

Brian Evans Associates

BIRCH COPPICE COLLIERY, DORDEN, WARWICKSHIRE

NGR SP 253 001 (centred)

ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF REPORT

Planning Ref. 1274/97/FAP

Oxford Archaeological Unit

August 2001

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Prepared by: Robin Bashford

Date: August 2001

Checked by:

Date:

Approved by:

Date:

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Summary

In February and March 2001, Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) undertook a watching brief at Birch Coppice Colliery, Dorden, Warwickshire (centred on SP 253 001). At least four phases of land drain installation were recorded, all of which were 20th century. No significant archaeological features or deposits were observed.

1. Introduction

Planning permission has been granted by North Warwickshire Borough Council for the erection of an engineering works to provide access, primary infrastructure for a development plateau and regrading and landscaping of the coal tip at the form Birch Coppice Colliery, Dorden, Warwickshire (Fig. 1).

The site is located to the south of Dorden and east of Baddesley Ensor. The colliery has had a considerable impact on the topography of the site, particularly at the western end where the ground level has been raised. The majority of the site lies at 90-100 m OD, though the raised area peaks at around 135 m OD. The southern end of the site is bounded by a dismantled mineral railway and the eastern end by Lower House Farm. The underlying geology is grey marl with beds of Sandstone (Geological Survey of Great Britain (England and Wales) Sheet 155, Atherstone).

2 Background

The site has been the subject of an Archaeological Assessment which formed part of an Environmental Statement (Brian Evans Associates, 1998). The results of the assessment are summarised below:

The development site is located immediately to the south of Watling Street, a major Roman road linking London with Wroxeter (now the A5). A large Roman coin hoard is reputed to have been found to the north of the main entrance to the colliery.

To the north-west of the site, prehistoric, Roman and medieval finds have been recorded. A cropmark enclosure of uncertain date is recorded to the east of the site which has been interpreted as an Iron Age D-shaped enclosure.

To the south-east of the site boundary lies St Nicholas Church and associated graveyard. It is likely that this is the focus of a deserted medieval village although the extent of this settlement is unknown.

Prior to the establishment of Birch Coppice Colliery in 1850, there is very little historical information available about the site itself. The Tithe map for the colliery area shows the area as open land with no field boundaries recorded. It is therefore possible that coal mining activity was already taking place on the site, and that the land had no Tithe value.

3 Aims

The aims of the watching brief were to identify any archaeological remains exposed on site during the course of the works, and to record these to established OAU standards (Wilkinson 1992), in order to secure their preservation by record.

4 Methodology

As the majority of the site to the north of Penmire Brook had been disturbed by the colliery, the watching brief focused on the area to the south, between the brook and the dismantled mineral railway (Fig. 2). This part of the site was scheduled as a cut and fill area and, as it was impractical to strip the entire site, a series of trenches were excavated across the cut area to assess any archaeological remains which may be destroyed by the development, the remaining topsoil strip was closely monitored.

Within the constraints imposed by health and safety considerations the deposits exposed were cleaned, inspected and recorded in plan, section and by colour slide and monochrome print photography. Written records were also made on proforma sheets.

5 Results

A total of eight trenches were excavated across the cut area of the part of the site scheduled for cut and fill. Trenches 1-6 were aligned roughly north-south whilst Trenches 7 and 8 were aligned east-west. Trenches 1, 2 and 3 were recorded in detail with a plan and sample sections from each trench (Figs 3-6) in order to show the concentration of land drains across the site. The remaining trenches were located on plan (Fig. 3) and photographed but no further recording was considered necessary given the lack of archaeological features or deposits.

The topsoil was also stripped from the fill area in preparation for the deposition of material excavated from the cut area. The diversion of Penmire Brook was also part of the development proposal and additional excavation was required around the eastern and southern edge of the site. The topsoil strip and the stream diversion were also monitored.

Trench 1 (Figs 2, 3 and 4)

Trench 1 measured 1.8 m x 65 m x c 0.5 m and was located to the west of the cut area. Numerous land drains were recorded in plan (Fig. 4) but no significant archaeological deposits or features were recorded. The stratigraphic sequence consisted of 0.40 m of silty loam topsoil overlying Grey Marl natural.

