

T H A M E S V A L L E Y

ARCHAEOLOGICAL

S E R V I C E S

**Land to the south of Skimmingdish Lane,
Bicester, Oxfordshire**

Archaeological Recording Action

by Andrew Muddin and Pierre Manisse

Site Code: SDL 17/222

(SP 5976 2361)

**Land to the south of Skimmingdish Lane,
Bicester, Oxfordshire**

An Archaeological Recording Action

For Taylor Wimpey Oxfordshire

by Andrew Munding and Pierre Manisse
Thames Valley Archaeological Services Ltd

Site Code SDL 17/222

December 2017

Summary

Site name: Land to the south of Skimmingdish Lane, Bicester, Oxfordshire

Grid reference: SP 5976 2361

Site activity: Recording Action

Date and duration of project: 6th November to 13th December 2017

Project coordinator: Danielle Milbank

Site supervisor: Luis Esteves, Pierre Manisse, Andrew Munding

Site code: SDL 17/222

Area of site: 2065 sq m stripped area within overall 2.54ha site

Summary of results: An open area excavation was undertaken, targeting linear features located in a prior evaluation. This confirmed the nature and extent of at least one of the features identified in the evaluation and located a small number of other features, most of which were undated. A single pit is tentatively dated to the Iron Age by pottery. A single sherd of medieval pottery was recovered from the topsoil. The most notable find, however, also from the topsoil, was a Bronze Age bronze spearhead.

Location and reference of archive: The archive is presently held at Thames Valley Archaeological Services, Reading and will be deposited with Oxfordshire Museum Service in due course.

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Report 17/222

Introduction

This report documents the results of an archaeological recording action carried out on land to the south of Skimmingdish Lane, Bicester, Oxfordshire, OX26 4FF (SP 5976 2361) (Fig. 1). The work was commissioned by Mr Steven Neal, of Taylor Wimpey Oxfordshire, Suite J, Windrush Court, Abingdon Business Park, Abingdon, Oxfordshire, OX14 1SY.

Planning permission (14/00697/F) has been gained from Cherwell District Council for the construction of a residential development on the site. An archaeological evaluation revealed only undated features, but these were judged likely to be ‘of some antiquity’ (FA 2013). Due to the potential disturbance of archaeological deposits, an archaeological recording action was required, targeting the features located in the evaluation.

This is in accordance with the Department for Communities and Local Government’s *National Planning Policy Framework* (NPPF 2012) and the District’s Council’s policies on archaeology. The field investigation was carried out to a specification approved by Mr Richard Oram, Planning Archaeologist for Oxfordshire County Archaeological Services, who monitored the excavation. The fieldwork was undertaken by Luis Esteves, Pierre Manisse, Anne-Michelle Huvig and Andrew MUNDIN, and the site code is SDL 17/222.

The archive is presently held at Thames Valley Archaeological Services, Reading and will be deposited with Oxfordshire Museum Service in due course.

Location, topography and geology

The site is located on the north-eastern edge of modern Bicester, with the recently realigned route of Skimmingdish Lane to the north. Between it and the site boundary is a cycle route, which follows the old road. Housing lies to the south and a new development is underway on the opposite side of Skimmingdish Lane to the north-east. The land is mostly scrub, but would historically have been agricultural land. It is mostly level, lying at a height 71m above Ordnance Datum but lies within a small valley which is a tributary of Langford Brook. The underlying geology is rubble stone mixed with silt and sand alluvium above Cornbrash Limestone (BGS Geotitles; BGS 2002).

Archaeological background

A evaluation has highlighted the site's archaeological potential. A small collection of linear features were identified; though undated, along with some isolated pits of possible archaeological origin that were found beneath subsoil (FA 2013). The only find was a struck flint, considered likely to be residual, in 'ditch' 803.

The site lies immediately south of the Scheduled and Conservation Area of the former RAF airbase at Bicester (now Bicester Heritage). This is an almost complete surviving example of a WWII bomber base, originally dating from 1923 and discontinued by the RAF in 2004. The airfield and surrounding area of 160ha contains 34 listed buildings associated with its use, which range from partially buried bomb stores, to aircraft hangers and a control tower. The site lies close to the sites of several (levelled) Bronze Age barrow burial sites. The Buckingham Road, to the north-west, follows the course of the Alchester to Towcester Roman road (Margary 1973, route 160a). An archaeological evaluation, c. 500m to the north-west (Pine 2000), located a small cluster of deposits certainly and probably of Roman (1st century AD) date. However, evaluations adjacent to the airfield, to the north-east found nothing of interest (Pilkinton 2016; Hammond 2005).

