

NEOLITHIC, ROMAN AND MEDIEVAL ARTEFACTS RECOVERED FROM THE FILLS OF A GLACIAL HOLLOW IN MELDRETH, CAMBRIDGESHIRE

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SUMMARY

Archaeological work conducted at Whitecroft Road, Meldreth by Archaeological Solutions Ltd identified a natural hollow of glacial origin similar to features which have been recorded elsewhere in southern Cambridgeshire, notably at nearby Melbourn and at the Hinxtton Genome Campus.

Artefactual evidence recovered from it suggested that human activity occurred at its margins in the early Neolithic period and that Romano-British and medieval settlement activity was present nearby. Analysis of its fills has suggested that it was a water-filled feature, at least seasonally, and it is possibly this that attracted the prehistoric activity. It is possible that the feature was used for watering livestock or that it attracted game and wildfowl that could be used to supplement the diet.

Later artefactual material maybe the result of fluctuations in water levels, periods of high precipitation, and seasonal flooding, causing nearby objects to wash into the hollow. Some deliberate discard must be considered amongst the agencies that led to the deposition of this material and later ploughing may have contributed to the mixing of the dateable evidence within this deposit.

Introduction

Early Holocene or periglacial hollows appear to be fairly common in the chalk landscapes of southern Cambridgeshire (Revell 2019, 45). Several examples have been recorded in the Melbourn area (e.g. Graham 2019; Ladd 2018, Ladd 2017; Ladd 2016) but amongst the best known such features are those recorded at the Hinxtton Genome Complex. The Hinxtton examples have been found to contain significant quantities of struck flint dating to the Mesolithic, Neolithic, Bronze Age and Iron Age periods as well as nationally significant assemblages of late glacial upper Palaeolithic date (Bishop 2016). In October 2019, archaeological trial trenching and a subsequent excavation, conducted by Archaeological Solutions Ltd, identified a feature of this type at 70 Whitecroft Road in Meldreth (Fig. 1).

The site that was subject to investigation forms a rectangular-shaped parcel of land encompassing some 0.41 hectares and is located in the north-eastern part of Meldreth. It formerly contained a house, garden and outbuildings. It lies at c.20m AOD in a relatively low-lying area. The land rises substantially to c.48m AOD to the south, beyond the nearby village of Melbourn. The closest watercourse to the proposed development site is the river Mel, which lies approximately 450m to the east. However, a drainage channel passes to the north of the site on a west-south-west to east-north-east alignment, this turns to the north after a short distance and runs north, towards the river Cam. The solid geology of the area consists of the West Melbury Marly Chalk Formation (BGS 1991). Overlying the solid geology, the soils of the area are those of the Sherborne association, which are described as shallow, well-drained, brashy calcareous clayey soils over limestone, associated with slowly permeable calcareous clayey soils. Also present in the vicinity of the site are soils of the Milton association, which are described as deep permeable calcareous fine loamy soils variably affected by groundwater and some similar shallower well drained soils over gravel in places (SSEW 1983).

Multi-period archaeological remains are recorded on the Cambridgeshire Historic Environment Record (CHER) in the Meldreth area. A Neolithic polished flint axe has been recovered from a location c.600m to the north and a scatter of flint debitage flakes has been noted further to the north (CHER 03426 & 03136a). A crop mark c.950m to the south suggests the presence of a Bronze Age barrow in the landscape (CHER MCB23525), while a late Bronze Age hoard (CHER 03117) found at Meldreth Station c.500m to the south-east may indicate high status occupation in the area on the basis that the control of supplies of metal and the technical skills to work it were sources of prestige and power in the Bronze Age (Champion 1999, 106).

The Iron Age and Roman landscape appears to demonstrate a more intense, continual pattern of occupation. The Avenell Way passes c.75m to the south of the site (CHER MCB19147). This was an ancient trackway which ran between Odsey and Meldreth before becoming disused and in-filled sometime between the 10th and 13th centuries. Its precise date is unknown but excavations along the route have shown the presence of Iron Age/Roman structures indicating that it was in use by this time. Also prominent in the Roman landscape is a burial site on Mettle Hill c.800m to the west, where a lead coffin, jewellery and five unguentaria were recorded (CHER 03167). This is also the probable original location of a suspected Roman stone coffin now located in Holy Trinity Church (CHER 03060B). Extensive Iron Age to Roman enclosure systems, potentially including settlement and buildings, have been identified as cropmarks in the local landscape, notable c.800m-1km to the south (CHER 08557, 08563, MCB23525 & MCB25638), and also c.1km to the west and east (CHER MCB23362 & 08909).

The surrounding landscape appears to have undergone significant transformation in the late Anglo-Saxon and medieval periods. Notably Flambard's Manor c.300m to the east has produced Anglo-Saxon pottery, and the moat here appears to have been at least partially cut in the late Anglo-Saxon period (CHER 01275 & 01275a). Saxo-Norman ditches have been also recorded c.300m to the north (CHER MCB19820), while late Anglo-Saxon pottery has been found close to other medieval moated sites in the local area (CHER 02113 & MCB19435). In addition to the medieval moated enclosure and manor at Flambard's, further moated enclosures are known at St. John's College Farm, Topcliffe's Mill, Sheene Farm, and Vesey's Manor (CHER 01246, 01249, 01251 & 01252). The core of medieval Meldreth appears to have been focussed on Holy Trinity Church, built in the 12th century c.950m to the north of the current site; this once had a significantly larger burial ground (CHER 03060, 03136, 03062, 03118 & 03425). Fragments of medieval to post-medieval field boundaries have previously been recorded during evaluation excavations between c.500-700m to the east and south of the site (CHER MCB23524 & MCB25637). The site appears to have lain at some distance from the post-medieval cores of settlement, in part evidenced by modest numbers of extant listed building along the High Street to the north and Chiswick End to the south. In the late 19th century, a Congregational chapel and villa were built within 200m of the site (CHER MCB24552 & MCB2455) after the landscape of the village had been altered by the establishment of the railway c.500m to the south-east in 1851 (i.e. CHER MCB24042 & MCB16571).

