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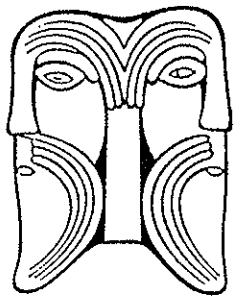
ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT



Dover, Russell Street.
1990

ASSESSMENT

RUSSELL ST CAR PARK, DOVER

ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT

Introduction

An archaeological assessment of the site was undertaken in January 1990 by the Oxford Archaeological Unit. The work was commissioned by Dover District Council to provide information for a proposed multi-storey car-park development.

The site covers approximately 0.8 ha. and lies east of the town centre, between Russell St and Woolcomber St, at the foot of Castle Hill. It is currently used as a surface car-park, but includes small commercial properties (to the south-west) and garages (to the north and north-west).

Boreholes within the car-park indicate that the underlying geology consists of chalk bedrock at c.-20m OD, overlain by 8-9m of chalk rubble, probably solifluction material. This is in turn covered by deep gravels which both lie below, and are interleaved with, the archaeological deposits (see P.2). Modern ground level is at 6.3 to 6.8m OD. The water table was encountered only in one trench, at c.2m OD.

Archaeological Background

The site has already been recognised as having archaeological potential (OAU 1990: 22-3,29). It is probable that this area formed part of the estuary of the River Dour during the Roman period but that thereafter gradual silting and deliberate infilling combined to block the estuary. Ultimately this process led to the reclamation of land on which settlement could, and did, take place. The 1860 Ordnance Survey map (see Fig.2) shows streets and properties laid out in a manner which is likely to have "fossilised", to some extent, the medieval situation.

As yet, there is little detail to add to this general picture - archaeological excavation has been concentrated on the Market Square area. Two small sites can, however, be usefully described. Small trial trenches during construction of the nearby sports centre (TR32324128) showed reclamation layers up to 5m deep associated with medieval pottery (Welby 1976: 107-117). South-west of the Russell St site a large wooden structure was seen in the mid-19th century during excavations for a gasometer (Fig.2). The structure, which has been interpreted as part of a Roman harbour, lay at approximately 6m below current ground level (Elsted 1856: 101).

Assessment Strategy

The aim of the assessment was to understand the nature, and, if possible, the depth, of the surviving archaeology. Previous work (see above) had indicated that archaeological deposits could

exist to a depth of 6m or more, but it was considered that the difficulty and expense of excavating trenches to this depth was not justified. A strategy involving shallower trenches was therefore employed.

Three trenches were excavated, all being 2m wide, but of varying length (Fig.1). The excavation method used for each trench was as follows:

Trench 1 (20 x 2m) - Modern deposits removed by mechanical excavator, then hand excavation to a maximum depth of 2.3m. Machine hole then excavated to 4.5m.

Trench 2 (5 x 2m) - As Trench 1 but hand excavation to a maximum of 2m. Machine hole then excavated to 4m.

Trench 3. (7.5 x 2m) - All deposits excavated by machine to 3.8m.

The positioning of the trenches was in part constrained by the need to keep the car-park open, but the positions of former roads and properties on the site, as shown on the Ordnance Survey map of 1860, were also taken into account. Figure 2 shows Trench 1 placed across a property and street frontage, while Trench 3 was intended to cross two street frontages. Trench 2 was excavated as close as possible to Townwall St, to try and cut the medieval town wall.

Finally, the site was visited regularly by environmental archaeologists from the Institute of Archaeology, London, as part of their survey of the Dour Valley. Advice given by them on site, and some tentative preliminary conclusions drawn by them, have been included in this report where appropriate.

Summary of the Archaeology

In two out of the three trenches, high quality archaeological stratification was found to a depth of 4m below ground level. The possibility cannot, however, be ruled out that further stratification, some of it possibly Roman, exists to a greater depth (6m or more). This conclusion is drawn because:

A. Layers of natural gravels, probably deposited during storms, were found both above and below archaeological deposits. The lowest gravels excavated, at 4m, could therefore seal further archaeology.

B. Boreholes within the car park show a layer of peaty material on the south side of the site, ie. near Trench 1. This material was encountered at c.6m below ground level, and is sandwiched by gravels.

C. A probable Roman structure was observed nearby in the mid-19th century, at a depth of c.6m (see Archaeological Background).

The stratification found can be summarised as silting, dump layers, chalk and cobbled floors or surfaces, rough boundaries, walls and a single oven. The vertical sections (Figs 3,6,7) show how these elements form a very clear sequence containing many sealed contexts. The sequence shows remarkably little disturbance (eg. cutting by later pits). In terms of dating, some possible late 11th century material was recovered but no deposit can be definitely placed earlier that the 12th century. From this point the sequence continues to the 15th century in Trench 1, and to the present day in Trench 2. Only two residual sherds of Roman pottery were recovered, and this is not considered sufficient evidence to affirm or deny Roman activity in this part of Dover.

Plans of structures were not recovered, and this is to be expected given the narrow width of assessment trenches. Rough boundaries and walls were, however, identified and would be traceable in larger scale excavations. One major disappointment in respect of plans was the failure to recover any information regarding street frontages which, in the case of Trench 1 across St James St, had been destroyed by both cellars and bombing. Surviving houses on St James St also have cellars on the street front, suggesting the problem is widespread. A second attempt to recover street frontages on Dolphin Lane was also unsuccessful (Trench 3), suggesting considerable destruction also took place in this area.

The ceramic material recovered from the assessment is highly promising in that it is abundant, and shows dateable characteristics. The development of the pottery from lower to upper levels reflects the well-preserved stratification, and clear trends can be discerned even within the small sample which the assessment produced. In addition to local wares, preliminary examination showed many imports. These were both regional (Canterbury, London, Surrey) and international (France, Germany, Netherlands).

