

*BIRMINGHAM UNIVERSITY
FIELD ARCHAEOLOGY UNIT*

**BULL'S GREEN LINK
ROAD, CHANTRY,
SOMERSET**

An Archaeological Watching Brief
1998

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by
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SUMMARY

A watching brief maintained during the construction of the Bull's Green Link Road, near Nunney, Somerset, revealed post-medieval features comprising a trackway, a culvert, and some evidence of a group of buildings, known from map evidence, which were abandoned in this century. A handful of Neolithic/Bronze Age flints and a few sherds of medieval and earlier pottery were collected in addition to post-medieval material.

1: INTRODUCTION

1.1: Location

The Bull's Green Link Road runs between Mary's Grave, on the Chantry to Leigh on Mendip road at NGR ST 708468, and cross roads west of Nunney at ST 730459, a total distance of 2.3km (Fig 1). The road line crosses a hilly landscape of pasture and arable fields with extensive woodland and areas of both active and abandoned quarrying. The route chosen follows existing routes in places, a trackway at its north-western end and a tarmac road at its south-eastern end. Between these two it crosses pasture fields to the north-west before entering an area of former quarrying where the ground level has been raised in recent years and where there are extensive spoil dumps.

1.2: Previous archaeological work

A programme of archaeological investigation was linked with the road scheme from planning through to construction. The programme was initiated with an assessment prepared by Somerset County Council's Environment Department. This was made up of a desk-based assessment and fieldwalking exercise and was followed by a magnetometer survey undertaken in 1992 by Geophysical Surveys of Bradford (Report no 92/20). Both formed part of an Environmental Appraisal Document. A watching brief with an element of controlled excavation was selected as the appropriate response and the work was undertaken to a brief prepared by the County Council Environment Department.

There are prehistoric, Roman and medieval remains in the vicinity, as well as post-medieval iron-working and other industrial sites. The 1886 1:2500 Ordnance Survey 1st edition map shows the area in detail from a century ago (Fig 2). The Somerset County Council investigations were augmented by the interim results of

recent and ongoing archaeological fieldwork by a local community group led by Penny Stokes.

Work prior to the watching brief had highlighted a number of areas of interest:

- 1 The place name, Mary's Grave, on the parish boundary at the north end of the route, suggests the possibility of the burial of criminals there, an attested practice at crossroads and between parishes.
- 2 The trackway running south from here is shown on a map of 1840 as was its intersection with a second trackway to the south. This latter was shown as 'Elm road' on a 1779 map of Mells.
- 3 The fields to the south lie to the east of Castlehill Wood. To the west of the road line is a rectangular earthwork enclosure measuring about 40m by 25m, marked by spread banks on three sides, the fourth side being the steep slope at the woodland edge. This may represent an early medieval defensive work and have given rise to the Castlehill name, applied both to the wood and to two fields named by 1840 as Castle Hill (the site of the earthwork) and Top Castle Hill, with areas of woodland to the south named as Under Castle Hill and Lower Castle Hill.
- 4 Field names in 1840 covered by the road line were Wood Ground, Copse, Lamberts, Browns Mead, Sideling and Long Paddock. By 1886 Copse had disappeared, part having become a plantation of firs, and most of Lamberts had been taken in to Browns Mead (Fig 2). One hundred years later the former fields Wood Ground and Copse had become one pasture field, while the remainder of Lamberts, Browns Mead, Sideling and Long Paddock formed another to the east. A considerable part of the road line in the western field had been the subject of geophysical survey suggesting possible ditch and pit features.
- 5 At Dead Woman's Bottom, map evidence showed buildings, named as Deadwomans, present in the 1840s. Quarrying was underway at that date to its east. The buildings at Deadwomans are shown in detail in 1886 (Fig 2). No research has been undertaken on the site but the western building sited on the stream could have been a mill. The settlement was abandoned in living memory, at some time in the early part of this century. Asham and Westdown quarries were working in 1948 and had expanded across Deadwomans in 1960. At the site it was suggested that streams running through Dead Woman's Bottom to feed into Chantry Pond might have palaeoenvironmental potential.
- 6 No areas of archaeological potential were identified on the road line to the east of Dead Woman's Bottom.

