

**The Archaeological Evaluation of a
Cropmark Complex at Brompton, Shropshire.**

by

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**Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit 1989
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An Archaeological Evaluation of a Cropmark Complex at Brompton, Shropshire.

Introduction

In May 1989, Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit and the Central Marches Archaeological Research Group (CMARG) jointly undertook an archaeological evaluation of a remarkable complex of cropmarks at Brompton, Shropshire in advance of a road widening scheme. The work was commissioned by Shropshire County Council. The cropmarks (see Fig.1) represent two Roman marching camps (SA 1211, SA 1212) and a more substantial Roman fort (SA 1214) to the west, at Pentrehyling. In addition, a stretch of Offa's Dyke passes through the marching camps. The fort (SA 1214) has been extensively excavated and surveyed by John Allen and CMARG but no previous work has been carried out on the other sites. Those parts of the marching camps where the cropmarks are most distinct and a stretch of Offa's Dyke running across them form a Scheduled Ancient Monument (SAM 308) but Pentrehyling fort is not included within the scheduled area (see Fig.1).

This revised report rectifies an omission in the original report and incorporates more recent work undertaken in the threatened area by CMARG (see Trench 8 in Part 2). The cropmark features are threatened in six areas, designated A - F (see Fig.2) and these are discussed in two sections. The first is concerned with the marching camps and Offa's Dyke, the second with the fort at Pentrehyling.

1. The Marching Camps and Offa's Dyke - J.Cane

Excavations

Five trenches were excavated to evaluate the presence, survival, and archaeological significance of features associated with the marching camps and a possible road (SA 4318) leading eastwards from Pentrehyling fort (SA 1214).

Trench 1 (Fig.3)

This trench was positioned to examine the junction of the western ditch of the larger marching camp (SA 1211) and the cropmark of a double-ditch feature (SA 4318) which may have defined a road leading eastwards from the east gate of the fort (SA 1214). A JCB was used to remove the topsoil from a c.20m x 1m area. The exposed natural subsoil was sealed by c.0.25m of topsoil, and was the same buff, silty gravel encountered in earlier excavations to the west (Allen 1986). The western ditch of marching camp SA 1211 was located and excavated (F.1). It was c.0.80m deep and c.1.80m wide and had a shallow 'V'-shaped profile. Its fills were of orange clayey soil with some evidence of silting in the bottom.

The western ditch of the marching camp was cut by a substantial ditch (F.2) which marked the northern edge of the possible road (SA 4318) running eastwards from the east gate of Pentrehyling fort (SA 1214). This feature was c.0.80m deep with steep sides and a flat-bottomed cleaning slot at the bottom. The fill sequence suggested gradual infilling rather than deliberate backfilling. No evidence of a road surface was located to the south of this feature, suggesting that all the metalling had been destroyed by the plough. A small extension to the south failed to locate evidence for road surfaces closer to the hedge-line. The finds from the two main features included c.900g of pottery, mostly coarse wares but with several sherds of Samian and a single sherd of a glazed beaker. A bow-type fibula was recovered from the main fill of F.2.

Trench 2 (Fig.2)

This 5m x 5m trench was dug to investigate an area of high ground to the west of the Montgomery road, which it was thought may have been an archaeological feature, such as a barrow. The topsoil was removed by JCB to reveal a compact silty clay natural subsoil with very frequent iron panning. This phenomenon was limited to the horizon just below the topsoil and had formed around the softer material in animal holes, suggesting a modern formation date. No archaeological material was found, which suggests that the high ground is a natural feature.

Trench 3 (Fig.2)

A 5m x 5m trench was dug with a JCB to the south of Trench 2 to evaluate the interior of the marching camps. A recently-dug water-pipe trench was located, cut through a mixed gravel and silty clay natural subsoil. This was partially excavated to confirm its nature but no other archaeological features were found. A single sherd of very abraded Romano-British pottery was recovered from the plough soil.

Trench 4 (Fig.2)

A 5m x 5m trench was dug to the east of the above trenches to investigate the area between the eastern defences of forts SA 1211 and SA 1212. A similar natural subsoil was contacted under c.0.80m of topsoil and ploughsoil. A single, shallow and ill-defined feature was excavated; no finds were recovered from its fills and it may have been a tree-hole. No other archaeological deposits were located.

Trench 7 (Fig.4)

The area to the south of the A 489 was further tested by a small hand-dug trench positioned to coincide with the intersection of the northern ditch of road SA 4318 and the western ditch of marching camp SA 1212. The trench failed to locate this intersection but did contact the road ditch. In spite of being truncated by the modern pipe-trench contacted in Trench 3, it was seen to be identical in shape and depth to the section excavated in Trench 1 (F.2). It contained pottery similar to that recovered from Trench 1 and two fragments of folded lead sheet, each weighing c.630g.

The Finds

Quantities of Romano-British pottery were recovered from Trenches 1 and 7. The majority is of 1st or 2nd century type and mostly comprises coarse wares. However, a few fragments of Samian ware and one glazed sherd (presumably also an import) were recovered. In addition a bronze fibula was recovered from the fills of the road ditch (F.2) in Trench 1. It is of 'bow' type with moulded projections along the side of the bow, and is probably 1st or 2nd century in date.

