Colchester Archaeological Trust Ltd

A Fieldwalking Survey at Abbotstone, Stanway, Colchester

for Tarmac Quarry Products Ltd

Phases 2 and 3

1998

Contents:

Plans:

Colchester Archaeological Trust Ltd

Archaeological Fieldwalking Survey at Abbotstone, Stanway

Phases 2 and 3

NGR: TL 943 227

Summary

A fieldwalking survey on 14.5 hectares of land scheduled for mineral extraction recovered Roman tile and brick in sufficient quantity to suggest the presence of one or more buildings in the vicinity. Although lacking in strong surface concentrations, the distribution pattern displayed an emphasis toward the north-western corner of the survey area. Elsewhere, there was an increased incidence of the material in parts of the central area, but too slight establish any firm association with cropmark features which occur in that part of the field. Other finds included a light scatter of flint tools, cores and flakes mainly representative of later Neolithic to early (or possibly middle) Bronze Age activity.

Introduction

This survey was commissioned by Tarmac Quarry Products Ltd in advance of the proposed Abbotstone pit extension which involves mineral extraction from a core area of 16.2 hectares of former farmland adjoining the north-western part of the Bellhouse pit at Stanway. The extraction works are planned to take place in three phases. The land to be affected by the first phase of the extension was fieldwalked in October 1997 (with results reproduced here in Appendix B). The subject of this report is the large field to the south of footpath no.15, which is scheduled for extraction under Phases 2 and 3 of the scheme.

Archaeological Background

The site lies within an area of archaeological importance to the west of Colchester where surveys and excavations are revealing an extensive pattern of activity belonging principally to the Iron Age and Roman periods. Aerial survey has yielded plentiful cropmark evidence in the area affected by Phase 3 of the proposed extraction works (Fig 1) indicating the underlying presence of enclosures, a ring ditch and other substantial features likely to be of archaeological significance. In contrast, the fields in Phases 1 and 2 have failed to produce cropmarks. However, this does not necessarily mean that the land is devoid of features, as disparities in cropmark definition are common due to local variations in ground conditions.

