



JOHN MOORE HERITAGE SERVICES

**P09/W0956 - LAND ADJACENT TO MARSH BRIDGE  
COTTAGES, DIDCOT, OXFORDSHIRE, OX11 8DL**

**ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS**

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## **Summary**

*An evaluation and subsequent watching brief was conducted by John Moore Heritage Services for the development of a residential site at Marsh Bridge Cottages, Didcot. Up to three phases of activity are suggested with some of them occurring in the prehistoric period. The presence of some pits suggests that at least one phase was not solely agricultural. The probability of the pottery being Bronze Age suggests that the known Bronze Age archaeology extends on to this site.*

## **1 INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1 Site Location (Figure 1)**

The site is located on the eastern side of Didcot, immediately south of the railway line and north of Sandringham Road (NGR SU 5355 8995). The underlying geology is shown as Gault Clay (Geological Survey of Great Britain. Henley-on-Thames Sheet 254. Solid and Drift Geology 1:50,000). The site lies at approximately 55m OD and was formerly an overgrown unused plot.

### **1.2 Planning Background**

Planning permission was sought for residential development of the site in May 2009. This application was withdrawn in October 2009 but South Oxfordshire District Council granted planning permission for a subsequent application for the erection of 14 residential units (P09/W0956). A condition of the planning permission required for a programme of archaeological work in accordance with a Written Scheme of Investigation. Oxfordshire County Archaeological Services (OCAS) prepared a *Brief* for the first stage of the programme of archaeological work, namely a field evaluation. Subsequent to the discovery of a number of ditch alignments a watching brief during the excavation of the house plot foundation trenches was carried out.

### **1.3 Archaeological Background**

The proposal site lay within an area of archaeological interest. 350m west of the site where an archaeological evaluation revealed numerous archaeological features comprising pits, postholes and ditches along with prehistoric pottery and struck flints dated to the Bronze Age (County Historic Environment Record number PRN 15646; NGR SU 5390 8989). Subsequent excavation revealed that the area had been used discontinuously from the Mesolithic period to the present day with settlement evidence being recorded from the late Mesolithic/Early Bronze Age through to the Late Bronze Age onwards. A Bronze Age or Iron Age field system was recorded in another evaluation to the NE of the proposal site (PRN 26129; SU 5390 9030). The proposal site has seen little modern development and any further aspects of these features surviving on the site could therefore be fairly well preserved.

The archaeological evaluation carried out by JMHS at the site revealed the presence of a north/south aligned ditch, which yielded prehistoric pottery and flint, and two parallel, undated, ditches oriented northeast/southwest. The north/south ditch was cut



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0 50 m

Figure 1. Site location

by a later, undated pit. At least two phases of activity, which appear to indicate the presence of prehistoric field-boundaries, were represented on-site.

The First Edition Ordnance Survey 1:2500 map of 1877 shows the site as an enclosed field, one of a row of small enclosures south of the railway.

Much of the above information has been obtained from the OCAS' *Brief*.

## **2 AIMS OF THE INVESTIGATION**

The aims of the investigation as laid out in the Written Scheme of Investigation were as follows:

### Evaluation

- To establish the presence/absence of archaeological remains within the site.
- To determine the extent, condition, nature, character, quality and date of any archaeological remains encountered.
- To assess the ecofactual and environmental potential of the archaeological features and deposits.

### Watching Brief

- To make a record of any significant remains revealed during the course of any operations that may disturb or destroy archaeological remains.
- To establish further the extent, condition, nature, character, quality and date of those archaeological remains already encountered during the evaluation.
- To assess the ecofactual and environmental potential of the archaeological features and deposits.
- In particular to establish whether features related to the known prehistoric settlement and agricultural use in the area extend into this development site.
- 

## **3 STRATEGY**

### **3.1 Research Design**

John Moore Heritage Services carried out the work to a Written Scheme of Investigation agreed with Oxfordshire County Archaeological Services (OCAS). Standard John Moore Heritage Services techniques were employed throughout, involving the completion of a written record for each deposit encountered, with scale plans and section drawings compiled where appropriate and possible.

The recording was carried out in accordance with the standards specified by the Institute for Archaeologists (1994).

### **3.2 Methodology**

In order to achieve the aims of the investigation during the evaluation phase it was agreed to excavate two trenches, each being 30m long by 1.6m wide (Fig. 1). Excavation took place with a 3 tonne excavator using a ditching bucket. Mechanical excavation took place down to the top of natural undisturbed geology. Deposits were sampled excavated by hand in order to meet the aims as defined above.

