

Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit

Report No. 168

An Archaeological Excavation Near Feltham Farm  
Bourton, Dorset, 1991

Interim Report by Laurence Jones  
with a contribution by Lynne Bevan

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#### Introduction

In April 1991 B.U.F.A.U. was commissioned by Somerset County Council to undertake a rescue excavation near Feltham Farm, Bourton, Dorset (N.G.R. ST77763036) the work being funded by English Heritage. The excavations were carried out prior to construction associated with the A303 Wincanton to Zeals road improvements.

#### The Site

The excavation site lay just south of the village of Bourton (Fig.1) situated on a northeast-facing slope overlooking the River Stour, some 300 metres to the northeast. Immediately to the east was a former public-right-of-way between Bourton and Silton (Fig.2). The site was first recognised after topsoil stripping in advance of road construction. It was identified by scatters of iron slag, medieval pottery and what was thought to be limestone flux material, which was later found to be natural shale, covering an area of approximately 15 x 20 metres; an overall area of approximately 65 x 15 metres, centred on the finds scatter, was available for excavation. Other adjacent areas within the road corridor had already been severely disturbed by the passage of heavy earthmoving machinery. This available area was bounded to the north by a recently-dug, 'V'-shaped drainage ditch, 1 metre in depth. Sherds of medieval pottery and iron slag could be seen in the upper levels of the ditch section. Further to the east, near the public right of way, what appeared to be a road surface was visible in the drainage ditch section for a length of more than 20 metres (Fig.3).

## **Methodology**

Spoil from the drainage ditch recently dug to the north had been dumped and spread across the site. A JCB mechanical excavator was employed to clear this overburden from an area of 8 x 35 metres. Subsequently an additional area, 7 x 11 metres, adjoining to the south, was also cleared. A trench, aligned north-south, and measuring 1.5 x 10 metres, was also dug through the ditch spoil 20 metres to the west (Fig.2).

## **Description**

### **Area 1**

After machining, the area was cleaned manually. A spread of mottled, blue-grey, silty clay(1001) was discernible occupying an area of approximately 15 sq metres in the centre of the machined zone and appeared to continue under the southern edge of the excavation. This clay was cut by a modern land drain (F1). The blue-grey silty clay was removed by hand and was seen to vary in depth, from between 0.10m in the east to 0.25m in the west. It contained sherds of medieval pottery and lumps of iron smithing slag. Beneath 1001 were two spreads of limestone rubble (F2, F3) approximately at right-angles to one another. F2, aligned roughly northwest-southeast, measured 3 x 1.5 metres and was cut by the modern drainage ditch to the north. Large amounts of smithing slag and some burnt stone and charcoal (1006) were concentrated over the rubble spread. F3, aligned northeast-southwest, measured 7 x 1.5 metres and, again, was defined by an overlying quantity of smithing slag and burnt stone with some charcoal (1006). These two spreads of rubble lay directly above the natural, yellow-blue clay (1003) and may represent severely truncated hearth bases.

Area 1 was extended south to expose more blue-grey silty clay (1001), removal of which exposed a linear feature (F4), 0.80m wide and aligned northwest-southeast. The feature, 0.10m deep, was flat-bottomed and filled with a greyish silt (1007), containing sherds of medieval pottery. Two small concentrations of iron smithing slag were noted, pressed into the natural clay (1003), some 6 metres east of F4.

## Area 2

No archaeological deposits were encountered in this trench. Natural clay was contacted 0.35m below ground level. A sondage was dug at the north end of this trench, and contacted natural shale at 0.90m below present ground level.

## The Finds by Lynne Bevan

### Pottery

A total of 438 sherds was excavated from three contexts. With the exception of six blue and white glazed Post-Medieval sherds and four green glazed sherds of 16th/17th century date, the assemblage is Medieval and can be broadly assigned to the 13th to 14th centuries, although some material of possible earlier date, the 12th to 14th centuries, appeared in context 1007.

Due to the absence of datable contexts and the high incidence of abrasion among the ceramic material, which has in many cases removed glaze and other applied decoration, it was not considered worthwhile at this stage to seek close parallels with other local assemblages, though fabric comparisons must later be sought. However, Laverstock kiln products, which are discussed below, have been identified among the assemblage (Musty 1969).

