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Lea Farm, Hurst Berkshire

Archaeological Evaluation Report



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LEA FARM, HURST. BERKSHIRE
ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION 1987

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A Report prepared by
The Trust for Wessex Archaeology



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Introduction

In 1986 a planning application was submitted to the local authorities for permission to extract sand and gravel from an area of approximately 52.8 hectares at Lea Farm, Hurst (SU787334). Although evidence of archaeological activity is not recorded for much of the current application area, one field does contain archaeological features visible on aerial photographs and three of the northern fields have vestigial traces of ridge and furrow, one additionally containing an area of earthworks. The latter lies south east of the site of the former Whistley Court Mansion, now demolished, which is thought to have been built on a site of possible Saxon origin (this lies just outside the current application area). Further cropmark evidence on aerial photographs and indications of mesolithic activity have been recorded in areas immediately to the north and east, for which planning permission already exists. In accordance with Berkshire County Council's Minerals Local Plan and policy EN26 of the draft Replacement Structure Plan 1986 which requires evaluation of application sites before determination, the Trust For Wessex Archaeology carried out evaluation work on behalf of the applicants, the Summerlease Gravel Co. Ltd., in March and April 1987.

The site (Figs.1 and ²3)

The River Loddon forms part of the western boundary to the site, which comprises thirteen fields in all. The area is generally flat and low-lying, at about 37m.OD., and is interrupted by many drains and

ponds. The underlying drift geology is recorded as river gravel with an area of alluvium lying just beyond the south western boundary of the site. Minor undulations occur in several fields, some of which may represent the courses of former river channels or ponds (fields 9 and 12). Other irregularities appear to be the result of field boundary changes and superceded drainage channels (fields 2, 7, 8 and 10), some of which are probably related to the ridge and furrow in fields 7, 8 and 10 and may drain into the slightly lower lying central area in field 9. The earthworks (field 7) consist of a rectangular platform and a series of low parallel banks; further, probably related, banks occur in the field immediately to the west, outside the current application area. All the fields are presently under pasture.

Strategy and method (Fig. 2)

The evaluation aimed firstly to investigate the suggested areas of archaeological potential, that is the cropmark and earthwork areas and also along the eastern site boundary where cropmarks are known to exist just outside the site; secondly to examine other parts of the application area as far as possible for signs of archaeological activity, bearing in mind the possibility that the river may have had some influence on the position of any such activity.

Because of the size of the area to be examined and the limited time available most of the trenches were opened by machine, after which further excavation of some features was done by hand. The machining was done in two stages, in the southern and then the northern halves of the area. This meant that extra trenches could be dug in promising areas in the southern part of the site during the second phase of machining. Small trenches were also excavated by hand in selected areas. Fifty one

trenches were dug altogether, thirty seven by machine and fourteen by hand, although three of the latter were extended by machine later on. The machine trenches ranged in length from 4.5 - 59.8m. and were all of single bucket width (1.90m.); the hand dug trenches each averaged 4 square metres. Two of the trenches (AJ and AK), dug in unsuccessful attempts to define the extent of features found nearby, were backfilled immediately without being recorded. A third trench (AP), also unsuccessful in locating the site of a possible cropmark, was similarly backfilled straight away, as was a fourth (AF), where the soil was extremely wet and unstable. Gravel was reached in at least part of thirty seven of the forty seven recorded trenches. Water was present and a problem in almost all of the trenches. Altogether about 1,546m² was opened, c.0.29% of the whole application area.

Results

Twenty nine of the trenches (A-D, F, G, K, L, N, P, R-W, Z, AB, AE, AF, AJ, AK, AP, AU, AW, AZ BA-BC) contained no evidence of archaeological features, although nine of them (B, C, G, P, U-W, Z, AE) did produce some finds (from the topsoil in trenches U and AE, from the subsoil in C, V, W and Z and unstratified in B, G and P) including five pieces of knapped flint (B, C, G, P) and three sherds of Roman pottery (Z, AE), some burnt flint, a few tile fragments and pieces of animal bone. Surface finds included four pieces of knapped flint (from field 4, which had only recently been sown) and three sherds of Roman pottery (field 7).

Soil profiles were similar in most of these trenches, and indeed for almost all of the trenches across the whole site, although the depth of the overburden above gravel did vary considerably. Dark brown - dark greyish brown clay or sometimes sandy loam topsoil (0.13-0.25m. deep)

overlay predominantly yellowish brown silty or sandy clays (0.16-0.80m.) above gravel. Exceptions to this general pattern were trenches A,B and V in field 1 nearest to the river. The top 0.75m. of trench A showed a recent sequence of redeposited material dredged from the river; this lay above at least 1.05m. of sandy clay which contained an increasing amount of organic material with depth, until it was almost pure peat. Trench B was similar, although less deep and no organic deposit was reached. Trench V, dug by hand to a depth of c.1.20m., contained in the lowest 0.30m. a slightly organic blue clay not seen elsewhere on the site. These trenches suggest that the course of the Loddon may previously have extended further east than it does at present.

The remaining twenty two trenches in which features were recorded (Fig.2) fall into various groups and concentrations of archaeological activity. The simplest group to deal with are those trenches which contained a single feature which did not extend, or was not traced, far beyond the trench in which it was first found. Trenches E,H and Y,M,AD,AG and AH are in this first category.

