

Hermitage Lane Maidstone, Kent

Archaeological Evaluation

NGR TQ 731 552



Barming Heath c.1801

OXFORD ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT

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Hermitage Lane, Maidstone: Archaeological Evaluation

1 Introduction

An archaeological evaluation was undertaken by the Oxford Archaeological Unit on 6.5 acres of land at Barming Heath, Hermitage Lane, Maidstone (NGR TQ 731552). The work was conducted on behalf of Barratt South London Ltd. to a specification set by Lawson-Price Environmental and approved by Kent County Council in relation to conditions placed upon planning permission for residential development (Planning Application MA/94/1316). The site lies on open land to the rear of Oakwood Psychiatric Hospital Nurses Home which fronts Hermitage Lane. The work took place on 25th - 27th January.

2 Objective

The objective was to establish the presence or otherwise of archaeological deposits and, if present, their depth, date, extent, nature and quality with a view to gaining sufficient information to formulate a mitigation strategy.

3 Geology and Topography

The site lies on a gentle SE facing slope at between about 82 and 86 m OD with a view overlooking the Medway valley. The underlying geology is the Sandgate Beds, consisting of sandy and clayey silts interbedded with limestone. Local fissuring has been reported in ground-tests. At the time of the evaluation the site was open grassland used for informal recreation.

4 Archaeological Background

The site had not been archaeologically investigated previously and no remains had been reported. A desk-top assessment, conducted by Lawson-Price Environmental, had identified Bronze Age burial material 500 m to the east and 1 km to the north. A Roman cemetery had been located c. 1 km to the north and Hermitage Lane is considered to have possible Roman origins. This suggested a modest potential for Roman and/or prehistoric remains on the site, particularly in view of its topographic location.

5 Method

Four trenches were excavated using a JCB equipped with a toothless bucket (see Fig. 1). Trenches 1, 2 and 4 were 40 m long and Trench 3 60 m long. They were all 2 m wide. They represent a 2% sample of the site.

The trenches were positioned approximately according to the plan attached to the specification, with some adjustment to avoid disturbing, as far as possible, the footpaths which crossed the heath.

They were machine-excavated as far as the undisturbed 'natural' geology. In Trs. 3 & 4 it was unclear whether the lower silts were of archaeological significance and these were partly machine-excavated and then cleaned by

hand. Features or potential features were examined by hand-excavation with the exception of the large 'quarry' in Tr. 1. Recording was conducted according to the standard OAU method with trenches planned at 1:100.

6 **Summary of Results**

The evaluation discovered very little of archaeological interest and no features which could be said to indicate a 'site'. A single sherd of pottery of Bronze Age/early Iron Age type was found in the lower deposits at the northern end of Trench 3. This did not appear to relate to any archaeological features and can be interpreted as a stray find from a nearby occupation. Two possible worked flints also came from this trench.

In Trench 1 a large feature of unknown overall size was interpreted as an infilled quarry, possibly related to the extraction of fuller's earth in the 17th-18th centuries. A brick wall in this trench was clearly a boundary associated with the building depicted on early 20th century OS maps.

A list of all deposits and finds is presented in Table 1.

7 **Trench descriptions**

Trench 1 (Figs. 1 & 2)

This trench ran down the eastern slope of the site into an area of rough ground which was shown to have been occupied by a house on the 1908 and 1932 editions (6-Inch series) of the Ordnance Survey.

The topsoil was about 35 cm deep and, at the E end directly overlay the 'natural' clayey silt. The edge of a modern feature [1/7] was encountered at the extreme E end. This was not excavated. Further west the remains of a N-S brick wall [1/6] was uncovered. It was 2 bricks wide, survived to 3 courses and rested on a mortar/rubble foundation which appeared not to be set very deeply into the natural silt. This seems to have marked the rear boundary of the late 19th/early 20th century property fronting Hermitage Lane.

