An Account of a Community Excavation at Snowden Hill Common

in The Parish of Hunshelf, South Yorkshire.

October to December 2018

Report prepared by

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With contributions from Tim Jeffery, Barry Tylee and Wendy Crossland

Contents

Location, Geology, Topography and Current Use

The excavations were located in Field A, centred on NGR 425650,401150 at an average altitude of 275m descending in a gentle slope to the NNW (figure 1).

The field lies to the north west of Back (or previously, Bramah) Lane on Snowden Hill Common in the Parish of Hunshelf, South Yorkshire, 3km north west of the town of Stocksbridge. It is approximately 10 km south west of the centre of Barnsley. The area was called Snodden Hill prior to the first Ordnance Survey six inch map of 1854 due to the OS surveyors apparently misunderstanding the local dialect (Hey 2002).

The geology of the local area consists of alluvium – clay and silt overlying bedrock of Greenmoor Sandstone from a local environment previously dominated by rivers. These sedimentary deposits are fluvial in origin ranging from coarse to fine grained and form beds of deposits reflecting the channels and floodplains of a river (BGS 2020).

Field A and the surrounding agricultural land is described as grade 4, poor (Natural England 2020) and is currently used as pasture although it has been ploughed in the past. It is situated in a relatively sheltered position north east of the Hunshelf ridge which runs south east to north west in an almost unbroken line from above Greenmoor to Hartcliffe Hill. The ridge carries the current road which follows the route of the former salt road (Hey 2001). There are extensive views from Field A. The panorama looking from west to east reveals Hartcliffe Hill at a distance of 3.5km, a prominent feature in the landscape at an altitude of 364m, Royd Moor to the north west with its array of wind turbines, the town of Penistone with its parish church. Emley moor 12km to the north with its TV mast and on a clear day, distant views in the direction of the Yorkshire Wolds to the north east. To the east there are views to Thurgoland and beyond.

Packhorse route to Willow Bridge

Boundary of Oxspring to the NW and Hunshelf to the SE

Field A

Salt road access for Oxspring Parish

Figure 1: OS six inch map, 1854, showing the location of field A. Source: NLS

Figure 2: The test pit locations. Source: Google Earth

TP1: NGR 425601,401193.

TP2: NGR 425627, 401200.

Background

The excavation of the two test pits was initiated by Wendy Crossland following her research and subsequent report, "Evidence for a Roman Camp at Roughbirchworth", November 2017 where Field A was highlighted as the site of a now capped well which according to Mr Battye, the landowner, was filled in within living memory. Wendy's report also describes a cropmark in Field A, found by her on an aerial photograph from 1948 (this is shown superimposed in red on figures 4 and 5). She suggests this could be the boundary of a putative Roman camp measuring approximately 8 acres. Her report also states that the area is unusual in that at Throstle Nest (figure 1) there is a junction of three parishes, Oxspring, Hunshelf and Langsett, where a short strip of land provided Oxspring parish with access to the salt road. Wendy's local knowledge enabled her to contact Mr Battye and obtain his kind permission for the excavation.

There is anecdotal evidence of a fragment of bronze and three Roman coins found in Field A by a metal detectorist (Crossland 2017), sadly the whereabouts of which are unknown.

Metal detecting finds recorded at the Portable Antiquities Scheme found within 500 metres of the test pit locations:
Tankard handle, AD 40-75, Ref. SWYOR - C8E9AA.
Round plate brooch, AD 25-250, Ref. SWYOR - 4F9BDC.
Roman headstud brooch, AD 75-200, Ref. SWYOR - 4F4929.
Copper alloy Roman brooch, AD43-120, Ref. SWYOR-F7989E.
Silver plated denarius coin, AD74, Ref. SWYOR-F5A6A1.

Crop marks on aerial photographs from 1975 taken by Cambridge Aerial Photos shows the "camp"; a known "D" shaped enclosure which is recorded in the Sites and Monuments Record (SMR 2173)and which spans two fields approximately 200 metres from the area where the test pits were excavated and also a distinct curving depression in Field A (figure 3).

John N Dransfield in his "A History of The Parish of Penistone", 1906, page 70, remarks, "It will be remembered that there was a Roman encampment at Oxspring". It is possible this refers to the "D" shaped enclosure but may indicate some folk memory of another site in the area.

The Hunshelf Enclosure Act was completed in 1813 (Kenworthy 1917).The Oxspring Enclosure Act was passed in 1818 and the land was enclosed in 1826 when the current walls were built. Previously Snowden Hill Common would have been open moorland (Hey 2001).

Figure 1 clearly shows the public right of way, which still exists, crossing the field and running from Dyson Cote in the south, ultimately north to Penistone. The antiquity of the path is uncertain but it is reasonable to believe it has been in existence for a long period of time given its route disregarding the enclosed field walls although respecting the "Camp" which is shown with three possible banks or ditches (see also figure 3).

With the full cooperation of Mr Battye, a local metal detectorist was invited to explore Field A to plough soil depth. Items discovered included a silver thimble, a piece of rolled up lead, a small copper alloy stud, a copper alloy object thought to be a possible phalera and a small lump of solid silver suggested to be hack silver. These items are yet to be positively identified and recorded

The Parish boundary between Oxspring to the north west and Hunshelf to the south east forms the north west boundary wall of Field A (figure 1). This boundary once followed the route of a packhorse trail between Bradfield and Wakefield (Hey 2001) which was in use in 1640 and probably much earlier (Nicholson 2001). This can be observed where the track, even today, continues north easterly to the packhorse crossing of The Don at Willow Bridge (figure 1). The boundary, its wall and evidently the packhorse trail continues south west to Throstle Nest, formerly Bleak Royd (figure 1) where it meets the salt road from Cheshire to Rotherham (Hey 2001).

