SUTTON COLDFIELD

BIRMINGHAM

an archaeological evaluation

1989

a report

by Alex Jones

B.U.F.A.U.

SUTTON COLDFIELD, BIRMINGHAM

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Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit 1989

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An archaeological evaluation 1989:

> Falstaff. Bardolph, get thee before to Coventry; fill me a bottle of sack. Our soldiers shall march through; we'll to Sutton Co'fil' tonight.
> (Shakespeare, Henry IV, Part I. Act IV, Scene II)

1.0: SUMMARY

This report describes the results of an archaeological evaluation off Mill Street, Sutton Coldfield, Birmingham. Survival of archaeological deposits was mostly limited to the alleyways between brick buildings on the frontage of Mill Street and High Street. Excavation revealed a group of post-holes for the uprights of timber-framed buildings, and a sequence of mortared and drystone wall-footings with associated occupation deposits. Groundworks in other areas of the site were archaeologically monitored.

2.0: INTRODUCTION

An area between Mill Street and Reddicroft, Sutton Coldfield, centred on NGR. SP 412296 was evaluated by archaeological excavation during a two week period in January and February 1989 by Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit (Figure 1A: Figure 1B). The work was commissioned by Birmingham City Council, in advance of the construction of new offices and underground car-parking.

Eight trenches were excavated, providing an extensive examination of the large area affected by the development (Figure 1C). On the Mill Street/ High Street frontage, trenches were excavated close to the modern street frontage, in the areas where a lesser risk of substantial later disturbance existed (Trenches I, III and IV). Further trenches were dug to examine the Reddicroft frontage (Trenches VI and VII), and to test the survival of deposits and the apparent terracing of natural in the northern area (Trenches II, V and VIII). A mechanical excavator was employed to remove up to 0.3m of demolition rubble from Trench I, prior to the hand definition and excavation of archaeological deposits. Excavation was undertaken manually in the other trenches (Trenches II-VIII). In each trench the priority was the understanding of the sequence and nature of the deposits, without necessarily excavating all archaeological features. The information recovered through this approach is regarded as being adequate for the interim statement of archaeological results which follows.

This report presents a summary of the archaeological information obtained during the evaluation and watching brief, supplemented by knowledge of previous archaeological and historical research in Sutton Coldfield.

3.0: THE SITE AND ITS SETTING

The area for evaluation is bounded by Mill Street and High Street to the

east, and to the west by Reddicroft, and lies to the north of the modern shopping centre of Sutton Coldfield (Figure 1B). The local solid geology is Old Red Sandstone, overlain by sands and gravels. The site has been extensively terraced to counteract a natural slope of 8m from north to south, and a lesser slope in the north from east to west. It formerly contained a terrace of brick buildings fronting onto Mill Street and High Street, now mostly demolished; some smaller buildings were set back from the main frontage (Figure 1B).

Documentary and cartographic evidence indicates that the site is located between the historic settlement core of the town, centred north of the Church (Figure 1B), at the junction of roads from Coleshill, Lichfield and Tamworth (Hodder, 1977), on a spur of land ca. 120m AOD, and a second focus of medieval settlement, to the south of the site, in the area now occupied by the Parade (City Museums, 1979). The purpose of the evaluation was to provide information about the development of the urban nucleus of the town by examination of an area between the two known original settlement cores.

The site was probably part of a parcel of lands given by Sir William Dixie to Emmanuel College, Cambridge University (Riland Bedford, 1891). An inventory of the lands belonging to the college taken in 1638 (Cover) lists two cottages, two houses and a garden fronting onto Mill Street. Cartographic evidence suggests that in the 18th century the Mill Street frontage was occupied by a terrace of buildings, divided by two alleyways in the approximate positions of Trenches I and III.

4.0: THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESULTS

4.1: The Mill Street frontage. Trenches I and III.

Trench I.

An area 10m by 5m, was opened beneath an alleyway between brick buildings fronting on Mill Street; a 1m wide trench was dug within this area to profile the natural deposits, and examine the early levels (Figure 2A).

