

Archaeological evaluation of land north of Sandridge Common, Melksham, Wiltshire



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Peter Lovett

With contributions by Rob Hedge

Summary

An archaeological evaluation was undertaken of land north of Sandridge Common, Melksham, Wiltshire (NGR ST 91742 64337). It was undertaken on behalf of CgMs Consulting, on behalf of Robert Hitchins Ltd, who intends to construct 100 dwellings and associated infrastructure for which a planning application has been submitted.

The project revealed an historic field boundary that was removed in the latter half of the 20th century, and limited survival of post-medieval ridge and furrow. The site lay within the medieval Royal Forest of Melksham, and it is suggested that the land was wooded until disafforestation in the 17th century for agricultural purposes, therefore precluding any earlier settlement activity.

Report

1 Background

1.1 Reasons for the project

An archaeological evaluation was undertaken of land north of Sandridge Common, Melksham, Wiltshire (NGR ST 91742 64337). It was undertaken on behalf of CgMs Consulting, on behalf of Robert Hitchins Ltd, who intends to construct 100 dwellings and associated infrastructure for which a planning application has been submitted to Wiltshire Council (reference 15/12454/OUT).

The proposed development site was considered to include non-designated heritage assets and potential heritage assets, the significance of which might be affected by the application.

No specific brief was prepared, but this project conforms to the generality of briefs, and for which a project proposal (including detailed specification) was produced (WA 2016).

The project also conforms to the *Standard and guidance: Archaeological field evaluation* (ClfA 2014a).

2 Aims

The aims of this evaluation are:

- to describe and assess the significance of the heritage asset with archaeological interest;
- to establish the nature, importance and extent of the archaeological site;
- to assess the impact of the application on the archaeological site.

3 Methods

3.1 Personnel

The project was led by Peter Lovett (BSc (hons)); who joined Worcestershire Archaeology in 2012 and has been practicing archaeology since 2004, assisted by Jessica Wheeler (BA (hons.)) and Nina O'Hare (BA (hons.)). The project managers responsible for the quality of the project were Tom Rogers (BA (hons.); MSc) and Tom Vaughan (BA (hons.); MA; ACIfA). Illustrations were prepared by Carolyn Hunt (BSc (hons); PG Cert; MCIfA). Robert Hedge (MA Cantab) contributed the finds report.

3.2 Documentary research

An archaeological desk-based assessment (DBA) was undertaken by CgMs Consulting (2015). The DBA established that no designated heritage assets lie within, or in the immediate proximity of the study site. Non-designated heritage assets, comprising poorly preserved earthwork remains of former post-medieval cultivation (ridge and furrow) and a post-medieval, or possible medieval, earthen bank of local significance, were identified on the study site itself. A low potential was recognised for previously unrecorded buried archaeological remains of significance dating to all periods to survive on the site.

3.3 List of sources consulted

Documentary sources

Published and grey literature sources are listed in the bibliography.

3.4 Fieldwork strategy

A detailed specification has been prepared by Worcestershire Archaeology (WA 2016).

Fieldwork was undertaken between 29 February and 2 March 2016.

Six trenches, amounting to just over 468m² in area, were excavated over the site area of 3.1ha, representing a sample of 1.5%. The location of the trenches is indicated in Figure 2. The trenches

were located to test specific anomalies as depicted by the geophysical survey (Stratascan 2015), as well as avoiding numerous services, both above and below ground.

Deposits considered not to be significant were removed under archaeological supervision using a 360° tracked excavator, employing a toothless bucket. Subsequent excavation was undertaken by hand. Clean surfaces were inspected and selected deposits were excavated to retrieve artefactual material and environmental samples, as well as to determine their nature. Deposits were recorded according to standard Worcestershire Archaeology practice (WA 2012). On completion of excavation, trenches were reinstated by replacing the excavated material.

3.5 Structural analysis

All fieldwork records were checked and cross-referenced. Analysis was effected through a combination of structural, artefactual and ecofactual evidence, allied to the information derived from other sources.

