

17

Homestead Moat

Wolverhampton

A Report on Archaeological Trial Excavations

by

Jon Cane

Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit 1988

Trial Excavations at Homestead Moat, Wolverhampton.

Location

Homestead Moat lies at the centre of the Ashmore Park housing estate in the Borough of Wolverhampton (SJ 959 019). It comprises a rectangular platform c.90 x 70m, surrounded by a mainly dry ditch (Figs. 1 & 2). The eastern corner and former entrance have been obscured by gardens and a branch library building adjacent to the shopping precinct.

Circumstances

The site is currently under threat from a proposal to extend the library, which occupies the eastern corner of the moat, and to construct a carpark over the platform itself. In the light of this, Wolverhampton Borough Council commissioned an extensive geophysical survey in 1987 to assess the extent and survival of archaeological deposits on the platform. The results were inconclusive, but several trends were observed (Griffiths 1988) and the findings were considered interesting enough to test through excavation. Work began on the excavation of two trenches (Fig 1) in the south-west corner of the site on 11th February, and was completed on February 26th. The excavation was carried out by the B.U.F.A.U., Community Programme-sponsored Roving Team, supervised by Jon Sterenberg; with Jon Cane as archaeological consultant.

The Excavation (Fig. 3)

The trenches, A & B, were positioned primarily to coincide with high readings recorded by the resistivity survey in the south-west corner of the platform. Nineteenth-century maps of the area show the moat circuit complete except for a centrally-placed entrance on the south side. For this reason, and because the ditch profile was fairly well defined, the platform was considered unlikely to have been cultivated on any significant scale. The decision was therefore made to dig the trenches by hand, in anticipation of intact features and deposits near to the surface.

The removal of the turf from **Trench B** revealed a dark, sandy topsoil with fragments of brick and other building debris (1000). This layer overlay a layer of clayey material (1001) with much building rubble, including fragments of concrete. Removal of this layer revealed it to be a dump of levelling material which overlay a thick deposit of dark sandy soil (1002). This layer was very compacted but became less so lower in its profile. Finds were few, but still included 20th-century material. At a depth of about 1.0m this layer quickly merged into a lighter, more sandy horizon. A trial sondage at the east end suggested that this represented the disturbed and contaminated top of the sandy-clay natural subsoil. Cut into this layer was a small linear feature (F3) which may be a drain or beam slot. No finds were recovered, however, and it is possible that this was a natural phenomenon. Although the sondage had not apparently penetrated the water table (as evident in the moat ditch) it was rapidly inundated with ground water and this presented considerable problems in exposing the top of the natural in the rest of the trench.

At this point it was decided to concentrate on Trench A, since it extended into the moat ditch area and might thus facilitate drainage from itself and from Trench B and allow the natural to be exposed along it's length.

The sequence in **Trench A** was very similar to that in B (Fig. 3). The turf was removed onto a compact topsoil (1001) and levelling layer (1002) of considerable depth. This overlay a deposit of small rubble and plaster (1003), which contained modern finds. This layer also filled at least one linear feature cut into the dark earth (1004) below, which may have been a wheel rut or a drag-line tooth-mark. This underlying dark earth was removed to expose the natural subsoil. Although proximity to the ditch prevented actual flooding, a constant flow of water from the overburden deposits made cleaning and definition difficult. One feature recognised and excavated (F1) was a rounded scoop, which was probably the truncated lower part of a pit. Its fills contained no finds. Trench A extended only c.1m into the ditch area but it appears that the present ditch profile is a result of modern landscaping. A thin, steeply sloping layer of dark, wet, humic material (1005) on the edge of the present ditch cut may be the 'tail' of the original ditch deposits. The natural in the bottom of Trench A was tested by another sondage and the sections recorded before the site was backfilled.

