

Wisley: Excavation in 1978

by M G O'CONNELL

WISLEY 1978 Full Report

The site (TQ 069 598)

The excavation site (fig. 1.1) is on low lying ground within the alluvial flood plain of the River Wey and approximately 11 metres from the west bank of that river. The underlying geology consists of alluvium but changes to lower terrace gravel to the south of the area investigated. The area is subject to flooding and the meadow land to the north is normally damp throughout the year.

The surrounding area is comparatively rich in archaeological material principally from the prehistoric and Roman periods.

Neolithic flint implements (fig. 1.2) were found only 30 metres to the south of the site between 1907 and 1912, while in 1907 a prehistoric dugout canoe (fig. 1.3) was discovered to the north-east on the south bank of the Wey (Gardner 1911,53). According to local residents, however, this canoe was found further down-stream at approximately TQ 071 602 and a second canoe was also discovered although it was burnt as firewood and its precise location was not recorded (Watson 1979). On the west bank of the river on an eminence of lower terrace gravel evidence of a multi-period occupation site (fig. 1.4) was recovered during extension of a sewage farm in 1922-3. Unfortunately the only account of the recovery of the finds is a rather intriguing one made by the Works Manager, A. Choate (Choate, 1953, 134-140). There are no drawn plans, sections or photographs of the site and due to the lack of recorded stratigraphic evidence later attempts to elucidate the history of the site (Smith 1924 and Lowther 1945) have necessarily depended upon an examination of the pottery and associated finds. The earliest evidence of occupation came from the middle Neolithic period (Smith 1924, 40-45) although the majority of the finds were assigned to the Iron Age by Lowther (1945, 32-38).

Evidence of Roman pottery production (fig. 1.5) in the 1st century A.D. was also found in 1904 on the same site (Gardner 1912, 131-2). Romano-British cremations (fig. 1.6) of the same period were unearthed in 1911 to the south-east of the area recently excavated (Gardner 1911, 53), while evidence of a Romano-British occupation site (c. A.D. 50-110) was retrieved during sand digging in 1936 to the north-west at a place known as Pipers Hill (Lowther 1938, 131-6) (fig. 1.7)

Documentary evidence

The first recorded mention of Wisley is in the Domesday Survey (1086) where it is described as a small agricultural community with a church and a mill worth 10s together with 6 acres of meadow and a fishery valued at 5d (Morris 1975, 36, 5). The area under investigation was known as 'Mill Lend' on the Tithe map of Wisley (1842) and it is likely that the medieval mill once stood in the immediate vicinity. It has been suggested (Chcate 1953, 135) that the River Wey used to run to the north and west side of the church and that the Broad Ditch represents the old course of the river, following the parish boundary (fig. 1). It has further been suggested (Ann Watson pers. comm.) that the straight stretch of the river alongside the sewage works was originally a deliberate cut associated with the mill mentioned above and it is noteworthy that the present line of the river cuts through lower terrace gravel whereas the Broad Ditch follows the alluvial flood plain. The mill is referred to again in 1206 while the latest record of the mill occurred in 1342 and it may have fallen out of use in that century (Bloxam, 1958) a suggestion possibly confirmed by the fact that the latest medieval pottery found on the site is also fourteenth century.

Trial Work - Ann Watson

Excavation was undertaken because the north-east corner of the area investigated was to be destroyed by the diversion of the course of the River Wey as part of the programme for construction of the M25 South-Orbital motorway.

Previous Work on the site - Ann Watson

Four trial trenches (A,B,C, and D) were excavated during January and February 1977 where trial pits were to be dug by the M25 construction engineers (fig. 2). A and B produced no finds and the sections of both trenches revealed only plough soil sealing a layer of sand above the gravel sub-soil, while C was probably in the old river bed of the Wey and yielded fine dark silt overlying the natural sand subsoil. Only a few sherds of post medieval pottery were found.

The fourth trial trench (D) was sited on sloping ground between B and C, where small sherds of prehistoric and medieval pottery had been found during field walking (fig. 3). Below the ploughsoil (I) a thin sandy layer (II) sealed a black sandy deposit (IV) containing a V shaped ditch (F2). The ditch, 50 cms deep and a 1.0 m wide, had been cut into the underlying alluvium (V) and ran east west. The fill of the ditch was the same black sandy soil as IV but became darker at the bottom of the feature. A thin black sticky deposit (III) above the ditch contained small fragments of decayed bone, charcoal and pottery.

There may have been a shallow feature on either side of the ditch (F1 and F3) but intensive activity by moles obscured any definite outline. A sherd of Roman pottery was found in the fill of F3.

Underlying IV was a layer of alluvium (V) and an area of dirty sand (VI) at the northern end of the trench that contained a few fragments of flint tempered prehistoric pottery, flints and flecks of charcoal. Both V and VI were 25 cms deep, under which there was a layer of sterile rusty coloured sand (VII) overlying clean sand (VIII) above the water table.

Excavation

On the basis of the documentary evidence and the importance of earlier finds it was decided to excavate a larger portion of the field. Accordingly between 21 August and 3 October 1978 an area (Area 1) of approximately 806 sq. metres was stripped of ploughsoil by machine (JCB digger/loader) (fig. 2). After initial levelling of Area 1 work concentrated on one area (Grid A) of approximately 156 sq. metres on the west edge of Area 1, due to the lack of manpower available and a time limit requested by the farmer of the land (fig. 4). A trial section, 1.0 m. wide was also cut through the natural alluvium (Section 10), (fig.5). On the discovery of two features (23 and 25) containing flecks of charcoal and resembling post-holes, it was considered necessary to strip the rest of Grid A to the same level (15.70 + 0.D.). The only features uncovered were an animal burrow (26) and a series of mole holes (28) also containing some charcoal. The similarity between these features, (26) and (28) and (25) suggested that the latter features might also be of animal origin.

