EXCAVATIONS AT GRIM'S DITCH

CHARLBURY 1985

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by JOHN LANGE AND ANNE FOSTER.

This report examines the excavation results of work carried out on two linear earthworks of the North Oxfordshire Grim's Ditch. Although findings provided no datable evidence for the construction period of the ditches nor their environmental setting, a relative chronology was established and an approximate 'terminus antequem' for both during the late 1st Century B.C. and late 1st Century A.D.. This is discussed in relation to other sections taken of the Grim's Ditch complex.

INTRODUCTION

Rescue excavations were carried out by memebers of the Oxford Archeological Unit on an exposed stretch of the North Oxfordshire Grim's Ditch in Charlbury Quarry, prior to its planned extension. The extant earthworks were first recognised by Copeland in 1982 based on place name and aerial photographic evidence. He later identified the course of the ditch as being south-west of Hill Farm (SP37052020 PRN8912). An ill defined but continuous dark mark was observed running from Ditchley Road to a point east-north-east of Sandford Mount. The line of the bank and ditch are still visible along the Charbury Ditchley Road and may amount for the angled bend in the road heading north-east to Hill Farm whereupon it appears to cut an Iron Age crop-mark site (SP37452050 PRN13217). Beyond the farm all trace of the earthwork disappears due to ploughing and is only discernable again west of Model Farm.

The site occupies a ridge of high ground north-east of Charbury. The ridge maintains ~~It maintains~~ a south-westerly slope until approximately 130 ft whereupon it breaks sharply down to the river Evenlode. The choice of location may not have been purely defensive as the scarcity of surface water on the Oolitic limestone, which forms the greater part of the SOLID ~~soil~~ geology of the area, must have made

access and perhaps control of the Evenlode important. The soils are typical of Dipslope plateau sites, seperated by narrow valleys, consisting mainly of fine to clay, brown rendzinas and calcareous soils (Grade III)[2].

As a result of quarry stripping, two soil filled linear features were discovered cutting through the upper cornbrash courses of the Taynton limestone (Figure 1). Any trace of the bank within the subsoil layers, would have been removed and consequently excavation was confined to examining the ditches. Ploughing had obscurred any physical indications of the bank and ditch beyond the limits of the excavation, although Copeland did observe a soil filled ditch profile in the north-east quarry face, 1m deep and 2.7m wide with a rounded bottom (SP3691191)[3].

Given the limitation of time and resources the immediate aim was to establish the relationship between the two ditches, to seek a chronology and to retrieve any datable material, cultural and environmental evidence from suitable diagnostic contexts. Moreover it was essential to correlate the findings at Charlbury with those from other samples of the North Oxfordshire Grim's Ditch.

THE EXCAVATION

A series of 6 profiles were cut across the ditches. In plan, ditch (A) followed an approximate north-east to south-west course for 60 metres with an average width of 2.15 metres. Ditch (B) maintained a more curved east-west orientation until it eventually intercepted and crossed ditch (A), (SP36962065). Although uniform in composition neither ditch proved to be continuous and effectively terminated at their southern most extents. Several associated features were also detected running parallel and at oblique angles to the main course of the earthworks.

TRENCH F4 (SP36962065)

The sectioned area consisted of a trench 3.8 x 1.1 metres which

revealed only the western profile of ditch (A). It was characterised by a flat bottomed ditch, 1 metre wide with a corresponding depth (Figure 1 Section 1). As exemplified in F1 no indication of silting prior to its rapid back filling was observed. The uniform fill of loose and compacted cornbrash was sealed by a layer of soil and cornbrash pebbles. The eastern profile had been obliterated, clearly as a result of ditch (A) being cut by ditch (B). A broad band of primary silt accumulated on the outer edge of ditch (B) before the proccess of backfilling was repeated. The primary fill was levelled off briefly before a rapid secondary fill of finer material was deposited on top. The upper levels of the ditch fill were re-cut by soil layer 4. The latter represents a continuation of a feature recognised in F2 and F6 although not obviously apparent in F3. It appeared to follow the main course of ditch (B), adhering closely to its north-eastern edge for 40 metres. a narrow, oblique feature (B1) was associated with the above and deliberately cut the cornbrash surface to feed directly into the re-cut of F2. To the north-east it disappeared beneath the quarry perimeter and field boundary.

TABLE 1

F4 DESCRIPTION OF LAYERS

LAYER	DESCRIPTION	INTERPRETATION
1	Angulated pieces of cornbrash at various degrees of compaction. Average size 10 cm in length and 5 cmm in width.	Primary fill for ditch (B).
2	Small rounded cornbrash pebbles within a sandy light brown soil.	Secondary fill. Overlies 1 and 5 but contemporaneous with 1.
3	Yellow/brown fine grain silt.	Primary silt for ditch (B).
4	Dark brown fine grain soil/ silt.	Primary silt after recut of 2.
5	Large angulated pieces of cornbrash, losly compacted, becoming sandier at lower levels.	Primary fill deposit for ditch (A)

TRENCH F5 (SP 3701 2010)

The sectioned area consisted of 2 ditches that abutted but did not intercept, running parallel in a north-east, south-west direction. The eastern ditch appears to be a continuation of ditch (A) with the same sequence and position of layers as that found on F1. It is characterised by a flat bottomed ditch of 80 cm wide and 96 cm deep. Once again the fill is predominately but is seperated from the eastern face of the ditch by layer 4. This formed a primary silt deposit derived from the dense red clay loam that lay directly on top of the natural cornbrash. This was also reflected in F1 and in other sections at Kiddington and Model Farm, where it was described by Harden as a pre Grim's Ditch cultivation layer.

