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## An Archaeological Watching Brief at Abbey Farm, Rocester, Staffordshire.

by

Iain Ferris



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## **An Archaeological Watching Brief at Abbey Farm, Rocester, Staffs.**

### **Summary**

*An archaeological watching brief was carried out by BUFAU and Iain Ferris Archaeological Associates during building alterations and demolition of barns forming part of the farm complex at Abbey Farm, Rocester, Staffordshire and during associated groundworks for new houses there. The archaeological work, commissioned by Amos Developments Ltd, was required because the buildings and most of the areas affected lay within the Scheduled Ancient Monument of Rocester Abbey and Roman Settlement (SAM Staffordshire No.66), a first-second century vicus and Roman fort complex and later civilian enclosure (centred on NGR SK110393). Lying to the north of Mill Street and west of St Michael's Church and Abbey Field, parts of the site were under grass and rough, scrub vegetation before site works commenced; other parts were surfaced with concrete or tarmac, having been part of the former farmyard here.*

*Many areas had been previously disturbed, as had already been suggested by an evaluation carried out here in 1989, but in a number of areas features and deposits of the Romano-British period were recorded. Of most interest was a group of three features to the north of the area of investigation, one of which appeared to be a furnace connected with bronze working. Another significant find was made to the south of the watching brief zone where observation of a service trench being dug northwards from the frontage onto Mill Street identified for the first time the position and line of the southern stretch of the so-called 'civilian' clay rampart that formed the central core of the post-fort settlement here at Rocester.*

### **Introduction**

This report summarises the results of an archaeological watching brief carried out by BUFAU and Iain Ferris Archaeological Associates during building alterations and demolition of barns forming part of the farm complex at Abbey Farm, Rocester, Staffordshire (Figures 1 and 2) and during associated groundworks for new houses here. The archaeological work, commissioned by Amos Developments Ltd., was required because the buildings and most of the areas affected lay within the Scheduled Ancient Monument of Rocester Abbey and Roman Settlement (SAM Staffordshire No.66), a first-second century vicus and Roman fort complex and later civilian enclosure (centred on NGR SK110393).

The area was subject to an archaeological evaluation by trial trenching in 1989 (Ferris 1989) and Scheduled Monument Consent conditions relating to archaeology were subsequently based on the results of this evaluation (Figure 3). It was a condition of Scheduled Monument Consent, granted in 1990 and subsequently renewed, that a detailed record of those parts of the buildings and below-ground remains affected by the proposed works was made, both prior to commencement of work and during those works. Some of the barns, due to deterioration, were demolished, rather than simply altered and refurbished as originally planned. This did not involve any additional below-ground works to those detailed in the original SMC. The recorded farm buildings have been reported on elsewhere (Hislop 2002).



Monitoring work commenced in February 2002 (Site Code for work in this year is ARS 02) and continued intermittently until February 2004 (Site Code ARS 04). The work was commissioned by Amos Developments Ltd. and was initially carried out by Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit under the direction of Dr Iain Ferris and was completed in 2004 by Iain Ferris Archaeological Associates. The archaeological watching brief was conducted in accordance with the Institute of Field Archaeologists' Standard and Guidance for Archaeological Watching Briefs (Institute of Field Archaeologists 1994) and the conditions of the Scheduled Monument Consent.

Alongside the results of the fieldwork this report also provides a quantification of the excavated finds assemblage. An assessment is made of the academic value of this material in the broader context of Rocester's archaeology. The report follows procedures defined in The Management of Archaeology Projects (MAP 2).

### **Site Location**

The site, part of Abbey Farm, comprises a parcel of land within the village of Rocester, Staffordshire (NGR centred on SK11153970), to the north of Mill Street and west of St Michael's Church and Abbey Field (Figures 1 and 2). Parts of the site were under grass and rough, scrub vegetation before site works commenced; other parts were surfaced with concrete or tarmac, having been part of the former farmyard here. An earthwork rampart, part of the so-called 'civilian' rampart around a post-military Romano-British settlement, survives in the north of the development area.

### **The Archaeological Background**

The site, whose underlying geology comprises river terrace sand-gravel, lies within an area of known archaeological context. Rocester is located at a point where the Roman road from Derby to Chesterton crosses the River Dove. Excavations in the 1960s confirmed the presence of a Roman fort and associated *vicus*. This area was further investigated in the period 1985-87, when it was shown that there was a complex sequence of late first-century Roman military activity and three successive forts, the latest of which was occupied until *c.* AD 200. A 'small town', or village, developed in the third and fourth centuries and was, in turn, succeeded by Anglo-Saxon and medieval occupation. This archaeological and historical development is outlined in Esmonde Cleary and Ferris (1996) but will be briefly repeated here.

