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**AXMINSTER BYPASS 1990
TRIAL EXCAVATIONS NORTH
OF ABBEY GATE, MUSBURY ROAD**

by

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INTRODUCTION

Trial trenches were excavated to the north-east of Abbey Gate, Axminster in advance of the construction of the A35 Axminster Bypass in an attempt to discover the projected course of a Roman road running south-west from Woodbury Farm.

1. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Axminster lies to the north of a junction of two important Roman roads: the Fosse Way, a major route extending to Lincoln, and the Dorchester-Honiton-Exeter road. These roads are followed by modern highways over much of their length, and it has rarely been possible to demonstrate their origins by excavation. One question debated for many years has been whether the Fosse Way extended south beyond Axminster to the coast. No Roman ports on the south coast have been recorded, although there was considerable Roman occupation at Seaton.

Excavations and a watching brief of a water main in Spring 1990 provided some answers. To the west of the Roman fort at Woodbury Farm (Silvester and Bidwell 1984) parts of the Dorchester-Exeter road were found which would have extended along the north side of the fort. A road running south along the western side of the fort was also located (Simpson 1990), demonstrating that a Roman road does indeed extend to the south beyond Axminster. The junction of these roads lies at the north-west corner of the fort.

Part of the Musbury road from Abbey Gate southwards has also long been regarded as a likely stretch of Roman road and is labelled as such by the Ordnance Survey. Discoveries made at Woodbury Farm seemed to confirm this, and narrowed down the likely position of a linking road. The route of the Axminster Bypass sweeps in an arc to the south of the fort and would certainly cross the line of any road continuing southwards. Recommendations for trial excavations were given in a preliminary report to assess the impact of the Bypass on archaeological sites (Weddell 1989).

2. THE EXCAVATIONS (see Fig. 2)

Trial trenches were dug by mechanical excavator in three fields stretching from Musbury Road to the east. They covered an overall length of over 265m. Trench 1 was 98m long and approximately 1.60m wide. Topsoil was removed by mechanical excavator, and cleaned by hand. A maximum depth of 0.52m was removed to the west where there was some soil development, otherwise a maximum of between 0.30-0.40m was removed. Trench 2 was excavated wholly by mechanical excavator using a bucket 1.10m wide for a length of 155m, gradually grading the topsoil and subsoil down to a maximum depth of 0.90m. It was not possible to investigate the area of Trench 3 until the watching brief as accessways were required for farm animals. No archaeological features were exposed, except for an undated hedgebank and ditches in Trench 1.

3. THE WATCHING BRIEF

A watching brief (Trench 3) was conducted during early construction work of the bypass in an area between trenches 1 and 2 where previous excavation had not been possible. This uncovered two small patches of metalled surface which are thought to be a continuation of the narrow lane running east from Musbury Road and are therefore not of Roman date. During the construction of the bypass an area of the present Musbury to Axminster road was breached at SY29199726. Here road foundation stones comprised of large chert boulders, some of them pitched, were exposed. Another section of similar foundations was exposed further north under Musbury Road at SY29239750. An examination in one area revealed what was believed to be 19th-century clinker beneath the foundations. However, there are considerable similarities between this road construction and the N-S Roman road found in the Woodbury Great Close excavations adjacent to the Roman fort (Simpson 1990). It is possible that these foundation stones do represent the Roman road, more or less in the same position as the present road, perhaps with later repairs. Workmen reported that similar foundations were exposed near Musbury at SY27779550 during the construction of the Musbury-Axminster water main.

