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Further Archaeological Work at Hill Farm, Willington, Derbyshire, July 1995: Phase 1

by

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Introduction

The following report outlines the results of a programme of archaeological monitoring undertaken during Phase 1 of the excavation of sand and gravel from land at Hill Farm near Willington in South Derbyshire (centred on SK 299 295) (Fig 1). The archaeological work relating to Phase 2 of the extraction programme will be the subject of a future report. The work was undertaken on behalf of Tarmac Construction during July 1995 by Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit (BUFAU) and followed an initial evaluation by BUFAU in March 1995 (Hughes 1995).

Archaeological Background

An assessment of the site in 1993 by the Field Archaeology Section of Liverpool Museum (Philpott 1993) highlighted the presence of a complex of cropmarks, identified from aerial photographs, within the development area (Fig 2) and recommended a further programme of evaluation to include geophysical survey and trial trenching. The objective of the evaluation, which was undertaken in March 1995, was to examine the character, quality, survival and date of the cropmark features and to determine whether they were an accurate reflection of the surviving archaeology. In the event the geophysical survey was not particularly successful in detecting sub-surface features. Many of the suggested cropmark features were also difficult to identify in the trial trenches. It seems likely that some may have been truncated by recent agricultural activity whilst others may have had a geological rather than an archaeological origin. An exception appeared to be a group in the east central part of the proposed development area, which included several circular and linear features (Fig. 2, Cropmark Complex 4). The evaluation report suggests that at least one of the circular features may be a ritual or mortuary monument dating to the late third or early second millenium BC. Several sherds of pottery, probably early Neolithic in date, were recovered from a shallow pit nearby (Fig. 2, Trench 10).

There was little or no evidence for archaeological activity in the north-western part of the evaluated area where there were few cropmarks. However, part of this area appears to have been affected by hillwash deposits which could be concealing archaeological features.

As a result of the evaluation, an 'Archaeological Exclusion Zone' was proposed for the area of the development site where the presence of archaeological deposits had been demonstrated (Fig 3, Areas A and B). Further proposals included additional archaeological evaluation in the area around the features containing the probable early Neolithic pottery (Area C) to determine whether or not the Archaeological Exclusion Zone needed to be extended. It was proposed that archaeological monitoring should be undertaken during the removal of the topsoil from the remainder of the area prior to the extraction of the sand and gravel.

Objectives

The objective of the archaeological works was to obtain an adequate record of any archaeological deposits or finds that might be disturbed or exposed by work associated with the development of the areas of the site outside the Archaeological Exclusion Zone.

Method

The programme of sand and gravel extraction is being undertaken in two phases (Fig. 3). Phase 1 began with the removal of topsoil from the area of the site to the south of the Archaeological Exclusion Zone (approximately 8 hectares). This work began with the removal of the topsoil from the area alongside Findern Lane. Quarrying activity then took place in this area. Topsoil was also removed from the area of an access road leading to the works associated with the construction of the Derby Southern Bypass immediately to the north of the site. The topsoil in the area to the north of the Archaeological Exclusion Zone (Phase 2) has not yet been removed. This report is concerned with the archaeological works relating to the Phase 1 works only. The work was undertaken in three distinct stages.

Stage 1: Further evaluation in the area of possible early Neolithic activity - Further evaluation was undertaken, prior to topsoil stripping, in the area of the features which produced the fragments of probable Early Neolithic pottery (Fig 3, Area C). The specific objective of this additional evaluation was to clarify the character and extent of the possible Neolithic activity. The evaluation consisted of five trial trenches each 1.5m wide and between 30m and 48m long (Fig 4, T20-24). The results were used to determine if the Archaeological Exclusion Zone needed to be extended to include this area.

Stage 2: Watching brief in the area of Phase 1 extraction - Continuous monitoring, by a team consisting of two archaeologists, was undertaken during the removal of the topsoil from the area of Phase 1 extraction. Any areas of archaeological interest which were identified were defined and recorded. All archaeological features were surveyed using an EDM and sample excavated. If further investigation of these areas was considered necessary prior to the extraction of sand and gravel, they were protected from further disturbance or damage. Particular attention was paid to areas where cropmarks had been previously been recorded. Where necessary a JCB mechanical excavator was used together with careful manual cleaning to increase definition in these areas. However, features which were obviously of modern origin, containing drainage pipes and modern pottery, were not usually recorded.

