

AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION OF A PROPOSED HOUSING DEVELOPMENT AT FRONT STREET, PORTESHAM, DORSET (NGR SY 603861)

1. SUMMARY

The archaeological evaluation of a proposed housing development at Front Street, Portesham, comprised the machine excavation of three trenches in areas likely to be directly affected by proposed groundworks for house construction. All trenches contained deep soil deposits of around 1.20m, likely to represent build-up for a Medieval lynchet, which in trenches 1 and 2 was sealing an earlier, probable colluvial deposit. Natural subsoil was not reached in any trench. Below the lynchet material on the west side of the site in trench 3, was an occupation layer from the Romano-British period, of probable 3rd to 4th-century date. Artefacts recovered from this layer include native and imported finewares, as well as local Black-Burnished Coarseware, including at least one piece which had been vitrified as a result of overfiring. This indicates the presence of a high temperature kiln, furnace or oven on or adjacent to the site, which may have been used for an industrial process, possibly pottery manufacture. Any future disturbance to the most significant archaeological remains present on the site is largely dependent on the nature and depth of groundworks associated with the development, with these remains likely to be present below the Medieval lynchet infill, from a depth of around 1.20m below the existing ground level.

2. INTRODUCTION

2.1 This report presents the results of an archaeological field evaluation of a proposed housing development at the junction of Front Street and Back Street, Portesham, Dorset (Planning Application WDDC 1/E/95/588). The work was commissioned by Lawray Partnership, on behalf of their clients, Ilchester Estates Ltd. The site location is shown on Fig. 1.

2.2 The evaluation was requested by West Dorset District Council, as advised by the County Archaeological Officer, to assist in determining the planning application. The work was carried out by AC *archaeology* on 18 July 1996.

2.3 The evaluation follows on from a detailed archaeological and historical, largely desk-based, study (Cox and Chandler 1996), which has identified that the site lies within 50m of the discovery of two Romano-British cist burials (DCC SMR Portesham 80). There is evidence for the presence of a former dovecote on the site, although it will not be affected by the proposed housing scheme.

2.4 The proposed development area is situated towards the base of a prominent south-facing slope, occupying an area thought to contain the remains of a Medieval lynchet. Much of the area is now overgrown with dense vegetation, with a garden lawn on the west-side of the site.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 The evaluation comprised the machine excavation of three trenches, with their positions determined in advance by Dorset County Council Archaeology Section. The position of each trench is shown on Fig. 1. There were minor on-site amendments to this layout, including shortening trench 1 and 2 due to problems with machine access. Trench 3 was lengthened accordingly to maintain the same percentage sample.

3.2 Topsoil and overburden were removed by mini-excavator. The presence of very hard ground and large roots necessitated the use of a narrower toothed bucket, with the trenches then subsequently hand-cleaned.

3.3 It was not possible to hand-excavate any archaeological deposits due to the depth of trenches below the safe working limit. Work was therefore limited to cleaning, recording and the collection of artefacts to confirm date of deposits.

3.4 All recording was carried out using the standard AC *archaeology* recording system, comprising written, graphic and photographic records.

3.5 A hand-held auger was used in the area of the former dovecote, in an attempt to locate any structural remains. A depth of 700mm was reached through redeposited soil, until the presence of stone or flint prevented further investigation.

4. RESULTS

All trenches were characterised by the presence of deep soil deposits interpreted as Medieval lynchet material. Natural subsoil was not encountered in any trench, although probable colluvial deposits were present below the lynchet material. A summary for each trench is given in Sections 4.1 - 4.3 below, with detailed sections of trenches 2 and 3 included as Fig. 2.

