

Justice Lane, Frome
An archaeological evaluation
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AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION OF THE NEW LIBRARY SITE

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Introduction and documentary background

Trial excavation and a later watching brief during development were undertaken at the new library site, Frome, by Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit, between March and July 1989 (Fig. 1A). The work was carried out on behalf of Somerset County Council in view of the proximity of the site to the medieval river crossing and to post-medieval industrial features, and because of buildings shown on the site in a map of 1813 (Fig. 1B). The records of excavation and watching brief are currently held at Birmingham University but will be deposited at the Somerset County Record Office in due course.

Prior to the excavation a walled garden was sited on the area to be developed. To the north is a circular stone-built structure, one of two surviving former wool stoves in Frome, both now scheduled monuments. While the ground slopes down to the river on its south side, north of the river the ground is relatively level towards Justice Lane, with a level flood plain to the west.

The following section is based on information kindly provided by Michael McGarvie and Derek Gill, and on the account of Frome by Roger Leech (Aston and Leech, 1977, 50-56).

East of the Justice Lane site, the present bridge dates from 1662, but replaced an earlier river crossing, since a rental of 1465 in the British Library mentions properties near the 'great bridge', and a five-arched stone bridge was recorded by Leland in the 16th century. A ford just below the bridge is recorded on 18th and 19th-century maps and may well have preceded the bridge in the earlier medieval period. The Black Swan and Bridge House on the west side of Bridge Street are 17th-century buildings.

Bridge Street was replaced as the main route northward when North Parade was constructed in 1797.

Although a map of Frome in 1774 is now lost, work by the Historical Research Group of the Frome Society for Local Study has established a version of the original from later copies. This shows buildings fronting the west side of Bridge Street at that date, presumably Bridge House and the Black Swan amongst others. No structures were mapped further west, although the western property boundary surviving to today is shown. Two buildings are clearly visible on the river bank on Cruse's 1813 map of Frome (now at Longleat House, reproduced in Aston and Leech 1977, 50), while a third building lies just outside the development area to the north-west. In addition the map indicates two features jutting out into the river from its northern bank. As noted above, both maps suggest a ford below the bridge. Around 1800 the bottom of Bridge Street was known as Pig Street and seems to have been an area of small shops and businesses, especially butchers. Collinson (1791, opposite p. 185) illustrates the ford, showing premises on the island in the middle of the Frome, apparently a fellmongers, with sheepskins hanging out to dry.

To the north of the site, Justice Lane was known in the 18th century as Edgell's Lane, the Edgell's being salters. The present name is not used before the 19th century, The map evidence suggests that the wool stove can be dated to between 1774 and 1813. The dying of wool was carried out by a family named Olive at this site and in Willow Vale, and an article on Edmund Crabb Olive in a series on Frome Worthies in the Somerset Standard for 25th November 1893, notes that seven vats and four furnaces were owned by Major Olive in Justice Lane at the beginning of the 19th century.

Excavation and watching brief at the Justice Lane site located both buildings on the riverside shown on the 1813 map, together with a yard surface and walls presumably associated with the building to the north-west. There was, however, no evidence to illuminate the waterfront structures visible on the 1813 map. The date of all the archaeological features recognised lay firmly within the post-medieval period, the evidence suggesting that the area was not built on before the 18th century.

The trial excavation (Figs. 2 and 3)

A trench was machine excavated in March 1989, running parallel to the river and, at its eastern end, turning to the north roughly at 60 degrees. The purpose of the excavation was 1) to locate the mapped building and 2) to intersect the rearward part of any surviving waterfront features. The trench faces were cleaned, drawn, and photographed, and some limited hand excavation of features was undertaken. It proved impossible, due to the limited space and access, to prospect for the western building.

Above the natural orange clay was a thin layer of mixed clay with cream mortar and charcoal flecks (2004) sealed beneath a humic layer (2003). This sequence was recorded over the western 10m of the main trench, and it was noted that the proportion of mortar mixed with clay in layer 2004 increased eastward. Four metres to the east a rubbish pit (F103) was located, cut deep into the natural orange clay, and filled with layers of charcoal, mortar, loam, and small limestone fragments. The pit was partially examined, and sufficient material was recovered to suggest its date, before excavation was abandoned at the water table. It was sealed beneath a layer of brown silt (1007) similar to the buried soil layer 2003, but there was no direct stratigraphic link.

