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Tameside Park, Aldridge Road,
Perry Barr, Birmingham:
an archaeological evaluation 2006

UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

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Tameside Park, Aldridge Road, Perry Barr, Birmingham: an archaeological evaluation 2006

By

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For

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TAMESIDE PARK, ALDRIDGE ROAD, PERRY BARR, BIRMINGHAM:

AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION, 2006

CONTENTS

SUMMARY

An archaeological evaluation was undertaken in January and February 2006 at Tameside Park, Aldridge Road, Perry Barr, Birmingham (NGR 40567 27895) in advance of a proposed development. The evaluation was informed by a desk-based assessment which highlighted that the course of the Roman road, Icknield Street, was likely to pass through the site. The presence of a watercourse depicted on historic maps also suggested the possibility of water management features, perhaps relating to a mill, surviving within the site. In addition it was highlighted that the location of the site, north of the River Tame, may indicate high potential for the preservation of organic archaeological and palaeo-environmental deposits.

The site comprises an area of former playing fields in the north and a southern area of built-up ground, adjacent to the river, probably created in the 20th century. Eight trenches were excavated and in the northern area of the site natural gravels were revealed, disturbed by natural tree root activity and overlain by a black silty clay peat-rich layer. To the south and east the peat-rich layer was much deeper, although it was contaminated by modern material and was below the water table.

The presence of undisturbed waterlogged archaeological or palaeo-environmental deposits within the site remains a possibility, although the southern area of the site has been extensively levelled with modern material, which may have contaminated any natural organic layers. Artefacts recovered included an assemblage of 19th century buttons and button blanks in a redeposited context, together with a small quantity of 19th and 20th century ceramics recovered from natural tree boles. No evidence of the Roman road or any other archaeological features was recorded.

TAMESIDE PARK, ALDRIDGE ROAD, PERRY BARR, BIRMINGHAM

AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION, 2005.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background to the project

This report provides the results of an archaeological evaluation undertaken by Birmingham Archaeology in January and February 2006 at Tameside Park, Aldridge Road, Perry Barr (Fig. 1; NGR 40567 27895). The evaluation was undertaken on behalf of Hinton Properties Ltd, following a requirement by Birmingham City Council Development Directorate as a response to Planning Policy Guidance Note 16, *Archaeology and Planning* (DoE 1990) and in accordance with Policy 8.36 of the Birmingham Unitary Development Plan and Birmingham City Council Archaeology Strategy (2004). The archaeological evaluation was undertaken in accordance with a brief prepared by Birmingham City Council (2005) and a detailed methodology in the form of a Written Scheme of Investigation (Birmingham Archaeology 2006) agreed in advance with the Birmingham City Council Planning Archaeologist. The evaluation conformed to guidelines set out by the Institute of Field Archaeologists (2001).

1.2 Location and geology

The site is located to the east of Aldridge Road, Perry Barr in a generally built-up urban area (Fig. 1; NGR 40567 27895). The site lies immediately to the south of the M6 motorway and to the north of the River Tame, which flows through a canalised channel. The south-west area of the site was formerly occupied by a car dealership in recent times and the southern area is built-up by several metres when compared with the northern part of the site. The latter area is characterised by former playing fields, and bordered on the west side by housing and an electricity sub-station. The eastern part of the site is bounded by a modern transport depot.

The site lies within the valley of the River Tame at c.96m above OD and is located immediately to the north of the river. The geology of the site is characterised by alluvial deposits associated with the river, and lies upon an island of boulder clay surrounded by sands and gravels (BGS map sheet 168). Geotechnical bore holes and test pits within the site have recorded the presence of alluvium, black organic clay and peats in the southern area between c.92m above OD and 95m above OD, overlying fluvioglacial gravels (Crossfield Consulting 2002). It is notable that peat deposits have also been recorded on another site in the vicinity (Birmingham City Council 2005). The alluvial layers are considered to vary in depth from between 0.8m and 1.4m (Crossfield Consulting 2002, 4), with the greatest depth of alluvium in the southeast corner of the site. No alluvial deposits were recorded in the northern area of the site, currently playing fields. Here topsoil and recent deposits overlay fluvioglacial gravels.

2 ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

Prior to the archaeological evaluation of the site a desk-based assessment was undertaken which summarised the known archaeological sites and find spots in the immediate locality, from available published documentary and cartographic sources (Halsted 2006). The significance of the known archaeological sites was assessed in both a local and regional context. The assessment revealed the potential for the presence of the Roman road, Icknield

Street, in the eastern area of the site and possible associated settlement such as that recorded in south-west Birmingham at Longdales Road, Kings Norton (Williams 2003a; 2003b). The potential survival of archaeological deposits or structures relating to the Roman crossing point of the River Tame in the southern area of the site was also highlighted as being of regional importance. The presence of a watercourse depicted on historic maps also suggested the possibility of water management features, perhaps relating to a mill, surviving within the site. The presence of alluvial and peat deposits, as identified through previous geotechnical works on the site (Crossfield Consulting Ltd 2002) provided the potential for the preservation of organic artefactual and structural material on the site. In addition, the presence of preserved organic deposits were also highlighted as having the potential to provide important ecofactual data relating to the past environment of the area.

