

BIRMINGHAM UNIVERSITY  
FIELD ARCHAEOLOGY UNIT

LIFFORD MILL, KINGS NORTON  
AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION

by

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## LIFFORD MILL: AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION, MAY 1989

### Introduction

The site of Lifford Mill, Kings Norton, Birmingham, lies immediately to the south of Tunnel Lane where it forms the southern boundary of Lifford Reservoir (Fig. 1). The site at present forms part of an area of green space among a number of modern factories.

The first recorded occupation of the site took place in the 1820s when a watermill was constructed, replacing a mill within the adjacent complex of buildings known as Lifford Hall. The original mill had been a corn mill, but the new establishment began life as a rolling mill. By the mid 1860s the mill had been converted to a factory producing rubber goods, and map evidence shows a major expansion of the original buildings between 1840 and 1884. There were further alterations to buildings in the northern corner of the site in the last decade of the nineteenth century, though production appears to have ceased around the turn of the century. On the 1904 O.S. 1:2500 map the mill is labelled disused. Later this century, however, the premises were in use again as workshops and storage space for commercial motor bodybuilders. The buildings were finally demolished in 1954, and a tennis court, now overgrown, laid over the southeastern half of the site (source: G. Demidowicz, 1985).

The only remains of the 170 years of industrial occupation visible prior to this evaluation were an 11m length of brick wall running northwest/southeast in the western part of the site, the

partially infilled millpool and sluice to the mill, and a length of brick and sandstone wall revetting the western edge of the mill dam.

### The Evaluation

The evaluation was undertaken, at the request of J. and E. Sturge Ltd., by Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit with a team of three site assistants under the supervision of the author.

The purpose of the evaluation was to assess the extent, quality, and survival of walls, floors, and in situ industrial structures in order to formulate a detailed programme for the full excavation and recording of the site.

Two hand dug trenches were excavated, one (Trench 1) parallel to the mill dam to examine the wheelpit and any extension of the mill buildings to the southwest, and the other (Trench 2) across the northern corner of the site to assess the survival of walls and deposits in this area associated with the development of the factory. A test pit (Trench 3) was dug towards the centre of the site to test the depth of archaeological deposits in this area. A geophysical survey was also conducted to the southwest, away from the site of the known mill and factory buildings, in an attempt to locate the tailrace of the pre-1820 mill to the south.

### The Geophysical Survey

The geophysical survey was conducted by Alex Jones, assisted by the author, using a resistivity meter. The survey was hampered by dense undergrowth, but nevertheless two profiles, 30m long and 2m

apart, were recorded to a depth of 3m across the site northwest to southeast (Fig. 1). Unfortunately the small range of the readings achieved made interpretation of the data difficult, and the presence of a watercourse was not evident from either profile (A. Jones, archive report).

#### Trench 1 (Fig. 2)

Trench 1, 25m long by 1m wide, was located parallel to, and 5m to the west of, the mill dam.

At the southern end of the trench, a brick wall (F7), of possible nineteenth-century date, crossed the trench at right angles. This wall was of the same width as, and in line with, the upstanding factory wall to the west, and probably represented the southermost extent of the factory buildings. A layer of greyish brown clay butted against the excavated wall on its south side, and a brick drain running parallel to the wall was cut into this layer. Butting against this wall on its northern side was a concrete pier 2.35m wide. The brick foundations of the north side of this pier were cut into a layer of greyish brown clay, similar to that further south.

The central 12m of the trench was covered by two twentieth-century floors, one of concrete to the south, and the other, of a mixture of tiles, brick and concrete, to the north; the two were separated by a red sandstone wall (F5). Although it was not possible to date this wall independently, it was on a line with a stub wall returning west from the sandstone portion of the wall revetting the mill dam. If, as seems likely, this latter wall

formed part of the original 1820s mill structure, then it is probable that the excavated sandstone wall was the south end wall of the mill, and that it remained in use until the demolition of the factory.

Towards the northern end of the brick and tile floor, the bricks had subsided into two pits. One of these (F10) was excavated, and proved to be rectangular and brick-lined, containing an in situ wooden beam with attached iron work. This pit was probably a machine pit belonging to the nineteenth century mill or rubber factory. The north end of the brick floor immediately overlay another brick floor, which extended northwards over the remainder of the trench. This floor was constructed with nineteenth-century bricks, though they proved to have been reused, for when a section of the floor was removed, it was seen to overlie rubble containing twentieth-century bricks. However, beneath this rubble were two mortar floors, one on top of the other, again probably belonging to the nineteenth-century mill or rubber factory.

No sign of the waterwheel pit was encountered, though a modern, preformed, concrete slab 2.75m wide (F2), overlying the brick floor and in line with the sluice in the mill dam, may have been a capstone put over the wheelpit when the waterwheel was removed in 1954. This slab, and the modern brick and concrete floors, immediately underlay the chippings and tarmac of the tennis court.

