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An Archaeological Evaluation  
of grounds adjacent to Box  
House Hotel, Box,  
Wiltshire.

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### Introduction

Box House Hotel and its formal gardens lie west of the parish church of St. Thomas à Becket on land which slopes down north westwards to the By Brook. On visiting the site it is immediately obvious that a great deal of artificial terracing has been undertaken to create broadly level lawns and in particular to allow the construction of the house in the early Nineteenth Century. A number of trenches have indicated a variety of subsoils ranging from brashy limestone, through calc tufa, to a firm mid grey clay. These results combined with the presence of a concentration of natural springs indicates the geological complexity of the site. From what we know about the archaeology of land to the north-east, east and south-east of the hotel grounds an archaeological evaluation of the site prior to consideration of any planning application was obviously essential.

### The History of Archaeological Intervention

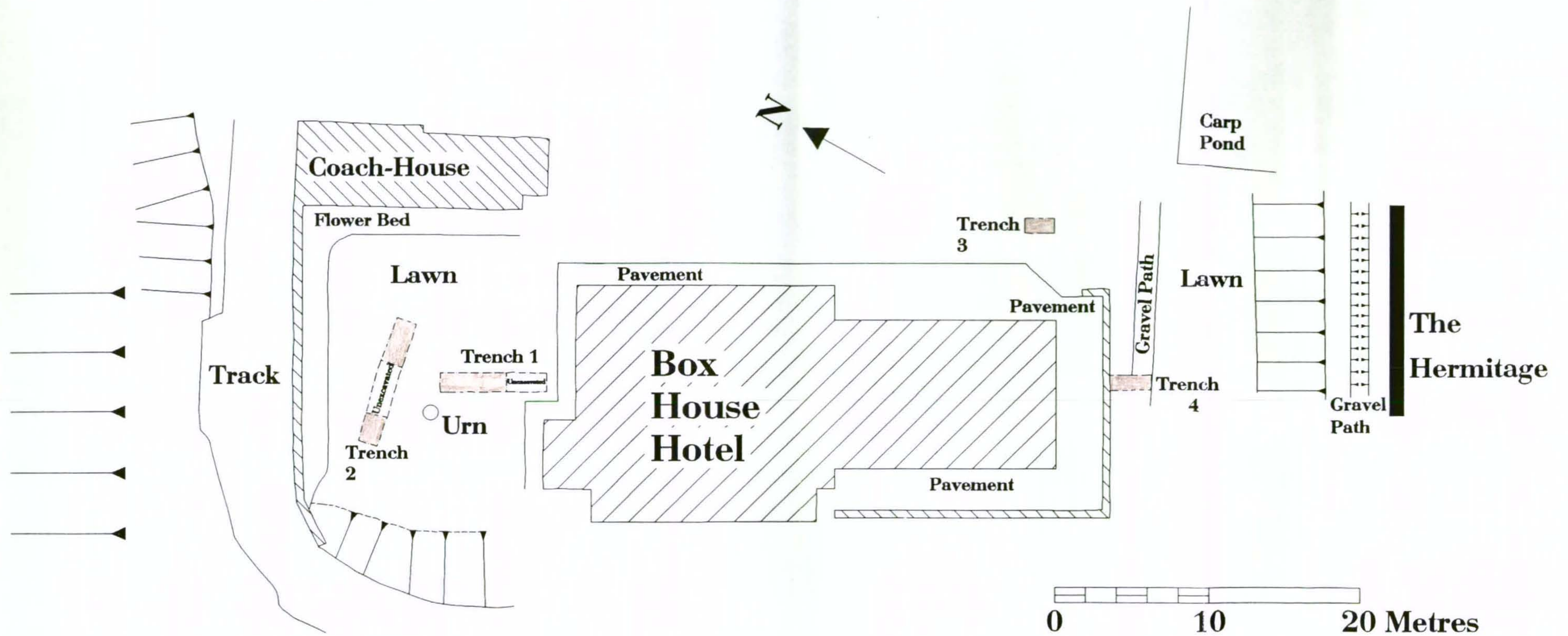
The presence of what has traditionally been seen as a Roman villa at Box has been known since the construction of a western extension to The Wilderness in 1829 unearthed Roman structures. The Reverend H M Scarth in "*Aquae Solis - notes of Roman Bath*" (1864) mentions the existence of a Roman bath-house on the south side of the churchyard. In 1904 a synthesis of all the known evidence was produced by H. Brakespear in an article entitled "The Roman Villa at Box". The article appeared in volume 33 of the Wiltshire Archaeological Magazine and concentrated on the extensive excavations carried out in 1902-3. The trenches dug in 1902-3 were located north and east of the large pond which is itself north-east of the parish church of St. Thomas à Becket. They revealed three ranges of a large masonry complex with rooms which contained hypocausts, mosaics and baths. A. Shaw Mellor wrote an article in the Wiltshire Archaeological Magazine volume 51 (1945),<sup>193</sup> describing the discovery in the grounds of Box House, of several Roman coins including a silver coin of Julia Soaemias, the mother of Elagabalus and one late Iron Age coin. In 1967/8 excavation work was undertaken in advance of the construction of Selwyn Hall and sample trenches were dug in order to clarify the phasing of the walls recorded by Brakespear. Work beneath Selwyn Hall established that masonry buildings of a Roman date extend at least as far east as Valens Terrace. The results relating to the 1967-8 excavations were presented by H R Hurst, D L Dartnell, C Fisher et alia in "*Excavations at Box Roman Villa 1967-8*", *Wiltshire Archaeological and Natural History Magazine* 81, 1987.

