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**Land at Fender House, Combwich, Somerset
An Archaeological Evaluation**

by
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Summary

No archaeological features earlier than the 18th century were found. Yard surfaces associated with a building present in 1840 were found, sealed beneath demolition material from the building. A pit dug in the 18th century for clay used locally in brick making was located, and an undated ditch.

1 Introduction

1.1 An archaeological evaluation was undertaken on land at Fender House, Combwich, by Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit from 30th August to 2nd September 1994. Work was on behalf of the owner, and followed a brief prepared by archaeologists at Somerset County Council's Department for the Environment, with whom the location of trial trenches was agreed in advance.

1.2 The site comprised a field to the rear of buildings fronting Brookside Road (NGR ST258422) in Combwich village (Fig 1). The north-west part of the field is an apple orchard, the remainder rough grazing. In the southern part of the field are the stub walls of three former greenhouses. These were part of a market garden complex and to the south-east of the field are a number of standing greenhouses, now disused and choked with brambles.

North and west of Fender House are single storey farm buildings and concrete yards. East of the access track are two lawns with flower beds. The upper lawn had formerly been the site of a further greenhouse.

The ground slopes to the south from a northern boundary at 20.5m above Ordnance Datum at the top of the slope, down to Brookside Road at 8m AOD.

1.3 Four trenches were opened using a machine, providing a 1.5m wide transect of the exposed subsoil. In addition five 1m² test pits were dug by hand; three of which were carried down to the natural subsoil (Fig 3). The resulting archaeology was then hand excavated and recorded using measured scale drawings and photographs. Finds were recorded on site and one group of pottery was retained.

1.4 Archaeological work was undertaken by four members of BUFAU staff under the direction of Peter Ellis. Thanks are due to the owner, Mrs M Pudner, to her father, Mr J Fear, to Mr T S Rogers of Pardoes, Bridgwater, to Mr M Betty, to Somerset County Council's Department for the Environment, and to the Local History Library, Taunton.

2 The archaeological background

2.1 The impetus for archaeological work came from Romano-British finds made nearby and from the proximity of the development site to the medieval village of Combwich (Fig. 1).

2.2 Romano-British remains have been found on the opposite side of the stream from the site during clay extraction for brick working in this century (Dewar 1940). Finds of Iron Age pottery suggest a prehistoric origin, and the proximity of the

major post-Roman cemetery on Cannington hillfort may indicate a post-Roman continuation for the settlement (Rahtz 1969; Lecch 1977, 24). Further Romano-British settlement evidence has been found along the west bank of the Parrett just to the north of the village (Somerset County Council Sites and Monuments Record: PRNs 10306 and 10658).

2.3 The medieval village of Combwich may be based on a rectangular street grid (Dunning 1992, 74), and was possibly a planned medieval town. A parallel may be drawn with Downend 5km to the east on the opposite side of the Parrett (Aston and Lecch 1977, 39). The eastern street may represent a former line of the Parrett, and the southern street, Brookside, a quay. The northern street, Ship Lane, runs east-west parallel with Brookside. The western street, Church Street seems more modern in origin. It was in existence by the time of the 1840 Tithe map, and as May Pole Street in 1851, renamed Church Street after 1868 (Dunning 1992, 74). The village had 20 households in 1563 (*ibid*, 76). A mill was in existence in the 16th century, probably on the north bank of Combwich Pill, and was last recorded in 1682 (*ibid*, 87). The village church of St Peter's was built between 1868 and 1870 (*ibid*, 109).

2.4 Analysis of Domesday book data suggests that the area to the west of the mouth of the Parrett was well populated and resourced (Darby and Welldon Finn 1967, figs 36, 37, 39, 41, 42). Large areas of meadowland are recorded at Combwich in Domesday Book (Darby and Welldon Finn 1967, 181). Combwich Down west of the village, of which the development site forms part, was common arable land until it was enclosed at the late date of 1867 (Dunning 1992, 105).

2.5 Post-medieval Combwich was based around its port. Corn was exported from here to Ireland from the 14th century, and by 1832 bricks were exported. Incoming cargoes included coal from Wales continuing into this century. Brick and tile manufacture at Combwich on the south side of the Pill is recorded from the 19th century until the brickyards were closed in the 1930s, although clay extraction continued until 1963 (Dunning 1992, 86).

