

BECKET PLACE, WELLS
An Archaeological Evaluation

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An archaeological evaluation of land at Becket Place, Wells, Somerset

1.0 Introduction

1.1: This evaluation was undertaken in response to a request from Mendip District Council, following an application to erect dwellings on land to the rear of No. 7 Priory Road, Wells (Planning Application ref. 076849/009). Somerset County Council's Development Control Archaeologist has advised that an archaeological evaluation of the site by trial trenching be undertaken prior to a final decision on the planning application. This recommendation conforms to central government advice as set out in *Planning Policy Guidance on Archaeology and Planning (PPG 16)*, Department of the Environment 1990; County Structure Plan policy AH5, and Mendip Local Plan Policy EN17. The evaluation was carried out in June 2000 in accordance with a Specification provided by the Environment and Property Department, Somerset County Council, and the *General Specification for Archaeological Work in Somerset*, Somerset County Council, March 1995.

2.0 The Site

2.1: The site for development comprises a small plot to the rear of no. 7 Priory Road, formerly part of its garden, and which backs onto Becket Place to the south east. Located within the historic bounds of the City of Wells, the site lies towards its southern corner at NGR ST 54774542 (Fig. 1).

2.2: The medieval city grew up around its cathedral, founded early in the 10th century upon the earlier church of St Andrew founded by Aldhelm around 700 AD. There is little evidence for urban development much before the Norman conquest, and there is no Domesday Book reference to a town. However, its market was well established by the 12th century, situated outside the west front of the old cathedral, where it remains to this day. The town developed thereafter, primarily from this focus, prospering during the 13th century to become the largest town in Somerset for a time, during the 14th century.

2.3: By the beginning of the 13th century the built up area of Wells probably extended south westwards to St John Street, leaving a largely vacant area between Southover and St Cuthbert Street. Within this piece of land was established the Priory of St John, initially as a hospital, by 1210. The priory and hospital buildings were located close to St John's Street, at its junction with the more modern Priory Road, although the precinct extended as far as West Street. Much of its surviving remains was destroyed or disturbed during the mid 19th century with the building of Priory Road and the Central Schools across its site. Some record of this was made at the time (Seral 1859), but no detailed information is available relating to the layout of the Priory buildings or its precinct. The main watercourse of the St Andrew's stream flowed through the precinct to the Bishops Out Mill on West Street, while burgages may have been established by the priory along the edge of its precinct in St Cuthbert Street and Southover (Aston and Leech 1977).

2.4: The Becket Place development lies well within the precinct of St John's Priory and close to the site of the former Central Schools. No archaeological remains are recorded from the site itself, but given its location the survival of evidence relating to the Priory, and possibly other remains, might be anticipated.

3.0 *The Evaluation*

3.1: The Specification for an archaeological evaluation recommended investigation by trial trenching within the development plot. The objective was to gain information relating to the presence, character and preservation of any archaeological remains or deposits, with a view to devising appropriate strategies for their future management in the context of proposals to develop the site. In June 2000 three trial trenches were cut specifically for this purpose, and a fourth cut to contain the foundations of the new boundary wall separating the plot from no.7 Priory Road was also observed and recorded (Fig. 2).

3.2: All trenches were cut with a mechanical excavator; Trenches 2, 3 and 4 for the evaluation with a ditching bucket 1.6m wide, and Trench 1 for the wall foundation with a toothed bucket almost 1.0m wide. All were excavated to depths where naturally deposited gravel formations, or the fills of man-made disturbances into them were exposed. The vertical trench sections and their bases were then cleaned by hand to define any archaeological features or deposits. Following this process, the latter were then sampled by excavation and associated finds collected, and accompanying proforma written records, graphic survey and photographic records were created for each trench. That archive of records forms the basis of this report and will be deposited, along with a copy, in the Wells Museum. A further copy of this report is lodged in the Somerset County Sites and Monuments Record.

4.0 *Results*

4.1: The units of stratigraphically defined features and deposits recognised within each trench were identified by separate sets of sequential numbers. A brief description of their character and occurrence in each trench is given, followed by an interpretation of the results from all (5.0).

