

**An Archaeological Evaluation at Abbey Farm,  
Rocester, Staffordshire**

by

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### Introduction

A small-scale evaluation of the archaeological potential of land to the west of Abbey Field, off Mill Street, Rocester in Staffordshire (centred on National Grid Reference SK 1105 3937) was undertaken by Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit in July 1989. The work was commissioned by the landowner, Mr. Philip Atkins, after the granting of Scheduled Monument Consent to allow excavation to proceed on land that lay within the Scheduled Area of Rocester Abbey and Roman Settlement (County Monument Number, Staffordshire No.66). The work was to a brief that limited the excavation to the location of archaeological deposits and their categorisation through minimal excavation, in order to so plan proposed developments as to preserve the archaeology in situ. Such an approach inevitably creates problems for the dating and interpretation of layers and features encountered and subsequently for the academic viability of wider conclusions based on such evidence. However, some attempt has been made in the following account to set the results of the evaluation in the context of our knowledge of past activity at Rocester recovered by larger-scale excavation work in 1961 (Webster 1962), 1964 and 1968 (Bell 1986), and 1985-1987 (Esmonde Cleary and Ferris forthcoming; Ferris forthcoming (a); Ferris forthcoming (b)).

### The Evaluation (Figures 1, 2)

The evaluation took the form of the excavation of sixteen trenches, Trenches 1-10 being dug initially with a JCB excavator and then further excavated and cleaned by hand, and Trenches 11-16 being much smaller hand-dug sondages. The sequence in each trench will first be discussed before being set in its wider context, both in relation to the other trenches and to the archaeology of Rocester as a whole, if applicable.

Trench 1 (Figure 3) This L-shaped trench lay to the north of the open area of yard set in the angle formed by two modern barns. It had originally been intended to excavate a single H-shaped trench in this area but the late notification of the presence of a live electricity cable cutting diagonally across the yard meant that the shape of Trenches 1 and 2 had to be altered for safety considerations. The modern farmyard surface over the whole of this zone was pitted and rutted, and sunken in places, and consisted of an uneven spread of stone chippings apparently still regularly added to as this area is prone to waterlogging in winter. Beneath the chippings, and in places exposed as the uppermost surface itself, was a layered deposit of farmyard make-up and surfacings (1000), including chippings, cobbles, ash and clinker, brick and tile, and, towards the base, a dark rich charcoally loam. The accumulated depth of modern and post-medieval yards was between 0.58m-0.76m, and they directly overlay two floors or working surfaces, one of clay (1002) and the other of rammed cobble (1004), into which were cut a number of features. To the west was a circular, bowl-shaped hearth or furnace (F1), about 1.38m in diameter and 0.18m in depth, extending into the section face to the north, backfilled with a soft, dark, silty clay (1001) heavily flecked with charcoal and containing lumps of smithing slag. Further east was a second sub-circular feature (F2), of diameter 1.45m and depth at centre 0.19m, which though its fill (a soft mid-brown mixed silty clay (1003)) included small quantities of charcoal, contained no slag and therefore could not be identified as a second hearth, or certainly not one that had been in use for any length of time. In the south of Trench 1 were two linear features (F3, F4) which, though not interconnected, probably belong to the same structure. F4, aligned north-south, was 1.32m in length, 0.40m wide and 0.15m deep, with a rounded terminal at either end. It was backfilled with a loose, dark brown silt clay (1032). To the south, and aligned east-west, was a similar slot (F3), with a rounded eastern end (the western end lay beyond the limit of excavation) backfilled with a very loose, dark brown clayey silt with charcoal (1005).

Trench 2 (Figure 3) This T-shaped trench lay to the south of Trench 1.

Once more the significant archaeological deposits were protected by a deep build-up of post-medieval and modern overburden. At the northern end of the trench these deposits were 0.73m deep, but some 2 metres further south was an east-west aligned cut (F6) that has evidently removed some quantity of deposits to the south, for here the depth of overburden increases to 0.98-1.15m, and along the southernmost edges of the trench, to 1.22-1.34m. The fact that there is no change in the consistency of the overburden or of the modern, that is 19th-Century, finds recovered from this deposit suggests that the cut dates also from this period. On the higher surface to the north the exposed archaeological surfaces themselves have also been cut into, in one or two places, by irregular features; F5, an ovoid, shallow feature was sectioned to test its date, while the other features, identified as dark, soft, soil stains were unexcavated though it seems probable that they were all, like F5, post-medieval. The surface into which these features could be seen to be cut (1007) was less stony than layer 1004 in Trench 1 and had a greenish, cess-like tinge and an upper surface heavily flecked with pieces of decayed bone. In thickness this layer must be at least 1.12m, as revealed in a section at the junction of the two arms of Trench 2 where the base of this deposit was revealed. Earlier than 1007, and exposed along the southern arm of Trench 2 with the removal of the deeper post-medieval overburden, was a surface of irregularly-spaced cobbling set in a matrix of a green-tinged silty clay (1009), there being one notable rectangular concentration of denser cobbling to the southwest. This surface can be seen to be cut into by a number of features backfilled with a soft, dark, charcoally, silty loam, these features including two probable beam-trenches (F7, F8), two possible postholes (F11, F12) and a pit (F10). The east-west aligned beam-trench (F7), the stretch within the area of excavation being c.6m in length, was 0.20m wide but only, to the east, 0.10m deep, and forms an angle with the north-south aligned F8.

