

Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit

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CATHOLME, STAFFORDSHIRE

An Archaeological Evaluation

1992

by A.E. Jones

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1.0: INTRODUCTION

This report describes the results of an archaeological evaluation of an area of rough grassland located to the north of the Eltra Gas depot at Catholme, Staffordshire (Figure 1A: centred on NGR. SK 19351671). In April 1992 Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit was commissioned by Eltra Gas Ltd to undertake the evaluation, to establish the archaeological potential of an area proposed for an office development, prior to the determination of an application for planning permission (Figure 1C).

The aims of the evaluation were to assess the nature, extent and significance of buried archaeological deposits within the area of the proposed development. In particular it was intended to determine whether the dense concentrations of archaeological features, recorded as cropmarks in the adjoining fields, continued into the area of the development itself.

2.0: THE SITE AND ITS SETTING

2.1: The site

The subsoil comprises mixed sands and gravels forming a flat river terrace of the River Trent. The site of the evaluation (Figure 1A) is located 7km southwest of Burton on Trent, and ca. 330m east of the modern A38 road. The Eltra Gas Ltd depot is bounded on the east by Catholme Lane, and to the west by arable farmland (Figure 1B). Part of the latter is a Scheduled Ancient Monument (Staffordshire No. 215), which also includes the extreme southeast corner of the depot (Figure 2). The site of the proposed development is defined to the south by the gas depot hardstanding, and to

the north by a belt of wooded grassland (Figure 1C).

2.2: The archaeological setting (Figure 2)

The site is located roughly in the centre of a zone of dense archaeological features, which have been recorded from the air as cropmarks, an effect caused by differential growth of crops over archaeological features such as ditches in the surrounding arable fields. Such features are not usually visible in grassland, which covers the area of the proposed development. The cropmark monuments in the surrounding area are recorded in the Staffordshire County Sites and Monuments Record (SMR). The national importance of these monuments, both individually and as a group, has led to the statutory protection of a large proportion as Scheduled Ancient Monuments. The plotted cropmarks define the form and extent of a prehistoric ritual complex, along a corridor at least 600m broad, which extends for approximately 500m both to the east and west of the site.

The easternmost monument of this group (SMR 1397) comprises a probable henge defined by five concentric rings of post-holes, arranged in a radiate pattern. Immediately to the east of the proposed development site lies a second putative radiate henge (SMR 203), formed by a circular enclosure with a radiating pattern of pits, bounded to the north by a broad curviform feature, possibly forming part of an enclosing ditch. A possible cropmark cursus (SMR 1477) has been located to the west of Catholme Lane, immediately adjoining the site. Two roughly parallel pit alignments (SMR 1478 and 1479), aligned east-west, appear to respect the position of the henges, and probably post-date the latter sites. Two small cropmark enclosures and a possible cursus (SMR 204) have been located to the north of the northern pit alignment, while the western end of a further putative cursus (SMR 1480), associated with a possible barrow (SMR 202), is located to the south of the southern pit alignment.

The eastern end of the putative cursus (SMR 1477) adjoining the site must presumably lie to the east of the lane, although not defined as a cropmark in the grassland here. This cropmark and others nearby of similar form have been identified as cursus monuments both because of their form and their

association with the probable henges. This association may be noted between the putative cursus (SMR 1477) and the radiate henge (SMR 203) on either side of the development area; while the easternmost henge (SMR 1397) is sited along the same line. The possible cursus (SMR 1480) appears to have its central axis focussed upon a circular double-ditched monument (SMR 202), probably a barrow. Although neither of the open-ended enclosures (SMR 1477 and 1480) have not been positively identified as cursus monuments by excavation, their positioning in relation to the henge sites suggests a connection.

Henge monuments are generally over 20m in diameter, and usually comprise a circular or oval-shaped enclosure surrounded by a ditch and bank. The majority of these sites contain internal features such as rings of posts or stone circles. These sites may be dated around 2800-2000 BC. Around 60-70 such sites are now known in Britain; thus the three putative henges at Catholme form a significant proportion of the national total.

