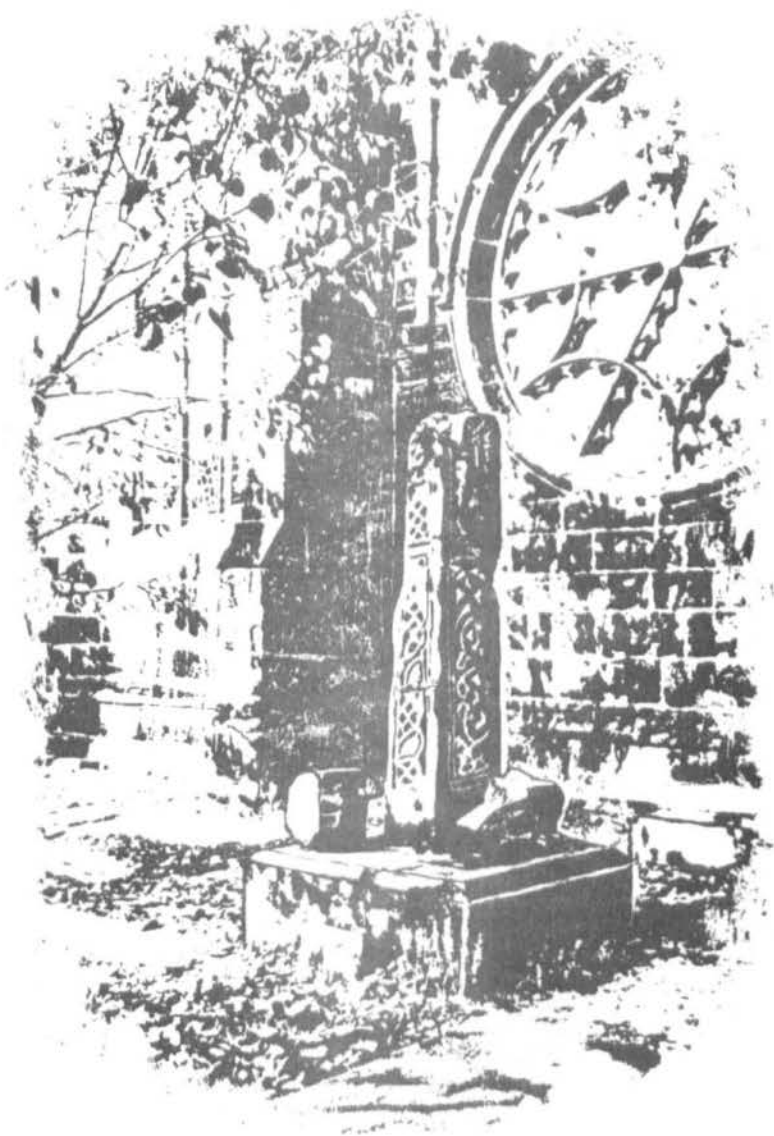


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ARCHÆOLOGY in LEEK



An Assessment of the Evidence

LEEK

An Assessment of the Evidence

by

Jon Cane and Nina Jaffa

This report is an evaluation of the archaeological potential of the small market town of Leek. The town's historical background is considered and the excavation of three small sites and a salvage recording operation in the Market area are reported in summary form.



Leek's Lady Mayor, Mrs J. Heath, visits the excavations. (Photo: Leek Post & Times)



Excavations at the Silk Street Site (Area 2) revealed no medieval evidence but a 19th-century rubbish pit produced quantities of Victorian pottery and glass.

LEEK

An Assessment of the Evidence.

1. Introduction

The town of Leek lies on a hill-top on the edge of the moorlands of north-east Staffordshire (Fig 1). It was described in the nineteenth century as the 'metropolis of the moorlands' and today has a population of more than 20,000. The town owes most of its prosperity and nearly all its buildings to the silk-rich eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and the church stands as the only visible reminder of its longer history.

The known history of the town has been limited by the paucity of surviving documents from the medieval and earlier periods, and by the lack of any previous archaeological work. The proposed development of the central area of the town provided the opportunity for a preliminary evaluation of the town's archaeological potential

The evaluation of Leek follows in the footsteps of similar studies in small towns in the Midlands, notably Shrewsbury, Worcester, Leicester and Stafford. These evaluations of the surviving archaeological strata were prompted in the main by the need to develop a predictive method, within which archaeological responses to development proposals could be made more effective. The creation of such a framework not only improves the formation of urban excavation strategy, but also allows for the co-operation of local authorities, commercial interests, and above all, the inhabitants of the town.

2. Historical background

The name 'Leek' is probably of Old English derivation - 'Lec' meaning stream, although Norse origins for the name have also been suggested (Gelling, 1981). The town's location may have been chosen for defensive purposes although no evidence exists for man-made defences; Leek was not a walled town in the Medieval period. A more likely reason may be the fact that two tributaries of the River Churnet rise near the top of the hill, providing a good water source.