Trench 2 (Figs 2, 3 and 5)

Trench 2 measured 1.8 m x 82.5 m x 0.55 m and also revealed a number of field drains on various alignments. A slot was excavated across one of these to confirm that the cuts observed were not archaeological features and revealed a ceramic pipe at the base of the cut.

Trench 3 (Figs 2, 3 and 6)

Trench 3 measured 1.8 m x 92 m x c 0.5 m. Three more slots were excavated across the land drains and again confirmed the recent origin of the features observed.

Trenches 4-8 (Fig. 3)

The remaining trenches revealed a similar concentration of field drains but no archaeological features or deposits. A potential alluvial deposit was observed in the northern end of trenches 5 and 6 although it is uncertain whether this marked the archaeological horizon or sealed any archaeological remains which may survive within the fill area immediately to the south of Penmire Brook.

Topsoil Strip in Fill Area and Excavation of Brook Diversion

Topsoil stripping within the fill area appeared to confirm that an alluvial deposit was present immediately to the south of Penmire Brook. No features were observed and although it is possible that archaeology survives beneath the alluvium, the lack of features or deposits across the rest of the site suggests that this is unlikely.

The channel for the stream diversion measured approximately 12 m in width and was excavated to a depth of c 7 m. No archaeological deposits or features were observed during this work.

6 Finds

No finds were recovered during the watching brief.

7 Environmental results

Although full consideration was given to various sampling strategies, due to the absence of any suitable deposits and the tight constraints of the excavation, no environmental soil samples were taken.

