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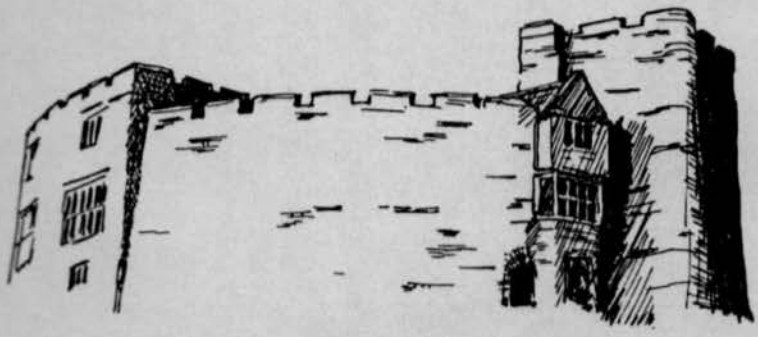
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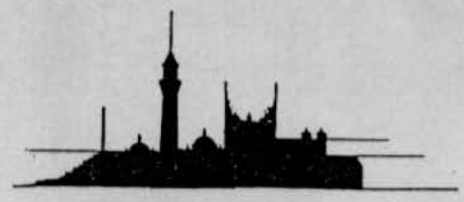
BIRMINGHAM UNIVERSITY
FIELD ARCHAEOLOGY UNIT

TRIAL EXCAVATIONS
at
TAMWORTH CASTLE

by Jon Cane



B.U.F.A.U.



Introduction

In April 1989 BUFAU undertook an archaeological evaluation of the ground floor of the tower of Tamworth Castle, the so-called castle dungeon. The work was commissioned by Tamworth Borough Council as part of a major programme of refurbishment and reinterpretation of the castle.

Plans to open the tower to the public included the option of exposing the original ground level, or even emptying a possible lower room, the so-called torture chamber. Speculation about the existence of this lower room seems to have begun in the nineteenth century but lacked any basis in firm evidence (Esme Ballard, unpub).

The stone tower, together with the curtain wall, is thought to have been built in the 1180s, presumably replacing a timber precursor. It is a three storey structure with walls over 2 metres thick. The lowest chamber has no windows and is entered by a single door leading from the central courtyard. The walls are of rough masonry with substantial structural cracks filled with recent mortar and the present floor is of uneven concrete with a few irregular slabs. The level of the threshold suggested that the floor level inside had not changed significantly. The principal objective of the excavation was to define the depth and nature of earlier floor levels.

The Excavation

A small trench (c.4.0m²) was excavated along the southern inside wall of the tower to locate and excavate the floor sequence. The concrete (1000) which covered most of the floor was relatively poor and easily removed, except against the east wall where its thickness limited the work, necessitating a slight modification of the original layout of the trench. The concrete sealed a thin (c.0.10m) layer of clay soil and rubble (1001), containing modern material including plastic. This was cut at the eastern end of the trench by two pits (F.1 and 2) containing twentieth century bottles, shoes and other refuse. Removal of their fills exposed part of the foundation courses of the eastern wall against which the pits had been dug. Excavation of layer 1001 revealed a thin (c.0.02m) layer of dirty sand, which in turn overlay an area of compact

clay, with charcoal and plaster trodden into its surface forming a floor (F.6/1008). This was in fact the trampled top of layer 1009, a compact mixed clay. This mixed clay layer was cut by a series of post holes which had been sealed by the floor. The largest (F.3) was a straight-sided pit, 1.0m in diameter and 0.50m deep, with the remains of a post impression in the bottom. Further to the south and cut by the foundations of the stone tower was a post hole of similar depth (F.8). This feature was much smaller in plan (0.25m in diameter), suggesting that the post may have been pulled rather than dug out. F.3 cut a small, shallow feature (F.4). To the south, another shallow post setting had been dug but this had been severely truncated by one of the twentieth century pits (F.2). The compact clay (1009) had been cut away in places by the foundations of the stone tower.

The Finds

All layers later than the primary floor (1008) contained varying quantities of modern finds, including building debris. F.1 and 2 contained large quantities of glass, including Champagne bottles, early twentieth century pottery and a pair of leather shoes. No finds were recovered from the clay floor F.6 or the clay which it sealed (1009). However, the deep post-holes F.3 and F.8 both contained sherds of coarse cooking pots and Stamford Ware, probably dateable to the 12th century. F.3 also contained some fragments of animal bone.

