

Land off Merton Road, Ambrosden, Oxfordshire

**Archaeological Evaluation** 

by Pierre-Damien Manisse

Site Code: MRA20/178

(SP 5997 1916)

# Land off Merton Road, Ambrosden, Oxfordshire

An Archaeological Evaluation

For Redrow Homes Ltd

by Pierre-Damien Manisse

Thames Valley Archaeological Services Ltd

Site Code MRA 20/178

April 2021

# Summary

Site name: Land off Merton Road, Ambrosden, Oxfordshire

Grid reference: SP 5997 1916

Site activity: Archaeological Evaluation

Date and duration of project: 6th – 8th April 2021

Project coordinator: Tim Dawson

Site supervisor: Pierre-Damien Manisse

Site code: MRA 20/178

Area of site: c. 4.2ha

**Summary of results:** Of the eleven trenches to be opened, ten were dug as intended, but one trench was abandoned due to rapid water ingress. The evaluation confirmed the archaeological potential of a circular geophysical anomaly indicating it was likely to be a prehistoric ring ditch/gully. A second doubtful circular could not be confirmed as being of interest. Several pits were also recorded across the site mainly of early post-medieval and modern date. Other trenches confirmed the presence of a backfilled pond.

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

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Report edited/checked by:	Steve Ford ✓ 26.04.21
	Steve Preston ✓ 26.04.21

Thames Valley Archaeological Services Ltd, 47–49 De Beauvoir Road, Reading RG1 5NR

# Land off Merton Road, Ambrosden, Oxfordshire An Archaeological Evaluation

by Pierre-Damien Manisse

Report 20/178

# Introduction

This report documents the results of an archaeological field evaluation carried out at land off Merton Road, Ambrosden, Oxfordshire, OX25 2NP (centred on SP 5997 1916) (Fig. 1). The work was commissioned by Dr Andy Richmond of Phoenix Consulting Archaeology Ltd, 13 Grove Place, Bedford, Bedfordshire, MK40 3JJ on behalf of Redrow Homes Ltd, Devon Way, Northampton, NN3 6DX.

Planning permission was granted on appeal (APP/C3105/W/19/32228169) by Cherwell District Council for a new housing development with associated parking and landscaping on the site. The consent is subject to two conditions (18 and 19) pertaining to archaeology and the historic environment requiring a programme of archaeological investigation and mitigation. This would take the form, initially of an archaeological evaluation, which would inform any mitigation strategy required. The evaluation was carried out in accordance with a written scheme of investigation prepared by Phoenix Consulting (Coates and Richmond 2020) and approved by the local planning authority.

This is in accordance with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government's *National Planning Policy Framework* (NPPF 2019) and the District Council's policies on archaeology. The project specification was approved by Oxfordshire County Council archaeological officer, the archaeological adviser to the District. The fieldwork was undertaken by Pierre-Damien Manisse, assisted by Emily Gibson, between 6th and 8th April 2021 and the site code is MRA 20/178. The archive is presently held at Thames Valley Archaeological Services, Reading and will be deposited at Oxfordshire Museum Service in due course.

## Location, topography and geology

The site is located just outside the village of Ambrosden, 350m south-west of its historic core (Fig. 1). It is an irregular plot of land, covering 4.12ha, currently used for grazing. It is bordered to the north by the Bicester military railway line and to the south by Merton Road, to the east is housing, and to the west, meadows (Fig. 2). The site has a very slight slope up towards the north and lies between 60 and 63m above Ordnance Datum (aOD) with undulations of ridge and furrow visible in places. The underlying geology (BGS 1994) is Cornbrash Formation, a rubbly limestone deposit from the Middle Jurassic period.

# Archaeological background

The site's archaeological and historical background has been highlighted in a desk-based assessment (Gilbey 2018). To summarize, the potential of the site mostly derives from the result of a recent geophysical survey (Evershed 2020). There was no previously known evidence within the site and the surroundings have delivered a few traces of prehistoric or Roman activity. About 150m north-east, associated with a possible ditch terminus, were some flint flakes and tools. Around 850m to the west an Iron Age enclosure, ditches and cremations were identified, and occupation extending into the Roman period. West of the site a possible early Saxon building is known. Ambrosden itself is mentioned in Domesday book (1086) as *Ameresdone*. Several Grade II listed buildings are recorded, including the parish church dedicated to St Mary. It retains some 12th-century elements Medieval pottery has been found through the village. The site was part of the larger Ambrosden Park, created in the 18th century by the Turner family. It included Ambrosden Hall, 160m to the north-east of the site, demolished in 1768, and probably also the large fishpond depicted on the 1847 Tithe map. Part of the fishpond was still apparent on the 1955 edition of the Ordnance Survey but was finally filled in the later 20th century. The main interest of the site lies in the discovery by the magnetometer survey of two sub-circular anomalies in the northern part of the site that could represent ploughed out Bronze Age barrows or ring gully house sites . The survey also revealed a number of linear features that could correspond to ridge and furrow cultivation.

