

**Parsonage Farm, Sparsholt Road,
Childrey, Oxfordshire**

**An Archaeological Watching Brief
for Berkeley Homes (Oxford) Limited**

by Kate Taylor

Thames Valley Archaeological Services Ltd

Site Code PFC00/37

December 2000

Summary

Site name: Parsonage Farm, Sparsholt Road, Childrey, Oxfordshire

Grid reference: SU 3605 8760

Site activity: Watching brief

Site supervisor: Kate Taylor

Date and duration of project: 3/10/00 – 9/10/00

Site code: PFC00/37

Area of site: 0.3 ha

Summary of results: Multi-period features and finds were recorded in foundation trenches: unstratified prehistoric struck flint; late Roman ditches and pits; late Saxon pottery; late medieval ditches; an undated posthole and post-medieval sheep burials. This indicates late Roman occupation of the site itself and activity in the vicinity during earlier and later periods.

Monuments identified: Ditches; pits; posthole. Also unstratified finds.

Location of archive: The archive is currently held by Thames Valley Archaeological Services Ltd, 47–49 De Beauvoir Road, Reading, Berkshire, RG1 5NR. It is anticipated that the complete archive will be deposited with Oxfordshire Museums Service under the accession number OXCMS: 2000.137.

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An Archaeological Watching Brief

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Report 00/37

Introduction

This report documents the results of an archaeological watching brief carried out at Parsonage Farm, Sparsholt, Road, Childrey, Wantage, Oxfordshire, OX12 9PH (SU 3605 8760) (Figs 1 and 2). The work was commissioned by Mr J Neville of Berkeley Homes (Oxford) Limited, Berkeley House, 20, Marcham Road, Abingdon, Oxfordshire, OX14 1AA.

Planning permission (CDH/6279/6) has been granted by the Vale of White Horse District Council for the conversion of an existing barn to residential use and the construction of three new dwellings with associated services. A condition (6) has been placed on this planning permission requiring that an archaeological watching brief take place during groundworks. This is in accordance with the Department of the Environment's Policy and Planning Guidance Note, *Archaeology and Planning* (PPG16 1990). The field investigation was carried out to a specification approved by Mr Hugh Coddington, Deputy County Archaeological Officer for Oxfordshire County Archaeological Services.

The fieldwork was undertaken by Steve Ford, Kate Taylor and Richard Oram between the 3rd and 9th of October 2000. The site code is PFC00/37. The archive is currently held by Thames Valley Archaeological Services Ltd, 47-49 De Beauvoir Road, Reading, Berkshire, RG1 5NR. It is anticipated that the complete archive will be deposited with Oxfordshire Museums Service under the accession number OXCMS: 2000.137.

Location, Topography and Geology

The site is located in the village of Childrey, near Wantage, 200m south of the church of St Mary and north-east of the High Street and village pond (Figs 1 and 2). It occupies a plot of fairly flat ground at a height of approximately 109m above Ordnance Datum on the southern side of Sparsholt Road. According to the British Geological Survey (BGS 1971) the natural geology is Upper Greensand. However, observation revealed clay across the whole site, possibly the Gault clay that is shown to underlie the Greensand.

Archaeological Background

The first documentary reference to a settlement at Childrey is in AD 950, the late Saxon period, although it is possible that the settlement existed before that time. Several deposits of earlier archaeological artefacts have been located in the vicinity, including a middle Bronze Age flanged axe, a Roman quernstone and a hoard of late 3rd century AD Roman coins, suggesting a focus of Roman activity in the area. Additionally, Challow Roman villa lies approximately 1 mile to the east.

Objectives and Methodology

The purpose of the watching brief was to excavate and record any archaeological deposits affected by the construction of the new dwellings. This involved examination of the areas stripped of overburden and topsoil, observation of the excavation of foundation trenches and monitoring of the spoilheaps for finds.