Medieval History

Our first historical reference to the settlement at Leek is the Domesday survey of 1086, which describes a large and valuable Royal manor or estate, held for the King by Earl Aelfgar. The remarkable collection of 9th and 10th century cross fragments around St Edward's church suggest that pre-Norman Leek was the site of a minster church of great wealth. It is likely that it stood on the site of the present church.

The church and manor were probably at the centre of a large estate which is likely to have remained in Royal hands until the early 13th century. The dedication of the present church to Edward the Confessor confirms Leek's strong royal associations.

After the Conquest, Leek was granted to the Earls of Chester. The first earl was Hugh Lupus, known as 'Hugh the Fat', reputedly 'so fat that he could hardly crawl' (Odericus Vitalis). Although this grant was revoked by Henry II when he came to the throne in 1154, by 1214 the town was again in the hands of the Earls of Chester. In 1214, the Cistercian Abbey of Dieulacres was founded by Ranulph de Blundeville. By this date Leek had been declared a borough and had a Wednesday market, described at this time as "newly established".

In 1297, "...the church together with the whole town was burnt down", according to William de Schepsheved, writing in 1374. The rebuilding of the church was completed in 1320. Further records from the medieval period are scarce but in 1374 references to severe flooding are recorded.

Post-Medieval History

Leek played its part in the Civil War of the 1640's. Parliamentary forces defeated a detachment of King's men, who supposedly made their last stand in the church. The 17th century brought not only war to Leek, but the beginnings of the silk industry which was to ensure the town's future. The historian John Sleigh attributed this to the influx of French refugees, fleeing religious repression in their own country. However, it may have developed from the established industry in Cheshire. Import controls on French, Indian and Chinese silks in the late 17th and early 18th centuries enhanced Leek's importance as a market for silk, ribbon and buttons. This prosperity continued into the 19th century and most of Leek's houses, public and industrial buildings date from this time.

3. The Archaeological Potential

The archaeology of Leek has never before been studied and its potential was unknown prior to the operations reported here. It was selected for study entirely on archaeological criteria.

Firstly, the presence of the crosses in the churchyard suggests early settlement on the site.

Secondly, the town fits well into the continuing study into urban origins in the Midlands currently being carried out by BUFAU. Its position on the fringe of early settlement in Staffordshire was hoped to make an interesting contrast to projects in progress in Stafford and Rocester.

Thirdly, large areas of the town were scheduled for re-development and the threat which this posed to the archaeology of the town needed to be assessed.

The selection of excavation areas was determined by local development plans and the likelihood of early strata survival (Figs. 2 & 3). Study of the modern topography of the town was limited by the lack of a detailed contour survey, but existing spot-heights were supplemented by site data (Fig. 4) to produce a fair representation of the town's topography. This shows a ridge of high ground running roughly east-west, with the church, and presumably its Saxon predecessor, standing on the western end.

Area 1 (Church Street site) was selected because of the possibility of good strata survival in the area. The market seemed to cover the eastern end of the same ridge of high ground and offered the opportunity to examine areas behind the frontages, where the chances of early strata survival were thought to be good. Area 2 (Silk Street site) was selected because of its proximity to the church and possible early settlement site around it.

4. The Excavations

Both areas were examined by the excavation of small trial trenches. In Area 1, a JCB excavator was used to remove the overburden; in Area 2 this material was removed by hand. All three trenches were thoroughly recorded and the archive (records and finds) will be deposited at Stoke-on-Trent City Museum.

AREA 1:

The first trenches were dug in an area of waste ground on the south side of Church St, opposite St Edward's church. The area was threatened by a scheme to widen Church St., and was considered important because of its proximity to the church, on the ridge of high ground which may have been the site of the earliest settlement. However, the earliest recorded buildings on the site were the public houses and shops of the 19th century. Two trenches were excavated, positioned to examine the slope away from the ridge on which the church stands. Trench 1 measured 2m x 8m and ran north-east - south-west, while Trench 2 measured 2m x 16m and ran down the slope from east to west.

Trench 1: (Fig. 5)

Revealed layers of post-medieval date which overlay the natural sub-soil at a depth of c.1.2m. These layers were interpreted as remains of 19th century foundations and cellar walls. Although no earlier archaeological features were discovered, fragments of a cooking pot, probably 12th century in date, were found lying on the natural sand. This vessel had probably been disturbed by the later activity on the site, but was very similar to examples found in medieval levels overlying the Roman settlement at Rocester.

Other finds were limited to post-medieval pottery, glass, clay pipes and butchery waste.

Trench 2

19th century cellars were encountered in this trench as well and severely hampered the operation. Shallow post-medieval deposits were removed to reveal a very disturbed natural sub-soil less than 0.5m below the modern ground surface, and an absence of earlier features. No pre-nineteenth century finds or activity evidence were recovered.