### **Prehistory**

Cropmarks of two ring ditches are recorded to the south of the village, down towards the confluence of the rivers Churnett and Dove. Fieldwalking here a number of years ago by a local amateur archaeologist recovered worked flints (Pat Drayton pers. comm.). Scatters of prehistoric material have been found at a number of excavation locations around the village: Late Neolithic and Late Iron Age pottery, and Mesolithic and Neolithic flints were found at the New Cemetery site (Esmonde Cleary and Ferris 196, 39, 182-183); Mesolithic and Neolithic flints at Dove First School (unpublished 1986); and Mesolithic and Neolithic flints at Orton's Pasture (Ferris, Bevan and Cuttler 2000, 53). It is noted that a prehistoric bronze axe was found at Arkwright's Mill in the eighteenth century (Gunstone 1964, 32) but, more significantly, there is a recorded find of prehistoric material, comprising a complete Beaker, uncovered in the 1930s during the construction of Northfield Avenue (Fowler 1955; Clarke 1970).



Recent excavation at Northfield Avenue recovered prehistoric worked flints, including a barbed and tanged arrowhead broadly contemporary with the nearby Beaker find.

### **Romano-British Period**

Three overlying but overlapping Roman forts were sited at Rocester, dating from the later first century to c. 200 A.D. Excavations at Mill Field to the east of the fort complex in 1986 (unpublished) found evidence of a banked enclosure contemporary with the military presence. To the south of the forts, in the area of Orton's Pasture, lay two enclosures, one of which was associated with a small shrine building, again contemporary with part of the period of the military occupation (Ferris, Bevan and Cuttler 2000). A *vicus*, possibly partially within an enclosure, lay to the west of the forts (Ferris and Bevan Forthcoming). It is not known where the northern limits of the three forts are situated. The location of the military cemetery is also presently unknown, but this could lie to the north of the forts. It has previously been suggested by pottery specialists that there may have been kilns operating in Rocester at some stage in the Roman period, producing coarsewares and, perhaps, mortaria, though the locations of any such kilns had not been identified.

A civilian settlement grew up following abandonment of the last fort at Rocester and this was later enclosed by a substantial clay rampart. This phase of Roman activity at Rocester is poorly understood, both spatially and in terms of chronology, though it is likely that the later settlement did not extend much further north than the area of the New Cemetery.

### **Saxon, Medieval and Post-Medieval Periods**

The excavations at the New Cemetery site encountered Saxon and Medieval ovens which, it was suggested, lay on the very fringes of the village in those periods. A number of low earthwork features existed on the Northfield Avenue site and evaluation indicated the presence of Medieval ditches or boundaries here, perhaps connected with field systems.

### **Archaeological Watching Brief Results**

All areas disturbed by groundworks were monitored during the watching brief, including the digging of foundation trenches, service trenches and fence post-holes (Figure 4). Full site records of all observations form the site archive which will be deposited with the Potteries Museum, Stoke-on-Trent, Staffordshire. Each area monitored that produced archaeological results will be briefly described in turn below. Records of recent and modern deposits recorded in areas where there was no other, earlier deposits either encountered or exposed are in the site archive and will not be discussed here.

During the building recording work, for ease of reference structures were assigned letter codes, so that below they will be referred to as Building A, with subdivisions A1, A2 etc, Building B etc. (Hislop 2002 Fig. 3). Each building plot, retained build or new build, was assigned a plot code by the developer-Plots 1-8 and Plots A-C-and these will also be used below.



Where new walls were to be built, both external and internal walls, a 0.90m-1.0m wide foundation trench was dug by machine along the line of the walls down to solid ground, that is natural gravel, before concrete was poured into the lower parts of the trenches.

#### **Service Trench from Mill Street Northwards**

Intensive monitoring was carried out on the digging of trench for a storm drain and five 'gully pits' connecting to it. The main cut started at the southern boundary of the site, just to the north of the pavement along the northern side of Mill Street. The trench ran northwards along the western verge of the drive up to Abbey Farm parallel to an existing service trench. The trench was 0.40m deep at its southern end, deepening gradually over a length of c. 20m to 1.68m at its northern end. The shallow nature of the trench meant that in its first 5m only the topsoil was exposed; this consisted of mid-brown silt (1000), heavily mixed and disturbed by previous excavation. As the trench deepened northwards at 8.95m it was possible to see a layer of heavy yellow-brown clay (1009/F114) below the topsoil. Initially, this clay could only be seen as a thin band, but the excavation of a 'gully pit' on the eastern edge of the trench revealed this band to be approximately 0.30m thick. Closer inspection of this layer was impossible due to the instability of the adjoining sections, although a photographic record was made. It appears that the clay band forms part of the clay rampart which was also noted in the north-west corner of the site as an earthwork during excavations in 1989 (Ferris 1989), at Dove First School in 1986 (unpublished) and in the New Cemetery (Esmonde Cleary and Ferris 1996). The full width of the clay rampart could not be ascertained during the watching brief (for the line of the rampart see Figure 4).

As the channel deepened further the natural gravel was exposed; no further archaeological deposits were noted and no finds were recovered. Excavation of the four remaining 'gully pits', to a depth of approximately 1.70m, also showed no evidence of any archaeological deposits and again no finds were recovered.

