PREHISTORIC WETLAND DEPOSITS AND MEDIEVAL REMAINS IN BEDALE, NORTH YORKSHIRE

PRE-CONSTRUCT ARCHAEOLOGY

Prehistoric wetland deposits and medieval remains in Bedale, North Yorkshire

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INTRODUCTION

A phased programme of archaeological investigations was undertaken by Pre-Construct Archaeology Limited in advance of development of land to the rear of 26 Market Place, Bedale, North Yorkshire (central National Grid Reference SE 265 881). The archaeological project was commissioned by CgMs Consulting, on behalf of McCarthy and Stone (Developments) Limited, and monitored by the Heritage Unit of North Yorkshire County Council, on behalf of the Local Planning Authority, Hambleton District Council. A preliminary archaeological evaluation, undertaken in Spring 2002, revealed the presence of a prehistoric wetland area, comprising substantial alluvial sediments representing deposition within a body of water, such as a lake, overlain by an extensive peat formation. Radiocarbon dating of the peat placed accumulation of the material in the Mesolithic period. Archaeological remains of medieval and post-medieval date were also recorded in the evaluation trenches, with Trench 1 containing important remains of medieval date. A more extensive open area excavation was undertaken, in the autumn of 2003, in order to further investigate the ancient wetland and overlying medieval deposits. The excavation focussed on the footprint of the main building in the development, with a total of c. 1,100 square metres being investigated. Evaluation Trench 1 lay to the north-east of this area, with the remains exposed therein remaining preserved *in situ*.

SITE LOCATION AND DESCRIPTION

Bedale is a small market town located on the extreme western edge of the Vale of Mowbray, a low-lying area of fertile agricultural land, with Wensleydale forming the margin of the Yorkshire Dales to the west and the North Yorkshire Moors rising to the east (Fig. 1). The solid geology of the area consists of the Cadeby Formation (formerly Lower Magnesian Limestone). The local drift geology comprises laminated silt and boulder clay, interleaved in places with fluvioglacial sand and gravel (Powell *et al.* 1992). Due to its topographic advantages, the Vale of Mowbray has always been an important transport route; the modern A1 road, which runs 2km to the east of the town, follows the approximate line of the Roman road, Dere Street. Other well-known North Yorkshire market towns, Richmond, Ripon and Northallerton, lie within 20km.

Bedale developed along the bank of the Bedale Beck, which flows into the River Swale 5km to the north-east The layout of the core of the town has survived from the medieval period, with a broad curved street, Market Place, running NW-SE and lined with two- and three-storey brick buildings, mostly of late 18th century origin. These front 'ladders' of long, narrow rear plots, reaching Bedale Beck to the east, and a back lane, Wycar, to the west (Figs. 2 and 3).

The site is located towards the southern end of Market Place, west of the street frontage, and comprises a roughly rectangular block of land, aligned NE-SW and covering 0.5 hectares (Fig. 2). The site encompasses two ancient backlots between the street frontage and back lane and, prior to the archaeological project, was occupied by derelict buildings and open areas of yard and hardstanding. Ground level across the majority of the excavation area was at c. 40.0m OD. In the north-western corner of the site, there was a distinct step-up in ground level; for example, evaluation Trench 5 was sited on hardstanding at 41.30m OD (Fig. 2).

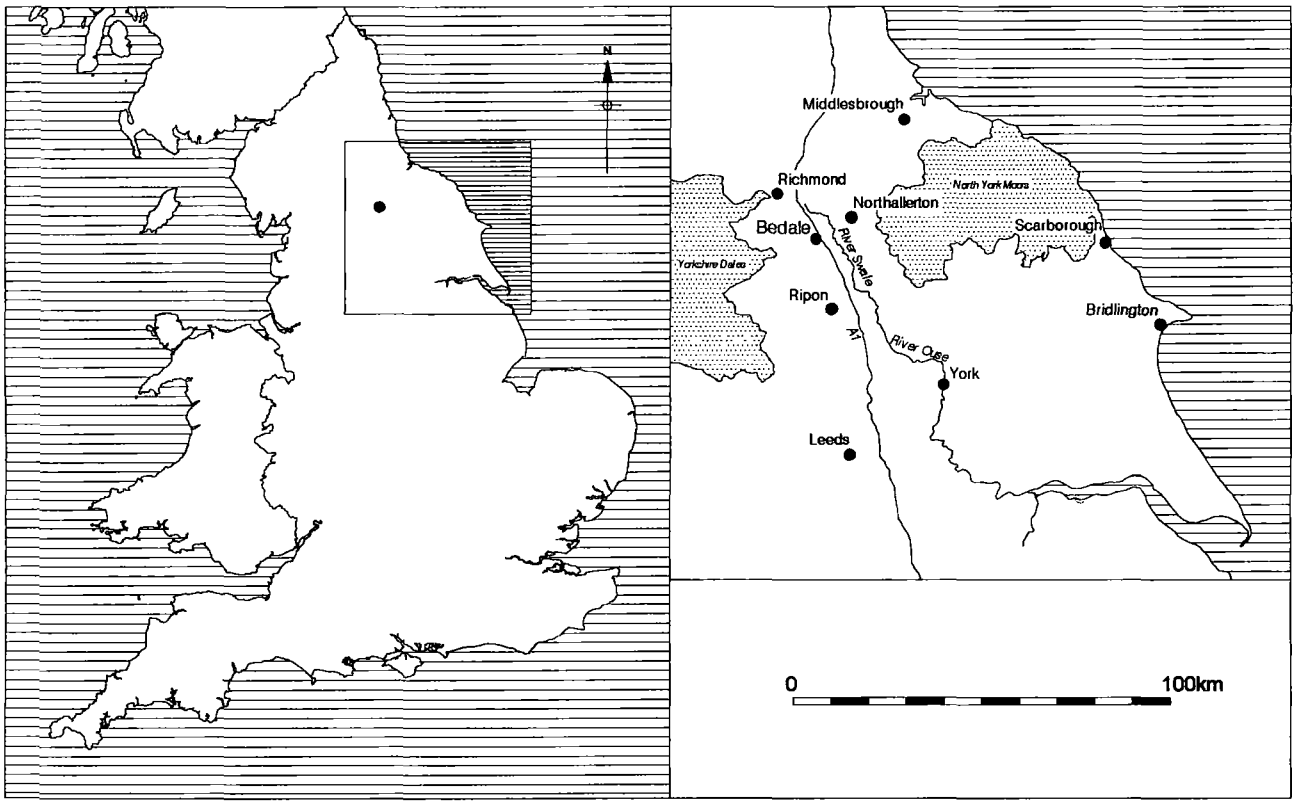
N
Middlesbrough
Richmond
North York Moors
Northallerton
Bedale
Scarborough
River Swale
Yorkshire Dales
Ripon
A1
Bridlington
River Ouse
York
Leeds
0
100km

