Alington Avenue
Dorchester, Dorset

Archaeological Survey and Evaluation

Online archive report
scanned from paper copy

wessex archaeology

WA Report Ref.: 30834
Date: 1984

EXCAVATIONS AT ALINGTON AVENUE

an archaeological survey and evaluation

by

Michael J. Heaton (M.S.C.)
Susan M. Davies and Peter J. Woodward (T.W.A.)

Graphics and cover design by Keith Speller (M.S.C.)

TRUST FOR WESSEX ARCHAEOLOGY

MANPOWER SERVICES COMMISSION COMMUNITY PROGRAMME

November 1984

EXCAVATIONS AT ALINGTON AVENUE

Contents: Page Number

Figures: At end of text

Introduction

Our current archaeological knowledge of Dorchester and its hinterland suggested that proposed housing developments for an area of some 16 hectares, 1 kilometre to the south-east of the Roman town, Durnovaria, would impinge on areas of archaeological and historical interest (Figs. 1 and 2).

The development area lies on a gentle ridge between the town, and Mount Pleasant. Excavations have defined the importance of Mount Pleasant as a centre in the Late Neolithic and Bronze Age period, which was subsequently arablised and farmed from the Late Iron Age onwards (Wainwright, 1979). Although not defined by survey or excavation, it is likely that an organised set of agricultural field systems on this ridge was initiated in the later Neolithic, and was fully developed into fixed patterns of land allotment during the Bronze Age. The surviving Bronze Age round barrows on the western edge of the development area are probably the residual earthworks of a linear barrow cemetery enclosed and defined within this field system as indeed occurs on the next ridge to the south (Grinsell, 1959 and 1982).

Settlement developments for the ridge during the later Iron Age and Roman period are not yet fully understood, but it is clear that the land-use was probably intensive. A series of burials and settlement remains have been recorded for this period. The construction in 1846 and widening of the South-Western railway-cut in 1884 (SY 702 901), produced recorded finds of various burials with associated Durotrigian Black ware vessels, a possible pottery kiln with associated occupational deposits, and a large 'V'-shaped dyke (running north-west to south-east) 7-8ft deep containing pottery, animal bones, human and animal teeth. None of these findings need be later than the 1st century A.D. and some are perhaps earlier (Fig. 2,i). In 1884 Thomas Hardy recorded various burials found in the construction of Max Gate House (SY 7044 8991), 3 of which were in one elliptical grave with early Black ware

vessels, fibulae and other associated grave goods. Other material on this site was of a more occupational nature such as pits, pottery, tools, bones (Fig. 2,vi). Even more inhumations were recorded beyond Max Gate House to the east (SY 7060 8996, and SY 7060 8999), unearthed during modern housing development. In 1960 4 inhumations were recorded to the east and south-east of Wareham House (SY 7030 8999), along with a variety of occupational evidence (Fig. 2, iii, iv, v). This occupation evidence has been summarised and generally described in the Royal Commissions Survey (R.C.H.M. II, 1970, 575-7).

The topographical position of the ridge in relation to the Roman town also suggests that it may be the location for an extended Roman cemetery of the Poundbury type (c.f. R.C.H.M. II, 1970, 532 and plan opposite 584); in addition a Roman road connecting the town to the Whitcombe and Broadmayne settlements (R.C.H.M. II, 1970, 532 and 619, 594) through to Purbeck may be present in the vicinity.

The presence of early Saxon burials on the ridge points to settlement continuity in the post-Roman period. Saxon burials were excavated at Mount Pleasant (Wainwright, 1979, 181-183), and the burials excavated in 1892 and described by the Royal Commission can now be ascribed to the 6th century A.D. (R.C.H.M. II, 1970, 575, 218,b). These excavations revealed 9 or more inhumations (SY 7027900[illegible], and at least 6 were in close fitting 2ft deep graves, all were extended and "faced the north-east". Another "faced south", and two more are recorded with rich grave goods of jewellery and a bone comb. Other finds include various pits, one filled with charcoal making it a possible stoke hole, whilst another had a fill of 'red earth' and contained an antler pick. These features are more likely perhaps to belong to an earlier prehistoric episode.(Fig. 2, ii).

The development of the agricultural landscape in the post-Roman period is uncertain, but a pattern of field development has been suggested (Keen, 1983 and Fig. 3). The development area is located across the eastern side of

this field system, which ultimately developed into the medieval open fields of Fordington parish and the land allotment boundaries of the Duchy estates which we know today.

This intensity of archaeological record in itself promoted the need for a full archaeological evaluation of the development area. It was hoped that survey and limited trial excavation would be able to pin-point areas of outstanding archaeological interest, from which a strategy to more fully record and recover the archaeological deposits and remains could be designed and developed, before housing construction took place.

The evaluation and survey work described in this report was undertaken by the Trust for Wessex Archaeology for the Duchy of Cornwall and the Historic Buildings and Monuments Commission for England. The work was co-ordinated by Susan M. Davies and Peter J. Woodward (field officers for Trust for Wessex Archaeology), and the trial excavations were carried out under the supervision of Michael J. Heaton and a team of six field workers who were all funded within a Manpower Services Community Programme under the agency of Dorset County Council.

The Survey Strategy

It was hoped to undertake a full geophysical survey at the outset of the evaluation (Fig. 1). This would have enabled a more rational excavation strategy. However this was not possible, but it is hoped that a geophysical survey can now be undertaken during December/January 1984-85, by the Ancient Monuments Laboratory (H.B.M.C.(E).). Indeed this would be essential for a full evaluation prior to development.

In the absence of this geophysical survey the primary archaeological areas were selected on the basis of the data described in the introduction. The most important area lies to the north of the east-west track from Hardye's School.

The area to the west and south of Fordington Farm could not be usefully sample excavated prior to geophysical survey, but is likely to contain information relating to a Bronze Age barrow cemetery.

The area within the field to the east of Fordington Farm could however be usefully examined by small scale excavation-trenching. This trial-trenching was designed to identify the intensity of settlement occupation, the possible presence and extent of cemeteries, the nature and extent of the assumed and projected field systems, and to assess the quality of archaeological survival. The quality of any surviving stratigraphy was not likely to be good due to modern ploughing, the sites location within the medieval open-field system, and the likely terracing of the fields into the shallow dry-coombe to the south. The recorded soils for the site are shallow calcareous silty soils (Soil Survey of England and Wales, 1984, 342a).

The trench layout is depicted in Fig. 2. The trenches were cut down to chalk bedrock by machine with a 2-metre wide toothless bucket. The located archaeological features cut into bedrock were then excavated by hand and recorded, together with the overlying stratigraphy recorded in section. The total area excavated was about 800 square metres, spread more or less evenly across the 3.46 hectares of field.