AREA 2:

The area of the existing Market complex was chosen because of the proposed demolition and replacement of most of the buildings in the area with a new market complex. This provided the opportunity to examine an area of potentially undisturbed medieval and

earlier deposits under the present market car parks. The area lies on the eastern end of the ridge of high ground on which the church was built. It was thought that the central area might have escaped the intensive terracing which characterises the frontage areas of the Market Square and Stockwell St. One controlled excavation took place, behind the western frontage of Silk St. on the eastern edge of the development area. The market area was further examined in a series of test holes dug as part of the survey carried out by Buro Happold, for the District Council.

Trench 1: A 2m x 8m excavation took place orientated east-west. Late post-medieval brick foundations and refuse pits were excavated and the natural subsoil was contacted at a depth of 0.5m. The late features contained quantities of pottery and glass dating to 1870-1880.
(Fig. 5)

Trial holes A-G: (Fig. 3)

The trial holes averaged 1 metre square and confirmed initial theories about the general topography of the area. Holes A, B, C, F, and G all contacted the natural sandy sub-soil or sandstone within 20cms. Only hole G showed any sign of feature disturbance and this was Post-Medieval.

Holes D and E were dug to a depth of 1.5m and natural was not contacted. The bulk of the overburden at this end of the carpark was late in date and no recognisably early strata was contacted. The engineer mentioned a story, told by a local, that the area had been used as a dumping ground in the 1940s. This fact suggests that the downward slopes of Stockwell St. and Silk St. to the south of the car park are a true indication of the natural topography, and that the high ground in the Market area is a result of post-medieval or modern dumping.

5. Conclusion.

Three main trends were revealed by excavation:

1) A lack of any survival of pre-19th century horizontal strata or features in all the areas investigated. Investigation of the Market area revealed the eastern end of the ridge to be the result of post-medieval dumping and the potential for early strata survival beneath this is no greater than in other areas.

2) Extensive post-medieval disturbance caused by cellar digging (revealed in a limited cellar survey in the Market area - Fig. 6).

3) The steep slopes on which most of the town is built have resulted in much erosion of the higher areas. In some towns this is often offset by the survival of 'strata traps' on the lower slopes, but the extensive terracing in these areas may well have destroyed these.

In the areas under immediate threat the archaeological potential is low. The probable quality of the remaining information is unlikely to be worth the considerable cost and effort needed to recover it, but a low intensity salvage recording operation while the development is in progress may be productive.

It must be stressed that an evaluation of this kind can only identify general trends and is subject to a wide margin of error. The historical importance of Leek has already been established by a very brief study of the sources, but the town's full archaeological potential can only be realised by continued co-operation between archaeological bodies and such far-sighted local authorities as the District Council.

Acknowledgements

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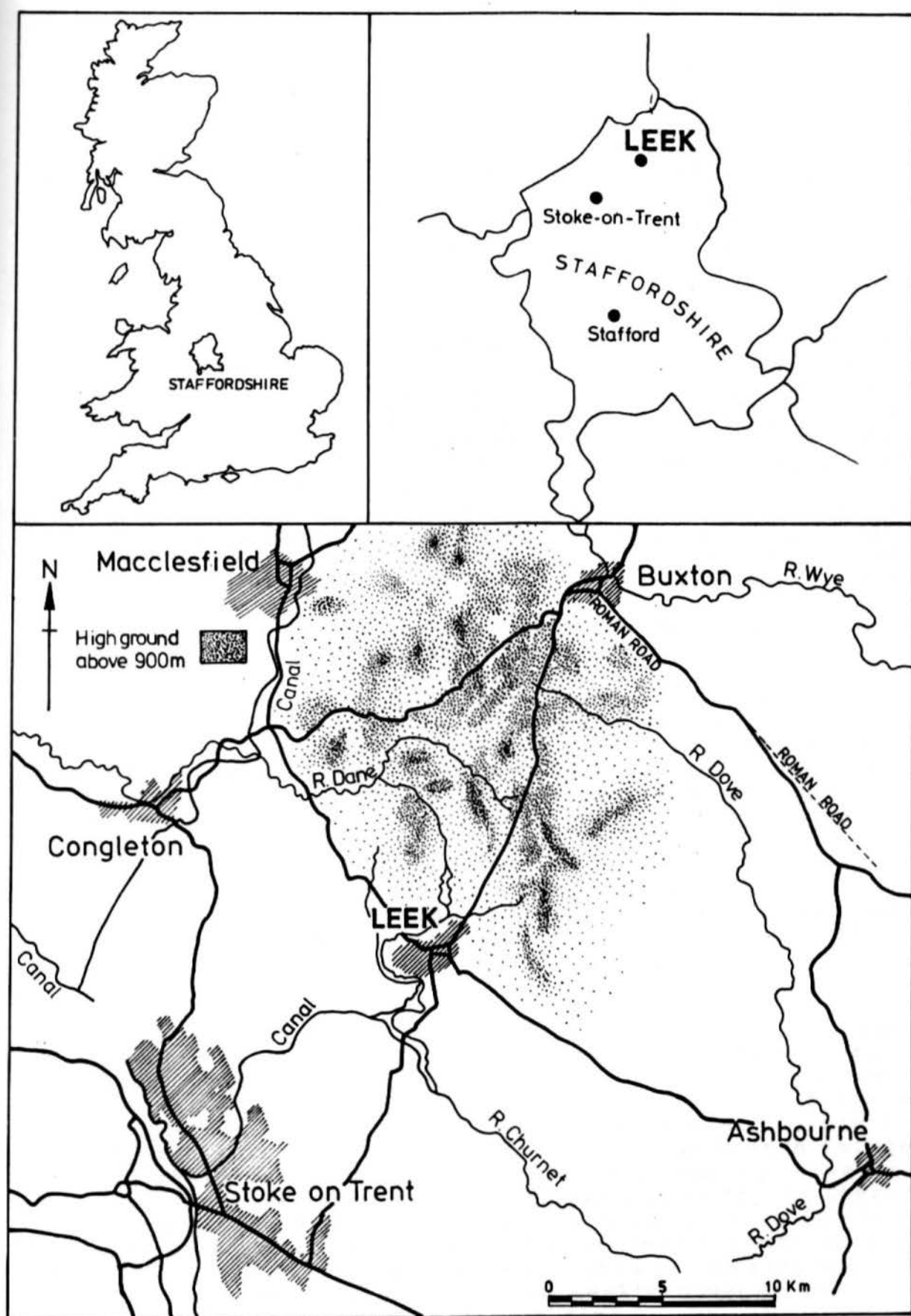


