BRIDGWATER & DISTRICT ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

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A ROMAN VILLA FOUND AT STAWELL in AUGUST 2000

By courtesy of the landowner, Mr Richard Graham, members of the Bridgwater & District Archaeological Society's Excavation Group (Peter Ellson, Hamish Ramsay and Colin Tarrant) working for some twelve days in August 2000 (about 250 man-hours) discovered remains of a building having painted wall-plaster decoration, stone roof-tiles, a cement floor, fragments of Roman Samian and RB wares and situated on high quality land. All these attributes, especially the wall-painting, suggest a Roman building of superior quality situated in its own extensive farm estate. Unlikely as it is to be a temple or bath-house, by all reasonable criteria it qualifies as a Roman Villa, even though its extent and other attributes are at present unknown.

THE SITE

Study of aerial photographs of an area near Stawell (see Fig. 1), south of the Polden Hills, suggested the existence of a bank-and-ditch enclosure. By physical probing of the land, an area with the potential to contain remains of a building was located. Unfortunately, this area was formerly the site of an orchard or plantation - hence, the likelihood was that any building remains would have been very seriously disturbed. Additionally, soil resistivity surveys were unavailable owing to unfavourable ground-moisture conditions. It was therefore without the guidance of geophysical responses of any kind other than the 'feel' of the probing iron that a series of trial trenches was opened.

Agricultural requirements limited the time available for this work and all trenches were back-filled within three weeks. There is a note in Appendix 1 on a nearby landscape feature known locally as 'The Green Ladders'. For trench location details see Appendix 2 lodged, with a copy of this Report, in the Somerset County Sites and Monuments Record, County Hall, Taunton. Finds are detailed in Appendix 3.

EXCAVATIONS

TRENCH 1.

This was opened by Hamish Ramsay at the southern flank of a prominent crop-mark seen on the aerial photographs (DAP, NV5 & NV6). Beneath the topsoil there was evidence of a deep ditch: the associated bank left few traces having presumably been levelled by repeated ploughing. The ditch contained a quantity of Romano-British potsherds at an intermediate level. Twenty-three artefacts were recovered, including one piece of plain Samian ware, one piece of Oxford ware, five grey-wares, 3 BB wares and five pieces of animal bone, cracked and chipped, not gnawed. Not excavated to full depth.

TRENCH 2.

The trench was opened by Colin Tarrant at the northern flank of the same crop-mark seen on the aerial photographs. He found that the ditch had been backfilled (at least in its upper levels) with angular lias rubble of medium-size. Amongst this rubble were five potsherds (including two rim-sherds of grey-ware) and two iron nails. The excavation was discontinued at this stage.

TRENCH 3. (See Fig 2).

This was opened at a site determined by Colin Tarrant as a direct result of manual probing of the area. Initially, a sondage disclosed a large and roughly round and flat-topped gritstone block at 16 inches (0.4 metre) below ground level. (Gritstones of similar material are found near Rushey Barper, *circa* 200m. north-west).

A trench (Trench 3A) of 5 x 7½ feet (1.50 x 2.15 metres, the larger dimension aligned north-south) was opened immediately west of the sondage. This disclosed an area paved with six very large gritstones with other gritstones partly exposed to the south and west: one on the west side was markedly inclined downwards and the floor had apparently been levelled by adding broken roofing-tiles on top. These tiles (see photograph, Fig. 3) were of lias and of similar shape to Roman stone roofing tiles. Many broken tiles (some with nail holes), three square-section iron nails and four potsherds were found in Trench 3A.

Trench 3A was then extended by 21 inches (0.55 metre) on its north side to form Trench 3B, contiguous with Trench 3A. It was then found that the paving in Trench 3A had been extended northwards, but not in gritstone as expected, but in lias: however, the two neatly cut rectangular lias flagstones (thinner than the gritstones) were displaced on their beddings. The eastern one was badly aligned and the western flag had tipped down towards the west. The two lias flags showed no signs of wear and gave the impression of being foreign to the site: they seemed so out-of-keeping with the gritstone paving to the south as to call for further investigation.

A small sondage was therefore made immediately to the north and here many layers of stone roofing tiles similar to those in Trench 3A were found. Buried just beyond the north edge of the western lias flag was a deeply rust-encrusted flat iron bar, about 20 inches (0.5 metre) long. It was carefully removed and taken immediately to Taunton for an expert opinion, where it was confirmed to be of post-medieval date. Meanwhile, a further small iron object was retrieved from beneath the edge of the eastern lias slab. Clearly, the site had been in use later than the previous finds had suggested. This appears to be confirmed by the fact that none of the pavement in Trench 3 had been covered with a backfill of lias rubble, unlike the backfilling encountered in Trenches 2 and 4 (*q.v.*).

This led to a review of Trench 3 as a whole. It was noted that two adjacent slabs on the western side of Trench 3 were both inclined markedly towards a point situated outside the trench to the west. Unfortunately, we had no time to investigate further.

Speculation on Trench 3. It was suggested that the subsidence of the two slabs had occurred because of the existence of a well to the immediate west of the excavated area; which led to a postulation that an early well had been utilised at a later date when the site was repaired with lias slabs. Furthermore, it was postulated that the area was roofed over with the stone roofing tiles found in abundance in this Trench! The lack of a backfill of lias blochs over the pavement may also be a significant indication of later usage. Speculation is a fine thing - it led to the discovery of the villa site - but the very existence or otherwise of a well-head has yet to be investigated. Undoubtedly, this area should be subjected to further investigation: if a well were present, its contents would likely provide essential dating evidence.

TRENCH 4. (see Fig. 4).

Trench 4 was 22 feet (6.8 metres) long north to south and 2 feet (0.6 metre) wide. About 8 inches (20 cm) of topsoil (4-1) was first removed: it contained no visible artefacts.

Beneath was a 5-inch (12-cm) thick spread of random lias rubble blocks (4-2), very few with mortar adhering, closely packed along the length of the trench except in two Regions 'A' and 'B' (see Fig. 4): in these Regions there was a larger proportion of decayed mortar with fewer lias stones. The spread of lias rubble (4-2) found on each side of and between Regions 'A' and 'B' was reminiscent of an area having been levelled using blocks of lias rubble in a manual backfilling operation, probably prior to agricultural use of the site. (It was similar to the backfill found in Trench 2).

Beneath this layer of lias blocks (not in Regions 'A' or 'B') was a 3-inch (8-cm) layer (4-3) composed of mixed materials *i. e.* lias chippings with a few inclusions of lias blocks in a loosely-packed matrix of decayed mortar with occasional inclusions of small rounded lumps of white lime. A small sherd of redware and another of BB ware[1] were found at the base of this layer.