Unglazed sandy coarsewares, of varying micaceous content and probable local origin, predominate, comprising 70.4% of the total assemblage, the forms present being cooking vessels, many exhibiting signs of sooting, and, to a lesser extent, jugs, several jug handles bearing incised slash-mark decoration. A rim sherd from a burnt cooking pot in a heavily-gritted, originally pinkish-brown fabric appears in context 1007. This bears traces of scratch-mark decoration of a type common from the 12th to the 14th centuries, the most likely source being the Laverstock kiln near Salisbury. Wincanton is well within its area of distribution.

An additional Laverstock product has also been identified in the form of fragments of a jug in a hard-fired, reduced grey fabric with spotted green

glaze. This form has a distinctive thumb-impressed decoration around the entire circumference of the base. Other green-glazed forms are present in the form of jugs, a pitcher and the base of a cooking pot with a heavily-sooted exterior, perhaps accidentally splashed with green glaze during the manufacturing process.

#### Pottery & Other Ceramics

| <u>Context</u> | <u>Pottery</u> | <u>Tile</u> | <u>Clay Pipe</u> |
|----------------|----------------|-------------|------------------|
| 1000           | 73             | 4           | -                |
| 1001           | 355            | 2           | 1                |
| 1007           | 10             | -           | -                |

Four fragments of ceramic field drain were excavated from context 1000 and two fragments of ceramic tile and a clay pipe stem from context 1001.

#### Slag and Ferrous Objects

A total of 45.35kg of smithing slag and 86g of tap slag was excavated from three contexts, along with a one bowl-shaped iron object encrusted with slag and corrosion-product from context 1006. Metalworking-related finds included a possible fragment of ceramic crucible and a lump of copper alloy, both from context 1001. Traces of metal residue were found on a sherd of coarse pottery, also from context 1001.

#### Slag Weight Table

| <u>Context</u> | <u>Smithing Slag</u> | <u>Tap Slag</u> |
|----------------|----------------------|-----------------|
| 1000           | 4.98 kg              |                 |
| 1001           | 30.78 kg             | 0.86 kg         |
| 1006           | 9.59 kg              |                 |
|                | Total: 45.35 kg      | Total: 0.86 kg  |

Three nails were excavated from context 1000 and fragments of several nails and ferrous objects including a key, part of a sickle blade and a ?knife blade fragment came from context 1001.

### Flint

Prehistoric finds were represented in the form of two struck flint flakes, one, an undiagnostic piece, was an unstratified surface find and the other, a possible early Neolithic flake, was from context 1000.

### Interpretation and Discussion

The earliest features on the site appear to be the two stone spreads F2 and F3, which probably represent severely truncated smithing- hearth bases of 13th to 14th century date; the linear feature F4 may also be associated with metalworking during this period. Large amounts of iron smithing slag were recovered from the site, together with 13th and 14th century pottery, charcoal and some iron smithing products, supporting the idea of fairly intensive smithing being practiced on or near the site. The presence of a single lump of tap slag and part of a possible crucible may indicate iron smelting activity in the area, although, no features confirming this were located during the excavation. Medieval smithing activity appears to extend to the north of the excavations, beyond the new road corridor, and survival of further metalworking-related features may be anticipated in this area.

The presence of a possible road surface to the east, together with a well-established right-of-way may indicate the presence of a medieval lane, running between Bourton and Silton, adjacent to the site. An unusual kink in the former field boundary to the southeast may be related to an access way from the smithing area onto this lane.

### Acknowledgements

The excavation was directed by Laurence Jones with the assistance of Mark Breedon, Lucie Dingwall, Sally Finter, Martin Lightfoot, and Luigi Signorelli. The finds were processed and reported on by Lynne Bevan. The project was monitored by Iain Ferris who also edited this report. The figures were drawn by the author, Mark Breedon and Caroline Gait. Thanks are also due to Richard Carter (Site Engineer, MRM Partners), Aidan McConville (Project Manager, Wimpey Construction), Peter McCrone (Archaeological Field Officer, Somerset County Council), and Charles and Nancy Hollinrake.

Laurence Jones

June 1991

### References

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- Tylecote, R.F 1981      The Medieval Smith and His Methods. C.B.A Research Report No.40, 42-50.