2.6 The site itself was a market garden until the 1970s. The Tithe Apportionment map of 1840 shows the field to the rear of Fender House undivided and without the orchard. A former layout of buildings is shown north of Brookside Rd with Fender House to the west, a narrow range to the north, and with buildings to the east running north from No 4 Brookside (Fig 2). This latter and Fender House itself alone survive. A wide opening from Brookside appears to enter an enclosure with further enclosures to the west and north.

3 Archaeological results

3.1 Trench A (Fig 3)

Trench A was excavated north-south down the hillslope from the plateau to the north to the northernmost abandoned greenhouse to the south.

The northernmost few metres exposed a cream sand capping reported elsewhere on the hilltop to the north. To its south an overall subsoil of brown/orange clay marked the natural surface with lias rock extruding in places, particularly at the southern end and at the top of the natural slope.

At the northern end of the trench a possible ditch, F101, was excavated (Fig 4). This was located just below the plateau edge, and was 2.6m wide and 0.3m deep. The fill was a uniform dark claysoil with shattered fragments of lias (2) sealed by a stiff clay which continued southward (1). Post-medieval pottery was found in the upper part of layer 2.

A secondary break of slope is clear part of the way down the hillslope, and in this area two possible features, F102 and F103, were located. Both were represented by dark soil to a maximum depth of 0.2m below the subsoil level (F102: Fig 4). Post-medieval pottery was found at the base of these features which may have been shallow pits or naturally-formed scoops resulting from animal burrows or tree roots.

The topsoil overburden was generally 0.2m deep. Post-medieval pottery and clay pipe fragments were found directly lying on the natural surface.

3.2 Trench B (Fig 3)

Trench B was excavated east-west across the orchard and the field to the east to join with Trench A. The position of the trench was dictated by the orchard layout.

The natural subsoil exposed was an orange clay.

In the orchard area a pit, F201 was excavated (Fig 4). This was steep sided, 6m across, and 1.20m deep. The fill was uniform dark claysoil with some small stones and charcoal. In one area large lias stones were found at the bottom of the pit. The curve of the feature's edge in the excavation trench suggested a circular or oval plan.

To the east were an area of modern burning and a spread of stone, possibly the remains of a path associated with the market garden.

Post-medieval pottery was again found at the base of the topsoil cover, which was generally 0.2m deep. In the area of F201 the depth increased to about 0.4m, forming a slightly raised area about 10m across.

3.3 Trench C (Fig. 3)

Trench C was cut on the west side of the site running north-south.

The natural surface was orange clay to the north with grey clay and lias rock to the south.

At the northern end a modern dump of material 0.5m deep was marked by potting material, plastic sacking, and other waste reportedly from the greenhouses. Two lines of smashed lias to the south suggest land drains. The topsoil cover over the natural was about 0.15m deep.

3.4 Trench D (Fig. 3)

Trench D was laid out east-west across a former greenhouse site and into the field to its west.

The subsoil was a stiff grey/orange clay.

Three ceramic land drains ran diagonally across the interior of the greenhouse. Topsoil cover was about 0.15m in the field. Within the former greenhouse area the natural surface was sealed by a compressed stony layer beneath a rich garden soil, a total depth of 0.25m.

3.5 The test pits

3.5.1 Access to the two lawns by machine was not possible and five hand-dug test pits were therefore excavated here (Fig 3).

3.5.2 Pits 3 and 5 (Fig 5)

These were excavated in the upper lawn area. The sequence in Pit 3 was of yard surfaces of brick and cobbles (4) overlying the natural clay surface, here of grey clay. These were laid out either side of a lias stone drain, F501, choked with silt (5), part of which was still open although the structure had collapsed. Yard and drain were sealed beneath stony layers (2 and 3) which may have formed a surface; these were in turn sealed by the garden soil of the lawn (1).

Test pit 5 was excavated to a depth of 0.8m without locating the natural surface, and further digging was abandoned. The principal deposit encountered, occurring at 0.4m below the surface onward, was a stiff yellow/brown clay containing lias (5). This lay beneath a band of yellow clay (4) which in turn was sealed by stiff grey clay (3). A horizon of lias fragments (2) lay at a depth of 0.12m from the surface beneath the garden soil (1). Layer 2 may have been a surface.

