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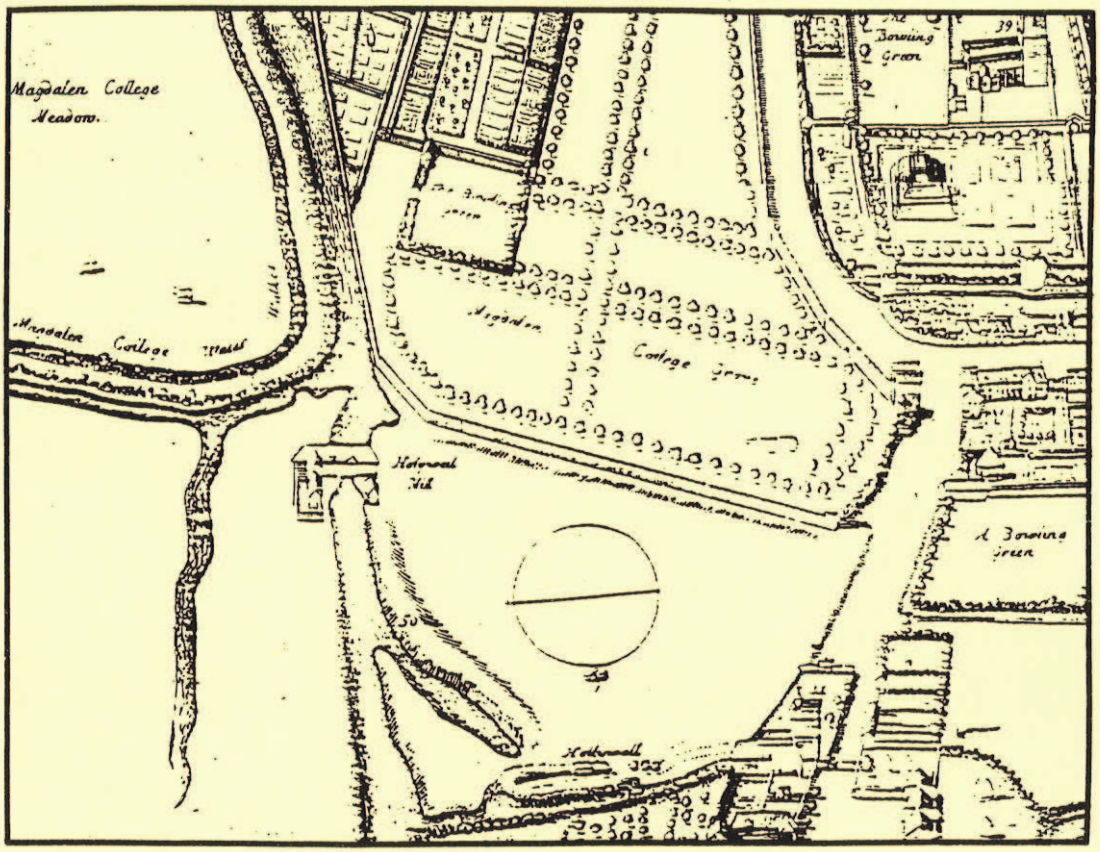
HOLYWELL FORD, OXFORD

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION



OXFORD ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT

1993

Holywell Ford, New Student Accommodation for Magdalen College
Planning Application NFH/294/93
NGR SP 522065

Archaeological Evaluation

1. Introduction

Magdalen College intends to build student accommodation blocks on the land adjacent to Holywell Mill, Oxford. The proposed new buildings would extend northwards alongside the mill stream at the back of the present Holywell Mill, and eastwards across the island formed between the mill stream and the river Cherwell.

As part of the requirement for planning permission for this development, the Oxford Archaeological Unit carried out an archaeological evaluation of the site at the end of July 1993.

The aim of the evaluation was to establish the presence and degree of preservation of any archaeological deposits, in order to determine the impact of the proposed development. A particular concern was locate any surviving foundations or deposits relating to the medieval mill and associated buildings, known to have existed on the site. It was also possible that features relating to Oxford's Civil War defences would exist in the area to the east of the present mill.

2. Summary of results

Wall foundations of at least two phases of earlier mill structures were discovered in the area immediately to the north of the present building. The walls appear to be built on top of deep deposit of gravel and clay which may represent part of the original millbank.

The existence of a very large feature, the bottom of which contained waterlogged deposits, was located to the north and east of the mill. Parts of the feature had only been filled in as recently as the 18th century, but some of the lower fills contained only medieval pottery. It would seem likely from its size and character that this feature represents the backfilled mill pond.

A large curving ditch, the top of which had again been backfilled in the 18th century, was found in the area of the orchard, some 35m to the east of the mill. This feature also produced a few sherds of medieval pottery from some of the lower fills , but no datable finds were retrieved from the bottom third of the ditch, which contained waterlogged deposits. The date and function of this feature is therefore unclear, but it is possibly that it was associated with the mill (perhaps as an overflow ditch for the mill pond or stream).

3. Archaeological and Historical Background

Holywell mill is not mentioned in Domesday Book, which it probably would have been if it had existed in 1086, and it is first mentioned in about 1200. As was often the case with medieval water mills, it was a double mill (i.e. with two wheels) of which one half had been granted to Merton College by 1279, and the other half was sold to the college in 1331. The college had meanwhile, in 1294, become lord of the manor of Holywell by appropriating the church and the rectorial manor. Rather than running the mill as part of the demesne farm, it was leased out to millers until being sold to Magdalen College in 1877, after which it seems to have been rebuilt as a private residence (VCH 271, 330).

