

Shrewsbury Abbey, Abbey Foregate, Shrewsbury, Shropshire
An Archaeological Investigation: 2004

SUMMARY	2
INTRODUCTION	3
BACKGROUND (FIG. 3)	3
AIMS	4
METHODOLOGY (FIG. 2)	5
RESULTS	5
MANHOLE MH1 (FIG. 4, PLATE 1)	5
MANHOLE MH1A (FIG. 4)	5
MANHOLE MH3 (FIG. 4)	6
SEWAGE PUMPING STATION (SPS: FIG. 5, PLATE 2).....	6
MANHOLE MH2 AND WATCHING BRIEF (FIG. 2).....	6
FINDS	6
POTTERY BY STEPHANIE RATKAI	6
WATERLOGGED WOOD BY STEVE ALLEN	7
DISCUSSION	8
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	9
REFERENCES	9

Tables

Table 1. Medieval pottery fabrics by context

Table 2. Characteristics and dating of pottery

Figures

1. Location of site within Shrewsbury

2. The Abbey site: areas investigated in 2004

3. John Carline's map of the Abbey precinct, 1825, showing areas investigated in 2004

4. Plan and section of manhole MH1; sections of manholes MH1A and MH3

5 Plan of SPS showing timber structures

6 Morticed timber from SPS; photo and plan

Plates

1. Walls F102 and F102A in manhole MH1

2. Morticed timber in SPS

Appendix

Details of worked wood from SPS

SUMMARY

Archaeological investigation and recording was undertaken in advance of the construction of a new sewerage system in Abbey Foregate, Shrewsbury, crossing the precinct of Shrewsbury Abbey (centred on NGR SO 49751225). The work was undertaken by Birmingham Archaeology on instruction from Severn Trent Water Ltd in summer 2004. A total of five interventions was recorded. The new pipeline was drilled below-ground, at a sufficient depth to ensure that archaeological deposits within the Abbey precinct were not disturbed.

To the north of the Abbey precinct was recorded a possible medieval cobbled street surface. The most important discovery was the identification of part of the Abbey's Guest Hall, or a later addition to that building, located on the southern edge of the precinct. To the southwest of the precinct was recorded part of a possible revetment or fish trap foundation, and part of a possible fish trap, overlain by a series of undated deposits within the Abbey Pool fishpond.

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INTRODUCTION

This report describes the results of archaeological investigations undertaken in advance of the construction of a new sewerage system within and adjoining the area of Shrewsbury Abbey, Shrewsbury, Shropshire (SA359; centred on NGR SO 4975 1225, Figs. 1-2). The work was undertaken by Birmingham Archaeology on instruction from Severn Trent Water Ltd in summer 2004. The sewerage scheme was designed from the outset to eliminate disturbance to archaeological deposits within the Abbey by the use of a tunnel drilled below the level of recorded archaeology within the area of the former abbey, a Scheduled Ancient Monument. Archaeological investigation was limited to interventions cut outside the Abbey boundary, dug mainly to send and recover the tunneling apparatus. As a preliminary to the scheme design test-pits were dug and archaeologically recorded (Hewitson 2003).

The excavation was carried out in accordance with a brief prepared by Shropshire County Council (2004) and a written scheme of investigation prepared by Birmingham Archaeology (2004) approved by Shropshire County Council and English Heritage. Scheduled Ancient Monument Consent was obtained to allow the groundworks and archaeological recording to take place.

The sewerage scheme extended from Abbey Foregate Loop in the north (MH3), crossing Abbey Foregate (MH2), and the car parks to the south (MH1, MH1a), with a spur extending to the southwest, adjoining Old Potts Way (SPS).

The underlying geology is silt-clay and river gravels.

BACKGROUND (Fig. 3)

The Benedictine Abbey of St Peter and St Paul was a Norman foundation, by Earl Roger of Montgomery during 1083-87, built on the eastern bank of the River Severn, outside the Anglo-Saxon settlement (Baker 2002, 9). The bones of St Winifred were brought to the site in 1138, and the cult of these relics was actively promoted by several abbots, being particularly popular in the 14th-15th centuries. The Abbey had an important impact on the local economy, partly because of the seasonal pilgrim traffic. Richard II lodged in the Abbey, and parliament met there in 1398. The later history of the Abbey is one of decline, illustrated by poorly-maintained buildings, financial irregularities and disputes with the town, such that the Bishop and Benedictine provincial chapter were forced to intervene. By the early 16th century, the Abbey's problems were increasing, with non-payment of debts, lack of proper accounting and decaying buildings (*ibid.*, 18). By the time of dissolution in January 1540 only the Abbot and 17 monks were remaining.

Many of the Abbey buildings survived into the 19th century. The cloisters and refectory were demolished in 1836 to make way for a re-alignment of Abbey Foregate. Later in that century the Guest Hall on the southern edge of the precinct, and the fishponds further to the south were cleared to make way for the Potteries, Shrewsbury and North Wales Railway, which opened in 1866. The Abbey Church, the so-called 'Old Infirmary' and the refectory pulpit are surviving above-ground reminders of the monastery. An extensive programme of archaeological excavation in 1986-8 (Baker 2002) provided the opportunity to investigate parts of the precinct boundary, the Abbey kitchen, and a post-medieval mill. This excavation report, which includes a re-assessment of the documentary and cartographic sources provides the basis for the interpretation of the archaeological remains described in this report.

Further remains of the precinct buildings to the south of Abbey Foregate are preserved beneath modern car parks where the buried archaeological remains are protected as a result of the raising of the ground surface during the 19th century, within a Scheduled Ancient Monument. The main sewerage pipe crossed the

precinct in an underground tunnel on a roughly north-south alignment, to the west of the Abbey Church and the west range of the cloisters.

AIMS

The general aim of the excavation was to preserve by record any archaeological remains affected by the proposed scheme. In particular, it was intended to identify and record any medieval and early medieval structures, together with evidence for the sequence and composition of waterlogged deposits, including evidence of the surrounding environment.

METHODOLOGY (Fig. 2)

The largest excavation was for the Sewage Pumping Station (SPS, which measured 11m in diameter. Manholes 1 and 1A (MH1 and MH1A) measured 3.7m in diameter, and Manholes 2 (MH2) and 3 (MH3) were 2m and 3m square, respectively. In each case a mechanical excavator was used to remove modern deposits, working under archaeological supervision. Subsequent excavation was in spits, each measuring 1.2m in depth. As the first stage in each spit a hand-excavated trench was dug across the intervention to test and record identified deposits. This was followed by machine excavation of the remainder of the spit, under archaeological supervision. Sufficient spits were dug to reach the maximum design depth of the intervention. For reasons of health and safety the sides of the excavations were protected by shoring or concrete caissons, and therefore perimeter sections could not be recorded.

