

**Excavations at Arle
Court, Cheltenham,
Gloucestershire, 1999.**

**Site Narrative and
Post-excavation Assessment**

Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit
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**Excavations at Arle Court, Cheltenham,
Gloucestershire, 1999**

Site Narrative and Post Excavation Assessment

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Excavations at Arle Court, Cheltenham, Gloucestershire, 1999. Site Narrative and Post-Excavation Assessment

Summary

Archaeological excavations undertaken at Arle Court, Cheltenham identified the remains of at least two phases of activity. A Late Iron Age enclosure ditch defined the earliest phase of activity on the site. No features were recorded to the north of the enclosure, or within its interior. To the south of the enclosure ditch there were poorly defined structural remains and a ditch, possibly of a similar date. The enclosure ditch was later recut either during the Late Iron Age or early in the Romano-British period. A small assemblage of Iron Age and Romano-British pottery was recovered.

Introduction

Arle Court lies on the southwestern edge of Cheltenham, to the northeast of Hatherley (Figure 1). The site is accessed from the north side of Hatherley Lane, approximately 1.5km east of Junction 11 of the M5, and forms part of a large residential development. Evaluation trial trenching was undertaken in August 1999 as a condition of outline planning permission by the Archaeology Service of Gloucestershire County Council in advance of the development of the site (Nichols 1999). Further excavation was carried out in accordance with the guidelines set down in Planning Policy Guidance Note 16 (Department of the Environment 1990).

The excavation area, centred on NGR SO 9163 2130, constituted a roughly rectangular shaped portion close to the southeast corner of the development (Figure 2). This totalled an area of approximately 2840 square metres. A second area excavated along the route of an access road, constituted a further 600 square metres. The excavation was commissioned by Bryant Homes Southwest and was undertaken by Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit.

SITE NARRATIVE

Site Background

The site, located in the Severn Vale, lies on Lower Lias Clays overlain by alluvium, and the land slopes gently from south to north towards the valley of the Hatherley Brook. The late Victorian house and gardens of Arle Court lie to the west of the development area and to the south lie a social club and tennis courts.

There are no known prehistoric or medieval sites within the immediate vicinity of the development. However, the frequency of findspots of Iron Age pottery has led Saville (1984) to conclude that settlement in the Severn Vale was extensive at that time. It has also been suggested that the present-day Arle Court may have been built on or near the site of a minor grange held by Llanthony Priory in the mid 12th century (Borthwick and Chandler 1998). The surrounding land appears to have been one of the open fields of Arle, and map evidence indicates that the development area was not

built on in the later post-medieval period, forming part of the parkland of Arle Court. Prior to the evaluation and excavation, the land in the vicinity of the development area was largely given over to playing fields.

SMR entries indicate that Romano-British pottery was recovered in a foundation trench at 16 Coberley Road, Benhall, 500m to the northeast of Arle Court House (SMR No 6657), and that 22 Roman coins were found at 5 Unwin Close, 250m south of the house (SMR No 6645), indicating that the area was utilised during this period. This initial indication was confirmed by the results of the evaluation. A total of six trial trenches established the presence of features dating to the prehistoric and Romano-British periods, within the southeastern corner of the proposed development area.

This preliminary report outlines the principal results of the excavation in the area of activity identified in the evaluation and provides a quantitative and qualitative assessment of the archive and finds. This is followed by an updated project design which includes proposals for further analysis leading to full publication of the results.

Objectives

The objective of the excavation was the preservation by record of significant archaeological features and deposits, through obtaining information on the layout, function, date, material culture and economy of the settlement focus identified during the evaluation.

Methodology

The excavation area and the access road to the south, were stripped of both topsoil (1000) and a 'B' horizon of alluvium (1001), by a tracked excavator using a toothless ditching bucket, down to the top of archaeological horizons. Archaeological deposits were planned with a total station EDM. Hand-excavation amounted to 50% of post-holes, and 20% of linear features.

Recording was by means of pre-printed pro-formas for contexts and features, plans (at 1:50), sections (at 1:10), and monochrome, print and colour slide photography. Soil samples of 20 litres were collected from datable features.

Results (Figures 3 and 4)

As the earlier evaluation suggested (Nichols 1999), the archaeological deposits were focused towards the southeast corner of both the development area and the excavation area. The results of excavation can be placed into two phases of activity on the basis of stratigraphic relationships and provisional spot dates of the pottery. A further group of features cannot be phased due to the lack of stratigraphic relationships, or diagnostic, dateable pottery.

