



ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION AT  
OUNDLE STATION YARD,  
ASHTON, NORTHANTS

N O R T H A M P T O N S H I R E  
A R C H A E O L O G Y U N I T



Northamptonshire  
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Planning and Transportation

**NORTHAMPTONSHIRE ARCHAEOLOGY UNIT**

**Contracts Section**

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**ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION AT  
Oundle Station Yard,  
Ashton, Northants**

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JUNE - JULY 1992

ABSTRACT

An archaeological evaluation was carried out in June and July 1992 of part of the Roman small town within Ashton parish which was later used as the Oundle railway station yard. The work was undertaken by the Contracts Section of the Northamptonshire County Council Archaeology Unit in fulfilment of the requirements of an archaeological evaluation brief designed to provide information for planning purposes. It comprised two stages: an initial survey of the former railway station and goods yard to identify the extent of modern disturbance and any potential areas of archaeological survival, followed by the excavation of 22 trenches in order to assess the actual survival of archaeological levels.

Cropmarks on three sides of the yard together with large scale, open area, archaeological excavation immediately to the south suggested that substantial Roman remains may once have been present (FIG 1). Indeed, during the construction of the railway station in 1845 a series of Roman burials and possible Roman pottery kilns were revealed. Three stages of recent disturbance, however, have greatly affected these remains:

- 1 Extensive pre 1845 gravel quarries;
- 2 Construction of the railway line, station (outside the evaluation area) and station yard with associated buildings;
- 3 Clearance and related drainage works subsequent to the closure of the railway in the 1970s.

Recent evaluation has shown the extent of such previous destruction to be widespread and indicates that only small pockets of undisturbed ground have survived. The best preserved area is located between the A605 road and the main office building within the yard (FIG 10). The Roman remains comprise the continuation of a limestone and gravel road with a series of recut side ditches which were identified during open area excavation to the south. A group of postholes at its western edge may denote the presence of a structure, while to the east the truncated remains of a limestone surface together with further postholes suggest that Roman remains were once more extensive. Such features as occurred elsewhere were similarly truncated and left isolated by being divorced from their wider contexts.

Beneath the bedding layer of the main railway line a single Roman pottery kiln and its immediate area were excavated. The kiln was perched on a pinnacle of gravel which had been left untouched by a series of deep post-medieval quarries. The lower part of the kiln had a diameter of 1.30m and was well preserved with limestone and mortar walls lined with hard mortar. A baked clay kiln support extended from the west wall towards the flue on the eastern side of the kiln and a group of kiln bars of various sizes was found within the fill of the chamber. Some 22.9 kg of pottery were recovered from the kiln itself. The majority of the material comprises jars and flagons in a fine creamware fabric which had probably been produced in the kiln since a number of wasters and other spoiled pieces were also present. The style of the pottery indicates a date for the kiln in the early second century AD. Three ditches, probably also of Roman date, were identified along the western edge of the proposed development area, but otherwise the absence of other contemporary features is due to post-medieval disturbance which has removed all but the deepest remains.

## INTRODUCTION

Archaeological evaluation of an area of 2.15 ha within the former yard of Oundle railway station was commissioned by Mr G Wilson of A1 Reclaims in Spring 1992 in order to assess the constraints upon any future development. The work was carried out by the Northamptonshire County Council Archaeology Unit Contracts Section in June and July 1992 and conducted in accordance with a Specification for Archaeological Evaluation, dated 21/2/92, which was produced to meet the requirements of an Archaeological Evaluation Brief for the area prepared by the county archaeological curator and dated 10/2/92.

## TOPOGRAPHY AND GEOLOGY

The evaluation area lies on the First Gravel Terrace along the edge of the floodplain to the east of the River Nene. The nearby pasture and set aside land rises gently from 20.50m OD to 21.10m OD but the yard itself has been modified (see below).

## INITIAL SURVEY

### 1 Documentary research

A study of maps held by the Northamptonshire Record Office was undertaken to determine changes in modern land-use which may have affected the survival of archaeological remains. The information was subsequently collated and plotted at 1:500 scale in conjunction with site survey data (FIG 2). Individual maps with relevant information include:

- a Inclosure Map of 1810 (NRO map 2858) showing two buildings at the edge of the then turnpike road which could have been used as a tollhouse. Although quarry pits are shown to the east of the main road none are present in the current application site.
- b Ashton Estate Map of 1858 (NRO map 2B706/24) showing the railway line, station and a related range of buildings in the yard. The present boundaries of the property had been defined by this time.
- c Ordnance Survey 25 inch plan, sheet XIX.1 (second edition of 1900) provides more detailed information including sidings, another range of buildings and cattle pens.
- d Ordnance Survey 25 inch plan, sheet TL 0489-0589 of 1959 shows the present office and saw mill together with the coal depot.
- e Plan of the former station layout published in R P Hendry and R P Hendry, Historical Survey of Selected LMS Stations, Vol 2 (Poole 1986). Additional small buildings and large water tanks shown.

2 Cropmark and excavation evidence

Cropmark information relating to the former Roman town has been plotted from air photographs and combined with the principal features which were discovered by previous archaeological excavation at the site (FIG 1). However, only two of the ditches visible in cropmark would enter the yard if their alignment

continued, whereas two metalled roads identified by excavation might be anticipated to cross the area. Where sampled by previous excavation the height of surviving Roman stratification was 21.43m above Ordnance Datum.

### 3 Topographical survey

A topographical survey of the station yard and its surroundings was drawn at a scale of 1:500 (FIG 2). It provides an indication of the extent of existing buildings and the different types of yard surfaces. The likely preservation of archaeological remains over large parts of the yard could not be assessed, however, since most of the area is covered by tarmac or ballast. A series of spot-heights demonstrates where the original ground surface may survive. The individual profiles (FIG 3) show that the eastern half of the application site is considerably lower than the surrounding land, thereby rendering the survival of archaeological features unlikely. The area of yard adjacent to the former main railway line is higher, probably to provide access to the platform and track edge.

### 4 Earthwork survey

The surface topography of the adjacent floodplain was examined in order to identify any earthworks, such as Roman roads, which might enter the application site. Only a raised modern track running parallel to the river was found.

## EXCAVATION

Following an assessment of the results of the preliminary survey the position of a series of ten investigative trenches was agreed with the county archaeological curator, with the provision for an additional 60m of trenches to be opened depending upon the initial results. During the course of fieldwork, recognition of the depth and wide extent of post-medieval gravel quarrying led to an agreed change of strategy whereby a series of five short trenches was opened in the northern part of the yard rather than a single long trench. A geological test-pit opened previously by the owner was also incorporated as trench 16. Seven further trenches were opened subsequently to assess the quality of preservation to the north and west of the main office building in accordance with the instruction of the archaeological curator who also specified their location. The identification of a pottery kiln in trench 7 led to the curatorial request for the excavation of a 5m square which showed the feature to be isolated. At the request of the landowner a short recording action was carried out to complete the excavation of the kiln rather than abandon it to future work. The results are included in this report.

## CONSTRAINTS

The presence of overhead electricity cables, together with the existence of a large number of trees protected by Preservation Order, limited the positioning of trenches adjacent to the A605 road to only a few locations. Similarly, the presence of an underground electricity cable prevented the extension of trench 22, while the existence of drainage pipes prevented the full excavation of the east end of trench 6.



## TRENCH DESCRIPTIONS

### Trench 1 (FIG 5)

An L-shaped trench, 14.50m long by 1.60m wide, was located between the A605 road and the main office building. The trench was machined to a depth of between 0.30-0.80m below the modern ground surface.

