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An Archaeological Evaluation at Bullimore Farm Shepton Mallet, Somerset 1991

B.U.F.A.U.

An Archaeological Evaluation at Bullimore Farm, Shepton Mallet, Somerset 1991

by Peter Leach
with Laurence Jones and Jonathan McKelvey

Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit 1991

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Introduction

As part of a programme of archaeological evaluations on the proposed route of a new road linking the A361 with the A37 east of Shepton Mallet, Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit was commissioned by Somerset County Council to examine an area immediately adjacent to Bullimore Farm. Prior to this investigation, undertaken in January 1991, geophysical prospection at the end of 1990 by Geophysical Surveys of Bradford had covered much of the area concerned, as part of a more extensive geophysical survey of the proposed route (Report 90/94). The results of that survey are shown (Fig.2) and integrated, where appropriate, with those obtained and reported upon here.

During 1990, a series of evaluations, similar to that under consideration here, and a major excavation, culminated in the recognition of an important and extensive complex of archaeological sites, the focus of which is the remains of a Roman 'Small Town'. This settlement is centred upon Fosse Lane (originally the Roman Fosse Way), extending for approximately 1km alongside the road between Charlton and Cannards Grave (Fig.1). The periphery of the settlement has still to be established in places, notably away from the road to the east and west. The most extensively explored areas of the settlement so far, lie to the west of Bullimore Farm, where industrial development is zoned or is already under way. An extensive programme of excavations in the summer of 1990 (Buteux 1990; Leach 1991) investigated a large area of the Romano-British settlement in fields immediately to the east of Fosse Lane and to the south of the redundant railway embankment, which also forms the northern boundary to the present site. North of the railway embankment the continuation of similar remains has been established through an evaluation combining geophysical survey with trial excavation (Leach 1990). In neither instance, however, were the eastern limits of surviving archaeological remains established. A proposal to route a new road corridor between those development sites and Bullimore Farm has thus prompted the requirement for the present evaluation.

The Evaluation

Towards the end of 1990 the programme of geophysical prospection by Geophysical Surveys of Bradford involved the greater part of the proposed road corridor between Bullimore Farm and Cannards Grave, together with smaller areas north of the farm and to the east of Frog Lane. The results and their interpretation are the subject of a separate report to Somerset County Council from Geophysical Surveys (Report 90/94), but include the area examined by BUFAU in the present evaluation. Preliminary indications from the geophysical survey, and the proximity of the remains uncovered by excavation on the site now developed by Showerings Ltd., immediately to the west, suggested some potential for the survival of archaeological remains close to Bullimore Farm.

To test this potential, a series of mechanically-excavated trial trenches was cut across a pasture field located immediately to the west of Bullimore Farm (centring NGR ST/631424). Bounded to the north by the former railway embankment, and to the east by a small stream, the present field (originally part of two) has been redefined on its western edge by the creation of a high earthen bank separating it from the Showerings' development (Fig.2).

Four *c.*2m-wide transects were cut by machine to remove the turf and topsoil overburden. Thereafter, manual cleaning of the subsoil horizon, and of any archaeological features or deposits surviving at that level, was undertaken. Trench A (over 160m long) was cut along the axis of the field, and three others, Trenches B, C and D, each *c.*40m long, were cut south eastwards from Trench A. Definition through manual cleaning of both archaeological features and natural horizons, permitted surface recording by means of written records, scale drawings and photography. Sampling of perceived archaeological deposits or features by excavation was rarely undertaken, but a broad sample of portable archaeological remains was collected in the manual cleaning process, the position of individual finds on the site being established three-dimensionally using an Electronic Distance Measurer (EDM) (Figures 3a & b and 4a & b). Figure 5 illustrates in more detail the character of the archaeological evidence uncovered in one sample area.

Archaeology

Between 0.20 and 0.30m of dark brown humic topsoil with a permanent turf cover was removed by machine. This topsoil has rarely been ploughed in recent times, and there was no sign of cultivation having significantly affected the archaeological or natural subsoil horizons below. Archaeological deposits were, for the most part, readily identifiable — generally as spreads of dark stony soil with a scatter of artefacts, among which more coherent features, such as stone settings and alignments or fills within linear or enclosed areas, were sometimes visible.

Natural subsoils were, for the most part, readily identifiable where exposed directly beneath the topsoil cover, contrasting with archaeological deposits and features. The underlying geology of horizontally-bedded lias limestone is wholly masked here by insoluble clays, somewhat variable in character and ranging from a buff-red, almost stone-free clay to a lighter, buff-yellow, stony clay silt. To the east, where the field is at its lowest close to the stream forming its eastern boundary, deeper mechanical excavation revealed darker grey silty clays, some of which may derive from grey clay formations within the lias. This may account in part for the presence of the small stream here flowing above an impermeable clay bed, although the stream itself may have contributed to the deposition of more recent clay silts in this shallow valley (see Trench B).

The evidence recorded in each trench is summarised briefly below, as the basis for an interpretation of its overall significance.

Trench A (Figs.3a & b and 4a & b)

For much of the first 30m of this trench southwards, natural buff-orange silty clay was exposed beneath the topsoil, within which the fills of discrete archaeological features were often well defined. At the northern extremity two parallel ditches (F1 and F2) are potentially elements of an east–west boundary, passing eastwards beneath the railway embankment. Proceeding south, a series of somewhat ephemeral features (F3–F7) suggest the fills of small pits and post-holes, possibly representing the remains of timber structures. More definite was a series of substantial stone-packed post-holes (F8, F9 and F12–F16) and some drystone wall footings (F10 and F11), all of which may belong to a timber-framed building (Structure I), aligned approximately east–west.

