



Archaeological trial trench evaluation at Thorn Road, Houghton Regis Central Bedfordshire November 2018

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OASIS REPORT FORM

PROJECT DETAILS		OASIS No: molanort1-336524	
Project title	Archaeological trial trench evaluation at Thorn Road, Houghton Regis, Central Bedfordshire		
Short summary	MOLA Northampton was commissioned to carry out an archaeological trial trench evaluation on land fronting Thorn Road, Houghton Regis, Bedfordshire. Five trenches augmented an earlier phase of evaluation. Ditches divided the area, representing earlier land partitions. Whilst none of these contained any datable finds the position of one corresponded with a minor watercourse depicted on a 1762 map of the Duke of Bedford's Houghton Regis estate.		
Project type	Trial trench evaluation		
Site status	None		
Previous work	None		
Current land use	Pasture		
Development type	Mixed use		
Future work	Yes		
Monument type/period	Ditches (post-medieval / undated)		
Significant finds	None		
PROJECT LOCATION			
County	Bedfordshire		
Site address	Thorn Farm, Thorn Road, Houghton Regis		
Postcode	N/A		
OS coordinates	TL 0011 2464		
Area (sq m/ha)	1.1ha		
Height aOD	100m		
PROJECT CREATORS			
Organisation	MOLA Northampton		
Project Brief originator	Martin Oake, Central Bedfordshire Council		
Project Design originator	MOLA Northampton		
Project Manager	Jim Brown (MOLA)		
Project Supervisor	Gemma Hewitt (MOLA)		
Sponsor or funding body	Bellway Homes		
PROJECT DATE			
Start date (dd-mm-yy)	26-11-2018		
End date (dd-mm-yy)	30-11-2018		
ARCHIVES		Location (Accession no.)	Content
Physical	Luton Collection LTNMG 2018/134		None
Digital			Site file, plan and section drawings, maps
Paper			GPS data, PDF report, digital photographs
BIBLIOGRAPHY			
Title	Journal/monograph or unpublished MOLA report		
Serial title & volume	Archaeological trial trench evaluation at Thorn Road, Houghton Regis, Central Bedfordshire, November 2018		
Author(s)	MOLA Northampton report 18/166		
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Archaeological trial trench evaluation at Thorn Road, Houghton Regis Central Bedfordshire November 2018

Abstract

MOLA (Museum of London Archaeology) was commissioned to carry out an archaeological trial trench evaluation on land fronting Thorn Road, Houghton Regis, Bedfordshire. Five trenches augmented an earlier phase of evaluation. Ditches divided the area, representing earlier land partitions. Whilst none of these contained any datable finds the position of one corresponded with a minor watercourse depicted on a 1762 map of the Duke of Bedford's Houghton Regis estate.

1 INTRODUCTION

MOLA (Museum of London Archaeology) was commissioned by Bellway Homes to carry out an archaeological trial trench evaluation on the Bidwell West development site to the north of Houghton Regis, Bedfordshire (NGR TL 0011 2464; Fig 1). The work was required in accordance with *The National Planning Policy Framework* (NPPF; MHCLG 2012), as part of an evaluation of the archaeological impacts of a large scale mixed use development scheme (Planning Application CB/15/00297/OUT). The majority of the development site was subject to evaluation in 2014 (CA 2014b) and the present work was restricted to c1.1ha of land in Parcel 4 that was not accessible at that time.

