

Archaeological Investigations Ltd.

WITLEY COURT

THE BOATHOUSE



A Building Survey and Partial Excavation

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ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS LTD

Director : R Shoesmith FSA, MIFA
Manager : A Boucher Bsc
Company Secretary : B Byron

**HEREFORD HOUSE
3, OFFA STREET
HEREFORD HR1 2LL**

Tel. (01432) 354775
Fax. (014320) 340497

for: English Heritage
Midland Region
Hazelrigg House
33 Marefair
Northampton

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THE BOATHOUSE FRONT POOL WITLEY COURT

REPORT ON A BUILDING SURVEY AND PARTIAL EXCAVATION

Text

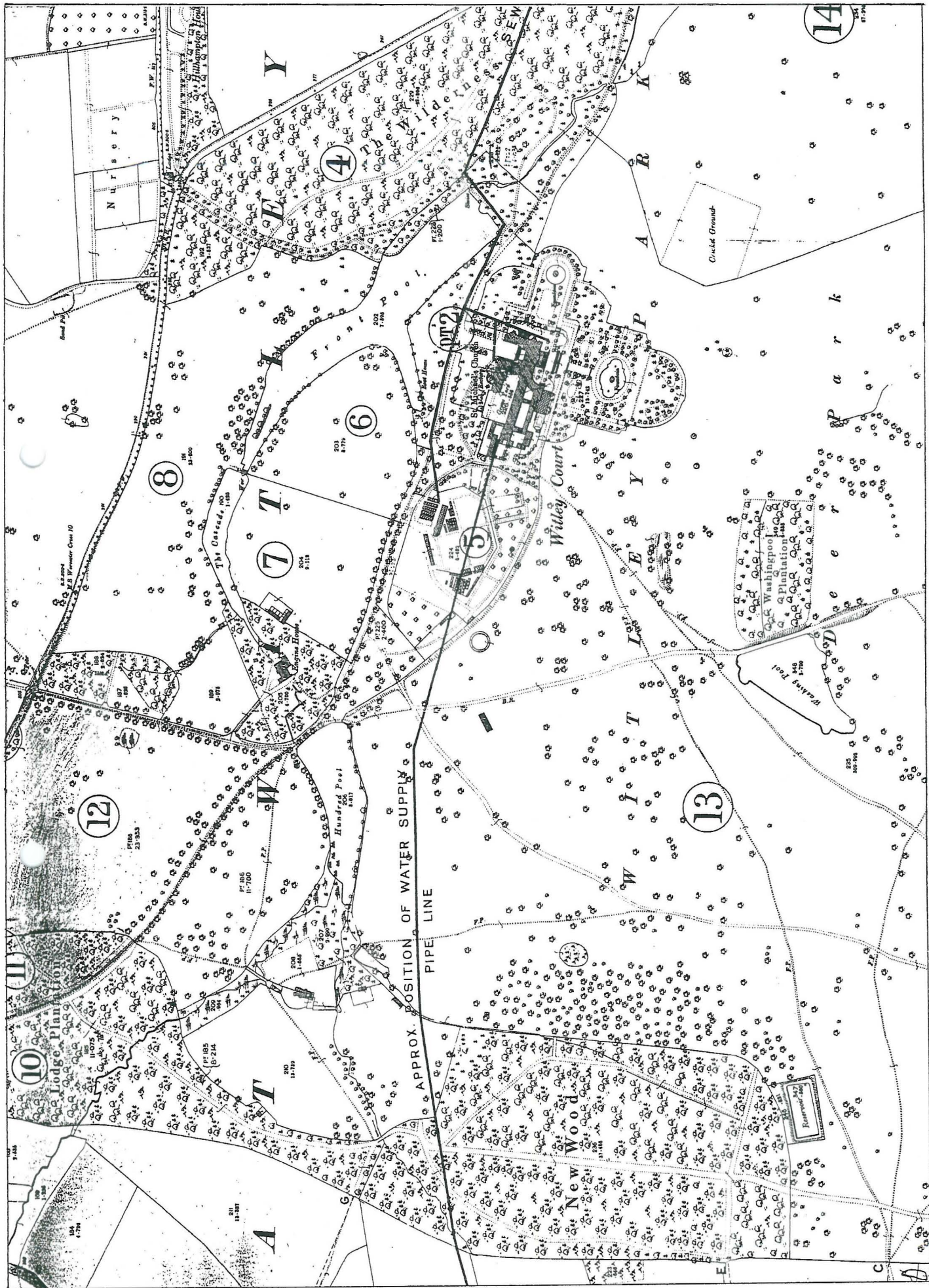
**Ron Shoesmith,
Pat Hughes
Tim Hoverd
Robert Williams**

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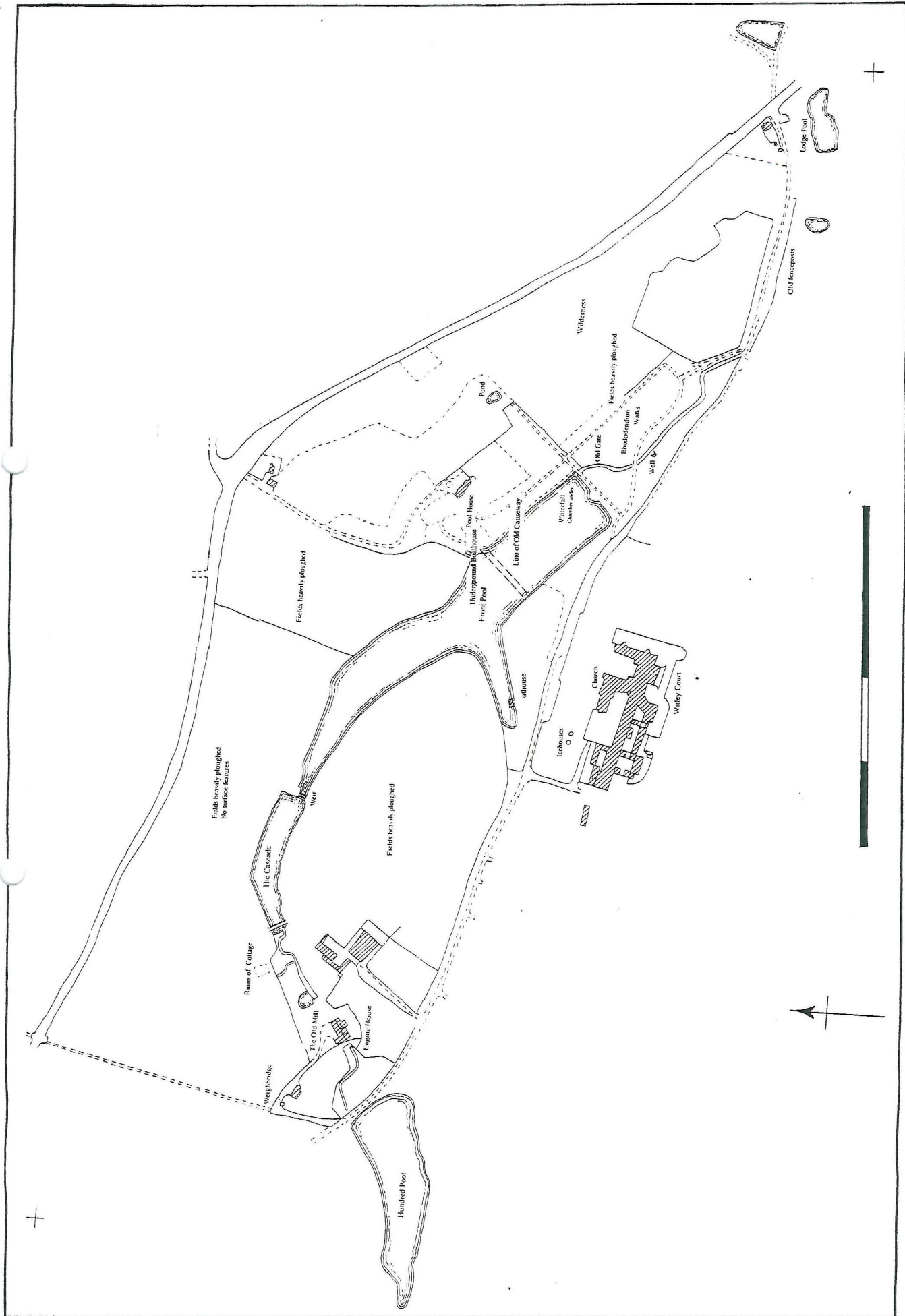
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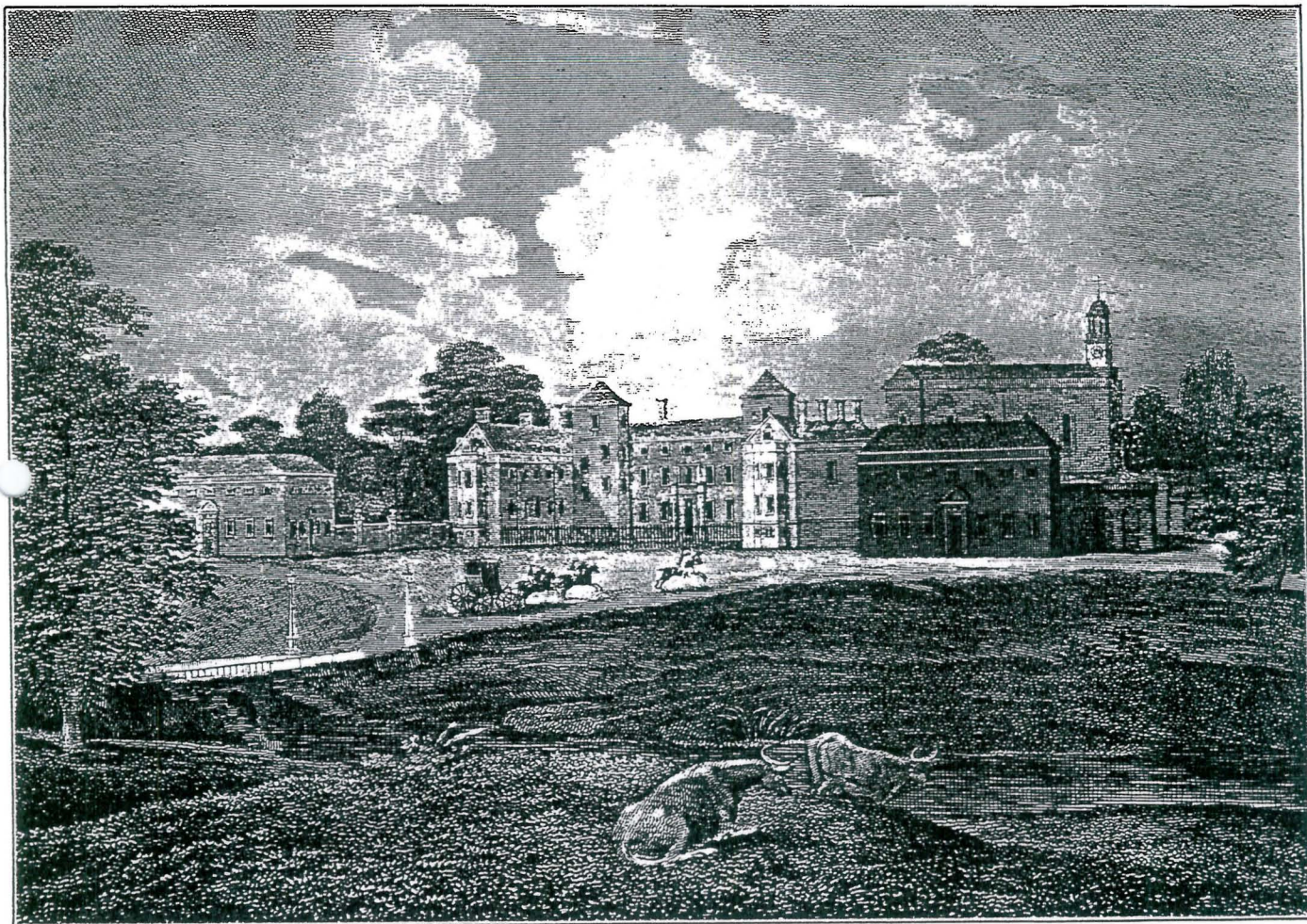
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Map of Witley Court estate taken from 1938 sale plan I.I.W.R.O (St. Helen's)
 b705:1067 BA 9687/1



