Woolhampton Quarry, Woolhampton, Berkshire: An Archaeological Watching Brief and Salvage Recording. 2001

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Woolhampton Quarry, Woolhampton, Berkshire: An Archaeological Watching Brief and Salvage Recording. 2001

by

Kate Bain

For further information please contact:
Birmingham Archaeology
The University of Birmingham
Edgbaston
Birmingham B15 2TT
Tel: 0121 414 5513
Fax: 0121 414 5516
E-Mail: bham-arch@bham.ac.uk
Web Address: http://www.barch.bham.ac.uk/bufau

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SUMMARY

During September 2001 Birmingham Archaeology, formerly Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit (BUFAU) undertook an intermittent watching brief at Woolhampton Quarry, Woolhampton, Berkshire. This was commissioned by Phoenix Consulting Archaeology Limited, on behalf of Lafarge Aggregates Limited. All work on this watching brief and concurrent salvage recording was carried out in accordance with an archaeological specification prepared by Tempus Reparatum Archaeological and Historical Associates Limited (TR 31090DCB). During the course of the intermittent watching brief two areas of archaeological interest were identified within the area of proposed gravel extraction. These comprised a row of wooden stakes, radiocarbon dated to the late medieval period, which lay along the eastern edge of a palaeochannel, and the partial remains of a brushwood trackway on a rough east-west alignment which produced a modern radiocarbon date. These features were subject to salvage recording prior to their destruction as a result of quarrying activities.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

An intermittent watching brief was carried out during 2001 At Woolhampton Quarry, Woolhampton, Berkshire by Birmingham Archaeology (formerly Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit (BUFAU)). This project was commissioned by Phoenix Consulting Archaeology Limited on behalf of Lafarge Aggregates Limited. All work carried out in the course of the watching brief and all subsequent salvage recording was undertaken in accordance with a specification prepared by Tempus Reparatum Archaeological and Historical Associates Limited (1995). The work undertaken in 2001, which is detailed in this report was part of a programme of ongoing work at the quarry (now concluded), and represents a phase of work, which was located in the southeast quadrant of the quarry.

2.0 SITE LOCATION AND GEOLOGY (Fig. 1)

Woolhampton Quarry, centred on NGR SU 570 660, lies on the southern floodplain of the River Kennet and is bounded by the river to the north and a minor road to the east (Fig. 1). The mineral deposits here are valley bottom gravels known as the Woolhampton Gravel Formation. These are overlain by more recent floodplain deposits; a mixture of silts, peats and tufas known as the Midgham Peat Formation. A thin loamy topsoil is derived from this, much of which has been under cultivation prior to quarrying. For a more detailed assessment of the geomorphology, sediments and soils see reports by Collins (1993) and Jordan (1993).

3.0 ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

Assessments of the whole quarry extension began in 1988, were ongoing during this phase of archaeological work, and have now been concluded. Since 1988 several phases of site evaluation have been carried out. These comprise desktop evaluations and field investigations, the latter by the excavation of test pits and trial trenches and with the maintenance of watching briefs (Fig. 2). Although prehistoric, Romano-British and medieval artefact scatters were discovered during these phases of work, there have been very few positively identified archaeological features. There is, however, evidence of the extraction and burning of peat. This activity appears to have occurred on quite a large scale in the area of the Kennet Valley in the 18th and 19th centuries AD. It has been suggested that in the case of this site, extensive peat extraction may potentially have destroyed a significant amount of archaeology (Leach & Hovey 1998).

4. AIMS AND METHODS

The aim of the watching brief was to monitor groundworks which took place within one specific area of the quarry, in order to determine the presence of archaeological deposits below the modern ground surface and to provide an understanding of the history and archaeology. All archaeological deposits which were encountered during the course of the watching brief were to be recorded in order to preserve their character, extent, state of preservation and date. These would be identified and recorded by means of pre-printed *pro-forma* sheets for contexts and features. Plans (at 1:20 and 1:100), sections (at 1:10 and 1:20), and monochrome, colour slide and colour print photography was to supplement this record. These records, together with recovered artefacts and environmental evidence, would form the site archive. Where no archaeological deposits were identified a record of the stratigraphy was to be made. The archive is currently stored at the offices of Birmingham Archaeology.

The aims were achieved through a series of site visits during the contractors' groundworks during 2001. Groundworks comprised the stripping of topsoil and subsoil over the specified area.

5.0 RESULTS

During the monitoring of groundworks, two areas of archaeological interest were identified (Fig. 2). Both of these comprised wooden structures which had been preserved by waterlogging.

