

No. 5 West Road, Cambridge
-An Archaeological Evaluation-

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Summary

Four trenches were opened in the gardens of No. 5 West Road, Cambridge, by the Cambridge Archaeological Unit in January 2002. Archaeological features were uncovered in both the front and rear gardens of the property, possibly of Saxon date and agrarian in nature. However, the archaeology was severely truncated, probably by later agricultural activity, and few artefacts were recovered.

Introduction

The Cambridge Archaeological Unit (CAU) carried out a field evaluation at No. 5 West Road, Cambridge, between the 21st and 29th of January 2002 in advance of proposed redevelopment. The work was funded by Gonville and Caius College.

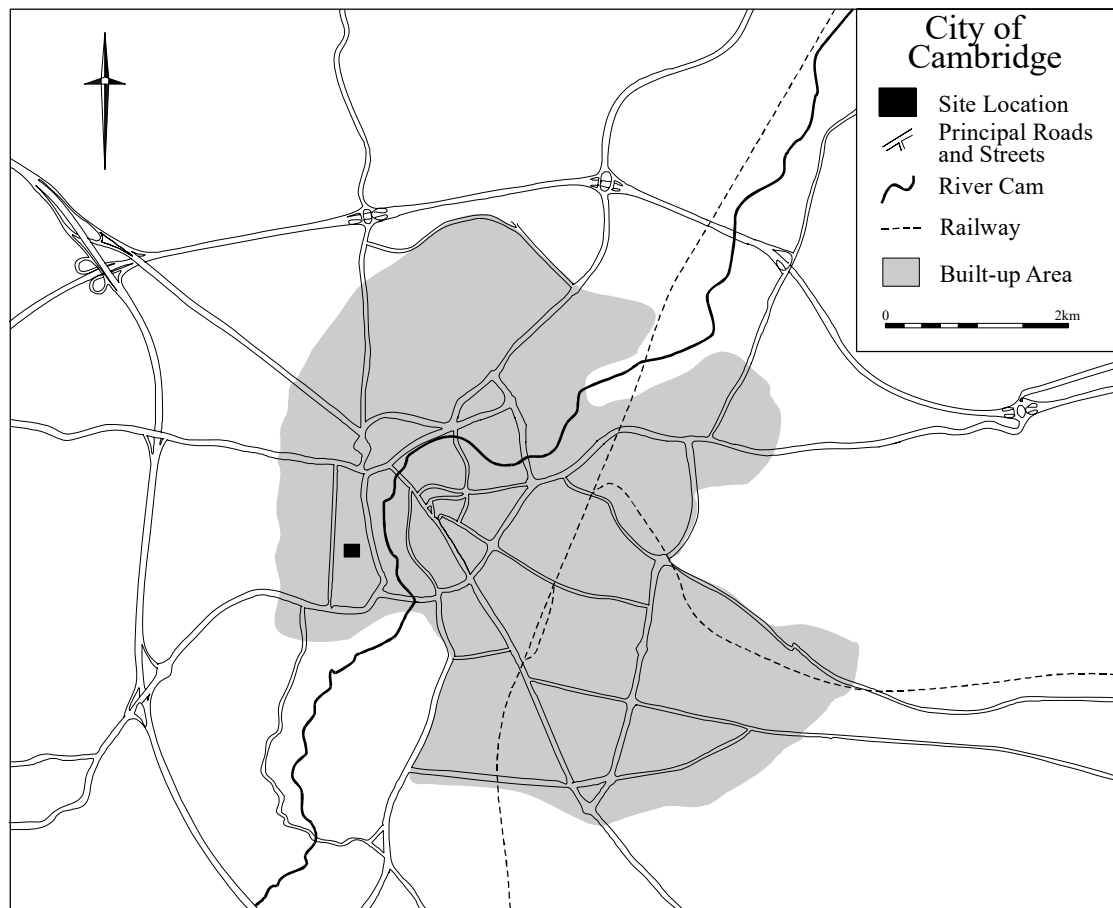


Figure 1 Site Location

The site comprises approximately 3584 sq.m of house and garden, on West Road, Cambridge, centred on TL 4428 5812. The site lies on the western margin of Cambridge, between Queen's Road and Grange Road. The underlying geology is second terrace river gravels, and the site lies at an approximate height of between 8m and 9m AOD. The current building effectively bisects the plot between front and back, both parts of which are cultivated as gardens, although a large part of the front plot is laid tarmac and gravel, currently in use as a car park. There are several mature trees within the site, causing some constraint to both the archaeological fieldwork and the proposed development. The proposed building will cover 975 sq.m on a N-S orientation, straddling the building currently occupying the site.

Archaeological and Historical Background

A detailed study of the archaeological and historical context of the site was included in the desktop assessment for the adjacent Sidgwick site (Hall 2001). The following section is a brief summary of the desktop research.