Stage 3: Contingency excavation in the area of Phase 1 extraction - A contingency was allowed for the further investigation of any areas of potential archaeological significance identified during the Stage 2 watching brief. However, in the event very little additional archaeological work was considered necessary in the area of Phase 1 extraction.

Archaeological recording was undertaken using a continuous numbered context system and pro-forma record cards. All archaeological features and deposits were photographed and a full drawn record at an appropriate scale was maintained. A programme of sampling of appropriate materials for environmental and/or other scientific analysis was undertaken. Special attention was paid to any waterlogged deposits encountered.

Results

Stage 1 - Evaluation in Area C (Fig 5)

Trench 20 (33m long by 1.5m wide) - A north-south orientated trench on the eastern edge of Area C. The northern limit of this trench intersected with the plotted location of the three linear cropmarks identified in the central area of the field. However, no trace of these features were identified in the trench. The only recorded feature was a small depression at the southern end of the trench filled with a grey-

brown silty sand (F1010). No finds were recovered and it seems likely that this had a natural rather than an archaeological origin.

Trench 21 (30m long by 1.5m wide) - A north-south orientated trench in the eastern part of Area C. Only two features were recorded (F2010 and F2021). Both had irregular profiles, contained no finds and were filled with a grey-brown silty sand. These are probably natural features.

Trench 22 (42m long by 1.5m wide) - A north-south orientated trench in western part of Area C. The only recorded feature was a shallow linear ditch (F3010), 1.2m wide and 0.4m deep, with a bowl-shaped profile and a grey-brown sandy-silt fill. This ditch has a similar profile, orientation and fill to features in Trench 23 (F4010) and Trench 24 (F5010).

Trench 23 (30m long and 1.5m wide) - A north-south orientated trench on western edge of Area C. The only recorded feature was a linear ditch (F4010), almost certainly the same feature as the ditch recorded in Trench 22 (F3010) and Trench 24 (F5010).

Trench 24 (48m long and 1.5m wide) - An east-west orientated trench on southern edge of Area C. The only recorded feature was a linear ditch (F5010), almost certainly the same feature as the ditch recorded in Trench 22 (F3010) and Trench 23 (F4010).

Stage 2 - Watching Brief in area of Phase 1 extraction and access road (Fig 4)

Many trenches of recent origin for land drains and water pipes, together with plough furrows, were observed during the monitoring of the topsoil stripping. All archaeological features were below the 0.25-35m deep modern topsoil and were cut into the natural gravel subsoil.

Three negative linear features were located during topsoil stripping for the access road. F200 was orientated northwest-southeast and was 0.54m wide and 0.19m deep with steep sides a flat base. It was filled with a greyish brown sandy silt and contained pebbles and occasional flecks of charcoal. Further north were two linear features aligned northeast-southwest running parallel with each other. The northernmost (F201) was 1.02m wide and 0.32m deep with steep sides and a rounded base and filled by brown sandy silt with a few pebbles. The feature immediately to the south (F202) was 1.00m wide and 0.22m deep with steep sides and a rounded base. It was also filled by a brown sandy silt with a few pebbles.

In the central area of the field were two irregular oval cuts (F203 and F206). The smaller of the two (F203) was 1.00m x 0.53m x 0.19m deep, with steep sides and a flat base. It was filled with a greyish brown sandy silt. The second cut (F206) was 2.85m x 0.73m x 0.13m deep, with steep sides and a flat base. It was filled with a light grey silt and appeared to have been disturbed by roots.

To the southeast were two parallel, linear cuts orientated northwest-southeast. The most westerly (F204) was 1.3m wide and 0.38m with steep sides and a 0.08m deep slot along its base. It was filled with a greyish-brown sandy silt containing a few pebbles. The second (F205) was 0.49m wide and 0.19m deep with very steep sides and a flat base. It was filled by a dark brown sandy silt with pebbles and flecks of charcoal. A third ditch (F209), orientated north-south, was identified to the northeast. This was 0.55m wide and 0.20m deep with steep sides and a rounded base and was filled with a greyish-brown sandy silt which contained pebbles and a small fragment of brick.

Two linear features (F207 and F208) were recorded in the southwestern part of the field. The easternmost (F207) was orientated northwest-southeast and was 0.80m wide and 0.29m deep. It had steep sides, a rounded base and was filled by a greyish-brown sandy silt with a few pebbles. The northern end appeared to link up with the eastern end of the second feature (F208). This was orientated east-west and was 1.00m wide and 0.20m deep. It had gently sloping sides, a rounded base and was filled with a greyish-brown sandy silt and gravel.