In trench E (field 1) topsoil and subsoil c.0.45m. deep sealed a ditch crossing the trench almost directly east - west. The ditch, c.0.45m. in depth, was cut down to the top of the gravel in part although not consistently (the surface of the gravel in trench E undulated considerably). The ditch was not found in trench AJ (field 2) c. 10m. to the east of trench E and at the far side of an existing drainage ditch. Six knapped flints and some burnt flint were recovered from this ditch.

Trench H (field 2), aligned north west - south east, clipped the north eastern edge of a slight positive lynchet following almost the

same alignment. It subsequently became apparent that the machine trench coincided with a ditch running parallel to and on the north east side of the lynchet, and a second trench, Y, was dug by hand at right angles to and c.1m. south east of trench H. The ditch appeared to be sealed by c.0.45m. of topsoil and subsoil and was cut through the underlying yellowish brown clay loam just as far as a sandy lens at the top of the gravel. No finds were recovered from this ditch. The tithe map of 1842 and John Dalby's map of the manors of Hurst and Hinton dated 1723 both show a field boundary in approximately the position of this ditch and lynchet.

In trench M (field 3) a possible pit, 0.80m. wide and 0.40m. deep, sealed only by topsoil was recorded. Gravel was 1.05m. below ground surface. One sherd of Roman pottery and one knapped flint were recovered from this feature. The fill also contained a noticeable quantity of small, scattered charcoal fragments. No other features were seen, but excavation was restricted by the presence of a large drainage ditch and a water pipe at either side of the trench.

Trench AG (field 10), on a slight rise beside a large ditch running along the eastern site boundary, contained a minimum of 0.50m. of topsoil and subsoil sealing the top of an apparent bank less than 0.30m. high (as far as was seen) and of unknown width, which followed the line of the present ditch. The edge of the bank was difficult to see and an attempt to examine it further in a second, machine dug trench nearby (BC) was inconclusive. A large flint scraper and some burnt flint were recovered from a layer sealing the base of this bank and one sherd of possible Bronze Age pottery and further burnt flint were found in the

sandy clay beneath it. Gravel was not reached in trench AG, although it was at 0.90m. below ground surface in trench BC.

Trench AH (field 10) was on a low mound in the centre of an area of ridge and furrow aligned east - west, the focus of a similarly aligned bank and ditch and of a much smaller bank running almost at right angles. The trench was started by hand and expanded later by machine. Beneath 0.53m. of topsoil and subsoil a narrow ditch apparently cut down just to the top of the gravel (c.0.85m. below ground surface) curved gently from west north west - east. There was not enough time to excavate any of the ditch fill by hand, although four knapped flints, some burnt flint, tile fragments and one sherd of mediaeval pottery were recovered from the subsoil in the hand dug section of AH.

Trench AD (field 8) was excavated by hand across a shallow possible ditch parallel to and c.5m. west of the large eastern boundary ditch. The trench section showed only a topsoil-filled depression cutting barely 0.08m. into the underlying subsoil and was probably the result of relatively recent drainage work.

Most of the remaining trenches contained several features, a number of which occurred in more than one trench.

Sections of a probably continuous small ditch running north - south were recorded in trenches Q, AQ and AR (field 13); the ditch was only excavated in trench Q. AR also contained part of another ditch, although it was not possible to excavate this in the time available. Both ditches were sealed by topsoil and subsoil between 0.35m. (AR) and 0.72m. (Q) deep. The ditch was 0.27m. deep where excavated, cut to within a few centimetres of the top of the gravel.

Trenches AK-AN (field 2) were placed with the aim of intercepting features visible on an aerial photograph. Several ditches were located, some of which were not apparent on the photograph and others, which may be associated with the cropmark group, were found in trenches J and AX to the south and east of AK-AN (Fig.³).

Five ditches were recorded in AL, all on similar north west - south east alignments. Three were recorded in AM, the next trench to the south east, but these were not excavated and it was not possible to establish direct links between the trenches with absolute certainty. All of the ditches in both trenches were only sealed by topsoil; three of the AL ditches were cut through the subsoil well into the gravel and probably corresponded with the three north west - south east cropmark ditches. The remaining two ditches in AL were shallow, cut only as far as the top of the gravel.

The ditch at the south western end of AL (a cropmark ditch, only examined in this trench) was 0.79m. deep. A few pieces of burnt flint but no datable finds were recovered from the fill. Twenty nine metres north eastward along the trench was the the second ditch (0.68m. deep) which probably formed part of the cropmark inner enclosure. No finds were recovered from this ditch. It may have crossed into trench AM, although the possible continuation there (from which came two sherds of Roman pottery) appeared to be on a slightly different alignment. Almost nine metres further along trench AL the first of two shallow ditches (0.47m. deep) cut across the south western edge of the largest cropmark ditch (1.22m. deep, at least 3.30m. wide at the top). The large ditch probably continued into trench AM; the smaller one may also have continued in that trench, having crossed to the north eastern side of the

larger ditch. No datable finds were recovered from the later ditch in either AL or AM. Fifty eight sherds of possible late iron age - early Roman pottery, some fired clay, tile fragments, burnt flint, two knapped flints and some animal bone were recovered from the earlier ditch in trench AL. The second shallow ditch (0.36m. deep), the last one in AL, was about five and a half metres north of the last pair. It did not appear to continue into trench AM. One sherd of probable Roman pottery, some fired clay and burnt flint were found in the small amount of fill left after machining.