At the W end of the trench under the topsoil was encountered an extensive and thick deposit of dumped material [1/2, 1/3 & 1/5] consisting of mixed layers of clayey silt with patches of yellow clay-silt and brick and slate fragments. This was excavated to a depth of 60 cm by machine but not bottomed. It appears to be the same deposit as was recorded in Trial Pits 2, 10 and 16 which reached a maximum depth 2.7 m. This deposit was clearly responsible for the modern contour of the land here, which rises about 1 m over 25 m, and must be assumed to be the infill of a quarry which had gone out of use by the early 19th century (ie. before the first cartographic survey by the Ordnance Survey c. 1801). Only the E edge of this feature was found.

Trench 2

This was the shallowest of the trenches, generally showing 20 cm of topsoil

directly overlying the natural silty clay. The northern 5 m or so was slightly deeper and showed a layer of dumped material [2/2] overlying traces of an earlier soil [2/3] which equates to the sequences found in Trenches 3 and 4. There were no features.

Trench 3 (Fig. 3)

This trench revealed a number of variations in deposits but no archaeological features were found. All the soils and potential features were interpreted as modern disturbances or natural variations.

Under a uniform topsoil was encountered a deposit of yellow silty clay dumping [3/2] which extended the whole length of the trench but was thickest at the S end (40 cm). Here it infilled the top of a natural hollow. Under this was an extensive dark greyish soil [3/3] which was generally very clean but was seen to contain occasional modern finds (eg. bottle glass) which suggested that it had been recently disturbed. A similar thin dark soil [3/7] underlay it at the southern two-thirds of the trench.

These upper layers contrasted strongly with the underlying sandy silts. A yellow sandy silt with grey mottling [3/10] occupied the central part of the trench. This was considered to be a natural deposit and was not generally excavated. However, two flint core fragments recovered during cleaning suggested that it might have been formed in prehistoric times, although the pieces were possibly intrusive.

Layer [3/4] was possibly equivalent in origin to [3/10] although it was markedly different in nature, being a friable reddish brown sandy silt. It was present mostly at the N and S ends of the trench occupying hollows in the underlying deposits. It reached a maximum depth of 18 cm at the S end. A single sherd of pottery recovered from [3/4] suggested that the deposit had some archaeological significance, but it seems possible, particularly considering the evidence from Trench 4, that the sherd had intruded into earlier deposits through root/animal action. The pottery was of fairly undiagnostic type but is considered most likely to be of late Bronze Age or Iron Age date.

The undisturbed natural geology consisted of a variable yellowish or reddish clay-silt with bands of broken sandstone.

Trench 4 (Fig. 2)

At the extreme E and W ends of the trench the modern topsoil directly overlay natural flinty clay-silt (as in Trench 2). In the central part, however, the trench was excavated more deeply through a compact yellow and grey mottled silt [4/4] which overlay a soft reddish brown silt [4/5]. These appear to be equivalent to layers [3/10] and [3/4] and occupied a hollow whose course was continued at the S end of Trench 3. No finds were recovered, and while these deposits cannot be dated it is possible that they predate any human occupation.

8 Discussion

Before the development of the modern grassland, evidence from all the trenches indicates a thin but extensive dumping of yellow clay-silt which had the effect of levelling off the somewhat undulating terrain. This overlay a dark greyish soil which contrasted sharply with the underlying silts/natural and contained some modern material. It seems likely, on the field evidence alone, that this layer had been disturbed by ploughing.

On the eastern side of the site the dumping appeared to immediately overlie the infill of an enormous feature which can only be interpreted as a quarry. It is possible that this is an infilled pit relating to the excavation of fuller's earth, as this commodity is associated with the Sandgate Beds (Geological Survey sheet 288). This part of Kent was particularly noted for the extraction and export of fuller's earth, with most documentary references citing activity in the 17th - 18th centuries (*V.C.H. Kent vol. iii*, 396-97). This feature, which does not appear on the OS map series, must have predated the building and grounds to the east which are of late 19th/early 20th century date.