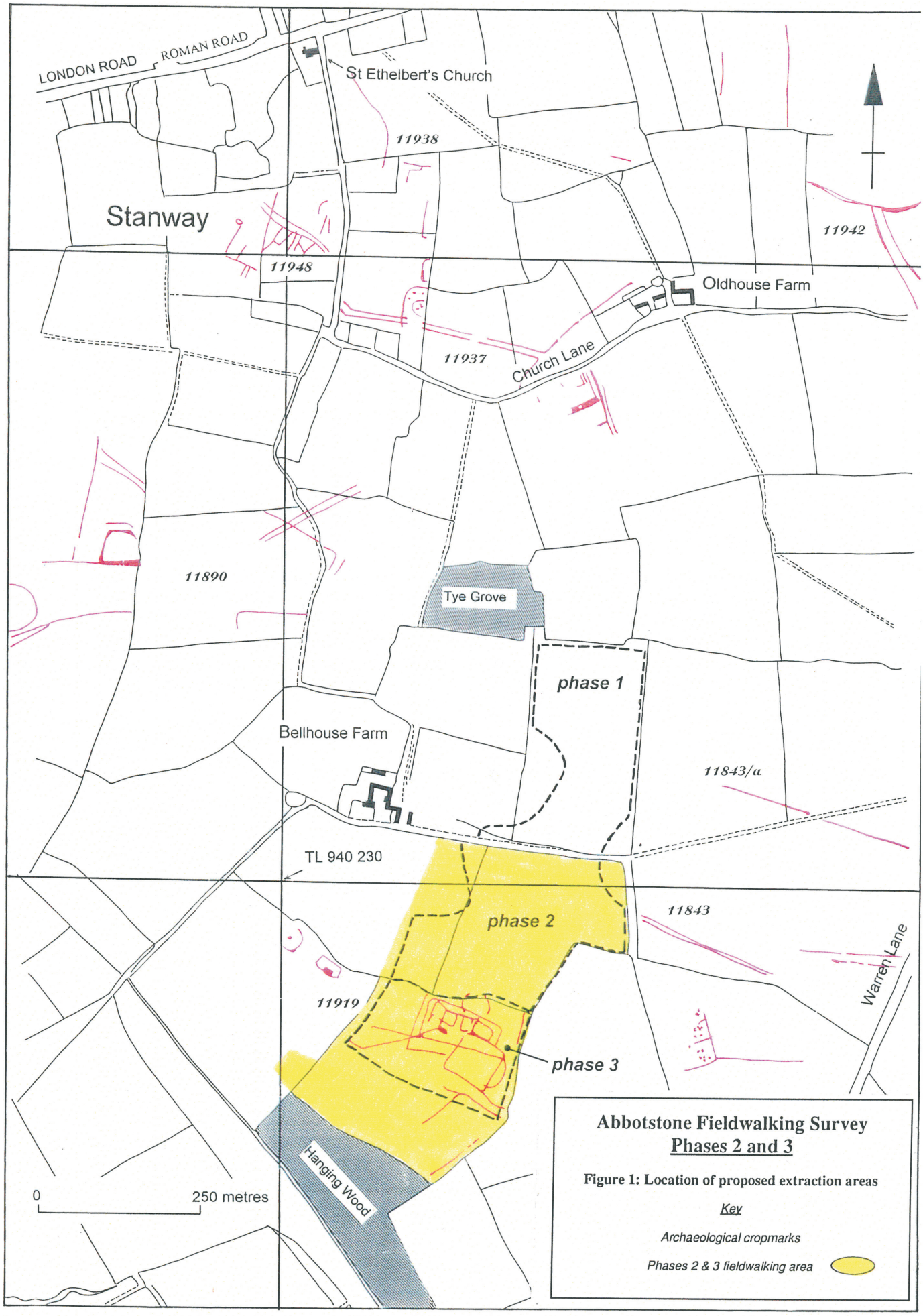


Figure 1. Location plan and cropmarks.

Topography and Soil

Earlier field boundaries have been removed, leaving one large undulating expanse of land. At the south-west corner of the field there is a sharp downward slope where the ground falls below the 30m contour in the direction of the Roman River. The ploughsoil is a mid-to-dark greyish brown sandy loam, with rounded medium and small stones common overall, and abundant in the lower ground to the south-west.

Conditions

The fieldwalking took place in early April in conditions very favourable for observation of surface finds. The field had been ploughed approximately one month previously and harrowed one week before the survey. Daylight conditions were good and the ground was moist from recent rain.

Methods

The fieldwork was carried out in accordance with Colchester Borough Council's 1997 "Guidelines on Standards and Practices for Archaeological Fieldwork in Colchester". The site was divided into 100 metre grid squares. Within the grid, fieldwalkers followed parallel lanes spaced 10 metres apart with each inspecting a two metre wide strip in the path of his lane, resulting in a 20% coverage of the overall area.

Results

Details of post-Roman finds, mainly tile, have been retained in the site archive and are not included in the attached plans since the items and their distribution were fairly typical of the background scatter commonly found in the region's ploughsoils.

The earlier material divides into two categories:

