

Archcliffe Fort, Dover

Watching brief and excavation inside the fort

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Frontispiece General view of the excavated trench showing buried yard surface, looking north-west

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Frontispiece General view of the excavated trench showing buried yard surface, looking north-west

Fig. 1 Map showing location of Archcliffe Fort (*Based on Ordnance Survey mapping with the permission of the Controller of Her Majesty's Stationery Office, ©Crown Copyright Licence No. AL100021009*)

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Archaeological watching brief and excavation at Archcliffe Fort, 2017

1. Summary

1.1 A hand-dug pipe trench cut within Archcliffe Fort, Dover, across the lawn between the former married quarters and the Emmaus furniture shop (NGR 631551 140309 to 631567 140297) showed that a metallised courtyard/parade ground, still extant across much of the interior of the fort, had once extended further to the north-east.

1.2 This former yard was sealed under a substantial deposit of soil and rubble which supported the present area of grass. The creation of this grassed area apparently occurred during the twentieth century, probably when the new army married quarters were erected on the site sometime after the Second World War. Map and photographic evidence indicate that the courtyard itself was not an original feature of the nineteenth-century fort, being laid down just before, or during, the First World War.

1.3 The trenching produced only a small quantity of finds, the bulk of which are of nineteenth- and twentieth-century date. A few items from earlier periods, including two prehistoric struck flints and a small medieval pot sherd, were also recovered, but the most noteworthy find was a substantially complete military steel helmet of First World War date.

2. Introduction

2.1 The Emmaus Dover community based in Archcliffe Fort at Dover (Scheduled Ancient Monument No. 26797; Fig. 1) needed to cut a new service trench across the interior of the fort, between the twentieth-century married quarters and the Emmaus furniture shop, in order to provide the shop with a gas supply for heating.

2.2 The excavations required, although fairly limited in depth and extent, provided an opportunity for some further archaeological investigations within the fort. Accordingly, most of the length of the pipe trench (NGR 631551 140309 to 631567 140297) was hand-excavated by members of the Dover Archaeological Group, under the supervision of the writer from Canterbury Archaeological Trust, in a one-day operation in April 2017 (Figs 2 & 3; Frontispiece). Additionally, an intermittent watching brief was maintained by the writer on various other minor excavations undertaken by the heating engineers in order to allow the installation of the new system.

2.3 Archcliffe Fort is situated on the western outskirts of Dover, adjacent to the old coast road to Folkestone (Fig. 1). It stands at an elevation of about 17 metres OD, upon a low promontory overlooking Shakespeare Beach and Dover's historic Western Docks. In topographical terms, although the site occupies a cliff-top position, it actually lies in the bottom of a dry chalk valley, truncated obliquely by the Strait of Dover. The marine truncation of this valley led to the creation of a slight bay immediately to the north-east of the Archcliffe headland (Biddle and Summerson 1982), making the fort site of some local strategic value in relation to the town's western docks complex.

2.4 The fieldwork generated a small archive, including ten recorded contexts, a general site plan, three measured block sections and sixteen digital photographs, together with a small, mixed finds assemblage (see below).

3. Historical and archaeological background

3.1 Archcliffe Fort represents an important element in the sequence of surviving artillery defences located at Dover. It effectively forms an extension of the great nineteenth-century fortress occupying

the Western Heights overlooking the town and port. The fort itself, however, has origins much earlier than anything else on this western side of Dover, with records of defence works here going back to the late medieval period. General histories of the fort have been previously provided by Doug Welby (1991) and Liv Gibbs (2004), with a summary in Parfitt 2016.

3.2 Although damaged and partially derelict today, the fort constitutes a multi-period site of considerable archaeological/historical interest in its own right. The bulk of the extant structures date between the seventeenth and the early twentieth century. The walls and outer defences are the oldest parts and incorporate the most significant elements of the fort, with the interior containing a series of nineteenth- and twentieth-century structures, reflecting the use and habitation of the fort over the last two centuries. The site is Scheduled as an Ancient Monument (No. 26797).

