



Glamorgan-Gwent Archaeological Trust
Contracts Division

Rhossili Lower Village (SAM Gm 414)
Survey and erosion assessment

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GGAT 55: Rhossili Lower Village survey and erosion assessment

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Figure 1: General plan of the site (based on the Ordnance Survey 1: 2500 map with the permission of Her Majesty's Stationery Office, ©Crown copyright Glamorgan-Gwent Archaeological Trust, licence no. AL 50677 A) showing survey stations, grid points and Scheduled area

Figure 2: Survey of the site showing principal features and location of Sites A and B (1980), cliff-face recording (1990) and geophysical survey (1996) (scale 1:750)

Figure 3: Detail of Sites A and B, with geophysical features plotted (scale 1:625)

Figure 4: Erosion assessment: historic erosion and predicted future threat; erosion monitoring points marked (scale 1:750)

Figure 5: Aerial photograph of site (Terry James, 1980), annotated to show Scheduled area, Sites A and B and cliff edge in 1980 and 1995

Summary

The "Lower Village" site of a besanded medieval settlement at Rhossili, Swansea (old West Glamorgan) is a Scheduled Ancient Monument undergoing continuing coastal erosion. In order to allow a management plan for the site to be drawn up, **GGAT Contracts** undertook a survey of the site and a review of past records to assess the rate, nature and extent of the erosion threat.

A re-examination of the evidence for medieval activity on the site led to a rejection of the hypothesis that it represented an early manor or settlement, and the conclusion that the alternative model, of a monastic estate held by the Knights Hospitallers, perhaps comprising a grange, church, cemetery and a related building, better fitted the results.

The erosion of the site, although sporadic, is of the order of 5m per decade; the loss of Site A and Site B in the middle term is therefore likely. Under immediate threat are features within 20m of the cliff-face, including exposed stub walls, middens, and geophysical anomalies.

To allow an appropriate long-term management strategy for the site to be drawn up, limited field evaluation to resolve the nature of the resource is recommended.

Acknowledgements

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The Trust is indebted to Rick Turner of Cadw: Welsh Historic Monuments, Mark Winder and Emma Plunkett Dillon of the National Trust, Geophysical Surveys of Bradford, and Medwyn Parry of the Royal Commission on Ancient and Historical Monuments in Wales for their help during the work.

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1. Introduction

1.1 *Commission*

The medieval settlement site at Rhossili, Swansea (old West Glamorgan) was identified as a result of erosion, and rescue excavations were undertaken in 1980-1. The site is now a Scheduled Ancient Monument, and is owned by the National Trust. Renewed erosion of the cliff-face occurred in the 1990s, and is continuing. Because of the practical problems and safety concerns of work on the eroding face, no detailed survey of the site had been prepared.

The need for the long-term management of the archaeological resource on the site, which had been recognised by the National Trust and Cadw, was emphasised in the report on the Cadw-funded Coastal Archaeology Survey prepared by GGAT in March 1996 (Locock 1996). The report recommended that, as a first step, a programme of survey be undertaken to provide a base-line for the monitoring of future erosion, combined with a review of past records and photographs to assess the rate of previous erosion on the site.

Following discussions with the National Trust, GGAT submitted an application for grant-aid to Cadw: Welsh Historic Monuments to carry out the survey; this was approved in June 1996.

1.2 *Specification for work*

The scope of the works was set out in the Project Proposal submitted to Cadw: Welsh Historic Monuments. Three tasks were identified: 1. Total Station survey of the Scheduled area; 2. emergency recording of exposed sections; 3. assessment of the rate, nature and causes of erosion. In addition, the RCAHMW and National Trust were contacted and the SMR was consulted in order to present a full account of past archaeological observations.

1.3 *Report layout*

The report describes the location of the site (Section 2) and summarises the archaeological evidence from previous work (Section 3) before giving an account of the current survey work (Section 4) and assessing the erosion threat (Section 5). Conclusions are then drawn (Section 6). Detailed data is presented in Appendices.

2. Location and description

2.1 *Topography* (fig. 1)

The site lies at the south end of Rhossili Bay, immediately north of the village of Rhossili (centred on SS 415 882). The ridge of Rhossili Down runs north-south along the bay; at the base of the slope is a marked solifluction terrace from the late Pleistocene. The building known as the Old Rectory occupies this terrace to the north of the Scheduled area. At the south end of the bay, the terrace is overlain by blown sand, forming elongated sand-dunes running east-west.

A stream runs down from the plateau to the east, through the sandy area, and onto the beach. A fenced path with steps leads diagonally across the site, and is the main access to the beach. The terrace deposits are subject to marine erosion; this has led to a series of land-slips and consequent loss of the old ground surface. In addition, the sand is subject to stream and wind erosion (the latter much reduced by the planting programme carried out by the National Trust).

2.2 *Designation of the site*

The site is one of recognised conservation value: in addition to being a Scheduled Ancient Monument (Gm 414), the area north of the stream is part of the Rhossili Down Site of Special Scientific Interest, and the whole area lies within the proposed Grade I historic landscape of Gower (HLW (WGI) 1) and an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

2.3 *Correlation of terminology*

For this report, the site has been identified as "Rhossili Lower Village", although the implications of the name are disputed (see Section 3). GGAT's excavations at the secular building and church were given site numbers 32 and 35 respectively (PRNs 1862w and 130w); the present work has been designated as site 338. The RCAHMW National Monuments Record lists the site under the NPRN 154456 (previously SS48NW 18). The spelling "Rhossili" has been retained throughout, following the Ordnance Survey; the variants "Rhosili" and "Rhossilli" are also current.

