
Four small excavations in Arbroath in the early 1980s

Dave Pollock

Introduction

On three occasions the team working on the Lunan Valley Project investigated sites on its doorstep, in the medieval town of Arbroath.

The first trench (HG82, see Illus 1) was excavated in a garden in the abbey precinct at the end of October 1982. Not surprisingly, a long period of horticulture dominated the site sequence and no medieval structures were found.

The second and third trenches (Co-op 83) were cut hurriedly through the floor of a dismantled engineering works against two potential medieval street frontages threatened by the construction of a shopping centre. One street front provided a shallow and fragmentary stratigraphy with the possible remains of a single medieval building overlying a back-filled stream or pond. The other produced no evidence for medieval roadside development.

A fourth trench (HP83) was excavated in a gap site, unthreatened in the short term, at the far end of likely burghage plots from the earliest planned town. In view of the disappointingly fragmentary pottery sequence from the other three sites, a trench – even well away from the street frontage – in the early burgh was expected to provide pottery comparable with fragments from the rural sites investigated by the Lunan Valley Project (Pollock 1985). Unfortunately, a pond or watercourse backfilled at the base of the cultivation soil effectively broke off the earlier end of any sequence.

The High Street garden excavation (HG82)

As it approaches the area of Kirk Square from the N, the present High Street swings away from the line of the abbey precinct wall (Illus 1). Whilst the S side of the street has remained largely static since the mid-19th century certainly (and the medieval period probably), a glance at the detailed 1859

survey (OS 1859, see Illus 2) reveals an old wide-mouthed High Street built in with shambles, and effectively split into a narrow vennel to the E and a wider street to the W. Redevelopment has now erased the vennel.

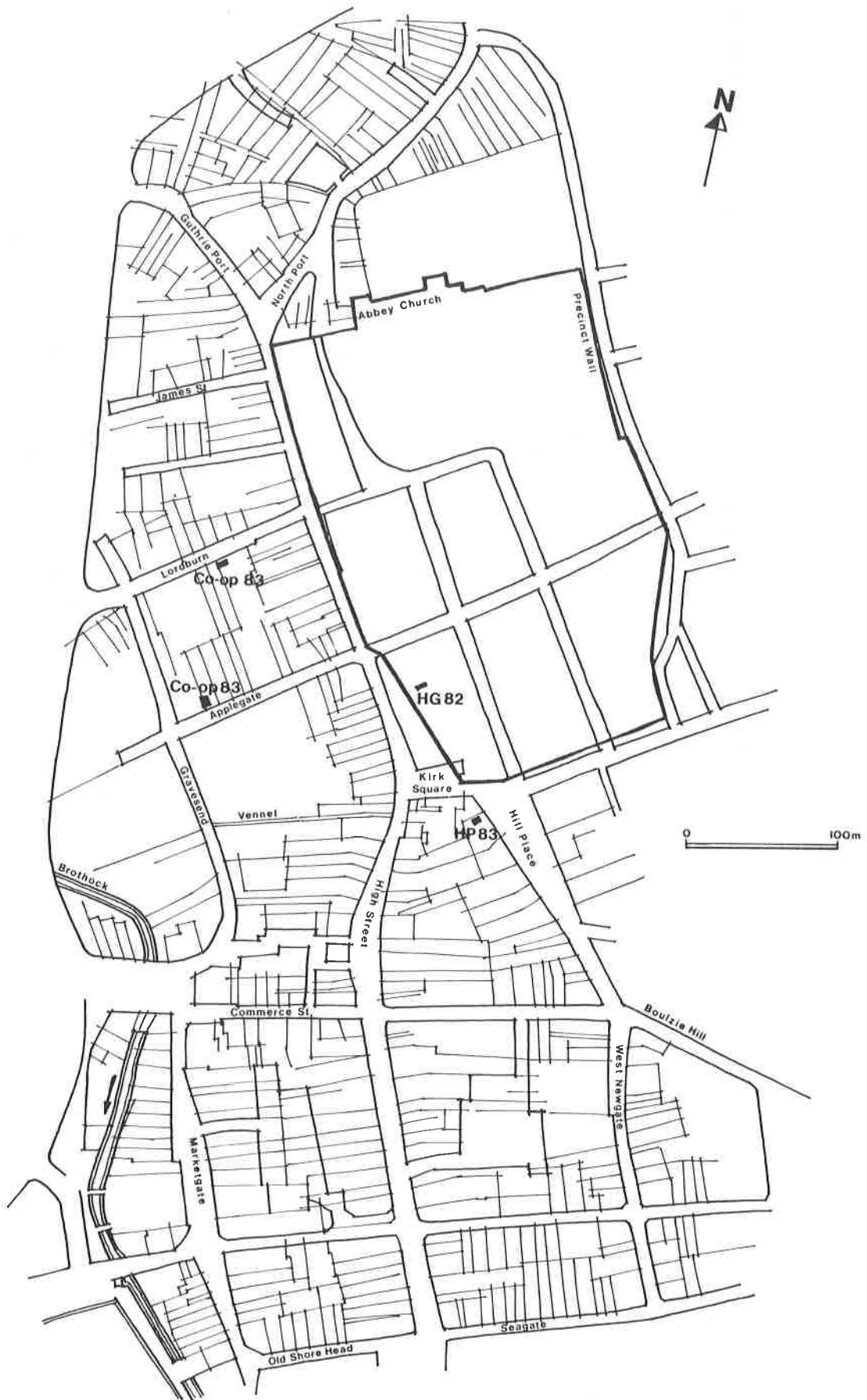
A building to the E of High Street, shown on the 1859 map and on an earlier 19th-century survey (Wood 1822), was still standing at the time of excavation. This building, and its associated main house, flaunt the old line of High Street, and must post-date the removal of the abbey precinct wall. The 1982 excavation took place in a garden on the E side of the building.