Trench 3 This trench was dug to the west of the large open-sided modern barn and revealed little of archaeological value. As with Trench 2 there was a difference in level between the north and the south, though to project this cutting-away of layers to the south as being the same incident as recorded in Trench 2 is not a viable exercise though this possibility must be borne in mind. At the north end of the trench was a 0.76m thick topsoil and soft, silty loam deposit (1011), overlying a fawn, clayey silt with pebbles (1012) that extended over the whole length of the trench, though to the south, beyond the out line, this was encountered at a depth of 1.30m.

Trench 4 (Figure 4) Trench 4 was located in the pasture field to the west of the farmyards, up against a boundary fence where a modern road terminates. The removal of the 0.05-0.10m-deep turf and topsoil (1013) immediately revealed a road surface (F13), at least 6.50m wide and aligned east-west, consisting of an unconsolidated surface of pebble, cobbles, sandstone chunks and occasional pieces of tile (1014). This surface was left in situ.

Trench 5 (Figure 4) In Trench 5, to the east of Trench 4, was encountered an identical sequence, immediately beneath the topsoil, revealing the continuation of road F13. The northern end of the road was here cut by an ovoid disturbance (F14), backfilled with a loose, dark, silty loam (1015) and, at the centre, an articulated animal burial, covered over with stones and cobbles. The opportunity was taken to partially empty this pit, to provide a window onto the earlier sequence beneath the road F13. In the side of pit F14 was revealed a deep, rammed cobble surface (1016) which probably is part of an earlier road (F15).

Trench 6 (Figure 5) Removal of the turf revealed a thick deposit of dark grey-brown, silty loam (1017) mixed with large quantities of post-medieval and modern pottery and glass, in quantities much larger than encountered elsewhere on the site. The depth of this levelling deposit at the south end of the trench was 0.37m and to the north 0.65m, indicating a general southwards slope in the underlying

surfaces. Layer 1017 was not removed in its entirety but rather sondages were dug at both ends of the trench to establish the nature of deposits at a lower level. To the north was revealed a cobbled surface (F18), probably a road, formed of closely packed, large river cobbles (1024) in a silt clay matrix. In places, under 1017, but over the cobbles, was a 0.05m-thick deposit of a stoneless clay silt (1018), presumably trample, that again contained post-medieval pottery.

The cobble surface (F18) ends 1.90m to the south where it lies flush with a deposit of small gravel (1020) that extends into the sondage to the west. Also in the southern sondage was revealed a light fawn-brown clay (1019), but the relationship between the gravel and the clay could not be established.

Trench 7 (Figures 5,6) This trench, aligned roughly east-west was located to cut across the line of an upstanding earthwork feature visible even under heavy grass cover. This feature, aligned north-south, was revealed, as expected, to be a rampart (F16), formed of a blocky, solid, light brown silt clay (1022), at the east end of the trench only 0.35m below the turf and topsoil (1021). The upper surface of the rampart could be seen to be disturbed in a number of places, as indicated by dark soil stains and concentrations of flecked bone, but none of these possible features was emptied. To the west of the rampart was a north-south aligned trench (F17), that may have been dug to rob a retaining or revetment wall for the outer face of the rampart. This trench was sectioned to confirm its identification as a robber trench; 1.13m wide and 0.50m deep it was backfilled with a compact dirty grey brown silt clay (1023), overlying a solid cobble surface (1031) that may have been a basal foundation course for the wall. Further west the southern cut of the trench was overlain by cobbles (1024) which formed a continuous surface (F18) 2.30m wide, running into the western section face where it was only 0.34m below the present ground surface. It has been assumed that this cobble surface is, in fact, a road, the same as that encountered at the east end of Trench 6.

Trench 8 (Figure 5) Located towards the eastern boundary of the pasture field, archaeological deposits were here overlain by a depth of topsoil (1025), 0.35m thick to the north and 0.61m to the south. Underlying this was a well laid cobble surface (F19, 1026) cut in one or two places by disturbances in whose upper surfaces could be noted post-medieval pottery and brick. None of these disturbances was excavated.

