Archaeological Watching Brief at Iron Sign Farm, Northumberland

Mini-digger exposing north end of the trench

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In April 2008 Archaeological Research Services Ltd were commissioned by British Telecom Plc to undertake an archaeological watching brief on land at Iron Sign Farm, Northumberland. The watching brief was carried out to monitor the groundwork on a public road close to Iron Sign farm. The ground works involved excavating to the level at which a telecommunications duct had been previously placed to assess whether archaeology existed or had been disturbed in the area. The route of the ducting crosses the Scheduled Ancient Monument of Hadrian's Wall, the Hadrian's Wall Vallum and the line of the Roman Military Way at approximate right-angles. Previous work along the route of the B6318 has revealed the presence of archaeological remains associated with Hadrian's Wall. Earthworks associated with the vallum are also visible in fields to the east and west of the proposed development. The purpose of this evaluation was to determine whether any remains survived, at what depth and in what condition.

Neither the fabric of Hadrian's Wall nor the vallum was identified during this watching brief and there were no signs of features lying below the road surface. The original natural surface had been heavily truncated during the construction of the road and it is likely that this process would have destroyed any surviving archaeology.

No features of archaeological significance or buried land surfaces were revealed.

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Location and Scope of Work

1.1.1 In April 2008 Archaeological Research Services Ltd were commissioned by British Telecom Plc to undertake an archaeological watching brief at Iron Sign Farm, Northumberland (Fig. 1). The site is centred at NZ 10372 67660, approximately 2.8km to the west of Heddon-on-the-Wall, Northumberland and lies at approximately 130m aOD.

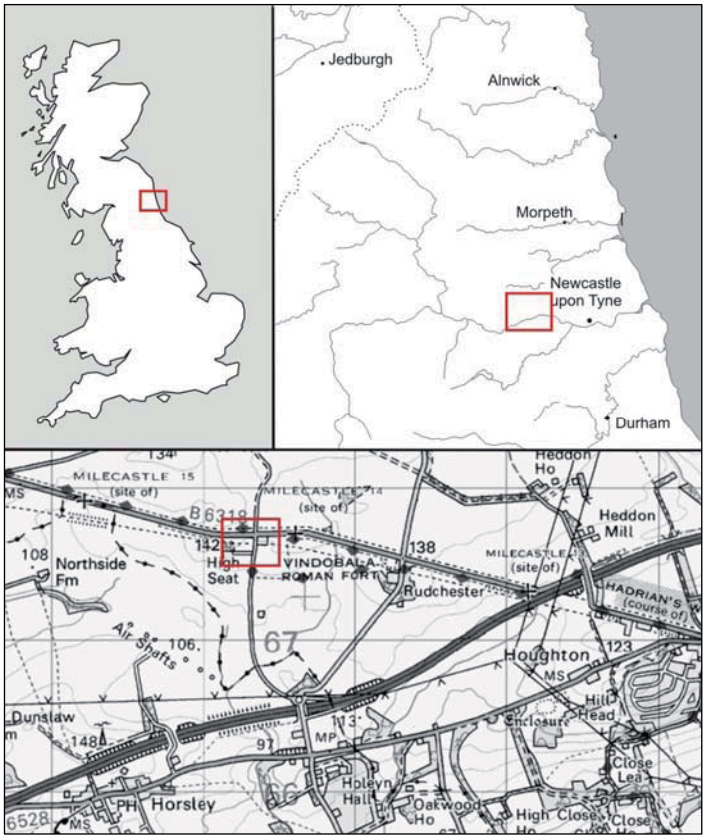

Fig. 1 Location of site.
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1.1.2. An archaeological evaluation has been performed previously on the site in the form of two trenches (Amat, D. & Carey, C. 2007). This watching brief was undertaken to monitor ground works in between the two trenches after the installation of underground ducting to carry a telecommunications cable, adjacent to and beneath public roads close to Iron Sign Farm. The ducting ran for approximately 195m along the minor road that lies on a north-south alignment to the west of Iron Sign Farm. The route crosses the Scheduled Ancient Monument of Hadrian's Wall, the Hadrian's Wall Vallum and the line of the Roman Military Way at approximate right-angles. Ninety-five metres of the duct lay within the legally protected area of Hadrian's Wall and this brief was undertaken to assess whether there were any archaeological features within the development area.

