Marches Archaeology

Greensforge Roman Fort
Mile Flat
Kingswinford
Staffordshire

A report on an archaeological field assessment

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This report is produced by

Marches Archaeology

Marches House
6 High Street
Clun
Shropshire
SY7 8JB

Tel:- 01588 640976
Fax:- 01588 640796
e-mail:- marches@archaeology.kc3.co.uk

For:-
Mr and Mrs Standish
The Paddocks
Mile Flat
Kingswinford
West Midlands
DY6 0AU

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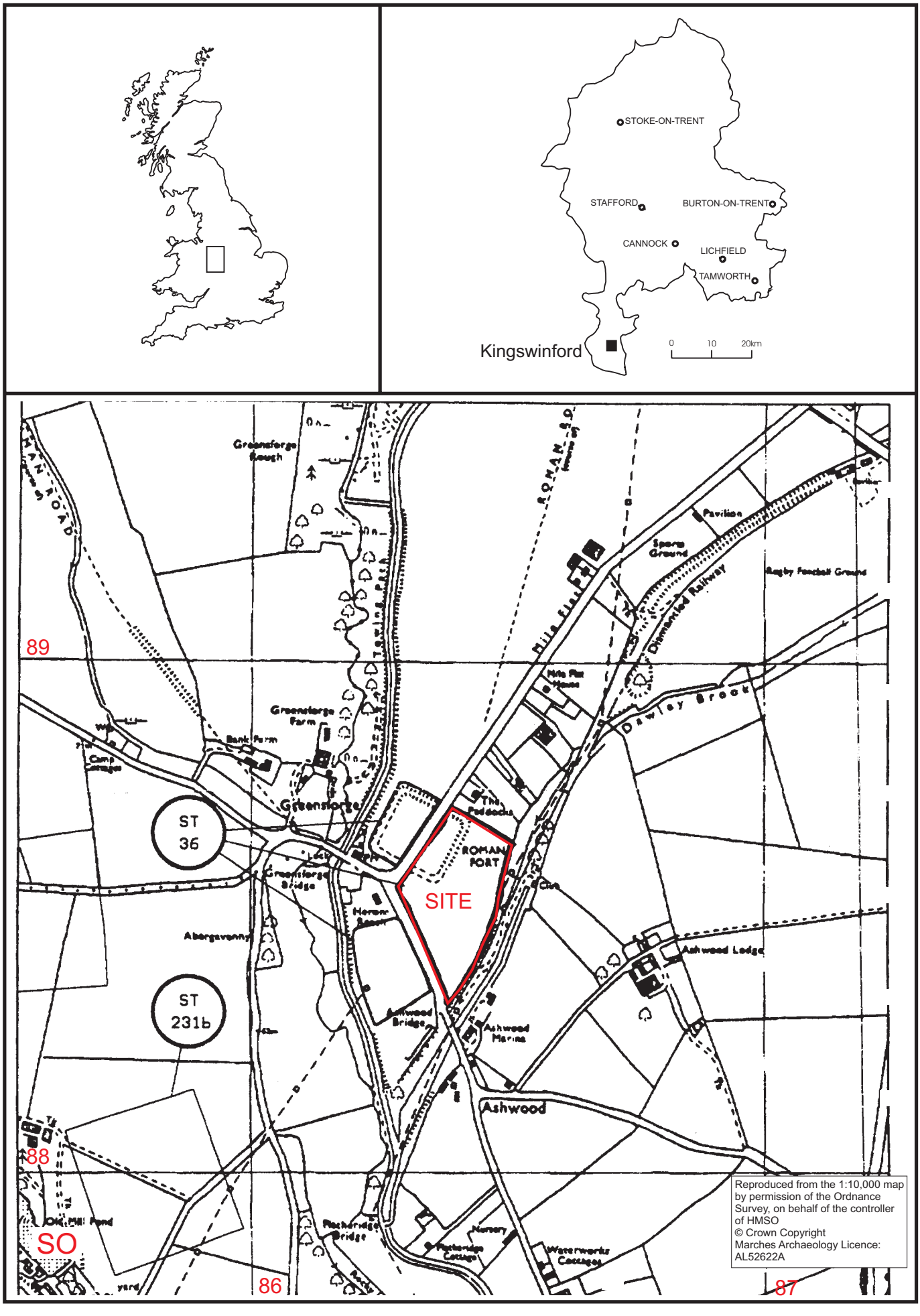

