

***A Watching Brief at
the Miners' Dry,
Snailbeach Lead Mine
Shropshire, 2010***

by
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Shropshire
Council

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A WATCHING BRIEF AT THE MINERS' DRY,
SNAILBEACH LEAD MINE, SHROPSHIRE, 2010

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A Report for
Countryside Access, Outdoor Recreation
Shropshire Council

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SUMMARY

In summer 2010 a watching brief was carried out by the Archaeology Service, Shropshire Council, on the excavation of new drainage trenches around an annexe on the east side of the Miners' Dry at Snailbeach Lead Mine, Shropshire. A sequence of deposits was recorded on the south side of the annexe and beneath a trackway on its north side, although no dating material was recovered from these.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Snailbeach is situated about 15km to the southwest of the centre of Shrewsbury and 17km northeast of Bishop's Castle at the head of a valley running northeastwards into the west side of the Stiperstones ridge. The Snailbeach mine (County Sites and Monuments Record No. SA984) is a well preserved example of a highly centralised mid to late 19th-century lead mine. A number of late 18th-century features also survive, incorporated in later developments, and a number of associated structures, such as the smelter, also survive. The survival of a large archive of documentary material in the collections of the Shropshire Records Office, the Northumberland County Record Office, and at Longleat House relating to the mine's operation is considered to be almost unique (Trueman and Gill, 1990, Vol. I, pp 42-50). These, amongst other factors, have led to Snailbeach Mine being considered as a monument of national importance, and it has accordingly been scheduled as an ancient monument as defined by the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act 1979 (Snailbeach Lead Mine, Shropshire, Monument No. 21658).

1.2 In 2010 work was carried out to create a new changing facility for underground tours and volunteer activities alongside the Miners Dry Visitor Centre. This involved the building on an existing structure on the east side of the Miners Dry. The existing structure had standing walls only and these were consolidated and raised and completed with an insulated slate roof and metal rooflights. The works included the excavation of a French drain along the south and east faces of the structure, and drains and soakaways for rainwater and an (optional) handwash.

1.3 Scheduled Monument Consent was granted for this work, and it was a requirement of the Scheduled Monument Consent that groundworks associated with the development were to be carried out under archaeological supervision. The Archaeology Service, Shropshire Council, was commissioned to carry out this watching brief.

1.4 The aim of the programme of archaeological work was to allow for the preservation by record of any archaeological remains that were encountered during the works.

2 ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 The Stiperstones-Shelve area has long been of great interest to geologists, as the rocks here show a complete sequence of the Ordovician period; the rocks also contain numerous intrusive mineral veins, dating from the late Devonian period, and lead and barytes mineralisation in the Shelve area gave rise to a thriving mining industry in the late 18th and 19th centuries.

The lead deposits at Snailbeach may have been worked in Roman times, although the earliest documented workings date to the mid-17th century. In the late 18th century, the Snailbeach Lead Mining Company was formed, and this operated until 1911. The mine's output reached a peak in the mid-19th century, when the mine was one of the country's largest producers of lead ore. Decline set in the late 19th century, although working for barytes continued until c.1955.

2.2 In 1989 Lancaster University carried out an archaeological survey of the Snailbeach Lead mine in advance of reclamation and safety work by Shropshire Council (Trueman and Gill, 1990). The

2.3 The Miners' Dry

In 1999, the Archaeology Service carried out some recording work on the Miners' Dry before its conversion to a visitors' centre. The recording included producing a plan of the remains of the existing floor before it was re-laid as part of the conversion. A watching brief was also carried out on the laying of an electricity cable from a pole by the Crusher House to the Miners' Dry. Where the cable trench cut across the present track through the core area, two cast iron pipes were seen running along the south side of the track, one of 100mm diameter at a depth of 280mm, the other of 50mm diameter at 600mm depth. (Hannaford, 2000)

3 THE WATCHING BRIEF

A trench for a new French drain was excavated around the outside of the south and east walls of the annexe to the Miners' Dry and across a trackway on its north side (see Figure 2). The trench was excavated with a mechanical mini-excavator, under an archaeological watching brief.