The trench cut through topsoil (0101) and a secondary tilth (0102) which contained post-medieval material and sealed a possible Roman soil horizon (0104). A thin pebble and gravel surface (0103), which sealed 0104, was identified in the south-east side of the trench but not opposite. The old soil, 0104, was cut by three Roman ditches each with a north-west to south-east alignment (0105, 0115 and 0116). They may represent successive ditches associated with the road which was exposed in trench 2. An area of burning between the ditches was possibly the scant remains of a hearth (0107).

A series of limestone-packed postholes (0108, 0109, 0110, 0111, 0112, 0117, 0118, 0119, 0120 and 0123) all cut 0104 and may date to the Roman period. While they may originally have formed a structure or building no pattern of layout could be identified within the limits of the trench. Towards the north-west end of the trench four parallel linear features clearly cut 0102 and represent the remains of modern steam-ploughing (0113, 0114, 0121 and 0122).

At the request of the archaeological curator the trench was extended through an existing trackway beside the main office building (0124). The make-up of the road was 0.70m deep and had removed archaeological levels.

### Trench 2 (FIG 6)

Trench 2 was located to the north-east of trench 1 and lay parallel with the south-east boundary of the former station yard. It measured 5.70m long by 1.60m wide and was machined to a depth of 0.50-0.80m. As in trench 1 topsoil (0201) and secondary tilth (0202 and 0203) containing post-medieval finds were removed to reveal a road constructed of gravel, pebbles and worn limestones (0204). It had a cambered profile and may have been related to gravel surface 0208 to the north-east. The road probably marks the continuation of a Roman road which was found during excavations to the east of the A605 in 1982. Surface 0208 sealed a roadside ditch (0205) and a gully (0206).

### Trench 3 (FIG 5)

Trench 3 was located about 20m from the southern boundary of the yard at a high point which was noted by the initial survey. It extended some 15m downslope to the general yard surface. The trench was cut through the modern yard surface (0301) and associated make-up layers 0302, 0303, 0304, 0320 and 0324, with a combined thickness of between 0.30-0.58m. At the north end of the trench the construction of the yard had removed any earlier layers and the modern make-up rested directly upon natural gravel (0305). To the south, these layers sealed a soil horizon (0321) which contained a sherd of post-medieval pottery and could represent the limited survival of topsoil before the construction of the railway.

Below 0321 at the southern end of the trench a limestone surface (0317) and several postholes with stone packing (0311-0316 and 0318) are probably of Roman date. They cut a layer of sandy loam (0319) which was 0.15m thick and

rested upon natural gravel. This layer did not continue to the north of gully 0309 and the post-medieval soil 0321 overlay the natural gravel. An isolated posthole, with substantial limestone packing and some 0.80m in diameter and 0.40m deep, was found at the north end of the trench (0307) but any further features had been removed by the construction of the modern yard.

#### Trench 4 (FIG 4)

Trench 4 was 18.50m long and 1.60m wide and was located 50m north-west of the original yard entrance. It was cut through the infill of a post-medieval gravel quarry (0405) to a depth of 1.55m, revealing natural sand and gravel at the north (0409) and further fill to the south. The quarry had removed all archaeological levels within the trench.

#### Trench 5 (FIG 4)

Trench 5 was situated parallel with and 30m to the north-west of trench 4. It was opened in two parts totalling 15m in length. The trench revealed deep post-medieval quarries with individual pits between 1.20-1.70m deep which had removed all archaeological levels.

#### Trench 6 (FIG 7)

Trench 6 was located to the north of the railway station and across the former main line. It was 11m long by 1.60m wide. Recent infill some 0.66m thick (0601 and 0602) sealed a gravel layer which may have formed part of the bedding for the railway line (0603) and a possible pre-railway subsoil (0604) above the natural sand and gravel at a depth of 0.80m-1.00m (0606). The

eastern part of the trench could not be fully excavated owing to the presence of drainage pipes (0607 and 0611) which, together with the construction of an adjacent manhole (0612), had probably destroyed any archaeological features in the area.

Two ditches of Roman date cut into the natural gravel on a north-east to south-west alignment. They also cut two shallow pits (0608 and 0610) which appear to have been truncated, possibly by the cultivation of the post-medieval soil 0604.

#### Trench 7 (FIGS 8-9 and 11-12)

Another trench was cut across the former railway line some 55m to the north of trench 6. It was originally 20m long and 1.60m wide but the identification of a Roman pottery kiln in section led to its enlargement by the opening of a 5m square at the south.

The trench cut through the modern yard surface (0701) and a layer of ash and cinders some 0.35m thick (0702). Below them layers of gravel (0705) and brown clay (0721) had probably formed a bedding some 0.50m thick for the railway track. At the east end of the trench both layers abutted the foundations of a substantial limestone wall which may have served as a revetment for the platform (0703). The foundations were 0.80m wide by 1.20m deep and had been set within a broad construction trench (0719). The depth of both the wall and railway bedding was probably due to the need to prevent subsidence into earlier gravel quarries (FIG 8).

A series of quarries occupied the eastern half of the trench while at the west

the make-up for the railway rested directly upon clean natural gravel at a depth of 1.45m below the present surface. No ancient features were found there and it is likely that substantial levelling occurred prior to the laying of the railway track. In that event any archaeological features would have been destroyed.

Six individual quarry pits (0737-0742) were identified in the eastern half of the trench where they had been dug in such a way as to leave narrow pinnacles of natural gravel along a north-south axis. The survival of these pinnacles which were each some 0.20m wide suggests that the upcast of one quarry pit was used to infill its predecessor. The individual pits appear to have been large although none of their true dimensions could be obtained within the confines of the trench. The largest pit, 0737, had an area of at least 5m by 2m and was divided from the other pits by the central ridge. To the west, pits 0738, 0741 and 0742 were of similar shape though even less of their individual areas was contained within the trench. Pits 0739 and 0740 were smaller with a width of 1.20m and 2m respectively. All of the quarry pits were steep sided with flat bases between 1.50 - 1.80m deep. Although large quantities of Roman pottery were retrieved from their fills, the discovery of post-medieval pottery, glass and clay tobacco-pipe fragments indicates an eighteenth century date.

The truncated remains of a Roman pottery kiln, 0711, survived at a depth of 1.20m below the present yard surface where an island of natural gravel (0713) had been formed by a widening of the central axis between pit 0737 and the other quarries. The structure had otherwise been closely cut away on all sides by quarries 0737, 0738, 0739 and 0741 and was presumably left in situ because there was little gravel in the working face below it.

The kiln was of circular plan, some 1.30m in diameter, and survived to a height of 0.65m (FIG 8). Its upper part had been removed by the sloping sides of the quarries, but where surviving the chamber wall was 0.15m thick and constructed of small limestone blocks mixed with layers of yellow and pink mortar with a lining of hard white mortar up to 20mm thick (0733). A flue was originally positioned in the east side of the kiln but had been largely destroyed by quarry 0737. Where it had entered the chamber the flue was 0.45m high and 0.45m wide, with a flat roof, vertical sides and a concave floor. A large, flat, smooth limestone block towards the south-east corner may have been a cheek or part of the side.

A tongue or ledge (0734), projecting from the interior west wall towards the flue, divided the chamber into two halves and provided a central support (FIG 9). It had become broken so that the front was located within the flue arch. Presumably it had originally supported the kiln bars which were found within the backfill of the chamber but none was in situ.

