

**An Archaeological Assessment
at Fosse Lane, Shepton Mallet**

by

Iain Ferris and Peter Leach

Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit 1990

The Roman Settlement at Charlton, Shepton Mallet, Somerset
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Introduction

In February 1990 Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit (BUFAU) was commissioned by Wayopen Estates Limited to undertake an archaeological investigation and evaluation on land scheduled for residential and industrial development to the east of Fosse Lane, about 1.5 miles to the south east of Shepton Mallet, Somerset (Grid Ref. ST630 424) in an area deemed to be of considerable archaeological potential (Figure 1). This work was carried out over a 4 week period in February and March 1990.

Work was to be concentrated in three large fields (Figure 2), all now under grass, and was based on a brief prepared by the County Archaeological Officer. The following interim account, with spot dates provided by a brief examination of the numerous finds, will present the excavated evidence and assess its place within the present state of knowledge about Roman activity in the vicinity of Shepton Mallet and in the wider context of the Roman West Country. Finally, the implications of the archaeological discoveries will be considered in relation to the development proposals.

The Evaluation

All the areas to be assessed were opened by a mechanical excavator and the topsoil stripped under archaeological supervision. Cleaning and excavation were then undertaken by hand.

Areas A and G (Figure 3)

An area approximately 40m by 40m (Area A) was opened around the general location of a Roman lead coffin, containing a burial, discovered in 1988 (see below). This initial area was subsequently extended by the opening of a second area (Area G), 20m by 20m, to the east.

With the exception of an area in the south east of Area A there was no vertical archaeological stratigraphy here, and with the removal of the 0.35-0.40m deep topsoil (1000) there was exposed a horizon of undulating, shattered Jurassic limestone bedrock and a natural brown-orange clay, into which could be seen to be cut large numbers of negative archaeological features. The bedrock sloped gently from west to east, a slope further emphasised by the natural topography. Considerable quantities of Roman pottery were recovered from the topsoil during machining. The size of the area opened and the profusion of features present meant that, given the limited timescale of the works and the level of manpower available, a sampling strategy towards the archaeology was adopted. It was decided to plan the whole area in detail and to sample excavate a limited number of features sufficient to establish a model for the sequence of activity here, to date that activity, and to suggest a function for the features and thus the nature of the activity represented.

Possibly the earliest feature in the area was a north-south aligned gulley (F43) running across the whole width of Area G, 1m wide and a maximum of 0.26m deep. It was backfilled with a clean, brown-orange silty clay containing the occasional small chunk of limestone (1029). No finds were recovered from the single excavated section, though two sherds of Roman pottery and a flint flake were found when cleaning over the top of the feature. The very rough cutting of the sides and the uneven, sloping base, all formed of limestone bedrock, as well as the backfill, are unlike those of any other feature on site and it may be, given that a number of worked flints were found in both Areas A and G, that this is a relict prehistoric feature. Its shallowness may not reflect its original depth for, as will be discussed below, there is considerable evidence for the removal by ploughing of the subsoil down to the level of the natural, and indeed the eastern edge of F43 is partially obscured in plan by the overspilling of deposit 1029, perhaps caused by the drag of the plough.

The gulley F43 was cut by a roughly east-west aligned feature (F50), filled with dark brown-grey silty clay. Its size and shape (2m long by 0.60m wide) suggested a grave cut but no human bone was encountered in cleaning the upper surface of the fill and no further excavation was possible in the

time available. However, further to the west, and bounded to the north by a ditch (F30), three human burials were located, in addition to the grave cut from which a lead coffin containing an adult female inhumation had previously been removed in 1988 (F29). These inhumations, all aligned roughly east-west, had been variously disturbed by ploughing; the grave F40 was only 0.08m in depth, F41 0.03m, and F42, cut into a hollow in the natural, sloping from 0.05-0.18m. There was no evidence for a coffin in any of the graves though a single iron nail and a plain iron ring were recovered from the fill of F42 (1032). A number of upright limestone blocks around the edges of grave F40 perhaps indicate that it was a slab-lined grave, a burial rite relatively common in the Roman South West. Another common rite was that of inhumation burial in a cist and it is possible that a small rectangular feature (F46), just to the west of gully F43, could represent an abandoned or re-used former cist grave.

The curving boundary ditch (F30) survived as a substantial rock-cut feature, 1.30m wide and 0.44m deep, despite the demonstrable denudation of the area by the plough. Its backfill (1023), a dark silty clay with limestone rubble, contained large amounts of pottery, a number of bronze coins, the latest of which was of Valentinian I (364-375), a bronze penannular brooch and fragments of animal bone.

The ditch profile was roughly V-shaped and it could be seen to have been backfilled in a single action. The lack of primary silting at the base and the integrity of the profile, suggest that it had been regularly cleaned out and maintained as a boundary, though deposit 1024 on the northern edge suggests a final incident of inwash immediately before backfilling. Longitudinal sectioning provided no evidence for internal structure within the ditch.