4.2: Trench 1 was cut as a wall foundation trench, 22m long, and to an average depth of 1m. (Fig. 2). This exposed the surface of a coarse red-brown gravel with some sand and large cobbles, identified as a natural formation (1003). This gravel was located in all four trenches and has been given the same numerical identity. It was sealed in places by a thin layer of more mixed, reddish-brown stony clay (1002), which also appeared to fill some shallow depressions within the gravel. At one point this layer and the gravel beneath were cut by a shallow, flat-bottomed ditch (F101), c. 0.6m wide, surviving up to 0.3m deep and aligned approximately north west – south east. Seven sherds of Romano-British pottery, including 4th-century types of Oxford and Dorset Black Burnished wares, were recovered from the stony clay fills of the 1.0m long excavated section.

The ditch was sealed by an extensive layer of dark brown stony soil with some charcoal, ash, brick/tile fragments, clay pipe, 19th-century pottery sherds, etc. (1001). This deposit, up to 0.3m thick, merged with a very similar deposit (1004) towards the south west end of the trench and contained within an irregular cut, F102, which also penetrated the gravel below. The full depth or extent of this cut was not revealed, but it contained material of similar character to that in layer 1001. At the north east end of the trench the layer 1001 was partly removed by a more extensive cut, F100, which also extended into Trench 2. This contained bands of stony rubble, ash and clinker, clay and soil, and appeared to be bounded to the south east by the stone boundary wall separating the development plot from St John's Court and Priory Place. A layer of dark brown humic topsoil (1000), up to 0.3m thick, sealed this cut and was present

throughout the trench. Towards its south west end was a shallow linear cut containing compacted dumps of limestone rubble capped by redeposited natural gravel, and lined on one side by an almost vertical setting of slates (F103). This feature continued to the south east, along the line of Trench 4, representing a path set into and sealed by the topsoil. The latter was itself sealed by a modern deposit of stone hardcore, laid to create a surface for car parking at the rear of no. 7 Priory Road, currently used as offices by the local Conservative Association.

4.3: Trench 2 was cut almost parallel to the north east boundary wall of the plot, 12m long and up to 1.0m deep in places (Figs. 2 and 3). The horizon of natural gravel (1003) was revealed at *c.* 0.6m below the surface at the southeast end of the trench, dropping to almost 1m below to the northwest. Two small features towards the southeast end of the trench cut into the gravel. The larger was a circular cut 0.6m in diameter, with steep sloping sides and a concave base, up to 0.3m deep (F202). It contained several large cobblestones, pitched on end in a gravel and clay matrix, and one sherd of Romano-British, Dorset Black Burnished pottery. Nearby was a more irregular and shallower cut (F203), with a similar fill but with no packing stones or other finds.

The two gravel exposures at either end of the trench were separated by a large disturbance comprising a sequence of cuts and dumped material. These were not investigated beyond their exposure by machine excavation, but the earliest appeared to be a large pit over 4m across and of unknown depth below the gravel horizon (F201). Its upper fills were revealed as tips of ashy soil and mortar, clay, mixed gravel soils, and stone, including some large shaped blocks. These deposits had been cut by or sealed beneath the fills within the shallower cut F100 seen further north in Trench 1, but both had been cut into by a later pit (F200). The exposed 3.5m wide portion had vertical sides over 0.6m deep and a flat base, and contained a relatively homogenous fill of orange clay gravel. All three features contained finds of 19th or early 20th century date, and were sealed by a modern deposit of humic, dark brown topsoil (2000).

4.4: Trench 3 was located towards the Becket Place boundary of the plot, 4.5m long and up to 1.0m deep (Fig. 2). The surface of natural gravel (1003) was exposed at *c.* 0.6m below the surface at the north east end of the trench. To the south it was cut away by the edge of a deep pit or trench of unknown extent or depth (F301). This contained dumps of loose grey-brown stony soil with some stone blocks, rubble, mortar, animal bones, oyster shells, and occasional brick/tile and 19th century pottery fragments. The pit was cut through a shallow stony subsoil deposit (3003) above the natural gravel horizon, but was sealed by banded deposits of humic soil (3002) and dumped deposits of stony clay soil, gravel, ash and clinker, with some mortar, brick and tile (3001). Set into the latter was a shallow cut aligned with the axis of the trench, over 1m wide and containing a succession of limestone rubble and compacted gravel fills retained on one side by a setting of steeply pitched roof slates (F300). A final surface layer of humic topsoil (3000) had sealed this feature.

