



THE UNIVERSITY  
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**A Building Record of the  
Royal Oak Enclosure,  
Boscobel House,  
Shropshire**

*Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit*



Institute of Field  
Archaeologists

Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit  
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**A Building Record of the Royal Oak Enclosure, Boscobel House, Shropshire**

by  
Malcolm Hislop

with a contribution by Erica Macey

*For further information please contact:*  
Simon Buteux or Iain Ferris (Directors)  
Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit  
The University of Birmingham  
Edgbaston  
Birmingham B15 2TT  
Tel: 0121 414 5513  
Fax: 0121 414 5516  
E-Mail: [BUFAU@bham.ac.uk](mailto:BUFAU@bham.ac.uk)  
Web Address: <http://www.bufau.bham.ac.uk>

## **Contents**

- 1.0 Summary
- 2.0 Introduction
- 3.0 Site Location
- 4.0 Objectives
- 5.0 Method
- 6.0 Historical Background
- 7.0 Results
- 8.0 The Finds
- 9.0 Discussion
- 10.0 Acknowledgements
- 11.0 Reference
- Appendix I: List of Graffiti
- Appendix II: Index to the Archive

## **Figures**

- 1. Location map
- 2. Plan of the plinth and location of trenches
- 3. Dated *grc*, *fiti*
- 4. Plan of collar
- 5. Trench 1, south facing section
- 6. Trench 2, east facing section
- 7. Trench 3&4, east facing section
- 8. Trench 4, north facing section
- 9. North elevation
- 10. East elevation
- 11. South elevation
- 12. West elevation
- 13. West facing section through the site

## **Plates**

- 1. Tooling marks
- 2. 1834 inscription
- 3. Railing sockets
- 4. Insert in railing collar
- 5. Trench 1, south facing section
- 6. Trench 2, east facing section
- 7. Trench 3, east facing section

## **A Building Record of the Royal Oak Enclosure, Boscobel House, Shropshire**

### **1.0 Summary**

*In December 2001/January 2002 archaeological recording of the plinth and railings surrounding the Royal Oak, Boscobel House, Shropshire (NGR SJ83790811), was carried out by Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit for English Heritage, in advance of repair work. The archaeological work included the exposure of those parts of the plinth that had become obscured, and the excavation of four small trenches, one each side of the plinth on the north and south sides. The structure was shown to comprise a single phase. No evidence was recovered for an earlier structure or for ground surfaces contemporary with the plinth and railings.*

### **2.0 Introduction**

In the summer of 2001 the Royal Oak at Boscobel House, Shropshire was struck by lightning, which caused a portion of the tree to become detached and to fall onto the surrounding railings. This resulted in damage to both railings, a section of which had become detached and had been removed to safety, and their stone plinth. In making plans to effect repair works, English Heritage commissioned Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit to investigate and record the character, construction, and condition of the plinth and railings; this work was carried out in December 2001/January 2002. The archaeological programme included the removal of vegetation that was obscuring parts of the plinth, the excavation of four small trenches, one each side of the plinth on the north and south sides of the structure, and the carrying out of a watching brief during the preparation work by the repair contractors.

### **3.0 Site Location**

Boscobel House is situated approximately 8 miles north-west of Wolverhampton, and immediately to the west of the Staffordshire county boundary. The Royal Oak lies some 140m to the south of the house at NGR SJ83790811 (Figure 1).

### **4.0 Objectives**

- To elucidate the character, construction, and condition of the plinth and railings around the Royal Oak, and to identify evidence for the intended height of the plinth above ground level.
- To make a record of the plinth and railings surrounding the Royal Oak, showing both above and below ground constructional detail, and existing damage to the structure, including *graffiti*, and evidence for earlier repairs.
- To monitor the removal of soil and vegetation on and around the plinth, and within the enclosure.

## 5.0 Method

The removal of vegetation and the excavation of the trenches were done by hand. Plans, elevations and sections were drawn at a scale of 1:10 or 1:20, and these were supplemented by monochrome and colour slide photography. The stones were allocated individual numbers to facilitate the recording of the *graffiti* and other characteristics. These are reproduced on the plan (Figure 2). All the *graffiti* were noted, and a selection of the more interesting was recorded in greater detail by means of pencil rubbings. Finds were collected by context, and washed, marked and bagged.

## 6.0 Historical Background

The Royal Oak is a descendant of the tree in which King Charles II secreted himself on Saturday 6<sup>th</sup> September 1650, during his flight from Worcester, where his army had been defeated by the Parliamentarians three days previously. This episode was related by Thomas Blount in his book *Boscobel* which was published in 1660, and the story captured the public imagination. Some time before 1680, the owners of Boscobel felt the need to erect a brick wall around the original tree in order to protect it from souvenir hunters who had already caused considerable damage. Unfortunately, this measure was either inadequate or too late to prevent the demise of the oak, but it allowed the present tree to grow up within a protected environment.

In 1712 William Stukeley recorded a younger tree growing close to the remains of the Royal Oak, having germinated from one of its acorns. It is probably this tree that was mentioned over one hundred years later by the Reverend Joseph Dale, as growing within one corner of the enclosure. By then all remnants of King Charles' tree had been removed. In 1787 the wall, having become ruinous, was rebuilt, and in 1817 this second wall was replaced by the present plinth and railings (Weaver, 1996).

## 7.0 Results

The enclosure (Figure 2) is circular in plan, and has an external diameter of 8.62m (28ft 3½ ins). The plinth consisted of a single layer of forty-five sandstone blocks that supported a superstructure of cast iron railings. Six of these stones (5, 12, 20, 27, 35, & 42) projected longitudinally into the enclosure at equal intervals, and incorporated housings for an equivalent number of stanchion irons that gave support to the railings. Each stone measured 0.30m (1ft) in width by 0.30m (1ft) in depth, and had 0.04m (1½ ins) wide chamfers along its two upper edges. The stanchion stones are all 1.195m (4ft 1in) in length, but the lengths of the other stones ranged from 0.94m (3ft 1in) to 0.295m (9ft 8ins).

All these stones appeared to bear tooling marks (Plate 1). They fall into two main categories. Firstly, a series of roughly straight, parallel striations are cut vertically on the sides and across the widths of the stones on the top face. In addition, in many cases the sides are edged with neatly executed borders of horizontal lines. They are not, however, applied consistently to every stone. Some have only one edge treated in this way, others have none.

