

*BIRMINGHAM UNIVERSITY
FIELD ARCHAEOLOGY UNIT*

**WOOLHAMPTON
QUARRY, Berkshire**

**An interim report on
archaeological works
1998**

B.U.F.A.U.



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WOOLHAMPTON QUARRY, Berkshire
An Interim Report on archaeological works 1998

by
Peter Leach and John Hovey

For further information please contact:
Simon Buteux, Iain Ferris or Peter Leach (Directors)
Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit
The University of Birmingham
Edgbaston
Birmingham B15 2TT
Tel: 0121 414 5513
Fax: 0121 414 5516
E-Mail: BUFAU@bham.ac.uk
Web Address: <http://www.bham.ac.uk/BUFAU/>

WOOLHAMPTON QUARRY, Berkshire

Archaeological Works 1998, An Interim Report

1.0 Introduction

In June 1998 Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit were commissioned by Lafarge Redland Aggregates Limited to undertake an archaeological investigation and monitoring operation at Woolhampton Quarry, near Newbury, Berkshire. The project was arranged through Phoenix Consulting, archaeological consultancy, and undertaken in accordance with a brief prepared in 1995 by Tempus Reparatum Associates Ltd. (TR 31090DCB). The first phase of work was undertaken between August and October 1998, and is the subject of this interim report.

2.0 The Site

2.1 Woolhampton Quarry, centred on NGR SU570660, lies within the southern floodplain of the River Kennet, bounded by the river to the north and a minor road to the east (Fig. 1).

2.2 The mineral deposits worked here are valley-bottom gravels known as the Woolhampton Gravel Formation. These are overlain by more recent floodplain deposits; a mixture of silts, gravel, peat and tufa known as the Midgham Peat Formation. Derived from this is a thin loamy topsoil, much of which has been in cultivation prior to quarrying. For a more detailed assessment of the geomorphology; sediments and soils see reports by Collins 1993 and Jordan 1993 in Hunn 1993.

2.3 Within the quarry concession archaeological investigation was required as part of a Section 106 planning agreement, for an area defined as Gravel Extraction Phase 3 (TR 31090DCB, 1995, figure. 2). Within this area, at the north east corner of the concession, a smaller locality, defined as 'd', was identified for more detailed examination. This corresponded approximately to the extent of a surface feature within the field, visible as a broad, low rise or bank 1m and more higher than surrounding areas (Fig. 2).

3.0 Previous research

3.1 Assessments of the archaeological implications of the whole quarry extension at Woolhampton began in 1988 and have involved several phases of site evaluation, utilising desktop research (Oxford Archaeological Associates 1990; Tempus Reparatum 1993), and field investigations by test pits and trial trenches (Wessex Archaeology, Farwell 1990; Tempus Reparatum 1993). These resulted in the specification for post-evaluation archaeological investigations (TR 31090DCB) prepared by Tempus Reparatum in 1995.

3.2 Despite the surface collection of some prehistoric, Romano-British and medieval artefacts, and traces of crop mark features, little data of coherent archaeological significance was obtained by the field evaluations. Of perhaps greatest

significance to the site, however, was research which indicated the large-scale extraction and burning of peat in the 18th and 19th centuries in this area of the Kennet Valley (Tempus Reparatum 1993, appendix 4). Evidence for these activities was apparent in the course of field evaluation and is thought to have affected not only the local topography but also the *in situ* survival of any earlier archaeological sites or remains.

3.3 More recently, an investigation by Phoenix Consulting of locality 'a' in extraction area 2, in accordance with the 1995 specification (figure 2), confirmed the scale and effect of this post-medieval peat extraction and was unable to locate any significant archaeological evidence for earlier activity. Despite this, there have been important discoveries of earlier prehistoric material in this sector of the Kennet Valley, recorded within the mixed peat and tufa valley-bottom deposits or upon the gravel surface immediately beneath them (summarised in Oxford Archaeological Associates Ltd 1990). These sites, notably around Thatcham, have produced classic early Mesolithic assemblages, and testify to the potential for archaeological and palaeo-environmental remains to survive at greater depths and in less disturbed horizons close to the main deposit of extractable gravel.

4.0 Strategy

4.1 The current phase of investigation is focused upon phase 3 of gravel extraction and in particular upon the locality defined as 'd' (Fig. 2). In conformity with the specification (TR 31090DCB, section 4.0, 1995) this area was surveyed following the harvest, and machine clearance of topsoil under archaeological supervision commenced towards the end of August 1998. This was the first phase of an operation to expose, investigate and record the sub-ploughsoil zone and any archaeological remains surviving at that level. The survival of a low surface feature here (2.3, above), coincident with area 'd', was ascribed to the presence of a gravel band or ridge close to the modern surface, and thus a locality with higher potential for the location of archaeological remains and their preservation from peat digging.

