Archaeological Investigations at
Rectory Wood, Church Stretton, Shropshire, 2009

by
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Archaeology Service

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ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS AT RECTORY WOOD, CHURCH STRETTON, SHROPSHIRE, 2009

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A report for the

Rectory Wood Heritage Project,
Outdoor Recreation Service,
Community Services,
Shropshire Council

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SUMMARY

In March 2009 the Archaeology Service led a community archaeology investigation at the Rectory Wood and Field Countryside Heritage Site on behalf of the Rectory Wood Heritage Project. The investigations took the form of the evaluation excavation of two structures, an icehouse and a summerhouse, within a former 18th and 19th century landscaped garden with “Capability” Brown connections.

The Rectory Wood Heritage Project is funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund and Shropshire Council.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Rectory Wood and Field, Church Stretton is a Shropshire Council owned and maintained Countryside Heritage Site, 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 (Fig. 1). 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 The Countryside Heritage Site incorporates part of a historic park (Historic Environment Record [HER] No. 07722) associated with the adjacent former Old Rectory (HER No. 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.

1.3 In 2008, the Countryside Service was successful in obtaining a grant from the "Your Heritage" fund of the Heritage Lottery Fund for a project, the Rectory Wood Heritage Project. The project intended to consolidate and repair the boundary wall and gates, to restore the yew-ringed pool, carry out some path improvements, and to carry out research on the former landscaped garden and provide on-site interpretation drawing on this research.

1.4 The research element of the project was to include desk-based research into the landscape design and exotic planting of Rectory Wood and the key archaeological features. Archaeological excavations would also be carried out on certain of these features. The proposed archaeological work would comprise the small scale excavation and recording of features within the former landscaped garden, such as the remains of a former ice house adjacent to the pool and a former building on the west edge of the wood (Hannaford, 2004, sites 15 & 16). The project would recruit volunteers from the local community to take part in the excavations.

1.5 The Archaeology Service, Shropshire Council, was commissioned by the Rectory Wood Heritage Project to lead the archaeological site investigations. The work was carried out in March 2009, 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.

3 ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

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, and the adjoining Rectory Field was bought in 1982. The site is currently managed by Shropshire Council, in partnership with the National Trust and the Rectory Wood and Field Interest Group as a Countryside Heritage Site. (Carty, 2005)

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 sites 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) or grotto, 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 looked at for 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.

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)

4 THE TRIAL EXCAVATIONS

4.1 The Ice House

The site of the ice house was thought to lie on the side of the hill sloping down to the south side of the Yew-ringed Pool. A hollow cut into the bedrock of the hillside marked the probable site of the chamber, though there were no visible remains of this. Two parallel rows of the moss-covered top of three or four large stones marked the possible site of an entrance into the ice house. Accordingly, a small trench was placed over this feature. Leaf-mould, topsoil and hill-wash were removed from the site by hand, and the trench was enlarged to reveal the chamber, entrance-passage and wing-walls of the ice house (Fig. 2).

The remains of the ice-house consisted of a circular chamber approximately 3.6m in diameter with an inner diameter of 3m (Fig. 3). The chamber was cut into the bedrock (39) on the hillside overlooking the yew-ringed pool. The chamber (36) of the ice-house was constructed of random–coursed Longmyndian sandstone rubble masonry bonded in buff lime mortar, with an inner lining of red brick. The space between the chamber and the cut in the bedrock was packed with a brown clay (37) which presumably provided a degree of waterproofing and insulation for the chamber. The chamber was entered by way of an entrance passage 2.6m long and 1.1m wide (internally) that led back from a (now dis-used) path on the lower hill slope. The walls of the entrance passage (3 & 4) were also built of random–coursed Longmyndian sandstone rubble. The outer ends of the passage walls turned outwards to form wing-walls (25 & 26) which revetted the upslope side of the path to either side of the entrance passage.