3.3 A series of historic maps and plans dating from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century indicate that buildings have existed within the fort from the earliest times, although never in large numbers. These seem mostly to have been placed towards the rear (landward) side of the fort. The general impression gained from the early map evidence is that the area trenched has been open ground for most of the time. Certainly, the detailed fort plan of 1884 shows the area as then being pathway or lawn, with the quarters of the Commanding Officer, South Front Barracks, set further to the west.

3.4 Today, apart from some laid twentieth-century concrete adjacent to the married quarters, the bulk of the area trenched is lawn. An east–west cable trench, cut to a shallow depth around 12 metres to the south in 1996 revealed only post-medieval make-up layers under the present yard surface, with no traces of any buried structures or features (Parfitt 1996).

4. Aims of the work

4.1 The aims of the archaeological work were to:-

- a) record details of any of the historic structure exposed;
- b) record details of any pre-fort finds, structures or deposits;
- c) recover any historical artefacts revealed;
- d) provide advice and guidance to the main contractor and represent the views of Historic England; and
- e) help safeguard the Ancient Monument from any accidental damage during the course of the works

5. Methodology

5.1 The specification previously prepared and agreed with Historic England (Parfitt 2017) required the hand excavation of the main pipe trench by an archaeological team, with additional works undertaken by the gas engineers being subject to a watching brief. The archaeological works were undertaken as a joint project between Canterbury Archaeological Trust and Dover Archaeological Group, led by Keith Parfitt, BA, FSA, MCifA (CAT Dover Office).

5.2 The main pipe trench across the lawn to the shop, was hand excavated in a one day operation by fifteen members of the Dover Group, under the direction of Keith Parfitt, on 23 April, 2017. The more limited excavations for the base of the new gas tank and associated works in the area north-west of the lawn, were subject to an intermittent archaeological watching-brief, undertaken by Keith Parfitt between 23 and 27 April.

5.3 Details of the exposed stratification were recorded following the general conventions set out in Canterbury Archaeological Trust's *Site Recording Manual*.

6. Description of the excavated trench (Figs 2 & 3; Frontispiece)

6.1 The importance of Archcliffe Fort has been outlined above. The new works offered some limited opportunity to archaeologically examine part of the interior of the fort, towards its north-eastern defences (Fig. 2).

6.2 The new trench was aligned north-west by south-east and was some 18.50m in length. It was 0.40 wide and excavated to a depth of 0.60m (Frontispiece). The ground surface in this area lay at around 16.50m above OD.

6.3 The trench was excavated under conditions of light cloud with some sunshine, judged to have been good for the purpose of accurate archaeological observation of soil deposits and cut-features. Below-ground soil conditions were fairly dry. The exposed sequence of deposits was much the same for the full length of the trench, although two modern drain trenches at the south-eastern end, leading from the shop building, had disturbed the sequence here (Block sections, Fig. 3). The natural subsoil was not reached at any point.

6.4 In the base of the trench was a continuous deposit of compacted, mixed grey and brown clay (Fig. 3, Context 6) containing frequent small chalk lumps, quantities of flint pebbles and some fragments of red brick. The full thickness of this deposit was not revealed but in places it was more than 0.15m. The deposit itself yielded a small collection of finds, including fragments of pottery, vessel glass, Welsh slate, peg-tile and a piece of furnace brick. All this material may be broadly dated to the nineteenth or early twentieth century.

6.5 Overlying the basal clay, was a thin layer of brick hardcore (Fig. 3, Context 5). This was between 0.04 and 0.12m thick. It consisted of a compacted grey gritty clay containing very frequent small and medium sized pieces of broken red and yellow brick, together with a quantity of small flint pebbles and occasional small chalk lumps. Datable finds recovered from this layer included a few pieces of pottery, vessel glass and clay tobacco pipe stem, together with a residual prehistoric struck flint. The latest material recovered is of nineteenth- or early twentieth-century date.

6.6 The brick rubble layer had formed the base for an asphalt yard surface (Fig. 3, Context 4) which extended for the full length of the trench. This was between 0.01 and 0.14m thick and in the central part of the excavation showed evidence for a second, subsequent layer of asphalt, separated from the first by a thin layer of grey crushed mortar (Fig. 3, BS 2). This would seem to represent a localised repair to the original surface. No datable finds were recovered.