Since the construction of this post-medieval building only the top 0.4m of soil has been under cultivation. The 0.6m deep accumulation of soil below pre-dates the demolition of the precinct wall, and must be associated with the wall itself or an earlier land division along the same line. Such a deep accumulation at the top of a slope down to the Brothock Water must have gathered against a physical, man-made barrier. Medieval pottery was recovered from this deeper soil, and bone preservation improved with depth, indicating less acidic soil conditions under the care of the abbey.

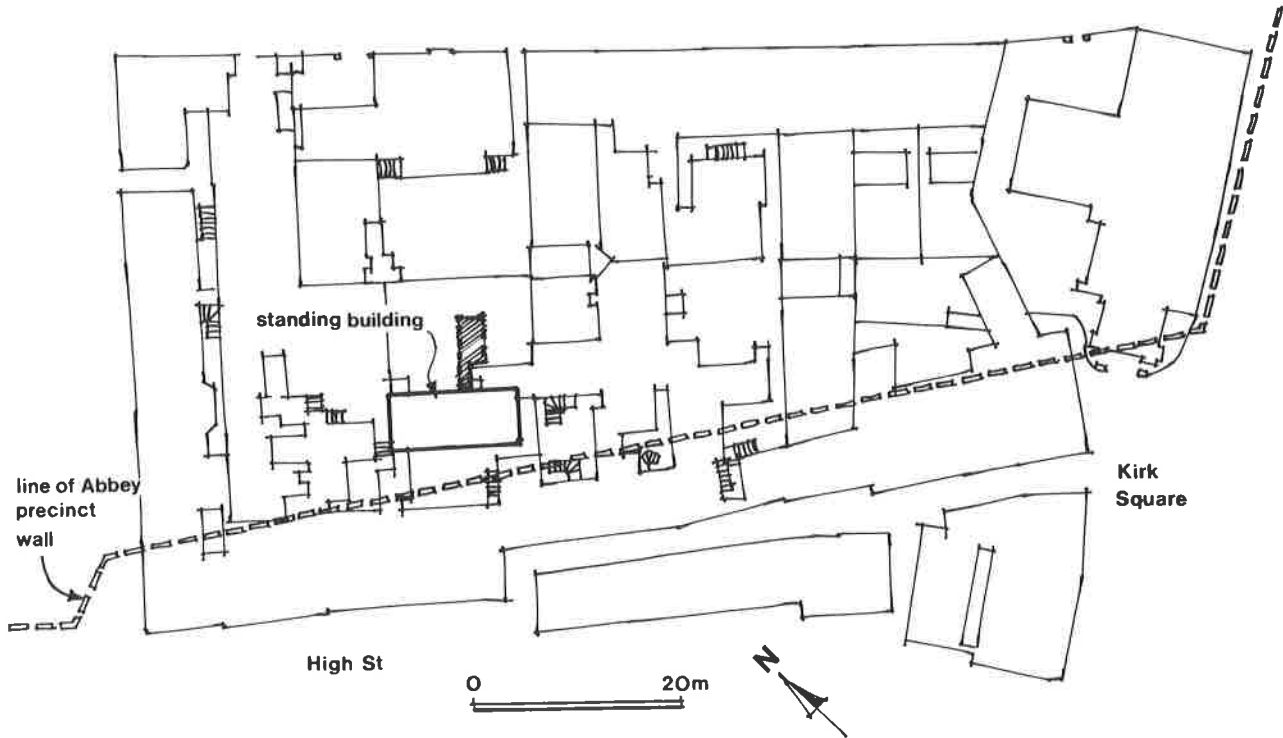
At the base of the soil a shallow linear hollow cut the subsoil (Illus 3). Presumably a cultivation furrow, the hollow came to an end within the trench. Its naturally hardened (indurated) base was marked by short cuts – spademarks – rather than the long linear ploughscores found in the furrow at Chapelton (Pollock 1985, 386).

The base of a roughly rectangular pit survived, cut into the subsoil, to a depth of only 0.05m. Within the pit and protruding from it were large pebbles, smaller stones and a human femur, all disturbed by later cultivation. If the pit and its contents represent the remains of a crouched inhumation, then it must be pre-monastic in date and have been relatively shallow.

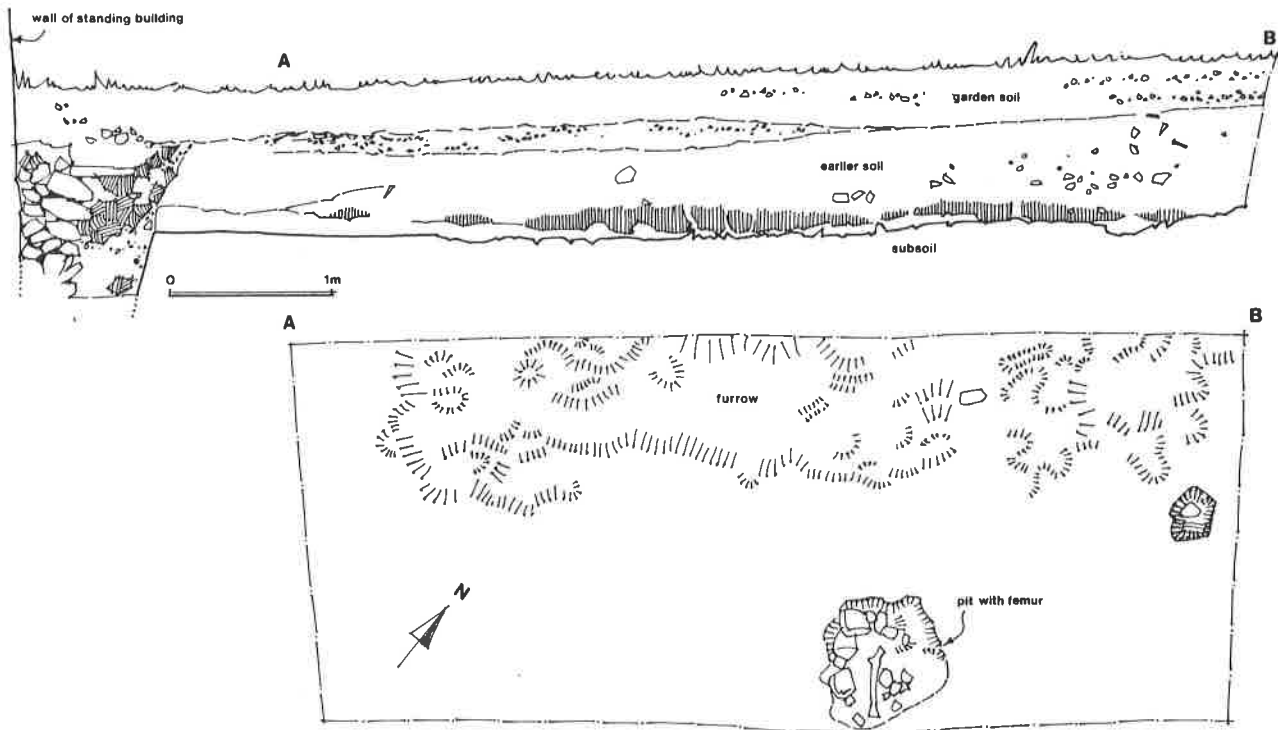
An unusual find from the trench was a medieval bronze tripod ewer, buried on its side in a narrow pit barely penetrating the subsoil. It was