A major feature encountered in the trench was a mass of masonry (F204). Limestone blocks were set in a cream/white mortar flecked with charcoal inclusions. To the east was a sunken feature (F104) cutting pit F103. This was floored with a single layer of tiles sealed beneath a dark silt (2010), in turn buried beneath a layer of demolition material. To the west were three mortar-filled trenches (F201, F202, and F205), the first two visible on either side of the excavation trench. The crumbly buff/white mortar fills of all three suggested the backfill of robbing trenches. A linear feature (F102) was traced in different exposures for 8m running diagonally toward the river. In three exposures to the north, brick and stone rubble, together with dark silts, suggested a collapsed drain. In the northernmost section the east side of the drain appeared more or less in situ beneath a brick floor (F107). The masonry here was bonded with mortar identical to F204. To the south the trench line was marked in section by a

mortar-filled trench similar to F201, F202, and F205. The trench base dropped c 0.4m over the 8m recorded length.

This evidence of former structures was sealed beneath widespread rubble and soil layers, themselves overlain by the make-up layers for the modern car park. These upper levels were heavily disturbed. To the east a service pipe trench (F101) and a rubble-filled pit (F108) were recorded.

The pit F103 seemed to represent the earliest excavated feature, with layer 2004 marking a building horizon, increasing in density to the east, and thus apparently associated with structures east of the excavated area. Later a garden soil developed, sealing both the pit and layer 2004. Subsequent features must be associated with the building known from the map evidence. The lines of three walls were clear, while F204 and the tiled F104 can be interpreted as representing elements of the same structure. The diagonal trench F102 seems likely to mark a drain exiting toward the river, crossing beneath floor levels within the building. Contemporaneity is suggested by the robbing trench evidence, apparently associating the disuse and partial removal of F102 with the robbed out walls of F201, F202, and F205. F104 seems likely to be associated, although the function of a tiled, below-ground feature is not clear. F204 might represent part of an ?interior wall collapsed northward. The bonding mortars of F204 and F102 were identical.

The dating evidence from pit F103, which should provide a terminus post quem for the sequence, suggested its filling in the 18th century. While a few (possibly) medieval pottery fragments were noted, sherds from an internally glazed vessel from the characteristic South Somerset kilns were reckoned to be later than the 17th century, while typically 19th-century material was conspicuously absent. There was no direct dating evidence for the remaining features, but cream/white mortar with black flecks is characteristic of 18th- and 19th-century work locally, and the presence of brick in F102 assures a 19th-century date for the feature, since, with one exception, brick was not used in Frome until then (Derek Gill pers. comm.).

The watching brief (Fig 2)

Extensive footing trenches were dug out by machine from a level established following topsoil stripping. The unstable nature of the underlying clay subsoil required excavation in places to a depth of over 3m. Dark silts were reported in some of the trenches, and these may be former water channels. The exposures of the natural surface indicated that the area would formerly have been threaded with river channels, the clay subsoils and silts resulting from riverbed deposition and alluviation.

A number of features were recorded in the trench faces, and in places on the lowered ground surface.

1) The buildings to the south of the site

The watching brief provided additional information to the trial excavation data. The walls F201, F202, and F205, located by archaeological excavation, were again picked up. The eastern wall was seen to terminate northward at a cross wall footing (F10), continuing westward as the line of the garden wall, F15, noted below. F10 only partially survived along the edge of the contractor's trench but appeared to be of unrobbed limestone, set in the characteristic cream/white black-flecked mortar noted in the trial excavation. A possible robber trench was recorded, apparently indicating an east-west aligned wall (F17) between F202 and F205. In the south-east corner of the development were further elements of the building. These comprised a stone floor (F5) of considerable thickness, contained within the brick side wall of a drain (F2). Four courses of stone, 0.3m deep, bonded with cream mortar, were seen in two sections, with the brick drain to the south. A further apparent drain side of brick was noted to the east. A fourth north-south running wall (F4) was recorded, in this case unrobbed and of random stone, bonded with the same cream/white, black-flecked mortar as F10. To the south of the wall was a large section of mortared footings (F1) forming a mass of stone set again in a similar mortar. This feature resembled F204 and appeared to represent its eastern continuation. It was observed to continue across and east of the line marked by F4, obliterating any evidence of its southern continuation. To

the west was a diagonally aligned brick and stone mortared footing or drain (F6).

