

**Archaeological monitoring and excavation at
Birch Pit, Stage 5 western extension,
Maldon Road, Birch, Colchester, Essex
August-September 2012**



**report prepared by
Chris Lister and Ben Holloway**

**on behalf of
Hanson Aggregates**

CAT project ref: 12/7j
Colchester and Ipswich Museums accession code: 2012.51
HEM site code: BIQY112
NGR: TL 9225 1935 (c)



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CAT Report 671
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1 Summary

Archaeological monitoring and excavation was carried out at Birch Pit in 2012 on behalf of Hanson Aggregates. The archaeological monitoring covered topsoil-stripping of an extraction area associated with the Stage 5 western extension of the quarry and was undertaken adjacent to areas excavated in 2007 and 2008.

Only two features were recorded during the course of the work, a post-hole containing pottery sherds dated to the Late Bronze Age or early Iron Age and a ditch dating to the post-medieval or modern period. The majority of the stripped area was disturbed by activity associated with the construction and subsequent removal of a World War II airbase.

2 Introduction (Fig 1)

This is the archive report covering archaeological monitoring and excavation carried out at Birch Pit, Maldon Road, Birch on behalf of Hanson Aggregates by Colchester Archaeological Trust (CAT) between 19th August and 12th September 2012. The requirement for archaeological work was prompted by an extension to the extraction area on the west of the existing quarry-pit. In July 2012 the Essex County Council Place Services historic environment specialist was consulted by Essex County Council (ECC) in continuation of planning consent for mineral extraction first granted in 1995. Attached to the consent was the following condition:

'No development, or preliminary groundworks of any kind shall take place until the applicant has secured the implementation of a programme of archaeological work and recording in accordance with a written scheme of investigation which has been submitted by the applicant, and approved by the MPA.'

This new extension is referred to as the 'Stage 5 western extension'. The area investigated by CAT under this extension is centred to the north-east of Palmer's Farm at NGR TL 9225 1935 and comprises c 6000 sq metres of arable land, formerly part of a World War II United States Army Air Force base. Birch Pit itself is located about 6 km south-west of Colchester (Figs 1-2).

The 2012 archaeological work consisted of the monitoring of a topsoil strip on the Stage 5 extension. Previous areas of watching brief and excavation on the quarry western extension have been identified by individual letters and in respect of this the 2012 area was allocated the letter I (Fig 2). Area I was located immediately to the west of Area D (excavated in 2007 - CAT Report 485) and Area G (excavated in 2008 - CAT Report 523).

All archaeological work was carried out in accordance with a Written Scheme of Investigation (WSI) produced by CAT (CAT 2012) in response to a brief issued by and agreed with the ECC Place Services (Gascoyne 2012).

In addition to the WSI, all fieldwork was carried out in accordance with the CAT *Policies and procedures* (CAT 2008), Colchester Borough Council's *Guidelines on standards and practice for archaeological fieldwork in the Borough of Colchester* (CIMS 2008a), and *Guidelines on the preparation and transfer of archaeological archives to Colchester Museums* (CIMS 2008b), and the Institute for Archaeologists' *Standard and guidance for an archaeological watching brief* (IfA 2008a) and *Standard and guidance for the collection, documentation, conservation and research of archaeological materials* (IfA 2008b). The guidance contained in the documents *Management of Research Projects in the Historic Environment* (MoRPHE: English Heritage 2006), and *Standards for field archaeology in the East of England* (EAA 14) was also followed.

3 Archaeological background

3.1 Archaeology

The archaeological background of the area around Birch Pit has been extensively summarised in the many CAT Reports produced since the planning consent for mineral extraction was first granted in 1995.

Prior to the 1990s, little was known of the archaeology of the area immediately surrounding Birch Pit. Most of the knowledge of the archaeology of the area derives from work carried out in advance of expansion of the quarry since the early 1990s. The archaeological work followed an environmental impact assessment carried out in 1992, the archaeological component of which was undertaken by CAT (CAT Report 8, appendix).

Aerial photographs show a large number of undated, but pre-modern, cropmarks resulting from activity beyond the north boundary of Birch Pit. Some 0.8 km to the north-west there is an extensive cropmark complex indicating a large sub-rectangular enclosure with associated tracks or driveways and a system of fields (EHER nos. 11548, 11577, 11582 & 11924). Close to these sites, but within the boundaries of the permissible northern quarrying area, there are several smaller cropmark sites (CAT Report 8, appendix). Neolithic and early Mesolithic flints have also been recorded about 2 km to the east of the site (Spencer & Dennis 1988).

The most significant archaeology identified during the 1992 assessment was two areas of surface scatters of Roman finds located to the northeast of Palmer's Farm (CAT Report 8, appendix). A small quantity of medieval pottery was also recovered. Further work was undertaken by CAT in 1997 on one of the areas of Roman finds (CAT Report 8, 4 and fig 2) and in 1998, geophysical survey and trial-trenching were undertaken by CAT within the same area of Roman finds. This revealed a number of features, surviving below the ploughsoil, which contained finds of Roman date (CAT Report 23).