The first of these archaeological features (Fig. 3 and Plate 1) was a series of 13 worked wooden stakes, observed initially in the quarry face as a result of storm erosion. The stakes varied in size and state of preservation although primarily they were square cut and worked to a point. They were aligned roughly north-south for a distance of approximately 3.0m. The alignment of stakes was located in an area of brown silty clay (1003) c.5.0m wide and 0.7m deep. The dimensions of this deposit fluctuated over the wider monitored area. This band of silty clay extended north-

south across the whole area. A calibrated radiocarbon date for the stakes was established between 1400AD and 1640AD (Beta Analytic Inc., 2002).

The second significant feature observed during this season's work was initially discovered by a team of archaeologists from Reading University. This was interpreted as a brushwood platform (Fig. 4 & 5 and Plates 2 & 3). The greater part of this feature had been excavated and recorded by Reading University. Birmingham Archaeology recorded the remainder of the platform (F100) within the parameters of the existing watching brief and salvage recording operation. A calibrated radiocarbon date for the trackway was established between 1800AD and 1850AD (The University of Waikato, 2002).

Two trenches were excavated by mechanical excavator under archaeological supervision along the alignment of the platform. Trench 1, which measured 5.75m x 1.5m was aligned roughly east–west and Trench 2, 4.5m x 1.5m was aligned north–south. Both revealed the remains of a partially preserved brushwood feature. It was constructed of overlapping, partially interwoven, thin branches. Within Trench 1 the branches could be seen predominantly to overlie a grey clay layer (1004) on the northern edge, giving way to a peat layer (1002) toward the southern edge. The exposed portion of the feature in Trench 2 was located in the upper 0.2m of the peat layer (2002). Although both trenches contained parts of the platform, the nature of the wood in each trench was slightly different.

The wood visible in Trench 1 comprised primarily long thin branch segments, which measured on average between 1.20m long and 1.70 m in length and 0.05m in diameter. By comparison, the wood overlying the peat surface in Trench 2 was represented by much flatter, broader pieces resembling roughly hewn timber rather than interwoven branch material.

Both sides of the trackway were overlain by several layers. The primary deposit, a light brown silty clay layer was in turn overlain by a gravelly sandy silt layer. Whilst in the southern end of Trench 1 a black layer of peat sealed the archaeology. Due to the degradation of the wood and the shallow depth of the feature no obvious elements of the construction method could be understood in the sections excavated through it. No associated artefacts were recorded from either trench or from the contexts above or below it. A modern land drain (F101), aligned northeast–southwest was observed, which cut through the feature at the eastern end of Trench 1.

6.0 DISCUSSION

The surviving archaeology comprised waterlogged wood deposits. It is suggested that the deposit into which the wooden stakes were driven may be a palaeochannel, possibly related to the nearby River Enborne. The preserved wood seemed to be set exclusively into this deposit along its western edge to a depth of c.0.5m, and is aligned in the same direction (north-south). It is likely that the wooden stakes were driven into this deposit and/or the deposit built up around them.

Why the stakes were only present for a length of *c.*3.0m is unclear. It may be due simply to an accident of preservation. Their purpose in this area is not clearly

understood either. As a result it is not possible to place them in any definitive context.

The wooden track was preserved across an area of peat deposits, which could indicate that the structure was built in order to facilitate dry passage across boggy land. It may also relate to the palaeochannel which snakes across the area of this site. Whilst it appears from the evidence of the radiocarbon testing that the two wooden structures are not contemporary. It is likely that both were constructed to exploit the peat deposits. The majority of the trackway lay on top of the peat and may have been part of a network of routes laid to facilitate exploitation of the resource during the 18th – 19th centuries. It is apparent therefore that in the past, wet conditions at this location not only preserved the archaeological deposits, but may also have given rise to their initial construction.

7.0 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The project was managed by Gary Coates and undertaken by Kate Bain, Mary Duncan, Nick Flavel, and Phil Mann for Birmingham Archaeology (BUFAU). Thanks are due to Dr. Andrew Richmond of Phoenix Consulting Archaeology Ltd who acted as archaeological consultant on behalf of Lafarge Aggregates Ltd and provided support and advise through to the resolution of the project, and to Veronica Fiorato of West Berkshire Council. Kate Bain wrote the report and Mark Hewson edited it.