4. THE SITE ARCHIVE

The site archive will be deposited in RAM Museum for permanent storage under the project number 418. Contents:

A4 Site Plan sheets	4
Photographs:	
Colour slide transparencies	28; Nos 418/107-112, 117-138
B/W negatives	31; Films 1719/23-8; 1772/9-16, 33-37; 1774/4-7, 18-26
Colour prints	20; Films 2093/5a-7a, 21a-33a; 2095/37; 2097/5-6; 2104/4-7

5. CONCLUSIONS

The trial excavations demonstrated that the Roman road, if running in a south-westerly direction from the fort at Woodbury as far as Musbury Road, did not survive in the area examined. The road may have been on the route of the present Musbury Road and opportunities to investigate this further should be taken.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Work was carried out for the Department of Transport by a team from Exeter Museums Archaeological Field Unit, supervised by S.J. Simpson. English Heritage provided funding for the fieldwork and the preparation of the research archive and reports. Thanks are due to the landowners, Mr Snell and Mr Symes for access to the site. The watching brief was undertaken by A. Stead. Site plans were drawn by D. Needs and A. Preston. Drawings (Figs 2 & 3) are by R. Parker and the project was administered by C.G. Henderson.

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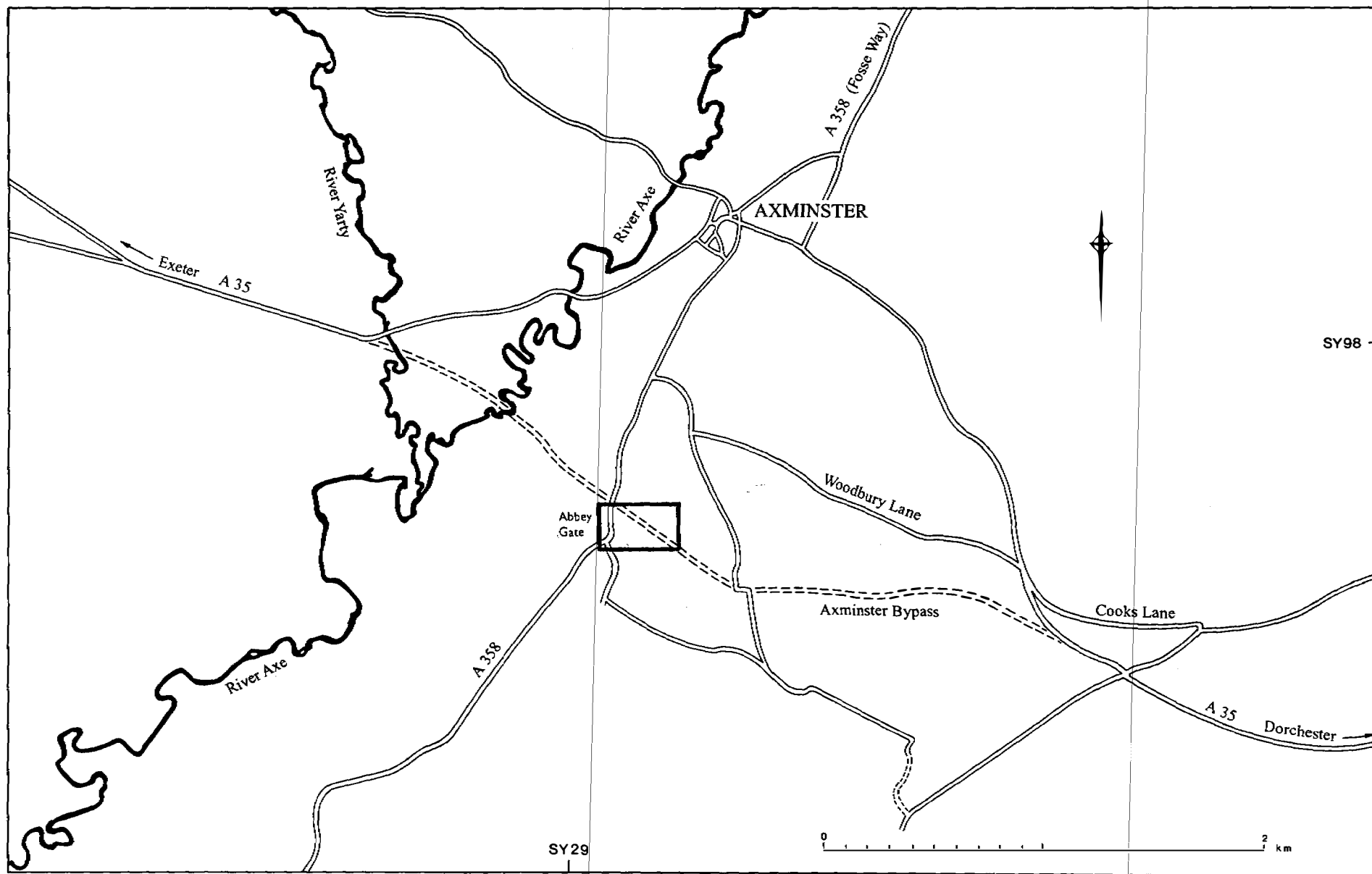