A second phase of monitoring focused on the 9.35m-extension of the original service trench, to the south and across Mill Street where it would join the local sewer system. The trench was excavated by machine to a depth of c.1.70 m in rolling segments, where by one stretch of trench was excavated, the pipe laid and covered with coarse gravel before moving on to the next segment of the trench. Subsequent monitoring was deemed unnecessary. The recorded sequence included modern road surfaces beneath the present Mill Street (1032 and 1033), a recent service trench (F112), a foundation trench for a brick boundary wall (F110/111), and mixed deposits containing Post-Medieval finds (1028).

#### **Plot 1**

Five foundation trenches were dug within the footprint of Plot 1, converted Building A3, and four were dug for the foundations of a new projecting wing. All foundation trenches were 0.90m-1.0m wide. Following removal of recent flooring (1002) from inside Building A3, a light brown mixed mortar clay levelling deposit (1102) was exposed. A stone-lined cellar (F127), 4.70m by 3.20m, was encountered in the northeastern corner of Building A3.



Floor levelling deposit 1102 overlay a dark brown sandy silt (1098). Both 1102 and 1098 contained brick fragments and were obviously relatively recent deposits. At a depth of 0.40m, under 1098, was a 0.50m-thick deposit of dark brown, charcoal-flecked sandy silt (1099) containing Roman pottery, a coin and other finds. Layer 1099 overlay a thin band of charcoal-flecked orange sandy silt (1100) which in turn overlay the natural sand and gravel subsoil at a depth of 1.20m. No features were identified cutting into or through the natural. Layers 1099 and 1100 were probably Romano-British in date.

## **Plot 2**

Three 1m-wide foundation trenches were dug within the footprint of Building A2 down to the surface of the natural gravel at a depth of 1.70m-1.80m. Immediately to the north of Building A2 the ground level was reduced by 0.50m, but only spreads of modern building rubble were exposed here.

The sequence of deposits here (from top downwards 1108, 1109, 1110, 1111, 1113 and 1112) was fully recorded, but none of the layers was deemed to be archaeologically-significant, with evidence suggesting extensive former disturbance of deposits here down to natural in relatively recent times. Layer 1110 contained a single sherd of Romano-British pottery

## **Plots 5-7 and Surrounding Areas**

Records were made of all horizons exposed here by groundworks, including modern farmyard surfaces and their associated levelling deposits, wall foundation trenches for brick farmyard buildings, drain cuts, and a brick-lined well (F116) exposed just to the south of Plot 7. A number of isolated layers and sequences of layers containing Romano-British pottery were also recorded lower down the sequence in foundation and service trenches (1059, 1060, 1062, 1064, 1066, 1068, 1072, 1074, 1077, 1079 and 1080) and most must be assumed to date to this period, although in the case of layer 1066 the Roman finds are probably residual, as Post-Medieval material was also recovered from this horizon. Each of these deposits was unfortunately seen in too small an area to enable their interpretation. Full descriptions of these deposits can be found in the site archive.

The most significant find here, however, was a possible metalworking furnace (F124: Figures 5 and 6, Plates 1 and 2), partially truncated by one of the service trenches dug to the north of Plots 2 and 5. Circular in plan, c. 1.0m east-west by perhaps the same dimensions north-south, the feature consisted of a 0.85m-deep pit with a c.0.25m-deep sandstone-lined channel cut into its base. The channel was backfilled with a deposit of reddish-brown compact sandy, silty clay (1085) containing much charcoal and a cleanish brown clay silt (1086). Deposit 1085 overflowed the channel on both sides. Overlying clay 1085 was a thick layer of mixed brown and red-yellow clay (1084) containing pebbles, charcoal flecks, lumps of fired clay, copper alloy slag and some angular pieces of yellow sandstone. Both the channel and the pit had some intact burned red and black clay lining surviving (1087 and 1088 respectively). Contexts 1084 and 1085 both contained Roman pottery. Pit F124 appeared to have truncated to the east by another smaller feature (F125) backfilled with red-brown charcoally silt (1095) containing Roman pottery. Pit F124 cut through a dark brown silt layer (1091) that sealed F125 and contained Roman pottery. A second pit (F126)



to the east of F124 was also seen to be cut through layer 1091. This irregular, oval pit, c. 0.90m east-west by perhaps the same dimensions north-south, was backfilled to a depth of 0.30m with a single deposit of grey brown mixed silt (1096), again containing Roman pottery.

Given the nature of the features F124-F126 and the fact that all had fills that contained Roman pottery it is to be assumed that these features are all Romano-British and are broadly contemporary. Unfortunately, none of the pottery sherds recovered was sufficiently diagnostic to date the features other than as being second-century or later, so it is not possible to say whether they represent military (pre-200 AD) or civilian activity (post-200 AD).

### **Plots A-C**

Monitoring of the foundation trenches in this area was greatly hampered by the depth of disturbance of deposits above the natural gravel which was encountered at a depth of 1.30m to the south of the plot but at 1.80m to the east and 2.20m to the north. In all but two areas mixed deposits (2000) containing modern finds such as brick and tile, wood and plastic extended over the whole area and directly overlay the natural which had clearly been dug away here to varying depths.