An archaeologist was present on site during the course of the development groundwork which had the potential to reveal or disturb archaeological remains. In this instance it monitored the excavation of foundation trenches required for the new buildings and the access road.

## **4 RESULTS Figure 2**

The results of both the evaluation and the watching brief are presented here. All features were assigned individual context numbers. Context numbers in ( ) show feature fills or deposits of material. The evaluation contexts were numbered 1/1, 2/1 etc. with the trench number preceding the context number and the watching brief 1, 2, etc.

The watching brief work commenced in the northeast corner of the site on Plots 1-4 and in an area of unstable geology. The foundation trenches on the eastern side were excavated to a depth of 2.5m and were subject to collapse. Large sheet-metal trench shutters had to be brought in to prevent the trenches collapsing. All observations therefore were made in the narrow foundation trenches under difficult conditions not entirely conducive to archaeological investigation. Even taking this into consideration a number of ditch alignments hinted at during the evaluation phase were confirmed and a number of new features discovered.

### **4.1 Ditches A – F Figure 2**

Feature 'A' was a ditch observed in Evaluation Trench 2 as 2/08 and aligned roughly northeast southwest. It was not visible in any of the other sections. It was 2.10m wide and 0.28m deep. It had 80-degree concave edges and a flat base (Fig. 3, Section 2.2). The fill was a moderate, mid grey silty clay, and contained 15% small gravel (2/09).

Feature 'B' was a ditch first observed in Evaluation Trench 1 as 1/04 (Fig. 3, Section 1.1) and also in Evaluation Trench 2 as 2/06 aligned north-northeast south-southwest and whose presence was confirmed when it was observed at the northwest corner of Plots 1-4. This latter section only picked up a heavily truncated version of what had been seen in the evaluation trenches as it was close to the driveway and under constant disturbance from construction traffic entering and leaving the site. In Trench 1 it was a U-shaped linear ditch. It had concave sides, and the top of the feature had 75-degree sloping sides on to a flat base. It was filled with (1/05), a compact mid brown silty clay containing 10-15% small gravel no larger than 0.02m. It was 0.37m

