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Field Farm, Shepton Mallet, Somerset
Excavations 1996 Interim Report

by
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Interim Report

Introduction

As a condition of permission for residential development at Field Farm, Shepton Mallet, a programme of archaeological work was required as part of the scheme. Site evaluations of the area proposed for development were undertaken in 1991 by geophysical prospection and selective trial trenching (Leach and Dingwall 1991). These indicated one area of particular archaeological potential adjacent to Field Farm itself, and provided the basis for an outline specification of works recommended by the Environment Department of Somerset County Council.

At the invitation of Bloor Homes, Swindon, main contractors for the development, the Field Archaeology Unit of the University of Birmingham (BUFAU) undertook to meet the specification and were commissioned to provide archaeological watching briefs in selected areas, and to carry out area excavations and recording in a designated area close to Field Farm. The following report is an interim account of results obtained from the latter. The watching brief requirements have yet to be completed as the development proceeds. Only when this stage is complete will a programme for post-excavation analysis and drafting of a full report be drawn up, as a final requirement of this archaeological programme.

Procedure and results

In accordance with the recommendation for area excavation in Area 3B of the development site, the location so designated, in a field of permanent pasture immediately north of Field Farm, was surveyed and the surface deposit of turf and topsoil removed with a mechanical excavator (Fig. 1). A total area in excess of 340 square m. was thus made available for examination and recording by a field team from BUFAU for three weeks during July 1996. Machine clearance revealed extensive areas of horizontal limestone bedrock or a thin overburden of stony clay subsoil immediately beneath the modern pasture. The greater part of the cleared area was then cleaned by hand using a combination of hoes, trowels and brushes, with the purpose of identifying and defining features and deposits of archaeological interest. With the exception of certain modern field boundaries, the only traces of previous human occupation in this area survived as cuts into the underlying subsoil or bedrock, and the deposits retained therein. Most of these were revealed across the centre of the excavation area and were sampled by the removal of varying proportions of their contents. This process also involved the creation of accompanying written, graphic and photographic records, and the collection of associated artefacts and other sample residues.

The remains encountered were not extensive, although several distinct phases of activity can be discerned (Fig.2). Of these, the earliest is represented by a few large shallow pits and several smaller features, all cut into bedrock. The pits (F102, F103 and F109) were up to five or six metres long but rarely more than 0.5m deep, and were backfilled with rubble and clay soil. Finds were generally sparse, but included flint flakes and occasional implements of Neolithic/Early Bronze Age character, animal bone, charcoal and some pottery of Late Bronze Age or Early Iron Age type. Less substantial features included smaller rock-cut pits (F118 and F119), and a group of four, shallow rock-cut post holes containing pitched or vertical packing stones (F104, F106, F112 and F116). No other deposits or features thought to be contemporary with this activity were noted, although a

light scatter of residual flint was also recovered in cleaning of surfaces elsewhere across the site.

At some time later than the infill of these pits, a broad but relatively shallow ditch (F100) was cut across the site and through one of the pits (F109). This feature, generally up to 2m wide, 0.5m deep and with a flat base, was cut somewhat irregularly through the bedrock on a gently curving arc from east to west. To the south west it terminated at a c. 3m wide causeway, before appearing to continue beyond the excavation from another ditch terminal (F120). The excavation of several sections produced very few finds beyond occasional flint flakes, animal bones and scattered charcoal. The upper fill of F100 was characterised by much large and medium stone debris, from the surface of which was recovered a handful of Romano-British pottery sherds. No other feature or deposit could with certainty be associated with this ditch.

North of the pits F109/F118 a circular, vertical-sided and flat bottomed pit c. 1m in diameter (F107), was cut over 0.5m into bedrock. The stone of its lower sides and base was burnt red and sealed by deposits of charcoal, ash and burnt soil. A shallower oval pit to the west (F108) could represent a stoke hole. Samples were taken from the burnt deposits, which may represent no more than one or two firings, in the hope of identifying the function of this oven. A few sherds of Romano-British pottery from its upper rubble fill may indicate the date of this feature. Once again, no other contemporary features or deposits were identified on the site, although other residual sherds of Roman pottery were occasionally collected from elsewhere during cleaning. A few sherds of medieval pottery were also recovered in that process, along with a 13/14th-century long-cross penny.

