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BIRMINGHAM UNIVERSITY
FIELD ARCHAEOLOGY UNIT

CLARES CARLTON

WELLS

An Archaeological Evaluation

November 1987

B.U.F.A.U.



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by Peter Leach

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1.1 Introduction

A field evaluation, by trial excavations, of the archaeological potential of this site was undertaken by Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit in November 1987. The project was commissioned by Simmons Building Design (Bath) on behalf of Lansdown Homes Ltd., (Beazer Homes), prior to residential development of the site. The premises, formerly occupied as a clothing factory, shop and warehouse accommodation by Clares Carlton Ltd., lie south of the Town Hall and Market Place, Wells. Immediately to the east is the moat and palace of the Bishop of Bath and Wells, and the site is presently served by a lane - Town Hall Buildings - giving access to the Market Place (Fig. 1b).

Partial demolition of Clares Carlton premises gave access to several areas and in fact enabled an adequate evaluation to be made of up to 90% of the whole site. The archaeological assessment was made over a period of five days (November 2nd - 6th), and involved mechanical excavation of transect trenches followed by hand clearance and definition of archaeological features and deposits, their sampling and recording. Six trenches were cut (I-VI) and recorded, the detail of which is available in an archive kept by BUFAU. Their distribution was determined by availability and the requirement to obtain as full a picture as possible of preceding arrangements and development of the area as was reconstructable from archaeological data (Fig. 2).

2.1 The Site

Human settlement at Wells has above all been influenced by the copious springs of St. Andrews Well, from which indeed the name is derived. Of almost equal importance, though hardly apparent today, is the well drained platform of alluvial outwash gravels underlying the town; its origin linked with the resurgence of water at the foot of the Mendip Hills. Aspects of both were apparent in this site's evaluation, and are central to its archaeological interpretation.

Excepting the cathedral, the archaeology of Wells is virtually unexplored, its potential barely tested (Aston & Leech 1977, 147-154). Research and excavation involving the cathedral and its environs have demonstrated both prehistoric and Roman interest and activity, centring no doubt upon the springs (Rodwell, 1980). Location of the Anglo-Saxon cathedral has implications for the origin and development of the early medieval settlement, although Wells did

not attain recognised urban status until after Domesday (Scrase 1978). The topography of the later medieval town, evidently flourishing by the 13th century, is still apparent in the streets and properties of today (Fig. 1b).

Study of the relict historical topography, and documentary sources provide clues to the history and development of the Clares Carlton site over the past eight centuries or so. In the medieval townscape the dominant features are burgage tenements of properties fronting onto the market place to the north, and the 13th-century creation of the moat and palace of the Bishop to the east. We have no direct information concerning the use or arrangement of the adjacent area to the south west, apart from an identification of the Palace Mill adjacent to the moat and sited beneath what are now public conveniences and a public car park. This establishment may have been created following the layout of the palace and its moat, although its identification as one of the nine Domesday mills at Wells cannot be ruled out (Scrase 1982, 238-243).

The northern boundary to the proposed development coincides approximately with the southern extremity of medieval tenements fronting the market place. Here, evidently, was the south boundary to the medieval town, which, despite a 14th-century murage grant, was never walled (Aston & Leech 1977, 150). Late in the 12th century a watercourse apparently bounded the borough on this side, land further to the south being the property of the Bishop.

These circumstances evidently held until the 18th century when we have the first clear depiction of arrangements in this part of the town. Simes' plan of Wells in 1735 shows the Clares Carlton site to have been occupied by small garden and orchard plots, watercourses, service lanes, and a handful of detached buildings - including the Palace Mill. A century later the mill was derelict and soon to be obliterated by new market development (Scrase, forthcoming). During the 19th century the area was progressively infilled by cottages and small scale industrial premises served by the Town Hall Buildings lane. In the present century Town Hall Buildings has been linked with South Street, and the expansion of industrial premises ultimately unified within the offices, warehousing and clothing manufacturing of Clares Carlton Ltd.

