

NORTHAMPTONSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

NORTHAMPTONSHIRE ARCHAEOLOGY

JUNE 2005

NGR: TL 0370 8815

ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRIAL EXCAVATION AT

OUNDLE SCHOOL, OUNDLE,

NORTHAMPTONSHIRE

MAY/JUNE 2005

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ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION AT OUNDLE SCHOOL, OUNDLE

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Abstract

Oundle School is located directly to the north of the historic Saxon and medieval core of the township of Oundle, Northamptonshire. An archaeological evaluation comprising trial excavation was carried out by Northamptonshire Archaeology in advance of the construction of a new Science Technology Block. Documentary and archaeological evidence had suggested that this area was located towards a focal area of early-middle Saxon settlement and there was the potential for the recovery of significant archaeological remains from this period. However, the excavation found only one unequivocal archaeological feature, a pit, from which was recovered a single potsherd with a late Saxon/medieval date range.

1 INTRODUCTION

Planning Permission has been granted for the construction of new science laboratories for Oundle School at Blackpot Lane, Oundle (NGR TL 0370 8815, Fig 1). The site is located in an area adjacent to the historic core of Oundle where important archaeological remains may survive, in close proximity to the Saxon settlement focus within the town.

Northamptonshire County Council Historic Environment Team (NCCHET) highlighted the archaeological potential of this site within the historic settlement area but the precise impact of the proposed construction could not be fully determined on the basis of the then available information. Accordingly, they requested that a programme of archaeological evaluation be undertaken in order to define the extent of the archaeological resource. This was outlined in the Brief issued by NCCHET on 24th September 2004

2 BACKGROUND

The site is located on the south side of the main sports field for Oundle School, at the junction of Blackpot Lane and Glaphorn Road, adjacent to school buildings directly to the south and east at an approximate elevation of 37m above Ordnance Survey datum.

The geology in this area slopes off to the east, with a 2.36m height difference between the west side of the site (Trench 1 at 36.16m OD) and the east (Trench 6 at 33.80m OD).

The site lies near the centre of the Saxon and medieval town of Oundle, adjacent to the historic core south of Blackpot Lane, an area defined as a Scheduled Ancient Monument. The River Nene flows 700m to the east of the site, a major crossing point since Roman times. Beyond the town further to the north-east is the Roman town at Ashton.

The history and archaeology of Oundle have been most recently collated and summarised in the Extensive Urban Survey for Northamptonshire (Foard and Ballinger 2002).

The British Geological Survey recorded the underlying geology of the site as Greater Oolite Limestone, with drift geology comprising Upper Estuarine Clays and/or alluvial silts or gravels. A detailed ground investigation comprising boreholes and test pits was carried out on behalf of the client prior to the archaeological investigation.

2.1 The Extensive Urban Survey

The Northamptonshire Extensive Urban Survey has considered Oundle in great detail aided by its excellent historic documentation (Foard and Ballinger 2002). The site clearly lies in an area of significant archaeological potential, principally related to its position within the Saxon and medieval town. As the Extensive Urban Survey suggests;

“Any disturbance on the scale of a house or more in the township of Oundle should also probably be subject to evaluation. This is because of the potential for occupation or other evidence of Saxon, Roman or Iron Age dates as precursors to the medieval town and their association with the Saxon administrative and ecclesiastical centre” ... “in this context, even the most small scale disturbance anywhere within the historic core has the potential to produce important archaeological information.” (op cit 2002, 21).

2.2 Previous archaeological work

Oundle generally and the East Road and Glapthorn Road areas in particular, have been the subject of considerable archaeological work in the recent past, as has been summarised by the Northamptonshire Sites and Monuments Record. The excellent state of preservation of many of Oundle's historic buildings has limited the scope of archaeological study within the town area to scattered small 'keyholes' between these buildings during re-development. This had led to a dichotomy between the potential of Oundle's archaeological record and the research needed to realize this.

Northamptonshire Archaeology undertook a desk-top study and evaluation of land directly to the south-east of the site prior to the construction of new school workshops along Blackpot Lane, to the east of the Palmer Building (Holmes and Hylton 1997). Despite its proximity to the Saxon settlement to the south of Blackpot Lane, no evidence for Saxon or medieval activity was found. Only disturbances interpreted as post-medieval quarrying activity were present.

Three further sites, on the east side of Oundle, centred around East Road have been excavated by Northamptonshire Archaeology (Morris and Parry 1996; Soden and Parry 1997; Atkins 1999). A further site has been the subject of research and excavation (Masters and Carlyle 2002). In general terms these concluded that East Road lay at the eastern margin of the medieval town and that the earlier Saxon town was much further west.

