

Archaeological Field Unit

An Archaeological Assessment at Marshall's Garage, Huntingdon

A Preliminary Report

K Welsh

1993

Cambridgeshire County Council

Commissioned By Paul Bancroft Architects

NON-TECHNICAL SUMMARY

During December 1993, the Archaeological Field Unit of Cambridgeshire County Council undertook an assessment at Marshall's garage, High Street, Huntingdon. Three trenches were excavated, all of which revealed a variety of archaeological deposits. The earliest of these were dated by pottery evidence to, the 12th or 13th century. A gravel surface, perhaps part of a yard, was also revealed and appeared to date to the 13th or 14th century. The next period of activity recognised archaeologically was an apparently deliberate raising of the ground surface, perhaps to combat problems of flooding. Large quantities of clay and other materials, much of it burnt, were observed in all three trenches and may have been dumped there at the end of the Medieval period.

Following this, a cellared building was constructed on the High Street frontage, perhaps around 1500. This building may well be one of three inns mentioned in a document dating to 1572. Evidence of a 17th century building, probably fronting onto Hartford Road, was also recorded. These buildings seem to have survived until the early 19th century, when they were demolished to make way for St Mary's vicarage. Wall footings belonging to the vicarage were seen just beneath the present tarmac and gravel surface, the building having been demolished in the 1930s to widen the junction between the High Street and Hartford Road.

The assessment showed widespread survival of Medieval and Post-Medieval deposits, including structures and other occupation evidence. The deliberate dumping of material on the site, probably at the end of the Medieval period, means that the earliest levels have only been partially disturbed by later building work, and the fact that much of the area remained open during the 19th and 20th centuries has further protected the archaeology.

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1 INTRODUCTION

From 13th to 23rd December 1993, the Archaeological Field Unit of Cambridgeshire County Council carried out an archaeological assessment at Marshall's car sales site in Huntingdon. The work was carried out at the request of Paul Bancroft Architects on behalf of Marshall's Garage, and in response to a brief prepared by the County Archaeology Office in order to produce a planning determination. The proposed development of the site includes the excavation of an underground car park, over the entire area, to a depth of about 3m.

The site is located on the High Street at the junction with Hartford Road (*Figure 1*) and is centred on TL 2406/7167. Its location within the Medieval and, almost certainly, the late Saxon settlement meant that the site was considered of prime importance in understanding the development of Huntingdon as an urban centre. It was particularly hoped that evidence of the documented Anglo-Scandinavian occupation of the town might have been present.

2 TOPOGRAPHY AND GEOLOGY

The site lies on flat land about 300m north-west of the river Great Ouse at a height of 13m OD. The British Geological Survey 1:50000 map shows the site lying on 1st and 2nd terrace river gravels overlying Oxford Clay

3 BACKGROUND

Huntingdon straddles the major Roman road, Ermine Street on the north-western side of the River Great Ouse. However, settlement during the Roman period was focused across the river at Godmanchester with Huntingdon forming only a northern bridgehead (or, just possibly, a suburb) of that settlement.

It is likely that Huntingdon originated as a settlement in the middle Saxon period. However, it is first referred to in the 10th century, as a stronghold of the Danish, when, in 921, Edward the Elder entered the 'burh' of Huntingdon. Later in the 10th century, an indirect reference indicates that it was already a market town, and coins bearing the name of Huntingdon show that a mint was in existence shortly after the middle of the century.

It is recorded that, in 1068, William the Conqueror visited the town and had the castle built, whilst the Domesday book states that the town had 256 burgesses, three moneyers, two churches and a mill. It also contains evidence that, prior to Edward the Confessor's