The most interesting feature of section 10 was the extent of iron panning where the iron oxides had been leached out of the alluvial sand. The vertical strips of iron panning and the mottled iron panning observed are the result of tree root action and a fluctuating water table respectively. Differential formation of iron panning probably accounts for the contrast between 2, a layer of yellow-brown alluvium with little iron panning, and 10, a layer of white/light grey alluvium with considerable iron panning. The extent of iron pan formation made it difficult to distinguish any layers within the natural subsoil apart from the ultimate layer of alluvium 2.

The excavation was marred by vandalism in mid-September when the medieval hearth (13 and 14) was destroyed soon after it had been revealed. It was therefore impossible to record the feature properly or to carry out archaeo-magnetic dating techniques on it, as had been hoped.

Results (figs. 4,5 and 6)

The Medieval periods

Only one period, the medieval, was represented by stratified archaeological material. The following contexts belong to that phase of occupation: (fig. 4) (6),(8),9, (12), (13) and (14), (17) and (18).

(6) Boundary ditch

This feature was a continuation of the ditch excavated by Ann Watson (Trial Trench D) and ran east-west with a maximum width of 1.50 m and depth 0.40 m. The fill, 5, consisted of a uniform deposit of dark brown sandy soil similar to the natural alluvium, 2. Finds consisted of several small sherds of twelfth century pottery, a few sherds of prehistoric pottery together with some flints and a fragmentary piece of a nineteenth century vessel.

(8) Fence Slot?

A very shallow irregular feature (maximum width 0.44m and depth 0.14m) also noted by Ann Watson Trial Trench D, ran to the north and parallel with (6). The fill consisted of dark brown sandy soil containing no finds.

(17) Post-hole

A shallow irregular feature (maximum width 1.86m and depth 0.35m) containing a fill of dark grey soil, 16, with two sherds of twelfth century pottery. Sealed by (9) and cut into 10.

(13) and (14) The hearth (fig. 7)

The original hearth had been eroded and when excavated consisted of (13) and (14), both resting on natural subsoil. (13) was composed of burnt ironstone and sandstone held together by baked clay, (measuring 0.41m x 0.37m). (14) consisted of a fragment of Niedermendig lava and others of sandstone set in baked clay and resting on a layer of dark grey soil with flecks of charcoal (measuring 0.30m x 0.26m).

Some burnt sherds of twelfth century pottery were associated with (14). Both features were enclosed by an area of burnt white alluvium (measured 1.40m x 1.02m), which may represent the full extent of the original hearth. As already noted above (13) and (14) were wrecked by vandals before more detailed examination could take place.

9 Occupation surface?

9 was a thin layer (maximum depth 0.10m) of grey soil with occasional flecks of charcoal overlying the natural subsoil and sealed by 3. Several sherds of twelfth century pottery were found, concentrated in a small area to the north of (12) and (13) and (14). Post medieval finds within 9 probably represent later disturbance.

(12) Pit

(12) was a steep-sided, subrectangular pit (maximum length 1.56m and width 1.42m and depth 0.55m) with a uniform fill, 11, consisting of medium grey sandy soil with flecks of charcoal containing 2 small fragments of baked clay, possibly from a loom-weight(s), tile and twelfth century pottery. (12) was cut through 9 and 2 and sealed by 3. Overlying the medieval features was 3, a layer of red/brown sandy soil with some small stones and containing twelfth/thirteenth and thirteenth/fourteenth century pottery, post-medieval pottery, clay pipes and iron slag, together with bone fragments. The sandy texture of 3 and the assortment of finds from several different periods suggests that it may represent an alluvial deposit.

A shallow irregular feature (21) of uncertain date was excavated to the south of the ditch and had a maximum width of 0.76m and depth 0.11m. The fill consisted of dark grey soil, 20, with no finds.

Conclusions

The evidence indicates the existence of a small habitation site represented by an occupation surface, 9, a pit (12), and hearth (13 and 14) bounded to the south by a shallow ditch (6) and a possible palisade or fence (8). Structural evidence is limited to a single post-hole (17). Occupation appears to have begun in the twelfth century and possibly continued into the fourteenth century when flooding affected the occupied area depositing a layer of alluvium, 3. The area is subject to flooding and the gradual buildup of soil over the site which slopes down towards the Wey could well have been accelerated by incursions of the river. The habitation site may be related to the medieval mill that is thought to have existed in the vicinity and both may have fallen into disuse at the same period (see above). The unstratified prehistoric material presumably derives from the multi period site found during the construction work on the Sewage plant (figs 1, 4 and 5).

The Medieval pottery (figs 8 and 9)

The medieval pottery shows many similarities to that found at the Brooklands site (Hanworth and Tomalin 1977), which is not surprising in view of the fact that Wisley and Weybridge are less than 4 kilometres apart. Of the fabric types identified at Wisley on one sub-group (Type 3ii, see below) is difficult to parallel closely at Weybridge and since the fabric types concerned are fully discussed at that site there is no need to repeat the arguments in this report. The lack of coins or metal artefacts makes it difficult to date the Wisley pottery closely. The main date range for the stratified material (from contexts 5, 9, 11, (14) and 16) lies between A.D. 1150 and 1275, although the presence of Pimply wares (type 1) makes a date within the twelfth century more acceptable.

