Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit

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PARSON'S LANE, LITTLEPORT, CAMBRIDGESHIRE.

An Archaeological Evaluation 1996

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PARSON'S LANE, LITTLEPORT, CAMBRIDGESHIRE.

An Archaeological Evaluation 1996

Contents

Figures

PARSON'S LANE, LITTLEPORT, CAMBRIDGESHIRE.

An Archaeological Evaluation 1996

1.0: SUMMARY

This report describes the results of an archaeological evaluation, employing air photographic assessment and trial-trenching, carried out following a resolution of the district council to grant planning consent for a development at Parson's Lane, Littleport, Cambridgeshire (centred on N.G.R. TL559868: hereinafter referred to as the study area, Fig. 1), subject to the signing of a section 106 agreement.

Evidence of prehistoric activity in the form of stray finds was recorded. It seems likely that the land use prior to, and during, the medieval period was almost exclusively agricultural.

2.0: INTRODUCTION

This report outlines the results of an archaeological evaluation of approximately 2.07 ha. of grassland located to the south of Parson's Lane, Littleport, Cambridgeshire (Fig. 2). The work was commissioned by Cambridgeshire County Council and was undertaken in May 1996 by Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit.

In accordance with the guidelines laid down in Planning Policy Guidance Note 16 (November 1990), a recommendation for an archaeological evaluation was made by the County Archaeology Office of Cambridgeshire County Council in advance of a proposed housing development. The methodology of this evaluation conforms to an evaluation design brief prepared by the County Archaeology Office (Austin 1996) and a specification prepared by Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit (Jones 1996).

The purpose of the evaluation was to determine the location, extent, date, character, significance and quality of any archaeological remains which may be affected by the proposed development and to provide a basis for a series of recommendations to mitigate the impact of the development. This report provides a detailed description of the results of trial-trenching, and an outline of proposals for further mitigation fieldwork.

3.0: THE STUDY AREA AND ITS SETTING

The study area, adjacent to the southwestern edge of the modern town of Littleport, comprises an area of grassland currently used as a playing field (Fig. 2). The aerial photographic assessment suggests the study area has been used as a playing field since at least 1955. The underlying solid geology is Jurassic Kimmeridge Clay. The drift geology consists of Quaternary, calcareous boulder clay (Tillite) of the Peacock Association (SSEW sheet 4 872a), with deposits of glacial sand and gravel to the southeast of the study area (Geological Survey of Great Britain sheet 173). The River Great Ouse lies approximately 1.5km to the east.

The study area is bordered to the north by Parson's Lane and a recent housing development, with older properties bordering onto the eastern boundary of the site. Land to the south is currently under crop, with a primary school immediately to the west.

4.0 THE HISTORICAL EVIDENCE *by Peter Ellis*

Evidence from the Sites and Monuments Record suggests that Littleport was a focus of prehistoric activity with finds of Mesolithic, Neolithic and Bronze Age flint artifacts found in the vicinity of the study area. A scatter of Bronze Age flints is recorded in the field immediately to the south of the study area (S.M.R. No.072190). One kilometre further to the south a Mesolithic stone object (S.M.R. No.07218) was found on the slightly higher ground at the junction of Grange Lane and the Ely Road. Three crop-marked ring ditches, 800m west of the study area (S.M.R. No.07196), coincide with find-spots of 19 flint artefacts which comprised as follows; an arrowhead, scrapers, blades, cores and flakes. A late-Neolithic date is suggested (S.M.R. Nos.07192, 07193).

An array of Romano-British saltern sites occur on the now silted line of the Old Croft River (S.M.R. Nos.17261, 08425, 10939), approximately 500m to the north of the study area. Briquettes and flue tiles have been found in a number of places along the river's roddon as well as quantities of pottery principally comprising shell-gritted and colour-coated wares. A sherd of Roman pottery and a small bronze strip were found near the ring ditches noted above.

The medieval S.M.R. evidence is limited to pottery found with the Roman material on the line of the Ely by-pass, approximately 1km to the west. Part of an undated enclosure can be seen on an aerial photograph, in the area of the Romano-British sites, and might be medieval in origin (S.M.R. No.07221).