3. Archaeological background

A complete list of archaeological observations on the site is given below (see Appendix). The evidence is reviewed here at some length because management decisions need to take account of the probable nature of the archaeological resource.

3.1 *Early work (to 1979)*

From early this century, the Site B building has been recognised as a church (e.g. Lethbridge 1928). Lucas (1982, 1) cites a parish clerk, who died in 1900, who could remember a wall and window of the old church being visible. It has long been suggested that the Romanesque doorway to the main church at Rhossili had been moved from that in the sand.

On at least three occasions, human bones were exposed by erosion on The Warren, presumably at the cliff face (Lethbridge 1928, Rutter 1949).

In addition, medieval pottery and other artefacts were recovered.

However, when the RCAHMW published the site (printed in 1981, but prepared previously), there was no structural evidence for settlement other than the church.

3.2 *Excavation, 1980*

Continuing erosion of the sand dunes had resulted in a change of course of the stream so that it ran to the northwest, and Site A became exposed and eroded. Dr G Jenkins of the Open University visited the site, and photographed a midden cut by the new stream bed; he noted animal bone to the south and human bone to the north (copy in SMR, 1862w).

Rescue excavations were undertaken by GGAT, and in addition a trial trench was excavated in Site B to confirm its identification. Interim reports on the work were published at the time (Davidson and Davidson 1980a; 1980b). A full account, with finds reports, was published later (Davidson *et al.* 1987), including a historical section based on research by Toft (1985).

Site A proved to be large round-cornered building with an entrance to the south; the walls were constructed of stone set in clay. Little occupation evidence was recovered, but a 13th-century date seems probable; two structural phases are distinguishable. The building was covered by sand following its disuse.

Site B was demonstrated to be a simple two-celled church; mortared stone walls survived to a height of 1.8m, and retained external and internal render; the latter had been painted in a 13th-century style. Post-medieval human and animal burials were found in the blown sand covering the floor. Two phases of construction were distinguished. After excavation, the site was reburied.

Further stretches of masonry were surveyed but not examined (Davidson *et al.* 1987 fig. 2).

Although the excavated evidence was limited and equivocal, an attempt was made to establish the context of the site by examining historical references. The listing of the manors of "Llandymore, Rhossili the great and the less" by Rice Merrick (1983 ed., 55) in a document copied from the now-lost *Register of Neath Abbey* led Davidson *et al.* (1987, 257, where it is misquoted as "the greater and the lesse" from "The Book of Neath") and Toft (1985) to argue

that there were two manors of Rhossili, paralleling the two medieval settlements and churches.¹

The earlier edition of Rice Merrick (1887, 77) reads "Landymore Rossily the great and the lesse". The special pleading required to avoid the reading as the (single) manor of "L the great and R the less", which correlates with the general documentary picture of Landimore (including Rhossili), is therefore tenuous (Beverley Smith and Pugh 1984, 212).

Davies (1879, 186) glosses a reference to the "manor of Rhosily, Llandimor and Llanrhidian" with the comment: "These three villages constitute but one Manor, i.e. the Manor of Llandimor. In all old documents this manor is so described". Interestingly, when in 1399 the widowed Duchess of Norfolk was granted one third of the manor of Landimore as dower, the division took the form of the land and tenements at Rhossili (Davies 1879, 156; this might imply that it was seen as an administrative sub-unit of the manor. Nicholl (1936, 38 *n.*) calls Rhossili a member of the manor of Landimore.

Although Davidson *et al.* and Toft acknowledge that the churches and settlements were co-existent for the 14th-15th centuries, they suggest that the "Lower" village is earlier, and that settlement shifted up to the plateau, perhaps as a result of increasing sand deposition.

They note, however, that the west half of Site A is built on 1m of blown sand which must pre-date the late medieval onset of besandment suggested by Higgins (1933). Whether it is reasonable to call the besanded site a "village" at all is open to question. The excavators considered that Site A was "larger than many manorial halls". Although other masonry elements have been observed on the site, this is the only secular building which has been identified. There is more evidence from chance finds for an extensive cemetery to the west of the church at Site B than for a settlement.

The assignment of the church of Rhossili to the Knights of St John (the Knights Hospitallers) in the late 12th century (Davidson *et al.* 1987, 257) may provide an alternative context for the Lower Village. Toft notes (1985, 53) that the area to the north of the Lower Village contains both the rectorial glebe and the building known as The Old Rectory which is tithe-free, and thus was probably held by the Knights of St John in the medieval period, and suggests that "the land on the platform which includes the deserted village was once a monastic estate". This suggestion is more in accordance with the existing excavation and documentary evidence than the supposed village. The components of the postulated estate are the grange at the Old Rectory, the church (and possibly a cemetery) and the building at Site A.

A revisionist interpretation of the excavation, based on the evidenced occupation, would be that we have one large secular building and a church constructed in the 12th-13th centuries, perhaps associated with a graveyard, largely deserted by the 16th century; the later blown sand apparently post-dates the abandonment of the buildings. There is little need for the concept of settlement shift in response to a changing environment; a minor change in population and layout may be all that is reflected. Rice Merrick's description of the parish of Rhossili mentions the hamlet of "Down in Rhossili", which may reflect secular occupation of the Rectory area following the Dissolution of the Monasteries in 1540 (1983 ed., 118).

3.3 *Recent work*

In 1990, erosion of the cliff to the south of the stream exposed a section within which archaeological features were visible. The National Trust commissioned GGAT to record them and comment on the implications of erosion (see fig. 2).

¹ Correspondence in the site archive of the 1980 excavations makes it clear that Davidson and Davidson were doubtful of the "two manors" evidence.