Illus 1. Excavation locations.



Illus 2. High Street garden excavation: trench relative to 19th-century buildings (OS 1859).



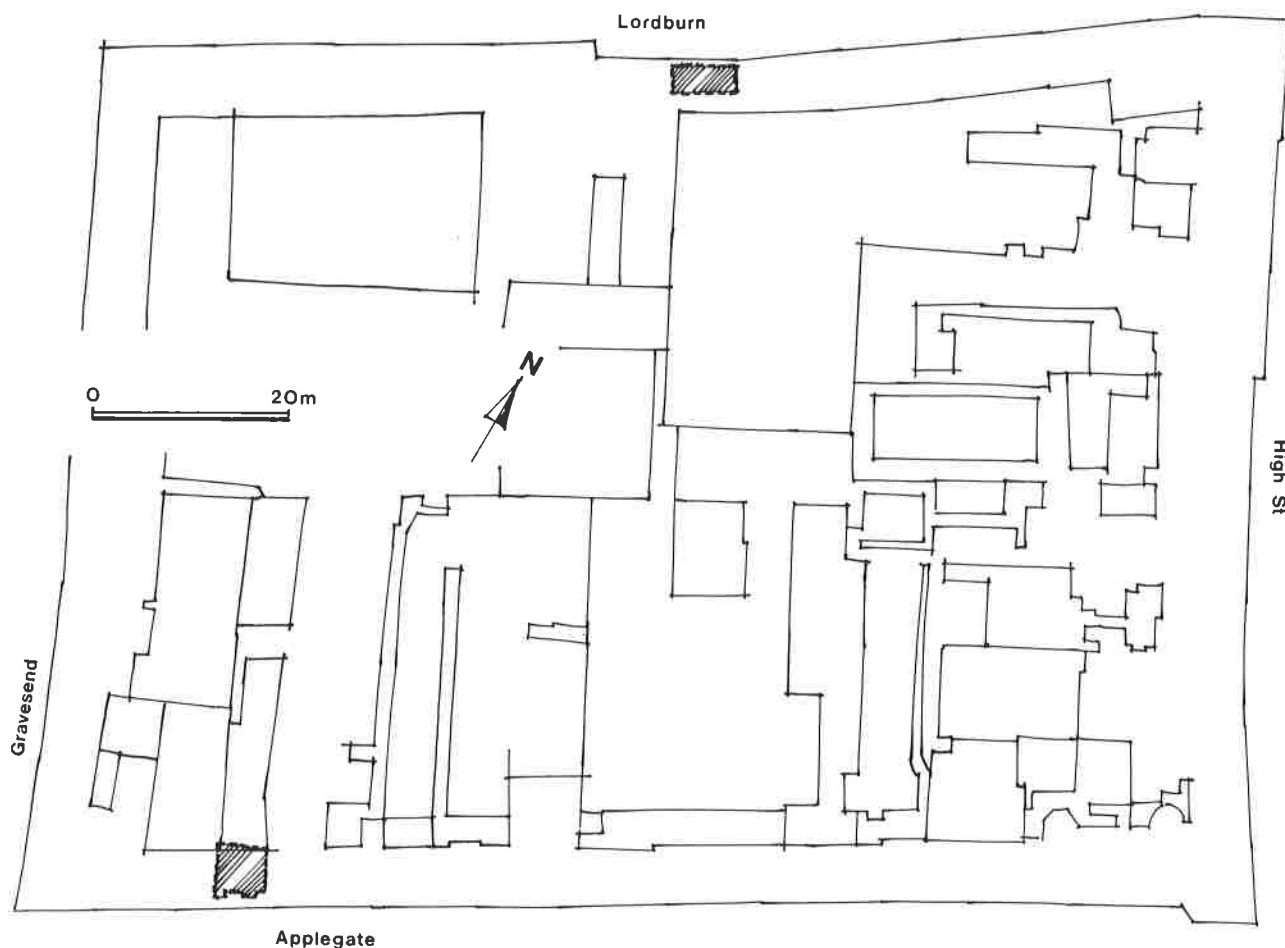
Illus 3. High Street garden excavation: section and plan.

certainly deposited whilst the precinct wall was in use, but no cut for the deposition was visible in the medieval soil accumulation.

The Applegate excavation (Co-op 83)

The only certain stone walls found in the small

trench were post-medieval (walls 1, 2, Illus 5) associated with the use of a stone-capped drain. Wall 1 survived only as a foundation course in a shallow trench; two courses of wall 2 survived at its Applegate end. Although the two lengths of walling did not connect, they were probably the remains of a single building of clay-bonded



Illus 4. Applegate and Lordburn excavations: trenches relative to 19th-century buildings (OS 1859).

stonework. The floor level (and the junction of the walls) had been removed during the construction of the factory floor, but the internal stone-capped drain survived in part. Green bottle glass from the silt in the drain indicated a post-medieval use.

