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WOODLANDS FARM, SHEPTON MALLET,
SOMERSET

An Archaeological Assessment

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1.0 Introduction

An archaeological assessment of land at Woodlands Farm, Shepton Mallet, was commissioned by the owners, Showerings Limited, from Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit in the autumn of 1990. Since at that time almost the whole property was under pasture and no recorded archaeological sites or finds were known, it was decided that the assessment should take the form of an extensive geophysical survey. Accordingly, this was undertaken in association with Geophysical Surveys (Bradford) at the end of January 1991. Their report on the results and the technical specifications for the survey accompany this report.

2.0 The Site

Woodlands Farm lies just to the east of Shepton Mallet and north of Charlton, astride a lane, formerly a Roman road - the Fosse Way (Fig. 1). The fields of permanent or sown pasture occupy south-west facing slopes, mainly above 500ft. AOD, on the southern flanks of the Mendip Hills. The underlying Carboniferous limestone supports a relatively thin topsoil, although the soluble limestones may be extensively fissured and well weathered, and are masked by insoluble residual clay deposits in places.

The fields themselves appear to be of relatively recent origin, probably created at the time of 18th-century enclosure, although subject to some modifications since then. This is most apparent in the fields to the south east, which undergo periodic ploughing and

have been amalgamated into larger units. Much of the remaining area is permanent pasture, where there is no evidence of ploughing in the recent past. A rapid ground surface survey of the property did not reveal clear evidence of any earlier cultivation and land use, or of former habitation sites or other features. The most significant relict landscape feature is the holloway bisecting the fields from north to south, created by the Fosse Way. This has survived as a boundary for almost 2,000 years, its present form resulting from the passage of a considerable pedestrian and wheeled traffic wearing down the original bedrock surface. A soil lynchet has accumulated immediately upslope of its eastern hedged boundary.

3.0 The Archaeological Evaluation

A series of archaeological discoveries and surveys in 1990, on land adjoining the Fosse Way just to the south of Charlton, were an immediate impetus for the present assessment. Substantial remains of an extensive Romano-British roadside settlement have been discovered and partly explored here over the past year (Buteux 1990 & Leach 1991). Their full extent has still to be determined, although Roman remains certainly continue north from the main focus on Fosse Lane as far as the River Sheppey at Charlton. In the context of development proposals for the land adjoining the Fosse Way at Woodlands Farm, it was considered expedient to obtain some assessment of its archaeological potential.

An archaeological evaluation is frequently undertaken as a phased process of investigation, commencing with a documentary search and surface survey, prior to any below-ground intervention. In this instance documentary research has involved no more than the examination of earlier map evidence, the Somerset County Sites and Monuments Record, and air photographic coverage, none of which were very informative as to earlier land use or the potential for surviving archaeological remains. The County S.M.R. records only one indistinctly defined site from an air photograph, of suspected post-medieval building remains in the south-east corner of the land, close

to Bodden Lane (SMR no.24947, Shepton Mallet). In the virtual absence of such clues to the presence of archaeological remains, from this research or from surface examination of the site, a programme of geophysical prospection was determined upon as the most effective survey method to cover such an extensive area of pasture, concerning which so little prior knowledge existed. It should be noted that the exercise of one other technique of surface examination, fieldwalking of ploughed land, was not possible at the time of the survey.

The programme of geophysical prospection was devised to cover a substantial sample of the available area, sufficient to suggest any areas where further archaeological investigation might be beneficial (Fig. 2). The detailed results of these surveys, their specifications, and immediate interpretation, are presented in the accompanying report (Geophysical Surveys Report 91/07). This report is provided as a commentary on those results, indicating their broader context and possible interpretation, and outlining their implications.