6.7 The asphalt surface had been cut by two substantial concrete piers/bases, placed some 9 metres apart but not necessarily directly connected with one another (Fig. 3). In the central part of the trench, pier/base 7 cut through both layers of asphalt (see above) and was at least 0.25m deep. It was 0.49m across the top, with two vertical iron rods set in the core. It was possible to preserve most of this base *in situ* during the cutting of the trench.

6.8 At the south-eastern end of the trench, pier/base 9 survived between the two modern drain trenches (Fig. 3). It was 0.58m across the top, and 0.30 deep. Again, it was possible to preserve most of this base *in situ* during the cutting of the present trench.

6.9 Evidence for further repair work to the asphalt yard surface was provided by a sand and cement screed (Fig. 3, Context 3) which had been laid directly upon areas of the asphalt surface. This survived as two separate patches set about 2.50m apart (Fig. 3). It was between 0.01 and 0.10m thick and in the central part of the trench was laid over the latest of the two asphalt surfaces, implying that there had been several phases of patching and repair work to the original yard surface in this area. Neither of the concrete bases (7 & 9) was covered by the layer.

6.10 The final yard surfacing was sealed by a thick dump of soil and rubble (Fig. 3, Context 2). This comprised a layer of mixed grey loam and cream chalky silt, between 0.15 and 0.30m thick. It contained frequent small flint pebbles and fragments of red and yellow brick, with some large flint nodules and a few concrete lumps. A small amount of domestic rubbish had also been incorporated and this included some nineteenth- to twentieth-century pottery, glass, iron nails and bolts and a few fragments of clay tobacco pipe stem. Of more particular interest, however, was a somewhat corroded but complete military steel helmet, found towards the south-eastern end of the excavated trench.

6.11 The soil and rubble dump was sealed with a final layer of mid grey-brown loam, which supported the modern turf (Fig. 3, Context 1). This was between 0.15 and 0.24m thick but it produced no finds.

7. Archaeological monitoring of new post-holes and additional trenching

7.1 Beyond the north-western end of the main trench, further limited excavations for five new post-holes, the base of the new gas tank, and the installation of the associated pipe work, as far the lawn, were subject to an intermittent archaeological watching-brief, as required. This work was undertaken by Keith Parfitt.

7.2 The results of these small scale works were of minimal interest and showed only mixed and disturbed soils in all the excavations, which were nowhere more than 0.60m deep. Most of this disturbed soil is likely to be connected with the construction of the post-war married quarters and the associated landscaping.

8. Finds

8.1 A small quantity of finds was recovered during the trenching. The bulk of this material is nineteenth and twentieth century in date, with a few items of earlier periods, including two prehistoric struck flints and a small medieval pot sherd. Perhaps the most noteworthy find was a substantially complete military steel helmet recovered from Context 2 (see below).

8.2 The material has been processed and catalogued according to standard Canterbury Archaeological Trust procedures. The collection will shortly be transferred to the English Heritage regional store at Dover Castle. Brief notes on the various categories of finds made are set out below.

8.3 Pottery

A total of 38 sherds of pottery (485g) was recovered from three separate contexts during the course of the trenching (Contexts 2, 5 & 6). The bulk of this material is of late nineteenth- to early twentieth-century date. There are 26 pieces of white chinaware, mostly plain but some decorated, with several that show evidence of being burnt. There is one complete small, brown stoneware ink pot and ten pieces of red glazed earthenware, most probably of nineteenth-century date, rather than earlier. There is one earlier sherd, in the form of a plain fragment of medieval orange-grey sandy ware probably of thirteenth- or fourteenth-century date (Context 2).

8.4 Glass and a bottle top

Eleven small pieces of glass (63g) were recovered, including both vessel glass (Contexts 2 & 5) and window glass (Context 6). One of the vessel glass fragments shows evidence of being burnt. Another piece of vessel glass is brown in colour and probably derives from a beer bottle. More certainly from a beer bottle is a rubber screw top marked 'TAYLOR WALKER 1938' (Context 2).