3 OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the current programme of archaeological works were:

- To identify any evidence for the survival of Saxon remains on the site which may be threatened by the proposed development. To determine the depth of burial, character, date, extent and state of preservation of any such remains.
- To determine the extent to which the current application site contains archaeological remains that can address issues identified in the Extensive Urban Survey Research Agenda for Oundle.
- To investigate and record appropriately any such remains identified.

- To create a suitably organised archive of the project data to ensure the “preservation by record” of all the archaeological remains affected by the development.

4 THE EXCAVATED EVIDENCE

Fieldwork was conducted between the 31st May and 3rd of June 2005. Six trenches and two test pits totalling 64 linear metres were positioned to the north and east of the existing buildings (Fig 2). The excavation of the trenches was carried out using a JCB 3CX excavator with a 1.6m wide toothless bucket under continuous archaeological supervision.

The works were undertaken in accordance with IFA guidelines (1999) and standard Northamptonshire Archaeology procedures. Topsoil, subsoil and overburden were removed until archaeologically sensitive deposits or clean natural horizons were revealed. All deposits were hand cleaned sufficiently to identify their nature. Recording was by Northamptonshire Archaeology pro-forma context sheets, supplemented by drawing plans at a scale of 1:20 and sections at 1:10. Levels were established in relation to Ordnance Datum and the trench positions recorded in relation to the national Ordnance Survey grid. A photographic record comprising Colour slides, Black and White negatives and digital colour photos was completed. Trench attributes are shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Trench and Test Pit Attributes

Trench no	Alignment	Length (m)	Depth (m)
1	East-West	6	0.66
2	North-South	10	0.65
3	East-West	10	0.50
4	East-West	10	0.60
5	East-West	15	0.58
6	North-South	5	0.41
Test Pit 1	East-West	4	0.78
Test Pit 2	North-South	4	0.93

4.1 General stratigraphy

In all six trenches and both test pits the natural substrate was encountered at depth of between 0.40m (Trench 4) and 0.95m (Test Pit 2). This comprised limestone slabs fixed in their bedding

planes within a matrix of decayed yellow limestone and patches of orange and yellow clay (Plate 1).

Trenches 1-5 and both test pits had a consistent subsoil comprising a mid brown, slightly clay loam containing frequent small angular limestone pieces, moderate charcoal flecking and in several of the trenches, thin lenses of red burnt deposits of cinder and ash (Plate 2). Numerous fragments of post-medieval brick and pottery were also recovered from the subsoil.

Trench 6 displayed a different sequence (Plate 3). Overlying the natural there was a modern build-up layer of re-deposited natural limestone fragments, decayed limestone and clay mixed with dark brown loamy material (603) averaging 0.2m in thickness. There were frequent modern brick fragments within this layer. Overlying this layer on the extreme south end of the trench was a modern deposit of pea gravel, (602), 0.21m thick. These layers can be interpreted as build-up layers associated with the landscaping of the fields and the construction of the Needham building directly to the east.

The topsoil in all trenches and test pits comprised a friable, mid brown sandy loam containing moderate small limestone fragments and moderate small pebbles, to an average thickness of 0.2m.

4.2 Archaeological features

Two features were found during the evaluation, a large pit in Test Pit 1 and a possible pit in Trench 4. Only these are described in detail below. A summary of trench stratigraphy can be found in Appendix 1.

Test Pit 1

Cut into the natural limestone was a large sub-circular pit, [705], measuring 2.3m in diameter and 0.57m deep (Fig 3, Plates 5 and 6). It had steep, irregular sides with a sharp break in slope leading to a flat base. The single fill, (704) comprised a very compact mid orange-brown clayey silt with frequent limestone fragments up to 0.2m in size and moderate charcoal flecking. Rather than being randomly distributed through the fill, these were clearly in tip-lines, indicating a deliberate backfilling of the pit following its disuse. A single sherd of St Neots type ware (850-1450 AD) was recovered. This fill was sealed by the subsoil (702).

Trench 4

On the west end of Trench 4 was a possible pit [404] (Fig 4, Plate 4). This had a shallow, irregular concave profile measuring 1.5m in diameter and 0.3m deep. It was filled by (403), a compact orange silty clay with occasional limestone fragment inclusion but no artefactual evidence. The irregular shape, clean fill and similarity to variations in the natural substrate elsewhere on site are indicative of a natural origin.