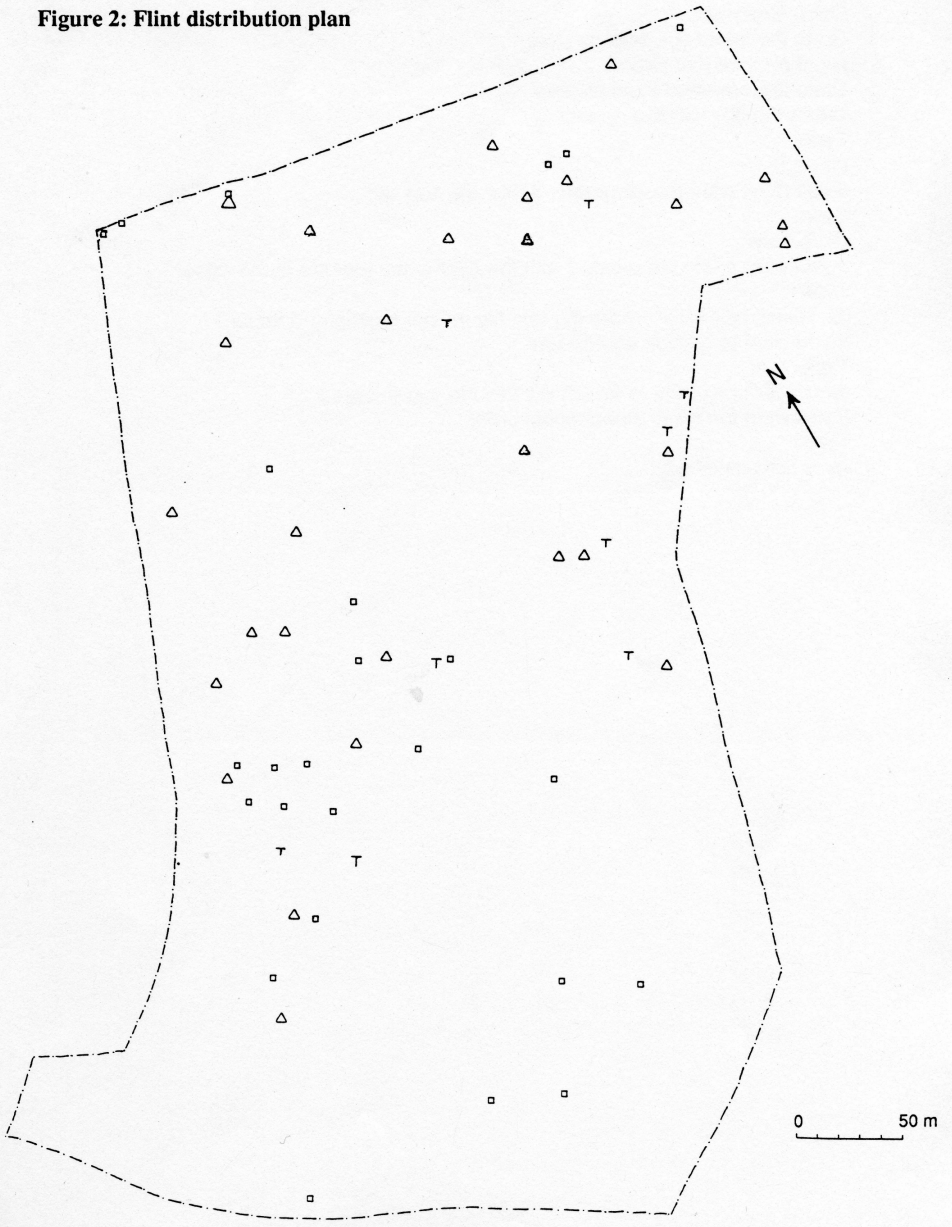
Prehistoric

Flint tools, Cores and Flakes. (Figure 2)

The flint finds consisted of five blades, a scraper, three cores and twenty-nine flakes. Although one tool (a patinated blade) is possibly of Mesolithic date, the flints in the main seem to be representative of later activity, probably in the later Neolithic to early (or possibly middle) Bronze Age. The flints were found in a broad scatter over the northern and central parts of the field, but were absent from the southern area. The apparent dearth of flints to the south may not be representative of their true distribution, since the ploughsoil in that area had a much higher natural content of small stones, which may have masked observation of worked examples.

