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# Archaeologies of Utopia?

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**Figure 1:** ***Johann Friedrich Krumnow (1811-1880)***

During 2006, the US-based Society for Historical Archaeology dedicated one entire issue (vol 40 number 1) of its journal *Historical Archaeology* to the archaeology of Utopian settlements. In the keynote paper by Thad M. Van Bueren and Sarah A. Tarlow entitled 'The interpretive potential of utopian settlements' (Van Bueren and Tarlow 2006), the authors discussed the possible contribution of archaeology to, in many cases, an already substantial body of understanding

concerning the various utopian social experiments that challenged American society from the 18th century.

Van Bueren and Tarlow identified four distinct strands within the possibilities for archaeological interpretation of past utopian experiments. The most obvious of these is the potential for archaeology to fill the *lacunae* within the historical record. Not all intentional communities set out to construct a presence or image within the public consciousness; but even with groups that dedicated substantial energy and resources towards that end, the material record might allow inference concerning the mundane or embarrasing details omitted or edited from their narrative: details that might illuminate the manner in which a utopian ideal played out in the quotidian.

The second strand of potential for archaeology is, again through the material record, to detect and investigate mismatches between rhetoric and performance. Also, to explore contradictions between the internal ideologies of communities and the perceptions of the broader society whose values and 'common sense' was challenged. That this is sticky ground, rife with polemic and propaganda, where interpretation is subject to an archaeologist's own orientation, is acknowledged by Van Bueren and Tarlow (2006:3). Similarly, the danger of trivialising past utopian endeavours within present public interpretation, in response to influence from the dominant culture, is an important issue addressed in some detail by Alison Wylie (2002:154-60) who expands upon the critique of Mark Leone. Sticky ground indeed, but of immense interest.

The third strand, according to Van Bueren and Tarlow, arises from the conscious expression of ideology upon the material world by utopian communities. Particular modes of living and the systems of belief upon which lifeways are based, might be archaeologically visible through structural organisation, architectural design, the use of symbolism and the modification of landscape.

The potential for archaeology to provide a diachronic perspective is Van Bueren and Tarlow's fourth strand. They argue that an examination of processes of ideological adaptation through time is an important counterweight to an historiographic tendency for 'monolithic interpretations that focus on the reasons groups "failed"' (2006:4).

Echoing Wylie, the authors note the particular importance of critical self-reflection for researchers who choose to investigate and interpret utopian communities, seeing this as an opportunity for ethical and professional development. Van Bueren and Tarlow conclude by noting that past idealisms and the lessons learned from attempts at engineering societal change through visionary movements have much relevance in the present. Despite the loss of faith in utopian vision during the 20th century due to the devastating failures of those utopian attempts at societal change represented by state Communism, Fascism and Nazism, the authors argue for the continuing relevance of the utopian imagination in creating alternatives to a future characterised by 'war, terror, conflict and inequality'; to which one might reasonably now add climate change.

The papers published in volume 40 (1) of *Historical Archaeology* range widely through time and (North American) space. Preucel and Pendery (2006:6-19) explore the chronology of Brook Farm (1841-1847) through changes in landscape and architecture which reflect the transition from radical and egalitarian Transcendentalist ideology to the more rigidly structured, secular and industrialised Fourierist Phalanx into which it consciously evolved. Tomaso *et al*. (2006: 20-36) report progress with their long-running and on-going Feltville Archaeological Project. Located in Central New Jersey, Feltville, between 1845 and 1860, was an experiment in decentralised reformed industry conducted by David Felt, a capitalist from New York City. Felt, a devout but tolerant Unitarian who had succeeded in the printing industry, built his ideal village and factory on a greenfields site apparently influenced by older Jeffersonian communal capitalist ideals and ethics, emphasising profitable but dispersed agrarian and self-contained industrial community as a vision for American development in place of full commitment to industrialisation (Tomaso *et al*. 2006:22-3). Felt abandoned his project in 1860 and was bankrupt in 1867. After Felt's departure, the village of Feltville was sold several times. The village suffered periods of abandonment before becoming a resort in the late nineteenth century, where Felt's architectural efforts were adaptively reused. Although abandoned again in 1916, much of the built features have survived into

the present. Neither Feltville, nor its backer, are well documented historically, while its archaeology appears to be a palimpsest having marked stratigraphic complexity. Nonetheless, Tomaso *et al*. remain optimistic that a hermeneutic between sketchy historical data and the evidence from archaeology and historical geography will ultimately allow Felt's vision to be understood.

The Oneida Perfectionist community founded in 1848 by John Humphrey Noyes is the subject of a paper by Heather Van Wormer (Van Wormer 2006). Following the retirement of Noyes and the abandonment of the community's controversial practice of complex marriage, together with the eugenically-inspired 'stirpiculture' reproductive program, Oneida changed from common ownership of the substantial assets into a joint stock company during 1881. Much of the community's built environment has survived together with a comprehensive documentary record. Noyes himself published extensively about Oneida and other communal ventures (eg. Noyes 1870) and the Oneida Community has generated much commentary, contemporary (eg. Nordhoff 1875), and in more recent times from the scholarly (Foster 1984, 1991, 1997), to the sensational (Eskapa 1987). Dolores Hayden (Hayden 1976), Isaac and Altman (1998) and architectural historian Janet White (White 1994, 1996, 2001) have all investigated the articulation between ideology and architecture at Oneida. There has been no archaeological investigation of Oneida, but Van Wormer, noting the existence of comprehensive records of the annual inventories compiled at Oneida between 1861 and 1883, foreshadows the possibility of excavation as a means of researching life at Oneida on a personal scale. Van Wormer also points out that investigation focussed on Oneida's daughter community at Wallingford might permit archaeological observation of the dissent known to have existed within the community. Fogarty's (1994) edition of Victor Hawley's diary is a poignant example of Oneidan dissent.