The northernmost arm of this curving ditch, its western limit, and part of the southernmost arm were clear in plan (Figure 3). The rest of this arm disappeared beneath an extensive stone rubble surface (F37), which, as the latest element of the sequence in Areas A and G, will be considered further below.

In the south-west of Area A was found a single foundation course for a dry-stone wall (F16) built of limestone rubble. This survived in four separate stretches, each c.0.75-0.95m wide, aligned very roughly east-west on an erratic course that immediately discounts its identification as having been in any way part of a building. It most probably represents a boundary wall, perhaps for an enclosure of some sort. The wall had evidently been carefully stripped down to the final foundation course, set in the base of a shallow cut into the natural orange clay here, and not diminished by the plough, there being no evidence for stone debris deriving from denudation of the wall during ploughing. The general curve of the wall towards the south suggests that the enclosed area lay to the south of F16, but though there are here a number of possible postholes (e.g. F23, F25, F27, F28) and possible pits (e.g. F20, F22, F26), represented by soil stains, none of these features can be directly related to F16 (time did not allow sampling of these features).

It should be noted that wall F16, for at least part of its westernmost line, would appear to sit on top of a shallow, backfilled V-shaped gully (F15), c.0.16m-0.22m deep, and suggesting some earlier enclosure here. The backfill of this gully (1028) contained a little, rather undiagnostic Roman pottery, providing no more than a broad terminus for either the gully F15 or the wall F16. However, both features were cut by another curving ditch or large gully (F17) which terminated with a butt end, just to the north of F16. Roughly 0.15m wide and 0.30-0.33m deep, it had a U-shaped profile with well-cut, regular sides and base and was backfilled with a single deposit of dark, yellow-brown silty clay with occasional limestone chunks (1022), containing quantities of pottery, animal bone and charcoal.

In the south, the sequence becomes much more complicated in plan, with F17 cutting another possible gully F21 (not sectioned), and in turn being cut away by a foundation trench (F19) containing the rubble footings for another suspected drystone wall. Only the south-eastern face of this wall foundation survived, being cut away in turn by another linear gully (F18) with a U-shaped profile.

This complicated sequence of gullies/ditches and walls suggests a long and intensive period of activity and certainly some continuity in use of this area.

In the south-east of Area A the activity was of a different nature. Though features like the drystone wall F16 and the cemetery boundary ditch F30 appeared to continue into this area, they would seem to be overlain by an extensive area of limestone hardstanding (F37). This feature, approximately 7m (north-south) by 12m (east-west) with an outlier of pitched stones (the foundation of this surface exposed by ploughing?) to the north, stands higher than the surrounding surface, doubtless due to its inbuilt antipathy to the plough. After the removal of the topsoil here by machine (being only c.0.15-0.20m deep over F37) there was exposed an even more extensive spread of rubble, mixed with dark soil and a large quantity of Roman potsherds (1020). This deposit directly overlay the hardstanding surface F37 and the cuts of a group of postholes or pits (F1-F4) in the south east corner of Area A. The quantity of occupation debris over F37 suggests a nearby focus of activity outside the excavated area, perhaps to the south or to the east.

In the north-west corner of Area A were a number of elongated ovoid features (F32-F35), the largest (F35) being c.5.25m by 1.75m in size; all backfilled with the same dark clay loam and small limestone rubble. Only F32 was sectioned, to reveal a bowl-shaped profile. This was 0.40m in depth at the centre, the base cut into the natural limestone bedrock; the backfill (1034) was a single homogeneous deposit, with stone rubble concentrated towards the upper part of the feature. A large amount of Roman pottery was recovered from F32, while fragments of animal bone and oyster shell were trampled into the top of both this feature and F33. Given their position, here cut into an area of clay natural, these pits could have been dug to obtain the clay and then have been used as rubbish pits. These features, being relatively isolated and with no direct physical relationship to other archaeological features, cannot at present be assigned to any particular phase of activity other than the broad 3rd/4th century horizon suggested by a cursory examination of the pottery from F32.

Areas B, C and D (Figure 4a)

This T-shaped trench, 25m (north-south) by 17.50m (east-west), was located close to the present road frontage on Fosse Lane to examine any surviving archaeological deposits in this zone of the development. That part of the trench parallel to Fosse Lane, (roughly on the line of the Roman Fosse Way here) was, for recording purposes, called B (south) and C (north), while the east-west aligned and interconnecting trench was called D. The whole trench was opened by machine and then largely excavated by hand; a further machine section was dug through a dump of limestone rubble (1016) to provide a full sequence down to the natural subsoil.

