

**An Archaeological Evaluation at  
Abbey Foregate, Shrewsbury, Shropshire**

**by**

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### Introduction

In October 1989 Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit undertook a small-scale excavation on land to the south of Abbey Foregate, Shrewsbury (National Grid Reference SJ 4975 1242). The excavation, on land owned by British Rail, was commissioned by Shropshire County Council (Highways and Transport Department) prior to the commencement of the English Bridge Gyratory Road Scheme.

The proposed road scheme encroaches on the scheduled ancient monument of Shrewsbury Abbey and Precinct (County Monument Number 359). It is estimated that the scheme will involve the lowering of the present ground level by 1.60 metres.

The brief for the excavation was to excavate a trench to the north of the "Old Infirmary" building, in that area of the scheduled monument under threat from the road scheme, to investigate the level of survival of the western wall of the "Old Infirmary" and of its north range, and to assess any deposits within these structures. The depth of excavation was limited to the extent of the threat from the road scheme, i.e. 1.60 metres.

### The Evaluation Trench

The trench, 9 metres in length, was located 3 metres north of the "Old Infirmary" building and 4 metres south of Abbey Foregate (Fig. 1). A trench was machine dug by a JCB excavator to remove modern overburden and further excavation was then carried out by hand. The trench was dug in an "L" shape both to examine any medieval deposits to the east, inside the "Old Infirmary" wall, and to accommodate the curving course of the proposed road through the scheduled area. The shape of the trench was also influenced, to some extent, by the large amounts of loose rubble encountered, which necessitated the "battering back" of the sections, particularly that to the east, to a safe angle.

After machining through the top layer of levelling material (1000), containing 20th century pottery fragments, many further layers of modern rubble/soil make-up were encountered (1001-1006, 1018-1020, 1025, 1027). These layers also contained much 20th century pottery and some 19th century sherds.

Cut through 1000 was a pipe trench (F16) backfilled with sandy loam and rubble (1026) (Fig. 3 S4). Cut through the lower make-up material were three pits (F13, F14, F15) (Fig. 3). F13 and F15 were filled with several layers of rubble/soil (1041-1043 and 1008, 1009), while F14 contained two different layers of green clay (1016, 1030) separated by loam and rubble (1017). Another pit (F8), cutting 1006, contained dumped mortar and rubble (1035) (Fig. 2).

On the western edge of the trench (Fig. 3, S1), running north-south along its entire length, was a brick and sandstone wall (F6) built of both large dressed red sandstone blocks (0.60 x 0.40 metres) and smaller, rough red and green sandstone blocks (< 0.30 x 0.20 metres) as well as red bricks (1031). This post-medieval wall was standing to a height of 50.88 metres A.O.D., its upper courses sealed by 1000, with sandstone and brick rubble foundations (1032) extending to a depth of 49.40 metres A.O.D. A brick-lined drain (F4) (Fig. 2) ran northeast-southwest under the wall (F6). Pottery found in the silty fill (1034) of this feature suggests that it was constructed in the 19th century.

On the east side of the trench, exposed in the west facing section (Fig. 3, S3) was a well-shaft (F5) 1.50 metres in diameter. It was lined with well-cut red sandstone blocks (0.40 x 0.16 x 0.10 metres) and filled with modern rubble/soil (1010, 1011 and 1012). Modern brick foundations were built on top of the backfilled shaft.

At the northern end of the trench, (Fig. 2) an area of mortared red and green sandstone blocks, measuring up to 0.50 metres in length, was contacted. These were later found to be the uppermost surviving courses of a possible medieval wall and buttress (F7, F1) first appearing at a height of 49.89 metres A.O.D. West of these features, at the same level, was an area of cobbles (F2), of an average size of 0.06 metres, set in a

dirty greyish sand (1021). A brick drainage channel (F3), running east-west, cut through this surface.

East of the sandstone wall (F7), at the same level, was an area of brown clay (1029) abutting a band of reddish clay (1028) further to the east. Abutting F7 was laid a large broken fragment of millstone, measuring some 0.90 by 0.50 metres and broken on two sides, with some unusual cross-keying around the central hole. Much eroded, a substantial portion of it lay embedded in the south facing section. Several red bricks were mortared to the top of the stone. These features, the uppermost surviving courses of buttress and wall (F1, F7), the cobbles (F2), clay and millstone, seemed to form a floor surface, cut away in one place by the pit F14 (Fig. 2).

