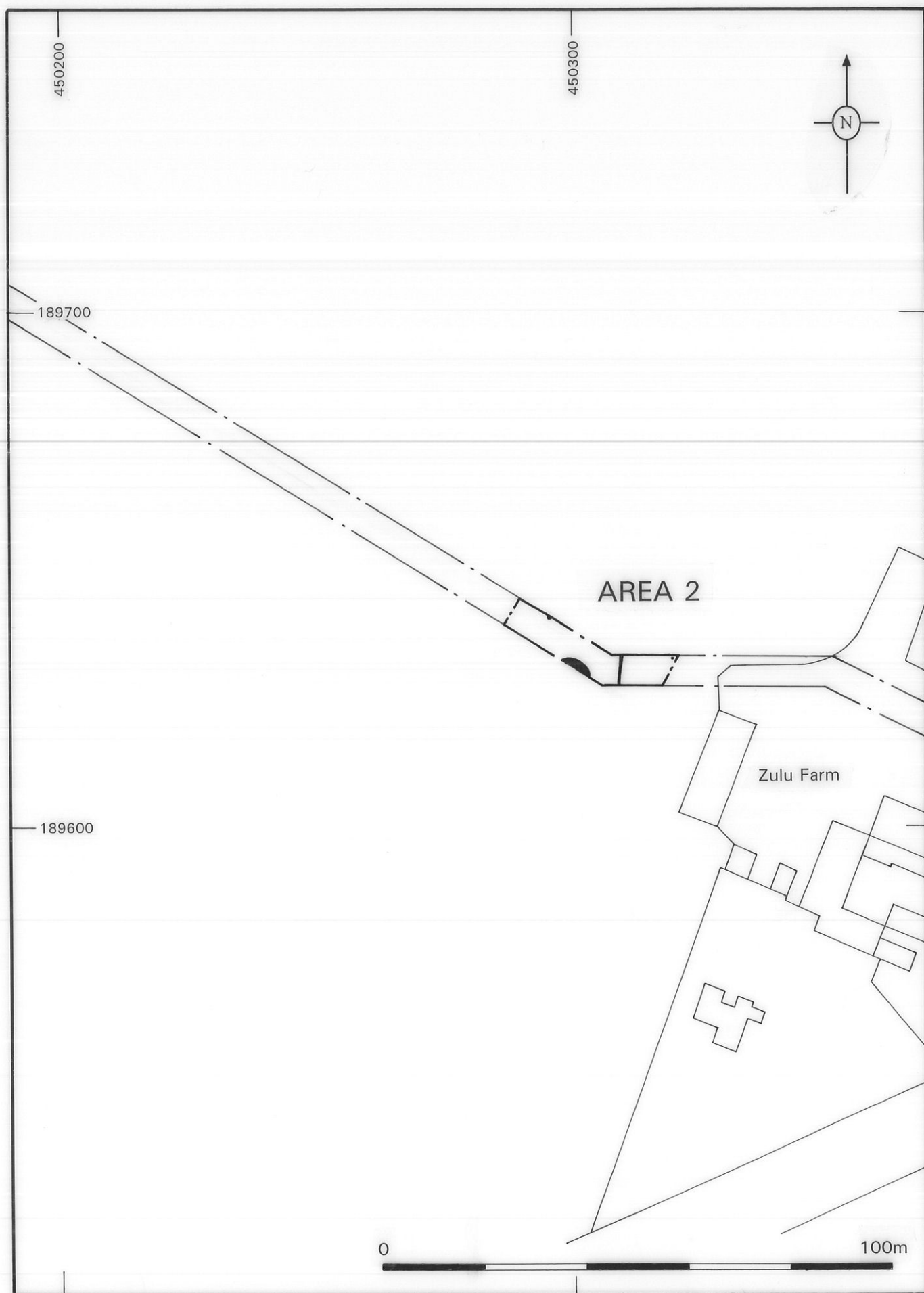


Fig. 6 Location of Area 2 (*archaeological features in black*)