A Summary of the Excavation Results

The following summary is based on a detailed trench description by M. J. Heaton. The excavation results are described in trench order (location of trenches Fig. 2). For brevity, only one detail trench plan, and one full trench section are reproduced here.

Trenches A and B revealed no discrete archaeological features but a deepening of the soil profile along the southern trench edge indicated that the trenches had been sited along the line of a field terrace. The soils overlying the scarped chalk bedrock were at their deepest in these trenches, 0.70m.

Trench C, running up hill from the eastern end of B, again produced little archaeology. Here the plough-soils were shallower, and the chalk bedrock had been severely scoured by modern ploughing; plough marks visibly scarred the chalk surface.

Trench D was more productive, the main features of interest were three medieval ditches; 085, 092, and 093. These lay at an angle to the trench and may represent arable field boundaries and headlands. These three ditches cut and were cut by a whole series of shallow gullies and ditches, all running north-south, and probably represent a series of structures and infield boundaries. The dating evidence (pottery) suggests a medieval or later date for this group.

Trench E sited on the crest of the hill, showed a very shallow ploughsoil cover, but contained the highest concentration of features and material finds (Figs. 2, 5 and 6). The location and the shallowness of the ploughsoil suggests that all the archaeological features were severely eroded. The trench is crossed by numerous ditches and gullies, all running north-south, which probably represent boundaries and drains (c.f. 096 and 135), or structures (129 052). Running along the trench are two lines of post-holes;

these may represent the walls of a building.

The majority of these features could be dated from the pottery to the later Iron Age and earlier Roman period, although small pieces of medieval pottery were identified in the top of feature 060 only. However the deposition of these sherds may be a result of animal disturbance at the base of the medieval ploughsoil. Medieval pottery was frequently found at chalk level. Feature 063 was a grave cut for one crouched inhumation 064 (adult, female) accompanied by a small bowl of Late Iron Age/Early Roman type (Fig. 5). Nearby were two other small jars of similar type in a shallow scoop, 120 (one illustrated in Fig. 6). This burial and associated vessel group, can be compared to the Max Gate burials (refer to introduction), and probably relate to the same settlement episode. The burial here may well be part of a more extensive cemetery. Other notable small finds included a small bone spoon (Fig. 6) from ditch 133. Very similar to one found in Winchester, dated to early 1st century A.D. (Cunliffe, 1964).

Trench F was sited off the crest of the hill, along the same alignment of D and E. The plough soil deepened in the north-western end of the trench, and points to agricultural erosion of the soils (refer also trenches A, B and C). The soils were up to 0.6m deep at the north-western end (Section, Fig. 7). In the eastern end of the trench were a series of shallow features, overlying a large recut 'V'-shaped ditch of Roman date, feature 086/100. This is clearly a substantial boundary, and runs south-west to north-east. This ditch has no clear relationship to the 'V'-shaped ditch recorded in the railway cutting (refer introduction). This boundary in turn overlies an earlier rectangular structure composed of shallow gullies, 056, 058, 088, and possible post-holes 158, 160 and 162. Feature 125, which contained a quantity of burnt flint, may be associated with hearth or kiln. A series of shallower linear cuts and gulleys 122, 124, 138 and 137, lay to the north-west; the south-western half of the trench was devoid of features (Fig. 2).

Trench G produced few archaeological features, but examination of the section showed that a series of ancient fields had terraced the slope. Below this terrace erosion was a single most interesting feature; a ditch, 127, 2m wide, 1.5m deep with near vertical sides (Section, Fig. 8).
Laid in the base of the ditch within primary chalk collapse was a trussed inhumation, with head against the western trench section (Fig. 9). The only finds in the primary silts of this ditch was knapped flint waste. This flint was in mint condition and examination of the material shows that the waste derived from perhaps as few as four nodules. One broken hammerstone was present, and two preparation flakes refit. No tools or retouched flakes were present. The trench section also showed that the ditch had been severely truncated as a result of later arable developments. The shape of this ditch, the inhumation, and the flint waste strongly point to an early prehistoric date, which is not unlikely to be of the Neolithic. Ditches of this type can be seen in the causewayed camp, and more particularly the long mound at Maiden Castle (Wheeler, 1943), and excavations of a comparable causewayed camp site at Hambledon Hill has emphasised the association of these sites with ritual and burial (Mercer, 1980). If this ditch is of this date it is of crucial importance for the interpretation of the development of the earlier prehistoric landscape in the area. Because of this potential a column of the ditch silts was sampled for environmental analysis; the analysis of the land snails in these deposits would provide useful comparative data for the sites at Mount Pleasant (Evans, 1979), Poundbury (Vaughan, 1982), Greyhound Yard (Allen, in preparation), and Winterbourne Steepleton (Bell et al., 1982).

Trench H failed to locate ditch 127, so its alignment may curve away towards Alington Avenue, but this may be confirmed by geophysical survey. Trench H did however produce a series of shallow ditches or gulleys, similar in form to those in trench E, and running north-south and east-west. The

pottery present indicates Roman and medieval dates for these features but a detailed analysis of the assemblage has yet to be carried out. However one ditch, 075, has a fill, and absence of pottery which may associate it with ditch 127, and it be of early prehistoric date.

Trench J produced no archaeological feature, but in common with all other trenches showed the site to be heavily scarped by medieval and modern ploughing.

The archaeological implications

The previous section has described in general terms the principal features and the sequence of land-use. Despite the continual erosion of soils and previous occupation episodes, the surviving archaeological features and stratigraphy are of great importance to the Dorchester area, which in itself is an archaeological area of outstanding national importance.

The principal episodes, which are of crucial interest and which fall into current research themes and strategies of the Trust for Wessex Archaeology and other bodies, needing further archaeological work are:

1. The earlier prehistoric episode and ditch 127; this needs to be defined by geophysical survey and further excavation.
2. The Bronze Age cemetery to the west of Fordington Farm; this needs a geophysical survey before excavation can be considered.
3. The prehistoric agricultural development; the downslope colluvial deposits need further examination for preserved environmental sequences, structures, and artefact assemblage.
4. The Late Iron Age - Early Roman cemetery and its associated structures, and their development into the post-Roman period.

Later periods and farming episodes are either not fully represented in the present evaluation, or are of lesser importance.

Recommendations

With reference to Fig. 1; this depicts where further geophysical survey is required, and where area excavation would be desirable.

It is proposed that the Trust for Wessex Archaeology should carry out the work, together with the current Dorchester Manpower Services Community Programme; this is under the agency of the Dorset County Council and an extension by the sponsor (T.W.A.) needs to be applied for from April 14th 1985.

It is proposed that the Trust should apply for project funding from The Historic Buildings and Monuments Commission for England and Wales, The Duchy of Cornwall, the District and County Councils and the Developer.