Figure 1.

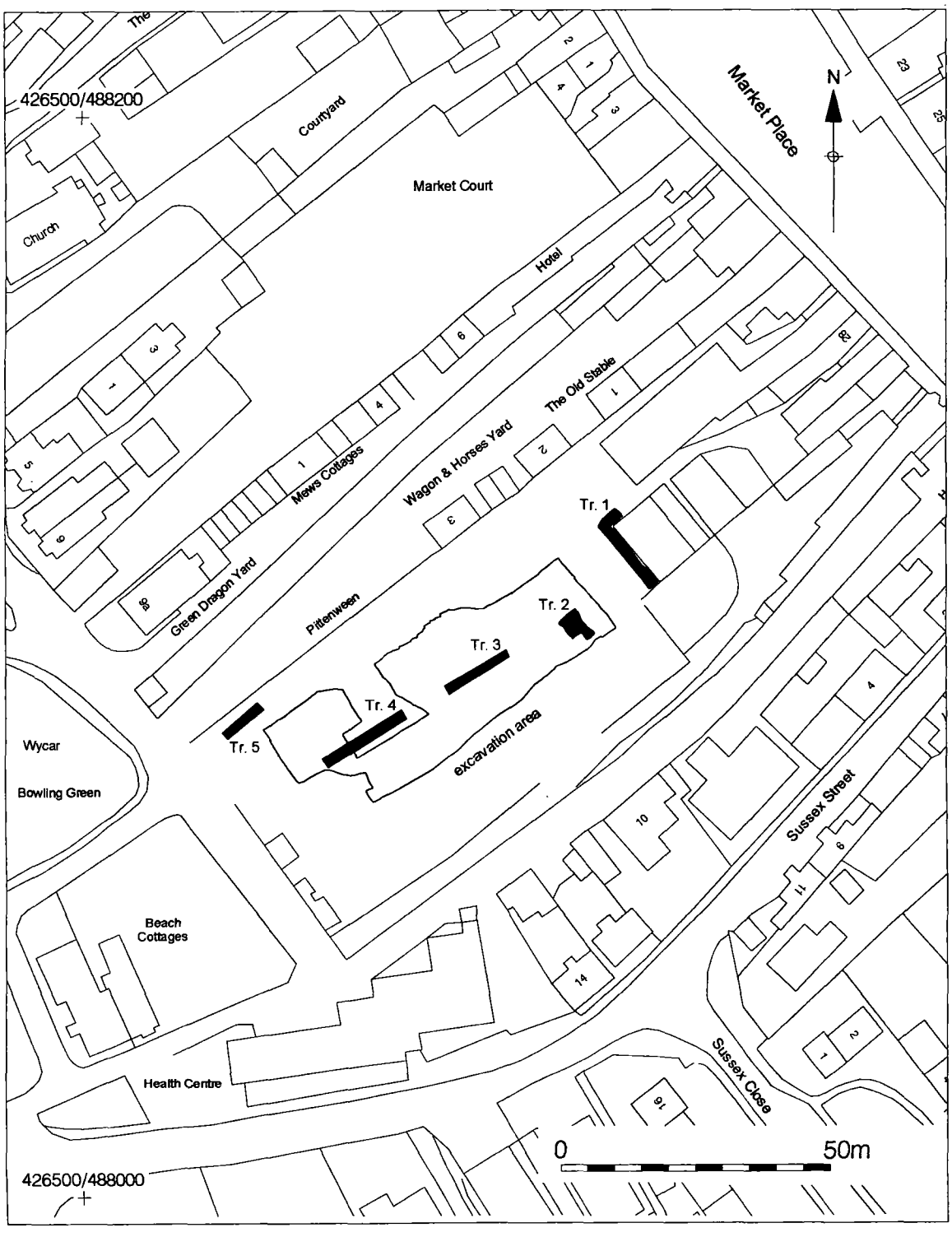
426500/488200
Courtyard
Market Court
Market Place
N
Church
Hotel
Mews Cottages
Wagon & Horses Yard
The Old Stable
Green Dragon Yard
Pittenween
Tr. 1
Tr. 2
Tr. 3
Tr. 4
Tr. 5
excavation area
Wycar
Bowling Green
Beach Cottages
Health Centre
Sussex Street
Sussex Close
0
50m
426500/488000

