
ANCHOR COTTAGE,
30 PRINCES STREET,
CORBRIDGE,
NORTHUMBERLAND

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION

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REPORT ON AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION

Prepared by:

The Archaeological Practice Ltd.

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SUMMARY

This report describes a programme of archaeological evaluation trenching conducted to inform a proposal for construction work to the rear of Anchor Cottage at 30, Princes Street, Corbridge, south Northumberland. An archaeological assessment and subsequent evaluation work carried out on an adjacent property in 2001 & 2003 provided contextual information regarding the archaeological and historical development of the area, demonstrating that while Corbridge itself has been the focus of intensive human activity since later prehistory, the eastern fringe of the town has been occupied since at least the later medieval period.

In requesting archaeological evaluation of the site, the county archaeologist for Northumberland noted the possibility that structures or features of post-medieval or earlier date had existed upon the site and that their remains survived below the modern ground surface. Accordingly, the trenching was devised to determine the precise impact of the proposed scheme on the area's cultural heritage remains.

The investigation of the site by archaeological trenching appears generally to support the findings of work elsewhere in the east part of Corbridge, revealing little archaeological evidence of any significance. The trenches revealed disturbed deposits of agricultural or garden soil underlying modern surfaces, the depth of such deposits varying according to the topography of the site. In one trench part of a pit was also revealed, the fill of which contained fragments of modern pottery, tile and glass.

The nature of remains found upon the site does not support a recommendation for further archaeological evaluation. However, since the site lies within the medieval town of Corbridge, it remains possible that archaeological remains may survive beneath modern overburden elsewhere within the site. It is not recommended, on the basis of the evidence presented, that any further archaeological evaluation work should be carried out. However, mitigation by archaeological watching brief may be considered appropriate in order to record any features of archaeological significance disturbed during the development works on parts of the site not subject to the evaluation works reported here.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Purpose of Evaluation

The following is a report on a programme of archaeological evaluation trenching carried out on land attached to the rear of Anchor Cottage at 30, Princes Street, Corbridge, by the Archaeological Practice Ltd. on behalf of the developer. The evaluation strategy was designed to further inform the planning process with regard to proposed construction work upon the site, which is planned to include deep excavation for a basement. The trenching was designed to test for the existence and define the nature of any features of archaeological importance in order to inform the planning process.

1.2 Cultural Heritage Background

No archaeological assessment of the site has been carried out. However, a review of cultural heritage issues for an adjacent site and its surrounding area was carried out by the Archaeological Practice (Archaeological Practice 2001). The full assessment of both discrete and more extensive historical landscape components revealed that the area of the development and its immediate environs, east of the core of Corbridge, were apparently undeveloped in the early part of the nineteenth century, but had fallen within the medieval town of Corbridge until its contraction in the 13th or 14th century. The most significant archaeological remains discovered during this investigation were a shallow ditch of probable medieval date and its contents which, when analysed, produced information about domestic practices, including diet.

There is no known artefactual evidence for prehistoric human activity within, or close to, the bounds of the assessment area, although the topographical context of the site and limited evidence from the wider environs suggests that this relatively resource-rich area would have been exploited from the earliest times. Evidence in the wider vicinity for Bronze Age activity is provided by burials at Stagshaw Close House, Dilston Park and the banks of the Cor Burn, as well as by stray finds in the vicinity (Craster 1914, 4-6).

Roman military and civil occupation in the close vicinity of the town is well-attested by the surviving remains of Roman *Coria*, one kilometre to the north-west (Bishop and Dore 1988), and an earlier military supply-base on adjacent land at Red House Farm (Hanson *et. al.* 1979). Dere Street Roman Road crosses the Tyne east of the fort, west of the village, and a Roman cemetery probably extends from *Coria* into the modern heart of Corbridge along Well Bank. In addition, a considerable quantity of Roman artefacts and other remains have been found in the town, but none attests with certainty to Roman occupation or settlement within the medieval and modern town.

