

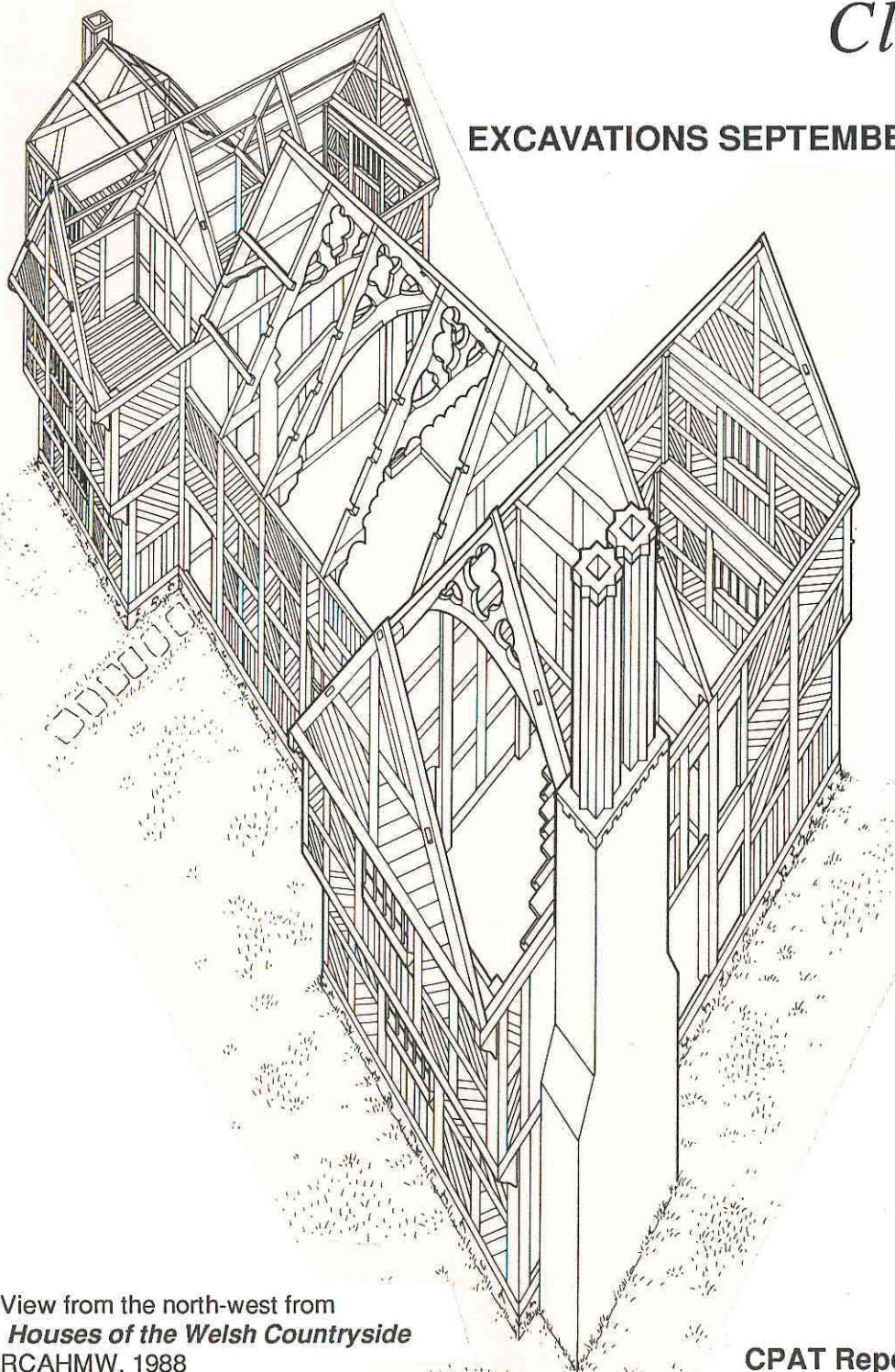
THE CLWYD-POWYS ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRUST

