

Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit

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**St. Michael and All Angels'  
Tettenhall, Wolverhampton  
An Archaeological Evaluation**

by

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**TETTENHALL, WOLVERHAMPTON**  
**AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION**

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**1.0 Introduction**

This report documents the results of an archaeological evaluation within part of the churchyard of St. Michael and All Angels', Tettenhall, Wolverhampton (Figure 1). Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit was commissioned by Arrol and Snell Ltd., Architects and Surveyors, on behalf of the Parochial Church Council, to undertake the evaluation in advance of the submission of proposals for the construction of ancillary buildings on the north side of the modern church. The evaluation planned to investigate the survival, character and period of any archaeological remains and to assess the impact of the development proposals upon the area. Following the granting of a Faculty by the Diocese of Lichfield the evaluation was undertaken in December 1993 and extended into January 1994.

**2.0 The Site and its Setting**

Prior to 1955 the Church of St. Michael and All Angels', Tettenhall was dedicated to St. Michael; its original dedication is not known. The church is thought to have been founded by Edwin (959-975) and its later status as a Royal Free Chapel may also suggest the presence of an early Saxon minster at this site. This status is recognised by the monks of Abingdon who record in their chronicle of 910 "The English and Danes fought at Tettenhall and the English had the victory" (Stevenson 1858) - the historical accuracy of this statement is suspect, but the fact that Tettenhall was used as a geographical marker by the monks gives some indication of the minster's importance. The Saxon minster was later replaced by a Norman church, parts of which survived in a much altered form up to 1950 (OAU 1993).

The medieval church consisted of a dean and a number of secular clergy living in the church college. It has been suggested (Stebbing Shaw 1798, 1801) that some of these medieval collegiate buildings lay to the east of the church, but there is no other evidence to confirm this. The dean, as lord of the manor, commanded an income from four dependent manors (Pendeford, Perton, Wrottesley and Codsall) - shortly before the church's dissolution (1547) this income was estimated at £423 (OAU 1993).

Information relating to the church structure itself is limited. The West Midlands Sites and Monuments Record (Site number 2534) details that prior to 1950 the church retained a Norman pier and capitals at either end of the north arcade, which, along with that at the south was otherwise Early English. The clerestory was Perpendicular, whilst the north aisle and tower were both Decorated. A Transitional round arch opened from the chancel to the Wrottesley Chapel on the north where the remainder of the arcades were very late Early English (c. 1270). A major part of this church was destroyed by fire in 1950 and the present rebuilt church is entirely modern, incorporating only the decorated tower and porch of

1883 and no other ancient work. The church was re-dedicated as St. Michael and All Angels' Church in 1955.

Within the proposed development area, the churchyard contained standing stone memorials dating from 1780 up to 1956. The sites of other irregularly set graves, not marked by stones, were visible as slight rectangular mounds in the modern ground surface.

### **3.0 Evaluation Methodology**

The brief for evaluation, prepared by Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit, specified the manual excavation of three sample trenches, each measuring 2m x 3m, within the proposed development area on the north side of the church. Location of the trenches was determined by the limited space available between standing memorial stones.

Trench A was originally planned to cut a tarmac path which ran north-south through the churchyard, skirting the eastern side of the modern church. In order to facilitate continued public access through the churchyard (Trench C truncated one path running east-west immediately to the north of the church), this trench was instead located 0.30m further west within the bounds of the turfed churchyard area (Figure 1c). In order to avoid undermining a substantial memorial stone (Figure 1c, Gravestone Number 20) Trench B was located 0.68m further west than specified in the brief. The location of Trench C 1.10m further north than indicated in the brief proved necessary in order to avoid removing a stone wall which runs parallel to the northern outer wall of the modern church (Figure 1c).

In Trenches A and B the grass and topsoil were removed manually, whilst the modern tarmac path and its hardcore foundation in Trench C were removed with a "breaker". All three trenches were excavated by hand with the objective of assessing and recording the character, survival and date of archaeological evidence down to the natural sandstone underlying the churchyard. Written, scale-drawn and photographic records were created and both artefact and human remains were collected and documented. The information obtained from these procedures is presented in this report and forms the basis for an interpretation of the evidence and its implications for the proposed development within the churchyard. Although all burials were comprehensively planned and recorded, only their associated cuts have been shown in Figure 2.

