

**Deritend Bridge, Digbeth,  
Birmingham:**

**An Archaeological Evaluation**

Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit  
**Project No. 1007**  
January 2003

**Deritend Bridge, Digbeth, Birmingham:  
An Archaeological Evaluation**

by  
Josh Williams

with contributions by  
Mariana Ciaraldi and 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  
Web Address: <http://www.bufau.bham.ac.uk>

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## **Deritend Bridge, Digbeth, Birmingham: An Archaeological Evaluation**

### **1.0 Summary**

*An archaeological evaluation was carried out in October and November 2002 by Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit as part of an outline planning application which proposes to redevelop a site at Deritend Bridge in Digbeth, Birmingham City Centre (NGR SP 40775/28630). The work was commissioned by Wardell Armstrong on behalf of International Stock. A previous desk-based assessment had identified the development site as part of a zone of potential archaeological significance, including potential remains of features and deposits dating from the medieval period and remains of later settlement and industry, particularly waterlogged deposits associated with the River Rea.*

*Trial-trenching showed survival of a possible 17<sup>th</sup> century channel or pool, containing waterlogged deposits in Trench 1, reaching to a depth of 3.1m below the modern tarmac surface. The natural subsoil was reached between a depth of 2.5m and 3m below the modern tarmac surface in Trenches 2 and 3. A post-medieval linear feature was cut through the natural subsoil in Trench 2. The remainder of the recorded deposits and features consisted of 19<sup>th</sup> century cellars, which had been backfilled in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and of services and their associated trenches. Despite large-scale disturbance by cellaring, this archaeological evaluation demonstrated that survival of archaeological deposits and features had survived as 'islands' between and beneath later disturbance. Because of the depth and potential significance of the surviving deposits, further excavation is likely to be required in advance of development in this area of the site. Due to the limited area available for inspection during the outline application investigations, further evaluation of the area may be required by Birmingham City Council as part of a detailed planning application.*

### **2.0 Introduction**

This report describes the results of archaeological fieldwork undertaken at a site at Deritend Bridge, Digbeth, Birmingham City Centre (NGR SP 40775/28630, Fig. 1) in October and November 2002. The work was carried out by Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit and commissioned by Wardell Armstrong on behalf of International Stock, to provide archaeological information as part of an outline planning application for the redevelopment of the site. An earlier desk-based assessment (Hodgkinson, 2002a) had identified the development site as being part of a zone of potential archaeological survival, and that development of the site was likely to affect below-ground archaeological remains. In line with government guidance (Planning and Policy Guidance Note 16) and the City Council's planning policies (Policy 8.36 of the Birmingham Plan), there was a requirement, therefore, for an archaeological evaluation to establish the nature and extent of below-ground archaeological survival within the area of development.

The archaeological evaluation was conducted in accordance with the Institute of Field Archaeologists Standard and Guidance for Field Evaluation (Institute of Field Archaeologists 1994), a brief prepared by Birmingham City Council (Hodder 2001) and a specification prepared by Wardell Armstrong (Hodgkinson, 2002b). This evaluation conformed to Planning Policy Guidance Note 16 (Department of Environment 1991).

The site archive is currently held at BUFAU. It will be deposited with the appropriate repository, within a reasonable time of the completion of the evaluation, subject to the approval of the landowner.

### **3.0 Location, Geology and Topography**

The proposed development site is located on the northern side of Bradford Street, and is at approximately 103m AOD. The land is bounded by Bradford Street to the south, Deritend High Street and Deritend Bridge to the north and Rea Street to the west. The eastern boundary is formed by a narrow alley way and a party wall between International Stock and the adjacent property. This area of land is henceforth referred to as the site. The land is currently occupied by retail buildings, warehouses and car-parking areas.

The historic centre of Birmingham lies on a ridge of Keuper sandstone, approximately 600m to the northwest of the site. The ridge slopes to the River Rea with drift geology of scattered sand and gravel, and alluvium along the valley floor.

