

Evidence of Romano-British Activity along the Route of the Harwell to Blewbury Sewerage Pipeline

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SUMMARY

Between August 1997 and February 1998 Cotswold Archaeological Trust carried out a watching brief during the construction of a pipeline which ran from a sewage station at Zulu Farm, Harwell to another on the NW outskirts of Blewbury. Two new Romano-British sites were identified. Site 1 was located to the E. of West Hagbourne and comprised pits within a rectilinear enclosure, measuring at least 45 m. across. Pottery of late 1st- or early 2nd-century to later 4th-century date was recovered. Site 2 was located approximately 60 m. to the NW of Zulu Farm, where four features, possibly part of a settlement, were identified. One of these features produced a 1st-century pottery assemblage. Other discoveries identified along the pipeline comprised unstratified pottery of Romano-British and later date, a single Romano-British ditch, and an undated feature.

INTRODUCTION

During 1997 and 1998 Thames Water Utilities Limited (TWUL) undertook to upgrade the sewage disposal system in the Didcot area. Although the works were undertaken under statutory powers, TWUL initiated a programme of archaeological monitoring under the terms of the 1989 Water Act Code of Practice on Conservation, Access and Recreation. In consultation with Hugh Coddington, Deputy County Archaeological Officer, a section of the pipeline between the sewage plants at Zulu Farm, Harwell (NGR SU 500899) and Blewbury (NGR SU 530860) was identified as requiring an archaeological watching brief during construction works (Fig. 1). The number of sites within the general vicinity and the identification of several Iron Age and Roman sites along the route of a pipeline excavated between Cleeve and Didcot,¹ suggested that construction works could disturb similar archaeological deposits. The watching brief was undertaken by Cotswold Archaeological Trust between August 1997 and February 1998.

The pipeline cut through land which was predominantly under arable cultivation. For most of its length the underlying geology consisted of Upper Greensand, Gault and Chalk. The land was generally flat, ranging from 65 m. to 75 m. OD with some gentle undulations.

Work commenced with the stripping of topsoil by mechanical excavator of a 10 m. wide wayleave. Topsoil and, if present, subsoil layers were removed to an average depth of 0.30 m. Variations in the depth of these layers meant that in some areas patches of soil remained, thereby potentially obscuring underlying archaeological deposits. Where this occurred the cutting of the pipe trench was monitored and, if identified, archaeological features recorded in section. Where significant deposits were found rapid salvage excavation was undertaken, the aims of which were to excavate and record any deposits certain to be

¹ S. Ford, 'The Archaeology of the Cleeve-Didcot Pipeline, South Oxfordshire, 1989', *Oxoniensia*, lv (1990), 1-40.