The topsoil over the whole area was 0.35-0.40m deep, at the south end of Area B overlying a 0.28m thick deposit of a browner, more clayey soil (1001) which, in turn, overlay a rough limestone surface (1009) interpreted as a road or track (F7). This feature had a good linear edge to the north but continued into the section face to the south, giving it a minimum width of 5.85m. Its irregular surface showed signs of wear and patching; a number of these infilled patches being sectioned, demonstrating that they were simply potholes in the surface.

To the north of track F7 was a 0.40-0.50m deep sequence of deposits overlying the natural orange clay. This sequence was only sampled in a 1m wide and 3.5m long sondage but appeared to consist of (going from the upper deposit downwards), a dump of limestone rubble (1007), overlying a grey brown silty clay with charcoal (1008), which in turn overlay a thin deposit of dirty mixed yellow-white mortar and silty clay (1015), in turn over another deposit of limestone rubble in a silty clay matrix (1016). Both the rubble 1016 and the stones forming the trackway F7 appeared to overlie the natural orange clay, which would suggest that the deposits to the north of the road are infilling a hollow of some sort; the limestone rubble 1016 extends northwards for a total length of 16.15m and was traced in the section of Area D eastwards for 6m. At the north end of Area C the removal of the topsoil and subsoil exposed the remnants of a limestone wall foundation coursing (F47, aligned north-south and partially sealed by rubble 1016 and F48, aligned east-west), partially cut away by a rubble

filled pit (F49). Set as they were into the upper surface of the orange natural clay, they must represent the very base of building wall lines, there being no robber trenches visible in section nor foundation cuts in plan.

In Area D the limestone rubble 1016 was removed by machine - it was here up to 0.50m deep - to expose the orange clay natural which, when cleaned, could be seen to have been cut by a number of features. These included a narrow, shallow linear trench (F8) aligned north-south and backfilled with silty clay and pieces of burnt limestone (1010), and, further to the east, a bowl-shaped pit (F9), about 0.60m in diameter and a maximum of 0.35m deep, backfilled with fire-reddened clay and burned limestone (1011), and containing a 2nd-century coin. Towards the eastern end of Area D, overlying the natural subsoil, was a thin spread of dirty yellow clay (1012), possibly the remnant of a floor (F10).

Area E (Figure 4b)

This trench (13m long) was dug at right angles to Fosse Lane, being aligned east-west. With the removal of the 0.35-0.50m depth of topsoil, a surface of natural orange clay was exposed along most of its length, the most easterly end of the trench having the limestone bedrock exposed at the same level. A circular area of mortar (1019) to the east was sectioned to reveal that it infilled a bowl-shaped, shallow hollow (F14) in the bedrock.

At the west end of the trench a 3.80m long stretch of limestone wall foundation (F12), aligned east-west, had two further wall stubs running off it at right angles. The walling was cut away in the north-west corner of the trench by a pit (F11) which, in addition, could be seen in plan to have cut away another possible pit, in the top of which, and partially embedded in the section, sat an ashlar block.

Only a small quantity of Roman pottery was recovered from the machining and sectioning of features in this trench.

Area F (Figure 2)

With the removal of the 0.35-0.40m depth of topsoil from this east-west aligned, 20m long trench, the surface of the limestone bedrock was exposed along its whole length. A number of possible features were tested but these proved to be merely hollows in the weathered bedrock, infilled with subsoil.

No pottery or other artifacts were recovered from this trench.

Summary

In the first instance, this evaluation has demonstrated that there is a considerable lateral spread of archaeological features and deposits within the proposed development area. In Areas B/C/D a stratigraphic sequence of activity survived intact, demonstrating that occupation here could have been continuous from the 2nd to the 4th century. The trackway leading off the line of the Fosse Way and the remnants of foundations for stone buildings in both Areas C and E would appear to represent the latest Roman activity here, suggesting not only the possibility of buildings having been strung out along the side of the road but also activity further back from the road frontage itself and linked to the Fosse Way by the trackway F7.

In Areas A/G the cemetery enclosure and the sequence of walled or ditched compounds would all appear to belong to the 3rd-4th century, as would the latest phase of activity here, represented by the surface of hardstanding. A structure or building complex may be located nearby, most probably to the east, as is suggested by the quantity of occupation debris spread in this area. Though denudation by the plough is most apparent in Areas A/G survival is, nevertheless, still good, and a considerable archaeological resource remains here to be disentangled. One further dimension to the site is the possibility of a prehistoric settlement, barely explored or understood in this evaluation.

Previous Discoveries

A number of previous discoveries of archaeological material in the proximity of the evaluation must now be briefly considered. In order to provide an immediate context for the results of this most recent work.

In 1887, on the west side of the Fosse Way, during further work on the railway line, the remains of a substantial Roman building were discovered. These included a '40ft long' stretch of wall, a well etc. and numerous artefacts dating from the 1st to 4th century (Somerset County Council SMR Information, PRN 24923). Less specifically provenanced Roman finds have also come from 'near the Fosse Way' and 'adjacent to the site of the Roman station' as well as from nearby Charlton (PRN 24923), and at Cannards Grave (PRN 24925).

