

Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit

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**Wroxeter Hotel, Wroxeter:  
An Archaeological Evaluation 1991**

by  
Simon Buteux and Peter Leach

For further information please contact:  
Simon Buteux (Manager), Peter Leach or Iain Ferris (Assistant Directors)  
Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit  
The University of Birmingham  
Edgbaston  
Birmingham B15 2TT  
Tel: 021 414 5513

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# Wroxeter Hotel, Wroxeter: An Archaeological Evaluation 1991

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## 1.0: Introduction

This report documents the results and implications of an archaeological evaluation undertaken within the grounds of the Wroxeter Hotel, Wroxeter, Shropshire. In December 1991 Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit (BUFAU) were commissioned by Mr and Mrs A Rowley, owners of the hotel, to carry out the assessment in accordance with a brief provided by Shropshire County Council and subject to a scheduled monument consent granted by the Secretary of the State for the Environment. The works undertaken were required to assess the implications of proposals for the erection of an extension to the rear of the hotel and for a new drainage and soakaway system.

## 2.0: The Site

Wroxeter Hotel is situated close to the southern perimeter of the Roman town of Wroxeter (Viroconium), the entire defended area of which is scheduled as an Ancient Monument (Shropshire No. 32), according to the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act 1979 (as amended) Section 2; and lies adjacent to the parish church of St. Andrew at NGR SJ 563082 (Figs. 1 and 2). The area of the evaluation was contained within the rear garden of the hotel, now under grass but formerly an orchard. No archaeological investigations or discoveries are documented from here, but can be cited at several adjacent localities.

Numerous archaeological excavations have been carried out in Wroxeter during the 19th and 20th centuries, principally concentrated upon the central insulae of the Roman town. The hotel lies at the southwest corner of the former town within the medieval and modern village of Wroxeter. This settlement has obscured many features of the earlier town, revealed with remarkable clarity elsewhere through aerial photography. Recent research into documentary sources, topography and the results of such archaeological excavations known to have taken place in this area have

highlighted its particular importance and potential for further discoveries (Barker 1990; Bassett 1990; Moffett 1989).

The main street through the village which now curves round the west end of the church does not follow its original route, and throughout the medieval period it took a more direct route to the east of the church, following a Roman, and indeed possibly pre-Roman, path (Bassett 1990, 11). A second Roman road, coming in from the southwest and crossing the river just south of the city, would have passed to the south of where the church now stands and would have joined the north-south road approximately where the Wroxeter Hotel is now situated; part of this route still survives as a deep hollow-way to Boat House Cottage. The projected routes of the two roads are indicated on Fig. 2 by means of red dashed lines. The pre-existence of this road system probably explains the orientation of the church which, at 23 degrees north of east, is well off a true orientation, and was presumably aligned on the roads. Wroxeter Hotel is thus situated at both an important crossroads in the Roman city and at the centre of the medieval settlement.

St. Andrew's church, immediately to the west of the hotel, is important both architecturally and historically. The earliest surviving part of the church, part of the north wall of the nave constructed entirely of re-used Roman masonry, dates perhaps to the 7th or 8th century (Moffett 1990, 8). In the Anglo-Saxon period it was an 'old minster', possessing a very large parish and staffed by a community of priests, and as such is likely to mark a major ecclesiastical, administrative and economic centre. It is possible, as Bassett has suggested, that the church has even earlier origins, and was founded by the remnants of the Roman population after the abandonment of the central areas of the city, prior to the Anglo-Saxon takeover of the area (Bassett 1990, 12).

Limited archaeological excavations undertaken around the church by BUFAU in 1985-6 (Moffett 1989) are the nearest recorded to the hotel, and encountered Roman features and deposits at between 1 and 2m beneath the present level of the churchyard (Fig. 2, D). Within what are now the hotel grounds to the north a much earlier discovery in 1827 uncovered what is still the finest mosaic pavement known at Wroxeter (Fox 1897, 135-6). This feature was probably a component of a major Roman building situated on the main street frontage (Fig. 2, B). The depth at which this mosaic was located is unknown, but a watching brief in 1981 of a house extension north of the church (Fig. 2, E) revealed Roman building remains within c.0.5m of the modern surface (Heather Bird, pers. comm.). The only other recorded excavation in the vicinity, by Thomas Wright in 1859 (Wright 1872, 100-101), revealed building foundations and Roman material on a site to the southwest, close to the town defences (Fig. 2, C).

