

OXFORD (OX)

OXFORD, PARK END STREET

FORMER HALLS BREWERY

ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT SEPTEMBER 1989

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Background information

Halls Oxford and West Brewery have occupied a site on Park End Street for forty years, recently being used as a bottling plant. The brewers have now relocated themselves outside the city centre, and the site has been released for redevelopment.

In 1984 an application was made for planning consent for a mixed commercial and housing development, which was finally given outline consent in 1988. At this point the Unit notified agents for the applicant that there was a possibility of important archaeological remains on the St Thomas Street and Hollybush Row frontages, and made an offer to provide an assessment of the quality of the remains and the likely impact of the proposed development. This offer was taken up in September 1989 and within ten days two trial trenches had been opened in the respective areas.

Archaeological Background (Fig. 4)

The brewery site lies in a medieval suburb of Oxford which has been shown by previous excavation to be part of the flood plain of the Thames, with properties strung out along a road between the Norman Castle and an Augustinian abbey built on the island of Oseney to the west. The late 12th century suburb presumably included the church of St Thomas the Martyr to the west (probably AD 1187-1191). By this time it is generally accepted that St Thomas Street must have been in existence, although doubt is now cast on this by the provisional results of this assessment.

A second major route seems to have been built around 1200 linking the North Gate of Oxford to Oseney Abbey and Hinksey Ferry, perhaps as a 'bypass' to avoid congestion around the castle. This included a new bridge at Hythe Bridge Street, leading on to Hollybush Row and joining the existing route either at High Street or at Oseney Lane.

Along these roads there would have been housing, probably largely promoted by the abbey itself. Four phases of domestic building were excavated at the Hamel in 1976-7, running from the c. 1205 to the early 16th century. This was an area of mixed peasant or artisan housing alongside the bigger and more substantial dwellings like the Hall of St Helen (Palmer 1980). Other early buildings in St Thomas are known from a 19th century illustration by J Buckler (J Munby, 1974), and from the work of SE Rigold on the Brewery site itself, where he describes a 13th century building excavated in 1947-48 (Rigold 1951). This building was said to be 18ft x 9ft, oblique to the road and constructed on a

'14 inch cushion of made-up clay and gravel', which in some ways accords with what is described below.

Method of Assessment (Fig. 1)

The areas of interest on the brewery site were identified from the outset as the frontages of the medieval streets, specifically those areas where major new building work was proposed and where visible modern disturbance was at a minimum. This resolved itself as the front yard of the bottling plant (Trench 1), and the interior of the western of two buildings on St Thomas Street (Trench 2). An initial trench shape was adopted of 5m x 2m at right angles to the street. In each case this appeared to give a representative sample of the stratigraphy, which was fortunate since the concrete of Trench 2 proved to be particularly tough and additional trenches would have overrun the timetable.

Beneath the concrete the levels were excavated by machine down to the tops of medieval walls in Trench 1, and to an undisturbed surface in Trench 2

Trench 1 (Figs. 2, 6)

Below the modern tarmac 1/1 was a variable thickness of demolition rubble 1/2 and drains etc. The machine had disturbed the top two courses of a north-south stone wall 1/4 which clearly belonged to the recent building shown on photographs of 1960 (OCL). Its construction level seemed however to be indicated by a layer with a thin surface of pea-gravel 1/6 against the east or outside face of its footing, and which produced pottery of early 17th century date. On the side of the wall towards Hollybush Row was a series of horizontal layers of loam, clay and mortar 1/3, which seemed to be laminated internal floors of the building.

The floors of the 1/4 building overlay a thick layer of loam 1/5 which covered both the eastern and northern arms of an earlier stone wall 1/8. A very similar layer 1/5/1 extended down into the angle between these walls onto a thin smooth 1/7 which was interpreted as internal floors of an earlier phase of building.

The presumed floor of the early building was laid on a mixed deposit of mortar and loam 1/9 which were interpreted as fill. Similar material was found east of 1/4 where the mechanical excavation had been taken to a deeper level. Finds from this area were recorded according to their level. 1/6/1 was dark grey brown silty loam nearly 0.5m thick down to a thin gravelly surface, beneath which was more similar loam 1/6/2. 1/6/3 beneath this included mottles of orange loam, with /4 and /5 similar again. The lowest soil horizon 1/6/6 was compacted gravelly loam with a white concretion immediately above the gravel.

