

Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit

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**An Archaeological Watching Brief
at Charmouth, Dorset**

by

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An Archaeological Watching Brief at Charmouth, Dorset

Summary

An archaeological watching brief undertaken during construction work within the back gardens of Mintaka/Mill View, The Street, Charmouth, produced medieval and post-medieval pottery sherds derived from the cultivated soil. No definite features were noted save for a robbed-out boundary wall. Pottery within the robber trench suggests that the wall was demolished in the 17th or 18th century.

1.0 Introduction

Proposals to develop land behind Mintaka/Mill View, The Street, Charmouth, prompted Dorset County Council to propose that an archaeological watching brief be undertaken when construction or demolition works were carried out.

The property is situated at grid reference SY36669363 and stands at approximately 10 metres A.O.D. at the eastern end of the medieval planned town. The underlying geology consists of large gravels and chert within clays and sand.

2.0 Historical Background

The historical background is summarised in 'Historic Towns in Dorset' by K. J. Penn published by the Dorset Natural History and Archaeological Society in 1980. Figures 1 and 2 are reproduced from this publication.

The settlement lies on the line of a major Roman road linking Dorchester and Exeter at a crossing of the River Char. There may have once have been a small harbour at the river mouth, now eroded away by the sea.

At the Domesday survey Charmouth (originally Cernemouth) was a small settlement with 16 saltworkers.

It came into the possession of Forde Abbey in the later 12th century and remained so until the Dissolution of the monasteries in the 16th century.

In 1320 the Abbot created a new planned town as a free borough with burgages measuring 66 feet by 330 feet (c. 20m x 100m). The town was not a success although the population in the 16th century numbered approximately 200. In 1851 the population was 601 and in 1901 numbered 560. There has been moderate growth this century but its major source of income, tourism, suffers due to its proximity to the more popular resort of Lyme Regis.

3.0 Methods

The watching brief took place intermittently between the 6th April 1994 and the 14th May 1994 with breaks due to construction or logistical difficulties.

All excavations were monitored and finds were collected and numbered according to the various service or construction trenches within which they were found and measured plans were taken at intervals to record the underlying stratigraphy of the site. The watching brief was also recorded photographically using colour slides and black and white prints and was carried out by Charles Hollinrake on behalf of the Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit (BUFAU).

4.0 The Site (see Figure 3)

Prior to the development the site originally contained ornamental and vegetable gardens and was divided into two portions with a large hedge forming the boundary.

The eastern half measured approximately 20m x 100m, the area of the 14th century burgage plots. The western half of the site measured approximately 40m x 50m. This area is also obviously based on the original medieval plan but the northern half of what must have originally been two burgages has been encroached upon by houses and gardens.

The western boundary of the site is a large wall of rubble stone and chert bonded by a gritty white mortar. Similar walls can be seen throughout the village.

The eastern boundary is a modern fence. Remains of a rubble stone wall, however, can be seen on the eastern boundary of the adjacent property, east of the development site. This latter property would appear to be the most easterly burgage of the planned village.

5.0 The Watching Brief

The top soil was stripped within the northern half of the garden where the new driveway was to be constructed. Not all topsoil was removed in this operation and the natural subsoil was not exposed. Finds from this operation were exclusively post-medieval, mainly of the 18th and 19th centuries.

Two service trenches were cut through the line of the new road together with their manhole pits (Figure 3).

The easterly trench exposed the western edge of the foundations of 'Mill View', the eastern house. The building was originally 1.8m wider and its gable end had been reduced to create a more substantial driveway into the rear of the properties. The foundations consisted of grey lias limestone blocks set into the top of the natural gravels and bonded with slightly gritty, pale yellow lime mortar.

The builders stated that 'Mill View' originally contained a floor of lias flagstones, similar to the foundation stones, which were bonded with a white gritty mortar, not yellow as in the foundations.

The area between the houses and immediately to the south contained gravels immediately below the modern surface, suggesting that the ground here had been lowered in the past.

Service trenches were then cut throughout the north, western and southern portions of the development area. Only one feature of any significance was noted.

When the western drain trench cut through the line of the hedge which separated the two halves of the garden a small ditch, probably a robbed out foundation trench, was noted. The feature was a little under 2 metres wide and relatively shallow,

around 0.3 metres, and contained some 17th-18th century pottery (bag 7). No other features were noted. This trench probably held a wall, similar to that forming the west boundary of the property, defining the (original) burgage plots in this area.

The foundations for the new vicarage cut in the southwest corner of the development plot were also monitored but without noting any archaeological features or horizons.

Apart from the one foundation trench, or robber trench, already noted no other subdivisions of the property were recognised.