More recent work in the area has been on a smaller scale but its significance has been considerable because it has shown that Roman occupation and activity was not restricted to the area north of Church Lane but extended to the south and west. In 1980 a late 1st to mid 2nd century ditch was identified in the garden of The Hermitage which lies south-east of Box House and south of the church. The ditch shares the alignment of the Roman buildings to the north, running as it does from south-west to north-east. In addition to a large assemblage of late 1st to mid 2nd century pottery, finds included a silver object which was clearly a representation of an eye. In 1992 a water pipe trench was dug along Church Lane running eastwards from Box House Cottage and the excavation was watched by the Bath Archaeological Trust. It revealed a Roman wall on the same alignment as the ditch, the visible portion of the wall measured 8.5 metres in length and in places it survived only 0.30 metres below the grass verge on the south side of Church Lane. In 1994 five test pits were dug by Wessex Archaeology in the grounds of the vicarage immediately south-east of Selwyn Hall,

four of the five holes revealed Roman walls. In the late 1980's a group of students from Chippenham College of Further Education carried out some trial excavations within the grounds of the hotel as part of an earlier planning application. A trench adjacent to the east side of the hotel revealed what was thought to be a Roman wall 1 metre below the modern ground level. One further "excavation" may be of considerable significance, the information however has come down to us entirely by word of mouth. Earth moving work was being undertaken between the north-west corner of the carp pond and the south-east corner of Box House, in order to plant new shrubs. At a depth of 2 feet, approximately 6 feet away from the north-west corner of the pond and on the line of the south-west edge of the pond, Bob Fry a former gardener at Box House, encountered what he describes as a "Roman Pavement". It was 1 foot wide and the tesserae were still embedded in mortar which was 3 inches thick. What of course is unclear is whether this fragment of pavement was *in situ* or if it had been redeposited from elsewhere. This fragment of pavement lies a short distance beyond that portion of the grounds which will be affected by the current planning proposal and for these reasons an investigation of the particular area was not engaged in.

