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FIELD ARCHAEOLOGY UNIT*

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site of a cropmarked ring ditch at the
National Memorial Arboretum, Alrewas,
Staffordshire**

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by

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Introduction

The following report describes the results of archaeological fieldwork on the site of a Scheduled Ancient Monument (SAM 199) at the National Memorial Arboretum near Alrewas, Staffordshire (Fig. 1, SK 1854 1460). The fieldwork involved the recording and reinstatement of a test pit accidentally dug into part of the monument by engineers working on behalf of the Arboretum. The fieldwork was undertaken by Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit during October 1997. The work was commissioned by Environmental Design Associates and conforms to a specification prepared by Staffordshire County Council.

The monument is positioned on the west bank of the River Tame near to its confluence with the River Trent. It was first identified following aerial photography undertaken in 1965. This revealed cropmark evidence for a large multiple ring ditch consisting of a number of concentric circular features which lay on a raised gravel terrace. The site was scheduled in 1969. Later aerial photography (Leicester Museum 3325/6 and 3364/14) suggested a larger and more complex site consisting of four concentric circles of ditches or pits, plus a pit centrally positioned within the monument. In addition, a number of linear features were located in the vicinity. The SMR entry refers to the monument as a possible henge (SMR 193).

The area around the monument has been subject to gravel extraction by Redland Aggregates Ltd. Prior to this work, English Heritage and the quarry operators agreed on an area to be excluded from operations in order to preserve the monument. Following the gravel extraction, the area around the monument became the site of the National Memorial Arboretum. The test pit was excavated in the southwestern corner of the Scheduled Ancient Monument during preliminary work associated with the establishment of the Arboretum (Fig. 2). During a visit by staff from Staffordshire County Council in August 1996, a portion of a prehistoric pottery vessel was visible in the eastern section of the trench about 0.5m below the ground surface. Three smaller sherds of pottery were recovered from the top of the spoil heap. In November 1996 the larger sherd had fallen into the bottom of the trench and was subsequently sent, with the three smaller sherds, to the Stoke-on-Trent Museum. A preliminary examination of the sherds by Dr Carol Allen suggested that the vessel was a late example of Beaker Ware.

Objectives

The objectives of the fieldwork as outlined in the brief were:

1. To carry out salvage recording of the damage to the monument arising from the excavation of the test pit.
2. To survey the monument and the surrounding area and provide an accurate plan of the monument, including a plot of all features indicated by aerial photography.

The work was to include: the recovery of artefacts from the disturbed area; the recording of the test pit sections; the accurate surveying of the position of the test pit; backfilling and reinstatement of the test pit.

Method

The excavated test pit was approximately 1.2m deep, 2.8m long and 0.75m wide. It was cleared of collapsed topsoil and plant growth, taking care not to further damage the monument. The sections were drawn at a scale of 1:10 and photographically recorded with both black and white and colour film.

Any artefacts visible in the sections were carefully removed. Care was taken not to burrow into the sections. In order to preserve the location of the disturbed area, before backfilling, the hole was completely lined with Terram. The spoil was reinstated and lightly tamped down, having been passed through a 10mm mesh sieve in order to recover any artefacts present.

In order to put the trench into context, its location was accurately surveyed, as was the surrounding landscape to a distance of 100m in all directions. All features indicated by aerial photographs were plotted.

Results

The survey (Fig 2): - The air photographic collection at the National Monuments Record was consulted. Copies of the following photographs were examined:

Specialist Collection - NGR Index Number SK1814/1-26, 36-47, 49-65; SK1815/4
Vertical Coversearch - 541/28; MAL/71115; MAL/75040; MAL/75036; MAL/75032;
MAL/81035; OS/70361; OS/71520.

