

birmingham archaeology

Land off Wellhead Lane,
Perry Barr
Birmingham

Archaeological
Evaluation
2008

UNIVERSITY OF
BIRMINGHAM



**WELLHEAD LANE, PERRY BARR, BIRMINGHAM.
ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION 2008**

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SUMMARY

Due to a planning application by Birmingham City University to construct a sports hall, all weather pitch, and associated access roads and parking at the site of the former Wellhead Lane sports centre, Perry Barr, Birmingham (centred on NGR SP 0727 9130), an archaeological evaluation was considered necessary in order to inform on any future archaeological implications of the proposed development. Birmingham Archaeology undertook the evaluation at the site located on land accessed by Wellhead Lane.

The site is considered of high archaeological potential. Along the eastern part of the site, the projected route of Ickniel Street, a Roman Road known to run through Birmingham, may bisect the area. Ickniel Street ran from the Roman town of Wall to the north of Birmingham, through Sutton Park where it is still an upstanding monument, through Birmingham where later development has largely obscured the route, and further south towards the Roman Fort in Edgbaston and then to the Roman town of Alcester.

A total of seven 50m long trial trenches were excavated across the area of the site, essentially in order to assess the archaeological potential of the site. Two of the trenches were positioned across the proposed route of the Roman Road, with a further five excavated across the site in order to locate any associated Roman occupation and to investigate the possible continuation of post-medieval features found to the east of the site in 1999.

A ditch was located in two of the trenches, aligned northeast-southwest, at the putative location of the road. This feature could not be dated and if a twin of this ditch existed at any point on the site it is probable that it had been subsequently truncated by modern service trenches. There was no sign of any built road surface associated with the ditch.

A further ditch was encountered close to the eastern limit of the site that corresponds to the line of a field boundary illustrated on some of the earliest detailed maps of the area. The feature appeared to have silted up through natural processes and no finds were recovered. This feature was sealed by 1.8m of modern debris, especially broken glass bottles, dating to the mid 20th century. This material most probably represents a levelling deposit brought in to level the site prior to the existing sports facilities.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Birmingham Archaeology was commissioned by Birmingham City University to undertake a programme of trial trenching ahead of the construction of a sports hall, all weather pitch and associated parking and access road at land off Wellhead Lane, Perry Barr Birmingham (hereinafter referred to as the site, Planning Application Number N/00349/08/FUL).

This report outlines the results of a field evaluation carried out in March 2008 and has been prepared in accordance with the Institute of Field Archaeologists Standards and Guidance for Archaeological Evaluations (IFA 2001).

Although no previous archaeological assessment has been carried out on this site, several archaeological projects have taken place on land immediately adjacent to the site. This includes a desk-based assessment and a watching brief (Jones 1993) carried out to the west during the construction of halls of residence. To the immediate east of the site a desk-based assessment (Halsted 2006) and an archaeological evaluation and excavation (Burrows and Halsted 2007) were completed.

This evaluation conformed to Written Scheme of Investigation (Birmingham Archaeology 2008) which was approved by the Local Planning Authority prior to implementation, in accordance with guidelines laid down in Planning Policy Guidance Note 16 (DoE 1990).

2 SITE DESCRIPTION, LOCATION AND GEOLOGY

The site was located on land accessed from Wellhead Lane, Perry Barr, Birmingham (NGR SP 0727 9130 Fig. 1). The proposed site was located on the southern half of an open field, formally the Wellhead Lane Sports Ground (Fig. 2). At the time of fieldwork the majority of the site comprised of open grassy space, to the southwest of the site the outline of abandoned tennis courts and a crown bowling green were readily apparent. The field was bounded by Holford Drive to the north, although the development area did not extend to the road. The eastern boundary of the site was characterised by a steep embankment terracing down to the sports ground. To the south of the site were the buildings associated with the bus depot, and to the west of the site were university halls of residence.

The site was located to the north of Birmingham city centre and on the southern valley slope, above the flood plain of the River Tame, now canalised. The underlying geology consists of Sandstone of the Kidderminster Conglomerate, however this was not encountered in the course of this evaluation with the natural subsoil deposits consisting of mixed sand and gravel, glacial in origin.