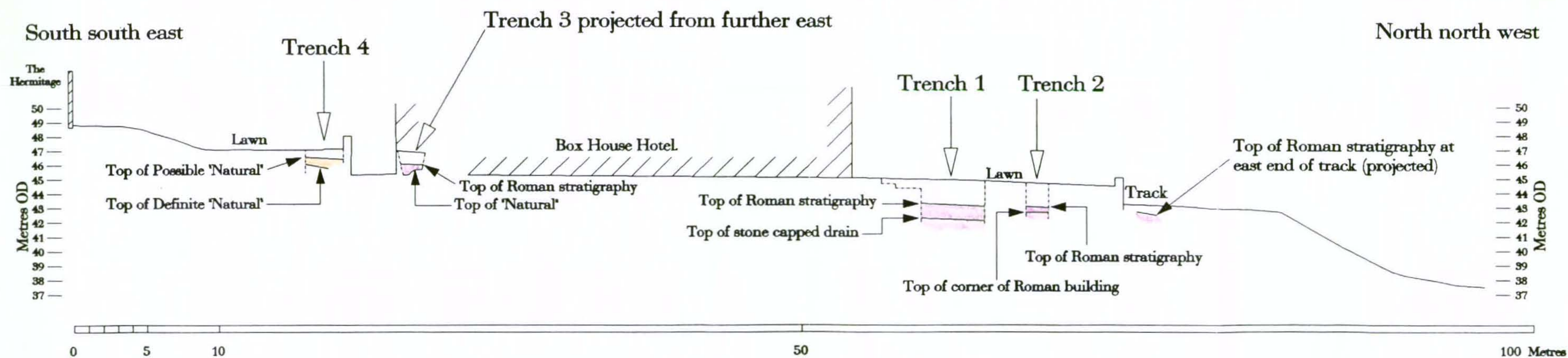
Thus prior to this evaluation the known extent of archaeological deposits of a Roman date was as follows: from the west end of Church Lane to the south-east corner of Selwyn Hall on the alignment of the north range of the "villa" which is a distance of approximately 120 metres, and from the northern side of the north range of the "villa" following the alignment of the eastern range of the "villa" to a point on the line of the ditch in the garden of The Hermitage (were it to be projected this far east) which is a distance of approximately 125 metres.





Plan showing location of  
excavation trenches





Profile showing the top of the Roman stratigraphy in relation to the present ground level.

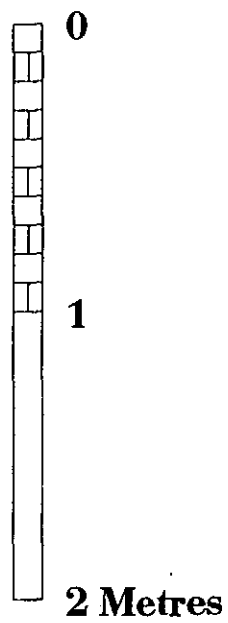
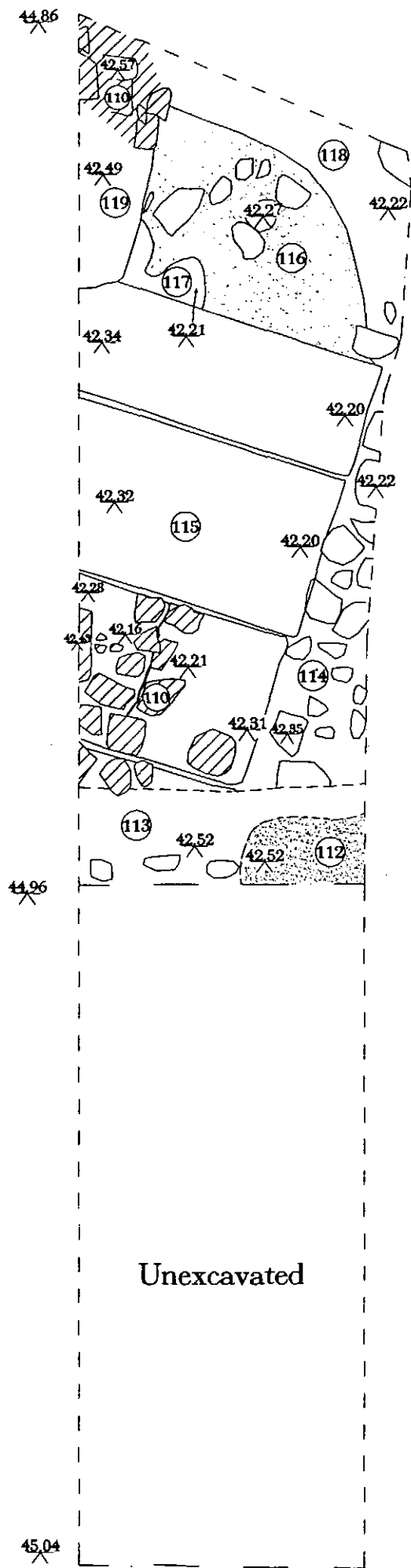