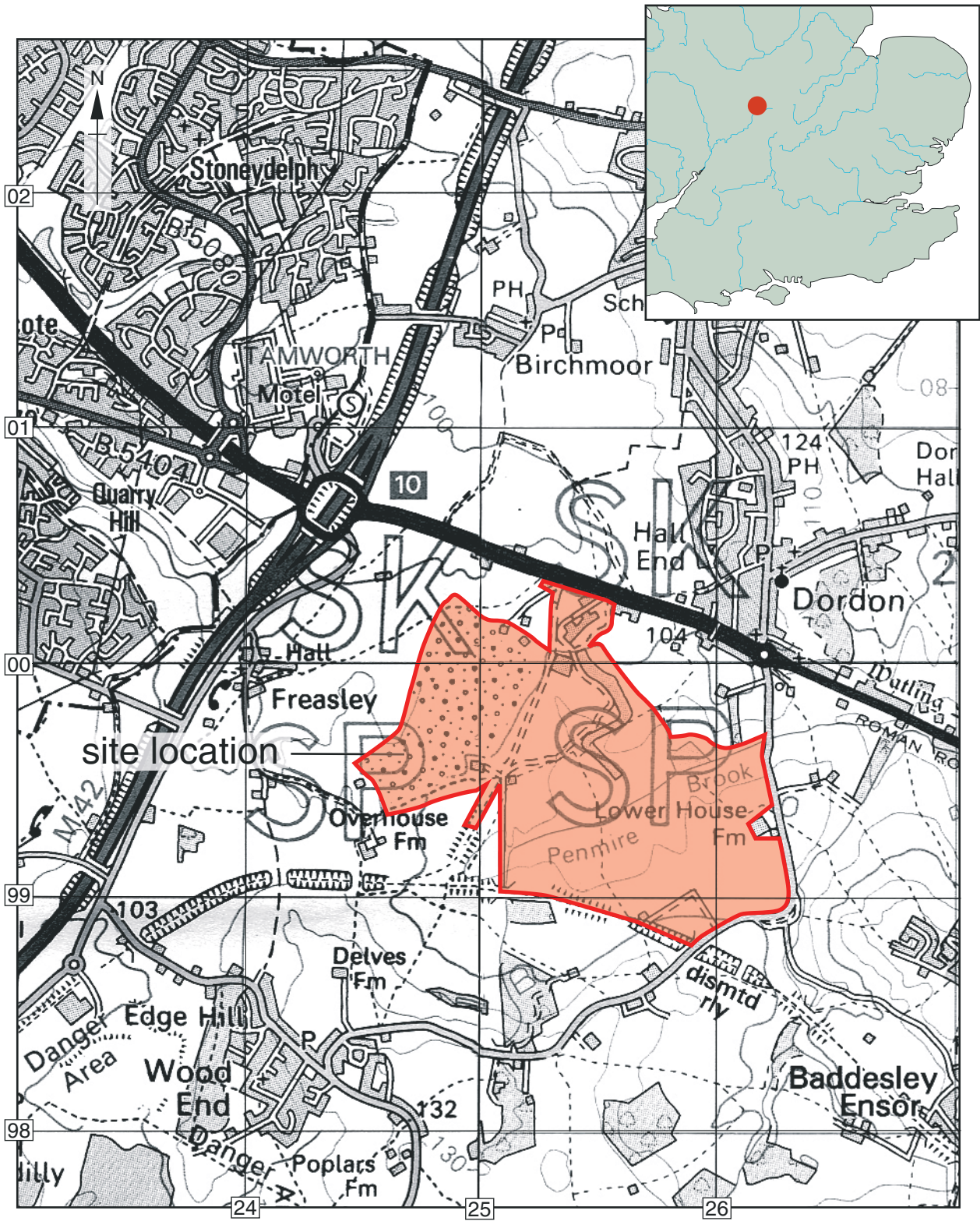
8 Discussion

The trial trenching carried out in the field to the south of Penmire Brook (Trenches 1-8) did not reveal any significant archaeological features or deposits.

The majority of the site to the north of Penmire Brook had been heavily truncated during the operational lifespan of the colliery. Colliery waste was observed to a depth of at least 10 m and was sealed by a fairly clean sandy deposit. It is almost certain that any archaeological remains have been destroyed by the colliery. There was potential for archaeological remains further to the north, particularly along the line of Watling Street (A5). However, the impact of the development in this area was minimal and not sufficient to reveal any archaeology which may exist in this area.

References.

Wilkinson, D (ed) 1992 Oxford Archaeological Unit Field Manual, (First edition, August 1992).



Scale 1:25,000

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Figure 1: Site location.