4.2 This operation was undertaken over approximately six weeks, removing almost 70% of the topsoil from area 'd' under conditions of continuous monitoring and recording, and the remainder as a monitored but more rapid strip (Fig. 3). In addition, the stripping of a sample area of mixed subsoil deposits revealed the underlying Woolhampton Gravel formation along its southern margin, while the excavation of six smaller test trenches at other selected localities explored further the range and sequences of overburden deposits down to the base gravel surface.

4.3 Concurrently, a watching brief was maintained during the removal of overburden at the northern extremity of extraction area 3, preparatory to the quarrying of gravel from here. Prior to this Phoenix Consulting had monitored the removal of topsoil from this area. Neither phase of monitoring recognised nor recovered any remains of archaeological significance.

4.4 At the present time no further removal of topsoil, or of subsoil deposits which mask the basal gravel is underway in area 3, although these operations will be subject to further archaeological monitoring as they take place. This procedure will also be applied to the second stage of overburden strip in area 'd', following which a final report on the archaeological monitoring and recording works will be prepared.

5.0 Results

5.1 The mechanical topsoil strip across area 'd' revealed a variety of subsoil formations, whose surfaces were clean scraped with a smooth-bladed bucket, following the removal of *c* 0.30m of clearly defined ploughsoil. It became apparent at an early stage that sand and gravel deposits were indeed present close to the modern surface, along the east-west axis of the visible rise in ground level. These were progressively exposed as a clearly defined feature, flanked on either side at lower levels by more variable, and often heavily disturbed deposits of silts, peat and tufa. The higher sand and gravel bank was disturbed in places by large regular intrusions and some smaller variations, while its perimeters were often irregular (Fig. 3).

5.2 Several test pits were excavated close to the junction between the sandy gravel bank and the lower more mixed deposits, to explore the relationships between the two types and their relationship with the underlying Woolhampton Gravel Formation. From these, and observations made during monitoring removal of the overburden deposits at the northern extremity of extraction area 3, it was apparent that the sand and gravel bank sealed some lower formations of peat and silts, while being partly overlapped north and south by more mixed deposits. Where exposed, the surface of the coarser Woolhampton gravel occurred at variable depths (between 1m and 4m), reflecting a configuration which must bear little relation to the modern surface.

5.3 These deposit sequences can be interpreted broadly in conformity with the more detailed report and interpretation of the local geomorphology and sediments by Collins (1993), as Appendix 4 in the *Tempus Reparatum* report (Hunn 1993). Following the final deposition of the glacial Woolhampton Gravels, at the commencement of the current Holocene postglacial period the Kennet Valley was then characterised by much lower energy water flows and the deposition of finer sediment types. These comprise the alternating sequences of silts, peat and tufa, whose lower levels have been associated elsewhere in the valley with early Mesolithic occupation (Wymer 1962). Conditions in the valley may eventually have stabilised sufficiently for a soil horizon to have formed in a carr woodland environment. Later, however, there was a return to higher energy river conditions, marked by the cutting of new channels and redeposition of material, including gravels and sand derived from the original Woolhampton Formation beneath. This reworking has resulted in the formation of large bars of coarser material, up to 2m thick, of which the sand and gravel bank exposed in area 'd' is evidently one.

5.4 This phase of more active erosion and deposition is almost certainly to be linked with the extensive later prehistoric opening up of the formerly forested landscape to agriculture; a phenomenon whose effects are now widely recognised in

the river valleys of southern Britain. This would suggest that the valley bottom at this time was unsuitable for any permanent occupation, and that traces of any more transitory use might well have been destroyed. The presence of occasional and partly mineralised animal bones within the bar deposits, principally limb bones of large ungulates, can only be interpreted as the result of redeposition, although it could signify seasonal use of the valley for pasture and watering domestic animals.

5.5 Surface exposure of the sand and gravel bar revealed several substantial later disturbances, mostly of linear character and with relatively straight edges. Frequently these extended into the areas of more mixed deposits on either side, where they were more difficult to define (Fig. 3). Wherever sectioned, these disturbances were vertical-sided cuts 1m and more deep, and contained mixed stony soils incorporating occasional fragments of brick and tile, earthenware pottery and clay pipe fragments of 18th-19th century types. This was clear evidence for the relatively recent phase of peat extraction, which though largely sparing the upstanding sand and gravel bar, had resulted in extensive disturbance of the upper peat and tufa horizons alongside.