Althrey Hall

Bangor-is-y-coed

Clwyd

EXCAVATIONS SEPTEMBER 1991



View from the north-west from
Houses of the Welsh Countryside
RCAHMW, 1988

CPAT Report No 22

Althrey Hall
Bangor-is-y-coed
Clwyd

EXCAVATIONS SEPTEMBER 1991

report by J R Cole
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INTRODUCTION

Althrey Hall (SJ 379441) is a Grade 1 listed building. Until recently the exterior was rendered and pebble-dashed. The record of the Ordnance Survey field visit in 1975 is somewhat dismissive: 'most of the half-timberwork is a sham, beams having been largely replaced by boarding, particularly in the gable-ends. Consequently very little original work is now visible and the house is not outstanding'. The full significance of the building only became clearly apparent once extensive repairs were started, which amount to almost complete rebuilding.

An initial survey of the building by the Royal Commission on Ancient and Historical Monuments in Wales which appeared in the first edition of *Houses of the Welsh Countryside* (Smith 1975, 120, fig 59b) has now been superseded by the series of amended and greatly more detailed measured drawings, including a perspective and interior reconstruction in the second edition (Smith 1988, 622-25, figs 199-202), from which the following description is taken. The house consists of a classic H-plan that is an open hall flanked by two storeyed cross-wings. The hall was entered by a passage screened by a spere-truss. The cross-wing at the passage end appear to have housed two service rooms between which a corridor led directly to the kitchen sited in a block built at right-angles to the cross-wing. The kitchen appears to be original and had a timber-framed fireplace. Enough survives of the three-door passage partition and corridor to make a complete reconstruction of this end of the building. At the other end the dais partition had two doorways given on to two parlours.

The discovery in 1987 of a wall painting of Elis ap Richard (d 1558) and his wife Jane Hanmer on the wall of their first floor chamber (Smith 1988, 609-10, pl VII), suggests that the present house may have been built between c 1520 - 1530, with the insertion of a lateral fireplace and first floor to the open hall following some years later.

At the request of the owner, Mr & Mrs T Smith, a brief was prepared by the Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust (dated 5 August 1991) which made recommendations for archaeological excavations and recording work in response to the on-going renovation works both in and around the building. Apart from substantial work to the standing structure, the current programme also included lowering the floor level within the hall and passage for the insertion of a new floor. The later floor surfaces, consisting of tiles, had already been removed, revealing earthen floor layers, with possible evidence of in situ burning. It was considered that further lowering of the interior would affect potentially important archaeological deposits relating to earlier phases of the house, and might also include evidence for any earlier structure on the site. Some evidence might already have been disturbed by clearance work that had already taken place and the opportunity already lost for recording floor level within the central bay of the east wing.

Specific proposals were included in the brief for immediate work on floor levels within the central hall area, although it was also recommended that consideration should be given to the archaeological potential of other areas in and around the hall which might be affected by future programmes of work, including the west wing, the north and south bays of the east wing, areas immediately outside the present building in response to the lowering of ground levels, the possible demolition of the Victorian wing to the rear and the proposed construction of a new house within the grounds.

EXCAVATIONS IN SEPTEMBER 1991

The excavation were carried out over a period of nine days within the central hall area. An

area of approximately 20m² was excavated, just under half of the original floor area of the hall (fig 1). Relevant context numbers are given bold in the following description.

The area available for excavation and the location of baulks and section lines was to some extent dictated by the need to retain access through the screens passage on the east and across the dais end at the western end of the hall to the foot of the present stairs, by scaffolding supporting a bressummer of the first floor, and by recent disturbances. Excavations extended to the low stone footings supporting the timber framing of the north wall of the hall (**3**), the massive pad-stone or stylobate supporting the northern end of the spere-truss on the eastern side of the hall (**1**), and up to the western side of the cross-passage

Areas of stone flags, concrete and wooden parquet flooring had already been removed. Initially work was concentrated on cleaning up the interior of the hall and cutting as straight and vertical as possible the edge of a number of previous small excavations and recent disturbances below this level.