The ditch running roughly at a right angle to and joining the north western ends of the three north west - south east cropmark ditches visible on the aerial photograph was not found in trench AK or the north western extension of AL. Further investigation in this area was made impossible by water entering the trenches very rapidly. In trench AN, about thirty seven metres south east of AM, two ditches were recorded but not excavated, their fills having been almost entirely removed by machine. Both were on north west - south east alignments (although not quite parallel), were sealed only by topsoil and cut (0.47m. and 0.51m. deep) through subsoil almost to the top of gravel. A single sherd of Roman pottery was found in one section of the northern ditch. It is unlikely, given their alignments, but just possible, that these ditches may have been the two shallow ditches of AL. It seems more probable that the northern ditch may have continued south eastwards to AX, although there and in trench J all features were sealed by c.0.25m. of brown sandy loam beneath the topsoil. This deposit was not recorded elsewhere and overlay the more usual yellowish brown sandy clay above gravel.

The northern one of the two larger ditches crossing AX was of similar depth (0.47m.) to those in AN; the other was deeper (0.80m.); both cut the gravel. No datable finds were recovered from the northern ditch, but ninety sherds of early Roman pottery, four knapped flints and some burnt flint were found in the southern one. At the north eastern end of AX (and in the hand dug trench, X, from which AX was expanded) was a shallow ditch or gully which terminated just short of the south eastern side of the trench. From this came six sherds of Romano-British pottery, some burnt flint and pieces of daub and fired clay.

Trench J, almost at a right angle to AX, had a small ditch and another very shallow linear feature running from south west - north east at its south eastern end. The ditch (0.33m. deep) had been partially interrupted by a later disturbance and may itself have cut an earlier pit. It contained one very small sherd of Roman pottery, one knapped flint and some burnt flint. The other feature was only 0.10m. deep and produced no finds. South east of the ditch was a single possible post hole (0.11m. deep and 0.28m. in diameter) which contained some burnt flint. Only the ditch was cut as far as the gravel. Fields 5 and 9 were both lower-lying than the north east corner of field 2 where these features occurred and it seems unlikely that they extended beyond its boundaries.

Three of the trenches in field 5 did contain features, however. In trench AA, a hand dug trench, c.0.37m. of topsoil and underlying dark brown - brownish grey clay loam sealed a north west - south east aligned ditch. The ditch (0.42m. deep) was cut through sandy clay to the top of the gravel; it contained no finds.

In trench AS two ditches, again running from north west - south east, were sectioned. Both were sealed by 0.30-0.50m. of topsoil and light yellowish brown clay loam. The smaller ditch (0.46m. deep) cut across the north eastern edge of a much larger V-shaped ditch with quite steeply sloping sides (at least 1.20m. deep and 4.50m. wide) which cut deeply into the sandy gravel. The small ditch may have been a continuation of the ditch in AA, although a considerable amount of burnt flint was recovered from the ditch fill in AS. Large quantities of burnt flint were recovered from the bigger ditch.

The large ditch continued in trench AT, sixty metres north east of AS, where it was slightly deeper (1.38m.). The ditch was cut at its north western side by a small pit (0.26m deep, 0.60m. wide), from which came three sherds of what may be Bronze Age pottery and a little burnt flint. The ditch itself contained one other sherd of possible Bronze Age pottery, five knapped flints and much burnt flint. East of the ditch, in the eastern extension of AT, an undulating layer of greyish brown sandy clay (0.04m-0.24m thick) lay beneath 0.50m. of topsoil and subsoil and above yellowish brown silty clay; this deposit contained two knapped flints and some burnt flint.

At the eastern side of the application area trench AY (field 8) contained a number of features of which only some of the latest were sampled in the last few days of the evaluation (Fig. ⁴5). The features were apparently concentrated in area of yellowish brown - light olive gravelly clay about twenty three metres long toward the southern end of the trench. The underlying gravel was exposed at either side of this area of clay. All were sealed by 0.40m.- 0.50m. of topsoil and subsoil. Three features only were excavated. The first, from which no finds were

recovered, was an irregular shallow scoop (0.26m. deep) at the western side of the trench and appeared to be cut down through the gravelly clay to the top of the gravel. The second feature was a recut of an earlier ditch (0.72m. deep, 2.60m. wide at the top) running east - west, probably a continuation of one of the cropmark features immediately outside the current application area. It contained over three hundred sherds of mediaeval pottery ranging from late C12th. through to C15th., tile fragments, animal bone and some burnt flint. Lastly a pit (1.15m. deep, 2.37m. wide) was sectioned at the eastern side of the trench, from which three sherds of mediaeval pottery and some animal bone were recovered. The unexcavated features included possible post holes, a small and apparently shallow linear feature cut by the pit and the earlier ditch.

Trench BD, 13m. west of AY, did not show such a concentration of features. Two east - west ditches (both at least 0.30m deep) and a possible post hole (0.15m. deep) were visible in section at the northern end of the trench, sealed by c.0.45m. of topsoil and subsoil. These were not excavated and no finds were recovered. A single sherd of mediaeval pottery was found at the base of the subsoil. The ditches did not appear to extend eastwards to AY, nor was the east - west ditch of AY present in BD.