The foundation trenches for the three house plots were excavated by a machine with a 0.65m wide toothed bucket. They were, on average, 1m deep but in places were considerably deeper. Almost the entire length of trenching was monitored, the majority during excavation. It was found that, although features could not be seen during machine excavation as the trenches were too narrow, they were clearly visible in section once the trenches were complete. All possible features seen in section were hand cleaned and partially excavated for finds retrieval purposes. A drawn and photographic record was made of each feature.

Heavy rainfall during groundworks caused severe flooding of the trenches and hampered observation and recording of deposits, especially in plot 1 at the front of the site.

Results (Figs 3 and 4)

Following demolition of existing farm buildings, the area to be developed was stripped of concrete and some topsoil. Observation at this stage did not reveal any archaeological deposits or finds as remaining made ground and soil concealed the natural geology over the entire area. Observation of the excavated foundation trenches showed that below a layer of c. 0.30m soily made ground the natural geology is clay with some mudstone lumps at the upper horizon. This was overlain in places by up to 0.20m of buried soil, which was seen in plot 1 (71) and plot 2 (59) although these may not represent the same deposit.

Cut features were recorded in all three plots, the majority were observed in opposing sections and appeared to be linear features, ditches or gullies. However, five were thought to be pits and one a posthole.

Plot 1

Although four features were recorded in the trenches for plot 1 they probably represent two linear features that have each been twice truncated by the foundations. Features 14 and 15 were both 'V-shaped' ditch slots, 1.4m wide and 0.8m deep and probably represent a north-south aligned ditch. Features 16 and 17 were slots through a large NW–SE aligned ditch, 3.7m wide and 1.3m deep. The smaller ditch produced just two sherds of pottery, one Saxon and one late medieval or early post-medieval. It appeared to be cut by the larger ditch, which contained two Roman sherds and one of 11th–12th century date. This suggests that both features are late medieval or later in date, although with such small quantities of pottery and a large number of residual (and ?intrusive) finds it is difficult to assign any dates with a high degree of certainty.

Plot 2

A total of nine features were recorded in this plot, four ditches, four pits and a posthole. Ditch 5 was wide (1.5m) and, although it was 0.47m deep, it was not particularly regular in profile. It appeared to be aligned roughly SW–NE and produced a single sherd of late 3rd–4th century Roman pottery. Another Roman ditch (9) was U-shaped in profile and aligned SE–NW. Slots 10 (Plate 2) and 11 were thought to represent the same feature running east–west across the northern part of the plot but one contained a sherd of Roman pottery and the other a late Saxon sherd.

Pit 6 was seen in opposing sections of the trench but excavation into the eastern section revealed the rounded end of the feature, showing it to be at least 1.20m long, 0.85m wide and 0.65m deep. It produced three sherds of undiagnostic Roman pottery and 35 bones representing the remains of a sheep. The excellent condition of the bone, the lack of any butchery marks and the size of the animal suggest that this is a post-medieval burial rather than Roman food waste. Similarly, feature 8 contained no pottery but produced a large number of sheep bones, probably another post-medieval burial of at least two sheep. Pit 7 was more ephemeral but is dated, again by just one sherd, to the 2nd–4th centuries AD. Much of the north-western corner of the plot was taken up by a large feature (13) at least 3.0m by 5.0m and 0.9m deep. It was seen in several lengths of trench and may be a complex of intercutting pits. It is dated by just one sherd to the 2nd–4th century AD.

The single posthole (12) was fully excavated in the baulk but no finds were recovered.

Plot 3

Ditch slots 1 (Plate 1) and 3 may represent the same feature, c. 1.0m wide and 0.4m deep and 2nd–4th century in date. The other ditch (4) is late Saxon or medieval. A small Roman pit (2) just 0.40m wide and 0.20m deep, was also recorded.

Finds

Pottery by Jane Timby

The archaeological work resulted in the recovery of some 24 sherds (143gms in weight) of pottery dating to the Roman, Saxon and medieval periods (Table 1). Generally speaking the pottery was poorly preserved with well-fragmented sherds in fairly abraded condition. The average sherd size is just 6gms, suggesting the material has been subjected to considerable post-depositional disturbance. Pottery was associated with 14 individual contexts; the incidence per deposit was, therefore, very low, thus limiting the degree of confidence that can be placed in the dating.