On the south side of the annexe, the natural subsoil, a buff clay ((Figure 3; 17) was seen at a depth of 1.4m below the ground surface beneath a deposit 1.1m thick of a very dark grey silty sand (15) with cinders and stone fragments. Above this was a concrete surface (13) on an orange sandy bedding (14). This surface had been cut through by the trench for an existing French drain (7) filled with stone chippings (6) and a very dark grey loam (5). These deposits were sealed beneath a thin layer of topsoil (4).

Around the southeast corner of the annexe, the natural clay (17) lay beneath a layer of buff silt with fine stone chippings (16). Above this was a deposit of grey silty sand (12) flecked with charcoal (an iron angle bar lay on the surface of this deposit), sealed by a dark grey sandy silty loam (11) with charcoal. A further deposit of buff sand with stone chippings (10) similar to the bedding for brick floor inside annex lay beneath a layer of grey silt (9) and a buried topsoil (8). These deposits were cut through by the existing French drain (7), and sealed by a thin topsoil layer (4).

From the northeast corner of the annexe, the buff silty sand with angular gravel (Fig. 4a; 16) lay beneath a deposit of white spar chippings (19) which abutted the north face of the building. The buff silty sand (16) was also cut by a shallow feature (24) with a cast iron pipe. These were sealed by a finely laminated deposit of fine dirty grey spar and charcoal (18) which extended north from the north wall of the Miner's Dry. This was cut by an electricity cable trench (22) excavated and recorded in 2000 (Hannaford, 2000). To the north, the laminated spar and charcoal (18) dipped down and lay beneath a deposit of very dark grey loam (20) and topsoil (4).

To the northeast of the building the laminated spar and charcoal (18) gave way to a dark grey loam with gravel (small spar fragments) and charcoal (Fig. 4c; 28) which lay beneath a dark grey loam topsoil (25). A pit (27), probably of relatively recent date, filled with very dark grey loam with some white spar (26) cut through this topsoil.

To the north, beneath the trackway (Figs. 4b & 4c; 29), two service trenches (32 & 35) were seen to have cut through a deposit of brown silty sand and gravel (30), slightly wider than the present trackway. This deposit probably represented a formation for the trackway. Its northern edge was seen to lie over a layer of crushed white spar (39) and was bordered by stone rubble (37) which may have been the remains of a flanking wall. This was sealed by a layer of brown sandy loam (38) and dark greyish brown topsoil (36).