# **Objectives and methodology**

The purpose of the evaluation was to determine the presence/absence, extent, condition, character, quality and date of any archaeological deposits within the area of development.

More specifically, this project aims to:

Determine if archaeologically relevant levels, of any period, have survived on this site; Determine whether the geophysical anomalies in the northern part of the site are associated with Bronze Age funerary activity;

Determine whether some of the other geophysical anomalies relate to archaeological features; Determine whether any features relating to Saxon, medieval and post-medieval settlement of Ambrosden are present; and to

Provide information in order to draw up an appropriate mitigation strategy

Any archaeological deposits or features were to be assessed according to the research priorities, of general agendas (HE 2017) or more local or thematic approaches (Hey and Hind 2014).

It was proposed to dig mechanically 11 trenches, 10 at 30m long and one 60m long, as close as possible as the agreed plan (Coates and Richmond 2020, fig. 3). The trenches' widths were to be between 1.60 and 1.80m

wide, and a 30m contingency was allowed to clarify any deposit if required. Topsoil and subsoil were to be separated. The excavation will be conducted under constant archaeological supervision with a sufficient percentage of the features being sampled by hand to carry out the objectives of the project.

# Results

The 11 trenches were dug almost as intended with only trench 1 slightly shifted at the request of the consultant and trench 9 only partially opened as it flooded too quickly (Fig. 3). Trenches varying in length from 29.30m to 35.8m and their depth ranging from 0.20m to 1.30m. The trenches' width was uniformly 1.60m. A metal detector (Minelab Vanquish 540) was used both *in situ* and on spoil to enhance finds recovery and spoilheaps were visually inspected. No additional material was found this way.

The lowest deposit encountered was a light grey brown silty clay with very frequent limestone inclusions, matching the expected geological horizon. In the south end of trenches 4, 7 and 8 it was overlain by a reddish brown silty clay with occasional limestone inclusions that was understood as a superficial geological deposit. Elsewhere a subsoil, light grey brown silt with scarce small limestone inclusions, was observed directly on top of the natural geology, except for trench 1. Above this was the present day topsoil, a mid to dark grey brown silt.

A complete list of trenches giving lengths, breadths, depths and a description of sections and geology is given in Appendix 1 and the excavated features, with dating evidence, are summarized in Appendix 2.

#### Trench 1

Trench 1 was aligned SW - NE and was 32m long and 0.20m deep. The stratigraphy consisted of 0.20m of topsoil overlying natural geology. Some post-medieval pottery was collected from topsoil. No features of archaeological interest were present.

#### Trench 2 (Figs 4 and 5; Pl. 1)

Trench 2 was aligned W - E and was 31.70m long and 0.37m deep. The stratigraphy consisted of 0.19m of topsoil and 0.06m subsoil overlying natural geology. At 20m from the west end of the trench, ditch 8 was recorded, aligned S-N. It was 1.10m wide and 0.20m deep. It had steep sides and a flattish base. It was filled by a friable grey brown silty sand with frequent limestones. Three sherds of prehistoric pottery (likely Bronze Age) were recovered. This feature matches the near circular anomaly seen in the geophysical survey.

### Trench 3 (Figs 4 and 5)

Trench 3 was aligned S - N and was 35.70m long and 0.40m deep. The stratigraphy consisted of 0.20m of topsoil and 0.10m subsoil overlying natural geology. At 20.6m from the south end of the trench, pit 6 was recorded. It was about 1.45m in diameter and 0.12m deep. It was shallow with an uneven base. It was filled with a firm grey brown silty sand. A sherd of pottery coming from its fill, (61) was tentatively dated to the early medieval period but a clay tobacco pipe fragment leaves no doubt regarding its post-medieval date. A couple of metres further north, pit 7 was only half visible in the trench. It was potentially 0.77m in diameter and 0.20m deep with similar characteristics and fill to pit 6. Two sherds of pottery from this fill included one of the 14th or 15th century and one generically post-medieval (or just possibly Roman). Considering its proximity to pit 6 and the general similarities among all the pits excavated, the post-medieval date is favoured.