Acknowledgements

The Trust for Wessex Archaeology was commissioned to carry out this evaluation by the Historic Buildings and Monuments Commission for England and Wales and the Duchy of Cornwall. The work was accomplished with great speed with a Manpower Services Community Programme, which had been working in Dorchester since April 1984 on the Trust's excavations in Dorchester. The authors of this report would like to thank these organisations for enabling the trial excavations to take place, and in particular, Dai Morgan-Evans (H.B.M.C.), Martin Argles and Tom McKaw (D of C), and Andrew Lawson (T.W.A.).

In addition we would wish to thank; Laurence Keen (Dorset County Council) for liaising on the planning aspects; Mr. and Mrs. John Findings, the Duchy tenants, for allowing access to their pasture before its use for winter grazing, and for their patience, interest and help; Fowler Plant Hire and Rollalong for machine hire; all the workers from the Community Programme for their excavation expertise on site in often appalling weather conditions and sometimes in the dark, Ian Duffie, Peter Sole, Paul Pearce, Marianne Aylward, Nick Plunkett, Elona Freeman, Richard Hewett, Roger Vincent, Stephanie Ovens, and Linda Stacey, and also Dee Brennan for managing the Community Programme scheme back at base: Paul Pearce for assisting on site and in the post-excavation processes; Keith Speller (M.S.C.) for the publication graphics and for his trench survey; Roy Entwhistle for sampling for Land Mollusca; to the many individuals who offered advice and expertise, in particular Jo Draper, Alan Graham, Stephen Staines, Phil Harding; all our visitors, and the landlord of the Trumpet Major for the loan of his torch.

References

Allen, M., in preparation, 'The Mollusca from the Late Neolithic post-alignment, Greyhound Yard, Dorchester', interim note on 1984 excavations by Davies, S. M., and Woodward, P. J., Trust for Wessex Archaeology, Salisbury, to be published in Proc. Dorset Nat. Hist. and Arch. Soc. 106, for 1984.

Bell, M., et al, 1982, 'The mollusca from the excavations at Rowden, Loscombe and Cowleaze, Winterbourne Steepleton' to be published in a full excavation report in preparation, Woodward, P. J., Trust for Wessex Archaeology, Salisbury. Interim notes on these excavations in Proc. Dorset Nat. Hist. and Arch. Soc., 103 (1981), 119-121; 104 (1982), 173-175.

Cunliffe, B., 1964, Winchester Excavations 1949-1960, City of Winchester Museums and Libraries Committee.

Evans, J. G. and Jones, H. 1979, 'Mount Pleasant and Woodhenge: the land mollusca' in Wainwright, G. J., Mount Pleasant Dorset: Excavations 1970-71, London, 190-213.

Grinsell, L. V., 1959, Dorset Barrows, Dorset Natural History and Archaeological Society, Dorchester.

Grinsell, L. V., 1982, Dorset Barrows Supplement, Dorset Natural History and Archaeological Society, Dorchester.

Keen, L. J. K., 1983, 'The towns of Dorset', in Haslam, J. (Ed.), The Anglo-Saxon Towns of Southern England, 203-247.

Mercer, R., 1980, Hambledon Hill: A Neolithic Landscape, Edinburgh. 1980.

R.C.H.M. — Royal Commission on Historical Monuments.

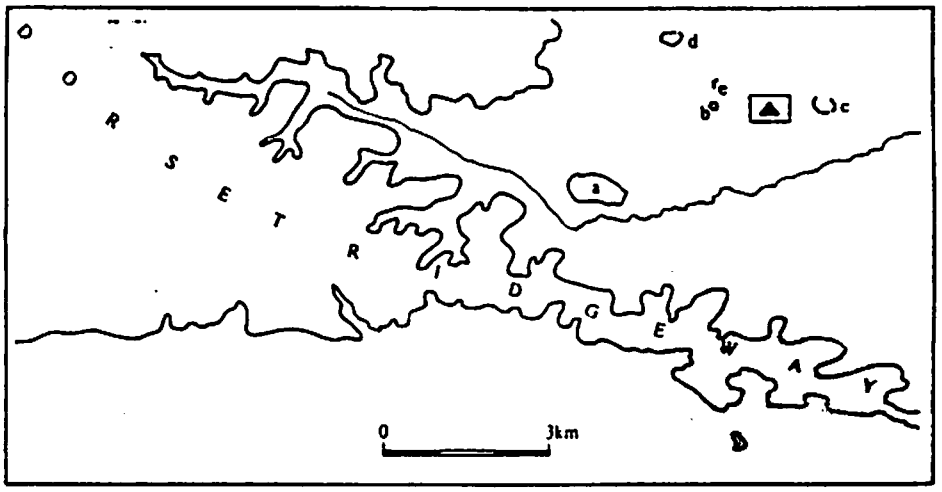
R.C.H.M. II — An inventory of the Historical Monuments in the County of Dorset, Volume II, R.C.H.M., London, 1970.

Soil Survey of England and Wales 1983, Legend for the 1:250,000 Soil Map of England and Wales, Lawes Agricultural Trust, Harpenden.

Vaughan, M., 1982, 'The Land Mollusca from Poundbury Excavations, 19 -1980', to be published in Green C. J. S., Excavations at Poundbury, Dorset Monograph Series, Dorset Natural History and Archaeological Society, Dorchester.

Wainwright, G. J., 1979, Mount Pleasant, Dorset: Excavations 1970-71, Soc. Antiq. Res. Rep. 37, London.

Wheeler, R. E. M., 1943, Maiden Castle, Dorset, Soc. Antiq. Res. Rep. XII, Oxford.


