

**13 Bell Lane, Thame,
Oxfordshire**

An Archaeological Watching Brief

for

J & J Estates Limited

December 1997

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by Leigh Pollinger

Report 97/79

Introduction

This report documents the results of an archaeological watching brief carried out at 13 Bell Lane, Thame, Oxfordshire (SP 7055 0606). The work was commissioned by Mr J. H. T. Springell, of J & J Estates Limited, Bridgeside Farm, Askett, Aylesbury, Bucks, HP27 9LT. Planning permission was granted by Cherwell District Council for the construction of four courtyard cottages with garages to the rear of 13 Bell Lane, and to alter the building at 91/92 High Street for office accommodation (ref. P93/N0284/LB). Permission was granted with the condition that an archaeological watching brief was undertaken during groundworks on the site. This is in accordance with the Department of the Environment's Policy and Planning Guidance Note, *Archaeology and Planning* (PPG 16, 1990). The field investigation was carried out to a specification approved by Mr. Paul Smith, County Archaeological Officer for Oxfordshire County Council. The fieldwork was undertaken by John Saunders, Steve Ford and Leigh Pollinger on the 6th, 7th and 11th of November and the 4th of December 1997. The site code is BLT 97/79.

Location, Topography and Geology

The site is situated within the historic core of Thame on a parcel of land previously occupied by the buildings and garden plot of 13 Bell Lane, and lies between the development bordering the north of the High Street and Bell Lane to the south (Figure 1). The area is generally flat, at a height of c. 70 metres above OD and is located on a boundary between a River Terrace

deposit and a Kimmeridge Clay formation according to the British Geological Survey (BGS 1981).

Archaeological Background

The site lies within an area of considerable archaeological interest appearing to be on the border of Old and New Thame. Old Thame developed around the Minster church, now St. Mary's, to the north-west of the site. This early settlement is mentioned in Domesday Book. In the 12th or 13th centuries the bishops of Lincoln, who had ownership over the land, established a new settlement to the east of the original village along the line of the realigned Oxford to Aylesbury road (now the High Street). The dating of the initial development of New Thame is in doubt but it certainly appears that the town was well established by the end of the 13th century.

Economic development of the area continued with only the depressions of the early 19th century significantly affecting the prosperity of the town (Airs et al 1975). There are still a number of buildings of architectural interest in Thame and Sherwood and Pevsner (1974, 815-816) specifically mention 91 High Street, part of this planning proposal, and the buildings in Bell Lane which were demolished to make way for the new courtyard housing.

Archaeological examinations of areas within the immediate vicinity of the Bell Lane site have revealed evidence of residual occupation from the Roman through to Medieval periods (Ford 1995) and archaeological deposits were observed at a site to the south of the High Street (Torrance 1994). In view of the archaeological and historical background and the location of Bell Lane on the edge of the Medieval development of the two Thame settlements the archaeological watching brief may help establish the sequence of growth of these settlements.

Objectives and Methodology

The purpose of the watching brief was to monitor the groundworks for the presence/absence, extent, condition, character, quality and date of any archaeological deposits within the area of development. This was achieved by monitoring topsoil-stripping and the excavation of foundation trenches and services for the presence of archaeological deposits. Spoil heaps were also inspected for artefacts.

Results

The foundations for Buildings 1 and 2 were inspected, as were foundation trenches A to D. The foundation trenches for Building 1 were 1.3 m. deep and 1.25 m. wide. A single truncated pit (0.29 m. remaining) with a flat bottom (F1) was observed in the north-east corner, underlying 1.1 m. of made ground. The fill (50), a clayey silt with some fragments of stone and charcoal, also contained three fragments of pot and some brick pieces of late Medieval and 16th century date.

The footings for Building 2 revealed three intercutting features (F2-F4) in the southernmost trench (Figs. 2 and 3). The surface area around these features was cleaned to fully reveal the archaeology. F2 was a circular/oval feature 0.8 m in diameter and over 0.3 m. deep (not fully bottomed) with a yellow brown clayey silt fill (51) from which four sherds of 13th to 14th century pot were recovered. F2 was cut by F3 to the west and F4 to the east. F3 was a circular feature with a flat base, 0.2 m. in diameter and 0.3 m. deep. It was filled with a compact dark brown clayey silt (52) with some fragments of bone (not retained) and is probably a posthole. During the cleaning of the trench section, it was felt that there was possibly a shallow feature overlying F3 but the edges of this feature were not clear and no finds were observed. F4 was 0.5 m. wide and 0.3 m. deep (not bottomed), and filled with a compact

dark brown/black clayey silt (53). Three fragments of late Medieval pottery were recovered from its fill.