The monument is clearly visible as a cropmark on numerous photographs. A particularly clear view appears on a vertical photograph (SK1814/51 NMR Accession number 2167/1181) taken on 13 July 1984 and this was the primary source for the cropmark plot. Three

concentric cropmarked ring ditches are visible together with a large pit at the centre of the inner ring ditch. There are traces of at least one further pit within the area defined by the inner ring ditch. The outer ditch is the most clearly defined and is approximately 34m in diameter. There are traces of two linear features, both orientated northwest-southeast, one to the north of the triple ring ditch and one to the south. It is not clear if these are directly related to the triple ring ditch or are part of a later landscape. On most of the photographs, the triple ring ditch is dissected by a northeast-southwest field boundary which approximately corresponds with the existing fence defining the southeastern side of the scheduled area. The triple ring ditch is less clear to the southeast of this boundary and the linear ditches are not visible at all.

When the majority of the photographs were taken, the triple ring ditch was located close to the confluence of a small stream and the River Tame in the southeastern area of a sub-rectangular field. However, the area surrounding the scheduled monument has now been transformed as a result of recent quarrying activity. The stream no longer exists but traces of a shallow ditch are visible where it formerly joined the river. The area of the scheduled monument is currently defined by a fence which includes a 10m stand-off on the northeastern, northwestern and southwestern sides. However, it should be noted that the fence supposedly defining the southeastern side of the monument does not fully enclose the site of the cropmarked features. To ensure the continued protection of the monument it is suggested that this fence should be moved at least 30m to the southeast.

The test pit (Fig. 3) - The natural subsoil (1004) comprised orange sandy gravel and was overlain by 0.3m to 0.4m of brown silty topsoil (1001). The sandy gravel was cut by a single feature (F101), 0.6m wide and 0.3m deep. It had a V-shaped profile with the northeast side sloping less steeply than the southwest (Fig. 3). It was filled with a brown silty sand (1002). This feature was visible in both long sections of the test pit suggesting a linear ditch, orientated east-west. Two fragments of pottery (possibly Roman in date), two flint flakes and one tile fragment were recovered from the sections of this feature.

The sieving of the soil displaced from the trench produced seven sherds of prehistoric pottery, two pieces of tile, five flint flakes, one piece of clay pipe and one piece of post-medieval bottle glass.

The Beaker vessel by Ann Woodward

The large fragment of pottery and three sherds recovered in 1996 were viewed initially at the Stoke-on-Trent Museum by Dr Carol Allen, who identified them as belonging to a late Beaker. These four fragments weighed 330g, and a further seven sherds, including one piece of base angle weighing 53g, were recovered during the sieving exercise of 1997. Taking all the pieces together, it has been possible to attempt a reconstruction of the vessel profile (Fig. 4). Approximately one half of the Beaker from rim to below the belly is present, with just a few sherds representing the lowest wall and base angle areas. It appears that the rest of the

vessel was not present in the presumed discrete feature within which it had been deposited (see below).

The vessel is buff to pale orange in colour and the sandy fabric contains mica flecks and a rare to medium occurrence of large, sub-rounded pieces of grog. The profile displays a long neck, simple rim and weakly shouldered belly. The base is slightly raised. The decoration is executed in tooth-comb technique, the tool employed having been a comb with five 'short' (i.e. almost square) teeth. The most striking element of the rather roughly-executed decorative scheme is a zone of tall standing filled triangles on the neck. These are bordered by bands of horizontal tooth-combed lines and ladder zones, with two rows of free-floating diagonal tooth-comb strokes towards the base.

The shape and style of this vessel are best matched amongst those of the Late Style (Case 1977, 72) dating from c.2000-1800 BC. More specifically, it can be placed in Clarke's S1 group of late southern Beakers. Within the midlands, S1 vessels bearing similar schemes of tall filled triangles, either standing or pendant, are known from Soham, Cambs, Deepdale, Staffs and Bakewell, Derbys (Clarke 1970, 371, Figs.751, 754 and 757). Although a fair number of Beakers are known from the counties of Staffordshire, Derbyshire and Leicestershire, most of these derive from barrow or cave contexts in the Peak District. Very few have been found in the gravels of the Trent valley and its tributaries (see map in Vine 1982, 275), and this example provides an important addition to the local corpus.