Beneath this again was a layer (4-4) comprising a firm matrix of decayed mortar with only a few inclusions of lias chips and with crushed lumps of white lime, all forming a hard-packed layer which very much suggested a trampled surface[2].

To establish whether this was a floor, or a remnant thereof, a small sondage was made towards the north end of Trench 4. This showed that about 3 inches (8 cm) beneath this hard-packed layer (4-4) lay a bed of hard cement (4-5) approximately 1 inch (2.5 cm) thick, set directly upon black earth (4-6). By a lucky chance, this small sondage exposed the north termination of the cement floor (4-5). A probe inserted to a further 2½ feet (0.76 m.) below this floor-level suggested that black earth extended below the bed of hard cement to a depth of at least four feet (1.25 m) below ground level.[3]

Hearth

On the trampled surface (4-4) of Trench 4 and centred on a point 3.4 metres from the south end was an an area of reddened clay (4-7) approximately 18 inches (0.5 metre) in diameter which had become hardened and discoloured by fire towards its centre. It was the remains of a little hearth (4-8) in which a small quantity of lead or pewter (4-9) was found.[4] It was concluded that the hearth had been utilised for small-scale lead or pewter casting in a later temporary occupation, when demolition debris (4-4) lay underfoot.

Floor

Along the length of the trench except in Regions 'A' and 'B', the hard cement layer (4-5) was now exposed by scraping away the trampled detritus (4-4) which had accumulated on it: this cement layer (4-5) was found intact for 14 feet (4.3 metres) along Trench 4 except for a length of 18 inches (0.46 metre) at its south end and 4 feet (1.22 metres) at its north end. The surface of this cement was carefully examined for any evidence of it having been a sub-floor carrying floor tiles or stone flags, (no loose tesserae having been encountered): there were no ridges in the surface showng joints between former flooring and no chips of red tile, brick or flakes of stone. There was nothing to suggest that the cement layer was not an original floor.

Region 'A'

This was 6 feet (1.8 metres) long and lay between 15½ and 21½ feet (4.7 and 6.5 metres) from the south end of the trench. Its upper portion (4-10) contained a tumbled mass of mid-brown decayed mortar containing lias rubble blocks and small lumps of white lime, typical of mortar of the Roman period.[5] Mortar adhering to some of the lias rubblestones confirmed them as former building stones from a collapsed wall. A sample of mortar was collected.

Beneath this and at floor level were numerous pieces of painted plaster[6] (4-11). In the sondage mentioned above where the north end of the floor (4-5) had been noted, no wall-footings were found; the base of the sondage and its stratigraphy to east and west showed only black earth below fallen plaster.

Three observations, namely the thickness of Region 'A' compared with Region 'B', the composition of the remains, and the absence of a floor to the north, implies that the wall in Region 'A' had been (part of) the north wall of the building. It is concluded that this wall had either collapsed outwards (towards the exterior of the building) or that, by chance Trench 4 was aligned on a doorway in the wall.

Region 'B'

This was 18 inches (0.45 metre) long and lay between 3 and 4½ feet (0.91 and 1.37 metres) from the south end of Trench 4. Between these limits the spread of random lias rubble blocks (4-2) and loose detritus (4-3) were absent: instead, there was a mix of light-brown and mid-brown decayed gritty mortar (4-12).

On further excavation in this Region the material encountered became lighter in colour at greater depth and was found to contain particles of crushed light-brown plaster rendering (4-13) in a matrix of rough mid-brown mortar. Clearly, this plaster and its substrate had come from a wall. Some pieces of painted plaster were collected.

When this material was removed, it was found that the hard cement floor (4-5) lay beneath it.

The length of this Region (18 inches) compared with Region 'A' (6 feet) was an indication that the wall that had previously existed here had probably been a partition

wall. However, there was no evidence of any slot for a timber sleeper in the floor, nor any other explanation for what otherwise appeared to have been the location of an internal partition wall. As a check, the cement floor in this Region was then removed to facilitate an inspection of the stratigraphy to east and west: these did not provide any additional elucidation. There may have been a doorway in the partition at this point. Such difficulties of interpretation abound when only very limited excavation takes place.

Outside

For a length of 4 feet three inches (1.3 metres) the north end of Trench 4 was widened out (see Fig. 4) to expose an excavated area 7 feet three inches (2.2 metres) wide. When the remains of the collapsed wall were cleared away, a layer of broken wall plaster (4-14) was encountered. It was noted that the density (per unit square) of plaster pieces was greatest to the south-east and far less to the north-west of this area and that there was an abrupt boundary across the north-east corner where the fall of plaster had been totally prevented - the cause of this was sought but not found. All the painted wall plaster in this rectangular area was recovered. Following the removal of plaster, Colin Tarrant confirmed that there was no cement floor (4-6) in this area, so it was concluded that this part of the site was external. (An external wall rendered and painted was found at Cirencester.[7]) Beneath the fallen plaster, in the underlying black earth (4-6) at a depth of 22 inches (0.55 metre) a turned shale[8] armlet (see Fig. 5) was found together with part of an oyster shell, 20 pieces of coarseware[9] and many very small bones of mammals and birds with quills and claws. Excavation of this waste-heap was limited by the time available and hence was confined to the south-western part of the rectangular extension of Trench 4 and to a depth of only 26 inches (0.65 metre).

TRENCH 5.

Trench 5 lay east-west, 20 inches (0.5 metre) wide and 10 feet (3 metres) long, was dug to seek any continuation of the building remains to the north-east. Two flints were found in the course of digging. A level footway or yard paved with small lias chippings was found at a depth of 16 inches (0.40 metre). On the floor was found a heavy 3½-inch (90mm) headless iron spike tapering down from a 7/16-inch (10mm) square cross-section to a pointed end. At the west end the floor became thinner and petered out over the last 12 inches (0.30 metre), possibly as a result of frequent passage or usage. At the east end, some large lias rubble was found without mortar or clay binding material, so this was tentatively ascribed to the remains of an external dry boundary wall or the wall of an outbuilding. The area of the whole trench appeared to be external to the building in Trench 4.

CONCLUSIONS

That the site had been previously robbed there is no doubt: only one piece of dressed stone and no unbroken roofing tiles were found amongst the rubble used to

level the site for agricultural usage. It is noted that the northern ditch beneath the cropmark (Trench 2) also contained similar building rubble.

