

Project No.419
May 1996

**An Archaeological Evaluation at
Halfway House, Wroxeter, Shropshire**

by
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1. Introduction

In May 1996, the Field Archaeology Unit of the University of Birmingham was commissioned by Smith Wooley and Partners, representing Raby Estates, to carry out an archaeological evaluation within the vicinity of redundant farm buildings located equidistantly between the village of Wroxeter and Halfway House (centred on NGR SJ565075) (Fig. 1a). The commissioning authorities wish to convert the redundant buildings to non-agricultural uses. The area for evaluation was contained within the fenced yard of the existing buildings on the site. Its aims were to locate any archaeological features and deposits likely to be affected, assess their survival, quality, condition and significance, and to identify, and recommend options for the management of the archaeological resource. These objectives were in accordance with the brief supplied by Shropshire County Council (Watson 1996).

2. Desktop assessment

2.1 Aerial photographic evidence

An initial examination was made of the relevant aerial photographs held at the county Sites and Monuments Record and in Dr Arnold Baker's collection of aerial photographs in the Special Collections at the University of Birmingham. Most of the photographs within the study area refer to a small auxiliary fort which lies to the west of the farm buildings. The early photographs of this fort indicate that the part of the field nearest the buildings was cropped differently from the field over the site of the fort (St Joseph 1958, pl. XIII,1). Thus, when conditions were ideal over the fort, this usually meant that the area immediately around the buildings was not in a condition to show similar evidence. Nonetheless, comprehensive overflying by Arnold Baker did manage to isolate periods when conditions were ideal for the area immediately around the buildings. His work managed to isolate two cropmarks which are relevant to the present evaluation. Immediately to the north of the farm buildings was a possible enclosure (SA 4575) and south of the farm buildings, at one field distance, was a linear cropmark, SA 2247. This latter cropmark is shown in one of the three photographs in the county SMR covering SJ5607 (SJ5607B). This was a view taken from the north by Dr A Baker in 1967 which shows the buildings in the centre of the photograph and cropmark SA 2247 in the background. Another recently acquired and uncatalogued Baker photograph showed the same view but from the south. This is an earlier photograph which shows linear cropmark SA 2247 as a hedge-line. There are no responses in the field containing SA4575. For this cropmark, the Baker collection at Birmingham provides the best evidence. Of the 35 photographs within SJ5607, eight showed either SA 2247 or SA 4575. Tracings were made of the best of this selection; SJ5607/18 (taken in 1957) and SJ5607/35 (taken in 1976) which were relevant to SA4575 in particular (Fig. 2 a & b). These showed that the cropmark appears as an elongated sub-rectangular single-ditched feature approximately 150m long and 40m broad. There are numerous internal features, many circular or sub-circular or discontinuous lines. On Dr Baker's plot of this evidence only the 'enclosure' is plotted (Baker site

150) and the internal evidence is ignored (Baker 1992, fig. 10. 17). The 1957 photograph shows the circular features to be quite regular and the surrounding 'enclosure' is apparently adjacent to a linear feature aligned north - south on its east side. The 1976 photograph is of exceptional clarity and is near-vertical. This shows the internal features to be more irregular than on the 1957 photograph and there is no sign of the linear feature. An east -west cropmark south of the enclosure represents the former hedge which must, therefore, have been removed between 1957 and 1976.

2.2 Cartographic evidence

The cartographic evidence is very poor for this area before the tithe survey of the 1840s. Estate maps dating from 1797, 1810 and 1813 were examined but none showed the relevant area (see appendix). One map (SRO 1 12/8/5) dating to 1807 was too fragile to consult. Earlier or contemporary large scale maps such as John Rocque's of 1752 and Robert Baugh's of 1808 do not show any detail or buildings in this area. The tithe map and apportionment (SRO 2656/16-17) confirm that at this date the farm buildings under consideration had not been built. Instead, the site lay on the junction between two fields, The Ash and Shade Meadow. This map does not show anything to account for cropmark SA 4575 while SA 2247 appears as the hedge between The Thornes and Footway Piece and then, further south, between Footway Leasow and Flat Leasow. When the area was next mapped in the 1880s by the Ordnance Survey, the farm buildings have appeared although the open-sided Dutch Barn has not been built. A sinuous track-way leading south from the complex is also marked. This feature appears on some of the aerial photographs. Subsequent editions of the Ordnance Survey maps show little variation from the original survey with the Dutch Barn being the only addition after the survey of 1902.

