



Former Ercol Furniture Site, Conegra Fields,
London Road, High Wycombe,
Buckinghamshire

Results of a small area excavation
and evaluation trial trenching





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trenching**

Prepared on behalf of
CgMs Consulting Ltd
Morley House
26 Holborn Viaduct
London
EC1A 2AT

by
Wessex Archaeology

Report reference: 69520.01

Date: July 2008

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Summary

Wessex Archaeology was commissioned by CgMs consulting on behalf of Bellway Homes to undertake a programme of archaeological investigations in advance of redevelopment at the former Ercol Factory Site, London Road High Wycombe NGR 488350,19252

The fieldwork was carried out between the 29th May and the 6th of June 2008.

An area measuring 10m x 10m was opened targeted on two features revealed during a previous evaluation by AOC Archaeology in 2006 that were thought to be of a possible prehistoric date (AOC, 2006). This area was supplemented by 5 trial trenches located in order to ascertain the presence or absence of further archaeological features.

Apart from the features recorded and excavated by AOC, no archaeological features were present within the excavation area. No features were recorded in four of the evaluation trenches, although in Trench 2 a large sub-circular feature was recorded, apparently cut into the natural chalk. Despite a reference to a Neolithic flint mine being discovered in the vicinity in 1902, the size and nature of the recorded fills suggest that the feature in Trench 2 is of natural origin and is in all probability a solution hollow.

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Acknowledgements

Wessex Archaeology is grateful to Duncan Hawkins of CgMs Consulting for commissioning the work and to David Radford (Assistant County Archaeologist, Buckingham County Council) for monitoring the project and visiting the Site. Wessex is also grateful to Bellway Homes for supplying the 360 tracked excavator to open the trenches. The project was managed on behalf of Wessex Archaeology by Nick Truckle (Senior Project Manager), and implemented in the field by Catriona Gibson (Senior Project Officer) and Mike Dinwiddy (Project Officer), assisted by Aleksandra Bolczyk and Christo Nicolle (Site Assistants). The illustrations were prepared by Liz James.

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Project Background

1.1.1 Wessex Archaeology (WA) was commissioned by CgMs Consulting (the Client) to undertake a programme of archaeological investigations in advance of redevelopment at the former Ercol Factory Site, London Road High Wycombe NGR 488350,192527 (hereafter the Site, see **Figure 1**).

1.1.2 The work was required as a consequence of a planning application submitted to Wycombe District Council for the erection of a residential development with associated car parking and landscaping. Previous archaeological work undertaken by AOC Archaeology in 2003 and 2006 suggests that the Site has been substantially terraced during construction of the Ercol Factory and that there is little potential for surviving archaeological remains across the majority of the Site. The exception is an area to the extreme south east of the Site where a Test Pit revealed some undated pits and post holes. It is in this area (See **Figure 1**) where the archaeological investigations were undertaken.

1.1.3 The work followed the requirements of a brief prepared by David Radford at Buckinghamshire County Council. This proposed an initial stage of archaeological investigation consisting of the excavation of a 10m x 10m area centred on AOC Test Pit 3 and a total length of 50m of additional trial trenching comprising 5 trenches each measuring 10m long. A second stage consisting of full excavation was then be undertaken if significant remains were encountered during the evaluation.

1.1.4 All archaeological works were undertaken in compliance with the standards outlined in the Institute of Field Archaeologists': *Standards and Guidance for Archaeological Field Evaluation* (2001)

1.2 Site Location, Geology and Topography

1.2.1 The Site consists of a small sub-rectangular plot of land roughly 0.18ha in size and is centred on NGR 488350 192527. It has been quite extensively terraced and truncated, as a consequence of both

the railway cutting immediately to the south of the Site and from its previous use as a furniture factory with associated levelled tarmac car park. The Site slopes downwards from the north-west to the south-east from c. 105m to c. 91m above Ordnance Datum (a.O.D). The Site is bounded by residential housing to the north, a railway line to the south, Greaves Road to the west and Hatters Lane to the east.

