

CULWORTH (NH)

THE
OXFORD ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT



CULWORTH, BERRY HILL CLOSE
ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT REPORT
FEBRUARY 1991

BERRY HILL CLOSE, CULWORTH, NORTHANTS
SP 544470

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INTRODUCTION

Culworth is a small village 10Km NNW of Brackley, Northants. It occupies a spur of high ground at a height of 165-170m above OD, with deeply-cut valleys to the north, west and south.

Berry Hill Close is a glebe field to the north of St Mary's churchyard, owned by the Diocese of Peterborough. It is currently used for seasonal grazing. The land lies on the plateau, with a steep E-W valley to the north.

The centre of the south half of the field is occupied by a large ring-work; this is a Scheduled Ancient Monument (Northants No. 26). Well-preserved ridge-and-furrow fields occupy much of the rest of the area, suggesting that there has been little recent cultivation. At least one possible building platform is visible in the south-east corner of the field, immediately to the north of the Old Rectory. The south-west corner contains several indistinct earthworks.

Culworth Parish Council has applied for permission to extend the graveyard of St Mary's Church northwards into the south-western corner of Berry Hill Close. The current access to the field from the High Street will become the access to the graveyard extension, but no groundworks are proposed in this area; three trees here are protected by Preservation Orders.

The area intended for burials is approximately 600 metres sq., and is adjacent to the Scheduled Ancient Monument. English Heritage has proposed that the Scheduled area should be extended to include a low bank external to the ditch of the ringwork. The area covered by the proposal has been amended accordingly. The current ground level is 169-170m above OD.

The Parish Council commissioned the Oxford Archaeological Unit to assess the archaeological potential of the area in order to assist in determining the Planning Application. The fieldwork took place in February 1991; funding was jointly provided by the Parish Council and English Heritage.

STRATEGY

A JCB mechanical excavator was used to cut four trenches, each 1.6m wide, in the proposed area (see Fig. 1):-

TRENCH	LENGTH	DEPTH	EXPOSED TO
1 E-W	20M	0.51M	natural ironstone + sand
2 N-S	17M	1.06M	natural ironstone + sand
3 E-W	11.5M	0.65M	natural ironstone + sand
4 E-W	10M	0.52M	natural ironstone + sand

The total area exposed was 93.6 m sq, or approximately 15.6% of the proposal area. Trenches 1, 2 and 4 contained archaeological

features. Trench 3 did not. All archaeological features were cut through natural deposits and were sealed by a subsoil layer located consistently in all trenches.

All features were sampled by hand. Trench plans were drawn at a scale of 1:100, while detailed plans were drawn at a scale of 1:20 where necessary. Sections were drawn at a scale of 1:20. Photographs were taken, in colour and black-and-white, of all trenches and features. No soil samples were taken, as there was no evidence for survival of carbonised organic materials.

A second element of the assessment was to survey any earthworks present in the proposal area. These consisted of: a clearly-defined E-W bank crossing the access way; the external bank to the ring-work immediately adjacent to the application area; and a slight N-S hollow running through the centre of the proposed burial area. The earthworks were surveyed and plotted at a scale of 1:500 (Fig. 1). No further consideration is given in this report to the bank in the access way, or to the external bank to the ring-work. The hollow is discussed further below.

The opportunity was taken to check the accuracy of the plan of the ringwork as shown on the OS 1:1250 map. As Figure 1 shows, the plot of the external bank to the ring-work confirmed the accuracy of the OS map.

RESULTS

In all trenches the topsoil, typically a dark greyish brown sandy loam, overlay a subsoil layer up to 0.51m thick consisting of dark brown or red-brown silty, sandy loam with occasional inclusions of ironstone. In Trenches 2 and 3 a second subsoil layer was present below the first, defined by its lighter colour. In all trenches the natural consisted of bands of ironstone and fine sand. The archaeological features in Trenches 1, 2 and 4 are described below.

Trench 1 (Figs 2 and 3)

A 3m wide, v-shaped ditch (context 4), ran E-W along the trench, turning through approximately 90 degrees to the S at the E end of the trench. The north side of the trench was extended to allow a complete segment to be excavated. The ditch was 1.7m deep, with its sides sloping at an angle of approximately 60 degrees to a narrow, flat bottom. A recut was evident in section. An assemblage of Early Iron Age pottery was recovered from the segment, including several flat-topped, upright rim sherds from a round-shouldered bowl in a shell-tempered fabric, and body sherds from a large storage jar. Animal bones were also present.