Objectives and methodology

The purpose of the recording action was to excavate and record all archaeological deposits present within the identified area targeted for excavation. The general objectives of the project were to:

- record and, if necessary, excavate and record all archaeological deposits and features within the areas threatened by the proposed development;

- produce relative and absolute dating and phasing for deposits and features recorded on the site;

- establish the character of these deposits in attempt to define functional areas on the site such as industrial, domestic, etc.; and to

- produce information on the economy and local environment and compare and contrast this with the results of other excavations in the region.

The specific research questions the project aimed to address were:

- When was the site first utilised and when was it abandoned?

- What is the palaeoenvironmental setting of the area?

- What is the date and nature of the features recorded by the evaluation?

- Are these features part of a settlement complex or features in the wider landscape?

The excavated area was targeted on two evaluation trenches that produced deposits of possible archaeological origin (although all were undated). The area was stripped under constant archaeological supervision, with a 360°

mechanical excavator, fitted with a toothless bucket. All spoilheaps were checked for finds, and a metal detector was used on deeper topsoil and subsoil deposits as they were exposed. All archaeological features were to be planned and sectioned as a minimum objective, with excavation sample proportions dependent on the nature and significance of the feature.

Results

In total, eight features of possible archaeological origin were identified within the 2065 sq m targeted area of the recording action (Figs 2 and 3). During soil stripping, finds were also recovered by metal detecting (see below).

Gully 1 (Pl. 1) was investigated with seven slots (slots 2, 3, 5, 6, 9, 12 and 15). The majority of the slots were 1.5m in length and varied between 0.36m and 0.48m wide, reaching a depth no deeper than 0.1m. No finds were recovered. The fill was uniform across the slots as a single deposit (Fig. 4), and was of medium compaction, light brown silt, with very occasional small rounded limestone inclusions. Six soil samples were taken from this fill at various points but no carbonized plant remains or finds were recovered.

The other features of possible archaeological origin were six pits, (4, 7, 8, 10, 14 and an irregular conjoined feature 11 and 13) (Figs 3 and 4). Pit 4, on the western edge of the investigated area, was an oval pit, 1.35m long (W-E) and 0.66m wide (N-S) which was 0.09m deep and was infilled with a single fill of brown silt with very occasional small rounded gravel. Eight small pieces of poorly-fired ceramic were recovered from this fill.

Pit 7 was an elongated feature 3m long (NW-SE) and 1.28m wide (SW-NE). It was 0.19m deep and contained a single fill (58) of brown silt with frequent small snail shells and very occasional small rounded limestone inclusions but no finds. Pit 8, which was fully excavated, was 1.12m wide and 0.72m long, located on the southern side of the excavated area. The pit contained two fills, the lower fill 60, filled the base of the feature, while the upper fill (59) was spread over the top of the feature. The upper fill was a grey brown silt with occasional small limestone inclusions, 0.1m thick. The lower fill was a grey silty gravel with frequent stone inclusions. This reached a depth of 0.2m. No finds were recovered.

Pit 10 was a sub-circular feature with a single fill (62)(Pl. 2). The feature was 0.6m in diameter and 0.28m deep. It was filled with a firm grey brown clayey silt with very occasional small limestone inclusions. A 10L sample (9) was taken from this fill, which again contained no carbonized plant remains. Pit 14, at the north west of the excavation area, was roughly circular and 0.76m in diameter. The fill was a friable, dark brown grey with some charcoal inclusions and small, occasional pieces of sub rounded heat-affected stone.

Adjacent to this was an irregular shaped pit made of two separate areas and investigated with two slots (11 and 13; Pl. 3). The southern extent was fully excavated in slot 11, which was 1m long and 0.88m wide. It was 0.12m deep. The northern section of the feature was oval in plan and was half sectioned (13). This was filled with a single fill of grey brown silt (65), which was 0.2m deep.

A small extension to the excavated area to examine a feature recorded in the evaluation and interpreted as a ditch (803) showed it to be an amorphous natural hollow. No finds were recovered from this area.

Finds

Pottery by Paul Blinkhorn

The pottery assemblage comprised nine co-joining pieces (just two original sherds) with a total weight of 13g. One is Iron Age, the other medieval.