3.6 Artefact methodology, by Rob Hedge

The finds work reported here conforms with the relevant sections of *Standard and guidance for the collection, documentation, conservation and research of archaeological materials* (ClfA 2014b), with archive creation informed by *Archaeological archives: a guide to the best practice in the creation, compilation, transfer and curation* (AAF 2011), and museum deposition by *Selection, retention and dispersal of archaeological collections* (SMA 1993).

3.6.1 Artefact recovery policy

The artefact recovery policy conformed to standard Worcestershire Archaeology practice (WA 2012; appendix 2).

3.6.2 Method of analysis

All hand-retrieved finds were examined. They were identified, quantified and dated to period. A *terminus post quem* date was produced for each stratified context. The date was used for determining the broad date of phases defined for the site. All information was recorded on *pro forma* sheets.

The pottery and ceramic building material was examined under x20 magnification and referenced as appropriate by fabric type and form according to the fabric reference series maintained by Worcestershire Archaeology (Hurst and Rees 1992 and www.worcestershireceramics.org).

3.6.3 Discard policy

The following categories/types of material will be discarded after a period of 6 months following the submission of this report, unless there is a specific request to retain them (and subject to the collection policy of the relevant depository):

- where unstratified;
- post-medieval material in general, and;
- generally where material has been specifically assessed by an appropriate specialist as having no obvious grounds for retention.

3.7 Environmental archaeology sampling policy

Sampling was undertaken according to standard Worcestershire Archaeology practice (WA 2012). In the event no deposits were identified which were considered to be suitable for environmental analysis.

4 The application site

4.1 Topography, geology and archaeological context

A desk-based assessment has been produced (CgMs Consulting 2015). In summary, the site lies on Oxford Clay Formation Mudstone, on broadly level land at c 45m Above Ordnance Datum. Remains of medieval or post-medieval ridge and furrow are visible in the landscape, as well as evidence of a bank. These are also visible in the geophysical survey (Fig 2).

No other heritage assets have been recorded within the site area, though a small Roman farmstead was discovered approximately 1km to the south, and an isolated Bronze Age pit was excavated c 420m south of the site. The area is historically part of Melksham Forest, a royal forest that was removed in the 1700s, suggesting that any agricultural activity, such as the ridge and furrow, dates from after this time.

4.2 Current land-use

The site has been used as pasture since at least the latter half of the 20th century.

5 Structural analysis

The trenches and features recorded are shown in Fig 2. The results of the structural analysis are presented in Appendix 1.

5.1.1 Phase 1: Natural deposits

The natural geology consisted of Oxford Clays, a mottled blueish yellow clay present at between 0.23m and 0.35m below the current ground level.

5.1.2 Phase 2: Post-Medieval deposits

An historic field boundary was excavated in Trenches 1 and 2 (Plates 2, 4, 6; Fig 3). Whilst only 1m wide and 0.4m deep in Trench 1, it was up to 4m wide in Trench 2, and included a recut and a possible hedge bedding trench. The earliest visible iteration of the ditch did not yield any dating evidence. The bedding may have effectively been a robber trench, as the current landowner removed the hedge in 1986, and slighted the ditch (John Sheate pers comm). It was left for some time to fill of its own accord before being intentionally backfilled with modern waste and rubble. The course of this ditch can be seen in the topography of the field (Plate 12), and it corresponds to historic mapping recorded in the DBA (CgMs Consulting 2015).

A number of remnant furrow bases were excavated and recorded across the site (Plates 5 and 8). They all aligned roughly north to south, and were very shallow. The subsoil had a diffuse interface with the natural substrate, and was the same material as that seen within these furrow bases. It included large amounts of fired clay, and white ceramic sherds, probably brought to the site through manuring.

5.1.3 Phase 3: Modern deposits

A number of field drains were observed crossing the site, despite which it remained a very damp parcel of land. The field was covered in a dark clay loam and turf.

5.2 Artefact analysis, by Rob Hedge

The artefactual assemblage recovered is summarised in Table 1.