### **4.0 The Archaeological Results**

#### **4.1 Trench A (Figure 2)**

Once the topsoil had been removed (0.4m) it was clear that root action from trees lining the tarmac path immediately to the east had caused extensive disturbance, particularly at the eastern section. Over 1.1m of loose sandy soil, containing only sparse ceramic and human bone fragments, was removed before the one burial in this trench was encountered (F1), corresponding with a horizon where the natural sandstone first appeared (depth 1.50-1.58m). Only the base of this east-west aligned burial cut survived (depth 1.58m), seen as a dark shadow against the bright red-orange of natural sandstone. The articulated skeleton was laid out extended with the head at the west - recovered bone was very fragmentary and root disturbance had destroyed much of the upper body. There were no traces of surviving wood or carbon, but the recovery of an *in situ* metal name-plate and two metal handles do suggest that a coffin had been used.

#### 4.2 Trench B (Figure 2)

The first of seven east-west aligned burials was encountered at 1.30m below the modern ground surface. Only two burials were completely excavated, both laid out extended with their heads at the west (F1, F3). Of the remaining five, one complete burial was left *in situ* (F6 see below), one extended into the west section (F2), two extended from the east section (F5 and F7) and one (F4) was truncated by two later burial cuts. Human bone was recovered from all levels of the loose sandy soil, with concentrations immediately above and adjacent to F1, F3 and F6.

The first burial encountered (F1, depth 1.30m) was cut in the north half of the trench and lay within a well-preserved wooden coffin with decorated metal handles and a metal name-plate still attached to the top of the coffin lid. The skeleton, "dressed" in a shroud, was in good condition. This burial had been placed directly over the cut of an earlier inhumation (F6) - the two coffins had been separated by c.40cm layer of loose redeposited sandy soil. F6 was placed within a well-preserved wooden coffin which had partially collapsed due to the weight of the burial above. The skeleton was in good condition, with some preservation of non-skeletal material. This burial was therefore left *in situ* (depth 1.73m).

The second fully excavated burial was cut into loose redeposited sandy soil within the southern half of the trench (F3, depth 1.60m) and lay parallel to F1 and F6. The outline of a wooden coffin with metal decorated handles and a metal name-plate was clearly visible within the burial cut, but their condition was extremely fragmentary. This also applied to the skeleton, parts of which had disintegrated into the surrounding soil.

A burial within the south-east corner (F4, depth 1.45m) was truncated at the west by F3 and at the east by F5 (depth 1.50m), leaving only the long bones *in situ*. Two metal handles recovered from the immediate area suggest that a coffin had originally been used.

The remaining three inhumations (F2, F5 and F7) were only partially excavated as the larger part of the burial cuts extended east and west outside the limits of Trench B. Fragments of wooden coffins were recovered from each of these burials.

Two further features were recorded, both of which cut the natural sandstone. F9 was cut against the west section, aligned north-south, this linear feature contained a concentration of long bones (depth 1.58m). The second feature (F8, depth 1.80m), cut against the south section and aligned east-west, contained no bone and was filled with loose sandy soil.

The natural sandstone horizon was first encountered at 1.55m below the modern ground surface.

#### 4.3 Trench C (Figure 2)

Twenty-one individual inhumation burials were identified in this trench. The bone was in a much poorer condition than that seen further to the north in Trenches A and B. Only small fragments of wood survived and isolated fragments of coffin furniture were recovered. Burial cuts were difficult to identify, the majority being represented by slight "shadows" in the loose sandy soil. The best-surviving articulated burials were restricted to the sandstone horizon (depth 1.38-76m). All features, with the exception of F17, were only partially excavated as a larger part of the burials extended beyond the limits of Trench C. Activity was more intense in the southern half of the trench, closest to the church itself; here burials inter-cut each other, resulting in only partial survival of individual skeletons.

Five burials (F1, F2, F3, F5 and F6), aligned east-west, with the head at the west and body extended, were encountered at 0.95m below the tarmac path. These were cut into a loose sandy soil (as seen in Trenches A and B) and organised into two rows, each burial separated by c.0.6m and each row by c.0.5m. F6 had been truncated by a later burial cut to approximately the same depth (F7). In contrast to the majority of recorded burials the arms of F7 had been folded across the chest and not extended by the side of the body. A further five inter-cutting burials were recorded in the south-east corner, the earliest of these (F16, depth 1.69m) incorporated a sandstone block as a head "support".