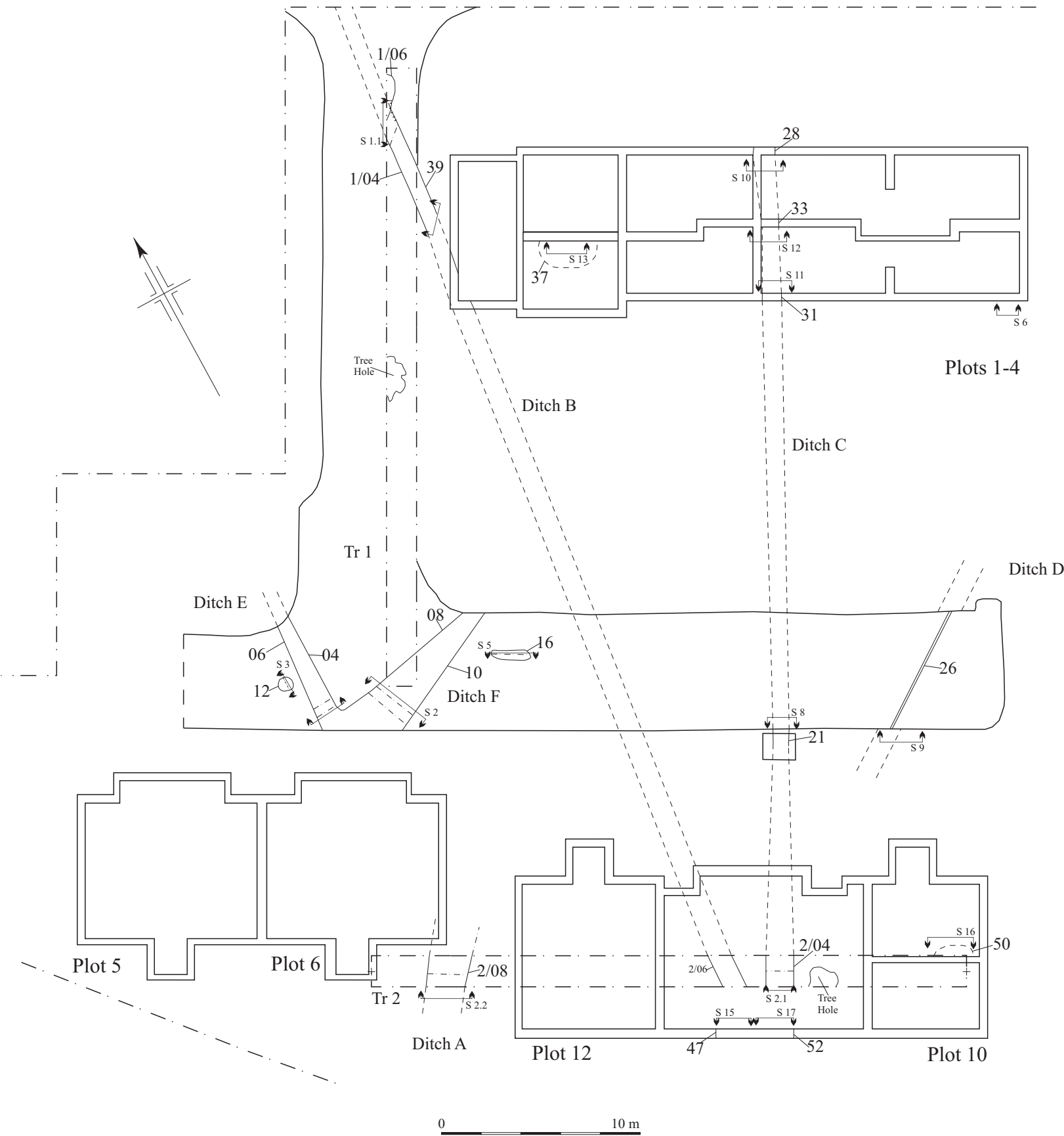


Figure 2. Plan



deep and 1m wide. Two sherds of prehistoric pottery and a flint were recovered from (1/05). It continued 1m wide in Trench 2 where it remained unexcavated.

Feature 'C' was a ditch first observed and recorded in Evaluation Trench 2 as 2/04 and aligned northeast southwest (Fig. 3, Section 2.1). Its alignment was confirmed in Sections 8, 10, 11 & 12 travelling from the south of the site in a straight line through the centre of Plots 1-4. In Section 8 it had been heavily truncated by the excavation of a storm drain manhole but its dark-grey silty clay fill (20) was visible. In sections 10-12 however, a clear profile was visible and with very little dimensional variation; in Section 1010 a primary silting (29) could be observed composed of a dark grey silty-clay not present in the other sections which revealed just one fill. The ditch was 1m wide and survived 0.2m deep at the southwest end (2/04), 0.6m wide and 0.15m deep in Section 8, context 21; 1.2m wide and 0.66m deep in Section 11, context 31; 0.97m deep and 0.43m deep in Section 12, context 33; and 1.14m wide and 0.47m deep in Section 10, context 28. The ditch had sides at 60<sup>0</sup> from the horizontal and a slightly rounded base. The majority of the fill was a mid brown-grey silty clay containing 15% small gravel no larger than 0.02m (2/05, 27, 30, & 32). The ditch also was seen at the southwest extent of the site (Fig. 3, Section 17) where 52 was 1.7m wide and 0.53m deep. Two flints were found in (2/05).

Feature 'D' was a ditch observed in Section 9 (Fig. 3) and in plan when the soil level was reduced to create the driveway for the house (only the extreme base was planned due to the depth of reduction). The ditch was aligned northeast-southwest and may have been recut. The later cut 26 contained the primary silt (25), a mid grey silty clay which appeared to result from erosion of the primary silt (53) of the earlier cut. Above the primary fill was a secondary fill of dark grey-brown silty clay (23) which was overlaid by dark brown-grey silty clay (22). The profile was 60<sup>0</sup> on the northwest side and mostly 45<sup>0</sup> on the other side. The ditch was 1.4m wide and 0.6m deep. The original cut of the ditch 24 was 1.72m wide and 0.28m deep with a slightly rounded base.

At the southwest extremity of the site three ditches probably intersected (Fig. 3, Section 15). The recut of ditch D is probably context 47 which was 1.2m wide and 0.88m deep. This contained three fills: mid brown-green silty clay (46), overlaid by light grey (whitish) redeposited Gault Clay (42), overlaid by dark brown-grey silty clay (40). This was cut into another ditch 45 that could have been the remains of two ditches that could be Feature B and the primary cut of ditch D. The feature was 2.2m wide, 0.55m deep and was filled by dark brown silty clay (44) in its upper fill. The primary fill (41) was mid grey silty clay.