Two large fragments of folded lead sheet were recovered from the ditch of the Roman road in Trench 7, suggesting that the metalworking activity identified to the south and east of the fort (Allen, 1986 & 1988) may extend into this area.

The recovery of such a varied assemblage from a relatively small sample suggests that further work will produce a very informative group of 1st and 2nd-century pottery and other artefacts.

2. Pentrehyling Fort - J.H.Allen

Excavations

Previous excavations on the site of the Roman fort at Pentrehyling (SA 1214) have successfully outlined the position of the defences and gates. Excavations have been carried out within the defences, in particular in the south-west corner. A smaller number of excavations have been undertaken outside the defences, mostly to the south and south-east of the A.489. The results of this work have been published in summary form (Allen 1986; Allen 1988).

This work has recovered the plan of the south gate of the fort, as well as part of the inter-vallum road, and a number of large pits dug behind the rampart, one of which contained a bowl furnace. Excavation of these features is continuing.

Excavations in the south-east corner of the fort have revealed the rear face of the rampart with a six-post corner tower, and a building containing a pit - possibly a latrine - set into the rear of the rampart. A further, rectangular building of at least three rooms appeared to extend northwards under the A.489, and is likely to be a barrack building. This work failed to locate the southern fort ditch at this point, and it may be that it followed a more southerly line defining an annexe.

Further information about the nature of activity outside the fort and its annexe was provided by excavations to the south of the house 'Brompton View' (Allen,1988). These revealed a number of rubbish pits containing quantities of pottery and other material. Most significant was a considerable quantity of litharge, the by-product of the extraction of silver from lead. Three ditches, aligned north-south, suggested a series of drains or aqueducts, crossed by the A.489. The presence of beam slots suggests buildings close to the road leading from the fort's east gate, the ditches of which show as cropmarks (SA 4318) to the north of the A.489.

The amount and diversity of the finds from this area point to an extra-mural settlement or vicus, extending along this route, and possibly connected with industrial activity.

The evaluation trenches

Trench 5 (Figs.5 and 6)

The trench was opened using a JCB which removed the topsoil close to the natural subsoil, the usual siltstone gravel with areas of compact silt. The surface was cleaned to reveal a series of features (Fig.5).

The main feature was a roughly circular pit (F.5) with a drainage gully leading into it. Considerable quantities of pottery, similar in type to that recovered from the pits to the south of the A.489, were found. Other finds included a bronze coin (of as yet undetermined date), a bronze dolphin brooch, and two further pieces of litharge. The fills of F.5 also contained quantities of slag and daub. The pit was completely excavated.

Another, quite shallow gully (F.11) ran north-south, cutting the pit but not crossing it. Levelling along this gully to determine whether it was another drain proved inconclusive, the bottom having little or no slope.

A further gully ran along the eastern side of the trench (F.7). It was rectangular in section and contained small pieces of glassy slag and charcoal. In the south-west corner a narrow slot (F.8) was located, possibly representing the wall foundation of a building. It was cut by a shallow pit containing the remains of a fire, and very small flakes of bone. A further pit (F.13), its fills rich in daub and charcoal, extended under the western section.

The results from this trench showed clearly that the activity already located south of the A.489 continued to the north. It also suggested that the dense archaeological features, probably connected with the site's industrial phase, follow the line of the Roman road leading from the fort.

Trench 6 (Fig.2)

This trench was opened with a JCB, which was used to remove the topsoil. The natural subsoil was the usual free-draining siltstone gravel. The surface was carefully cleaned but no archaeological features were present.

Trench 8 (not plotted on Fig.2)

Further excavation by CMARG took place during the summer to the west of Trench 5, within the fort. A 20m x 5m area was excavated to reveal the remains of the fort's main north-south road and activity areas to the east. In some of these areas negative features were rare but evidence of fires or hearths was recovered. Evidence of buildings, probably representing barrack-blocks, was found in other areas, further confirming the generally intact nature of the deposits within the fort.

3. Discussion and Recommendations

Discussion

Apart from Offa's Dyke, the sites threatened by the proposed development belong to the Roman period. The marching camps were probably constructed during Scapula's Welsh campaigns against the Silures in 48-51 AD, and following campaigns to consolidate the frontier. These temporary camps were probably occupied for a few days at most and the potential archaeological yield in terms of artefacts and structures is low, as has been demonstrated by the evaluation. However, enhanced survival of strata might be expected under the earthwork of Offa's Dyke, and examination of this area of the marching camps should be a part of any investigation of the Dyke itself.