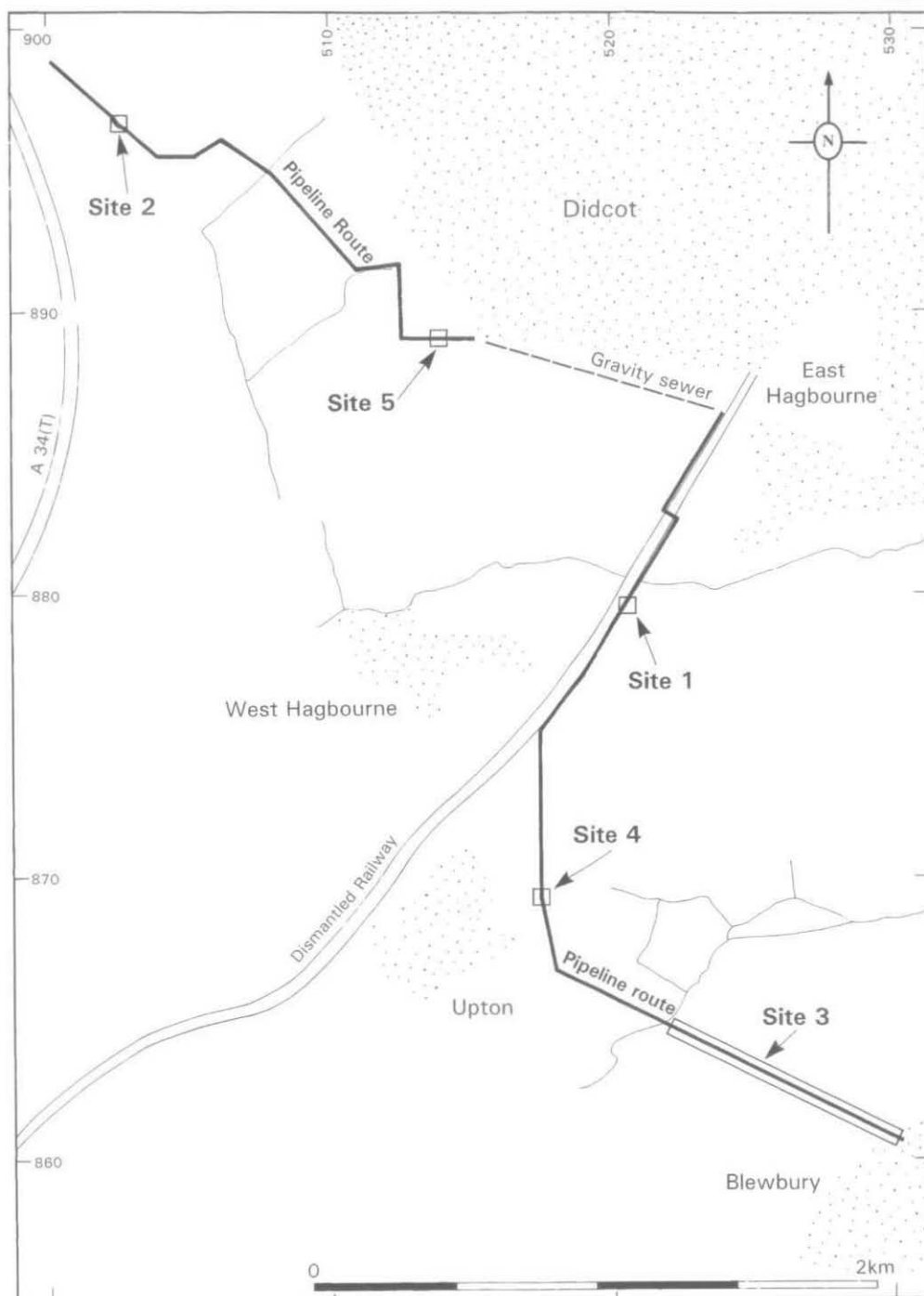


Fig. 1. Location of Sites 1-5.

destroyed by the excavation of the pipe trench, to establish the nature and date of the site, and, if possible, to place it in a local and regional context. All pits and postholes were half-sectioned, and all linear features as a minimum sectioned once by hand. A full written, drawn and photographic record was made.

Five areas of archaeological activity were identified. Sites 4 and 5 comprised single features whilst Site 3 comprised a concentration of artefacts retrieved from the topsoil. These three sites are briefly described at the end of this article. Of more note were Sites 1 and 2, both of which contained datable archaeological features. Consequently these two sites are described more fully. Full details of all the sites can be found in the archive which has been deposited with Oxfordshire County Museum under accession number 1997.62.

RESULTS

SITE 1

Site 1 was located to the E. of West Hagbourne (NGR SU 520879) and consisted of ditches and pits belonging to part of a Romano-British settlement (Fig. 2).

Ditch 118 was aligned approximately E.-W., flat-bottomed, 1.6 m. wide and 0.62 m. deep. An assemblage of 16 potsherds, which can be dated to the 1st to early 2nd centuries, was recovered from the fill of a recut of this ditch. Approximately 30 m. to the N. was a possible N.-S. aligned return 106, which had a similar profile and dimensions to ditch 118, being flat-bottomed, 1.25 m. wide and 0.5 m. deep. Twelve Roman potsherds were recovered from its fill. Parallel to ditch 106 was a further flat-bottomed ditch 103 which was 1.6 m. wide and 0.75 m. deep with two fills, the secondary of which contained an assemblage of 31 potsherds which can be dated to the 4th century.