Most of the masonry is pinkish in colour, but a number of stones have a grey tinge (Figure 2). The difference is not particularly obvious, and, as the distribution is

random, it does not seem to have an architectural significance. The plinth was inscribed with a considerable amount of *graffiti* (Appendix). This is heaviest towards the south, where a noticeboard stood until recently, and tapers out towards the north. Most is in the form of initials; there are some full names, and some inscriptions are accompanied by dates which span a period of 150 years. The earliest is 1834, some seventeen years after the structure was erected (Figure 3, Plate 2).

The railings were of 0.025m (1in) square section, and were 2.36m (7ft 9ins) high from the top of the plinth, and had pointed tops. They were placed diagonally to the face of the plinth, and were set in specially prepared sockets within the plinth stones (Plate 3), and held in position with lead. At a height of 2.13m (7ft) they were linked by a plain collar, 0.10m (4ins) wide by 0.025m (1in) thick. The collar that remained *in situ* at the time of the survey incorporated seven joins, apparently original, and nine inserts (Figure 4, Plate 4) which seem to represent repairs. Only in one case is there an uninterrupted section between joins. This measures 1.55m (5ft 1in), but there are three longer sections, measuring 1.62m (5ft 4ins), 1.75m (5ft 9ins) and 2.05m (6ft 9ins) respectively, and it seems probable that the collar was made in sections of varying lengths. Only in one case does a join in the collar coincide with the interface of two plinth stones, though there are five instances of this occurring in respect of the inserts.

### *The Excavations*

All four trenches revealed a similar stratigraphic sequence; an upper layer, approximately 0.20m deep, of a dark brown silty topsoil, (context numbers 1000, 2000, 3000 & 4000 corresponding respectively to trenches 1,2,3 & 4), and a lower layer of loose sandy silt containing pebbles, much disturbed by root activity (context numbers 1001, 2001, 3001 & 4001 corresponding respectively to trenches 1,2,3 & 4). The top of the lower layer was approximately level with the bases of the plinth stones. The excavations revealed that the stone plinth was built on brick foundations (9½"x 4¼"x 2½"), of two or three courses, and of no discernible bonding pattern.

The south facing section of **Trench 1** (Figure 5, Plate 5) showed three courses, the lowest course of bricks being set on their sides, though this particular characteristic was not encountered elsewhere. At one point the bricks had been built around one of the tree roots, suggesting that the tree was already mature when the enclosure was erected. In **Trench 2** the brickwork beneath the north end of the stanchion stone had subsided, probably as a result of burrowing activity (Figure 6, Plate 6). The stone itself displayed an interesting pattern of tooling marks in which a border of horizontal lines had been cut 0.31m from the north end. To the south of this line were the usual vertical striations, while to the north the stone had been dressed with short irregular marks in a diagonal direction. Beneath the stanchion stone uncovered in **Trench 3** was a levelling layer of tiles (Figure 7, Plate 7). **Trench 4** revealed that the stanchion stone had diagonal tooling on its north end (Figure 8, Plate 8).

### **8.0 The Finds (by Erica Macey)**

The site produced a small quantity of finds, all of post-medieval date. The assemblage was fragmentary, but unabraded. Six fragments of pottery were recovered from the site; these were all dated to the 17<sup>th</sup> or 18<sup>th</sup> Century.

Other finds from the site included a 1935 George V penny, thirteen fragments of undiagnostic ceramic tile and nine fragments of ceramic brick, which were also undiagnostic. Two nails and four metal fragments, all of modern date, were also noted, as was a fragment of wine bottle and a piece of modern safety glass.

## **9.0 Discussion**

The failure to locate any remains of the wall that is known to have preceded the railings in surrounding the Royal Oak, may result from the older structure having been centred on the original tree, rather than its successor, which grew up within one corner of the enclosure. Alternatively, it is possible that the site was comprehensively cleared prior to the erection of the plinth.

The lack of any discernible evidence for a construction trench for the building may be explained by the disturbed nature of the lower of the two stratigraphic layers, but it may also owe something to the character of the site. Root activity has raised the Royal Oak above the level of the surrounding land, and preparation of the area for construction probably involved cutting back the slope, prior to setting the plinth against a vertical edge, so obviating a construction trench.

Although the excavations revealed no trace of the early 19th Century ground level in relation to the plinth, the irregular nature of the brick foundations shows that they were intended to be buried, and that only the plinth was meant to be exposed.

In general, the character of the monument is provincial and utilitarian. The railings have an unrelieved monotony about them and serve no more than a functional purpose. The furrow-like surface treatment of the stones has a mechanical look, and appears unfinished. In addition, the edge refinements are inconsistently applied, suggesting a lack of quality control. These features seem to suggest that the craftsmen involved were figures of no more than local repute.

## **10.0 Acknowledgements**

The excavations and recording work were supervised by Malcolm Hislop assisted by Mel Conway, and Helen Martin, who also undertook the watching brief. This report was written by Malcolm Hislop and includes a contribution by Erica Maccy; it was edited by Ian Ferris who also managed the project. Tony Fleming of English Heritage monitored the work for the client. The drawings are by Nigel Dodds.

## **11.0 Reference**

Weaver, O.J. *Boscobel House and White Ladies Priory*. 2nd edn (English Heritage, 1996)

## APPENDIX I: LIST OF THE GRAFFITI

This appendix records all the inscriptions, according to stone number (see Fig.2) that were legible at the time of the recording work.

1. HT / RE / DS / EE
2. WS
3. –
4. –
5. –
6. JR
7. JK 1871 / T.LAWSON / HL / HP / PE / WHP
8. JW / T.MYATT
9. ROX
10. –
11. LP / W / H / TC + DB 1984
12. –
13. DXN 1876
14. HB 1871 / JTT / HL
15. WAH 1896
16. -
17. PM / EA / CC
18. GB 1834 / GH
19. RP / NW / PE / CIW
20. DE / JRW
21. III / TR / JW
22. JS 1946 / HM / DH / JF / EEC / LA / NB / PB / DB / DM
23. GB / VD / WF / JB
24. ST AC 1927 / EAC
25. AK / HG / OB / HP / JON / WW / WA / SP / AI / HB / WS / NS / AB
26. TS / NW / HENRY ..AFFORD
27. J.HALE / SP 1947 / AO / RWL
28. JEH / NH / CM 1912 TR
29. AB / CE / TH
30. AM / RP / MH / AWP / CS
31. JW / AP / HI / TP / FB / J SMITH
32. WT / HB / W.SUTTON / JP / FA
33. JHW / AHG / TB / AB / CA / TM / HB
34. W MOON / DH / RH / JOC / KF / IF
35. WW 1956
36. D DAWSON
37. CNB / HW 1915
38. FA / TA / WM / GHC / HI / CL
39. TC + DB 1931 / JB / EH
40. HPS / AT / JF / HT / JE
41. WM
42. DM 1950 / TH
43. –
44. GWB
45. WH EASKIN / H LAVIT



## **APPENDIX II: INDEX TO THE ARCHIVE**

The revision of this report has involved the renumbering of the plinth stones, and of the joints and inserts in the railing collar. In the interests of consistency, this renumbering has also been applied to the archive.