1.3: Specification

The specification for the watching brief foresaw a concentration of effort at points 1-5 listed in 1.2 above. Archaeological work under more controlled circumstances was also envisaged. This comprised a requirement for:

- 1 A small scale excavation across the trackway to the south of Mary's Grave. Two badger crossings were proposed here and it was suggested that these should be excavated archaeologically.
- 2 Trial trenching at Dead Woman's Bottom with a view to recovering palaeoenvironmental samples from any sealed deposits associated with earlier stream courses.

2: RESULTS

2.1: Acknowledgements

The watching brief was undertaken by the author for Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit between January and July 1998. A small scale excavation involved the assistance of BUFAU staff, John Hovey and Chris Patrick, in April 1998. Thanks are due in particular to Howard Cliff of W S Atkins for expediting the work. Penny Stokes is thanked for information on the road line taken from archaeological survey work in the area.

2.2: Mary's Grave

Contractor's work at Mary's Grave involved firstly the stripping of topsoil and overburden to the south of the Chantry to Leigh on Mendip road, secondly the excavation, to a depth of about 1m, of two 10x10m areas either side of the proposed new road, and lastly the cutting of a service trench across the existing road.

Of these, the two 1m deep areas and the road section were recorded. Yellow clay with occasional stone inclusions was seen to overlie limestone bedrock. The existing tarmac road lay on make up layers set directly on bedrock. No evidence of archaeological features was seen.

2.3: Trackway excavation

In the event, the cutting of the badger crossings, with which archaeological investigations were to coincide, was programmed to follow the stripping of the road line and the subsequent deposition of a layer of stone. Two sections were therefore cut by machine under archaeological supervision prior to the stripping of the road line. In each section the road surface was cleaned back from the trench on its south side for about 3m and selected areas were then excavated by hand. The two trenches were sited 80m and 180m to the south of the Mary's Grave intersection.

The northern trench showed the clearest sequence (Fig 3). A layer of broken limestone and clay, 1003, had been deposited onto the natural yellow clay surface. The layer was 4.4m wide and 0.4m deep, and filled two depressions in the natural surface 1.6m apart. There was a greater proportion of stone to clay at the top of the layer. Above 1003 was a layer of gravel and worn cobbles, 1002, forming the trackway surface with visible traffic ruts. Later than the trackway, F100, and to its west, was a deposit of clay and stones, 1007, beneath a layer of burning, 1008, and soft clay, 1006. These had spread for 3m westward to overlie the lip of a shallow silted ditch, F101, 3m wide, with the existing hedgerow bank beyond. East of the road was a second ditch, F102, 1.2m wide and 0.3m deep, its west side cutting trackway layers. This in turn lay beneath an earthen bank, removed prior to the excavation.

The trackway rubble had been lain directly onto natural clay, which had thus been previously cleared. The two depressions, 1.6m apart, may mark vehicle ruts from a previous trackway use. The rubble in layer 1003 was quarry material, forming the foundation for the track surface. The base of layer 1003 lay below the natural surface suggesting either that the material had sunk into the soft clay or, more likely, that a pre-existing trackway had formed itself into the beginning of a holloway. The field boundary bank and ditch could not be stratigraphically related to the trackway, except that both were earlier than layers 1006-1008. The ditch to the east was later than the trackway, at any rate in its latest form. It had gone out of use and been replaced by a field bank.

The only direct dating evidence was a penny of George V from layer 1002. The quarry rubble, layer 1003, gave the appearance of being relatively recent, and the whole trackway may have been laid out earlier this century on the line of previous routes attested back as far as 1779 on map evidence.