8.5 Clay tobacco pipe

Nine clay tobacco pipe fragments were recovered (26g). These were all short fragments of broken stem, apart from part of a bowl found in Context 2. This showed evidence of being burnt, probably after breakage. Stylistically, the bowl fragment is probably seventeenth or early eighteenth century in date.

8.6 Prehistoric struck flint

Two prehistoric struck flint were recovered. Context 2 produced a primary flake, unworked but slightly burnt, whilst Context 5 yielded an unworked secondary flake with a blue-white patina. Prehistoric flintwork has been previously discovered within the area of the fort in rather less disturbed contexts (Parfitt 1996).

8.7 Other finds

Other finds from the trenching included two small pieces of animal bone, Welsh slate fragments, two iron nails and a piece of fire-brick. Of most interest, however, was the essentially complete steel helmet recovered from Context 2, towards the south-eastern end of the trench.

Although somewhat corroded, the helmet would appear to be an example of the well known First World War Brodie helmet, designed and patented in 1915 by John Leopold Brodie (identification by Jon Iveson, Dover Museum).

9. Interpretation of the exposed deposits

9.1 The deposits exposed (Fig. 3) would seem to represent a fairly straightforward sequence of events, broadly reflecting the changing use of the fort. In the base of the trench, the earliest deposit, a compacted, mixed grey and brown clay layer with chalk, flint and brick fragments (Context 6), may be readily interpreted as a general levelling deposit relating to landscaping work within the interior of the fort. The available dating evidence indicates that the layer is no earlier than the nineteenth century (see above).

9.2 The general dump layer (6) was sealed by a thin layer of brick hardcore (Context 5) which formed the base for an asphalt yard surface (Context 4) that extended along the full length of the trench. This showed some evidence for localised repairs to the original surface. There seems little doubt that this surface equates with the metallated yard/parade ground shown in the First World War photograph of the fort's interior (Fig. 4).

9.3 Subsequently, the yard surface had been cut into by two substantial concrete piers/bases, placed some 9 metres apart. These presumably relate to minor structures erected on this open ground, although they need not necessarily be directly connected with one another.

9.4 Later, the old yard surface on the north-east side of the fort was buried under a dump of soil and rubble (Context 2) intended to provide the base for a new, slightly raised area of lawn (Frontispiece). A quantity of domestic rubbish had been incorporated into this deposit – most closely datable is a beer bottle stopper dated 1938, but a more unusual find was the military steel helmet of apparently of First World War date.

9.5 Although containing some earlier material, there can be no doubt that Context 2 was deposited sometime during the twentieth century, the most likely occasion being when the new army married quarters were erected on the site sometime after the Second World War, probably during the 1950s. Most probably, the intention then was to create a more pleasing grassed area immediately in front of the new houses, whilst leaving the working yard open to the south-west, in front of the main entrance. An aerial photograph of the fort dated 1960 shows the grassed area as being well established by this time (photo accessed from Google Earth, 8.6.17).

9.6 The dumped material constituting Context 2 could be derived from elsewhere in fort itself or it could have been brought in from outside, perhaps as debris cleared from the Western Heights or Dover Castle. The presence of the steel helmet would certainly suggest that the source of the material was a military site, rather than the town.

10. Conclusions

10.1 The excavated trench has provided another opportunity to archaeologically examine the interior of Archcliffe Fort, although its shallow depth meant that only the higher stratified deposits could be investigated.

10.2 The work established that the central courtyard/parade ground which presently occupies much of the interior of the fort was once more extensive and originally continued towards the ramparts on the north-east side. This evidence is largely confirmed by a First World War photograph, only discovered by the writer after the excavation had taken place (Fig. 4).

10.3 The combined evidence thus suggests that a substantial area of the fort's former parade ground should lie buried and preserved below the modern lawn, sealed by a dump of soil and rubble probably laid during the 1950s. To the south-west, the same yard continues in daily use, its surface being regularly disturbed by the passage of modern traffic.

10.4 The central yard itself does not seem to have been a primary feature of the Victorian fort because a large-scale plan of the site dated 1884 shows most of the open areas inside as then being occupied by lawns or a kitchen garden, cut across by various metalled paths and roadways rather than being one continuously surfaced area.