Trench 2 (Fig. 3)

Below the reinforced concrete floor 2/1 was a layer of black cinder/ash 2/2 which extended over the entire trench. Directly beneath this was a large stone footing 2/8 near the street, and a series of medieval floor layers 2/3/1-2/3/4 that together were 0.15m at their thickest point. They consisted of narrow lenses of charcoal, sand, silty clay and loam. Traces were found of the north wall 2/4 of the building which would have contained these floors, the stones bonded together with red-brown clay 2/4/1. This wall appeared to cut through a trench 2/11 on a similar alignment which was respected by the floor layers. Where it appeared in the east section this trench included laid stone, which suggested that it was the partly-robbled remains of an earlier wall.

A layer of brown clayey loam 2/5 more than 1m thick and including medieval finds lay underneath all this. It was assumed to be a dumped deposit, and a section was machined out of the north-west corner in order to confirm its depth and to investigate the deeper deposits. This exposed a ditch 2/17 running south-east, north-west which was cut into the orange clay-loam natural surface 2/14 and silted up. In the silts could be seen the shape of a medieval pit 2/16 of which the fill was gleyed as a result of permanent waterlogging, and within which a heavy seepage of diesel oil had accumulated.

In the south-east corner was a wall footing bonded with loam. It lies directly beneath the cinder layer cutting through the dump layer.

Dating Evidence and other Finds

The pottery finds have been analysed by Maureen Mellor, who has provided some provisional dating as follows. The so-called landfill deposits in both trenches contain pottery typical of the second half of the 14th century, and may be as late as 1400. The larger groups all came from Trench 1 (ie 1/6/1 down to 1/6/5). They are surprisingly homogeneous, with no suggestion that the deeper levels are significantly earlier than those above, and virtually no 'residual' sherds from previous occupation in the area. They include domestic wares from the Savernake Forest in Wiltshire, tablewares from Brill/Boarstall in Bucks, fragments from Minety in Wilts, from the Kennet Valley, a cistern from Farnborough hill in Surrey and a Tudor-type lobed dish. Trench 2 landfill had similar material although less had been excavated of these deeper levels.

Amongst the later levels there were two dateable assemblages, the internal deposits within building 1/8, including the fill deposit 1/5/1, all 14th-15th century, and the construction level 1/6 of the later building which appeared to be of the early 17th century. A small group of pottery from Pit 2/16 suggested that it had been open at the time of the landfill, or was dug very soon after.

DISCUSSION

A natural ground surface was seen in only one place, where Trench 2 had been dug down to a depth of 1.9m. It showed as a thick layer of orange-brown clay loam at 55.66mOD compared with 55.45mOD for the layer above the natural gravel in Trench 1. The Trench 1 deposit is likely to have been an unusually thick layer of the periglacial alluvium which is found above the gravel on both the flood plain terrace and the Summertown-Radley terrace at Oxford. There is no obvious explanation why it is absent in Trench 1, since it appears to be described in the Site Investigation report Borehole 1 between 1.8 (about 55.9mOD) and 2.5m depth.

An Early Drainage Ditch Covered by Landfill

Cutting through the natural levels of Trench 1 was a silty ditch-shaped feature running ESE-WNW which might be related to the ditch reported by Rigold in the previous excavation. Otherwise the earliest event in the area, which was also the most conspicuous deposit in both trenches, was between 0.85m and 1.15m of landfill (1/6 etc. and 2/5). Similar deposits have been seen on a floodplain site to the north (Rewley Abbey Assessment) and on the site of the Blackfriars Cloister to the southeast, but with considerably less depth in each case. The present site suggests a concerted process of reclamation which is not represented at the only other excavated site in St Thomas at the Hamel, where settlement started earlier and from a deeper level. This has considerable implications for the development of the suburb.

