

# **ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS AT RECTORY WOOD, CHURCH STRETTON, SHROPSHIRE 2017**

by  
H R HANNAFORD MCIfA

A report for  
**Church Stretton Town Council**

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**Archaeology Service,**  
Historic Environment Team, Shropshire Council,  
Shirehall, Abbey Foregate, Shrewsbury SY2 6ND  
Tel: 01743 254622 email: [archaeology@shropshire.gov.uk](mailto:archaeology@shropshire.gov.uk)

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## SUMMARY

Rectory Wood and Field, Church Stretton, is a Countryside Heritage Site which lies within part of a historic park associated with the adjacent former Old Rectory. The grounds were laid out in the late 18th century and have associations with Lancelot (Capability) Brown. In November 2017 the Archaeology Service, Shropshire Council, undertook an archaeological recording and assessment of two features within the woodland. These comprised the remains of a former footbridge and a rockery, thought to be a fernery. The archaeological work was carried out on behalf of Church Stretton Town Council.

## **1 INTRODUCTION**

**1.1** Rectory Wood and Field, Church Stretton is situated on the west edge of the town of Church Stretton, Shropshire (NGR SO 451 936). It is a 10ha site comprising 7ha of woodland and 3ha of grassland. The site was formerly part of the grounds of the Old Rectory. Both the wood and field comprise steep banks adjoining and rising to meet the Long Mynd. Other features on the site include a stream, paths, a pond and mature specimen trees.

**1.2** Rectory Wood and Field is now a Countryside Heritage Site owned by Church Stretton Town Council and a partnership between Church Stretton Town Council, Shropshire Council, the National Trust and the Rectory Wood and Field Interest Group is responsible for the ongoing management of the site.

**1.3** The site lies within part of a historic park (Shropshire Historic Environment Record [HER] No. PRN 07722) associated with the adjacent former Old Rectory (PRN 10773), a Grade II Listed Building. These grounds were laid out in the late 18th century and have associations with Lancelot (Capability) Brown. The well preserved remains of this landscape comprise woodland walks, a stream and artificial pool, and sites of buildings, which include a pumping house and an ice house.

**1.5** In 2017 Church Stretton Town Council proposed carrying out a small project in Rectory Wood to identify, locate, and record the remains of a footbridge (PRN 31057) and to record the remains of a fernery (PRN 31046).

**1.6** The Archaeology Service, Shropshire Council, was commissioned by Church Stretton Town Council to carry out 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 survey is to provide an assessment of the extant remains of an ornamental rockery or fernery and the remains of the abutments of a footbridge depicted on the Ordnance Survey First Edition 6" map of c.1880.

The need for this work has arisen due to the level of erosion taking place around the rockery and the recent unearthing of the remains of a gothic arch during site

management works. There is a proposal to reinstate the footbridge shown on the 1880 map site and an evaluation of the site of the original bridge is therefore required prior to installation of the new footbridge.

**2.2 Objectives:** The objectives of the survey were to include:

- (a) the review of existing recorded information;
- (b) production of record sheets, base and working maps on which to record information;
- (c) field inspection and recording;
- (d) compilation of summary and overlay maps showing the recorded features,
- (e) production of a summary assessment report with recommendations for conservation and possible consolidation of the rockery features.

### **3 ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND**

**3.1** The Old Rectory, Church Stretton, is situated on the northwest side of the town, about 150m northwest of St Laurence's Church. The rectory is an early 19th century building incorporating an earlier structure (HER 10773). In 1749 Professor John Mainwaring, a theologian and Fellow of St. John's College, Cambridge, became Rector of the parish. Among the society visitors to Mainwaring's house was his friend, Lancelot "Capability" Brown. A plan of 1767 shows that Mainwaring had been improving the grounds of the rectory since before this date (SA 3651/B/122/1) and continued to do so through the next decade. Brown is believed to have advised on these improvements. A subsequent Rector, T.B. Coleman, remodelled the Rectory in the early 19th century to improve its views (Stamper, 1996b), and his successor, R N Pemberton, undertook further improvements to the gardens, which probably included the felling and replanting of much of Mainwaring's woodland (Phibbs, 2009). Rectory Wood was acquired by Shropshire County Council in 1962 to prevent clear-felling of the woodland. The adjoining Rectory Field was bought by the county council in 1982, and the site has since then been managed as a Countryside Heritage Site. The site is now in the ownership of Church Stretton Town Council.

