

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION AT THE FORMER MATERNITY HOME, LEXDEN ROAD, COLCHESTER: SUMMARY REPORT

INTRODUCTION

An evaluation was carried out on behalf of Lexden Restorations Ltd in order to assess the impact of the proposed redevelopment on the archaeological remains. Previous discoveries from the site were negligible, although Roman cremation burials have been found nearby in Vint Crescent (CAR 6, 1039). These formed part of an extensive cemetery area, which flanked the western approach roads to the Roman town (CAR 9, 258-62). In the vicinity of the site, the line of one of these roads approximated to that of Lexden Road, while another has been projected to pass over or close to the site's southern edge (*ibid*, 263).

Evidence for post-Roman activity is sparse until the late Victorian development of the area. The site (TL 982 249) is fairly level at approximately 35 m OD, with the exception of a bank 1.3 m high, which supports a number of mature trees, against the northern edge. This may represent the pre-Victorian ground level, and gives an indication of the extent of modern terracing.

The evaluation consisted of a series of machine-dug trenches in the open areas to the north and south of the sprawl of redundant hospital buildings (Fig 1). The full evaluation reports, together with the finds, are retained in the site archive, deposited with Colchester Museums (CM 1997.47).

EVALUATION TRENCHES

Excavation of the trenches (T1-T5) took place from 20/8/97 to 27/8/97. The overburden was removed by mechanical excavator, until significant archaeological features or natural subsoil were reached. The latter consisted of sands and gravels, with occasional pockets of cover loam.

TRENCHES 1, 4 & 5 (Figs 1, 2, 4-6)

At the front or northern end of the site, the trenches were shallow; T1 was 0.5-0.8m deep, T4 was 0.5-0.6m deep, and T5 was 0.55-0.85m deep. Much of the post-Roman topsoil had been terraced away in this area, with the exception of the eastern end of T1, where up to 0.5m of topsoil survived close to the edge of the site, and to a lesser extent along the southern side of T5. Elsewhere the trench sides consisted largely of make-up and surfacing for the modern driveway. Recent services prevented the full excavation of T1 and necessitated the offset at the west end of T5.

ROMAN PITS

The main features revealed in T1, T4 and T5 were large pits (F3, F6-F11, F13) of Roman date. These ranged in size from 1m to 2.5m across, and were usually oval-shaped, although F6 was sub-rectangular. The fill of the pits was typically a charcoal-enriched, dark greyish-brown colour, with F9 also containing bands of redeposited, reddish-yellow sand and gravel.

Although the pits were left unexcavated, surface collection produced a high frequency of finds, including pottery, bone and tile. The pottery ranged in date from the mid-1st to the 3rd or even 4th centuries, with a preponderance of 2nd- and 3rd-century types, for example from F6 and F11. Provisional identification of a copper-alloy coin from F10 suggests a late 3rd- or 4th-century date.

The pits were probably rubbish pits, spread out along the southern edge of the Roman road; a phenomenon recognised further east at sites off Lexden Road. They may also have been utilised as a source of sand and gravel.

Two small Roman pits or postholes (F4, 0.25m deep, in T1, and F14, 0.17m deep, in T4) were half-sectioned. A small quantity of redeposited cremated bone was recovered from F10 and F14, although no *in situ* cremation burial was uncovered. All traces of Roman layers, such as floors or middens, appear not to have survived later destruction. Large quantities of Roman finds, mostly unstratified, were found during machining, derived mainly from the topsoil (L1). Post-Roman features included a modern pit or trench (F12 in T5), and numerous service trenches.

A short section of the bank at the northern end of the site was cut back and drawn (Sx 4; Figs 1 & 6). A substantial layer of topsoil (L1), 1.33m thick, sealed the topsoil, which lay 0.12m below the surface of the modern driveway. Although slight traces of stratification were observed within the topsoil, there was no clear evidence that the bank had been artificially raised. The section tends to confirm therefore the considerable thickness of topsoil which formerly covered the site.