Discussion

The earliest features on the site were the post-holes sealed by the clay floor. The clay make-up into which they were cut probably represents the original motte material, and the post-holes may relate either to the timber structure of the earliest castle or to scaffolding associated with the construction of the 12th century stone tower. The fact that post-hole F.8 seems to have been cut by the foundations of this tower suggests that for this feature at least, the first option is true. Similarities in depth and finds may mean that post-hole F.3 is of similar date and function. The posts which they held would have been removed when the stone castle was built in the late 12th century; the date of the pottery from their fills fits well with this date.

When the stone tower was built, its foundations were dug into the top edge of the mound, cutting through the earlier features, leaving the top of the mound inside the tower to form a simple beaten clay floor, level with the top of the foundations. No evidence of later floor layers was recovered, other than the crude concrete laid during this century.

The results of this excavation can be summarised thus:

1. The original clay floor of the stone tower survives, despite damage from later pit digging.
2. This floor is now sealed by a maximum of only 0.15m of later material, including the present concrete floor.
3. There is no evidence for a lower chamber beneath this floor.
4. Early features, possibly belonging to the timber castle, survive well.
5. No evidence was recovered as to the original use of the room, but the lack of occupation deposits as well as the lack of windows may suggest use as a store-room.

Conclusions and recommendations

The discovery of the possible remains of the original timber castle just beneath the present floor levels is of considerable interest and importance. Whilst it would undoubtedly be of interest to excavate the remaining floor area and expose the earlier remains, such an undertaking cannot be justified or recommended.

1. In principle, preservation is preferable to destruction, by archaeological excavation or otherwise, wherever an option exists.
2. Excavation and subsequent permanent exposure of remains here would be unsuitable for long-term display and would render the room unusable.
3. A substantial lowering of the floor levels within the tower would not only destroy the earlier remains but would be historically inaccurate, as the excavation has demonstrated the absence of a lower chamber.
4. Exposure of the internal tower foundation spread would reduce the available floor area and possibly the structural stability of the tower itself.

These factors would seem to rule out any further excavation works here. It is therefore recommended that reinstatement of the floor at the

present level would be the most appropriate response to the excavation results.

Jon Cane

Acknowledgements

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References

- Esme Ballard: Tamworth Castle Museum, Descriptions of the Dungeon; An unpublished collection of references to the dungeon.
- Esme Ballard: Tamworth Castle Museum (1987 Guidebook)