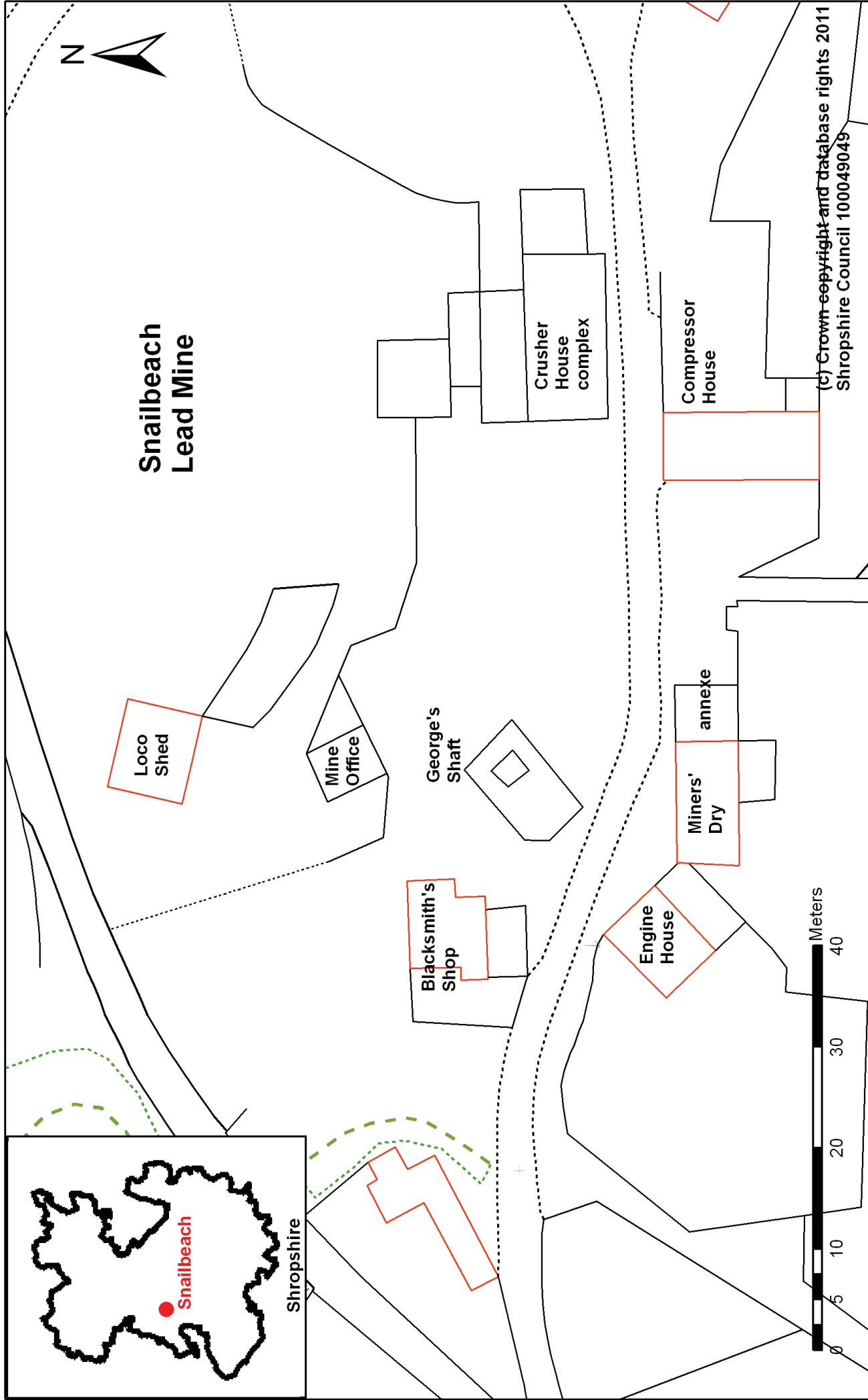
No further significant archaeological deposits were encountered in the drainage work.

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ABBREVIATIONS

- HER** Historic Environment Record, Shropshire Council
- OS** Ordnance Survey
- SA** Shropshire Archives, Castle Gates, Shrewsbury
- TSAHS** Transactions of the Shropshire Archaeological and Historical Society
- TSAS** Transactions of the Shropshire Archaeological Society