Fig. 1: Location map showing the town of Leek, major roads, rivers and high ground.

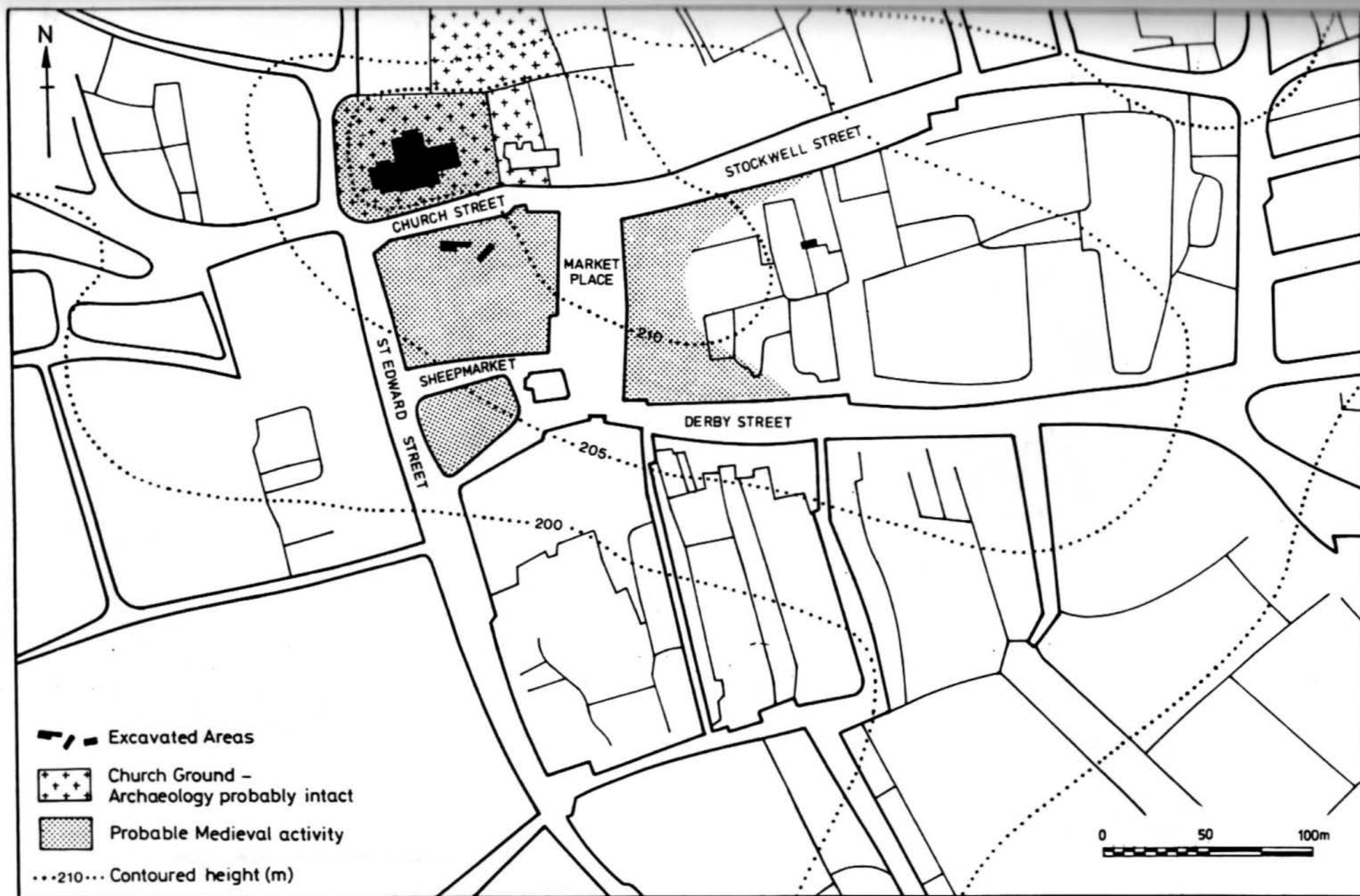


Fig. 2: Map showing areas of probable medieval activity.(Base map: 1838 O.S.)