In its original location Manhole MH1 exposed the remains of sandstone walls of medieval date, and for this reason was re-located approximately 13m to the south, further away from the precinct (Manhole 1A). Other groundworks were subject to an archaeological watching brief.

Recording in each intervention was the same. Each hand-excavated spit was drawn in plan and section, and recorded by means of pre-printed context and feature pro-formas, and photographs. Datable features and deposits were sampled for paleoenvironmental analysis. Particular importance was attached to the sampling of datable waterlogged deposits. Finds were collected by context.

The site archive will be deposited with Rowley's House Museum, Shrewsbury, subject to the consent of the landowner.

RESULTS

Manhole MH1 (Fig. 4, Plate 1)

The junction between two bonded sandstone walls, F102, F102a, was recorded at a depth of 1.45m below the modern ground surface. The walls measured 0.73m (F102) and 0.45m (F102a) in width. They were constructed of roughly shaped blocks of varying sizes, but with neatly faced surfaces. Wall F102 survived to a minimum depth of 0.6m. Layers of debris were built up against the walls. To the west of F102 the earliest deposit excavated was a grey-clay, 1015, possibly alluvial in origin, which was not excavated. Above was a layer of dark grey clay, 1012, sealed by a lens of blue-grey silt-clay, 1011. This was overlain by a layer of dark brown silt-clay, 1010, sealed by a deposit of red sand-silt, 1009, with frequent sandstone fragments, interpreted as a demolition deposit. Above was a layer of dark grey clay-silt, 1008. Within the small part of the excavated interior of the building the earliest recorded deposit was a red-brown silt-clay, 1014, overlain by a layer of dark grey silt-clay, 1013. Layers 1013 and 1008 were sealed by a deposit of demolition material, 1007 (not illustrated), containing brick and sandstone fragments. Above were layers of brick and rubble hardcore for the modern car park.

Layer 1012 contained pottery of 14th-15th century date, and layer 1007 contained mid-late 17th-early 18th century date, together with residual sherds of 13th-15th and 15th-16th century date.

Manhole MH1A (Fig. 4)

Natural red silt-clay (1029) was uncovered at a depth of 3.7m below the modern ground surface. Above was a shallow lens of grey rounded stones, 1028, measuring c 0.04-0.09m in diameter, overlain by a waterlogged black layer containing wood, seeds, leaves and sandy silt, 1027. This was sealed by a deposit of grey clay, 1026. In turn this was overlain by a thin lens of organic matter, 1025, above an organic deposit of grey silt-clay, 1024. Above were a sequence of build-up deposits (1023-1017), measuring a total of 1.2m in depth.

Layer 1022 contained late 19th-20th century pottery, and layer 1023 19th-20th century pottery.

Manhole MH3 (Fig. 4)

The natural subsoil comprised a layer of brown-red silt-clay, 3006A, sealed by a deposit of brown river gravel and red silt-clay, 3006. The subsoils were overlain by a compact cobbled surface, 3005, recorded at a depth of 1m below the modern surface. This surface was overlain by a layer of crushed red sandstone fragments, 3004, a probable demolition deposit measuring a total of 0.15m in depth. Above were a total of 1.3m of post-medieval build-up deposits and surfaces (3000-3003).

Layer 3004 contained pottery of mid 17th-18th century date.

Sewage Pumping Station (SPS: Fig. 5, Plate 2)

Natural red silt-clay, 4016, was located at a depth of 5.6m below the modern surface. Dug into this was a wooden structure, F401, consisting of a series of roundwood uprights pressed into the natural subsoil to a depth of 0.10-0.15m (Allen, below). The sharpened brushwood uprights measured 0.1-0.12m in diameter, and were spaced at a distance of 0.45-0.5m apart. Smaller brushwood fragments, c. 0.03-0.04m in diameter, had been woven horizontally around the uprights to create a possible structure, only partly visible within the SPS. The structure survived to a maximum height of 0.8m. Feature F401 was overlain with rounded stones, varying in size from 0.02-0.2m in diameter, set within a soft silt-clay, 4018. Above this layer was a wooden plank (C, F402), measuring 1.8m in length, 0.36m in width, and 0.12m thick. This was overlain by a deposit of yellow straw/reeds, 4017, c 0.03m thick (4017, not illustrated). This was overlain by a sequence of gravel deposits incorporating rounded stones, 4011-4015 (not illustrated). Driven through the gravels and into the natural subsoil were two large wooden pile points, A and B (F402), both with sharpened ends. Above the gravels were a series of waterlogged deposits, 4005-4007 and 4010 (not illustrated), cut by a modern brick culvert (not illustrated), overlain by build-up deposits for the modern car park.

No finds were recovered from this intervention, except for 19th century material derived from recent deposits (not described).

Manhole MH2 and watching brief (Fig. 2)

No features of archaeological, or possible archaeological interest were found in MH2 or during observation of a service trench 1.1m in depth cut between MH1a and the SPS.

FINDS

Pottery by Stephanie Rátkai

A very small assemblage of 37 sherds of pottery was recovered from the site. The greater number of these were of 19th or 20th century date. Twelve medieval sherds were identified and these were matched to the Shrewsbury pottery type series (Table 1) used for several Shrewsbury sites by the author (Rátkai 2004). Details of the medieval fabrics are given in the interim St Julian's Friars report, the relevant part of the appendix from which is included below (Table 2). The pottery assemblage was too small to allow any further analysis of the pottery.