The archive consists of :-

- Archaeological brief
- Method statement
- 5 levels sheets
- 4 context record index sheets
- 8 context record sheets
- 9 photograph index sheets
- 19 B&W negative strips
- 2 B&W contact sheets
- 24 colour prints (6x4)
- 8 B&W prints (6x4)
- 2 drawing record sheets
- 17 field drawings
- 9 sheets of graffiti rubbings
- 5 items of correspondence
- 4 finds assemblage summary sheets

### **Details of Drawings**

1. Plan of plinth (1:50)
2. Plan of railing collar (1:50)
3. Trench 1: south facing section (1:10)
4. Trench 1: west facing section (1:10)
5. Trench 2: north facing section (1:20)
6. Trench 2: east facing section (1:20)
7. Trench 2: west facing section (1:20)
8. Trenches 3 & 4: east facing section (1:20)
9. Trench 4: north facing section (1:20)
10. Trench 3: west facing section (1:20)
11. Trench 3: south facing section (1:20)
12. Plan of Royal Oak enclosure (1:20)
13. North facing elevation: plinth and railings (1:20)
14. East facing elevation: plinth and railings (1:20)
15. South facing elevation: plinth and railings (1:20)
16. West facing elevation: plinth and railings (1:20)
17. Details of damaged stones (1:20)

## **Details of Photographs**

### Black and White Prints

#### *Film 1*

13. Trench 1: south facing section
14. Trench 1: south facing section
15. Stone 20
16. Stone 19
17. Stone 18
18. Stone 17
19. Stone 16
20. Stone 15
21. Stone 14
22. Railings from the west
23. Insert 4
- 26 Stone 12
- 27 Railings from the west

#### *Film 2*

2. Stone 12
3. Stone 12
4. Railings from west
5. Stone 11
6. Stone 10
7. Insert 3
8. Insert 3
9. Stone 9
10. Stone 8
11. -
12. Stone 6
13. Stone 5
14. Stone 4
15. Stone 3
16. Stone 2
17. Stone 1
18. Stone 45
19. Stone 44
20. Stone 43
21. Stone 42
22. Detail of Stone 42
23. Insert 2
24. Stone 41
25. Stone 40
26. Stone 39
27. Stone 38
28. Stone 37

29. Stone 36
30. Stone 35
31. Stone 34
32. Stone 33
33. Stone 32
34. Stone 31

*Film 3*

4. Royal Oak from the south
5. Royal Oak from the south
6. Royal Oak from the east
7. Royal Oak from the east
8. Royal Oak from the west
9. Royal Oak from the west
10. Royal Oak from the north
11. Royal Oak from the north

*Film 4*

2. Stone 31
3. Stone 30
4. Stone 29
5. Stone 28
6. Stone 27
7. Stone 26
8. Stone 25
9. Stone 24
10. Stone 23
11. Stone 22
12. Stone 21
13. Detail of stone 18
14. Insert 1
15. Insert 9
16. Insert 9
17. Insert 9
18. Joint 7
19. Joint 7
20. Insert 8
21. Insert 7
22. Insert 7
23. Insert 6
24. Insert 6
25. Joint 4
26. Insert 5
27. Joint 3
28. Trench 4: north facing section
29. Trench 4: east facing section
30. Trench 3: south facing section
31. Trench 3: west facing section

32. Trench 3: east facing section
33. Trench 2: north facing section
34. Trench 2: east facing section
35. Trench 2: west facing section

### Colour Slides

#### *Film 1*

1. Trench 1: south facing section
2. Trench 1: south facing section
3. Trench 1: south facing section
4. Stone 20
5. Stone 19
6. Stone 18
7. Stone 17
8. Stone 16
9. Stone 15
10. Stone 14
11. Railings Stone 14
12. Insert 4
13. Stone 13
14. Insert 4
15. Stone 12
16. Stone 11
17. Stone 10
18. Insert 3
19. Insert 3
20. Stone 9
21. Stone 8
22. Stone 7
23. Stone 6
24. Join 2
25. Stone 6
26. Stone 5
27. Stone 4
28. Stone 3
29. Stone 2

#### *Film 2*

1. Stone 2
2. Stone 1
3. Stone 45
4. Stone 44
5. Stone 43
6. Stone 42
7. Detail of Stone 42
8. Insert 2
9. Stone 41

10. Stone 40
11. Stone 39
12. Stone 38
- 13.
14. Stone 36
15. Stone 35
16. Stone 33
17. Stone 32
18. Stone 31
19. Stone 30
20. Stone 29
21. Stone 28
22. Stone 27
23. Stone 26
24. Stone 25
25. Stones 24 & 23
26. Stone 22
27. Stone 21
28. Detail of
29. Inset 2

*Film 3*

1. Stone 37
2. Stone 24
3. Stone 23
4. Stone 11

*Film 4*

1. Inset 1
2. Inset 9
3. Inset 9
4. Join 7
5. Join 7
6. Inset 8
7. Join 6
8. Join 5
9. Inset 7
10. Inset 6
11. Join 4
12. Join 4
13. Inset 5
14. Join 3
15. Trench 4: east facing section
16. Trench 4: east facing section
17. Trench 4: east facing section
18. Trench 3: south facing section
19. Trench 3 west facing section
20. Trench 3: east facing section

21. Trench 2: north facing section
22. Trench 2: east facing section
23. Trench 2: west facing section

### Colour Prints

#### *Film 1*

14. Stone 10
15. Stone 4
16. Stone 41
17. Stone 40
18. Stone 36
19. Stone 30
20. Stone 29
21. Stone 28
22. Stone 27
23. Stone 26
24. Stone 25
25. Stone 24
26. Stone 34
27. Stones 19 to 16
28. Stone 17
29. Stones 31 & 30
30. Interior from the east
31. Stone 31 from the east
32. -
33. Interior from the south
34. Enclosure from the south
35. Enclosure from the south
36. Enclosure from the south
37. Enclosure from the north
38. Enclosure from the north