Stage 3 - Contingency work

Three areas, each 10m by 10m, were defined in the central area of the field, after the initial topsoil stripping by the contractors. These were designed to coincide with the plotted location of cropmarks, including the two possible rectilinear enclosures (Cropmark Complex 11) and the possible triple ditch system (Cropmark Complex 7). However, despite careful cleaning of the natural gravel in each of these areas, no evidence for any of the archaeological features suggested by the cropmarks could be identified.

Discussion

The evaluation in Area C and the watching brief confirms the conclusions reached in the original evaluation (Hughes 1995, 6) that, in general, the preservation of archaeological features was poor. The only finds that were recovered, such as modern pottery and fragments of drainpipe, were of recent date.

The only archaeological feature recorded in the evaluated area (Area C) was the shallow ditch represented by the excavated sections in Trenches 22, 23 and 24 (F3010, F4010 and F5010). There was no further trace of the Neolithic features recorded in Trench 10. Consequently, it was not considered necessary to extend the limits of the Archaeological Exclusion Zone.

The ditch recorded in Area C might also be represented by two of the features recorded during the watching brief (F200 and F204). All these features were of similar shape, size, orientation and fill, and may represent a former field boundary running across the centre of the field. Unfortunately, none of the excavated sections produced any dating evidence. Surprisingly, this feature does not appear on any of the cropmark plots. Conversely, very few of the features that do appear on these plots could be identified on the ground. In the original evaluation report it was suggested that many of the shallower features might not have survived the effects of erosion and plough truncation, and that others might have been caused by natural variations in the subsoil (Hughes 1995, 6-7). An exception is probably the linear feature in the southwestern area of the field (F207/F208) which appears to correspond with part of Cropmark Complex 1. Again, no dating evidence was recovered. It should be noted that the majority of this Cropmark Complex lies, undisturbed, below the topsoil stockpile in the southwestern corner of the field.

The remaining features are less easy to interpret. The linear features in the north of the field (F201 and F202) may be associated with a former field boundary on the same alignment as the existing boundary to the north. The oval features in the central area of the field (F203 and F206) may well be caused by tree root disturbance or by the variable character of the natural subsoil.

Acknowledgements

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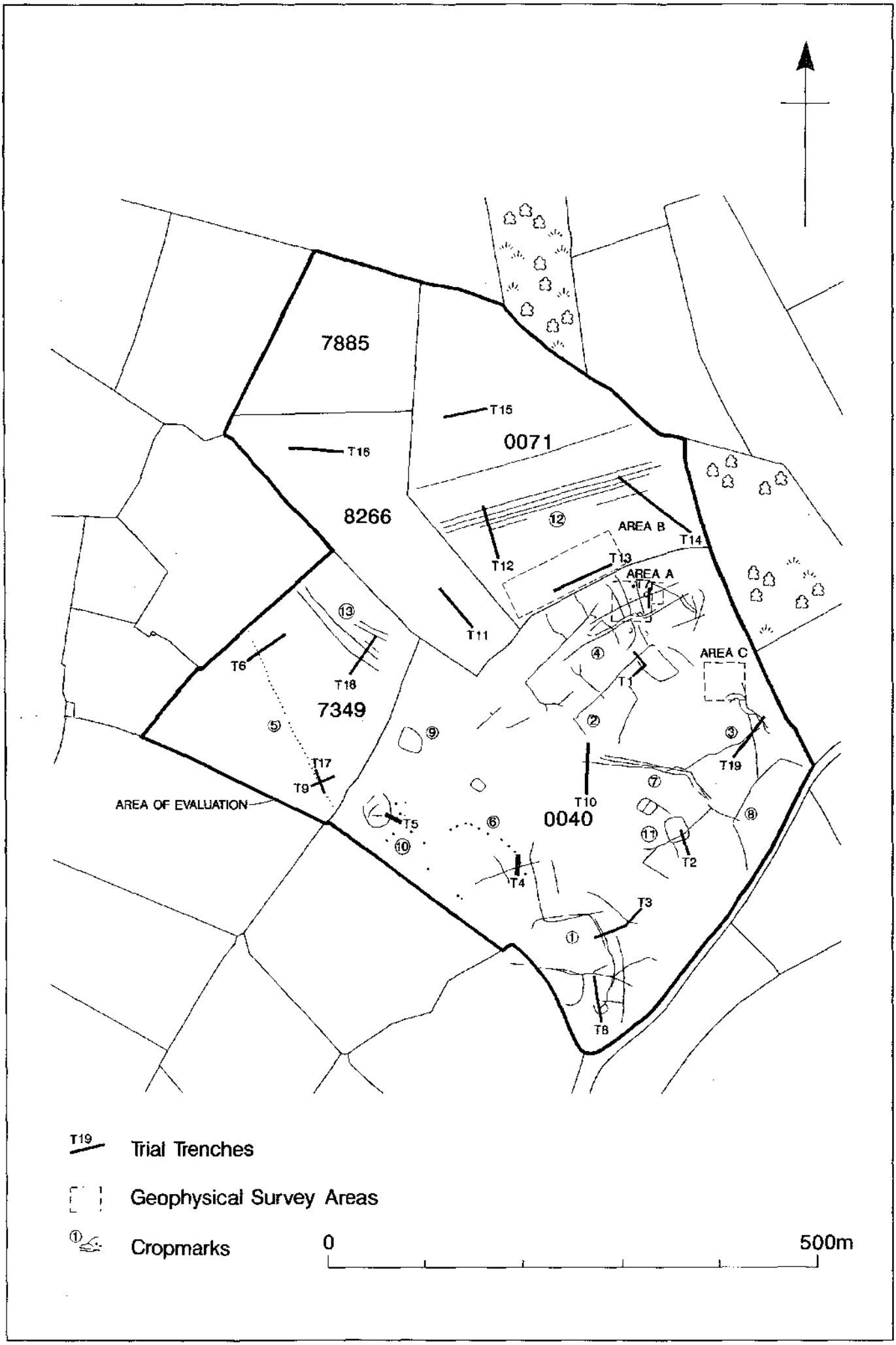

