

ETHEL STREET, WELLS
An archaeological evaluation

By E. G. Hughes

An Archaeological Evaluation At Ethel Street, Wells.

Introduction.

This report outlines the results of a short archaeological excavation carried out prior to the construction of a Tesco superstore adjacent to Ethel Street, Wells, N.G.R. ST545 454. The work was undertaken by Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit on behalf of Tesco Stores Limited during July 1990.

The Site.

The site was located to the southwest of the town centre of Wells and to the north of St. Andrew's Stream, which flows westwards towards the former Priory mill (Fig. 1). The mill, which is situated on the east side of West Street, closed about 1970 and became Sheldon Jones' animal feed works (Stanton 1989, 38). The area was located within the precinct of St. John's Priory on the southwest outskirts of the medieval town (Aston and Leech 1977, Map 65). The Priory was founded as a hospital dedicated to St. John the Baptist in about 1210 by Hugh de Wells (Archdeacon of Wells from 1204-1209 and Bishop of Lincoln from 1209-1235) and his brother Jocelin (Bishop of Bath). The hospital was surrendered to the King in 1539 and passed into the possession of Bishop Clerk in exchange for the manor of Dogmersfield, Hampshire (Holmes 1911, 159). The hospital and lands returned to the crown in 1548 and then passed into private ownership in 1575. After the dissolution, the Hospital appears to have been used as a dwelling house (Serel 1859, 16) and during the early 19th century for light manufacturing (ibid, 17).

The western limit of the precinct appears to have been formed by West Street and its eastern limit by St. John's Street (Aston and Leech 1977, 149), with St. Andrew's Stream running approximately through the middle. The buildings of the hospital itself appear to have stood within the eastern part of this area and may be the buildings illustrated alongside St. John's Street on the 1735 map by William Simes. Some were pulled down in 1812 to make way for the construction of the Central School. However,

considerable portions appear to have survived, including a 14th-century house, until as late as 1858 when further demolition took place for extensions to the school (Holmes 1908, 143). While these extensions were being built, extensive foundations were observed beyond the previously existing walls, along with early worked building stone and rubble (Serel 1859, 17). It seems likely that the former hospital buildings were further disturbed when new streets, including Priory Road, Princes Road and Ethel Street, were laid out across the former precinct.

The map by Simes suggests that the area of current interest, to the north of St. Andrew's Stream and northeast of the priory mill, may have been used for orchards during the early 18th century. Early maps of the region (e.g. Greenwood 1822) also suggest that this area had not been developed. This appears to have remained the case until the recently demolished workshops were built. The 1:2500 O.S. map of 1929 indicates that the area was still then an open field. The equivalent map for 1969, on which the recent workshops do appear, indicates that the banks of St. Andrew's Stream to the south had been reinforced and culverted, perhaps to prevent flooding.

It is also noticeable that the ground level appears to dip slightly down from St. Andrew's Stream towards Ethel Street to the north. This suggests that the stream may have been artificially diverted southwards from its original course to provide water for the mill. This slope appears to have been partially levelled during the construction of the recent workshops, necessitating the building of a 1m high retaining wall between the workshops and the stream.

The excavation.

The proposed development will involve the construction of a large store, measuring approximately 65 m by 55 m, between St. Andrew's Stream and Ethel Street (Fig. 2). The specifications indicated that the external wall beams would be approximately 0.45 m wide by 0.6 m deep with building column bases 1 m square and at least 1 m deep.

At the time of the excavation, the former workshops had been demolished leaving substantial concrete floor slabs. These partly determined the position of the excavated trenches. Trench 1, 25.6 m long and 1 m wide, was orientated northwest-southeast and was located in the area of the former trackway between the workshops. Trench 2, 21 m long and 1 m wide, was orientated northeast-southwest and was located within the western area of the development. The location of Trench 3, which was 10 m long and 1 m wide, was designed to test the area between the workshops and St. Andrew's Stream which did not appear to have been affected by the possible terracing. In addition to these trenches, two sondages were recorded. Sondage 1 had been excavated by one of the potential building contractors and was located in the northernmost corner of the proposed development. Sondage 2 was located in the southernmost corner of the site (Fig. 2).