3.5.3 Pits 1, 2 and 4 (Fig 5)

These were excavated in the lower lawn. The Pit 1 sequence comprised a linear feature, F502, cut into natural orange clay. At the lowest point excavated this contained mortared stone. The upper part of the cut and the natural surface was sealed by a layer of claysoil with some mortared rubble (4), beneath a stiff dark clay with charcoal (3). This in turn lay beneath a layer of orange clay (2), sealed by a deep garden soil (1).

In Pit 2 the lowest point reached at 1.2m from the surface was marked by a layer of lias fragments set in grey clay (4), sealed beneath a 0.5m deep layer of mortared rubble (3). This lay beneath a deposit of orange clay (2) similar to layer 2 in Test Pit 1, with a similar garden soil above (1).

Finally in Pit 4 a simple sequence was recorded with the natural surface of orange clay beneath a 0.38m deep overburden of garden soil.

3.5.4 Dating evidence

The lowest levels in all the test pits contained red earthenware pottery with brown internal glazes datable to the 19th century.

4 Discussion

4.1 Results from the trial excavations were negative from the point of view of any surviving Romano-British or medieval evidence. A few sherds of 1st-4th century AD black-burnished ware from Poole, Dorset, were found, and a half dozen sherds of cream and red ware medieval jugs with external green glaze, dating from the 13th-15th centuries AD. These finds could however represent normal field manuring.

It has been suggested that the Romano-British discoveries south of the site and from the bank of the Parrett to the east might have derived from a settlement on higher ground (Leech 1977). Occupation at Combech seems very likely. But any such settlement, however damaged and disturbed, would be expected to leave a greater degree of evidence than was found on this site, and thus a settlement in the proposed development area can almost certainly be discounted. Although the area of the site examined directly north of Brookside Road was extremely small, no indications of settlement earlier than the post-medieval period were found.

4.2 Post-medieval evidence comprised the ditch in Trench A, the pit in Trench B and the building evidence in Test Pits 1-5. The ditch was not a convincing feature. Enclosure here was not undertaken until the 19th century and must be represented by the present field boundaries. It is possible that some definition of the hilltop was made previously, but the slightness of the feature and the uniformity of the fill suggest a recent date. It may therefore be a simple scoop cut into rock rather than a ditch.

The pit, F201, in Trench B seems likely to have been a marl pit dug for clay. There are earthworks in the orchard area which may represent spoil from further pitting. The pottery finds suggest an earlier date in the 18th century than the commercial clay pits of the 19th century. The pit may be paralleled by those reported from the commercial clay pits to the south. Here numerous pits were reported cut to a depth of 4'6" (1.37m) containing 'black earth charcoal, ash and coprolites' (Dewar 1940, 129). These were exposed in the larger scale workings of the 20th century and may represent small scale clay extraction and subsequent rubbish infilling. The reported depth is similar to F201, presumably the depth at which clay recovery was not worth the additional effort required.

The results from Test Pits 1-5 need to be considered with the 19th century Tithe map evidence (Fig 2). Taken together the evidence suggests that Fender House and the demolished buildings north of No 4 Brookside surrounded a cobbled yard with drains. The trench F502 in Test Pit 1 may represent a further extension of the drain, F501, in Test Pit 3. It might alternatively be a building footing, although no structures were shown here in 1840. The yard and drains were covered in demolition material and it seems reasonable to relate this to the levelling of the eastern range of buildings, which must have occurred after 1840. In two trenches an overall layer of clay suggested natural clay redeposited (layers 2 in Test Pits 1 and 2). This may have formed the base for a surface.

The orientation of Fender House itself is a peculiarity that might reflect the influence of some earlier layout to its east. The demolished buildings recorded in 1840 may be deemed to have been the same date as No 4 (apparently early 19th century), to which they were apparently joined, but there may have been earlier structures here.

5 Recommendations

5.1 Mitigation strategies

Buildings present in 1840 and since demolished are present in the south part of the proposed development. The test pitting suggested a 19th century context. It is, however, suggested that the development design is undertaken with the location of these former buildings in mind and that the layout avoids them as far as possible (Fig 2).