Witley Court and the pools



Whitley Court in Worcestershire, engraved by W. Angus 1810 H.W.R.O (St. Helen's)
899:27 BA 3678

The Boathouse

Front Pool, Witley Court, Worcestershire

Report on a building survey and partial excavation

Introduction

Witley Park, centred on the ruins of Witley Court Witley Park, is registered II* on the Register of Historic Parks and Gardens, and is now in multiple ownership. The northern part of the Park, between the A443 and the present carriage drive, was surveyed by the City of Hereford Archaeology Unit. A Report was produced in July 1994 (Hereford Archaeology Series 215).

Following this, English Heritage bought the Pool House estate. This included much of this area to the north of the drive that had originally been part of the Witley Court estate. An important part of this acquisition was the Front Pool, an ornamental lake which included a derelict timber boathouse, built around the turn of the century and now partially buried in the lakeside mud.

As part of its renovation of the estate, English Heritage intend to restore the boathouse to its original condition. In the first instance a detailed survey and report was commissioned from the City of Hereford Archaeology Unit. The survey included limited excavation to establish, as far as possible without extensive drainage and pumping works, the extent and nature of the buried features.

The site works took place between July and September 1996.

Background

The earliest visible part of Witley Court consists of the thirteenth century undercroft, now part of the cellars. This would have been associated with a manor house that was eventually converted to become the home of the Russell family, staunch Royalists during the Civil War.

In 1655 the estate was sold to Thomas Foley, the iron magnate. During the 1730s the Court was enlarged with two wings added to the main building, two stable blocks built to the north and a new church. Further extensive works, commissioned around 1800 and attributable to John Nash, included the creation of a stable court to the west. Repton, who was responsible for the grounds, proposed that the house should be set on a terrace with the grass of the park coming right up to the terrace wall.

Financial problems led to the Foleys selling Witley in 1837 to the trustees of William Humble, 11th Baron Ward, and between 1843 and 1846 it was let to Adelaide, widow of William IV. Lord Ward came into his inheritance in 1846 at the age of 28 and was determined to remodel Witley on a grand scale. He appointed Samuel Whitfield Daukes as architect and commissioned new work including the addition of the crescent wing and the orangery. He was also responsible for refacing the main building in limestone to create an Italianate palace in a Greek Revivalist style.

The gardens adjacent to the mansion had to be on the same ambitious scale as the works to the building and Ward found the finest landscape garden designer of the period - William Andrews Nesfield. Nesfield laid out his 'monster work' at Witley during the 1850s. It was designed to reflect the grandeur of the house and the wealth of one of the richest men in Europe.

For over half a century Witley Court was one of the largest private houses in the country and one of its most fashionable - visited by aristocracy and royalty. By 1920 even the massive Dudley fortunes were waning and the house was sold to Sir Herbert Smith. In 1937 a fire gutted part of the house and Smith was unwilling or unable to repair it. In 1938 the house and grounds were sold by auction - but this time for architectural salvage. For the next half century it was stripped of all its finery and most of the easily transportable building materials. It became, in the words of Pevsner, 'a palace, regal in size and grandeur...a supremely splendid shell.' Finally, to prevent any more losses, the Court was taken into compulsory guardianship by the Department of the Environment in 1972. The Department began a programme of consolidation and repair that, since its creation in 1984, has been continued by English Heritage.

The front pool and the causeway

A 1732 plan shows that the park was then considerably smaller than it became during the 18th century. The area immediately south of the house was taken up with small enclosed fields and scattered cottages and the woodland was confined to a single 500 yard strip on the western edge of the estate. Access to the mansion was either along a tree-lined avenue somewhat south of the present drive to the Worcester Lodge or by means of a track on the line of the existing drive from the Stourport Lodge, which, at the Hundred Pool, diverged from the modern access to wind across a meadow to the front of the house. The site of the present front pools was covered with trees and bounded to the north by the stream.

The land to the north of the stream was part of Hillhampton Manor and in 1718 it was bought by the third Thomas Foley. Shortly afterwards the whole area to the north of the house was landscaped with the creation of the front pools and the introduction of a grand entrance which ran directly from the main road to the front courtyard of the house. This new avenue was carried across the pools by means of a causeway and bridge. This was similar to that built by Vanbrugh at Blenheim which originally crossed three canals, but now spans a large lake constructed by Capability Brown in 1764. Indeed, when Bishop Hough visited Witley he declared that his Lordship had made 'a spacious avenue to his house, resembling that at Blenheim'. If this is the avenue to which the Bishop is alluding - and it seems highly likely - it can only mean that the bridge and avenue at Witley were built in 1732/3.

A careful study of contemporary prints has led to the conclusion that the causeway crossed the main pool at its widest point where the two arms join. The existing driveway, which joins the main Worcester road opposite the Stourport road junction, is the remnant of the drive leading to this causeway; it now bears round to the left, but once continued to the main entrance to the house. From the corner a clear view of the north front of the Court can be obtained, together with some idea of the engineering skills that would have been needed to bridge the ravine in the front of the house.

A survey of 1793/4 sheds further light on what was happening in the area to the north of the house. It lists a garden, little garden, meadow, paddock and barn, Warford Pool and two other pools, all apparently outside the deer park. It also includes the 'Wilderness and pool'. Missing from the survey is the mill, one of the corn-mills owned by the Foleys in 1664, which is shown to the east of the front pool on Taylor's 1772 map, in the area that became the Wilderness. Since the Nash engraving shows that there were trees on the Wilderness by 1784, it follows that the mill was probably demolished as part of the landscaping that formed the 'Wilderness', sometime between 1772 and 1781.

The two roads included in the 1793/4 survey are from the Worcester road 'at Piper's', and from the Martley road. It is evident that this survey pre-dated the change in the access route and confirms the evidence from G.S. Repton's sketchbook (1803-5) and from the engraving by W. Angus, published in 1810, that the central causeway across the pools continued in use throughout the 18th century and into the first decade of the 19th. However, it was during this period that considerable alterations were being made to the house including the removal of the stable blocks and the introduction of a porticoed entrance to the north front. These last works took place sometime between 1810 and 1817, when Prattinton scribbled a tiny sketch plan of the house, showing north and south porticoes and one of the stable blocks, implying that work was still under way. Indeed Laird, writing in 1814, described the south front only as having a portico and found the house still in some disorder. It must have been as part of this remodelling that the causeway and bridge were removed and the present access roads constructed. They appear on Greenwood's map of Worcestershire, published in 1822, and can be seen on a number of early 19th-century engravings and water-colours.