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1.2. Geology and soils

1.2.1. The solid geology of the area consists of Carboniferous, Namurian, Millstone Grit Series and the drift geology consists of glacial till (British Geological Survey 2007).

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. An archaeological watching brief was undertaken to establish whether any archaeological features were affected by the ground works and to assess the depth and condition of any features present. The ground work involved the lifting of the current road surface and excavation down to the level of the telecommunications duct.

2.2 The ground works excavated a trench 24m long (divided in the centre by a sunken junction box) and by 1m wide (fig. 2) with a depth between 0.15m and 0.20m using a toothless ditching bucket until the duct was exposed. This process was monitored by an archaeologist in order to assess whether any significant archaeological features were exposed during the process and to prevent over excavation of the natural level.

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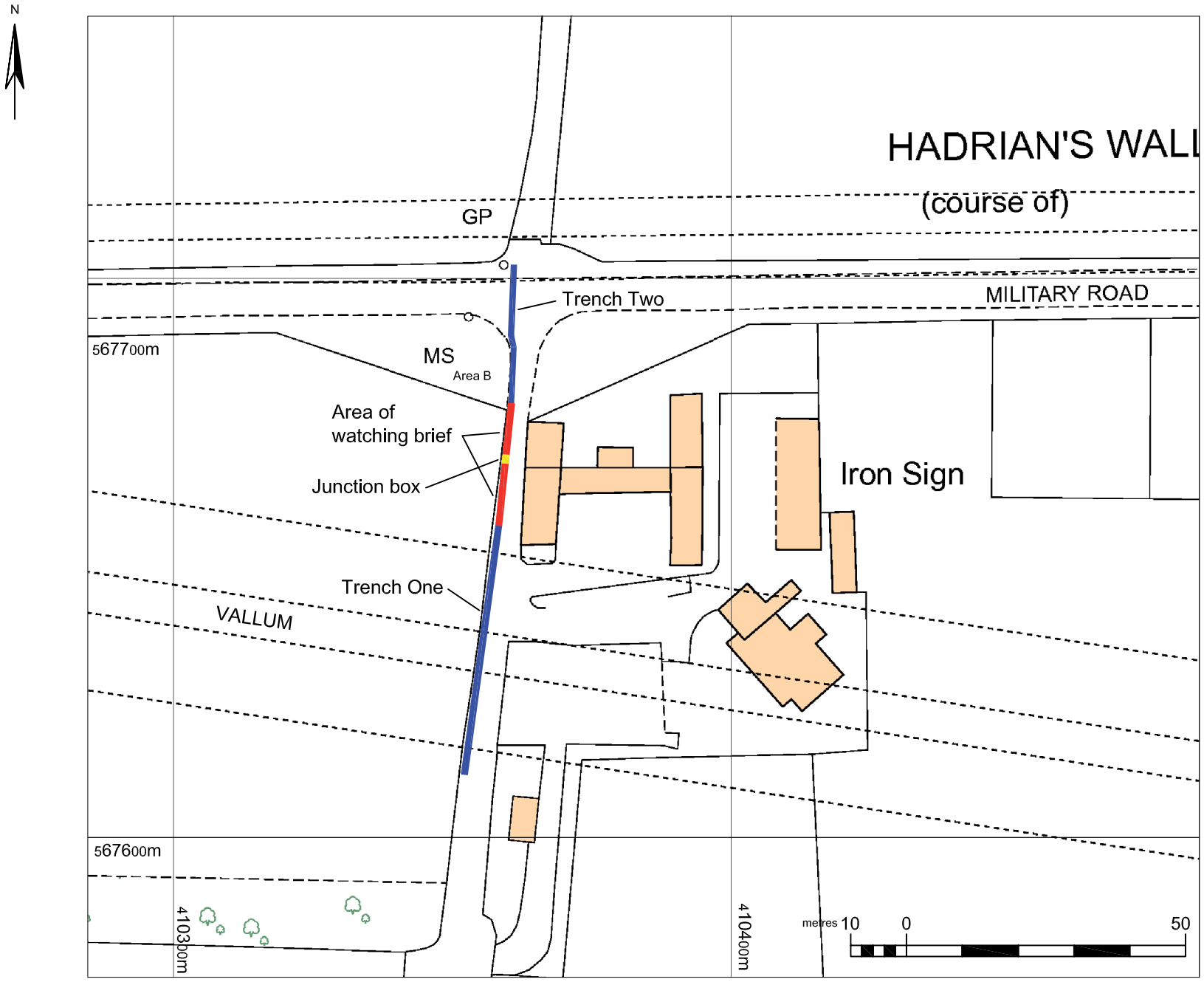