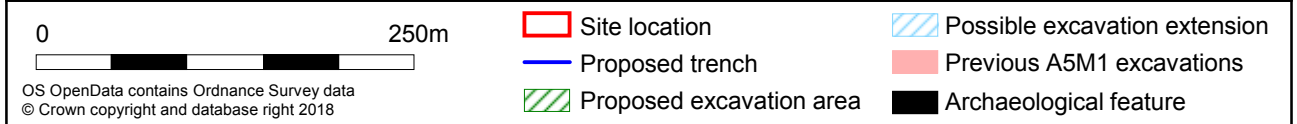
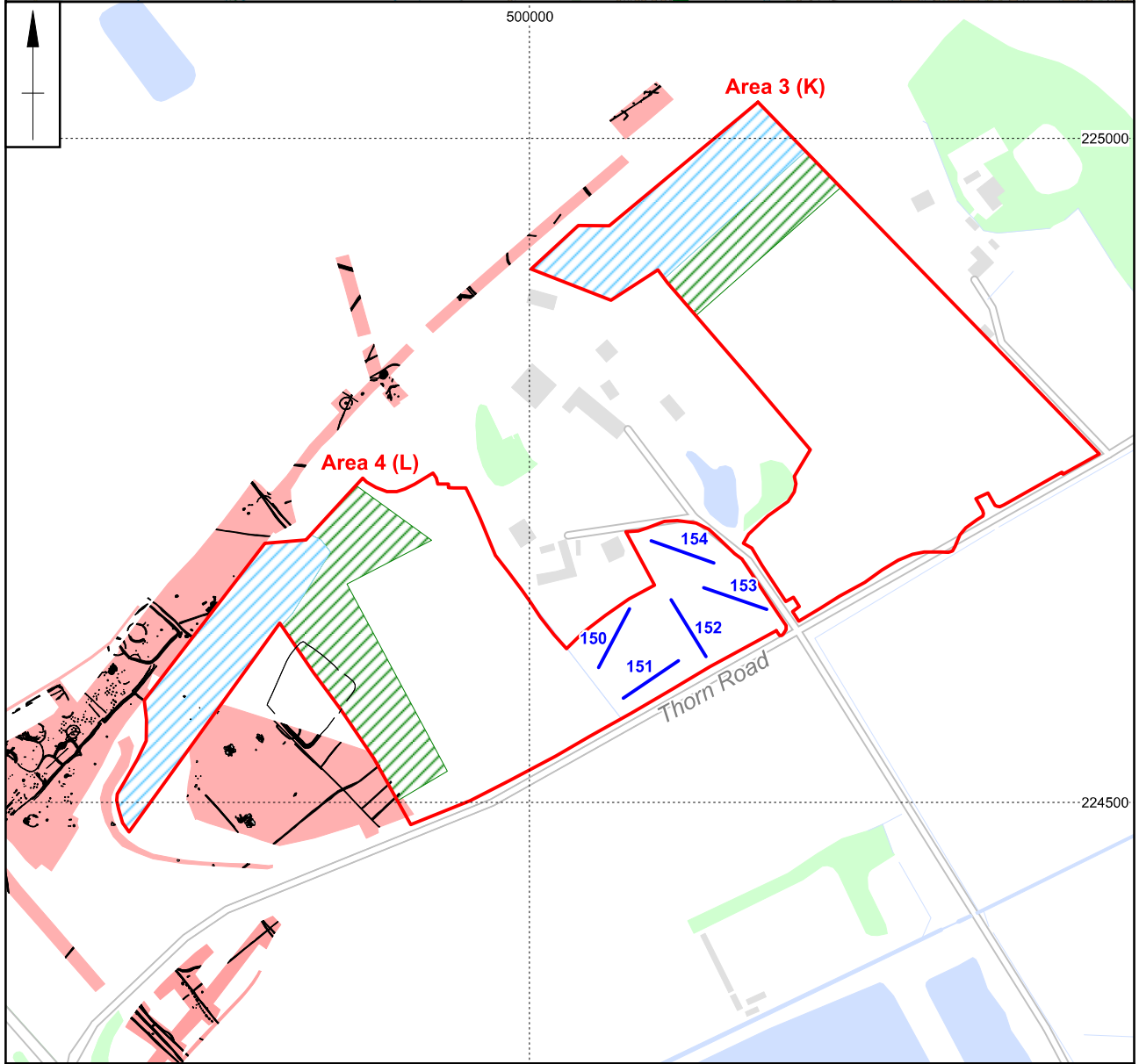
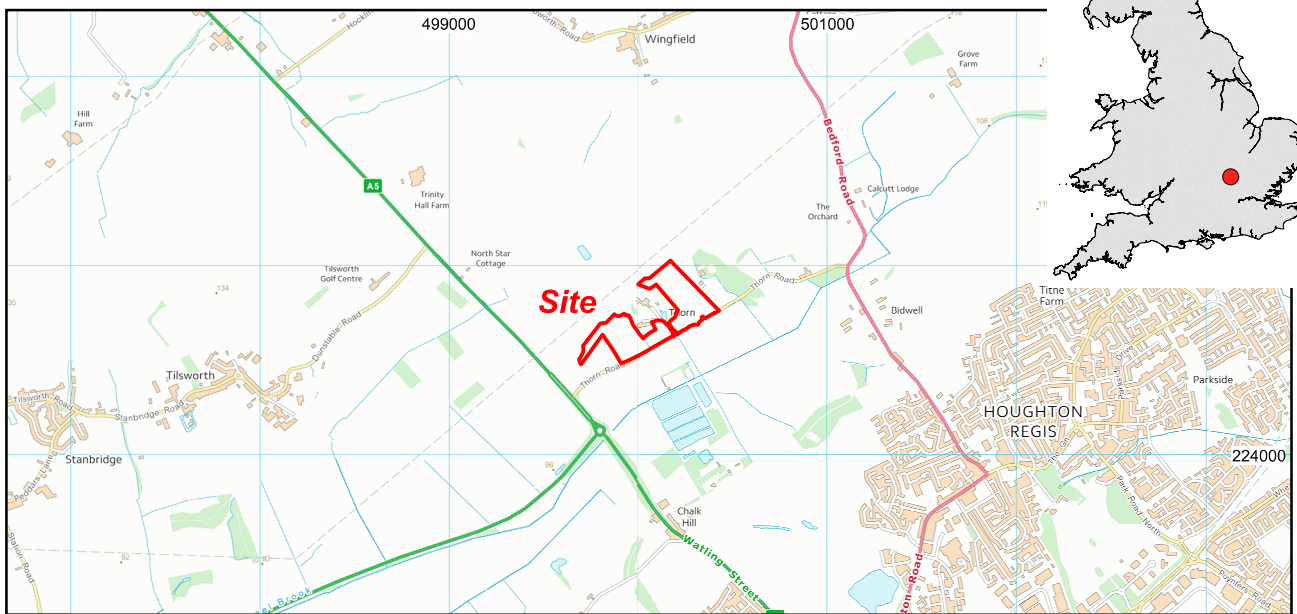
The archaeological work was designed and managed in accordance with the Historic England guidance document *Management of Research Projects in the Historic Environment* (HE 2015) and its scope was outlined in a Written Scheme of Investigation (WSI) (MOLA 2018). The WSI was prepared by MOLA Northampton and approved by the Central Bedfordshire Council Archaeology Team. The fieldwork took place in November 2018. The project archive is identified by site code BW2018 and will be deposited with Luton Museum under accession number LTNMG 2018/134.

