

# SALVAGE EXCAVATIONS AT CARMARTHEN DISTRICT COUNCIL'S SPILMAN STREET CAR PARK, CARMARTHEN

JUNE 1985

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## SUMMARY

Plans to construct a new Chairman's Parlour within the grounds of the council's staff car park initiated discussions between the Council's officers and the Trust with a view to observe and record archaeological features in the building's foundation trenches. Subsequently new plans were proposed to construct an underground emergency room, which had more significant implications for any archaeological features. The general area had for some time been considered as a possible site for the Roman fort. In view of limitations imposed by the council's timetable for redeveloping the site the Trust was unable to undertake wholesale excavation, but was with the council's co-operation allowed to excavate two trial trenches. These demonstrated that a considerable depth of Roman stratigraphy existed under the site. The sheer depth of overburden, however, made work in these trenches dangerous, and they were backfilled after minimal recording. Following this the Trust was allowed to be present to record any features that would emerge during the removal of overburden by the contractors. In these difficult circumstances it became apparent that a great wealth of first century Roman occupation lay under the site which was destroyed without adequate record. Fortunately some features survived at sufficient depth to enable a salvage record to be made, in addition to those features that could be seen in section. The most noteworthy features include a street, and a probable tanning pit with associated timber buildings which had been burnt down. Dating of all features is firmly Flavian (AD75-95), which indicates that the area formed part of or was close to the Roman fort.

## ROMAN CARMARTHEN

It was only in the late 1960s that the pioneering work of Professor Barri Jones convincingly demonstrated that the Roman settlement at Carmarthen was more than purely military in character. He was able to show that a large defended Roman town lay in an area bounded by Richmond Terrace, Old Oak Lane,

The Esplanade and The Parade, Parade Road and Little Water Street. This significantly revised the general notion that the Roman settlement at Carmarthen was only military in character, although the Roman name for Carmarthen - Moridunum (=Sea-fort) - clearly indicates that some form of military fortification existed. Having defined the site of the Roman town, where a number of excavations have subsequently been undertaken, the most pressing archaeological problem for the period has been the location of the site of the presumed fort. Professor Jones suggested that the town would have grown up outside the gates of the fort, so not unreasonably he proposed that the site of the fort lay somewhere to the west of the town, i.e. in the Spilman Street/King Street area. This suggestion has been supported by finds from a small trench he excavated in the garden of the Red Cross HQ in Spilman Street which were of first century (military period) date. Subsequent excavation by the Trust south of Church Street also defined two phases of first century activity sealed by civilian settlement associated with the later town. These early features are not considered to lay within the fort, but in the excavator's opinion possibly relate to a fort annexe. In addition finds from a new machine pit inside the Journal office were also early in date. On balance the weight of archaeological opinion has strongly favoured a King Street/Spilman Street location for the fort but the area is so heavily built up that no excavation has been possible. The work at the Spilman Street car park represents a considerable advance in our knowledge of the early Roman occupation of Carmarthen and reinforces the necessity for archaeological excavation there prior to any future redevelopment plans.

## THE EXCAVATIONS

The initial trial trenches were machine excavated to a depth of about 2.8m and set at right angles to one another and confined within the limits of the proposed Chairman's parlour. It became immediately apparent that any archaeological features lay buried below a considerable depth of comparatively recent black garden soil that had accumulated since the Middle Ages. The Roman occupation levels lay variously between 1.5 to a little over 3 metres below the existing tarmacadam carpark surface. The first trench measured 12 by 1.2 metres and was cut at right angles to the south east boundary wall of the car park, the latter representing part of the medieval town wall line. This trench contained a number of Roman occupation levels, some of which extended below the 2.7 metre level of initial excavation. Although the trench was substantially shored, the loose nature of the upper deposits made work below too hazardous to justify continued excavation, and the trench was abandoned following the drawing of principal features in section.