Putting the evidence for this building from excavation and watching brief together, four parallel wall footings trenches were established, apparently terminating northward at the line of the garden wall where an east west wall was found. A possible cross wall was noted lying too close to the north of the building to represent a room, and is thus a probable corridor definition. Two probable drains were recorded running diagonally toward the river. Both may have been associated with a hard standing crossed by brick drains. East of F4 a further brick wall also suggested a drainage channel. F4 and F205 represent a possible building width, and it may be that F201 and F202 mark an additional building or pentice.

Less was clarified with regard to the building mapped in 1813 in the south-west corner of the development. The evidence recovered was of a robbed-out trench (F11) backfilled with mortar and stone, running north-south and of a similar character to those to the east. Assuming this to be the east wall of the mapped building, other recorded features may be interpreted. West of the wall line a dense mass of clay (F13) may represent make-up for floor levels within the building, while east of the wall line a spread of fine cobbles (F14), may have formed a possible outside yard, sealed toward the wall by a mass of rubble interpretable as a demolition level.

2) The walled garden

Prior to the development a high stone wall enclosed a garden area. The footings of this wall (F15) were recorded in the trench sides in a number of places, and it was of interest to note that the footings shared a similar grey and black-flecked cream mortar to that bonding the sections of masonry footing to the south. The southern wall line was not located and would have been removed by a contractors trench. However, it must have lain just to the north of F10-the northern wall of the riverside building. In the east were slight indications of a robbed wall (F20). The two sightings were in line with F4 to the south, and may represent the footings trench of

the wall shown here on the 1813 map. West of the line was a patch of mortar and stone (F21), possibly representing a further robbed wall trench. To the north the garden wall appeared to act as the southern boundary of the features described below.

3) Features to the north

Evidence of a substantial building was recorded in the western side of the development. This comprised a wall or wall footing (F27) standing to a height of 1m, with a floor area of stone and mortar (F26) to the north and a spread of rubble to the south. North of the floor, and separated from it by a possible robbed-out wall, was a coursed wall or wall footing (F24) to be identified with that shown in 1813. At right angles to this was a possible wall (F29) running eastward, while a further wall line (F31) was visible running north-south 8m to the east. North of the east-west wall and exposed on the newly established ground level, were a stone cobbled surface (F29) and a solid brick floor (F30) to the west. It proved impossible to establish a relationship between the walls and a substantial masonry wall (F28) running diagonally, and aligned on the circular wool stove. The final feature from this area was two sides of a well constructed stone-lined pit (F23) aligned on the north garden wall. This could not have been larger than 1m across internally, and survived to a depth of 0.6m.

Conclusions

The archaeological work undertaken at the library site demonstrated that land use for buildings was unlikely to have taken place before relatively recent times. The evidence therefore supports that from the 1774 map of Frome showing no structures to the rear of the Bridge Street properties. It may be speculated that the river channels divided formerly below the bridge crossing, running westward across a wide floodplain. It is possible that the straight channel west of the bridge is an engineered feature, and that the river was canalised and the northern bank reclaimed as one operation. Nothing from the work carried out suggested a date before the 18th century for initial activity here, represented by the pit and layer 2004, and the same date may be postulated for this hypothetical

episode of river management and land reclamation.

The riverside building may have fronted onto a yard to the east. The existing buildings on the east and north of the site would have formed the other sides of an open courtyard. Straight-jointed stone blocking on the south wall of the northern range of standing buildings suggests the former existence of open fronted spaces such as stables, since the blocked entrances are too wide and numerous for doorways. Some courtyard focus is suggested by the sundial (now broken) set in an upper gable. A relationship was noted in the excavation between the footings of the building mapped in 1813, and the garden wall demolished prior to the development. A stable yard and walled garden may be suggested, the yard leading directly out onto Bridge Street and North Parade.