5.2 Watching brief

No further excavation would seem warranted. The results of these trial excavations may be deemed reasonably conclusive evidence that further prospection for Roman or medieval remains would not be rewarding.

The careful clearing of overburden in the area of the lawns would reveal the 19th-century layout and the western parts of buildings demolished in the later 19th century which lie within the development area. However, the value of the remains is insufficient to justify a large scale archaeological intervention.

The marl pit in the orchard area may be one of a number of such pits, but no further archaeological investigation of these appears to be warranted.

It may be advisable for an archaeologist to visit the site during any development to record further evidence, particularly of marl pits and of buildings on Brookside Road. The area of the greenhouses is of course an unknown quantity and may also repay examination. A full time watching brief would not be justified but occasional visits arranged in liaison with the developer are recommended.

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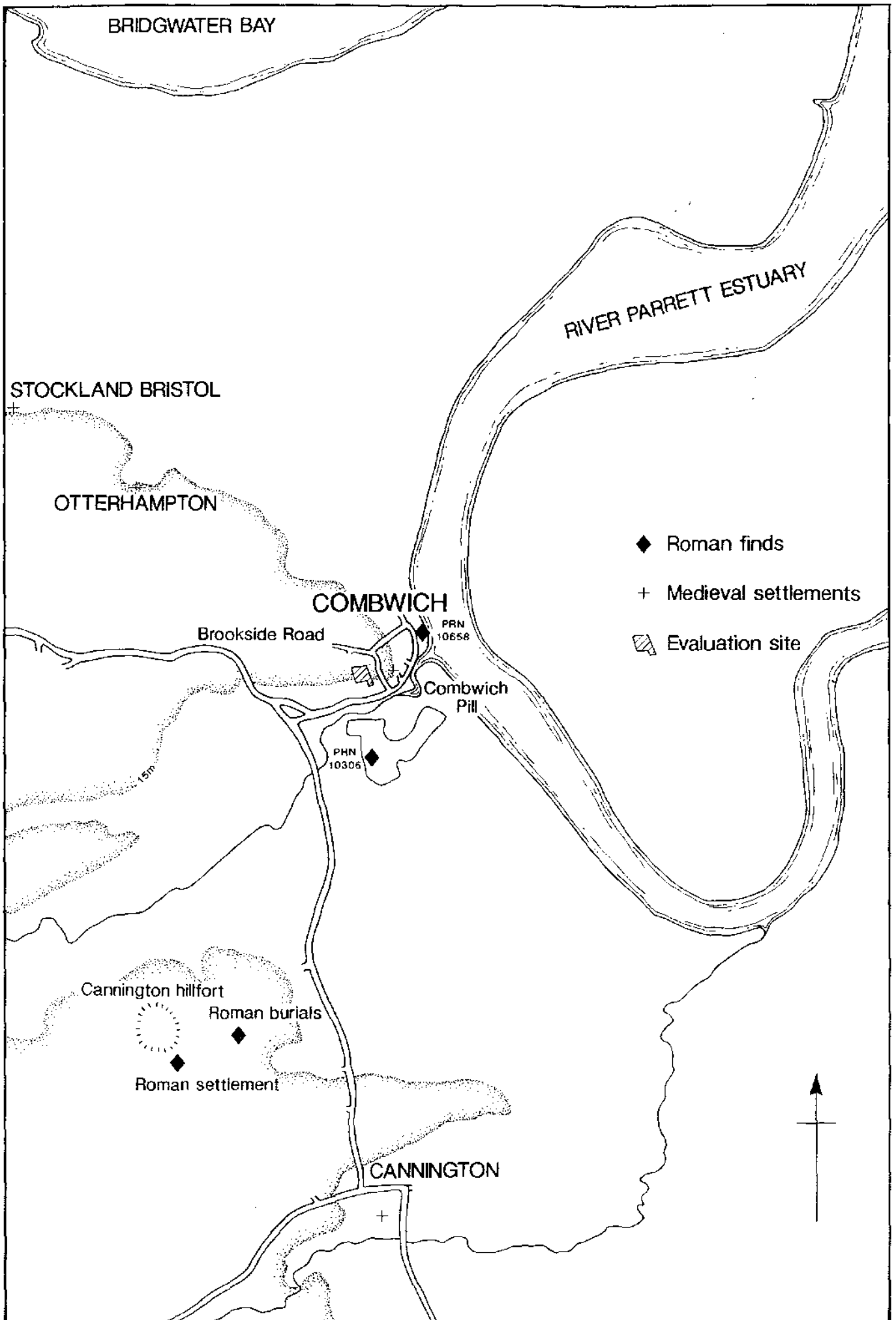