The sequence lay at the south end of the Scheduled Area, at the modern field boundary (see fig. 3). The solifluction terrace (unit 6) was overlain by a red sandy clay layer (unit 5), which filled an apparent cut directly below the fence (this may be a periglacial feature). Wind-blown sand (unit 4), 1m deep, covered the sandy clay, and a shallow turf-line and topsoil developed (unit 1). The fence overlay a stony field bank (unit 2); to the north (downslope), a rubble-filled ditch (unit 3) was noted (Owen-John 1991, 2-4 and fig. 2). A further possible ditch was noted 12m south of the fence-line. Martin Bell noted mortar in a rabbit hole 20m from the cliff edge (Owen-John 1991, 5), perhaps a wall.

In early 1996, the National Trust commissioned a resistivity survey by Geophysical Surveys of Bradford (GSB 1996) of the village site and the Old Rectory (now owned by the National Trust, and thought to retain parts of a medieval building: M Winder pers. comm.). High-resistance anomalies interpreted as walls were identified (GSB 1996, fig. 7: see fig. 3), including an enclosure around the church (N), a courtyard or large building to the southeast (O), three areas to the west and north of the church enclosure (P, Q, R), walls north of Site A (S), and a possible wall just north of the stream (T).

4. Results of survey and recording

4.1 Methodology

A survey of the Scheduled area was undertaken using a Zeiss Elta-3 total station (figs. 2, 3). Three station points were set out along the cliff edge, marked with yellow-painted grid pegs. These were left *in situ* to facilitate subsequent monitoring of erosion (see Section 5.3). A dumpy-level traverse tied in Station 3 to the Ordnance Survey benchmark on the Rocket House (at SS 417 883) (81.81m OD).

For the initial survey, the instrument station (west of the road to the Old Rectory) was assigned the arbitrary grid coordinates 200m E / -200m N; its true HI was 39.50m. The station was oriented on estimated North. The station points, the track to the Old Rectory and various fences were then surveyed. These were plotted at 1:1000 and then reduced to 1:2500 to allow correlation with the Ordnance Survey plan. As a result, it was found that the survey north lay 6 degrees east of OS grid north. Further survey was undertaken from a station southeast of grid point 1, using angle and distance measurements; these were subsequently converted to site grid coordinates by calculation. The full list of the 130 readings and converted points is held in the site archive. The survey was plotted at scales of 1:1000 and 1:500. It was found that contour plots failed to reflect the site topography in an understandable form. Raised areas have been demarcated on fig. 2.

Although it had been intended that the whole of the Scheduled area would be surveyed, the absence of any features in the area of slope north of the track to the Old Rectory, or in the field to the east of that containing Sites A and B, meant that existing OS mapping of those areas was adequate.

General and detailed photographs of the archaeological site were taken in monochrome and colour transparency film.

Previously-unrecorded structures and possible structure were surveyed and described (see Appendix 3).

The geophysical survey results were plotted onto the survey plan (fig. 3). Although the GSB survey pegs had been left *in situ*, none were visible in the undergrowth. The surveys were therefore plotted using a best-fit based on fence-lines and other features.

4.2 Features identified (fig. 3)

4.2.1 Structures

Site A: house

Exposed masonry survived of the northeast corner of the excavated building. A further stretch of walling to the south is probably wall 042 rather than the southeast side of the building. Approximately 6m of the building has been lost since 1980 (Davidson *et al.* 1978, fig. 3).

Site B: church

The church site is enclosed by a post-and-wire fence. It is heavily vegetated. The principal visible feature is a large mound some 2m high, running north-south towards the west of the fenced area. It is assumed that this mound covers the west end of the church; the east end was exposed in 1980 (Davidson *et al.* 1987, fig. 4).

South field boundary

The ditch and more recent field bank to the south of the stream were recorded in 1990 (Owen-John 1991); they are still visible in the cliff-face.

001

A patch of stones in a low mound in the stream bed leading to Site A; this may be modern dumped material or part of a wall.

002

An exposed stretch of masonry running northwest-southeast, recorded in 1980 (Davidson *et al.* fig. 2); it is still visible.

003

A modern revetment wall to the north of the path to the beach (recorded to prevent confusion).

004

An area of masonry on the actively-eroding face of the cliff. It may be part of wall 008.

4.2.2 Middens

Midden material has been noted at wall 002 northwest of Site A, southeast of Site A, and to the north of the beach access path.

4.2.3 Geophysical anomalies

K, L, M, and N

This group of anomalies is assumed to reflect the presence of features associated with the church (site B), including the church itself (K), an enclosure wall (N) and two areas of possible structures (L and M).

P, Q, and R

This group of anomalies lies in the irregular area of sand-dunes west of the church enclosure; they may be structural.

S

To the north and south of 002, and parallel to it, there are two strong anomalies interpreted as possible walls. These lie within the area of midden material, and so a chronological relationship between structures and midden could be established by excavation.

T

A further possible wall noted on the cliff edge well to the south of previously-recorded features.

5. Erosion assessment

5.1 Evidence for past erosion (figs. 4, 5)

The chronology of past erosion is best recorded by the series of aerial photographs of the site (see Appendix 2). Mapping at a scale sufficient to reflect the localised changes has been too irregular to provide firm data.

Three types of erosion affect the site: wind erosion of the exposed sand, stream erosion, and marine erosion at the base of the cliff.

Of these, wind erosion was once a major management problem, but a programme of planting initiated by the National Trust in 1987 has effectively controlled this except at the cliff face. The archaeological impact of such erosion on structures was in any case small, restricted to the exposure of new features.

