

Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit

Report No. 184

October 1991

NORTHOVER, ILCHESTER
An Archaeological Evaluation 1991

by
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1.0: INTRODUCTION

This report describes the results of an archaeological evaluation of an area of overgrown former orchards and gardens, previously in the grounds of Northover House on the north bank of the River Yeo, within the suburb of Northover, Ilchester, Somerset (Figure 1A: centred on NGR. ST 522228) and their implications. In September 1991 Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit was commissioned by the Hanneford Finance Company to undertake the evaluation, in advance of the submission of proposals for a residential development.

The aims of the evaluation were to assess the nature, extent and significance of buried archaeological deposits within the area of the proposed development. In particular, it was intended to characterise the nature of any surviving Romano-British deposits affected by the development, and to determine the effects of Post-Medieval land use upon their survival.

2.0: THE SITE AND ITS SETTING

2.1: The site

The subsoil is an alluvial clay-silt, located at approximately 11.10m AOD, deposited over river terrace gravels (Leach forthcoming, II.8). The modern ground surface is mostly flat, falling gently to the northwest in the western area of the site. The southern edge of the site, adjacent to the river, has been embanked to prevent flooding, and a wall inserted at its front.

The site of the evaluation (Figure 1B) is bounded to the south by the River Yeo, and to the east by the A37 road: the north and part of the west boundaries are defined by stone walls which, along with Gaol Cottages represent the only surviving upstanding remains of Somerset County Gaol, demolished around 1843. These walls also define the southern and part of the eastern limits of the Scheduled Area (Somerset Ancient Monument No. 510) of Northover Romano-

British cemetery. The area adjoining the road frontage, in the east of the site, is presently occupied by a garage and car showroom, surrounded by an extensive area of concrete and tarmac hardstanding, which formerly incorporated petrol pumps to the south of the garage. The remainder of the site is overgrown with grass and bushes.

2.2: The archaeological setting

The development site lies just to the north of the Romano-British town of *Lendinae*, established astride the Fosse Way, on the south bank of the River Yeo (Leach 1982a and forthcoming). It lies within the extra-mural settlement of Northover extending north from the crossing of the River Yeo, and on the fringes of the extensive Romano-British cemetery defined to the north in 1982 (Leach 1982b; Leach forthcoming, II.8), following previous discoveries and limited excavation (Gray 1934). An earlier exploitation of this area was represented by linear, ditched land boundaries pre-dating the cemetery, some of which could be of Iron Age origin. The cemetery, which may have contained upwards of 1500 inhumations, was in use principally during the 4th and early 5th centuries. Its southern limit is apparently marked by a ditch aligned approximately northwest-southeast found in 1982 (Figure 2: F167; and Leach forthcoming, II.8). If this interpretation is correct, the cemetery would extend to the south beyond the scheduled area, to include a narrow zone in the northwest angle of the proposed development site (Figure 5, Zone A).

The site of the County Gaol was moved to Northover in the mid-17th century. Cartographic evidence (Cox 1979) indicates that the two-storey early 19th-century gaol occupied an extensive area within the centre of the development site. Following the demolition of

the gaol after 1843, the area was planted with orchards and gardens (O.S. Map 1906).

3.0: EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

A total of seven trenches were excavated, to provide an extensive examination of the development area (Figure 1B). Trench I was dug to determine the possible southward continuation of the Roman cemetery into the northwestern zone of the site, in a peripheral area of the gaol site. Trenches II–IV, located more centrally within the gaol site, were excavated to establish the quality and survival of both pre-gaol and gaol features and deposits here. Trenches V–VII, positioned towards the modern road frontage, were dug in an attempt to determine the presence and survival of Romano-British and medieval buildings, boundary structures and associated occupation deposits, on the western frontage of the Fosse Way. A proposal for trial-trenching submitted to Hanneford Finance Co. in April 1991 required planning approval by South Somerset District Council before the evaluation could take place. In the event, some repositioning of trenches was necessary throughout the site, to avoid disrupting rights of way, and for safety reasons.

In each trench the overburden was removed by mechanical excavator under archaeological control. This exposed the upper horizons of pre-gaol features in Trench I, and the uppermost surviving levels of the truncated remains of the gaol were revealed elsewhere at a depth of approximately 1.6–1.8m below the modern ground surface. All trenches measured 1.6m in width, with the exception of Trench VII which was restricted to a width of 1m through lack of space. In each trench the priority was the definition of structural archaeological features and deposits from their upper levels, coupled with the limited excavation of test-pits in undisturbed areas, with the aim of sampling any pre-gaol archaeological sequence and locating the underlying natural alluvium. The information recovered through this approach is considered adequate for a basic understanding of the nature and survival of the archaeological deposits. Recording was by means of pro-forma recording sheets, supplemented by plans, sections and photographs which are held in the archive. Subject to the owner's approval, it is proposed to deposit the paper archive in the

Somerset County Record Office and the finds in the Somerset County Museum.

4.0: THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESULTS

4.1: The western area (Trench I) (Figure 2, Figure 3)

Trench I comprised two perpendicular trenches, measuring 7m and 16m in length. The western arm, aligned north–south, was located perpendicular to and inside the western boundary of the post-1821 gaol extension. The eastern arm, aligned west–east, was sited between the southern end of the former trench and the western boundary of the pre-1822 gaol.

The upper horizon of natural alluvium was exposed in the base of two ditches (F105, F106), at a depth of 1.3m below the modern surface (at 11.15m AOD). This alluvial deposit was overlain by a deposit of buff-brown disturbed silt-clay (1014), approximately 0.4m in depth, exposed by machining in the base of the western arm of the trench, and cut by at least three linear features, which follow a predominant west–east alignment. The southernmost feature of this group was a shallow, flat based ditch (F105), 2.6m wide, with a stepped profile to the north. The ditch was filled with buff-brown clay-soil (1009), with a tip of stone building debris at its base, and containing Iron Age and Romano-British pottery and iron nails.