Probably in order to preserve it as a working mill during the Civil War siege of Oxford it was surrounded by a small bastion, as depicted on de Gomme's map of the defences of Oxford in 1644 (Fig. 2a). A slight trace of this may be discernable today as a slight earthwork east of the mill, while on Loggan's map of 1675 (Fig. 1a) a small watercourse is shown on its east side, that appears on all later maps. The mill is clearly shown by Loggan and has ancillary buildings extending into the area of the proposed development. It is also possible that structures and associated features (leats, sluices etc) of an earlier medieval mill than the one shown may also survive underneath. Davis's map of 1797 (Fig. 1b) also shows the mill, with what appears to be the remains of a mill pond, already partially backfilled, running round the back of the building. Later maps show no significant changes in the topography of the site (Fig. 2b).

4. Topography

The area of the proposed development consists of a triangular island of fairly flat land formed between the present mill stream and the river Cherwell. The site is at present an orchard and garden, and has existed as such since at least the beginning of the century. The underlying geology of the site is the second gravel terrace.

5. Strategy

Prior to the evaluation a desktop survey of the site was carried out by J. Munby . This included documentary research and examination of maps and illustrations.

The river banks along the edges of the site were inspected for significant deposits (where practical) and the area was surveyed for earthworks.

Three trenches of appropriate sizes were excavated across the lines of the proposed new buildings (fig.3); though the exact position of the trenches was partially dictated by the need to avoid existing trees and their root systems.

A mini mechanical digger was used to excavate the trenches down to the top of archaeological deposits, or in their absence to the top of the natural subsoil. Archaeological features were sampled by hand to retrieve datable finds and then described

and photographed. The trenches were planned at 1:50 and sections were drawn where appropriate.

Bulk samples were taken from waterlogged deposits to assess the palaeoenvironmental potential of the site.

6. Results

The only significant deposits to be seen during an initial inspection of the river banks adjacent to the site were a number of stones in the stream to the north of the mill, which appear to represent the remains of the ford. This was not however a conclusive survey, as drainage of the present mill stream and large scale clearance of undergrowth would be necessary for a proper inspection.

No obvious earthworks were located in the area of the proposed development, though there is a considerable amount of undulations caused by modern dumping and garden activity which may obscure them.

6.1 Trench 1 (figs. 4, 4b and 4c)

Trench 1 (8m in length) was placed in an E - W alignment, 2.5m to the north of the present mill building. The trench was machine excavated to an average depth of 0.65m, removing the topsoil (104) and a number of 18/19th century deposits (100, 101, 106, 107, 117 and 119). The removal of these deposits revealed the edge of a wall foundations; at which point the trench was widened from 0.80m to 1.80m so that more of the walls could be exposed. The latest of these walls (102) was overlying an earlier wall of a slightly different alignment and shape (109), and utilizing it as a foundation. Projecting from under the west face of wall 102 was a small offset (121), which appeared to be part of the same build , but without destroying wall 102 this could not be clarified.

Some 2m from the east end of the trench was the west edge of a large feature (111). The feature was excavated to a depth of 1.5m below the present ground surface, but clearly continued down below this level.

In the centre of the trench were two build-up or dump layers (120) and (108). Both these layers were abutting wall 109 and contained only medieval pottery. These layers appeared to be cut away to the east by the large feature (111), but may have just respected its edge. Below the earliest of these layers (108) was a deep deposit of gravely clay (110).

Natural gravel or naturally deposited Alluviums were not reached at any point in this trench.

6.2 Trench 2 (figs. 5a and 5b)

Trench 2 (17m in length, 0.80m wide) was position in an NE - SW alignment through the NW corner of the site. The trench was machine excavated to an average depth of 1.10m,

removing the topsoil (201) and series of layers containing 18th-century finds. In the north-eastern three quarters of the trench these deposits (202, 203, 204, 205, and 206,) appeared to be backfilling a very large feature some 11m wide (208). In the NE end of the trench the bottom north edge of this feature was clearly visible, and a machine excavated sondage showed it to continue down to a depth of at least 2 m. The lower part of the feature contained waterlogged deposits (207) which still produced 18th-century finds at this level. In the area of the trench to the north of feature 208 were two layers of alluvium (209 and 210), which had been cut away by the feature. The southern edge of feature 208 appeared to be approximately 6m from the SW end of the trench, but was much disturbed by tree roots. To the south of this edge was a thick layer of gravel and clay (211) which may have been upcast from the feature. Below this was a layer of alluvium (212).

6.3 Trench 3 (figs. 6a, 6b, 6c, and 6d)

Trench 3 (25m in length and 0.80 wide) was positioned in an E - W alignment through the area to the east of the mill. The trench was machine excavated to an average depth of 0.50m, removing the topsoil (300) and partially removing a layer of disturbed alluvium (301). In the west half of the trench were a number of shallow linear features cut from the top of layer 301.

In the east end of the trench was a very large ditch (325), running in from the south and curving round to the east. This feature was also cut from the top of the alluvium 301. A N - S extension was added to the east end of the trench so that a section could be excavated across the ditch at right angles. The ditch was some 4m wide and 1.50m deep and contained waterlogged deposits towards the bottom.

Small sondages excavated through the alluvium 301 at various places in the trench showed that it overlaid two earlier layers of alluvium (302) and (303). The earliest of these, (303) directly overlaid the natural gravel; the top of which was reached at an average depth of 1.15m below the present ground surface. No dating evidence was retrieved from any of the alluvial deposits.

6.4 Comments on results

Only seeing small areas of some of the features and deposits in the narrow trenches of this evaluation does limit the potential for interpretation. This was a particular problem due to the size and depths of some of the features, as they could not be bottomed without much larger trenches to accommodate shoring.