Fig. 1 Combwich: Location plan

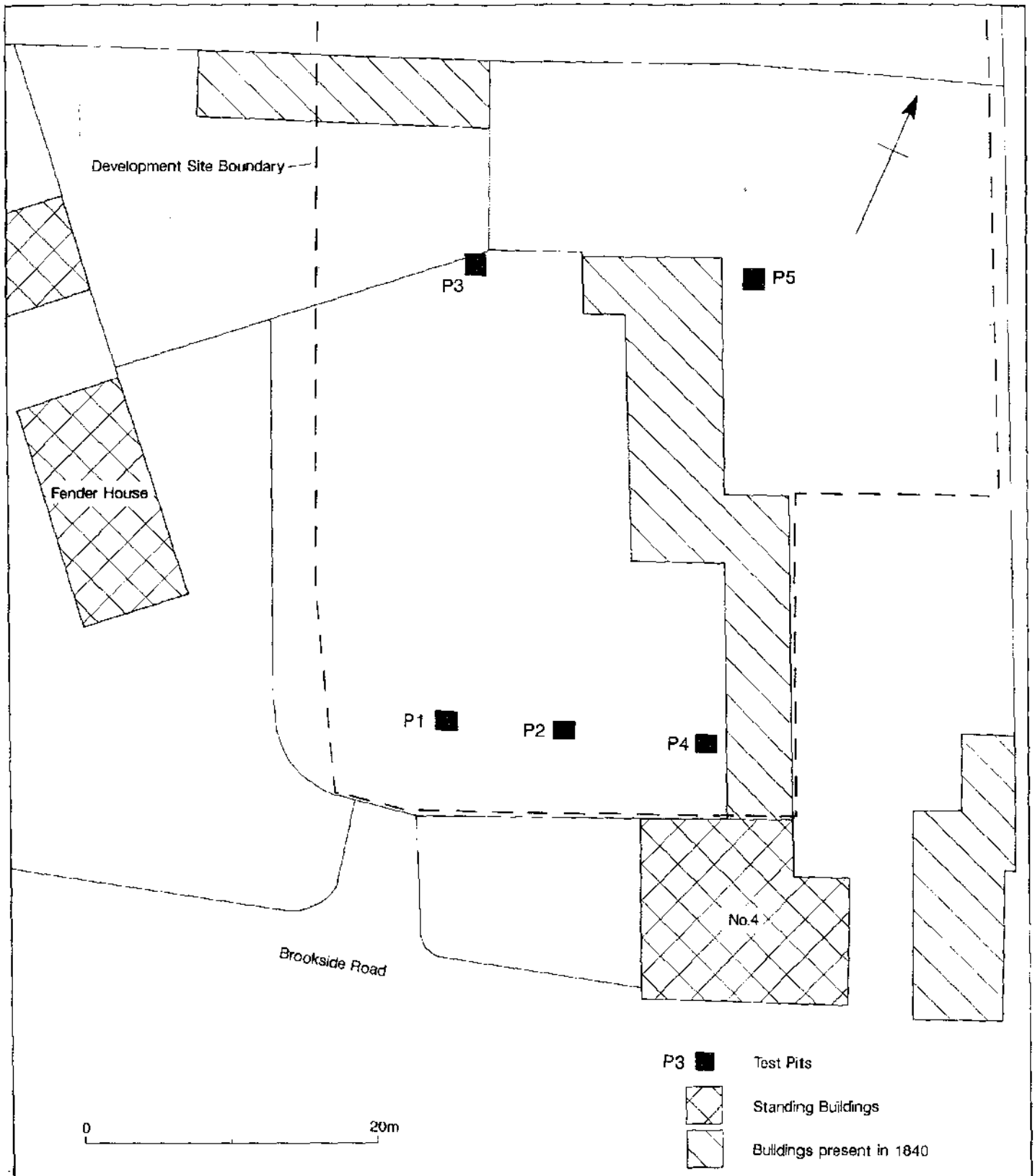


Fig. 2 Southern Area: Position of buildings shown on 1840 Tithe Map