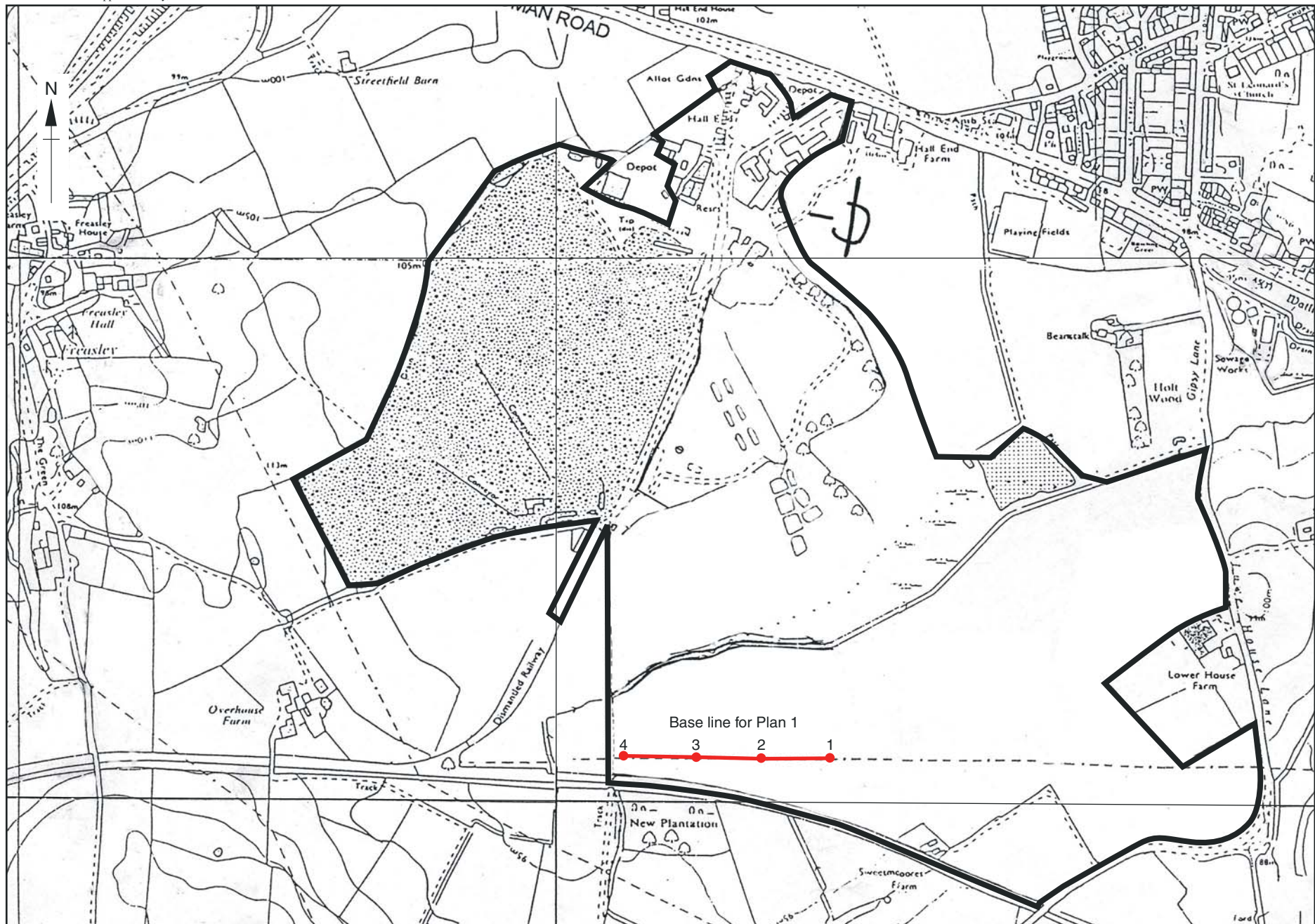
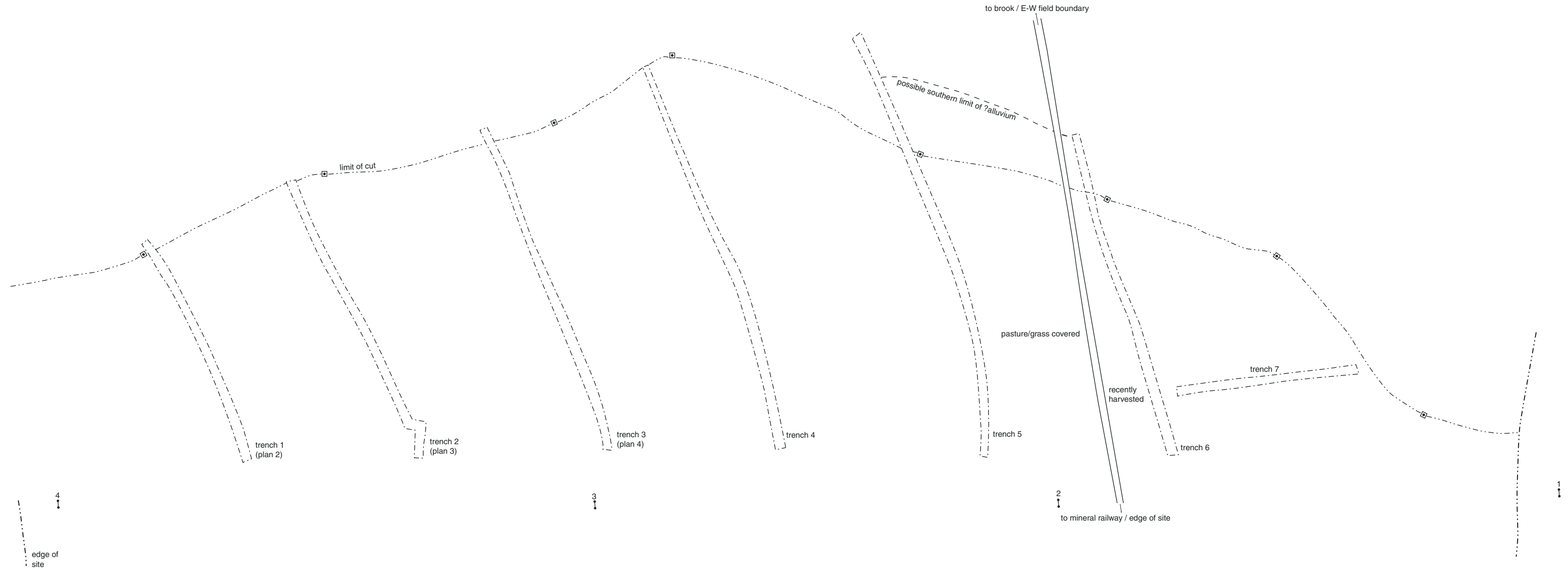


Figure 2: Site Boundary and Location of Plan 1.