a
b
c
d
e
0
3km

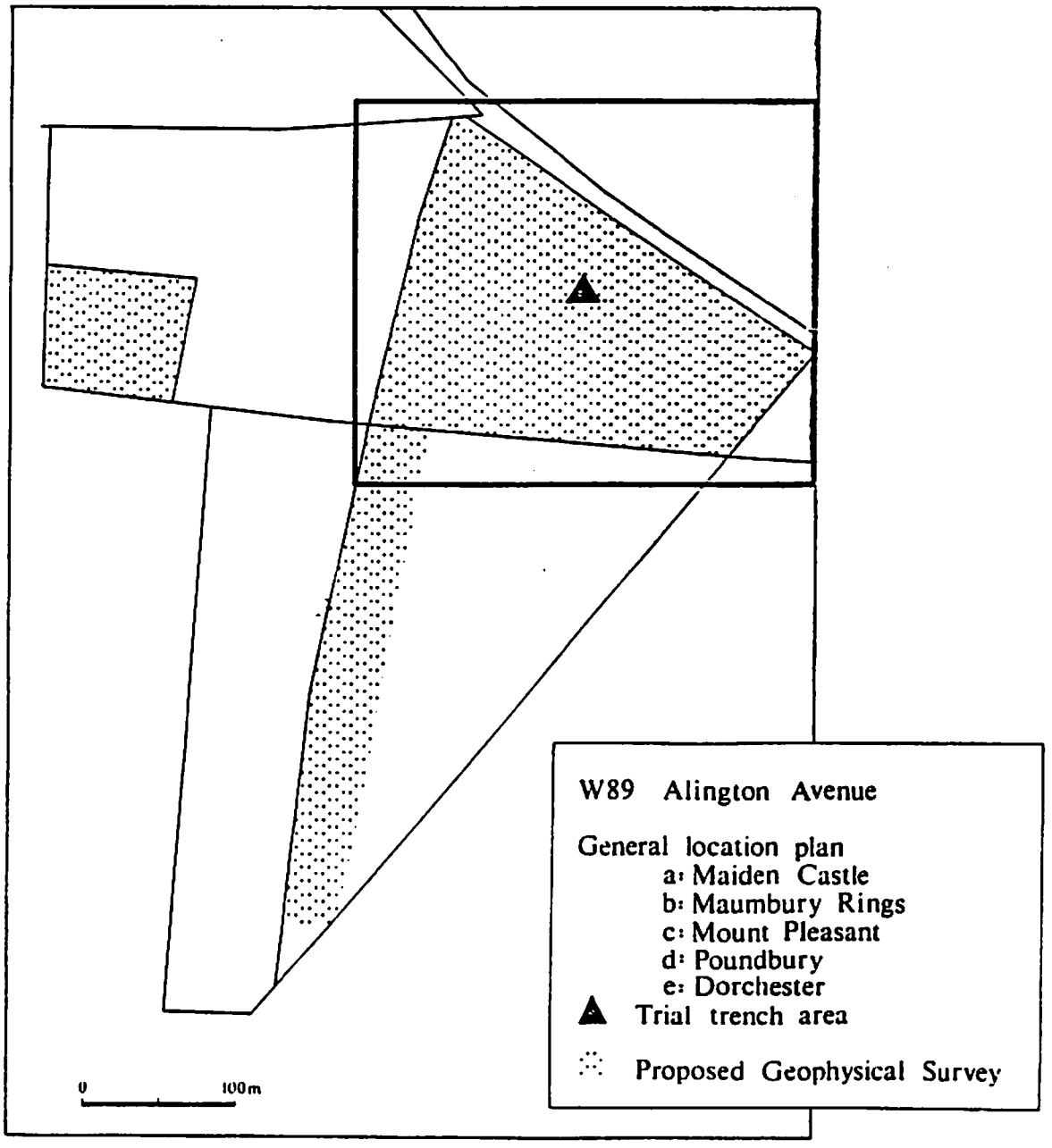

N
0
100m
W89 Alington Avenue
General location plan
a: Maiden Castle
b: Maumbury Rings
c: Mount Pleasant
d: Poundbury
e: Dorchester
Trial trench area
Proposed Geophysical Survey

Fig 1

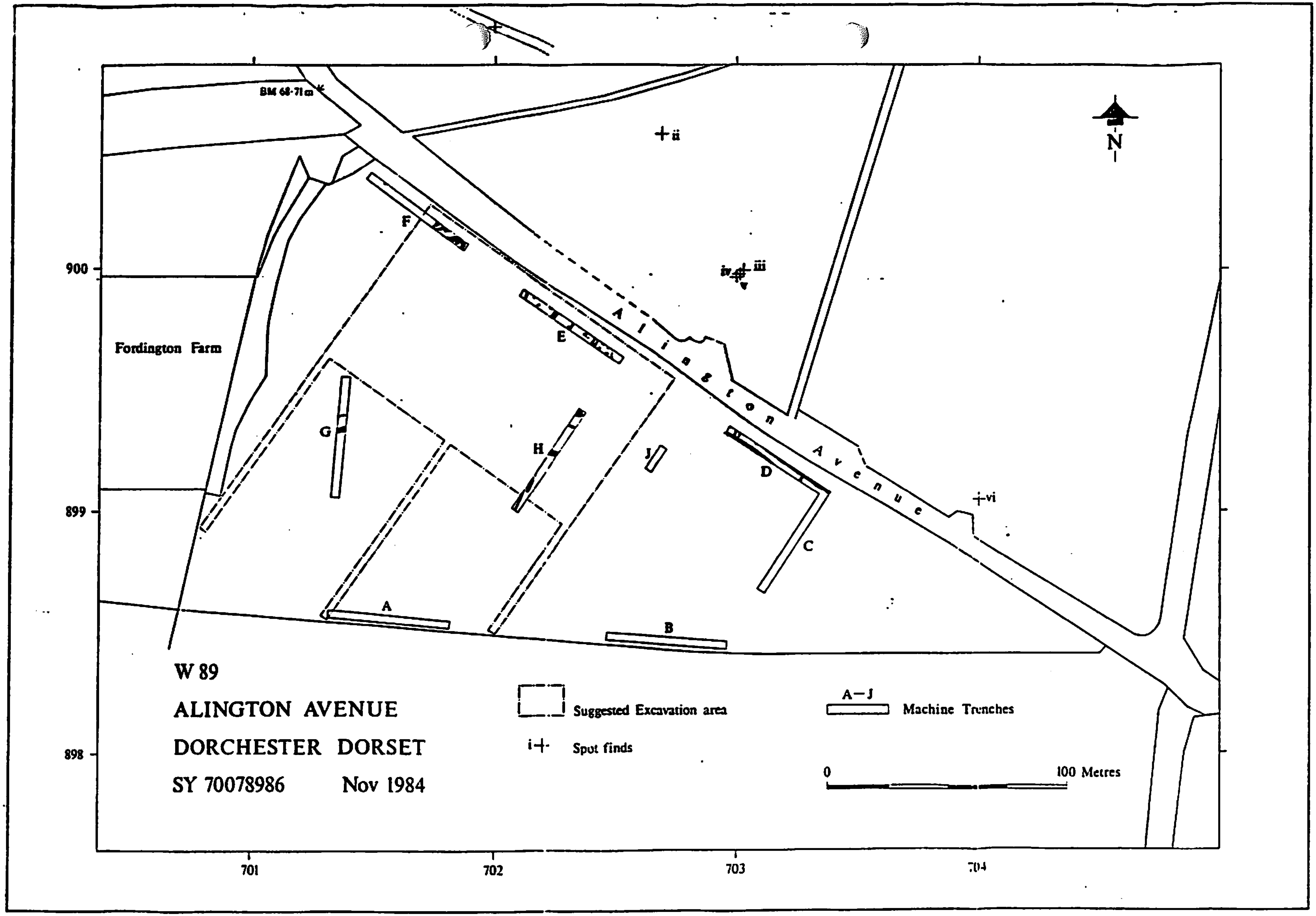

BM 68·71m
+ii
N
iv iii v
Fordington Farm
F
E
A l i n g t o n A v e n u e
G
H
J
D
+vi
C
A
B
900
899
898
701
702
703
704
W 89
ALINGTON AVENUE
DORCHESTER DORSET
SY 70078986 Nov 1984
Suggested Excavation area
Spot finds
A—J
Machine Trenches
0
100 Metres