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Study Area
THATCHAM
Reproduced from the 1998 Ordnance Survey 1:50,000 map with the permission of the Controller of Her Majesty's Stationary Office.
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Fig.1

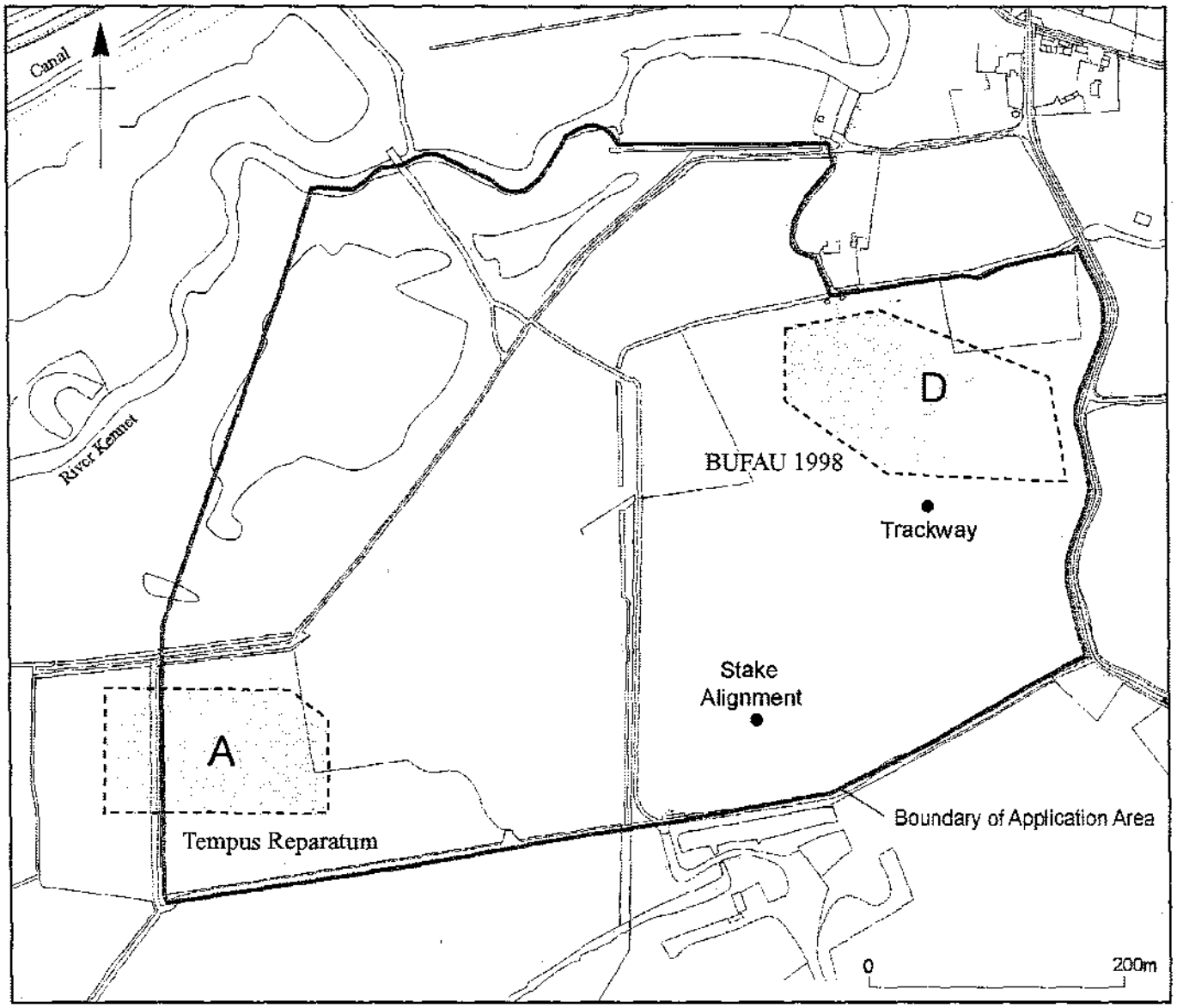

Canal
River Kennet
D
BUFAU 1998
Trackway
Stake
Alignment
A
Tempus Reparatum
Boundary of Application Area
0
200m