Trench 2 (Figs 2 and 3)

Context 5 was an E-W gully, 0.7m wide and 0.38m deep, at the north end of the trench. Its sides sloped at 45 degrees into a

rounded base. There were no finds from the feature. Its eastward extension is likely to intercut with ditch 4 in Trench 1.

Context 7 was a NW-SE gully, 0.98m wide and 0.41m deep, in the middle of the trench. Its sides sloped at 45 degrees into a flat base. There were no finds.

A modern pit, context 6 measuring 1.70m by 1.60m, was not excavated. Bricks, slate and modern pottery and glass were recovered from the top of the feature.

Trench 4 (Figs 2, 3 and 4)

Two features were found in Trench 4. A NE-SW ditch, context 5, crossed the east end of the trench. It was 2.8m wide and 0.75m deep, with a broad, U-shaped profile (Fig. 3). Traces of a bank on the SE side of the ditch were visible in section (Fig. 3). A single shell-tempered potsherd, probably of Early Iron Age date, and a fragment of animal bone were recovered from the ditch. A recut of the ditch was visible in section (Fig. 3).

The second feature, context 4, was a sub-circular pit, 0.4m deep and approximately 1.7m in diameter with steep sides and a flat base. The latter was covered by a layer, up to 0.2m thick, of limestone and ironstone slabs (Fig. 4). The top of the feature was filled with sandy silt-loam. A single, small sherd of late Saxon pottery was found in the top of this fill.

When the stone layer was removed from the pit, a circular void was revealed (Fig. 4) set centrally below the later pit. If the void was cut from the same level as the pit, it would have been 0.7m deep. This feature is interpreted as a post-hole which was deliberately removed, and immediately replaced with a post-pad in the same location.

CONCLUSION

At least three phases of activity were identified. The first, and most important, consisted of a number of features of Early Iron Age date. Ditch 4, Trench 1, and Ditch 5, Trench 4, probably represent parts of at least one substantial enclosure. Both ditches had been recut during their lifetime. The orientation and course of the ditches makes it clear that most of the interior of the enclosure or enclosures lies beneath the existing cemetery and the Primary School. The portion in Berry Hill Close, therefore, is the only surviving element of the Early Iron Age settlement.

The N-S hollow crossing the assessment area appears to follow the southward turn of Ditch 4, Trench 1. The hollow, however, extends northwards beyond the corner of the ditch before fading out. The hollow, therefore, cannot be caused wholly by slumpage over the line of the ditch unless the 'corner' at the east end of trench 1 is in fact a junction of two ditches.

Gulleys 5 and 7, Trench 2, did not produce any finds. Their stratigraphic position, however, is analogous to that of the ditches in that they were sealed by the subsoil. It is therefore suggested that the gullies are also of Early Iron Age date.

The post-hole and succeeding post-pad, context 4 Trench 4, was cut from the same level as ditch 5 Trench 4, and was also sealed by the subsoil. The upper fill of the post-pad contained a single, very small sherd of late saxon pottery. This is likely to be intrusive, and the feature should probably be seen as contemporary with the ditch.

The subsoil layers in each trench represent a very thick, apparently non-geological soil deposit. The site lies on a dry plateau, so that the soil can be neither colluvial (hill wash) nor alluvial (water-borne). The date of deposition is unknown but it self-evidently post-dates the Early Iron Age in that the subsoil sealed the ditches and other features. A pre-medieval date is also likely, as the ridge-and-furrow field system must have been established after the subsoil was deposited. The subsoil probably represents a deliberate deposit for cultivation.

Modern (late 19th/20th century) activity was noted at the west edge of the field, in trench 2.

SUMMARY

The assessment produced evidence of an Early Iron Age settlement. Most of the site lies under the existing cemetery and the Primary School. Subsoil sealed the settlement, although the course of one of the ditches may be reflected in an earthwork which crosses the area. No evidence for activity associated with the ring-work was found.