This boundary was the subject of a dispute in the 1750's between Godfrey Bosville who owned the land on the Oxspring side of the boundary and Edward Wortley, owner of the land on the Hunshelf side. The dispute went to arbitration. The boundary was defined and the issue finally resolved in November 1756 (W.E. Spencer, SDHS).

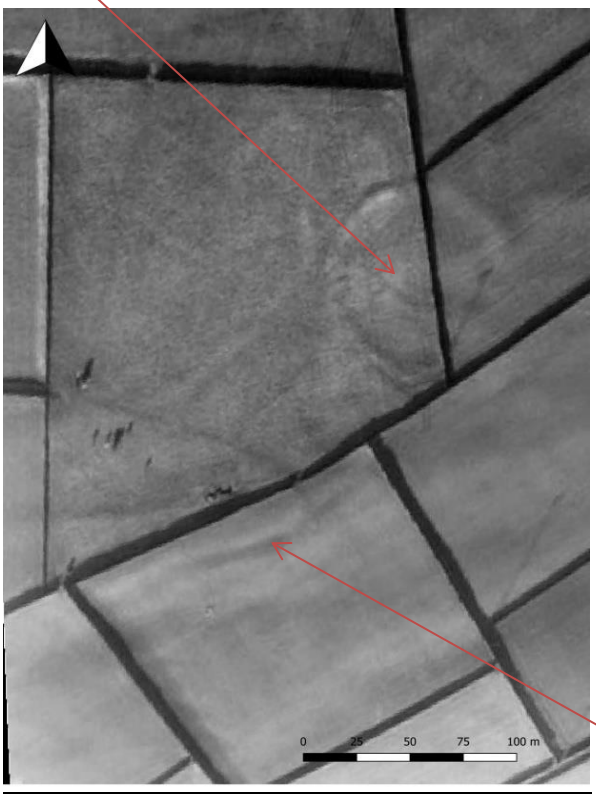


Figure 3: Aerial photograph, 12/08/1975, source: C.A.P.

Geophysical Surveys

Magnetometry (figure 4) and resistivity (figure 5) geophysical surveys were carried out by the University of Sheffield with the help of volunteers in December 2017.

The geophysical surveys were carried out using 20m square grids. 41 square grids were covered by the magnetometry survey and 8 grids in the north east corner were also covered by the resistivity survey.

The curving depression showed up as a weak positive linear anomaly on the magnetometry survey and as linear anomaly of low resistance on the resistivity survey. This feature was tentatively identified as a cut feature of archaeological origin.

A strong positive discrete anomaly approximately 4m in diameter just to the south of the curving feature was detected by the magnetometry survey. This feature was just outside the area covered by the resistivity survey. This feature was tentatively identified as a cut feature of archaeological origin.

A weak positive linear anomaly with a right-angled bend was detected by the magnetometry survey but showed as an area of low resistance on the resistivity survey. It was unclear if this feature was archaeological in origin.

A linear anomaly of low resistance was shown on the resistivity survey on a line parallel to that of the public footpath. This feature was tentatively identified as a former line of the public footpath.

