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BANBURY INNER RELIEF ROAD :

STAGES II & III

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATIONS

NORTH OF BRIDGE STREET

Oxford Archaeological Unit

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# BANBURY INNER RELIEF ROAD : STAGES II & III ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATIONS NORTH OF BRIDGE STREET

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## Summary

Excavations were carried out north of Bridge Street by the Oxford Archaeological Unit (conducted by R A Chambers and Mark Roberts) in January/February 1990 in advance of the construction of the Banbury Inner Relief Road. The excavation was located on the eastern limit of the medieval town at the foot of the causeway to the medieval bridge across the river Cherwell. The investigation located the river cliff of the Cherwell, a major topographical feature which determined the extent of the medieval town (Figs. 1-3).

The earliest evidence of settlement consisted of a stone based building and a scatter of small pits of approximately 1200 AD (Figs. 4, 5).

A north-south property boundary divided the site, beginning as a ditch probably in the medieval period, replaced by a series of stone and brick walls which continued up to the present century (Fig. 3).

A sequence of building foundations fronting onto Bridge Street was found beneath No.s 59-60 which probably began in the late 16th Century. From about 1800 AD buildings associated with the new Oxford Canal (opened in 1790) expanded over the infilled floodplain of the Cherwell.

## Acknowledgement

The excavation was funded by Oxfordshire County Council. We are grateful to the staff of the County Highways Department and Norwest Holst, the contracting engineers, for their assistance. Thanks also to John Steane, the County Archaeological Officer and Melissa Barnett, Curator of Banbury Museum. Finds and records will be deposited with the museum sector of the Oxfordshire County Council Department of Leisure, Arts and Library Services.

## Location (Fig. 1)

The excavations lay within a triangular site of 2.8 ha south of the Oxford to Birmingham Canal, north of Bridge Street and east of Mill Lane. On Bridge Street the site was at the foot of the causeway leading to the bridge across the Cherwell floodplain. Two arches of the medieval stone bridge, c. 14th Century, remain visible, showing that the medieval crossing is encapsulated within the core of the modern road bridge.



The site was 200 metres from the south-east corner of the Banbury Castle ditch. This area represents the easternmost extension of medieval Banbury where it extends towards the bridge. The natural marl forms a bridgehead into the Cherwell floodplain. Bridge Street, the road from the Market Place, runs along this promontory.

West of the ford/bridge the medieval town lies on gently rising ground (middle lias) dominated in the Middle Ages by the Castle. The medieval town lay south and south-west of the castle, with an extension south-eastward towards the bridge.

### The Excavations

The construction of stages II and III of the Banbury Inner Relief Road provided an opportunity to examine the date and character of the development of the very eastern end of the medieval town. The work was conducted in two phases : an initial excavation, lasting four weeks from January to early February 1990, and a watching brief in May 1990.

The site is best known locally for the canalside warehouse featured on the cover of the 1989 telephone directory. The warehouse was demolished in December 1989, just one month short of the bicentenary of the construction of the final section of the Oxford to Birmingham Canal from Banbury to Oxford. This warehouse and the former fire station were surrounded by a complex of small industrial units during the past century, causing much ground disturbance. Sufficient survived below ground to demonstrate the earlier history and development of the site. Four trenches were excavated, their size limited by the available resources. These were designed to sample the area from Bridge Street towards the canal. Limited access only was available on the Bridge Street frontage (Trench 1) owing to the presence of standing buildings. Observations were made in the area of Numbers 63 and 64 during road construction.

### Trench 1 (Fig. 4)

An L-shaped trench was excavated fronting onto Bridge Street for about 10 m and extending 5 m to 15 m to the north (total area 77 sq metres). Stratification was relatively shallow. At about 0.6 m below the present ground level four small pits/postholes (17, 57, 58, 59) and one larger pit (51) found cutting into the natural marl, about 2-3 m back from the present pavement of Bridge Street (north) (Fig. 6). Pit 51 contained five sherds of late 12th/early 13th Century pottery of local fabrics. The other pits/postholes were probably of similar date (on stratigraphical grounds; they contained no pottery). A small rectangular area (feature 50) of scorched marl and stone may indicate the remains of a medieval hearth. These features suggest the presence of a medieval structure, but its plan cannot be defined from this limited area. There were no associated floor levels.

There was no trace of any medieval stone building foundation in this section of Bridge Street.

The Victorian brick walls of 59-60 Bridge Street (demolished in December 1989) overlay coursed iron stone rubble foundations, its occupation dated by pottery from an associated floor level to the late 16th/17th Century.