TRENCHES 2 & 3 (Figs 1, 3 & 6)

The trenches at the rear of the site were slightly deeper than those at the front; T2 was 0.5-1.05m deep, and T3 was 1-1.2m deep. The eastern end of T3 was offset to avoid a gas main. The post-Roman topsoil (L1) survived to a greater depth in T2 and T3, and in places sealed a mixed layer of reworked subsoil (L2), up to 0.4m thick, which overlay undisturbed subsoil.

There was an absence of Roman finds from T2 and T3, and no definite Roman features were uncovered. An undated shallow gully (F2) in T3 was possibly of Roman or even earlier date. There was however an abundance of gravel at the interface of topsoil and subsoil, and in L2 (Fig 6), which may have derived from Roman street metalling. Metalling from the projected Roman road could have been destroyed by later ploughing, or more likely lay a short distance from the line of the trenches.

A large pit (F5) in T3, from which a fragment of peg-tile was recovered, was of late medieval to post-medieval date, while a small modern pit (F1) in T2 was probably associated with the nearby manhole.

CONCLUSIONS

The shallow depth (0.5-0.85m) of the Roman pits uncovered in T1, T4 and T5 demonstrates that archaeological remains on the site will be significantly affected by the proposed development. On the basis of the evaluation, a large number of Roman pits, producing many finds, can be expected below the proposed crescent. Evidence for Roman cremations and buildings was slight, although a scatter of the former should be anticipated; remains of the latter seem less likely. There were some indications in T2 and T3 that an east-west Roman road extends across or close to the southern edge of the site.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are grateful to Lexden Restorations Ltd for funding the evaluation, to Essex Rivers Healthcare Trust for permitting access to the site, and to Vaughan & Blyth for providing machinery. Thanks also to those who helped with the evaluation, especially Alec Wade for his assistance during the fieldwork.

IMPORTANT NOTE

It should be recognised that this is an evaluation based on a sample of the proposed development area. It is therefore quite possible that, as with all evaluations of this nature, the results may not provide an accurate profile of the site. There may be more substantial remains under the footprint of the proposed building than is indicated by the results of the evaluation; for example, there could be significant clusters of burials which might be affected by the proposed development. More trenches on the south side of the main block would have improved the effectiveness of the evaluation.

ABBREVIATIONS

- CAR 6** P. Crummy, *Excavations at Culver Street, the Gilbert School, and other sites in Colchester, 1971-85* (1992)
- CAR 9** N. Crummy, P. Crummy and C. Crossan, *Excavations of Roman and later cemeteries, churches and monastic sites in Colchester, 1971-88* (1993)

