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Field Farm, Shepton Mallet, Somerset

An Archaeological Evaluation 1991

by
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with Lucie Dingwall

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1.0 Introduction

As a prelude to the submission of proposals for an extensive residential development on land at Field Farm, Shepton Mallet (Fig. 1), an archaeological evaluation of selected areas was undertaken in 1991. Two phases of assessment were commissioned by Field Farm Development, the first involving geophysical surveys which sampled widely within the proposed development zone (Geophysical Surveys Report 91/11, Fig. 1). On the basis of results obtained from this first phase, a second phase of assessment involving trial trenching in the vicinity of two of the geophysical survey areas was carried out by Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit in April 1991. These excavations were undertaken at the recommendation of R.A.Croft, Archaeological Officer for Somerset County Council, with a view to obtaining more specific interpretations of certain geophysical anomalies.

2.0 The Site

Field Farm lies on the southern outskirts of Shepton Mallet, centring on N.G.R. ST 625428, between Whitstone Road (A37) and Cannard's Grave Road, to the east and west, and a disused railway line to the north. The land, at around 500 feet above sea level, slopes down very gently northwards towards the valley of the River Sheppey, and is underlain by almost horizontal beds of Jurassic Lias limestone. At the time of the evaluation most of the area was under permanent pasture, and not therefore susceptible to investigation by such techniques as fieldwalking or the examination of aerial photographs to detect crop or soil marks.

No prior information concerning possible archaeological sites within the land belonging to Field Farm was available, although a high potential for such discoveries in the vicinity of Shepton Mallet was recognised. Above all, perhaps, the recent discovery of a major Romano-British settlement alongside Fosse Lane (Leach 1991), to the east of Field Farm, highlighted the potential for further discoveries at Field Farm itself. Since the initial discovery and large-scale excavations of a part of the Fosse Lane settlement in the summer of 1990, further site evaluations have been undertaken in the locality, combining the techniques of geophysical survey and trial excavation (Fig. 1). The ground conditions around Shepton Mallet favour magnetometer survey, a geophysical technique which allows rapid coverage of relatively large areas. The follow-up trial excavation involves transect trenching of more limited areas to verify or interpret the results of geophysical survey (e.g. Leach 1990a).

3.0 The Evaluation

The preliminary phase of site assessment at Field Farm by means of geophysical prospection was undertaken in January 1991. Five areas within the land proposed for development were sampled, totalling almost three hectares (Geophysical Surveys Report 91/11). Overall, and particularly in the light of results obtained elsewhere in this locality (2.0 above), the Field Farm results did not suggest great archaeological potential. Several phenomena could be attributed to relatively modern features, such as former tracks and field boundaries, or areas where fragments of iron or other iron-rich material were present in the topsoil. While it must be recognised that the below-ground picture obtained through geophysical prospection will necessarily be simplified, and that archaeological interpretation of geophysical anomalies is often problematic, there was little in the results from

the prospected areas A1, A2 and B to suggest that further investigation by means of excavation would be profitable.

In areas C1 and C2 the results were more promising, although phenomena of relatively recent origin indicative of field boundaries, tracks and possibly tree-holes, were also suspected. Here, a second phase of evaluation, comprising the excavation of trial trenches across some of the geophysical anomalies was deemed appropriate. One set of trenches, identified as A to E, was positioned to cut across the geophysical survey area C1 and to extend the area sampled southwards. In the adjacent field to the east, survey area C2 was sampled by transect Trench F, and a second trench (G), was positioned outside it to the south (Fig. 2).

This second phase of evaluation was undertaken using a JCB mechanical excavator to remove turf and topsoil along the 2m-wide transect trenches. Thereafter, manual cleaning of the suboil horizon was achieved over the greater part of the trenches to define and record any archaeological features or deposits surviving at that level. This process permitted recording by means of pro-forma record sheets, scale drawings and photography, and the recovery in context of any significant artefact remains. A small sample of the features or deposits defined by this process were further excavated in an attempt to clarify their status and period. The finds and records obtained in the course of this evaluation comprise an archive upon which the results and implications of the assessment depend and, at the owner's discretion, require deposition in an appropriate museum.