The second trench, set at right angles to the first on an NE-SW alignment, measured 12.5 by 1.2 metres and extended to a maximum depth of 2.7 metres with a small sondage cut to a depth of 3.9 metres. The most noteworthy feature which at this stage was thought to be a large ditch or pit, was investigated in more detail in the subsequent salvage excavation, and is described later. It was clear that at least two distinct phases of Roman occupation were distinguishable in section. The first appeared as a series of burnt occupation horizons that may have been contemporary with the large tank or ditch; and the second was the sealing of these features by a massive layer of stiff clay. The finds were insufficiently adequate to establish anything other than a general Roman date.

In the following week contractors moved on to the site and commenced cutting an area of 21.5 by 15.5 metres to a depth of between 3.3 and 3.6 metres below the existing ground level to about 16.6 metres above Ordnance Datum. A total amount of about 1150 cubic metres was removed from the site to various dumps near Carmarthen over the following five days. As the excavating machine moved across the site the levelled area was trowelled clean, and it soon became clear that apart from the south-east corner no Roman features survived to this depth of excavation apart from the pit noted in the trial trench. In the corner three phases of activity were apparent, where a drainage ditch (30) running north-south down the natural slope, cut a possible cill-beam (32) of a timber building. This drain (see fig. 1) was cut in turn by a later drain (31) running on approximately the same alignment. To the east of these a massive post pit (or trench) could be seen in both plan and section, with an associated post pipe. The sectional evidence suggests that this may have formed part of a building with wattle-and-daub or cob-walls, as burnt clay deposits appeared in section in line with the post pipe. As with other areas of the site, there was clear evidence for destruction by fire.

The only other feature that survived in plan was the pit (rather than ditch) which had been observed in the initial trial investigation. This was rectangular, 7.7 by 4.9 metres and survived only to a depth of 30 cm. The evidence from the trial trench, and the south (W) section confirmed that it was originally cut from a height of 17.66m OD, and therefore was about 1.8m deep (See Figs. 2 3). The pit had been cut well into the porous gravel subsoil and had been lined with a 10-20cm deposit of stiff yellow clay presumably to hold liquid. The base of the feature contained a series of lateral and cross excavated impressions in the subsoil that are interpreted as emplacements for timber framing and separators that may have divided the tank into four separate chambers, each approximately 1.5 by 4.3m. The cross impressions appeared to stop short of the side impressions, which may mean that the timbers butted or were morticed into the side timbers. The internal dimensions of the tank of 7 by 4.3m give a liquid capacity of about 11,918 gallons (54,180 litres) with the individual compartments holding about 2,979 gallons (13,545 litres). In the southern corner the tank was joined by a clay

lined trench (62) 70-80cm wide and 1.8m deep that appeared to slope gently towards the tank and is therefore interpreted as a feeder rather than a drain. No evidence for any drainage survived in plan, although a pit or ditch in the north section may have had some connection with the tank's functioning. There were also some slight indications of timbering along the upper sides of the tank when it was recorded in the trial trench (Fig. 2), although much of the clay lining had apparently slumped into the base. Excavation of the basal lining showed additional evidence for slumping, which may have occurred as a result of an attempt to strip out the timberwork, since there was no evidence for the latter which might have been expected in the anaerobic and waterlogged conditions. The layer immediately above the clay basal lining was charcoal rich and contained a mass of pottery fragments (context 46). This layer is clearly not associated with the functioning of the pit since it seals the clay which had slumped from the sides, and therefore its deposition post-dates the abandonment of the feature. In plan form the tank is not unlike excavated examples of post medieval tanning pits, and in view of the evidence for liquid retention this seems a plausible interpretation. The only established Roman tanning pit recorded from Wales is that discovered at Brithdir (White, 1979), although a smaller tank discovered at Caerleon bears some similarities. Other Roman tanning features are recorded at Silchester (ibid) and Frocester villa (see Bristol Glos. Trans. XCVII, 1979). The Brithdir tanning pit was somewhat smaller than the Carmarthen example and its construction differed, in that the sides were built of stone. The base was covered with a lattice of timbers (some of which were preserved in situ) which the excavator suggests formed a raised boarded floor that may have accompanied boarded sides, thus making a single watertight compartment. It is possible that the basal timbers at Carmarthen also supported a boarded floor so the tank would form not four but one single chamber. Evidence for sluicing arrangements at Brithdir were not clear.