4.5: Trench 4 to the south west was 12m long and cut 1m or more deep to contact, and in places penetrate, the horizon of natural gravel 1003 (Figs. 2 and 3). The gravel surface was seen to slope gently down from *c.* 0.7 to 0.9m below the modern surface, from south to north in this trench. Its surface was sealed in most places by a thin layer of mixed sandy clay and gravel subsoil (4003). This was cut at one point by a steep-sided ditch with a concave base, over 1m wide and up to 0.6m deep, on a northeast – southwest alignment (F401). Excavation of a 50% sample of its visible fill revealed loose stony clay fills incorporating occasional fragments of animal bone, roof slate, oyster shell and one sherd of medieval pottery.

This feature was buried beneath a thick layer of mixed, dark brown humic soil (4000), within which was set a shallow linear cut following generally the axis of the trench (F400). The cut,

just over 1m wide, contained a dump of limestone rubble sealed by a compact layer of redeposited natural gravel, retained on one side by a steeply inclined setting of roof slates. Its continuation as F103 was seen in Trench 1, and can be identified as a garden path. The surface topsoil was partly buried along the southwest side of this trench by a relatively recent dump of red stone rubble hardcore and clinker.

5.0 Interpretation

5.1: A deposit of coarse, fluvial gravel was identified as a base formation level of wholly natural origin in all the trenches. Its full depth and extent is unknown, but is likely to represent an episode of deposition during periods of increased water flow and rapid runoff within the valley of the St Andrew stream. Such conditions probably last occurred towards the end of the last glaciation or early in the Holocene, with meltwaters periodically transporting and depositing coarse debris deriving from the southern slopes and valleys of Mendip. Material of almost identical character was identified a few hundred metres upstream, during an evaluation on the site of the former Clare's factory beside the Bishop's Palace in 1987 (Leach 1987), and on the west side of the stream in 1990 (Hughes 1990) and Fig. 1.

5.2: The presence of such relatively well drained deposits in the St Andrew's valley, along with the abundant water supply, were doubtless factors in the foundation of Wells at this locality, and will have been an equal attraction for earlier settlers. The presence of suspected Roman features at Becket Place can be paralleled on the Clare's site (*op cit*), and are also suspected beneath or close to the cathedral. The quantity of pottery (seven sherds) from so short an excavated section of the ditch F101 in Trench 1, as well as the stone packed post-hole F202 and possible stakehole F203 in Trench 2, suggest the close proximity of Romano-British structures and occupation here. Whatever its character, some settlement and exploitation of the valley-bottom at this time is now surely demonstrated, with possibly earlier origins.

5.3: Despite the known proximity of the former buildings of St John's Priory and hospital to the north, and the location of this site within its precinct, evidence of medieval remains or structures was surprisingly sparse. The only suspected feature was the ditch F401 in Trench 4, which appears to be oriented at approximately 90 degrees to St John's Street and may represent a boundary division within the precinct. A continuation of this ditch northwards across Trench 2 might be anticipated, but the extensive 19th century disturbances identified as pits F200 and F201 may well have destroyed it. A few animal bones, oyster shell and a single sherd of coarse pottery do not suggest the close proximity of occupation, although the presence of occasional slate fragments indicate the use of such material, most probably derived from the Quantock or Brendon Hills of west Somerset, for roofing some of the Priory buildings. No other contemporary remains or other residual material of medieval date was recognised in this evaluation, although subsequent 19th and 20th century disturbances of overlying deposits, down to or into the horizon of the natural gravel, were evidently widespread.

