

**ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS AT THE
CASTLE FIELD ARBORETUM,
ELLESMERE, SHROPSHIRE 2017**

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A report for
**Country Parks and Sites, Outdoor Partnerships,
Shropshire Council**

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Castle Field arboretum, Ellesmere, is situated on former garden terraces that form a part of The Mere at Ellesmere Countryside Heritage Site (comprising the Cremorne Gardens, The Mere, the Castle Field arboretum, and Ellesmere Castle). The site, sometimes also referred to as “The Garden Terraces”, is owned by Shropshire Council and managed by the Council’s Outdoor Partnerships Team.

1.2 The Castle Field arboretum on the west side of Church Street, Ellesmere, was formerly part of the landscaped grounds of Ellesmere House, built c.1800 for the Duke of Bridgewater. The grounds were laid out from 1808 and include a series of garden terraces, which were extended from 1854 onwards.

1.3 The remains of an early 19th century ice-house survive alongside the path at the base of the hill slope.

1.4 Archaeologically, the garden terraces are significant as a good local example of 19th century landscape gardening and provides physical evidence for the increasing exploitation of the Mere and its environs for recreational purposes.

1.5 In 2017 the Country Parks and Sites team, Outdoor Partnerships, proposed carrying out a small project in the Castle Field Arboretum. One strand of this project was to carry out a small community archaeology project to further research the remains of a structure close to the entranceway to the garden terraces. This brick feature had been exposed during path clearance work, and was thought to be the capped top of an ice house. It was proposed that this feature should be investigated further and recorded archaeologically, and, if necessary, conserved.

1.6 The Archaeology Service, Shropshire Council, was commissioned by the Country Parks and Sites team to lead the archaeological site investigations. The work was carried out in November 2017, and this report details the findings of these investigations.

2 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

2.1 Aims: The aim of the archaeological investigation was to provide information that will be available to assist and inform the future interpretation and management of the site.

2.2 Objectives: The objectives of the investigation were to:

- (a) To locate and map the extent of the archaeological features investigated.
- (b) To assess the survival, quality, condition and relative significance of these archaeological features, deposits and structures.
- (c) To provide information that will assist with the interpretation and future management of the site.

- (d) To provide first-hand experience of practical archaeology for the community volunteers.

2.3 The aim of the project was to investigate the remains of a structure thought to be an ice house close to the path by the entranceway from the main road into the Castle Field arboretum. The remains were to be investigated and recorded archaeologically. The results of this research would help the site managers to better conserve, enhance and interpret the Castle Field garden terraces to the local community and visitors to Ellesmere and enhance links between the Countryside Heritage Site and the town.

3 ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

3.1 The Castle Field arboretum was formerly part of the landscaped grounds of Ellesmere House, built c.1800 for the Duke of Bridgewater and his Estate Agent. The grounds were laid out from 1808 and include a series of garden terraces, which were extended from 1854 onwards. By 1874 the extended garden with terraces and the ice house are shown on the 1st edition ordnance survey plan.

3.2 The garden terraces comprise a series of artificially terraced paths and scarps that give access from the castle earthworks, down the steeply sloping ground and along the base of the slope by the mere-side road. The spoil from the creation of the terraces was used to create Moscow island (abbreviated to 'Cow' Island) in the mere. This area was already tree covered by 1835 (Wood, 1835) and was enhanced and partially replanted c.1990. The partially visible remains of an early 19th century ice-house survive alongside the path at the base of the hill slope. A series of parallel linear garden terraces, probably dating to the 1850's, extend immediately to the west of the Garden Terraces in the present gardens of Ellesmere House and 1, Church Hill.

4 THE INVESTIGATIONS

4.1 The site of the ice house lies on the side of the hill sloping down to the main road and the Mere. The top of the ice house had until relatively recently been exposed and occasionally opened for inspection by Countryside Service staff. However, in recent years the top had become covered in hill-wash and leaf mould.