The fort at Pentrehyling is a different matter. This fort is thought to have been built at a time when a succession of Welsh campaigns allowed military stations to be built further and further west, possibly after Scapula's initial campaigns, and may have been garrisoned by auxiliary units. It is slightly larger than the auxiliary fort to the south at Jay Lane, but probably had the same basic layout (Stanford, 1980). Many of the forts built during the early campaigns were replaced by major stations, as

the frontier was pushed westwards, and the fort at Pentrehyling has been assumed to have been replaced by that at Forden Gaer, to the north-west (Stanford, 1980). The process cannot have been simple, however. Firstly, the Pentrehyling fort has an unconventional plan with its southern ditch defining an annexe. This seems not to have been an addition but part of the original layout. Other forts with annexes are known, for example at Leintwardine, where the extension housed the bath-house. The annexe at Pentrehyling may have been built to take advantage of the extra protection afforded by the River Caebitra, but other functions are possible. The presence of fort annexes may be linked to industrial activity, use as animal compounds or storage areas. In the light of recent work it seems likely that the Pentrehyling annexe was built specifically to protect an important industrial activity, such as the processing of lead, including the extraction of silver. If correct, this hypothesis suggests that the fort was not a standard frontier station and may differ in other ways. Rather than being one of a progression of standard auxiliary forts, it may have been a specialist supply/works depot, serving the frontier stations further west. This arrangement may have existed in other frontier areas at this time (Hurst, 1985), but more widespread sampling of this type of site is needed to answer these questions.

The Research Framework

The road widening scheme threatens areas of the marching camps, the later fort and a section of Offa's Dyke. These areas are shown on Figure 2 and have been designated A - F, and individual recommendations are made for each discrete area. However, four broad research aims can be defined within which the work should proceed.

- I The relationships between the Roman military sites. The chronological relationship of marching camp to fort may already have been ascertained in Trench 1, where a road-flanking ditch relating to the fort cuts the marching camp ditch. Artefactual and functional comparisons are made difficult by the expected slight nature and therefore poor survival of marching camp deposits. However, study of areas where extra-mural settlement evidence overlies the marching camp area may go some way to answering these questions. Differential survival under the Offa's Dyke earthwork may also allow more definite statements to be made about the

nature of occupation within the marching camps. Any such differential survival may also affect the conclusions to be drawn from the excavation of other marching camps in the region.

- II The structure and function of Pentrehyling fort. Recent archaeological work has demonstrated the presence of an annexe to the south of the fort. This feature seems to have been part of the original plan, but its purpose is unknown. The possibility of it having been an industrial enclosure, perhaps associated with the processing of lead (including the extraction of silver) has been raised by CMARG's work and makes this area of vital importance to the understanding the site. The fact, if confirmed, that the fort was unusual, in plan at least, from its conception raises the possibility that the fort's location and history may have been influenced more by economic than military factors. The answers to these questions will have considerable implications for our understanding of the lead industry in the frontier zone and perhaps of the factors influencing the early Welsh campaigns as a whole.
- III The sequence and nature of the extra-mural settlement. Evidence for concentrated activity, possibly connected with the lead processing industry, has been identified extending at least 200 metres east from the east gate of the fort. Information to be recovered concerning the nature of this occupation will be important in efforts to establish the longevity and status of the site after the early military campaigns.
- IV Offa's Dyke. A c.12 metre length of the Dyke will be affected by the proposed road works. The monument is very eroded at this point and its bank is barely visible. However, the opportunity to excavate such a relatively large area of the bank, combines with the potential for enhanced survival of the Roman marching camp beneath to make total excavation of the bank desirable. Total excavation of the ditch, however, cannot be justified. This feature should be sampled by means of smaller trenches to recover potential environmental evidence, and to examine its sequence of fills.

Recommendations

Area A

The potential of this area, to the north of the A.489, has been demonstrated by recent work by CMARG. It covers a large area of the interior of the fort SA 1214, representing a transect running east west across the fort defences and interior. The ditches and ramparts, inter-vallum road, and internal features such as the barrack blocks and roads seen in Trench 8, will be affected by the road widening. In addition, trial excavation in the threatened area outside the eastern rampart (Trench 5) indicates dense extra-mural occupation. This extra-mural activity was not encountered to the west of the fort, where Trench 6 revealed no archaeological features, and thus no archaeological work is recommended further west than this trench. Archaeological work should therefore be concentrated to the east, where some 1250 square metres would need to be stripped of topsoil to permit a detailed examination. This process should establish the basic internal layout of the fort, while subsequent sample excavation may throw light on the duration of occupation, and its relationship with the activities in the annexe to the south.

Area B

The area to the south of area A has equally high potential. The proposed works will affect a substantial section of the southern defences, internal features, and part of the annexe. Study of this area will provide vital information on the layout of these areas and on the nature and duration of the industrial activities in and around them. The area has already been intensively studied by CMARG and what remains should be fully excavated, prior to road widening.

Area C

An area to the east of Brompton View, which includes a section of the road leading from the fort's eastern gate. The survival of features associated with the road, and occupation around it, has been demonstrated by Trench 1. The whole of this area (550 square metres) should be examined in the manner of area A (above) in order to establish the nature and extent of the extra-mural settlement which follows the road.

Area D

The western end of this stretch contains surviving archaeological deposits in the form of the road ditch, sampled in Trench 7. The density and nature of the finds in its fills suggest that the extra-mural activity to the east of the fort continues at least as far as this trench. This had also been confirmed by salvage recording carried out as the pipe trench (see Trench 7) was dug in this area. The eastern area of this stretch, as tested by Trench 3, seems to have little archaeological potential. The whole of area D should however be stripped of topsoil (400 square metres) and any archaeological features sampled. It is anticipated that a more detailed excavation sample will only be necessary from an area of c.250 square metres at the western end.