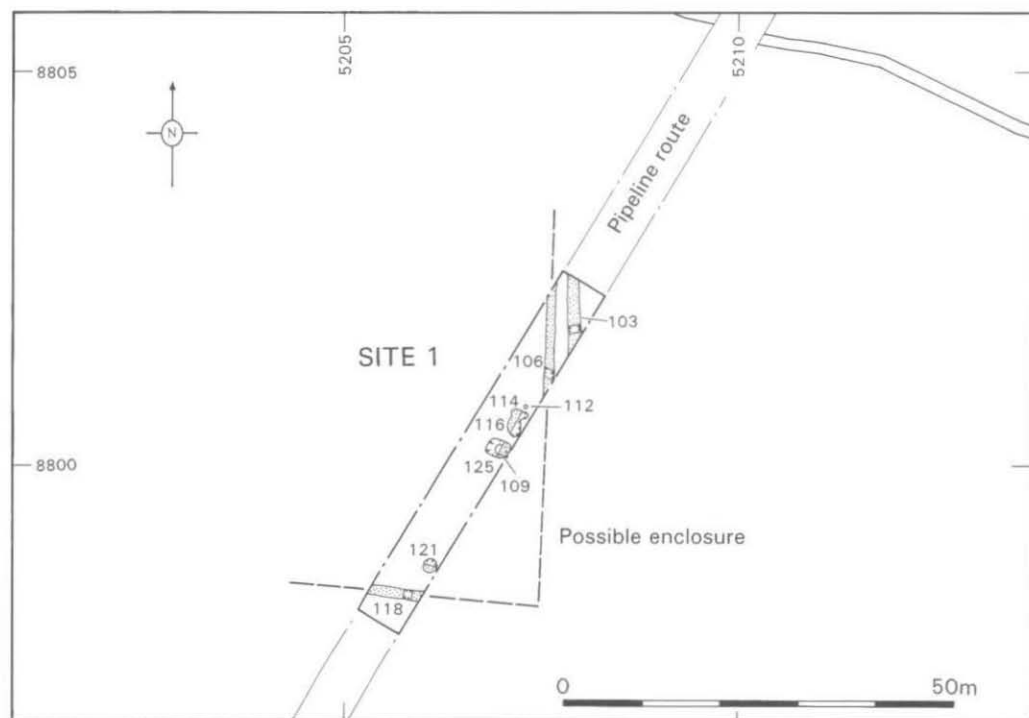


Fig. 2. Site 1, plan of all features.

Between ditches 118 and 106 six features were identified. Pit 121 was 1.62 m. in diameter, 0.88 m. deep and vertically sided. Traces of a clay lining suggested that the pit was originally used for storage, although the fill of a recut contained animal bone and an assemblage of 51 potsherds, largely dating to the 4th century but with residual late 2nd- to 3rd-century wares, suggesting that in its final phase the pit was used for rubbish disposal. Pit 109 was 1.2 m. in diameter, vertically sided, 1.55 m. deep and contained an assemblage of 23 potsherds which range in date from late 2nd-century to mid to late 3rd-century. It had been cut by a shallow scoop 125. Immediately to the N. were two shallow pits 116, 114, and a possible posthole 112. Pit 114 contained a single Roman potsherd.

THE POTTERY by JANE TIMBY

A total of 147 sherds of Roman pottery weighing 3,065 g. was recovered from Site 1. The sherds are quite well-preserved with fresh edges but of mixed size, typical of redeposited rubbish material. The assemblage was sorted into fabric types and quantified by sherd count and weight (Table 1). Traded regional wares, for example some products of the Oxfordshire industries, are referred to by codes published in the National Roman Fabric Reference Collection.² Wares of more local or unknown source have been given site-specific codes based on either the main fabric characteristics, for example, GROG for grog-tempered ware, or known regional origin, for example OXF RE for Oxfordshire reduced sandy wares (see Table 1).

