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**AXMINSTER BYPASS 1990
TRIAL EXCAVATIONS, KINGS FARM
TIPPING SITE, WOODBURY LANE**

by

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1. INTRODUCTION

The excavation described in this report was initiated following the lodging of a planning application by Coles Excavations Ltd for permission to tip construction debris from the Axminster Bypass in a field adjacent to Woodbury Lane, Axminster (SY30549700). The field belongs to Kings Farm, which lies immediately to the south, and the new bypass passes through its south-eastern edge. Because of the possibility that part of the E-W Roman road from Exeter to Dorchester crossed the site, Devon County Council requested the applicants to commission an archaeological evaluation. This was undertaken by Exeter Museums Archaeological Field Unit on 16-17 August 1990 to a specification prepared by Devon County Council (as described in 1.2). Five trenches were excavated by machine next to Woodbury Lane in the northern part of the site in order to locate the Roman road and any associated features.

1.1 Archaeological background

Woodbury Lane has long been assumed to follow the line of the Roman road from Exeter to Dorchester. Recent excavations in the vicinity of Woodbury Farm, 800 m to the west of the Kings Farm tipping site, confirmed that the Roman road lay just to the south of Woodbury Lane at that point (EMAFU Report No. 90.16). The Roman road is likely to have been fairly straight in its alignment. Whilst being fairly straight overall the present Woodbury Lane follows a somewhat irregular course which is probably the product of a series of minor deviations from the original Roman line made in the medieval period. This area is thought to have been unenclosed moorland before the 14th century, so that traffic could easily have made small diversions from the original course of the road in places where it was blocked or badly rutted. With the passage of time some of these detours would have become part of the established routeway, so that the medieval lane eventually came to follow a more sinuous course than its Roman predecessor. It is possible also that the Roman road was considerably wider than the medieval lane, giving scope for small-scale meanderings even within the limits of the original highway.

As well as the Roman road, the recent excavations at Woodbury Farm also revealed the existence of a first-century Roman fort situated on the south side of Woodbury Lane (Fig. 1). The fort, which overlooks the Axe valley on the west, lies at a height of 70 m O.D. on the lower slopes of the Greensand plateau known as Trinity Hill. The section of the Exeter-Dorchester road which runs eastward from the top of Gammon Hill and across the Axe/Yarty flood plain appears to have been aligned on this fort. To the east of the fort the Roman road follows a slightly different alignment as it climbs the Greensand plateau, which rises to a height of over 200 m O.D. The road passed through a natural col or gap at Burrowshot Cross, whence it descended into Charmouth and on towards Dorchester. The central section of Woodbury Lane between Chattan and the Kings Farm tipping site follows a relatively straight course aligned on the north-east corner of the fort. To the east of the tipping site Woodbury Lane turns a little towards the north to follow the 140 m contour as it curves around the hill occupied by Symonds Down House before running up to Symonds Down Farm beyond Symonds Cross. The Roman road probably followed a similar course in a series of short straight alignments, passing for a short distance along what is now the west end of Cooks

Lane before climbing up to the gap at Burrowshot Cross. Between Symonds Down Farm and Burrowshot Cross the medieval road from Charmouth to Axminster can still be seen in the form of a deeply-eroded hollow way, now a somewhat overgrown drainage ditch. The line of the Roman road at this point probably lies next to the hollow way on its north-east side. This is suggested by the existence of a substantial chert make-up deposit, thought to be part of the *agger* of the Roman road, which is exposed in the bottom and sides of a modern track heading north-east from Burrowshot Cross a little above the head of the hollow way.

1.2 The objectives of the evaluation

The overall objective of the evaluation, as set out in the specification prepared by Devon County Council, was to assess the position, survival and extent of any archaeological remains in the site: more specifically the Roman road and any associated features or deposits which might be present, such as outlying elements of the Woodbury Farm Roman site.

The evaluation was intended to permit the identification of measures that could be taken to ensure the future preservation of any archaeological deposits located in the tipping site.

