AYLESFORD (KE)

Little Kit's Coty
Aylesford, Kent

Archaeological Assessment

Oxford Archaeological Unit
August 1989

SUMMARY

Eight trenches were excavated adjacent to Little Kits Coty to establish whether traces of an associated mound or quarry ditches might extend some distance from the monument. No such features were postively identified, but a previously unknown Iron Age settlement was discovered.

INTRODUCTION

Little Kits Coty is believed to be the collapsed remains of a Neolithic stone burial chamber. By analogy with some monuments in the Medway area it could have stood at the end of a long barrow, up to 60m. long, possibly surrounded by upright stones (peristalith). Quarry ditches could have been dug to provide soil for the mound.

The visible remains are in the guardianship of English Heritage and assessment work on the site was undertaken on their behalf at the instigation of British Rail. The site is open to the public.

The monument lies on the optimal line of the Channel Tunnel Rail Link (C.T.R.L.). Although a revised line has been suggested which would run to the N of the stones, this is not a final line and in any case there was concern that the buried remains of the tomb could still be destroyed.

For this reason the Oxford Archaeological Unit undertook an assessment to locate the direction and extent of any surrounding mound and ditches in advance of final plans of C.T.R.L. so that damage to the monument could be avoided.

Method

Eight trenches were excavated by a JCB machine using a 1.5m. wide toothless bucket. This cut down through the modern ploughsoil and earlier hill-wash to the natural chalk. Machine stripping was very carefully watched and controlled and no clear horizons within this internal were noted. The trenches were cleaned by hand and the exposed features recorded. One or more sections were excavated across each feature. (See fig.). The sides of the trenches were carefully examined to check for stratigraphic horizons in section.

Three trenches (A, 66m long ; C, 34m long ; and D, 21m long) were excavated along the provisional line of C.T.R.L. to assess the immediate threat. The five other trenches (B, 45m long ; E, 28.5m long ; F, 6.75m long ; G, 28.5m long ; and H, 29m long) were positioned nearer the monument to cut across the barrow/ditches on their most likely alignments of putative quarry ditches and barrow mound and to provide more detailed information should any change in plans occur which might affect the monument.

Allowing for ditches and gullies extending between trenches, at least eighteen separate archaeological features were observed in the trenches : ditches, gullies, pits and post holes. Each feature was sectioned and recorded. (See figs 2-4). Not all features contained datable finds.

Results

General Stratigraphy

The modern ploughsoil is 0.20 - 0.28m thick and overlies earlier ploughsoil (L 2i 0.10 - 0.35m thick), thickest (up to 0.5m) at the SW end of Trench H and generally along the NW boundary of the field adjacent to Rochester road.

This layer generally had a fairly level base overlying features cut into the subsoil. It was composed of pale grey brown fine loam with 5% 2 - 5mm flecks of chalk and occasional flints.

In Trench B a further, slightly different ploughsoil (L2ii) of very similar character underlying this horizon. The distinction was too slight to be noted in machining but was visible in section, mainly between ditches 8 and 11 which cut this layer. Here it was 0.15m thick. Traces of the layer extended into trenches H and E. There was no trace of any turf line or an undisturbed natural soil horizon on the surface of the chalk beneath this layer.

The only indication of the character of the original undisturbed natural soil on the site is the orange brown fine loam fill of F6, a probable tree hole or other natural feature.

In trenches A, B (NE end) and C traces of parallel ploughmarks were observed in the surface of the chalk beneath L2. They were not planned in detail and their extent is shown on the detailed plans by a cross hatching convention which indicates their orientation and overall extent. Examples of the marks themselves are shown adjacent to F12/A and 6/A. Their stratigraphic relationships to other features is not clear. They were parallel to some of the ditches and gullies.

Features (Figs 3,4)

Ten ditches or gullies, three with multiple recuts (F4, 19 and 20) the rest with simple profiles (F3, 7, 8, 11, 16?, 21, 23) were recorded. All were shallow, generally, not more than 0.7m surviving beneath the general subsoil layer 2i. They are on at least 3 different broad alignments. Some clearly parallel to each other (Figs 2, 3). Iron Age pottery was recovered from F3, 4, 8, 11 and 23.

Five small pits were recorded (F5, 12, 15, 18, 22) 0.20 - 0.40m deep. F18 cut F4/D and had been dug to bury a sarsen stone. 60 - 70 broken pieces of sarsen came from F6. No pottery was found in the pits F5 and F15 produced 2 and 3 flints respectively. Two possible post holes were recorded adjacent to F8. (F9, 10).