### Trench 1

The first two trenches were dug on the lawn which lies north of Box House and west of the coach-house, the lawn is some 30 metres south of the wall recorded in the pipe trench dug along Church Lane. Trench 1 was 7 metres long by a maximum of 1.5 metres wide and was excavated to a maximum depth of 2.6 metres below the present turf line - natural subsoil was not encountered at any point within the trench. The dark grey-brown loamy topsoil (101) and grey-brown loam with limestone pebbles (102) with a combined thickness of 0.75 metres, contained C18th and C19th ceramics and represent material introduced to create the present lawn. Three layers with a combined depth of 0.8 - 1 metre represent an earlier sequence of dumping - a fine reddish grey-brown loamy silt (103), a dark brown-grey slightly gritty loam with limestone pebbles and pennant fragments (104) and a raft of limestone rubble in a buff-yellow and grey matrix of crushed limestone and silty clay (105) - all contained very small quantities of pre-C19th ceramics including clay pipes. Layers 103-105 indicate quite extensive landscaping work which may well predate the construction of the present house. At the southern end of the trench three modern features were encountered - a wall (106) sealed by the topsoil was parallel with and 2.6 metres north of the north wall of the house, its ashy grey mortar and general appearance suggested it was likely to be contemporary with the house. It may have formed the edge of a terrace before the lawn was laid. At a distance of 0.15 metres and 1.35 metres north of wall 106 were two ceramic drains, it was thought likely that they were live and for this reason full excavation did not take place at the southern end of the trench.

Below layer 105 which is broadly post-Medieval, were the uppermost Roman deposits. The top of layer 108 was at 43.27 OD. Despite the fact that layer 108 (finely stratified deposits of black, dark grey and light grey ashy silt with green staining and red burnt clay flecking) and layer 109 (a substantial lens of pale yellow-grey-green finely crushed limestone within layer 108) contained no dateable artefacts, they were layers which in part at least appeared in trench 2 where they could be firmly dated as Roman. Layer 107 (limestone pebbles in an orange-brown gritty clay), existed only at the southern end of the trench and its origin remains unclear. Layers 108 & 109 fill a substantial cut feature (111). The finely stratified ashy lenses forming layer 108 have been sampled, but analysis of these samples, if deemed necessary, will take up to 3 months. There is nothing to suggest that any burning actually took place in cut 111 and the fine stratification indicates that the layer was formed by the repeated deposition of thin ashy lenses rather than a single massive dump. Given that we know that hypocausts exist close by, this layer may represent the dumping of waste from the associated furnaces. Feature 111 into which 108 & 109 have been deposited, cuts through earlier Roman deposits. Layer 110, which was a mass of limestone building rubble in a matrix of orange-buff crushed limestone and mortar, had been heavily truncated by cut 111. The total absence of any humic deposit or soil development suggested that layer 110 was material associated with the demolition of immediately adjacent structures or demolition material introduced from elsewhere, rather than the result of abandonment and gradual collapse of an adjacent structure.

Rubble 110 sealed a deposit of creamy white crushed limestone (112), which itself sealed a pale silty clay with charcoal inclusions (113), neither deposit extended more than 0.5 metres north of the southern end of the trench - and although they were cleaned up and photographed they were not excavated. North of layers 112 & 113 the rubble of layer 110 lies directly on a massive stone capped drain. Portions of four capstones were revealed in the base of the trench but remained unexcavated, the four were roughly level and encountered at 42.32 OD.



**Trench 1**

The largest block was 0.73 metres wide and over 1.2 metres long - the long axes of the blocks straddled the width of the drain. The weight of the material sealing the drain had caused one of the capstones to break its back and its central portions had slumped into the silted up drain. The southernmost of the four capstones was seen to extend below layer 113. At the northern end of the trench the capstones were absent and layer 116 (occasional blocks of limestone in a dirty buff-yellow crushed limestone matrix), layer 117 (a deep rust red water deposited gritty silt) and layer 118 (limestone pebbles in a pale grey degraded mortar) all appear to have been dumped in the drain following the removal of the capstones. A further massive block (119) which may actually be a disturbed capstone, projected from the base of the section forming the western side of the trench. The block was sealed by rubble 110 and itself partially sealed the most northerly of the *in situ* capstones, it had been deliberately cut through when feature 111 was dug. To the east of the stone capped drain is a well compacted deposit of large limestone cobbles in a matrix of buff-yellow-grey degraded mortar (114). The cobbles showed little signs of wear, but the level nature of the layer as a whole and its component parts, combined with the fact that it butts neatly against the capstones suggests that it was deliberately laid with the intention of forming a hard surface.