An attempt was made to drain the site, and thus make cleaning of the natural possible, by the excavation of a further sondage to below the water table in Trench B and by the use of a water pump. This was partially successful in the eastern half of the trench, and a shallow scoop (F2), packed with large cobbles and rubble (1009), was defined and excavated. Crushed in amongst the stones were the remains of a 13th-century white-ware jug as well as a few fragments of other jugs and cooking pots. The presence of more modern material suggested that these finds had been disturbed by the landscaping operation which seems to have affected the whole area. No other features were recognised and it proved impractical to clear the whole trench down to natural.

The trench was then recorded and backfilled.

The Finds

Apart from modern debris in the upper layers, only pottery was recovered. In the main this comprised a few 18th- to 20th-century fragments. However, one context (1009) produced a number of medieval sherds, and fragments of at least three vessels were recovered. Modern sherds also recovered from this layer suggest that the medieval material had been disturbed or redeposited. Nevertheless it is an interesting group, comprising a few sherds of coarse, sandy cooking pots, and fragments of two jugs, one of which is drawn and reconstructed in Figure 4. The jugs are in a white/buff fabric decorated with bands of brown paint of a type common in south Staffordshire in the late-13th and 14th centuries

The Map Evidence

Preliminary examination of early Ordnance Survey maps (1887 and 1957) suggests that the original monument has undergone significant changes during this century. The moat shown on these maps was an irregular rectangle, with a ditch of varying width and an entrance centrally placed on the east side. Most of the northern side has now been covered by the library (which also covers the site of the entrance) and a landscaped garden area. The present surviving moat is more uniform in width, although it appears to follow more or less the same line as the original.

Discussion and Recommendations

Several conclusions and implications can be drawn from this archaeological evaluation based upon the excavations described above and the preceding geophysical survey.

- 1) In the relatively recent past, probably as part of the Ashmore Park development, the whole monument was landscaped. The depth and nature of the deposits excavated suggest that the original ground surface on the platform has been removed, truncating such features as may have survived. This was possibly to fill the moat area for the building of the library. The platform may then have been reconstructed and the moat remodelled as part of the landscaping process.
- 2) The geophysical survey results apparently reflect only fairly random variations in the modern rubble dumped as part of this operation.
- 3) In the area tested no intact ground surface has survived. This circumstance seems likely to prevail over the remainder of the moat platform, although much more extensive work would be required to verify this.
- 4) Truncated original features do however survive, and medieval finds (albeit residual) suggest the presence of a fairly high-quality, contemporary material assemblage. Primary deposits probably survive within the ditch and there appears to be potential for good organic preservation in a waterlogged environment.
- 5) The proposed extension of the library and construction of the carpark are unlikely to constitute a threat to the surviving archaeology. It is however recommended that an archaeological watching and recording brief be maintained during excavation of foundations for the former.
- 6) In view of the conditions encountered, and in particular the depth of water-saturated modern overburden, more extensive excavations would not be expedient or justifiable at present without a much greater commitment of resources.

Acknowledgements

The project was commissioned and funded by Wolverhampton Borough Council and supported by the Manpower Services Commission Community Programme. Thanks are due to the staff of the Ashmore Park Library for their hospitality during the work; and to Mr N. Hogben, Assistant Planning Officer (Wolverhampton), for his assistance in facilitating this project.

Jon Cane
B.U.F.A.U.
March 1988

Fig. 1 Location map.

Fig. 2 Location of the site and trial trenches.

Fig. 3 Plans and section of excavated trenches.

