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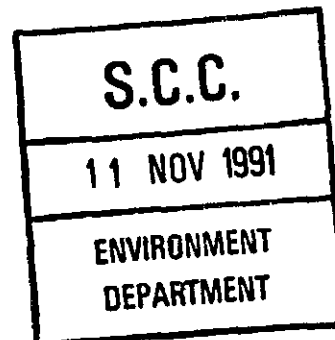
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**An Archaeological Evaluation  
at Fosse Lane (Wolff Construction)  
Shepton Mallet, Somerset, 1991**

by Peter Leach  
with Laurence Jones and Jonathan McKelvey



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## Introduction

As a planning requirement, an assessment was undertaken in January 1991 of the archaeological potential of land on the west side of Fosse Lane at Charlton, Shepton Mallet. Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit (BUFAU) was commissioned to undertake the work and prepare this report on behalf of the owner and prospective developer, Wolff Construction Ltd., of Shepton Mallet. As a preliminary to excavation works a geophysical survey was carried out by Geophysical Surveys of Bradford at the request of Somerset County Council. This survey is the subject of a separate report (Geophysical Surveys Report 90/87), the results of which are integrated with those arising from the trial excavation by BUFAU and presented together in this document.

The context for the present assessment is provided by a series of archaeological discoveries made during 1990 in the course of similar evaluations on sites elsewhere along both sides of Fosse Lane, and the results of a major excavation on the site of the new Showering's Warehouse (Fig. 1). Cumulatively, the data from these investigations demonstrated the presence here of a major Romano-British settlement – the site of a small roadside town – flanking both sides of Fosse Lane (the Roman Fosse Way) between Charlton and Cannards Grave. The site reported upon here lies opposite two sites assessed in 1990 – Persimmon Homes and the Mendip Business Park (Fig. 1) – upon which both Romano-British and prehistoric archaeological features and remains were recorded (Geophysical Surveys, Report 90/50; Leach 1990). Archaeological discoveries recorded along the west side of Fosse Lane have so far been fewer, although the site of a large Roman building at the Fosse Lane Industrial Estate to the south has long been known, since its

discovery and destruction during the course of railway construction in 1887. This discovery, and the evidence obtained on the two adjacent sites east of Fosse Lane, suggested a high potential for the survival of archaeological remains on the site belonging to Wolff Construction Ltd.

## The Evaluation

The Wolff Construction site comprised a field of permanent pasture over 1.5 hectares in extent, centring on NGR. ST 629 429. At the time of the evaluation the plot fronted onto the west side of Fosse Lane, and was bounded to the north and west by industrial development, and by houses and gardens to the south.

Prior to the evaluations taking place the contractor had stripped topsoil from the entire western margin of the field and from an area alongside its northern boundary. The latter portion was heavily disturbed and thus not easily available for any further examination. Much of the stripped area along the western margin could however be examined at the exposed subsoil horizon (Fig. 2).

The geophysical survey by magnetometer involved areas, primarily, which had not been divested of their topsoil cover. Details of the results and specifications of this survey are provided in Geophysical Surveys Report 90/87. To complement these results, and to both expand their scope and clarify their interpretation, a series of mechanically excavated trial trenches were opened by BUFAU (Fig. 2). These comprised four transects, one cut parallel with and close to Fosse Lane (Trench 1), and three at approximately 90° to the frontage (Trenches 2–4). Area 5, from which the topsoil had already been removed, was not trenched but was linked with the east–west Trenches 2–4.

A JCB excavator was employed to remove topsoil along each of the transects, generally to widths of between 1.5 and 2m. The greater part of Trench 1, however, was opened to approximately 3m width in anticipation of more complex archaeological remains. Thereafter, the procedure involved manual cleaning of levels exposed beneath the topsoil to define any archaeological features or deposits and to recover associated artefacts. This definition of archaeological remains was accompanied by a descriptive written record, photographic coverage and the preparation of scale plans; the position of all portable finds recovered and removed from the site was plotted three-dimensionally with an electronic distance measurer. Beyond cleaning the upper surviving levels to enhance definition, no attempt was made to excavate – and thus in effect destroy – any of the archaeological features and deposits encountered. Sample excavation was not considered necessary in the light of information already obtained by the excavation elsewhere within the Fosse Lane archaeological complex of closely comparable features and deposits. Furthermore, sufficient in the way of portable finds were recovered in the cleaning and definition process to identify and date, in general terms, the remains uncovered.