The weather conditions during the excavation were generally good, but the naturally high level of the water table in the area of trench 3 made difficult, and limited the areas of deeper excavation in this part of the site.

7. Conclusions

Wall foundations and deposits, at least some of which are of medieval date and almost certainly relating to earlier mill structures, survive relatively undisturbed in the area to the north of the present mill. It would seem to be possible determine the extent of these deposits by projecting the line of the apparent mill pond.

The lack of dating evidence from the large ditch in trench 3, or from the alluviums it is cut through leaves its interpretation or possible importance unclear.

C Bell
Oxford Archaeological Unit
August 1993

Sources consulted

Victoria County History Oxon Vol iv

De Gomme's map of Oxford 1644 (*Oxoniensia I*, 1936)

Loggan's map of Oxford 1675

Davis's map of Oxford 1797

Ordnance survey maps 1800 to 1900

Table of Contexts and Finds

TRENCH NO.	CXT	TYPE	WIDTH	DEPTH	COMMENTS	POTTERY - NO.SHERDS
1	100	Fill		0.30	Fill of small modern feature	2 post-medieval
	101	Layer		0.50	Build up/dump layer	13 post-medieval
	102	Wall	0.55		Foundation	
	103	Pit?	0.90	0.30	Modern	
	104	Layer		0.30	Topsoil	
	105				Finds reference	30 post-medieval 2 Medieval
	106	Layer		0.40	Build up/dump layer	
	107	Layer		0.15	Rubble spread	1 post-medieval
	108	Layer		0.44	Build up/dump layer	
	109	Wall	0.90		Foundation used as footing for 102	
	110	Layer		>0.55	Mill bank?	
	111	Feature	?		Part of Mill pond?	
	112	Layer		0.11	Fill of 111	
	113	Layer		0.25	Fill of 111	8 post-medieval
	114	Layer		0.23	Fill of 111	3 post-medieval 1 Medieval
	115	Layer		0.18	Fill of 111	
	116	Layer		0.30	Fill of 111	1 Medieval
	117	Fill		0.30	Fill of robber trench 118	
	118	Robber trench	0.55	0.30	Rolling wall 102	
	119	Layer		0.28	Build up/dump layer	
	120	Layer		0.14	Demolition layer?	1 Medieval
	121	Wall		0.30	Offset for 102?	

TRENCH NO.	CXT	TYPE	WIDTH	DEPTH	COMMENTS	POTTERY - NO.SHERDS
2	201	Layer		0.25	Topsoil	
	202	Layer		0.30	Fill of 208	
	203	Layer		0.50	Fill of 208	
	204	Layer		0.25	Fill of 208	
	205	Layer		0.75	Fill of 208	3 post-medieval
	206	Layer		0.25	Fill of 208	1 post-medieval
	207	Layer		0.80	Fill of 208 waterlogged	
	208	Feature	11	72	Mill pond?	
	209	Layer		0.40	Alluvium	
	210	Layer			Alluvium, not excavated	
	211	Layer		0.35	Topsoil	
	212				Alluvium, not excavated	
3	300	Layer		0.35	Topsoil	
	301	Layer		0.20	Alluvium	
	302	Layer		0.25	Alluvium	
	303	Layer		0.25	Alluvium	
	304	Natural			Natural gravel	
	305				Finds reference	19 post-medieval
	306	Layer		0.14	Fill of 308	
	307	Layer		0.20	Fill of 308	6 post-medieval
	308	Feature	0.60	0.40	Shallow ditch/gully?	
	309	Layer		0.15	Fill of 310	
	310	Feature	0.30	0.32	Shallow ditch/gully?	
	311	Layer		0.18	Fill of 313	
	312	Layer		0.18	Fill of 313	
	313	Feature	1.10	0.45	Shallow ditch/gulley?	
	314	Layer		0.12	Fill of 316	

TRENCH NO.	CXT	TYPE	WIDTH	DEPTH	COMMENTS	POTTERY - NO.SHERDS
3	315	Layer		0.22	Fill of 316	
	316	Feature	1.20	0.34	Shallow ditch/gully?	
	317	Layer		0.14	Fill of 319	
	318	Layer		0.18	Fill of 319	
	319	Feature	1.00	0.32	Shallow ditch/gully?	
	320				Finds reference	16 post-medieval
	321	Layer		0.25	Fill of 325	
	322	Layer		0.35	Fill of 325	1 post-medieval
	323	Layer		0.40	Fill of 325	
	324	Layer		0.40	Fill of 325	1 Medieval 1 Roman?
	325	Ditch	4.00	1.45	Curving ditch	
	326	Layer		0.32	Fill of 325	2 post-medieval
	327	Layer		0.40	Fill of 325 waterlogged	
	328	Layer		0.18	Fill of 325 waterlogged	
	329	Layer		0.40	Fill of 325	
	330	Layer		0.14	Fill of 310	

