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ROYAL GEORGE HOTEL, BIRDLIP
GLOS 3738

A report on an archaeological evaluation
in October 1990.

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Contents

1. Summary
2. Introduction
3. Aims
4. Method
5. Analysis
6. Discussion
7. Conclusions
8. Recommendation
9. Bibliography

1. Summary

- 1.1 An archaeological evaluation was carried out in the grounds of the Royal George Hotel, Birdlip, Gloucestershire, in advance of the construction by Whitbread Retail Property Development of an extension to the hotel. The evaluation was undertaken by Gloucestershire County Council Archaeology Section.
- 1.2 The evaluation revealed Roman stratigraphy commencing between 0.10m and 0.15m below the present ground surface (288.27m OD - 288.40m OD). Roman features were found in all excavated trenches suggesting their survival across the entire area of the proposed extension. In the eastern and central areas of the proposed development Roman features consisted of a cobbled surface lying directly above the limestone bedrock. Trenches, walls and floor surfaces indicative of several phases of domestic occupation were found in the western part of the site.

2. Introduction

- 2.1 The evaluation site lies on the edge of the Cotswold escarpment (SO 92491444), in the village of Birdlip. The hotel is situated in extensive grounds on the northern side of the village street, the old A417.
- 2.2 Development proposals (ref. 89T/3296/01/02) were submitted to Tewkesbury Borough Council by Whitbread Retail Property Development. As the site is within an area of archaeological interest, registered on the County Sites and Monuments Record (Glos 3738, 4934, 4933, and 9742) planning consent was granted subject to appropriate arrangements for archaeological recording. A proposed programme for evaluation was drawn up by the County Archaeologist (Wills 1990) and agreed by Tewkesbury Borough Council and Plumridge Knott Design for Whitbread.
- 2.3 The geology of the site is oolitic limestone, overlain in places by a thin layer of an orange silty clay. This is directly covered by a dark brown loam.
- 2.4 Birdlip is situated approximately half way between Cirencester (Roman Corinium) and Gloucester (Roman Glevum) on Ermin Street, the Roman road linking the two towns. A hoard of over 200 coins was found c 1890, and the remains of substantial Roman buildings in 1917-18, in the grounds of the Royal George. When further extensions to the building were planned in 1985-6 an archaeological evaluation, initiated by English Heritage (Guy 1986), identified cobbled surfaces covered by Roman building debris. No further traces of such deposits were however identified during the subsequent building works (Isaac 1987), except in one area where in situ deposits relating to domestic occupation were reported during construction of the staircase in the southwestern part of this extension (D. Evans, Manager, pers comm.).

3. Aims

- 3.1 The aims of the evaluation were to locate and record archaeological deposits and to determine their significance, in order to enable the impact of the development on the archaeological remains to be assessed and to allow recommendations to be made on the appropriate recording of any deposits before destruction.

4. Method

- 4.1 Four trenches were excavated by hand, within the area of the proposed extension, on the upper terrace of the site northwest of the hotel.

Trench 1 was 2m x 2m and was positioned 3m x 4m west of the northwest corner of the 1985/6 extension. The objective was to evaluate the southern corner of the proposed development.

Trench 2 was 2m x 2m and lay 10m northwest of the north wall of the 1985/6 extension and 6m due north of Trench 1. The objective was to evaluate the centre of the proposed development.

Trench 3 was 2m x 2m and lay 16m northwest of the north wall of the 1985/6 extension and 6m due north of Trench 2. The objective was to evaluate the northern corner of the proposed development.

Trench 4 was 2m x 2m and lay 6m due west of Trench 2. The objective was to evaluate the northwestern corner of the proposed development.

- 4.2 Excavation, and recording consisting of photographic, drawn, and written records, were undertaken according to standard archaeological procedure.