4.0 Archaeology

Throughout the evaluation turf and topsoil to a depth of *c.* 0.10 – 0.15m were removed by machine. Beneath this surface layer was a lighter brown clay soil, containing a sparse scatter of weathered limestone fragments, which was removed in the same process to a depth of *c.* 0.15m. Within these layers were occasional fragments of 18th-and 19th-century pottery, clay pipes, glass, brick and tile, and coal. Machine excavation was halted at the base of this horizon, where a change in the character of the stratigraphy was apparent. Most frequently this change was marked by the appearance of the weathered upper surface of bedrock, or a notable increase in the density of stone rubble indicating its close proximity. After manual cleaning, features of potential archaeological significance were revealed either cut into or immediately overlying this horizon.

4.1 Trenches A–E (Fig. 3)

This set of trenches was laid out to clarify the existence and character of geophysical anomalies plotted in area C1, and to sample possible extensions of these features further south. Solid bedrock, or the weathered upper horizon of it, was exposed along almost the entire length of **Trench A**. A machine-excavated sondage *c.* 1m deep was made into the weathered rock horizon towards the east end of the trench to verify its level and nature. In places a relatively solid, though extensively fissured, limestone bedrock surface was visible. Elsewhere, the solid bedrock was masked by spreads of disturbed rubble and cobbles in a stony red-brown clay matrix. These formations are all apparently of wholly natural origin, although subject in places to man-made disturbance. These variations of natural stratigraphy were recorded throughout the evaluation trenches, normally at depths between 0.30 and 0.40m beneath the modern surface.

At the western end of Trench A a small group of suspected archaeological features was recorded, comprising an area of compacted worn cobbles, a more diffuse area of small pitched stone and cobbles and a scatter of small vertical cuts infilled with soil, penetrating the weathered horizon of natural; the latter are interpreted as postholes. No other archaeological features were identified along the remainder of this 50m E–W trench, although one or two more recent disturbances were observed, penetrating the subsoil from just below the topsoil horizon.

Towards the eastern end of Trench A another transect, **Trench C**, was excavated, orientated at almost 90° to Trench A and extending northwards for nearly 30m and into part of the geophysical survey area C1. Surfaces of solid or weathered

bedrock were recorded along its entire length, with no indication of archaeological features.

A short gap separated Trench A from **Trench B**, which continued the alignment of A eastwards for another 65m; two further trenches, D and E, were excavated at approximatly 90 0 to Trench B. At the junction of Trenches B and D a shallow foundation trench cut into bedrock was revealed, into which was set the disturbed base of a drystone wall (F9). This survived most intact, and to a width of over 1m, to the east, mainly within Trench D, and was associated with sherds of post-medieval pottery. The wall was indistinct and much fragmented to the west, where it apparently overlay a deeper cut into bedrock (F21). The stony red-brown clay fill of this pit or ditch was not excavated further, but several flaked flints were recovered from its upper level and from the immediate vicinity. To the east, wall foundation F9 appeared to continue over a pair of parallel linear features, aligned NE–SW, neither of which were excavated further. That to the west (F10) contained much loose, angular stone rubble, some of it pitched, and may represent a wall foundation or wall collapse into a ditch. The darker clay soil deposit with fewer stones and sherds of Iron Age pottery, immediately to the east (F14), may represent the fill of an associated ditch, possibly a later re-cut of F10.

From this pair of archaeological features eastwards to the junction with Trench E, the natural bedrock or its masking of clay and weathered rubble were apparently largely undisturbed. Another sondage was made into the bedrock along this stretch to clarify its nature. At the base of the topsoil, about 5m west of the junction with Trench E, a spread of cobbles and small pitched stone crossed the trench on an approximate NE–SW alignment, possibly representing an earlier alignment of the public footpath which crosses the field today.

The only other feature of apparently human origin encountered in Trench B was part of another linear ditch (F11) cut into bedrock, about 5m east of the junction with Trench E. This ditch, aligned approximately NE–SW and almost 3m wide, was partly excavated and contained a stony red-brown soil fill, but there were no associated finds.

Trench D, was excavated at almost 90° to B and extended almost 50m north, into the area of geophysical survey. In the southern half of the trench a pair of linear features, aligned approximately NE–SW, were not excavated but appear to represent a ditch (F19) accompanied by a bank or wall foundation (F20). Alternatively, these two parallel features may represent a rubble-filled ditch and its adjacent re-cut, in the manner suggested for F10 and F14 in Trench B above. A smaller pit-type feature (F18) was encountered a little further north, but not excavated further. Further north again, a broad band of disturbance over 3m wide contained post-medieval tile, pottery, charcoal and coal fragments (F12 & F13). This was aligned approximately E–W but not excavated; what appears to have been a tree hole (F16) was also seen immediately alongside these features to the north. Along the remaining *c.* 30m of the trench the bedrock, or the deposit which masks it in places, was exposed. Only one other possible archaeological feature, part of a small pit (F15), was seen in this section of the trench, the northern end of which was disturbed and partly hidden by the extensive root system of an adjacent mature ash tree.