5.4: No further activity was detected in this area until the 19th century when large pits were cut into the gravel; F201 in Trench 2 and F301 in Trench 3. Neither were fully exposed or bottomed, but localised gravel quarrying may be one explanation for their presence. Their date is indicated by material from their fills, which suggests that they were used to dispose of both domestic and building debris. One context for this might be the levelling of the Priory remains and construction works associated with the building of Priory Road and the Central Schools in the 1850s, although none of the material encountered could be ascribed with certainty to that source.

5.5: Thereafter, this area became part of the garden to the rear of no. 7 Priory Road, and has continued in that capacity, although now much overgrown, to the time of this evaluation. A considerable depth of topsoil had accumulated in places over this area, enhanced no doubt by years of cultivation and episodes of domestic rubbish disposal. As noted previously (5.3), this activity had in places disturbed the strata down to the level of the underlying gravel. Two well-constructed garden paths were intersected, F300 in Trench 3 and F400/F103 in Trenches 4 and 1. A third probably lay parallel to Trench 2; all were probably linked, and were probably laid out sometime after the garden had been established. A pit (F100) encountered in Trench 1 may have originated during an earlier phase of garden activity, unless this was another example of suggested pre-garden gravel excavation. The large clay and gravel filled pit (F200) encountered in Trench 2 was, perhaps, a foundation for a garden outhouse or some other contemporary structure.

6.0 *Conclusions and recommendations*

6.1: The results of this evaluation demonstrate a relatively low archaeological potential for this site, but are of greater value as contributions towards our wider understanding of the origins and development of Wells. The extent of the gravel terrace, which underlies much of the city, has once again been demonstrated, and was clearly a potent factor in attracting human settlement to this locality. Perhaps the most important archaeological evidence recovered relates to an episode of late Roman occupation, some of whose remains appear to lie within or close to this site. This provides a further contribution to a growing body of evidence for Romano-British settlement and agricultural exploitation in this valley, whose original focus may well have been the springs from which the medieval settlement took its name.

6.2: The potential for recovery of information relating to the Priory of St John was perhaps the most prominent reason for an archaeological evaluation on this site, although in the event attributable evidence has been minimal. There was no direct evidence for structural remains here, nor of residual material which might have come from the site of some of its buildings just to the north and destroyed during the 19th century. The ditch in Trench 4 is presumed to represent a contemporary plot boundary within the former precinct, and appears to conform in alignment with property boundaries extending back from the south side of St John's Street. Likewise, there was no evidence for earlier medieval occupation in this area, which was presumably open ground on the margins of the town before the founding of the Priory in 1206-9. This relative sparsity of evidence for medieval activity within the precinct is matched by results obtained in an evaluation at Ethel Street on the north side of St Andrew's stream in 1990; a site now occupied by the Tesco supermarket (Hughes 1990).

6.3: Evidence for the use of this site after the 16th century dissolution of the Priory until the 19th century, was not recovered. Some localised gravel quarrying may have occurred here, prior to or associated with the building of Priory Road and the Victorian villas along it, of which no 7 is one. Thereafter, the evidence recovered relates to the layout and use of this plot as the garden belonging to that house, and which may have contributed to some loss of further evidence for the earlier phases of Roman and medieval occupation.

6.4: Despite the relatively low-level of significant archaeological remains demonstrated on this site, the development as proposed may well encounter further remains of both Roman and medieval date. Any requirement for a further archaeological response to the development will be at the discretion of the Planning Authority, as advised by the archaeologists in the Environment and Property Department of Somerset County Council. However, in the

circumstances, the monitoring of groundworks for foundations and services may well be recommended as appropriate, to enhance the value of what has already been recovered.