- 1.2.2 The British Geological Survey map (BGS 225) demonstrates that the solid geology of the Site is Upper Chalk, which is capped to the north by clay with flints. Alluvium lies to the south of the site, adjacent to the River Rye, which runs in a south-easterly direction.

1.3 Archaeological Background and Previous Investigations

Introduction

- 1.3.1 An archaeological desk-based assessment was produced for the Site by AOC Archaeology in 2003. The assessment revealed that there was a limited potential for archaeological remains from the prehistoric, Roman, medieval and Post medieval periods with the first recorded development on the Site taking place on the 1920s.

Prehistoric and possible prehistoric

- 1.3.2 In 1902 workmen apparently discovered a 'Neolithic flint mine' together with an antler pick on London Road during the construction of the railway (Head 1955, 38; (Buckinghamshire County Archaeological Service, 2008). The exact location of this supposed flint mine is not known, but since the railway cutting lies in the immediate vicinity of the Site, it could be quite close. Kim Biddulph (Neolithic to Early Bronze Age Buckinghamshire: a Resource Assessment, 21) has argued that this feature was unlikely to have been a flint mine, but does not offer any explanation why.
- 1.3.3 AOC undertook a programme of test-pitting on the former Ercol factory site in 2003. This test-pitting demonstrated that the construction of the Ercol Factory had involved terracing of the existing slope which had caused the destruction of any potential archaeological remains over much of the Site.
- 1.3.4 However, **Test Pit 3**, in the south-eastern corner of the Site revealed archaeological remains in the form of pits. The test pit was expanded to a 5m by 5m area, and a total of two pits and two small post holes were recorded and excavated, all cutting relatively untruncated chalk natural. The largest of these features was a circular near vertically-sided pit 1.14m in depth and 1.1m in diameter; to the south of this was another steep sided pit and to the north were the two post holes. All of the fills were similar and therefore the excavators concluded that they were contemporary and could possibly be prehistoric in date although only a small fragment of animal bone was retrieved despite 100% excavation (AOC Archaeology 2004, 7).

- 1.3.5 A watching brief subsequently undertaken by AOC during site demolition works did not reveal any archaeological deposits (AOC Archaeology, 2006).

2 METHODS

2.1 Aims and Objectives

2.1.1 The general aims of the project were to identify and record any significant archaeological deposits or features revealed during the groundworks, with particular attention to be paid to the potential for prehistoric remains.

2.1.2 If any prehistoric remains were encountered, the evaluation was to establish the character, extent and date of any activity, and relate the evidence to the existing body of knowledge established for prehistoric activity along the tributaries of the Thames valley.

2.2 Health and Safety

2.2.1 Health and Safety considerations were of paramount importance in conducting all fieldwork. Safe working practices overrides archaeological considerations at all times.

2.2.2 All work was carried out in accordance with the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974 and the Management of Health and Safety Regulations 1992, and all other relevant Health and Safety legislation, regulations and codes of practice in force at the time.

2.2.3 Wessex Archaeology supplied a copy of their Health and Safety Policy and a Risk Assessment to the Client before the commencement of the fieldwork. The Risk Assessment was read, understood and signed by all staff attending the Site before the groundwork began.

2.3 Service Location

2.3.1 Before any fieldwork began, statutory authorities were consulted, for information regarding the presence of any below/above ground services. No live underground services were thought to be present. However, the Site was walked over and inspected to visually identify, where possible, the location of above and below ground services.

2.3.2 All evaluation trench locations and the area excavation was scanned prior to and during machine excavation with a Cable Avoidance Tool (CAT) to verify the absence of any live underground services.

2.4 Fieldwork Methodology

2.4.1 The proposed works comprised opening an area measuring 10m by 10m in plan, targeted on AOC's **Test Pit 3**, in an attempt to define whether further archaeological features could be identified. In addition, five 10m x 1.8m evaluation trenches were proposed – three

to the east of the excavation area, and two to its west, in order to define the extent of any activity.