A prehistoric presence is suggested in the study area by a number of stray finds, including a Neolithic stone axe c. 350m to the south-east, a Mesolithic stone adze or axe on Newnham terrace, a Bronze Age rapier from the Grange Road area, and a flint end scraper was recovered from the Law Faculty site, adjacent to No. 5 West Road (Dickens 1993). Prehistoric burials have been reported from Newnham Playing Field (Browne 1974), and a single pit of Bronze Age date was excavated at King's Garden Hostel (Dodwell 2001). Further prehistoric activity was encountered at Burrell's Walk (Gdaniec 1992), and a ditch of possible Iron Age date has been recorded at the University Library (Gibson 1996). More recently, evidence for small scale Iron Age settlement has been uncovered by the CAU on Barton Road (Mackay forthcoming).

The Roman period is well attested to on the western side of Cambridge. The CAU excavations at High Cross (Whittaker 2001) and Vicar's Farm (Lucas and Whittaker 2001) both revealed extensive evidence of Romano-British settlement. Sites are also recorded within Newnham, along Grange Road, at Newnham College and at Burrell's Field, opposite Robinson College suggesting a landscape of small scale agrarian settlement distributed within the western hinterland of the Roman town.

Saxon settlement is poorly attested to in Cambridge, although several cemeteries lie within the vicinity of the site. A cemetery spanning the 5th to 7th centuries lay at St. John's College Playing Field, and an early/middle Saxon cemetery was excavated by the CAU in the summer of 2000 on the opposite side of West Road at King's College Garden Hostel (Dodwell 2001), the full extent of which is unknown. Two further cemeteries have been found in Newnham Playing Field (Browne 1974) and at Newnham Croft on Barton Road. By the time of the Domesday survey in 1086, the area around Malting Lane and Newnham Road junction had been built upon, and Newnham Mill itself has a pre-conquest foundation date.

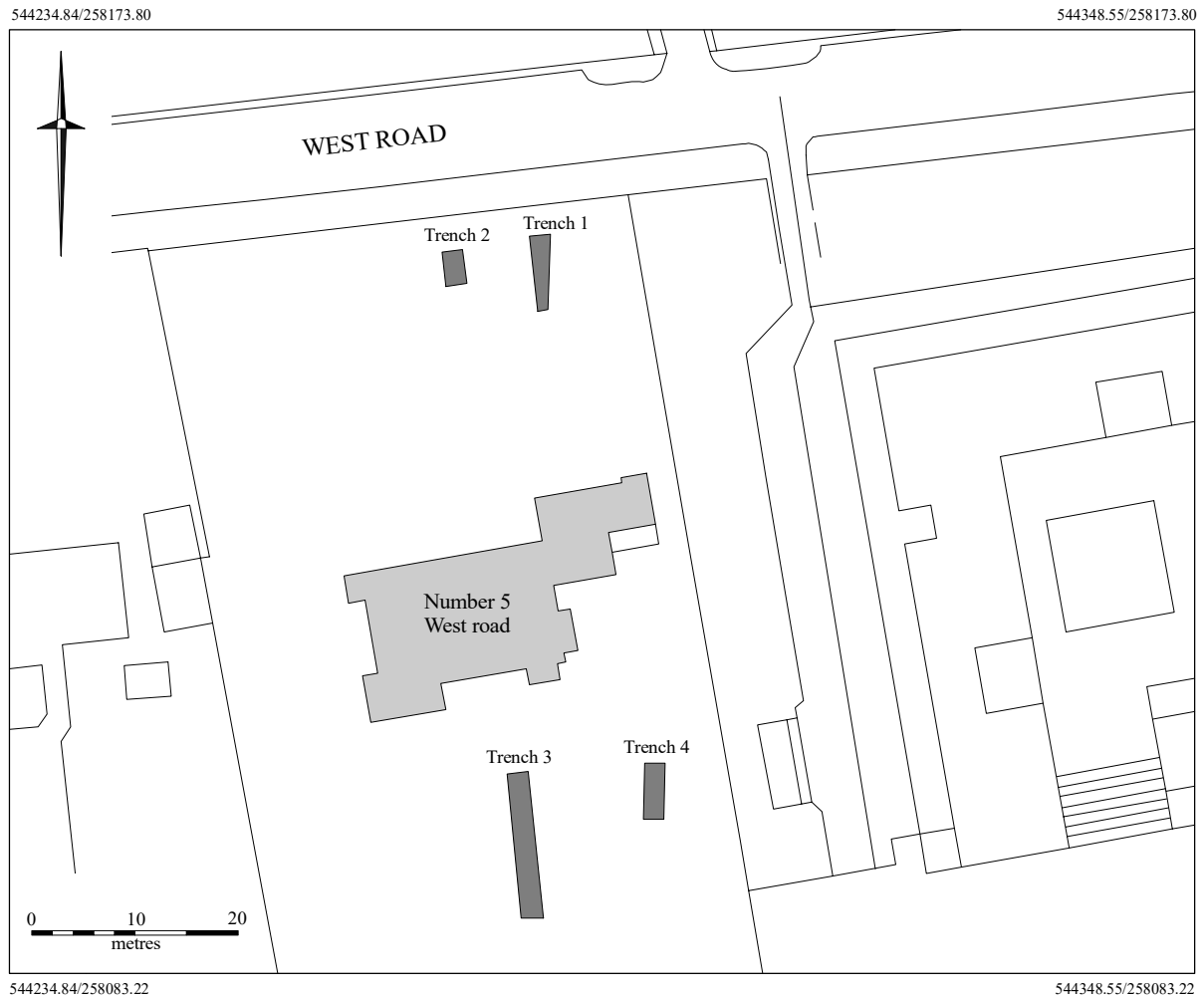
The core of the Medieval town of Cambridge lay to the east of the river Cam, with a smaller settlement in the mill area of Newnham. At this time the development area fell within the town's *West Fields* (Hall and Ravensdale 1976), an area of open field agriculture.