Trench E was also excavated at almost right angles to Trench B, to provide a further sample of the geophysical survey area C1. Solid bedrock or its weathered surface was seen throughout the trench. A linear feature (F22) aligned almost N–S along the axis of the trench from its north end appeared to be of natural origin, possibly an infilled fissure within the limestone.

4.2 Trenches F and G (Fig. 3)

These two trenches were excavated and examined following the procedure adopted for Trenches A–E, with the objective of testing the geophysical results obtained in survey area C2 and the adjacent area to the south.

Less than half of **Trench F** was subjected to manual cleaning and detailed recording following machine excavation, although it was possible to see from the latter that the solid bedrock, or a weathered horizon of clay soil and stone rubble immediately above it, was present throughout the trench at no more than 0.40m below the modern field surface. Most of the effort of manual

cleaning was concentrated in the central section of the trench in an attempt to locate two linear geophysical anomalies. Neither were convincingly identified although a small rock-cut feature (F23) was seen and partially excavated close to one geophysical anomaly. Also in its vicinity were a scatter of flint flakes and implements, and areas of cobbling or pitched stone rubble which may have been man-made formations.

Trench G was examined in a manner rather similar to F, in that only the central section was manually cleaned and recorded. Here, the only archaeological evidence comprised a broad, rock-cut linear feature complex (F24 – F26), over 4m wide and possibly representing an intersection of two (or more) ditches. These were not excavated, although a few sherds of medieval pottery were recovered from one (F25), along with later material of 18th- or 19th-century date.

5.0 Interpretation and Discussion

At first sight this evaluation has not produced results which suggest any great density or coherence of surviving archaeological remains. Those recognised were sparsely distributed, and considerable lengths of the trial trenches revealed no more than the subsoil cover above bedrock or a natural weathered stony clay horizon. Analysis of the excavation results in combination with those obtained by geophysical survey, together with the use of map evidence, does, however, permit some degree of interpretation of former settlement and land use (Fig. 3).

5.1 Post-Medieval

Evidence for land use in the recent past was perhaps most apparent from the results obtained. The existing fields of permanent pasture showed few signs of former land-use patterns in the form of surviving earthworks, although there were traces of earlier field boundaries in the larger field immediately to the north of Field Farm (Fig. 2). Some of these almost certainly correspond with divisions recorded on 19th-century estate maps and earlier editions of the large scale Ordnance Survey sheets covering this area. Two former E–W divisions are depicted on Figure 3, terminating east at a N–S boundary. Slight surface earthworks are still visible in places, although little beyond a stone scatter just below the topsoil was seen where these boundaries were intersected by the evaluation trenches. The southern E–W boundary seems to be reflected by a parallel geophysical anomaly, albeit slightly displaced to the north. Further south, the position and alignment of the wall foundation F9 at the junction of Trenches B and D, suggests the former presence of another parallel E–W field boundary which had evidently disappeared prior to an estate map of 1818 (Somerset County Record Office DD/ BT 19/329). Several sherds of 18th-century pottery and some clay pipe stems were found among or close to these wall foundations. The more northerly field boundary is marked by two mature trees and two sub-circular geophysical anomalies which could represent former tree-holes.

Two other relatively modern features are paths depicted on the 19th-century maps, one of which is still a right of way today. These appear to have been located fairly closely as geophysical anomalies in the survey area C1, although they are not currently visible on the surface of the field. One other feature apparently relating to the post-medieval land use is a large pit-type complex located in Trench D. Only the surface fills of this multiple feature (F12, F13 & F16) were seen, but it corresponds fairly closely with a large geophysical anomaly in this position. The smaller pit (F16) here may be part of another tree-hole marking the former E–W field boundary at this point. The status of two other similar anomalies to the west was not established but their alignment corresponds with the earlier field boundary here.