TABLE 1: Medieval pottery fabrics by context

Context	Fabric	Qty	Form	Date
1007	Cb4.1	2	jug	13th-15th c
1007	Cb5.1	1	jug handle	13th-14th c
1007	Ca6	1	jug handle	mid 13th-14th c
1007	Aa1.1	1	jug	15th-16th c?
1007	Ab4	1	jug	13th?
1007	Ab1.2	1	jug	15th-16th c?
1007	Cb2	1	jug	13th-14th c
1007	Cb2	1	?	13th-14th c
1012	Ca1	1	jug	14th-15th c
MH1	Ca1	1	jug	14th-15th c

TABLE 2: Characteristics and dating of pottery

Fabric	Clay	Firing	Manufacture	Date
Ab4	ir	reduced, oxidised surfaces	hm	em Early Glazed Sandy ware
Cb2	ir	reduced, oxidised surfaces and margins	hm?	em-?hm Early Glazed Sandy ware
Ab1.2	ir	oxidised	wm	lm Late Medieval/Post-Medieval Transitional
Ca1	ir	oxidised	wm	?hm-lm Medieval Sandy Glazed Ware
Aa1.1	ir	reduced, oxidised surface	wm	lm Late Medieval/Post-Medieval Transitional Ware
Cb5.1	ir/ip	variable oxidation	wm	?hm Medieval Sandy Glazed ware
Ca6	w	oxidised	wm	hm Sandy White -Pale Pink Ware
Cb4.1	w	reduced apart from margins and surfaces	?	hm-?lm Sandy Whiteware

Waterlogged wood by Steve Allen

The waterlogged wood (see Appendix for details) was in a relatively good state of preservation. This indicated that waterlogged anoxic conditions had been maintained in all contexts in which the material survived up to the time of excavation. There were some indications of surface damage during burial from small stones or gravel crushed into the softer wood surface. The original wood surfaces were slightly abraded, removing traces of tool signature marks, indicating some mobility in the deposit in which they were found. No indications of woodworm damage were noted and given the amount of sapwood present on each timber, this would suggest the timbers had arrived in their findspot very shortly after having been cut.

Owing to the conversions employed and the fast growth rate of the wood, the timbers are unlikely to provide dendrochronological dates. The technology present indicates a medieval date i.e. 10-15th centuries AD, and the best parallels for the plank are 11-12th century. The two pile points (A and B, F402) and the plank (C, F402) are almost certainly from the same structure - the wood from which they are cut is very similar in character and in the case of A and B, probably from the same tree. What this structure was though cannot be determined from the wooden remains alone. Plank C was incomplete, and it is probable that at least one more mortice would be present in the part not seen. The form of the plank is similar to morticed baseplates found on the London waterfront of 11th and 12th century date (Brigham 1990, 86-7) and it is possible that a similar object is present here. The plank would seem to have formed a baseplate with the mortices housing 'tusk tenons' on the lower ends of upright timbers (subsequently robbed). Thirteenth century and later baseplates are usually pegged to lock the mortice and tenon joint. There are no peg holes in plank C. The absence of any woodworm attack and the relatively undamaged condition of the

sapwood suggests it has not been reused. A foundation for a fish trap or similar structure built near the edge of the river channel is possible. Alternatively, these timbers may represent the remains of an otherwise robbed formal revetment structure.

A roundwood structure (D, F401), of small uprights with horizontal rods woven between them, was also partly recorded within the SPS. Again, because it was incomplete, the function of the structure cannot be determined. All the components are summer cut and represent a single construction episode. The uprights (1 and 2) are oak and ash whilst the rods (3-6) are oak and alder. All three species can be managed to produce poles suitable for wattle structures and have probably been derived from a managed woodland, rather than being cut in the immediate vicinity of the findspot. The rods are rather more substantial than those often used in hurdles or wattle panels; this structure could be part of a revetment.

DISCUSSION

The most interesting discovery was the two bonded sandstone walls recorded in manhole MH1 (Fig. 4), although the walls and associated deposits were not investigated in detail. John Carline's plan of the precinct dated 1825 (Fig. 3) maps a rectangular building, with a number of irregular additions in this approximate location. Owen and Blakeway (1825) describe the building as follows:

'beyond the range of the refectory... is a large range of red stone buildings ending on the west side with a high gable surmounted by a flower. This may have been the Guest Hall for the reception and entertainment of strangers. Previous to some late alterations, it was a long room; and when incorporated into the abbey house after it became lay property, was dominated by the gallery and used as a warehouse for woollen goods'

The building was formed of two ranges, together forming an L-shape in plan, measuring 16.3m by 9.2m. Whilst it is difficult to be precise given the small size of the intervention, the two bonded walls are likely to represent part of the southwestern angle of the western extension to the east-west aligned presumed Guest House. Early 19th century watercolours (e.g. Buckler's sketch of 1822) show a range of rooms projecting from the southern side of the original build (to the south of F102/F102a), which formed Henry Powy's Drawing Room. At the start of the 18th century the site passed from the Langley family to the Powys family of Berwick. In 1843 the property passed to Henry Powys who modernised the mansion and cleared some monastic ruins (Baker 2002, 42).

These buildings were demolished in 1866 for the construction of the Potteries, Shrewsbury and North Wales Railway (Baker 2002, 41). Although it is not clear if this building formed part of the abbot's own range, or if it comprised guest quarters, the building represented one of the most prestigious structures within the abbey. Its location close to the western court was interpreted by Baker (2002, 41) as suggesting a public role.

The excavated sequence from the adjoining Queen Anne House site (Baker 2002, 73ff) illustrates the gradual southwards expansion of the precinct. Here, the earliest feature was the southern precinct boundary, dated to the 12th-13th century, formed by a green sandstone wall. The later red sandstone wall, dated 1330-1400 defines a slight southward expansion of the precinct. From 1400-1450 a roughly square building, interpreted as a kitchen was built out in the reclaimed former marshy area to the south of the earlier precinct wall. This sequence illustrates the reclamation of wetland beyond the terrace edge. This was indeed, the only direction in which the precinct could expand. Its northern and eastern boundaries were formed by the medieval course of Abbey Foregate, and its western limit was defined by the River Severn (Baker 2002, 195).

The waterlogged deposits recorded at the base of manhole MH1A were probably formed within an east-west aligned channel recorded to the south of the Guest House mapped on Carline's plan of 1825. Unfortunately, no dating evidence was obtained from the early deposits. The later deposits, 1022-1023, contained 19th-20th century pottery. The area was levelled-up preparatory for the construction of the Potteries, Shrewsbury and North Wales Railway in 1866.

The SPS was located along the northern edge of the monastic fishpond (Abbey Pool on Carline's plan of 1825; Fig. 3). The morticed plank (C) probably forms a baseplate for a revetment similar to that of 11th-12th century date recorded in London (Brigham 1990, 86-7). This date would place the revetment towards the early part of the Abbey's history. The two pile points (A and B) may have anchored a rearward facing horizontal member (e.g. Milne and Milne 1982, figs. 12 and 15, Trig Lane 1974-6). The location of the possible revetment within the SPS, adjoining the mapped northern side of the monastic fishpond supports this interpretation. The wood fragments recovered were not suitable for tree-ring dating. A row of paired post-holes cut into the base of a steep slope at the Queen Anne House site (Baker 2002, 73), may also have formed a revetment.