The southern edge of a second linear feature (F106), 0.5m deep, to the north of F105, was excavated to a depth of 0.3m, but the northern limit of this feature could not be located. The fill of ditch F106 (1010) could not be distinguished from the earlier deposit to the north into which it was cut (1012), which may represent the fill of an earlier cut, not defined at excavation. Alternatively, F106 may represent a limited re-cut of the earlier feature filled with 1012. The fill of F106 contained crumbs of shell-tempered Iron Age pottery.

The eastern end of a vertical-sided, rectangular grave cut (F107), 0.65m wide north–south, was dug into the fill (1012) of the un-defined earlier feature (possibly F106). The grave-cut was partially excavated to uncover the lower femurs of an adult inhumation burial, orientated west–east, with the head to the west. Two iron coffin nails were recovered from the grave fill (1011).

In the eastern arm of the trench a broad linear feature, aligned west–east, and approximately 2m wide, was exposed within the machined horizon, but not excavated. This ?ditch was cut into disturbed alluvium (1014), also recorded in the western arm of the trench. This feature was filled with a mid-brown, stony clay-soil (1013) containing sherds of Romano-British pottery (not collected).

An overall layer of buff-brown clay-soil (1002), containing scatters of lias and hamstone fragments, brick, tile and Post-Medieval pottery sealed F105–F107, 1012 and 1013, and was cut by a group of features associated with the gaol (F101–F104 and 1008: see below) in the eastern arm of the trench.

The west perimeter wall (F103) of the pre-1822 gaol defined the eastern limit of the eastern arm of the trench (and the western limit of Trench II: see below). The wall is composed of horizontal courses of squared lias blocks and stands to a height of 3m above modern ground level. The wall may have been contemporary with an (unexcavated) perpendicular cut filled with stony mid-brown clay-soil (1008) containing lias and hamstone fragments, cut to the west by a stone-filled soakaway (F102) aligned approximately north–south. To the west, a circular brick well (F101) was exposed, set within a cut (F104), containing loose lias chippings.

An extensive spread of demolition rubble, mixed with humic brown soil, (1001) sealed the gaol features in the eastern arm of the trench, and the clay-soil (1002) in the western arm, immediately beneath the modern topsoil (1000).

4.2: The central area (Trenches II–IV) (Figure 2, Figure 3)

Trench II

In Trench II the upper horizon of natural gravel (2019) was located at a depth of 2.2m below the modern surface (at 11.2m AOD), sealed by a deposit of buff-orange natural alluvium (2018), 0.15m in depth, exposed in the side of a vertical-sided cut (F208) aligned approximately north–south.

Elements of two distinct phases of gaol construction were defined by limited manual excavation following machining. The first phase

was represented by two mortared and horizontally coursed walls of squared lias blocks (F204 and F207), each 0.6m wide, aligned approximately north–south, and a drain (F202), aligned west–east, lined with lias blocks, and capped by irregularly-shaped hamstone flags. The second phase arrangements were represented by the construction of a mortared and horizontally-coursed wall of lias blocks aligned west–east (F200), truncating F204 just inside the north baulk. The wall F204 was also broadened to the west (F206) to a total width of 1m. The southern dividing wall of a small room to the west of F204 was formed by the insertion of a crude mortared wall of lias blocks (F205) joining F206, and bonded into F103 to the west. A further dividing cross-wall (F203), 0.8m wide, aligned north–south, was bonded into F200. The earlier drain (F202) was replaced by a parallel drain to the north (F201), lined with red bricks and capped by rectangular hamstone slabs, which returned to the north to exit beneath F200.

A mid-brown clay-silt (2016) was deposited against the truncated wall footings, after demolition and ground clearance. Above were mixed layers of demolition material, containing mortar and shattered lias stone (2002, 2003, 2007, 2014), totalling 1.2m in depth, below the modern topsoil (2000).

Trench III (Figure 2)

The earliest feature defined in Trench III may have been a natural river channel, filled with a mottled clay (3013). It was located in a sondage 1m square, at a depth of 2.4m below the modern ground surface (at 11.03m AOD); but the depth or alignment of this suspected channel could not be defined. A shallow horizon of disturbed alluvium (3016) containing a scatter of animal bone sealed the clay 3013 and was in turn capped by a yard surface of compact gravel (3015).

Truncated elements of the gaol, exposed in the base of the trench at a depth of 1.8m below the modern surface (at 11.90m AOD), were cleaned and recorded. A mortared wall (F302) formed of horizontally-coursed lias blocks, aligned north–south, was exposed in the east of the trench. A partially-robbed, stone-lined drain (F304), aligned approximately southwest–northeast, turned a right-angle just inside the northern baulk.

To the west of F304 the gravel yard (3015) was cut by vertical-sided, robber trench (F306).

Layers of demolition debris (3007, 3003, 3002) totalling 1.2m in depth, sealed the remains of the gaol. A robber trench (F301) was later cut from the upper horizon of debris to recover stone from the wall F302.