5. Analysis

5.1 Trench 1

Two phases of archaeological deposits were present:

Modern: The topsoil loam (context number 100) was 0.24m deep, and overlay two cut features: a small 'V' shaped pit (114) and a badly disturbed robber trench (112). The fills of both were very similar, composed of brown loam with fragments of mortar, and Roman tile. These in turn overlay a 0.16m layer of dark brown loam containing mortar, plaster, small limestone fragments, Roman pottery sherds, and bone (101). A bronze coin of Constantinus (317-324) was found in this layer. Two sherds of medieval pottery which were recovered may be the result of later contamination (see 6.1).

Roman: A 0.26m wide x 0.10m deep foundation of limestone blocks set in light brown mortar, with a residue of white plaster on its surface (103), was situated in the southeastern part of the trench. The northwestern part of this feature had been robbed out. The foundation overlay a layer of crushed mortar and limestone (some worked stone), plentiful broken roof tile and painted wall plaster (five colours were identified) (105). A bronze coin of the 4th century came from this layer which was 0.43m deep and filled a 'T' shaped trench (110). The trench had slightly sloping sides and a flat base and was aligned northsouth - eastwest.

Remnants of floor surfaces were sealed by 103 and had been cut by 110. These comprised a compact level layer of mortar and agglomerates (115), above a layer of loam, pebbles, charcoal, and ceramic material (116), which sealed another compact level layer of mortar, pebbles, and limestone (117). To the east of 110 a grey loamy layer (106), 0.18m deep, lay above two compact level layers of mortar above a layer of coarser mortar (108). To the north of 110 a thin layer of greyish brown loam (104) overlay a yellow gravelly clay (109) which sealed the layered limestone bedrock (111).

5.2 Trench 2

Two phases of archaeological deposits were present:

Modern: The topsoil loam (200) was 0.14m deep and sealed a 0.10m thick deposit of light grey loam (204).

Roman: A 0.35m deep layer of small limestone pieces, mortar, and broken Roman tile with some loam (201), containing a bronze coin of Constantinus (AD 317-324), was sealed by 204. This overlay and was revetted by a 'bank' of limestone rubble, worked stone and tiles which lay along the northeast side of the trench. These layers were on top of a level surface of worn cobbles (c 0.02m) and limestone (202). A bronze coin of Claudius II (AD 260-270) lay on top of the surface. An area of approximately 0.70m in diameter (203) showed signs of burning (reddening of the stone), and disturbance to the surface of 202, although there was no sign of ash. The cobbles directly overlay the limestone bedrock (205).

5.3 Trench 3

Two phases of archaeological deposits were present:

Modern: The topsoil loam (300) was 0.10m deep. In the northwestern part of the trench it overlay a 0.12m layer of tarmac and breeze blocks (301). This lay in a depression in the surface of a 0.18m layer of compact broken and disintegrated limestone (303). Both 301 and 303 had a level surface. The underlying 0.18m layer of greyish brown loam (302) contained broken Roman tile, large to medium limestone pieces, and some mortar. A few medieval pot sherds were recovered from the surface of this material.

Roman: A level surface (0.20m thick) of worn limestone pieces with some small (0.03m - 0.05m) cobbles (304) directly sealed the limestone bedrock (305). The worn surface of 305 was clearly visible in large areas where 304 had been completely worn away. A few small sherds of Roman pottery lay on this surface.

5.4 Trench 4

Two phases of archaeological deposits were present:

Modern: The topsoil (400) was 0.10m deep and overlay a narrow 'V' shaped trench (406), 0.17m wide and 0.23m deep, running north-south in the eastern part of the trench. The trench was filled with fine crushed mortar and a few limestone pieces (405). A small piece of galvanised pipe lay at its base.

In the northern corner of the excavation a layer of blue bricks set in concrete were observed in section (407). A 0.17m layer of limestone rubble in a matrix of disintegrated mortar lay below (401). This also included pieces of window glass, bottle glass, and blue and white glazed pottery.

A squarish pit (413), 0.40m deep, was in the eastern corner of the trench. Tree root damage obscured the level from which 413 had been cut. The pit, which had a flat base and vertical sides, was filled with dark brown loam (412) containing limestone rubble, Roman tile and a badly corroded coin (possibly Roman).