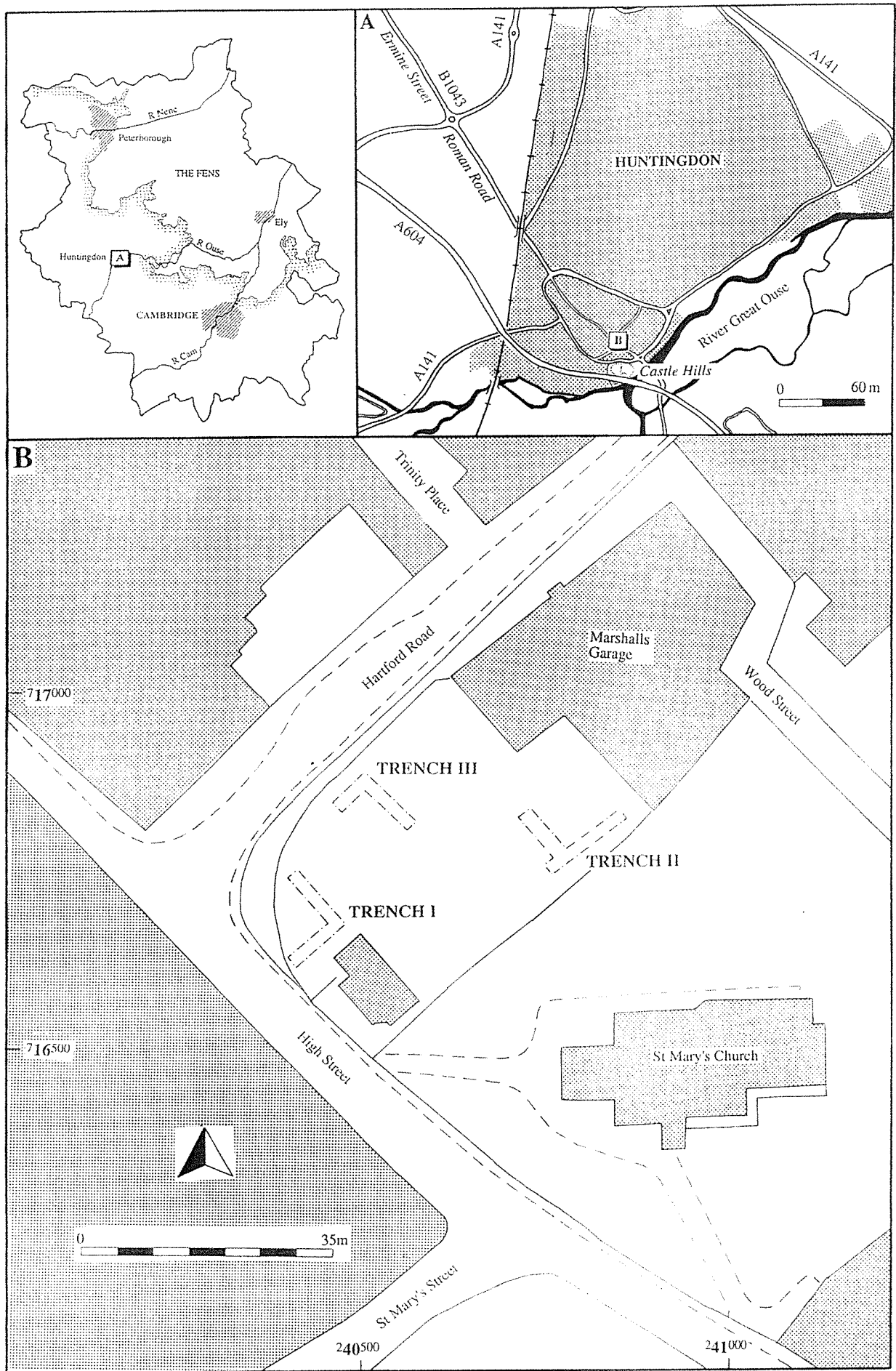


Figure 1 Location Plan

reign, the town had reduced size quite considerably but that, from Edward until the Domesday survey, very little, if any, contraction had occurred.

A period of difficulty followed, with figures showing that the taxable value of the town had been halved by the mid-12th century. In the later part of the century, the castle was dismantled and the town entered a period of increased prosperity which lasted through the 13th century. During this time the town acquired a total of sixteen churches as well as numerous other religious foundations. However, fortunes changed during the next century and the town suffered greatly from economic hardship and depopulation, and by the late 14th century as many as eleven of the churches were redundant.

The site lies within the southern part of the presumed area of the pre-Conquest town, although not within the defended 'burgh'. Its position on the High Street frontage indicates that it would have been occupied throughout the town's history. The earliest map of the town (Speed's Map of Huntingdon, 1610) shows that the High Street frontage and, possibly, the Hartford Road (called, at various times, Swan Lane, St Mary's Lane, Three Tuns Lane, and Bear Lane) frontage were built-up by the early 17th century. However, it has been suggested (Dickinson 1972) that, based on a slightly earlier document of 1572, Speed had simply confused Hartford Street with the adjacent Germain Street, then one of the main routes into the town. This same document also appears to place three inns (the Swan, the Cock in the Hoop, and the Bull) on the High Street frontage of the site. By the mid-18th century, the Hartford Road frontage was certainly developed. By the mid-19th century, the area was partly occupied by a vicarage, with a still-surviving, timber-framed building of the 17th century forming part of a second property. The vicarage was demolished in the 1930s in order to widen the junction between Hartford Road and the High Street - its foundations now largely lie under the road.

4 METHODOLOGY AND CONSTRAINTS

Much of the site is occupied by Marshall's car showroom and offices, so that only the gravel forecourt (about half of the total area) was available for evaluation. It was hoped that redundant service trenches, or other recent features, could be located, and their fills removed, in order to record the earlier deposits with as little disturbance as possible. Unfortunately, this was not possible and so a scheme of trenching was devised which attempted to cover both those areas known to have been built-up in the 19th century and earlier, and those areas of, apparently, open ground or garden. It was felt that the most useful data, in terms of the urban and economic development of the town, would be retrieved from refuse and activity areas to the rear of historic buildings where damage from later building work would be less likely.

