Land at Forge Mill, Sandwell/Birmingham
WEST MIDLANDS

Report on an Archaeological Evaluation

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Summary

Trent and Peak Archaeology was contracted by the Environment Agency to undertake an archaeological evaluation within the footprint of proposed flood defence works along the River Tame in the Sandwell Valley, West Midlands.

The Sandwell Valley is an area of undeveloped land within the West Midlands conurbation, surrounded by the built up areas of West Bromwich, to the south and west, Perry Barr, to the north, and Handsworth, to the east. It is dominated by recreational land, including the Sandwell Valley Country Park and the Sandwell Valley Nature Reserve as well as a number of golf courses.

No previous intrusive archaeological work has been undertaken within the vicinity of the proposed flood defence works and what little is known of the potential of the area is largely the result of surveys undertaken in the 1980s and excavations undertaken to the southwest in the vicinity of the Sandwell Priory site where evidence of prehistoric activity was found.

The later prehistoric and Roman periods are represented only by a scatter of finds in the wider area. There is no evidence of early Medieval activity/occupation. In the medieval period the main settlement foci lay outside of this stretch of the valley and this area probably lay within the open fields of Handsworth. Post-medieval development wrought significant changes in the use of the landscape with the establishment of a colliery to the northwest and iron forges/furnaces within the valley to the west.

Six trial trenches were excavated within the footprint of the proposed works. No features of apparent early date were identified. Ditches recorded in Trenches 04, 05 and 06 yielded no dating evidence but the loose, dark and loamy fills did not suggest great antiquity. The ditches in Trenches 04 and 05 match the NNW-SSE alignment of no longer extant boundaries depicted on 19th century Ordnance Survey mapping (and partly visible on the ground) although only that in Trench 05 appears to closely match a mapped boundary. However, the north-south ditch in Trench 06 does not appear to match any mapped features and may be of earlier date.

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1. INTRODUCTION.

1.1 Trent and Peak Archaeology was contracted by the Environment Agency to undertake an archaeological evaluation within the footprint of proposed flood defence works along the River Tame in the Sandwell Valley, West Midlands (Fig.1). The intention of the investigation was to characterise the archaeological potential of the site of the proposed works. This will provide the basis for an assessment of the impact of the proposed development on the cultural heritage resource.

1.2 The site (NGR SP 03904 92456) is located at the boundary between the areas of Handsworth, West Bromwich and Great Barr, within the county of the West Midlands. It lies approximately 4.5km north west of Birmingham and 6km south east of Walsall Earlier desk-based assessment of the site (Mapplethorpe and Malone 2014) had highlighted the potential for previously unidentified archaeological deposits to survive within and on the edge of the Tame floodplain.

2. PROJECT BACKGROUND.

2.1 The Sandwell Valley is an area of undeveloped land within the West Midlands conurbation, surrounded by the built up areas of West Bromwich, to the south and west, Perry Barr, to the north, and Handsworth, to the east. It is dominated by recreational land, including the Sandwell Valley Country Park and the Sandwell Valley Nature Reserve as well as a number of golf courses.

2.2 Topographically the area constitutes part of the valley of the River Tame, with ground sloping from all sides down to the course of the river which falls from around 105m O.D. to below 100m O.D. from northwest to southeast. The highest point is to the south at c. 145m above Hilltop Golf Club. Trench locations lay generally on the northwest sloping sides of the valley and the valley floor.

2.3 The 1:50,000 British Geological Mapping shows that site is situated in an area where several different types of superficial geology are found. The bedrock of the area consists of Enville Member sandstone with subordinate conglomerate, siltstone and mudstone. This was formed approximately 271 to 309 million years ago in the Permian and Carboniferous periods. The majority of the superficial geology consists of mid Pleistocene till with bands of mid Pleistocene glacio-fluvial sand and gravel. Closer to the River Tame the superficial geology consists of river terrace deposits of sand and gravel along with clay, silt, sand and gravel alluvium (http://mapapps.bgs.ac.uk/geologyofbritain/home.html)..

2.4 The archaeological work comprised six trial/evaluation trenches excavated within the footprint of the proposed works at the eastern end of the valley. Trench positions were agreed by the Environment Agency with Mike Hodder at Birmingham City Council. Trench 1 lay on the north side of the river alongside a path within the Sandwell Valley Nature Reserve. Trenches 2-6, on the south side of the river, were located within the ground of the Handsworth Golf Club (Fig. 1).

3. HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND.

3.1 No previous intrusive archaeological work has been undertaken within the vicinity of the proposed flood defence works and what little is known of the potential of the area is largely the result of surveys undertaken in the 1980s and excavations undertaken to the southwest in the vicinity of the Sandwell Priory site (Hewitt and Hodder 1988). Large quantities of late Mesolithic flintwork were found here and four probable Bronze Age burnt mounds were also identified. The 'Sand Well' natural spring may have proved a particularly attractive location for such activity, but Neolithic flintwork is recorded from near to Forge Farm towards the north and west and such material may be more widely distributed. Land-use in modern times would not lend itself to the discovery of such remains but the potential is not high on current evidence.

3.2 The later prehistoric and Roman periods are represented only by a scatter of finds in the wider area. There is no evidence of early Medieval activity/occupation. The potential for such remains is low on current evidence.

3.3 In the medieval period the main settlement foci lay outside of this stretch of the valley. The northern part probably lay within the open fields of Bromwich, the south and east within the fields of Handsworth. The estate of Sandwell Priory lay beyond the open-field system of West Bromwich but may have included parts of the west of the valley and probably included the Sandwell Mill on the north side of Swan Pool, however, the evidence for the existence of dwellings in the valley other than the priory before the 18th century is sparse (Hewitt and Hodder 1988, 26) and potential remains low-moderate

3.4 Evidence of post-medieval development and use of the landscape is more likely to be encountered. The development of Sandwell Mill into a slitting mill, and the establishment of Forge Mill on the river are testament to this industrial development. The location of the associated furnace (perhaps nearer to Forge Farm) remains unknown. Below ground remains of this may survive and evidence for construction and development over time of mill leats and ponds is likely to survive.

4. OBJECTIVES.

4.1 ***The objective of the archaeological evaluation can be stated as:***

4.2 To characterise the archaeological potential of the site of the proposed works. This will provide the basis for an assessment of the impact of the proposed development on the cultural heritage resource.

4.3 Any buried archaeological remains revealed during works within the area, would offer an opportunity to address research priorities highlighted in the West Midlands Archaeological Research Assessment and Research Agenda (Watt 2011). On the basis of this desk-based assessment, it is suggested that any remains encountered are most likely to relate to the post-medieval and industrial development of the valley which, if present, could be of regional significance.

There are few, if any, records of earlier (Prehistoric, Roman or Anglo-Saxon) remains in the vicinity. Any such remains, depending on their nature, could also be highly significant. The significance of the discovery would depend on the coherence of the remains that were recovered. All features recorded and excavated as well as artefacts recovered will be analysed in the light of the research agenda set out in the above.

5. METHODOLOGY.

5.1 ***The methodology can be summarised as:***

5.2 At all times the project will follow current IfA best practice as laid out in *Standard and Guidance for Archaeological Field Evaluation* (Institute for Archaeologists 2008).

5.3 Excavation of six evaluation trenches within the footprint of the proposed works. Trenches excavated using a tracked excavator with a toothless ditching bucket under constant archaeological supervision. Placement of the trenches was defined by the Environment Agency Archaeologist, in consultation with the Birmingham City Council Planning Archaeologist. Adjustments to placement in the field were necessitated by constraints on the ground in liaison with EA and their ecologists (Fig. 2). Clearance of undergrowth/long grass was undertaken with EA ecologist in attendance and under thier guidance.