In the NE corner of the trench the medieval ground level no longer remained, but in the rest of the trench a shallow (rarely greater than 0.2m) accumulation of mud and domestic debris represented better survival. An earlier building may be represented by slabs and boulders placed in a short wide strip aligned with Applegate (S1, Illus 6), either footings for a rear wall within 3m of the present street front or (less likely) an external pavement. A similar, but smaller, patch of stones (S2) may have represented an internal cross wall or end wall of the building. Both fragments of stonework had been damaged – by trampling under muddy conditions, and probably by robbing – to such an extent that their original function remains uncertain. If they were footings for a medieval building, that building was dismantled – and apparently not replaced – long before the other stone walls on site were constructed.

A collection of pits was found N and W of the stone footings. To the W a single shallow pit (pit 4) had been back-filled with boulders to stabilise the

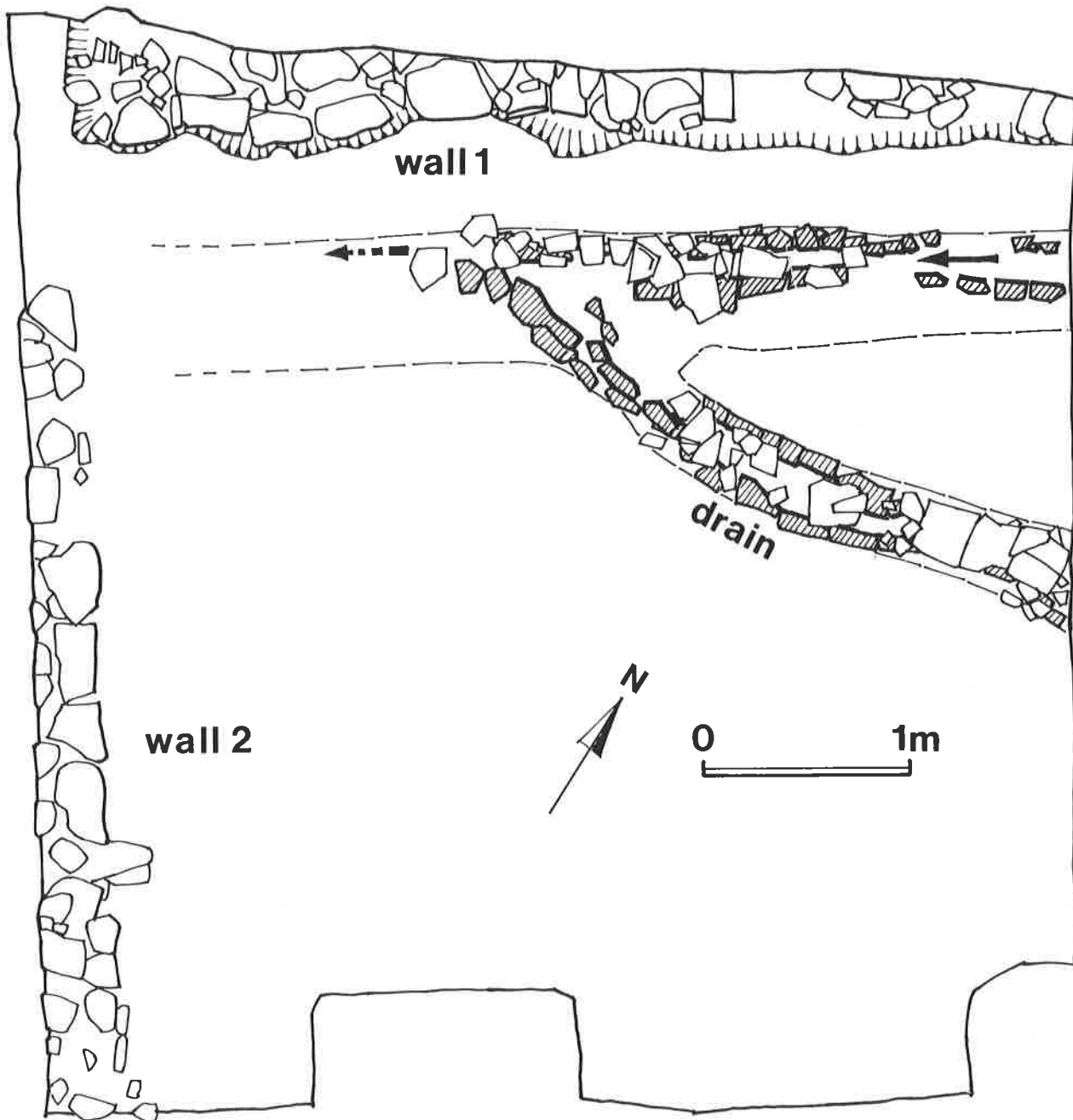
disturbed ground. Pit 1, at 0.6m the deepest found, had roughly squared corners and produced 28 sherds of medieval pottery from its fill.

Prior to the construction of the stone footings an irregular water-filled depression crossed the site obliquely. Its base was puddled by trampling in waterlogged conditions, and its fill was an irregular series of silt and sand beds. It was probably a pond similar to the one excavated at Hill Place (see below), here fed by running water from a spring line close to High Street. As at Hill Place there was no evidence of stone or timber revetment beside the water, and before the stone footings were laid the partly silted hollow was filled in with mud and clay and sealed with a layer of clean sandy clay. Medieval pottery was recovered from the infill.

A back-filled pit was cut by the hollow. This pit, too, was sealed with clean sandy clay, but contained no water-laid deposits.