It is perhaps noteworthy that the Brithdir tank lay, along with other workshops, close to the fortlet in an area formerly occupied by an auxiliary fort. This may have interesting implications for any discussion on the position of the Carmarthen fort and tanning pit.

## THE SECTIONS

The only other features that could be recorded were those exposed in the sections, and it is proposed to deal with each section individually before attempting to discuss possible stratigraphical links.

The North Section. This was the longest continuous section measuring over 21 metres. Working from SW to NE, the first and most prominent feature was a cross section of a street which had been laid out on ground previously cut down into the gravel subsoil. The street, measuring something over 3.6m wide

also sealed a small pit or gully which contained a rich charcoal fill (48). The street was crescentic in section attaining a maximum height of 35cm at its apex. Unfortunately there were no definite stratigraphical links contemporary with the street's construction and other features in this section. As in the west section, the street was sealed by a thin deposit of charcoal-rich dark soil which may suggest a period of abandonment. A similar (but not the same) deposit also extended NE of the street where it lay above the truncated subsoil, and further NE it sealed a thin lens of clay. At this point both layers were cut by a pit or ditch (61) which may have some association with the presumed tanning activity. It had the same basal fills as the tanning pit, which suggests that this also remained open for some time after the cessation of tanning activity. The upper fills showed marked evidence for considerable subsidence similar to that seen in the section across the presumed tanning pit (Fig. 2). The level from which pit 61 was cut on the NE side was not at all clear, the layers appearing as a confusion of redeposited subsoil with only a few flecks of charcoal and clay to indicate human interference. To the NE of this were a series of layers and post holes that very likely represent part of a timber building of possibly two phases. This structure may have been fronted by a drainage gully, and contained evidence for a rebuilding following its probable destruction by fire as demonstrated by the considerable amount of burning and charcoal associated with its primary levels. The latest surface showed as a clear cobbled line running NE from the most prominent of the three post holes that could be seen in this section. This surface sealed the other two post holes, and may therefore represent a yard rather than an interior floor. The finds from this building (50 and 51) were incapable of accurate dating. All features in this section, including the street and buildings, were subsequently sealed by an extensive deposit of stiff grey clay (11), which although weathered in its upper profile, lay to a depth of between 30-90cm. The dating of this deposit is not at all clear, but only Roman material was discovered from within it, and it is assumed to be Roman in date. This is supported by evidence from the south section where a similar clay lay in the upper part of ditch (62).

East Section. What is presumed to be the same timber building could also be traced in the NW corner of the east section, where again a number of post holes were cut from the same levels. Again there was clear evidence for destruction by fire. These post holes were cut from the level of the buried natural soil, which had only been truncated in the very corner of the section. Above the post holes was a deposit of green sand. This characteristic deposit could also be seen in the south section (W) in association with other buildings and is therefore a useful indicator for comparing stratigraphical links. These will be discussed later.

The building in the NW corner of the east section is also overlaid by the same thick layer of grey clay (11), which terminated abruptly some 4.6m from the corner where the N-S drain (30) ran into the section. Clearly the drain is later than the building since it cuts the green sand which continues to the SE of the drain. But the drain is probably earlier than the grey clay as the latter's associated stoney layer runs over it. Between this drain and the other N-S drain (31) were more burnt horizons and green sand which appeared to overlay the drain. Since drain 31 was, in plan, demonstrated to be later than drain 30, then the sand must be redeposited. Between the drains are two possible postholes, one sealed by and the other later than the sand. Other features, unfortunately not seen in plan, are difficult to explain from purely sectional evidence: there is clay which might be part of the fill of ditch 31; another possible post hole which is sealed in turn by a pit or gully.