The kiln had been deliberately backfilled with layers 0707, 0720, 0729 and 0730 which contained 22.9 kg of Roman pottery, comprising mostly jars and flagons in a fine cream fabric which may have been the principal product of the kiln. On the basis of the pottery a date in the early second century AD is likely for its operation.

#### Trench 8 (FIG 7)

Trench 8 was 10.50m long by 1.60m wide and aligned roughly parallel with the former railway line in the northern corner of the yard. It was cut to a depth of 0.24m through recent topsoil (0801) and a compact gravel layer which may

have acted as bedding for the railway track (0802). A dark brown sandy loam beneath the gravel contained post-medieval pottery and may represent the pre railway topsoil (0803) since it rested directly upon the natural gravel (0804). It also sealed the edge of a substantial pit at the northern end of the trench. However, whilst the feature contained only Roman pottery where sampled, its date remains uncertain since post-medieval quarries to the south also produced large quantities of Roman material. The only other feature in the area was a modern pipe trench (0805).

#### Trenches 9-13 (FIG 4)

A series of 2m long trenches was cut to establish the extent of post medieval quarrying in the northern part of the yard. All of the trenches were cut into modern levelling deposits some 0.70-1.15m deep which filled the upper part of a series of large post-medieval quarry pits. The individual pits were at least 1.60m deep with their lower fills of brown clay possibly denoting the original backfill. Natural gravel was reached in every trench except trench 11 where it had still not been located at a depth of 1.80m. No pre-quarrying levels or deposits survived in any of these trenches.

#### Trench 14 (FIG 4)

Trench 14 was located 12m to the north of trench 3 in order to identify any continuation of archaeological levels. It was 8.50m long and cut through the modern yard surface and associated make-up layers to a depth of 0.75m. The northernmost part contained a continuation of the post-medieval quarries observed in trench 4 (1406), which were excavated to a depth of 1.50m without reaching the natural substrate. The rest of the trench was made up of clean

undisturbed gravel suggesting that the former surface had been removed together with any archaeological features.

#### Trench 15 (FIG 4)

Trench 15 was 11m long and located 10m to the north of the saw-mill. It cut a level of modern make-up some 0.45m thick (1501) to reveal a layer of mixed gravels which had probably formed the underlying ballast of the railway sidings (1502). Beneath them a post-medieval quarry pit penetrated the natural to a depth of 1.70m from the yard surface, thereby removing any archaeological remains.

#### Trench 16 (FIG 4)

A geological test pit was excavated by the landowner at a point some 23m to the south west of trench 4 towards the eastern boundary of the former goods yard. It was 2m long and cut through modern levelling layers to a depth of 0.75m, whereupon a brown clay quarry fill was excavated to a depth of 1.30m from the present surface. Undisturbed natural gravel was not located in the trench bottom but it is clear that the quarrying will have removed any archaeological layers.

#### Trench 17 (FIG 4)

A trench was cut below the hedge which forms the north east boundary of the yard in order to trace the continuation of cropmarks which had been identified in the adjoining field. The trench showed that post-medieval quarry pits extended right up to the boundary. The quarry edge sloped at approximately



35 degrees and reached a depth of 1.50m in the trench but probably continued at a greater depth towards the goods yard. The section along the hedge line was unaffected by quarrying but had been greatly disturbed by animal burrows. Although two ditches (1705 and 1706) extended from the adjacent field towards the goods yard both had been cut away by the quarries.

#### Trench 18 (FIG 4)

Trench 18 was located 5m to the south-west of the main site office. It was 13m long and cut through the modern gravel surface and associated make-up layer to a depth of some 0.50m. An underlying post-medieval quarry was investigated to a depth of 1.60m from the present surface without reaching its base; its infill was of dark grey loam unlike the contents of the quarries in the northern part of the yard. No earlier archaeological layers had survived.

#### Trench 19 (FIG 4)

Trench 19 was located parallel with trench 18 at a distance of 11m to the south-west. It was 7m long and revealed the northern edge of a quarry pit at a depth of 1m below modern make-up. The pit was filled with a dark loam layer (1905) which was so similar to the type of infilling observed in trench 18 that it may be part of the same feature. The pit cut layers at the north which contained clay tobacco-pipe fragments, but proximity to the busy entrance of the present site and ensuing safety considerations precluded full excavation.

#### Trench 20 (FIG 7)

Trench 20 was 6.5m long and located next to and parallel with the former railway station building. At a depth of c 1m below modern hardcore (2001) and associated make-up layers (2002-2004) a buried soil, some 0.15-0.25m thick, rested directly upon natural gravel (2005). It contained a single sherd of post-medieval pottery.

Two gullies, 2008 and 2010, were cut into the natural to depths of 0.25m, and 0.38m respectively, but both may once have been more substantial before becoming truncated by the buried soil. They were roughly parallel and aligned in a north-east to south-west direction. Of them, 2010 may have been recut by 2009 but previously it had cut a shallow pit (2011) and hollow (2012). A narrow meandering feature to the south may be attributed to animal action. None of the features produced any pottery and they therefore remain undated.

#### Trench 21 (FIG 4)

Trench 21 was located 10m to the south-west of trench 15. It was 10m long and cut through the brick foundations of a building which rested upon a solid base of gravel and clay some 0.63m thick (2102, 2104 and 2103). The make-up contained occasional cinders, possibly from railway activity. The clean state of the underlying natural gravel surface suggests that redevelopment had removed any former topsoil and archaeological levels.

#### Trench 22 (FIG 4)

Trench 22 was located 2m to the north of a goods shed but its size was limited

to a length of 6.5m because of the presence of an electricity cable. The trench cut through recently infilled material to a depth of 1.50m (2201) and such build-up was presumably intended to link the goods yard with the higher level of the former station platform. A layer of gravel hardcore some 0.50m thick (2202) may have been introduced by the railway company to seal a partially backfilled quarry (2203). The base of the quarry was some 2.50m below the present ground surface and its cutting will have destroyed any archaeological features.

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Contracts Section, Northamptonshire County Council Archaeology Unit 25.7.92

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Schedule of illustrations

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- Fig 10 Potential areas of archaeological survival.
- Fig 11 Roman pottery kiln preserved between post-medieval quarries.
- Fig 12 Detail of Roman pottery kiln.