**3.2** In November 2004, the Archaeology Service, Shropshire County Council, carried out a desk-based and rapid field survey of Rectory Wood and Field on behalf of the Rectory Wood and Field Interest Group. The survey comprised a desk-top study and a Level 1 rapid field survey, and identified a total of 37 features within the study area. The

survey identified and assessed the condition of the remains of 23 garden features on the ground, including an ice house and a rockery (possibly a fernery), view-points, and the remains of a building. The majority of these features were recorded as being in a poor condition. The survey generally confirmed the findings made by Stamper's 1996 assessment of the site. The cartographic sources consulted by the survey suggested that Rev. Mainwaring had begun to improve his lands in "Brownian" style by 1767. It also suggested that the planting of woodland on the site began after 1767.

**3.3** In 2009, John Phibbs of the Debois Landscape Survey Group carried out a further investigation of the site specifically to examine the nature and extent of Capability Brown's influence on the design and layout of the garden. This concluded that the documentary evidence strongly suggested that Brown did advise on the garden, and that although much of Mainwaring's planting was felled and re-planted in the 1820s-30s by Pemberton, the location of viewpoints, marked by structures or earthworks, gave clues to the layout of Mainwaring's design. (Phibbs, 2009)

**3.4** In March 2009 the Archaeology Service led a community archaeology investigation at Rectory Wood and Field on behalf of the Rectory Wood Heritage Project, funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund and Shropshire Council. The investigations took the form of the evaluation excavation of two structures, an icehouse and a summerhouse within the woodland (Hannaford, 2009). Initials laid into the summerhouse floor indicated that it was likely to have been the work of the Rev. Mainwaring.

## **4 THE RECORDING**

**4.1** The site of the footbridge on the west side of the pool at NGR SO 44847 93924 (HER PRN 31057).

**4.2** The current survey has provided a more detailed drawn and photographic record of the remains of the footbridge. Both abutments to the bridge survive to some extent in the banks of the Town Brook (Fig. 4, 1 & 2). The southern abutment (Fig. 4, 1) is up to 3m in width and survives to a height of about 0.8m above the stream bed. The abutment was seen to have a brick core, which would presumably originally have been mortared, though the mortar of the visible brickwork has been washed out. The brick core was surrounded by stone rubble much of which has been washed away. The

surviving stonework appears to be earth-fast, though again it is possible that any mortar bonding has been washed out.

**4.3** The remains of the northern abutment (Fig. 4, 2) were about 2m wide and again survived to a height of about 0.8m above the stream bed. This abutment also had a brick core, though only two bricks were visible at the base of the abutment in the edge of the stream bed. The rest of the abutment comprised earth-fast stone rubble (again, any original mortar bonding had been washed out of the visible stonework. Three iron rods (5) rise from the bank just to the east of the northern abutment. These may perhaps be the remains of a rail between the bridge and the pool, or possibly were placed to support or restrain a box bush.

**4.4** Part of a stone grave slab (Fig 4, 3) that originally will have formed the decking of the footbridge (as with “Dead Man’s Bridge” upstream to the west) lay in the pool 3.5m to the east of the abutments (this fragment appears to have been moved to the east since it was last recorded in 2009).

**4.5** Three metres to the west of the footbridge abutments the remains of a low dam (Fig. 4, 4) of three stone fragments cross the stream. This dam will have been deliberately placed upstream of the bridge to disturb the stream flow for audible effect.

**4.6** The rockery or fernery lies about 30m to the northwest of the Old Rectory, adjacent to the west wall of its former kitchen gardens, at SO 45113 93863.