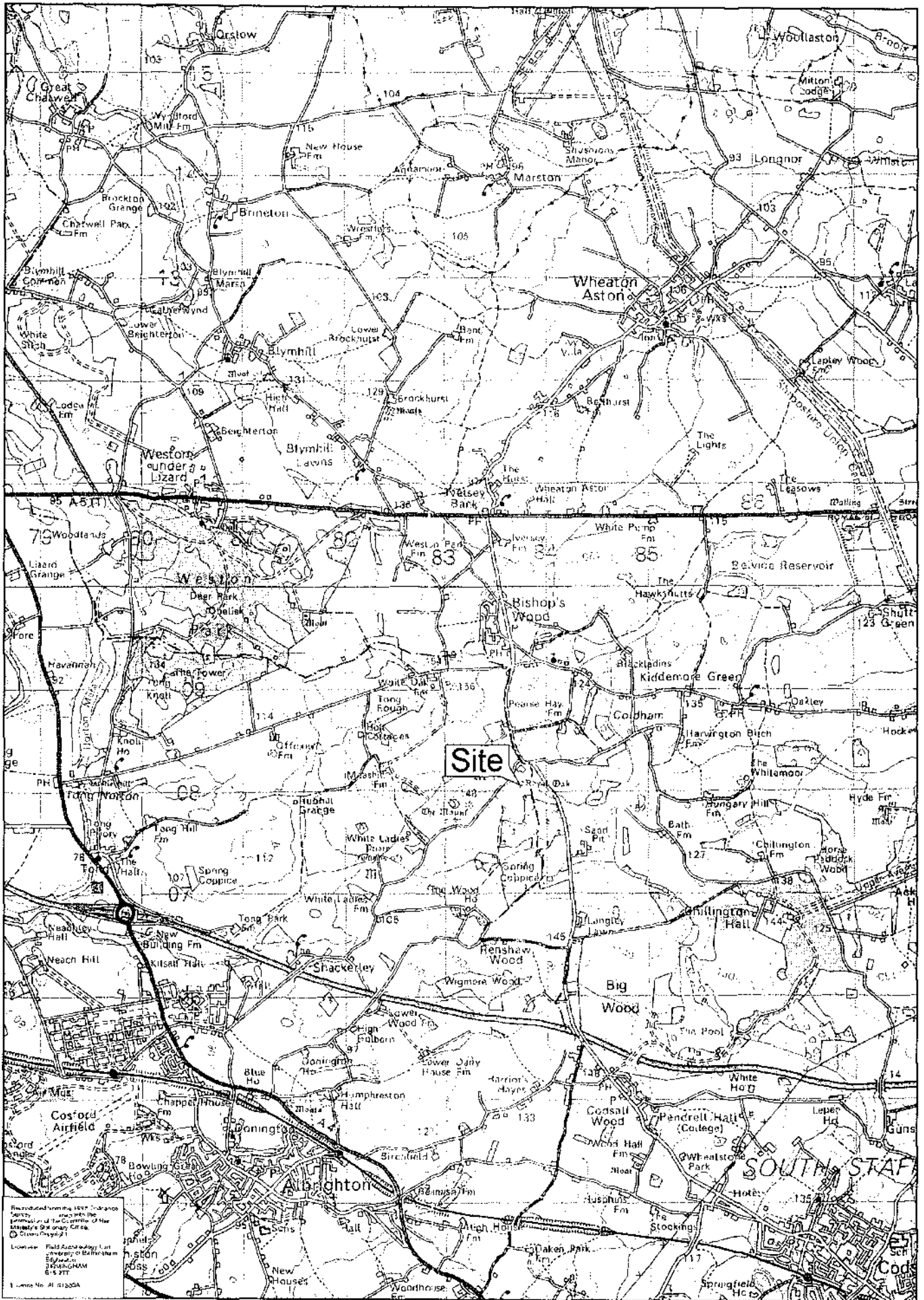


Fig.1 Location Map

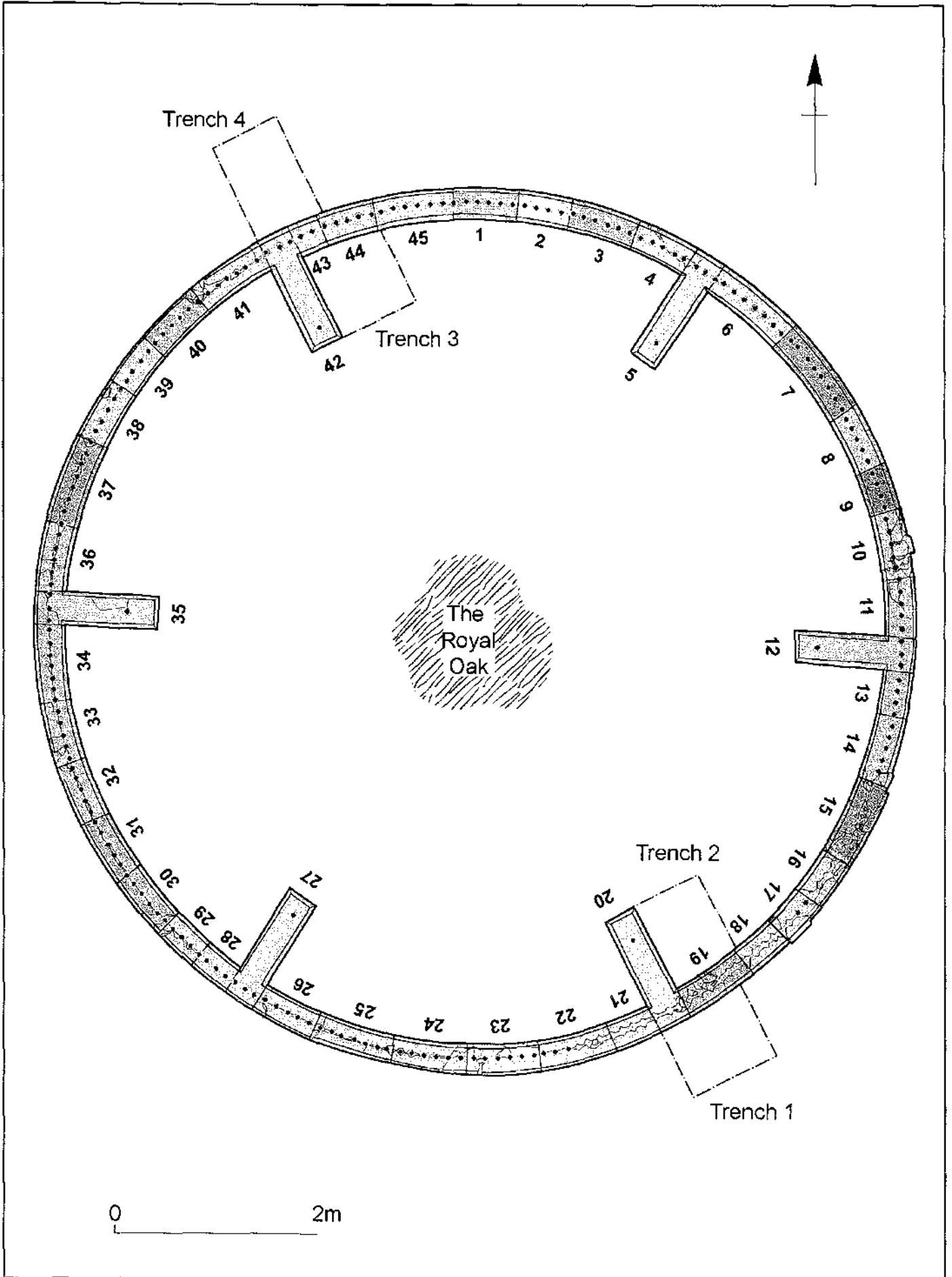


Fig.2 Plan of plinth and location of trenches



G B 1834

Stone No.18

J K 1871

Stone No.7

H B 1871

Stone No.14

D X N 1876