Other papers discuss such diverse subjects as the burial practices of the Society of Friends (Bromberg and Shephard 2006), the bizarre cosmology of Cyrus Teed and his Koreshan Unity Settlement, which has been the subject of very limited archaeological investigation (Tarlow 2006) and the excavation of a looted rubbish dump at the Theosophical Society's Point Loma Institute (Van Wormer and Gross 2006). Stacy Kozakavich (2006) discusses the salvage archaeology of a co-operative settlement established in Western Canada by an immigrant group of Russian adherents of Peter Verigin's New Doukhobor religious sect. Kozakavich's interesting paper, in sketching Doukhobor identity as a multilayered complex of belief and behaviour, realises several of those strands of archaeological potential identified by Van Bueren and Tarlow.

Against a comprehensive historical background, Van Bueren's own paper (Van Bueren 2006) describes a survey - and the beginnings of excavation - at the California site of the early twentieth-century Llano del Rio Cooperative, an attempt at the practical implementation of an egalitarian, socialist and feminist alternative to industrial capitalism. A highway construction project prompted the work, to determine the significance of the surviving cultural landscape and the extent of existing remains on the former Llano holdings, during which almost 400 surface features were recorded. Van Bueren remains pessimistic regarding the possibility of locating archaeological evidence of the feminist agenda that saw women undertaking men's traditional work roles at Llano (2006:147-8). However, other aspects of the women's social reform project, together with evidence of changes both in ideology and the class structures within the membership, are likely to be present within the temporal development of the cooperative's built environment, according to Van Bueren. Excavation of the archaeological deposits at Llano is expected to permit the utopian vision and lived practice to be compared.

The final paper in volume 40(1) of *Historical Archaeology* is Suzanne Spencer-Wood's comprehensive review of gender ideology and practice, according to historical sources, within utopian communities. An important issue concerning women's roles within such communities is the degree to which domestic tasks such as food preparation and laundering were performed communally or co-operatively. For this question, Spencer-Wood suggests somewhat obvious archaeological indicators, which include the size of cellar holes, the distribution of footings and the size of chimney bases, while presenting the probably over-optimistic possibilities of excavating cooking vessels to determine their size and the confident identification of genderised spaces from material

remains (Spencer Wood 2006:169-170).

Reflection upon this collection of papers is revealing: Although the research is confined to North America, and the published collection attempts to cover a diverse range of ideological expression, there are some surprising omissions. Except for an all-too-brief mention by Spencer-Wood (2006:176), David Starbuck's long-running program of work on the Canterbury Shakers (eg. Starbuck 2004, 1999, 1998, 1990, 1986) is ignored, as is Stephen Warfel's numerous seasons of excavation at Conrad Beissel's eighteenth-century Ephrata Cloister (Warfel 1993-1999). The recentness of the work selected for publication was not apparently an issue, as Bromberg and Shephard's paper discusses a salvage project undertaken in 1994 and Van Wormer and Gross' paper on the Theosophical Society dump relies on an even earlier excavation. That the papers published in the volume in question were intended to form a 'synopsis of the utopian movement in North America' is explicitly stated by Van Bueren and Tarlow (2006:1). Notwithstanding, one might be led to consider that utopian vision and intent was confined to that continent alone, which was (and remains) very far from the truth. For example, there were literally dozens of co-operative homestead associations and village settlements within the Colony of Victoria alone, during the closing decade of the nineteenth century (Blake 1966, Metcalf 1997:123). A further observation regarding the papers published in volume 40 (1) of *Historical Archaeology* might note their scarcely bridled optimism within interpretations derived from material remains. Examples of this lie in the unquestioned face-value attribution of function as alcohol containers for glass bottle remains at Llano (Van Bueren 2006:148) and at the Doukhobor village (Kozakavich 2006:124) in the inference of behaviours that deviated from the temperance agendas of these communities. Martin Carney's powerful critique of function-based analytical approaches to archaeological glass assemblages (Carney 1998:87-9) has clearly had little impact in North America. Nor has the argument that the traditional antiquarian attribution for the function of dark olive green glass containers as 'beer/wine' is undermined by their use for diverse contents including cordials, whisky, blacking, turpentine, methylated spirits, stove polish, linseed oil and vinegar, together with unknowable histories of ad hoc use and re-use (Carney 1998:87; Hewitt 2003:78, 91; Brooks 2005:10).

