

Southfield House Dorchester, Dorset

Archaeological Evaluation Report



**Archive report scanned
from the original document**



WA Report Ref.: 31652

31652

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION AT
SOUTHFIELD HOUSE DORCHESTER

W190

Susan M. Davies and C.N. Thompson

Archaeological Evaluation at Southfield House, Dorchester, Dorset.

The Trust for Wessex Archaeology was commissioned by Wimpey Home Holdings Ltd to carry out an archaeological evaluation in the garden of Southfield House, Dorchester, before redevelopment of the site as sheltered housing. Initially a series of machine-cut trenches were excavated across the site; following the exposure of the archaeological features a larger area was opened up to facilitate their excavation by hand in one selected area. A sequence of ditches, banks and burials belonging to the Roman town were examined.

Introduction and Background

Southfield House lies across the line of the southern defences of the Roman town of *Durnovaria*, immediately east of the suggested site of the south gate and the road to Radipole (Weymouth) at SY 6825 9030. The exact location of the gate and any associated structures is uncertain. The town defences of *Durnovaria* were probably initially constructed in the latter half of the second century AD and consisted, as far as is known, of an earth bank and multiple ditch system. A stone wall was later added to the front of this bank, perhaps in the fourth century. Part of the rubble core of the wall still survives on the west side of the town in Albert Road. The overall width of the bank is suggested to be c 4m, with the ditch system c 38 to 47m wide overall, excluding any counterscarp bank. From the records of 1896 the depth of the ditches seems to have been c 4m. Any access into the town is likely to have been via causeways rather than bridges (RCHM 1970, 542-551).

Roman cemeteries have been found along most of the roads out of *Durnovaria*, in accordance with laws applicable to the period. To the southwest, groups of burials have been found flanking the road to Radipole, as far as the amphitheatre at Maumbury Rings, including a number at the junction of Weymouth Road and Great Western Road, just to the west of Southfield House.

Observation of eight test pits excavated by the Developers in the garden of the house in 1986 indicated the presence of substantial features varying in depth from 2 to 3m. On the west side of the site it was noted that the natural chalk bedrock was significantly higher than on the east side, possibly suggesting the presence of a causeway or break in the defensive system.

The observation of the test pits and the existing evidence for the location of the defences of the Roman town suggested that a further stage of investigation was more than worthwhile. The Developers, Wimpey Home Holdings Ltd, commissioned and funded an evaluation of the site, with a view to determining the nature and state of preservation of any extant archaeological remains. This work, carried out in late June and July 1987, is reported below.

The Initial Evaluation Trenches, 1-5

Six trial trenches were excavated by machine in the garden of Southfield House, in the area outside the line of the proposed building. All trenches were aligned north-south across the line of the Late Roman defences, apart from trench 4 which was located to test for features between trenches 1 and 3 (Fig. 2). The trenches were excavated down to natural chalk, except where exceptionally deep archaeological features were found (the Late Roman ditch). Most of the deposits thus removed were modern topsoil, but they also included part of the upper fills of the ditch and the defensive bank make-up.

Elements of the defences were found in five of the six trenches excavated: the outer ditch was present in trenches 1, 2a and 5; and the counterscarp bank lying to the south of the ditch, in trenches 1, 2, 2a, 3 and 5.

The Ditch: the full depth of the ditch was only excavated in trench 2a, where the fill was removed by machine to a depth of 3.2m from the modern surface. The fill of the ditch was a homogeneous fine brown loam down to within c. 0.75m of the bottom. The lowest layers comprised a fine red-brown silty clay on the south side and chalk wash with occasional chalk rubble on the north. The upper fills were identical to the fills of the ditch observed in the other trenches (trenches 1 and 5) and to those in sections of the defences observed elsewhere in Dorchester (A.H. Graham pers. comm.) The ditch was c. 7m wide at the top and had a splayed V-shaped profile.

Very few finds were found in the machine-excavated section of the ditch, and were limited to fragments of animal bone; no datable material was recovered. It is assumed that the ditch located is the outermost ditch of the Late Roman town defences.