To the west was a smaller, steep sided, flat bottomed ditch 70 cm deep and 70 cm wide containing a primary silt deposit of light, yellow brown soil with a uniform secondary fill of cornbrash and soil. This was anomalous with F3 and may be a continuation of ditch (B) although this could not be substantiated. Both ditches were re-cut by a shallow trench represented by soil layer 1. This probably belongs to the same group of later linear features associated with the re-cuting of ditch (B) and running parallel with ditch (A).

The smaller ditch could have served as a bedding trench for a palisade but evidence was insufficient to confirm any continuity. Moreover the suggested 'V' shaped palisade trenches at Blenheim and Model Farm, Harden was unable to determine whether or not they were contempory or later than the main earthworks.

TABLE 2 (Please turn over.)

TABLE 2

F5 DESCRIPTION OF LAYERS

LAYER	DESCRIPTION	INTERPRETATION
1	Yellow/brown fine grain soil, with cornbrash pebbles.	Primary silt for re-cut of 3 and 2.
2	Angulated and rounded pieces of cornbrash within a light brown fine/medium grain soil.	Primary fill for West ditch.
3	Angulated pieces of cornbrash of various sizes, loosly compacted within a fine brown soil.	Primary fill for ditch (A).
4	Red, clay, silt with small rounded black pebbles.	Primary silt from red clay loam.

THE FINDS

THE POTTERY

None of the pottery was determinate enough to re-pay illustration but nevertheless provides an approximate indication of the period at which both ditches fell into disuse. From an upper soil layer of F1, one sherd of late Iron Age date was discovered along with 2 further sherds in the secondary fill of F3, one body and one rim of Roman, Oxfordshire ware dated approximately to the late 1st Century A.D..

ENVIRONMENTAL

Several pieces of charcoal, identified as oak, were located in the lower levels of the primary ditch fill from F4, ditch (B) but was considered insufficient for dating purposes.

LAND USE

Thomas Pride's map of 1761, showed that a high proportion of the open or common fields remaining were on higher ground to the east of Charbury. Ditchley Way Furlong, where the site is situated, was divided into strips, some of which were orientated in s north-east, south-west direction and adjoining Mackeralshire Furlong to the south. Thrift Furlong to the east suggests woodland and may have been part of Lees Rest Wood.

The Jesse Clifford version of the Charlbury Tithe Map of 1848 shows that few of the open fields remained and more permanent, stockproof boundaries were prefered.[6] This may help to explain the re-use of ditch (B) and other associated linear features for just such a purpose.

The red brashy soils are well suited for crop production, especially corn. Despite being free draining the underlying limestone retains sufficient quantities of moisture for healthy growth allowing for easy land management and cultivation. All of these factors contribute to the agricultural importance of the area enclosed by Grim's Ditch which would have supported a mixture of arable, pasture and woodland.

DISCUSSION

Thus from the field evidence, a chronology could be established whereby ditch (A) experienced rapid backfilling perhaps in the later part of the First Century B.C. before being re-cut by a second phase ditch of similar dimensions, design and composition. This became disused in the late First Century A.D. and was re-cut by a later field or livestock boundary. These factors may suggest that phase 2 (ditch (B)) was consequent on the destruction of phase 1, (Ditch (A)),and may have been ultimately responsible for its abandonment. If we assume ditch (A) is a continuation of an early phase of Grim's Dyke it compares favourably in proportions and compositions to other examples at Model Farm, Kiddington[7], and dyke C at Callow Hill[8], suggesting that their construction was apart of a unified scheme of earthworks. All examples showed the bank and ditch to be discontinuous and indicated a late Iron Age date for the earthworks. Evidence from the ditch fills at each section demonstrated that they had been deliberately backfilled soon after construction. By way of contrast sections from Blenheim[9], Northleigh[10] and Mongewell[11] all testified to a long period of silting and the ditch to be uncut. Moreover the topography of the south Oxfordshire Grim's Ditch differs from that of the north in its use of both upland and lowland regions.

This may prompt the suggestion that the south Oxfordshire Grim's Dyke belongs to a different phase to those earthworks between the Evenode and Glyme.

Unfortunately the north Oxfordshire Grim's Ditch has yet to produce sufficient datable pottery from secure contexts except from perhaps Blenheim where a late 1st Century A.D. pottery was discovered in the ditch fill and probably represents the period at which the dyke system became disused.