Three trenches, totalling 57m in length, were opened using a mechanical excavator with a 1.6m toothless ditching bucket (see *Figure 1*). Trench I was positioned to avoid the 19th century buildings so as to investigate the earlier High Street frontage. At the back of the vicarage and the adjoining property was a small cul-de-sac known, on the 1885 Ordnance Survey map, as Hartford Place, and Trench II was located so that it was partly within the street and partly within a small row of houses. The area was not built-up until after the mid-18th century and probably not until the 19th. Trench III was located to investigate the Hartford Road frontage and the area immediately behind it.

It was originally intended to open all three trenches at the same time, which would have allowed strategic decisions to be made with regard to the best use of the available time. However, in order to allow the continued operation of the car showroom, it was agreed that each trench be opened, recorded, and back-filled before starting the next one. In the event, this did not cause any serious problems and the evaluation was completed on time.

During machining, the decision had to be taken whether or not to remove deposits based on their age and also on their nature. For example, where it was clear that a layer was composed of demolition material and presumably quite extensive, or where clean gravel had been dumped, it was felt that its removal would cause minimal loss of information whilst greatly increasing the recovery of evidence from earlier periods.

Once machining was completed, each trench was cleaned by hand, and photographed. They were then planned, and appropriate vertical sections drawn. Where possible, pottery was retrieved from well-defined deposits so that some idea of date range could be established. Excavation was kept to a minimum with only occasional features partially excavated for specific objectives. In places, where it was clear that extensive layers remained, small trial holes were hand-dug in order to produce dating evidence and to establish the total depth of archaeological deposits.

5 RESULTS

Trench I (*Figure 2 and Photocopy 1*) The earliest deposit encountered in this trench, at a depth of about 1.8m below the ground surface, was a layer, 101, or possibly the fill of a pit, containing frequent flecks of charcoal. It contained no dating evidence but was sealed by an dark, homogeneous layer, 73, containing late 11th-early 13th century, shelly ware pottery. Above this was a series of dumped layers, 64, 65, 70, 71, many of which were obviously burnt, including thin layers of charcoal. Cut into these, were several clay-filled pits and post-holes, 55, 57, 59, 61, also undated. Truncating these deposits, to a depth of around 1.6m, was a cellared building, oriented parallel to the High Street. The cellar, measuring about 5m north-east to south-west and 4m north-west to south-east, was lined in part with river cobbles and mortar, 8 and 75, in part with clay, 26. Wall 8 continued to the north-west, beyond the area of the cellar. An associated brick structure, 15, possibly the base of a hearth, was found to contain large fragments of a ceramic bowl dating to the late 14th-early 16th century. The cellar was cut into layers which contained sherds of late Medieval (1350-1550) pottery, surviving at a depth of only about 0.4m below the present surface. Part of the cellar wall was cut away, Cut 7, and the cellar back-filled, mainly with peg tiles. Three 19th century wall-footings, Walls 2, 3, and 4 were constructed over the back-filled cellar. Wall 3 was built on top of the cellar wall, 75. They were sealed by recent rubble serving as a levelling layer for the present forecourt.

Trench II (*Figure 3 and Photocopy 2*) The earliest deposit in this trench was the fill of a pit, 218, containing sherds of pottery dating to the late 12th-early 14th century, at a depth of 1.6m. It was cut into natural, silty clay and was sealed by a dark, homogeneous layer, 229, similar to that seen in Trench I. Above this was a very compact gravel layer, 216, at a depth of 1.4m, on the surface which lay a spread of large cobbles and limestone fragments, 215, some of which were clearly worked. Pottery from the surface of the gravel dated to the 12th and 13th centuries. The gravel was cut by vertical-sided, linear cut, 213, containing pottery of a similar date. Sealing this, up to about 1.0m below the ground surface, were several layers of clay and silty clay 224-228, much of which showed signs of burning. Pottery from layers, not seen in section but almost certainly contemporary, included residual Roman and, possibly, late Saxon, as well as 13th and 14th century, sherds. Above, was a dark, homogeneous layer, 223, into which were cut several 19th century brick structures, 203, 204, 209, and 220. The upper 0.7m was composed of 19th or 20th century demolition material and quantities of waste from the garage. The south-west edge of the north-eastern arm of this trench was formed by a 20th century brick structure, perhaps an oil tank.