□ Wooden pegs marking boundary between cut and fill (cut to the South)

1 Wooden pylons (marked on location map)



Figure 3 : Site plan (South of Penmire Brook).

DOB/CWB*Birch Coppice Colliery, Dordon*RMS* 28.08.01.

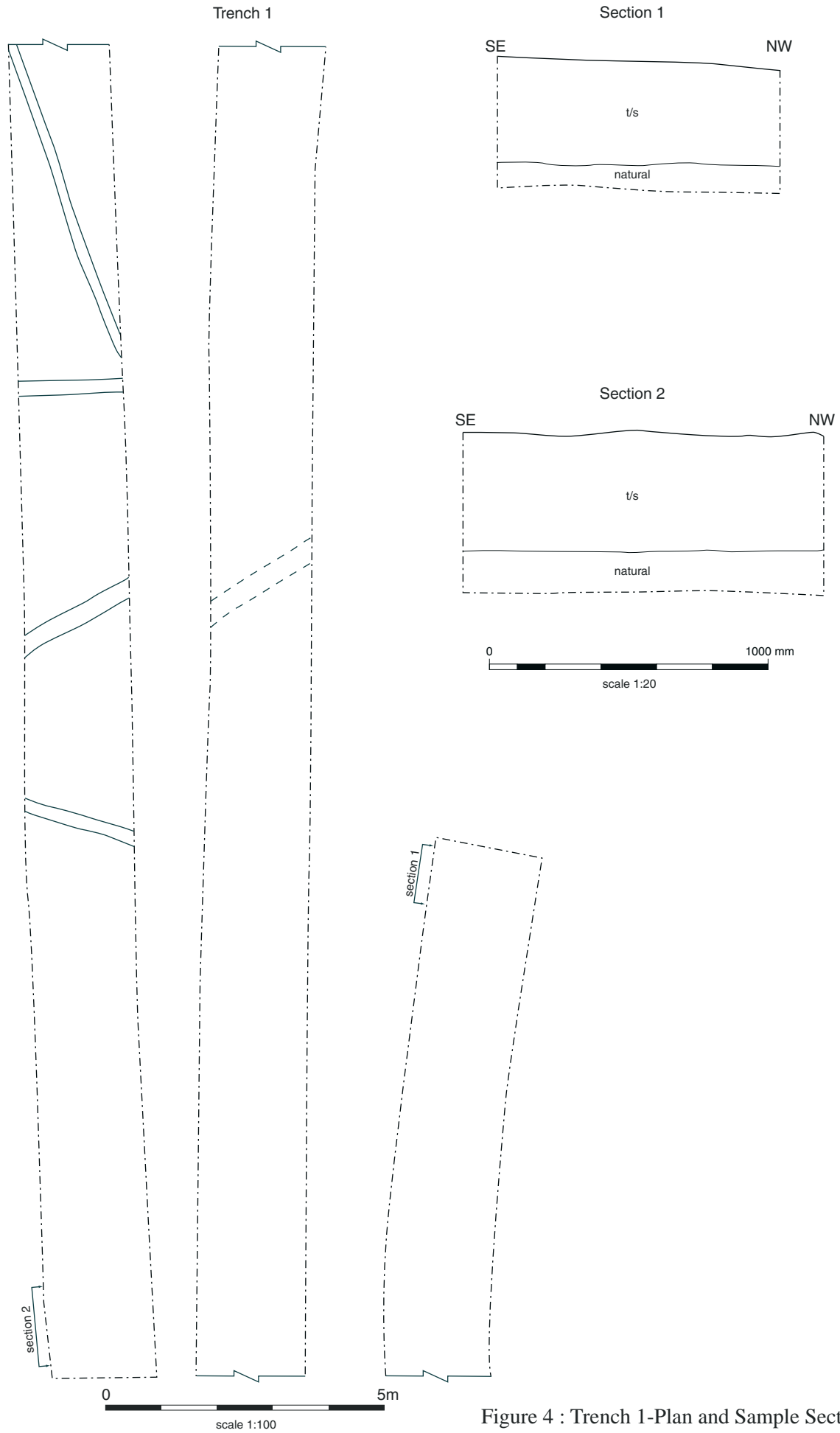


Figure 4 : Trench 1-Plan and Sample Sections.