The front wall of this building along Bridge Street was masked by the Victorian brick wall. However, the surviving stone walls (features 11, 12) indicate a rectangular structure at least 5 m wide parallel to Bridge Street with a central chimney stack (feature 6) whose foundations indicate back-to-back fireplaces. The eastern room of this building was 5 m across.

The evidence is limited, but it suggests that two attached houses existed here with central lobby entrances opening onto the area south of the hearths, each with a single ground and first floor rooms.

An ironstone lined drain ran across the area of the eastern room, capped originally with stone. The drain was in use until the Victorian period, but its date of construction is uncertain.

The northern extension of Trench 1 revealed ironstone rubble foundations (features 14, 15) which were annexes of the post-medieval buildings. The first of these annexes was 3.65 m wide (no floors survived). To the north the annexe bounded by wall 15 was only about 1 m wide. A cess pit (feature 16) between the walls was dug down for one metre, but was not bottomed. The upper fill contained 17th and 18th Century tile and Victorian pottery.

The traces of a further wall (feature 13) were found south of wall 14, but insufficient time was available to clarify the stratigraphy of this disturbed area.

At the western end of Trench 1 an exterior 19th Century metalled surface of brick and wooden blocks on edge was located outside 59 Bridge Street. No excavation took place beneath this.

#### Trench 2 (Fig. 5)

This trench (50 m by about 3 m) ran from behind Trench 1 northwards towards the canal. The trench coincided with the western edge of a contemporary property boundary demarcated by a brick and stone rubble wall. This wall was found to perpetuate an earlier stone boundary wall, itself built along the line of an infilled boundary ditch (feature 35 in section 20, Fig. 6).

The boundary ditch contained no closely dateable finds but is likely on stratigraphical grounds to belong to the later medieval period. The base of this ditch was 1 m below the present ground surface (and slightly less in the medieval period, judging from the level of the medieval wall, feature 18).

This ditch was also located in a second section 4.5 m to the south, running at right angles to Bridge Street.



Feature 18/25 was an unmortared ironstone rubble wall foundation standing 0.20 m high (two courses). This outlined the east side and south-east corner of a medieval building, no earlier than the late 12th/early 13th century, on the basis of pottery in the layers through which it cuts. The corner of the building lay 21 m north of Bridge Street, aligned almost N-S at an angle to Bridge Street. No floor levels survived. Part of a shallow pit (feature 64) was found beneath the wall (18), but contained no pottery (section 20, Fig. 6).

The boundary wall (19) contained a variety of building material including dressed local and non-local limestones. This quality of reused material may have come from the Castle after its demolition following the Civil War.

A series of 19th and 20th Century wall foundations were found lying approximately at right angles to the boundary wall, which coincided with boundaries on the 19th Century Ordnance Survey Map.

The long boundary wall and its medieval predecessor were at right angles to Bridge Street. However, about 45 m north of the street the boundary stopped at the edge of the Cherwell river cliff. Subsequent to the construction of the canal wharfrage this boundary was extended for 23 metres on a new alignment at right angles to the canal. The new foundations were ironstone rubble and formed the eastern side of a canalside warehouse.

#### Trenches 3 and 4

Trench 4 ran east-west parallel to the rear of 63-69 Bridge Street for 36 metres. Trench 3 was an irregular trench which ran northward towards the canal for 32 metres. The trench contained a dog-leg in the centre to avoid modern deep foundations. From the west end of Trench 3 the former ground surface, buried under c. 1 m of modern build-up, sloped downwards beneath the water table at c. 2 m indicating the edge of the river cliff. A test-pit at the east end of Trench 4 failed to find natural subsoil at c. 3 m illustrating the depth of 19th Century landfill present over much of the floodplain south-west of the canal. Trenches 3 and 4 indicate that this area consists of infilled land on the edge of the river Cherwell and lies beyond the edge of the medieval urban occupation.

#### Number 63-64 Bridge Street

A watching brief was conducted by Mike Napthan of the Oxford Archaeological Unit during the construction of the new road following the demolition of 63-64 Bridge Street. The cellar of No. 64 had stone built walls and appeared to have been backfilled in the early part of the present century. In the limited area (about 1 m) between the cellars of No.s 63 and 64 fragments of a well-made stone pathway and stone foundations, possibly of the 18th Century, were found. These sealed a small stone and clay-lined well with evidence of a barrel lining in its base (2 m beneath current ground level). A pit cut by the well contained 16th/17th Century pottery.