In the field to the east, assessed by geophysical survey area C2 and Trenches F and G (Fig. 3), there was no cartographic evidence for earlier land division. A linear geophysical anomaly, which could not be clearly verified in the trial trenching, is aligned parallel with the two existing field boundaries to the east and west. This anomaly and perhaps another to the east, which was also not located in Trench F, may represent earlier field divisions of pre-19th-century date. In Trench G the large ditch-type features (F24 and F25) contained medieval and post-medieval pottery

sherds and could also represent elements of post-medieval land division. South of the evaluation trenches the faint surface traces of ridge-and-furrow cultivation on a N–S alignment were observed, parallel with the present east and west field boundaries. Neither existing field is known to have been cultivated during the current ownership of Field Farm, although earlier episodes of arable farming can be postulated. The topsoil/subsoil division is relatively well marked in profile, suggesting that no ploughing to the base of those horizons – below 0.30m depth – has taken place for many years. Within these levels a fair scatter of pottery, glass, tile and other fragmentary rubbish could have been introduced through manuring. Most of this is of 18th- and 19th-century date, although small, well-abraded sherds of medieval pottery were also present in small quantities.

5.2 Prehistoric

The evidence for much earlier phases of land use here is more tenuous and difficult to interpret as a coherent pattern from the results of this evaluation. Of potentially the greatest significance was a set of geophysical anomalies and excavated features, located in the western half of the survey area C1 and Trenches B, D and E (Fig. 3). Ditches F11 and F19/20 may be linked with a Y-shaped geophysical anomaly to the north, and possibly another separate feature beyond. In Trench B a similar ditch (F10/F14) close to the junction with Trench D, which contained several sherds of Iron Age pottery, may also be part of this complex. Together, these features may be part of a series of enclosures marking the site of an Iron Age farmstead.

At the west end of Trench B part of another feature (F21) was the focus for a scatter of flint flakes and implements; these suggest an earlier phase of prehistoric activity on or near the evaluation site. Other flints were recorded as a light scatter from several other trenches, and another small concentration was found in Trench F associated with cobbling and one small rock-cut feature (F23). Finally, at the west end of Trench A areas of cobbling and pitched stone associated with a group of rock-cut post-holes (F1–F7) are potentially of prehistoric origin. No datable objects were found in close association here, however, and their dating must remain open.

5.3 Summary

In essence, two principal phases of human activity can be identified at Field Farm from this evaluation. The latest relates primarily to agricultural activities and land division in the past two centuries or so. Some of the boundary features can be verified with reference to early map evidence. Traces of ridge-and-furrow cultivation in the eastern field, however, and occasional small sherds of very abraded medieval pottery, are relics of earlier episodes of cultivation. A handful of similarly abraded Romano-British potsherds hint at even earlier exploitation. In this context, although no contemporary features were identified, the existence of the major Romano-British settlement nearby at Fosse Lane should be noted (Fig. 1). The apparent absence of any occupation or structural features of that date at Field Farm suggests that there was no extension of the Fosse Lane settlement this far westwards, although the area is likely to have been occupied by arable or pasture fields relating directly to the township and its inhabitants.

Perhaps the most significant archaeological potential at Field Farm relates to a possible Iron Age settlement focus in the western field. Although the evidence is relatively slight, both the geophysical indicators and the excavation samples point tentatively to at least one substantial ditched enclosure, within which occupation evidence may still be preserved. A far more extensive exposure of subsoil levels would be required for a fuller exploration of these remains, and understanding of their character and significance. In a local context the presence of an Iron Age farmstead here, should this prove to be a correct interpretation of these remains, would not be unexpected. The site itself is well drained and lies close to a local water supply – a spring or well just to the south of the modern farm, overlooking a shallow valley which continues north down to the deeper valley of the River Sheppey.

In the wider locality, a series of recent archaeological evaluations have identified other potential foci of Iron Age settlement. One may lie benath part of the Fosse Lane Roman town, and what seems to be a separate site was identified just to the north of Cannard's Grave on the fringes of the Roman settlement (Leach 1990b). Native Iron Age settlements of this type are likely to be the background from which Roman Shepton Mallet developed, and would thus be of especial significance to an understanding of the town's origins.