Trench 9 and 10 Trenches 9 and 10 were excavated inside an open-fronted barn to the north of the farmyard. Both, with the removal of vestigial deposits of manure, could be seen to be floored with a layer of stone chippings and gravel (1027) up to 0.20m in thickness. Beneath this in Trench 10 was a concrete floor (1028) which was removed in a small sondage to the west of the trench. Revealed in this sondage was an east-west aligned wall (F20) built of well-cut and faced sandstone blocks, up against whose northern face was a dump of loose, charcoally loam (1047) which was excavated down to a depth of 1m below the upper surface of the chippings. It is likely that 1047 is the backfill of a wall foundation trench. In Trench 9 no concrete floor was present; rather, directly under the chippings were revealed an east-west brick wall (F21) and a north-south sandstone wall (F22) of a similar build to F20. A sondage was dug inside the angle formed by the walls to a depth of 1m below the chippings, revealing a single dump of loose, dark brown silt clay with pebbles (1029). The lower part of this dump contained three sherds of Roman pottery.

Trenches 11-14 These sondages were dug around the modern grain storage barn to the south of the farmyard. In Trench 11 a surface of cobbles (1037) was revealed below a depth of 0.52-0.54m of topsoil (1036). In Trench 12 another cobble surface, formed of larger river cobbles (1039), was encountered below 0.39-0.41m of topsoil (1038). In Trench 13 the brick wall of an old silage clamp was uncovered just beneath the surface with a clay spread (1040) to the north of this wall revealed at a depth of 0.20-0.25m. Trench 14, to the west of the barn was in an area taken inside the former silage clamp and here was

encountered a depth of at least 0.70m of modern backfill and rubbish, including tin cans and glass bottles.

Trenches 15 and 16 The final two sondages were dug at the north-west (Trench 15) and south-west (Trench 16) corners of the open-sided modern barn, to either side of Trench 3. In Trench 15 a cobbled surface, consisting of large and medium river cobbles (1044) underlay a depth of 0.65m of topsoil (1043). In Trench 16 a surface of similar cobbles (1046), though more compacted, underlay a depth of 0.64-0.69m of topsoil (1045).

### Interpretation

As has already been mentioned, interpretation of such limited trenching, with the archaeologically significant layers being located rather than excavated, is difficult, and is made much more so by the paucity of finds from most of the trenches. With the Scheduled area of Rocester encompassing much of the plan of three successive Roman forts, and an associated early civilian settlement, of a later Roman civilian enclosure, of a Saxon settlement, and a medieval monastic site, it is virtually impossible to be certain of the date or significance of many of the features encountered during the evaluation.

### The Western Pasture Field

In the pasture field to the west of the farmyard the east-west aligned cobbled road surface (F13), identified in both Trenches 4 and 5, continues the line of the modern road, which at present stops at the farm's boundary fence, and doubtless continues under the modern silage clamp to the east. The upper surface of this excavated road includes tile and sandstone in its matrix and in appearance it resembles a medieval road or track excavated to the south of the New Cemetery site, Rocester, in 1987, this track reusing the line of a Roman military road of the mid to late 2nd Century. The



rammed cobble surface revealed beneath F13 may again be an earlier Roman surface, this being the possible line of the Via Principalis of the latest fort, and, again, in all probability an access road into the later civilian enclosure. The topography of the ground to the north of Trenches 4 and 5, and the depth of levelling deposits found in Trench 6 suggest the presence here of a ditch, perhaps with a terminal just to the north of road F13, the ditch restarting to the south of the road. The dishing of the cobbled surface or road (F18) seen in Trenches 6 and 7 suggests that it is post-Roman and overlies the backfilled ditch, this perhaps being confirmed by the fact that the cobbles in Trench 7 partially overlie the cut of robber trench F17 whose backfill contains a sherd of medieval pottery. The postulated ditch may be Roman military, or it may be associated with the clay rampart F16. This rampart has been examined at a number of locations in Rochester and there is little doubt that it dates to the later 3rd Century. The cobbled surface to the north of the rampart in Trench 8 does not fit into any pattern seen elsewhere around the town and it may be a medieval or post-medieval surface.

#### The Farmyard and Modern Barns

It is impossible to successfully interpret the features exposed in this area, due to what has evidently been extensive landscaping in the post-medieval period, which has affected the southern part of the area in question, and to disturbance in the form of a former silage clamp constructed further to the south. At least two periods of activity are represented in Trenches 1 and 2, the latest involving a smithing hearth (F1), pit (F2), and beam (?) trenches (F3, F4), the earlier, exposed at the base of a post-medieval disturbance, taking the form of a building represented by beam trenches (F7, F8), postholes (F11, F12), cobbled floors (F9), and a pit (F10). The depth and nature of the earlier structure suggests a military origin, while the later may represent a secondary military phase or a later Roman civilian horizon. No pottery was recovered to date either period of activity.