### 3.0: Methodology

In accordance with the brief provided by Shropshire County Council and the programme approved in the scheduled monument consent, three hand-dug trenches were excavated and recorded. Trenches I and II (respectively 2 x 9m and 2 x 5m) were located to coincide with the east and south sides of the proposed hotel extension, while Trench III (2 x 10m) coincided with the proposed location of the soakaway (Fig. 3). In all instances the objective was to establish the presence and character of any significant archaeological features and deposits (effectively those of Medieval, Roman or earlier periods), while carrying out the minimum destructive excavation necessary to achieve this aim.

Written, drawn and photographic records were maintained for each trench, and artefacts were recovered from individually identified deposits, primarily for the purpose of dating the sequences uncovered and to assist in their interpretation. The information obtained by these procedures is considered adequate to provide a fair assessment of the archaeological evidence contained within the areas likely to be affected by the proposed development, and the basis for a set of recommendations for future management (7.0, below). The archive record and artefact

assemblage arising from the fieldwork will be lodged with the Borough Museum, Shrewsbury; copies of this report will be held by the Shropshire Sites and Monuments Record.

## 4.0: The Archaeology

### 4.1 Trench I (Fig. 4)

Of the three areas excavated the archaeological sequence in this trench proved to be the most complex. It was located to assess the impact of proposed new foundation works along the eastern perimeter of the existing hotel extension. The natural subsoil, a buff/orange silty sand, was exposed in limited areas, over 1.10m below the modern ground surface, where Roman period and later pits had been cut into it. Towards the eastern end of the trench this silty sand had an uneven capping of stiff buff/orange clay (1009) up to 0.50m thick. The clay was box-sectioned to determine whether it might be a man-made formation, possibly the remnants of a bank, but was found to be of natural origin. The subsoil sequence thus represented - a buff/orange silty sand patchily capped by a boulder clay - is commonly encountered elsewhere at Wroxeter (Roger White, pers. comm.).

Towards the centre and in the western half of the trench, where the overlying boulder clay was absent, the natural buff/orange silty sand was overlain by a thin, artefactually sterile layer of green/brown silty sand with a slight humic content (1014), possibly the disturbed surface of the natural sand or the remnant of soil formation on it. Above this, in the western half of the trench, a thin loamy soil (1008) of possible Roman date survived at a depth of approximately 0.75m below the modern ground surface (1008). This soil was cut by an irregular flat-bottomed scoop (F104), with a sterile silty sand fill (1013), of unknown date or function but quite possibly a natural disturbance.

In the eastern half of the trench the boulder clay was cut by two or three pits of Roman date (F102, F103 and F106). Although in no case fully exposed within the trench, the pits were of irregular shape. F102 and F103 had been cut by a later pit of post-medieval date (F101) which obscured the relationship between them; it is probable that they are simply two sides of the same pit. The fill of these pits, probably rubbish

pits, contained animal bone, the occasional iron nail, and a varied assemblage of Roman pottery of 2nd-century through to 4th-century date. A bronze radiate coin of Claudius II (268-70) was recovered from pit F103.

The Roman-period levels and pits were sealed across the whole trench by a humic and relatively stone-free soil (1002/1005), c.0.5m deep and containing a mixture of Roman, medieval and post-medieval pottery. This soil probably represents an accumulation resulting from centuries of cultivation and horticulture, activity which has apparently truncated the Roman-period features and deposits beneath. This cultivation soil was cut by a single post-medieval pit (F101), containing a mixture of artefactual material from the Roman period through to at least the 18th century. Pit and cultivation soil were in turn sealed by the modern topsoil (1001), containing a mix of material from the Roman period through to the 20th century, and the turf line (1000).

#### 4.2: Trench II (Fig. 5)

A smaller trench cut from the south wall of the existing hotel extension was positioned to assess the impact of foundations along the southern boundary of the proposed new extension. The sequence of deposits here replicated to some extent that in Trench I, although here the capping of boulder clay sealing the buff/orange silty sand subsoil was absent, and the thin sterile layer of green/brown sandy silt (2008) sealing the undisturbed natural sand was exposed across most of the base of the trench. This layer was cut by two shallow gullies (F201 and F202) of possibly Roman date towards the northern end of the trench, and overlain by a thin, probably severely truncated, Romano-British horizon (2009) at the southern end of the trench.