Natural orange sand was contacted at 121.6m AOD on the Mill Street frontage, falling at the west of the trench by 0.5m. Natural sand was overlain by a homogenous deposit of disturbed natural, up to 0.2m in depth. A group of circular post holes for vertical timber uprights was cut from within this soil (Figure 2A). These features were filled with a uniform dark grey silt flecked with charcoal; not all were excavated. A ?beam slot, 0.1m in depth, was aligned approximately north-south, to the west of the post holes, distinguished from the surrounding area by it's darker fill, flecked with charcoal (Figure 2A: F104). No contemporary occupation deposits or dating evidence for this period of activity was recovered.

Above, the earliest stone-built structure was represented by a 1m length of rough stone footings, aligned approximately north-south, of which up to three courses survived, set in a foundation trench cut from above the disturbed horizon sealing the natural (Figure 2A: F101). A single course of irregular stone footings aligned west-east (Figure 2A: F103) and a ?padstone (Figure 2A: F101) may relate to the same ?rectangular structure.

Later, a substantial building (Figure 2A: F106, F105) was constructed on the same alignment as the former structure, set back from the Mill Street frontage, cutting an earlier drystone wall (Figure 2A: F103). A foundation course of angular stone blocks set into a construction trench 0.5m wide was revealed beneath a later brick wall (Figure 2A). The north west corner of the structure was exposed enclosing an irregular cobbled yard surface, cut to the south by later disturbance (Figure 2A). The east facing wall survived to a height of five courses.

Sealing this structure was a layer of demolition rubble, containing fragments of glass bottles and 18th century pottery, which extended over the whole of the trench, and cut into the cobbled yard. Into this mixed layer were dug footings of a brick wall aligned approximately west-east, which defined the extent of a brick-paved alleyway separating Numbers 20 and 22 Mill Street (Figure 1B: Figure 2A).

Trench III.

In Trench III (Figure 2B) attention was concentrated on the investigation of a sequence of mortared stone wall footings, beneath a further brick paved alleyway. An extensive area was hand excavated to define the features in plan; a 1m wide sondage was dug to define the relationships between the different buildings thus encountered.

The earliest coherent feature was the south-west corner of a stone-footed structure comprising two exterior walls (F305 and F308), and an internal partition (F309), aligned west-east (Figure 2B), associated with an irregular yard surface composed of cobbles set in brown clay soil.

A later period of construction is evidenced by two mortared wall footings on a predominantly north-south alignment (Figure 2B: F306, F301), both cutting the earlier structure. A drystone wall of crushed sandstone blocks (F301) was terraced into natural. A mortared wall (F306) to the west of F301 was set over foundations cut to two different levels. A compacted floor of orange-red flecked clay, inserted between F306 and F301 sealed the truncated footings of the earlier structure. Further mortared wall footings (Figure 2B:F302), aligned west-east, represent a later period of construction, and cut the footings of the preceeding phase. A quantity of stone rubble was infilled behind F302 after its construction (Figure 2B).

The sequence of sandstone-walled structures was truncated to the south and north of the trench by the foundations and floors of brick buildings which incorporated the lower courses of F302 to the south. A mixed deposit containing brick rubble sealed the stone structures and represents debris remaining after the recent demolition.

4.2: The Reddicroft frontage. Trenches VI and VII.

Two small sondages (Figure 1C), each 2m by 1m, encountered natural sand at ca. 0.15m below the modern surface, sealed by dark brown topsoil containing demolition debris. No features were contacted, except for the tips of two wooden stakes in Trench VI, set into the natural sand and probably part of a recent fence.

4.3: The north of the site. Trenches II, IV, V and VIII.

Trenches II and V.

Two small trenches were dug in a former garden area to quantify the build-up of deposits against the terrace walls (Figure 1C). Natural deposits of orange-brown sand in each trench were contacted at 0.9m below the modern surface, overlain by a horizon of disturbed natural, sealed by grey modern topsoil mixed with organic matter and rubbish, containing 19th-century artifacts.

Trench IV.