The stream has a high localised erosive potential, as was shown in 1980 when its course changed to that leading to Site A. The rapid loss of much of the interior stratigraphy of the building is an indication of the threat. The National Trust has since ensured that the stream reverted to its main course, although the northern bed does have an intermittent water flow. The head material underlying the sand is relatively resistant.

The principal erosion threat to the site as a whole is therefore marine erosion. Regular high water levels and heavy wave action at the base of the cliff leads to slumping of the cliff-face and land slips. This probably explains the retreat of the cliff-face by 5m over the period 1980-1995, with increased loss at the south end of the site.

5.2 Future threats

It is to be expected that marine erosion will continue to undermine the site along the cliff face, and therefore that the erosion face will retreat to the east. The coastline falls within Welsh Office General Level Service coastal survey units W.84.5070 and W.84.5075, classified as highly exposed to erosion; the GGAT coastal archaeology survey classified it as erosion class 5 (severe) in the Gwynedd Archaeological Trust assessment categories.

The sharply-cut stream valley at the south of the site is likely to see a higher degree of loss from a combination of stream action and land-slips on the greater height of head material.

Site B, up to 50m from the present face, may be lost in 100-150 years; the features identified in the area west of Site B and within 20m of the cliff-face may be lost within the next 20-30 years (fig. 4).

5.3 Monitoring points

To allow the future rate of erosion to be readily monitored, a number of fixed points have been identified (see fig. 4).

Marker	NGR ¹	Site grid reference	Current distance to cliff face
GGAT grid peg 1 (yellow)	SS 41505 88332	136.507E / -244.959N / 26.89OD	5.5m
GGAT grid peg 2 (yellow)	SS 41502 88375	130.790E / -206.033N / 21.86OD	12.0m

GGAT grid peg 3 (yellow)	SS 41502 88450	124.392E / -126.615N / 17.80OD	5.5m
Fence around church site: southwest corner	SS 41520 88373	148.235E / -204.371N / 22.87OD	29.3m
South boundary of site: fencepost with two arms	SS 41520 88270	177.172E / -312.581N / 37.75OD	32.5m
Wall of Site A	SS 41512 88350	142.08E / -235.48N / 27.72OD	5.5m

¹ Estimated from plot of site survey on OS 1:2500.

6. Conclusion

6.1 *Nature of the site*

The identification of the site as a besanded medieval settlement is correct, although the previously-preferred hypothesis that it represents an earlier location of the village of Rhossili is felt to be improbable. It is considered more likely that the site is part of a monastic estate owned by the Knights Hospitallers.

The quality of preservation to be expected from a besanded site is high (as reflected in the painted wall-plaster found *in situ* in the church).

The strong evidence for medieval burials associated with the church, extending into the area of current erosion to the west, is another aspect of high potential.

The geophysical survey and the exposed stonework around the site suggests that, even if it is not a village, there remain more structures to be identified within the area at high risk of erosion.

6.2 *Erosion threat*

The current rate of loss due to marine erosion is of the order of 1m per year. The strip within 20m of the present cliff-face can therefore be considered to be at risk of loss in the medium term.

Archaeological features related to the use of the site are likely to be lost from the cliff edge on a shorter timescale.

In the long term, it is likely that all of the features now known, including the church, will be lost over the next 100-150 years.

6.3 *Possible management strategies*

Two alternative strategies to manage the archaeological effects of erosion may be adopted.

6.3.1 *Monitoring and emergency recording*

Regular (perhaps annual) visits to the site by archaeologists could be carried out to measure erosion and to record and investigate any features exposed, resulting in the creation in the long term of a coherent record of the archaeology of the site.

6.3.2 *Pre-emptive excavation*

Alternatively, it may be felt to be more effective to carry out excavation of threatened parts of the site in advance of erosion to allow their investigation to be undertaken in controlled circumstances. Such a programme could be timed to achieve the greatest possible benefit from external resourcing (perhaps by a joint project between the National Trust, Cadw: Welsh Historic Monuments and GGAT).

6.4 *Recommended action*

The selection of an appropriate management strategy depends on the nature and value of the archaeological resource under direct threat.

It is therefore recommended that a limited evaluation be undertaken to clarify the following issues:

1. Extent of wall 002, relationship to midden, nature of geophysical anomalies S
2. Nature of geophysical feature T
3. Investigation of "cemetery" area west of Site B (geophysical features P and Q) to test for the presence of burials
4. Testing of strong anomalies N and O to interpret context of Site B.

The evaluation, comprising six 3m x 1m trenches, would be a small-scale project which could be undertaken at small cost for the information generated. Such data would provide a firm basis for the proper future management of this important site.

Appendix 1: Index of archaeological interventions and management

pre 1928	Medieval pot and a human jaw eroded from "a very small midden below the church" (Lethbridge 1928, 177)
1949	Two skeletons recovered from The Warren (Rutter 1949, 12-13): "a few years earlier, a number of skeletons were exposed near this point"
1966	Site visit by RCAHMW (RCAHMW 1981, 361)
1979	Erosion
1980	Animal and human bone reported from stream at cliff edge (D Jenkins: photograph, plan and note in SMR) Excavation Site A building, Site B building (church) (Davidson and Davidson 1980a; 1980b; Davidson <i>et al.</i> 1987) Plan of buildings at 1:250 (HT of RCAHMW) ¹ SAM designation December
1981	Artefacts recovered (Davidson <i>et al.</i> 1987)
1982	Report on site visit, erosion (Sell for GGAT 1982) Site description and survey at 1:2500 (ASP of RCAHMW) ²
1985	Site visit to locate church and house (Toft for GGAT: site visit form in SMR)
1986	National Trust acquires land
1987	SMC: dune cutting, matting and seeding, channel drainage water
1990	exposure following land-slip Five-Year Management Plan drawn up by National Trust
1990	Recording of exposed features (Owen-John 1991)
1992	SMC: repair to path
1995	SMC: resurfacing track to Rectory, drainage for track, burial of electricity and telephone cables
1996	Geophysical survey of church and Rectory (GSB 1996) Site visit for Coastal Survey (Locock 1996)

¹ This plan was not related to any external points. It formed the basis of GGAT's published plans (Davidson *et al.* 1987, fig. 2, Davidson and Davidson 1980a fig. 1).