3 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The principle aim of the evaluation was to determine the character, state of preservation and the potential significance of any buried remains.

More specific aims were to:

- Investigate the survival of structures and deposits relating to Roman roadside settlement
- Investigate the survival of remains of past environmental conditions, particularly within alluvial deposits
- Evaluate the potential of the site to contribute to an understanding of the historic development of this part of Birmingham.

4 METHODOLOGY

4.1 Fieldwork

The proposed development area covers approximately c.5.6 hectares. A total of 8 trenches were excavated across the site totalling 760m² which provided a c.1% sample of the total area (Fig. 2).

Trenches were located in order to intersect the suggested line of the Roman road, Icknield Street, in the northern area of the site, and to establish the presence or absence of any associated archaeological deposits. In the southern area of the site trenches were located in order to intersect a former stream channel, as indicated on historic maps, and to sample any alluvial deposits, which have the potential to provide palaeo-environmental data or waterlogged archaeological material.

Six trenches were excavated to a length of 50m and a width of c.2m in the northern area of the site and these were excavated to the top of the uppermost archaeological horizon or the natural subsoil, whichever were uppermost. Two trenches were excavated in the southern area of the site measuring 8m by 10m at the surface. These trenches were excavated to the uppermost organic deposits and were excavated in 1m steps for health and safety considerations (Birmingham Archaeology 2005, 44 and 2006, 2). All topsoil and modern overburden was removed using both a JCB and 360° tracked mechanical excavator with a toothless ditching bucket, under direct archaeological supervision. Subsequent cleaning and excavation was by hand.

All stratigraphic sequences were recorded, even where no archaeology was present. Trenches were surveyed and planned using an EDM and individual profiles of cut features and significant

vertical stratigraphy were drawn to a scale of 1:20. A comprehensive written record was maintained using a continuous numbered context system on *pro-forma* context cards. Written records and scale plans were supplemented by photographs using colour slide and monochrome print 35mm film. All finds were collected, bagged and labelled according to the numbered context sequence. Recovered finds were cleaned and marked and remedial conservation work carried out as necessary

The full site archive will include all artefacts recovered from the site. The site archive will be prepared according to guidelines set down in Appendix 3 of the Management of Archaeology Projects (English Heritage, 1991), the Guidelines for the Preparation of Excavation Archives for Long-term Storage (UKIC, 1990) and Standards in the Museum Care of Archaeological collections (Museum and Art Galleries Commission, 1992). Finds and the paper archive will be deposited with Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, subject to permission from the landowner.

5 RESULTS

5.1 Introduction

This section describes the results of the evaluation in numerical trench order. The location of the trenches is illustrated on Fig. 2 and a selection of illustrated profiles through the natural features and stratigraphy can be found in Figs. 3 and 4. The dimensions of all contexts, recorded in the trenches can also be found in Appendix 1. No cut features of archaeological origin were recorded in the trenches.

5.2 Subsoil (natural)

The natural subsoil was reached at a height of between 95.3mm AOD at the north end of Trench 1 and 93.7m at the east end of Trench 5. This consisted of a greyish sand and gravel across the northern area of the site. It was not identified in the southern area during the trial trenching.

5.3 Trench descriptions (Fig. 2)

Trench 1

Trench 1 was orientated north-west to south-east. The trench was excavated to a depth of between 0.36m and 0.45m where the surface of natural grey-white sand and gravel was recorded at between 94.8m and 95.3m above OD. A number of sub-circular features were recorded cutting into the natural gravel, and containing a dark-brown-black silty sand. Several of these features were excavated by hand (1002, 1004 and 1006) and varied between 1 and 2m in width and 0.18 to 0.22m in depth, with irregular profiles. These features, and the natural subsoil, were sealed by a layer of dark-brown-black silty sand (1001), 0.25m in depth, similar to the contexts filling the sub-circular features, which was in turn overlain by a dark brown silty sand topsoil (1000), 0.16m –0.25m in depth. No artefacts were recovered.

Trench 2

Trench 2 was orientated east-west and was excavated to a depth of 0.35m where the surface of the grey-white natural sand and gravel was recorded at between 94.8m and 94.9m above OD. Again a number of sub-circular features were recorded cutting into the natural gravel. A number of these features were excavated by hand (2003, 2005, 2007, 2009, 2011, 2013,

2015 2017; Fig. 3). The features were generally shallow (c.0.10m-0.4m deep) with irregular or concave profiles, between 0.26m and 1.2m in width, and filled by dark-brown-black silty sand. The deepest feature 2013 0.6m deep, with an irregular near-vertical edge on its eastern side. Post-medieval ceramics were recovered from features 2003 and 2005, at the western end of the trench. The features were sealed by a layer of dark-brown-black silty sand (2001) 0.15m in depth, which was in turn overlain by topsoil (2000) c. 0.2m in depth.