With the exception perhaps of Heather Van Wormer (2006:37-8), none of the authors has attempted to pursue a definition of utopianism beyond Van Bueren and Tarlow's evidently Marxist view that 'all utopian ventures were acts of social resistance that explicitly criticised dominant group values and practices' (2006:2). Perhaps this is both wise and deliberate, as there is little agreement to be found in the broader literature. Krishan Kumar's approach (1991:33-35), echoed by Roland Schaer (2000:3), is that the utopian tradition is strictly a product of the secular and humanist west, which effectively privileges the utopian socialism of Henri Comte de Saint-Simon, of Etienne Cabet, of Louis Blanc, of Herbert Spencer, of Charles Fourier, of Robert Owen, of Nikolay Chernyshevsky, of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, of Joseph Stalin and of Mao Zedong, as the only way to Utopia. Of course, such a definition would exclude all of the communities discussed in *Historical Archaeology* vol 40(1), except perhaps the latter Fourierist stage of Brook Farm and the overtly socialist Llano del Rio. The noted scholar of utopianism, Barbara Goodwin, argued a finer line still: to Goodwin (1978:7), any social theorist whose ideals are fragmentary or less than comprehensive, is no utopian, which most decidedly rules out the Theosophical Society. Ruth Levitas, on the other hand, allows that utopianism is simply an expressed "desire for a different better way of being" (1990:181). Indeed, 'Utopia is about how we would live and what kind of a world we would live in if we could do just that' (Levitas1990:1).

Interestingly, Heather Van Wormer has very sensibly adopted the descriptor 'intentional community' (2006:37). Bill Metcalf and Betty Huf explain the use of this broadly inclusive term as a means of working around the problem of utopian definition, with its overt politicality: '"Utopian refers to the *intention* to achieve an ideal society, not to the outcome of the attempt.' (Metcalf and Huf 2002:2, emphasis added).

When I first approached the notion of conducting archaeological research at the site of Johan Friedrich Krumnow's Herrnhut Commune (1853-1889) near Penshurst in Western Victoria (Figures 1, 2 and 3), I was filled with optimisms of the kind strongly evident in vol. 40(1) of *Historical Archaeology.* Once I had identified Herrnhut as having been 'successful' according to Rosabeth Kanter's criteria for utopian communities cited and

discussed in Bainbridge (1997:134-141), Stark and Bainbridge (1996:159-161), also Brumann (2003:398-401), I argued its importance in the search for sociological explanation of long-term human co-operation and altruism – that often elusive social glue. Articulating my own perceptions of what an archaeology of utopianism might reveal, I rehearsed those now familiar possibilities of detecting inconsistencies between performance and rhetoric, of searching out symbolism and ideology in landscape and structural organisation, of interrogating the material culture within the remains of Herrnhut as a means of creating 'an illuminating new view within the debate where social position, economic status and class aspiration are equated with modes and tastes of consumption'; at the same time recognising that a

> major archaeological challenge at Herrnhut, once data is gathered from the landscape is, through analysis of the physical and documentary evidence, the teasing out of those various influences of practicality, ethnicity and ideology (Hewitt 2004a).

Disillusionment followed promptly.

Following a preliminary topographic survey that identified and located features that most probably related to the first stage of the commune period, I began a program of archaeogeophysical remote sensing, using gradiometry (Figure 4), magnetic susceptibility and ground conductivity, hoping to observe the broad structural organisation of the earliest phase of settlement and, of course, to detect those all-important trash deposits (Hewitt 2004b). The program was a dismal failure as a result of gross interference from buckshot soil and igneous geology.

At about that time, I had tracked down the original 1888 contract plans for construction of the railway that traversed the commune site (Figure 5). According to Metcalf and Huf's (2002) history, the earliest Herrnhut settlement location had been abandoned following the fire that destroyed it in 1860. In a mixed blessing, the railway plan which includes the only known and consequently invaluable, depiction of the arrangement of the settlement at any time during its existence, showed no fewer than three buildings in place where none should have been. My hopeful pristine site was, in fact, a palimpsest.

Concurrent close reading of the historical sources brought a growing uneasiness that all was not well within the documentary evidence. Krumnow's only surviving autograph document (Metcalf and Darragh 2001) gives a carefully contrived account of the commune that, apparently sheltering beneath the umbrella of an assumed Moravianism, tells the Colonial Legislature what it wants to hear. No other written record from the community seems to have survived the litigation that proceeded from the leader's intestate death in 1880. All of the contemporary sources whose commentary on Krumnow and his community underpins the received history, had axes to grind and long-standing scores to settle. The documentary history unravelled into polemic. In tracing Krumnow to the primary (pre-1840) German immigrations to South Australia and the beginnings of the Lutheran Church in Australia, almost no reliable information could be found. Krumnow was undoubtedly a key player in the dissention that wracked Australian Lutheranism almost from the outset, soon leading to schisms that went unhealed for one hundred and twenty years. The facts have been lost within partisan (and probably libellous) reconstructions of Lutheran history from all sides of the conflict, while the deep enmities that followed Krumnow to Victoria found continued expression in accusations of immoral behaviour and deprecatory references to his physical deformity. Among the few apparently uncontaminated anecdotal references to Krumnow's character is bible colporteur Johann Schmidt's welcoming encounter with him during a visit to Herrnhut (Metcalf and Huf 2002:40; Graetz n.d.). Actions and words at Krumnow's burial indicate him to have been regarded as honest in business, a kind-hearted employer and a sincere friend (Metcalf and Huf 2002:40, 92). However, the nature of Krumnow's beliefs and hence the spiritual underpinnings of the Herrnhut community remain enigmatic.