### **4.0 Archaeological Background**

An archaeological desk-based assessment of the Digbeth Economic Regeneration Area was carried out in 1995 (Litherland 1995). This assessment covered the Digbeth/High Street Deritend and High Street Bordesley frontage, and noted that the area was susceptible to flooding, due to its proximity to the River Rea. This had led to piecemeal development on the site and a raising of the ground level in order to facilitate building. Digbeth Island itself was also raised to create an artificial causeway crossing the two original courses of the River Rea. This previous raising of ground levels may have resulted in the good survival of below-ground archaeological deposits. A desk-based assessment for the Deritend Bridge site (Hodgkinson 2002a) was carried out, and found cartographic evidence for the existence of a large pool covering most of the site up to the eighteenth century. It is unlikely, therefore that there would be extensive settlement on the site in the medieval and early post-medieval period, although there is a high potential for industrial activity, including tanning. This would be similar to other sites in the area, particularly at Floodgate Street (Williams 2002). Later mapping recorded large scale development within the area, demonstrating that the area had been extensively modified and the River Rea had been culverted through the site (Hodgkinson, 2002a).

## 5.0 Objectives

The main objective of the archaeological evaluation was to determine the location, extent, date, character, condition, significance and quality of any surviving archaeological remains in advance of development. In particular, the aim was to assess the extent to which earlier archaeological deposits had been affected by cellars constructed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The evaluation aimed to provide information to permit an informed decision on the archaeological issues relating to the site at the outline planning application stage, and to allow the formulation of strategies for the evaluation of the site at a detailed planning application stage.

## 6.0 Method

Three trenches, each 2m in width and 15m in length, were excavated within the site (Fig. 2). Trench 1 was excavated along a northeast-southwest alignment towards the south of the International Stock car park. Trench 2, also orientated northeast-southwest, was excavated in the northeast corner of the International Stock. Trench 3, 15m in length, was excavated at right angles to Rea Street, on the north side of the florists car park. The trenches were not positioned to locate any particular archaeological remains, but the trench layout was designed to optimise the small space available for the evaluation. The trenches were excavated to a depth of 1.2m for safety purposes, although in each trench a 3m long box was excavated to a maximum depth of 3.5m to locate any deeper deposits. The exact location of these boxes was determined during the evaluation, in agreement with the City Archaeologist, and were shored for safety purposes.

The layers of modern overburden were removed with the use of a wheeled excavator, under archaeological supervision. The natural subsoil was reached in Trenches 2 and 3. The natural subsoil was not reached in Trench 1 due to the depth of the overlying deposits. Subsequent excavation of archaeological deposits was carried out by hand and finds were recovered. Recording was carried out using pre-printed *pro forma* record cards for contexts and features, supplemented by plans (at 1:20 and 1:50), sections (at 1:10 and 1:20), and monochrome print and colour slide photography.

## 7.0 Results

### Trench 1 (Fig. 3)

Trench 1 was excavated to a depth of 1.2m and to a depth of 3.1m at the northeastern end.

A dark brown/black organic silt layer (1044) was encountered at a depth of 2.6m below the car-park surface. This was overlain by a dark brown silty layer (1042), 0.9m thick, which contained a lens of redeposited natural (orange-yellow clay, 1043). In turn, 1042 was overlain across the entire trench by a black silty layer (1004), reached at a depth of 1m below the present ground surface. This contained fragments of brick and 19<sup>th</sup>-century pottery. 1004 had been cut into by a northeast-southwest

aligned brick cellar wall (F104/1010), which had been infilled on the northwest side by a light brown silt (1005), containing brick, tile, ash, clinker and mortar. These layers were overlain by a series of bricks (1003), laid at a 45° angle, which may have formed a floor or yard surface. This floor was uncovered at a depth of 0.7m, and had been cut through by four red brick walls (F100/1006, F101/1007, F102/1008, F103/1009), all aligned northwest-southeast. Sealing 1003 was a layer of bricks (1002), 0.2m thick, which in turn was overlain by a layer of modern build up (1001), revealed 0.1m below the modern surface. The trench was capped by tarmac (1000) forming the car park surface.

#### Trench 2 (Fig. 4)

Trench 1 was excavated to a depth of 1.2m and to a depth of 3m in the centre.

The natural subsoil (1036) was located at a depth of 3m in the centre of the trench. It consisted of a yellow clay with large river pebbles. The natural subsoil was cut on the northwest side of the trench by a northeast-southwest aligned linear feature (F115). This feature was filled at the bottom by a thin (0.1m) layer of brown sandy silt (1038). The upper fill was a pink clay (1037) containing fragments of brick and tile. This deposit looked like it had been deliberately backfilled into the feature, possibly as a levelling deposit.