### The Barn to the North of the Farmyard

The trenches excavated here suggest a considerable build-up of deposits associated with an earlier, substantial stone farmhouse or farm building.

### Implications for Development Proposals

The evaluation has demonstrated the existence of significant archaeological deposits in two of the three areas being considered for development; in the third area, the interior of the brick barn to the north of the farmyard, disturbance of the ground (or building up of the levels) to a depth of 1m can be demonstrated to have already occurred.

In the pasture field to the west the relative depths of topsoil masking the archaeology will have to be taken account of in planning the line and gradient of new access roads; only a few centimetres of soil at present protect the road surface which continues the line of the modern Abbey Way eastwards, and though deposits are considerably deeper to the north, the topsoil again thins out as it rises over the line of the clay rampart.

In the farmyard the significant archaeological deposits are masked by a thickness of c.0.76m of post-medieval levelling, this depth of overburden increasing in the south to c.1.34m. Around the modern grain-storage shed considerable disturbance associated with a former silage clamp can be shown to have already taken place. Such a build-up of deposits, 0.76-1.34m, in an already at present in any case lower than the farm road to the east, suggests that some building solution causing little or no damage to the underlying archaeology can be found. The position of the east-west aligned cut, possibly part of a long, linear feature extending beyond Trench 3 to the west, may allow service trenches to be planned on this line, again to minimise any potential damage to archaeological deposits.

I.M. Ferris,  
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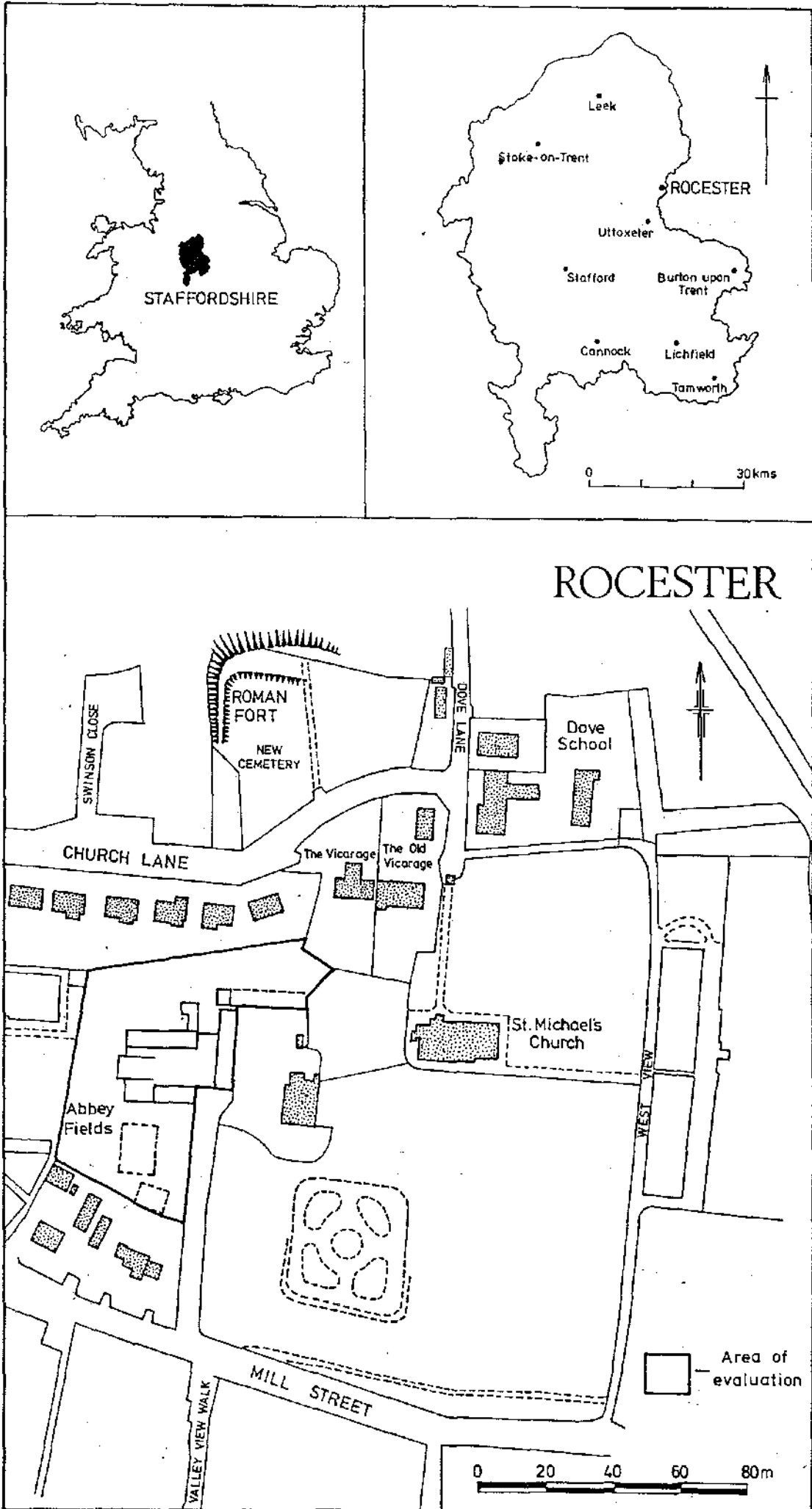