Trenches 1 and 2 were excavated by machine and their sections drawn and photographed. The machine was also used to excavate Sondage 2 and the upper, recent deposits in Trench 3. The remaining deposits in Trench 3 were hand excavated to the natural gravels.

Results.

In Trench 1 the natural clay and gravel (1007) lay between 0.5 m and 0.6 m below the existing ground surface. A small sondage, 0.3 m deep, excavated through this gravel at the northwestern end of the trench, rapidly filled with water, indicating that the water table had been reached. The natural was overlain by up to 0.2 m of fine brown silt (1003) containing occasional flecks of mortar and charcoal and very occasional fragments of pottery and animal bone. This deposit became noticeably darker (1005) towards the northwestern end of the trench. It was overlain by 0.2 m of dark brown loam containing charcoal and occasional fragments of modern pottery. The uppermost deposit consisted of a rubble hardcore for the trackway, up to 0.25 m thick.

The stratigraphy in Trench 2 proved very similar to that in Trench 1. The natural clayey gravels were encountered between 0.7 and 0.8 m below the existing ground surface and, as observed in Trench 1, were saturated with

water. They were overlain by up to 0.4 m of dark brown silt (1010), becoming slightly lighter in colour towards the bottom and similar in texture and composition to 1003/1005 in Trench 1. The uppermost deposit consisted of up to 0.5 m of modern hardcore and industrial rubble (1001).

In the southwestern area of Trench 3 (Fig. 3) the natural gravels were overlain by a thin spread of stone rubble containing fragments of pink mortar and roofing slate (1008). This rubble was cut by two U-shaped gullies (F1 and F2). To the northeast of the rubble spread, F1 was 1 m wide and 0.6 m deep, and was filled by a clayey silt containing flecks of charcoal and mortar and fragments of pottery, animal bone and oyster shell. The fill became stonier towards the bottom of the gully. At the southwestern limit of the trench, F2 contained a very similar fill and was at least 0.8 m wide and 0.5 m deep. These features were overlain by 0.3 m of dark brown loam containing fragments of modern pottery and ironwork. The uppermost deposit consisted of 0.3 m of recent industrial rubble.

At least 2 m of mixed soil and rubble overlay the natural gravels in Sondage 1, suggesting that considerable quantities of material had been redeposited at the northern end of the site, perhaps during the construction of the workshops. In Sondage 2 the natural gravels were overlain by at least 0.5 m of silts, similar to those recorded in Trenches 1 and 2. These were overlain by approximately 0.5 m of industrial rubble.

Discussion.

It appears likely that the area investigated had not been significantly developed until the recently demolished workshops were built within the last 60 years. However, there is evidence to suggest that the site may have been earlier used for orchards or other agricultural activities. It is possible that the area may have been located in the western part of St. John's Priory precinct, although it seems unlikely that any of the original priory buildings were located here. These would appear to have focussed on St. John's Street to the east. The only suggestion of any earlier buildings in the area was the spread of stone rubble in Trench 3 (1008). This did not appear to be very substantial and produced no dating evidence

other than a single very abraded (possibly medieval) sherd of pottery. It appears likely that the two gullies (F1 and F2) in Trench 3 were used to channel water off St. Andrew's Stream. Small quantities of pottery were recovered from both features, including fragments of red earthenware, some with an internal glaze, and 18th-century stoneware. Many of the sherds were extremely abraded. F1 also contained a single flint scraper, with evidence for retouch on all four of its sides. Although this was clearly from a residual context, it does support the evidence for prehistoric settlement in Wells recovered during the excavations at the cathedral (Rodwell 1980, 39).

The silt layers in Trenches 1 and 2 (1003, 1005 and 1010) also contained a small mixed assemblage of pottery, including several very abraded fragments of red earthenware with a brown or green/brown glaze, and several fragments of white china. Layer 1005 also contained a small worked flint core. It appears likely that these silts had been deposited by periodic flooding of St. Andrew's Stream before its banks were reinforced in recent times. A flood in this area is reported to have occurred as recently as 1985 (Stanton 1989, 38).

