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ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRUST

THE CHOIR, RIPON CATHEDRAL, NORTH YORKSHIRE

REPORT ON AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATION

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ABSTRACT

Between 24th – 29th February 2000 York Archaeological Trust carried out an excavation in the choir of Ripon Cathedral. Nearly all deposits encountered proved to be of 19th century or later date and to relate to probable heating pipes and deposits associated with floors. These are thought to have been the work of the Victorian ecclesiastical architect Gilbert Scott. The earliest deposit, only very small parts of which were excavated, is of unknown date and may originally have been deposited in order to raise the ground level at the eastern end of the Cathedral beyond the crest of the hill-slope.

1. INTRODUCTION

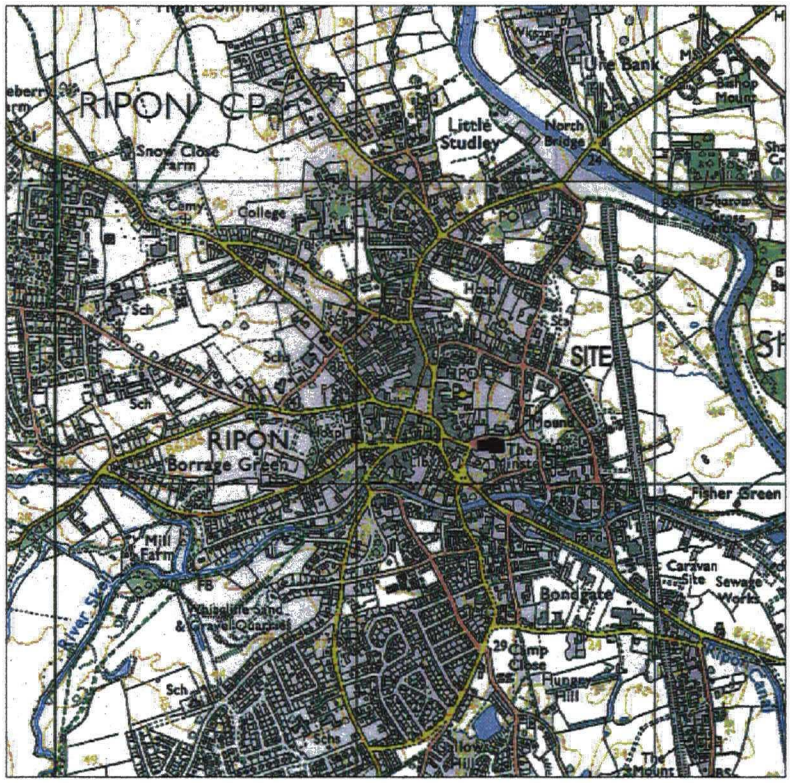
Between 24th – 29th February 2000 York Archaeological Trust (YAT) carried out a small archaeological excavation in the east central part of the choir of Ripon Cathedral, North Yorkshire, (NGR SE 314 711), (Figure 1. Site location map, Figure 2. Trench location plan). All works were carried out on behalf of the Dean and Chapter of Ripon Cathedral and at the behest of Patrick Crawford of Caroe and Partners, Chartered Architects. The scheme of works followed a brief formulated by Professor Richard Bailey, Archaeological Consultant to Ripon Cathedral, and formalised in a written scheme of investigation prepared by York Archaeological Trust.

The excavation was carried out so that loose marble floor tiles in this part of the choir could be re-laid on a new stable bedding. Excavation commenced after to the lifting of the extant marble floor tiles by the Cathedral masons.

The drift geology of the area is of glacial sands and gravels with an underlying solid geology of Permian mudstones.

2. BRIEF HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

St Wilfrid's church on the site of Ripon Cathedral is said to have been founded in 672. Wilfrid's crypt still survives though little is known of the rest of this church. The present Cathedral structure is a composite of architectural styles that serves to emphasise the prolonged time-scale of building, re-building, alteration and addition. In addition to the 7th century crypt, traces of "Romanesque" and "Early English" elements can be identified amid the predominantly Gothic architecture. Later works, of the post-medieval to modern periods, are also evident within the fabric as well as being attested in documentary sources. Foremost amongst the later restorers and renovators was Gilbert Scott who between 1866-1871 exercised his architectural skills throughout many areas of the Cathedral (Forster, Robson & Deadman, 1993).