The natural subsoil was overlain by a thin layer of redeposited natural (1041), located at a depth of 2.9m from the car park surface. In turn this was overlain by a 0.3m thick layer of black ash and silt (1040) containing eighteenth century pottery. Capping this was a 0.6m thick layer of bricks and rubble (1039). This was sealed in the northeastern end of the trench by a layer of white mortar (1032), 0.4m thick. At the southwestern end of the trench, 1039 was overlain by a dark brown silt (1034) which changed to a darker brown (1035) at the end of the trench. Both 1034 and 1035 produced 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century pottery, animal bone, oyster shell, clay pipe and glass. These layers (1032, 1034 and 1035) were sealed by a black silt layer with fragments of brick and tile, a maximum of 0.5m thick. In turn, this was overlain by a rubble layer (1024) reached at a depth of 0.2m.

Cutting 1024 was a square feature (F110), filled with mixture of brick and clay (1026). This had a pipe trench (F111/1027) cut through it at a depth of 0.7m. Cutting F110 to the west was large disturbance (F112) filled by a layer of pink clay (1028). This was cut at the northeastern end of the trench by a bowl-shaped feature (F114) filled with a bluish brown sandy clay (1030). The entire trench was capped by a layer of crushed stone and tarmac (1023) which formed the car park surface.

#### Trench 3 (Fig. 5)

Trench 3 was 15m long and was excavated at right angles to Rea Street, to a depth of 1.2m and a maximum depth of 2.5m at the southeastern end of the trench.

The natural subsoil (1031), a yellowish sandy clay with pockets of gravel, was encountered at a depth of 2.5m below the car-park surface. This was overlain by a dark brown silty clay (1017), 0.9m thick. This deposit had been cut by a series of

brick cellar walls (F107/1019, F108/1020 and F109/1018). F107 and F108 were aligned northwest-southeast, while F109 was aligned northeast-southwest. A series of floor layers (1013, 1014, 1014, 1016) were noted within the cellar structure, mainly comprising tile and brick.

Towards the northwestern end of the trench another two brick cellar walls (F105/1021 and F106/1022) were visible in section. Above the floor surfaces, and infilling the cellars was a layer of modern rubble (1012), consisting of brick, tile and ash, up to 0.1m below the car park surface. The car park surface (1011) consisted of a layer of stone and tarmac.

### **8.0 Finds** *by Erica Macey*

A small quantity of finds, mainly of post-medieval date, was recovered from the site. Most of the finds were largely unabraded, although a high degree of fragmentation was noted across the assemblage. Ten fragments of post-medieval pottery were recovered from the site. These included possible fragments of 19<sup>th</sup> century utilitarian white ware (1017 x 3, 1035 x 3) and fragments of blue-and-white ware of possible 18<sup>th</sup> century date (1017 x 1, 1035 x 1, 1040 x 1).

A small amount of brick (1034x 3) and tile (1037 x 3) was also sampled. The brick fragments were too small to be of any diagnostic use, but it was noted that the fabric of the tile bore close resemblance to the dominant tile fabric recorded at other Birmingham sites such as Park Street, which dated from the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards (Macey 2002, 21-22).

Other finds of probable post-medieval date included two small, undiagnostic fragments of animal bone (1034 1035), one fragment of oyster shell (1034), one fragment of clay pipe stem (1035) and two very small fragments of clear vessel glass (1034).

Items of modern appearance included two fragments of machine-cut stone (1033). These were cut into rectangular blocks, with two raised strips and the letter "H" one face. The smoothness and regularity of these blocks suggests they were machine-cut. Other items of modern appearance were a bolt (1033) and an iron nail (1033).

### **9.0 Environmental Evidence** *by Marina Ciaraldi*

An environmental sample was taken from the lowest waterlogged deposit (1044) in Trench 1. The biological remains observed in the samples are here assessed in order to establish how they have been preserved and their potential in understanding the economy and palaeoenvironment of the site.

The deposit was dark brown and silty. A small sub-sample of 300 ml was taken from the 20-litre sample and dispersed in lukewarm water. It was then poured onto a 0.3mm mesh. The organic material was then scanned under a low-power stereomicroscope. Plant remains were identified with the help of the author's reference collection.



The sample contained waterlogged organic remains and small fragments of coal and charcoal. Some of the waterlogged plant remains included seeds of elder (*Sambucus nigra* L.), thistles (*Carduus/Cirsium*), docks (*Polygonum* sp.), fat hen (*Chenopodium album* L.) and, most notably, fragments of hemp stem (*Cannabis vulgaris* L.). The sample contained also numerous fragments of insect.