#### Trench 4 (Figs 4 and 5)

Trench 4 was aligned SSE - NNW and was 33m long and 0.73m deep. The stratigraphy consisted of 0.26m of topsoil and 0.10m subsoil overlying natural geology. There was an additional deposit, a red brown silty clay, up to 0.30m thick in the southern end, below the subsoil. Two intercutting pits, 3 and 5, were noted at 12.3m from the southern end of the trench. They had similar fills, a firm light grey brown silty sand with rare limestones. Pit 3 was sub-circular, 2m by at least 1.15m and relatively shallow (0.16m deep). Pit 5 had an estimated diameter of 0.50m and a depth of 0.07m. Both had a shallow profile with an uneven base. The pottery and tile from pit 3 could be Late Medieval. No finds were recovered from pit 5, though again its closeness would suggest a similar date.

#### Trench 5 (Pl. 2)

Trench 5 was aligned W - E and was 32.35m long and 0.40-0.45m deep. The stratigraphy consisted of 0.20m of topsoil and 0.20m subsoil overlying natural geology. No finds were recovered. The furrows noted during the geophysical survey were barely perceptible in plan.

# Trench 6 (Figs 4 and 5; Pl. 3)

Trench 6 was aligned almost W-E and was 31.60m long and 0.37m deep. The stratigraphy consisted of 0.17m of topsoil and 0.07m subsoil overlying natural geology. At 8.30m from the west end of the trench, pit 2 was recorded which had an estimated diameter of 2.20m and a depth of 0.39m. It had very steep sides and a flat base. Its basal fill (56) was a firm bluish grey silty clay, yielding a metal button and a fragment of tile. It was at most

0.07m thick. The main fill (57) was a firm grey brown silty sand with rare limestones. It contained an iron hook, a tile fragment, some animal bones and two pottery sherds, one medieval and one post-medieval. A late post-medieval date is likely.

#### Trench 7 (Figs 4 and 5; Pl. 4-5)

Trench 7 was aligned ESE - WNW and was 29.30m long and 0.76m deep. The stratigraphy consisted of 0.25m of topsoil and 0.11m subsoil overlying natural geology. For the south-east half of the trench, the extra reddish brown deposit between the subsoil and the geology was noted. It was up to 0.34m thick. At 16.60m from that south-east end of the trench, pit 4 was recorded which was  $1.50 \times 20.65m$  and 0.19m deep. It had steep sides and an uneven base filled with a firm light grey brown silty sand deposit containing rare limestones. No finds were recovered.

#### Trench 8 (Figs 4 and 5)

Trench 8 was aligned SE - NW and was 31.60m long and 0.65m deep. The stratigraphy consisted of 0.20m of topsoil and 0.20m subsoil overlying natural geology, again with the extra deposit, 0.25m thick at most, towards the south-east half of the trench. At 1.20m from the south-east end of the trench, furrow 11 was recorded and another one at 10.70m from the same end. In between there was modern pit 10, dug into the subsoil, containing some asbestos waste. No finds of interest were collected.

### Trench 9

Trench 9 was aligned W - E and was limited to 2m long and 1.30m deep. The stratigraphy consisted of 0.20m of topsoil and the rest of the fill consisted of at least 1.10m of modern infill. The geological level was not reached. As the trench was filling up with water, it was considered unsafe to carry on opening it. It was located where the previous fishpond was. No finds were recovered.

## Trench 10 (Pl. 6)

Trench 10 was aligned W - E and was 30.70m long and up to 1.25m deep (0.70m on average). The stratigraphy consisted of 0.23m of topsoil and 0.13m subsoil overlying made ground, corresponding to the modern backfill of the trench. In places the natural geology was reached at 0.56m below ground level, indicating that the trench stood possibly near the edge of the pond. No finds were recovered.

# Trench 11 (Pl. 7)

Trench 11 was aligned almost S - N and was 63m long and up to 1.30m deep (0.74m on average). The stratigraphy consisted of 0.30m of topsoil overlying modern made ground, corresponding to the backfill of the fish pond. Three test pits at 1.30m deep were made to assess the depth of this but did not reach the geological horizon. No finds were recovered.

# Finds

# Pottery by Sue Anderson

#### Introduction

Seventeen sherds of pottery weighing 120g were collected from eight contexts. Table 1 shows the quantification by fabric and a summary catalogue is included as Appendix 3. A full record is included in the archive in MS Access format.

Table 1. Pottery quantification by fabric.