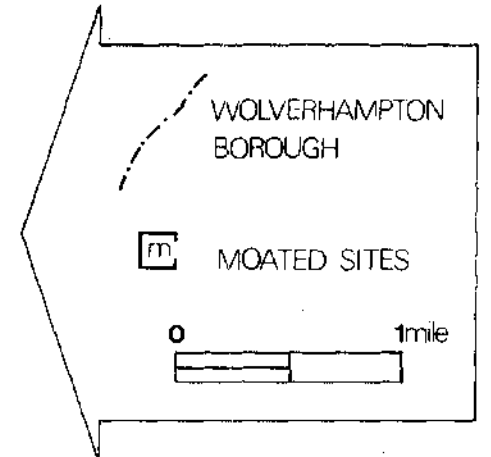
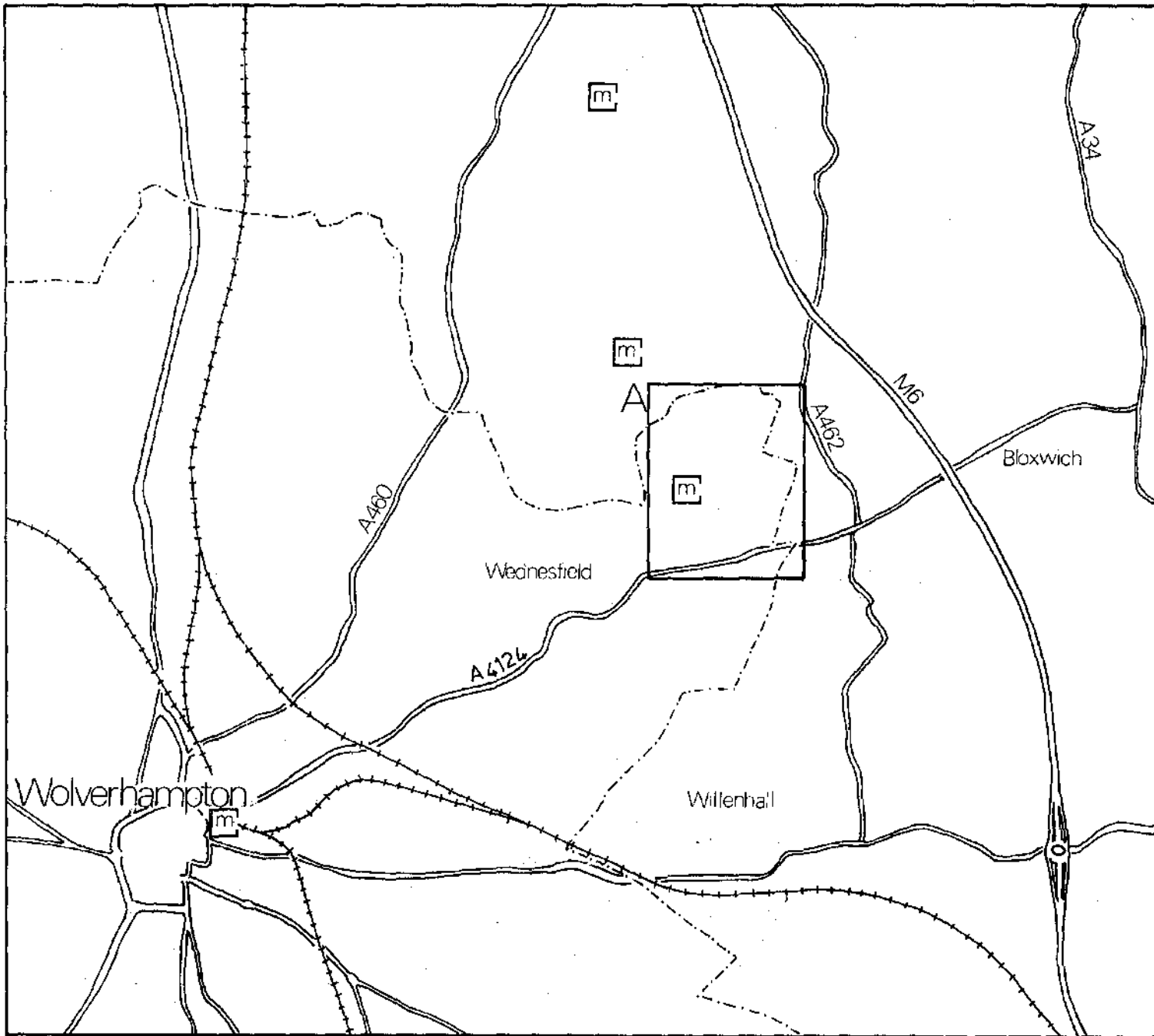


Fig. 1 Location map.