Figure 2.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Bedale originated before the Norman Conquest and the town and church are mentioned in the Domesday Book survey, earried out in the area in 1085. Stonework dating to the late 9th and early 10th centuries remains preserved in St. Gregory's Church, which is now mostiy a 13th and 14th century building, sited at the north end of Market Place. The town survived the 'Devastation of the North', 1069-1071 but the valuation of the parish was exceptionally low in the Domesday Book (McCall 1907).

Bedale attained relative prosperity during the medieval period, mainly as a result of the wool trade, and the town was granted a market charter by Henry III in 1251. Relatively littie is known of the medieval history of the settiement, except that the FitzAlans acquired the manor soon after the Conquest. Brian FitzAlan, Eari of Arundel, had a castie at Bedale, although a local historian wrote in 1823 that no traces of this remained above ground (Lewis 1975, xii). It is thought to have stood close to the church, in the northem end of the town.

The 'corridor village' style is typical of medieval settlements in the north of England, the form being particularly prevalent in the land between the Tyne and the Tees. A principal characteristic is street frontage buildings joined together to form continuous elevations along either a main street or market place. The land to the rear of the narrow frontage properties was sub-divided into tenements, historically held on burgage tenure, and, as in Bedale, comprising elongated backiots extending away from the dwellings, which in former times contained features such as vegetable gardens, animal pens, outbuildings, yards and middens.

The Market Cross, standing at the junction of the Wynd, Emgate and Market Place, the main medieval streets, is of 14th century date. For the most part, however, the fabric of Bedale is of Georgian or more modem construction. A drawing from 1716 shows a town characterised by low houses of timber-frame construction, but extensive clearance of these buildings in the 18th century allowed construction of the two- and three-storey brick buildings still in evidence today. (*ibid.* xi). The town was relatively prosperous during the post-medieval period, supporting small industries of weaving, dyeing, fulling and tanning (*ibid.*)

A map of Bedale dated 1772 (Fig. 3) shows the site encompassing the south-western portions of two backiots, labelled as plots 21 and 22, owned by a Mrs Heddon and Robert Lodge, respectively. The Tithe Map of 1838 (Fig. 4) shows the south-western portion of these plots amalgamated and occupied by a gas house, which remained in place well into the 20th century.

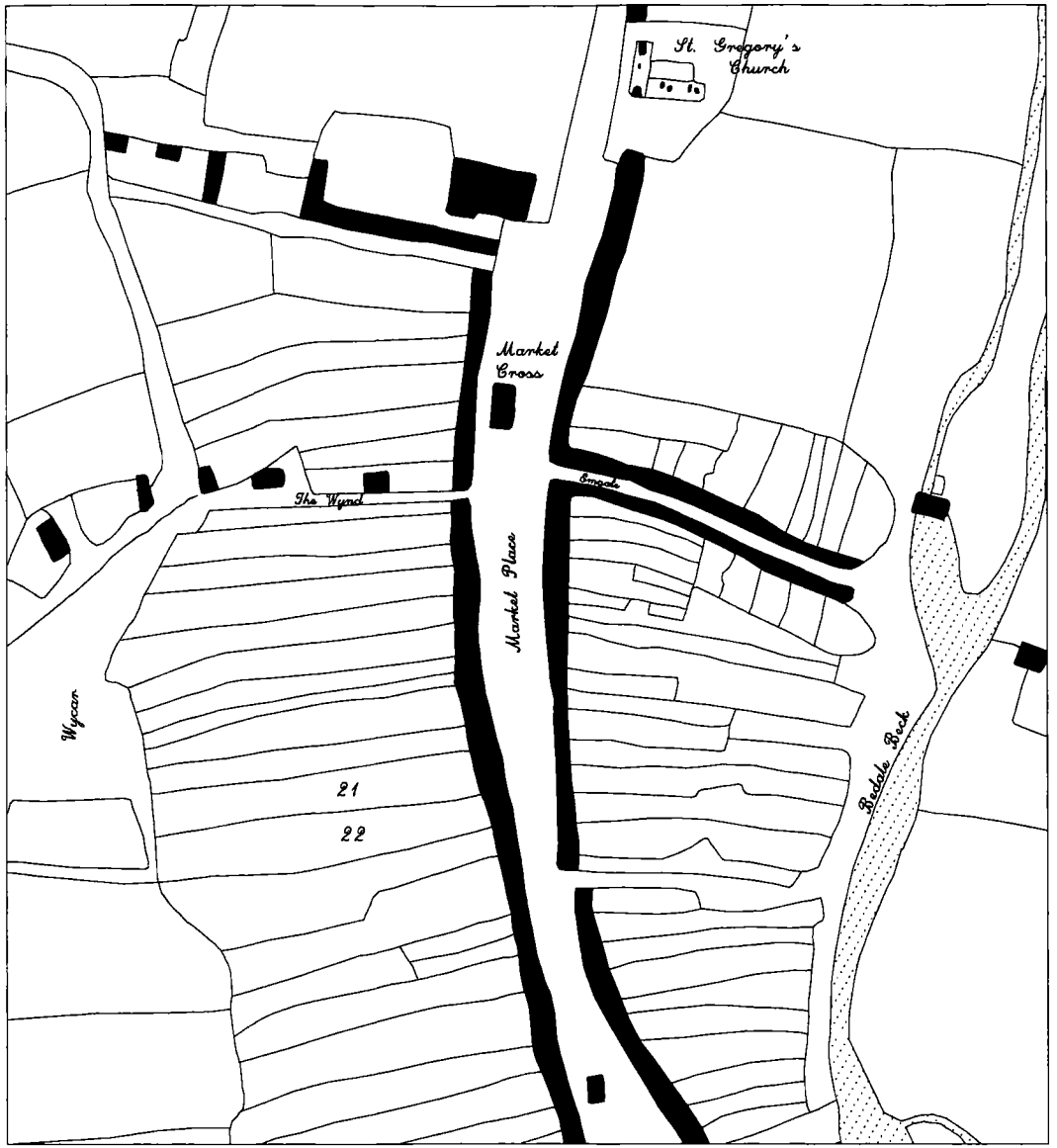
St. Gregory's Church
Market Cross
The Wynd
Market Place
Wycar
21
22
Bedale Beck