Given the depth and instability of most of these deposits and the narrowness of the foundation trenches being dug (0.90m-1.0m) it was not safe to enter these trenches to record the two possible archaeological deposits surviving as isolated layers above the natural. Both of these layers or fills (2004 and 2005) contained Romano-British pottery, recovered from the machine bucket. Layer 2004 was a light, charcoal-flecked grey silty clay in the very northwest corner of Plot C. Layer 2005 was a mid-brown silty clay with charcoal and pebble inclusions recorded towards the centre of the foundation trench forming the boundary wall between Plots B and C. The full extent of these layers could not be gauged. The so-called clay 'civilian' rampart whose line should run through Plot A was not recorded here, and it must be assumed that the feature had been completely levelled in this area.

### **The Finds by Lynne Bevan**

A total of 128 sherds of Romano-British pottery, weighing 2636g, was recovered, along with a few prehistoric flints, a sherd of Medieval pottery and 43 sherds of Post-Medieval pottery. A small number of Romano-British small finds was also recovered. The animal bones recovered, mainly of cattle and sheep, constitute too small an assemblage to be viable for study and most in any case came from contexts containing residual pottery. The bones are therefore quantified in Table 1 but not otherwise discussed further. Roman pottery came from 25 separate contexts, in the majority of cases in small individual assemblages of less than 15-20 sherds. The condition of this pottery was, on the whole, not very good, with an average sherd weight of c.20.59g.

### **Prehistoric Finds**

Prehistoric finds comprised two humanly-struck flint waste flakes (Table 1), neither of which showed any signs of secondary working or utilisation. While these isolated finds attest to human activity in the area during the Neolithic to Bronze Age periods they are likely to have resulted from isolated knapping episodes rather than prehistoric settlement of any duration.



Context	Roman Pottery (weight in grams)	Other Pottery	Other Ceramics	Other Finds
ARS 02				
1000		1 Post-Medieval		1 20 <sup>th</sup> c. bottle
1004	1 (21g)		1 brick fragment	4 animal bones
1017	19 (114g)			
1028		9 Post-Medieval	1 clay pipe	1 window glass fragment
1059	6 (320g)			1 bottle glass fragment
1060	2 (22g)			1 corroded iron object & 3 animal bones
1062	2 (13g)			
1064	20 (428g)			4 animal bones
1066	2 (10g)	12 Post-Medieval		
1068	3 (5g)			2 animal bones
1072	4 (8g)			
1074	3 (56g)			
1077	3 (22g)			2 animal bones
1079	2 (19g)			1 slag, 2 animal bones
1080	3 (55g)			6 animal bones
1084	7 (83g)		Large bag of fired clay	slag, 5 animal bones, 1 iron nail, 1 flint
1085	2 (38g)			3 lead fragments
1090	10 (436g)	1 Medieval & 3 Post-Medieval		63 animal bones, 1 clay pipe, 1 flint, 1 copper alloy fragment
1091	6 (334g)			
1095	4 (23g)			2 animal bones
1096	8 (56g)			2 slag fragments, 2 animal bones, iron nail
1099	8 (170g)		Fired clay fragments	4 <sup>th</sup> c. coin, copper alloy sheet fragment, glass bottle fragment, animal bone
1106	1 (14g)			
1110	1 (44g)		Fired clay	3 animal bones
Trench 6	1 (33g)			
Topsoil		3 Post- Medieval		
ARS 04				
2004	7 (242g)			
2005	3 (191g)			
2000		15 Post- Medieval		

Table 1: Summary of All Finds

### **Roman Pottery**

A total of 128 fragments of Roman pottery, weighing 2636g, was recovered (Tables 1 and 2). A high incidence of abrasion was noted among the pottery fragments. For the purposes of this report, the Romano-British pottery has been quantified by sherd count in broad family groups defined by macroscopic analysis only at this stage. Identification of certain groups is to some extent therefore inevitably subjective and some degree of overlap is possible between some groups, particularly in the case of some probable BB1 copies, as previously identified among the assemblage from the New Cemetery site (Leary 1996), Orton's Pasture and the Mill Street *vicus* site, Rocester (Bevan 2000 and Bevan forthcoming).

The overall impression of the assemblage is that many of the forms present have already been published and noted at Rocester (Bell 1986, Leary 1996, Bevan 2000, Bevan forthcoming) or at Derby (Dool *et al.* 1985). The proportionally-large number of grey ware jar forms seem to be very much already recorded forms from Rocester. Other pottery types included Whitewares, Black Burnished wares, a few colour-coated sherds and small quantities of Samian tablewares, mortaria and amphorae. The majority of the vessels in the assemblage would seem to be later first-century-early/mid second-century in date, the majority being second-century.

While all of the pottery types present, particularly the greyware GRA and GRB groups, could be related to Leary's original Rocester fabric series (Leary 1996, 41-43), the small size of the current assemblage did not warrant detailed subdivision or further study at this stage beyond simple tabulation to broad pottery types (Table 2). However, it is recommended that any future work on this small assemblage should attempt to relate it to the larger assemblages of Roman pottery previously recovered from Rocester, in order to achieve a degree of chronological resolution and perhaps provide clues regarding site function.