Abbotstone Fieldwalking Survey: Phases 2 and 3

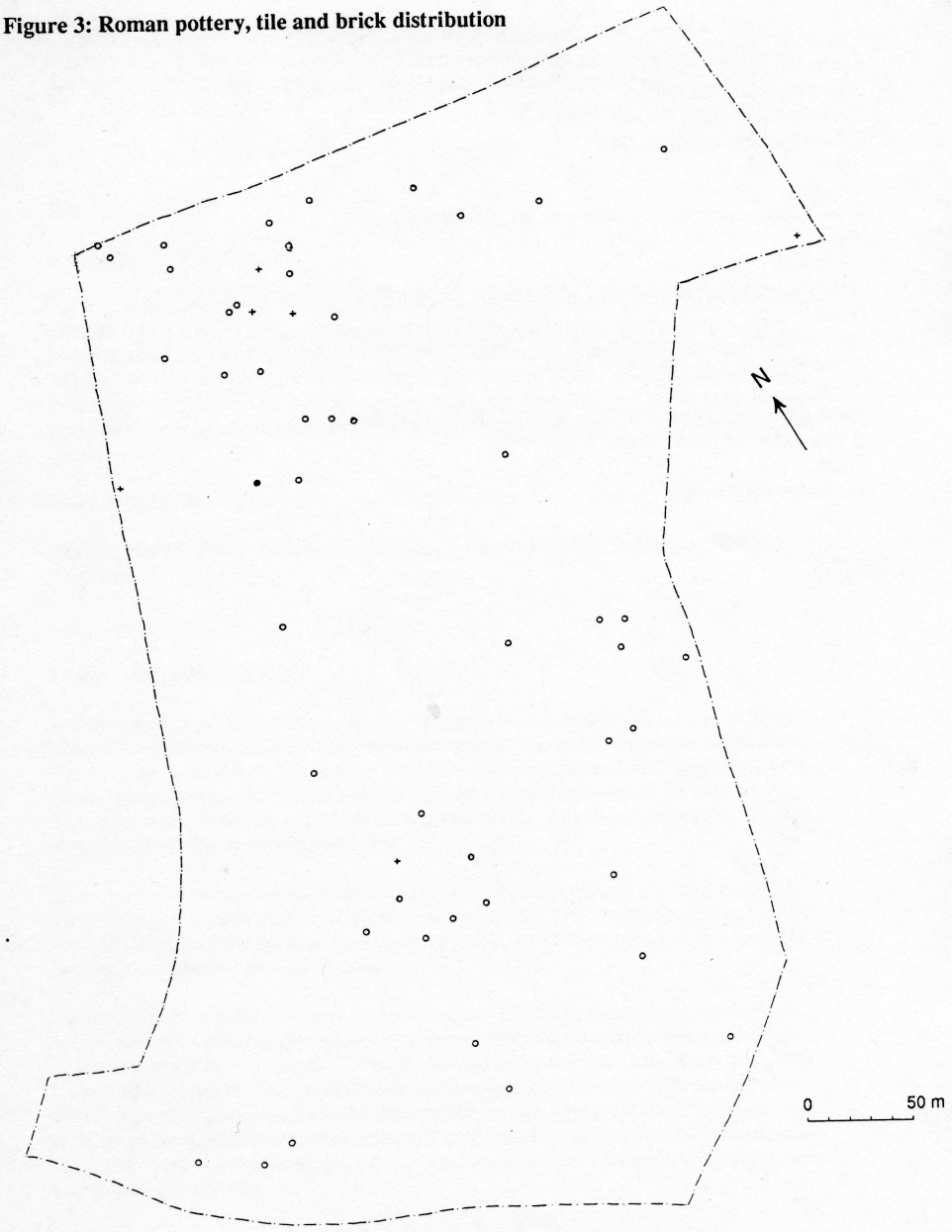
Figure 2: Flint distribution plan



T : Flint tools and cores. Δ : Flint flakes. □ : Burnt flint.

Abbotstone Fieldwalking Survey: Phases 2 and 3

Figure 3: Roman pottery, tile and brick distribution



● Pottery: Roman. O Tile and brick: Roman. + Tile and brick: indeterminate date.

Burnt Flint. (Figure 2)

When found in quantity, burnt flint is frequently an indicator of prehistoric activity. The majority of the 25 plots shown in Figure 2 represent individual finds and are thinly scattered throughout the field, with a slightly higher incidence in the western part of the central area.

Roman

Tile and Brick. (Figure 3)

The commonest material on the field surface was tile and brick. In several instances the pieces retrieved were too fragmentary and abraded to permit firm identification of their form. The plots thus distinguish between satisfactorily identifiable Roman material (47 finds) and examples of uncertain but possibly Roman date. The finds included one small piece of 2nd-to 3rd-century combed box tile, from the northern end of the field. The distribution plan shows a light scatter throughout, with increased rates of occurrence to the north-west and in parts of the central area.

Pottery. (Figure 3)

Only one sherd of Roman pottery was recovered; a small and heavily eroded fragment of a Samian base.