Other archaeological work has been undertaken by CAT at the quarry in response to the expansion of the extraction area (Fig 1). In 1995, a small oven of Roman date was excavated on the east side of the quarry close to Brake's Farm (NGR TL 9333 2002; CAT excavation 1995 on Fig 1; CAT archive 6/95b). In 2001, evaluation trenching was undertaken by CAT in advance of a northern extension to the quarry. This revealed features of Bronze Age and Roman date (CAT Report 141). Excavation on this area in 2003 revealed a Bronze Age cemetery - consisting of three ring-ditches associated with sixteen urned and unurned cremation burials - and part of a Roman field system (CAT excavation 2003 on Fig 1; CAT Report 289). In 2005 excavation at the Birch airfield compost site (on the former USAAF airbase) revealed features of Late Iron Age or early Roman, and Roman date (CAT Report 326; CAT excavation 2005 on Fig 1). In 2004, again in 2005-6, 2007 and in 2008, excavation was undertaken by CAT prior to extensions to the western side of the quarry (Fig 2; CAT Report 383, CAT Report 485, CAT Report 523). This work revealed features of prehistoric, Roman, medieval and post-medieval date. The main period of activity was during the Late Iron Age, Roman, medieval and early post-medieval periods. No clear traces of any buildings were found within the excavated areas, but the remains of ditches revealed enclosures divided by tracks or driveways. A Roman oven was situated within the area of one enclosure, and there were a small number of cremation burials situated to the east of the enclosures. A few features dated to the Late Bronze Age, including one large pit which was possibly a waterhole. In addition, there were a small number of features of post-medieval and modern date.

3.2 Disturbance to the archaeology caused by the construction and demolition of Birch airfield

During previous excavations disturbance to the archaeology by the construction and subsequent demolition of Birch airfield has been noted. The impact and implications of this have been discussed previously (CAT Report 485 section 3.2).

With reference to the Stage 5 excavation, approximately three quarters of the stripped area had been affected by the airfield. There were numerous wheel-ruts penetrating the natural which was generally very hard and compacted, probably a direct

result of the passage of heavy machinery over the site during the removal of the airfield. A number of disused armoured electricity cables were also encountered which almost certainly relate to the airfield.

4 Aim

The aim of the monitoring and excavation was to record and establish the character, extent, date and significance of any archaeological features or remains that would be destroyed either by mineral extraction or from associated quarry works.

5 Methods

The site was mechanically stripped of topsoil by Hanson Aggregates using a 360° excavator equipped with a toothless ditching bucket, under the supervision and control of a CAT archaeologist. The area stripped (Area I) consisted of the extraction zone, which measured 228m x 25m, and a haul road to the west of the extraction zone, which measured 228m x 4m. The extraction zone and the haul road were separated by a 3m wide bund. The total area of the Stage 5 western extension was 0.75ha.

During the monitoring, records of excavated contexts, layers, features and deposits were entered on CAT pro-forma record sheets. All features and significant deposits were planned using a Total Station and their profiles or sections drawn at a scale of 1:10. The photographic record consists of general site shots and shots of all archaeological features and deposits. Standard recording shots were taken with a digital camera and incorporated a scale and north arrow.

6 Results

During the monitoring of the topsoil strip on Area I, only two features of archaeological significance were recorded; a north-west to south-east aligned ditch (F1) and post-hole (F2) both located in the southern part of the site (Fig 3). The ditch contained a glass bottle and coal clinker and is likely a post-medieval or modern agricultural feature. This ditch is the continuation of a feature recorded during the Stage 2 western extension excavation (CAT Report 383 fig 2). The post-hole is an isolated feature which produced fragments of prehistoric pottery. The area to the north of F1 and F2 was characterised by substantial modern disturbance associated with the former runway system. Due to this it was not possible to discern any archaeological features that may have been present prior to the construction of the airfield.

7 Finds

Stephen Benfield

Introduction

A small quantity of bulk finds of prehistoric and Roman date were recovered. These are listed by context and described in Table 2. The Roman pottery fabrics refer to the Colchester Roman pottery fabric series (CAR 10). All of the pottery fabrics are listed in Table 1.

Fabric	Description
<i>Prehistoric:</i>	
HMF	hand-made, flint-tempered
<i>Roman:</i>	
DJ	coarse oxidised and related wares
GX	other coarse wares, principally locally-produced grey wares

Table 1 Pottery fabrics

context	finds no.	finds	spot dating
F002	001	Prehistoric pottery (4@ 2g) one small sherd and three fragments, flint-tempered (Fabric HMF), probably Late Bronze Age-Early Iron Age Burnt flint (1@ 2g) small piece discoloured by heat	Late Bronze Age-Early Iron Age
US	002	Pottery Roman (7@ 51g) abraded; Fabric DZ (oxidised sandy fabric) Fabric GX CBM Roman (1@ 139g) abraded, <i>imbrex</i> roof tile	Roman

Table 2 Finds by context and find number

Discussion

A very small quantity of finds can be dated to the prehistoric period. These are associated with F2(1). Although not closely datable the prehistoric pottery is probably of Late Bronze Age-Early Iron Age date as significant quantities of similar pottery dated to that period have been recovered from previous excavations at on adjacent areas (CAT Report 383, 16-17 & CAT Report 485, 17-21). Heat affected stone (burnt flint) while again not being closely datable is also a typical find associated with prehistoric occupation sites and may well be contemporary with the flint-tempered pottery.

