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**A Watching Brief at  
Wroxeter Hotel,  
Shropshire**

*Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit*



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Penny Ward,  
Natural and Historic Environment Group  
Shropshire County Council,  
Shirehall,  
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Shrewsbury

13<sup>th</sup> July 2001

Dear Penny,

Please find enclosed your copy of the report on the watching brief that I recently carried out at The Wroxeter Hotel in advance of the construction works on the site. As you will see, not exactly exciting reading but the job is at least done.

I hope everything is going well. I saw the advert for your Historic Landscape characterisation post – good to see you getting some back up at last!.

All the best,

Dr Roger White, BA, MIFA  
Project Manager

SHROPSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL COMMUNITY AND ENVIRONMENT SERVICES		
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Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit  
**Project No. 813**  
July 2001

**A Watching Brief at  
Wroxeter Hotel, Shropshire**

by  
Roger White, BA, PhD, MIFA

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## A WATCHING BRIEF AT WROXETER HOTEL, SHROPSHIRE

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## A WATCHING BRIEF AT WROXETER HOTEL, SHROPSHIRE

by Roger White

### Summary

A watching brief was carried out as a condition of Scheduled Monument Consent in advance of construction of an extension to the Wroxeter Hotel, Shropshire, at the southern end of the abandoned Roman City of *Viroconium* (County SAM 32; NGR SJ 5639 0821). Five interconnected trenches were excavated by machine under supervision. No archaeology of significance was discovered in Trenches 1, 4 and 5. At the east end of Trench 2 the base of a possible bank was found, with a marking out ditch behind it, and, on top of the bank, a hearth that was identified in section. A late 1<sup>st</sup> century body sherd of North Gaulish White Ware was found in association but not stratified. In Trench 3, an irregular paved surface was found at the west end. This was not structural and, since the water table lay immediately below, it was thought that the layer was hard-standing. A group of 2<sup>nd</sup> – 4<sup>th</sup> century pottery was found among the stones. Both hearth and paved surface were preserved *in situ*. The results are broadly similar to previous work on the Wroxeter Hotel (Buteux and Leach 1992) and suggest that there was little occupation here in the Roman period and none in the medieval period. However, the bank and its hearth might be associated with military-style activity of late 1<sup>st</sup> century date. If so, this north-south bank cannot have been part of the fortress since that lay to the north, but its true function and date cannot be determined on such a small sample. ESA 5719

### Circumstances of the excavation

The work described in this text was carried out to fulfil the conditions of the Scheduled Monument Consent granted in respect of works to extend the accommodation and facilities at the Wroxeter Hotel (Middleton 1999). The work was carried out in accordance with a brief written and supplied by M.D. Watson (Watson 1998), as stipulated in the SMC. Due to a misunderstanding, the work was commenced on site before the required three-week notification had elapsed. Once this had been realised, work was halted while consultations took place that led to an agreement between Dr Paul Stamper, Inspector of Ancient Monuments, and Michael Watson, County Archaeologist, that the Field Archaeology Unit be commissioned to carry out the work.

### Previous Work

The site at the Wroxeter Hotel (SJ 5639 0821) was evaluated in 1991 prior to the reconstruction of the existing extension to the hotel (Buteux and Leach 1992). As part of that work, a desk-based assessment was carried out to examine the history of previous work on the site and in the vicinity. This concluded that there had been no previous work within the hotel grounds but that significant archaeological discoveries had been made nearby. Notably, a mosaic had been discovered in 1827 near the junction of Patch Lane and Watling Street (c. SJ 56400840) and structural evidence had been seen in the extension of Topsy Cottage (SJ 56300833; Figure 1). It was also surmised that an early road existed, an extension of Watling Street dividing *insulae* 1, 4 and 8 from 2, 5 and 9, that passed just to the east of the hotel (*ibid.* fig.2). In consequence, it was expected that the evaluation might find evidence for early roadside settlement. ESA 5719

In the event, the three excavation trenches found little of interest. The most productive was Trench I which found Roman levels at 0.65m, with evidence for a number of pits and gullies of an insubstantial nature. Trench II largely replicated this evidence on a smaller scale, while Trench III found little of interest but considerable evidence for modern drainage disturbance before the water table was encountered at about 1.2m below ground level (Buteux and Leach 1992 fig.5). It was noted that there were substantial post-medieval levels accumulated on the site and that the natural ground level appeared to be sloping down to the south.