Area E

Trench 2 suggests that this area is devoid of archaeological deposits. No further work is recommended here.

Area F

Trench 4 contacted no archaeological deposits. A trench has been excavated across the stretch of Offa's Dyke threatened by the road widening by the Extra-mural Department of Manchester University. Although the bank of the Dyke was examined, the ditch was not. In addition, the trench excavated was probably too small to fully assess the potential for increased survival of any marching camp features sealed and protected by the bank. This provides a rare opportunity to examine an area of a marching camp which has been protected from erosion and agriculture for the last 1000 years. The area of the bank and its immediate environs (100 square metres) should be fully excavated, and the dyke ditch sampled by more limited trenching.

Summary

It is clear that the proposed works constitute a serious threat to an important archaeological site. The cropmark complex at Brompton represents a remarkable sequence of human occupation, from prehistory to the Medieval period. Pre-Roman activity is hinted at by the proximity of a round barrow SA 1210 (not threatened by the road scheme). The Roman presence dominates the sequence, initially in the form of a series of marching camps. These were replaced by a more substantial fort which may have been a centre for industrial activity, and possibly silver extraction. In the Saxon period, Offa's Dyke was constructed across the site, and three centuries later a motte and bailey castle was built to the south.

The evaluation trenches described above suggest that areas of intact archaeological strata survive mainly in the western half of the proposed road works area, concentrated within and around the fort (SA 1214) and the road leading eastwards from it (SA 4318). It is in this area that further archaeological work should be concentrated. The excavation of eight evaluation trenches has shown that, in most areas, archaeological strata are well preserved but confined to features cut into the natural subsoil. This suggests that large-scale removal of topsoil and ploughsoil would be most cost effective in achieving a maximum exposure of archaeological features to be recorded, fully excavated or sub-sampled. A known exception is Area B, where earlier work has shown that the road bank and hedge have afforded some protection from the plough and thus some preservation of horizontal strata.

These proposals involve topsoil removal, subsurface examination, selective archaeological excavation, and recording over an area of c.2650 square metres; approximately half the total threatened area. The archaeological work reported above suggests that this site has a high potential in furthering our understanding, not only of the Roman army's Welsh campaigns and the mechanisms by which the army was supplied and supported, but also of the process of economic exploitation and expansion which followed.

With careful planning, and a full or substantial implementation of these proposals for an archaeological response to the road improvement scheme,

the full potential of this important threatened resource may yet be realised.

Acknowledgments

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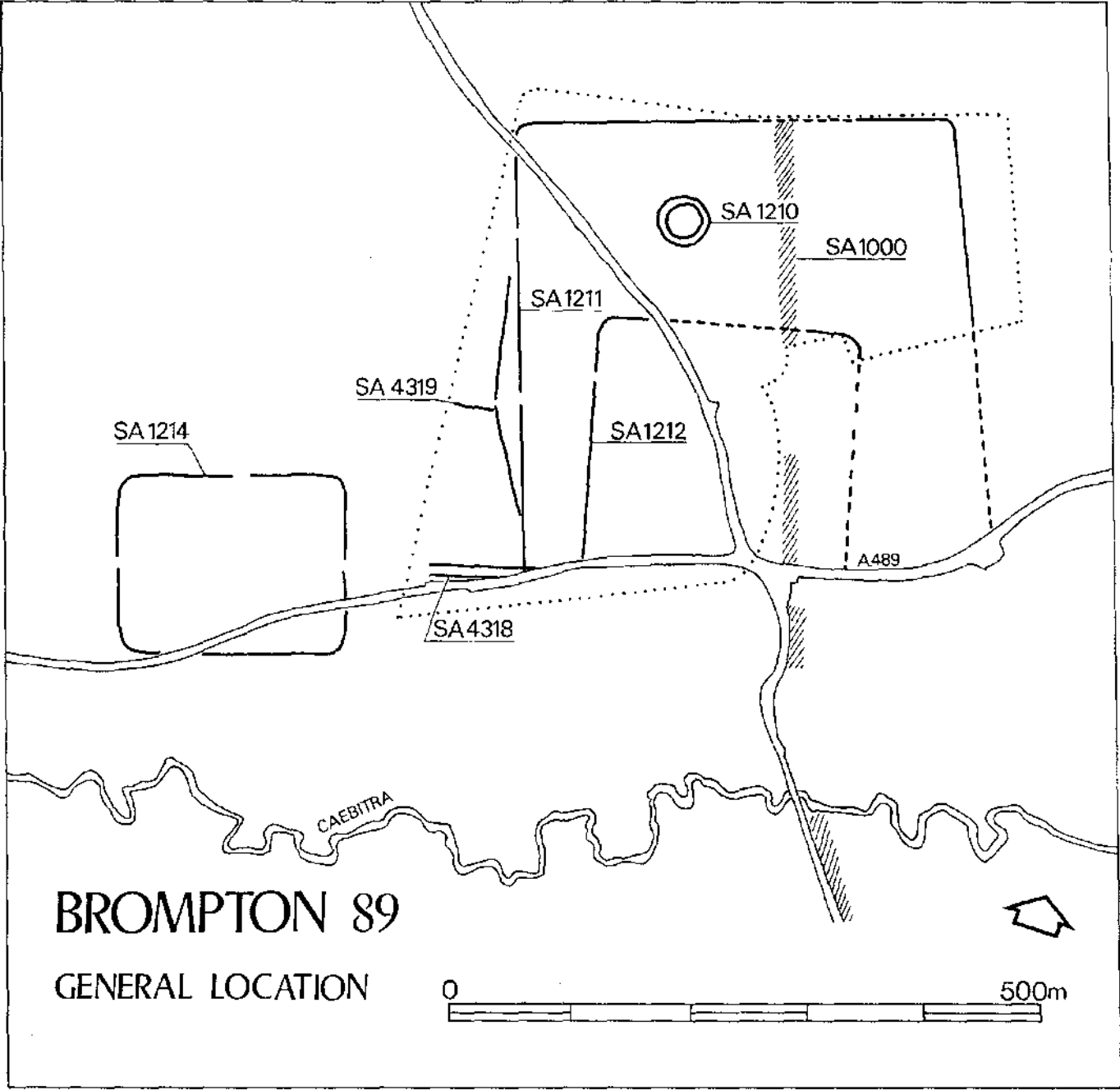