- 2.4.2 A second stage of archaeological works was proposed in the event that significant archaeological deposits were encountered.
- 2.4.3 All works were undertaken in accordance with the brief issued by Buckinghamshire County Archaeological Service and a Written Scheme of Investigation produced by Wessex Archaeology. All fieldwork was conducted in accordance with the guidance and standards outlined by the Institute of Field Archaeologists' Standard and Guidance for Archaeological Field Evaluations (as amended 1994).
- 2.4.4 Trenches were opened and all modern overburden was removed using a 360° tracked mechanical excavator with a toothless ditching bucket under constant archaeological supervision. Mechanical excavation continued to the top of archaeological horizons or to the surface of the underlying chalk.

2.5 Recording

- 2.5.1 Trenches were set out using a Leica GPS System. All exposed archaeological deposits were recorded using Wessex Archaeology's *pro forma* recording system. A complete drawn record of excavated archaeological features and deposits was compiled. As a minimum, a representative section of any blank evaluation trench was recorded (at a scale of 1:10), a trench sheet was compiled, photographs were taken, the trench was surveyed using a Leica GPS 500 machine, and the spoil heaps were scanned for any archaeological finds. All trenches and features were surveyed with reference to the Ordnance Survey National Grid. The OD of all principal features and levels were calculated and annotated on to plans and sections.
- 2.5.2 A full photographic record was maintained using colour transparencies, black and white negatives (on 35mm film) and digital photographs.

3 RESULTS

3.1 Introduction

- 3.1.1 The fieldwork was carried out in two phases between the 29th and 30th of May and the 5th and 6th of June 2008. The need for two phases of works was to enable the trenches and excavation area to be cleared of materials that had been stored within the area of proposed investigation and to ensure that adequate space was available to store spoil from the excavated trenches.
- 3.1.2 The 10m by 10m excavation area had to be moved 1m to the south, due to Health and Safety Consideration (the presence of a 4m high bund immediately to its north).

3.2 Trench Summaries

3.2.1 Summaries of the deposits and features excavated in the trenches are provided in Appendix 1.

3.3 Area 1

3.3.1 The 10m by 10m area was targeted over the previous AOC 5m x 5m area. A total of 0.43m of modern overburden was removed before chalk natural was encountered. This comprised tarmac, modern brick made ground and levelling layers. No topsoil or subsoil was identified, and it is clear that this part of the Site has been truncated in the past

3.3.2 Both of the pits that were fully excavated by AOC were identified. It is possible that the two post holes noted by AOC lay to the north of the excavation area, as these were not present.

3.3.3 Pit **5** was the smaller of the two features. It was oval, 0.88 x 0.56m in plan and was filled with modern backfill that included brick and clinker. Pit **7** was the larger pit, and situated 2.25m to the north of pit **5**. It was roughly circular in plan, with a diameter of 1.15m. Again as it had already been fully excavated, it contained only modern backfill.

3.3.4 A small tree throw (**9**) was noted immediately to the south of pit **5**. As it was quite regular in plan, it was initially thought to be another pit. It was roughly circular, 1.1m in diameter and 0.28m deep with irregular sides and an irregular base. Its single fill was sterile, and was a bioturbated mixture of redeposited chalk and silty clay.

3.3.5 Immediately to the south of tree throw **9**, two small pockets of modern disturbance were identified, indicated by fragments of modern brick pressed into the ground. No modern cut could be identified and it is possible that the disturbance relates to the backfilling of the previous AOC trench.

3.3.6 No other archaeological features were noted within this trench. Geologically, however, a series of periglacial striations were identified in the south-eastern part of the excavation area, aligned NE-SW. They were irregular and filled with orange silty clay, and therefore are unlikely to represent plough marks, although they were all roughly parallel to one another.

