

Prehistoric and Roman settlement in Reigate Road, Ewell: fieldwork conducted by Tom K Walls 1945–52

JONATHAN COTTON

with contributions by

KAY HARTLEY, PAT NICOLAYSEN, ROSEMARY POWERS and DAVID WILLIAMS

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This report is dedicated to the memory of Tom Kenneth Walls, who died aged 80 in November 1992.

Summary

The results of episodic fieldwork conducted just over 50 years ago on a dip-slope spur of North Downs chalk 2km south-south-east of Ewell are described. The spur had witnessed intermittent activity in the Mesolithic and Neolithic/Bronze Age periods, which intensified from the middle of the 1st millennium BC and culminated in the establishment of a farming settlement occupied in the decades either side of the Roman conquest. Features excavated included a number of pits and deeper shafts, which produced a wide range of finds. Those from three substantial chalk-cut storage pits of classic form and profile are considered in detail, and comprise an assemblage of late pre-Roman Iron Age/Roman Iron Age pottery incorporating sherds of East Sussex Grog-tempered ware, fragments of greensand rotary querns, items traditionally associated with weaving including triangular clay loomweights, chalk spindlewhorls and a bone gouge, as well as a single fragment of briquetage. Other notable finds placed in and over the pits include a series of special deposits in the form of a human infant and parts of several articulated and semi-articulated animal carcasses, together with a late 1st or early 2nd century urned cremation burial of a young man accompanied by nine inscribed bone gaming counters and a tenth made of pottery. Graffiti lightly scratched on the plain reverses of six of the bone counters appear to denote ownership by one 'Remus', a personal name attested in Gaul. A second, separate, cremation comprised bones of sheep/goat placed in a complete greyware jar. Later Roman activity is attested by the presence of quantities of mainly unstratified pottery, building material and small finds of iron and copper alloy including a 2nd century plate brooch of shoe-sole form and a small quantity of 3rd and 4th century coins. The Looe site is entry no 1101 in the Surrey SMR.

Background to the present account

INTRODUCTION

This report describes the results of excavations undertaken by Tom Walls in the garden of his family home at The Looe, Reigate Road, Ewell, between the summer of 1946 and June 1949 (fig 1). It also incorporates the results of fieldwork he conducted on Priest Hill Farm