5 THE FINDS

5.1 Pottery

A single sherd of St Neots type ware (Iain Soden *pers. com*) weighing 5g was retrieved from the mid section of (703). This is a relatively un-diagnostic type dated to 850-1450 AD. Charring on the exterior surface indicates use as part of a cooking pot. It was largely un-abraded, indicating deposition *in situ*.

5.2 Animal bone

A single incomplete adult cattle (*bos*) jaw bone and tibia fragment (Karen Deighton *pers. com*) weighing 390g were retrieved from (703).

6 DISCUSSION

Given the close proximity of the development area to the Saxon and medieval core of the town, the development area had the potential to produce significant archaeological information relating to the development of Oundle as suggested in the EUS. In the event, the evaluation produced very little evidence for previous land use.

The area of the evaluation was on built-up ground to the north of the historic core of Oundle. The presence of post-medieval material within the subsoil of all the trenches and test pits indicates that this is a relatively recent depositional layer. This could be largely related to the land use as open fields and a close in the post-medieval period as suggested by Holmes and Hylton (1997) and the subsequent landscaping of the school grounds.

The sole archaeological feature encountered was Pit [705] in Test Pit 1 containing a deliberately deposited fill containing a single sherd of charred pot, perhaps indicating waste from cooking activity. This indicates a generally low level of activity in this part of town in the Saxon and Medieval periods, consistent with the theory that East Road lay at the eastern margin of the settlement at these times.

There was no evidence for ridge and furrow agriculture in the excavated area. Either this technique was not employed or the furrows have been erased by later ploughing or other land use activities, not surprising given that the subsoil appears to be a relatively recent deposition.

Inevitably, modern construction may have affected the survival of archaeological remains; an air-raid shelter has truncated much of the area south of Test Pit 2 and depositional layers relating to the construction of the Needham building are present in Trench 6.

It would seem that either Saxon or medieval occupation did not extend significantly to the north of Blackpot Lane or that the archaeological evidence for it has been obscured by later land use.

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APPENDIX 1: Trench and Test Pit Context Description

Trench Number	Deposit	Context Number	Description	Max Depth (m)	Interpretation	Artefacts
1	Layer	101	Dark brown sandy loam with occasional limestone inclusion	0.21m	Topsoil	<i>Modern brick, pottery and glass</i>
1	Layer	102	Mid brown sandy silt with moderate limestone fragments and lenses of ash deposits	0.27m	Subsoil	<i>Post-medieval brick</i>
1	Layer	103	Limestone slabs and decayed limestone with patches of yellowish orange clay	0.18m	Natural	
2	Layer	201	See (101)	0.22m	Topsoil	<i>Modern pot and glass</i>
2	Layer	202	Mid brown sandy silt with moderate limestone inclusion	0.32m	Subsoil	<i>Post-medieval brick</i>
2	Layer	203	See (103)	0.11m	Natural	
3	Layer	301	See (103)	0.2m	Topsoil	
3	Layer	302	See (202)	0.22m	Subsoil	<i>Post-medieval pot and brick</i>
3	Layer	303	Limestone slabs and decayed limestone with patches of orangey brown clay	0.06m	Natural	
4	Layer	401	See (101)	0.22m	Topsoil	
4	Layer	402	See (202)	0.25m	Subsoil	<i>Post-medieval brick/clay pipe</i>
4	Fill	403	Compact, mid brownish-orange clay	0.13m	Fill of [404]	
4	Cut	404	Wide, shallow, irregular concave profile, 1.5m wide. Probable natural feature	0.25m	Pit?	
4	Layer	405	See (103)	0.13m	Natural	
5	Layer	501	See (103)	0.2m	Topsoil	<i>Modern brick and wire</i>
5	Layer	502	See (102)	0.23m.	Subsoil	
5	Layer	503	See (103)	0.13m	Natural	
6	Layer	601	See (101)	0.2m	Topsoil	<i>Modern brick and</i>

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						<i>glass</i>
6	Layer	602	Pea Gravel	0.2m	Construction build-up layer	
6	Layer	603	Re-deposited limestone fragments mixed with subsoil	0.21m	Construction build-up layer	<i>Modern brick</i>
6	Layer	604	See (103)	0.41m	Natural	
Test Pit 1						
7	Layer	701	See (101)	0.22m	Topsoil	<i>Modern brick and glass</i>
7	Layer	702	See (102)	0.32m	Subsoil	
7	Fill	704	Compact, medium orangey-brown clayey silt with limestone chunks.	0.57m	Fill of [704]	<i>St Neots type potsherd</i>
7	Cut	705	Sub-circular, steep sided cut with flat base.	0.57m	Pit	
7	Layer	703	See (103)	0.13m	Natural	
Test Pit 2						
8	Layer	801	See (101)	0.2m	Topsoil	<i>Modern pot</i>
8	Layer	802	See (102)	0.75m	Subsoil	
8	Layer	803	See (103)	0.05m	Natural	