Roman: The large rubble (401) overlay a 0.24m thick layer of smaller rubble lying in a matrix of yellowish loam (402). Pea grits lay at the base of this layer. A single coursed wall (409), 0.87m wide, of mortared stone blocks ran east-west for 0.40m from the eastern side of the trench. The 'ghost' of this wall was visible in a bed of yellow mortar for a further 0.55m, at which point it was cut by a pit (413). The wall overlay a foundation of roughly dumped limestone rubble (410), which filled a trench with vertical sides and a sloping base, approximately 0.15m deep (411). Remnants of mortar, 0.01m thick, were observed south of the wall (408). North of the wall lay a sloping bank of clay and mortar (414). To the south the wall seemed to cut two badly preserved white plaster surfaces lying on top of one another (403). The upper surface was approximately 0.02m thick and showed signs of extensive burning which in places had burnt through to the layer below. Nails were found directly on this surface. Sandwiched between the two layers of plaster were Roman roof tile (tegulae). These were badly broken up but in two places appeared to have been deliberately positioned.

Below the plaster layers was a worn cobbled surface (403). This layer was not completely exposed in the course of the evaluation.

6. Discussion

6.1 Trench 1

Modern: The small pit (114) and robber trench (112) were of recent origin. The latter may relate to the 1917-18 robbing of the Roman walls recorded about this position on the OS map (1:2500, 1973). The exact position of the medieval sherds was not recorded but they were probably close to the surface of 101 and it is therefore possible that the major part of this layer was Roman.

Roman: Two phases of Roman buildings were identified. The latest phase comprised a partially robbed-out wall foundation with remnants of a plaster floor. This overlay the destruction rubble of an earlier phase.

The destruction rubble filled a 'T'-Shaped construction trench which had been robbed of its wall stone. The fill of the trench suggested the earlier building had a tiled roof and painted wall plaster. Layers of plaster flooring lay on either side of one arm of the trench, implying the floors of the two 'rooms' were relaid at least twice. The upper level was roughly the same in both rooms (287.91m OD). A loam layer outside the trench may have been a remnant of external ground material.

The coin evidence suggests that the second building phase dated to the early-to-mid 4th Century.

6.2 Trench 2

Modern: No features.

Roman: Two phases of activity were identified.

The later phase consisted of a tile and rubble bank, supporting a layer of smaller material. The layers which appears to have been deliberately dumped, perhaps to level the site. An early 4th Century coin may date this phase to the same period as the destruction of the earlier building in Trench 1.

The earlier phase consisted of a worn cobble surface which had a mid-to-3rd century coin embedded in it. The purpose of the burning on the surface, prior to the dumping, is unknown.

6.3 Trench 3

Modern: The tarmac, limestone and upper part of the underlying loam all appeared to be modern in date. The lower part of the loam layer had both medieval and Roman material within it.

Roman: The cobbled surface was very similar to the surface in Trench 2 but slightly less worn. Their respective levels were similar : 287.97m OD in Trench 2, 287.96m OD in Trench 3.

6.4 Trench 4

Modern: A number of cut features lay just below the topsoil including a square pit and waterpipe trench. These and the brick surface, probably part of a yard, seem likely to be associated with a nearby cottage now demolished.

Roman: Three phases of Roman activity occurred in this trench: a wall foundation, on the same alignment as the main walls in Trench 1, with an associated mortar floor, overlying two plaster floors. The construction trench for the wall had cut the plaster floors suggesting they belonged to an earlier phases. The floors had undergone some burning possibly prior to their disuse. A cobbled surface below the floors was the earliest phase observed. It is doubtful that it was associated with the surfaces seen in Trench 2-3, being 0.30m higher.

7. Conclusions

- 7.1 The evaluation suggests that Roman deposits survive over the whole of the area of the projected development, at depths of between 0.10m and 0.15m below the present ground surface (c 288.22m OD). The remains are best interpreted as a cobbled yard (Trenches 2-3), with buildings on its western side (Trenches 1-4), which were of at least two phases of construction. The building in Trench 4 had a much more complicated history which the evaluation was unable to unravel.