The evidence indicates that the small portion of building surveyed (Trench 4) had a cement floor which was divided by a thin plastered and painted partition wall and terminated in the north by a substantial plastered and painted stone wall which had collapsed outwards *i.e.* towards the north. No evidence of roof-tiles, tesserae or floor tiles was found within the confines of Trench 4 and none was found in extensive field-walks made in a wide area around the site. Remains of heated walls, hypocausts, box-tile flues or a furnace site may exist to the immediate west: such might be expected in a building having painted wall-plaster and situated in the best agricultural land in the neighbourhood. Plastered and painted walls alone indicate a reasonable degree of wealth and standing of the former owner of the building.

Dating evidence from Trench 4 is extremely meagre and at present suggests C3 - C4. When assessed, some of the pottery found outside the north wall may provide more information on dating. This will be issued in due course in Appendix 3.

The area excavated covered only a very small portion of the villa site, and the two occupation sites thereby disclosed may be only the uppermost in a succession of occupation sites. In accordance with the Society's policy of discovery with minimal destruction, the exposed portion of floor of the said building was preserved intact, except for the small sondages described.

It is proposed to attempt an estimation of the overall size of the villa by means of a geophysical survey at a later date when ground and crop conditions are suitable. No further excavation is planned.

PETER ELLSON, August - September, 2000.

REFERENCES

1. Similar to Oxford colour-coated coarseware, *c.*325-400+ illustrated in *Cirencester Excavations V* (1998), ed. Neil Holbrook, p. 161..

2. 'Trampled surface'; *Cirencester Excavations V* (1998) ed. Neil Holbrook, p. 116; p. 161 refers to large quantities of fragmented and trampled plaster rerendered and repainted several times.

3. The fields in this area to east of Stawell are called 'Blacklands', a name suggesting a prolonged period of human occupation).

4. The distribution of Roman pewter is significant. In England, areas around Cambridge and the Mendip region are the two centres where pewter is most prevalent. In our area by 1958 finds of pewter had occurred in three locations in Shapwick, one in Meare and one in Edington. For a map of the distribution of pewter in Roman Britain, see Wedlake, W. J., *Excavations at Camerton* (1958), op. p. 87.

5. Roman mortar was made on-site by mixing together slaked-lime and sand or gravel and adding water. Slaked-lime was made by adding a limited amount of water to lumps of burnt limestone blocks: these blocks then needed to be puddled down by hand, using special long-handled tools somewhat akin to bent hoes. Failure to break up all the lime during slaking led to the inclusion of the small rounded lumps of white lime usually found in Roman mortar.

6. 'Plaster'; the Society does not have facilities to distinguish this material from the mortar substrate other than by colour and texture. It is seen, however, that the flat surfaces of the plaster encountered here had been coated with a very thin white skim coat before being painted. Roman wall-painting was done on plastered walls. Stone walls would first be given a coat of coarse mortar, followed by a coat of fine cement render. They were then given a fine skim-coat of white plaster in the presence of the artist who worked immediately on the wet surface of plaster so that the colour penetrated the surface and would not rub off when dry. The finished work is known as *fresco*. See Jean Pierre Adam,

Roman Building Materials and Techniques (1994), 216 ff. Tests on samples of the painted plaster found at this site show that the colour does not wash off and cannot easily be rubbed off.

7. *Cirencester Excavations V* (1998), ed. Neil Holbrook, pp. 116, 161.

8. *Cirencester Excavations V* (1998), ed. Neil Holbrook, pp. 298-9 *et al.* Part of a shale armlet or bracelet, probably made at or near to Eldon's Seat, Encombe, Dorset. Similar to that found at the Wraxall Roman Villa, but flat on one flank and curved on the other and of smaller overall diameter; possibly a child's bracelet. Others have been found at Silchester, South Shields, Colchester and Cirencester.

9. Parts of a hand-made cooking pot, blackened body with base (3 pcs.); 2 grey-ware rimsherds (one in two pcs.); 1 large stained grey-ware bodysherd, ?hand made; 3 grey-ware bodysherds, all wheel-made; one bodysherd having depressed-lattice decoration and gritty fabric; 2 small bodysherds, black, wiped exteriors; 7 small bodysherds, various; Total 20. Also 1 oyster shell.