OASIS REPORT FORM

PROJECT DETAILS		
Project name	Archaeological Evaluation at Oundle School Scitec, Oundle, Northamptonshire	
<i>Oundle School is located directly to the north of the historic Saxon and medieval core of the township of Oundle, Northamptonshire. An archaeological evaluation comprising trial excavation was carried out by Northamptonshire Archaeology in advance of the construction of a new Science Technology Block. Documentary and archaeological evidence had suggested that this area was located towards a focal area of early-middle Saxon settlement and there was the potential for the recovery of significant archaeological remains from this period. However, the excavation found only one unequivocal archaeological feature, a pit with a single potsherd with a late Saxon/medieval date range.</i>		
Project type (eg DBA, evaluation etc)	Evaluation	
Site status (none, NT, SAM etc)	none	
Previous work (SMR numbers etc)	none	
Current Land use	School grounds	
Future work (yes, no, unknown)	unknown	
Monument type/ period		
Significant finds (artefact type and period)	St Neots pottery	
PROJECT LOCATION		
County	Northamptonshire	
Site address (including postcode)	Oundle School, Oundle	
Study area (sq.m or ha)		
OS Easting & Northing (use grid sq. numbers)	TL 0370 8815	
Height OD	37m	
PROJECT CREATORS		
Organisation	Northamptonshire Archaeology	
Project brief originator	Myk Flitcroft	
Project Design originator	Iain Soden	
Director/Supervisor	Adrian Burrow	
Project Manager	Tony Walsh	
Sponsor or funding body	Oundle School	
PROJECT DATE		
Start date	May 2005	
End date	June 2005	
ARCHIVES	Location(Acc. no.)	Content (eg pottery, animal bone etc)
Physical	Northants Arch.	Pottery, Animal Bone
Paper	NA	Site Records
Digital	NA	Report Data
BIBLIOGRAPHY	Journal/monograph, published or forthcoming, or unpublished client report (NA report)	
Title		
Serial title & volume		
Author(s)		
Page numbers		
Date		