Figure 3.

Figure 4.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL METHODOLOGY

The excavation area comprised an irregular, but roughly rectangular, french with maximum dimensions 64m NE-SW x 22m NW-SE, covering c. 1,100 square metres, the majority of the footprint of the building in the development (Fig. 2).

Overburden was removed by machine under archaeological supervision across the excavation area and a NE-SW aligned sondage was excavated by machine along the south-westem limit of excavation (Section 1, Fig. 5). The purpose of this sondage was to examine, in section, the prehistoric wetland deposits, although due to the unstable nature of the deposits, the depth of excavation was limited by Health and Safety considerations. Other sondages (Fig. 5) were hand-excavated through the wetland deposits: towards the south-western end of the excavation area (Sections 2 and 3), centrally (Section 18) and adjacent to the north-eastern limit of excavation (Section 17). Four column samples comprising two parallel columns in each section, were taken through the wetland deposits in Section 17 (Samples 1 and 2) and Section 18 (Samples 3 and 4). Preliminary analysis of pollen and plant and invertebrate macrofbssils, along with targeted radiocarbon dating of organic material, confimied the findings of the original archaeological evaluation, in that the organic silts and peats represented an area of ancient wetland of eariy Holocene origin, in archaeological terms, derived from the Mesolithic period. Significant at a regional level, these deposits had potential to add considerably to current understanding of eariy Holocene landscape and climate changes in the area. Accordingly, Sample 3 was selected fbr further detailed analysis leading to full publication of the results, as detailed in this paper.

Medieval and post-medieval features were recorded in plan and section within the excavation area, with at least 10% of linear features being hand-excavated. Two bulk samples, Samples 5 and 6, recovered from the fills of boundary ditches of medieval date were selected for further detailed analysis, following on from a phase of post-excavation assessment (PCA 2004).

RESULTS OF THE INVESTIGATIONS

Natural sub-stratum

Glacial sand and gravel was exposed at the south-western end of the excavation area (Fig. 5). This deposit was recorded at a maximum height of 40.10m OD, sloping away gentiy to the south. In evaluation Trench 5, to the north-west of the excavation area, natural boulder clay was recorded at 41.64m OD, demonstrating a significant localised rise in the natural ground level. To the east, in evaluation Trench 1, glacial sand and gravel overiain by boulder clay was exposed in the northern portion of the french at a maximum height of 41.12m OD.

Prehistoric Lake

The edge of a substantial feature, interpreted as a lake-bed, truncated natural sand and gravel in the south-westem end of the excavation area. Thick deposits of laminated organic silts represent water deposited sediments, derived from a shallow body of water, such as a lake, infilling naturally. Sections 2 and 3 (Figs. 7 and 8) revealed the gentiy sloping profile of the lake-bed. Section 2 recorded a basal height at 39.14m OD, comparable to the 39.08m OD recorded on lake-bed sand and gravel, to the east in Section 17 (Fig. 9).

Alluvial silts within the lake-bed largely comprised layers of fine silt and sand, with occasional clay bands, varying in colour from very light brown through to dark brown, with occasional blue and green hues. The thickest full alluvial sequence in the lake-bed recorded was in Section 17, where a total of 0.70m of material was exposed, this lying close to the lake edge. In the cenfral part of the excavation area, the full thickness of alluvial material could not be exposed for the reasons given above.

The profile of the alluvial sequence recorded in Section 1 is broadly indicative of the profile of the underiying lake-bed, although the lake-bed was not exposed and the maximum recorded thickness of the material was 1.20m (Fig. 6). The edge of the lake was also recorded to the north-east of the excavation area, in evaluation Trench 1, indicating that the feature extended across an area measuring at least 75m NE-SW by 25m NW-SE.

Full details of radiocarbon dating and biological analysis of the lake-bed sediments are set out below, but in broad summary, pollen analysis suggests a hazel-dominated woodland in the vicinity while the lake infilled.