4.2 The remains of the top of the ice-house consisted of a brick cylinder (Fig4, 3) 2.65m in diameter by 1.25m sitting on the main body of the ice house. Clearing leaf mould from the top cover revealed an inspection or access opening in the northern quadrant of the top covered with a modern concrete slab. This was temporarily removed to view the interior of the icehouse chamber. The chamber was seen to be empty to a depth of at least 3m from the top, though the base was covered with soil and some debris. The brick-built chamber was cylindrical, of wider diameter than the top, with the cylindrical top built around two arched ribs. Two blocked arched doorways were seen, in the northeast and northwest angles of the chamber. The doorways were framed with

moulded tiles, which also formed a string course around the chamber just above the top of the doorways, and also were used to frame the inspection hatch. The chamber had clearly been cut into the hillside, though the natural subsoil was not seen during the current investigations. The exterior of the cylindrical top had been covered with clay to within about 0.4m of its top, though this had been done some time in the last 5 decades, as the decayed remains of a tin of c. 1960s date was recovered from this clay cladding. The remainder of the top was covered from view with topsoil and leaf mould.

4.3 Curving to the east from the northeast corner of the icehouse the top of a brick wall (4) was seen to be part of an entrance passage. Leaf mould was removed from the upper courses of the outer face of the wall, and further leaf mould and sand (8) (containing a number of plastic cider bottles) were removed from the internal side, revealing a short section of the back wall (5) of the passage and a cross wall (6). There was no sign of a doorway into the passage, but the depth of the excavations here were limited due to the steepness of the slope to the south.

4.4 A patch of stone and brick rubble was located at the base of the hillside 9m to the northwest of the ice house. This stonework had in the past been (mistakenly) identified as the remains of the ice house itself. Leaf mould and topsoil (Fig. 5, 9) were again cleared from the stonework to reveal a decayed limestone wall, reinforced with brickwork, terraced into the hillside (11). At the southeastern end of the wall, further excavation revealed the end of a brick passage running back southeastwards towards the icehouse. This passage would have given access to the blocked doorway on the northwestern side of the ice house. The inner faces of the brick walls (13 & 14) were covered with a thin render in which was visible the imprint of a door frame. The passage was filled with topsoil and sand (10), which produced an iron hinge adjacent to the door frame. A line of limestone fragments (12) marked a possible eastern wing wall to this entrance passage.

5 DISCUSSION

5.1 Ice houses An icehouse is a structure built for storing ice. These structures allowed ice to be packed into a compact space and their walls and roofs were usually insulated to slow the melting process. Icehouses started to become features in the formal gardens of country houses from the early 17th century, and by the mid 19th century most country houses would have had one or more icehouses on their estate. They were often incorporated into the basements of town-houses too. Initially intended for storing ice for cooling wine and preparing puddings, it was soon appreciated that perishable food – meat, poultry, game, fish, butter, etc could be preserved for longer by being stored in the icehouse along with the ice. The ice came from natural or artificial ponds on the estate (sometimes purpose-built for creating ice in freezing weather). As the road, canal and railway networks improved and developed, ice could be brought in from further afield, particularly in mild winters, and by the mid 19th century ice was being imported from Norway and America. Ice houses come in a large variety of shape, size, and complexity, but most estate icehouses shared a number of common features. They

would have a chamber for storing the ice, sometimes cut into a bank or hillside; there would be a sump or drain at the bottom of the chamber to remove melted ice; and the chamber would be entered via a short passage, with two or more doors. A useful introduction and guide to icehouses has been produced by Tim Buxbaum for Shire Publications (Buxbaum, 2008).

5.2 The ice house in the Castle Field arboretum appears to survive for the most part in very good condition. The main chamber itself is intact, and the northeastern entrance passage appears to be complete, lacking only its roof. The western entrance passage likewise appears to be intact within the hillside – although again it appears to be missing its roof. The remains of the wing wall (Fig. 5, 11) on the southwestern side of the entrance passage survives in the hillside. This wall was of limestone fragments – with a rusticated outer face – mortared against brick pillars terraced into the hillside. A further wing wall (12) running north from the northeastern side of this entrance passage was partially revealed.