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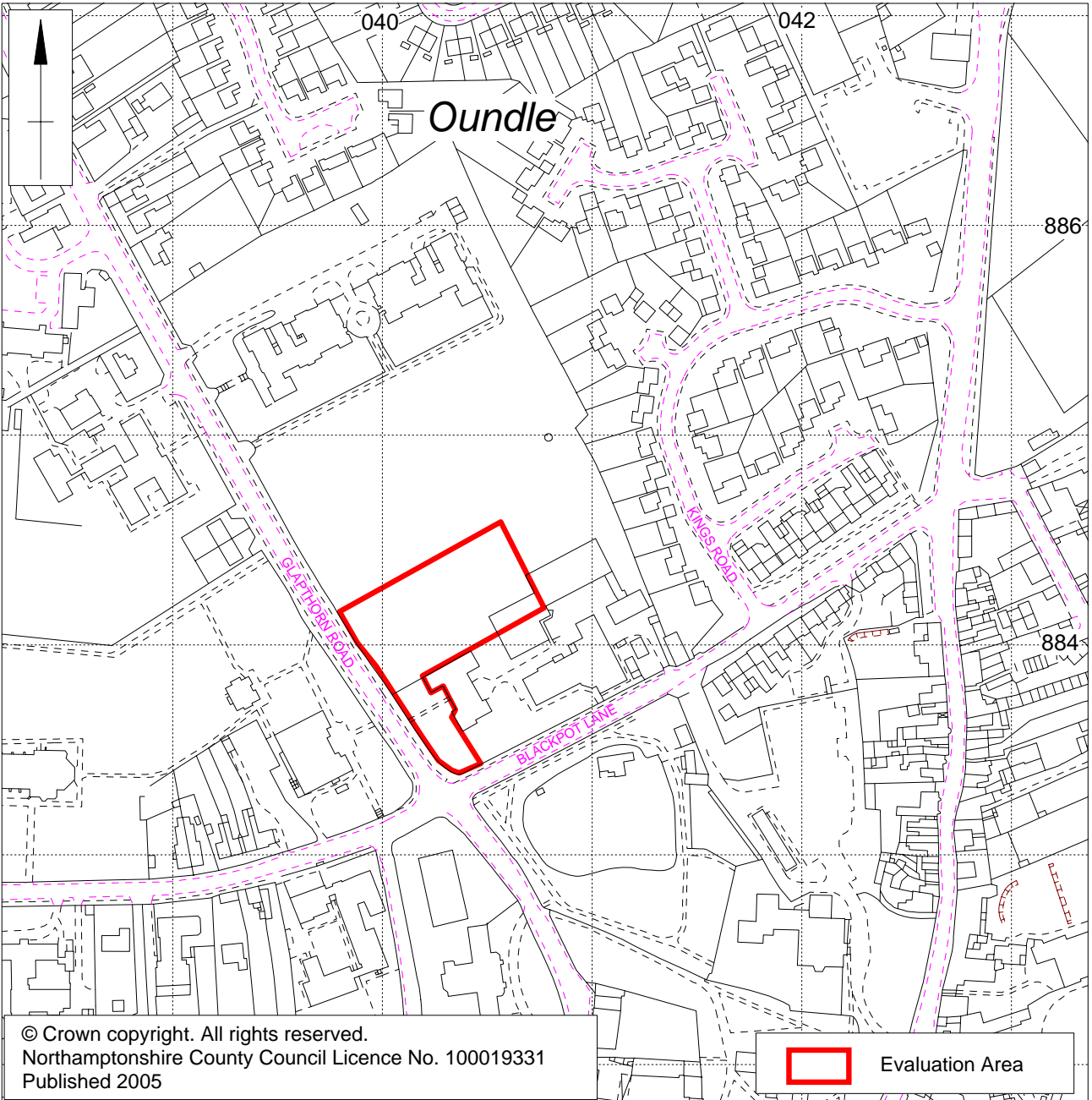