Fig. 2

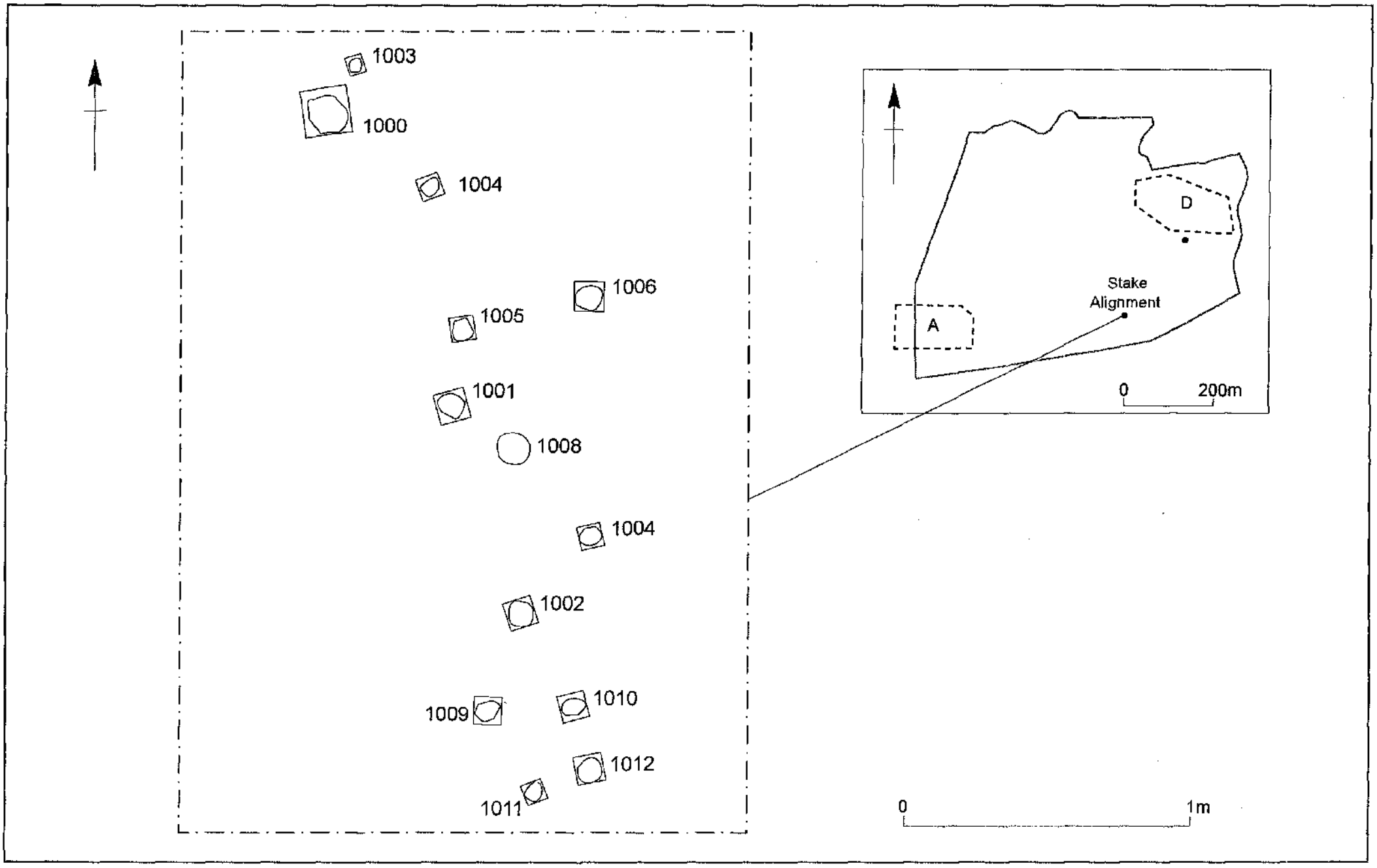

1003
1000
1004
1006
1005
1001
1008
1004
1002
1009
1010
1012
1011
D
Stake
Alignment
A
0
200m
0
1m