Figure 1

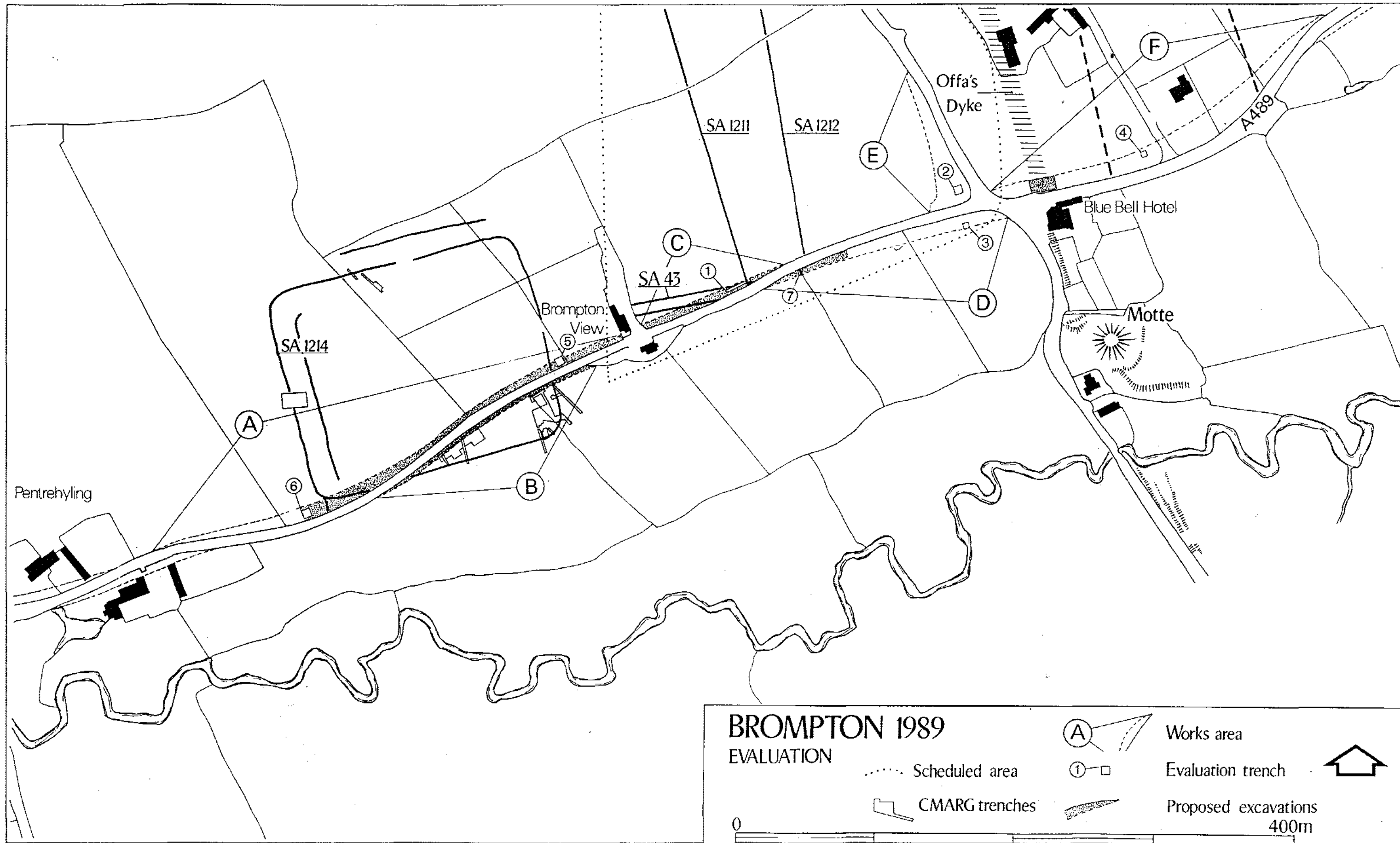