4.0 Archaeological Interpretation

At first sight the geophysical prospection has not revealed many phenomena which may confidently be ascribed to the existence of extensive archaeological remains. Areas A, C, F and G have been suggested in the report as areas where some such evidence may be present, to which should be added Area L and possibly B. Before discussing further the specific potential of these areas and results, it is necessary to consider briefly the results of earlier geophysical surveys in the vicinity of Charlton and the Fosse Way, and of their relationship to, and accurate reflection of, proven archaeological remains here.

The most extensively excavated and understood area of archaeological remains in the locality are on the site of Showerings' new warehouse at Fosse Lane. These comprise the remains of stone buildings, ditched and walled boundaries, streets, industrial features, human

burials, and the remains of more ephemeral structures, all associated with extensive spreads of rubbish and other deposits derived from human activity and occupation, almost exclusively of Roman date. No geophysical survey was undertaken here prior to excavation but several surveys have been commissioned since on sites immediately adjacent to the warehouse development. Several points arise from this:

- i) Archaeological remains of considerable extent and complexity, though often of no great vertical depth, have been demonstrated to survive over a wide area to the south of Charlton, focussing upon Fosse Lane.
- ii) Geophysical prospection techniques, magnetometry survey in particular, reflect some of these remains; a fact subsequently proven by archaeological trial trenching on survey areas.
- iii) For reasons not yet fully understood, the limestone bedrock and subsoils around Shepton Mallet provide a good background for magnetometer survey results in particular.
- iv) Archaeological trial trenching may confirm the suspected presence of geophysical anomalies of human origin and permit their interpretation, but almost invariably demonstrates a far more intensive and extensive degree of archaeological survival and complexity.

The 12 areas subjected to geophysical survey (A-K, Fig. 2) were selected with the intention of gaining information from large samples of the different land use and topographic zones apparent within the land unit as a whole. Thus, areas A, B, C, D and E covered the larger field units to the south east, on relatively level ground and subject to periodic ploughing. Areas F, G and H examined the fields of permanent pasture to the north, with some bias towards the Fosse Way lane bounding this area to the west. The south-west sloping fields of permanent pasture west of the lane were covered by areas I, J, K and L. It is convenient to review the archaeological potential of Woodlands Farm as a whole, on the basis of the geophysical survey results, with reference to these three zones.

4.1 Areas A-E

In terms of its potential for human exploitation, the south-eastern zone is the most favoured, and could perhaps be expected to yield some evidence for earlier human occupation. It is therefore regrettable that there was no opportunity for a fieldwalking survey on any of this land, which might have revealed concentrations of human artefact remains. However, an opportunity was afforded by the laying of a gas main, to examine an excavated transect across this area. Its approximate course is indicated on Figure 2, and involved the removal of topsoil along a strip of land up to 3m wide. Conditions for observation were not ideal, and a detailed examination was not possible; no positive identification of archaeological features or remains was made across this zone.

The geophysical survey results hardly contradict this negative impression, although attention is drawn to one or two locations. Pit-like anomalies in Area A may be of natural origin but could equally be man-made (Figs. A1 and A2, Survey Report). The apparent absence of linear anomalies, which have usually signified man-made features (ditches or walls) on other surveyed sites in the Charlton area, may weaken the interpretation of Area A anomalies as man-made, but this requires verification.

Area B, on the fringe of this area, displays a rather curious pattern of geophysical anomalies, most of which are probably natural in origin. In view of the proximity of this area to the Fosse Way, however, it might be desirable to test these results further. The eastern boundary of Area B coincides with a marked break of slope, and possibly a spread mound or platform above the slope, at what may have been the corner of a former field. The only reflection of this is a curving band of ferrous disturbance in the eastern half of the survey plot (Figure B1, Survey Report), but some further examination of the surface feature in this area would be justified.

Area C contains one of the clearest indications of a linear boundary feature seen anywhere within the survey area (Figure C1, Survey Report). While this is likely to coincide with a field boundary of the relatively recent past, it does resemble closely features subsequently identified as Roman or prehistoric ditches on other archaeological sites examined recently in the locality. Some verification of its character and possible date could thus be justified.