Recommendations

It is clear from the above that the Russell St site contains potentially valuable information about the medieval period in Dover from the 12th century onwards. Evidence for earlier periods may also exist. In particular, the site could provide a well-dated sequence of medieval occupation and, through imported material, evidence of early trade. To date, no such sequence has been published for the town. It is considered to be particularly important, in terms of the town's palaeoenvironments, that such a sequence could be tied in with the levels of silting and storm-deposited gravels which have been identified.

Accordingly, it is recommended that disturbance of the site to depths of greater than 0.5m should not take place without prior archaeological investigation. As regards foundations for the proposed multi-storey car park, the preferred options from an archaeological point of view would be either pad foundations, or piles set in a number of close clusters. Both these options

would allow limited archaeological trenches to be pre-excavated. A dispersed grid of piles would pose far greater problems, in that it would not be possible to mitigate the damage except by large-scale excavation. Preferred areas for pads or pile clusters would obviously be along the streets and street frontages, where some damage appears to have already taken place.

Description of the archaeology - NB Numbers given refer, unless stated otherwise, to the section drawings (Figs 3,6,7).

The lowest layer examined in Trench 1 (see Fig.3) was an angular gravel (1/54), beginning some 4.4m below ground level, at which height water began to flood into the trench. This is a naturally deposited layer, and is tentatively interpreted as a river gravel. Above it was 1/53, a smaller more rounded gravel with its top at 3.10m. This, along with similar layers in Trench 2 (2/94, 2/93, Figs.6,7), is likely to have been washed back (eg. during storms) from a feature lying further seawards. In contrast, the lowest layer seen in Trench 3 was a clean yellow sand which began at 2.6m and extends to at least 3.8m below ground level.

In all three trenches the deposits above the gravel or sand were very silty, organic, and with a high sand content. These were noticeably cleaner towards the bottom (eg. 1/52, 2/92) but contained progressively more chalk fragments and charcoal towards the top (1/51, 2/90). Preliminary examination of the material suggests the silt was being deposited under waterlogged conditions and that some dumping was taking place, particularly in the upper levels. Finds were very sparse, but some pottery from layer 2/90 indicates a late 11th or, more probably, early 12th century date.

In Trench 2, this silting-up sequence was sealed by coarse rubble (2/87), probably intended to level-up and dry out the site, preparatory to building. Layers of clay (1.46, 1.45) in Trench 1 may have served the same purpose, and produced material from the first half of the 12th century. The levelling-up sequence was, however, interrupted. This is shown in Trench 2 by a layer of clean, rounded gravel (2/87) at 2.0m below ground level. The layer was 0.2 to 0.3m deep, and the dumping of rubble apparently continued above it (2/86). The gravel, as before, is likely to have been swept back from a feature lying further seawards. The implications of this stratification have been discussed above (see Summary).

Above these early levels, the trenches varied considerably in character, and are thus best described individually:

Trench 1

Further dumping of rubble and clay (1/44, 1/50) in the 12th century was succeeded by a bank of rough chalk blocks, possibly representing a crude wall or boundary (1/48). A hard surface of rammed chalk was laid partially over this feature, spreading eastwards (1/49). This situation is illustrated in Figure 5. The

floor 1/41 was later extended westwards (1/43) and a thin layer of occupation material (1/40) formed over it. A late 12th to early 13th century date is suggested for 1/40.

Over 1/40 was a series of dumps (mid- to late 13th century) succeeded by a N-S wall (1/26) associated with a gully (1/32) and soakaway (1/30). No clear floors were found with this situation which is illustrated in Figure 4. Dumps of soil against and over the wall 1/26 date to the late 14th or early 15th centuries (1/12). Successive material was 15th century, but was finally covered only by 19th century and modern layers, indicating a gap in activity in this area.

At the east end of Trench 1 was a brick-built, rubble-filled cellar (Fig.4) which, moving further eastward, had been destroyed by a bomb or shell. The bomb crater was partially excavated by machine; it proved to be 4.4m deep and contained only brick rubble. The crater had thus destroyed all trace of the St James St frontage.

Trench 2

Above the gravel layer described above (2/86) was a deep series of thin chalk and cobbled surfaces. Boundaries ran north-south across the site and these sometimes took the form of low, crude chalk walls (eg. 2/28) and, in one case, a beam slot (2/40). Occupation layers had formed on many of the surfaces, showing a sequence which ran from the 12th to the 16th centuries. The type of deposits excavated above layer 2/17 (see Fig.7) indicate that from the 17th century onwards the area was in use as a garden.

Figure 8 shows a number of floor surfaces interrupted by a north-south boundary which was extremely clear, but very narrow. This may have been a single wooden plank, placed on edge. Postholes at this and other levels indicated the likely presence of wooden structures. Figure 9 shows the same boundary line in place at a earlier level, where an oven (2/41) was also excavated.

Trench 3

This trench was both very different to Trenches 1 and 2, and more difficult to interpret. Above the yellow sand described above (3/6) was a layer of dark silt, with a high sand content, beginning 2.8m below ground level and extending upwards for 0.3 to 0.4m. This was covered by a 1m deep deposit of very loose chalk rubble (3/4) which may have represented destruction from a flint and chalk wall seen at the east end of the trench (3/7). The chalk rubble was sealed by a grey clay/silt (3/3) with its top at 0.4m below ground level. Only brick rubble and tarmac were found above this.

No datable material was recovered from Trench 3, the stratification of which evidently reflects far less intensive activity than Trenches 1 and 2.