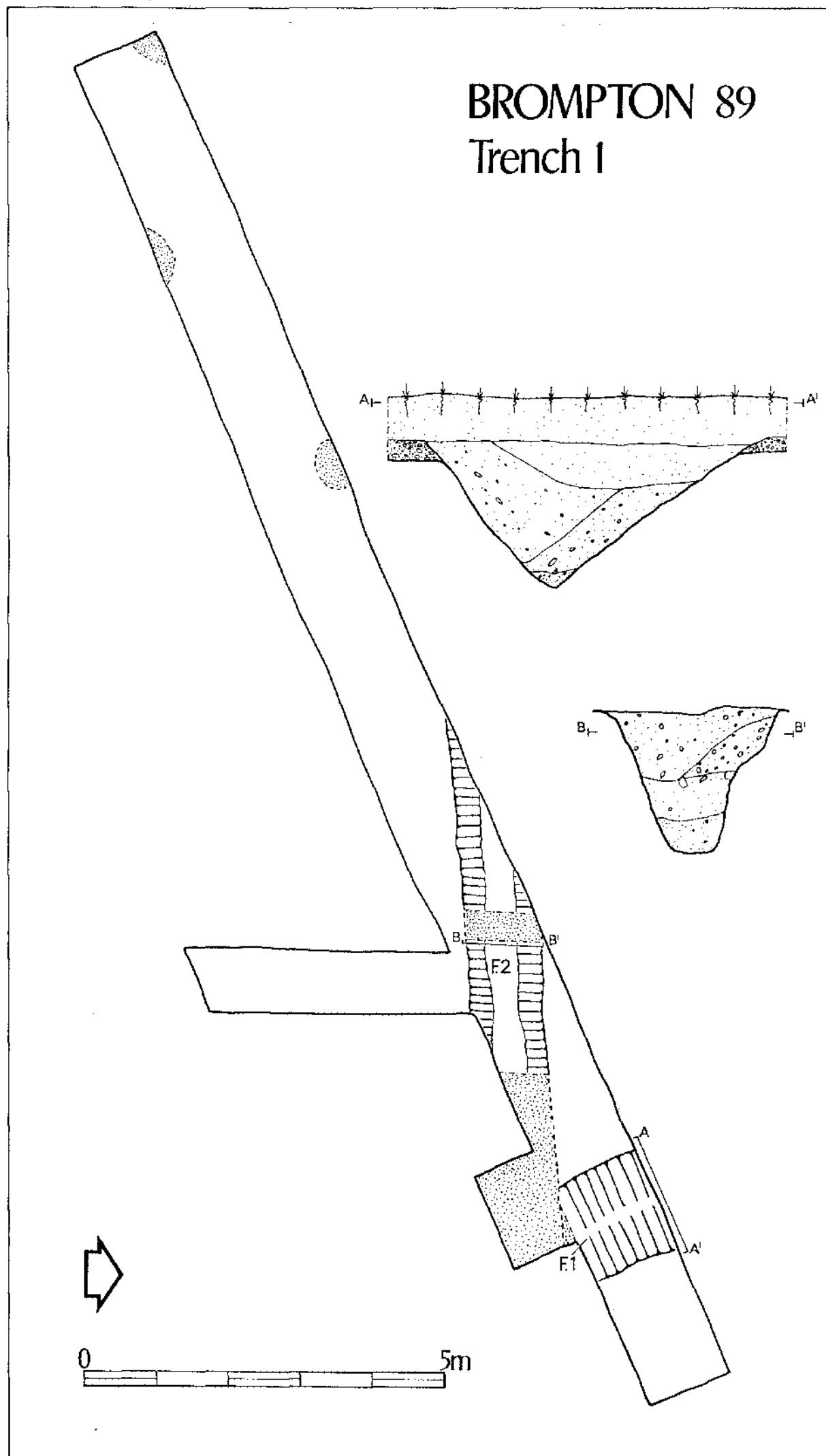