Development of the Medieval Suburb

The early medieval road pattern on the flood plain west of Oxford has been discussed in the Victoria County History (Oxon IV 284). The route from the town to Hinksey Ferry on the Berkshire side was either by the present Oseney Bridge, or more directly along Oseney Lane. Oseney Lane is potentially a straight route from the castle via the abbey to the ferry, perhaps having been diverted through the Hamel in 12th century. The present excavation may suggest a different option for the medieval traveller, which can be argued from the landfill operation.

Part at least of the modern St Thomas Street is shown by the dating of the landfill to have been added to the pattern of the early suburb. How it happened is unclear as yet, either by strip-wise dumping along the lines of proposed roads, or by tipping over the whole area, working outwards from one or more points. Either way, the quantity of pottery and bone leaves little doubt that the fill material was rubbish carted from the town, and the closeness of the dating and absence of 'residual' sherds suggests that it was contemporary household refuse rather than the spoil from digging cellars and cess pits.

Large volumes of such medieval waste are known from London's

waterfront sites where they can sometimes be dated by dendrochronology to the actual year of deposition. At St Thomas it is unlikely that there will be such accurate confirmatory dating, but it is clear from the provisional dating that something quite unexpected is happening. It might have been a new policy of carting away domestic rubbish, which would explain why there is proportionately less pottery of this period from sites in the town itself. The alternative is that for a short period Oseney Abbey deliberately encouraged waste to be brought here to raise ground levels for building. There are certainly many references to new building work in St Thomas at this time, and although none of them can be specifically related to the properties in question they indicate a general prosperity and expansion (Palmer, (1980) 141).

If the building platform on St Thomas St was late 14th or early 15th century, what was the 13th century building that Rigold saw in 1947-8? It is possible that his dating was wrong, but it is unlikely he was as much as a century out. The alternative is that he was in fact looking at an earlier phase of building which was not represented in the present Trench 2, and this raises an interesting question. If there was an early building at an angle to the present Street, was the early street itself also going off at an angle with Ditch 2/17 running beside it. If so it would be continuation of the line of the east end of St Thomas St heading straight towards Oseney Bridge (see Fig 4) and could have been an important link between the castle area and the main route to the west.

15th Century and Later Buildings (see Fig. 5)

Both trenches on the present site showed buildings constructed on the surface of this platform. In each case they behave as if they were fronting onto the modern streets, and they therefore illustrate the continuity of the street pattern once established. On St Thomas Street the medieval building platform was only 0.45m below the modern surface, the earliest structure having apparently been dismantled or 'robbed' to make way for its successor. On Hollybush Row the early stonework had survived in good condition however (1/8), evidently protected by a blanket of soil (1/5) which had perhaps accumulated over a period of desertion.

These would be the first generation of properties in the new squared-up plan of this part of St Thomas. In both cases they were followed by heavier footings, closer to the road at St Thomas Street (2/8), further back at Hollybush Row(1/8). The later building at Hollybush Row is likely to have been post-medieval, although its walls are unusually thick, and without the reused ashlar stone which one would expect in a 16th-17th century building within range of the dissolved abbeys of Oseney and Rewley. Nevertheless it is probably the foundation of one of the buildings which survived in 1960 which the RCHM Oxford volume described as probably 17th century (No 173), and this would agree

with the dating of the pottery from its construction level (see Fig 5).

CONCLUSIONS

This assessment has provided a new insight into the development of not only the suburb of St Thomas but also of the entire western side of Oxford, and has demonstrated some unusually well preserved late medieval house structures built on what might be a deliberately prepared estate plan, at a time when such a major development would not have been expected in this suburban situation.

Brian Durham

O A U
October 1989

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The Unit is grateful for the assistance of Malcolm Graham and the Oxfordshire County Libraries local history department for advice on the topographical sources.