Beyond this the large post pit (or trench) can be seen cut from the height of the buried soil. The section shows what may be a wall line with stone and burnt clay which may represent a fire destroyed wattle-and-daub or cobb wall founded on a post and trench wall; one of a possible line of uprights was excavated and is visible as a post pipe in plan (projected on to the section drawing). To the south the associated levels appeared to drop off sharply where the subsoil had been cut away. Again there was much evidence for burning. The only dateable find from this burnt layer is a fragment of first century South Gaulish Samian.

Above nearly all features in this section a fragmentary stoney surface seemed to run from the stiff grey clay that covered the building in the NE corner, and that was sealed in turn by a clayey layer that is interpreted as a hill wash derived from the clay higher up the slope.

South Section. The cut into subsoil observed in the SE corner of the last section continued as a horizontal line at the very limit of excavation, and was sealed in part by a very distinct charcoal lens and in part by patches of gravel. There was also a continuation of the same burnt layer from the previous section. It is possible that the cut and charcoal/gravel layers formed the floor surface of a building, probably not the same timber building indicated by the large post and trench in the east section. Half the profile of ditch 31 could be seen in the SW corner, and two possible postholes appeared to be cut from the same level as the fragmentary stoney layer seen also in the last section, which was in turn overlaid by the clayey hillwash. Immediately above this, in the SW corner was a pit which produced two glazed fragments of medieval pot (26).

West Section (E). The two drains, 30 and 31, can be seen in the SE corner, cut into the buried soil. To the NE a full soil profile survives, which has a number of pits or gullies cut into it. At the NW corner was a large post pit and pipe which cut an earlier ditch or pit. The post pit appeared to be

contemporary with a green sand layer which lay over a thin lens of clay. On the SE side of the post pit there was considerable evidence for burning on top of the buried soil, and above this yet another lens of burning and charcoal, which was sealed in turn by the same fragmentary stoney layer described in the last two sections. This produced a worn coin of the Emperor Domitian (AD 81-96). Again it is difficult to understand the precise stratigraphical sequences purely from the section. Do the two separate layers of burning represent different phases or are they one and the same? In view of the fact that both relate to the post pit, then it is more probable that only one burning is represented here. Once again the building itself is partly sealed by the grey clay, which seems to be at the same level as the stoney band.

South Section (W). This section mirrors in part what can be seen in the north section, in that a near-complete cross section of the street is again apparent. The street seals a small stakehole. There is also more evidence for the presumed building described at the NW end of the last section, in the form of at least two post pits and four stakeholes. Much the same sort of sequence as with other buildings was repeated here, with buried soil sealed first by a thin lens of clay, then by a burnt layer, then by green sand and then by the layer of stiff grey clay. It is possible that this building may have had an associated structure straddling the ditch (62) that fed the tanning pit, as there were two stakeholes either side of the ditch. The burnt layers of this building fortunately produced a number of dateable Samian vessels (34/34a) all of them firmly first century.

Between ditch 62 and the street were two pits or gullies probably cutting the buried soil and above these a number of ill defined layers merging in the indistinct clay deposits. A pit that cut the upper grey clay contained the only possible second century pot shard from the whole site (43). The street itself appeared to have a number of layers covering its surface; these are probably not resurfacings but a succession of dumps perhaps contemporary with the extensive grey clay layers.

West Section. The road surface could be seen along the whole length of this section running up the gentle slope. Again, as with the north section most of the street had been laid over previously levelled ground with no surviving buried soil except in the SE corner. The street sealed a pit and a stakehole. Over the street surface was an accumulation of dark grey humic soil, noted in the north section and only visible as a very thin lens in the south, which has been suggested as evidence for possible abandonment. This layer was overlaid in turn by the stiff grey clay seen elsewhere, and then in turn by a thick deposit of gravel on the down slope side of the section which thinned out towards the NW. It is probable that this layer ran at a different angle to the street, which would account for the apparent variations in depth seen in section.

All the sections had a considerable overburden of garden soil, which was in turn sealed by rubble and hardcore which formed a dressing for the car park which had been constructed in the mid 1970s.