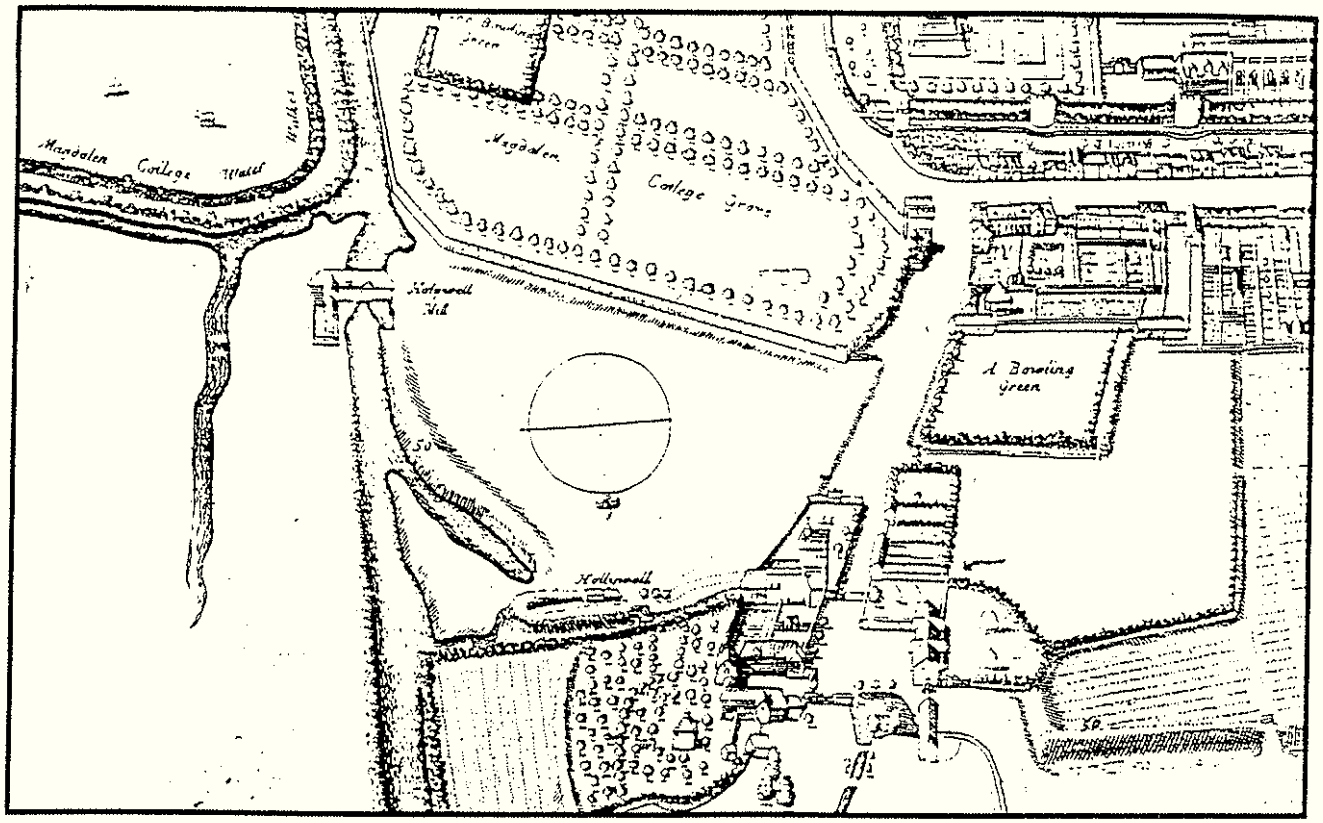


Figure 1a Loggan's map showing Holywell Mill

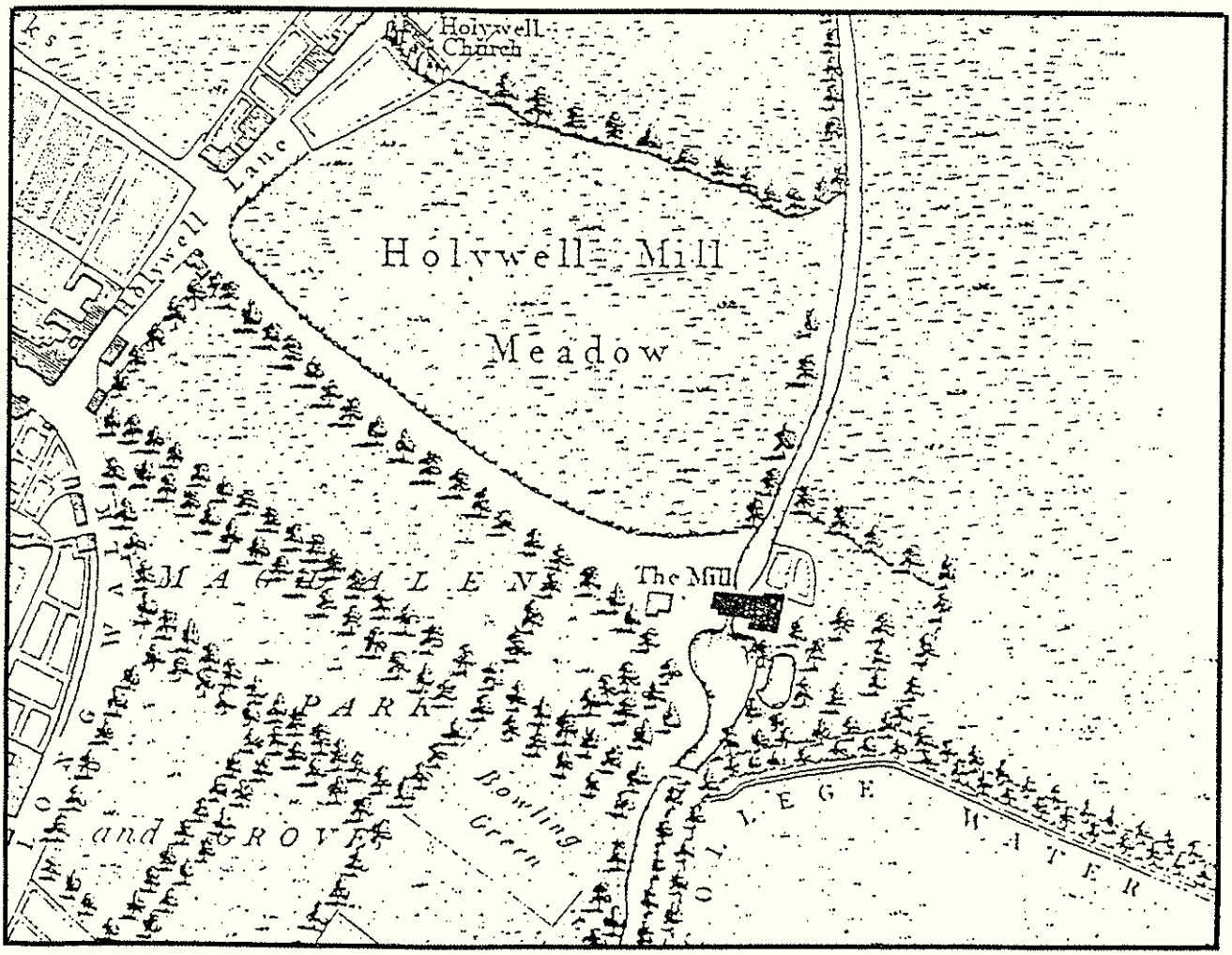


Figure 1b Davis's map of 1797 showing the possible remains of the Mill pond