The suffix 'port' suggests a Saxon market centre and perhaps a royal manor (as Milborne Port, Somerset). The manor of Littleport is listed in the Domesday Book, belonging at this time to the demense of Ely. In 1109 it was granted, on the formation of the see of Ely, to the Bishop as one of the so called six episcopal vills, and remained with the bishopric until the 16th century. Medieval records suggest that the fens were used for sedge, with pools providing large quantities of eels. The study area lay within Mill Field, one of five common arable fields, all sited to the south and west of the village. In the 16th century the enclosure of small tracts of arable land for pasture was resisted by the villagers. The process of enclosure probably reached a peak during the later-18th and early-19th century and was not completed until 1840. The 1839 tithe apportionment map uses the name 'Mill Field' to describe several fields, suggesting the study area had only recently been enclosed. Parson's Lane, evident on the 1839 tithe map, may be earlier in origin, since it continues westward from the line of the medieval Main Street and Church Lane. Fields to the south of Parson's Lane are described on the 1886 O.S. map as 'Littleport Fields' which is the current name given to all the old common fields.

The tithe and first edition O.S. maps show a narrow strip of buildings fronting onto the south side of Wisbech Road, with a few buildings lying directly to the west of the Ely Road/High Street. The remainder of the area (bounded by Woodfen Road, Wisbech Road, and Ely Road/High Street) was devoted to agricultural use. Although the majority of the present development is 20th century, the pattern of enclosures is still reflected by the layout of the modern estates.

The presence of prehistoric ring ditches and of flint artifacts and debitage, suggests the main archaeological potential within the study area is prehistoric. As an 'island' during the prehistoric period, Littleport would have been a focus for settlement, particularly in view of the natural protection afforded by the fens. Prehistoric find-spots in the vicinity indicate a high potential for prehistoric remains within the study area. The absence of archaeological findings during recent developments, adjacent to the study area, are less significant for prehistoric activity than for Romano-

British. The potential for Romano-British deposits within the study area are dependant on the extent of activity to the north by the Old Croft River. Twentieth century development neighbouring the study area has produced no reports of Romano-British finds. Romano-British occupation and salt-working activity appears to be confined to alluvium, north of the Wisbech Road, with little evidence of a Roman presence on the boulder clay to the south.

The presence of medieval and post-medieval deposits seems unlikely. As part of the medieval field system the land use of the study area would have been agricultural, both prior to the enclosures and afterwards. Consideration might be given to the Parson's Lane street frontage during trial trenching, which, as a westward continuation of Main Street has archaeological potential for associated structures. The documentary evidence, however, suggests little former use of the study area other than for agriculture.

5.0: THE AERIAL PHOTOGRAPHIC EVIDENCE *(Air Photo Services)*

Despite detailed stereoscopic examination of vertical aerial photographs under 1.5x and 3x magnification, no archaeological features were identified from the available evidence within, or in the immediate environs of, the assessment area. Traces of vestigial and ploughed-out ridge and furrow, indicative of medieval agriculture, can be seen to the south and west. None is visible with certainty within the area or its immediate environs.

The absence of evidence is reinforced by the absence of specialist oblique aerial photographs in an area which has been regularly overflown by aerial archaeologists from C.U.C.A.P., N.L.A.P. and A.P.S.. As stated previously, this does *not* guarantee that no archaeological deposits will be found during fieldwork.

A complete list of aerial photographs and references consulted is available in the report 'Parson's Lane, Littleport, Cambridgeshire. Aerial Photographic Assessment' *Air Photo Services May 1996.*

6.0: TRIAL TRENCHING RESULTS (Fig. 3)

A total of eleven trial trenches was excavated to examine the archaeological potential of the site. In respect of the negative evidence produced by the aerial photographic search and the desk based assessment, a sampling strategy was employed to investigate approximately 2% of the study area. Random trenches were positioned perpendicular to each other to increase the probability of sampling linear features. This trenching amounted in total to approximately 260 square metres. In all trenches the overburden was removed by a mechanical excavator to expose the uppermost levels of the natural subsoil. The machined surface was then hand-cleaned to define any archaeological features present. Any archaeological features present were sampled by hand-excavation to provide information concerning the survival and complexity of the fills, and to recover artifactual and ecofactual samples for analysis.

Recording was by means of pre-printed, pro-forma recording sheets for contexts and features, supplemented by scale drawings, plans, sections, and photographs, which are all held in the archive.