### Archaeology

The trial-trenching and earlier soil stripping undertaken by the developer revealed a relatively thin humic turf and topsoil layer, generally between 0.20–0.30m depth, above both natural subsoil and archaeological deposits. Excepting above the latter, this topsoil had formed upon a subsoil of red-brown silty clay, sealing at variable depths (where seen) a weathered, horizontally-bedded lias limestone bedrock. Archaeological features and deposits were concentrated towards the east of the site, closest to the road frontage; a simplified depiction of the archaeological evidence recorded by both geophysical survey and trial trenching is given in Figure 3. Figure 4 shows the distribution of the principal finds categories.

Archaeological features and deposits were encountered throughout Trench 1, although they were not always fully interpretable within the

limitations of the evaluation procedure. At the southern extremity a clearly defined, clay-bonded stone wall (F1), masked by a soil and rubble overburden, suggests the north wall of a stone-founded building (Structure I) lying mainly further to the south. A continuation of its alignment is suggested by the geophysical anomaly (A1) south and parallel with Trench 2. Part of a square or rectangular timber room or outhouse was set against the north face of this wall, defined by two possible beam slots (1010) and a cobbled internal floor. Further north, and close to the junction with Trench 2, closely set pitched stone cobbles (F2) may mark the corner of another structure (Structure II), whose west wall in Trench 2 is probably represented by another strip of cobbling aligned north–south (F3). The north wall to this structure was not clearly defined, except perhaps as an east–west alignment marking the edge of a rubble spread (1001) lying across Trench 1. Within this putative building was a further area of pitched cobbles (1017) and occupation deposits (1013), at the junction with Trench 2.

Continuing west along Trench 2, pitched stone cobbling (1007) marked an exterior surface to Structure II, while a more extensive spread of rubble and some cobbling (1034) may in part represent occupation debris and surfaces extending back from the structures closest to the road. Further west again the silty clay, buff-red subsoil, with stone scatters and some archaeological finds – primarily Romano-British pottery – lay directly below the topsoil. A sondage cut to almost 1m deep through this level, did not reach solid bedrock but cut through a buried soil horizon, possibly within a pre-Roman ditch feature, although there was no associated dating evidence. Excepting a scatter of finds (Fig. 4), no other archaeological remains were encountered in this trench.

North from Structure II along Trench 1, were the remains of two hearths (F4 and F5), exposed in the western and eastern baulks of the trench. No clear structure could be identified in association with these, although an east–west drystone wall footing (F6) lay further to the north. On a similar alignment, northwards again, a strip of stone rubble within what may be

an infilled ditch (1003), could mark a property division to road frontage establishments. A similar feature some 3m to the north (F7) could have been another ditched boundary, possibly a redefinition of property limits. Between and partly overlying these features, deposits of occupation soil and rubble (1042) were part of a more extensive spread along much of Trench 1. A geophysical anomaly (A2) plotted in the area to the west and on a similar alignment to these boundary features (Fig. 3), is probably an imprecise reflection of one or both of them.

At the junction with Trench 3 are identified the remains of what may be another structural complex (Structure III). Within Trench 1 a curving wall alignment (F8) enclosed an area of rubble (1005), partly overlain by soil and stony occupation deposits to the south. A more coherent horizon of large pitched limestone cobbling (1006) commenced in Trench 3 but was shortly interrupted by a feature aligned north-south and comprising large, heavily burnt limestone slabs set on edge (F9). Although not fully investigated, this appears to be part of an oven or kiln structure, set within or replaced by a cobbled yard or floor (several pieces of iron slag were recovered in its vicinity). Human bone from the top of its fill may however suggest an alternative explanation for F9 – as a grave or as an oven structure re-used as such.