2 BACKGROUND

2.1 Location, topography and geology

Parcel 4 of the Bidwell West development is located c1.3km west-north-west of Bidwell and immediately west of Thorn Farm. It is bounded to the south by Thorn Road and to the north by the recently constructed A5–M1 link road, these two roads converging to a junction with the A5 at the western tip of the development area. The trial trenches were excavated in a 1.1ha field to the south of the farm, immediately west of its drive (Fig 1).

The evaluation area is c100m above Ordnance Datum on a very gentle south-facing slope. It lies within the valley of the Ouzel Brook, a broad and shallow stream valley which drains westwards along the foot of the Chiltern scarp. The geology of the evaluation area is West Melbury Marly Chalk, with no recorded superficial drift (BGS 2018). The soil is described as freely draining, loamy and lime-rich (Landis 2018).



Scale 1:5000 Site location and proposed works Fig 1

2.2 Historical and archaeological background

The archaeological and historical background of the Bidwell West has been presented in detail in the Heritage Desk-Based Assessment (CA 2014a). The following summary draws on that document and refers to subsequent archaeological works undertaken in connection with the A5–M1 Link Road (Brown 2016, Brown forthcoming) and other local developments.

Prehistoric

Neolithic pits (HER687) were discovered during quarrying at Puddlehill, c1km south of the present evaluation area, 1951–65. Another pit, dating from the early Neolithic and containing pottery, flint flakes, burnt hazelnut shells and charcoal, was found near the edge of the quarry (CA 2014b).

A possible Bronze Age pit (HER18292) was encountered during archaeological investigations along the route of the A5–M1 Link Road (NA 2008a-b) and a late Bronze Age/early Iron Age feature was identified at the base of the chalk scarp during the evaluation in 2014 (CA 2014b). The main Link Road excavations recorded a large, flat-bottomed middle Bronze Age pit or well to the north of Thorn Farm, on Site Q, and a probable late Bronze Age pit closer to the farm, within the footprint of an overbridge in Site G, as well as a Bronze Age pit alignment south of Thorn Road near its junction with the A5 (Brown forthcoming).