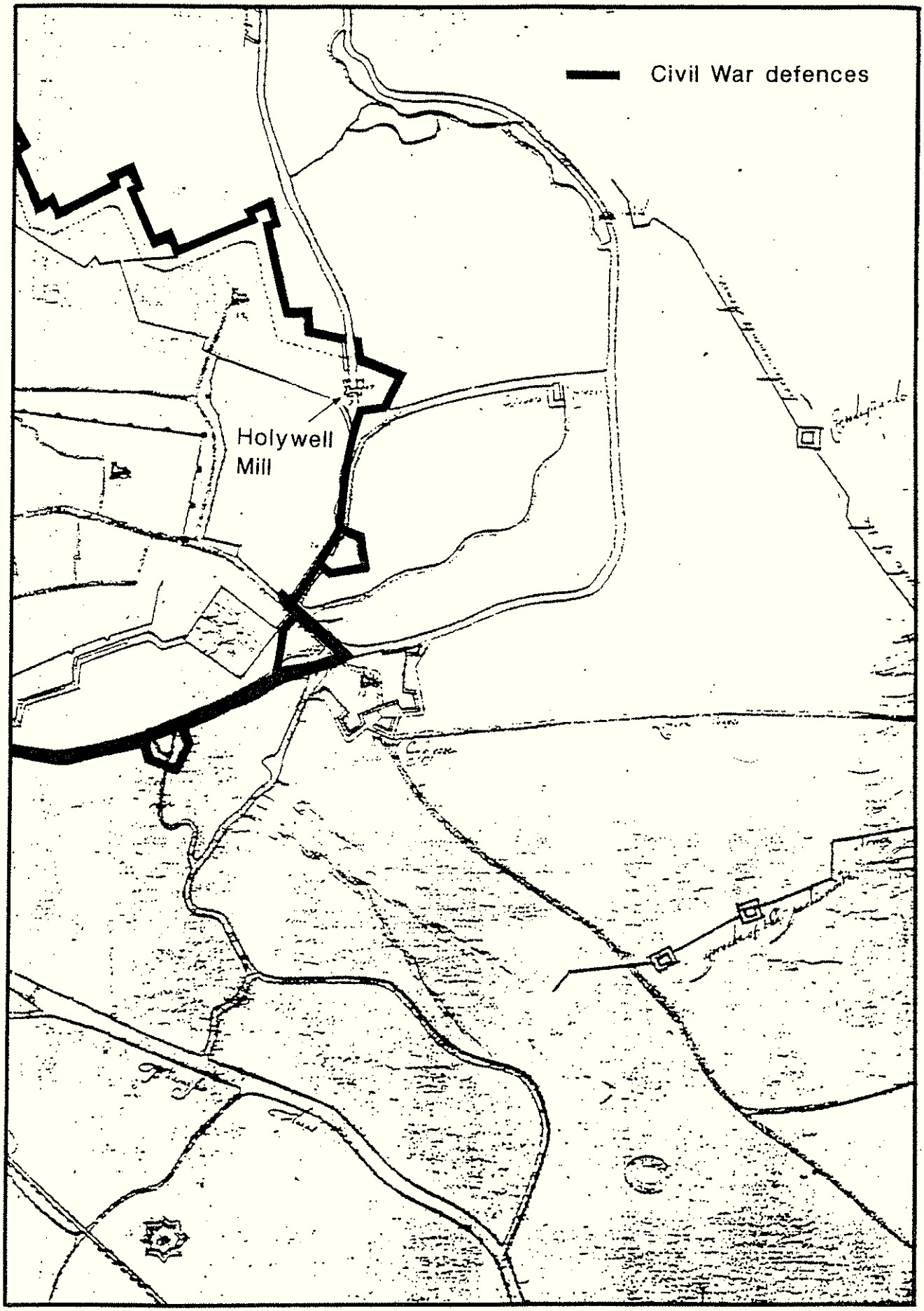


Figure 2a De Gomme map of 1644 showing Oxfords Civil War defences

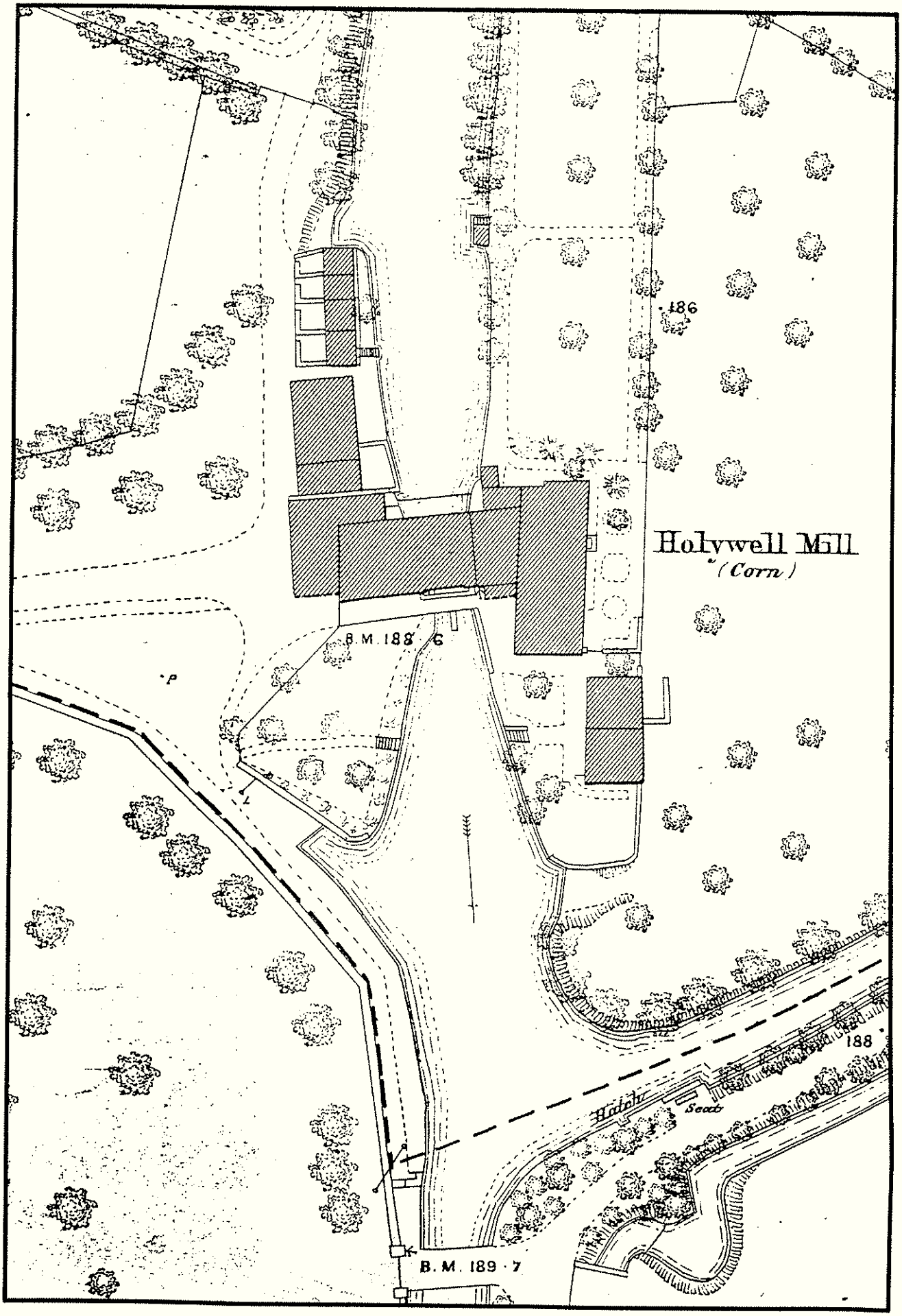