## Conclusion

This small-scale excavation clarified the extent of medieval settlement in the eastern section of Banbury close to the Cherwell. It has also defined the pronounced edge of the floodplain beyond which the medieval town did not extend. Only during the early 19th Century after the construction of the canal were industrial buildings and warehousing built over the infilled land.

In view of the limited and disturbed samples, animal bone, pottery and other finds have not been reported in detail. Records, finds and photographs will be deposited with the Oxfordshire County Museum.

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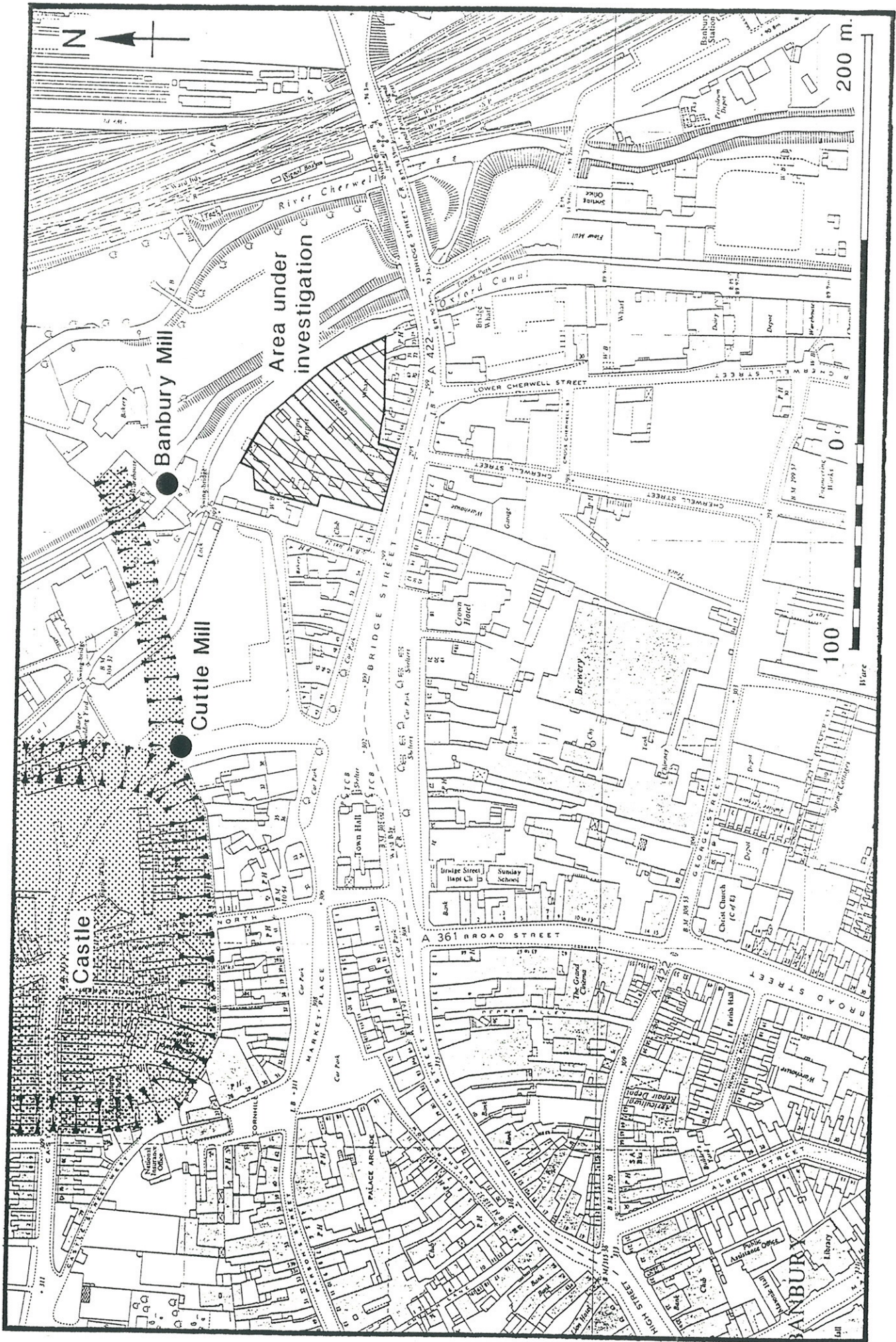


