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**Maidenbrook Farm, Cheddon Fitzpaine, Somerset:
an archaeological desk-top study and evaluation**

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Summary

Evaluation trenching at Maidenbrook Farm revealed no evidence of medieval or earlier features in the area partly surrounded by ponds and ditches directly to the south of the farm, nor in the field to the south. The natural gravel surface in these areas was cut by four features all apparently of post-medieval date. In the trenches opened to the west of the area excavated in 1990, the absence of late-Iron Age and Romano-British pottery and features demonstrated that occupation of that date did not continue into this area. However, two undated ditch-like features may be an indication of earlier prehistoric activity, although a natural, geological, origin is also possible.

Introduction

Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit was commissioned by Alan Leather Associates on behalf of Tarker Ltd to undertake a desk-top study and an archaeological evaluation on land at Maidenbrook Farm in October 1997 (Fig 1). The fieldwork undertaken was in accordance with a brief prepared by Somerset County Council in response to a proposal to develop the land for housing. It involved the machine excavation of eight pre-sited trenches set out in a farmyard to the south of the farm and in OS land parcels 5423 and 6722 further to the south.

Maidenbrook is mentioned in Domesday as owing customary dues to the Manor of Taunton, together with a group of holdings near Taunton (Darby and Welldon Finn 1967, fig 48). A lord of Maidenbrook is recorded in 1249 (Mead 1977) and the sale of the farm in 1268, with 'buildings, gardens, alder beds, meadows and pastures' is listed (SRS 1892, 217). In 1280 Maidenbrook was mentioned in four legal cases, including one referring to an obstructed thoroughfare and another to a tenement (SRS 1929, 62, 66, 168). In 1366 the land belonged to the Hospital of St John the Baptist, Bridgwater, and again included meadow, pasture and alder groves (Mead 1977). Ownership by the hospital in 1389 is recorded by Collinson (1791, 246). At the Dissolution it was bought from the Crown by Emanuel Lucar, a Billingsgate (London) merchant, together with properties in Bridgwater (the site of the Franciscan Friary), Blakeford, and Over Stowey. Emanuel died in 1573 and Maidenbrook was passed to his son Mark who lived there until 1600 when he was succeeded in turn by his son Emanuel (Chadwyck Healey 1901, 202, 204, 207, and family tree between pp 214 and 215). In 1676 the property was recorded as the house and gardens, with both arable and pasture land as well as a small area of furze and heath. Maidenbrook was held by the Lucars until it was acquired by the Methuen family in the 18th century (Mead 1977). From the early-19th century, the property was owned successively by James Bond (from 1809) and William Hale (from 1825). The construction of the Bridgwater and Taunton canal through the farm in 1825 occasioned detailed arrangements regarding the maintenance of an irrigation system (Mead 1977). From 1858 the building was tenanted and then owned by the Meads until recently (Mead 1977).

Structural analysis within the house has suggested a construction sequence (PSANHS 1988). The earliest part of the present building, the eastern north-south oriented block, may be dated to c. 1500 by a large fireplace in what may have been a hall. Mead (1977) records 13th or 14th century panelling and 16th-century timbers in the same room. Two further blocks, to the north and west, were then added, the evidence suggesting a rapid expansion, with the northern block rebuilt in

the 17th century (Grade II listing ST22NW 5/251). A post-medieval overshot mill has been recorded (SMR PRN 43393) and a system of ponds south of the farm has been suspected of indicating a medieval moat (SMR PRN 44012). The title map of 1837 shows the watercourse but not the ponds on the east side of the farm, although the southern pond appears to be present.

An earlier archaeological evaluation in 1990 examined areas to the east of the farm, concentrating particularly on a cropmark feature photographed in the 1970s (McDonnell 1990). Results from the evaluation led to excavations later in 1990 which located late Iron Age and Romano-British features. The finds were dominated by pottery of this date, but also included a flint collection dated to the Mesolithic period, and a handful of earlier prehistoric ceramics dating from the late Neolithic to the Iron Age (Ferris and Bevan 1993). Other finds in the vicinity of Maidenbrook Farm comprise Palaeolithic finds (SMR PRN 43136), cropmark features (SMR PRNs 43387, 44192, 44451 and 44519), and a Neolithic/Bronze Age flint scatter and Romano-British settlement evidence at Nerrol's Farm (SMR PRN 44496).