Phase 1: Late Iron Age

Phase 2: Early Romano-British

Phase 1 (Late Iron Age)

The excavation revealed two sides of a possible enclosure ditch (F106, Figure 3). The ditch would have originally been approximately 2m in width with a V-shaped profile. Cut to a depth of 1m along the northeast side (S8, Figure 4), the ditch became gradually deeper towards the south, reaching a maximum depth of 1.2m. A smaller ditch (F105), aligned east-west, may have drained into the larger enclosure ditch during this phase, but it was not possible to establish a firm relationship between these two features due to the later recutting of the enclosure ditch (F111 - see phase 2 below). Spot-dating of the pottery has placed both these features in the late Iron Age (see below) To the southeast was a small curvilinear gully (F101), which terminated with a post-hole (F118) at the northern end. This appeared to respect the southwestern alignment of the enclosure ditch. A north-south aligned gully (F33) and ditch (F16), probably contemporary with the enclosure ditch (F106), were encountered at the southern end of evaluation Trench 2, outside the area of the subsequent excavation.

Phase 2 (Early Romano-British)

A later recut (F111) of the enclosure ditch (F106) was evident in all the excavated sections. This cut was shallower, more rounded and clearly truncated the east-west aligned ditch (F105) and the ditch and gully to the south (F16 and F33).

Not phased

Six post-holes (F26, F28, F100, F103, F104 and F108, Figure 3) to the south of the main enclosure ditch (F106/F111) could not be assigned to a phase with any degree of certainty. In the southwest corner of the excavation area was a north-south aligned V-shaped ditch (F109/F114) with a depth of 0.79m. On a more northerly alignment than the enclosure ditch, this feature (F109/F114) may represent a field boundary. The analysis of artefactual data may enable the phasing of some of these features.

ASSESSMENT

Factual Data

Site Records

	Evaluation	Excavation
Feature records	-	26
Context records	7	51
Drawings		
A1	2	6
A3	-	4
A4	9	10
Photographs		
Black and white	64	37
Colour slide	59	36
Sample records	-	11
Assemblage summaries	-	33
Survey record sheets	3	3

Finds and environmental samples

	Evaluation	Excavation
Daub/fired clay	22	265
Prehistoric pottery	1	292
Romano-British Pottery	16	53
Post-medieval pottery	2	-
Flint	-	2
Animal bone	-	40
Quernstone	1	-

Statement of potential

Stratigraphic and structural data

The concentration of structural features in the southeastern corner of the excavation suggests a focus of activity within this area. All features were sealed by alluvium and the area may have been poorly drained during the Romano-British and later periods. This alluvium probably represents several events of flooding from the Hatherley Brook to the north and may explain the concentration of structural features to the south of the enclosure, rather than to the north. The lack of structural features within the enclosure suggests that it may have been for the purpose of, for example, stock control rather than for the definition of settlement boundaries. Unfortunately, no pottery was obtained from any of the structural features outside the enclosure, so firm conclusions cannot be drawn regarding date and function of these features. The different phases of the enclosure ditch (F106, F111) will be relatively closely dateable on the basis of the pottery recovered, and full artefactual analysis may help to clarify the function of the enclosure ditch, and the smaller ditch to the west (F105).

The Pottery by Annette Hancocks

A total of 345 sherds were recovered from the excavation (Table 1). Of these, 292 sherds (81%) were of late Iron Age date, with the remaining 53 sherds (19%) comprising Romano-British pottery of early 2nd-century date. The assemblage spans the late Iron Age to the early 2nd century AD.

Pottery	Quantity	Weight (g)
Prehistoric	292	1000g
Roman	53	264g
Total Pottery	345	1264g

Table 1 - the pottery assemblage from the excavation by sherd count and weight

The prehistoric pottery

Factual data - Palaeozoic limestone tempered pottery, of late Iron Age date occurred in 62% of the excavated features. Spot dating suggests that the large enclosure ditch F106 is of later Iron Age date and is contemporary with the ditch F105. F106 was recut in the Roman period (early-2nd-century). Some 25% of the Iron Age material is residual, deriving from four contexts. This appears to be as a direct result of the later

Roman recut F111. The remaining prehistoric ceramics came from well-stratified deposits. No sampling bias was observed although a small quantity of material appears to be abraded and poorly leached and has affected some of the Palaeozoic material. This will not affect the long-term storage of the pottery.