5.3 It would be possible to completely excavate the north face of the ice house, and preserve it as a (ruined) garden feature. However, the remains would be likely to require consolidation to render them stable and safe, and there would be a considerable quantity of soil to be removed and disposed of. It is also likely that only the top access cylinder was visible originally in any case, with the body of the ice house being encased in clay to provide insulation. The trial excavations left the top of the chamber and the eastern entrance passage wall partly exposed, and this should be sufficient to locate and identify the structure, whilst being protected from weathering by topsoil. The remains could be kept in this condition with minimal maintenance, i.e. the brushing away of leaf fall, perhaps on an annual basis.

5.4 The end of the western entrance passage and its wing walls were also identified and partially exposed by these investigations. The southwestern wing wall (Fig. 5, 11) could be consolidated and even partially restored (much of the original limestone facing lies where it has fallen from the wall face. Further light excavation could be undertaken to reveal more of the northeastern wing wall (12).

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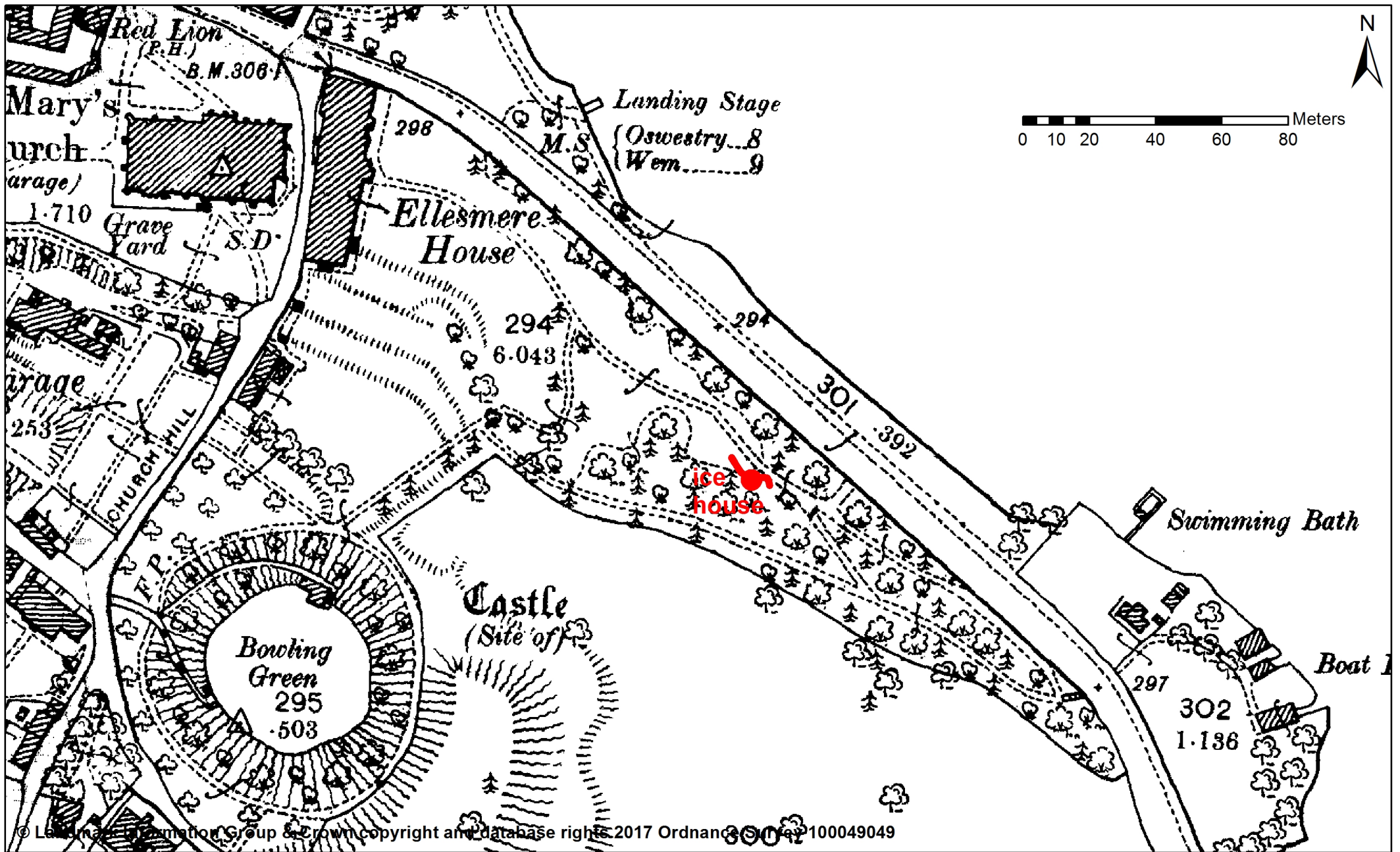
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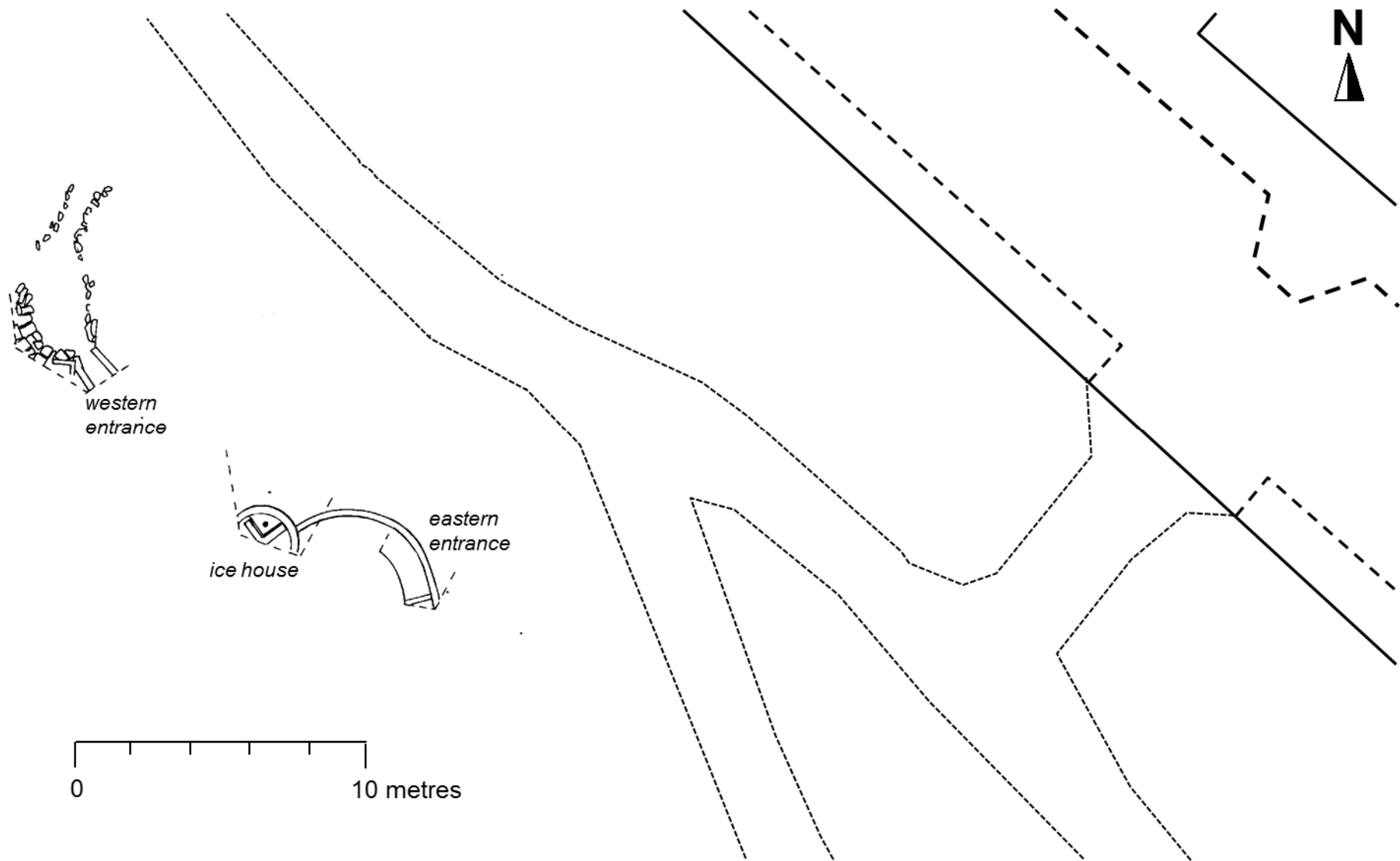
THE CASTLE FIELD ARBORETUM, ELLESMERE 2017
Figure 1: The location of the study area