Six other features were probable tree holes (F6, 13, 14, 17, 25, 26).

Finds

The pottery was examined by P Couldrey. Thirty three sherds of Iron Age pottery, 17 from 11/A/1; 10 from 4/A/1; 1 from 4/A/2; 2 from F3/A/2; 2 from 8/A/1; 1 from 23/A/2. Fabrics include shelly wares, grog tempered wares and sandy glauconitic wares, the shelly pottery being commonest. Only one rim was found, a rounded almost bead rim in a shelly fabric (23/A/2).

One grog tempered sherd might be Beaker but it is not out of place in this Iron Age material. Not all the pottery need be contemporary but there is nothing to indicate that it is not. The rim is middle to late Iron Age; the grog tempering in several sherds suggests a late Iron Age date.

Flints

Sixty one worked flints (including 19 haphazardly collected topsoil finds) were recovered. Forty one were flakes, 5 were blades or blade fragments, 6 were scrapers, 1 was a bifacially worked piece (possibly a knife or 'laurel leaf'), 2 were irregular cores with 3 further failed cores or core fragments and 3 other miscellaneous fragments. There was some gravel flint as well as chalk flint present. The vast majority of the material was hard hammer struck, and the relatively small proportion of blades suggests a predominantly if not entirely late Neolithic to Bronze Age date range.

Quern Stones

Two stone rubbers were recovered from the topsoil.

Iron Object

An iron object possibly a nail head was recovered from 11/A/1

Oyster shells

Twelve oyster shells were found in features 11, 20, 21, and 23 (9 of them from 23/A/2).

Daub

Three fragments from 11/A/1

INTERPRETATION AND CONCLUSIONS

No trace of a mound associated with Little Kits Coty was found. The only possible evidence of remains of a buried ground surface would be L2/ii, but its character is more in keeping with being a later prehistoric ploughsoil. The only candidate for a quarry ditch for a barrow is ditch 4. It cannot be proved that it is continuous between Trenches E, A and C, but its character was very similar in E and A. Three very rapid trenches between trenches C and D showed that this ditch must terminate between the two, c 50m from Little Kits Coty. It is approximately the right position for a quarry ditch, aligned on a point adjacent to the megaliths, and its length would be reasonable. Nevertheless, there are various reasons to think that it is probably not a quarry ditch. It is too shallow to have produced enough material for a significant mound; its slight curve inwards is uncharacteristic of long barrow ditches which often curve outwards; it was recut like an ordinary field ditch; it contained Iron Age pottery well down in it though not actually at the base of the ditch; there was no evidence in Trench B or the NW end of Trench A for a parallel ditch to the W.

There is thus no good evidence that Little Kits Coty was set in an earthen long barrow like Kits Coty or more distant sites such as Waylands Smithy or West Kennet. Stukeley published a reconstruction of Little Kits Coty as a small D Shaped monument, apparently on the basis of a description of it before its destruction, though the published description on which it is based would not obviously result in such an interpretation. (Stukeleys Diaries, Surtees Society 76 (1883), 226: letter from Hercules Ayleway reporting results of enquiries undertaken for Stukeley). Possibly Stukeley had more information which no longer survives.

One of the other Medway tombs, the Chestnuts, Addington, was excavated in 1957. It was a similarly jumbled heap of stones. The excavation while not extensive enough conclusively to prove the non-existence of side ditches provided some evidence that the mound may have been quite small and simply formed by scraping up surrounding topsoil (J Alexander, Archaeologia Cantiana 76 (1961) 1 - 87).

The full extent of the Iron Age settlement is not known, but it seems likely that the ditches and very possibly the pits may well represent more than one phase because of the varied alignments of the features. There is no evidence of arable cultivation from the soils and the ploughmarks parallel to some of the ditches.

The density of features and of domestic rubbish was generally fairly low. Bones were preserved in rather poor condition, but with charred plant remains and molluscs, indicate some potential evidence of the contemporary environment and economy. It is possible that the Iron Age material here represents only the periphery of a larger settlement. The stratigraphy in Trench B where the ditches cut an earlier ploughsoil indicates some potential for slightly enhanced stratigraphic preservation.

The immediate aim of this assessment was to elucidate the potential for surviving subsoil deposits associated with Little Kits Coty; the full evaluation of the unexpected Iron Age site would require further excavation.