The archaeological investigations

The first phase of investigation comprised a trial trench evaluation of the site, carried out in 2019 (Locke and Podbury 2019; CHER ECB 5845). This recorded post-medieval furrows that correspond with the alignment of historic field boundaries and residual sherds of medieval pottery in the subsoil. The principal archaeological feature present was a large hollow which contained flint and pottery of an early Neolithic date. The hollow contained silty grey fills which were considered to represent the accumulation of material through alluvial action; a hypothesis supported by the molluscan evidence which suggested that the hollow

was water-filled and well-vegetated. Artefactual evidence comprised non-diagnostic body sherds of pottery, struck flint blade cores and flint debitage that appear consistent with a date in the early Neolithic period. The presence of Neolithic activity in the local landscape has been previously suggested by scatters of debitage flakes and a polished axe recovered as surface finds in the local vicinity (CHER 03426 & 03136a).

Based on the results of the trial trench evaluation (Locke and Podbury 2019), Cambridgeshire County Council Historic Environment Team (CCC HET) required a programme of open area excavation to further investigate archaeological remains within the site. Specifically, it was required that the large hollow revealed within Trench 1 of the evaluation was investigated through a programme of systematic test pitting.

A total of 13 test pits were excavated out of 23 (Figs. 2-5). These measured 2m x 2m. The test pits were positioned to avoid the area of the demolished buildings that were present on site. The results of the test pitting were assessed, and the excavation ceased based on advice from CCC HET.

The excavated spoil was sieved to enhance the finds recovery and the excavation area was scanned by metal detector. 100% of the soil removed from the hollow was put through a 10mm fine sieve supported by a frame. Forty litre bulk samples were taken from each deposit within each excavated test square.

During the evaluation the hollow was sampled for mollusc shells, as well as for carbonised plant macrofossils. The findings from the mollusc investigation indicated a natural, wet depression which would have been well vegetated and likely to be prone to seasonal fluctuations in water-level, perhaps largely becoming dry in drier seasons. Evidence from the mollusc assemblage indicated that it was surrounded by dense vegetation, although there was also some evidence of grassland taxa, which may indicate grassland or grazed pasture in the near vicinity. A landscape feature such as this may have attracted transient human activity, perhaps as a convenient watering hollow for animals. The assemblage was relatively consistent throughout the profile, although aquatic taxa made a smaller contribution in the upper fills as the feature silted up and became drier.

A monolith sample for palaeoenvironmental analysis was also taken but no further work was recommended on this. Discussion with Prof. Rob Scaife, University of Southampton, highlighted the fact that the alkaline conditions and lack of permanent waterlogging within the feature are likely to have resulted in degradation of most of the pollen in the deposits. Although only a small assemblage of carbonised plant macrofossil remains was gathered from the evaluation, the number of features investigated was low. As such, further sampling was undertaken to better understand whether this low density of remains was consistent across the site.

All environmental and artefactual analysis is reported on in the Research Archive Report that was compiled for this project (Newton *et al.* 2020).

The results of the excavation

The natural substrate recorded at the site (L2002) was a firm, very light yellow clayey silt with frequent chalk. This was overlain by Subsoil L2001, a firm, mid grey brown yellow clayey silt with occasional small to medium sub-angular flint. Overlying this was topsoil L2000, a loose dark brown to black silt.

Within the south-western part of the excavated area was large hollow F2003 (Fig. 2). This was the same feature as that recorded during the preceding trial trench evaluation (Locke

and Podbury 2019). The hollow measured 18.50+ x 10.00+ x 0.95m but its full extent was not revealed within the excavation area (Figs. 2-5). It appeared to be aligned with its assumed long axis running north to south. It had a gentle break of slope steepening into moderately sloping sides and a flat, undulating base. It contained two fills. Its basal fill, L2005, was a firm, mid blue grey silty clay, which is likely to have been deposited through natural silting, perhaps during seasonal ponding within the hollow. It contained struck flint, burnt flint, prehistoric pottery and seemingly intrusive medieval pottery.

Its upper fill, L2004, was a friable, mid grey brown clayey silt with moderate small sub-angular and sub-rounded flint inclusions. Multiperiod activity could be seen within this upper fill with struck flint, burnt flint, alongside Roman and medieval pottery and a variety of other finds. The hollow had no relationship to other features recorded during the excavation or evaluation phase.

During the excavation, 481 pieces (2158g) of struck flint in a sharp condition but with widely varying degrees of patination (absent to heavy), consistent with significant weathering and movement of deposits. The assemblage was entirely contained in the fills of Hollow F2003. The technological traits of the assemblage suggest this is a very homogenous group consistent with the core reduction strategies and implements of the early Neolithic period, including exhausted single platform and rotated blade cores, blades, a leaf-shaped arrowhead and dominated by relatively small blade-like debitage produced as a by-product of core reduction. The systematic reduction of cores to produce blades, albeit potentially with limited raw material, including some platform rejuvenation and a prevalence of un-corticated and tertiary flakes, combined with a limited array of characteristic implements is typical of early Neolithic activity in the region, and closely comparable to the significantly larger settlement assemblage from Kilverstone (Beadsmore 2006, 58-59 and 66-67). The majority of this material was recovered from basal fill L2005 but some flint of this type, including minor concentrations of debitage, was present in the upper fill, L2004.