Figure 1

# ROCESTER, Abbey Farm 1989

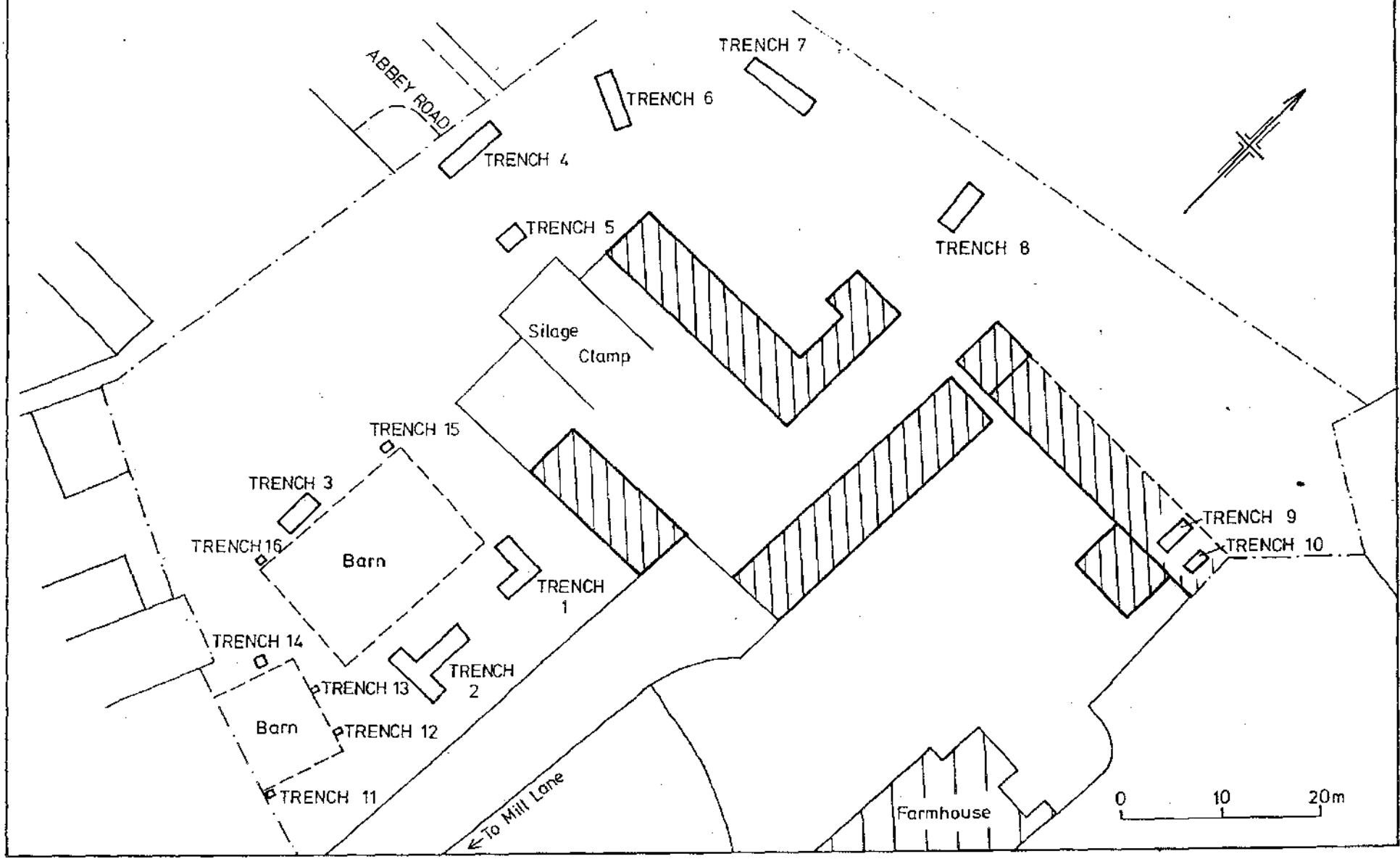


Figure 2