Trench IV (Figure 2)

Trench IV was dug in an L-shape, with the long axis parallel to, and just inside the modern flood defences. Machining exposed a mortared wall composed of horizontal courses of squared lias blocks (F406) aligned approximately west-east, which survived to within 1.0m of the modern ground surface (at 12.0m AOD) at the junction of the two arms of this trench. A mixed demolition horizon (4003) composed of dark brown clay-soil containing angular lias rubble and buff mortar, was exposed by machining over the remainder of the base of the trench. This layer was cleaned manually to expose the upper levels of three backfilled robber trenches (F401, F402, F404) at a depth of 1.7m below the modern surface (at 11.40m AOD), each aligned approximately north-south. Partial emptying of the eastern robber trench (F407) exposed the *in situ* remains of a mortared hamstone wall (F401) at a depth of 2.30m below the modern surface. Two further robber trenches (F402, F404) were exposed to the west of F401 but not emptied. The robber trenches were overlain by up to 1.50m of mixed build-up of lias stone rubble, mortar and clay-soil (4001, 4002) below the modern topsoil (4000).

4.3: The eastern area (Trenches V–VII)

Trench V (Figure 2, Figure 3)

Trench V, located immediately to the rear of the garage, was excavated to investigate the archaeological potential of the area to the rear of the western frontage on the Fosse Way. Machining exposed the *in situ* remains of the gaol, which were cleaned and recorded, and a sondage was excavated in the north of the trench to determine the survival of pre-gaol archaeological deposits, and to locate natural alluvium.

The upper horizon of natural buff-orange alluvium was located in the sondage, at a depth of 2.00m below the modern surface (at 11.10m

AOD). This alluvial deposit was cut by the western edge of a ?boundary ditch (F506), filled with dark grey gritty clay-silt (5016) which contained pottery of 2nd-century type. A dark grey-brown mottled clay-silt (5015) sealed F506 and natural alluvium, and contained Romano-British pottery of 4th-century type. This layer was cut by a shallow flat-based ditch (F507) aligned approximately west-east, filled with mottled green-brown clay (5006) and containing pottery of 4th-century type. A number of poorly-defined features (not illustrated), were tentatively identified cutting the fill of F507, including two curvilinear gullies (F505 and F508) and two possible post-holes (F504 and F509), which contained medieval pottery. No coherent structural arrangement of these features could be defined in the limited area available for excavation.

The truncated remains of gaol walls were exposed by machining in the remainder of the trench. A mortared wall (F500) 0.70m wide, composed of lias blocks was exposed in the base of the trench at a depth of 1.50m below the modern surface (at 11.60m AOD), and aligned approximately north-south. This wall incorporated a buttress (F501) on its west side and was bonded to a cross-wall (F510) 1.20m wide, aligned west-east. A demolition deposit, 0.90m deep, composed of mortar and lias stone chippings (5008), including a number of hamstone column bases and other architectural fragments, overlay the surviving walls. This layer (5008) was cut by a pit (F511) partly exposed inside the east baulk, cut to the level of the wall below.

Trench VI (Figure 2)

Trench VI was re-located to the south to avoid the deep and extensive disturbance caused by a group of petrol tanks immediately to the south of the car showroom. The upper horizon of natural buff-orange alluvium (6016) was exposed at a depth of 2.30m below the modern surface (at 11.15m AOD) in a sondage in the west of the trench. The alluvium was sealed by a buff-brown clay-silt (6015) containing fragments of slate. Above this layer was a succession of horizontal layers of demolition rubble (6007–6012) cut by the western edge of a steep-sided disturbance (F600) exposed in the east of the trench, filled with a brown clay-silt containing lias and

hamstone rubble, brick and mortar (6013). Above were further horizontal layers of demolition rubble and post-medieval build-up (6001–6006), 1m thick, immediately below the modern tarmac hardstanding.

Trench VII (Figure 2)

Excavation of Trench VII, measuring 6m in length, and located between Northover House and the north wall of the garage, exposed a drain inspection chamber (F700), at a depth of 0.8m below the modern surface. The inspection chamber was walled with mortared lias blocks, and capped with hamstone slabs. Partial removal of this capping exposed an arched drain, (partly filled with water and possibly still in use) lined with lias blocks, at a depth of 2.5m below the modern surface. The drain was aligned west–east, following the position and alignment of the trench. A dark brown clay soil (7001), backfilled above the drain, was exposed over the remainder of the trench. It was not possible to re-position this trench to avoid the deep disturbance caused by the drain, because of the close proximity of existing buildings and live services.

5.0: DISCUSSION

5.1: Pre-gaol features (Figure 2)

A horizon of contaminated alluvium (1014) above natural alluvium was cut by a group of linear ditched features (F105, F106, and unexcavated ditches 1012 and 1013), in Trench I. It is probable that these features are broadly contemporary with the pre-cemetery boundaries located to the west and north in 1982 (Leach 1982b), although these features cannot be directly related stratigraphically. The inhumation (F107) probably post-dated ditch F106, which itself may have been a limited re-cut of the earlier (undefined) ditch feature (filled with 1012) cut by the inhumation.

The flat-based profile and fills of the southern excavated ditch (F105) suggests that it functioned as a boundary marker, rather than for drainage. This feature corresponds both in position and alignment with a ditch of similar form partially excavated in 1982 (Figure 2: Leach forthcoming, II.8, F167), and almost certainly represents the eastward continuation of that ditch. Ditch F167 was infilled in the 4th-century and was cut by several inhumations. It is possible that the ditches

F167 and F105 functioned for a time as a southern boundary to the cemetery, before being encroached upon by burials as the cemetery expanded southwards. A single, well-preserved adult inhumation (F107) belonging to the late Roman cemetery was cut into the fill of a ditched boundary, just inside the southern margin of the cemetery (as defined by F105/F167).