The assemblage came from 7 stratified contexts and could be dated from the medieval/post-medieval period onwards (see Table 1). Using pottery as an index of artefact condition, this was generally poor with the majority of sherds displaying high levels of abrasion, and the average sherd size being below average.

period	material class	material subtype	object specific type	count	weight(g)
medieval/post-medieval	ceramic		brick/tile	2	16
medieval/post-medieval	ceramic		roof tile	3	50
late medieval/post-medieval	ceramic		brick	3	94
post-medieval	ceramic		pot	2	28
post-medieval/modern	ceramic		pot	6	18
post-medieval/modern	ceramic		roof tile	1	25
modern	ceramic		pot	3	75
modern	ceramic		sewer pipe	2	384
modern	glass		vessel	1	6
modern	metal	aluminium	vessel	1	4
modern	metal	iron	nail	3	29
modern	metal	iron	staple	1	8
modern	plastic		crisp packet	1	1
undated	bone	animal bone	animal bone	2	47
undated	ceramic		fired clay	13	308
undated	organic	shell	oyster shell	1	2
Totals:				45	1095

Table 1: Quantification of the assemblage

Summary artefactual evidence

For the finds from individual features, consult table 2.

Medieval/post-medieval

Residual abraded undiagnostic roof tile and brick fragments were present across the site, with a concentration in rubble deposit (203). Due to their condition it was not possible to ascribe definitive dates; several pieces of roof tile may be medieval in origin but the bulk of the ceramic building material is likely to be post-medieval in date.

Post-medieval/modern

The majority of the pottery recovered was refined earthenware of late-18th century to early-19th century date, largely creamware and pearlware with a single sherd of engine-turned dipped earthenware. A single sherd of coarse red earthenware of similar date was also present.

Modern

Much of the assemblage comprised modern 19th century domestic and agricultural rubbish, including iron fixings, 20th century sewer pipes, glass vessel fragments and later 20th century food packets and drinks cans.

Undated

Potentially of interest were fragments of highly abraded fired clay with numerous voids representing burnt-out organic material such as straw, recovered from a number of contexts.

Although not easily dateable or typologically identifiable, they may comprise fragments of burnt daub from an unknown structure, though there are no other indications that they originated within the site area, so may have been incorporated into the site through agricultural processes.

context	material class	material subtype	object specific type	count	weight(g)	start date	end date	TPQ date range
101	ceramic		fired clay	2	169			1800-1900
	ceramic		brick/tile	1	7	1200	1800	
	ceramic		pot	1	3	1800	1900	
201	ceramic		fired clay	8	94			1800-1950
	ceramic		pot	1	65	1800	1900	
	ceramic		brick	1	72	1400	1800	
	glass		vessel	1	6	1800	1950	
	ceramic		pot	1	2	1760	1840	
	ceramic		pot	1	3	1780	1840	
203	ceramic		sewer pipe	1	200	1900	2000	1900-2000
	metal	iron	staple	1	8	1900	2000	
	ceramic		pot	1	3	1760	1840	
	ceramic		pot	1	12	1700	1800	
	ceramic		roof tile	2	23	1200	1800	
	ceramic		roof tile	1	25	1700	1900	
	ceramic		brick	2	22	1400	1800	
	ceramic		brick/tile	1	9	1200	1800	
204	ceramic		sewer pipe	1	184	1900	2000	1988-2000
	ceramic		fired clay	1	31			
	ceramic		pot	1	7	1800	1950	
	bone	animal bone	animal bone	2	47			
	ceramic		roof tile	1	27	1200	1800	
	plastic		crisp packet	1	1	1988	1994	
	metal	aluminium	vessel	1	4	1980	1995	
	metal	iron	nail	3	29	1900	2000	
	organic	shell	oyster shell	1	2			
503	ceramic		pot	1	3	1760	1840	1760-1840
600	ceramic		pot	1	16	1760	1790	1780-1900
	ceramic		pot	1	1	1780	1840	
	ceramic		pot	1	6	1770	1900	
603	ceramic		fired clay	2	14			undated

Table 2: Summary of context dating based on artefacts

The finds assemblage largely comprises agricultural and domestic material of post-medieval and modern date. The poor condition suggests that the material has been incorporated into the site through agricultural processes and, therefore, after the clearance of the forest which is documented in the post-medieval period.