The prehistoric pottery recovered from F2003 is manufactured in a fabric tempered with common calcined flint (1-4mm) that commonly protrudes from the surface, and with a patchy bonfire firing. Based on limited evidence, it is almost certain that these sherds formed part of early Neolithic Plain Bowls, typically associated with Mildenhall Ware in early Neolithic assemblages in the region, including at Hurst Fen, Mildenhall (Clark *et al.* 1960), Kilverstone, Thetford (Knight 2006a) and Sawston (Peachey 2018, fig.43). The 18 sherds (102g) of Roman pottery that were recovered consisted of four distinct fabrics. These were Les Martres-de-Veyre samian ware (Tomber and Dore 1998, 30), Lezoux samian ware 2 (Tomber and Dore 1998, 32), Horningsea oxidised ware (Tomber and Dore 1998, 116; Evans 1991, 35; Evans *et al.* 2017, 52). Only three sherds of the central Gaulish samian ware were present. The remaining Roman pottery was limited to locally-produced coarse wares, notably a shallow plain rim dish manufactured in the kilns at Horningsea, which was a utilitarian form with a long currency in the 2nd to 4th centuries AD. The other Roman coarse wares were plain body sherds of sandy grey wares, possibly including further Horningsea products although this was not conclusive, and all were likely to have been derived from closed forms such as jars.

The post-Roman pottery from the hollow was all medieval with the exception of a single sherd of London type stoneware (17th-19th centuries), with unabraded surfaces. Four glazed medieval sherds came from the hollow comprising three of Hedingham Ware and one of Brill Ware. The remaining pottery from the test pitting of F2003 were all abraded sandy and shelly coarsewares dating to between the 12th and 14th centuries, with only one jar rim sherd and a fragment each of a strap handle and a base sherd, present the remainder being body sherds.

A total of 14 highly abraded small fragments (100g) of CBM were recovered from Hollow F2003. All were manufactured in a mid to dark orange fabric with inclusions of common fine silty quartz, sparse red iron rich grains (<0.5mm) and occasional flint (<5mm). This fabric suggests that the CBM is of Roman origin but there are no diagnostic fragments present. A single fragment in L2004 had an intact thickness of 15mm and appeared flat, which may suggest it is derived from a tegula roof tile.

The carbonised plant macrofossil remains from L2004, the medieval upper fill of Depression F2003, were of common medieval cereal crops free-threshing type wheat, hulled barley and oat, accompanied by pulses (pea/bean). The density of remains is consistent with background scatters of carbonised debris from nearby domestic occupation. The very small number of carbonised remains from L2005, the lower early Neolithic fill of depression F2003, are considered unlikely to indicate significant contemporary occupation in the vicinity of the feature. The likelihood that they represent intrusive material from the overlying medieval deposit L2004 should be considered one of the most probable interpretations.

The mollusc assemblage from Column Sample <14> indicated a water filled depression during the early Neolithic, with areas of damp grassland, waste ground and scrub type habitats on the margins of the feature (L2005). Deposits dated to the medieval period (L2004) indicate that the feature was predominantly dry by this time, although with possible periods of standing water. Most taxa were indicative of tall damp vegetation and ground litter. Indicators of aquatic conditions reduced as the feature's silting advanced. Taxa indicative of calcareous short-turf grassland were dominant in the upper, modern horizon L2008.

Macromorphological analysis of the monolith sample taken from F2003 indicated that there were three clear deposition layers, with a further deposit (L2010) identifiable beneath L2005, all with individual pedogenic characteristics. The three layers were all formed initially through alluvial deposition and then affected by further individual pedogenesis.

The soil development of the layers indicates that the lower layer (L2010) has undergone considerable gleying, the soil structure providing evidence of high clay content. The mid layer (L2005) contains a higher level of organic matter due to the colour and composition. There was evidence in the upper layer (L2004) of the inclusion of flint fragments, not originally deposited through alluvial processes and indicative of fragments newly broken.

Ditch F2006 was situated in the western corner of the site. It was linear in plan (4.00+ x 1.20+ x 0.50m) and orientated north-east to south-west. It had moderately sloping sides and a concave base. It contained two fills. Its basal fill, L2007, was a mid brown grey clayey silt with occasional small chalk nodules. Its upper fill, L2009, was a dark grey brown clayey silt with moderate small sub-angular flint. Two sherds of medieval pottery were recovered from the basal fill, L2007. Ditch F2006 ran at a slightly oblique angle to Whitecroft Road to the west. This suggests that the feature was not directly related to the road, not representing a roadside ditch or similar feature, unless the alignment of Whitecroft Road itself has changed over time.

Discussion

Overview of the recorded archaeology

The excavation revealed a large hollow, with its long axis aligned north to south. It is likely that this is the result of fluvial action in a periglacial environment. It is notable that its orientation is similar to that of the drainage channel that lies to the north of the excavation site and leads to the river Cam.

Hollow F2003 contained two fills. Dateable artefactual evidence from basal Fill L2005 is from the Neolithic period. This included both struck flint and pottery. However, sherds of medieval pottery were also present within this fill. As a feature of possible late glacial origin, the accumulation of Fill L2005 is likely to have originated earlier than the Neolithic period but this material represents the first identifiable human activity associated with F2003. More mixed dating evidence was recovered from upper Fill L2004. The majority of this consisted of medieval pottery but also included 18 sherds of Roman pottery, 14 very small fragments of Roman CBM, and four iron nails of Roman to post-medieval date. Some early Neolithic struck flint and pottery was also present in this deposit.

