

Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit

Report No. 217

August 1992

**An Archaeological Evaluation of
Development Land at Fosse Lane,
Shepton Mallet, Somerset, 1992**

by
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1: Introduction

This report was commissioned from Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit by The Hiram Walker Group Ltd. in respect of an area of land zoned for development at Fosse Lane, Shepton Mallet. An assessment of its archaeological potential is required in support of proposals for development, following the advice of PPG 16 from the Department of the Environment to local planning authorities. The site (NGR ST 63 1424) lies immediately adjacent and to the east of an area subject to extensive archaeological excavations in 1990, which revealed the substantial remains of part of a small Romano-British town (Fig.2). These discoveries have prompted subsequent archaeological evaluations in the vicinity of Fosse Lane, linked to further development proposals (Fig.1).

2: Evaluation Procedure

An archaeological assessment of almost 1.5 hectares of land to the rear of a warehouse and distribution depot on Fosse Lane was undertaken in view of the nature and extent of remains uncovered during the excavations in 1990 of the future site of the warehouse. At the time of the 1990 excavations the current site was not scheduled for immediate development (although it was subject to some disturbance relating to construction works on the adjoining site) and no full assessment was made of its archaeological potential. However, a partial geophysical survey by magnetometer was undertaken in the northwestern part of this site (Fig.2, Survey Areas 2 and 3). Use of the site in 1990 restricted the scope of that survey and in view of the disturbances which occurred then, and subsequent levelling-up operations, further geophysical survey would be unlikely to produce worthwhile or meaningful results.

To complete the archaeological assessment of the site a series of trial trenches were cut to sample the extent, character and survival of any remains throughout the area. This involved the mechanical excavation of two long transects along the N-S axis of the site (Trenches A and B) and two shorter spurs (C and D) at approximately 90 degrees from Trench B (Fig.2). Mechanical excavation achieved the rapid removal of recent overburden to expose over 800 square metres of the sub-soil horizons in which archaeological features and deposits survive *in situ*, and enabled these to be cleaned and defined by hand for recording purposes. The recording process involved the numerical identification of archaeological features and deposits, supplemented by a pro-forma written record, graphic and photographic records, and the collection of artefactual remains uncovered during the hand-cleaning operation. More detailed investigation by excavation was deemed unnecessary in view of the extensive corpus of information relating to very similar features and deposits excavated on the adjoining warehouse site in 1990, and in view of the wish to retain the surviving remains encountered in the 1992 evaluation in as intact a condition as possible. The predominantly N-S trench alignment adopted in this evaluation was determined in part by the site layout, but more particularly by information relating to the distribution of archaeological features obtained in 1990 on the warehouse site (Fig.2 and Leach 1991), and in 1991 at Bullimore Farm in the field immediately adjacent to the east (Fig.1 and Leach 1991a).

The archive of site records and finds collected during the evaluation are currently housed at the University of Birmingham. Subject to future

agreements, they may ultimately be deposited with the Somerset County Museum and County Records Office, with a copy of the archive to the National Monuments Record (RCHM) England.

3: Results

In this section the archaeological evidence recorded in each of the trenches is briefly reviewed and interpreted (Fig. 3). A discussion of its wider context and significance, and some recommendations relevant to its future management are presented in sections 4 and 5.

3.1: Trench A

The eastern trench approximately 160m long by 2m wide, was cut close to and parallel with the embankment bounding the site, approximately 160m long by 2m wide. A considerable overburden of recently deposited landfill was encountered throughout the trench, in excess of 1m deep to the north, and gradually decreasing to c.0.50m to the south. This sealed a former topsoil horizon, itself comprising in part material stripped from areas further to the west, as well as the turf and topsoil which originally formed the surface of the field. All this re-deposited material derived from earthmoving operations connected with foundation works and landscaping associated with the warehouse and distribution depot built in 1990-91.

From north to south the level of 'natural' horizontal limestone bedrock, sometimes masked by a thin buff-orange clay, varied between approximately 157.0m and 157.5m AOD. Above this base a composite layer, rarely more than 0.50m thick, contained archaeological deposits and the now buried topsoil immediately above. Locally, some archaeological deposits penetrate the bedrock horizon within artificial cuts such as pits, post-holes or ditches. None of these were emptied in this evaluation but previous experience in 1990 suggests that such features rarely penetrate below 0.50m into the bedrock. The present surface of the site in this area stands at between c.158.30m and 158.50m AOD.