5.4 A plan of any archaeological remains will be produced. A written, drawn and photographic record of the trenches will be maintained. Drawings will be produced at a suitable scale, normally 1:10 or 1:20 for sections and 1:50 for plans.

5.5 If archaeological remains are found, a sampling strategy will be agreed and a more detailed written scheme of investigation will be submitted for approval. Excavation will be carried out by machine unless archaeological remains are located. Mechanical excavation should cease if archaeological remains are found.

6. RESULTS.

6.1 As noted above, a total of six trenches were excavated. The results are now discussed.

6.2 Trench 01 (Figs 2, 13; Plate 1) was placed north of the River Tame between the concrete track and the railway line. The area was overgrown with small trees and brambles. In conjunction with the EA ecologist an area reasonably clear of trees was identified and undergrowth cleared, but constraints meant that the trench was aligned rather more SW-NE than E-W. The concrete path here sits on raised ground (existing river defence) with ground dropping towards a narrow strip of potentially undisturbed ground between there and the railway. The trench identified only a small area of natural sand and gravel deposits (0031, 0032, 0033) at a depth of c. 0.8m with redeposited clay (0036) forming the embankment to the south and redeposited sand and gravel (0030) to the north, presumably related to the construction of the railway. Compact mid-brown sandy loam topsoil (0035) was 0.25m-0.40m in depth. No archaeological features or deposits were encountered.

6.3 Trench 02 (Figs 3, 10; Plate 2) was located on level and low-lying ground south of the river, within the grounds of the Handsworth Golf Club (but in an area unused as part of the course and fairly overgrown with vegetation/long grass). It was 30m in length and 1.6m wide and aligned SW-NE. Topsoil (0001), 0.2m-0.3m thick, overlay loose sand and gravel deposits, varying from light-mid orange in colour (0025) to buff/mid grey (0026, 0027, 0028). A ceramic drain within cut [0009] was revealed running E-W towards the north end of the trench, but no archaeological features were identified or artefacts recovered.

6.4 Trench 03 (Figs 4, 8; Plate 3) lay 27m south of Trench 02 on the same alignment and in the same general topographic location. It was 30m x 1.6m in width and also aligned NE-SW. Topsoil (0001), 0.20-0.25m in thickness, overlay sand and gravel deposits (0014, 0015) similar to those seen elsewhere. A ceramic drain ran north-south across the trench within cut [0010], backfilled with redeposited sand and gravel (0016, 0017). No archaeological features were identified or artefacts recovered.

6.5 Trench 04 (Figs 5, 9; Plate 4) was located 94m southwest of Trench 03 in the same general topographic location. It was 30m x 1.6m in width and also aligned NE-SW. Topsoil (0001) was 0.25-0.30m thick, overlying sand and gravel deposits (0021, 0022, 0023). A ceramic drain (0012), within cut [0018] was noted running north-south across the northern half of the trench. Towards the southern end of the trench was ditch [0011], running NNW-SSE, 2.00m wide and 0.6m deep with shallowly sloping sides to a rounded base (Plate 8). The ditch was filled by loose grey/brown sand/gravel (0024). No artefacts were recovered.

6.6 Trench 05 (Figs 6, 11; Plate 5) was situated alongside the golf course fairway close to the north-eastern boundary with the Hamstead Hall Academy. It was aligned SW-NE at the base of rising ground on the edge of the valley. Topsoil (0001) was 0.20-0.30m in thickness above natural sand and gravel (0008). Ditch [0005] was recorded running NNW-SSE towards the southern end of the trench. The ditch was 1.60m wide x 0.50m deep, filled with a loose greyish brown sandy loam (0006), not clearly distinguishable from the topsoil (Plate 7). No artefacts were recovered, but the loose loamy fill did not suggest great antiquity.

6.7 Trench 06 (Figs 7, 12; Plate 6) lay 88m southeast of Trench 05 further up the slope away from the river alongside the same golf-course fairway. Topsoil (0001) was 0.30-0.50m in depth above loose orange sand and gravel (0002). Towards the centre of the trench was ditch [0003], 1.50m wide by 0.50m deep, running NNE-SSW across the trench and filled by (0004) (Plate 9). No dating evidence was recovered.

7. CONCLUSION

8.1 All of the trenches south of the river were of similar character with 0.3-0.4m of sandy loam topsoil immediately above deposits of riverine sand and gravel. Trench 1, on the north side of the river, lay in an area subject to greater post-medieval and modern disturbance, but natural sand and gravel deposits of similar character were also recorded here.

8.2 No features of apparent early date were identified. Ditches were recorded in Trenches 04, 05 and 06. No dating evidence was retrieved from any of the features, but the fills were uniformly loose, dark and loamy. The ditches in Trenches 04 and 05 match the NNW-SSE alignment of no longer extant boundaries depicted on 19th century Ordnance Survey mapping (and partly visible on the ground) although only that in Trench 05 appears to closely match a mapped boundary (Fig. 14). However, the north-south ditch in Trench 06 does not appear to match any mapped features and it remains possible that this might be of earlier date.

ACKOWLEDGEMENTS

Trent & Peak Archaeology would like to thank Ed Wilson and Amelia Russell of the Environment Agency for commissioning the work and also Alex Mcdonald of EA for assistance and guidance on site. Jo Miskin at Sandwell Borough Council arranged access to the RSPB reserve site north of the River Tame.

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Hurford, M. 2014 *Sandwell Forge Mill. Archaeological Monitoring of Engineering Test-Pits*, unpublished TPA report 44/2014

IfA 2008 *Standard and Guidance for Archaeological Field Evaluation*

Mapplethorpe K. and Malone, S. 2014 *Sandwell Forge Mill. Archaeological Desk-based Assessment*, unpublished TPA report 25/2014

Watt, S. (ed.) 2011 *The Archaeology of the West Midlands. A Framework for Research*, Oxford

Online resources

The Domesday Book Online: http://www.domesdaybook.co.uk

National Library of Scotland: Ordnance Survey - Six-inch England and Wales, 1842-1952 http://maps.nls.uk/os/6inch-england-and-wales/

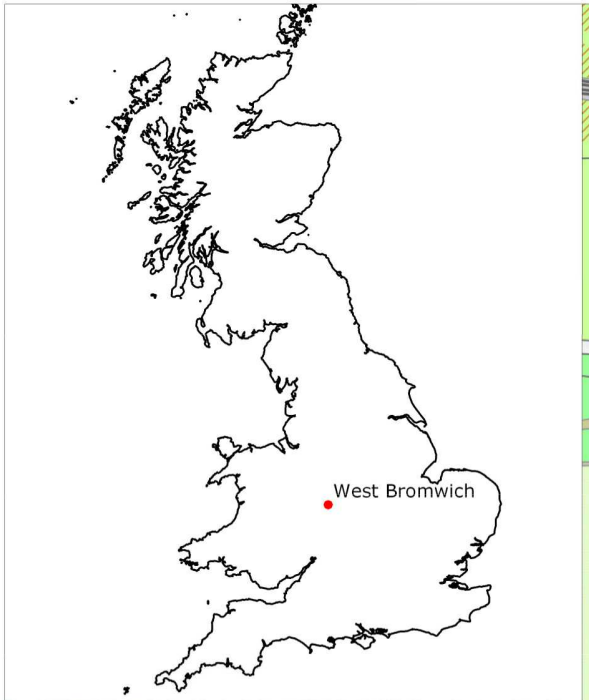
http://mapapps.bgs.ac.uk/geologyofbritain/home.html

http://www.landis.org.uk/soilscapes

Appendix 1. Summary context list.