Around 1864 a number of Roman kilns manufacturing 'Shepton Mallet Ware' - a Severn Valley-style pottery - were found during building works at the Anglo-Bavian Brewery, along with a number of stray artefacts of the 1st and 2nd centuries (PRN 24922).

The County Sites and Monuments Record also lists a possible Roman enclosure at Charlton (PRN 24951) and, nearby, a parchmark noted on an aerial photograph which may be a stone building (PRN 24947).

In 1987 BUFAU undertook an archaeological evaluation at Brewery Lane, Charlton (Ellis 1987), during the course of which a single Roman burial was recorded - possibly part of a cemetery sited here on the hilltop.

For a number of years the three fields evaluated for this development have been walked by local metal-detector users, information from whom suggests the widespread location and recovery of Roman metalwork and coins, as well as pottery. Unfortunately, these discoveries have not been mapped, although approximate localities are known and further spreads of material exist in the fields on the west side of the Fosse Way. A brief examination of the 150-200 coins recovered by the detectorists suggests that they ranged in date from the late 1st to the 4th century, the majority being of

the later 3rd and 4th century. As a result of this activity a Roman lead coffin was also located, and eventually removed by staff from the Somerset County Museum in 1988, the site of which was relocated in the present evaluation (Area A, F29).

A number of observations made by the authors during the recent evaluation also point to a spread of activity towards Charlton and Frog Lane. Roman pottery was recovered from an area north of the former railway embankment, recently stripped down to bedrock, where possible Roman ditches were exposed in section.

Discussion

The results of this evaluation and the evidence, albeit fragmentary, from previous work and observations would appear to confirm the suggestion made by Roger Smith that Shepton Mallet/Charlton was a roadside settlement in the Roman period (Smith 1987, 298). Lying almost equidistant from the roadside settlement at Camerton to the north (Wedlake 1958) and the important Roman town of Ilchester to the south (Leach 1982), its position on the Fosse Way makes it an obvious focal point; perhaps serving a number of different functions - farming settlement, market, staging post for drovers, minor industrial centre - all of which may be reflected in the evidence from these excavations and earlier discoveries. A combination of such functions need not necessarily define the settlement as having had a truly urban character - regular streets, public or official buildings, etc. - and it may more closely have resembled Camerton, which sprawled rather haphazardly over an area of at least 5-6 hectares. While it may be suspected that well-constructed stone buildings fronted onto the Fosse Way at Shepton Mallet, working farms, industrial operations and associated elements were probably sited to the rear, served by lanes leading off from the main road. The walled and ditched compounds found in Areas A and G in this evaluation, located some way back from the line of the road, may have been used for the temporary corralling of stock in transit to market, like those seen elsewhere off important route ways (see, for instance, Orton Hall Farm; Mackreth 1975). Alternatively, they may relate to a nearby

farming establishment, similar to that discovered at Bradley Hill, Somerton (Leech 1981), with its own graveyard.

The Roman West Country was one of the richest agricultural areas of the province (Leech 1982; Gresne 1975) and the countryside was densely settled from the 1st century onwards, doubtless reflecting an earlier wealthy and populous pre-Roman Iron Age community. The system reached its apotheosis with the development (by the 4th century) of many rich villas in Somerset, notable for their mosaic floors. In addition to the purely agricultural wealth the natural mineral resources of the area were heavily exploited in the Roman period - Mendip lead and silver was mined commercially as early as 49 A.D., coal was extracted from the Somerset measures, and good building stone quarried from a number of sources in the region. The creation of wealth led inevitably to an economic climate suitable for the generation of trade and industry. The region became particularly well known for the manufacture of pewter vessels, Camerton being one of the centres for this, while at Shepton Mallet a pottery manufacturing industry certainly flourished in the 2nd century A.D. It is against such a background that this roadside settlement, whether defined as a village or a small town beside the Fosse Way, must be viewed.

Implications and Recommendations

This archaeological evaluation has demonstrated a considerable survival of features and deposits assignable to the Roman period in all areas examined (with the exception of Area F). Some plough damage (and possibly other disturbance) can be demonstrated, but extensive and relatively well-preserved remains have been proven, surviving to within 0.30 - 0.40m of the modern surface, and continuing beyond the bounds of all but one of the excavated areas in most directions.

As suggested above, these discoveries, taken together with previous finds and documented remains in the locality, almost certainly represent an important and barely explored or appreciated Romano-British roadside settlement. From the evidence recovered and recorded in this assessment,

the stratified remains of a sequence of road-frontage properties (in existence from at least the 2nd to the late 4th century) are to be expected along sections of the present Fosse Lane/Fosse Way road sides between Charlton and Cannards Grave. Such remains may not occur as a continuous development but this zone, extending back 20 metres or more eastwards from the modern road line, should be regarded as having a high archaeological potential. A similar potential may exist to the west of the road but this area lay outside the evaluation limits.