The Maidenbrook Farm site is located on the edge of the flood plain of the River Tone with the ground rising gently to the north. The geology comprises river gravels, probably First Terrace Gravels, overlying Mercia Mudstone and sealed beneath alluvial deposits. Previous work had noted that the uppermost alluvium had been deposited after the Roman period with 4th-century features cut into a lower alluvium. Flint artefacts were suspected to derive from occupation horizons within the latter.

The desk top study involved a collation of the SMR evidence and a brief review of the cartographic and secondary documentary records held at the Somerset Local History Library, the results of which have been outlined above. The fieldwork trenches were excavated by JCB and the small number of features exposed were then cleaned and recorded. The water table was clearly much lower than in the 1990 evaluation, although one trench, Trench F, became partly waterlogged.

The documentary research was greatly assisted by a typescript paper on the history of the farm by Audrey Mead. The fieldwork was undertaken with the assistance of Humphrey Woods.

Results

The farmyard (Fig 1)

Three trenches, D, G and H, were cut in the farmyard to the south of the farm buildings. The farmyard area was defined by ponds to the east and south, and by a 3m deep ditch running westward from the latter. In all three trenches, natural gravel was encountered beneath an intermittent layer of gravel and hard core over which a thin humic cover had accumulated. The natural gravel comprised a mixture of horizontally-fractured small stones together with small rounded pebbles and occasional larger stones in a matrix of red sandy clay. It was also marked by black patches of manganese deposits and lenses of red and yellow clay. At one point the natural surface was a band of compacted yellow sand and gravel. The gravel was located at 0.1m below the ground surface (Table)

Cut into the gravel in Trench G was a ditch, F4, 1.1m wide and 0.3m deep, into the fill of which (J012) had been inserted a drystone wall, F5, 0.4m wide and 0.2m deep (Fig 2). The wall was built of thin horizontally-laid stones with a straight edge to the south and a ragged edge to the north as though formerly set into a bank. The stone used was a grey shaley material, of local origin judging by its use in field boundaries; it was also recorded in the 1990 excavation as used for posthole packing. Above the natural gravel, an intermittent yard surface of gravel and stone

was visible in places, on which a thin soil layer had developed, rarely deeper than 0.1m and generally 0.05m deep. A surviving vertical face of soil 0.2m deep, to the south of Trench D, suggested that topsoil may have been removed from the area.

The features found suggested a long standing boundary marked initially by a ditch, later replaced by a wall. This is likely to be the boundary shown on the 1837 tithe map at which time the area was divided into three enclosures (Fig 1). Bottle glass and white glazed pottery of 18th or 19th-century date was found from the fill of the ditch together with an earthenware sherd of 18th or 19th-century date.

OS land parcel 5423 (Fig 1)

Two trenches, E and F, were cut in the north part of the field. To the north and east lay the 3m deep ditch and associated pond defining the farmyard area. The ground beside the boundary, and extending 20m to the south, was lower by about 0.3m than the main part of the field to the south. Two surface linear features were visible.

Trench E revealed a natural gravel surface at 0.35m below ground level (Table). This was more uniform than in the farmyard area, comprising small fragmented shaley stone in a dark orange/brown clay matrix. This lay beneath a thin layer of stoney clay, 0.1m deep, itself sealed beneath 0.25m of red/brown humic topsoil. The natural gravel was cut by the two linear features visible on the ground. F1 to the north was 2.8m wide and 0.6m deep and filled with two base layers of clay and stone (1008 and 1007), a gravel layer (1006), two layers of silt (1004 and 1005), a deposit of red and grey clay (1003) with a stoney soil layer (1002) filling the hollow beneath the topsoil (Fig 2). To the south F2 was recorded as a 1m wide shallow ditch, no more than 0.1m deep.