Henge enclosures are circular or oval in form, containing or lying adjacent to one or more henge monuments. If the unexplained two parallel curving features to the north of western henge (SMR 203) are of archaeological origin, this group may be of considerable national significance as only four henge enclosures, dated around 2800-2400 BC, have so far been identified in Britain.

Cursus features are formed by elongated rectilinear earthwork enclosures, generally extending over 250m in length. The form of the putative cursus monuments identified at Catholme suggest that they may represent the examples of a 'squat' variety, but their secure identification could only be achieved by extensive excavation.

The proximity of monuments of national importance to the proposed development site (principally the cursus (SMR 1477) to the west, and the henge complex (SMR 203) to the east) suggested that parts of these or other monuments of national importance could coincide with the proposed development area, and prompted the requirement to evaluate the affected area prior to the determination of the application for planning consent.

3.0: EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

The evaluation trench (Figure 1C, Plate 1) was positioned to coincide with the location of the proposed development, to provide a direct examination of the archaeological potential of the proposed development area. The trench, covering approximately half of the floor area of the proposed building, measured 29m by 5m, with an extension 5m long and 1.6m wide positioned at the southern end of its eastern side.

Modern overburden, comprising topsoil measuring between 0.4-0.3m in depth, was removed by mechanical excavator (JCB 3CX), under archaeological supervision. There being no overall archaeological layers present below the topsoil, the machining exposed the upper horizon of the natural subsoil below. This horizon was cleaned repeatedly by hand to expose and define any negative features cut into the subsoil. The features identified were examined by means of hand-excavated sondages or in half-section. The information recovered through this approach is considered adequate for a basic understanding of the nature and survival of any archaeological deposits. Recording was by means of pro-forma recording sheets, supplemented by plans, sections and photographs which are held in the archive. Subject to the owner's approval it is proposed to deposit the paper archive in the Stoke on Trent Museum.

4.0: THE RESULTS (Figure 3)

The natural subsoil was located at between 50.4-50.25m AOD. The subsoil comprised a mixture of sands and gravels, within which were evident patches of clay in the north of the trench, and extensive areas of dark mineral staining in the south of the area evaluated. A sandstone boulder was exposed in the centre of the trench. All the features identified were cut into the subsoil horizon; no overall archaeological layers were present.

The western end of a shallow gully (F3) filled with stony gravel (1004) was located and partially excavated in the northeast of the trench. Also sampled was a shallow irregularly-based gully (F6) aligned northwest-

southeast, which contained a fill similar to that of the former feature. To the south of the trench a darker patch (F9) within the subsoil was identified by limited excavation to be a shallow lens of mineralisation (?manganese) capping the compact bright orange sandy subsoil here.

Three ill-defined disturbances were cut into the natural gully (F6). The easternmost of this group (F4) was irregularly-shaped and measured a maximum of 0.3m in depth; a second irregular feature (F11) was partly excavated in the west of the trench. A small, shallow circular feature (F5) in the north of F6 was also half-sectioned. Two further negative features (F1,F2) were identified and partially excavated to the south of the gully. The former was very shallow and poorly-defined, the latter measured a maximum of 0.3m in depth, but had a very irregular base. A further well-defined disturbance (F7) was half-excavated in the south of the trench.

A land-drain trench (F8), aligned northwest-southeast was exposed and recorded in the eastern extension of the trench. To the north a vertical-sided stakehole (F10), 0.1m deep was fully excavated.

No artifacts were recovered from the topsoil, or from any of the features partly excavated.

5.0: DISCUSSION

Although the identification of archaeological features in such a variable subsoil can cause difficulties, the cutting of a comparatively wide evaluation trench (5m wide), and the repeated cleaning of the entire area has permitted these problems of identification to be largely overcome. The large sandstone boulder exposed by machining is probably of geological origin, an erratic boulder deposited during the last glaciation.

With the exception of the field drain (F8) and the stakehole (F10) there appear to be no manmade features within the evaluation trench, and a modern date for both these features is probable. The two gulleys (F3,F6) are probably geological in origin. The remaining features are probably the

result of root disturbance.

6.0: IMPLICATIONS AND PROPOSALS

6.1: Implications

This evaluation has not yielded any evidence of the archaeological features represented by the cropmarks found in the surrounding areas, or of any other remains of archaeological importance. Given that approximately half of the area of the proposed development area has been examined by controlled archaeological evaluation, it is reasonable to conclude that there is a low probability of archaeological remains being located in the remainder of the proposed development area.