A good range and variety of locally and regionally produced pottery was observed. The fabrics were very standardised, with three clear groups observed: Palaeozoic limestone, grog and shell tempered wares. Diagnostic sherds were recognised which should enable the dating of features to be tightened up. These include a globular/ovoid jar with a flat, externally expanded rim.

A single undiagnostic body sherd from Trench 2, context 21 was recovered during the evaluation. The flint-tempered fabric was not comparable to any recognised during the assessment of the excavated material.

Potential - This is small, but significant assemblage which should establish the chronological development of the site. The assemblage as a whole can be compared with material excavated at nearby sites such as Gilder's Paddock, Bishops Cleeve (Hancocks forthcoming) and similar assemblages from sites such as Guiting Power (Saville 1984). The possibility of continued occupation from the late Iron Age to the early Roman period can be addressed by establishing the ceramic sequence, thus adding to our understanding of the nature and character of Iron Age occupation in rural Gloucestershire.

Romano-British pottery

Factual data - The Romano-British pottery assemblage comprised 53 sherds (15%) of the pottery recovered from the site (Table 1). All of the material derived from the recut ditch F111 and dated to the early 2nd century AD. Three distinctive fabric types, Black-Burnished ware, Severn Valley ware and micaceous greyware were recognised. Diagnostic material included the base and handle of a tankard, a handle of a flagon in Severn Valley ware and an acute lattice decorated sherd and jar in Black-Burnished ware.

Additionally, 16 sherds of Romano-British pottery were recovered during the evaluation and reported on by Timby (1999).

Potential - This is small, but significant assemblage which should establish the chronological development of the site. The possibility of continued occupation from the late Iron Age to the early Roman period can be addressed by establishing the ceramic sequence, thus adding to our understanding of the nature and character of Iron Age occupation in rural Gloucestershire.

The assemblage offers the opportunity to explore several of the major research issues identified by the SGRP on rural assemblages. This is especially the case since rural assemblages are still under-represented. Willis (1997, 55) notes that less than 25% of excavations in the region were on 'rural' sites other than villas. This reflects the rural imbalance in favour of high status sites. It is important that these rural assemblages are studied to establish the social, economic and functional aspects of sites, as well as forming the only dating evidence.

Storage and curation

The assemblage does not provide any long term storage problems. The final archive will be deposited at Cheltenham Museum and Art Gallery.

Recommendations for further work on both assemblages

Pottery to be recorded to PCRG and SGRP standards and guidelines

Petrography: 2 pottery samples and 1 thin-section on quernstone

Petrography Report: Rob Ixer

Drawing: 3 rim sherds

Pottery report: Includes pro forma, fabric identifications, data entry, summations, report writing, editing

Fired clay/daub assessment by Annette Hancocks

Factual data - A small quantity of fired clay/daub; some 265 fragments were recognised and recovered from 13 contexts. The material was rapidly scanned for evidence of diagnostic loomweight fragments, wattle impressions, clay plate fragments and possible briquetage. None of this material was diagnostic in nature. All the fired clay/daub derived from well-stratified deposits associated with a good prehistoric pottery assemblage. No preservation bias was observed. A further 22 fragments were recovered from the evaluation (Nichols 1999).

Potential - With the exception of 10 fragments, the remaining 255 pieces of fired clay/daub derived from the Late Iron Age phase 1. This is significant and will warrant further analysis. Of the phase 1 material some 226 pieces derive from F105, the largest single volume of material. This feature must have been clay lined at some point.

Recommendations for further work - Little diagnostic material was observed, although the spatial distribution of the fired clay/daub should be analysed in further detail in an attempt to determine the function of the features from which it derives.

The Flint by Lynne Bevan

Results - A flake and a scraper were recovered, both from a cleaning horizon (1001). The raw material used for both items was a very dark grey, good quality flint with traces of a 'fresh' white cortex. This suggests that the flint was obtained from primary deposits (a flint mine), rather than flint pebbles from a secondary source, such as river gravels.

Although not generally datable as a tool type, a Neolithic to Bronze Age date is most probable for the roughly-ovoid side and end scraper. The broad flake might be of a similar date to the scraper. The colour and cortex of the flints are so similar that the two items might even have originated from the same nodule which appears to have been imported to the site from the chalklands.

Potential - Since the two flint items are not closely datable and were both recovered from unstratified deposits, there is no necessity for any further action beyond a basic cataloguing of the material.

The Animal Bone by Umberto Albarella

Methodology - A small number of animal bones were recovered during the evaluation and excavation. Most of the material was collected by hand, although bulk soil samples were also collected. Three selected samples of 20 litres each were processed for the purposes of assessment. Animal bones from the flotation residue were collected on a 2mm sieve.