Fig. 1: Stawell

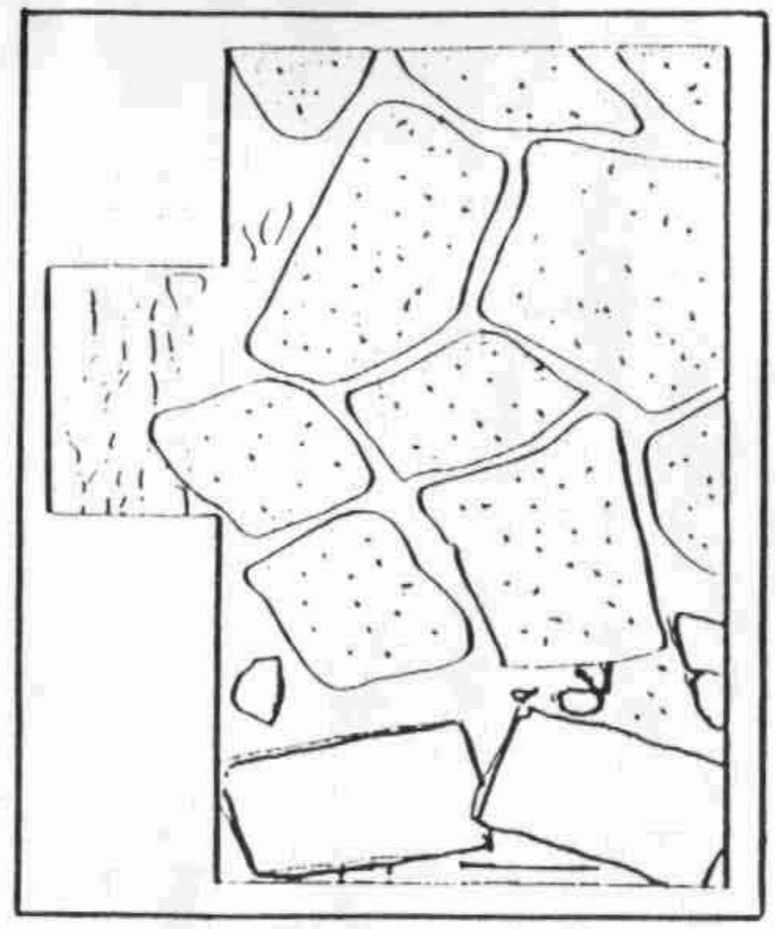


Fig. 2: Trench 3

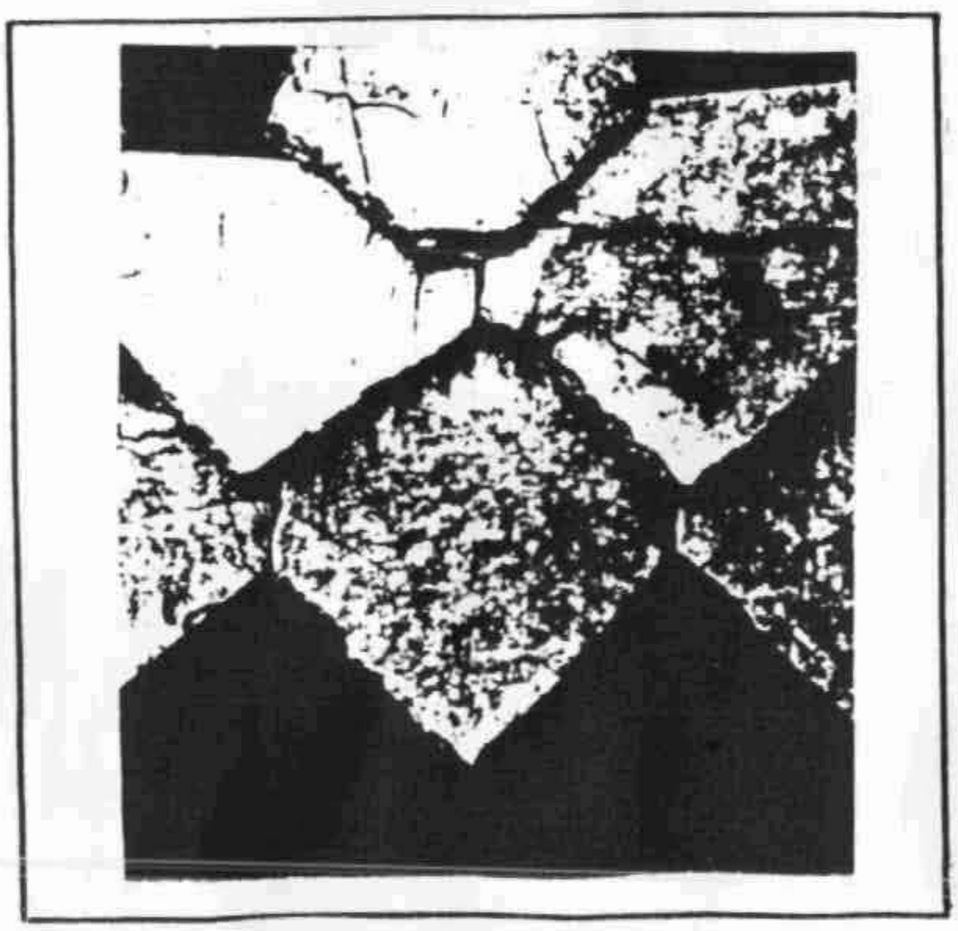


Fig. 3: Roof tiles

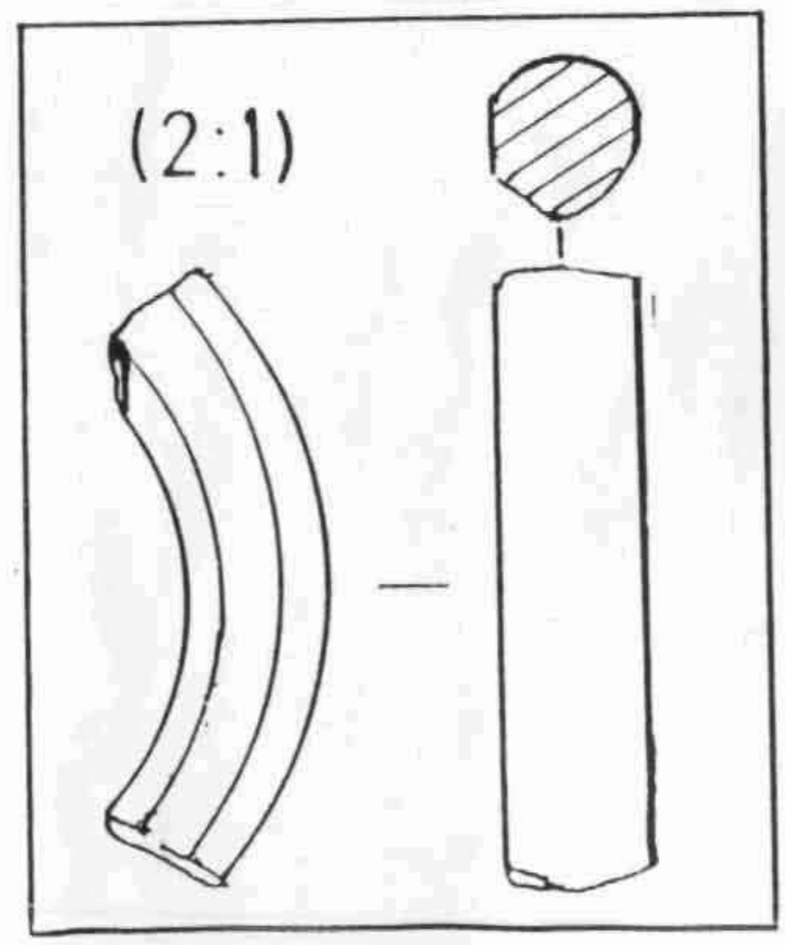
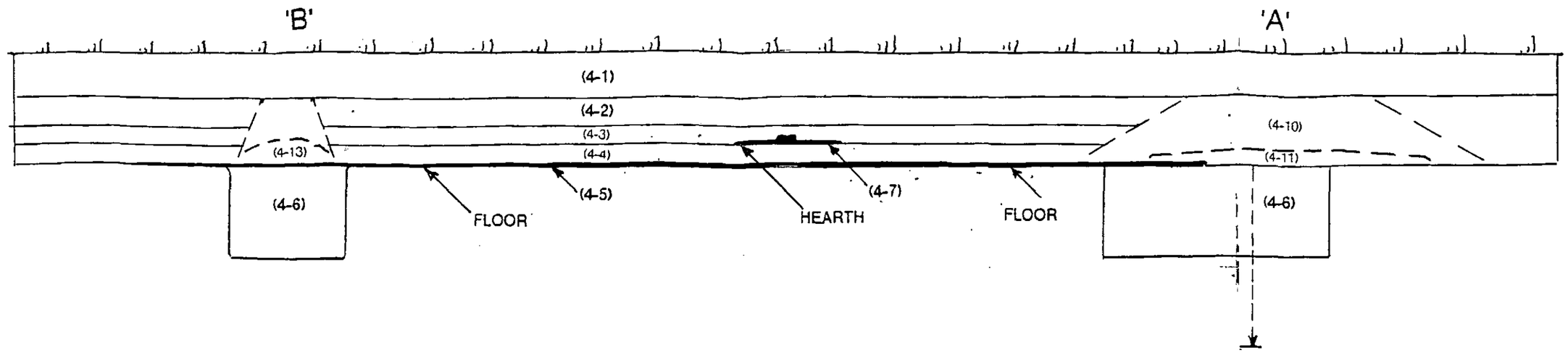