Fabric	Code	Date range	No	Wt(g)	MNV
Prehistoric	PREH	Bronze Age?	3	13	3
Sandy handmade coarseware	EMW	11th-13th century	1	1	1
Brill Boarstall ware (coarser type)	OXAW	Late 12th-Mid-14th century	2	14	2
Brill Boarstall ware	OXAM	13th-15th century	1	1	1
Late med Brill Boarstall ware	OXBX	14th-15th century	1	7	1
Late medieval red earthenware	LMT	15th-16th century	1	2	1
Glazed red earthenware	GRE	16th-18th century	6	71	2
Post-medieval unglazed redware	PMRW	16th-18th century	1	7	1
Iron glazed blackwares	IGBW	16th-18th century	1	4	1
Totals			17	120	13

Quantification was carried out using sherd count, weight and minimum number of vessels (MNV). There were no rims to permit an EVE calculation. Local medieval wares were identified with the aid of Mellor (1994), but pre- and post-medieval fabric codes were assigned from the author's fabric series. Methods follow MPRG recommendations (MPRG 2001) and form terminology follows MPRG (1998).

## The assemblage

Three handmade sherds in a soft silty fabric, containing sparse red grog and calcareous inclusions, were found in ditch fill 63. These are likely to be of Bronze Age date, but only one sherd was of reasonable size and all three were abraded.

A handmade bodysherd of early medieval (broadly late 11th to mid 13th century) sandy type was recovered from pit fill (61). The fabric was medium sandy and hard, black, and possibly smoothed with some grass-wiping externally. The sherd is thin-walled. An earlier date (prehistoric or Early Saxon) cannot be entirely discounted.

Three sherds of high medieval date were all Brill/Boarstall types. All fragments were body sherds with traces of orange, yellow or copper green glaze externally. One sherd was decorated with a red slip stripe. Sherds were all abraded and were recovered from pit fills 55, 56 and 58, two of which also contained late medieval or post-medieval finds.

The late medieval or early post-medieval period was represented by a body sherd of late medieval Brill/Boarstall ware from pit fill 62 and a small fragment of another late medieval redware with internal green glaze from pit fill 55. An unglazed redware with an incised line externally, from pit fill 62, may be a post-medieval Brill product although a Roman date is also possible, and there were several fragments of glazed post-medieval redwares (GRE, IGBW) including a body fragment of an IGBW tankard from layer 54, and two flat bases of GRE with internal orange glaze, one from pit fill 56 and the other (comprising five sherds) from topsoil.

# Ceramic Building Material by Sue Anderson

Four fragments (143g) of CBM were recovered from three contexts (Appendix 4). From pit fill 55 there were two pieces of post-medieval plain roof tile in fine sandy (fs) and fine sandy with clay pellet (fscp) fabrics. Another small fragment from pit fill 57, also in fabric fscp, was probably a piece of post-medieval roof tile. A small, abraded fragment from pit fill 58 with a small spot of clear glaze on one edge was possibly a fragment of medieval floor tile. It had thin white mortar on the base, and was in a medium sandy poorly mixed (msx) fabric.

# Animal Bones by Ceri Falys

Two pieces of animal bone were recovered from pit 2 (56), in Trench 6. Weighing a total of 12g, the fragments displayed excellent surface preservation, although both showed evidence of excavation damage. One was the distal portion of a sheep/goat metapodium. The other fragment was a portion of an unidentified long bone shaft.

#### *Clay tobacco pipe* by Cristina Mateos

One fragment of clay pipe was recovered from pit 6, weighing 10g. The stem fragment is not closely datable, but clearly post-medieval.

# Metalwork by Aidan Colyer

Two pieces of metalwork were recovered from pit 2 in trench 6.

The first of these is a ferrous hook recovered from deposit 56. The hook is only 20mm in length and is likely from a bag. The shaping and quality of the metal suggest a post-medieval to modern date for the object.

The second piece was from deposit 57 and is a button made of a modern ferrous alloy. There is no evidence of rust and the loop on the rear has been welded on. This button is very late post-medieval to modern in date.

# Conclusion

Of the eleven intended trenches, ten were opened successfully. Trench 9 was abandoned due to excessive water inflow. The main sub-circular anomaly seen in the geophysical survey was confirmed in trench 2 as being a prehistoric ring ditch/gully. However, the more doubtful anomaly next to it was not observed at all in trench 3. Pits with generally similar profiles (shallow with steep sides and uneven base) were seen in trenches 3, 4, 6 and 7 and can be assigned a uniformly post-medieval date, despite having only a few finds. The ridge and furrow cultivation, visible on the surface, was not particularly obvious below ground in trench 5, 6 or 7 though identified more positively in trench 8.