### **Other Roman Finds**

Other Roman finds included an illegible 4<sup>th</sup> century coin, possibly of the House of Constantine, and a fragment of blue-green glass from a bottle (1099). Other probable Roman finds comprised a copper alloy fitting, possibly a decorative terminal from a bracelet (1090), and a fragment of curved copper alloy sheet (1099).

Evidence for on-site metalworking included three amorphous globules of melted lead (1085) and large quantities of bronze-smithing slag and fired clay from the remains of a hearth (1084). Small quantities of slag were also recovered from contexts 1079 and 1096.

### **Post-Roman Finds**

One fragment of Medieval pottery and a total of 43 fragments of Post-Medieval pottery were recovered (Table 1). In contrast to the Roman sherds which tended to be abraded and small in size, large fragments of Post-Medieval pottery, mainly of a high quality, were recovered. These mainly comprised brown-glazed wares, whitewares and slipwares of late-eighteenth to early-nineteenth century date.



Context	Samian	Mortaria/ Amphorae	Greyware/ BB1	Oxidised wares	White- wares	Derbys/ Shell- temp/ Colour- coat
ARS 02						
1004					1	
1017				19		
1059	1	3/	/1	1		
1060	1		1/			
1062			1/			
1064	4	1/	5/5	2	1	1 Derbys
1066			2/			
1068	2		1/			
1072					4	
1074				3		
1077	1		3/			
1079			2/			
1080			3/			
1084	1		1/3	1	1	
1085	1		1/			
1090	1		5/1	1		2 Derbys
1091		/3		1		1 Derbys, 1 shell- tempered
1095	1			2	1	
1096	5		3/			
1099	1		3/	1		3 Derbys
1106	1					
1110			1/			
Trench 6				1		
ARS 04						
2004			6/			1 colour- coat
2005			2/		1	
Totals:	22	4/3	40/10	32	9	7/1/1

Table 2: Roman Pottery

### Watching Brief Overview

The watching brief at Abbey Farm has provided valuable information to contribute to the understanding of the Romano-British occupation of the area. Although many areas monitored as part of the archaeological exercise had been previously disturbed, as had already been suggested by an evaluation carried out here in 1989, in a number of areas features and deposits of the Romano-British period were recorded. Twenty five layers or features containing 128 sherds of Romano-British pottery were recorded. Prehistoric flints and a single sherd of Medieval pottery were also recovered, along with Post-Medieval pottery.

Of most interest was a group of three features (F124, F125 and F126) to the north of the area of investigation, one of which (F124) appeared to be a furnace connected to bronze working. Another significant find was made to the south of the watching brief zone where observation of a service trench being dug northwards from the frontage onto Mill Street identified for the first time the position and line of the southern stretch of the so-called 'civilian' clay rampart (1009/F114) that formed the central core of the post-fort settlement here at Rocester.

The excavation has provided important evidence about the chronology, layout, and nature of activity in the southwestern part of the fort complex and later civilian enclosure at Rocester, in a way that complements and enhances the results of the work carried out at the New Cemetery Site (Esmonde Cleary and Ferris 1996) and on a smaller scale in the 1960s (Bell 1986), and in the late 1990s at the adjacent Mill Street *vicus* site (Mould 1996; Ferris and Bevan Forthcoming). Alongside Wall, Rocester is now one of the most-studied Romano-British sites in the county, something that will be further enhanced by the reporting of the results of work on the present site described in this report.

### **Acknowledgements**

The project was sponsored by Amos Developments Ltd. who are thanked for their interest and help during all stages of the work. We are grateful to Chris Welch and Chris Wardle of Staffordshire County Council, for advice and guidance on-site. The watching brief was managed at all stages by Dr Iain Ferris and was carried out initially by BUFAU and subsequently by Iain Ferris Archaeological Associates. Work on site was variously carried out by Andy Rudge, Chris Hewitson, Richard Lee, Steve Graham, Steve Williams, Roy Krakowicz, Bob Bracken, Suzanne Blake, Maurice Hopper, Kate Bain, Phil Mann, Sally Radford, Helen Martin, Ellie Ramsey, Lisette Piper, Melissa Conway, Catharine Orchard, Erica Macey and Iain Ferris. Erica Macey processed the finds which are reported on here by Lynne Bevan. Dr Iain Ferris compiled and edited this report.