The group although small contains material spanning the late 1st or early 2nd to later 4th centuries. Earlier pottery was associated with the topsoil layer 101 and ditches 118 (fill 119) and 106 (fills 107-8). Most of the sherds comprise reduced or oxidised fine sandy wares, (OXF RE, OXF OX) and whitewares (OXF WH), products of the local Oxfordshire industries. Also present are grog-tempered wares (GROG, GS) and a handmade sandy ware (SAND). Next in the ceramic sequence is context 102 containing wares of 2nd- to 3rd-century currency. Slightly later pottery was recovered from pit 109 (fills 110, 111) including a Dorset black-burnished flat-rimmed dish (DOR BB1), (OXF WH) (mid to later 2nd-century) associated with Oxfordshire colour-coated ware (OXF RS) dating to the second half of the 3rd century. The latest ceramic material came from ditch 103 (fill 104) and pit 121 (fill 123) both of which contained a range of 4th-century wares. Ditch 103 produced sherds of (OXF RS) Young³ types C20, C45, C47, C99/100, Midlands grog-tempered storage jar (PNK GT), (DOR BB1) and late Roman shelly ware (ROB SH) providing a *terminus post quem* after c. 360/70. Pit 121 produced similar material along with two redeposited sherds of Central Gaulish samian (CG SAM), one burnt sherd from a Dragendorff 33 cup.

The pottery indicates that the site was occupied from the later 1st or early 2nd century. Although the group is dominated by local wares the presence of traded wares suggests a fairly well-appointed household. The occupation pattern fits a common theme seen in the Upper Thames Valley where many rural native establishments were abandoned in the early 2nd century, coinciding with the appearance of Roman style pottery. Other examples can be cited at Old Shifford Farm, Standlake,⁴ and Gravelly Guy⁵ in Oxfordshire and Thornhill Farm at Fairford, Glos.⁶ It has been suggested that sites were reorganised into larger more nucleated communities.⁷ These settlements appear to be more adapted to Roman ways and the pottery tends to be exclusively Roman.

Illustrated sherds (Fig. 4)

1. Wheelmade necked bowl. Orange-brown grog and sand-tempered fabric (GS). Topsoil layer 101.
2. Fine greyware handled jug. Vertical burnishing on the neck. Fabric OXF RE. Probably Young⁸ type R9/10, dating to the 4th century. Pit 121 (fill 123).

² R. Tomber and J. Dore, *The National Roman Fabric Reference Collection: a handbook* (Museum of London Archaeology Service/ English Heritage/ British Museum, 1998).

³ C.J. Young, *Oxfordshire Roman Pottery* (BAR Brit. Ser. 43, 1977).

⁴ G. Hey, 'Iron Age and Roman Settlement at Old Shifford Farm, Standlake', *Oxoniensia*, lx (1995), 93-175, cf. p. 171.

⁵ Report in prep. Oxford Archaeological Unit.

⁶ Report in prep. Oxford Archaeological Unit.

⁷ Hey, op. cit. note 4.

⁸ Young, op. cit. note 3.

TABLE 1. ROMAN POTTERY FROM SITE 1

GROUP	CODE	DESCRIPTION	NO	%	WT	%
Import	CG SAM	Central Gaulish samian	2	1	8	—
Regional	DOR	Dorset black-burnished	6	4	79	2.5
	BB1*					
	PNKGT*	Midlands grog-tempered	1	—	1644	53.5
Local	ROB SH*	Midlands shell-tempered	11	7.5	92	3
	GROG	Grog tempered	7	5	107	3.5
	GS	Grog & sand tempered	4	3	57	2
	OXF OX	Oxon oxidised sandy	5	3.5	31	1
	OXF RE	Oxon reduced sandy	78	53	786	25.5
	OXF WH*	Oxon whiteware	2	1	7	—
	OXFRS*	Oxon colour-coated ware	27	18	194	6
	SAND	Hm grey sandy ware	4	3	60	2
TOTAL			147	100	3065	100

* wares found in the National Roman Fabric Reference Collection

THE ANIMAL BONE by TRACEY STICKLER

A total of 61 bones of cattle, sheep/goat, pig, deer, and dog was recovered from seven features on Site 1. The majority of the bones came from the fill of ditch 103 (22 fragments, most of which display butchery marks) and from pit 121 (18 fragments, no butchery, but one of which had been burned). The remaining contexts produced between one and seven fragments, with further evidence for butchery coming from the contents of pit 109.

