

Moorstream Cottage, Lower Way Thatcham, Berkshire

Archaeological Evaluation Report



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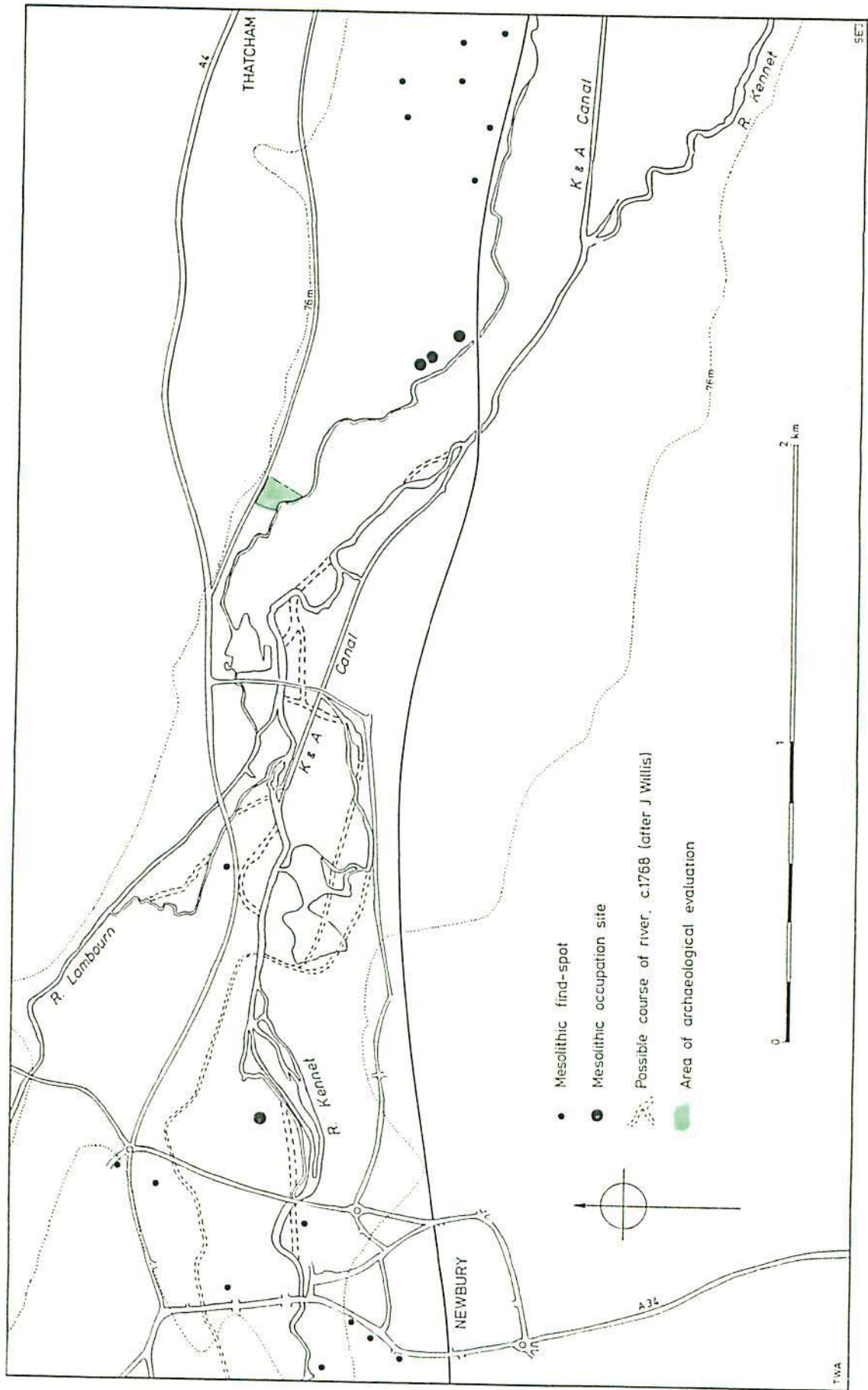
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LOWER WAY, THATCHAM

Introduction

An application for permission to build a water-sports and recreation centre at Lower Way, Thatcham was submitted to Berkshire County Council in July 1985. This area of Thatcham has been defined as an area of high archaeological potential owing to the number of important sites and finds dating to the Mesolithic period found in the vicinity. Mesolithic activity in the Kennet Valley in general, and in the Thatcham/Newbury area in particular, is well attested. Environmental evidence indicates that the Kennet Valley in this period would have been an open marshy area: an ideal environment for Mesolithic hunter-fishers. Mesolithic implements have been found at several sites between Thatcham and Newbury. The Mesolithic site dug in 1957/8 by John Wymer of Reading Museum is located some 400m to the south-east of the site at Lower Way and in a similar topographical position. Wymer found Mesolithic flint and bone implements as well as hearths on top of the natural gravel subsoil, sealed beneath a black compact peat.