Much of the unstratified pottery (contexts 2 and 3) would also fit within this date bracket while the decoration on two sherds (fig. 9, 28 and 29) is paralleled in a Saxo-Norman context (c. A.D. 950-1100) at Catherington, Hampshire (Pile and Barton 1971, fig 23, 18 and 20). However, this type of decoration may have had a fairly long currency and similar decorated work occurs at Ellington Hunts., in a thirteenth century context (Tebbut et al 1971, fig 9.69). There is no diagnostic material amongst the Surrey ware and therefore only a general date range of c. 1250-1325 can be assigned to it.

The stratified and unstratified pottery from Trial Trench D, excavated by Ann Watson, presents a similar picture and only two sherds from the unstratified material deserve special attention. The rim of one cooking pot (fig 9.36) is well developed, contrasting markedly with the simple everted form of the majority of the other vessels and apart from the Surrey ware is the only medieval wheel-made vessel from the site. The decoration on one body sherd (fig 9.46) is similar to that found on fig 9, 29, although the impressions are more rounded and appear to be bordered by at least one incised line.

The fabric types are as follows:

1. Pimply wares - equivalent to Weybridge type B, date range 1050-1150.
2. Shell-tempered wares
 - i. Vesiculated - equivalent to Weybridge Type D3, date range 1150-1250.
 - ii. Soapy - equivalent to Weybridge Type D2, date range 1150-1250.
3. Sand-tempered wares
 - i. Red/brown surfaced sandy with a grey core (abbreviated to RBSG in text) - equivalent to Weybridge Type E, date range 1150-1275.
 - ii. Hard Sandy - related to 3i but not closely paralleled at Weybridge. Hard sandy wares also occur at Guildford in a twelfth-thirteenth century context (Holling 1969, 121-5).

4. Surrey wares - equivalent to Weybridge Type F, date range 1250-1325.

Fig. 8

2 Natural alluvium

1. Everted rim. RBSG
2. Bowl, slightly vesiculated RBSG (similar to Weybridge fig 36,15 (Hanworth and Tomalin 1977) in same fabric).

5 Ditch fill

3. Everted rim. RBSG
4. Everted rim. RBSG. Uneven knife trimming on outer surface. Some abrasion.

16 Fill of Irregular Pit or Gully

5. Cooking-pot rim. Similar in form to Weybridge fig. 35,3 (op.cit.) a Laverstock Type I rim. Red to brown soapy, shell gritted.

11 Fill of Rubbish pit

6. Everted rim of cooking pot. Vesiculated ware.
7. Cooking-pot rim. Similar to Weybridge fig 43, 114 (op. cit.) a Laverstock Type I rim. Vesiculated ware with some grit inclusions.
8. Cooking-pot rim. Similar to Weybridge fig 36, 19 (op. cit.) a Laverstock Type III rim. Vesiculated ware with some grit inclusions. Outer surface burnt.
9. Cooking-pot rim. Similar to Weybridge fig. 36, 23 (op. cit) a Laverstock Type III rim. Vesiculated ware with some grit inclusions. Burnt on outer and inner surfaces.
10. Cooking-pot rim. Similar to Weybridge fig. 35, 3 (op. cit.) a Laverstock Type I rim. Vesiculated ware with some grit inclusions.
11. Cooking-pot rim. Similar to Weybridge fig. 35, 3 (op. cit.) a Laverstock Type I rim. Vesiculated ware with some grit inclusions.

12. Cooking-pot rim. Vesiculated ware with some grit inclusions.
Outer surface burnt.
13. Everted rim. RBSG slightly vesiculated. Inner surface burnt.
14. Everted rim. Vesiculated ware with some grit inclusions.
15. Squared rim. Vesiculated ware with some grit inclusions.
- 3 Layer sealing medieval occupation (unstratified)
16. Cooking-pot rim. Similar to Weybridge fig. 35, 10 (op. cit) a
Laverstock Type III rim. Vesiculated ware with some grit inclusions.
Outer and inner surfaces burnt.
17. Cooking-pot rim. Similar to Weybridge fig. 36, 19 (op. cit.) a
Laverstock Type III rim. Vesiculated ware with some grit inclusions.
Fig. 9
18. Cooking-pot rim. RBSG. Outer surface burnt.
19. Everted rim. Vesiculated ware. Slightly abraded.
20. Everted rim. RBSG. Outer and inner surfaces burnt.
21. Everted rim. RBSG. Outer and inner surfaces burnt.
22. Everted rim. Vesiculated ware with some grit inclusions. Outer
surface burnt.
23. Rim. Vesiculated ware. Abraded.
24. Rim. Hard sandy fabric with grit inclusions. Finger-tipping on top
of rim.
25. Everted rim. Vesiculated ware. Outer and inner surfaces burnt.
26. Rim. RBSG. Outer and inner surfaces burnt and slightly abraded.
27. Thickened rim. Vesiculated ware. Finger tipping on tope of rim and
single perforation below rim.
- 28 and 29. Two body sherds in hard sandy fabric with grit inclusions.
Both decorated with rows of small notched ouletting.
30. Base. Surrey ware. Finger tip impressions on outside of vessel.

Pottery from Trial Trench D 1277The Medieval ditch (F2)

- 31. Laverstock Type III rim. RBSG. Finger-tipping on rim.
- 32. Bowl. RBSG. Finger-tipping on rim.