Fig. 2

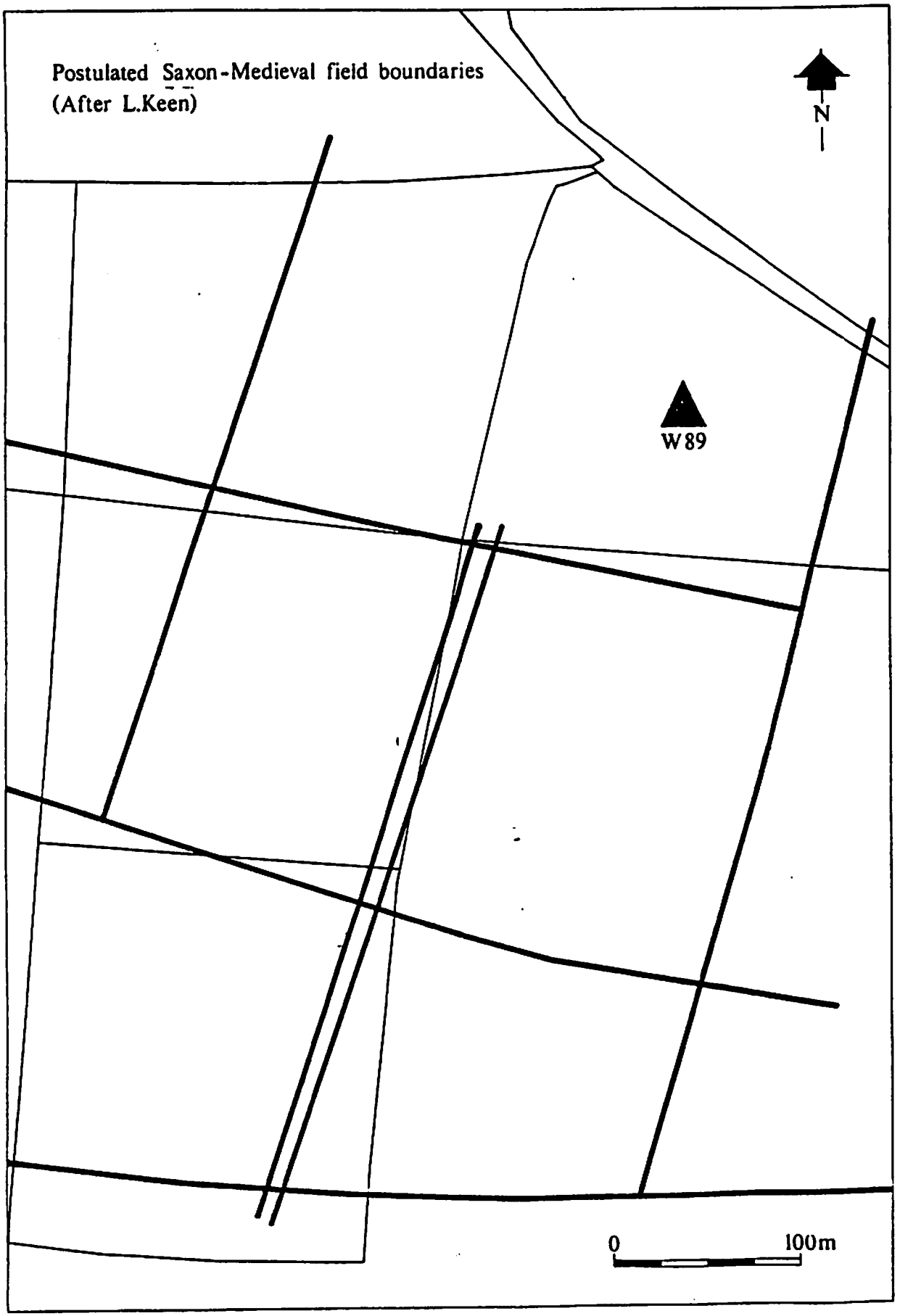

Postulated Saxon-Medieval field boundaries
(After L.Keen)
N
W89
0
100m

Fig. 3