The same sequence was recorded in the second trench, although here much less survived, with road layers no deeper than a maximum 0.2m.

In addition to the trackway excavations, the machine digging of a service trench to the east was observed, as was the digging of the badger runs. The stripping of the trackway line was not seen; the deposition of the stone layer following almost immediately. Nothing of archaeological interest was seen in the service trench, while the badger run trenches replicated the excavation evidence, albeit much truncated by the stripping process. The construction of an underpass at the south end of the trackway was watched, and revealed bedrock beneath a thin covering of natural clay with some limestone. The initial stripping was not watched. There was no evidence here as to the structure and survival of elements of the east-west running trackway.

2.4: Wood Ground to Long Paddock

The five fields shown in 1840 are now reduced to two divided by a neck of woodland. The western field was stripped of topsoil in its entirety. It was possible

to carefully fieldwalk the exposed surfaces. A possible flint core, several flint flakes, a small abraded fragment of Romano-British Black-Burnished pottery, and a few fragments of medieval pottery attested to some activity earlier than the post-medieval period. More recent evidence comprised a number of isolated patches of burnt material of which ten were recorded. The stoney clay subsoil was seen to have been burnt red beneath deposits of charcoal. Generally these areas of burning were about 1m across and no more than 0.05m deep, although towards the centre of the field was a more extensive area about 10m by 5m. This latter was associated with more recent rubbish including plastic sheeting.

Analysis of the magnetometer survey results suggests that the burnt areas may have been the cause of the isolated geophysical anomalies. However, nothing could be seen on the ground that might have given rise to the linear anomalies.

It can be suggested that the burnt areas mark sites of carbonised tree stumps following the reclamation of woodland. The map evidence indicates that the northern definition of Asham Wood has been fairly fluid, with former fields on its edge having reverted to woodland. It is possible that woodland once extended further north and was then reclaimed before the recent reversions. However, there were no indications of a date from any of the burnt features. The large area of burning appeared to represent quite recent activity and may simply be the site of a large bonfire.

In the field to the south-east only the road line was stripped. Further areas of burning - three in number - were observed, here accompanied by iron objects of recent appearance and in one case by a sherd of post-medieval pottery. None were greater than 1.5m in diameter. At the top of the field the road cutting sectioned a feature measuring 1.2m across and 0.7m deep. This might represent the field boundary between the 1840s fields Brown's Mead and Lamberts, but its size and profile suggested rather a pit. A few fragments of whiteware (datable to the 19th century or later) were recovered from its fill.

A substantial system of stone culverting was also recorded on the slope down to Dead Woman's Bottom. Following topsoil stripping a profile was recorded beside the road line. The culvert was 0.6m wide and 0.6m deep with horizontally laid stone sides and an arched stone cover. Joining this drain at right angles was a 0.25m wide and 0.5m deep culvert with a stone slab cover. The remains of the system were clearly visible crossing the stripped road line. In one area, the culvert appeared to cut through or form part of an area of burnt stone with an associated spread of dense charcoal 0.2m thick recorded over a length of 3m.

The burnt areas might represent more carbonised tree roots, but another interpretation would see them as representing small scale industrial activity. This explanation is better suited to the locality, given the proximity of Deadwomans, the possible pit and the elaborate culverting on a steeply sloping area.

2.5: Dead Woman's Bottom

Prior to road construction, the landscape features of Dead Woman's Bottom all belonged to a recently abandoned modern quarry. When the quarry expanded onto this area in 1960 (information from Penny Stokes), the ground had clearly been levelled up across the valley bottom. This was made clear in all machine excavations in the area. In places up to 3m of recent dumping was revealed.

A single boundary wall was all that was noted of Deadwomans, although associated enclosures to the north remain untouched. The wall was of drystone construction, five courses high and surviving as a 5m length, which, judging by the map evidence, must have represented a revetment wall since it was unmortared and lay to the east of the known buildings (Fig 2).