With the possible exception of the fragments of fired clay, subject to the wishes of the relevant repository, the bulk of the assemblage is not considered worthy of retention.

6 Synthesis

The site lies within the bounds of the Royal Forest of Melksham, which probably precluded agricultural activity until its disafforestation in the 17th century. The pottery retrieved from the subsoil and remnant furrow material is all late 18th to 19th century in date.

The evidence for ridge and furrow is still visible in the landscape, though it does not impact greatly into the natural substrate.

The excavated field boundary is present on historic mapping from at least 1835 and is still there in 1988, though it had gone by 2006 (CgMs Consulting 2015). As was relayed by the farmer, the hedge was removed sometime in the 1986 and the ditch allowed to infill, before the current hedge was planted in 1991 and the ditch backfilled.

The limited archaeology identified during the evaluation did not allow for an interrogation of the research agendas as laid out in *South West Archaeological Research Framework* (Webster 2008).

7 Significance

The nature of the archaeological interest is limited to post-medieval agricultural activity. This is present in two forms; firstly as ridge and furrow, partially surviving in the topography of the landscape, but severely limited below ground. Secondly as an historic field boundary that was removed in the latter half of the 20th century. The artefactual assemblage is restricted to 19th and 20th century material.

The archaeological features are not deeply buried, and so are vulnerable to the impacts of development. However, there is very limited potential for archaeological research, as the remains are not deemed to be significant.

8 Publication summary

Worcestershire Archaeology has a professional obligation to publish the results of archaeological projects within a reasonable period of time. To this end, Worcestershire Archaeology intends to use this summary as the basis for publication through local or regional journals. The client is requested to consider the content of this section as being acceptable for such publication.

An archaeological evaluation was undertaken on behalf of CgMs Consulting at Sandridge Common, Melksham, Wiltshire (NGR ST 91742 64337). The project revealed an historic field boundary that was removed in the latter half of the 20th century, and limited survival of post-medieval ridge and furrow. The site lay within the medieval Royal Forest of Melksham, and it is suggested that the land was wooded until disafforestation in the 17th century, therefore precluding any earlier settlement activity.