The earthworks

The remaining two trenches, AC and AV, were dug in the area of earthworks in field 7 to try and establish their function and date. The main feature is a rectangular platform, c51m.x15m., the long axis from west north west - east south east, in the north west corner of the field. The platform is about 0.23m. higher than the general level of the

field, although this increases slightly at the western end of the platform (against the field boundary). The platform's height is accentuated by a shallow ditch 3m. wide around its eastern end. At either side of the western end of the platform the ditch is replaced by a gentle slope. A small kidney-shaped pond just cuts into the southern edge of the platform. A shallow scoop is visible in the northern half of the platform which leads out into a series of shallow banks and ditches parallel to its long axis. There are three banks in all, 3, 5 and 13m. wide, the intervening ditches being 6, 6 and 7m. respectively. A north north east - south south east ditch running on from the platform boundary ditch defines the eastward extent of the banks and ditches. Their northern limit is the drainage ditch forming the present field boundary, the far side of which has a vertical brick face, possibly the remains of a ha-ha which may once have enclosed the gardens of Whistley Court Mansion. In the next field westwards (outside the current application area) there is no obvious sign of the platform continuing, although traces of the northernmost bank and ditch are visible. Other banks (on one of which stands an avenue of trees) and a ditch run at a right angle down the field as far as Lodge Wood. The avenue is most probably that mentioned in the Victoria County History, again part of Whistley Court Mansion gardens. (Lodge Wood is shown with formal walks and paths in several early maps).

Trench AC was dug by hand on the north eastern end of the platform. Topsoil overlay 0.45-0.55m. of brown - yellowish brown clay containing numerous pieces of chalk, from the lowest 0.25m. of which layer were recovered four sherds of post mediaeval pottery, two iron nails, pieces

of tile, brick and glass, four knapped flints and some burnt flint. Gravel was reached between 0.57- 0.67m. below the surface.

Trench AV, a machine dug trench, ran south east from the edge of the platform across the boundary ditch. The ditch, sealed by topsoil, was only 0.20m. deep; no finds were recovered from it although a piece of modern bottle glass and part of a brick were found during machining.

The vestigial ridge and furrow present across most of field 7 appeared to have been interrupted by the insertion of the earthworks although this was not conclusively proved during the evaluation. From the finds produced during the excavation of AC and AV it would appear that the platform and associated earthworks may be of relatively recent origin, probably associated with Whistley Court Mansion (the date of the last building on the site is not known, but is believed to be C17th).

The ridge and furrow

Remnants of ridge and furrow (4.30m. from furrow to furrow) occur across fields 7, 8 and 10. Three different alignments are visible; east - west in field 10 and the southern part of field 8, west north west - east south east in the northern part of field 8 and north north east - south south west in field 7. A number of related banks and ditches also survive, probably former field boundaries; a shallow and indistinct ditch separates the different alignments in field 8. A large ditch runs westward from the eastern boundary of field 7, apparently from a slightly lower-lying, marshy part of field 8; shortly after entering field 7 the ditch turns south toward the lowest (and wettest) central part of the site in field 9. The marshy area of field 8 is partially defined by a very slight bank and does not appear to contain any traces of ridge and furrow. The ridge and furrow isolated in the corner of

field 7 by this ditch follows the same alignment as the rest of that field .

Discussion

This evaluation has demonstrated that evidence of archaeological activity survives in some density in a number of parts of the site. Previous archaeological knowledge of the area was limited to the observation of cropmarks in field 2 and the earthworks in fields 7, 8 and 10. The possibility of features outside the eastern boundary extending into the application area, or of sites being found similar to those suspected nearby or known from similar locations (such as the possible mesolithic site to the north of the application area) was considered and has proved useful. The relative absence of archaeology in some parts of the site may only reflect the small sample of the whole area which was investigated (less than 1%).

Fifty eight knapped flints were recovered from the whole site, the largest numbers from any one trench being nine from trench AX and eight from trench AT (although the number of finds may reflect more on the difficult conditions experienced during excavation than the number of finds actually present). The earliest are probably mesolithic although many of them are not readily datable. Contemporary features were difficult to find and although the flints were not often recovered from identified features, the possibility of their presence somewhere on the site still remains.

The large ditch in field 5, although its position was not signalled on aerial photographs, is well preserved, as is the smaller one; their extent is not known. The large ditch may be Bronze Age in date, although

none of the four sherds recovered from this trench was diagnostic and it cannot therefore be securely dated. The smaller ditches remain undated.

The trenches at the north eastern end of field 2 showed a higher density and greater degree of complexity of features than was shown on the aerial photograph. Analysis of the pottery suggests occupation from the late iron age into the early Roman period. Although the area of activity was not clearly defined it is unlikely that it extended far beyond the area of the machine trenches.

The mediaeval (and quite possibly earlier) features in field 8 also show both high density and complexity, although perhaps over a relatively small area. The pottery from the few excavated features covers a relatively wide date range (late C12th. - C15th.) but further refinement might be achieved by further investigation.

The ridge and furrow, although as yet undated, may be mediaeval and quite possibly contemporary with the activity on the eastern boundary. The earthworks area remains enigmatic, although most probably related to the relatively late development of Whistley Court Mansion.