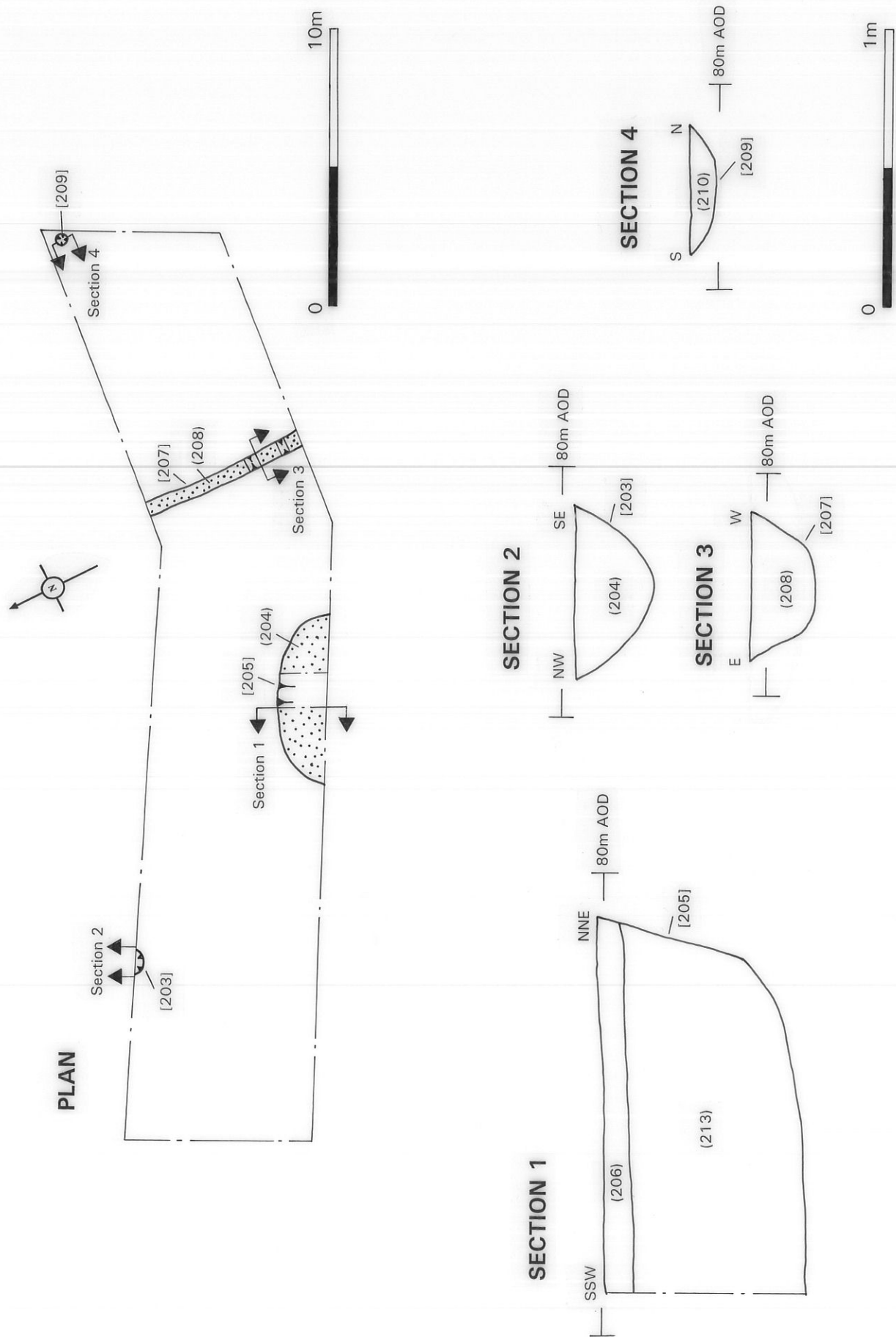


Fig. 7 Plan and sections, Area 2