Several unstratified pottery sherds and a piece of ceramic building material (CBM) were also recovered (US(2)). All are abraded. Some of the sherds are Roman greyware (Fabric GX) while two sherds in a sandy, oxidised fabric are also probably Roman (Fabric DJ). The piece of CBM is in a hard, red, sandy fabric, but it is quite abraded. It is possibly from a Roman *imbrex* roof tile, but might also be from a post-medieval/modern tile or drainage pipe.

8 Discussion

Discussion of the archaeology excavated at Birch Pit has been covered in previous reports (CAT Report 383, section 9; CAT Report 485, section 8; CAT Report 523, section 8) and there is little to add to those discussions from the Stage 5 western extension.

The post-hole dating to the prehistoric period probably belongs to the Late Bronze Age. This would be in keeping with the large number of features and finds already excavated and assigned to this period. As this post-hole is an isolated feature, there is no reason to suggest a change in the focus of the Bronze Age settlement postulated around the area of the ring-ditch excavated in Area A during the 2005-6 Stage 2 western extension.

The post-medieval or modern ditch is in perfect alignment with a field boundary depicted on the 1881 Ordnance Survey map of Birch (Fig 5). It is not possible to state when this boundary was dug but a likely timescale for the infilling of the ditch would be when the USAAF airbase was constructed in 1942-3.

9 Further work

This is the final report on the work undertaken in 2012 on the Stage 5 extraction area of the western extension to Birch Pit. Although this excavation has not yielded any significant remains, and the main focus of the Roman settlement appears to have been encountered in the 2008 excavation, the areas so far excavated are not the full extent of the known archaeology in this part of the quarry. Both the Roman features and the recorded surface spreads of Roman finds extend north and north-east beyond the limit of the present excavation (CAT Report 8, fig 1) Significant remains of prehistoric and medieval to early post-medieval remains have also been revealed in this western

extension of the quarry. The recording of the extent and nature of the remaining archaeology will need to be addressed in any future expansion of the quarry.

10 Acknowledgements

The project was commissioned by Alex Smiles of Hanson. Site work was managed and carried out by Ben Holloway and Chris Lister. The project was monitored for the Historic Environment Place Services by Adrian Gascoyne.

11 References

- | | | |
|------------------|-------|--|
| CAR 10 | 1999 | <i>Colchester Archaeological Report 10: Roman pottery from excavations in Colchester 1971-86</i> , by Robin Symonds & Sue Wade |
| CAT | 2012 | <i>Policies and procedures</i> |
| CAT | 2012 | <i>Written Scheme of Investigation for Archaeological Monitoring and Excavation at Hanson Quarry, Birch, Maldon Road, Colchester, Essex, August 2012</i> |
| CAT Report 8 | 1997 | <i>A Fieldwalking Survey at Birch, Colchester</i> , November 1997. Unpublished CAT client report by Carl Crossan |
| CAT Report 23 | 1998 | <i>Geophysical Survey and Trial-trenching at Birch, Colchester, October 1998</i> . Unpublished CAT client report, by Carl Crossan |
| CAT Report 141 | 2001 | <i>An archaeological evaluation at Birch Pit, northern extension, Colchester, Essex, May 2001</i> . Unpublished CAT client report by Don Shimmin, June 2001 |
| CAT Report 289 | 2005 | <i>An archaeological excavation at Birch Pit northern extension, Maldon Road, Colchester, Essex, June-August 2003</i> . Unpublished CAT client report by Ben Holloway & Patrick Spencer, March 2005 |
| CAT Report 326 | 2006 | <i>An archaeological excavation and watching brief at Birch airfield compost site, Birch, Colchester, Essex, May-August 2005</i> . Unpublished CAT client report by Carl Crossan, February 2006 |
| CAT Report 383 | 2007 | <i>Archaeological investigations at Birch Pit western extension, Maldon Road, Colchester, Essex, 2004 and 2005-6</i> . Unpublished CAT client report by Stephen Benfield |
| CAT Report 485 | 2008 | <i>An archaeological excavation at Birch Pit, Stage 3 western extension, Maldon Road, Birch, Colchester, Essex, July-August 2007</i> . Unpublished CAT client report by Stephen Benfield & Emma Spurgeon |
| CAT Report 523 | 2010 | <i>An archaeological excavation at Birch Pit, Stage 4 western extension, Maldon Road, Colchester, Essex, October-November 2008</i> . Unpublished CAT client report by Stephen Benfield & Emma Spurgeon |
| CIMS | 2008a | <i>Guidelines on standards and practice for archaeological fieldwork in the Borough of Colchester</i> (CBC) |
| CIMS | 2008b | <i>Guidelines on the preparation and transfer of archaeological archives to Colchester and Ipswich Museums</i> (CBC) |
| EAA 14 | 2003 | <i>Standards for field archaeology in the East of England</i> , East Anglian Archaeology, Occasional Papers, 14, ed by D Gurney |
| English Heritage | 2006 | <i>Management of Research Projects in the Historic Environment</i> (MoRPHE) |
| Gascoyne, A | 2012 | <i>Archaeological monitoring and excavation – Phase 5 of Birch Pit western extension, Birch, August 2012</i> . ECC brief |
| IfA | 2008a | <i>Standard and guidance for archaeological watching brief</i> |
| IfA | 2008b | <i>Standard and guidance for the collection, documentation,</i> |

conservation and research of archaeological materials

Spencer, P S & Dennis, N J 1988 'Neolithic flint from Birch, near Colchester', in *Colchester Archaeological Group Bulletin*, **31**, 31-8