Approaching the junction with Trench B, an extensive spread of dark grey-brown stony clay soil contained stone building rubble, charcoal, burnt clay, mortar fragments, pottery and animal bone (1038). No attempt was made to investigate this deposit, which continued east into Trench B, although possible wall alignments (e.g. F19 and F20, 1037 and 1040) were visible in places and a plentiful sample of artefacts was recovered from its surface in cleaning (Fig 4a). This context marked the commencement of a slight but visible rise in the present ground level, continuing at least as far as Trench C; archaeological deposits occurring in places less than 0.20m below the modern turf line. No clear evidence of a building arrangement could be discerned within 1038, but the content of this complex of deposits certainly represents

occupation debris and indicates the likelihood of another building here (Structure II). Continuing for several metres south along Trench A, natural clay was visible beneath a thinner spread of stony subsoil, within which artefacts and other occupation debris were sparsely scattered.

Beyond this were seen the remains of a further structure (Structure III), partly exposed in the trench and associated with occupation debris (1048 and 1049), burnt daub, the suggestion of drystone settings (1051 and 1052) to support timber-framed walls, and at least one post-pit (1050). Less than 2m south of these building remains part of a closely-packed, stone cobble platform (1053), over 2.5m across and continuing east beyond the trench, formed the surround to a stone-lined well (F21). This was completely infilled, only its top two surviving courses being exposed by excavation to verify its identity. Just south of the well platform again, the remains of a second timber-framed building (Structure IV) were partly exposed. This appears to have been very similar in character to Structure III, a rectangular, timber-framed building aligned east–west, with the remains of daub, stone settings (F22 and F23) supporting daub and timber walls, and spreads of occupation debris (1058 and 1062). Further layers of structural and occupation debris continued for several metres southwards, thinning out over another exposure of natural clay, lightly scattered with occupation material (Fig.5).

Approaching the junction with Trench C, extensive deposits of occupation and structural remains were bounded to the north by the remains of a kiln or oven (F24) and what may have been a stoke-hole (F25) filled with ash and charcoal (Structure V). The adjacent occupation deposit (1066) gave way south and east to an extensive area of closely packed, pitched cobbling (1055), part of a yard surface or platform which extended several metres east along Trench C. Potential wall alignments (F26 and F27) within or bounding the platform, may mark foundations for timber-framed walls or partitions. To the east, in Trench C, a north–south linear feature (F38) suggests an eastern boundary to the stone platform (1055) of this complex (Structure VI)—possibly the beam slot for a timber-framed wall. What may be the true southern boundary to Structure VI, though some 2m south of the boundary wall (F27), was a set of structural features aligned approximately east–west. These comprised a stone rubble base (1070) for a pair of large, closely-set post-holes (F28 and F29), beyond which were the remains of a parallel, stone-lined exterior drain (F30) with a strip of rough metalling (1072) alongside to the south.

The southern boundary features to Structure VI were cut by a ditch (F31) extending diagonally across the trench. Linked with this feature was a second ?contemporary ditch (F32), which continued to the west. Beyond these features several metres of stony clay soil with few artefacts was succeeded by a series of east–west boundary features (Fig. 3b)—successive ditch alignments—into which drystone walls appear to have been set at a later date (F33, F34 and F35). Areas of pitched cobbles (1075) and less coherent spreads of rubble and occupation material in this area suggest the proximity of another building, and perhaps an east–west lane alongside a successively defined boundary. Natural clay subsoil was visible once again for several metres, overlain with a thin scatter of occupation debris, before further concentrations of building remains, artefacts and rubbish deposits were once again encountered. The remains of another structure is suspected beneath, or close to, this spread, which then continued more thickly (1078/1079) almost to the junction with Trench D to the south. Bounding this deposit and adjacent to Trench D was another linear east–west boundary (F36), possibly the remains of a wall, collapsed or set into a ditch. Beyond the Trench D junction was another, more substantial east–west boundary feature (F37) comprising, once again, what appeared to be the remains of a wall set or collapsed into a ditch.

Beyond the boundary ditch F37, the natural, buff-brown clay subsoil was fully exposed over the remaining 30m or more of Trench A southwards. The only recognisable features here were a series of narrow, stone-lined ditches (F46 & F47) cut from a level just beneath the modern turf line and almost certainly portions of a relatively recent land drainage system. Otherwise, artefacts or remains of earlier periods were virtually non-existent in this sector.

Trench B (Figs. 3a & 4a)

This was the most northerly of the three trenches cut approximately at right angles to the axial Trench A. Beyond the most concentrated spread of occupation debris and rubble (1038) associated with the putative Structure II, a less dense deposit (1041) continued for at least another 10m to the east. This was cut diagonally by a double line of vertically-set limestone blocks (1042), probably part of a drain aligned almost north–south. Further east, an infilled cut — possibly a wall robbing-trench (1043) — was seen along the north baulk of Trench B. Beyond this, a diagonal strip of stone rubble (1044), aligned approximately east–west across the Trench, may represent a collapsed wall, to the east of which lay a band of sandy clay with stone rubble (1045/1047) on a similar alignment. These three contexts were cut by a broad, 2m-wide strip of dark grey silty clay with some rubble, on a different, NE–SW alignment,possibly marking the fill of a later ditch.

A little to the east of 1046 a machine-excavated sondage was dug to examine the deposit of buff-grey silty clay-natural here, which lay directly beneath the turf and topsoil horizon across the remainder of Trench B. No more than 0.50m of silt could be removed before the water table was encountered and a dark grey-black silty clay (1057) was seen. This contained occasional limestone fragments but no artefacts, and may represent the fill of a more extensive linear depression — possibly an earlier stream channel.

Trench C (Figs. 3a & 4a)

The western end of this second east–west trench linked with Trench A, intercepting the eastern continuation of Structure VI (above). To the east of that structure an area of natural clay subsoil with a light stone and artefact scatter was interrupted at one point by what appeared to be the fill of a pit (F39). Further east, the subsoil was overlain by a spread of stone rubble with some suggestions of cobbling (1083), and a lighter occupation deposit (1085) adjacent. These deposits were cut by two connected linear features (F44 and F45), potentially representing the remains of decayed timber building foundations. Together, these features and deposits suggest the remains of another timber-framed building (Structure VII).