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10th September 1997

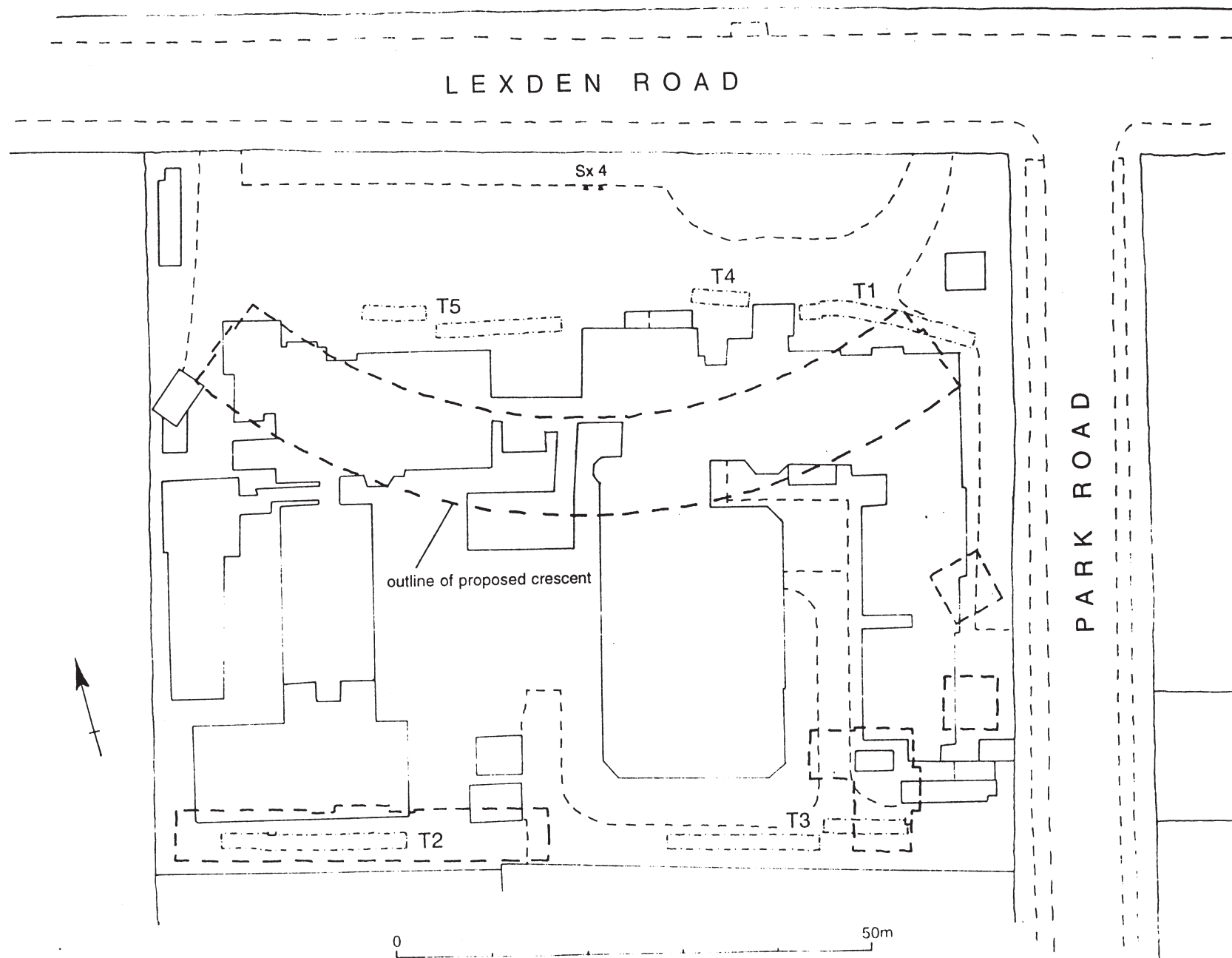


Fig 1 Evaluation trenches at the former Maternity Home.