The finds of flintwork indicate (not surprisingly) late Neolithic and Bronze Age activity in the area. Again further fieldwork by surface collection or excavation would be required to elucidate its character.

The present alignment of CTRL as proposed at the time of the assessment would not affect physical remains associated with Little Kits Coty, though it would still affect its setting and amenity value. This alignment or any other within the engineering constraints which apply would affect parts of the Iron Age settlement, though further work would be required to establish the full extent of the impact on this site.

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September 1989

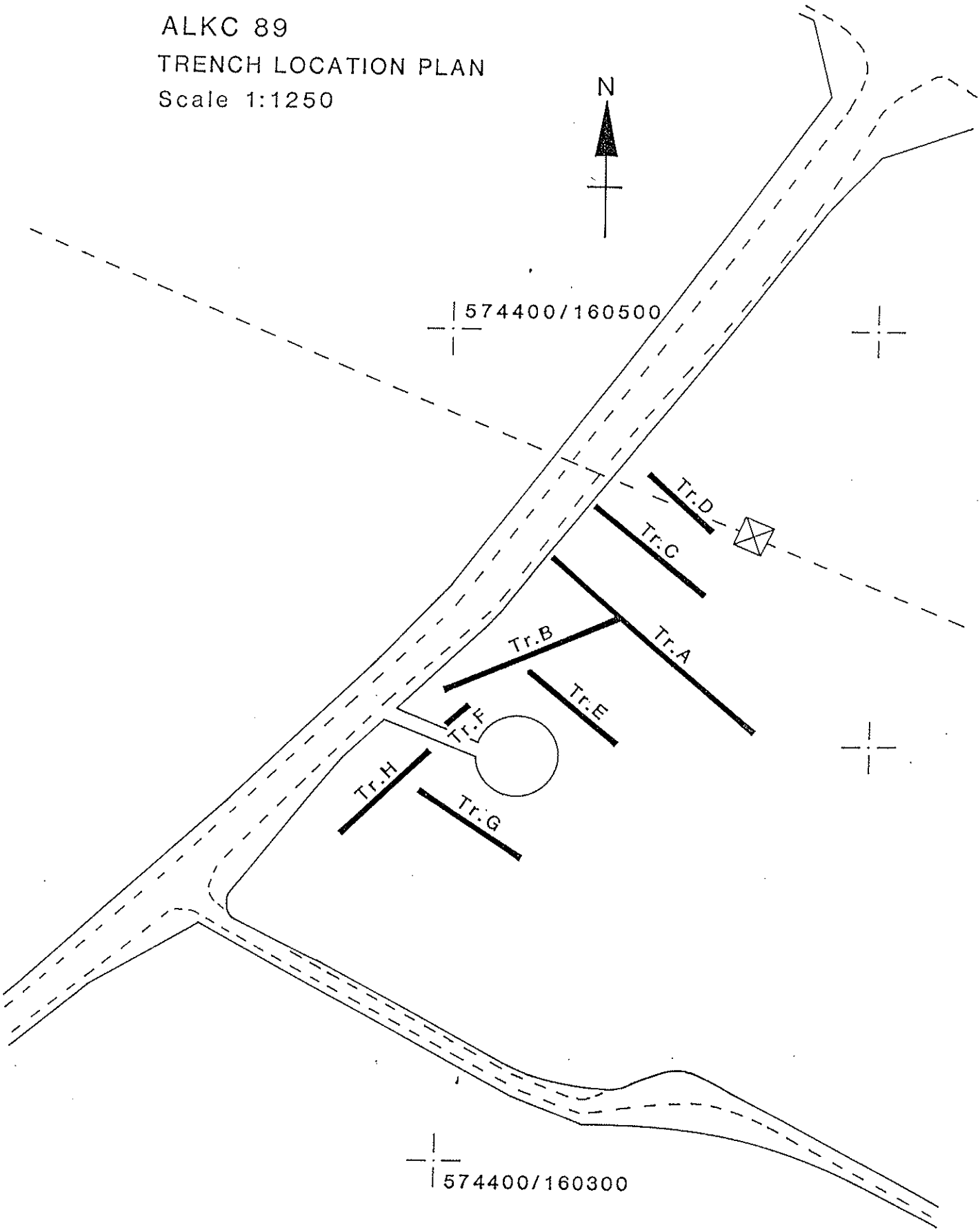
ALKC 89
TRENCH LOCATION PLAN
Scale 1:1250
N
574400/160500
Tr.D
Tr.C
Tr.B
Tr.A
Tr.E
Tr.F
Tr.H
Tr.G
574400/160300