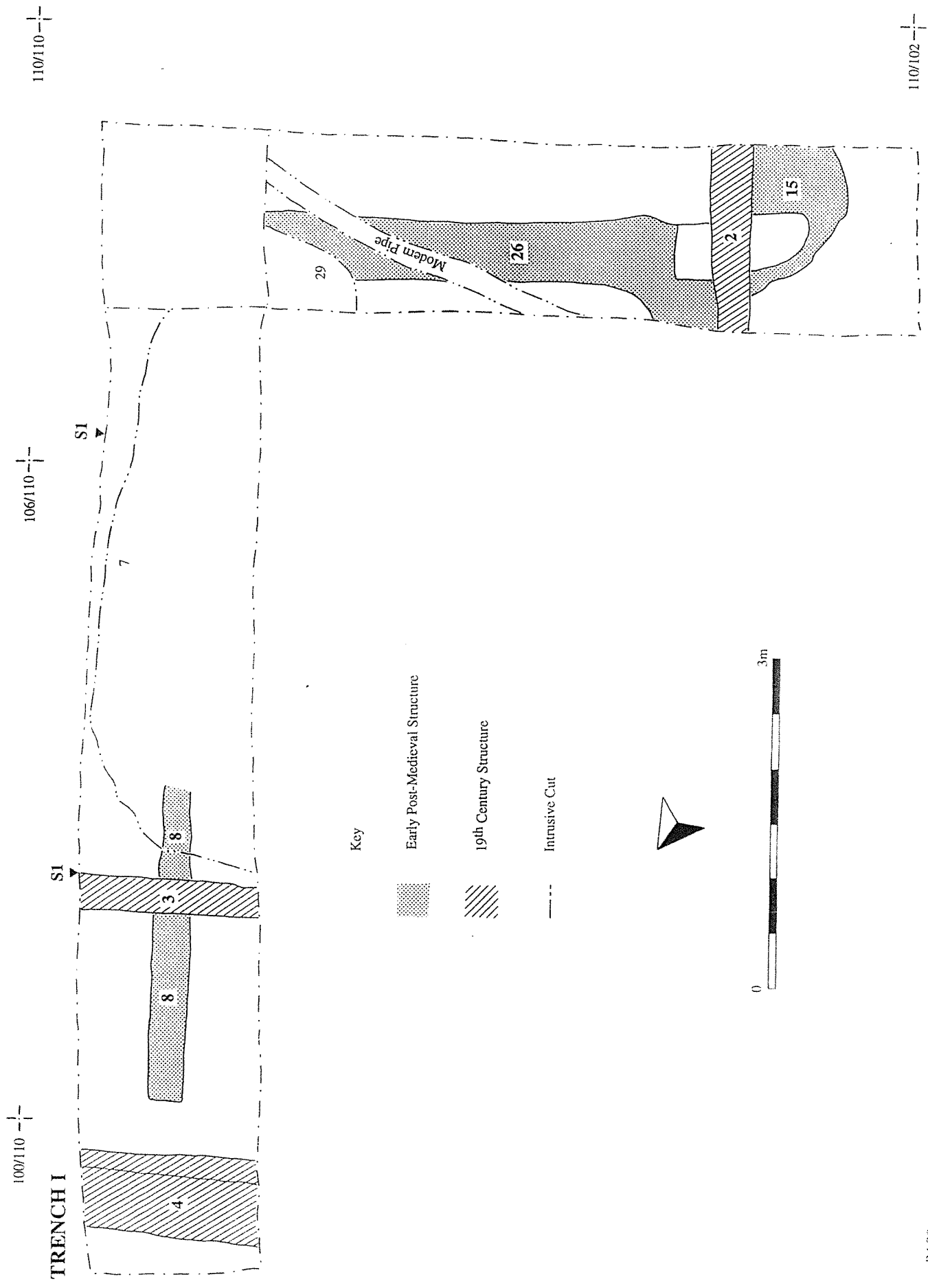


Figure 2 Trench I, Plan of Structural Remains

TRENCH II

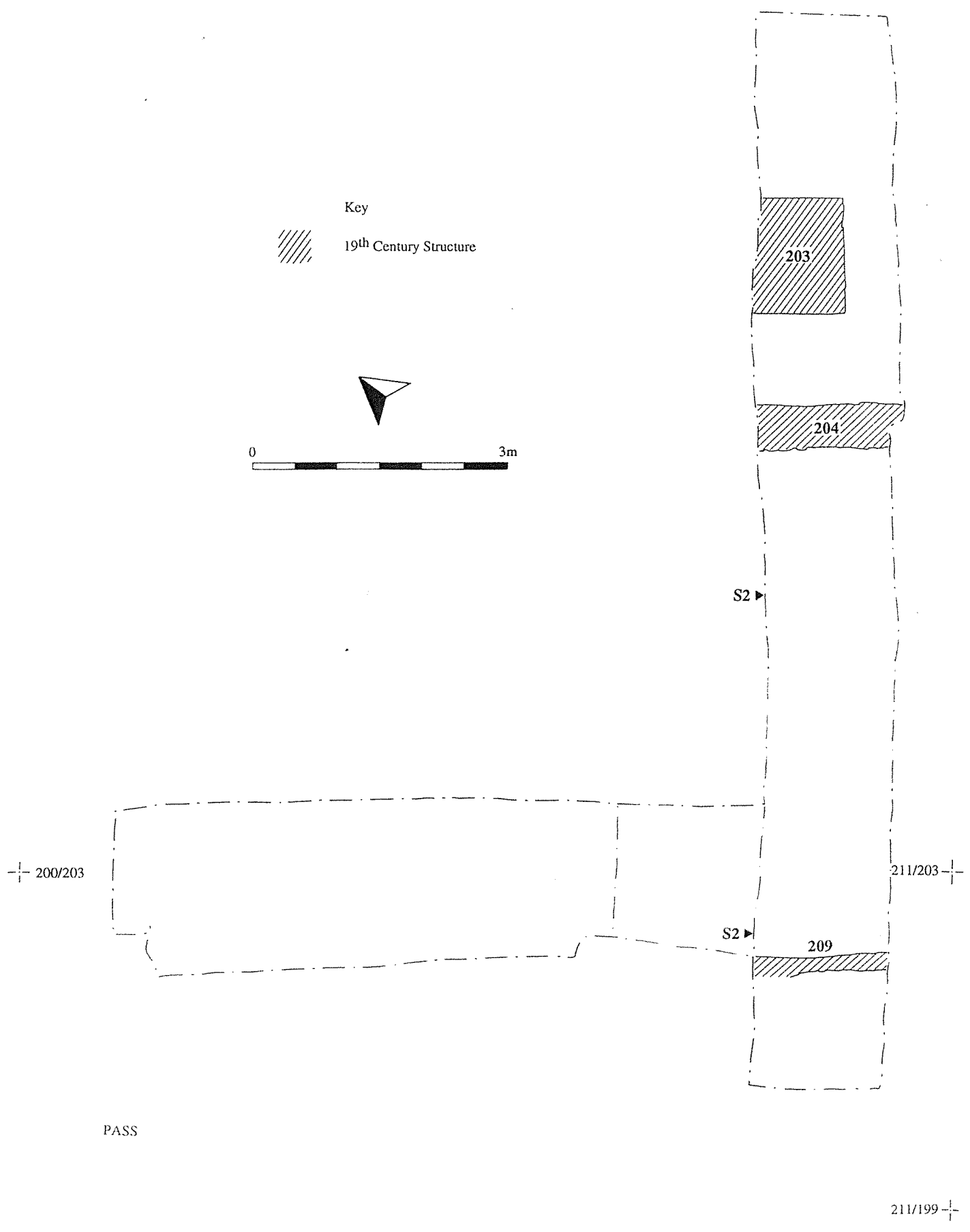


Figure 3 Trench II, Plan of Structural Remains

TRENCH III

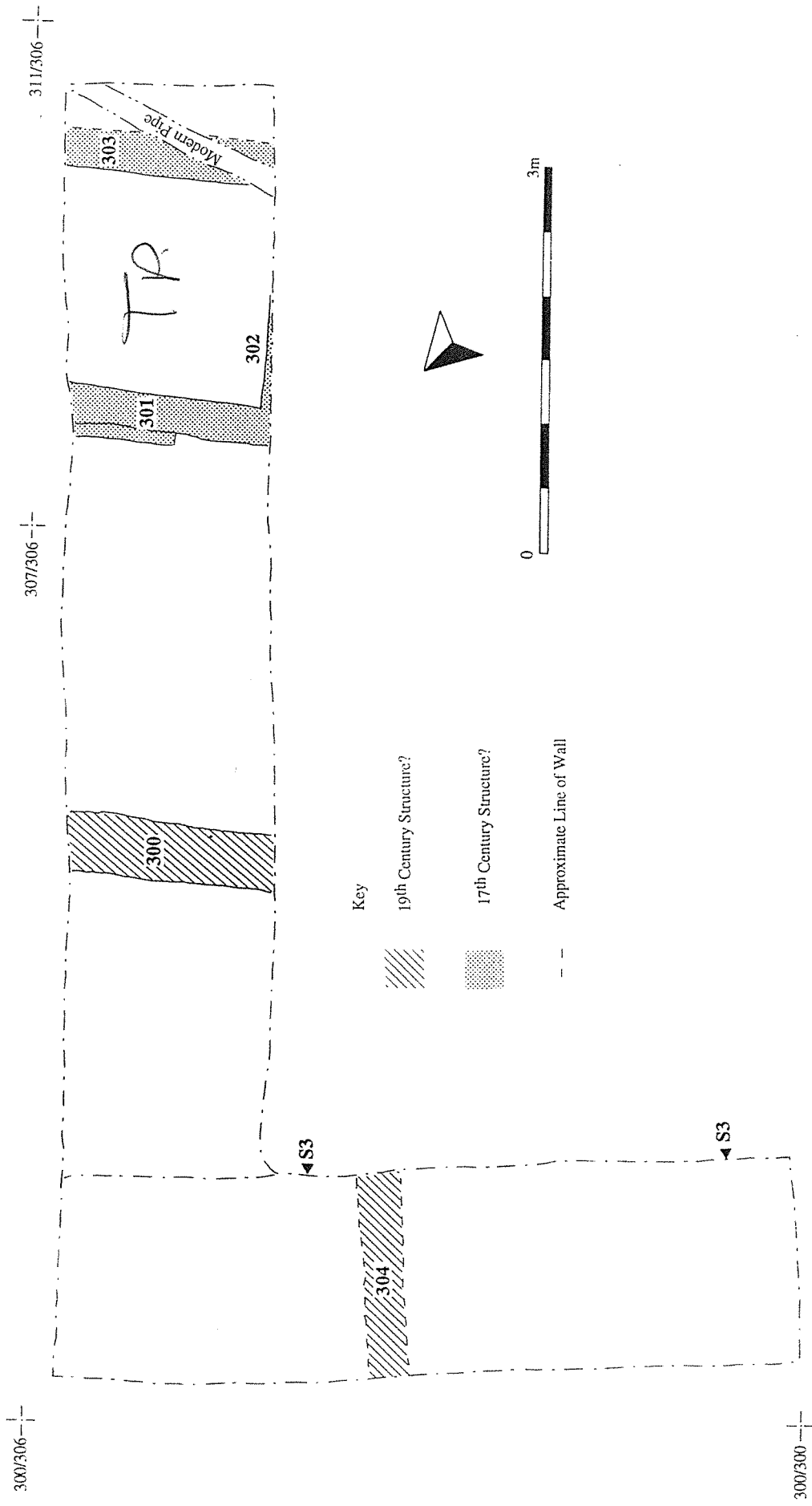


Figure 4 Trench III, Plan of Structural Remains

Trench III (*Figure 4 and Photocopy 3*) A pit, 335, containing 12th-13th century pottery was cut into natural silty clay at a depth of about 2.0m. This was sealed by layers of sand, clay, and silty clay, much of it burnt, and charcoal, 325-334. These layers sloped down fairly steeply to the north. Pottery recovered dated from the 11th-13th centuries. Above this, a layer of clean sand and gravel, 324, was seen, giving a level surface at about 1.0m below the ground surface. This was sealed by a layer of silty clay which, in turn, was cut by the construction trench for a north-east to south-west running brick wall, Wall 301. It was cut from about 0.8m below the present ground surface, and contained 16th-17th century pottery. The upper three courses appeared to be a rebuild, 308. This rebuild, along with Walls 302 and 303, may have formed a shallow basement. The construction cut for Wall 301 was sealed by a thin layer containing crushed mortar. Above this, a dark homogenous layer had been deposited against the wall and was cut by a large pit containing frequent brick bats and roof-tiles. A fourth wall, Wall 300 and the remains of another, insubstantial, wall, 304, were also cut into this layer.

6 INTERPRETATION