The structure of interwoven uprights and horizontal roundwood (F401) also found in the SPS may have formed one side of a fish weir (Steane and Foreman 1988, 170), leading fish into a 'catching chamber' often formed by a wicker basket (e.g., *ibid.*, fig. 23). The excavated part of the structure may have comprised part of the curving northern side of the eastern end of the catching chamber, although this cannot be proven. The stone fragments, 4018, may have anchored the structure (e.g. *ibid.*, fig. 21). Later fish weirs in the Shrewsbury area (Pannett 1988, 371), typically comprised a wattle fence supported by timber braces and piles forming at least one V-shaped funnel. Alternatively, this structure could have formed part of a second, curving revetment.

The cobble surface, 3005, recorded in manhole MH3 to the west of the Abbey Church was probably a medieval street surface, also recorded during trenching along the west front of the Abbey Church (Leach 1992, 6). More significantly, the surface was found 1m below the modern street level, which indicates a considerable build-up of material, perhaps to counteract flooding, in the intervening period. This intervention was located to the north of the northern monastic Gate House, and outside the precinct. This surface would have formed part of the medieval course of Abbey Foregate (Fig. 3), which went out of use as a main thoroughfare when the road was re-routed by Telford across part of the former monastic precinct (Fig. 2). The surface was sealed by a deposit of crushed sandstone, 3004, containing pottery of mid 17th-18th century date which suggests an association with the post-Dissolution piecemeal clearance and levelling of the monastic buildings.

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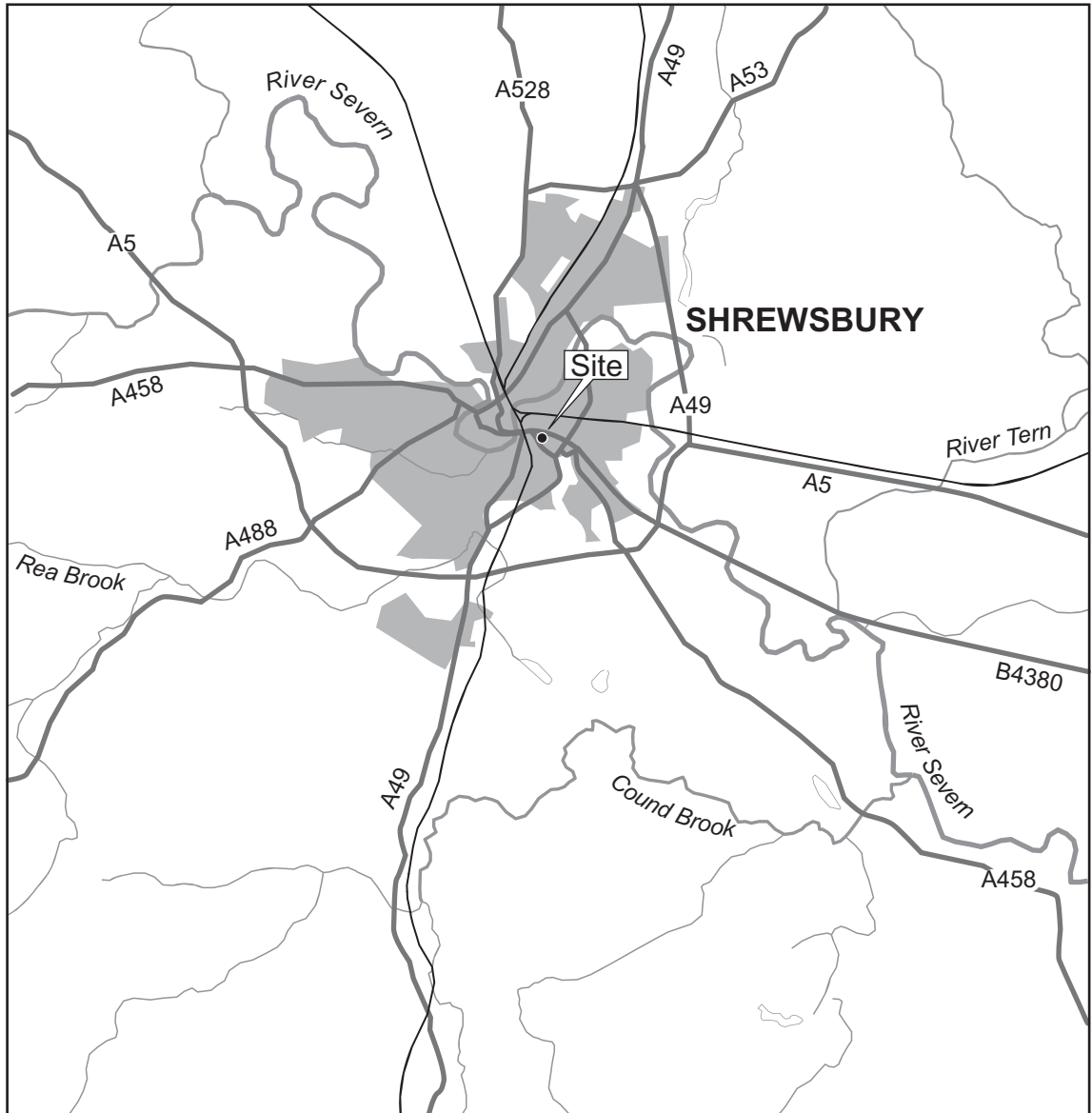