Little evidence of pre-gaol occupation could be recovered from the zone close to the Fosse Way frontage, partly because of the limited area available for examination here, and also the extensive disturbance caused by the deeply-buried gaol features. The earliest feature located in the sondage in Trench V was a (only partly excavated) ditch (F506), aligned north–south, which contained pottery of 2nd-century type. Later Roman land use may be represented by a perpendicular ditch (F504) which contained pottery of 4th-century type. This ditch was cut by a group of shallow features (F504, F505, F508, F509) which were difficult to define on excavation. These may provide the only evidence encountered during the evaluation for post-Roman activity associated with the medieval suburb of Northover.

5.2: Gaol features (Figure 2, Figure 4)

The majority of the gaol features encountered during the evaluation can be identified in relation to the detailed plans dated 1821 (Cox 1979), showing both existing and proposed structural arrangements (Figure 4).

Trench I was located outside the west perimeter boundary of the pre-1822 gaol. The western perimeter wall of the earlier gaol defined the eastern limit of the trench, and the north wall of the later gaol extension defined the northern limit of the trench. The well (F101) and soakaway (F102), probably relate to the post-1822 western extension, in the area reserved for 'boys under 16 years of age committed for trial for misdemeanour'.

Trench II, located inside the western perimeter boundary of the earlier gaol, was sited at the northern end of the factory, recorded on the plan of 1821, which was then proposed for demolition. Although the features uncovered here appear more complex than those depicted on the plan, it is probable that the walls identified here relate to

at least two phases of the remodelling of the internal arrangements of the factory. Other features exposed, such as drains, may have been too small to be depicted on the plan.

Trench III was positioned across the yard reserved for 'female convict felons', and extended to the east into the yard reserved for 'females committed for trial on charges of felony', identified as a gravelled surface (3015). The eastern boundary wall (F302) of the west yard was defined in the east of the trench. The dividing wall between the two yards was probably represented by a vertical-sided robber trench (F306), aligned north-south. The stone drain (F304), aligned northeast-southeast, is also recorded on the gaol plans.

Trench IV was located in the former position of the Felons Yard, and across the 'Turnkeys Lodge'. Excavation here exposed the southern wall of the Felons Yard (F406) and three internal walls (F404, F401, F402), aligned north-south, within the Turnkeys Lodge. Trench V was sited in the position occupied by the Turnkeys Lodge in the east of the gaol. Excavation identified the east wall (F501) of the southern passage leading to the Lodge, aligned approximately north-south, and the south wall of the Lodge (F500), aligned east-west.

Trench VI was dug outside the confines of the pre-1822 gaol, but within the southeast corner of the proposed extended 'Upper Debtors Yard'. The cut (F600) recorded in the east of the trench may be a robber-trench relating to a north-south wall of the 'Court' building to the east of the Debtors Yard. Trench VII exposed the inspection chamber of a main gaol drain (F700), part of the system which eventually drained into the river.

6.0: IMPLICATIONS AND PROPOSALS

6.1: Implications (Figure 2)

The present evaluation has both amplified and clarified the information provided by the 1982 evaluation, relating to the southern limits of the Romano-British cemetery. The definition of the true alignment of this important boundary and the confirmation of its earlier interpretation suggest that a zone approximately 8m wide in the northwest of the development area, and immediately to the south of the Scheduled Ancient Monument, may be within the confines of the

Romano-British cemetery. This zone (A), together with the scheduled area to the north, deserves the highest grade of protection from sub-surface intrusions.

Trench I lay to the west of the main gaol buildings, and archaeological survival, exemplified by the ditches, and in particular the adult inhumation, was good. Ground level in this area is lower than elsewhere on the development site, and the Romano-British features were sealed by no more than 0.9m of overburden. Further graves to the east may have been severely truncated by gaol construction, although equally any islands of Romano-British stratigraphy or features surviving the construction of the gaol will be mantled and protected by upwards of 1.6m of overlying gaol demolition deposits and modern topsoil.

The pre-gaol activity in the east of the development area is much more difficult to interpret, due to the severe truncation of earlier deposits by gaol features, and the limited areas available for investigation at, or close-to, the presumed Roman and medieval street frontages. However, the information from Trench V suggests limited survival of Romano-British stratigraphy, up to 0.30m in depth above natural alluvium, and of negative features cutting this horizon.

The most tangible remains of the gaol are the northern and western perimeter walls, standing to a height of up to 3m above modern ground level. Trenching exposed the truncated and partially robbed-out remains of the gaol, at a depth of 1.6-1.8m below the modern ground surface. An exception was the wall F406 in Trench IV which was located at a depth of 1m below the modern surface. In Trench I, the gaol-related features occurred at a depth of 0.5m below the modern surface. Although the buried remains of the gaol merit a lesser degree of protection to that accorded to the Romano-British features, it is nevertheless desirable that they should be preserved *in situ* wherever possible.

6.2: Proposals (Figure 5)

The archaeological proposals arising out of this evaluation exercise are defined with reference to the existing preliminary plan of the development. For the purpose of outlining the

archaeological recommendations, the site has been sub-divided into four zones, according to the nature and importance of the demonstrable archaeological deposits, and their quality and survival.

6.2.1: Specific proposals by zone

ZONE A: The Romano-British cemetery.

This area is not presently proposed for house construction. Because of the potential importance of the archaeological remains present here, their shallow depth below the modern surface, and the proximity of the Scheduled Ancient Monument, it is recommended that no housing units be sited here and that no service trenches be routed through this area unless provision is made for a full archaeological investigation.

ZONE B: The southwestern angle of the site.

This area lies immediately to the south of the Romano-British cemetery. The excavation of foundation or service trenches in this zone may truncate pre-cemetery Romano-British features located at a depth of 0.9m below the modern surface.