Areas D and E are effectively devoid of identifiable archaeological features, although faint traces of linear features, notably in area D, are possible reflections of earlier field boundaries (Figs D.1 and E.1, Survey Report). There was no reflection of any structural remains in Area E which might equate with those suggested by the SMR record (3.0, above).

4.2 Areas F-H

The north-eastern areas of permanent pasture, which include an orchard, were covered by three sample plots; the orchard could not be conveniently surveyed. Geophysical anomalies of archaeological significance are sparse or absent in the three sample areas, and probably throughout this zone. Only in area F, closest to the Fosse Way, may the indications be worthy of some additional verification (Figs. F.1, G.1 and H.1, Survey Report).

4.3. Areas I, J, K and L

Survey indications of archaeological features from sample areas in the zone of permanent pasture fields west of the Fosse Way, are, for the most part, very sparse. In Areas I and J recent ferrous anomalies distort the results somewhat, while in K the evidence for regular linear features, possibly earlier land boundaries - is, at best, indistinct (Figs. I.1, J.1 and K.1, Survey Report). On the basis of these results there appears to be little justification for any further investigation here.

Of potentially more interest is Area L, both by virtue of the geophysical anomalies and its position adjacent to the Fosse Way, overlooking the steeper slope of the valley above the River Sheppey to the north. Although much smaller in extent, the survey does suggest the possibility of man-made features here, perhaps even structural remains (Fig. L.1, Survey Report), and some verification of the significance of these results would be desirable.

5.0 Conclusions

At this stage of survey, any interpretation of the results or conclusions can only be tentative. On the one hand it is known that archaeological anomalies are susceptible to detection by geophysical survey in this area of Shepton Mallet, although by no means always to their full extent or complexity; on the other hand most of the anomalies detected at Woodlands Farm are far less positive than seen elsewhere (e.g. Leach 1990a, Leach 1991a and Survey Report 90/52) and appear unlikely to represent much of great archaeological significance.

Several sites of potential interest have, however, been pinpointed in the Survey Report 91/7 (Geophysical Survey) and in 4.1-4.3, above, and it is perhaps legitimate to offer some tentative suggestions in the light of the archaeological knowledge accumulated in the wider locality.

The Roman road - the Fosse Way - is at present the only known archaeological monument on the Woodlands Farm estate. Its significance south of Charlton has been amply proven as a focus for the Roman 'small town' there. The River Sheppey would form a convenient northern boundary to that settlement, and from the geophysical survey results on the Woodland Farm side, this appears to be so. Few of the characteristic patterns of archaeologically-generated anomalies seen and verified on sites alongside Fosse Lane

are detectable in these survey results. The Fosse Way acted as a focus for the Roman settlement, whose layout was to some extent determined by the presence of the road. Whether or not any outlying premises existed north of the river, Roman land boundaries may still survive which can be related to the road. Several of the survey areas revealed traces of potential field or other enclosure boundaries, e.g. Areas C, D or K. The most likely candidate for the survival of any early settlement remains was the field containing Area L, both by virtue of geophysical results and from its location. Evidence of either Romano-British or Medieval date could well survive here. An evaluation by BUFAU in 1987 at Bewery Lane, just south of the river, verified a medieval earthwork and occupation there and encountered a single Roman burial (Ellis 1987).

Evidence of prehistoric settlement remains in the surrounding region is relatively plentiful, although frequently more difficult to detect. Some remains of Iron Age settlement have now been detected beneath or adjacent to the Roman town site, and flint implements of Neolithic or Early Bronze Age date also occur widely there. Free-draining limestone soils were favoured settlement locations, particularly in earlier prehistoric times, and the south-west facing slopes of the Woodlands Farm land would have been attractive. At least two areas contain features with some archaeological potential as elements of pre-Roman settlement sites. Large pits, primarily for the storage of grain, are a common feature on Iron Age settlement sites in southern Britain. One such, near Christon at the western end of the Mendip Hills, was discovered and excavated prior to the construction of the M5 motorway, and included a series of large rock-cut pits and a cemetery within the settlement area (Morris 1988). The anomalies detected in Area A could equate with remains of this type, as possibly may the evidence from Area F.