These features were overlain across the whole trench by an accumulation of humic soils up to 1m deep. Several horizons could be more or less clearly distinguished within this overburden. Layer 2004, 0.5m - 0.75m deep and containing a broad mix of Roman, medieval and post-medieval material, was very similar to 1005 in Trench I and very probably represents the same accumulation of cultivation soil. Above this layers 2002 and 2004 contained mortar, and in the latter case a dump of roof slates, perhaps

contemporary with the construction of the existing hotel extension, the whole being sealed by the modern topsoil and turf (2001 and 2000).

#### 4.3: Trench III (Fig. 5)

The third and largest trench was positioned towards the southeast corner of the garden to investigate the site for a proposed septic tank soakaway system. Once again, the presence of a very considerable accumulation of relatively recent topsoil and humic soil was the dominant feature. A succession of ill-defined deposits (3000 - 3003) were characterised by a mixture of finds from Roman to modern in date, including the most significant group of medieval pottery from the site. Several drainage features were encountered close to the lower limit of excavation, at c.1m below the modern surface, comprising (from west to east) a stone-lined drain F301, two earthenware drains F302 and F303, and a stone and brick rubble soakaway (F300). All of these features were aligned approximately northeast-southwest and were apparently of 19th-century date.

At this horizon the ground water table was encountered and it proved difficult to undertake the investigation of any deeper deposits or features. Post-medieval pottery was still being recovered from the lowest levels reached and neither Romano-British nor natural deposits or formations were encountered. Given the ground water level and the anticipated depth to which new drainage works are proposed, the continuation of excavation was not considered justifiable here.

#### 5.0: The Finds

The vast majority of all the finds were residual, with Roman material being found extensively in all contexts from Roman through to modern. The assemblage of Roman pottery covers a very broad sweep of dates and types, as might be anticipated from within the Roman city, from colour-coated 'military' wares through to Late Roman calcite-gritted wares. Severn Valley wares, Grey wares, Black Burnished wares, Nene Valley wares, mica-dusted wares, Samian, Mancetter-Hartshill mortaria, amphora, etc, are all extensively represented. Roman tile and brick is also present, although not in great quantities, and masonry fragments were notable

for their absence. A small collection of other miscellaneous Roman artefacts was recovered - glass, iron nails, spindle whorls, etc - including a bronze radiate coin of Claudius II.

A reasonably substantial group of medieval pottery was recovered, primarily from the 'cultivation soils' (1002/1005, 2003, 3001-3003) and notably from Trench III. With the exception of a possible sherd of Stamford ware, very little of the medieval material can be dated earlier than the 12th-13th centuries, and hand-made (?) post-Roman pottery - such as is recorded from the excavations at St. Andrew's church (Moffett 1989, 11-12) - was not noted during the brief inspection made of the material. In general, the medieval assemblage is in local fabrics and indistinguishable from contemporary assemblages from Shrewsbury (V. Buteux, pers. comm.), including cooking pots, green-glazed 'Shrewsbury ware' pitchers and splash-glazed jugs.

As elsewhere in Wroxeter, but in contrast with the surrounding landscape, bone preservation was good.

#### **6.0: Discussion**

The archaeological inferences which can be drawn from three evaluation trenches are necessarily limited and tentative. The general character of the remains, possible cultivation soils, drainage gullies and small 'rubbish' pits, does not suggest intensive exploitation of this part of the city in the Roman period, an inference strengthened by the relatively small quantity of building debris amongst the artefact assemblage. The 'rubbish' pits in Trench I suggest perhaps a 'backyard area', giving way to the south to an area within city defences which was perhaps never extensively developed and was used primarily for agricultural or horticultural purposes.

Evidence for the subsequent history of this part of Wroxeter is contained almost exclusively within the very considerable deposits of humic soil which seal the Roman levels in all three trenches. Within this overburden the great mixture of finds from all periods suggests that these deposits were created to some extent at the expense of preceding archaeological stratigraphy. This truncation process, affecting the Romano-

British horizons in Trenches I and II, will have been responsible for the incorporation of contemporary material - pottery, tile, animal bone, etc. - into the post-Roman overburden. Similarly, such a process probably accounts for the presence of medieval pottery in this soil, although no contemporary features or deposits of that period could be confidently identified.

The depth and character of the post-Roman soil overburden suggests deep and prolonged cultivation, with the depth of the accumulation apparently increasing somewhat downslope to the south. How much of this accumulation can be attributed to medieval settlement and cultivation is unclear, but the presence of 18th- and 19th-century material mixed with earlier remains virtually throughout, suggests that much of the soil formation process may have taken place within the last two centuries, perhaps relating to the use of land immediately surrounding the vicarage (now Wroxeter Hotel). This interpretation is perhaps reinforced by the depth of the probably 19th-century drainage features in Trench III, which are unlikely to have been set one metre or more into the ground at the time of their insertion.