Shallow Feature (F3)

- 33. Everted rim of cooking pot. Shell tempered.

Layer III

- 34. Flattened rim of bowl. Shell-tempered. Abraded.
- 35. Laverstock Type I rim. Vesiculated. Knife-trimming below rim.
- 36. Flattened rim of cooking pot. Vesiculated. Wheel-made.
- 37. Everted rim of cooking pot. Vesiculated.
- 38. Rim. Pimply fabric.
- 39. Rim. RBSG. Outer and inner surfaces burnt.
- 40. Everted rim of cooking pot. RBSG.
- 41. Rim. Pimply fabric.
- 42. Rim. Vesiculated. Abraded.
- 43. Laverstock Type III rim. Shell-tempered.
- 44. Rim. RBSG, slightly vesiculated. Outer and inner surfaces burnt.
- 45. Bowl. RBSG.
- 46. Body sherd in RBSG and decorated with rounded/sub-rectangular punched impressions bordered by a vertical line (or lines?).

MAYEN/NIEDERMENDIG QUERNSTONE FRAGMENTS FROM WISLEY

Two fragments of vesicular lava of Mayen/Niedermendig type were identified. One (A) formed part of the hearth (14) while the other (B) was found on the surface of the area of burnt or parched sand enclosing the hearth (fig 7). Both fragments display vertical cross-sections revealing the thickness of the stones. The grinding profile and pecked back surfaces of the stone appear to be parallel suggesting the original form to be a flat disc. The thickness of 41mm for fragment A and 59mm for fragment B show two different quernstones to be present.

The thickness and parallel surfaces compare well with Mayen/Niedermendig quernstones recovered from the thirteenth century house at Brooklands. At both sites thick and thin examples similar to the Wisley pieces were present and have been tentatively ascribed to Roder's type 7 and 8 (e.g. Brooklands stones 379b and 628).

The thicker type 8 stones are believed to have been introduced about AD 1000 but the thin stones seem never to have been completely supplanted - eighteenth century stones inscribed with their dates are known.

A further example from the Lower Wey region might be mentioned here. This is the gateway to Yarn, a fifteenth century farmhouse at TQ08715721 near Ockham. It comprises a flat lava quernstone fragment 30mm thick and partially perforated near its outer edge. It also bears traces of an inset iron lifting plate. This fragment might possibly comprise part of the same thirteenth/fourteenth century consignment as Wisley and Brooklands, but it may of course be equally possible that German lava querns were in use in this part of Surrey at a considerably later time.

D. J. Tomalin

The Prehistoric Pottery

A small quantity of unstratified, coarse, flint-tempered potsherds were found. Most were abraded while some contained grog inclusions. One fragmentary body sherd bore evidence of finger-tipping, a decorative technique that originates in the Middle Bronze Age but is still commonly found in Iron Age contexts (Alcock 1973, 119-20 and Barrett 1975, 107). The sherds were too small for the identification of any forms.

The Flints

A number of unstratified flints were found in the course of the excavation, three of which deserve attention.

Natural Alluvium, 2

1. Broken end of semi-transparent flint flake. 3mm long x 1.5mm wide.
2. Broken bulbar end of dull cherty ochreous flint. 3.75mm long x 4mm long x 0.5mm thick. Small number of pressure flakes to produce 1mm long curved scraper to the right of small platform (a mesolithic feature).

Medieval Ditch Fill, 5

3. A semi-grey mottled flint, with ochreous flint inclusions. 4mm wide x 4.5m long. The end of a broad flake, a sawing or cutting tool; the main work edge produced by regular pressure flaking on the right side for 2mm.

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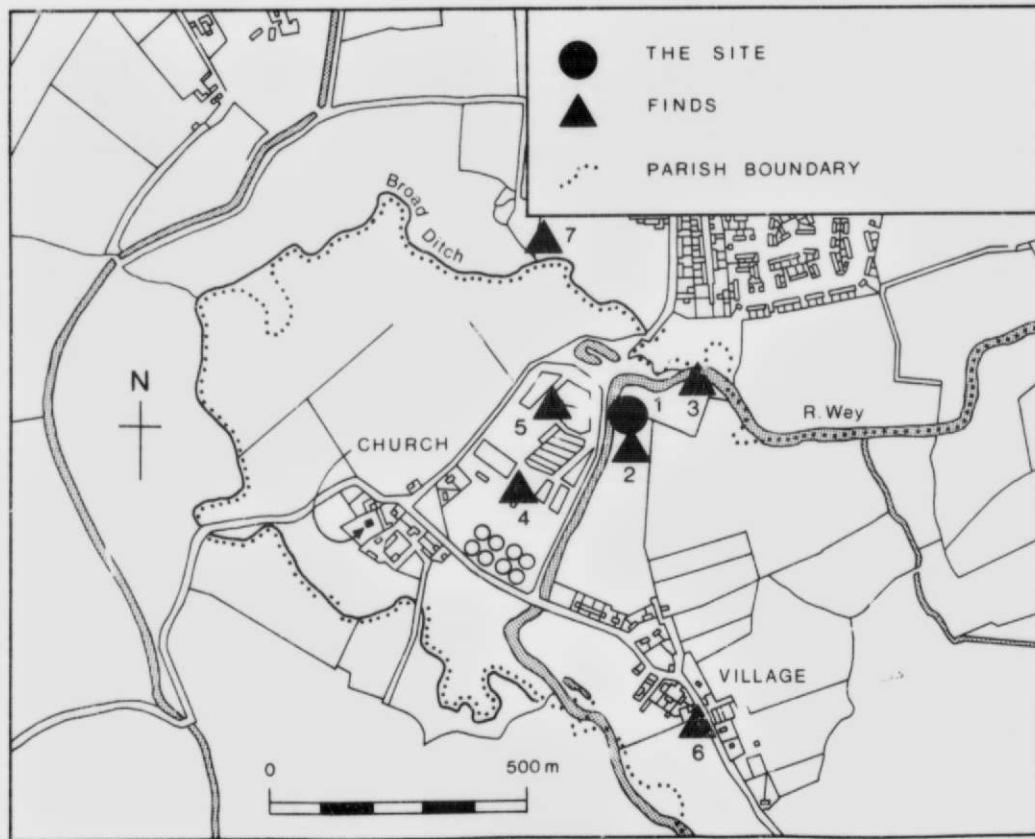


