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Archaeological Fieldwork in 1997 and 1998

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by

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FREEMAN'S FARM FELTON, N SOMERSET

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Summary

Topsoil stripping prior to quarrying at Freeman's Farm was archaeologically monitored between March and July 1997. Spreads of Romano-British pottery were recorded but no settlement features were identified (3.2.2, 3.2.2, 5.2, 6.1). In other areas of the site a small number of possible features were recorded, none of which were datable. A post-medieval building identified in earlier fieldwork was fully recorded (3.3.1-3.3.12, 6.3) as were quarry features, stone-lined ponds and the parish boundary bank, also noted earlier. A further collection of pottery and flint flakes and artefacts was made in addition to the large amount of flint material collected and analysed in earlier fieldwork in 1992 (Ellis 1992a and b; Bevan and Ellis 1996). Further work to characterise the possible Romano-British site is suggested as well, as small scale excavation of the post-medieval building.

1 Circumstances of the watching brief

1.1 The work was undertaken on behalf of RMC Roadstone Products Ltd. It followed a project brief prepared by BUFAU in April 1996, itself following a schedule of requirements prepared by North Somerset Council.

1.2 Work on the access road began in May and was followed by initial groundwork on the quarry area in June and July (Fig 1). Road construction involved topsoil stripping followed by subsoil removal and, to the north, large scale downcutting into rock, part of which involved the use of explosives. A drainage tank was excavated to the east of the new road as well as trenches associated with connecting the new road with the A38. Early in the programme, in March, a hedge was relocated from the quarry area to the side of the A38, the work involving the preparation of a linear trench. The principal machine used in all these works was a 360 degree excavator.

1.3 In the quarry area itself, topsoil stripping and subsoil stripping were separate operations using box scrapers and bulldozers. The lagoon in the east corner of the site was excavated to a depth of about 2m. Subsoil and rock were used to create a mound (bund) to the south of the site. This was covered by topsoil redeposited from a mound of material located to the east and north of the tank and wooded area retained in the north of the site. This latter area, approximately 250m square was stripped of topsoil but not of subsoil and will be brought within the quarry area at a later date. Its north side is covered by a further bund. The quarry area itself measures about 300 by 230m.

1.4 Archaeological work was undertaken during topsoil stripping except for a two week period in June. The great majority of the area stripped of topsoil was carefully fieldwalked in parallel lines separated by about 5m. An area of about 100 by 50m directly south of Freeman's Farm was stripped of topsoil and subsequently became the site of a bund. This area was not viewed by the author. The type of machinery used in the quarry area was not best suited for archaeological observation following the removal of topsoil since box scrapers do not react as

sensitively to the ground contours as 360 degree machines. In addition these heavy vehicles tend to damage newly exposed surfaces.

1.5 The subsequent process of subsoil stripping was also watched with all areas again being walked, albeit less comprehensively than for the topsoil stripping.

1.6 In February 1998, the opportunity was taken to record by drawings and photographs the main features identified in earlier reports but which had only previously been viewed beneath undergrowth and tree foliage.

2 Archaeological background

2.1 The road line was the subject of a geophysical survey in 1996 (GSB 1996). The fields through which it passes had also been examined in 1992 when the southern field (source of a Bronze Age axe in the 1930s) was under the plough and had been fieldwalked (Ellis 1992a). The 1992 work had been negative but the 1996 survey identified a number of anomalies as possible archaeological features.

2.2 In the quarry area preliminary fieldwork in 1992 had been limited, since three of the four fields taken into the quarry area were under pasture. The fourth field, numbered Field 9 in 1992, had, however, been fieldwalked and an area which had been the subject of geophysical survey had subsequently been trial trenched. The west part of this field lies outside the present quarry.

3 Results

3.1 The new roadline

3.1.1 Taking account of the geophysical plot, topsoil stripping of the new road was carefully monitored. Since the survey, the road line had been slightly modified by a shift of its central area in the southern field to the west. In the event none of the anomalies could be defined on the ground as of archaeological origin and many could be identified as the result of natural phenomena. Of the cluster of suggested features near the A38, the northernmost was seen as a long linear feature running from north-west to south-east. This coincided exactly with a break in the natural geology from rock to the south to clay to the north. To its south a U-shaped anomaly giving a strong, possibly archaeological, signal may well have been associated with a set of clay-filled fissures in the rock surface, about 1m wide. The topsoil on the west side of the road covered a layer of clay about 0.6m deep overlying the rock, a depth much greater than the more usual 0.3m. This layer of clay was uniform and unbroken across the fissures and the uniform fills of the fissures themselves suggested their natural origin. A trench recorded along the north side of the A38 east of the new road line and the trench cut for the hedge relocation both showed further clay-filled fissures, and these may well be the features picked up to the north within the survey area.