Examination of the sections provided by the existing disturbances indicated that the uppermost layer of flooring material was composed of an homogeneous layer of silty clay (**7**) and clay hearth base (**9**) contemporary with the present building. North-south and east-west medial sections were temporarily retained in order to record the sections, and then the entire layer was quickly removed.

This revealed an earlier floor level (**22**) associated with a lower hearth (**10**). A decision to retain the upper hearth for display determined the location of the a narrow section dug across the lower one. This, together with another narrow section excavated through an area of stony clay in the north-east corner of the hall were the only areas excavated below this level.

Phase 1

The earliest features within the hall were two probable postholes (**25, 27**) whose outlines were partly and fortuitously identified in the narrow sections mentioned above (not illustrated). Posthole **27**, more than c 0.25m across, was identified in the section excavated through the layer (**8/22**) beneath one of the hearths (**10**). Posthole **25**, c 0.42 by more than 0.36m across, lay beneath a similar depth of clay some 2.50m to the north-east in the narrow section in the north-east corner of the hall. Both were cut through a smooth surface of compact silty clay (**26**) which appeared to form an earlier surface. Neither of the two postholes were excavated to their full depth, but were both greater than c 0.3m deep from the surface of layer **26**. Neither of the features contained stone packing; they were filled with silty clay, and the lack of any surviving evidence of timber suggests that the original posts had been withdrawn. There was no evidence of whether the two are directly associated with each other or what form of structure they represent.

Phase 2

The compact silty clay (**8/22**) sealing these two postholes appeared to form the matrix for a second floor. It was immediately overlain by the earlier of the two superimposed hearths and appears to have been contemporary with three postholes of a timber structure pre-dating the present building.

The lower hearth (10) was formed on the surface of the new flooring material and had a slightly dished upper surface and was represented by an reddened area of clay sited more or less at the centre of the present hall. The limits of the more intensely oxidised area (cross-hatched on fig 2) suggests that the hearth had a rectangular outline c 0.8 by 2.5m across aligned along the main axis of the present building. On the surface of the hearth was a layer of wood ash and charcoal up to c 0.02m thick, which included recognisable twig fragments (sample AH1). Slight disturbances to the hearths suggesting cleaning out and the movement of the hearth over the central floor space of the building suggest the presence of a hearth in this area over probably a number of years.

About 1.80m north of the hearth and 0.4 and closely parallel with the inside the footings of the north wall of the present hall were two postholes (12, 16) cut into layer 8/22. Both were distinctly oblong in plan; each measured approximately 0.40-0.45m north-south by 0.25-0.30m east-west, and 0.4m in depth from the surface of layer 8/22. They both contained rounded packing stones but no trace of rotted timber or charcoal survived. At a point 2m to the south-east a third posthole (21) was noted in section during the excavation of a large oval pit (18), through which the posthole had been dug. Its dimensions, approximately 0.30m east-west by over 0.25m north-south (to the section-line), closely resembles postholes 12 and 16 in form though lacking any stone packing.

A spread of angular stones and chippings (8b) up to c 0.05m thick occupied the north-east corner of the hall, extending from the south-west angle of the adjacent spere-truss pad-stone (1) towards the stone footings 2m west.

A probable foundation-trench (11) for these footings, c 0.20m wide and 0.05-0.08m deep, was noted cutting through this layer along part of the north wall of the hall and surrounding the spere-truss pad-stone itself, indicating that the layer pre-dates the present building.

An irregular oval posthole (14), c 0.3m by 0.45m across and 0.58m deep, cut the edge of the pit 18 noted above. The lower fill (20) included fragments of tile or brick, rotten bone, together with small angular stones resembling those in layer 8b noted above, while the upper fill (15) contained frequent chippings, implying a short lifespan before infilling with sweepings and construction debris.