12 Glossary and abbreviations

Bronze Age	the period spanning 2000 – c 700 BC, sub-divided into the Early, Middle and Later Bronze Age
CAT	Colchester Archaeological Trust
CBC	Colchester Borough Council
CIMS	Colchester and Ipswich Museums
context	specific location on an excavation, usually relates to finds
cut	an excavation of unspecified purpose
ECC	Essex County Council
EHHER	Essex Historic Environment Record
HEM	Historic Environment Management team of Essex County Council
IfA	Institute for Archaeologists
Iron Age	the period spanning c 700 BC – AD 43, sub-divided into the Early, Middle and Late Iron Age
medieval	the period from AD 1066 - 1500
modern	19th century to the present
NGR	National Grid Reference
post-medieval	the period from AD 1500/1540 - 1800
Roman	the period from AD 43 to c AD 430
USAAF	United States Army Air Force
WSI	Written Scheme of Investigation

13 Archive deposition

The paper and digital archive is currently held by the Colchester Archaeological Trust at Roman Circus House, off Circular Road North, Colchester, CO2 7GZ, but will be permanently deposited with Colchester & Ipswich Museum (accession 2012.51).

14 Contents of archive

One A4 document wallet containing:

1 Introduction

- 1.1 Copy of ECC brief
- 1.2 Copy of WSI produced by CAT
- 1.3 Risk assessment
- 1.4 Method statement
- 1.5 Safe system of work document

2 Site archive

- 2.1 Site digital photographic record
- 2.2 Attendance register
- 2.3 Context sheets (F1-F2, L1-L3)
- 2.4 Finds register
- 2.5 Site photographic record on CD

3 Research archive

- 3.1 Client report

Not in wallet:
The finds (1 small bag)
1 x A3 sx sheet

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Distribution list:

Alex Smiles, Hanson Aggregates
Adrian Gascoyne, ECC HEM officer
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Date: 26.11.12