# FELTHAM FARM 1991 Bourton Dorset

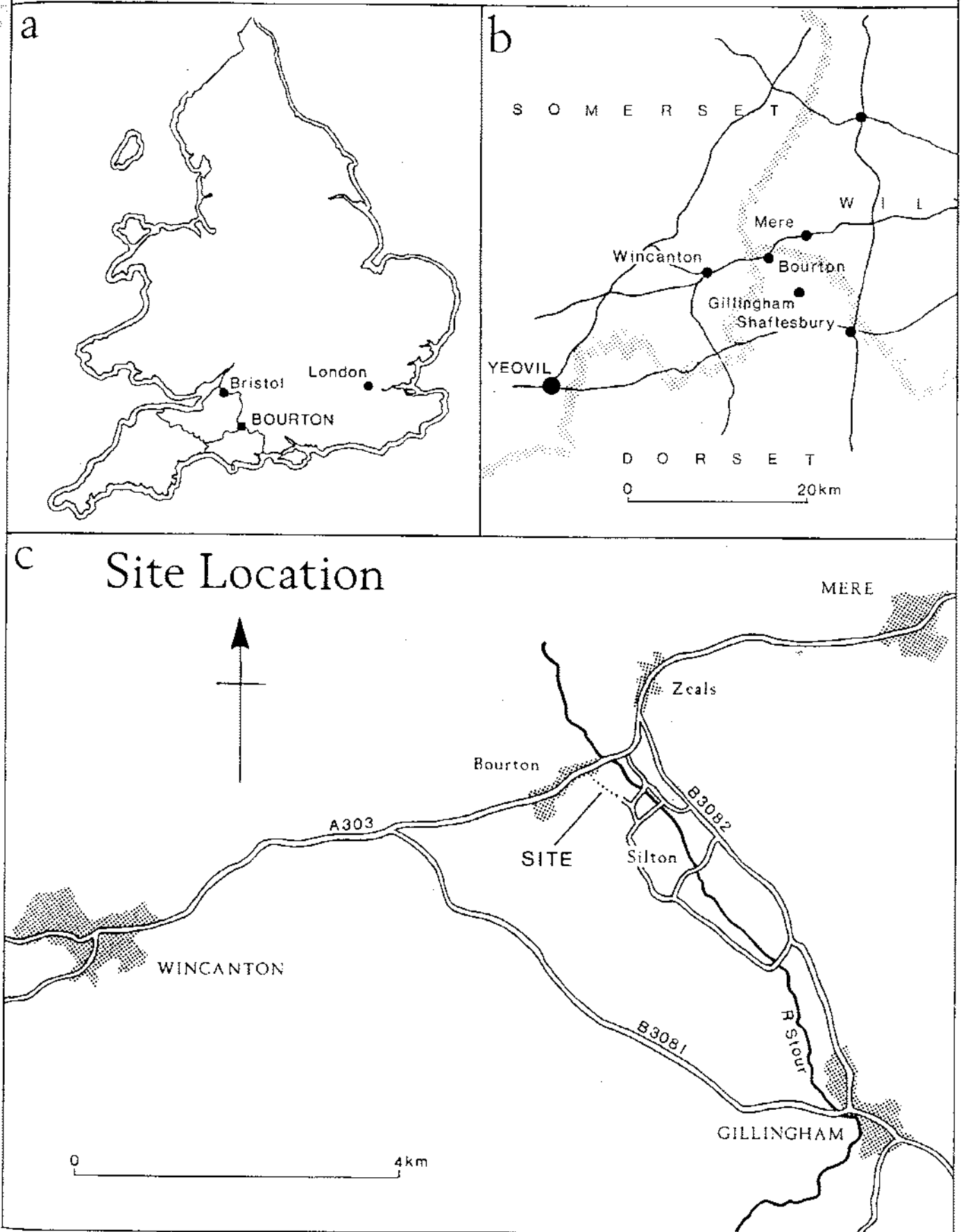


Fig. 1



# FELTHAM FARM 1991. Bourton, Dorset

## Location of Excavation

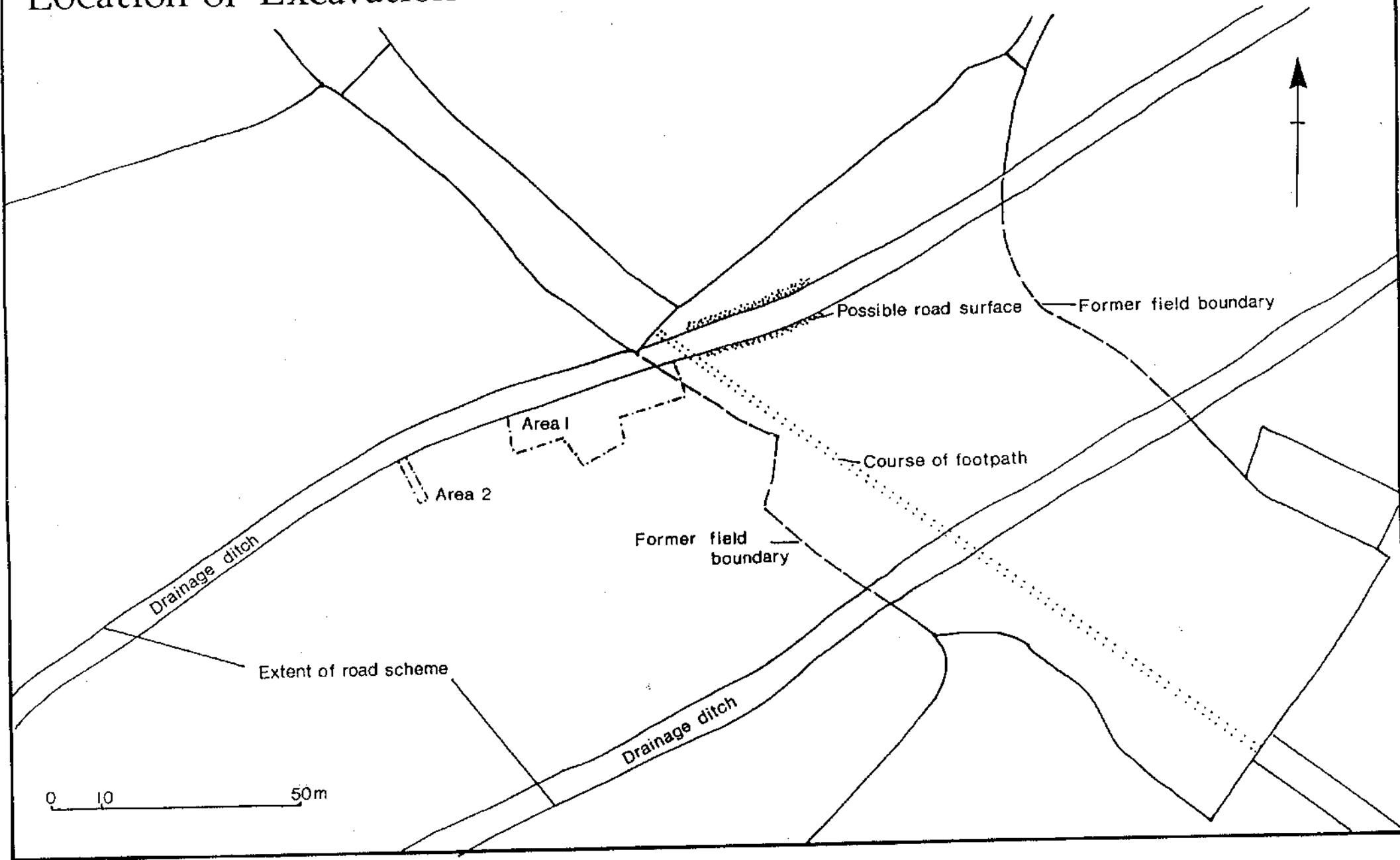