Figure 2b Extract from O.S. 1:500 map of 1878, sheet no XXXIII.15.24

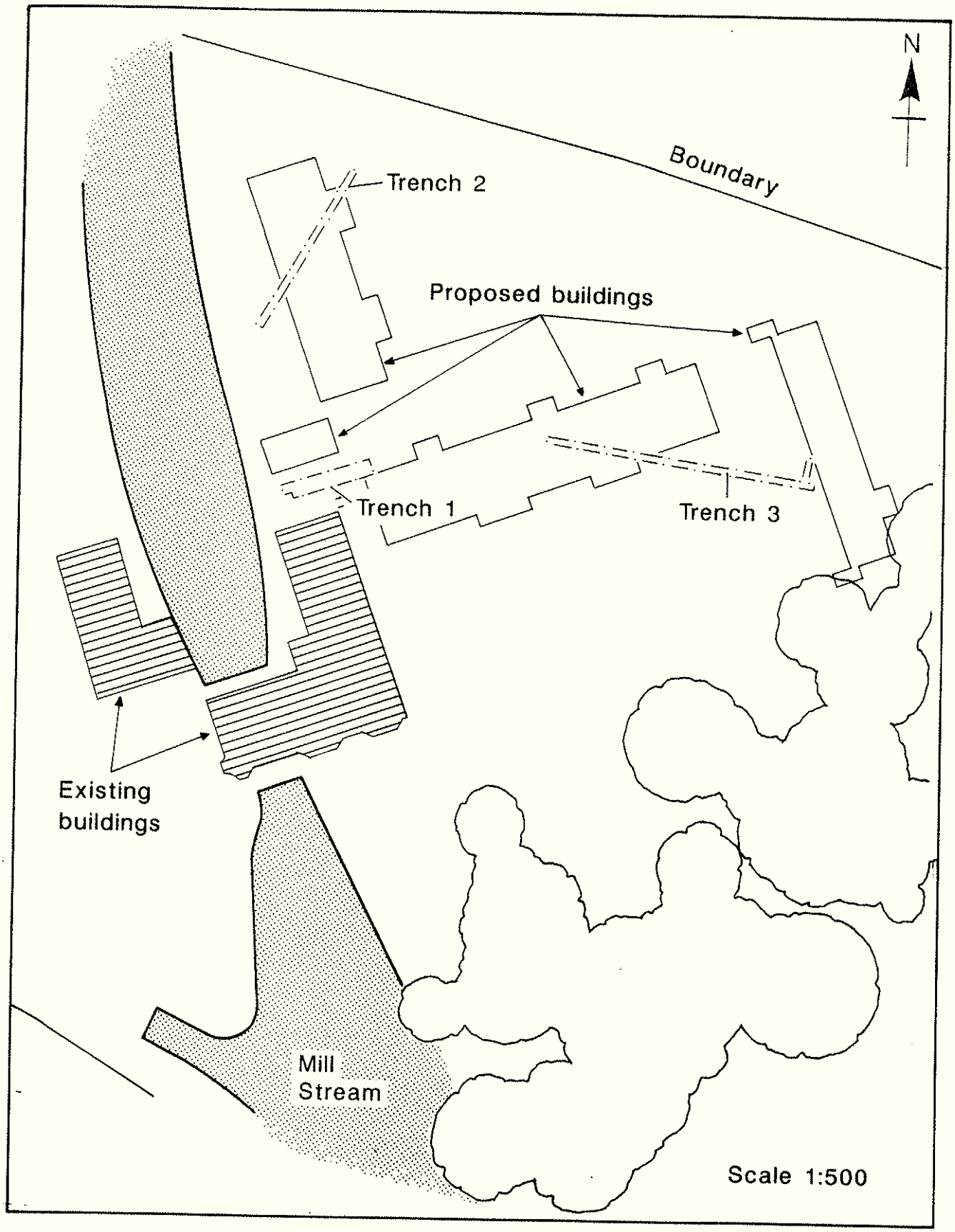


Figure 3 Location of trenches

Figure 5a Plan of Trench 2

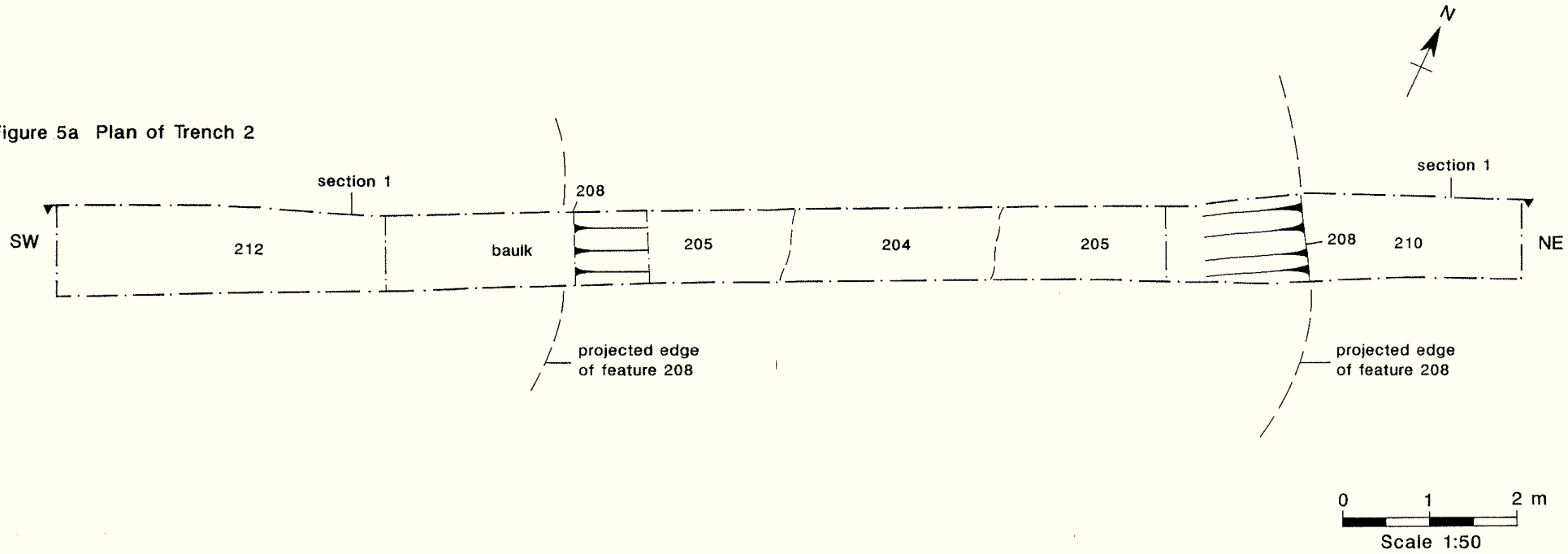