Review of Phases 1, 2 and 3

In Phases 2 and 3 the finds recovery rate per hectare was considerably higher than in Phase 1, where the 1997 fieldwalk on 5.2 hectares produced only 3 pieces of Roman tile, 1 prehistoric flint flake and 1 burnt flint. The fact that the finds yield from Phases 2 and 3 was consistently greater for each period and type of material suggests that the disparity may be due to the differing ground conditions, rather than accurately reflecting the relative presence of any category of material between the two areas.

Of the sample of prehistoric finds, the tools and waste flints appear to represent a general scatter, with no concentrations or bias toward any part of the field. Little significance can currently be attributed to the isolated finds of burnt flint, which were not recovered in sufficient quantity to indicate the presence of a site.

Among the Roman finds, the almost complete absence of Roman pottery is curious, as a Roman site with a broad range of building material might be expected to produce pottery in greater quantity than the single sherd found in the northern part of the field. When the Roman tile and brick distribution is compared to the existing localised cropmark evidence, there is a slight but possibly coincidental relationship between the two. Higher levels of Roman tile and brick occurred in parts of the central (cropmark) area, but the material was at its most common toward the north-western corner of the field, where the nature and extent of underlying features have yet to be established.

Archive

Subject to the permission of the landowner, finds will be placed in the permanent care of the Colchester Museum. The accession code for the finds and research archive is 1998:54.

Acknowledgements

The survey was commissioned by Tarmac Quarry Products Ltd., to whom thanks are due for arranging the ploughing and harrowing of the survey area. The Trust is indebted to Peter Berridge of Colchester Museum for comment on the flint finds.

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Appendix A

Extracts from the Essex Archaeological Sites and Monuments Record For Abbotstone and Surrounding Areas

For numbered plot locations please refer to the location plan, Figure 1.

Extract From Essex Sites and Monuments Record
(For locations, please see Figure 1.)

11843
NGR: TL 948230

Description: Cropmarks centred on above NGR; possible roads / trackways.

11890
NGR: TL 938235

Description: Cropmark centred on above NGR; an enclosure formed by a wide cropmark. There is a suggestion of a double enclosure to the north. the cropmark is incomplete on the east side; other boundaries are dependant on it to the west of the enclosure. Possibly Roman, it seems not to be a medieval or post-medieval enclosure as there is nothing visible on the tithe and estate maps in the ERO.

11919
NGR: 942227

Description: Cropmarks: rectilinear enclosures, rectangular enclosure, linear features and possible ring ditch.

11937
NGR: TL 944239

Description: Iron Age ditched trackway and enclosures.

11938
NGR: TL 942243

Description: Cropmarks: linear features and possible trackway.

11942
NGR: TL950240

Description: Cropmarks of old field boundary with double ditched trackway, penannular ring ditch.

11948
NGR: TL 939240

Description: Cropmarks: an east-west trackway, linear features, a rectangular enclosure and to the south one ring ditch.

Appendix B

Extract from Abbotstone Phase One Fieldwalking Report:

Results and Distribution Plan

Extract from Abbotstone Phase One Fieldwalking Report
November, 1997

Results

Figure 2 shows the distribution of Roman and earlier finds from the surface of the field. These are summarised below by period:

Roman

Tile and Brick
The commonest material on the field surface was tile and brick. In several instances the pieces retrieved were too fragmentary and abraded to permit firm identification of their form. The plots thus distinguish between clearly identifiable Roman material (3 plots), and examples of uncertain but possibly Roman date.

Prehistoric

Burnt Flint
An single piece of burnt flint was recorded near the south boundary of the field.

Worked Flint
One prehistoric struck flake, possibly of Neolithic or Bronze Age date, was recovered from the southern part of the field.

Discussion

Roman Period

Although Roman brick and roof tile are present in the ploughsoil the few samples recovered are too widely dispersed to point to a specific location as the source of these materials. When the plots of the less firmly dateable materials are taken into account there is a bias toward the northern half of the field, but this is of doubtful significance in view of the small number of finds involved. In relation to the surrounding cropmark features it was also noted that all but one of the tile plots shown on Figure 2 lie to the north of a line formed by the projected westward course of a 320m long linear cropmark (number 11843/A shown in red on Fig.1). However, this coincidence is of limited value since the antiquity and true extent of the feature is unknown.