6.2: Proposals

While the results of the present exercise have demonstrated that the probability of archaeological remains being located in the remainder of the development area is low, given the national importance of the immediately surrounding dense complex of archaeological monuments it is recommended that provision be made for archaeological inspection and recording during the construction groundworks.

7.0: ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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CATHOLME Staffordshire Evaluation 1992

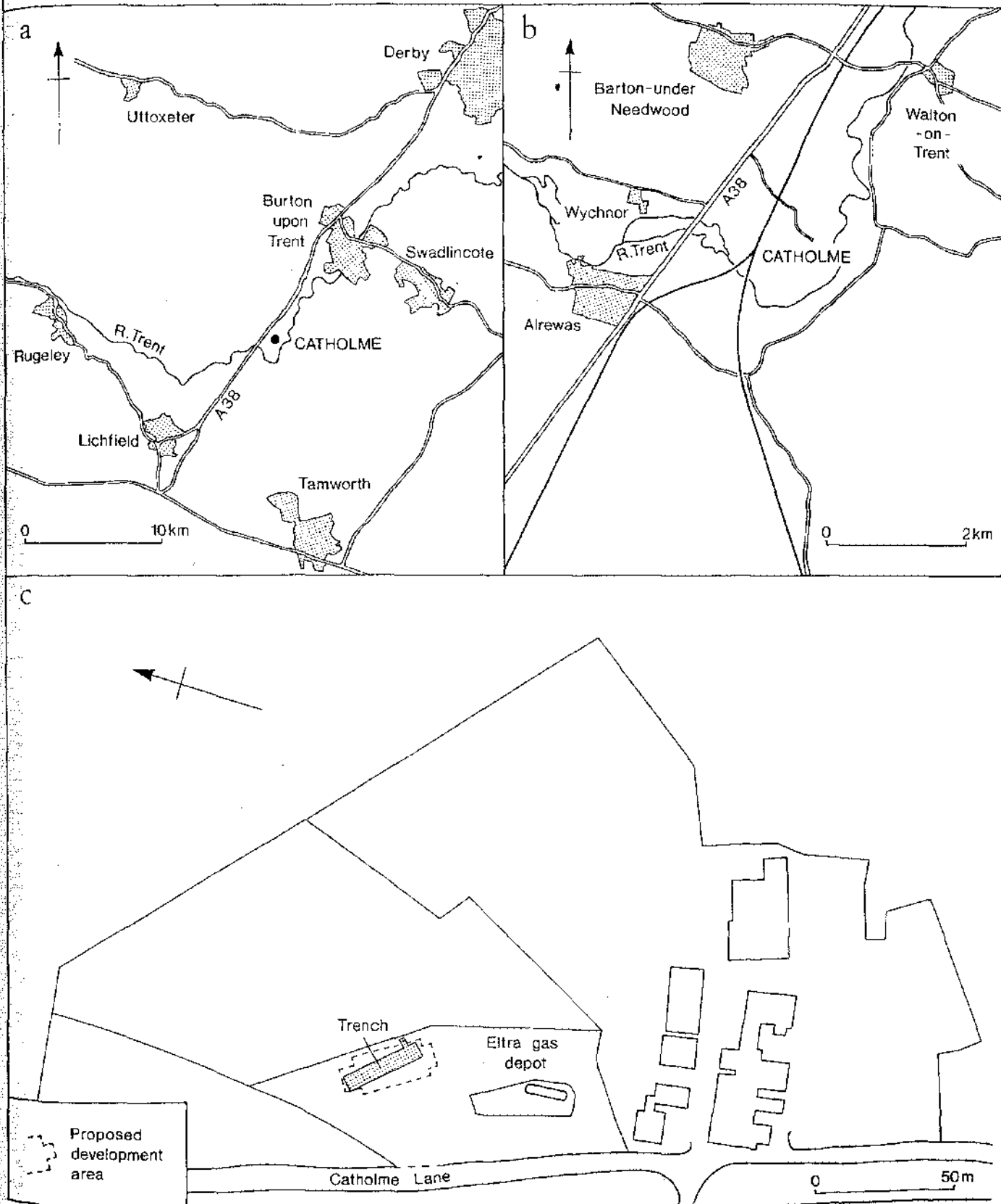