² This plan is fixed in relation to the path, stream and coast, all of which have since moved

Appendix 2: Catalogue of air photographs

As part of the Scheduled Ancient Monument aerial monitoring programme undertaken by RCAHMW and GGAT for Cadw: Welsh Historic Monuments, the site has been photographed on three occasions since its designation in 1980. The 1988 flight did not take a close-up of the site.

Date	Film/frame reference nos.	Taken by
1980	Not stated: print in SMR file 1862w	Terry James
1988	A64/15-16	GGAT
1991	A109/05	RCAHMW
1995	A131/32	GGAT

The evidence of erosion on the photographs is presented on fig. 5.

The National Trust holds a collection of colour slides, showing the site, taken annually from the beach. These were not consulted for the present study because it was felt that the air photographs provided better information on the site as a whole.

Appendix 3: Site recording

Structures and possible structures

001 In the stream bed leading to Site A, at the east end of a low bank (presumed stabilised sand dune), there are three large squarish stones, perhaps a wall. No trace of mortar was visible. It is possible that the feature is a product of modern dumping to re-direct the stream down the south course.

002 Length of wall, noted in 1980 (Davidson *et al.* 1980, fig. 2), running northwest-southeast to the north of Site A.

003 Modern revetment wall to north of path.

004 Part of 0.6m-wide wall exposed at top of eroding face; apparently clay-bonded (perhaps Site A wall 008)

Other features

Middens

Midden material has been recorded at the following points:

in cliff face north of grid peg 2

to north and south of 002

to southeast of Site A building

Quarries

Two exposed rock-faces were surveyed (see fig. 2). They are presumed to be of fairly recent origin. The southern quarry has a small sheep-walk or pathway leading northeast towards the stream.

Limekilns

The two limekilns recorded on the OS map have been demolished.

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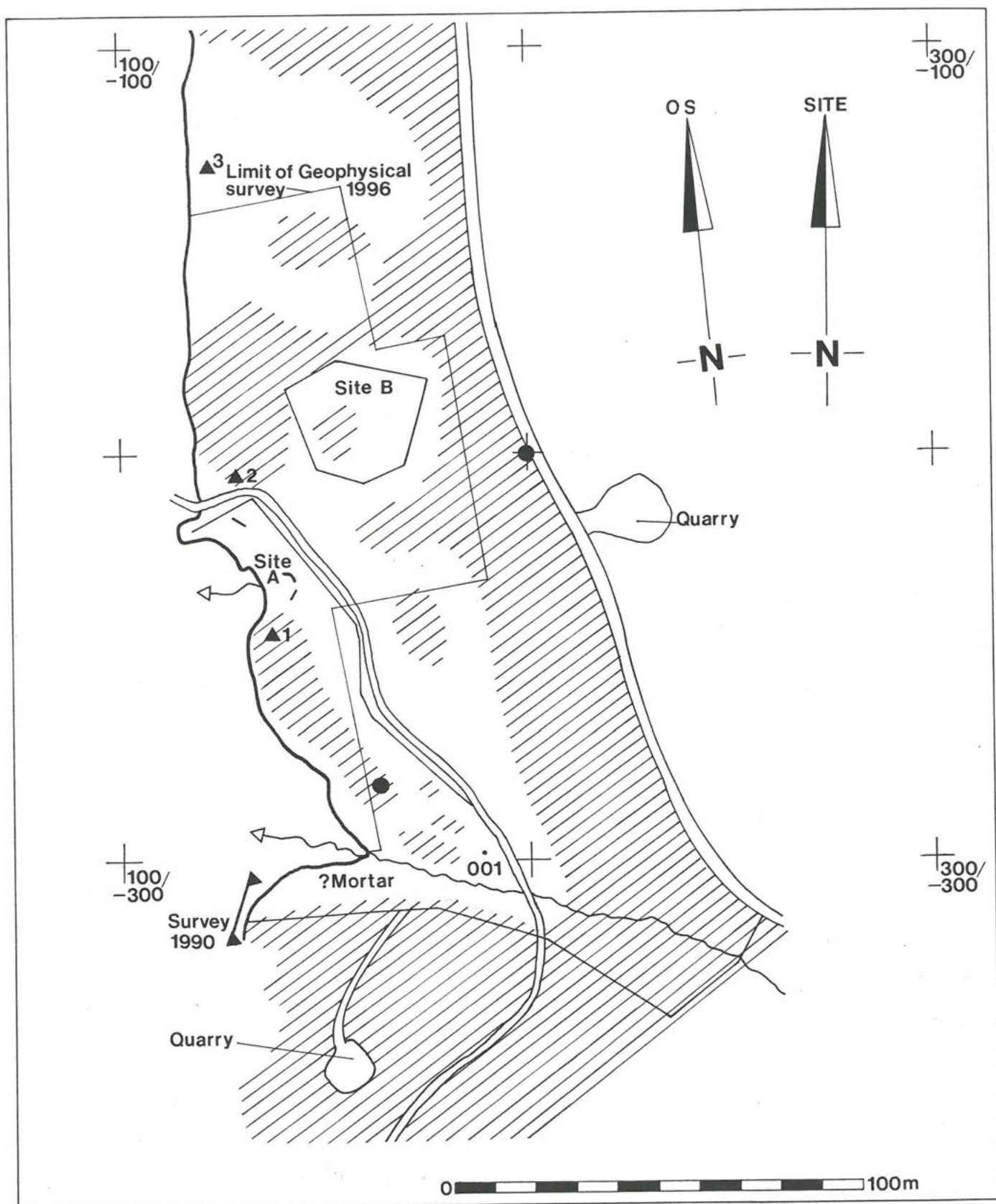