Preservation generally appears good even of quite shallow features and the high water table should mean that organic material (including environmental evidence) should survive in almost all parts of the site.

If the application is approved it seems clear from the work so far carried out that preservation or further investigation of some parts of the site should be considered.

Acknowledgments

The landowner, Mr. Lee, kindly allowed access to the land and tolerated the following disturbance. Thanks are due to the site assistants who put up with being very wet and uncomfortable for much of

their time at Lea Farm without becoming mutinous. Documentary research was carried out by Lorraine Mephram. Julie Lancley processed and analysed the finds. The drawings were done by Karen Holt and this report was produced in the offices of the Trust For Wessex Archaeology. It is hoped that, subject to negotiation, the records and finds will be deposited in Reading Museum.

C.A. Farwell. May 1987.

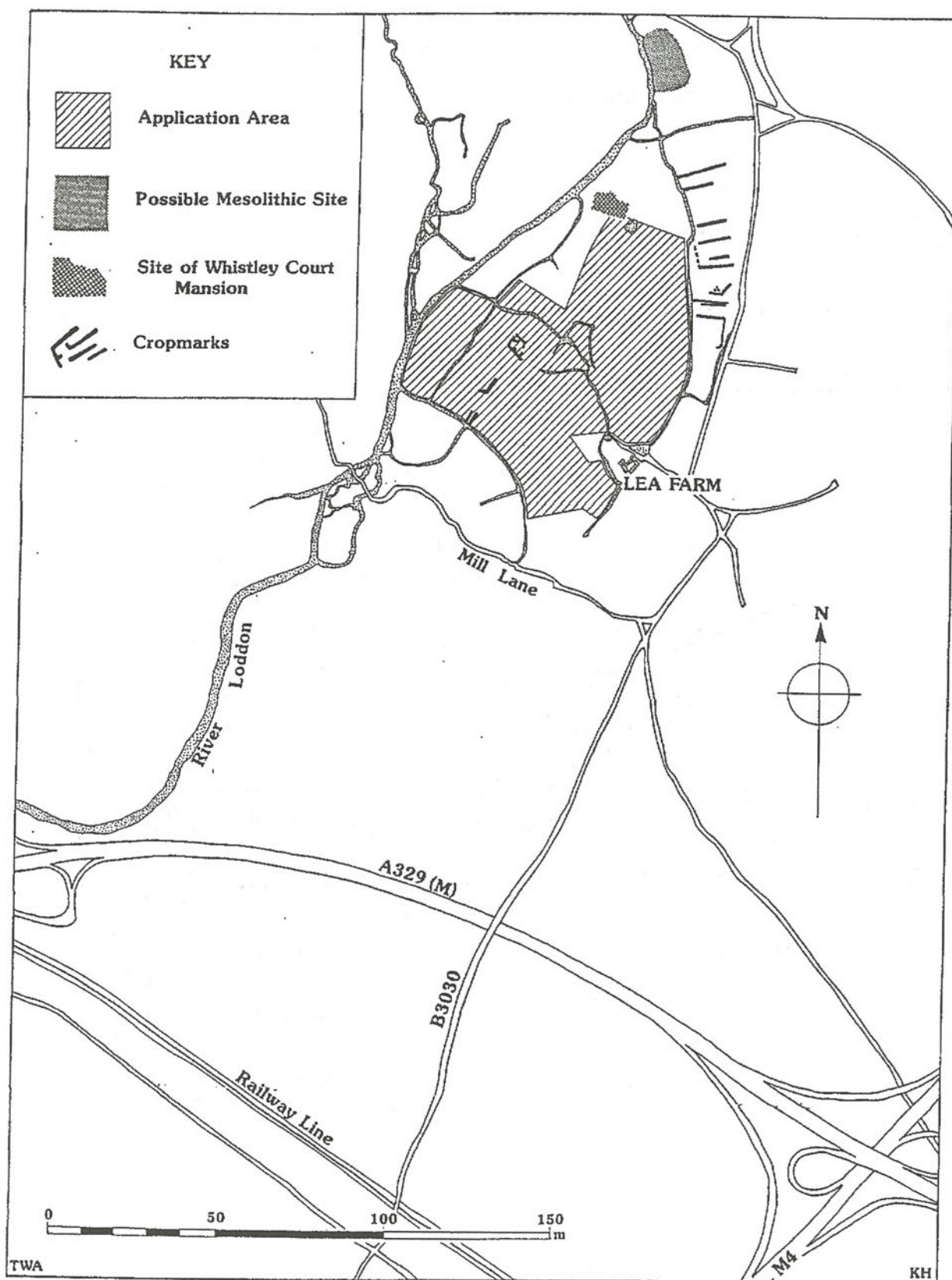


Fig 1. Site location.