Evidence for post Medieval land use across the development area is purely agricultural, with West Road seemingly laid out in the 19th century.

Aims and Methods

The principle objective was to determine the presence or absence and character (e.g. degree of preservation and chronological range) of archaeological remains, and to place those remains within a local, regional and national archaeological context.

The evaluation consisted of four trenches, totalling 30m. They were excavated using a 360° mini mechanical excavator with a 1m wide toothless ditching bucket. Where possible, the trenches were excavated to a width of 2m, although Trench 1 was compromised by the course of a service pipe. Once excavated, the trenches were hand cleaned, where necessary, and base planned at 1:50 or 1:20. Recording was conducted using the Unit-modified Museum of London system (Spence 1990), and feature sections were recorded at 1:10. All work was carried out in strict accordance with statutory Health and Safety legislation, and in accordance with the recommendations of SCAUM (Allen and Holt 1997).



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Figure 2 Trench Locations

Results

Trench 1

Trench 1 was 7m long, lying on a N-S alignment in the front garden of the property. Although the northern end was 2m wide, a service pipe cutting along the eastern edge of the trench resulted in the southern end being only 1m wide, with a gradual narrowing between the two ends. The trench was 1.20m deep, 0.78m of which was topsoil, 0.25m subsoil, and the remainder rooted natural sand and gravel. It was at