The stratigraphy was similar throughout the site with between 0.2 to 0.4m of cultivated top soil lying upon a sandy clay subsoil containing stones, brick, bone and pot sherds with a depth of between 0.3 to 0.6m. Below the subsoil was a deposit of large gravels and chert within a clayey yellow sand.

6.00 The Finds

Interim pottery totals

79 individual finds of pot, brick/tile, clay pipes:

C12-C14 3	C13-C15 5	C14-C16 5	C15-C17 7	
C16-C17 9	C16-C18 1	C17 9	C17-C18 12	
C18 1	C18-C19 17	C19 3	flowerpot 5	? 2

Many sherds of 18th and 19th century cream, transfer and blue glazed wares were not collected.

7.0 Discussion

The watching brief has produced pottery sherds of the 12th century through to the present day. No Romano/British or Saxon sherds were recovered and the majority of the finds would appear to date from the 17th century onwards. Almost all of the earlier medieval sherds are small and abraded and were not found in sufficient quantity to suggest that occupation of that period was present within the development site. The earlier sherds might simply denote manuring or casual disposal of rubbish upon an infield.

No rubbish or cess pits were noted of any period; they might exist within the area of the modern gardens immediately south of Mintaka and Mill View. A line of outside privies are still extant behind Mill View - these are constructed from rubble stone and, like the boundary walls, are also bonded in a white gritty mortar.

It is possible that this part of the planned town was not settled in the medieval period; perhaps the area around the church and the northern half of the settlement was favoured with the burgages on the extremities of the town not finding tenants until after the Dissolution in the 17th century.

8.0 Recommendations

It is not felt that continued archaeological monitoring of this site would be very productive nor would it be likely to enhance our understanding of the towns history. No features have been noted, no further boundaries will be cut through, and rubbish or cess pits are unlikely to be found so far south of the houses bounding the main road.