The lower silts in the northern part of the site (Trench 3) yielded the only finds of archaeological interest - the sherd of ?later prehistoric pottery and two worked flints. These deposits present some problems of interpretation. They were at the same general level as the surface of the natural geology where it presented itself as either weathered sandstone or a cohesive clayey silt, and it seems likely that they can be interpreted as highly weathered varieties of the natural silt. These few finds, which came from near the surface of these deposits, can readily be seen as intrusive. Alternatively the silts can be interpreted as colluvial accumulations within natural hollows which were infilling during the later prehistoric period and incorporated some stray material.

9 Comment on Results

The evaluation took place in cold, intermittently wet weather which inconvenienced the fieldwork to some degree but is thought not to have compromised the results presented.

There was a marked absence of any material earlier than the relatively modern (18th - 20th centuries). While finds recovered during machine excavation are an unreliable sample, it seems clear that, had earlier material been present, a proportion of it would have been found.

Attention was paid to the possibility of prehistoric features (which tend to be the most difficult to trace), particularly as the sherd of ?prehistoric pottery was recovered in the first few metres of Trench 3 (the first trench excavated). The general absence of flint in particular makes it unlikely that there was any prehistoric occupation here. Roman occupation normally betrays itself by a proliferation of sherds and none were found. In

conclusion, the results would seem to be reliable.

Table 1: Contextual information

Tr/Cxt	Type	Width m	Depth m	Finds	Comment
1/1	topsoil		0.2-0.3		
1/2	layer		0.35 max		mod. dump
1/3	layer		0.10	post-med pot (3)	mod. soil under 1/2
1/4	pit	?	2.7 ?		quarry?
1/5	fill of 4		0.6+		
1/6	brick wall	0.23			boundary wall
1/7	pit	?	0.4+		mod., not exc.
1/8	fill of 7		0.4+		
1/9	posthole?	0.2	0.09		mod.?
1/10	fill of 9	0.2	0.09		
2/1	topsoil		0.15		
2/2	layer		0.10		mod. dump
2/3	layer		0.08 max		ploughsoil?
2/4	natural				
3/1	topsoil		0.16-0.23		
3/2	layer		0.17		mod. dump
3/3	layer		0.20		ploughsoil?
3/4	layer		0.13	?prehist. pot (1)	colluvium?
3/5	layer		0.10 max		weathered natura?l?
3/6	natural				stone & silt
3/7	layer		0.1-0.12	post-med pot (1)	ploughsoil?
3/8	pipe trench	0.57	0.50+		mod. services
3/9	fill of 8	0.57	0.50+		
3/10	layer		0.08	flint (2)	weathered natural?
4/1	topsoil		0.20		
4/2	layer		0.25 max		mod. dump
4/3	layer		0.15 max		ploughsoil?
4/4	layer		0.7-0.10		weathered natural?
4/5	layer		0.4 max		colluvium?
4/6	natural				