**4.7** The west wall (Fig 5, 6) of the fernery is a terrace up to 1.3m in height of stone blocks, battered back into the hillside. The stonework appears to be of dry-stone construction and is in reasonably good condition. The central feature (7) is a circular bed about 4m in diameter and about 0.7m in height, again of dry-stone construction. The bed is in a fair condition, although some stonework is missing from its southern side and its eastern side, and a tree is growing out of its southeast side.

**4.8** An entrance to the fernery is created at its southern end by a deposit of soil revetted with dry-stone walling (Fig. 5, 8) against the wall separating the wood from the Old Rectory’s former kitchen gardens. The historic mapping shows a small structure here 2m square, of unknown function. At the northern end of the fernery, a flight of three stone steps (9) leads the path up towards the yew-ringed pool and ice house. The fernery’s west wall continues along the west side of the path at a much reduced height,

and a dry-stone wall (10) flanks the east side of the path, curving round to enclose the large sweet chestnut tree.

**4.9** At the northern end of the path lie three architectural fragments (Fig. 5, 11), which have been placed here following their discovery during path clearance. The fragments comprise two sides and a section of the arch of an ornamental gothic archway.

**4.10** The modern path runs past the east side of the sweet chestnut tree, to continue towards the pool. The historic mapping shows that it terminated here in a small structure, of unknown function, 3m wide by 2m deep.

## **5 DISCUSSION**

### **The foot bridge**

**5.1** The footbridge at the west end of the pool is marked on the 1834 plan of the Rectory gardens (SA P67/F/1/1) and on the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> editions of the Ordnance Survey 25" maps (OS 1883 & 1903) and subsequent OS maps until the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The footbridge carried a path which ran along the south side of the Town Brook, past the ice house across the town brook at the west end of the pool. The path then ran west to the edge of the wood, by the summer house. By 1974 the bridge and the path around the south side of the pool had disappeared from the mapping (and presumably gone out of use) (OS, 1974). The location of the remains of the bridge was recorded by the 2004 survey (Hannaford, 2004, site 14).

**5.2** The abutments to the former footbridge across the Town Brook at the western end of the pool survive in part, although in a de-graded state. Both abutments retain some of their stonework, although some of the supporting brick work is exposed, particularly in the southern abutment, and any original mortar has been washed away. The photographic record held by the Archaeology Service suggests that the fragmentary remains of the former bridge deck have been moved since 2009 – only one fragment out of three visible in a 2009 photograph could be located during the present survey (though the other fragments may be buried in leaf litter and silt in the pool edge.)

**5.3** It should be feasible to install a new timber footbridge over the Town Brook across the abutments of the old footbridge without disturbing these further or compromising the low dam just upstream of the former bridge. Some tree and sapling clearance here

would improve the visual amenity, although the two box shrubs by the northern abutment should be retained if possible.

### **The fernery**

**5.4** The fernery is not shown as a feature on the 1767 or 1834 plans, but its presence in the later 19<sup>th</sup> century is indicated by the layout of the paths here on the 1883 25" OS map. The location of the fernery was recorded by the 2004 survey (Hannaford, 2004, site 3).

**5.5** The fernery is in a generally good condition, with most of the dry-stone walling apparently stable. The photographic record held by the Archaeology Service suggests that there has not been any great deterioration since 2004. The west terrace wall of the fernery appears to be earth-fast (though whether it is fixed in any way to the subsoil or bedrock behind it is not clear. The central bed is also in relatively good condition, though some stonework is missing from the southern and eastern edges. The steps and path leading north from the fernery are in good condition. There is some displacement of the stone kerb alongside the current path adjacent to the large sweet chestnut tree – the displaced stones could be simply re-bedded.

**5.6** On-going clearance of brambles, laurel, and other invasive shrubs should be undertaken by cutting (not spraying). The tree growing in the southeastern side of the central bed could be cut down (to the level of the top of the bed). If suitable rock is available, then the missing stonework on the south and east sides of the central bed could be replaced, and the bed could be planted with a selection of ferns. The fragments of arch could be placed beside the path – re-erection of the arch is probably not feasible as much of the masonry is missing, but the remaining fragments make a feature of interest.