The main significance of the vessel, however, is that usage of the monument represented by the cropmark within the Early Bronze Age period has been confirmed. The placing of this half-pot in a discrete feature adjacent to the monument is highly reminiscent of the deposit of two part-Beakers over the rich metal hoard outside a barrow at Lockington, Leics. In that case it was argued that the pots were heirlooms from which fragments had been removed deliberately over time for use as keepsakes, or for the provision of 'special' grog to be incorporated in new vessels. The extreme wear, particularly of the decoration, visible on the Alrewas Beaker would add further weight to a similar interpretation in the present case - the deliberate deposition of a family heirloom, probably in a pit, close to the ritual cropmark site.

Discussion

The only feature visible in the section contained pottery of Roman or later date. Consequently, it seems likely that this represents a linear feature dating to the Romano-British period or later. No prehistoric material was recovered from the sections of the test pit apart from a single worked flint flake.

The prehistoric pottery that was recovered during the excavation and from the sieved soil clearly must have originated from a small discrete pit or feature which has been completely destroyed during the excavation of the test pit. Clearly, this feature must have been located close to the northwest-facing section where the large fragment of pottery was initially

observed. It seems likely that the last remaining trace of the pit was lost following a localised collapse of the section when the pottery fell out of the section in November 1996. Only part of the vessel was recovered. It seems highly unlikely that any fragments were missed during the sieving of the excavated spoil heap. Consequently it seems probable that only part of the vessel had been buried in the pit.

The pit was presumably a satellite feature associated with the cropmarked ring ditch. Such small peripheral features are frequently associated with Late Neolithic and Early Bronze Age burial or ritual monuments. Regional examples include Sharpstones Hill (Barker *et al.* 1991), Meole Brace (Hughes and Woodward 1995), and Bromfield (Hughes *et al.* 1995) in Shropshire, Foston in Derbyshire (Hughes and Jones 1995) and Lockington in Leicestershire (Hughes 1996). In many cases these are thought to have been satellite burials associated with a former burial mound and frequently contain fragments of cremated human bone. However, no evidence for any cremated bone was recovered during the sieving of the excavated soil at Alrewas. It seems more likely that the beaker represents a special deposit buried close to a ritual site. A possible parallel is the deposit of two part beakers associated with rich metalwork at Lockington in Leicestershire (see above).