Trenches A, B, C and D, and Test Pits A and B were also observed. These revealed topsoil or made ground up to 0.6 m. deep lying directly on top of subsoil or natural. In trench B was a truncated pit (F5) 0.8 m. wide and 0.3 m. deep with a fill (54) of greeny brown clayey silt. Considerable quantities of bone and brick were observed during the excavation of this feature (most not retained) but no pottery was recovered.

Trench D ran along the northern boundary of the site, parallel with the pavement and roadway. A probable Victorian drain (F6) was observed within this trench, with a brick flat bottomed section and a domed brick top. At the eastern end of the trench the remains of a manhole cover associated with this drain were seen.

Finds

Details of finds retained are shown in the table below (pottery information supplied by Katherine Underwood-Keevil):

Feature	Fill	Quantity	Weight (gms)	Description
F1	C50	3	20	Tile and brick fragments - late Medieval. Pottery late Medieval from Stoke Row, Nettlebed kilns 16th century.
F2	C51	4	20	Slip pattern decorated ware (Brill Barstall). Rounded jug Oxford ADW - 13 to 14th century.
F4	52	-	-	Fragments of bone, not retained.
F4	C53	3	6	1 fine fragment 1 Brill Barstall fragment late Medieval date. 1 fragment of brick.
F5	C54	1	< 1	1 brick fragment retained (other brick and bone fragments not retained).

Conclusions

The amount of evidence recovered from the watching brief is unfortunately too limited to allow detailed comment on the early development of the town. However, the presence of a 13th or 14th century pit (F2), albeit dated by very few sherds, suggests occupation in the

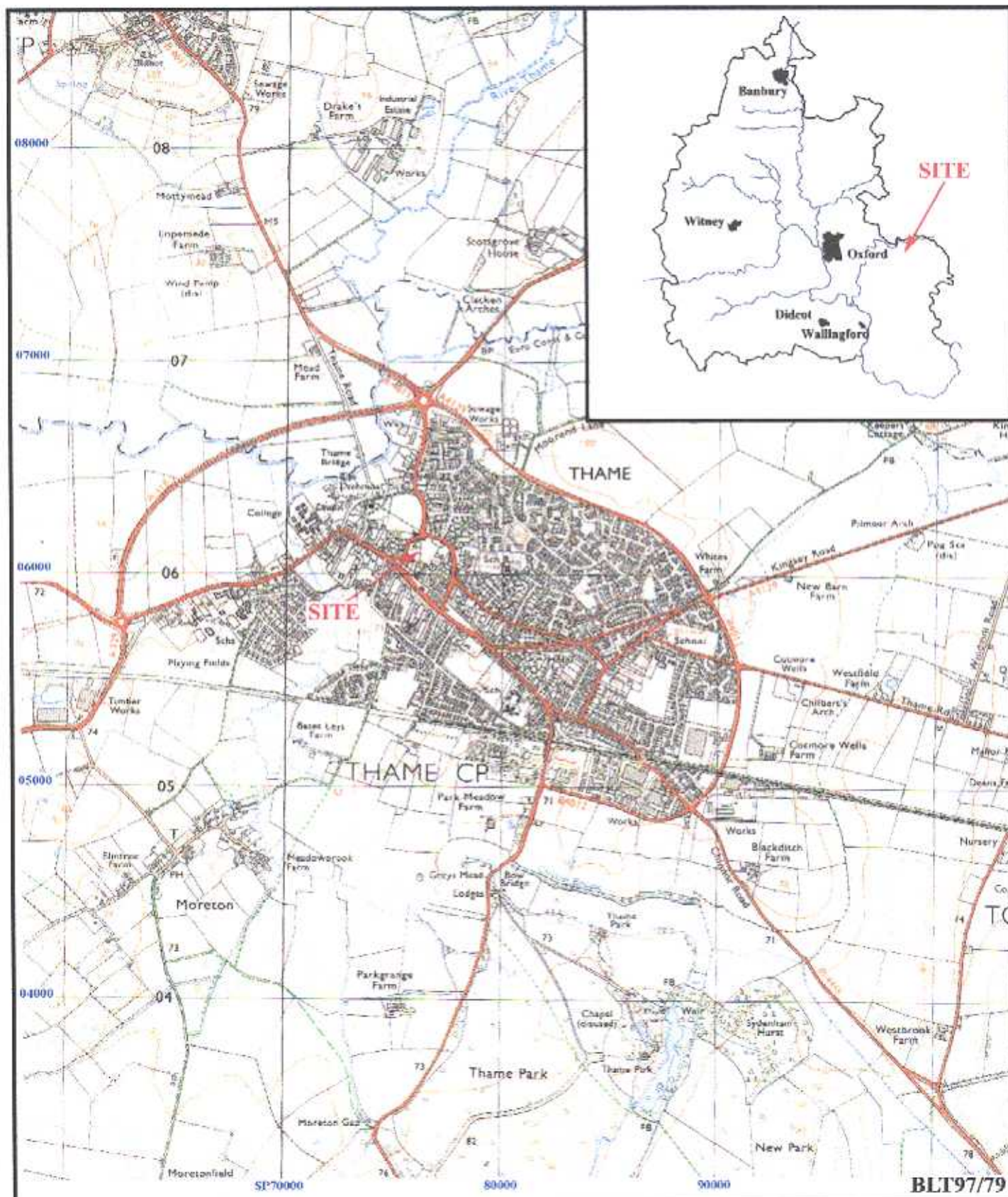
vicinity during this period. The fact that this was then cut by a later Medieval feature (F4) and an undated feature (F3) also points to continued later activity in the vicinity.