3.4 Evaluation Trench 1

3.4.1 The length of this trench was governed by the space available in which it could be opened. It was located 12m to the east of Area 1 and aligned roughly NW-SE and measured 10m in length by 2.2m in width. A total depth of 0.45m of tarmac and modern overburden was removed before chalk natural was reached. No archaeological features or finds were encountered within this trench

3.5 Evaluation Trench 2

- 3.5.1 This trench was located 3m to the west of Area 1. It was aligned roughly NWW-SEE and was extended to the south. It was 16m in length, 2.2m in width and with a southern extension of 4.5m. A total of 0.37m of tarmac and modern overburden was removed on to a light brown silty clay deposit that covered almost the entire extent of the trench. In the western and eastern extent of the Site, chalk natural was identified. Judicious extension of this trench to the south allowed the southern extent of a large roughly circular feature to be identified in plan (**205**). This feature was vertically sided and cut the chalk natural. The upper fill (**206**) was deepest in the centre of the feature and relates to a slow silting fill of light brown silty clay. A small number of finds were retrieved from this deposit including two animal bones and ceramic building material (CBM). The lower fill (**207**) was hand-excavated to a depth of 1.2m. It comprised a thick homogenous deposit of loose redeposited chalk natural that may represent a deliberate backfill. A machine-excavated slot (0.7m in width) was able to determine that this deposit continued to a depth of at least 2.5m below the present ground surface. One sherd of CBM was retrieved from the fill, and it was otherwise relatively sterile.
- 3.5.2 It is difficult to characterise this feature with certainty, given the constraints of the evaluation trench. The feature was only partially revealed and due to Health and Safety Considerations could not be excavated to the base. It is clear that it is a substantial and deep feature that is at least 12.2m in diameter that may well be a natural feature such as a solution hollow or sink hole

3.6 Evaluation trenches 3, 4 and 5

- 3.6.1 These trenches were located to the east of area 1. The stratigraphy encountered (**Plate 3**) almost entirely consisted of relatively modern made ground varying in depth from 0.33m in trench 3 to 1.37m in trench 5. Below the made ground a 0.10m layer of medium brown soft silty sand, possibly buried garden soils were recorded above the natural chalk. No archaeological features were encountered within these trenches. Detailed descriptions of the trenches are listed in the Appendix below.

4 ENVIRONMENTAL

- 4.1.1 A bulk sample of nine litres was processed for the recovery of charred plant remains and wood charcoal and a sample of 1500 grams for the recovery of molluscs from the large feature 205.

- 4.1.2 The flots were examined under a x10-x40 stereo-binocular microscope. No charred plant remains or charcoal fragments were observed in either sample. A few molluscs were retrieved in the bulk sample. These were six shells of *Vallonia*, including both *costata* and *excentrica*, and a single shell of *Helicella itala*. The mollusc sample produced a single shell of *Vallonia costata*. These are all open country species.
- 4.1.3 The environmental remains recovered from this feature do not provide any significant assistance in determining the nature of this feature.

5 DISCUSSION

- 5.1.1 Although the two pits recorded by AOC Archaeology were identified, no further archaeological deposits were encountered within the excavation area and therefore the previously recorded features remain undated. It is clear, however that they do not represent significant settlement activity even if a date in the prehistoric period were attributable. It is also difficult to characterise the large feature identified in Trench 2 with certainty. Health and Safety and general site constraints mean that it was not possible to excavate the feature beyond a sample section to a depth of c2.5m below current ground level.
- 5.1.2 Records from 1902 suggest a flint mine of Neolithic date was recorded in the vicinity although this attribution has since been disputed. The shape, size and profile (circular, 12m + in diameter, vertically sided) of the feature at London Road is comparable both with known and excavated solution hollows and Neolithic flint mines. At Grimes Graves the larger shaft pits were roughly 12m in diameter and more than 14m deep (Longworth *et al.* 1991). The mines at Cissbury ranged in diameter from 3m to 36m and those at Blackpatch ranged from 3m to 8m. At Slonk Hill, also in Sussex, flint mines in the form of distinct circular depressions ranged from 5m to 20m in diameter (Barber *et al.* 1999).
- 5.1.3 Neolithic flint mines do not usually exist in isolation (e.g. Grimes Graves in Suffolk or Blackpatch, and Cissbury in Sussex; Barber *et al.* 1999), however it is usual for disused flint mines to be deliberately backfilled with the quarry waste generated from later mines. The redeposited chalk backfill encountered within the large hollow on the Site at London Road is more characteristic of the fills of a solution hollow, although the lower deposits were not investigated. It should also be noted that the only find retrieved from the fills was a fragment of post medieval ceramic tile.
- 5.1.4 Given the potential depth of the feature and the sterile nature of the upper fills, it is clear that the development proposals will have no adverse impact on the lower fills of the feature and therefore it will effectively be preserved *in situ*.