The possibility for archaeological investigation of contradiction and deviance from the Herrnhut utopian vision, as proposed by Van Bueren and Tarlow, requires understanding of the belief system that drove that

vision. Similarly, in order to recognise ideological expression in the structure of the Herrnhut community's material world, it is helpful to have some glimmer of the nature of those ideologies. In that sense, Herrnhut is no Oneida. Indeed, the inaccessibility of Herrnhut's theological framework echoes Janet White's difficulties in understanding the Jansonism of the Bishop Hill Colonists, whose vaguely articulated doctrine emanated from a charismatic bible fundamentalist with a very narrow view of the worth of other books (White 159-78).

Discovery, within the Victorian Railways Spotswood archives, of a series of aerial photographs, which covered the then still-existing track through the Herrnhut lands, revealed that given the right conditions, much evidence of past agricultural activity could still be seen within the rail reserve and a narrow adjacent strip during the early 1950s. Although the area identified with the older settlement of Herrnhut was not included, features such as ditches, fencelines, later ruins and areas of cultivation characteristic of primitive single-mouldboard ploughs (Twidale 1972; Twidale and Campbell 1993; Twidale and Bourne 1978; Twidale et al. 1971) were clearly evident in the photographs. Using the 1888 railway plan, it was possible to infer a useful part of the structural organisation of the settlement in its final form from the aerial data. Evidence was also found during topographic recording of the site early in the present project that given low angles of incident light, short pasture cover and differential vegetative response to soil moisture gradients, much detail of the settlement layout had survived into the present. This was cause for some optimism in the expectation that archaeological remains of settlement structures and occupation might also be well preserved beneath the ground surface.

Respecting the time and resource constraints of a PhD project, the scope was restricted to investigation of a complex of structures that were thought to include the remains of the earliest phase of settlement (Figure 6). Nevertheless, at approximately two hectares, the study area to be sampled by excavation was rather large in the absence of the geophysical data that was looked to as a means of guidance. Although the research design had stated that eighteen features would be targeted with excavation trenches having a total area of at least 94 square metres (Figure 7), in practice, only twelve features could be sampled within the four week field season. However, the area of the trenches grew to slightly more than 300 square metres as we struggled to make sense of what was being revealed (Figure 8). As is discussed in my account of the taphonomy of the Herrnhut site (Hewitt 2005), rabbit infestation and the efforts to control and eradicate these pests had severely damaged the archaeology. In eleven out of the twelve trenches, only small regions of the area excavated had escaped destruction by burrowing. Although nine of the trenches had been placed within what had almost certainly been buildings, only two of these trenches were found to contain partial but unequivocal structural evidence (Figures 9 and 10). Some five thousand artefacts were recovered and a small proportion of these appear to be within primary contexts that relate to the destructive fire of 1860. Many artefacts related to the destruction by fire were found in secondary contexts. Unfortunately, these have limited analytical value due to the sampling biases that are consequent upon the processes of redeposition. Only a tiny proportion of the artefacts recovered could be linked to the dominant German ethnicity of the Herrnhut communards. Conjoin analysis of ceramic sherds has, however, revealed details of the communards' strategies for the apparently thorough clean-up of burned structures, which was evidently followed by the reclamation and recycling of materials. Despite the taphonomic chaos and the general absence of structural remains, some inference of building aspect, which is crucial for the understanding of settlement spatial organisation, has been possible from the presence, absence and distribution of fragmentary window glass. The nature of the assemblages that were recovered from their original fire-destruction context will broadly indicate the function of the buildings investigated. In the case of what was evidently the original settlement's primary communal building, the kitchen and bakehouse (Figure 9), excavations have not only revealed the structural technology, but also allow insights into a temporal sequence that includes partial destruction by fire, temporary reoccupation immediately afterwards and subsequent radical changes in function when a new communal kitchen was constructed elsewhere.

Although the excavation has produced useful results, the archaeology of Herrnhut, on a microscale, was not as well-preserved as the survival of elements of the historical landscape had suggested. In general, the data gathered so far, were not especially encouraging for the production of a broadly satisfying outcome.

It was not until Rudy Frank suspended a 35 mm camera from a kite towards the end of the excavation season, in order to record elevated and panoramic views of the trenches (Figures 11, 12 and 13), did we begin to appreciate the power of aerial photography at this site, given appropriate conditions. We were fortunate perhaps in that heavy rain had fallen near the end of the field season causing fresh germination in areas that had been cleared of dry grass in order that excavators might avoid the wandering tiger snakes. Climatic vagaries - and the Pleistocene at Bend Road (Hewitt and De Lang 2007) did not permit further attempts at flights over Herrnhut until locally intense late-summer rains produced germination within almost entirely depleted pasture early in the present year. This time, a digital camera was used to record thousands of images, producing remarkable views of the earlier and later settlements. Previously unknown features were revealed and much otherwise inaccessible detail became clear (Figure 14).

Aerial photography has proven to be invaluable at Herrnhut and filled many of the gaps left by the failure of geophysical prospection. Although the images from Rudy's kite, in combination with the data derived from excavation and topographic surveys, will result in the emergence of hopefully persuasive views of structural organisation, the absence of a reliable documentary record will not allow the fine-grained perspectives and ideological inferences suggested by Van Bueren and Tarlow. Nonetheless, in the manner of research conducted on pre-literate societies, insights resulting from this present work will be helpful towards an understanding of the beliefs and intentions of Krumnow and his followers at Herrnhut and doubtless point out directions for subsequent rewarding investigation.