Prehistoric peat formation

Peat layers overiay lake-bed alluvium across the excavation area and were also recorded to the north-east, in evaluation Trench 1. The maximum recorded thickness of the peat formation was c. 1.0m, in Section 18 in the central part of the excavation area (Fig. 12), with the material thinning out towards the lake edges (Figs. 8 and 9). The highest level recorded for peat at the site was 40.14m OD, in evaluation Trench 1, on the north-eastem margins of the wetland area.

Again, full details of radiocarbon dating and biological analysis of the peat formation are set out below, but in broad summary, pollen analysis indicates a wetiand area of swampy sedge fen, the vegetative element characteristic of such a landscape being the source of the peat.

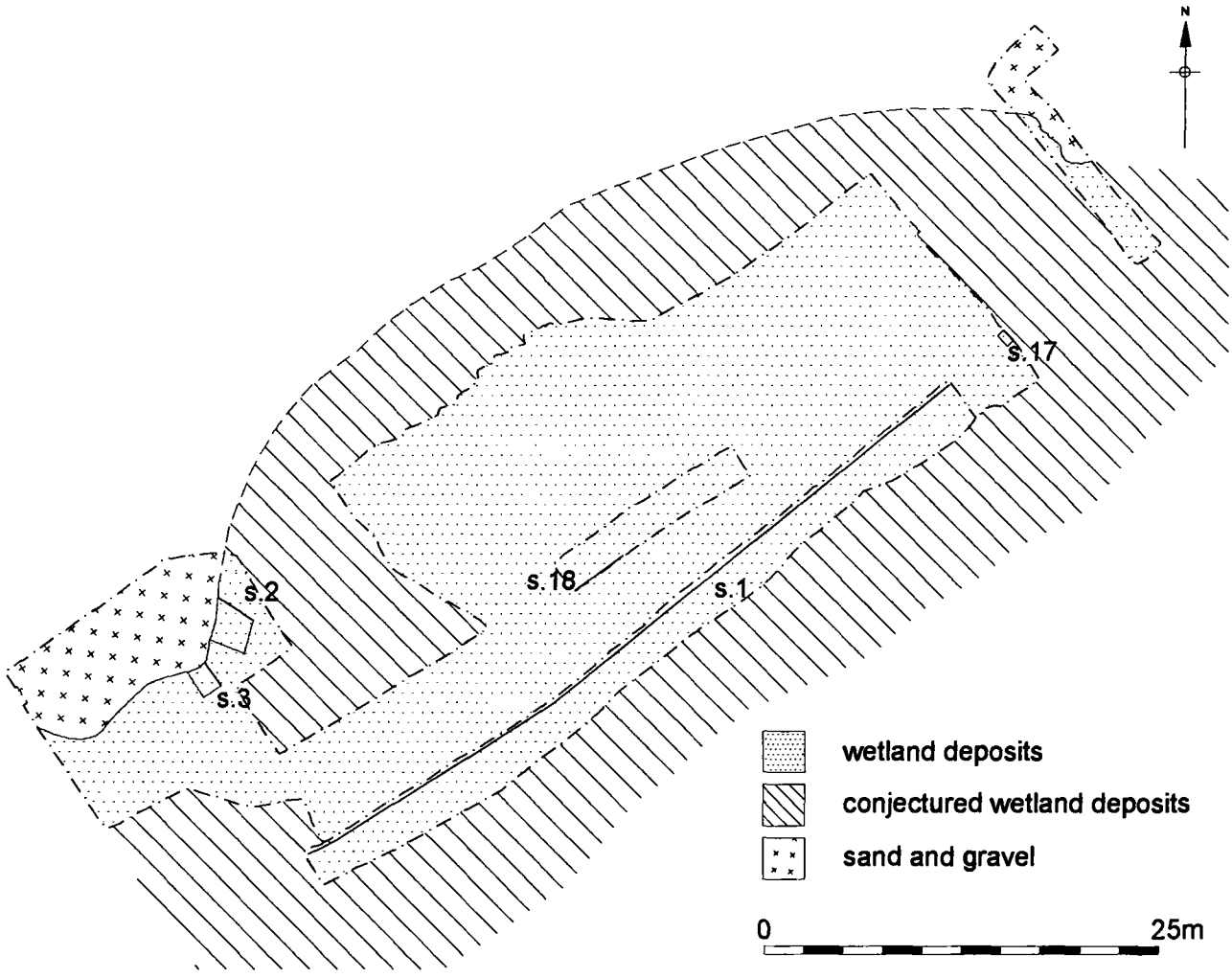
N
s.17
s.18
s.1
s.2
s.3
wetland deposits
conjectured wetland deposits
sand and gravel
0
25m

Figure 5.