Figure 2: Survey of the site showing principal features and location of Sites A and B (1980), cliff-face recording (1990) and geophysical survey (1996) (scale 1:750)

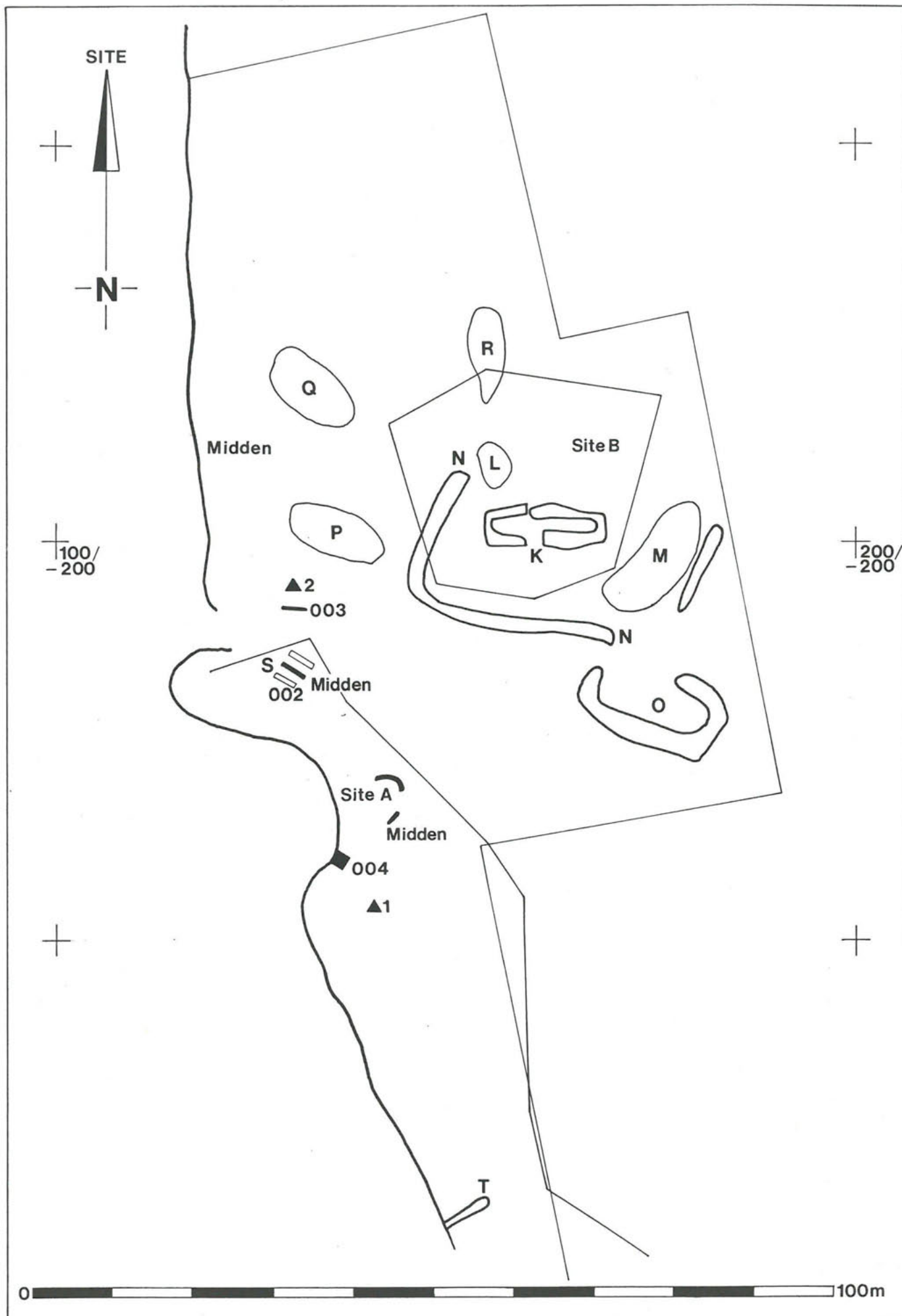


Figure 3: Detail of Sites A and B, with geophysical features plotted (scale 1:625)