All three trenches revealed a considerable depth of archaeological deposits, with the earliest features being cut from a depth of between 1.6 and 2.0m. They were cut into what appeared to be a natural, silty clay alluvium. Pottery recovered from the upper fills of the features in Trenches II and III dates them to the 13th century, or perhaps to the previous century. In Trench I, the earliest, undated, level was sealed by a dark, homogeneous layer containing two large rim sherds of late 11th to early 13th century, shelly ware. Although the earliest features were only partly revealed in small test-pits, their presence suggests occupation of the site, rather than, for example, manuring of market gardens. The most likely place for any structures of this date is the High Street frontage. This is, of course, where the greatest disturbance by later building work might be expected. Fortunately, the later cellared-building observed here only partially truncated the earliest deposits and so any structural evidence (such as post-holes) may well survive. In Trench II, a dark, homogeneous layer, similar to that in Trench I, was overlaid by a gravel surface, perhaps some sort of yard. Pottery from its surface, and from a linear cut contemporary with its use, suggests a construction date in the 13th or 14th centuries. A spread of cobbles and limestone fragments (some worked) on the gravel surface may have come from the linear cut, suggesting the possibility that it is a 'robber' trench, removing the footings of a wall. However, no traces of masonry were evident in the excavated portion, so that this interpretation is uncertain.