Trench 3

Trench 3 was orientated north-west to south-east and the trench was excavated to a depth of between 0.5m, at its southern end, and to 0.8m, at its northern end, where the natural grey-white sands and gravels was recorded at 94.5m above OD. A number of irregular sub-circular and curvilinear features were visible cutting into the natural gravel. Four features (3004, 3006, 3008, 3010) were hand excavated and these varied in width between 0.8m and 1.1m and in depth between 0.1m and 0.24m. The features were generally concave or irregular in profile and filled by dark brown-black silty sand. The features were interpreted as natural in origin representing tree boles or tree root disturbance. These features were sealed by a layer of dark brown-black silty sand (3001) between 0.25 and 0.5m in depth, which was overlain by topsoil (3000) 0.25-0.30m in depth. No artefacts were recovered.

Trench 4

Trench 4 was orientated approximately east-west and was excavated to between c.1.5m below the current surface (94.5m above OD) at the eastern end of the trench and c.1.25m (94.8m above OD) below the surface at the western end of the trench where the natural grey-white sands and gravels were recorded. No features were identified cutting the natural sand and gravels which were overlain by a waterlogged layer of brown-black organic silty clay (4002) 0.25m-0.5m in depth. The layer 4002 contained post-medieval ceramics and brick and tile fragments (these were not recovered). Layer 4002 was overlain by several dark grey-brown to black layers (4001), 0.6m-0.8m in depth. These layers contained post-medieval ceramics, brick, tile and slag and a large quantity of mother-of-pearl buttons and button blanks. These Layer 4001 was sealed by a layer of topsoil (4000), c.0.25m in depth.

Trench 5

Trench 5 was orientated east-west and was excavated to between 0.4m below the surface (94.2m above OD) at its western end and to 1.22m from the surface (93.7m above OD), at its eastern end, revealing the natural grey-white sand and gravel. A number of sub-circular and oval features were recorded cutting into the natural sands and gravels (5004, Fig. 3, 5005, 5006, 5007, Fig. 3, 5008, 5009, 5010, 5011, 5012 and 5013). These features were largely shallow between 0.7m to 1.5m wide and 0.16 to 0.5m in depth, and contained dark brown-black silty clay-peat. A further sub-circular feature (5015) cut into the gravels on its eastern side and was filled with dark brown silty clay-peat (5014) and contained preserved wood and post- medieval ceramics. A black organic peat-like layer (5004) overlay the natural gravels and the features in the trench, measuring between 0.1m and 0.2m in depth. Layer 5004 was greater in depth on the southern side of the trench, appearing to shelve down to the south and east. Post-medieval ceramics were also recovered from layer 5004, and the shallow sub-rounded feature 5007.

Trench 6

Trench 6 was orientated east-west and was excavated to a depth of between 0.6m at its western end and 1.2m at its eastern end (93.2m above OD). The earliest layer recorded was a

black organic silty clay layer (6007) at least 0.4m deep. Layer 6007 was overlain by redeposited orange sand and gravel (6006), c.0.1m deep at its eastern end. Layers 6007 and 6006 were overlain by a layer of dark grey-brown silty sand (6005) 0.1m deep, which was overlain by an orange-brown silty sand (6004) 0.3m deep, sealed by topsoil (6000), 0.3m deep. The trench was inundated with water during machine excavation and the natural sands and gravels were not reached. No artefacts were recovered.

Trench 7 **(Fig. 4)**

Trench 7 was excavated in the southern area of the site at the approximate location of a former stream channel identified in the desk-based assessment (Halsted 2006, 7). The trench was excavated to a depth of 4.5m below the current surface at 93.7m above OD. The trench was inundated with water at the base. A black organic clay (7002), of unknown thickness, was recorded at a depth of c. 4.5m. This was overlain by a black organic waterlogged layer (7001) containing a large quantity of modern debris (metal fittings etc.), c.2.25m in depth. Layer 7001 was overlain by modern brick rubble (7000) represented by several episodes of tipping. The modern rubble layer 7001, probably a levelling deposit, was inherently unstable. The trench was, therefore, backfilled in the interests of health and safety and no further recording or excavation undertaken.

Trench 8 **(Fig. 4)**

Trench 8 was also excavated in the northern area of the site, where geotechnical investigations had indicated the presence of alluvial deposits at a depth of 3.3m below the current surface (Crossfield Consulting Ltd 2002, BH 3). The trench was excavated to a depth of 4.1m below the current surface at 93.9m above OD. A layer of black organic silty clay (8001) was revealed in the base of the trench which was overlain by a layer of modern brick rubble (8000) 3.5m deep, which could be seen to be composed of several episodes of tipping. This was sealed by layers of crushed stone hardcore, 0.6m deep.

6 THE FINDS BY ERICA MACEY-BRACKEN

A small assemblage of finds was recovered from the site. The assemblage consisted largely of pearl buttons and button blanks, but eleven sherds of pottery, three clay pipe stems, two fragments of vessel glass, a fragment of roof tile and a fragment of brick were also recovered.

A large quantity of mother of pearl buttons and button blanks were recovered from a dump in Trench 4 (4001). Over 100 buttons and button blanks were present in the sample collected, ranging from very small buttons 7mm in diameter, to large buttons of 25mm in diameter. A small quantity of oval buttons, 16mm in length, were also noted. Button making debris is common on urban sites in Birmingham, and the industry in the city was at its peak in the mid 19th century (White, 1977).