N Thomas, D B Harden and D W Harding sought a defensive function for Grim's Dyke and its use of high ground would suggest this, the later advocating defense by guerilla warfare tactics[12]. The scarcity of finds and material culture at Charlbury would seem to support Fine's hypothesis of an unmanned political/economic boundary. Perhaps it belongs to a period where the shift in emphasis on defense of nucleated settlements in favour of larger territorial oppida during the latter part of the 1st Century B.C. and early 1st Cebtury A.D. Comparisons can be made with other similar sites at Bagendon, Silchester, Selsey and Camlodunum.[13] If the north Oxfordshire Grim's Ditch is from this period it would pre-suppose a centralised form of social system whereas evidence would suggest the contrary of spacially isolated, enclosed settlements. The organisation and stategy required for its construction would certainly be beyond the capabilities of one individual social group.[14]

Obviously a great deal more work has to be done if the dyke system is to be dated but the nature of the earthwork will make this difficult but further examination of the gaps and possible entrances may go further in discovering its function.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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FOOTNOTES

1 J Copeland, C.B.A.9 Newsletter 13, (1982), 120-121.

2 Physiograghic MAp of Oxford Region and Geological Survey Maps 218 (Solid and Draft) 1968.

3 T Copeland Ibid 120.

4 with grounds D.B. Harden.

5 V.H.C. Oxon.X, 130.

6 Don Porter and Alan Spier, 'Hedges in our Countryside' (1985)R.

7 D B Harden, Ibid.

8 N Thomas, 'Excavations at Calloe Hill, Glympton and Stonesfield, Oxoniensia 22, (1957), 18.

9 D B Harden, Ibid.

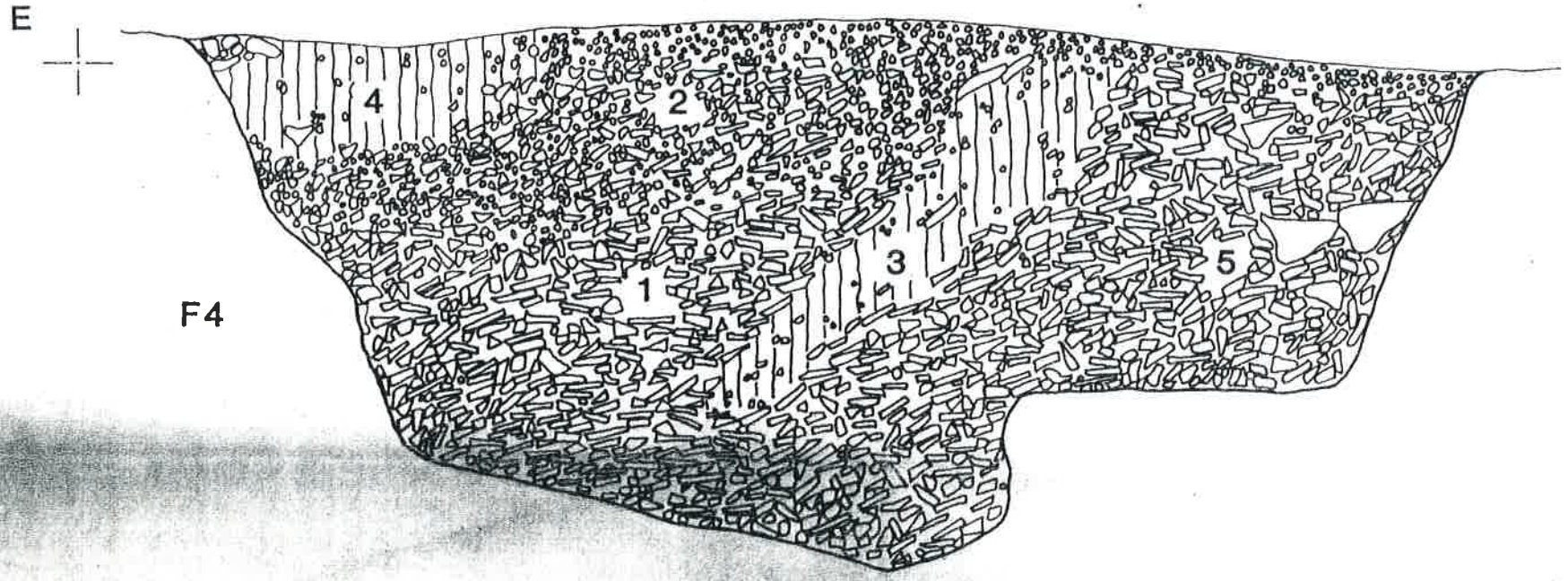
10 D Fine, 'An Excavation of the North Oxfordshire Grim's Ditch at North Leigh, Oxoniensia 41 (1976) 15 - 16.