Ditch F2006 was identified in the north-western corner of the excavated area. It extended beyond the limits of excavation, but its observable eastern edge indicated that it was aligned north-north-west to south-south-east. This alignment places it an oblique angle to the adjacent Whitecroft Road which suggests that it is unlikely to represent a former roadside ditch. It is possible that an earlier iteration of the road was positioned on a slightly different alignment, but this has certainly not been the case since at least the late 19th century. Two sherds of medieval pottery were recovered from Ditch F2006.

The fills of Hollow F2003

The basal fill of Hollow F2003 was observed, during excavation, to be L2005. This was a maximum of 0.12m deep and was only present in the deeper parts of the hollow. Soil macromorphological analysis has, however, identified a distinction between the upper parts of L2005 and its lower 4cm. These lower portions have been assigned the context number L2010. L2010 appears to have undergone significant gleying and had a higher clay content whereas L2005 contained a higher proportion of organic material.

The silt and clay content of both L2010 and L2005 indicate that they were deposited under alluvial conditions and the presence of fine gravel within L2005 suggests that this was fairly slow-moving water. This would be consistent with the results of environmental sample analysis which demonstrated that L2005 (including L2010) contained a mollusc assemblage indicating that F2003, at its time of deposition, was a water filled depression, containing abundant weed and a muddy substrate, with damp grassland, waste ground and scrub-type habitats at its margins. Micromorphological analysis has demonstrated that the material at the base of the deposit (L2010), was the product of different formation processes to the overlying layers. This lower deposit shows evidence for localised waterlogging through the presence of Fe aggregation. This suggests that waterlogging occurred only in pockets in the soil and not throughout, at least at the location from which the sample, and the thin section derived from it, was taken. The molluscs from the lower part of the deposit, however, indicate more permanent aquatic conditions during the early silting of the feature, but it is possible that conditions fluctuated during what could have been an extended period of time. The material overlying this has higher levels of bioturbation from earthworms and molluscs, as well as having higher levels of amorphous organic material. This may represent plant material buried by the overlying material which was, nevertheless, very similar in structure to the material below.

Upper fill L2004 was described during excavation as a mid grey brown clayey silt with moderate small sub-angular and sub-rounded flint inclusions. Macromorphological analysis has revised this description to a silty clay but confirms that, like L2005 (and L2010), it is an alluvial deposit. Environmental sampling has identified a variety of mollusc species in this deposit, including those associated with grassland. It is possible that some of these are derived from habitats in the surrounding area but its perhaps more likely that, at this time,

F2003 existed as a damp depression during the drier months of the year perhaps becoming water-filled during the wetter seasons.

Human activity in association with Hollow F2003

Man-made objects present in basal fill L2005 consisted of struck flint and small fragments of early Neolithic pottery. Four sherds of medieval pottery were also recovered. It appears likely that these were intrusive.

It is possible that the Neolithic material was incorporated into L2005 through overland flow carrying material distributed as occupational detritus in the area surrounding Hollow F2003 into the feature. It is, however, equally feasible that such material was deliberately deposited into feature. It is possible that, as in later prehistoric periods, that there was some kind of symbolic motivation behind the deposition of objects into watery contexts. Indeed Davis *et al.* (2007) discuss the possible ritual deposition of Neolithic stone axes in a wetland context in Cumbria, but there is insufficient evidence to reach such a conclusion with regard to the objects recovered from L2005.

The material evidence is suggestive of human occupation within the vicinity of Hollow F2003. It is possible that this occupation took the form of settlement in close proximity but the environmental conditions that appear to have been prevalent, consisting of a pond surrounded by damp grassland, are likely to have attracted game and waterfowl that would could have been hunted or trapped. A small, simple leaf-shape arrowhead, recovered from L2005, might be indicative of such activity. Similarly, debitage, cores and evidence for blade production, alongside the small fragments of pottery that were recovered, could represent activity occurring within the temporary camps of hunting/trapping parties.

The density of carbonised remains of common medieval cereal crops, including free-threshing type wheat, hulled barley and oat, as well as pulses, in L2004 is suggestive of domestic occupation in the vicinity during the medieval period. The medieval pottery assemblage can also be considered to indicate the presence of this type of occupation in the surrounding area. This is not particularly surprising, medieval activity is well-attested in Meldreth. The medieval moated manorial complex of Flambard's Manor is located c.300m to the east of the current site and the medieval core of Meldreth, focussed on the 12th century Holy Trinity Church, lies c.950m to the north.

The small quantity of possible Roman CBM and the 18 sherds of Roman pottery also attest to Roman occupation in the surrounding area. Extensive Iron Age to Roman enclosure systems have been identified locally and the Avenell Way, an ancient trackway possibly utilised during the Romano-British period, passes c.75m to the south of the site.

Quite how F2003 was utilised during the Roman and medieval periods remains open to speculation. These assemblages are mostly associated with upper fill L2004, evidence from which suggests that it is representative of only seasonal waterlogging or ponding. It is possible that the hunting or trapping of wildfowl, and possibly game, still occurred in these periods but the presence of hunting camps is unlikely by this time. This occupational detritus might therefore derive from refuse deposits or from episodes of manuring subsequently be removed from there, perhaps through agricultural processes or perhaps through natural processes.

Hollow F2003 in wider context

As noted in the introduction to this paper, features similar to F2003 are recorded elsewhere on the chalky geology of southern Cambridgeshire. They appear to be fairly numerous in the Melbourn area, just to the south of Meldreth but also occur elsewhere as the important Hinxton example demonstrates.