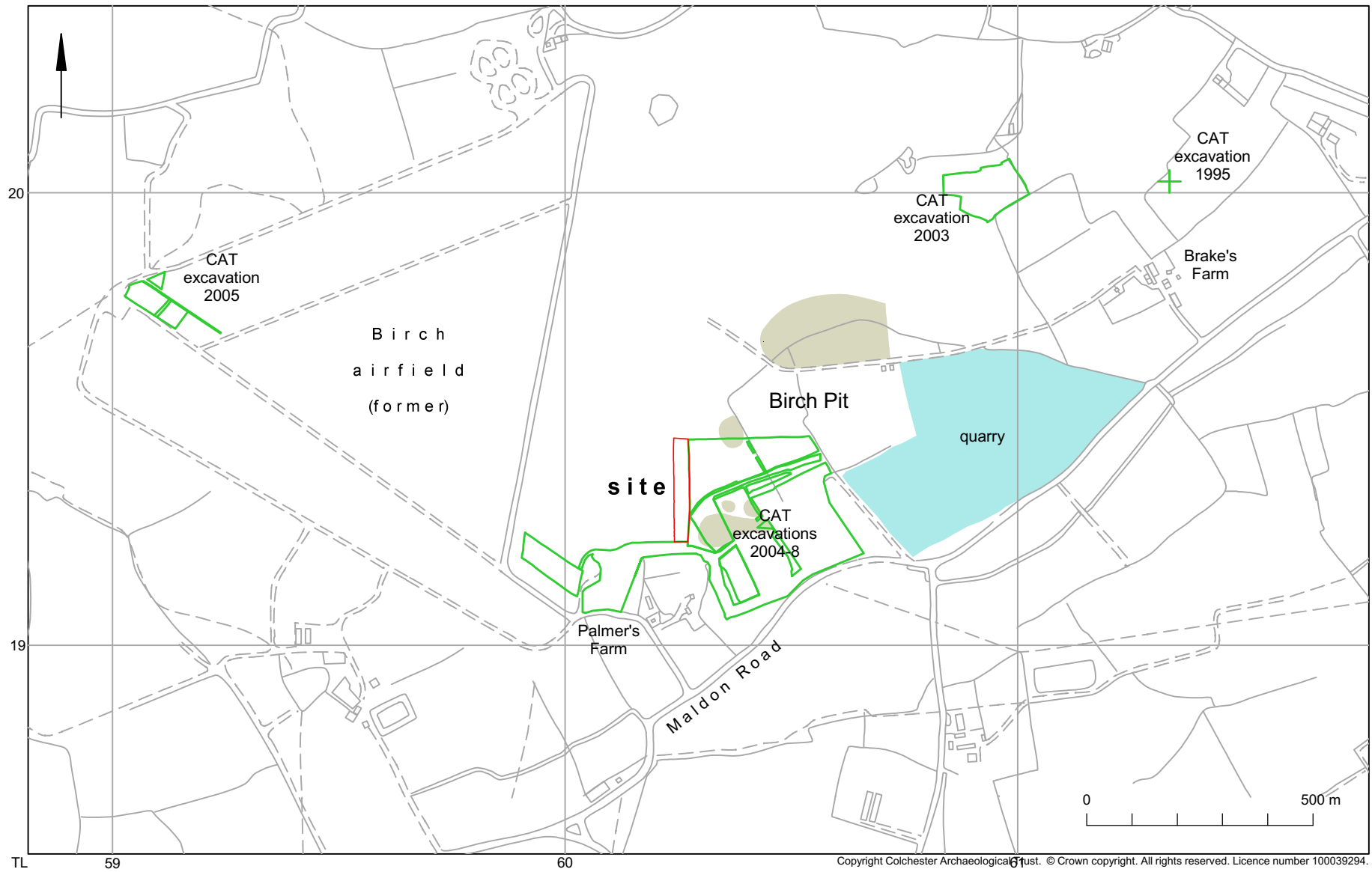

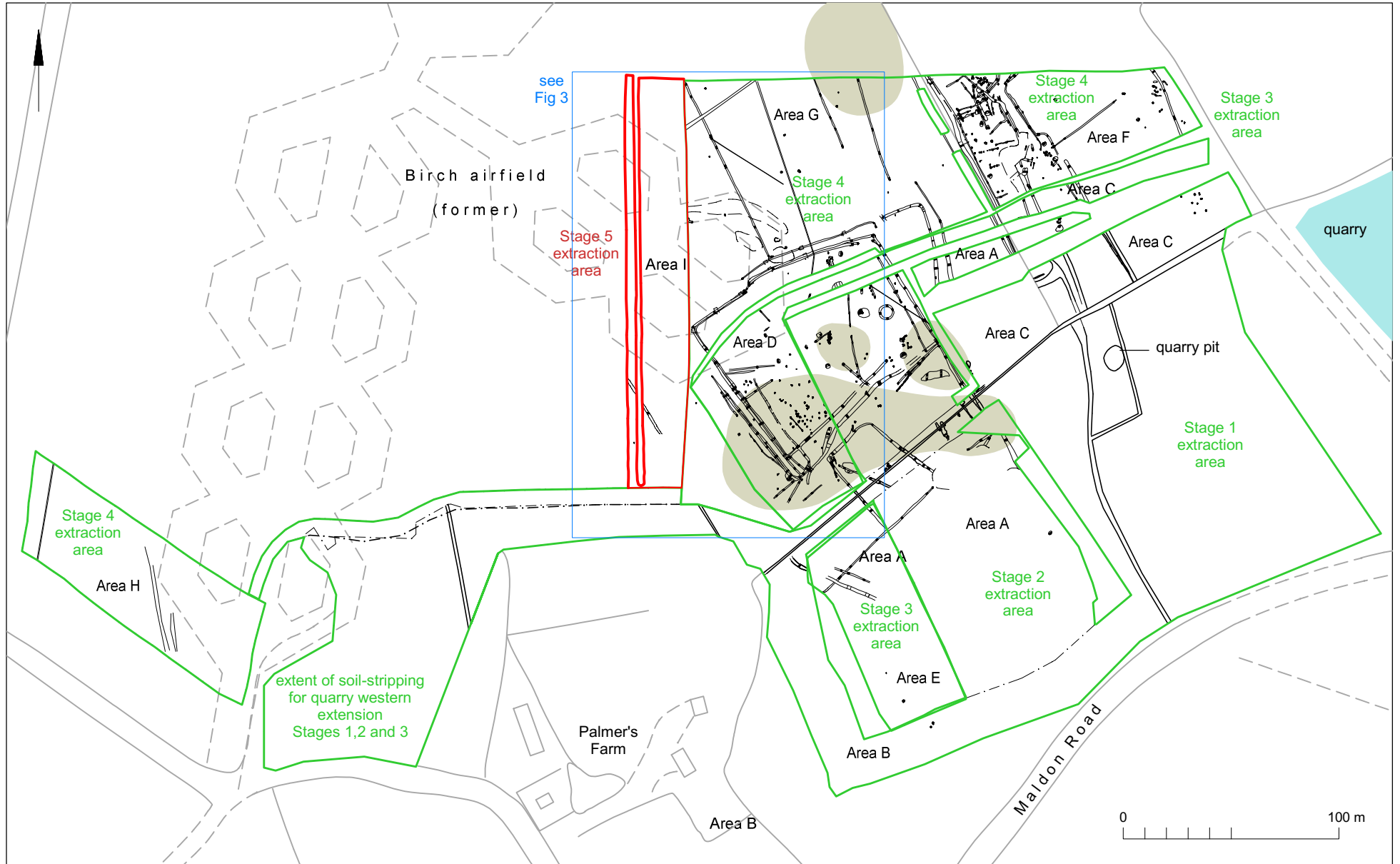


Fig 1 Site location and locations of previous excavations in the surrounding area.

 concentrations of Roman surface finds



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Fig 2 Areas covered by archaeological watching briefs and excavations, showing the quarry Stage 5 western extension (2012) extraction area.