The former is from Pit 4, fill 55, and weighs 7g. It is very friable and has partially disintegrated, though the eight crumbs are all from one vessel. It is in a shelly fabric typical of the Iron Age in the Bicester area (eg. Woodward and Marley 2000).

The medieval sherd (weighing 6g) is from the subsoil, and is from the neck of a glazed jug in Brill/Boarstall Ware, fabric OXAM of the Oxfordshire Type-Series. It is datable to the 13th – 14th centuries (Mellor 1994). Such pottery is a common find in the region.

Animal bone by Lizzi Lewins

A small assemblage of animal bone (15 fragments), weighing a total of 51g was recovered during the course of the investigation. The bone was highly fragmented and eroded, hindering identification. Of the fifteen fragments only two could be partly identified, both from pit 7 (58): a partial long bone shaft fragment from a medium sized mammal and a partial astragalus from a large mammal. No further analysis was possible.

Worked bone by Lizzi Lewins

A single piece of worked bone was recovered from the subsoil. It is rectangular in shape and measures 90mm in length, 15mm wide and 7mm deep. It tapers slightly along its length however it is incomplete and so the minimum width could not be determined. It is likely that this is a knife handle; a slot runs through the inside of the length of the piece into which a tang would be inserted. There is no evidence for the use of rivets and no sign of any decoration (though surface abrasion may have removed any). No date could be assigned to this piece.

Metalwork by Steve Crabb

Two metal objects were retained from a metal detector survey of this site. A copper alloy spearhead was found in the topsoil (Pl. 4). It is a socketed leaf-shaped spearhead which measures 130mm long, 75mm of which is the blade and 55mm of which is the socket; it is 28mm wide at the widest point, 15mm across at the socket, and the lozenges over the loops are 17mm long. The blade is leaf-shaped with a pronounced rounded central rib. The surface is a dark brown colour with little evidence for corrosion, this surface colour is likely to be the result of the burial environment and the spear's composition. The blade has a large number of lengthwise striations from base to tip, the socket has further striations but these are not consistently aligned in the same direction. There is however a small section of the rib which has been coarsely ground to remove excess metal from the casting process. There are remains of casting ribs along both sides of the socket in line with the blade edge. There is a small piece of damage to the edge of one side of the blade and the other edge has been slightly folded. The point of the spear has been scratched during excavation revealing the colour of the metal. On either side of the socket is a small raised protrusion, these are in the same location as the cast loops of looped socketed spearheads of the middle Bronze Age but they are not perforated through. The socket contains organic material which is likely to represent the original spear shaft. The recovery of this object from topsoil, in such good condition, is a rare find.

A lead musket ball also from the topsoil measures 16mm across and weighs 24g. It has two remnants of casting sprue on opposing sides of the ball, which had been snapped off but not further smoothed over. This size and weight of ball most closely matches that of a carbine (Fleming 2012). It is not possible to accurately date this ball as it is within the range of non-standardized balls from a Civil War era firing range assigned to the carbine category and is closely matched to the standardized size of musket ball employed from the mid 18th century by British forces. It is not inconceivable that one of the personnel from the nearby RAF base possessed an antique firearm and this ball is a modern loss and perhaps even a modern casting.

Further notes on the bronze spearhead by Robin J Taylor

The blade has well-milled edges, although there are a couple of nicks and dents from damage. One nick in the blade edge is 7mm long and might be the result of a glancing blow with another weapon, or perhaps an old break or flaw. The blade edge is slightly blunted and is uneven and wavy, as if distorted by some lateral pressure. There are many fine longitudinal scratches on the blade and socket, suggesting some surface abrasion and polishing in the past.

The midrib is a slightly angular lozenge shape from a round socket; there are some dents in the midrib. The socket has a couple of holes in it, which are perhaps casting flaws. The impression is of a piece that was prepared

and finished, but possibly never used to any extent. There is not much pitting, corrosion and no heavy, green patination, so the object is perhaps from a well-sealed or waterlogged context.