Overall there is sufficient evidence to confirm the presence of the ring ditch/gully and this area of the site is considered to have archaeological potential. Lesser areas of potential might be indicted by the small number of pits of post-medieval date.

#### References

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# **APPENDIX 1:** Trench details

Trench	Length (m)	Breadth (m)	Depth (m)	Comment
1	32.00	1.6	0.20	0–0.20m topsoil; 0.20m+ natural geology.
2	31.70	1.6	0.37	0-0.19m topsoil; 0.19-0.25m subsoil; 0.25m+ natural geology. Ditch 8 [Pl. 1]
3	35.70	1.6	0.40	0–0.20m topsoil; 0.20–0.30m subsoil; 0.30m+ natural geology. Pits 6 and 7.
4	33.00	1.6	0.73	0–0.26m topsoil; 0.26–0.36m subsoil; 0.36–0.66m red-brown silty clay (alluvium) (54); 0.66m+ natural geology. Pits 3 and 5.
5	32.35	1.6	0.40-0.45	0-0.20m topsoil; 0.20-0.40m subsoil; 0.40m+ natural geology. Faint traces of furrows. [Pl. 2]
6	31.60	1.6	0.37	0–0.17m topsoil; 0.17–0.24m subsoil; 0.25m+ natural geology. Pit 2 [Pl. 3]
7	29.30	1.6	0.76	0–0.25m topsoil; 0.25–0.36m subsoil; reddish-brown silty clay (54) in southern half only, 0.36–0.70m; 0.70m+ natural geology. Pit 4 [Pls 4, 5]
8	31.60	1.6	0.65	0-0.20m topsoil; 0.20-0.40m subsoil; 0.40-0.65m reddish-brown silty clay (54) in southern half only; 0.65m+ natural geology. Pit 10, furrow 11.
9	2.00	1.6	1.30	0–0.20m topsoil; 0.20–1.30m modern pond backfill. Flooded.
10	30.70	1.6	1.30	0-0.23m topsoil; 0.23-0.36m subsoil; 0.36m+, modern pond backfill. In places, natural geology at 0.56m [Pl. 6]
11	63.00	1.6	1.30	0–0.30m topsoil; 0.30m+, modern pond backfill. [Pl. 7]

# **APPENDIX 2**: Feature details

Trench	Cut	Fill (s)	Туре	Date	Dating evidence
6	1	55	Pit	Post-Medieval	Pottery & CBM
6	2	56-57	Pit	Post-Medieval/Modern	Pottery & CBM, metal finds
4	3	58	Pit	Late Medieval?	Pottery & CBM
7	4	60	Pit		
4	5	59	Pit		
3	6	61	Pit	Post-Medieval	Medieval Pottery but clay pipe
3	7	62	Pit	Post-Medieval?	Pottery
2	8	63	Ditch/gully	Prehistoric (Bronze Age?)	Pottery
8	9	65	Furrow		
8	10	64	Pit	Modern	Asbestos
8	11	66	Furrow		

# APPENDIX 3: Pottery summary

Trench	Feature	Context	Fabric	Type	No	Wt/g	MNV	Form	Notes	Spot date
1		50	GRE	BD	5	68	1			16-18
11		54	IGBW	D	1	4	1	TK		16-18
6	1	55	OXAW	D	1	9	1			L12-M14
6	1	55	LMT	D	1	2	1			15-16
6	2	56	OXAW	D	1	5	1			L12-M14
6	2	56	GRE	В	1	3	1			16-18
4	3	58	OXAM	D	1	1	1			13-15
3	6	61	EMW	U	1	1	1		ms black, ?grass wiped	11-12 (or earlier)
3	7	62	OXBX	D	1	7	1			14-15
3	7	62	PMRW	D	1	7	1		form could be Rom	16-18?
2	8	63	PREH	U	3	13	3		grog & calc?	BA?