What may have been a contemporary boundary to this structure was a linear feature aligned approximately north–south across the trench (F40), probably a ditch. Thereafter, the natural silty buff-brown clay continued along the remainder of the trench beneath the turf and topsoil horizon, cut only by two relatively modern, stone-lined land drains (F41 and F42). A shallow sondage towards the eastern end of the trench, through part of the natural clay-silt deposit, revealed part of a shallow ditch (F43) running along the axis of Trench C. This raises the possibility of earlier archaeological features sealed beneath the upper levels of these silts, derived perhaps from the former course of the stream, although in this instance still of a Romano-British date.

Trench D (Figs. 3b & 4b)

Excepting a thin spread of occupation debris extending for a few metres east along the trench from its junction with Trench A, Trench D contained no features or finds of Romano-British date. The only features recorded were three stone-lined field drains (F48–F50), of a type seen in Trenches A and C, and probably of 19th-century origin.

Finds (Figs. 4a & 4b)

A sample of portable metal, stone, bone and ceramic objects was collected in the sub-surface cleaning process; individual items or small groups being given unique find numbers and their positions plotted with the EDM. Of the several hundred objects thus recovered, the great majority were of Roman date and could frequently be associated with the archaeological features and deposits encountered. Among the categories collected and identified was pottery — predominantly of 3rd and 4th-century date but with a fair proportion of 2nd-century types; iron and bronze artefacts, including knives, tools, fittings, and ornaments (including brooches of 2nd-century manufacture); coins — mainly of the 3rd and 4th-centuries; slag and iron-ore fragments; stone objects, including roof tiles, which were not removed from the site; and animal bone.

Excepting material which is intrinsically undatable, such as animal bone, a handful of finds do not relate to the period of Romano-British occupation revealed here. A scatter of flint flakes and artefacts suggests a much earlier phase of prehistoric human activity, recognised extensively across the whole Fosse Lane settlement; while a few post-medieval pottery sherds reflect agricultural use of this area in much more recent times.

Interpretations and Conclusions

Through the application of evaluation techniques combining geophysical survey with trial trench excavation, it has been possible to prove the existence of archaeological remains on this site and provide some assessment of their character. Both techniques suggest that such remains survive over more than half the area examined, with a concentration towards the north west (Fig 2).

The evidence comprises structural foundations, floor and yard areas, industrial and domestic features, linear boundaries, and extensive spreads of occupation debris; in association with an abundant assemblage of artefacts and other remains. The latter, and the character of the archaeological features revealed, leave no doubt that the remains overall represent part of a substantial Romano-British settlement. The evidence suggests that these remains now survive only at (approximately) their original ground level, but a wealth of material, including the portable finds, is clearly still present in situ and at no great depth below the modern turf. Beyond the north-western concentration of remains, archaeological survival is evidently much more sparse, although not to be wholly discounted — linear boundary features in particular are probably to be encountered to the south and east.

Since this evaluation was designed to be little more than a proving exercise, no attempt at detailed investigation of the archaeological features or deposits recorded here was made. It is, however, possible to make more detailed inferences of their character and significance with reference to other recent archaeological discoveries in the locality, and thus suggest a context for these remains. Of particular relevance to the Bullimore Farm site are the excavations and discoveries made in the summer of 1990 on land immediately adjacent to the west. That area, now occupied by a warehouse and service areas belonging to Showerings Ltd., revealed the very extensive remains of what is interpreted as a major portion of a Roman 'Small Town' situated alongside the Fosse Way (Fosse Lane) (Buteux 1990; Leach 1991).

Subsequent evaluations, in advance of further prospective developments in the area, have verified and expanded upon this original interpretation. Not only do the discoveries and remains recorded on the Showerings' site compare closely with those at Bullimore Farm, but it is apparent that the latter are in fact a direct extension of the area of Roman occupation proven to the west. This latest evaluation and further geophysical surveys in the vicinity of Bullimore Farm suggest, furthermore, that one of the eastern boundaries to the Roman town actually lies within this area.

Of the remains themselves, little more need be added to the account given in the section 'Archaeology', above. The general east–west trend to major land and property division boundaries is in conformity with the pattern established further west in 1990 — the Fosse Way doubtless acting as a base line for the Roman layout. The remains of stone-founded and timber-framed buildings, of types excavated more thoroughly on the Showerings' site, are certainly present once again, as are hearths, cobbled yards, a well and the spreads of debris arising from the collapse of former structures and the cumulative disposal of rubbish. The preponderance of timber-framed over stone-founded structures here, apparently in contrast to most sites excavated or evaluated elsewhere in the settlement, may be significant, given the peripheral location of Bullimore Farm. None of the remains is likely to survive to any great depth, except where occasional features have been cut more deeply into the subsoil and subsequently infilled. Nevertheless, their particular value and coherence has been well demonstrated where extensively exposed on the

Showerings' development to the west, where the overall plan and configuration of the remains could best be appreciated.

At Bullimore Farm one feature in particular, although not extensively sampled in the evaluation, may well preserve more deeply-buried remains and sequences. The present stream bounding the site to the east almost certainly followed a different course in earlier times and evidence from Trenches B and C, in particular, suggests the presence of an earlier stream course and its silts — which probably formed a natural boundary to the settlement here. The silting in this shallow valley may be of especial interest, with its potential for sealing and preserving features and deposits of earlier date, or even organic remains in waterlogged conditions.

In essence, what is likely to survive here at Bullimore Farm is a portion of the former Roman town of Shepton Mallet, comprising the domestic, industrial and probably agricultural remains of perhaps two or three separate properties; their history, development and character. Whether or not these remains could be related directly to evidence uncovered further to the west on the Showerings' site, they are undoubtedly an integral part of the same settlement. Furthermore, Bullimore Farm appears to represent a zone on the very periphery of the Roman settlement, where town and countryside met and where some evidence of both environments might thus be expected.

Implications and Recommendations

The evaluation at Bullimore Farm has demonstrated clearly the widespread survival of archaeological remains, primarily of Romano-British date. With an emphasis towards the north west in the scale and complexity of surviving evidence, the remains lie for the most part within a zone or horizon of deposits from *c*.0.20m. below the modern ground surface and often no more than 0.30m thick. The following recommendations are proposed with a view to safeguarding, or minimising wherever possible the impact of any major change in land use upon the proven surviving archaeological resource.