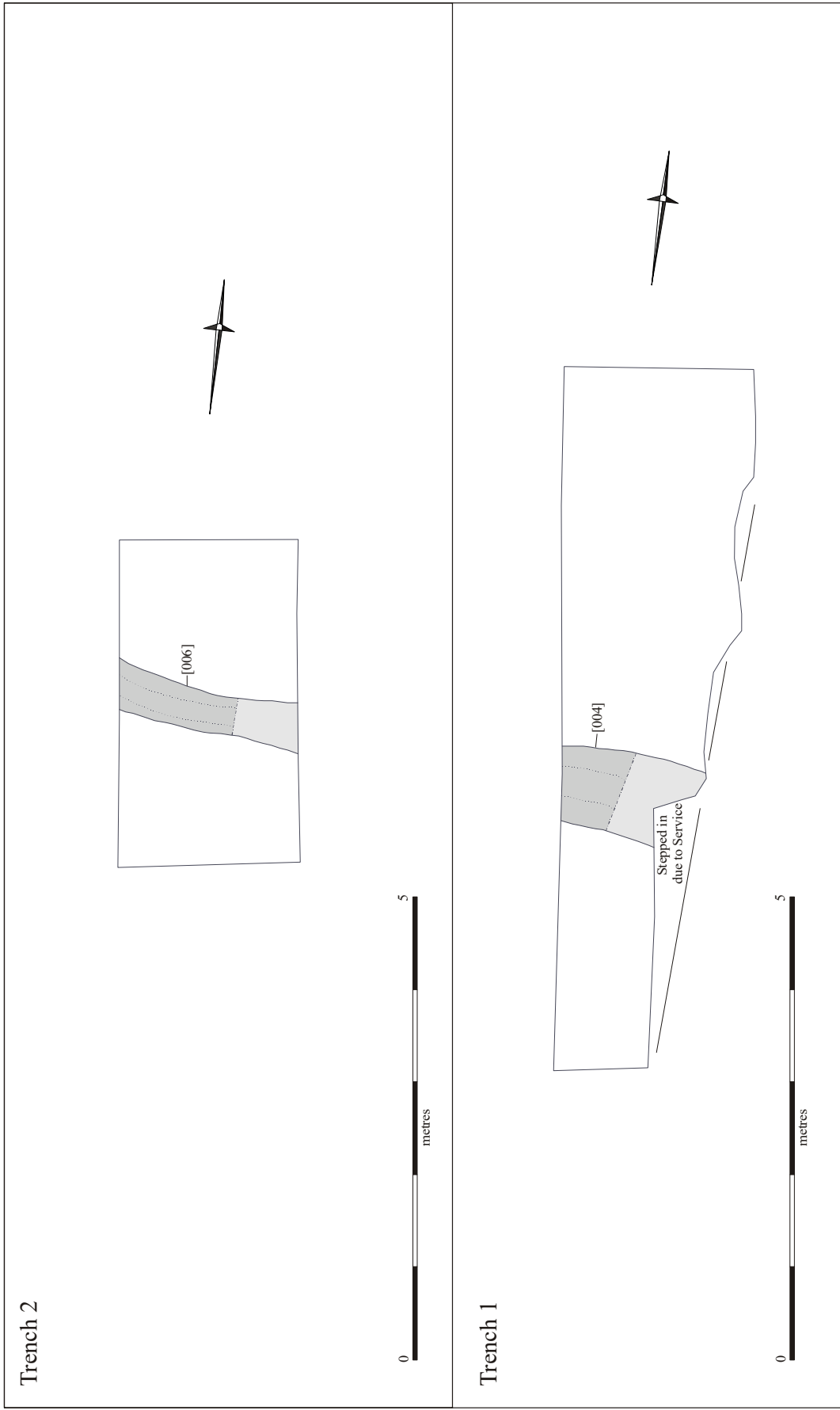


Figure 3: Plans of Trenches 1 and 2

this level that archaeology could be defined, despite appearing a little higher in section.

Only one feature was uncovered in Trench 1, [004], a narrow, linear ditch running approximately E-W. On the trench base, where the feature could first be defined in plan, its dimensions were 0.85m wide and 0.20m deep, although in section the width could be observed reaching approximately 1.40m and the depth 0.40-0.50m. The fill, [003], was a dark red-brown gravelly clay-sand and contained two pieces of animal bone. This feature was also uncovered in Trench 2. A single sherd of Ipswich ware pottery (8th-9th centuries) was recovered from the topsoil of this trench in addition to 18th - 19th century pot.

Trench 2

Trench 2 was 3m long and 2m wide, lying on a N-S alignment in the front garden of the property. The trench was 1.2m deep, 0.75m of which was topsoil, 0.45m was subsoil, and a skim of dirty natural at the base. Ditch [006], a continuation of [004], was revealed on the base of the trench, but no other features were observed. Cut [006] was 0.40m wide and 0.15m deep, with a fill identical to [003]. A single sherd of mica-tempered early Saxon pot was recovered from the topsoil of Trench 2 (D. Hall pers. com.), and although the sherd is unabraded, its location in the topsoil can suggest only a tentative link with the underlying feature. The remainder of the pottery recovered from the topsoil consisted of 18th century sherds.

Trench 3

Trench 3 was 15m long, with a short break to avoid a live cable, and 2m wide, on a N-S alignment, in the rear garden of the property. The trench was an average of 1.20m deep, with the depth of topsoil ranging from 0.25m to 0.86m. The soil make-up of the trench differed greatly between the northern and southern halves, although the presence of the live service prevented a full north-south section being recorded. Post Medieval ploughing could be discerned at the base of the topsoil across the length of the trench. The topsoil yielded 18th - 19th century pottery, clay tobacco pipe and bone, and the subsoil twenty-one pieces of animal bone and a piece of tile, all from the northern half of the trench.

The northern half of the trench was the most interesting archaeologically, with several features being revealed. Three shallow and truncated ditches were uncovered, all following a roughly E-W alignment, although deviating slightly from each other, and an upstanding marl dump, that stood proud of the level of the ditches. The northernmost ditch, [008], was up to 1.05m wide, and 0.25m deep, filled by [009], a mid brown clay-sand with occasional charcoal. A fragment of lava stone was recovered from the post-machining surface of this feature, and one piece of animal bone was present in the fill. Cut by [008], and running along its northern edge, was [010], a shallow slot probably representing an earlier cut of the same ditch. Sitting on the southern edge of [008] and seemingly cut by it was [012], a shallow, butt-ending feature containing one piece of animal bone. Sitting alongside the southern edge of [012] was [013], a ridge of redeposited marl running on the same alignment, 0.80m