#### **7.0: Implications and Recommendations**

By extrapolating the data from the three trenches it appears that the modern day lie of the land reflects approximately its natural configuration in this area, one metre or more beneath the overlying mantle of archaeological deposits and topsoil. This gentle downhill slope from north to south is reflected in the field immediately to the east, where the ground slopes into a small shallow valley which then continues downhill westwards towards the River Severn. The post-Roman overburden, recorded at its maximum in Trench III, becomes gradually but progressively shallower proceeding uphill northwards via Trench II to Trench I. While conditions may vary somewhat throughout the site, the impression is gained of better preserved archaeological features and deposits of Roman date buried beneath a decreasing overburden of post-medieval soil towards the northern end of the site, where, in Trench I, substantially intact Roman period deposits occur at a depth of 0.65m below the modern ground surface.

On the basis of these observations and the character and significance of the archaeological stratigraphy recorded in this evaluation, the following recommendations are proposed in the interests of safeguarding and managing the archaeological resource.

- i) Excavation works for the provision of foundations or services within areas east of the existing hotel extension can be undertaken to a depth not exceeding 0.65m below the existing ground surface (ie 53.82m AOD) without risk to significant archaeological remains.
- ii) Excavation works for the provision of foundations or services to the south of the existing hotel extension can be undertaken to a depth of 1.00m below the existing ground surface (ie 53.84m AOD) without risk to significant archaeological remains.
- iii) Excavation works for the provision of a septic tank soakaway system can be undertaken to a depth of 1.00m below the existing ground surface without risk to significant archaeological remains. In the area of Trench III this represents an absolute level of 52.36m AOD.
- iv) The below-ground removal of the foundations of structures to be demolished prior to redevelopment should be avoided or kept to a minimum.

## 9.0: References

- |               |      |                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|---------------|------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
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- v) The provision of foundations or services, may require further archaeological excavation and/or monitoring as a condition of a further scheduled monument consent for the development to proceed.