The presence of hemp stem strongly suggests that hemp retting took place on site. This would be consistent with the evidence from other archaeological excavations in the area (Ciaraldi 2000 and 2002a, Hall 2001). However, unlike the nearby site of Floodgate Street (Ciaraldi 2002b), the, albeit limited assemblage does not seem to indicate that tanning took place on site

The good state of preservation of various categories of biological remains suggests that they will play an important role in the understanding the human activities that took place on site as well as on the reconstruction of the palaeoenvironment. It is, therefore, recommended that an appropriate sampling strategy aimed at the recovery of biological remains (particularly macroremains, insects and pollen) is adopted in any future investigations. The research questions highlighted in recent reports on the environmental assemblage from other sites in the centre of Birmingham (Ciaraldi 2000, 2002a and 2002b) will provide a useful base to design the sampling strategy appropriately.

## **10.0 Discussion and Implications**

All three trenches demonstrated heavy disturbance by cellaring, as was suspected from the desk-based assessment of the area (Litherland 1995 and Hodgkinson, 2002a). The waterlogged deposits in Trench 1 (1042, 1043, 1044) are likely to be from a channel or a pool, such as the one identified in the desk-based assessment (Hodgkinson 2002a), or the channel at Floodgate Street (Williams 2002). It is possible that this was the former River Rea, particularly as the parish boundary, following the line of the river is shown on the 1<sup>st</sup> edition OS map. Although there is an unfortunate lack of secure dating for this deposit, it is likely to be 18<sup>th</sup> century or earlier. It is interesting that hemp was detected within the sample from this channel, particularly as a rope making industry was located on Milk Street, north of Moores Row (formerly known as Rope Walk, Litherland, 1995). This would suggest a different industrial activity from the Floodgate Street site, especially as no material associated with tanning was identified in the channel material. The natural subsoil was reached in the other two trenches at a depth of between 2.5m and 3m, with a post-medieval feature (F115), cut through the natural in Trench 2. The depth of the natural in Trench 2 (AOD 100.24m), 3.1m below the present ground surface is very similar to Floodgate St (Williams, 2002) where natural subsoil was located between AOD 99.50m and AOD 101m.

The evaluation trenches did not locate any more significant or extensive earlier archaeological deposits because the trenches were too confined for safe deep excavation. However, the survival of deeply buried archaeology has been proven by the evaluation. It is likely, therefore, that further evaluation of the archaeology will

need to be undertaken as part of a detailed planning application. The results of this evaluation would suggest that a full excavation would be necessary for the area already evaluated. Any recommendations for further evaluation and/or mitigation strategies would be decided upon by Birmingham City Council.

## 11.0 Acknowledgements

The project was commissioned by Wardell Armstrong on behalf of International Stock. Thanks are due to Mr Dave Hodgkinson of Wardell Armstrong. We are grateful to Dr Mike Hodder, Planning Archaeologist, Birmingham City Council, for advice and guidance on site. The evaluation was supervised by Josh Williams, with the assistance of Richard Cherrington and Helena Beak. Steve Litherland managed the project and edited this report. Illustrations were prepared by John Halsted.