The Front pool and the boathouse

The Front Pool has changed very little and consists of a roughly rectangular area with a long northern arm that follows the original contours and a short western arm which leads to the boathouse. At its eastern end is the waterfall, the stonework of which shows signs of recent maintenance. Beneath the waterfall is a small chamber approached through the screen of water by means of an irregular 'rusticated' entrance. The chamber is partially hewn from the rock and has a channel running away below the pool to allow for draining when necessary.

The pool is now used for fishing and stations have been set up all around the edge. A path still runs all the way around the pool although traces are now slight. To the north of the lake a formal walk still exists, but all evidence of the path along the south side that must have served the boathouse have disappeared. The boathouse, on the southern side of a small western extension to the pool, is close to the front of the house.

The Boathouse

The boathouse is now in very poor condition and is over half buried in a thick silt which has accumulated in this part of the pool. It was about 8m long and 4m wide, built of timber and with a roof of timber shingles. The southern, landward side included a porch which has recently collapsed. However, the main structure, consisting of a series of timber posts, still stands, but it is now leaning to the south-east where it is supported by a tree. The building is of five bays on the long sides and two bays on the closed western side. The rustic decoration, consisting of curved elm branches nailed within the panels, has almost totally disappeared and most of the shingles belonging to the roof have either fallen or simply rotted away. Comparison with photographs taken in 1994 show that there has been a rapid deterioration of the whole structure in the past two years.

The design of the porch is unusual as the east and west sides were open for the lakeside path to go straight through. To the north of the path, within the porch was a pair of double doors leading into the boathouse and to the south a panel that filled the full width of the porch. Both the doors and the panel were infilled in *cotage ornee* decoration.

Before any survey work started, the undergrowth around the building was cleared away and a full photographic survey, both internal and external, was commissioned. This provided a detailed record of the building and its condition and allowed the drawn survey to be a spatial reconstruction.

The Building Survey.

The survey work took place in the summer of 1996 when the lake was at its lowest level. At English Heritage's request all the drawings were produced at a scale of 1:5 so that they could be used in the future reconstruction of the boathouse. Also all plans and elevations were drawn with all elements positioned in the original correct places and not where they happened to have moved or fallen. For the purposes of the survey it was assumed that the main posts were originally vertical and the wall plates and ridge beam were horizontal.

All four main elevations of the boathouse were recorded as were all elevations of the porch. The drawings show all the remaining *cotage ornee* decoration and the position of each nail associated with sections of lost decoration. The porch had collapsed and the gates which had separating the porch from the main boathouse were removed so that they could be properly drawn and details relating to their construction and operation recorded. The remainder of the timbers belonging to the porch were then recorded and carefully removed to store.

Two cross-sections, which include the position of the decking found during the excavation, have been produced and a plan has been prepared at wall-plate level and another showing the truss arrangement.

The Roof

Externally the ridge and hips were originally capped by moulded timbers which in turn were covered by lead, in short overlapping sheets. The lead overlaid wooden (possibly Cedar) shingles, 8mm at the top edge, thickening to 15mm at the bottom edge. Each shingle had a width of 16cm and was 32cm long. Each shingle overlapped the next by half its length and was double-screwed with 2cm long iron screws. The shingle roof was laid on horizontal pine planks, 12mm thick by 18cm wide, nailed to the principals. The planks covered the entire roof. Between the shingles and the planking was a thin layer of bitumenised material containing horse hair, probably used as extra waterproofing. Much of the roofing material has collapsed or rotted away.

Internally there are 8 pairs of main common rafters approximately 34cm apart, each with a collar. All the collars are simply nailed to the west face of the principals with the exception of the westernmost truss where the collar was attached to the east face. This was because the jack rafters on the hip were in the way. Each principal butts the ridge beam and is nailed to it from each side. At the wall plate level the principals are jointed with a birdsmouth end and are also nailed.

The Walls

The wall plates, which are 15cm by 11cm in size, are lapped into the corner posts and bolted through with iron straps at the corners. The straps also join the wall plates together. In most cases they sit on the mid-posts which are half lapped internally around the wall plates. However, the wall plate associated with the west frame was turned through 90 degrees as compared with the other three, the size of the timber being the same. In this instance the mid-post has simply been nailed to the wall plate and had no lap joint unlike all the other mid-posts.

The upper parts of all the corner posts are each scarfed to lower primary posts. Each is then held by 4 iron bolts just above the present ground surface. The mid-posts do not appear to include any scarf joints.

The east frame, being the entrance to the boathouse from the lake, was designed to be partially open. The southern entrance post was approximately 80cm from the south corner post. This was also the approximate width of the decking. The open part of this frame had arched braces springing from the soffit of the wall plate to the two posts. Each arch had a moulded pendant and the spandrels to the arches contained *cotage ornee* decoration.

The south frame included the pedestrian entry from the porch

The Porch

The porch was in a very dilapidated state making interpretation somewhat difficult. The roof was of exactly the same construction as the main roof in that it included shingles, horizontal planks and bitumen. Six principal rafters without collars attached to them make up the roof. The ridge beam is set much lower than the main roof. The porch ridge may have had a lead covering and was nailed from both sides to the bitumen-covered planking attached to the main structure. The porch ridge did not line up with a main truss.

The porch gates, although partially buried in the silt, were in reasonably good condition. The *cotage ornee* decoration survives fully in the upper two panels and partially in the two lower ones. The lock and hinges are also well preserved. At the junction where the gate posts meet the wall plates, the gate-posts are shallowly notched and the wall plates are tenoned. These are the only joints that are pegged, all the others being bolted or nailed. The gate-posts then rise above the wall plates giving an additional height of approximately 90cm.

The southern frame of the porch, which was 1.06m south of the gate frame, was 1.38m wide. This frame was also originally filled with the *cotage ornee* decoration.

The east and west frames of the porch were apparently always open and had no indication (such as nails left *in situ*) to show that they had ever been filled.

The Decking.

The decking was buried under the silt when the main survey took place and only became visible when parts were excavated. It is described later in this report.

The cotage ornee decoration

The *cotage ornee* decoration was apparently not just a random arrangement if the gates are taken as the example. It would appear that the branches were so ordered as to provide a circular opening in the centre of each panel. This decoration was used as infill in all the panels of the boathouse except the arched opening in the eastern wall, through which the boat entered and exited. The porch was similarly decorated except for the east and west sides through which the lakeside walk passed.

The Excavation.

The surface within the boathouse now consists of waterlogged silt containing much humic material. At the time of the survey and excavation, the water level was only some 150mm below the ground surface, making excavation difficult. A pump was used to keep the excavated areas relatively clear of water and ensure that features of interest could be recorded. The main purpose of the excavation was to establish the extent, layout, depth and state of preservation of the decking, which would have been used to gain access to the boat.

Initially trench A was opened in the north-west corner of the boathouse, approximately 1.9m long and 1.4m wide. This contained three vertical, square-cut, posts which were overlain by two rails on east/west axis. The rails were partially covered by three 200mm wide planks or boards. The whole of the structure had slipped vertically to the west, but apart from this it would appear that spatially, the main components of the decking remain *in situ*.

A second trench (B) was then opened which encompassed the entire porch area and continued north across the boathouse. This trench was designed to provide information concerning the footings of the porch, the make-up of the lakeside path, and additional details regarding the extent and state of preservation of the decking. It was also hoped that it would provide some information about the profile of the base of the lake within the boathouse. The

trench was 1.6m wide and 4.2m long and at its northern end joined the first trench (A). The bank-side excavation demonstrated that the lakeside path consisted of a lightly gravelled surface pressed into the naturally occurring clay over the entire area of the porch. The main posts extended 1.6m below the base of the wall-plate. The southern-most posts of the porch rested directly on the surface of the clay, but the intermediate posts were only bedded in the silt. Just inside the boathouse, the decking consisted of post-and-rail covered by boards and was approximately 1.2m wide, similar to that found in trench A. The clay profile within the boathouse slopes downwards into the lake at a constant rate, indicating that the lake bed had been purposefully constructed and that the natural valley was not just flooded. The intermediate posts on the lake side elevation of the boathouse are approximately 0.35m above the clay surface, terminating approximately 1.6m below the base of the wall-plate.

Three other trenches were opened along the southern wall of the boathouse to obtain further information concerning the extent, construction and layout of the decking.

Trench C was situated in the south-west corner of the boathouse. The position was chosen to produced information concerning the intersection of the two sections of floor. Here a diagonal rail went from the corner-post to two smaller posts at the opposite edge of the decking, giving additional support to the floor and suggesting a join line for the boards running on a north/south axis with those on an east/west axis.

Trench D was excavated approximately 0.5m east of trench B and confirmed the regular spacing of the posts supporting the decking.

Trench E was in the south-eastern corner of the boathouse and as in trench C a diagonal timber ran from the corner-post to the edge of the decking. However, in this case the timber was laid on a concrete base. The concrete had been cast *in situ* and butted against the internal face of the corner-post and two smaller posts. Its internal edge followed the line of the decking where it would also have acted as a support. To the east of the boathouse the concrete continued for approximately 1.4m before being obscured by tree roots in the bank. It is assumed that the concrete is a secondary feature and that was inserted either to stop this corner of the boathouse from sinking or, and possibly more likely, to stabilise sinking that had already occurred.

Reconstruction

Following the survey and excavation, an artistic reconstruction of the boathouse, illustrating the extent of the decking and the original appearance of the structure has been produced.