Trench 1
Objectives and results

Trench 1 measured 25m in length, and was aligned east-west (Fig. 3). The subsoil in Trench 1 was exposed at a depth of 0.53m, and was consistent in matrix in all trenches. This comprised of grey/brown clay with inclusions of calcareous limestone, which was mixed with an orange/brown silt with sand and clay (1013), similar to the overlying alluvium (1001). This measured 0.20m-0.25m in depth, and was cut by a number of land drains. These were in turn sealed by topsoil measuring 0.33m in depth.

Interpretation

No features of archaeological interest were identified in Trench 1.

Trench 2
Objectives and results

Trench 2 was aligned north-south, perpendicular to Trench 1 and measured 25m in length. At the southern end of Trench 2, a sondage, 2m in length, was machined to a depth of 1.2m to test the nature of the natural subsoil (1013).

The subsoil in Trench 2 (1013) was exposed at a depth of 0.88m and was cut by two features, F101 and F102 (Fig. 3). Feature F101 (located at the northern end of Trench 2), was a linear feature aligned northeast-southwest, with steep sides and a rounded base. Measuring 0.19m in depth and 0.42m in width, F101 was filled with a light brown silty clay with orange sand and occasional charcoal flecks (1005), which contained two flint flakes.

Towards the middle of Trench 2 was a small, irregular, ovoid feature (F102, Fig. 3). With steep sides and a rounded base, F102 measured approximately 0.16m in depth and 0.42m in width. Filled by an orange/ brown sandy clay (1007), feature F102 contained no finds. These features (F101 and F102) were both sealed by an alluvial layer (1001) approximately 0.52m in depth, which in turn was sealed by 0.36m of topsoil.

Interpretation

Feature F101 may relate to a former field boundary. The irregular nature of feature F102 suggests it may be natural in origin. The paucity of finds from features F101 and F102 makes dating difficult, although both are sealed by the alluvium (1001).

Trench 3
Objectives and results

Trench 3 measured 25m in length and was aligned east-west.

The subsoil in Trench 3 (1013), was exposed at a depth of 0.49m. This was cut by a linear feature (F100) aligned northeast-southwest, with vertical sides and a flat base. Measuring approximately 0.54m in width and 0.14m in depth, feature F100 was filled with a light brown sandy clay (1006) which contained flecks of charcoal and two sherds of possible Roman pottery.

This was sealed by approximately 0.14m of alluvium (1001), which in turn was sealed by 0.35m of topsoil.

Interpretation
Feature F100 seems likely to be the remains of a former field or plot boundary.

Trench 4
Objectives and results

Trench 4 measured 25m in length and was aligned north-south.

The subsoil in Trench 4 was exposed at a depth of 0.45m. This was cut by a linear feature (F112) aligned northeast-southwest, with gradually sloping sides and a rounded base. Approximately 0.70m in width and 0.14m in depth feature F112 was filled by a light brown sandy clay with silt (1018). This was sealed by 0.12m of alluvium (1001), which in turn was overlain by 0.33m of topsoil.

Interpretation
Feature F112 seems likely to be a former field boundary. No other features of archaeological interest were identified in Trench 4.

Trench 5
Objectives and results

Trench 5 measured 24m in length and was orientated north-south. The subsoil (1013) in Trench 5 was exposed at a depth of approximately 0.41m. This was sealed by a layer of alluvium (1001) measuring approximately 0.11m in depth. Two linear features were excavated (F114 and F115), aligned northeast-southwest. These were cut into the alluvium (1001), and retained a profile comparable to ridge and furrow. These in turn were cut down the middle by features containing land drains. The trench was sealed by 0.30m of topsoil.

Interpretation

It appears that the plough furrows were utilised during the laying of land drains, suggesting ridge and furrow survived as an earthwork until a period of agricultural improvement, possibly during the late-18th/early-19th centuries. That the alluvium is cut by the furrows is also significant since it suggests that the alluvium pre-dates the medieval period. No further features of archaeological significance were identified in Trench 5.

Trench 6
Objectives and results

Trench 6 measured 15m in length and was orientated east-west. This trench was located to investigate the potential for remains of structures that may formerly have fronted onto Parson's Lane.