3. Assessment of desk-top evaluation

The aerial photographic evidence showed unequivocally that cropmark SA 2247 had been a hedge-line until c. 1967. It is surmised in the SMR entry that this hedge may have been following a Roman road alignment, an hypothesis given some credibility by the apparent continuation of this feature seen on the aerial photograph of 1957 as a line adjacent to the enclosure SA 4575 north of the farm buildings (Fig. 3). Trench 1 was placed to investigate whether these two elements did indeed link up and to determine their nature. Trench 2 was placed at right angles to trench 1 to section the possible enclosure SA 4575 whose south-east corner apparently lay within the study area. Since the cartographic evidence demonstrates that the site had been out of cultivation since the 1880s, it was expected that preservation of any archaeological features should be good.

4. Evaluation

Following the desk-top assessment of the cropmarks, it was resolved to trial trench the area contained within the enclosure around the farm buildings in two locations (Fig. 1 b). Both trenches were 15m long and 1.5m wide. Trench 1 was located at the western end of the Dutch Barn and followed its alignment. Trench 2 lay 10m to the west of the Dutch Barn and as close as possible to the fence around the site. The trenches were machined down to the first recognisable archaeological interface using a JCBIIIc fitted with a toothless bucket.

Trench 1

Evidence

The initial overall context (1000) consisted of a layer of loose, sandy topsoil 100-150mm in depth and containing inclusions of rounded pebbles up to 40mm in size (Fig. 4). At the western end of the trench, there was a disturbed and ill-defined modern intrusion containing some late nineteenth or early twentieth century pottery (see finds report). No edges could be detected to this feature and it was included within the overall layer. Immediately beneath 1000 and again filling the whole trench was a dense band of loose pebbles in sand with patches of crushed and shattered brick, field drain and other modern building material (1001). This represented the floor of the Dutch Barn which was otherwise of earth. No trodden or worn surface was seen, however, and this layer must be seen as a foundation rather than a true floor level. Scaled beneath this layer was another overall context (1002) which consisted of a layer 0.5m thick of orange-brown silty sand. The layer contained a sparse number of rounded pebbles and more angular stone fragments as well as occasional patches of grey gleyed clay. No features were visible in its surface other than amorphous and indefinable tree root positions which were seen at the west end. These intrusions, once they had been identified, were not emptied. A single sherd of Roman Severn valley ware was located on the interface between 1001 and 1002 (see section 5).

A machine-cut sondage at the east end demonstrated the depth of 1002 and it was decided to cut a 0.5m wide slot along the north edge of the trench to locate natural and to detect whether the layer sealed any possible features. At the junction with natural a fill (1004) was located. This was very similar to the overlying layer being differentiated merely by the clay patches within it and its greater dampness. This context filled a V-shaped cut (F1) which was 1m wide and 0.3m deep (Fig. 4). It was cut into the natural sand (1003) which formed an undulating but east to west sloping surface.

