

# BLAKESLEY HALL BIRMINGHAM

an archaeological evaluation  
1989



by Alex Jones

*B.U.F.A.U.*



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#### 1.0: SUMMARY

This report describes the results of a small-scale archaeological evaluation in the grounds of Blakesley Hall, Birmingham, in advance of the proposed re-creation of a 17th-century formal garden. The evaluation uncovered evidence for post-medieval structural and garden features. Two postholes and a gully were uncovered adjoining the Hall. The garden features comprised a raised flower-bed, footings for a greenhouse and a path near the Hall. Near the centre of the lawned area two drains were located. No features which could be associated with an original 17th-century formal garden were, however, identified.

#### 2.0: INTRODUCTION

In March 1989 Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit (BUFAU) was commissioned by Birmingham City Museum to undertake an archaeological evaluation in the grounds of Blakesley Hall, Yardley, Birmingham (centred on NGR. SP 130 862) (Figure 1). The site evaluated forms part of a rectangular lawned area adjacent to the west wing of Blakesley Hall (Figure 1C). An earlier resistivity survey of this area identified a linear anomaly, up to 3m wide aligned north-south (Figure 1C). This anomaly comprised an area of higher resistivity than the surrounding area, and was interpreted as a stone-filled feature, such as a path or wall.

The purpose of the evaluation was to establish the nature, quality and depth of any archaeological deposits, and, in particular, to ascertain the survival of any 17th-century formal garden features which it was suspected may have existed in this area. The Museum propose to plant a 17th-century-style formal garden on the site, either following the plan of archaeological evidence recovered in situ, if such survives, or by reference to documentary parallels.

Three trenches were hand excavated to the top of the natural sub-soil where possible (Figure 1c) Trench I bisected the lawned area, and was intended to provide an extensive sample of deposits in this area. Trench II concentrated on the area of the greatest archaeological potential, immediately adjoining the house. Trench III sampled the area of the geophysical anomaly.

In each case the deposits encountered were systematically excavated (extensions were dug when necessary to define the alignments of the features encountered). Recording was by means of written pro-formas, drawn sections, plans and photographs.

The following presents a summary of the archaeological information obtained during the evaluation, supplemented by earlier archaeological discoveries in the Hall's grounds.

### 3.0: THE SITE AND ITS SETTING

Blakesley Hall is a late 16th-century timber framed house built by Richard Smalbroke, a local merchant and smallholder. Archaeological evidence indicates an earlier exploitation of this site and the surrounding area. Excavation within the Hall's Dining Room uncovered a pebble surface, dated by associated pottery to the 13th-century (Roe and Mc Callum 1983). A geophysical survey in the nearby Bowling Green (Figure 1B) suggested the presence of a moated site immediately to the north of the Hall (Wardle and Williams 1984). More recently waterlogged timbers, possibly relating to the construction phase of the house, have been uncovered adjacent to and underlying the kitchen area (Molyneux pers. comm.).

During the 16th-century garden layout was mostly formal. The archaeological excavation of gardens of this period can uncover important evidence of the social aspirations and fashions affecting wealthy owners (Taylor 1983), such as the Smalbroke family. Documentary and excavated evidence suggests that the favoured location for formal gardens was adjacent to the parlour (at Blakesley to the west of the Hall: Figure 1C). Thus it was

important to discover if such a garden had survived later disturbance, before the re-creation of a garden of the period. Cartographic evidence suggests the area west of the Hall was a kitchen garden in the 19th-century (Grimley and Son auction catalogue, plan 1900).

#### 4.0: THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESULTS

##### 4.1: Trench I (Figure 1C)

Natural stiff red-orange clay was contacted c.0.7m below the modern surface, sealed by a fine layer of light brown silt soil. A pair of shallow garden drains c.0.2m wide, and backfilled with clinker and ash aligned approximately south-west north-east were cut into this disturbed horizon (Figure 1C). These features may be associated with a linear out (Figure 1C), 5cm in depth joining the two drains and filled with a mixed layer of broken brick, stone fragments and clinker, which continued to the north beyond the trench.

At the eastern end of the trench a deposit of contaminated brown silt was contacted 0.8m below the modern surface, overlain by a compact dark clay soil mixed with sandstone rubble and flecked with mortar. This clay layer is interpreted as a garden soil, contaminated by construction debris. It was overlain by a rough garden path, aligned approximately north-south, up to 1.2m in width, with a cambered surface, and formed of small rounded pebbles set in a dark brown clay soil.

Above the path a raised flower-bed was contacted, formed of a stony dark humic clay soil, up to 0.1m in depth, and relating to a further phase of cultivation.

This later garden soil was cut by the shallow, brick-faced, soft, off-white mortar foundations for a ?greenhouse, aligned approximately east-west, along the line of the trench.

A make-up layer of stony brown clay soil was contacted along the entire length of the trench, overlying the drains towards the west end of the trench, and the garden features to the east. This was overlain by the modern garden soil, which contained a marked concentration of brick rubble and mortar towards the Hall.