Natural orange sand was encountered at 0.2m below the post-demolition surface, cut by a shallow linear feature, 0.4m wide, filled with dirty silt, and aligned south west-north east; it may be interpreted as a drainage gully. Above was a dark brown mixed topsoil containing demolition debris (Figure 1C).

Trench VIII

This 1m x 4m trench was dug to expose a length of mortared sandstone wall, four courses in height, joined to the external wall of 6 High Street (Figure 1 C); it's inner face was obscured by modern wooden panelling and no internal partitions were visible.

4.4: The watching brief.

A watching brief was maintained during the evaluation to monitor groundworks at the north of the site involving the removal of up to 2m of topsoil and natural sands. The foundation courses of the sandstone terrace wall forming the northern site boundary were revealed during extensive machining. A series of butresses has been added to its south face to increase stability (Figure 1C). Two stone terrace walls of ?19th century date were noted, one aligned approximately south-north cutting an earlier sandstone wall of similar alignment (Figure 1C), but no other coherent features were visible. Further sandstone walls revealed during demolition of the brick-built structures were recorded photographically in-situ.

5.0: DISCUSSION

The archaeological return from this evaluation has been high relative to the limited resources available and the statistically small areas evaluated. The inability to extend the areas investigated and monitor groundworks on the Mill Street/ High Street frontage was a disappointment. However, despite the paucity of stratified datable artifacts, the evidence uncovered may be fitted into a tentative chronology, based on the principles of archaeological stratigraphy and comparison with cartographic information.

The series of terraces by which the ground falls away to the south were probably constructed by cutting away into the slope rather than by dumping; the deep deposits of disturbed silts recorded in this part of the site may be a post-terrace formation.

The evidence from Trench I suggests early activity near the site resulting in the deposition of disturbed natural silt, succeeded by occupation in-situ, in the form of timber-framed buildings; occupation evidence of a kind not paralleled in early contexts elsewhere in the town. The evidence indicates a phase of occupation undoubtedly pre-dating the sequence of stone-footed buildings seen during the evaluation.

A later occupation sequence of some complexity is indicated by the evidence from Trenches I and III. At least two phases of construction are represented in Trench I. The insubstantial remains of one, possibly two, stone-footed structures, are succeeded by a well constructed building with an internal floor-surface, set back from the road frontage. Trench III suggests a more complex pattern of stone-built properties, again located away from the modern street frontage.

Mill Street was extended to the west in the 1820s to take its modern alignment; Snape's map of 1743 shows a terrace of dwellings fronting directly onto the contemporary line of the street. Therefore, if the cartographic evidence is correct, the latest of the sequence of structures pre-dates 1743. A survey of the area in 1638 (Cover) lists a group of houses and cottages and may well refer to the structures encountered during the evaluation. These may be contemporary with buildings of similar construction, dating from the early 17th century, in the High Street, those recorded elsewhere in the site (Trench VIII). On stratigraphic, and morphological grounds the evidence for earliest occupation should be pre-17th century, and may hint at an early settlement nucleus in this area. This evidence could make an important contribution to our understanding of the early development of the urban fabric of Sutton Coldfield.

A comparison of the cartographic and archaeological evidence suggests a degree of structural continuity, exemplified in particular by the positioning of two alleys between the brick buildings in the locations formerly occupied by alleys shown on Snape's map. This continuity has important implications for further archaeological evaluation in the town. The examination of carefully targetted locations such as alleyways may allow a better understanding of the early development of the town of Sutton Coldfield.

6.0: IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS.

This evaluation was commissioned after detailed planning approval for the impending development was granted; there was no opportunity to amend development proposals in the light of the information produced by the evaluation to safeguard the surviving archaeology. Despite the undoubted value of the archaeological evidence, preserved through record by the evaluation, it is sadly true that the development may well result in the destruction of layers of archaeological importance over much of the site.

This publication is an interim report. The fuller consideration of these results, followed by publication in a local academic journal, inevitably a longer term process, will ensure the wider availability of the conclusions.