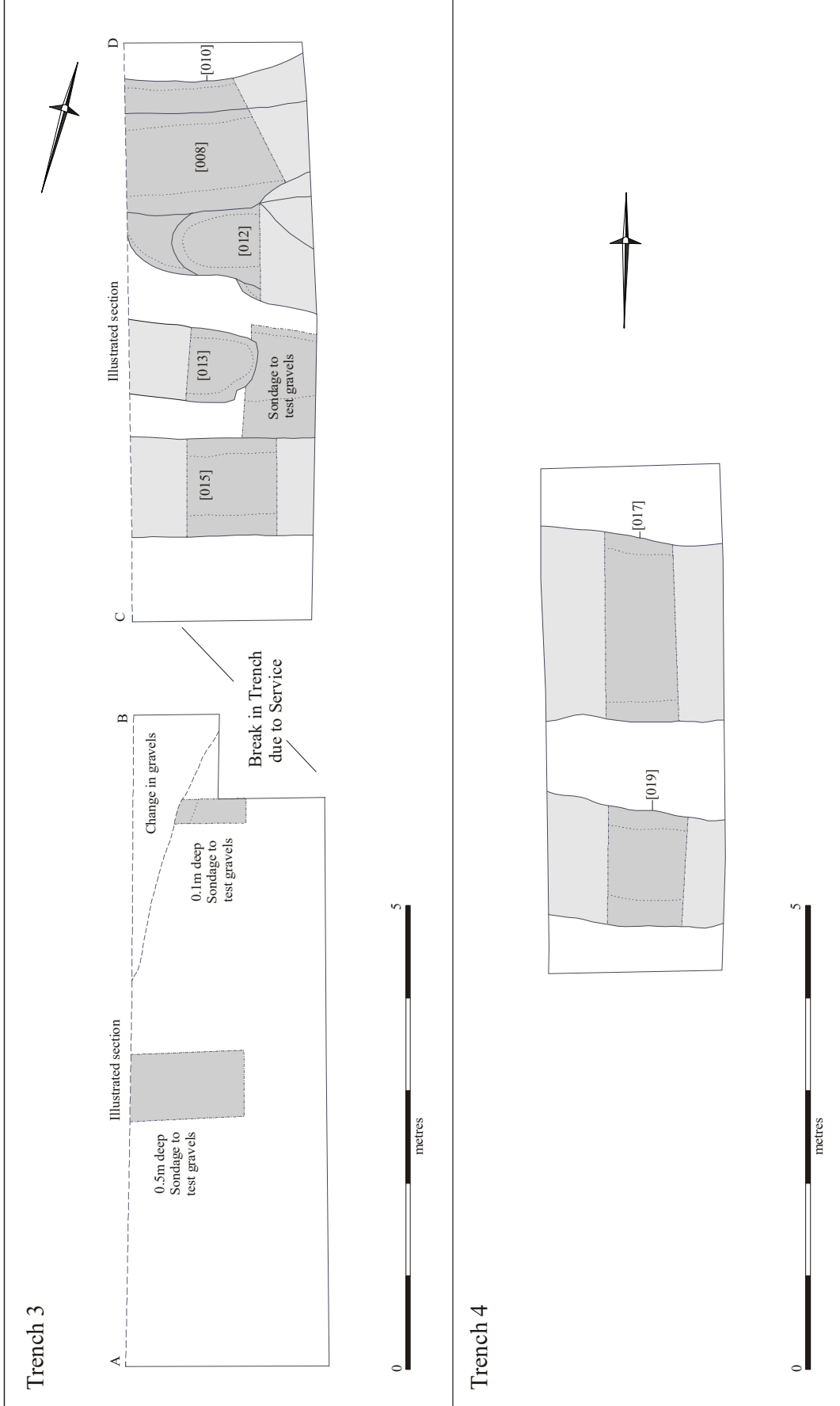


Figure 4: Plans of Trenches 3 and 4

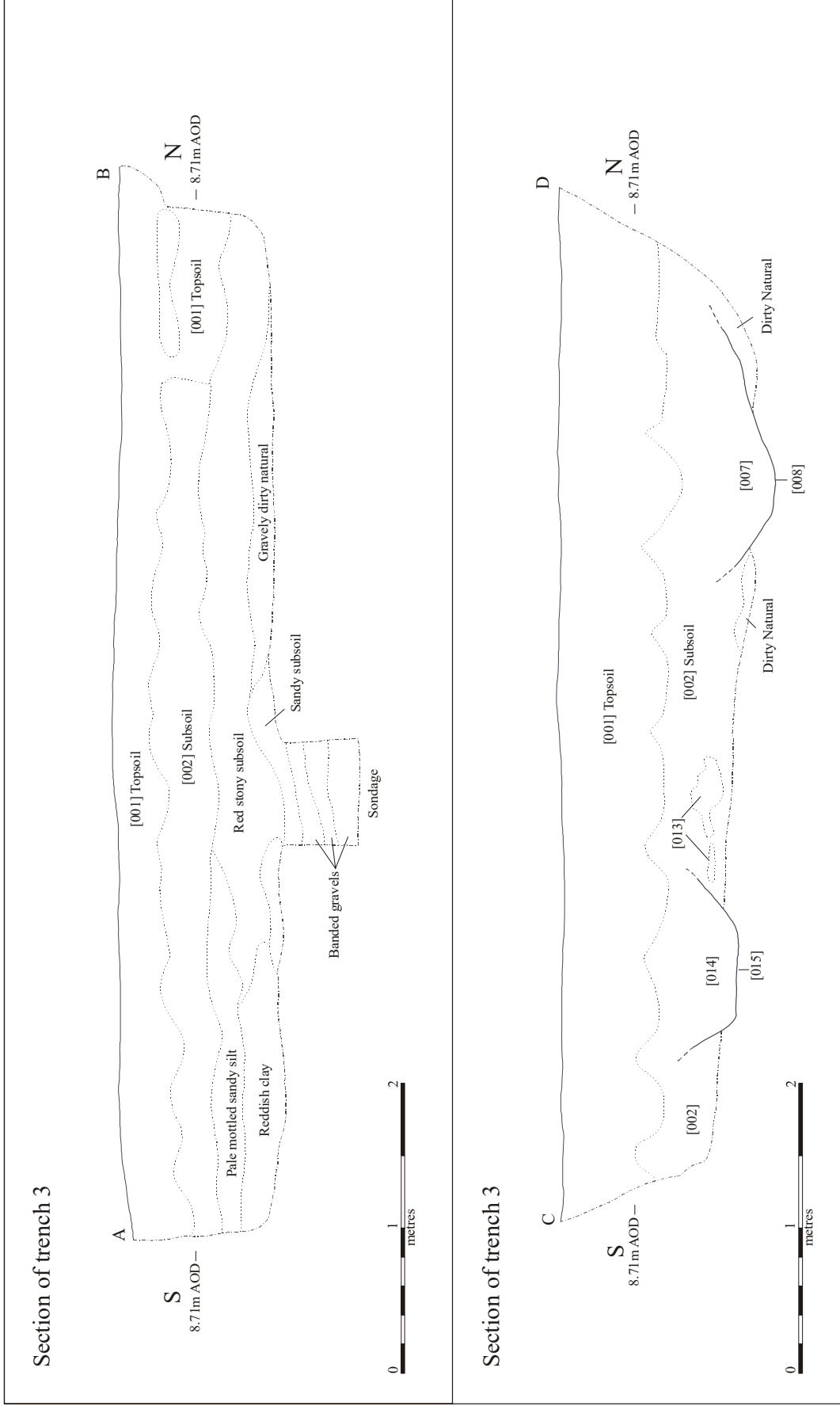


Figure 5: Section of trench 3

wide and up to 0.35m high. Initially this was considered to represent upcast from one of the ditches, but the marl deposit consisted of pure marl and lenses of dark loamy soil, with no sand or gravel mixed in. Although the ditches were cut into a marly natural, the upcast would also have included a mix of natural sand and gravel, which was conspicuously absent from the make-up of [013].

To the south of [013] lay an E-W linear, [015], 0.95m wide and 0.18m deep, containing four pieces of animal bone. This feature could be observed cutting through a part of the subsoil, with relatively gently sloping sides, and was also observed in Trench 4.

The southern half of the trench was devoid of archaeological features, and was distinguished by a variation in the natural geology, and also by a change in the make-up of the soils. The surface of the natural sand appeared significantly higher in the southern part of Trench 3. This make-up consisted of 0.40m of topsoil and 0.42m of subsoil, below which lay an orange-red gravelly clay-sand overlying gravel. Although these last layers were investigated during the machining, and further tested by hand dug slots, it would appear that the top of the orange-red gravelly clay-sand represented the surface of the natural geology, albeit rooted and burrowed. Relatively, this marked a significant rising of the natural geology in the southern half of the trench, mirrored by both the depth of topsoil and subsoil. The implications of this will be discussed below.

Trench 4