Phase 3

The layers and features described above were all sealed by a homogeneous layer of silty clay 7, between 0.12-22m thick, almost completely free of pebbles. The surface of this layer was fairly level and was butted tightly against the stone footings for the sill beam of the north wall of the hall and spere-truss stylobate. The layer therefore appears to form the floor contemporary with the present hall.

An upper hearth (9) with a reddened clay base had been laid directly upon the ash of the previous hearth, towards its western side. The full extent of the hearth is uncertain since it had been severely truncated on the western side, but it appears to have been c 1.7m across north-south and up to 1.2m across east-west. A disturbed area (23) above the hearth base (see section on fig 3) subsequently backfilled with silty material (24) suggests that there may again have been a central open hearth set on stone slabs and possibly with a kerb, subsequently robbed out when the new lateral fireplace was added in the 16th century. It seems likely that this stone hearth would have been bedded the immediately underlying clay base (9) and the new flooring material (7) would have been had butted up

against it.

Phase 4

The Phase 3 floor was overlain by a layer, 0.10-12m thick, of fine, silty, orange sand (6) which formed the foundation for a brick floor (5) that had been removed in advance of archaeological excavation.

DISCUSSION

The Phase 1 features appear to be settings for earth-fast posts. It is possible that these belong to a building of uncertain alignment and unknown extent, having a beaten earth floor and no evidence of a hearth.

These posts were drawn and a new, Phase 2, floor was laid, associated with an open hearth (9) aligned east-west. Despite the relatively thin spread of associated ash and charcoal, it seems likely that it was in use for some period of time. The floor is associated with two postholes identified just inside the present north wall of the hall (12, 16) and a further posthole (21) lying due south of the pad-stone of the northern spere-truss base forming one side of the screens passage. The absence of any clear change in floor material to the north and south of postholes 12 and 16 suggests that they belong to an aisled hall with a central open hearth, of which these are the settings for the internal posts. The overall extent of this open hall cannot yet be determined, but is likely to have had a wider roof-span than the present hall. The location of posthole 21 suggests that this building had an internal division in a position repeated in the present H-plan house. It seems likely that the hearth would have occupied a central position within the building. It was more extensive than the later hearth which, since it pre-dates the kitchen wing, may mean that it was used for both heating and cooking.

Aisled construction in Wales was largely confined to the north-east, close to the English border (Smith 1988, 94-9, 422-3, Map 22) and it would therefore not be particularly surprising that this construction method had been employed for a building preceding the H-plan house. The use of earth-fast posts, at least for the internal posts, suggests a date within perhaps the early 15th century. No trace of internal framing was identified, but this may well have been raised upon stone footings, as in the present house (cf also Owain Glyndwr's Hall at Sycharth, dated to before 1403; Hague and Warhurst 1966).

Phase 3 belongs to the construction of the present house in the early 16th century. Substantial stone footings of two courses to support the timber framing for the new building and the massive pad-stone for the spere-truss were set in a foundation trench cut through the earlier floor and a new hearth base of well puddled clay (9) was laid directly upon the previous hearth. Posthole 14 may have been a scaffolding post or similar temporary timber used during the raising of the building. A stony layer towards the north-east corner of the hall (8b) seems likely to belong to the construction phase and to have resulted from the dressing of the adjacent spere-truss stylobate.

The nature of the early 16th century floor-surface is uncertain, but may again have been a beaten earth floor, possibly with a central open stone hearth that was later removed.

The insertion of a first floor within the hall, possible in the middle or latter part of the 16th century necessitated the construction of the lateral fireplace in its present position, the lintel of which presently helps to support a beam supporting the first floor.

EXCAVATION ARCHIVE

The excavation archive currently comprises the following records, reports and materials.