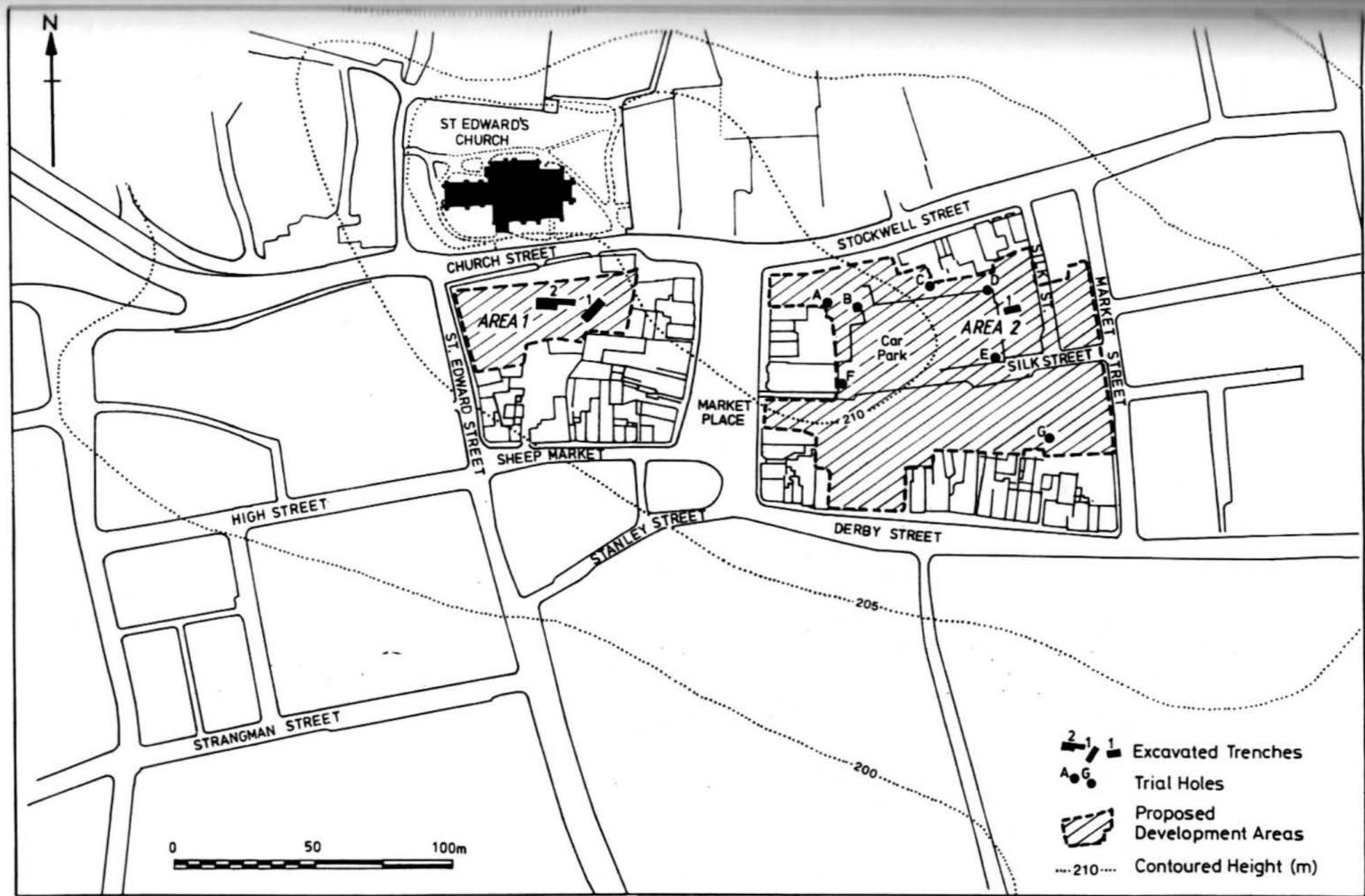
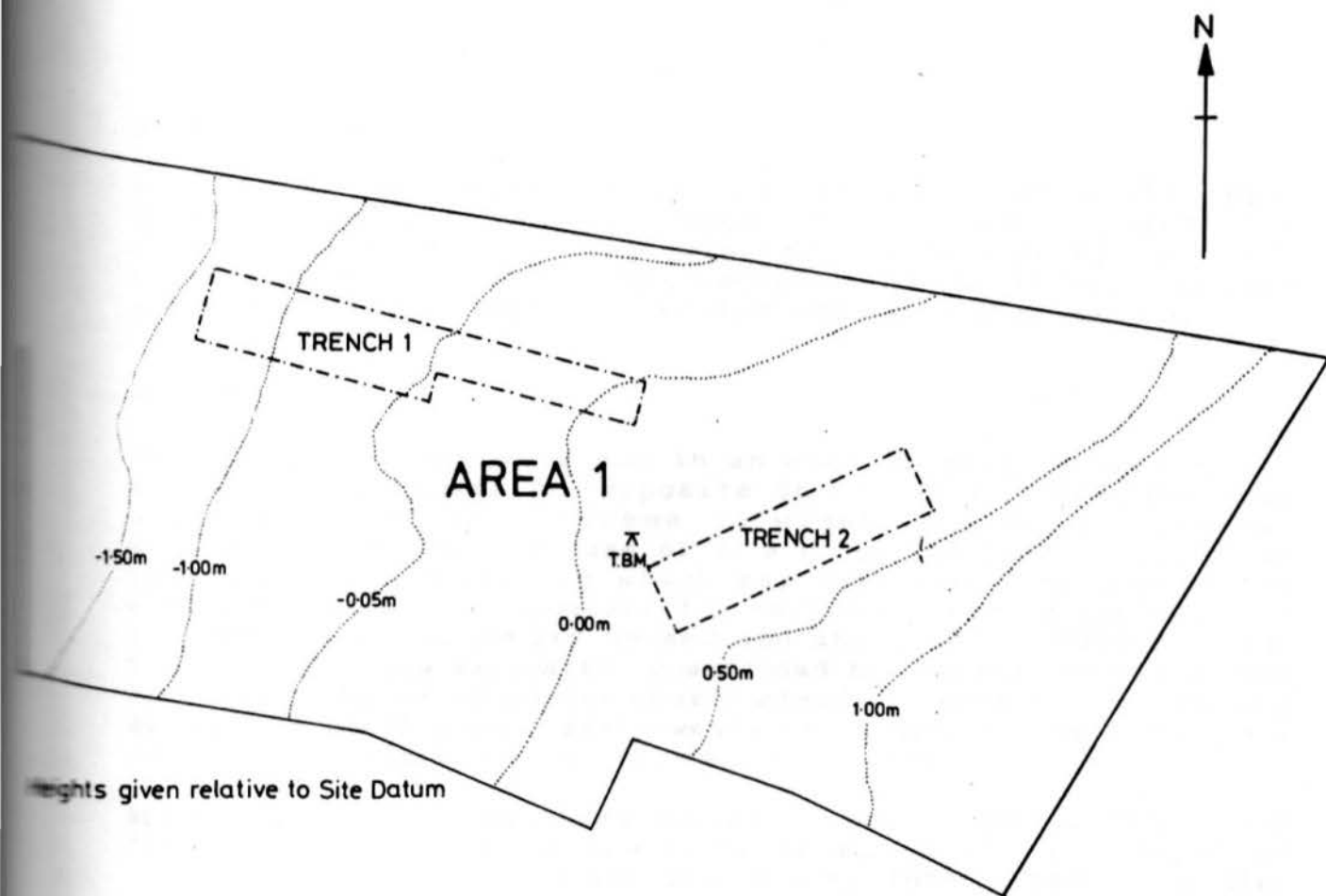
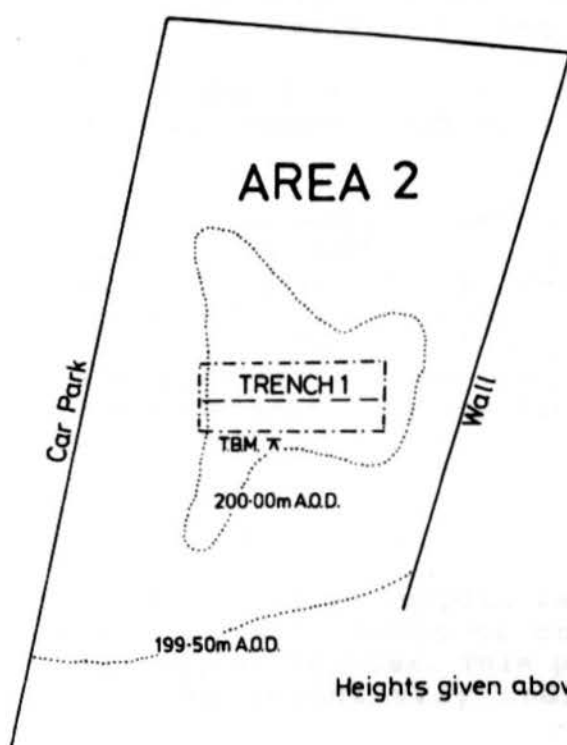


Fig. 3: Map showing proposed areas of development, excavated trenches and trial holes.
(Base map: modern O.S.)