Context	Description	Interpretation	Area
0001	loose mid greyish brown sandy loam, 10% sub-rounded pebbles 1-2cm	topsoil	2-6
0002	light-mid loose orange sand and gravel	natural	6
0003	feature cut, 1.50m wide x 0.50m deep		6
0004	mixed loose grey/brown sand/gravel	fill of [0003]	6
0005	feature cut, 1.60m wide x 0.50m deep		5
0006	same in description as 0001	fill of [0005] - suggesting prob not earlier than C19	5
0008	loose light grey sand and gravel, 40% sub-round pebbles 1-4cm	natural	5
0009	feature cut 0.5m wide x 0.35m deep	cut for ceramic drain	2
0010	feature cut 0.80m wide x 0.90m deep	cut for ceramic drain	3
0011	feature cut 2.00m wide x 0.6m deep		4
0012	ceramic drain		4
0013	light-mid loose orange sand and gravel	natural	5
0014	loose mid grey sand and gravel	natural	3
0015	loose mid-reddish brown sand and gravel	natural	3
0016	mixed loose grey/brown sand/gravel	fill of [0010]	3
0017	firm dark grey clay	fill of [0010]	3
0018	cut 0.3m wide for ceramic drain 0012		4
0019	mid-dark brown gravelly sandy loam	fill of drain cut [0018]	4
0020	loose grey/brown sand/gravel	fill of [0011]	4
0021	loose light grey sand and gravel	? redeposited natural	4
0022	light-mid loose orange sand and gravel	Upper fill [0011]	4
0023	mid orange sand and gravel	natural	4
0024	same as 0020	fill of [0011]	4
0025	mid orange sand and gravel	natural	2
0026	as 0025	natural	2
0027	mid-light orange sand and gravel	natural	2
0028	dark orange sand and gravel	natural	2
0029	loose mid-dark brown gravelly sandy	fill of [0009]	2

	loam		
0030	orange brown sandy loam, >5% charcoal inclusion, 10% rounded pebbles up to 30mm size	redeposited natural	1
0031	orange/yellow sand	natural?	1
0032	as 0031, slightly darker	natural?	1
0033	as 0031	natural?	1
0034	as 0030 but darker in colour, 10% charcoal inclusion	redeposited natural	1
0035	compact mid brown sandy loam, frequent roots	topsoil	1
0036	red/brown clay	redeposited clay bank material	1



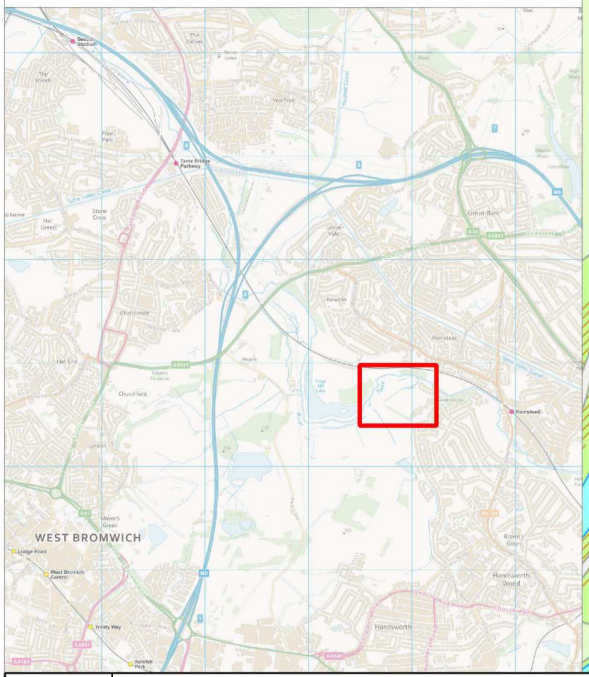


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Figure 1: Site location

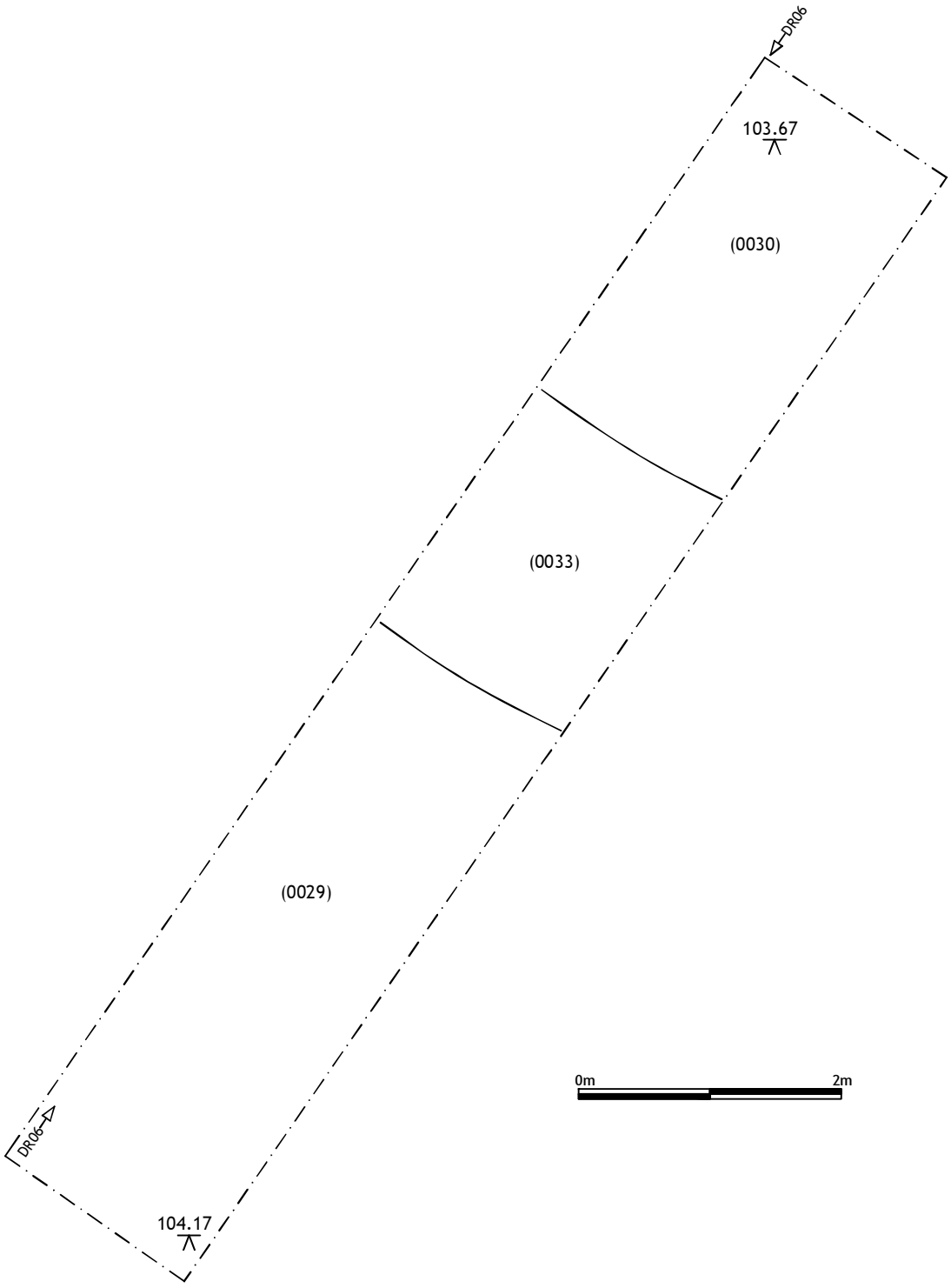


Figure 02: Plan Trench 1 (1:50@A3)