Roman

At least fifteen sherds of Roman date are present. Amongst the fabrics represented are sherds of Dorset black burnished ware, a local grey sandy, slightly micaceous ware and Oxfordshire type grog-tempered storage jar. Featured sherds are sparse but forms present include jar, a straight-sided dish and at least one flanged conical bowl. The latter vessels and the general range of fabrics indicate a date of activity in the later Roman period (3rd–4th century).

Seven features produced exclusively Roman sherds: 2, 5, 6, 7, 9, 11 and 13. A further two sherds came from deposit 59 and two were redeposited in feature 16.

Saxon

At least two, possibly three sherds are present, indicative of Saxon activity in the locality. Two pieces are classic organic tempered wares from ditch slot 14 and deposit 71; the third piece is a shell-tempered ware from ditch slot 4. The sherd from deposit 71 is small and quite abraded, whilst that from ditch slot 14 is redeposited alongside later material. Organic-tempered wares have quite a long time-span and, without independent dating evidence, these sherds could date anywhere between 6th and 9th century. The shell-tempered ware is more difficult to place as a solitary find but may be a St Neots-type, which would suggest a date in the 10th to 11th century.

Medieval

Five sherds of medieval date are present, including one sherd of Newbury fabric type A with a flint temper from ditch slot 16, which is likely to date to the 11th to 12th century. A Cotswold-type limestone-tempered sherd

featured amongst the unstratified finds. A sherd from ditch slot 14 may be of later medieval or even early post-medieval date. The other pieces were too small to identify.

Summary

The assemblage is of poor quality and really only serves to indicate activity dating to the later Roman, Saxon and early medieval periods. This in itself is potentially of interest, particularly if further work produces sufficient material to show continuity of occupation throughout this period.

Table 1: Pottery by context

<i>Cut</i>	<i>Deposit</i>	<i>Roman</i>	<i>Saxon</i>	<i>Med</i>	<i>nd</i>	<i>Tot no</i>	<i>Tot wt</i>	<i>Date</i>
-	59	2	0	0	0	2	9	Roman
-	71	0	1	0	0	1	3	6th–9th century
1	50	2	0	0	0	2	28	Roman 2nd–4th century
2	51	1	0	0	0	1	2	Roman
4	53	0	1	0	0	1	12	Late Saxon or medieval
5	54	1	0	0	0	1	5	Late 3rd–4th century
6	55	3	0	0	0	3	23	Roman
7	56	1	0	0	0	1	3	2nd–4th century
9	60	1	0	0	0	1	2	Roman
10	61	0	0	1	0	1	5	Late Saxon or medieval
11	62	1	0	0	0	1	2	2nd–4th century
13	64	1	0	0	0	1	5	2nd–4th century
14	66	0	1	1	0	2	17	Saxon/?late medieval/post-medieval
16	69	2	0	1	0	3	18	Roman/11th–12th century
	Plot 1 spoil	0	0	2	1	3	9	Medieval
TOTAL		15	3	5	1	24	143	

Animal Bone by Sheila Hamilton-Dyer

A total of 129 individual bones was recorded. The bones are mainly well preserved with very little erosion but some had been broken on excavation. Most of the identified material is of sheep, cattle and horse (Table 2). No pig bones were identified in this very small sample, nor were there any dog bones, but several bones had been accessible to dogs before final disposal.

The majority of the bones were collected from pit 6 (35 bones) and pit 8 (63 bones) in plot 2. These are of a single sheep burial in pit 6 and the partial remains of at least two sheep in pit 8. The individual in pit 6 would have been approximately three years at death and stood about 0.69m at the withers. Most of the recovered remains from pit 8 are thoracic bones and offer little in the way of age or size data but the general appearance is of similar animals. At least one was hornless. No butchery marks were observed on any of these and it is likely that the remains represent burial of natural mortalities. The bones from these two pits are very well preserved, light and pale brown in colour. The single horse and cattle fragments from pit 8 are less well preserved and, in the case of the cattle calcaneum, dog gnawed. Given the large size of the sheep bones and the excellent state of preservation, it is

suggested that these may be post-medieval burials and that the few Roman ceramic sherds from pit 6 are likely to be residual.