Fig.5: Shale armlet



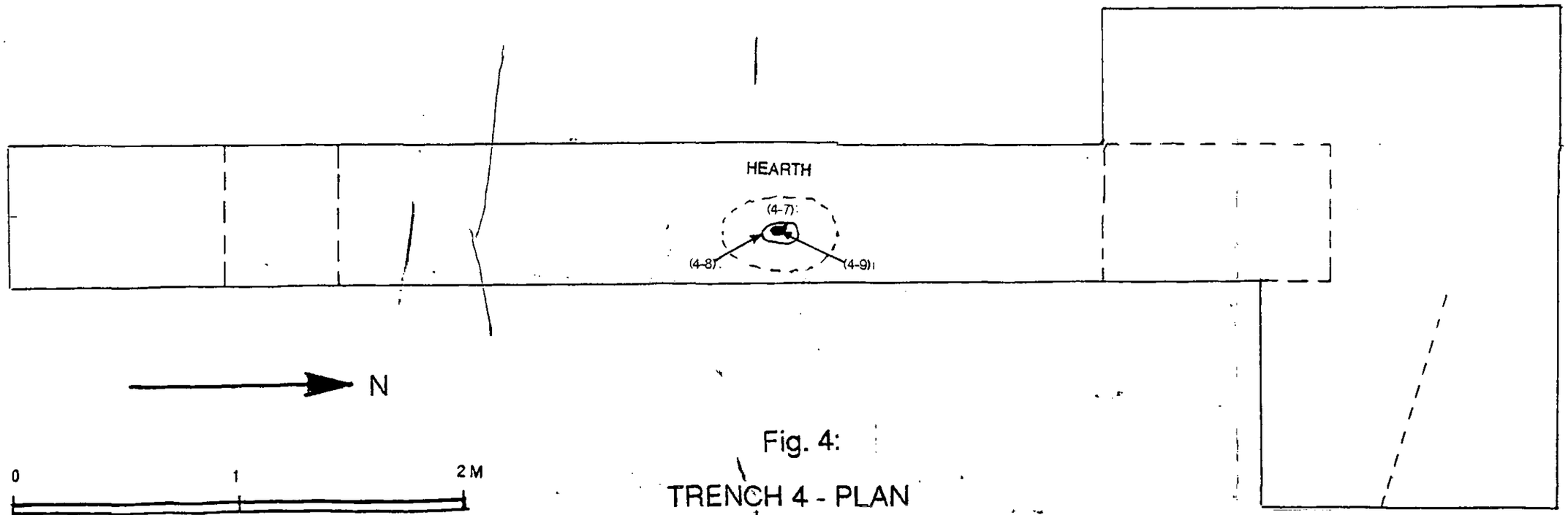


Fig. 4:

TRENCH 4 - PLAN

PBE 2K

A ROMAN VILLA FOUND AT STAWELL

'THE GREEN LADDERS' - - APPENDIX 1.

On the steep south-facing scarp slope of the Polden Hills are an irregularly-spaced close array of banks running steeply up the scarp, approximately at right-angles to the line of the ridge. These are known locally as 'The Green Ladders' and are allegedly the site of a former vinyard. Furthermore, it is sometimes claimed that they are of Roman origin, although on what evidence we have been unable to ascertain.

The discovery of a Roman villa to the south of the 'Green Ladders' is now almost certain to lead to further unsubstantiated claims as to the Roman origin of the 'ladders'. Such claims are unsupportable on the excavators' present knowledge of the villa.

LOCATION OF TRENCHES IN FIELD 4531 - - APPENDIX 2.

See drawings accompanying this Appendix.

Trenches 1, 2 and 3 were offset from, and aligned parallel to, a straight baseline between the eastern gatepost on the south side of the field and the electricity supply pole (Pole B) situated 126.7 metres to the north at ST 37383835. In the data that follow, the north-south dimension of a trench or sondage is quoted first, followed by its east-west dimension.

Trench 1 was 8.6 x 0.4 metres, its south-eastern corner being 8.6 metres west from a point on the baseline 49 metres north from the gatepost.

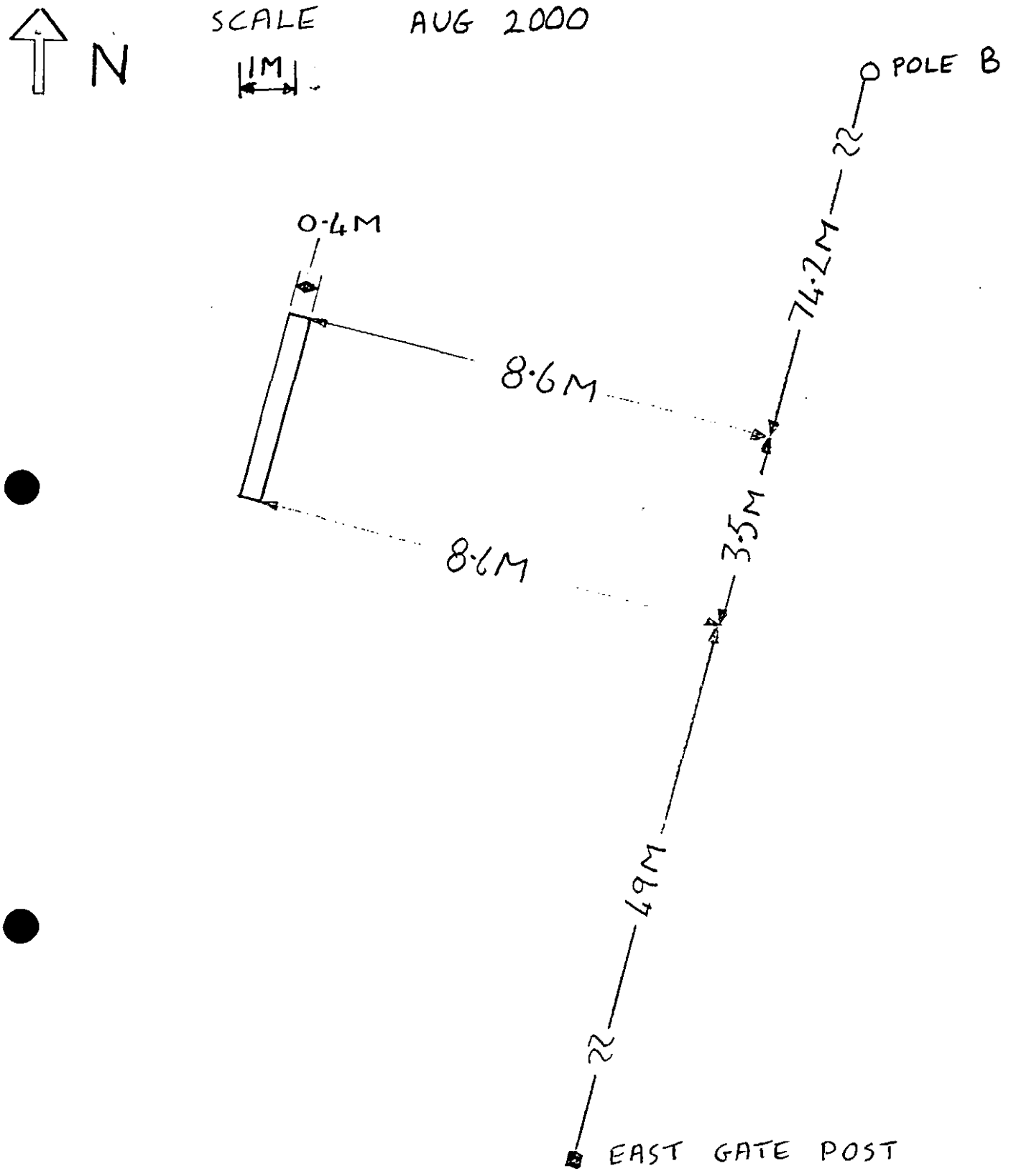
Trench 2 was 1.2 x 1.1 metres, its south-eastern corner being 0.8 metres west from a point on the baseline 99.5 metres north from the gatepost.