Mechanical removal of the landfill overburden and buried soils revealed a largely intact (albeit truncated by previous land use, cultivation, etc) subsoil horizon incorporating a series of archaeological features and deposits.

For some 35m from the northern extremity of the trench a layer of dark stony soil, c.0.20m thick, contained relatively abundant evidence of Romano-British occupation, principally in the form of pottery and animal bones. At one point an alignment of larger stone rubble (1004) suggests the foundations of a drystone boundary wall aligned approximately E-W. Further south another drystone boundary wall foundation (1006) crossed the trench diagonally on a NE-SW alignment. This defined a further extensive area of dark stony soil overlying areas of closely packed cobbles (1007) continuing over 25m southwards. Several individual structures may be incorporated within this horizon, the clearest of which was a semicircular setting or platform of large stone blocks (1008). The southern boundary to this cobble and rubble spread appeared to be the disturbed footings of another E-W drystone boundary wall (1009), immediately beyond which lay a ditch (1011) on a slightly different alignment. Less than 5m beyond this ditch may be the fill of a much broader ditch (1013), also crossing the trench on an E-W alignment. All these features appeared from their finds content to be of Romano-British origin.

From the probable ditch 1013 southwards, a horizon of clayey soil and stone scatters contained much sparser evidence of Roman occupation, which gradually petered out southwards. Cutting this horizon and penetrating 'natural' clay/bedrock were three narrow, stone-lined E-W drainage ditches (1015, 1017 and 1018). By analogy with examples seen elsewhere in this locality these are almost certainly of post-medieval date, probably cut as field drains when the 'Enclosure' field pattern was laid out in this area in the late 18th or early 19th century. At around 50m from the south end of Trench A the mortared foundations (1019) of a stone wall, c.5m long, were seen in the west baulk, running parallel with it. Horizons of stony clay soil (1020/21), with a little Roman pottery, lay to the south and east of this wall, which presumably represents the east end of a stone building continuing to the west. Some 15m south of this building an E-W aligned stony horizon in the clay soil (1022) may be the remains of a roughly cobbled track. The only other feature at this

southern end of the trench was another stone-lined field drain (1023) aligned NE-SW.

3.2: Trenches B, C and D

Trench B, cut parallel and close to the western boundary of the site, was just over 200m in length and 2m wide. In contrast to Trench A there was little overburden of recent landfill and buried topsoil, in some instances less than 0.30m of recent make-up sealing 'natural' bedrock. This was the case at the north end of the trench, where the rock lay at approximately 158.5m AOD. Southwards, the depth of overburden increased gradually beyond the junction with Trench C, to as much as 0.50m beyond the Trench D junction. From approximately this point southward, a layer of buried topsoil and turf was also present beneath the landfill, although disturbed or considerably compressed in places. The bedrock horizon was encountered at c.158.20m AOD at the south end of Trench B, the present ground level standing a little below 159m here, and just above that level further north.

The removal of original turf and topsoil levels prior to the deposition of clay and rubble landfill over the northern two thirds of this trench had also disturbed underlying deposits of archaeological origin or content. This process was less marked further south, and barely affected areas immediately to the east which were sampled by Trenches C and D. Trench C, cut at 90 degrees to Trench B, was c.35m long and 2m wide, its 'natural' bedrock base rising from approximately 157.6m to 158.6m, east to west. Up to 0.60m of overburden sealed the original turf and topsoil horizon, which was still present for almost its full length. Trench D, further to the south, was also cut at an approximate right angle to Trench B and measured c.18.0m long by 2m wide. Once again, a maximum of almost 0.60m of recent overburden sealed the original turf/topsoil horizon, below which were preserved archaeological features and deposits. The presence here of structural remains led to an extension c.7 x 2m in the south side of the trench in order to examine these more fully.

Mechanical removal of recent overburden at the north end of Trench B exposed a weathered bedrock surface over the first 50m of the cut.

One or two minor disturbances in that surface were potentially of archaeological significance and a change in level at one point may indicate an earlier field boundary marked by a negative lynchet (1050). A more substantial lynchet survived at the junction with Trench C as a bank of soil and rubble (1053) incorporating a drystone wall footing (1054). These features appear to be the remains of the corner of a relatively modern field, still visible as collapsed stone walling above a break of slope in this area in 1990. From this point southwards, for almost 100m, features and deposits of Romano-British origin were preserved, initially within the slight terrace or lynchet created by the modern field boundary remains. Rubble and soil associated with this feature were mixed with disturbance and dumping originating during warehouse construction works late in 1990. These events have also affected the upper levels of Romano-British deposits at least as far as the junction of Trenches B and D.