concentrations of Roman surface finds

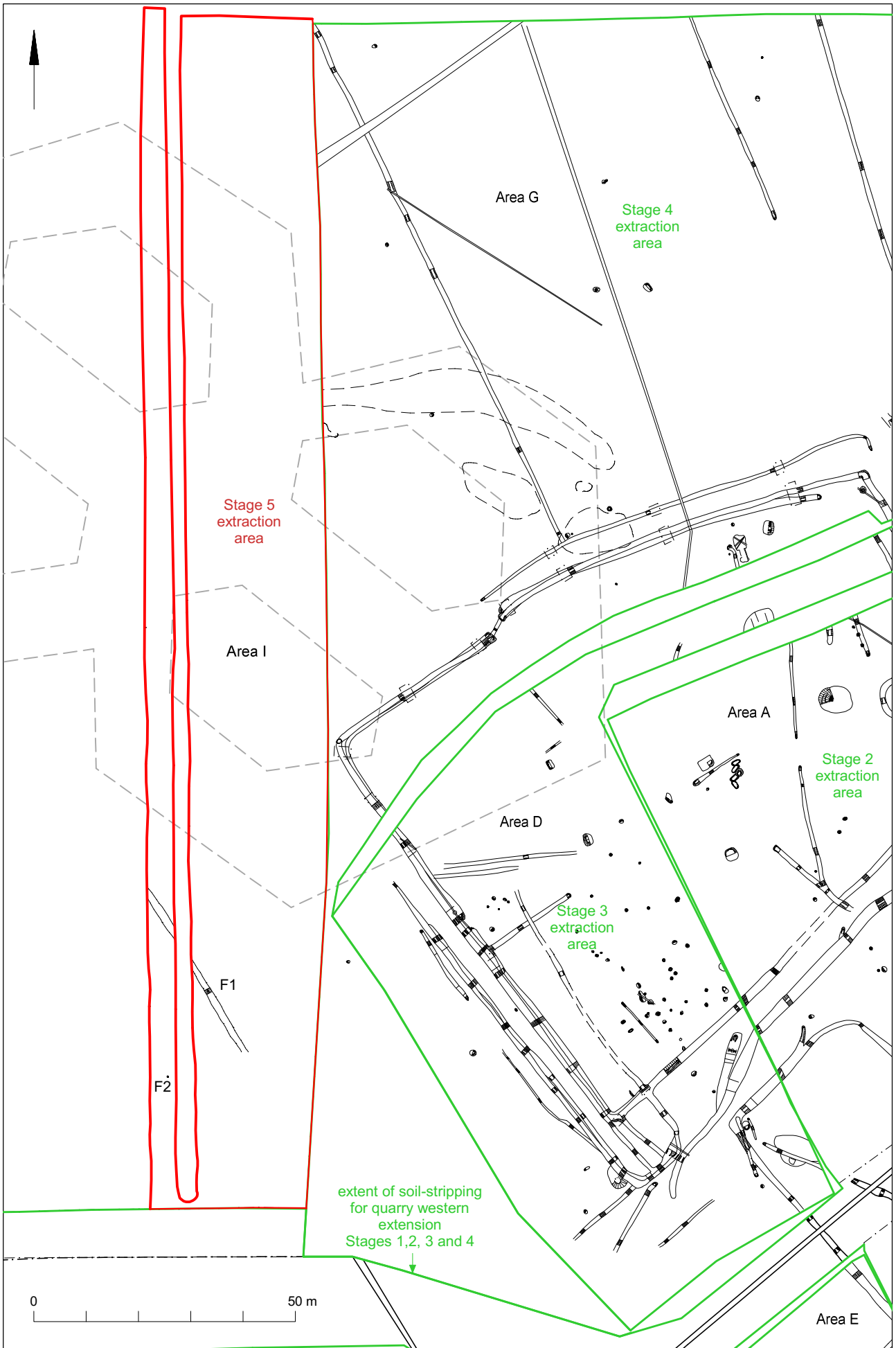
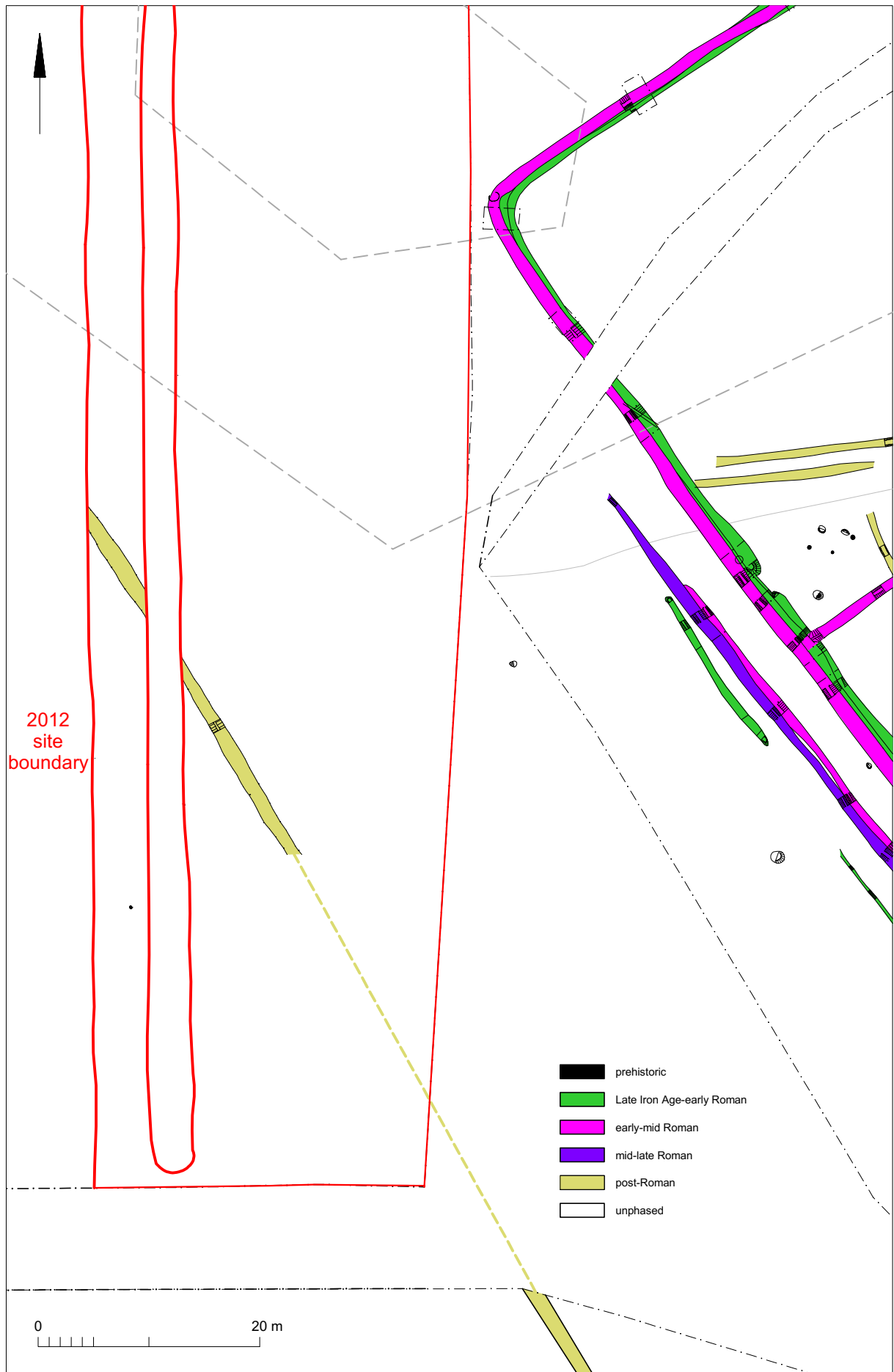