5.6 Also seen on the lighter sand/gravel surface of the bar were occasional irregular patches of darker gravel and soil, which may represent the former location of large trees. No other finds were associated with these features. Other irregularities on this surface were interpreted as natural variations in the character of the deposits, apart from a few narrow and shallow disturbances representing the base of deep modern ploughing. Elsewhere within area 'd', it was more difficult to define the bounds of disturbances on the darker and more mixed subsoils, but considerable areas were evidently much disturbed by the peat digging.

6.0 Summary

6.1 Excepting the effects of modern agriculture, the 18th and 19th-century peat extraction represents virtually the only direct evidence of human activity in the area investigated. No other evidence of archaeological significance was recorded as a result of the topsoil strip, even on the bar, where it might have been anticipated that conditions favourable to former occupation were at an optimum in the locality, as were the conditions for observation. A few sherds of Roman and medieval pottery from the topsoil were the only recorded exception, though most probably explicable as residue from occasional manuring of fields which were some way removed from any contemporary settlement.

6.2 Given the suggested post-glacial history of the valley at this point (5.4, above), the almost complete absence of prehistoric lithics is perhaps less surprising, though unusual. As yet there is no hint of much earlier prehistoric activity here, as in the Mesolithic, but any such evidence is only likely to survive towards the base of the Holocene, Midgham Peat formations deposited upon the basal gravel. Investigation of this potential must await the second phase of overburden strip and its archaeological monitoring, projected for the first months of 1999.