The remaining few bones (31 fragments) are not diagnostic. The horse metacarpus in feature 13 offers an estimated withers height of 1.231m, this pony size is common throughout all the periods represented at the site.

Table 2: Species distribution of animal bone

<i>Cut</i>	<i>Deposit</i>	<i>horse</i>	<i>cattle</i>	<i>sheep/goat</i>	<i>cattle-size</i>	<i>sheep-size</i>	<i>Total</i>
1	50	-	-	-	1	1	2
4	53	-	1	2	1	-	4
6	55	-	-	35	-	-	35
8	57	1	1	61	-	-	63
9	60	-	-	-	1	-	1
10	61	-	-	-	2	1	3
13	64	2	1	-	1	-	4
14	66	1	4	1	4	1	11
16	69	-	3	-	1	-	4
	59	-	-	-	1	-	1
	71	-	1	-	-	-	1
	Total	4	11	99	12	3	129
	<i>percent</i>	3.1	8.5	76.7	9.3	2.3	

Struck Flint by Steve Ford

Three struck flints were recovered from the site (Table 3). These comprised two flakes and a core or possible core tool. None were particularly diagnostic and one of the flakes may in fact be accidentally struck.

Table 3: Struck flint

<i>Cut</i>	<i>Deposit</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Type</i>
-	59	1	Flake
13	64	1	Core / core tool
-	Plot 2 spoil	1	?Flake / ?plough struck

Burnt Clay by Nicola Powell

A small fragment of burnt clay weighing less than 1gm was recovered from pit 6 (55). It may possibly be a chip of brick or tile but is too small to be convincingly identified.

Conclusion

This small project has revealed a number of phases of activity in this previously unexamined part of the village of Childrey. The earliest activity is represented by unstratified and redeposited worked flint of a prehistoric date, although no features belong to this phase. The Roman evidence is the most substantial, the ditches and pits would appear to represent occupation of the site, probably in the 3rd–4th centuries AD. This date corresponds with the hoard of late 3rd-century coins found nearby. The Saxon and medieval evidence is limited to a few redeposited sherds, the earliest being 6th–9th century in date, and a small number of poorly dated medieval

ditches. Although no definitely post-medieval pottery was recovered, two pits containing sheep burials are thought to be fairly recent in origin.