The mammal bones were recorded following a modified version of the method described in Davis (1992) and Albarella and Davis (1994). In brief, all teeth (lower and upper) and a restricted suite of parts of the postcranial skeleton were recorded and used in counts. These are: skull (zygomaticus), scapula (glenoid articulation), distal humerus, distal radius, proximal ulna, carpal 2-3, distal metacarpal, pelvis (ischial part of acetabulum), distal femur, distal tibia, calcaneum (sustentaculum), lateral part of the astragalus, naviculo-cuboid, distal metatarsal and the proximal ends of phalanges 1, 2 and 3. At least 50% of a given part had to be present for it to be counted.

Results - The bone assemblage is divided into two phases:

Phase 1 - late Iron Age

Phase 2 - early Romano-British.

The material from the evaluation only provided an identifiable cattle metapodial and is not further discussed in this report.

The preservation of the earlier material is poor, whereas the Romano-British bone is generally in good condition. Cattle foot bones from context 1041 (enclosure ditch, F111) are in articulation and therefore suggest that the material was found in a primary deposit. The worse preservation of the earlier material is also attested by the higher proportion of teeth in this group (Table 2). Teeth are very durable and tend to survive even in harsh soil conditions. This has also caused a stronger recovery bias for the Iron Age material, as loose teeth are often overlooked during the excavation, but are more often recovered in the soil samples (Table 2).

Cattle and sheep/goat, as is typical for the period, are the dominant species, but pig, equid (probably horse), dog and cat bones are also present. The predominance of cattle over sheep/goat in the hand-collected assemblage is probably due to a recovery bias (Table 3). Two caprine bones from the Romano-British level could be attributed with certainty to the sheep. In Britain sheep have always been much more common than goats, including both the Iron Age and Roman periods. Butchery marks were noted on a few bones; ageing and metric data were taken but are of little use for such a small assemblage. However, it might be worth mentioning that some of the cattle bones belonged to very small animals, normally associated with native rather than fully Romanised settlements.

	Late Iron Age (only hand-coll.)	Early Romano-British (only hand-coll.)	Total hand-collected	Total sieved
Teeth	10	2	12	-
Bones	6	17	23	5

Table 2. Count of teeth and post-cranial bones.

	Late Iron Age			Early Romano-British
	Hand-collected	Sieved	Total	Hand-collected
Cattle	9	-	9	13
Sheep/Goat	4	5	9	2
Pig	-	-	-	2
Equid	1	-	1	1
Dog	1	-	1	-
Cat	-	-	-	1
Turdid	1	-	1	-
TOTAL	16	5	21	19

Table 3. Numbers of counted animal bones.

Potential - Unfortunately this assemblage is too small to provide any further information on the use of animals at Arle Court.

The charred plant remains by Pam Grinter

In total, three samples from the excavations were selected for assessment in order to determine:

- if charred plant remains are present.
- what the charred plant remains may tell us about the agricultural activities taking place near to the enclosure.
- what the plant remains may tell us about the surrounding environment.

Method - Soil samples were processed by bucket flotation. Bicarbonate of soda was added to each sample to aid the breakdown of the heavy clay soil. Flots were sieved to 500µm and the heavy residues were sieved to 1mm. All samples were air-dried.

The flots were scanned under a low-powered microscope at magnifications between x10 and x25. The assessment of the flots was made without reference to a seed collection and as a result all identifications should be seen as provisional. In addition, the speed of assessment may also mean that smaller items, such as weed seeds, were overlooked. The heavy residues have not been examined for this assessment and, therefore, the results presented here are solely based on the flots.

Results - Table 4 summarises the assessment results for the three samples examined. Only one sample contained charred plant remains (Sample 8 context F105/1018). The cereal grains and rachis fragments present in this sample were badly eroded and

poorly preserved. Sample 1 (F103/107) contained a small amount of charcoal.

Potential - As only a few charred plant remains were present in one sample and in view of the fact that the soil from this site is heavy clay, which makes processing both difficult and time consuming, it is not recommended that any further work on the analysis of the charred plant remains from this site takes place.