Fig. 1

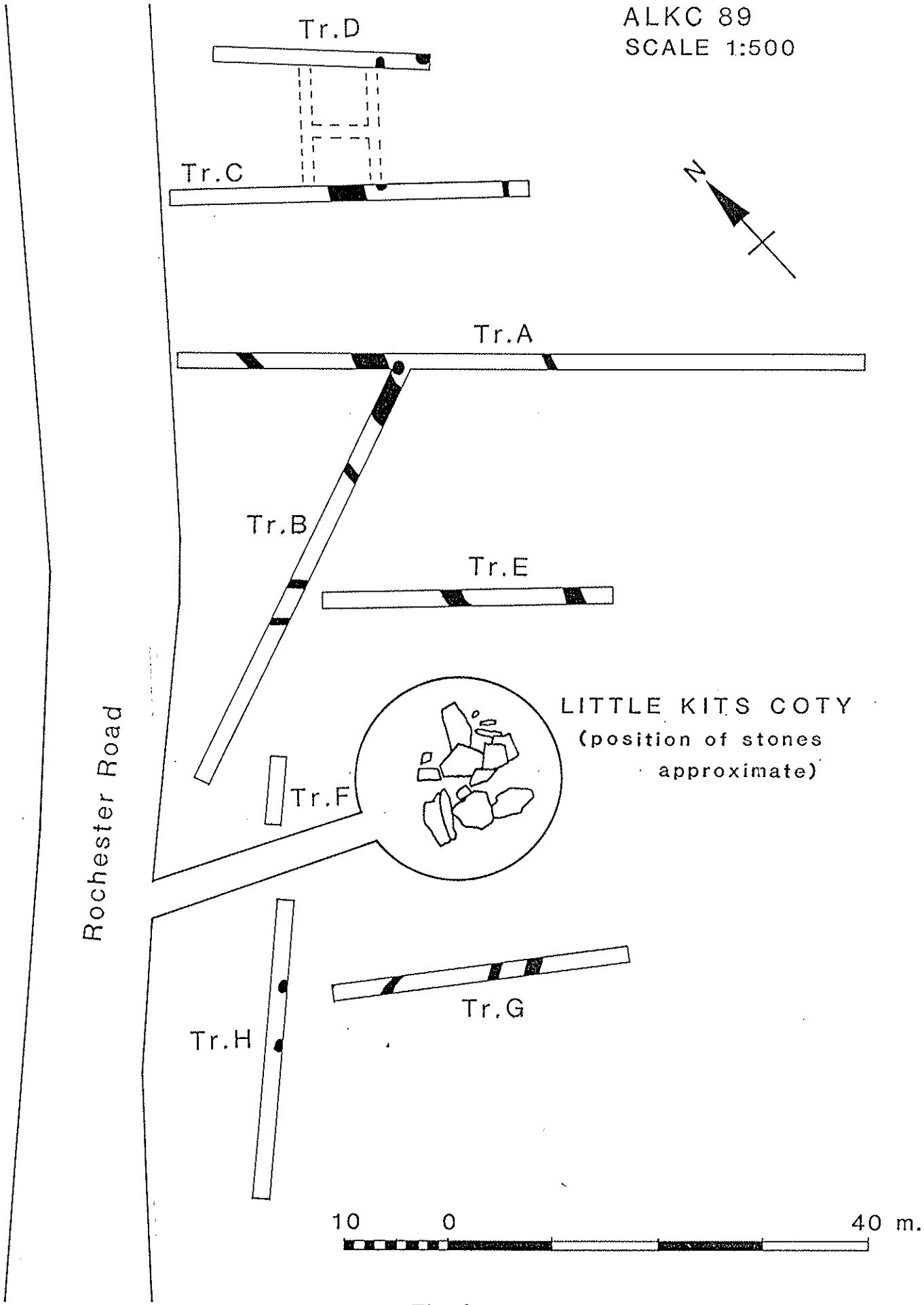
ALKC 89
SCALE 1:500
Tr.D
Tr.C
N
Tr.A
Tr.B
Tr.E
LITTLE KITS COTY
(position of stones
approximate)
Tr.F
Rochester Road
Tr.G
Tr.H
10 0 40 m.