Conclusions

As previously described, the upper parts of the four corner posts are each attached to lower posts by scarf joints and four large iron bolts, just above the present ground surface. The lower posts appear to be primary. There are several possible reasons for this unusual method of construction. It could be that the majority of the superstructure has been replaced at some time with a building of the same overall dimensions. This is considered unlikely as the part of the building most likely to suffer from rot would be the posts below the water line. It is also very difficult to see how the lower parts of the posts could have been replaced at a later date than the original construction, although the possibility has to be borne in mind.

The most likely solution is that what is now present was associated with the original method of construction of the boathouse. It is suggested that, due to the clayey nature of the lake bed, the most effective way of securing the structure would have been to pile-drive the corner posts into the ground. The posts would then be trimmed to a common level and the whole of the superstructure would then be designed to fit and simply dropped onto the four posts. The upper corner posts would then be fixed by a simple joint, such as a half lap and iron strap arrangement. This method of construction would appear to be confirmed by observations made during the survey and excavation. The mid-post along the long lake side was not scarfed like the corner posts but was found to be a single timber. However, it did not continue down to the underlying clay and was thus of rather doubtful structural integrity. The failure of the wall plate at this point can be directly related to this prefabricated method of construction.

The decking within the boathouse followed an 'L' shape, running along the whole length of the southern and western sides. Most of the support posts still remain in their original locations in relation to the rest of the structure but, like the boathouse itself, many have moved vertically making it difficult to estimate a precise level for the decking. It would appear that the decking was constructed totally independent of the main structure of the boathouse and depended on its own support posts for support and stability.

Because they were two independent structures, the level of the decking is liable to have varied somewhat from one place to another as both it and the boathouse would have been subject to different settlement. The top of the concrete in the south-eastern corner, which still appears to be in a horizontal plane and unaffected by the movement of the rest of the structure, also supported the decking. The top of the concrete is 1.16m below the wall-plate soffit and, allowing for the thickness of the boarding, this gives a height at this point of approximately 1.13m to the wall-plate. Other measurements at the opposing corner put the top of the post associated with the decking at 1.38m below the soffit. Allowing for a joist and the thickness of the planking, this would give a height of approximately 1.30m.

Of course, both these measurements could be totally wrong. The boathouse was quite heavy as compared with the decking and may well have sunk a substantial distance into the ground whilst the decking stayed more or less in its original position. Gradually the head height inside the boathouse would have become less and less as settlement continued. The concrete at the south-eastern corner may have stabilised the process to some extent at this point, but even this is not certain. The present level of the decking is shown in the appropriate cross-sections but in any reconstruction, the decking should be inserted at an appropriate height to give headroom to those using the boathouse.

The full depths of the lower parts of the corner posts has not been established, but it must be substantial to provide sufficient support for the whole of the boathouse which to all intents and purposes is hanging from the four corners. The concrete could be original and laid to minimise erosion to the bank at this point whilst providing additional support for the south-east corner of the building, but it is more likely to be a later repair intended to counteract the subsidence at this corner which is still apparent.

The lakeside path was never a substantial feature, the gravelling on its surface being very light, and it is therefore not surprising that little evidence for its precise route now survives. It would seem that sufficient metalling was used to remove all potentially muddy places and ensure that it could be used dryshod. After a few years it would have become a reasonably solid grassy path - doubtless what was intended. It is clear that the path did not stop at the porch but continued in both an easterly and westerly direction forming a circular walk around the entire lake.

It is difficult to establish a firm date for the construction of the boathouse. The south-western extension to the lake was present from its construction in the early 18th century. The earliest Ordnance Survey maps do not mention the boathouse, but it is present in the base maps used during the 1938 sale. The finds from the excavation date from the 1930s onwards. The padlocks which were associated with an iron band attached to an intermediate post on the north elevation appear to be from the 1950s or later and were probably put there for fishermen to secure their boats.

There was one other example of *cotage ornee* on the Estate. This was part of the porch of the Red House. It was constructed using the same-sized timber and in the same design as the boathouse. Older inhabitants of Great Witley describe an estate worker who produced huge quantities of fencing and panels in *cotage ornee* just prior to World War One. Such a date would not seem unreasonable for the boathouse.



**Internal -
looking east**



The fallen gate



The boathouse from the north-west



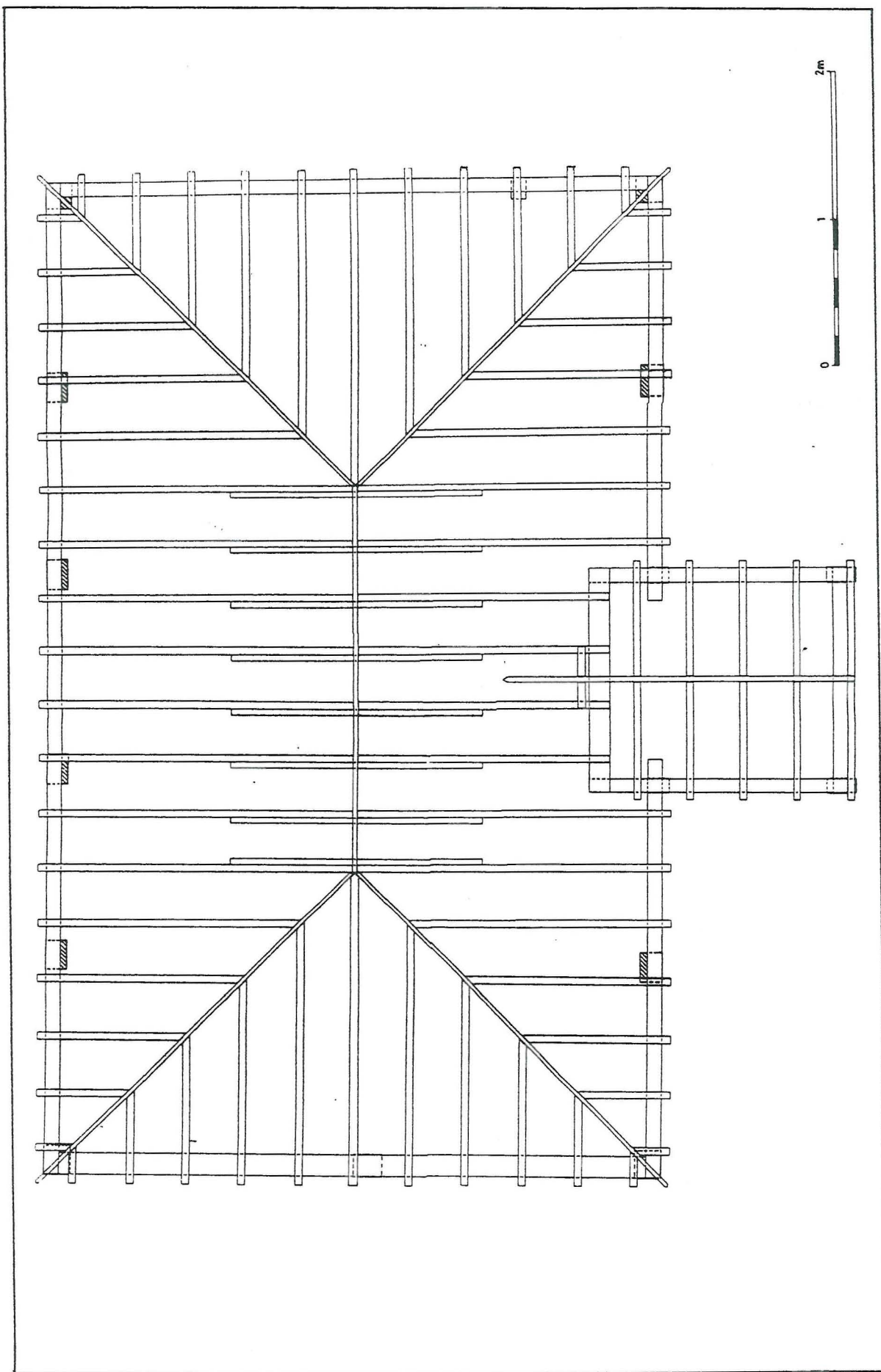
The boathouse from the south, landward side, including the collapsed porch



