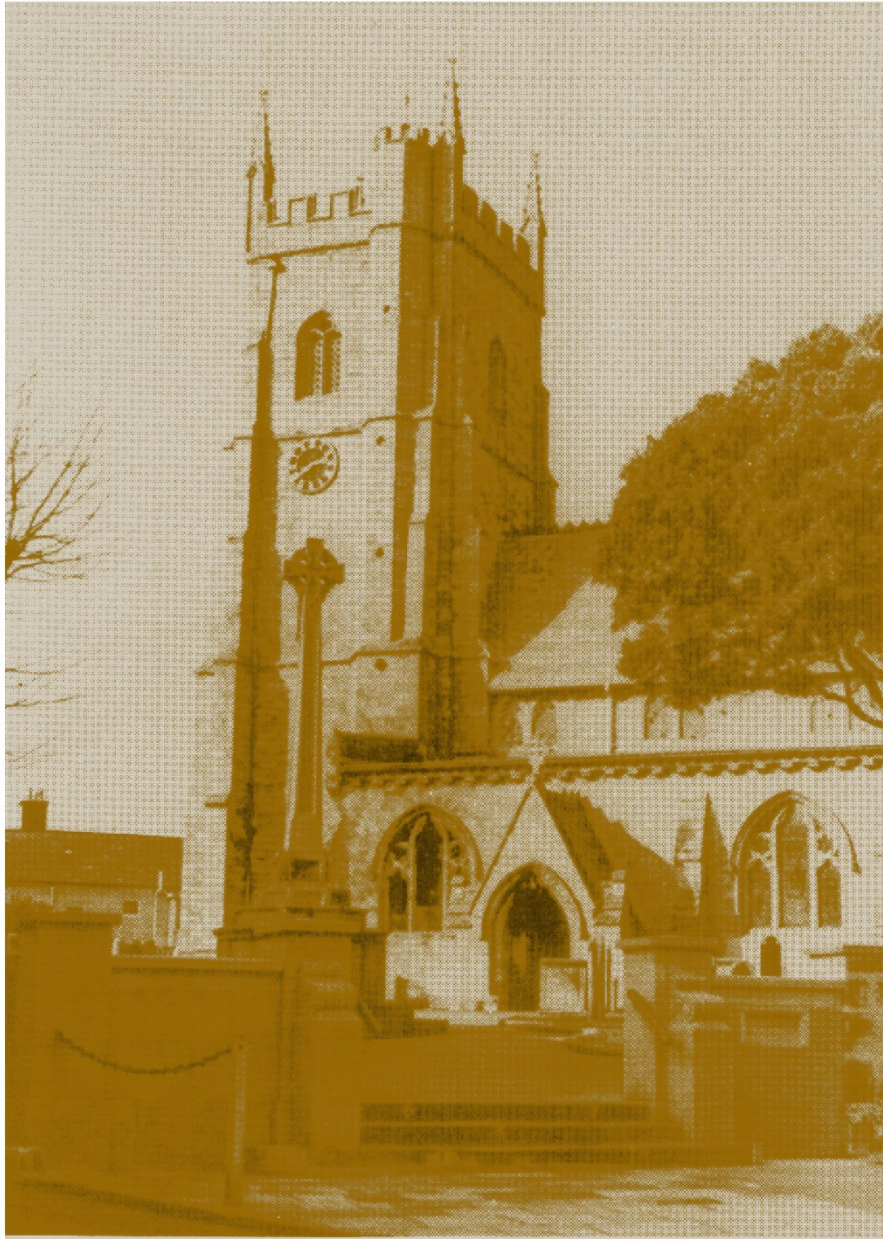


ST GILES AND ST NICHOLAS CHURCH, SIDMOUTH



ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION

*By*  
*Stewart Brown Associates, June 2004*

THE CHURCH OF ST GILES AND ST NICHOLAS, SIDMOUTH  
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*SUMMARY*

*Three small trial trenches were opened within the present church nave and crossing, both of which date from the 1860's when the medieval church was largely rebuilt. Trench 1 exposed mortared stone footings belonging to the south wall of the former medieval church chancel. Trench 2 located a grave dating from the 18<sup>th</sup> or 19<sup>th</sup> century and part of another linear feature of similar date, possibly a second grave. Trench 3 investigated the uppermost levels of a graveyard soil in an area lying inside the present church, but outside the former medieval church, a little to the south of the medieval chancel. The graveyard soil contained numerous bones from disturbed infant burials, as well as one articulated skeleton of an infant aged 1-2 years.*