Fig. 1 Location map.

AXMINSTER: ABBEY GATE 1990

Location of Trenches

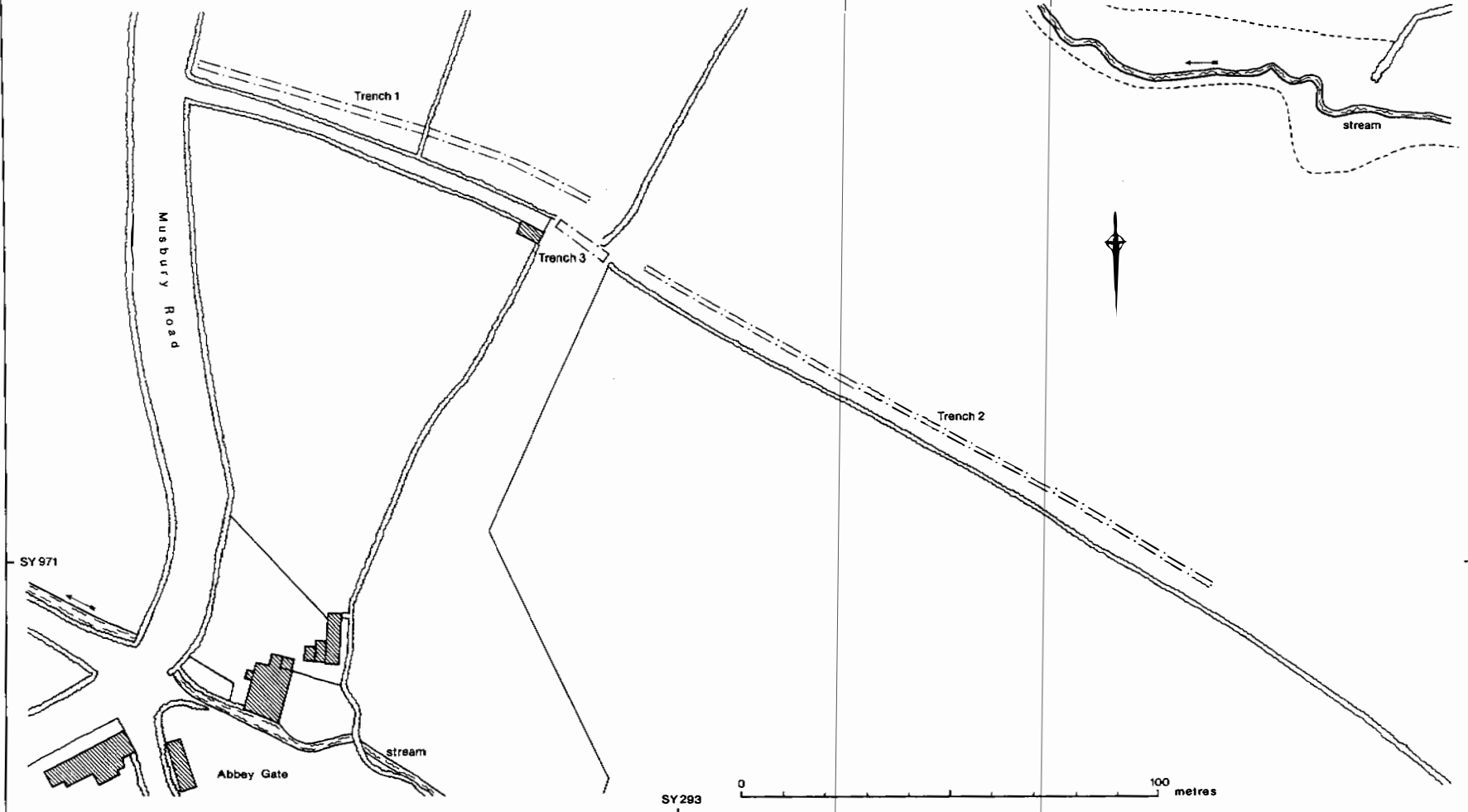


Fig. 2 Location of trenches.