3 HISTORIC AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

To date, no evidence of prehistoric activity has come to light in the immediate vicinity of the site. Although as highlighted by Halsted (2006 2) the location of site, just beyond the flood plain of the River Tame has a relatively high potential for prehistoric settlement, as illustrated by sites further along the course of the river.

Most significantly the route of the Roman Road, Icknield Street could run through the site (ibid 2-3). The possible line of this can be ascertained using evidence from the sites to

the north and south of the city, however much of the route of the road within the city is masked by later development. It is possible to project the likely route through Birmingham, one of which passes through the site close to the western end on a northeast-southwest alignment (Halsted 2006, see Fig. 2). It is also possible that Roman occupation associated with the road, as it crossed the River Tame, could be present on or in the vicinity of the site.

Historical evidence of medieval and post-medieval activity in the vicinity of the site is confined to evidence of mills along the course of the River Tame, illustrating the intensification of industrial activity along the River Tame in the area (Halsted 2006 3-4). Other industry evident in the vicinity of the site is the Wellhead Brewery, at the entrance to the site on Wellhead Lane, in use up to the 1930s (ibid 4).

Several different archaeological sites have been recorded in the immediate vicinity of the site. On land to the west of the site, a watching brief was carried out during the construction of the university halls of residence, although it was apparent that extensive late post-medieval disturbance had probably destroyed any evidence of earlier activity (Jones 1993). On land bounding the site to the east, a series of evaluation trenches and a small open area were excavated in 2006, revealing a series of post-medieval postholes and a ditch which although re-cut in the post medieval period produced a late glacial C14 date suggesting the feature was possibly an early palaeo-channel preserved on the site (Burrows and Halsted 2006). To the south of this a metalled surface dating to the 18th century was identified during a watching brief carried out in 1998 on a sewer construction (Linnane 1999).

4 AIMS

The principle aim of the evaluation was to determine the character, state of preservation and the potential significance of any buried archaeological remains to inform future mitigation strategies, as stated in the Written Scheme of Investigation (Birmingham Archaeology 2008 3).

In particular the specific aims were:

- To confirm the presence/ absence of the Roman road, and to assess its course, survival and extent.
- To assess the presence of any roadside settlement and investigate its preservation and extent.
- To assess the survival of any post-medieval remains present across the site.
- To provide material to aid the planning process.
- To identify the potential of the site to further our understanding of the historic development of this part of Birmingham.

5 METHOD

A total of 7 trenches were excavated across the site measuring 50m long and 1.6m wide (Fig. 2). Two of the trenches (Trench 1 and 7; Fig. 2) were located across the putative line of the Roman road in order to confirm the presence or absence of this feature. Five further trenches were excavated across the area of the site to assess any remains of Roman settlement and any later archaeological features and deposits.

All topsoil and modern overburden was removed using a JCB mechanical excavator with a toothless ditching bucket, under direct archaeological supervision, down to the top of the uppermost archaeological horizon or the subsoil. Subsequent cleaning and excavation was by hand.

All stratigraphic sequences were recorded, even where no archaeology was present. Features were planned and sections were drawn through all cut features and significant vertical stratigraphy at an appropriate scale. A comprehensive written record was maintained using a continuous numbered context system on *pro-forma* context and feature cards. Written records and scale plans were supplemented by photographs using monochrome, colour slide photography and digital.

The full site archive includes all artefactual remains 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 the appropriate repository subject to permission from the landowner.

6 RESULTS

6.1 Trench 1

Trench 1 was located towards the western side of the site (Fig 2). This was excavated in the proposed location of the Roman road towards the southern extent of the site. The trench was 50m long and 1.6m wide and excavated to a depth of 0.75m below the modern ground surface.

The natural subsoil consisted of mixed pockets of sand and coarse gravel (1005) which sloped downwards towards the east. The natural was encountered at 99.396m AOD at the western end of the trench and 98.648m AOD at the eastern end. Truncating the natural at the western end of the trench was a ditch (1004). This appeared to be aligned northeast to southwest and had a gently curved profile, 1.5m wide and 0.5m deep (Fig. 3). The ditch was filled by a sand rich silt deposit (1003) with occasional small pebbles. Overlying this was a layer of subsoil rich in silt (1002) up to 0.35m deep. This in turn had been sealed by the topsoil (1001) which in turn was overlaid by a layer of turf (1000). No dating evidence was retrieved from this trial trench.