Between the junctions with Trenches C and D a somewhat variable horizon of stony clay soil included areas of rubble, cobbling, possible stone settings (including a wall alignment (1058)), Romano-British pottery, animal bone and some metal finds, including coins. This evidently represents occupation and constructional debris, within which the remains of at least one stone-founded building could be recognised. This comprised the pitched stone foundations (1061) of the east wall to a building at least 10m long, and a short section of its north wall (1060), of similar construction. Mortar was associated with these footings but no upper wall courses had survived *in situ* at this point.

Trench C was cut eastwards from this area, one objective being to assess the spread of occupation in that direction. In the event relatively few archaeological deposits were encountered, the post-Roman field boundary accumulation sealing only a large N-S aligned ditch (1055) close to the west end of Trench C. Part of what was probably a large pit (fill 1084) was seen further east, cut into a surface of the bedrock. A relatively thin and indistinct Romano-British occupation layer overlay the bedrock and became more pronounced towards the east end of the trench where it overlay 'natural' clay sealing the

bedrock. This occupation horizon seems to equate broadly with the deposits 1002 and 1005 in Trench A.

Returning to Trench B, occupation deposits (1064–66) continue south from the building foundations 1060/1061 to the junction with Trench D, where another stone-founded structure was identified. This was defined by three sets of pitched wall footings and rubble (1067–69) outlining the east end of a room c.3 x 3m in area (as seen), but continuing west beyond the trench baulk. Trench D was cut east for c.18m from this point, in part to explore again the extent and preservation of remains in the zone between Trenches A and B. An occupation deposit (1078) was followed c.4m east from the structure defined by 1067–69, and then partly machined away to reveal the foundations of an earlier phase of building and deposits. This latter was exposed further by the extension of Trench D southwards. The remains here comprised robbed-out wall foundation trenches (1079–1080) defining the south east corner of a building, which should continue further west beneath the later deposit 1078. An infant burial (1081) lay alongside the southern wall trench 1079. Immediately to the east of this robbed-out building were the remains of a very substantial rectangular stone platform, c.3 x 4m in area and lying N–S across the widened trench. This comprised areas of large, vertically-pitched stone and some horizontally-laid alignments of stone blocks (1082) forming a composite structure, apparently set partly into a cut or depression in clay/bedrock natural. A further strip of large stone rubble (1083) was exposed along the south baulk, but no further excavation of any of these features was undertaken. Without this it is difficult to interpret the platform structure 1082, although the remains of a large corn drying oven is one possibility. A few metres east of this complex of structures was seen the western edge of a large N–S cut into bedrock. This contained a light brown clay soil fill (1085) with charcoal and animal bone, and is tentatively identified as a rock-cut ditch or pit of prehistoric origin.

Returning again to Trench B, occupation soils and debris (1071–74) spread southwards from the building remains at the junction with Trench

D; the density of Romano-British material gradually diminishing over a c.40m extent. The final 50m or so of Trench B revealed no deposits or features of Roman date within or above the 'natural' clay or bedrock. The only evidence of former land use was three post-Roman, stone-lined field drains (1075–77), aligned NW–SE–SW; one of which was associated with 18th-/early 19th-century earthenware pottery.

4: Interpretation

As suggested previously, the presence of extensive Romano-British settlement remains partly excavated on the site of the warehouse and depot immediately to the west (Leach 1991), and similar remains sampled just to the east beside Bullimore Farm (Leach 1991a) hinted strongly at the continuation and survival of such evidence within the plot of land evaluated in this report. The evidence reviewed in section 3 (above) bears this out, deposits and remains of Roman date predominating, although some evidence of post-medieval agriculture was also recovered and there is the possibility of a prehistoric element, represented also by a handful of flint artefacts.

Of itself, the Romano-British settlement and structural evidence is but a sample and frequently lacks coherence as revealed here. In the context of the more extensive investigations and discoveries in the near vicinity, however, the evidence can be interpreted with far more confidence. The excavation in 1990 identified and sampled two particular foci of activity within the Fosse Lane Roman settlement, both associated with groups of buildings and other structures (Fig.2). Of these, the more southerly appears to extend furthest east from the Fosse Way frontage, following perhaps the general line of a street in that direction. The eastwards extension of this concentration of occupation and activity was first examined by geophysical prospection in a survey undertaken in the summer of 1990 (Geophysical Surveys Report 90/49). Although lying only partly within the present site, the magnetic anomalies suggestive of archaeological phenomena in Survey Area 2 (Fig.2) coincide very well with the remains exposed in the centre of Trench B and in Trench D. Survey Area 3 revealed features attributable in part to modern disturbances which had already affected that

area, but little of suspected archaeological origin. This result is, once again, broadly confirmed by the present evaluation; Trench C and the north ends of A and B revealing a paucity of remains.