The core of the chamber was filled with loosely packed stone and brick rubble (35) that almost certainly represented the collapsed roof of the structure. This deposit filled the chamber to within 0.8m of the top of the wall; it was not excavated. The top of the wall of the chamber was covered by a steeply sloping deposit of grey silty loam with small stone chippings (8 & 9), that appeared to have washed into the sides of the top of the chamber from the hillside above. The remainder of the top of the chamber was filled with a dark greyish brown humic loam (10) topsoil, and a peaty layer of humic soil composed of composted leaf mould (7). The side walls of the entrance passage were truncated and sloped down in line with the hillside from the top of the chamber to the edge of the former path along the hillside. The leaf-mould (1) and topsoil (2) were cleared from the top of the side walls (3 & 4) and top and front of the wing walls (25 & 26). The fills of the entrance passage were sampled and seen to consist of a stony dark grey silty loam (5) with some large stone fragments and brick; at the north end of the passageway this deposit (6) contained less brick and stone.

The excavations were partially backfilled on completion to maintain stability of the exposed structure while allowing the basic form to remain visible.

4.2 The Summer House

Possible structural remains had been identified close to the northwest edge of the Countryside Heritage Site by the 2004 survey (Fig. 2). These remains were seen to comprise a low mound about 4m across and 0.3m in height, with brick, stone, and mortar fragments visible in the topsoil. One course of a dry-stone wall was visible. (Hannaford, 2004)

A 1m x 5m trench was laid out over the line of the drystone wall recorded by the 2004 survey. The trench was extended to cover an area 5m x 5m square. A thin layer of leafmould and very dark greyish brown humic loam (11) were removed to reveal three walls of a D-shaped structure (Fig. 4). The structure was 4.35m long by 4.35m wide across the D. The walls were 0.35m thick and were built of Longmyndian sandstone and fragments of 17th-century red brick bonded in a buff mortar. The west corner of the structure had been severely truncated where the modern path had cut across the corner of the structure. The southwest wall (14) and the western end of the end wall (12) survived to a height of only two courses (0.10m). By contrast, the walls (12 & 13) at the north corner of the building survived to a height of 0.75m, partially protected by hill-wash and accumulated leaf-mould.

The southeast half of the structure was open. Six square-section pillar bases (15, 16, 17, 20, 28, & 30) marked the 5-sided curve of the structure. The pillar bases were of Grinshill stone and 0.2m square in section. Three of the bases still had iron fixings in the centre for fixing to the (missing) pillars, the other three had holes where the fixings had been lost. A broken section of squared stone, probably one of the pillars, was seen beside the stream bed c. 50m to the southeast of the structure.

On the inside of the walls of the D-shaped structure, the topsoil was of a depth of as little as 0.05m up to 0.65m. Immediately beneath the topsoil was a pebble and cobble floor surface (18). This floor did not survive in the western corner of the structure, where it had been worn away, as well as being cut through by a large oval pit (32). The southeast, east, and northeast edges of the floor were kerbed in buff brick or stones. The edges on the south and southwest sides were of cobbles. The floor was not uniform. In the northwest half of the structure, enclosed by the walls, the surviving floor was of rounded pebbles. In the southeast half of the structure the floor comprised a mixture of pebbles, cobbles and rounded stones. Incorporated into the floor at the northeast edge of the structure was a mosaic of pebbles, with the letter “M” in a rectangular border picked out in white pebbles. The “M” was preceded by what appeared to be another letter, either an “I” or a “J”, but the mosaic had been damaged here. The pebbles were bedded in dark grey humic loam, and this lay directly over the natural subsoil (34) of dark brown silty sand and grit.

On completion of the excavations the floor was covered with topsoil, built up around the walls to protect the structure against weathering and accidental damage.