Behind the road frontage a much more extensive zone with archaeological potential is demonstrated, related or ancillary to the primary roadside focus of Roman settlement. Once again, the density of remains here will be variable (as shown by Areas A and G) but could be spatially extensive. Stratified sequences may be more uncommon but cannot be ruled out. The evaluation determined no clear limits to this zone and some potential for the survival of such remains must exist throughout the designated area of development.

The implications for what is evidently an important archaeological resource surviving extensively, if variably, across the whole area, relative to (as yet) non-detailed proposals for development, can thus be summarised.

- 1) Any sub-surface disturbance in excess of 0.30m depth will potentially expose and damage archaeological features and deposits. This must apply to the entire development zone south of the disused railway embankment, excepting that portion destroyed by an infilled railway cutting diverging southwards away from the Fosse Way. North of the embankment further Roman remains are inferred but no adequate evaluation has been undertaken.
- 2) The identification of 'zones of development' relating to the proposals for this site (e.g. service roads, buildings, car parking areas, etc.) would permit the formulation of a policy to minimise disturbance of the archaeological resource. This might in part be achieved through building or site design, protection in situ by

rafting or otherwise raising present ground levels, etc., subject to overall design specifications for the development.

- 3) Where extensive sub-surface disturbance is unavoidable, provision should be made for archaeological recording in such designated areas. This could normally be achieved through a sampling strategy similar to that applied to those areas investigated in the course of this assessment. A minimum response should involve mechanical topsoil stripping, surface cleaning and definition of any archaeological remains, measured survey and recording of the same, and sample excavation of all features and deposits.

Further responses and recommendations arise from these observations

- 4) Notwithstanding the scope of the investigation and assessment achieved so far, there is an urgent need for more information concerning the extent and density of archaeological remains surviving throughout the development area. Geophysical survey would probably be the most cost effective survey technique, to be applied extensively elsewhere within the fields south of the railway embankment, and ideally in sample areas to the north. Some small-scale supplementary excavation might also be applied as part of this assessment, to test the validity and character of the geophysical survey results.
- 5) In the current state of knowledge, recommendations for protection through the application of design options suggest the road frontage zone to be the most archaeologically sensitive and thus to be avoided wherever possible by development. Excepting the main evaluation site (Area A/G) and its immediate vicinity, detailed recommendations for design options applicable to the remaining areas will be difficult without further archaeological input (as proposed in 4, above).
- 6) In the event of implementation of option 3 (above), the recommended response can be programmed and timetabled to cause the minimum delay

or inconvenience to the development schedule as a whole; indeed, the archaeological response could be costed and integrated within the developer's overall timetable and be required to conform to it.

- 7) Commensurate with the recovery and recording of archaeological remains from this site is both the opportunity and requirement to research, present and disseminate the discoveries and their significance. This implies a financial provision for the necessary processing and presentation of results, but also an opportunity for the client/developer to publicise the considerable archaeological interest of this site and their own contribution towards its conservation.

In conclusion, it should be stressed that the archaeological discoveries made so far at Shepton Mallet, and their implications, are of outstanding importance. Although its existence has been hinted at before, these discoveries seem to confirm the location and scale of a major new settlement in Roman Britain. Development proposals for this area present both a challenge and an opportunity, in return for a quite modest expenditure of time and resources, to explore and illuminate this resource and to put Shepton Mallet, literally, on to the map of Roman Britain.