Recent archaeological excavations at Thorn Turn have produced evidence of late Bronze Age/early Iron Age field systems and trackways with evidence of small scale occupation interspersed within the boundary features (Oake *pers comm*).

Iron Age and Roman

A middle Iron Age settlement (Site G) was identified during the A5-M1 Link Road excavations immediately to the north of Parcels 3 and 4 (Brown 2016). Its remains comprised boundaries, enclosures, roundhouse structures and associated features. Outlying field systems, boundaries and a rectilinear enclosure associated with this settlement were recorded to the west of Parcel 4 during the same excavation programme (Sites D and M). One of the boundaries replaced an early to middle Iron Age pit alignment 100m to the south of the western edge of Parcel 4.

Roman enclosures were encountered at Site Q on the A5–M1 Link Road, to the north of Parcel 3 (Brown 2016). Another Roman site has been discovered in a small field to the east of Thorn Spring (CA 2014b); pottery from this dates from the late 2nd to 4th centuries. One other site, which also featured the remains of Roman activity, was encountered c600m to the north-east, near Thorn (HER16541; CA 2014b).

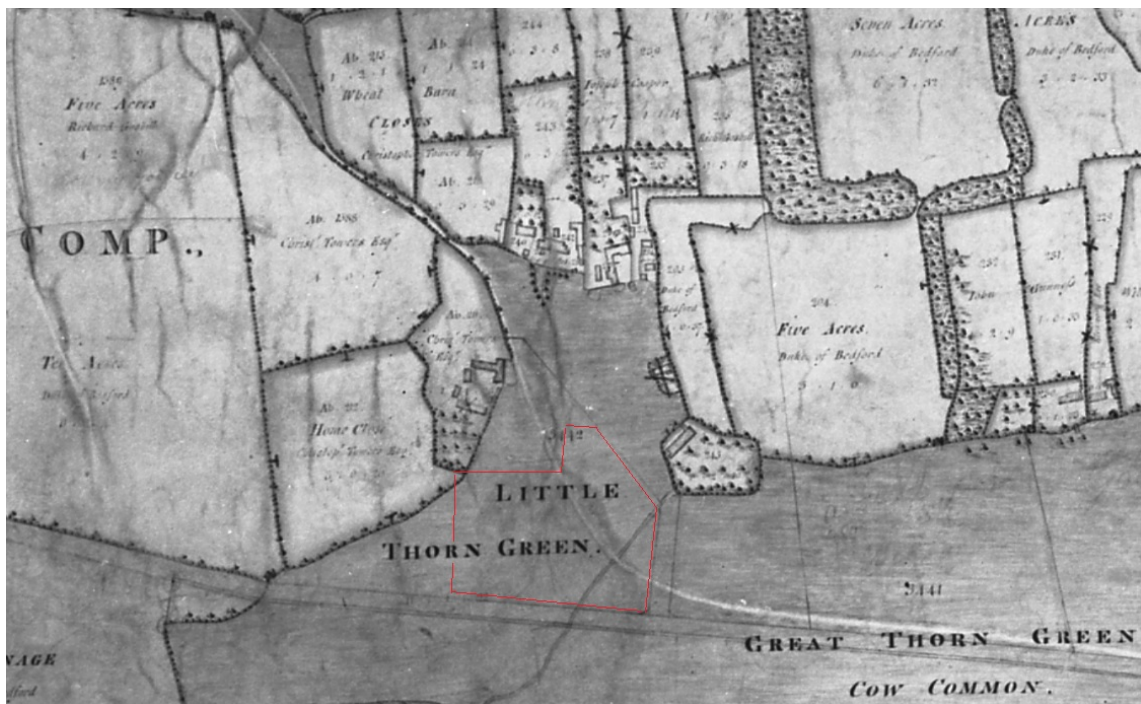
Cremation burials and inhumations of Iron Age to Roman date were excavated on Site Q. The cremations dated from the early 1st century AD and were probably late Iron Age. One of the inhumations was middle to late Iron Age and the other probably early Roman.