The subsoil (1013) in Trench 6 was exposed at a depth of approximately 0.68m. This was overlain by a thin layer of alluvium (1001) measuring approximately 0.10m in depth. Linear feature F109, cutting the alluvium (1001), was aligned north-south, with steep sides and a flat base. Measuring 0.70m in width and 0.23m in depth, feature F109 was filled with a grey/brown sandy clay with silt and occasional charcoal flecks (1015).

Interpretation
Feature F109 may represent a field or property boundary. No evidence of structures fronting Parson's Lane was identified.

Trench 7
Objectives and results

Trench 7 measured 25m in length and was orientated north-south.

The subsoil in Trench 7 was exposed at a depth of approximately 0.46m. This was overlain by an alluvial layer (1001) measuring approximately 0.12m in depth. A shallow linear feature (F110) aligned northwest-southeast, was cut through the alluvium (1001), with steep sides and a sloping base. Measuring 0.71m in width and 0.14m in depth, feature F110 was filled with a dark orange/brown silt with sand and clay (1016). To the north of feature F110, was the remains of a plough furrow, aligned northeast-southwest and containing a land drain at its base. Trench 7 was sealed by 0.34m of topsoil.

Interpretation
Feature F110 may represent a field or strip boundary. No other features of archaeological interest were identified in Trench 7.

Trench 8
Objectives and results

Trench 8 measured 25m in length and was orientated east-west. The subsoil in Trench 8 (1013) was exposed at a depth of approximately 0.41m . Two linear features (F104 and F106), both aligned northwest-southeast were cut with steep/vertical sides and flat bases. Both features (F104 and F106),measured approximately 0.60m in width and 0.15m in depth, and were filled by a brown sandy clay with silt (1011), very similar in matrix to the alluvial layer (1001). Measuring 0.08m in depth, the alluvium was sealed by 0.33m of topsoil.

Interpretation
Features F104 and F106 may represent field or strip boundaries. No other features of archaeological interest were identified in Trench 8.

Trench 9
Objectives and results

Trench 9 measured 25m in length and was orientated east-west. The subsoil (1013) was exposed at a depth of approximately 0.40m. This was cut by a linear feature aligned northeast-southwest, with gradual sloping sides and a rounded base. Measuring approximately 0.90m in width and 0.13m in depth, feature F107 was filled with a light brown sandy clay (1017).

This was sealed by approximately 0.09m of alluvium (1001), which in turn was sealed by 0.31m of topsoil (1000).

Interpretation
Feature F107 may represent a field or strip boundary. No other features of archaeological interest were identified in Trench 9.

Trench 10
Objectives and results

Trench 10 measured 25m in length, and was aligned east-west (Fig. 3). The subsoil in Trench 10 (1013) was exposed at a depth of 0.43m. This was sealed by a layer

of alluvium (1001) measuring approximately 0.08m in depth. This was in turn sealed by topsoil measuring 0.35m in depth.

Interpretation
All features excavated in Trench 10 were of natural origin, with no features of archaeological interest identified.

Trench 11
Objectives and results

Trench 11 measured 25m in length and was aligned north-south.

The subsoil in Trench 11 was exposed at a depth of 0.45m. This was cut by a linear feature (F108) aligned northeast-southwest, with steeply sloping sides and irregular flat base. Feature F108 measured 0.70m in width and 0.21m in depth, and was filled by a brown silt with clay. This was sealed by 0.07m of alluvium (1001), which in turn was sealed by 0.34m of topsoil.

Interpretation
Feature F108 seems likely to be field boundary. No other features of archaeological interest were identified in Trench 11.

7.0: THE FINDS

The flint artifacts *by Lynne Bevan*

F101, 1005. 2 struck flakes.
F104, 1011. One complete struck flake of mid-grey high quality flint, with traces of utilisation along one edge.
One notched, deliberately retouched flake of poor quality flint with remnant pebble cortex towards the base.
F106, 1019. One yellowish beige flake with retouch along one edge.
F109, 1015. One possible flake fragment.
F113, 1014. One side and end scraper, retouched around 80% of its circumference. This is an ovoid flake of translucent beige flint, with a shallow retouch on one side and steeper retouch on the other, This is not a chronologically diagnostic artifact, but a Neolithic to Bronze Age date seems most likely.