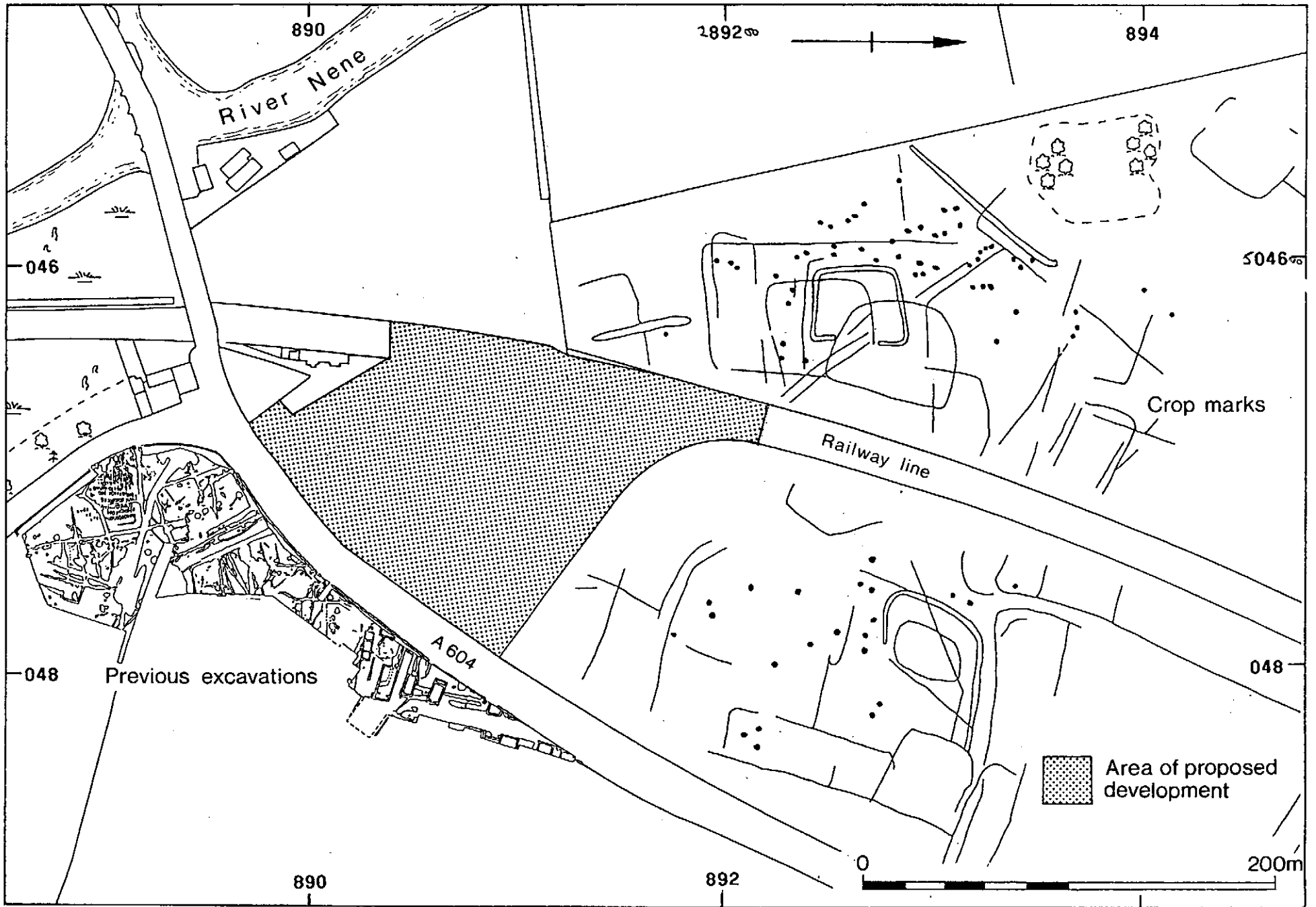


Fig 1 Location plan showing previous excavations and cropmarks

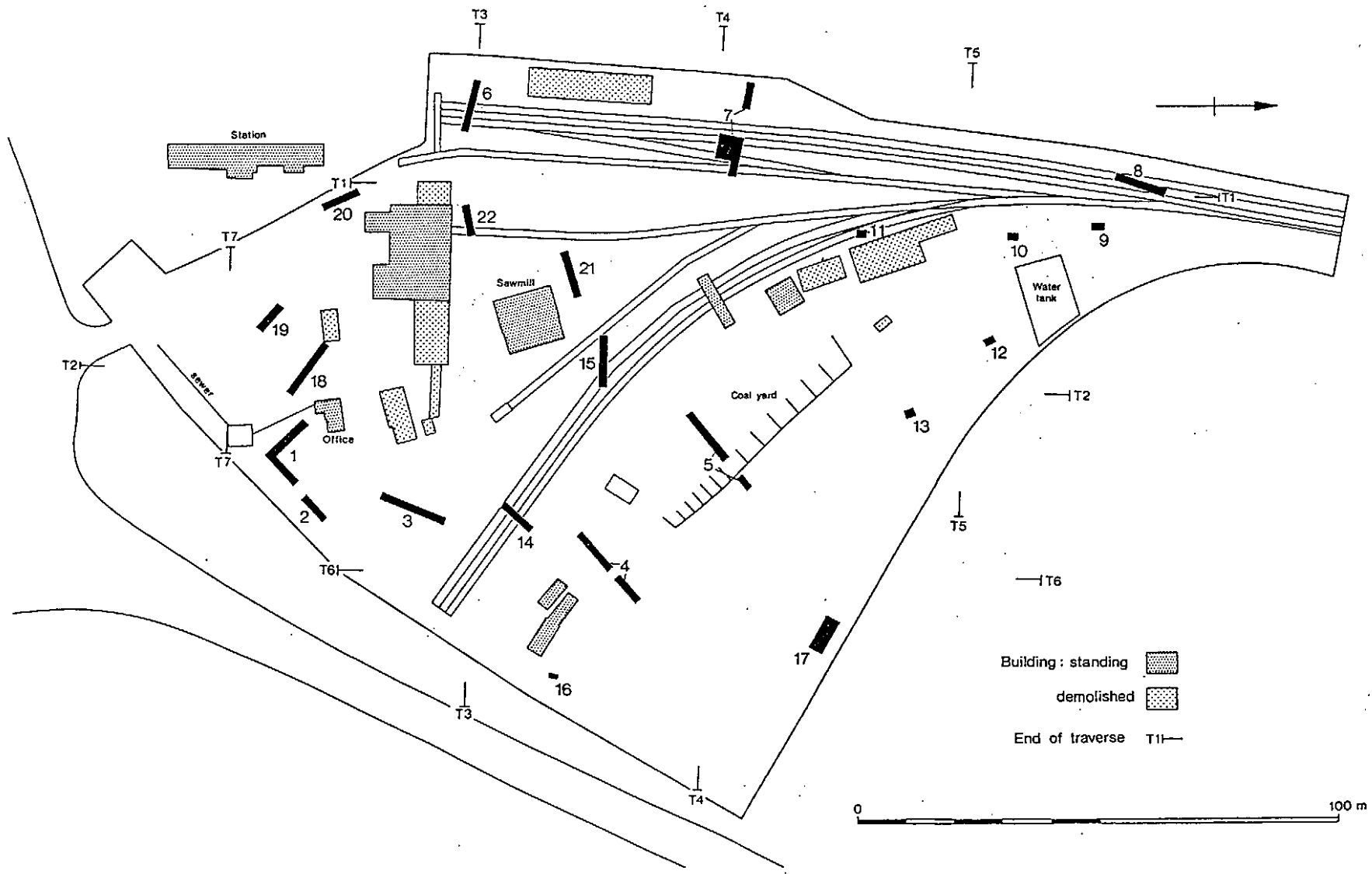