Finally, the surface feature bounding the south-east corner of Area B should be considered as of potential interest, despite the absence of clear geophysical anomaly patterns here. Several Bronze Age burial mounds recorded in the vicinity of Shepton Mallet occupy sites such as

this, on the edge of steep slopes overlooking a valley. In this particular instance the low knoll or platform, partly occupied by a mature ash tree, may be no more than the spread corner of two or more field wall intersections. Nevertheless, earlier field monuments such as round barrows are sometimes utilised within later land boundaries, and this possibility should be considered here.

6.0 Implications and Recommendations

The Woodlands Farm Geophysical Survey results suggest a relatively low level of potential archaeological anomalies over the area as a whole. On closer inspection, several localities do however contain features which are difficult to interpret and might require a further level of assessment. In addition to these, the opportunity should be taken to examine the margins of the Fosse Way - the original road itself will almost certainly have been worn away and is not in any case available for more detailed examination in this sector. To achieve these objectives the most effective technique would be limited trial trenching in selected areas to verify the identity and character of the features in question. Provision should also be made for a non-intensive fieldwalking programme to cover the arable land in the south eastern sector of the property, were any of this area to be ploughed.

Should more specific proposals for the development of the land be drawn up it may then be possible to identify positively areas where any archaeological remains survive; understand more clearly their character, period and extent; and provide more specific advice relating to strategies for their preservation or recorded removal under controlled conditions, as appropriate.

A phased approach to archaeological site evaluation has been applied most successfully on other sites at Fosse Lane (e.g. the Mendip Business Park, Leach 1990b), and elsewhere in this country. This, and the results indicated in Survey Report 91/07, would justify the following procedure (see Figure 2).

- i) Area A: up to three transect trenches (maximum 2m width) machine-excavated to remove topsoil, followed by manual cleaning, examination and recording of the sub-soil horizon, with sample excavation of any archaeological features thus encountered, to intersect several potential 'pit-type' features.
- ii) Area B: a maximum of two transect trenches, undertaken as for Area A, to examine the potential 'round barrow' feature, ferrous disturbances and the break of slope.
- iii) Area C: a maximum of two transect trenches, undertaken as for Area A, to examine the pronounced linear anomalies.
- iv) Area F: excavation of a single transect trench, undertaken as for Area A, to intersect with possible 'pit' features and an indistinct linear anomaly, and to examine the Fosse Way margin.
- v) Area K: excavation of a single transect trench, undertaken as for Area A, to examine indistinct linear anomalies and the Fosse Way margin.
- vi) Area L: excavation of a series of transect trenches, undertaken as for Area A, to assess the potential of this corner of the site overall, verify the character of particular geophysical anomalies in L, and to examine the Fosse Way margin.
- vii) Other Areas: To supplement the programme outlined in i-vi some additional transects may be desirable to sample the area between Area C and the Fosse Way, that between Areas C, D and E, and from the Fosse Way into Area I.

Suggested locations for trial trenching are indicated on Figure 2, with the proviso that some minor modifications might be required in the light of ground conditions or specific discoveries. As stated, any opportunity for a fieldwalking survey of ploughed arable fields will be subject to availability, but would provide valuable supplementary data.

This phase of assessment could be undertaken over a maximum period of three weeks on the ground with a small archaeological field team supported by a mechanical excavator for topsoil removal and backfilling. A further report on the results and their implications would then be prepared.