Fig 2 - location of geophysical survey areas and trial trenches

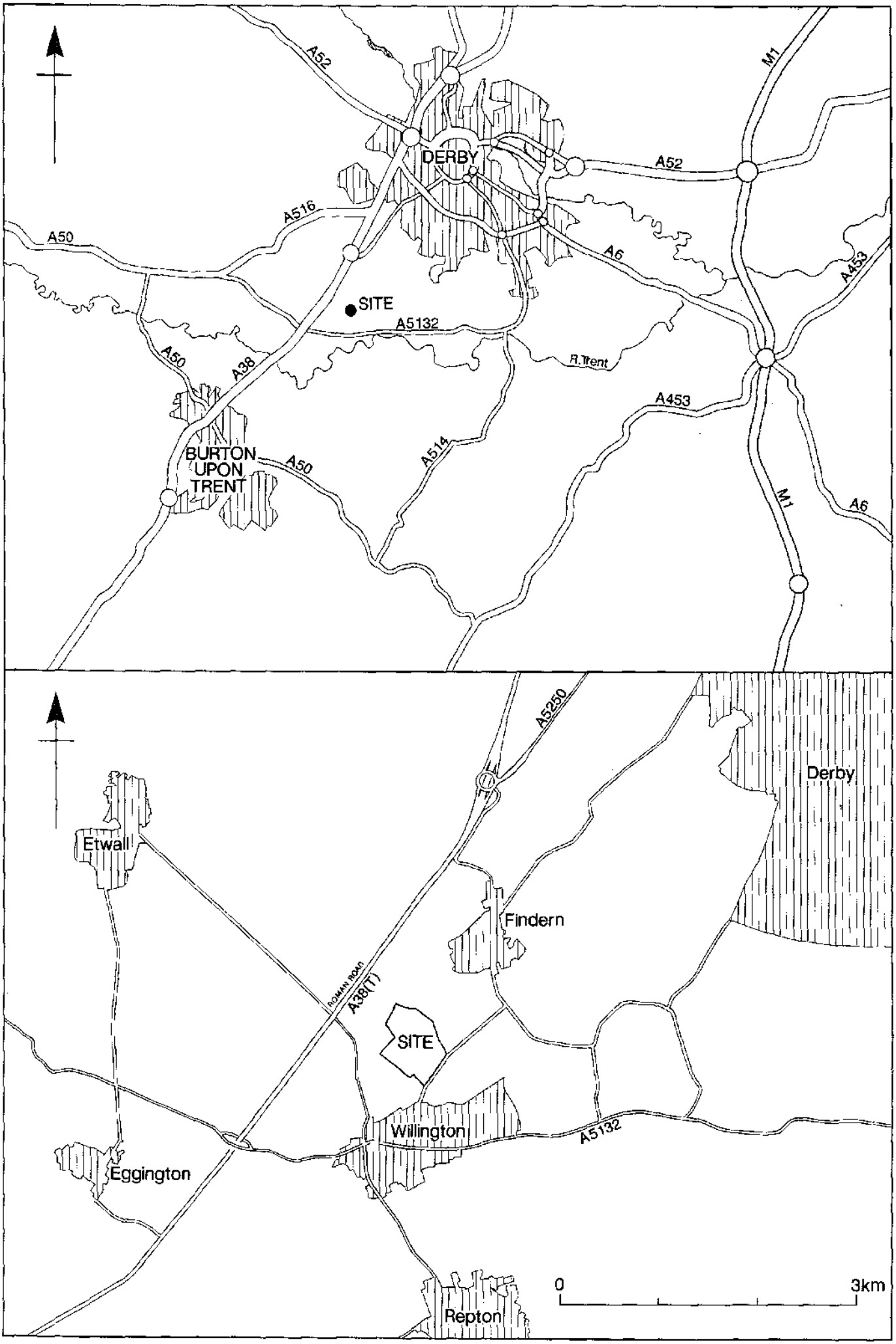