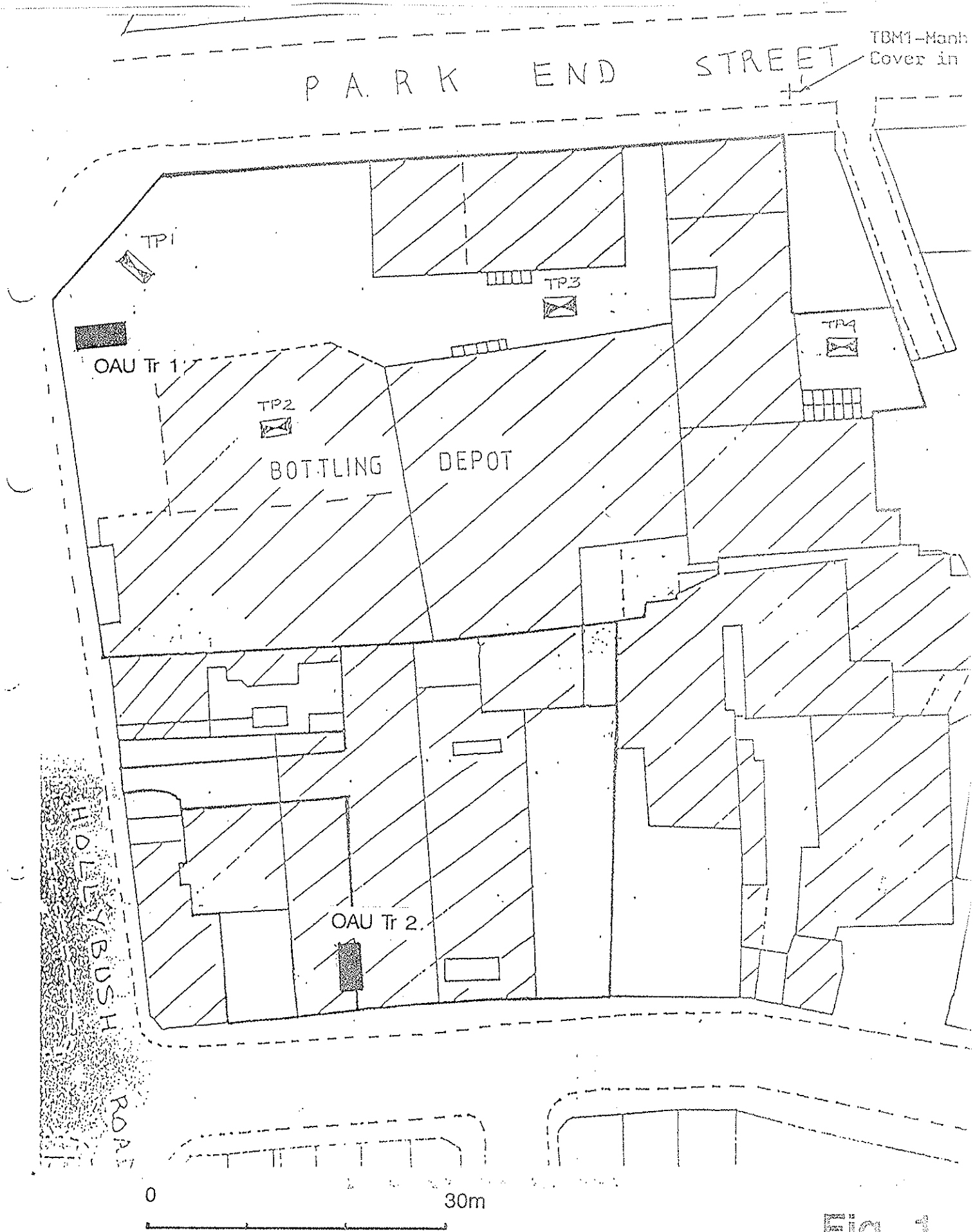
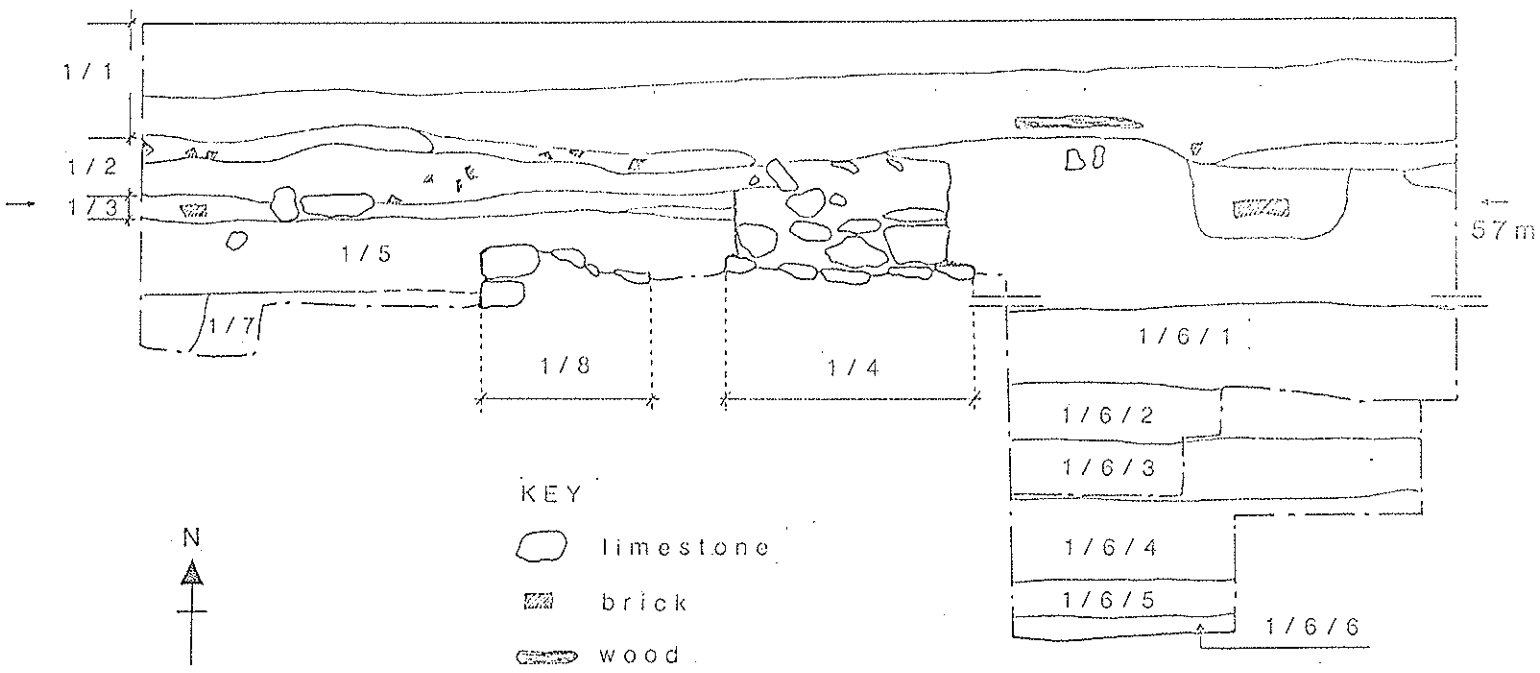
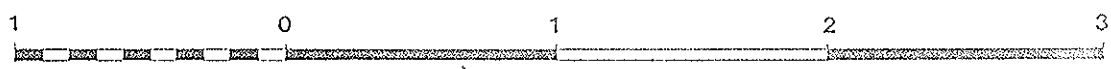