The evidence for earlier prehistoric activity at Field Farm is more difficult to interpret and should, once again, be considered in the light of discoveries made elsewhere in other recent evaluations and excavations (e.g. Leach 1991). Prehistoric flint implements and flakes of predominantly Neolithic character have been recovered widely in the vicinity of Shepton Mallet, and notably around Fosse Lane where most archaeological investigation has taken place. Little of this material has yet been related to coherent structural features or other remains, although the density of the material indicates that real occupation sites are to be expected in the locality as a whole. The Field Farm evidence fits into this pattern, although once again the identification of specific archaeological features with flint assemblages is uncertain. The relative sparsity of later human activity in this particular area may, however, be an advantage in isolating evidence of this earlier period, should opportunities to examine more extensive areas arise.

6.0 Implications and Recommendations

The recommendations arising from the evaluation are made with reference to the demonstrable archaeological resource identified at Field Farm, local ground conditions, and the likely impact of proposals for development and construction works on an extensive scale. The latter, including both foundation and service trench works, are liable to reach, and in places penetrate into, solid bedrock. Archaeological deposits and features, where present, survive at or immediately below that level, principally where they are cut into bedrock or levels just above it. The zone of maximum archaeological sensitivity will be at this horizon (0.20m and downwards beneath the modern turf) and within the man-made features penetrating bedrock. No specific assessment of the impact of development proposals is made in this report, but wherever extensive construction works are envisaged any surviving archaeological remains are likely to be severely affected overall, and in particular instances completely destroyed.

In particular, the two stages of evaluation at Field Farm have identified one area where potentially significant and sensitive archaeological remains are most likely to survive, namely the area of the suspected Iron Age settlement in Trenches B, D and E and the survey area C1 (Fig. 3). Elsewhere, the evidence of post-medieval land use is already well understood and of low archaeological value. Other evidence of prehistoric or later occupation or exploitation in the area is sparse and its extent or significance difficult to assess from the data obtained. The likelihood of archaeological remains within other areas evaluated only by geophysical survey (Geophysical Surveys Report 11/91), or indeed beyond, cannot be ruled out, although on present evidence appears relatively low.

In these circumstances only the area of potential Iron Age settlement is identified as that within which some additional provision for archaeology should be made (Fig. 2). It is difficult to define precisely the extent of this area, particularly to the south where further remains of potential significance should be anticipated beyond the bounds of the evaluations. Options for additional archaeological provision are proposed as follows:

i) A design option whereby the Iron Age settlement site and its locality are excluded from development of any kind. This would ensure the site's preservation intact, although some further exploratory work would be required to establish its full extent.

ii) Archaeological excavation of those archaeological features and deposits which coincide with specific areas of below-ground disturbance. This would be subject to the detailed development specifications

and their suspected impact, although in practice this latter is not always easy to anticipate with precision.

iii) Total area archaeological excavation of man-made features and deposits (or a substantial sample thereof) throughout the entire area of predicted significant archaeological remains to be affected in any way by the proposed development. Some further evaluation to determine the full extent of these remains would be required as a prelude to such excavations.

Of these, the first will normally be the preferred option, to guarantee the survival and preservation of the archaeological remains *in situ*. Should all or a part of the area be proposed for development it is recommended that the third option be applied well in advance to that portion to be affected. In the circumstances of a well-formulated archaeological excavation and recording programme the evidence recovered will be most fully interpretable, while ensuring a degree of preservation through the recovery of finds and other physical data relating to the site and its morphology. Exercise of the second option is likely to be less satisfactory in this respect and still risks the loss of further archaeological evidence as the development proceeds or specifications change. One further option – the maintenance of an archaeological watching brief during development – is not proposed here. In practice this is rarely productive of coherent results or an adequate record of the archaeological resource on sites of this type.

7.0 Acknowledgments

We are grateful to Mr and Mrs D. Vagg of Field Farm and to Mr Tim Gray of Smith-Woolley for liaison and support in the course of this evaluation. The field project was supervised by Lucie Dingwall with a team from B.U.F.A.U. comprising Richard Broomhead, Charles and Nancy Hollinrake, Alex Jones, Martin Lightfoot, Luigi Signorelli and Nicola Trafford, and monitored by Peter Leach. The report was illustrated by Mark Breedon and Caroline Gait, edited by Simon Buteux and produced by Lucie Dingwall and Ann Humphries.