Fig.1

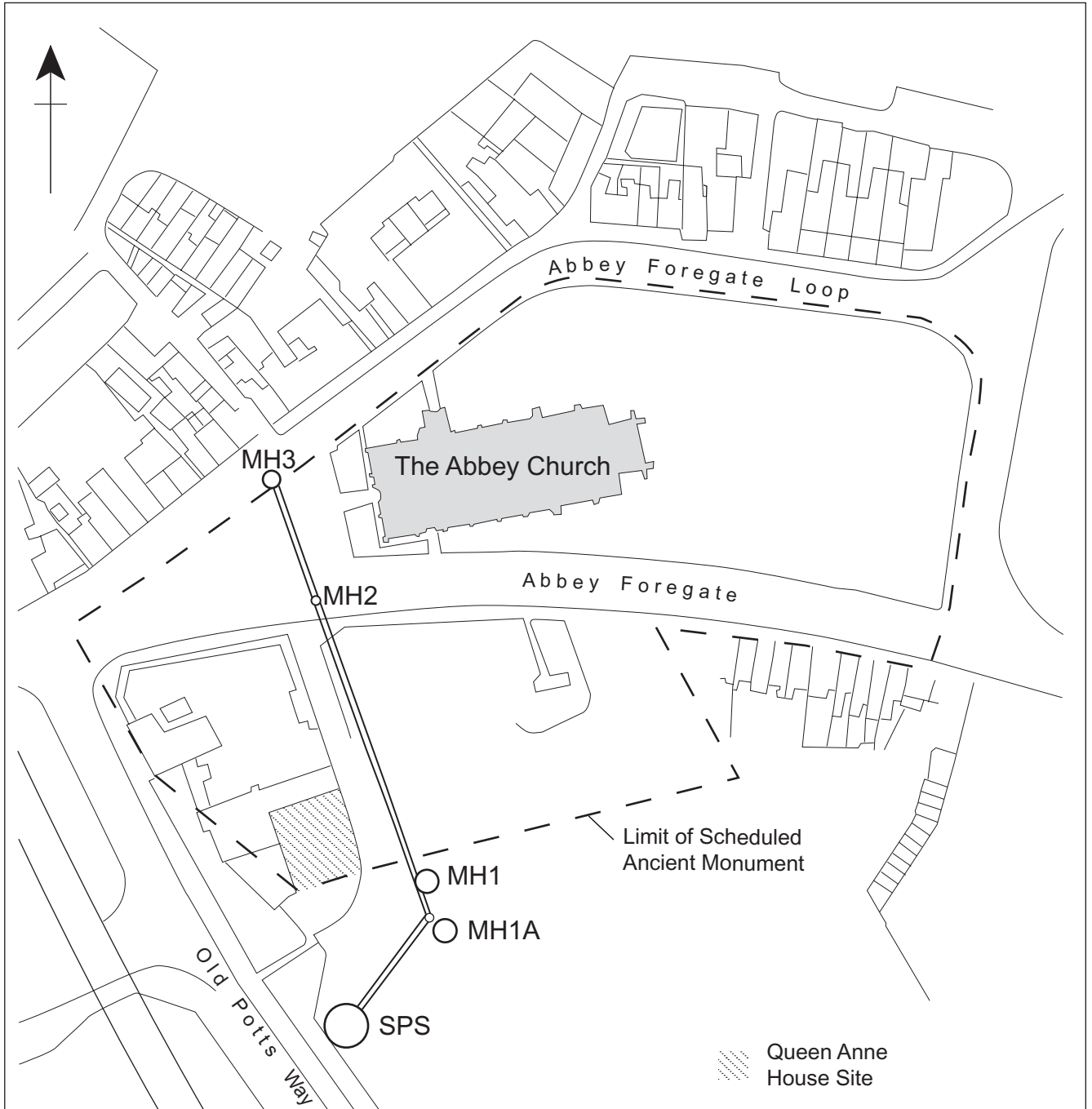


Fig.2

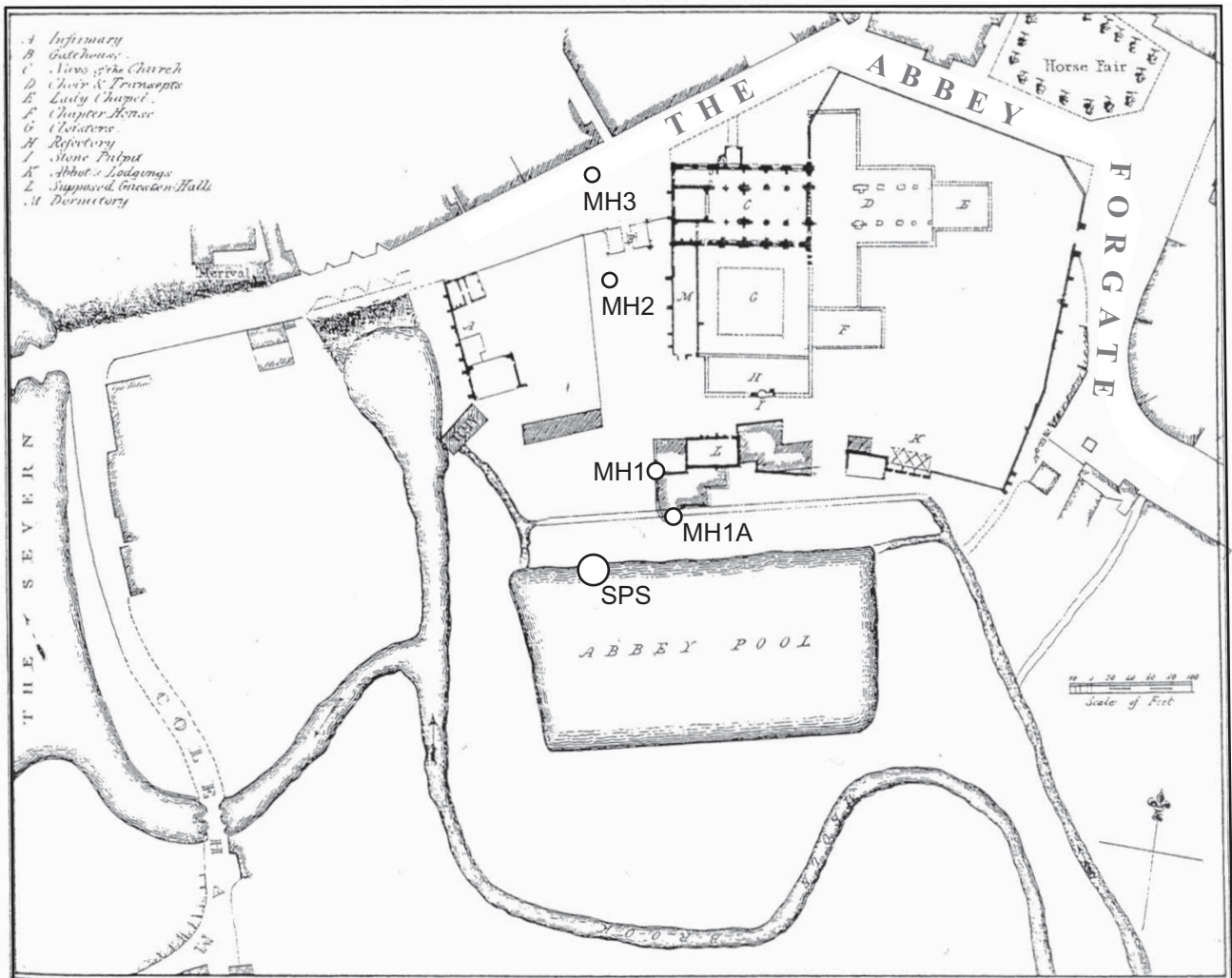


Fig.3

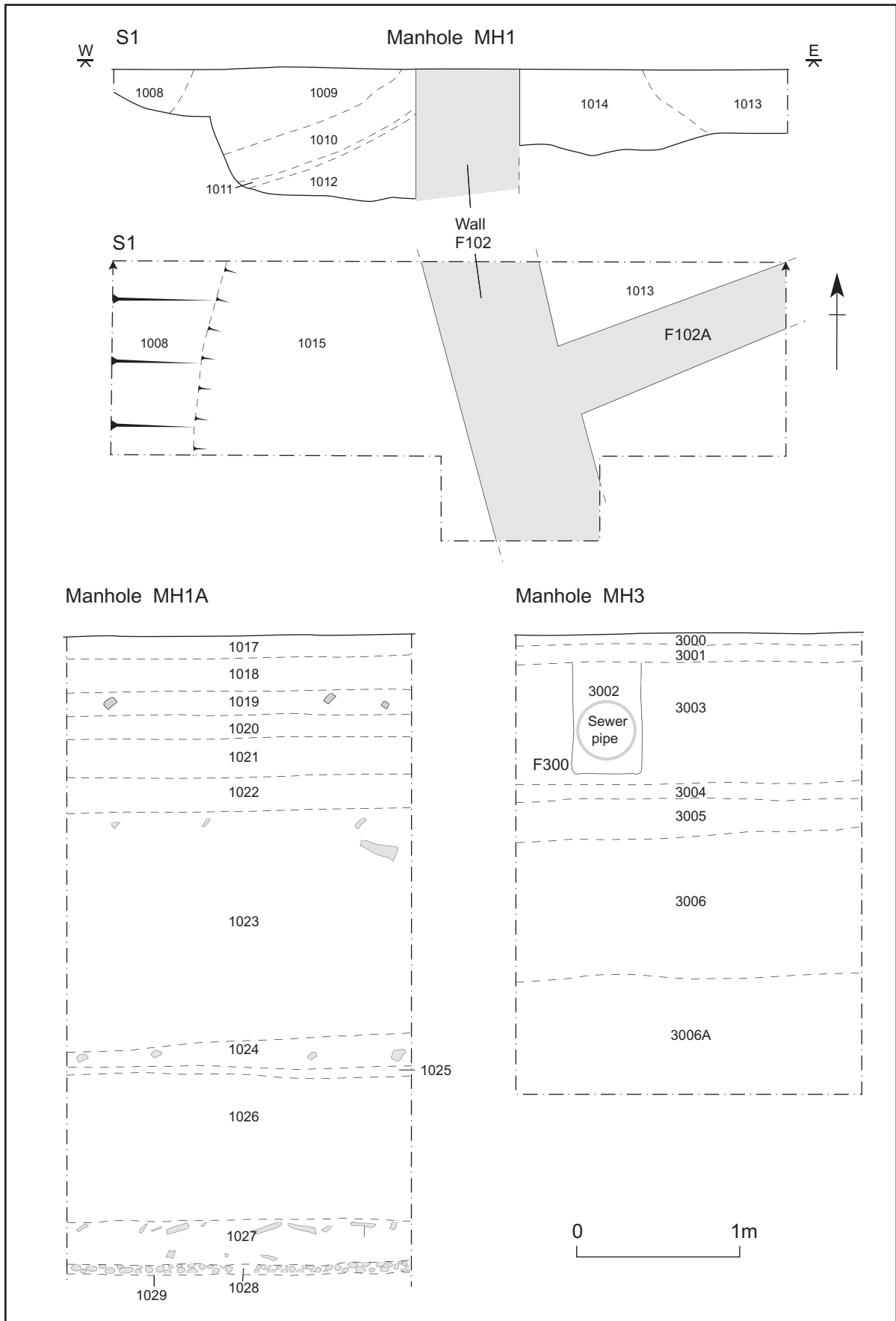


Fig.4

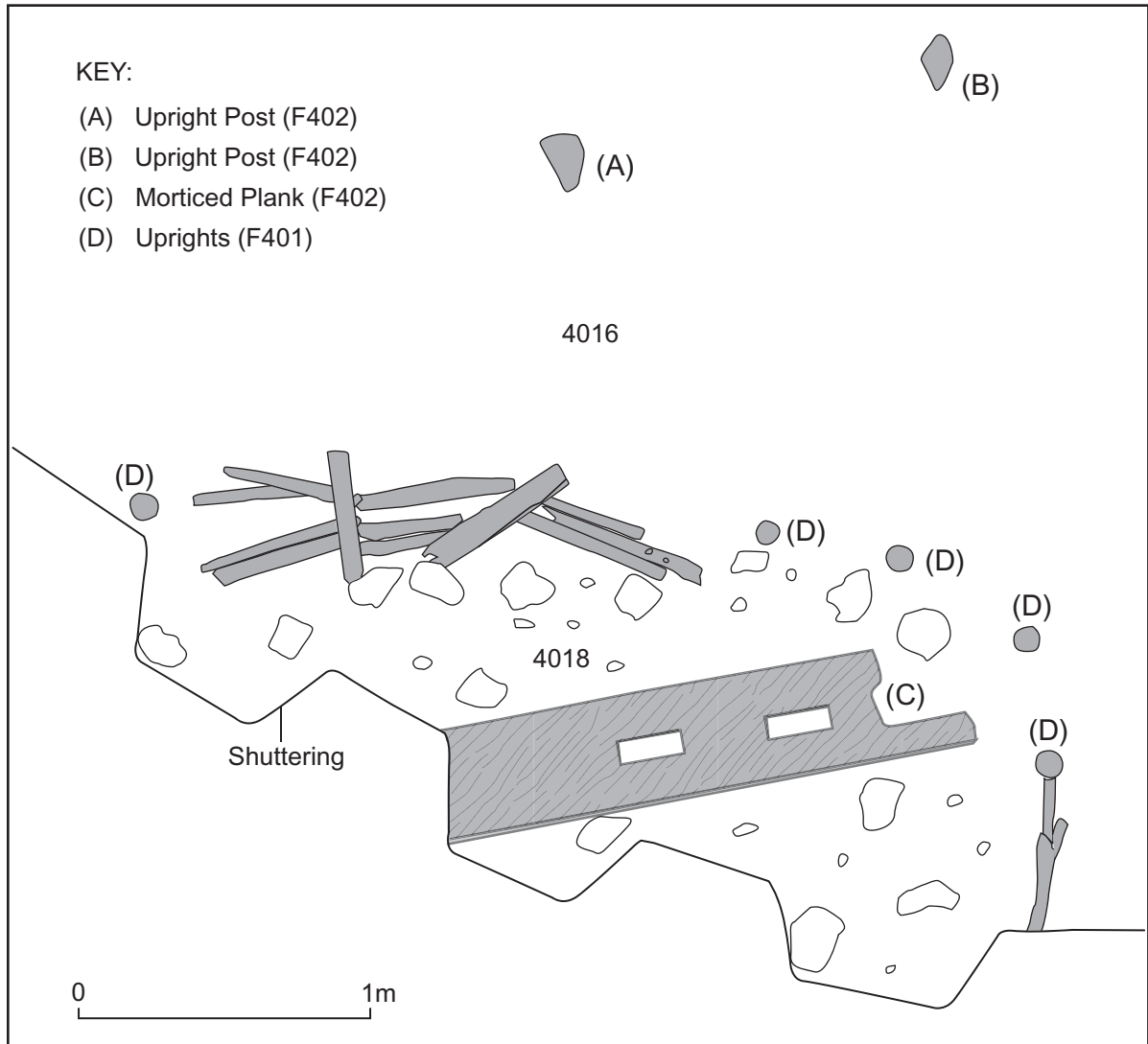


Fig.5

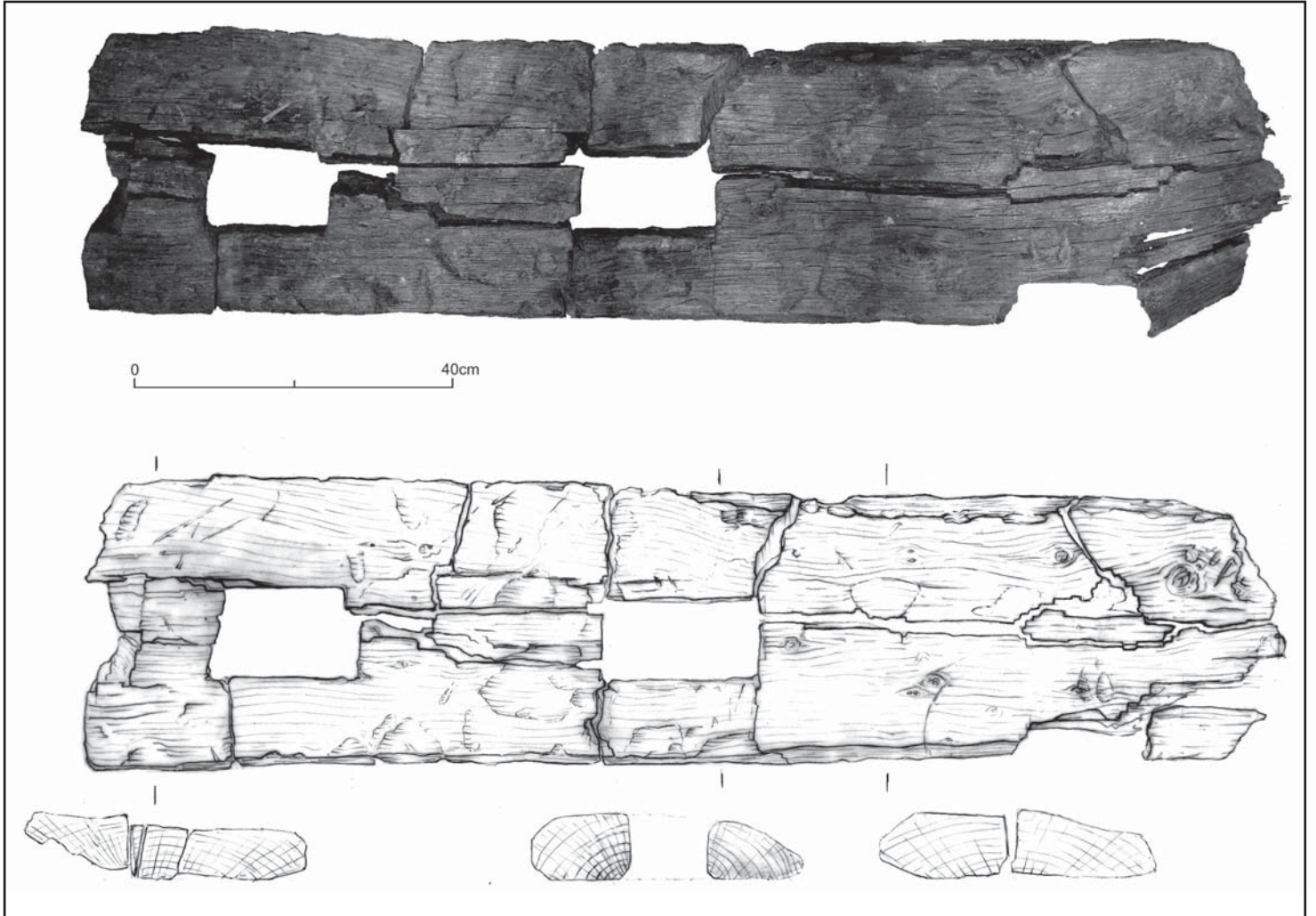


Fig.6

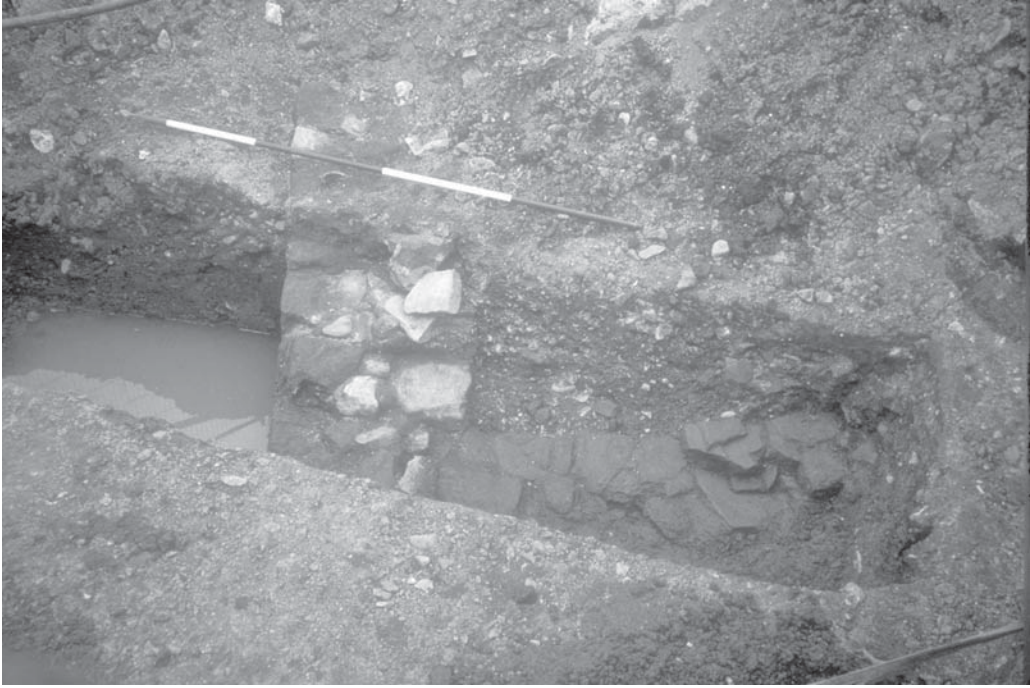


Plate 1

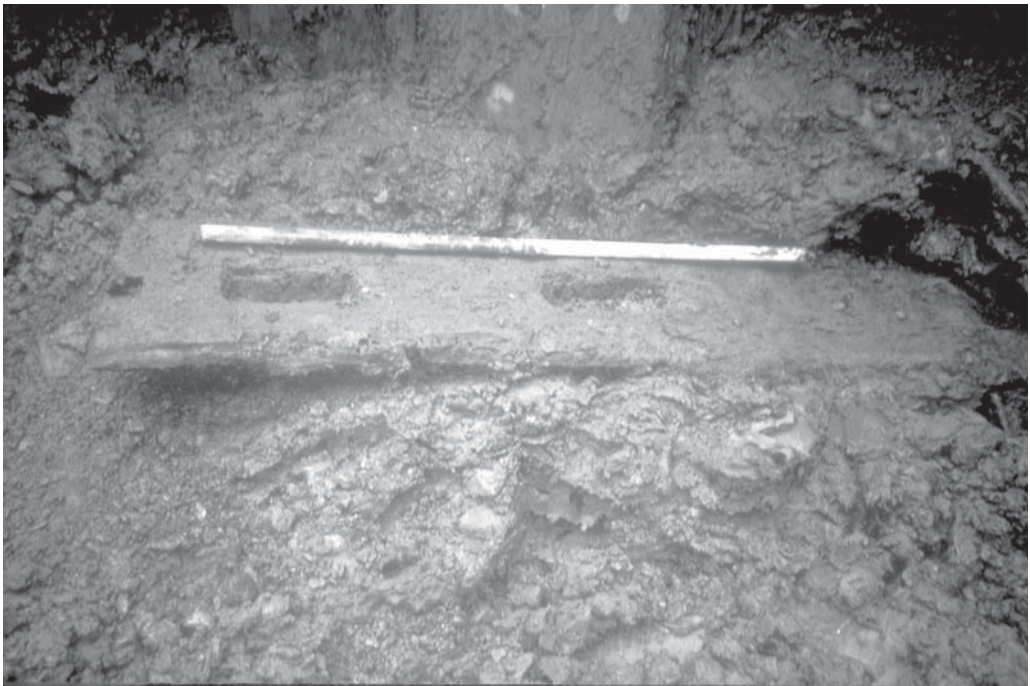


Plate 2

Appendix: details of the worked wood from SPS

Identification	Sample No.	Comment	Species ID
Post A, F402		Tangentially faced pile point cut from halved roundwood log. Much sapwood present on one face. Both faces and edges hewn to create sub rectangular cross section tip. Axe hewing marks present on both faces and