Immediately above this were several, very well-defined, layers of clay and silty clay, showing considerable signs of burning. Similar layers were observed in both other trenches and are almost certainly contemporary with each other. They may derive from the demolition and burning of nearby structures or, alternatively, the material may have been brought in from outside. Either way, it is likely that it was deliberately dumped, perhaps to raise the ground level if flooding was a problem. The pottery recovered from these layers includes a small amount of residual Roman and, possibly, late Saxon wares but, in the main, dates from the 12th to 14th centuries. It is probable, then, that it was dumped here at the end of the Medieval period and may be connected with the phase of activity that included the construction of the cellared building seen in Trench I.

This building can be dated to, perhaps, around 1500, and, as such, can probably be equated with the buildings shown on the Speed's map of 1610. If the interpretation of the earlier document, of 1572, is correct (see Dickinson, 1972), then it could belong to one of the three inns apparently to be found on the High Street frontage. Somewhat later brickwork, perhaps 17th century, was seen in Trench III, perhaps forming part of a building fronting onto Hartford Road. These buildings were probably not demolished until the 19th century, when St Mary's Vicarage was built. Walls 2 and 3 can be

matched with the Vicarage garden walls shown on the Ordnance Survey map of 1885, while Wall 4 formed the south-east wall of the Vicarage building itself. The walls seen in Trench II also date to the 19th century and form part of the small cul-de-sac shown on the 1885 map.