FIG. 1

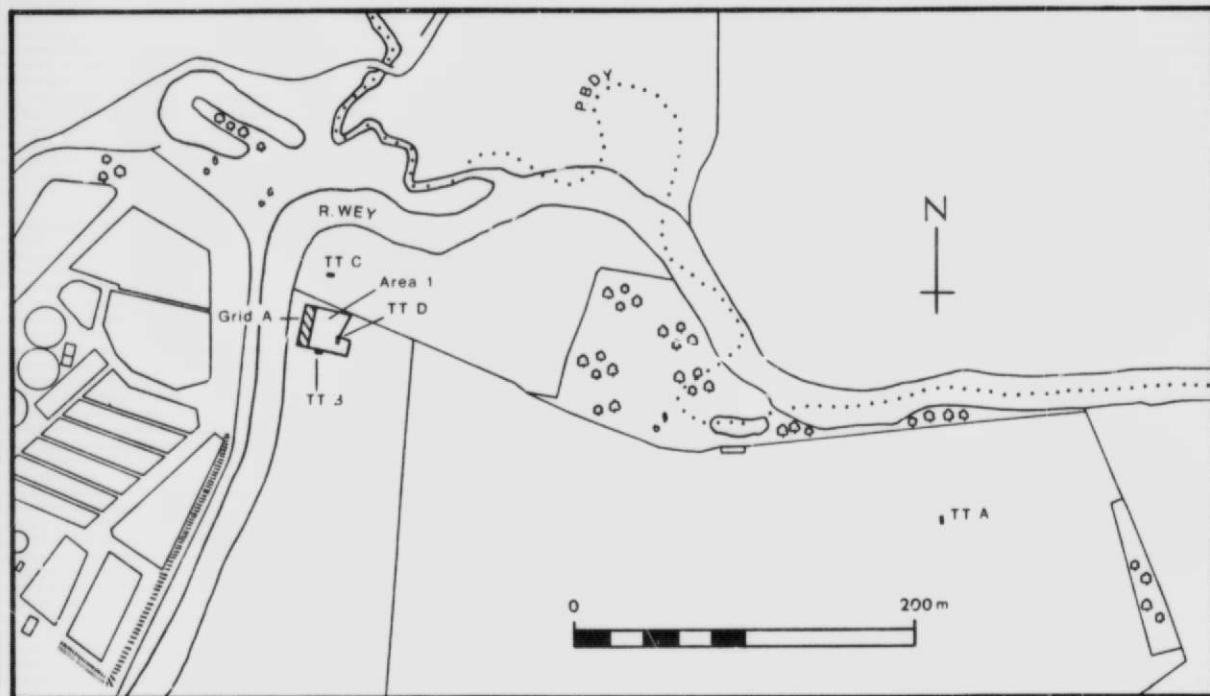


FIG. 2

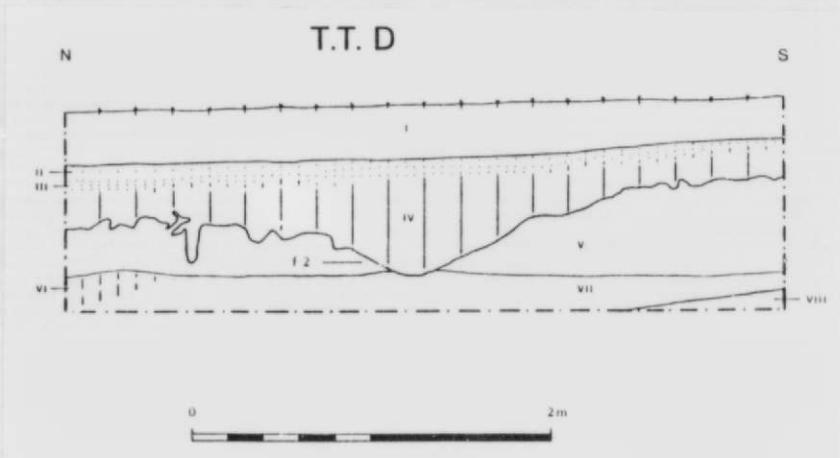


FIG. 3