Scale 1:25 000

Figure 1, Site location plan

A number of small-scale antiquarian explorations are known to have taken place in the vicinity of the crypt during the course of the 19th century. Below ground disturbances, principally relating to the organ, are again known to have taken place to the east of the crypt within the 19th century. Sadly, these works went by with little in the way of archaeological recording. Four minor archaeological investigations took place at the crypt during the 20th century and archaeological observations were made during construction work at the eastern end of the north transept (Hall 1995). In recent years a substantial part of the crossing was excavated above the crypt (Clarke and Hall 1997). This revealed parts of the north and south walls of an early church and the roofs of the contemporary crypt and its passage-ways cut into natural deposits. Evidence pertaining to early floors of this church and to subsequent alterations was also recovered. The bulk of the remaining deposits were post-medieval to modern in date. There are no records of archaeological excavation to the east of the crossing.

3. METHODOLOGY

The archaeological works consisted of the excavation of a single rectangular trench measuring some 11.56m x 3.0m with the removal of all deposits down to a depth of 0.20m below the level of the underside of the tiles. Each deposit encountered was individually planned at a scale of 1:20 and recorded on a separate pro-forma context card. Sections were drawn at a scale of 1:10. A series of colour print photographs were taken during the course of the excavations. Due to the presence of a number of highly compacted deposits it proved necessary to employ an electric jack-hammer to facilitate their removal. In order to minimise any adverse effects caused by dust and spoil the excavations were conducted within a fully enclosed "polyspan" tent.

A small quantity of dis-articulated human bone was recovered from two of the deposits encountered. These remains were not removed from the site and were re-interred at the base of the trench upon the completion of excavation.

All finds and site records are currently stored by York Archaeological Trust under the Harrogate Museum accession code HARGM: 10002

4. THE EXCAVATION

The earliest deposit encountered within the trench was a mixture of sands and silty sands (context 1006). Approximately 95% of the base of the trench was covered by this material, the remaining 5% being occupied by the very lowest parts of the overlying context (1005). The upper surface of 1006, of which very little was excavated, was fairly even though a just perceptible slope, to the north, was noted. The bulk of this context was comprised of reddish brown, loose, dry, fine sand. Although of fairly clean appearance, small quantities of cream coloured lime mortar and lesser quantities of angular and sub-angular limestone fragments up to 0.08m in size were noted within 1006, as were several fragments of dis-articulated human bone. Several lenses and pockets of mid brown silty sand were also observed within 1006. Inclusions of small quantities of mortar, stone and dis-articulated human bone were again noted within these constituent materials. Whilst the bulk of context 1006 had the appearance of re-deposited natural sand, the presence of finds throughout the deposit indicates that 1006 cannot be the