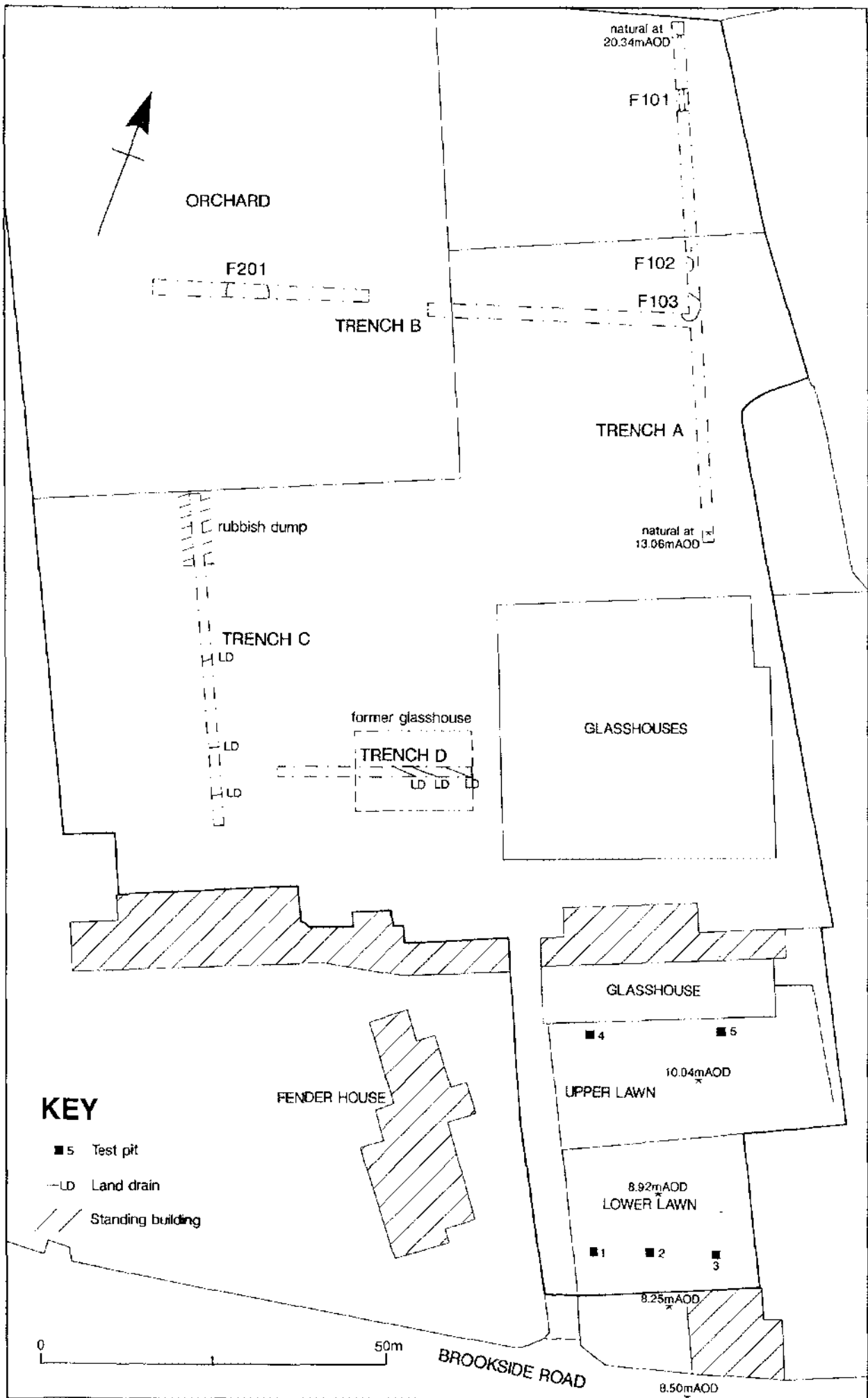


Fig. 3 Location of trenches and main features

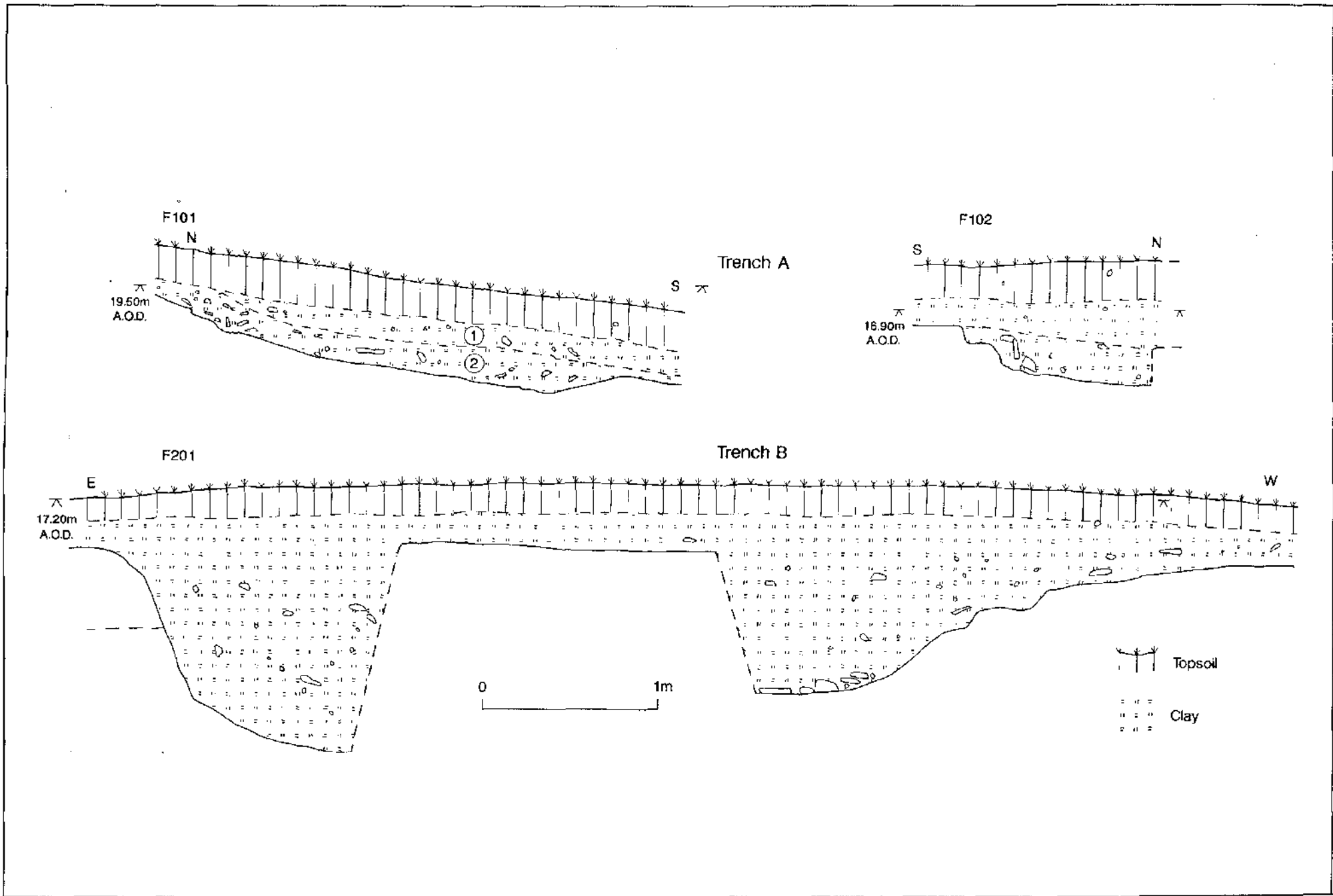


Fig. 4 Profiles of F101, F102 and F201