THE FLINT by GRAEME WALKER

Six flints were recovered from Site 1. A possible core and an awl came from the fill of ditch 106; a broken flake from the fill of pit 125; a burnt flint from the fill of pit 109, and a flake from the fill of pit 114. There were no diagnostic pieces but a later prehistoric date is possible for some.

SITE 2

Site 2 was located approximately 60 m. to the NW. of Zulu Farm, Harwell (NGR SU 502897). Four features, possibly part of a late 1st-century Romano-British settlement, were identified (Fig. 3).

Pit 205 measured at least 6 m. x 1.8 m. across and 0.72 m. in depth. Its two fills contained an assemblage of 47 potsherds dated to the 1st century, four red deer bones, and a single residual burnt worked flint. To the E. a narrow, flat-bottomed, N.-S. aligned gully 207 was 0.52 m. wide and 0.23 m. deep with a fill which contained a single Roman potsherd and a single pig bone. Pit or posthole 209 produced no dating evidence, whilst a single Roman rimsherd was recovered from pit 203.

THE POTTERY by JANE TIMBY

A small group of just 49 sherds came from Site 2 all of which appear to belong to the early Roman period (1st century). The pottery came from just four contexts (204, 206, 208 and 213) and comprised exclusively local wares (Table 2). A single rimsherd from pit 203 (fill 204) is from a small carinated cup (Fig. 4.3), a form more familiar in Severn Valley ware. Pit 205 contained grog-tempered sherds alongside reduced and oxidised sandy wares, including a wheelmade, necked cordoned bowl (Fig. 4.4) and a devolved butt beaker (Fig. 4.5). Pit 207 contained a single small sand and flint-tempered sherd.

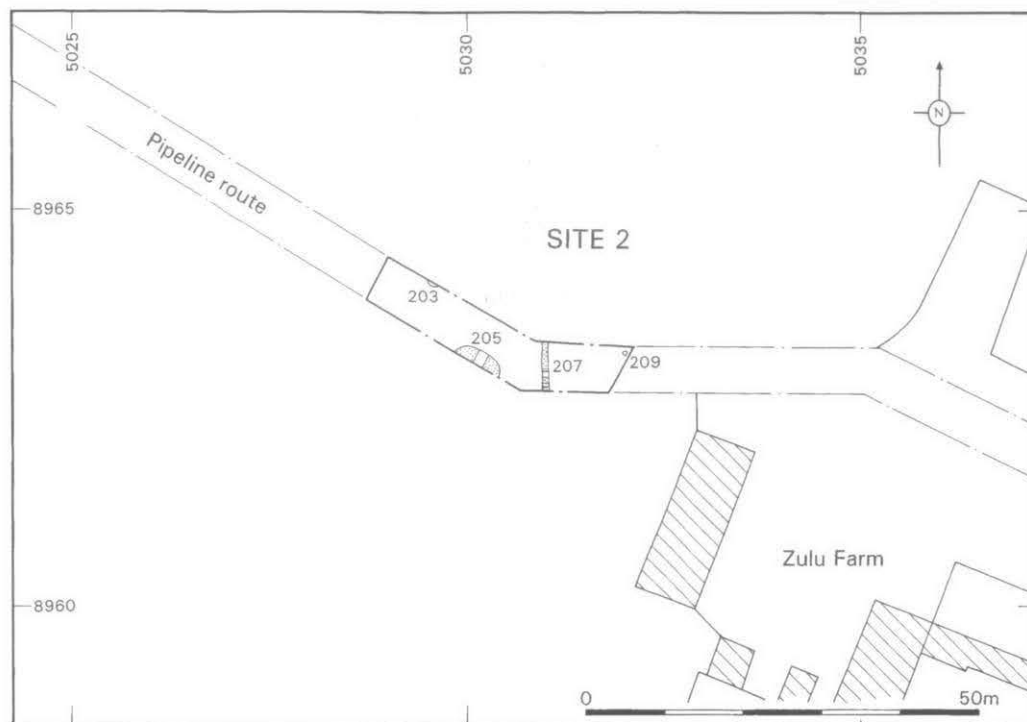


Fig. 3. Site 2, plan of all features.