In Trench F, cut across the low ground to the west of the pond, flooding prevented cleaning and a detailed record. A dark soil filled feature, F3, was recorded at the east end of the trench. To its west a bank of gravel incorporated some large stones, including examples 0.8 by 0.3 by 0.1m deep. A lower area to the west was cut by ditch F1. On the ground it was clear that F2 ran southward from a point corresponding with F3 before turning to the west.

The evidence suggests that F1 and F2 may have been intended to carry water from the pond into the fields, since both ditches peter out on the ground. It is possible that F3 represents the choked fill of a pond perhaps dammed up by the gravel bank. The stones found may have been associated with the bank or may have been later hardcore added to a wet area. It is of interest to note that the sale of Maidenbrook land to the Bridgwater and Taunton Canal Company in 1825 included arrangements to culvert water across to the fields south of the canal for the purpose of irrigation (Mead 1977). No finds were directly associated with F1, F2 or F3, although two sherds of earthenware of 18th or 19th-century date and a sherd of Donyatt pottery of 18th-century date, as well as post-medieval ironwork, were recovered from the spoil heaps.

OS land parcel 6722 (Fig 1)

Four trenches A, B, C and J, were excavated here to different depths. Trench J was cut down to the top of the natural gravel at a maximum depth of 1m below ground surface, while Trench A was cut to a depth of 0.3m, Trench B to 0.75m and Trench C to 0.5m. The natural gravel was located in Trenches J and B and in a hand-dug sondage in Trench C. It comprised a very mixed layer, generally of medium-sized rounded gravel in a red to grey sandy matrix, but also included larger stones, fine gravel, sand and clay banding, and areas blackened by manganese deposits. Undulations as much as 0.2m deep were clear in the gravel surface along

the length of Trench J. At its south end the gravel was c. 0.3m higher over a length of 10m, than to the north.

Overlying the gravel was a compact layer of red/brown clay (1025) containing some stones and fragments of manganese, resulting in dark flecks in the clay. Occasional gravel lenses were recorded. Two features, F10 and F11, were recorded, cut from the surface of this layer and penetrating into the gravel, both linear features crossing Trench J from west to east (Fig 2). F11 was V-profiled with a slightly rounded base, while F10 had steep sides and a flattened base. F11 was filled with a soft grey/green sandy clay (1029) in which was a possible later deposit of lighter-coloured clay with more manganese flecking. F10 was filled with a stiff red brown clay (1027) with stone, dark manganese flecks and white clay flecks. This possibly overlay a similar, but slightly greyer, layer with fewer stones (1028).

The grey clay filling F11 was identical to an alluvial deposit (1018) which was recorded over the northern 27m of Trench J, and in Trenches B and C, as well as in the small area of Trench A cut to its depth. This sandy, green grey band was 0.12m deep on average and occasionally deepened into shallow scoops. Two of these, in Trench J, were up to 0.25m deep, and oval or circular in plan. Similar features were seen in Trench B where the grey clay filled slight hollows in the natural gravel.

Layer 1018 and the recorded features were sealed beneath a further band of alluvial clay (1017) orange in colour and relatively stone-free. Two possible ditch-like features, F8 and F9, running parallel and separated by a 0.5m ridge, may have been cut through the layer. Both were noticeable because of a dark brown fill which appeared to retain moisture more than layer 1017. They were sealed beneath a dark brown humic topsoil, 0.15m deep.

Interpretation of the features found was difficult. F10 and F11 may have been formed geologically. Their fills did not contain any occupation evidence, with the exception of a flint chip from F11, although this might be natural since flint is found in the First Terrace Gravels. There was no evidence of primary fills or of weathering on the sides of the features. The fill of F10 was very compact, while the soft clay in F11 was the same as the overall alluvium, layer 1018.