3.1.2 One archaeological feature, F1, was, however, located and was partly excavated (Figs 1 and 2). This comprised a sub-rectangular pit 1.1m in diameter dug into clay and the rock strata below. The pit fill was excavated to 0.7m in depth initially by hand and then by

machine. The vertical sides were seen at the lowest point excavated to reach a flat base. The fill comprised brown clay and stone with patches of cream and yellow clay. A creamy clay was evident against the vertical sides of the feature. There were no finds. The evidence of the type of fill and the vertical rock-cut sides suggested recent activity. This feature lay within an area of increased magnetic response identified in the survey very close to the U-shaped anomalies.

3.1.3 Further north the clay subsoil in the northern part of Field 16 was examined in a small test hole dug by the machine. Interestingly, the clay here contained flecks of charcoal to a depth of 1m below the modern ground surface. These were not seen in the lower levels exposed which continued to 2m below ground level. The surface morphology and the waterlogged ground here suggests that this area may have been subject to flooding in the past and the clay might therefore have been a succession of deposits occurring during human activity in the vicinity - the source of the charcoal inclusions. However no evidence of silting bands was visible.

3.1.4 Further north in Field 14 none of the survey anomalies could be recognised on the ground, except a recent pipe trench. The northernmost section of the road was excavated to a depth of 3-4m and a machine-dug section here was recorded across a feature identified as a quarry at the junction of Fields 9, 12 and 14. The rock surface lay well below the base of the feature which was sited on a 2m deep strata of grey clay with yellow lenses. The feature would therefore seem most likely to have been a sink hole and may have been a natural pond at certain times of the year. The rocky rubble with which it was filled, and which suggested its use as a quarry, must therefore have been a deposit following its disuse, presumably material cleared in recent years during ploughing.

3.2 The quarry area

3.2.1 The most important findings came from an area of stripped topsoil to the south of Freeman's Farm. The field had been down to pasture for a number of years. Unfortunately the topsoil stripping process itself was not seen and the area was examined after topsoil removal. Romano-British pottery was observed in an area close to the north-west field boundary with Fields 6 and 7. This primarily comprised late 2nd-early 3rd century locally produced greywares (53% by count) and Severn valley ware (5%) with some regionally traded Black Burnished ware (39%)and residual imported samian (<1%.) The pottery consisted of unabraded, medium sized sherds, demonstrating fresh, clean breaks, probably as a result of the topsoil stripping process. The cleared area comprised a layer of natural clay over rock. The clay was deeply rutted by machinery and it is possible that features associated with the pottery scatter had been masked or destroyed by topsoil stripping. Nevertheless despite careful examination no evidence was seen on the ground for pits, ditches or postholes indicative of settlements.

3.2.2 A further area marked by a spread of Romano-British pottery was not seen by the author but the area was fieldwalked by two local amateur archaeologists. This area lay directly within the northern field boundary and by the time of the author's visit was the site of a bund along the north side of the quarry area. Romano-British pottery and tile was reported as well as an area of large flat stones lying directly on the natural clay surface.

3.2.3 Elsewhere in the course of topsoil stripping and the relocation of topsoil to points around the site, pottery, and flint artefacts and flakes, were collected. When freshly exposed on the ground the locations of finds were recorded on a 1:1250 plan by eye, while, where possible, the origin of finds from the relocated topsoil was identified to a general area. The impression given by the flint find spots confirmed the 1992 fieldwalking evidence of finds increasing northward from an area free of finds in the southern corner.

3.2.4 Topsoil stripping revealed a mixed surface of rock, clay and, occasionally, unremoved topsoil. This lay in general at a depth of 0.25m below the original ground surface although there were deeper and shallower areas. Subsoil stripping cleared mixed clay and rock areas down to solid rock formations at a depth of 1 to 1.5m below the original ground surface.

3.2.5 The geology so exposed had been partly seen in the trial trenches in 1992. In 1997 it was possible to confirm that large areas of clay overlay the limestone and that limestone fissures were clay filled. A linear clay-filled area was visible in the north-west area of the quarry running north-south for about 100m. The clay was of differing colours, generally orange but also cream, black, yellow and dark red. Some of the clay was a soft shale like material.