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Figure 1





Figure 2

# ROCESTER, Abbey Farm 1989

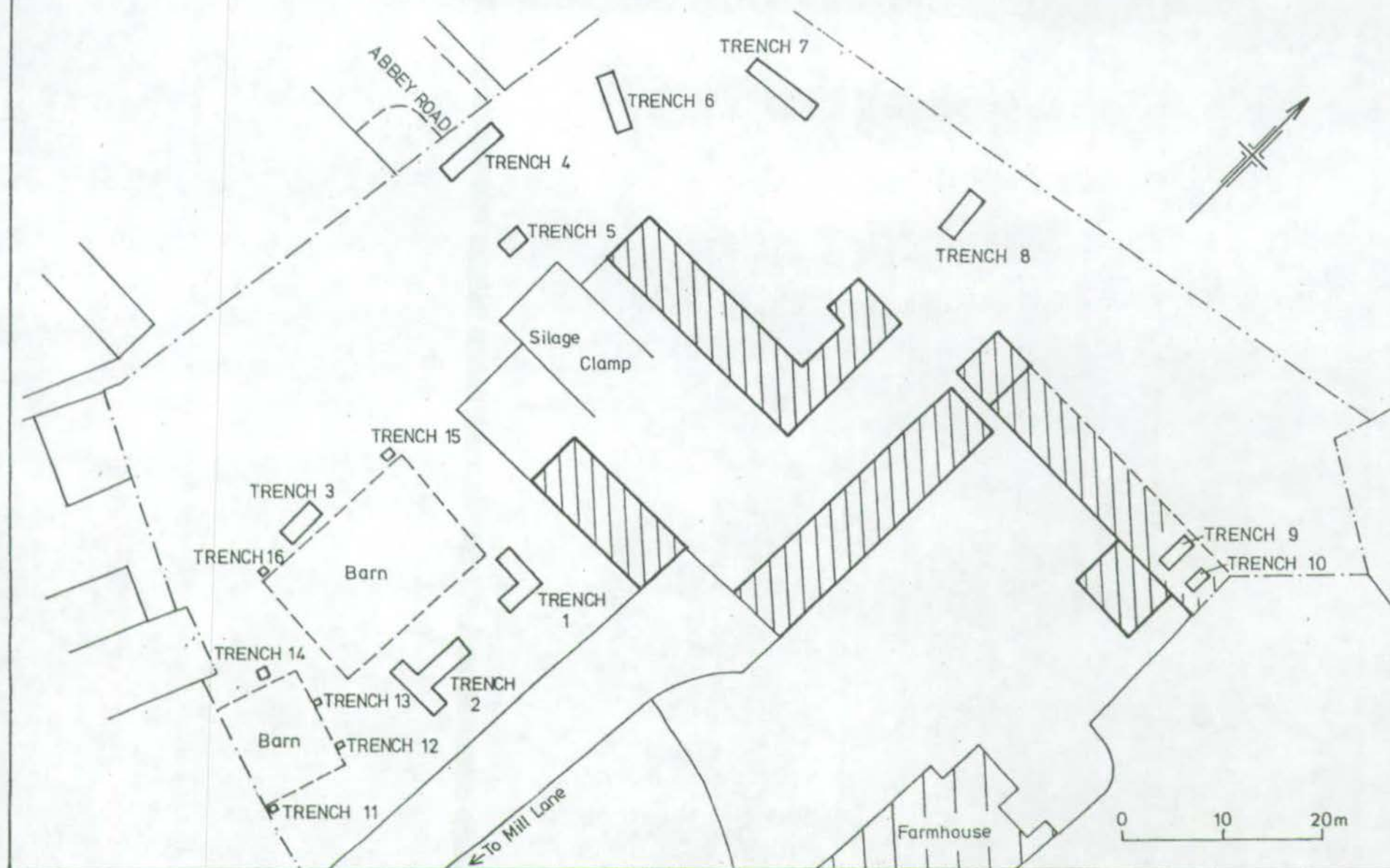
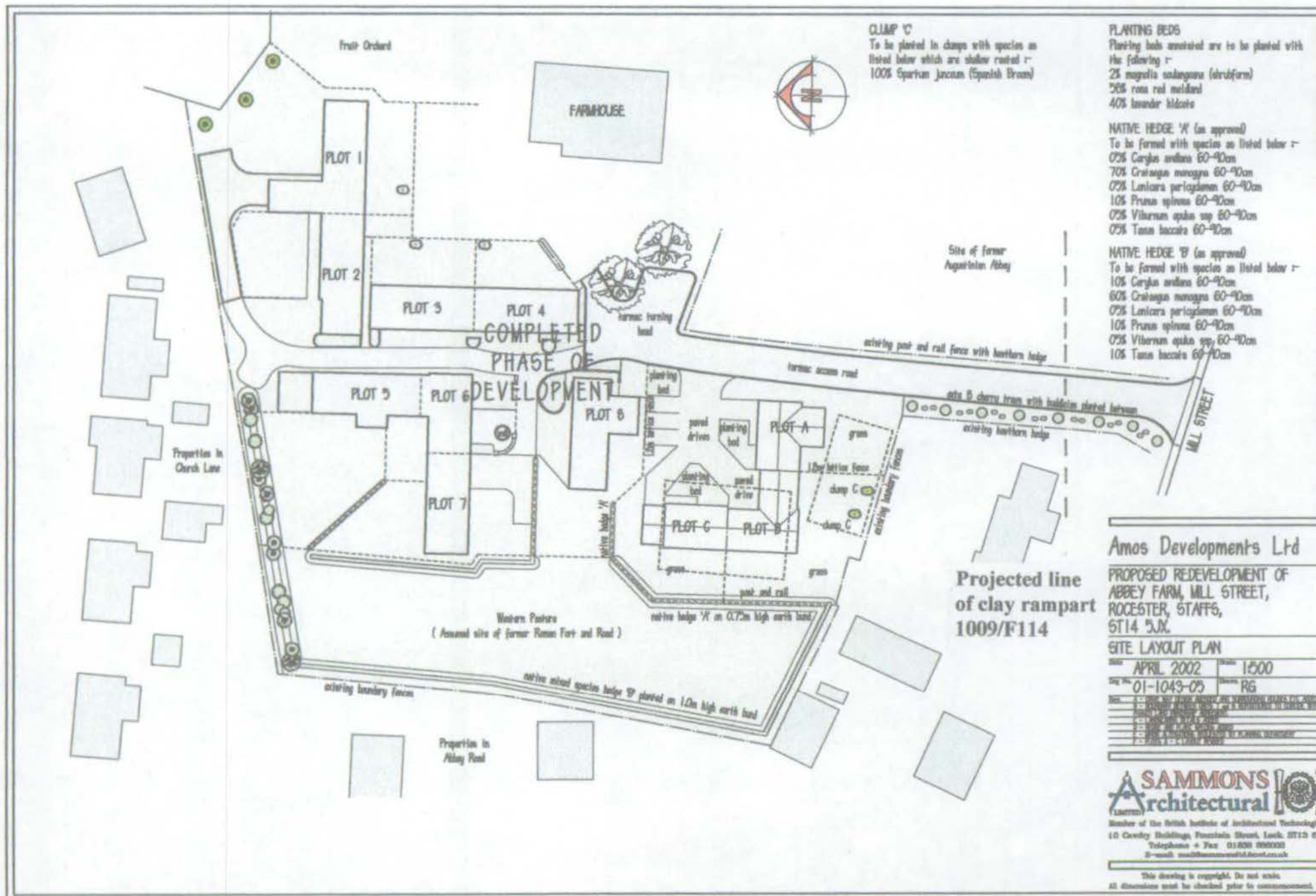