The earliest sure reference to the medieval Corbridge is a note on Anglian settlement in AD 786, but it is likely that the present form and layout of the town developed

when the town became a *burgh* in the late tenth or early eleventh centuries and a *borough* in the late twelfth century, its status and extent defined by the completion of a town ditch in the same period. The present evaluation site, however, probably lies outside the area defined by this early boundary. Corbridge reached the peak of its medieval prosperity in the thirteenth century, from which time several prominent monuments survive, including the modified church of St Andrew and the fortified Vicar's Pele, dating to around the year 1300 (Craster 1914, 209-15). At the eastern extremity of the village, the Low Hall pele tower due south of the present evaluation site may also have originated in the thirteenth century as a hall house (see *SMR ref. 96 SE 13*). One of the main medieval roads within the town, from which medieval burgage plots extended backwards, is the present St Helen's Street - named after the medieval St Helen's Chapel - the eastern end of which continues north-eastwards to the present evaluation site at the rear of the medieval Prent Street (see Craster 1914, 113). It is unclear whether the Prent street frontage was built up in the medieval period - historic maps do not provide convincing evidence for burgage plot divisions on the correct alignment, of the sort that survive well further to the west and along both the north and south sides of Main Street. It seems likely that in the later medieval and post-medieval periods the present assessment area lay at the rear of burgage plots extending from the Main Street frontage.

In summary, based on an assessment carried out in 2001 at the adjacent Princes Street garage property (The Archaeological Practice 2001), as well as an evaluation there in 2003 (The Archaeological Practice Ltd. 2003), it appears that the site is likely to have been peripheral to the Saxon and early post-Conquest settlement of the town. Although the town expanded eastwards in the later medieval period, the site lay some distance north of the core of settlement along the present Main Street. The contraction of the village due to the Scottish Wars in the later medieval and post-medieval periods meant that the assessment site was probably not (re-)built upon until the nineteenth century.

2. EVALUATION PROGRAMME

2.1 Aims

The aims of the programme of evaluation trenching were to investigate the possibility that significant archaeological remains were present within the site, to determine the character of any such remains and determine, as far as possible, their date, function and state of preservation, as outlined in the evaluation project design (Northumberland County Council Conservation Team - NCCCT).

2.2 Methods

The trenches were placed in open spaces within the site in positions considered most likely to intercept features of archaeological interest, such as boundary features extending from Princes Street. Trench 1 was located on the site of the proposed dwelling where deep excavations for a basement are proposed. Trench 2 was located on the site of a proposed detached garage.

A mechanical excavator, closely supervised by archaeologists, was used to excavate the surface topsoil down to sub-soil level. All anomalies or features of potential interest were examined closely by hand to appraise their importance before continuing with the excavation. The surface of the sub-soil was also cleaned by hand to reveal any potential features cut into it. All trench sections were also hand-cleaned for recording purposes.

2.3 Trench Location and Extent

The location and extent of evaluation trenching is shown on Figure 1.

Trenches	Location	Alignment
T1: 15.0m by 1.5m	West South-West of the site entrance, parallel with Princes Street	WSW-ENE
T2: 5.0m by 1.5m	South South-East of the site entrance	NW-SE

Trench 1.

Trench 1, measuring 15m x 1.5m, was positioned on the same alignment as Princes Street, with the principle aims of cutting across any plot divisions running back from the street, thereby revealing them, and uncovering any settlement remains at the rear of putative dwellings on Princes Street.

Trench 2.

Trench 2 was positioned alongside the eastern boundary of the site, approximately at right angles to the direction of Princes Street to the North and Main Street to the South, adjacent to a possible early lane leading south-east from Princes Street.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Trench 1