## 8.0: Acknowledgements

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# WROXETER HOTEL 1991

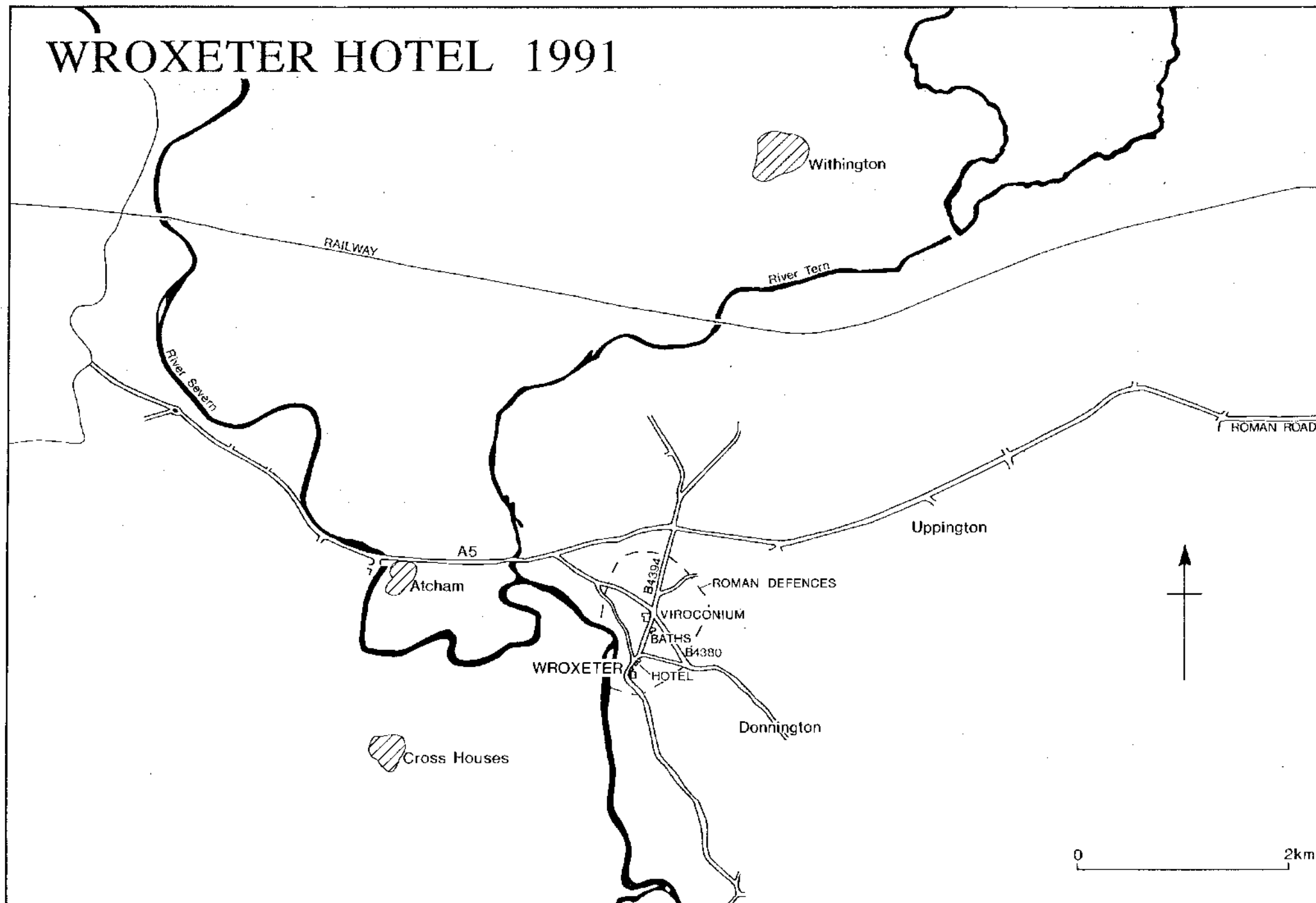