3.2.6 Following topsoil removal circular clay-filled areas were visible and a number of these continued to be visible following subsoil stripping. They varied in size from 10m down to 1m across their longest axes and were filled with clay, generally dark grey in colour but in places yellow, red and cream. A particular feature was the presence in some cases of dark brown material around the sides of the features resembling a humic material. Although this and the clay fills were examined for artefacts or other inclusions none were recovered and they appeared to be sterile natural layers.

3.2.7 These clay-filled areas seem likely to represent sink holes or solution hollows. They are common features on limestone. There have been indications that these may have been used both in prehistory (Bronze Age examples have been excavated on the Isle of Man) and more recent times (on limestone Mediterranean sites) but there was no evidence of human use at Freeman's Farm.

3.2.8 The angle of rest of the bedrock strata varied. In places this was flat with pitched strata more general. Over much of the subsoil-stripped area the presence of quartz seams were clear on the ground as well as occasional clay fissures.

3.2.9 A north-south running feature visible on air photographs and illustrated in 1992 (Ellis 1992a), lying in Field 9 to the south of the junction of Fields 7 and 10 was not replicated on the ground. There was no evidence that this was a former field boundary. The line does however correspond with a general change in the subsoil from clay to its west to rock to its east. A supposed quarry on the former boundary between Fields 9 and 11 was cleared and appeared to have been cut into clay. As with its counterpart to the south-east on the road line this seems likely to have been a natural pond. A further supposed quarry at the junction of Fields 7, 9 and 10, although stone-filled, may also be a former natural pond.

3.2.10 The area of geophysical survey and trial trenching in 1992 in Field 9 was carefully examined (Ellis 1992a, 2.4.5: Trenches 9 and 10). No evidence of the geophysical anomalies was found. However, three features, F2-4, were found just to the north of the area of survey

(Figs 1 and 2). These comprised roughly circular or sub-rectangular areas clearly visible as areas of dark brown clay with charcoal set within the orange natural surface. F2 measured 2m by 1.6, F3 1.4 by 0.8m and F4 0.5 by 0.3m. The presence of charcoal suggested the fills of pits and F2 and F3 were partly excavated. Excavation of F2 revealed a flat-based pit 0.4m deep with fills of dark brown clay and charcoal with lias and red sandstone inclusions separated by a lens of sandy cream clay with charcoal. F3 was 0.45m deep with a U-shaped profile and a fill of dark brown clay with charcoal beneath a thin upper layer of more orange clay. In both cases charcoal was plentiful and increased toward the base. There was no evidence of in situ burning. There were no finds associated with the features except a flint chip from F2. They are therefore undated but the clarity of the fills and the extent of charcoal suggested a relatively recent origin. While F3 may have been the hole for a burnt tree stump, F2 was a deliberately dug and backfilled feature. F4 had been heavily damaged by a wheel rut and was not examined.

3.3 Recording of features noted in 1992

3.3.1 A post-medieval building, a number of quarries, stone-lined ponds and the parish field boundary bank were recorded early in 1998 when undergrowth had died back.

3.3.2 The post-medieval buildings on Tinker's Lane (Ellis 1992b, Site 8) lie in the south-west corner of Field 3 (Fig 3). They are generally marked by collapsed stone walling with, in places, stretches of surviving upstanding walling with short lengths of wall faces visible. The wall lines are frequently the location of trees. The ruins survive to a maximum height of 1.7m along Tinker's Lane but are generally around 0.5m high. The interiors of the buildings are marked by rubble generally sloping down to a lowest point at the centre of the former room. Two or possibly three buildings were identified.

3.3.3 Building 1 measures 8.6 by 5.1m and lies with the gable wall of Room 1 facing Tinker's Lane. The wall here narrows in width from a wide uncoursed base of large blocks to uncoursed stone walling above. Elsewhere the walls of Room 1 survive less well, the south wall standing to a maximum of 0.45m with interior and exterior wall faces visible. The location of the east end of the building is very unclear. The east wall itself is thoroughly spread to the east. The south-east corner is less damaged and gives an indication of where the east wall must lie. The north wall is marked by rubble rather than wall face except for one stretch to the north where Room 2 lies, measuring 4.6 by 4.3m. Fortunately the junction of the east wall of Room 2 and the north wall of Room 1 is visible demonstrating that the two walls are bonded together and therefore contemporary. In general Room 2 survives better than Room 1 and wall faces are clear at the north-west and south-east angles standing 0.6 - 0.7m high. To the west of Room 2, the west wall of Room 1 continues northward as a slighter structure and turns eastward towards Room 2.