5 DISCUSSION

The nature of the structure at the northwestern edge of the site identified by the 2004 field survey (Hannaford, 2004) was uncertain, though it appeared to have been sited to give a view down the valley towards the yew-ringed pool and pump-house (or gothic folly) (Phibbs, 2009). The trial revealed the foundations and floor of a D-shaped building, and these were sufficient to identify the structure as a summer house. The cartographic evidence suggests a date for the construction of the summerhouse of between 1767 and 1834. The mosaic letters I M or J M recorded by the excavation suggest that the summer house was built by John Mainwaring as part of his development of the garden. The brick fragments used in the walls of the summer house were of interest as they were of dimensions that indicated a 17th-century date. They had clearly been re-used, and were similar to the bricks used in the lower courses of the site boundary wall on Church Street. There were no finds of tile or slate, and it is likely that the upper part and roof of the summer house were of timber. As surmised, the summerhouse would have given a view along down the stream valley towards the yew-ringed pool and the pump house. The 1834 plan shows that during Pemberton's time this stretch of the brook was open ground (possible lawn, as suggested by Phibbs) with a few clumps of planting, though the pump house itself was within trees and probably obscured from view. Some thinning of the cherry-laurel, rhododendron, and other scrub and saplings that have grown here might partially open up this view again.

The remains of the summer house would be vulnerable to erosion if left exposed: the pebble and cobble floor is bedded on buried soil directly over the natural gravely subsoil, and the end walls of the structure appear to have only slight foundations of a couple of courses depth. The mortar bonding the walls is not especially hard either. In fact the southwestern corner of the building had been damaged by its proximity to the path running through this part of the site. The excavations were backfilled to the top of the walls, re-covering the floor, and protecting the walls, but allowing the partial outline of the structure to be visible.

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).

The ice house in Rectory Wood appears to survive in reasonable condition. It is likely to have had a circular, barrel-vaulted chamber. The structure survived to a height of 2.5m above the level of the former path, which itself was about 2m above the level of the pool. This would allow for a depth below the path of up to another 1.5m construction, with a drain beneath running into the pool. The roof of the structure has clearly collapsed, filling the chamber, and the top of the entrance passage has been truncated in line with the slope of the hillside. However, it is likely that the main body of the icehouse survives in the hillside. The only clue to the dating of the ice-house was in the bricks of the lining of the chamber, which were 18th-century in date. The form of the ice-house would also fit with this period.

It would be possible to completely excavate 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 spoil and rubble to be removed and disposed of. The trial excavations left the top of the chamber, entrance passage walls, and wing walls exposed, 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.

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ABBREVIATIONS

AOD	Above Ordnance Datum
ASD	Above Site Datum
CBA	Council for British Archaeology
DoE	Department of the Environment
OS	Ordnance Survey
SA	Shropshire Archives
HER	County Historic Environment (Sites and Monuments) Record
TSAHS	Transactions of the Shropshire Archaeological and Historical Society
TSAS	Transactions of the Shropshire Archaeological Society