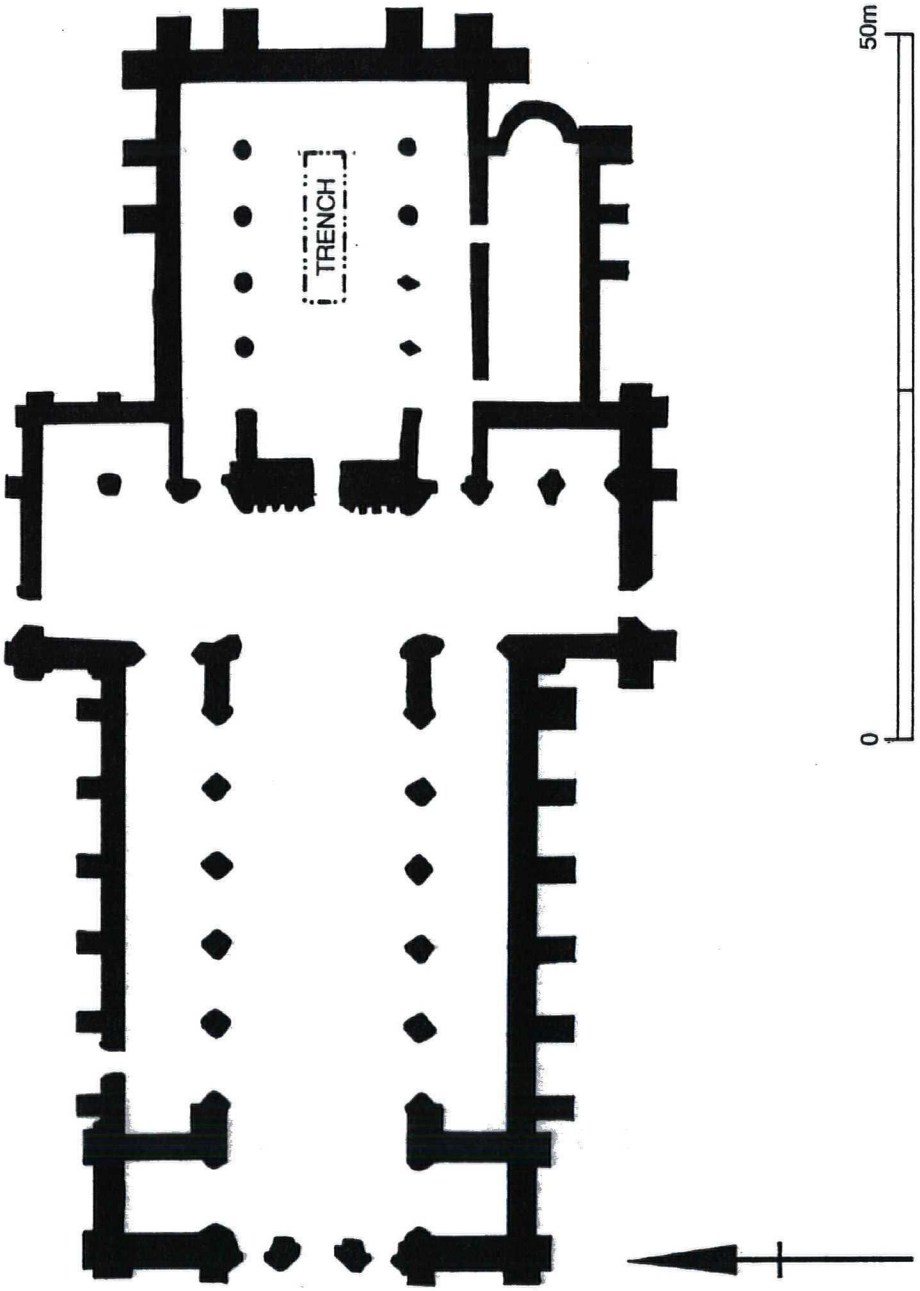


Figure 2, Trench location plan

product of the simple re-deposition of clean natural material. The dis-articulated human bone must almost certainly be derived from disturbed burials within, or adjacent to, the Cathedral. Likewise, it is probable that the mortar and stone relate to building rubble originating within the church. No dating evidence was recovered from 1006, though it is clearly of 19th century or earlier origin. Although interpretation of this deposit is uncertain the mixed nature of 1006 together with the fact that it occurs at a height more than 2.50m above the exterior ground level to the north may suggest that it was deposited primarily to raise the ground level at the east (down slope) end of the Cathedral. If so, then the deposit is likely to be of medieval origin. Whilst no grave cuts could be recognised at the upper level of 1006, burials through this material are possible and a succession of inter-cutting burials would have the effect of producing disarticulated bone throughout the deposit. Similarly, the stone and mortar could conceivably originate from underlying structural elements partially disturbed by any such graves.

Directly above 1006 was a interconnected network of iron pipes, context 1005. These pipes were of two (external) diameters 65mm (2 ½") and 36mm (1 ½ "). The largest of these, a single pipe run, was aligned east - west in the central part of the trench. The smaller pipes, two runs, aligned north – south. All the pipes continued beyond the northern, southern, eastern and western limits of excavation. Connections between pipes were via a system of four-way threaded unions. These pipes and their connections were clearly of developed industrial manufacture and therefore almost certainly not of an origin earlier than the 19th century. A fall was apparent along the line of the major east – west pipe, this being some 0.14m lower at the west of the trench than at the east. In several places the network was seen to rest directly over fragments of stone and brick, context 1007, which clearly represent an attempt to level the pipes at the required heights. Whilst their function was not conclusively ascertained it is probable that they represent water pipes of a heating system. Their low level, combined with a degree of non rigid flexibility, argues against their representing structural ties.