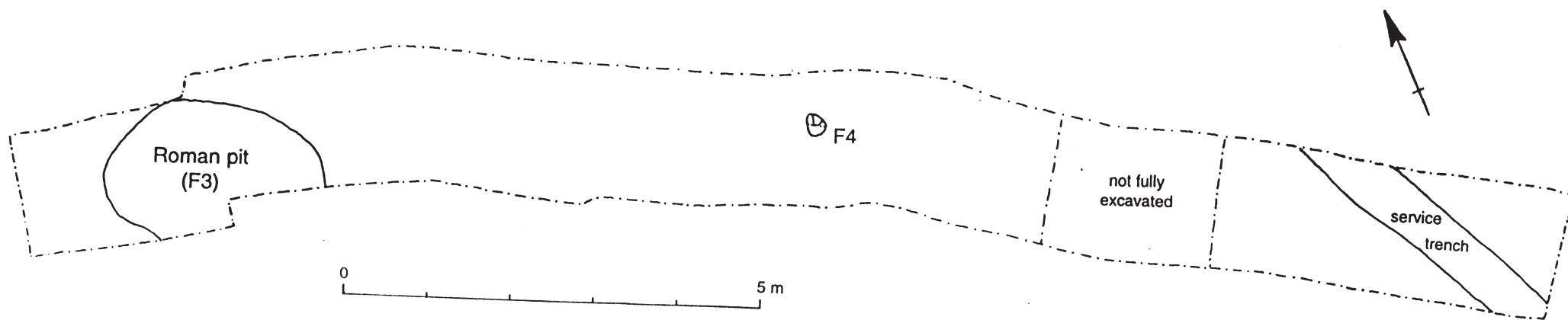


Fig 2 Trench 1

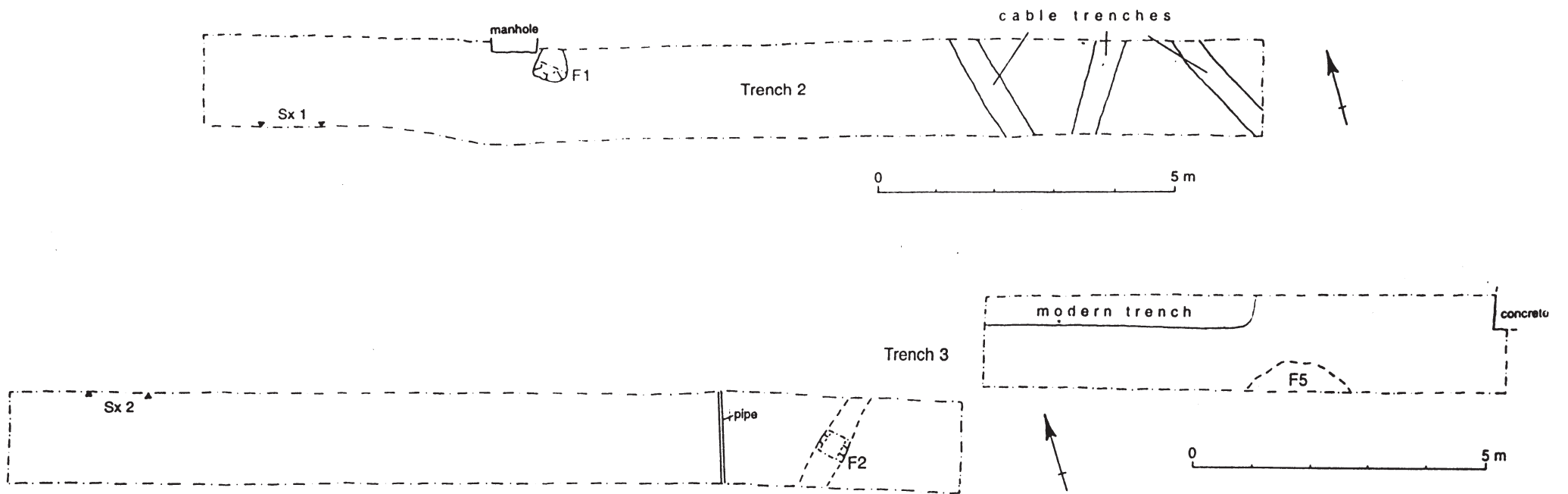


Fig 3 Trenches 2 and 3