Feature E was a pair of shallow ditches aligned northeast southwest and recorded when the soil level was reduced for the driveway on the western side of the site. Their relationship to each other and to paired ditch Feature F is unknown as they were too heavily truncated. Ditches 4 and 6 were probably a recut of the original (Fig. 3, Section 1). Ditch 4, 0.5m wide, 0.08m deep had a flat U-shape while ditch 6 was 0.4m wide, 0.09m deep and of a similar profile. Both were filled with dark brown-grey silty clay (3 & 5).

At right angles Feature F was a pair of shallow ditches aligned roughly northeast southwest which were discovered when the soil level was reduced for the driveway.

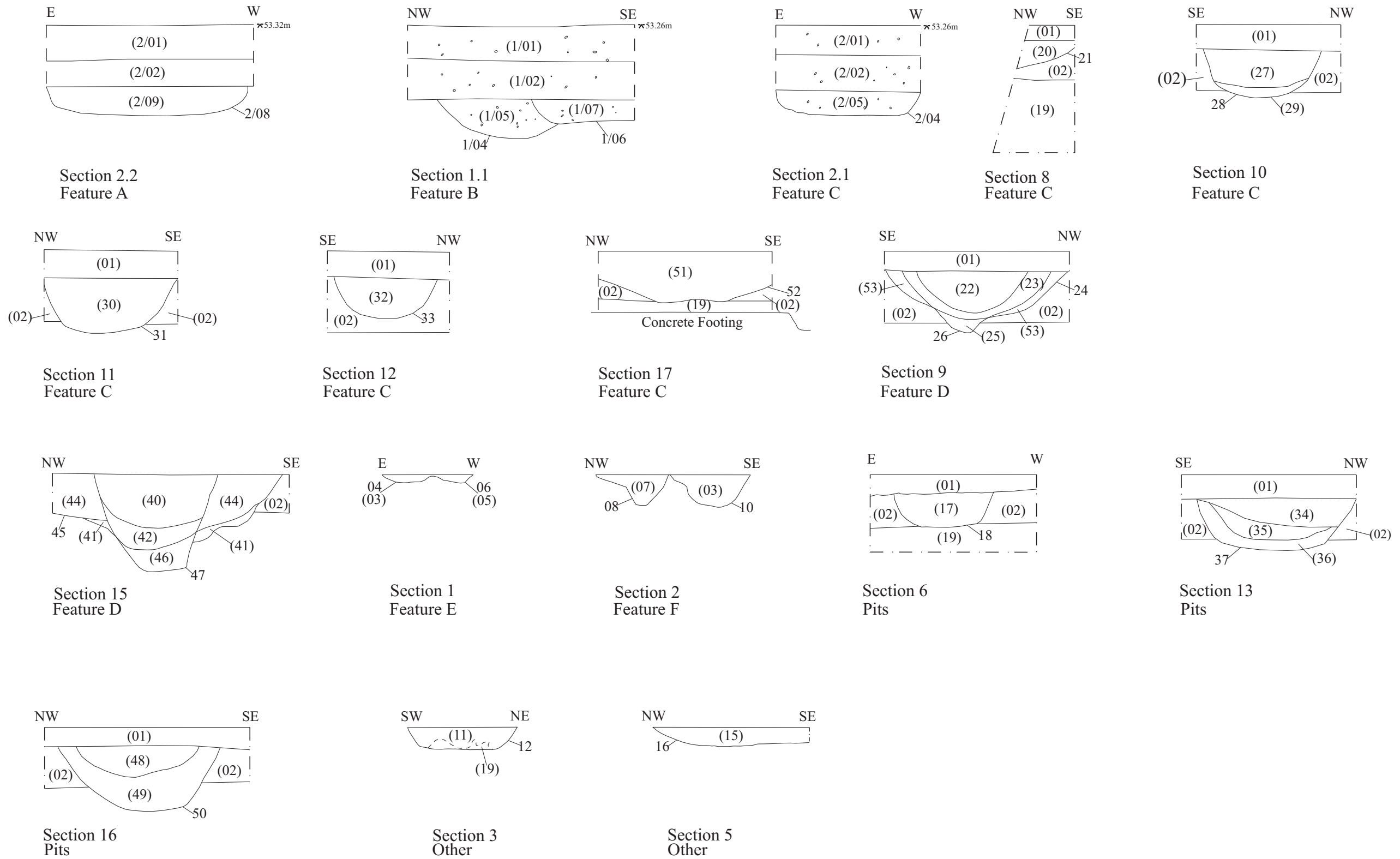


Figure 3. Sections

Ditch 8 was 0.69m wide, 0.31 deep and had sides at 45<sup>0</sup> with a flat base. The other ditch 10 was 0.82m wide, 0.32 and had U-shaped profile (Fig. 3, Section 2). Both were filled with mid brown-grey silty clay (7 & 9).