The pitched cobbles (1006) continue for over 10m westwards from F9 along Trench 3, presumably as part of the Structure III complex. Thereafter, more confused deposits of rubble, soil and occupation debris gradually thinned out over the natural clay subsoil. Along the south baulk of the trench these deposits overlie a linear fill of stony clay soil (1031) which may represent another east-west boundary feature, similar to that indicated by the geophysical anomaly A2 and the ditch F7, etc. Between Trench 3 and that anomaly, a more extensive geophysical anomaly (A3) may reflect the general area of Structure III, and in particular, the presence of hearths, slag or other burnt features with a higher than average iron content (Fig. 3). Within the remainder of this trench archaeological finds or deposits were much more sparse, the most significant being apparently, the fills of a series of post-medieval pits.

The most northerly machined transect – Trench 4 – was cut parallel to Trenches 2 and 3 but was separated by spoil dumps from the north end of Trench 1. At its eastern end, closest to Fosse Lane, an area of pitched stone cobbles (1037) and part of a flagstone floor (F10) were separated by a disturbance from the remains of a ?wall (1040) aligned north-south and rubble with some further cobbles (1041). These features are interpreted as remains of Structure IV, probably part of another Romano-British road-frontage property north of those identified in Trench 1. At the north end of the latter, stone rubble and cobbles (1004) may be a further element of Structure IV. The cobbles, stone rubble and occupation spread (1041) continued west for some 10m beyond Structure IV in Trench 4, before thinning out over the natural, stony clay subsoil horizon. There were no further finds from this trench nor any sign of the linear geophysical anomaly (A4) apparently crossing it diagonally (Fig. 3).

All three east-west trenches extended westwards into the area stripped previously of topsoil by the developer. Excepting areas sealed by soil dumps, or badly disturbed by machine tracks, this zone (referred to as Area 5) was available for examination at subsoil level, although no extensive manual clearance was attempted. Only one clearly visible archaeological feature was recorded, an east-west ditch alignment (F11) lying between Trenches 2 and 3. This extended fully across Area 5 but curved towards the north as it continued east beyond the topsoil-stripped zone. Post-medieval pottery in its upper fill suggests a post-Roman feature, possibly linked with the post-medieval pit features towards the west end of Trench 3. The two linear geophysical anomalies (A1 and A2) recorded in the areas south of Trenches 2 and 3, respectively, were not observed to continue into Area 5. Similarly, the geophysical anomaly A5 could not be identified as an archaeological feature, but may reflect the proximity of the modern metal fence to the survey area.

With the exception of a few post-medieval artefacts from features referred to in the foregoing, virtually all the datable finds recovered from archaeological contexts on the site were of Roman date. Their distribution (Fig. 4) reflects closely

the occurrence of features and deposits encountered in Trench 1 and the eastern halves of Trenches 2-4. The bulk of the material recovered was pottery, much of it in a fairly abraded condition. This is likely to reflect its location and recovery in stony and somewhat disturbed deposits, none of which were excavated to depths where better preservation might be expected.

Other finds included animal bone, which generally survives well in this environment; brick and daub; slag; iron tools and objects; copper-alloy objects, including coins; and stone objects including roof tile fragments – the latter not removed as finds. Relative to other areas excavated or evaluated within the Fosse Way Roman settlement, the range and quality of this material was not impressive – only four poor specimens of 4th-century coins were found, for example.

Overall, the finds are of 3rd and 4th century character, although well-worn pottery of 2nd-century type is present. A handful of worked flint tools and flakes hint at a much earlier prehistoric phase – a phenomenon recorded widely on other sites in the area.

### Interpretation and Conclusions

The programme of archaeological assessment carried out at Fosse Lane suggests a basic subdivision of the site into two zones of interest (Fig. 2).