Trench 2

Evidence

The initial overall context (2000), which was machined from the site, showed abundant signs of modern disturbance at the north and south ends of the trench (Fig. 4). At the north end, considerable quantities of beet and humic soil along with modern pipe, metal and wood demonstrated clearly that the area had recently been used as a beet store. The disturbance caused by this reached to a depth of 0.1m but did not seem to have penetrated into potential archaeological layers. At the south end, a concentration of modern brick tile and builder's rubble was found within a limited area. This coincided with a modern tractor access point to the field. Elsewhere, the layer was similar to (1000) - a silty sand with pebble and other inclusions, including some stones up to 0.2m in size. Beneath 2000, the next context (2001) consisted of a layer of pale silt with rounded pebbles. Modern intrusions were visible in its surface, showing as slightly darker patches with inclusions of coal. Some of these amorphous modern features were sectioned by a 0.5m wide slot cut along the west side of the trench in order to detect any other features but they did not resolve themselves. A single abraded sherd of Roman pottery came from this layer (see section 5). The natural, a reddish sand (2002), was established in a machine-cut

sondage at the south end and was traced beneath 2001 along the length of the trench. No features were detected cutting into it.

5. Finds by Jane Evans

The small assemblage of pottery was predominantly post-Medieval, including black-glazed earthenware, manganese streaked ware, slipware, blue and white slip-glazed ware, and cream lead-glazed ware relating to activity in the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries. Contemporary with this were three fragments of bottle glass. The assemblage also produced two abraded sherds of probable Roman date, one from (1002) and one from (2001).

6. Interpretation

The only definite feature located, F1 in Trench 1, was almost certainly of natural origin since it had been sealed beneath a thick deposit of fluvio-glacial silt. This silt cannot be a recent accumulation since the site lies well above the Severn flood-plain, which lies on the west bank of the river in the region of Wroxeter (Pannett 1989). The cut aligned reasonably well with SA 2247 and, since it retained its dampness throughout the excavation, this may account for the persistent linear cropmark observed north and south of the site. Alternatively, and perhaps more probably, the association of the linear feature north of the buildings and SA 2247 is fortuitous, SA 2247 merely being initially a hedge line and then a cropmark on the site of the hedge. In this context it is of interest that SA 2247 is not included in Steven Bassett's reconstruction of the early landscape around Wroxeter and this too would suggest that the hedge line represented by SA 2247 was a relatively late feature (Bassett 1990, fig. 18).

Nothing was seen of SA 4575 in Trench 2. While it is conceivable that the cut might have been destroyed either by the beet store or by the building operations to lay out the farm compound in the late nineteenth century, it seems more probable that the feature does not exist or, despite appearances, did not enter the farmyard. The internal detail visible on Dr Baker's photograph SJ5607/35 shows clearly that the bulk, if not all, of the marks are geological and probably glacial in origin. This may include the enclosure itself which might, perhaps, be interpreted as an irregular ice-wedge polygon. A number of modern irregular tree-holes located in Trench 1 may mark the position of the hedge between The Ash and Shade Meadow as marked on the tithe map.

7. Conclusions

The excavations at Halfway house farm buildings, Wroxeter, failed to locate any features of archaeological interest. The only feature detected was a natural glacial channel whose alignment corresponded with that of SA 2247 and may account for that feature. Certainly, the southern half of this cropmark is merely the echo of the former field boundary but the assumption that this hedge marked the line of an original Roman road seems now to be unlikely. Cropmark SA 4575 similarly should be seen as a dubious feature, despite the clarity of its outline on the aerial photographs. The internal evidence certainly marks it as being of natural derivation.

8. Recommendations

The lack of any positive outcome from the evaluation obviates the need for any further archaeological work on the site. There is no necessity to have a watching brief during the groundworks since these are unlikely to impinge on any archaeology unless they extend into the field into the north where they may affect SA4575. If this is to be the case, a watching brief should be carried out to observe whether the outline of this irregular enclosure may be detected.