Nevertheless their profiles suggest a man-made origin and these enigmatic features may be early prehistoric field boundaries, running parallel to each other. It would be possible to argue that the east section across F11 showed a postpit.

The hollows filled by layer 1018 are more likely to be natural in origin, and in Trench B in particular excavation strongly suggested natural periglacial deposits, although here layer 1018 directly overlay the gravel. The two later features in Trench J, F8 and F9, may have been ditches of late-Roman or more recent date judging by their location in the sequence of alluvium. They also lay more or less on the line of the Romano-British ditch, F28, excavated in 1990. However, they were essentially marked by different coloured, and more water retentive, soil rather than by distinctive cuts, and these may have been naturally formed pockets in the alluvium.

A flint chip was recovered from the base of F11, as noted above. Otherwise there were no finds from features although a flint scraper of Neolithic/Bronze Age date was located in cleaning layers from Trench A, a small abraded late-iron Age or Romano-British sherd from Trench B and a small flint core, possibly Mesolithic, from Trench C. A few flakes of chert and flint were found in the spoil heaps.

Discussion

The evaluation evidence therefore was principally negative. There was no evidence to support interpretation of the present ponds as indicative of a moat. The map evidence suggests that the eastern pond may post date the tube map. The very deep and sharply cut water-course west of the ponds appears to be post-medieval in date. It may have replaced or have been contemporary with a post-medieval system of irrigating the fields perhaps indicated by ditches F1 and F2.

The almost complete absence of pottery and other finds suggested that the features located in excavation in 1990 did not continue westward. The deep ditch between the two fields is likely to have been long standing as was Allen's brook, the parish boundary to the east. The undulating surface of the gravel suggested braided stream courses with banks of gravel between. The lower level of the gravel at the north end of LP 5423 might represent a palaeochannel beside the higher ground to the north and thus possibly the origin of the southern pond. The impression given was that the gravel surface would be highly unlikely to have formed an occupied surface. As at Ilchester (Thew 1994), the early alluvial deposits may be the result of Neolithic clearance and cultivation of upland areas and this may be the origin in part of layers 1025 and/or 1018. The latter deposit seems to have then been in place in the late-iron Age, with layer 1017 deposited after the Roman period. The Mesolithic to Bronze Age horizons remain to be located within layers 1025 and 1018.

The alluvial deposits suggest that this part of the Tone flood plain would not have seen permanent occupation in prehistory because of vulnerability to flooding. Occupation is likely to have been sited on the gravel at the edge of the flood plain as is the case with Maidenbrook Farm itself which appears to be on gravel at the edge of the alluvium. However, as on the Thames and Warwickshire Avon gravels, these lands would have represented a rich resource presumably seasonally exploited. The 1990 excavation evidence may thus have derived from seasonal occupation, the deeply-ditched features suggesting a high water table and flooding. The presence here of earlier prehistoric pottery fabrics and of Mesolithic flints is puzzling. This suggests regular use over a long period but there does not appear to be any natural feature, an island of gravel for example, to attract occasional occupation. The 1990 report suggested ritual activity as a possibility in Phases 2A and B (Ferris and Bevan 1993, 9, 14), and a long-lived ritual focus might be an explanation of the continuity shown by the pottery.

The possible ditches located to the west in this evaluation suggest that features from the early prehistoric period remain to be located in this area. Further archaeological work should clarify their nature and provide more evidence regarding the character of the gravel and alluvial deposits. A watching brief during the construction process would be an appropriate response, but the nature of further archaeological work and design mitigation strategies would need to be formulated by archaeologists in the Department for the Environment of Somerset County Council.