The Lordburn excavation (Co-op 83)

The trench beside Lordburn (the street) was more impressively and significantly disappointing than its partner beside Applegate. Below the concrete and hardcore of the factory floor some disturbed



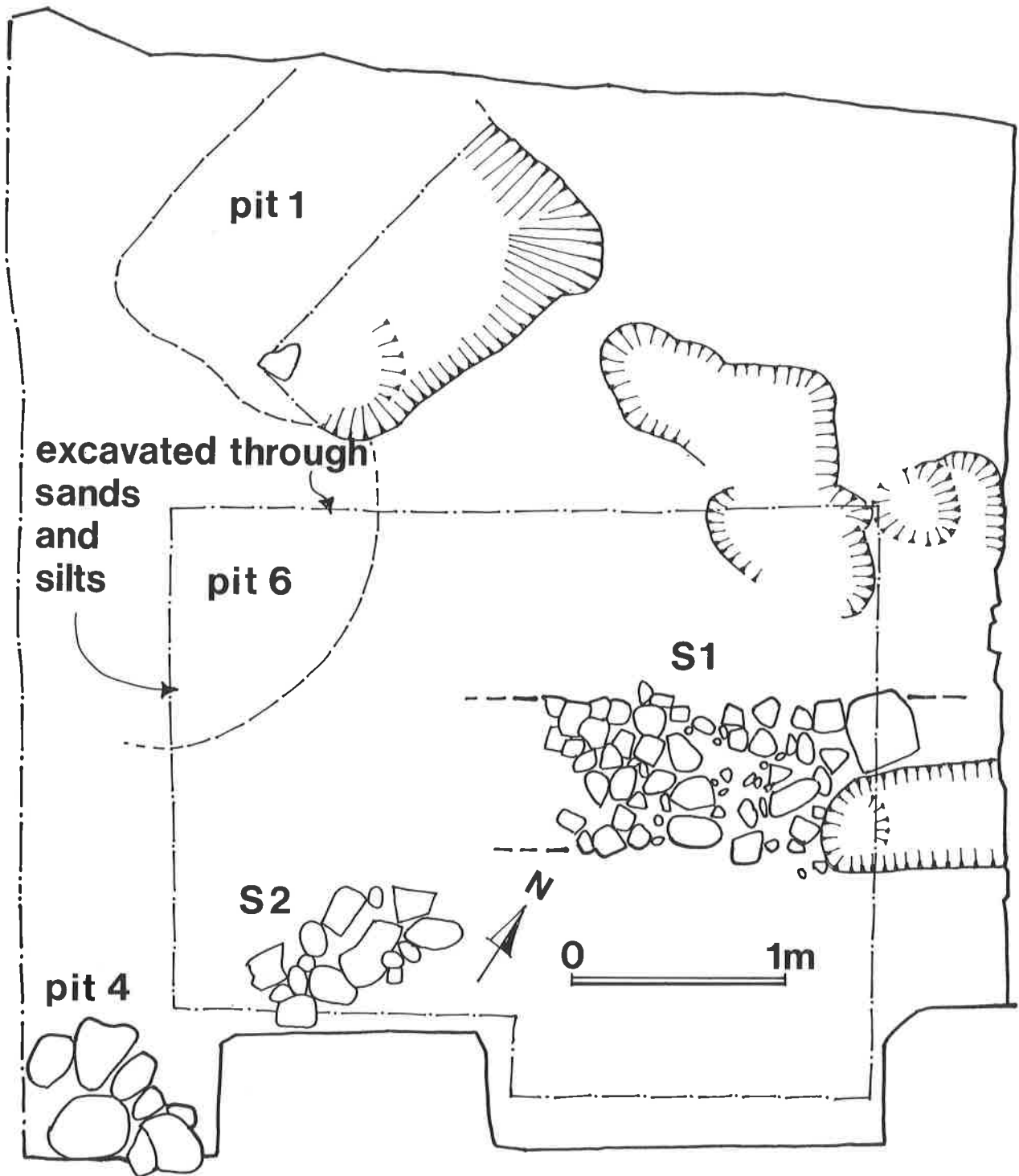
Illus 5. Applegate excavation: post-medieval features.

rubble was pressed into a sandy soil. Otherwise the sandy soil, a clean hillwash / cultivation soil containing no domestic debris, formed the only layer above washed sands. Almost 1m deep, the soil represented cultivation away from buildings over a considerable period. Either the S side of the street was not developed on the flat ground of the Brothock floodplain during the medieval period or the street has moved since. A suggestion of the latter is provided by the formidable walled land division conspicuous N of the present street, converging with Lordburn at its junction with High Street. Aligned with the High Street burgage plots, the wall may mark the line of an earlier Lordburn, perhaps abandoned after flooding.

The Hill Place excavation (HP83)

The S side of Hill Place continues the line of the the abbey precinct wall from the NW, although the wall itself turned sharply NE before reaching this point. The street front certainly follows a major medieval land division marking the end of the burgage plots from High Street, and the medieval line in turn follows closely a natural fossil cliffline. In 1983 a small trench was cut in a gap site on the S side of Hill Place (Illus 7).

A post-medieval building was represented by the foundation course of a back wall and up to three courses of an end wall (walls 1, 2, Illus 9). The walls were set in a foundation trench up to