1.3 The site (Figs 1-2)

The tipping site is situated towards the eastern end of Woodbury Lane about 500 m from its junction with the A35 Axminster to Dorchester road. The field (OS No. 5300) is 3.4 ha in extent and includes a small parcel of land in the north-western corner (OS No. 5011) which contains an infilled quarry. The ground within the site slopes from south to north between 105 m and 125 m O.D. and is under permanent pasture. At the northern end of the field Woodbury Lane crosses the head of a small combe which drains towards the north. On its southern side the lane is bounded by a hedgebank 3 m wide.

2. THE EXCAVATIONS (Fig. 2)

Five trenches on a north-east/south-west alignment were excavated at the northern end of the site roughly at right-angles to the assumed line of the Roman road. Trench 1, positioned at the lowest point in the combe, produced convincing evidence for the presence of the Roman road in the form of a thick deposit of Greensand chert make-up material; once the existence of the road had been established, it was decided, following consultation with DCC and Coles Excavations, to cut further trenches in order to trace the line of the road to either side and to record the stratification in sufficient detail to make further archaeological excavation in advance of tipping unnecessary. The stratification within each trench is described below, with reference to the section drawings in Figs 3-5.

Trench 1 (Fig. 3, Section 1)

The initial trench was located approximately in the centre of the area under investigation at a point where the hedgebank lay slightly further north than elsewhere. The trench was some 40 m long and 1.5 m wide.

Roman road

An area of compacted stone, primarily made up of large and medium-sized fragments of chert (510), was located at the northern end of the trench, just inside the modern hedgebank. Its surviving width was 9.5 m although its highest level was somewhat narrower, being only about 6 m wide. Its full extent towards the north is unknown as it has been truncated by the later hedgebank. The stony material survived to a maximum depth of 0.6 m. This feature represents an *agger* or raised platform on which the surface of the Roman road would have been laid. It was apparently constructed within a slight terrace intended to counteract the natural slope of the ground and provide a level base for the road (Fig. 5 section 6). On the south (i.e. upslope) side of the road the make-up partly filled a shallow depression some 7 m wide. The origin of this feature is not known; it could represent a pre-existing hollow. Layers 504, 505 and 507 infilled a slight depression within the overall hollow and were sealed by the road material 510.

No road surfaces survived on top of the *agger*, which had probably been disturbed by ploughing. No dating material was recovered from any of the deposits described above.

Hillwash deposits

The succeeding archeological stratification consists of accumulated colluvial deposits (or hillwash) derived from the slopes above the road platform primarily as a result of ploughing. The earliest such layer is 511, which occupies the hollow adjoining the road and is likely to be contemporary with its construction or use. Two later layers of hillwash (512, 515) underlie the modern topsoil 516. These appear to date from the late medieval period and have a combined thickness of about 0.6 m.

That the *agger* originally survived to a greater height is confirmed by the attitude of the two earlier layers 512 and 515. Both can be seen in section 1 (Fig. 3) to be rising up at the north where they meet the *agger*. It seems likely that layer 512 once sealed the upper surface of the road although it has been removed by modern ploughing. A very abraded sherd of medieval pottery recovered from this layer may be ascribed to the period after c. 1400, suggesting a 15th- or 16th-century date for the accumulation of this material over the road.

Trench 2 (Fig. 4, section 2)

This was positioned about 40 m to the east of Trench 1 in order to locate the *agger* identified above. A shallow, level terrace about 7 m wide was again observed. The southern edge of the *agger* was recorded just within the northern side of the trench (548). The actual make-up for the road was however continuous with a stony clay-loam deposit to the south of it. The mound of the *agger* survived to a depth of about 0.5 m. Hillwash deposits 549, 550 and 552 had accumulated to a depth of 1.2 m above it. A modern roadside ditch cut through these layers and was sealed by the topsoil 516. No dating evidence was recovered from this trench.

Trench 3 (Fig. 5, section 3)

Sited at the extreme western end of the field this trench was intended to locate any buried features continuing the alignment of the boundary to the rear of Chattan Old Cottages, about 20 m south of Woodbury Lane.

No archaeological deposits survived in this area, which had been disturbed by quarrying.