9 Acknowledgements

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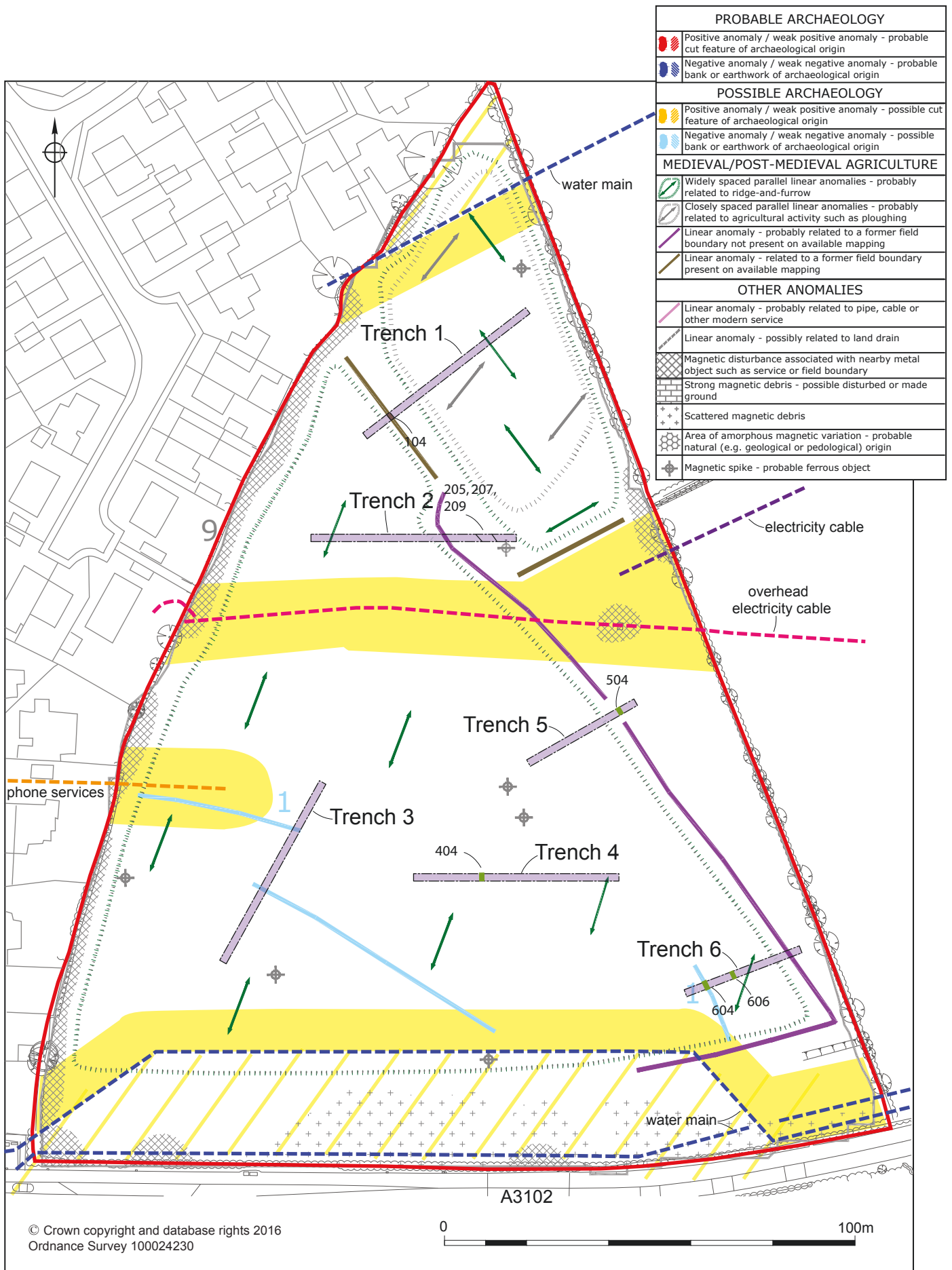
WA 2016 *Proposal for an archaeological evaluation at Sandridge Common, Melksham, Worcestershire*, Worcestershire Archaeology, Worcestershire County Council, unpublished document dated 22 February 2016, **P4783**