The greater part of the trench was positioned on a redundant tennis court, the macadam surface [101] and underlying hardcore foundation [102] of which extended eastwards from the western end of the trench for a distance of approximately 10 metres. The W end of the macadam surface lay at 40.79m aOD. At the eastern end of the trench a deposit of topsoil [103] extended to approximately the same depth (c.0.2m) as the hardcore. The ground surface at the E end of the trench (@ 41.12m aOD) was turf covered. Beneath the hardcore and topsoil layers was a largely sterile and clearly disturbed deposit of mixed sandy gravel & silty loam, interpreted as made ground [104]. Beneath the tennis court this deposit extended to depths of between 1.1 and 1.25m below ground level, but at the eastern end of the trench was rather shallower, extending to a fairly uniform depth of c.0.70m below ground level. Cutting through the made ground deposit [104] at this point (i.e. where deep made ground to the west gives way to shallower made ground to the east) is a well-defined steep (almost square-) sided pit [108] containing a sandy gravel fill with black horizontal bands of oily and/or organic matter [109]. Also contained in this fill were a large number of spent gun cartridges. At the western end of the trench the sandy deposit [104] was cut by a feature [105] containing top-soil [106], probably best interpreted as the remains of a root bowl or pit excavated for planting purposes. An ashy deposit [107], interpreted as fired debris, underlay the made ground [104] east of the base of pit [105]. Below this, as elsewhere below [104] and [105] were sub-soil and possible bedrock in various forms, including hard sandy till [110, 114 & 115] buff-coloured sand [111], apparent fragmented sandstone bedrock [112], pure brown sand [113], orange sand [116] and clay [117]. The most convincing bedrock outcrop (part of [114] occurred 9.5m from the W end of the trench, peaking at 39.74m aOD). The only feature certainly excavated into the various sub-soil deposits was a steep sided pit [118] cut into the sandy sub-soil at a depth of 1.10m below ground level and extending to a depth of 1.46m below ground level (39.35m aOD). The pit contained a deposit of sandy silt [119] not unlike the surrounding matrix. A clay pipe stem was found in the upper part of this fill and several sherds of glazed pottery, tile and glass in the lower part of the fill.

Interpretation

The deposits recorded suggest periodic phases of excavation and re-excavation, possibly associated with waste disposal and gardening activities, later superficially disturbed by the construction of a tennis court. Penetration into the natural sub-soil at the western end of the trench of an apparent refuse pit containing pottery of probably 19th century date suggests that such activities have at times stripped the site to sub-soil level and may have removed any traces of earlier activity on the site. The complete absence of pre-modern pottery from all contexts adds weight to this suggestion. A deep pit [108] cut almost vertically into the overburden to sub-soil depth appears to be on the line of a boundary shown on modern maps running at right angles to Princes Street. The orientation of the boundary suggests it could be on the

line of an early, possible medieval, plot division, but the nature of the pit fill – exclusively modern in character – does not provide supporting evidence for an early date.

3.2 Trench 2

Removal of the shallow topsoil surface [201] (40.85m aOD at the S end) revealed a rough hardcore or cobbled ‘surface’ [202] (@ 40.19m aOD), underlying which was the natural sub-soil and bedrock [203] (excavated to max. 40.03m aOD). There were no finds of any note from this trench.

Interpretation

The relatively shallow depth of top-soil in this trench can be explained by the topography of the site, wherein Trench 2 lies upon a slight crest. The hard core or cobbled surface uncovered at a shallow depth beneath the top soil may be suggested as a former yard space or, perhaps, a trackway. However, no artifactual evidence was found to suggest that it was of any great antiquity, or to merit further research into its likely character and function. The underlying deposits interpreted as sub-soil were entirely sterile.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The evaluation excavations at the rear of Anchor Cottage, 30 Princes Street, Corbridge, revealed archaeological evidence of little significance. The evidence of deep, highly disturbed deposits of made ground is indicative of modern land use, specifically gardening and waste disposal, the scale and intensity of which seems likely to have removed any traces of previous land-use. There is no specific evidence for medieval or earlier human activity upon the site.

It should be cautioned, however that the absence of significant finds from the part of the site subjected to evaluation does not necessarily rule out the possibility that significant remains survive elsewhere upon the site.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the absence of evidence for significant archaeological remains within the evaluation trenches, together with the evidence for heavy and repeated disturbance to sub-soil level, the further intensive archaeological investigation of the site for either evaluation or recording purposes is not warranted.