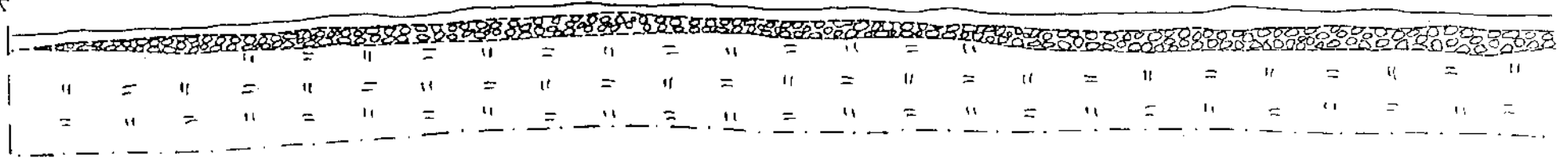
Fig. 2

# FELTHAM FARM 1991. Bourton, Dorset

## Drainage Ditch Section

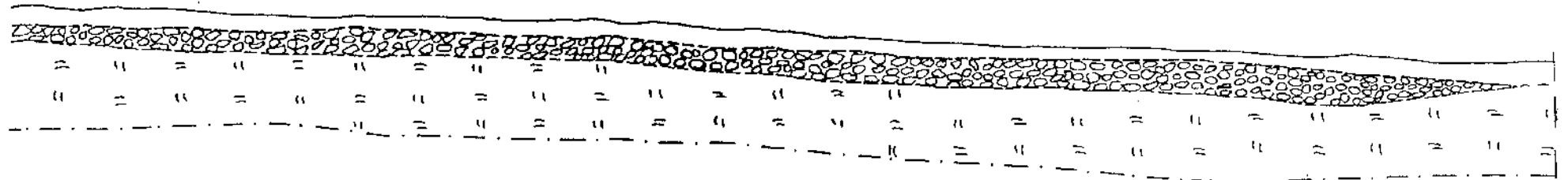