Prehistoric Period

When found in quantity burnt flint is frequently an indicator of prehistoric activity. However, little significance can be attached to the isolated find in the southern part of Phase 1 unless future fieldwalking in the adjoining region of Phase 2 produces further examples. Similarly, the

flint flake, in its apparently isolated situation does not permit any conclusions to be made, other than noting its presence as an example of prehistoric activity in the area

Existing knowledge of the surrounding areas suggests that archaeologically significant features can be expected to lie within the five hectares due to be affected by Phase 1. While this initial survey of the Phase 1 ploughsoil has yielded evidence of early activity the results at this stage offer little indication of the local intensity of features on which to specifically aim further work.

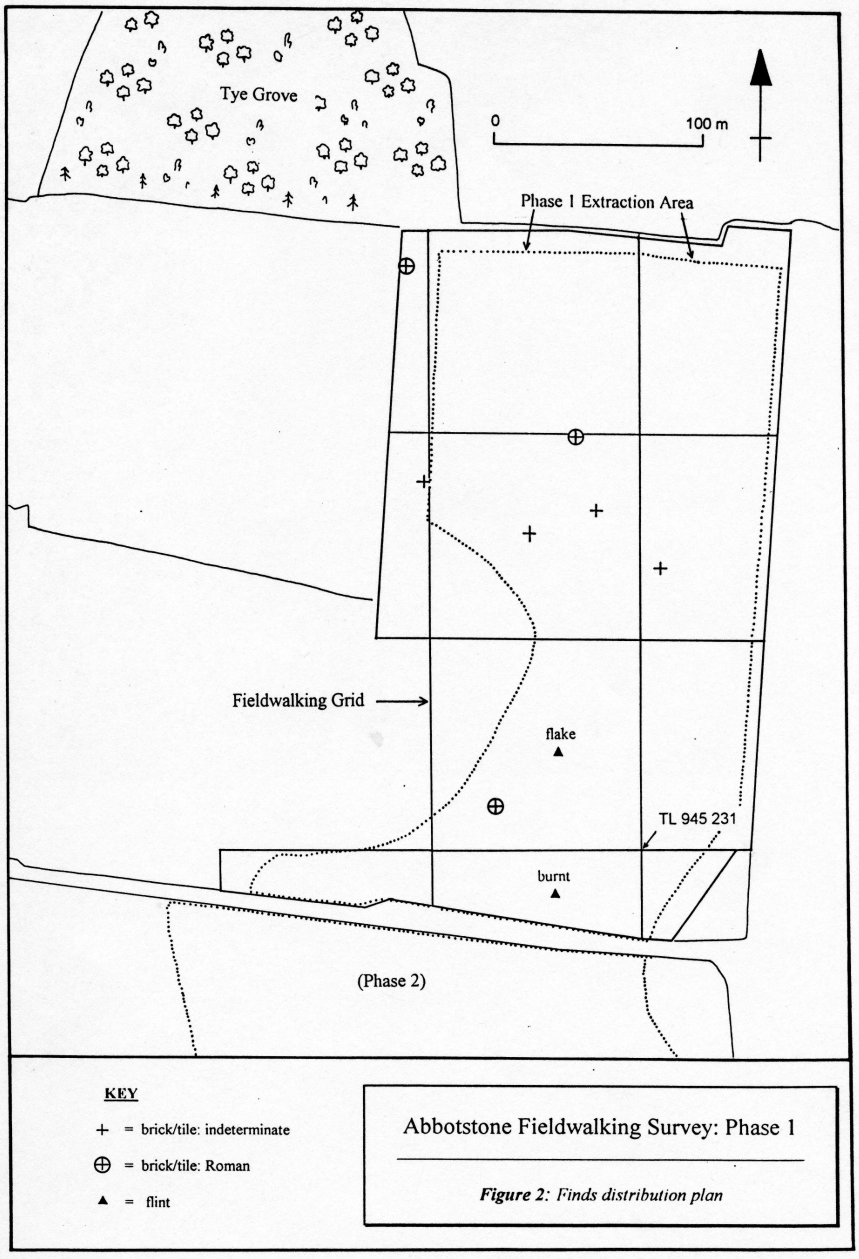

***Figure 2**: Finds distribution plan*