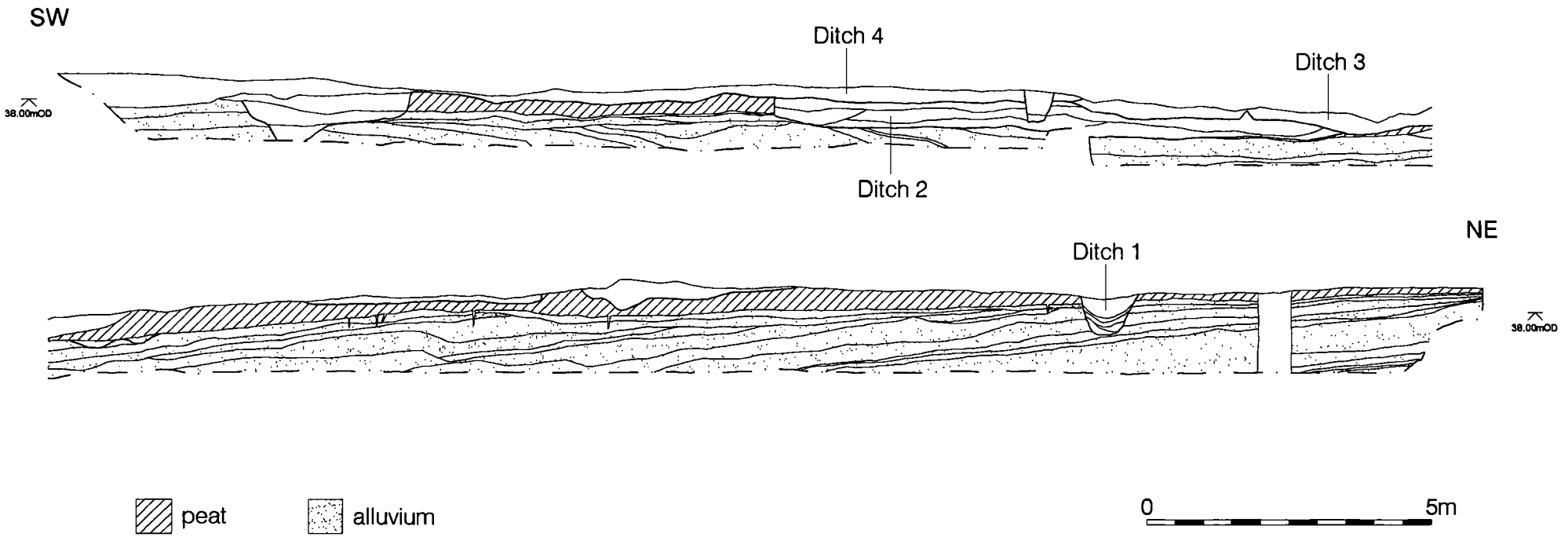
SW
Ditch 4
Ditch 3
38.00mOD
Ditch 2
NE
Ditch 1
38.00mOD
peat
alluvium
0
5m

Figure 6.

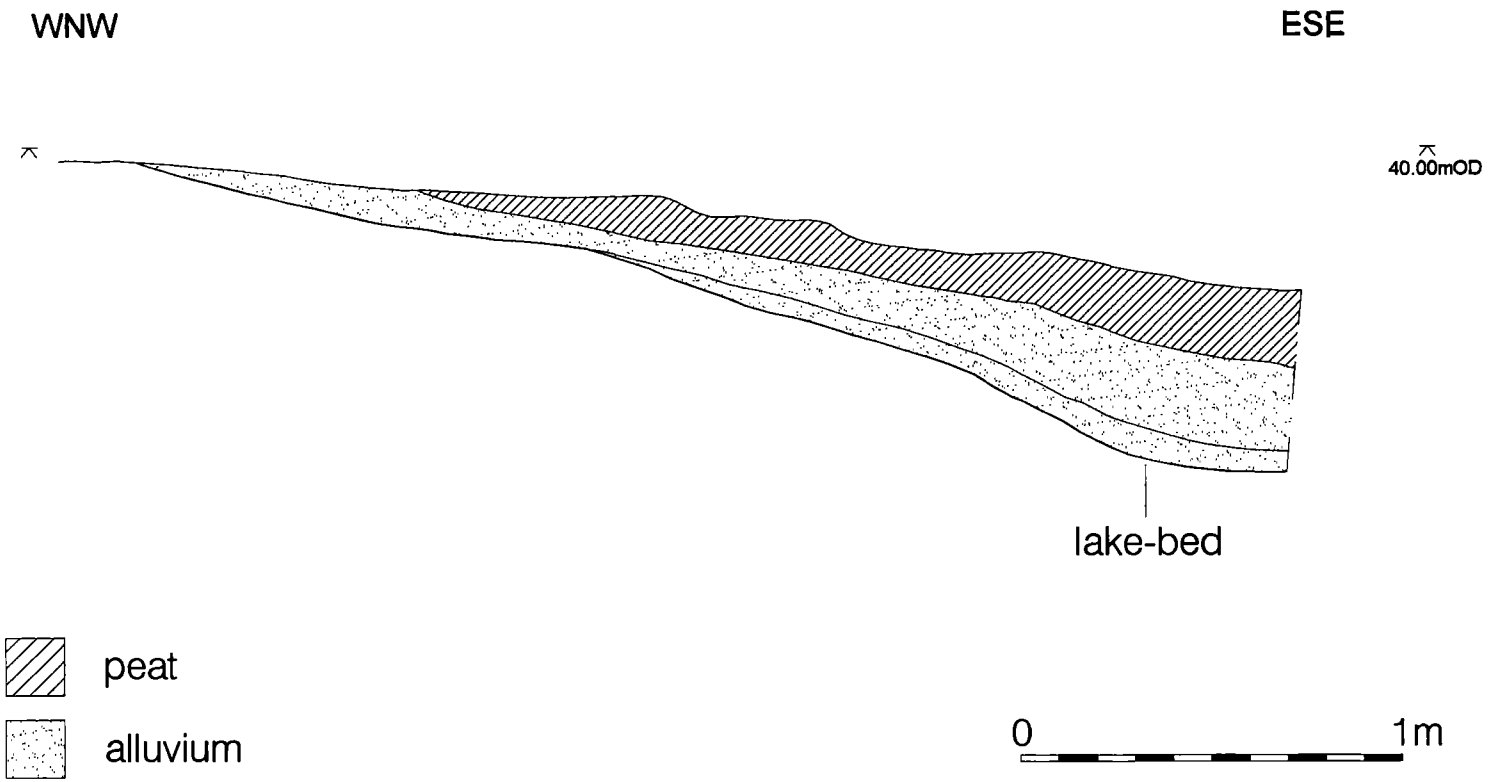

Figure 7.