Fig 2 Previous and existing landuse with archaeological trenches

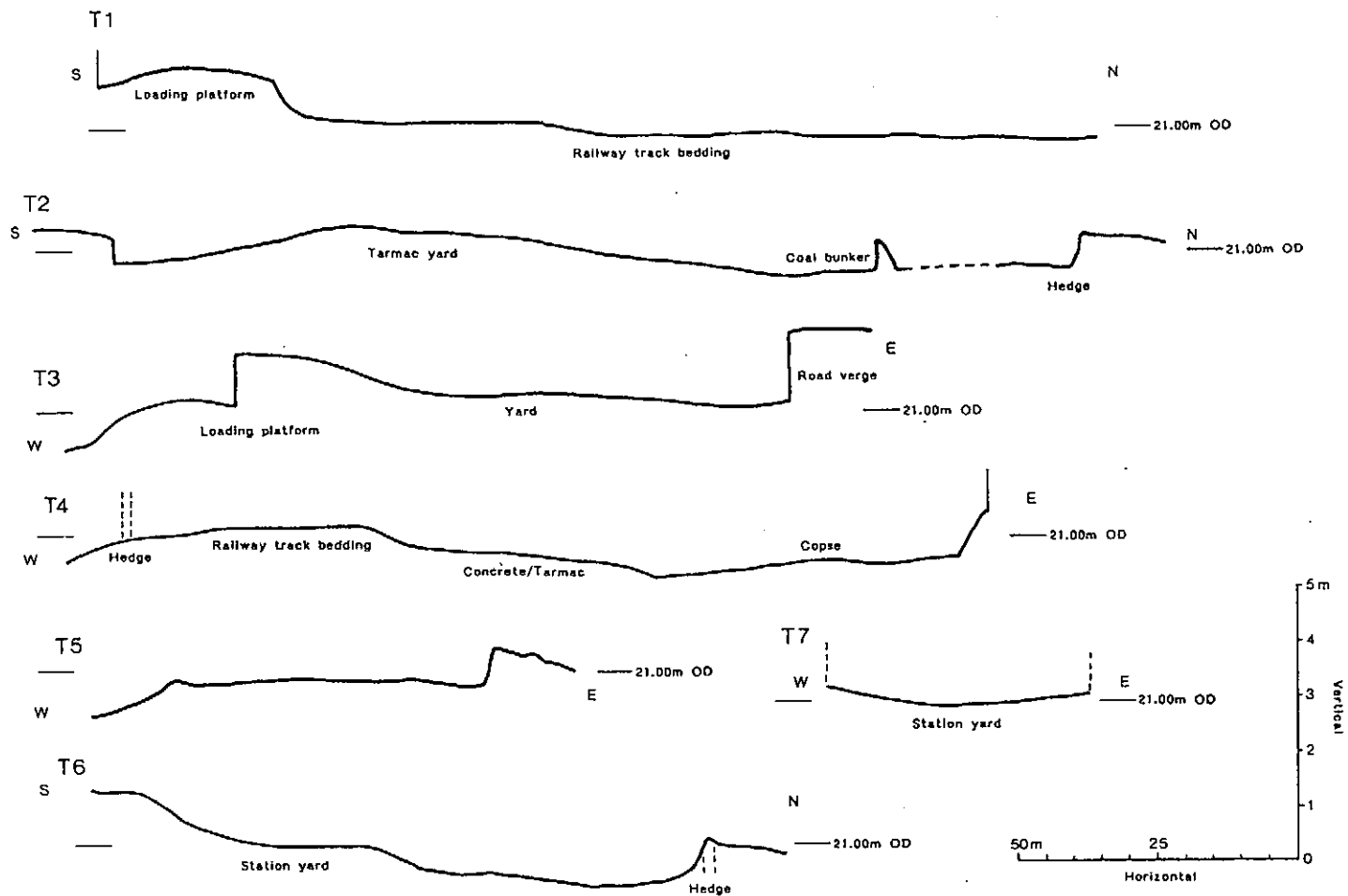


Fig 3 Profiles across station yard and surrounding areas.  
For position see Fig 2