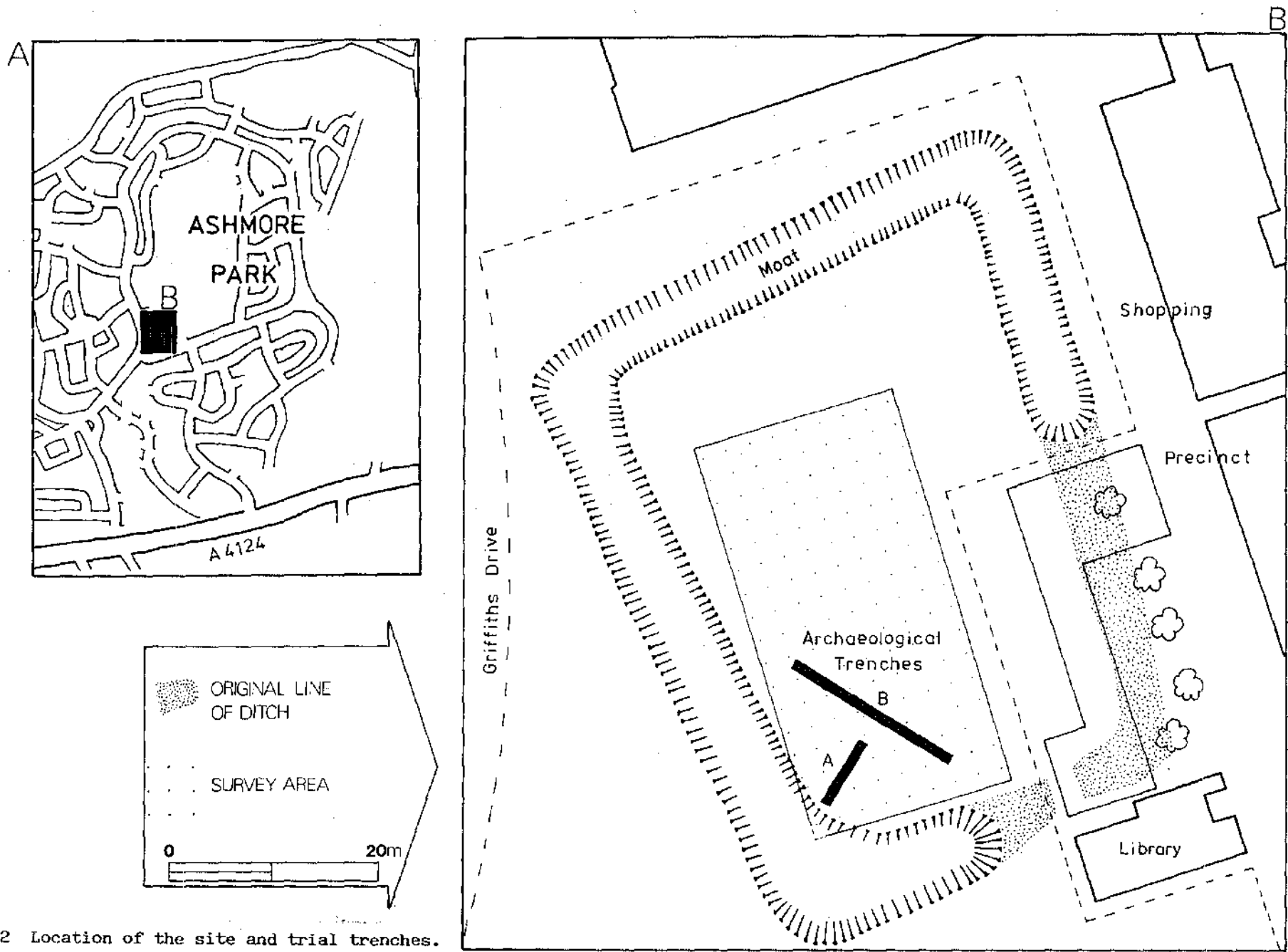


Fig. 2 Location of the site and trial trenches.