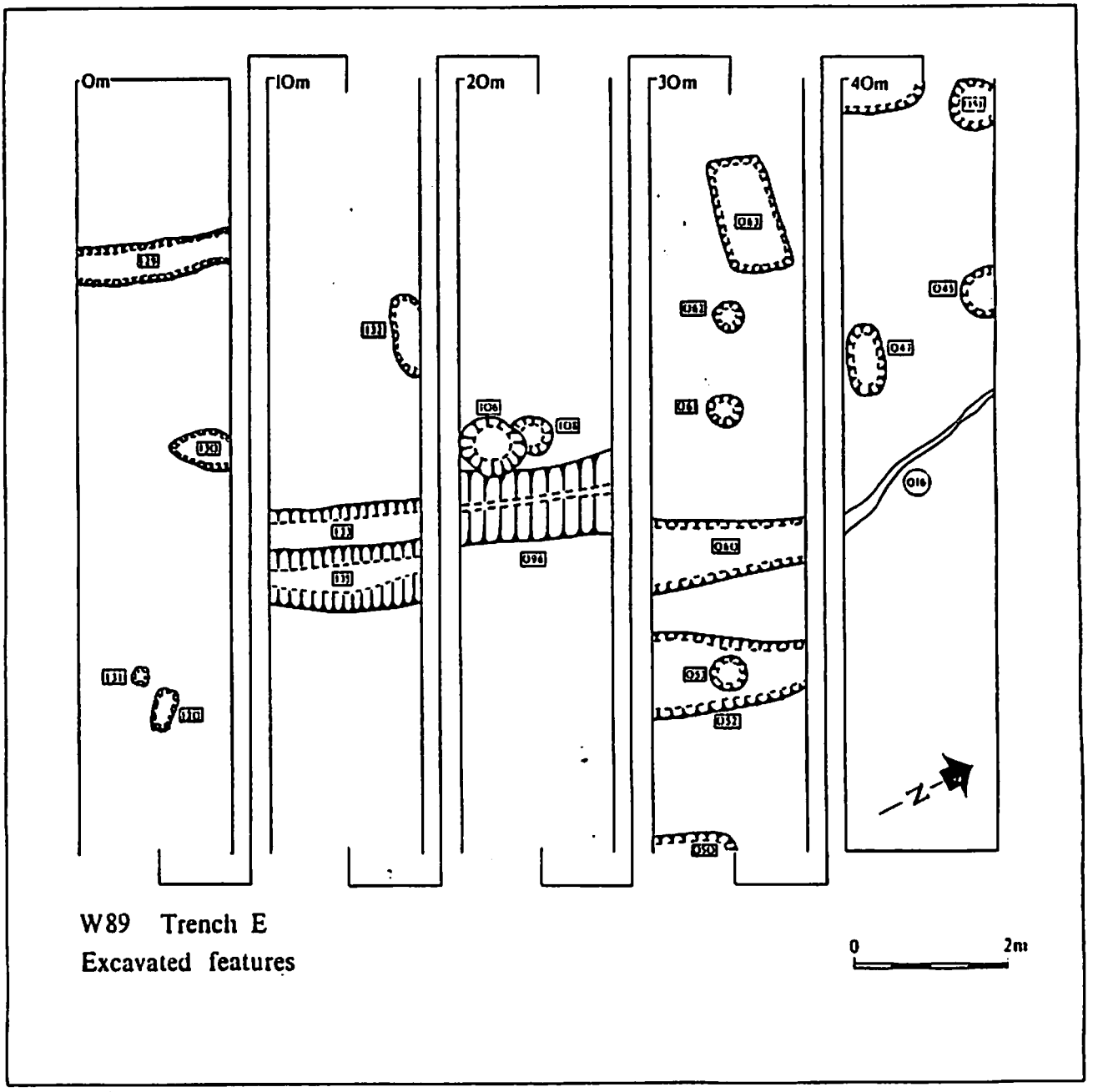
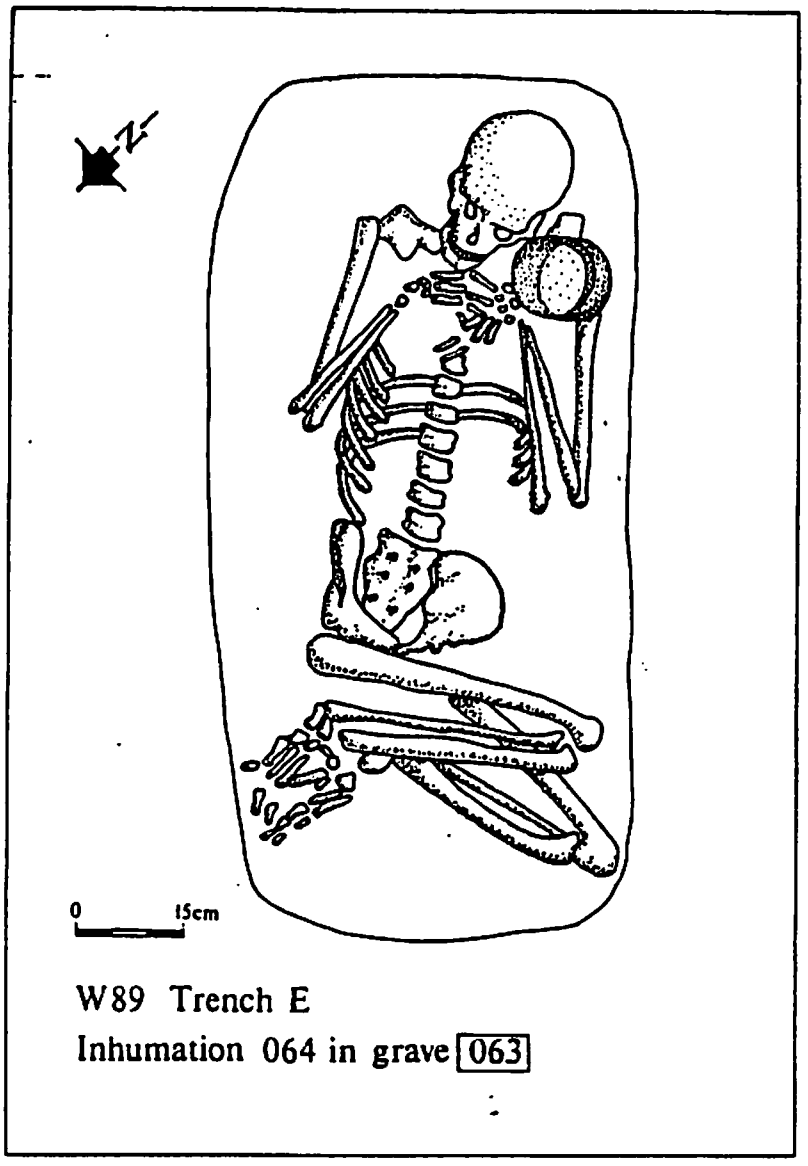
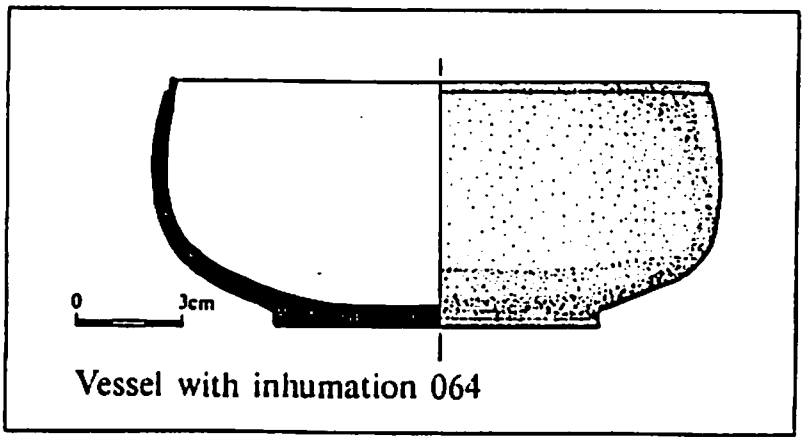