This spearhead fits with the leaf-shaped, side-looped type which are usually classified as Class IV; it has a wide distribution, but with concentrations in North Wiltshire, Berkshire, Oxfordshire and the Thames Valley (Ehrenberg, 1977, 7–8). Ehrenberg points out that the eye of the loops in this type is always very small and thus it is difficult to determine how they might have been used to secure the shaft, or they are possibly non-functional in some cases (1977, 7). Hoard and settlement site associations date these spearheads to the later part of the Middle Bronze Age or Taunton phase in southern Britain (Ehrenberg, 1977, 8; O'Connor, 1980, 39). The Taunton phase can be dated to 1400–1200 BC (Taylor, 1993, 23). More than two-thirds of the spearheads in Ehrenberg's study area came from the rivers Thames and Kennet (1977, 17). The deposition of weaponry in water and wet places has long been seen as votive offering (Bradley, 1998).

Macrobotanical analysis by Joanna Pine

Thirteen bulk soil samples were processed from features excavated during the recording action. The samples were sieved to 0.25mm and air dried and the resultant flots examined under a low-power binocular microscope at x10 magnification. No charred seeds were present in any of the samples. A small collection of charcoal (<1g) was recovered from the sample from pit 14 but in poor condition and not identifiable.

Conclusion

The recording action has been successful in excavating the area as intended, but had limited success in finding features other than those that had previously been recorded. All except one of the features remain undated. Pit 4 contained a few crumbs of Iron Age pottery, originally from a single sherd, and is only very tentatively dated to this period. There are no other recorded Iron Age deposits in the vicinity and it may be that this is another example of an isolated Iron Age feature which are occasionally encountered, if difficult to interpret.

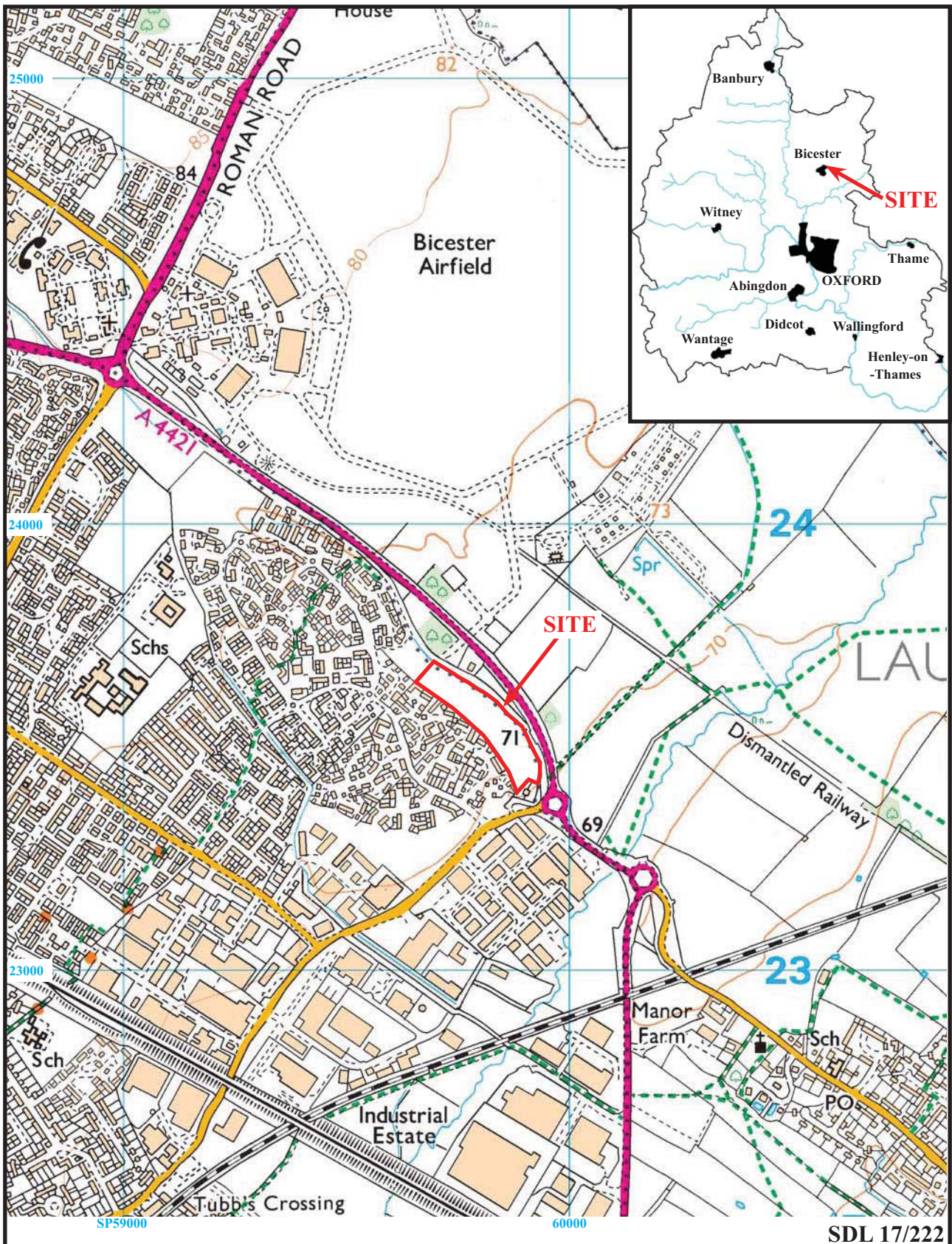
The most notable find, however, was a Bronze Age bronze spearhead from the topsoil, whose manufacture can be dated to the later Middle Bronze Age (1400–1200 BC). For a topsoil find, its condition is remarkable and it is possible that it may originally have been deposited in water or in a waterlogged environment. If so, it is not clear how it ended up in topsoil, or how far it may have travelled in doing so. Despite the presence of numerous cropmarks assumed to represent Bronze Age barrows in the vicinity (including seven destroyed by the development of the airfield), the Bronze Age is not well represented in the archaeological record of Bicester and this find may give some support to the interpretation of the cropmark evidence.