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- Ordnance Survey, 1903**: 25" 2nd edition, Shropshire Sheet Nos LVI.5 & 9
- Ordnance Survey, 1927**: 25" 1927 edition, Shropshire Sheet Nos LVI.5 & 9
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## ABBREVIATIONS

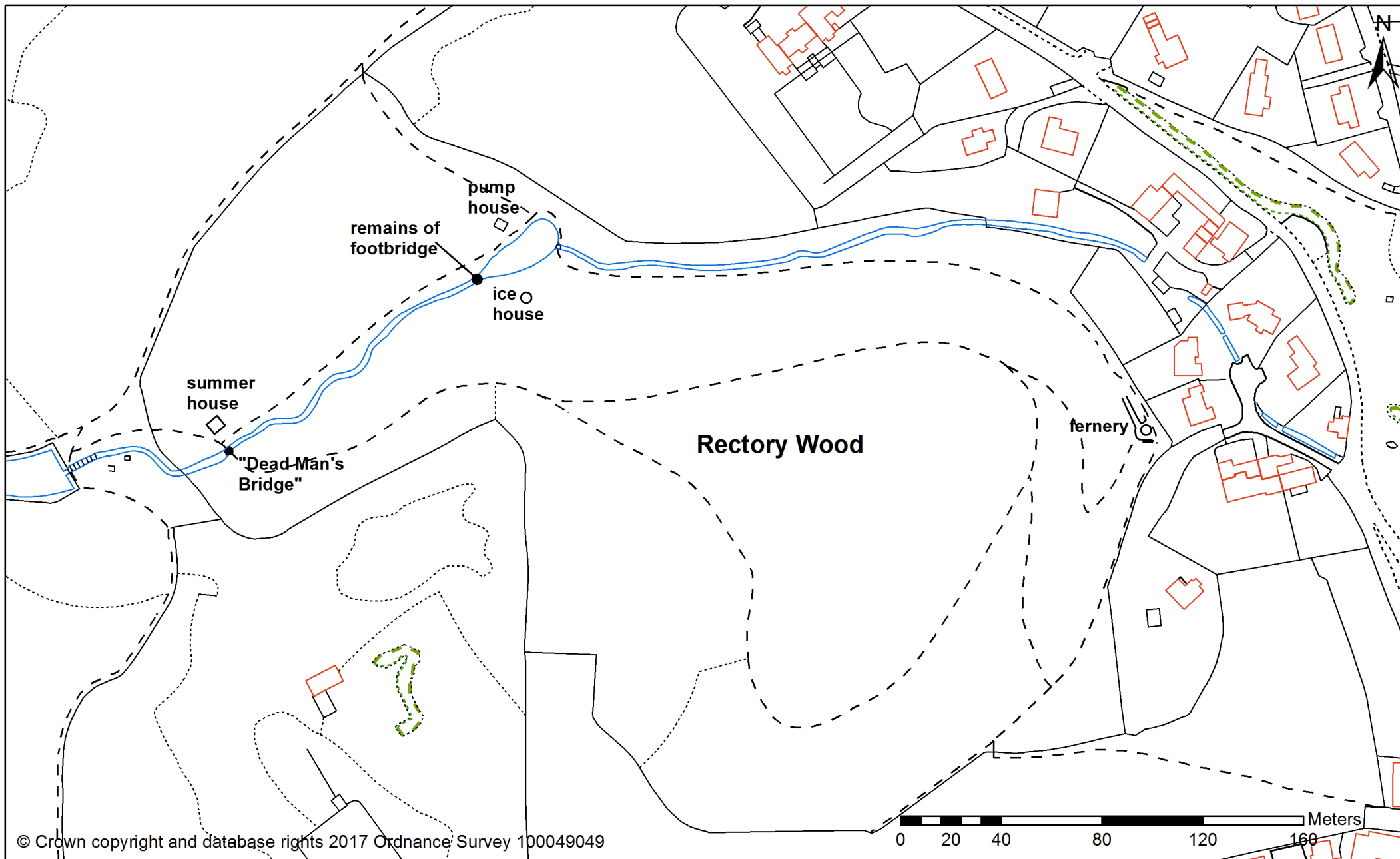
<b>CBA</b>	Council for British Archaeology
<b>HER</b>	Historic Environment Record
<b>OS</b>	Ordnance Survey
<b>PRN</b>	Primary Record Number
<b>SA</b>	Shropshire Archives

## Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Mr Michael Turner, Amenities and Services Officer, Church Stretton Town Council and Dr Ian Dormer for their help and assistance in this project, and am grateful for the interest and encouragement from the many visitors to the woods whilst the investigations were being carried out.







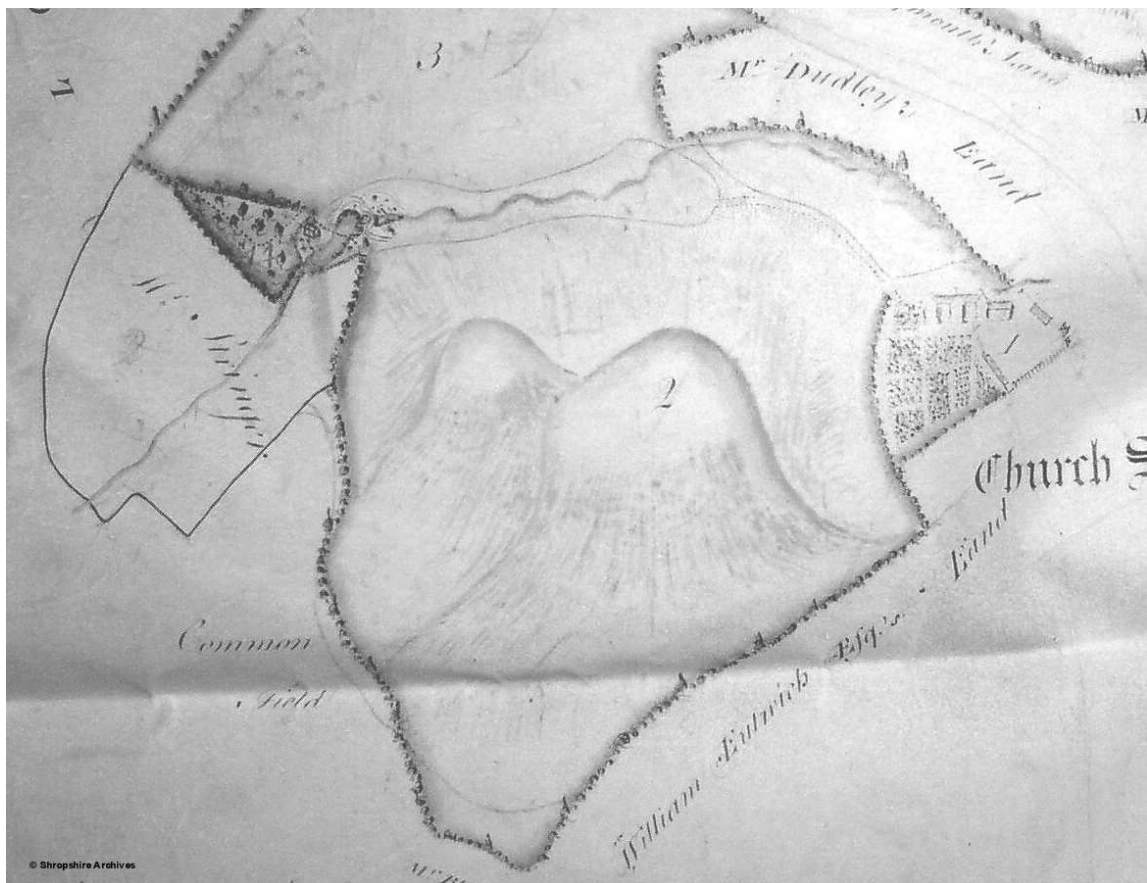


Figure 3a: Extract from 1767 plan showing the study area (ref: SA 3651/B/122/1)