Fig. 1: Location of site

Greensforge Roman Fort
Mile Flat
Kingswinford
Staffordshire

NGR: SO 8639 8867

Report on an archaeological field assessment

Report by
Richard Stone

Summary

Three trenches were excavated across the edges of an outdoor riding school which had been created without scheduled monument consent. The general dig level for the school did not penetrate through the topsoil. Directly below the topsoil were natural deposits. Drainage for the school cut into this and may have damaged significant archaeology. However, no features were seen, only one sherd of Roman pottery was found and it is considered unlikely that significant damage has been done.

1 Introduction

An outdoor manège or riding school was created several years ago within Greensforge Roman Fort, Kingswinford (Fig.1). The site is situated at NGR: SO 8639 8867. At the time no application was made for planning permission. It recently came to the attention of the owner that planning permission was required and application for retrospective planning permission was submitted to the local planning authority. As the site is a scheduled ancient monument (ref: county monument 36) the local planning authority referred the matter to the Department for Culture Media and Sport. An Inspector from the Department's advisors, English Heritage, required that a field investigation be carried out to assess the damage caused to the monument by the construction of the riding school in order to inform the appropriate strategy for any further action. Marches Archaeology was commissioned by Mr and Mrs Standish, owners of the site, to carry out the work.

2 Archaeological and Historical Background

The site is a rectangular enclosure defined by an earthwork bank. It is known variously as Greensforge Roman Fort, Greensforge Camp and Ashwood Heath Camp. The site is now bisected by the early 19th century road known as Mile Flat. The size of the enclosure is consistent with use by an Auxiliary Cohort. Excavations carried out in 1928 recovered evidence suggesting that it was occupied only until the last quarter of the first century AD. On the basis of this evidence it has been considered that this may have been a military construction of the time of the conquest (i.e. soon after AD 43) which was followed by a short-lived civil settlement. It is understood that more recent investigations have been carried out on the site by Birmingham University. However, records of this work have not been deposited with English Heritage.

3 Scope and aims of the project

The scope of the project was discussed between Marches Archaeology and the English Heritage Inspector. It was agreed that the site investigation would consist of three trenches, each 1.5m wide and at least 3m long. Each trench was positioned to straddle the edge of the manège to provide a direct comparison with unaffected areas (Fig. 2).

An archaeological evaluation aims to "gain information about the archaeological resource within a given area or site (including presence or absence, character, extent, date, integrity, state of preservation and quality) in order to make an assessment of its merit in the appropriate context, leading to one or more of the following: the formulation of a strategy to ensure the recording, preservation or management of the resource; the formulation of a strategy to initiate a threat to the archaeological resource; the formulation of a proposal for further archaeological investigation within a programme of research" (Institute of Field Archaeologists Standard and Guidance for Archaeological Field Evaluations).

The objective of this assessment, based on the above stated aim, was to identify the extent of damage, if any, caused to the monument during construction of the outdoor riding school.

4 Results of the assessment

Three trenches were excavated by mechanical excavator to the bottom of the disturbance caused by the construction of the manège. Further test excavation was carried out by hand. The trenches were left open for backfilling and reinstatement by the client.

In each trench the basic stratigraphy was similar (Fig. 3). The earliest layer identified was red and yellow sands and gravels (context numbers 105, 205, 305). This is the natural drift geology of the area. Any archaeological features, including any associated with the occupation of the site during the Roman period, would be visible in this background. During the site assessment no such features were identified.