Stone No.13

C M 1912 T R

Stone No.28

H W  
1915

Stone No.37

ST  
AC 1927

Stone No.24

J. S. 1946.

Stone No.22

D M  
1950

Stone No.42

T C + D B 1984

Stone No.11

0 5cm

Fig.3 Dated Graffiti

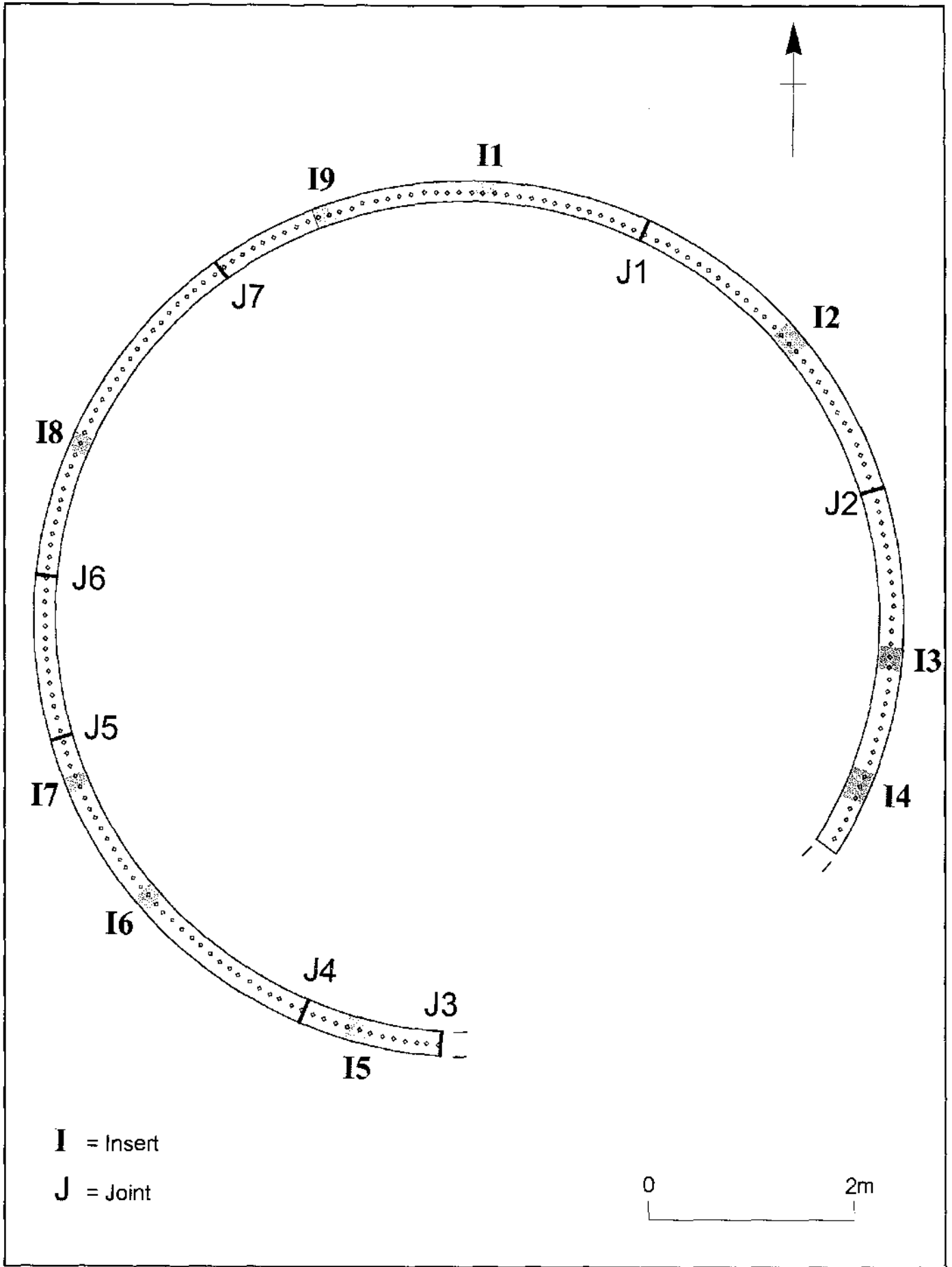