9. References

Baker A, 1992 *Air archaeology in the valley of the River Severn* unpublished PhD thesis, University of Southampton

Bassett, S R, 1990 The Roman and Medieval landscape of Wroxeter in P A Barker (ed.) *From Roman Viroconium to Medieval Wroxeter* Worcester, 10 - 12

Pannett, D, 1989 The River Severn at Wroxeter *Transactions of the Shropshire Archaeological and Historical Society* **66**, 48-55

St Joseph, J K, 1958 Air reconnaissance in Britain, 1955-7 *Journal Roman Studies* **48**, 86-101

Watson, M D, 1996 *Briefing for an archaeological evaluation at Wroxeter, Shropshire*

Appendix 1: List of records and maps consulted

Aerial photographs

Sites & Monuments Record: SJ5607/A, B, C and uncatalogued

University of Birmingham, Special collections: Baker Collection, vol. 4

Maps

Shropshire Records & Research Office: Salt addnl. coll. 3651

Estates belonging to the Right Honble. Thomas Noel Lord Berwick received in exchange from Sir William Pulteney Bart (1797)

Rough map of estates ... belonging to Rt. Honble Thomas Noel Lord Berwick (1810)

Rough map of estates in the Parishes of Wroxeter, Atcham and Wollaston belonging to the Rt. Honble. Thomas Noel Lord Berwick (1813)

Map too fragile to consult SRO 112/8/5

Map of lands exchanged between Lord Berwick the Earl of Darlington and the Rev. Edward Dara, vicar of Wroxeter, with schedule showing field names and acreage (1807).

Tithe map and apportionment, Wroxeter parish SRO 2565/16-17

Apportionment of the Rents-charge in lieu of tithes in the Parish of Wroxeter in the county of Salop (1840)

Plan of the parish of Wroxeter in the County of Salop (1842)

Ordnance Survey 6" (first edition (1882)

Ordnance Survey 6" (second edition (1902)