Most of the flints show evidence of a compacted cortex which is characteristic of pebble flint from secondary deposits.

The pottery *by Jane Evans*

A small assemblage of fragmentary and abraded pottery sherds was recovered (20 sherds) ranging in date from Roman (1 certain, 2 possible) through to post-medieval. The Roman pottery included the pedestal base from a samian cup or small bowl which had been smoothed down and perforated, most likely for use as a spindle whorl. Re-use of broken sherds in this way is not unusual and could have taken place at any time after the vessel went out of use.

1006. Two possible Roman sherds.
1101. Samian base, re-used as a spindle whorl.

8.0: THE ENVIRONMENTAL EVIDENCE *by Lisa Moffett*

Twenty litre soil samples from features F101, Trench 2 and F104, Trench 8) were rapidly floated through a 700 micron sieve to recover a sample of any charred plant remains present. The flot was briefly scanned under magnification.

Feature F104 (1101) yielded a solitary cereal seed.

Feature F101 (1005) yielded only charcoal and no seeds.

The limited evidence from these features suggests a low environmental potential, and therefore no further environmental work is recommended.

9.0: DISCUSSION

Formerly an island within the peat fen, Littleport has been shown to have been a focus for activity from the prehistoric period through to the medieval. Recent landuse of the study area as a playing field did not provide conditions favourable to the identification of archaeological anomalies from aerial photographs. The documentary assessment, however, demonstrated the archaeological potential with regard to the density of prehistoric finds spots in the immediate vicinity. Recent landuse of the study area, as a playing field, may have facilitated good preservation of any archaeological remains.

The earliest features (F100, F101 F107, F108, F112 and F113, Fig. 3), sealed by various depths of alluvium (1001), are a series of ditches, all aligned northeast-southwest. These may represent former field or property boundaries, which, sharing a similar alignment, may all belong to the same field system. Feature F113 produced a retouched side and end scraper. Features F100, F101 and F108, however, produced a few abraded, possibly Roman sherds, which may have been deposited as residual material at any time between the Roman and medieval periods.

The two linear features in Trench 8 (F104 and F106), both aligned northwest-southeast, may possibly have been in evidence at the time of the alluviation, since the matrix of the fill is similar in character to the alluvial layer (1001). The flint flake recovered from feature F104 is almost certainly residual, particularly since the flint blade from feature F104 was discovered in association with the re-used Roman Samian base.

Exact dating of features is difficult due to the paucity of finds from the evaluation. The presence of alluvium, evident across the site in varying depths however, provides the potential to tentatively phase the linear features identified. Since the alluvium is earlier than medieval ridge and furrow, features F100, F101, F104, F106, F107, F108, F112 and F113 could represent activity dating from any time between the Roman and medieval periods. This does, however, assume that the alluvium is a single event, uniform across the study area, and not, as could be the case, a whole series of events that had taken place over hundreds of years.

The remaining features would appear to be former property boundaries, or the result of medieval 'Midland type' strip farming, forming ridge and furrow. The archaeological evidence suggests agricultural landuse of the study area during different periods, with little evidence for any other kind of activity. This would appear to support both the historical and aerial photographic assessments.

Medieval settlements are often pre-dated by earlier settlements lying on the periphery of the main focus of occupation. No such activity was identified by this evaluation. However, residual finds do indicate prehistoric and Roman activity within the vicinity of the study area, and future work within the focus of the former

'island' of Littleport may provide a more complete picture of past activity in the locality.

10.0 IMPLICATIONS AND PROPOSALS

Given that the study area has been extensively investigated through desk-top assessment and aerial photographic assessment, and given the largely negative results produced by trial-trenching, further detailed archaeological investigation within the study area is not considered worthwhile.

11.0: ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This project was commissioned by Cambridgeshire County Council. The fieldwork was monitored for Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit by Alex Jones and for Cambridgeshire County Council by Louise Austin. The aerial photographic assessment was undertaken by Chris Cox and Alice Deegan of Air Photographic Services. The trial-trenching was supervised by Richard Cuttler with the assistance of Sarah Watt and Eleanor Ramsey. The desk based assessment was undertaken by Peter Ellis, with an analysis of the flint finds by Lynne Bevan and the pottery by Jane Evans. The environmental evidence was assessed by Lisa Moffett. The report was edited by Iain Ferris and the drawings prepared by Nigel Dodds.