Fig.3

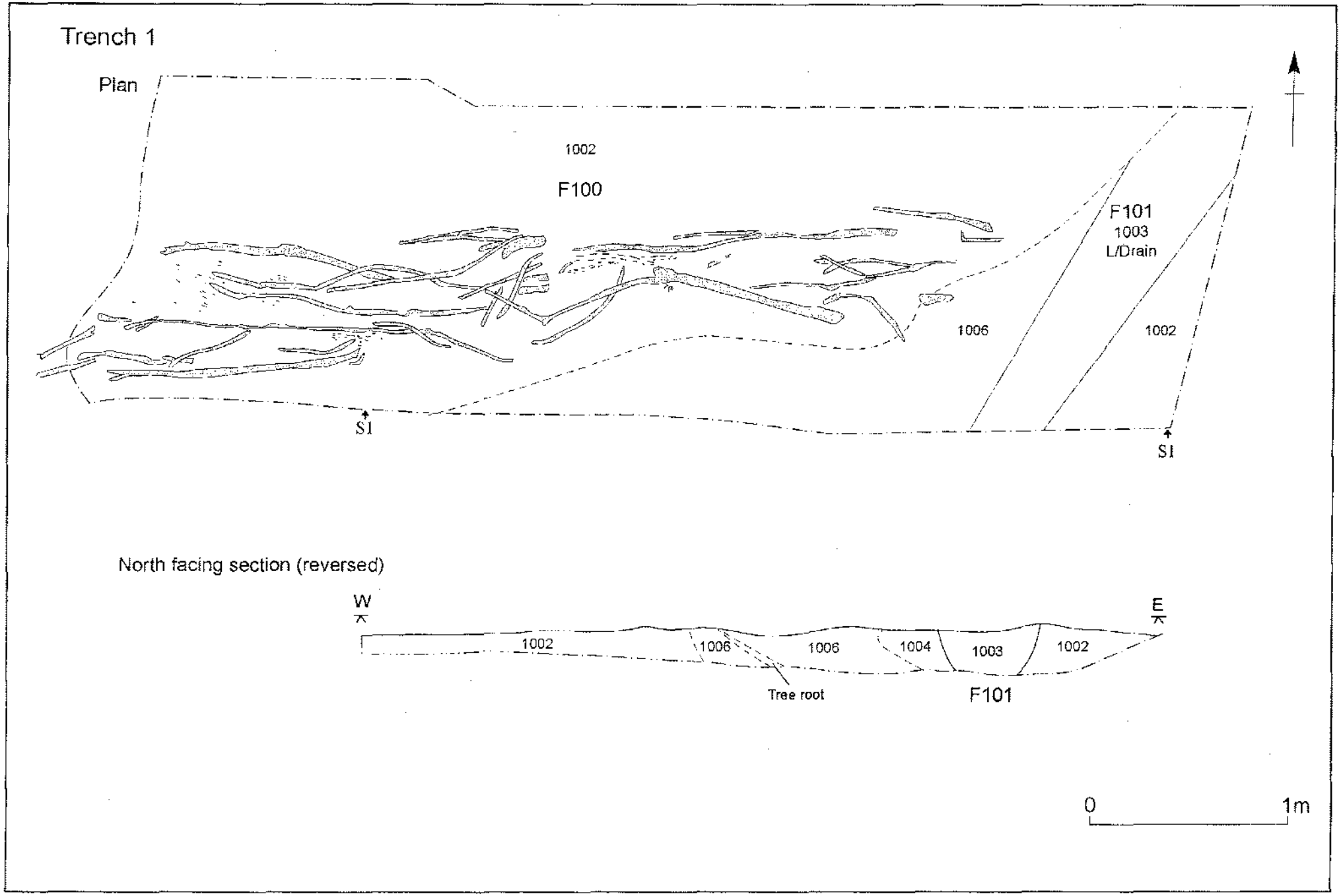

Trench 1
Plan
1002
F100
F101
1003
L/Drain
1006
1002
S1
S1
North facing section (reversed)
W
E
1002
1006
1006
1004
1003
1002
Tree root
F101
0
1m