The 1813 map evidence ties in well with the ground plan recovered by archaeology (Figs. 1A and 2); the west and north sides coincide satisfactorily, and it is possible that F4 may represent the eastern side of the building. The position of the masonry mass (F1) east of the line of F4 complicates an otherwise relatively simple picture. The 1813 map seems sufficiently accurate in general to point out that the modern river appears to have doubled in width since 1813. The riverside building under discussion here would have extended some way southward and about one third must have been lost to recent river widening, presumably by a combination of both natural and human activity. The walled garden of course is not represented, but the work has shown that it must have been constructed to align with an existing building.

The building partially examined to the west, is shown on the 1813 map to be directly related to one of the two structures jutting out into the river. There was little from the excavation to suggest its function. The map evidence suggests that it lies to the south west of the features located by excavation. As with the building to the east it may be that this structure was standing when the walled garden was constructed since the latter seems to respect it.

The floors, walls, and stone-lined pit to the north of the site may be

seen in the context of the circular wool stove. The diagonal wall F29 seems quite out of character with the layout here and must be a later, recent wall feature. It is of interest that none of these features occur within the area of the walled garden and it must be suspected therefore that, as to the south, most of the recorded features here are contemporary. Thus a courtyard and surrounding buildings and a walled garden may be seen as under one ownership, while the wool stove, the building recorded in 1813 to its west, and the features recorded in the watching brief, are all possibly under a different ownership and land use. In this context the function of the structures shown in the river in 1813 is important. Mr Mc Garvie suggests that these may have been used for washing cloth, and this may indicate a connection with the industrial functions associated with the wool stove. It is possible that the garden wall was specifically intended to separate the garden from these riverside activities.