AXMINSTER: ABBEY GATE

Trench 3, Watching brief

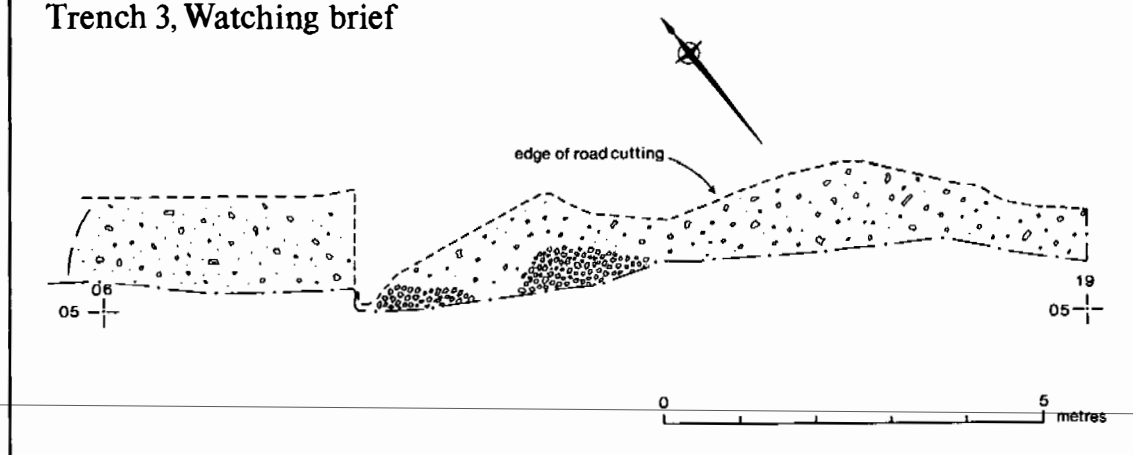