11 J Hinchcliffe, 'Excavations at Grim's Ditch, Mongewell (1974), 122 - 135.

12 D W Harding, 'The Iron Age in the Upper Thames Basin (1972), 58.

13 B Cunliffe and T Rowley, 'Oppida' (1976) 135.

14 B Cunliffe and D Miles, 'Aspects of the Iron Age in Central Southern Britain (1984), 82.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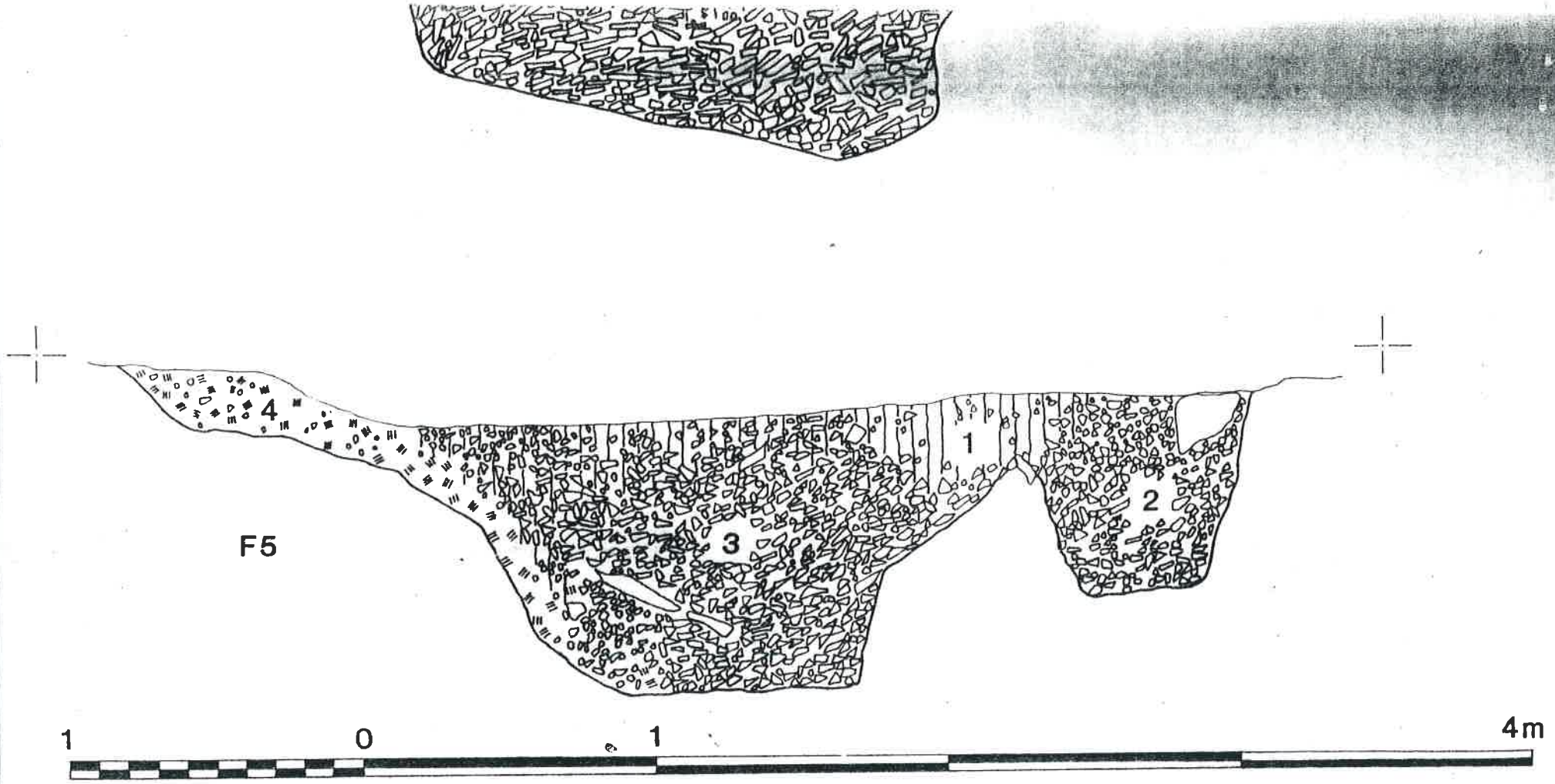