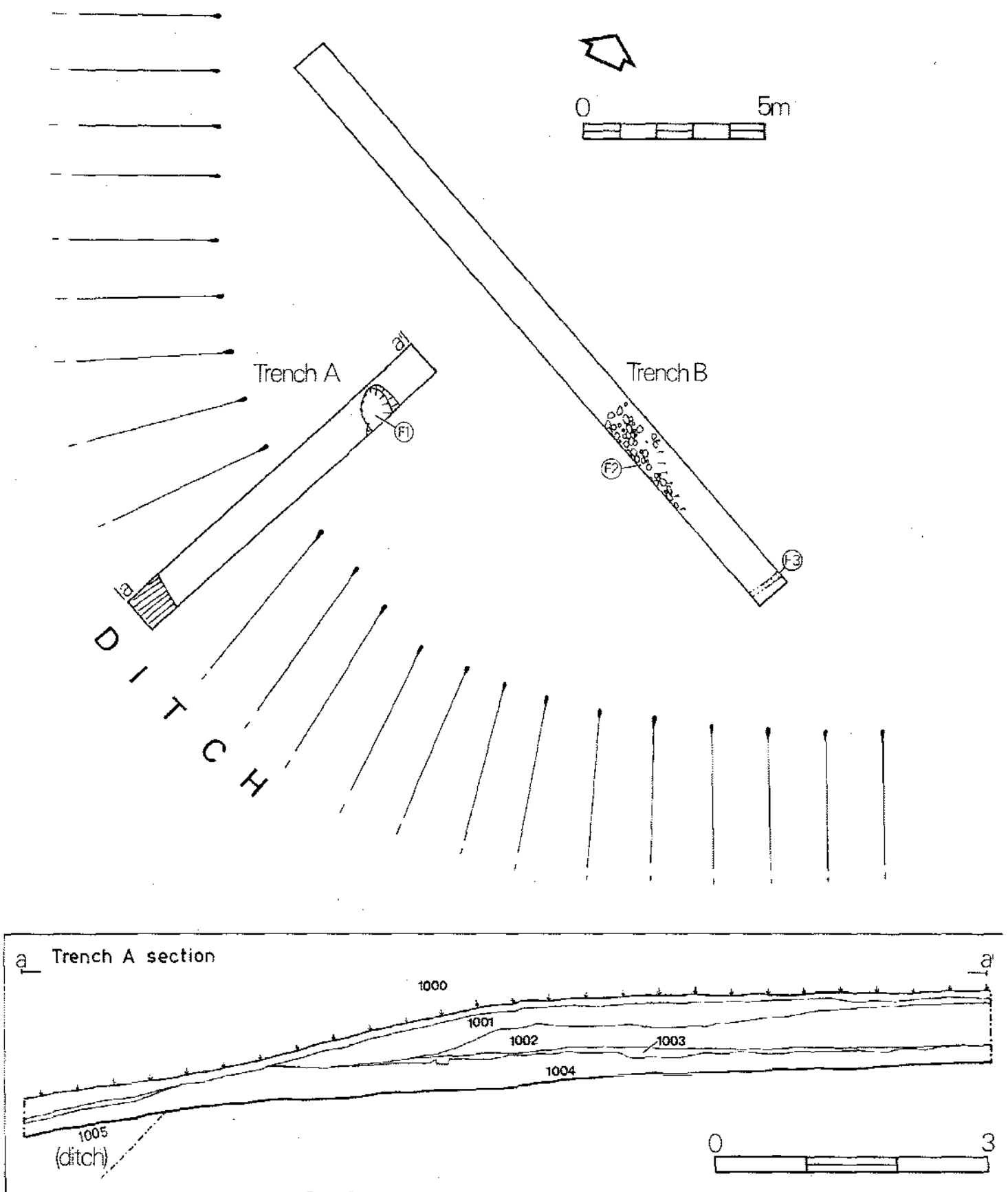


Fig. 3 Plans and section of excavated trenches.