12.0: REFERENCES

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Map sources

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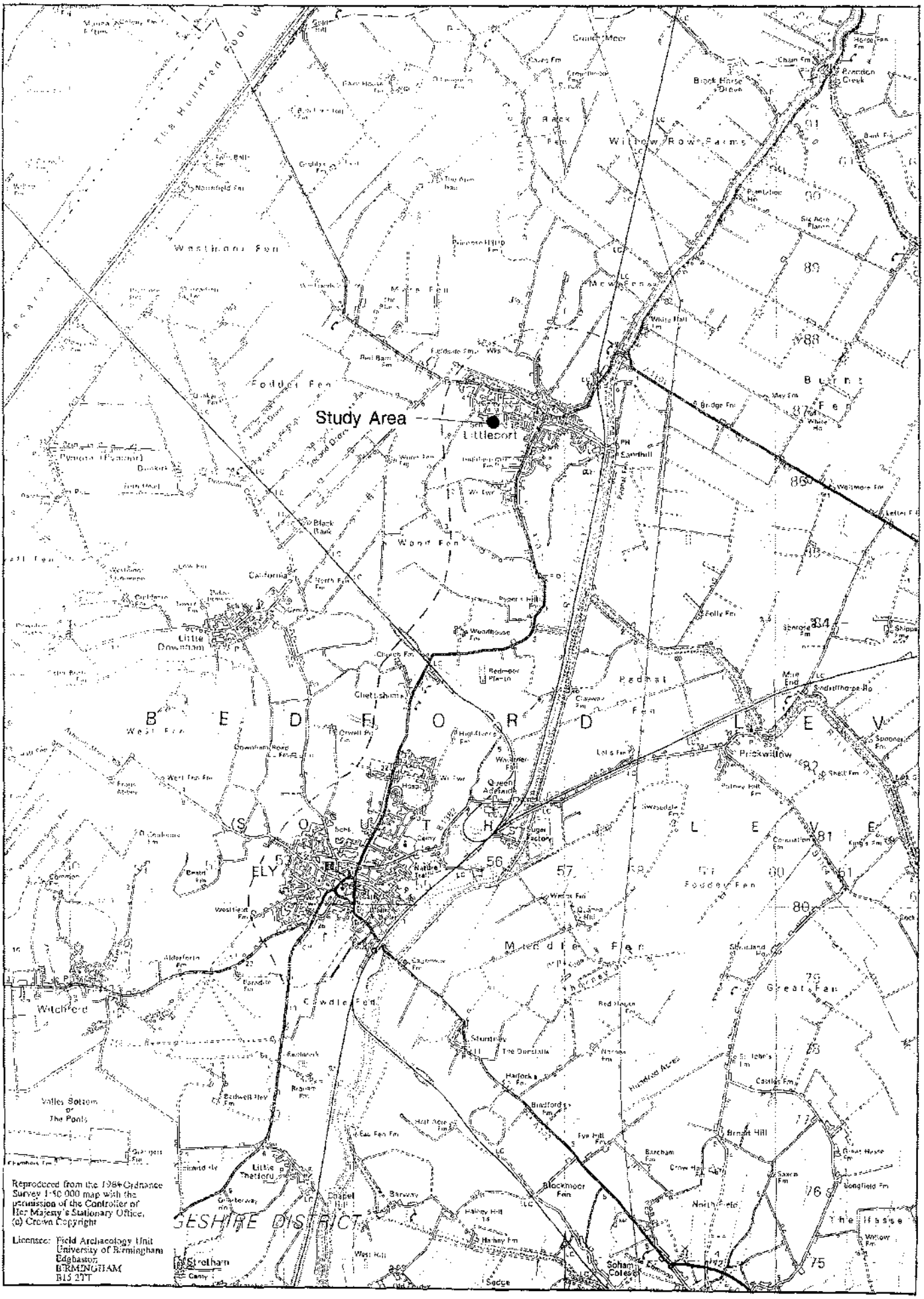
Study Area
Littleport
Sandhill
Little Downham
Ely
Witchford
Prickwillow
Soham
Stretham
Little Thetford
Reproduced from the 1984 Ordnance Survey 1:50 000 map with the permission of the Controller of Her Majesty's Stationary Office. (c) Crown Copyright
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Fig.1