7 CONCLUSIONS

It is clear that this is an important site, at least in terms of the post-Conquest development of Huntingdon. The earliest deposits encountered date to the 12th or 13th century and it is not unreasonable to suppose that larger scale excavation would reveal evidence of structures of this period on the High Street frontage, at a depth of perhaps 1.6m or more. Much of the pottery associated with these deposits is a shelly ware which could, perhaps, come from a relatively local industry or from sources to the north, in Northamptonshire or Lincolnshire (pers comm P Spoerry). A slightly later, probably 14th century, phase of activity is represented by the gravel surface in Trench II, in this case, well away from either the High Street or Hartford Road frontages. The next phase represented archaeologically seems to be a general raising of the ground surface across the site in the late Medieval period. This may have been in response to damp conditions or flooding. Cut into these layers is the very early Post-Medieval cellared building - it is not clear whether the clay-filled pits and post-holes in Trench I abut this building or are cut by it. However, it is clear that, on the High Street frontage, there is, in places, as little as 0.4m of later deposits above the late Medieval and early Post-Medieval levels.

In conclusion, then, there is a high potential for the survival of Medieval and early Post-Medieval deposits across much of the site, although some loss can be expected due to the modern brickwork seen in Trench II, especially if it is, indeed, an oil tank. In the area occupied by the car showroom and workshop, survival is also likely to be good since the building's foundations are unlikely to be very deep.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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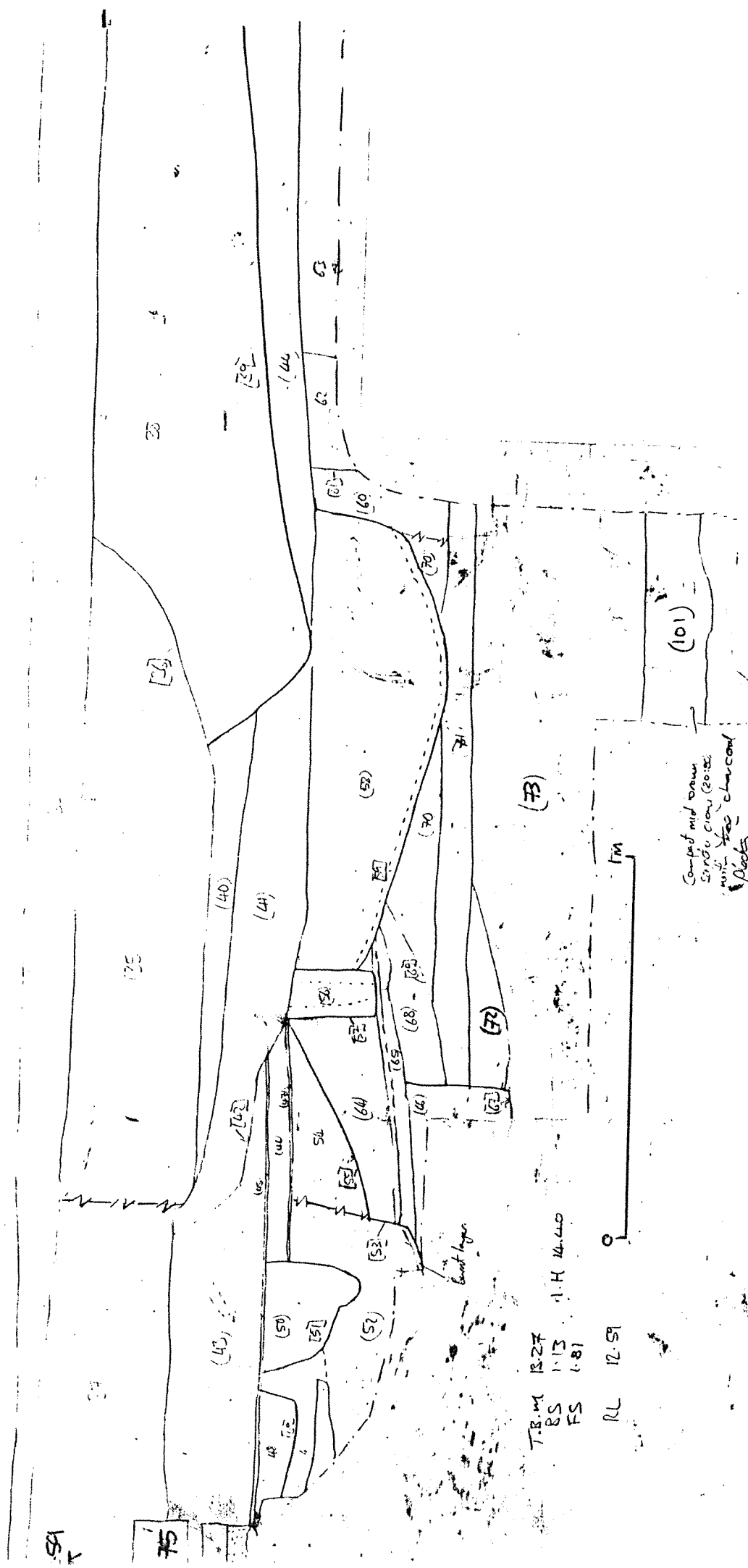
PHOTOCOPY 1