Fig. 1



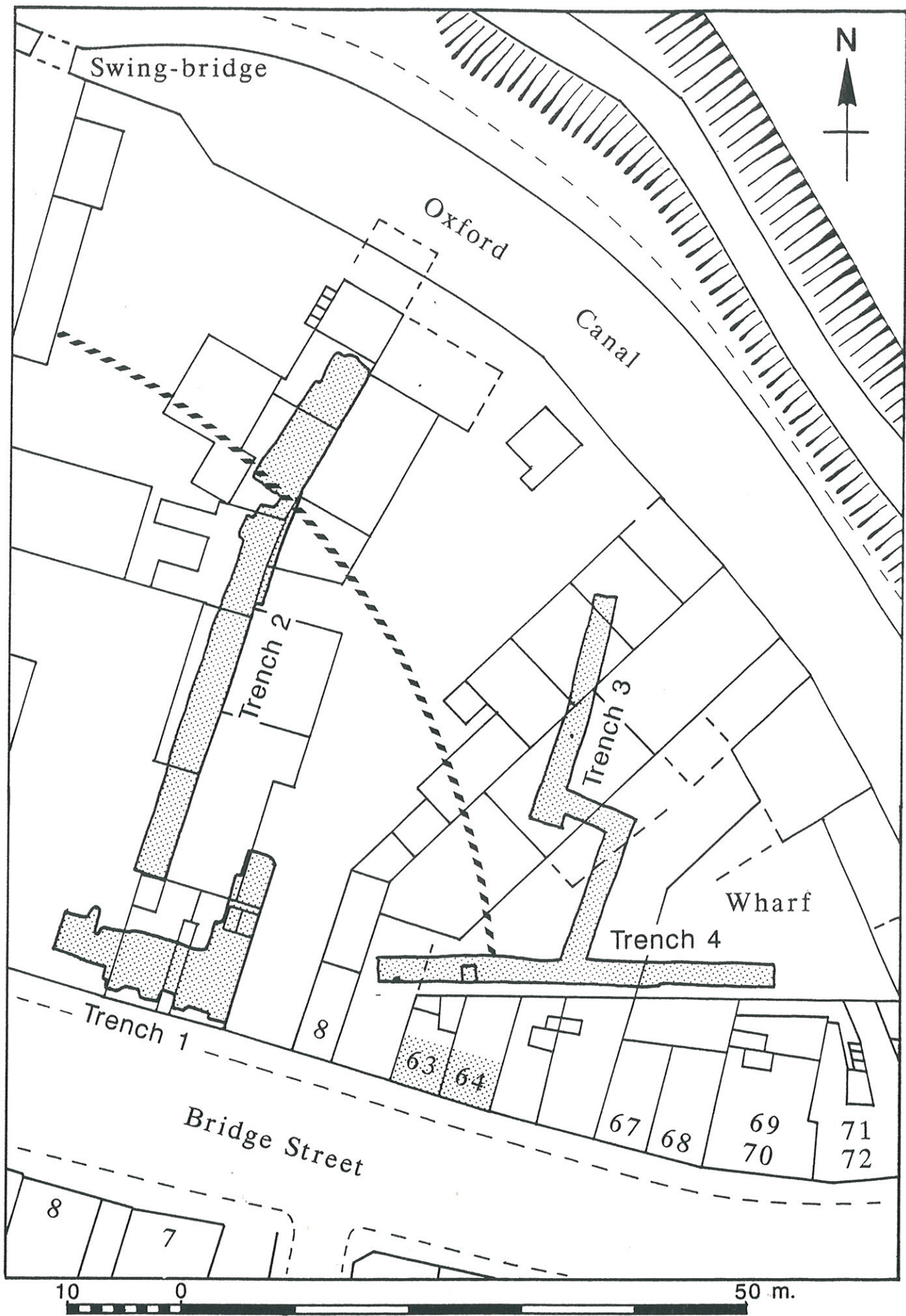