# ROCESTER, Abbey Farm

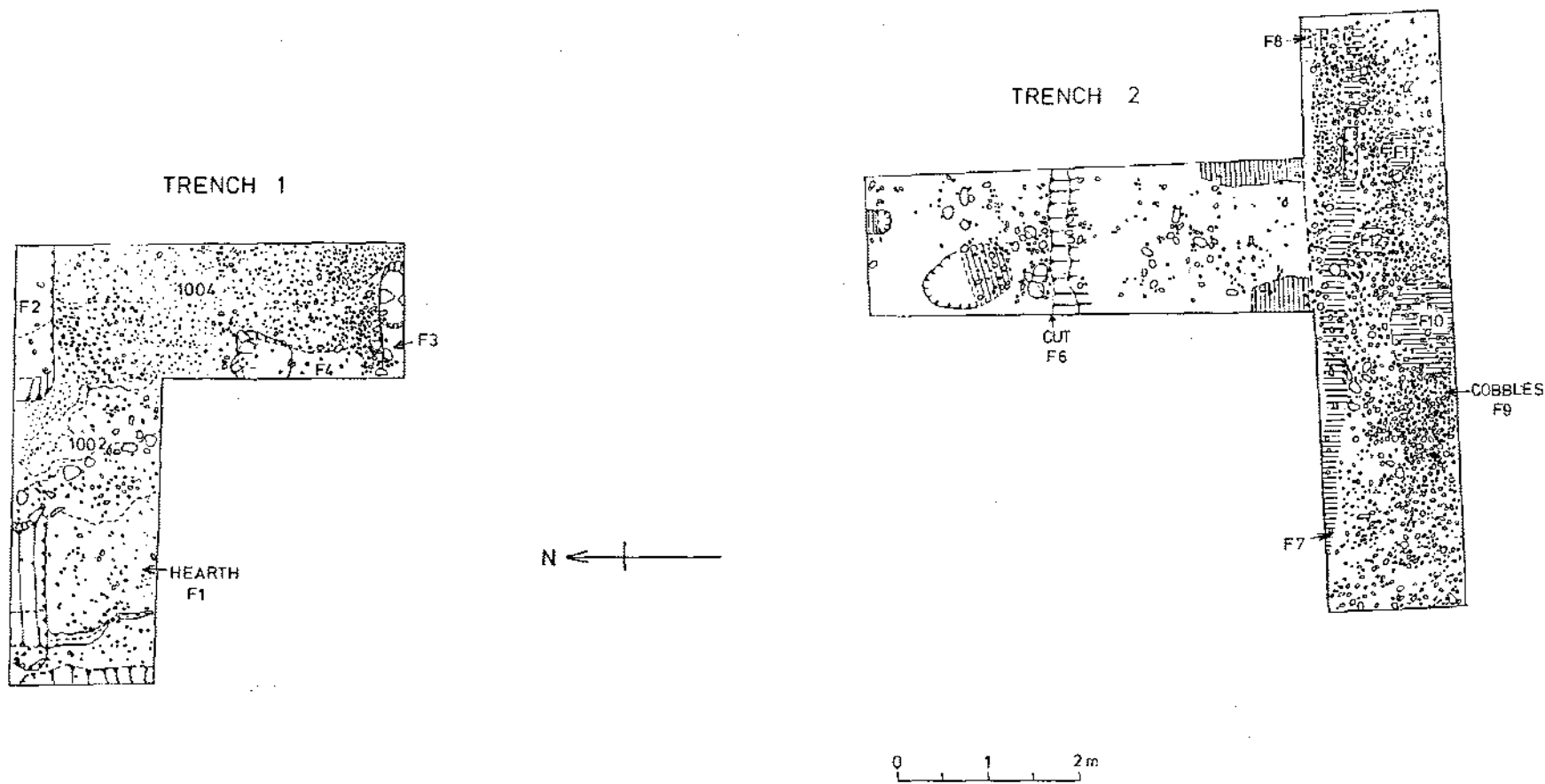


Figure 3

# ROCESTER, Abbey Farm

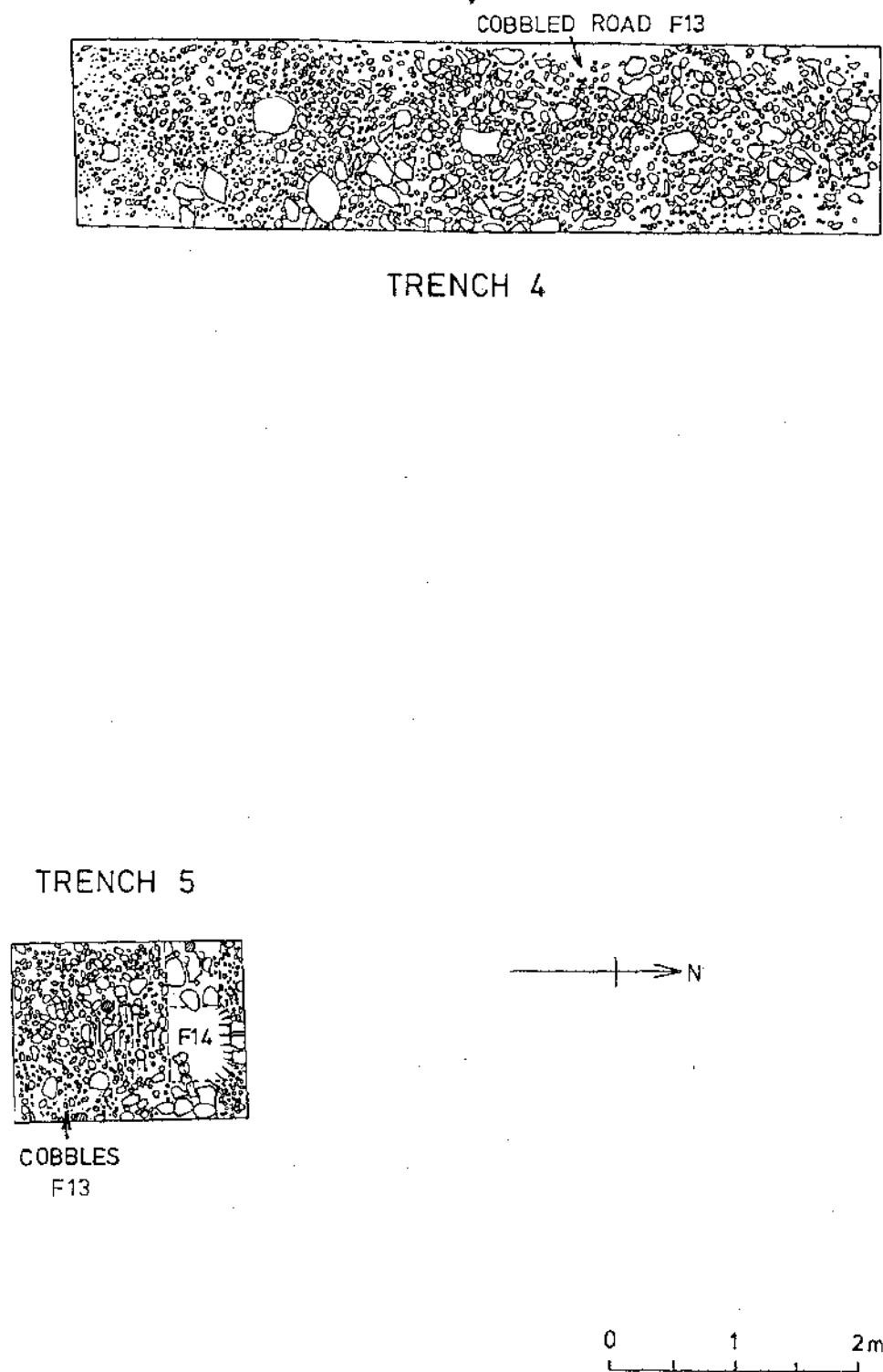