1. Any development involving removal of turf and topsoil levels will almost certainly have an adverse effect upon the relatively sensitive remains at lower levels, even if it is not envisaged that these levels be removed. Wherever possible, development involving ground disturbance of this nature (or of course to greater depths) should avoid the zone of 'archaeological deposits' defined in Figure 2.

2. Subject to the specifications for any construction works, it may be possible to raise levels significantly above those presently existing and thus give added protection to the archaeological remains in this area. Should this be possible, some preliminary turf/topsoil stripping may still be required. Experience on the adjacent Showerings' development, and elsewhere within the Fosse Lane Roman settlement, suggests that significant damage to archaeological deposits may, nevertheless, still occur, and that any such stripping would require careful monitoring.

3. Outside the zone of 'archaeological deposits', features of archaeological significance, though much more dispersed, must still be anticipated. Although the archaeological resource here is of more limited value, avoidance of any sub-surface disturbance should once again be the preferred option.

4. Should a development involving this field, nevertheless, be proposed, it must be recognised that some damage to archaeological remains in either zone here will be almost inevitable, and provision must therefore be made to remedy this. This may be achieved by the exercise of three basic options, the application of which may, in practice, be mutual and complementary.

   a) Design: the course and scale of development works should seek to minimise their destructive effects upon the archaeological resource by excluding as much as possible of the 'Archaeological deposits' zone (Fig. 2).

   b) Monitoring: wherever turf and topsoil levels are disturbed by mechanical excavation this process should be closely monitored by a

professional archaeologist; ideally, through direction of the stripping process, and intervention where necessary, to record or recover any archaeological remains encountered.

c) Excavation: to ensure the fullest understanding and recovery of archaeological remains and deposits, all areas affected by turf/topsoil stripping, and certainly any cut to deeper levels, should be examined and recorded by a thorough archaeological excavation and recording programme involving an appropriate professional contractor. In practice, this process should take place some time prior to any contractor's works, leaving the area completely clear for those works upon completion of the archaeological programme. The latter would involve careful mechanical removal of the turf and topsoil horizon over the designated development zone within this field, as a preliminary to identification, recording and excavation of all archaeological deposits therein. This process may in practice be undertaken within the limits of a predetermined sampling strategy and would operate within a fixed and costed timetable, involving both the fieldwork and a programme of preparation and analysis of the results for publication, and for deposition of the finds and archive.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to Messrs. Edwards & Son at Bullimore Farm for their forbearance and co-operation in the course of the evaluation, and to Mr Dennis Dennet (Wayopen Estates) for the provision of a mechanical excavator. Thanks are due to Geophysical Surveys of Bradford for information in advance of their full report on the geophysical prospection programme, and to Bob Croft, Somerset County Council, for liaison throughout the project.

The evaluation was directed by Peter Leach and Laurence Jones in January 1991 with a team from Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit comprising Richard Broomhead, Charles and Nancy Hollinrake, Jonathan McKelvey, Luigi Signorelli and Humphrey Woods. The report was illustrated by Laurence Jones, edited by Simon Buteux, and prepared by Ann Humphries and Liz Hooper.

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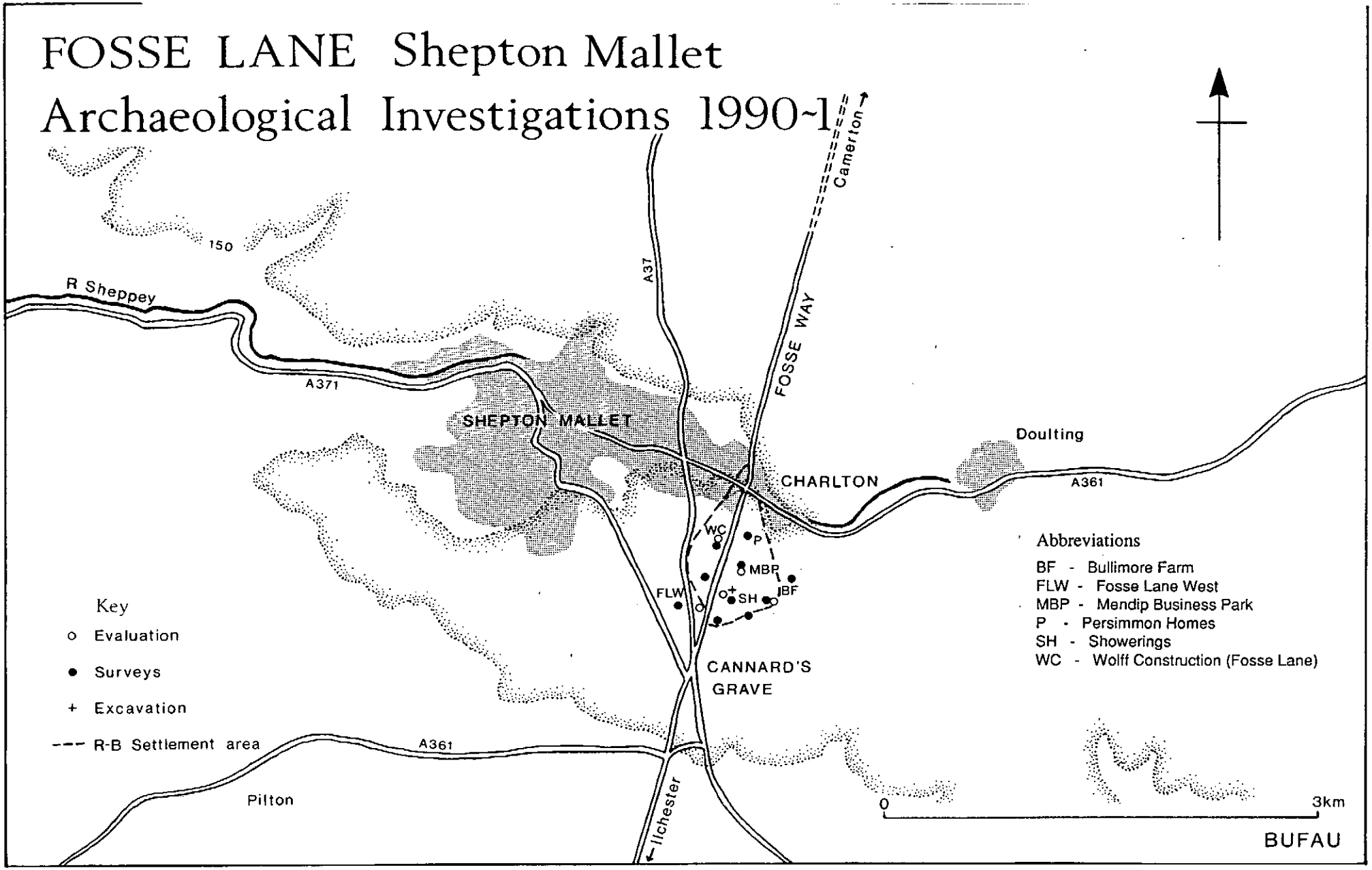