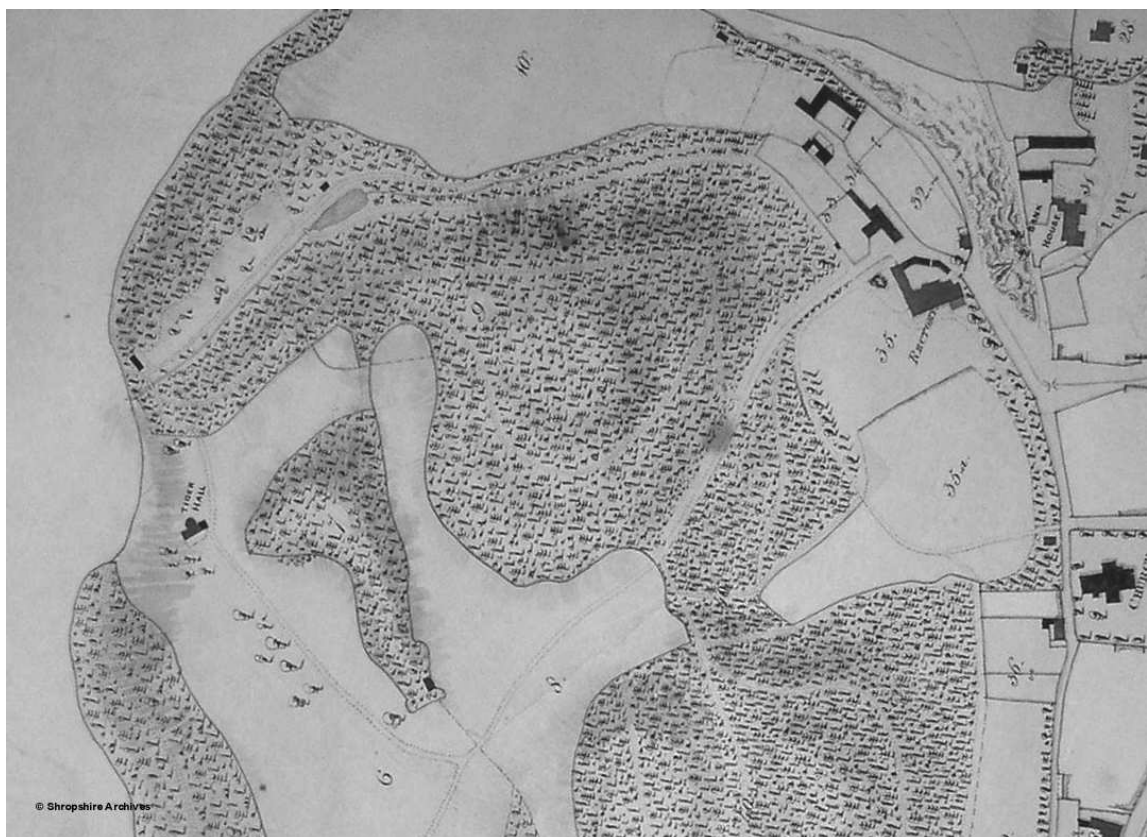