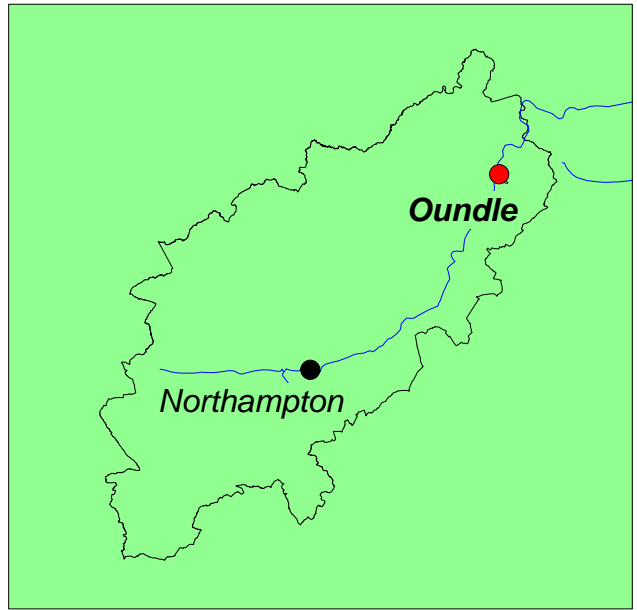
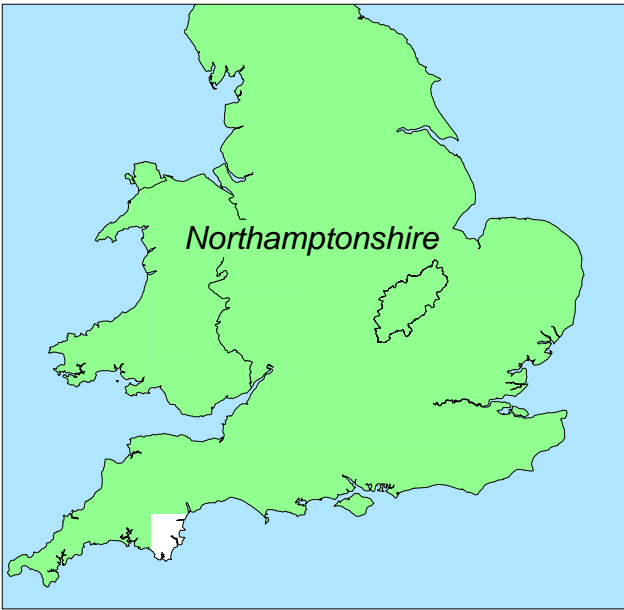
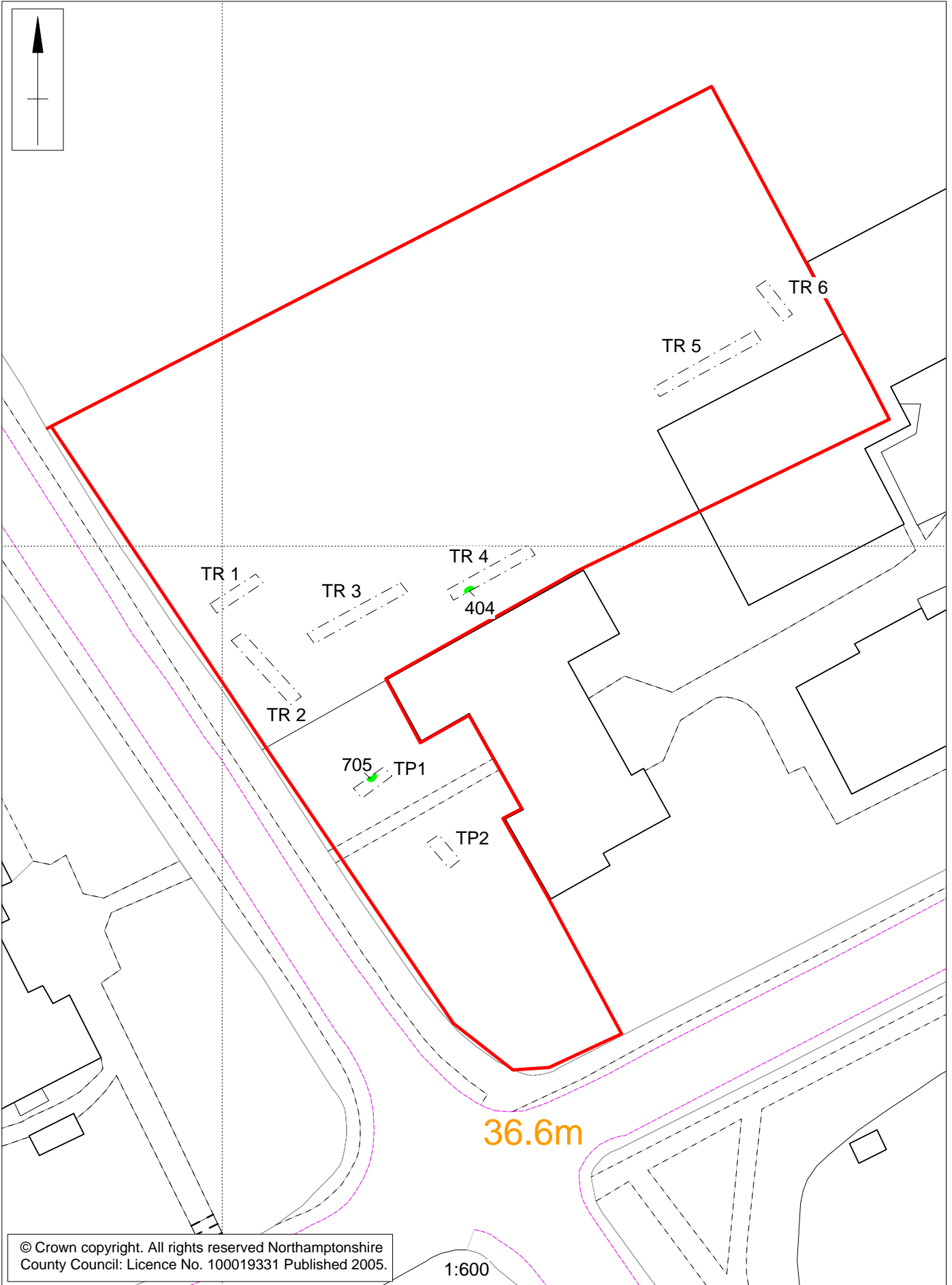