TRENCH I

SE

Excavation
6' x 10'

W



T.B.M. 13.27
 BS 1.13
 FS 1.81

RL 12.59

1m

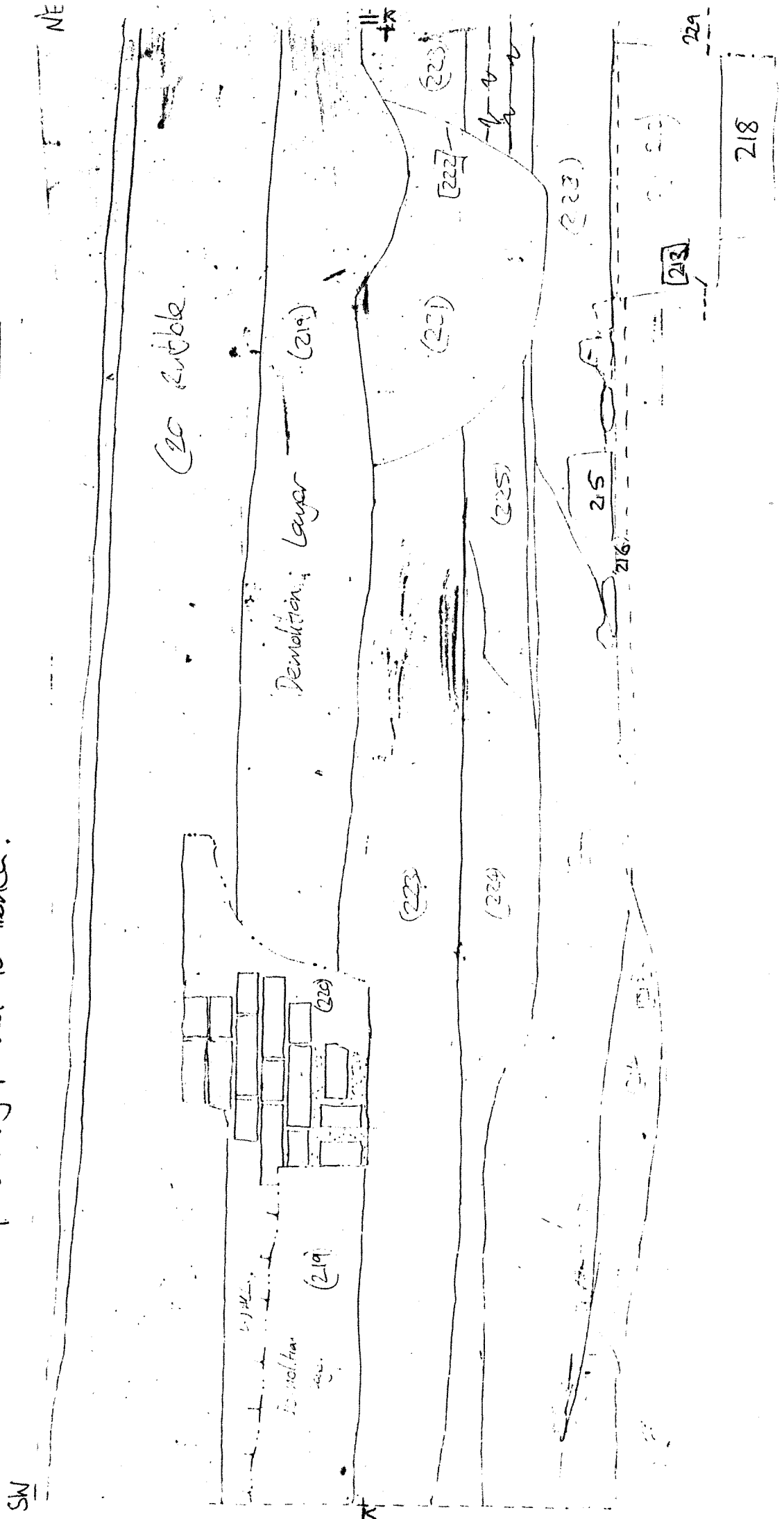
Compact mid brown
 Sand. clay (20%)
 with fine charcoal
 flecks

NATURAL
 0.1% - brown
 sandy clay

TRENCH II

PHOTOCOPY 2

Wall (220) visible where part of section collapsed running parallel to trench.





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