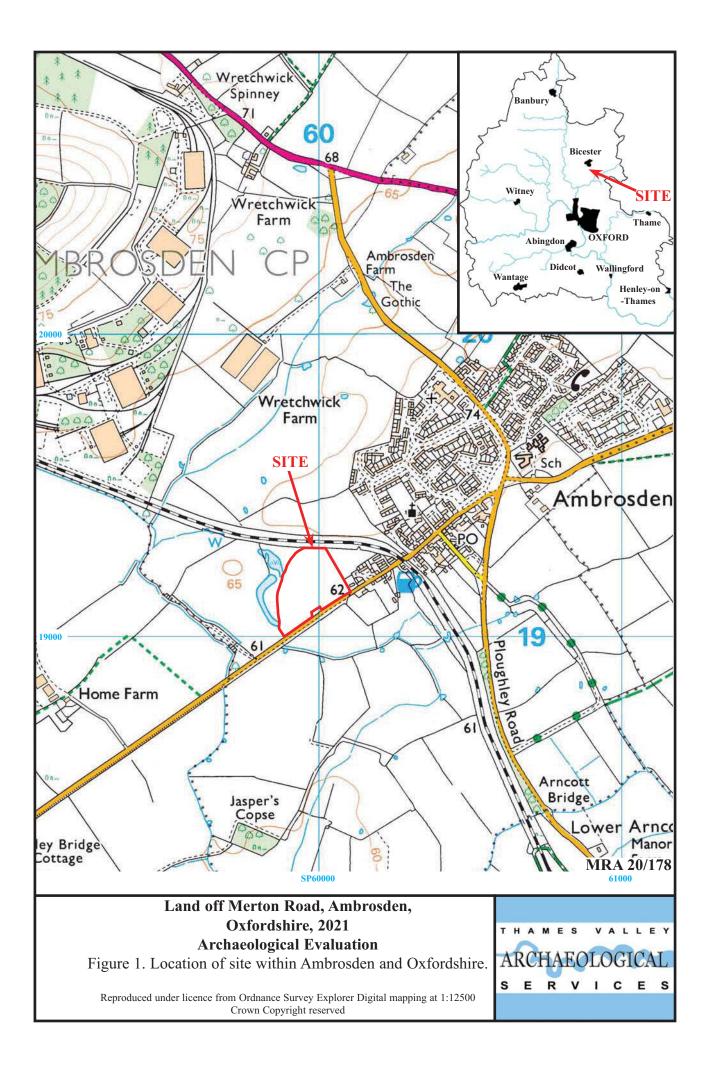
# APPENDIX 4: CBM summary

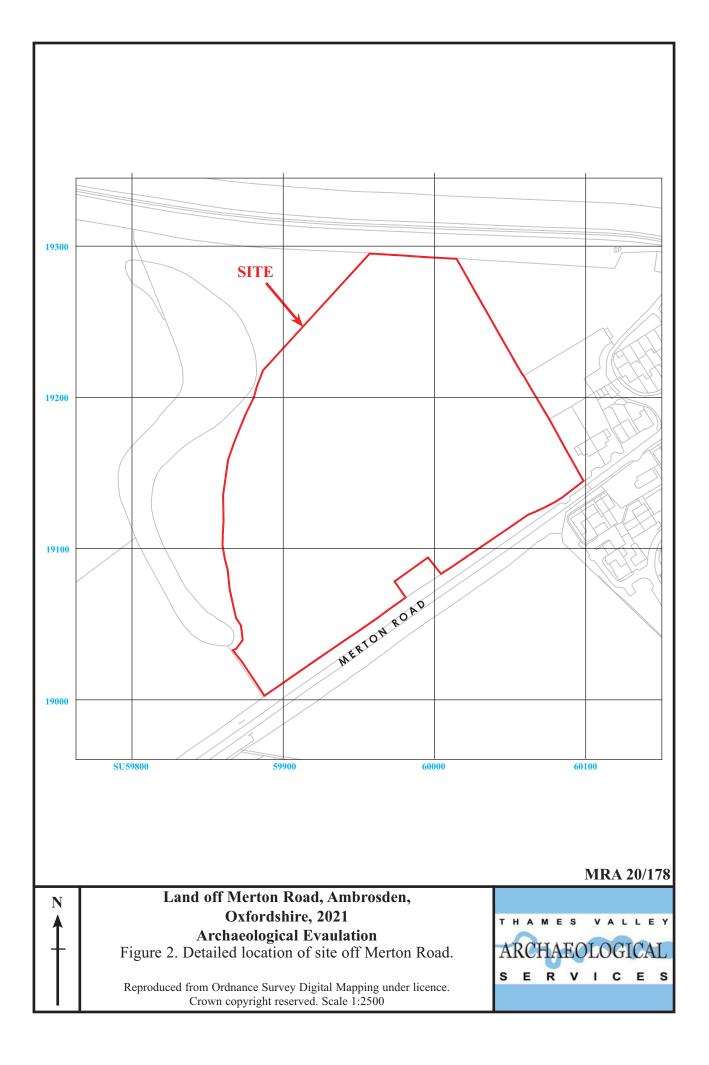
Feature	Context	Fabric	Form	No	Wt	MinNo	Abr	Mortar	Notes	Date
1	55	fscp	RTP	1	117	1				pmed
1	55	fs	RTP	1	20	1				pmed
2	57	fscp	RTP?	1	1	1				pmed
3	58	msx	FT?	1	5	1	+	thin white on base	small spot clear glaze on edge	med?