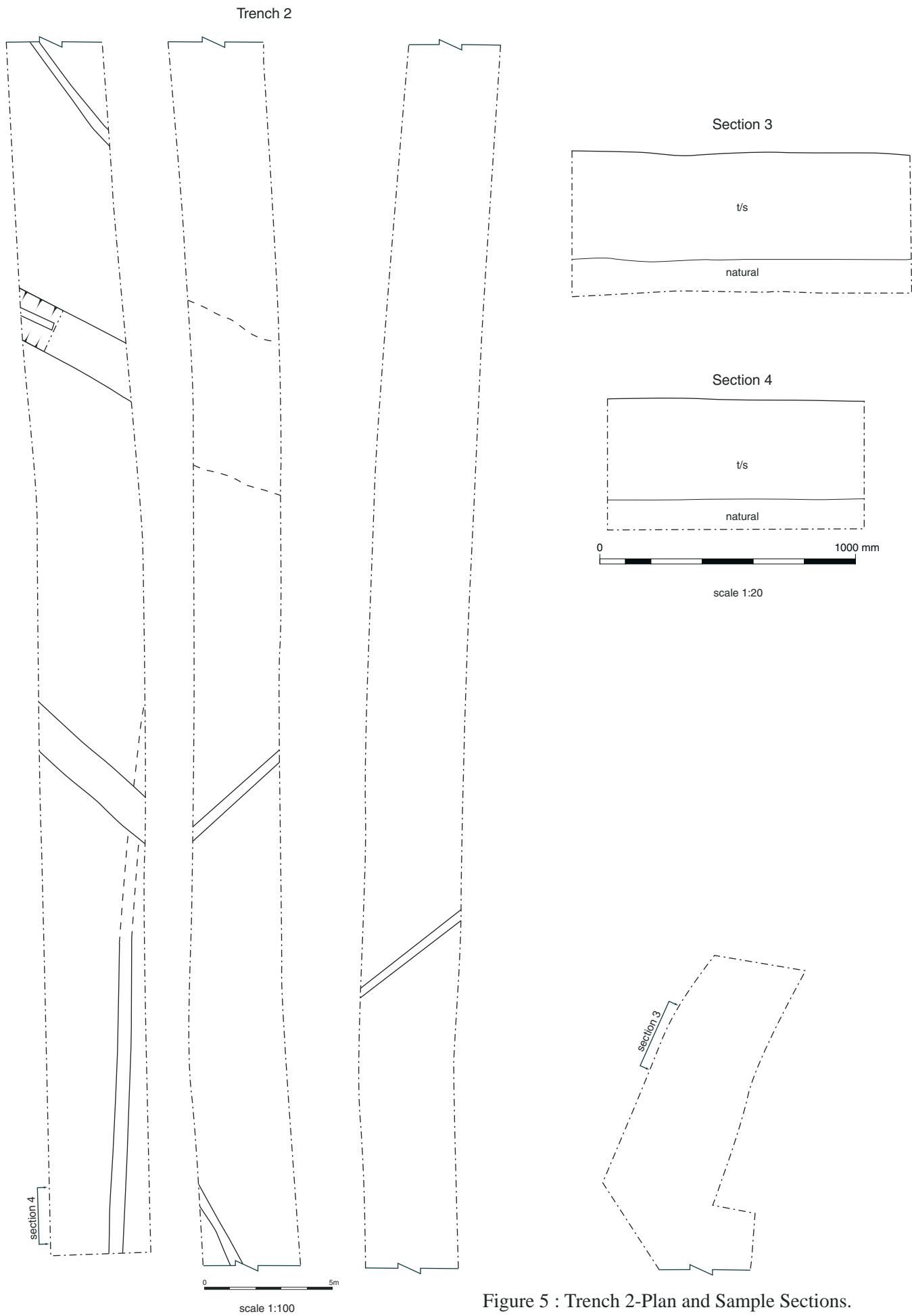


Figure 5 : Trench 2-Plan and Sample Sections.