8. Recommendation

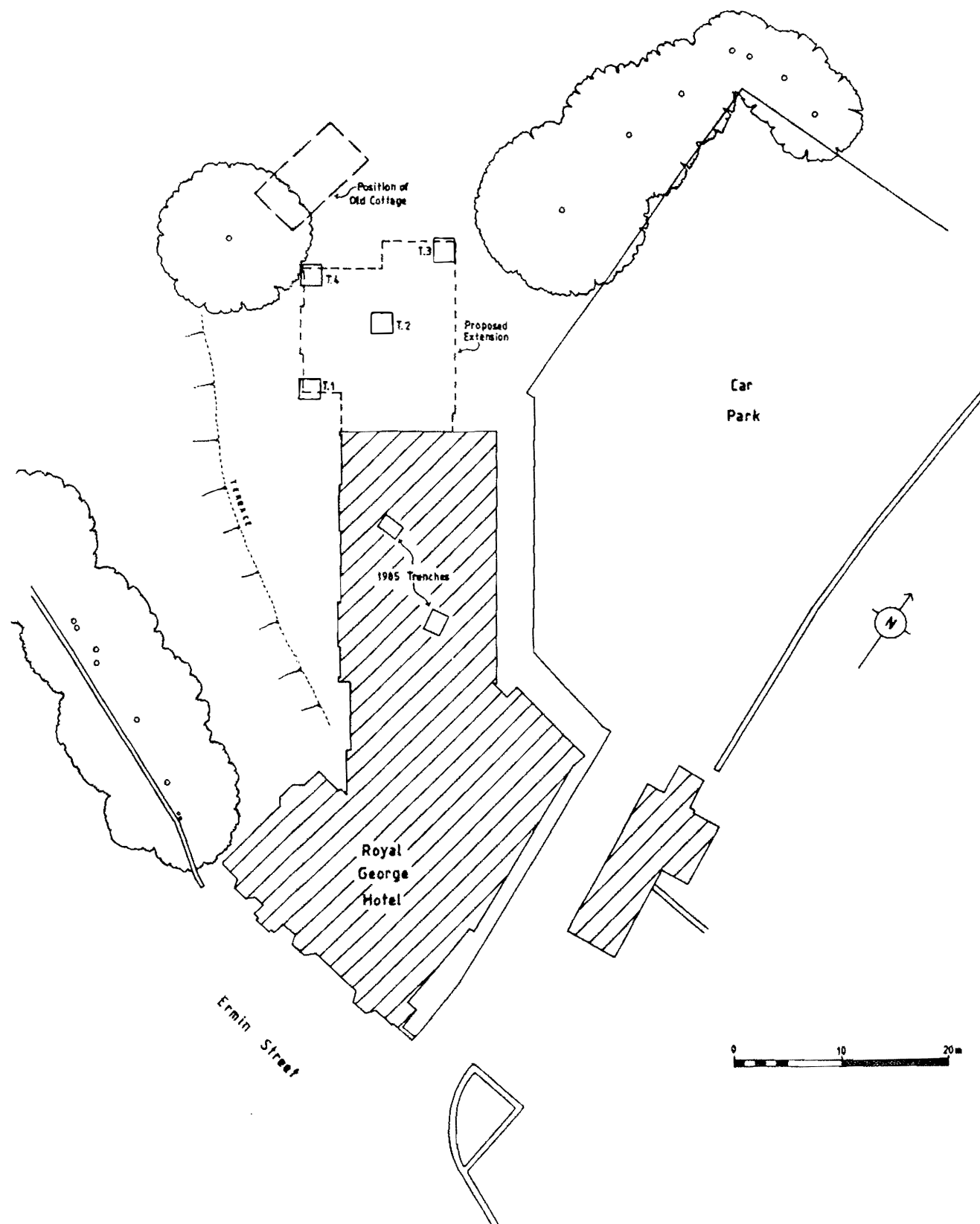
- 8.1 If groundworks for the proposed hotel extension will penetrate the existing ground surface to a depth of more than 288.22m OD, the identified archaeological levels of Roman date will be destroyed. Consideration should be given to minimising the effect of the works on the significant archaeological levels; where damage is unavoidable archaeological excavation of the area affected should be undertaken in advance of development to ensure that a full record of the archaeological evidence is compiled.