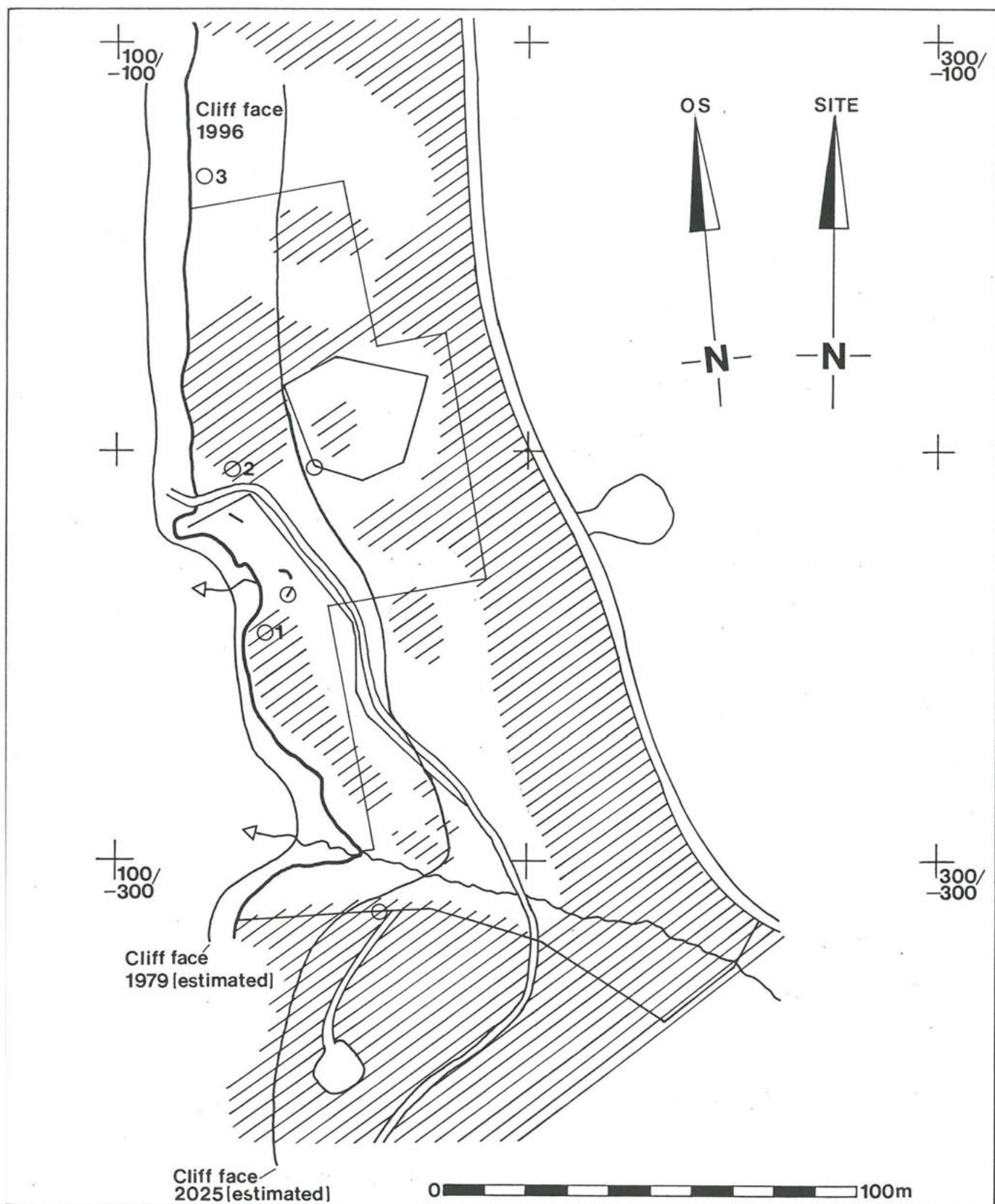


Figure 4: Erosion assessment: historic erosion and predicted future threat; erosion monitoring points marked (scale 1:750)