Zone 1 comprises an area covering the full extent of the eastern site frontage and extending back westwards for between 20 and 30 metres from that boundary. Within this zone the removal of 0.20 – 0.30m of disturbed and recent topsoil reveals the remains of archaeological structures, features and associated deposits to be almost continuous. No more than a sample was actually seen and recorded in the evaluation, but their full exposure and dissection would undoubtedly reveal the plan and remains of a c. 100m length of Romano-British road frontage properties, and their structures. With the exception of more deeply cut, infilled features, the average depth of archaeological deposits is probably little more than 0.30m surviving below the base of the

topsoil. Despite this, and the fact that truncated remains at their original ground levels only now survive, it is likely that a reasonably clear picture of the layout and sequence of occupation for a period of over 300 years is still preserved.

By analogy with discoveries made elsewhere in the vicinity of Fosse Lane, there is little doubt that the remains surviving on this site are a part of the much more extensive Romano-British roadside settlement or small town at Shepton Mallet, whose existence and character were established in 1990 (Buteux 1990; Leach 1991). Both the finds and structural remains are very similar in character to those discovered and interpreted on sites to the east of Fosse Lane. From the evidence sampled it appears that a fairly continuous frontage of buildings and other structures existed alongside the original Fosse Way in this area, from perhaps the 2nd century until at least the later 4th century.

The remainder of this site falls within Zone 2; essentially all that area lying to the west of Zone 1 (Fig. 2). The opportunity of more extensive observations afforded by the partial topsoil stripping of this area, combined with the more controlled examination made possible by the evaluation transect trenches and the geophysical survey, reinforce an impression that archaeological remains are very sparse in this zone. No structures of Romano-British date were encountered, and the only features appear to be boundary ditches extending back westwards from the original Roman road frontage and the properties along it. Two were identified by geophysical prospection, and a third within the evaluation Trench 3. These boundary ditches suggest property or land divisions 15–20 metres wide, which may have been part of an early settlement layout. Further divisions on a similar alignment could be anticipated to the north, while evidence for the subdivision of strips or for activities relating to their use may still exist in places, although not encountered in this evaluation. Finds of Roman date were rare in this area (Fig. 4) and the potential for 'backyard' occupation of a domestic or industrial nature in Zone 2, contemporary with the buildings of Zone 1, appears low.

While Zone 2 undoubtedly contains some evidence for a use connected with the Romano-British urban road frontage development to the east, the evidence is sparse, and surviving archaeological features or deposits should not be anticipated over more than a small proportion of this area. In a much later period there is, however, some sign of occupation or land use in an area between the west ends of Trenches 2 and possibly during the 18th century.

Overall, the existence of Romano-British settlement remains within the proposed development site have been demonstrated by this evaluation, with some hints of much earlier and much later activity. Of particular value has been the recognition that as part of a much larger Romano-British roadside settlement, this particular site demonstrates most clearly so far the character of settlement remains as they survive along the west side of the Fosse Way. In contrast to the east side, where more extensive assessment has taken place, this site has also provided an opportunity to examine the road frontage, in an area, furthermore, where its disturbance by modern services or roadworks has been minimal. Hints of a somewhat lower material, and thus perhaps social status, relative to other parts of the settlement so far examined, give another potential dimension to the value of this site.

### Recommendations

Arising from the evaluation and the archaeological evidence encountered, the following recommendations are proposed with a view to safeguarding the surviving remains.

1. As the most important and vulnerable area of archaeological survival, Zone 1 should be protected wherever feasible from any further sub-surface disturbance. Design options for the proposed development should be sought which protect as large an area as possible. Removal or disturbance of topsoil here should be avoided, and some build-up or sealing of the present ground level would be desirable.

2. Wherever disturbance or excavation in connection with development is unavoidable in Zone 1, archaeological excavation, removal and recording of the proven archaeological resource should be a preliminary to those works. Thus, where service trenching, foundation works or other contractor's disturbance is necessary, this procedure should be applied through the employment of a professional archaeological contractor and with the advice of Somerset County Council's archaeologist.
3. In Zone 2, ground disturbance and excavation works in connection with any proposals for development are unlikely to significantly affect any known archaeological resource. However, in view of the suspected historical relationship of this area with the archaeological remains in Zone 1, and the possibility that some contemporary or earlier remains do in fact survive here, a monitoring arrangement is desirable during the course of such groundworks. Professional archaeological advice and input should once again be sought to undertake any monitoring and recording of archaeological remains which may thus come to light.

### Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to Mr. R. Wolff (Wolff Construction) who commissioned this evaluation and provided a JCB mechanical excavator, and to Mr. R.A. Croft (Somerset County Council) for access to the geophysical survey report commissioned by the County Council.

The project was directed by Peter Leach and Laurence Jones in January 1991, with a team from the 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

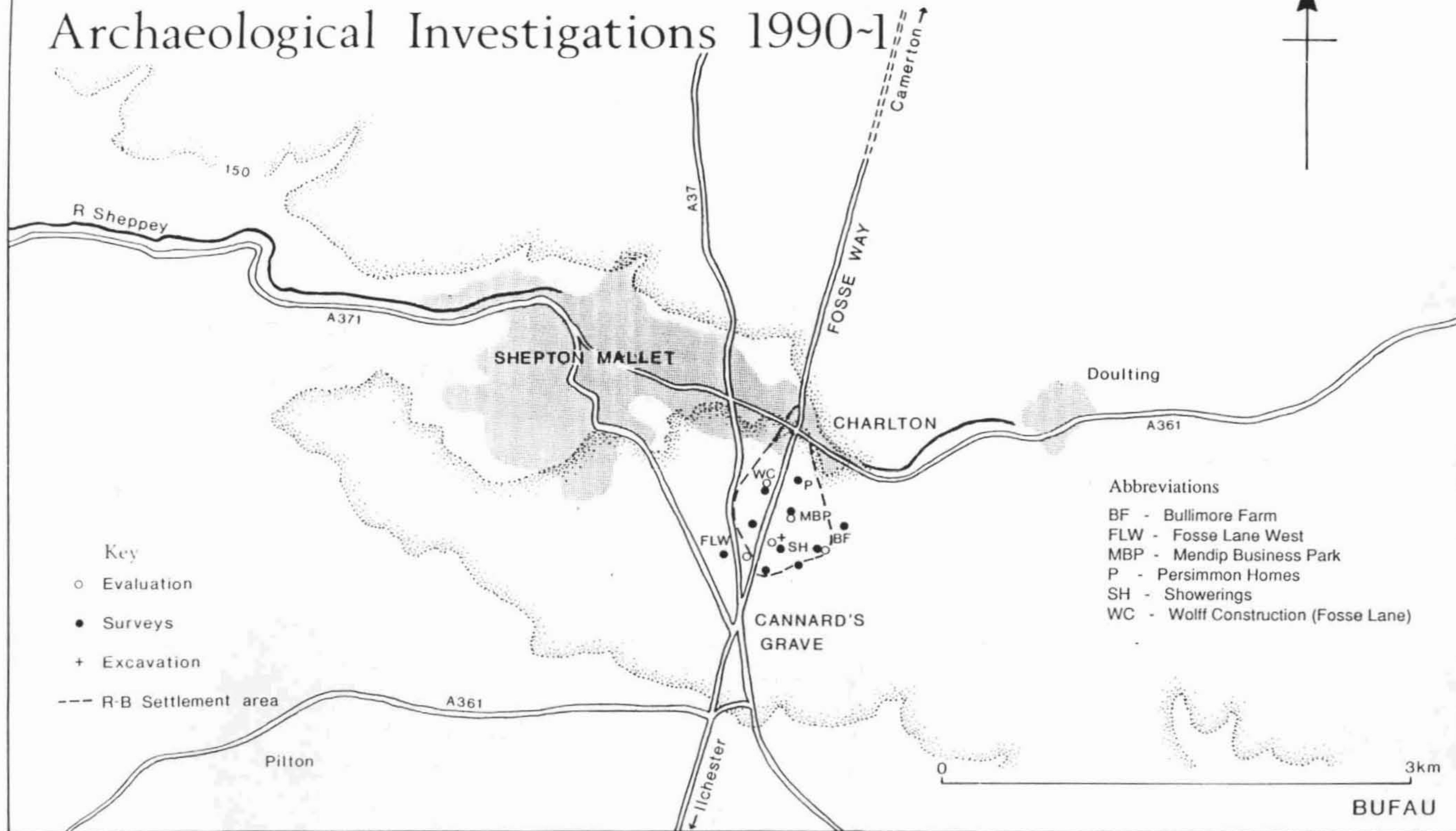


Fig. 1

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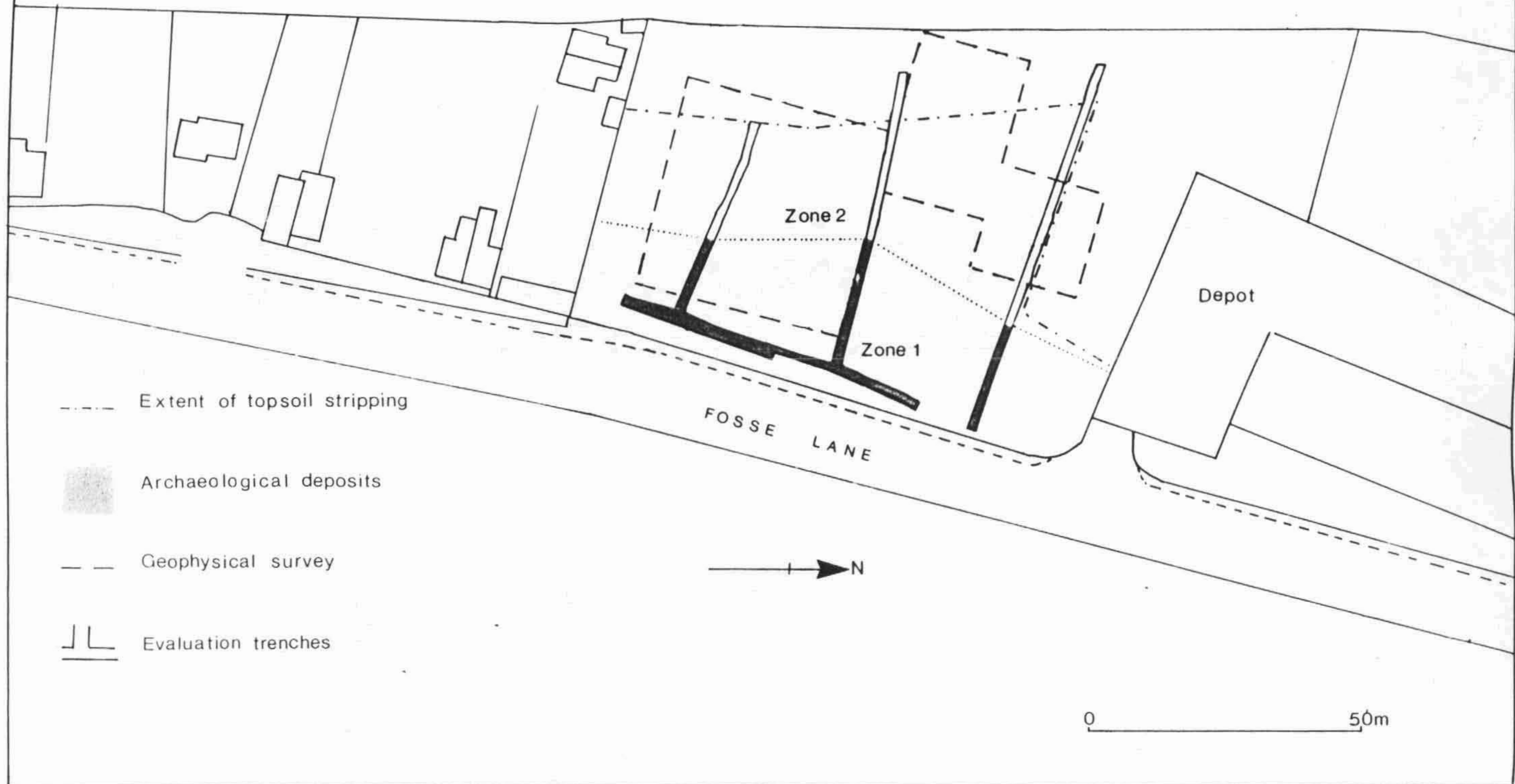


