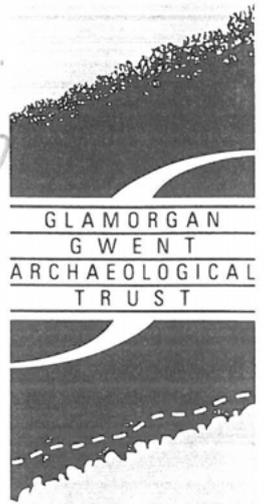


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**Abergavenny Castle, Gwent : North East Tower**

**Heritage Recording**

**October 1998**

**A report for Monmouthshire County Council by S H Sell**



*Mrs G. Palmer del.* **ABERGAVENTNY CASTLE.** *W. Byrne sculp.*  
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### **Summary**

Monmouthshire County Council are undertaking a rolling programme of repair and preservation work on the Scheduled Ancient Monument of Abergavenny Castle, Gwent. Phase 1b involves consolidation of the North East Tower and associated structural remains, and during this part of the programme it became necessary to remove and replace a section of unsound 19th century retaining wall below the north wall of the tower. In accordance with the requirements of Cadw:Welsh Historic Monuments for the exposed surfaces, previously concealed by the retaining wall, to be cleaned and recorded archaeologically the Glamorgan-Gwent Archaeological Trust (Contracts Division) (hereafter GGAT Contracts) was commissioned to undertake the work. In addition to the specified task GGAT Contracts were subsequently required to record and remove the remainder of the section of the wall in question ready for reconstruction to take place upon new foundations. Groundwork was limited to the removal of the retaining wall and cleaning of the wall trench and bank above sufficient for recording to take place. This work took place between October 1st and 5th, 1998, and results indicate that the retaining wall concealed an early bank which had subsequently been used as the foundation for the North East Tower. The bank must have turned at this point towards the west, perhaps on a line followed by the later curtain wall, but both have been completely lost in the area to the north west of the tower

### **Acknowledgments**

The work was carried out by S H Sell of GGAT Contracts with assistance from Gerald Gregory and Rosie Irons, to whom thanks are due. The writer is also grateful to GGAT Illustration Department for the artwork and to Frank Olding, Curator of Abergavenny Museum, and to Steve Tipping, the mason in charge, for their help and advice during the project.

### **Copyright Notice**

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## **1 Introduction**

### *1.1 Development proposal and commission*

Monmouthshire County Council, as part of Phase 1 of their rolling programme for preservation of the Scheduled Ancient Monument (hereafter SAM) of Abergavenny Castle (SAM MM 56) have partly dismantled an unsound section of 19th century retaining wall below the north face of the castle's north east tower. Under the terms of Scheduled Monument Consent (SMC) it was required by Cadw that the exposed surfaces, thought to show a section of early medieval bank, should be recorded before reconstruction took place. GGAT Contracts was commissioned to carry out this work, with the additional task of completing the removal of the section of wall in question and carrying out all such recording as was deemed necessary. The work took place between 1st and 5th October 1998.

### *1.2 Location and historical background*

Abergavenny Castle (NGR SO 299139) lies to the south of the town on the south east end of a natural spur at c65m OD, overlooking the Usk close to its confluence with the Gavenny River. The natural geology is glacial sands and gravels overlying Old Red Sandstone. Founded by Hamelin de Ballon c1087, the motte still survives, albeit in much altered form, and a length of bank attributable to the Norman bailey which lay to the north was noted beneath the East Tower during excavations in 1990 (Maylan 1990, 8). The present stone structural remains mostly belong to the early 14th century and are thought to be the work of John de Hastings and his son, another John, and to be contemporary with the rebuilding of the town walls in stone. The castle was besieged during the Glyndwr rebellion in 1404, but was not taken and continued to be maintained until at least the time of Leland (1538). There followed a period of decay, but the castle saw further service during the Civil War, being to some extent slighted in 1645. Coxe's plan of 1799 shows the castle more or less intact, but during the early 19th century the growth of the town and specifically the construction of a hunting lodge on the motte undoubtedly caused major damage to the site and the removal of much of its stone for reuse elsewhere, as probably occurred in the case of the curtain wall to the north of the North East Tower.

### *1.3 Layout of the report*

The report describes the results of the fieldwork in Section 2, with conclusions given in Section 3.