6.2 Trench 2

Trench 2 was located towards the middle of the site (Fig. 2). This was 50m long and 1.6m wide and excavated to a depth of 0.5m below the modern ground surface. The southern end of this trench was staggered in order to avoid an electrical cable encountered during excavation.

The natural subsoil consisted of mixed sand and coarse gravel (2003) and sloped downwards towards the southern end of the trench. This was encountered at 98.651m AOD at the southern end and 98.993m AOD at the northern end of the trench. This had been sealed by a subsoil layer of sand rich silt (2002) 0.1m deep. This had been cut by a small pit (2004) 0.25m in diameter and 0.1m deep (Fig. 2). The pit was sealed by a layer of topsoil (2001) 0.3m deep which was topped by a layer of turf (2000). No finds were recovered from the deposits in this trench.

6.3 Trench 3

Trench 3 was located close to the southern boundary of the site and was aligned east to west (Fig. 2). This was 50m long, 1.6m wide and excavated to a maximum depth of 1.15m below the modern ground surface at the eastern end, and to a depth of 0.4m at the western end of the trench.

The natural subsoil (3004) consisted of mixed sand and gravel pockets which sloped downwards towards the eastern end of the trench. The natural was encountered at 96.989m AOD at this end and 98.414m AOD at the western end. This was sealed by a silt rich subsoil layer (3003) 0.1m deep. Overlying this was a layer of topsoil (3002) 0.2m deep. At the east end of the trench was a deposit of mixed rubbish rubble (3001) which extended 10m into the eastern end of the trench and had a maximum depth of 0.7m. This and the area of the trench were sealed by a layer of turf (3000).

6.4 Trench 4

Trench 4 was located close to the eastern boundary of the site and aligned north to south (Fig. 2) measuring 50m long and 1.6m wide and excavated to a depth of 2m. A short area of the trench was stepped out around a feature in order to safely enter the trench at this point.

The natural subsoil (4003) consisted of mixed sand and gravel lenses this sloped downwards towards the southern end of the trench and was encountered at 96.882m AOD at this end and 97.015m AOD at the northern end of the trench. This had been cut by a ditch (4005, Fig. 3). This was aligned east to west and was 1.1m wide and 0.2m deep. This was filled by beige silt and sand with very few inclusions (4004) and no finds were recovered from this. To the north of this was a tree bole (not illustrated). Both (4005) and the tree bole were sealed by a layer of soil (4002) 0.3m deep. This, in turn, had been sealed by a layer of mixed refuse including building rubble, ash, clinker, metal, and especially glass bottles up to 1.8m deep (4001). This and the area of the trench were sealed by a layer of turf (4000).

6.5 Trench 5

Trench 5 was located close to the middle of the site and was aligned northeast to southwest. The trench was 50m long and 1.6m wide and excavated to a depth of 0.6m below the modern ground surface. The natural subsoil consisted of mixed gravel (5004) and sand that sloped towards the northeast (98.553m to 99.062m). Sealing this was a layer of silt rich sandy subsoil (5003) 0.1m deep. Sealing this was a layer of topsoil (5002) 0.4m deep which was overlaid by a layer of turf 0.1m deep. No archaeological deposits were encountered within this trench and no finds were recovered.

6.6 Trench 6

Trench 6 was located at the northern extent of the site. The trench was aligned east to west and was 50m long and 1.6m wide and excavated to a maximum depth of 1m below the modern ground surface. The natural subsoil (6004) consisted of lenses of sand and gravel. This sloped downwards towards the eastern end of the trench and was encountered at 98.127m at this end and 99.09m AOD at the western end of the trench. Overlying this was a layer of subsoil rich in silt and sand (6003) with a maximum depth of 0.1m. Sealing this was a layer of topsoil (6002) with a depth of 0.4m. At the eastern end of the trench a layer of mixed modern debris (6001) including building rubble, ash and coal, soil and gravel had been deposited over the topsoil. This extended 20m into the eastern end of the trench and had a maximum depth of 0.6m. This was sealed by a layer of turf (6000).