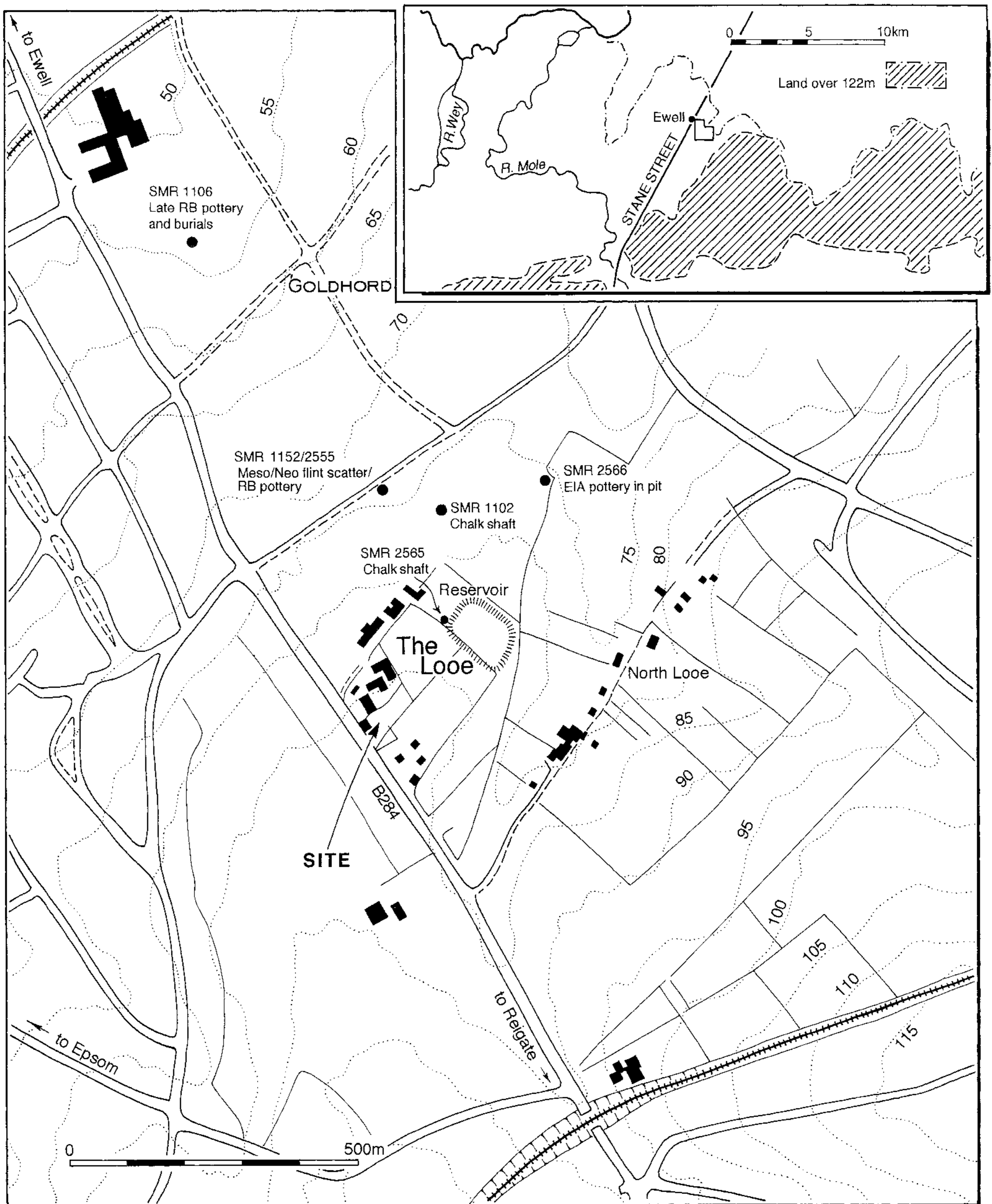


Fig 1 The Looe: site location in relation to relevant SMR data and the approximate position of the 'Goldhord' place-name. (Reproduced by kind permission of the Ordnance Survey, © Crown Copyright NC/01/24321)

between c 1945 and 1952, and attempts to relate the results of both pieces of work to their regional setting.

The present account is a reworked version of an undergraduate dissertation presented as part-fulfilment of a degree at the University of Wales Bangor in 1977. Brief notes on The Looe excavations have already been published (Cotton 1978; Abdy & Bierton 1997, 128 gazetteer entry 1), as have others on the inscribed bone gaming counters which

accompanied a Roman cremation burial inserted into the upper fill of one of three large storage pits (Hassall & Tomlin 1977, 445, fig 30; Bird 1987, 187, fig 7.14; Frere & Tomlin 1991, 2440.20, 107–10, 188–90 & 335). Tom Walls submitted a short account of his excavation of one of a number of large shafts on Priest Hill to W F Rankine for inclusion in the *Surrey Archaeological Collections*, but it was never published (Walls 1949). The original site records and finds, together with a copy of the dissertation, have been returned to Bourne Hall Museum, Ewell.

TOM KENNETH WALLS

A note on the early career of Tom Walls may not be out of place here. He was the only son of the farceur, producer, film star and racehorse owner/trainer Tom Walls senior, now probably best remembered for his work with Ben Travers at the Aldwych Theatre in the 1920s; he also famously saddled the 1932 Epsom Derby winner, *April the Fifth* (Travers 1957, 142). Tom junior's career was equally eventful if less public. In his youth it encompassed boxing (Harrow School's Middleweight Champion in 1930); amateur National Hunt riding (winner of the Grand Military Gold Cup on his father's *Crafty Alice* at Sandown Park in 1934); service in both the army (5th Royal Inniskilling Dragoon Guards) and the Royal Air Force (wartime Squadron Leader based at the Central Flying School, Upavon, Wiltshire); and various small roles in post-war films such as *Spring in Park Lane* (1948) and *Maytime in Mayfair* (1949) (SHC: 6140/1–2).

His interest in archaeology was initially sparked in the spring of 1944 by contacts with American aircrew who regularly went 'flinting' in their off-duty moments in the fields close to Old Sarum, and Upavon, Wiltshire. His first artefact, a flint scraper, was found on Normanton Down, Wilsford, Salisbury, on 15 March 1944. Thus hooked, Tom participated in the early exploration of an extensive site at East Chisenbury that he and others had spotted from the air, and which is now interpreted as a Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age midden (McOmish 1996). His finds and records from the site are lodged with the South Wiltshire Museum, Salisbury (David Field, pers comm) and with the British Museum. He carried this wartime interest back to Surrey, where he was engaged in fieldwork of one sort or another virtually up until the time of his death. Apart from a long-standing devotion to the archaeology of Ewell, his most important contribution to the county's wider past was the identification and eventual publication of a series of Palaeolithic finds from high-level sites near Lower Kingswood (Walls & Cotton 1980), following earlier work in the same locality by L W Carpenter. Tom's collection of Palaeolithic material from the area is also now in the British Museum. The work published here represents his first sortie into Surrey's archaeology.