FOSSE LANE Shepton Mallet
Archaeological Investigations 1990-1
150
R Sheppey
A371
A37
Camerton
FOSSE WAY
SHEPTON MALLET
CHARLTON
Doulting
A361
WC
P
MBP
FLW
SH
BF
CANNARD'S
GRAVE
Key
o Evaluation
• Surveys
+ Excavation
--- R-B Settlement area
Abbreviations
BF - Bullimore Farm
FLW - Fosse Lane West
MBP - Mendip Business Park
P - Persimmon Homes
SH - Showerings
WC - Wolff Construction (Fosse Lane)
A361
Pilton
Ilchester
0
3km
BUFAU

Fig. 1

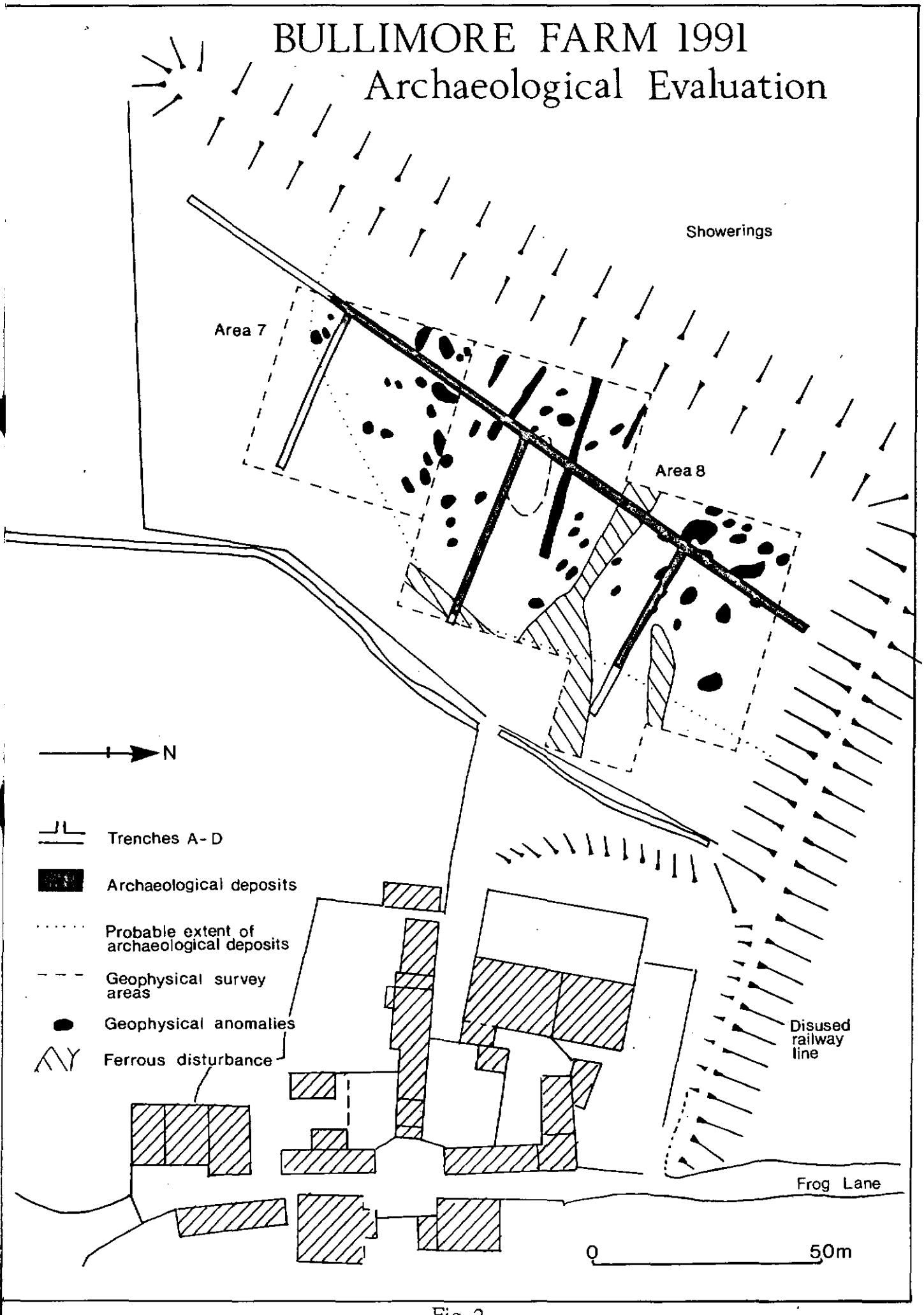

BULLIMORE FARM 1991
Archaeological Evaluation
Showerings
Area 7
Area 8
N
Trenches A-D
Archaeological deposits
Probable extent of archaeological deposits
Geophysical survey areas
Geophysical anomalies
Ferrous disturbance
Disused railway line
Frog Lane
0
50m