Three options are proposed:

- (A) Preserve the archaeologically-sensitive deposits *in situ* by importing soil to artificially raise the ground level in this zone to obviate any disturbance to the proven deposits, or
- (B) Raft building foundations to limit the depth of foundation trenches to a maximum depth of 0.9m below existing ground level. This option could be combined with (A) above, or
- (C) Preserve the buried archaeology by record. This option involves the archaeological excavation of all foundation and service trenches which will penetrate to a depth below 0.9m of the modern surface, and the recording, and eventual publication, of the information obtained.

ZONE C: The centre of the site.

No pre-gaol archaeological features were identified in this area. Although it is possible that small islands of earlier stratigraphy have survived gaol construction, it is probable that these deposits are heavily truncated and of possibly limited research value. Given the substantial depth of overburden (between 1.6–1.8m) the ideal design

solution would involve no ground disturbance below the level of the truncated remains of the gaol. Accordingly it is recommended that should foundation or service trenches not penetrate beneath 1.6m of the modern ground surface, no further archaeological input will be required.

ZONE D: The road frontage.

The archaeological results here were largely inconclusive, as a result of the limited areas available for investigation, and the depth of the post-gaol overburden.

It is recommended that a further trench, measuring 1.6m by 10m, be excavated in the area presently occupied by the garage, following its demolition, to further test the archaeological potential of this area, before development commences. Subject to the results of this further trenching, it is recommended that should house or road foundations and services in this area not penetrate beneath 1.8m of the modern ground surface, no further archaeological input will be required.

6.2.2: General proposals

- (A) All upstanding gaol walls affected by the development should be recorded photographically, and by means of scaled drawings to identify their architectural and structural components.
- (B) A watching brief should be maintained by a qualified archaeologist to monitor the groundworks in Zones A–D. This archaeological input would permit the recording, analysis and eventual publication of information obtained before destruction or disturbance of archaeological deposits and features during the course of development.

7.0: ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project was sponsored by Hanneford Finance Limited. It was directed by Peter Leach and Alex Jones, with the assistance of Ed Newton, Steve Litherland, and Charles and Nancy Hollinrake. The figures were drawn by Nigel Dodds, and the report was compiled at BUFAU by Liz Hooper. We are grateful to Bob Croft, Archaeological Officer, Somerset County Council for discussion of the results, and to Messrs Capazoli (proprietors of the garage) for their co-operation during the fieldwork.