Medieval and post-medieval

The former medieval hamlet of Thorn (HER16888) was located in the vicinity of Thorn Farm, between Parcels 3 and 4 and the Scheduled remains of a moated site, recorded as lying within 'ancient' woodland, are located at Thorn Spring (HER140; SM1013519), c230m to the north-east of the hamlet. A possible second moated enclosure, surviving as two linear ponds, lies to the south of Thorn Road, at Bury Spinney (HER147).

Approximately 160m north-west of this, linear and irregular earthworks of probable medieval date have been recorded (HER12269), whilst a possible track defined by parallel ditches is recorded immediately to the south (HER1485).

Although much of the land around Thorn was enclosed at an early date the land to the south, including the site of the present evaluation, was unenclosed common land. A map of the Duke of Bedford's Houghton Regis estate in 1762 (Bedfordshire Archive Service ref. B553) shows the enclosed fields and common land, with the latter being divided into Little and Great Thorn Green (Fig 2). A minor watercourse, flowing across the south-eastern part of the evaluation area, formed the boundary between the two portions of the common and was crossed by a track which led west across the common and turned north-west past Thorn. A number of straight lines sketched onto the original map probably relate to the new road and boundaries established when the green was enclosed in the early 19th century.



Duke of Bedford's estate map, 1762 (Bedfordshire Archive Service ref. B553); extract with indicative extent of evaluation area Fig 2

In the 18th century, Thorn was the site of a Baptist meeting house with an adjacent burial ground (HER 2433). This was located in proximity to the present Thorn Farm, between Parcels 3 and 4. The meeting house was demolished in c1801 but the burial ground survives.

3 OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

3.1 Objectives

The objective of this evaluation was to determine the presence or absence of archaeological remains and to test and confirm the results of a preceding geophysical survey (CA 2014b). More specific aims were to establish:

- the location, extent, date, character, condition, significance, and quality of any remains present;
- the relationship of any remains found to the surrounding contemporary landscapes and;
- the potential for palaeo-environmental remains to determine local environmental conditions.

The results of this evaluation have limited archaeological significance and do not, in themselves, merit detailed assessment in relation to the local and regional research agendas (Glazebrook 1997; Brown and Glazebrook 2000; Medlycott 2011; Oake *et al* 2007). However, archaeological mitigation works are ongoing elsewhere in Parcel 4 and the adjacent Parcel 3, and the results of this evaluation might be more profitably considered as part of the overall post-excavation analysis of the site.

3.2 Methodology

Five trenches were excavated, each 2.8m wide. These were numbered as Trenches 150 to 154, continuing the sequence of trench numbers used in the previous phase of evaluation (CA 2014b). Trenches 150 - 152 were 50m long and were located as envisioned in the WSI (MOLA 2018). However Trench 153 was shortened to 40m, and Trench 154 was relocated and shortened to 42.5m, in order to avoid overhead cables (Fig 1). All trench locations were recorded relative to the Ordnance Survey National Grid and Datum, using a Leica Viva GPS with SMARTNET real-time corrections operating to a 3D tolerance of $\pm 0.05\text{m}$.

The trenches were excavated by a 35 ton 360° tracked mechanical excavator, fitted with a toothless ditching bucket, under constant archaeological supervision. The topsoil and subsoil were removed sequentially and stored in separate stockpiles adjacent to each trench. Following the completion of the work the trenches were backfilled with the excavated material and lightly compacted.