### **Methodology and Results.**

On arrival at site, an inspection of the existing groundworks was carried out. This comprised the standing foundations of the western half of the extension which had been completed to 1m height above ground level (Figures 2 and 3). The backfilled footings of these walls were inspected for Roman material, masonry, or varying soil colours but nothing of antiquity was noted. The eastern half of the footings had been laid out and Trench 1, immediately adjacent to the existing east wall of the extension, had been excavated to a depth of 1.5m. The excavation of the remaining four trenches was undertaken under watching brief conditions using a JCB Sitemaster IV, with a toothed-bucket attachment, 0.6m wide. Excavation of Trenches 2-4 proceeded from west to east to the depth stipulated in the brief (0.75m) but advice given by a borough building inspector made it clear that the level reached was not secure enough for the footings to comply with current building regulations. Since evidence had been detected in the excavation of the trench that the contexts being removed were modern, it was decided to proceed until natural and/or ancient archaeological levels were reached (generally at c. 1.5m). Contexts were recorded in section or *in situ* on proforma record cards and plans were produced on permatrace at scale of 1:20 and 1:50.

#### *Trench 1*

The contexts within Trench 1 were observed in section, since this trench had already been excavated. The overall depth of the trench was c. 1.5m, the width 1.4m, and the overall length was 6m. The north face of the trench was obscured by the concrete raft beneath the existing extension. The southern face of the trench was observed along its full length. Its fill consisted of two layers. The uppermost layer (1000) was 0.3m thick and comprised a spread of rubble and modern building material in a dark humic loam. Below this was a layer of homogenous dark grey silty loam (1001). Stratified beneath 1000, and 2.5m west of the eastern end of the trench, was a U-shaped cut (1002), 1m wide and 0.6m deep. Its fill (1003) was a mixed clay sand loam with charcoal flecks and occasional pieces of tile. Some rubble was concentrated towards the middle of the feature. Modern brick was recovered from this context and it is thought that these levels were modern in origin, perhaps reflecting previous ephemeral modern buildings on the site.

#### *Trench 2*

Trench 2 was of similar dimensions to, and was parallel with, Trench 1 and lay 3m south of it. The contexts seen being excavated by the machine (2000 and 2001) were identical to those seen in Trench 1 (1000, 1001) and modern material was found in both contexts. The uppermost layer is probably a modern levelling layer, while the underlying 2001 seems to be an homogenous, silty layer. Together these layers reached an overall depth of 1.5m (Figure 3, S1). The removal of 2001 revealed an homogenous layer of clay and, at the east end of the trench, two discrete contexts. The

first (2002) was a grey silty clay fill with some bone but no diagnostic or dateable finds that lay in a shallow scoop (2005), 0.3m wide and up to 0.05m deep. The cut projected from the northern edge of the Trench (Figure 3) so its full extent could not be determined. It may just have been a small pit or posthole, but viewing the fill in section it became apparent that the cut may have been more substantial than first appeared. This conclusion arose from the fact that on the eastern side of the cut the line of the feature was extended by a spread of red / buff clay (2003) that was 0.10m thick adjacent to cut 2005, but which thickened to 0.3m at the intersection of Trench 5 (Figure 3, S1). On the western side, an extension was less visible, due to the fact that the fill (2002) was virtually identical to the layer through which it was cut (2001). However, the possibility that 2005 was a more substantial cut of up to 0.4m in depth cannot be discounted. Equally, it may have been a relatively slight linear feature or pit cut into the tail of a low bank.

The clay layer (2003) extended over the whole of the base of the trench and is considered to be the natural subsoil. However, as noted already, the layer rose towards the east end and it was in the top of this context that a second archaeological context was noted, 2004. This was seen in section after it had been partially cut away by the machine. (Due to the use of a toothed bucket it was not possible to observe what was being excavated until the bucket was removed from the trench. The unexpected change of level in 2003 made it inevitable that the context was partly cut into. When Trench 5 was cut later on, it was ensured that 2003 and 2004 were not further disturbed.) Examination of the excavated portion of 2003/4 on the spoilheap produced a single sherd of North Gaulish White Ware (see below). Context 2004 was observed as a layer of buff-shading-to-orange clay 0.03m thick and 0.3m wide, interpreted as a hearth, an interpretation given more credence by the fired nature of the buff clay on the surface of the context (Figure 3, S2). The context was not investigated further and was protected from potential damage during the construction process by covering it with plastic sheet and hardboard. However, the disturbance by partial excavation will unfortunately have precluded the possibility of remanent magnetic dating of the hearth. Taken together, contexts 2002-5 appear to represent evidence for a (redeposited natural?) clay bank behind which may have been a ditch, and on top of which was a hearth. The sequence can be paralleled by numerous military sites where a clay bank often has a marking-out slot at the back and a hearth on the top (A. Johnson 1983, 200-1), as indeed has already been demonstrated at Wroxeter (S. Johnson 1976, fig. 4). If this is indeed the interpretation in this case, it is surprising since the area lies *c.* 200m south of the fortress (Webster 2001). The interpretation of these contexts will be further explored in the conclusion.