Figure 3





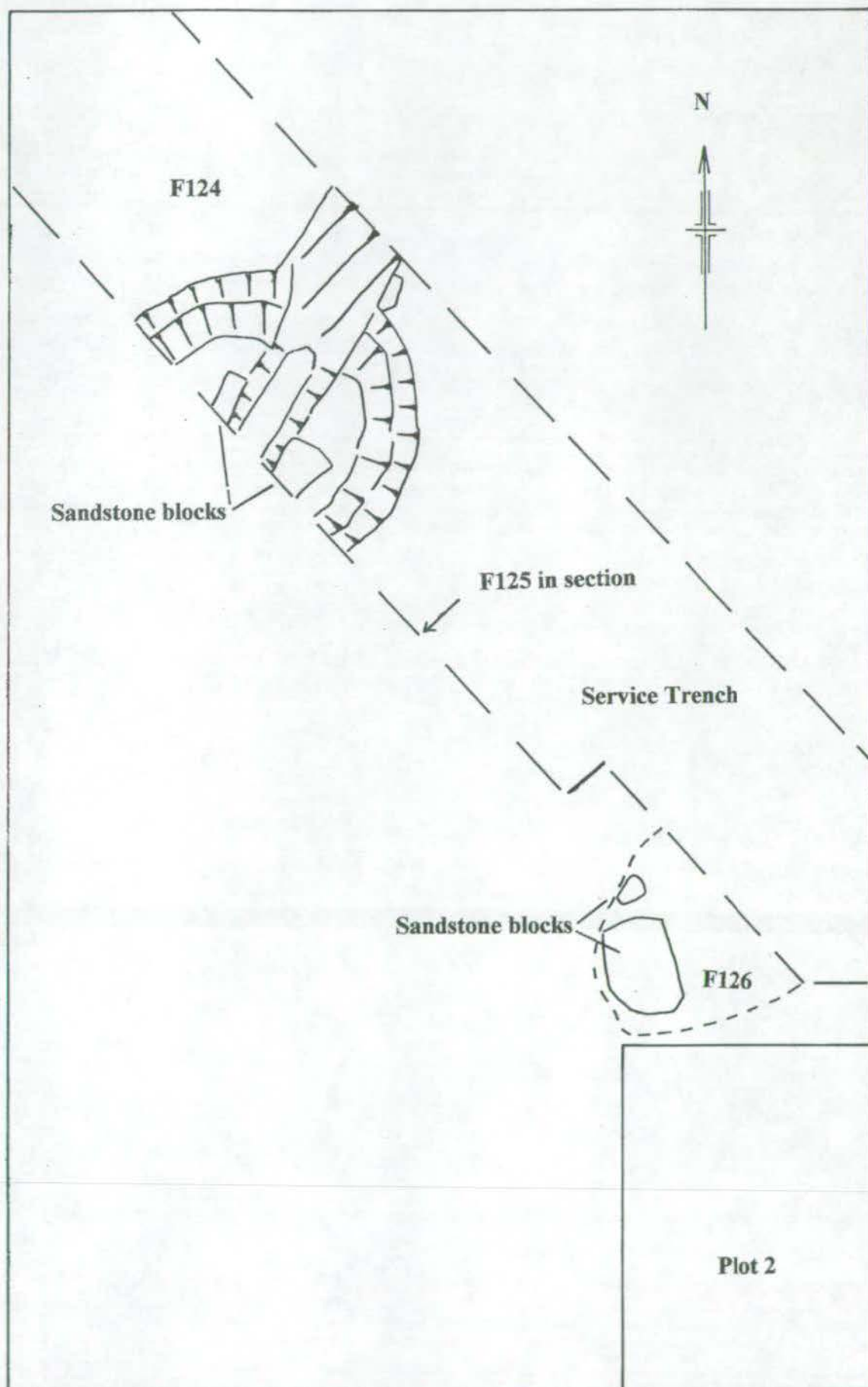


Figure 5