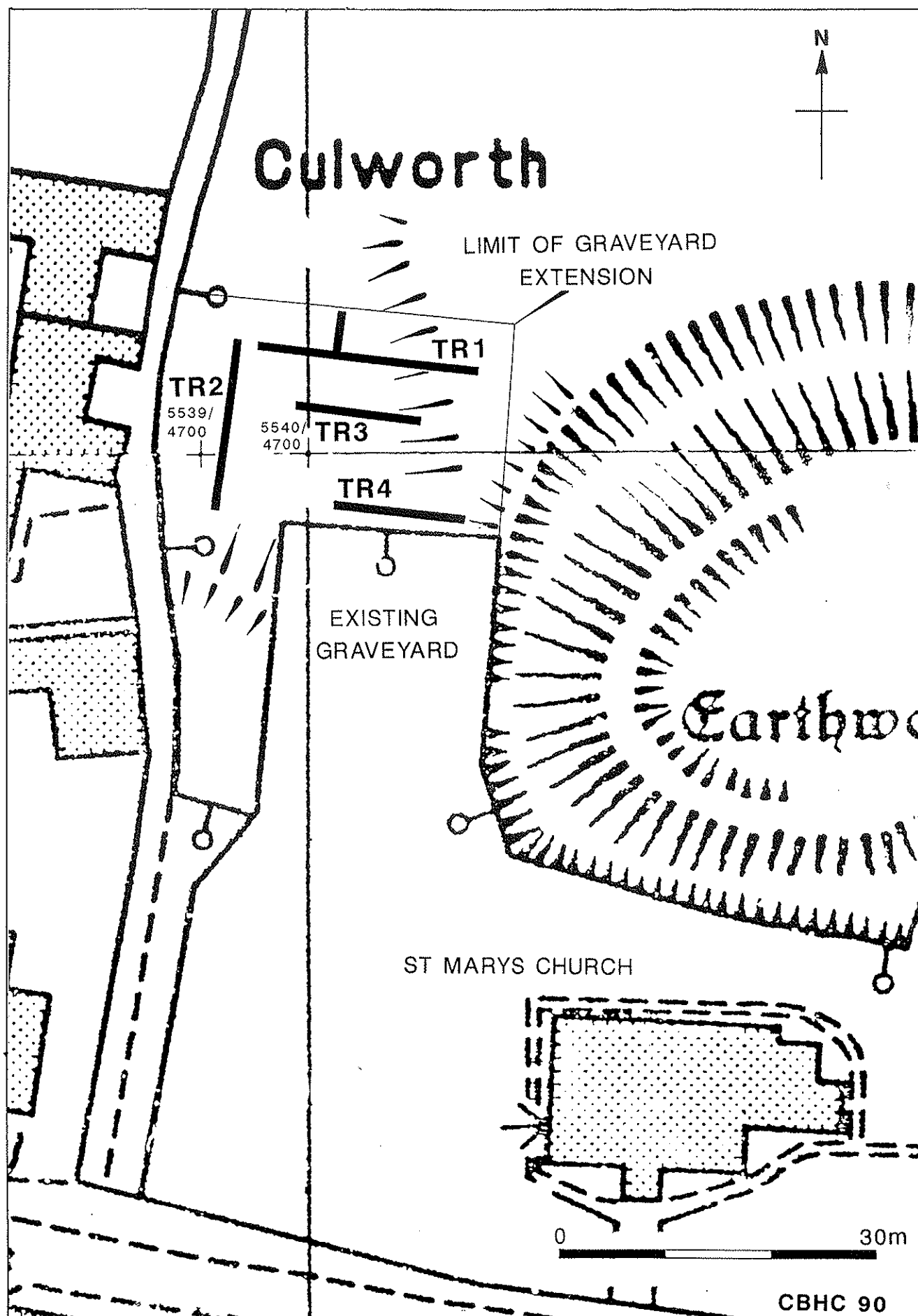