The absence of features and the shallow depth of deposits recorded in Trenches 1 and 2, together with the redeposited material observed in the section of Sondage 1, tends to confirm that much of the area was terraced and levelled during the construction of the recent workshops.

Implications and Proposals.

The excavation has suggested that there is little archaeological potential in the southern part of the area formerly occupied by the workshops. Any archaeological features which may have survived the terracing, in the northern area of the development are likely to be protected by the redeposited material.

Trench 3 indicates that the area between the workshops and St. Andrews Stream has also survived the terracing. Some of this area is threatened (Archer, Boxer, Partners, Drawing Number 1683.SK.33A) and it is recommended

that some provision be made for a watching brief during the development. In particular, this might provide evidence for the origin and date of the building rubble (1008).

Acknowledgements.

The excavation was directed by the author and was carried out with the assistance of Charlie and Nancy Hollinrake. The illustrations were produced by Colette Paterson and Caroline Gait. The report was edited by Peter Leach and Simon Buteux. I am also grateful to Bob Croft (Somerset County Council) and John Woodgate (Archer, Boxer, Partners) for their information and assistance, and to Laurence Jones and Quentin Hutchinson for surveying the trenches.

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August 1990

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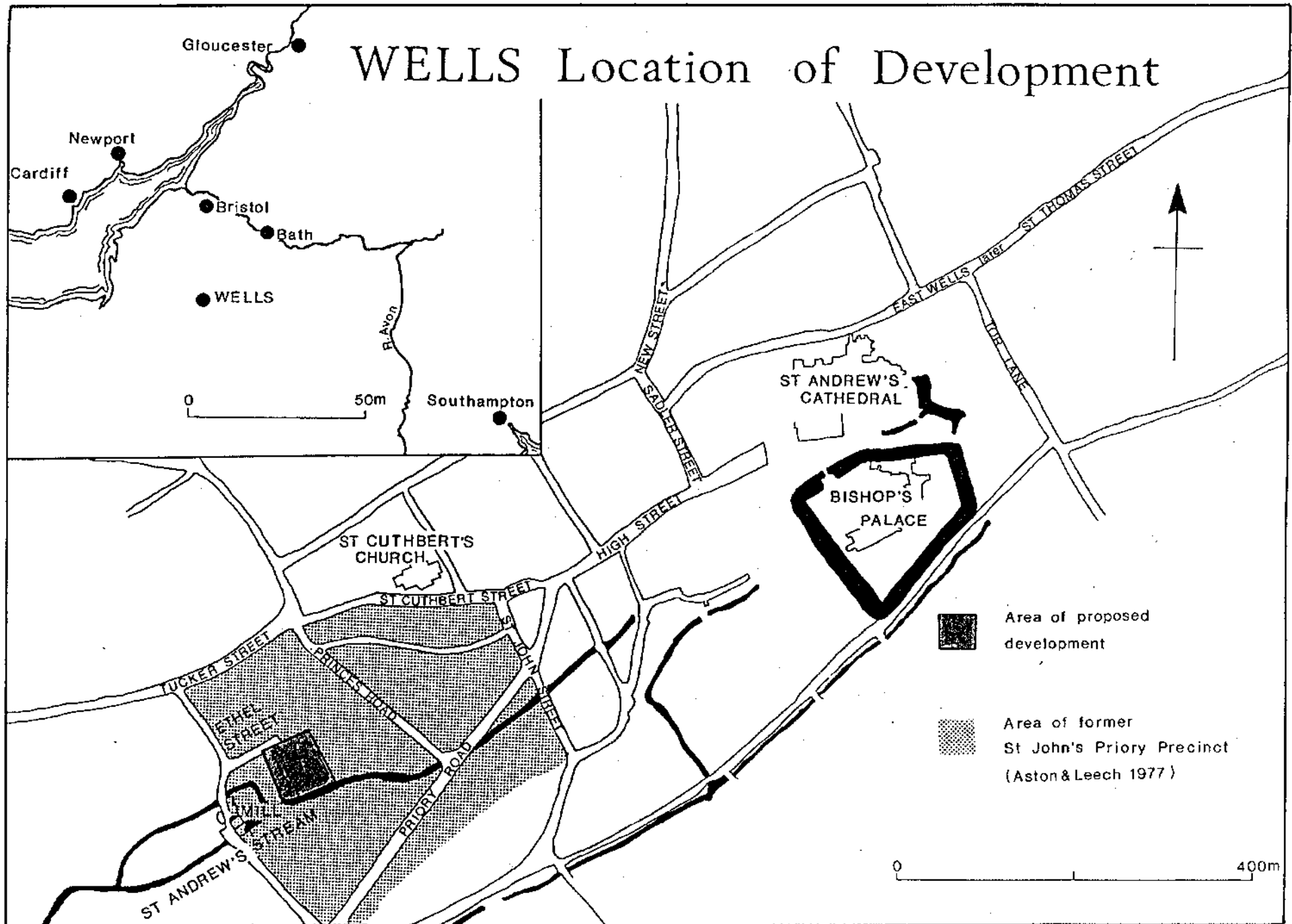