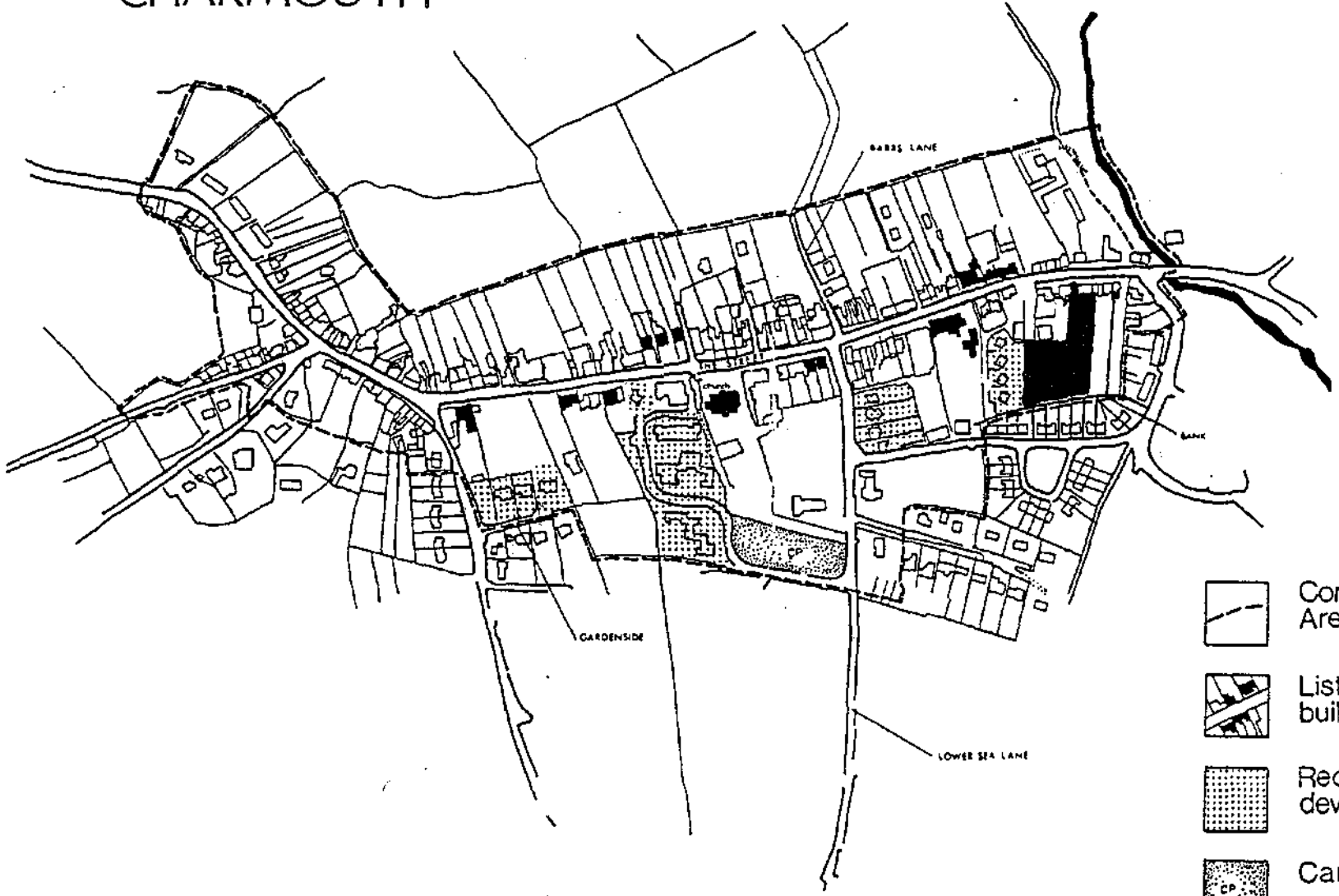
Acknowledgements





I would like to thank Mr. Melvin Sparks, the owner of the property, for his cooperation in this project; to the builder Mr. Roy Copp, of W.S.Copp and Sons of Bridport and the JCB driver Mr. Mike Christian, for their help and cooperation.

The site agent Mr. Clive Hawkins arranged the planning details, and the watching brief was carried out under the aegis of the Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit. It was supervised by Dr. Ann Woodward who also edited this report.