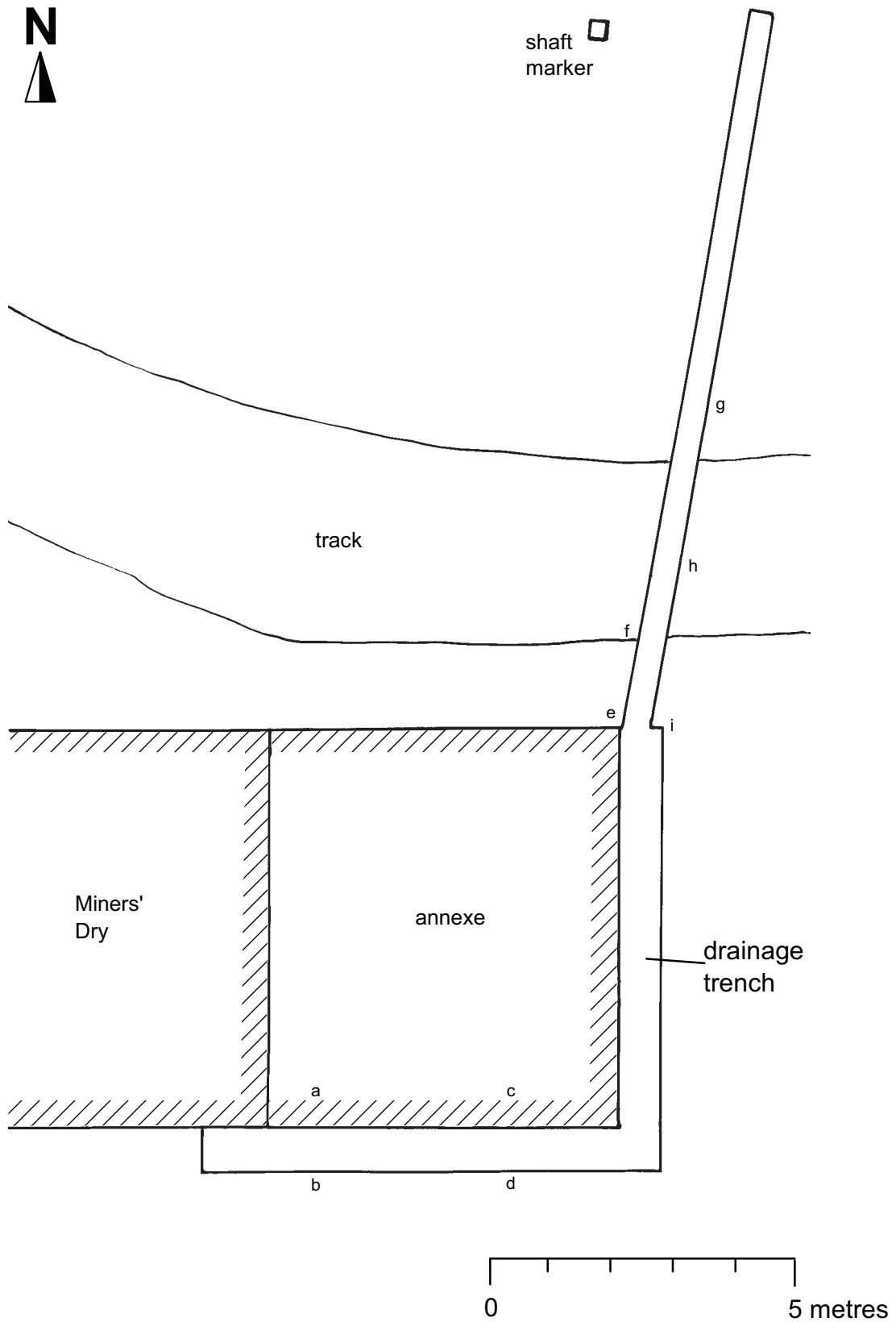


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Figure 1: The core area of Snailbeach Lead Mine, showing the location of the Miners' Dry and annexe