Fig. 1



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Fig. 2

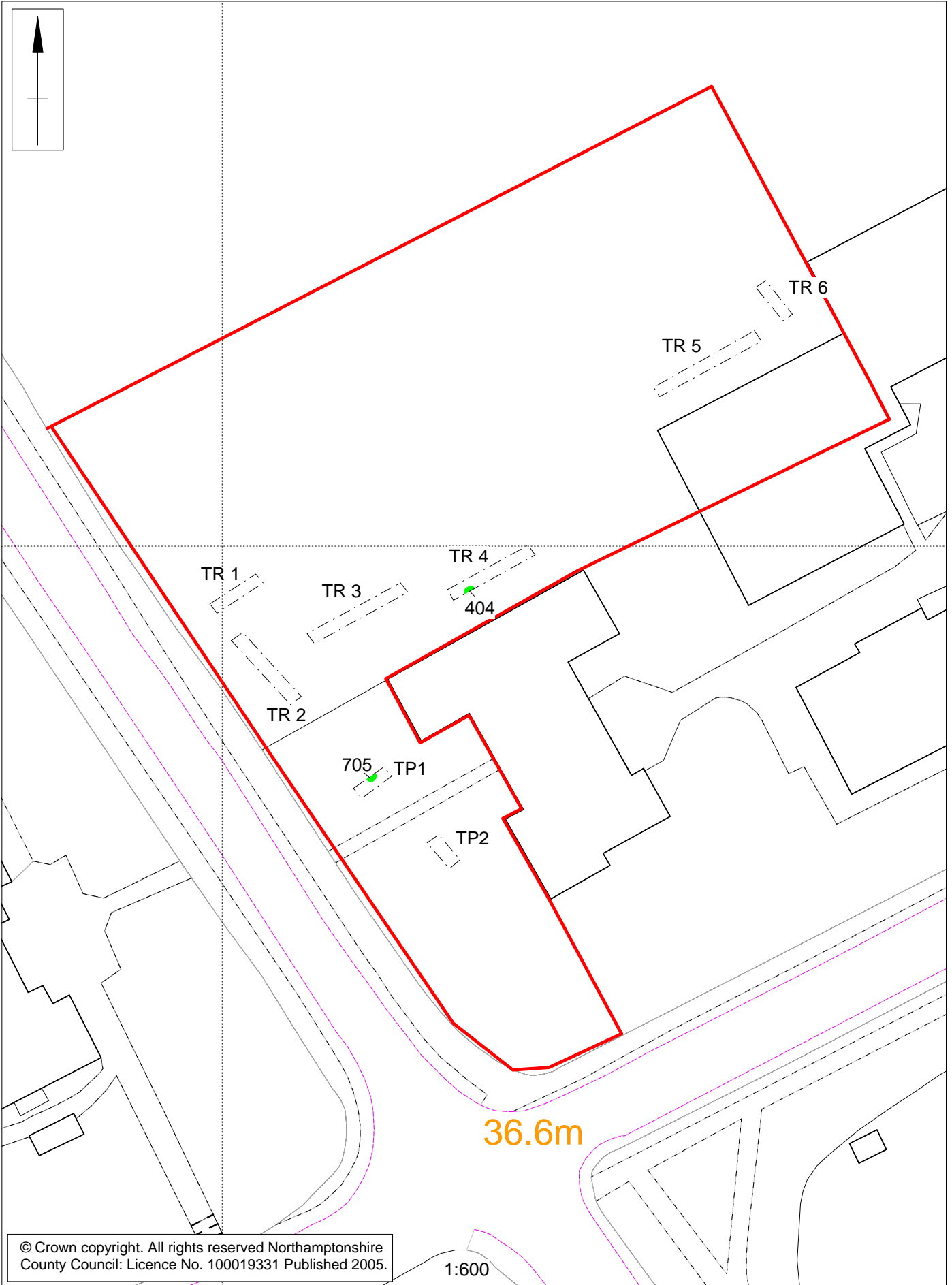
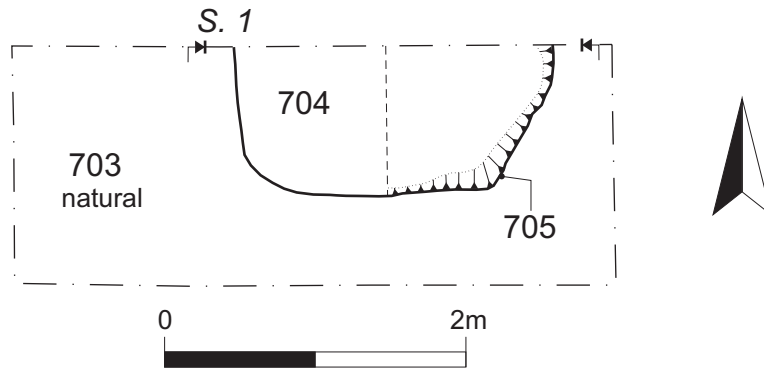


Fig. 2

Oundle School (SciTec Centre)