3.3.4 A possible entranceway from Room 1 to Room 2 is suggested by a lower area in the line of the party wall. An entrance is possible in the room's east wall. No entrance to Room 1 from outside is suggested except at the east end of Room 1. The interiors of both rooms are rubble filled. At their lowest point they lie about 0.3m higher than the surrounding ground level. Where walls are visible they are of coursed stone unlike the west wall of Room 1. The north wall of Room 2 on the interior is made of smaller blocks than elsewhere. Although there

is no indication of mortar in the exposed faces it is assumed that the walls were mortared at one time.

3.3.5 Building 2 lies to the east of Building 1 at a slightly different orientation. It is not clear if it comprises a three room block or two separate structures with a partly walled open space between. Its three components are all equally sized. The building faces onto a trackway, 3-4m wide, which runs east from Tinker's Lane and can be traced for 60m before disappearing in Field 3. The three rooms are together about 17m long with Rooms 1 and 2 4.3m wide and Room 3 6.2 by 4.6m.

3.3.6 The south wall of Room 1 survives well on the exterior and interior. On the exterior five courses of squared blocks 0.2 by 0.1m deep are visible at one point. The wall here is 1m high on the lane side and 0.6m high on the interior. The south-west corner of the room is clear. The east wall survives to a height of 1m but without clear faces. The north wall is rather unclear but a section of the north side is possibly represented by large stones. An entrance is possible at the east end of the north wall. Larger stones were used on the west wall, presumably marking the gable wall; one example being 0.28 by 0.2 by 0.17m deep.

3.3.7 Room 2 to the east may have been a walled open area between Rooms 1 and 3. The south wall has an entrance gap while the north wall only runs for 1.3m east of Room 1. Its line to the east is barely marked on the ground.

3.3.8 Room 3 to the east is set lengthways onto the line of Rooms 1 and 2. Its walls survive well. The south wall fronting onto the track survives to a height of 0.9m with 6 courses of 0.12 by 0.12m squared blocks apparent. It appears to continue eastward for a short distance. The east wall survives less well but a short section of wall face is clear. The north wall is a line of spread stones with the north-west corner of the building still clear. The north end of the west wall is 0.6m wide and survives to 0.5m on the interior. Five mortar-bonded courses are visible. An entrance is possible in the middle of the west wall.

3.3.9 Building 1, Room 1, is the largest room and Building 1, Room 2, the smallest. The three rooms of Building 2, the central one poorly marked on its north side, are identical in size. Stones used in the walls range from the thin blocks used in the north wall of Building 1, Room 2, to the large blocks used in the building's west wall. Generally walls are roughly coursed. Entrances are not well defined. No larger stones from door or window framing were noticed.

3.3.10 Most importantly for the purposes of interpreting the buildings is the absence of definite evidence in the form of thickened walls for chimney breasts and hearths. Chimneys might have been present in the party wall between Building 2, Rooms 1 and 2, and in the north wall of Room 3. The east wall of Building 1, Room 1, has been almost completely levelled, while a hearth is possible in the north wall of Room 2. However, it is possible that Building 1 may have been a purely agricultural building with an open east front into Room 1, presumably therefore a cart shed with an ancillary room, Room 2, leading off it. Building 2, whether two separate structures or not, seems more likely to have been a dwelling or dwellings.

3.3.11 There were no on site artefacts to suggest a date for these buildings although post-medieval pottery was collected in this corner of the field in 1992. Medieval pottery was

recorded in 1992 from Fields 1, 2 and 3. The buildings do not appear on the earliest maps of the area, the 1840 tithe map for Backwell, nor on the 1885 and 1904 early Ordnance Survey maps. They must therefore have been ruinous by 1840. An earlier interpretation suggested that they were more recent than 1840, the OS data not having been viewed, and this has now been withdrawn (Ellis 1992a, 2.4). The map evidence also gives some indication of activity here - apart from Tinker's Lane itself, three footpaths coincide at this corner of the field.

3.3.12 The different orientations of the two buildings may be an indication of different dates, with Building 1 on Tinker's Lane perhaps the initial structure. It is worth noting that buildings going out of use in the 18th century may be the last indications of earlier settlements.