4.1 Trench 1

This trench was aligned approximately north to south with dimensions of 3.0 x 0.8m and a maximum depth of 1.30m. As with all trenches, the investigation failed to reach natural subsoil, with the depositional sequence described in Table 1 below. No artefacts were recovered from specific layers, or from spoilheap collection.

| Context | Depth below ground surface | Description | Interpretation |
|---------|----------------------------|---|--|
| 100 | 0-400mm | Dark greyish brown silty clay loam soil containing occasional natural flint fragments and nodules and frequent root disturbance | Topsoil |
| 101 | 400-1200mm | Extensive layer of dark brown silty clay containing occasional natural flint fragments and nodules, frequent chalk fragments and frequent limestone fragments | Redeposited soil, possibly representing lynchet material, or soil build-up against retaining wall at the front of the site |
| 102 | 1200-1300mm + | Layer of creamy-brown clay silt containing frequent chalk flecks and occasional natural flint fragments | Probable colluvial deposit of unknown depth |

Table 1 : The Depositional Sequence for Trench 1

4.2 Trench 2

This trench was aligned approximately north to south with dimensions of 6.50 x 1.10m, and excavated to a maximum depth of 1.35m onto a probable colluvial deposit. The general depositional sequence for this trench is shown in Table 2 below with a detailed section shown on Fig. 2. This trench contained a possible pit of Medieval or later date, only visible in the east-facing section. F203 showed in section as having a width of 800mm and depth of 420mm, with its profile showing as moderately sloping onto a rounded base. Its fill (context 204) was composed of a dark-brown silty clay containing rare natural flint fragments and nodules, occasional chalk flecks and rare charcoal flecks. No artefacts were recovered.

| Context | Depth below ground surface | Description | Interpretation |
|---------|----------------------------|--|--|
| 200 | 0-600mm | Dark brown silty clay loam soil containing occasional natural flint fragments and nodules and frequent root disturbance | Topsoil |
| 201 | 600-870mm | Extensive layer of dark brown silty clay containing very frequent natural flint fragments and nodules, occasional chalk and limestone fragments and rare charcoal flecks | Redeposited soil, possibly representing lynchet fill |
| 202 | 870-1200mm | Layer composed of mid to dark brown silty clay containing occasional natural flint fragments and nodules, rare chalk fragments and rare charcoal flecks | Soil accumulation, possibly lynchet material |
| 205 | 1200-1400mm+ | Layer of dark orange-brown slightly silty clay containing occasional flint fragments and nodules and pockets of creamy-white chalky clay silt | Probable colluvial deposit |

Table 2 : The Depositional Sequence for Trench 2

4.3 Trench 3

This trench was located in the lawn area on the west side of the site. It was aligned north to south with dimensions of 6.50 x 0.80m, and excavated to a maximum depth of 1.30m. Beneath the lynchet build-up (context 301) was a probable occupation layer (context 302) of Romano-British date. This layer was composed of a dark grey, very compact clay with a maximum depth of 150mm. This layer contained a large area of charcoal located in a continuous band in the southern half of the trench and in smaller patches in the northern half. The nature of the layer and quantity of finds, does suggest in situ occupation rather than a colluvial deposit. Artefacts recovered include imported and local pottery and worked flint. The full depositional sequence for this trench is shown in Table 3 below.

| Context | Depth below ground surface | Description | Interpretation |
|---------|----------------------------|--|--|
| 300 | 0-250mm | Layer of dark greyish-brown silty clay loam, containing occasional natural flint fragments and nodules, rare chalk fragments and rare charcoal flecks | Topsoil and turf |
| 301 | 250-1200mm | Extensive, fairly uniform layer of very dark greyish-brown silty clay containing occasional natural flint fragments and nodules, rare chalk fragments and rare charcoal flecks | Probable lynchet soil |
| 302 | 1200-1350mm | Layer of dark grey clay containing frequent charcoal | Romano-British occupation layer |
| 303 | 1350-1500mm+ | Layer of creamy-brown, crumbly chalky silt containing frequent flint fragments | Redeposited natural, probably colluvium. Limited investigation by auger (150mm) failed to reveal full depth of deposit. Small worked flint flake recovered |