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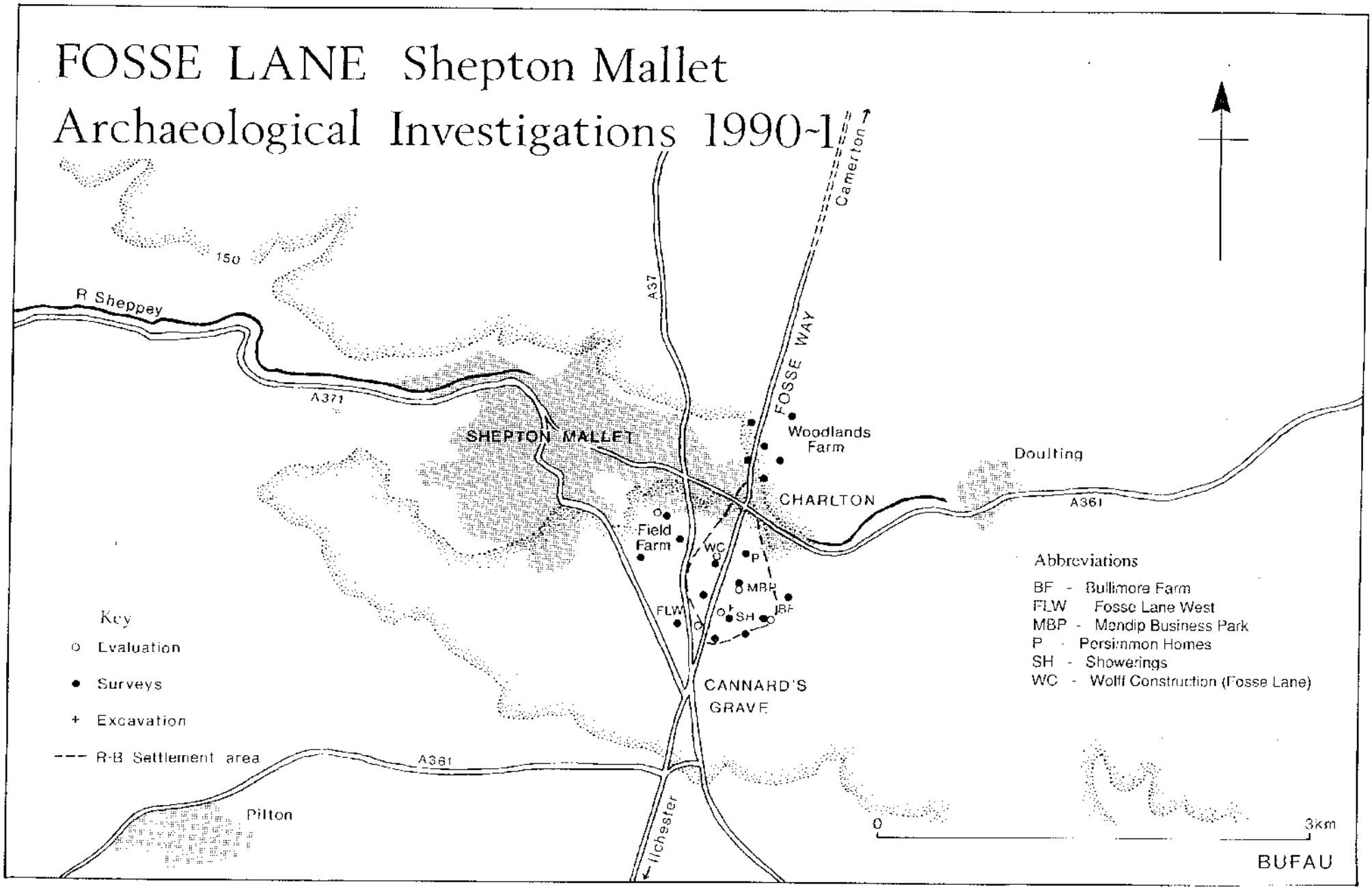
FOSSE LANE Shepton Mallet
Archaeological Investigations 1990-1
150
R Sheppey
A371
A37
Camerton
FOSSE WAY
SHEPTON MALLET
Woodlands Farm
Doulting
CHARLTON
A361
Field Farm
WC
P
MBP
FLW
SH
BF
CANNARD'S GRAVE
Key
Evaluation
Surveys
Excavation
R-B Settlement area
Abbreviations
BF - Bullimore Farm
FLW Fosse Lane West
MBP - Mendip Business Park
P - Persimmon Homes
SH - Showerings
WC - Wolff Construction (Fosse Lane)
A361
Pilton
Ilchester
0
3km
BUFAU