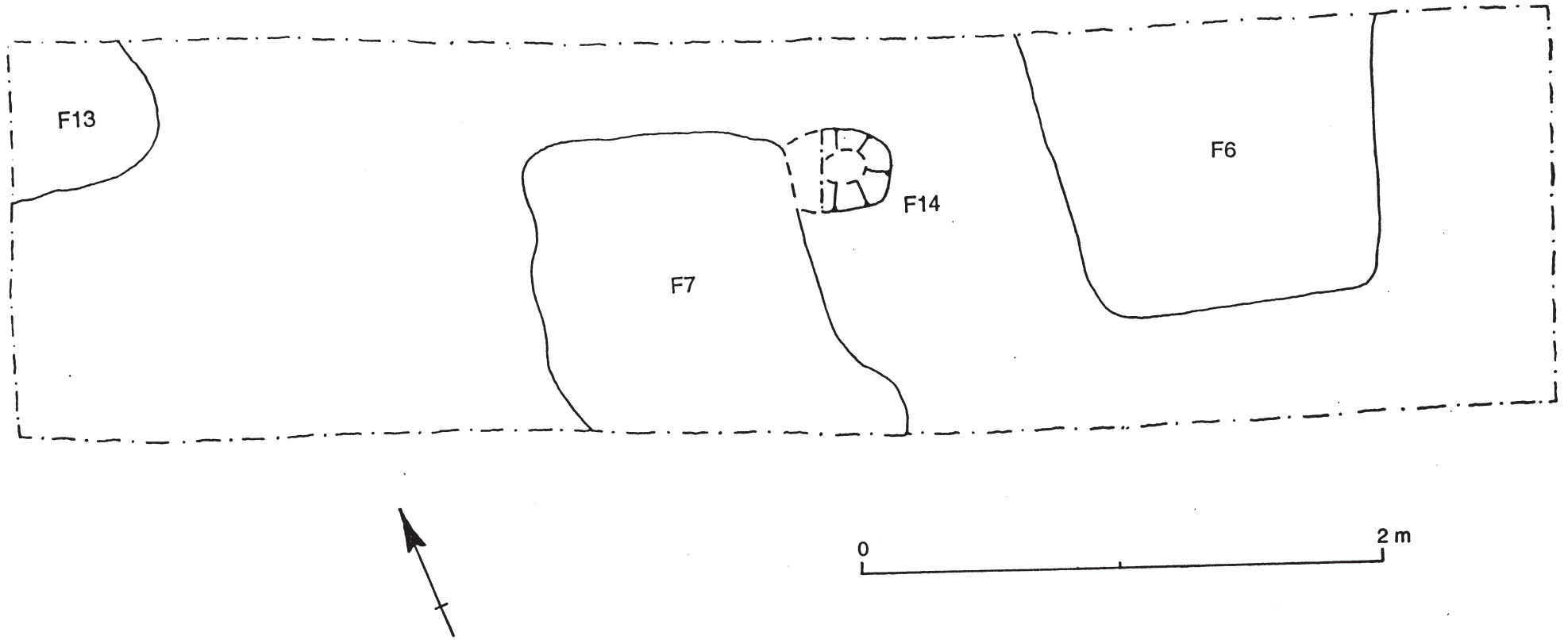


Fig 4 . Roman pits in Trench 4.

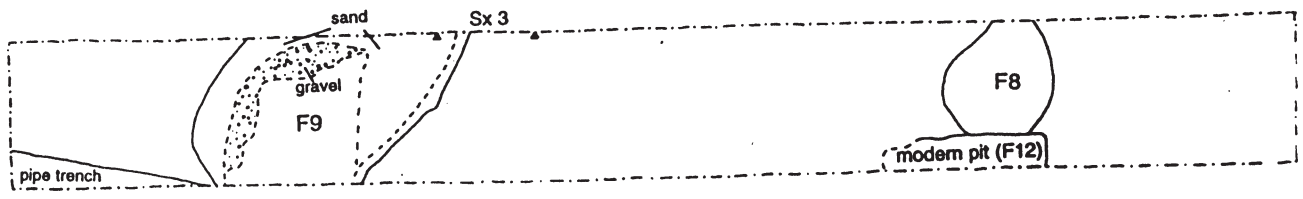
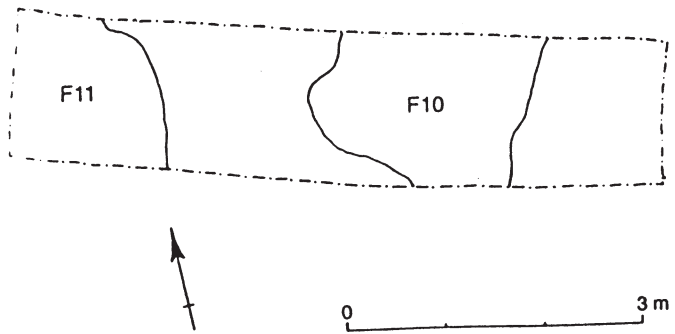