Fig. 1



# WROXETER HOTEL 1991

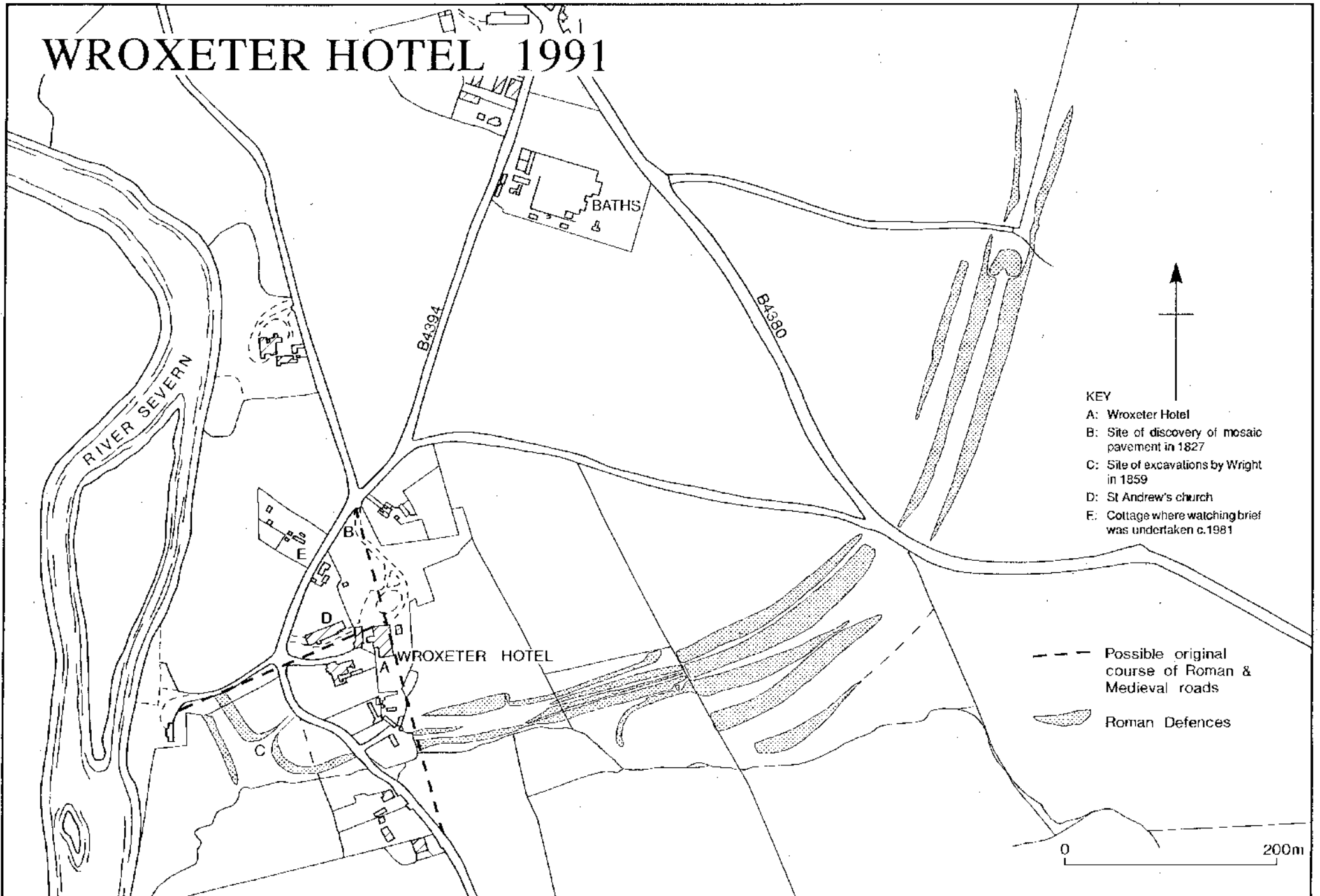


Fig. 2