Fig. 1

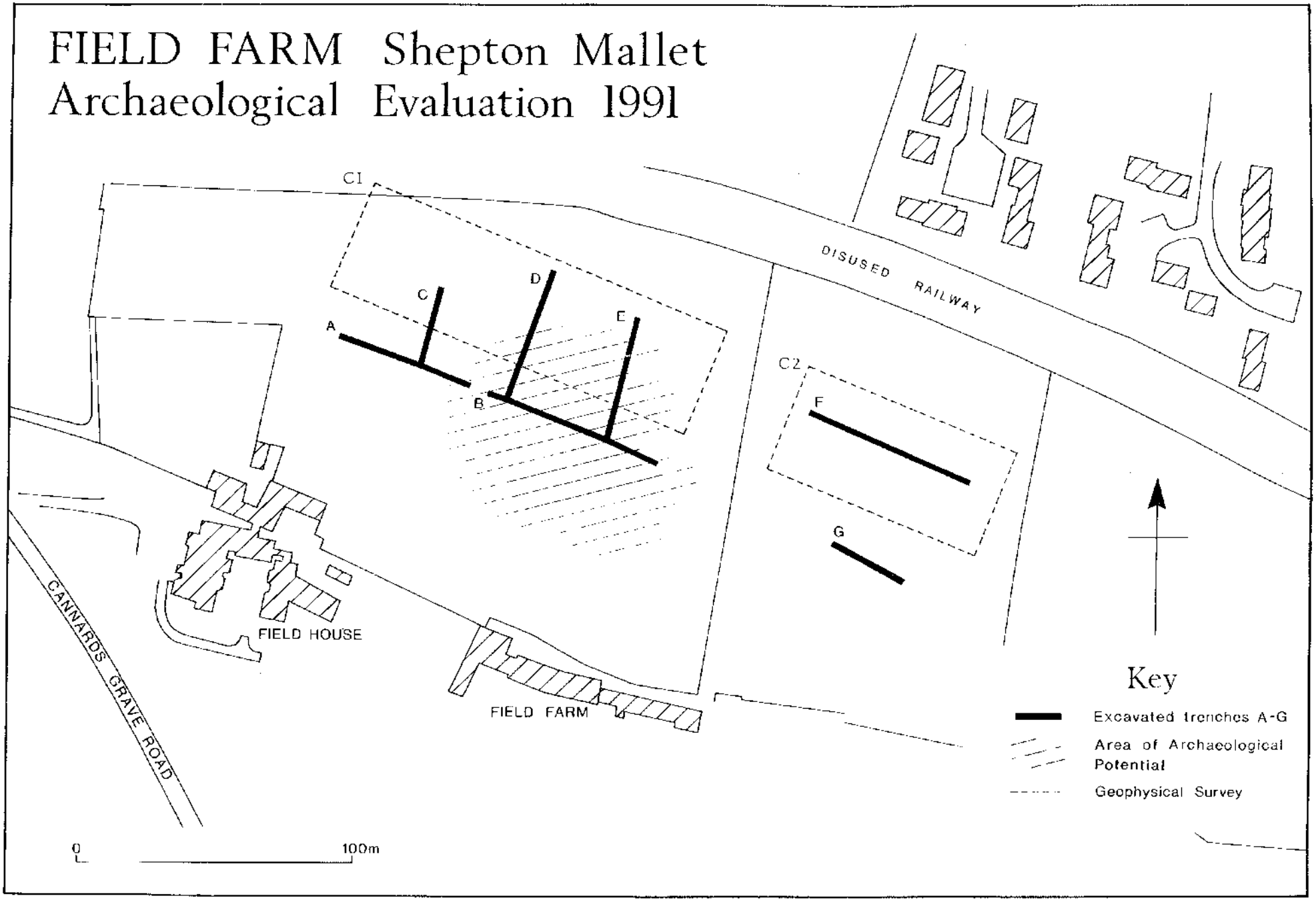
FIELD FARM Shepton Mallet
Archaeological Evaluation 1991
C1
C2
A
B
C
D
E
F
G
DISUSED RAILWAY
FIELD HOUSE
FIELD FARM
CANNARDS GRAVE ROAD
0
100m
Key
Excavated trenches A-G
Area of Archaeological Potential
Geophysical Survey