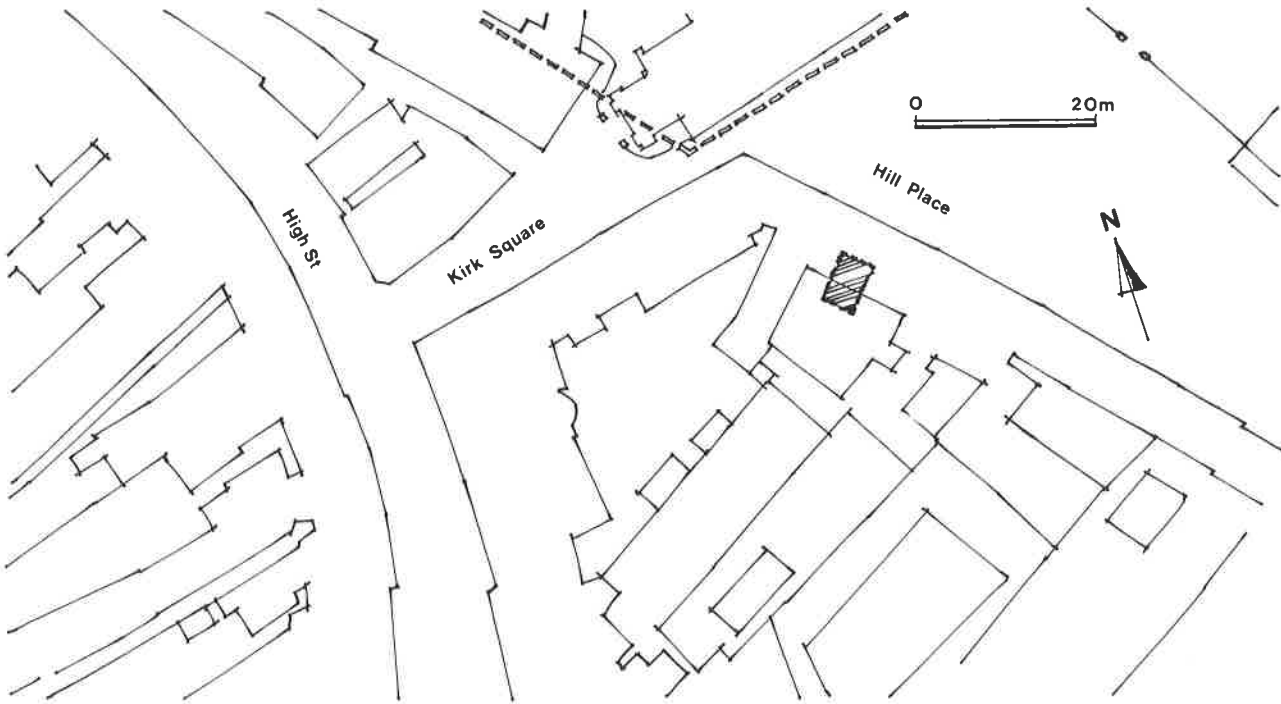


Illus 6. Applegate excavation: medieval features.

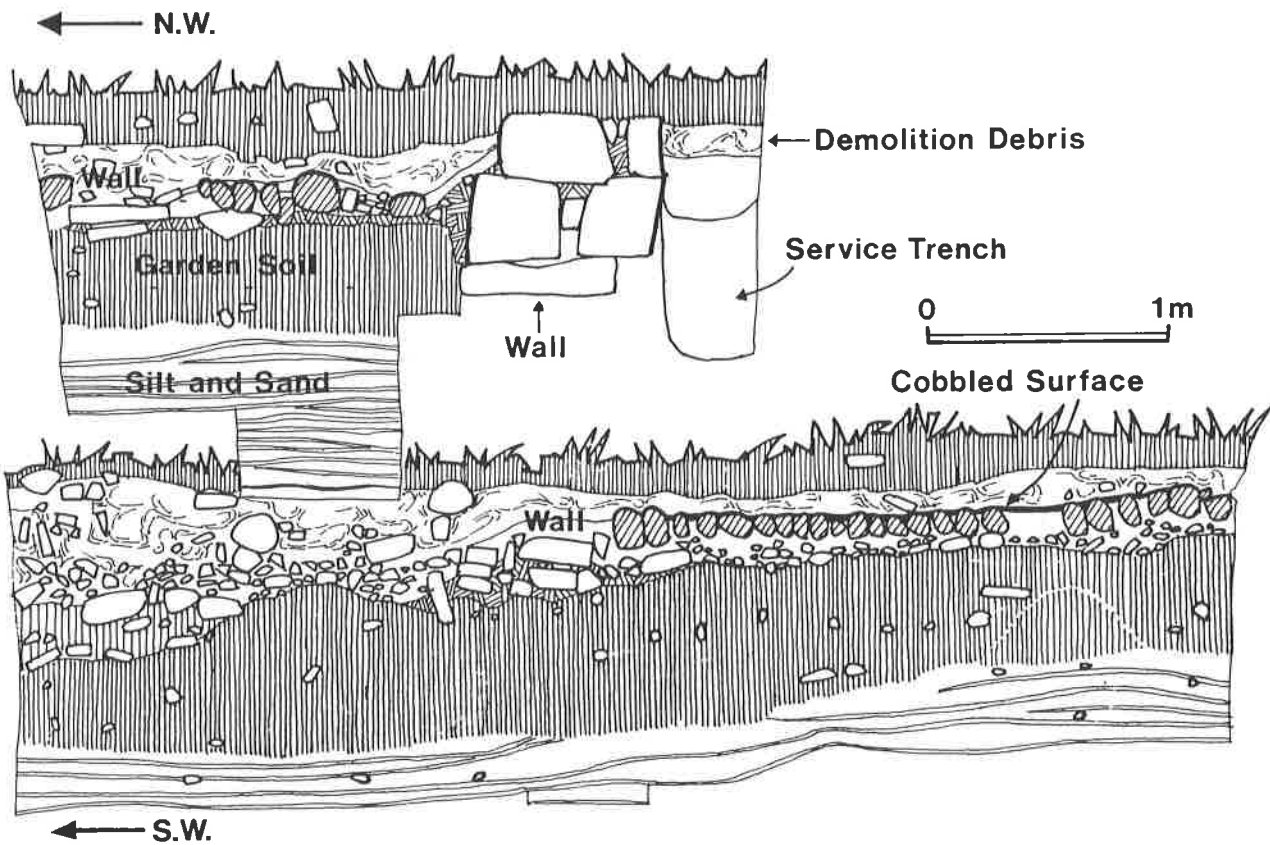
0.3m deep and composed of boulders and sandstone blocks bonded with clay. When the back wall was demolished to ground level the end wall remained in use as part of the adjacent building. A cobbled surface was laid in the gap site, over the stump of the demolished back wall (by 1822, see Wood 1822), and the cobbled surface was in turn partly built over. A new stone-and-mortar wall (wall 3) formed the end of a building over the N end of the cobbles, narrowing the gap to less than 1.5m (by 1859, see Ordnance Survey 1859).

Before the Hill Place frontage was developed the site was under cultivation (Illus 8). A wedge of garden soil 0.4m deep uphill and 0.6m deep downhill produced medieval pottery; the top of the soil produced fragments of clay pipe.