Revell (2019, 45) notes that hollows of this type can often contain traces of activity from a number of distinct archaeological periods. This is certainly the case with regards Hollow F2003. Occasionally some may preserve clear evidence of more coherent activity in one or more particular periods (*ibid.*). The identification of almost solely early Neolithic activity in association with basal fill L2005 would appear to conform to this pattern, although the accumulation of this deposit must have begun earlier than the early Neolithic. At Linton Road, Great Abington a hollow of this type was found to contain finds of Mesolithic, Neolithic, Bronze Age, late Iron Age to early Roman, and post-medieval date. These artefacts were recovered primarily from the upper fill and were considered to indicate that the feature was 'open' for a long period of time, or that the upper fill accumulated over a prolonged period (Revell 2019, 45). A similar interpretation might be applied to L2004, the upper fill of F2003, which contained Roman and medieval artefactual evidence. At Great Abington, however, it was suggested that later ploughing of the site could have caused at least some degree of post-depositional mixing (Revell 2019, 45). It cannot be entirely ruled out that the same did not occur at the current site.

Conclusions

Hollow F2003 is a topographical hollow or depression in the surrounding marly chalk resulting from fluvial action probably during the late glacial period. This created an erosional depression that appears, on the basis of molluscan evidence, to have been prone to seasonal flooding. Analysis of its fills indicates that they are of alluvial origin and derived from the local parent material but displayed different pedogenic characteristics when subject to micromorphological analysis.

Finds from the earliest fills of the hollow represent prehistoric activity, probably seasonal or episodic, that utilised a water-filled hollow as a resource or landscape marker. Such a pattern of ephemeral settlement and settlement mobility, possibly through seasonal transhumance, is consistent with the pattern evident in much of southern Cambridgeshire (Pollard 2000, 7). It is possible to speculate that the hollow, and the environmental conditions that prevailed there, provided certain resources, perhaps such as game, wildfowl and even reeds, that were attractive to the local Neolithic population. The area surrounding the hollow may have been subject to occasional visits by hunting or trapping parties, groups bringing livestock to the hollow for water, or by people gathering reeds and other plant material.

More mixed dating evidence was recovered from upper fill L2004. The presence of carbonised cereal remains of species typical of medieval assemblages, as well as medieval pottery, indicates that the site lay in proximity to domestic activity of some kind at this time. The known history and archaeology of Meldreth demonstrates that this is almost certainly the case. The Roman artefacts recovered from L2004 also suggest that occupation of this date occurred in proximity to the site.

It is possible that fluctuations in water levels, periods of high precipitation, and seasonal flooding, caused nearby objects to wash into the hollow and deposited within upper fill L2004. Some deliberate discard must be considered amongst the agencies that led to the deposition of this material and later ploughing may have contributed to the mixing of the dateable

evidence within this deposit.

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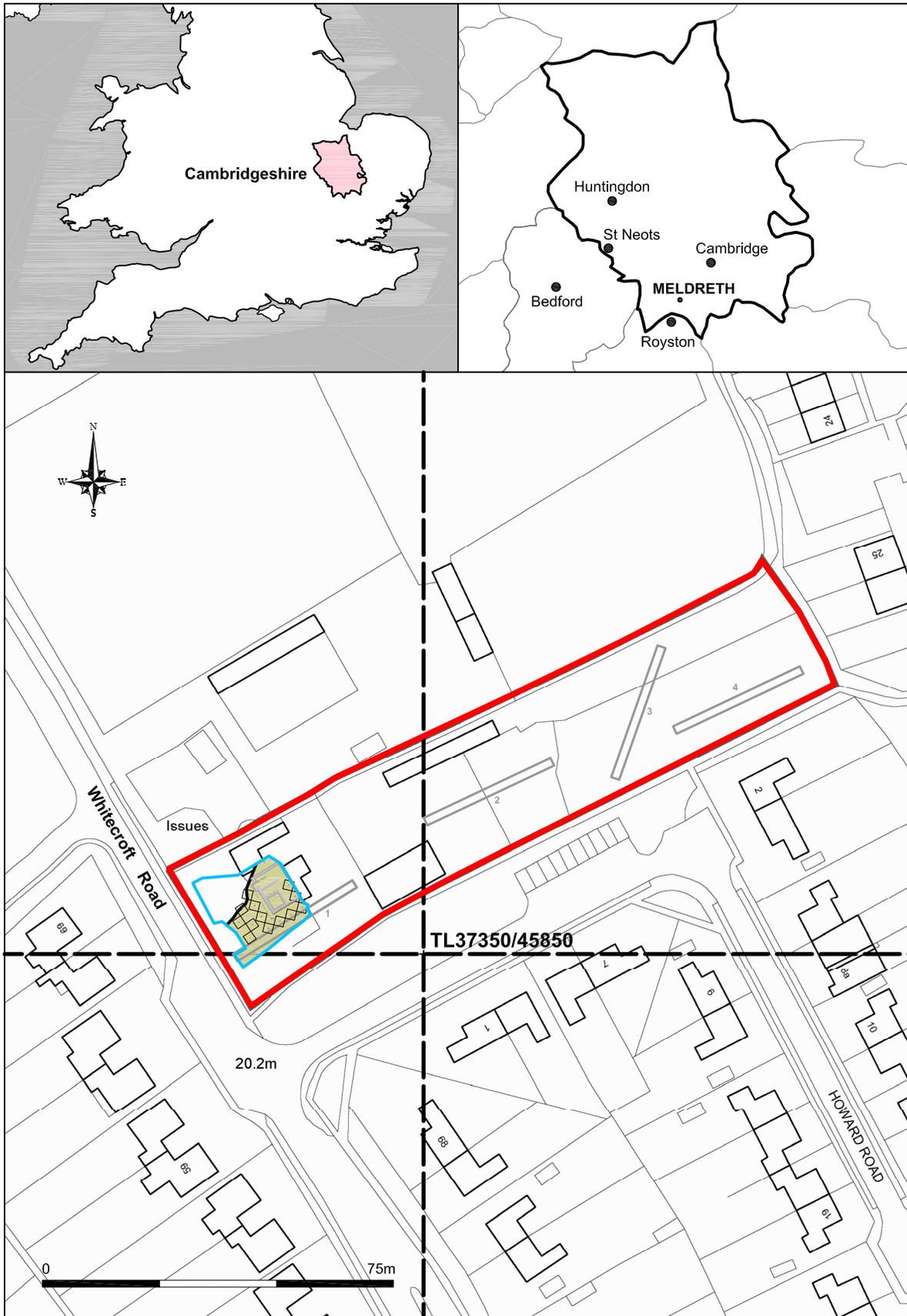