7 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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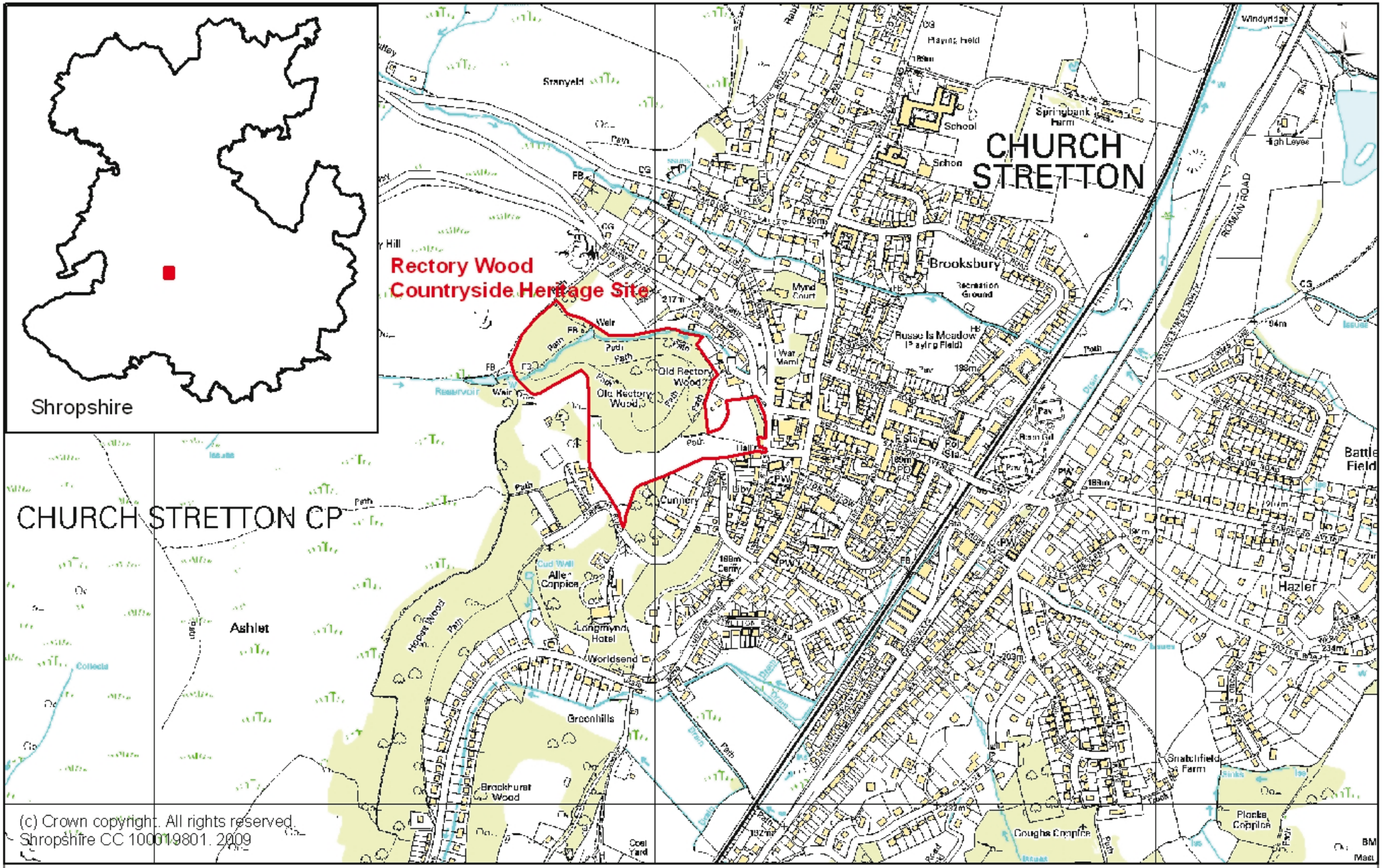

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Figure 1: Location of the study area