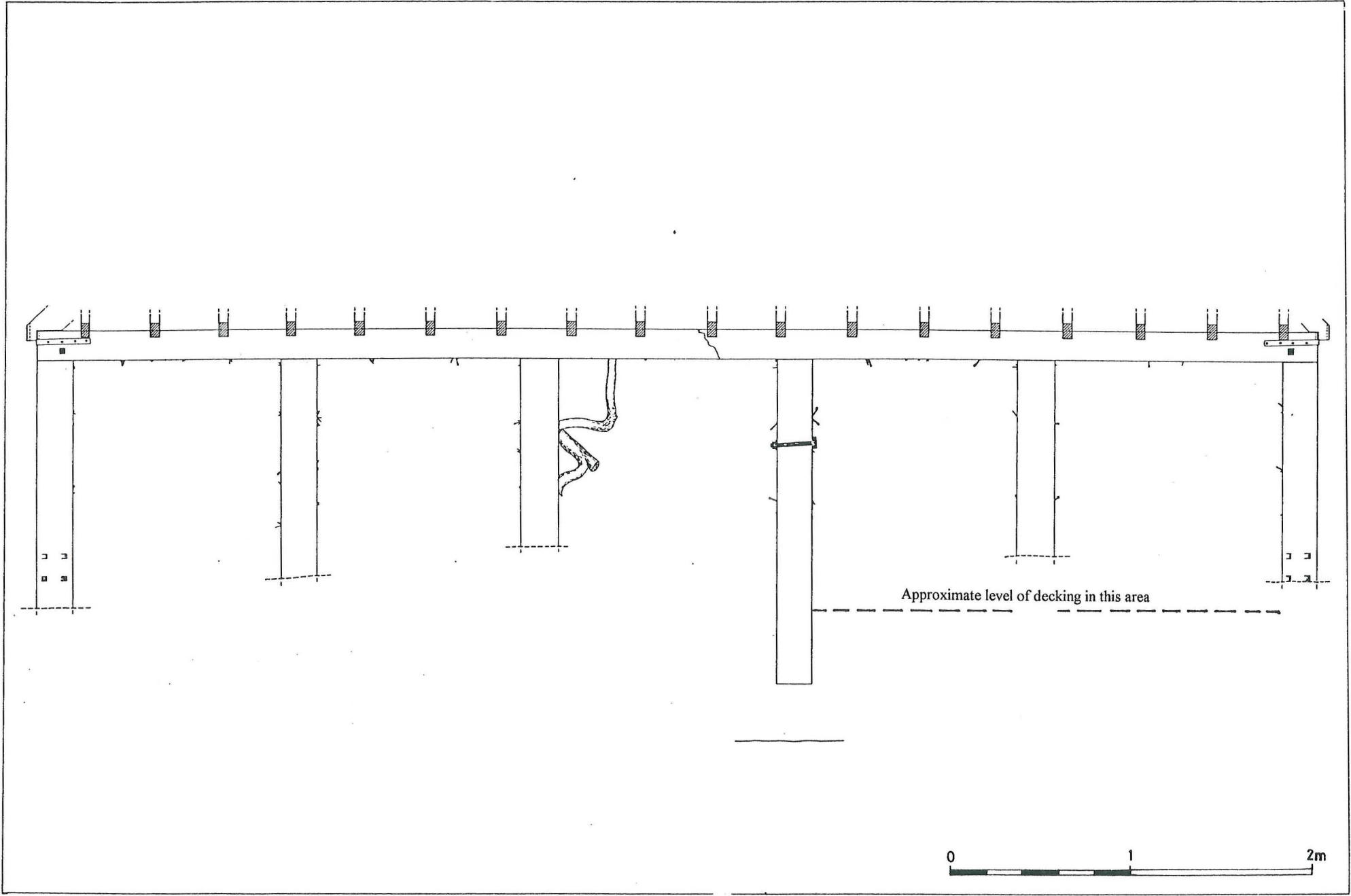
The interior of the boathouse from the south-east



The east elevation of the boathouse



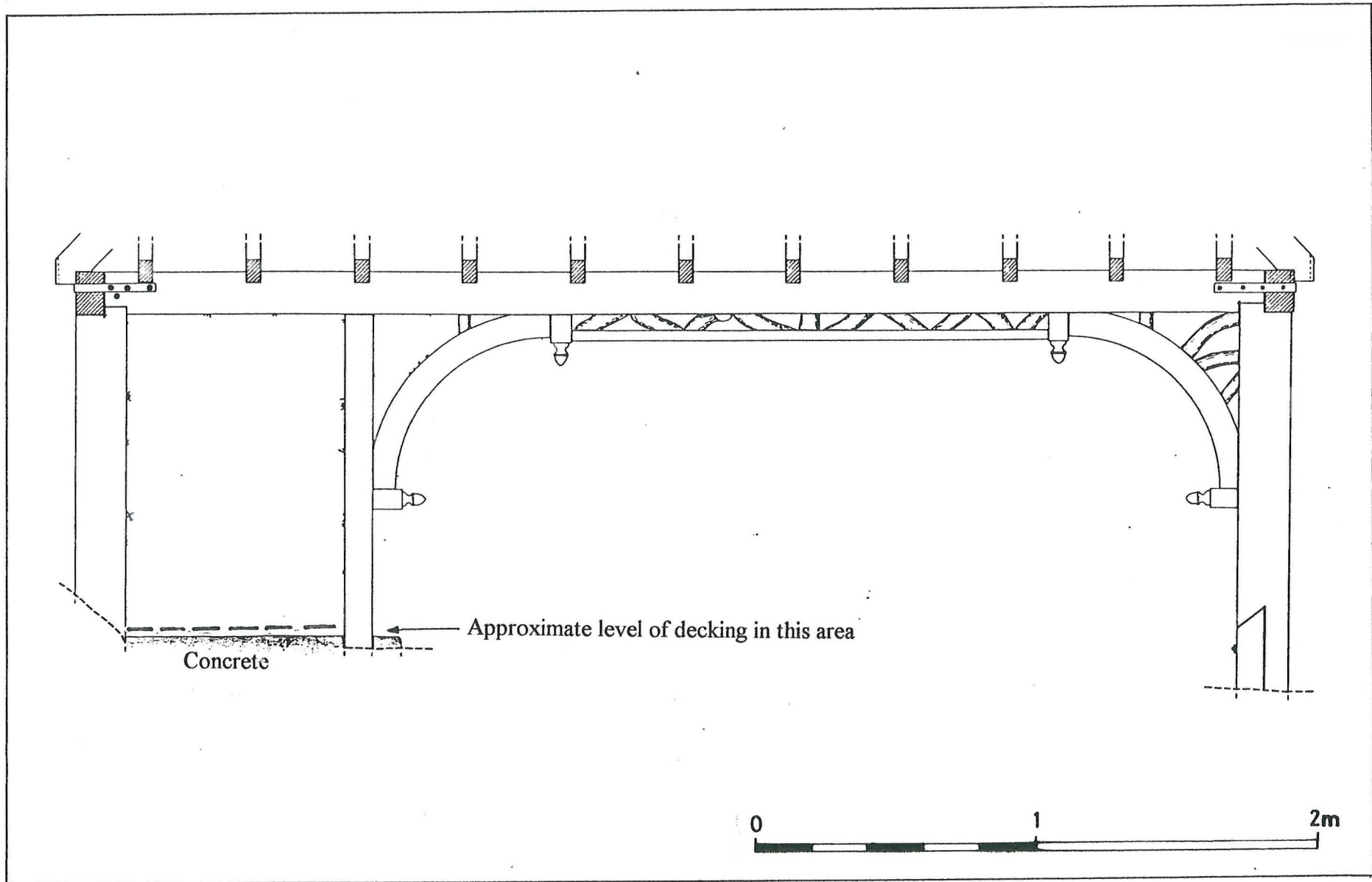
Roof Plan.



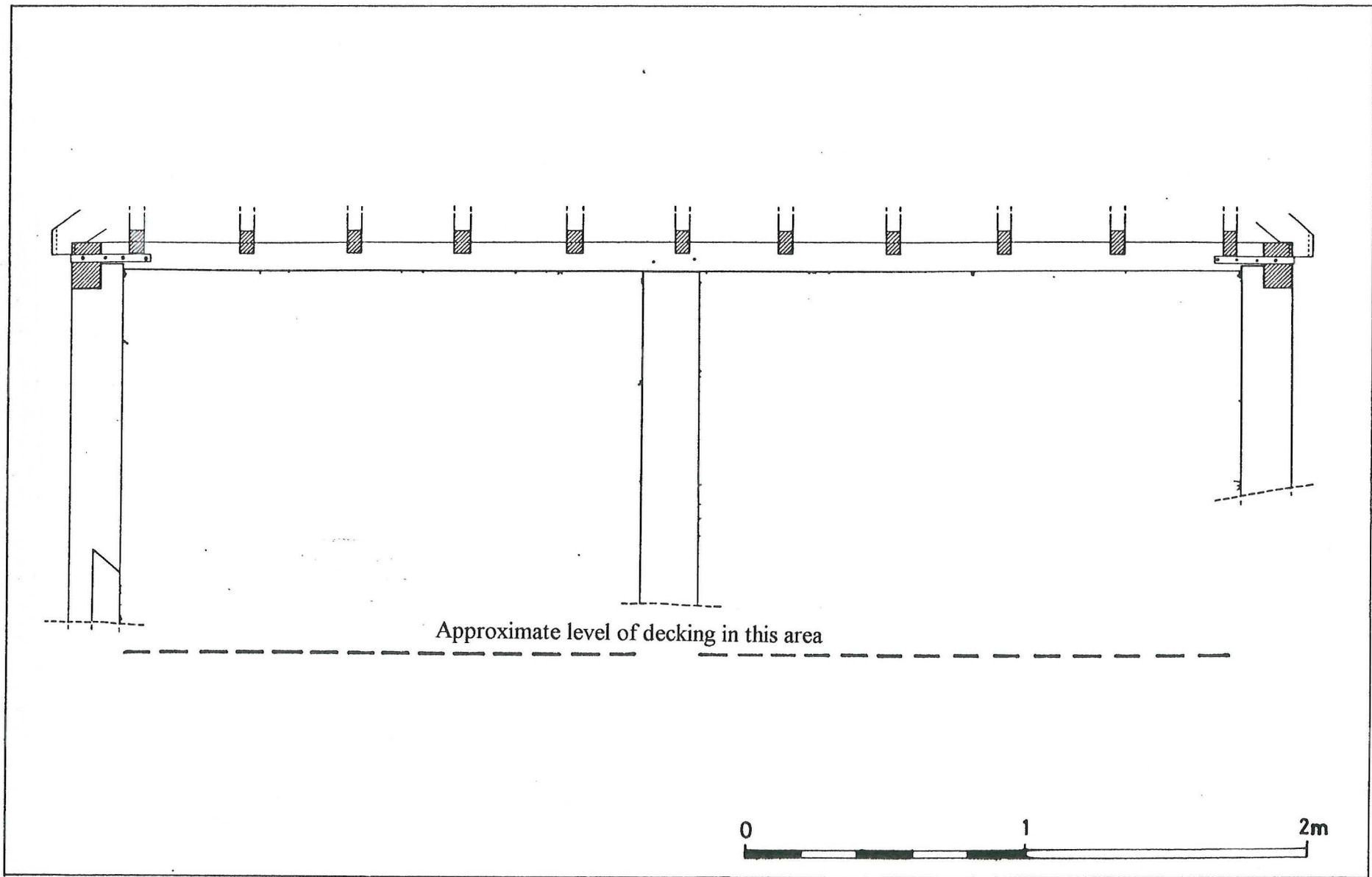
Approximate level of decking in this area