FIG 1

ETHEL STREET WELLS Location of Trenches

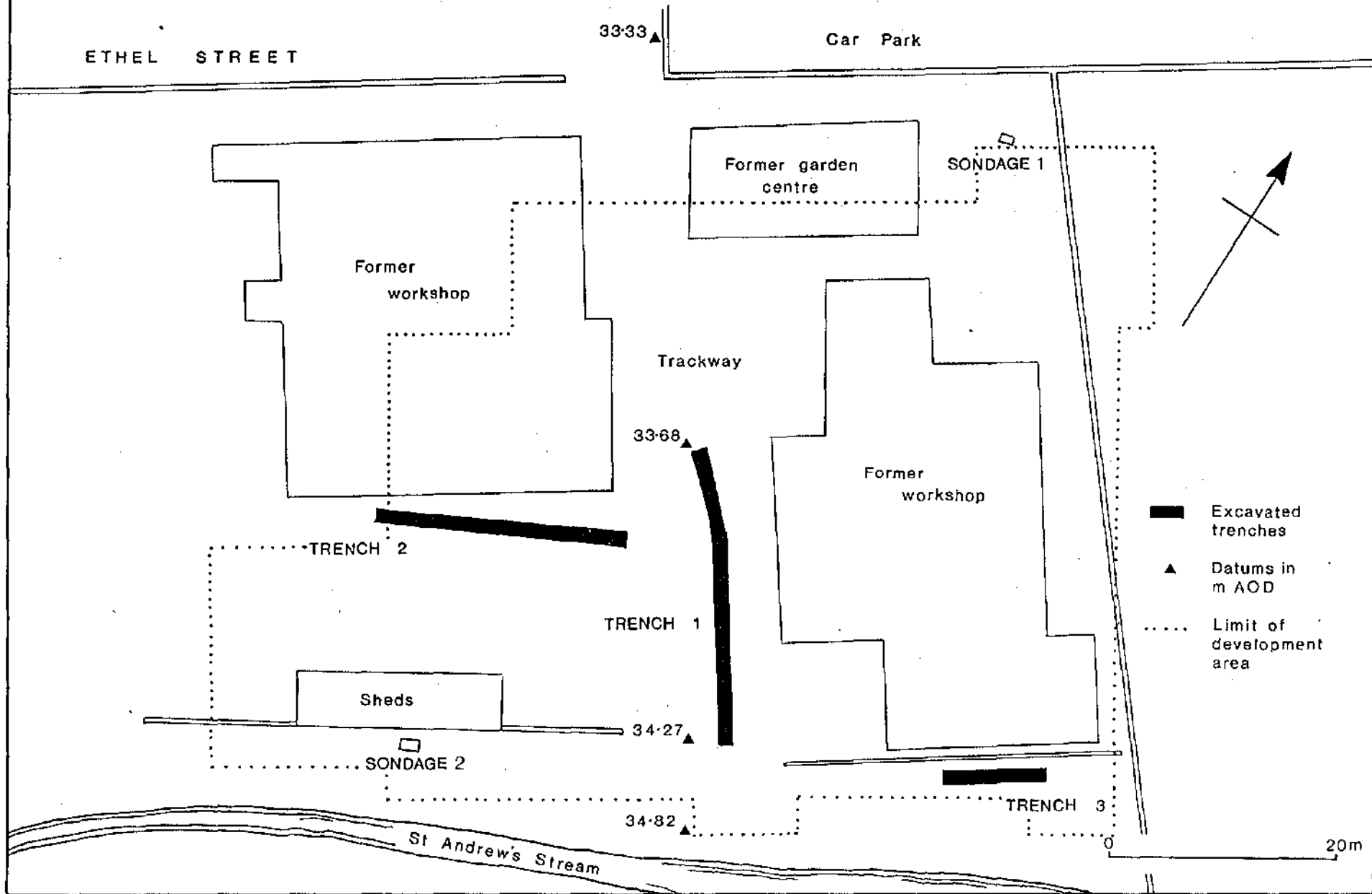
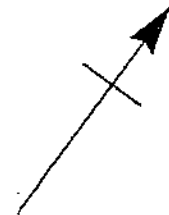
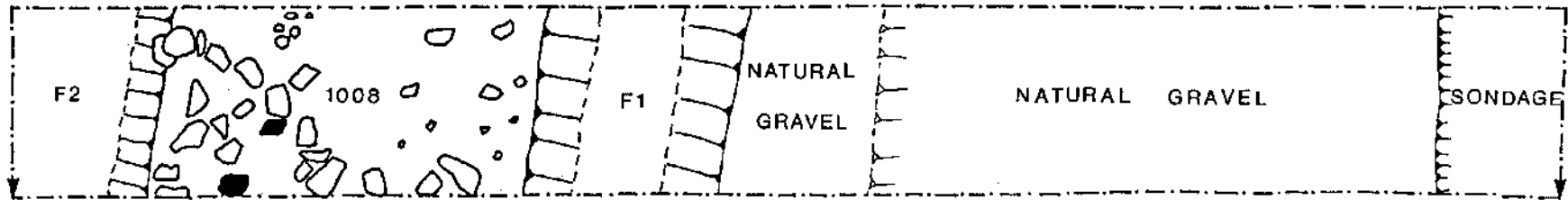