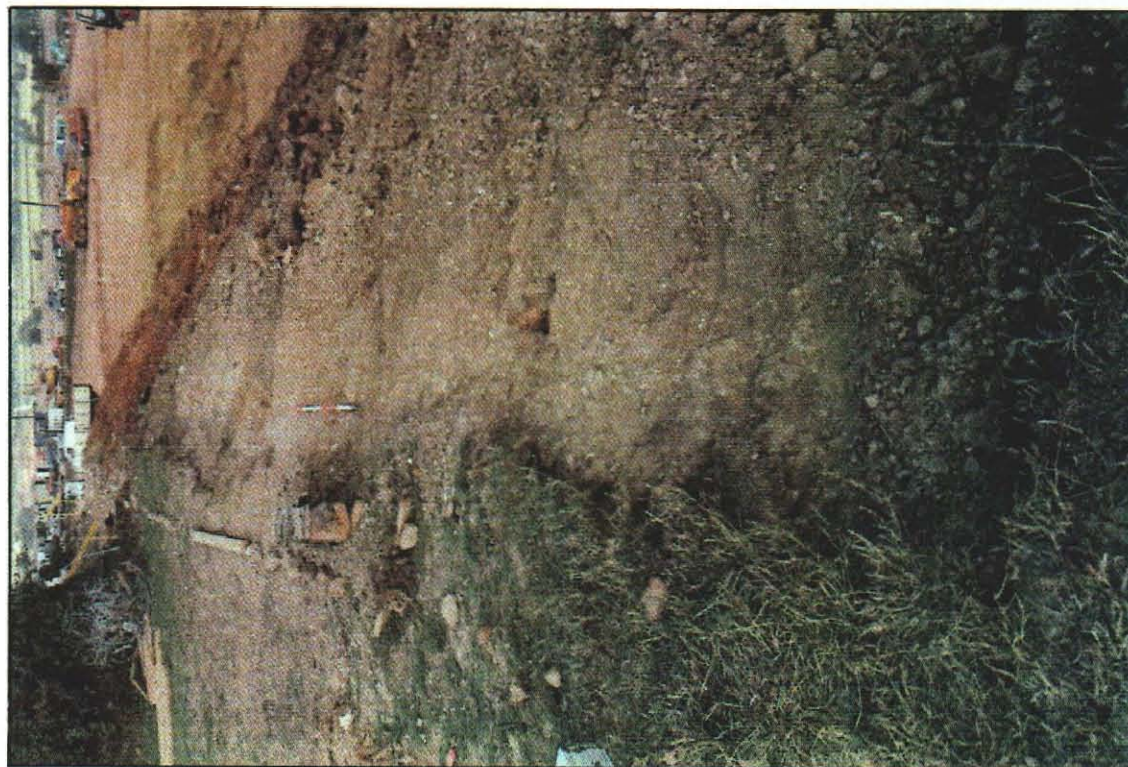
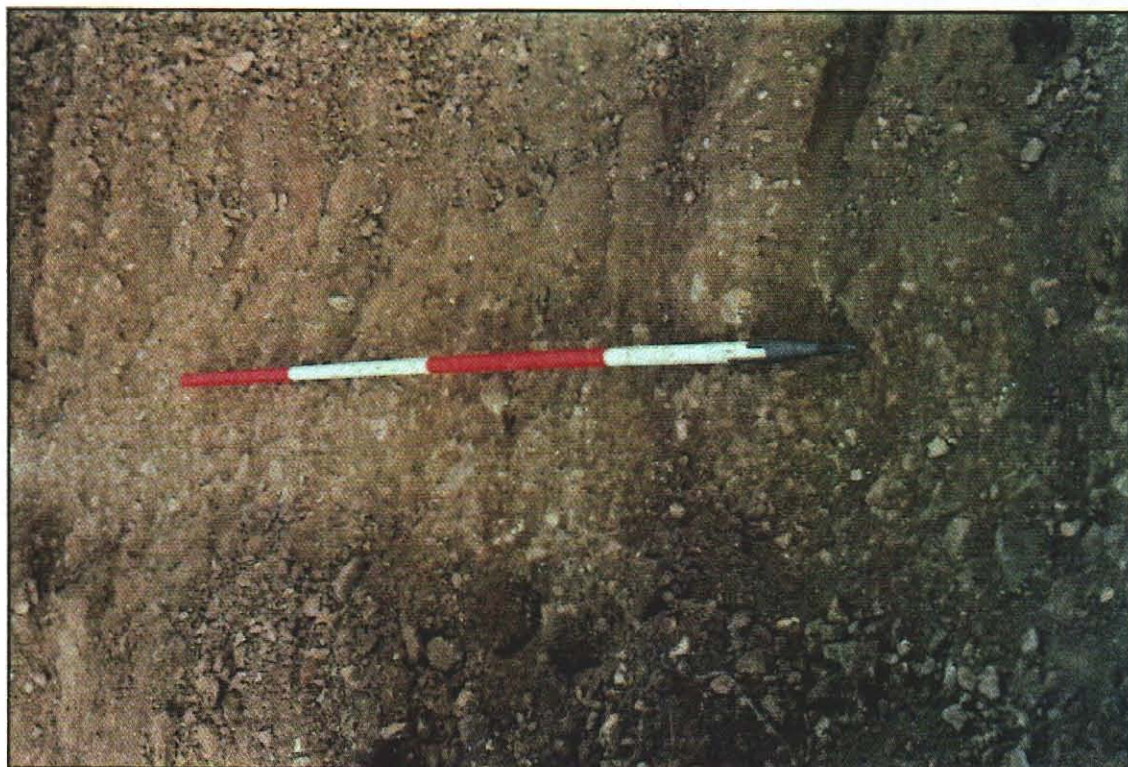


Fig. 3 Trench 3.