### *Trench 3*

Trench 3 was of similar dimensions to Trenches 1 and 2 and lay 4m south of, and parallel to, Trench 2. The initial contexts (3000 and 3002) were identical in character to those discussed for Trenches 1 and 2 (i.e. 1000 & 1001; 2000 & 2001). Below these contexts and at the west end of the trench, a substantial layer of rubble (3001) was encountered that was eventually traced for 3.0m east – west (Figure 3). Since the north and south limits of the rubble lay beneath their respective baulks, the full extent of the context remains unknown, although its continuation was possibly observed in Trench 4 (below). The context was hand-cleaned to determine its character and to retrieve dating material but was not otherwise disturbed. This cleaning demonstrated that the layer was not structural, nor was it noticeably worn *in situ*. Indeed, the level

of the individual stones changed abruptly in places, leading to the conclusion that this was merely a levelling layer. A small group of Roman pottery was recovered from among the stones (see below). No other contexts of significance were observed since the remainder of the trench was occupied by 3003, the continuation of 3002 at the same level as 3001.

#### *Trench 4*

Trench 4 lay 4.5m south of Trench 3 and was parallel to it. No contexts were allocated in this trench since the sides were too unstable to allow entry. However, observation from the baulk showed that a layer of stone similar 3001 to the north, and probably a continuation of it, was located at the west end of the trench. In this instance, the stone layer was removed, since the water table had been reached and solid ground was required for construction. This demonstrated that natural lay just beneath the stone layer. It may thus be surmised that the stone layer in both trenches was deposited as a hard-standing around a marshy or boggy area that built up against the back of the town defences once these had been constructed in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century. This interpretation will be discussed further below.

#### *Trench 5*

Unlike the other four trenches, Trench 5 was orientated north – south and was 9.5m in length, although the width of 0.6m was maintained. Its purpose was to link all four trenches and it formed the eastern limit of the watching brief. Given that clear knowledge of where archaeological levels lay within the other four trenches, it was possible to limit excavation in this trench purely to the upper, modern contexts (5000 and 5001). The base of the trench was stepped where it coincided with Trenches 2 and 3, to avoid damaging any archaeological levels.

### **Conclusions**

The conclusions that can be drawn from such a small intervention are necessarily limited. However, the results broadly confirm those of the 1991 excavation, i.e. that there was no substantial occupation of the site and there was certainly no evidence for a road or roadside settlement in the vicinity. The fact that the excavation was located largely within the area covered by the earlier Trench III also accounts for the deeper deposits encountered. One aspect of the excavation can be elucidated further in the light of recent work in the village. The 1999 excavations in advance of the relining of the Atcham water main (WST99; White 2000) encountered a very similar sequence of deposits to the current Trench 3 within its intervention 15. This intervention was located at SJ 56290815, i.e. c. 120m southwest of the Wroxeter Hotel site. The sequence there consisted of two homogenous silty layers (8000, 8001), together up to 1m thick, overlying a rubble surface (8004) identical in character to 3001, and also situated on the water-table. The O.D. level for this surface was at, or just under, 50m, whereas the level on 3001 was 51.43m O.D. This suggests that it is not unlikely that we are looking at a similar phenomenon: a consistent area of hard-standing within the declivity behind the town's defences erected in the mid 2<sup>nd</sup> century. What this hard-standing was used for is not clear.

The contexts in Trench 2, a hearth on a bank and a pit or possible linear associated with the bank, are less easy to interpret. They have the character of a military rampart and hearth, but they cannot be part of the fortress whose southern boundary lies 200m to the north. The orientation of the bank is also apparently north – south, with the



inside of the bank lying to the west. This introduces the possibility that this bank is associated with the *vicus* which is now known to lie in the area of the ford, west of St Andrew's Church (Esmonde Cleary 2000, 405). If so, this might be envisaged as a defence or demarcation of the settlement, with the road extending southwards from the *porta principalis sinister* which lies to the east (White and Barker 1998, fig. 16). This is certainly consistent with the lack of occupation identified in the excavation.