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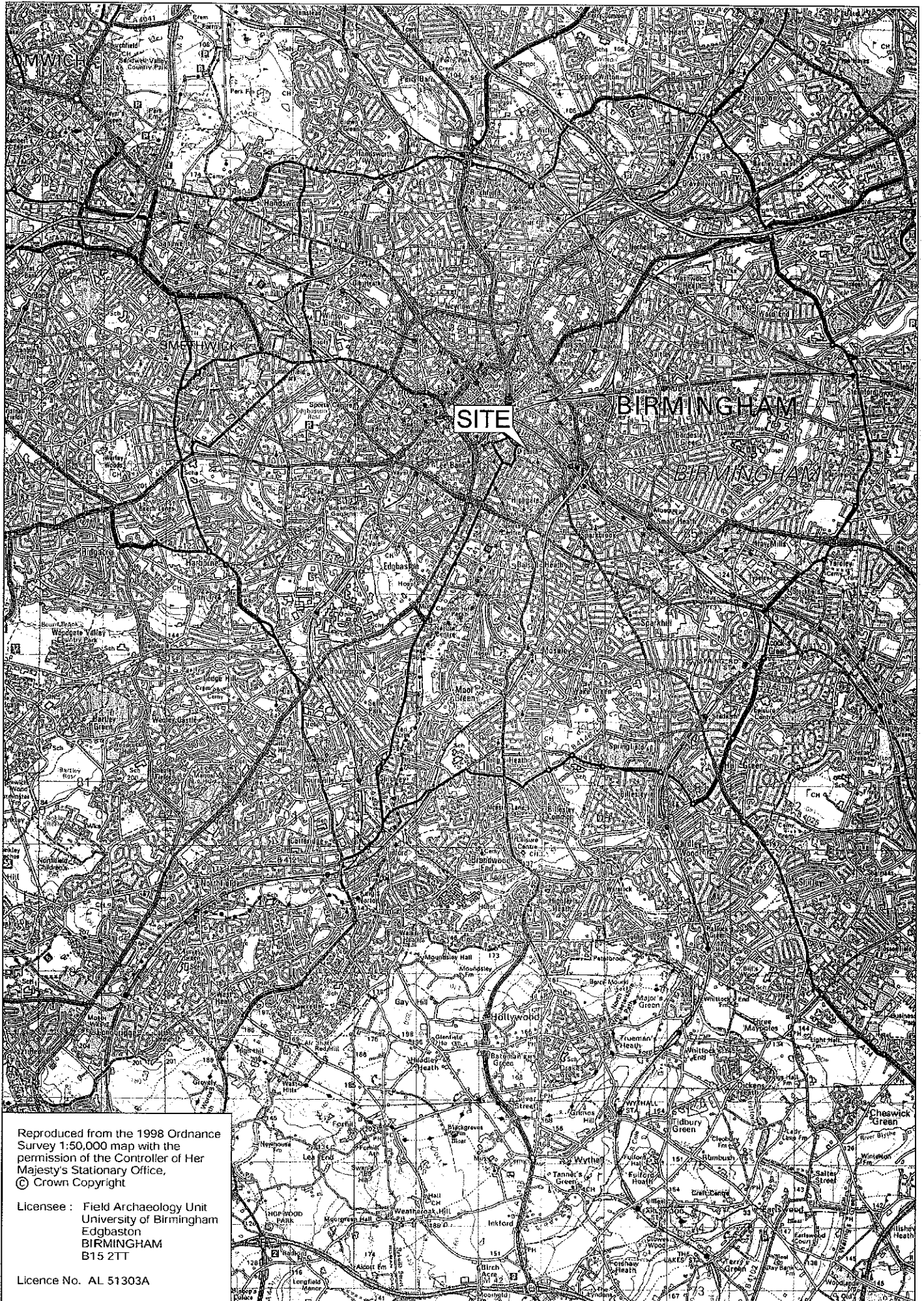
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Fig.1