Fig.4 Plan of collar, showing inserts & joints

TRENCH 1 South Facing Section

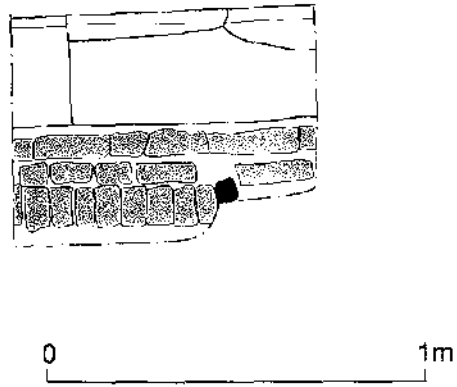


Fig.5

TRENCH 2 East Facing Section

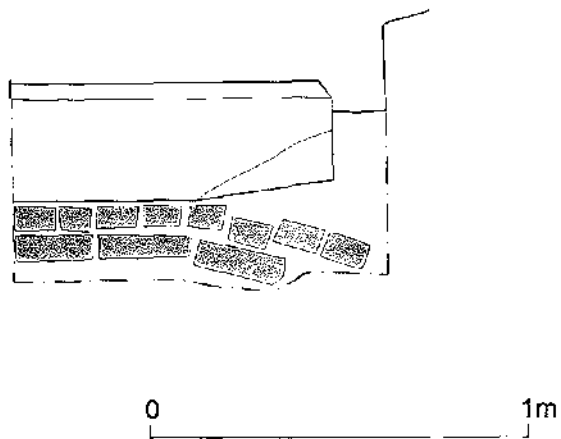


Fig.6