Figures



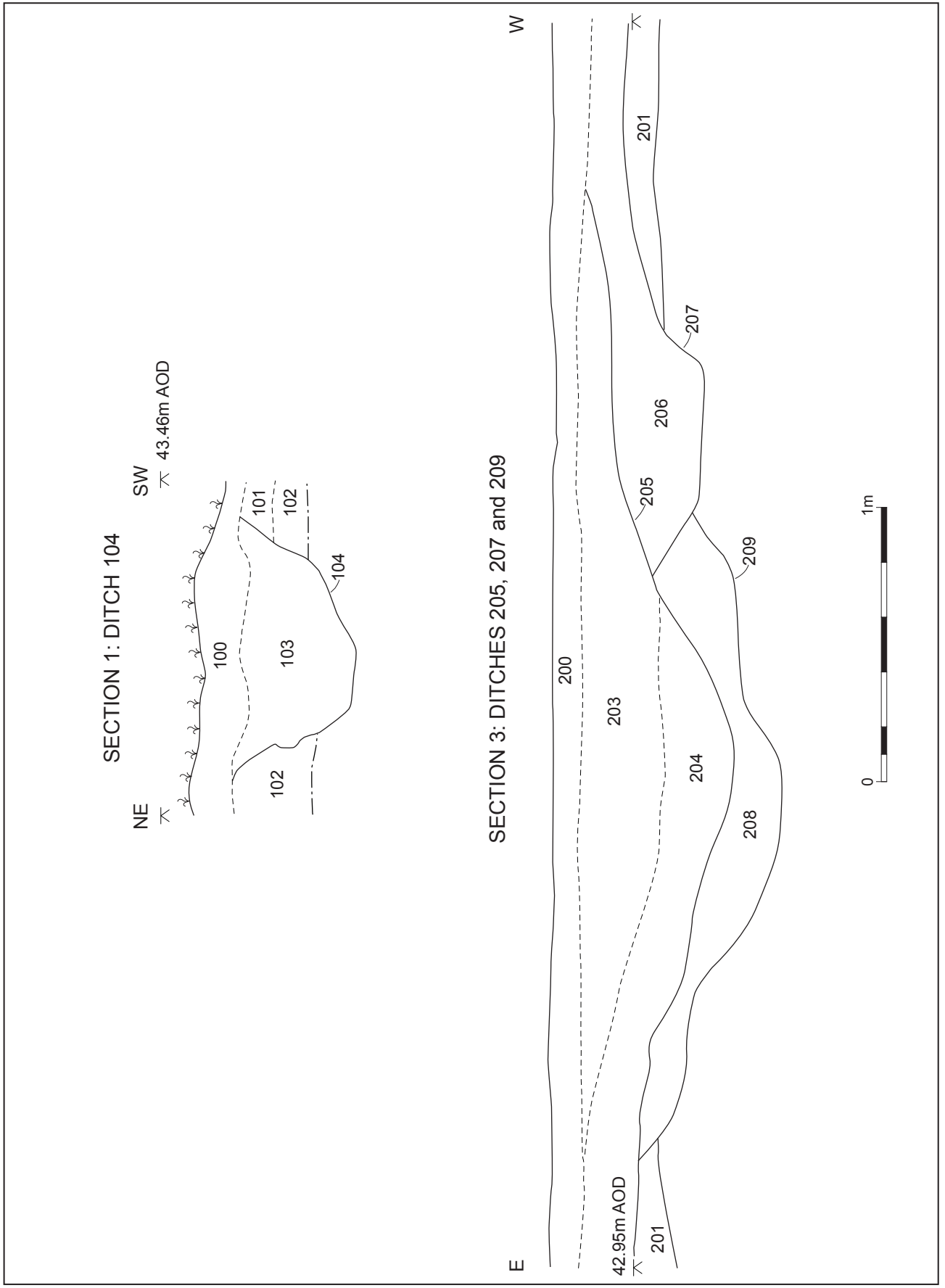
Location of the site

Figure 1



Trench locations over Geophysics (based upon Stratascan Fig No 05)

Figure 2



Sections

Figure 3

Plates



Plate 1 The site, looking south-west



Plate 2 Ditch 104, looking south-east (1m scale)



Plate 3 Trench 1, looking north-east (1m scales)



Plate 4 Trench 2, looking west (1m scales)



Plate 5 Furrow 503, looking south (1m scale)



Plate 6 Ditches 205, 207 and 209, looking south (1m scales)



Plate 7 Trench 5, looking east (1m scales)



Plate 8 Furrow 404, looking north-east (1m scale)



Plate 9 Trench 4, looking west (1m scales)



Plate 10 Trench 6, looking south-west (1m scales)



Plate 11 Trench 3, looking north-east (1m scales)



Plate 12 Old hedge line and boundary visible in the landscape, looking south-west

Appendix 1 Trench descriptions

Trench 1

Length: 50m Width: 1.8m Orientation: North-east to south-west

Context summary:

Context	Feature	Context	Description	Height/ depth	Interpretation
100	Topsoil	Layer	Friable mid brownish grey silty clay loam	0.26m	Topsoil
101	Subsoil	Layer	Friable light brownish grey silty clay	0.09m	Subsoil
102	Natural	Layer	Compact light blueish yellow clay		Natural clay
103	Ditch	Fill	Friable dark brownish grey clay silt	0.42m	Fill of modern field boundary/drainage ditch
104	Ditch	Cut		0.42m	Modern field boundary/drainage ditch

Trench 2

Length: 50m Width: 1.8m Orientation: East to west

Context summary:

Context	Feature	Context	Description	Height/ depth	Interpretation
200	Topsoil	Layer	Friable mid brownish grey silty clay loam	0.18m	Topsoil
201	Subsoil	Layer	Friable light brownish grey silty clay	0.06m	Subsoil
202	Natural	Layer	Compact light blueish yellow clay		Natural clay
203	Ditch	Fill	Firm light greyish yellow silty clay	0.3m	Backfill of modern ditch
204	Ditch	Fill	Soft dark greyish black silty sand	0.26m	Dumped backfill of modern ditch
205	Ditch	Cut		0.58m	Modern ditch cut, truncates earlier versions
206	Ditch	Fill	Soft mid brownish grey sandy clay	0.36m	Fill of hedge bed?
207	Ditch	Cut		0.36m	Bedding trench for hedgerow or robber cut for removal of hedge
208	Ditch	Fill	Firm mid yellowish grey silty clay	0.26m	Fill of earliest ditch cut
209	Ditch	Cut		0.26m	Earliest ditch cut visible

Trench 3

Length: 50m

Width: 1.8m

Orientation: North-east to south-west

Context summary:

Context	Feature	Context	Description	Height/ depth	Interpretation
300	Topsoil	Layer	Friable dark brownish grey silty clay loam	0.14m	Topsoil
301	Subsoil	Layer	Friable mid brownish grey silty clay	0.09m	Subsoil
302	Natural	Layer	Compact light blueish yellow clay		Natural clay

Trench 4

Length: 50m

Width: 1.8m

Orientation: East to west

Context summary:

Context	Feature	Context	Description	Height/ depth	Interpretation
400	Topsoil	Layer	Friable dark brownish grey silty clay loam	0.15m	Topsoil
401	Subsoil	Layer	Friable mid brownish grey silty clay	0.09m	Subsoil
402	Natural	Layer	Compact light blueish yellow clay		Natural Clay
403	Furrow	Fill	Friable mid greyish brown silty clay	0.06m	Fill of furrow
404	Furrow	Cut		0.06m	Remnant of furrow
405	Furrow	Fill	Friable mid greyish brown silty clay		Fill of furrow
406	Furrow	Cut			Remnant of furrow

Trench 5

Length: 50m Width: 1.8m Orientation: East to west

Context summary:

Context	Feature	Context	Description	Height/ depth	Interpretation
500	Topsoil	Layer	Friable mid brownish grey silty clay loam	0.11m	Topsoil
501	Subsoil	Layer	Friable light brownish grey silty clay	0.2m	Subsoil
502	Natural	Layer	Firm mid blueish yellow clay		Natural clay
503	Furrow	Fill	Friable light brownish grey silty clay	0.09m	Fill of furrow
504	Furrow	Cut		0.09m	Remanant of furrow

Trench 6

Length: 50m Width: 1.8m Orientation: North-west to south-east

Context summary:

Context	Feature	Context	Description	Height/ depth	Interpretation
600	Topsoil	Layer	Friable mid brownish grey silty clay loam	0.1m	Topsoil
601	Subsoil	Layer	Friable light brownish grey silty clay	0.15m	Subsoil
602	Natural	Layer	Firm mid blueish yellow clay		Natural clay
603	Furrow	Fill	Friable light brownish grey silty clay	0.09m	Fill of furrow
604	Furrow	Cut		0.09m	Furrow remnant
605	Furrow	Fill	Friable light brownish grey silty clay		Fill of furrow
606	Furrow	Cut			Furrow remnant

Appendix 2 Technical information

The archive

The archive consists of:

- 2 Context records AS1
- 3 Field progress reports AS2
- 1 Photographic records AS3
- 79 Digital photographs
- 1 Drawing number catalogues AS4
- 2 Scale drawings
- 6 Trench record sheets AS41
- 1 CD-Rom/DVDs
- 1 Copy of this report (bound hard copy)

The project archive is intended to be placed at:

Wiltshire Museum
41 Long Street,
Devizes, Wiltshire,
SN10 1NS
Telephone: 01380 727369