Given that medieval remains are known to survive in the vicinity, however, it is recommended that consideration should be given to archaeological monitoring of construction operations for the proposed development to determine whether significant deposits associated with medieval or earlier periods survive elsewhere upon the site and to provide a record of their character and extent in mitigation.

6. REFERENCES

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APPENDIX 1: Context descriptions

Trench 1

- 101 Macadam surface (40.79m aOD)
- 102 Hardcore foundation comprising angular sandstone blocks up to 0.20m max. diam., some mortar and other mixed debris.
- 103 Silty loam topsoil
- 104 Mixed sandy gravel & silty loam, apparently low in humic content but containing some metal and plastic debris. Extends to 1.25m below ground level at west end of trench; 0.70m below ground level at east end.
- 105 Feature of a form consistent with root penetration, perhaps (partially) deliberately excavated to accommodate a large bush or tree.
- 106 Silty loam topsoil.
- 107 Ashy deposit in a form suggesting that it may have been a heap subsequently buried. Lies on natural surface at 1.60m below ground level.
- 108 A well-defined steep (almost square-) sided pit extending from the base of the macadam/hardcore surface to max. 1.28m below ground level.
- 109 Sandy gravel pit fill with black horizontal bands of oily and/or organic matter. Spent gun cartridges were included in this fill, which is clearly modern.
- 110 Compact stony glacial till from 1.10 m below ground level.
- 111 Buff-coloured sand, probably natural, from 0.85 m below ground level.
- 112 Fragmented sandstone bedrock from 0.90 m below ground level.
- 113 Pure brown sand, probably natural.
- 114 Compact stony glacial till, from 1.05m below ground level, with a pronounced hump of bedrock (@ 39.74m aOD).
- 115 Compact stony glacial till, from 0.85 m below ground level.
- 116 Orange sand, probably natural.
- 117 Brown clay, apparently natural.
- 118 Steep sided pit (partially excavated), from 1.10m below ground level and up to 0.36m deep (@ 39.35m aOD).
- 119 Deposit of mixed sandy silt, with a clay pipe stem found in the upper part and several sherds of glazed pottery, tile and glass in the lower part.

Trench 2

- 201 Silty loam topsoil extending from the surface (40.85m aOD at S end) to 0.50m below ground level.
- 202 Rough hardcore or cobbled sandstone 'surface' at 0.50m below ground level (40.19m aOD).
- 203 Glacial till sub-soil of mixed stone and yellow sandy clay, giving way to possible bedrock from 0.70m below ground level