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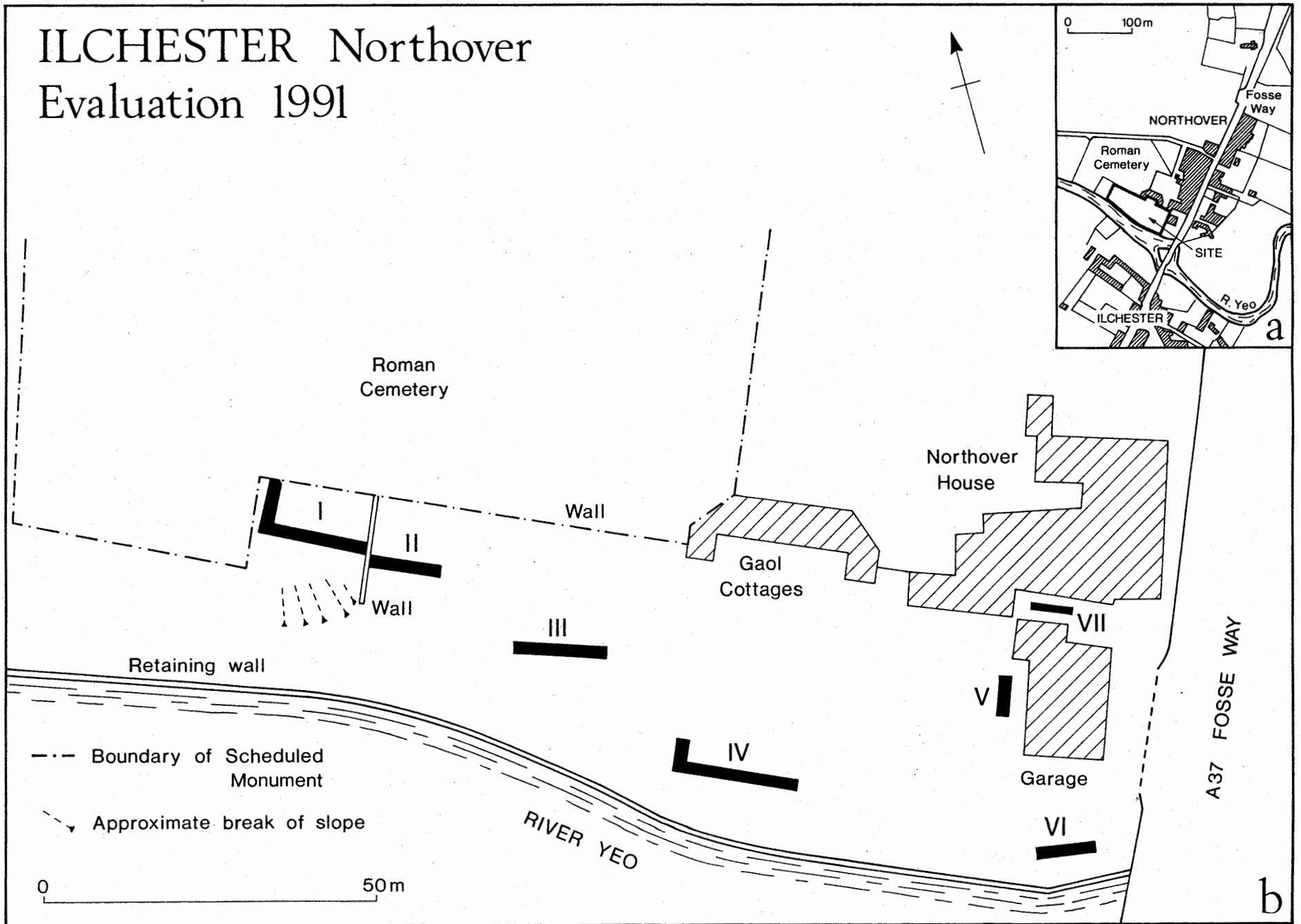
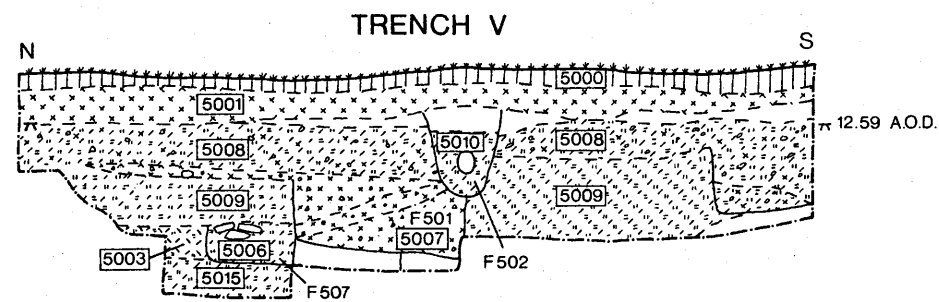
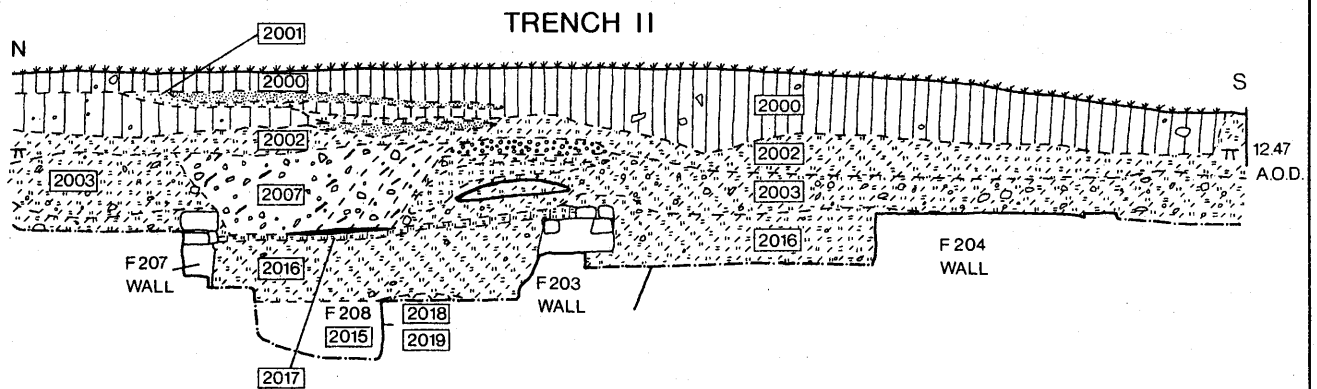
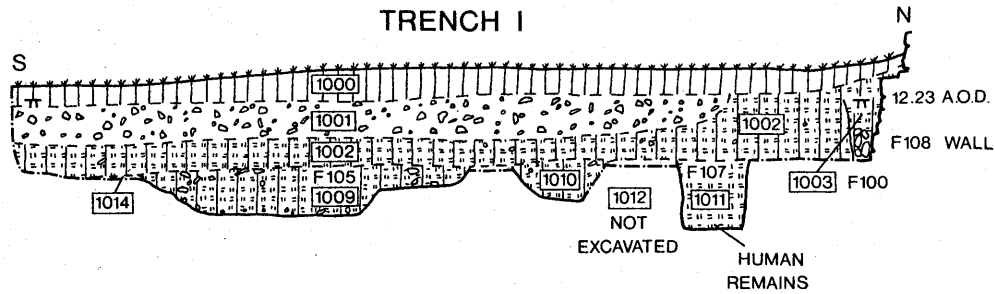


Figure 1

ILCHESTER Northover 1991

Sections



- ||||| Topsoil
- o o o Stone rubble
- ||||| Clay
- ||||| Clay soil
- ||||| Clay silt
- x x x Silt clay
- o o o Sand
- ||||| Yellow sand
- ||||| Gravel
- x x x Mortar
- /// Ash

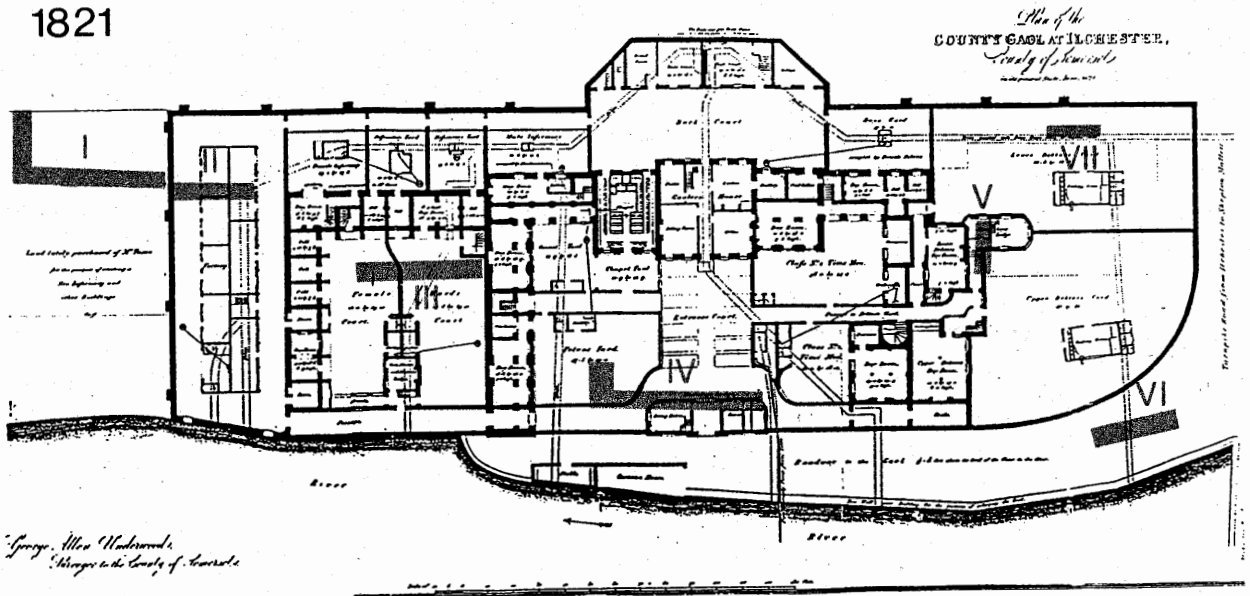
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Figure 3