SITE LOCATION, DOCUMENTARY BACKGROUND AND PREVIOUS WORK

In 1946, The Looe comprised an imposing private house with stables and an entrance lodge set back from the Reigate Road on rising ground 2km south-south-east of the village of Ewell (TQ 228 608; fig 1). To the north and east lay fields belonging to Priest Hill Farm, whose buildings (demolished in 1956) lay on the modern Banstead Road 1km or so to the north-north-east (Abdy 1995, 12). The Looe then was rather more isolated than it is today and the intervening years have resulted in a number of other changes. The house itself has been sub-divided; many of the outbuildings and stables have fallen into disuse or been demolished, and the lodge comprises a separate private residence with its own garden. Furthermore, much of the land attached to Priest Hill Farm has been terraced, levelled and turned into playing fields.

Situated on an elevated spur of North Downs chalk at 85m OD, the site commands extensive views across the Thames valley to the north. On the 1802 enclosure award map the area formed part of the great Southfield, one of the cultivated fields occupying the

southern part of Ewell parish, and given over to arable and small stands of woodland. The soils hereabouts comprise well-drained argillic brown earths of Frilsham Association, capable of yielding cereal and grassland crops. Much of the area around North Looe Farm to the south-east remains in horticultural use to this day (Abdy 1995, 10).

Prior to Tom Walls' investigations no finds had suggested ancient activity in the immediate vicinity of the chalk spur, although Roman material had been found in Ewell since at least the middle of the 19th century (Diamond 1847; Warne 1859–61). However, several late Roman burials were discovered during the digging of anti-aircraft ditches across Priest Hill Farm at *c*TQ 2253 6163 some 800m to the north in 1940 (fig 1, SMR 1106), while in the same year an Iron Age pit was recorded near Longdown Lane a little way to the south (SMR 929; Frere 1942). Moreover, it is tempting to link the Priest Hill burials with a local field name 'Goldhord' recorded in the 1408 *Register or Memorial of Ewell* (Deedes 1913). According to Gelling (1978, 142), 'hord' names probably indicate the ancient discovery of treasure. The approximate position of the 'Goldhord' field name is marked on figure 1.

Little further has come to light since the completion of the work described here, although there are unconfirmed reports of the finding of a bronze spearhead and of a potin coin in the North Looe area (Jeremy Harte, pers comm), and of a second fragmentary potin coin south of Longdown Lane (James Barfoot, pers comm). Recent evaluation of the latter area by the Surrey County Archaeology Unit has, however, proved negative (Dinah Saich, pers comm).

The Looe excavations 1946–9

INTRODUCTION TO THE EXCAVATIONS AND THE SITE ARCHIVE

Stray finds of struck flint and Roman pottery, made during gardening operations undertaken while on leave from the RAF, first alerted Tom Walls to the archaeological potential of The Looe site. Following demobilization he single-handedly carried out small-scale excavations over a period of nearly three years, between the summer of 1946 and the sale of the property prior to the death of his father in November 1949. In all, four trenches were opened (numbered I, II, IIA and III), and the course of a curving gully traced (fig 2). The excavation of a fifth trench (IV) by the present writer in 1976, following an auger survey, recovered little save unstratified pottery and is not considered further here, although its position is marked on figure 2.

The site archive was deposited with Bourne Hall Museum by Tom Walls and now consists of four groups of material:

- 1 a site notebook, plans, sections, correspondence and finds, the latter marked in pencil and ink and stored in re-sealable plastic bags in cardboard boxes. None of the photographs of the excavation taken by Tom Walls (John McManus, pers comm) have been located;
- 2 notes made by Frank Pemberton and Ina Godman during inspection of the material in the early 1970s;
- 3 notes and correspondence generated by the present writer during the preparation of his dissertation in 1976–7, together with finds from the fifth trench, stored in a separate cardboard box;
- 4 the notes generated during the preparation of this article.

The report presented here drew on all the sources cited above, and benefited considerably from numerous discussions with Tom Walls during 1976–7 and after, which accounts for the 'pers comm' notations in the text below.

TRENCH LOCATIONS

Trenches I and III were situated in the middle of a lawn surrounded by an oval concrete path (the latter still traceable during the summer of 1976). Where undisturbed by