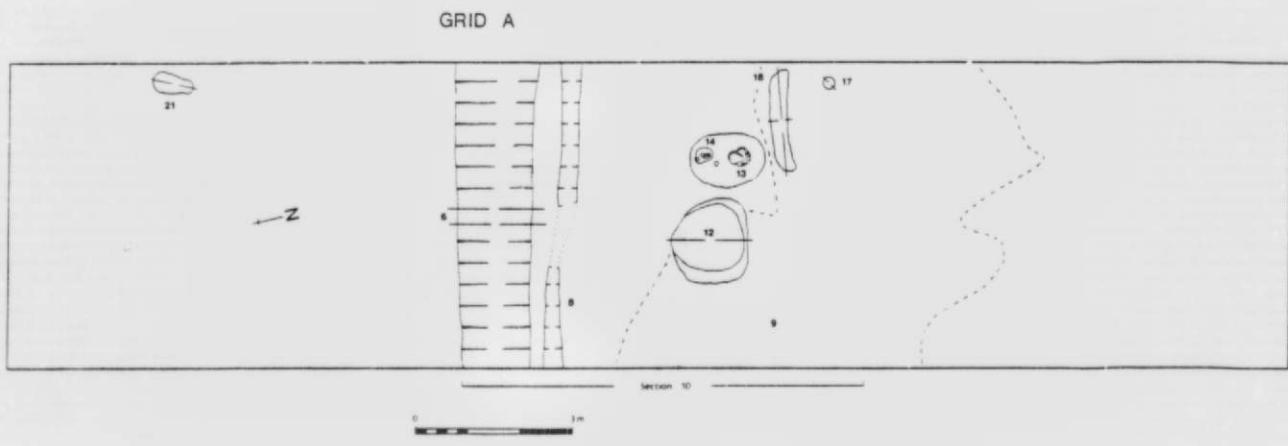


FIG. 4

SECTION 10

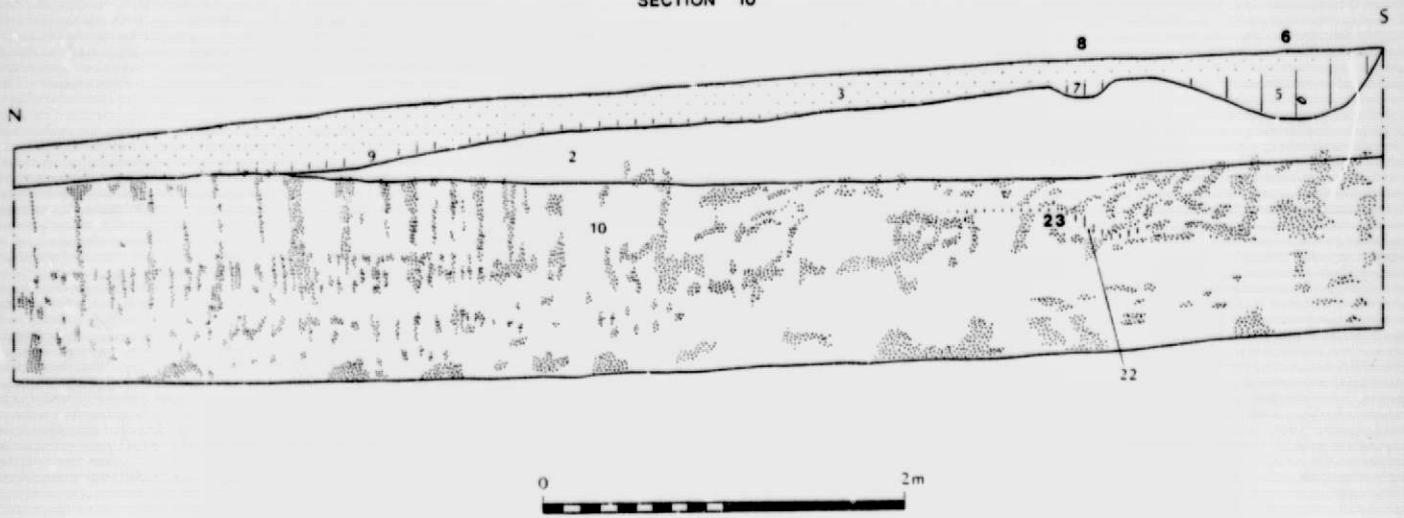


FIG. 5