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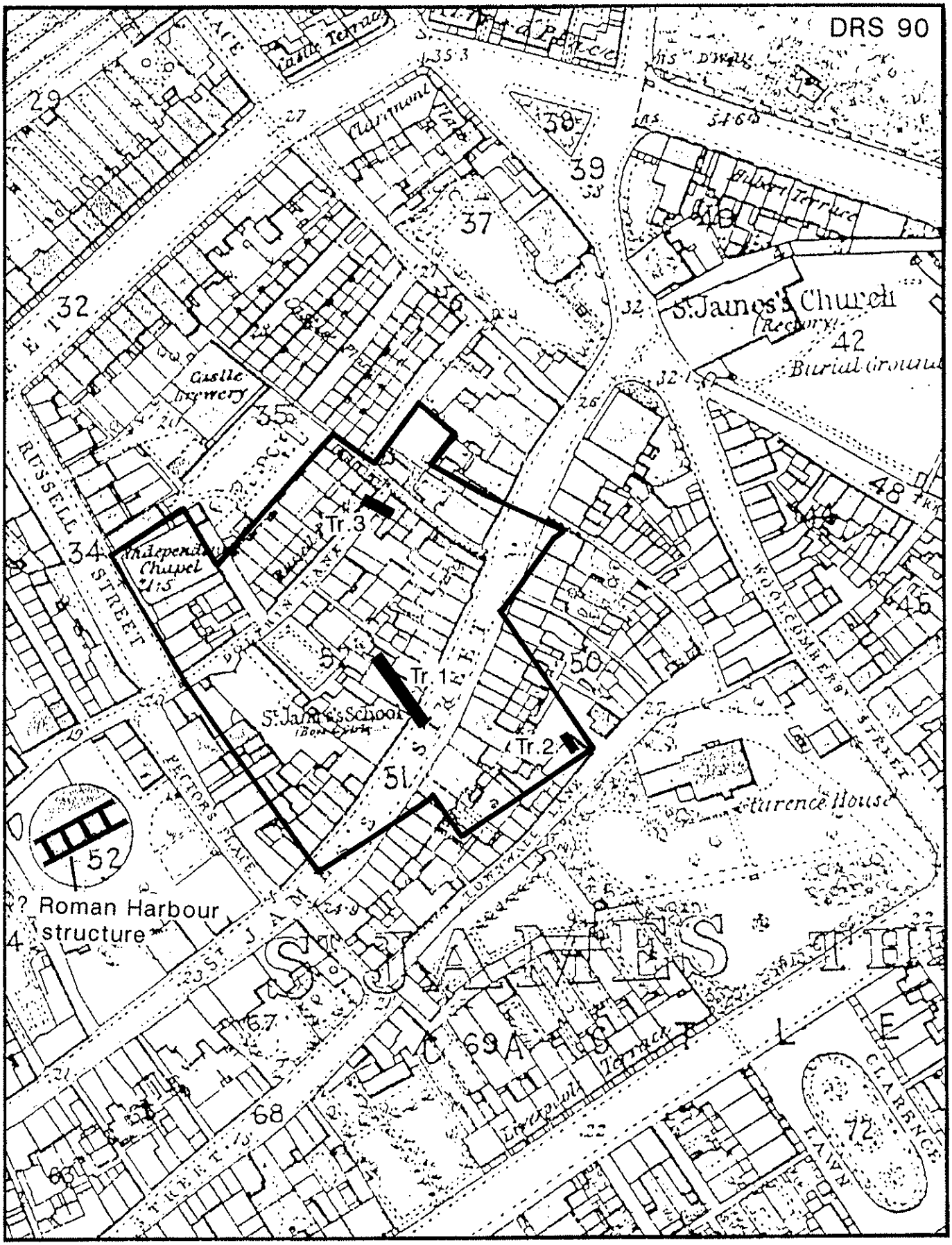


Fig. 2 1860 O.S. map with Development area and trenches superimposed.