Sealing the pipes 1005 was a highly compacted rubbly deposit up to 0.24m thick, context 1004. This deposit was composed overwhelmingly of angular and sub-angular fragments of limestone of a size up to 0.12m that were partially bonded with a cream lime mortar. Occasional fragments of brick and small rounded pebbles were present within this material. Four pieces of limestone from this deposit bore flat faces or tooling marks that indicate them to be fragments of architectural masonry. A small quantity of finds was recovered from 1004. These included several small sherds of plain window glass, one fragment of clay pipe stem, one sherd of 18th or 19th century pottery and 18 dis-articulated human bones (or fragments thereof). Despite the presence of these finds the deposit was of very "clean" appearance, no soils being present within the rubble. This latter point is of some interest given that human bone, which was presumably derived from burials at the church, was present. Five small flat topped vertically set wooden stakes (all context 1008) were noted within this material. Although to varying degrees decayed, each was between 0.20 – 0.29m tall and in the region of 0.09m wide, the flat upper part being flush with the upper level of 1004. There seems little doubt that these pegs represent levelling guides, the flat top indicating a formation level. Context 1004 is best interpreted as a rubble makeup deposit for the overlying mortar floor, this case seemingly being confirmed by the presence of pegs 1008. Whilst the presence of the occasional piece of brick and glass within an otherwise pure rubble and mortar deposit need engender little surprise, the presence of human bone, as noted above, is somewhat more mysterious. Whilst clearly originating from disturbed burials it can only be assumed that the inclusion of human bone within what is clearly a 19th century structural deposit was a product of accident rather than design.