0 50 100 200 300 400 500 Meters

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Scale: 1:10,000

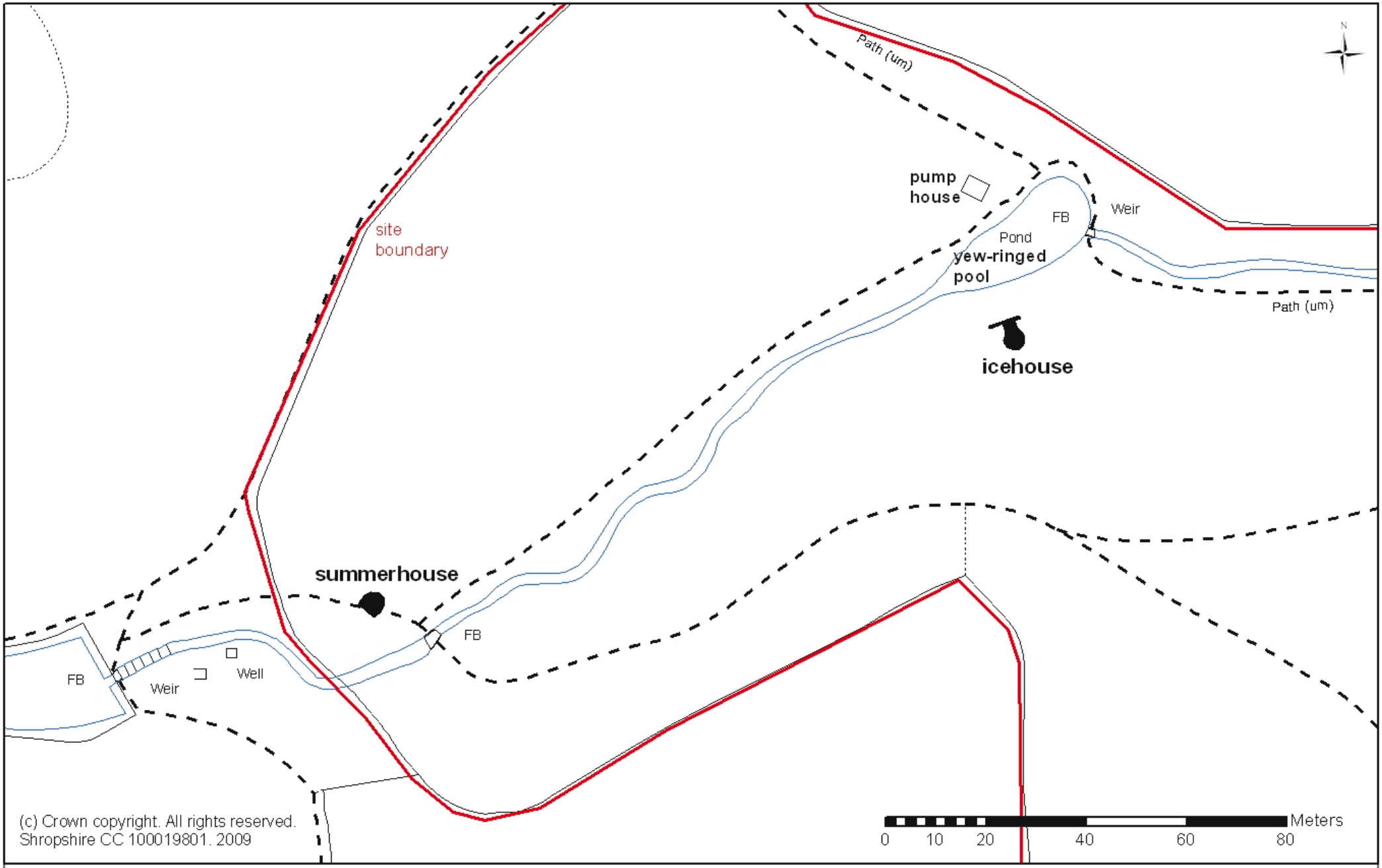

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Figure 2: Location of the Summerhouse and the Icehouse

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Shrewsbury, Shropshire, SY1 2AQ
Scale: 1:1,000