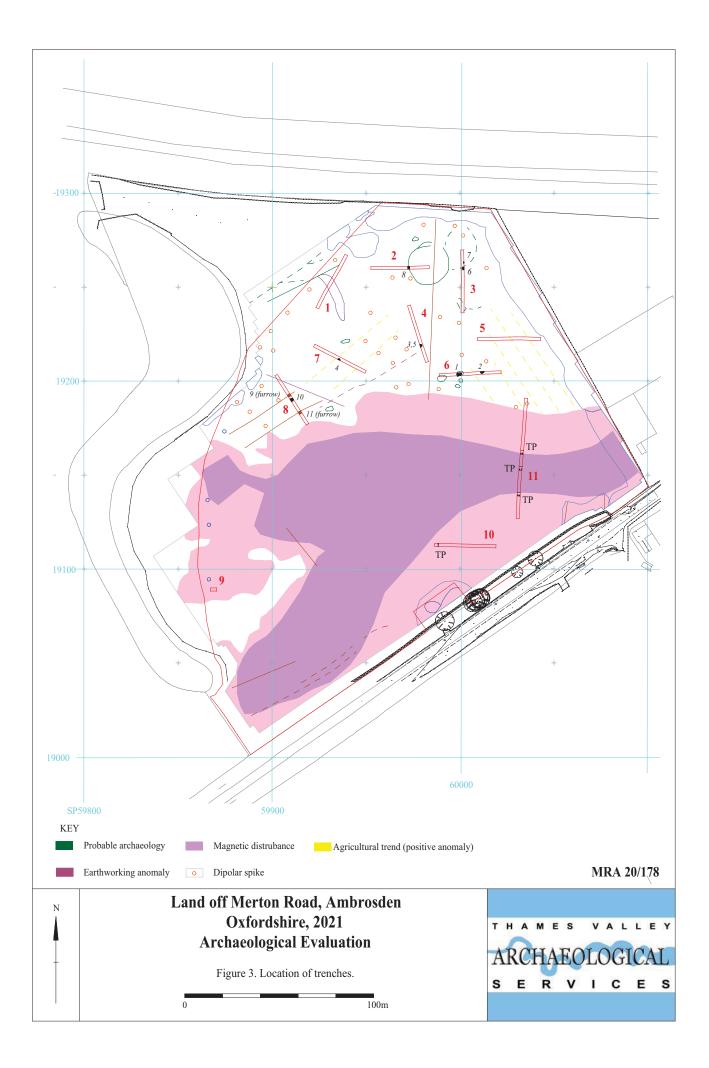
Key.

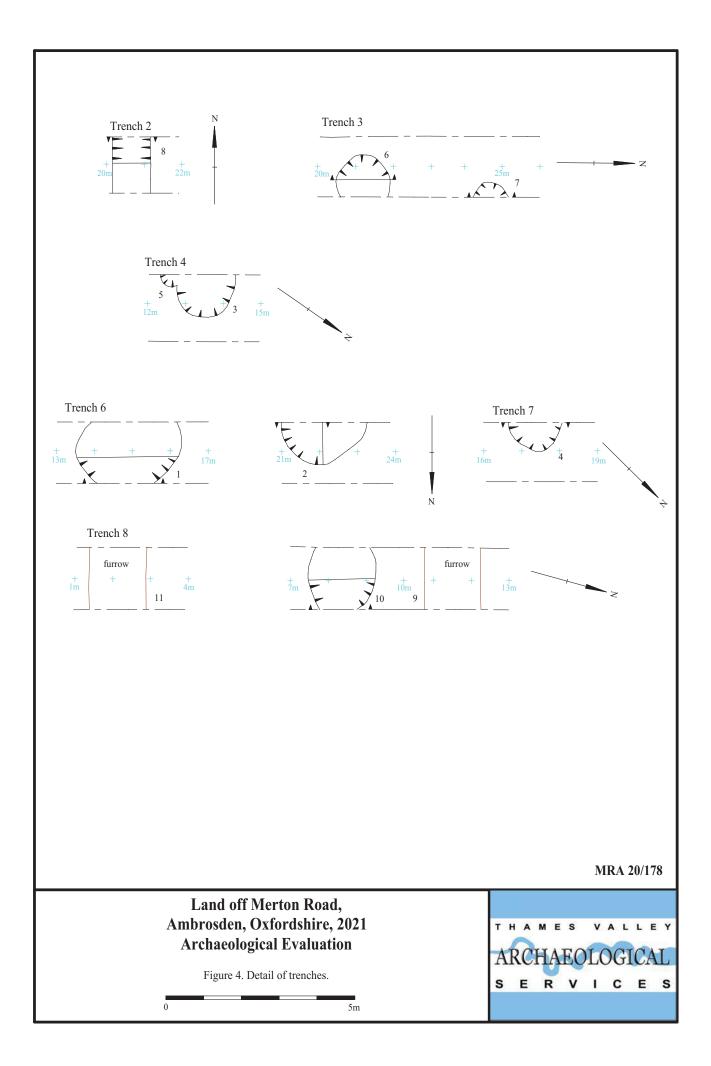
Fabric: fs - fine sandy; fscp - fs with clay pellets; msx - medium sandy poorly mixed.