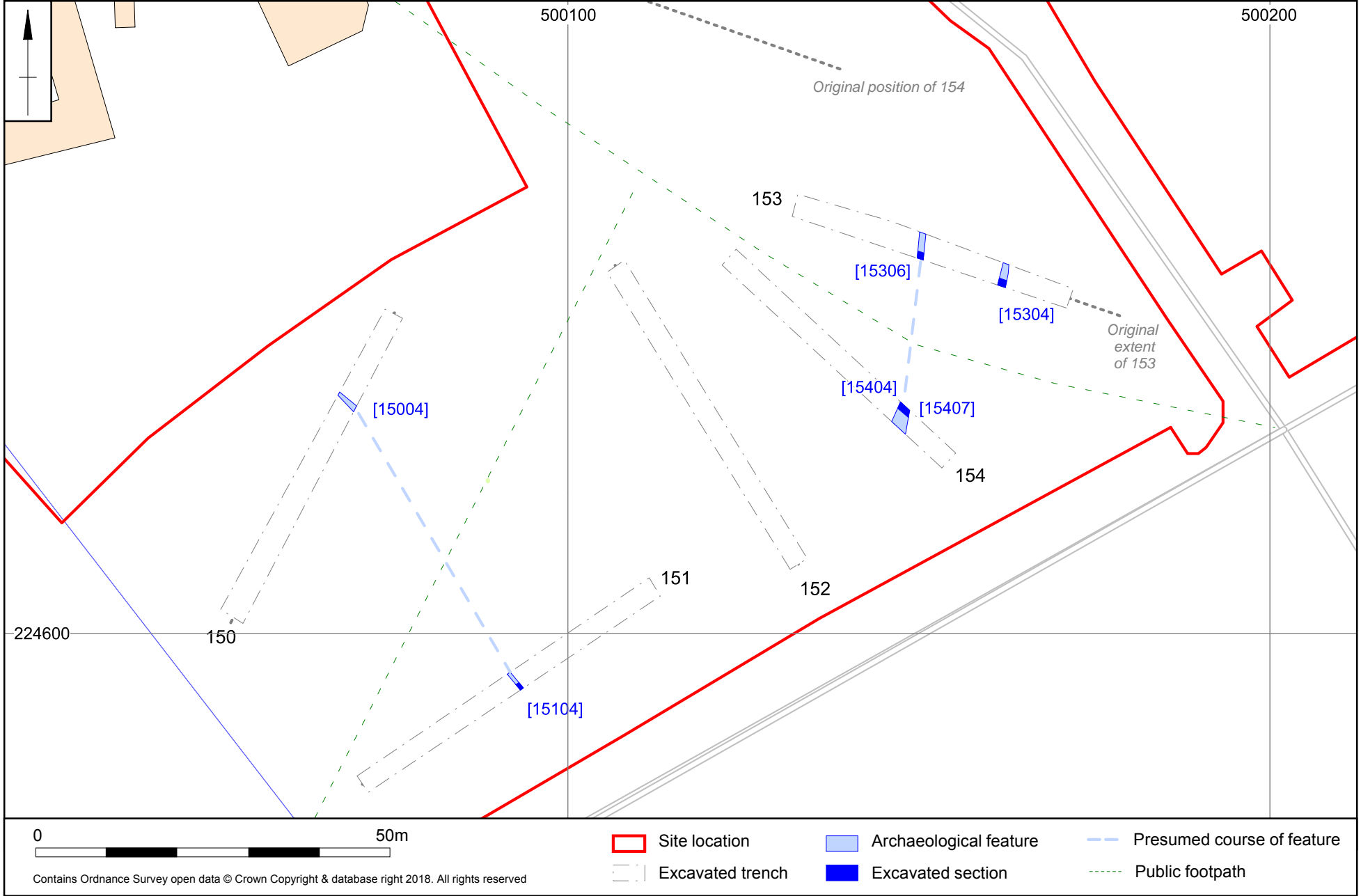
Cleaning of exposed surfaces, hand excavation and recording was carried out in accordance with the methodology set out in the Written Scheme of Investigation (MOLA 2018), following standard fieldwork procedures set out in the *Archaeological Fieldwork Manual* (MOLA 2014) and in accordance with the Chartered Institute for Archaeologists' *Standard and Guidance: Archaeological Field Evaluation* (CIfA 2014a) and *Code of Conduct* (2014b). Archaeological features were plotted on trench plans at a scale of 1:50 and details of each context were recorded on *pro-forma* sheets. High resolution digital photographs were taken to record overall views of each trench together with representative views of each trench section and detailed views of individual features. The level of each trench and section, relative to Ordnance Datum, was recorded by a Leica Viva GPS.

The spoil heaps and archaeological features were scanned with a metal detector to check for metallic finds. However, no archaeological finds of any type were retrieved. None of the excavated features required environmental sampling.

Scale 1:750 (A4)

Trenches and archaeological features

Fig 3



0 50m

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4 THE EXCAVATED EVIDENCE

4.1 General stratigraphy

The natural substrate exposed in the trenches was soft chalky, silty clay, varying in colour from white to grey or yellow white. Occasional flint nodules, patches of chalky rubble and patches of sandy clay were observed. This natural was directly overlain by a friable mid grey brown silty clay topsoil, averaging around 0.3m thick but frequently deeper.