Trench 3 was 2.7 x 1.5 metres, its south-western corner being 3.5 metres west from a point on the baseline 117.5 metres north from the gatepost. The first sondage was 0.8 x 0.5 meters, contiguous with the eastern side of Trench 3 at 0.7 metres north of its south-eastern corner. The second sondage was 0.7 x 0.3 meters, contiguous with the southern side of Trench 3 at 1.0 metres west of its south-eastern corner.

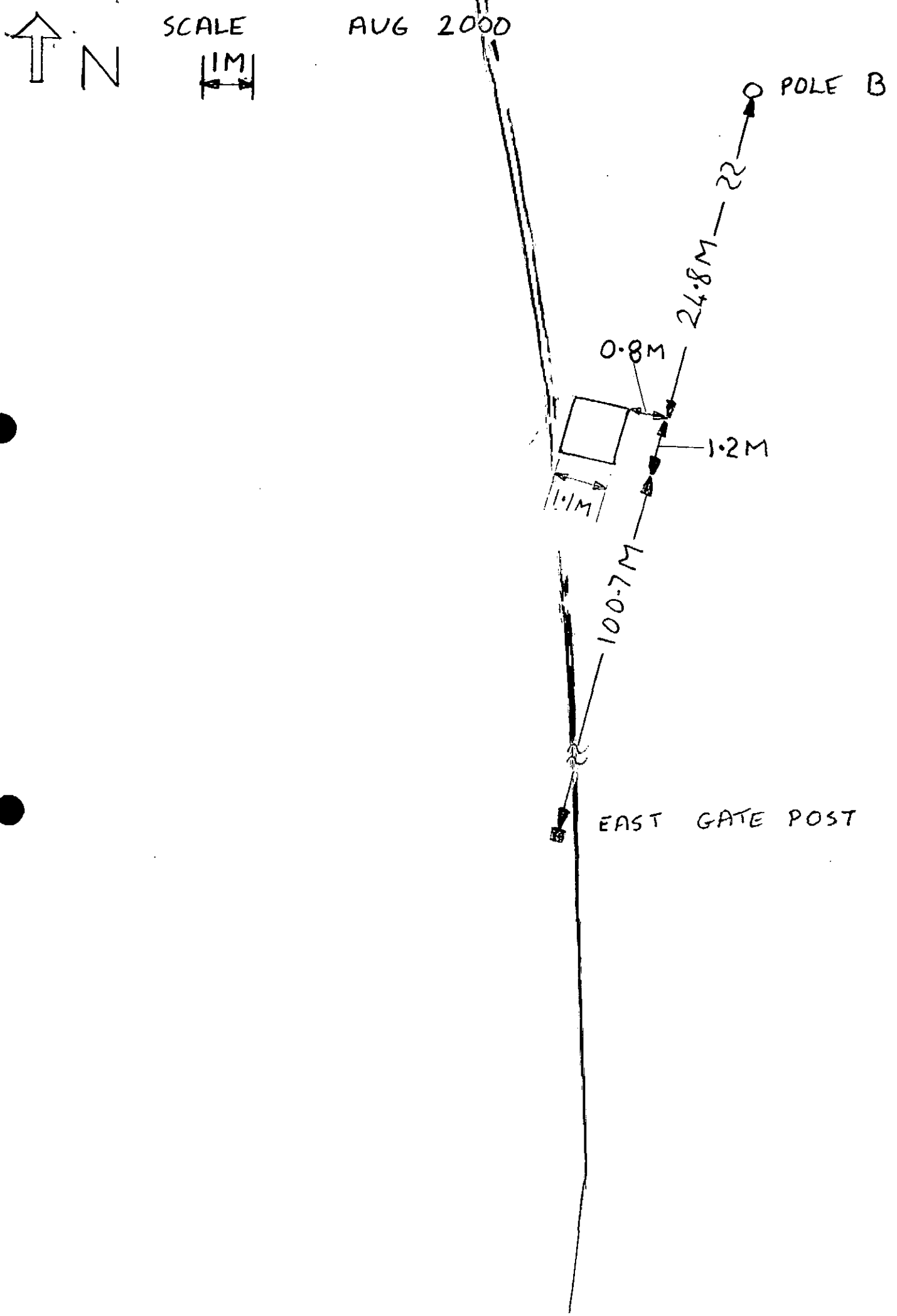
Trench 4 was 6.8 x 0.6 metres. To locate it on the land, it is helpful to use two pegs and two range-rods. Start at the electricity supply pole described above (Pole B). From Pole B measure 10.0 metres along the imaginary straight line joining Pole B to another electricity supply pole (Pole D) situated to the south east in the southern hedge of the same field and insert a peg DD. From Pole B measure 11.1 metres along the imaginary straight line joining it to another electricity supply pole (Pole C) situated within the same field 105.8 metres to the east and insert a peg CC. Lay out a measuring tape from peg BB to peg CC and extend it to at least 12.2 metres. This is the centre-line of Trench 4. (Check: the centre-line should be 9.6 metres from Pole B). Trench 4 extends from the 4.4-metre point to the 11.2-metre point on the tape. Insert range-rods to mark each end of Trench 4. (Note that peg DD is located within the area of Trench 4). Trench 4 has two lateral extensions at its north end, one towards the west and another towards the east. On the west side, the extension is 0.6 metre westward for a length of 2.0 metres; on the east side, the the extension is 1.0 metre eastward for a length of 1.2 metre. (Check: the north end of Trench 4 is 2.2 metres wide). Delineate Trench 4 with string and eight pegs.