Activity was less intense in the northern half where F11 had been truncated by a later burial (F9). The arms of F9, instead of being extended at the side of the body were crossed against the chest. Less than 0.10m to the south F19 extended into the east section; only fragmentary pieces of skull could be recovered.

The natural sandstone horizon (seen at 1.56-1.68m) was cut at the centre of the trench by three burials. F20 maintained an east-west alignment, whilst the two stratigraphically earliest burials (F17 and F21) were clearly aligned northeast-southwest. This alignment may reflect that of an earlier medieval building, but the burials were not accompanied by any further evidence to support a medieval date. Although the bone was extremely fragile in all three burials, they were well-preserved in plan (F17 had arms folded across the chest) and the dark fill of the burial cuts stood out clearly against the bright red-orange sandstone, contrasting with the condition of burials recovered from a higher level.

The outer stone wall, which runs parallel to the modern church structure, extended less than 0.5m below the present tarmac path.

## **5.0 Discussion**

The evaluation of St. Michael and All Angels' churchyard by means of three sample trenches on the north side of the church has provided specific information relating to the concentration, preservation and depth of burials within the proposed development area. This information may provide a basis for suggesting the probability of concentration and preservation elsewhere within the proposed extension zone.

The natural sandstone maintains a remarkably constant level within the sampled area (depths ranging 1.50-1.58m). The sandstone is overlain by a build-up of loose sandy, and very largely disturbed, soil which forms a gentle east-west slope in the ground surface on the north side of the modern church.

A total of twenty-nine individual burials were identified within the three sample trenches, the density and inter-cutting of these burials reflecting a heavy usage over a long period in time. Circumstances within each trench do differ.

Trench A represents the least used area. Although a substantial broken gravestone was recorded in the loose sandy soil it is unlikely that any burial other than that already detailed was originally placed in this trench. It may be the case that F1 represents a continuation of the line of memorials seen immediately to the south (Figure 1c) and that the broken gravestone did originally mark this burial.

As expected, due to its location close to the modern church, Trench C represented the most heavily used area, a sequence of twenty-one inter-cutting burials were recorded from 0.95m down to the natural sandstone. Bone preservation was not good and coffin fittings, when recovered, were in a similar condition. The information extracted from this trench reflected a clear organisation of burials

within the upper metre of the churchyard; two rows of burials extending from the church, all aligned east-west and all regularly spaced (Figure 2). These rows, although a little less regulated, are also recorded in Trench B.

It has already been stated that standing memorials within the proposed development area ranged in date from 1780 to 1956. Not one of the excavated burials were marked by a memorial stone but it is likely that they reflect the timespan of the surrounding memorial stones; those burials closest to the church in Trench C may be earlier.

It was possible to date one burial - the lettering inscribed on a metal name-plate from F1 in Trench B was cleaned in a post-excavation study and dated that burial to 1953. That the burial immediately below this (F6) was in a similar state of preservation, suggests it may be of a similar date.

## **6.0 Implications and Recommendations**

As was to be expected, this evaluation demonstrated the survival of intact inhumation burials to the north of the modern church and within the proposed development zone. Information has been recovered relating to the preservation and depth of burial and the depth and occurrence of the underlying natural sandstone. None of the recorded burials could be associated with an earlier medieval church and no archaeology of earlier buildings was encountered. Although all twenty-nine burials are technically modern (post 1700), several implications should be noted if the proposed development is to proceed as envisaged:

1. Trench A represents a low-density area of burial. It is likely that extensive root action from trees lining the modern tarmac path immediately to the east will have prevented the survival of intact burials within this eastern extent of the proposed development.
2. Trench C represents a high density burial zone. The recovery of twenty-one inter-cutting burials within this sample trench indicates that the area closest to the modern church will hold a concentration of burials beginning at less than one metre below the present path surface and continuing to at least 1.70m into the natural sandstone. The slightly different alignment of two burials within this zone may suggest a medieval date.
3. The recording of seven inhumations within Trench B suggests that the concentration of burials remains high up to the western limit of the proposed extension.
4. It should be noted from the results of this evaluation that very recent burials (post war) are likely to be found even in areas not marked by memorial stones. If the proposed development proceeds it should be anticipated that further burials of this date would be encountered.
5. The evaluation has indicated that there are no remains which are likely to be of significant archaeological interest within the three sample trenches. Although sensitive burials were encountered, it is unlikely that any archaeology will have survived within the area of the proposed footing of the building and it is therefore recommended that no further excavation is required.