FIG 2

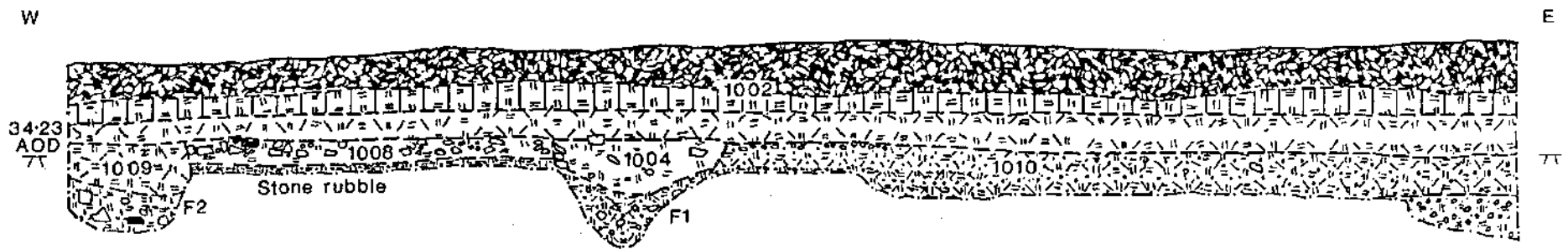
ETHEL STREET WELLS Trench 3



Plan



Section (Reversed)



- | | | | |
|--|----------------|--|-----------|
| | Slag and waste | | Silt clay |
| | Clay loam | | Slate |
| | Clay silt | | Mortar |

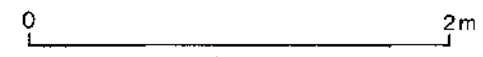


FIG 3