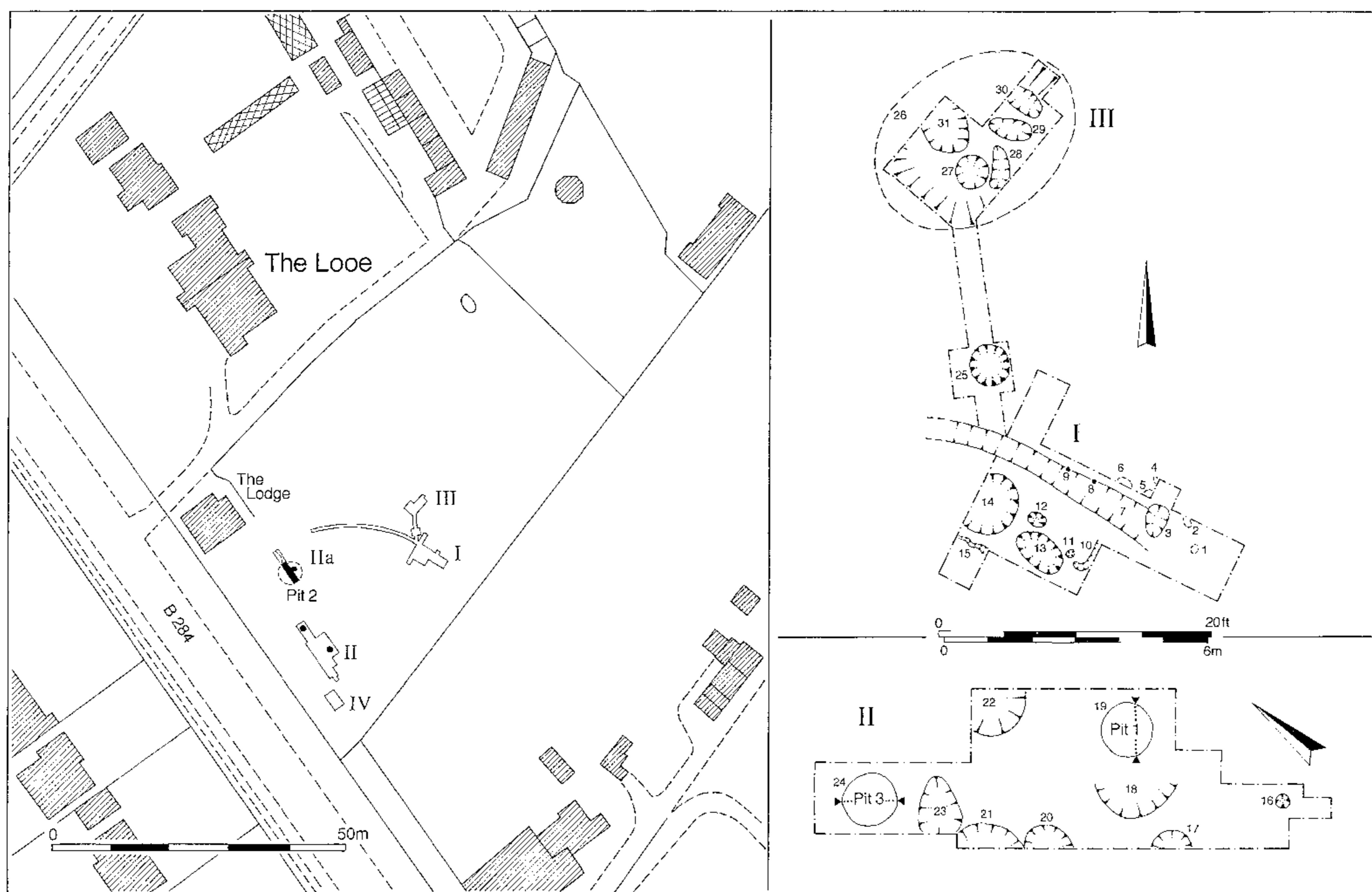


Fig 2 The Looe: location of trenches I, II, IIa, III and IV and feature plan, showing the relative positions of pits 1-3 in trenches II and IIa

archaeological features, the natural chalk occurred at a fairly uniform depth of 14 inches (*c* 35cm) below the surface. Features comprised a series of small pits, postholes and a long curving gully in trench I, and a large shallow 'working hollow' in trench III.

Trench II lay some 20m to the south-west, in the seed bed of the lodge garden. Here the surface of the natural chalk was less regular than that in trenches I and III, owing to cultivation and tree-root disturbance, and it varied between depths of 16 and 22 inches (*c* 40 and *c* 56cm) below the surface. Features comprised two large pits and a number of shallow scoops.

Trench IIA lay a few metres north-west of trench II, in the middle of the lodge lawn, and excavations in August 1948 revealed a large pit apparently cut by a second smaller pit on its north-western edge, both found by accident while searching for a return of the curving gully initially located in trench I. The size and position of the pits in the middle of the lawn precluded anything other than the excavation of a narrow 34 inch (*c* 86cm) wide section. The position of the largest pit could be clearly identified in 1976, for it showed as a green depression in an otherwise parched lawn during the long dry summer.