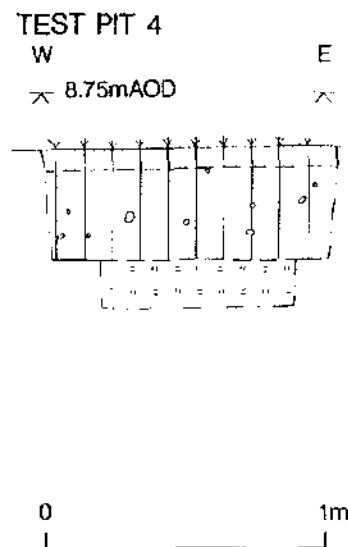
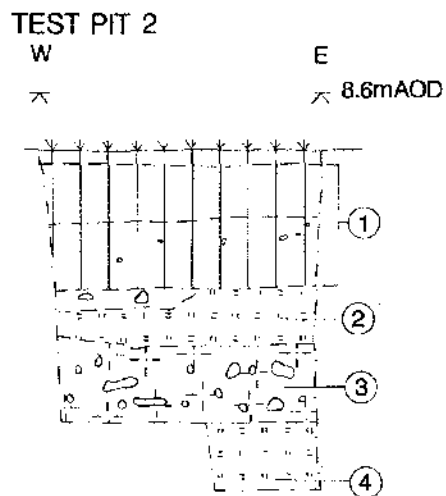
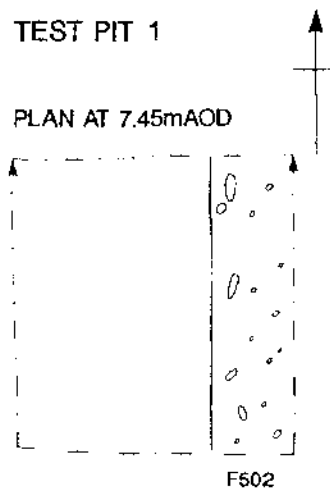