## **2 Fieldwork Results**

### *2.1 Methodology*

The section of the bank revealed by the partial removal of the 19th century retaining wall (context 001) was cleaned and trimmed to a limited extent, so far as to allow recording to be undertaken with reasonable accuracy, but was not cut back to a vertical face. The lowest courses of wall 001 were also cleaned, and the adjacent soil level cleared of loose material. The upstanding section of the retaining wall was given a thorough clean, and superficial cleaning was also carried out on other adjacent stonework for photographic purposes. Relationships were then recorded photographically and a plan made of the lowest courses of wall 001. The exposed section (context 013) was also drawn. Subsequently the decision was taken to remove the lowest courses of wall 001, and this was carried out archaeologically, with further reduction of the upstanding part of the wall to the west. No excavation took place beyond the limits of the retaining wall. The new levels reached were cleaned and recorded fully, with a further plan being made of the exposed levels in advance of reconstruction.

### *2.2 Results*

Removal of wall 001 over much of its length afforded the opportunity to examine its construction and immediate relationships in some detail, but the information on the sequence of events in this part of the castle's defences was otherwise strictly limited. It appears that wall 001 had been built into the side of

what seems likely to have been part of an early defensive bank, in order to prevent further erosion, perhaps following the collapse of the north eastern defences in the 19th century. The wall itself was only faced on the outside and was constructed of mixed sandstone rubble construction loosely mortared. It had been contoured into the side of the ?bank/natural scarp (general context number 013) with a width of up to 0.70m. It was stepped down from west to east, but despite its present condition its builders appear to have sought a stable base for their foundation. As well as its function of revetting the layers into which it was partially cut it also has the appearance of underpinning the mass of masonry formed by the battered lower courses, now surviving as corework only, of the north wall of the North East Tower at its junction with the curtain wall, now just a stub (contexts 007 and 014). This originally ran in a north westerly direction at this point towards a junction with the Town Wall, according to Coxe's plan of 1799 (Fig.5a).

On the outside (north) of wall 001 an accumulation of garden soil and debris, of 19th century or later date (context 012) presumably indicates recent use of the land belonging to properties on Cross Street, whose boundaries can still be traced (Fig.2, contexts 003 and 005). One of these garden walls (003) formed an acute angle with wall 001 at its western end, where it had been built into a poorly-constructed section of wall (context 002). The present perimeter wall (context 004) appears to have been added in the late 19th century and does not respect any earlier defensive work. Wall 002 has the present appearance of filling the gap between the north west corner of the North East Tower and the later perimeter wall (004), and of strengthening the retaining wall 001 which lies beneath it. It may be the surviving remnant of an earlier post-medieval boundary, returning as garden wall 003 and now redrawn by wall 004. It was difficult to be clear on relationships between the various sections of post-medieval wall outside and to the north west of the tower - all except wall 001 strictly lie outside the scope of this report.

At its eastern end the relationships of 001 became less clear. It appears to narrow somewhat as it merges with the lower stonework of the tower which descends towards the east - the lowest courses (context 015) appear to be distinct from the mass of the main construction (contexts 007 and 014, with 006, the north wall of the tower, and 010, the stub of the curtain, above). 015 may be a foundation stepped into the earlier bank to afford more stability for the structures above. A number of late 19th century stamped bricks noted at a low level within the line of wall 001 may be intrusive, perhaps belonging to a later repair, although wall 001 does contain in its construction some brick of earlier - perhaps early 19th century - date.

The surface exposed by the removal of 001 appeared to be formed, at least in part, from layers of dumped material and is thus likely to be part of an earlier defensive bank (general context 013). The uppermost layer (context 017) lying directly below context 014, the corework of the base of the curtain wall stub, was a reddish-brown clayey soil with sparse small stone and frequent flecks of fired clay with a lesser frequency of small charcoal. This overlay a denser, more compact although otherwise similar layer with less stone and occasional flecks of charcoal and fired clay (context 018). The lowest layer (019) was much looser, with a much higher content of gravel and small pebbles. It is this level into which wall 001 was seen to be terraced, and which appeared to drop away fairly steeply to the north east, following the removal of wall 001. What appears to be a tipline of pebbles shows running down shallowly towards the west near the interface with layer 018 above, but this entire layer most likely represents the natural glacial gravel upon which Abergavenny Castle was built. Layers 017 and 018, however, are clearly introduced - although no finds were noted the content of charcoal and fired clay - probably daub from timber building construction - point towards these layers having been dumped from clearance elsewhere, the upper (017) containing a widespread scatter of destruction material.