ILCHESTER Northover 1991

Gaol plans

1821



Plan of proposed additions

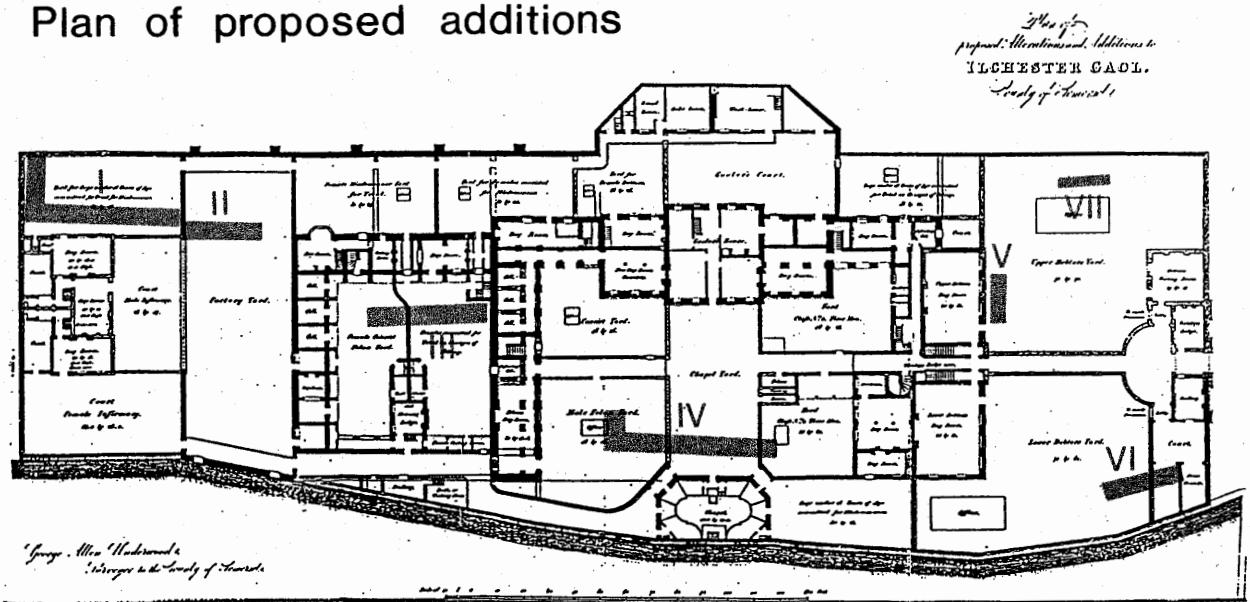
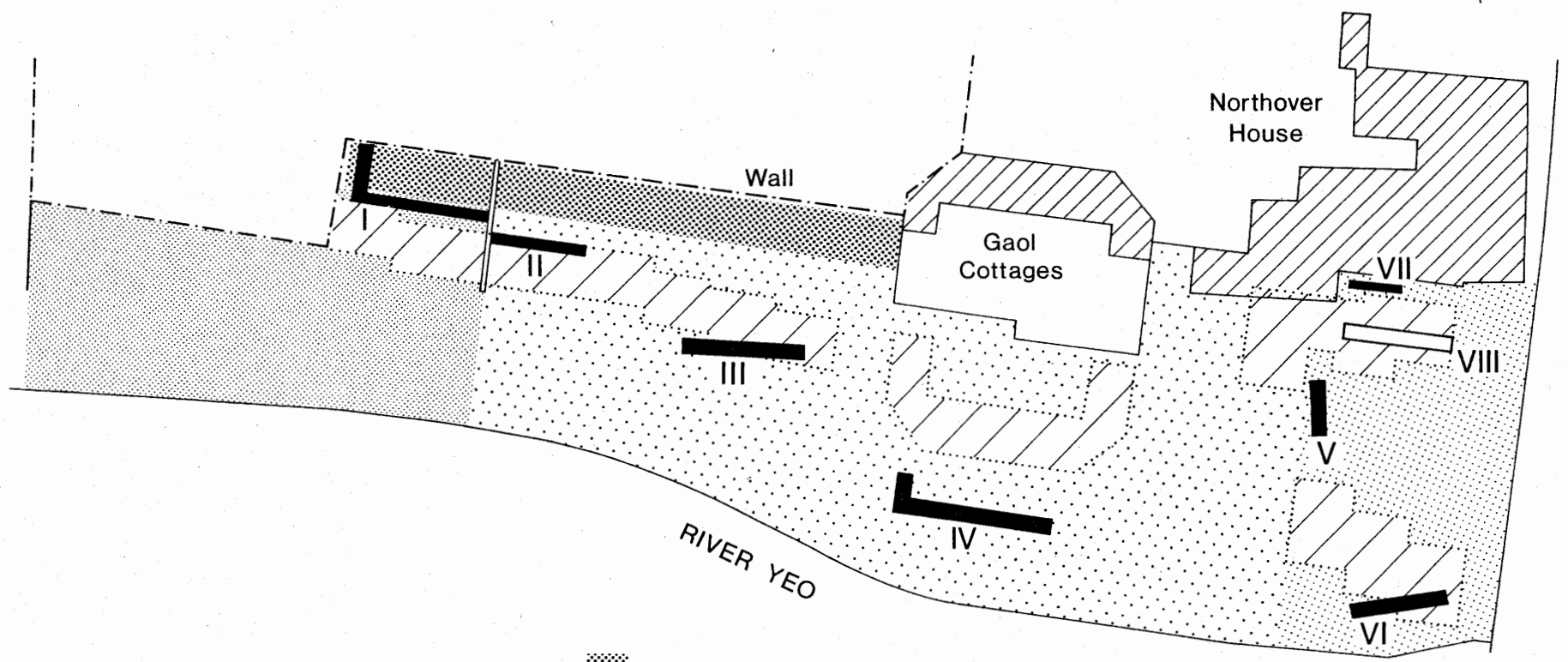