Figure 5b Trench 2, section 1

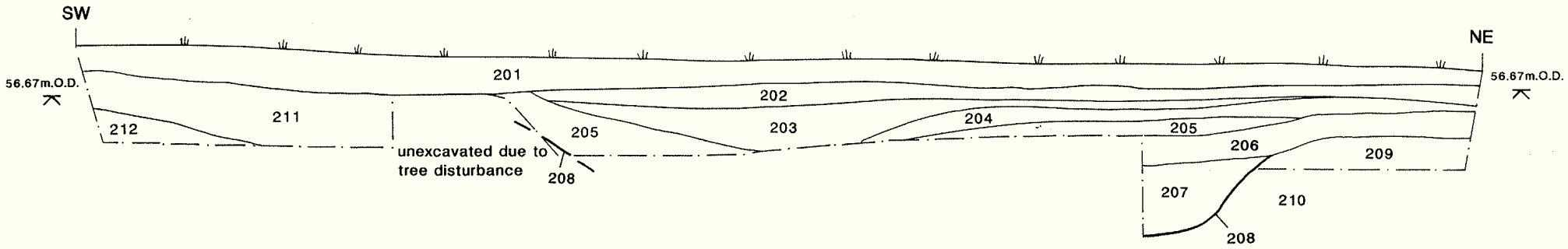


Figure 6a Plan of Trench 3

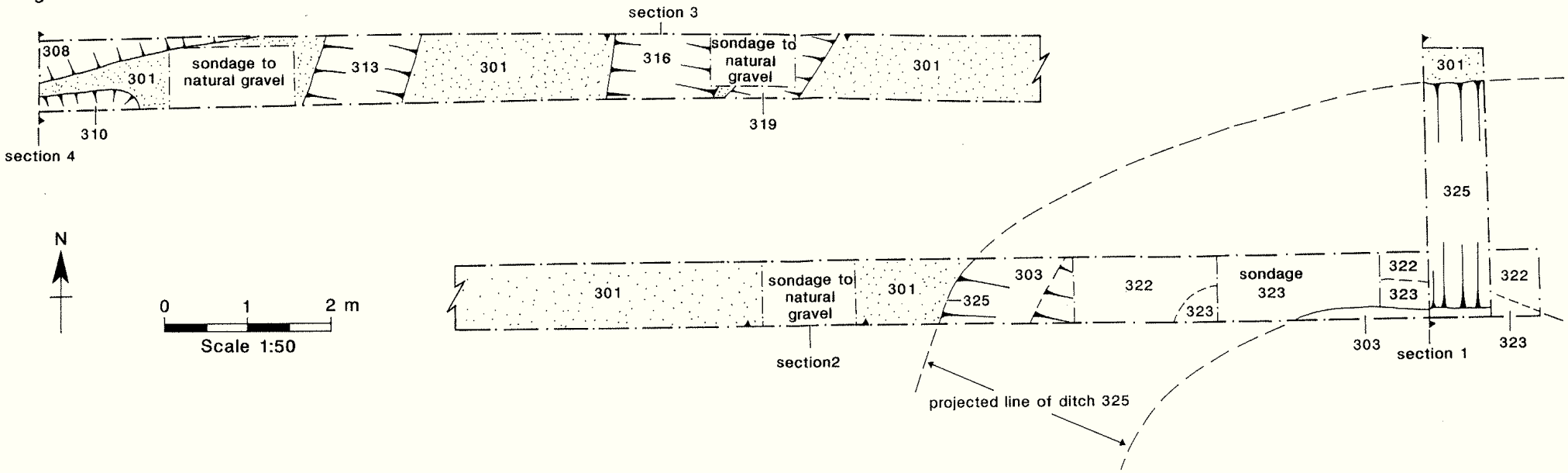


Figure 6b Trench 3, section 1