The Counterscarp Bank: the full width of the bank was exposed in trench 1 and either end in trenches 2 and 2a (Fig. 2). The bank was c. 23m wide and survived, in trench 1, to a height of c. 1.25m (Fig. 4). It was constructed of dumped layers of chalk and clay. Finds in the make-up of the bank are of 2nd- to 3rd-century date. During the manual excavation of the top layers of the bank in the early stages of extending the trench a decorated copper-alloy brooch, dating to the earlier part of the 2nd century was found (Fig. 3, SF1, context 040).

The line of the ditch and the counterscarp bank run at a slight angle to South Walks and this suggests that the defences may be narrowing off or turning towards the presumed site of the gateway into the Roman town.

Other Features: in trench 1, cut by the Late Roman defensive ditch and underlying the counterscarp bank was a second ditch (052), aligned roughly north-northeast/south-southwest (Fig. 2). A third ditch (042) lay at the extreme south end of the trench, apparently filled with brown loam akin to that in the Late Roman ditch, and lying at right-angles to the second ditch (Fig. 2). These two ditches are described below in Trench 1Ex.

In trenches 2, 2a and 3 small gullies or, more likely, graves were located (Fig. 2), but were not further investigated.

A more detailed description of the individual trenches is contained in Appendix 1

The discoveries in the initial evaluation trenches raised the need for further work to examine the nature and date of the unexpected second ditch. Consequently trench 1 was extended westwards to the south of the annexe of Southfield House. Initially this extension was dug by hand (trenches 1A and 1B, Fig. 2), but subsequently it was opened up down to chalk by a machine (trench 1Ex, Figs. 2 and 3). Sections across the second ditch and excavation of other features revealed was then completed manually.

Results of the Excavation of Trench 1EX

An area c. 15m by 8m was excavated to chalk bedrock or the lower archaeological strata. This removed topsoil and deposits belonging to the Late Roman counterscarp bank (039, 040, 041 etc Fig. 4), and revealed the earlier ditches as well as three graves (Fig. 3). Depth of chalk below the modern surface was c. 2m.

Ditch 042/052

The two ditches originally defined in the evaluation trench 1 were found on the excavation of the extension to be a single feature, a right-angled ditch with square-cut corner. Stratigraphically this was the earliest feature on the site, cut by the Late Roman ditch (057) and by two graves (066 and 068 below) and underlying the counterscarp bank contemporary with the ditch 057. As the section through ditch 052 shows (Fig. 4) the layers in the bank had subsided into the earlier ditch 052. Ditch 052 had a splayed-V profile, and was cut into the natural chalk to a depth of c. 1.5m. It was filled with red-brown clay, with a central core of flints in clay. This fill was very similar to the clay make-up of the counterscarp bank and both probably derive from the natural Clay-with-Flints subsoil which overlies the chalk over much of Dorchester. This natural clay was also found under the counterscarp bank, where a remnant and much truncated prehistoric brown loam (derived from arable cultivation) also survived on top of it (Mike Allen pers. comm.). Animal bone and pottery were recovered from all layers infilling the ditch, and the pottery which includes a Central Gaulish Samian base with a maker's stamp, can be dated to the 2nd century AD.

The function of the ditch is not certain, and no other features were located which might have clarified it. The fill is very homogenous and similar in character to that of the counterscarp bank, and it is very likely that the ditch 042/052 was deliberately filled in when the Late Roman defences were constructed.

The Burials

The early ditch 042/052 was cut by two burials, 066 and 068; another burial, 064, lay to the west. Only the two burials which cut the ditch were excavated, and only 066 was lifted. This policy was followed as the area being excavated was proposed for car-parking and disturbance at the level of the graves was not anticipated. All three burials were extended inhumations in wooden coffins, aligned east-west. The wooden coffins were identified from the presence of iron nails. All the burials lay to the south of the counterscarp bank, and could be contemporary with it. Other burials may exist in unexcavated areas.