Fig 1 - location of site

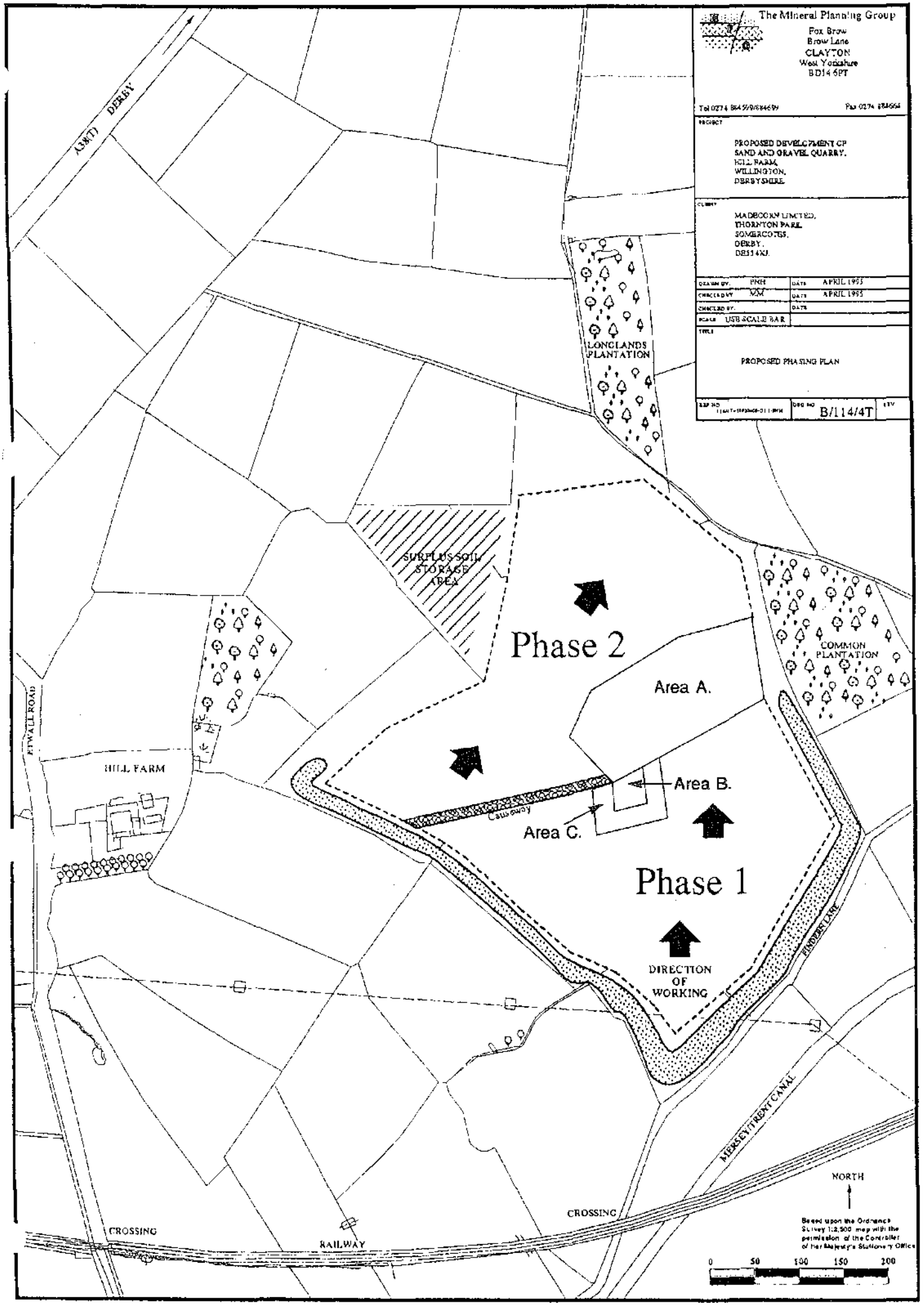

Fig 3 - Proposed development