Overlying the natural sands and gravels was a humic sandy silt which forms the topsoil (104, 204, 304). Within the manège this had been compacted and as it was covered by the manège itself it now drains more slowly than the area outside. Consequently the soil is darker and harder inside the manège, but is clearly the same soil. In trenches 1 and 2 the topsoil was 0.30m thick above the natural gravels (outside the manège), and 0.45m thick in trench 3. In the three trenches this soil produced a total of four sherds of pottery. Three were of 19th century date (trenches 1 and 2) and one was a body sherd of Severn Valley ware, probably of the later 1st or early 2nd century.

Within the manège the sequence consisted of a woven polyvinyl membrane (103, 203, 303) laid above the topsoil, which had been lowered by on average 0.10m-0.15m, above which was hardcore (102, 202, 302)0.12m-0.15m thick, with sand (101, 201, 301) 0.15-0.18m thick forming the surface of the riding school.

In trenches 2 and 3 drainage for the manège was seen. This consisted of the continuation of a polyvinyl membrane above the cut (207, 307) filled with hardcore

(206, 306) and covered by a further layer of polyvinyl membrane. Both drainage trenches continued deep enough to cut into the natural sands and gravels, for a depth of 0.1m-0.2m. The trenches were dug to a nominal width of 0.6m.

According to Mr Stuart Cartwright, who constructed the manège, the drainage consisted of three parallel trenches, joining at the south-western end of the school. This latter drain is outside the school. A photograph of the laying of this drainage, seen by the present author, confirms this layout, which is shown on Fig. 2.

5 Assessment of the damage to the monument

If the scheme for the construction of the manège had been subject to an application for Scheduled Monument Consent prior to the works having been carried out it would have been appropriate to carry out an initial evaluation. The result of this would probably have recommended a watching brief during the site strip and the excavation for the drainage. This would have allowed any threatened archaeological remains to have been identified, excavated, recorded and reported.

As only small trenches were opened it is not possible to be certain that the nature of the monument is similar throughout the manège. Nevertheless, as the three trenches had very similar stratigraphy and yielded similar artefactual information a high level of confidence is given to the assessment described below. The single sherd of Roman pottery supports the currently accepted dating of the use of the monument, and the scarcity suggests that the archaeology is not intensive on the site.

The construction of the manège itself has not penetrated through the topsoil and has compacted only about 30mm of this. It has increase the water-holding capacity of the soil. It is therefore considered that the works have had no impact, or at worst a negligible impact, on any archaeologically significant remains.

The drainage dug for the manège may have had an impact on the archaeological resource as the trenches penetrated up to 0.2m (as seen) of the natural sands and gravels which lie directly beneath the topsoil. It is of note that no layers exist between the topsoil and natural in the parts of the trenches where this was tested. This suggests that Roman surfaces are either lost throughout the area of the manège or have been severely truncated. This loss is due to historic cultivation of the land and not to the construction of the manège.

No archaeological features were seen cut through the sands and gravels in the drainage trenches. Only a very small area was seen and this may not be representative. However, the general lack of Roman material (pottery etc.) seen in the site assessment tends to suggest that any remains are not extensive. As Roman surfaces appear to have been largely lost previously, it is only deep features which are likely to have been affected by the recent drainage. Although this may have lost some significant information – if such exists – it is considered that as the damage is localised it is highly unlikely that it would have compromised interpretation of the site in any future investigation.

6 Acknowledgements

Marches Archaeology is grateful to the client, Mr and Mrs Standish, for their assistance during the fieldwork; to Stuart Cartwright for digging the overburden, assisting with the site survey and for showing photographs of the construction of the manège; to David Cartwright for his assistance with the excavation and cleaning of the soils and for his enthusiasm; and to staff of English Heritage (West Midlands Region) for information related to the scheduled ancient monument.