Archaeology Service,
 Historic Environment Team, Shropshire Council,
 Shirehall, Abbey Foregate, Shrewsbury, Shropshire, SY2 6ND

Scale: 1:10,000

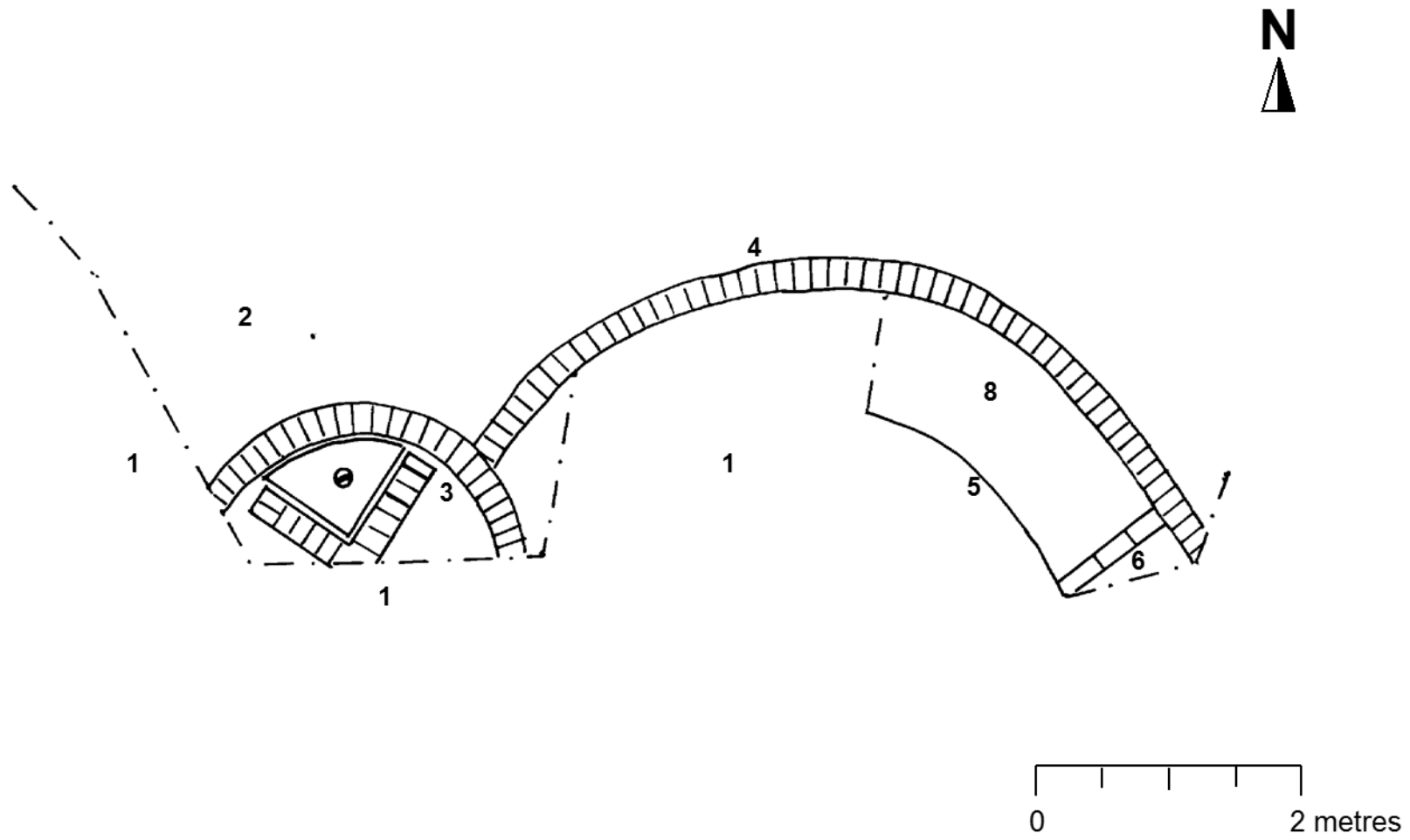