Fig. 2

BULLIMORE FARM 1991
Archaeological Features (south)

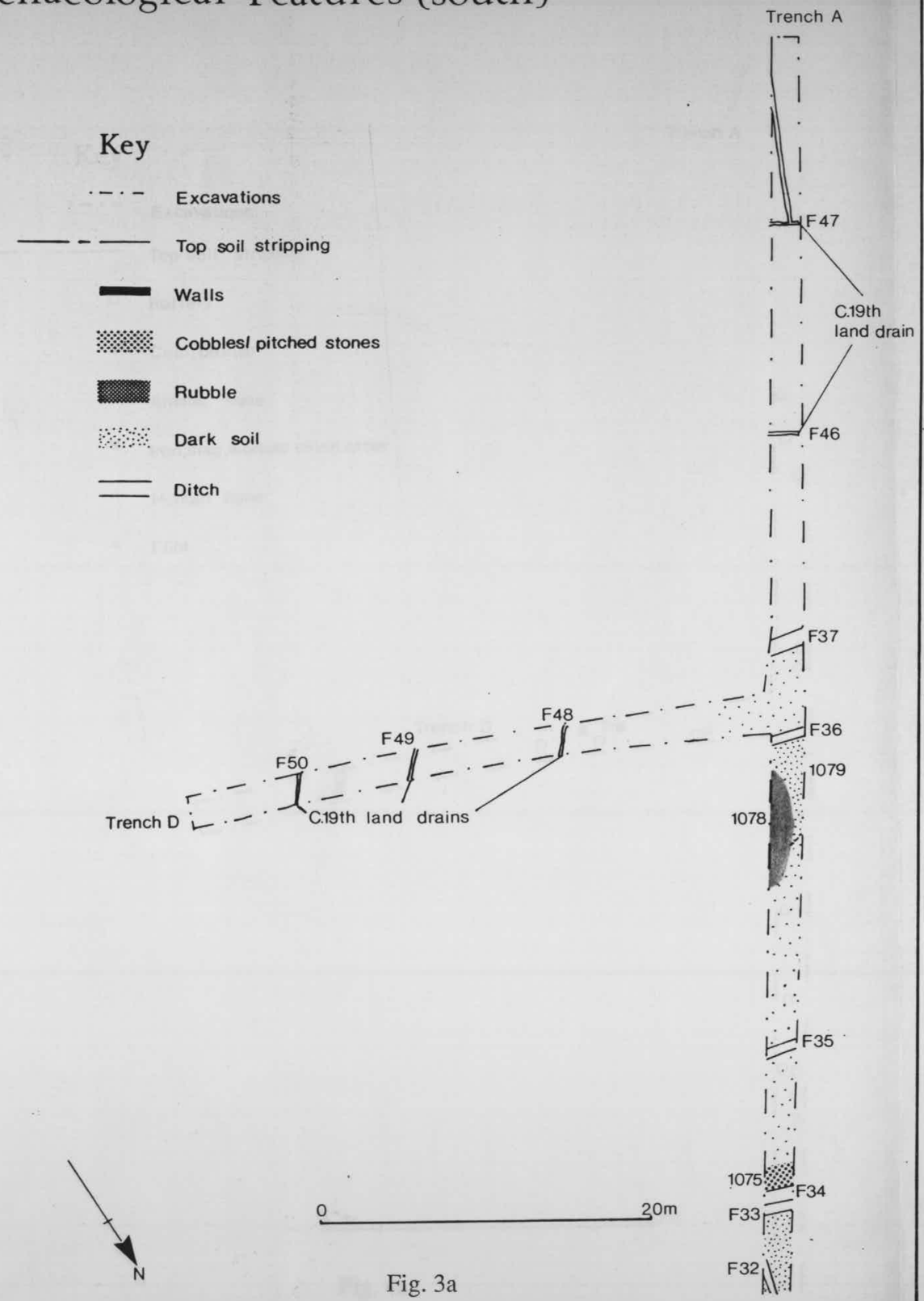


Fig. 3a

BULLIMORE FARM 1991
Archaeological Features (north)