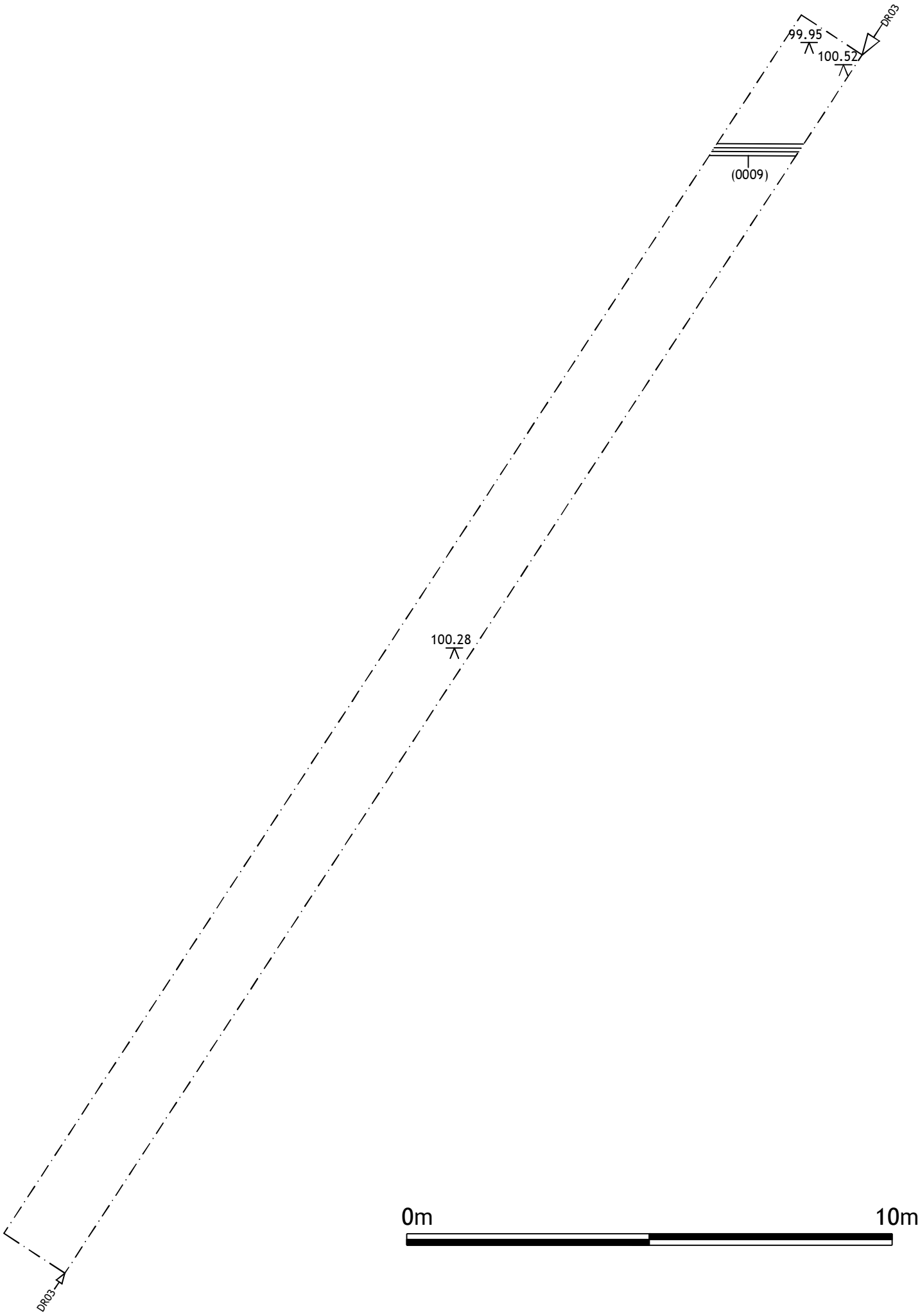


Figure 03: Plan Trench 2 (1:100 @ A3)

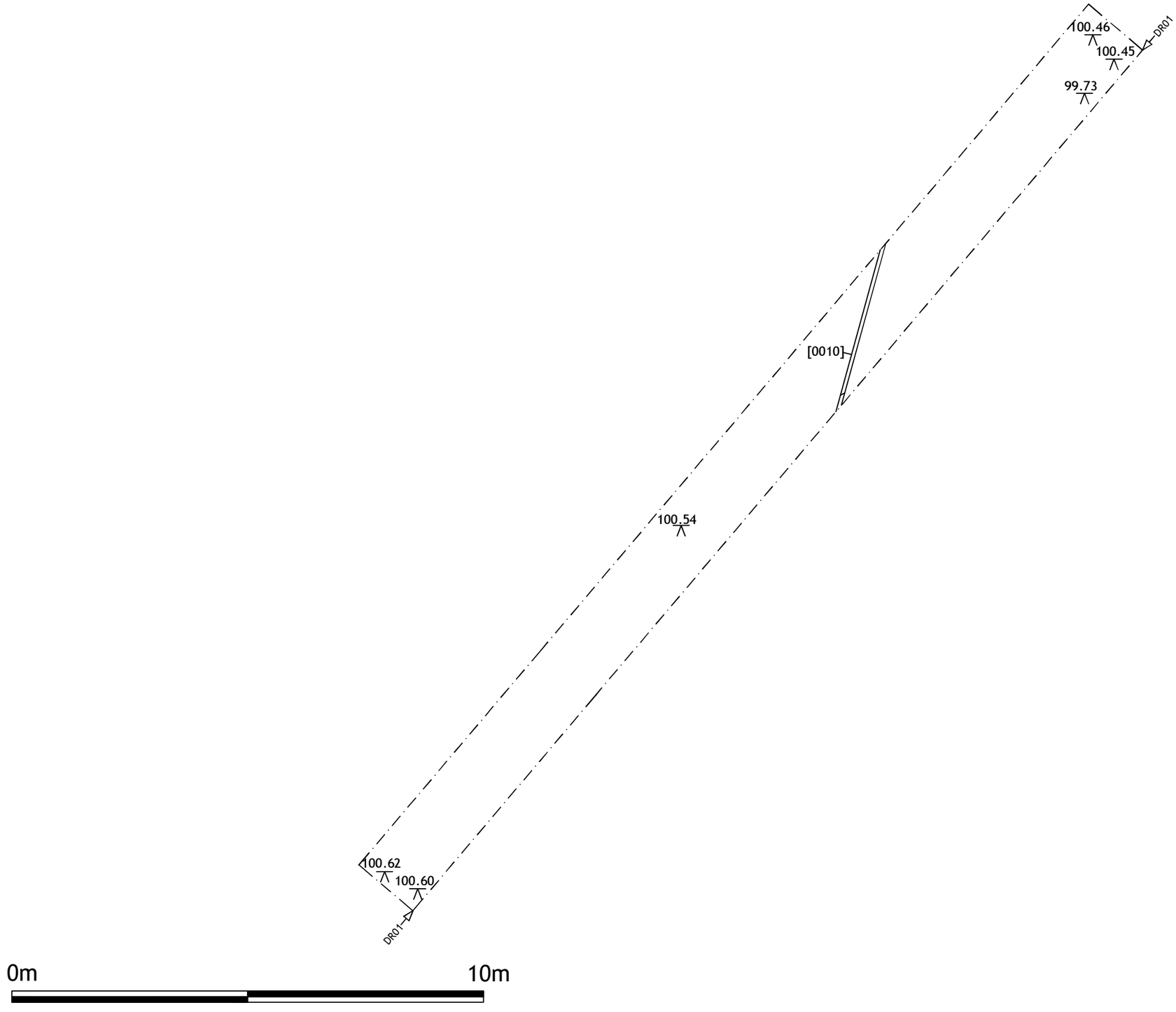


Figure 04: Plan Trench 3 (1:100 @ A3)