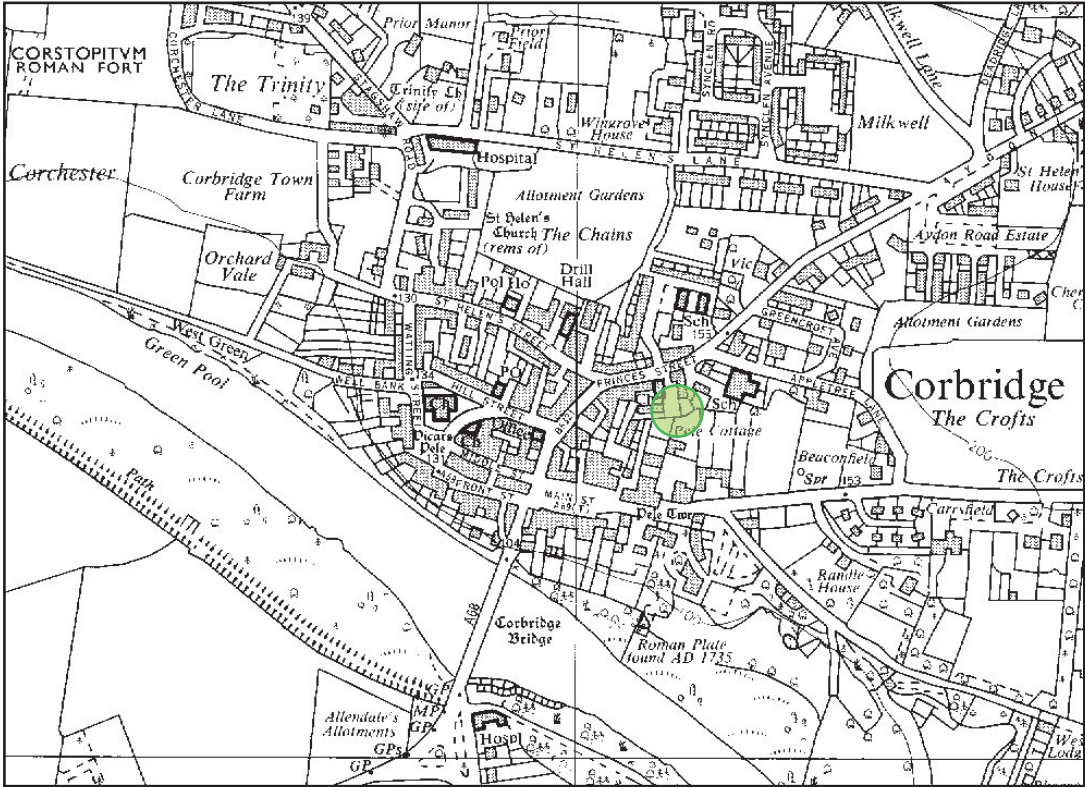


Figure 1: Location of the evaluation site in Corbridge, Northumberland

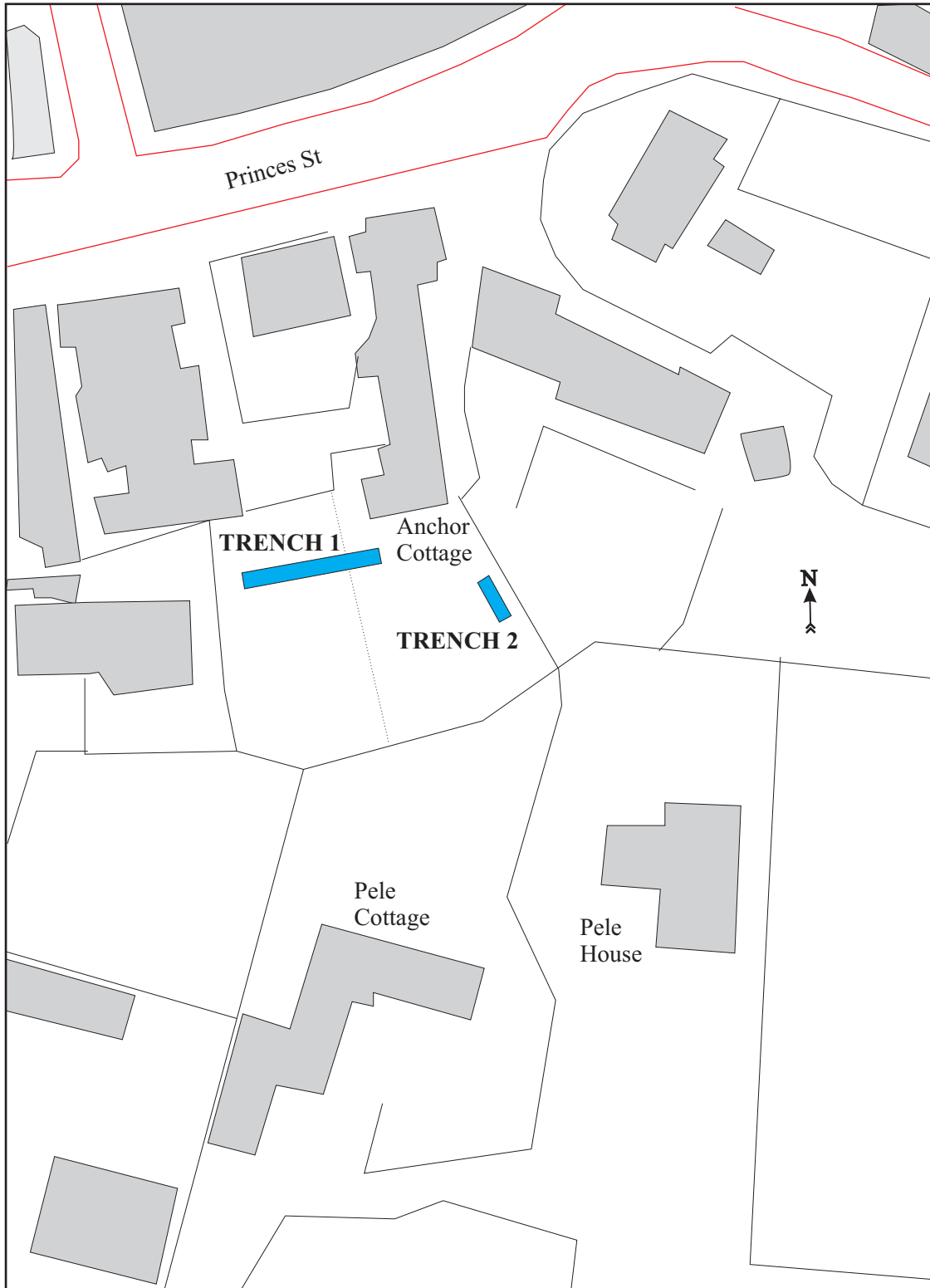


Figure 2: Trench location plan.