6.7 Trench 7

Trench 7 was located at the northwestern corner of the site and was positioned in order to investigate the course of the Roman road. The trench was 50m long and 1.6m wide and excavated to a depth of 0.8m

The natural subsoil consisted of mixed sand and gravels (7004) and sloped downwards towards the east. The natural was encountered at 98.921m AOD at the east end of the trench, and 99.561m AOD at the western end. Cutting this was linear ditch (7003) aligned roughly north to south, which was located around 20m from the western end of the trench (Fig. 2). The ditch was 1.45m wide 0.5m deep and the fill consisted of beige sandy silt (7002 Fig 3). This was sealed by a layer of brown silt and sand subsoil (7001) which had a maximum depth of 0.4m. Cut into this was a small pit or posthole (7005) that was 0.2m in diameter and 0.08m deep filled by dark brown silt (7006). This was sealed by the topsoil (7000) which had a depth of 0.4m and topped by a layer of turf. Truncating this at the very western end of this trench were two cuts for electric services these were not excavated for reasons of health and safety.

7 THE FINDS

The only finds recovered from the site were from the deep deposit of assorted refuse located in Trench 4 (4001). A small sample of material was taken for analysis.

Fourteen glass bottles of late 19th – early 20th century date were recovered. Many of the bottles were embossed with manufacturers' names, including seven bottles from Ansell's Brewery. Other bottles recovered from the deposit included a milk bottle from the Midlands Counties Dairies Ltd, a Fletchers tomato sauce bottle, a Barretts Aston bottle, a bottle of lung tonic from Owbridges of Hull and a medicine phial with dosage marks, as well as two un-embossed bottles.

Other finds from (4001) included a stoneware jar and bottle and a yellow-glazed ceramic jar. A partial firebrick with a steam engine stamp was also recovered, as was a spherical copper alloy object and a red metal sign warning that PERSONS THROWING STONES AT THESE TELEGRAPHS WILL BE PROSECUTED. This sign carried the emblem of a crown and the initials GR.

One un-stratified object was recovered from the site; this was a battered street sign, with the name Welham Road painted on it.

8 DISCUSSION

There is very little evidence for archaeological activity on this site. However, the ditch identified in Trenches 1 and 7, presumed to be the same feature, is in the right location to represent the eastern side ditch of the Roman Road (see Fig. 2). No evidence was recovered to assess the date of the ditch. Evidence to support this feature as a remnant of the Roman road could include descriptions of the road, recorded elsewhere along the route, especially in Sutton Park. This site suggested that the road surface was not a particularly well made, certainly not paved, and that the construction was dependant on what materials were immediately to hand (Hodder 2004 61). Survey in Sutton Park also suggests that the ditches on either side of the roadway were most likely associated with surveying the route, rather than a part of the construction (ibid 62). The characterisation of the construction of the road to the north of the site could suggest that the ditch identified in the course of this evaluation could be related to the road construction, with the road itself having been lost to erosion over time. Certainly in both trenches 1 and 7 this feature had been sealed by 0.4m depth of subsoil and 0.4m of topsoil, and although these are not in themselves datable it is probable that these deposits accumulated over some time. The absence of Roman settlement adjacent to the line of the Roman may be indication that this area was utilised for agricultural purposes, such as livestock grazing, and not associated with permanent settlement.

In Trench 4, a linear ditch (4005 Fig 2 and 3) was encountered aligned east to west that corresponded with the location of a boundary illustrated on the majority of the historic

maps (Fig 9 to 10 and 12-16 in Halsted 2006) and continues to survive in the current alignment of the northern edge of the crown bowling green and tennis court, illustrated in Fig 2 as the square structures through which Trenches 1 and 2 were excavated. Interestingly although it has obviously been a boundary line until quite recently the feature itself is filled by fine clean silt and sealed by almost 0.3m of topsoil. This suggests that this feature had silted up and topsoil allowed to build up over it prior to the deposition of the 1.8m of rubbish dumped over this sometime in the 20th century. Without any direct dating evidence it is difficult to establish a date for the filling of this ditch. It is possible that the tree bowl to the north of the ditch could represent a tree or hedge line, demarking the boundary after the ditch boundary fell out of use.