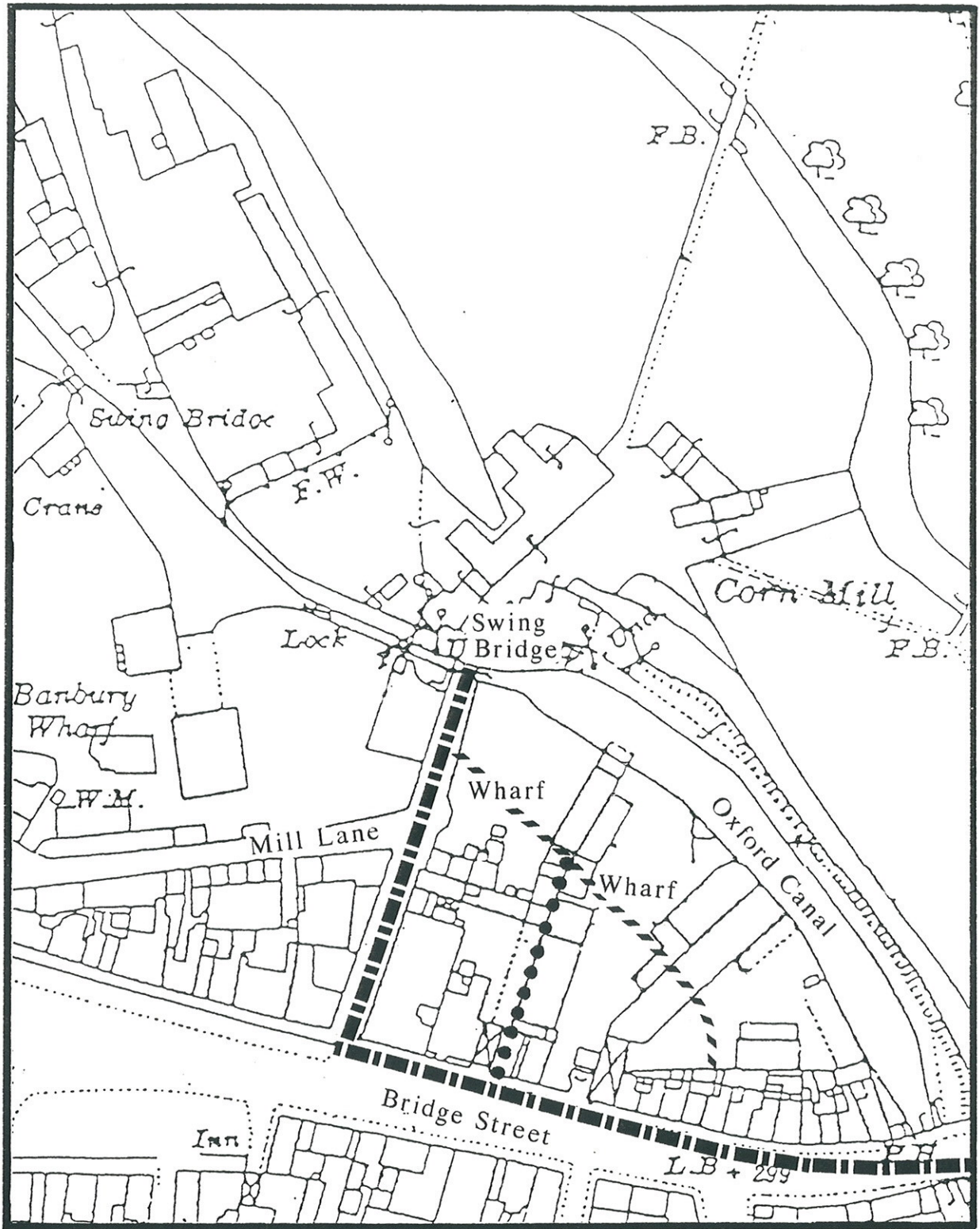