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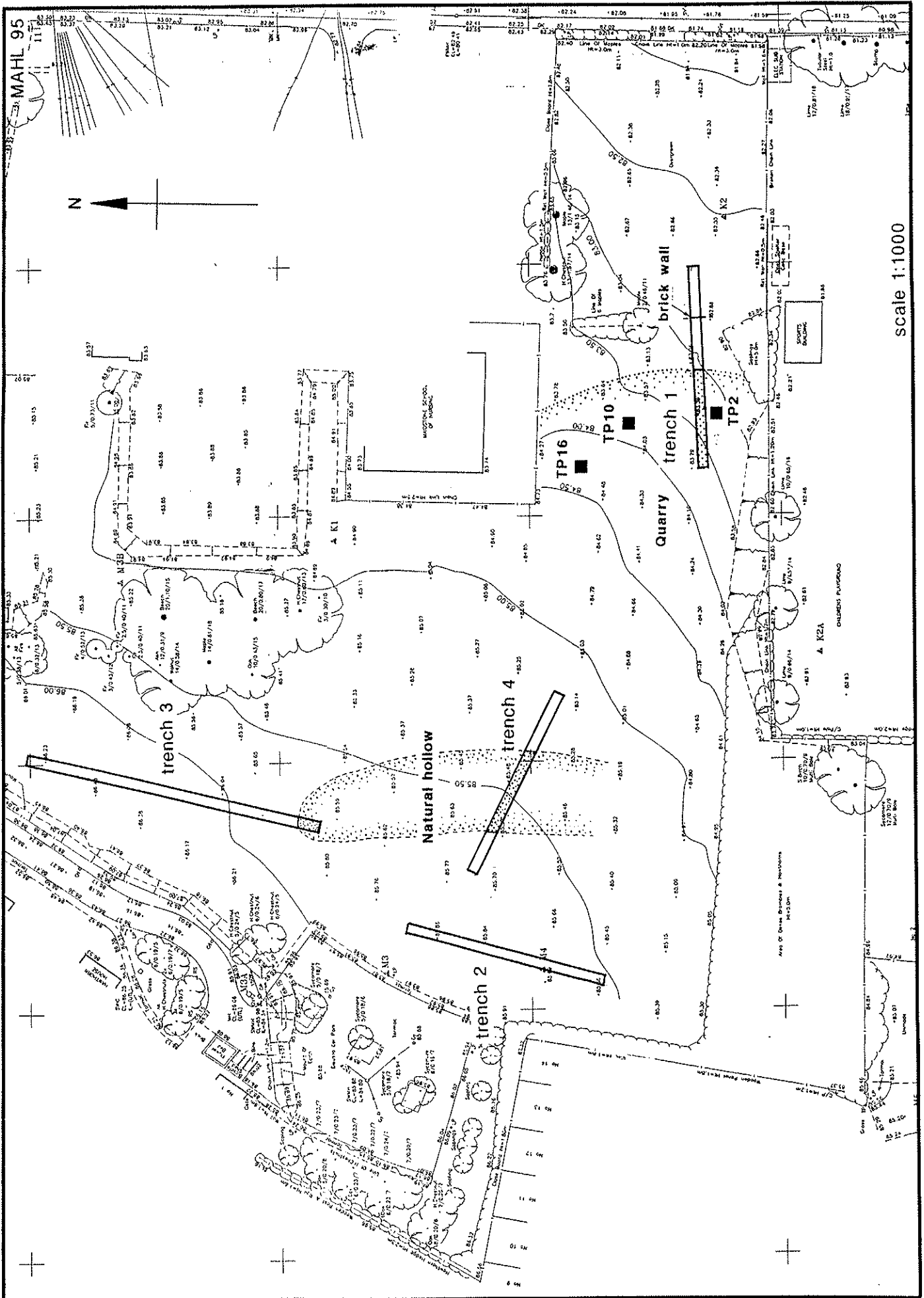