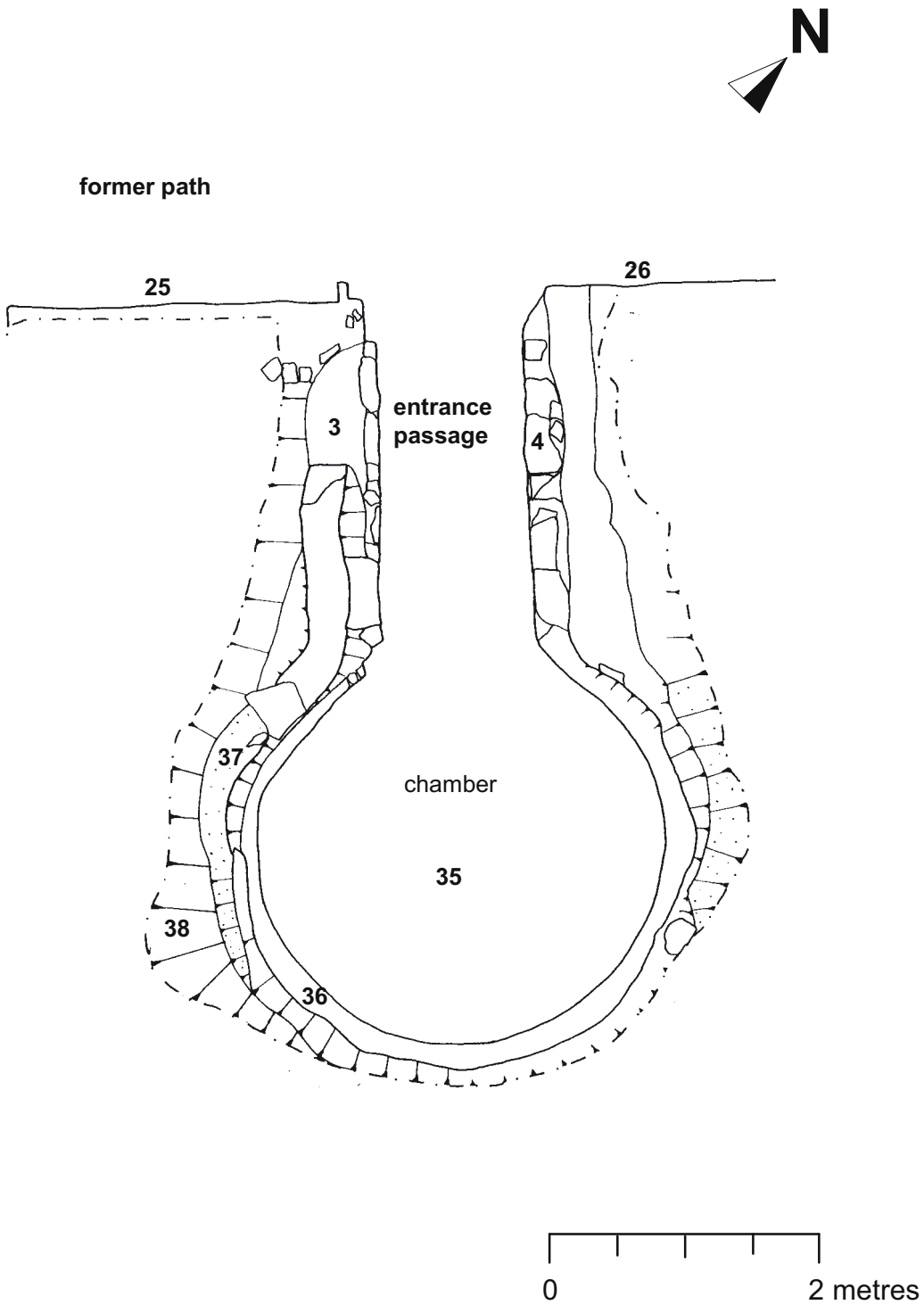

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