Two streams converge at Dead Woman's bottom before draining northward into Chantry Pool. Deep excavations to accommodate the stream course beneath the new road were observed at three places. In addition further excavations for the temporary diversions of the stream courses were also watched. The three stream culvert excavations (Fig 3, A-C) were vertical sided cuttings, about 10m by 15m in plan on average, and were excavated through to natural rock to a depth of as much as 4m from the surface. Typically the cuttings showed about 2m of recent dump above stream deposits varying from 0.2m to 1m thick, resting on natural rock which itself was cut through to a depth of 1m. These excavations were deep and clear enough to make any trenching solely for archaeological purposes unnecessary.

The westernmost cutting, A, revealed a layer of compressed branches and vegetation, 0.2m thick and at least 3m wide, above the shaley natural rock. This was sealed beneath a layer of brown silty clay, itself underlying a recent overburden layer of soil and rubbish mixed with quarry spoil. The bottom layer appeared to represent the contents of the former stream course, the fill of undegraded vegetation and branches suggesting that this was recent. In the central and eastern cuttings, B and C, the stream beds were more clearly indicated with, in each case, a single deposit of black organic material resting directly upon the natural rock beneath deposits of sealing rubble from the 20th century levelling. In the central cutting the deposit was again shallow at 0.3m deep, but in the easternmost cutting an organic layer 1m deep was recorded. This latter cutting was directly upstream of the bridge running beneath the road, and the depth of organic material would suggest that a small pond may have formed on the southern upstream side of the road bridge.

No layering was visible and there was no stratigraphic evidence for the date of the stream deposits. Although they could belong to any time predating 1960 when the site was buried, it is likely that they represent deposition which occurred in relatively recent years. This was certainly the case with the westernmost exposure in A. In view of the absence of a stratigraphic sequence or independent dating evidence no samples were collected.

2.6: The eastern road section

From Dead Woman's Bottom the road line has been cut deeply into the precipitous hillslope here. This excavation showed that the steepness of the hillside had been accentuated by the dumping of quarry spoil, the battered section revealing a complex tipping sequence. Above Dead Woman's Bottom to the end of the road line the ground is level. The route here was observed following topsoil stripping. Natural orange clay pockets were seen to occur occasionally in the limestone bedrock. Careful walking of the exposed surface revealed no certain evidence of activity. At a point 380m from the end of the road line a possible linear gully 0.2m wide and 0.1m deep was recorded for a length of 3m. This apparent feature had a concave profile and was filled with orange clay similar to the natural clay. There was no dating evidence from the fill. This may represent an animal burrow. Apart from this, no archaeological features were seen in plan. Only post-medieval artefacts were present.

3: CONCLUSIONS

No landscape features predating the post-medieval period were identified during the watching brief, although occasional unassociated finds and the Castle Hill earthwork clearly suggest earlier activity in the locality. None of the small number of pottery sherds and flint flakes warranted specialist comment. There was some evidence on the ground that former areas of woodland might have been cleared and brought into cultivation in relatively recent times. Some field boundaries and the communications systems are likely to have been of greater antiquity but the trackway examined in detail appeared to be recent. Those field boundaries lost since the 1840s were not visible on the ground. The features found to the north-west of Dead Woman's Bottom may be related to the dwellings at Deadwomans. The remains of the latter were deeply buried beneath recent deposits, but the absence of any pottery or other datable evidence, from any of the contractor's excavations, which might have suggested that this was a long-lived settlement, need not be meaningful.

Fig 1 The road line and location of sites discussed in the text

Fig 2 Ordnance survey 1st edition c 1886

Fig 3 Trackway section and location of deep culvert excavations at Dead Woman's Bottom

Sources

No original library research was undertaken for this project. As noted above preliminary archaeological work was undertaken by Somerset County Council's Environment Department and additional data was kindly supplied by Penny Stokes.