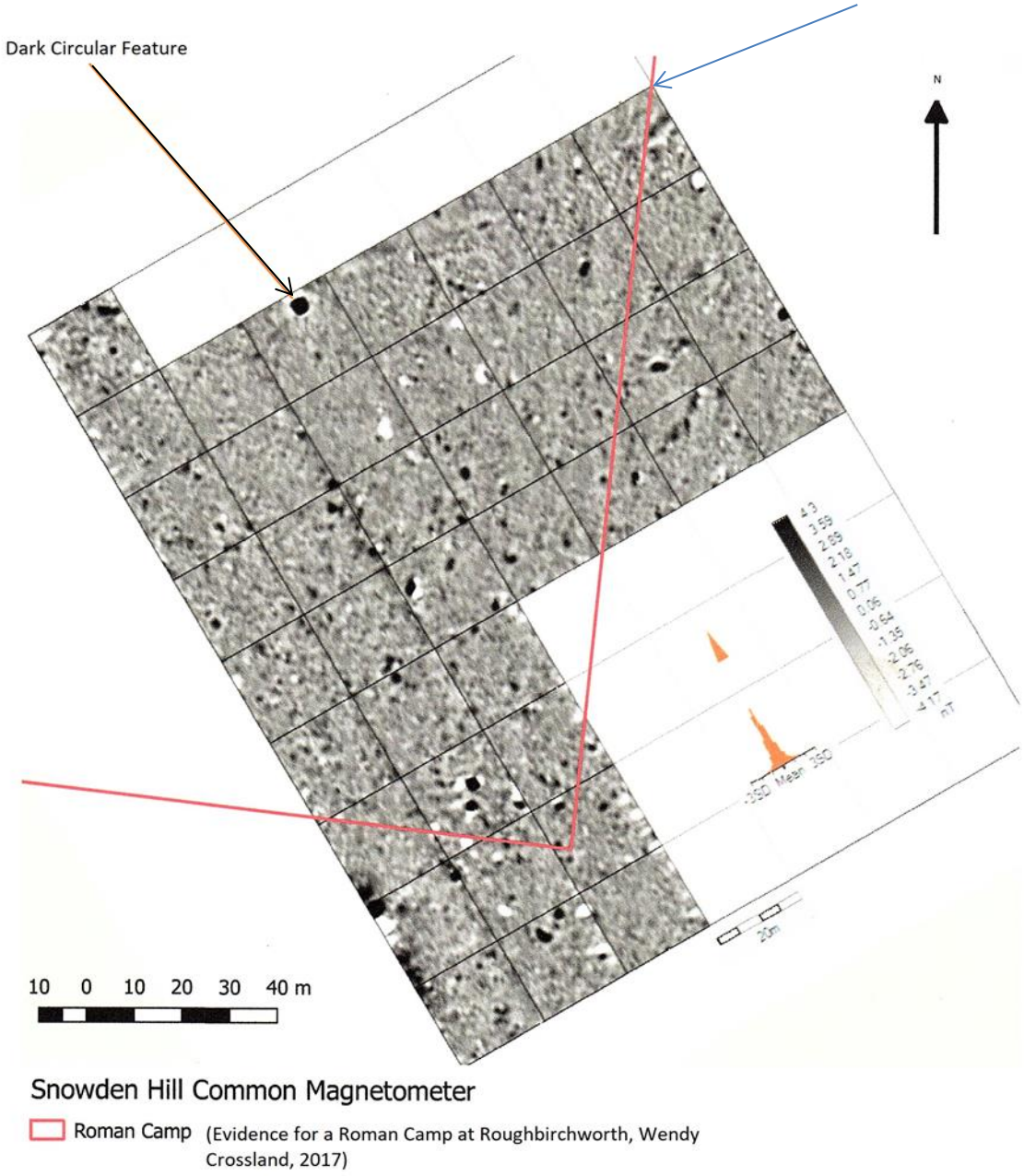
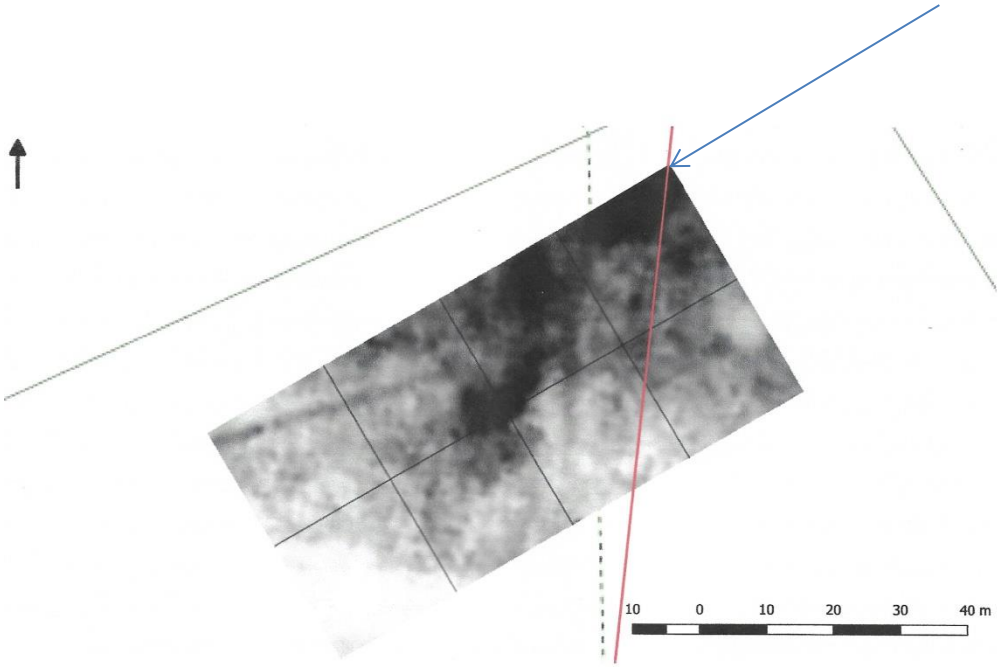


Figure 4: Showing the circular feature targeted by Test Pit 1. Source: Sheffield University



Snowden Hill Common Resistivity

——— Line of cropmark suggesting boundary of Roman camp (Crossland, 2017)

--------- Footpath

——— Field walls

——→ Indicates corresponding point on magnetometry survey

Figure 5: Showing the boundary of the possible Roman camp. Source: Sheffield University

Aims and Objectives

The excavation of Test Pit 1 was proposed to investigate the dark circular feature revealed by the magnetometer (figure 4).

Test Pit 2 was excavated to investigate the curving depression visible in figure 3.

The objective of the exercise was to gather any archaeological data and to hopefully build evidence of a possible Roman presence in the area which would add to current knowledge.

Methodology

In October 2018, using measurements calculated from the geophysical surveys, positions were plotted for the excavation of two, 1 metre square test pits to be called TP1 and TP2.

The test pits were dug by hand. They were recorded by single context, photographed using a digital camera and drawings were made.

Grid references were obtained using a Garmin etrex 20 hand held GPS device.

The following is a brief description of the results.

Test Pit 1. 1 metre square, location NGR 425601,401193.