3.3.13 As noted above, some of the quarries located in 1992 (Ellis 1992b, table 2 and figure) were shown to be sink holes and natural ponds (3.1.4). However, those in Fields 3 and 5 were recorded in detail and were definitely quarries. In Field 3 an area of 25m north-south by 30m east-west is cut into the field. Three quarry faces survive here to a maximum of 1.5m high. These are cut within a lower area suggesting two phases of work. In Field 5 a 27m north-south by 16m east-west area has similarly been lowered to a maximum depth of 1.2m. There are no exposed rock faces visible here. To north and south are further areas of scrub separated from the field. In the southern area a low bank running east-west survives. In both quarries recent stone dumps may have obscured earlier features.

3.3.14 Two stone-lined ponds were recorded. Both have sloping stone-floored entries at one end to allow access to stock. The pond in Field 3 is the earlier and more ruinous. This is shown on the 1885 Ordnance Survey 1st edition. The pond in Field 4 is larger and is still in use. The evidence suggests that it was built this century.

3.3.15 A final feature examined in detail was the parish boundary, suggested as the location of further work at a future date. The bank had only been seen before when the hedge line was in leaf. It was clear in 1998 that the feature was much less substantial than previously thought. Although the boundary area is wide, 3-4m in places, the bank itself is nowhere more than 0.3m high. In places, without the hedge line, the boundary would be marked simply by a drop in field levels on either side. Opportunities for the examination of the junction of parish boundary and other banks - suggested as a focus of excavation - are poor.

4 Finds

4.1 As in 1992 post-medieval pottery, brick, glass and recent artefacts were present but were not collected. Apart from that from the Romano-British site, the pottery collected comprised 7 sherds of Romano-British and 3 of medieval pottery, the former including greywares and BB1 while the latter comprised undiagnostic sherds. The few Roman sherds were large suggesting their origin in a feature freshly disturbed by the stripping and they seem likely to have derived from the Roman site in Field 10. The flint collected totalled 39 items including a mesolithic microlith, a scraper and two blades of Neolithic/Bronze Age date, and a fragment of a core, together with 26 flakes and 8 flint chips. As a group the collection does not merit detailed analysis in view of the scale of previous work.

4.2 A total of 156 unstratified sherds of Romano-British pottery were recognised as a result of topsoil stripping. As mentioned (3.2.1) most of the assemblage is of local origin and

in good condition. Very few diagnostic sherds were observed, although a Black Burnished ware dog dish and flanged bowl fragment conform to the date range of late 2nd-early 3rd century. The pottery was unabraded and demonstrated fresh, clean breaks, probably as a result of the topsoil stripping process. It can be compared with other material in the vicinity, notably from Row of Ashes farm, Butcombe (Fowler 1968; 1970.)

5 Conclusions

5.1 The 1997 archaeological work at Freeman's Farm has failed to identify definite prehistoric features. Geophysical anomalies have once again been shown to be possibly natural in origin. No prehistoric pottery was found. However, the continuing presence of flint artefacts and flakes underlines the conclusions arrived at in 1992 that the material derives from ploughed out occupation sites of Neolithic or Bronze Age date (Bevan and Ellis 1996). The possibility of finding archaeological features in future work should not therefore be discounted although it should be recognised that the initial groundwork for quarrying is not suitable for their recognition.

5.2 The finding of Romano-British pottery in Field 10 was foreshadowed in 1992 when Roman pottery was found at the east end of Field 6 (Ellis 1992a, 2.4). These findings can be seen in the context of the air photographic evidence for a site to the north-east of Freeman's Farm discussed earlier (Ellis 1992a, 6.6).

5.3 The buildings on Tinker's Lane can now be seen to be earlier than originally thought. They appear to be 18th-century in date and to represent a small farmstead.

6 Recommendations

6.1 The archaeology presently marked by the Romano-British pottery spread in Field 10 needs to be further characterised. Topsoil has been stripped here. The area has been rutted by the passage of heavy machinery and considerable damage is likely to have been done. Nevertheless further work is advisable. Geophysical survey has now been shown not to be a useful tool and a survey of the area would therefore be inappropriate. Further surface collection of pottery is suggested accompanied by sample excavation to identify potential archaeological features from which the pottery is likely to derive.

6.2 Excavation of the parish boundary bank at a future date is already on the agenda. The survey work in 1998 has shown that the work required is less than originally envisaged. The very slight surviving bank will almost certainly have lost any original structure through tree rooting, and the aim of excavation can now be limited to reconnaissance for ditches accompanying or marking the original boundary.