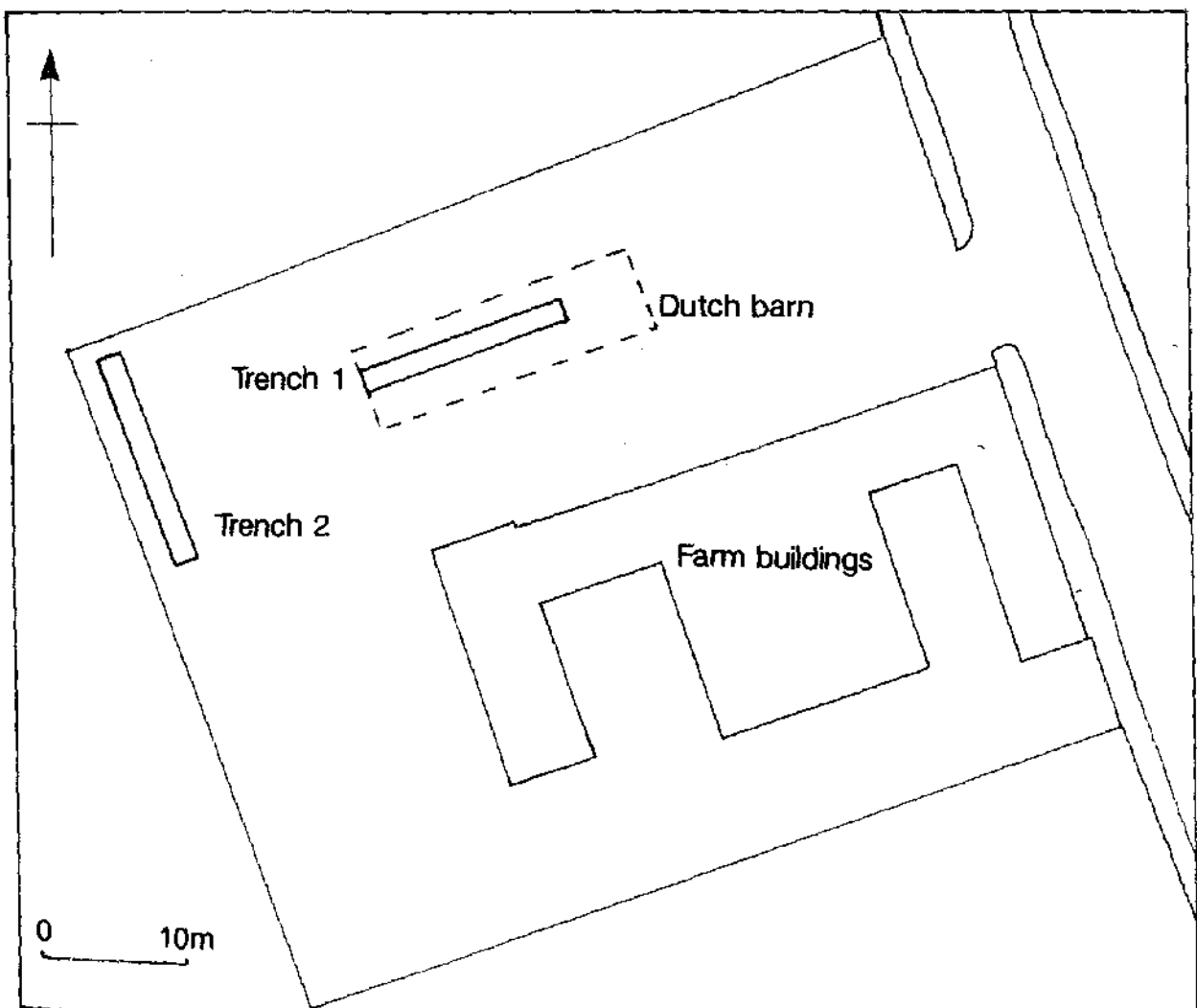