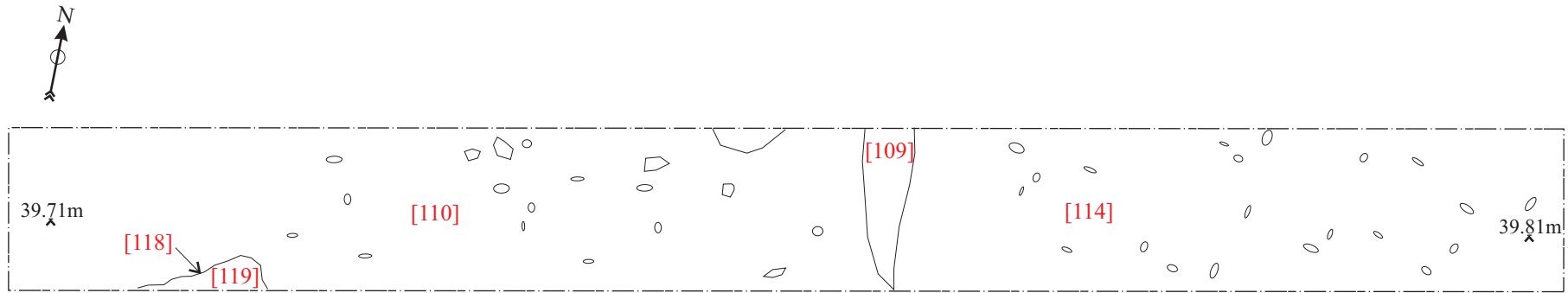


Figure 3: Plan of Trench 1

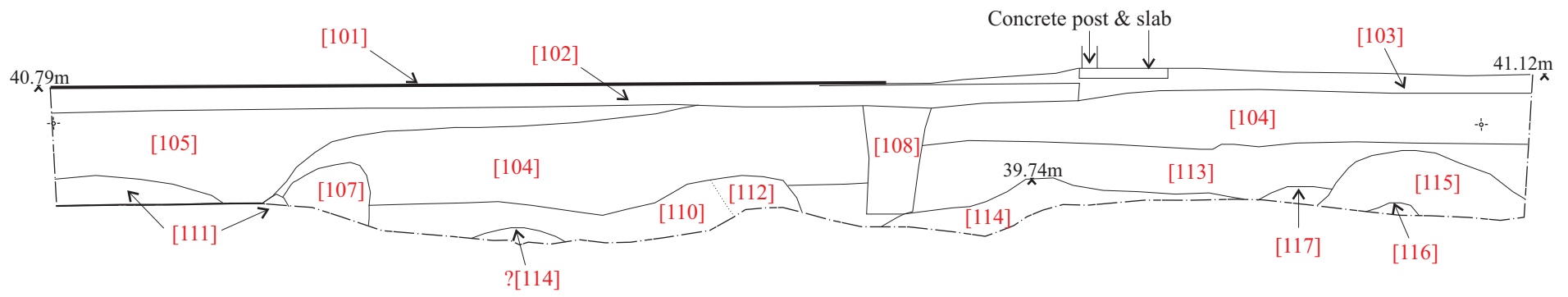


Figure 4: South-facing Section of Trench 1

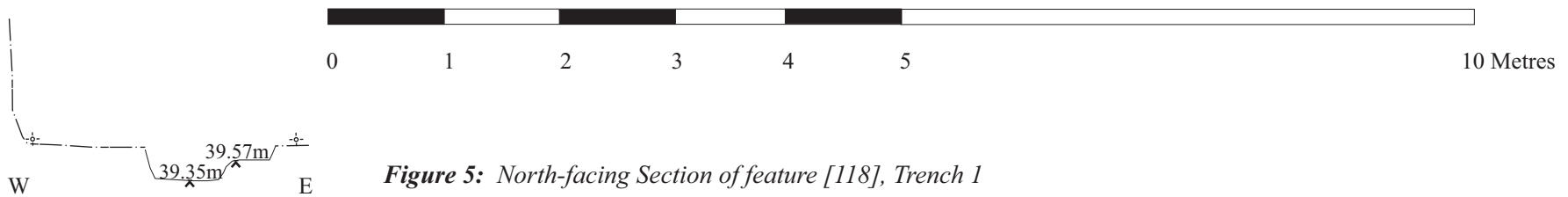


Figure 5: North-facing Section of feature [118], Trench 1

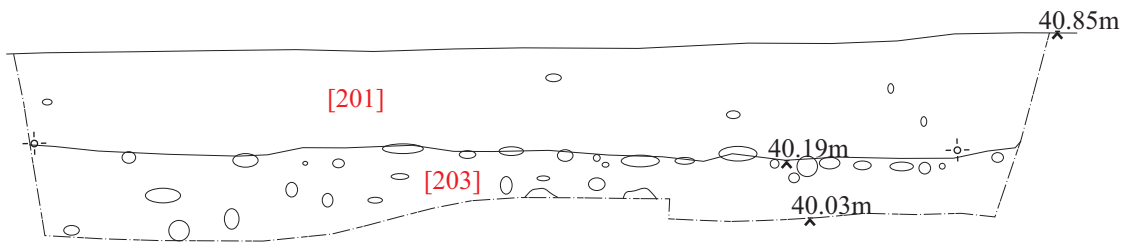