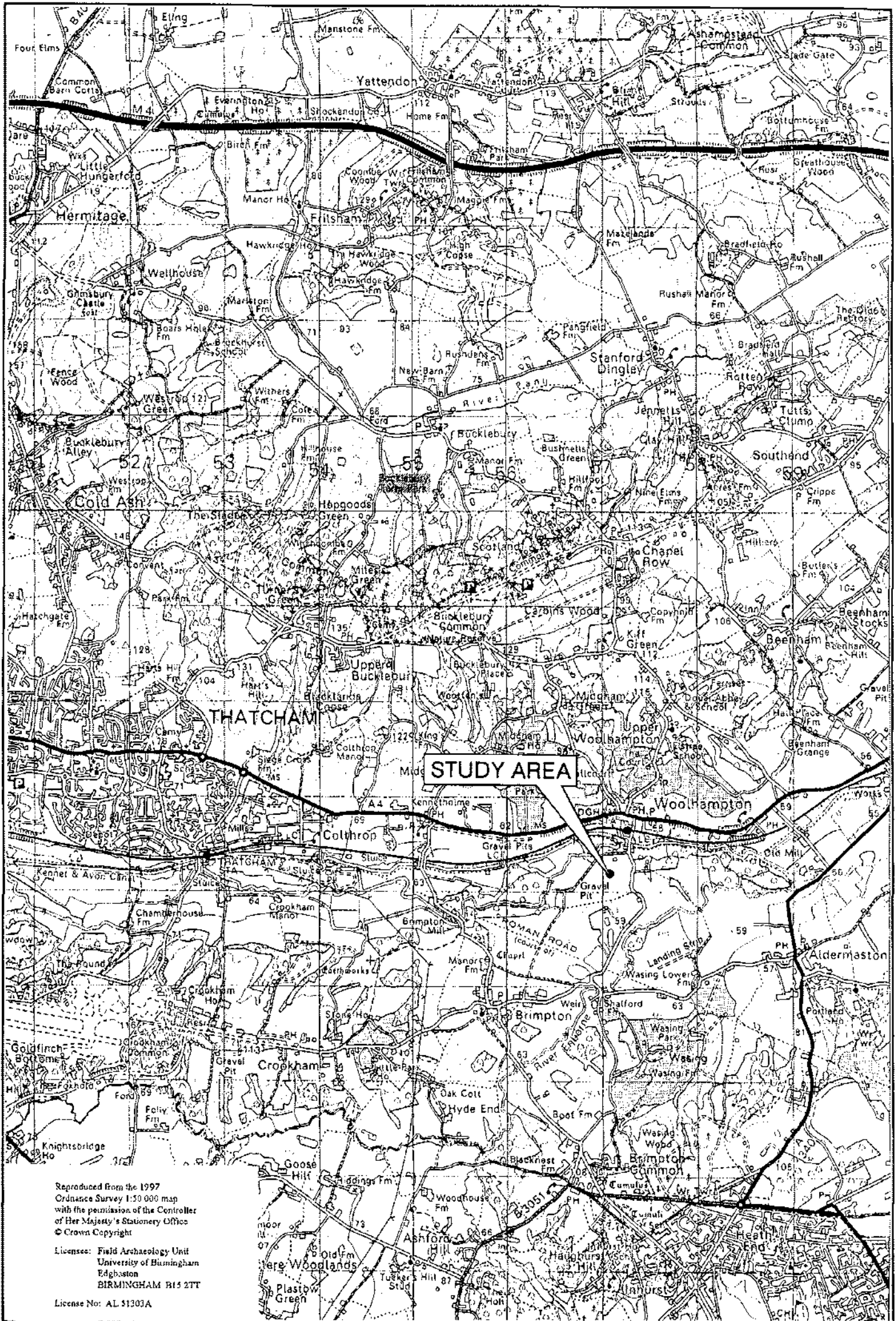
7.0 Acknowledgements

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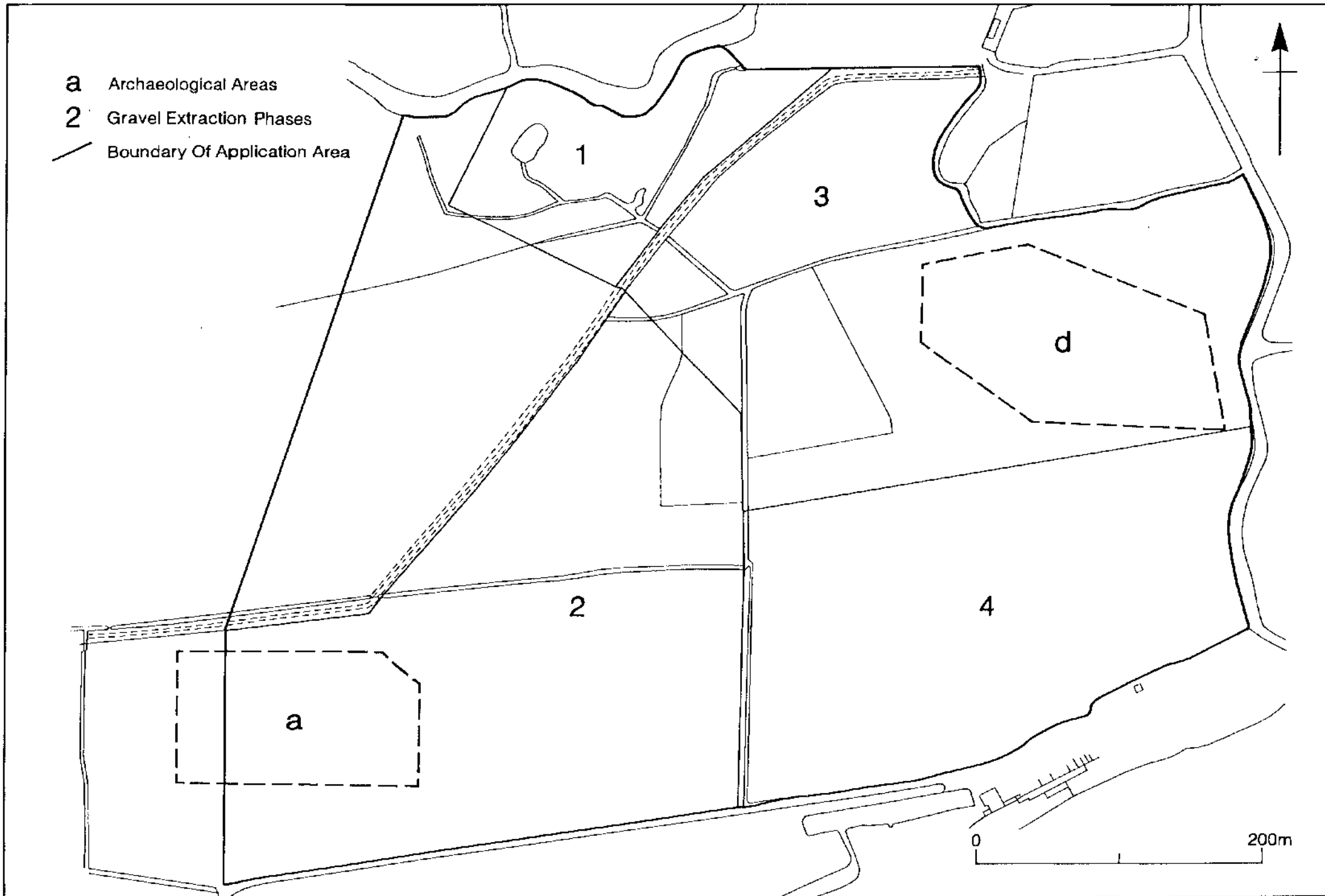