#### 4.2: Trench II (Figure 1C)

Trench II (Figure 1C) was located along the eastern edge of the lawn, immediately to the west of the flowerbed bordering the Hall Parlour (Figure 1C). Much of the area between the trench and the Hall is disturbed by deep modern service trenches and inspection chambers, and is probably archaeologically sterile. A path formed of horizontally laid bricks leads out from the parlour door onto the lawn. This may be a reinstatement of an earlier feature.

Natural red-orange clay was contacted 0.8m below the modern surface, sealed by a mixed orange-brown silt flecked with charcoal. At the southern end of Trench II a shallow gully 0.3m wide, aligned approximately north-south cut into this mixed horizon. The identification of this feature is uncertain as it was only seen for a length of 0.5m in the trench. A steep-sided sub-circular post hole, 0.1m in diameter cut into the brown silt-soil fill of the gully, and the natural clay beneath. The silt-soil fill of the post-hole contained a sherd of 17th-century glazed pottery. A second post hole, to the north of the first, measured 0.15m in diameter, and was cut to a flat base into the disturbed natural.

Sealing both postholes was a mixed dark-brown soil, containing brick, mortar and stone fragments and 19th-century pottery, below the modern garden soil.

#### 4.3: Trench III (Figure 1C)

A trench measuring 3m by 1m was dug to investigate the area of the geophysical anomaly (Figure 1C). Natural red-orange clay was contacted 0.7m below the modern surface, sealed by a brown-orange silt 0.2m in depth. This

was overlain by a stony dark humic soil immediately beneath the modern garden soil. No archaeological features or deposits were contacted.

## 5.0: DISCUSSION

The earliest datable evidence derives from Trench II where the two postholes and gully encountered here may have gone out of use by the 17th-century. They may relate to the erection of scaffolding associated with the construction or repair of the hall, or to a temporary building adjoining the hall, or to a structure preceding the construction of the late 16th-century hall. Excavations in the dining room of the hall indicated that occupation of the site dates back to at least the 13th-century (Roe 1984; Roe and McCallum 1983).

The evidence for garden features is more difficult to interpret, due to the lack of dating evidence, and the inability to assign the features in Trench I to a single stratigraphic sequence. The limited sample excavated suggests the presence of a variety of features associated with a planned garden layout, comprising crude drains, a raised flower border and a path in the vicinity of the Hall, followed by the construction of a greenhouse. The latter may be contemporary with the 19th-century vegetable garden shown on a plan of 1900.

## 6.0: IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### 6.1: Implications

Trench II has demonstrated that evidence of timber structures, either contemporary with or earlier than the 16th-century Hall, survive in the area immediately adjoining the western side of the Hall. When considered in conjunction with the survival of medieval occupation deposits under the hall itself, and deposits containing waterlogged timber on the north side of the hall (Molyneux, pers. comm), it is apparent that there is considerable potential for the survival and recovery of important

archaeological evidence relating to medieval occupation of the site and to the construction of the hall.

The evidence from Trenches I and III suggests these areas are of secondary archaeological importance. The recovery of a variety of garden features, albeit undated, requires some further archaeological monitoring before development.

#### 6.2: Recommendations

It is recommended that the area adjoining the house (hatched on Figure 1C) be examined by controlled archaeological excavation before the creation of a formal garden, or any other works which may disturb the archaeological deposits.

It is further recommended that an archaeological presence in the form of a watching brief be maintained during groundworks in the remainder of the lawned area. This will enable the examination and recording of any archaeological features uncovered.

#### 7.0: ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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8.0: REFERENCES

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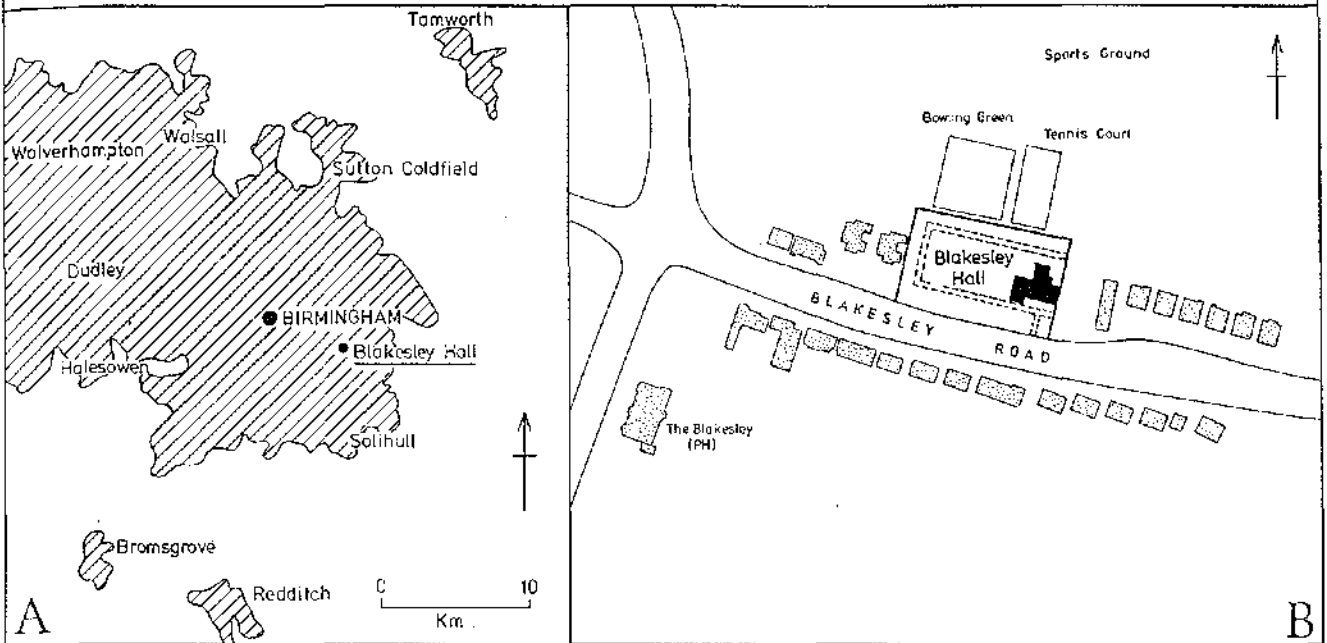
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## Areas of archaeological investigation