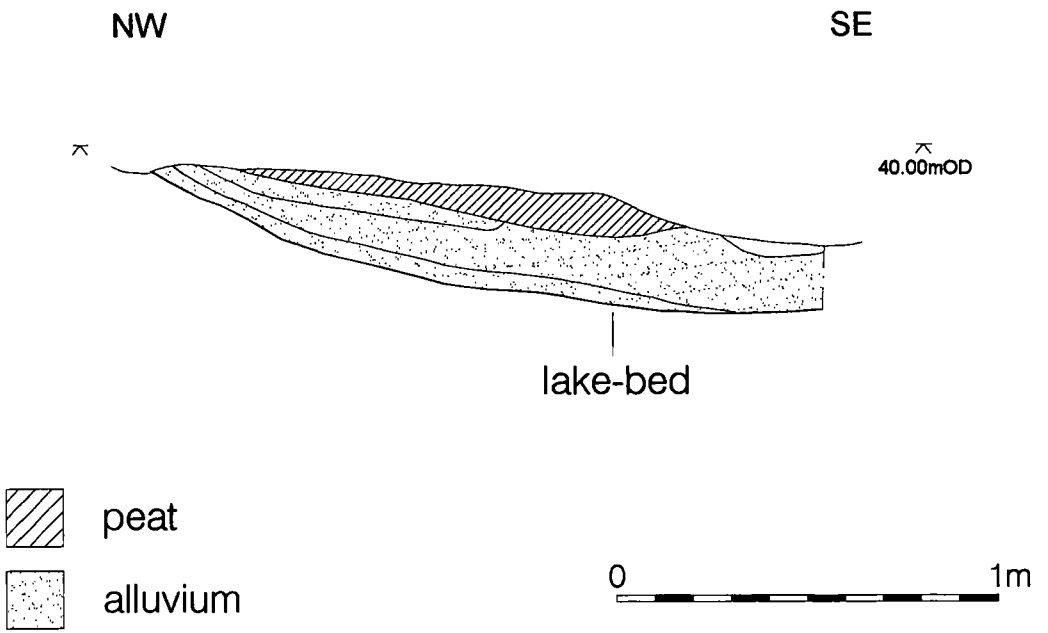

Figure 8.

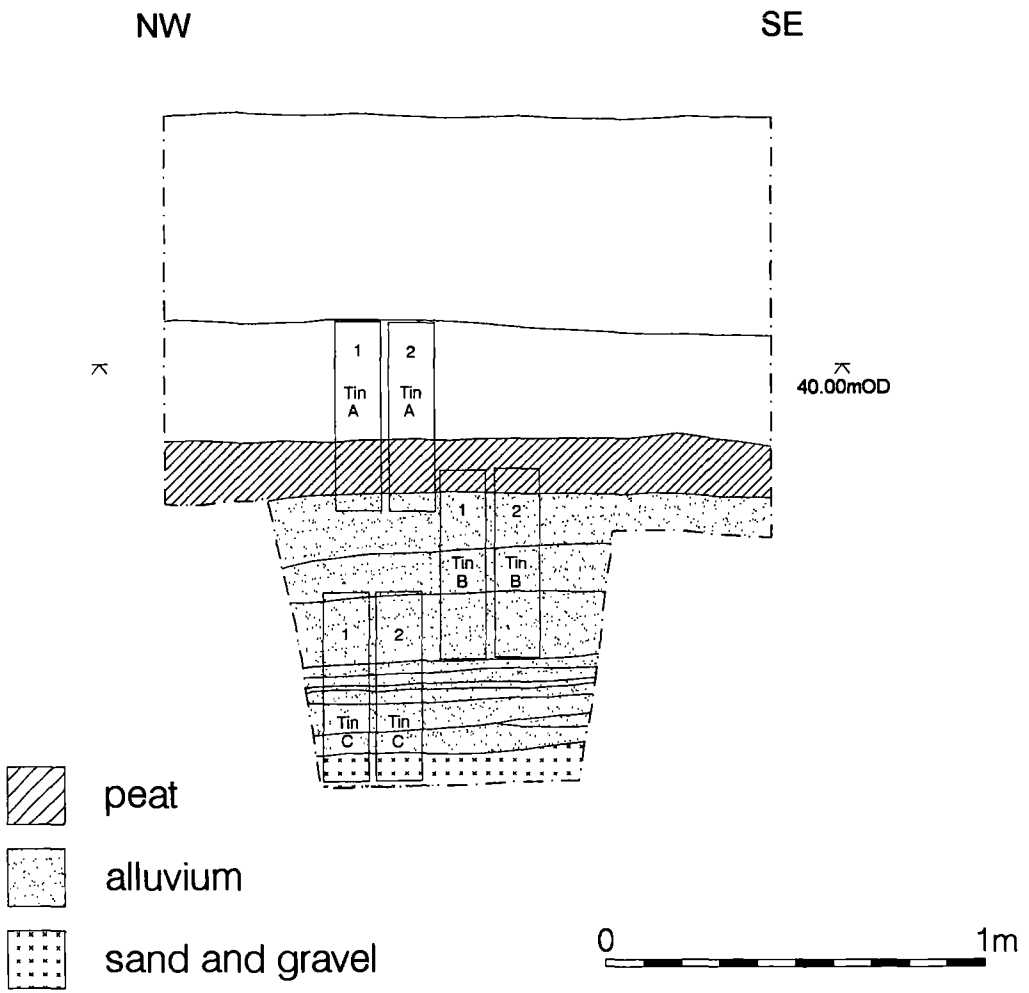
NW
SE
40.00mOD
1
2
Tin A
Tin A
Tin B
Tin B
Tin C
Tin C
peat
alluvium
sand and gravel
0
1m