Site Records

Plans and sections archive

Excavation plan, A1, 1:20, PAH 1

Excavation plan, A1, 1:20, PAH 1-3

Section drawings, A1, 1:10, Sections SAH 1-

Photographic archive

1 35mm black and white

42 35mm colour slides

Context record archive

29 context record sheets

Finds record archive

7 finds sheets

1 sample sheet

finds list

Finds and samples

Pottery - 1 green glazed sherd - late medieval?, 1 brown glazed sherd, 3 glazed sherds, 46 sherds glazed ware; *Stone* - 2 fragments; *Iron* - 1 fragment; 1 lump, 3 nails including 2 heads; *Copper-alloy* - 2 fragments of ring; *Bone* - 3 teeth; 1 fragment; *Samples* - charcoal/clay sample from hearth 10, sample AH1

RECOMMENDATION FOR WORK

There is probably little scope for further excavation inside the hall although further limited excavation and recording might be undertaken in the area around the building in the event of building work, the reduction of ground levels and the installation of services. Further study/dating of pottery and analysis of charcoal sample is desirable. It seems unlikely that any of the finds require conservation. The preparation of a short report for publication in an appropriate journal is desirable.

Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to the following: Mr & Mrs T Smith, who gave permission to excavate; Stephen Greuter, Clwyd County Council for early discussions on the archaeological potential of the building; Chris Martin, Kenneth Brassil, Nigel Jones, and Bill Britnell of the Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust who helped in setting up the project and with the production of this report; and Lesley Arrowsmith and Allen Richardson who gave help during the excavations.

References

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Smith, P, 1988. *Houses of the Welsh Countryside* (HMSO, 2nd edition)