This was 5m long and 2m wide on a N-S alignment in the rear garden of the property. The trench was an average of 1.20m deep, with the topsoil accounting for approximately 0.70m of the total. Subsoil accounted for 0.30m of the depth, and the remaining 0.20m consisted of an indistinct merging between the subsoil and features. Two features were uncovered, one, [019], being a continuation of [015] in Trench 3 and containing three pieces of animal bone. The remaining feature, [017], also on an E-W alignment, was 1.80m wide and 0.31m deep, containing one worked flint, three pieces of animal bone, one piece of burnt flint and one piece of burnt stone. It was unclear whether this represented any of the features exposed in Trench 3, although it did run along a similar course to the projected line of [008].

Discussion

Although a thick deposit of overburden can act as a protective layer to archaeology, it is significant at West Road to observe that more than half of the overburden depth consisted of post-Medieval garden soils, and these had been deposited after a significant truncation of the underlying archaeology had occurred. This would appear to be the case in all of the trenches except the southern half of Trench 3 where, despite a seeming lack of truncation, no archaeology existed. It is unlikely to be coincidence that at the very point that the natural geology dips in Trench 3, the depth of topsoil doubles, almost certainly in an attempt to level the ground surface in more recent times. What is less clear is the cause of the sudden rise in natural. Feature [015] forms the boundary between the two levels, its southern edge clearly truncating the