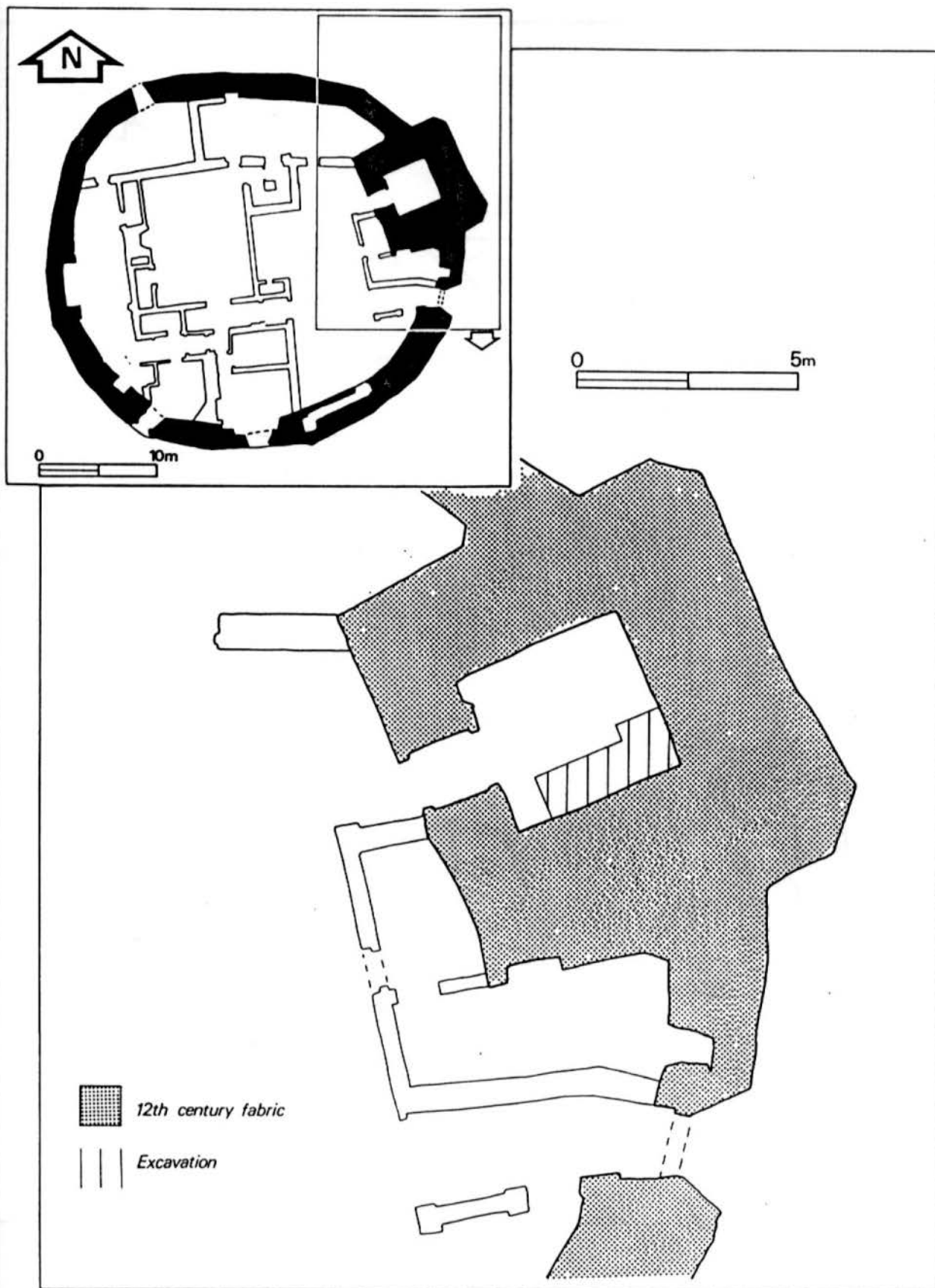


Figure 1: Tamworth Castle, showing the 12th century stone tower and location of excavation.

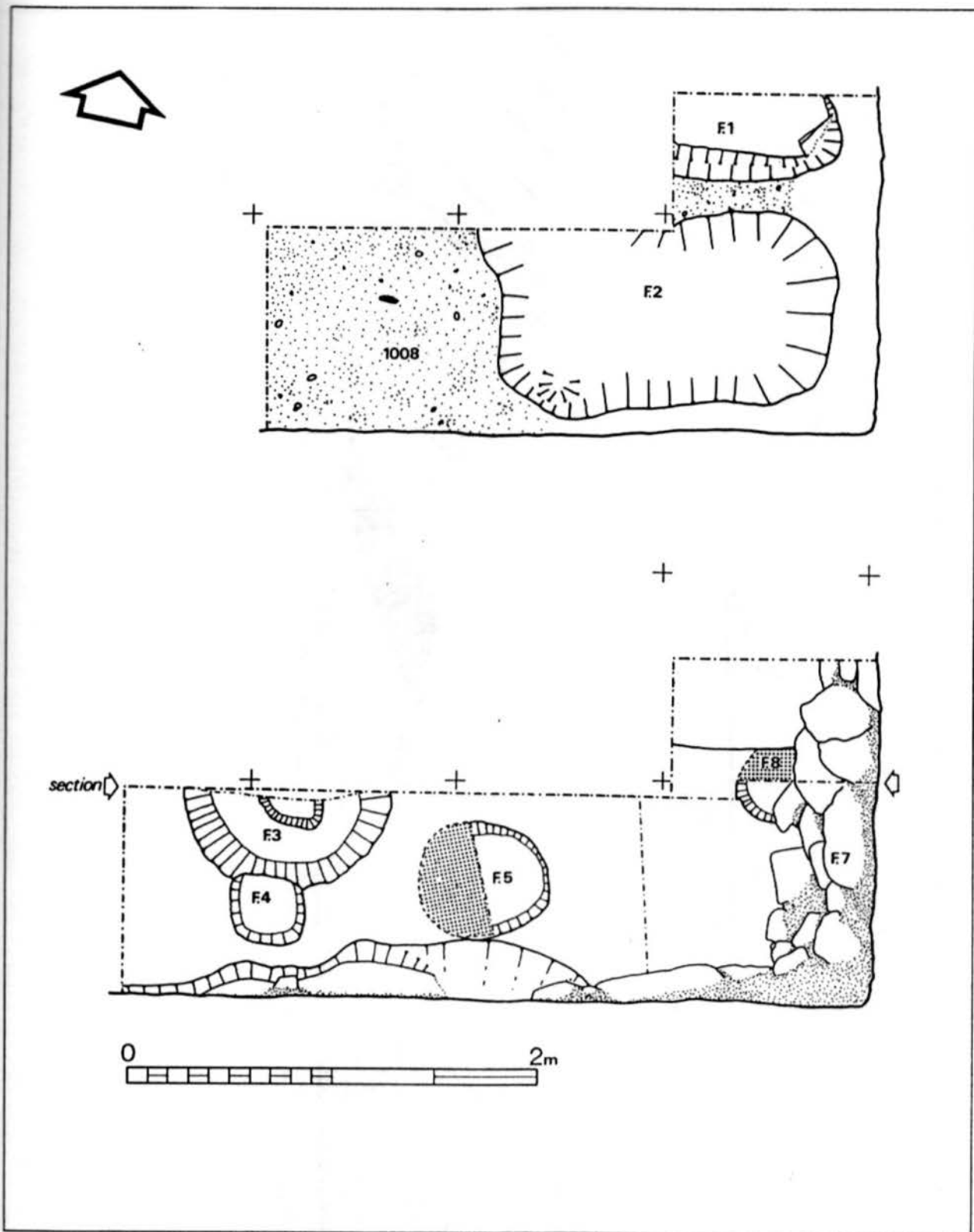


Figure 2: Plans showing modern pits cutting the original floor (above) and (below) the early post-holes.