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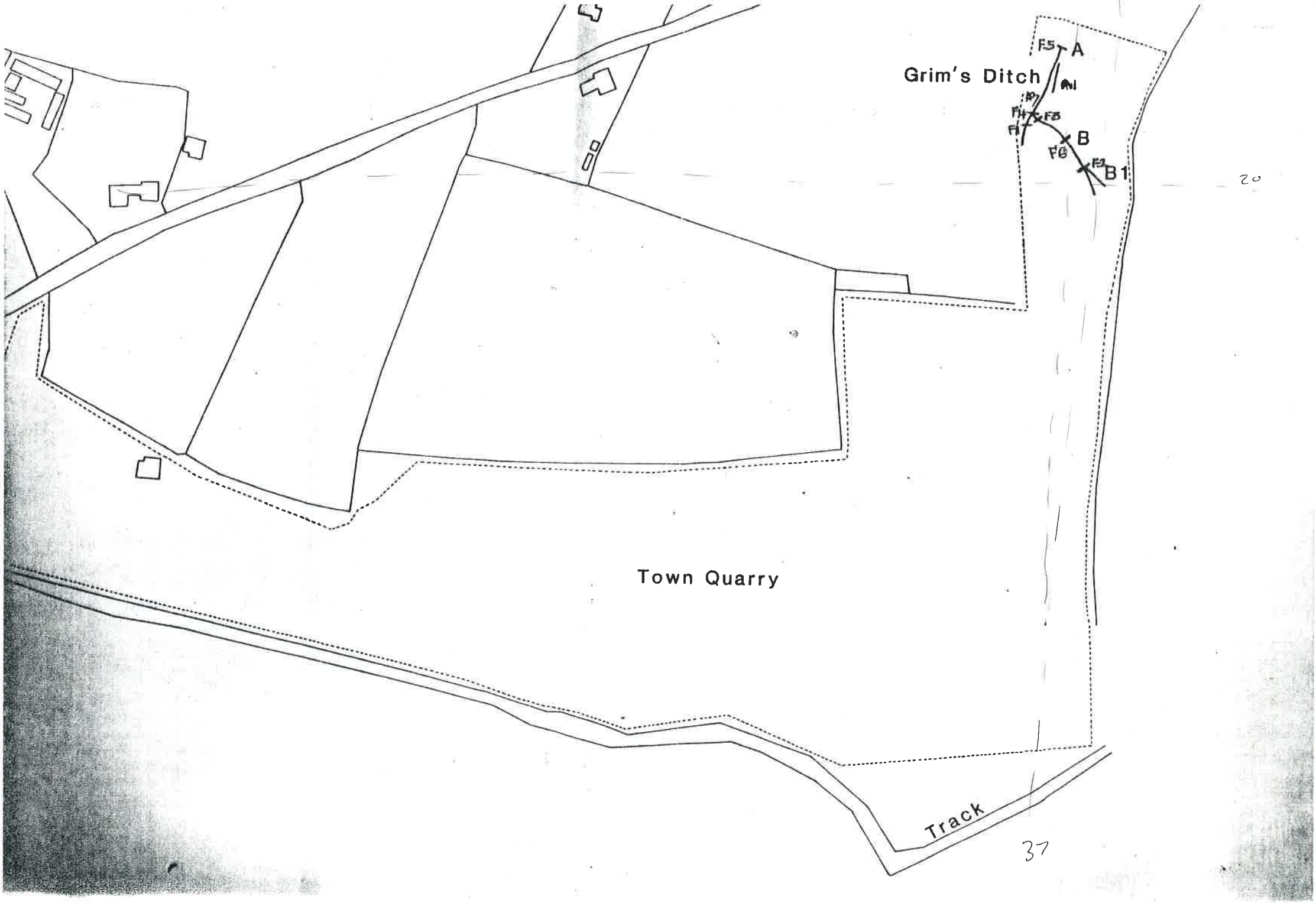
Grim's Ditch
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B
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20