The pottery all dated to the late 19th or early 20th century (Kirsty Nichol, pers. comm.). The 19th century pottery included two sherds of porcelain (2006 x 1, 5006 x 1), including one sherd (5006) from the rim of a small jar, a sherd of coarseware (5006), a sherd of willow-pattern (2004), two sherds of transfer-printed ware (5014) and two sherds of pearlware (2014). Three sherds of early 20th century pottery, including two sherds of blue and white ware were also recovered from Trench 5 (5004).

Other finds from the site, of probable 19th-20th century date, included three pieces of clay pipe stem (2006 x 1, 5004 x 1, 5014 x 1), two small fragments of clear green vessel glass (2014), a fragment of brick (2014), and a fragment of roof tile (5004).

7 DISCUSSION

The evaluation did not produce evidence of a Roman road surviving within the site. It may be that the Roman road ran further to the east of the site. All recorded features were filled with contexts similar to the peat-rich layers which sealed them and were generally irregular in shape and profile. These features appear to have been the result of natural processes in the form of tree boles and tree root activity. Those that contained datable artefacts may be post medieval, probably of 19th or early 20th century date. An exception may have been a possible pit (5014) at the east of Trench 5, which also contained 19th century ceramics, but this may equally have represented a large tree bole. Although few finds were recovered from the peat rich layers overlying the natural sands and gravels in the northern part of the site, it is possible in the light of artefacts recovered from tree boles, that this layer also belongs to the post-medieval period. Indeed a layer of peat in Trench 5 (5004), produced early 20th century pottery. It is equally possible that that this layer, between 0.25m in depth in the northern area of the site (Trench 1) and 0.5m in depth towards the south (Trench 4), is earlier in date than the later post medieval period. Post medieval material may have been incorporated into the layer from overlying deposits when trees were uprooted in this period, for instance. It also appears likely that the deposit has been disturbed and truncated during the deposition of modern levelling deposits, particularly towards the south of the site. In Trench 4, for instance, layers of post medieval material (c. 0.8m in depth) were recorded directly overlying the black peat-rich organic layer at the base of the trench, which also contained post-medieval ceramics. It is likely therefore, that post medieval material has become incorporated into the black organic peat-rich layer potentially across much of the site. Although the peat-rich layer cannot be securely dated it would appear to be a natural organic deposit formed during repeated waterlogging of vegetation close to the River Tame.

In the southern area of the site, dark brown-black organic silty clay was recorded at the base of Trench 7 (c. 93.7m above OD), excavated by machine. This deposit appeared to be free from post medieval material when compared with the substantial deposits of modern levelling material overlying it. The exact nature of this silty clay could not be established with any certainty due to inundation of the trench with water and the necessity to backfill on health and safety grounds. It is possible that the deposit represented a layer of organic material comparable to that recorded in the northern area of the site, or alternatively a channel fill from the stream course recorded on historic maps in this area. In view of the quantity of modern material overlying this deposit it cannot be stated with confidence that it was free from recent contamination.

A layer of black organic material was also recorded at a comparable depth (c. 93.9m above OD) at the base of Trench 8. This again may have represented a layer of organic silty clay comparable with that recorded in trenches to the north. Its thickness was not established due to health and safety considerations. The quantity of overlying levelling deposits may also suggest that the layer may have been truncated or contaminated with modern material during the 20th century levelling activity on the site. Any deeper deposits of peat or alluvium potentially present on the site may provide palaeo-environmental data provided they could be securely dated to earlier periods and they were from a non-contaminated context. Such data may provide useful information regarding the past environment of the locality. However, no such contexts were identified during the evaluation.

The earliest evidence for activity on or in the vicinity of the site is represented by substantial quantities of mother-of-pearl buttons and button blanks. These probably date to the 18th or 19th centuries and button manufacture was an important industry in Birmingham in this period (Hodder 2004, 140). The buttons were recovered from a redeposited context within levelling layers in Trench 4. The concentration of buttons and blanks appear to represent a single episode of dumping within a probable 19th or early 20th century levelling deposit.

Evidence of button making has been recorded from Edgbaston Street in the city centre, dating to the early 19th century (Buteux 2003, 80-81). Buttons made from shell were not manufactured in a mechanised process, but were turned by hand on a lathe (*ibid*. 81). The manufacture of mother-of-pearl buttons was in decline in the late 19th century and had been replaced by buttons from other materials including plastic in the early 20th century (*ibid*.). Therefore the buttons on the site are likely to derive from the waste products of a mother-of-pearl button workshop in the vicinity dating to at least the 19th century. J. Hatfield is described as a pearl button maker in 1875 (White & Co. 1875) at Walsall Road, Perry Barr to the west of the site. It is not possible to suggest, however, that the buttons on the site necessarily derive from this particular manufactory. It is equally possible that the buttons relate to a button making workshop in the vicinity of the site and that the waste products have been dumped either during the use of the workshop or at the end of its use-life. The presence of a significant assemblage of buttons and blanks represents a valuable contribution to the study of late post medieval industry in the area and demonstrates that the archaeological record can usefully augment documentary studies of Birmingham's industrial history (Hodder 2003, 2).