References

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Acknowledgements

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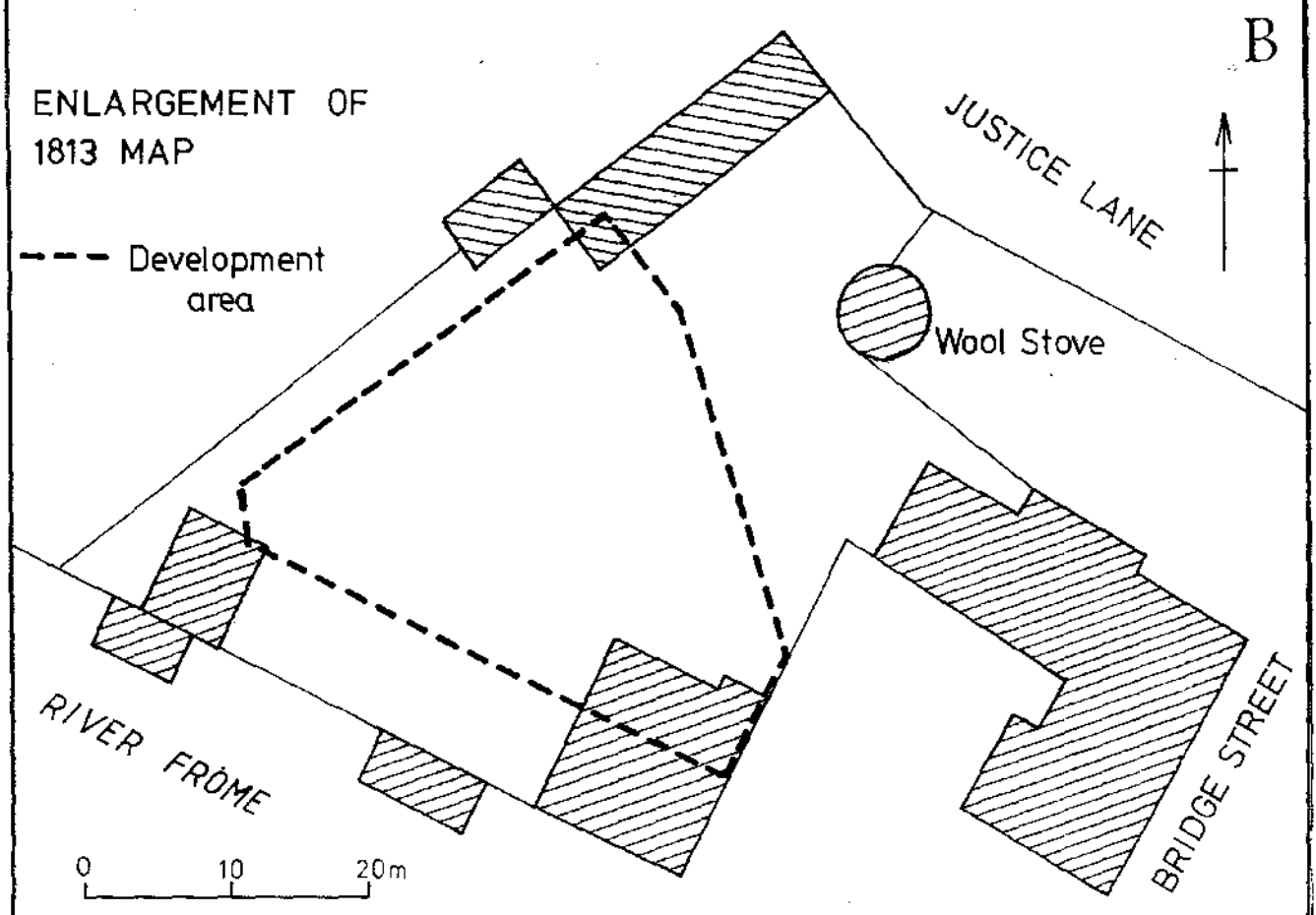
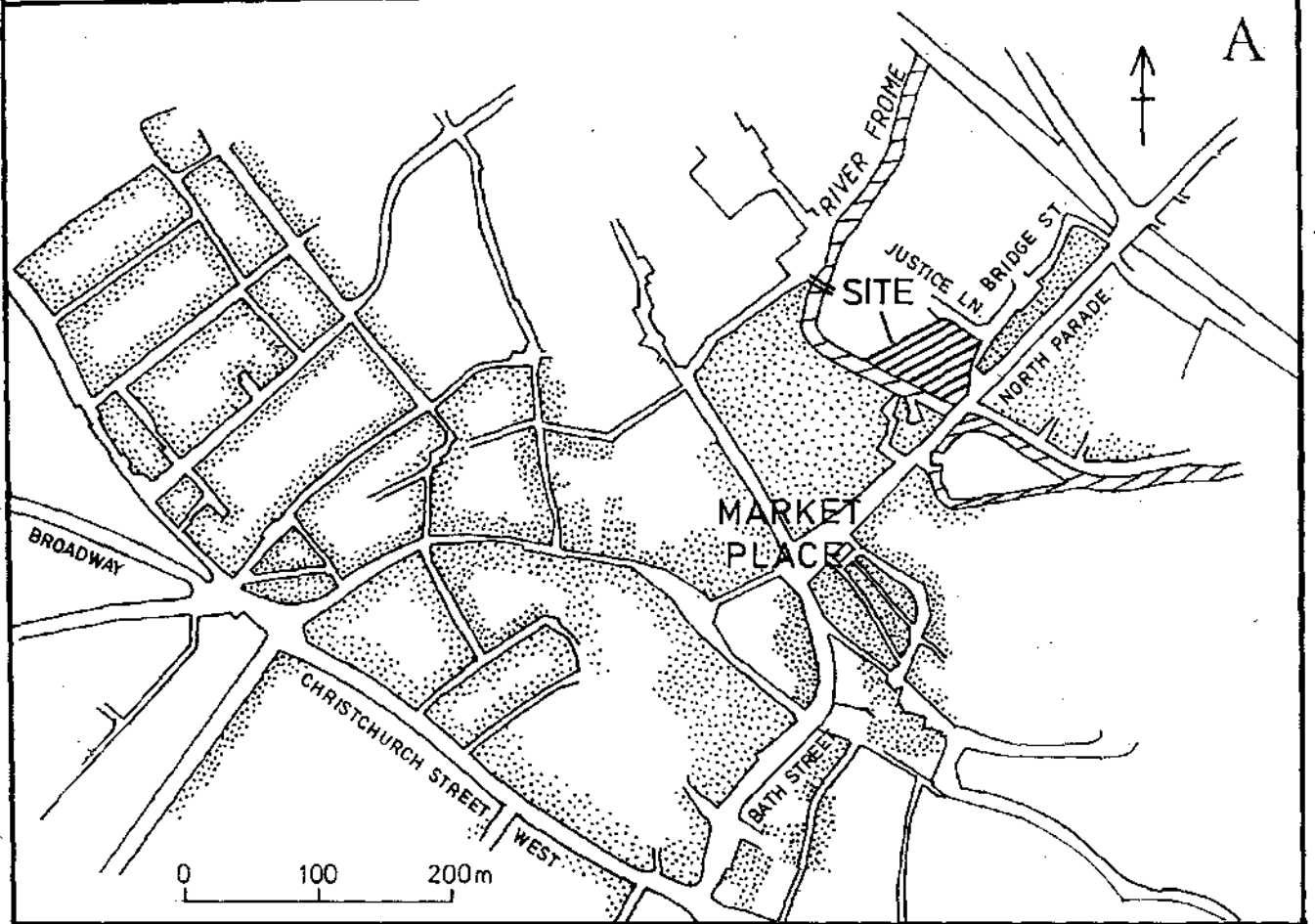