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7 APPENDIX 1: TRENCH RECORDS

AREA 1. Dimensions: 10.6 x 9.8 x 0.43 m

Context	Description	Depth
1	Tarmac - modern	0-0.11m
2	Levelling layer – mid-orange clayey sand with moderate gravel. Levelling layer under tarmac	0.11-0.23m
3	Demolition Layer – made ground . Composed of red brick fragments, mortar and gravel within a c	0.23-0.43m
4	Natural – Chalk natural	0.43m+
5	Cut of previously excavated pit – excavated by AOC in 2003	
6	Modern backfill of pit [5]	
7	Cut of previously excavated pit – excavated by AOC in 2003	
8	Modern backfill of pit [7]	
9	Cut of a small bush throw/ tree throw	
10	Fill of tree throw [9]	
11	Cut of post hole or modern disturbance	
12	Fill of post hole or modern disturbance/[11]	
13	Cut of post hole or modern disturbance	
14	Fill of post hole or modern disturbance [13]	

TRENCH 1. Dimensions: 10 x 2.3 x 0.45 m

Context	Description	Depth
101	Tarmac - modern	0-0.14m
102	Levelling layer under tarmac. Bright orange sandy clay with moderate small and medium gravel. Quite loose – modern	0.14-0.27m
103	Made ground – mixed deposit of modern red brick and medium sized rounded gravel	0.27-0.45m
104	Natural – chalk natural	0.45m+

TRENCH 2. Dimensions: 16 x 4.2 x 2.1x0.37

Context	Description	Depth
201	Tarmac – modern	0-0.16m
202	Levelling layer under tarmac. Bright orange sandy clay with moderate small and medium gravel. Quite loose – modern	0.16-0.28m
203	Made ground or demolition layer. Broken modern red brick fragments in a flint gravel matrix	0.28-0.37m
204	Natural – chalk natural	0.37m+
205	Cut of large feature – possibly a pit or a solution hollow	See sheets
206	Upper fill of pit [205]. Slow silting	
207	Lower fill of pit [205]. Redeposited chalk natural – loose and 'blocky'	