Fig.4

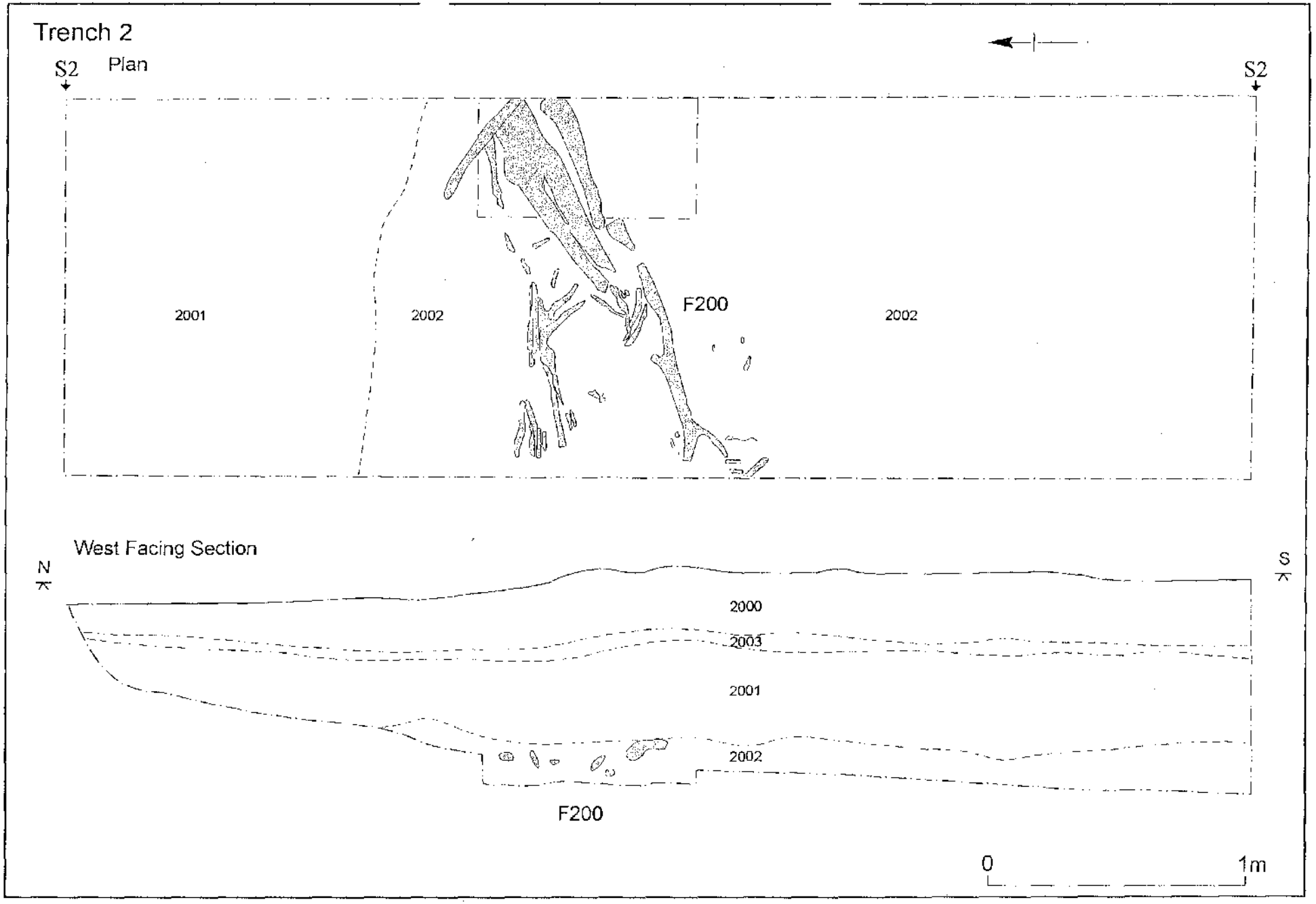

Trench 2
S2
Plan
S2
2001
2002
F200
2002
West Facing Section
N
S
2000
2003
2001
2002
F200
0
1m