The cobbled area and drainage channel (F2, F3) were removed to expose the south elevation of the buttress (F1) and east elevation of the wall (F7). Below the cobbled area a light brown clay-sand layer (1037), containing a large fragment of medieval floor tile, together with much rubble, was exposed. This layer was, in turn, removed to the maximum trench depth of 1.60 metres (49.37 metres A.O.D.). At this level a band of grey-green silty sand (1038) was encountered west of the sandstone wall (F7) and running parallel to it. To the east of the wall the layer of brown clay (1029) was removed along with the reddish clay (1028) and the green clay (1030) from pit F14. While removing these contexts a poorly constructed sandstone wall (F9), made of rough blocks (average size 0.40 x 0.25 metres), was contacted (Fig. 2).

The removal of these contexts (1028, 1029, 1030 and 1037) further exposed the elevations of wall and buttress (F7 and F1) (Fig. 4). The buttress (F1) was made of mortared red sandstone blocks, measuring a maximum of 0.50 by 0.30 metres, one of the blocks in the south elevation having four vertical grooves cut in it. F1 seems to be of a similar build to buttresses visible on the western elevation of the "Old Infirmary" wall. Made of principally red sandstone blocks, measuring a maximum of 0.40 by 0.25 metres, and bonded with a light brown mortar, it also to the east contained some smaller blocks of green sandstone. South of the buttress the wall was truncated and here much green sandstone rubble was visible, suggesting that F7 was built on an earlier wall. A short stretch of this earlier wall (F12) was exposed in the east elevation of F7, projecting out

some 0.30 metres and running parallel with F7, at a height of 49.54 metres A.O.D.

Abutting these two walls to the east was what appeared to be the base of an arch (F11) consisting of two large mortared red sandstone blocks, and the remains of a third, bedded on fragments of red sandstone and a clean red clay (1046 ). A small shallow sondage (0.50 by 0.50 metres) was dug to the south of these blocks and contacted another block of red sandstone directly below the others, again bonded with clean red clay (1046). A similar feature (F10), 2 metres to the south, was also investigated by the digging of a sondage. This exposed further red sandstone blocks bonded with clean red clay, as seen in the examination of F11.

Excavation now ceased at this level, with contexts 1004, 1006, 1012, 1029-1046 and features 1, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12 exposed to be left in situ.

### Interpretation

18th and 19th century illustrations of the west view of the abbey depict the present remains of the "Old Infirmary" building joined to a northern range by an arcaded wall with six arches. The wall is heavily buttressed and overlooks the waterfront of the north channel of the Rea Brook.

The north range appears to have been converted into two cottages by 1825 (Owen and Blakeway 1825). In 1836 Thomas Telford demolished the north range and most of the arcaded wall, and re-routed Abbey Foregate through the precinct area.

The earliest structure encountered in the recent evaluation trench was a truncated wall of green sandstone rubble (F12) running north-south. This seems similar to the earliest stone precinct wall encountered during the Queen Anne House site excavations in 1985 (Baker and Cooper Forthcoming).

A short stretch of the monastic precinct wall was also revealed during excavation in the former Bertram Edwards yard in 1987/88 (Baker and Cooper Forthcoming). This was running south-east from the south-west corner of

the "Old Infirmary" building. The wall (F12) appears to have been reused to link the north range with the "Infirmary" building to the south.

Built on top of the earlier wall (F12) was a now-fragmented wall built of red sandstone blocks (F7) and supported by a buttress, likewise built of red sandstone (F1). The position of the wall, running north-south, was consistent with the expected alignment of the arcaded wall, and its build similar to that of the small stretch of wall joined to the west elevation of the "Infirmary" building.

Abutting the later sandstone wall (F7) there was what appeared to be the build (F11) of a red sandstone arch (Fig. 4), which may have been inserted at a later date. Another group of sandstone blocks (F10), 2 metres to the south, was probably also related to this arch. Both were bonded with the same red clay, and their relationship seems beyond doubt.

These features may be the remains of the arcaded wall, depicted in the 18th century illustrations, and it is possible that more extensive remains of the wall survive at a lower depth, together with evidence for its relationship with the medieval waterfront. However, their misalignment with the upstanding elevation raises some doubts about this, as does the medium of their bonding; doubts that cannot be allayed given the limited nature of the present investigations. No surfaces of medieval date were encountered in the excavation though, again, some may survive in situ at a lower level.