Trench D and the central sections of Trenches A and B demonstrate the eastern continuation of a zone of occupation, perhaps 100m or more across north to south, which extends from the Fosse Way frontage down to the vicinity of Bullimore Farm. It was noted in the evaluation at Bullimore Farm early in 1991 (Leach 1991), that the Roman occupation extended over 300m back from the Fosse Way frontage, its furthest extent almost certainly marked by the stream which now follows Frog Lane; potentially the eastern boundary to much of the settlement. The present evaluation demonstrates clearly the continuous nature of Romano-British occupation throughout this zone. To the south such evidence is almost totally absent, while further north it is more sparsely distributed, although, as demonstrated by previous work on the Mendip Business Park site, it is by no means absent (Leach 1990). No detailed investigation was undertaken of the features and deposits encountered in this 1992 evaluation, but the presence of stone building foundations, suspected industrial features, boundaries, cobbled yards or streets, and probably burials, as well as portable finds (coins, pottery, animal bone, etc.) is closely comparable with such features excavated in 1990.

As already noted, the condition of these remains, given that they were much truncated by past land use, is relatively good where the now buried soil has been left *in situ* beneath later landfill. Wherever the original topsoil was removed or severely disturbed during adjacent warehouse construction works and associated earthmoving, the underlying archaeology has suffered, either through compaction or further truncation and disturbance from above. Against this, however, it should be recognised that subsequent landfill, particularly over the eastern half of the site, now provides an additional protective cover above archaeological remains there. It should also be noted that all perimeters of the site are cut by deep trenches for storm drainage. These were avoided by the evaluation trenches but will have destroyed all archaeological features or deposits in their course.

For convenience in assessing the impact of any further development upon the archaeological resources still preserved on this site, three zones can be broadly distinguished (Fig.2).

Zone 1 Sparse archaeological remains, poorly preserved to the west but deeply buried and well protected to the east beneath 1m and more of modern landfill and buried topsoil.

Zone 2 Extensive archaeological deposits and remains almost continuously present; thinly buried and variably damaged to the west but buried and better preserved beneath progressively deeper overburden up to 1m deep, eastwards from Trench B. Some more localised recent disturbances have probably affected this zone but its overall archaeological coherence should not have been seriously impaired.

Zone 3 Archaeological features or deposits virtually non-existent, although a few relating to the settlement further north might be expected. This area is relatively well protected beneath recent overburden and the now buried turf and topsoil horizon.

5: Implications and Recommendations

A site evaluation, combining information from previous archaeological investigations and surveys with that obtained in recent trial trenching, has demonstrated the presence of archaeological remains within the greater part of an area of land zoned for development to the rear of the warehouse premises on Fosse Lane, Shepton Mallet. Preservation of remains throughout is generally good, though variable, particularly to the west, where maximum disturbance has occurred in the recent past and the existing ground cover is thinnest. A central zone (2) c.100m wide across the whole site, incorporates the most extensive and important remains; Zones 1 and 3 on either side are less sensitive, although some archaeology is certainly present within Zone 1.

With these factors in mind the following recommendations are provided, as a basis for any planning conditions which may be applied in the event of specific development proposals for the site.

1. Total archaeological excavation to recover and record archaeological data in those areas

to be substantially affected by building foundation works in Zone 2 should be avoided. This is a very expensive operation, once the costs of analysing and presenting the data for publication are included, and will effectively destroy another substantial portion of the Fosse Lane Roman town for a return of questionable value. Such an option might however be appropriate in advance of foundation works involving the other two zones, in particular Zone 3.

2. A design option which avoids or minimises ground works in Zone 2, particularly its western half, should be sought. Structures erected within the other zones should ideally opt for a raised raft foundation, or similar design solution minimising sub-surface disturbance. Wherever such foundations or service trenches must necessarily be cut through the archaeological levels defined an archaeological contractor should be employed to remove all deposits containing archaeological remains beneath the horizon of recent site overburden, down to the 'natural' clay/bedrock level.
3. The removal of recent overburden deposits should be kept to an absolute minimum,

particularly in the western half of the site. These now afford protection to the archaeological resource, and their removal, except by a controlled archaeological operation, will almost certainly damage the underlying archaeology.