Fig. 5

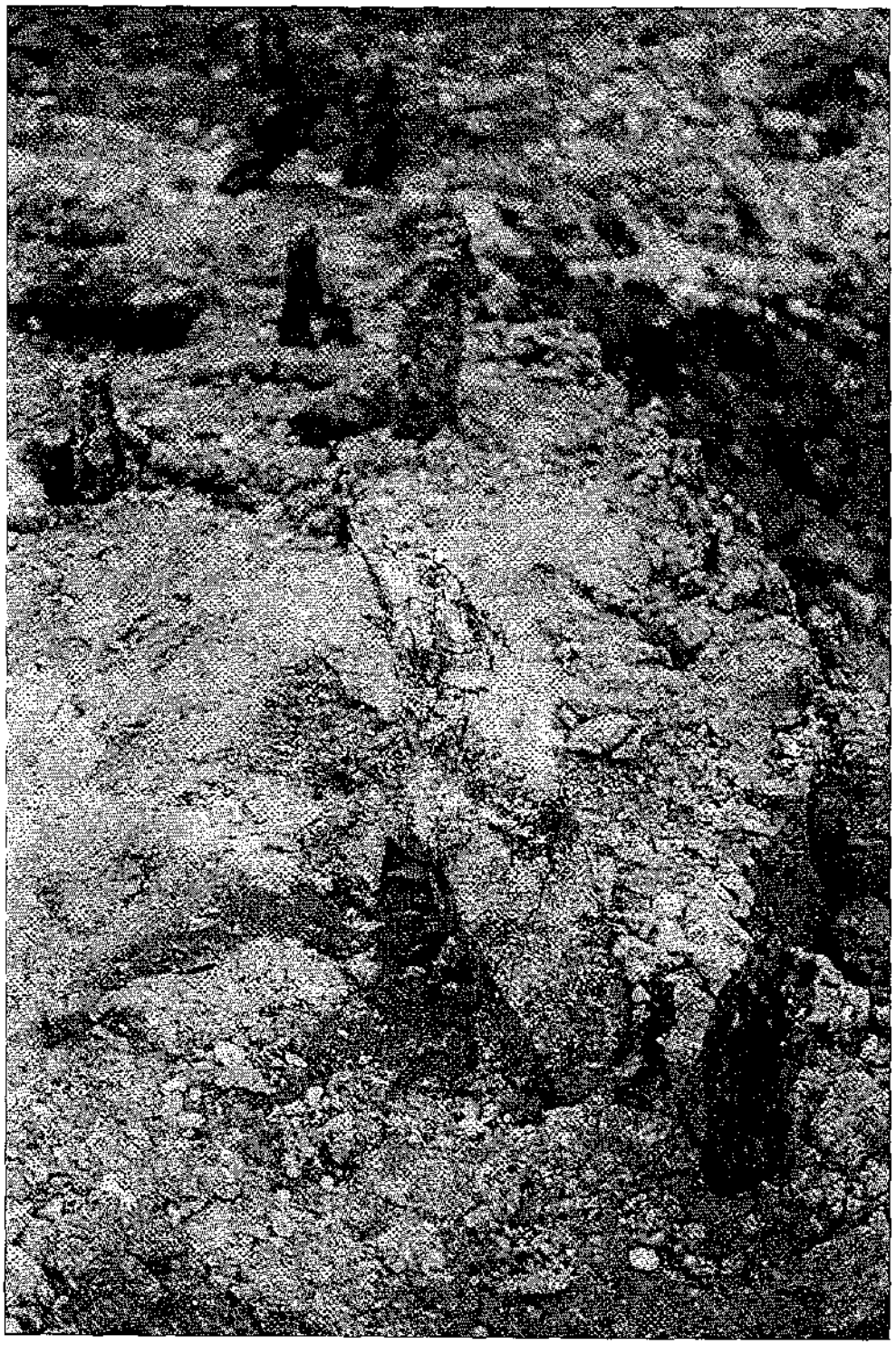


Plate 1

Plate 2

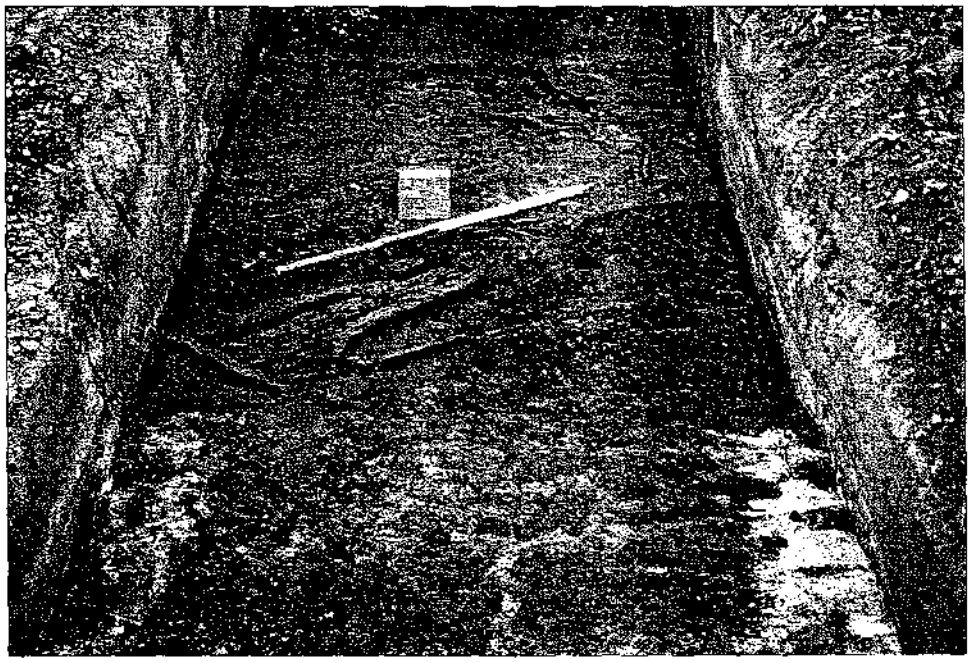


Plate 3

CALIBRATION OF RADIOCARBON AGE TO CALENDAR YEARS

(Variables: est. C13/C12=-25:lab. mult=1)