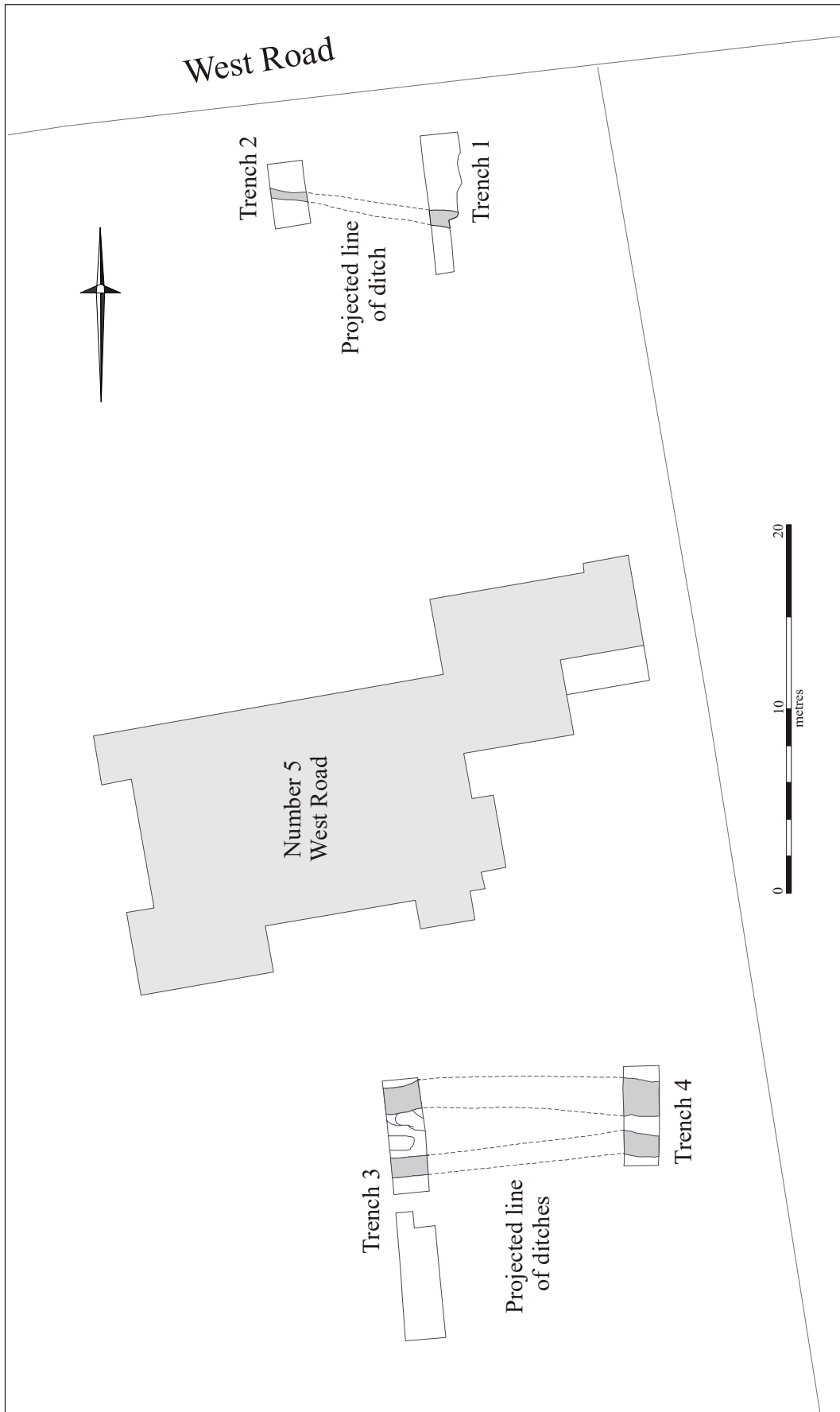


Figure 6: Ditch alignments

natural orange-red sand, while its northern edge cuts only subsoil at a corresponding depth. From that point northwards, the natural occurs at what must be an artificially low level, and although this truncation might partially be explained by the wide cuts of the parallel ditches, it does not account for the existence of subsoil between the cuts, nor for marl dump [013] at the same level, for the deposit did not sit in any observable cut.

The most reasonable interpretation for this phenomenon must be agricultural activity, with prolonged ploughing lowering the level of base natural, and subsequent episodes of ploughing truncating a series of agricultural features (boundary/drainage ditches, ridge and furrow). With marl commonly used as a fertiliser, dump [013] might best be explained within that context, as an abandoned stockpile of pure marl, either excavated from the ditches or from a separate quarry. However, if the earliest features in Trench 3 are assumed to pre-date the medieval ridge and furrow known to have existed in the West Fields, and were truncated by the Medieval agriculture, this would suggest a Saxon or even Roman date. This assumption is in keeping with the piece of lava quern recovered from the fill of [008].

Less well understood in this sequence of events is why the southern half of Trench 3 (and presumably the land to either side) should not have undergone the same process of truncation. Ditch [015] might have conceivably formed a delineation between areas of land use, lying as it does on the exact boundary between the differences in level. Although conjecture as to the purpose behind this division is inherently inconclusive, it was noted that the orange-red natural in Trench 3 had turned to clay at the southern end, possibly representing a significant change in geology that would inevitably impact on agricultural practice. More recent agricultural activity is visible by a corrugated pattern at the base of the topsoil, interestingly occurring the whole length of the trench, attesting to a post medieval ground surface that was lower above the archaeological features, and has now been buried in an attempt to level the ground.