Trench 4 (Fig. 5, section 4)

Although Trench 4 was positioned beyond the eastern extremity of the quarry disturbance as shown on OS maps, all the layers within the trench appeared to be quarry infill. Layer 529 in section 4 contained late 19th-century bottle glass.

Trench 5 (Fig. 4, section 5)

Located approximately halfway between Trenches 1 and 2, Trench 5 was again positioned as close as possible to Woodbury Lane. The stratification within the trench, was not as deep as that in Trench 2 but the sequence of deposition was broadly similar. The *agger* was again observed at the northern end of the trench, although in a disturbed condition.

Layers 540 and 541 directly overlay bedrock (542) and contained numerous fragments of charcoal. It is possible that this deposit was associated with the clearance of woodland in the prehistoric or Roman periods. These layers were sealed by a layer of hillwash (539) up to 0.7m thick, which may tentatively be equated with layer 511 in Trench 1. This material may therefore have originated in the Roman period.

Intermixed with the hillwash at its northern end was a matrix of very stony material with numerous fragments of chert (536) and other stones. This material was very similar in character to the Roman road make-up 510 in Trench 1. There was no clearly-defined limit to this layer however and it is likely to have been disturbed by ploughing and soil movement. Its upper level has almost certainly been truncated by a later ploughsoil (535) which is probably equivalent to the medieval soil (512) in Trench 1.

The earliest evidence for the course of the present Woodbury Lane appears to be the cutting of a ditch (538), which was probably associated with a roadside hedgebank. This ditch is cut into the stony layer (536) and both were subsequently overlain by ploughsoil (535). This soil was sealed by modern topsoil (516) which also infilled a later hedgebank ditch (546).

3. CONCLUSIONS

3.1 The Roman road

The information recorded in the trenches has confirmed the existence of the Roman road on a line just to the south of Woodbury Lane. The road followed a NW/SE alignment within the field and appears to form part of a straight alignment 0.5 km long between Chattan and Symonds Down House (see Fig. 1).

The main conclusions are as follows:

- i) The Roman road, in a relatively complete state of preservation, was located in Trench 1 (layer 510 in section 1, Fig. 3).
- ii) The exact extent of this feature was not established although it is possible that a length of about 30m of well-preserved roadway could lie between trenches 4 and 5. Evidence for the position of the road was retrieved from Trenches 2 and 5 but here the major part of it lay outside the trench under Woodbury Lane.
- iii) The road lies within a distance of 22m from the south of the present Woodbury Lane carriageway in Trench 1. To the east of this trench the course of the road merges with that of the present Woodbury Lane.
- iv) Quarrying and dumping of material in the north-west corner of the field (OS No. 5011 on Fig. 2) has removed all trace of the road in this area.
- v) At the eastern end of the field the Roman road lies very close to, or partly beneath, the hedgebanks of Woodbury Lane itself.
- vi) The course of the road between the Woodbury Fort and Burrowshot Cross broadly follows the line of Woodbury Lane in a series of short straight alignments as suggested in Ch. 1.1.

3.2 Other archaeological deposits

- i) No evidence of Roman occupation, or of inhumations, was identified on the site.
- ii) In Trench 5 the charcoal-rich deposit (540/541) is of considerable interest as it contains burnt wood which could be subjected to radiocarbon dating.
- iii) The main phase of agricultural activity represented by layers 512, 515, 535 appears to date from the late medieval period. This would be consistent with documentary evidence (summarised in EMAFU Report 87.06) which suggests that this area was being reclaimed for agriculture in the 14th-15th centuries.

3.3 Outcome of the evaluation

As a result of the identification of the Roman road in the evaluation exercise, a small modification to the tipping proposal was agreed between Devon County Council and Coles Excavations Ltd to safeguard the surviving archaeological deposits. Consent for the modified proposal was then granted, and no delay to the applicants' programme resulted from the archaeological works.