It is unfortunate that no detailed predictive study, based on survey and research and supplemented by small-scale problem-orientated evaluation exists for this area. Such a survey, in conjunction with the Sites and Monuments Record, would provide a vital planning tool that would help safeguard important archaeological evidence and provide forward planning for the recording of such evidence as an integral part of the planning and development process.

7.0: ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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8.0: REFERENCES

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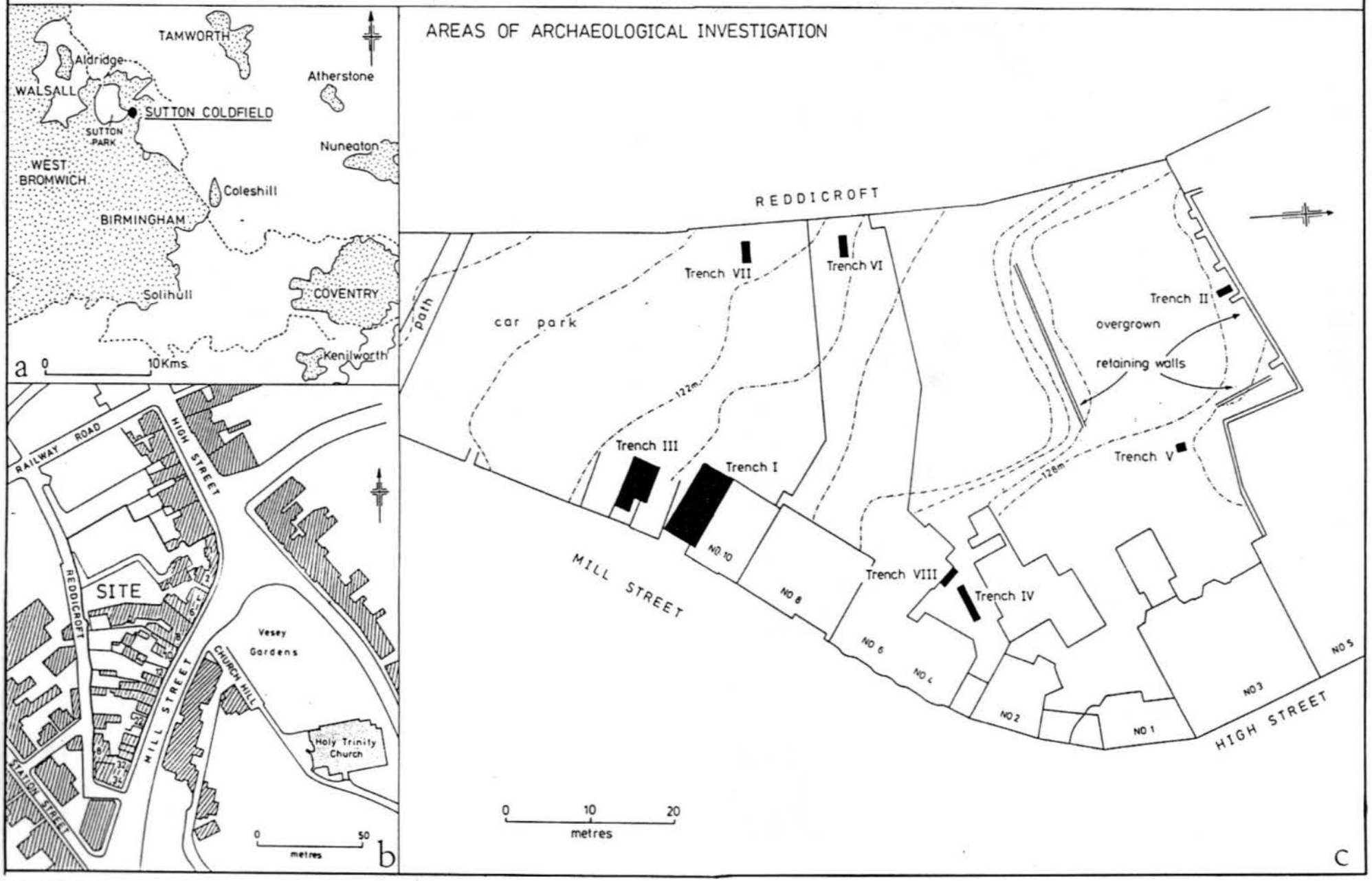
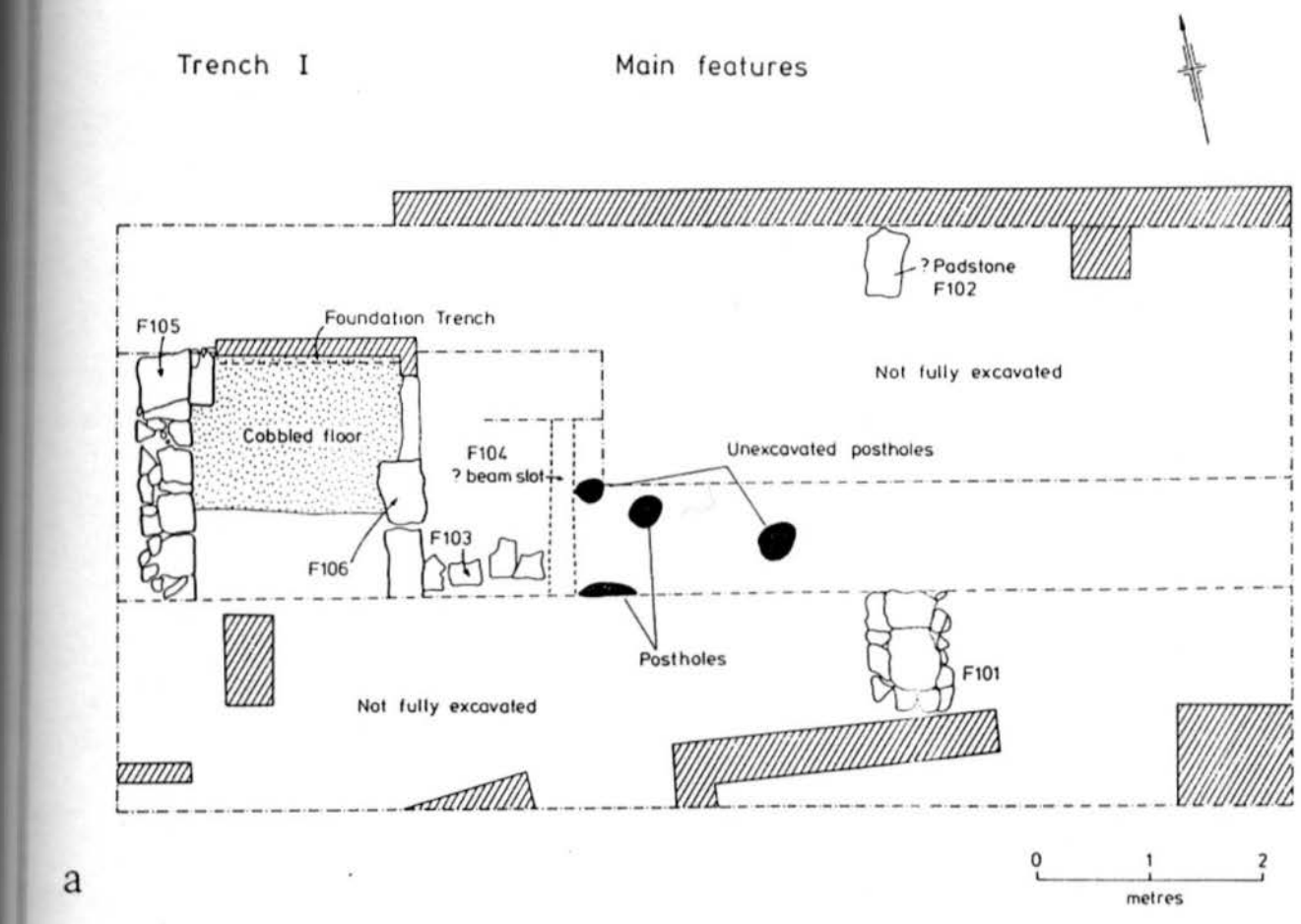