Trench Location Plan

KEY



Trenches with Archaeological features



Application Area



Cropmarks

0 150 300 450 m

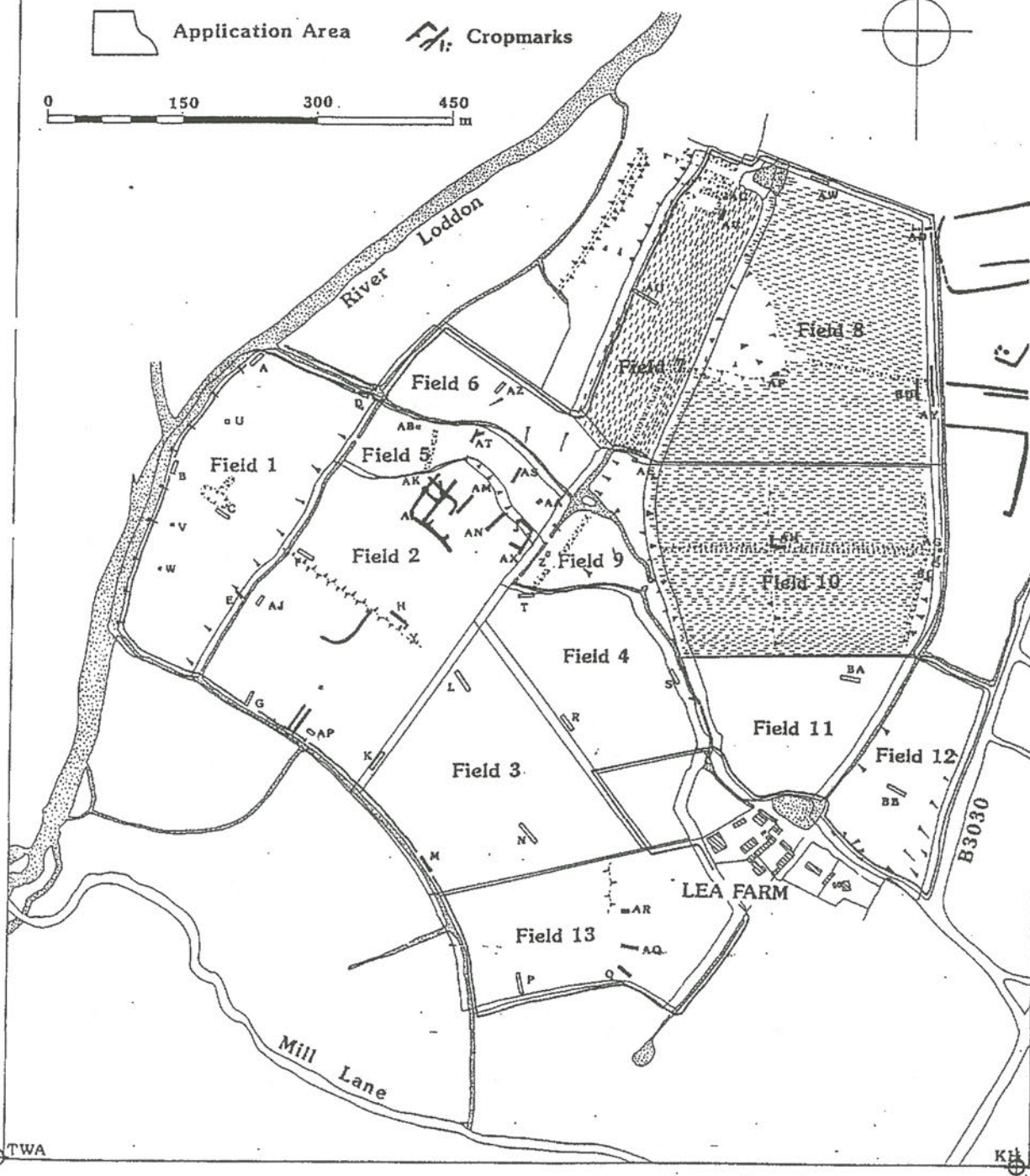
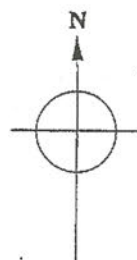


Fig 2.
Overlay to Fig 2 showing earthwork and cropmark features.

 Cropmarks



Overlay to Fig 2 showing earthwork and cropmark features.