8 CONCLUSIONS

The results of the evaluation have suggest that the Roman road, Icknield Street does not survive within the confines of the site. It is possible that the road originally lay outside the site boundary, possibly to the east. The lack of any archaeological features cutting into natural gravels or any Romano-British artefacts, whether associated with *in situ* features or in residual contexts, suggests that Romano-British settlement was not present here. This is particularly true of the northern area of the site (Trenches 1, 3 and 5) where post medieval levelling deposits and potential truncation were less evident. Towards the south of the site (Trenches 4, 6, 7 and 8) waterlogged organic deposits were identified although these were potentially contaminated by 20th century levelling deposits, particularly in Trenches 7 and 8. Again no *in situ* archaeological deposits were identified and no clear evidence of the watercourse depicted on historic maps was found due to the deep 19th -20th century levelling deposits at this part of the site. Although evidence of late post medieval button manufacture was recorded in Trench 4, these deposits do not appear to represent *in situ* activity and they are likely to derive from a workshop in the vicinity, with the material having been transported an unknown distance to the site with other waste material.

9 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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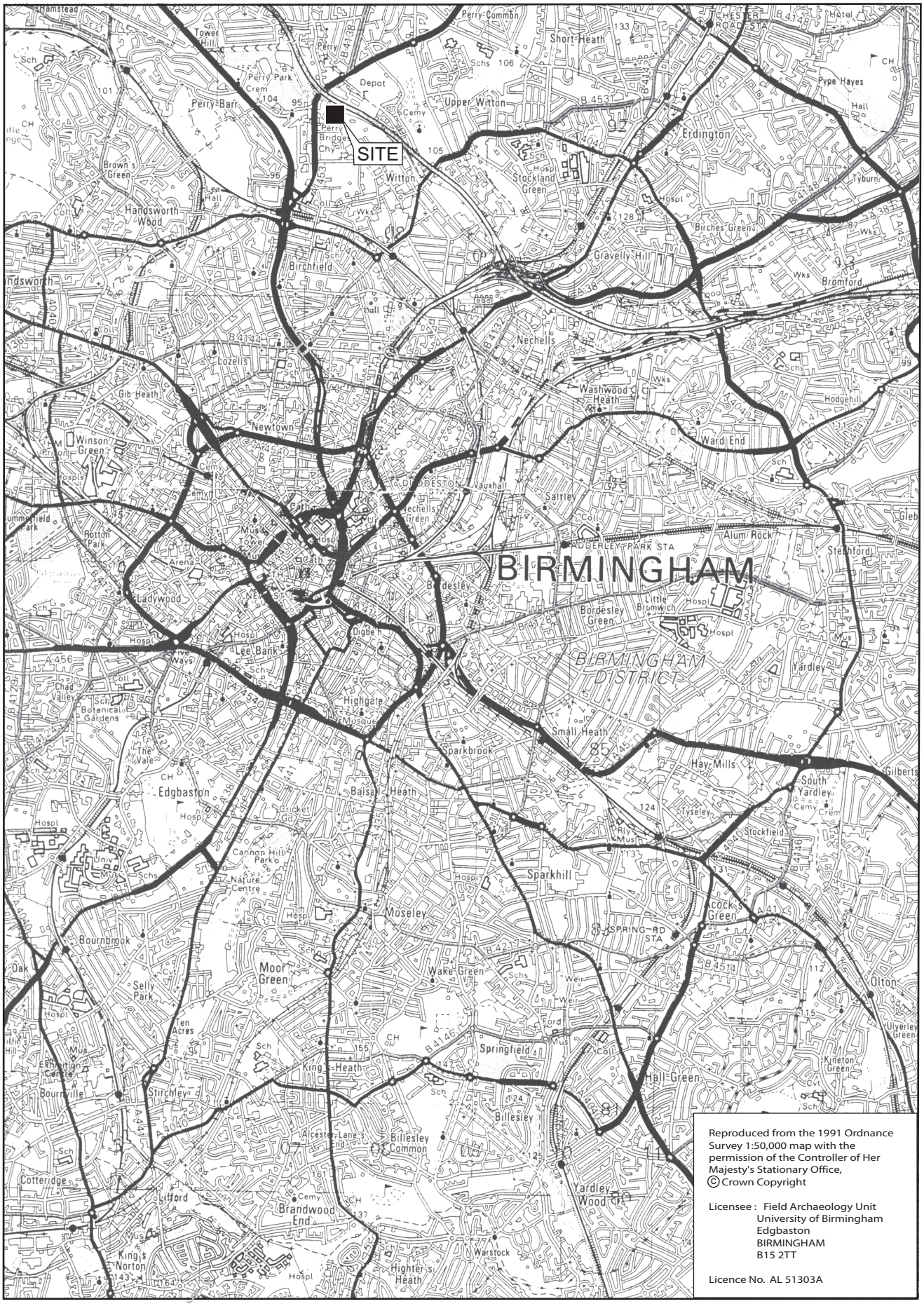