The Project

In May 2004, John Scott of Oliver West and John Scott Architects commissioned Stewart Brown Associates to carry out an archaeological evaluation comprising three small trial trenches which were opened inside the church nave and crossing (Fig. 1). The evaluation was undertaken prior to proposed alterations to the internal layout, comprising the removal of all existing nave and aisle pews, and the construction of a new solid floor over the whole area of nave and aisles. This will involve excavation to approximately 0.4m below present floor level. The evaluation was intended to establish the nature of archaeological survival to a depth of 0.4m at three separate locations.

Objectives

1. To establish whether or not the existing floor structure and substructures pre-date the 1860's rebuilding.
2. To establish whether any strata of archaeological or historical importance are likely to be disturbed by the works.
3. To establish the existing subfloor construction.

Method

The trial pits measured approximately 1m square. Existing floor coverings were lifted and the subfloor excavated by hand. The location of the trial pits was chosen in order to represent a range of situations which are likely to be typical, covering 1/ an area within the former medieval church; 2/ an area outside the former medieval church; and 3/ an area straddling the conjectured external wall of the former medieval church.

Trenches 2 and 3 were excavated to the intended depth of 0.4m. Trench 1 uncovered medieval wall foundations at a lesser depth, so was discontinued in order to preserve the remains. Individual archaeological contexts were recorded. Two section drawings were made of each trial pit. The only finds were fragments of local brick and tile dating from the 18<sup>th</sup> or 19<sup>th</sup> century, and a number of scattered human bones. These were noted and then discarded. Spoil from the excavations was tipped in the graveyard. Sharp sand was used to backfill the excavations when recording was finished.

### Previous Archaeological Work

The standing fabric of the church was assessed by Keystone Historic Buildings Consultants in 2002 (Keystone Report no. 669). The medieval church was entirely rebuilt and enlarged in the 1860's, except for the medieval tower, which was retained.

### Archive Assessment

In view of the small scale of the evaluation and the simple stratigraphy it is considered appropriate that the record compiled in the present report is sufficient and that no site archive is required. All site records have been reproduced in the report, including context descriptions, sections and site plans showing context numbers. Brick and tile finds were noted then discarded. The photographic record of the excavations is adequately represented in the report.

### Description (Fig. 2, Plates 1-3)

#### *Trench 1*

##### Context 1

Wooden board floor, probably 1960's, replacing an earlier board floor of the 1860's.

##### Context 2

White mortar skim - trampled construction mortar over layer of crushed mortar from demolition of medieval wall (context 4, below).

##### Context 3

Light brown friable gritty clay with white mortar flecks, slate fragments, occasional stones and local hand-made brick fragments. Probably a construction feature dating from c. 1860.

##### Context 4

Medieval wall footing comprising stone rubble and cobbles bonded with white lime mortar with very little aggregate.

##### Context 5

Stone foundation for mortared wall 4. Large cobbles set in light brown clay.

#### Context 6

Foundation trench for present arcade pier, dating from c. 1860. Filled with loose stoney light brown clay with mortar and slate fragments

#### *Trench 2*

#### Context 1

Purbeck stone floor slab with Beer stone edging to each side.

#### Context 2

Make-up dump, dating from c. 1860. Light brown friable clay with numerous white mortar flecks, slate fragments, grit and stones. The dump also contained a number of human bones scattered throughout its depth.

#### Context 3

Linear trench – only part excavated. This could be a grave dating from the 18<sup>th</sup> or 19<sup>th</sup> century, or possibly a service trench dating from the rebuilding of 1860. The trench fill comprised loose, friable light brown clay with many stones, cobbles slate fragments and white mortar flecks. The fill also contained fragments of local hand-made brick dating from the 18<sup>th</sup> or 19<sup>th</sup> century.