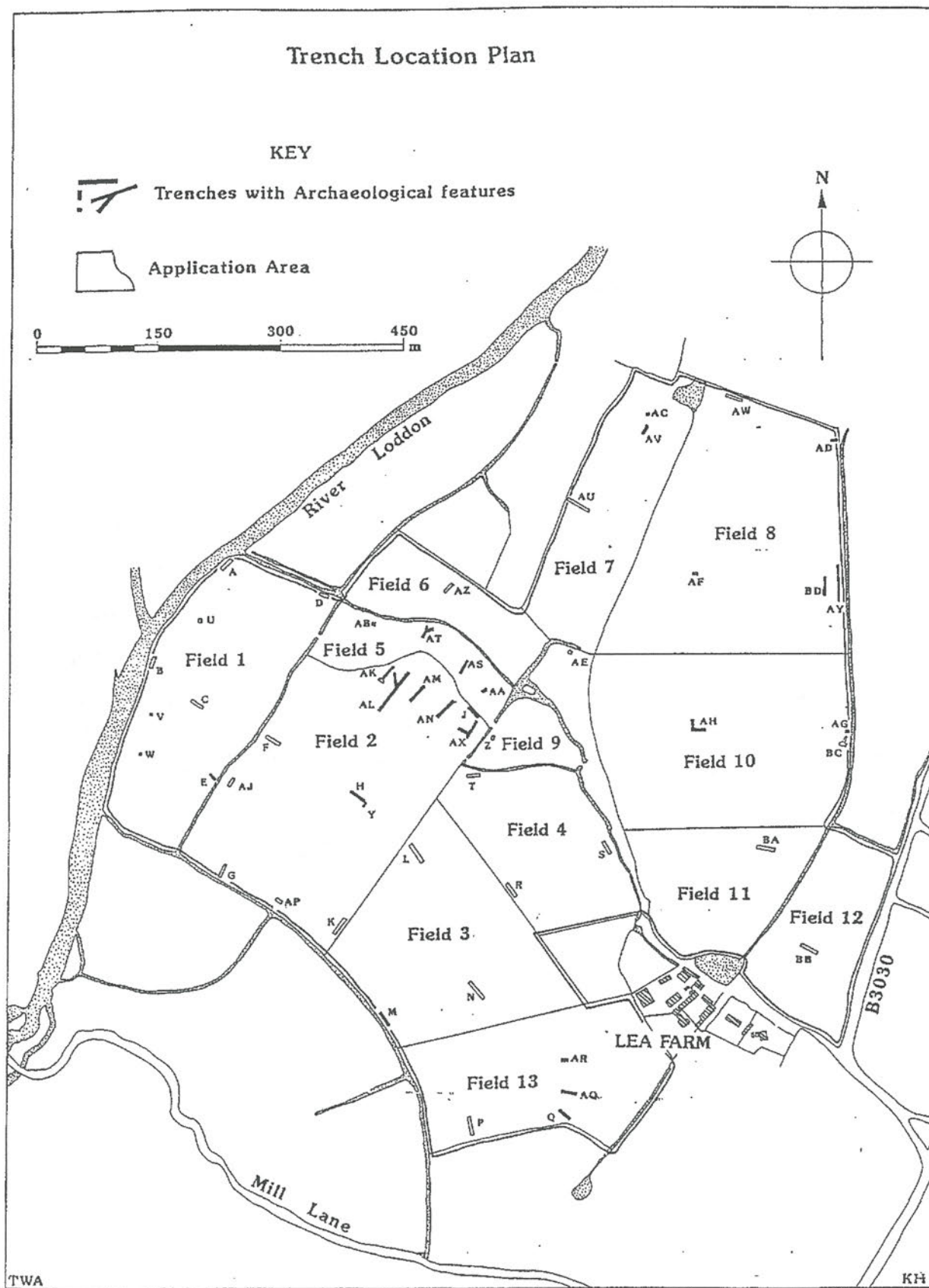


Fig 2.