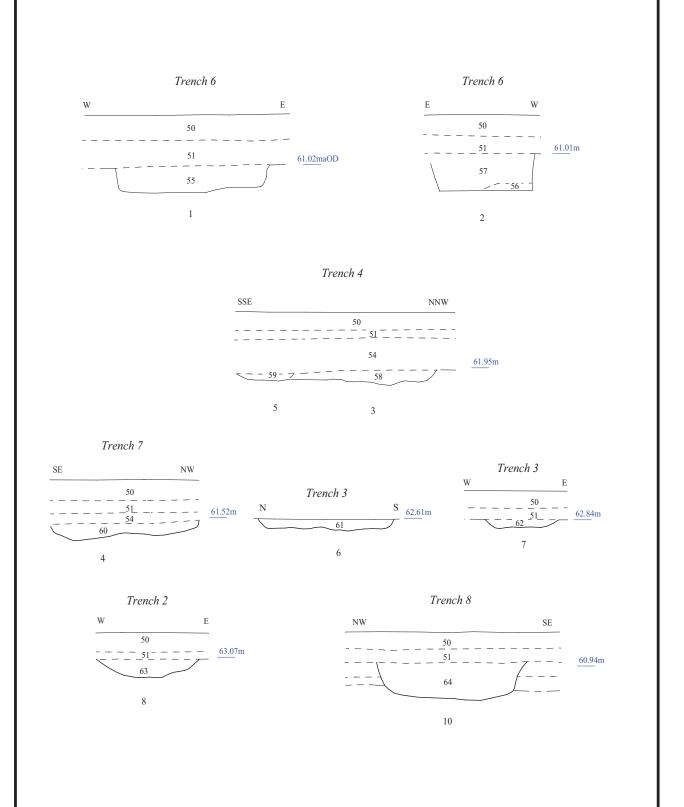
Form: FT – floor tile; RTP – post-medieval plain roof tile.











60.94m OD





Plate 1. Trench 2, looking East, Scales: horizontal 2m and 1m, vertical 0.3m.



Plate 2. Trench 5 looking West, Scales: horizontal 2m and 1m, vertical.

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Land off Merton Road, Ambrosden, Oxfordshire, 2021 Archaeological Evaluation Plates 1 and 2.





Plate 3. Trench 6, pit 2, looking South West, Scales: horizontal 1m x2, vertical 0.5m.



Plate 4. Trench 7, looking West, Scales: horizontal 2m and 1m, vertical 0.5m.



Plate 5. Trench 7, pit 4, looking South East, Scale: horizontal 1m, vertical 0.5m

# Land off Merton Road, Ambrosden, Oxfordshire, 2021 Archaeological Evaluation Plates 3 - 5.



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Plate 6. Trench 10, looking East, Scales: horizontal 2m and 1m, vertical 0.5m.



Plate 7. Trench 11, looking North North East, Scales: horizontal 2m and 1m, vertical 0.5m

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Land off Merton Road, Ambrosden, Oxfordshire, 2021 Archaeological Evaluation Plates 6 and 7.



# TIME CHART

# **Calendar Years**

Modern	AD 1901
Victorian	AD 1837
Post Medieval	AD 1500
Medieval	AD 1066
Saxon	AD 410
Roman	AD 43
Iron Age	AD 0 BC 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
$\checkmark$	¥



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