## Trench 2

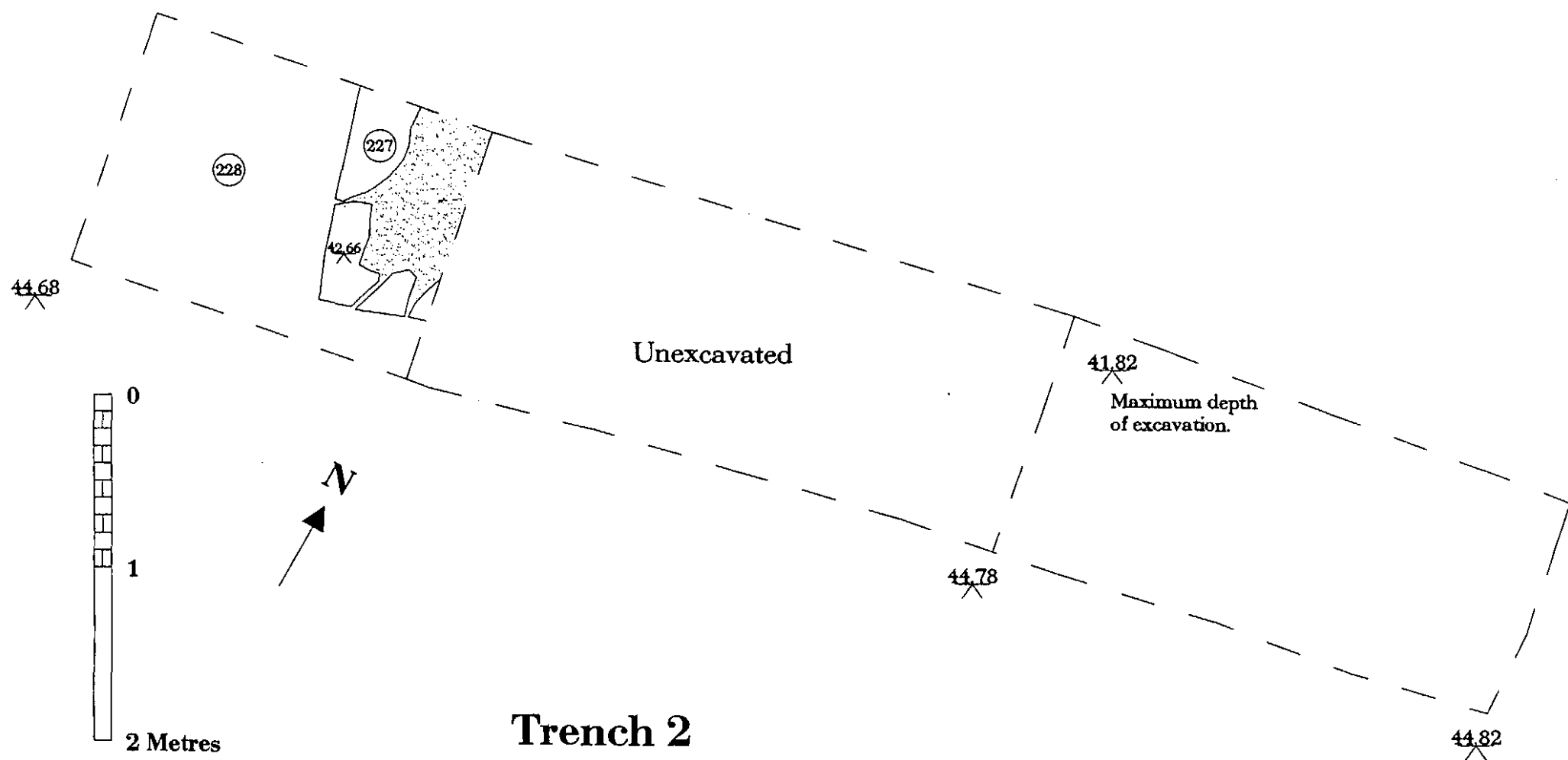
Trench 2 was dug in order to establish the date of the finely stratified ashy deposits (108) in trench 1 and to determine whether the drain was an isolated feature or part of a more complex group of structures. The trench was 8.5 metres long and 1.5 metres deep, its long axis was perpendicular to the line of the stone capped drain in trench 1. The uppermost Roman deposit 214 was revealed across the whole of the trench but only the easternmost and westernmost quarters of the trench were closely investigated.