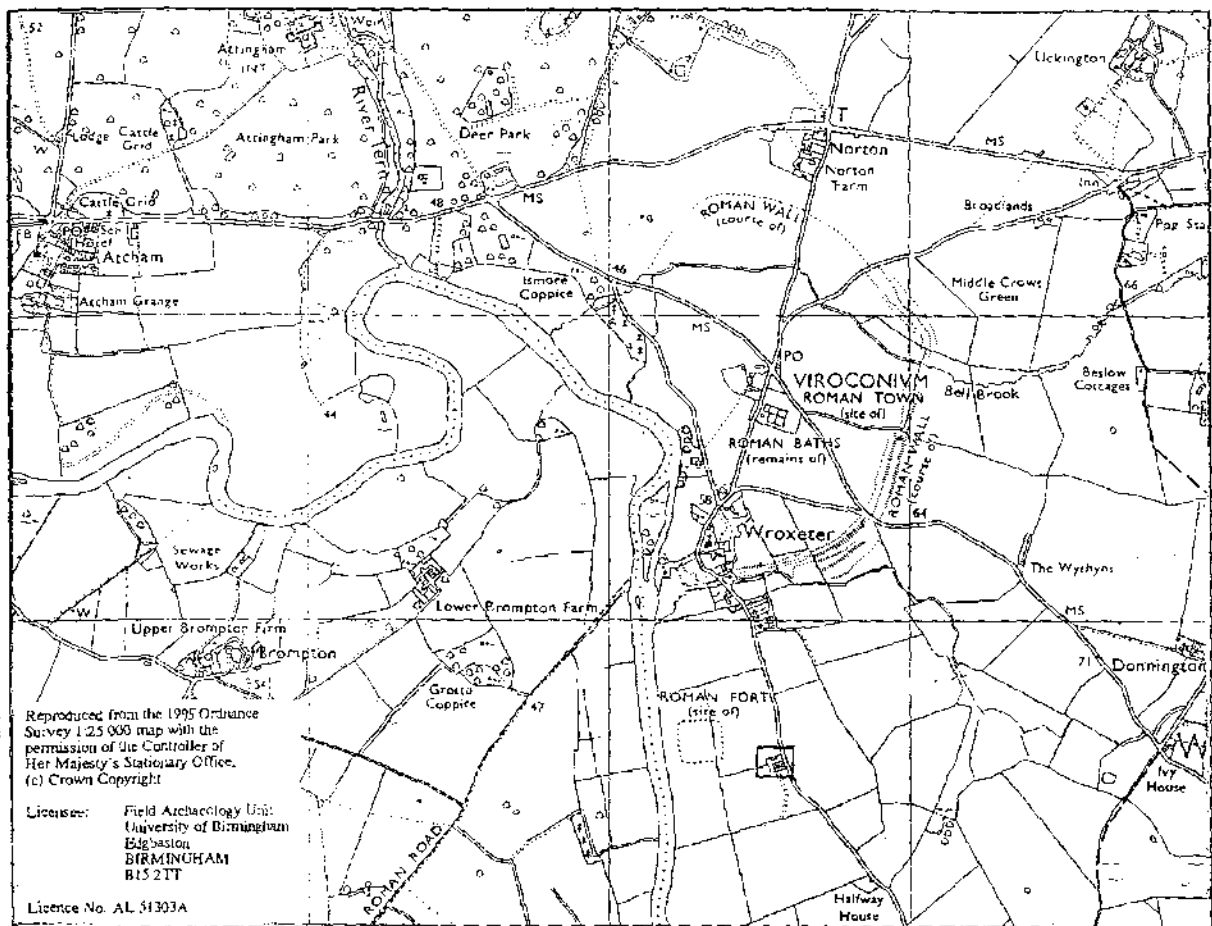