Figure 2

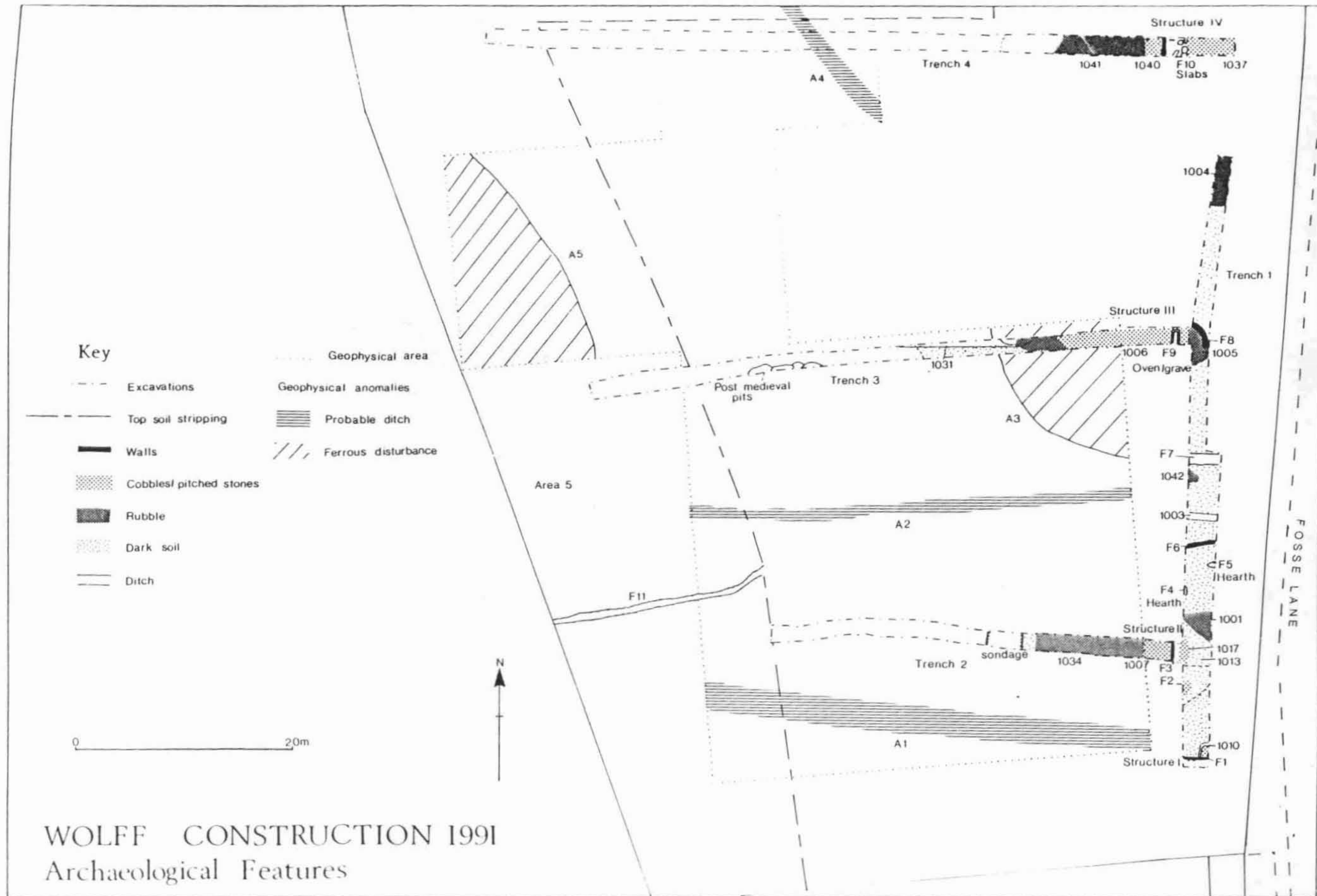