9. Bibliography

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- Baddeley, J. St.C. 1923 The Romano-British 'Stationes' on Irmine Street, TBGAS, 45, 294-95
- Isaac, J. 1987 Observations of development at the Royal George Hotel, Birdlip, Gloucestershire County Council SMR

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Figure 2
Location of evaluation trenches
Scale 1:200
Drawn 13.ni.90 ug



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Trench 1

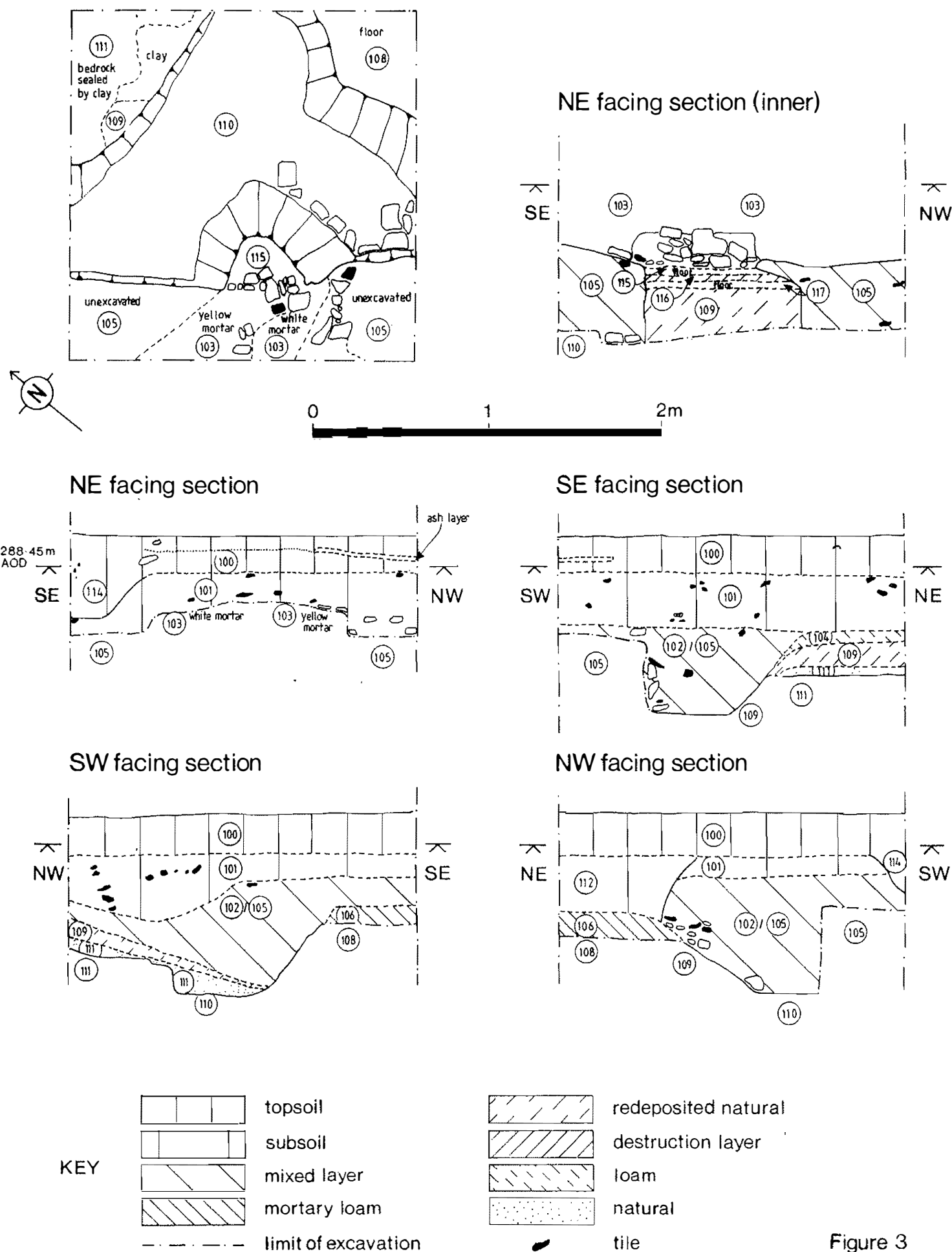
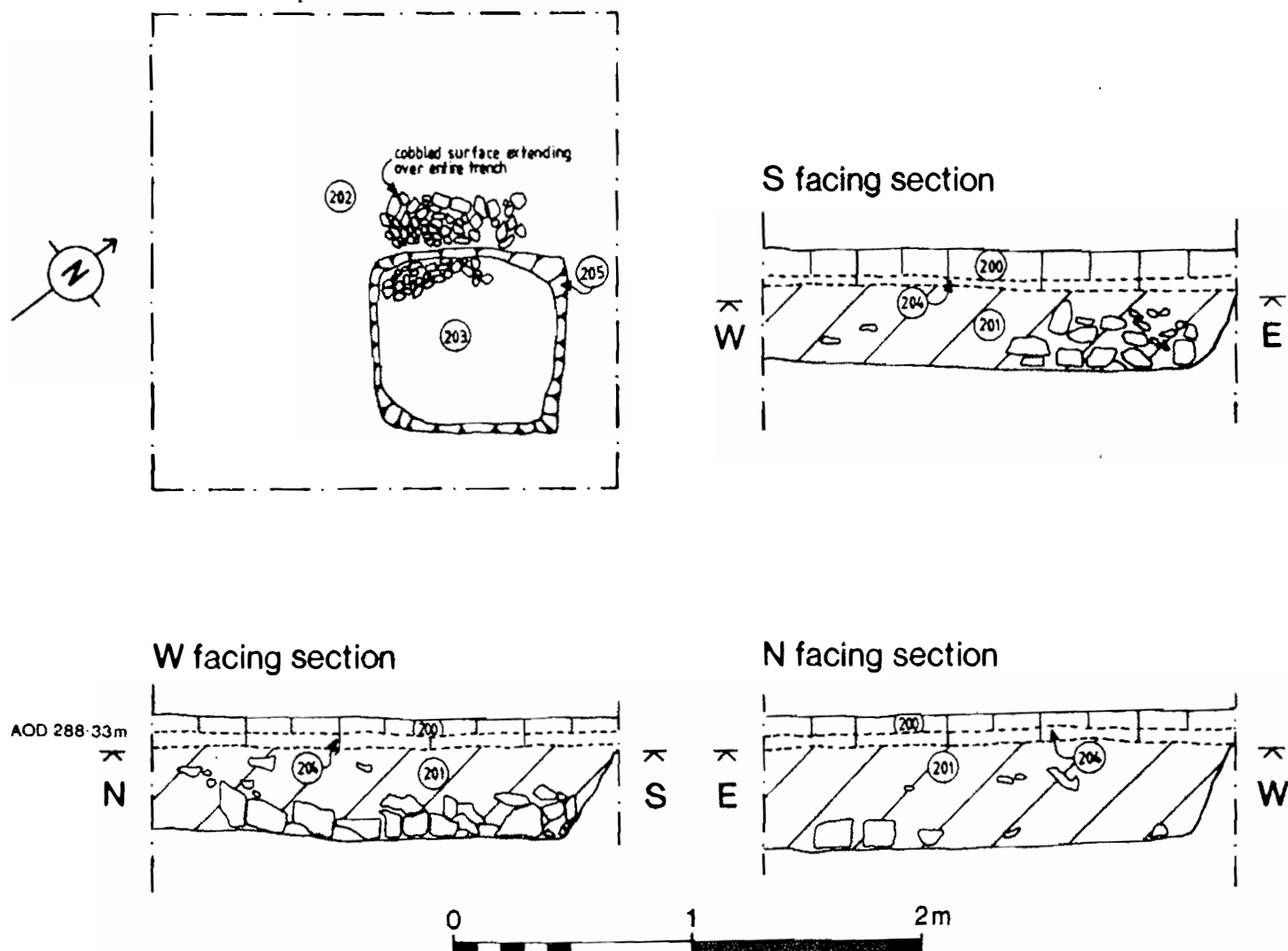