Figure 4



# ROCESTER, Abbey Farm

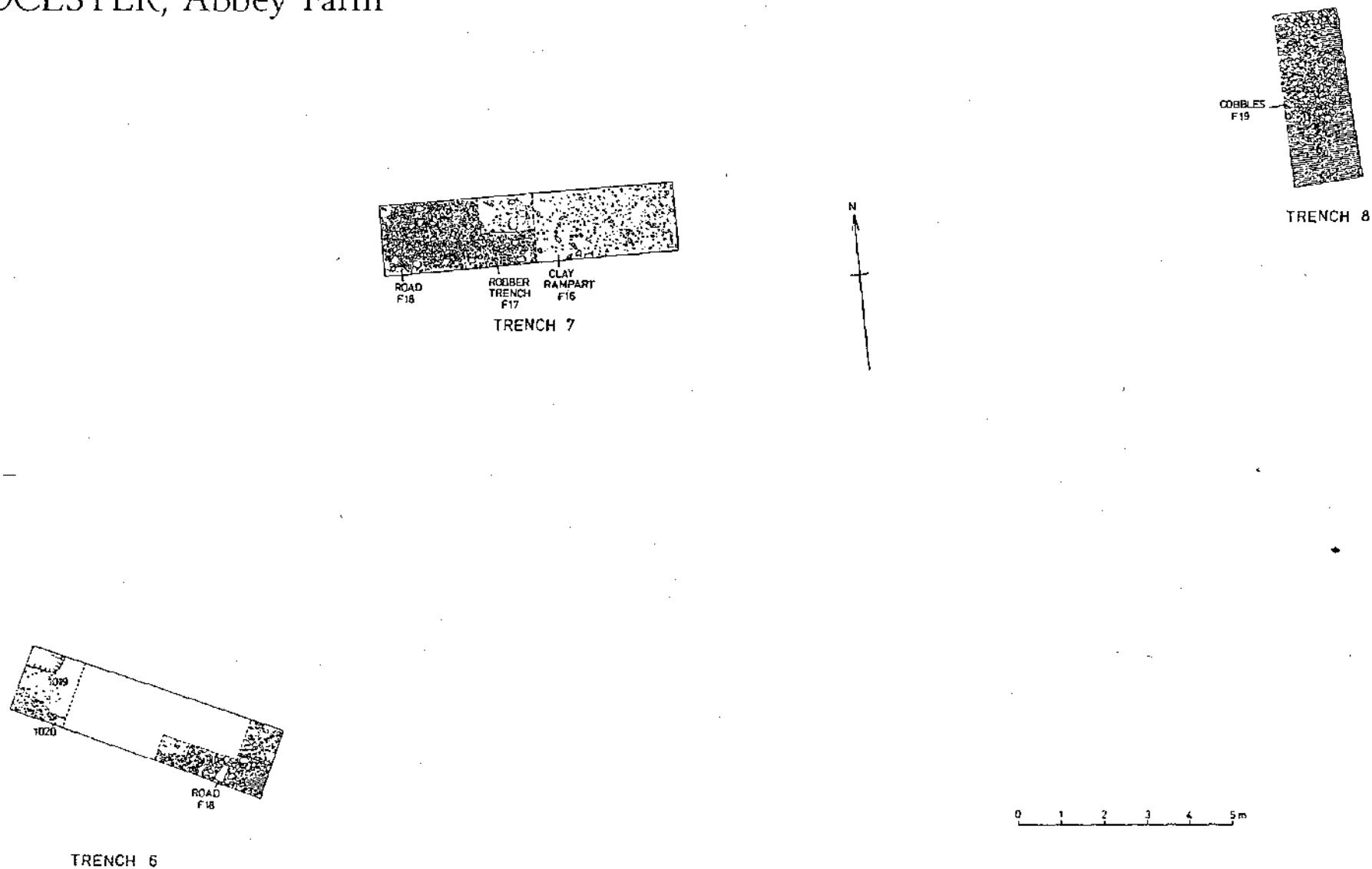


Figure 5