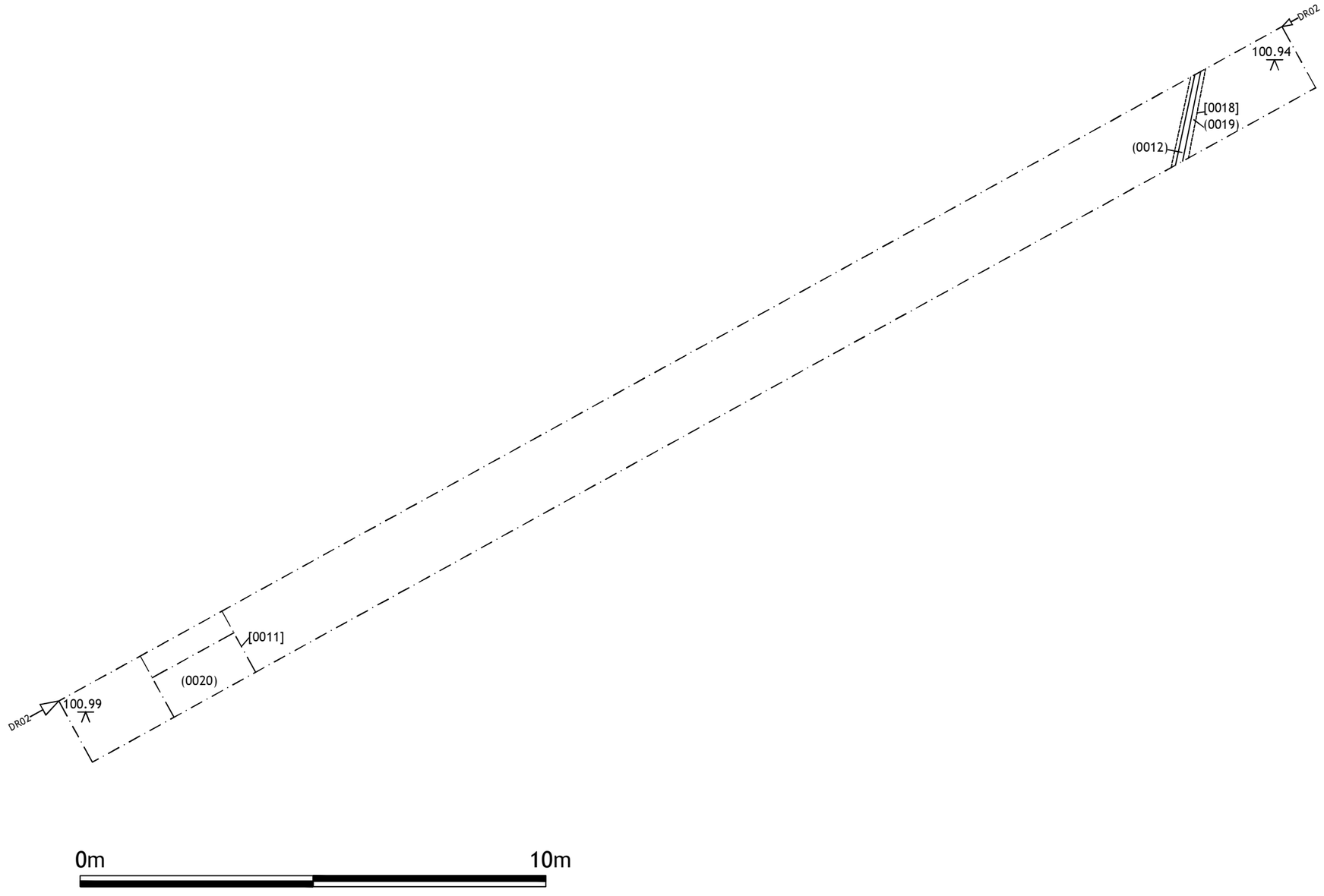


Figure 05: Plan Trench 4 (1:100 @ A3)

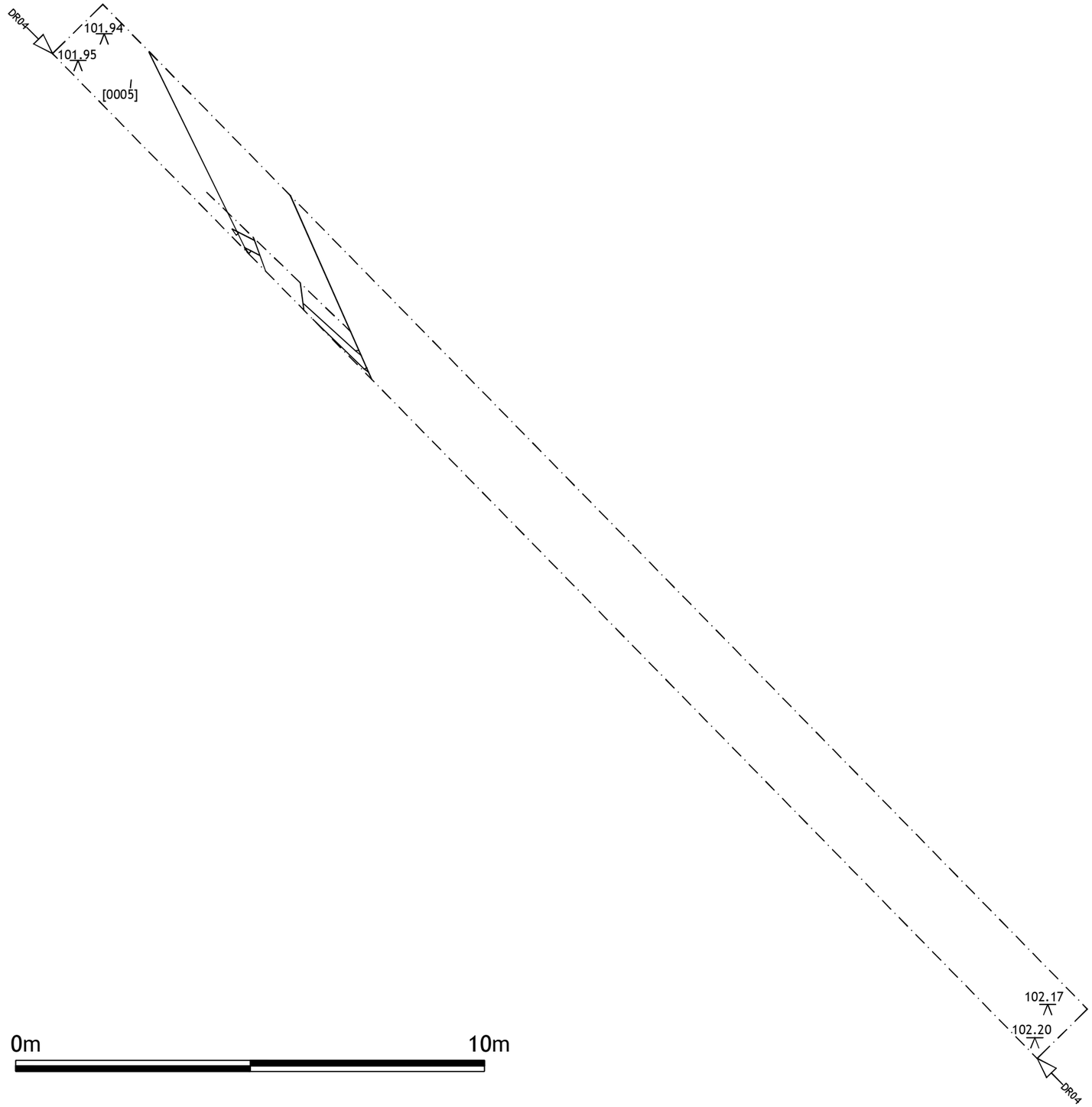


Figure 06: Plan Trench 5 (1:100 @ A3)