Other feature located on the site which include two very ephemeral postholes cutting the subsoil, that are presumably late post-medieval or modern in origin, although without dating evidence this is impossible to verify. The material dumped on the eastern side of the site and evident in Trenches 3, 4 and 5 was presumably used to level the area to create a usable surface for a recreation ground

9 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Fig.1

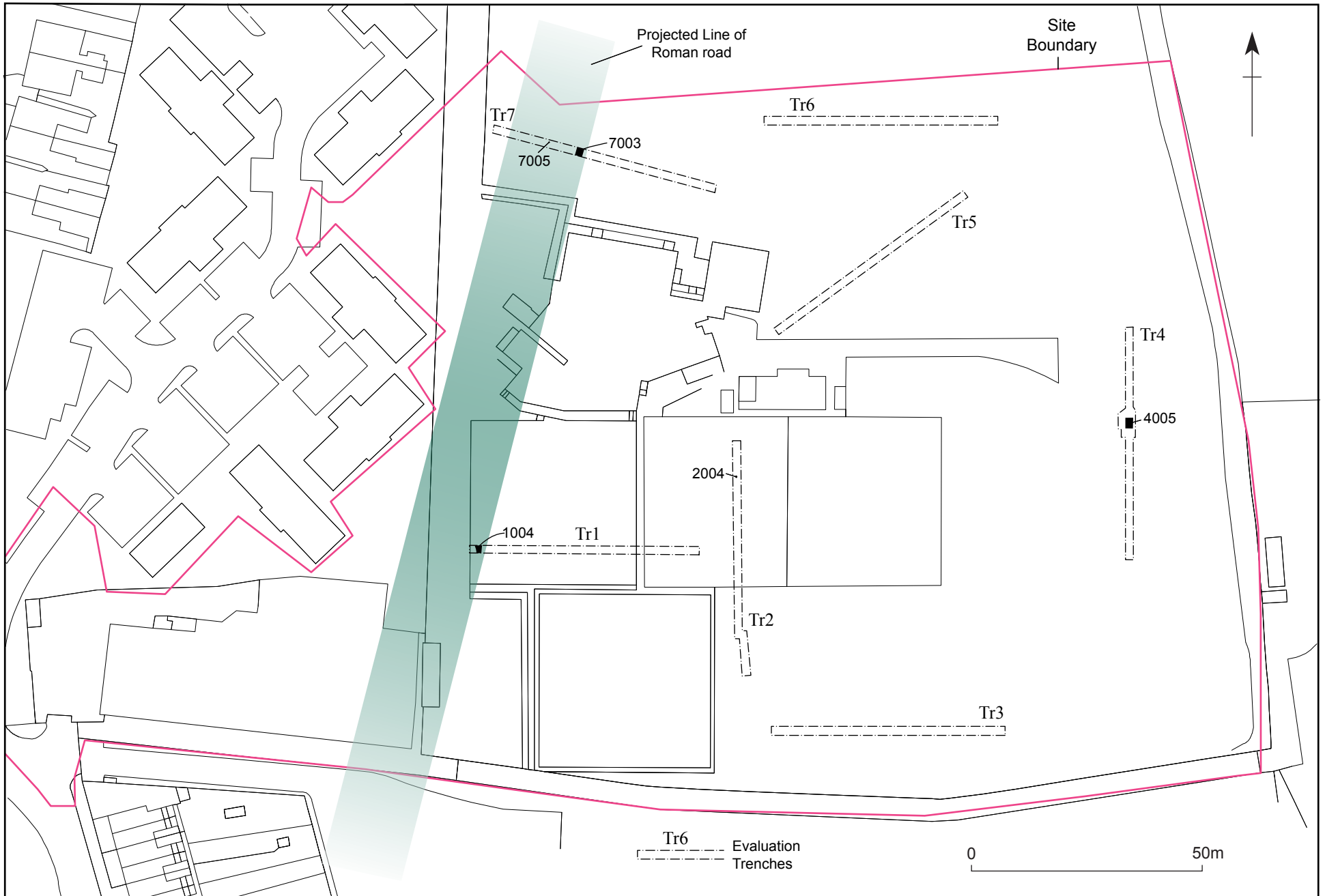


Fig. 2

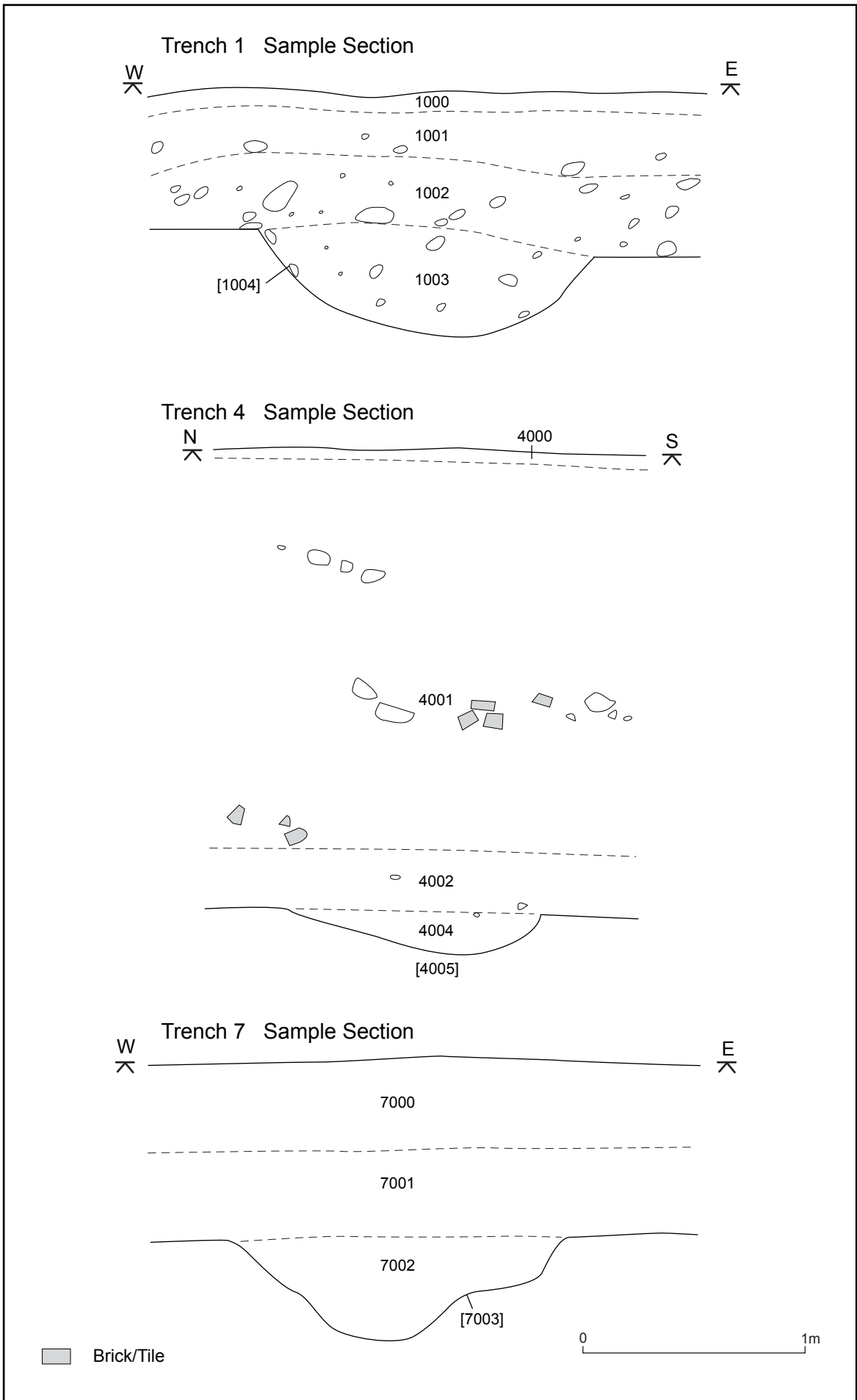


Fig.3