The plough soil (context 1001) was excavated with no evidence of finds. The subsoil, (context 1002) at 10cms below ground level, revealed a number of small to medium stones (figure6).

Figure 6: TP1, context 1002. Source: A.Tissington

As the subsoil and stones were being removed, a clay layer was revealed (context 1003, depth 20cm BGL, figure 7) comprising an irregular shaped band running roughly ESE to NNW, embedded with a few small stones. There was a concentration of stones to the SW of the test pit.

Figure 7: TP1. Source: A. Tissington

After removing the remaining subsoil leaving context 1003 in place, two clay layers were revealed; a main clay layer to the north west of context 1003 (context 1005, depth 22-24cm BGL, figure 8) and a clay layer to the north east of context 1003 (context 1012 at a depth of 22-24cm BGL). Both these layers were believed to be natural. The two layers were at an average of 3cms lower than context 1003 and further exposed the extent of the irregular shaped raised clay level. It was noticed the stones revealed at this level seemed to be bounded by the cut of a possible pit towards the southern corner of TP1 (figure 8) with a concentration of stones to the northern corner.

Figure 8: TP1. Source: A. Tissington

Context 1003 had a large, roughly reverse “Q” or later “S” shaped depression (due to drying and crumbling of the clay surround) (context 1006, figure 8) which contained soil and a piece of what appeared to be charcoal. Later, after being sent for dating (ARS) which was not successful, it was thought to be shale or similar. A further small piece of similar material was located at the SE edge of TP1 (figure 8) also later not thought to be charcoal. There was one small circular depression in context 1003 that contained only subsoil (figure 8).

Figure 9: TP1, context 1006: Source: A. Tissington

The NE portion of TP1 was left undisturbed and investigations were concentrated on the fill of the possible pit (context 1009). Some of the stones from the NW corner were removed while retaining the stones to the SE of the possible pit. They were relatively loosely packed and containing some appearing to be burnt (figure 10). At a depth of 34cm BGL, the upper surface of a large stone (context 1010, figure 10) was revealed at the west corner of TP1. While not easy to see on the photographs there appeared to be three or possibly four shallow grooves running E/W on the upper surface of this large stone.

Figure 10: TP1. Source: A. Tissington

After continuing to remove the stones to the NW of the pit, a clay layer (context 1011) was revealed which was believed to be a natural clay surface at a depth of 39 to 48cm BGL (figure 11) descending from SE to NW. During this final removal of stones, two small pieces of off white stone were noticed which were later identified as chalk due to tests carried out by Barry Tylee (see figure 10 for the location of one of them placed on edge amongst the loose stones).

At this lowest level (48cm, BGL, context 1011, figure 11) it was noted that there were two voids extending under the large stone (context 1010) with the stone appearing to rest on a stone at the edge of its narrowest point (figure 12).

Figure 11: TP1, context 1011. Source: A. Tissington

Figure 12: TP1, context 1010 showing voids. Source: A. Tissington

At this point a decision was made to conclude the excavation.

All stones from the test pit apart from the off white stones mentioned earlier were thought to resemble the local geology.

Test Pit 2 – 1 metre square, location NGR 425627,401200.

The plough soil (context 2001) was removed with only one find, a metal hook which appeared to be of recent date.

As the subsoil (context 2002) was being removed it was noticed that loosely bound stones and voids were appearing at the SE edge of TP2, (figure 13) at a depth of 30cm.

Figure 13: SE edge of TP2, loosely bound stones. Source: A. Tissington

It was decided to investigate this small area further and a narrow strip was excavated (figure 14) which exposed more loose stones. The subsoil was then removed down to the same depth across the entire test pit.

Figure 14: TP2. Facing SW. Source: A. Tissington

The further removal of the subsoil revealed a layer of stones (context 2003, figure 15, depth 31cm. BGL) with more voids. The stones all appeared to be loose in the subsoil with mainly small stones and a few medium to large stones. Finding this inconclusive a decision was made to carry on and remove them.

Figure 15: TP2, context 2003. Source: A. Tissington

At a depth of 40cm BGL, (figure 16) the upper surface of a very large stone (context 2004) was revealed with large tightly packed stones (context 2005) to the NW side of TP2. The difference was noted between context 2005 and the area of small to medium loose stones revealed to the SE of the test pit which was given the context number 2006. The packed stones (context 2005) were retained whilst part of the area of soil and loose stones (context 2006) was removed to investigate context 2004 and ascertain a natural level.

Figure 16: TP2. Source: A. Tissington

What was believed to be a natural clay level (context 2007) lying beneath the loose stones was found at a maximum depth of 64cm BGL (figure 17).

Figure 17: TP2. Source: A. Tissington

Figure 18: TP2 showing southern corner of test pit. Source: A. Tissington

Figure 19: TP2, north east section. Source: A. Tissington

The very large stone (context 2004) now revealed with maximum dimensions of: - width 54cm, depth 14cm and height 13cm. It appears to be placed on two smaller stones at either end (figure 20).

Figure 20: TP2, context 2004. Source: A. Tissington

On closer examination of the area to the NW of the very large stone it was noted the large stones behind it (context 2005) appeared to be deliberately placed, packed in tightly and at a similar level to context 2004 (figures 20/21). There was no apparent wear to the upper surface of the very the large stone.

Figure 21: TP2, NW at top. Source: A. Tissington

At this point a decision was made to conclude the excavation.