Fig.2

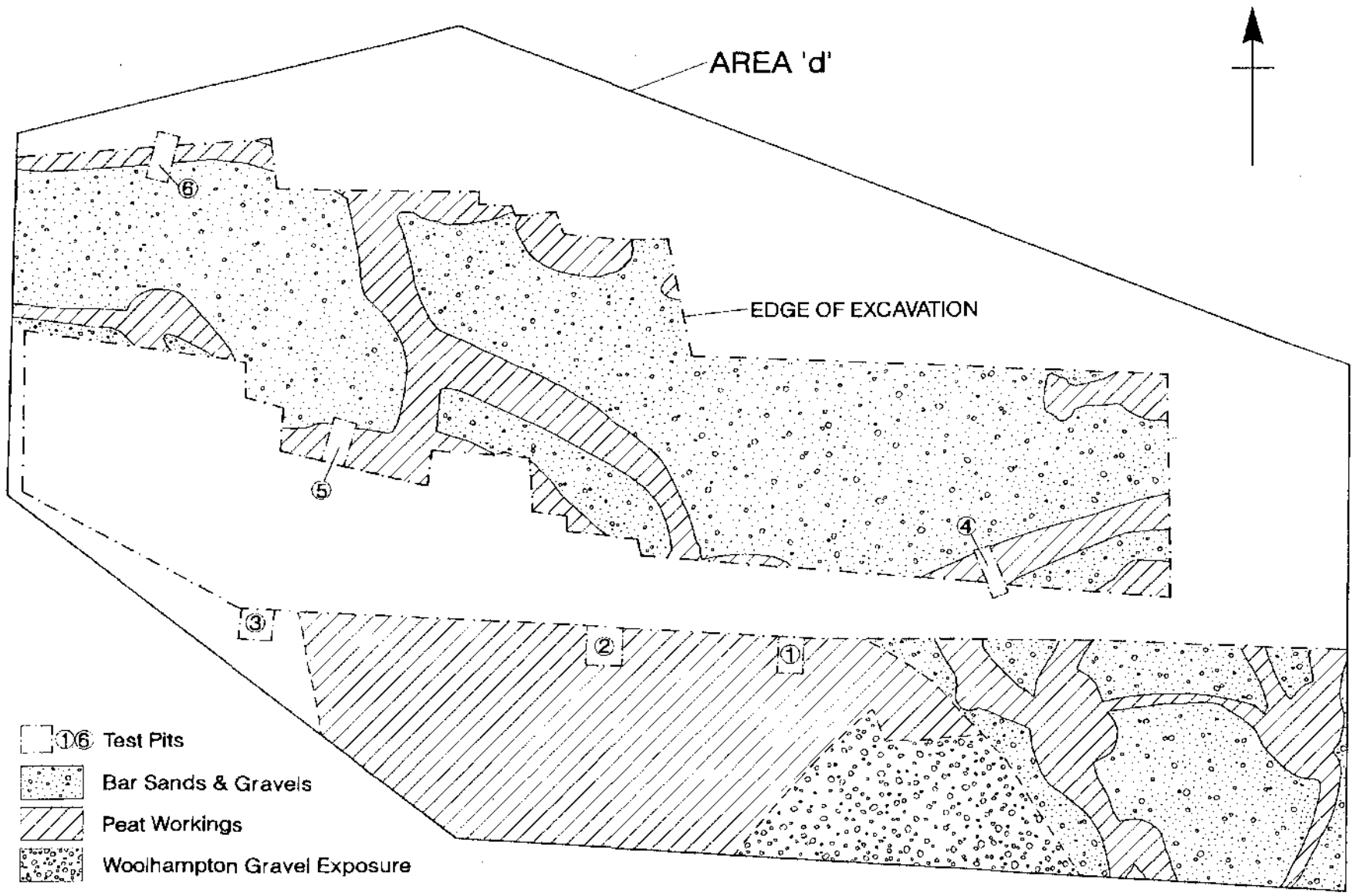


Fig. 1