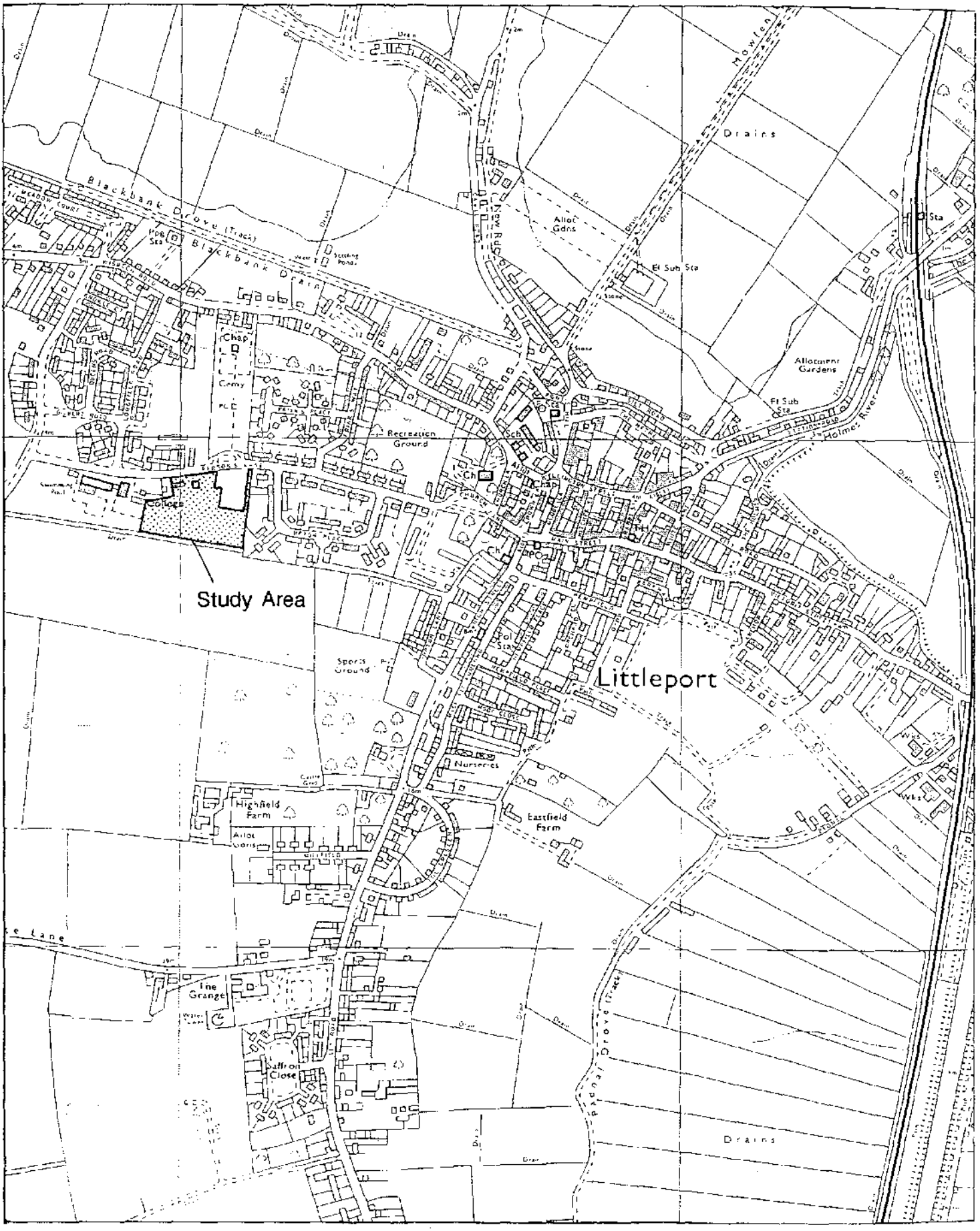
Study Area
Littleport
Blackbank Drove (Track)
Blackbank Drain
Drains
Allot Gdns
El Sub Sta
Allotment Gardens
Recreation Ground
Holmes River
Sports Ground
Nurseries
Highfield Farm
Eastfield Farm
The Grange
Saffron Close
Bridge Drove (Track)