### 3 Conclusions

The purpose of the conditions attached to Scheduled Monument Consent was to ensure that a record was made of any exposures and not to carry out any intrusive investigations. In such circumstances interpretation of the exposed remains is necessarily strictly limited. If the upper levels revealed by the removal of the retaining wall represent a surviving part of the bank of the Norman bailey, it was not possible to hazard its alignment at this point, where it must turn towards the west from a line due north - south. The bank was previously noted in some detail beneath the East Tower (Maylan 1990, 7-8) and may well have set the line for the later curtain wall at least between the East and North East Towers. The curtain wall, now a stub only beyond the position of the North East Tower, could have followed the line taken by the earlier bank here also, with both now completely lost, possibly as the result of a landslip after Coxe's time (Fig. 5ab; Frank Olding *pers. comm.*) Such a slip is indicated by the line of the late 19th century boundary wall (004) and the lie of the land to its north. The loss of the defences to the north west of the North East Tower could perhaps have been hastened by robbing of the castle's materials for the growing town of Abergavenny, or to have led to further removal of stonework; conversely the result could have been the construction of a retaining wall - 001- to prevent further erosion and collapse at this corner of the castle defences.

### Bibliography

Maylan, C. N. 1990 *Excavations at the South East Tower of Abergavenny Castle* (GGAT report)

