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DANES TRENCH AND PREHISTORIC LAND DIVISION IN THE UPPER DARENT VALLEY

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The linear earthwork known as Danes Trench lies on the lower slopes of Polhill between the A21 road and the existing field system. N.G.R. TQ 50405920–50485984. It lies on the four hundred foot contour and follows the curve of the hillside along a roughly north–south alignment. Like so many linear earthworks in southern Britain, Danes Trench appears to start and finish abruptly, but on closer examination the northern end can be seen to be cut by the line of the old Polhill road. On the opposite side of that road a depression can be detected in the hedgerow bank, which corresponds to the line of the trench. Unfortunately, any further evidence beyond the hedgerow has been lost due to deep ploughing. The southern end appears to come to an abrupt end below the embankment of the present A21 road and was probably covered by earth from the widening of that road. Local eyewitness accounts of the trench before the road was widened, suggest that it did continue on the other side of the A21, to join the Pilgrims' Way.¹

The programme of surveying and excavation was undertaken by the Otford and District Historical Society's Archaeological Group because of the possible destruction of the Trench by the Swanley/M25 link road. I would like to thank Cliff and Elizabeth Ward, John Garrett and, in particular, David Gayfer, for their help in this project, and also Mr. J. W. Jackson, Divisional Surveyor, Kent County Council, for his permission to carry out the work. Local background information on the site was given by Dennis Clarke and Anthony Stoyel and I thank them for their assistance. In addition I would like to thank Professor B. W. Cunliffe, for reading this paper and for his suggestions and encouragement.

¹ Dennis Clarke, personal communication.

The name Danes Trench probably takes its name, like several other local features such as Danes Field and Dane Bottom, from the Battle of Otford in which Edmund Ironside defeated the Danes in A.D. 1016. The earliest literary evidence for the name has been traced back to 1406 and with such a background history it is easy to see how the earthwork acquired its name in village folklore; however, any connection between the Trench and the battle appears to be unlikely.²

The excavation of this linear earthwork showed that a steep-sided 'V' ditch had been purposefully cut into the natural chalk slope and that the rubble had been piled on the lower slope to form a bank. Several layers of dumped rubble were found in the bank with no evidence of a turf-line between. The primary dump layer in the bank (Layer 6) consisted of a loam layer with chalk inclusion and represented the initial excavation of the 'V' ditch. Overlying this was Layer 4, which was made up of chalk rubble with a brown staining. The top of the bank (Layer 2) consisted of hard packed pure chalk rubble, no doubt from the deepest diggings of the ditch. The infill of the ditch consisted of a primary layer (5) made up of chalk rubble and silt, which represented the initial erosion of the bank, where rubble fell back into the ditch and wash from the bank was included. Layer 3 which overlaid 5 was made up of pure grey silt and represented a relatively long period of silting from the bank. Layer 1 comprised humus and general decayed material with chalk.

A second section was dug through the ditch and bank at a point marked X-Y on the plan. This showed a similar profile for the 'V' ditch and the bank with similar layers and dimensions to the first section A-B.

The lack of material evidence from Danes Trench makes the dating of this earthwork difficult, although the fact that the name was in use in 1406 would suggest a date somewhat older for its construction. Several theories have been put forward for its use including the idea that it might have formed part of a boundary for a deer park in Dutchmore Wood, but there is no literary evidence to substantiate this theory, nor are there any signs of a continuation of a bank and ditch around the wood. Another theory put forward was that the Trench was a trackway and indeed the modern profile does bear a close resemblance to sections of the North Downs Trackway. However, the excavation evidence, which showed a steep-sided 'V' ditch and the absence of a tread level, would suggest the Trench was unlikely to have carried any traffic along its route.