7.0 *Acknowledgements*

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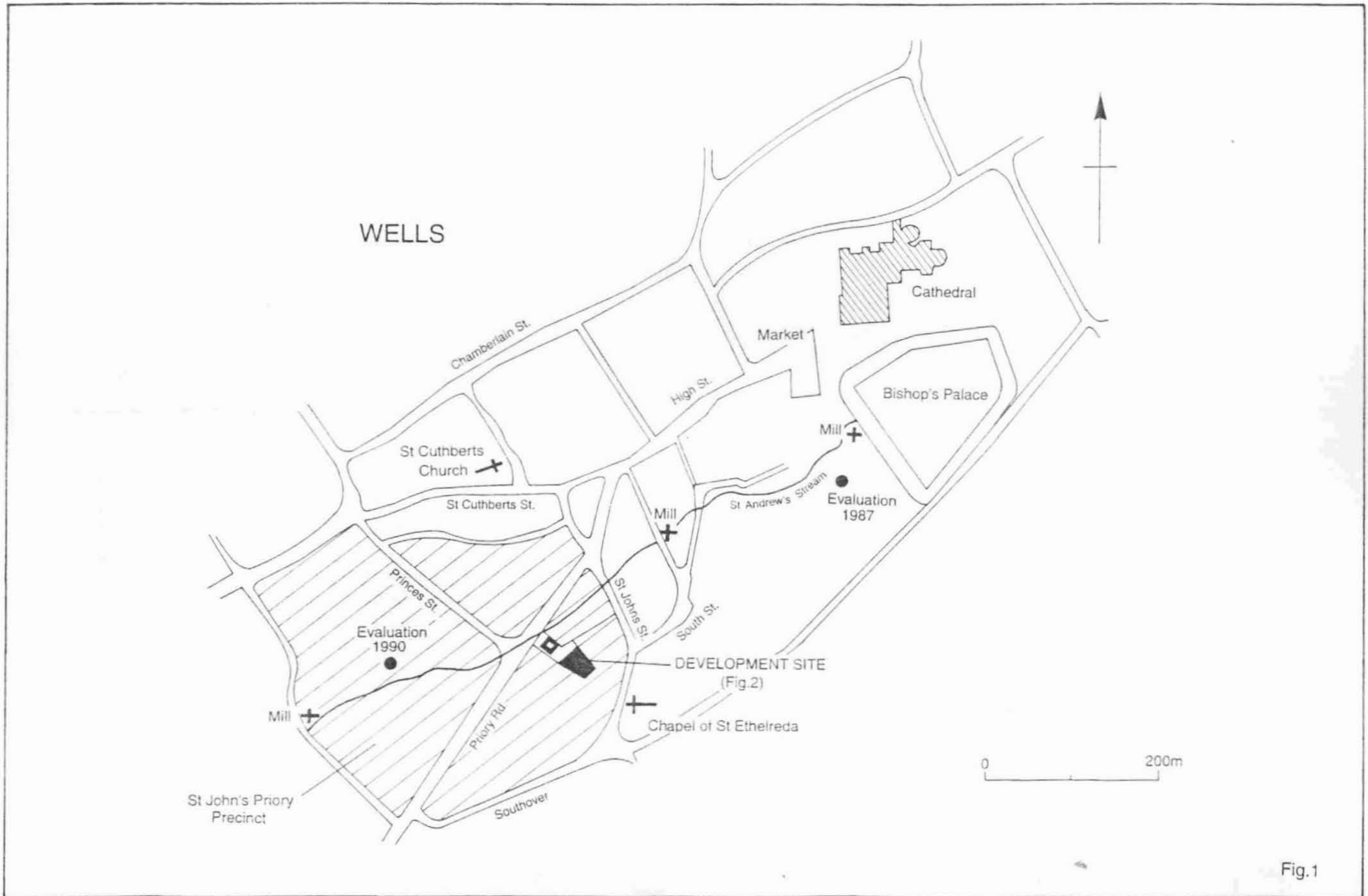