The post-Roman deposits correspond quite closely to those in trench 1. Layers 201 and 204 are equivalent to 101 and 102 but are separated at the eastern end of the trench by a gravel path 203, indicating that they are not part of the same dumping sequence. Layer 204 seals three deposits (205, 206 & 207) which contain varying quantities of stone dust presumably derived from the construction of the present house. Layers 208, 209, 210, 211 and 212 which are sealed by 205, 206 and 207 and which clearly predate the construction of the house and contain a selection of post-medieval ceramics including clay pipes, are broadly equivalent to layers 103 and 104. Layer 213 which is sealed by 212 is directly equivalent to 105. Layers 201 to 213 have a combined thickness of between 1.55 and 1.75 metres.

No post-Roman deposits were recovered from any of the layers below 213. The base of layer 213 was at 43.06 OD. Layer 214, a 0.20 metre thick dark grey loam, contained occasional fragments of Roman coarseware ceramics, pennant and unworked limestone, it appeared to represent a period of relatively low activity which allowed a gradual soil development. It sealed all the other Roman deposits within the trench. Across the eastern half of the trench below 214 was a 0.08 metre thick deposit of clean golden yellow limestone gravel (215). The absence of any inclusions within gravel 215 suggests it represents the redeposition of natural gravel. The gravel may be the final deposit in a sequence of interleaved lenses, where fairly uniform ashy deposits equivalent to 108 are separated by layers of limestone in various forms (which illustrate the diversity of the natural subsoil mentioned in the introduction to this report). Whilst in trench 1 it was possible to see the edge of a cut feature into which these lenses had been dumped, no such feature could be identified in trench 2. However the severity with which the lenses dipped northwards down the slope suggested that were being dumped into a cut feature rather than onto a natural slope. The sequence of lenses identified in the eastern third of the trench below 215 was as follows: - 216 a pale grey ashy-charcoaly silt; 222 a pale buff-brown brashy limestone; 223 a pale green-brown silt with a few limestone pebbles; 217 limestone pebbles and gravel in a red-brown grit matrix, but also including larger unworked limestone blocks; 218 a pale grey very ashy silt; 219 a very dark grey almost pure ash. The full sequence of lenses from 215 to 219 had a combined maximum thickness of 1.20 metres.

Layer 219 sealed a layer of rough limestone cobbles which remained unexcavated. The layer of cobbles (220) lay in the bottom of a narrow sondage and only a small portion of its upper surface was identified. Nonetheless it did show similarities to layers 114 (contemporary with drain 115) and 116 (material backfilling the drain cut after robbing out of the capstones) and it was encountered at a depth which corresponds broadly with that of these layers (41.96 OD) taking into account the fact that trench 2 lies down the natural slope from trench 1.

The sequence of ashy lenses present in the easternmost quarter of the trench and in trench 1 were absent at the western end of the trench. The explanation for this is simple, sometime after the dumping of lens 215 (the last in the sequence), the ground was cleared to allow the



construction of a masonry building and the layers below soil 214 at the west end of the trench whilst still Roman, post date both the ashy lenses and the building. Immediately below 214 was a 0.06 metre thick demolition layer of buff-orange broken up mortar fragments (224). Layer 225 was a fine mid brown loam with charcoal flecking and this sealed a deposit of dark grey ashy-charcoaly loam (226), layers 225 and 226 were each 0.18 metres thick. Layer 226 sealed the south-west corner of a masonry building (228) and a deposit of limestone rubble in a matrix of yellow brown crushed mortar (227), which remained unexcavated. The foundation trench (229) for wall (228) cut through rubble 227. Only the outside corner of the building was identified. The wall (or more accurately walls) are a minimum of 0.70 metres wide and formed of large roughly faced limestone blocks bonded with a buff-orange mortar. The top of the uppermost surviving course of the wall was at 42.66 OD.