## 7.0 Acknowledgements

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## 8.0 References

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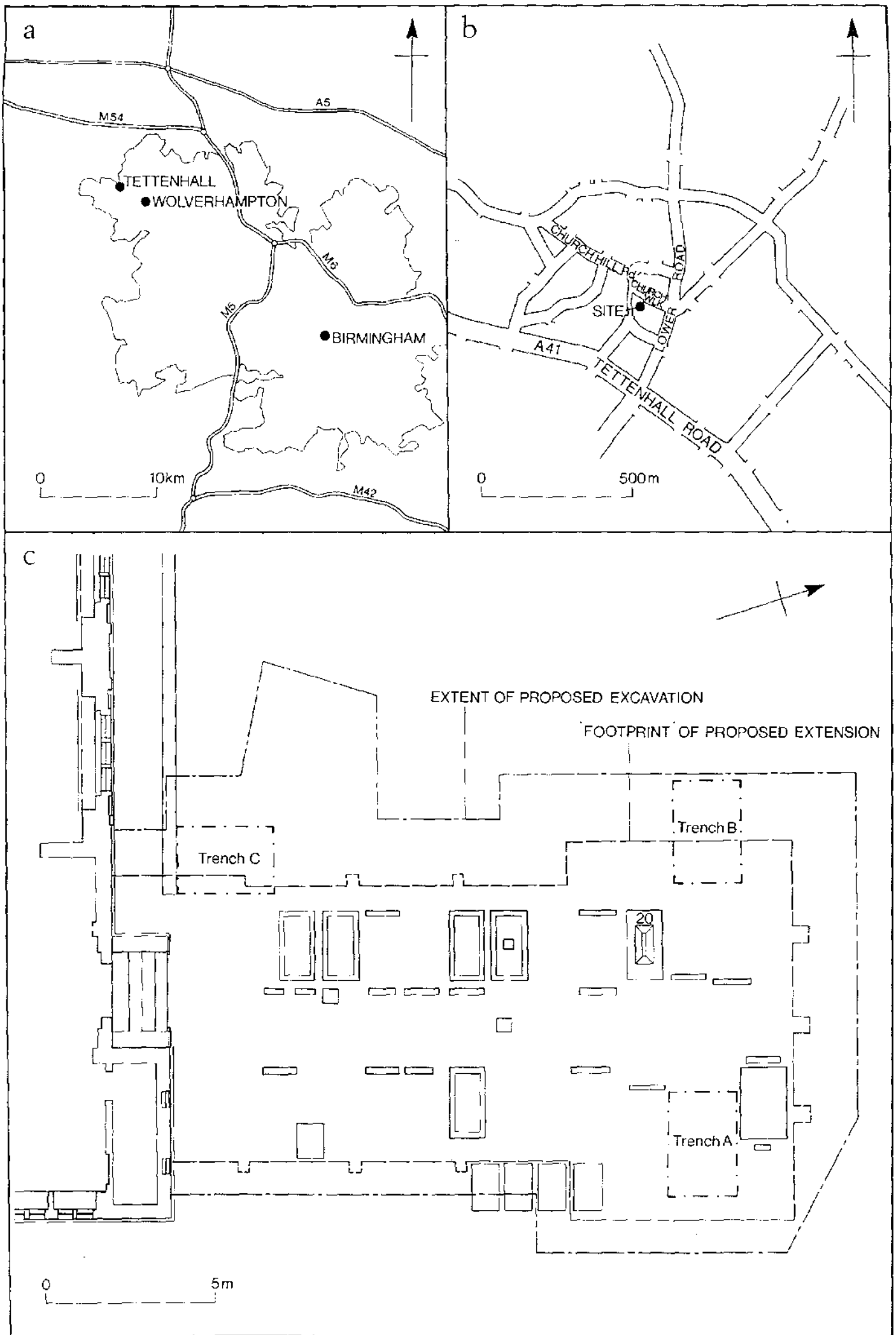
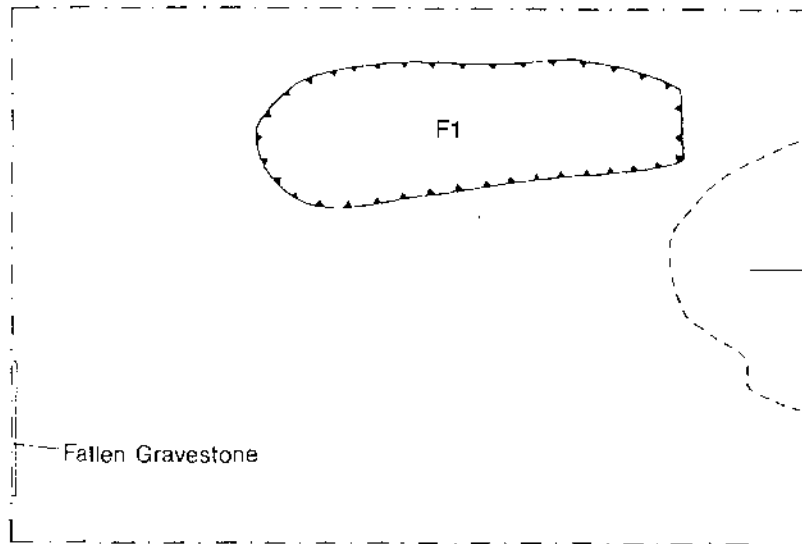