### **Roman pottery**

by Annette Hancocks

The material was rapidly scanned and spot dates assigned. A total of seven sherds (90g) of pottery with an average weight of 15g was recovered from two contexts (2003 and 3001).

A single sherd of probable North Gaulish White Ware (NOG WH 1) was recovered from context 2003. This ware has a potential source in north Gaul or the Rhineland such as Cologne and Remagen (Tomber and Dore, 1998, 22) and can be dated to the pre-Flavian period.

The remaining six sherds, from context 3001, comprised two sherds of Central Gaulish samian, two oxidised sherds, a coarse sandy greyware sherd and a diagnostic rim from a greyware copy of a BB1 straight-sided dish (dog dish) with burnished arc decoration surviving (cf Symonds 1997, 282 & 293 fig.356). It seems probable that the samian is residual, with the remainder of the pottery dating to between the 2<sup>nd</sup>/4<sup>th</sup> centuries AD. A possible flange from a tile (*tegula*) was also recovered from this deposit.

### **Acknowledgements**

The author would like to thank Mike Watson for permitting him to undertake the excavation by waiving his prior claim to the site. He is also grateful to Dr Paul Stamper for so swiftly arranging for the work to take place. Finally, he would like to thank Philip Rowley and Arthur Maiden of the Wroxeter Hotel for their helpfulness on the day and for supplying refreshments, and the machinist and builders for their aid. The drawings were provided by Kate Hamer, Mark Breedon and Nigel Dodds, from originals provided by the author.

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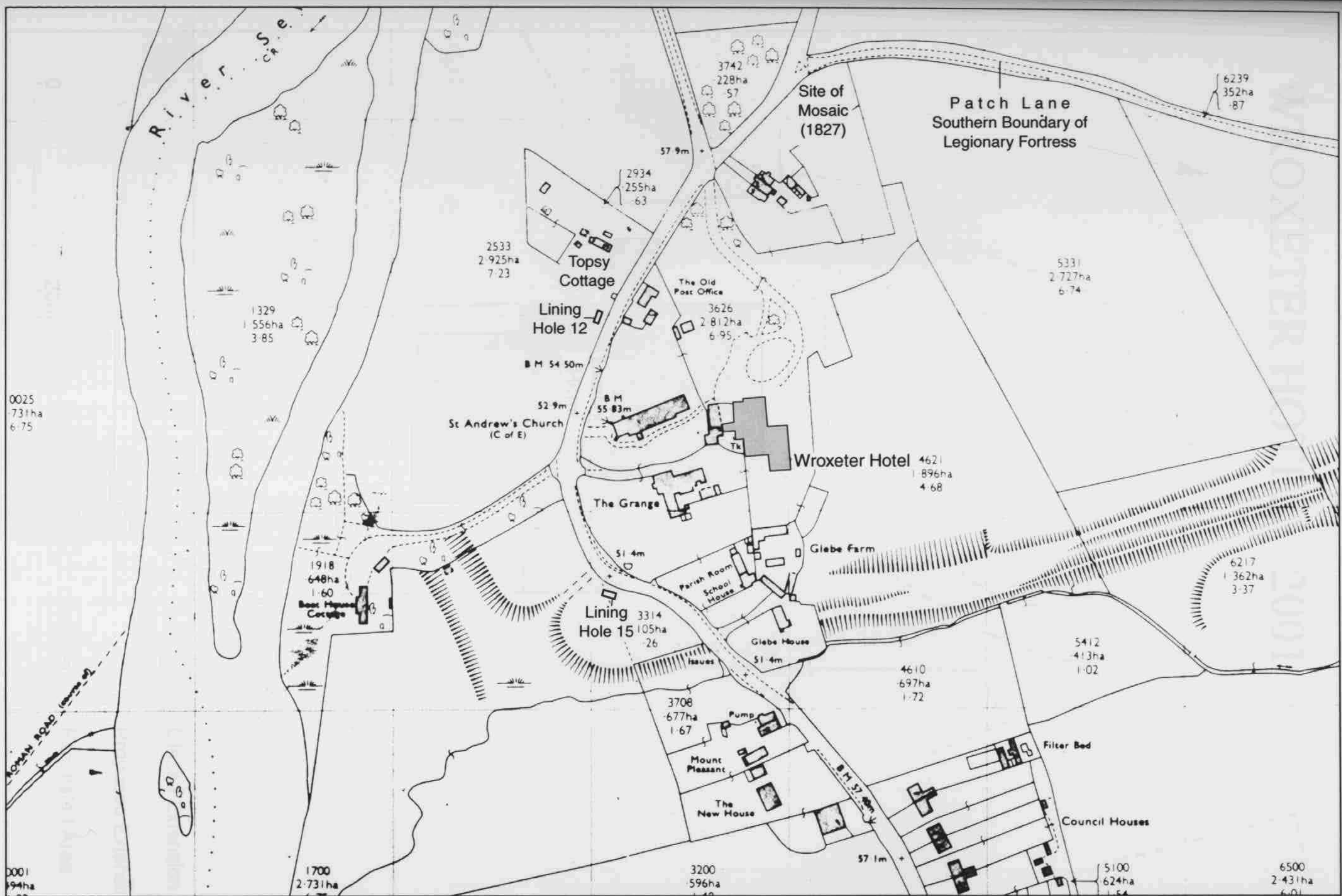