Fig. 4

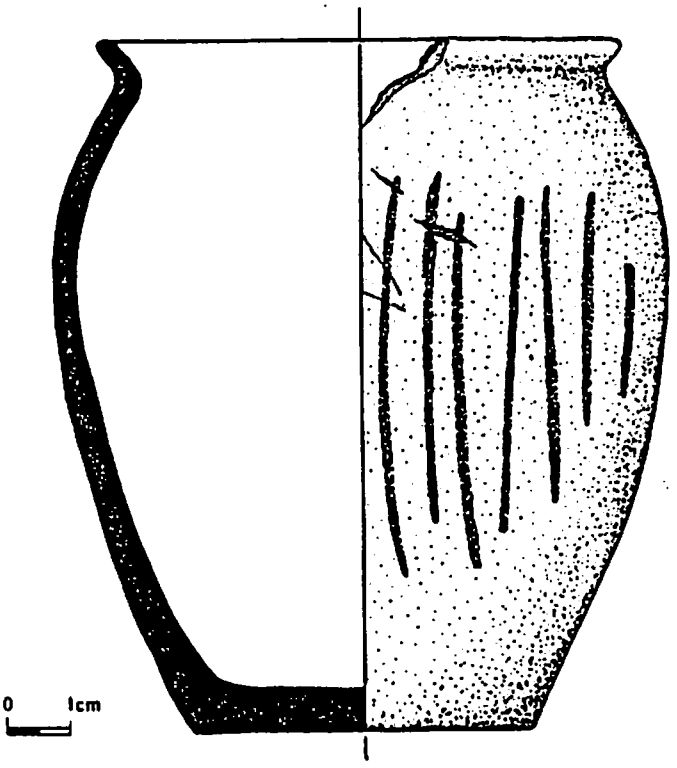


W89 Trench E
Inhumation 064 in grave 063

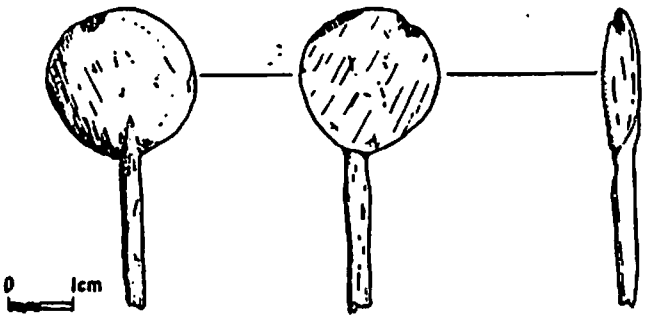


Vessel with inhumation 064

Fig. 5

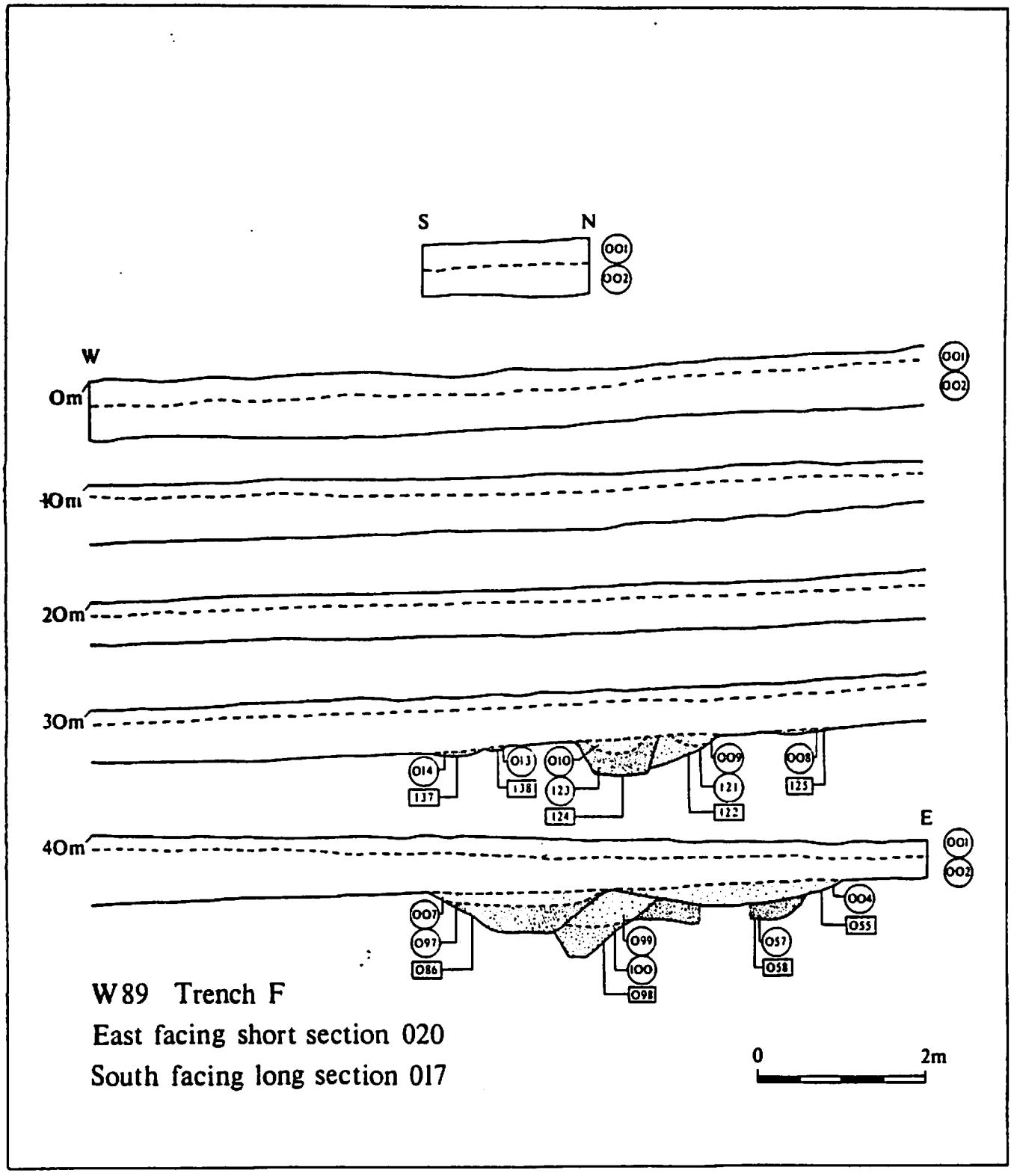


W89 Trench E
Black Durotrigian decorated jar in feature 120



W89 Trench E
Bone spoon fragment in ditch 133

Fig. 6



W89 Trench F
East facing short section 020
South facing long section 017

Fig. 7.