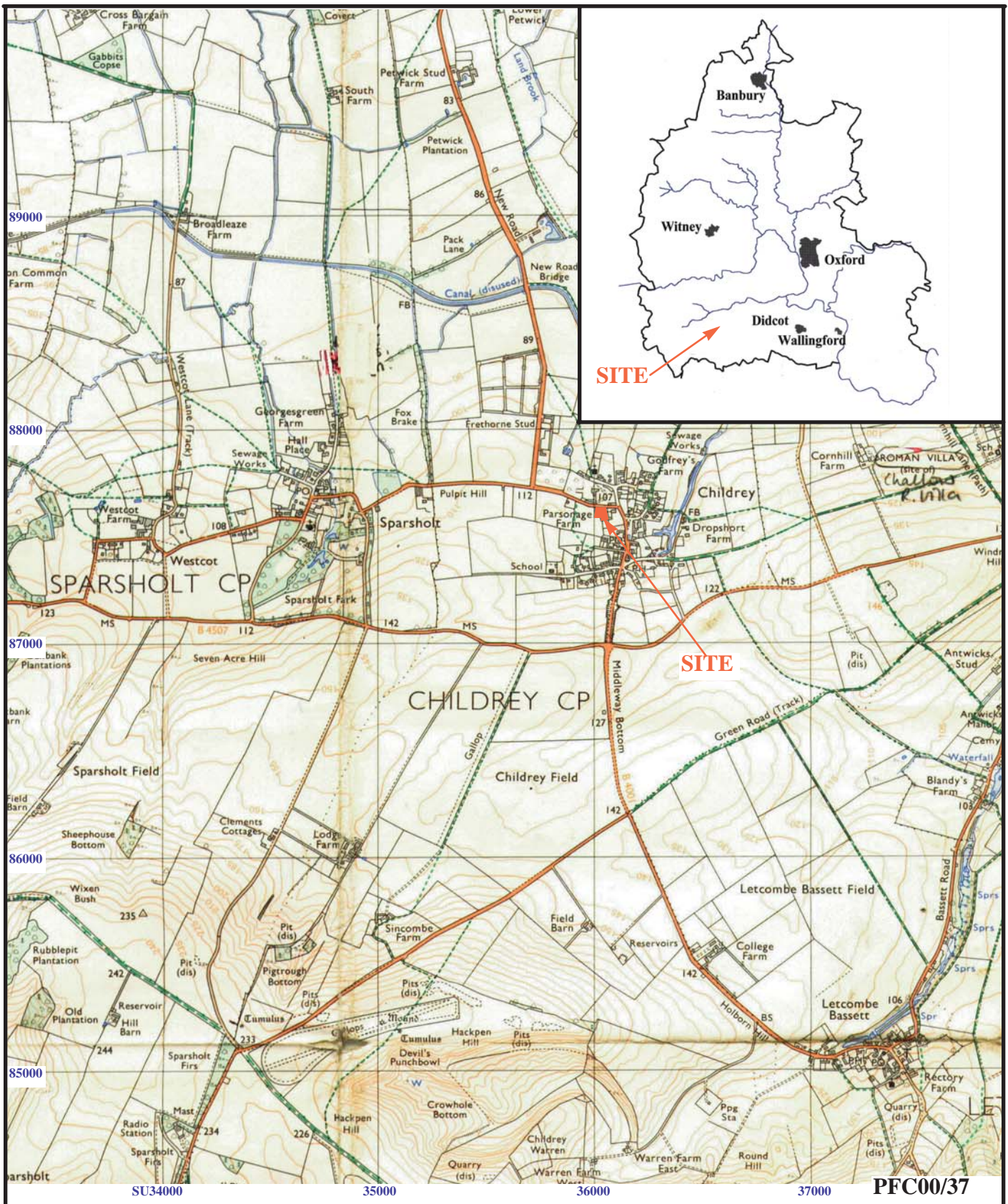
Whilst the nature of the project has limited the scale of the findings and their interpretation, they do show that the area has high archaeological potential, particularly for the Roman period. This should be considered should further development take place in adjacent areas.

References

BGS, 1971, *British Geological Survey*, 1:63360, Sheet 253, Drift Edition, Keyworth
PPG 16, 1990, *Archaeology and Planning*, Department of the Environment Planning Policy Guidance Note 16, HMSO

APPENDIX 1: Features and deposits by date

<i>Cut</i>	<i>Deposits</i>	<i>Plot</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Date</i>
1	50	3	Ditch slot	Late Roman
2	51	3	Pit	Roman
3	52	3	Ditch slot	Late Roman
4	53	3	Ditch slot	Late Saxon or medieval
5	54	2	Ditch slot	Late Roman
6	55, 58	2	Pit	Post-medieval
7	56	2	Pit	Late Roman
8	57	2	Pit	Post-medieval
9	60	2	Ditch slot	Roman
10	61	2	Ditch slot	Late Saxon or medieval
11	62	2	Ditch slot	Late Saxon or medieval
12	63	2	Posthole	-
13	64, 65	2	Pit	Late Roman
14	66, 67	1	Ditch slot	Late medieval or post-medieval
15	68	1	Ditch slot	Late medieval or post-medieval
16	69, 72	1	Ditch slot	Late medieval or post-medieval
17	70	1	Ditch slot	Late medieval or post-medieval
	59	2	Buried soil layer	Roman
	71	1	Buried soil layer	Saxon 6th–9th century