North external elevation



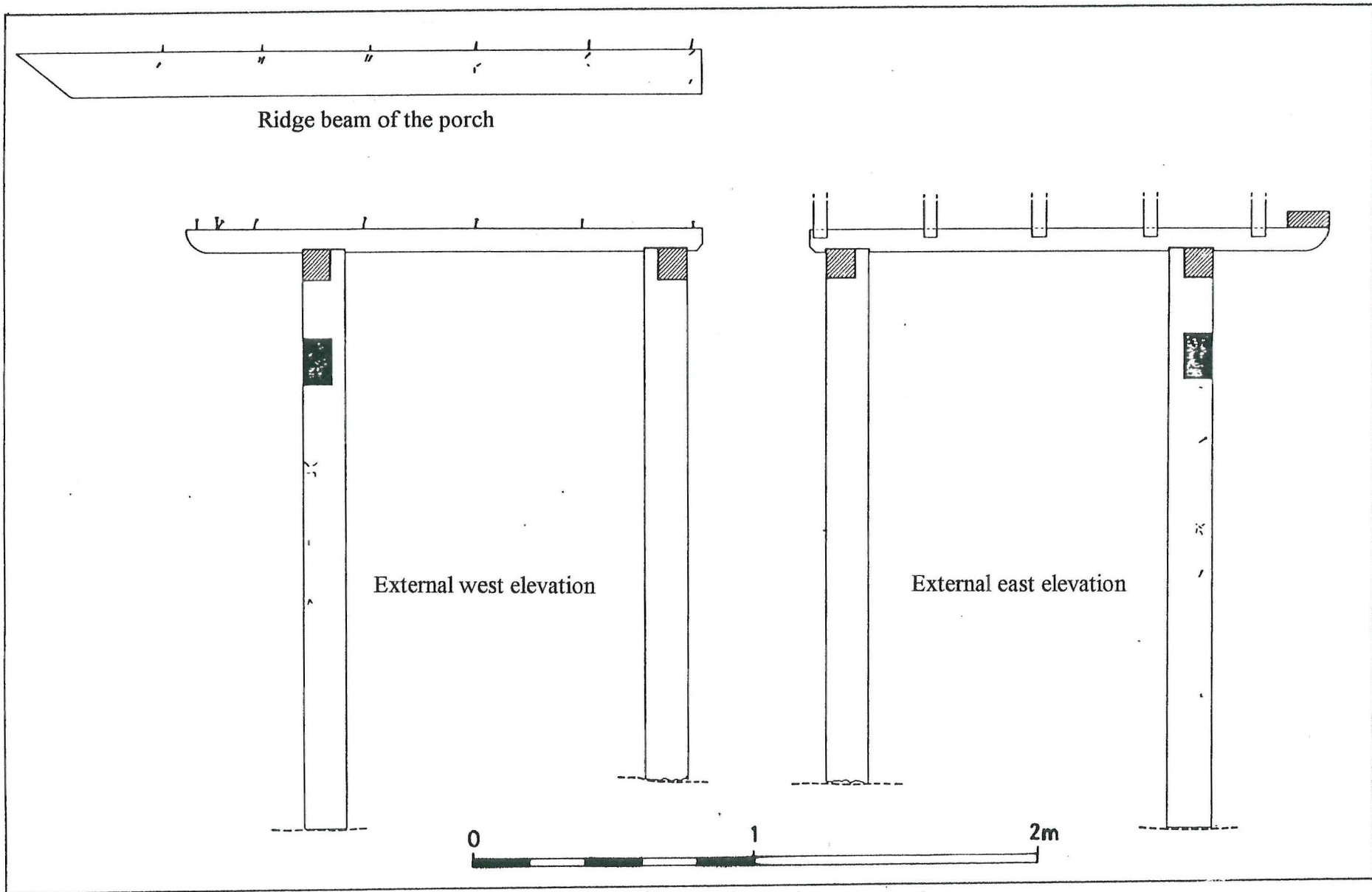
East External Elevation.



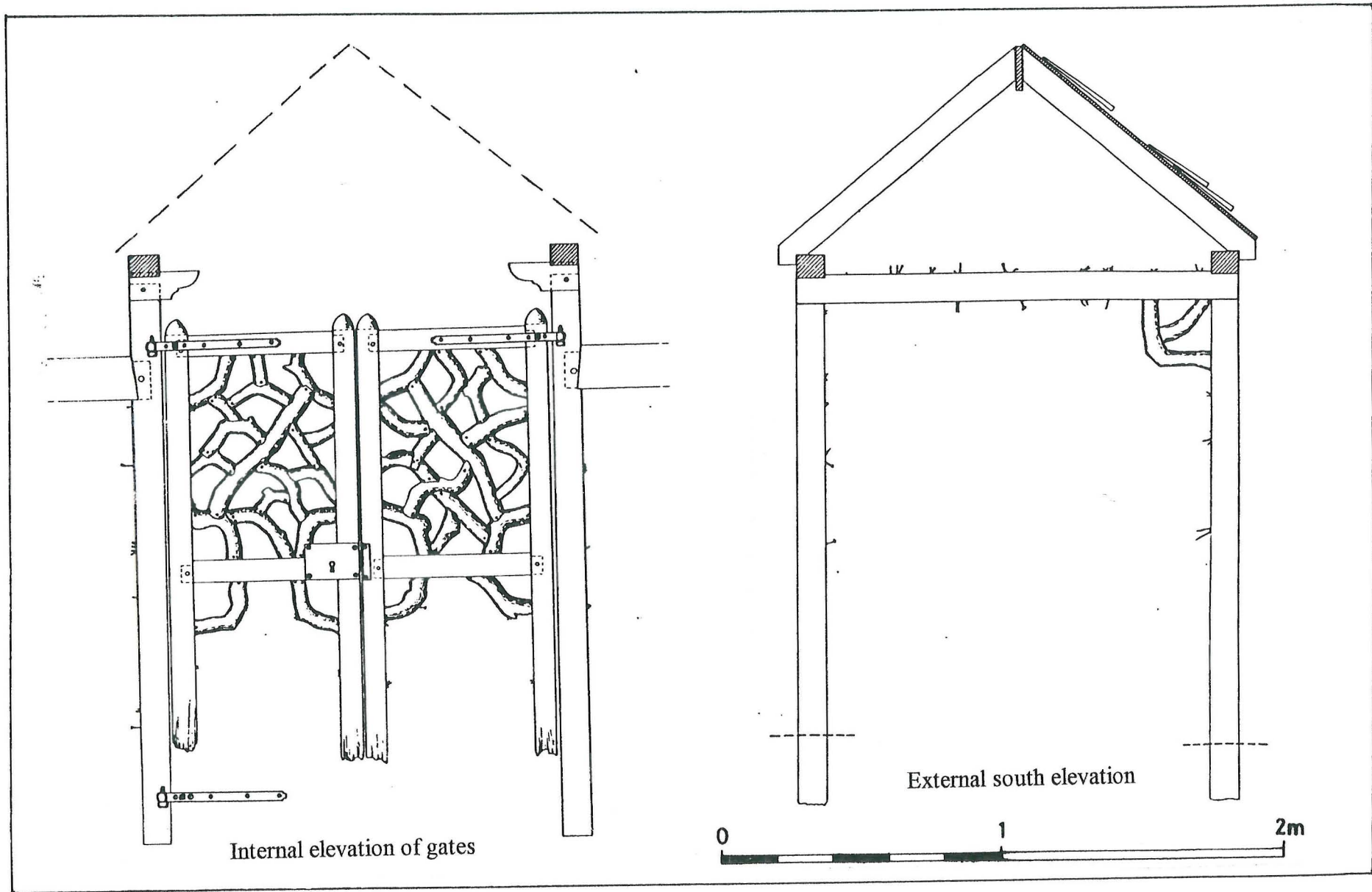
Approximate level of decking in this area