Towards its base the garden soil turns sandier, and this overlies a deliberate infill of soil and domestic debris sealing water-laid sands and silts. The water-laid deposits, unexpected on the hillside site, formed the floor of the whole trench and contained a great deal of medieval pottery. The wide-



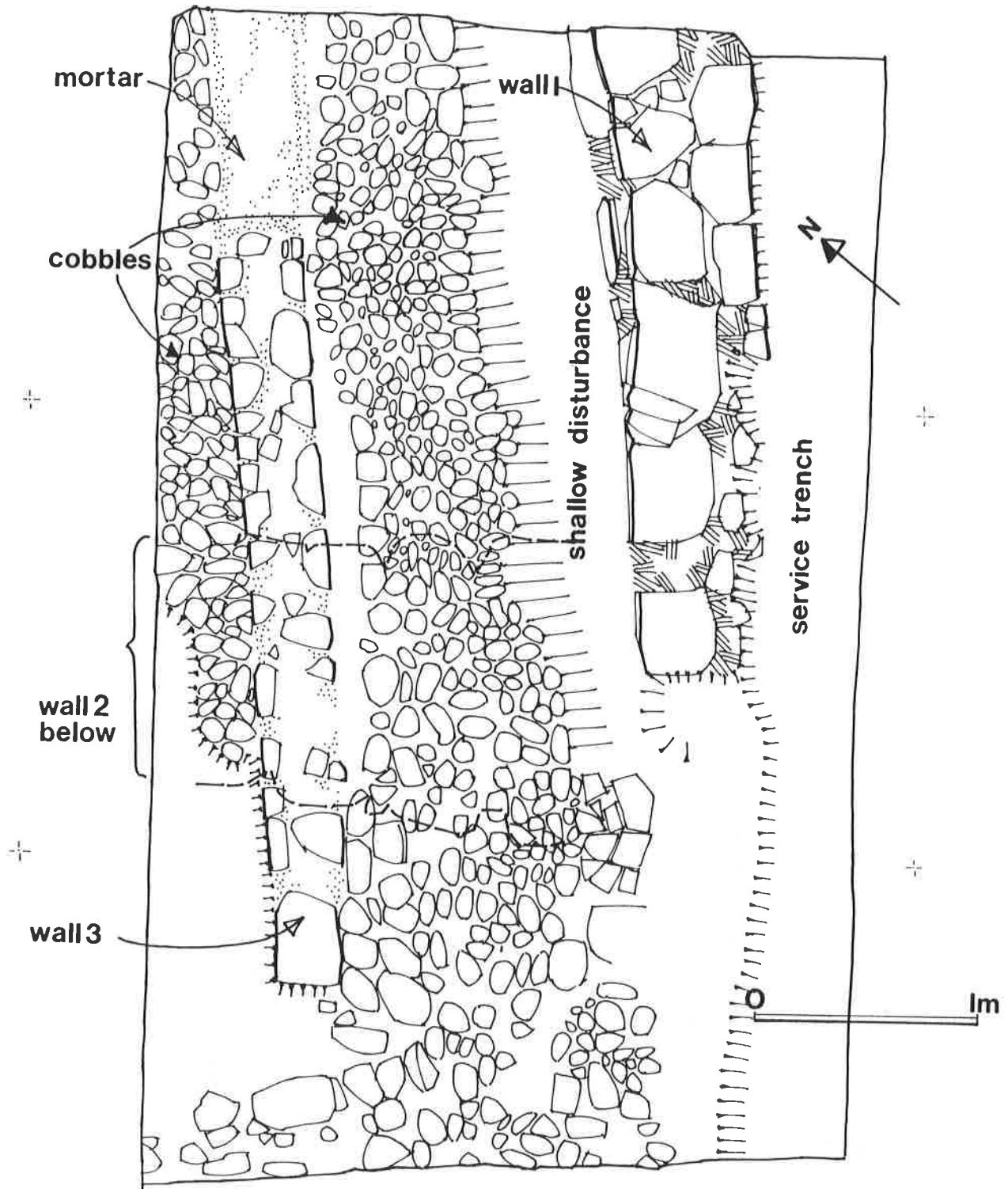
Illus 7. Hill Place excavation: trench relative to 19th-century buildings (OS 1859).



Illus 8. Hill Place excavation: sections.

spread silts and sands can only have been deposited behind an artificial barrier on the slope; an unmolested stream would have cut a narrow course down the hill. As on the Applegate site there was

no evidence for revetment beside the water, but in view of the steepness of the slope off Hill Place the dam holding back the pond must have been within a few metres of the W edge of the excavation.