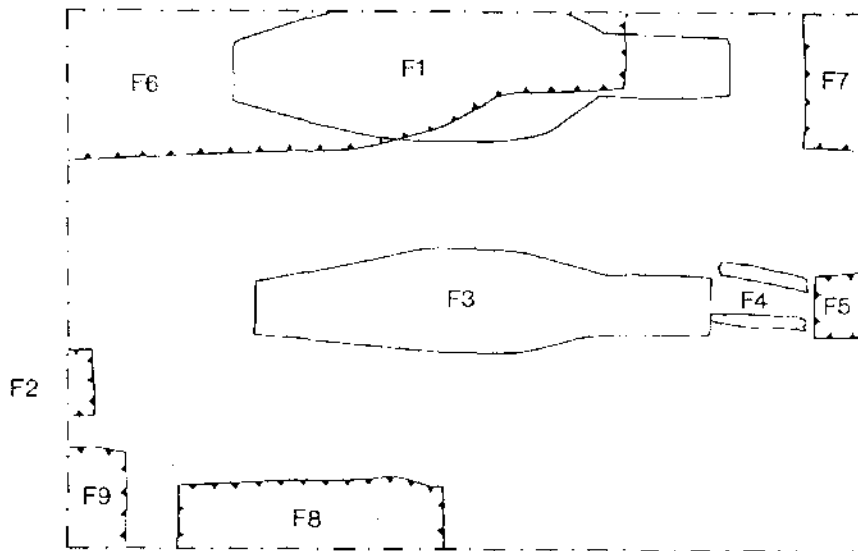
Figure 1

### TRENCH A

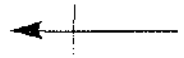
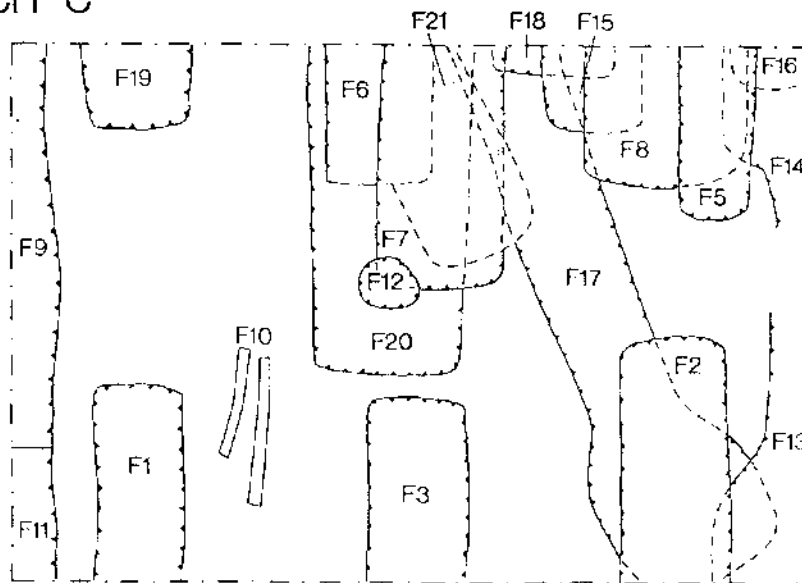


Extensive root disturbance

### TRENCH B



### TRENCH C



0 1m

Figure 2