10.5 The creation of the main internal yard would thus appear to be a subsequent development at the fort, first laid down sometime just before or during the First World War. The subsequent replacement of its north-eastern side by a grassed area coincidentally returns this part of the site closer to its appearance in 1884.

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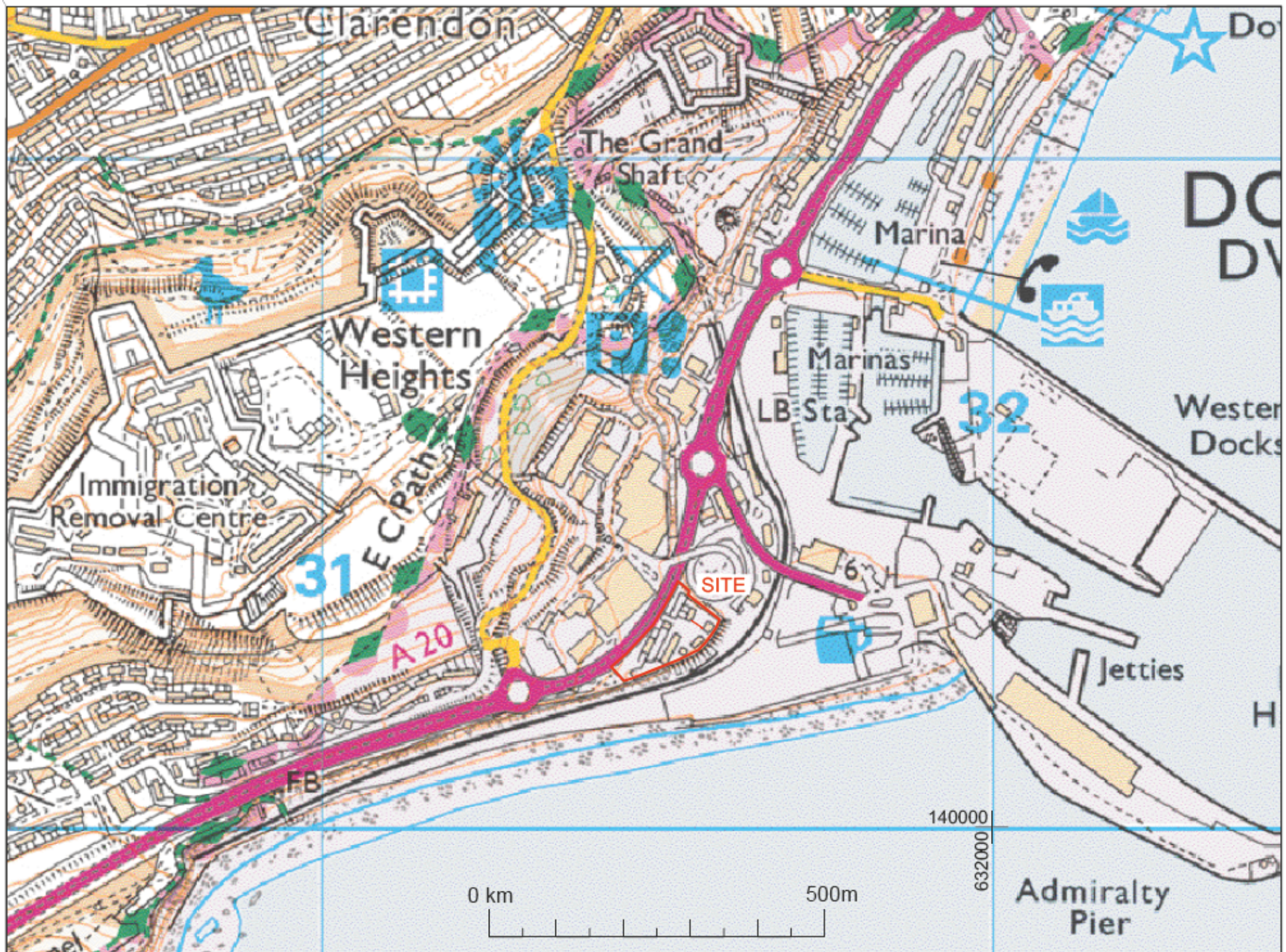