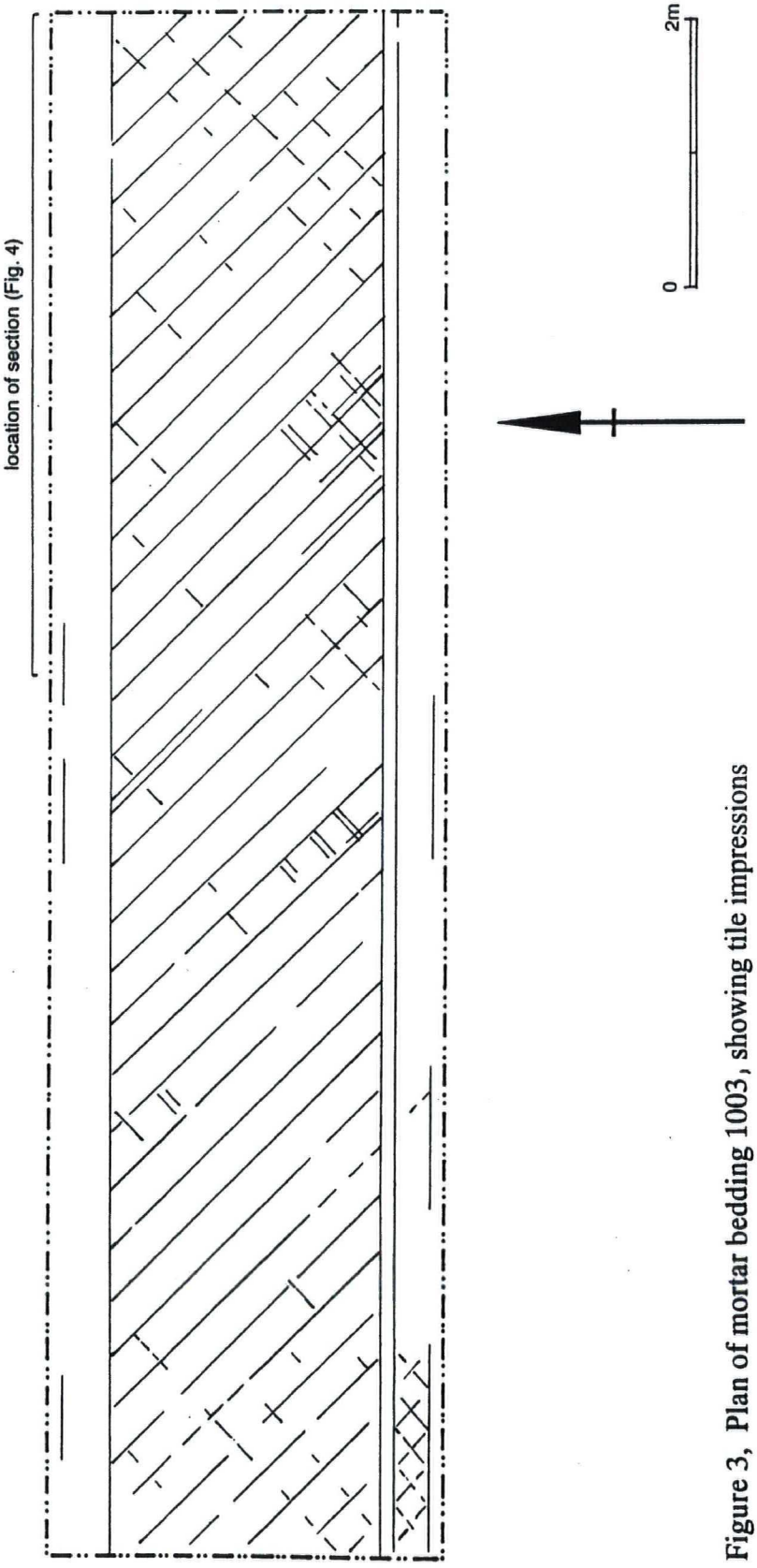


Figure 3, Plan of mortar bedding 1003, showing tile impressions

Makeup 1004 formed a level base for a bed of mortar 1003. This bed was pale greyish cream of colour, hard, varied in thickness from 0.03m – 0.06m, and displayed an upper surface that was uniformly level to within 15mm. Distinguishing features of 1003 were the impressions of former tile settings. These indicated a border down the northern and southern edges of the trench, in which some diamond type of arrangement was present, with the remainder consisting of diagonally lain pieces. From these impressions it is possible to deduce that the tiles that originally lay here were arranged in a pattern similar, if not identical, to those recently lifted. Furthermore, comparisons of measurements of the recently lifted choir tiles with those of the impressions within the mortar raise the possibility, if not the likelihood, that those tiles originally sat at the slightly lower level of mortar 1003.

Sealing the mortar bedding was a deposit of yellow – light brown fine sand ranging in thickness from 4mm – 10mm, context 1002. This deposit formed the bedding for the recently lifted floor tiles. As noted above, it is thought likely that the tiles formerly sat at the level of mortar 1003.

The uppermost deposit, context 1001, was the marble floor tiles. At the time of commencement of the archaeological works these had been lifted in the area of the trench and were visible in section alone.

5. THE FINDS

All of the finds came from context 1004. They include a single sherd of late18th/19th century slipware pottery, a tobacco pipe stem fragment, an oyster shell and five plain window glass fragments. The small finds include two long nails (sf5), other nails and nail fragments (sf6), an iron hinge or bracket (sf3), a large iron bracket (sf4) and an iron hook (sf7). Two large wooden pegs, miscellaneous small fragments of stone, some worked, (presumably rubble) and mortar samples were also retained. All of the material is no earlier than late post-medieval in date and contains nothing of significance. It has the appearance of builders' rubbish which has been expeditiously cleared up.

6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Little in the way of significant archaeological deposits was encountered within the trench. All contexts, with the exception of the earliest, context 1006, appear to be of 19th century and later origin. These were comprised of probable heating pipes sealed by deposits relating to the makeup and bedding for a tile floor. The heating and floor deposits are likely to be the work of the Victorian ecclesiastical architect Gilbert Scott who worked at the Cathedral during the years 1866 – 71. It is known that Scott carried out much work within the choir and a print reproduced in 1993 and captioned "choir before Scott's restoration" indicates the floor to be of a different finish to that of today (Forster, Robson and Deadman, 1993). It is stated in the same publication that heating was not installed in the Cathedral until the 1850's.