Fig. 1 a) Location map of Wroxeter village
 b) Plan of the farm buildings showing the location of the trenches

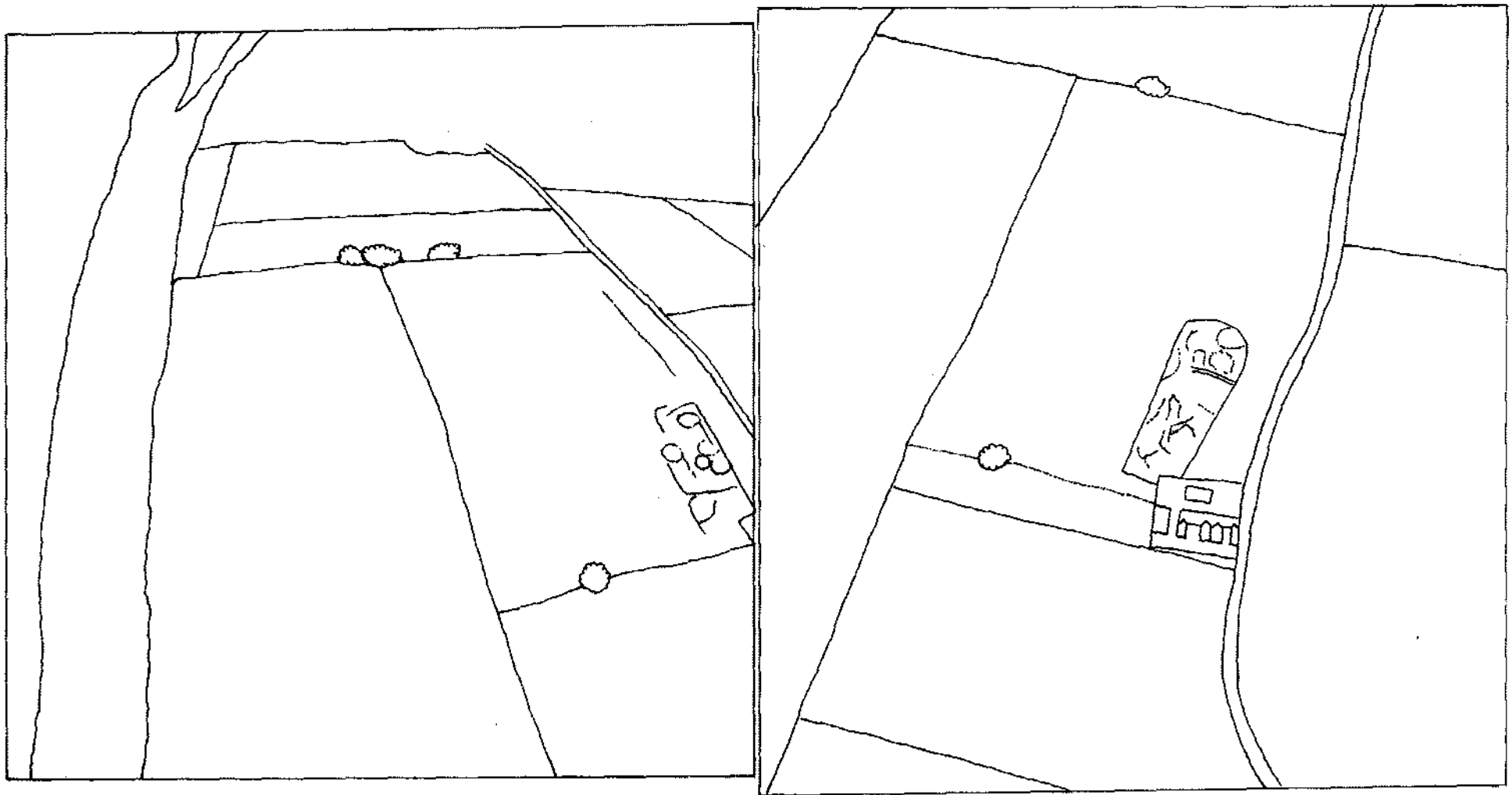


Fig. 2 Tracing of Baker photographs SJ5607/18 (1957) and SJ5607/35 (1976) showing evidence for SA 4575