Figure 4

ILCHESTER Northover Proposals 1991



-  Proposed Units
 -  Trenches
 -  Proposed trench
- Zones
- A 
 - B 
 - C 
 - D 

0 50m

Figure 5

ILCHESTER Northover 1991

Main features

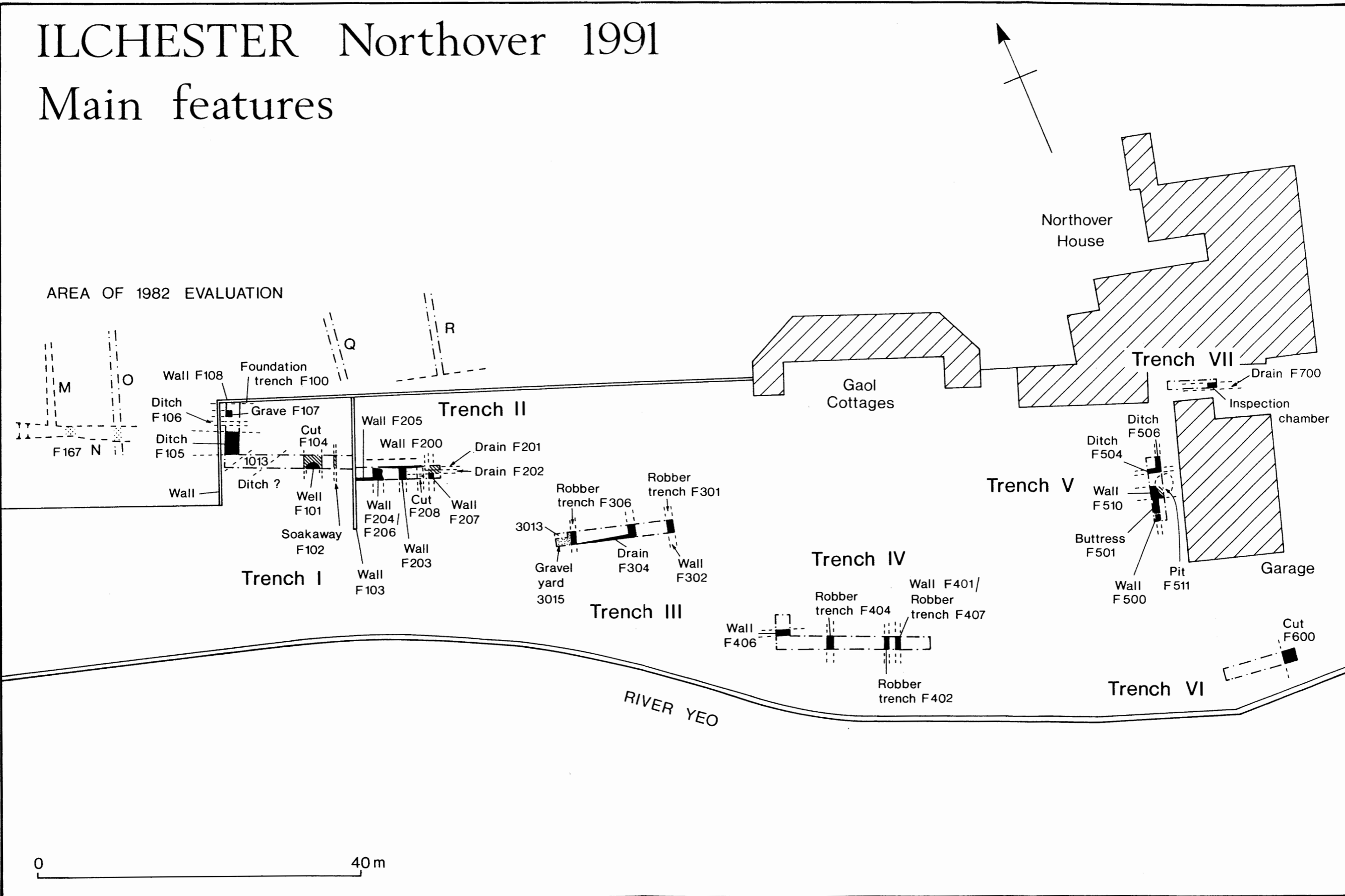


Figure 2