Fig 3 Area I (inset to Fig 2).



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Fig 4 Phasing of features.

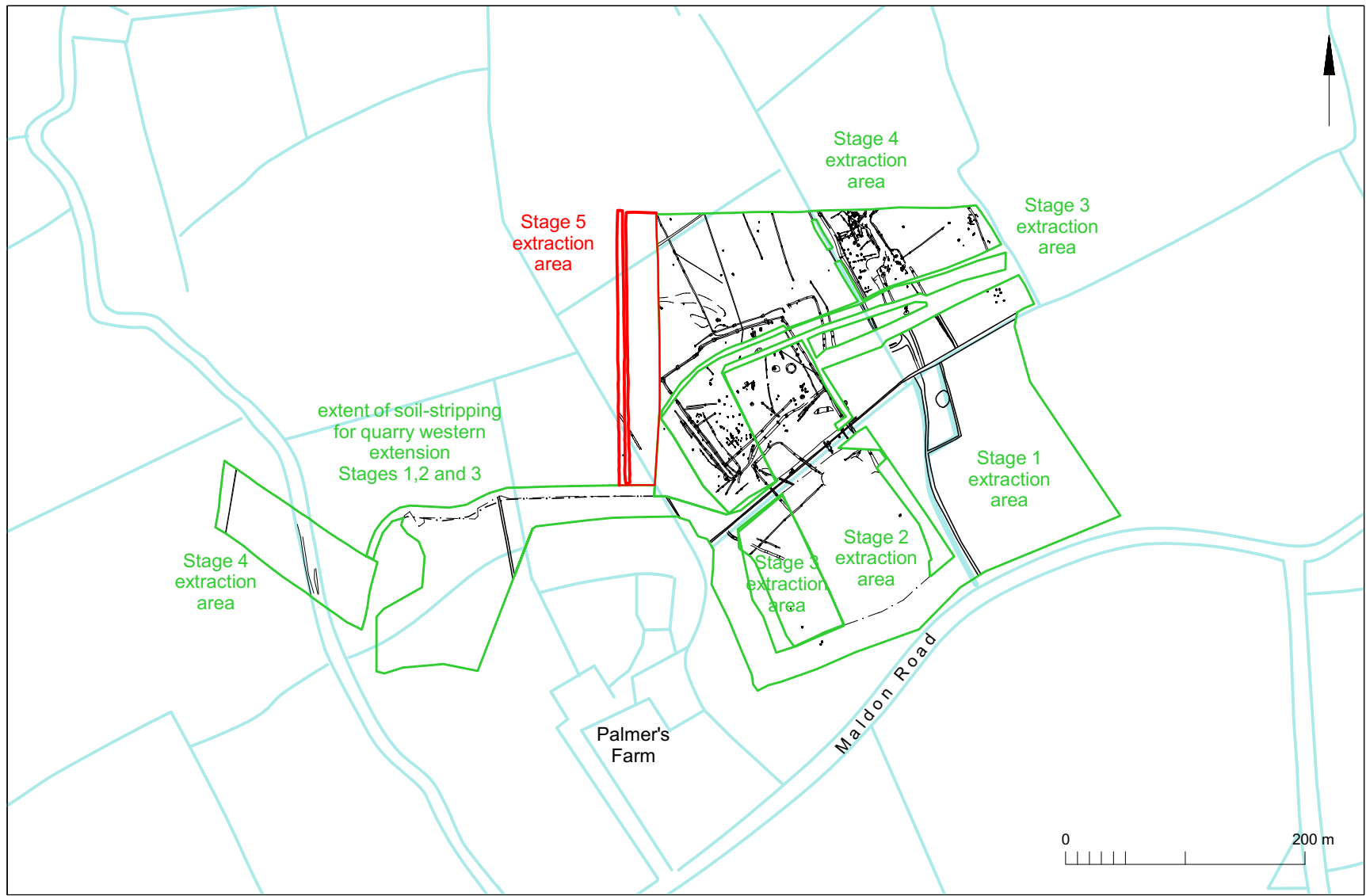


Fig 5 Excavations overlaid on the 1881 Ordnance Survey map.

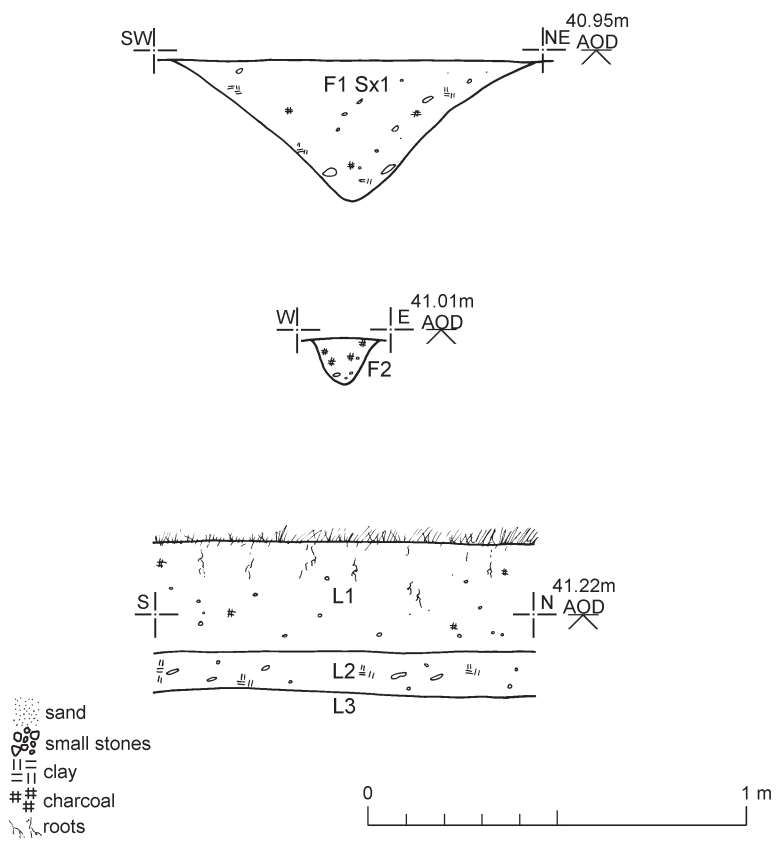


Fig 6 F1 and F2 section. Representative section.

Essex Historic Environment Record/ Essex Archaeology and History

Summary sheet

Address: Birch Pit, Maldon Road, Birch, Colchester, Essex	
Parish: Birch	District: Colchester
NGR: TL 9225 1935 (c)	Site codes: CAT project code - 12/7j ECC HEM code – BIQY112
Type of work: Monitoring and excavation	Site director/group: Colchester Archaeological Trust
Date of work: August-September 2012	Size of area investigated: 0.75 ha (open area)
Location of curating museum: Colchester and Ipswich Museums accession code 2012.51	Funding source: Hansons Aggregates
Monitored by: Adrian Gascoyne of Essex County Council Historic Environment Place Services	
Further seasons anticipated? Yes	Related EHER numbers: 11548, 11577, 11582 & 11924
Final report:	CAT Report 671
Periods represented:	prehistoric-modern
Summary: <i>Archaeological monitoring and excavation was carried out at Birch Pit in 2012 on behalf of Hanson Aggregates. The archaeological monitoring covered topsoil-stripping of an extraction area associated with the Stage 5 western extension of the quarry and was undertaken adjacent to areas excavated in 2007 and 2008. Only two features were recorded during the course of the work, a post-hole containing pottery sherds dated to the Late Bronze Age or early Iron Age and a ditch dating to the post-medieval or modern period. The majority of the stripped area was disturbed by activity associated with the construction and subsequent removal of a World War II airbase.</i>	
Previous summaries/reports:	CAT Report 383, CAT Report 485, CAT Report 523
Keywords: Bronze Age	Significance: *
Author of summary: Chris Lister	Date of summary: November 2012