Table Location and surface levels of gravel and alluvium (in metres above OD)

	Farmyard	LP 5423	LP 6722
upper alluvium (1017)	-	-	14.7
middle alluvium (1018)	-	-	14.5
lower alluvium (1025)	-	-	14.35
natural gravel	14.45	13.9	14.0-14.3

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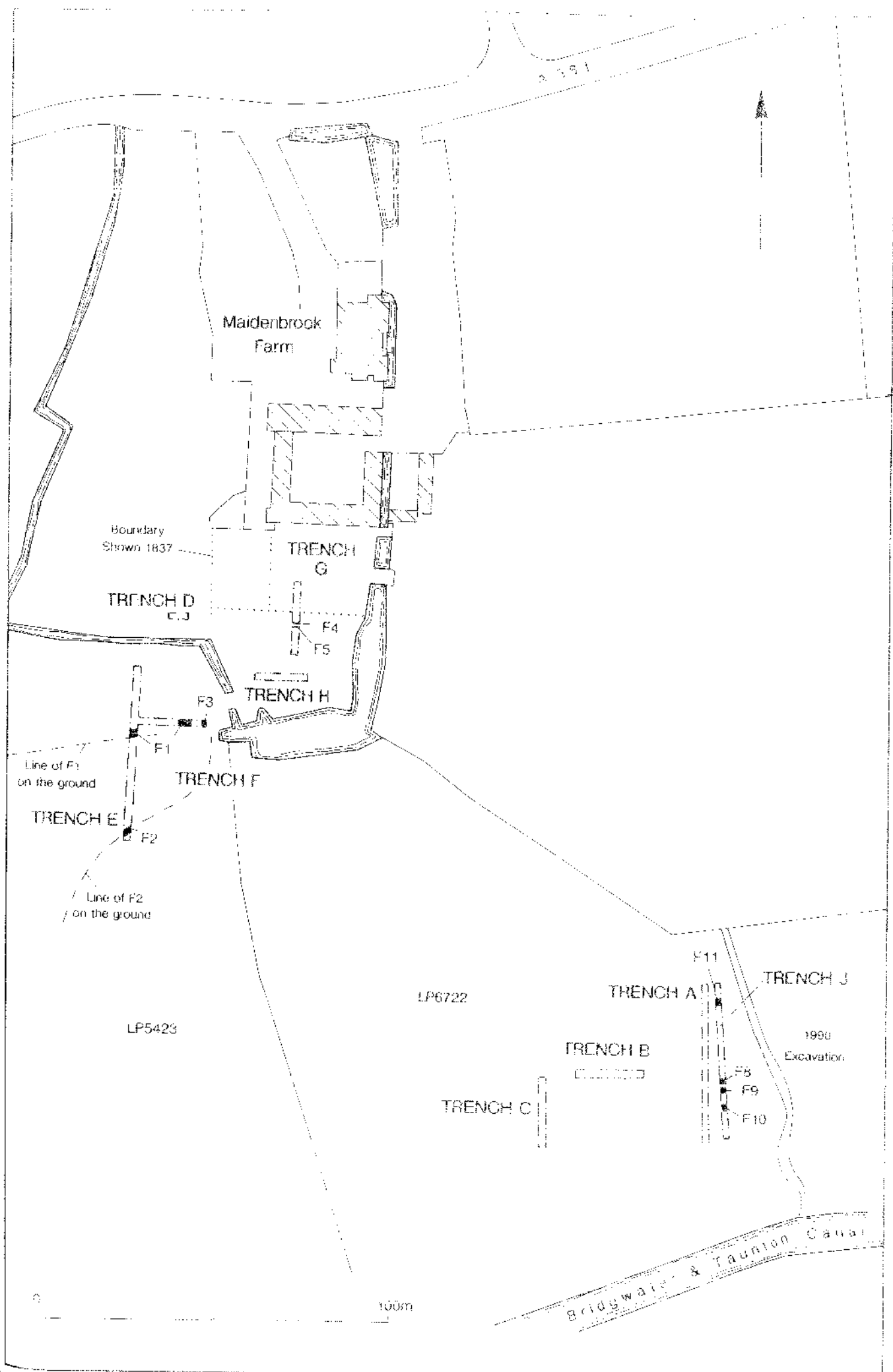