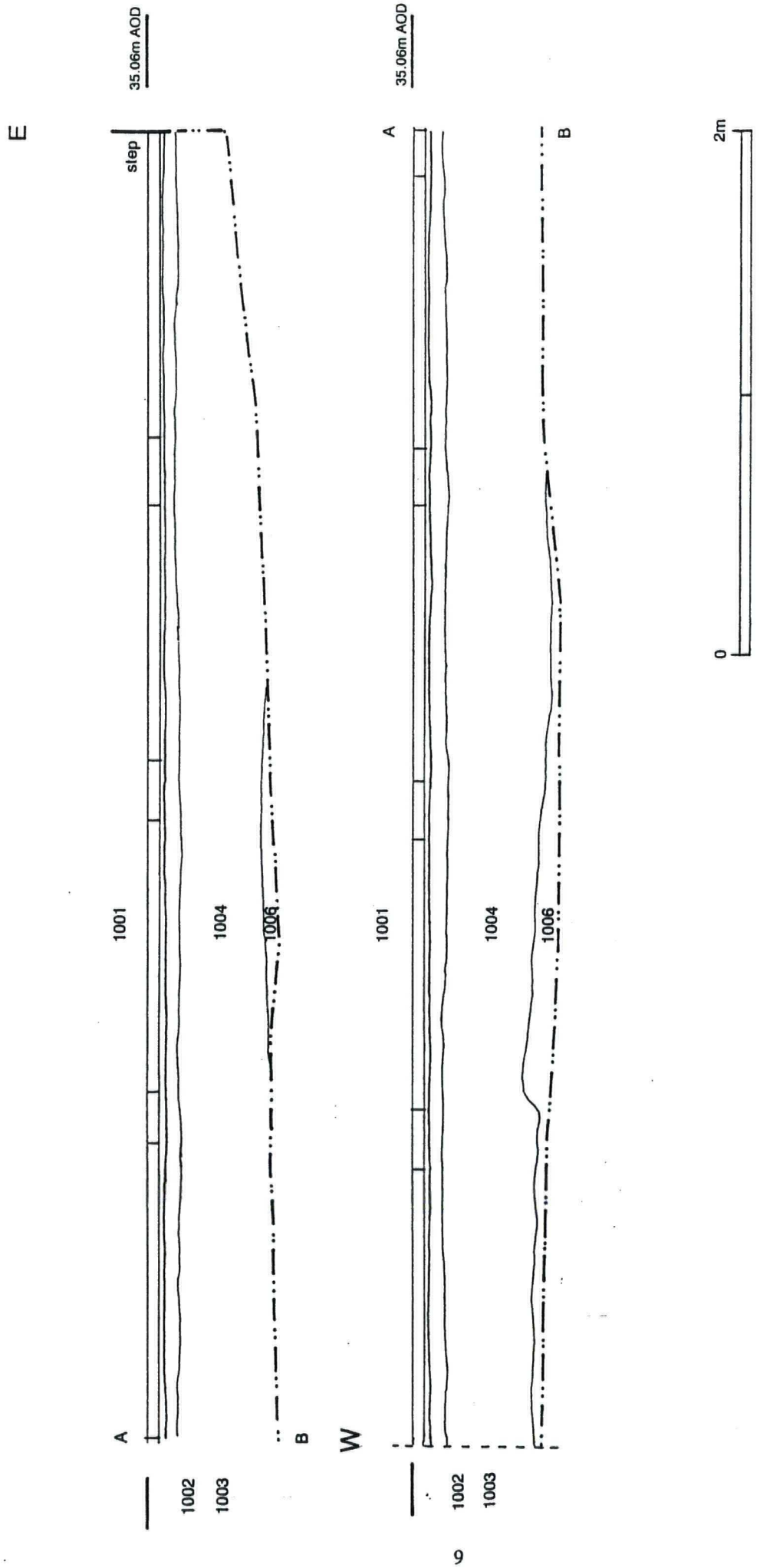


Figure 4; South facing section through deposits

7. LIST OF SOURCES

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8. LIST OF CONTRIBUTORS

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