Figure 6: S-W facing section of Trench 2

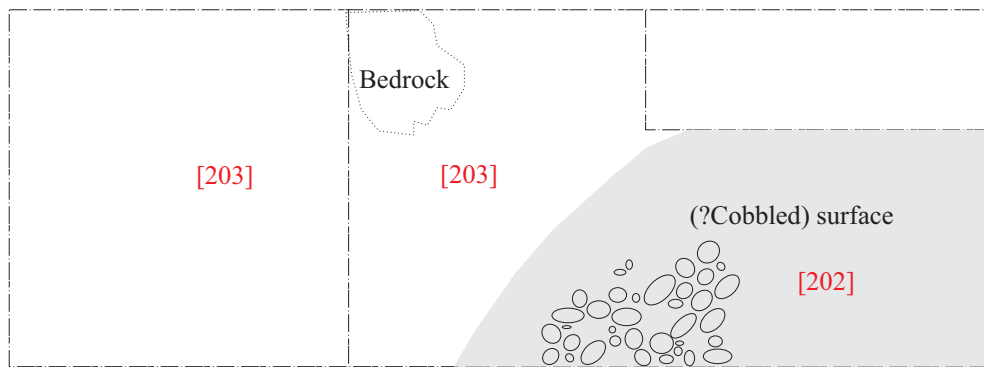


Figure 7: Plan of Trench 2





Plate 2: Trench 1 viewed from the east



Plate 3: Trench 1, west end of south-facing section



Plate 4: Trench 2 viewed from the south-east



Plate 5: View of possible surface [202] in Trench 2, underlying top-soil [201]