# WROXETER HOTEL 1991

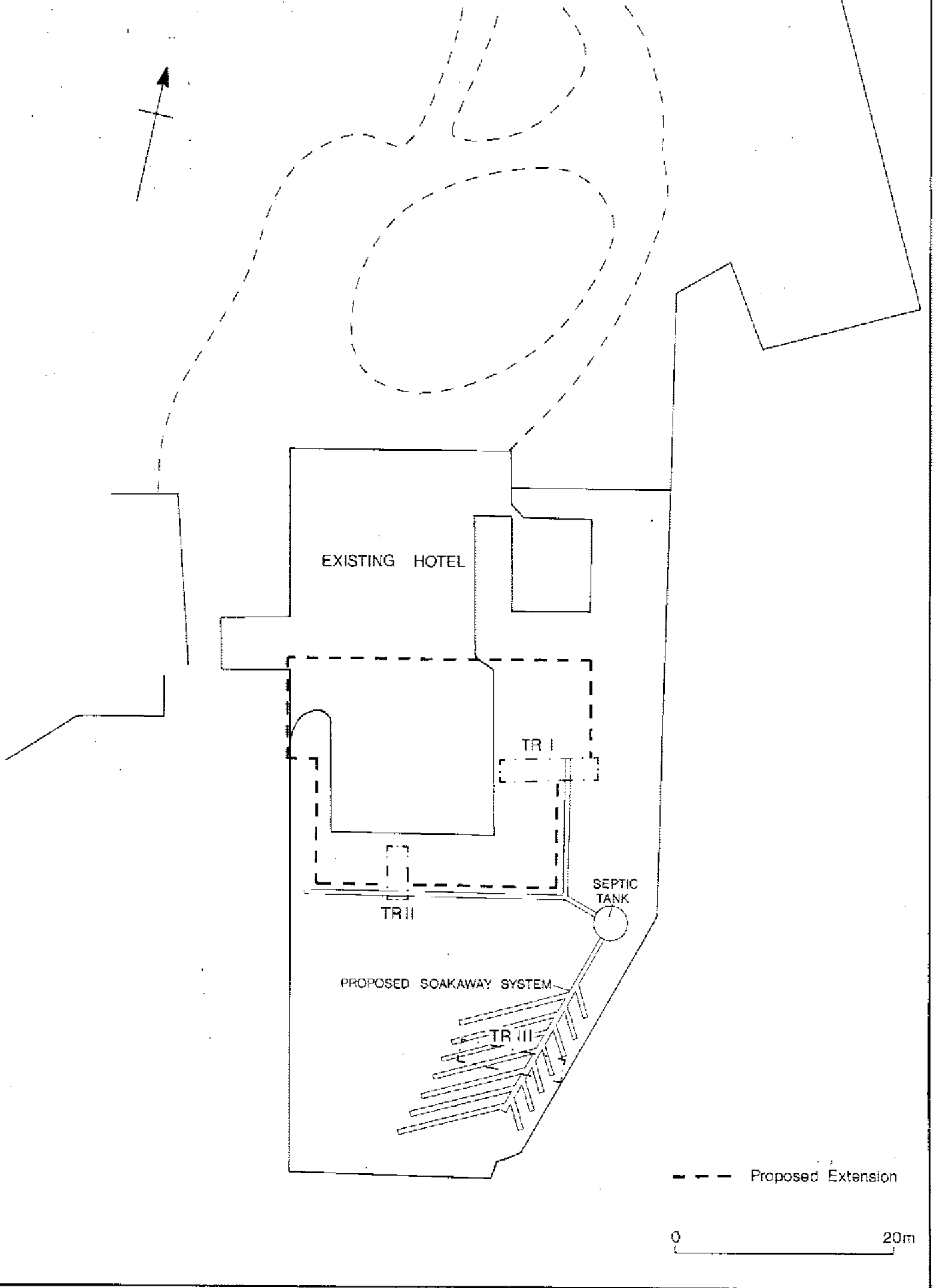


Fig. 3

# WROXETER HOTEL 1991

## Trench I North Facing Section (Reversed)