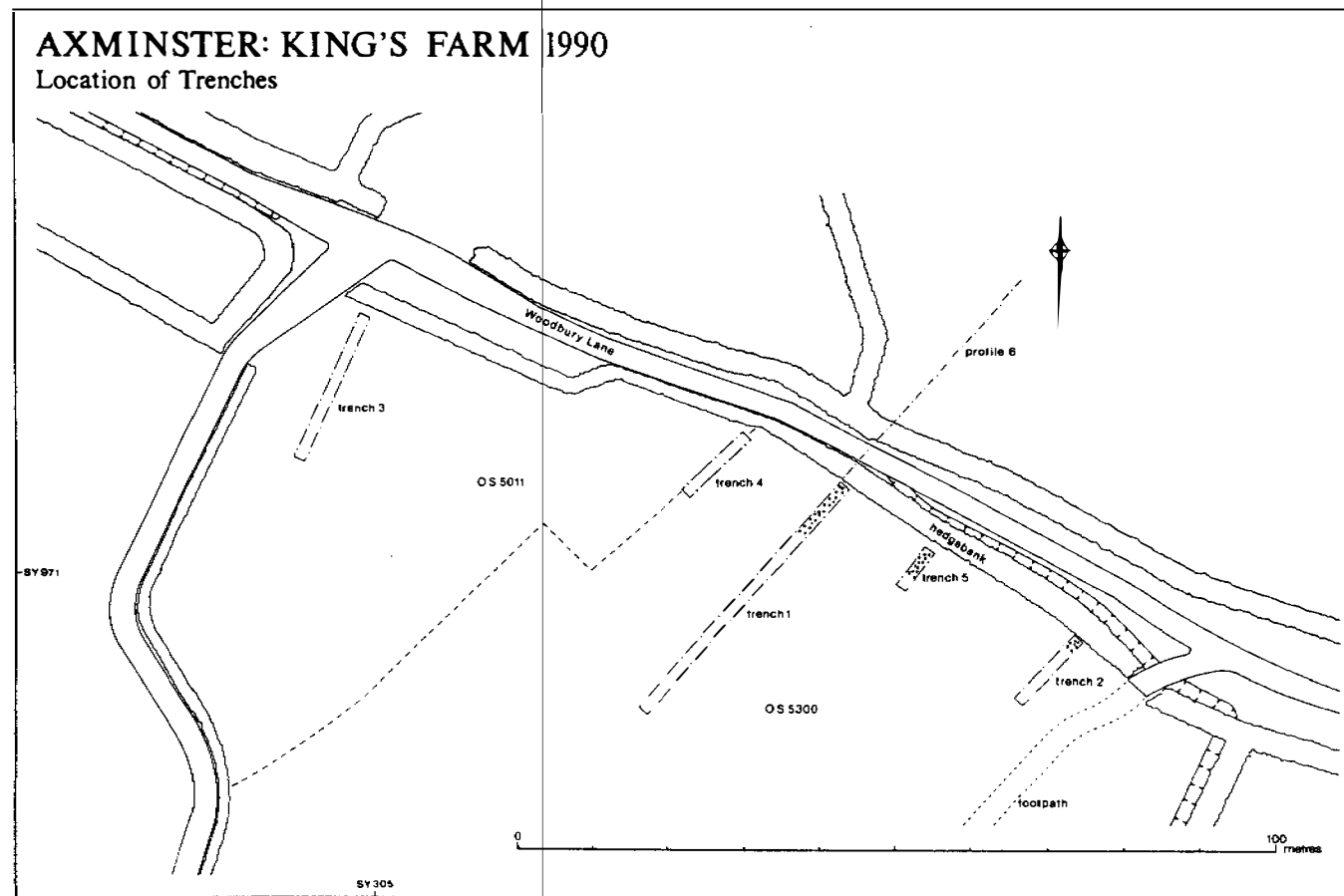


Fig. 2 Location of trenches. The position of the Roman road in Trenches 1, 2 and 5 is also shown.