Acknowledgements

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FOSSE LANE EVALUATION

Shepton Mallet

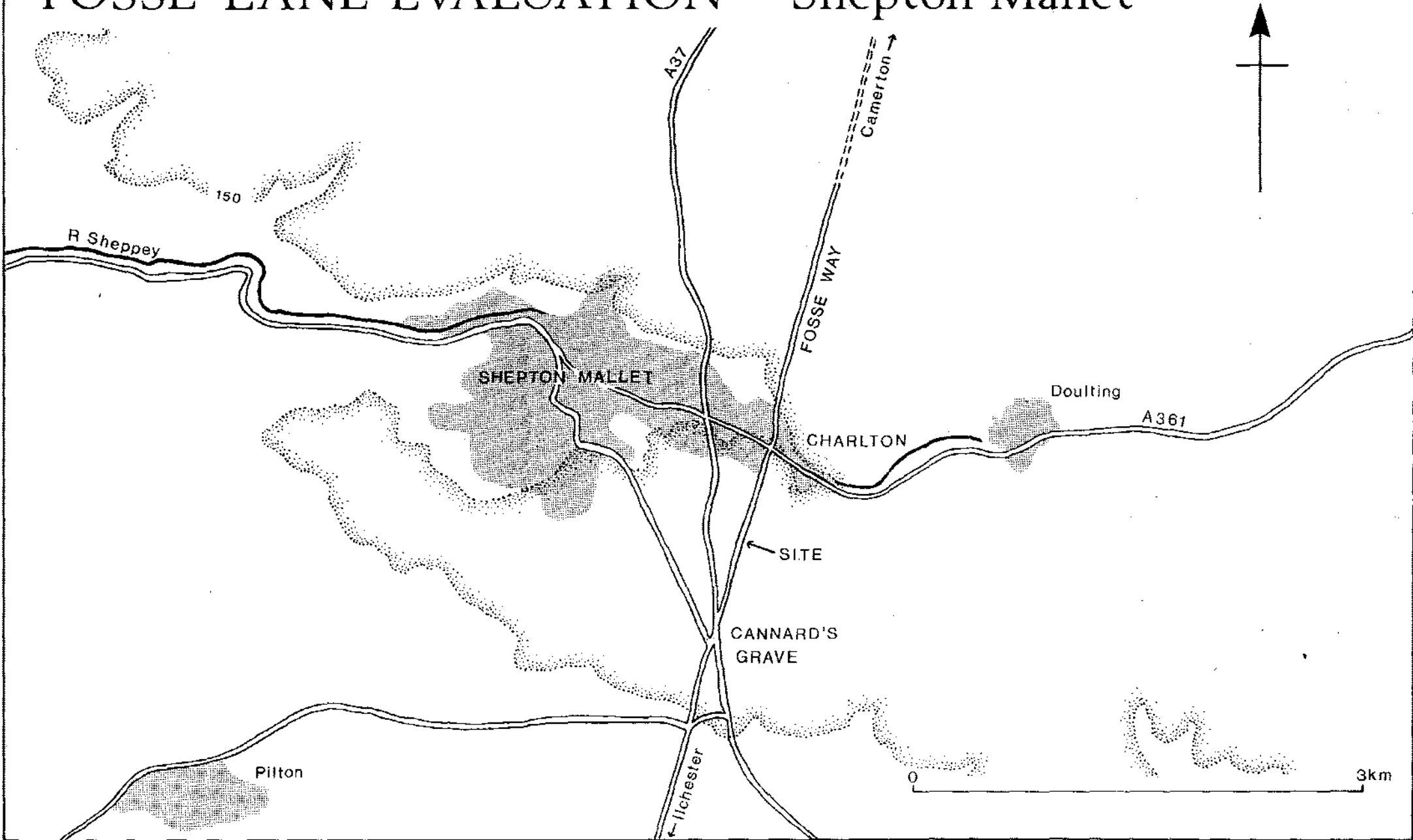


FIG.1

FOSSE LANE EVALUATION

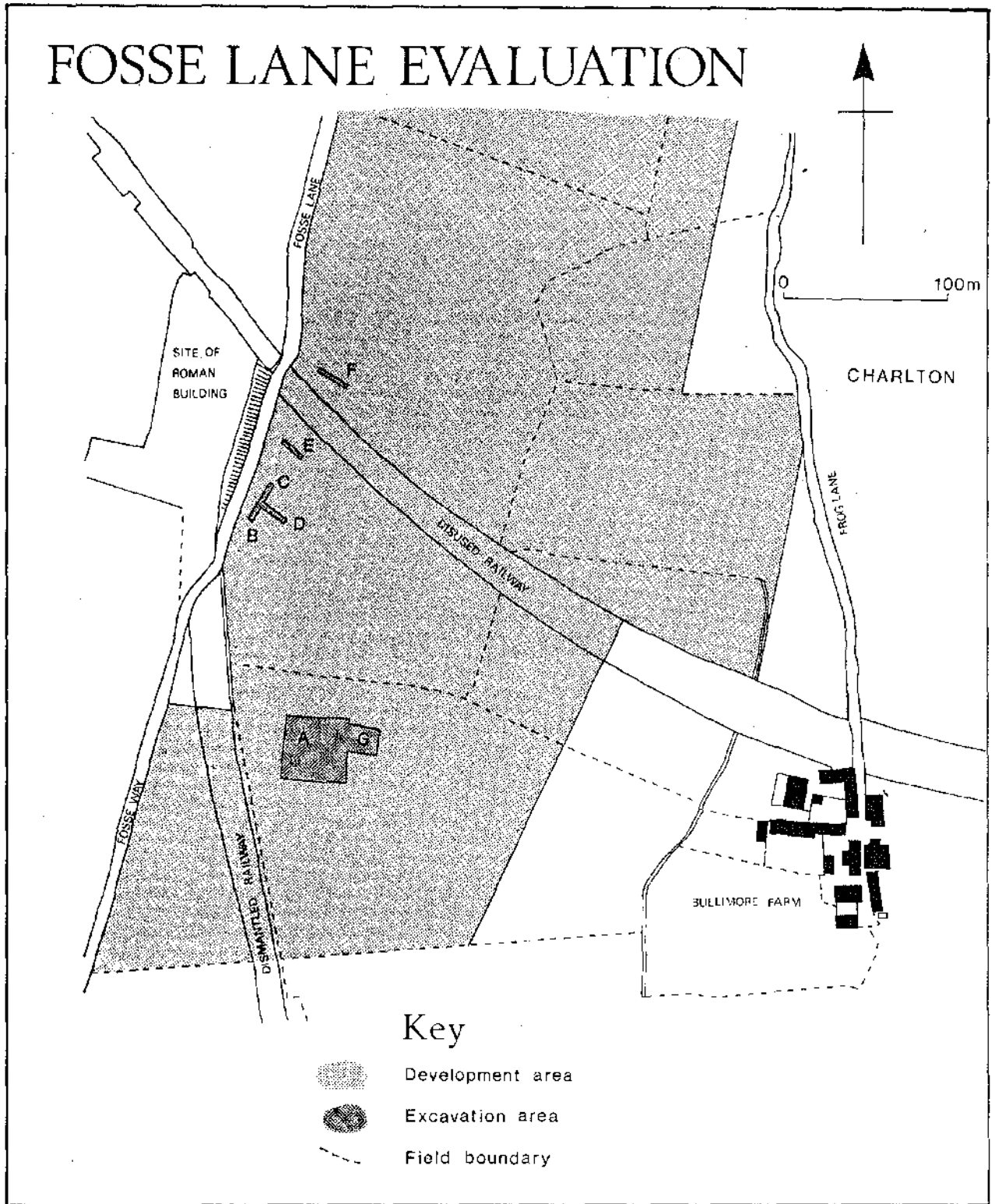


FIG 2