Fig. 2



■■■■■■■■■■ Boundary formed by roads around area of investigation

●●●●●●●● Boundary Ditch/Wall

/////// River Cliff



Fig. 3



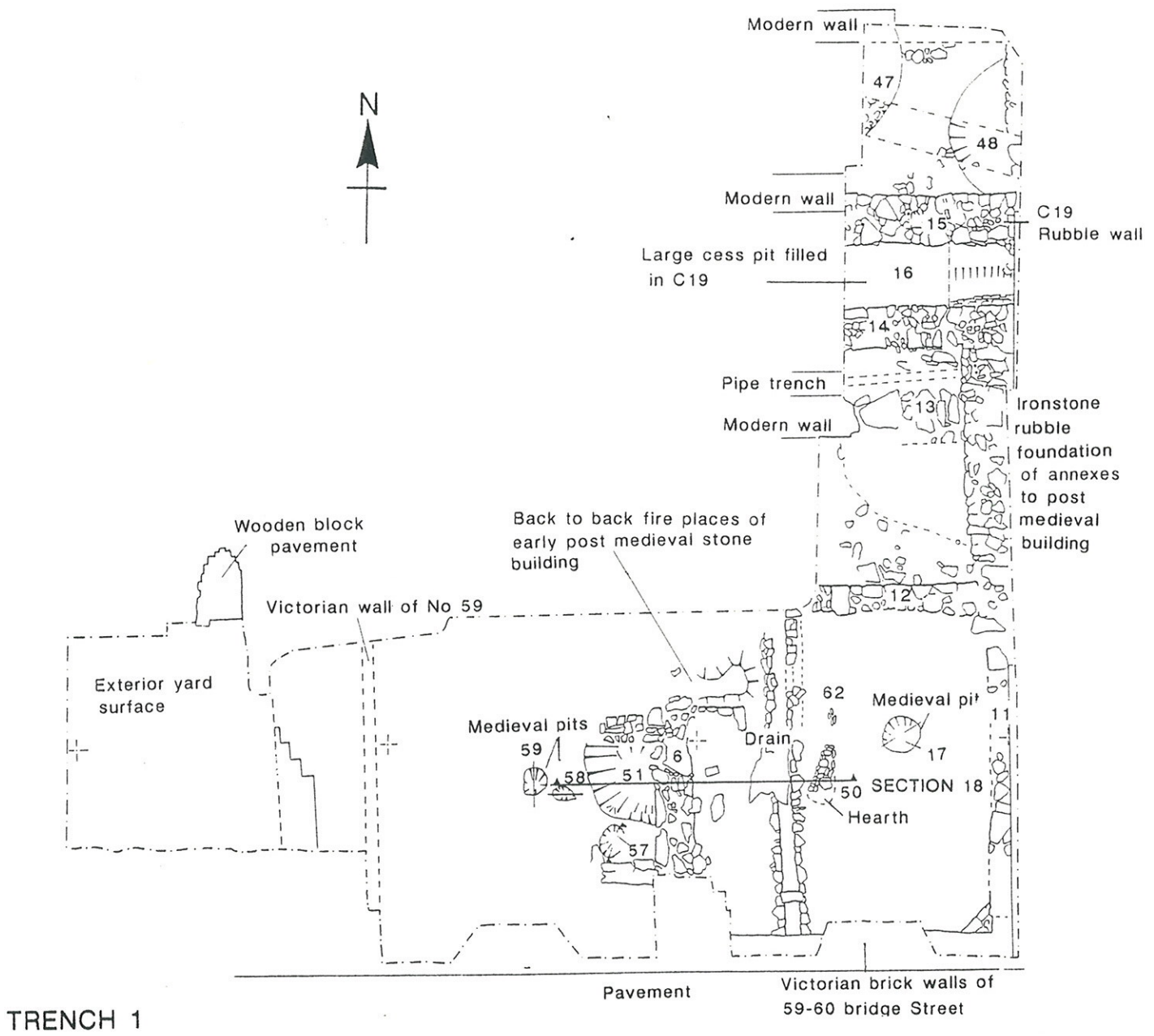
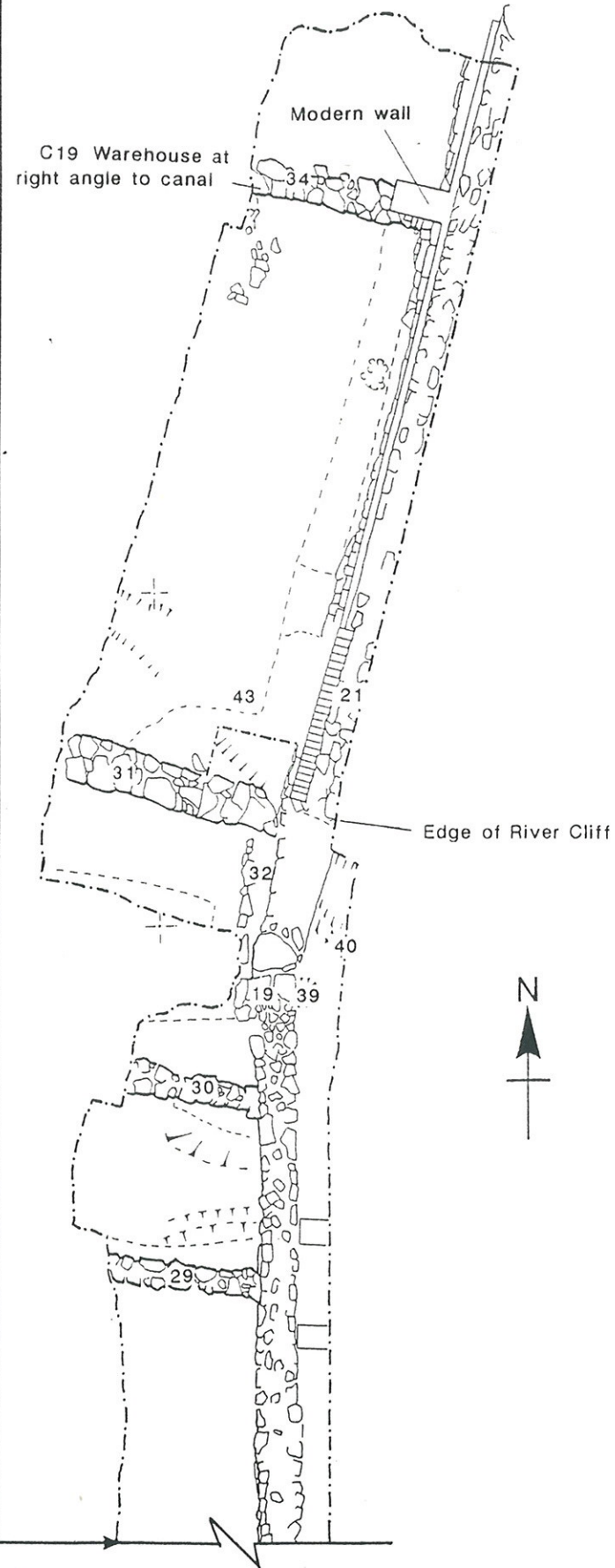
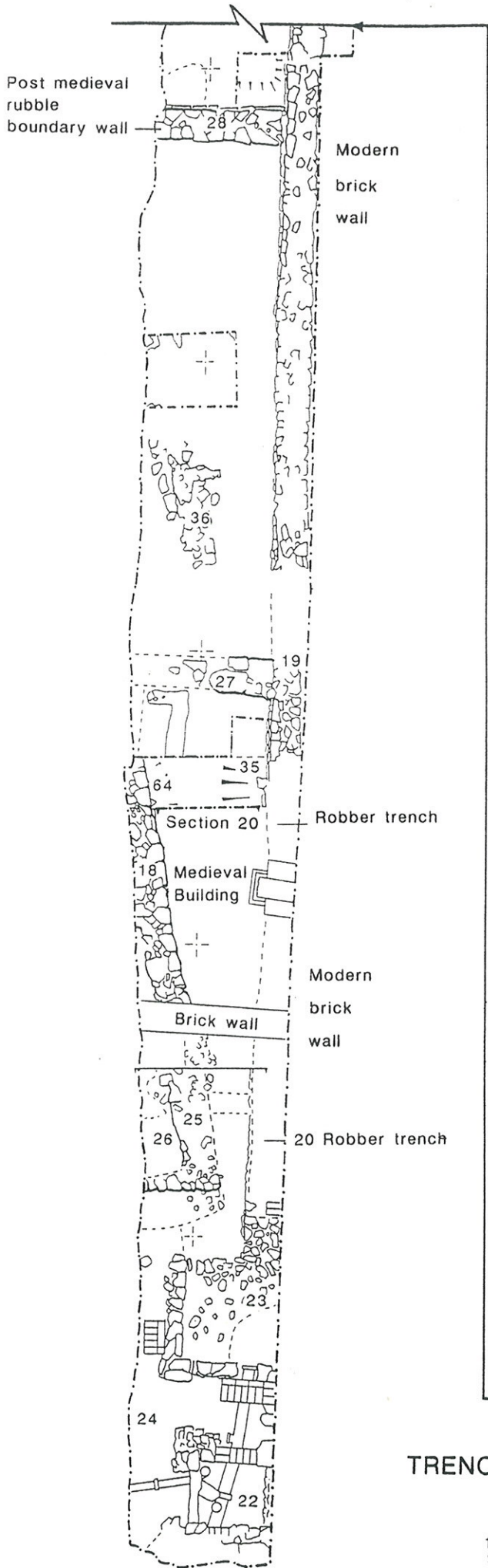