Figure 3

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Trench 2



Trench 3

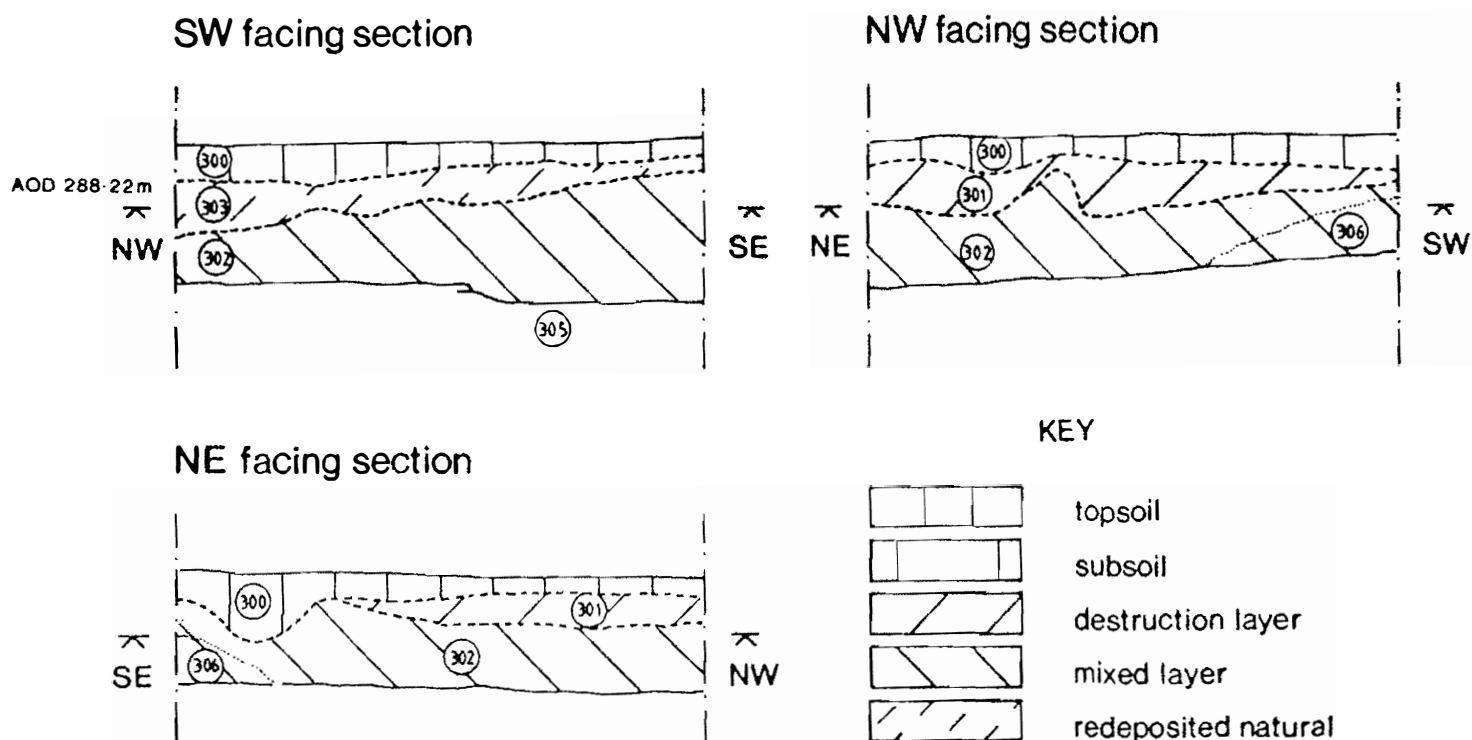


Figure 4

ROYAL GEORGE HOTEL, BIRDLIP 1990
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 Trench 4