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APPENDIX 1: Catalogue of Features

<i>Cut</i>	<i>Fill</i>	<i>Group</i>	<i>Type</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Comments / Dating Evidence</i>
	50		Topsoil		
	51		Subsoil		
	52		Geology		
2	53	1	Gully		
3	54	1	Gully		
4	55		Pit	Iron Age?	1 sherd of pottery
5	56	1	Gully		
6	57	1	Gully		
7	58		Pit?		
8	59, 60		Pit		
9	61	1	Gully		
10	62		Pit		
11	63		Pit?		
12	64	1	Gully		
13	65		Pit		
14	66		Pit		
15	67	1	Ditch terminus		

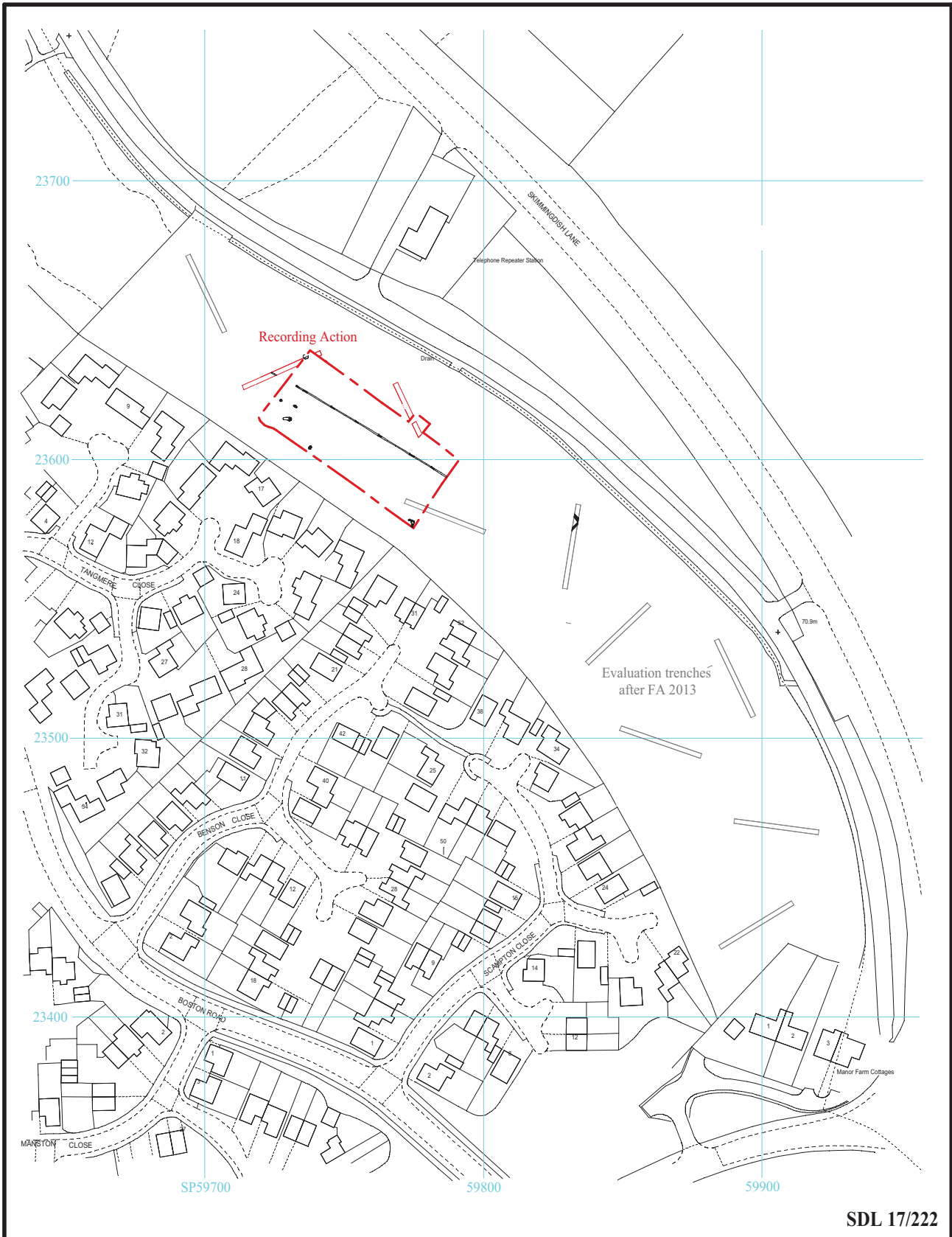


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Land to the south of Skimmingdish Lane, Bicester, Oxfordshire, 2017
Archaeological Recording Action
 Figure 1. Location of site within Bicester and Oxfordshire.

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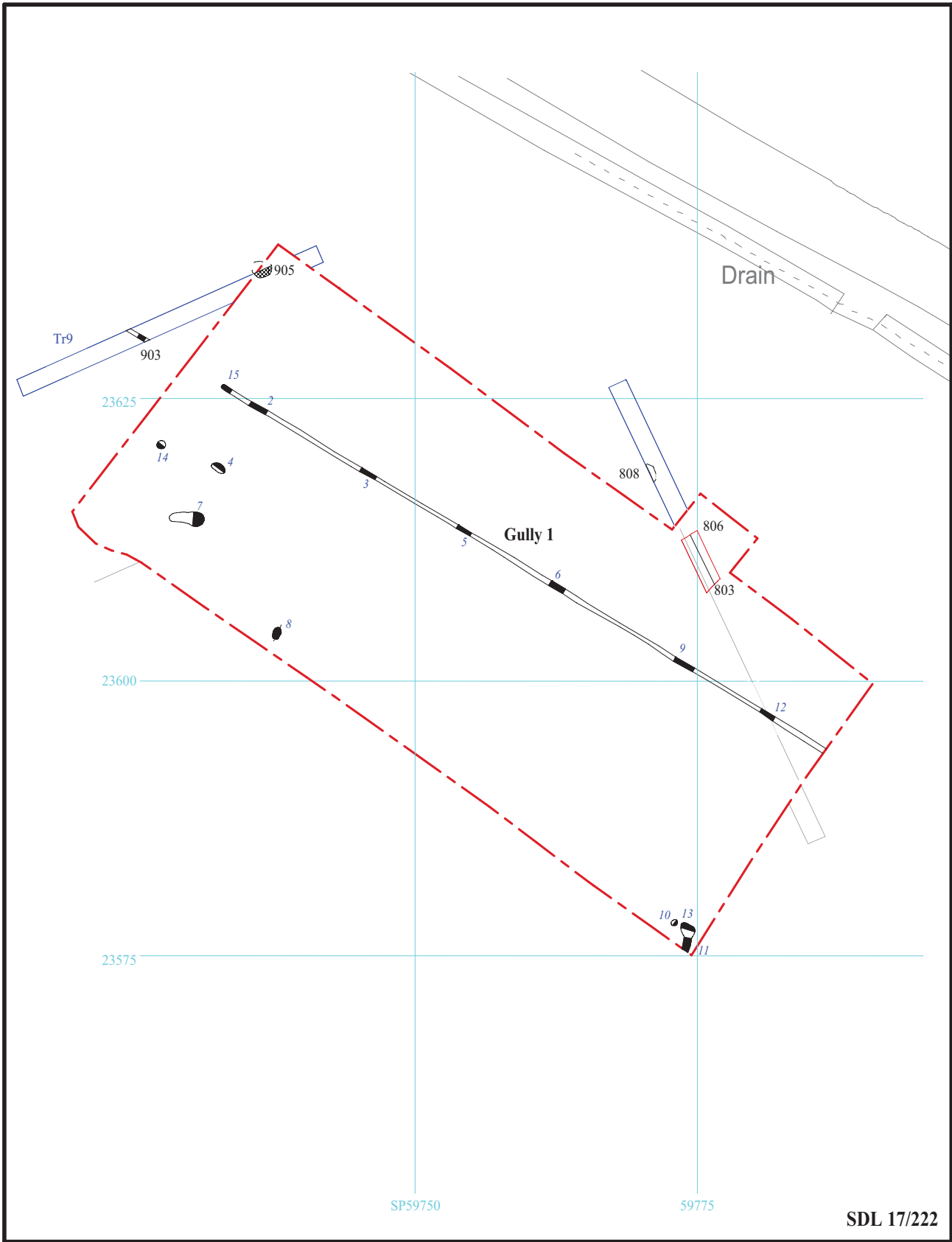
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Figure 2. Detail of site.