Figure 2

Figure 3



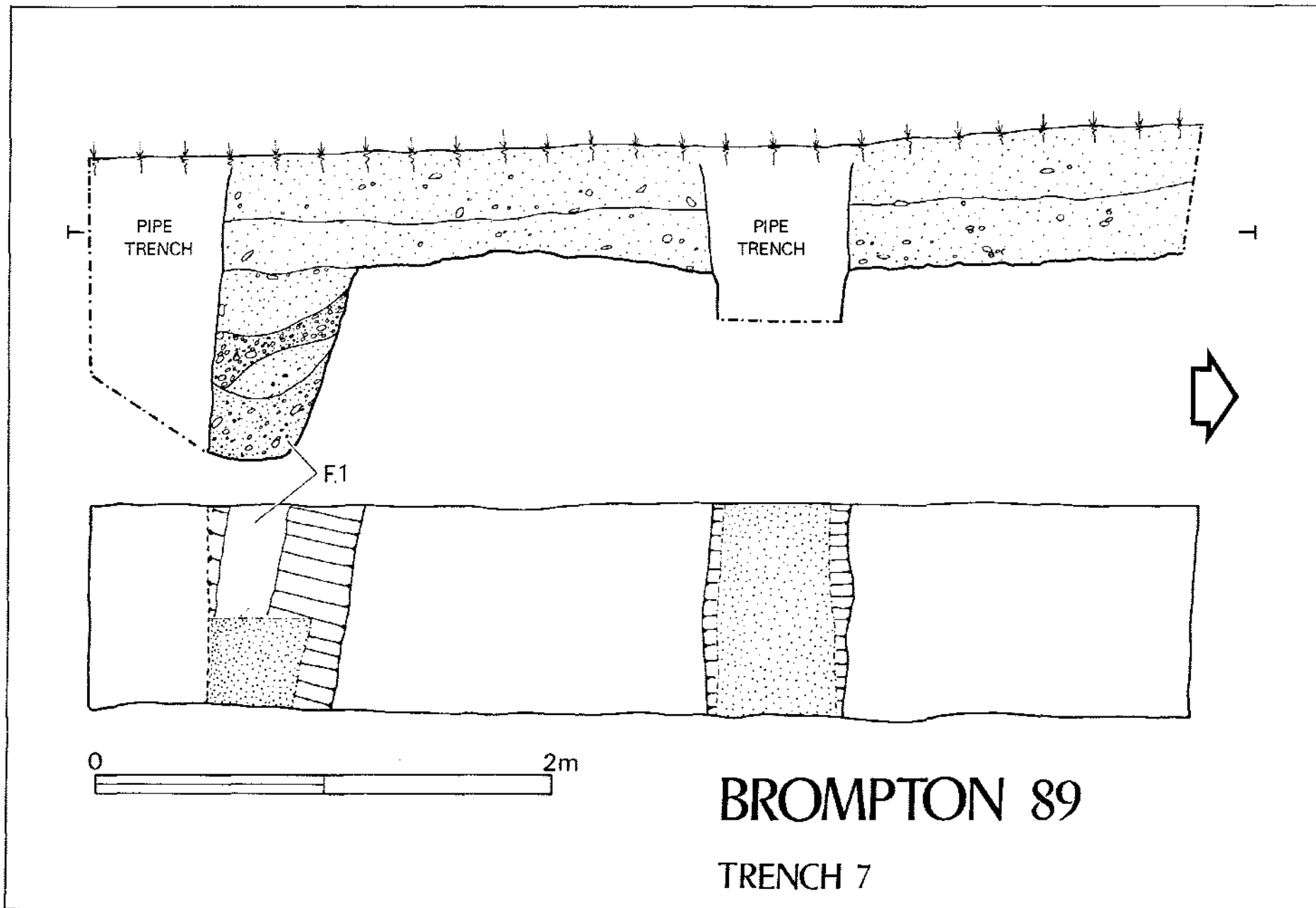


Figure 4

BROMPTON 89



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2m