TABLE 2. ROMAN POTTERY FROM SITE 2

GROUP	CODE	DESCRIPTION	NO.	%	WT	%
Local	GROG	Grog tempered	29	59	111	45.5
	GS	Grog & sand tempered	6	12	72	29.5
	SF	Sand & flint tempered	1	2	3	1
	OXF OX	Oxon oxidised sandy	1	2	9	4
	OXF RE	Oxon reduced sandy	12	25	49	20
TOTAL			49	100	244	100

Illustrated sherds (Fig. 4)

3. Orange grog-tempered carinated cup/bowl with a black interior. GROG. Pit 203 (fill 204).
4. Wheelmade, necked cordoned bowl. Red-brown surfaces, dark grey core. GS. Pit 205 (fill 213).
5. Dark orange, dense sandy ware bevelled rim beaker. OXF OX. Pit 205 (fill 206).

SITES 3-5

Site 3 was located immediately NW. of the pumping station at Blewbury (NGR SU 524863). No archaeological features were identified but a small quantity of potsherds ranging in date from Roman to post-medieval was recovered from the topsoil for a distance of approximately 900 m. The potsherds were evenly distributed with no concentrations being noted. Given the lack of associated features these sherds probably derive from the manuring of fields.

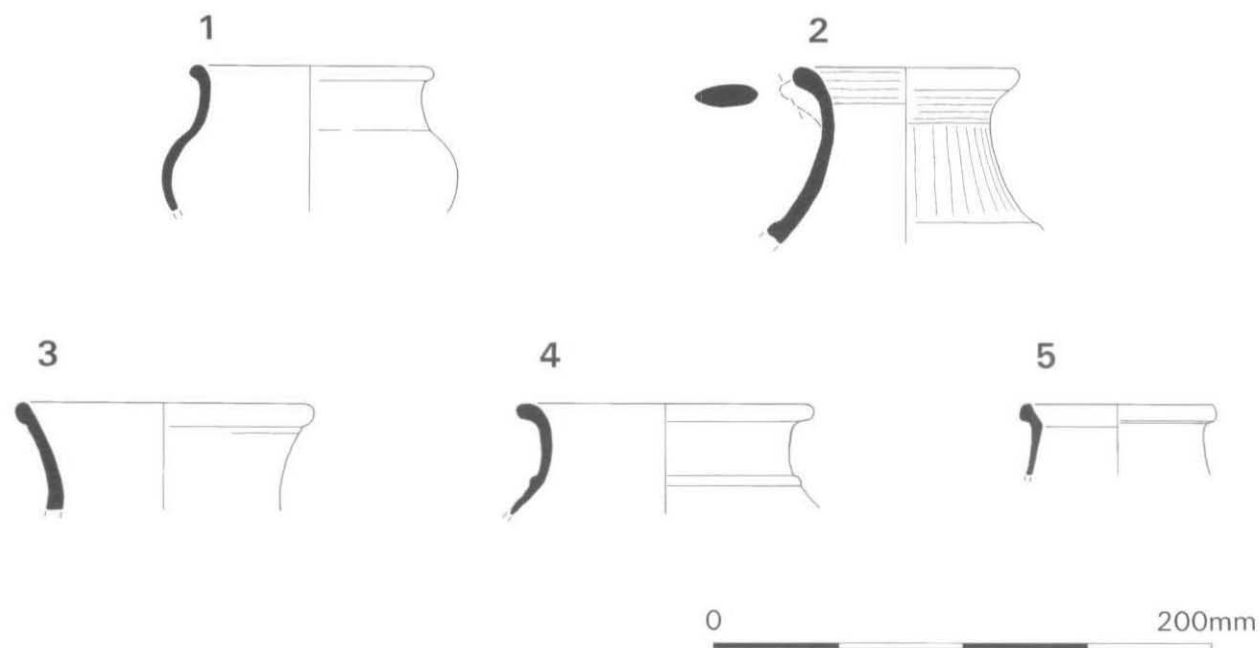


Fig. 4. Illustrated pottery.