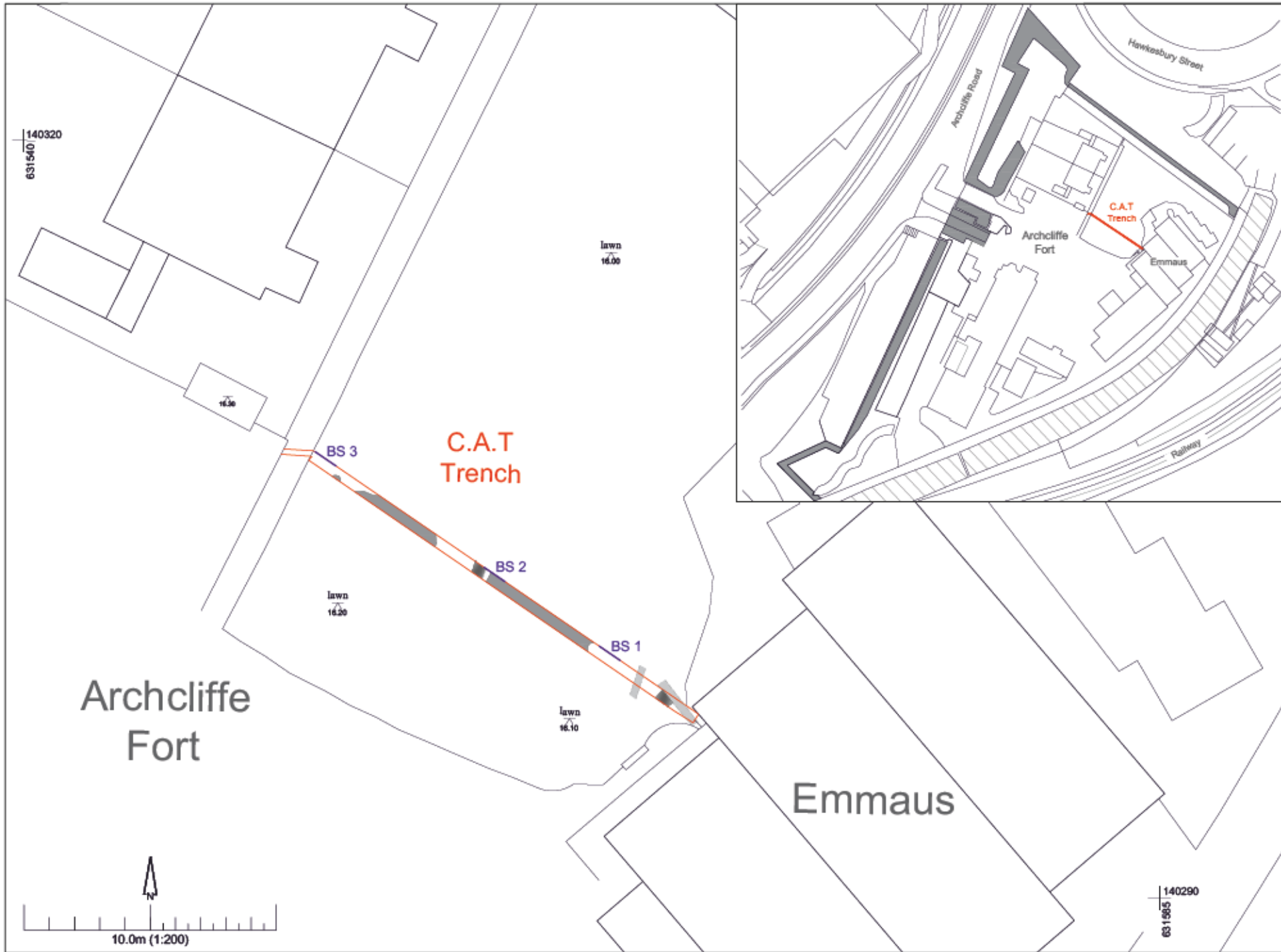
Fig.1

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Fig.1 Map showing general location of Archcliffe Fort