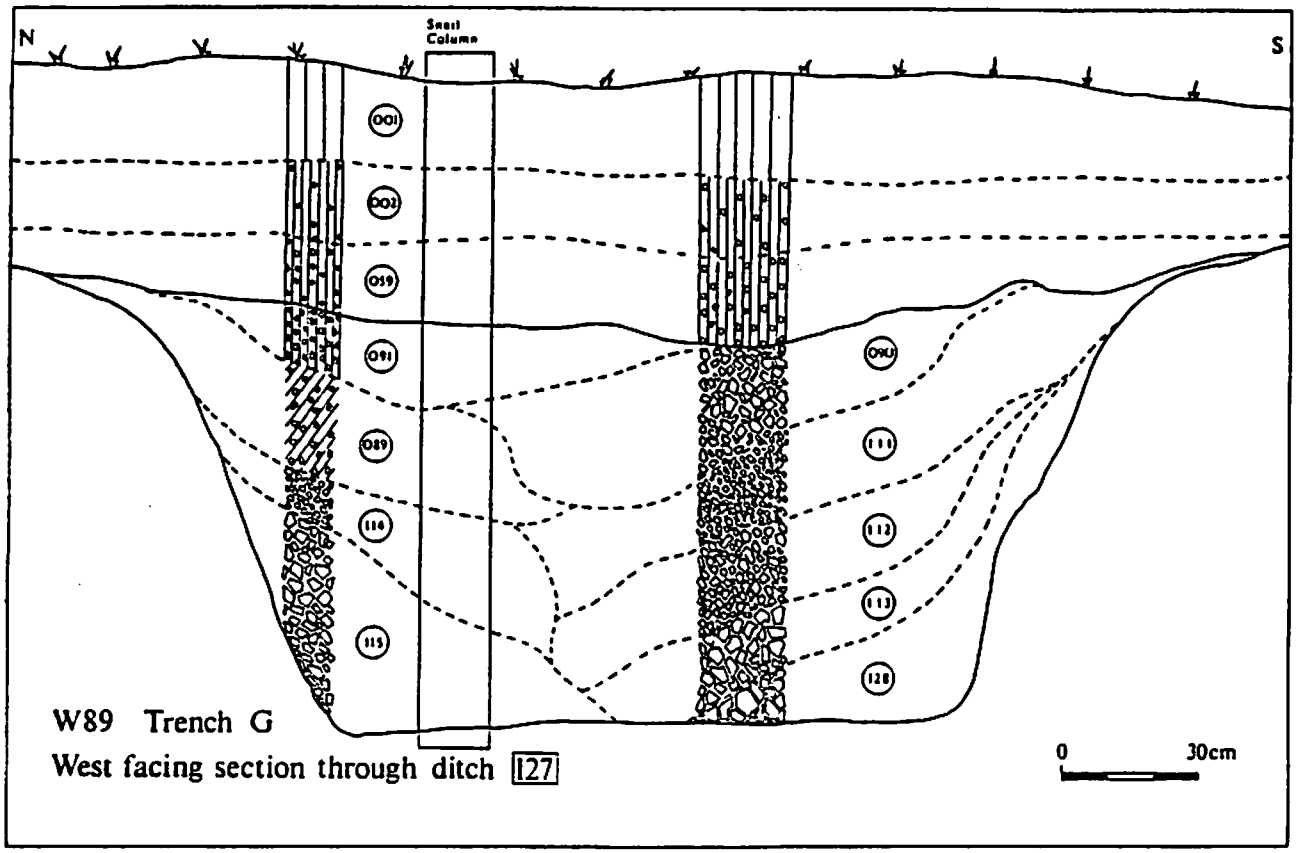
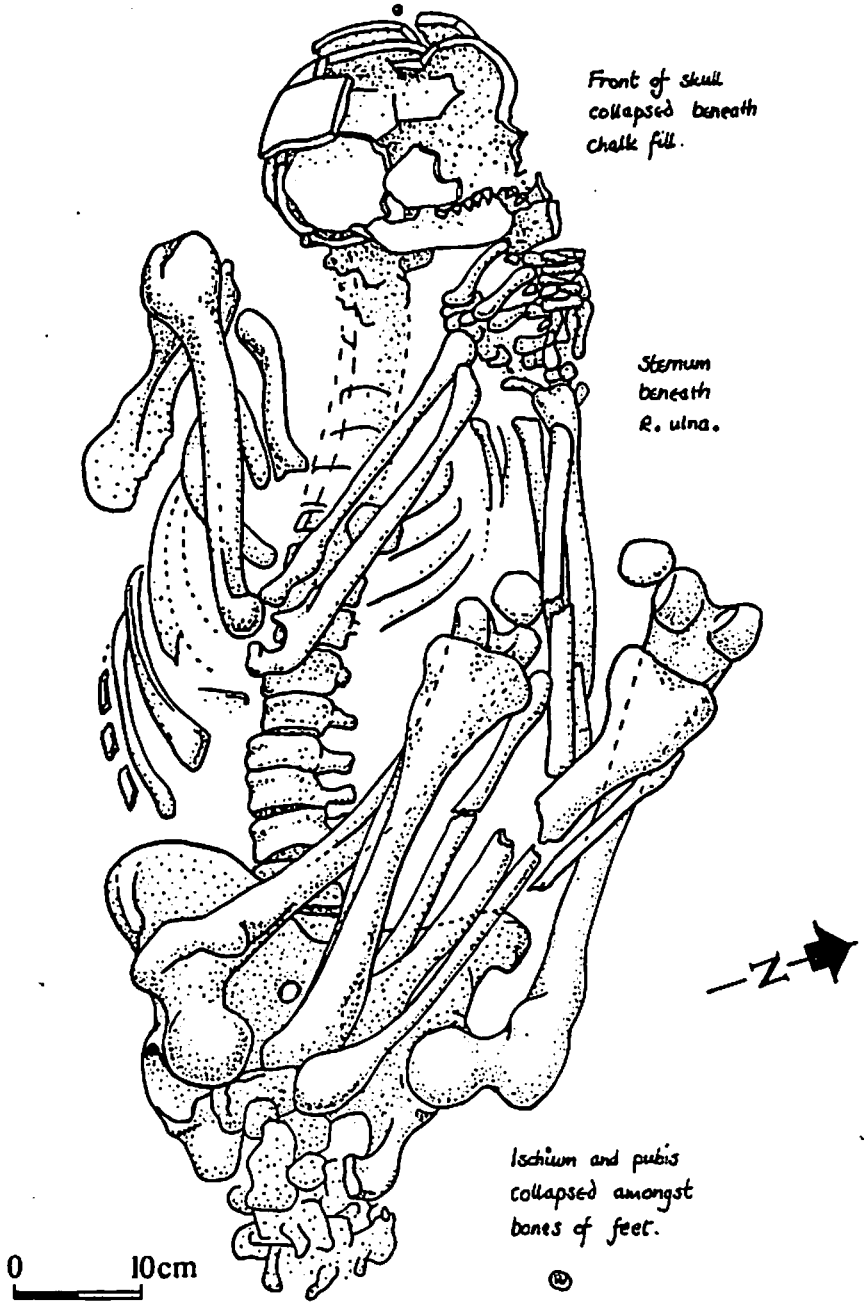

N
S
Snail Column
001
002
059
091
089
116
115
090
111
112
113
128
W89 Trench G
West facing section through ditch 127
0
30cm

Fig. 8



W89 Trench G

Inhumation 126 in ditch 127

Fig. 9.

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