W 108.84m A.O.D

π



108.84m π E

π



Natural clay



Road surface



Fig. 3

# FELTHAM FARM 1991 Bourton, Dorset

## Plan of Area 1

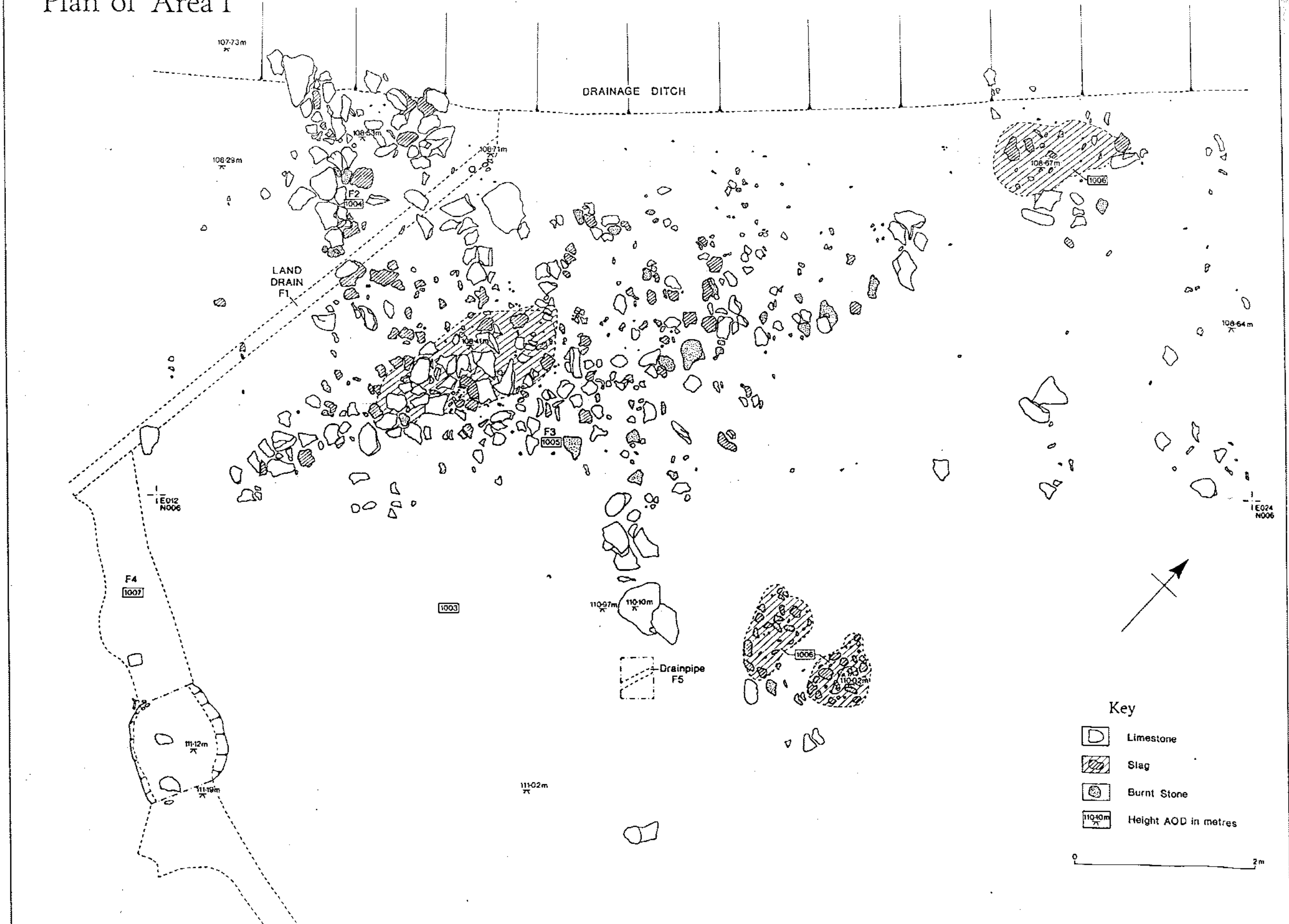


Fig. 4