edges >74 w. Top end detached but refitting. Several large longitudinal shrinkage cracks. Very fast grown- c. 3-4 rings/10mm. 1.045m l, 155 w, 119 th.	Quercus spp.
Post B, F402		Halved pile point cut from roundwood log. Much sapwood present on one face. Both faces and edges hewn to create sub rectangular cross section tip. Axe hewing marks present on wider face >108mm w. Some longitudinal shrinkage cracks and surface damage present. Very fast grown- c. 3-4 rings /10mm. 1.008 m l, 191 w, 132 th.	Quercus spp.
Plank C, F402		Tangentially faced plank with much sapwood on upper face as found. Two through mortices in face present on surviving length, one at mid point, other towards one end of plank. Faint hewing marks on both faces and ends of mortices. Truncated by pile driven shoring of trench and broken into 11 refitting and one non refitting pieces. Several longitudinal shrinkage cracks. Fast grown, 3-4 rings/10mm. 1.513 m l, 328 w, 798 th. mortice at mid point 204 l, 103 w, mortice towards end 195 l, 110 w.	Quercus spp.
Roundwood Structure D, F401	1	Length of roundwood in two refitting sections. 352 l, 60 dia. 21 annual rings, summer cut.	Quercus spp.
Roundwood Structure D, F401	2	Length of roundwood in three refitting sections. 482 l, 47 dia. 7 annual rings, summer cut.	Fraxinus excelsior L.
Roundwood Structure D, F401	3	Length of roundwood in two refitting sections. 331 l, 30 dia. 10 annual rings, summer cut.	Quercus spp.
Roundwood Structure D, F401	4	Length of roundwood in four refitting sections. 339 l, 33 dia. 8 annual rings, summer cut.	Quercus spp.
Roundwood Structure D, F401	5	Length of roundwood in two refitting sections. 134 l, 40 dia. 7 annual rings, summer cut.	Alnus spp.
Roundwood Structure D, F401	6	Length of roundwood in six refitting sections. 667 l, 33 dia. 8 annual rings, summer cut.	Quercus spp.
Roundwood Structure D, F401		Seven more non refitting fragments derived from one or the other of the above lengths of roundwood	

All species identifications follow Schweingruber (1982)