Town Quarry
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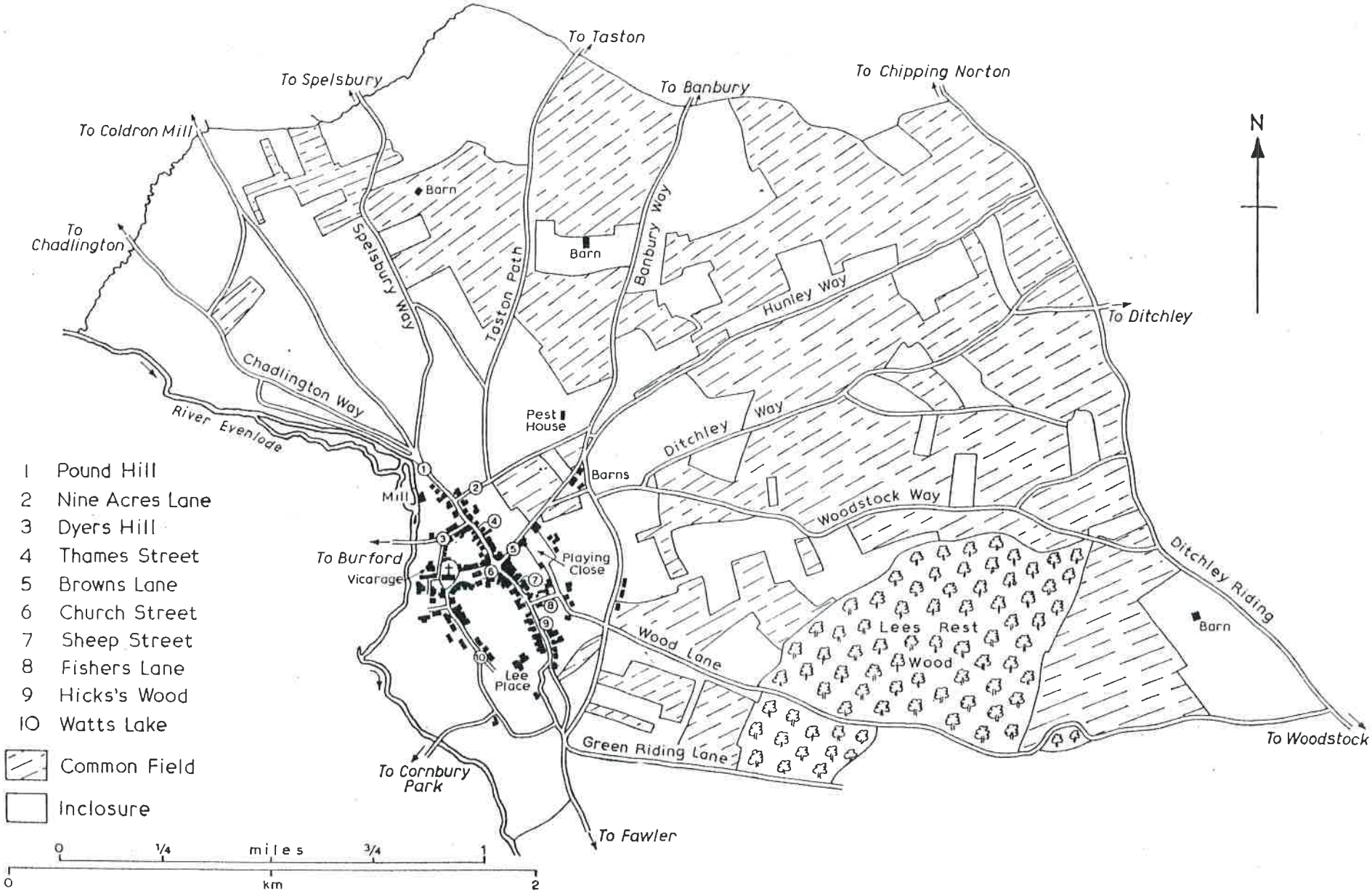
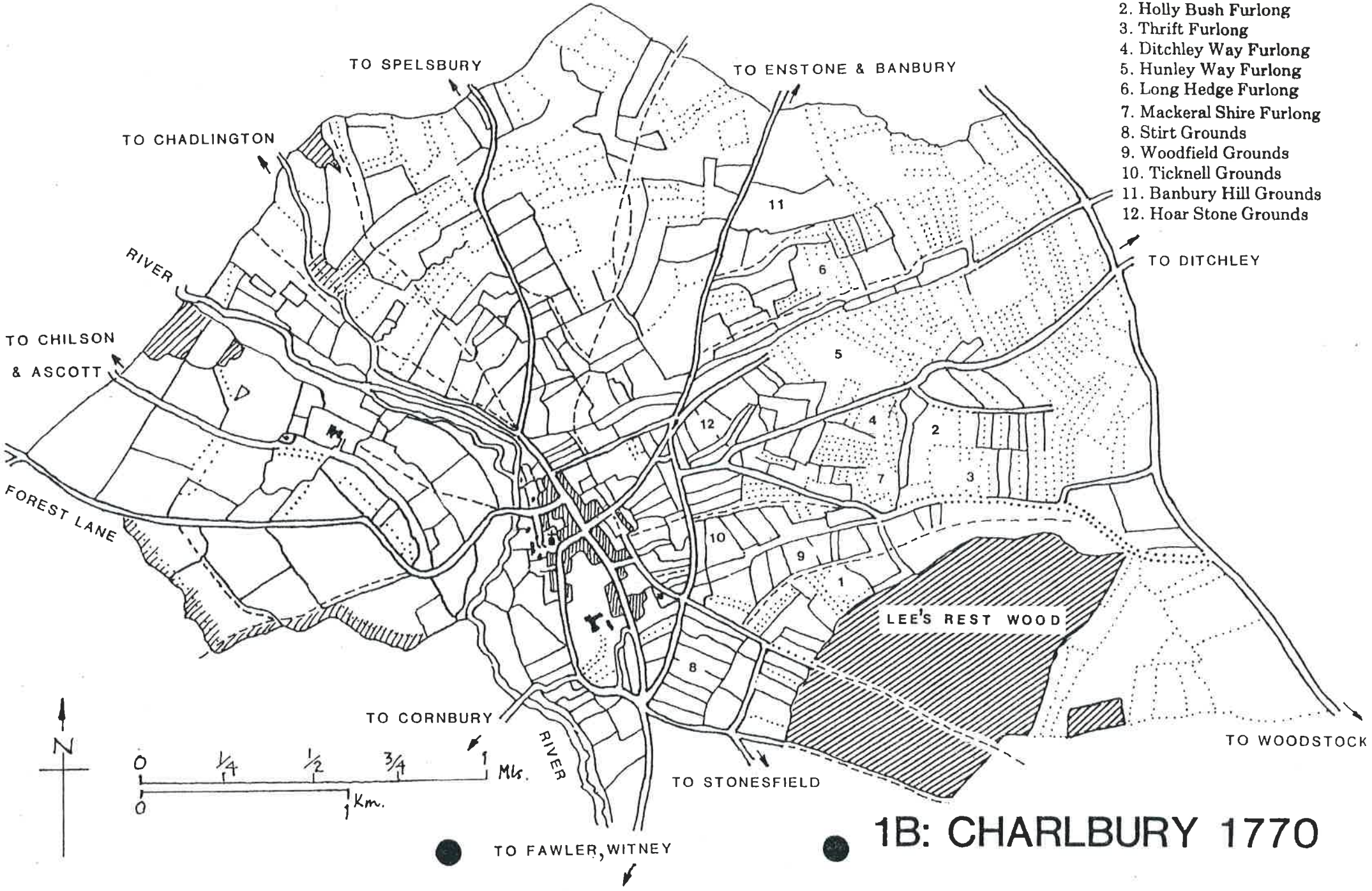
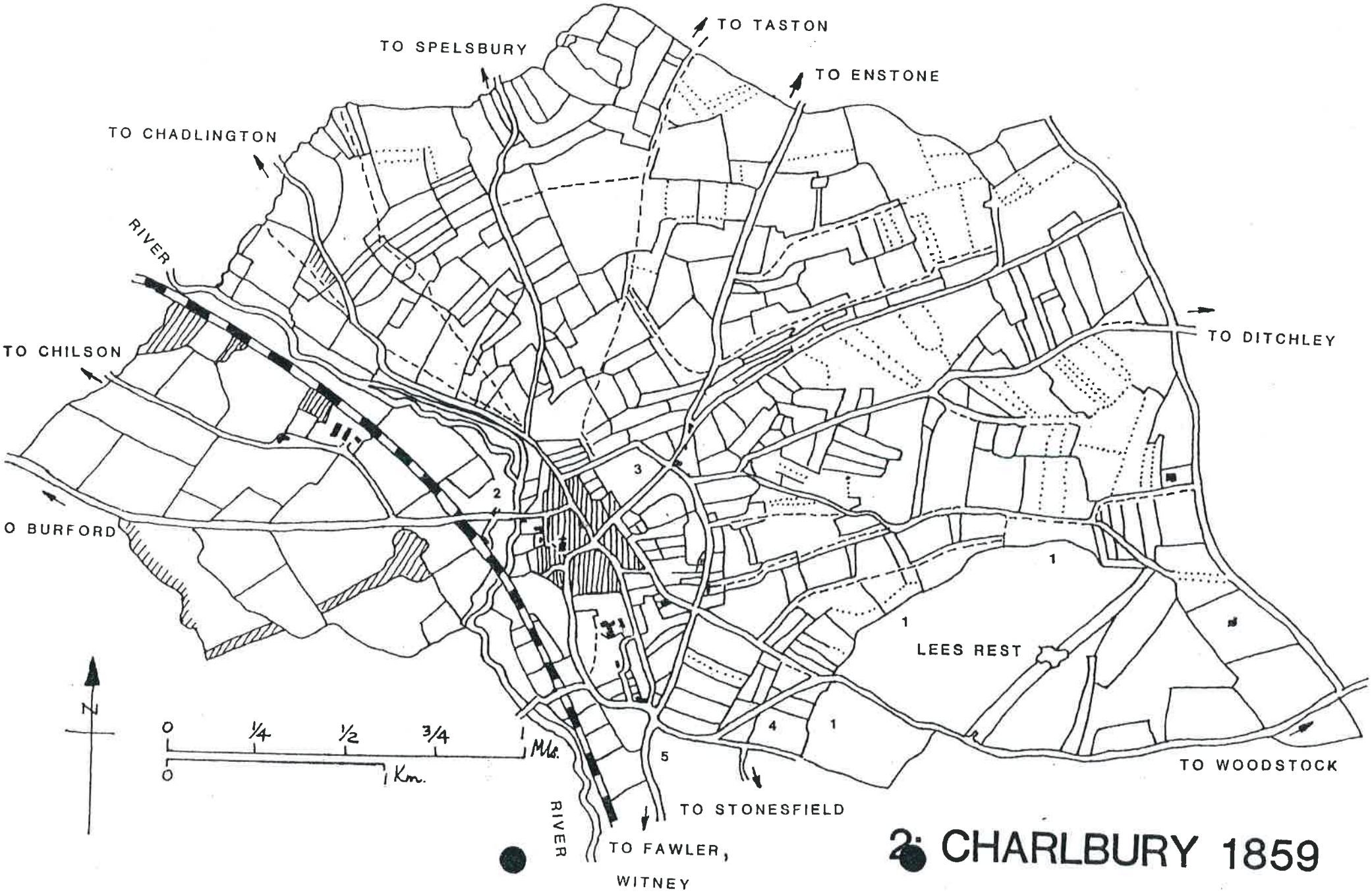