Fig.1

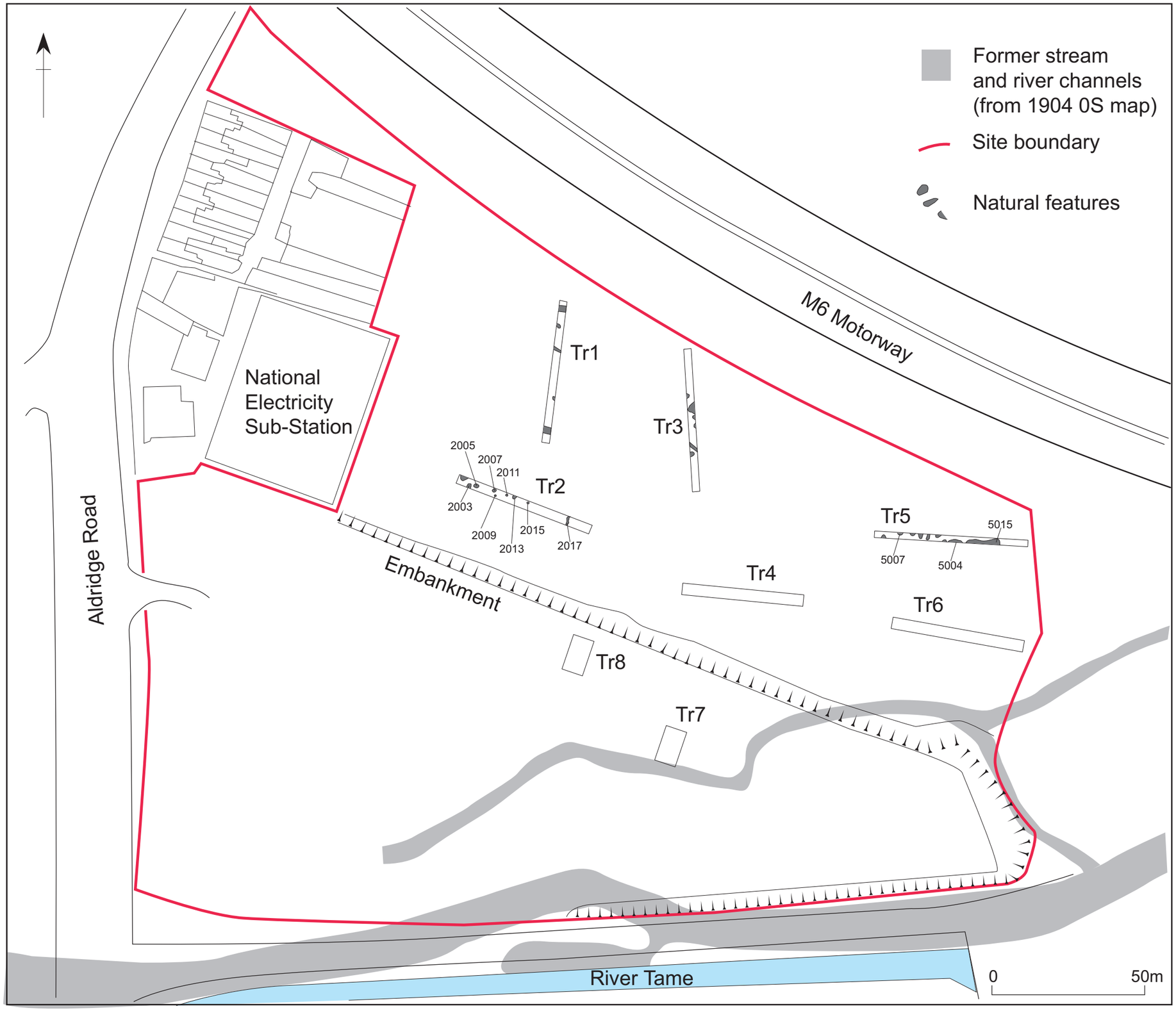
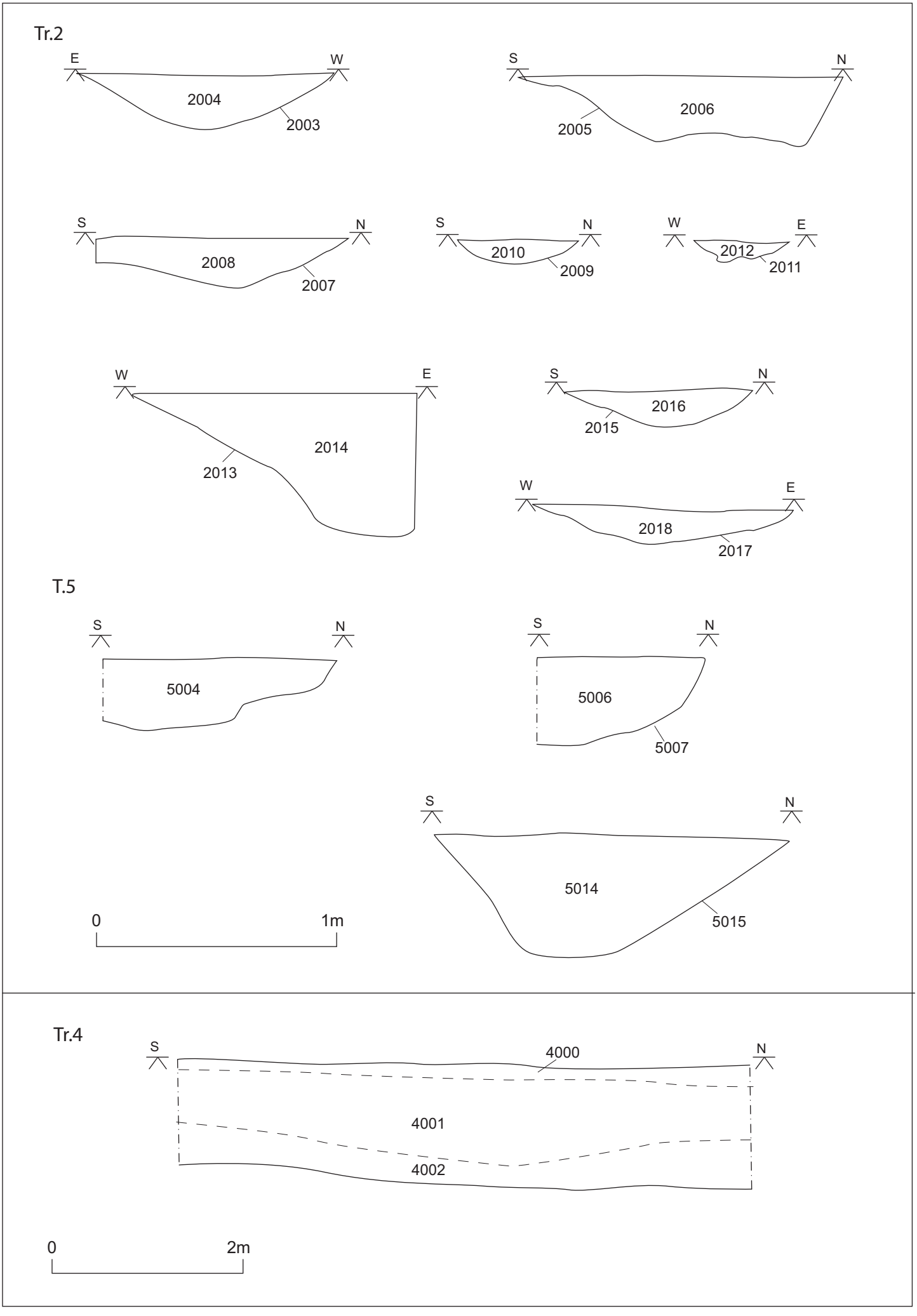