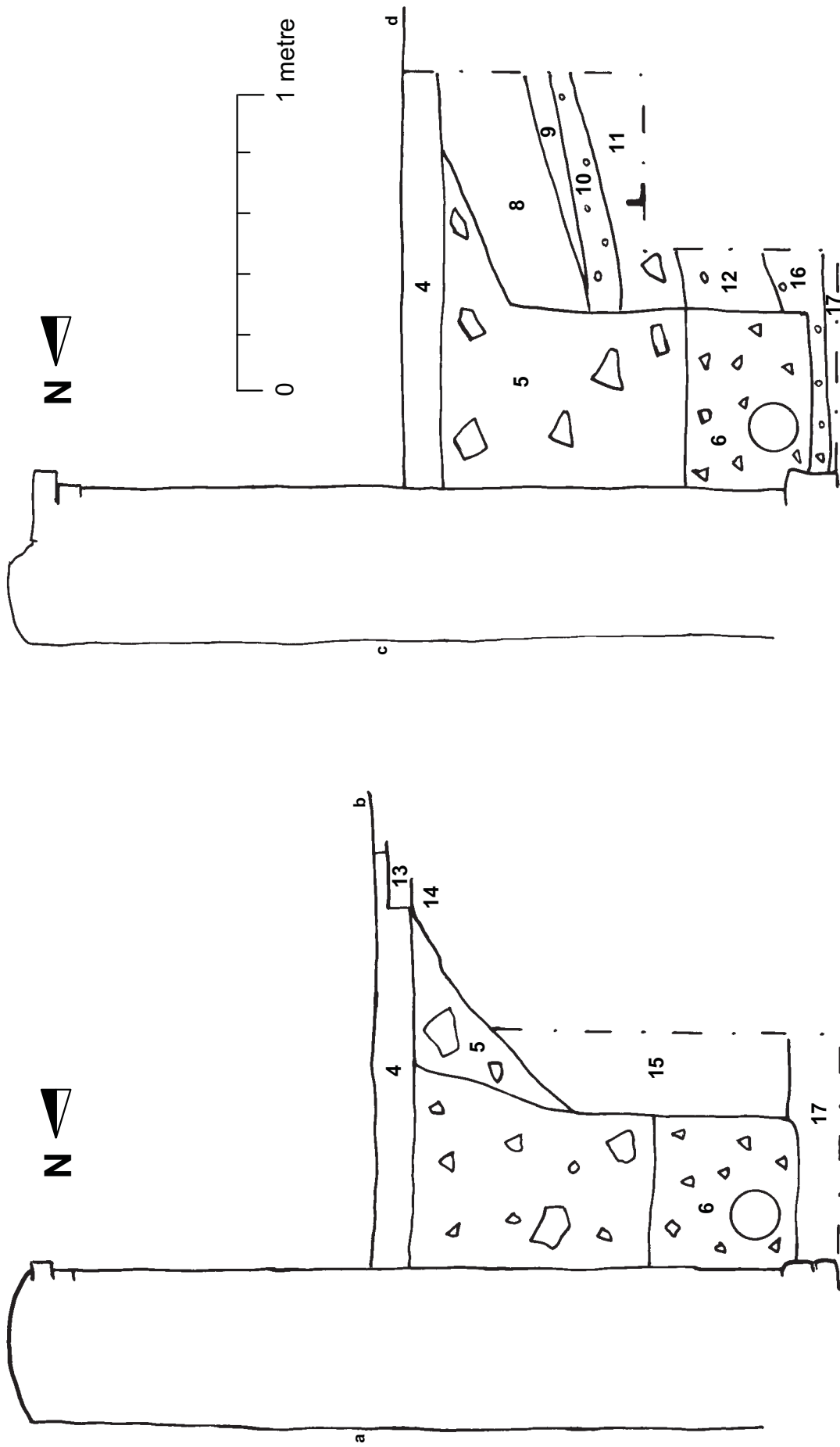
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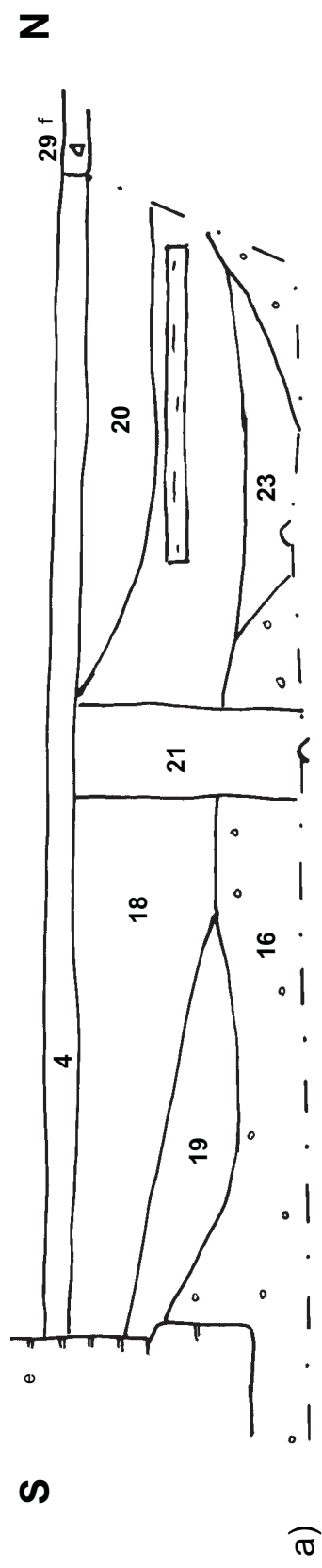
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Figure 2: The annexe to the Miners' Dry; plan view, showing the drain trench and the location of the section drawings (Figures 3 & 4); 1:100 scale