After the north range and arcaded wall were levelled, this partially demolished stretch of wall and buttress (F7, F1) appear to have been used as part of a yard surface, flush with a cobbled area (F2) and a brick drainage channel (F3). A millstone set into this surface had an unusual cross-keying seen previously on a millstone reused in an early post-medieval drain on the Queen Anne House site (Hugh Hannaford, pers.comm.). This yard surface may have been contemporary with a small warehouse or shed whose eastern wall (F6) and drain (F4) were contacted on the western side of the trench. It seems likely that both yard and warehouse/shed were part of the 19th century mill and malthouse complex.

A well shaft (F5), lined with red sandstone blocks, in the west facing section of the trench appears to be of 19th century construction.

The area seems to have been subject to heavy dumping of rubble and make-up material in the 20th century, after the mill had gone out of use.

#### Implications and Recommendations

1. The proposed English Bridge Gyratory Road Scheme, in its present form, will at least partially destroy the medieval features recorded during the excavations. The course of the proposed Gyratory Road would have to be moved by at least 2 metres to the west to preserve these features in situ within the scheduled area.

The uppermost surviving courses of medieval walling are at a depth of approximately 0.84 metres below the present ground surface and thus fall within the 1.60 metres deep zone of disturbance. No contemporary floors or surfaces were encountered within this zone. Advice on the implications of the archaeological survival within the scheduled area must be sought from English Heritage.

2. In addition to any recommendations made for the scheduled area, an archaeological watching brief should be undertaken in the area to the south of Abbey Foregate and to the west of the "Old Infirmary" building, during the lowering of the ground surface prior to road construction.