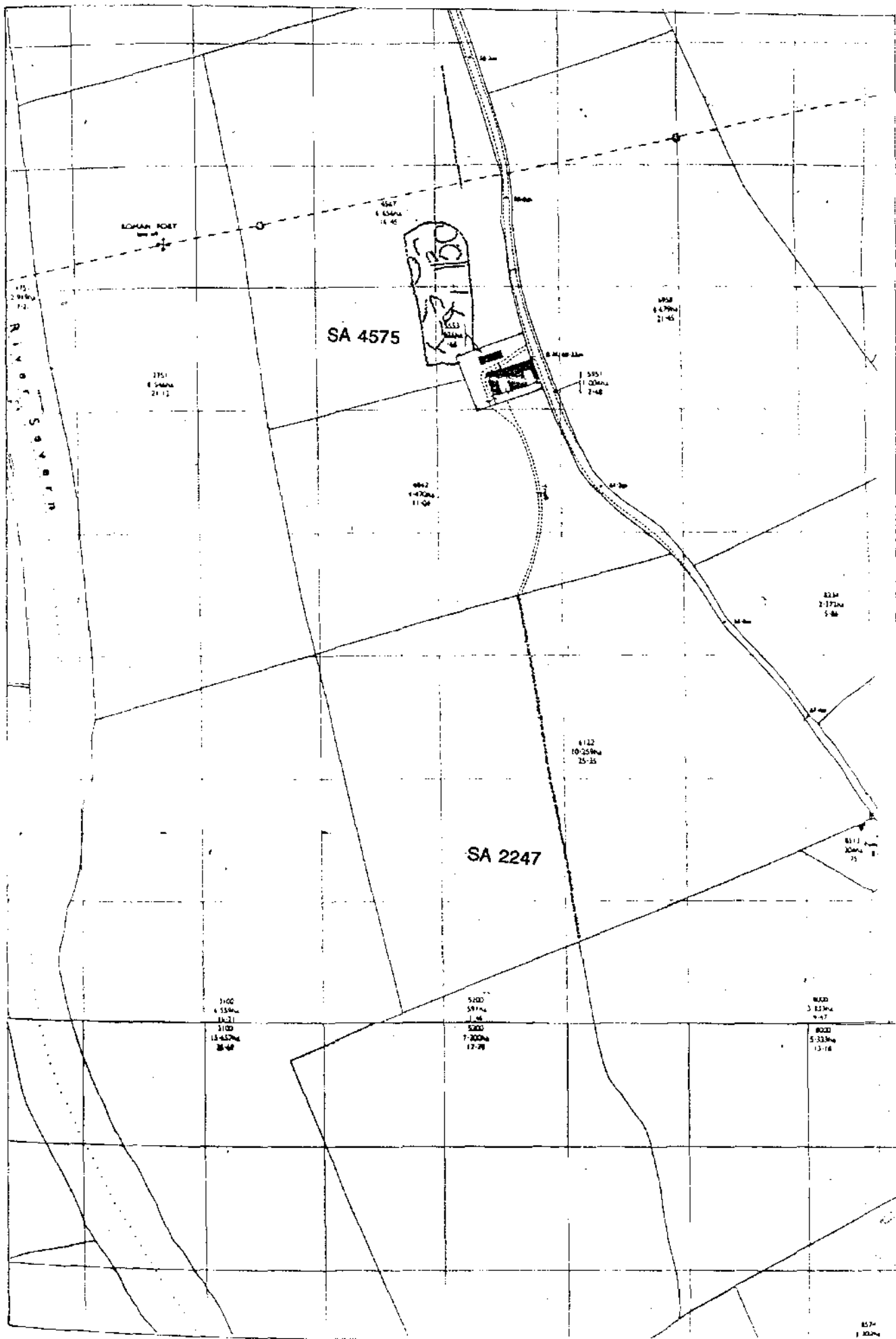
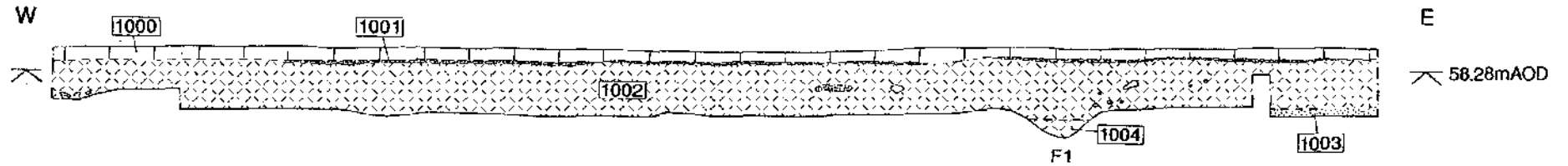


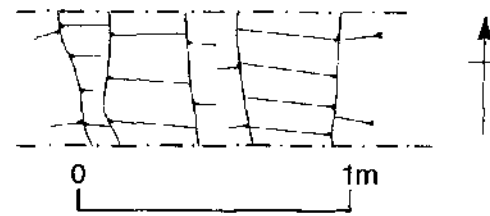
Fig. 3 Cropmark plots of SA 2247 and SA 4575

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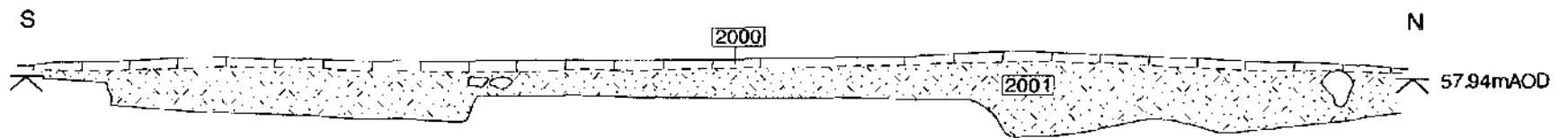
Trench I



Plan of F1



Trench II



Key





-  Topsoil
-  Rubble
-  Silt
-  Sand



Fig. 4 Sections through Trenches 1 and 2 (scale 1:50) and a plan of F1 (scale 1:20)