3.1 Archaeological Evaluation

At the time of this evaluation several areas were unavailable or difficult of access. In view of this and the suspected earlier topography of the site, a series of machine-excavated transects were cut to investigate the character, preservation and period of archaeological deposits representing the past history of this area. The evaluation procedure involved mechanical excavation of trenches (I-VI), just over 1.0 m wide, to horizons where the natural subsoil or groundwater levels were encountered. Archaeological strata were then defined and recorded in vertical section, and occasionally in the horizontal, where mechanical excavation was judged to be

inappropriate. Associated finds were recovered from the stratigraphic units so identified, and a sample of the material retained. Graphic and photographic records of the observed strata were accompanied by a definitive and interpretative written record. The results from each area (Fig. 2) are reviewed briefly and their implications considered as follows.

3.2 Trenches I-III (Fig. 2)

The largest single area available for investigation lay to the south west, following demolition of factory premises. A segmented alignment of three trenches was laid out here on the longest axis.

Trench I revealed a considerable build-up of post-medieval deposits relating to 19th- and 20th- century industrial use of the area, succeeding levels of garden soil and debris originating prior to that phase. A natural substrate of coarse clay gravel and rock debris, predominantly red-brown in colour, underlay the soils at c.41.0m AOD, coincident with a ground water table in this area. The gravel can be identified with the platform of post-glacial outwash gravels underlying the town and was encountered elsewhere during the evaluation. The fill of an earlier ?post-medieval ditch, aligned approximately north east to south west (F6), was largely inaccessible beneath the water table. No other identifiable features of archaeological significance were recorded.

In Trench II the sequence and depth of deposits was essentially a repeat of Trench I, although the absence of groundwater here suggests that its level in the latter was due to other factors. Most of the deposits above natural gravel seem to have accumulated since the 16th century, but remnants of an earlier soil horizon survived in places. At the west end of the trench finds from this earlier level and from a length of shallow ditch (F1) included sherds of Roman pottery and the pin of a bronze penannular brooch.

The sequence of Trenches I and II continued westwards in III, but with the addition of a thick dump of stone roof tile and building debris beneath the later 19th- and 20th- century levels. This may represent late 19th-century demolition of structures and properties occupying part of this area before conversion to factory premises. Stone wall footings (F2) and a broad shallow ditch (F3) seem to have been associated with this process. The natural gravel base was somewhat lower here but rose gently again to c.41.0m AOD at the west corner of the trench. An oblique turn of the trench northwards soon encountered more deeply stratified deposits beneath the modern makeup. This was reflected in a shallow downhill scarp (F5) of underlying natural gravel to the north. This slope and the associated deposits represent the south edge of a considerable depression of unknown depth and extent, from which sherds of both Roman and medieval pottery were recovered. The groundwater table here was reached at c.39.70m AOD., less than 2.0m below the modern surface.

3.3 Trench IV (Fig. 2)

North of Town Hall Buildings a long narrow plot was also available for examination, although still sealed in part by a thick concrete raft. This factor and the anticipated topography here determined the minimal evaluation provided by Trench IV. As expected the water table was encountered less than 1.50m below the modern tarmac surface and recent makeup deposits. Machine excavation into underlying waterlogged strata suggested the deposition of calcareous clay silts and gravel with tufa in a watercourse. It was not feasible to proceed below c.2.0m (c.39.70m AOD.), and the full depth of deposits down to natural could not therefore be assessed.

3.4 Trench V (Fig. 2)

A former car parking area was available for the two arms of Trench V. The proximity of the culverted St. Andrews Stream suggested that this area too occupied the site of former watercourses, as excavation subsequently proved. In the shorter southern arm machine excavation revealed a 2.0m-thick sequence of clay silts and waterlogged deposits, at the base of which natural gravel was seen at c.39.50m AOD. Since this was below the natural groundwater table (c.40.0m AOD.) it was difficult to examine the anaerobic fills here, although preservation of wood and organic material within them, in association with 13th- and 14th-century pottery, was good.