Test Pit 1



Section 1
36.54m OD

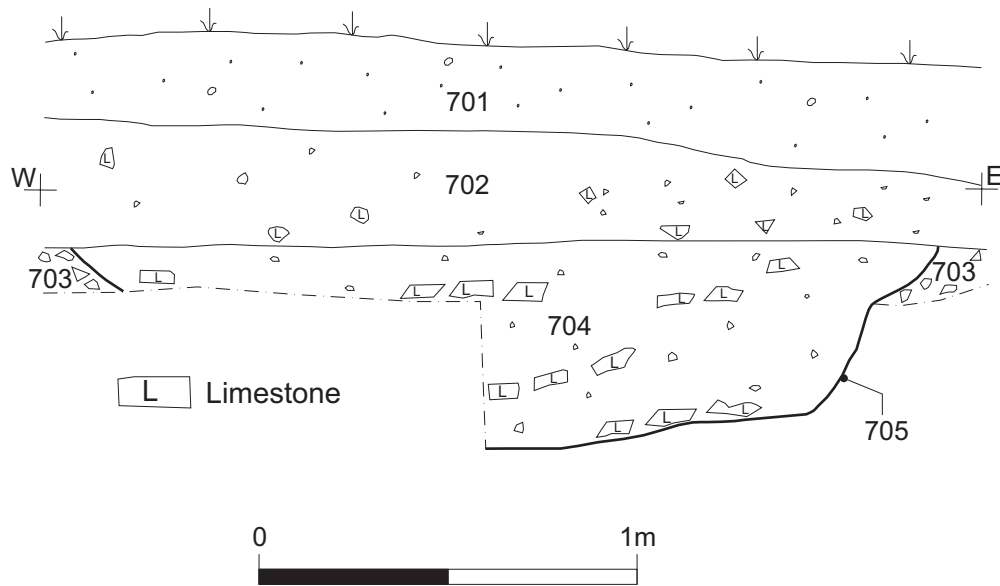
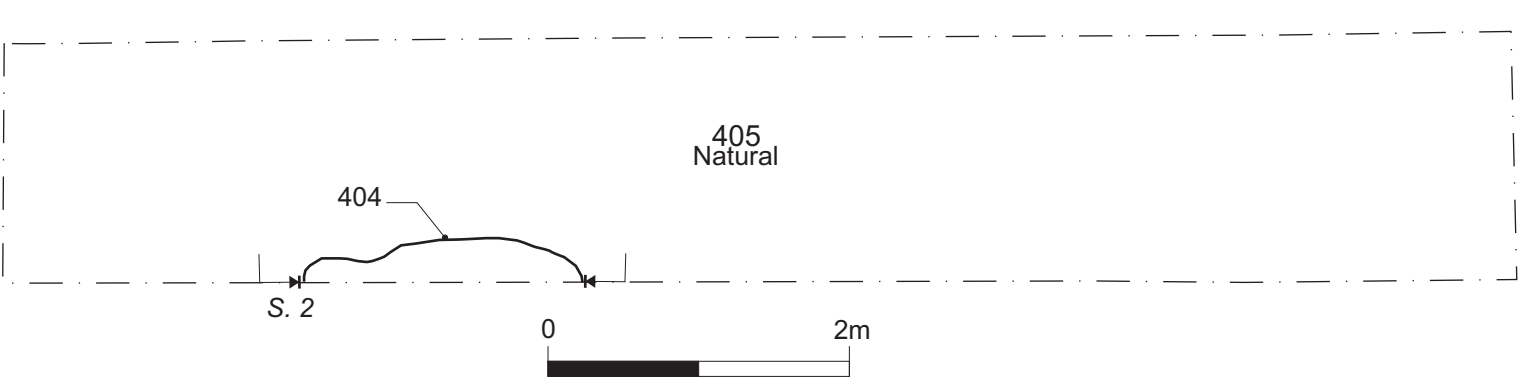


Fig. 3

Oundle School (SciTech Centre)

Trench 4



Section 2
35.66m OD

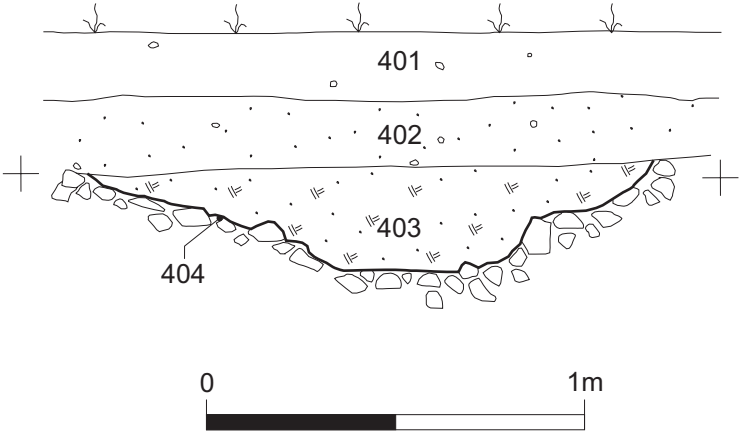


Fig. 4



Plate 1



Plate 2



Plate 3



Plate 4



Plate 5



Plate 6