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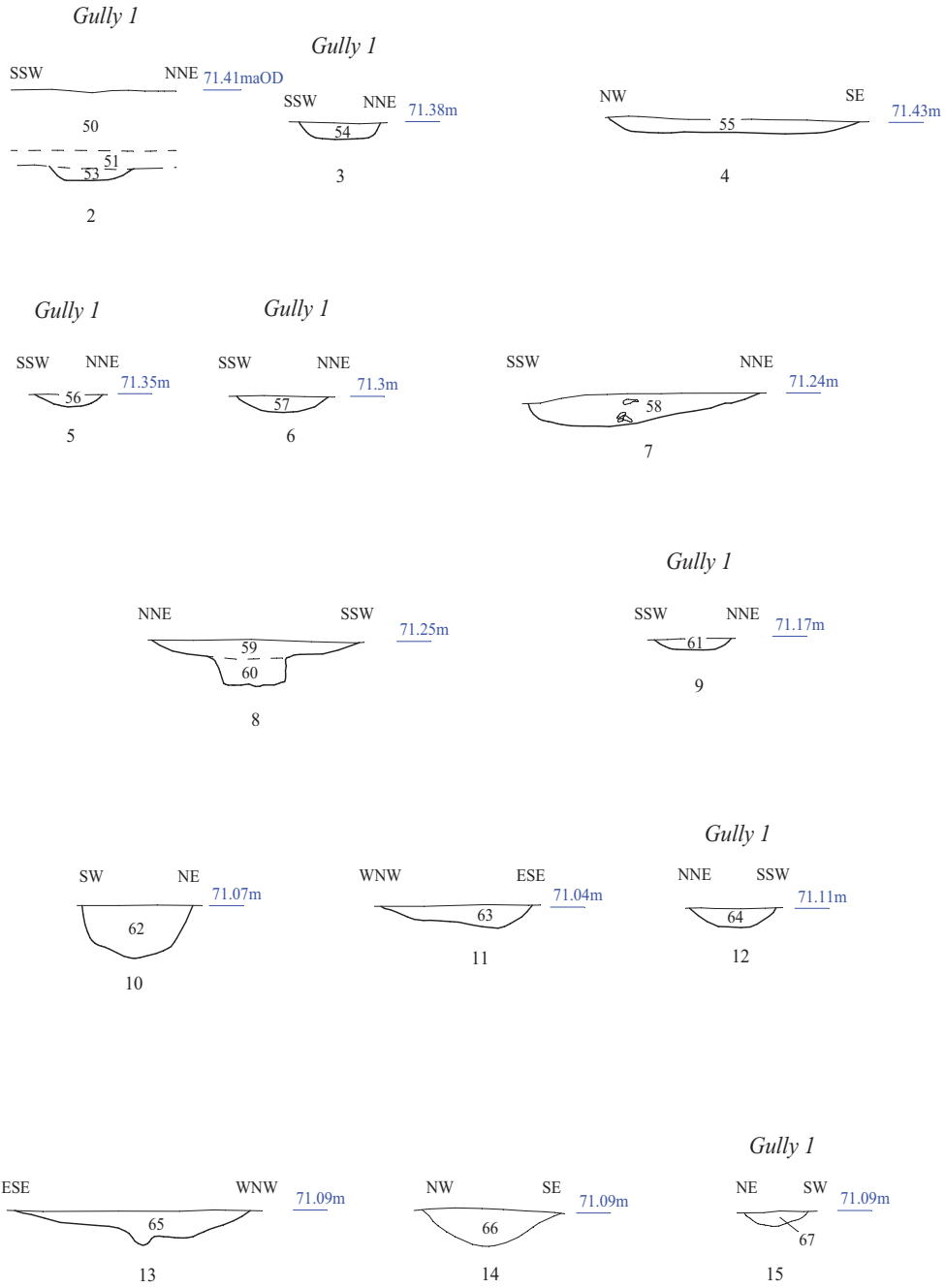