Former stream
and river channels
(from 1904 0S map)
Site boundary
Natural features
M6 Motorway
National
Electricity
Sub-Station
Tr1
Tr3
2005
2007
2011
Tr2
2003
2009
2013
2015
2017
Tr5
5015
5007
5004
Tr4
Tr6
Aldridge Road
Embankment
Tr8
Tr7
River Tame
0
50m

Fig.2


Tr.2
E
W
2004
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2016
2015
W
E
2018
2017
T.5
S
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5004
S
N
5006
5007
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5015
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1m
Tr.4
S
N
4000
4001
4002
0
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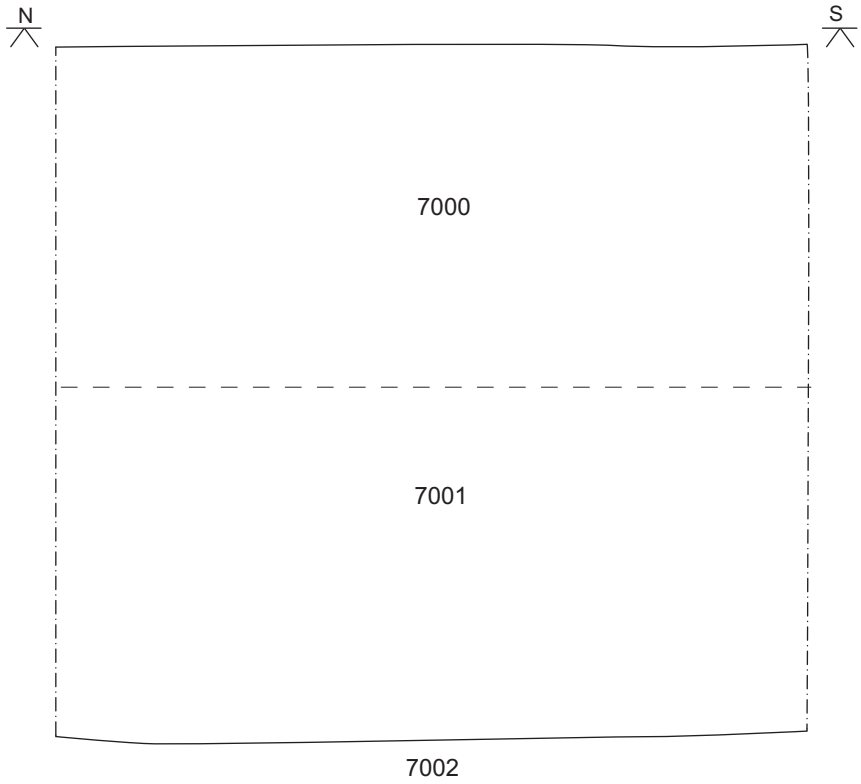
Fig.3