The final phases of activity represented on the site are of much more recent date. Most prominent were the remains of field boundaries (F105, F110, etc.), still visible in places as low rubble and soil banks above bedrock or earlier deposits. These define parts of several rectilinear enclosures, probably laid out as small fields in the 18th or 19th centuries, and in some instances removed within living memory to create the present larger field of pasture. Moderate quantities of 19th and early 20th-century pottery, tile and other debris was associated with these boundaries, representing the positions of former drystone walls. Similar finds were found with other localised dumps of mixed soil or disturbances into the bedrock. The largest of these was a sub-rectangular cut containing some mortar and brick rubble adjacent to the northern field boundary. This was associated with a number of rock-cut post holes and marks the site of a stable removed earlier this century. At least one other sub-circular disturbance to the south west marked the site of a large tree, also removed in living memory. Several other similar disturbances in the bedrock/subsoil surface may mark the site of other uprooted trees, though of unknown date.

Conclusions

At this stage of the project an interpretation of the data obtained must be provisional, and subject to the results of analysis and any other discoveries made in the course of future monitoring during the development. As was anticipated by the site evaluation in 1991, the principal remains of archaeological significance in this locality are of prehistoric date. A majority of the features of the first phase contained pottery which is provisionally identified as of Late Bronze Age or Early Iron Age type. Associated with this were deposits containing some animal bone, charcoal and occasional fragments of daub, suggesting debris from a settlement. None of this material was present in great quantity, and from the distribution of the surviving features it is difficult to see any clear pattern which might aid a more detailed interpretation. Despite the presence of some domestic debris in the pits,

there was no other evidence apparent for their use, the most likely explanation being small quarries for the extraction of stone. In the absence of any contemporary features or deposits surviving above the bedrock horizon, the only other structural evidence was the handful of shallower rock-cut features. These were too few to suggest any coherent pattern, but buildings of timber-framed construction could easily have sat upon the well drained and almost horizontal bedrock with little need for dug footings. Stone from the suggested quarry pits may have been used to reinforce or protect the bases of such buildings, which are most likely to have been circular in plan. The small quantities of flint recovered may be indicative of earlier prehistoric activity, but this was probably off site.

The cutting of ditch F100 and its continuation F120, were evidently a later event than the excavation and probably infill of the pits, but a lack of readily datable material from the excavated sections presently hinders a clearer understanding of the context for this. From the form and alignment of both ditch segments, part of an enclosure or compound is implied, with at least one entrance marked by a causeway. Much heavy stone rubble in the upper fills of F100, particularly along its south side, suggests the possibility of an inner drystone wall which was eventually slighted and pushed back into the ditch. The few sherds of Romano-British pottery from the surface of this deposit suggest that this obliteration occurred before or early in the Roman period. An Iron Age date for the ditched compound appears most likely, possibly to enclose the postulated earlier settlement or other activity which succeeded it. There was no evidence for a return within the area opened, but to the east, a linear geophysical anomaly and a similar segment of ditch exposed towards the south-east end of the 1991 evaluation trenches suggests the presence of a sub-circular compound at least 60m across (Fig. 1).

In the Roman period the rock-cut oven and stokehole (F107/8) appear to be isolated features, possibly connected with agricultural activity in this locality. The nearest known Romano-British settlements lie beneath Shepton Mallet (pottery kilns) or alongside Fosse Lane, but Field Farm is likely to have been part of a contemporary agricultural landscape of pasture and arable fields. The occasional sherds of Roman pottery found elsewhere on the site probably originated in this context, through manuring, as will occasional medieval pottery sherds and the coin - testimony of continuing later land use. This has persisted up to the present day, and traces of more recent uses and alterations in land boundaries still survived in the area examined.

In conclusion, it can be stated that archaeological remains within the area designated for investigation have now been fully explored and sufficiently sampled to assess their significance. As a result of this exercise a substantial late prehistoric enclosure has been identified, containing traces of earlier and possibly contemporary settlement. Completion of the watching brief programme may shed further light upon these remains, although it is apparent that much of the enclosure lies immediately to the east of the area excavation site. However, the scale and likely character of archaeological remains anticipated further east need not justify continuing investigations to a similar degree in that direction. Should development proceed in those areas immediately to the east or south of the excavation site (Fig. 1), it is strongly recommended that the programme of monitoring, with opportunities for salvage excavation and recording as appropriate, be extended. It is anticipated that such a procedure would considerably enhance the value of the data gathered so far and thus our understanding of this potentially important site.