Fig. 4



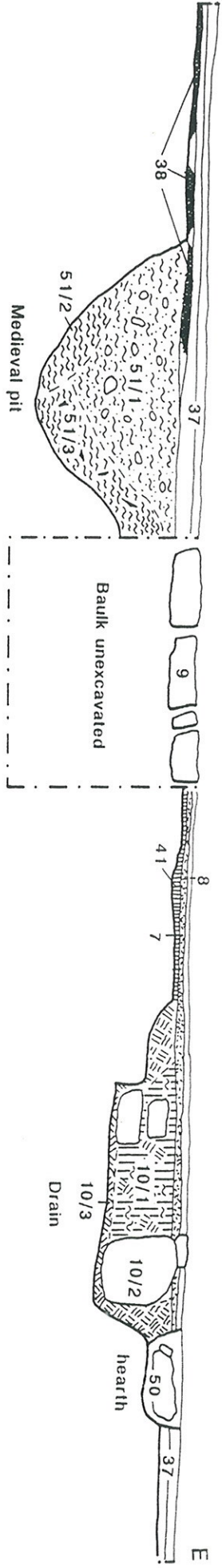
TRENCH 2



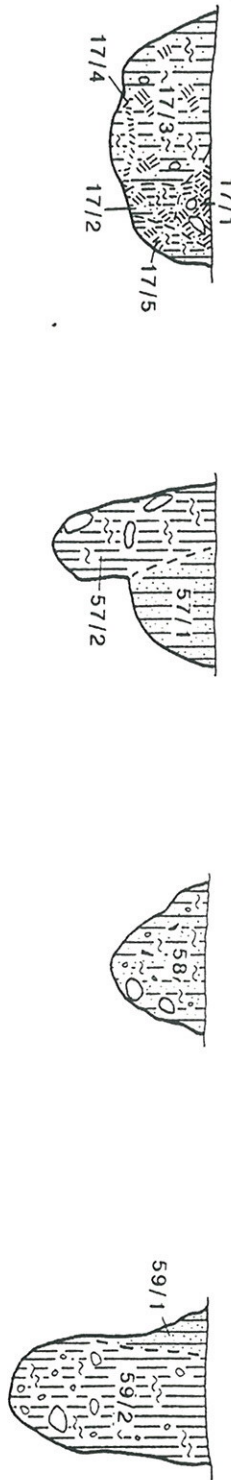
Fig. 5



Section 18  
W



Trench 1



Trench 2 Section 20

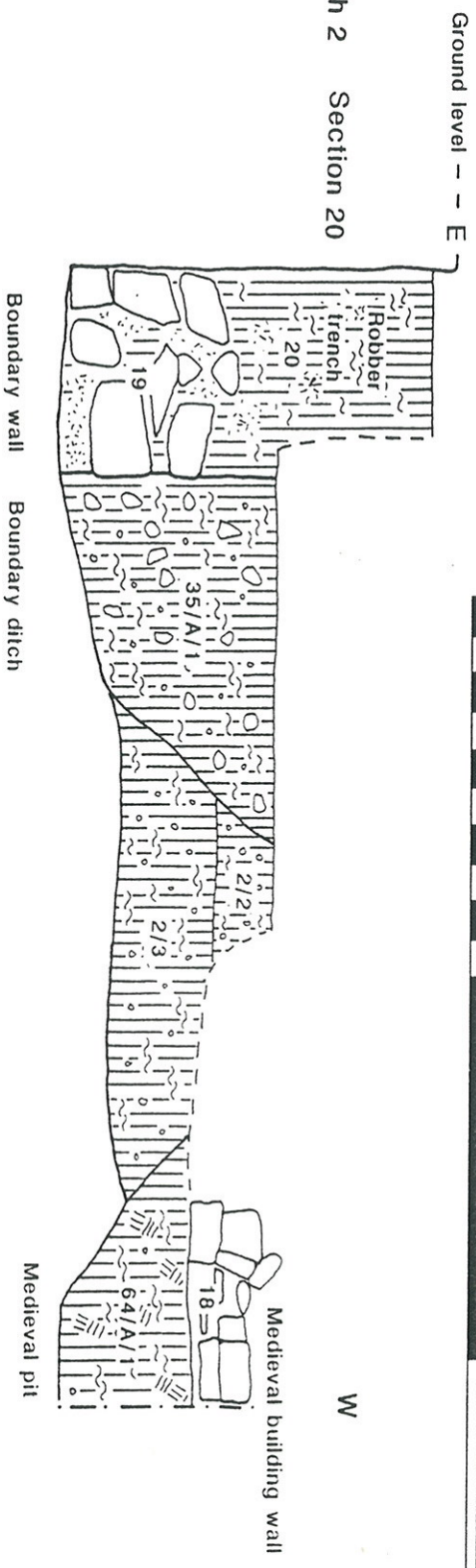


Fig. 6