Tr.7



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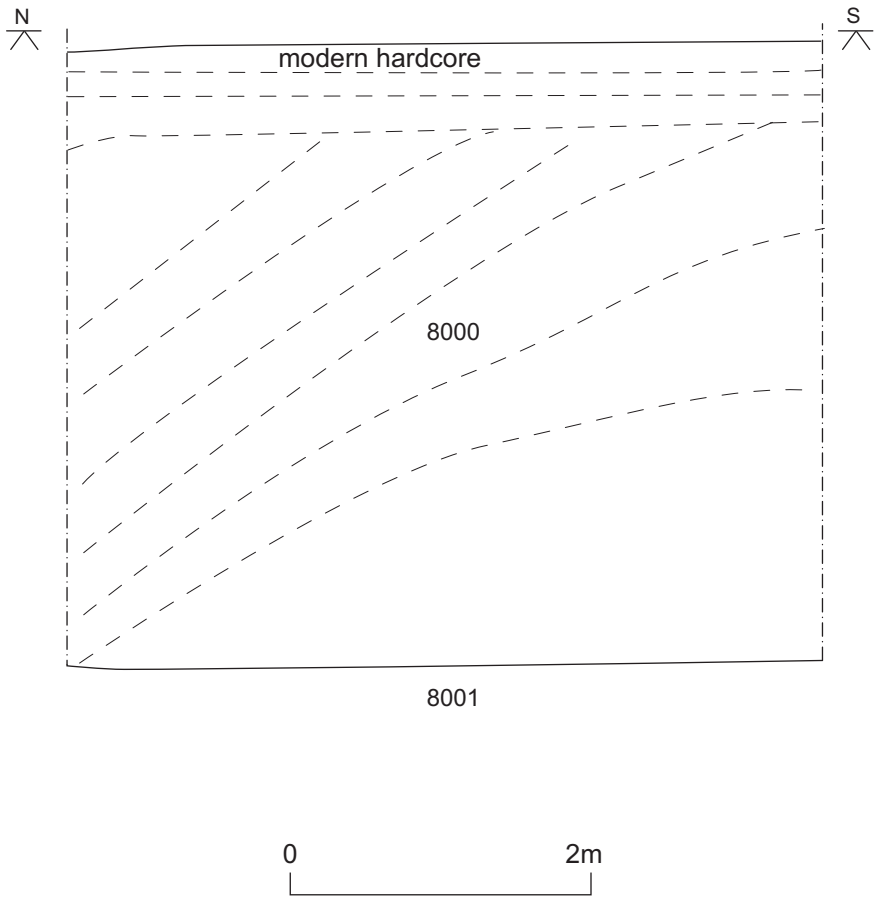

Fig.4

APPENDIX 1

Table 1 appendix of context dimensions and spot dates

Context	Context type	Depth (m)	Width (m)	Finds (date)
1000	layer	0.25		
1001	layer	0.25		
1002	hollow	0.22	1.1	
1003	fill	0.22	1.1	
1004	hollow	0.14	1	
1005	fill	0.14	1	
1006	hollow	0.18	2	
1007	fill	0.18	2	
1008	natural			
2000	layer	0.2		
2001	layer	0.15		
2002	natural			
2003	hollow	0.22	1.10	
2004	fill	0.22	1.10	C19th x 1
2005	hollow	0.26	1.34	
2006	fill	0.26	1.34	C19th x 2
2007	hollow	0.2	1	
2008	fill	0.2	1	
2009	hollow	0.10	0.5	
2010	fill	0.10	0.5	
2011	hollow	0.8	0.4	
2012	fill	0.8	0.4	
2013	hollow	0.6	1.2	
2014	fill	0.6	1.2	C19th x 5
3000	layer	0.3		
3001	layer	0.5		
3002	natural			
3004	hollow	0.16	1.1	
3005	fill	0.16	1.1	
3006	hollow	0.2	0.9	
3007	fill	0.2	0.9	
3008	hollow	0.2	0.8	
3009	fill	0.2	0.8	
3010	hollow	0.22	1	
3011	fill	0.22	1	
4000	layer	0.1		
4001	layer	0.34		C19th buttons x 100
4002	layer	0.2		
4003	natural			
5000	layer	0.25		
5001	layer	0.2-0.8		
5002	layer	0.10-0.2		
5003	natural			

5004	fill	0.3	1	C20th x 5
5005	fill	0.16	0.8	
5006	fill	0.36	0.7	C19th x 2
5007	hollow	0.36	0.7	
5014	fill	0.52	1.5	C19th x 3
5015	Cut	0.52	1.5	
6000	layer	0.2		
6001	layer	0.3		
6002	layer	0.1		
6003	natural			
7000	layer	2.25		
7001	layer	2.25		
7002	layer	unknown		
8000	layer	4.1		
8001	layer	unknown		