6.3 The 1998 work has suggested that the ruined buildings in Field 3 are earlier than originally thought. Only excavation can reveal their function and date. It is possible that settlement here was longstanding, that the ruined buildings mark its final form, and that there are earlier structures. Excavation is therefore suggested in the form of a set of carefully sited trenches to clarify wall locations, building functions, and, it is to be hoped, to collect material evidence to date the structures on site.

Acknowledgements

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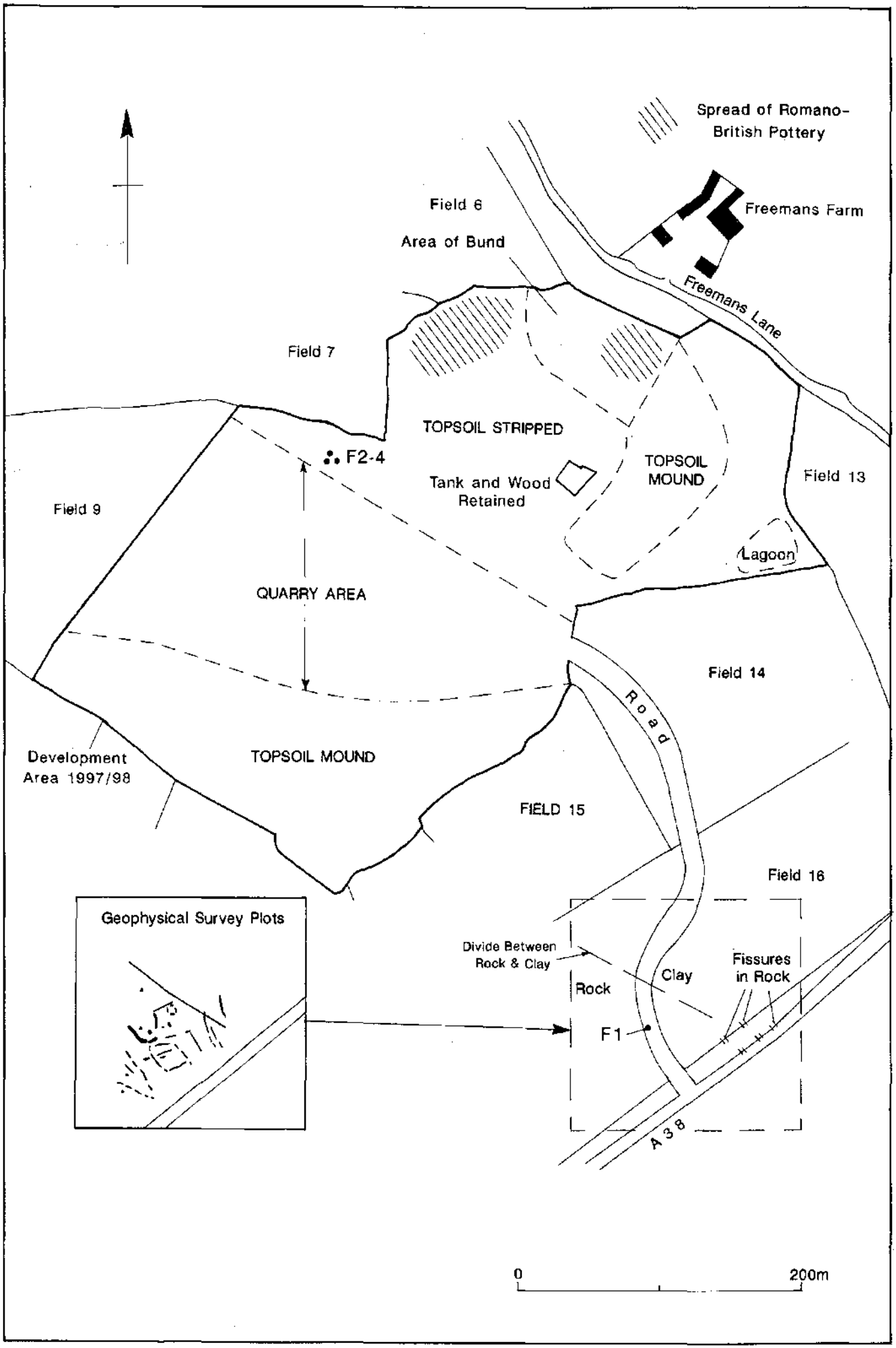
Spread of Romano-British Pottery
Field 6
Area of Bund
Freemans Farm
Freemans Lane
Field 7
TOPSOIL STRIPPED
F2-4
Tank and Wood Retained
TOPSOIL MOUND
Field 13
Field 9
Lagoon
QUARRY AREA
Field 14
Road
Development Area 1997/98
TOPSOIL MOUND
FIELD 15
Field 16
Geophysical Survey Plots
Divide Between Rock & Clay
Rock
Clay
Fissures in Rock
F1
A38
0
200m