Later medieval and post-medieval build-up completed the infill of this area, in the course of which St. Andrews Stream was culverted. Evidence for this was recorded in the eastern arm of the trench, where the outer, mortared stone rubble jacket around the culvert (F7) was located at one point in the north baulk. Over 0.50m of 19th- and 20th- century deposits and structural footings seal this whole area, upon which more recent yard and tarmac surfaces are laid.

3.5 Trench VI (Fig. 2)

Building demolition in the south east corner of the site permitted the layout of Trench VI within the cleared area. Once again the overburden of modern makeup and demolition rubble was considerable, sealing earlier deposits. In the south arm the sequence was comparable to that recorded in Trenches I - II. The natural gravel sub-surface was again reached beneath a mixed soil accumulation originating prior to 19th- and 20th- century industrial use: at c.42.0m AOD., and 1.0m below the modern surface. A gentle decline northwards of the gravel horizon became more pronounced at the corner of the trench, where the top of a much steeper slope or cut (F8) was recorded continuing eastwards. In the eastern trench arm this depression was sealed by deposits including building material, ash, and burnt debris which incorporated some late medieval

pottery. A much greater depth of deposits, some of which are waterlogged, were penetrated here but could not be recorded in detail below a water table at c.41.50m AOD.

3.6 Summary

The results of this evaluation, combined with previous knowledge and inference, now permit a clearer understanding of the early topography of this area. This in turn sets the scene for the interpretation of archaeological features and deposits and the processes whereby these have arisen. Primarily, the Clares Carlton site overlies the course of a shallow trough or valley cut through late Pleistocene or early post-glacial outwash gravels beneath the later town. This will have been formed by the west-flowing streams issuing from the St. Andrews Well springs and sources further east, which link with the River Sheppey near Wookey. There are hints of Romano-British exploitation of the gravel terrace south of the valley from this investigation, and elsewhere around the springs from other discoveries (Fig. 1a).

Although the full depth and dimensions of this valley were not established, its southern edge can be reconstructed from evidence in Trenches III and VI, while Trench V probably lay towards its northern side. The process of silting and progressive infill may not have gathered pace until major modifications were made to the water supply and its distribution from the 13th century onwards. The Bishop's Palace moat was a major interruption to the natural watercourses, as no doubt were the siting of the Palace Mill, and diversions of water to supply the medieval town. These factors, contributing to a reduction and modification of the flow of water in the valley downstream, plus pollution and refuse disposal originating from the flourishing medieval town, will have encouraged the accretion of deposits in the valley bottom.

In these circumstances the medieval environment can be largely reconstructed here as a shallow marshy valley, possibly waste ground or water meadow, subject to periodic inundation and used from time to time as a dump for domestic or industrial rubbish from the town. Such an area was clearly unsuitable for any permanent structures or settlement, and indeed formed a natural southern boundary to medieval Wells. Better drained land to the south was the property of the Bishop and evidently reserved primarily for agricultural use. The Bishop's Tithe Barn lay in this area (Fig. 1b), and the name 'Conygree' here suggests that a rabbit warren was maintained for the Bishop beside the palace moat.

By the 18th century, when Simes' plan of 1735 gives us the first clear picture, gardens and small orchard or pasture enclosures occupied what was by then a largely infilled valley. The St. Andrews Stream and a subsidiary watercourse to the south both crossed the area, flowing westwards from the Palace Mill and moat. By the 19th century both had been culverted and the area was being infilled

with cottages and small industrial/commercial premises on either side of Town Hall Buildings.

As stated in 1.1 above, an almost total archaeological evaluation is judged to have been achieved here, given the suggested sequence of activity and development for this area over two millennia or so. The only significant exception was the north east corner, adjacent to the moat and Palace Mill. Demolition of the latter in or soon after 1835 will have obliterated the above-ground structure, but remains at lower levels and possibly earlier phases of the building will almost certainly have been buried in levelling-up operations. Given the conditions encountered just to the west in Trench V, the potential for a waterlogged environment, and thus preservation of organic artifacts and structures, must be high.