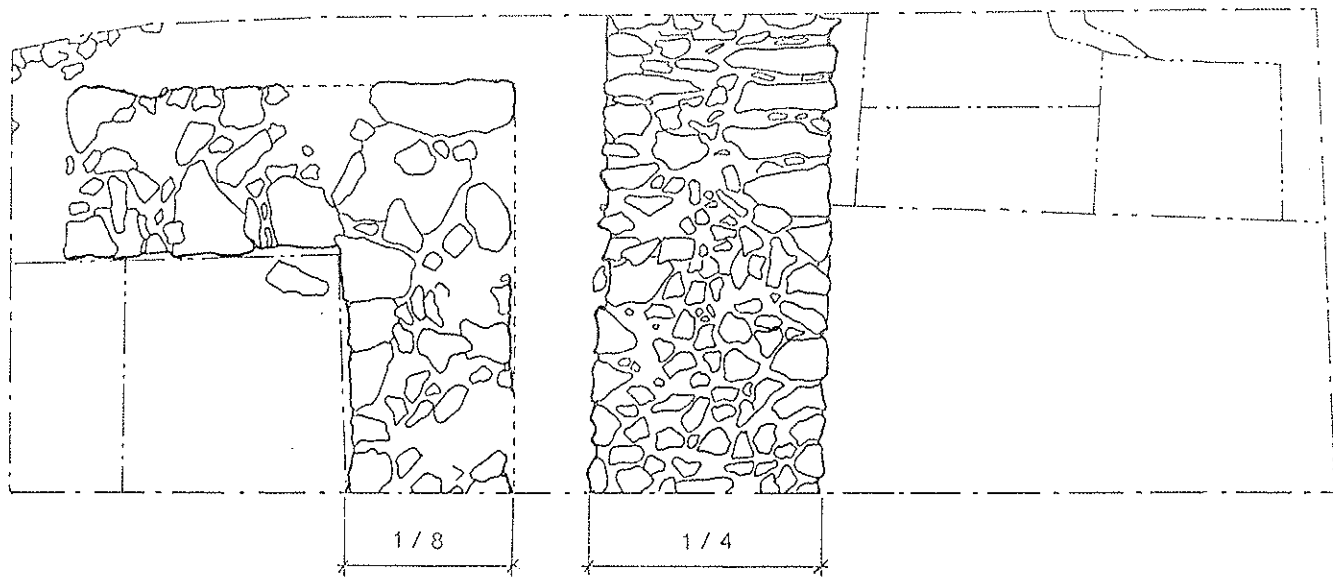
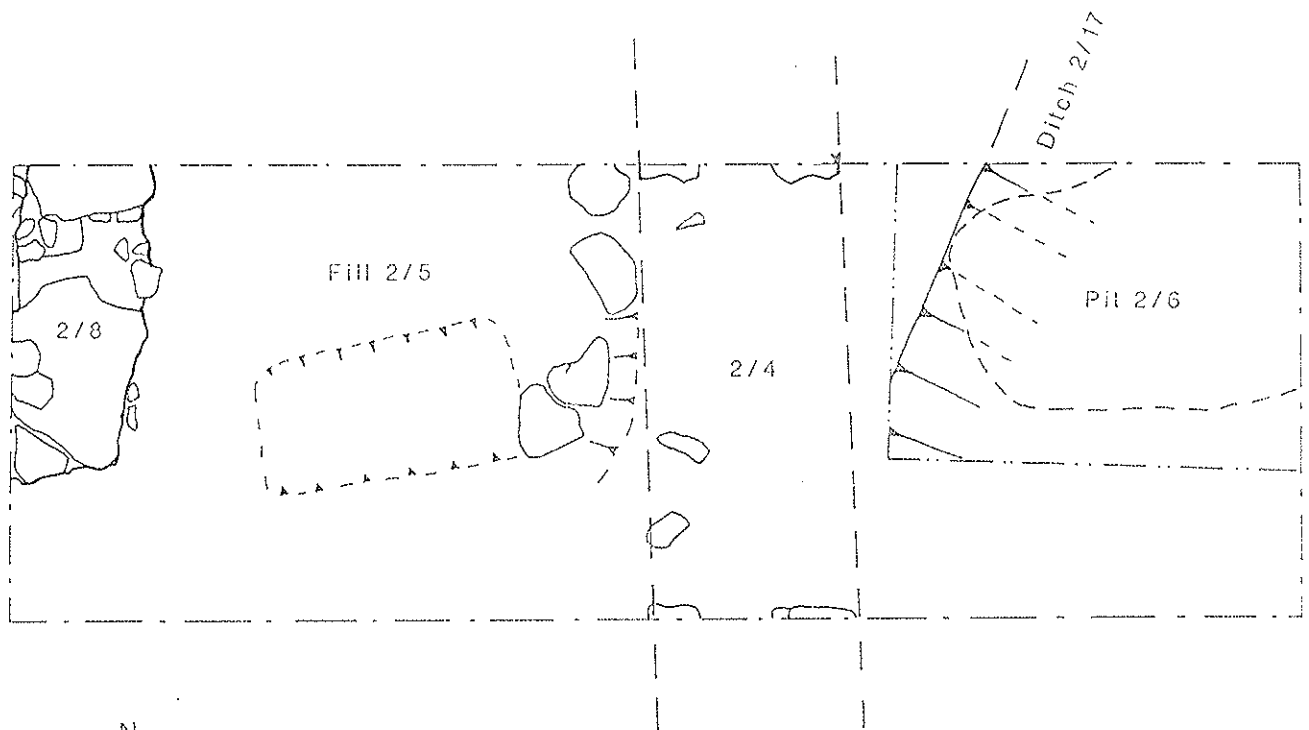
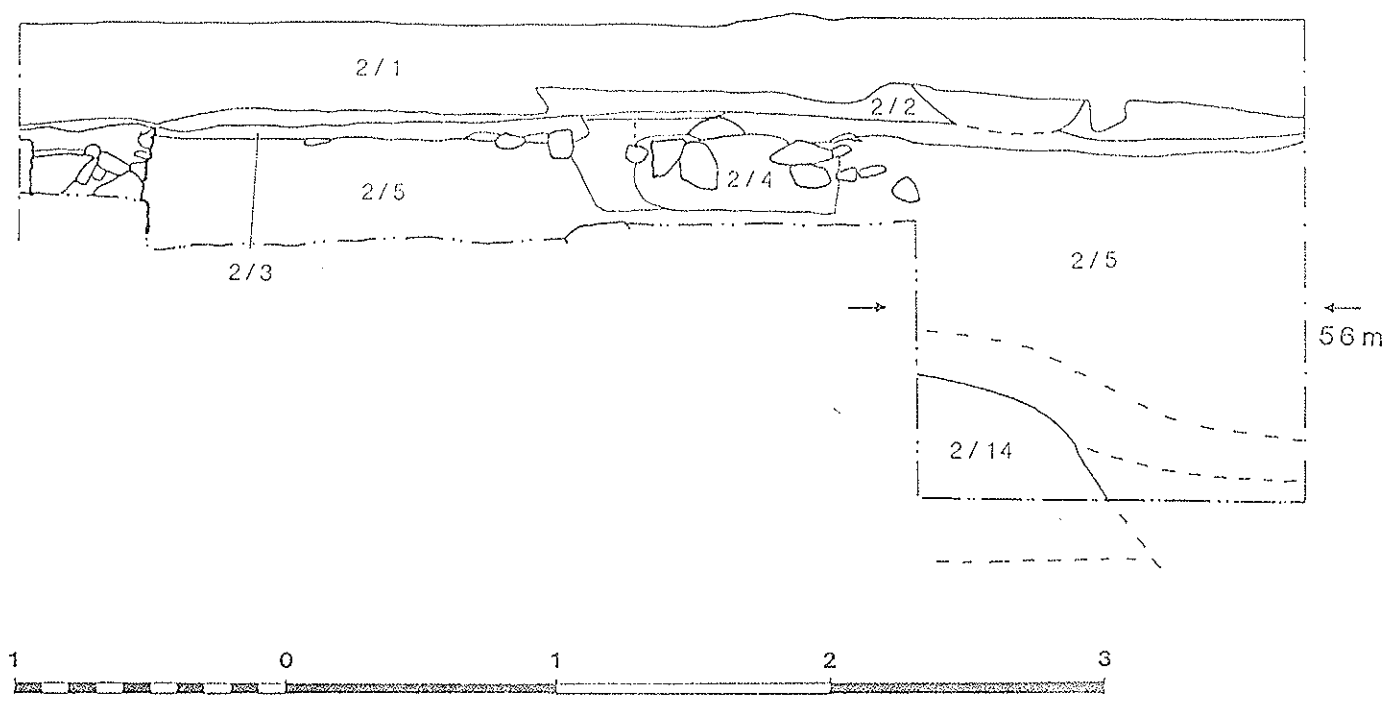


Fig. 1



OXPES 89
 TRENCH 1 PLAN & COMPOSITE SECTION
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Fig. 2



OXPES 89
 TRENCH 2 PLAN & SECTION
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Fig. 3