Fig.1

# WROXETER HOTEL 2001

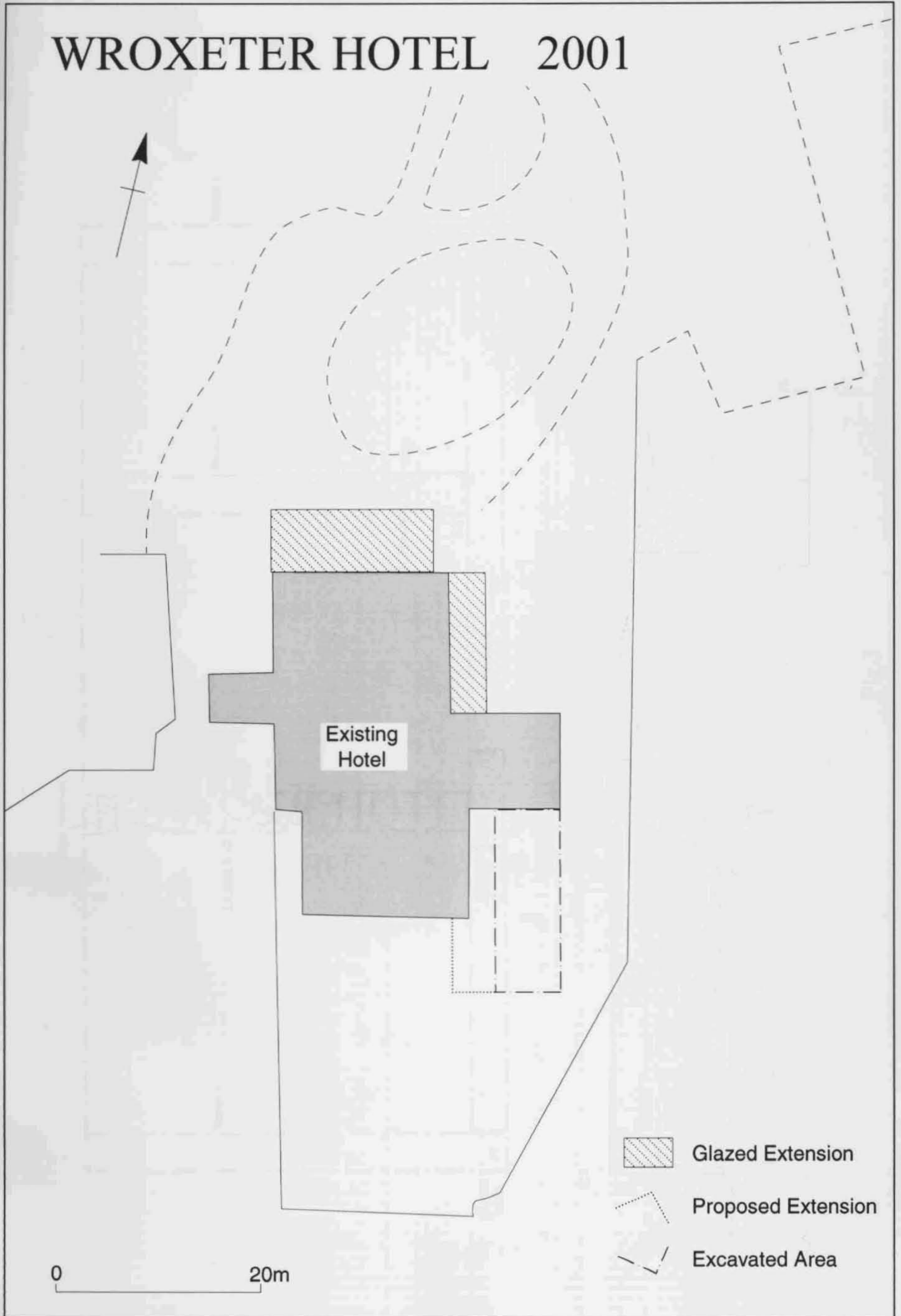


Fig.2