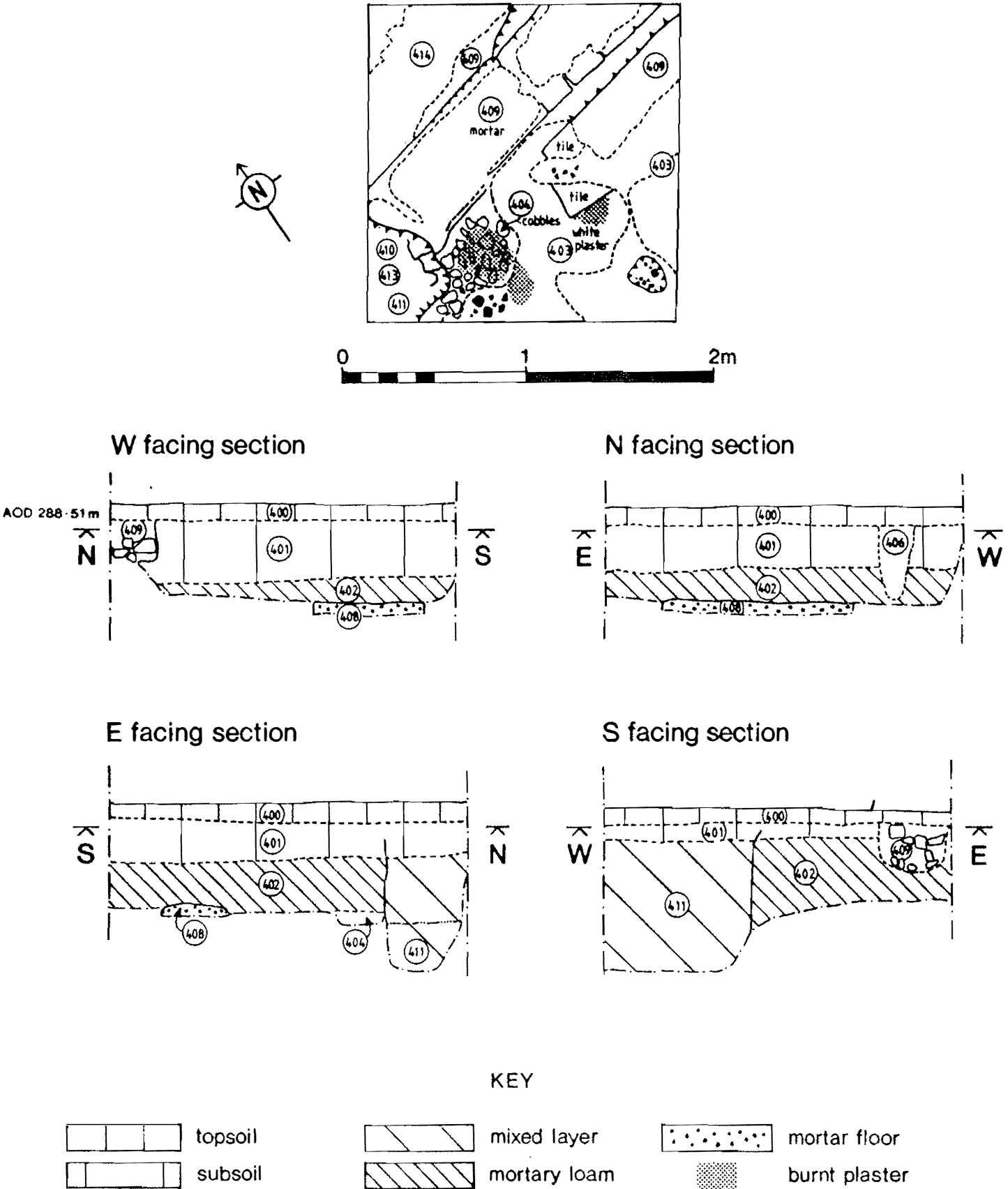


Figure 5