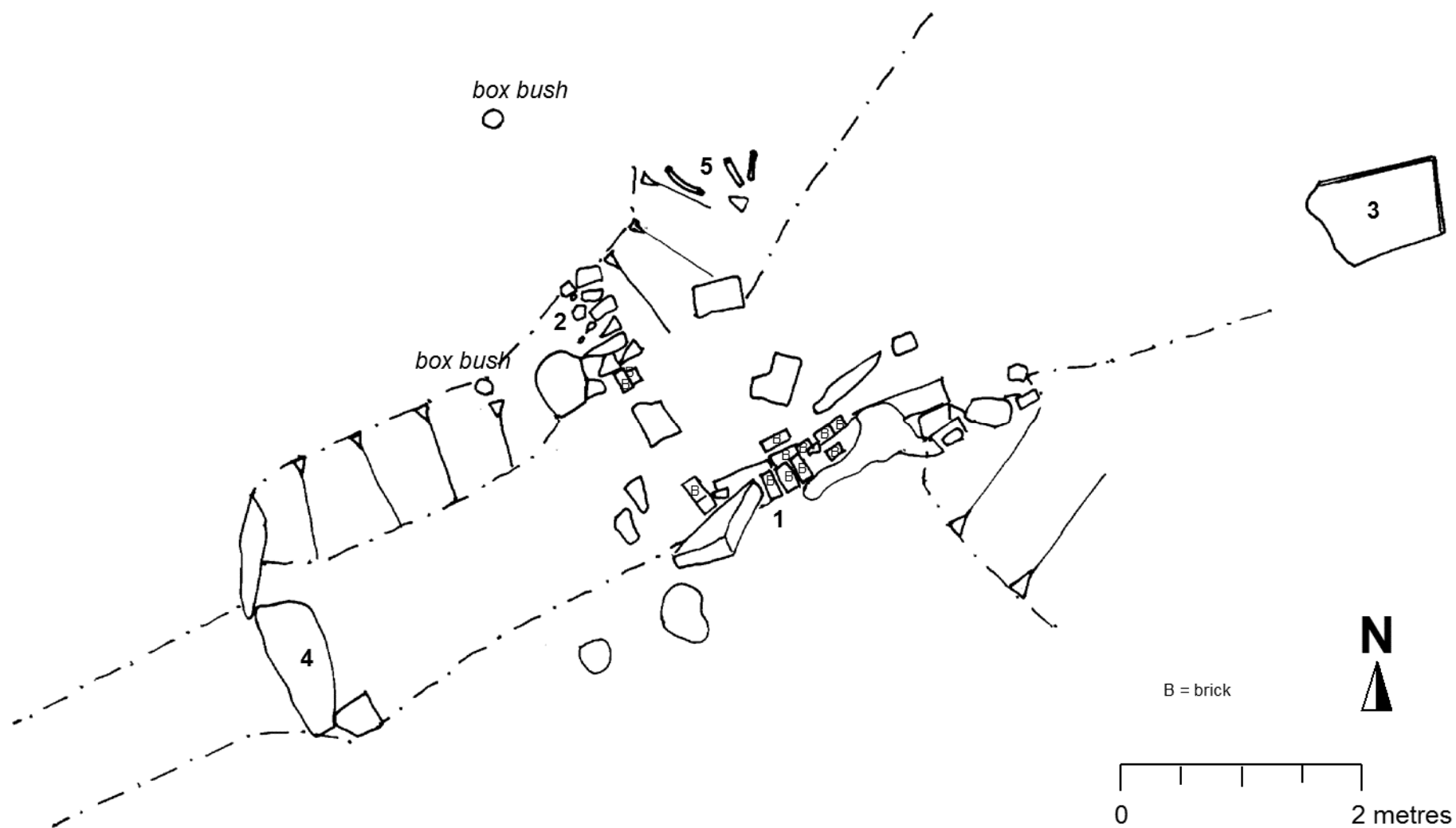