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**Figure 2** *Herrnhut Commune was established near Penshurst in Western Victoria during 1853*

**Figure 3** *The ruin of Krumnow's later house at Herrnhut (Rudy Frank)*

**Figure 4** *Geophysics at Herrnhut: surveyof the older settlement site using twin Bartington grad-601 fluxgate gradiometers*

**Figure 5** ***The 1880 Victorian Railways contract plan (north is to the bottom in accordance with VR eccentricity)***

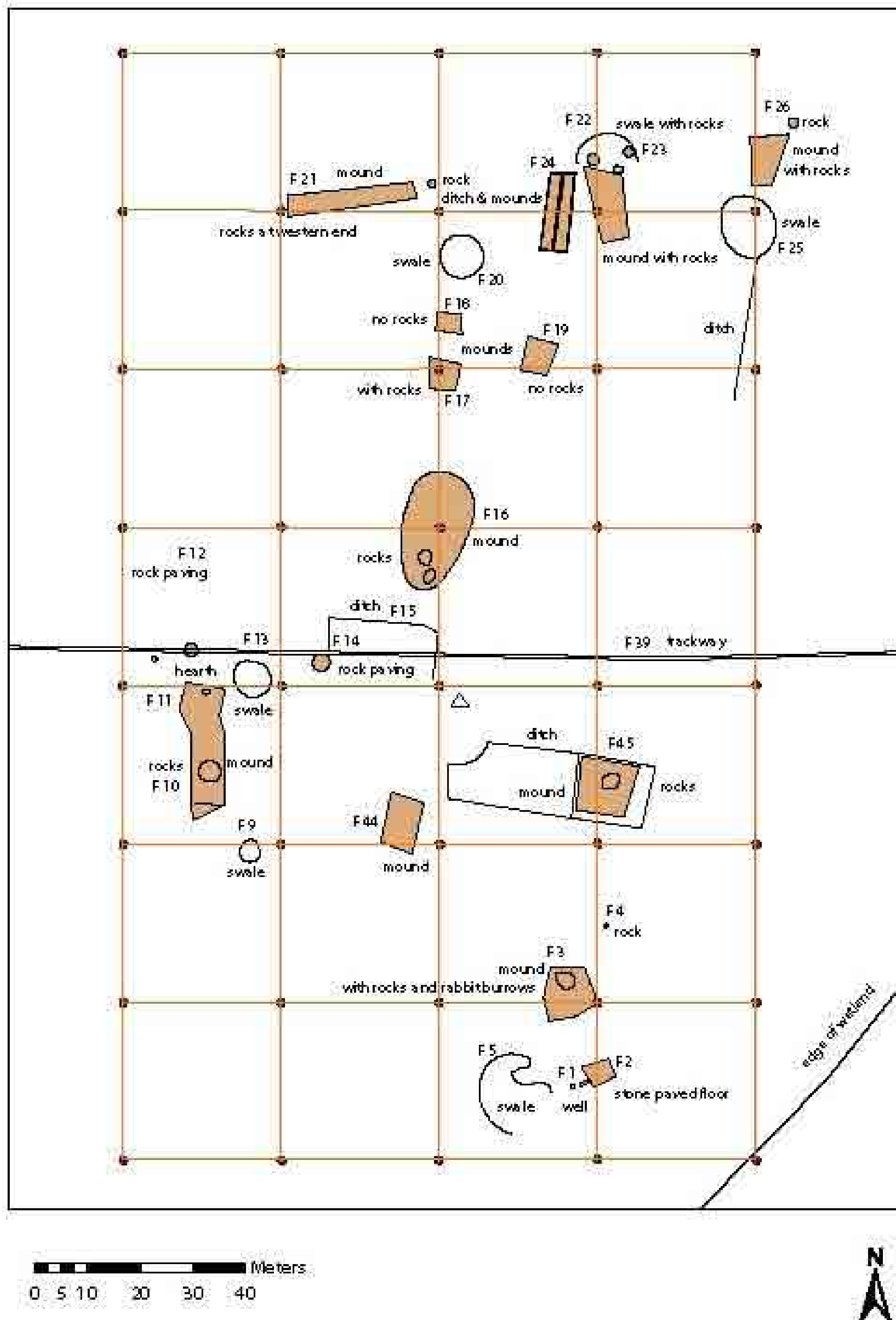
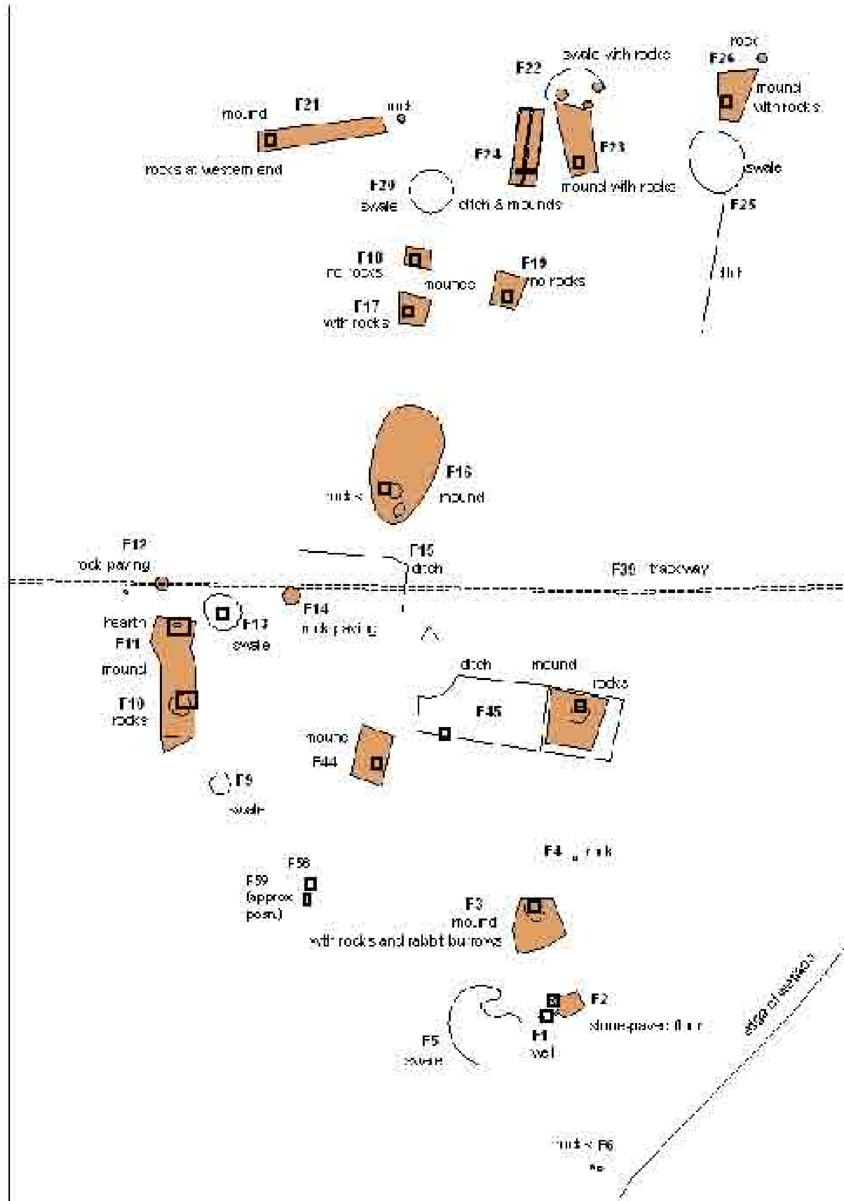