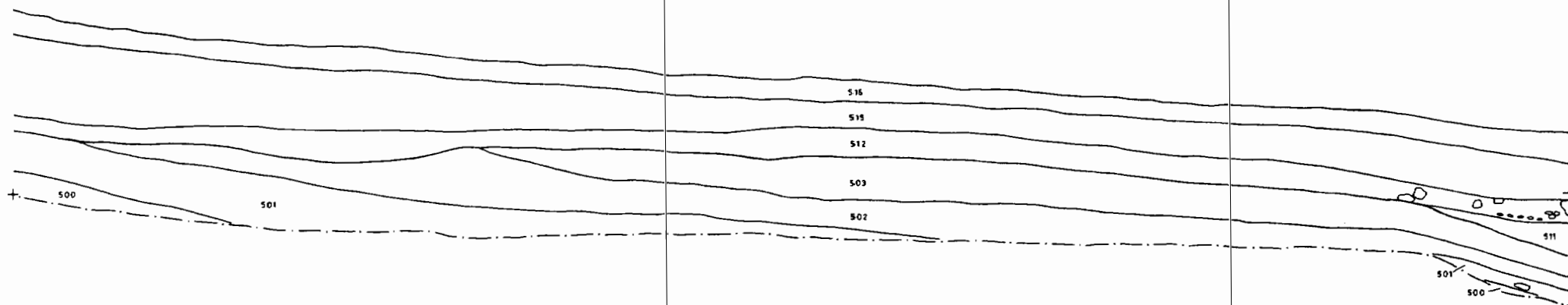
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Section 1 (part)

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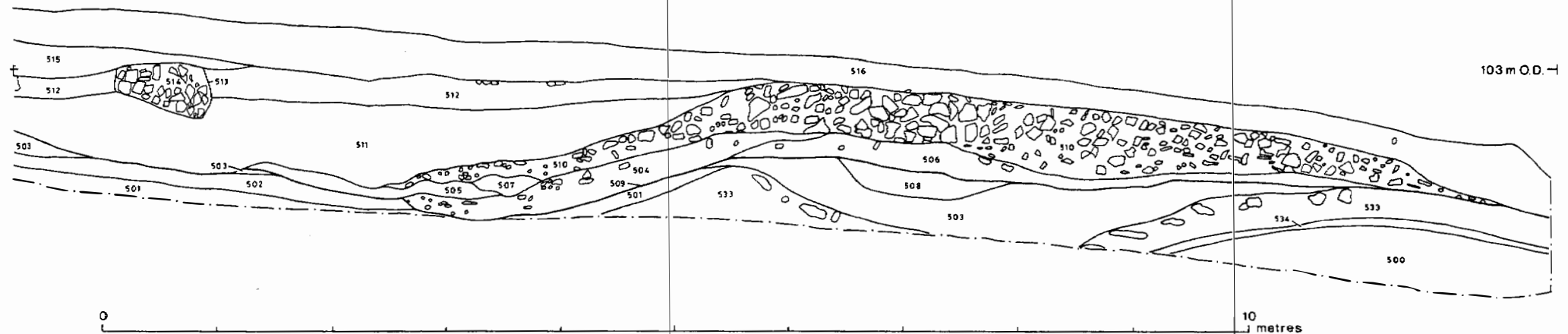


Fig. 3 Section 1 (Trench 1), showing Roman road (layer 510).