of sand and gravel quarry

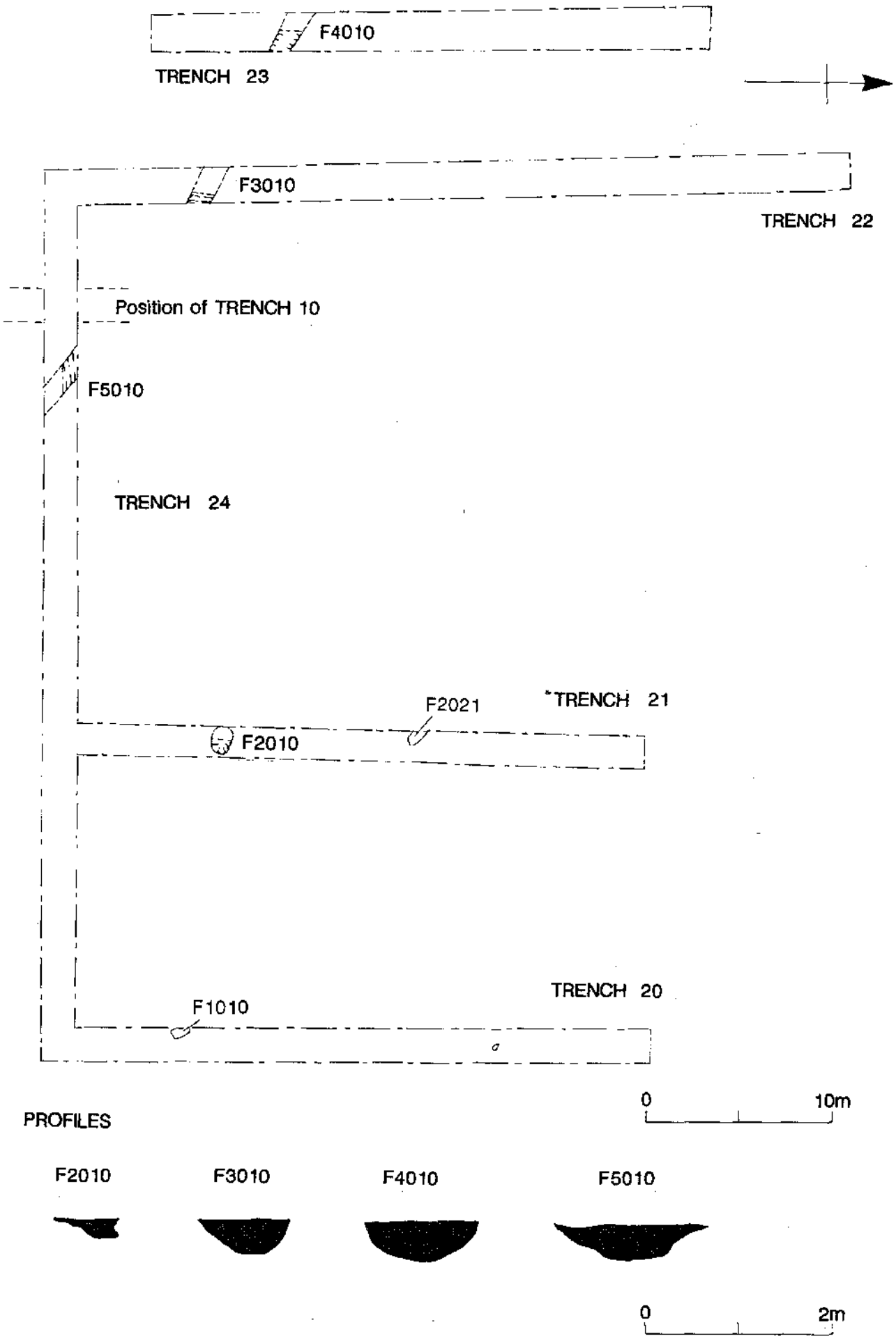

Fig 5 - Plan of evaluation