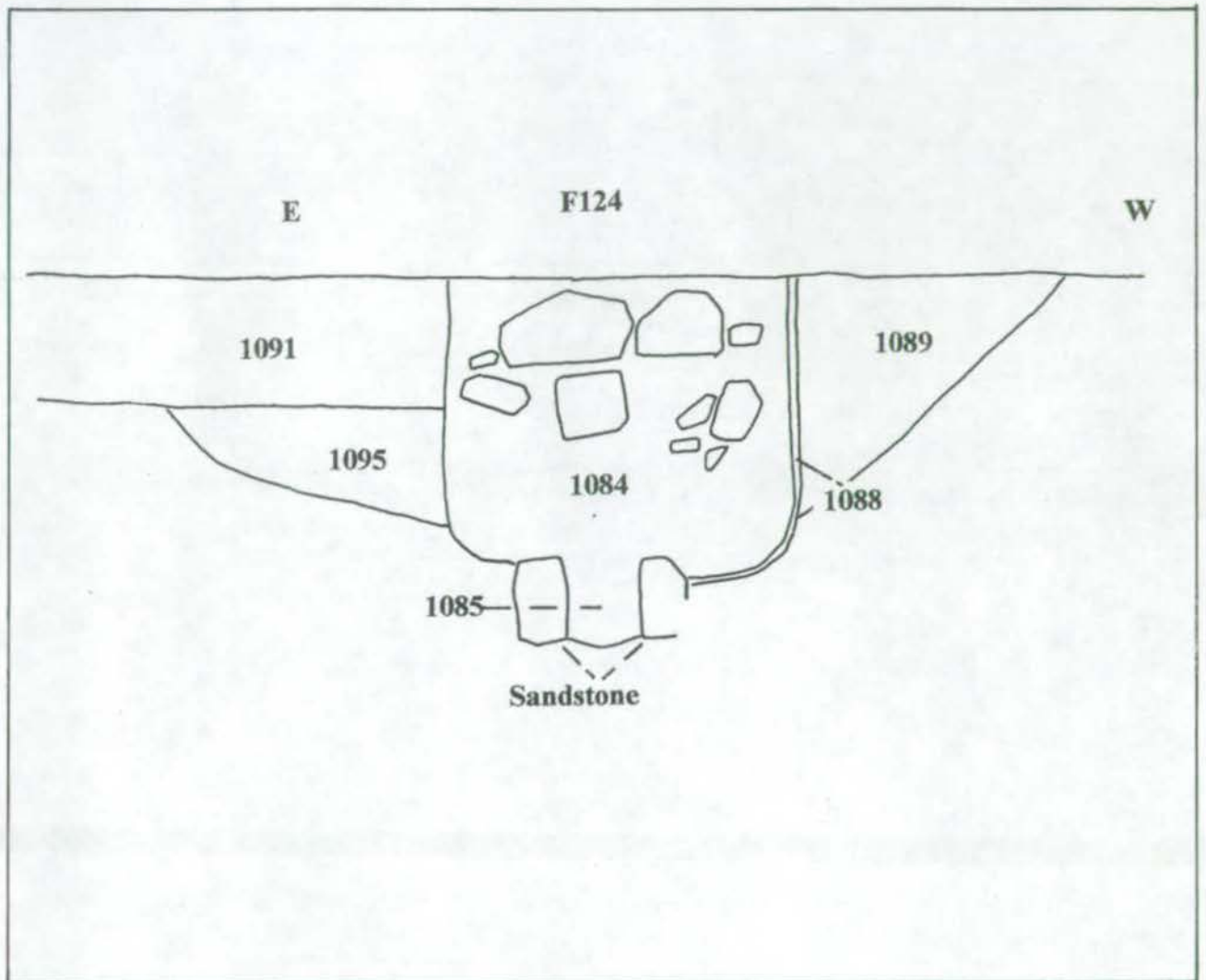


Figure 6



Plate 1



Plate 2