## DISCUSSION

It is clear from the sectional evidence that a great wealth of first century Roman material was destroyed by the construction of this building without adequate record, and it is an unsatisfactory task to try and piece together a jigsaw that is so evidently incomplete. However a number of logical deductions can be made about the features in section which can be linked stratigraphically with the tanning pit.

It is quite obvious by studying Figure 1 that the tanning pit appears to respect the alignment of the street. Moreover we are fortunate that so many postholes survived in the sections; this suggests that the buildings also respect the line of the street and the pit. From the evidence of the south section (W) it can be seen that the feeder ditch (62) to the tanning pit is cut from the same level as the buildings which had burnt down, and it is reasonable to suppose that the tanning operation ceased when the building was destroyed. It is moreover suggested that the post abandonment layer 46 in the base of the tanning pit may represent part of the levelled remains of buildings, as this layer contained so much charcoal and pottery. This is supported by the ample amounts of contemporary Samian from this layer (46) and layers 34, 34A, 35, 40 and 41 from the building, which has a consistent dating of pottery manufactured in the last quarter of the first century AD. The building in the north corner of the site seen mainly in the north section was constructed at the same level of buried soil as that observed in the south, had also burnt down, and was sealed by the green sand. There can be little doubt that the two buildings are contemporary.

Although it is difficult to stratigraphically link the street with these buildings, the fact that they appear, within the limits of the evidence, to align themselves on the street argues in favour of contemporaneity, especially in view of the early date of the buildings. It is further argued that the dark humic soil overlaying the street, which contained much charcoal, accumulated after the fire and the consequent abandonment of the site. There is some evidence from the sections, however, that the buildings in the NE corner of the site had been reconstructed after the fire.

In all probability some time of period elapsed before any subsequent activity when the massive deposits of clay were introduced. It is possible that before this, however, that drains 30 and 31 were constructed, as the upper layer of drain 31 (which was the later drain) contained a similar clay to the dump. Moreover the stoney band, (seen best in the east section), which appears to run at the same level as the clay, clearly sealed the two drains.



The most pressing question is the origin and date of this clay. The material could not have been derived from the immediate subsoil as it was far too homogenous. Its characteristics were very similar to the clays used in the ramparts of the Roman town defences, and the latter is thought to have been brought up from the valley floor. Such a large amount of clay can only have resulted from a massive effort and one is hard pressed to explain its function. An attractive suggestion is that the street, tanning pits and buildings were sited very close to, if not actually within, the fort, and this clay is the spread remnant of an abandoned or foreshortened fort rampart. The siting of a tanning pit within a fort is most unlikely, but the existence of the street running directly towards what is today quite a precipitous slope cannot be easily explained away. On the other hand, without the pit one could reasonably suggest that the street is an intervallum road of the fort with buildings inside this. The fort rampart would then lay immediately to the SW of the street, and its remains spread over the interior of the fort after abandonment. The street's alignment runs perpendicular to the natural terrace, an alignment which would be best suited to the SW line of the fort's defences.

Alternatively if the buildings lay outside and to the west of the fort, then we could be dealing with early vicus features or an annexe, and the clay could then have been spread from the east. If the latter were the case then the question must be asked: where is the street running? If it is running down to the valley floor, then there must have been considerable changes to the slope of the terrace since Roman times, because the present slope is far too precipitous. The construction of the extended medieval town wall along this terrace in 1415 would certainly have had the effect of sharpening the natural break of slope. Moreover the wall itself would act as a barrier to soil creep and retain the ever increasing amount of garden soil. Lastly, it is not known to what extent the terrace itself may have been cut back by the medieval wall builders. It is therefore probable that the original slope was far slighter, so the street could conceivably have run down to the valley floor to the site of wharfs, quays and/or a bridging point. Yet another alternative, accepting that the terrace may have undergone significant modification since Roman times, is that the street could have turned a right angle (or formed a T-junction) to run along the top of the terrace. These suggestions will remain as open questions until further excavation can be undertaken in the area.