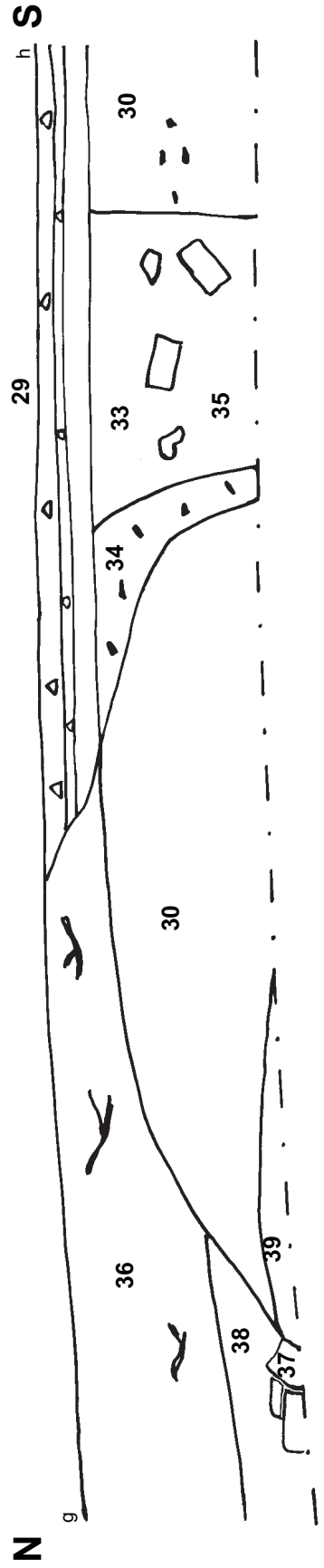


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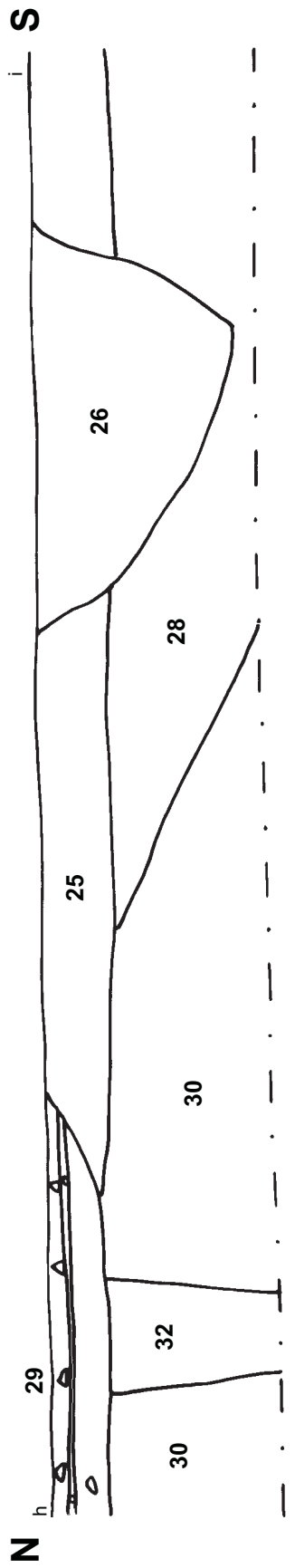
Figure 3: Sections through drainage trench on the south side of the Miners' Dry annexe (for locations see Fig. 2); 1:20 scale



a)



b)



c)



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Figure 4: Sections through drainage trench north of the Miners' Dry annexe (for locations see Fig. 2); 1:20 scale



Photo 1: The Miners' Dry annexe, before conversion, looking south



Photo 2: The new drain trench north from the Miners' Dry, looking northeast