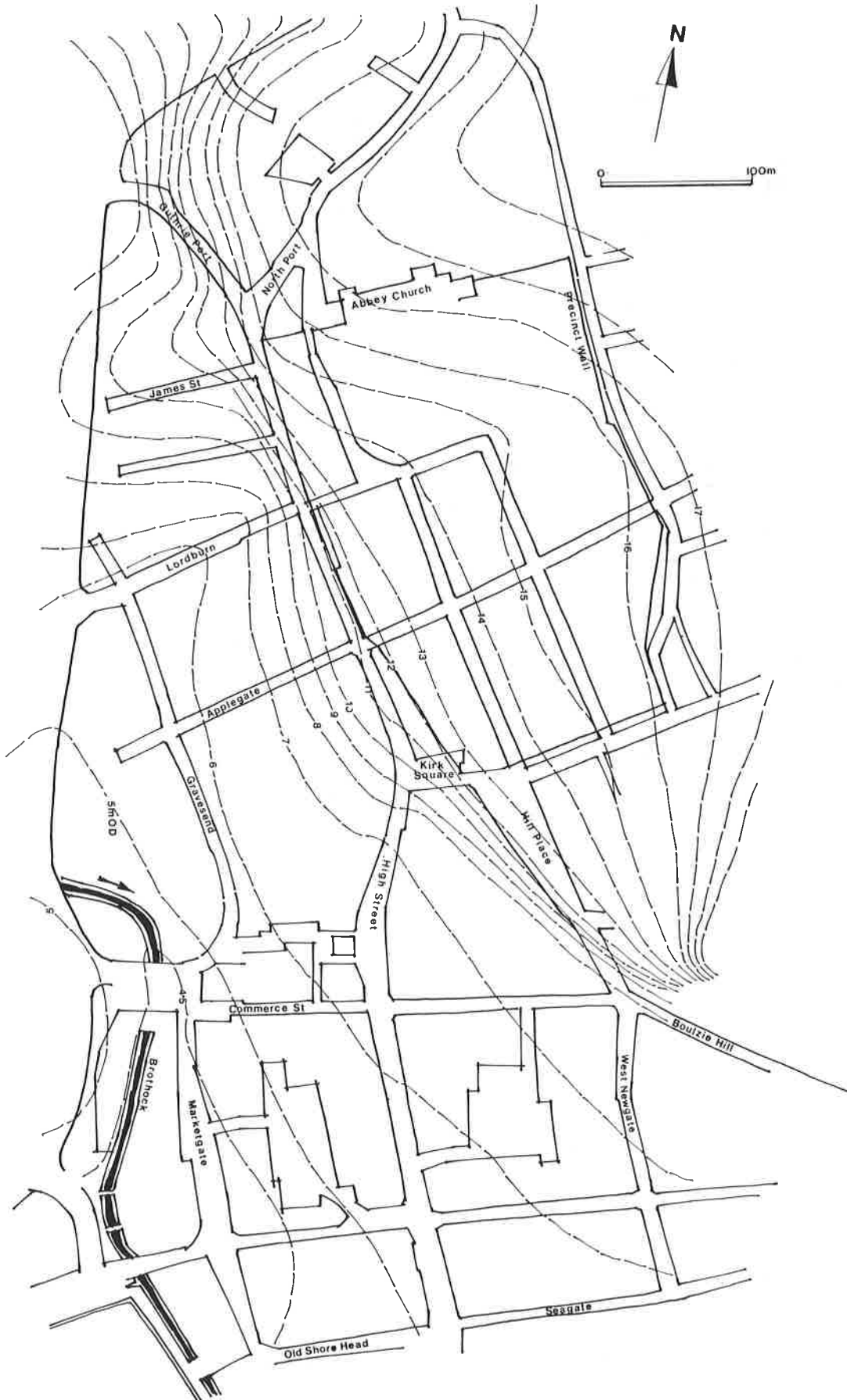
Illus 9. Hill Place excavation: plan.

The topography and preservation of medieval Arbroath

Medieval Arbroath can be split along the line of the abbey precinct wall (and further S along the line of the Hill Place frontage). This line roughly separates the well-drained fairly level high ground to the E from the steep fossil cliff and the adjacent floodplain of the Brothock Water (Illus 10). Even

the gentle slope between High Street and Lordburn, potentially favourable for development, is marred by a spring line under High Street along this length. The abbey was founded before the burgh; the better ground was taken by the abbey.

Within the abbey precinct preservation is potentially good, in terms of soil conditions and soil accumulation (see High Street garden excavation above). The precinct wall has trapped hillwash



Illus 10. Arbroath: topography.

on its E side, providing a reasonable soil build-up along its length, whilst the infilling of the Lorth Burn beside the known abbey buildings should have protected the stumps of a number of interesting buildings from past redevelopment.

In the burgh, W of the precinct wall, a certain amount of damage must have been caused by water pouring from the spring line and from other burns (see above, Applegate and Hill Place excavations). Further damage is likely immediately on the burgh side of the precinct wall, along High Street. Except where Lorth Burn crosses the street towards the N, the ground level will probably have eroded underfoot through the medieval period.

S of the present Kirk Square, where High Street drops to the low raised beach, preservation is more promising under a substantial accumulation of soil and development debris. The burn dropping from Hill Place and crossing the street will have caused some damage to deposits, but will have deposited silt on the more level ground and may have preserved timber in its organic state or as casts in the silt.

Further S, towards Old Shore Head and Seagate, the preservation of medieval layers is potentially poor. Service trenches cut through High Street S of Commerce Street consistently produced beach deposits within 0.4m of the street surface (observed 1983) and alterations to an old property towards the W end of Seagate exposed sand within 0.2m of the pavement level (observed 1982).

Marketgate, a late addition to the medieval streets, should provide better-preserved deposits. Roadside properties are still low lying and prone to flooding. Ground level should have risen during

and since the medieval period in response to the flood threat.

Outside the abbey precinct the best potential preservation of medieval Arbroath is offered beside Marketgate, beside High Street between Commerce Street and Kirk Square, and at the intersection of High Street and Lordburn. Further reasonable deposits may be preserved at the NW corner of the abbey precinct, at the N end of High Street, by Guthrie Port and by North Port. The ground slopes steeply from the E; perhaps soil accumulation has kept pace with soil erosion in this area.

Acknowledgements

This report was originally written in 1983, and I am grateful to Historic Scotland for providing the funds to drag it from the filing cabinet. I would like to thank everyone on the project all those years ago, in particular John Cannell who supervised most of the Arbroath excavations. And I would like to thank the members of TAFAC who kept an eye on us. This report remains a postscript to the main work of the Lunan Valley Project, most of which is in print (Pollock 1985), and the remainder of which is on its way (the Ironhill excavations, in a forthcoming *Proc Soc Antiq Scot*).

References

- Pollock D, 1985 'The Lunan Valley Project: medieval rural settlement in Angus', *Proc Soc Antiq Scot* 115, 357-399.
Wood 1822 *Plan of the Town of Angus*, (Arbroath).

This paper is published with the aid of a grant from Historic Scotland.

Abstract

A programme of limited excavations in the early 1980s has contributed to the deposit modelling process in medieval Arbroath. Preservation of deposits is sharply contrasted on either side of the Abbey precinct wall. Reasons for this are discussed.

Keywords: burgh, Arbroath, precinct wall, horticulture