Site 4 was located to the E. of Upton (NGR SU 516869). A single linear E.-W. aligned ditch 304 had a flat-bottomed profile, was 0.6 m. wide and just 0.12 m. deep. Its fill contained two Roman potsherds. The interpretation of this apparently isolated feature is uncertain although it may point to the presence of a further Romano-British site in the immediate vicinity or possibly be part of a field system associated with another settlement.

Site 5 was located some 200 m. SE. of Down Farm on the southern outskirts of Didcot (NGR SU 511891) and consisted of a single linear feature which was 0.55 m. wide and 0.15 m. deep. Its date and function are not known.

DISCUSSION

The archaeological monitoring of pipeline projects inevitably tends to be difficult. The incomplete removal of topsoil or subsoil during the machine strip may result in smaller areas of activity being overlooked, whilst the limited width of the trench wayleave renders interpretation difficult for the sites encountered.

No prehistoric features were found during the watching brief. However, prehistoric sites have been identified along the route of a pipeline which ran to the east between Cleeve and Didcot⁹ and in Didcot itself.¹⁰ Findspots of prehistoric material are also recorded on the County Sites and Monuments Record in the general area between Didcot and the Downs. In this regard the recovery of six residual flints from Site 1, which suggests prehistoric activity within its vicinity, is not unusual. A single residual flint was also found on Site 2 and unstratified flints were found on Sites 3 and 4.

The discovery of the new Romano-British sites on the present pipeline is not particularly unexpected considering that the area lies in close proximity to other known sites of this date. Romano-British occupation is known just to the north of Didcot at Hadden Hill¹¹ and in Didcot itself.¹² The presence of further Roman sites a few kilometres to the east was established during the excavation of the Cleeve to Didcot pipeline, where several sites were found between Moulsoford and South Moreton.¹³ It may be significant that both new sites were situated near a water supply. Site 1 lies just 50 m. to the south of a small stream and 150 m. to the west of a spring. Site 2 also lies approximately 250 m. to the south-east of a stream.

It is difficult to assess the function and status of the newly identified sites given the limited information gained from the watching brief. Site 1 may originally have consisted of a single rectilinear enclosure measuring at least 45 m. across. The type of pottery and animal bone found at both Sites 1 and 2 suggests that they are small rural settlements, although the presence of samian ware at Site 1 indicates that this site had access to imported wares and possessed a degree of wealth.

The limited investigation of these sites inevitably means that it is difficult to place them in their regional context without further fieldwork. However, it may be reasonable to suggest that these were small rural establishments served by larger local market centres, as suggested by the presence of samian, Dorset black-burnished ware and Midlands grog-tempered storage jar. The Romano-British small towns at Wantage, Abingdon and Dorchester all lie within 10 km. of these newly discovered sites. In addition, although Site 1 has been

⁹ Ford, *op. cit.* note 1.

¹⁰ P. Booth, A. Boyle and G.D. Keevill, 'A Romano-British Kiln Site at Lower Farm, Nuneham Courtenay, and Other Sites on the Didcot to Oxford and Wootton to Abingdon Water Mains, Oxfordshire', *Oxoniensia*, lviii (1993), 100-6.

¹¹ R.A. Chambers, 'Iron Age and Later Settlement to the West of All Saints' Parish Church, Didcot, Oxon.', *Oxoniensia*, lviii (1993), 27-32.

¹² Booth et al., *op. cit.* note 10.

¹³ Ford, *op. cit.* note 1.

examined only partially, the pottery evidence would suggest it fits a fairly typical pattern of occupation for the Upper Thames Valley, where rural native settlements were abandoned in the early 2nd century and replaced by new establishments using exclusively Roman pottery.

Historically the area between the Thames Valley and the North Wessex Downs was thought to be largely devoid of settlement during the Romano-British period,¹⁴ especially when compared with the extensive settlements identified on the gravels of the Upper Thames Valley which are much more susceptible to detection through aerial photography. However the discovery, as a result of opportunistic fieldwork, of sites between Moulsoford and South Moreton, at West Hagbourne, and between Didcot and Harwell would suggest the area was settled, although to what degree is difficult to determine in the absence of further survey.

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¹⁴ See Map 9 in G. Briggs, J. Cook and T. Rowley, *The Archaeology of the Oxford Region* (1986).