#### Context 4

A post-medieval grave. The grave fill comprised light brown friable clay with mortar and slate flecks, and some stones. The fill produced two fragments of 18<sup>th</sup>- or 19<sup>th</sup>-century tile.

#### Context 5

Clay deposit – probably natural. Linear trench 3 and grave 4 above had both been cut through a clean, stiff light brown clay deposit. The deposit was exposed in the sides of the trench and grave to a depth of 0.5m (parts of the two archaeological features were excavated somewhat deeper than 0.4m in order to investigate the clay deposit further). Below the depth of 0.5m, the clay became stoney.

#### *Trench 3*

#### Context 1

Stone flagged floor, including one Purbeck stone slab, dating from the 1860's.

#### Context 2

Three brick sleeper walls with thin slate capping, dating from the 1860's. The sleeper walls were made of local hand-made bricks bonded with white sandy lime mortar (no

aggregate). The walls extended E-W and were built 0.11m wide (one brick's width) and 0.12 - 0.15m high. They were spaced 0.3m apart.

### Context 3

White lime mortar skim/ trampled construction layer, or remnant of mortar mixing area, dating from c. 1860. Hard compacted white lime mortar (identical with mortar used for sleeper walls 2 above), laminated with trampled clay.

### Context 4

Graveyard soil - undated, although probably post-medieval. Light brown friable clay with white mortar flecks and grit. The uppermost part of this deposit was trampled and compacted as well as hardened by lime seepage from the white mortar skim (context 3) above. The graveyard soil contained one articulated human infant skeleton (with teeth) as well as numerous scattered human infant bones (from two or more other infant burials). The complete skeleton was lifted and handed to David James (Vicar) for reburial in the churchyard. The soil also contained occasional adult human bones.

### *Finds*

Brick and tile finds were noted, then discarded. The human bones were deposited in the graveyard. No other finds were retrieved.

### Discussion

#### *Trench 1*

The stone wall foundations exposed in Trench 1 must represent the south wall of the medieval church chancel, since it is known that the former chancel wall lay in precisely this position (Fig 1). The foundations lie immediately below construction deposits associated with the present church built in the 1860's. The mortared masonry foundations (context 4) lie on average 0.2m below the present board floor (ranging from 0.16m to 0.24m). The cobble and clay footings (context 5) beneath the mortared masonry lie on average 0.36m below the board floor (ranging from 0.3m to 0.43m).

#### *Trench 2*

The grave (context 4) and possible second grave (context 3) both date from shortly before the church was rebuilt in the 1860's. Both were directly overlain by a make-up dump (context 2) associated with the laying of the present floor (ie contemporary with the rebuilding of the 1860's).

#### *Trench 3*

Dr. Julian Litten, an authority on English funeral practice and body disposal, has been able to shed some light on the discovery of human infant bones in the uppermost levels of the burial soil (context 4). He comments, 'It was tradition for unbaptised infants and stillbirths to be buried on the north side of the church, usually close to the

church wall. The reason for the latter was so that rainwater from the church roof - which was considered 'hallowed' as a result of its contact with part of a consecrated building - would drip down onto their little bodies and so impart a measure of sanctity on them. Bodies were rarely deposited deeper than 1.5m as was the system for individual graves. Individual coffins were not in general use until the last quarter of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Until then - and later in some areas - bodies were taken to the churchyard in a parish coffin, taken out at the graveside, and buried in their shroud' (Dr Julian Litten pers. comm.).

Here at Sidmouth, the infant burials were found on the south side of the chancel, so it appears that local burial practice for infants was not confined solely to the area to the north (there may of course be more infant burials on the north side as well). The articulated skeleton must have been one of the last to have been buried since it lay intact and undisturbed, close to the surface of the soil. The other scattered infant bones must have come from earlier burials that had been disturbed in one way or another. The lack of evidence for coffins is attributable to the practice mentioned by Dr Lytten in which the bodies were placed in shallow graves with only a shroud to cover them.

The infant burials cannot be closely dated since no dating evidence was found alongside them. It seems likely that they belong to the later post-medieval period because they were found at a very shallow depth (only 15cm depth of the burial soil was excavated). They must however pre-date the church rebuilding of 1860 since they were covered over by the floor of the new crossing. Such burials could have taken place over an extended period of time. Most of the infant bones were dispersed throughout the soil, so it would appear that later burials were frequently dug through earlier ones.

### Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dave Robinson for his much-appreciated assistance during the excavations. Many thanks also go to Valerie Dunn, Verger, for her help with safety measures.

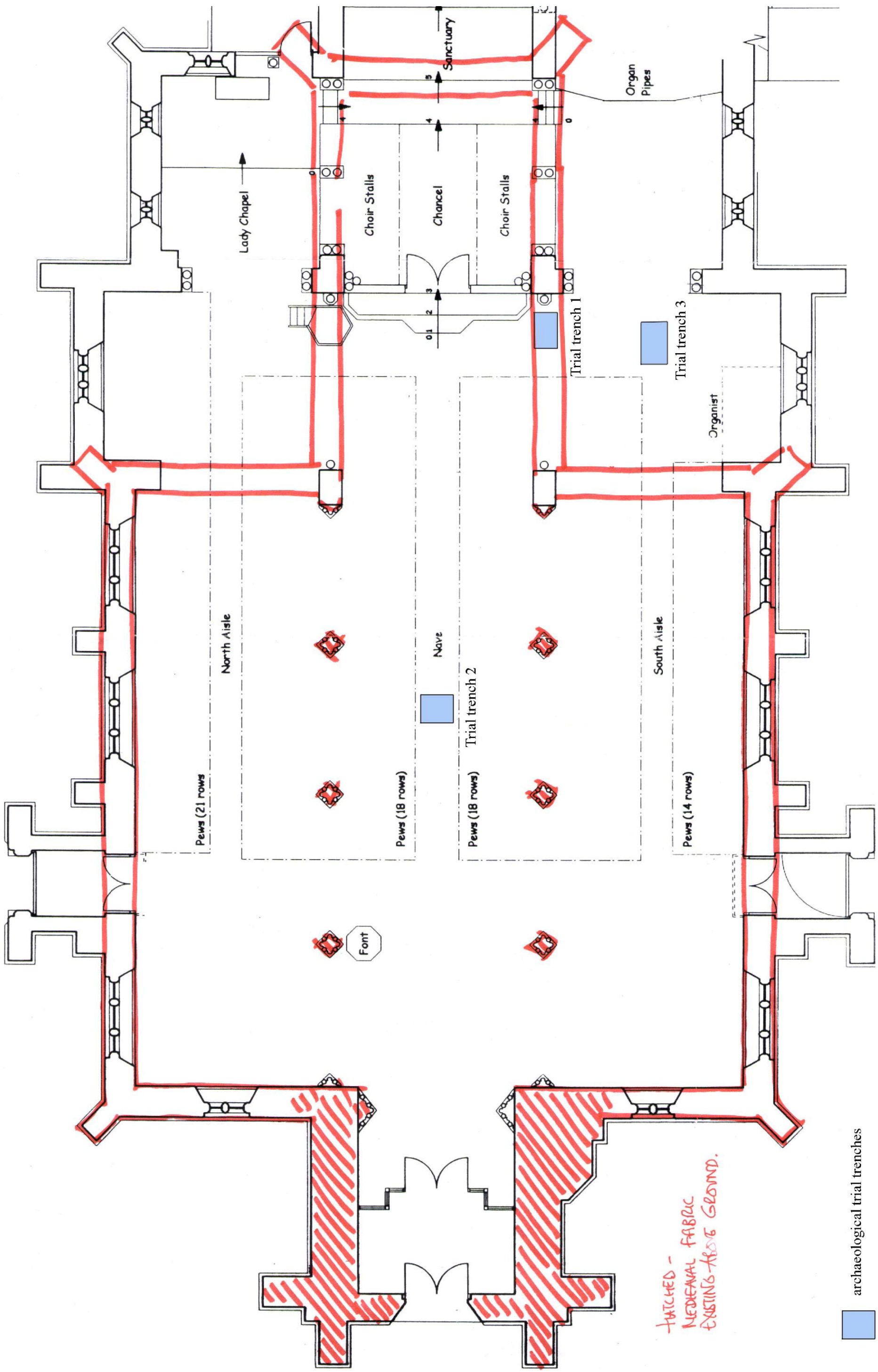


Fig 1 Plan after Oliver West and John Scott showing location of archaeological trial trenches