THE PRESENT ACCOUNT

No undisturbed horizontal stratigraphy survived anywhere above the surface of the natural chalk, although a number of features cutting into it were identified in all trenches (table 1, M2). This account concentrates on the features for which adequate records (and finds) survive. These comprise the three large pits and two urned cremation deposits in trenches II and IIA, and the 'working hollow' in trench III. Although a majority of the excavated features are therefore to all intents and purposes undated, the quantity of pottery recovered suggests that many of these were Roman. Finds are illustrated in figures 4-15.

PHASED FEATURES

The cut features represent at least four phases of activity on the chalk spur within the confines of The Looe property. Phase 1 dates to the Early Iron Age, and is represented by the ‘working hollow’, context 26. Phase 2 dates to the decades either side of the Roman conquest, and is represented by the three large pits, contexts 19, 24 and 32 (fig 3). Phase 3 dates to the late 1st–early 2nd century, and is represented by the cremation burial, context 33, and stray finds including pottery and building material. Phase 4 dates to the 2nd century and later, and is represented by a small pit, context 35, an animal cremation contained in a greyware jar, context 34, possibly the gully, context 7, and various stray finds. A number of features remain unphased.

Phase 1

The earliest feature located during the excavations lay within trench III and comprised a large dished scoop or ‘working hollow’, context 26, cut some 8 inches (200mm) into the chalk (fig 2b). It had gently sloping sides and was roughly rectangular in shape measuring 14 x 9 feet (4.25 x 2.75m). Five sub-rectangular to circular scoops or hollows were cut or worn into its floor. The nature of its fill is not recorded although finds included pottery (fig 4) and an abraded fragment of triangular clay loom-weight.