#### Trench 2

Trench 2 was originally intended to run for 20m across the

northern corner of the site. However, as the site boundaries at either end of the trench were revetted with banks of recently dumped clay up to 2m higher than the rest of the site, it was decided to excavate only the central portion of the trench, covering an area 4m long by 1m wide. Here the modern clay deposit was only 0.5m deep, and it overlay a 0.2m deposit of dark grey silty sand and rubble. This layer, in turn, sealed the foundation courses of three twentieth-century brick walls, all running parallel, northwest to southeast. These walls were cut into a greyish brown clay similar to that seen at the southern end of Trench 1. No floors associated with these walls were found. The walls were probably the remains of factory buildings known to have stood in this area during the first half of this century.

#### Trench 3 (Fig. 2)

Trench 3 was a test pit 2m long by 1m wide, located towards the centre of the site, though still within the area of the tennis court. Here, beneath the tarmac and chippings of the tennis court, a layer of demolition rubble overlay a brick floor similar to those encountered in Trench 1. This floor butted the brick surround of a drain downpipe, which, in turn, was built against the northern face of a nineteenth-century brick wall (F18). This wall was on the same line as the red sandstone wall in Trench 1, and probably belonged to the mid-nineteenth-century expansion of the original mill.

#### Conclusion and Recommendations for Further Work

In the northern part of the site, only the foundation walls of the twentieth-century factory survive. However, to the south and

east, in that half of the site covered by the tennis courts, although the twentieth-century factory buildings were demolished to ground floor level their floors remain largely intact. These seal floors and features of nineteenth-century date. Furthermore, walls of nineteenth-century date remain, one possibly being the south wall of the 1820s mill, the others representing the mid-nineteenth-century expansion on the site.

There would thus appear to be ample scope for further work at Lifford Mill. The work could usefully be spread over two seasons, each of about three weeks duration and each concentrating on a different area (Fig. 3). With careful use of a machine (JCB) to remove the tennis court deposits and, after their recording, the twentieth century factory floors, the excavation of the 1820s mill could be achieved in one season. A second season would be needed to explore the mid-nineteenth- and twentieth-century expansion of the factory. It is envisaged at this stage that the workforce might be composed of a combination of experienced excavators, students under training, and volunteers from the Birmingham and Warwickshire Archaeological Society.

#### Acknowledgements

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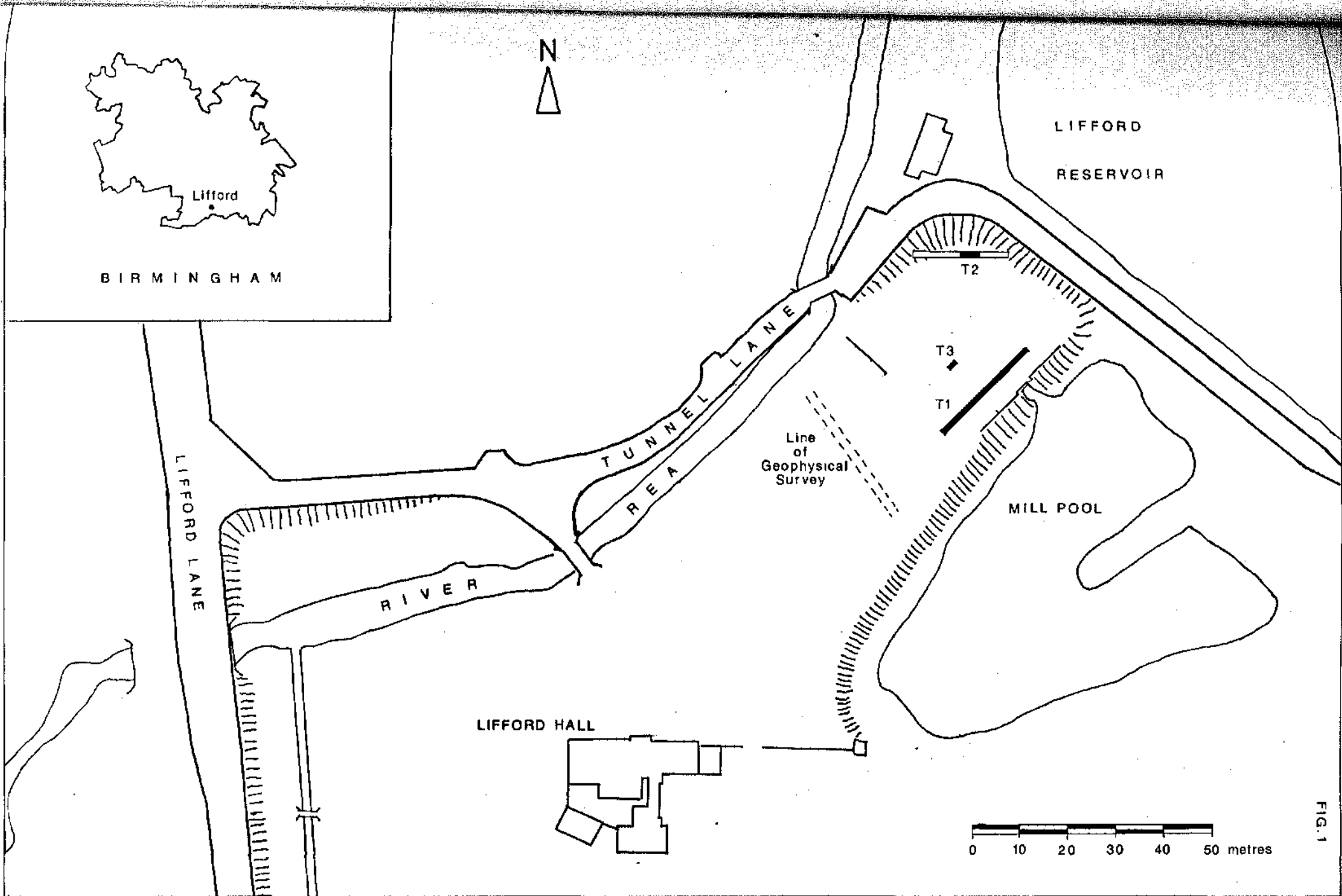