Figure 1 Site location plan

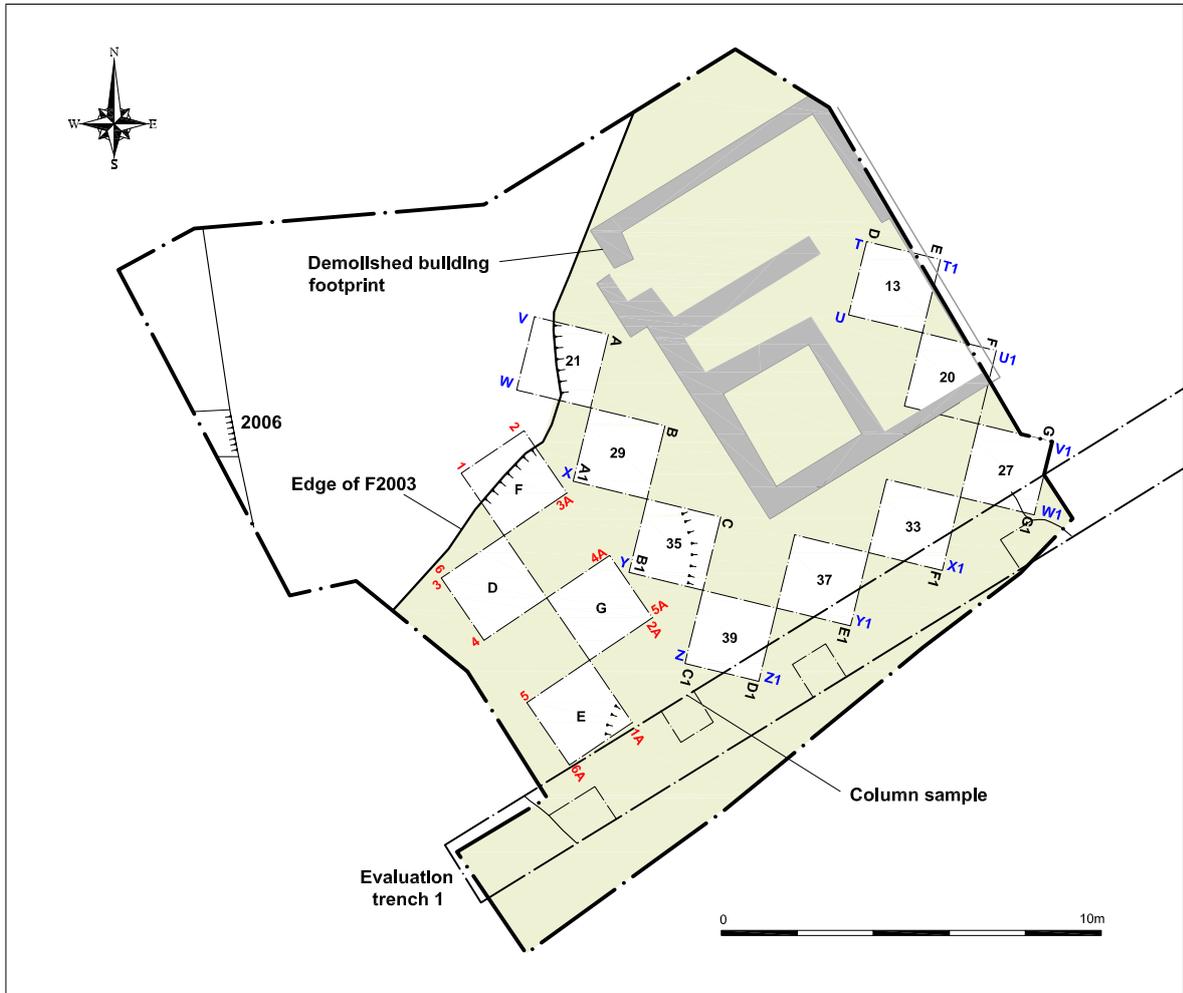


Figure 2 Test pit location plan