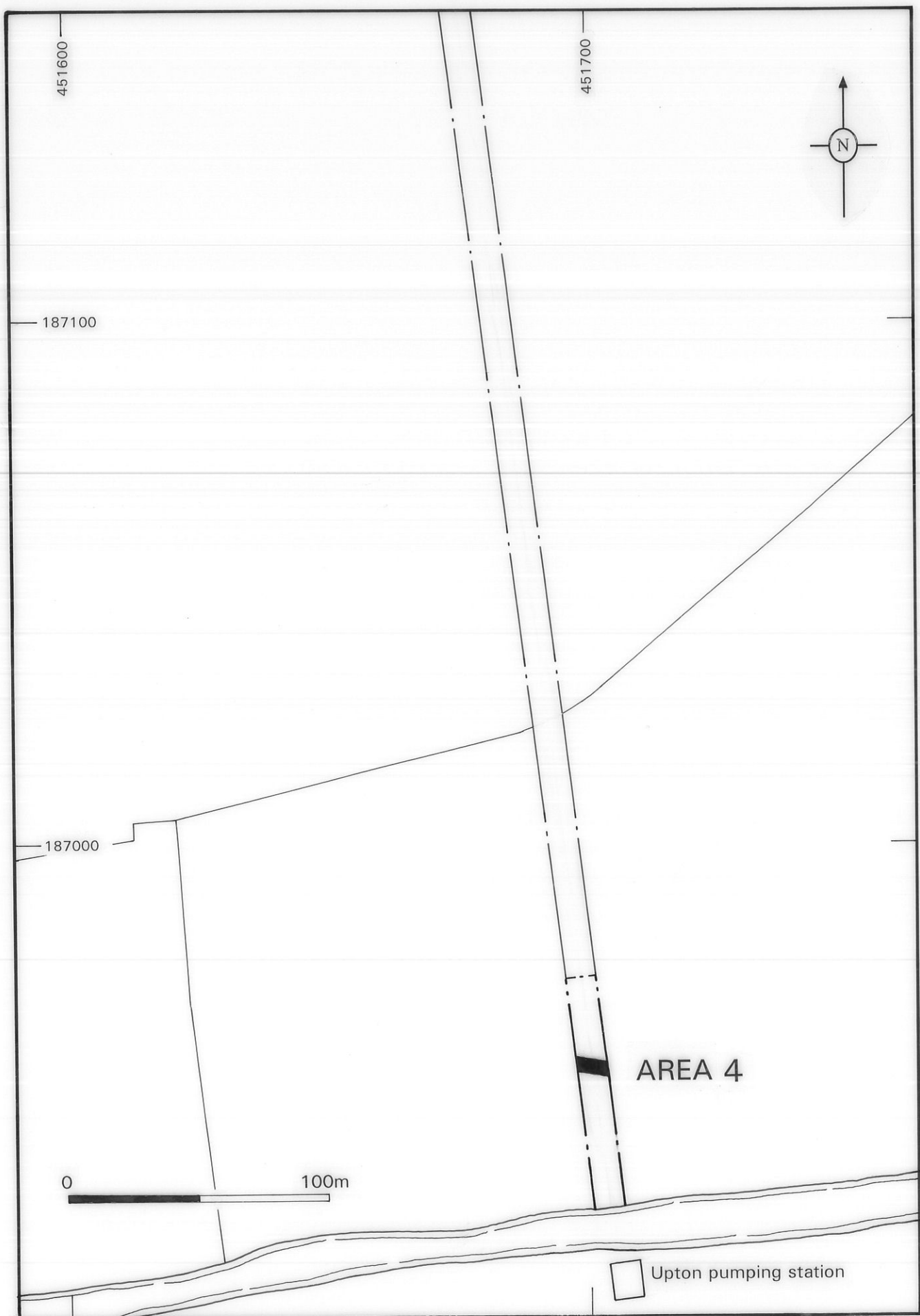


Fig. 8 Location of Area 4 (*archaeological features in black*)