## **4.2 Pits & Other Features**

A pit 37 was observed in Section 13 (Fig. 3) in the western area of Plots 1-4. It was 1.56m wide in section and 0.51m deep. The lowest fill (36) was dark grey-black silty clay with 40% charcoal overlaid by mid brown-yellow silty clay (35). This was covered by mid grey-brown silty clay (34).

The edge of a further pit was observed in Section 16 (Fig. 3) in Plot 10. This pit 50 was seen in section and was 1.62m wide and 0.64m deep. The profile was U-shaped. The primary fill was dark grey-black silty clay (49) and the final filling was dark brown-grey silty clay (48). Pit 18 towards the southwest corner of Plots 1-4 was seen in section. It was 0.49m wide and 0.37m deep with sides of 75<sup>0</sup> degrees and a rounded base (Fig. 3, Section 6). The fill (17) was brown-grey silty clay. Ditch B was cut by pit 1/6, an oval shaped pit. It had 85<sup>0</sup> sides and a flat base. It was filled with (1/07), a compact dark brown-grey silty clay. It was 0.22m deep and 2.30m wide (Fig. 3, Section 1.1).

A recent tree-planting pit 12 was discovered adjacent to Feature E (Fig. 3, Section 3). A possible tree-throw or area of bioturbation 16 was encountered east of Feature F in the driveway (Fig. 3, Section 5).

The features were cut into subsoil (2) which was an interface between the topsoil (1) and the Gault Clay (19).

## **5 FINDS**

### **5.1 Pottery by Frances Raymond**

Two heavily abraded sherds of prehistoric pottery (weighing 9g.) came from the fill of Ditch B 1/05, where their poor condition would suggest that they may have been residual. Both are wall fragments providing no evidence for vessel form. One is tempered with common quantities of coarse crushed burnt flint (up to 5mm.); a fabric used most commonly during the middle and late Bronze Age. The other is in a sandy ware containing moderate amounts of medium grade quartzite (up to 3mm.), which might be of contemporary or later date.

### **5.2 Ceramic building material**

Pressed in the top of natural (1/03) were three fragments of roof tile and one fragment of brick.

### **5.3 Flint by Roy Entwistle**

A small group of flint consisting of three un-patinated, tertiary flakes (weighing 9 grams) was recovered from the fill of Ditches B and C (contexts 1/05 and 2/05). The

surviving cortex suggests that the flint was derived from river gravels, or other secondary deposits.

Such a small assemblage offers little scope for interpretation and there are no technological traits that might indicate a particular period. Indeed, as suggested for the pottery, there is a possibility that the flint is residual.

#### **5.4 Animal bone**

Six fragment of animal bone was recovered from Ditch B fill (1/05). The bone fragments are in very poor condition and it is not possible to identify them.

#### **5.5 Environmental Remains**

No environmental samples were taken.

### **6 DISCUSSION**

The archaeological work has established that the site was used in the prehistoric period. That prehistoric finds were only recovered from the fills of features and not from the overburden on the site strongly suggests that at least Ditches B and C are prehistoric and that the finds are not residual.

The alignment of the ditches and the intercutting suggest more than one phase and perhaps up to three phases of activity on the site with Ditch D apparently the latest. Ditch A is parallel and may be part of the same system. While Ditch F is relatively parallel, the form is not the same as the others and it may not be contemporary.

Whether the ditches are field boundaries or enclosure ditches is unknown. The presence of four pits suggests that activity other than just agricultural practice was being carried out on the site. It is possible that some ditches belong to a field system while others form enclosures perhaps associated with settlement. The nature of the fabric of the pottery being similar to Bronze Age material suggests that the known Bronze Age activity in the area extends this far. Extensive Bronze Age settlement and associated field systems are known on the south side of Reading (Moore & Jennings 1992).

### **7 ARCHIVE**

#### **Archive Contents**

The archive consists of the following:

##### Paper record

The project brief

Written scheme of investigation

The project report

The primary site record

The archive currently is maintained by John Moore Heritage Services and will be transferred to the County Museums' Store.

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