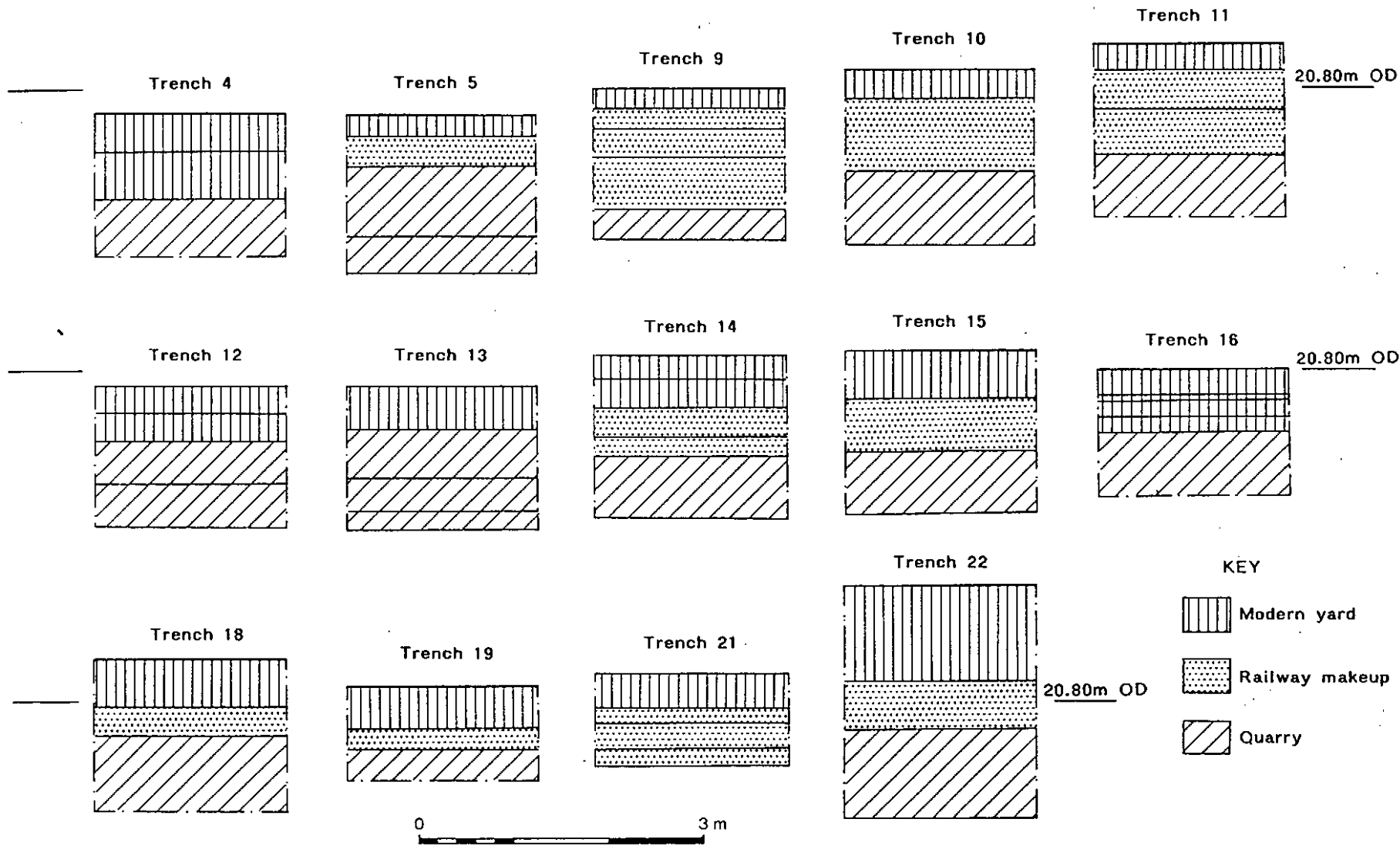


Fig 4 Schematic sections of trenches 4-5, 9-16, 18-19 and 21-22



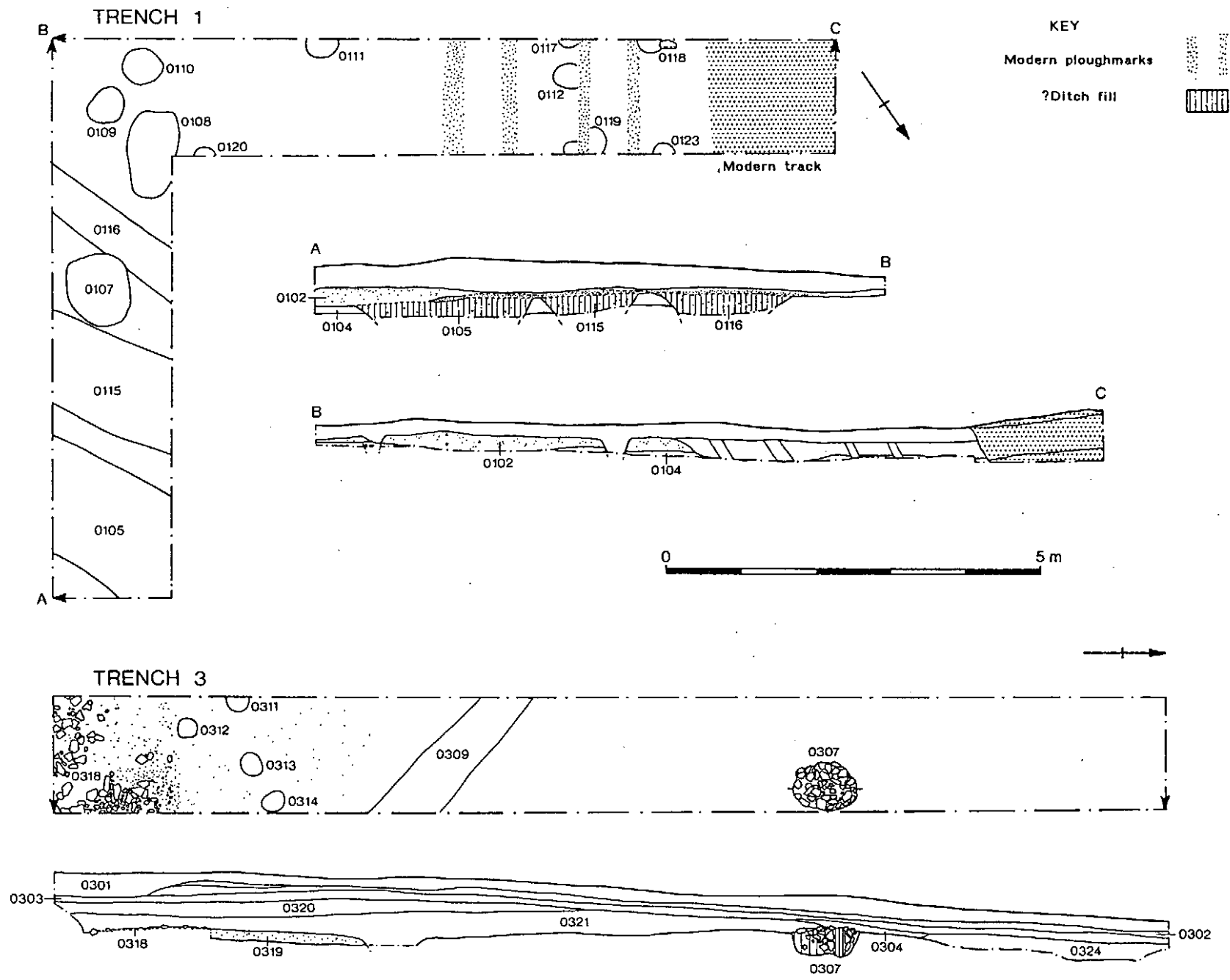


Fig 5 Trenches 1 and 3