Heights given relative to Site Datum



Heights given above Ordnance Datum

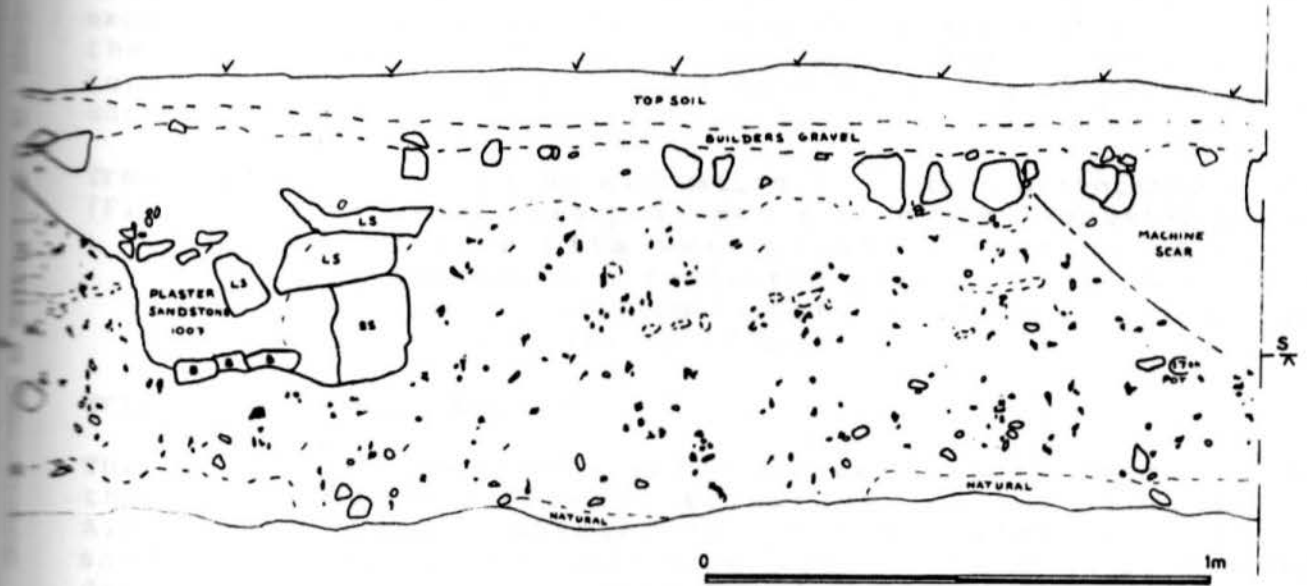
Fig. 4: Contour plans of areas investigated. Plotted using an Electronic Distance Meter. Top: Area 1 (Church Street) - heights relative to Temporary Bench Mark. Bottom: Area 2 (Silk Street) - heights given Above Ordnance Datum.