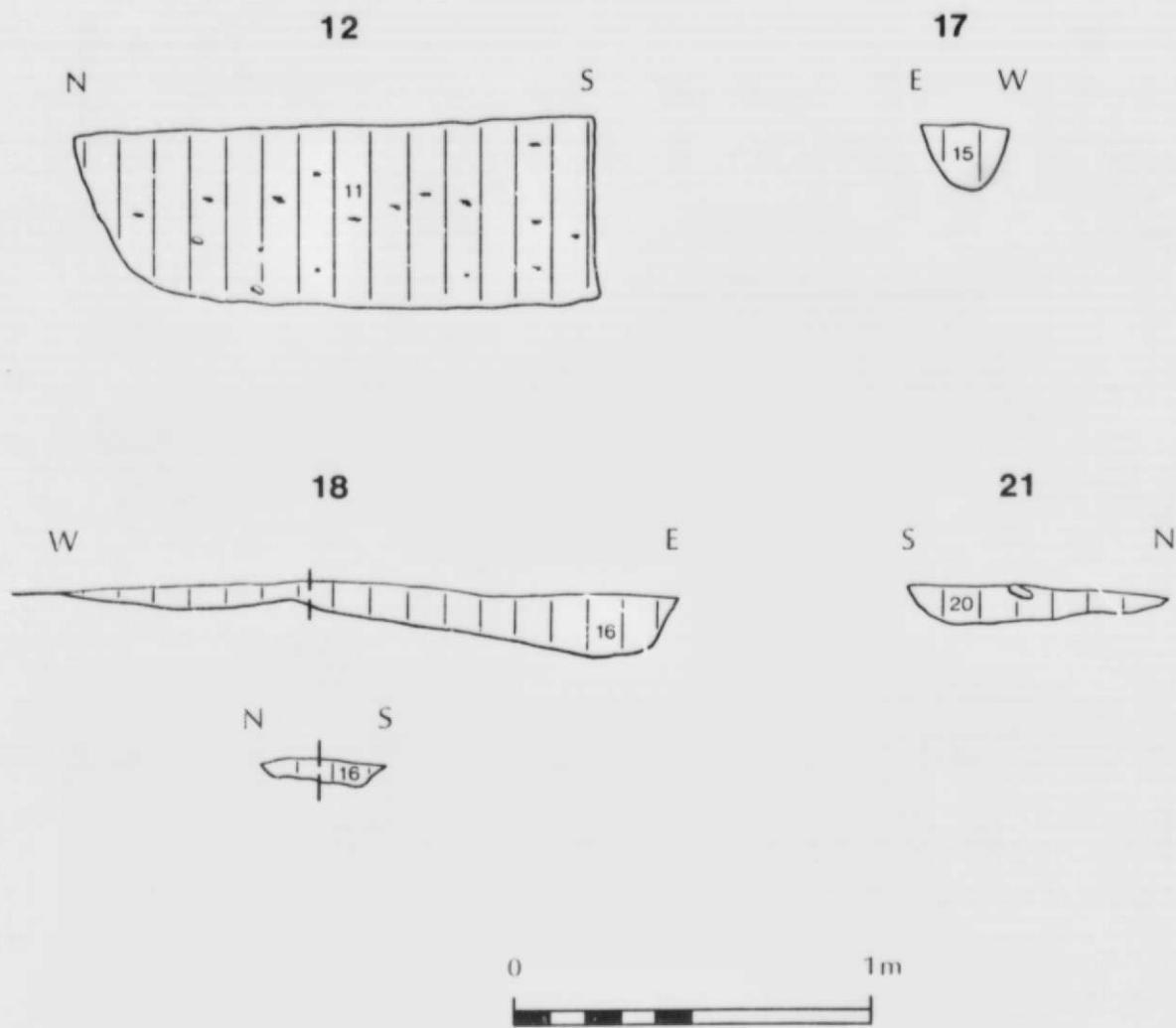
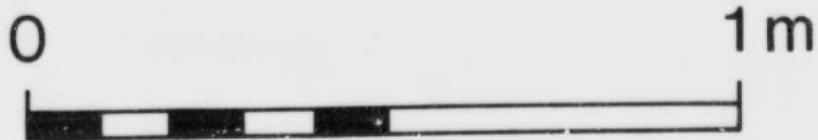
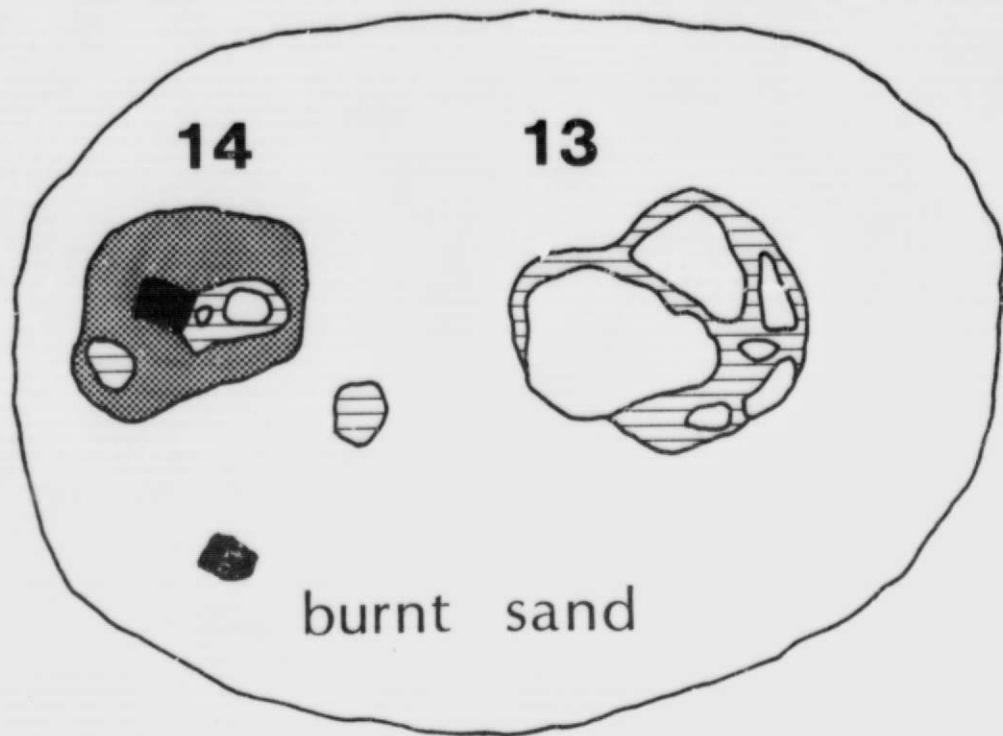