Fig.1

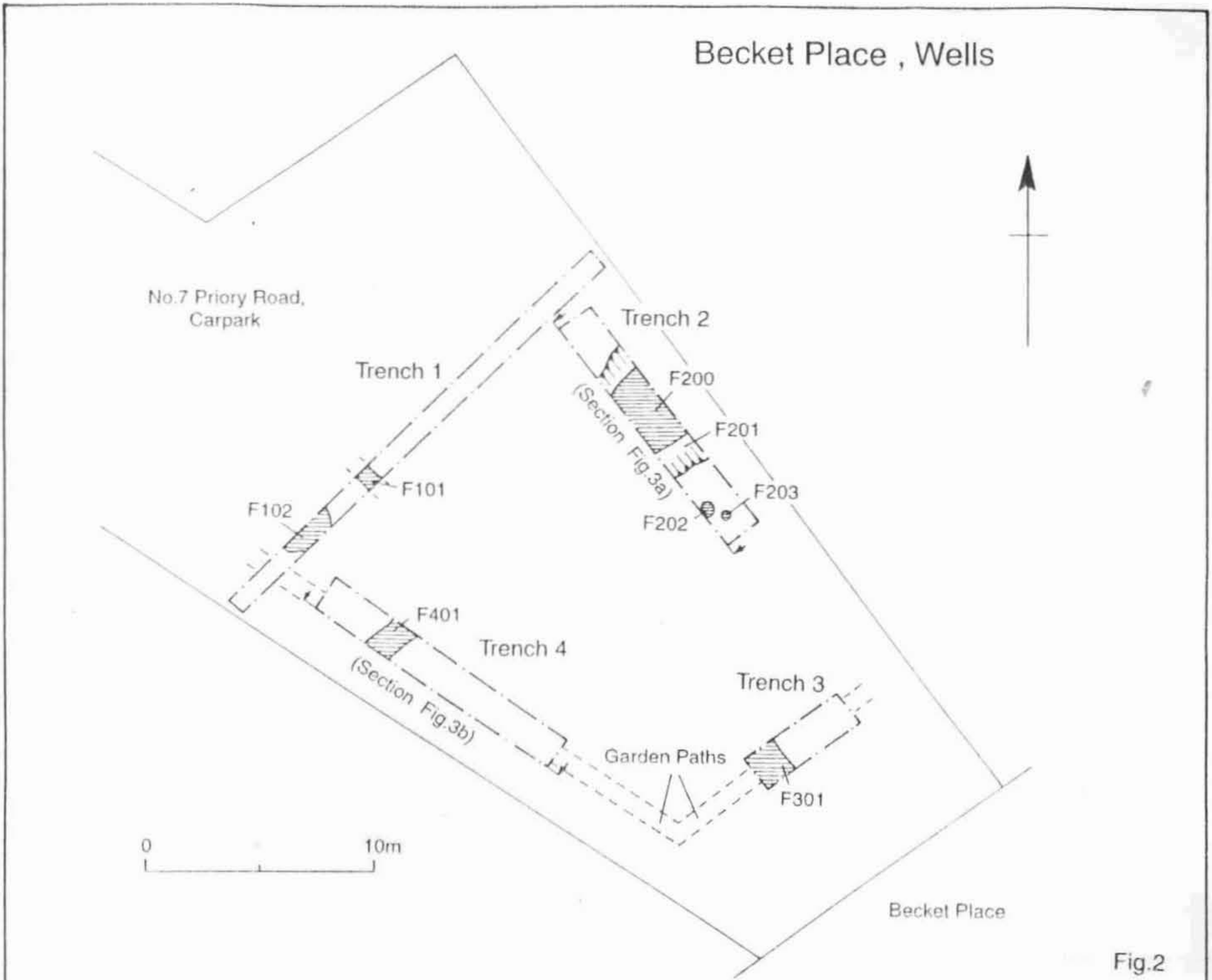


Fig.2

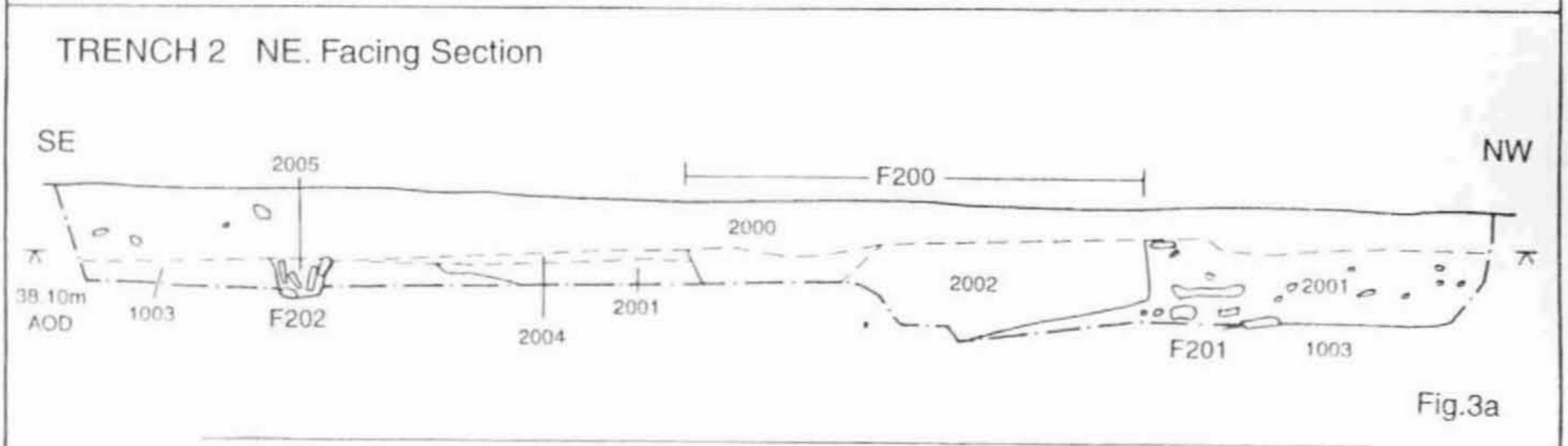