In the front garden of the property, investigated by Trenches 1 and 2, another deep sequence was exposed, probably representing a similar story of agricultural truncation and post-medieval build-up. The single ditch exposed, as with those in Trenches 3 and 4, and on a similar alignment as them, is probably a pre-medieval agricultural feature, given the tiny quantity of bone recovered from it, its linear character and its level of truncation. The sherd of Ipswich ware pottery found in the topsoil of Trench 1, and the early Saxon pottery found in the topsoil of Trench 2 were not necessarily associated with this feature, and the evident movement of topsoil during levelling and landscaping work does little to improve their provenance. However, it is unlikely that the topsoil capping these trenches moved any great distance, and the sherds help to confirm the already suspected Saxon presence in the locality, and may well be contemporaneous with the lava quern found in Trench 3.

Considering the site as a whole, the surviving features are highly suggestive of Saxon agricultural use, although it is also conceivable that the features represent activity on the margin of a settlement. Although the trenches on West Road provided no direct evidence of buildings, Saxon settlement is highly likely in the area, given the proximity of the cemetery at King's Garden Hostel and the other cemeteries in the surrounding area. The density of artefacts within the features, predominantly

consisting of animal bone, is perhaps a little high for features with no domestic link, and this might also suggest that, whatever their genuine function, the ditches lay close to settlement activity of some kind. The recovery of single sherds of both early and middle Saxon pottery, despite being residual, as well as the fragment of lava quern, help to confirm this local settlement presence.

Acknowledgements

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Appendix 1: Finds List

Cat. No.	Context	Feature	Mat.	Num.	Area	Location	Notes	Wt(g)
001	Topsoil		PT	21		Tr. 1	18th-19th C; 1 Ipswich 650-900.	460
002	Topsoil		TP	4		Tr. 1		14
003	Topsoil		OT	1		Tr. 1	vulcanised rubber lemonade bottle top marked 'Wadsworth Cambridge'	16
004	Topsoil		PT	13		Tr. 2	1 early Saxon; rest 18th C.	149
005	Topsoil		TP	1		Tr. 2		4
006	Topsoil [001]		PT	10		Tr. 3	18th-19th C.	232
007	Topsoil [001]		TP	4		Tr. 3	1 bowl	38
008	Topsoil [001]		BN	2		Tr. 3	1 horncore	33
009	Subsoil		BN	21		Tr. 3		235
010	Subsoil		TL	1		Tr. 3		34
011	002		BN	2		Tr. 4	2=1	15
012	003		BN	3		Tr. 1	2=1	15
013	007		BN	1				2
014	007		WS	7			lava quern frags.	38
015	011		BN	2			2=1	28
016	014		BN	4			2=1	26
017	016		BN	3		Tr. 4	butchering	96
018	016		FL	1		Tr. 4		6
019	016		BF	1		Tr. 4		22
020	016		ST	1		Tr. 4	burnt	49
021	018		BN	3		Tr. 4	in situ teeth	46

Appendix 2: Context List

Context No.	Trench	Type	Description
1		L	Topsoil. Dark brown humic loamy cultivated soil.
2		L	Subsoil. Grey-brown sandy clay-silt.
3	1	F	Ditch fill. Dark red-brown sandy, gravelly clay-silt.
4	1	C	Ditch cut. Linear. Rounded base V profile. 1.50m wide in trench section, 0.50m deep in section (dimensions 0.90m wide and 0.38m deep on trench base).
5	2	F	Ditch fill = [003]. Dark red-brown sandy, gravelly clay-silt.
6	2	C	Ditch cut = [004]. 0.38m wide, 0.18m deep.
7	3	F	Ditch fill. Mid brown clay-sand, occ. charcoal.
8	3	C	Ditch cut. 1.05m wide, 0.24m deep.
9	3	F	Ditch fill. Pale mid brown clay-sand, occ. charcoal.
10	3	C	Ditch cut. Very shallow, on edge of [008], probably an earlier cut of [008]. 0.08m deep, 0.25m wide.
11	3	F	Ditch fill. Mixed pale brown clay-sand, occ. charcoal.
12	3	C	Ditch cut. 0.70m wide, 0.20m deep, with gently sloping, irregular butt.
13	3	L	Dump. Redeposited marl and soil dump, clean of other natural deposits.
14	3	F	Ditch fill. Dark brown loamy clay sand, occ. charcoal.
15	3	C	Ditch cut. Linear. 1.94m wide, 0.17m deep. Bowl shaped profile.
16	4	F	Ditch fill. Dark brown sandy clay-silt, occ. charcoal.
17	4	C	Ditch cut. Wide flat based cut with steep sides. Linear. 1.80m wide, 0.31m deep.
18	4	F	Ditch fill = [014]. Dark brown loamy clay-sand, occ. charcoal.
19	4	C	Ditch cut = [015]. 1.20m wide, 0.48m deep. Linear, flat based.