FIG. 6



-  lava
-  stone
-  baked clay
-  grey soil

FIG. 7

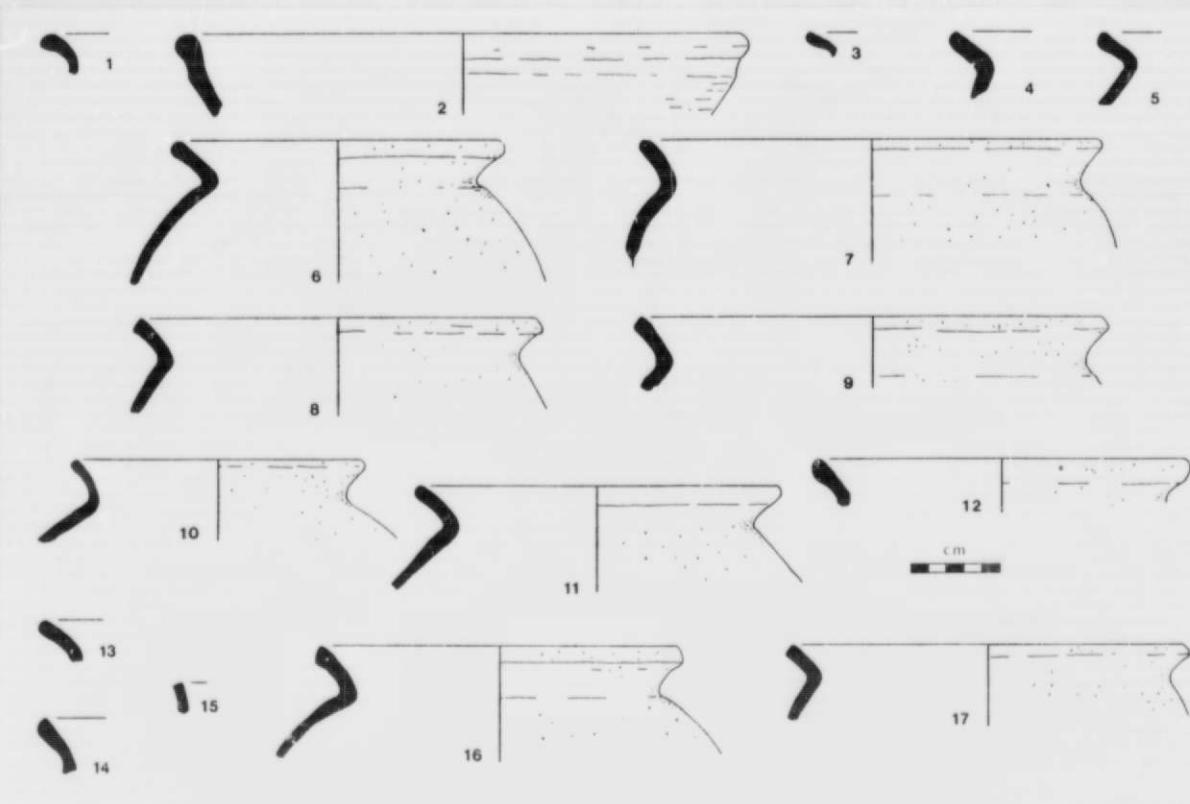


FIG. 8

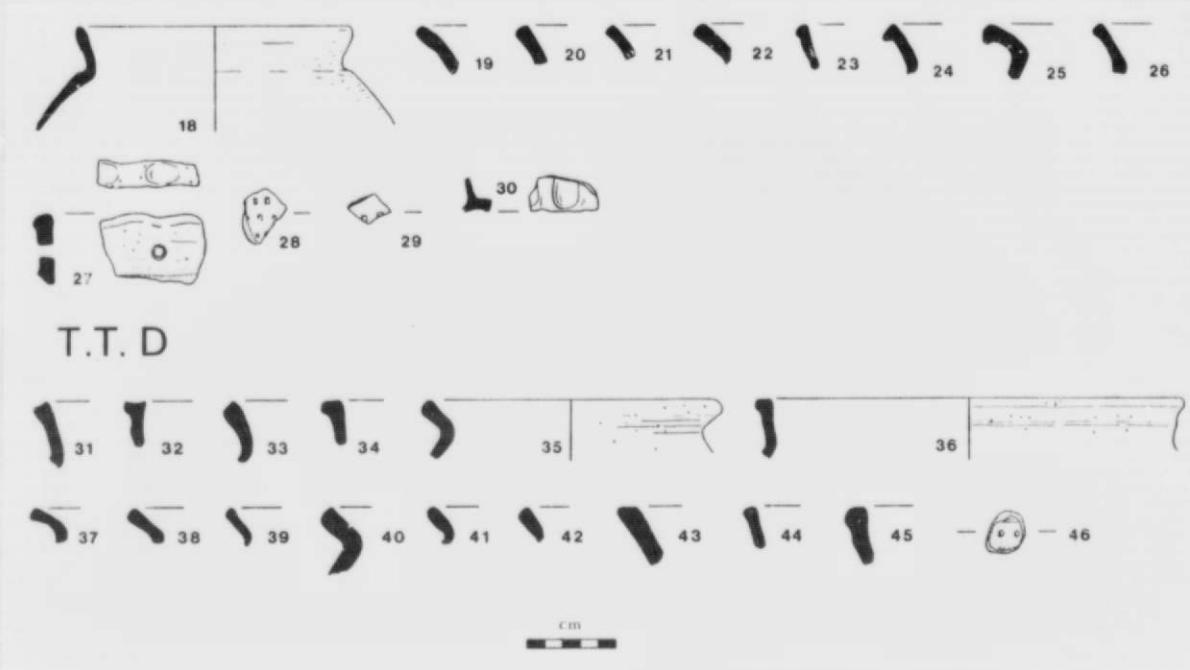


FIG. 9