References

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Appendix 1: Summary of features and fills

Context	Description
F1	Flat based small pit
F2	Circular pit
F3	Probable posthole
F4	Small pit
F5	Bowl-shaped pit
F6	Drain
S0	Fill of F1. Finds – pottery and brick.
S1	Fill of F2. Finds = pottery, bone and tile.
S2	Fill of F3. Finds = bone.
S3	Fill of F4. Finds = bone and tile.
S4	Fill of F5. Finds = bone and brick



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Figure 1. Location of site within Thame and Oxfordshire.

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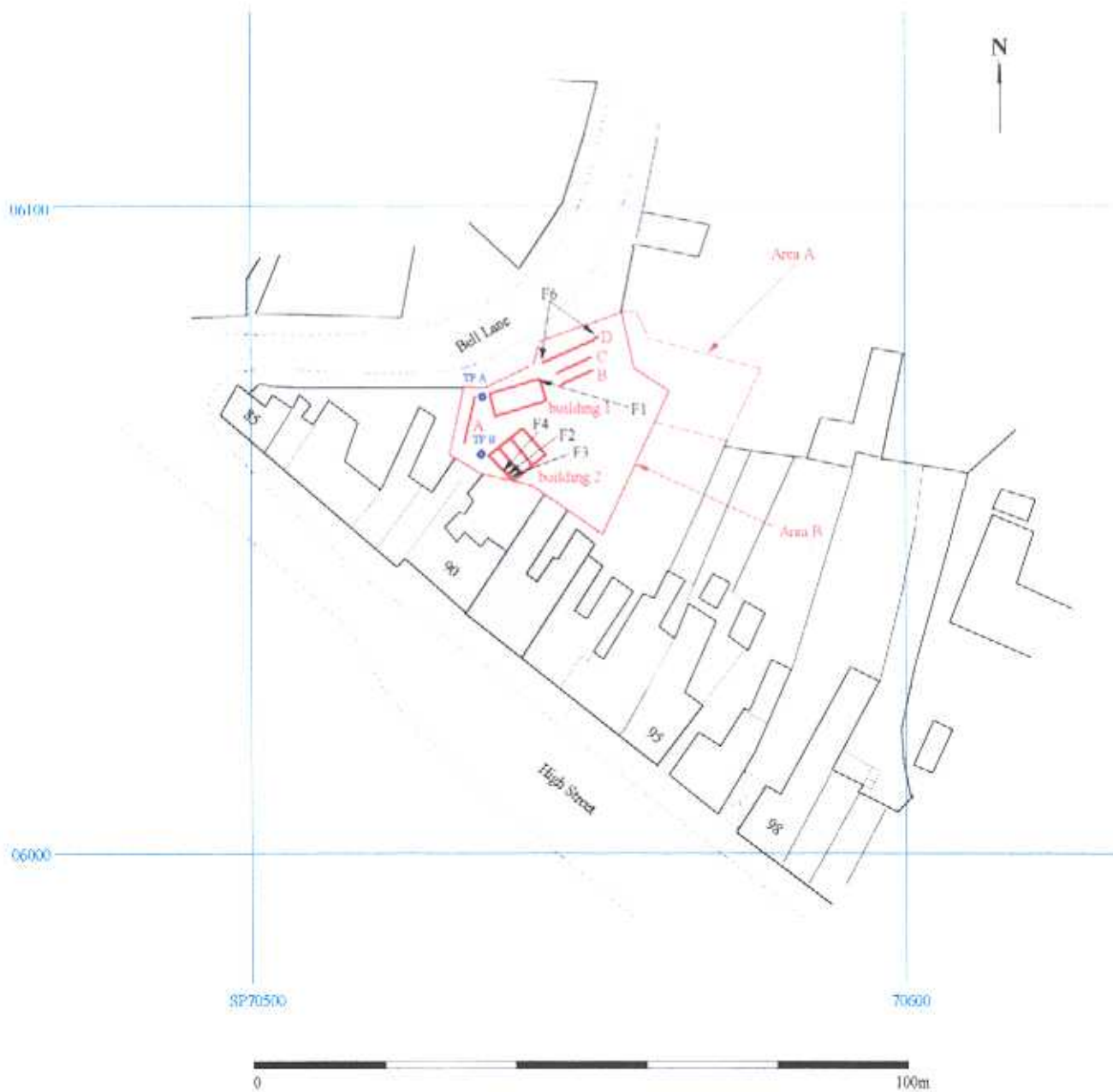