To the south east similar deposits were encountered and observed to continue for an unknown extent north and east. Although barely penetrated, the deposits in Trench VI suggest the potential for a considerable sequence of medieval stratigraphy and the preservation, in much higher proportions, of medieval refuse and artifacts, some in the waterlogged conditions favourable for organic preservation. The recovery of a sample of such material, and a clearer understanding of earlier arrangements here, would be desirable; particularly in the light of a relative ignorance of the archaeology of secular Wells.

4.1 Recommendations

For the purposes of an archaeological evaluation and its implications the Clares Carlton site can be sub-divided into three zones (Fig. 2)

Zone 1 comprises the entire area to the south east of Town Hall Buildings with the exception of the frontage strip. With rare exceptions the deposits here are dry above a natural gravel substrate and are of post-medieval origin. Their archaeological interest is low, although the recognition of Roman activity here could be amplified by further evidence. A watching brief during contractors' excavations is recommended for this area.

Zone ii lies mainly to the north of Town Hall Buildings but includes its south frontage strip. Beneath this area 2.0m or more of deposits survive beneath modern makeup. Their lower levels are waterlogged, preserving evidence of medieval and probably Roman depositions and artifacts. Since none of the latter may be in primary contexts, there is no known evidence for historic structures in this area, and the deposits are of such depth and extent, further detailed archaeological investigation can hardly be justified. Once again watching briefs during contractors' excavations in this area will be the most appropriate response.

Zone iii is primarily that area unavailable for evaluation in 1987, beneath and east of the turn of Town Hall Buildings to the north. Documentary evidence and the evaluation of adjacent areas suggest a potential for preservation of both structural and artifactual evidence in waterlogged medieval contexts. A further phase of evaluation is needed here before any development takes place.

4.2 Phase II Evaluation

To respond adequately to the anticipated archaeological preservation and problems in Zone iii a combination of an evaluation along the lines already implemented elsewhere, with a degree of more extensive, controlled excavation is proposed. With the aid of mechanical excavation it should be possible to select one or more sample areas for manual excavation, recovery and more detailed recording. Recovery of information relating to the Palace Mill, its structure, and artifacts associated or in adjacent deposits will be the priority here, particularly in conditions of anaerobic preservation.

To carry out these recommendations a further, costed phase of work will be required, the timing of which will depend on the availability of this site and on the development schedule. It will be apparent that an adequate provision of both time and resources, somewhat greater than that so far expended, will be necessary before development takes place. It should then also be possible to fulfill all the archaeological requirements for this site (Zone iii) and thus, watching briefs excepted, for the Clares Carlton Site as a whole. It is recommended that this final phase be implemented, when appropriate, in consultation with the County Archaeological Officer and the archaeological contractor.