Grave 066

A shallow subrectangular grave cut 0.25m into the fill of ditch 052. Extended inhumation with arms crossed over the chest, left over right. Decapitated, with the skull, mandible and four vertebrae laid between the feet. Preliminary examination of the bones suggest that the burial is that of a woman, aged c. 25 years (J.Mckinley pers. comm.). No gravegoods, but 2nd-century pottery was found in the fill of the grave..

Grave 068

A shallow subrectangular grave cut c. 0.25m into the fill of ditch 042. Extended inhumation of an adult, aged c. 25 years, legs crossed at the ankles, left over right, arms by the sides. No gravegoods.

Discussion

The discovery of an Early Roman ditch outside the walls of the Late Roman town is of great interest in adding to the understanding of the development of the town of *Durnovaria*. The alignment of this new ditch, 042/052, appears to continue the line of Charles Street and it does fit with other anomalous linear features observed in the southeast area of the town, probably again outside the walls. It is possible therefore that this ditch represents an early laying out of an *insula* for the developing Roman town at some time in the late 1st or early 2nd century (W.G.Putnam pers. comm.). The *insula* was obviously never built on, the expectations of the early planners being perhaps too grandiose, and the laying out ditch was abandoned and backfilled with the construction of the later defences. Most of the dating evidence for the construction of these defences points to a date in the latter part of the 2nd century.

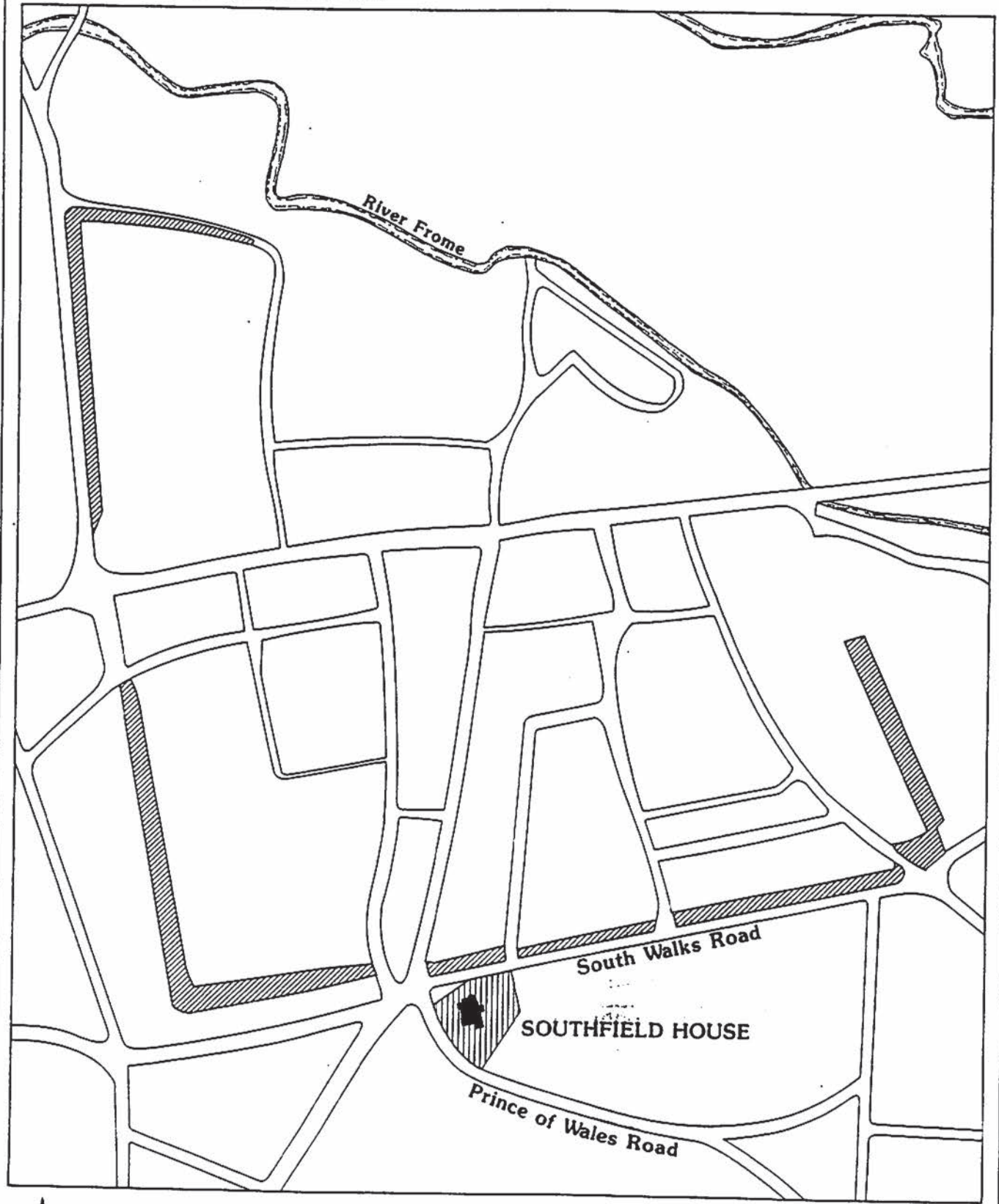
The burials located were not entirely unexpected, and represent an extension of the known cemetery area around the south gateway into the Roman town. Their relationship to the counterscarp bank, apparently lying to the south of it and respecting its line, suggests contemporaneity with its use. Burials in wooden coffins are known from many cemetery sites along the Roman roads outside the town, in accordance with Roman law, and are generally dated to the 3rd or 4th century AD. The lack of gravegoods might imply a late date within that range. Decapitated burials are also not uncommonly found in Late Roman cemeteries across southern England, and local examples can be cited from the extensive urban cemetery adjacent to Poundbury Hillfort, as well as