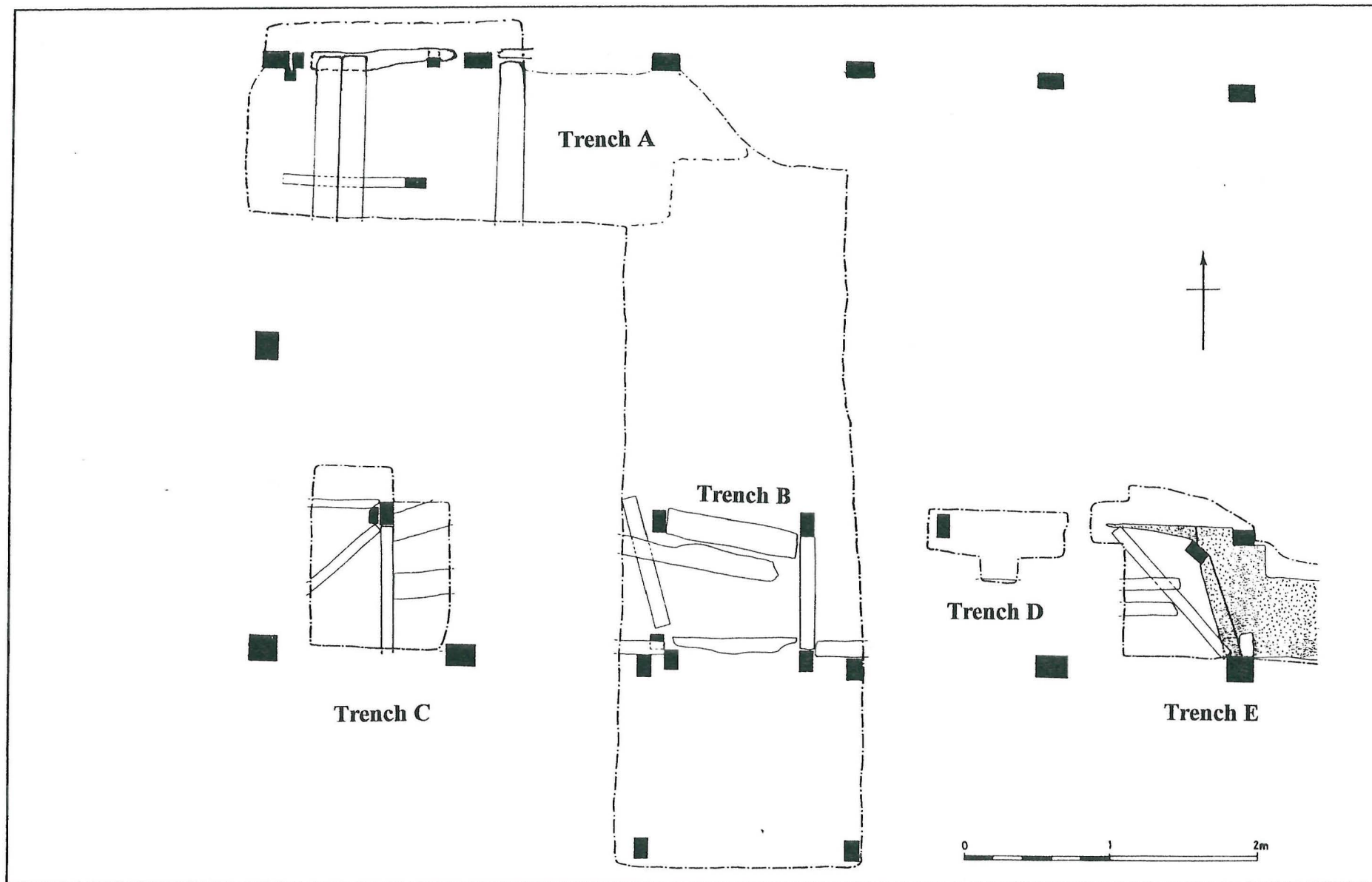
West External Elevation.