w. 97.13m OD.

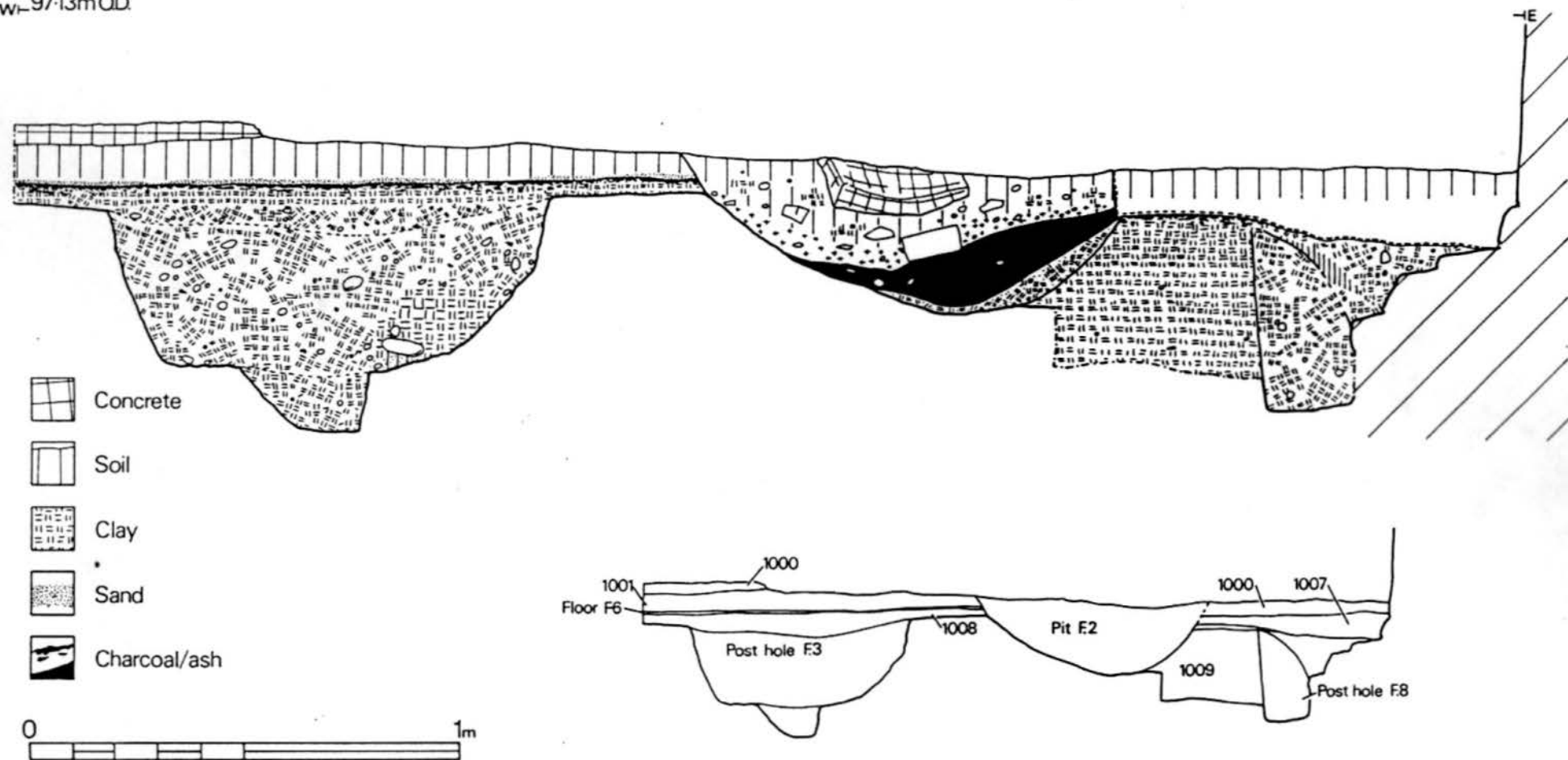


Figure 3: South facing section.