All stones from the test pit were thought to resemble local geology.

Discussion

Test Pit 1
What was the origin of the chalk pieces?
The large grooved stone (context 1010) at the base of the pit and the raised clay layer (context 1003) also need an explanation.

Test Pit 2
With the very large stone and packed stones (context 2004/2005), was this a remnant of the foundation for a road or track of some sort running NE/SW and was this part of a link to the salt road at Throstle Nest or involved in the boundary dispute of the 1750's?
Could it be part of the old packhorse trail written about by David Hey or possibly some earlier route?

Was the salt road based on a former Roman road and given the finds in the locality does it suggest more extensive Roman activity in the area?

Summary and Conclusion

The Aims and Objectives section states that the excavation was proposed to bring forward more evidence of a Roman presence in the area. Unfortunately with no finds in the test pits, in this exercise at least, no positive evidence was produced to add to the metal detecting finds mentioned in the text.

Both test pits did however uncover some intriguing features which merit further investigation to try and characterise them and endeavour to recover data to date them.

It could also be argued that as features were found in both test pits, even with their restricted size, there may be more to discover in Field A and the surrounding area.

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Last but not least, we would like to express our grateful thanks to the landowner, Richard Battye, for his friendliness, tremendous enthusiasm for our project and without whose permission none of this would have been possible.

The content of this report is my sole responsibility and any errors are entirely my own.