FIG. 1

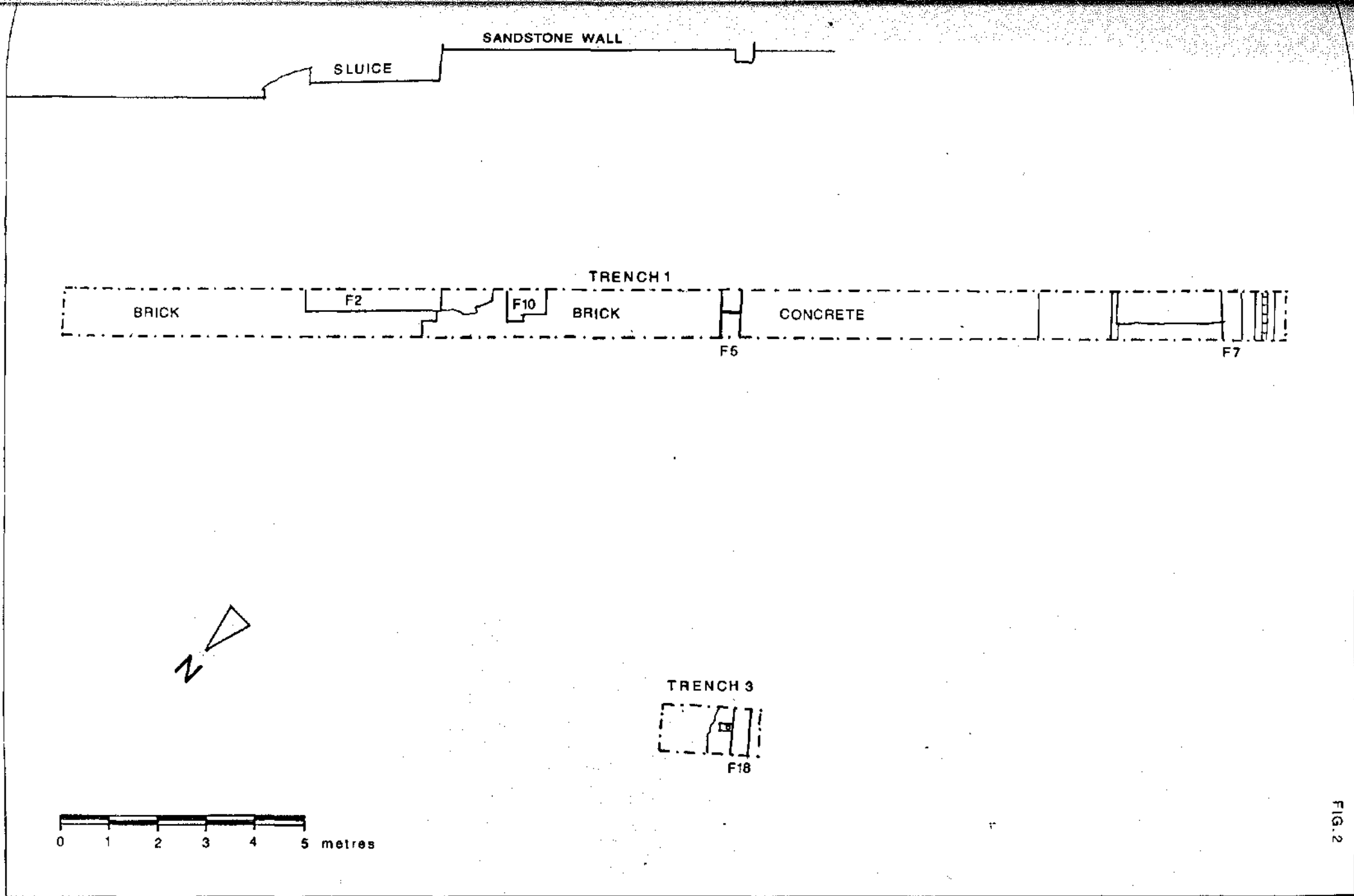
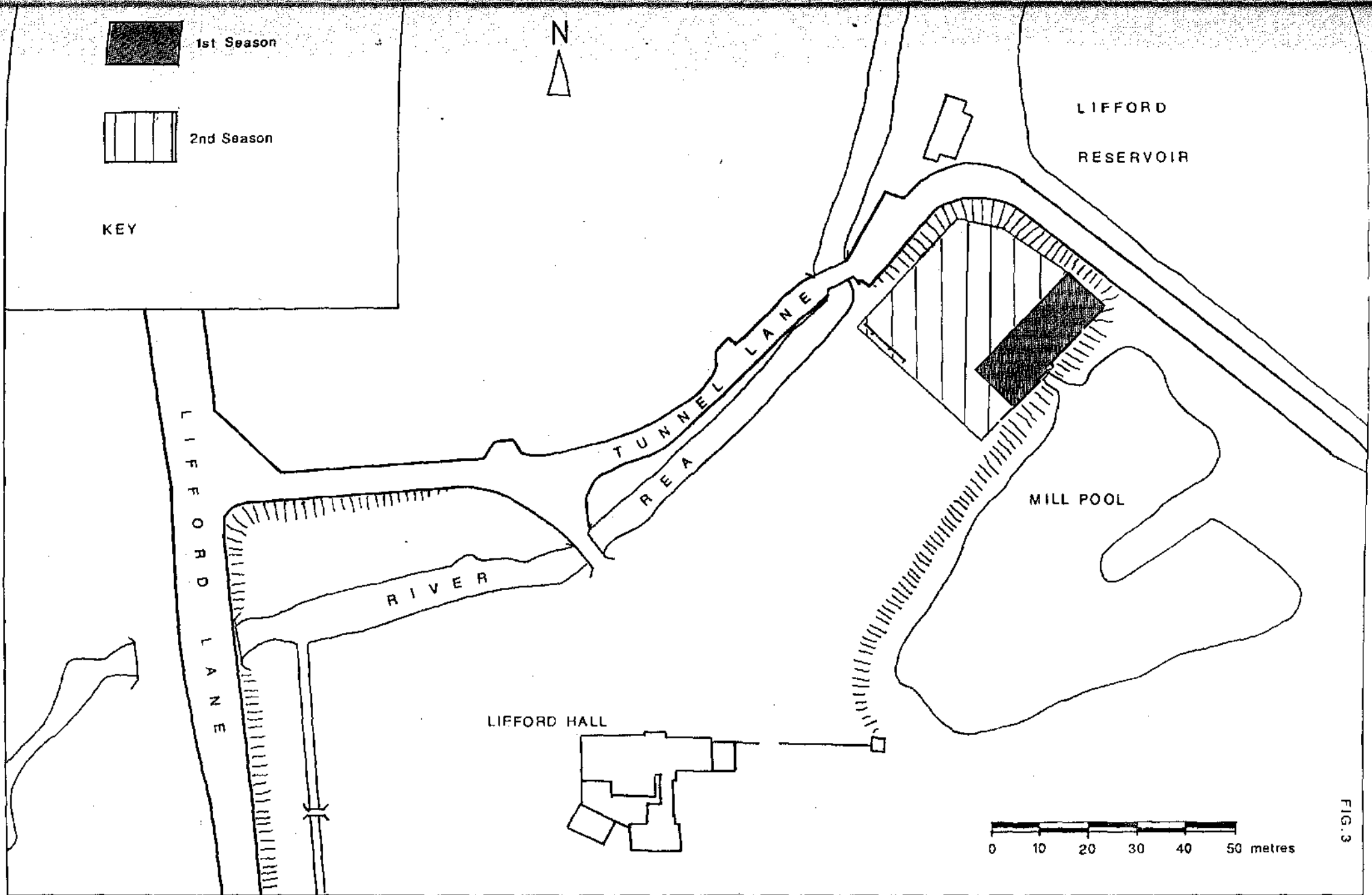


FIG. 2



1st Season

2nd Season

KEY



LIFFORD  
RESERVOIR

TUNNEL  
LANE

LIFFORD  
LANE

RIVER

MILL POOL

LIFFORD HALL

0 10 20 30 40 50 metres

FIG. 3