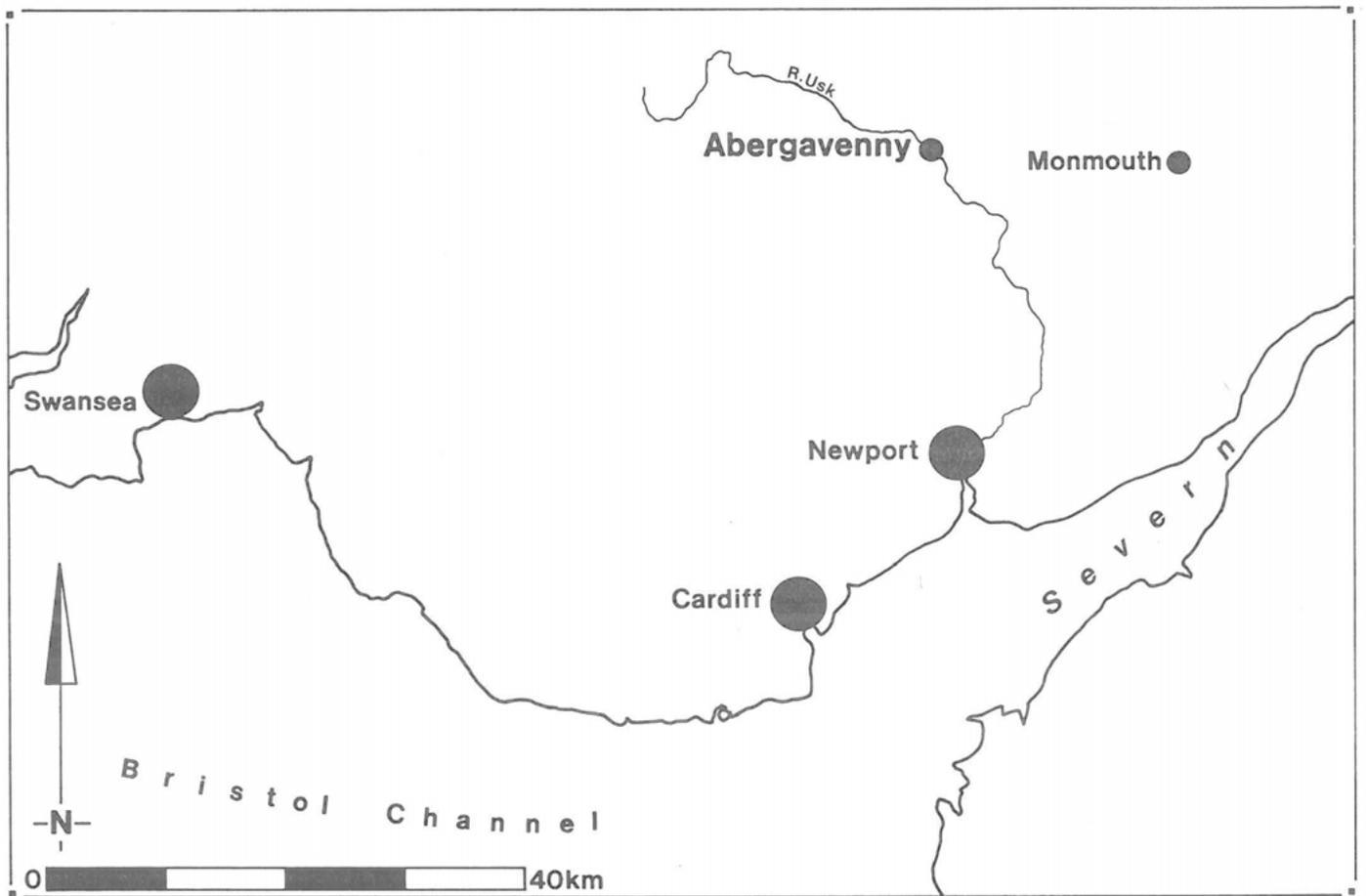


Fig 1 Location plan

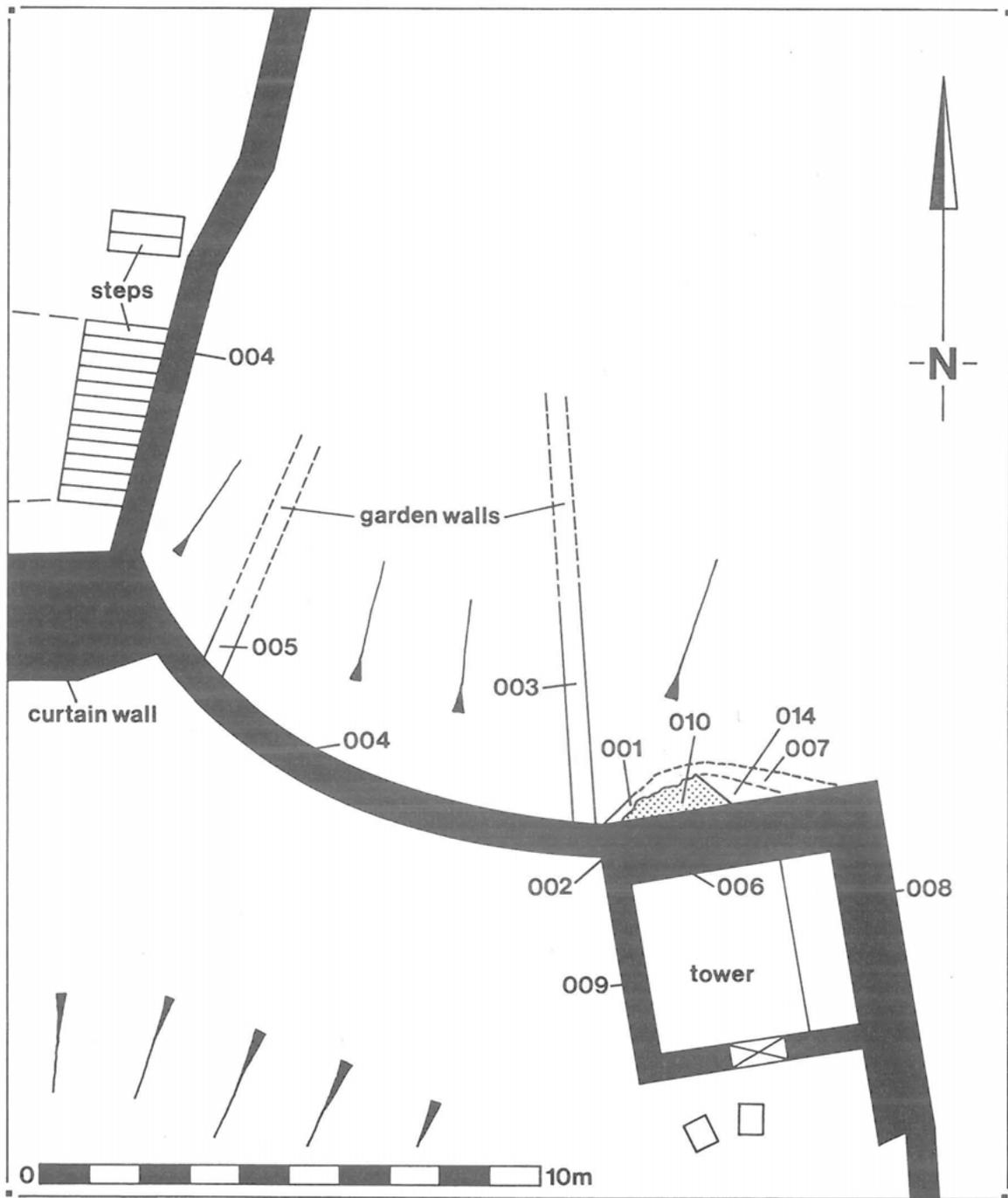


Fig 2 Study area (sketch) showing positions of main features.