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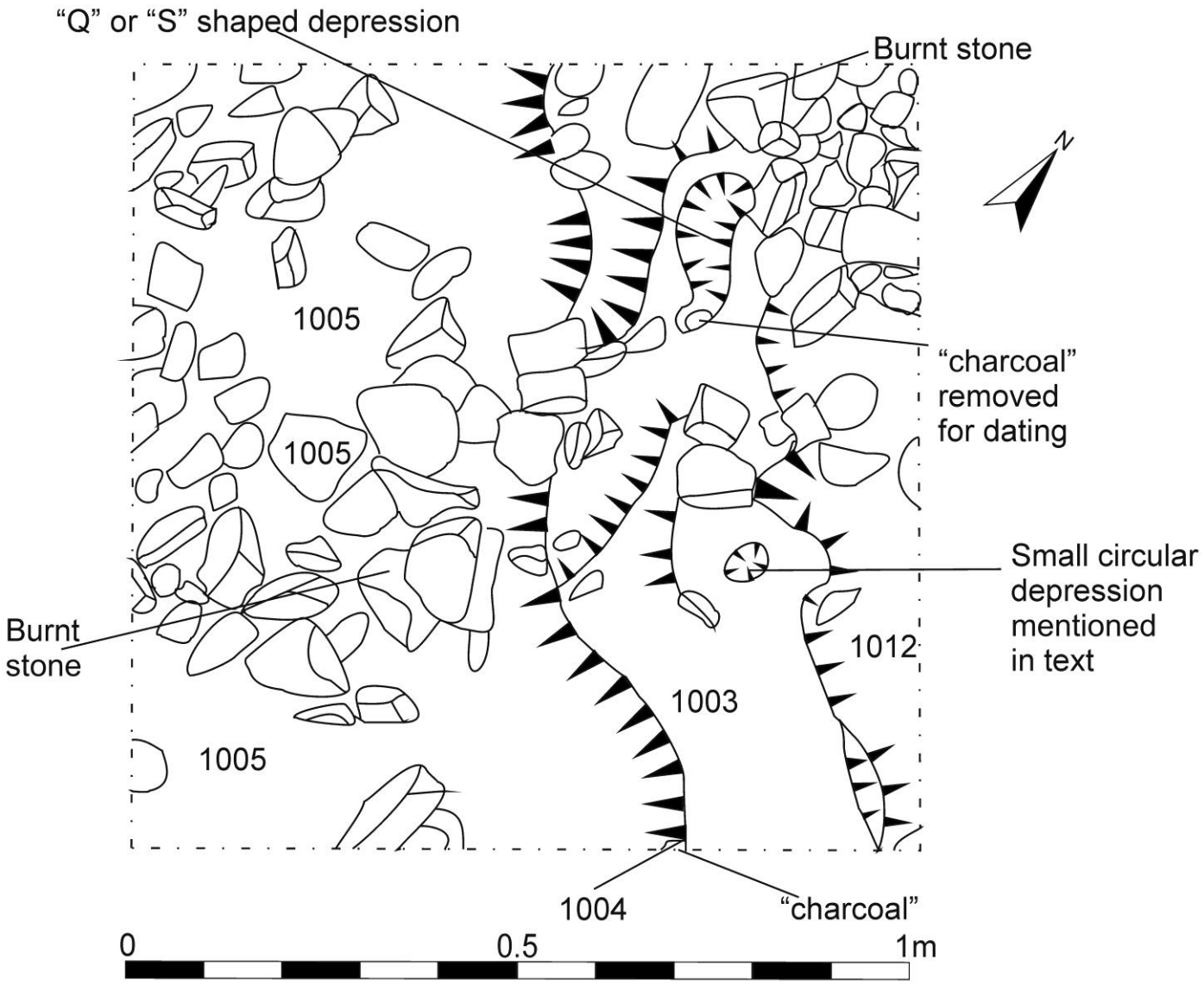
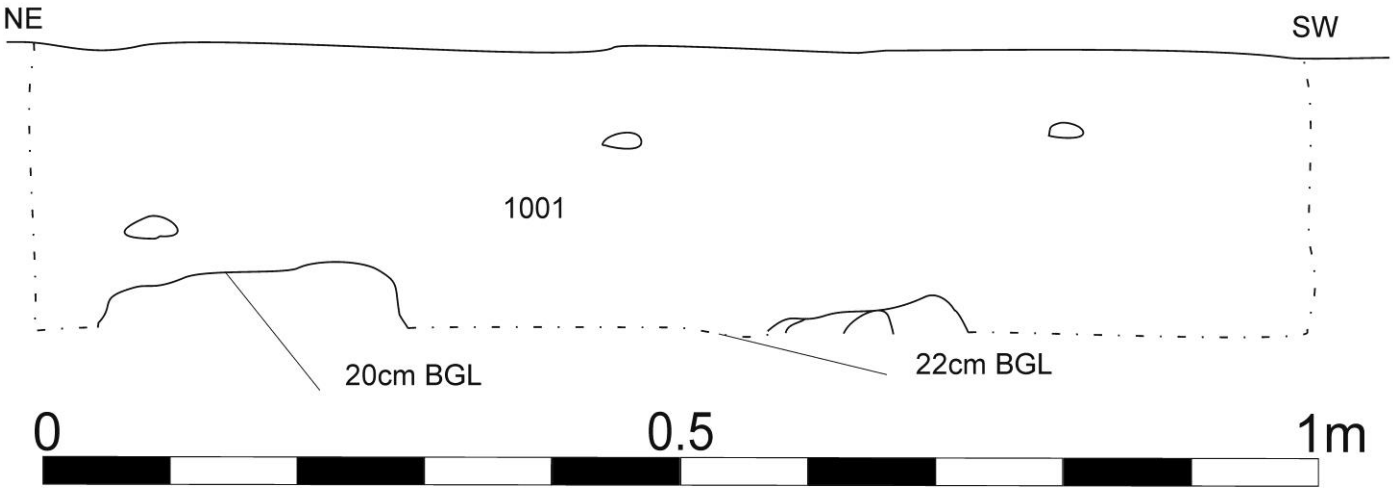
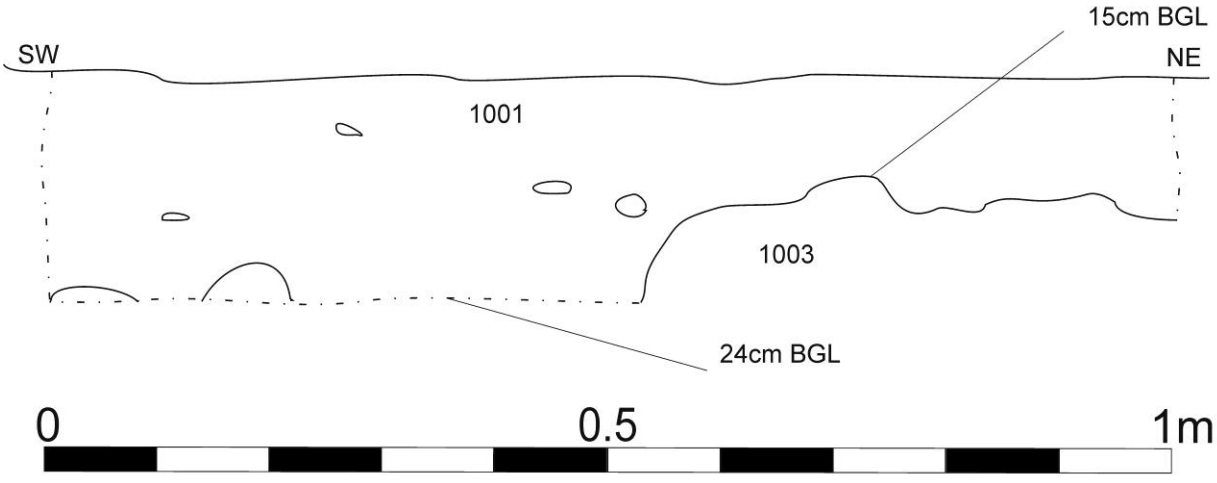