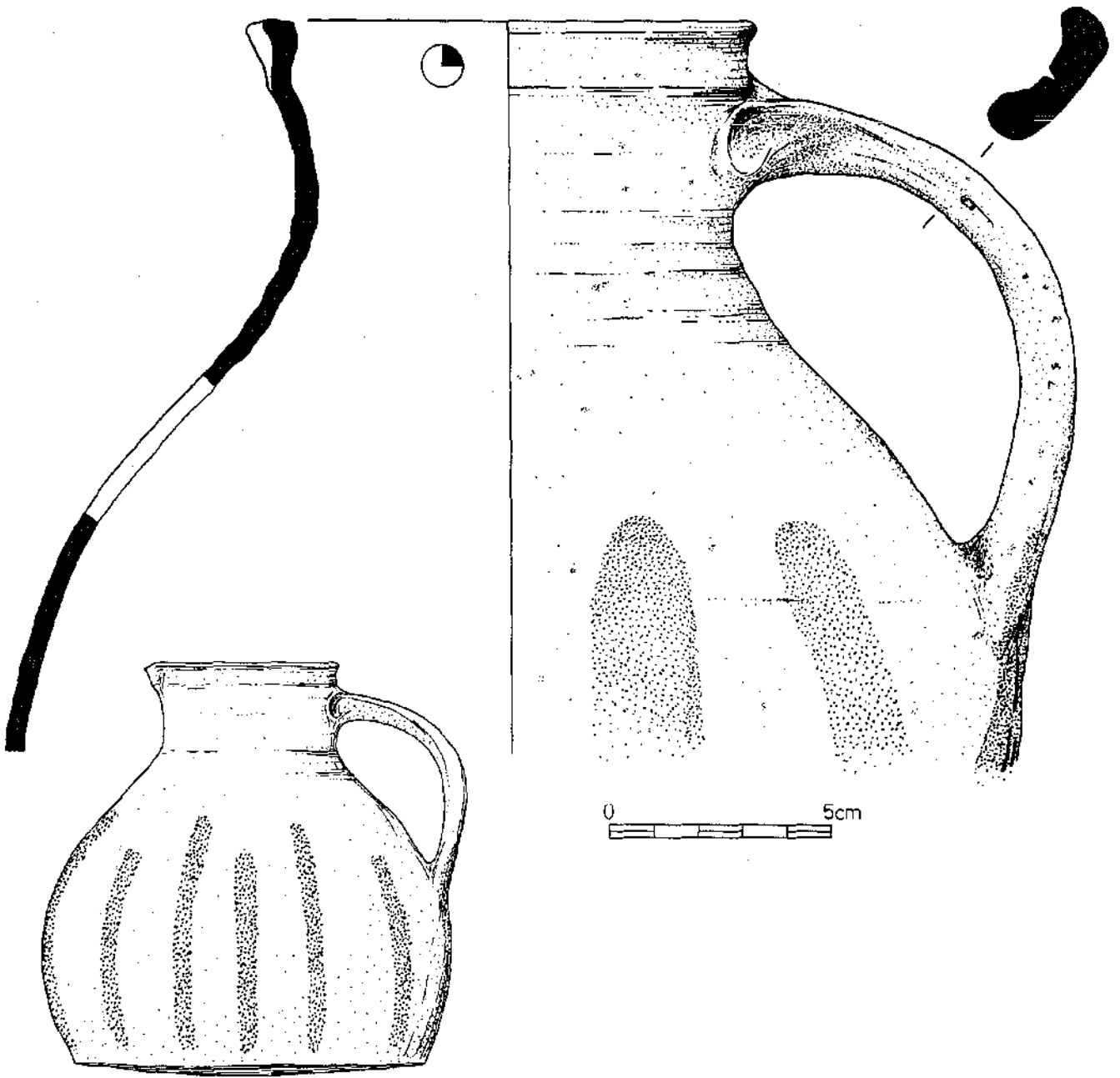


Fig. 4 Drawing and reconstruction of a late-13th or 14th-century jug found on the site.