TRENCH 5 PLAN

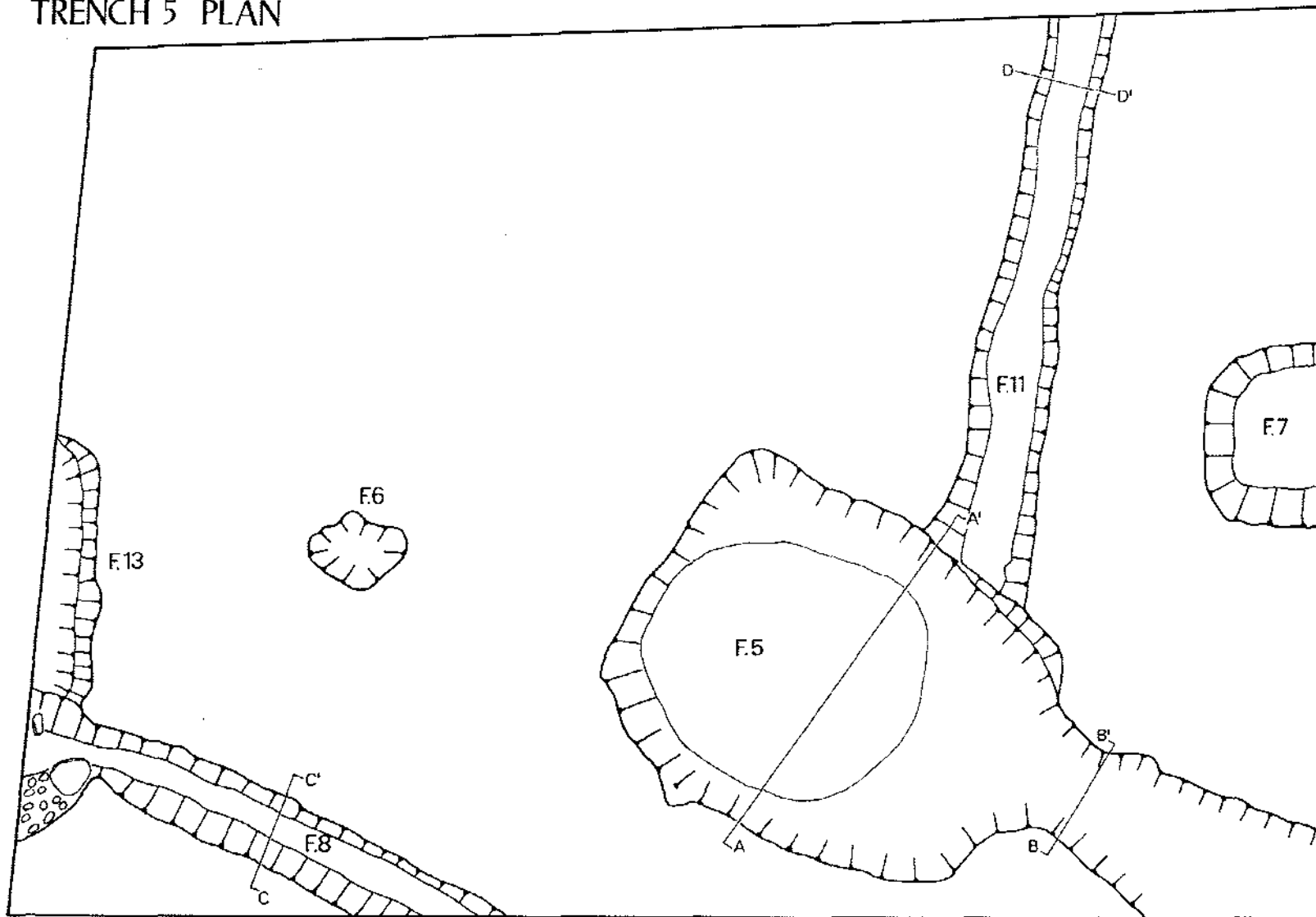


Figure 5

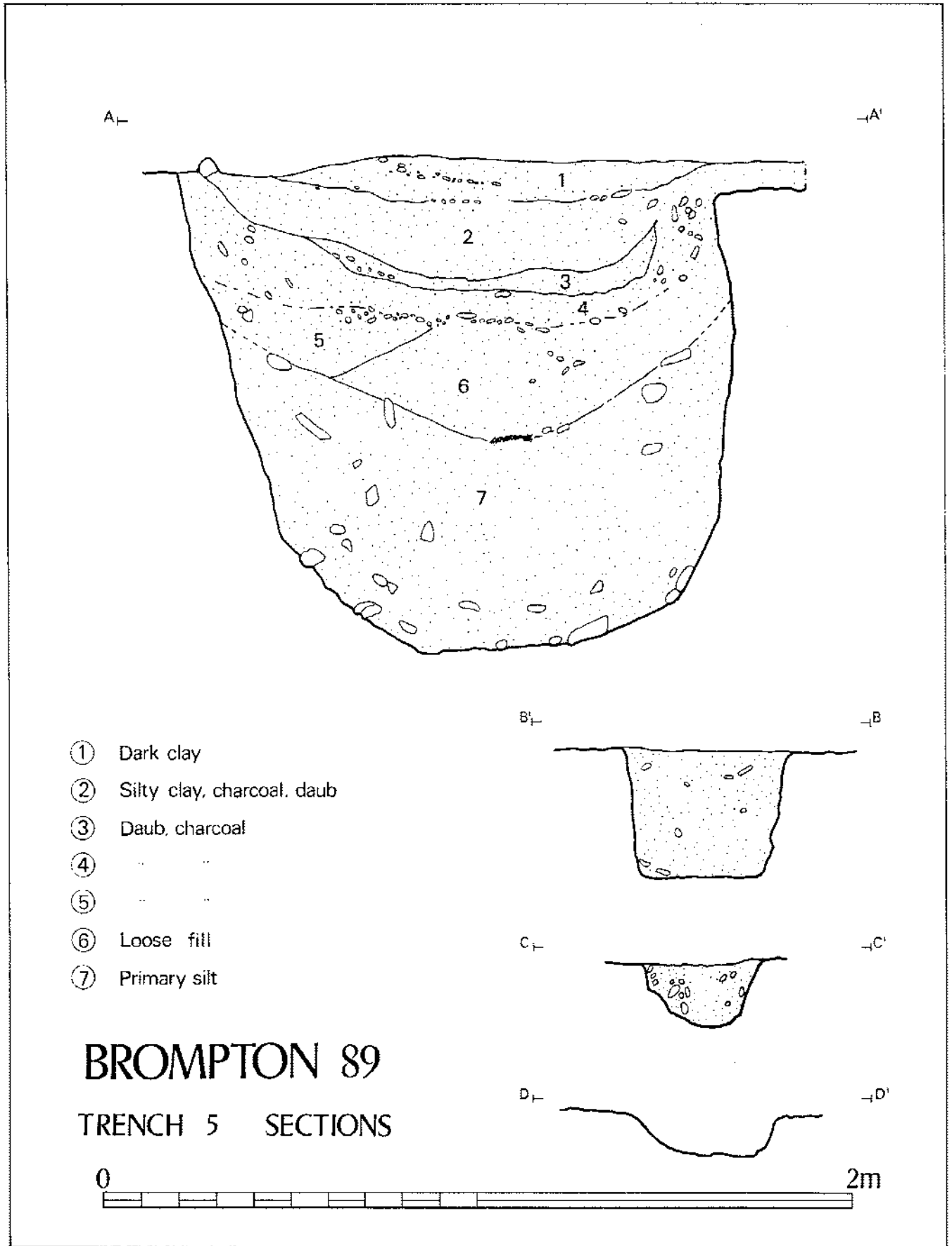


Figure 6