Leek 1986 Church Street

TRENCH 1 AREA 1

SECTION 2

1:10



LEEK 1986 Silk Street

TRENCH 1 AREA 2

North Facing Section 1:20

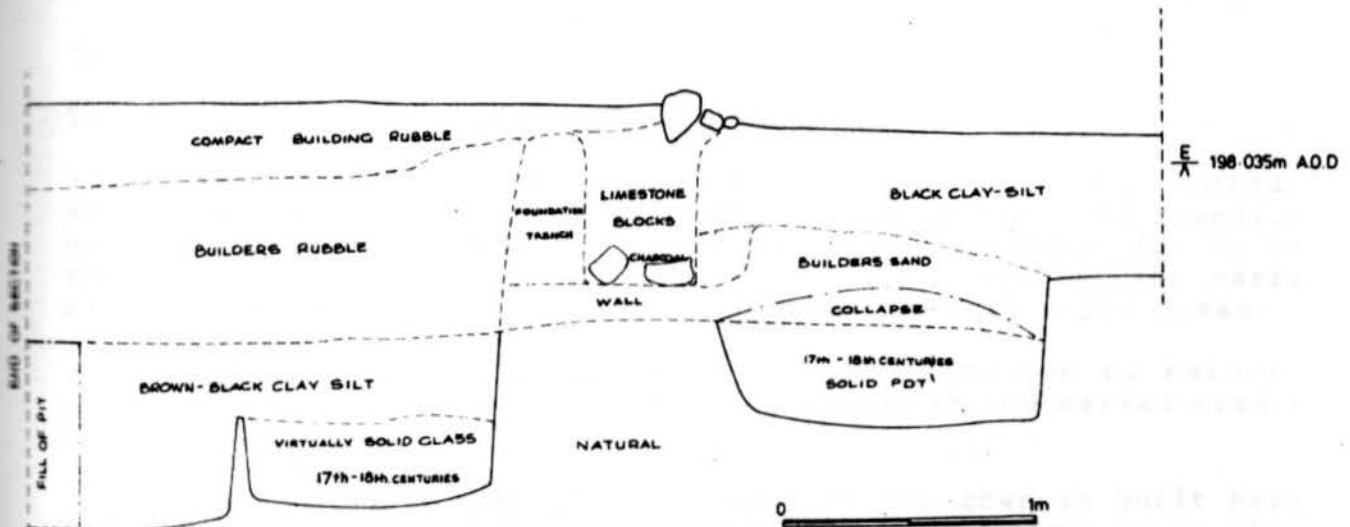


Fig. 5: Drawn sections of excavated trenches. Top: N-S section of Trench 1, Area 1 (Church Street). Bottom: W-E section of Trench 1, Area 2 (Silk Street)

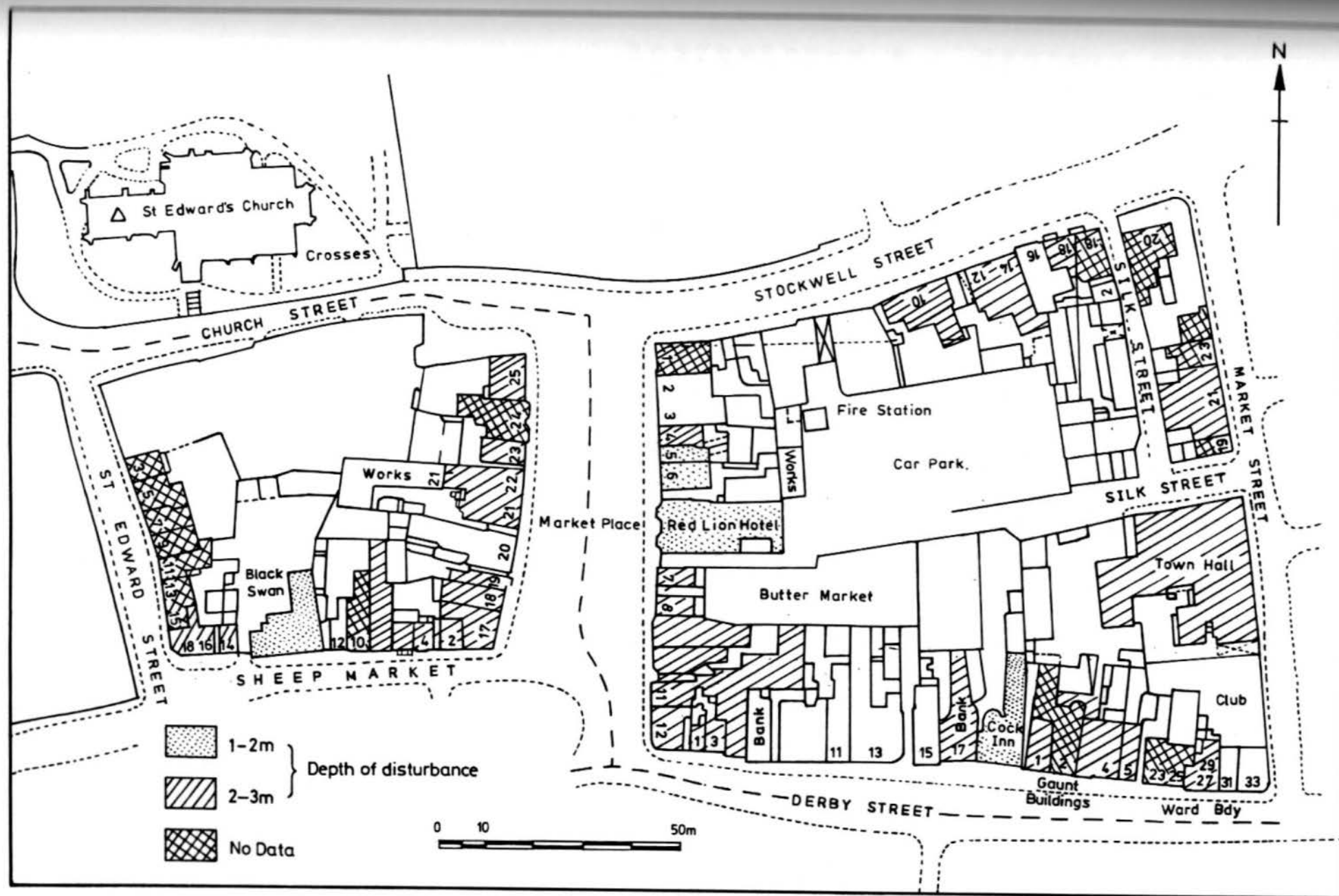


Fig. 6: Map showing, in diagrammatic form, results of the cellar survey undertaken in the market area.