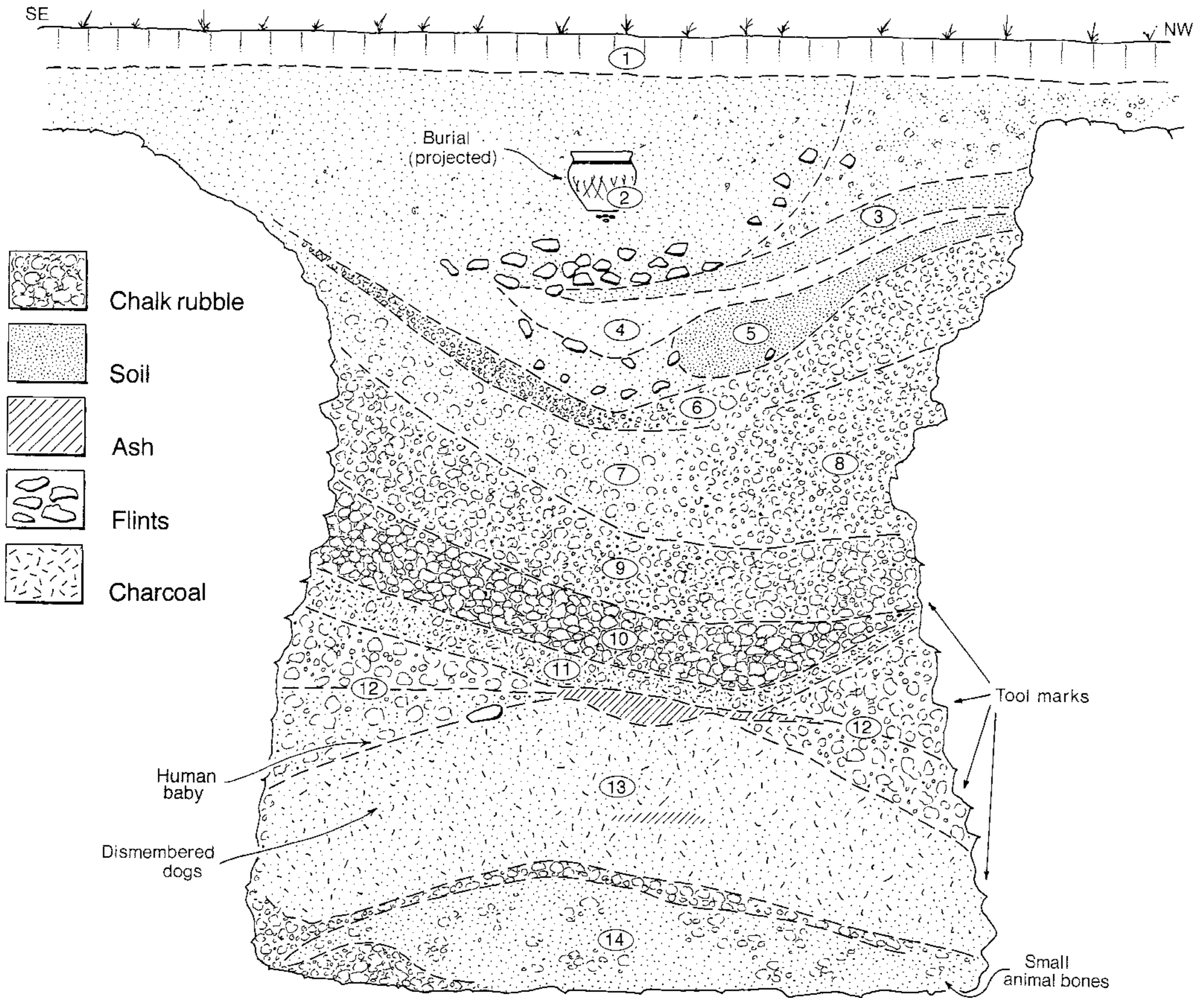
Phase 2

Phase 2 is represented by three large, deep, chalk-cut pits of classic form and profile, two located in trench II and the third in trench IIA (fig 3). Of these, pits 1 and 3 in trench II, contexts 19 and 24 respectively, were totally excavated; the deepest, pit 2 in trench IIA, context 32, was sectioned. Inked-in and annotated section drawings are available for pit 3; a similar drawing was completed for pit 2 (Tom Walls, pers comm), but cannot now be located. The drawing published here therefore, like that of pit 1, is based on the original pencil draft, with additions from sketches contained in the site notebook.

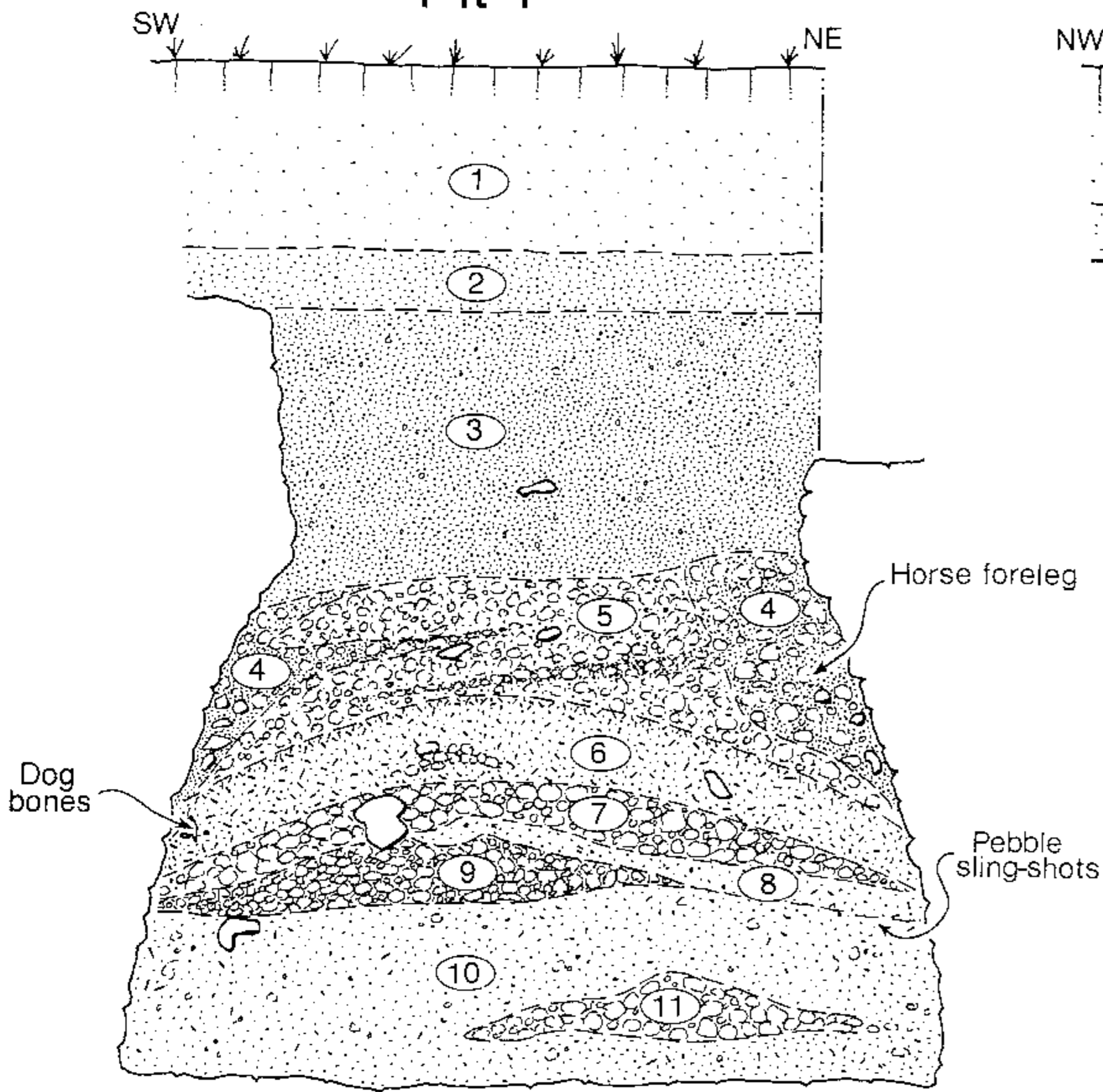
Pits 1 and 3 were of ‘beehive’ shape, with deeply undercut sides, flat floors and narrow mouths. Pit 1 measured just over 4 feet (1.22m) in diameter at its mouth and was over 6 feet 4 inches (1.93m) deep; pit 3 also measured some 4 feet (*c* 1.22m) in diameter at its mouth and was 7 feet (2.13m) deep. The larger pit 2 was sub-rectangular in profile with a flat floor, although the section drawing suggests that its upper walls had suffered from erosion; it measured some 8 feet in width (*c* 2.44m) at its mouth and was 11 feet 6 inches (3.5m) deep. Tool marks survived on the lower walls of this pit (Tom Walls, pers comm), though none were seen in pits 1 and 3. Judged solely on the evidence of the drawn sections, secondary use of the pits as convenient receptacles generated fills comprising a combination of natural chalk and household or midden deposits. This is consistent with the majority of such features excavated on chalk subsoils.