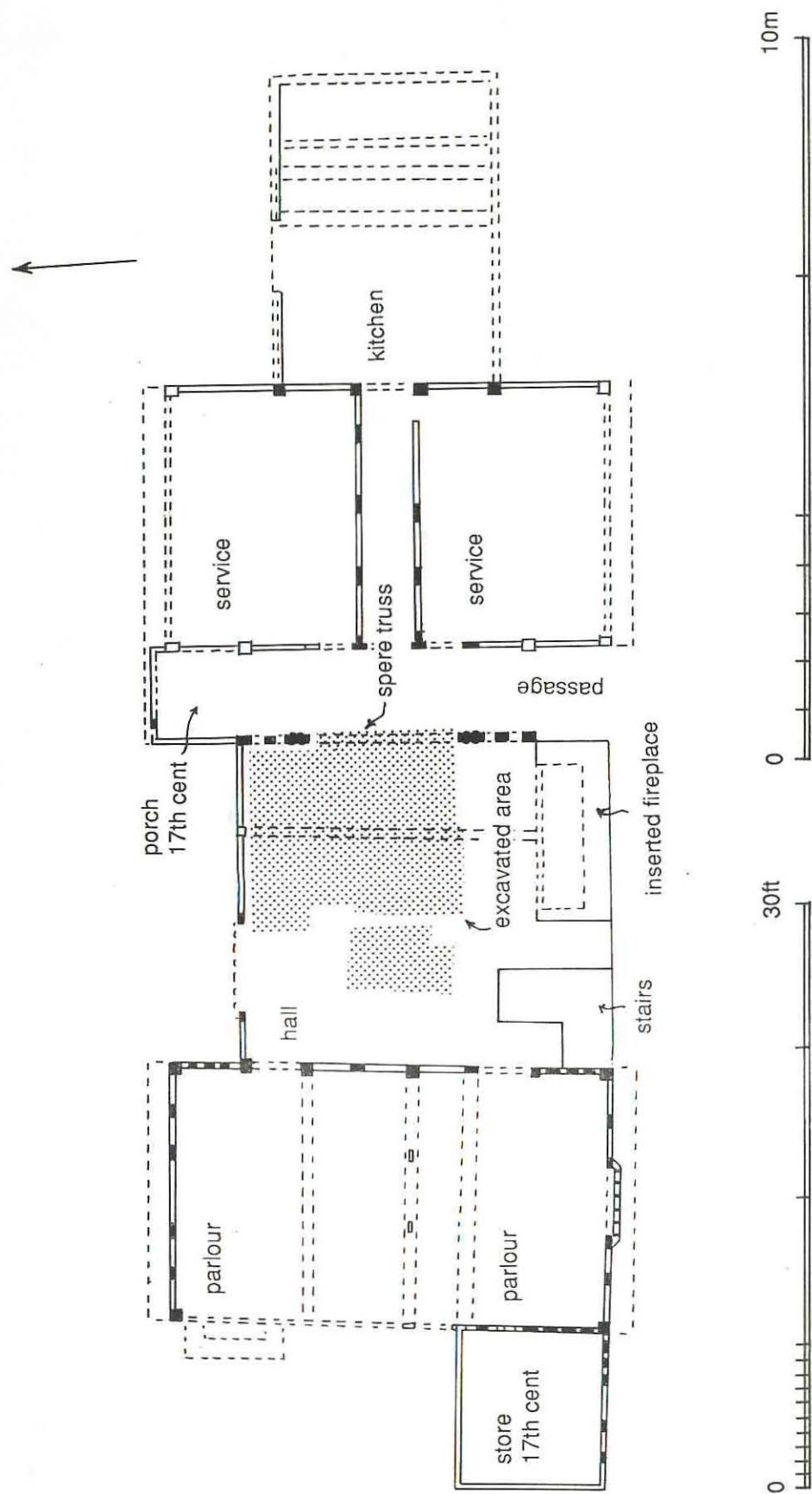


Figure 1
Althrey Hall, Bangor-is-y-coed, Clwyd, showing location of excavations in September 1991 (after Smith 1988, fig 199)