Immediately to the south of the site at Lower Way, on the opposite bank of the Moor Ditch, archaeological evaluation



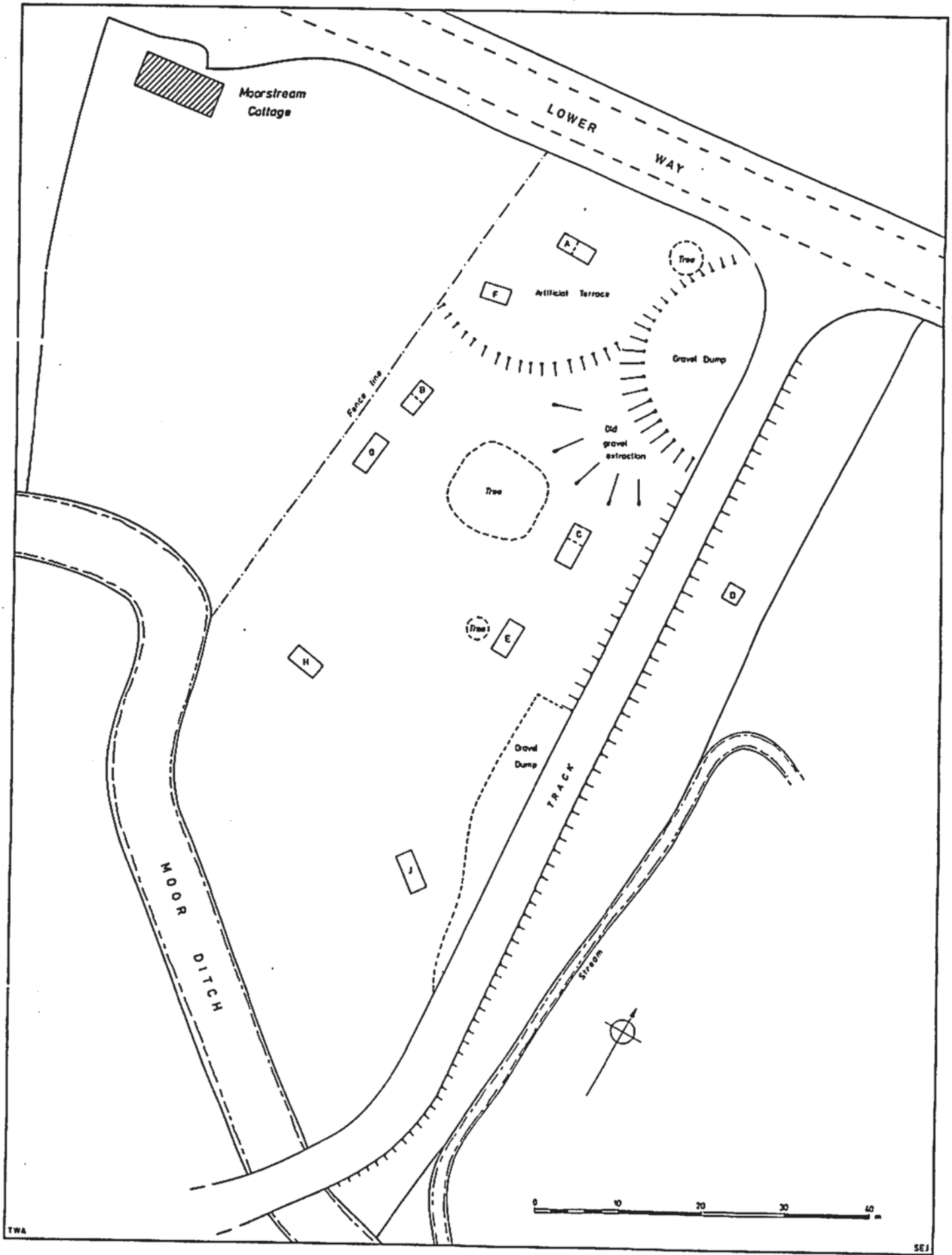
SITE LOCATION

in 1985 indicated that the natural gravel subsoil was at a relatively high level in this area, and evidence of some kind of activity, in the form of animal bone and burnt flint, was recovered from the top of the gravel, sealed beneath a layer of peat. The high level of the gravel in this area may mark the site of a former island in the surrounding marsh.

The potential, then, for the survival of archaeological levels, and evidence for Mesolithic activity in particular at Lower Way was high. Consequently, in accordance with Berkshire County Council's policy No.EN26, as stated in the Draft Replacement Structure Plan 1985, Northfield Developments commissioned the Trust for Wessex Archaeology to evaluate the archaeological potential of the site. This archaeological investigation was carried out over a two week period at the end of March and was funded by the applicant who also provided the necessary machinery.