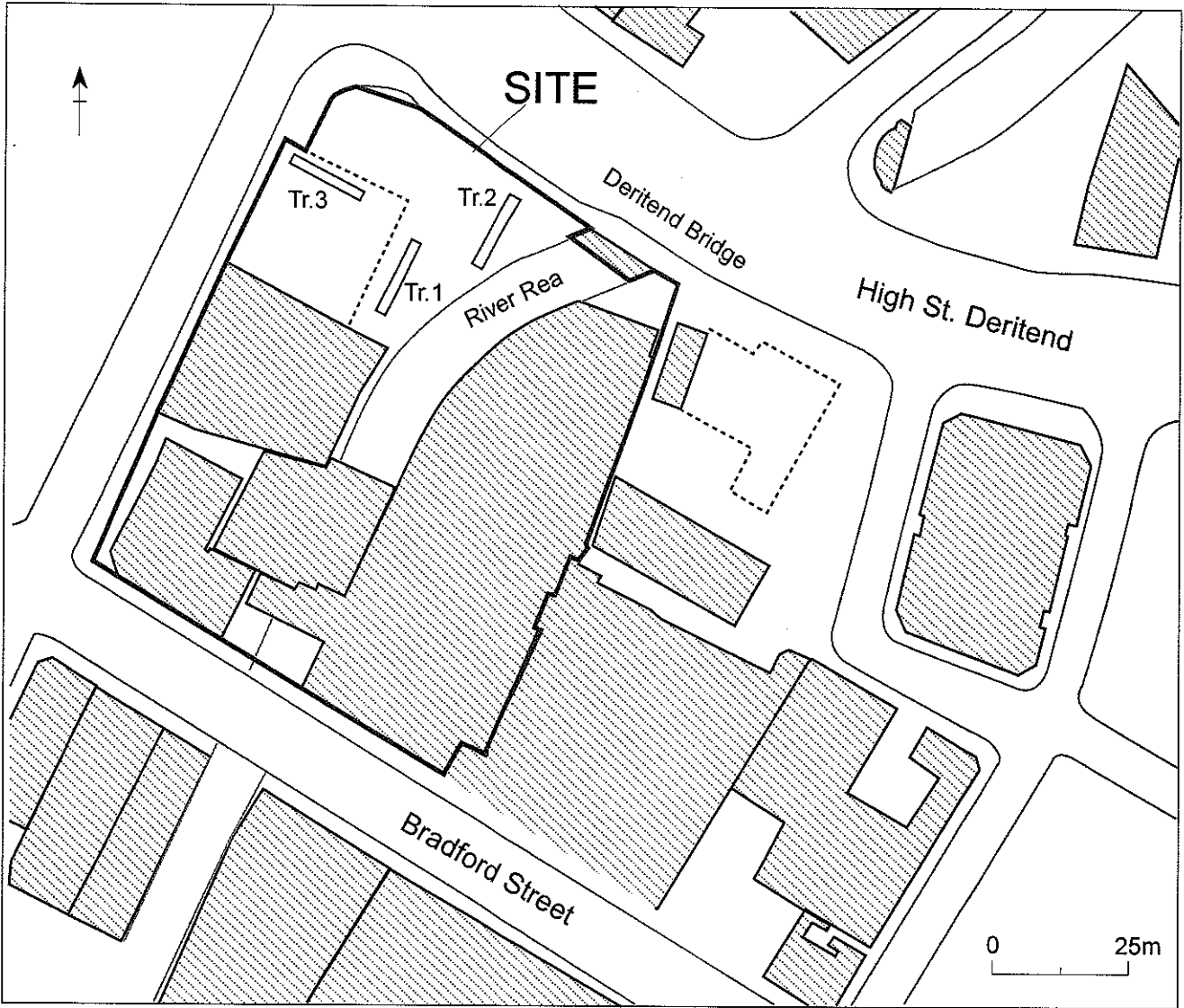


Fig.2