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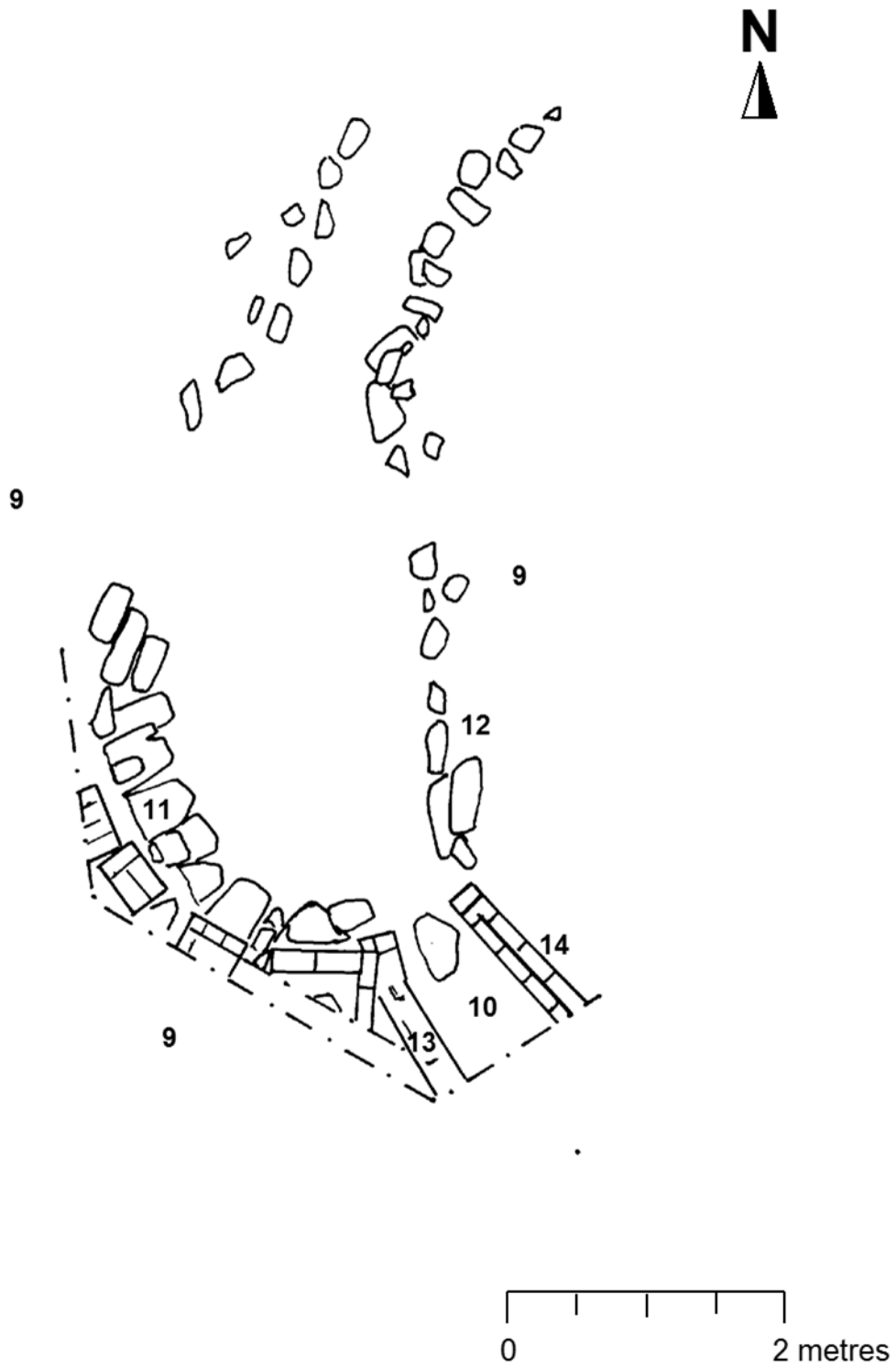
THE CASTLE FIELD ARBORETUM, ELLESMERE 2017

Figure 3: The location of the ice house, scale 1:200



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