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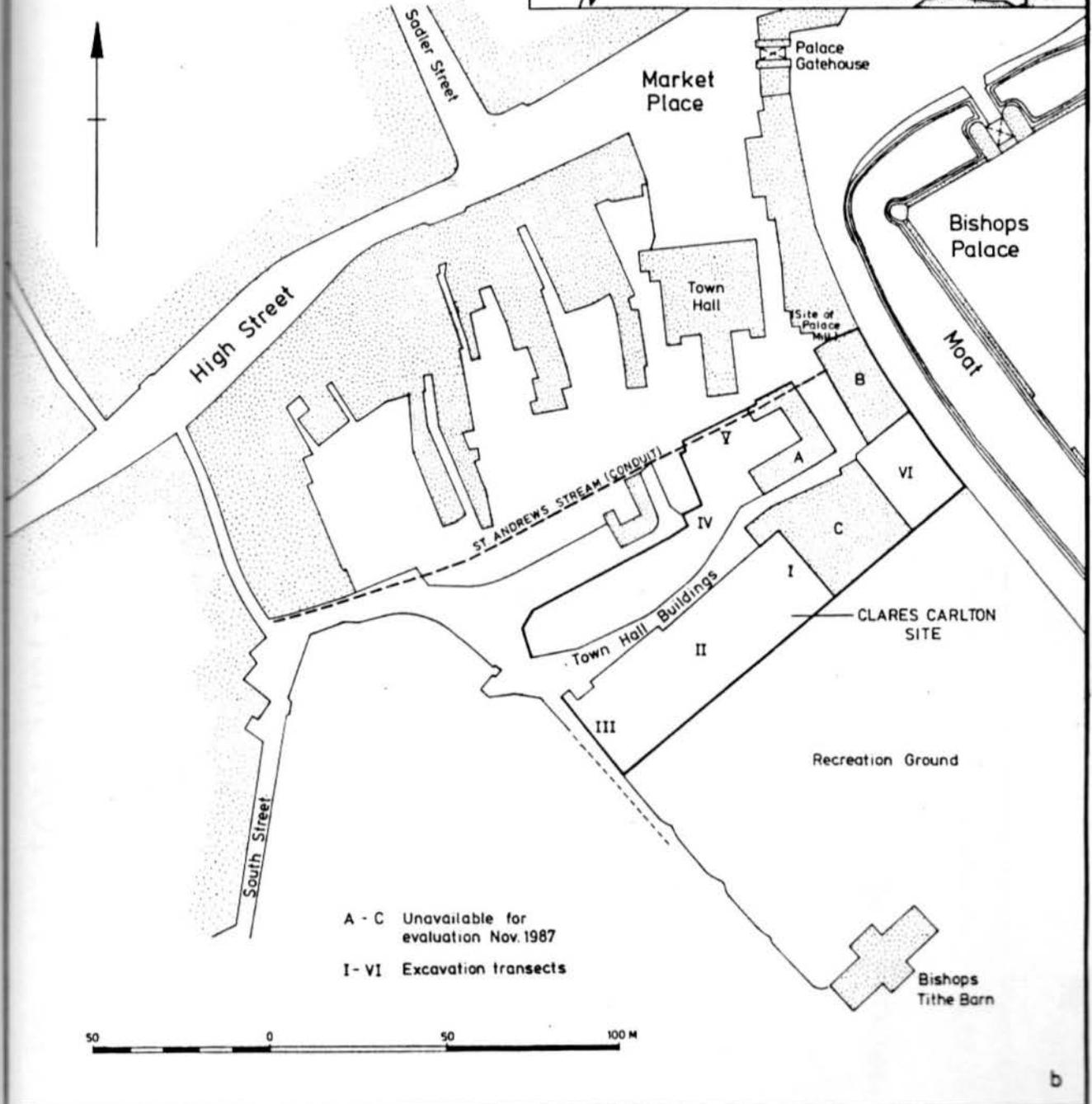
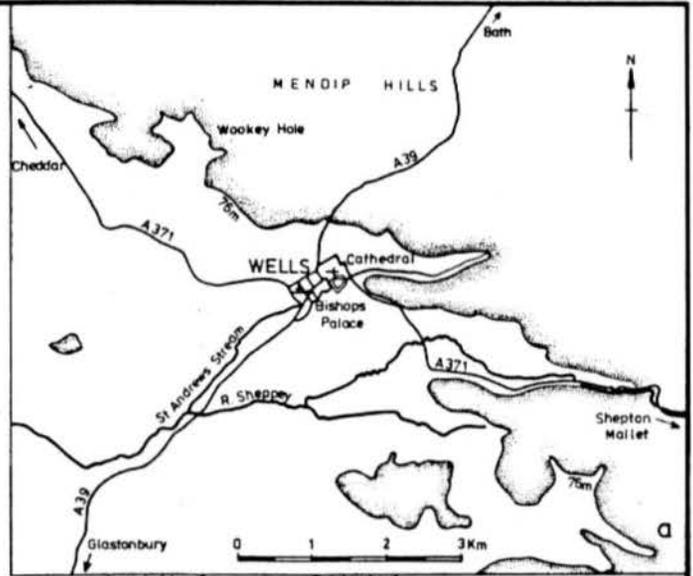