Fig.2

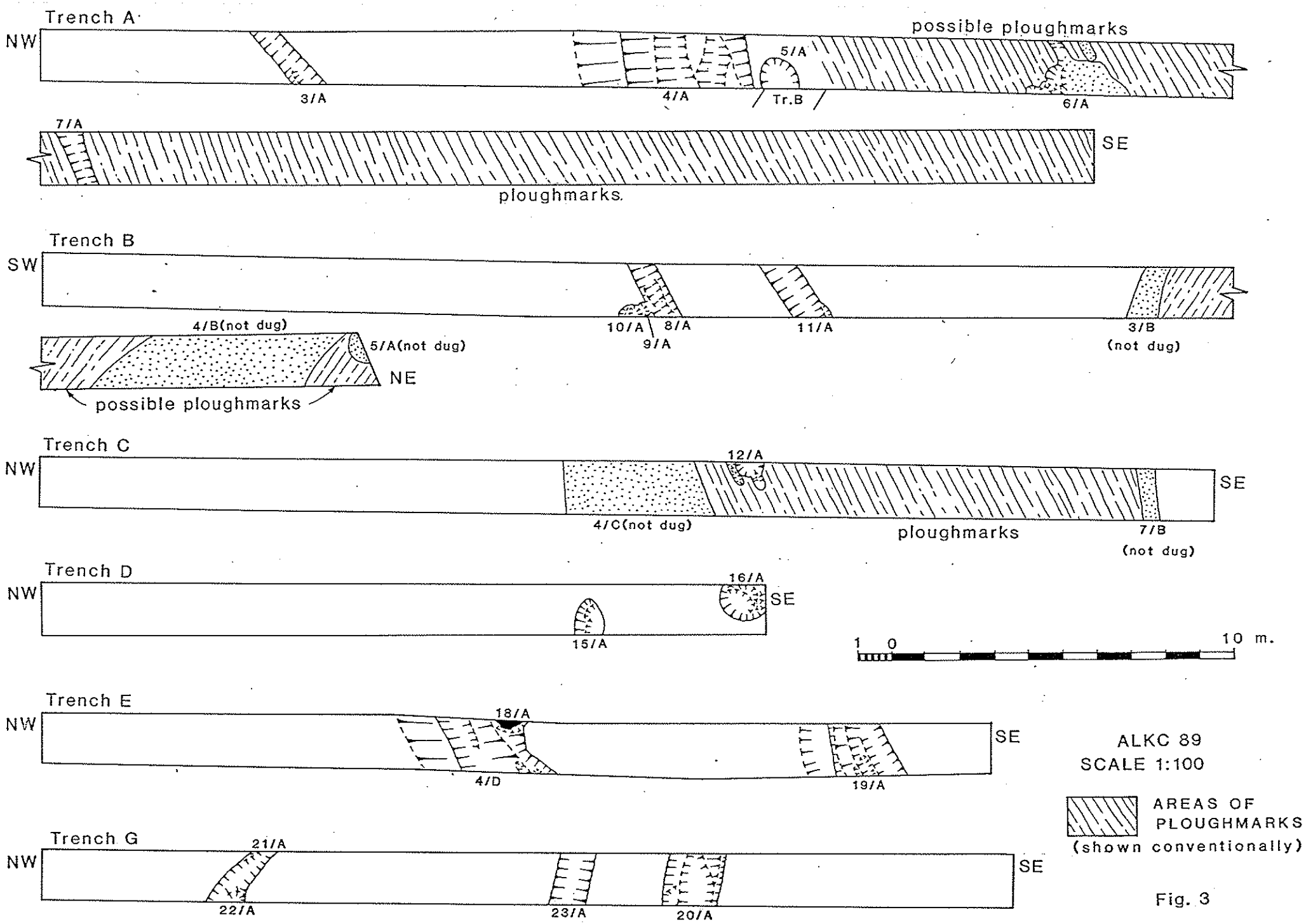
Trench A
NW
possible ploughmarks
5/A
3/A
4/A
Tr.B
6/A
7/A
SE
ploughmarks.
Trench B
SW
4/B(not dug)
5/A(not dug)
10/A
8/A
9/A
11/A
3/B
(not dug)
NE
possible ploughmarks
Trench C
NW
12/A
SE
4/C(not dug)
ploughmarks
7/B
(not dug)
Trench D
NW
16/A
SE
15/A
1 0
10 m.
Trench E
NW
18/A
SE
4/D
19/A
ALKC 89
SCALE 1:100
AREAS OF PLOUGHMARKS
(shown conventionally)
Trench G
NW
21/A
SE
22/A
23/A
20/A