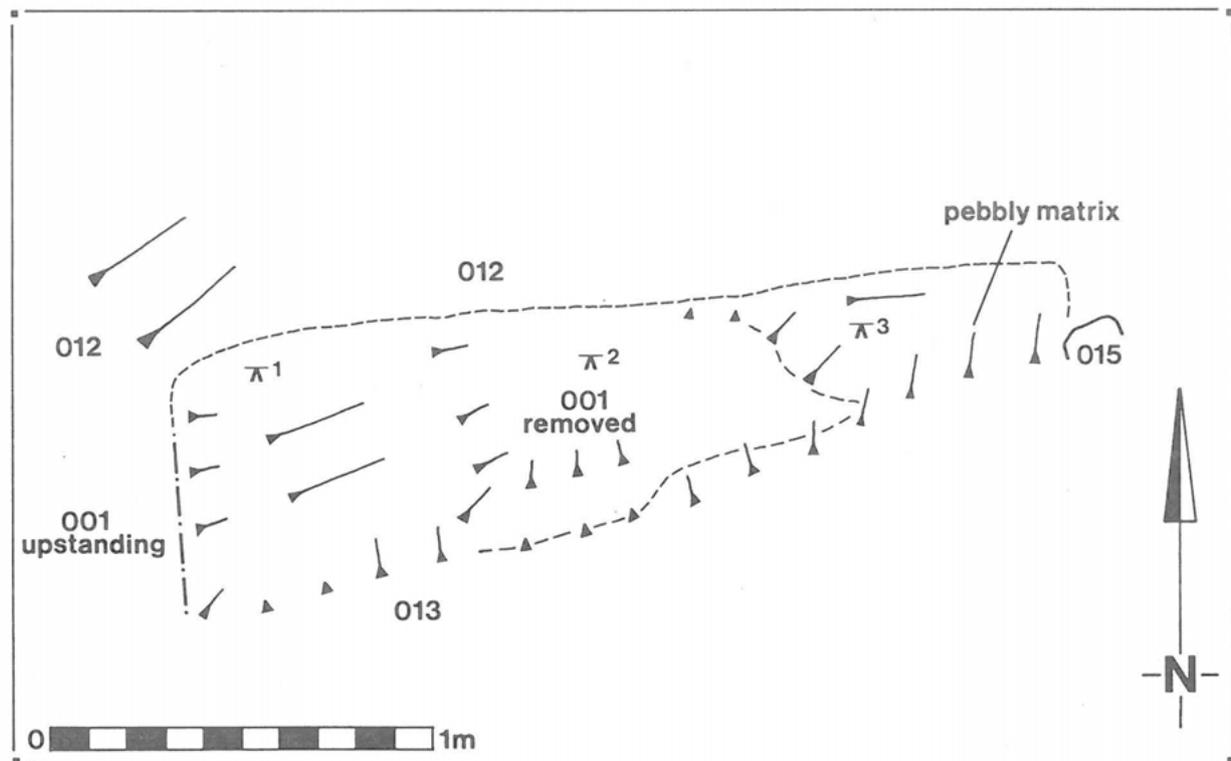
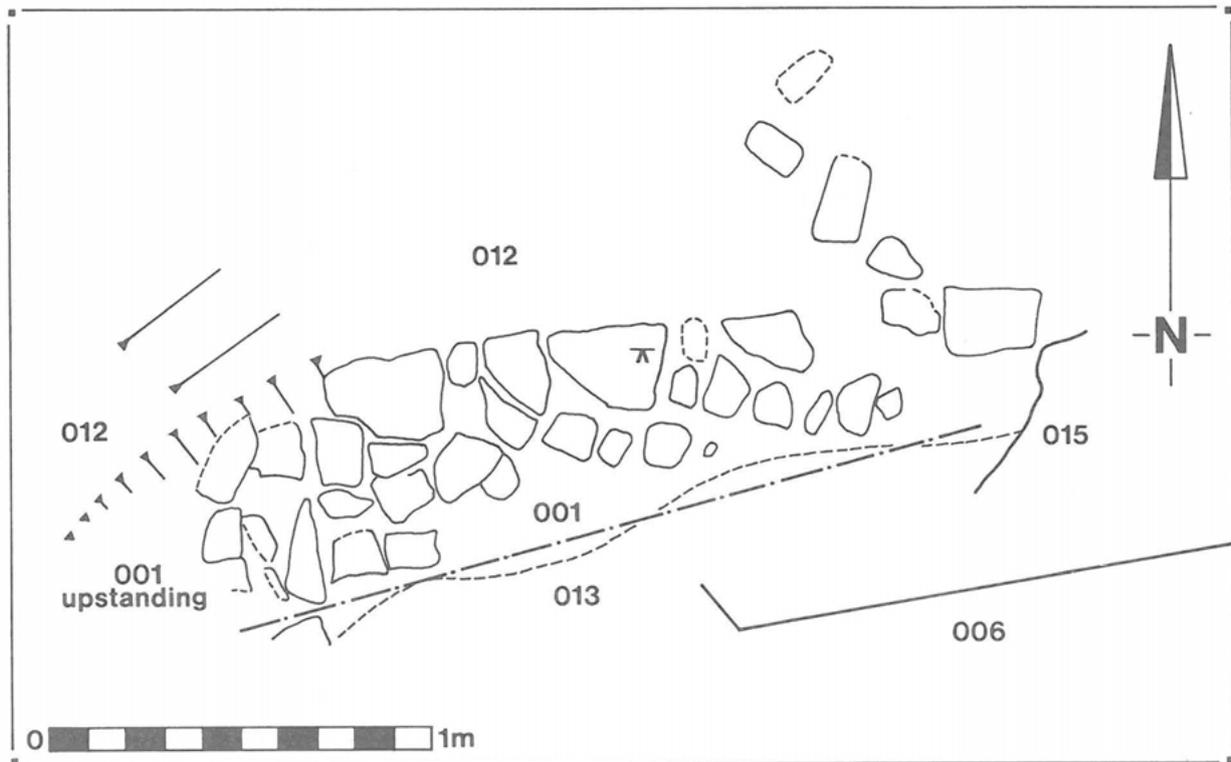