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Site Code: IRS08
Drawing Ref: Report Fig. 2
Date: 04 April 08
Drawn: DA
Scale: 1:1000 at A4

Title:

Figure 2: Location of trenches

Key:

Area of watching brief

Previous evaluation trenches

Junction box

Notes:

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3. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

3.1 Prehistory

3.1.1. The earliest known activity close to the study area dates from the Mesolithic period where flint tools were found at Heddon Law and stone axes, thought to date to the Neolithic period, have been found at Heddon. A Bronze Age cairn was discovered at Heddon Law Farm and was later re-used in the Medieval period as a beacon. Evidence of circular structures dating from the Bronze Age and or Iron Age were also found at Heddon whilst quarrying works were being undertaken (Huntley and Allen 2004). At the nearby village of Horsley, situated approximately 1.7 kilometers to the south-west of the study area, there is evidence of Iron Age activity in the form of settlements located at Horsley Wood and Horsley Hill, which both survive as a series of banks and ditches (Heddon website 2007). A defended Iron Age settlement with a protective ditch and bank was built to the east of the study area at Houghton.

3.2 Romano-British

3.2.1. There is extensive evidence for Roman activity in the area in the form of Hadrian's Wall and its associated forts and milecastles. Following a visit from the Emperor Hadrian in AD 122, the Romans began work on the wall and once complete it had an approximate length of 80 miles. The route ran roughly parallel to the 'Stanegate', the main Roman supply road from east to west running from Corbridge to Carlisle (Forde-Johnston 1978). Hadrian's Wall ran through Heddon-on-the-Wall and directly past Iron Sign Farm. The line of the vallum associated with the wall ran beneath Iron Sign Farm and the line of the wall is thought to be buried below the public road known as the 'Military Road' (B6318) which was originally built in 1745. The 80 miles of the wall were marked with 'Milecastles'. These Milecastles were fortified structures to house garrisons of soldiers.

3.2.2. The study area is situated near Milecastle 14 whose remains were still visible until the later twentieth century. Milecastle 14 was excavated in 1946 and again in 2000 which discovered the walls of the milecastle heavily damaged with only fragments surviving. It had also been damaged by ploughing (Keys to the past 2007). It is thought that many of the wall's milecastles and turrets lie beneath the Military Road. The Roman fort of Rudchester (Vindovala) lies just to the east of the study area.

3.2.3. The fort guarded the valley of the March Burn and was well preserved until the eighteenth century when many of the stones were removed to be used elsewhere. The site was then heavily ploughed and farmed. All that can be seen now is a slight earthwork. Since 1897 the site has been excavated several times and remains of the Commanding Officer's house, the Headquarters' Building and a granary have been discovered. Finds from the site include a life-size statue of the Roman god Hercules and five altars to Mithras. The vicus to the south and south-west of the fort and included a temple to Mithras. Milecastle 15 is located to the south west at the village of Horsley, although all that is visible are a series of hollows and an earthwork platform.

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3.3. Early-Medieval

3.3.1. There is no direct evidence for Medieval settlement within the study area but the Church of St Andrew in Heddon contains late Saxon stonework incorporated into its nave. It is thought that the church was consecrated in 630 AD and has had many name changes over the years (Northumberland Communities 2007).

3.4. Medieval

3.4.1. Medieval hamlets and villages have been located at East Heddon, West Heddon, Rudchester and Houghton. In the thirteenth century a large house and tower were built at Rudchester, which may have been built to protect its occupants from Scottish raiders during the wars with Scotland. In the fourteenth century the church of St Andrew at Heddon was altered and during the sixteenth century many farms and villages began to develop in the area (Keys to the Past 2007).

3.5. Post-Medieval

3.5.1. The area continued to develop during the eighteenth century and although Iron Sign is not shown on Armstrong's 1769 map of Northumberland it is clearly visible on Fryer's 1820 map of Northumberland (Fig. 3). The first edition Ordnance Survey Map of 1860 shows Iron Sign as a public house named 'The Crown and Thistle' (Fig. 4). The name Iron Sign does not appear again until the second edition Ordnance Survey Map of 1897.