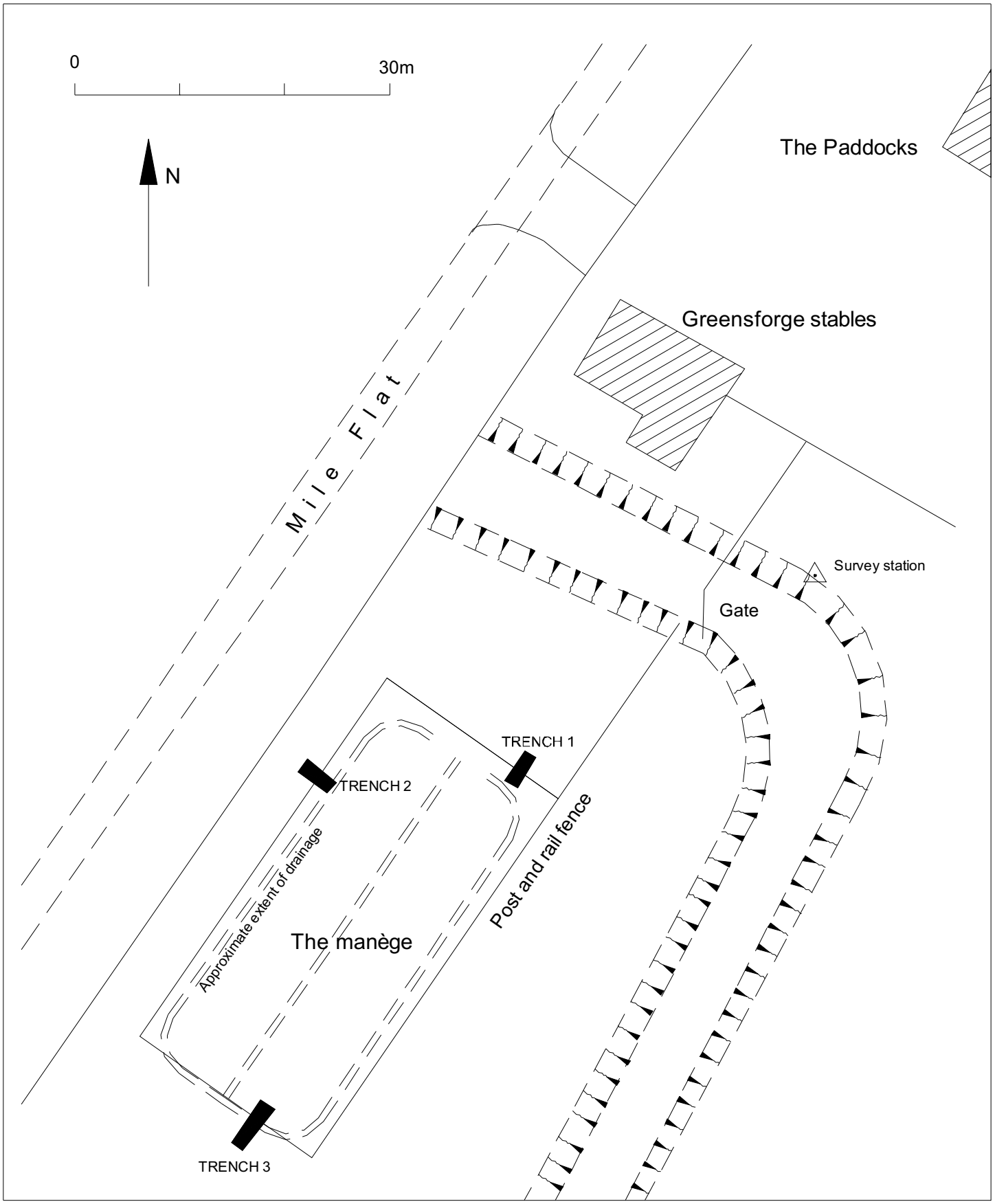

Fig.2: Location of the trenches

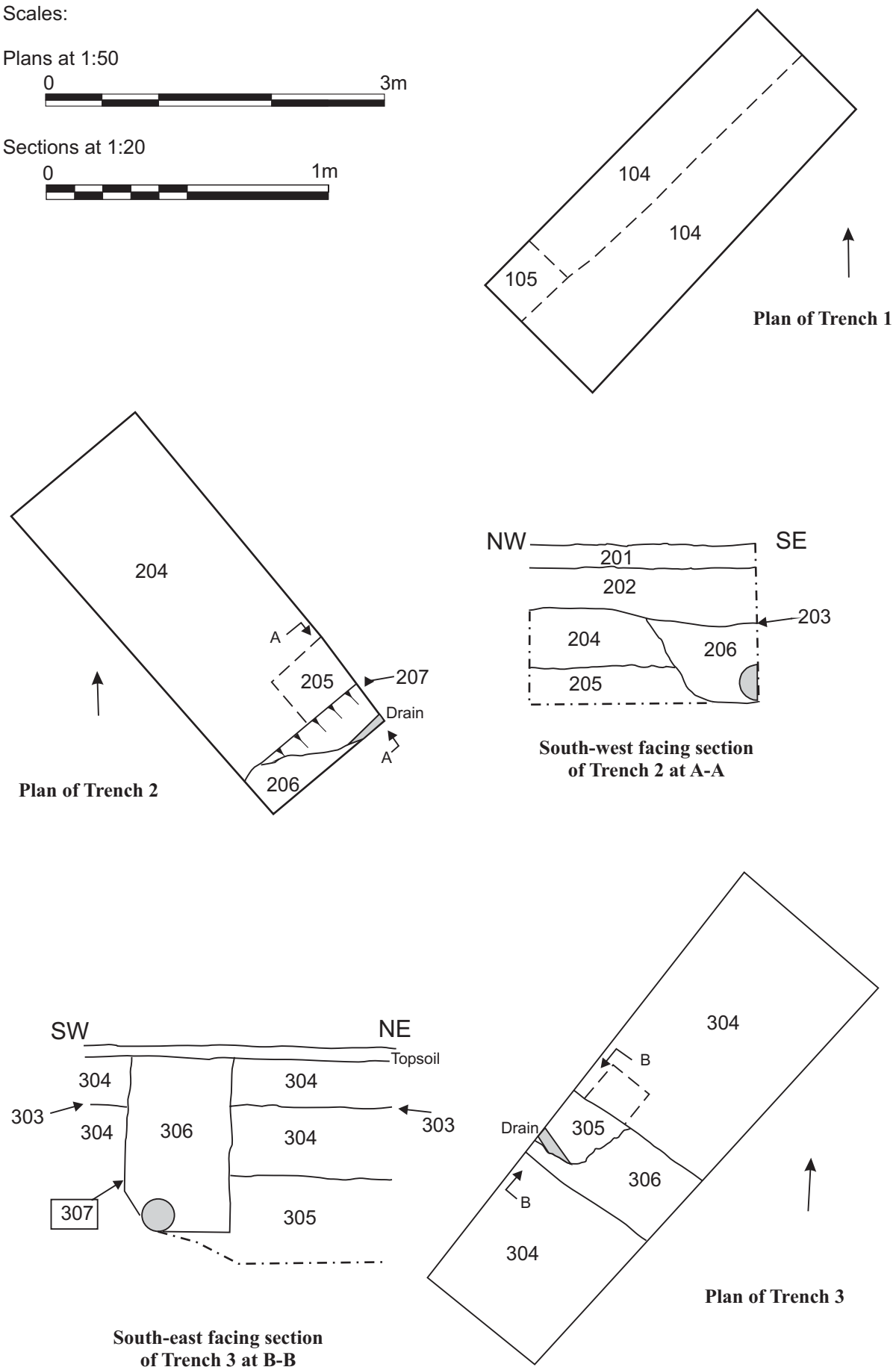

Fig. 3: Plans and sections of the trenches

Plate 1: Trench 1

Plate 2: Trench 2

Plate 4: Trench 3

Plate 3: Trench 2, detail of subsoil and drain