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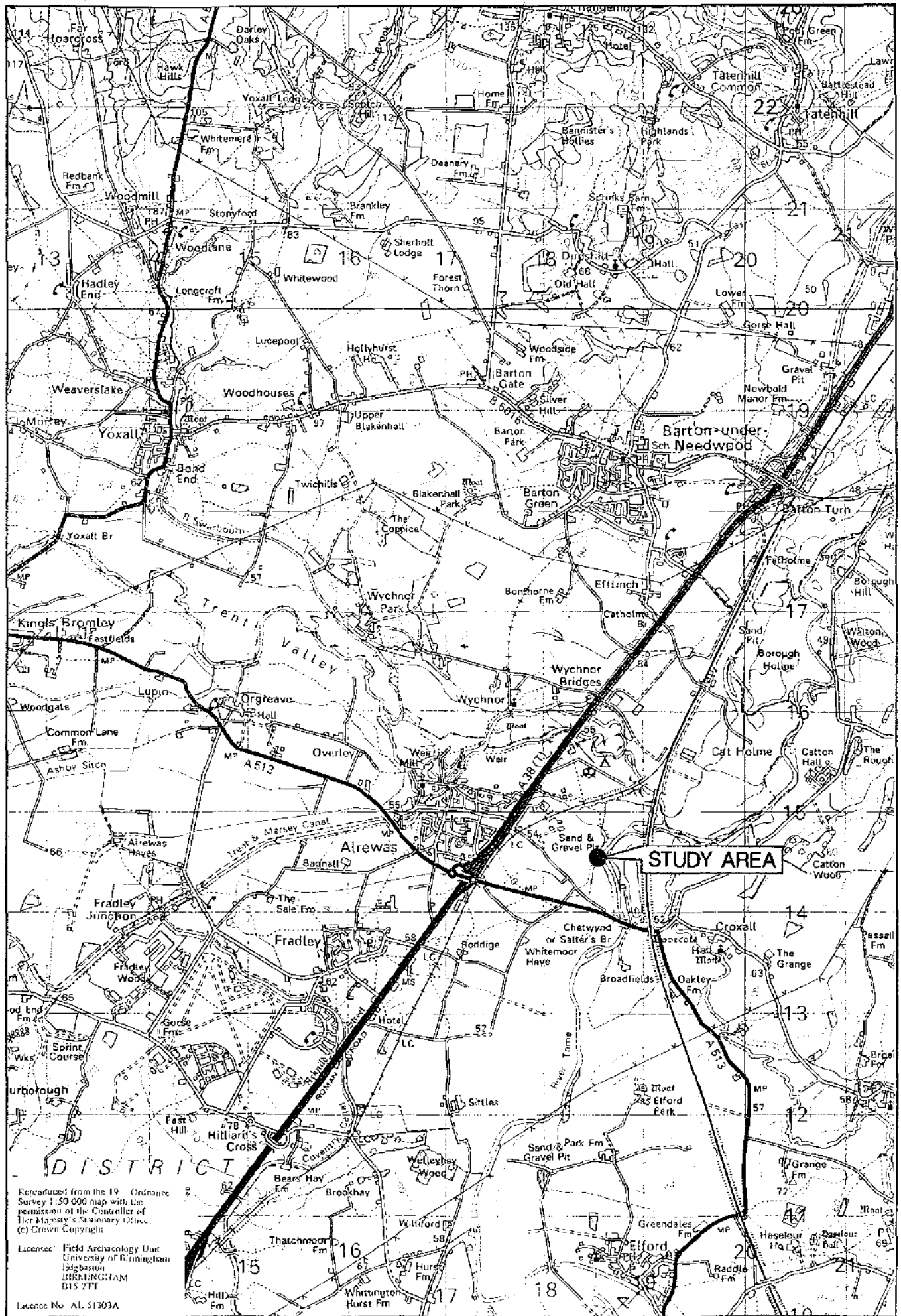
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Fig.1