Sample	Feature	Context	Description	Sample Vol.	Flot Vol.	Further analysis	Comments
1	F103	1007	Fill of Posthole	5L	20ml	NO	No seeds present Charcoal +
3	F106	1014	Enclosure ditch	16L	<5ml	NO	No seeds present Charcoal +
8	F105	1018	Fill of short linear	20L	40ml	NO	3 cereal grains, 4 eroded rachis bases Charcoal ++

Key: Charcoal + = <10ml of charcoal, Charcoal ++ = between 10-100ml of charcoal, Charcoal +++ = >100ml of charcoal

Table 4. Results of the assessment of charred plant remains

UPDATED RESEARCH DESIGN

Research Objectives

The site at Arle Court, although relatively small, has the potential to make a significant contribution to research into rural sites in this area, in particular the nature of the transition from the Late Iron Age to the Romano-British period, with the possibility of continuous occupation through the transition period. The animal bone assemblage and the charred plant remains are deemed to be too limited to be worthy of further analysis. However, the ceramic assemblage, although relatively small, will form an important addition to the regional corpus, and offers the opportunity to enhance our understanding of the nature of rural settlement in Gloucestershire. Non-hillfort settlements in the Iron Age have historically been overshadowed by the hillforts (Saville 1984, 149), and in the Romano-British period, research into rural sites has been dominated by high-status villa sites (Willis 1997, 55). The ceramic assemblage from a relatively low-status rural site such as Arle Court can be usefully compared with assemblages from other sites in the region, thus enhancing research into the social, economic and functional character of such sites.

Following a full examination of the pottery and fired clay/daub, an updated report on the results of the excavation will be prepared and offered to the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeology Society for publication in their transactions. An attempt will be made to review the results in the context of other excavated Iron Age/Romano-British sites in the area, in particular Guiting Power in the Cotswolds and Gilder's Paddock at Bishops Cleeve.

Publication Synopsis

An Iron Age/Romano-British Settlement at Arle Court, Cheltenham, Gloucestershire

by Richard Cuttler and Lucie Dingwall

Summary

Acknowledgements

Introduction - the site and its landscape setting, background to the excavation, objectives and methodology

The Results - an illustrated account outlining main features and site characteristics, accompanied by a series of specialist reports on the artefactual and environmental data collected

Discussion

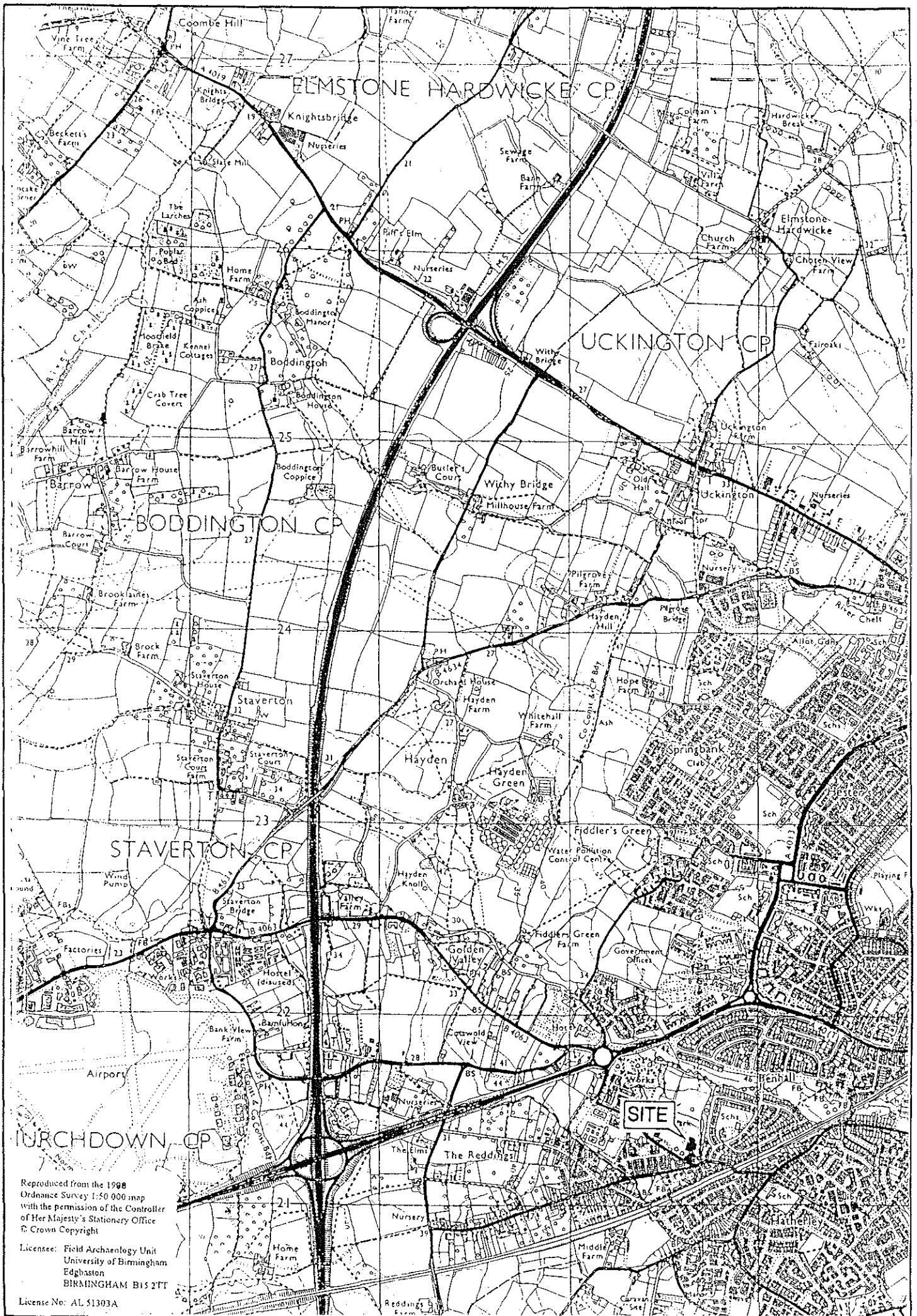
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Acknowledgements