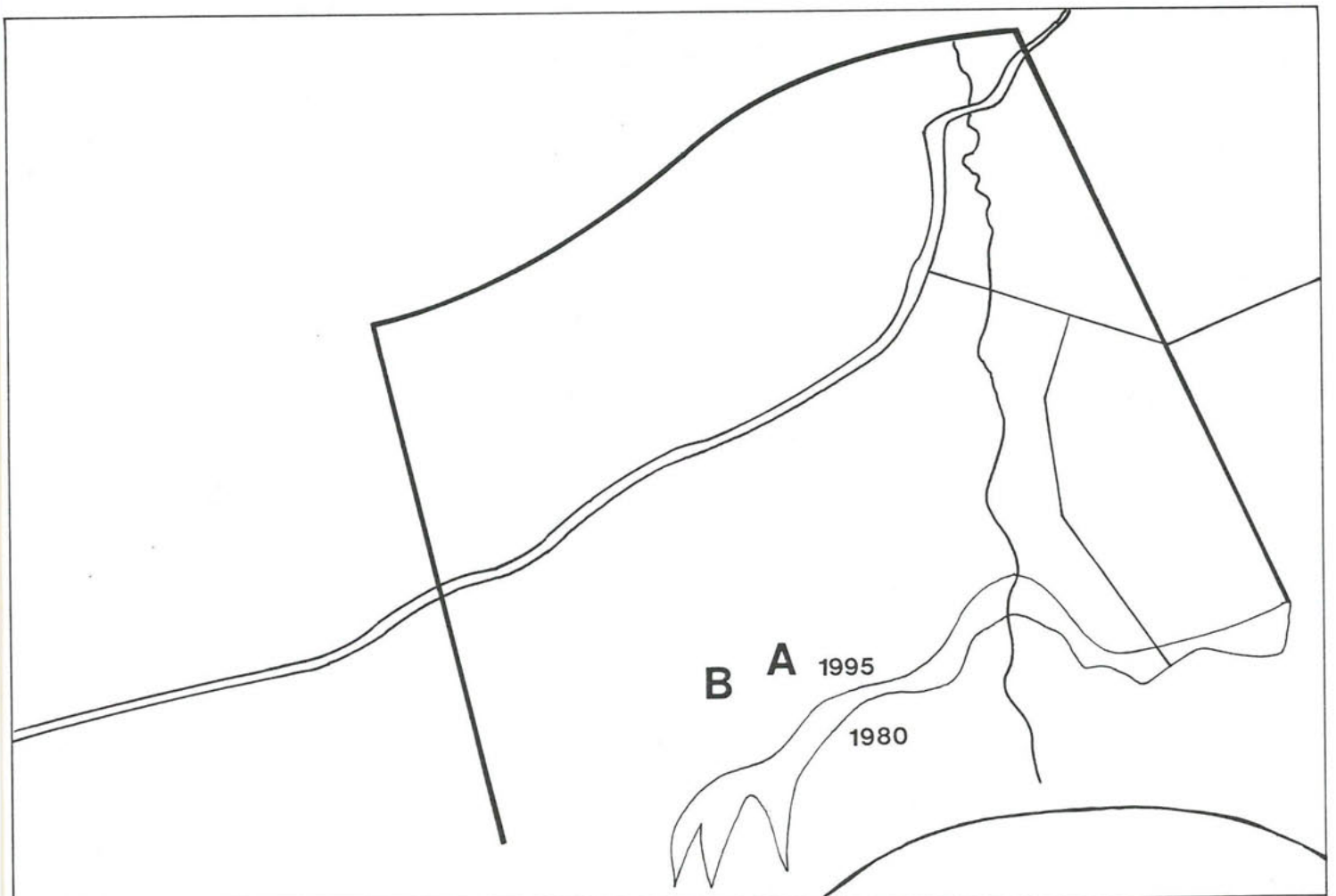
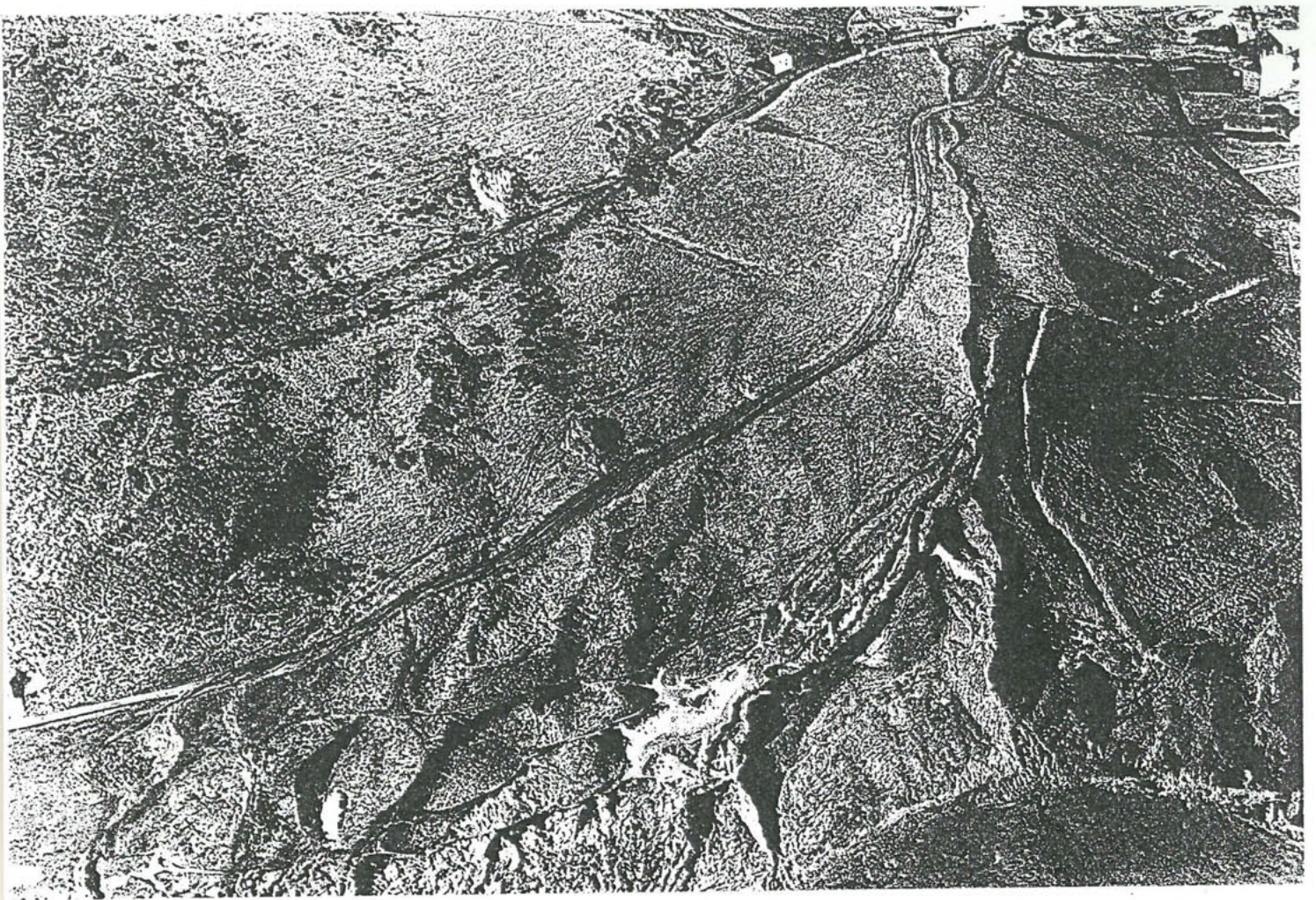


Figure 5: Aerial photograph of site (Terry James, 1980), annotated to show Scheduled area, Sites A and B and cliff edge in 1980 and 1995