Fig 1 Location of trenches and main features

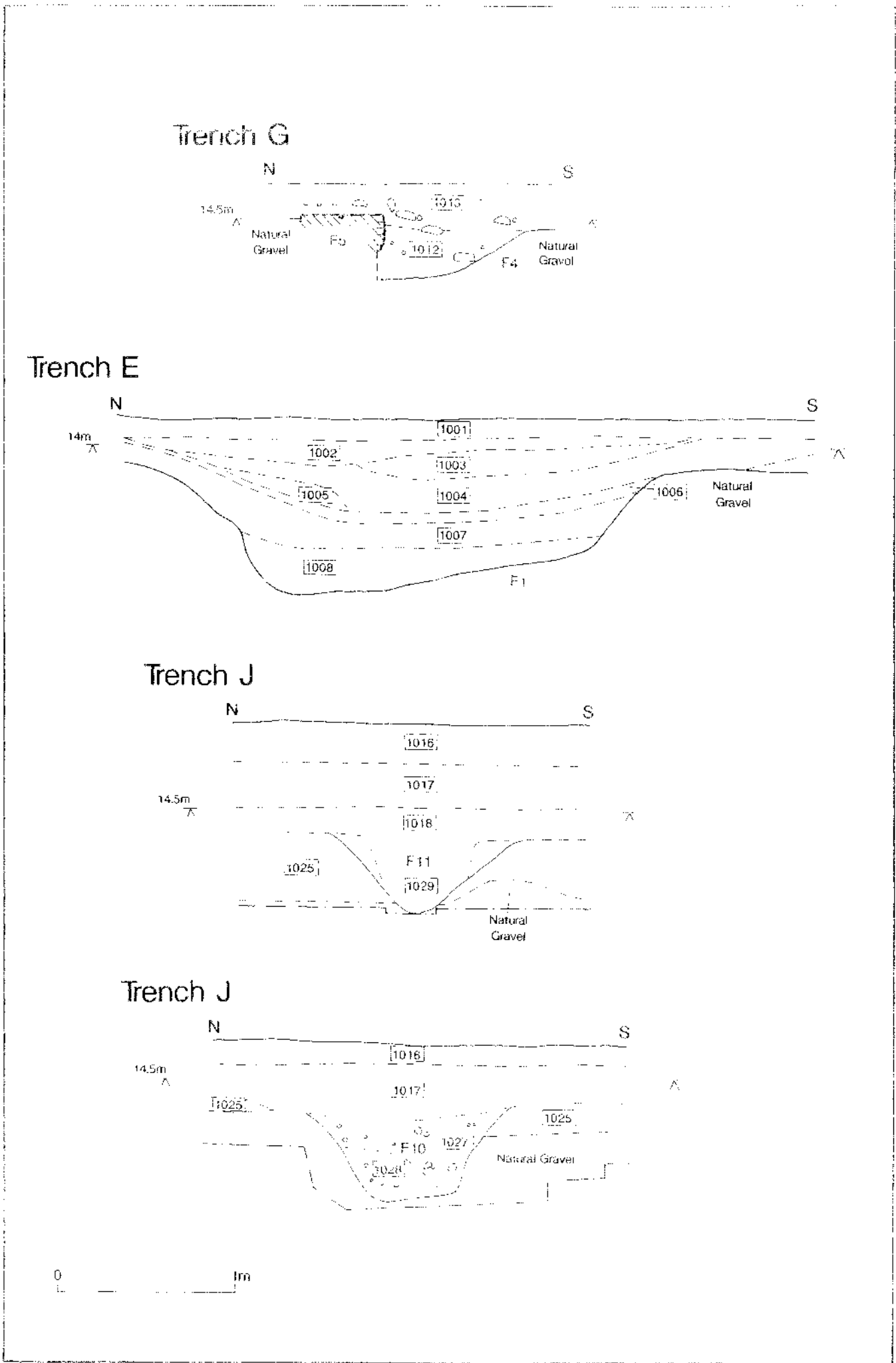


Fig 2 Sections of F4 and F5 (farmyard), F1 (LP 5423), and F10 and F11 (LP 6722)