4.2 Archaeological features

The trenches exposed three ditches and a section which comprised with either the cut and recut of a single ditch or the intersection of two separate ditches (Fig 3). No dating evidence was recovered from any of these features.

Ditches in Trenches 150 and 151 were similar in character and fill and each had north-westerly alignments, suggesting they were parts of a single feature. Ditch [15104] was 0.53m wide and 0.18m deep, with steep, straight sides sloping to an uneven and root disturbed base (Figs 4 and 7, S3). The fill was a mid to dark grey silty clay with occasional, randomly distributed, stone inclusions and charcoal flecks and was interpreted by the excavator as perhaps resulting from deliberate backfilling rather than natural silting. Ditch [15004] was not excavated, but was c0.7m wide in plan and had a mid to dark grey silty clay fill with occasional stones.



Section of ditch [15104], looking south Fig 4

Two ditches in Trenches 153 and 154 were probably also parts of one feature, both being broad, shallow features with similar fill and orientation. Ditch [15304] was 1.0m wide and 0.18m deep with very shallow sides grading to a flattish convex base (Fig 7, S1). Its fill was a slightly compact mid brown-grey silty clay with occasional small rounded stones.

Ditch [15407] was 2.1m wide and 0.15m deep with a correspondingly shallow profile (Figs 5 and 7, S4). It was filled with mid brown-grey silty clay with moderate stone inclusions. This was cut through by a narrower and deeper ditch, [15404] which was 0.78m wide by 0.24m deep. Its main fill, (15403), was a medium to dark brown-grey silty clay with occasional small sub-angular stones. This overlay a lobe of compact yellowy white chalky clay (15406) which was probably a piece of disturbed natural sediment re-deposited against the southern side of the ditch.



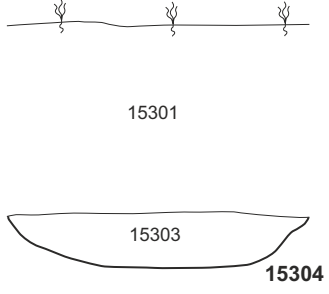
Section of ditches [15404] and [15407], looking north-east Fig 5

Ditch [15306] was 0.75m wide by 0.25m deep with shallow, flaring sides at the top giving way to a steep-sided V-shaped cut with a narrow base (Figs 6–7, S2). It was filled by slightly compact light brownish grey silty clay with occasional small stones and frequent chalk inclusions. The density of chalk inclusions reflected the presence of a chalky layer at the top of the natural substrate through which the ditch had been cut.

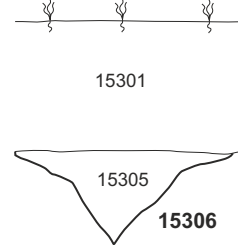


Section of ditch [15306], looking south-west Fig 6

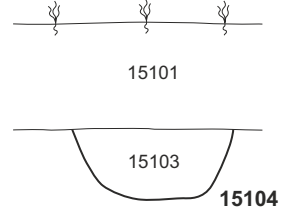
Section 1
SE NW



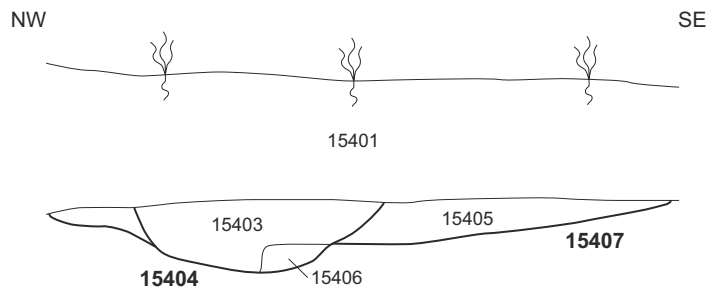
Section 2
SE NW



Section 3
E W



Section 4



Scale 1:25

Archaeological sections 1-4 Fig 7

5 DISCUSSION

The evaluation identified a small number of relatively shallow ditches, none of which contained artefactual dating. However, the broad and shallow ditch [15304]/[15407], which was encountered in Trenches 153 and 154, closely matches the line of a minor watercourse shown on a 1762 map of the Duke of Bedford's Houghton Regis estate. This feature formed the boundary between Little Thorn Green and Great Thorn Green (Fig 2).