One fortunate part of the operation is the amount of dateable stratified finds that were recovered from the sections which leave no doubt about the military context of these features. Another is the almost complete lack of any later pottery apart from one Samian fragment from context 43, and even this could be first century. The worn coin, dating from the reign of Domitian (AD81-96) came from the stoney band in the west section (S), and this layer may be contemporary with the clay dump. This could place the clay deposition in the second (or indeed any later) century; but an early to mid second century date would fit with accepted theories for the abandonment or

foreshortening of forts. The lack of any later pottery suggests that if the fort is sited closeby, then there was no significant Roman settlement of the area following an assumed military abandonment of the site.

## CONCLUSION

This salvage excavation has more than ever stressed the importance of the King Street/Spilman Street area, and demonstrated that there is a considerable amount of stratified archaeology on the terrace between the Norman Castle and the Roman town. Whilst the dating of these features can clearly be seen to belong to the military period their precise relation to the fort remains uncertain. It is indeed unfortunate that insufficient time could not be allowed for a proper investigation of the site, as so much more information could have been recovered which may have successfully resolved some of the outstanding questions. It is now doubly important that in future adequate opportunity be given for the full excavation of any other redevelopments that may occur in the area.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Trust is grateful to Carmarthen District Council for allowing the excavation of the initial trial trenches, and would like to thank the officers who co-operated within the lamentably limited timetable imposed for the development during the salvage operation. We would also like to express our thanks to the contractors, Gwili Construction, who made a difficult task somewhat easier by their willing co-operation.

I would like to thank Tony Totterdale, Chrissy Williams, Gwilym Bere, Jacki Briggs, Ken Murphy and Heather James who assisted with the excavation. Heather James and Dr J. L. Davies kindly commented on the draft of this text.

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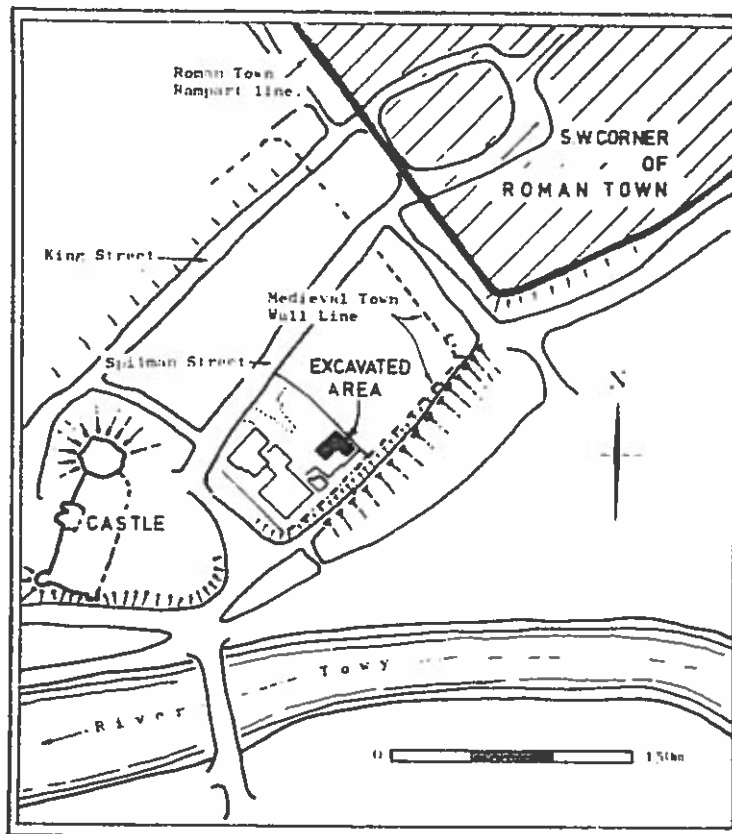


Figure 3. Location plan of excavation. The fort is thought to occupy the plateau between the medieval castle and the Roman town.