7.0 References

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Archaeological Investigations 1990-1

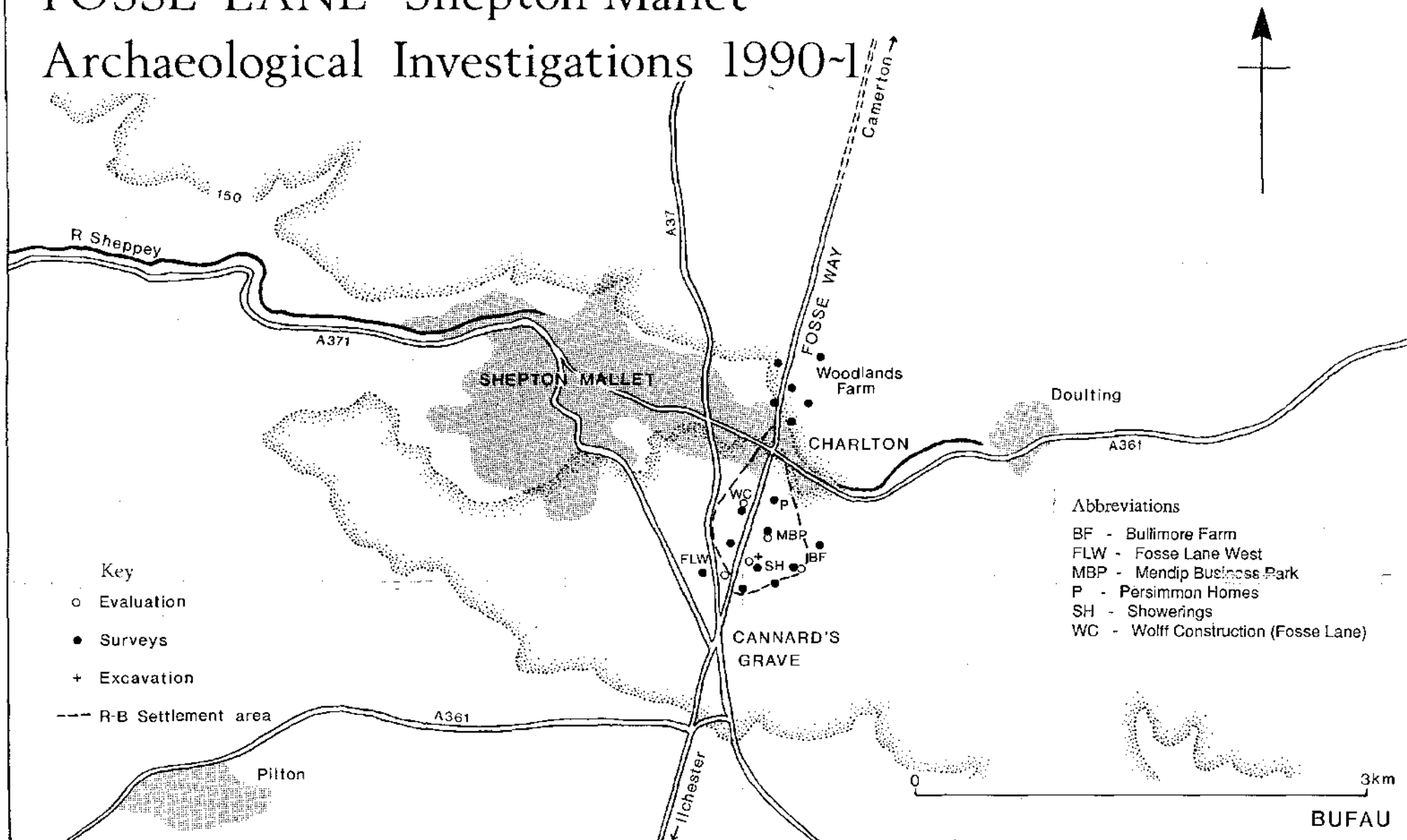