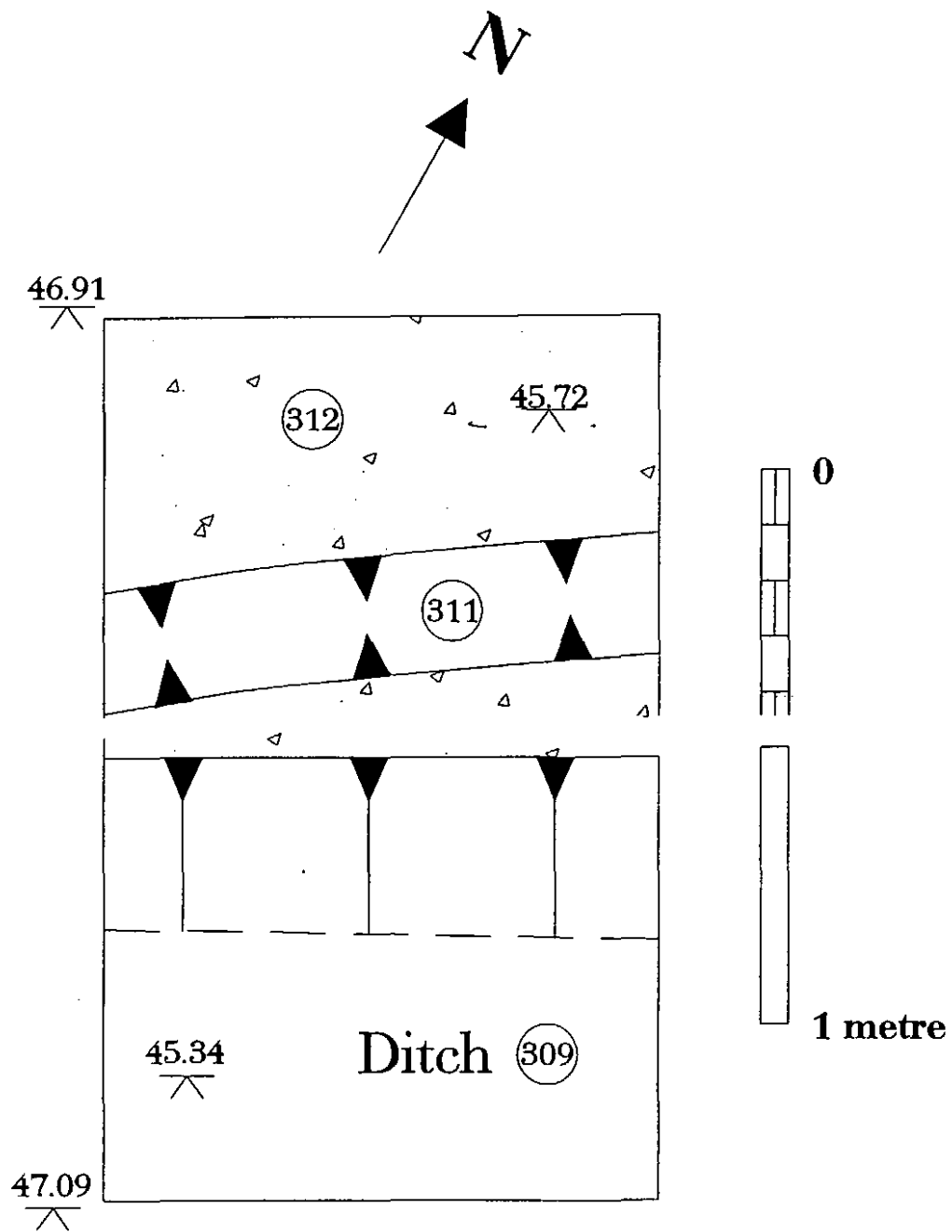
### **Trench 3**

Initially trench 3 was only 1 metre square and located in the corner of an existing flower bed, but this was too small to allow excavation to a sufficient depth to fully evaluate the archaeological potential of the ground to the east of the southern annexe of the hotel. The trench had to be backfilled when only dug to a depth of 1 metre and a larger trench had to be dug through the lawn immediately to the east, in the position shown on the location plan.