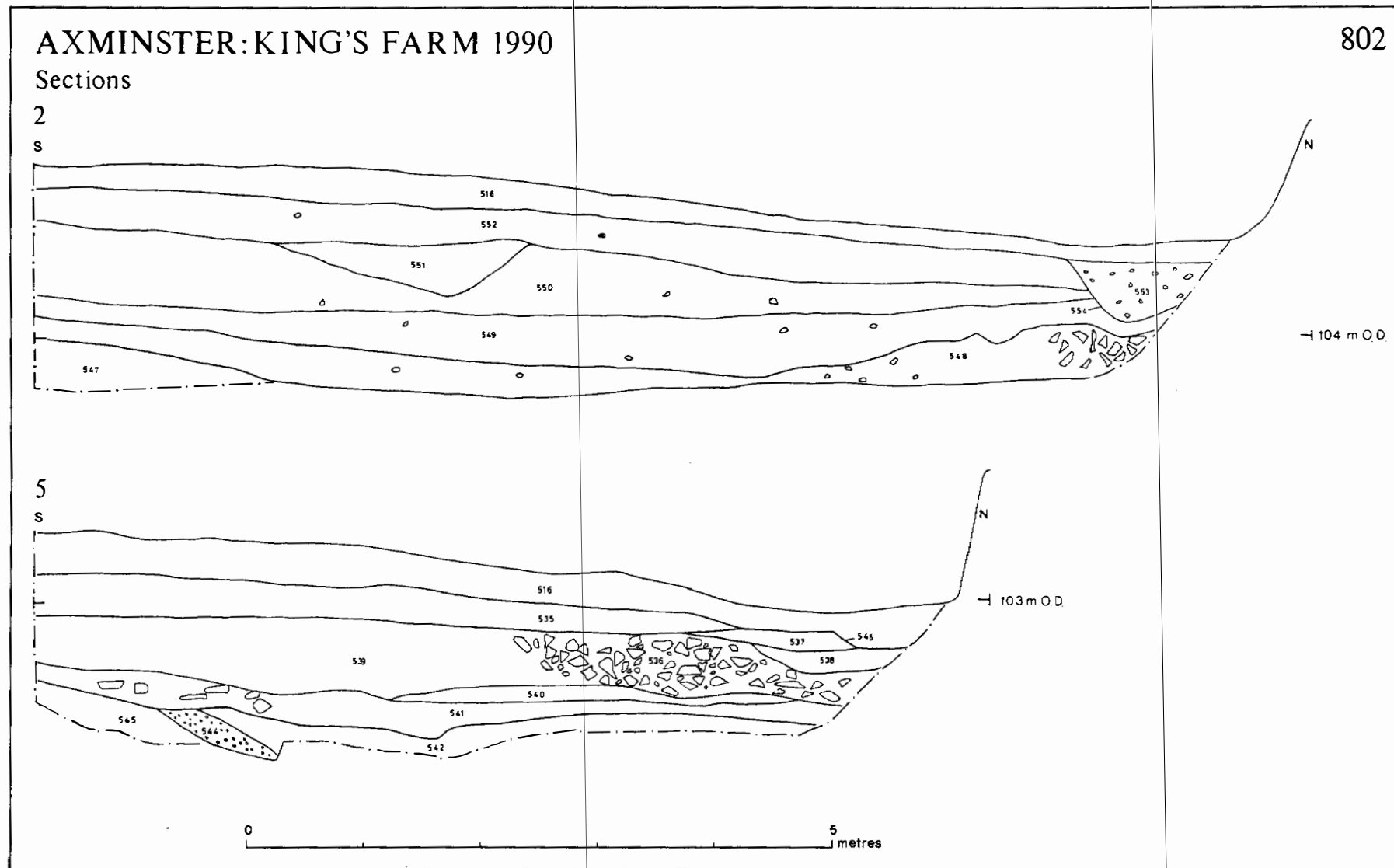


Fig. 4 Sections 2 and 5 (Trenches 2 and 5).

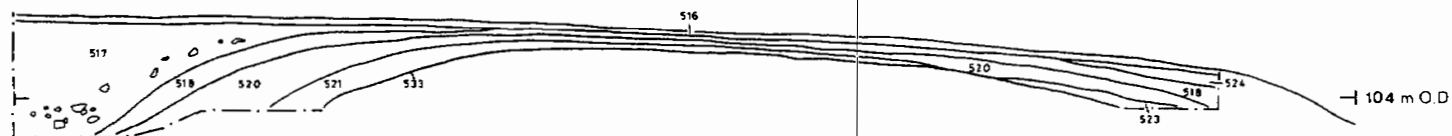
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Sections

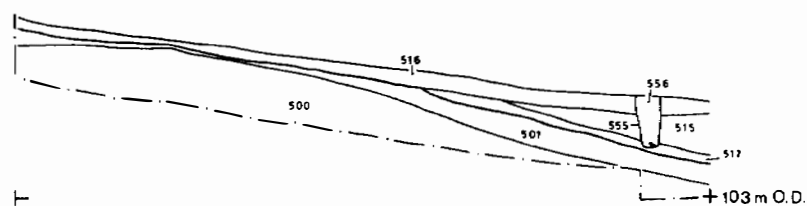
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Fig. 5 Sections 3 and 4 (Trenches 3 and 4) and the southern part of section 1. Section 6 is a profile along Trench 1 and across Woodbury Lane.