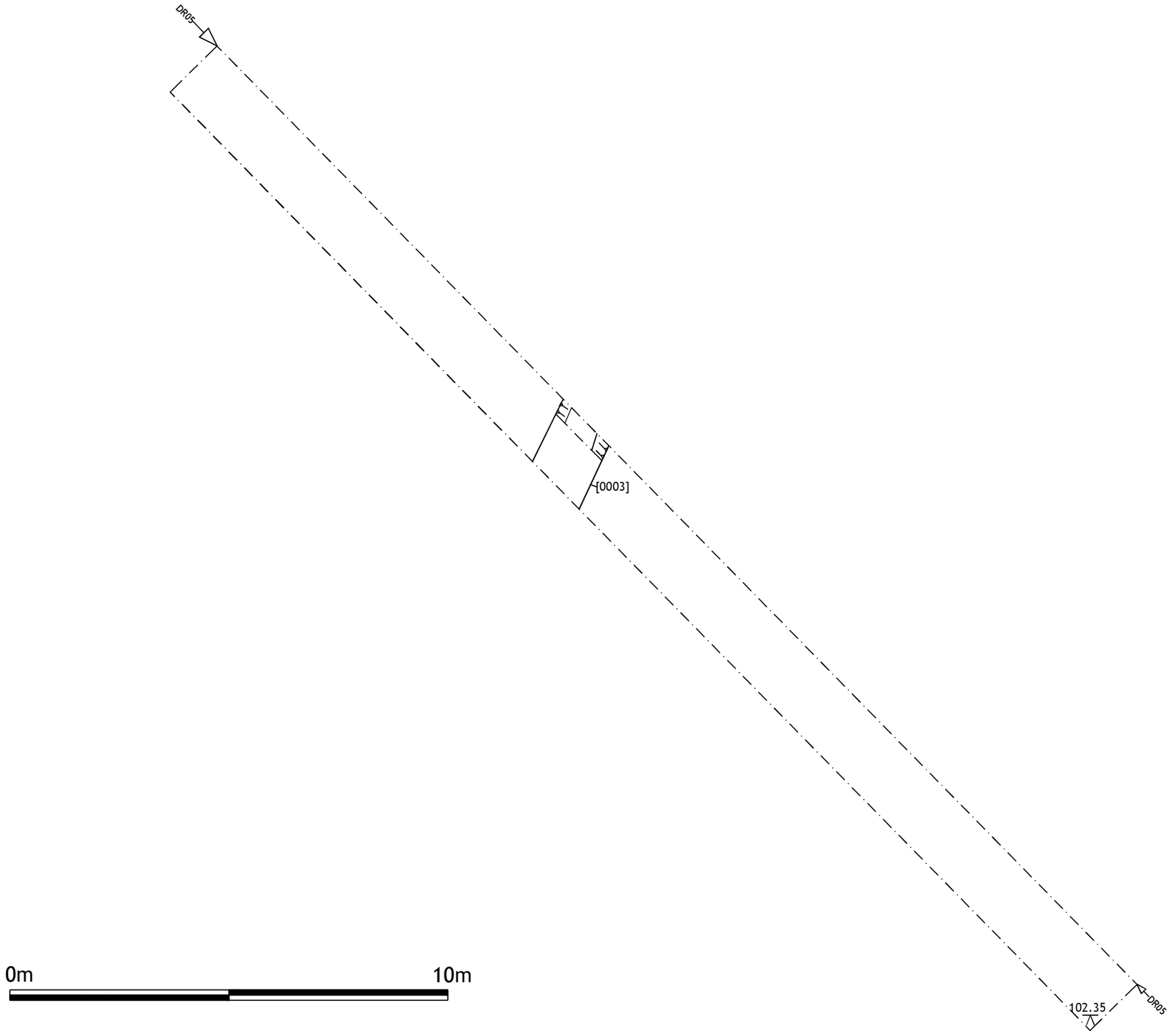
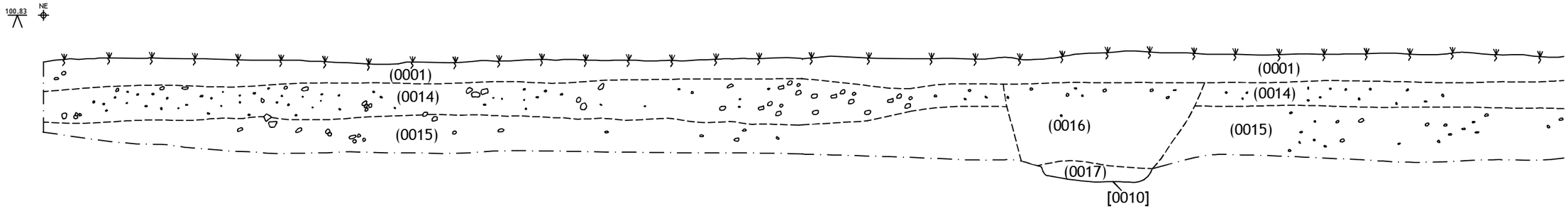


Figure 07: Plan Trench 6 (1:100 @ A3)



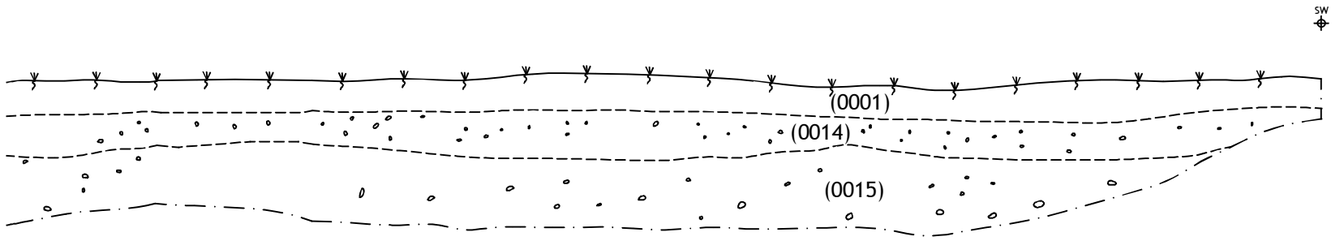
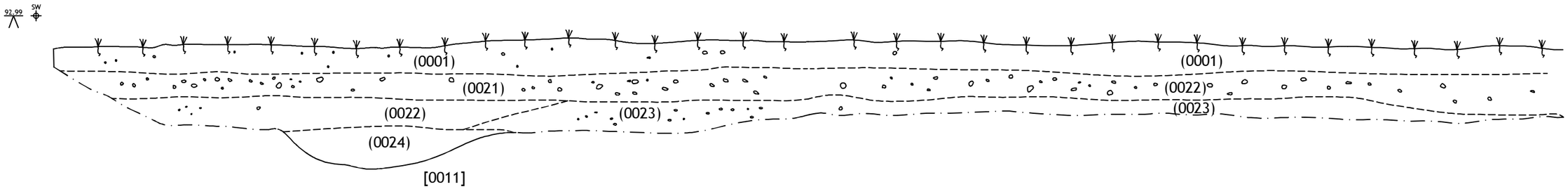


Figure 08: Trench 03 - North-West Facing Section (1:40 @ A3)