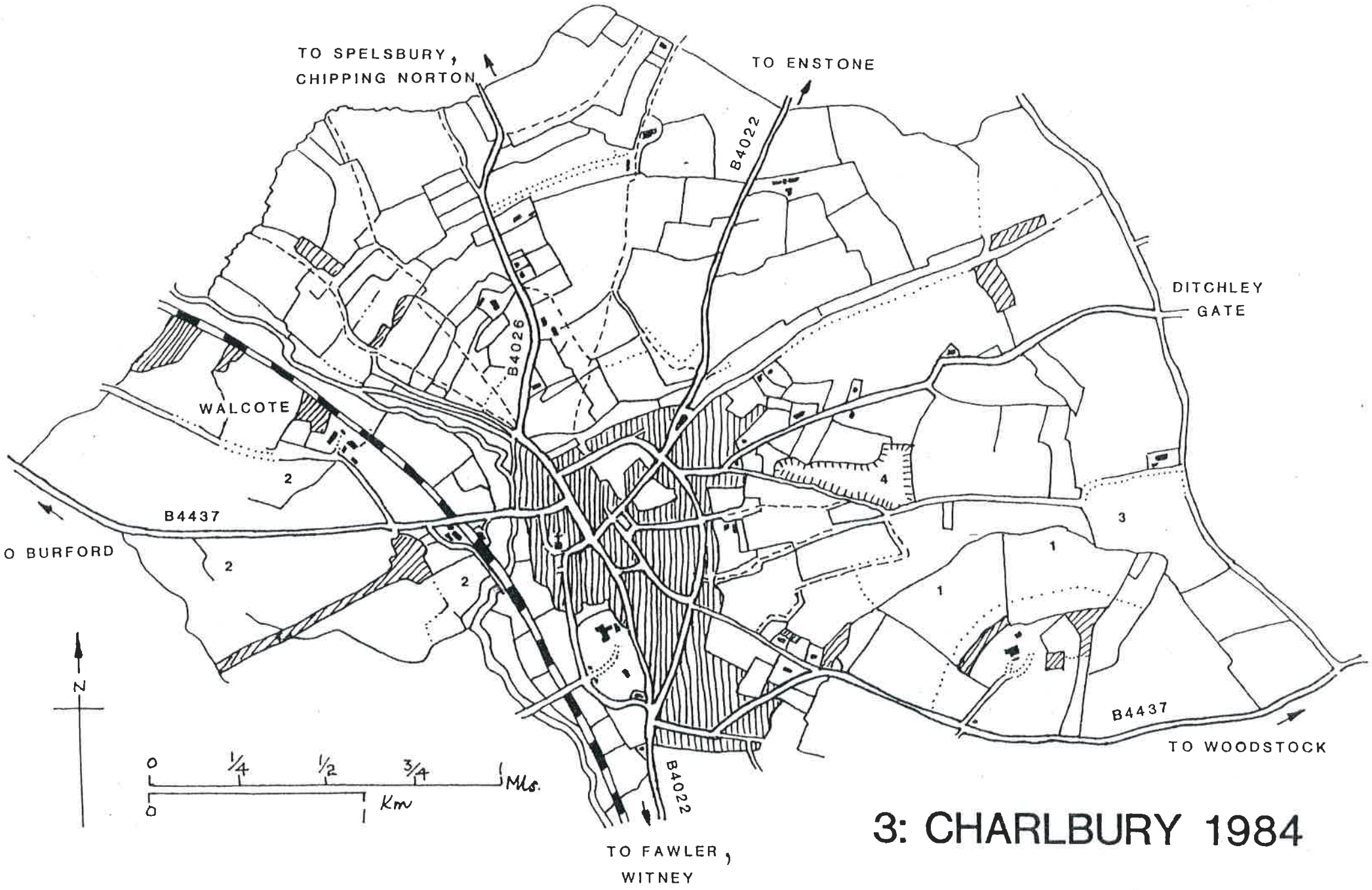
1A: CHARLBURY 1761



1B: CHARLBURY 1770



CHARLBURY 1859



3: CHARLBURY 1984

SSIFICATION [illegible]

most of the soil in each delineation conforms to that class.

TABLE 1

*Classes in higher categories**

Major group	*Group*	*Subgroup*
1 *Terrestrial raw soils* Mineral soils with no diagnostic pedogenic horizons or disturbed fragments of such horizons, unless buried beneath a recent deposit more than 30 cm thick	1.1 *Raw sands* Non-alluvial, sandy (mainly dune sands)	
	1.2 *Raw alluvial soils* In recent alluvium, normally coarse textured	
	1.3 *Raw skeletal soils* With bedrock or non-alluvial fragmental material at 30 cm or less	
	1.4 *Raw earths* In naturally occurring, unconsolidated, non-alluvial loamy, clayey or marly material	
	1.5 *Man-made raw soils* In artificially disturbed material, e.g. mining spoil	
2 *Hydric raw soils* (Raw gley soils) Gleyed mineral soils, normally in very recent marine or estuarine alluvium, with no distinct topsoil, and/or ripened no deeper than 20 cm	2.1 *Raw sandy gley soils* In sandy material	
	2.2 *Unripened gley soils* In loamy or clayey alluvium, with a ripened topsoil less than 20 cm thick	
3 *Lithomorphic (A/C) soils* With distinct, humose or organic topsoil over C horizon or bedrock at 40 cm or less, and no diagnostic B or gleyed horizon within that depth	3.1 *Rankers* With non-calcareous topsoil over bedrock (including massive limestone) or non-calcareous, non-alluvial C horizon (excluding sands)	3.11 humic ranker 3.12 grey (non-humic) ranker 3.13 brown (non-humic) ranker 3.14 podzolic ranker (with greyish E) 3.15 stagnogleyic (fragic) ranker
	3.2 *Sand-rankers* With non-calcareous, non-alluvial sandy C horizon	3.21 typical sand-ranker 3.22 podzolic sand-ranker 3.23 gleyic sand-ranker
	3.3 *Ranker-like alluvial soils* In non-calcareous recent alluvium (usually coarse textured)	3.31 typical ranker-like alluvial soil 3.32 gleyic ranker-like alluvial soil
	3.4 *Rendzinas* Over extremely calcareous non-alluvial C horizon fragmentary limestone or chalk	3.41 humic rendzina 3.42 grey (non-humic) rendzina 3.43 brown (non-humic) rendzina 3.44 colluvial (non-humic) rendzina 3.45 gleyic rendzina 3.46 humic gleyic rendzina
	3.5 *Pararendzinas* With moderately calcareous non-alluvial C horizon (excluding sands)	3.51 typical (non-humic) pararendzina 3.52 humic pararendzina 3.53 colluvial pararendzina 3.54 stagnogleyic pararendzina 3.55 gleyic pararendzina
	3.6 *Sand-pararendzinas* With calcareous sandy C horizon	3.61 typical sand-pararendzina
	3.7 *Rendzina-like alluvial soils* In recent alluvium	3.71 typical rendzina-like alluvial soil 3.72 gleyic rendzina-like alluvial soil
4 *Pelosols* Slowly permeable (when wet), non-alluvial clayey soils with B or BC horizon showing vertic features and no E, non-calcareous Ilg or paleo-argillic horizon	4.1 *Calcareous pelosols* Without argillic horizon	4.11 typical (stagnogleyic) calcareous pelosol
	4.2 *Non-calcareous pelosols* Without argillic horizon	4.21 typical (stagnogleyic) non-calcareous pelosol
	4.3 *Argillic pelosols* With argillic horizon	4.31 typical (stagnogleyic) argillic pelosol

* Names in parenthesis are alternative or explanatory.