plan of excavations

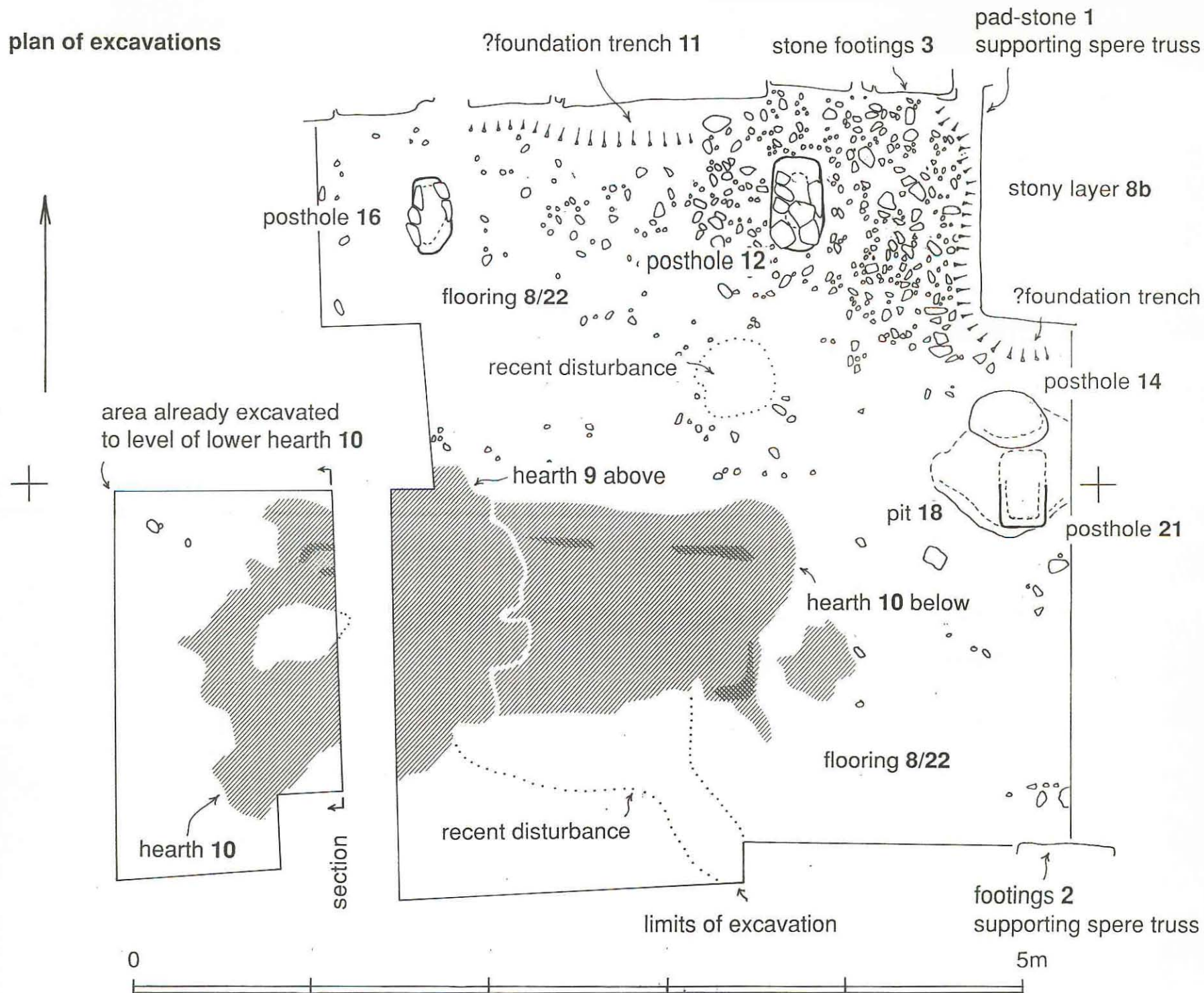


Figure 2

Plan of excavations in September 1991

schematic sections of hearths 9 & 10

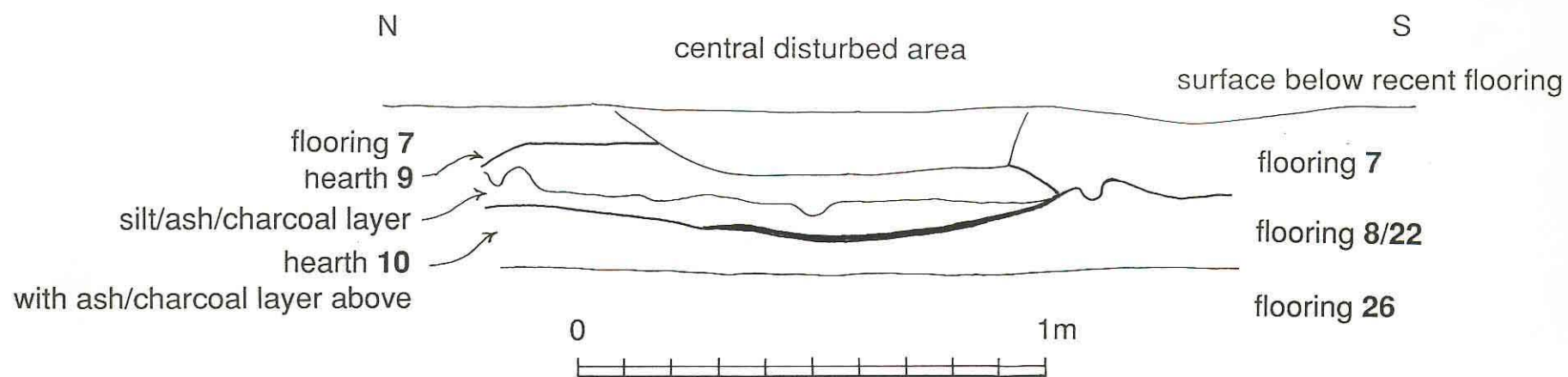


Figure 3

Section drawings (see location on fig 2)