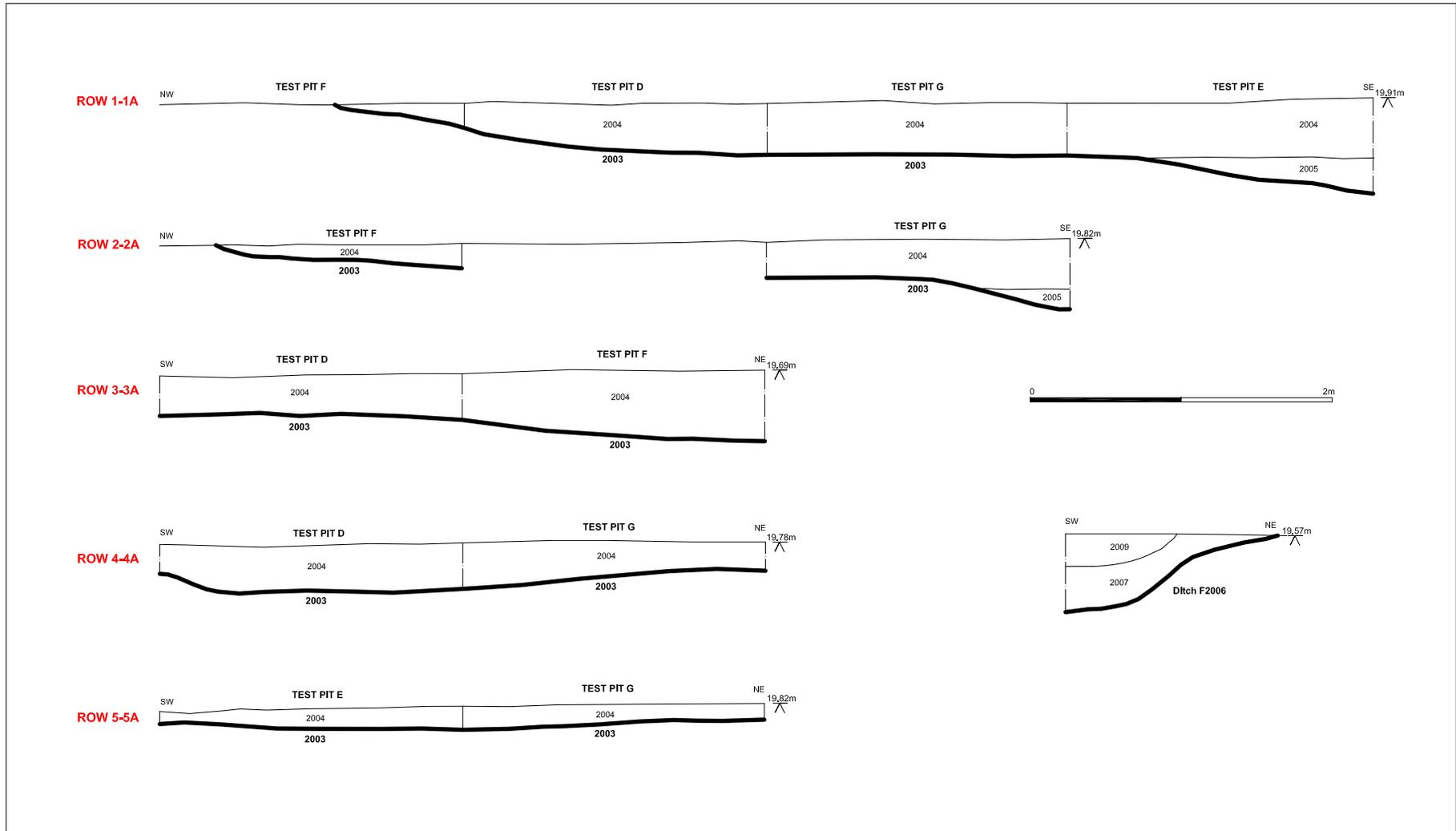


Figure 3 Test pit rows 1 - 5

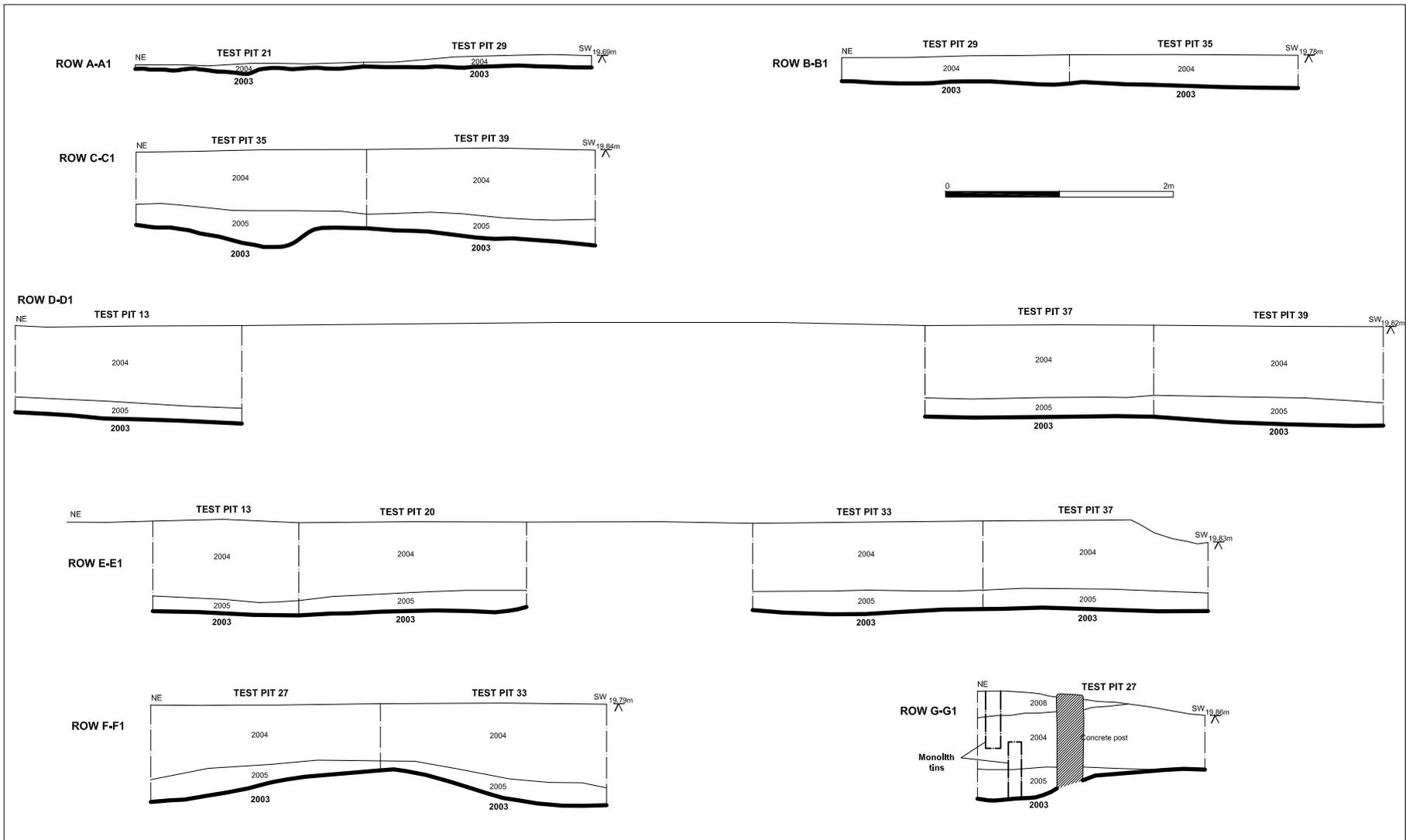