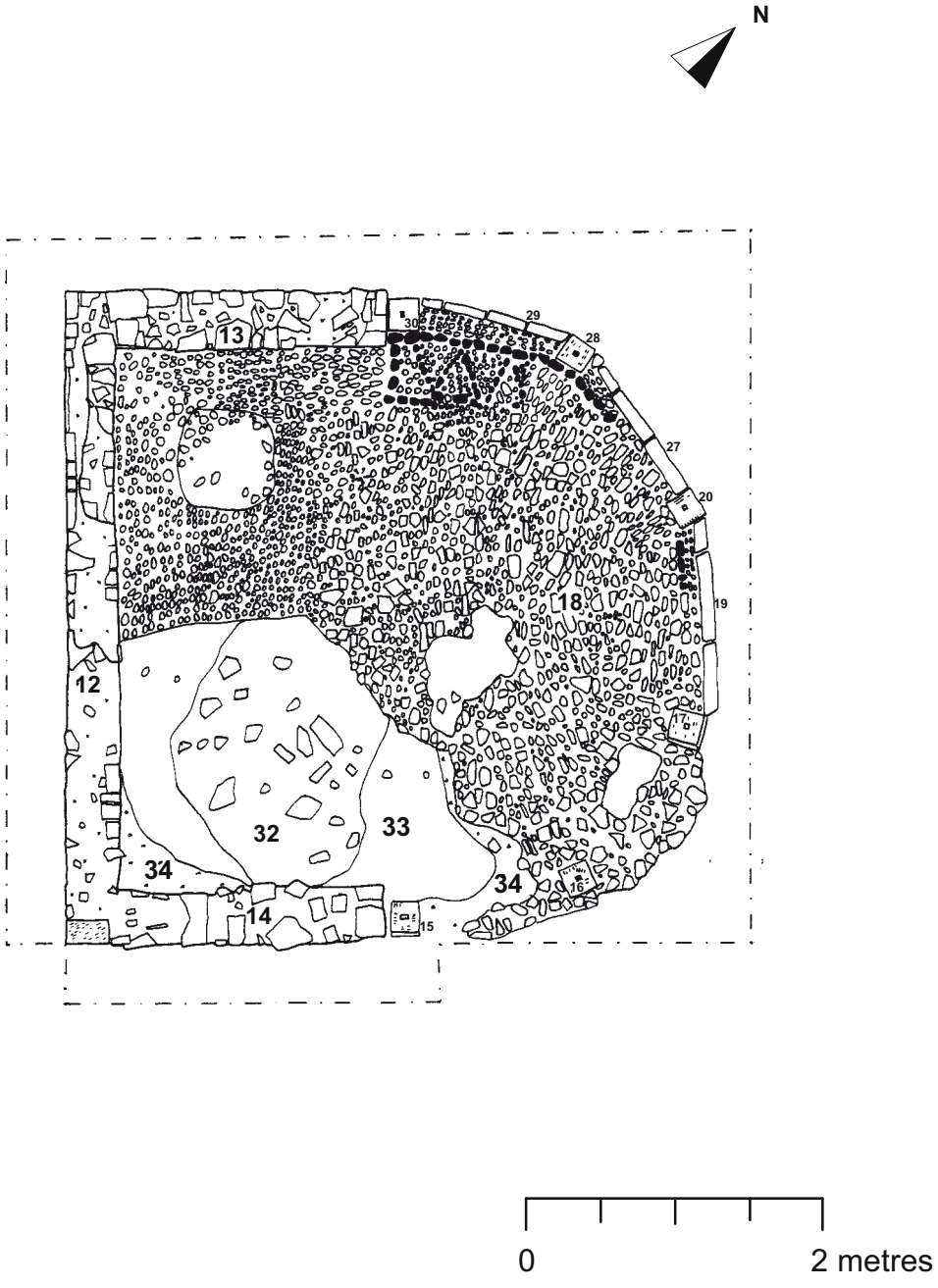
Figure 3: The ice house; plan view; 1:50 scale