Laboratory number: **Beta-151215**

Conventional radiocarbon age[1]: **430±70 BP**

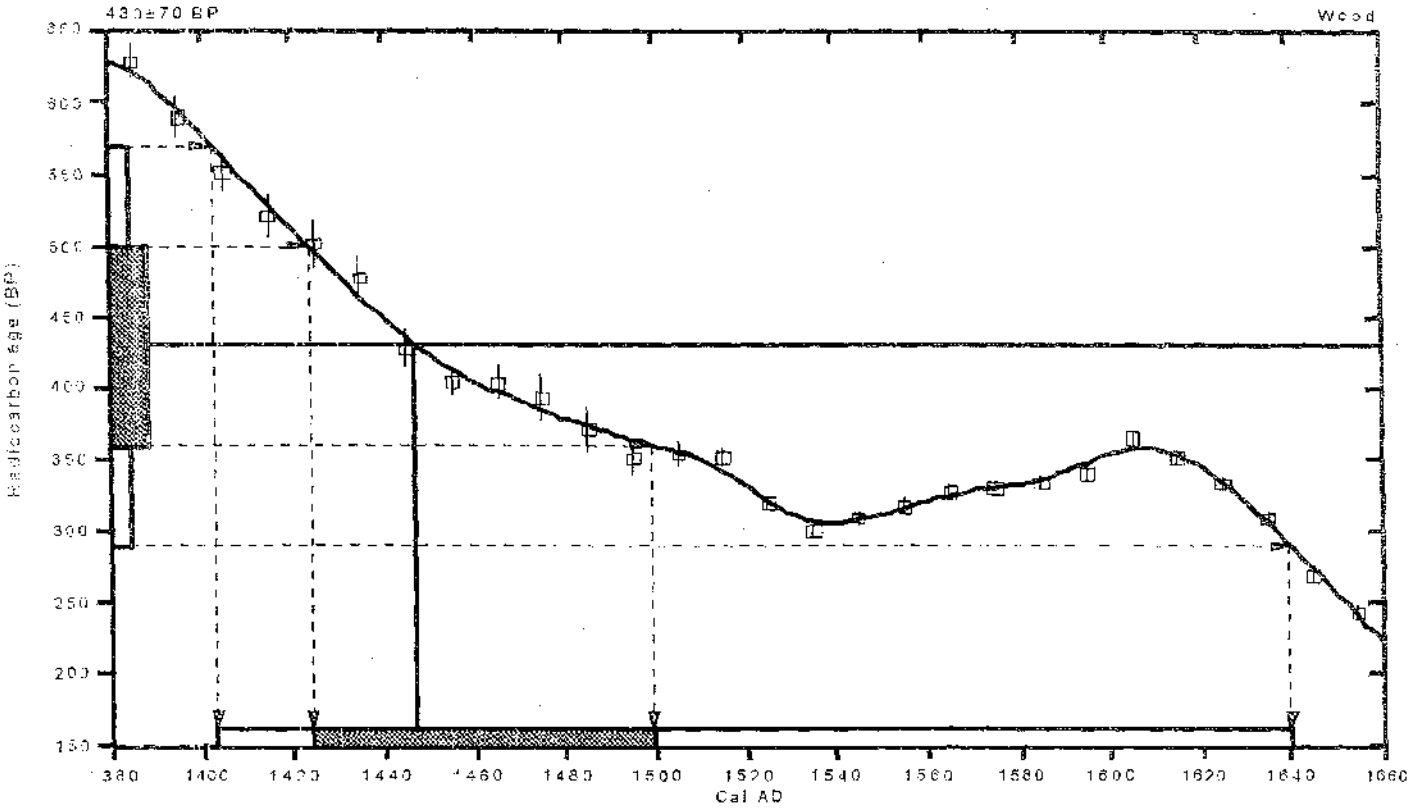
2 Sigma calibrated result: **Cal AD 1400 to 1640 (Cal BP 550 to 310)**
(95% probability)

[1] C13/C12 ratio estimated

Intercept data

Intercept of radiocarbon age with calibration curve: Cal AD 1450 (Cal BP 500)

1 Sigma calibrated result: Cal AD 1420 to 1500 (Cal BP 530 to 450)
(68% probability)



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Database used

Calibration Database
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Beta Analytic Inc.

4985 SW 74 Court, Miami, Florida 33155 USA • Tel: (305) 667 5167 • Fax: (305) 663 0964 • E-Mail: beta@radiocarbon.com

The University of Waikato

Radiocarbon Dating Laboratory

Private Bag 3105
Hamilton,
New Zealand.
Fax +64 7 838 4192
Ph +64 7 838 4278
email c14@waikato.ac.nz
Head: Dr Alan Hogg

Report on Radiocarbon Age Determination for Wk- 10524

Submitter	M Ciaraldi
Submitter's Code	Woolhampton 07 - F100 (1002) a.1
Site & Location	Woolhampton, Staffordshire, United Kingdom
Sample Material	Small twigs from wooden platform
Physical Pretreatment	Surfaces scraped clean. The wood was chopped up into small splinters.
Chemical Pretreatment	Sample was washed in hot 10% HCl, rinsed and treated with hot 2% NaOH. The NaOH insoluble fraction was treated with hot 10% HCl, filtered, rinsed and dried.

$d^{14}C$	-24.6 ± 3.6	‰
$\delta^{13}C$	-26.0 ± 0.2	‰
$D^{14}C$	-22.7 ± 4.4	‰
% Modern	97.7 ± 0.4	%
Result	**184 ± 37 BP (Modern)**	

Comments

Ali Hogg
2/9/04

- Result is *Conventional Age or % Modern* as per Stuiver and Polach, 1977, Radiocarbon 19, 355-363. This is based on the Libby half-life of 5568 yr with correction for isotopic fractionation applied. This age is normally quoted in publications and must include the appropriate error term and Wk number.
- Quoted errors are 1 standard deviation due to counting statistics multiplied by an experimentally determined Laboratory Error Multiplier of 1.217 .
- The isotopic fractionation, $\delta^{13}C$, is expressed as ‰ wrt PDB.
- Results are reported as *% Modern* when the conventional age is younger than 200 yr BP.