## Main features

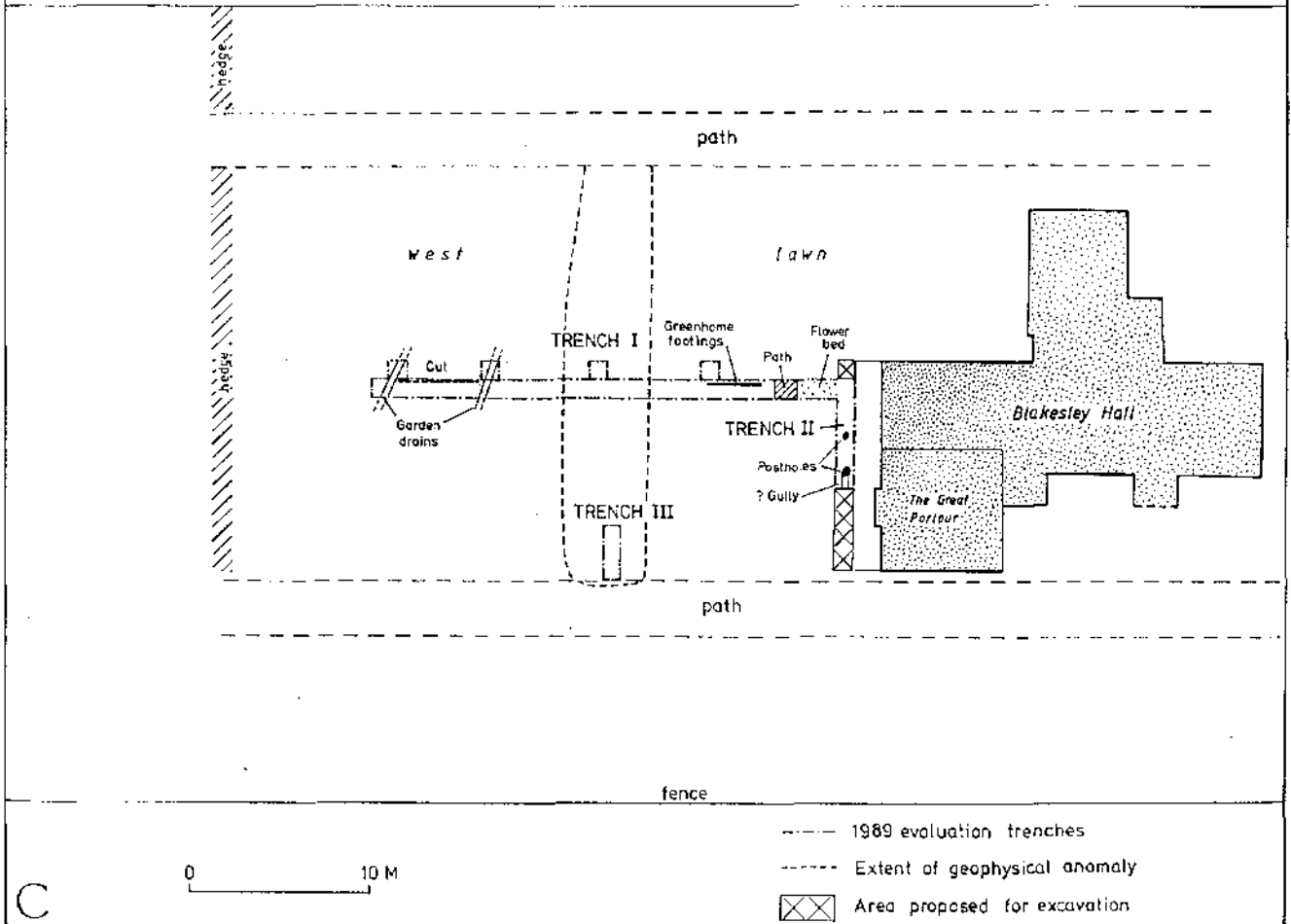


Figure 1