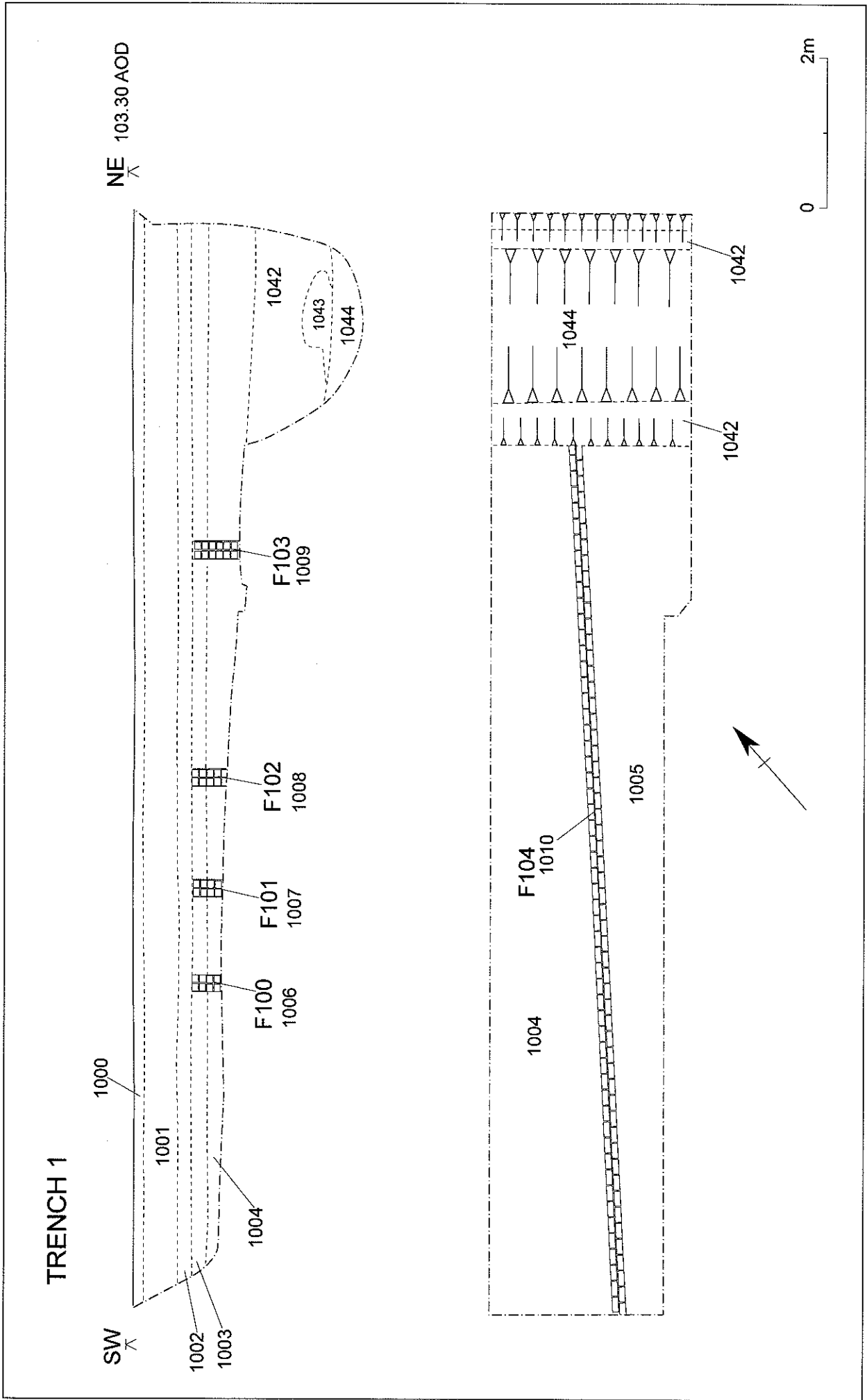


Fig. 3

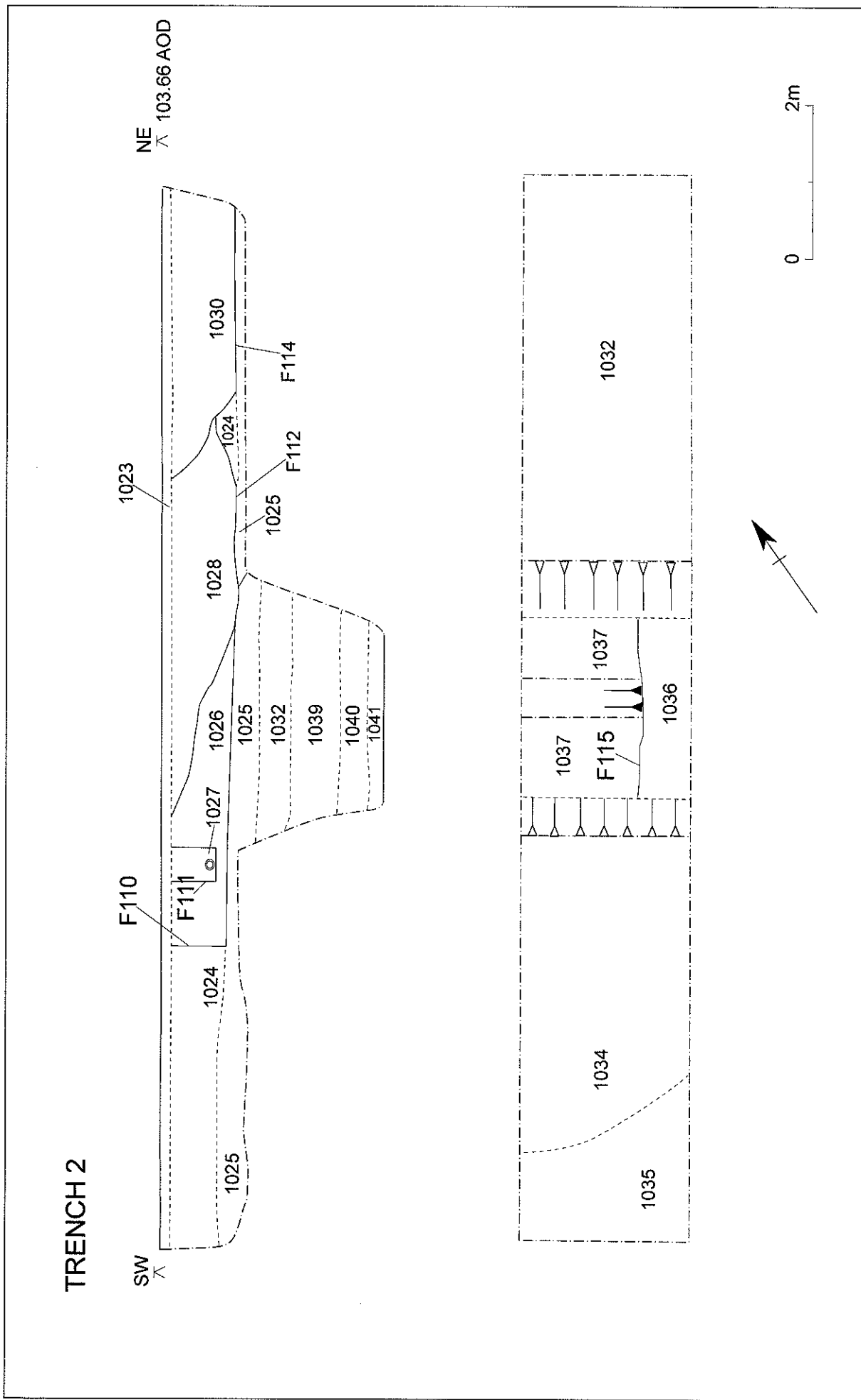