Figure 1

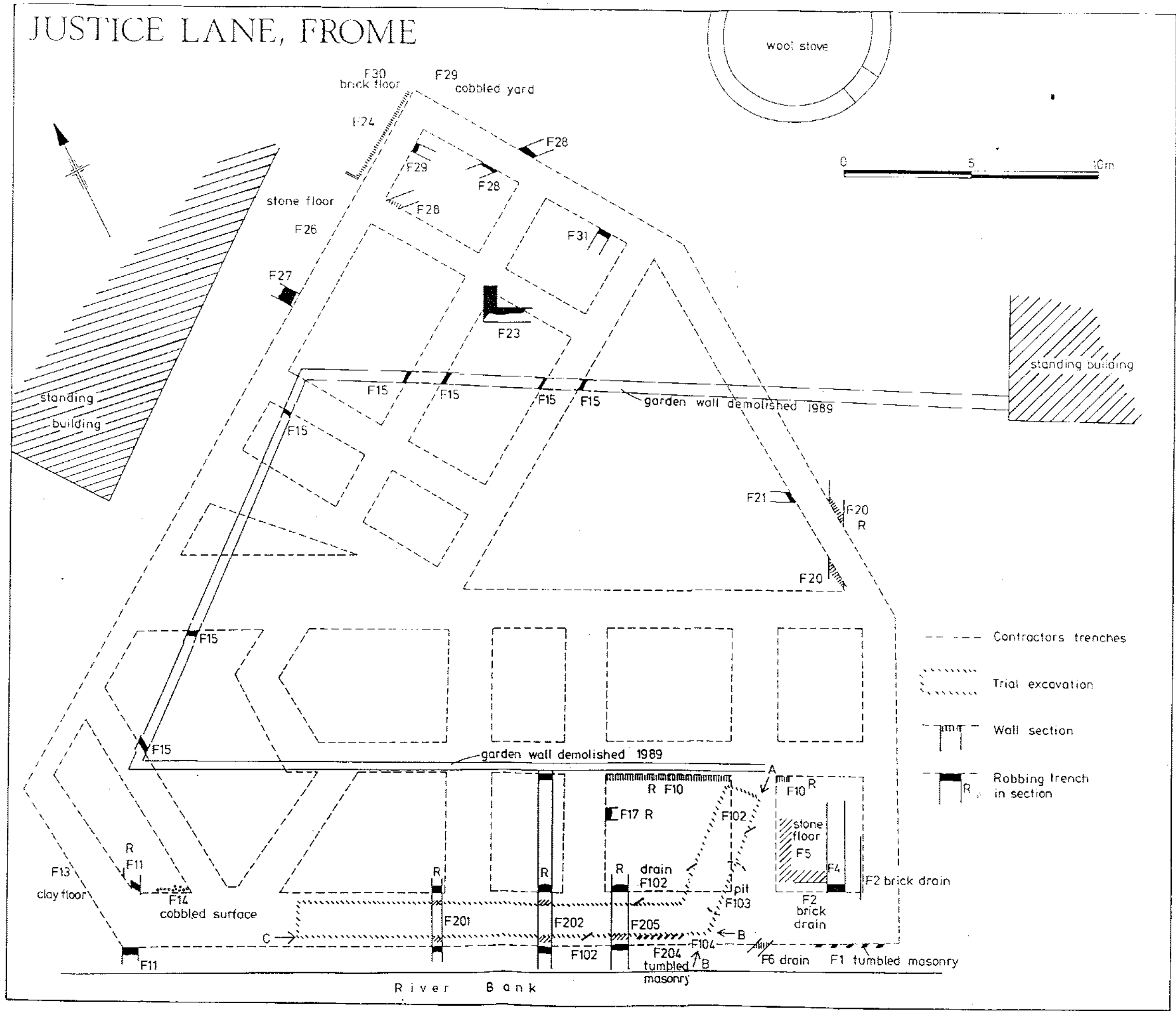


Figure 2

JUSTICE LANE, FROME 1989 Sections

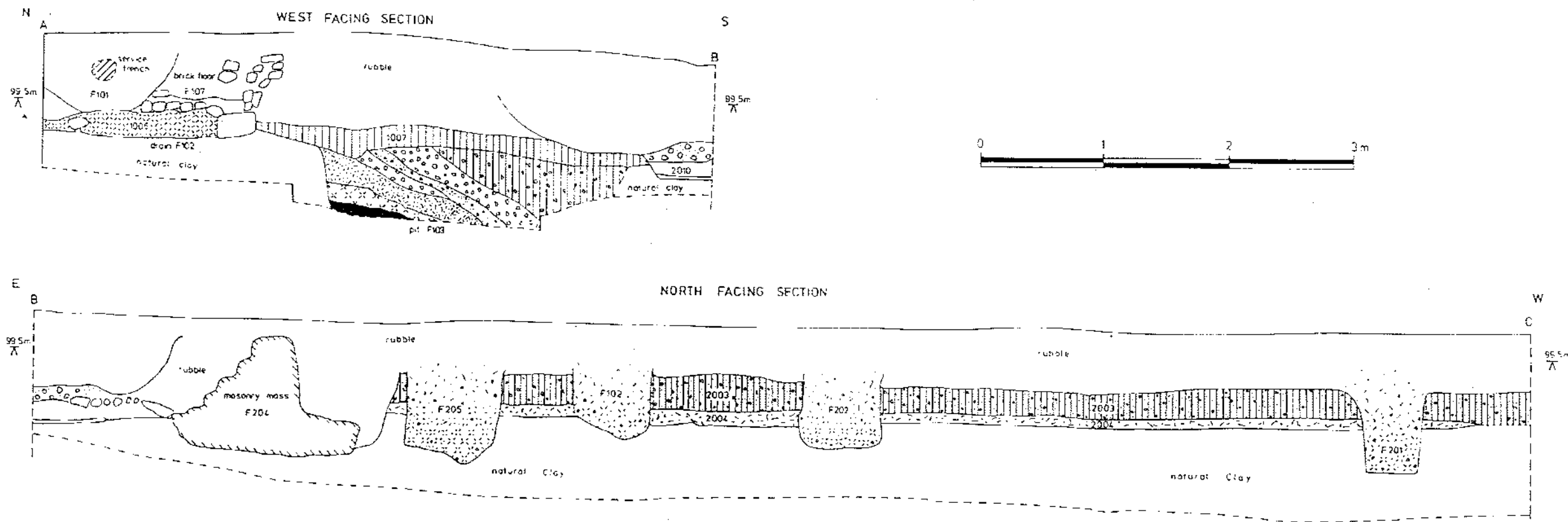


Figure 3