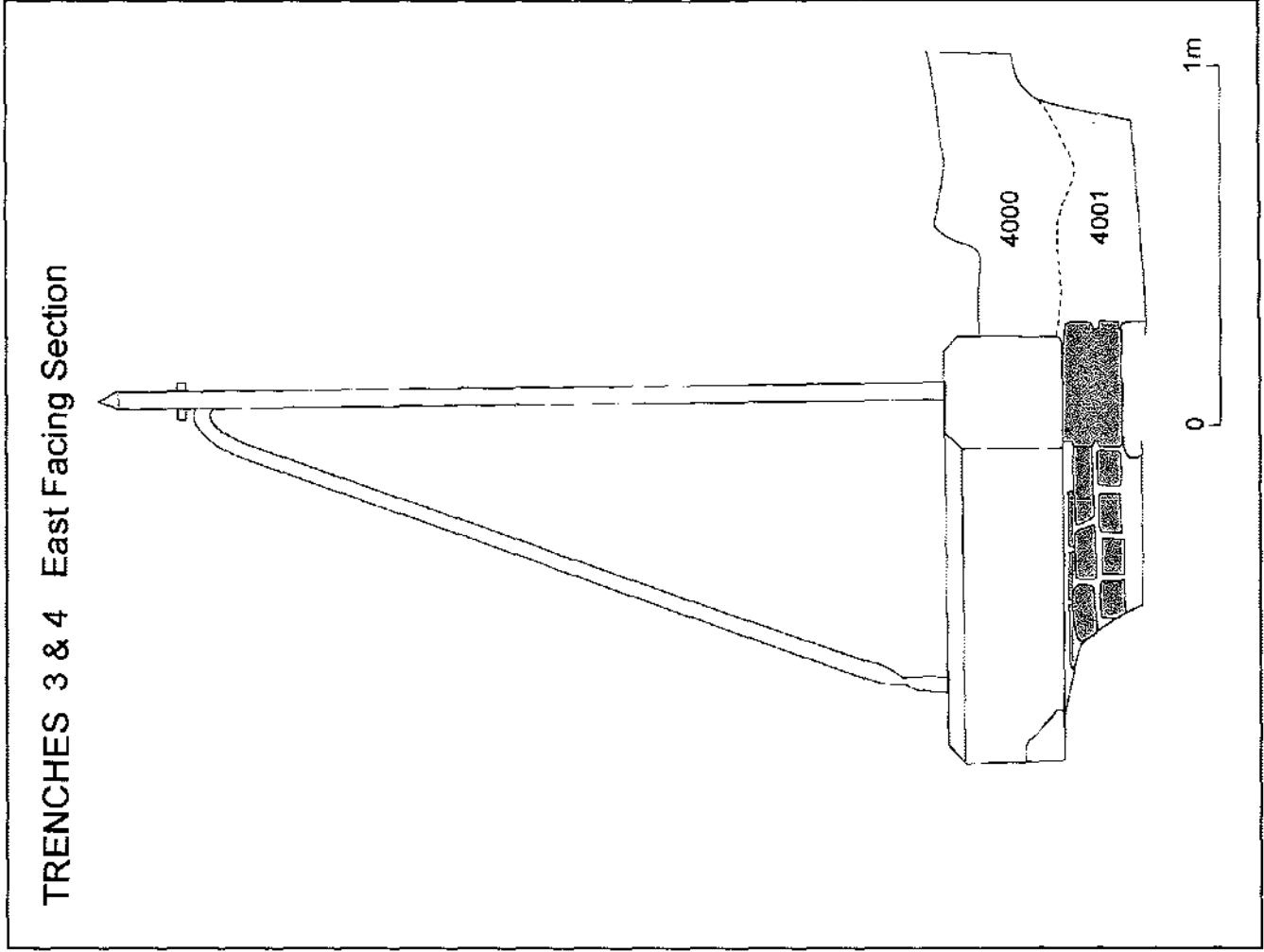


Fig.7

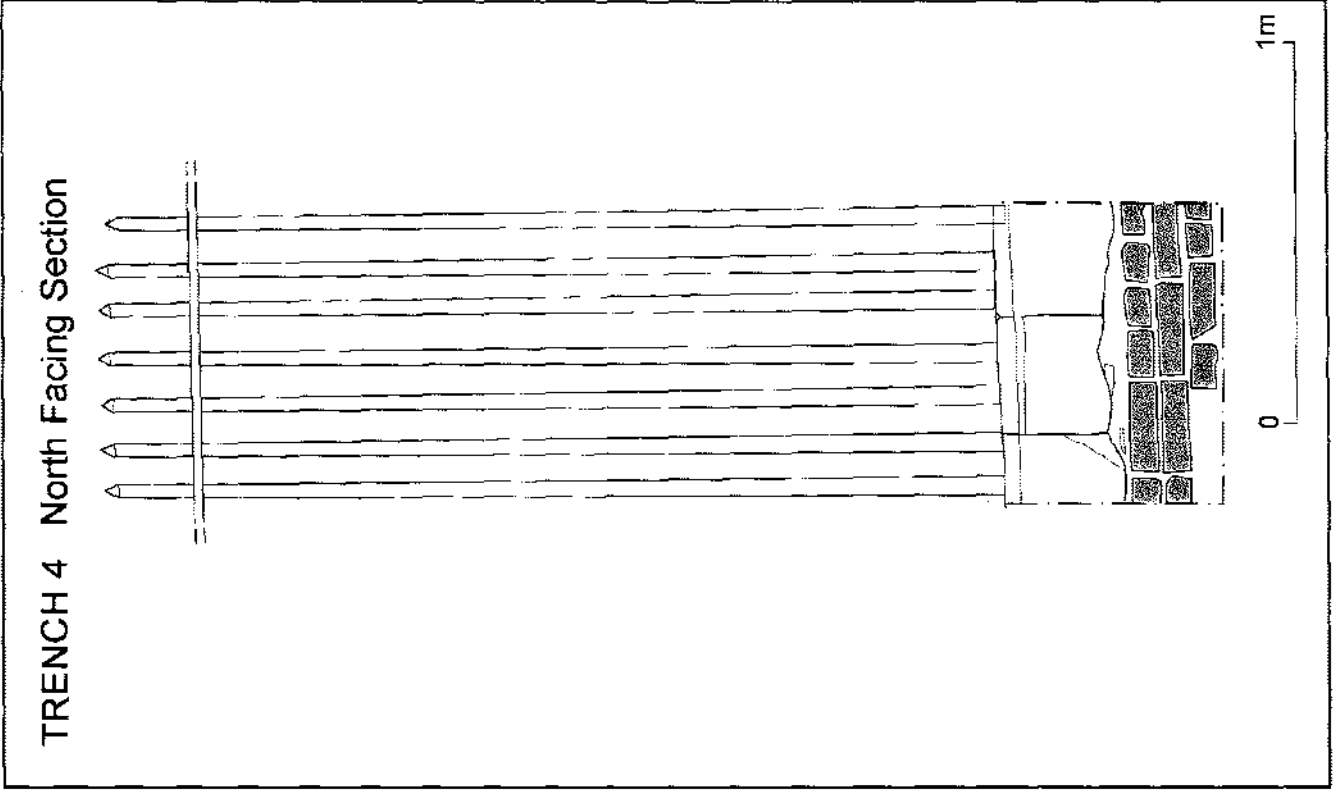


Fig.8

Fig.11 South Facing Elevation

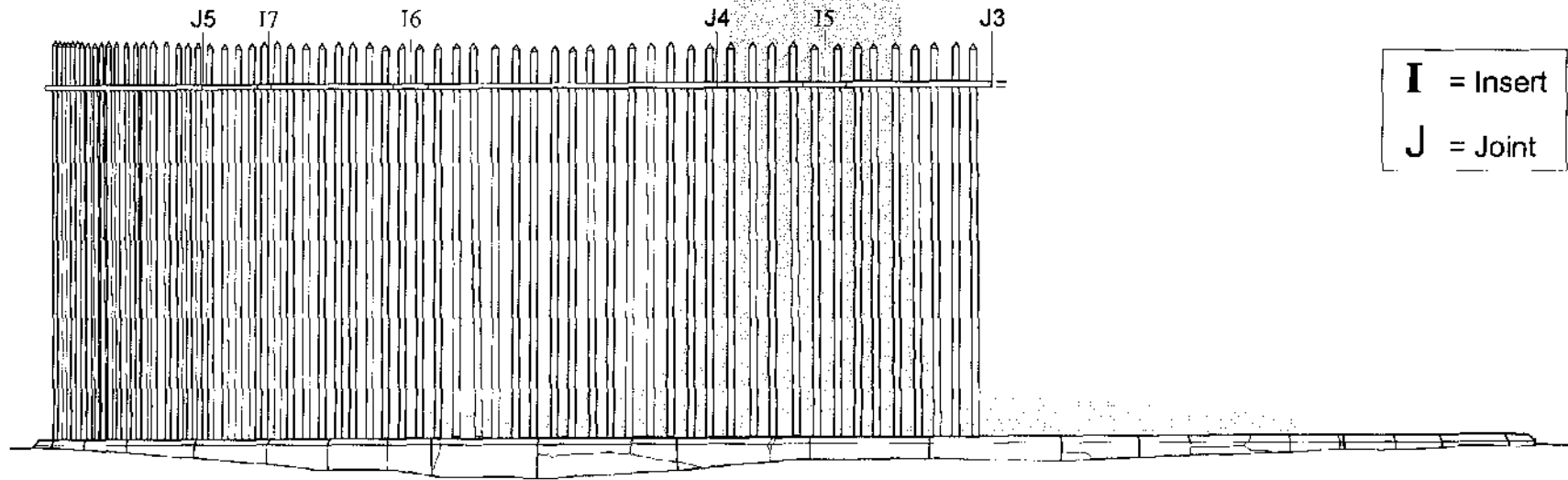
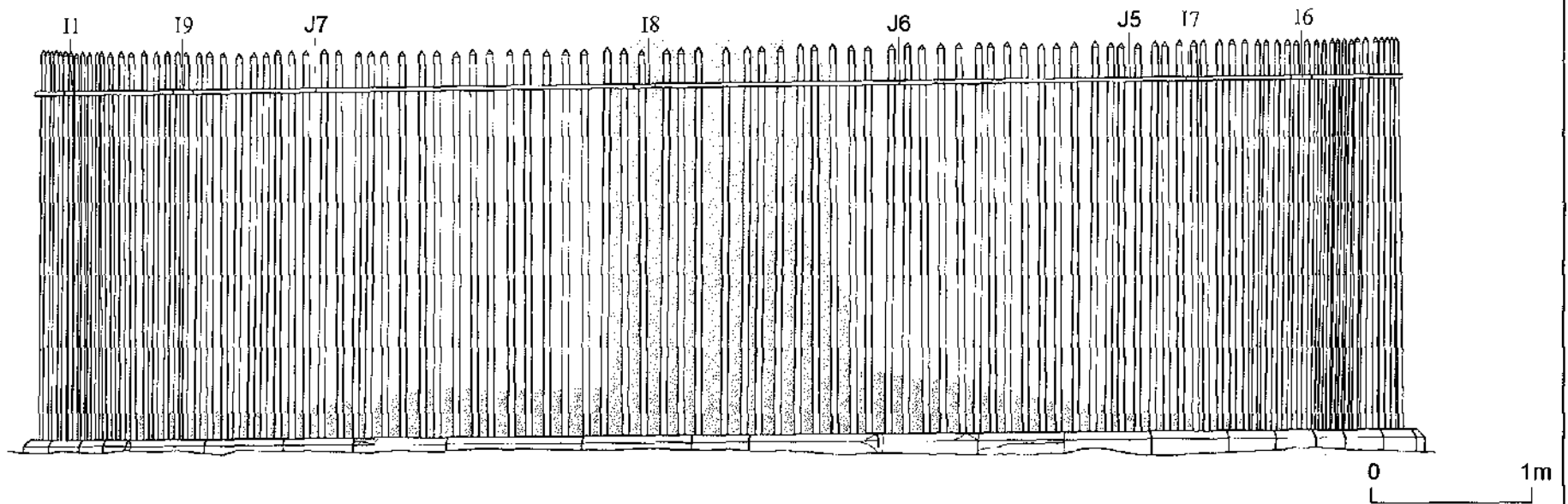
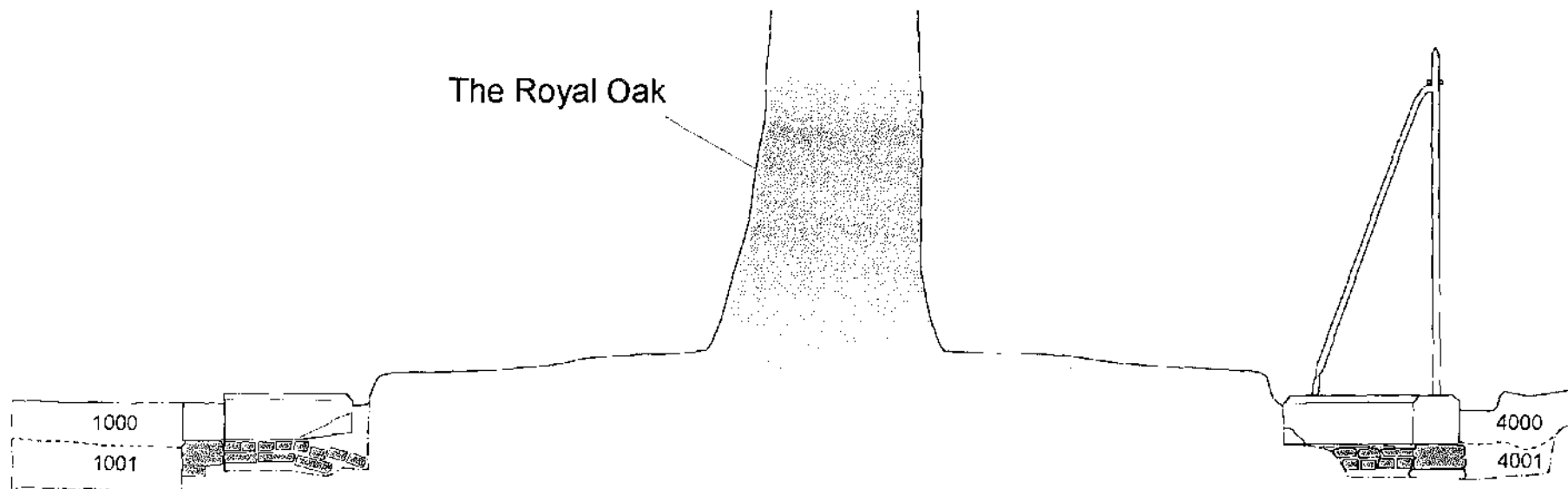