The site

The area of the application comprised 1.54 hectares of land to the south of Lower Way adjacent to the Moor Ditch at a height of 69.9 metres O.D. Part of the area to the south has already been extracted leaving about 1.0 hectare



LOCATION OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRENCHES

to be evaluated. The Moor Stream Cottage and garden in the western part of the site was fenced off and was not available for investigation. The area examined was some 50m x 100m. Its southern boundary was marked by the Moor Ditch. The site sloped gently from north to south, but the northern end had been recently built up artificially with gravel to form a small flat terrace, probably the site of a building. A gravel track had recently been constructed running north-south across the site; this and adjacent gravel dumps limited the area which could be examined. There was also a shallow depression at the north end of the site immediately to the south of the gravel terrace. This may mark the site of gravel extraction, and consequently this area was not investigated further since it was likely that any surviving archaeological contexts would have been destroyed by this activity. Tree growth further restricted the area available.

Excavation strategy

The expected depth of overburden above the natural gravel and also the possibility of encountering intact archaeological contexts suggested that hand dug trenches would be most appropriate to ascertain the nature of any surviving archaeology on the site, and a series of 2m x 2m

squares was planned to sample the site thoroughly. Three 2m x 2m squares were dug by hand in the area to the west of the track (A-C). The overburden was much greater than expected and none of these trenches reached the natural gravel subsoil before waterlogging and the depth of the trenches prevented further excavation by hand. One more trench was dug by hand to the east of the track (D). This trench was abandoned at a depth of 0.6m due to modern disturbance.

Trenches A-C were subsequently extended both horizontally and vertically by machine, and five further trenches were dug by machine (E-J). In only one trench (J) was the gravel reached, at a depth of 2.0 metres.

Results

The trenches in the south and east part of the site revealed modern sedge growth, up to a depth of 1m in Trench C. Trenches A, B and F, in the north and west of the site, had a more loamy topsoil.

All the trenches excavated, with the exception of A and D, produced evidence of a substantial river channel running across the site, in the form of a sequence of well bedded

deposits of silt and tufaceous sand overlying a coarse nodular tufa layer. Lenses of organic silt also occurred in the sequence. The depth of this tufa layer below the ground surface ranged from 1.5m at the north of the site (Trench F) to 1.2m at the south (Trench H) and the total depth of the channel is unknown. To the south-east of H, Trench J reached natural gravel at a depth of c.2m. Some trenches produced a more mixed sequence than others, with the nodular tufa being more broken down and dispersed amongst the other deposits (Trenches G, H and J).

Trench A, located on the small gravel terrace at the northern end of the site, revealed a far more disturbed sequence. Beneath the gravel make-up and original topsoil was a series of silty clay layers. The presence of a sewage pipe running north-west/south-east across the corner of the trench at a depth of c.1.3m indicated recent disturbance at least to this depth and probably beyond. Due to the presence of the pipe, the machine driver felt it unwise to dig any deeper in this trench, and it proved impossible to ascertain the depth of recent disturbance and whether archaeological contexts survived intact beneath. However, it may be that excavation for the sewage pipe and for the construction of the adjacent road would

have destroyed any surviving archaeology in this part of the site.

The small amount of evidence for archaeological activity on the site was nevertheless significant. Three pieces of worked flint were recovered from the site: one waste flake from Trench B and two blade segments from Trench A. All were recovered from the topsoil and are therefore derived, but nevertheless indicate some form of activity in the vicinity. In addition, two sherds of medieval pottery were recovered, one from Trench B, in association with the burnt flint concentration, and one from the topsoil in Trench D.

Trench B produced a substantial amount of burnt flint from a layer immediately below the topsoil. This burnt flint was concentrated over an area of charcoal staining and patches of burnt soil. However, the presence of modern brick both associated with, and below, this feature would indicate that this represents some quite recent activity.

Discussion

The presence of a former river channel running across the site at Lower Way was quite unsuspected, and its course

right under the shallow bluff at the north end of the site is surprising. It probably formed a loop of the Moor Ditch, although it does not appear on any early maps of the area and its date is uncertain.

Since it proved impossible to reach the natural gravel, except in one trench, the presence of Mesolithic material above the gravel could not be proved either way; however, the existence of the river channel would seem to preclude this. No evidence was recovered from Trench J, where the gravel was located, but the conditions of excavation were not conducive to the careful examination of the layers above the gravel. Other Mesolithic finds in the area have usually been found sealed beneath a layer of peat. No such layer was found at Lower Way; if it existed, it may have been eroded by the action of the river channel across the site.

The recovery of three worked flints from the site, although from derived contexts, nevertheless indicates that some kind of activity was taking place in the vicinity of the site, and a watching brief during any future development of the site would be essential, especially in the western part of the site which was unavailable for evaluation.

Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to Northfield Developments for their help and co-operation during the evaluation of the site, and to the landowner, Mr R. Durnford, for access to the site. The project was managed by Sue Lobb and directed by Lorraine Mepham, with the assistance of Christine Farwell, Robin Iles and Chris Elmer. The drawings were done by Liz James. The finds and archive will be deposited at Newbury and District Museum.

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