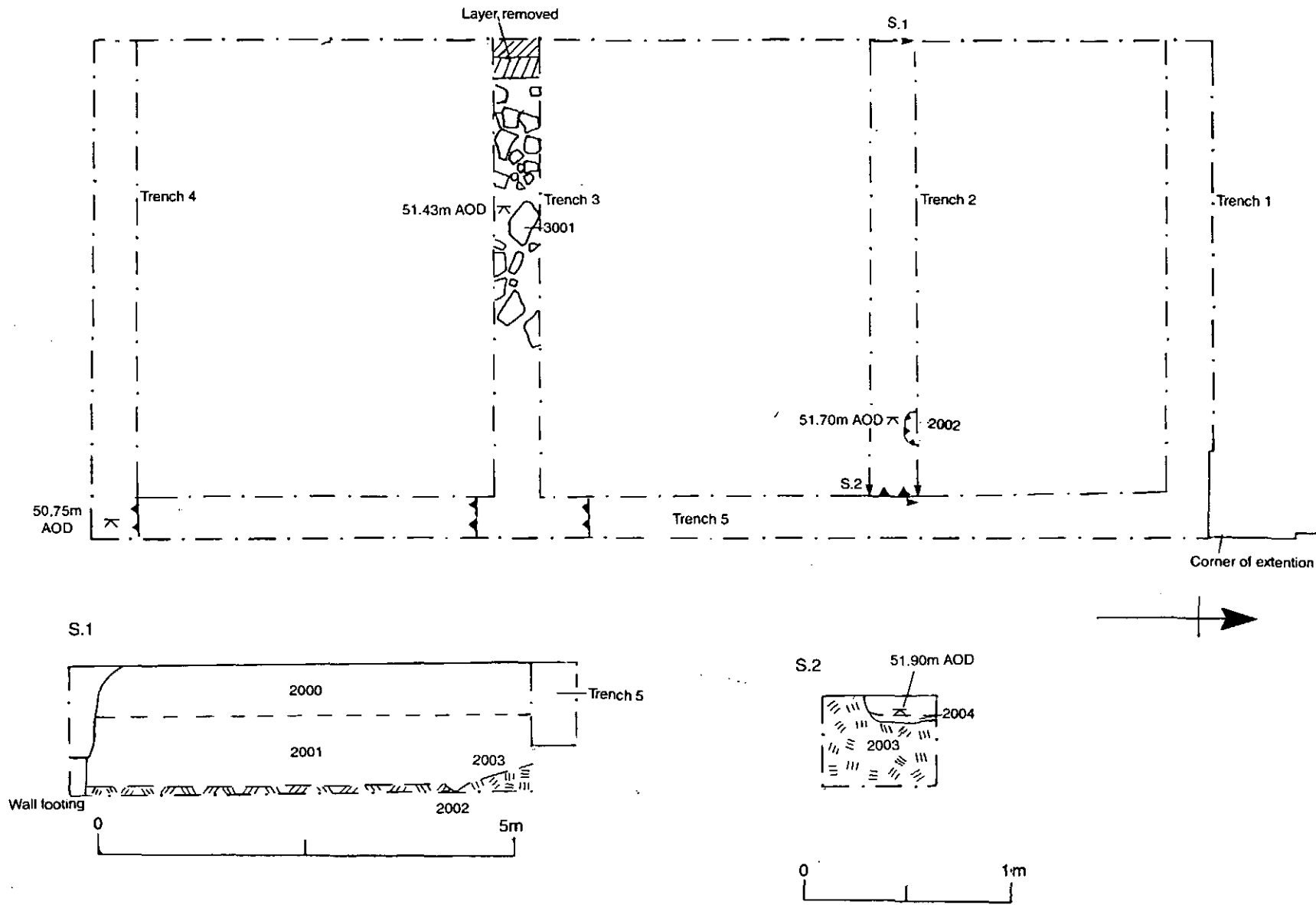


Fig.3

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