Table 3 : The Depositional Sequence for Trench 3

5. THE FINDS

5.1 A summary of all finds recovered is given in Table 4.

| Trench | Context | Romano-British Pottery | | Medieval Pottery | | Worked Flint | | Others | | Comments |
|--------|---------|------------------------|-----|------------------|-----|--------------|-----|--------|-----|--|
| | | No. | Wt. | No. | Wt. | No. | Wt. | No. | Wt. | |
| 2 | 202 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 6 | 3 | 44 | 0 | 0 | includes SF1 Flint tool |
| 2 | 205 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 5 | 77 | 0 | 0 | |
| 2 | 206 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 35 | 9 | 169 | 0 | 0 | Flint includes flake core |
| 3 | 301 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 4 | 1 | 2 | Ceramic Building Material |
| 3 | 302 | 14 | 216 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 17 | 0 | 0 | |
| 3 | 304 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 43 | 1 | 20 | Vitrified ceramic possibly overfired pottery |
| TOTALS | | 15 | 217 | 5 | 41 | 22 | 354 | 2 | 22 | |

Table 4 : Finds Quantification by Number / Weight in Grams

5.2 The Pottery

A total of 20 pieces weighing 259 grams was recovered from the evaluation. All pieces recovered from Trench 3 are of Romano-British date, with the majority recovered from the probable occupation layer (context 302). Non-local types recovered include an imported samian-ware bowl fragment, New Forest Ware mortarium/bowl fragment and a rimsherd from a New Forest Ware bowl or cup. These date to around the 3rd or 4th-century AD. The local fabrics comprised Black-Burnished Ware, and included jars and flat-rimmed bowl types dating to the 2nd or 3rd century AD, as well as some small fragments of undiagnostic coarsewares. Probably the most significant find from the layer was a large fragment of vitrified Black-Burnished Ware pottery, almost certainly indicating the presence of a high-temperature kiln, furnace or oven on or adjacent to the site, potentially evidence for pottery production or other type of industrial activity. A further vitrified fragment was recovered from spoilheap collection (context 304).

Medieval pottery was recovered from the probable lynchet infill and from spoilheap collection. These comprised orange, flint-tempered coarseware fabrics of undiagnostic forms.

5.3 Worked Flint

A total of 22 pieces weighing 354 grams was recovered from the evaluation. Most pieces showed a blue/grey patina and are likely to be derived from a local chalk source. Diagnostic elements include a single platform flake core and a probable flake knife (SF1) on a broad flake. The remaining components of this assemblage comprised predominantly broad waste flakes, although three pieces have been classified as retouched flakes. The presence of flint attributed to a flake technology, and the absence of any blade elements, does indicate a later Prehistoric, probably Bronze Age date for this assemblage. The prehistoric worked flint recovered, should be considered to be largely residual, and does not indicate activity of this date on the site, as much of the material was within lynchet soil and colluvial deposits.

6. CONCLUSIONS

6.1 The evaluation has confirmed the presence of extensive, deep soil deposits, with a consistent depth of around 1.20m in all trenches, and therefore likely to exist across the whole site. It is probable, based on the local topography, that these deposits represent lynchet build-up, which may have been landscaped to form a broad level terrace at a later date. The artefact and stratigraphical evidence indicates a likely Medieval date for the lynchet's formation. Below this deposit was redeposited material, probably colluvium, with natural subsoil not reached in any trench.

6.2 Below the lynchet soil in trench 3, at a depth of around 1.20m below the current ground surface, was a probable occupation layer of Romano-British date. Significant quantities of pottery were recovered from this layer, which include imported finewares and local coarsewares. It is therefore likely that much of the west side of the site could contain important evidence for Romano-British occupation dating to the 3rd or 4th-century AD. Although there were no conclusive archaeological features in trenches 1 and 2, it is possible that deposits may extend into these areas.

6.3 Perhaps the most significant finds in trench 3 were two fairly large sherds of vitrified ceramic, likely to be overfired Black-Burnished Ware pottery. This suggests the presence of a kiln, furnace or oven, possibly indicating pottery production or other type of industrial activity, on or adjacent to the site.

6.4 Any disturbance to these potentially significant archaeological remains, is largely dependent on the nature and depth of groundworks associated with the future development of the site. The probable lynchet soil is likely to be present across the whole of the site to a depth of around 1.20m below the existing ground level, with archaeological features or deposits potentially present at this depth or below. If normal-depth strip footings are used then it may be possible to avoid any disturbance to the significant Roman-British levels.