It seems probable therefore that Danes Trench was a land boundary and that its function was to restrict access from the wooded hillside

2. Dennis Clarke and Anthony Stoyel, *Otford in Kent: A History*, 1975, 38-9.

onto the pastoral lands of the river valley. The similarity in the dimensions and construction of the Trench with other linear earthworks along the South Downs might suggest a common use. Examples in Wessex and other downland areas have shown that settlements of people practising pastoral farming, constructed linear earthworks in the early part of the first millennium B.C., in order to protect and maintain their herds within defined territories. The idea of these boundaries appears to have been a steep-sided 'V' ditch cut into the chalk, with a bank on either or both sides of the ditch. At Quarley Hill, Hampshire, for example, a single bank was found on the lower slope of the hill and when excavated, the dimensions of the 'V' ditch were very similar to those of Danes Trench. The excavator also noted the absence of a turf line in the bank, which led him to suggest the regular clearance of the ditch.³

The Upper Darent Valley was clearly in use during the early first millennium B.C.; the map in Fig. 1 shows the distribution of Late Bronze Age finds from the Otford area⁴ and the recent excavation of a settlement site in Otford, in which Beaker pottery was found, would suggest that the area had been occupied well into the early second millennium B.C.⁵ The rich grasslands of the Darent Valley would have offered a plentiful supply of grazing land and in line with similar settlement patterns along the South Downs, pastoralism would probably have formed the basis of the local economy.

Cunliffe suggests that these boundaries are indicative of organized land division between clan or tribal groupings in the first millennium B.C., which were closely allied to a local meeting place, frequently a hilltop defined by simple earthworks. Some of these hilltop centres later developed into hill-forts in the Early Iron Age under pressure from the movement of new people into southern England. A process of evolution then took place in the Later Iron Age which led to single centres gaining dominance and the smaller hill-forts, which did not lend themselves to fortification improvement, either went out of use or came under the domination of the single centres. This process has been

3. C. F. C. Hawkes, 'The Excavations at Quarley Hill, 1938', *Proc. Hampshire Field Club*, xiv (1939), 136-90.

4. Late Bronze Age spearhead, Lullingstone (*Arch. Cant.*, lxxxiv (1969), 251); two Bronze Age axes, Sevenoaks (*Kent Arch. Review*, 42 (1975), 32-3); socketed bronze axe, Dunton Green (*Arch. Cant.*, xlix (1938), 285); Late Bronze Age chisel, Eynsford (*Arch. Cant.*, xciii (1977), 206-7); Middle Bronze Age burial, Otford (*Arch. Cant.*, xci (1975), 187); bowl barrow, Otford (*Arch. Cant.*, lxi (1948), 181); barrow, Mill Pond Wood, Sevenoaks (*Journ. R. Anthropol. Inst.*, (1896), 137); arrowhead, Otford (O.S. site index); Bronze Age flints, Sevenoaks (O.S. site index); Late Bronze Age pottery, Ightham (*Arch. Cant.*, xlv (1933), 163).