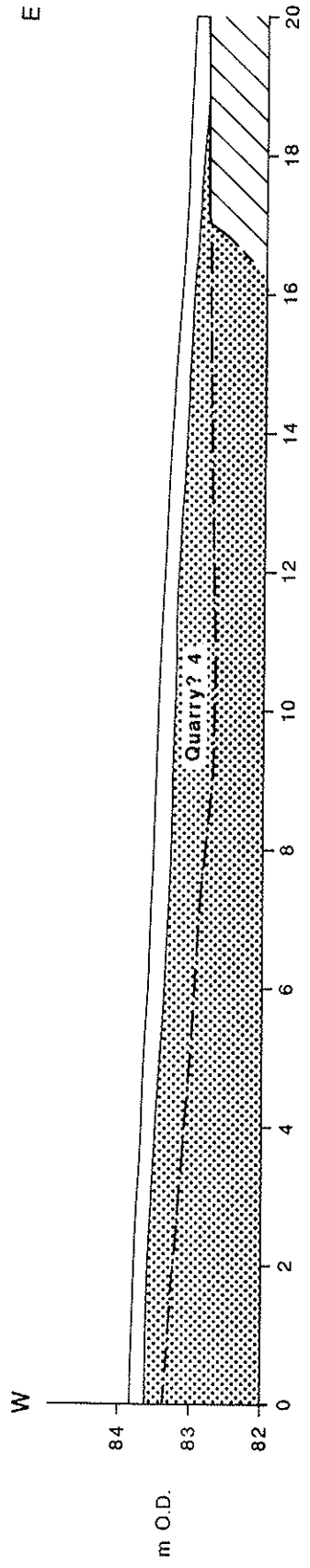
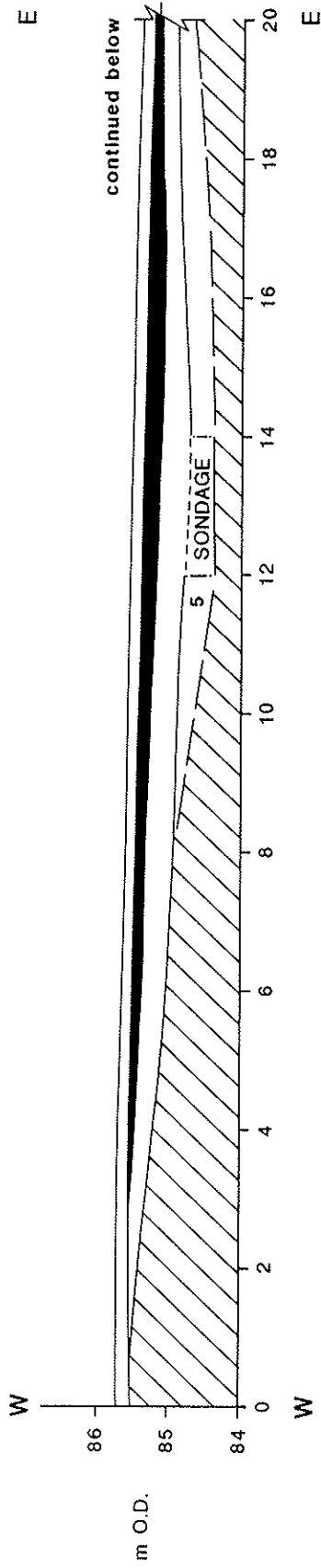