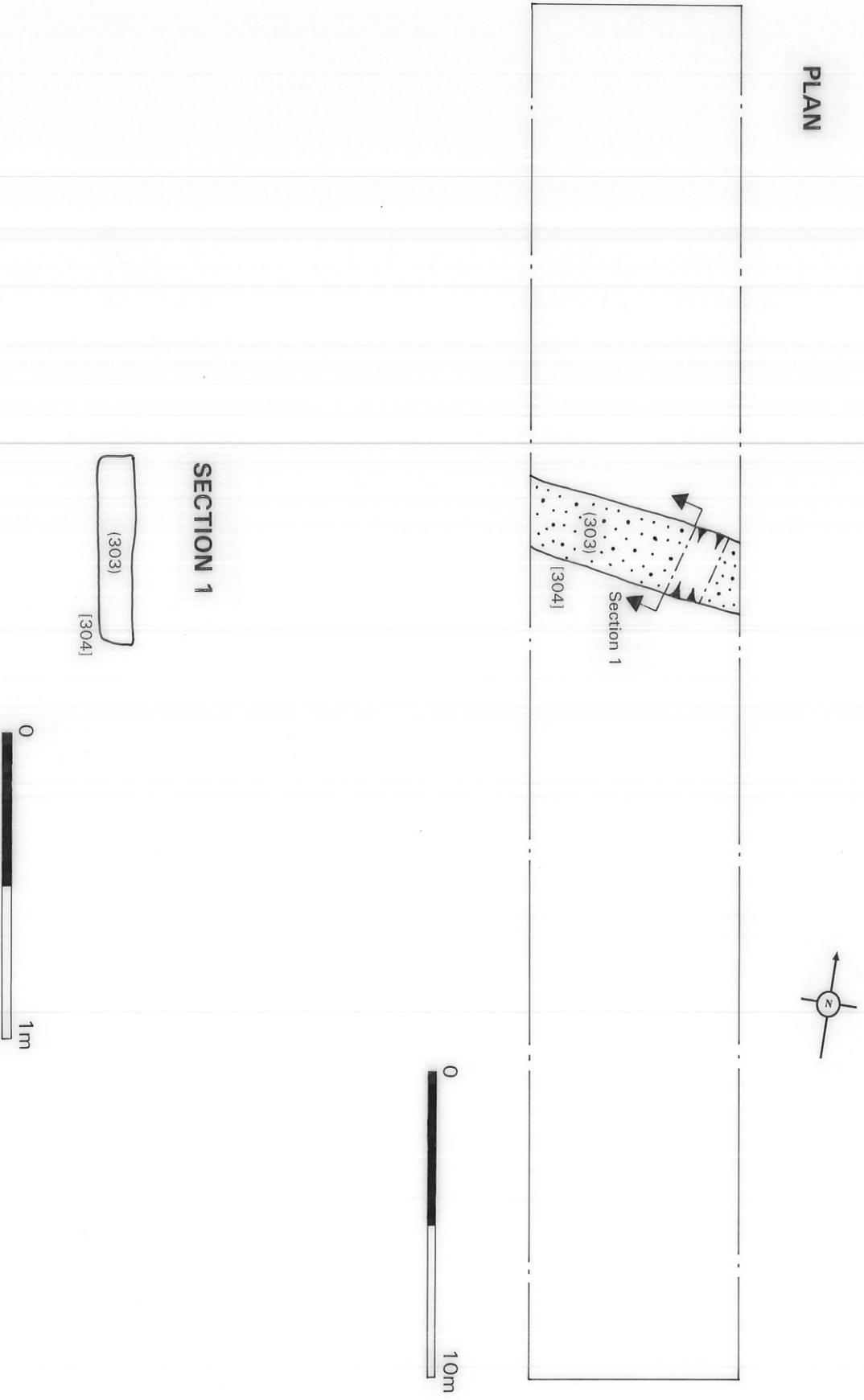


Fig. 9 Plan and section, Area 4