5. Awaiting publication.

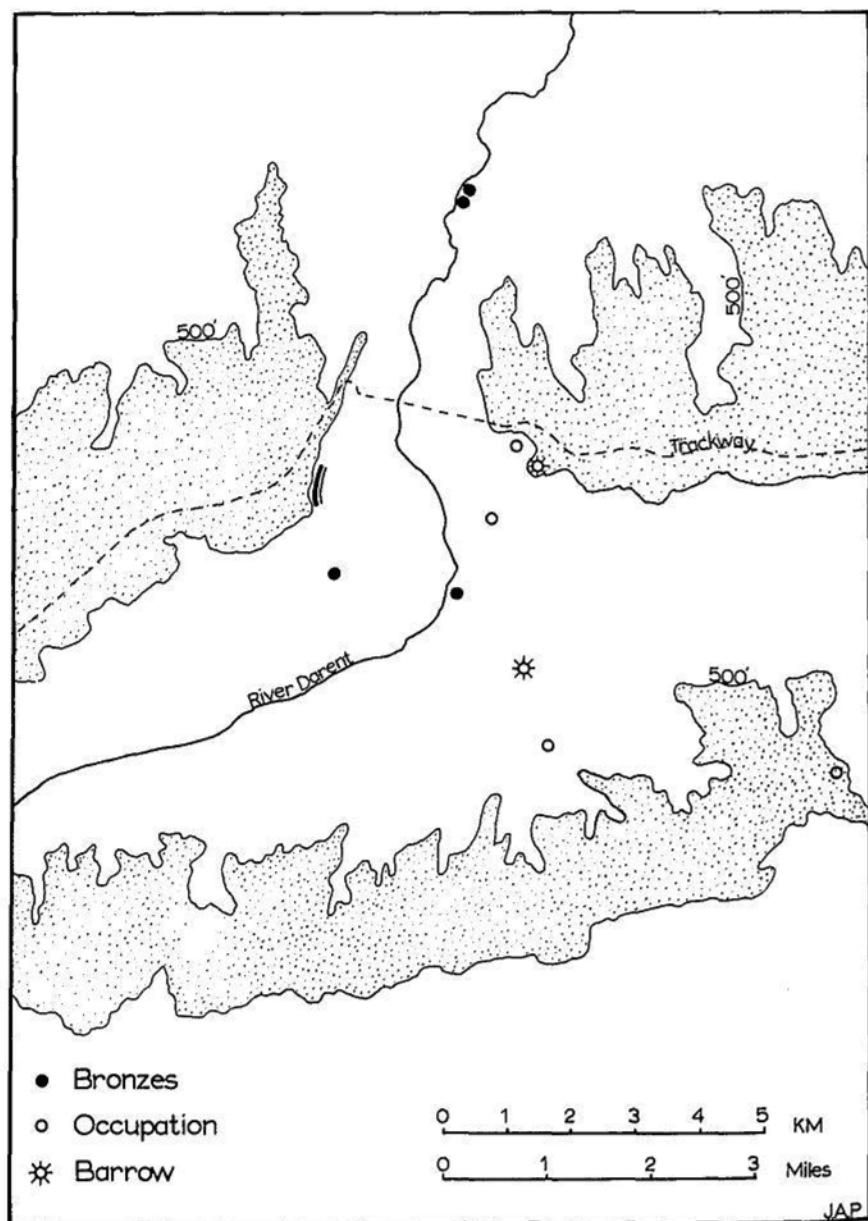


Fig. 1.

shown to have occurred in Wessex and along the South Downs before the second century B.C.⁶

It is significant that the Upper Darent Valley also has a number of smaller hill-forts. The example on Otford Mount appears to fit Cunliffe's model as an early hilltop centre defined by a simple earthwork, particularly as it has a bowl barrow on the summit.⁷ The recent excavations in which Beaker pottery was found close to a Middle Bronze Age burial⁸ all lie immediately below the Mount and clearly show a continuity of occupation for the immediate area. While Otford Mount has never been excavated, it would seem probable that it would show a pattern of early occupation, perhaps as a focal meeting-place where cattle were kept in times of unrest. The absence of any vallated earthworks on the Mount would suggest that the site was never developed as a hill-fort, partially due no doubt to its close proximity to Oldbury.

A similar situation existed in Sussex, where at Harrow Hill excavations have shown that a simple pastoral enclosure existed in the early mid-first millennium, which it is suggested served as a collecting enclosure for the livestock of several local communities. This site also failed to develop as a hill-fort and came under the domination, together with Highdown and Chanctonbury, of neighbouring Cissbury.⁹

It is known that Oldbury had improved its defences by the second century B.C.¹⁰ and its size, forty-nine hectares, combined with its strategic position would point to a similar nucleation of local power followed by the eventual dominance over most of the Upper Darent Valley territories.

If these hill-forts in the Upper Darent Valley are plotted and the principle of Thiessen polygons applied, similar to the examples in central Wessex,⁶ the theoretical territories controlled by each of these centres can be defined (Fig. 2). As these territories often follow natural features, it is suggested that the combination of the edge of the escarpments, Danes Trench and the North Downs Trackway could be used to define a territory whose centre was Otford Mount.