Fig.1

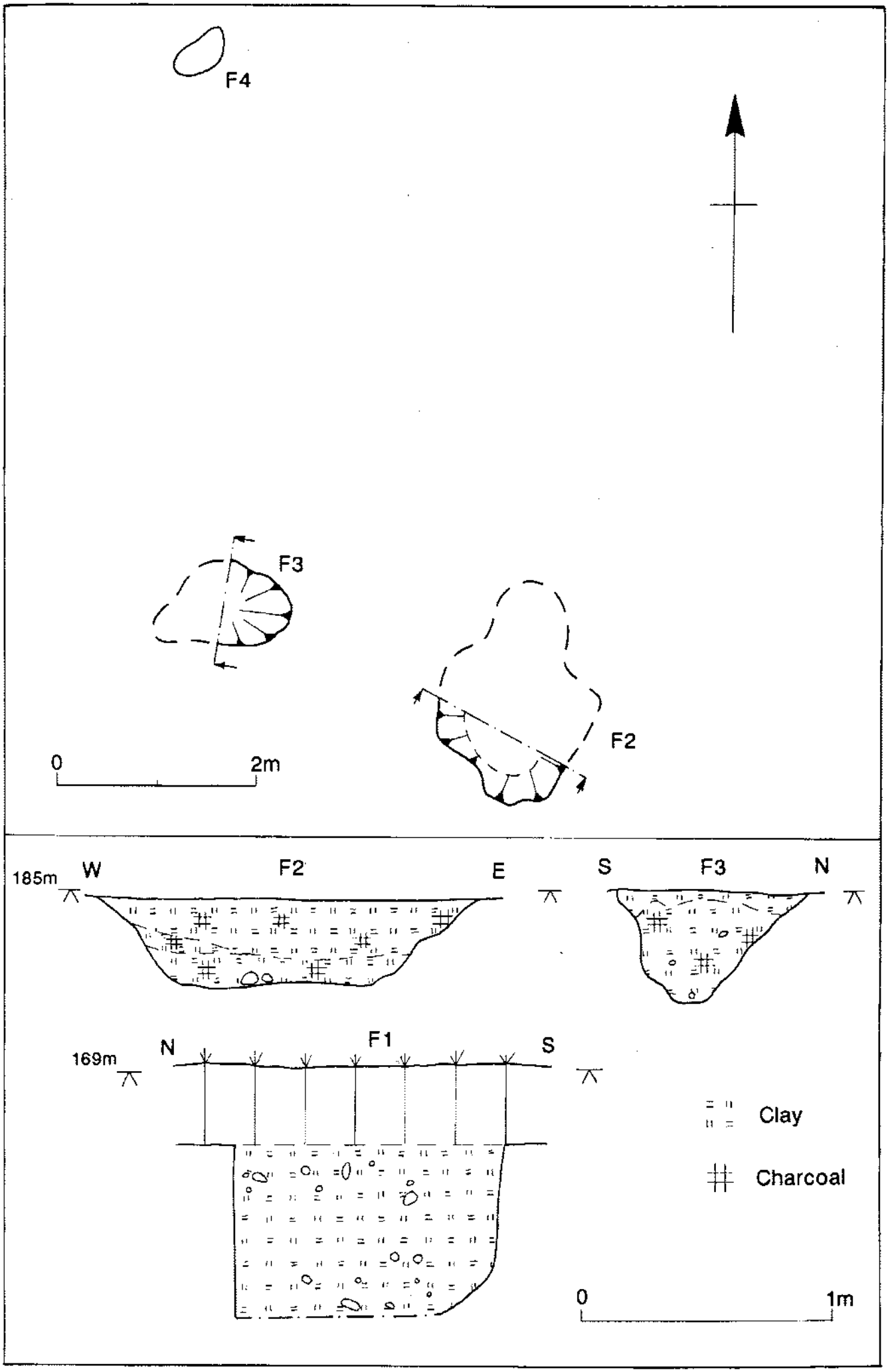

Fig.2

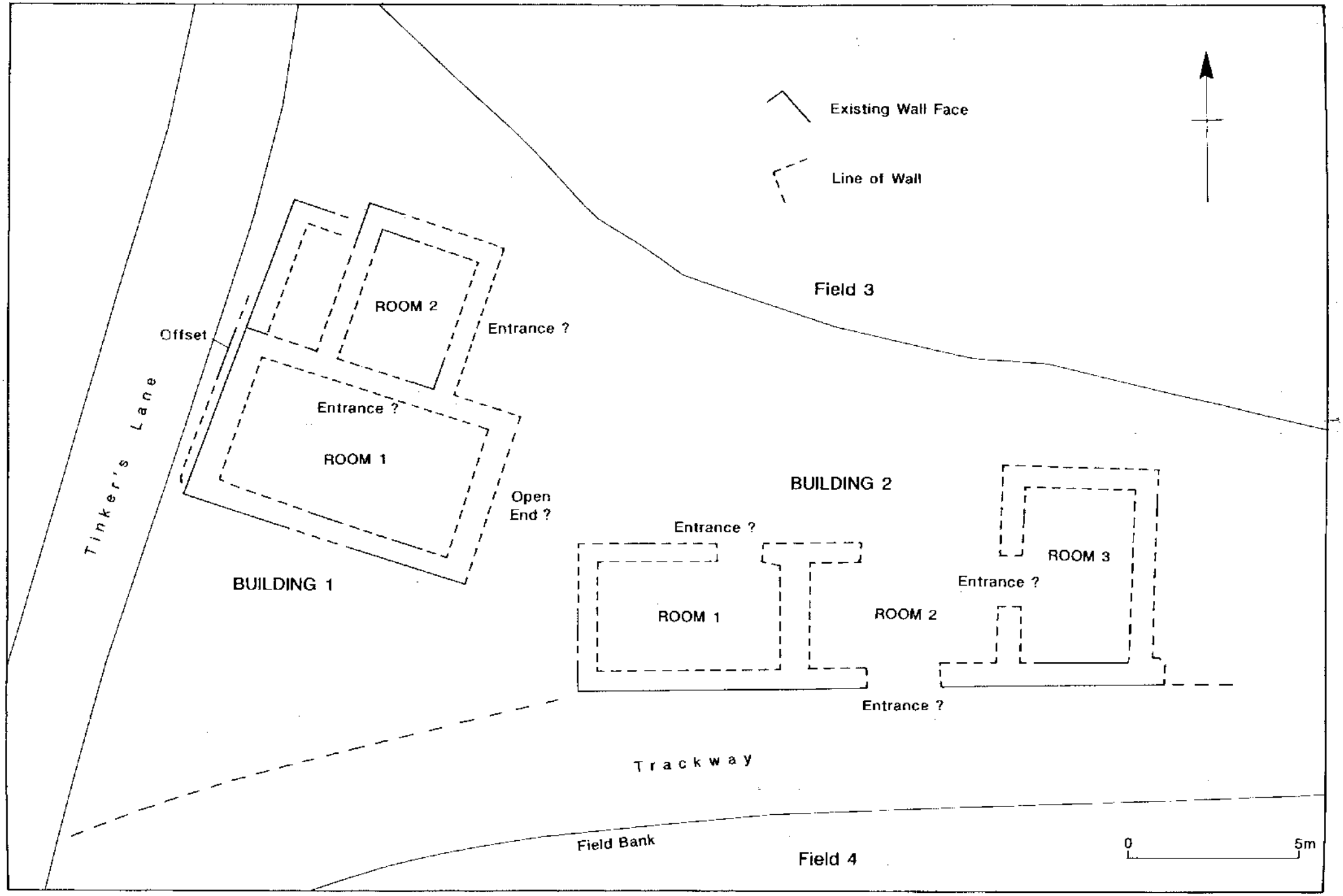
Existing Wall Face
Line of Wall
Field 3
ROOM 2
Offset
Entrance ?
Entrance ?
ROOM 1
Open
End ?
BUILDING 1
Tinker's Lane
BUILDING 2
Entrance ?
ROOM 1
ROOM 3
Entrance ?
ROOM 2
Entrance ?
Trackway
Field Bank
Field 4
0
5m

Fig.3