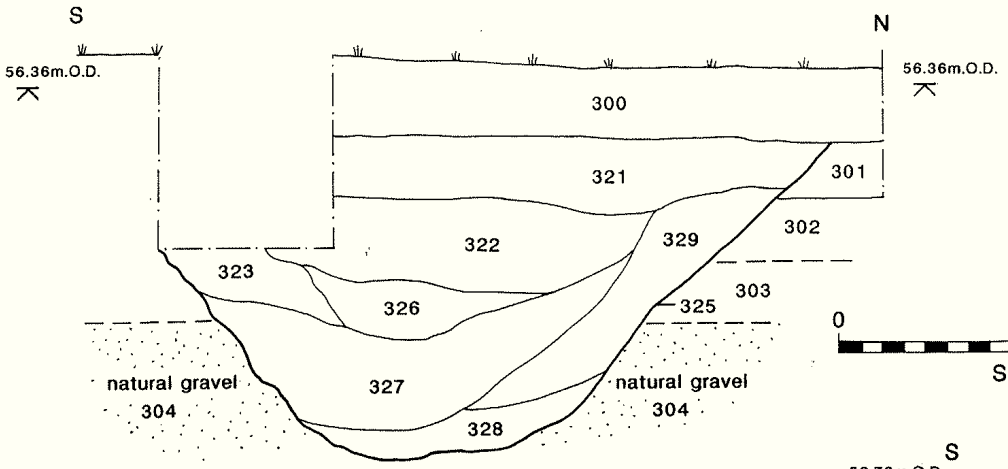
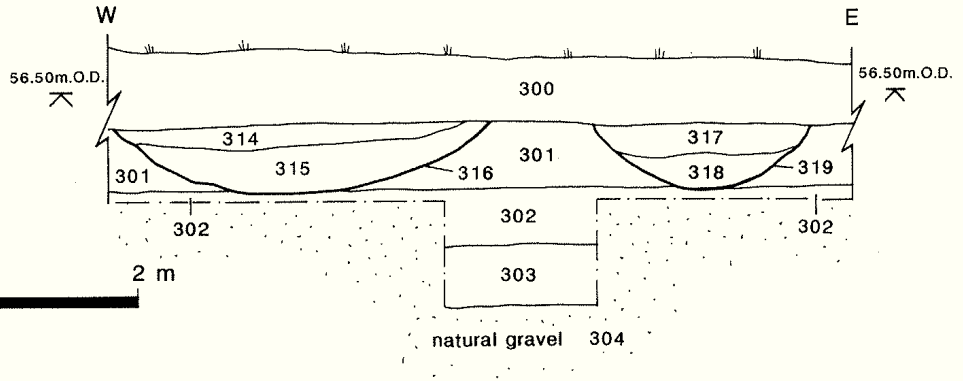


Figure 6c Trench 3, section 3



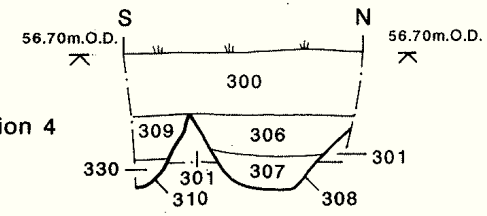


Figure 6d Trench 3, section 4