Figure 3b: Extract from 1834 map showing the study area (ref: SA P67/F/1/1)

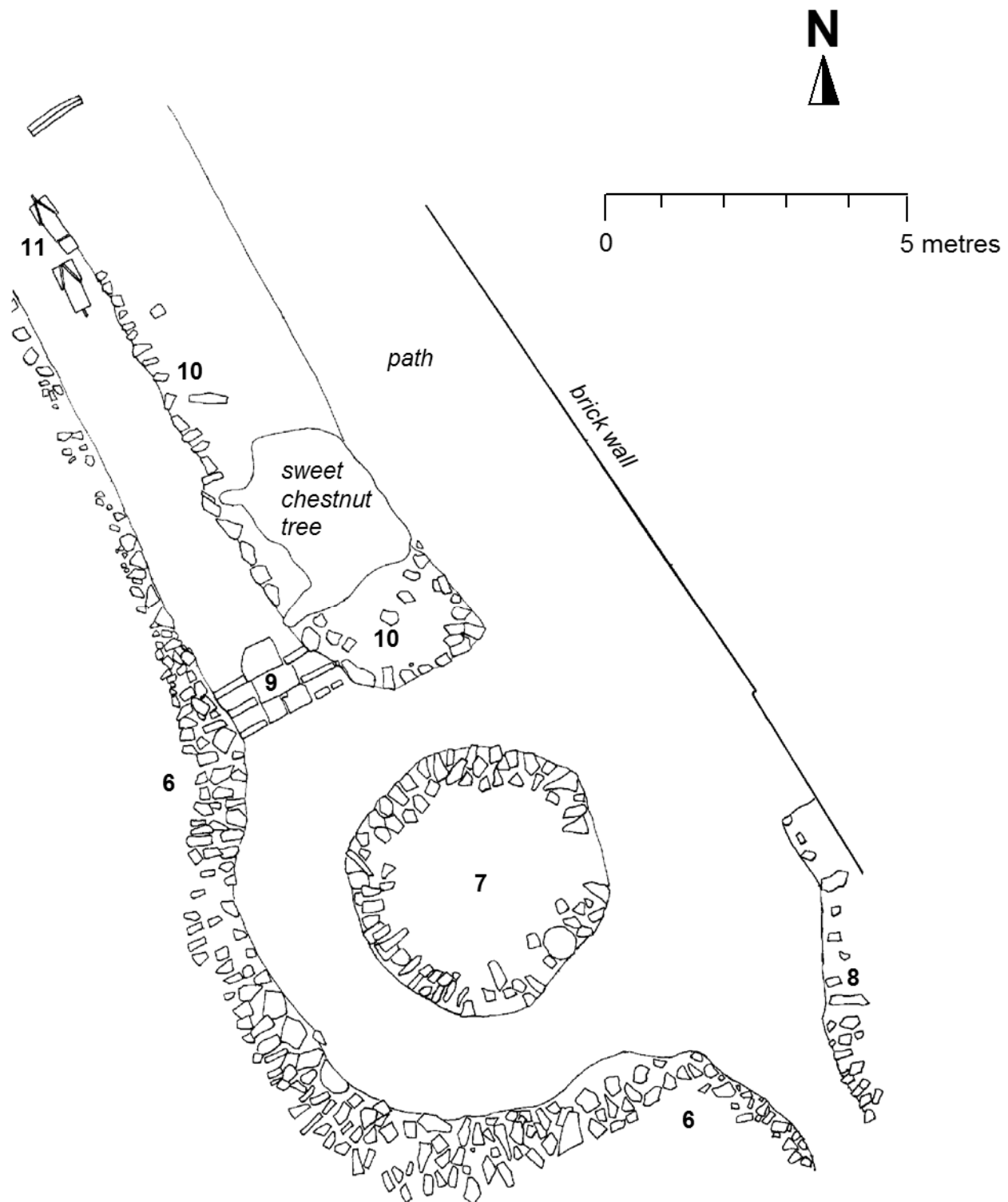
## RECTORY WOOD 2017

Figure 3: 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century plans of the Rectory gardens



# **RECTORY WOOD, CHURCH STRETTON 2017**

Figure 4: The remains of the footbridge west of the yew-ringed pool, scale 1:50



## RECTORY WOOD, CHURCH STRETTON 2017

Figure 5: The fernery, scale 1:100





Photo 1: The location of the footbridge, looking NE towards The yew-ringed pool



Photo 2: The location of the footbridge, looking SW, with the fragment of grave slab decking in the foreground



Photo 3: The southern abutment of the footbridge, looking S; scale bars 1m & 0.5m



Photo 4: The northern abutment of the footbridge, looking N scale bars 1m & 0.5m





Photo 5: The former footbridge, with the dam in the background, looking SW; scale bars 1m & 0.5m



Photo 6: The west wall of the fernery, looking NW; scale bar 1m



Photo 7: The steps at the N end of the fernery, looking N; scale bar 1m



Photo 8: The central bed in the fernery, looking S; scale bar 1m