TRENCH 3. Dimensions: 10.6 x 2 x 0.61x0.61

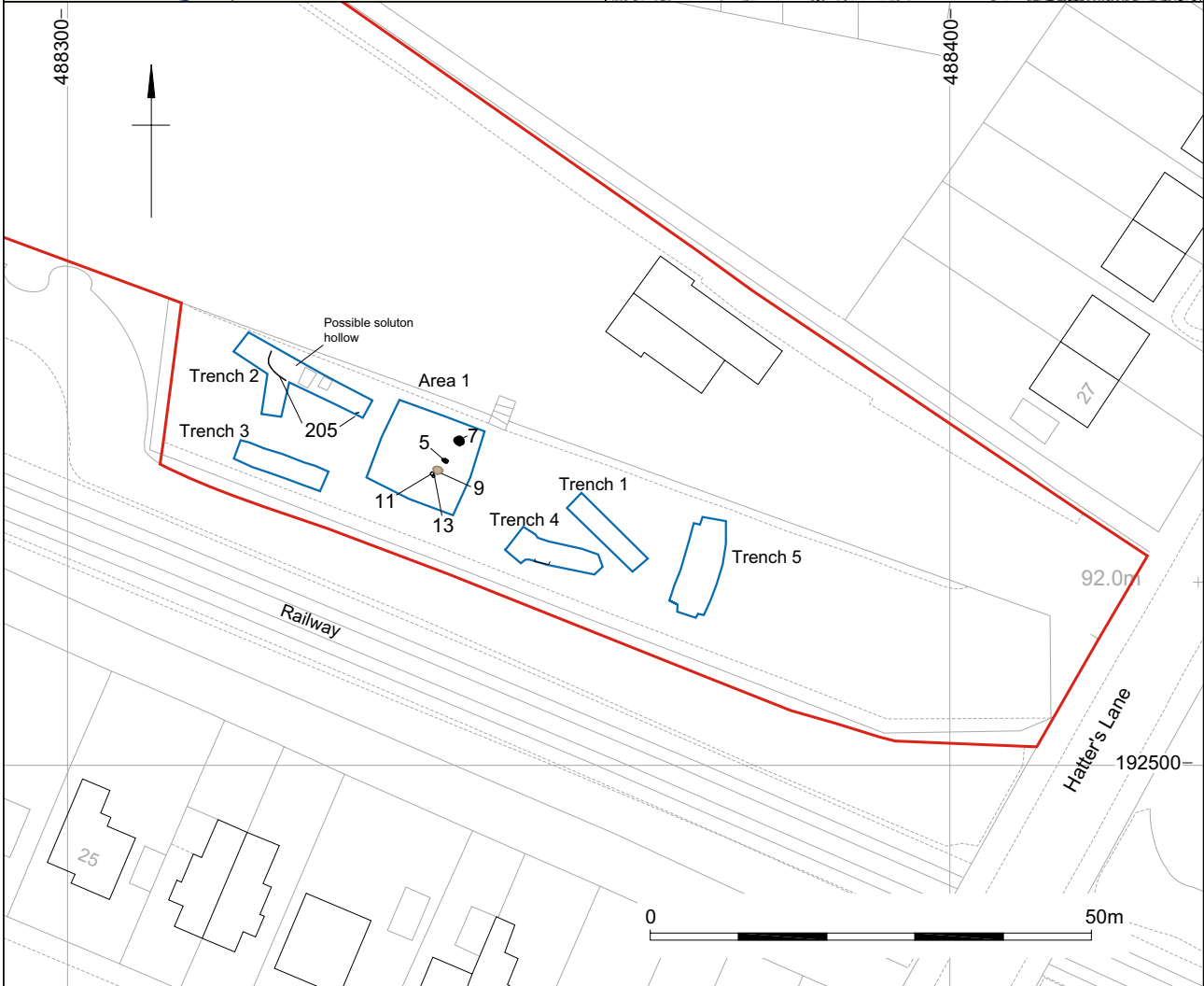
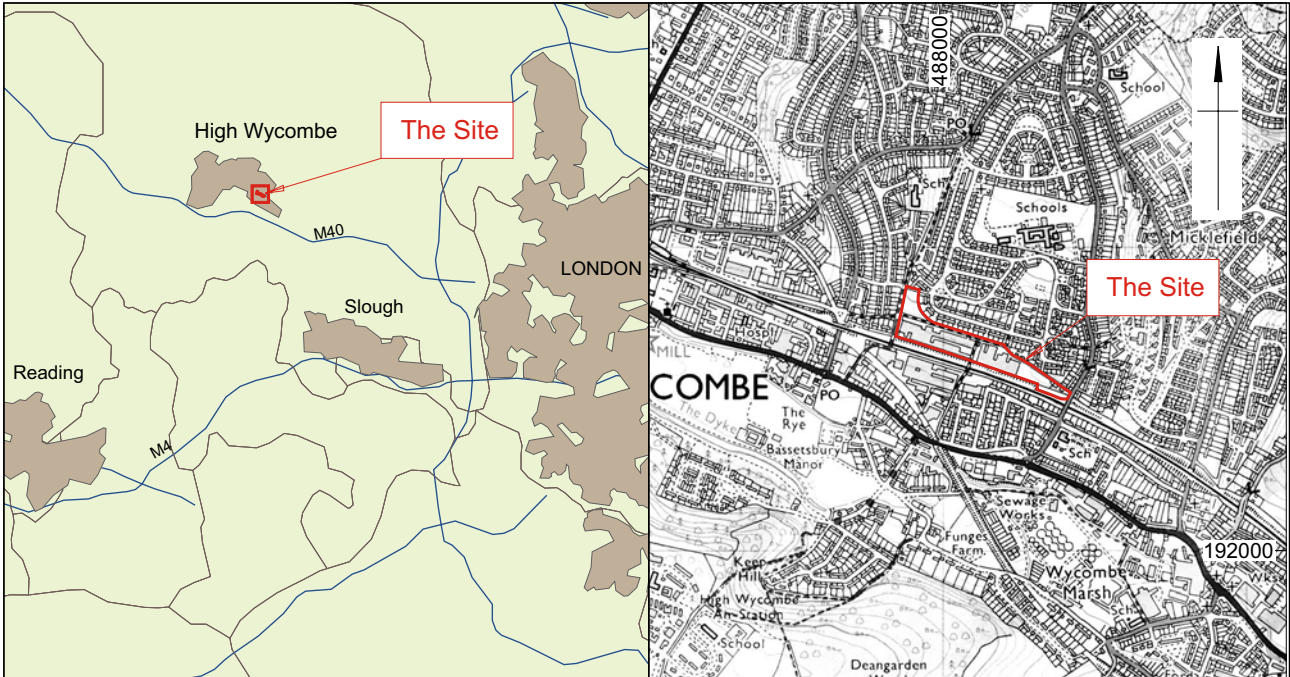
Context	Description	Depth
301	Tarmac – modern	0.-0.11m
302	Made ground, loose layer of orangy sand with moderate small and medium rounded pebbles and crumbled brick	0.11-0.33m
303	Made ground-Light brown sandy layer with sub-angular pebbles and flint	0.33-0.39m
304	Medium grey silty sands with small –med chalk inclusions and small subrounded flint.	0.39-0.44m
305	Garden soils- Medium brown silty loam, small chalk inclusions.	0.44-0.54m
305	Natural – chalk natural, periglacial marking	0.54m- 0.61m+