Fig.2

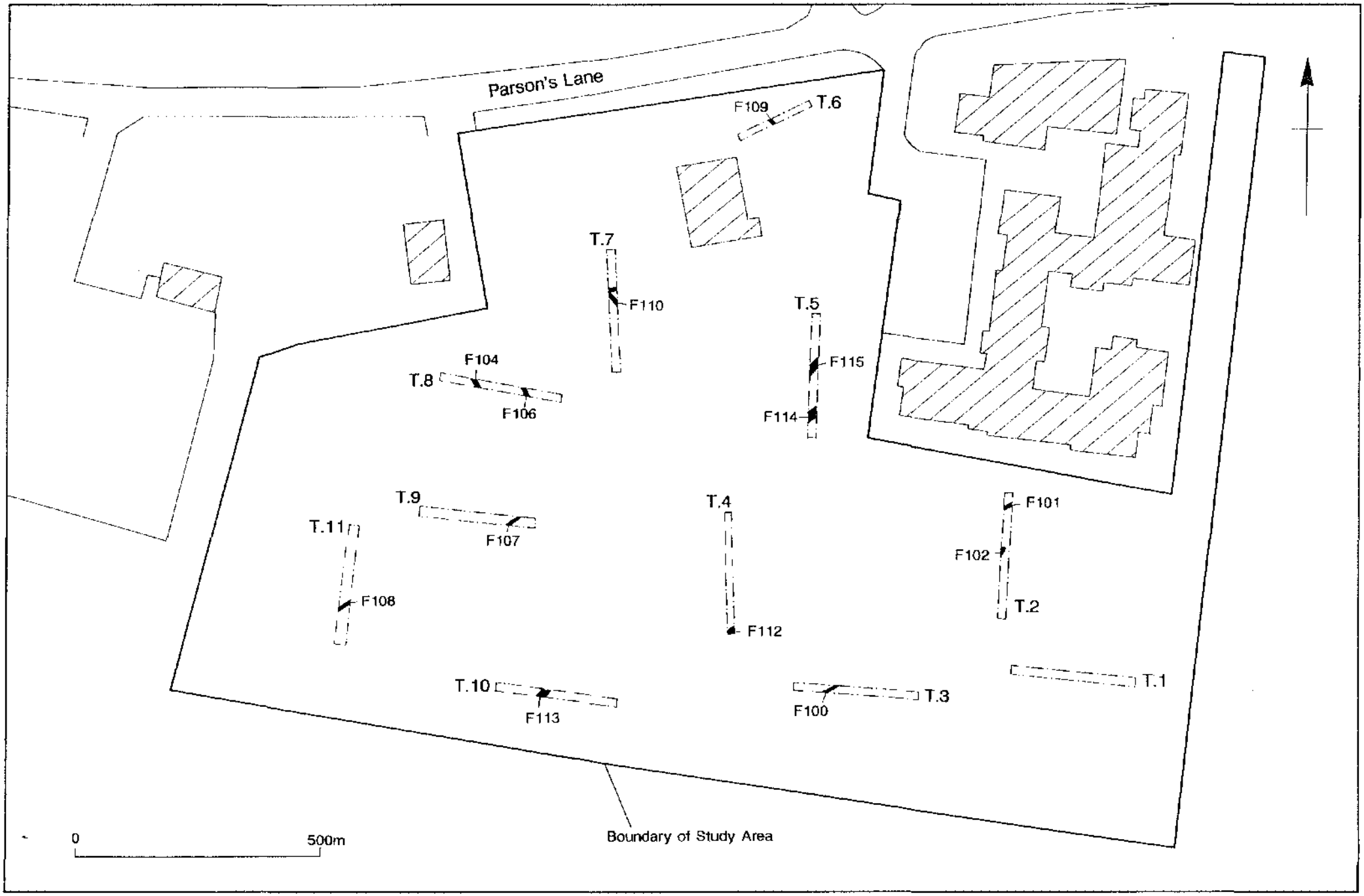
Parson's Lane
F109
T.6
T.7
F110
T.5
F115
F104
T.8
F106
F114
T.9
T.4
F101
T.11
F107
F102
F108
T.2
F112
T.1
T.10
T.3
F113
F100
0
500m
Boundary of Study Area

Fig.3