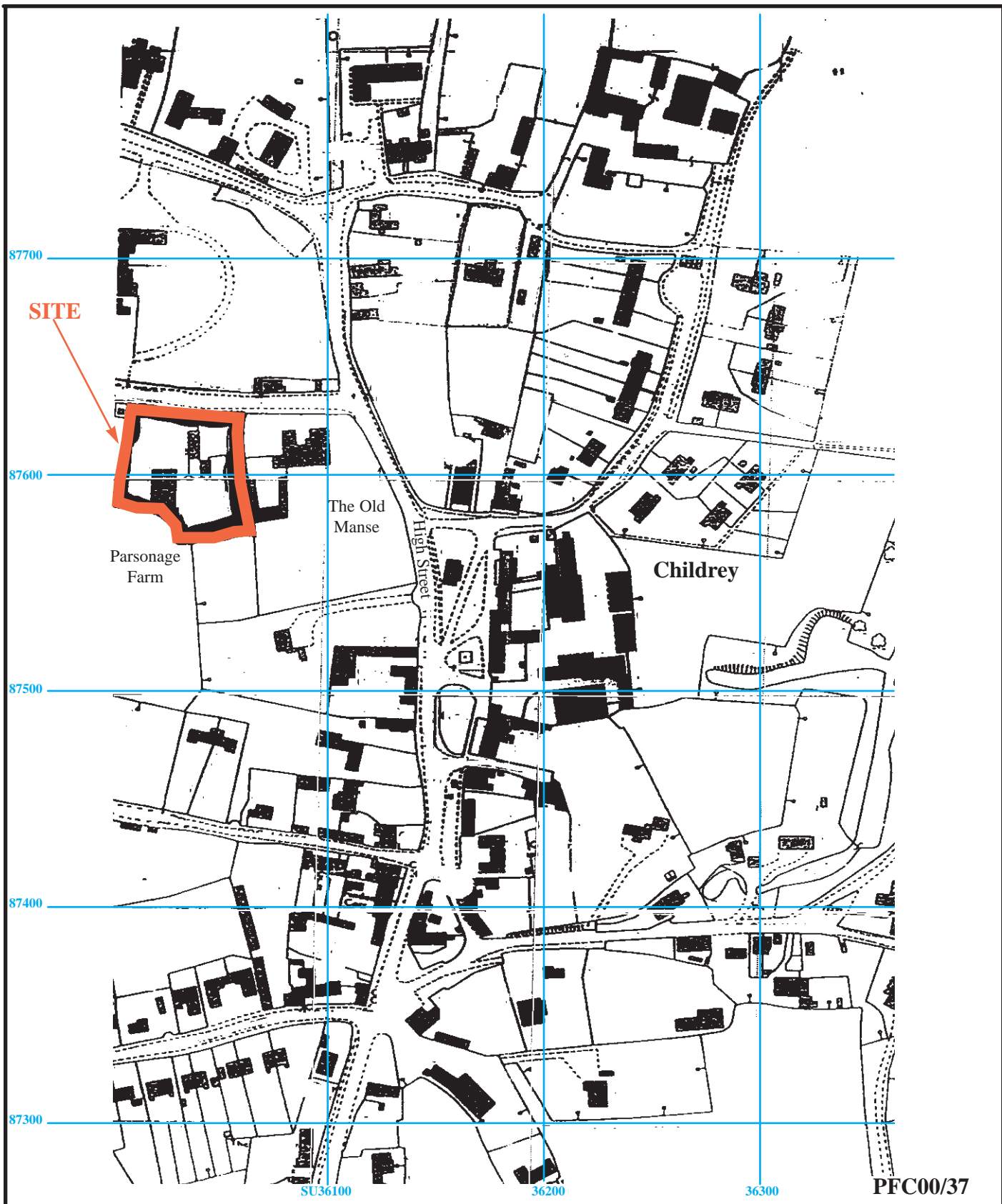


Parsonage Farm, Childrey, Oxfordshire, 2000

Figure 1. Location of site within Childrey and Oxfordshire.

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Parsonage Farm, Childrey, Oxfordshire, 2000

Figure 2. Location of site.