Charles Hollinrake
8 July 1994

CHARMOUTH



-  Conservation Area
-  Listed buildings
-  Recent development
-  Carpark

0 200m

FIG 1
KP

CHARMOUTH EARLY FEATURES

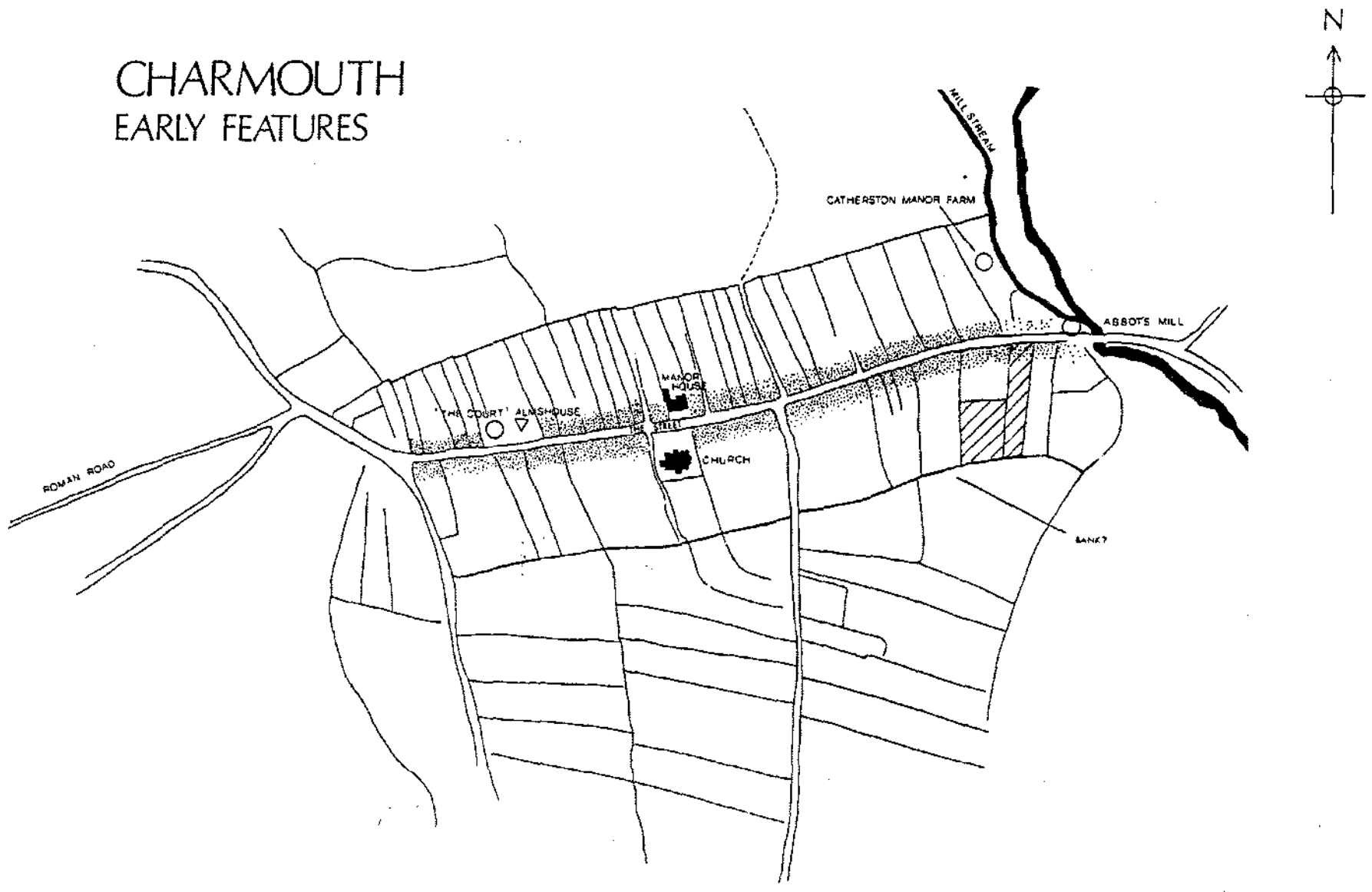
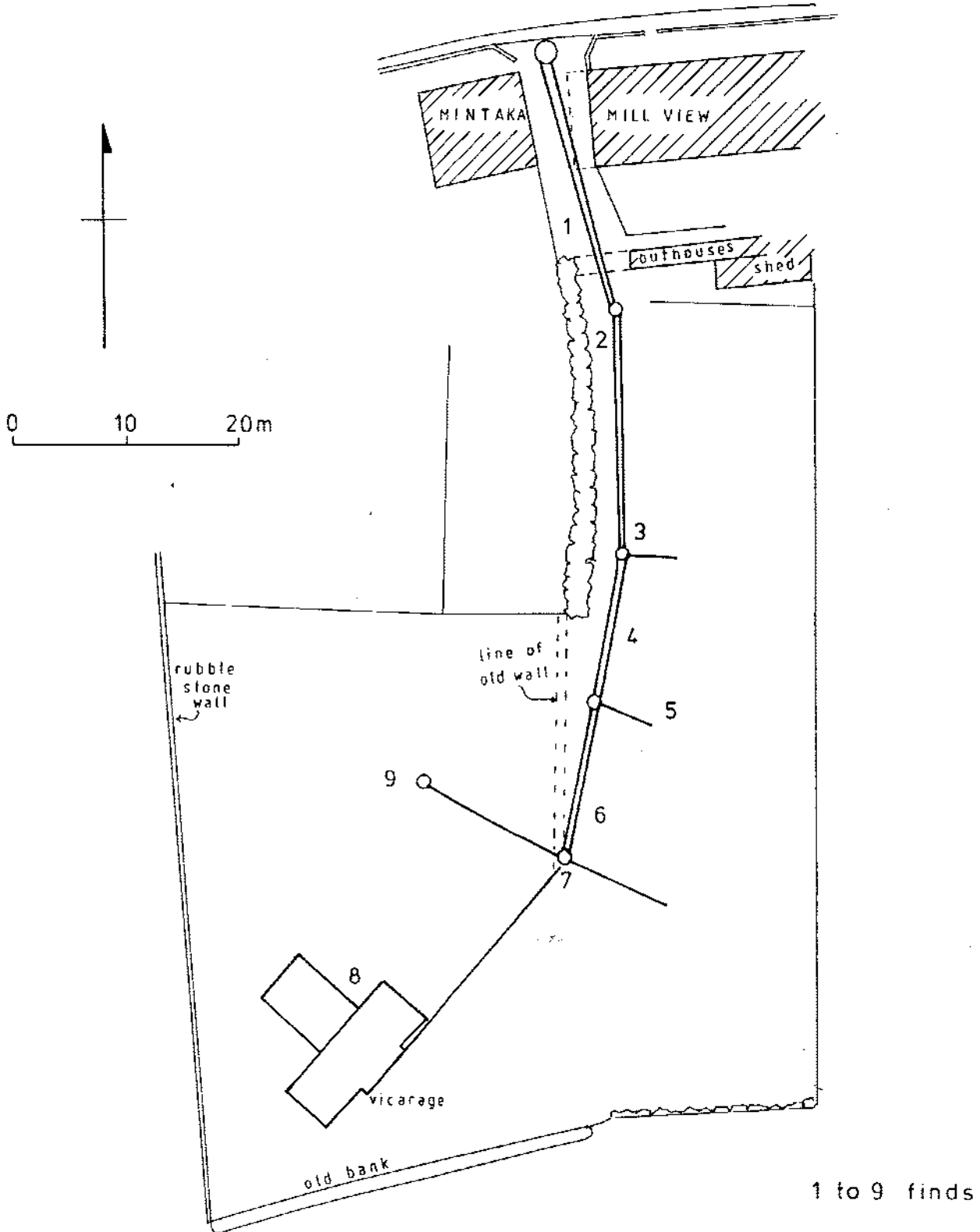


FIG 2

KJP

The Street



1 to 9 finds

Charmouth - The Street

Service trenches

FIG 3