SHEPTON MALLET 1990 Areas A and G

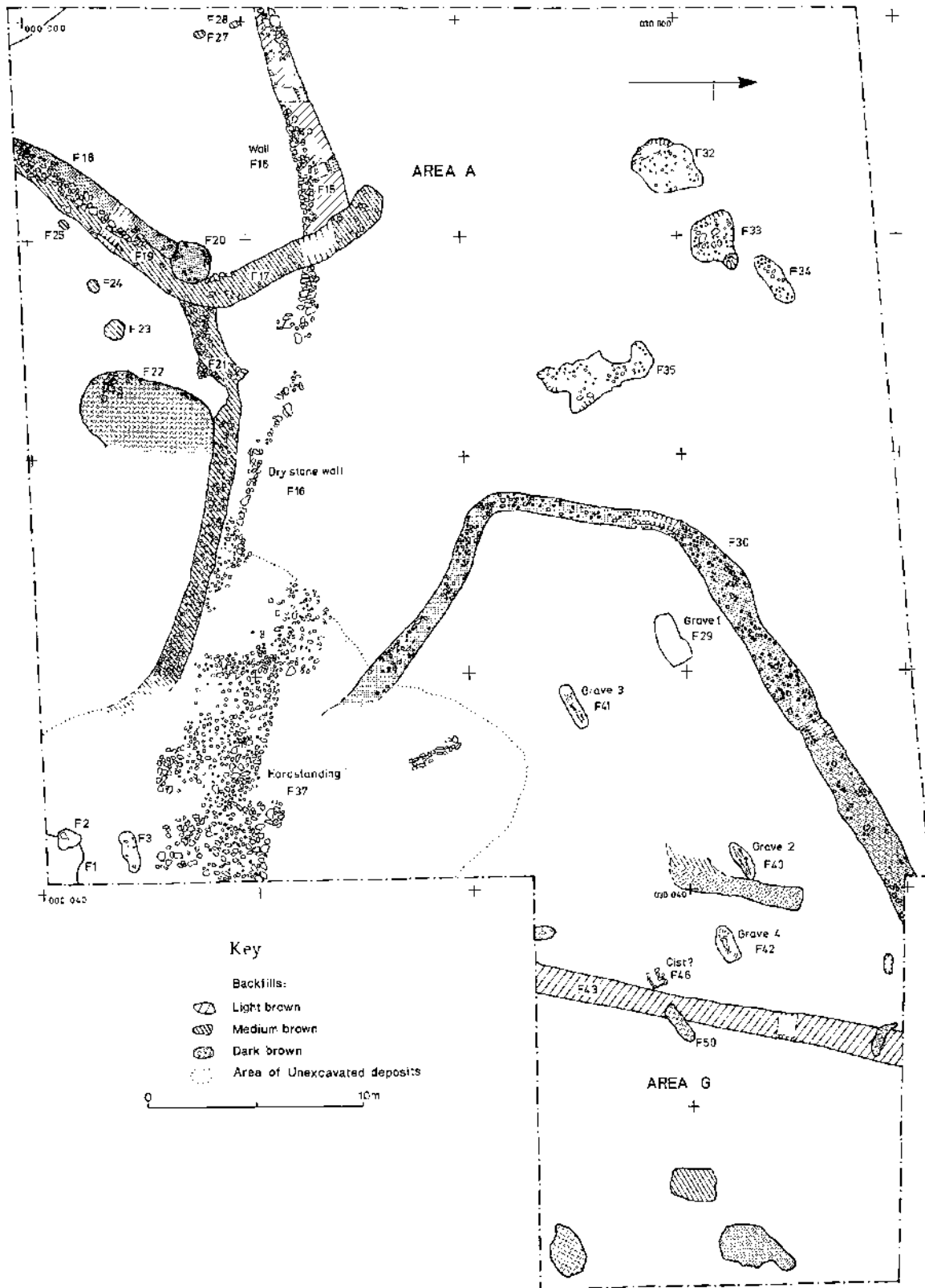


FIG 3

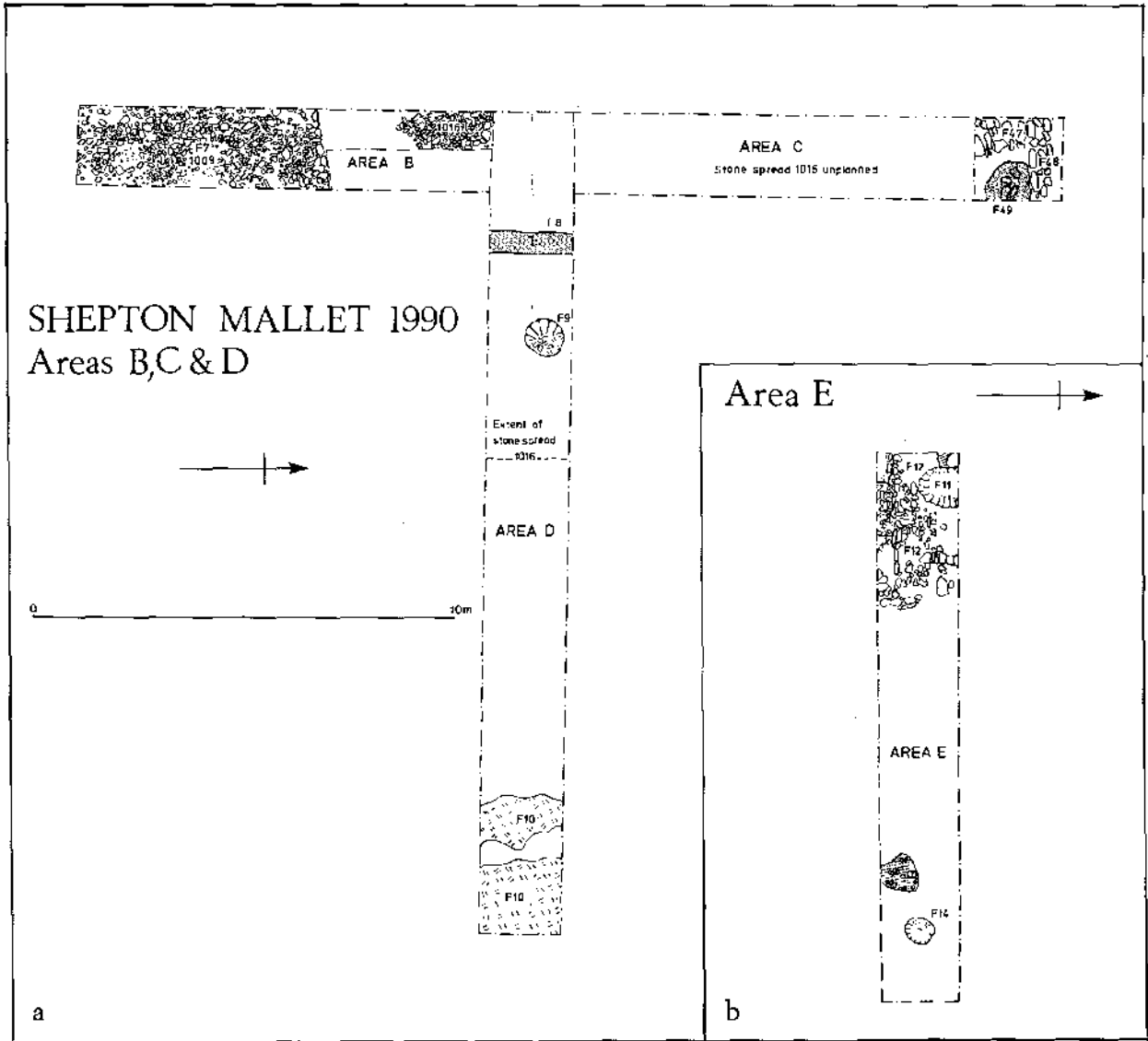


FIG 4