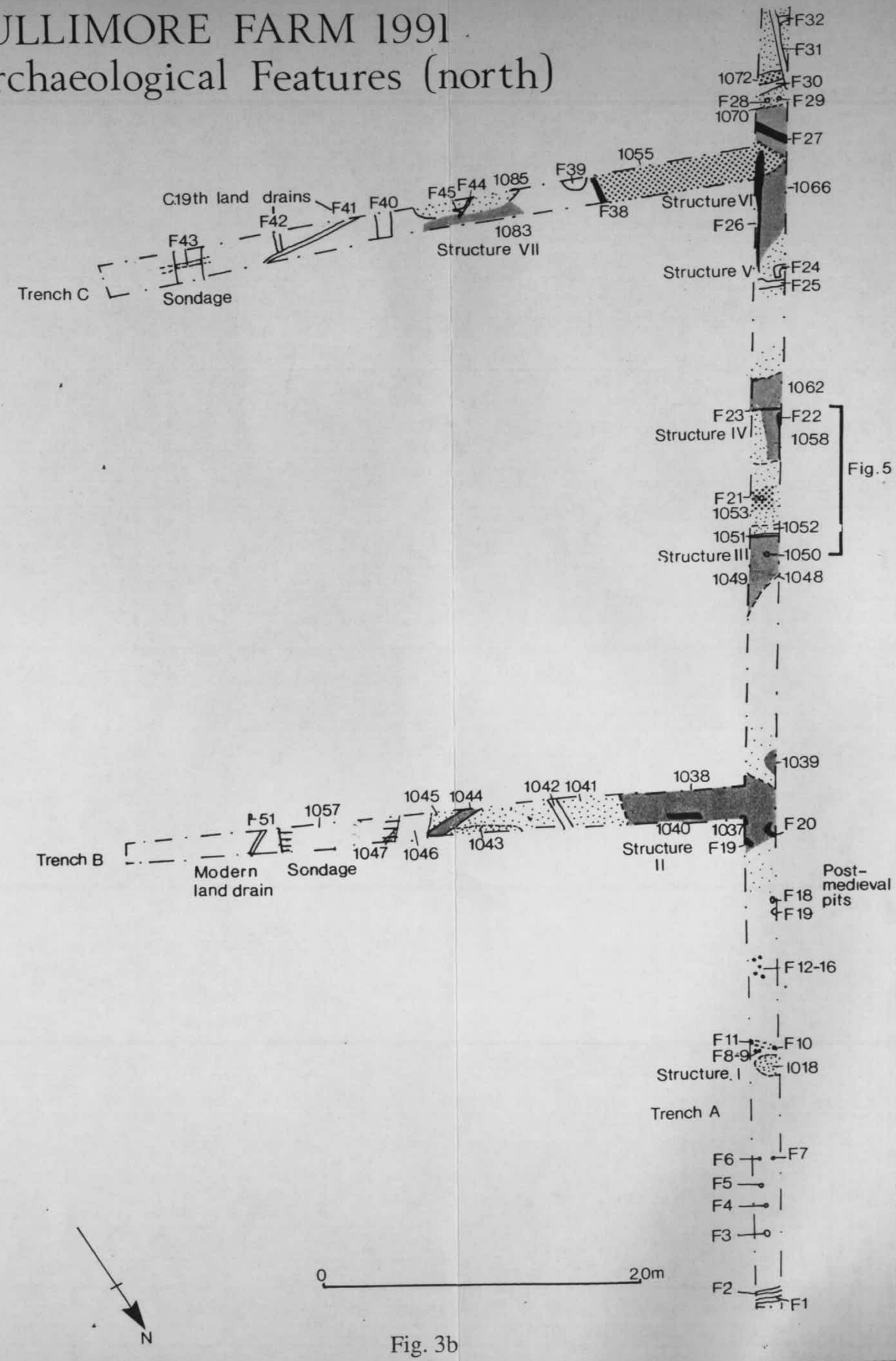


Fig. 3b

BULLIMORE FARM 1991
Finds Distribution

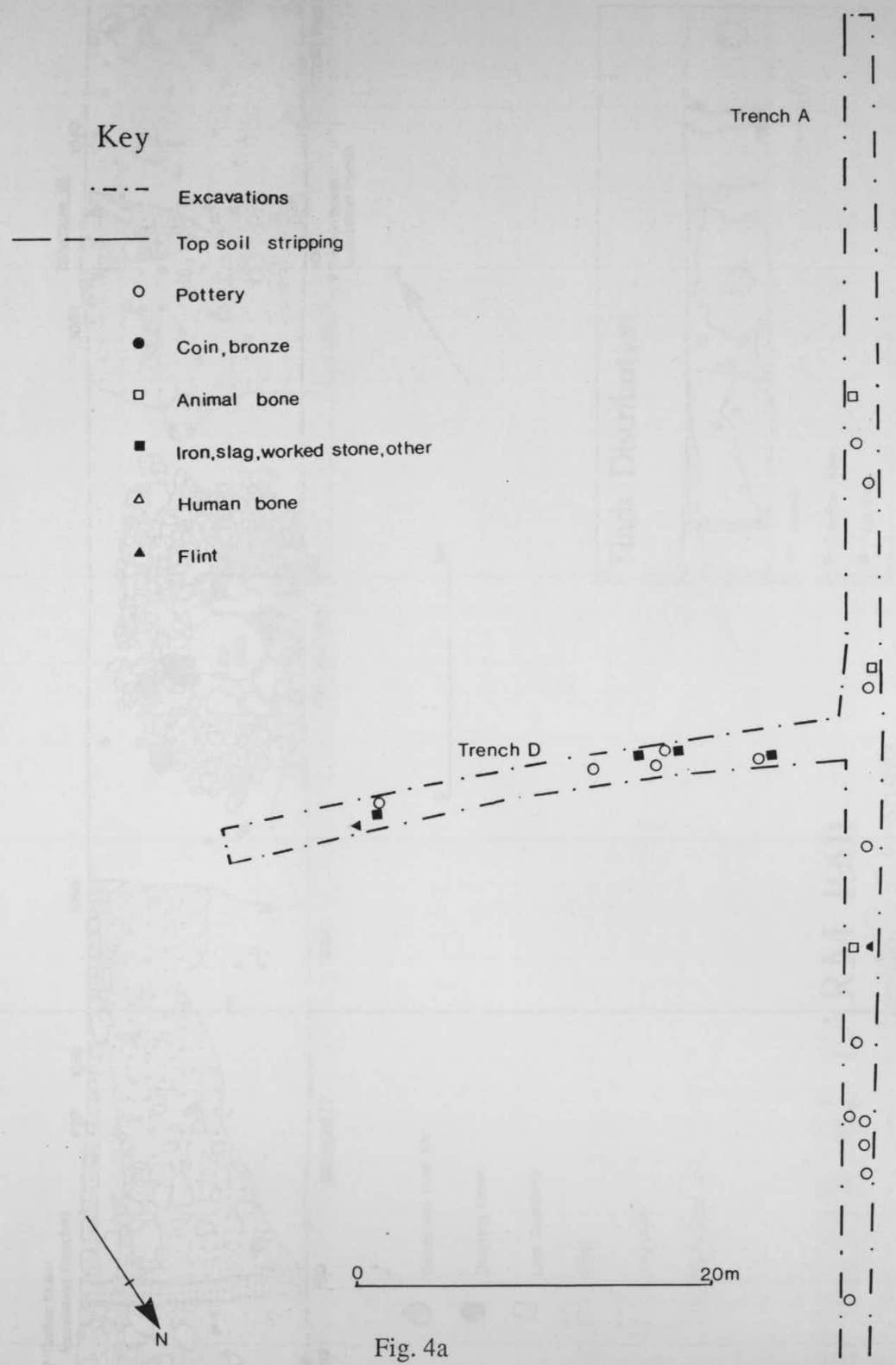


Fig. 4a

BULLIMORE FARM 1991
Finds Distribution

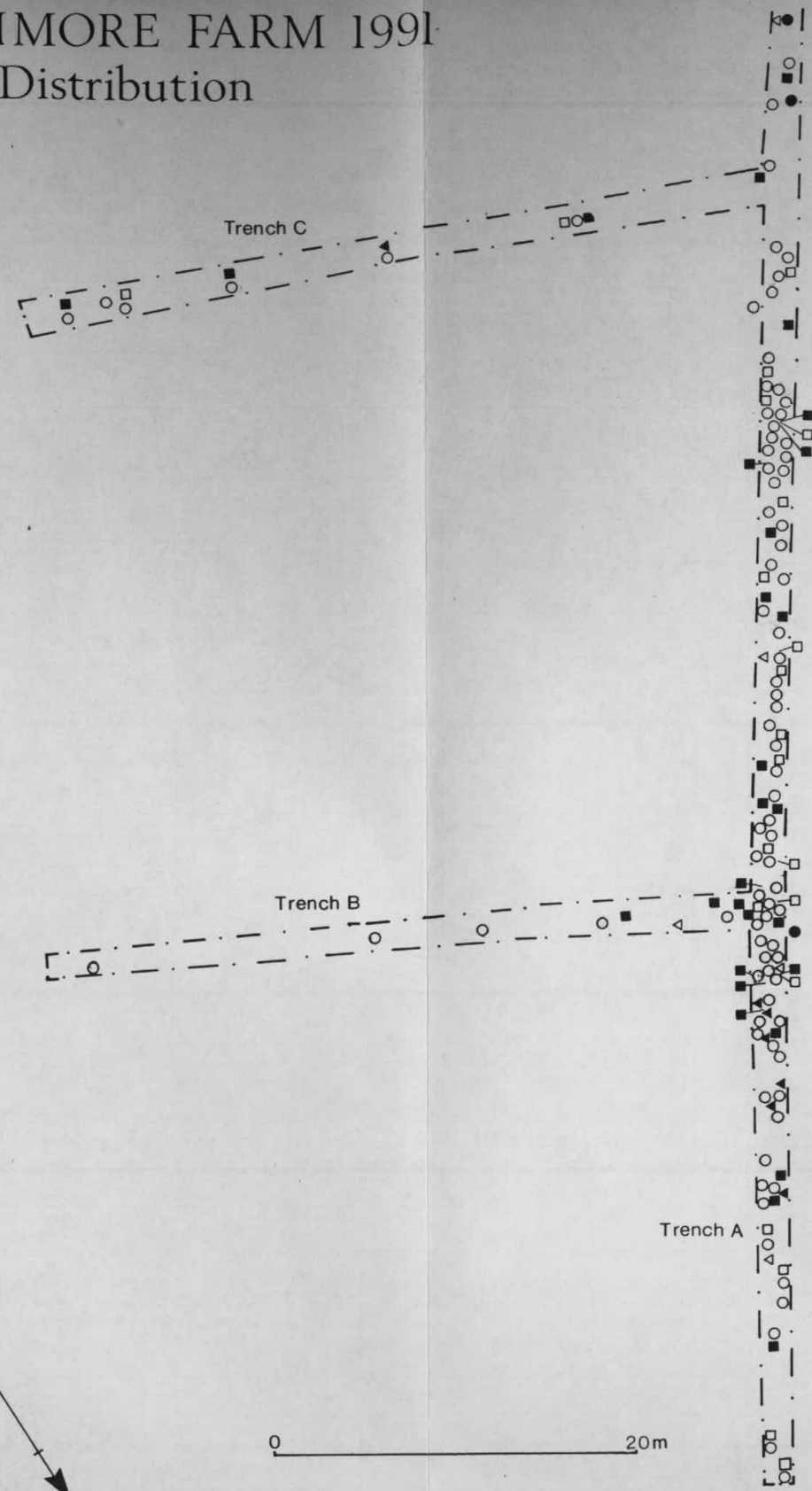