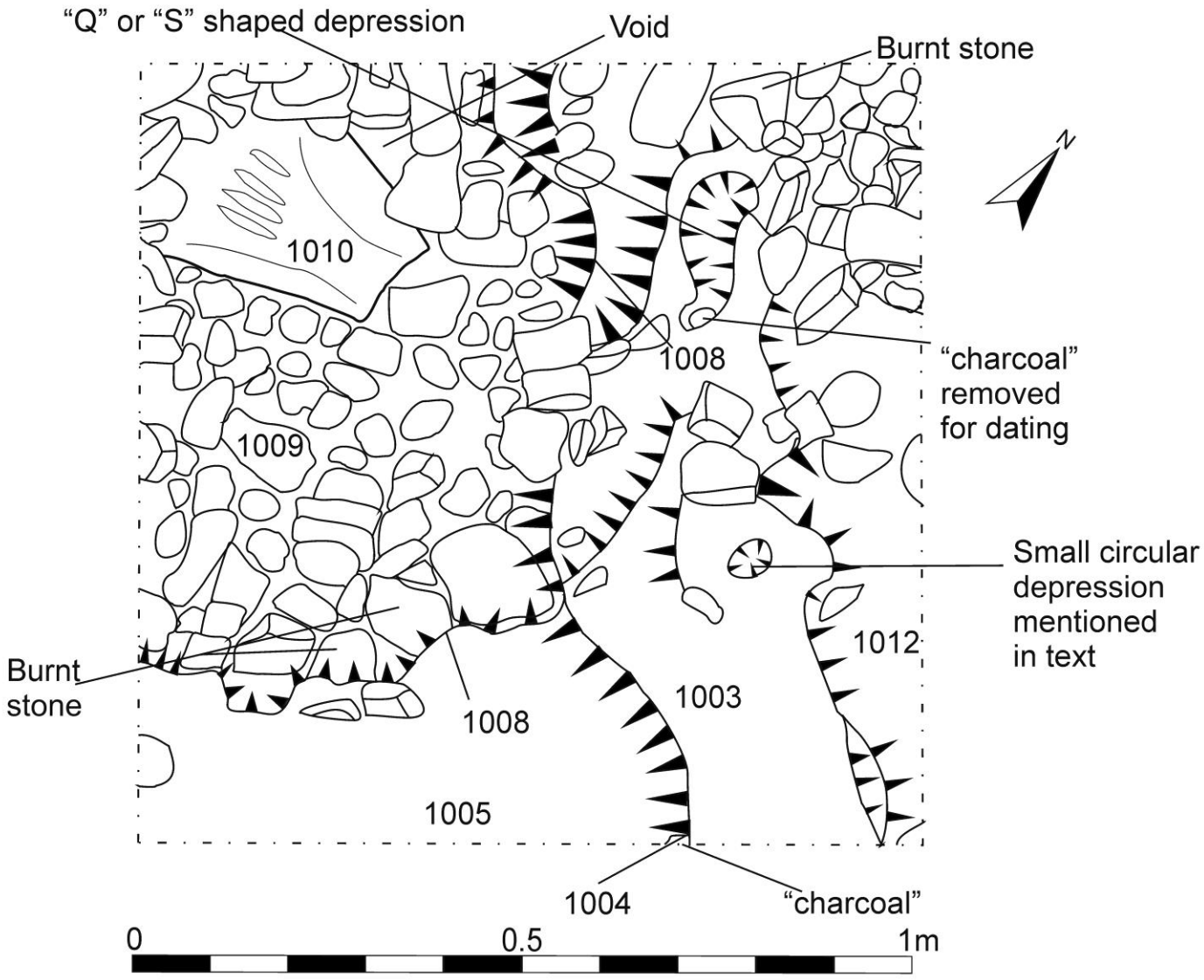
TP 1 - pre excavation plan



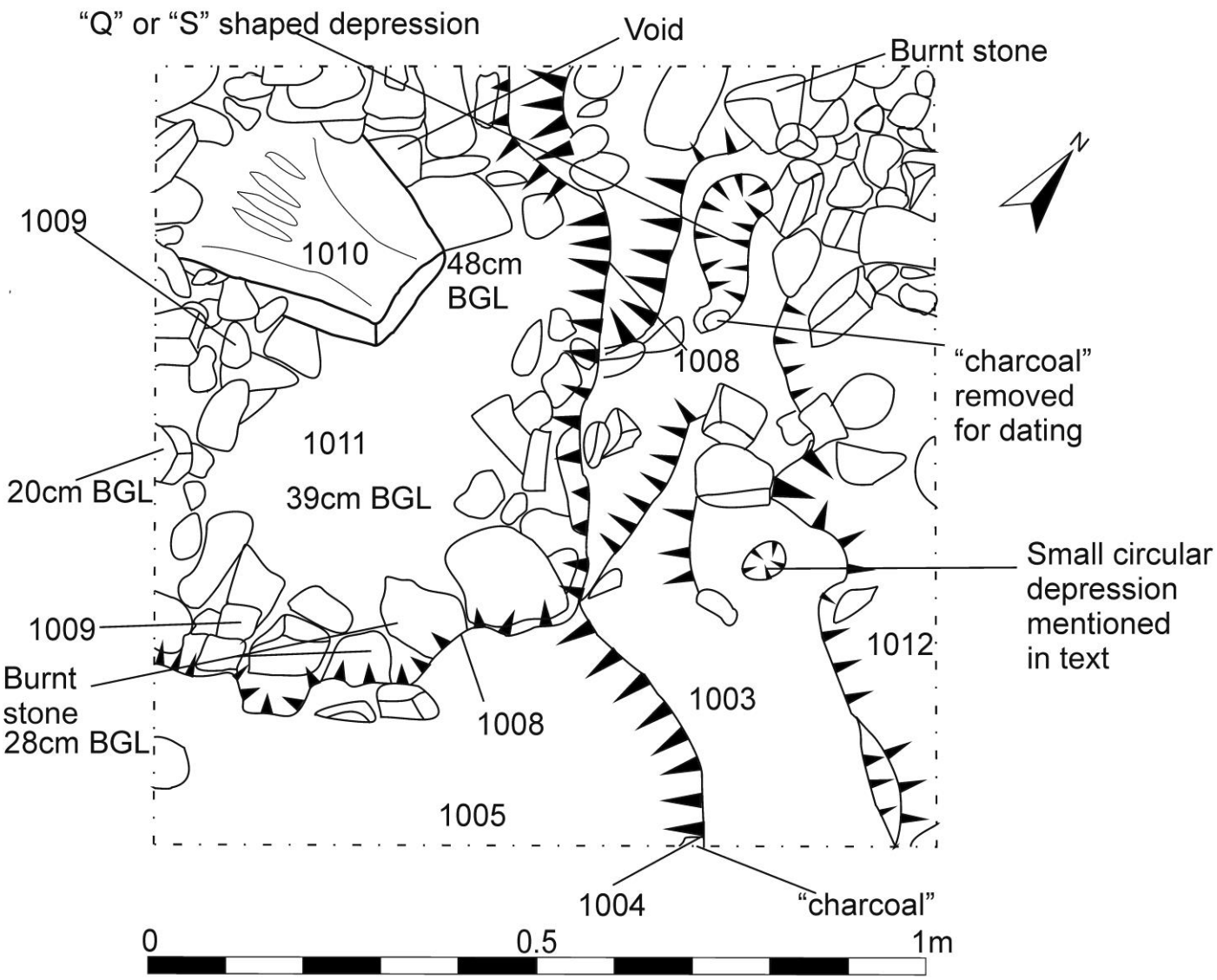
TP 1 – NW facing section



TP 1 – SE facing section

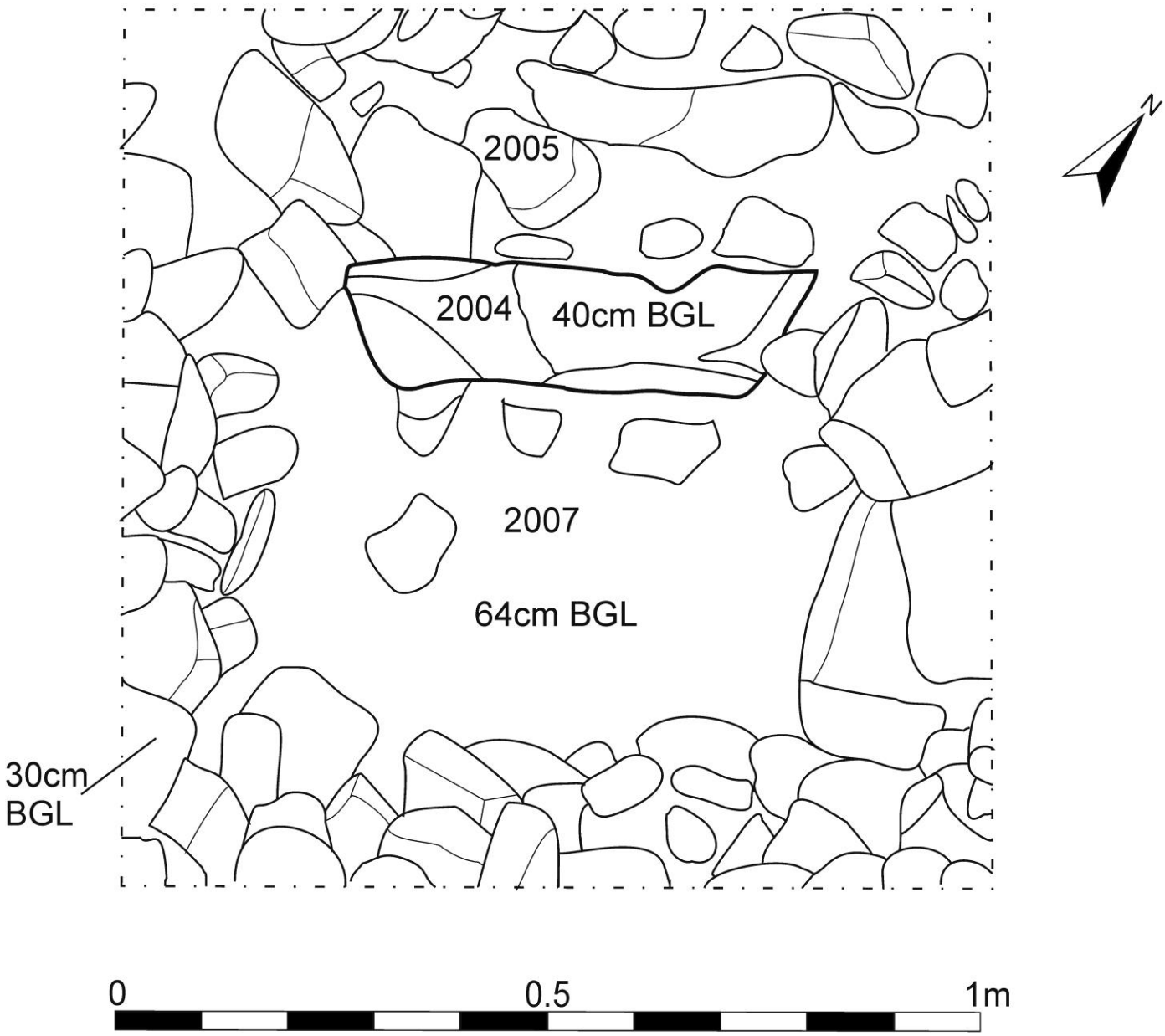


TP 1 – mid excavation plan



TP 1 – post excavation plan

The section of Test Pit 2 consisted of only successive bands of topsoil, subsoil and a layer of small and medium stones. This was felt to be uninformative in such a small excavation, so was not recorded in a scale drawing.



TP 2 – post excavation plan