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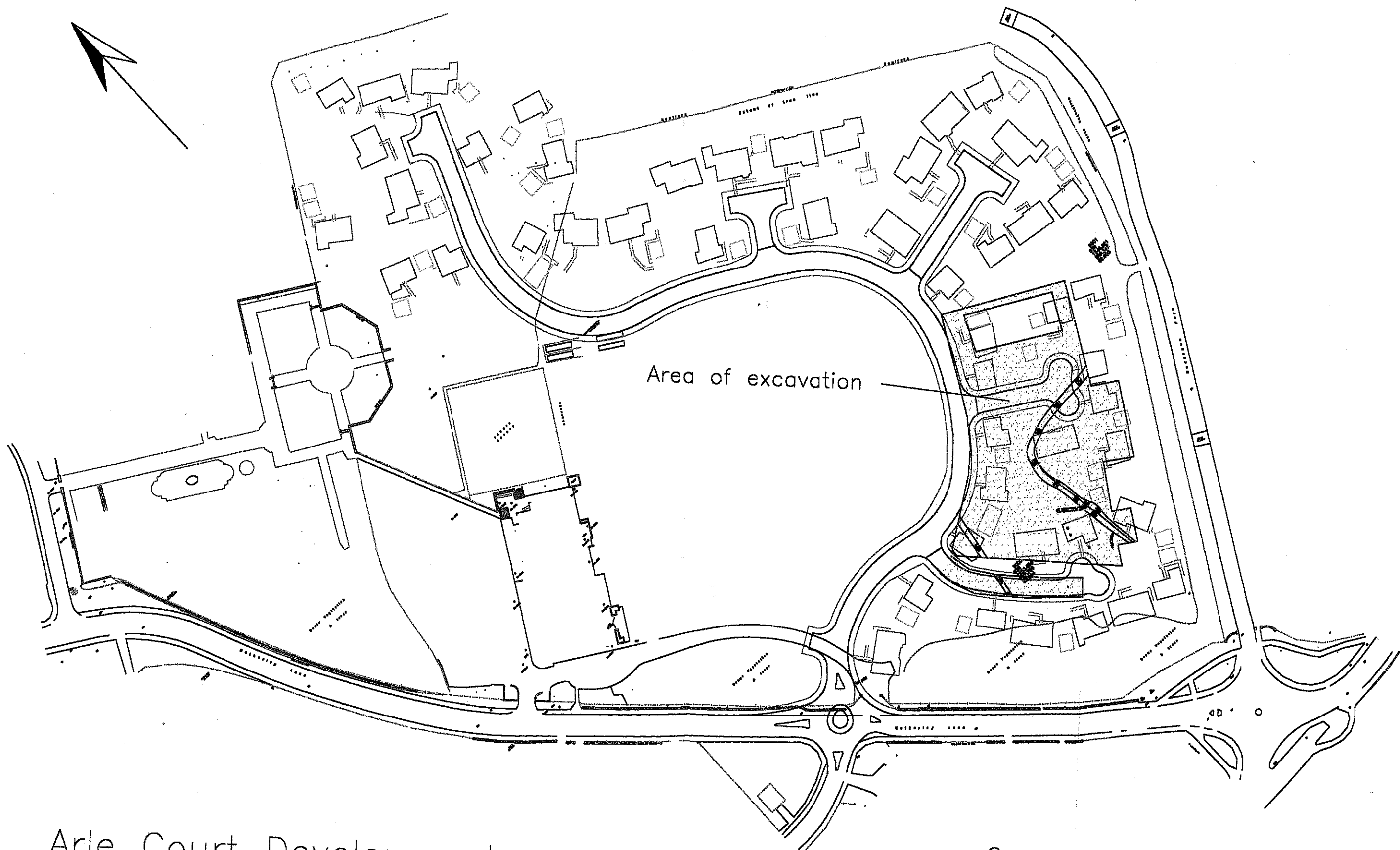