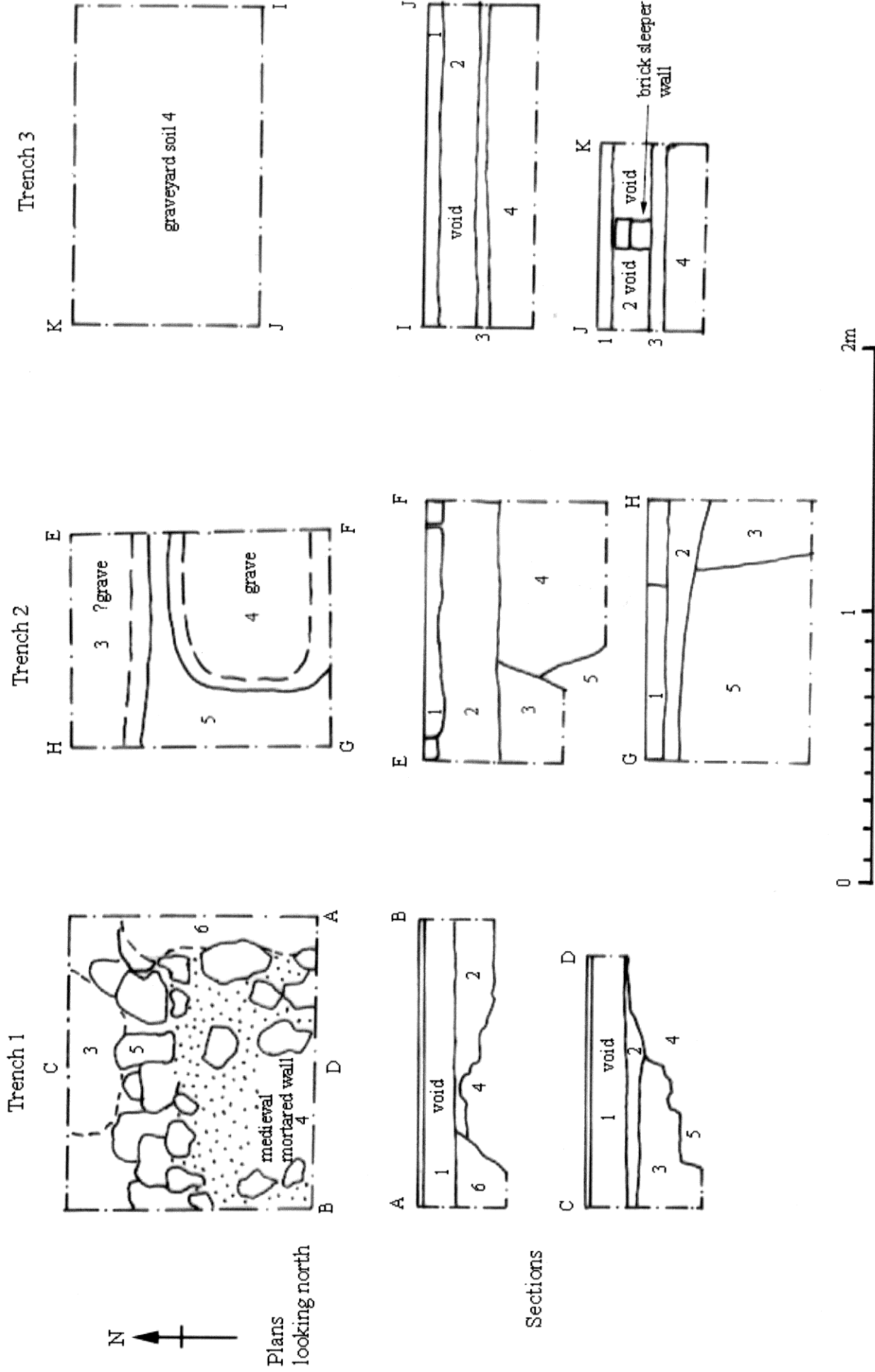


Fig 2 Plans and sections of trial trenches





Plate 1 Trench 1, looking E



Plate 2 Trench 2, looking W



Plate 3 Trench 3, looking E