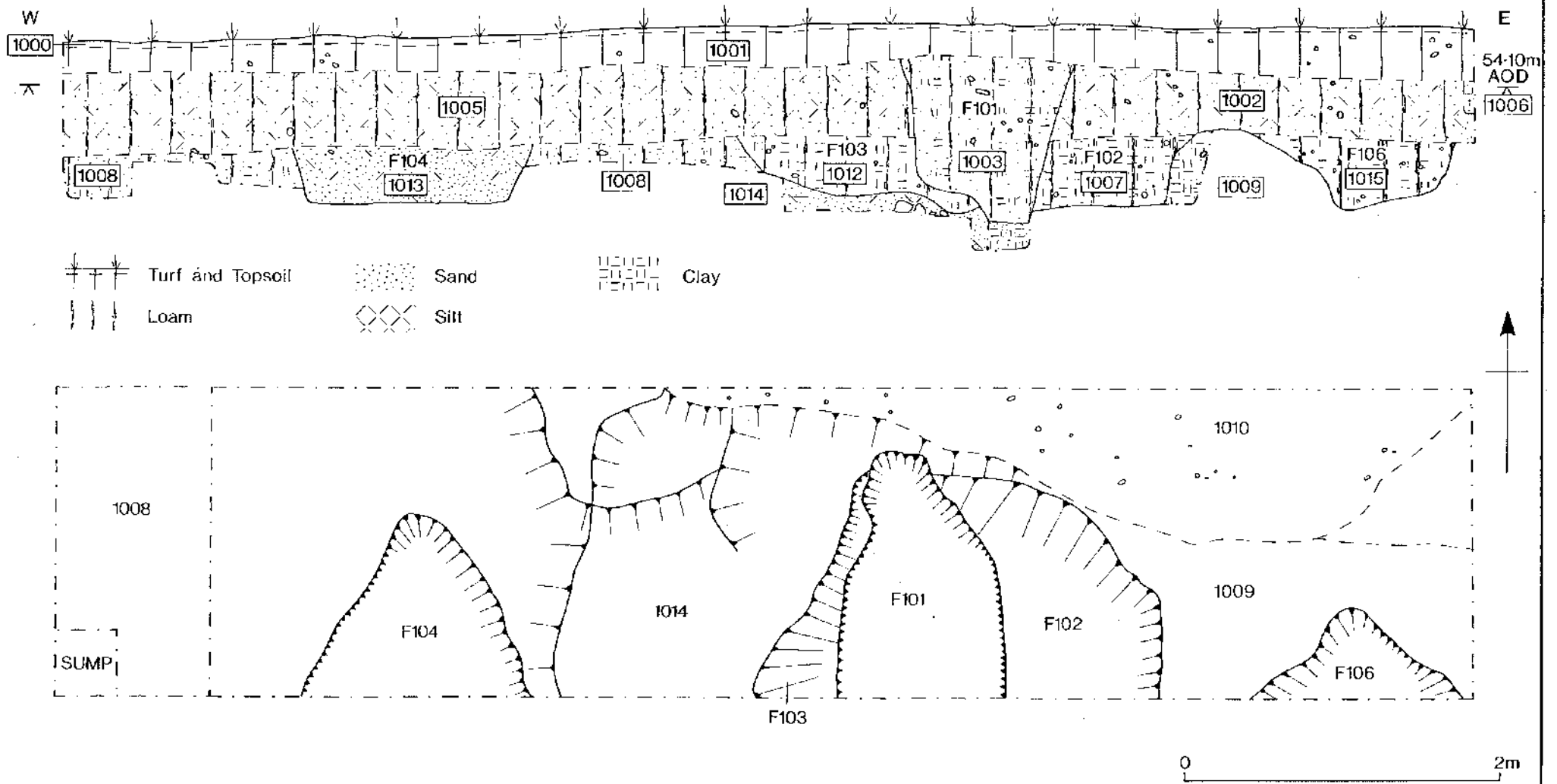


Fig. 4

# WROXETER HOTEL 1991

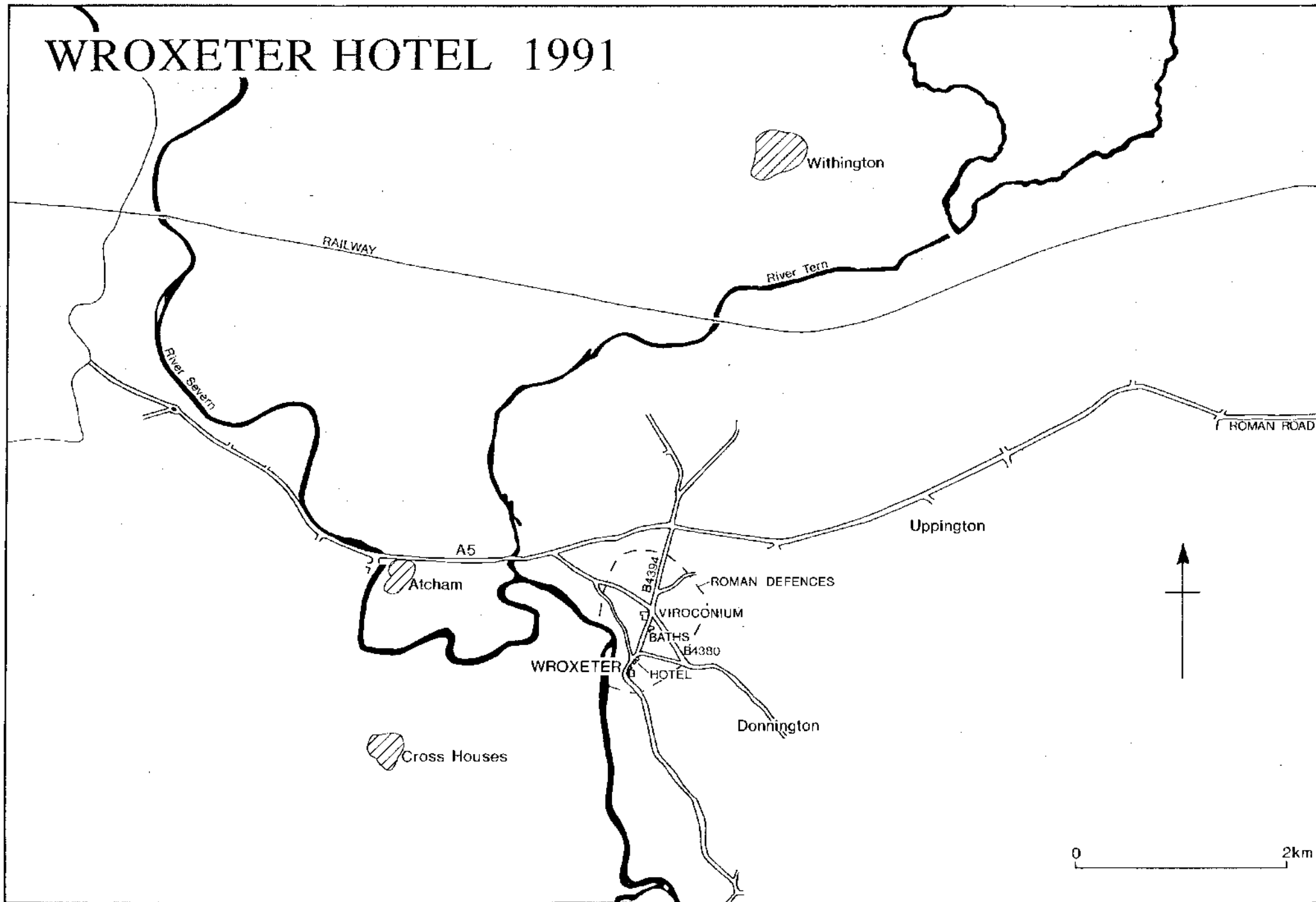


Fig. 1