The Trackway which runs across the valley and crosses the River Darent at Filston Farm, marks the existing parish boundary between Otford and Shoreham and aligns well with the theoretical boundary to

6. B. W. Cunliffe, *Iron Age Communities in Britain*, London, 1974, 260-3.

7. *Arch. Cant.*, lxi (1948), 181.

8. *Ibid.*, xci (1975), 187.

9. Barry Cunliffe, 'Some Aspects of Hill-forts and their cultural Environments', in Margaret Jesson and David Hill (Eds.), *The Iron Age and its Hill-forts*, Southampton, 1971, 66.

10. *Arch. Cant.*, li (1939), 156-8.

divide the territories of Hulberry and Otford Mount. This feature has been used as a boundary for a considerable period of time. Geoffrey Hewlett uses the hedge along its line in his paper on hedgerow dating, in which he concludes the hedge to be about one thousand years old and suggests the boundary to be the one mentioned in the Saxon charter of Otford of A.D. 822.¹¹ Hewlett goes on to point out the strong possibility of some boundaries being considerably older than the hedges and clearly this could be applied to the Trackway banks. The use of trackways as boundaries and vice versa has been mentioned before,³ and where trackways cut across open grazing land as this one does, their dual role as access routes and boundaries between territories seems highly probable.

Danes Trench probably continued in a northerly direction along the side of the Darent Valley to join the trackway somewhere above Filston Farm and an unusual kink in the line of the trackway as it climbs up the valley may well be this junction. The absence of any other linear earthworks in the Otford area makes further division difficult, although a hollow way which runs up the side of the Downs above Kemsing, as a continuation of Childsbridge Lane, is all that remains of a possible eastern boundary dividing Otford Mount and Oldbury.

A southern boundary for the territory has long been lost under the town of Sevenoaks, but this is likely to have followed the sandstone ridge along the four–five hundred foot contour (Fig. 1). If the theory is correct that the ridge and the land to the south were covered with dense forest in pre-historic times and were virtually unpenetrable until the Late Iron Age,¹² then the ridge could have formed a natural southern boundary for the territory.

The pattern of pre-historic settlement shown for the Upper Darent Valley does bear a close resemblance to areas along the South Downs and the use of Danes Trench as a territorial boundary would suggest that a similar system of territorial division allied to hillforts existed in Kent during the first millennium B.C. Dyer's findings in the east Chilterns¹³ have clearly extended the distribution of these features and the reports of the findings of linear earthworks close to hillforts in other parts of Kent may well extend this system of land division further.

11. Geoffrey Hewlett, 'Reconstructing a historical Landscape from Field and documentary Evidence: Otford in Kent', *Agric. History Review*, 21 (1973), 94–110.

12. Sir John Dunlop, *The Pleasant Town of Sevenoaks: A History*, (1964), 8–10.

13. J. F. Dyer, 'Drays Ditches, Bedfordshire, and Early Iron Age territorial Boundaries in the eastern Chilterns', *Antiq. Journ.*, xlii (1961), 44–62.

DANES TRENCH

COMPARATIVE DIMENSIONS OF BRONZE AGE/EARLY IRON AGE LINEAR EARTHWORKS (‘V’ ditches with single banks)

Site	Dimensions of ditch		
	Depth	Width	Base width
Danes Trench	3-4 ft.	7 ft.	6 in.
Quarley Hill ³			
Ditch 1	4 ft. 8 in.	12 ft.	6 in.
Ditch 2	4 ft.	8 ft.	6 in.
Drays Ditch ¹³	3-4 ft.	8 ft.	12 in.
Hayes Common ¹⁴	5 ft.	7 ft.	10 in.
Bourton on the Water ¹⁵	3-5 ft.	6½ ft.	6 in.

The dimensions of the banks are subject to considerable variation due to erosion and have therefore been omitted from the list.