Rectory Wood 2009
Figure 4: The summerhouse; plan view; 1:50 scale

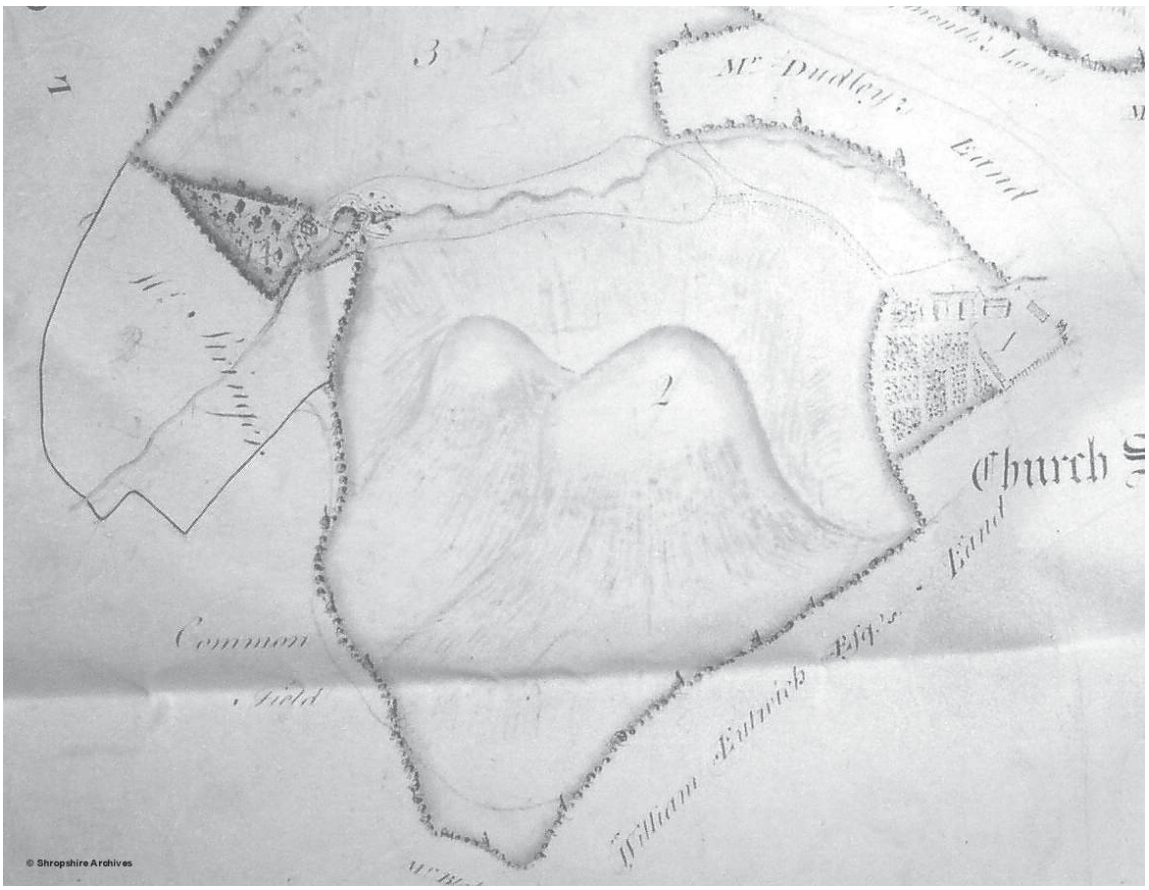


Figure 5a: Extract from 1767 plan showing the study area (SA 3651/B/122/1)

Figure 5b: Extract from 1834 map showing the study area (SA P67/F/1/1)

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Figure 5: 18th and 19th century plans of the Rectory gardens

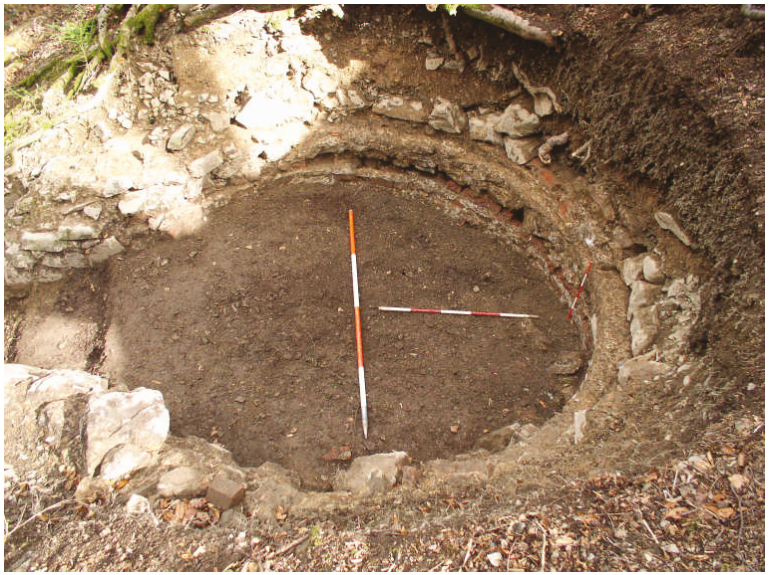

Photo 1: The chamber of the icehouse

Photo 2: The entrance passage and wing wall of the icehouse

Photo 3: The summerhouse

Photo 4: The mosaic “M” in the floor of the summerhouse

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