# ROCESTER, Abbey Farm

## TRENCH 7 SOUTH SECTION

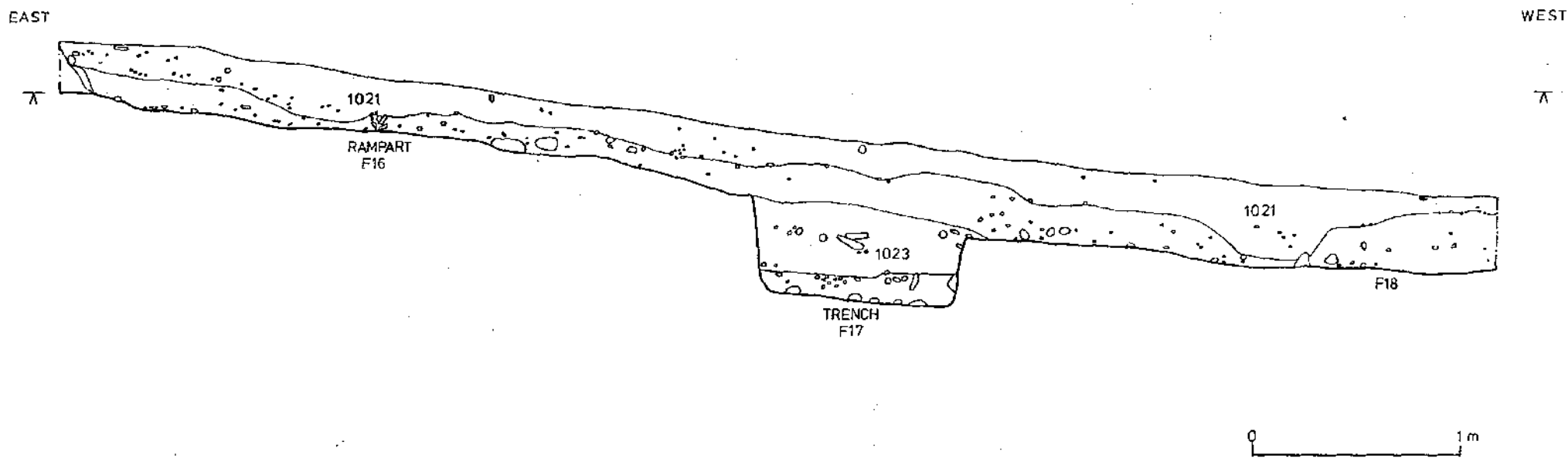


Figure 6