14. B. J. Philp, *Excavations in West Kent, 1960-1970*, (1973), 32.

15. G. C. Dunning, ‘Bronze Age Settlement near Bourton-on-the-Water, Gloucester’, *Antiq. Journ.*, xii (1932), 279.

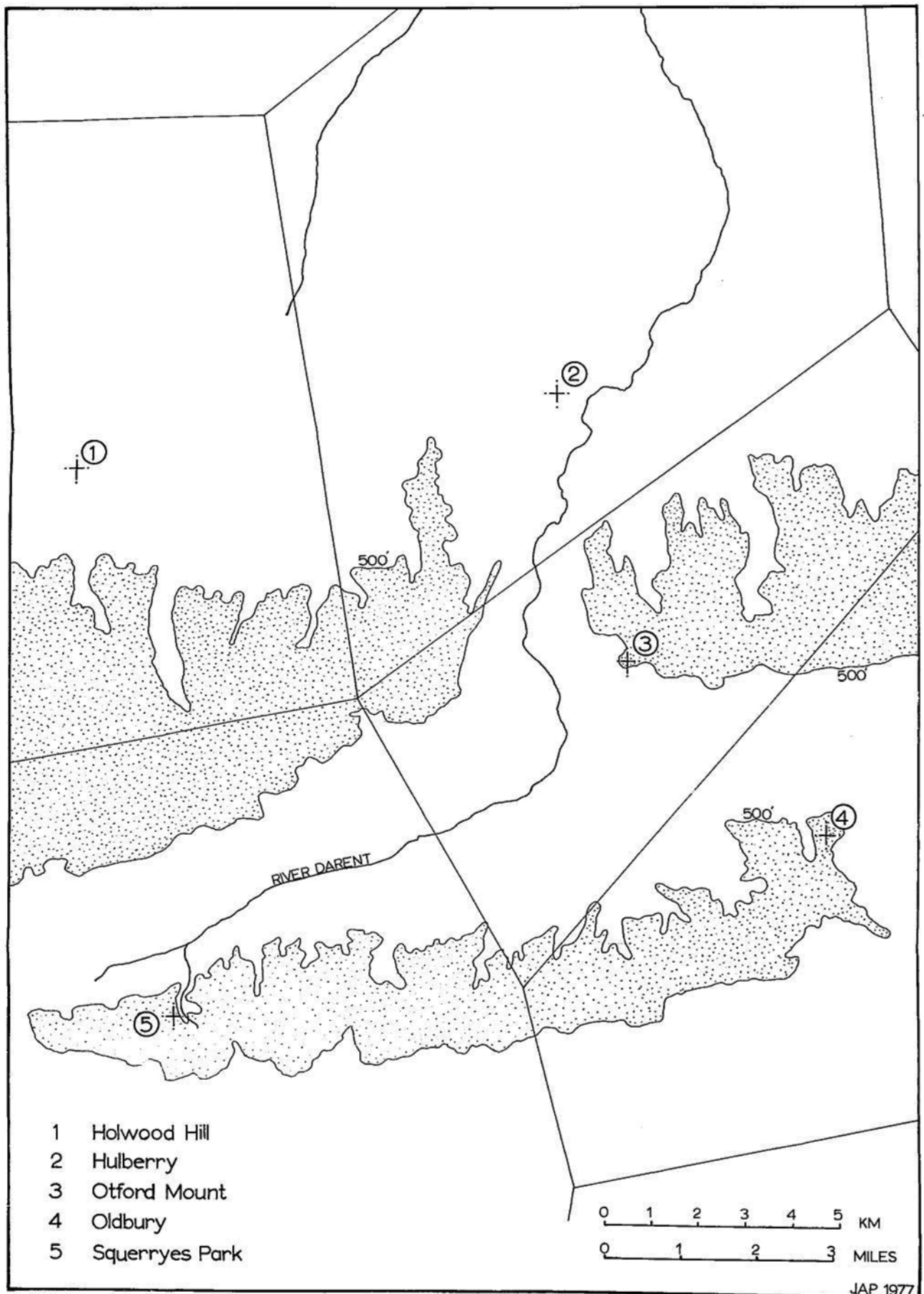


Fig. 2.