4. Consultation with the County or Planning Authority Archaeologist, a professional archaeological contractor and, if appropriate, English Heritage, should be sought prior to the submission of design proposals for planning permission.

6: Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to the Hiram Walker Group Ltd. who commissioned this assessment and in particular to Mrs. Jean Curtis, Property and Site Services Administrator for liaison. We are further grateful to Mr. and Mrs. D. Dennett, Wayopen Estates, for assistance and the provision of a mechanical excavator. The evaluation was directed in the field by Peter Leach, with the support of Simon Almy, Keith Faxon, Charles Hollinrake, Laurence Jones and Stephen Litherland. The report was illustrated by Mark Breedon, edited by Simon Buteux, and produced by Liz Hooper and Ann Humphries.

7: References

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SHEPTON MALLET

Archaeological Investigations 1990-92



Figure 1

FOSSE LANE, Shepton Mallet Excavations and Surveys 1990-92

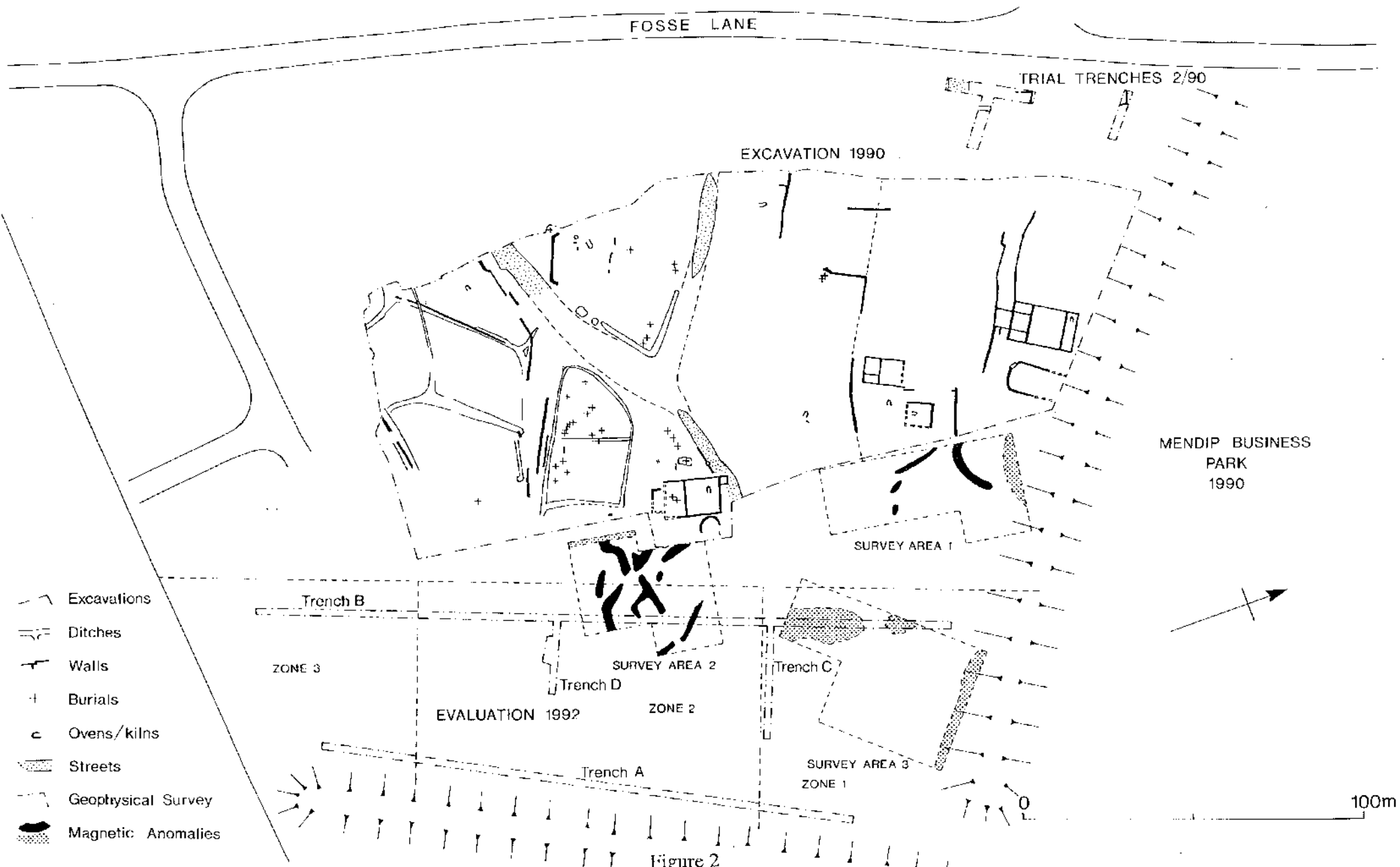


Figure 2

FOSSE LANE DEVELOPMENT SITE

Archaeological Evaluation 1992

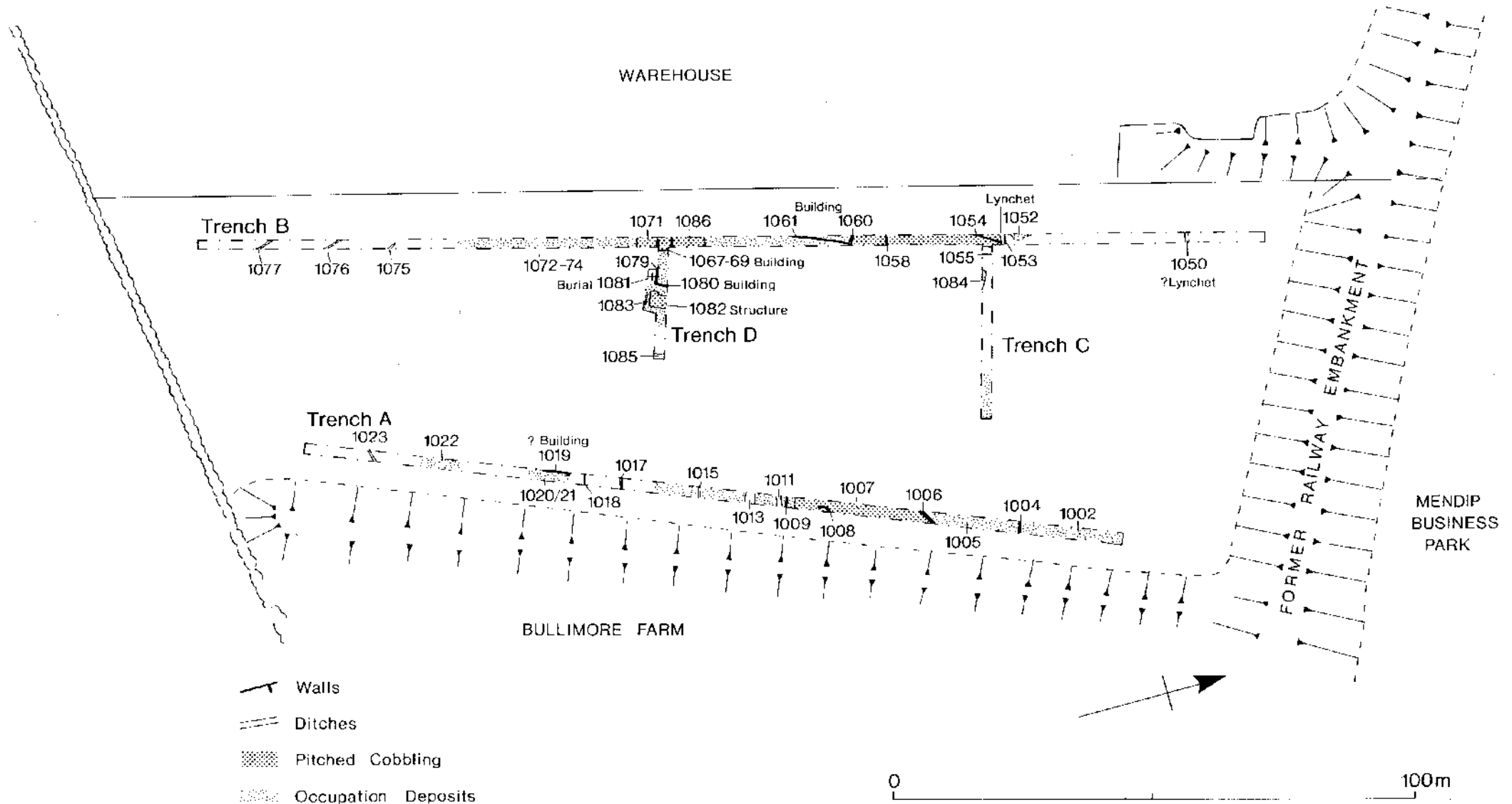


Figure 3