from the smaller rural cemetery recently excavated at Alington Avenue to the southeast of the Roman town.

Acknowledgements

The excavations were entirely funded by the Developers, Wimpey Home Holdings Ltd, who also supplied all machine-time. In particular the Trust is grateful to Euan Cresswell, Reg Firm and Terry Vincent for all their help and interest (and patience). The site was supervised in the field by Neil Thompson; the illustrations were prepared by Amanda Balfour; and the project managed by Susan M. Davies for the Trust for Wessex Archaeology.

LOCATION OF SOUTHFIELD HOUSE IN DORCHESTER



KEY
[Diagonal lines] Roman walls
[Vertical lines] Southfield House garden

0 50 100 150 metres

AMB

Figure 1

W190

SOUTHFIELD HOUSE DORCHESTER

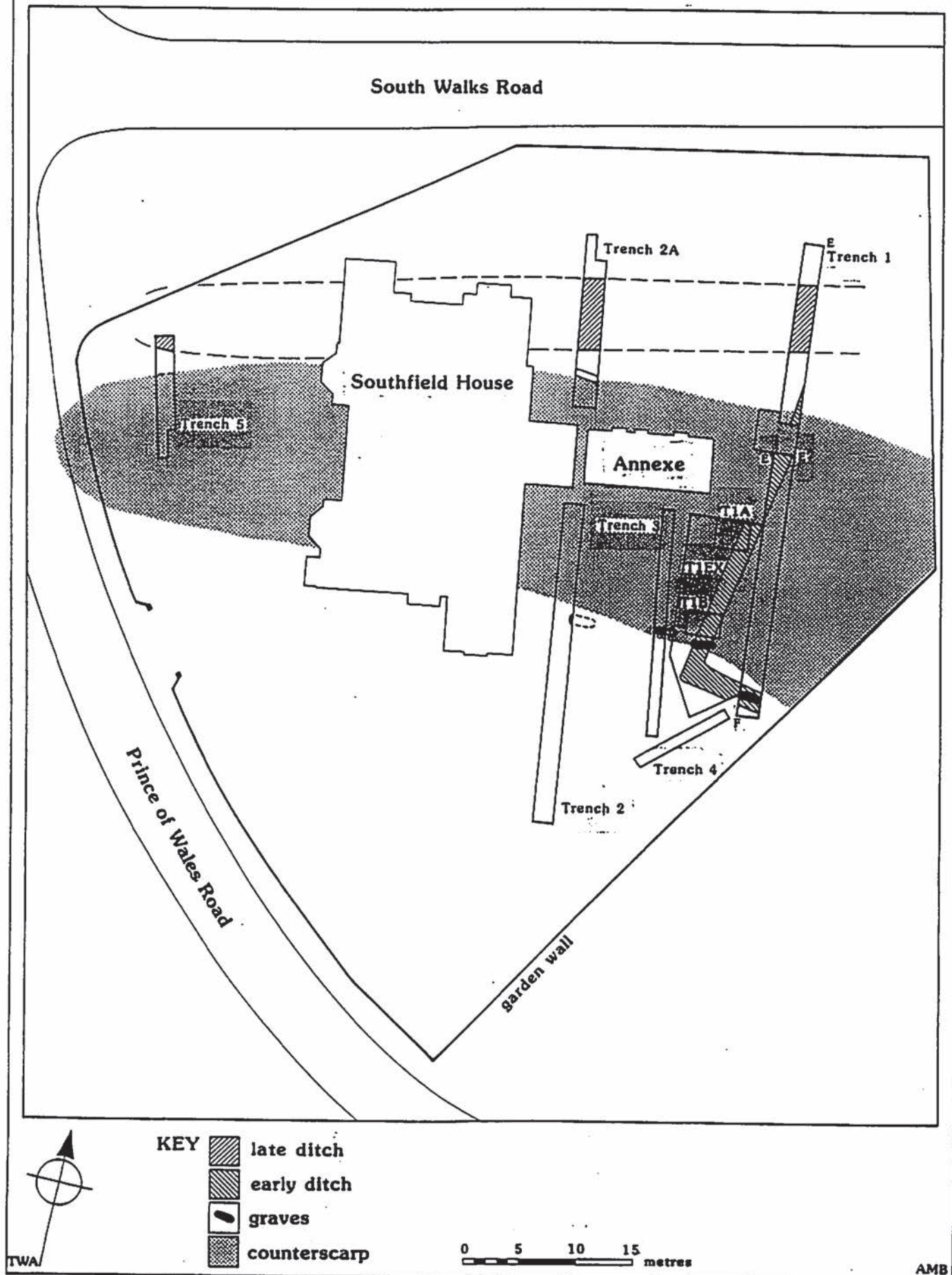


Figure 2

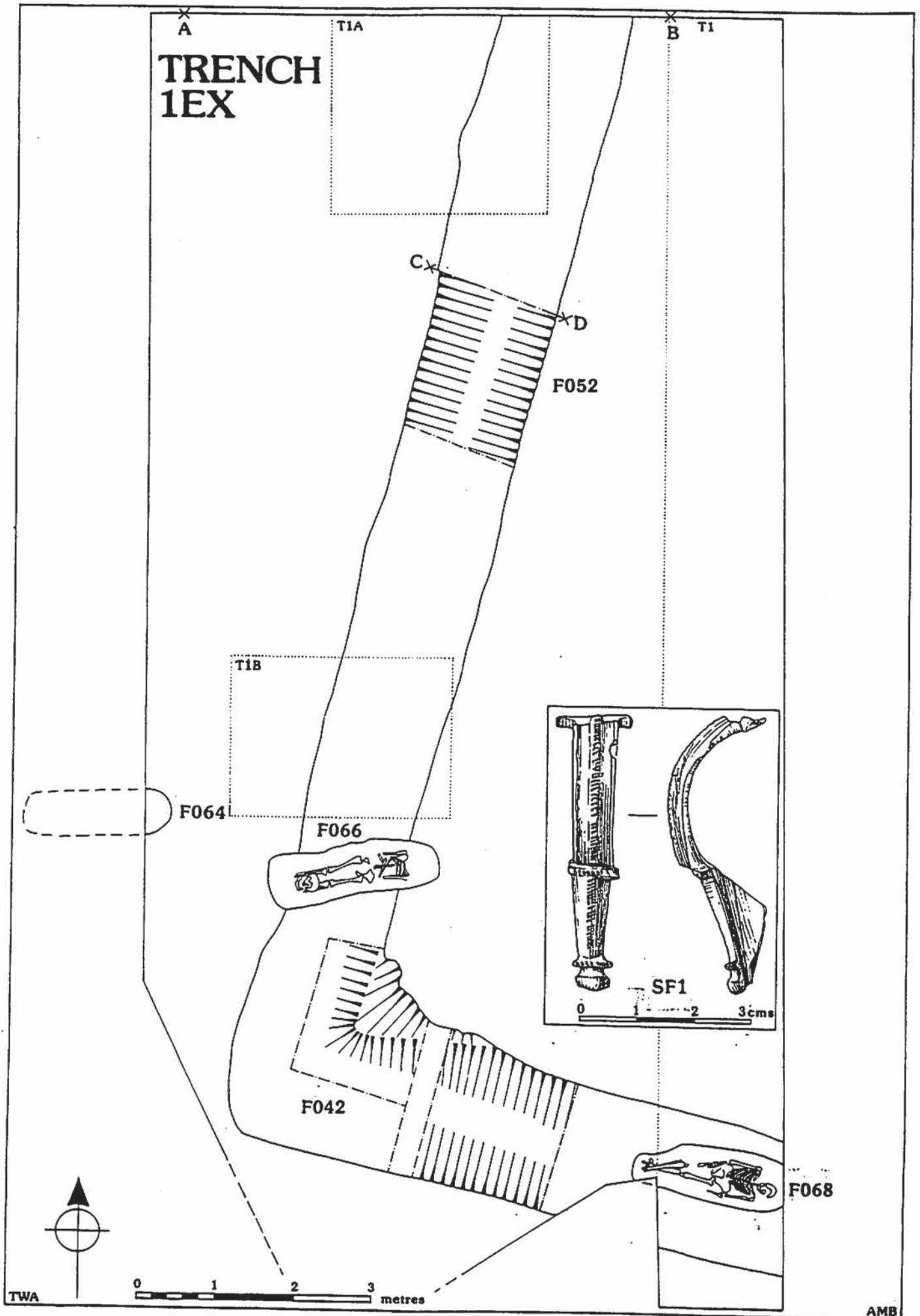


Figure 3

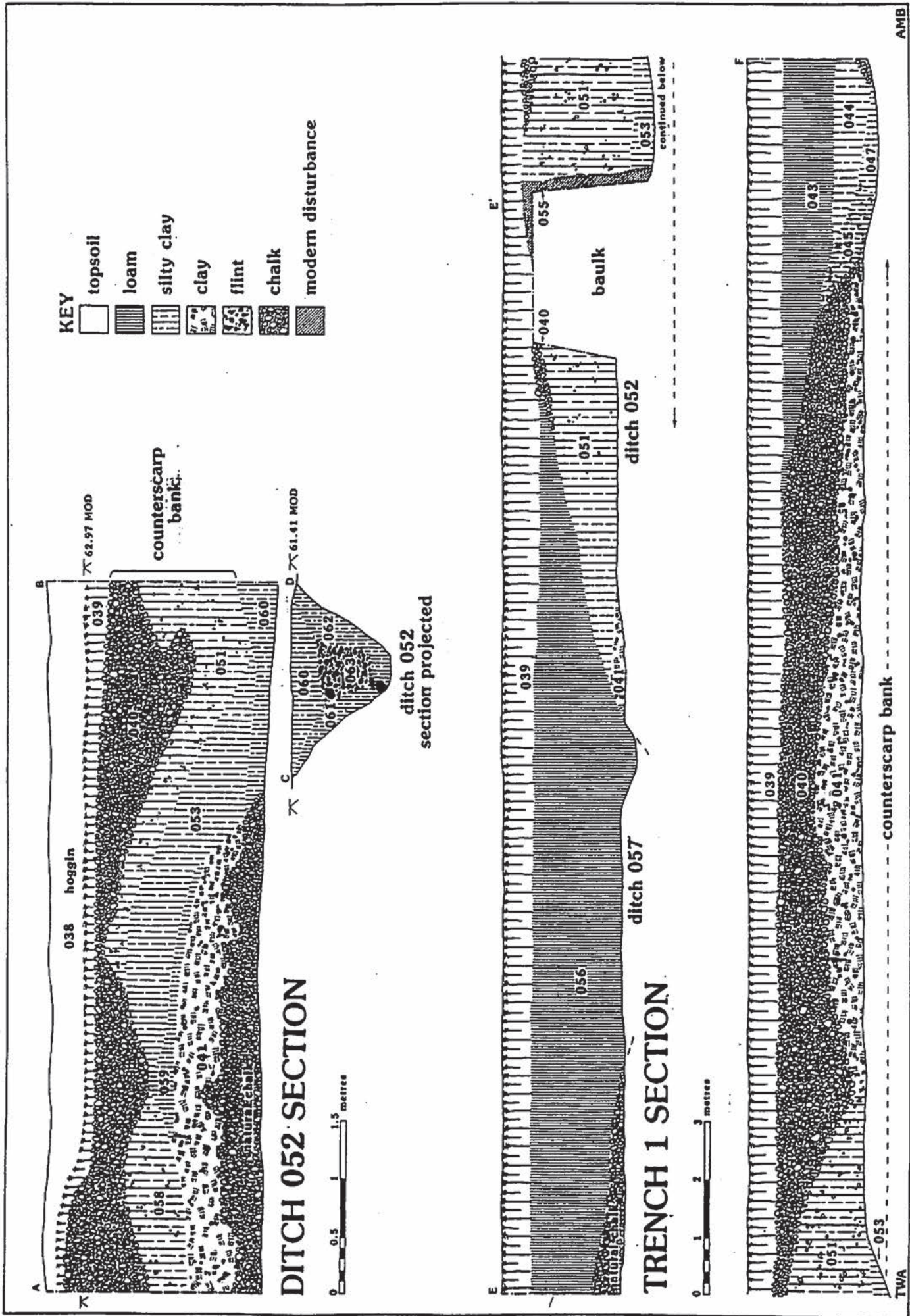


Figure 4

Appendix 1: The Evaluation Trenches 1 to 5.

All trenches were excavated using a JCB mechanical excavator with 4'-wide toothless bucket.

Trench 1

(Location Fig. 1, section Fig. 4)

Aligned north-south on the east side of the site. Length 43.00m, average width 1.60m. Depth north end 1.91m, south end 2.09m. At the north end, the outer defensive ditch (057) of the Late Roman town was discovered. It lay 3.60m from the end of the trench, and was 8m wide. It was not fully excavated, only the top fills were exposed where the ditch cut into natural chalk bedrock. The overlying soil deposits, nearly 2m deep all, appear to be relatively modern buildup. To the south, extending some 22m, were the clay and chalk dump layers of the Late Roman defensive counterscarp bank, contemporary with the ditch. Preserved underneath this bank were the remains of a buried soil, a poorly-developed and heavily truncated brown loam, the remnants of the prehistoric soils which developed before the imposition of the Roman town.

In the centre of the trench was a soakaway from the house, which cut through a second ditch (052) running north-east to south-west across the trench. This ditch was sealed by the counterscarp bank. The south end of the trench contained a third ditch aligned south-east north-west (042). The ditches at either end of the trench were both covered with a massive build up of very rich humic soil which extended down to the level of the chalk natural.