trenches 20-24

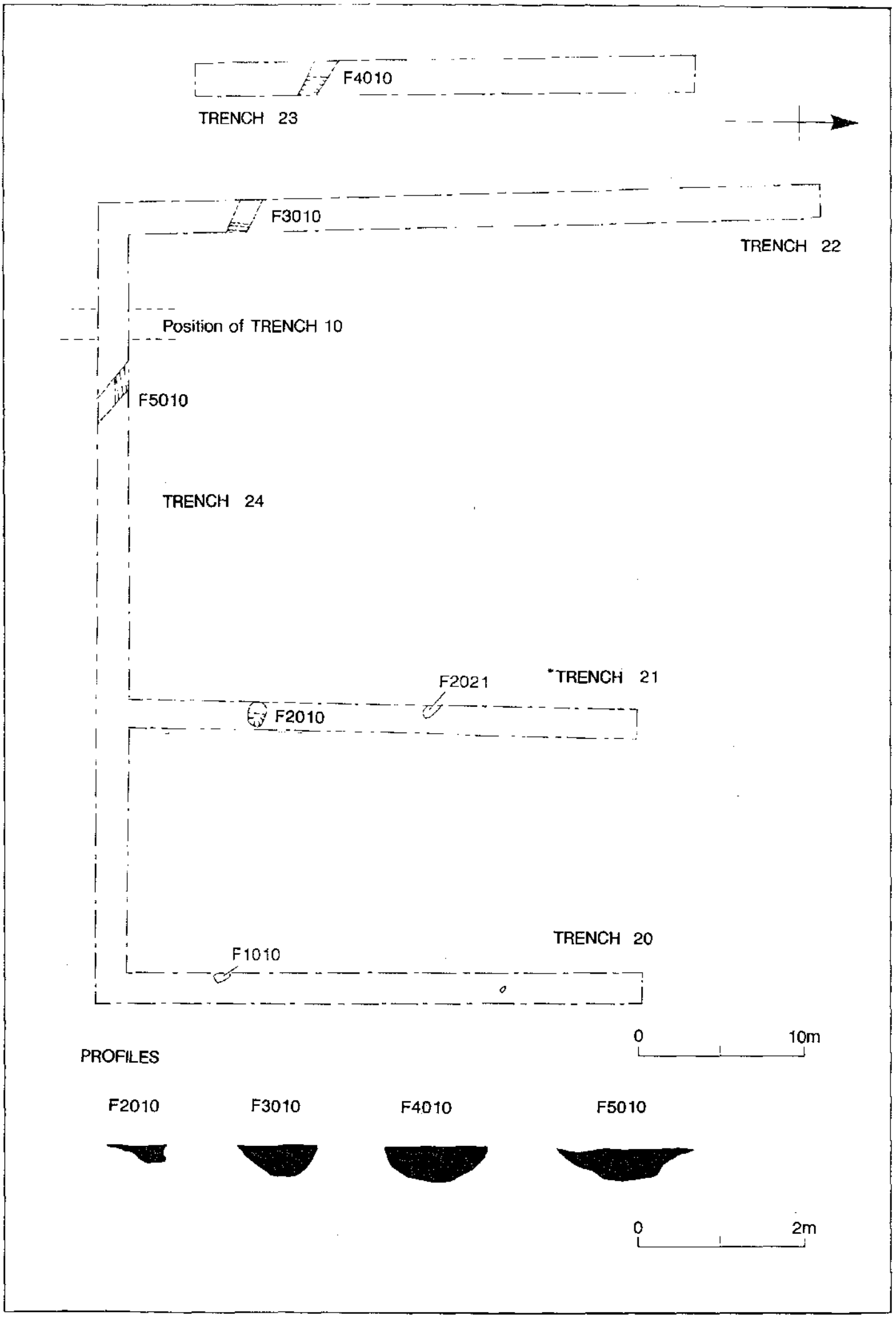

Fig 5 - Plan of evaluation trenches 20-24