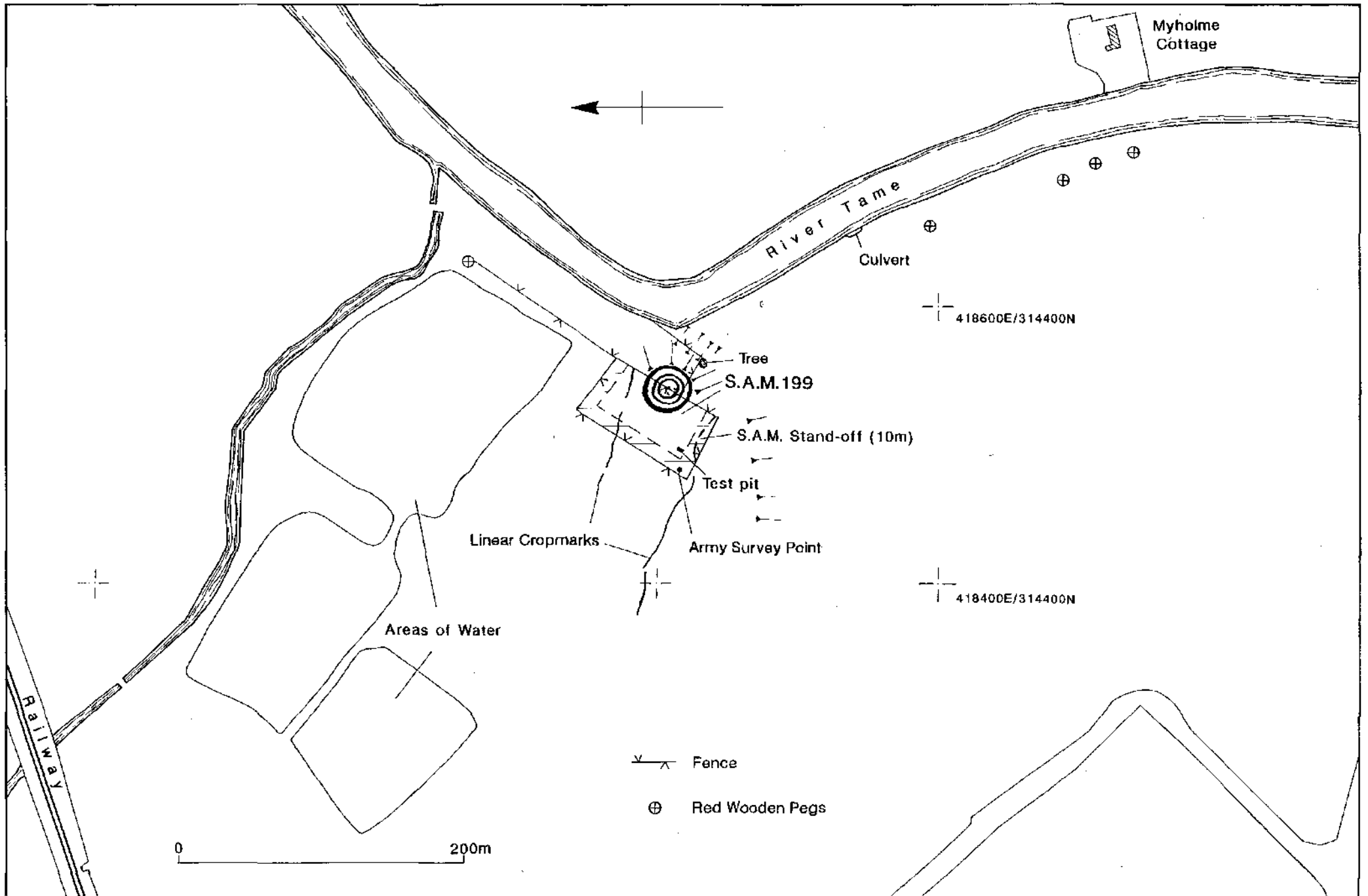


Fig 2

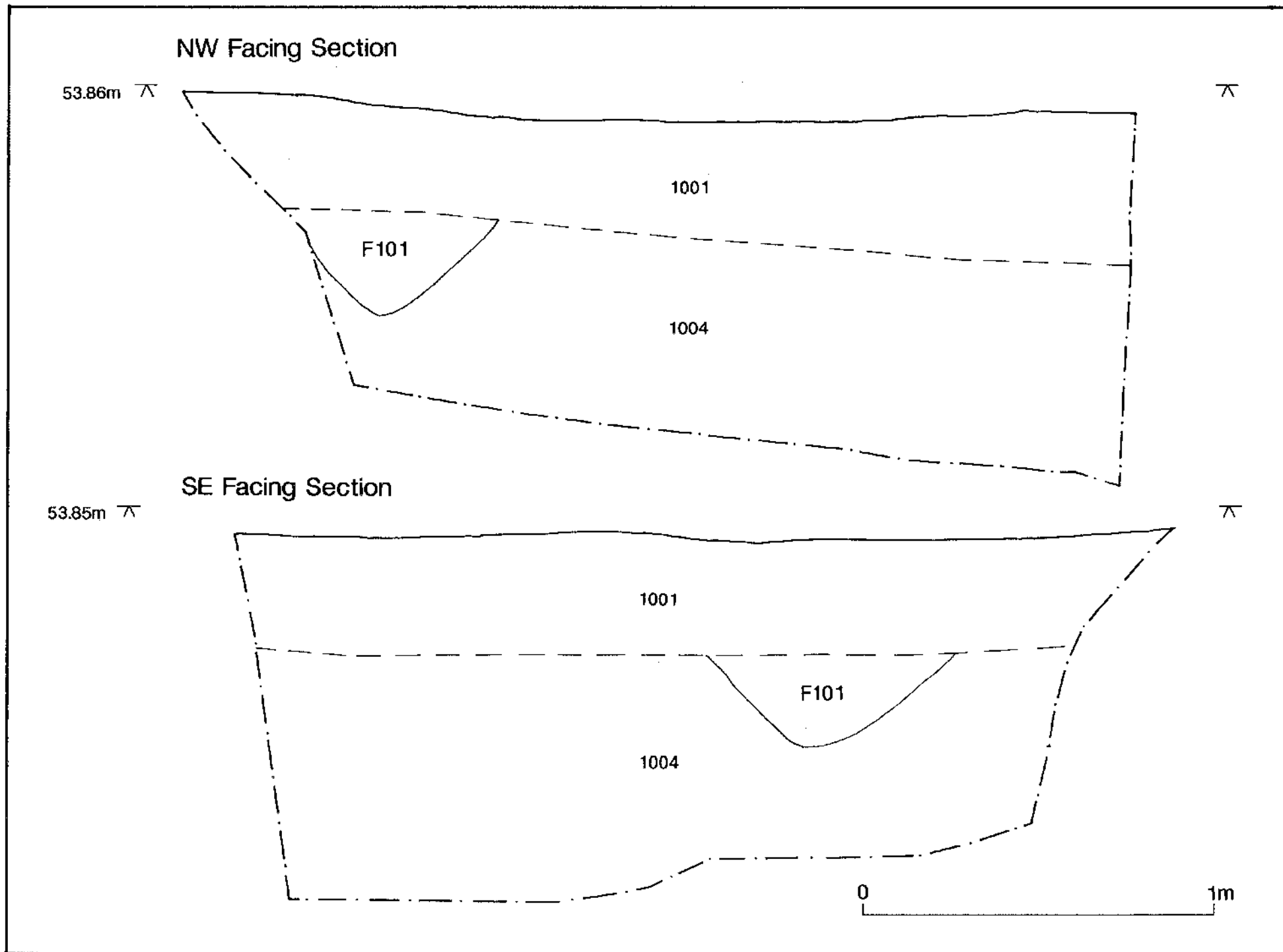


Fig.3

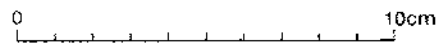
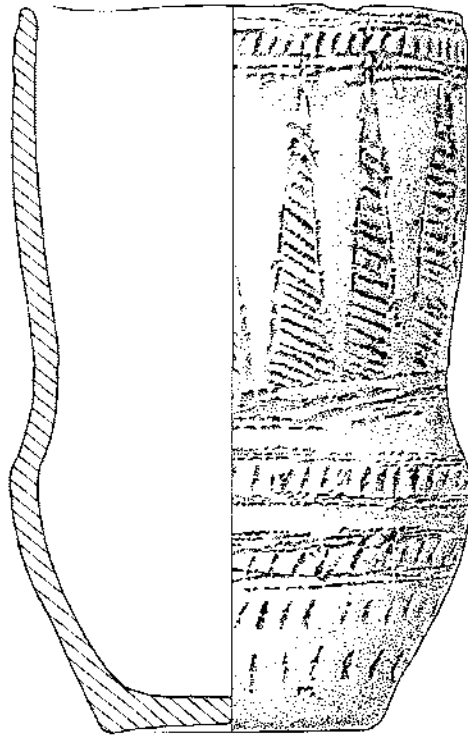


Fig.4