Fig.12 West Facing Elevation



East-facing Section through the site.



0 2m

Fig.13



Plate 3



Plate 4



Plate 5

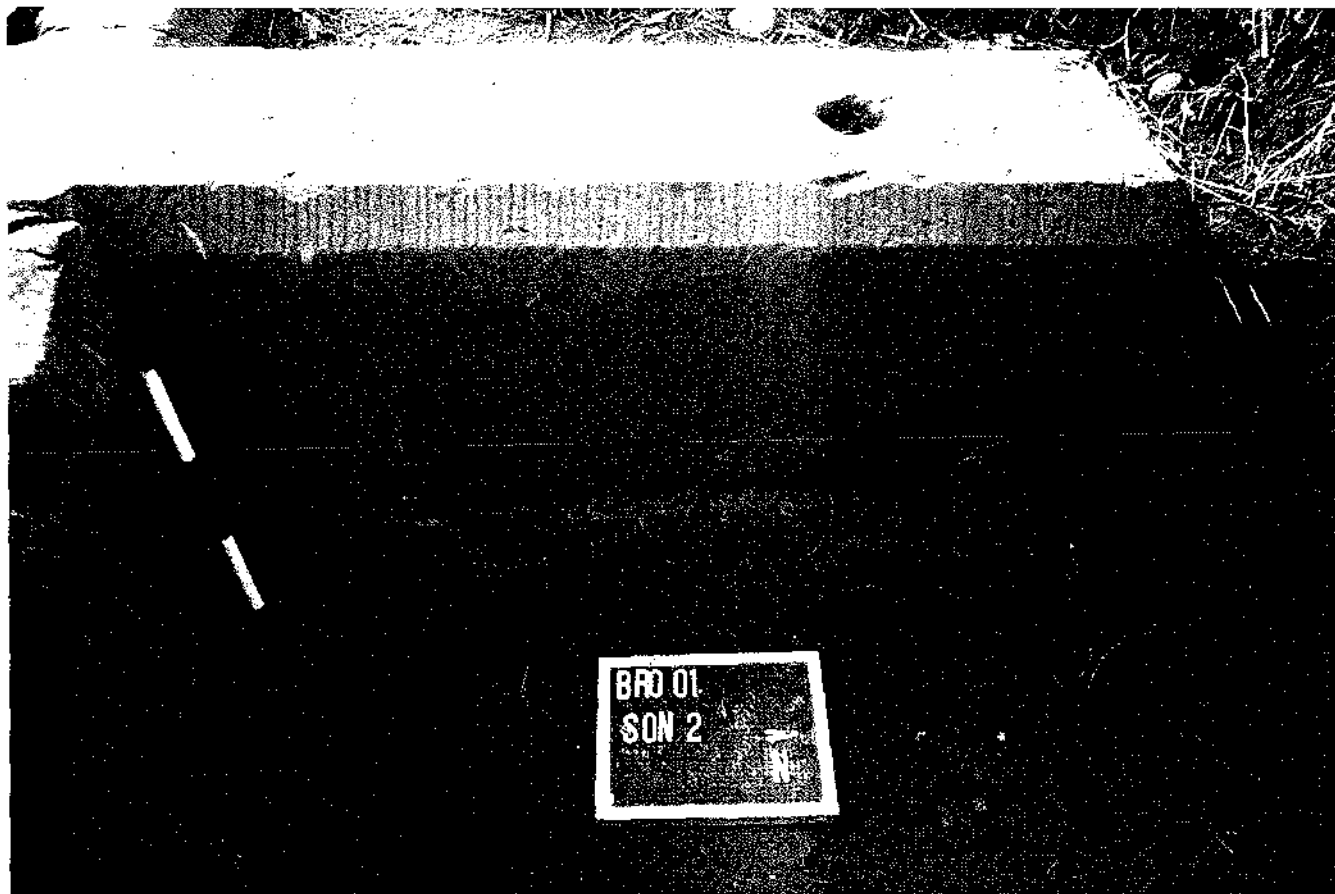


Plate 6





Plate 7



Plate 8