Fig 21 Sections of excavation

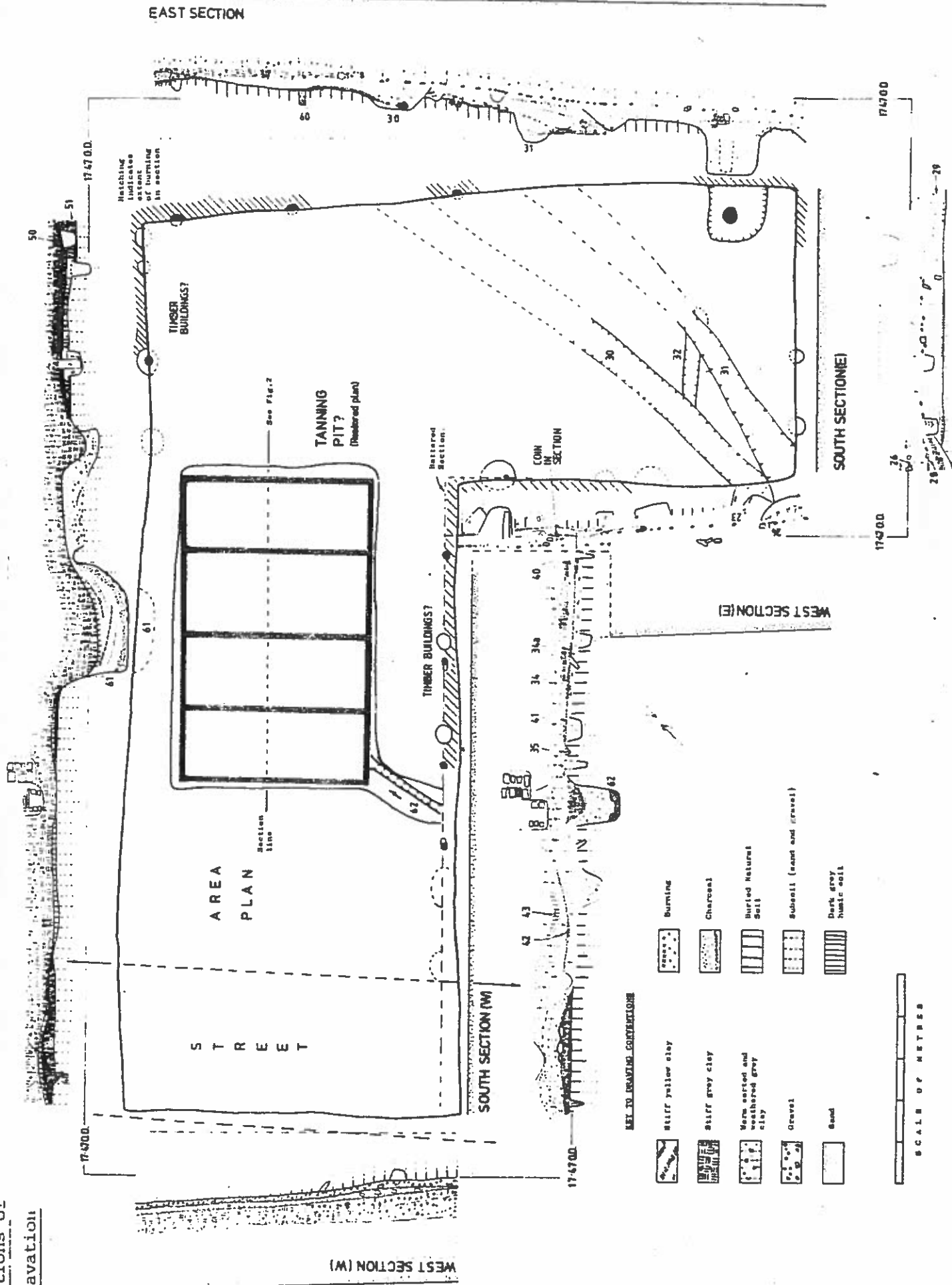
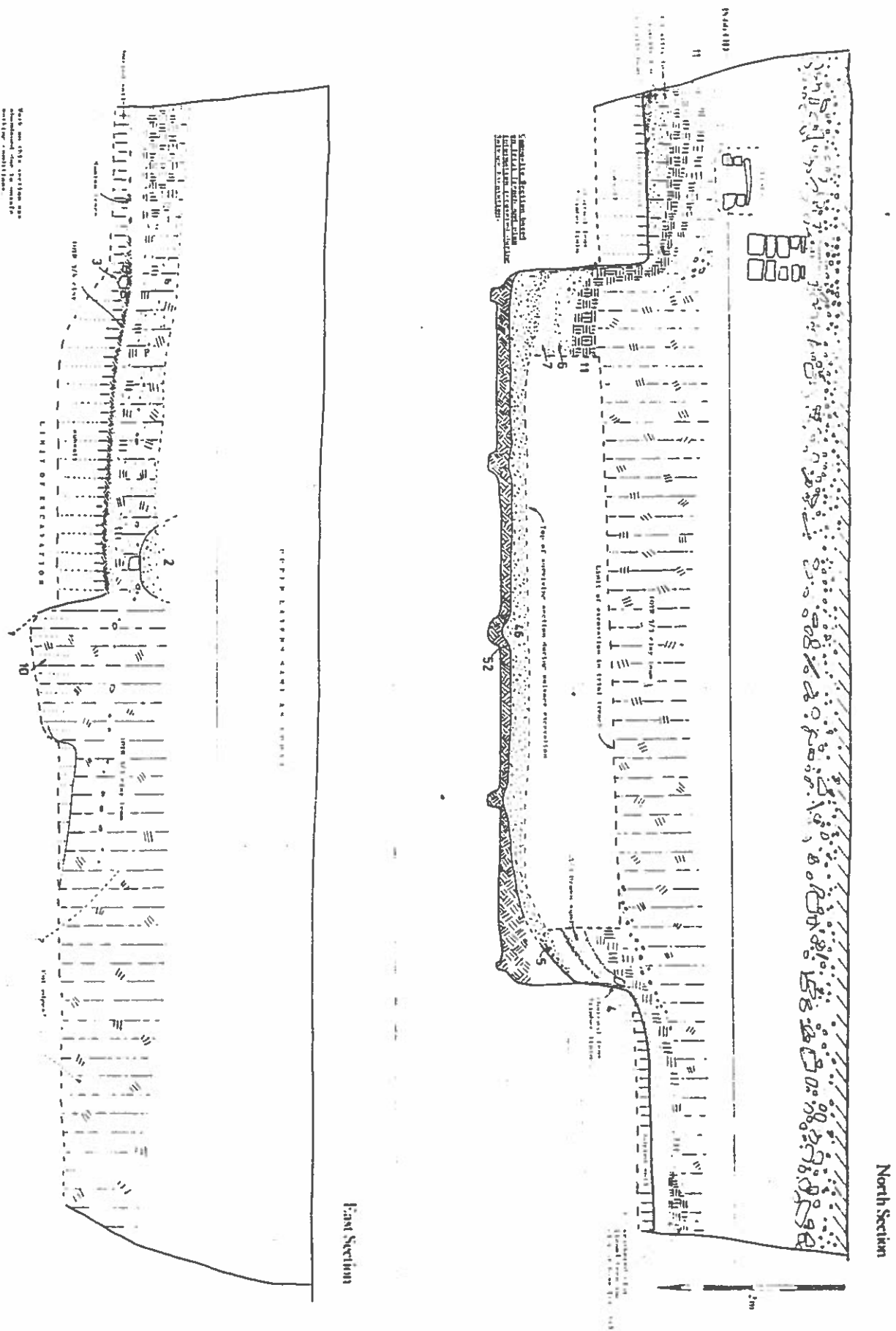


FIGURE 2 Sections of Initial Trial Trenches  
 CARNARKIEN DISTRICT COL'NAIL - Spilman Street office car park



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