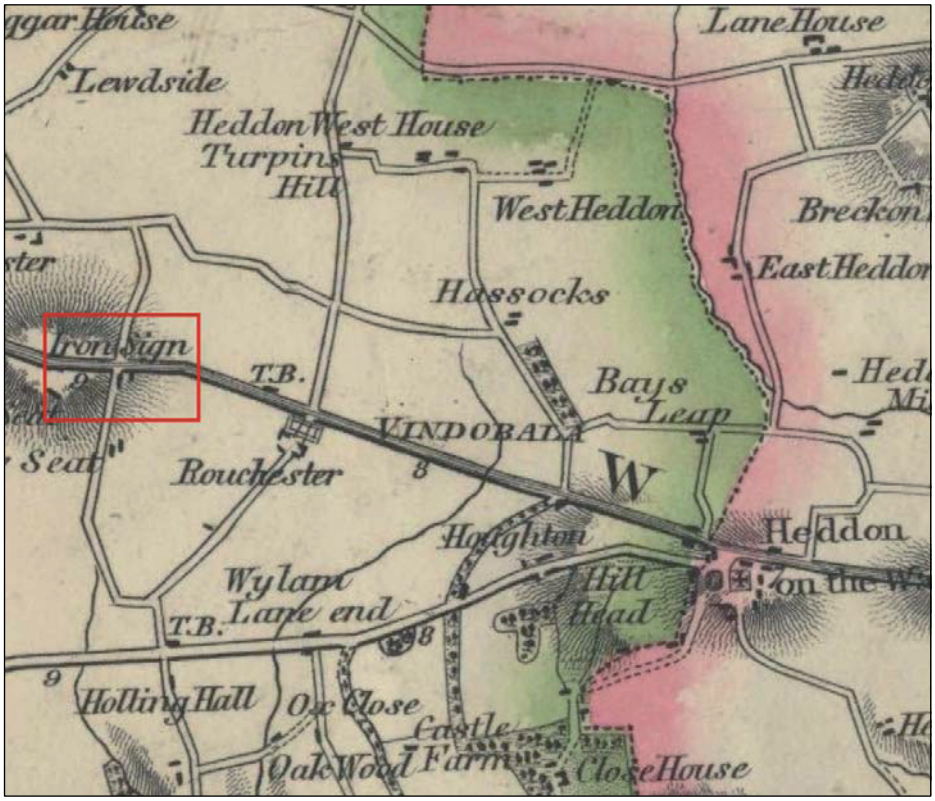

Fig. 3 Fryer's 1820 Map of Northumberland, Iron Sign Farm is shown in red

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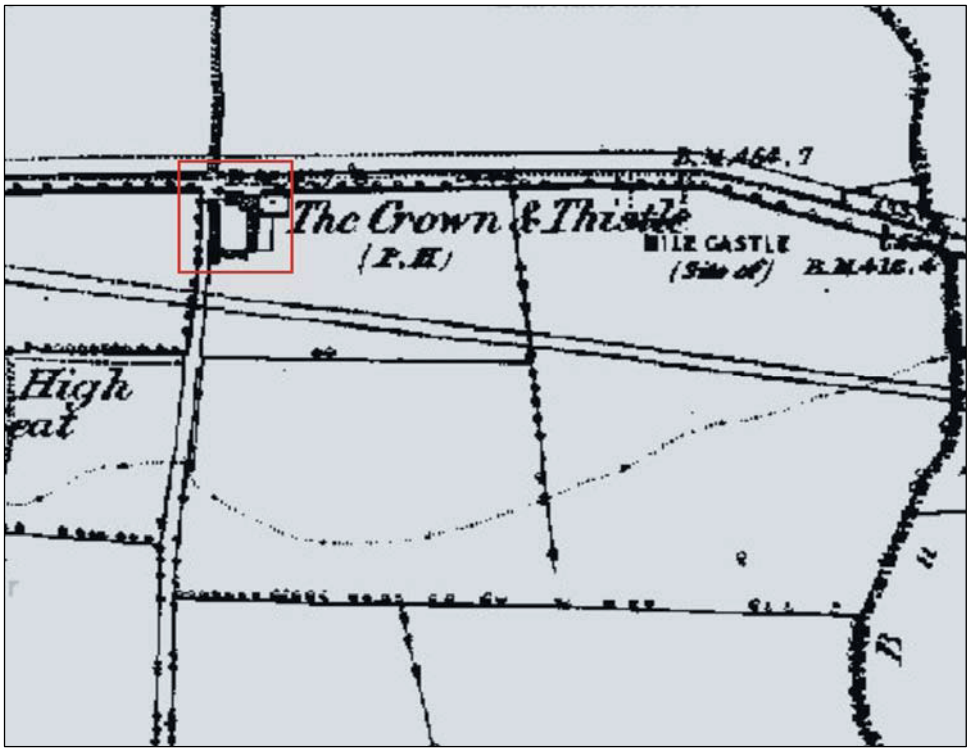