Pl. 1 The metallised surface in Trench 3 looking west.



Pl. 2 Detail of metallised surface.



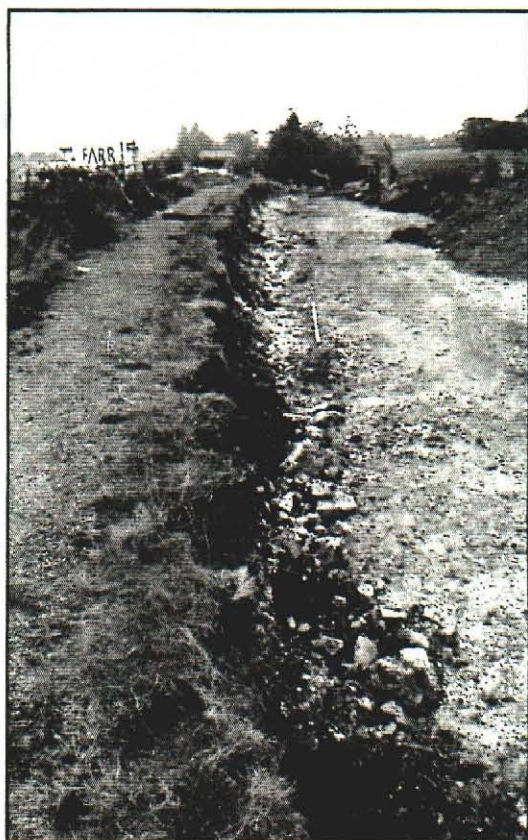
Pl. 3 The bypass under construction: the east end of Trench 3 visible in the foreground.



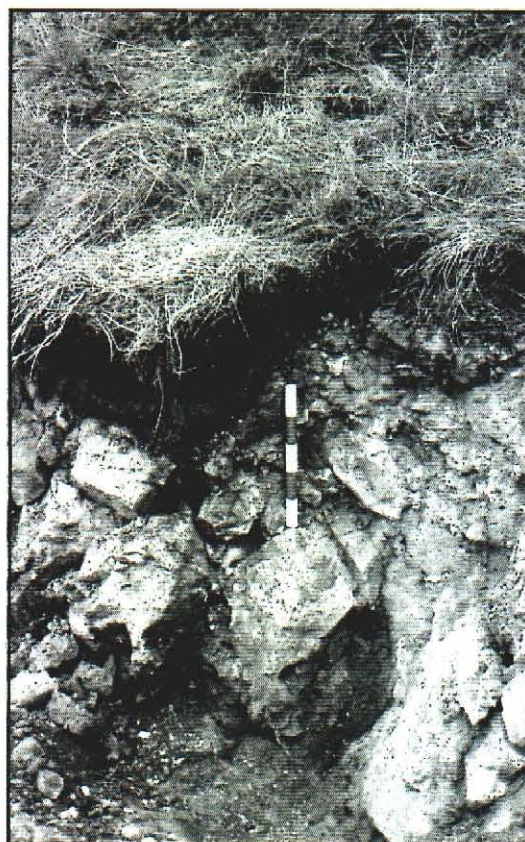
Pl. 4 From the site of Trench 3 looking west.



Pl. 5 Road foundations of chert or flint below the modern road surface at Abbey Gate (SY29199711), looking south.



Pl. 6 Road foundations of chert or flint below the footpath on Musbsury Road (SY29239750).



Pl. 7 Detail of road foundations on Musbury Lane.