The ditch at the north end (F057) appeared to be contemporary with the counterscarp (040), but that at the south end seemed at first glance to cut through the bank (F042, fills 043-047). This interpretation was subsequently proved incorrect when the area excavated was extended (see main section of report). The oblique ditch (F052) was clearly sealed by the counterscarp bank and although it did not have any visible relationship with the two other ditches it must predate ditch 057 (which is contemporary with the bank). A large buildup above the chalk level on top of F052 (051) may represent the deliberate infilling of the ditch when the town defences were constructed.

No other features were present.

Trench 2

(Location Fig. 2)

Situated immediately to the east of the house, the northern end being 1.40m south of the annexe. Length 28.50m, average width 1.60m, depth: north end 2.07m, south end 1.46m.

The northern part of the trench was taken up by the counterscarp bank (033), which was disturbed by later gardenening activity, (034), which filled the southern portion of the trench. No other features were noticed apart from what appeared to be the butt end of a ditch or gully or possibly grave in the eastern section, 10.00m from the north end.

Trench 2a

(Location Fig. 2)

Immediately north of the annexe, on the same alignment as Trench 2. Length 15m, average width 1.5m, depth to chalk c 2m. The southern end of the counterscarp bank was visible at the extreme south end of the trench below the backfill buildup of the Late Roman town ditch. The ditch was 5.00m from the south end of the trench and was 6.50m wide. It was excavated by machine in order to establish the depth of the chalk for the benefit of the structural engineer. A depth of 3.20m was reached before natural chalk at its base was encountered. The fill was almost entirely the dark humic soil noted in Trenches 1 and 5, apart from the bottom 1.00m which was a red-brown silty-clay, with chalk wash on the north side. A narrow gully was noted between the ditch and the south end of the trench, assumed to be related to the house drainage system. Evidence of the soakaway was also noted in the sections.

Trench 3

(Location Fig. 2)

Located between trenches 2 and 3, 0.90m wide, length 20.00m. depth: north end 1.65m, south end 1.73m. This trench showed a very similar section to that in trench 2, with the counterscarp bank cut by gardening activity. A gully or grave was noted c 13m from the south end of the trench.

Trench 4

(Location Fig. 2)

Aligned north-east south-west, 9.00m long, this trench was expected to pick up the line of ditch F052 (Trench 1). The northeast end was c. 1m from the south end of Trench 1 and ran southwestwards until it passed the south end of Trench 3. Depth: northeast end 1.97m, southwest end 2.02m. No evidence of any archaeological features was noted. The section was all made up ground.

Trench 5

(Location Fig. 2)

In the northwest corner of the site, on the west side of the house, this trench was an attempt to establish any evidence indicative of the south gate of the Roman town. The southern edge of the Late Roman town ditch was located at the extreme north end of the trench and the contemporary counterscarp bank lay beneath the garden build up immediately to the south. Trench length: 11m, width: 1.60m, depth: north end 1.17m, south end 0.97m.

SUMMARY

The trial trenches succeeded in establishing the nature and extent of the southern limits of the Late Roman town defences of *Durnovaria*. Though no evidence of any roads or for the nature of the south gateway was discovered, the relative shallowness of the chalk in Trench 5 is

suggestive of the beginnings of a ditch terminal adjacent to the southern entrance to the town.

No dating evidence was recovered from the outer ditch F057. The town defences are known to have consisted of a triple ditch and bank system constructed no earlier than 130 AD with a later stone wall added possibly as late as the 4th century. Presumably the ditch discovered is the third of these defensive ditches.



Wessex Archaeology Ltd. registered office Portway House, Old Sarum Park, Salisbury, Wiltshire, UK SP4 6EB
Tel.: 01722 326867 info@wessexarch.co.uk www.wessexarch.co.uk

Wessex Archaeology Ltd is a company limited by guarantee registered in England, company number 1712772. It is also a Charity registered in England and Wales, number 287786; and in Scotland, Scottish Charity number SC042630. Our registered office is at Portway House, Old Sarum Park, Salisbury, Wiltshire, UK SP4 6EB.