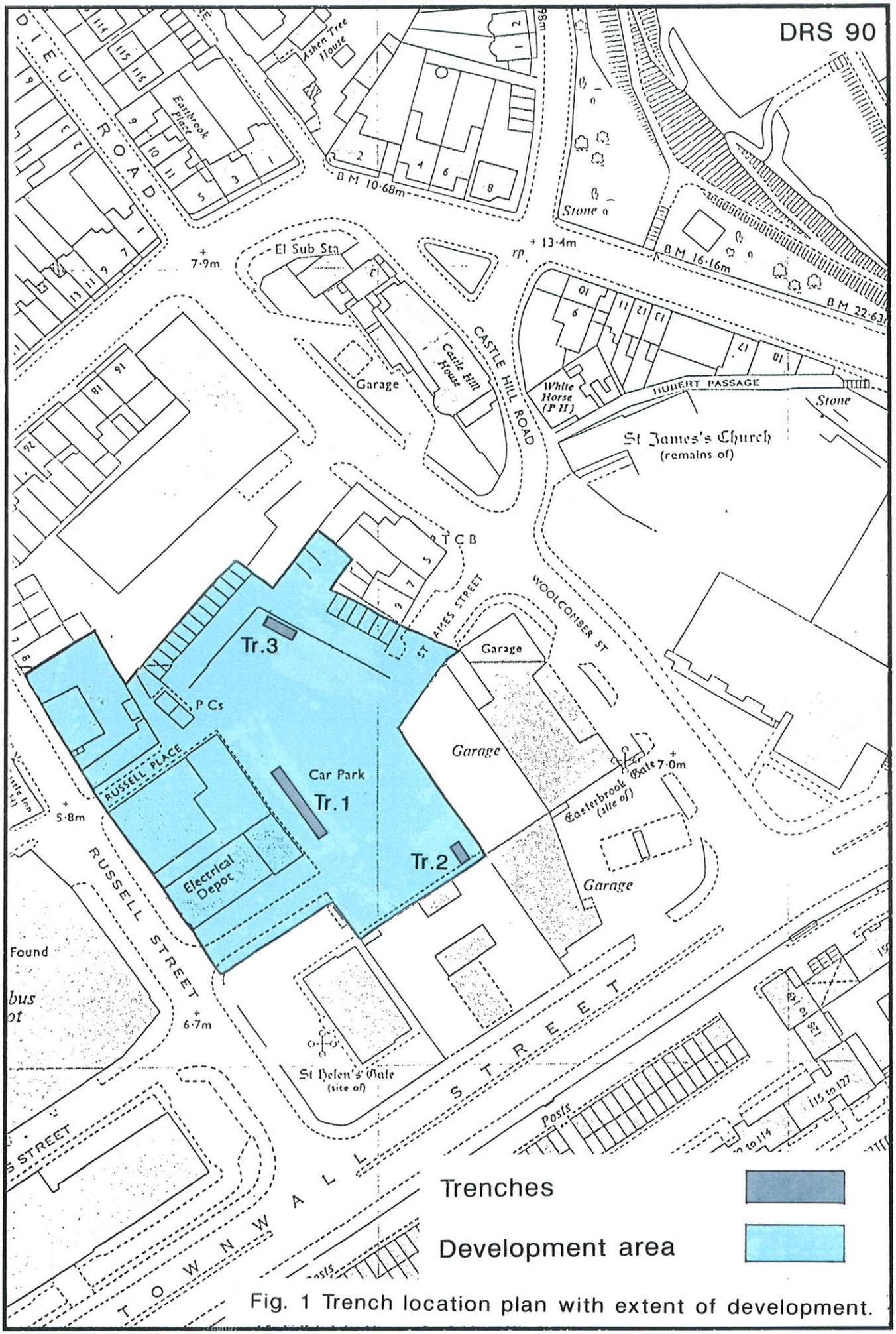
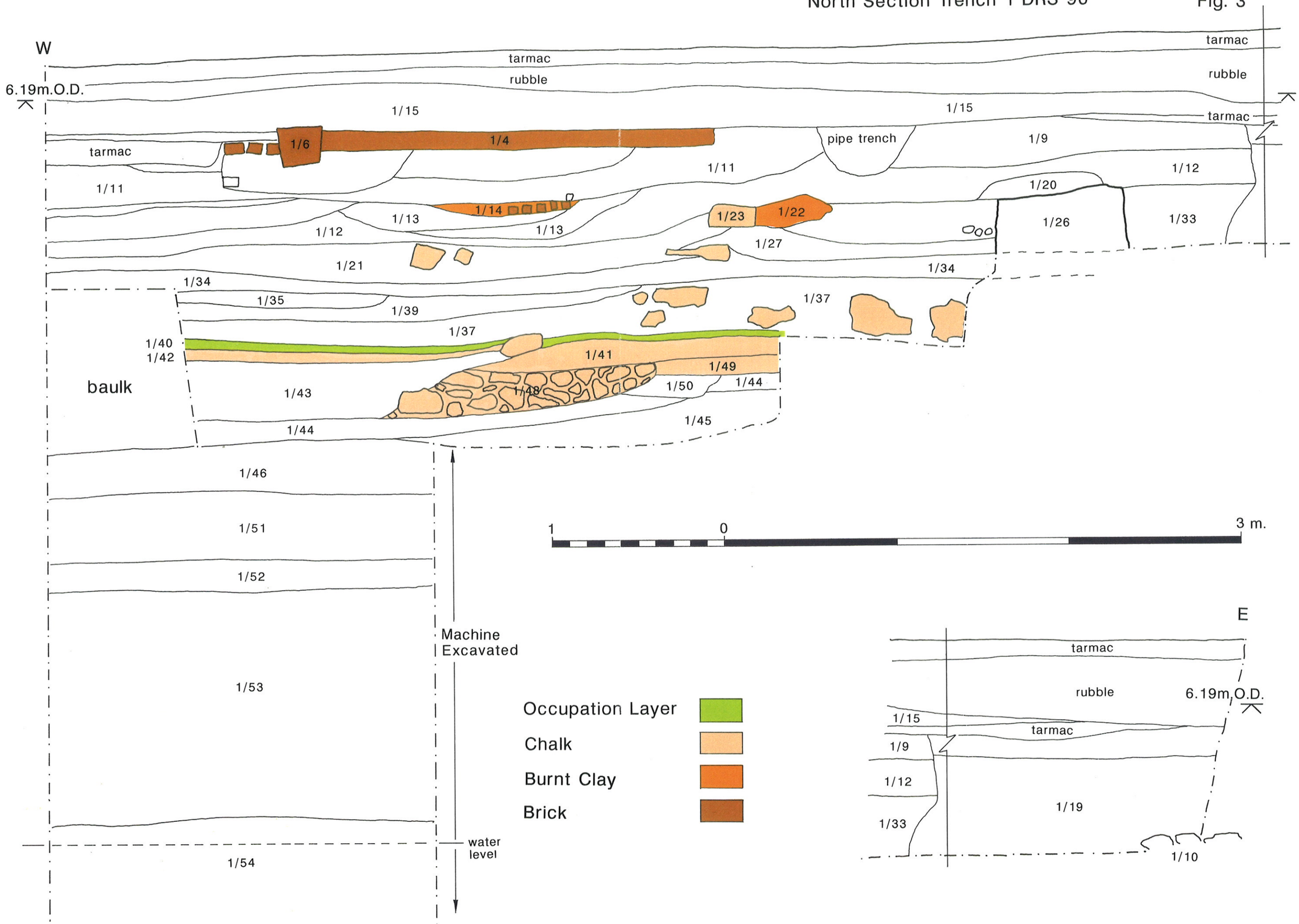