The 1762 map suggests that a track crossed the watercourse somewhere in the east of the evaluation area, although it is unclear whether this would have been by a ford or a simple bridge. No evidence for a track or crossing point was found in any of the trenches.

The absence of ridge and furrow from any of the trenches is notable and suggests that the evaluation area never formed part of a medieval open field under arable cultivation. This corresponds well with the mapped presence of common ground in this area.

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MOLA, December 2018

APPENDIX 1: TABLE OF CONTEXTS

Trench No	Length, width & alignment			
150	50m x 2.80m SW - NE			
Context	Context type Feature & type	Description	Dimensions	Artefacts/ Samples
15001	Topsoil	Friable med grey-brown silty clay with <5% small stones	-	-
15002	Natural	Light grey-white chalky-clay <5% flint nodules	0.40m average depth	-
15003	Fill of ditch [15004]	Med-dark grey silty-clay with occasional gravels and small stones	-	-
15004	Cut of ditch	N-S linear feature, same as ditch [15104]. Old field boundary seen on mapping, only dug in trench 151	-	-

Trench No	Length, width & alignment			
151	50m x 2.80m WSW-ENE			
Context	Context type Feature & type	Description	Dimensions	Artefacts/ Samples
15101	Topsoil	Friable med grey-brown silty clay	-	-
15102	Natural	Light yellow-white chalky clay with bands of soft yellow sand	0.30m average depth	-
15103	Fill of ditch [15104]	Medium-dark grey silty clay with occasional stone inclusion distributed randomly. Possibly been backfilled naturally, charcoal flecks are found throughout	0.53m wide 0.35m deep	-
15104	Cut of ditch	Linear N-S feature with straight sides sloping at between 60 and 70 degrees. Flat though uneven base. Possible field boundary, some root intrusion.	0.53m wide 0.35m deep	-

Trench No	Length, width & alignment			
152	50m x 2.80m NNW-SSE			
Context	Context type Feature & type	Description	Dimensions	Artefacts/ Samples
15201	Topsoil	Friable med grey-brown silty clay with <1% small stone inclusions	-	-
15202	Natural	Light yellow-white chalky clay with <5% flint nodules. Natural bands of light grey-brown clay present at north-end of trench. Can also be seen in trenches 153 and 134.	0.29m average depth	-

Trench No	Length, width & alignment			
153	40m x 2.80m WNW-ESE			
Context	Context type Feature & type	Description	Dimensions	Artefacts/ Samples
15301	Topsoil	Friable medium brown-grey silty clay	-	-
15302	Natural	Light grey clay with <1% small flint nodules, very soft.	0.31m average depth	-
15303	Fill of ditch [15304]	Med brown-grey, mildly compact silty clay. Occasional small rounded stone inclusion	1m wide 0.18m deep	-
15304	Cut of ditch	Linear, SW-NE ditch with gradual sloping sides with gradual break to a concave base	1m wide 0.18m deep	-
15305	Fill of ditch [15306]	Light brown-grey, mildly compact silty clay. Occasional small sub-angular stone and frequent chalk inclusion	0.75m wide 0.25m deep	-
15306	Cut of ditch	Linear, SW-NE ditch with steep sides and sharp break at base to form a 'V' shaped cut. Also present in trench 154	0.75m wide 0.25m deep	-

Trench No	Length, width & alignment			
154	42.5m x 2.80m NW-SE			
Context	Context type Feature & type	Description	Dimensions	Artefacts/ Samples
15401	Topsoil	Friable med grey-brown silty clay		-
15402	Natural	Soft light grey-white chalky clay with large patches of flint nodules.	0.32m average depth	-
15403	Fill of ditch [15404]	Med-dark brown-grey silty clay with occasional small sub-angular stone inclusion	1m wide	-
15404	Cut of ditch	Linear E-W ditch with wide 'U' shaped cut with levelled base. Same ditch as [15306]	-	-
15405	Upper fill of ditch [15407]	Med grey-brown silty clay with <5% mixed stone	-	-
15406	Lower fill of ditch [15407]	Compact degraded natural yellow-white chalky clay. Result of water logging. Cut by [15405]		
15407	Cut of ditch	E-W 'U' shaped ditch cut with broad flat base	-	-



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