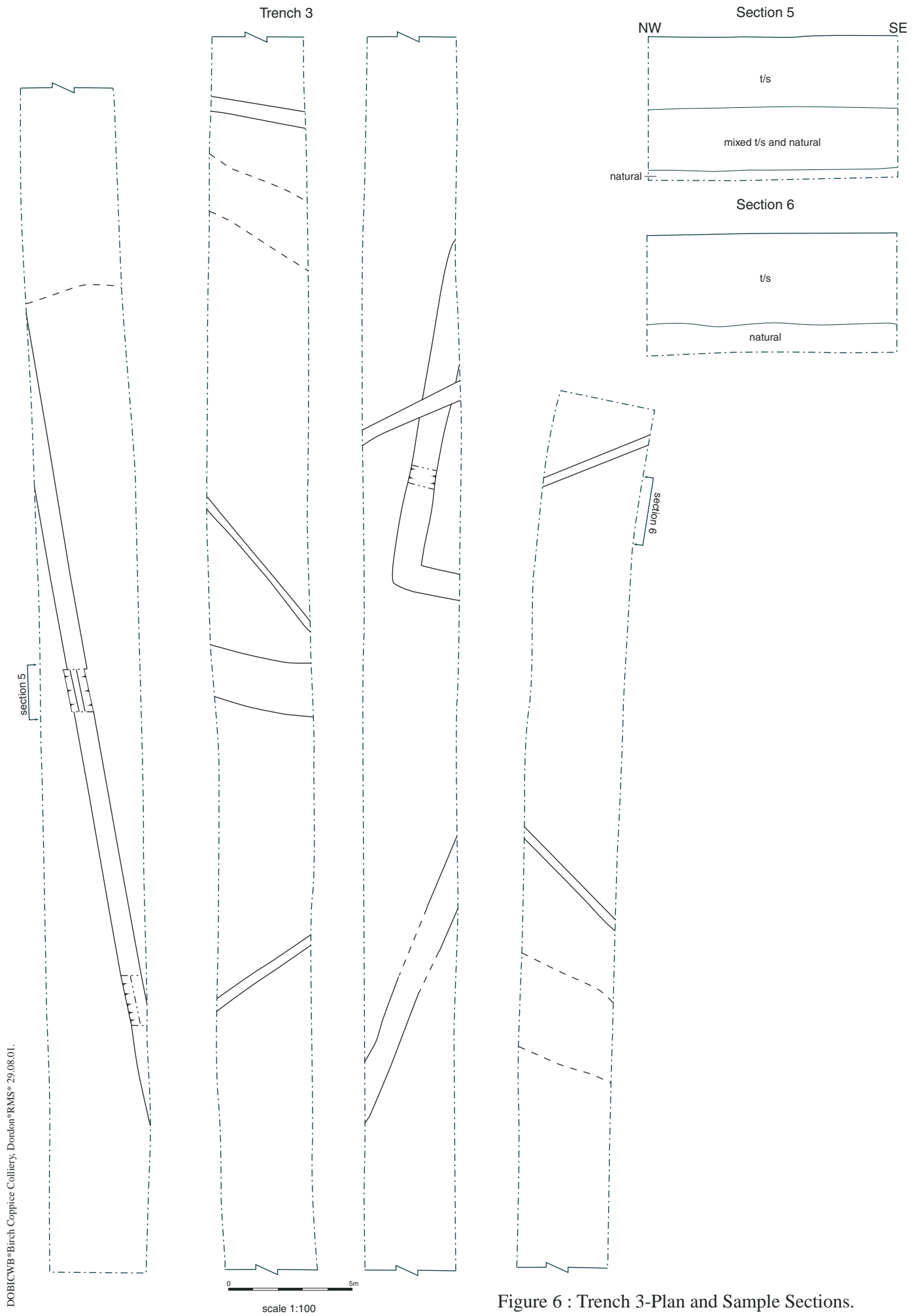


Figure 6 : Trench 3-Plan and Sample Sections.