Figure 1

SUTTON . COLDFIELD 1989 *plans*



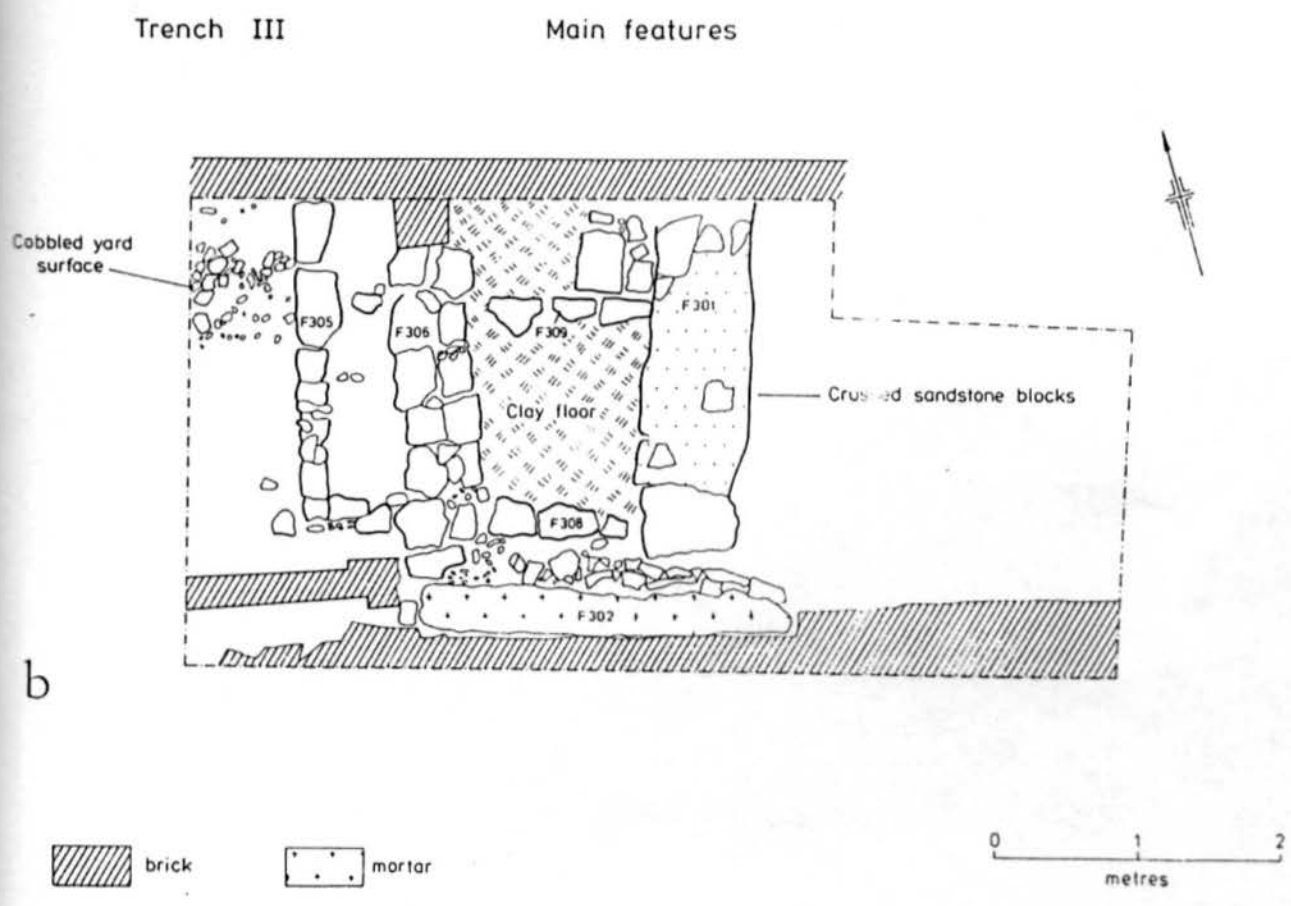


Figure 2