Fig. 4 First edition Ordnance Survey Map of 1860. The site of Iron Sign Farm is shown in red and labelled 'The Crown and Thistle'

4. RESULTS

4.1. The site was made up from various stratigraphic layers. These were as follows:

4.1.1. *Tarmac* (001)
The groundwork was located on a modern road and a layer of tarmac covered them entirely.

4.1.3. *Re-deposited natural clay with sand* (002)
A layer of redeposited natural clay with sand (002) was present. This deposit appeared to have been removed from the natural surface during the construction of the roads and redeposited when the ground was levelled. It comprised a mid-brown material with inclusions of modern brick and tile fragments along with small stones.

4.1.4. *Natural clay with sand* (003)
The trench contained undisturbed natural clay with sand (003) which lay directly below the redeposited material (002). This consisted of mid-brown material with small stone inclusions.

4.2. The ground works excavated a trench 24m long (divided in the centre by a sunken junction box) and 1m wide (fig. 2) with a depth between 0.15m and 0.20m. the stratigraphy of the ground consisted of a tarmac layer from the current road surface (001), a layer of re-deposited natural (002) and a layer of

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natural clay with sand (003) the duct ran centrally overlying the re-deposited natural (figs. 5-9).

4.3. From an examination of the junction box situated in the centre of the groundworks, it was evident that previous services had been placed (including telephone and electric cables) on the site at a depth of approximately 0.60m below the surface on the same alignment as the duct.

Fig. 5 Tarmac being lifted to reveal duct at a shallow depth.

Fig. 6 Northern half of trench showing duct.

Fig. 7 Southern edge of trench with sunken junction box at north end.

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Fig. 8 View from the North edge of trench looking south

Fig. 9 Duct entering junction box

5. CONCLUSION

5.1. There were no surviving *in-situ* archaeological remains dating from the Roman period in the area of the watching brief. The lack of archaeological remains in an otherwise archaeologically rich area can probably be attributed to the disturbance caused by the construction of the modern roads and the laying of services and other cables prior to this one.

6. PUBLICITY, CONFIDENTIALITY AND COPYRIGHT

6.1. Any publicity will be handled by the client.

6.2. Archaeological Research Services Ltd will retain the copyright of all documentary and photographic material under the Copyright, Designs and Patent Act (1988).

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7.1 All statements and opinions contained within this report arising from the works undertaken are offered in good faith and compiled according to professional standards. No responsibility can be accepted by the author/s of the report for any errors of fact or opinion resulting from data supplied by any third party, or for loss or other consequence arising from decisions or actions made upon the basis of facts or opinions expressed in any such report(s), howsoever such facts and opinions may have been derived.

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8. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

8.1. Archaeological Research Services Ltd would like to thank all those involved in this project, in particular Alan Cavender of British Telecom.

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Keys to the Past	http://www.keystothepast.info/
Roman Britain	http://www.roman-britain.org/
Heddon website	http://www.heddon.co.uk/

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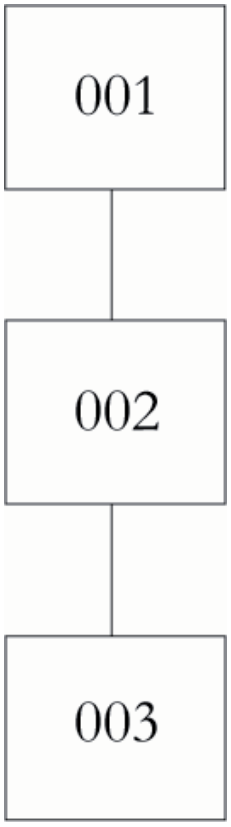
Appendix I: Harris matrices

Watching brief trench:



Appendix II: Context register

Context No.	Trench	Description
001	-	Tarmac road surface
002	-	Re-deposited natural clay with sand
003	-	Undisturbed natural clay with sand

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