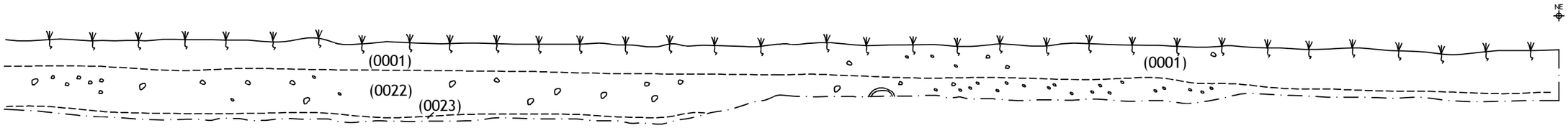


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Figure 09: Trench 04 - South-East Facing Section (1:40 @ A3)

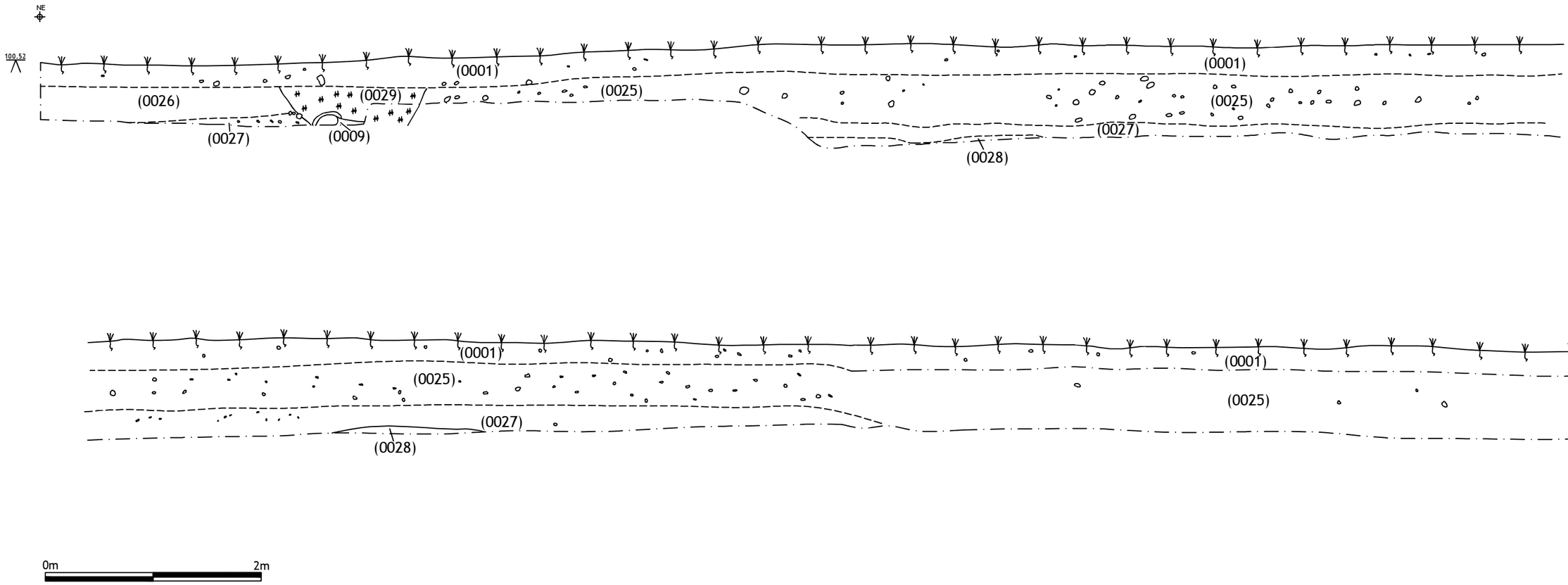

Figure 10: Trench 02 - North-west Facing Section (1:40 @ A3)

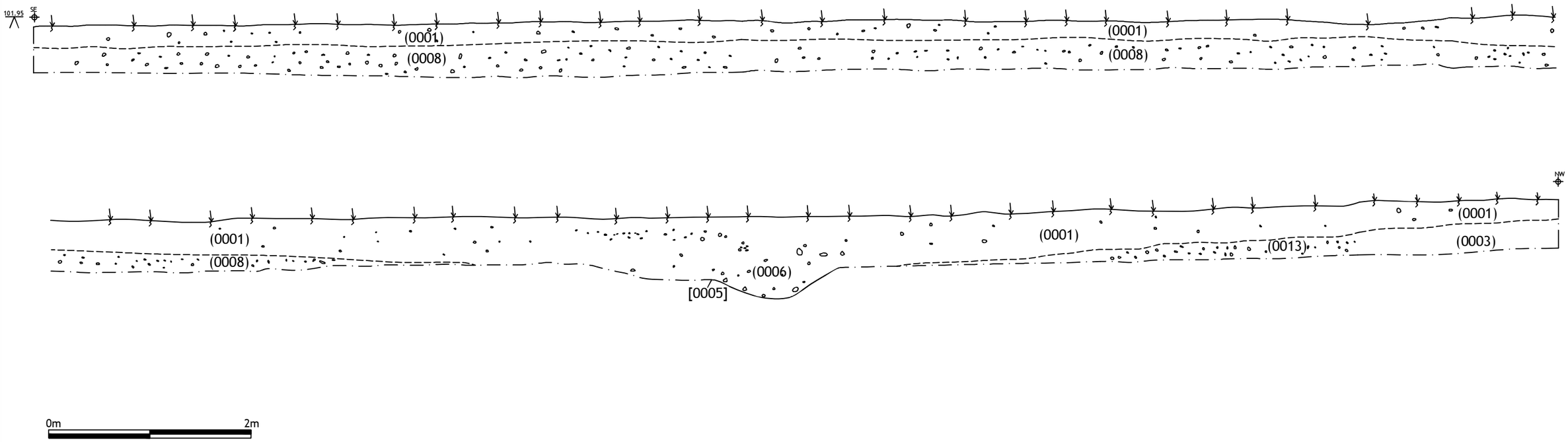

Figure 11: Trench 05 - North-East Facing Section (1:40 @ A3)