7. REFERENCES

Cox, P.W. and Chandler, J., 1996, *A Preliminary Archaeological Assessment of a Proposed Housing Development at Front Street, Portesham, Dorset*, unpublished client report ref. 2096/1/0

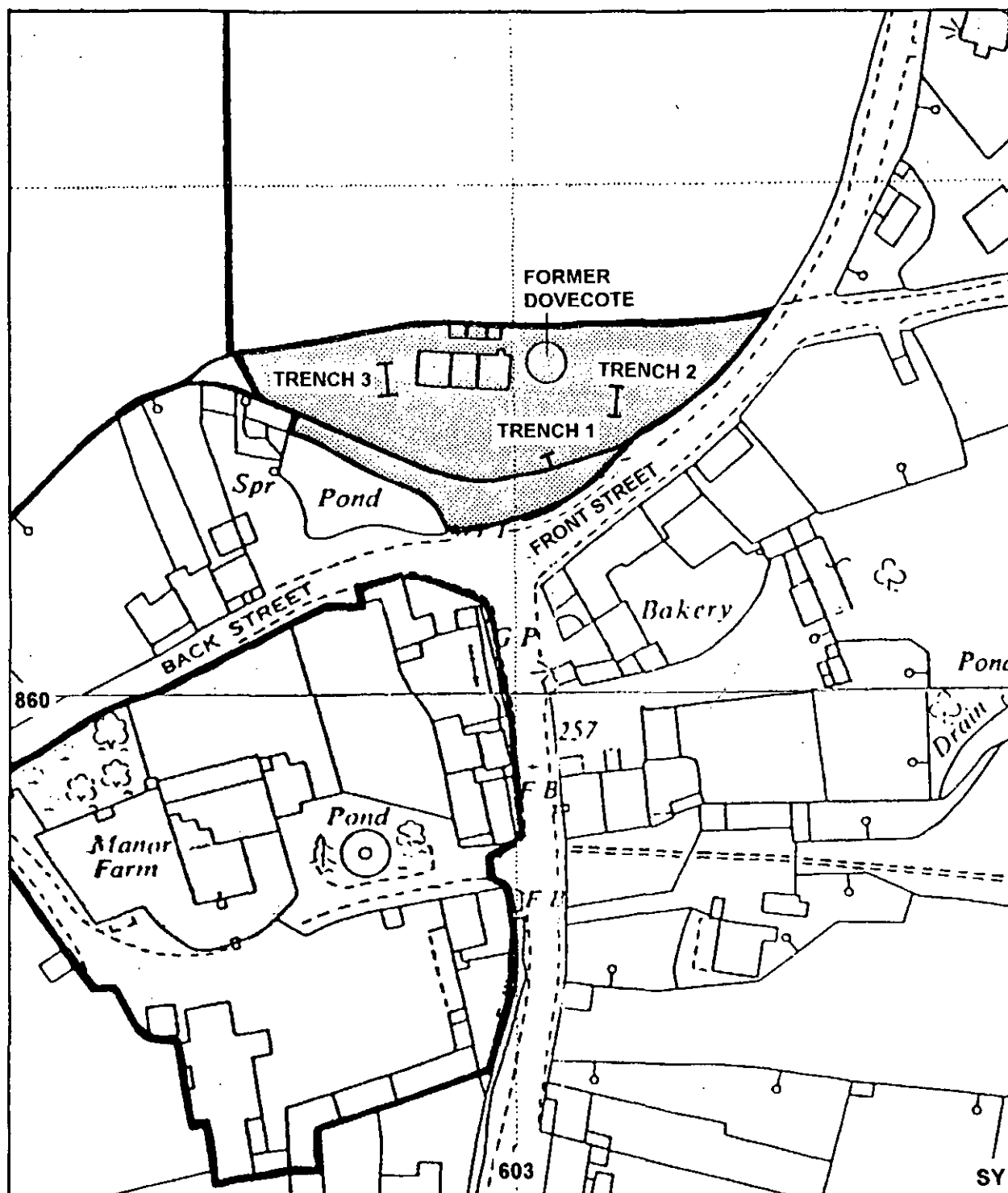


FIG. 1 : SITE AND TRENCH LOCATION PLAN 1 : 1 250

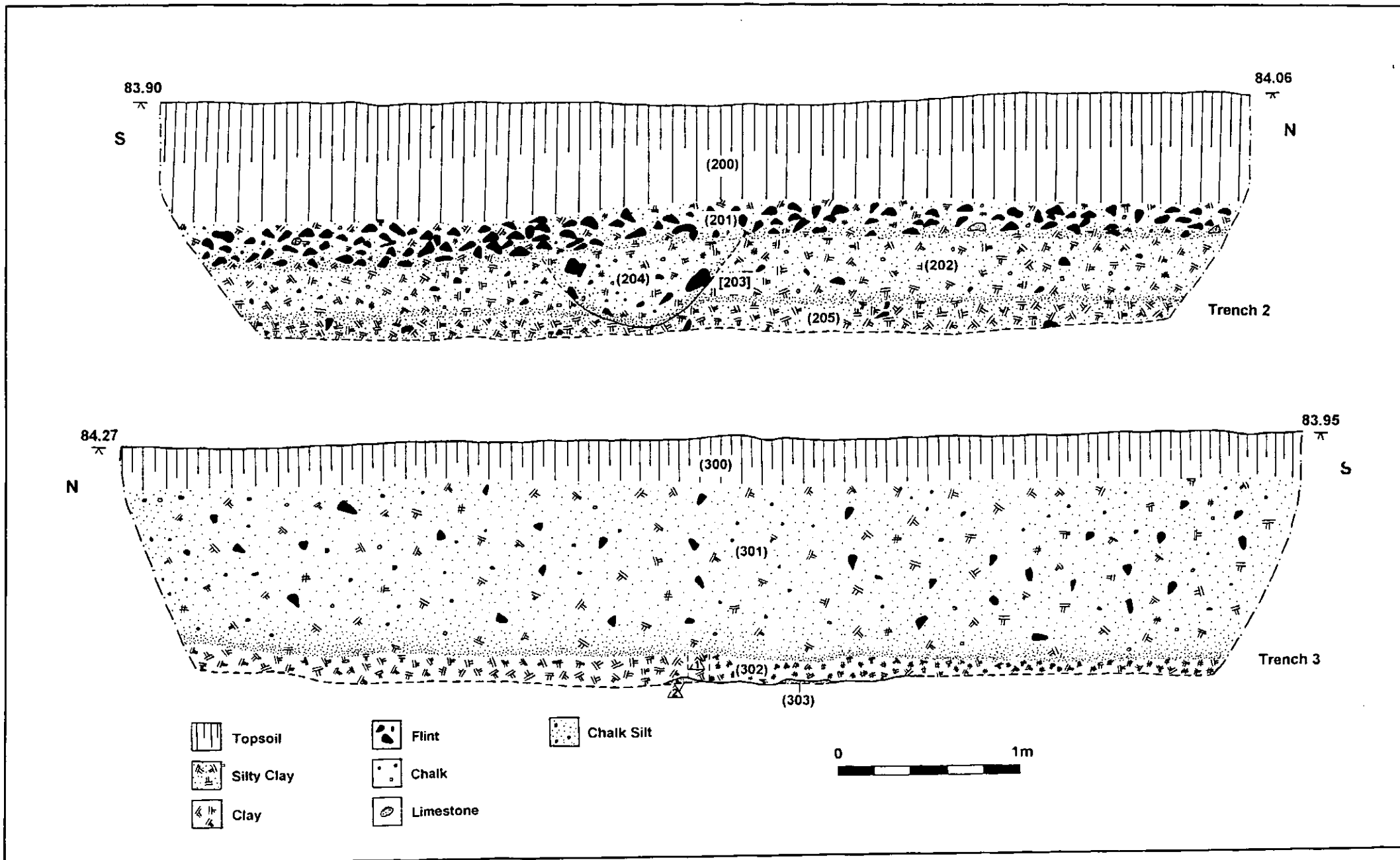


FIG. 2 : SECTIONS OF TRENCHES 2 AND 3