Parsonage Farm, Childrey, Oxfordshire, 2000

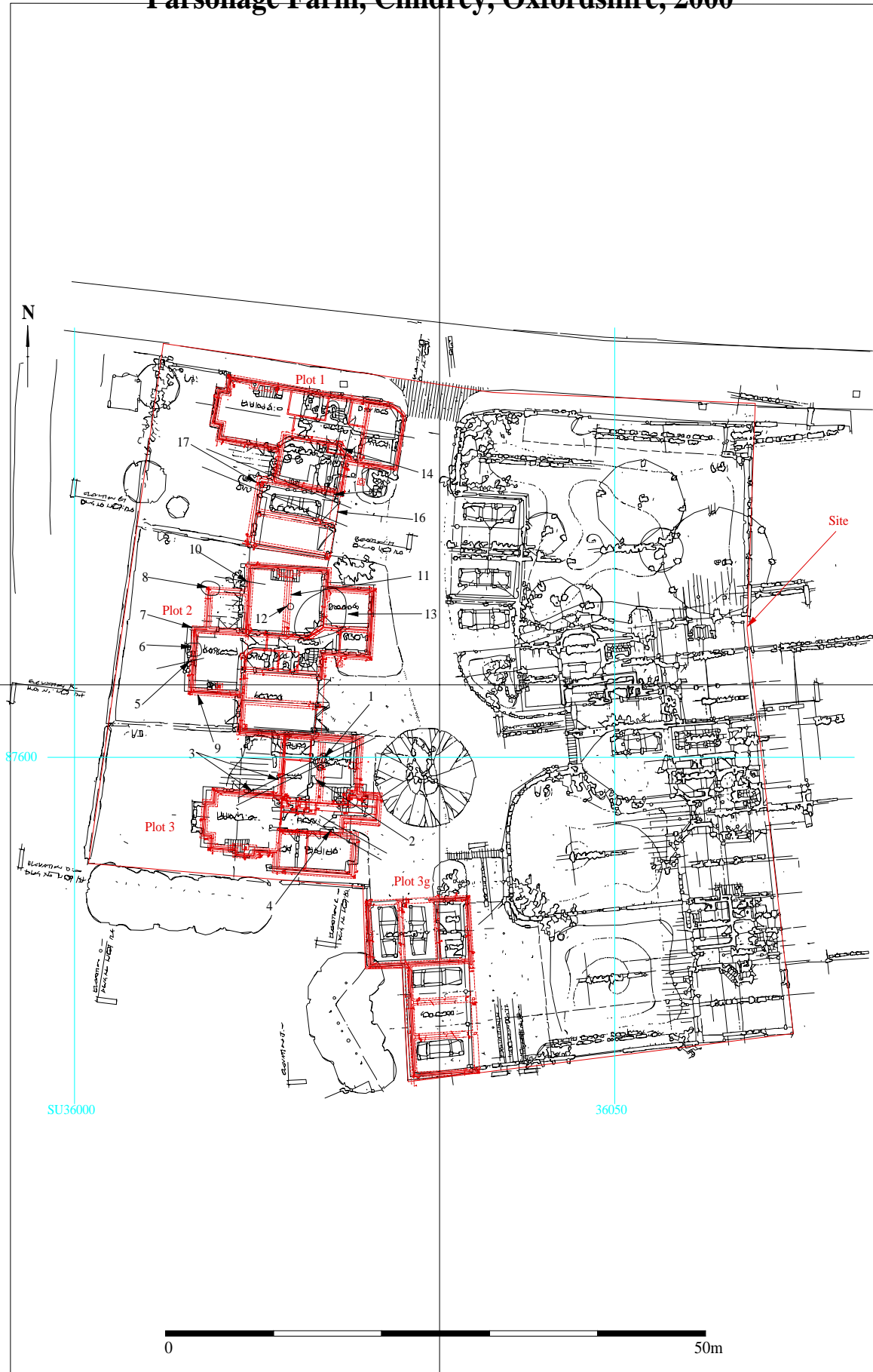


Figure 3. Location of archaeological deposits recorded during watching brief.