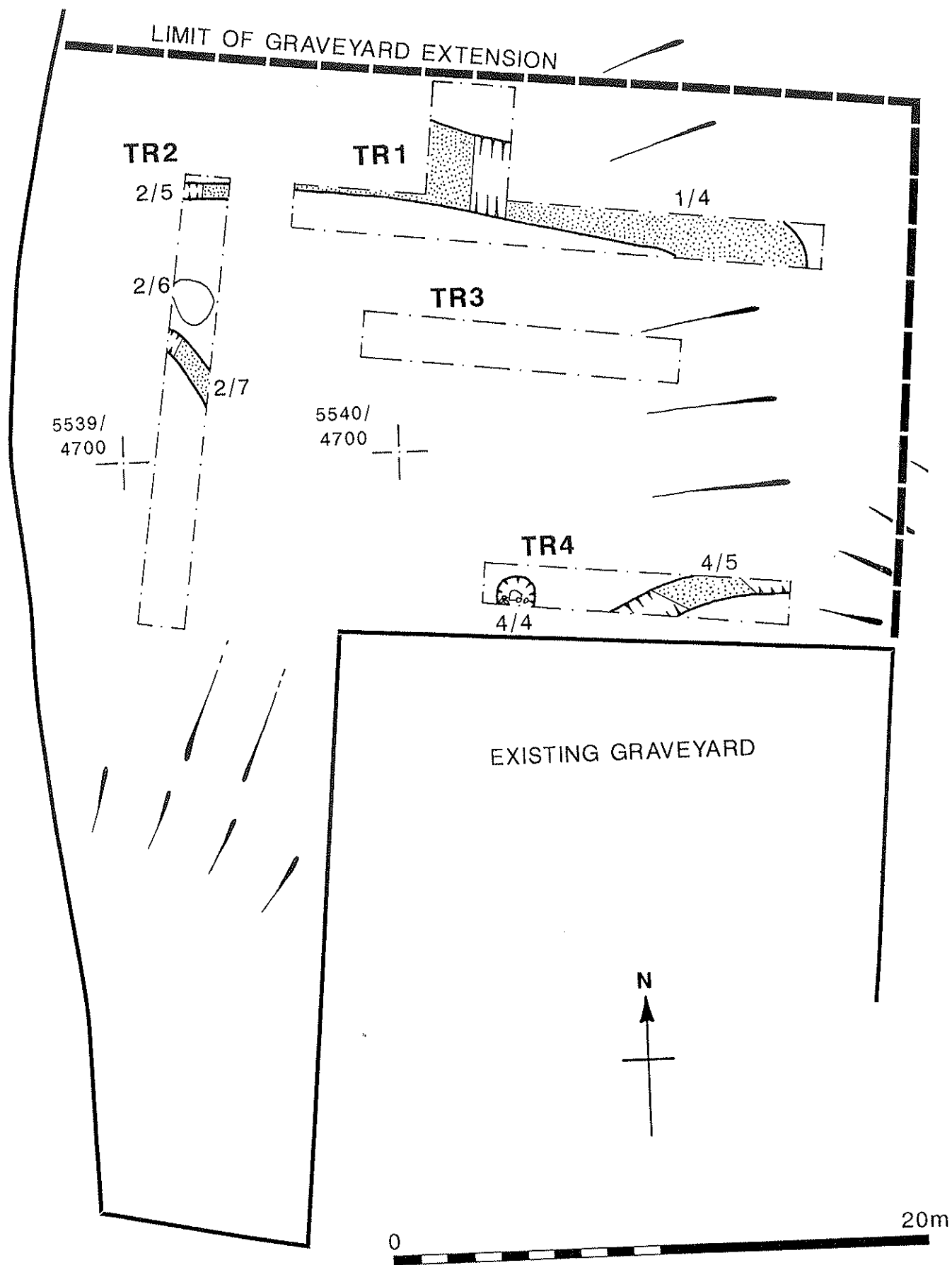