figure 1

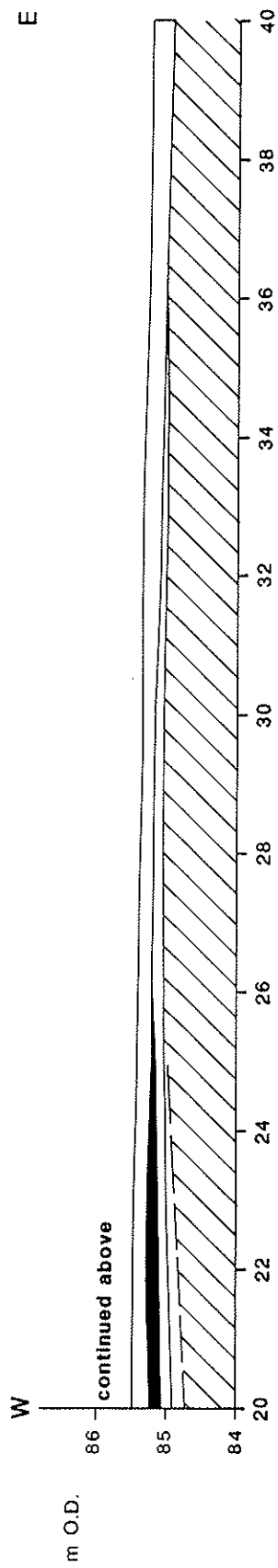
Trench profiles Trench 1



Trench 4



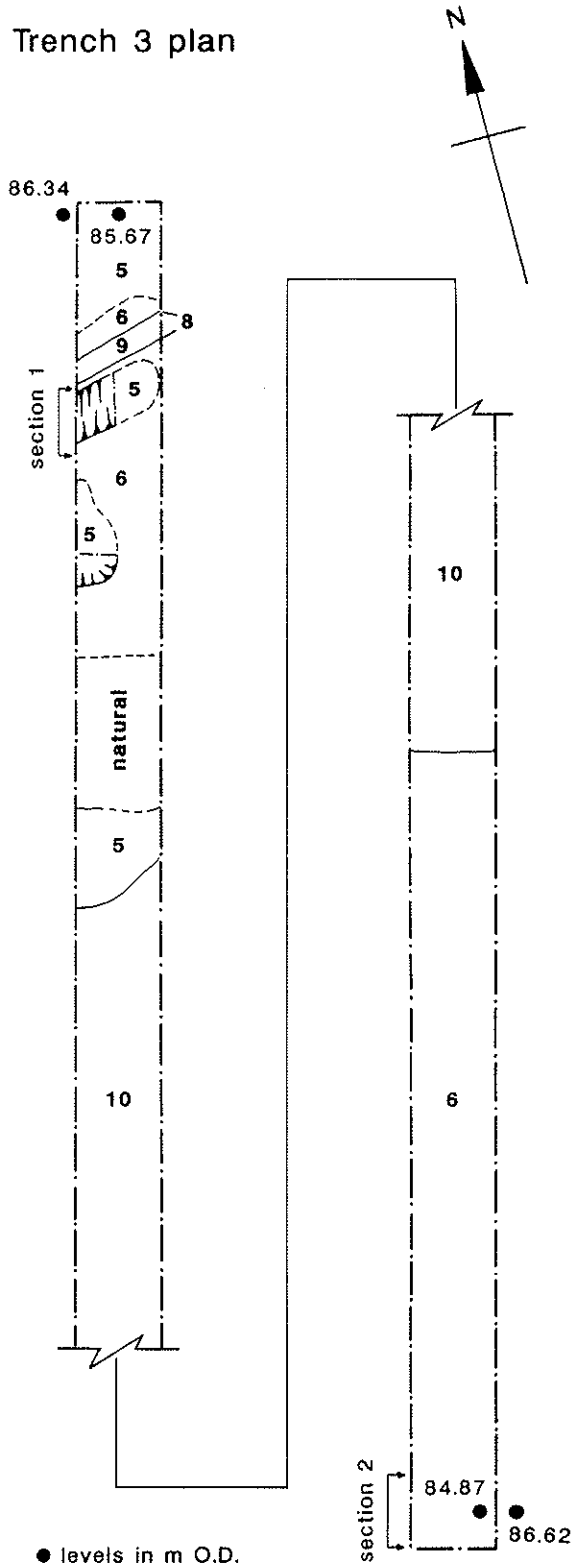
Trench 1



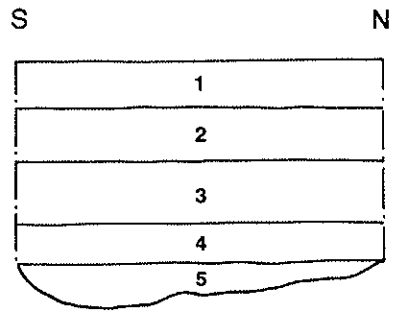
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figure 2

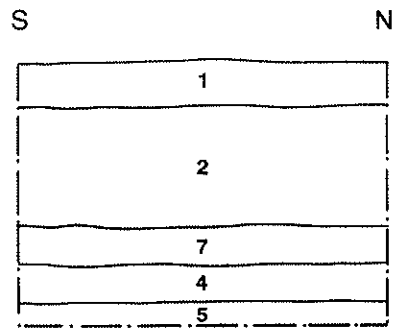
Trench 3 plan



section 1



section 2



scale 1:200

scale 1:25

figure 3

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