Fig 3 Retaining wall 001 before (upper) and after removal

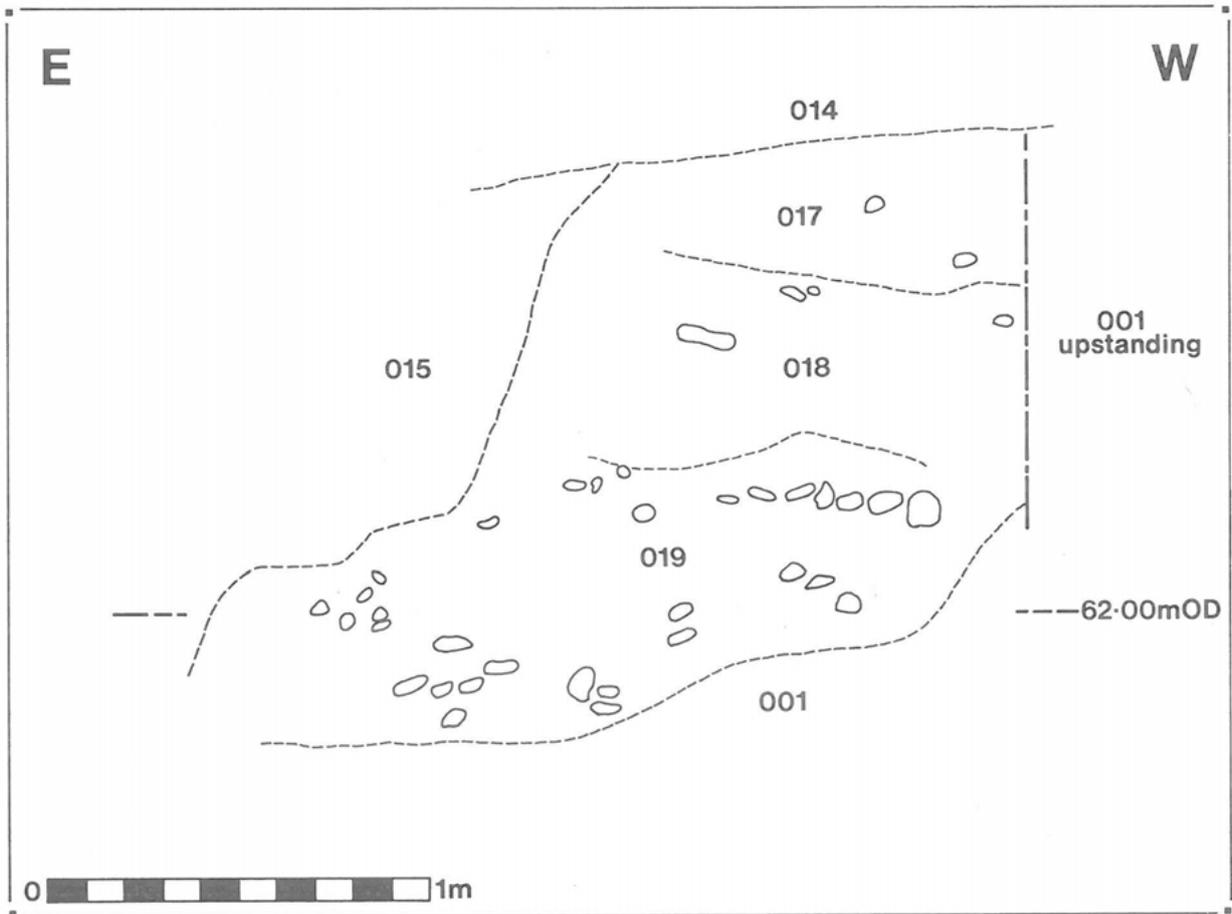
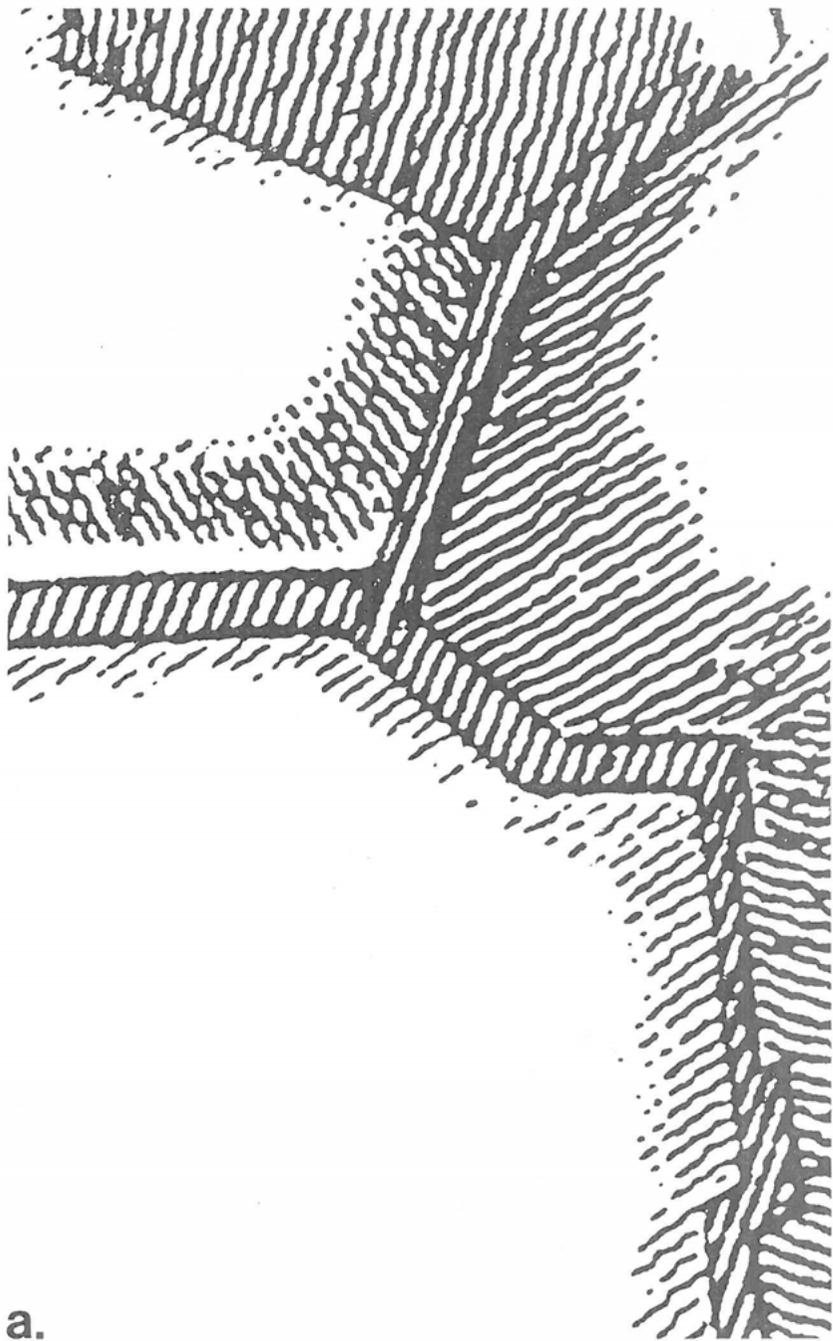
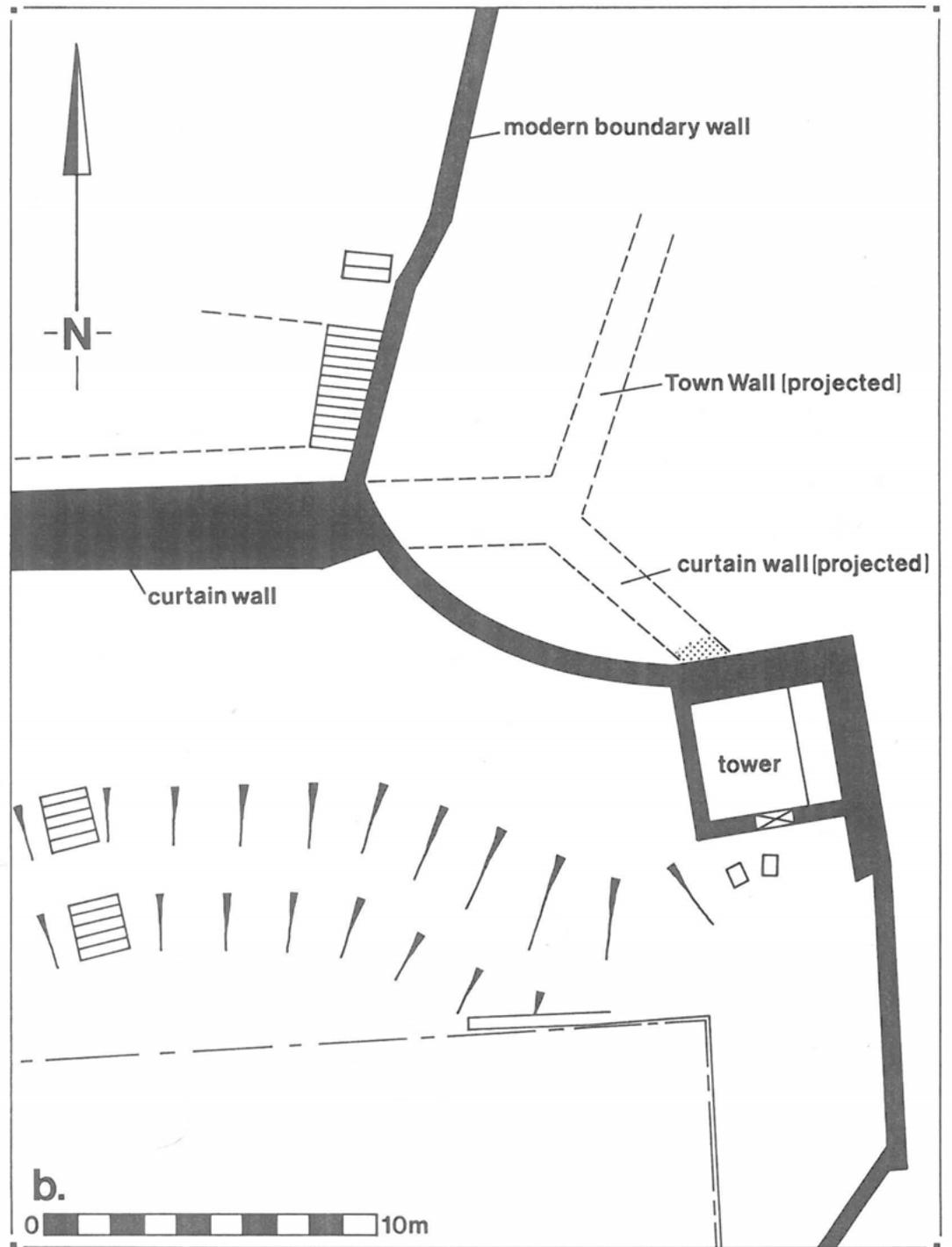


Fig 4 Section of exposed bank 013



a.

Fig 5 Detail from Coxe (1799) (a) with conjectural line of curtain wall shown for comparison (b)



b.

0 10m