Fig. 3

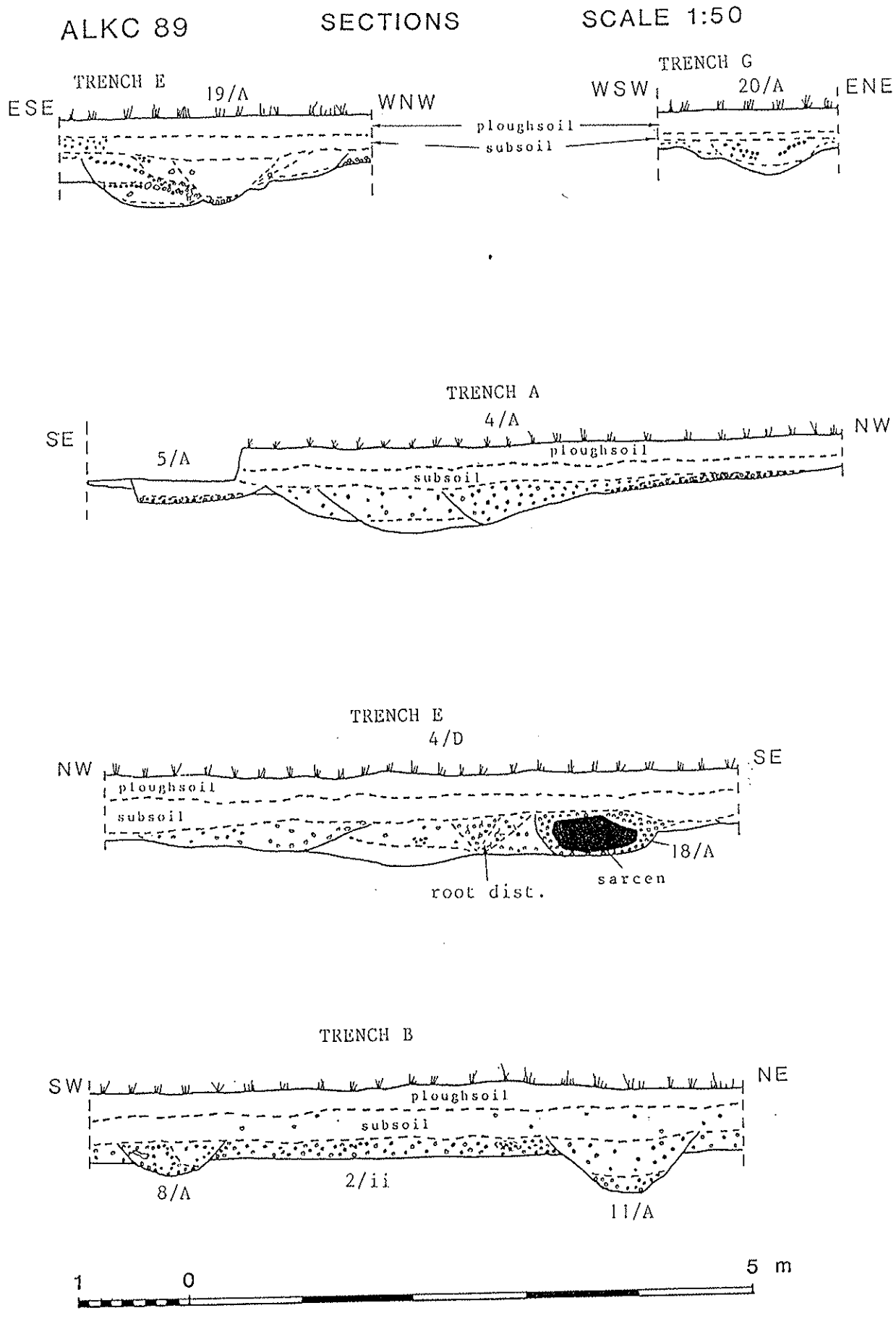
ALKC 89
SECTIONS
SCALE 1:50
TRENCH E
19/A
ESE
WNW
ploughsoil
subsoil
TRENCH G
WSW
20/A
ENE
TRENCH A
4/A
SE
5/A
NW
ploughsoil
subsoil
TRENCH E
4/D
NW
SE
ploughsoil
subsoil
18/A
sarcen
root dist.
TRENCH B
SW
NE
ploughsoil
subsoil
8/A
2/ii
11/A
1
0
5 m

Fig.4