The backfilling process seems to have commenced quickly in pits 1 and 3, at least before any shattered chalk had accumulated on the floor of either. The basal fill of pit 3 contained a complete (though smashed) pottery vessel (fig 7, no 36) and the skeleton of a dog equivalent in size to that of a modern sheepdog (Juliet Jewell, pers comm); the lower fills of pit 1 incorporated ‘lumps of clay’ and frequent small Tertiary pebbles ‘suitable for sling stones’. By contrast pit 2 probably remained open for a short period before the backfilling process started, for shattered chalk rubble and the bones of small animals such as frog, vole and water vole were scattered across its floor. The latter had presumably fallen into the open pit and become trapped. Two species of snail were of ‘land forms common in the area today’ (identified by Judith King, 1949). Well-defined tip lines of fine chalk divided

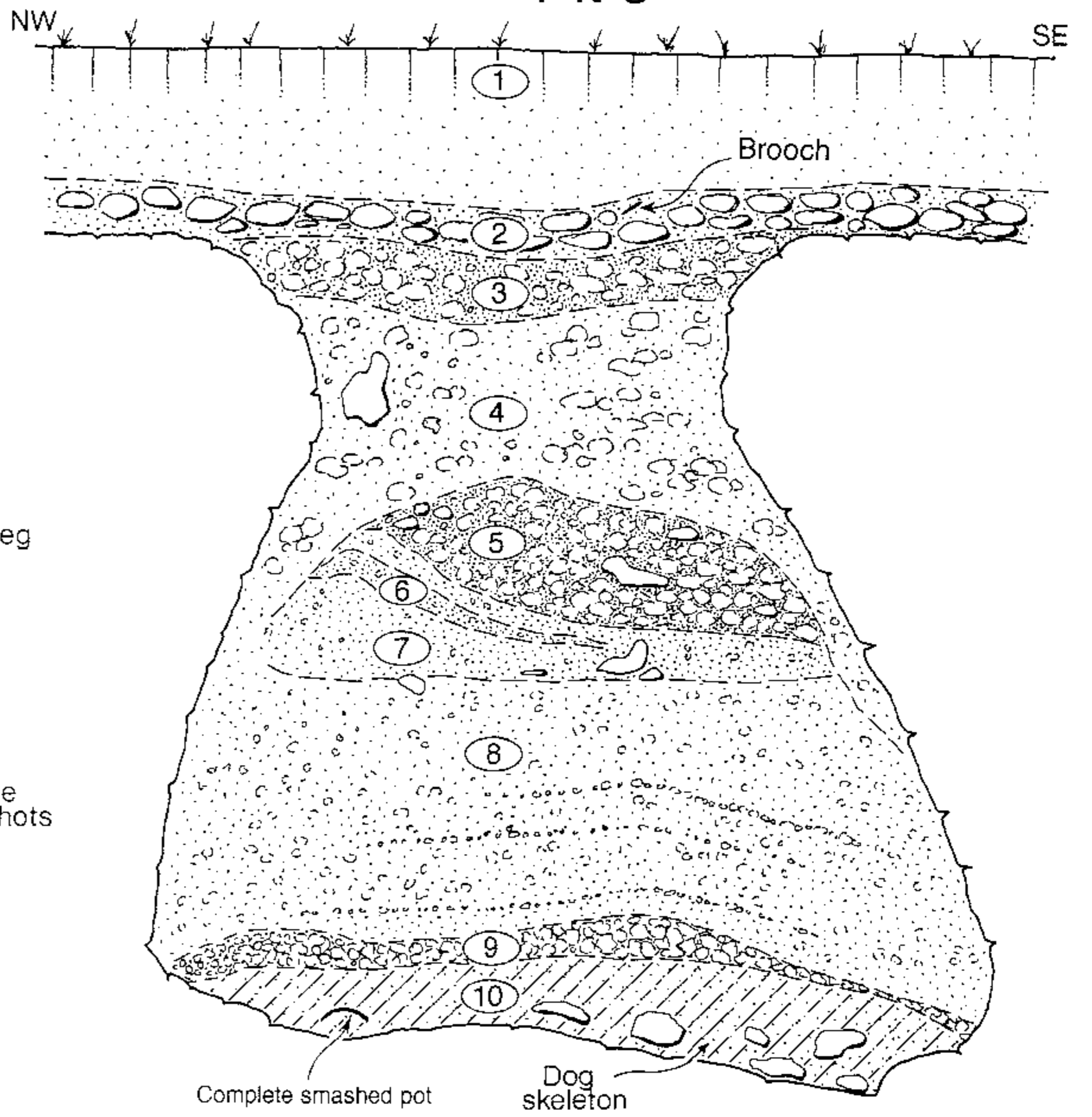
Pit 2



Pit 1



Pit 3



the otherwise homogeneous layer 8 in pit 3, and conjoining sherds of pottery vessels were found in different layers within pit 1 (eg fig 5, nos 14–15).

There appears to have been a distinct hiatus in the fill sequence of pits 1 and 2. In pit 1, this occurred following the deposition of layer 6, when a pile of twigs was thrown in and burnt. The subsequent fill (layer 4) incorporated the lower foreleg of a horse. In pit 2 this occurred after the deposition of layer 13, the latter incorporating parts of dog carcasses comprising an articulated hind leg and most of a vertebral column (one *ilium* was noted to have had cut marks on its inner surface). Twigs of ?*pomoideae* (perhaps hawthorn — John Giorgi, pers comm) then appear to have burnt slowly *in situ* over layer 13 and the body of at least one human infant was deposited. Its remains had rolled to the sides of the pit and were sealed by collapsed chalk (layer 12). A substantial part of a lower quernstone (fig 10, no 9) was deposited at the same level. Soil layer 11 aside, subsequent fills (layers 7–10) comprised primarily layers of clean chalk rubble, perhaps generated by the digging of other pits close by.

A further hiatus occurred before the final closure of pits 1 and 3, which in the latter case allowed later potsherds to become incorporated in the uppermost fill, layer 4 (eg fig 7, nos 49–50). Pits 2 and 3 appear to have been closed with layers of dumped chalk (layers 6 and 3, respectively). The subsequent settling of the fill of pit 2 required the addition of further levelling, layers 3–5, the latter incorporating quantities of pottery (fig 6, nos 25–35) and large flint nodules. Later activity at the mouth of the pit included the deposition of a cremation burial in a pot accompanied by a group of bone gaming counters (fig 11, no 1 & fig 12) and possibly a dog; the digging of a further shallow pit context 35, and the subsequent insertion of a second complete pottery vessel (fig 11, no 2) containing burnt animal bone.

Phase 3

A complete pottery vessel holding the cremated human remains of a young adult male accompanied by nine bone gaming counters and a tenth made of pottery was placed over the levelling layers (3–5) at the mouth of pit 2 (figs: 3; 11, no 1; 12). Three of the bone counters, the pottery counter and four iron nails were found amongst the cremated bone inside the vessel. The pot had been placed upright on a further five bone gaming counters arranged face down in a triangular formation; another bone counter was located ‘25 inches [63.5cm] to the west’.

Working on the assumption that the burial was contained within a rectangular grave cut aligned east–west, a narrow extension was dug eastwards into the side of the trench. This revealed the crushed skeleton of a young dog 2 feet (61cm) to the east, which may or may not have been associated with the rest of the group.

Phase 4

Phase 4 is represented by a small pit (context 35), cutting the north-western side of pit 2; a second complete pottery vessel (fig 11, no 2), context 34 (not shown on fig 3), and possibly by the curving gully (context 7), to the north.

A sketch section contained in the site notebook shows that the pit (context 35), cut into the levelling layers over pit 2. Its fill contained pottery and building material (including ‘pink plaster’), although none of this can be identified amongst the surviving finds. Apparently, subsequent to the backfilling of pit 35 (the sketch section is not clear), a complete greyware jar containing a small quantity of burnt bones of sheep/goat type, was placed upright in a small feature cutting into its fill.