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Fig.2

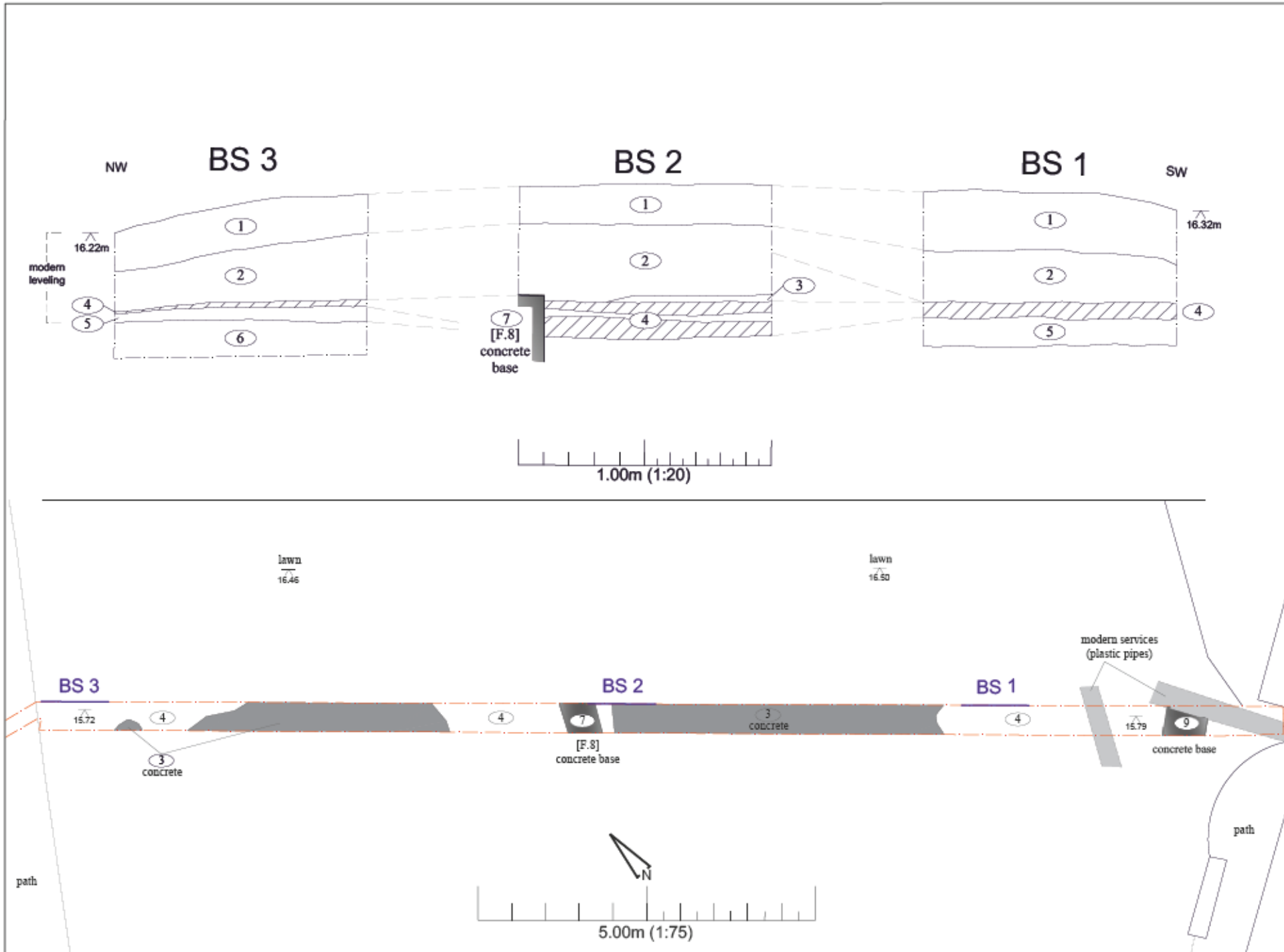


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Fig.2 General plan of excavated trench and inset showing location within Fort

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Fig.3



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Fig. 3 Detailed plan and block sections of the excavated trench



Fig. 4 General view of the fort interior, looking west sometime during the First World War, showing extent of metallized parade ground