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Figure 3. Plan of features.





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Figure 4. Sections.



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Plate 1. Gully 1, looking north west, Scales: 1m and 0.3m.

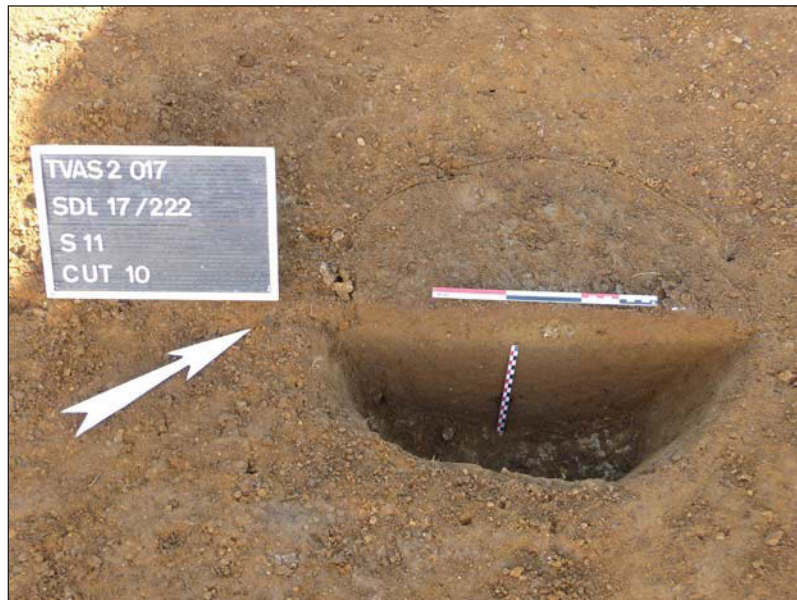


Plate 2. Pit 10, looking north west, Scales: 0.3m and 0.2m.

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Land to the south of Skimmingdish Lane,
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Plates 1 and 2.

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Plate 3. Pits 11 and 13, looking south,
Scales: 1m and 0.1m.



Plate 4. Spearhead, found in the topsoil (50).

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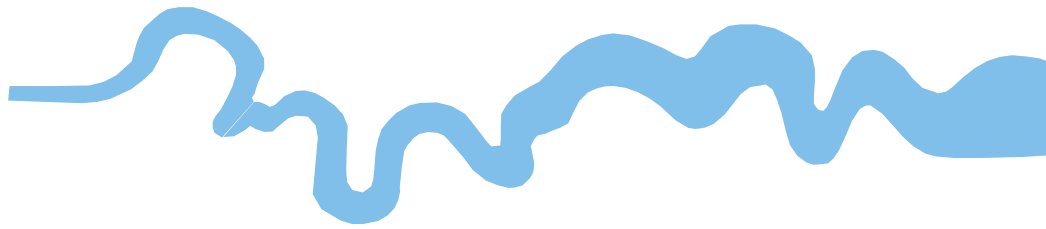
Land to the south of Skimmingdish Lane,
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Plates 3 and 4.

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TIME CHART

	Calendar Years
Modern _____	AD 1901
Victorian _____	AD 1837
Post Medieval _____	AD 1500
Medieval _____	AD 1066
Saxon _____	AD 410
Roman _____	AD 43 AD 0 BC
Iron Age _____	750 BC
Bronze Age: Late _____	1300 BC
Bronze Age: Middle _____	1700 BC
Bronze Age: Early _____	2100 BC
Neolithic: Late	3300 BC
Neolithic: Early	4300 BC
Mesolithic: Late	6000 BC
Mesolithic: Early	10000 BC
Palaeolithic: Upper	30000 BC
Palaeolithic: Middle	70000 BC
Palaeolithic: Lower	2,000,000 BC





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