Fig 5 Roman pits in Trench 5

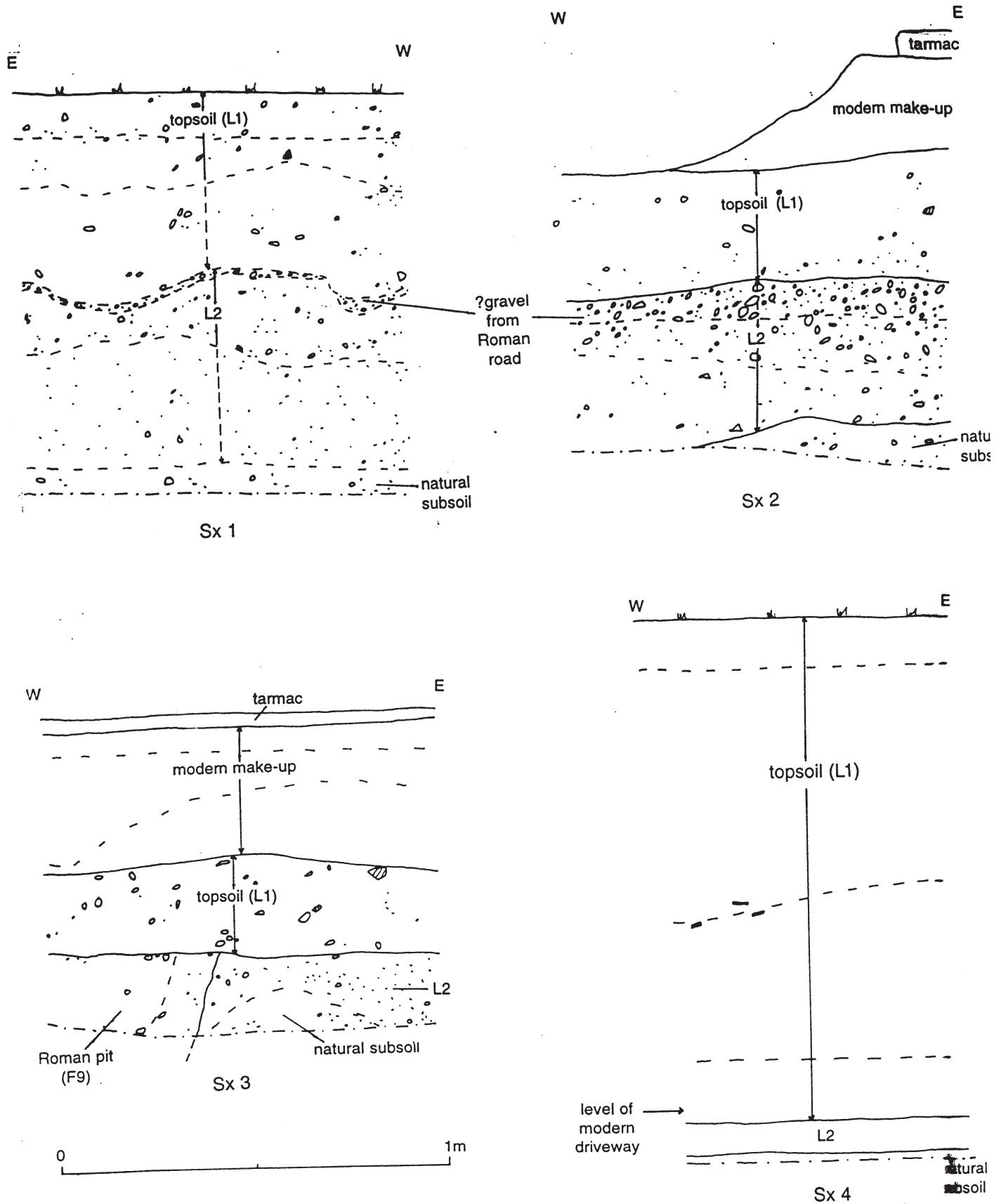


Fig 6 Sections 1-4.

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