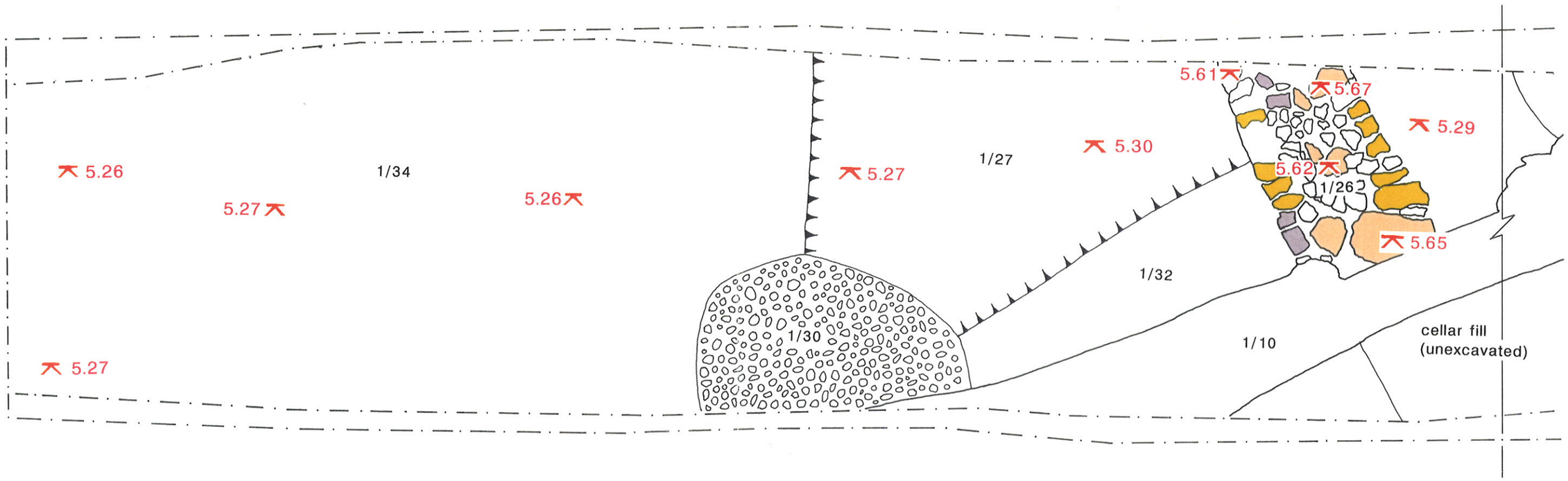
Fig. 1 Trench location plan with extent of development.

North Section Trench 1 DRS 90

Fig. 3



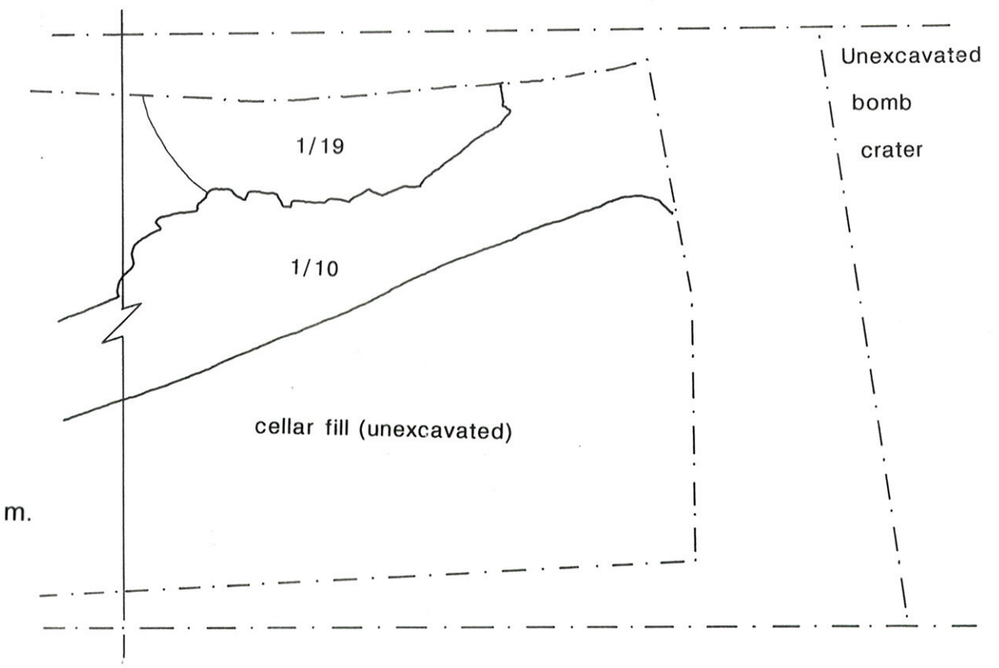
Trench 1 DRS 90 Fig. 4



Tile
Flint
Chalk
Level 5.26

N

1 0 3 m.