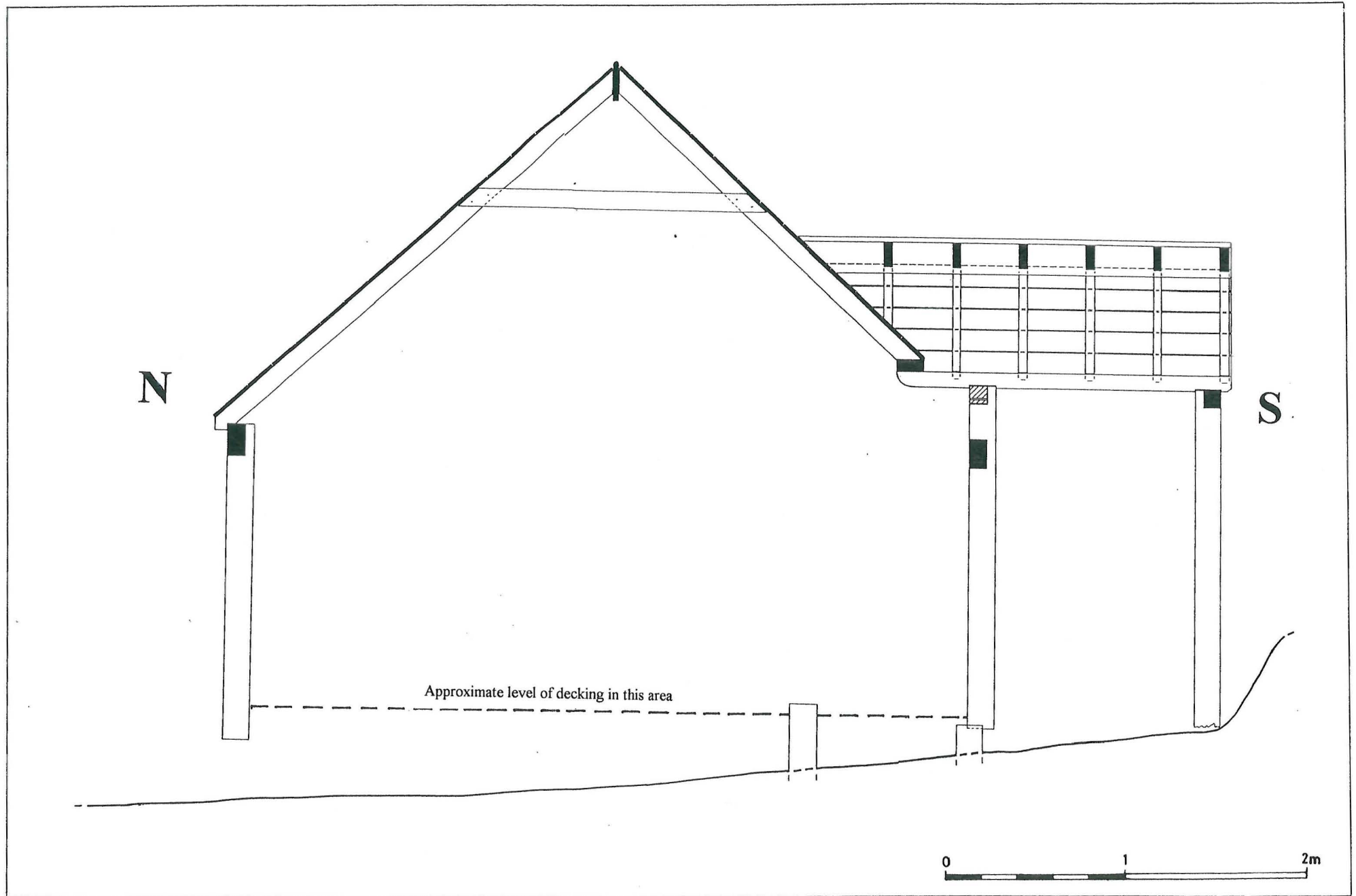
The Porch



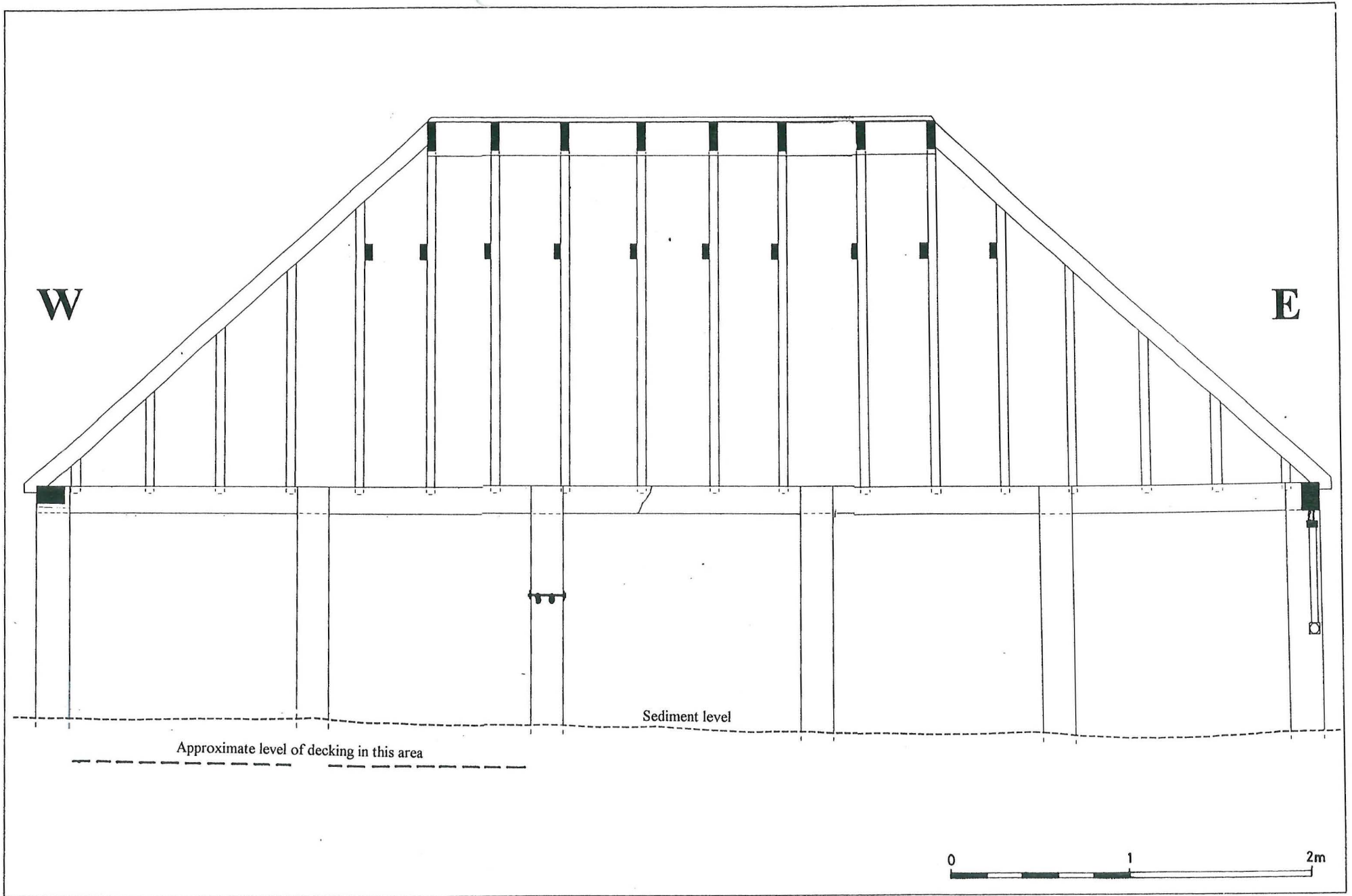
The Porch



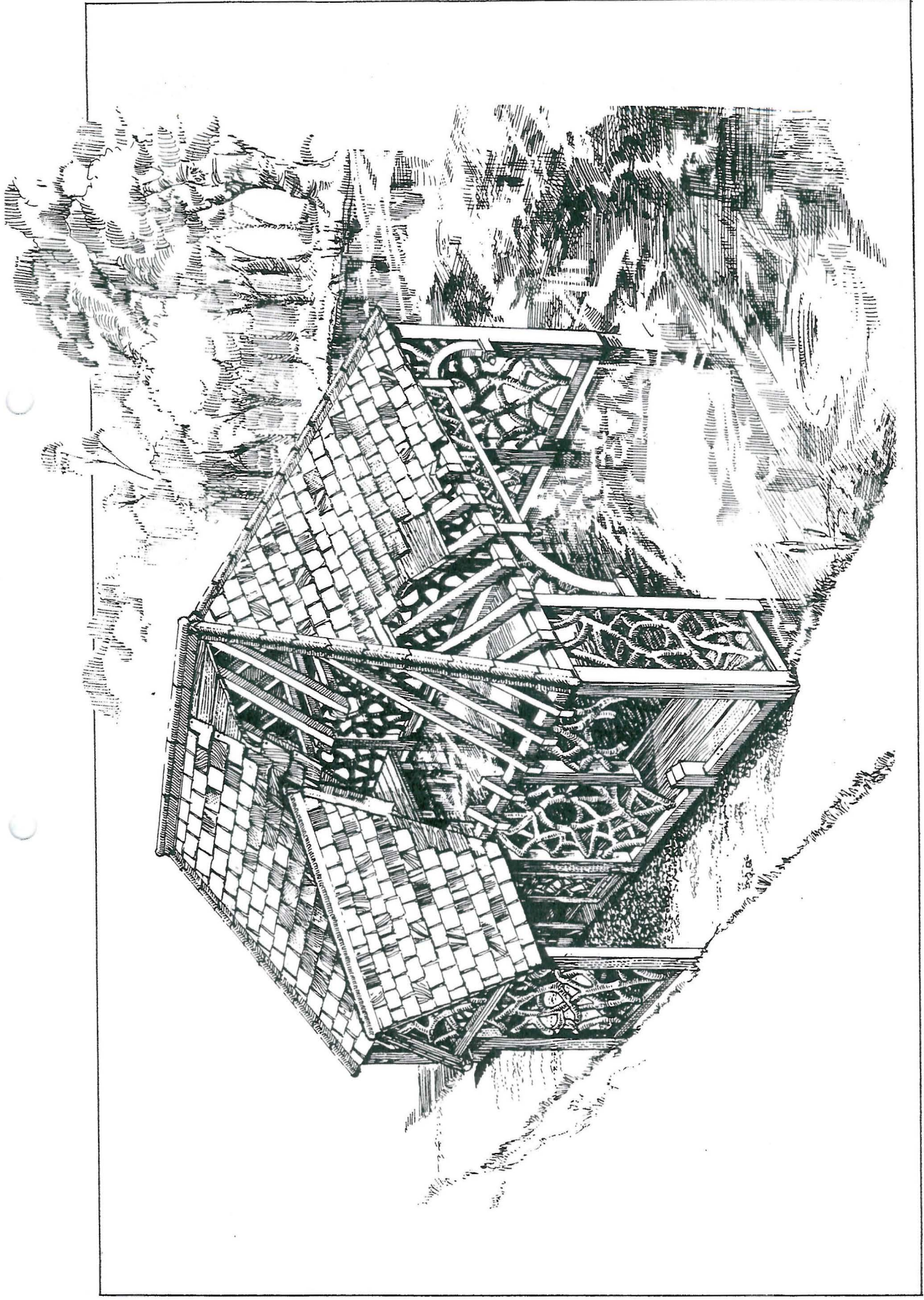
Plan of the Boathouse showing the excavated trenches and the extent of the surviving decking.



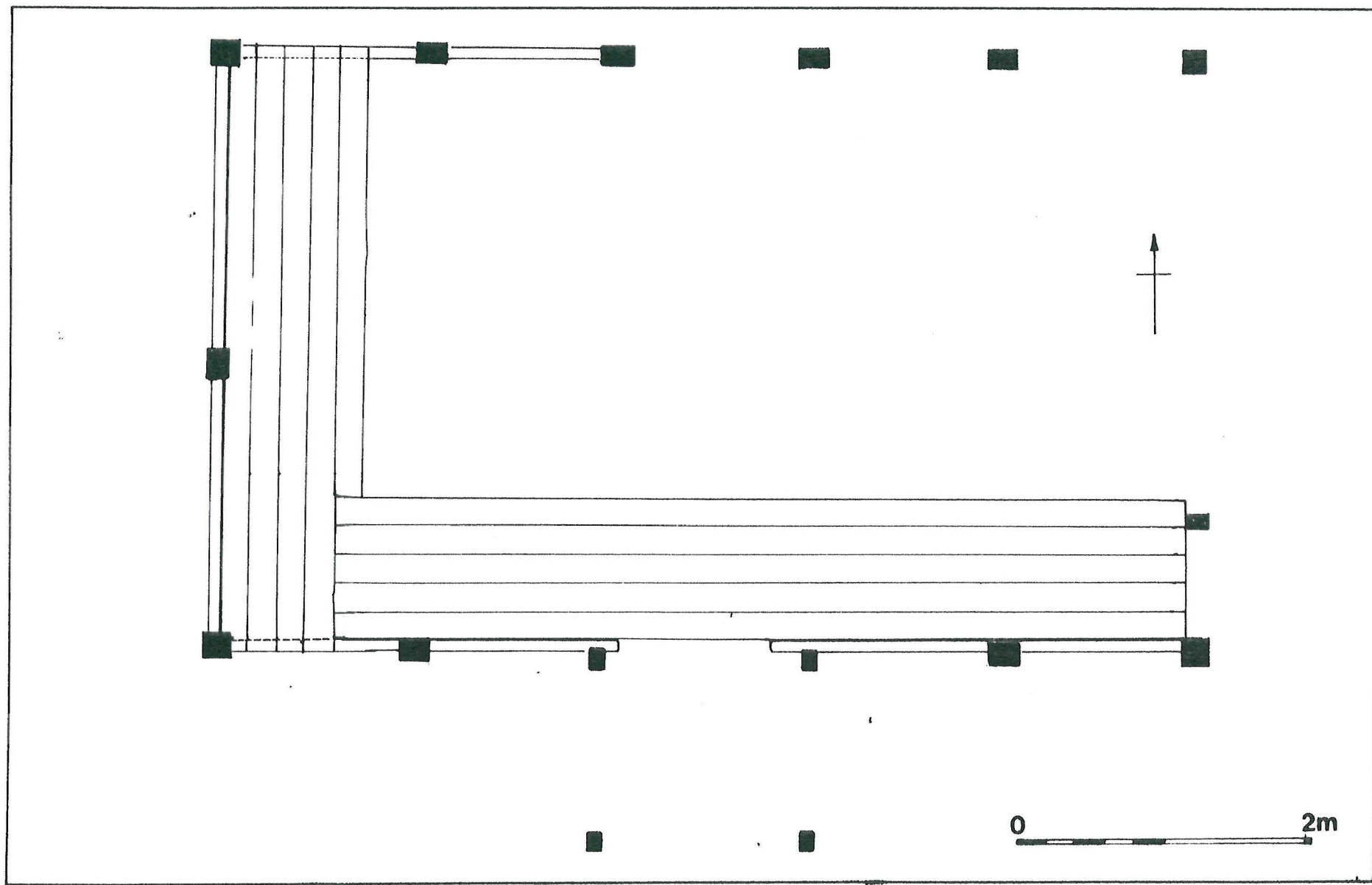
North-south cross-section showing the clay level



West-east cross-section showing the level of the sediment



Artistic Reconstruction of the Boathouse.



Plan of the Boathouse showing the extent and presumed layout of the decking.