Figure 2. Location of watching brief areas.

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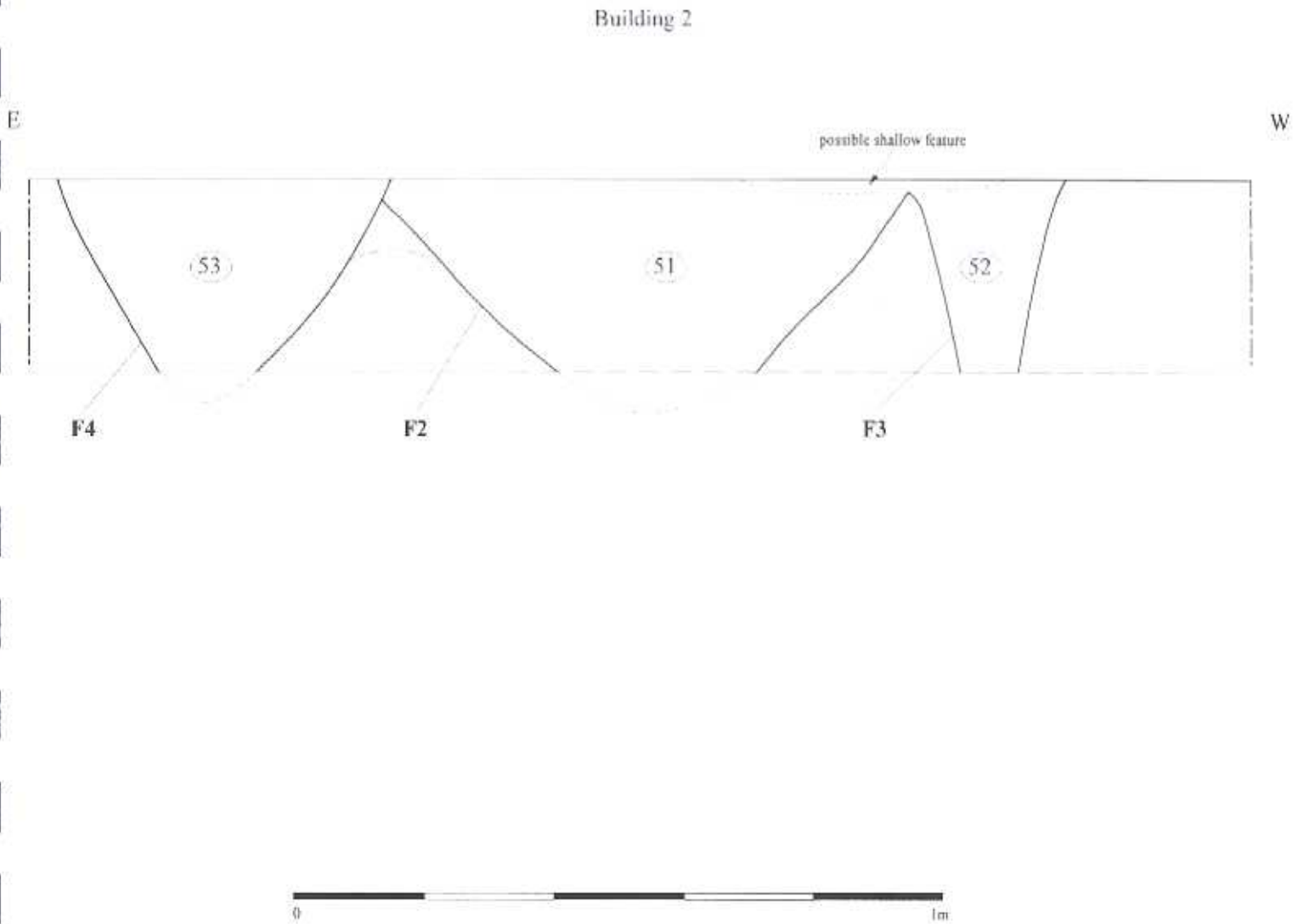


Figure 3. Sections of features F2, F3 and F4.