Fig. 1

CATHOLME 1992: Surrounding cropmarks

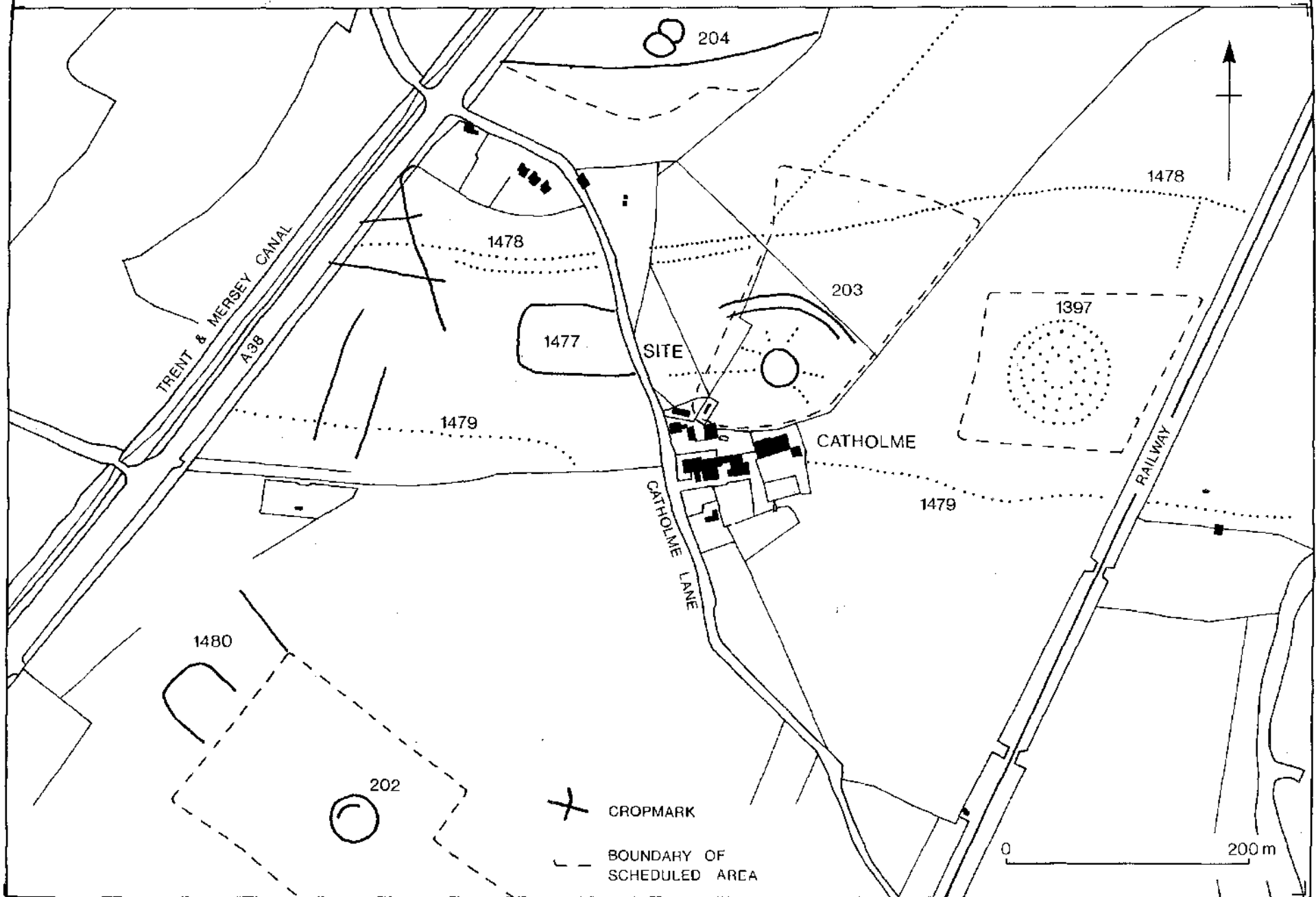


Fig. 2

CATHOLME 1992 Simplified site plan

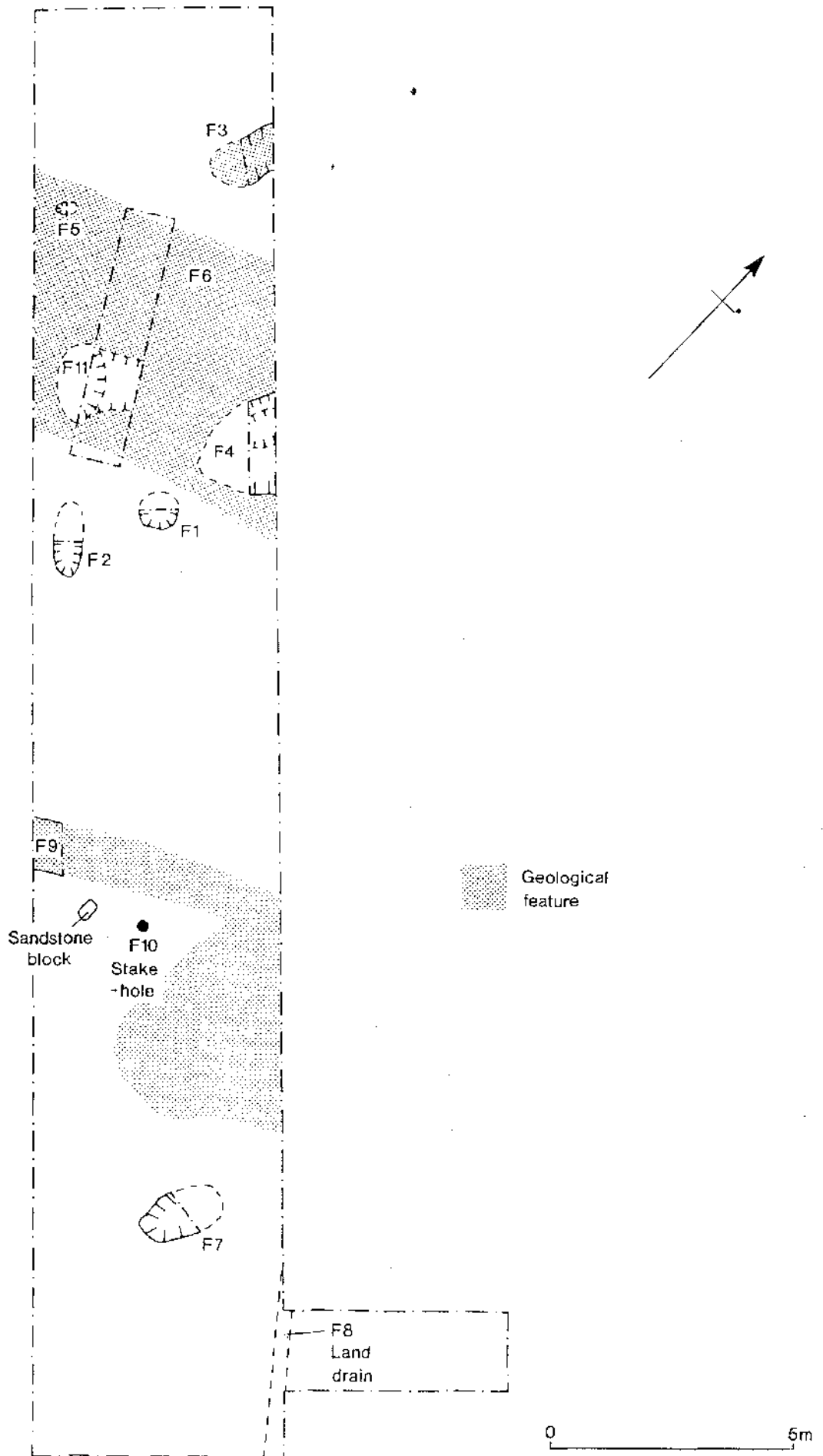


Fig. 3



Plate 1. Evaluation trench after cleaning, and during excavation of F1, F2 and F4. Looking north.