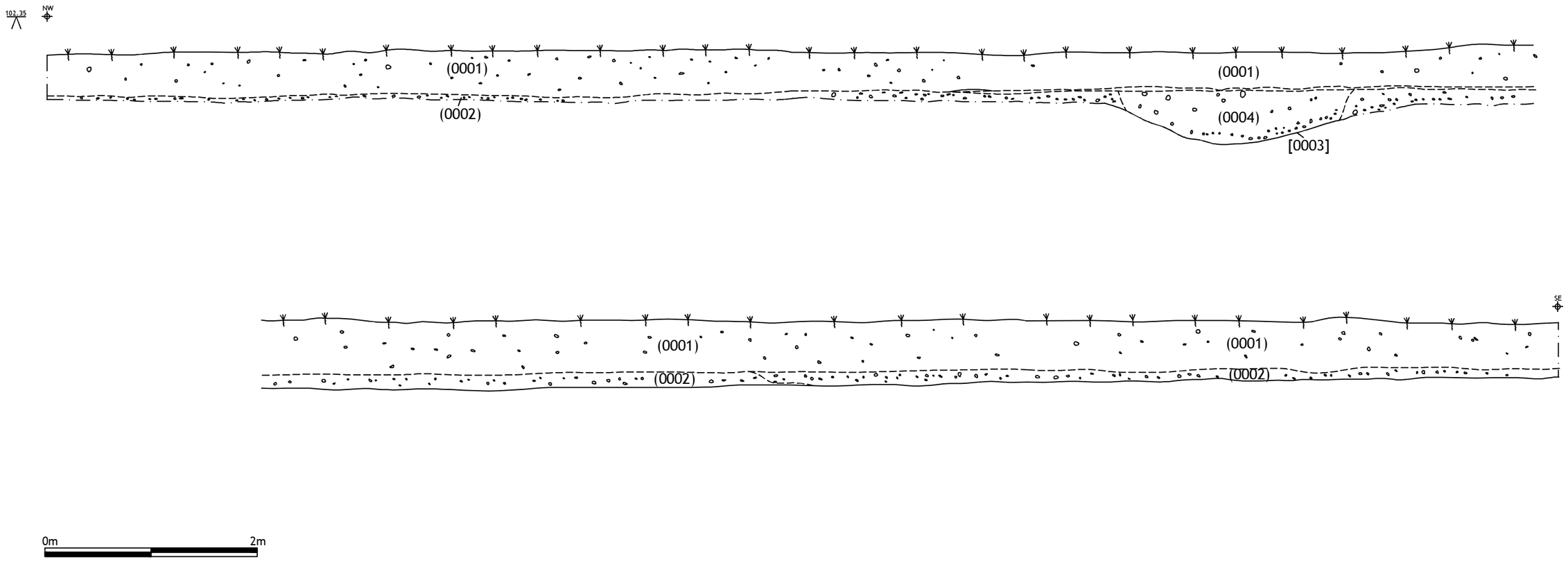

Figure 12: Trench 06 - South-West Facing Section (1:40 @ A3)

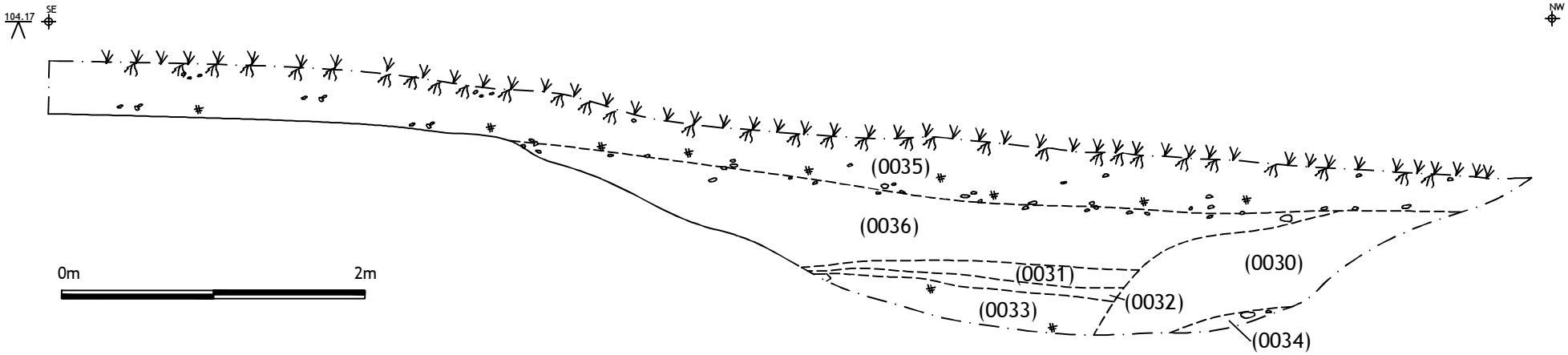

Figure 13: Trench 01 - South-East Facing Section (1:40 @ A4)

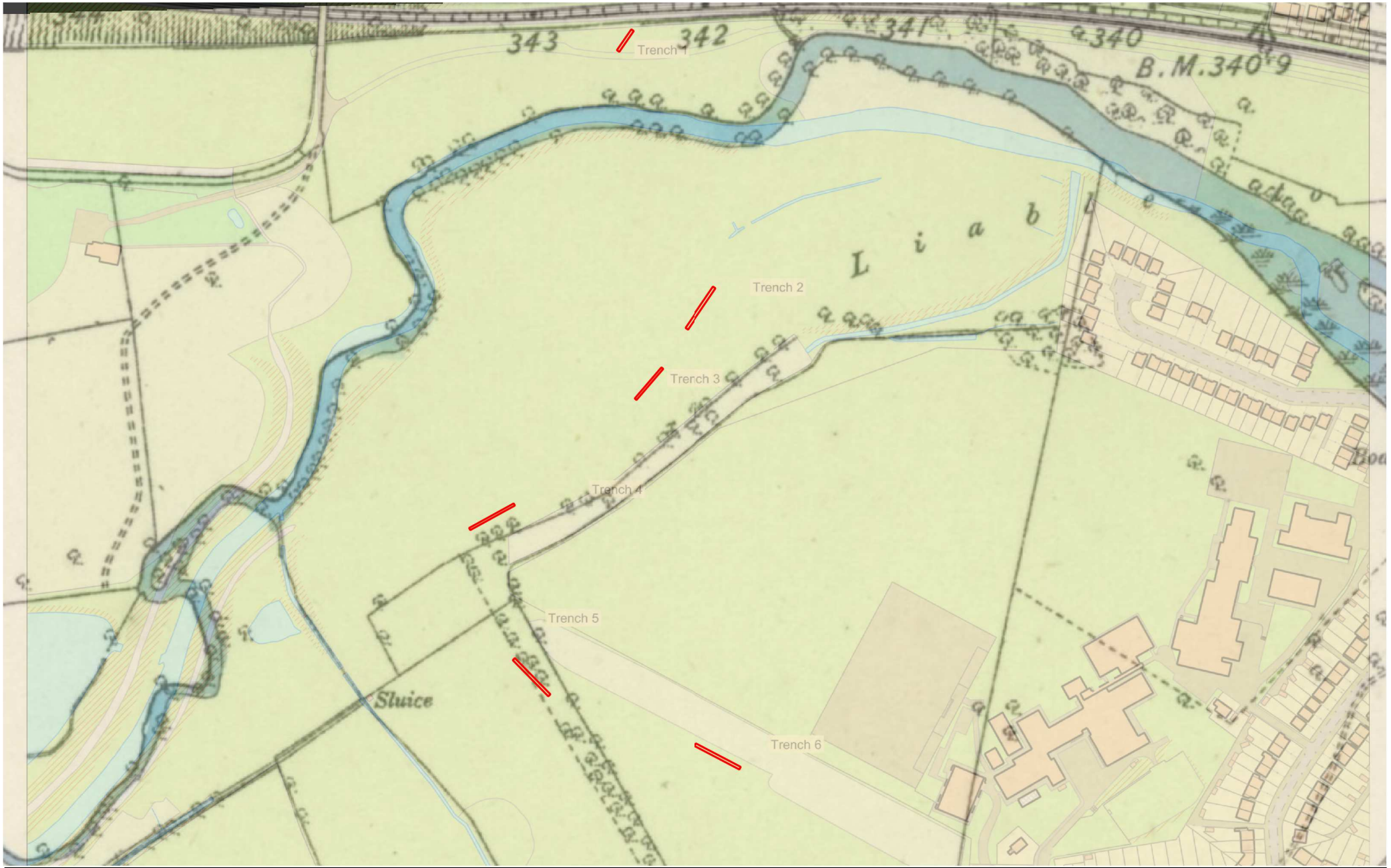

Figure 14 Trench locationsin relation to 1886 OS 6 inch mapping overlain on modern map base

Plate 1 Trench 01 looking north

Plate 2 Trench 02, looking south-east, ceramic drain in foreground

Plate 3 Trench 03, looking south-west

Plate 4 Trench 04 looking south-west

Plate 5 Trench 5 looking south-east, [0005] running obliquely across.

Plate 6 Trench 06 looking south-east

Plate 7 Trench 05, ditch [0005] north-west facing section

Plate 8 Trench 04, ditch [0011] south-east facing section

Plate 9 Trench 06, ditch [0003] north-west facing section