Trench 1 DRS 90 Fig. 5

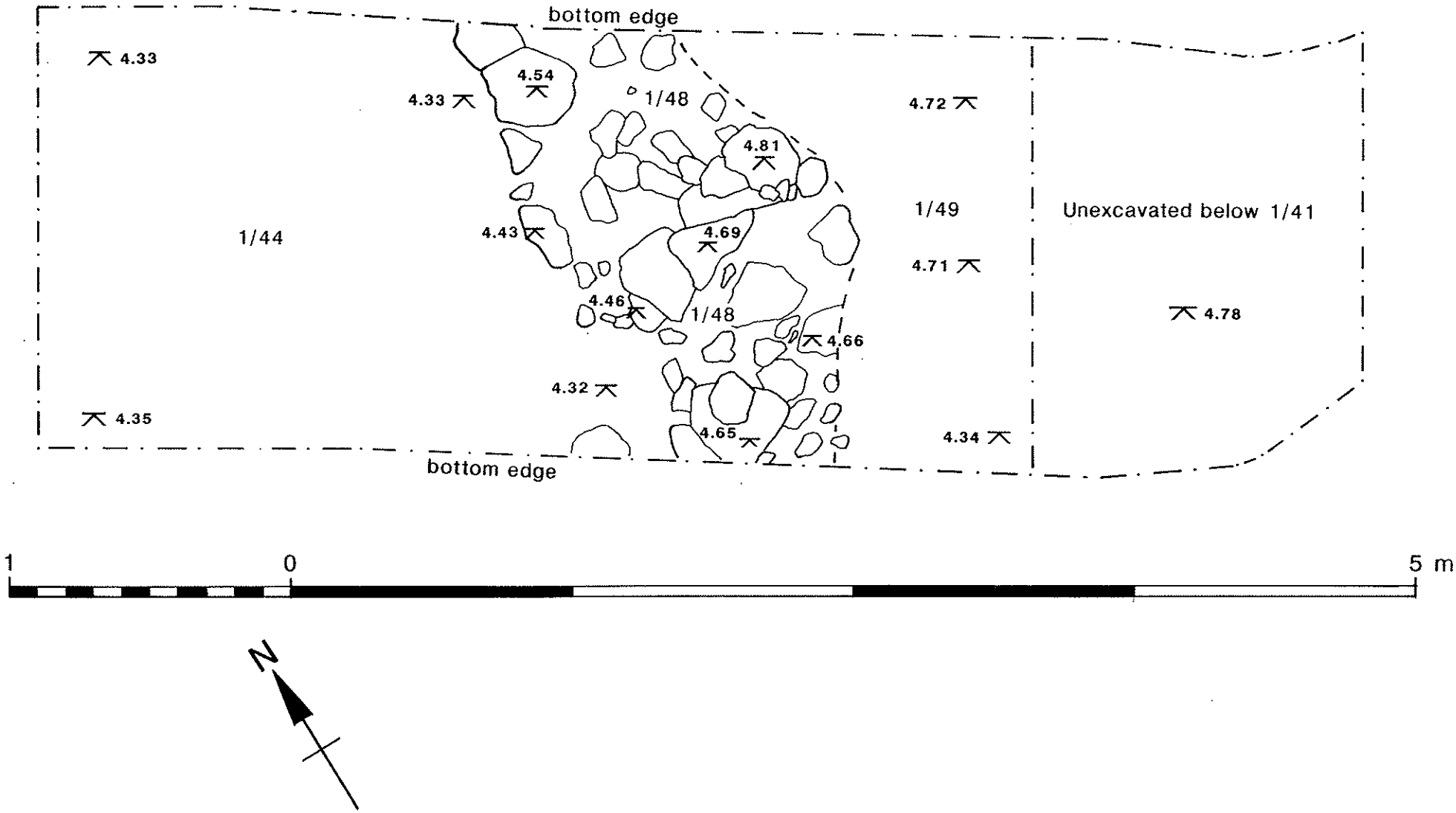


Fig. 6 Trench 2 DRS 90

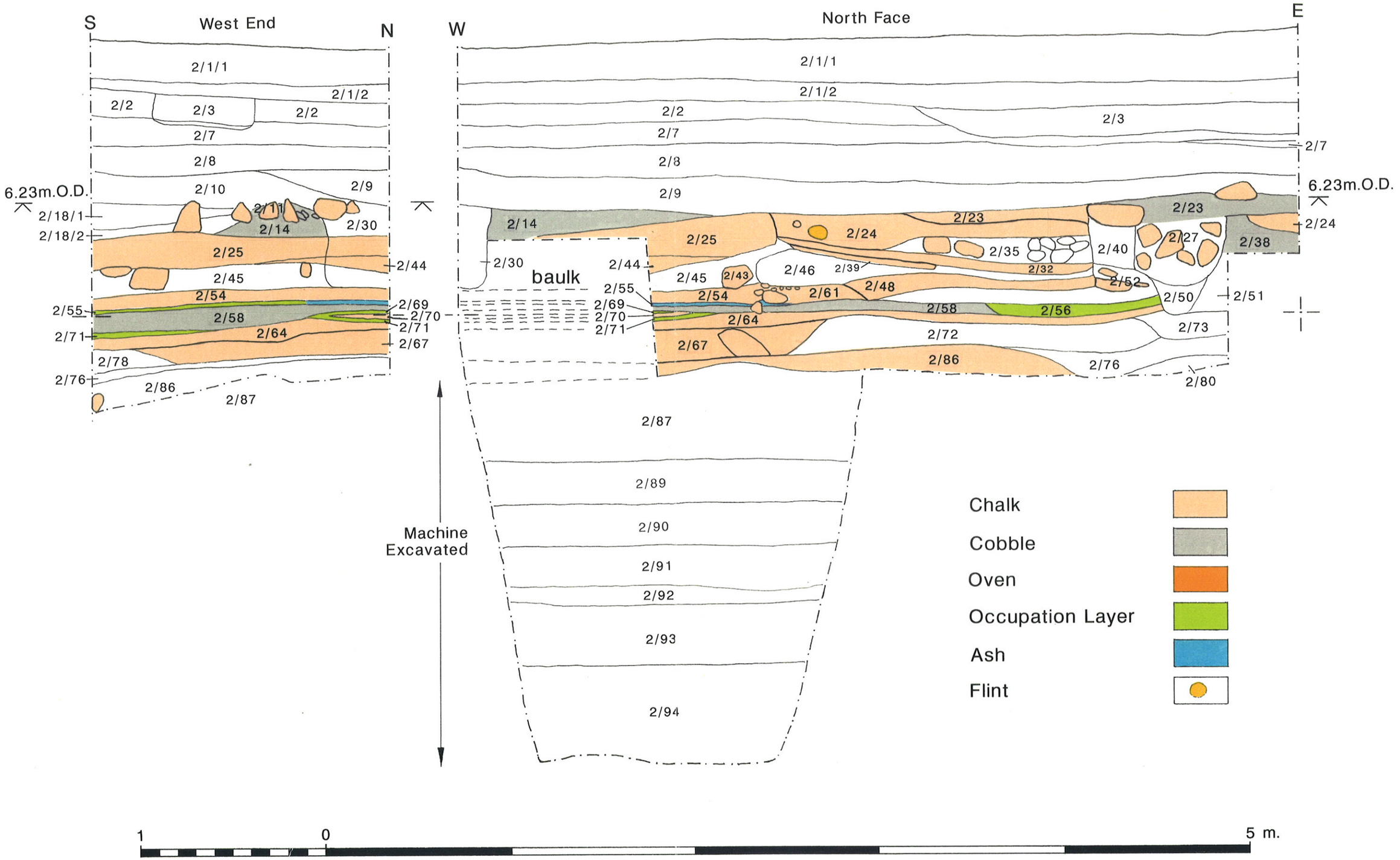


Fig. 7 Trench 2 DRS 90