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### References

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# LOCATION OF EXCAVATION ABBEY FOREGATE SHEWSBURY 1989

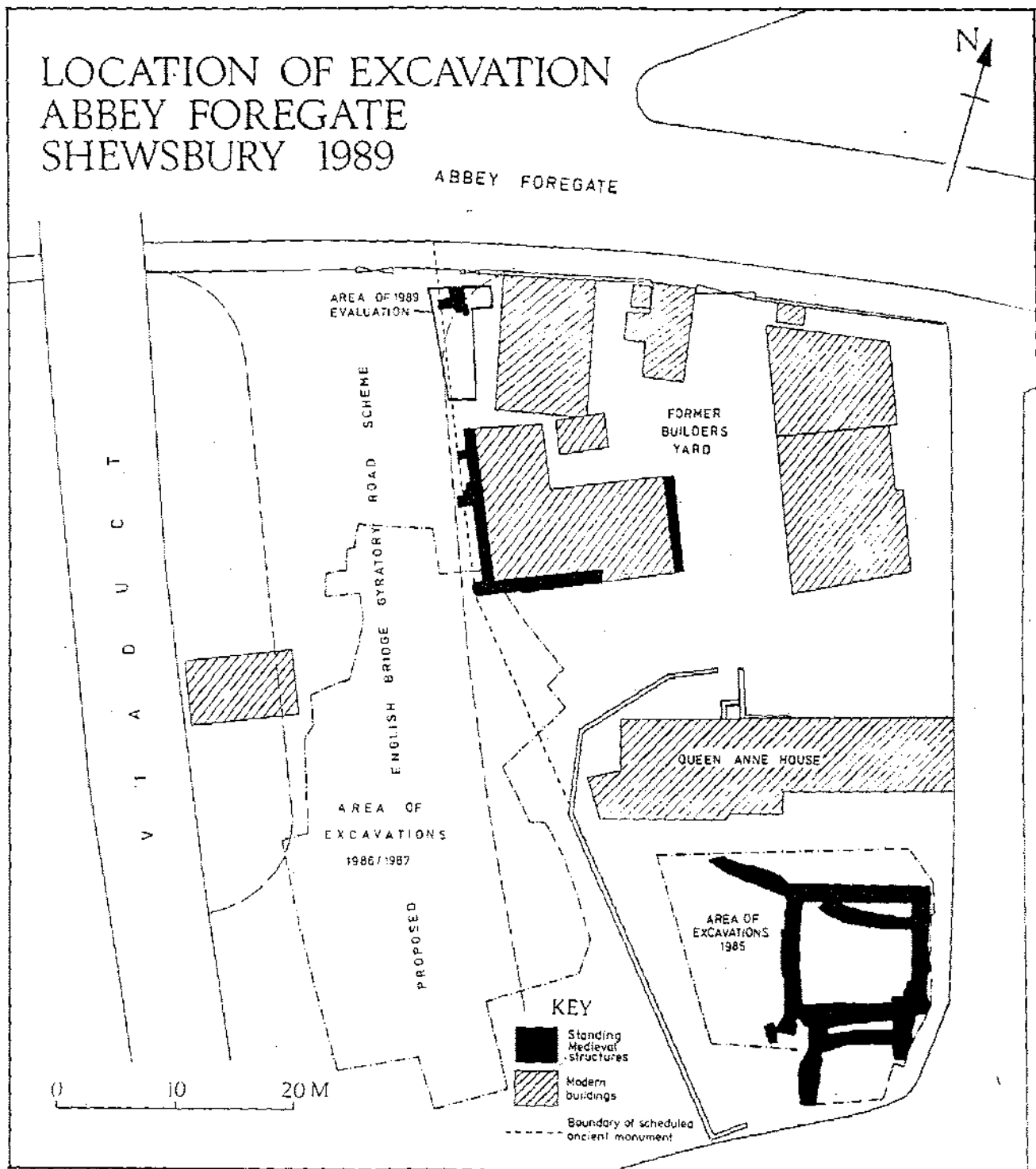
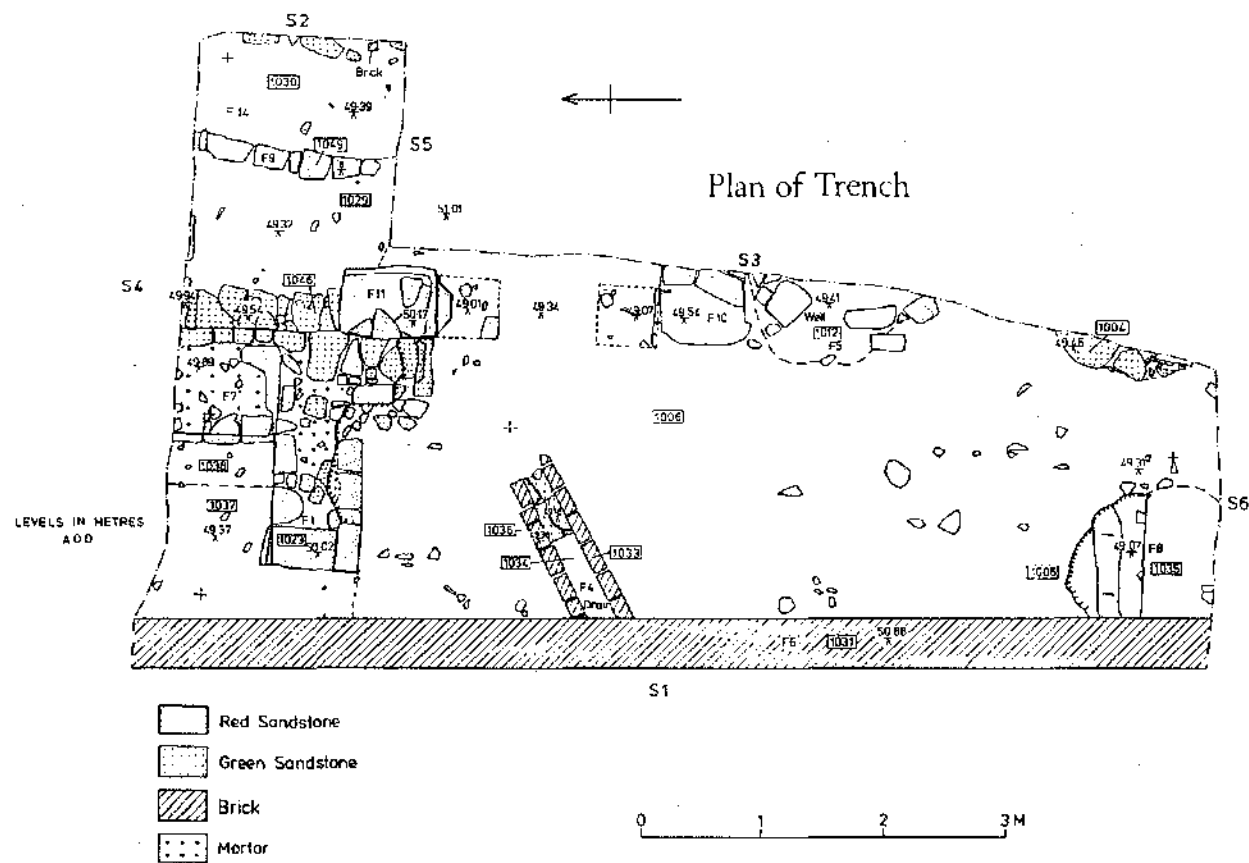