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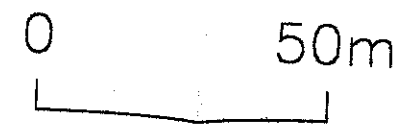
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Fig.1



Arle Court Development

Figure 2



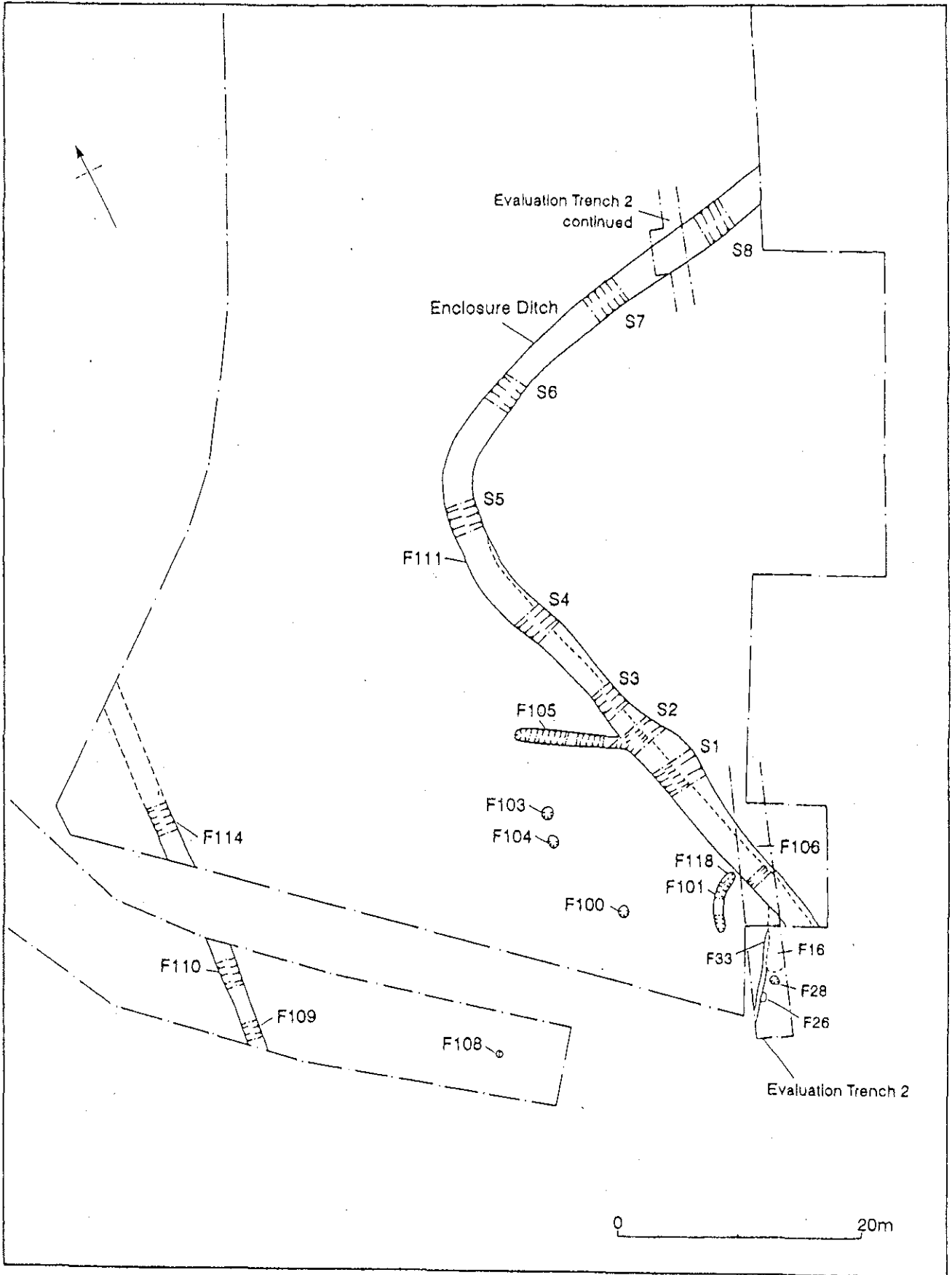


Fig.3

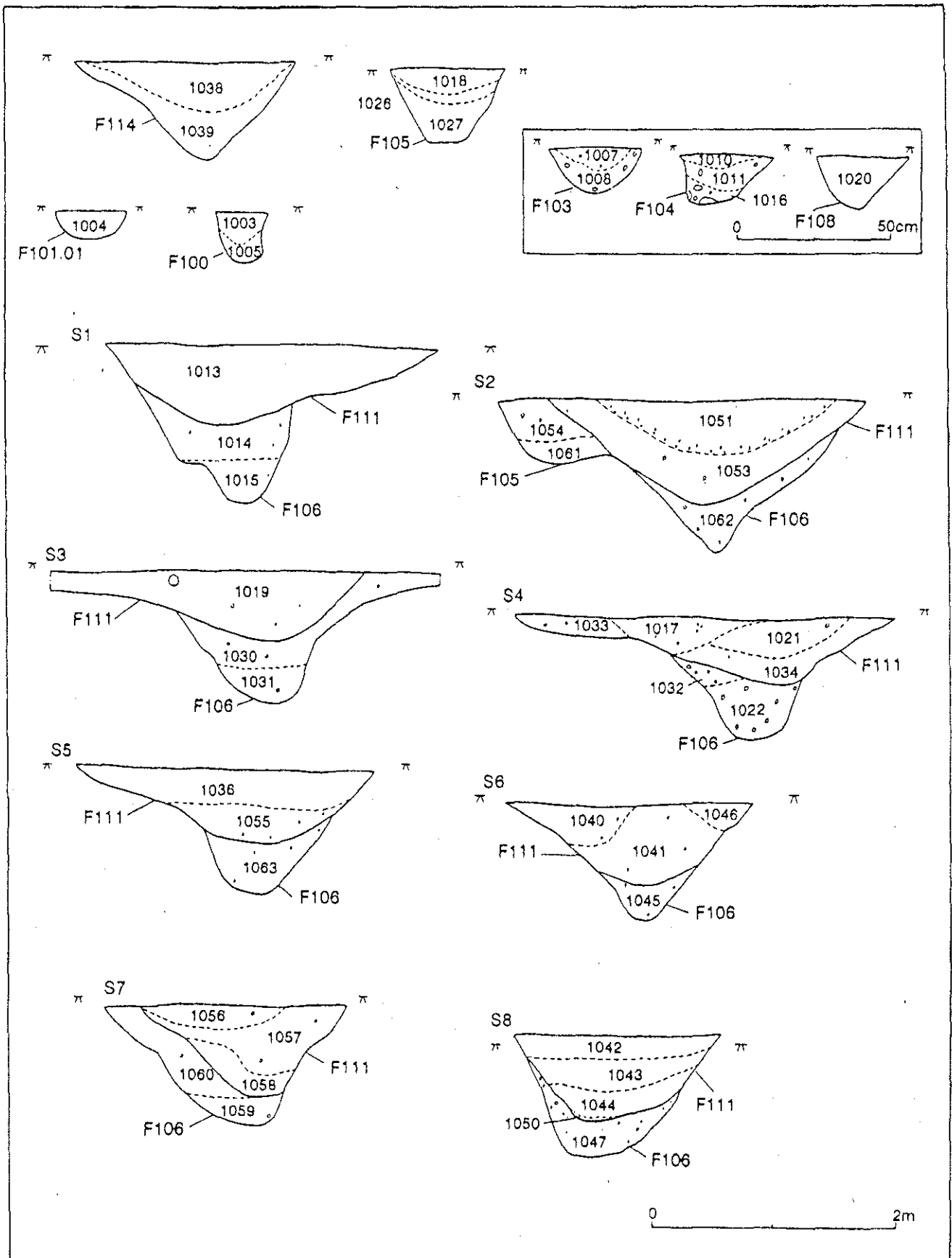


Fig. 4