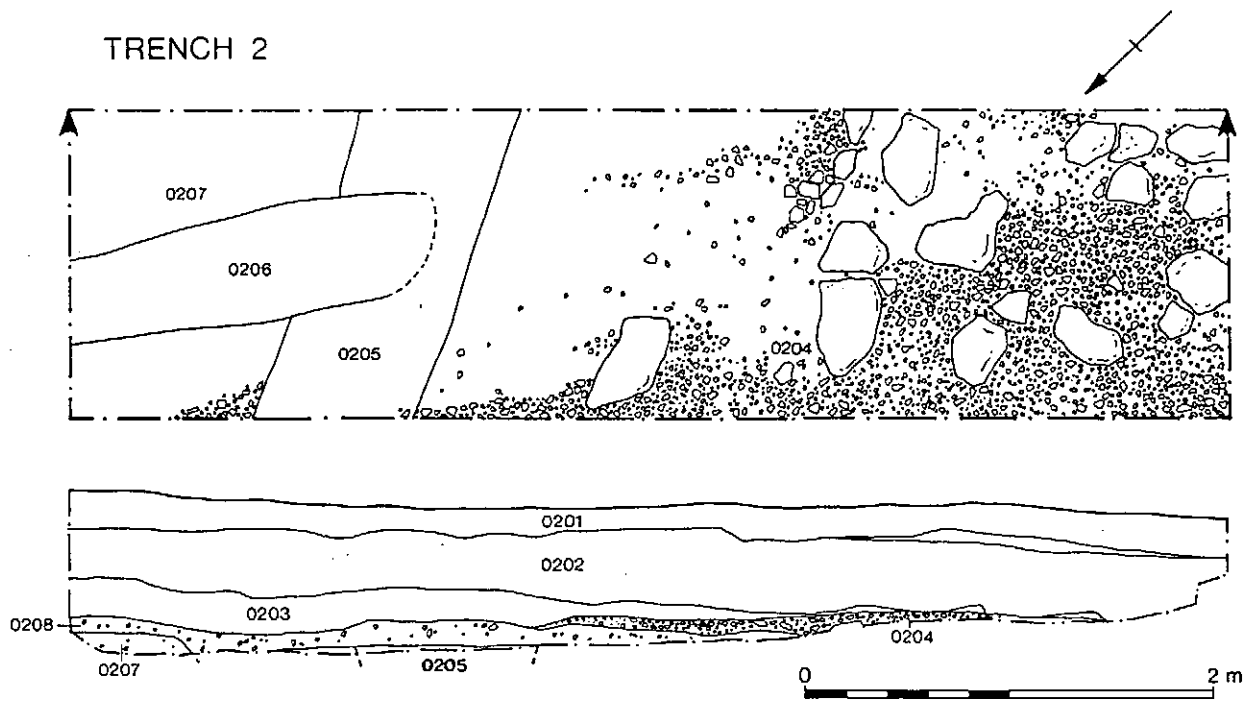


Fig 6 Trench 2

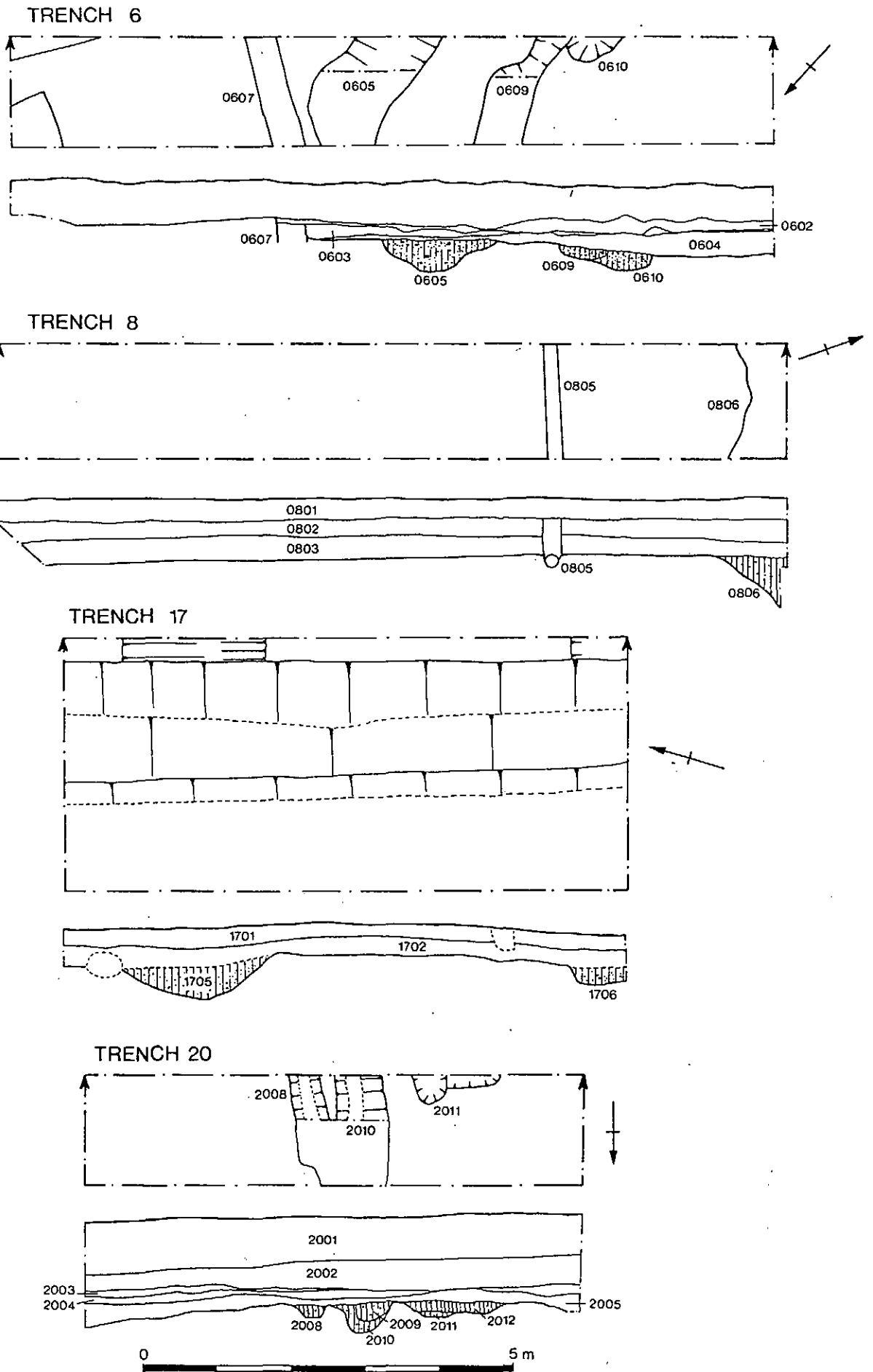


Fig 7 Trenches 6, 8, 17 and 20

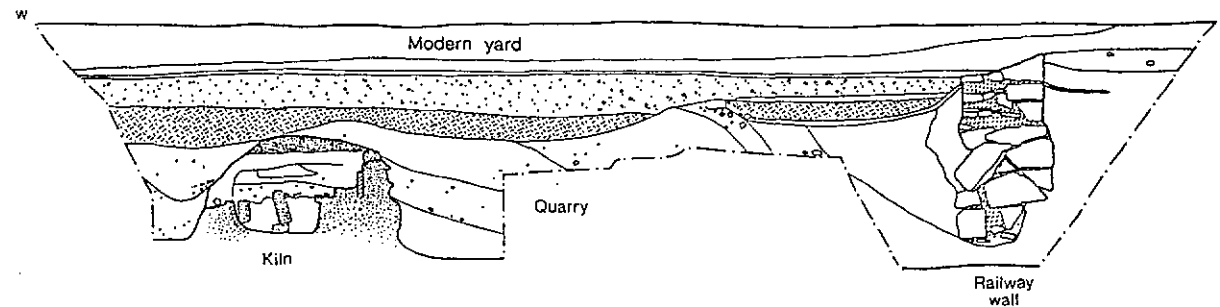
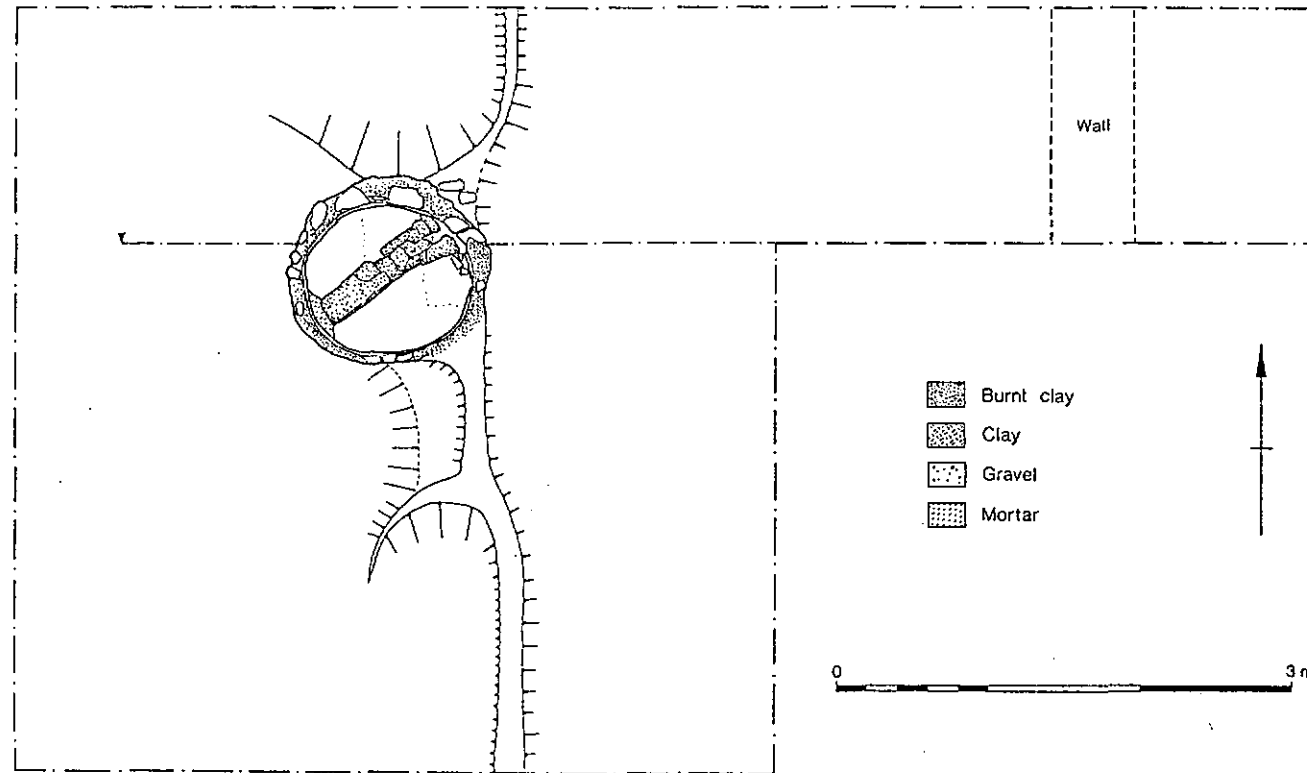