Trench 5 is at right-angles to Trench 4. To locate it on the land, it is helpful to use two range-rods. It is 0.4 x 2.8 metres and its north-east corner is 19.8 metres from Pole B on an imaginary line from Pole B to Pole D. Insert a range-rod here to mark the eastern end. (Check: This range-rod should be 7.5 metres from the 13.2-metre point on the measuring tape set out to mark the centre-line of Trench 4). The western end of Trench 5 is 2.8 metres west of the range rod. Insert another range-rod here to mark the western end of Trench 5. (Check: The western end of Trench 5 is 4.7 metres from the 13.2-metre point on the measuring tape set out to mark the centre-line of Trench 4). Delineate Trench 5 with string and four pegs.

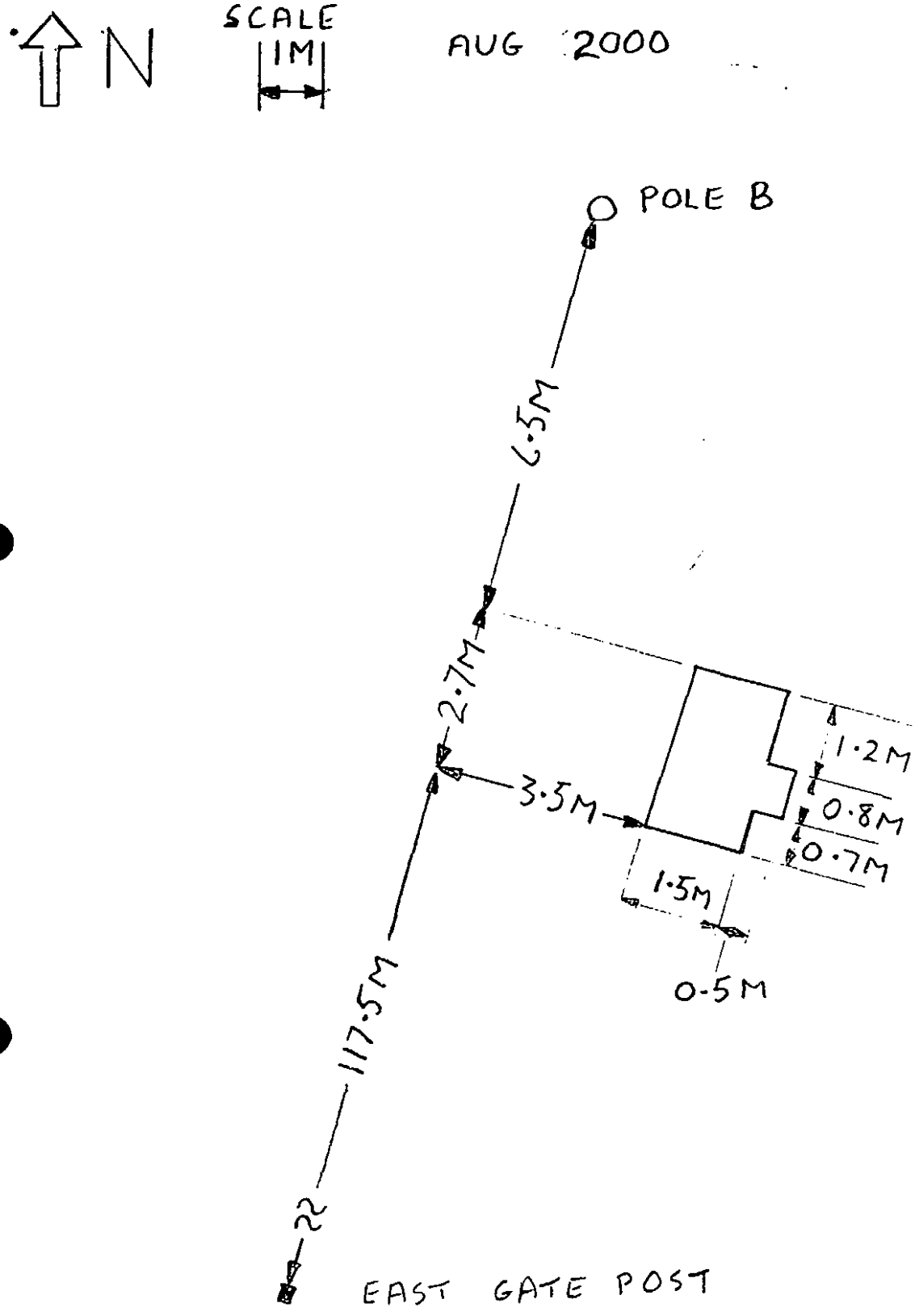
STAWELL TRENCH 1 LOCATION



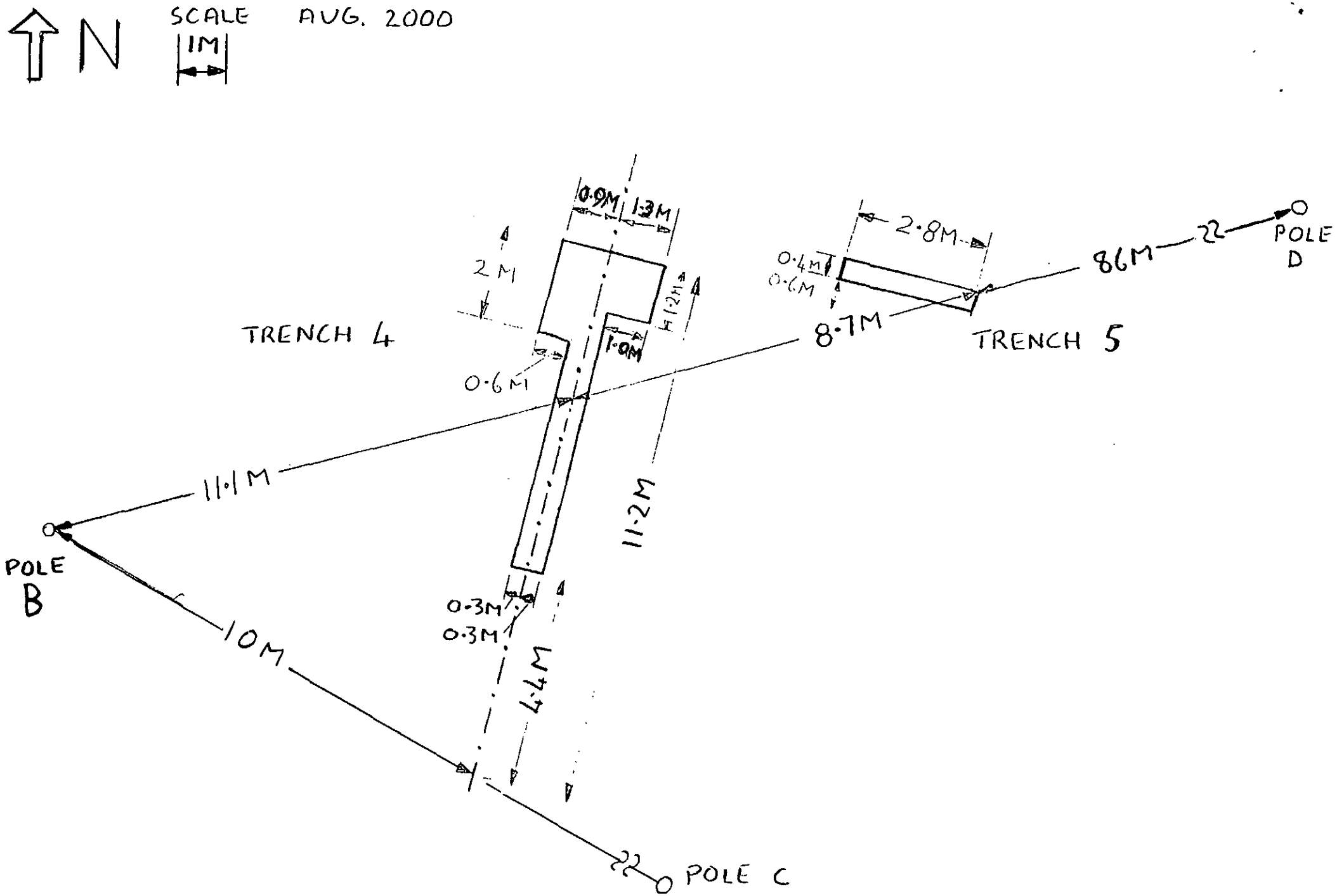
STAWELL TRENCH 2 LOCATION

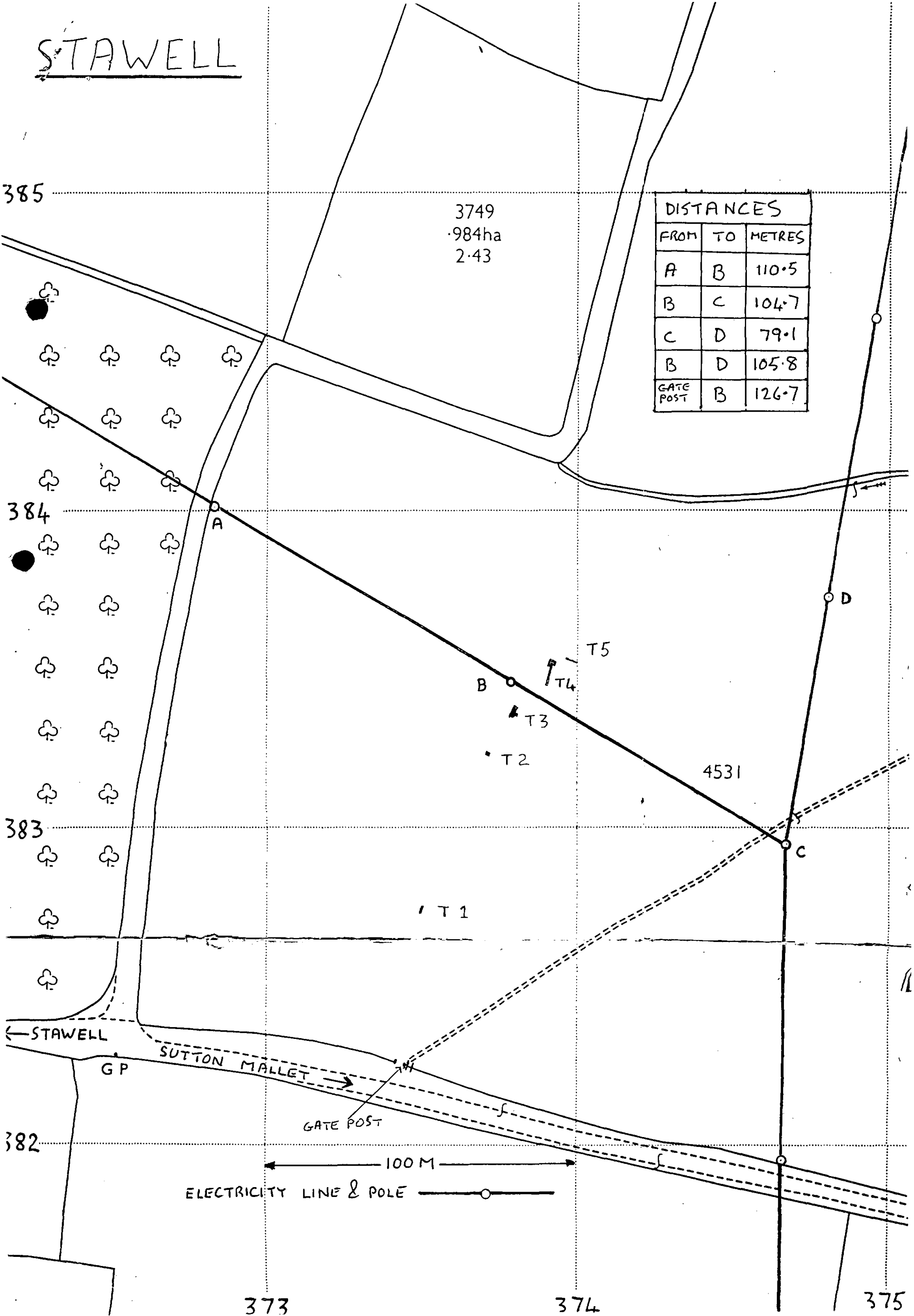


STAWELL TRENCH 3 LOCATION



STAWELL TRENCH 4 & [redacted] LOCATION





DISTANCES		
FROM	TO	METRES
A	B	110·5
B	C	104·7
C	D	79·1
B	D	105·8
GATE POST	B	126·7