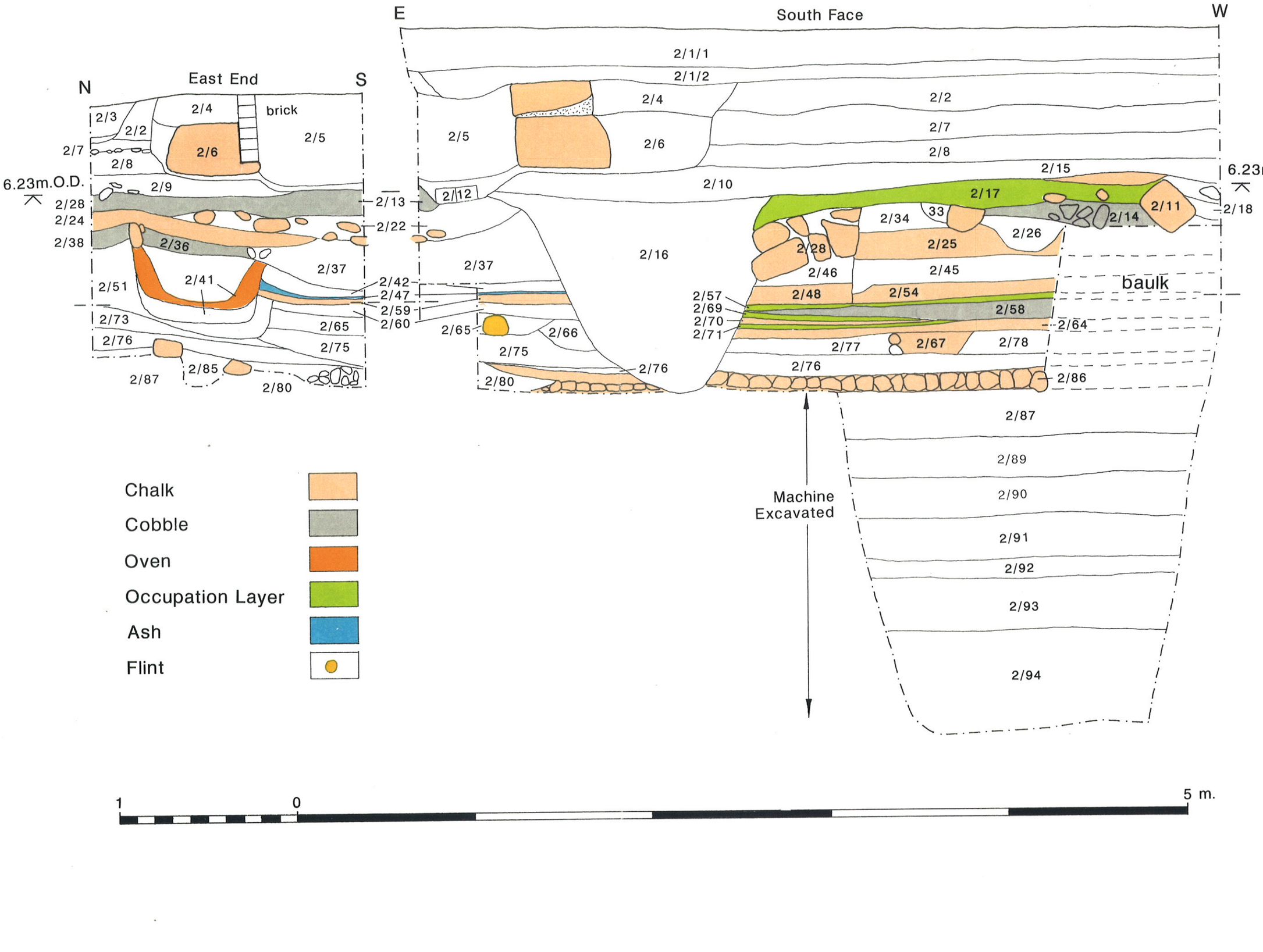
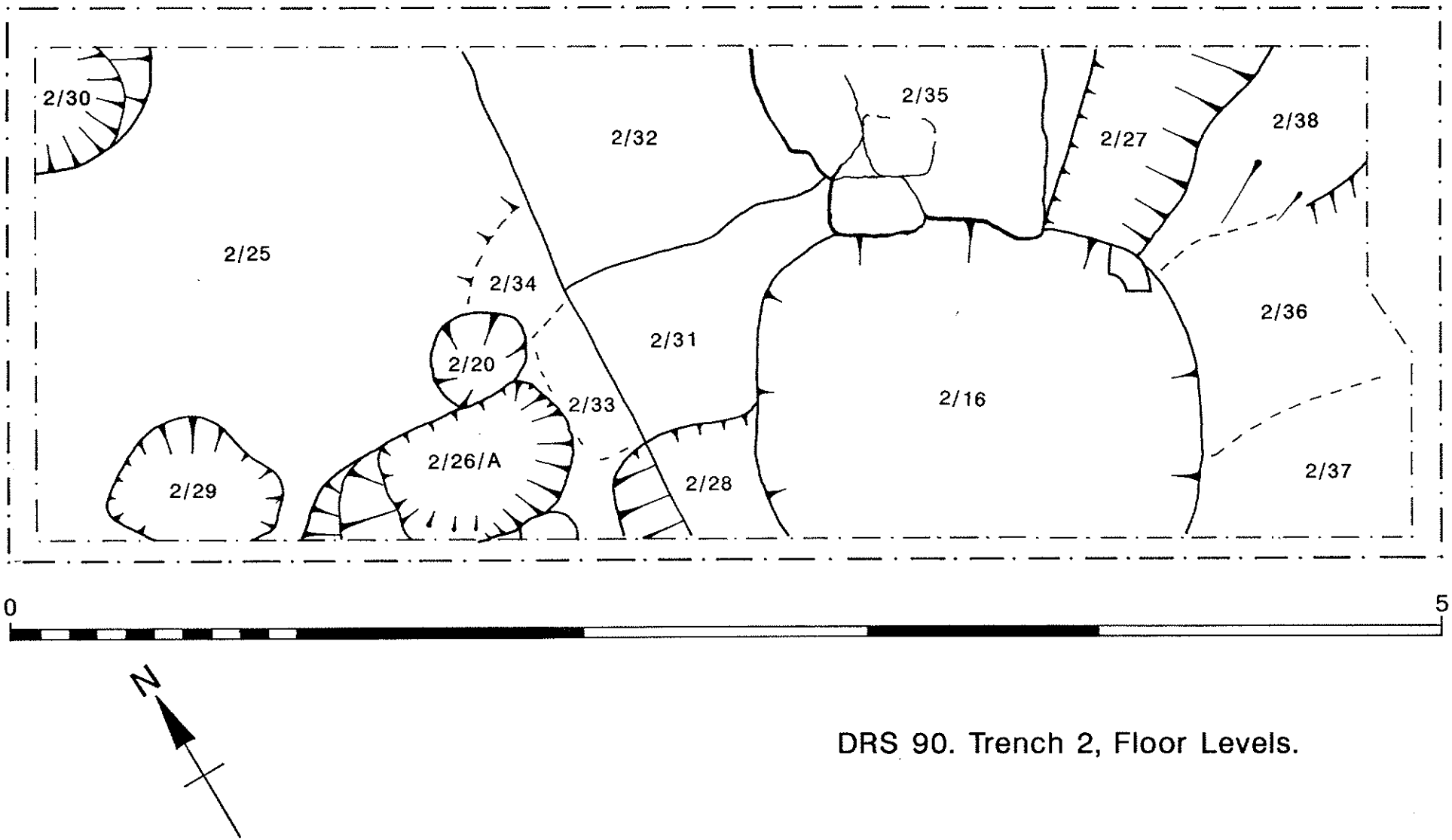
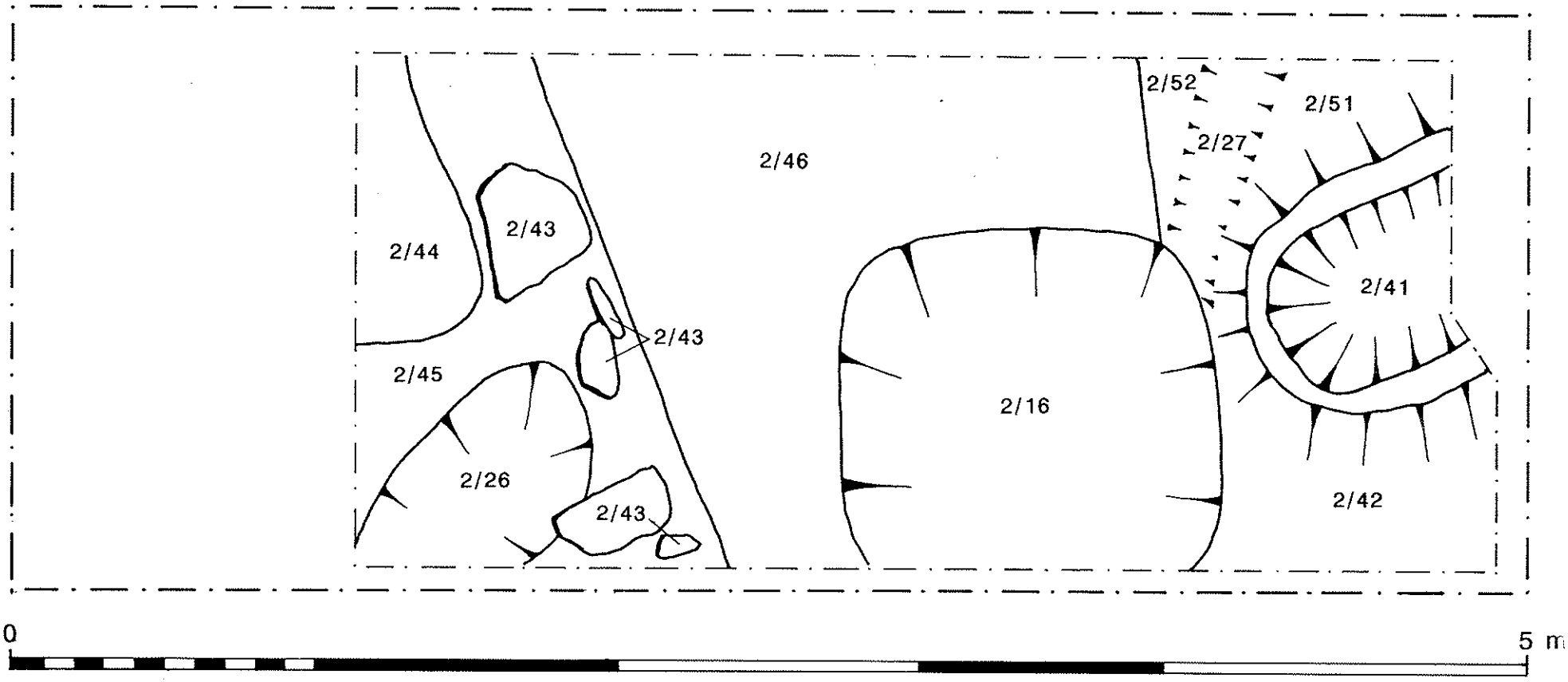


Fig. 8



DRS 90. Trench 2, Floor Levels.

Fig. 9



DRS 90. Trench 2, Oven 2/41 and associated features.

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