fig 1

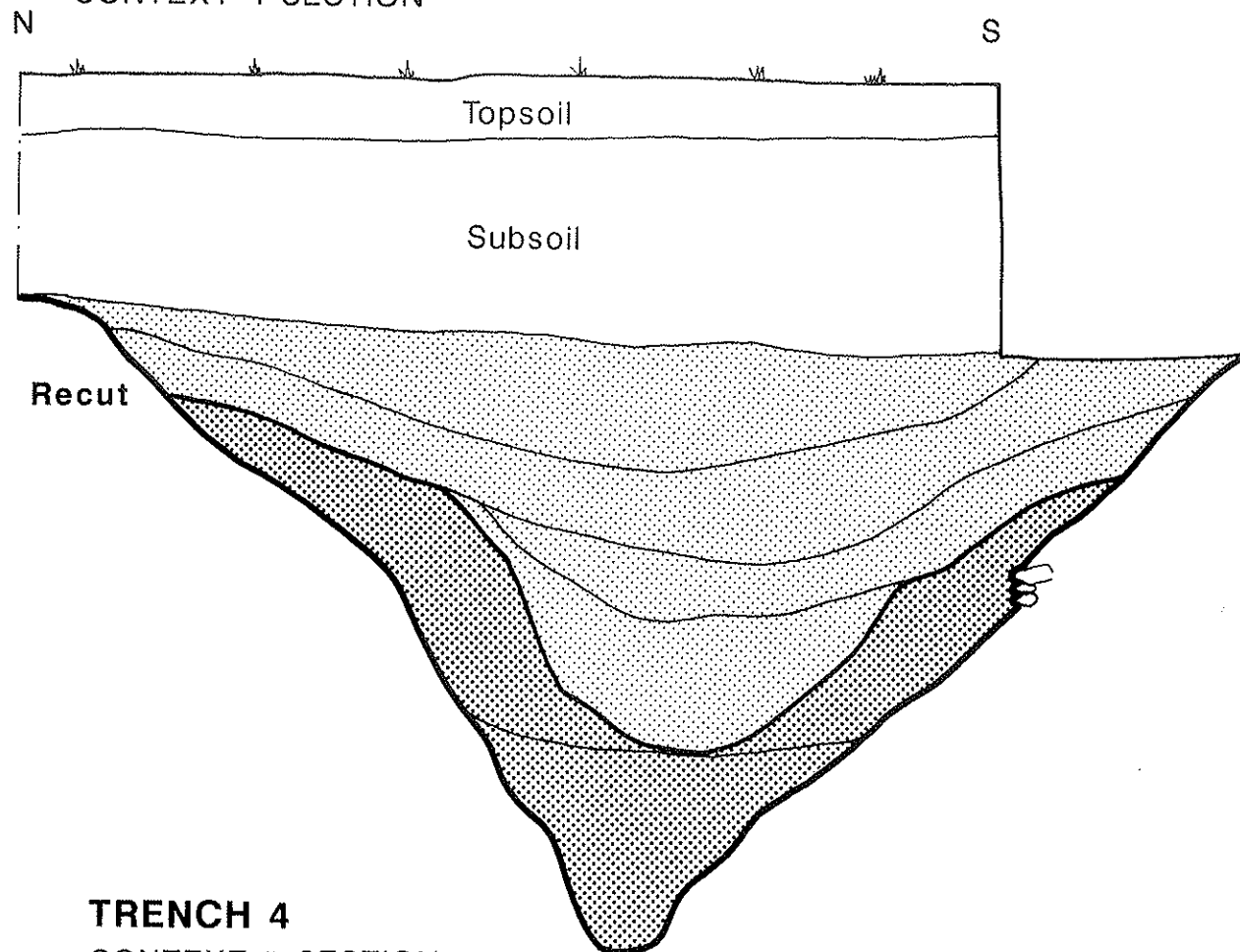


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fig 2

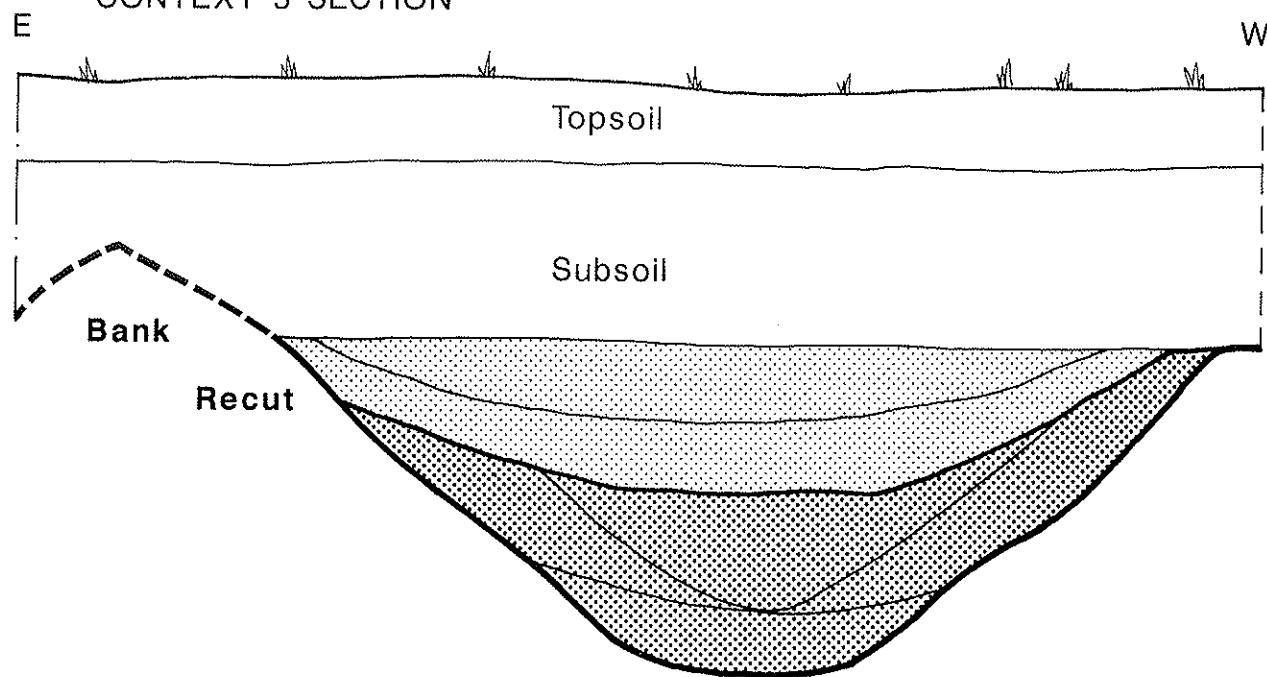
TRENCH 1

CONTEXT 4 SECTION



TRENCH 4

CONTEXT 5 SECTION

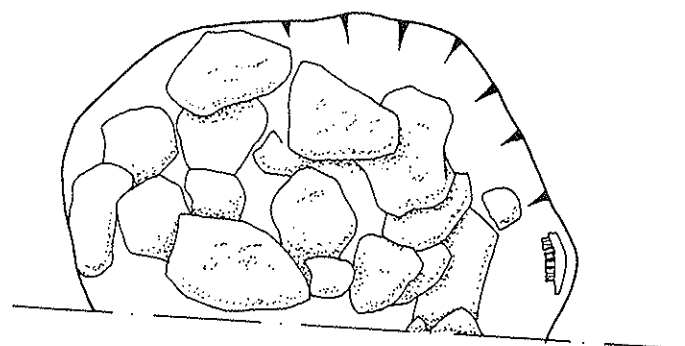


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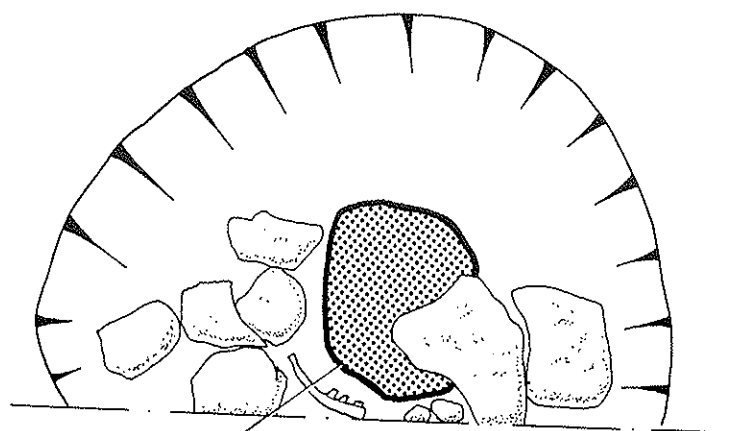


fig 3

TRENCH 4
CONTEXT 4 PLANS



POST PAD



POST HOLE

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fig 4