**Figure 6** ***Geophysics at Herrnhut: the array of twenty-eight 30 metre square survey grids set out over topographic features within the older settlement site.***

pre-1860 Hermhut settlement with proposed excavation trenches




0 5 10 20 30 40 Meters

Figure 3

**Figure 7** ***Proposed excavation sampling strategy for features within the older settlement site.***

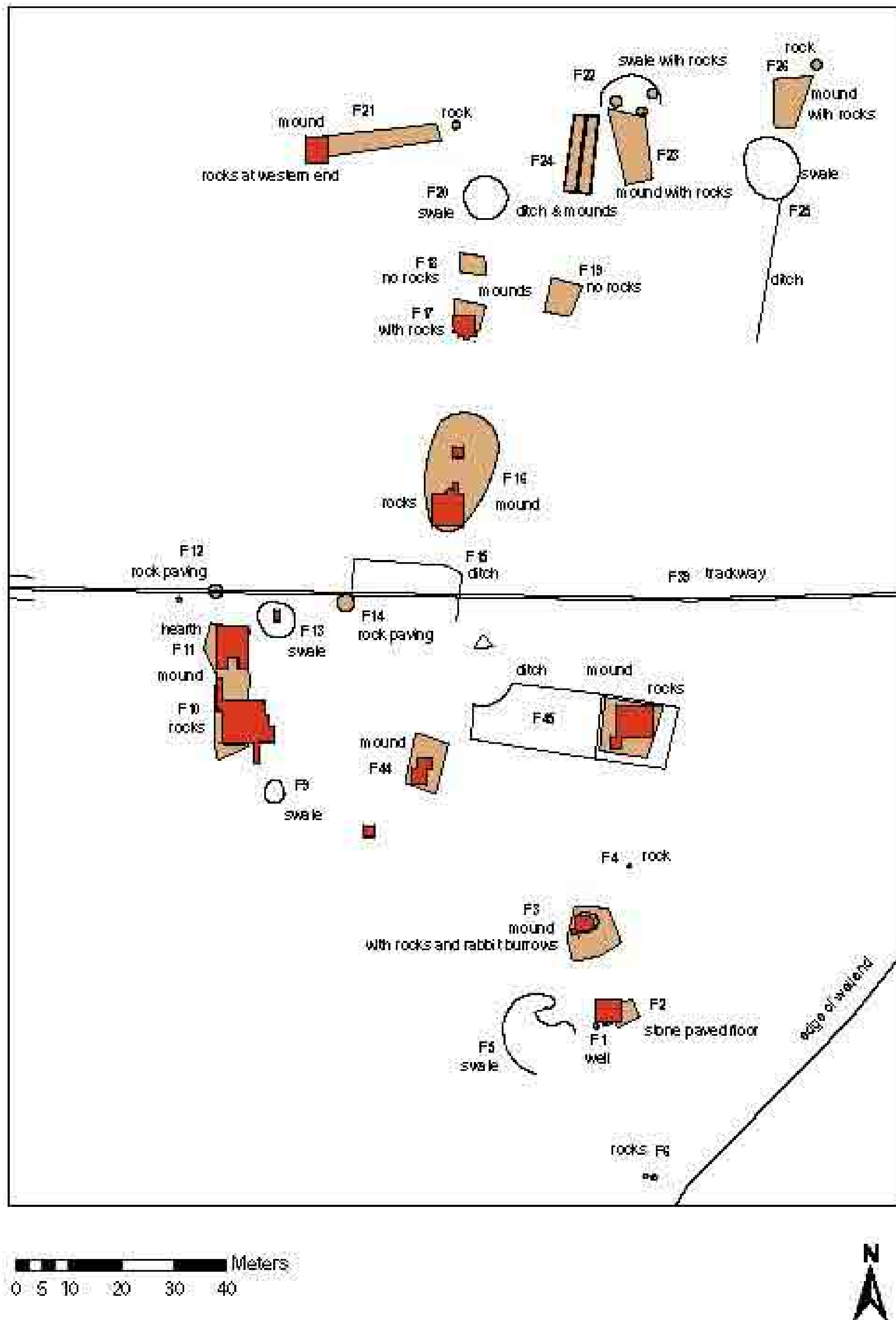



**Figure 8** *Actual areas excavated within older settlement site*

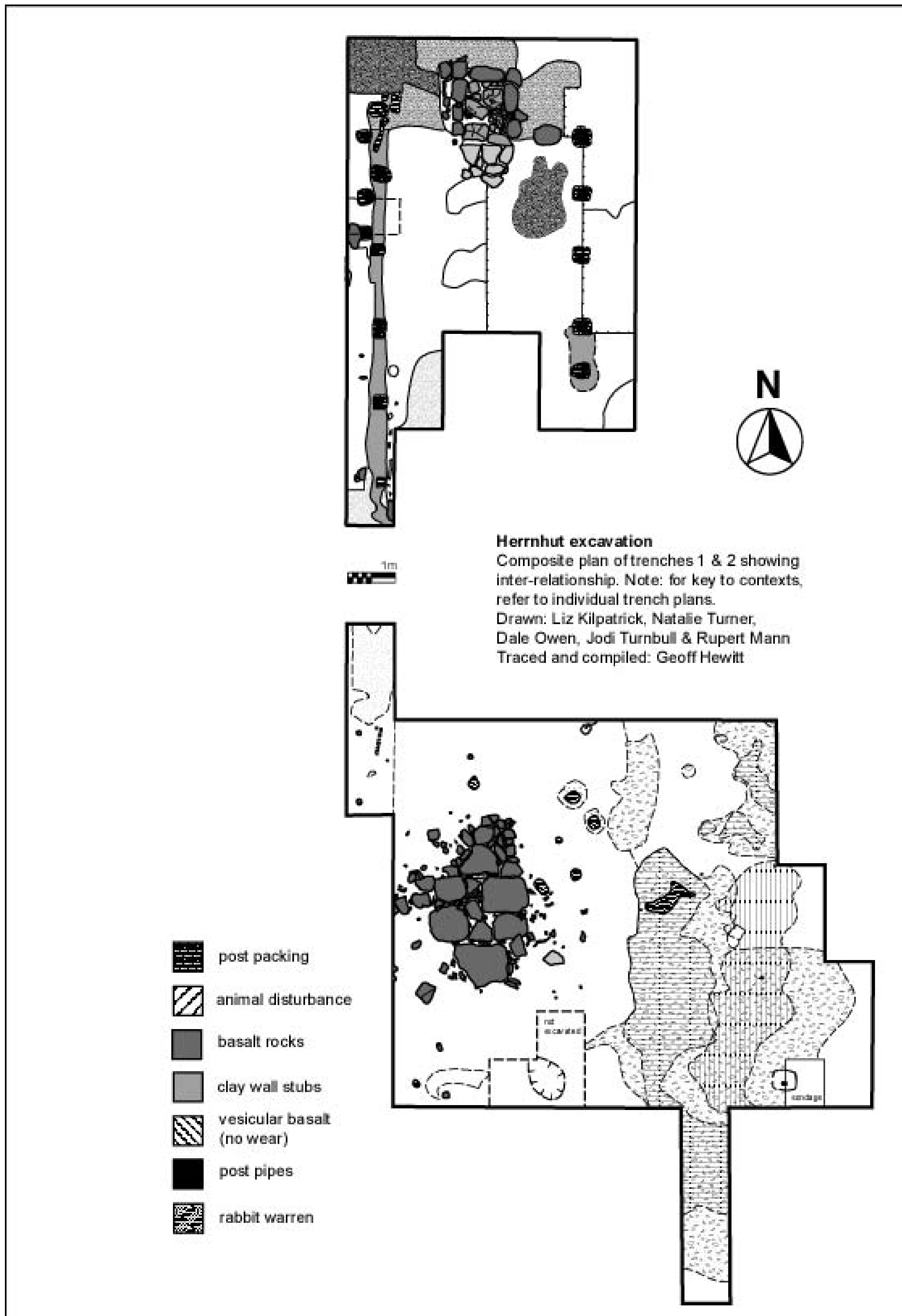



**Figure 9** ***Composite plan of trenches 1 and 2, an earth-fast post-framed building with mud walls, apparently the communal kitchen and bakehouse.***