Figure 4 Test pit rows A - G

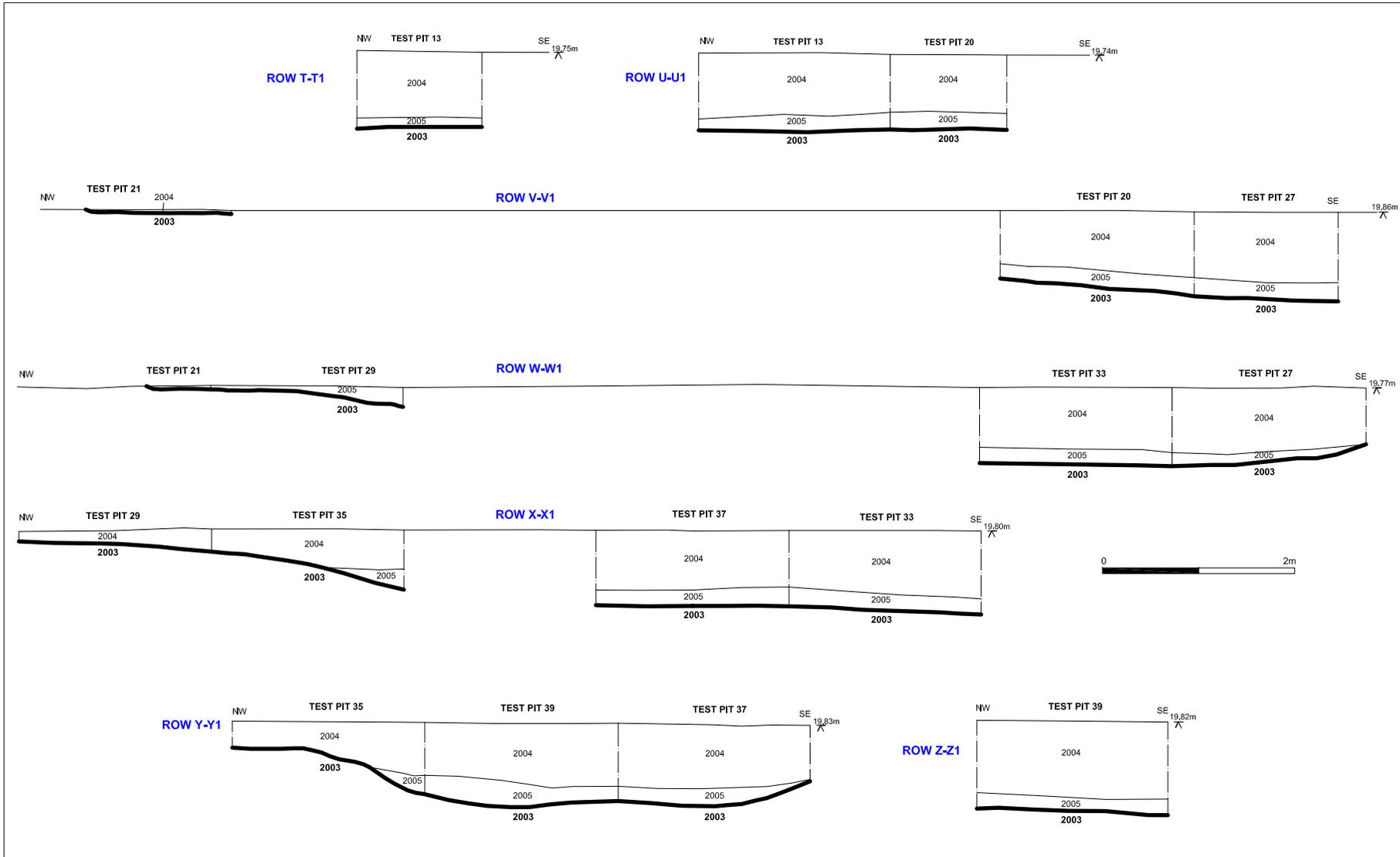


Figure 5 Test pit rows T - Z