Figure 1

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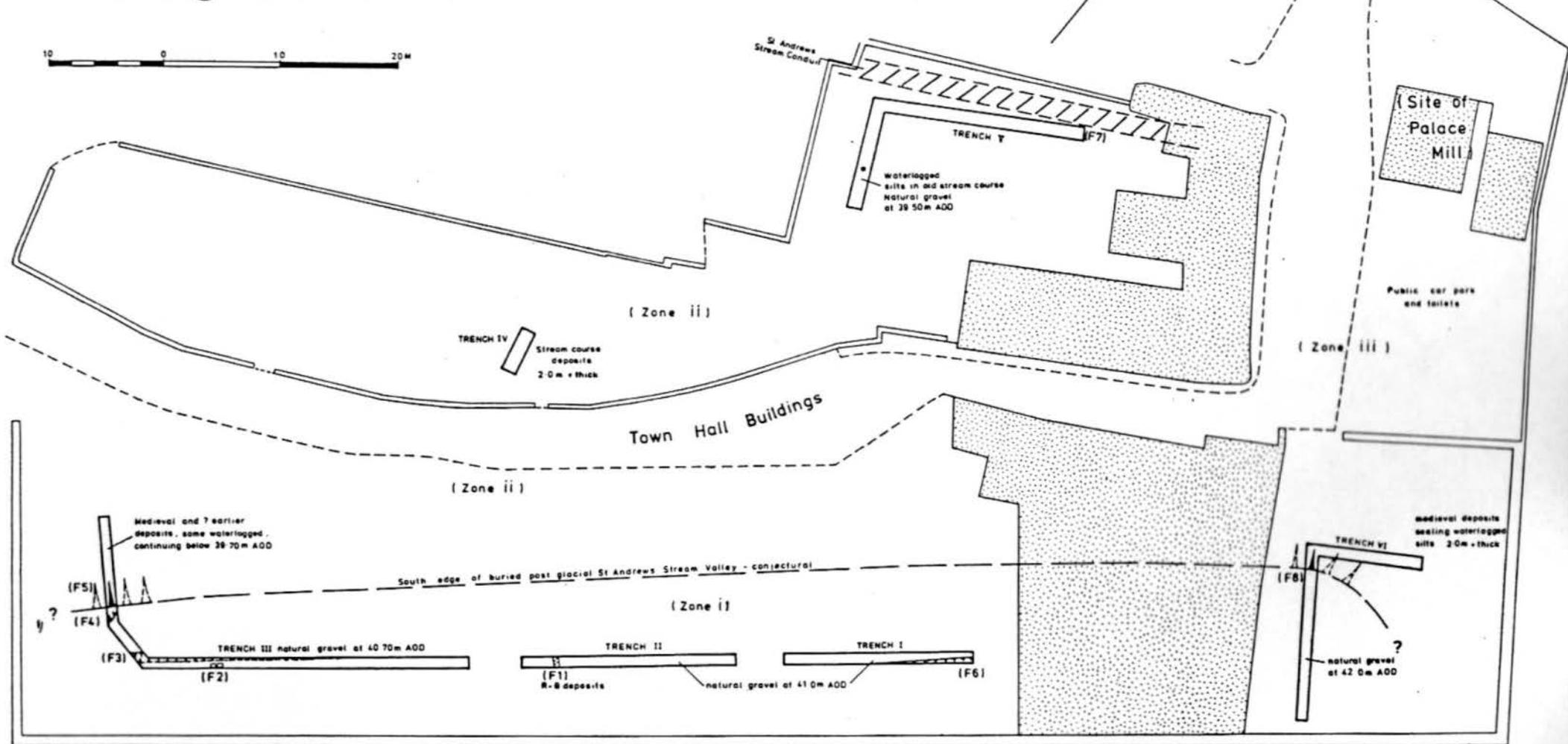


Figure 2