Fig.3a

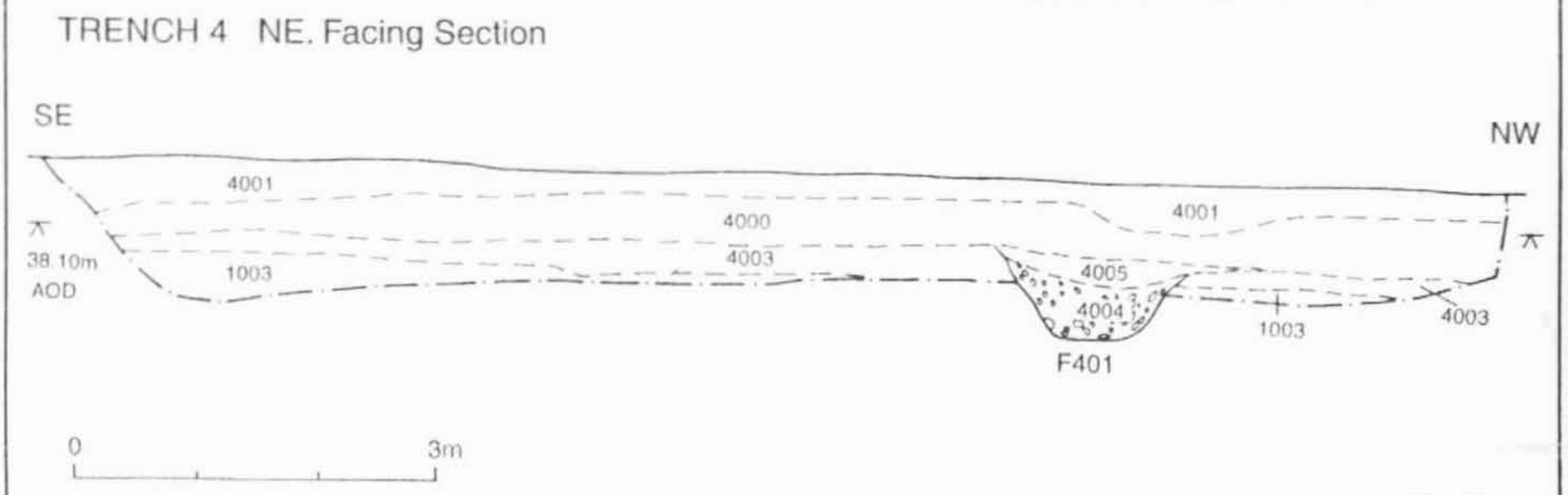


Fig.3b