Fig 8 Trench 7 showing Roman pottery kiln and post-medieval quarries

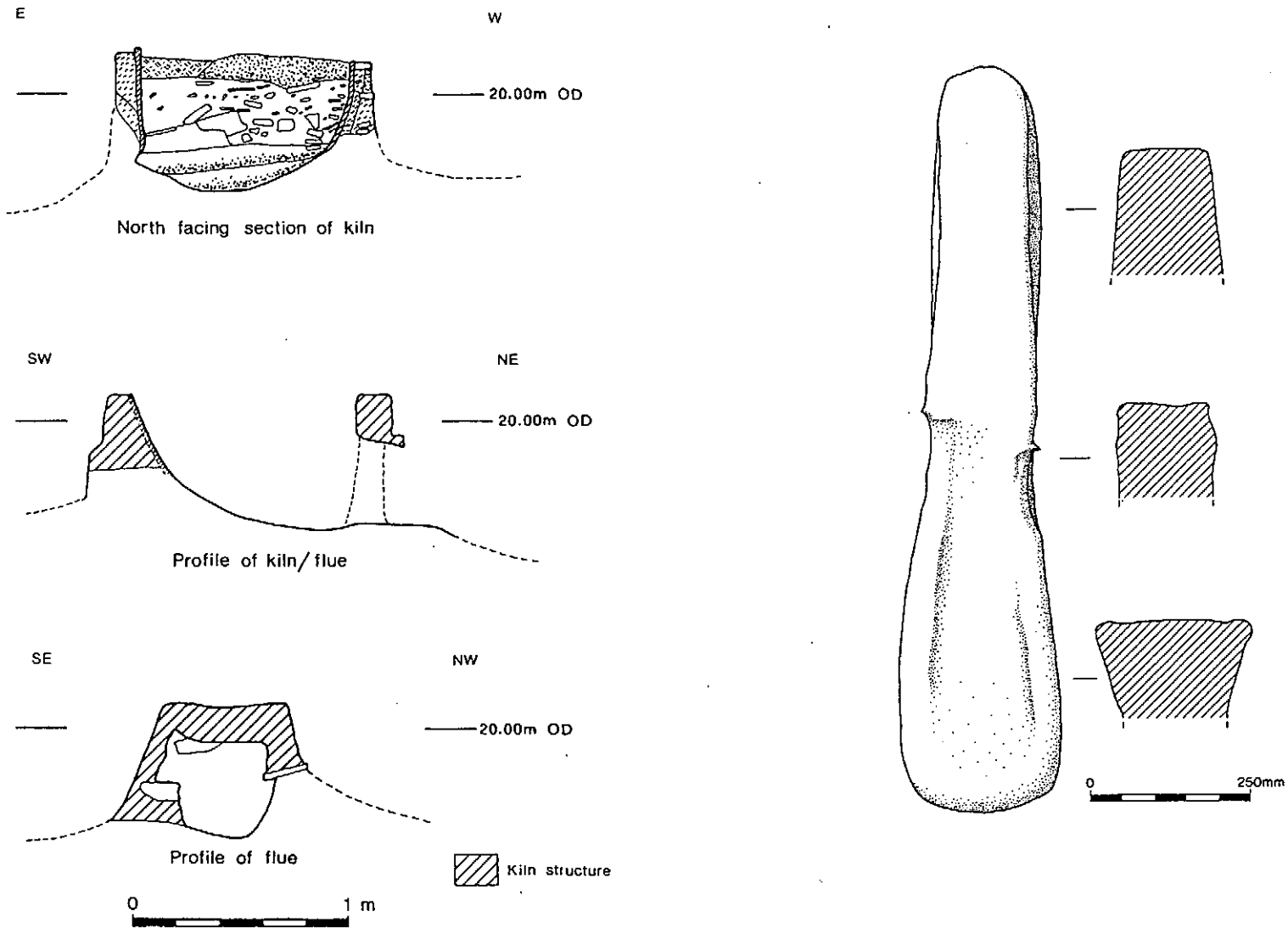


Fig 9 Section and profiles of pottery kiln and central support



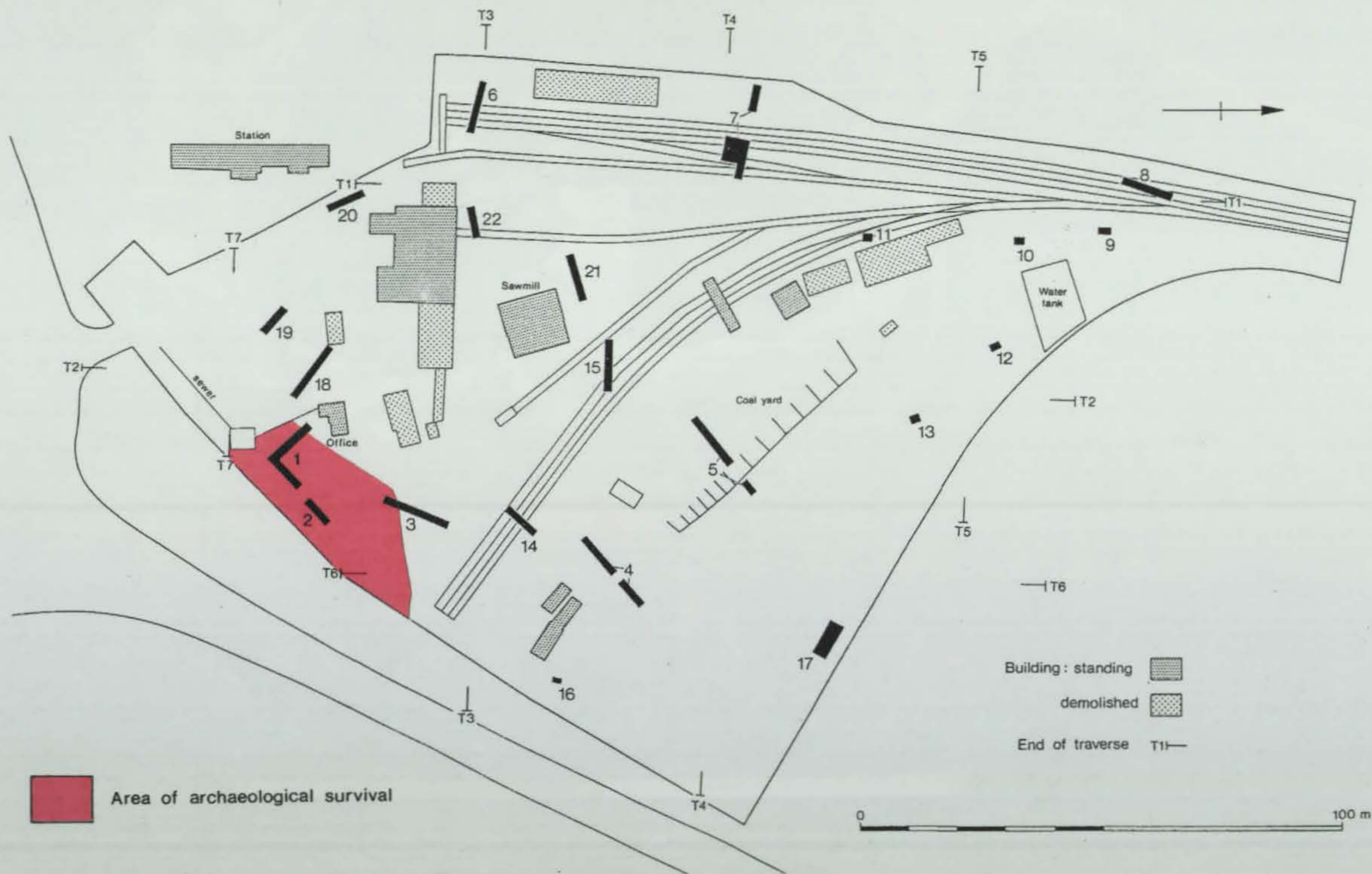


Fig 10 Potential areas of archaeological survival





Fig 11 Roman pottery kiln preserved between post-medieval quarries





Fig 12 Post-medieval quarries and isolated Roman pottery kiln



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