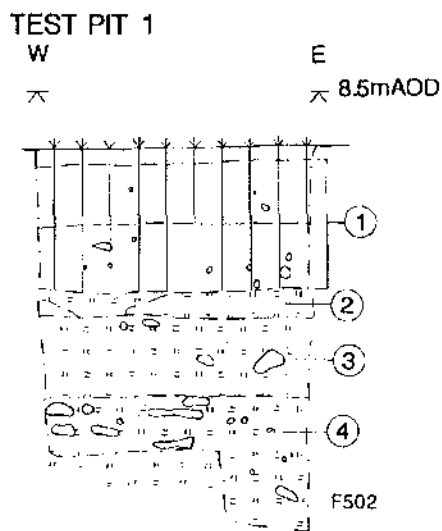
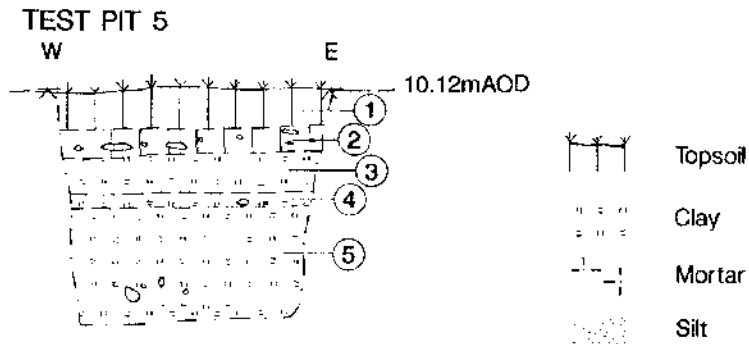
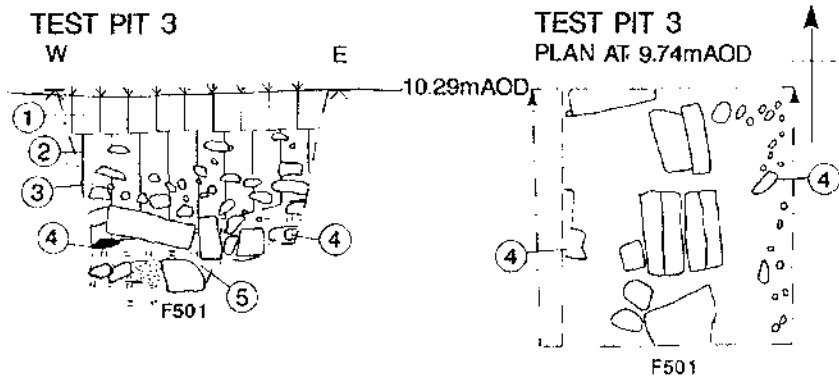


Fig. 5 Test Pit sections and plans