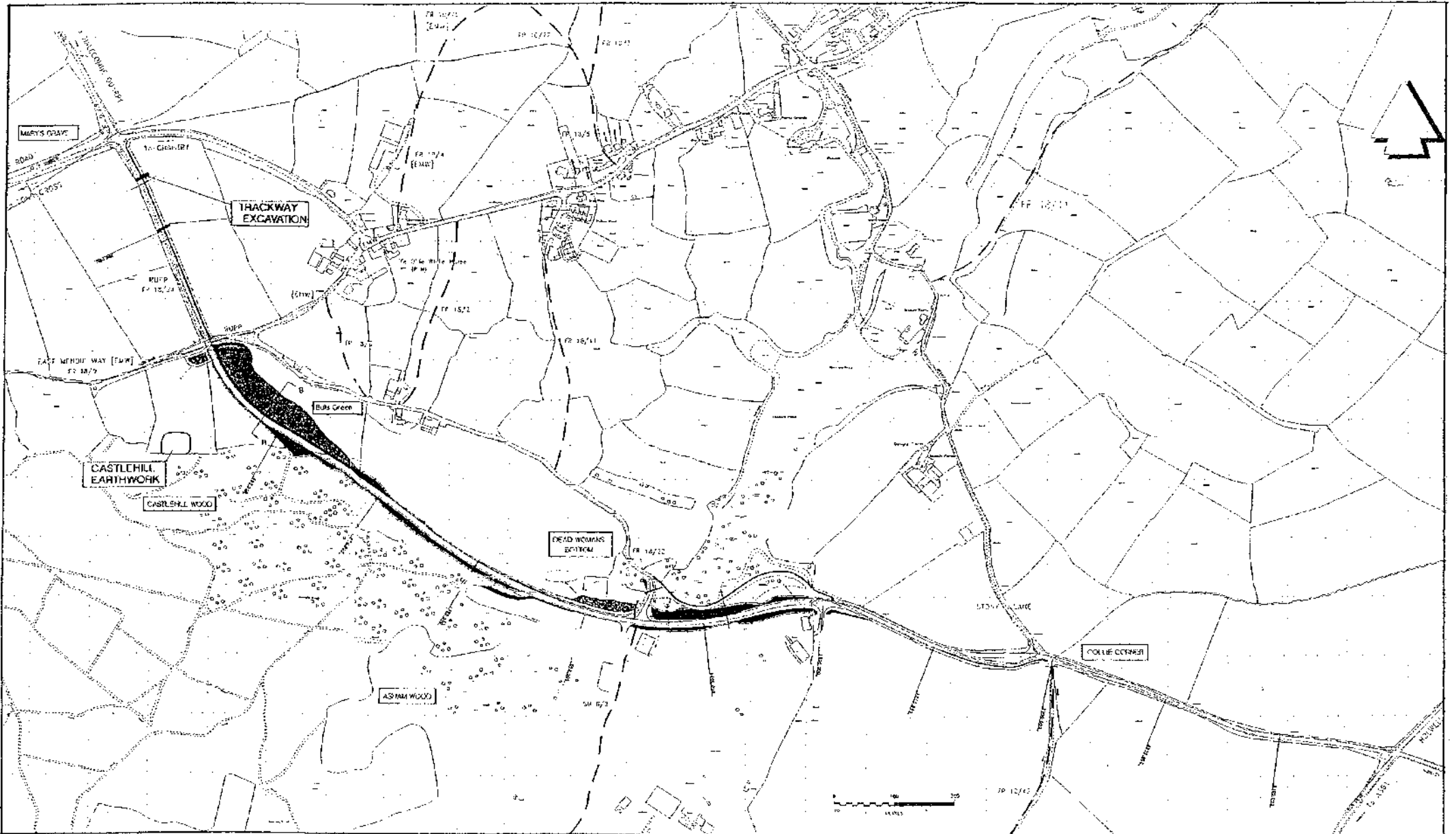


Fig.1