Figure 9.

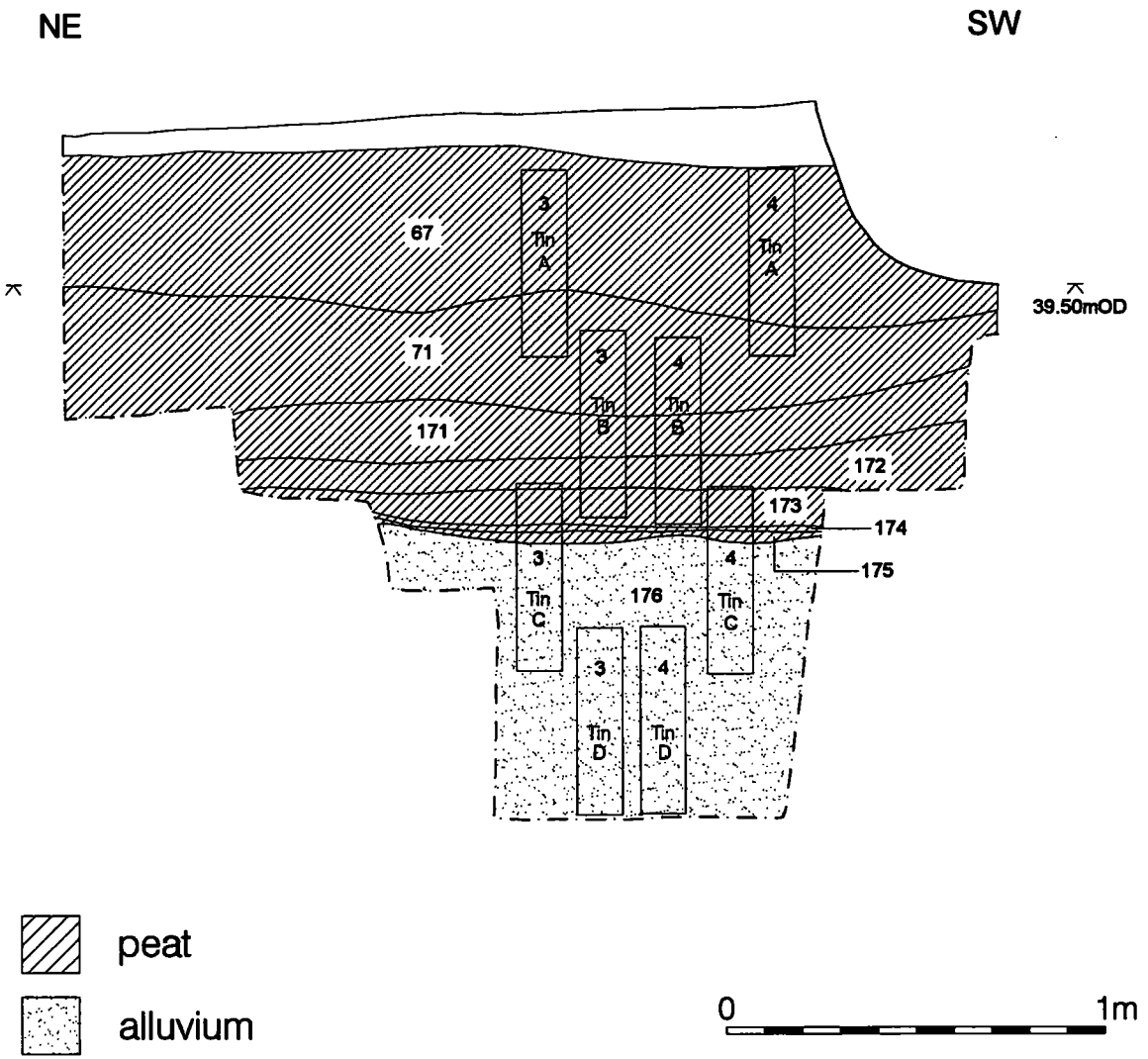
NE
SW
39.50mOD
67
71
171
172
173
174
175
176
3
Tin
A
4
Tin
A
3
Tin
B
4
Tin
B
3
Tin
C
4
Tin
C
3
Tin
D
4
Tin
D
peat
alluvium
0
1m

Figure 10.