Below the 0.34 metre deep loamy topsoil (301), was a 0.10 metre thick gritty grey-brown loam (302). A well compacted layer of small limestone cobbles in a matrix of light grey clay (303) lay below 302 and sealed a further grey loam (304). Layers 301 - 304 all contained post - Roman ceramics. Finds included two sherds of unglazed Medieval coarseware and a range of C17th - C19th glazed finewares. Layer 305 was a very firm and extremely stoney deposit with a grey loam matrix, in common with all the layers below it, the finds recovered were exclusively Roman. Layer 305 was 0.25 metres thick and sealed a slightly thinner and less stoney grey clayey-loam (306). Layers 305 and 306 appear to be hillwash deposits.

A small lens of pale brown sandy loam with gravel inclusions and orange staining (307) lay below 306 and sealed 308 the fill of ditch 309. The northern side of the ditch and its base lay within the excavation, on the southern edge of trench 3 the base of the ditch was rising slightly, suggesting the bottom of the south side of the ditch cut. The ditch was 0.40 metres deep and likely to be no narrower than 1.20 metres. Ditch 309 is broadly parallel with the ditch found in the grounds of the Hermitage and the finds are of a similar date - that is to say C1st and C2nd. Fill 308 was not uniform but only one context number was allocated to the finds from the ditch. Lenses of mid grey sandy silt were interleaved with lenses of limestone gravel, the bottom fill of the ditch was a very dark grey silt with gravel inclusions. The lower ditch fills contained several large and unabraded sherds of Roman coarseware.

Only 0.08 metres north of the northern side of the ditch was a shallow (0.08m) slot (311), it was filled with the same mid grey sandy silt and limestone gravel as the adjacent ditch. The ditch 309 and slot 311 cut through stoney grey loam which was even firmer and more compacted than 305. The material remained unexcavated and was assumed to be natural, once again having established the presence of Roman features further excavation was felt unnecessary.



**Trench 3**

#### **Trench 4**

This was the only trench which contained no Roman artefacts. Layer 401, which was partially sealed by an existing gravel path, was a grey-brown loam with a maximum thickness of 0.50 metres. This layer had been thrown up against the back of the retaining wall (410) which flanks the western, southern and eastern sides of the southern annexe of the hotel. Parallel with wall 410 and 1.50 metres south of it was a narrow trench (404) backfilled with a greenish-yellow plastic clay (403) which was sealed by layer 401. The function of the trench was uncertain, but the fact that it cut through layer 402 means it is C19th at the earliest. Layer 401 also sealed a construction horizon, layer 402 was a 0.08 metre thick deposit of cream coloured stone dust derived from the construction of wall 410 which it butted up against. The construction trench (411) of wall 410 cut all the layers below 402.

Layer 405, a 0.14 metre thick dark grey loam, represented the topsoil at the time the retaining wall was constructed, in common with layer 401 it contained a scatter of C18th and C19th ceramics. Layers 406, 407, 408 and 409 contained no artefacts of any kind nor any charcoal flecks or others indications of human activity. Layer 406 an orange clay with occasional limestone pebbles, layer 407 a grey clay with limestone pebbles, layer 408 a thin layer of limestone gravel and grit, and layer 409 (partially excavated) a firm greenish grey silty clay had a combined thickness of 1 metre and must be regarded as natural deposits. There are two possible explanations for why Roman deposits were not identified to the south of retaining wall 410. The first is that no Roman activity took place in this particular vicinity and the second is that any signs of Roman activity have been removed by subsequent activity on this portion of the site, without further investigation this question can never be confidently answered. As far as the rest of the lawn on the south side of the hotel is concerned the answer to this question is irrelevant. The lawn is artificially level and archaeological deposits are absent at its northern end where their chances of preservation were at their greatest because of the natural slope to the south. For this reason it is justifiable to argue that archaeologically significant deposits do not exist beneath this lawn. Beyond the lawn the ground rises quite steeply and it remains a possibility that Roman deposits survive within the strip of ground north of the wall marking the boundary with the Hermitage and south of the lawn. In fact given the presence of a Roman ditch on either side of this whole area south of the hotel it seems unlikely that Roman deposits will be entirely absent unless they have already been destroyed, as seems to be the case beneath the lawn

#### **The Archive.**

The finds and site archive including a photographic record will ultimately be deposited at Devises Museum.