Fig.4

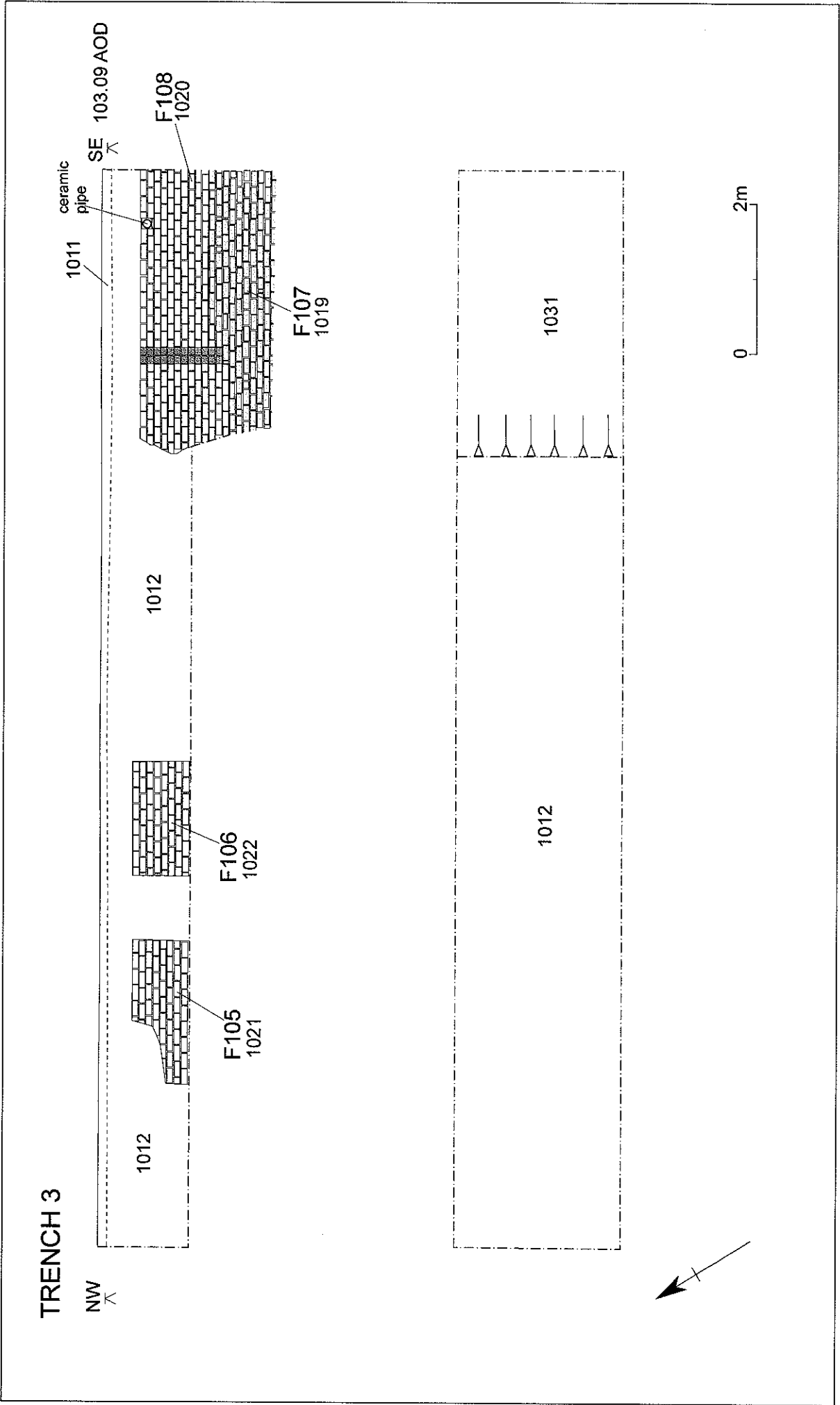


Fig.5