FIG.1

# ABBAY FOREGATE, SHREWSBURY 1989



Plan of Cobbled Area

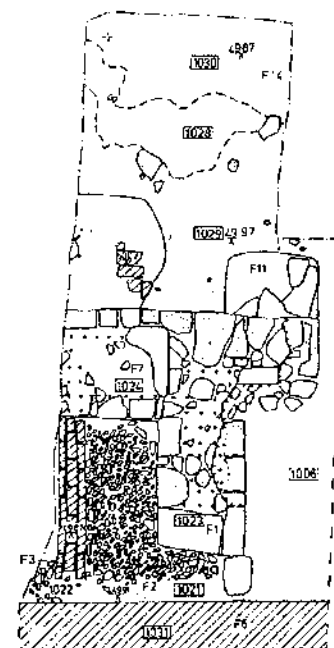


FIG. 2



# ABBEY FOREGATE, SHREWSBURY 1989 ELEVATIONS OF FEATURES

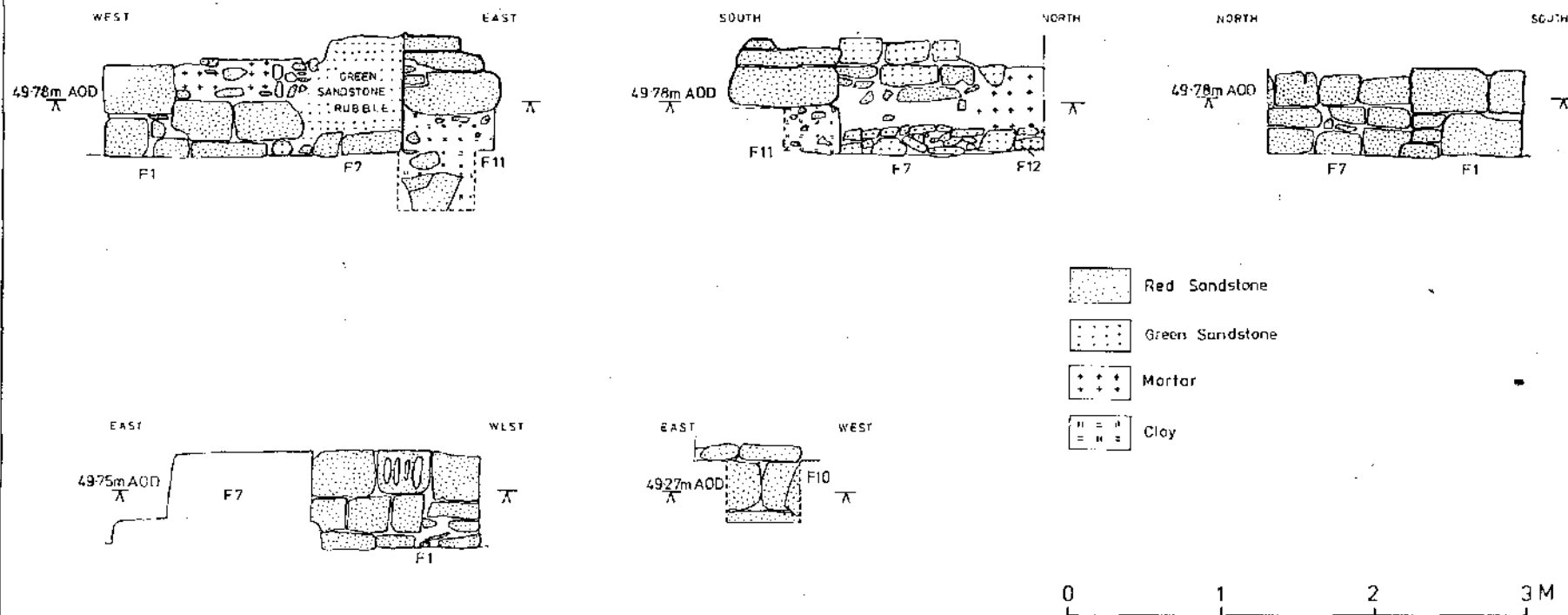


FIG. 4

# ABBEY FOREGATE, SHREWSBURY 1989 PROFILE OF EXCAVATION IN RELATION TO ROAD

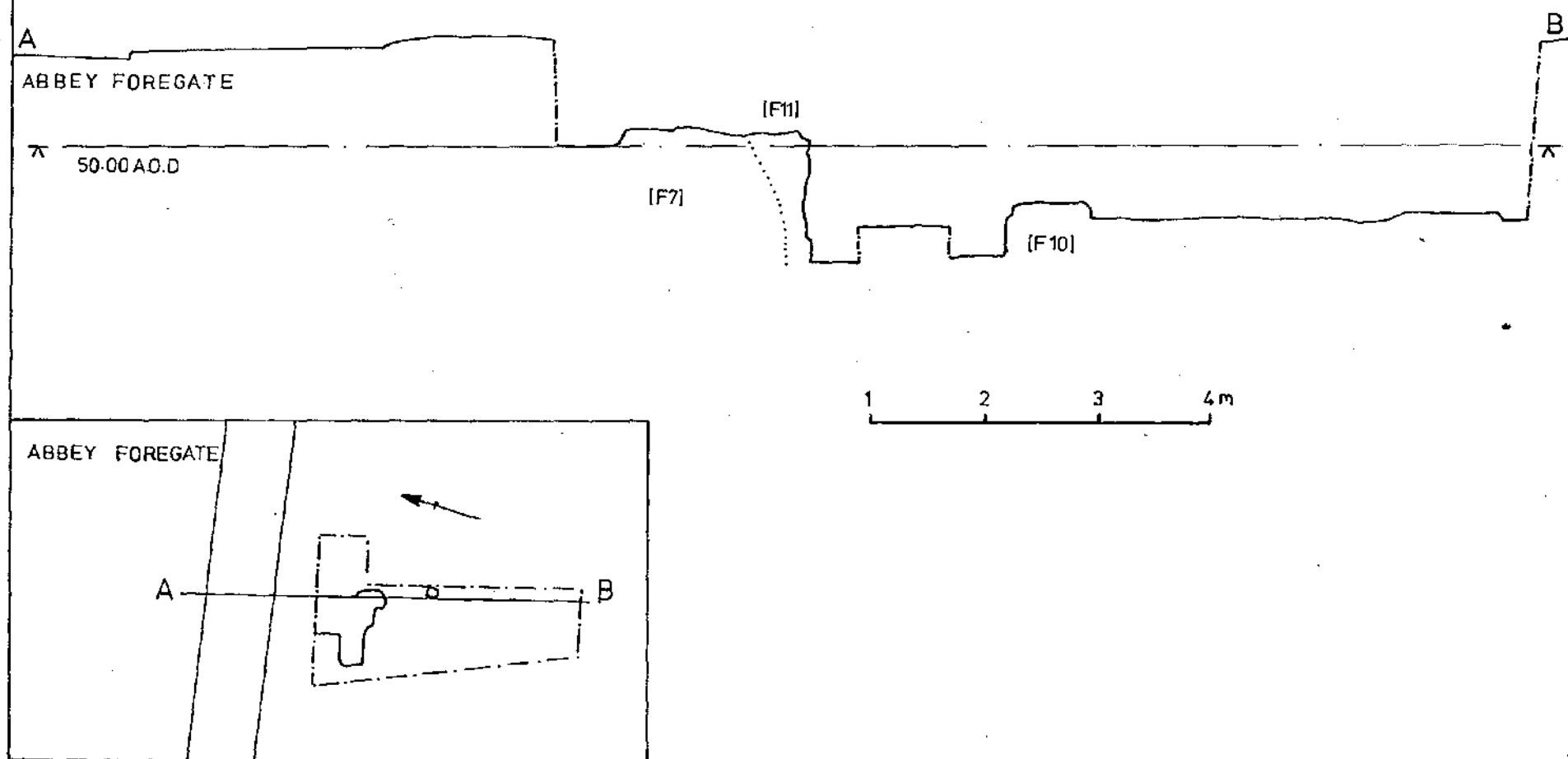


FIG.5