TRENCH 4. Dimensions: 9.4 x 2.3 x 0.67x0.73

Context	Description	Depth
401	Tarmac – modern	0.85-0.97m
402	Made ground, loose layer of orangy sand with moderate small and medium rounded pebbles and crumbled brick	0.97-1.29m
403	Made ground- dark brown loamy sand with small to med-rounded pebbles + crumbled loose brick	
404	Made ground- mid grey compact sandy clay loam with small-medium calc inclusions and subrounded flint, very compact	
405	Original garden soils, medium brown silty sands with small –med chalk inclusions and small subrounded flint.	1.29-1.37m
406	Natural – chalk natural	1.37m+

TRENCH 5. Dimensions: 11.2 x 2.2 x 1.45x1.37

Context	Description	Depth
501	Building rubble	0-0.85m
502	Tarmac – modern	0.85-0.97m
503	Made ground, loose layer of orangy sand with moderate small and medium rounded pebbles and crumbled brick	0.97-1.29m
504	Original garden soils, medium brown silty sands with small –med chalk inclusions and small subrounded flint.	1.29-1.37m
505	Natural – chalk natural	1.37m+



- Site Boundary
- Excavated Trench/Area



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Site location with excavated trenches and features

Figure 1



Plate 1: Area 1 from the east



Plate 2: Trench 2 showing feature 205



Plate 3: Trench 4 representative section

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Plate 4: Trench 1 from the east




Plate 5: Trench 3 from the west



Plate 6: Trench 4 from the west



Plate 7: Trench 5 from the south

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WESSEX ARCHAEOLOGY LIMITED.

Registered Head Office: Portway House, Old Sarum Park, Salisbury, Wiltshire SP4 6EB.

Tel: 01722 326867 Fax: 01722 337562 info@wessexarch.co.uk www.wessexarch.co.uk

London Office: Unit 113, The Chandlery, 50 Westminster Bridge Road, London SE1 7QY.

Tel: 020 7953 7494 Fax: 020 7953 7499 london-info@wessexarch.co.uk www.wessexarch.co.uk