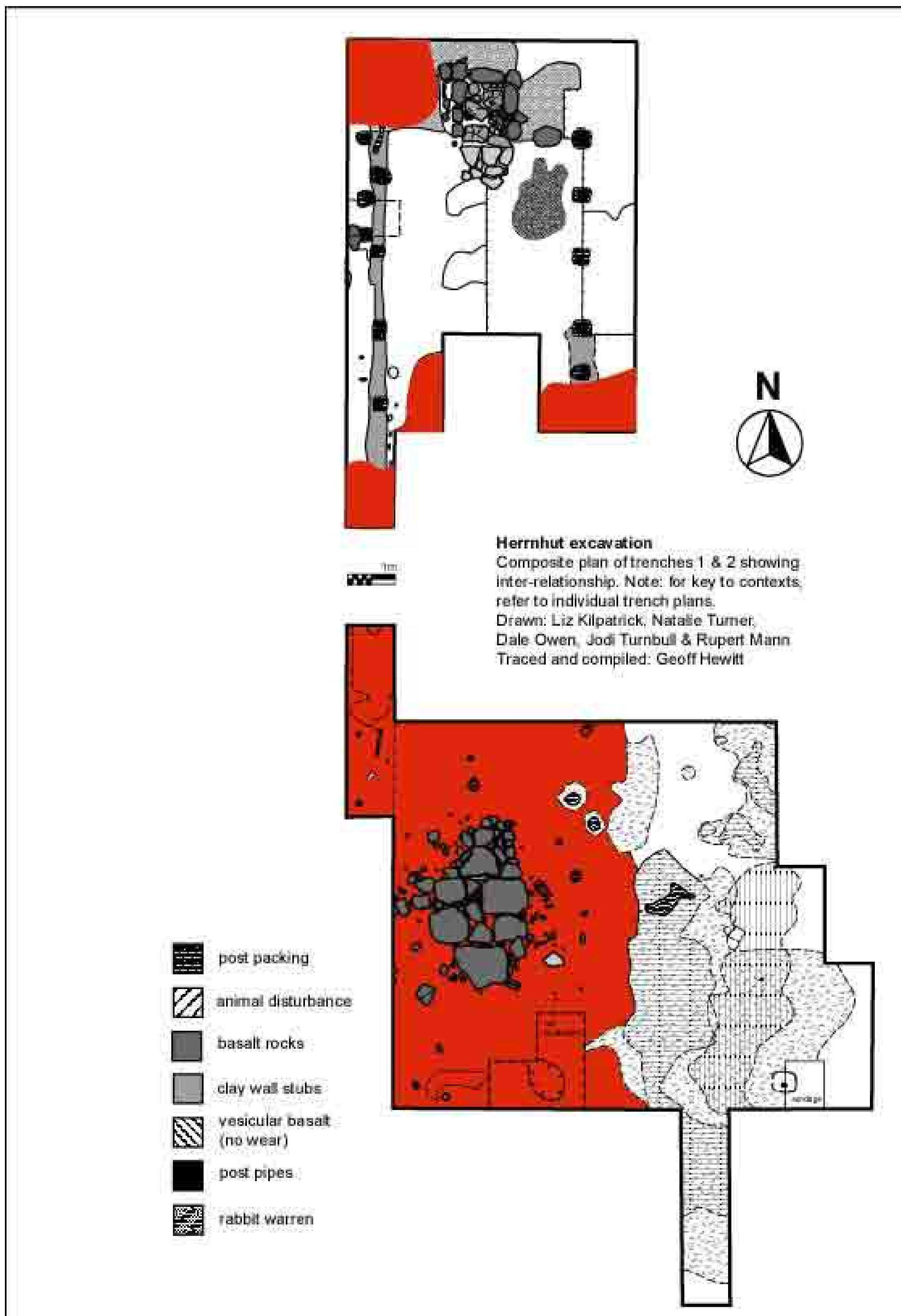



**Figure 10** *The plan shown in Figure 9 but now indicating the extent of disturbance due to rabbits and rabbiters.*

**Figure 11** ***Oblique aerial photograph of portion of the older Herrnhut settlement site taken by Rudy Frank using a 35 mm camera suspended below a kite. Mount Rouse and the township of Penshurst are in the right background.***

**Figure 12** ***Vertical aerial photograph of Herrnhut trench 4 taken by Rudy Frank using a 35 mm camera suspended below a kite.***

**Figure 13** ***Vertical aerial photograph of the twelve excavation trenches within the older settlement site taken by Rudy Frank using a 35 mm camera suspended below a kite***

**Figure 14** ***Enhanced oblique aerial photograph of the Herrnhut settlement site taken by Rudy Frank using a digital camera suspended below a kite. This image reveals details of agricultural activities together with drains, fences, stockyards, trackways, an unfinished well, buildings and traces of the fire that destroyed the settlement in 1860.***