Parsonage Farm, Childrey, Oxfordshire, 2000

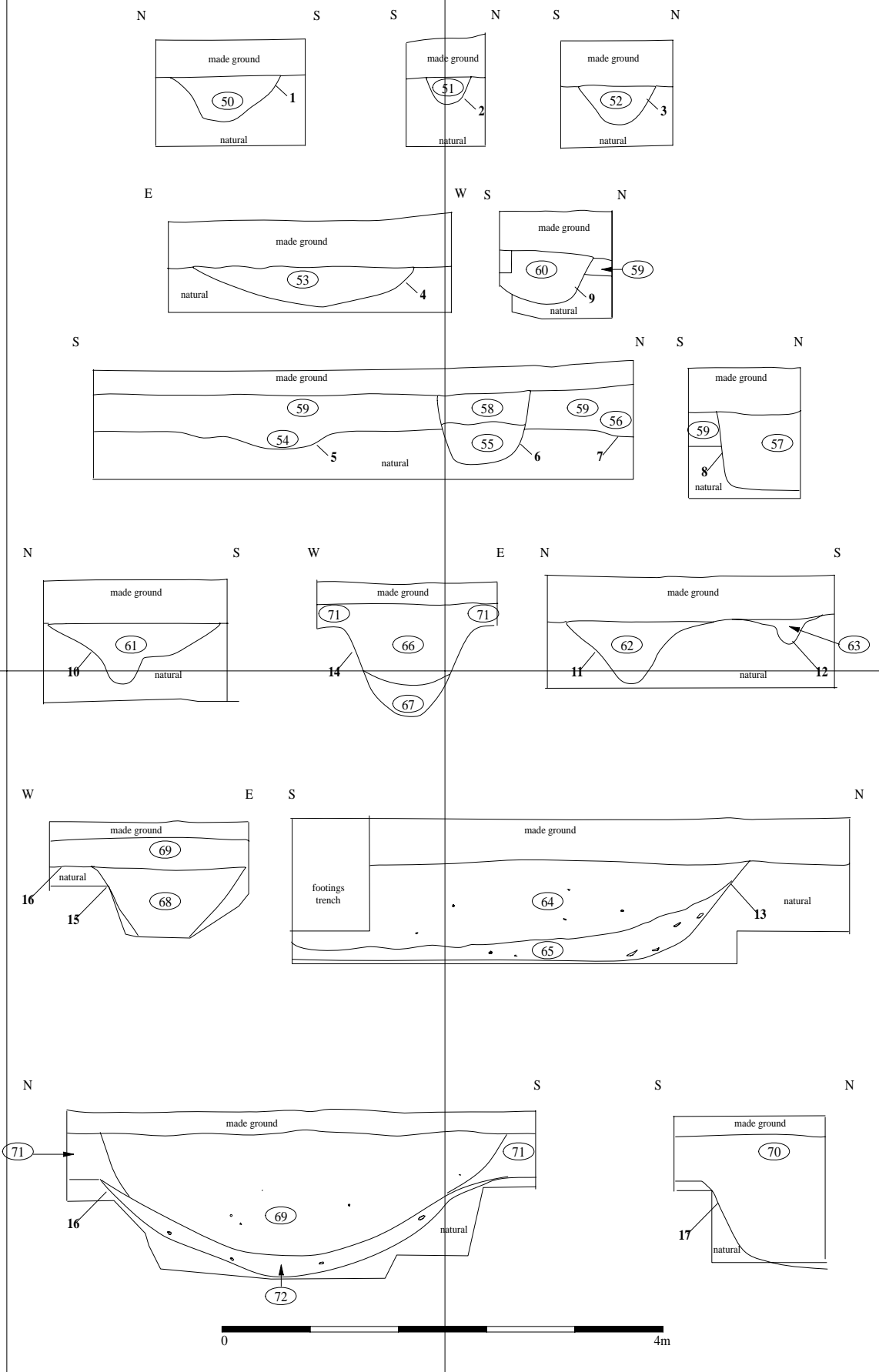


Figure 4. Sections of all archaeological features.



Plate 1. Plot 3 looking east, showing feature 1, scale: 0.50m.



Plate 2. Plot 2 looking north east showing feature 10, scales: 0.10m and 0.50m.