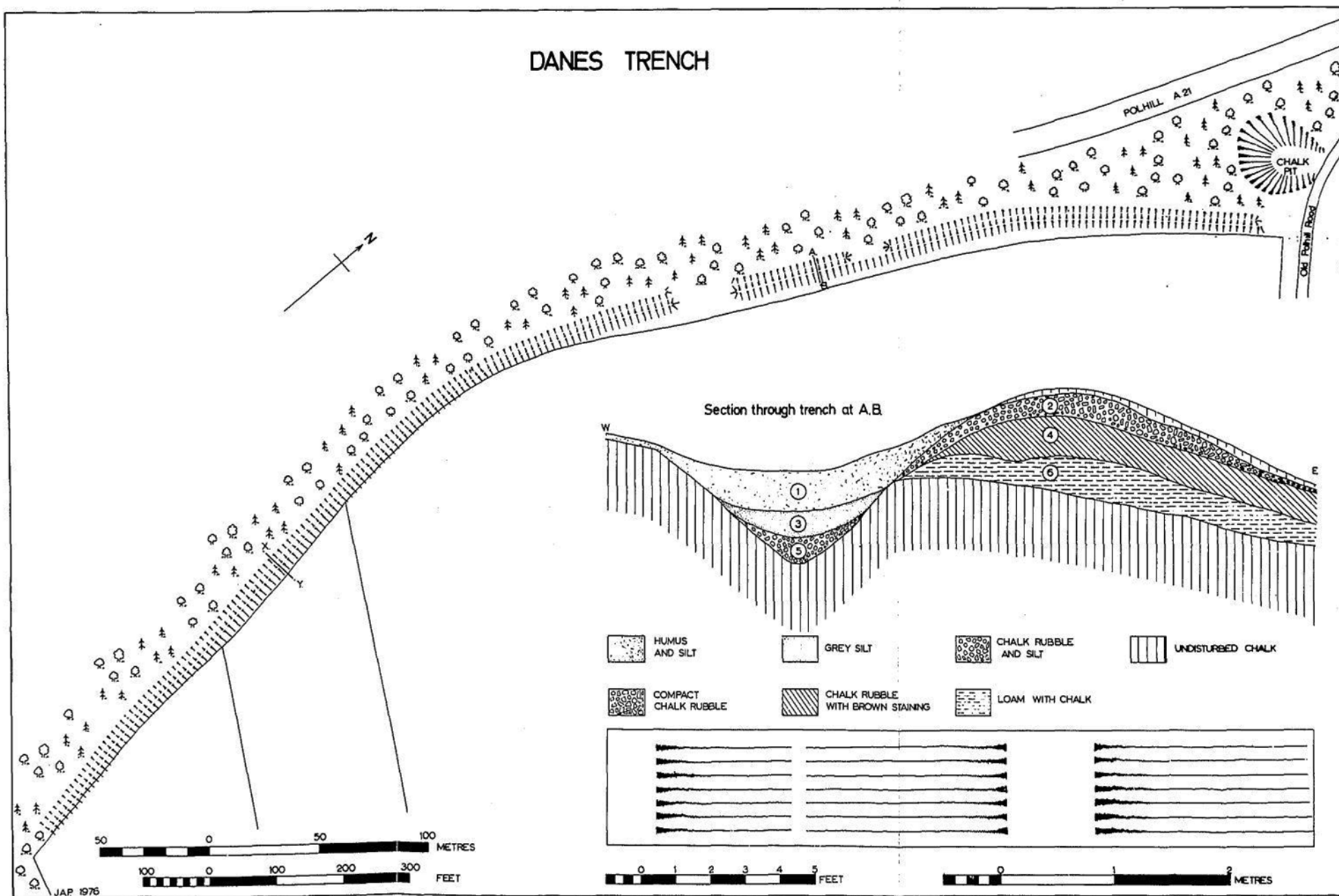


Fig. 3.