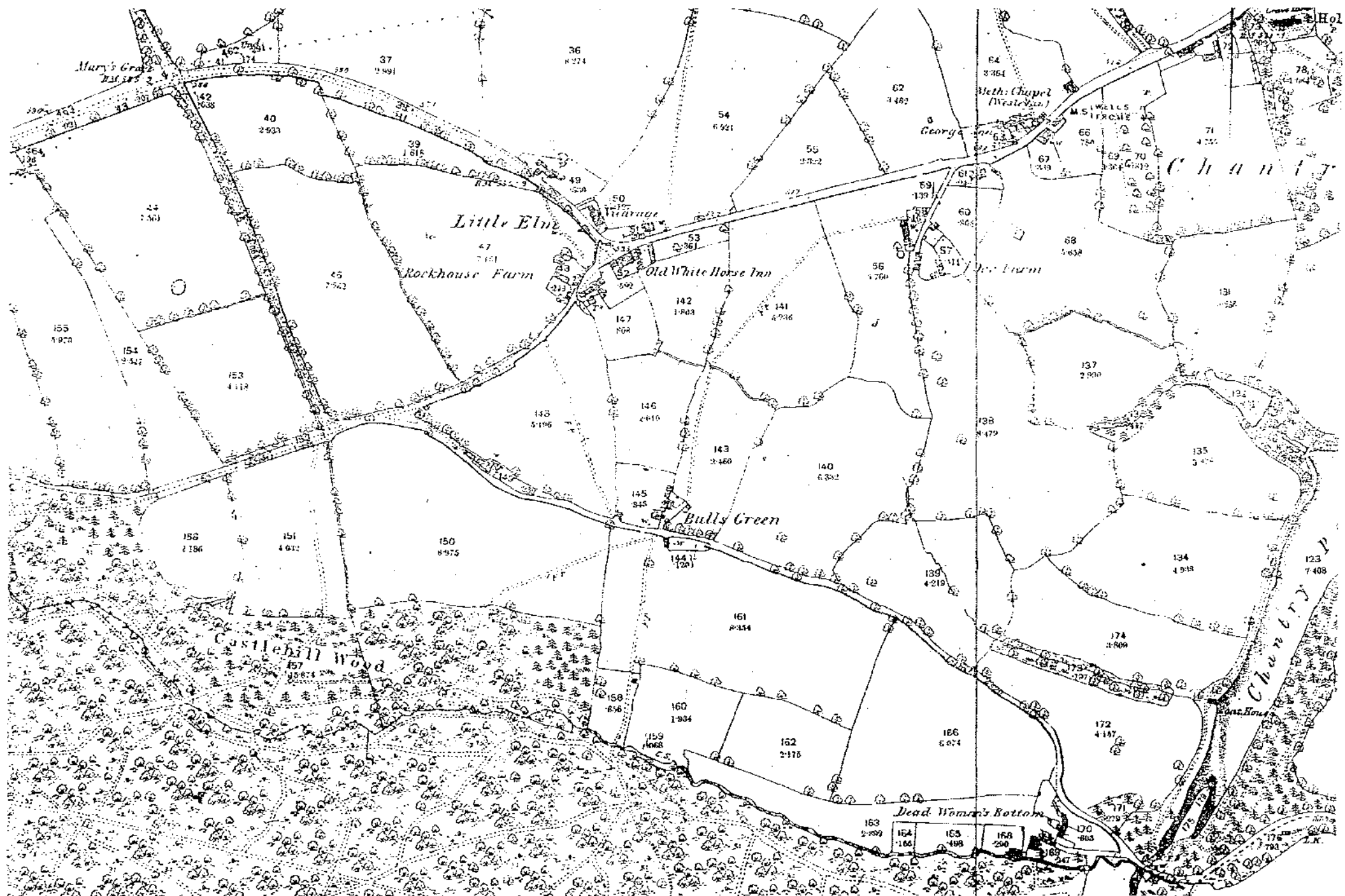
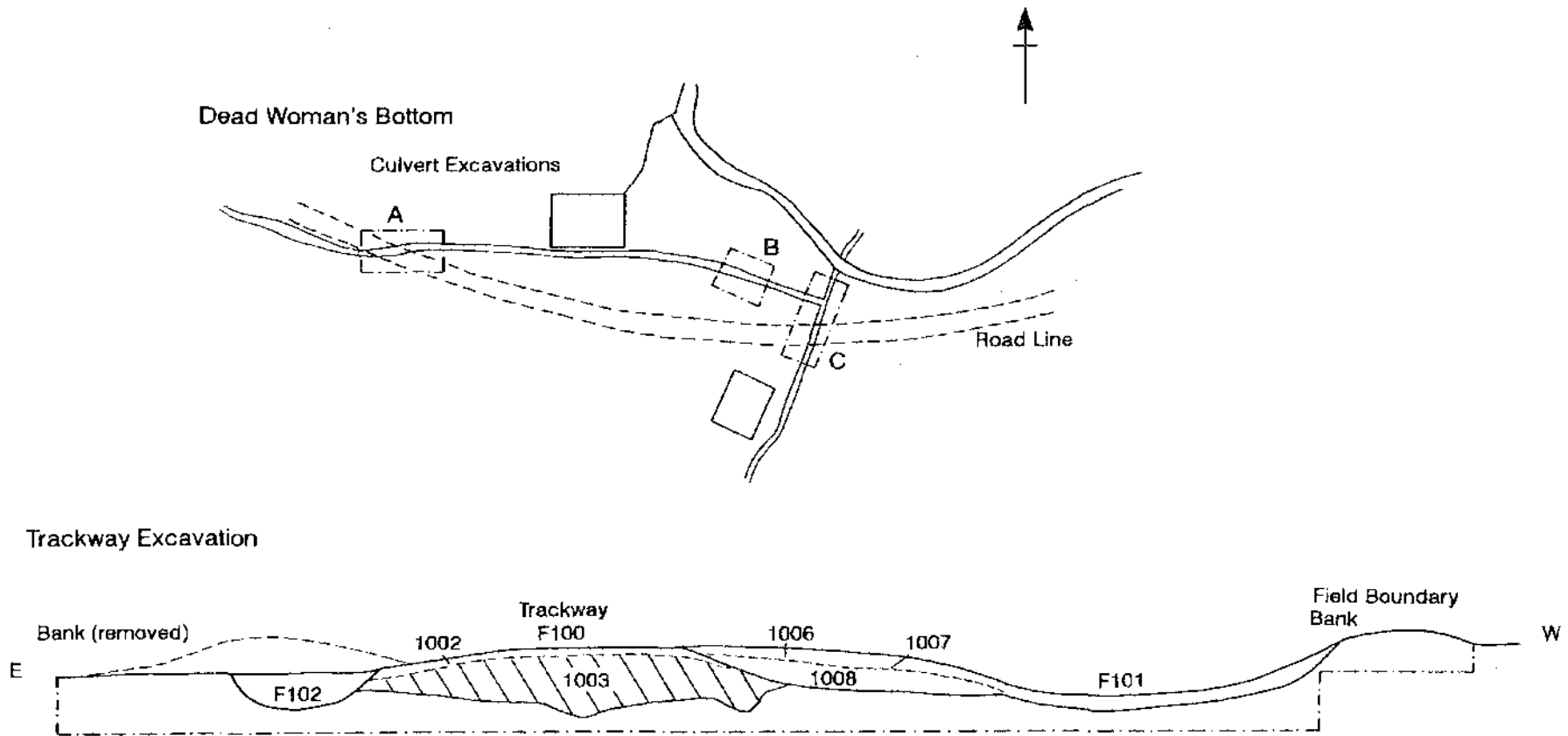


Fig 2



Plan 0 100m

Section 0 2m

Fig.3