FIG 2

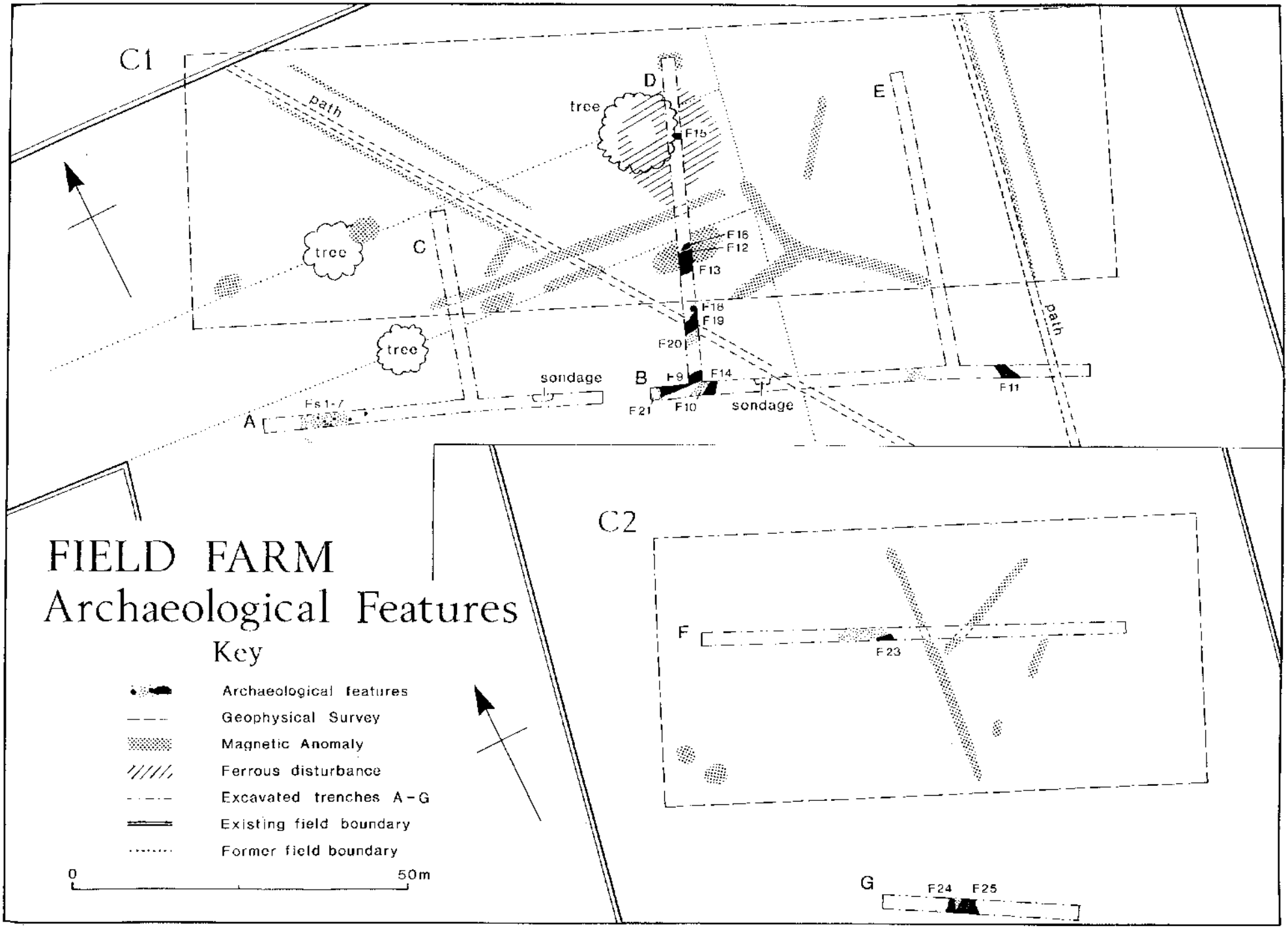
C1
path
tree
D
F15
E
tree
C
F16
F12
F13
F18
F19
F20
path
tree
sondage
B
F9
F14
F11
A
Fs1-7
F21
F10
sondage
C2
F
F23
G
F24
F25
FIELD FARM
Archaeological Features
Key
Archaeological features
Geophysical Survey
Magnetic Anomaly
Ferrous disturbance
Excavated trenches A-G
Existing field boundary
Former field boundary
0
50m

FIG. 3