Leach P. and Digwall L. 1991 *Field Farm, Shepton Mallet, An Archaeological Evaluation 1991* Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit. Report No. 162

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FIELD FARM : ARCHAEOLOGY

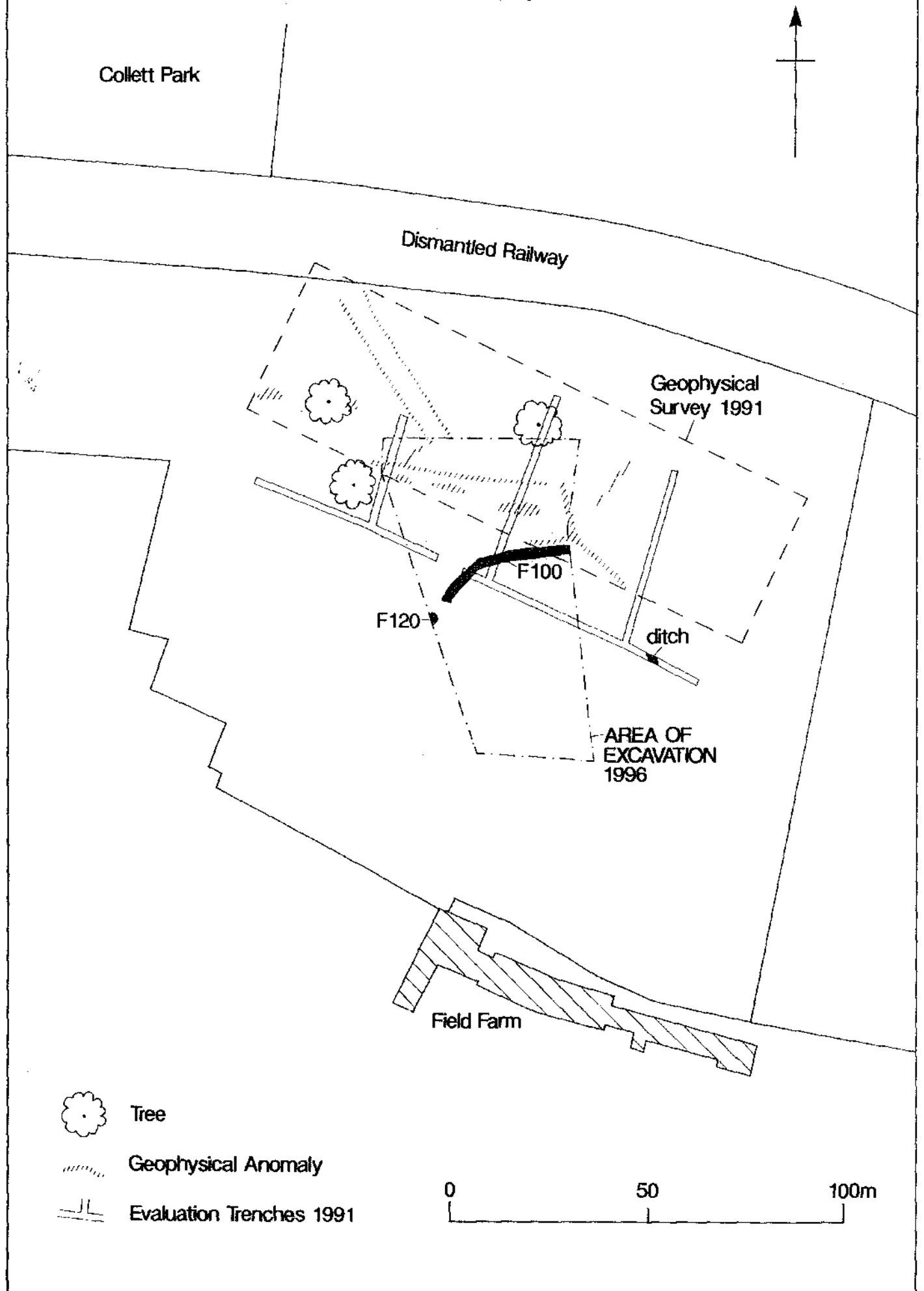


Fig.1

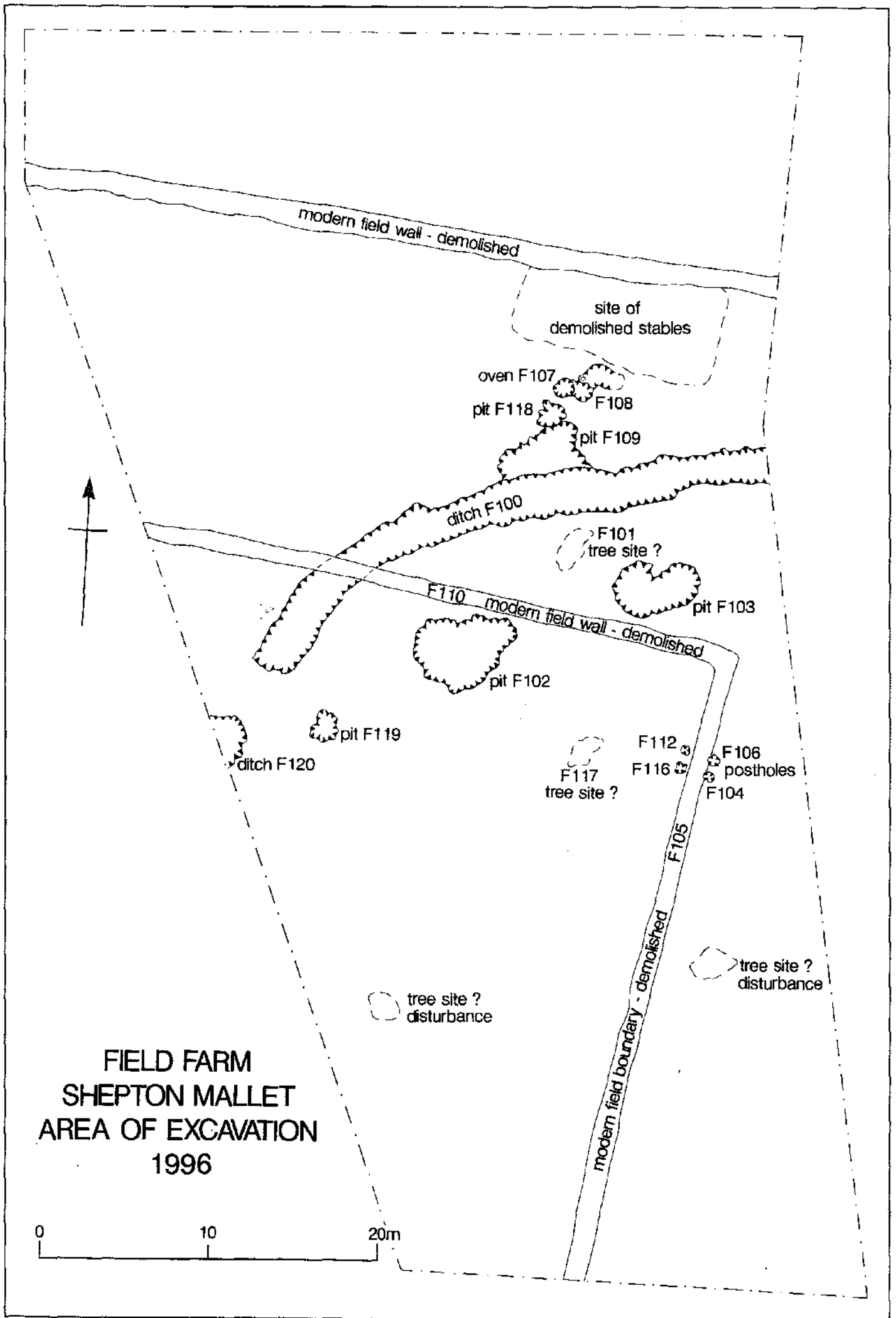


Fig.2