Figure 3

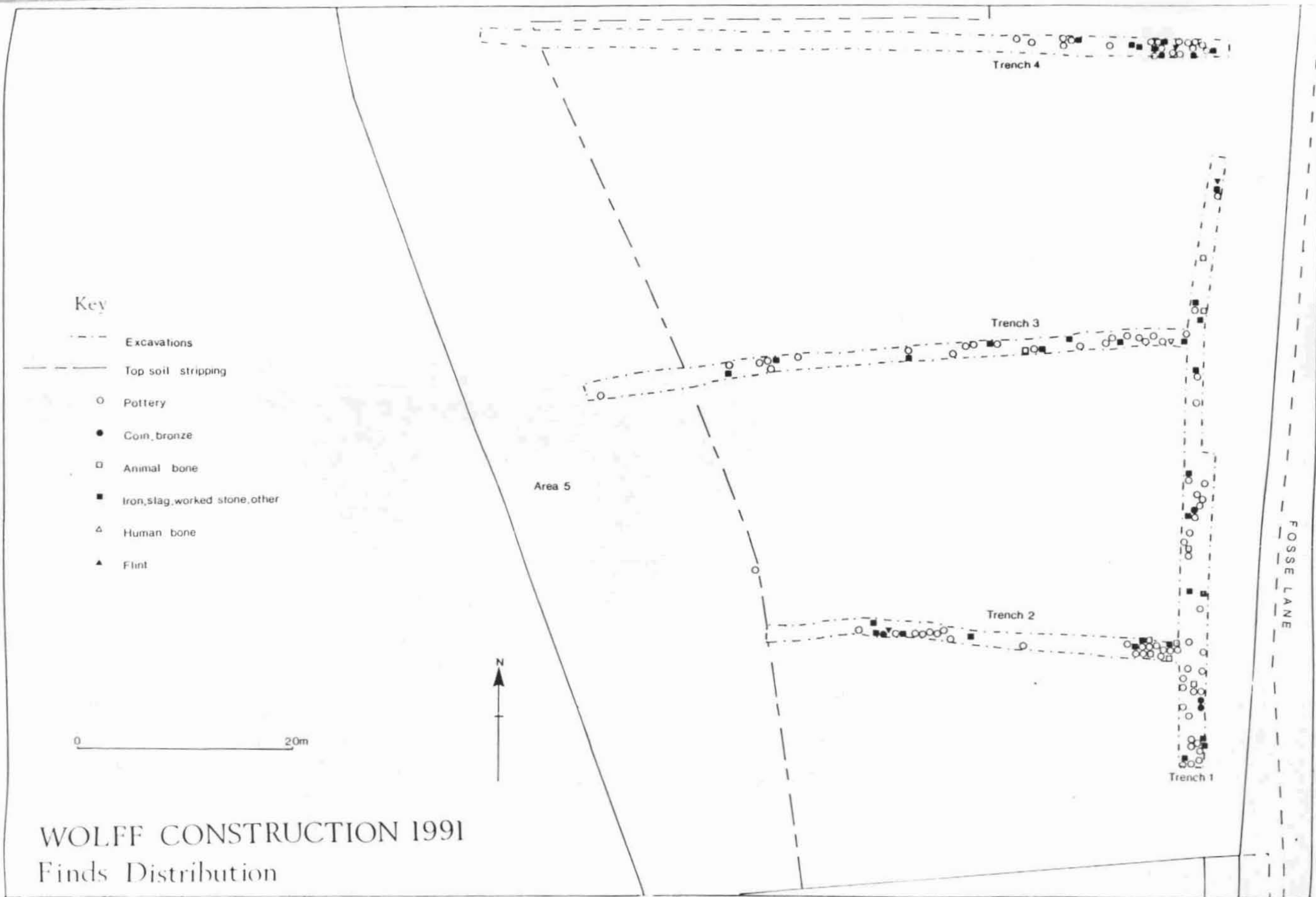


Figure 4