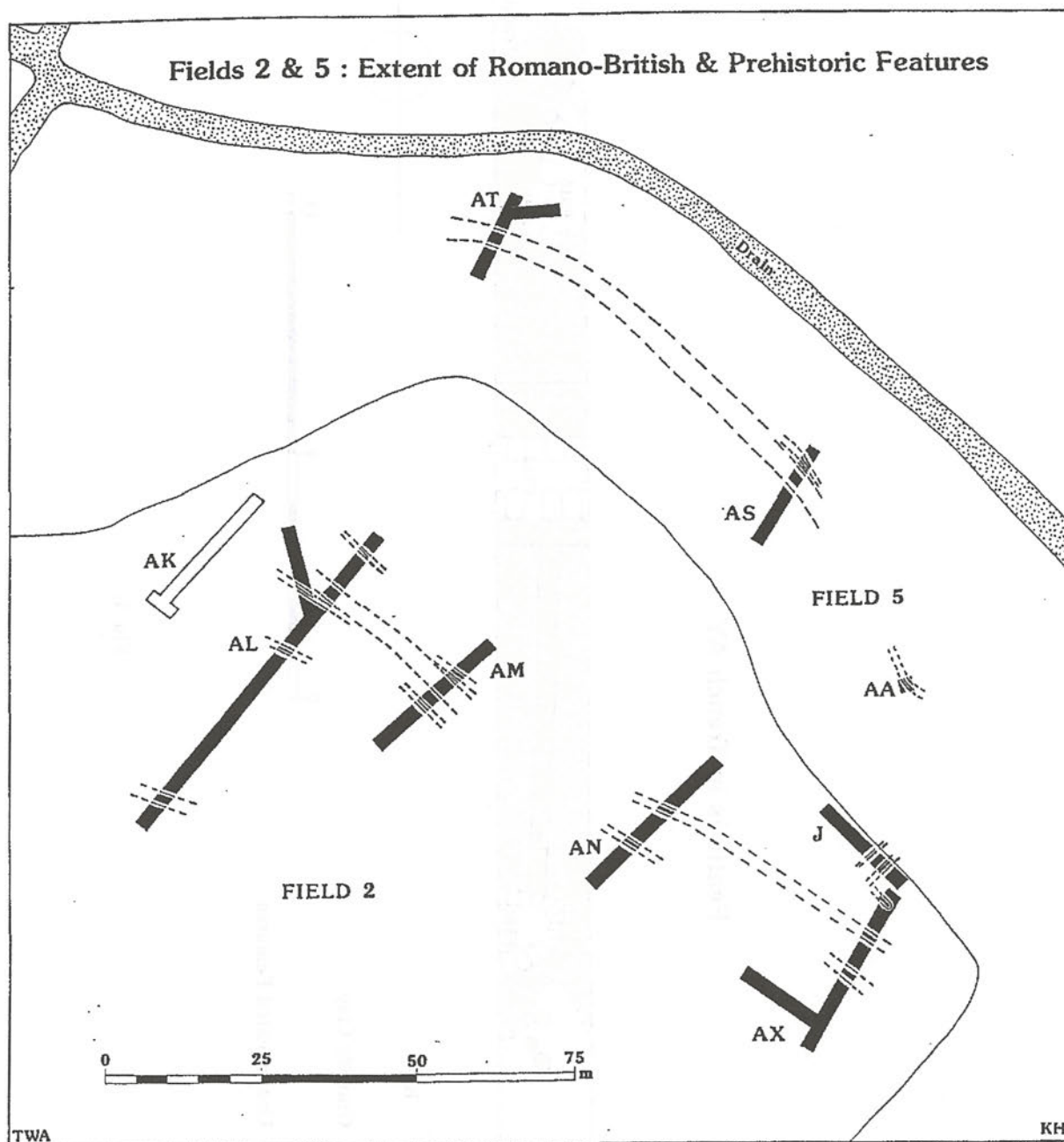


Fig 3.

Features in Trench AY



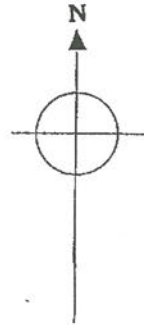
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Gravelly Clay



Unexcavated Features

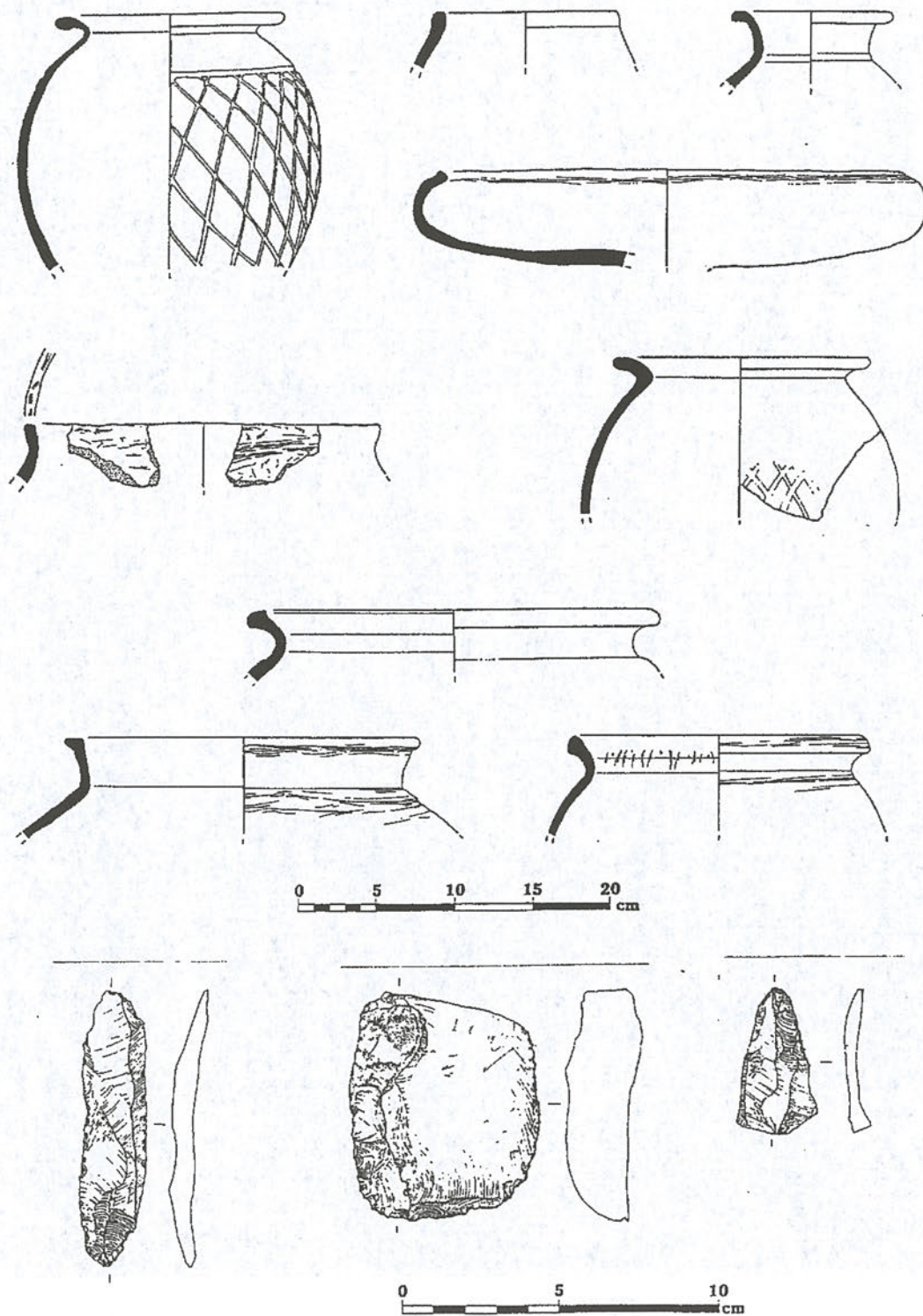


TWA

KH

Fig 4.

Sample of Romano-British & Medieval Pottery
and Prehistoric Flint Artefacts



TWA

KH

Fig 5.



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