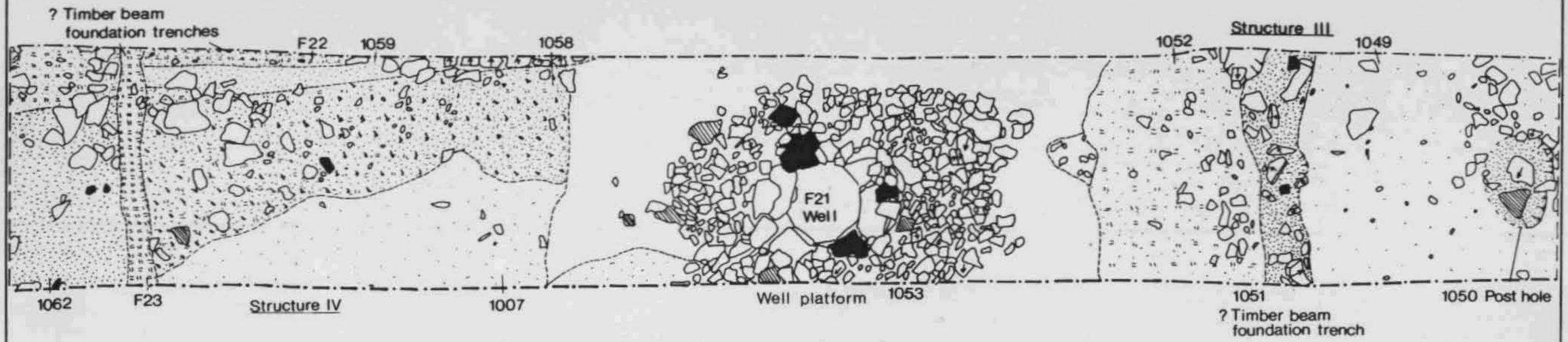


Fig. 4b



Sandstone roof tile

Doulting stone

Lias limestone

Clay

Charcoal

Occupation soil

0 2m

N

Finds Distribution

BULLIMORE FARM 1991

Trench A: Specimen Archaeological Features

Fig. 5