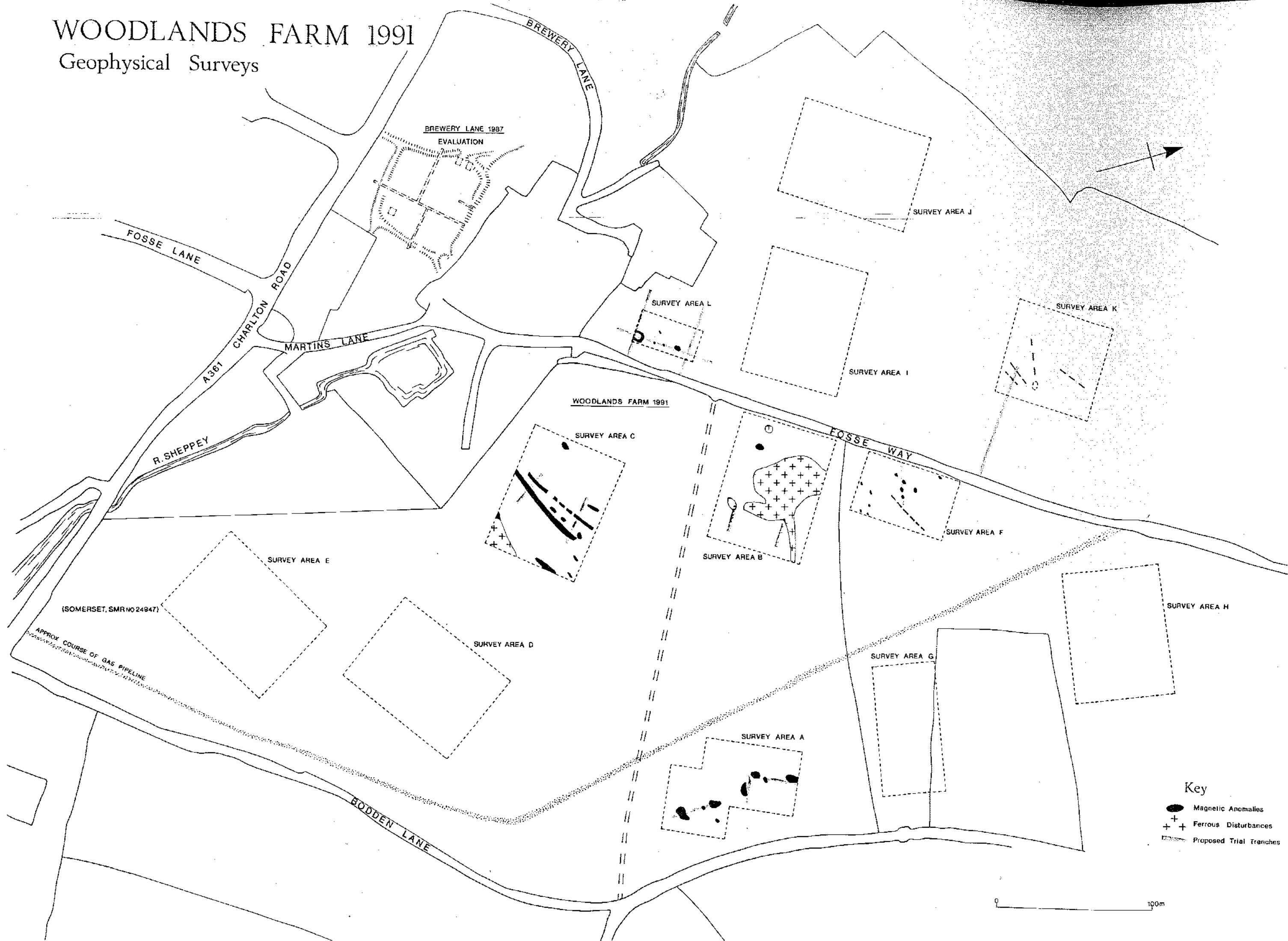


Fig. 1

WOODLANDS FARM 1991

Geophysical Surveys



Key

- Magnetic Anomalies
- + Ferrous Disturbances
- - - Proposed Trial Trenches

100m