

**COURT HOUSE FARM,  
EARDISLAND:**

**An Archaeological Evaluation**

by

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“...and they filled the land full of castles. They cruelly oppressed the wretched men of the land with castle works and when the castles were made they filled them with devils and evil men and they said openly, that Christ slept, and His saints.”

The Anglo Saxon Chronicle, 1137

## Introduction

The archaeological evaluation reported on here was carried out in advance of the submission of a planning application to Leominster District Council proposing the construction of new housing, and the conversion of existing farm buildings for housing, at Court House Farm, Eardisland, Herefordshire (NGR SO 420 586). The proposed development site is currently a working farmyard which lies immediately adjacent to the motte of Eardisland Castle (HWCM 1683). The motte together with its encircling moat is a Scheduled Ancient Monument (Hereford and Worcester No. 96). Prior to the archaeological evaluation circumstantial evidence suggested that the farmyard might occupy the area of the castle bailey (HWCM 9319) although no physical trace of a bailey had been identified. The purpose of the evaluation was to determine the presence or absence of physical remains of a castle bailey and, if present, to assess their nature, extent and archaeological importance, with a view to defining the requirements for the preservation of any such remains, including, where appropriate, the parameters for design of suitable foundations.

The evaluation was commissioned by the John Needham Partnership on behalf of the owners Mr and Mrs Lowe and was carried out by Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit during the week Monday 12 February to Friday 16 February 1990.

## The Site and its Setting

Court House Farm is situated in the village and parish of Eardisland on the River Arrow, 7 kilometres west of Leominster (Fig. 1a). The village maintains much of its historic character and contains many fine timber-framed houses and cottages of 17th-century or earlier date, including Staick House (RCHME 1934, 47-8), dating in part from the 14th century, situated just to the north east of Court House Farm and the Old Manor House and dovecote (RCHME 1934, 48), dating from the 17th century, just to the north west (Fig 1b). The proposed development site itself (Fig 2) comprises a part of the farmyard of Court House Farm which contains functional modern farm buildings, principally cattle sheds, in addition to silage mounds and a hay storage area. Court House itself, however, probably dates from the 16th century, although from the 18th century it has been subject to much alteration and extension (RCHME 1934, 48). The tree-covered motte, the view of which from the village is obscured by farm buildings, is situated in the south-east corner of the farmyard, with concrete trackways, modern sheds and silage mounds hard against its surrounding moat on the north and west sides. The motte has a diameter of about 45m at its base and rises to a height of just under 5m (RCHME 1934, 47). Some 20m south of the motte and farmyard is the parish church of St. Mary. The nave was constructed in the early 13th century, the south porch and chancel added

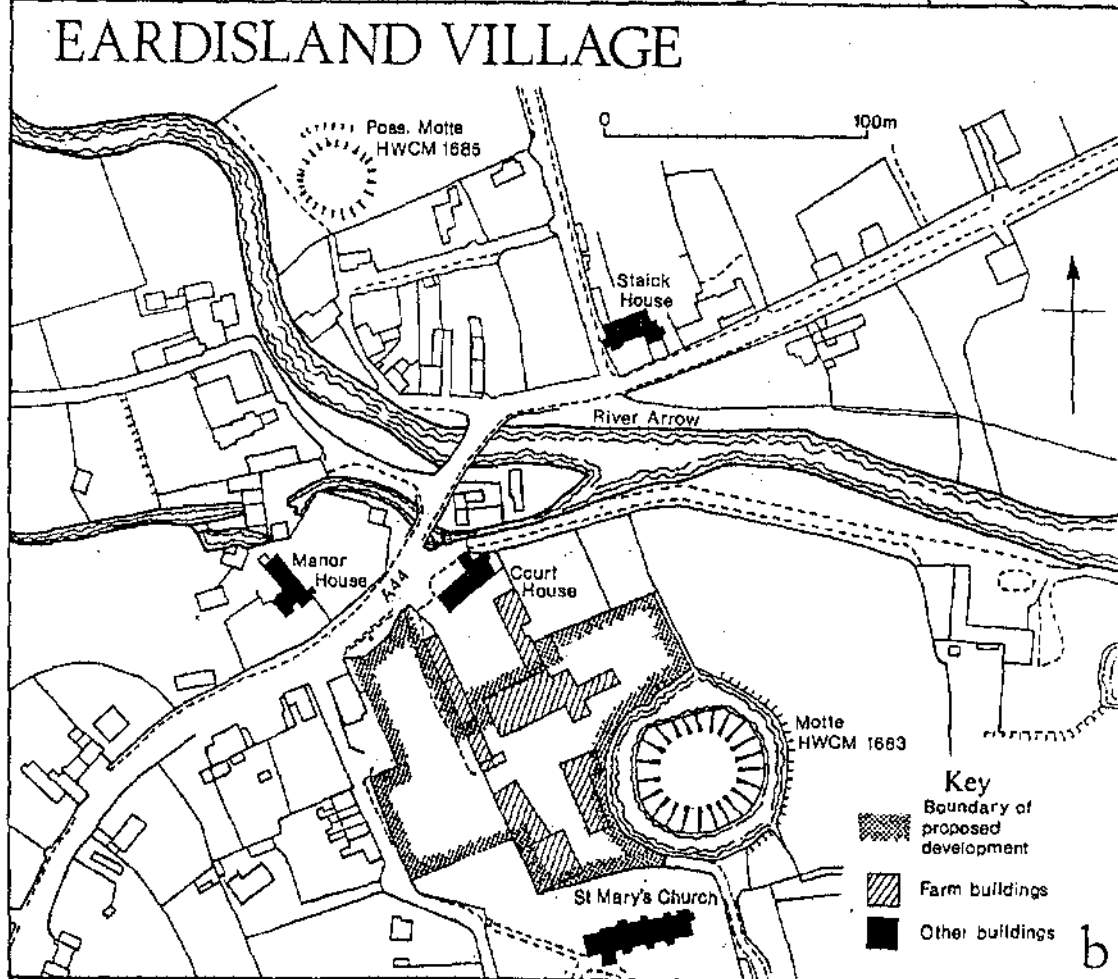
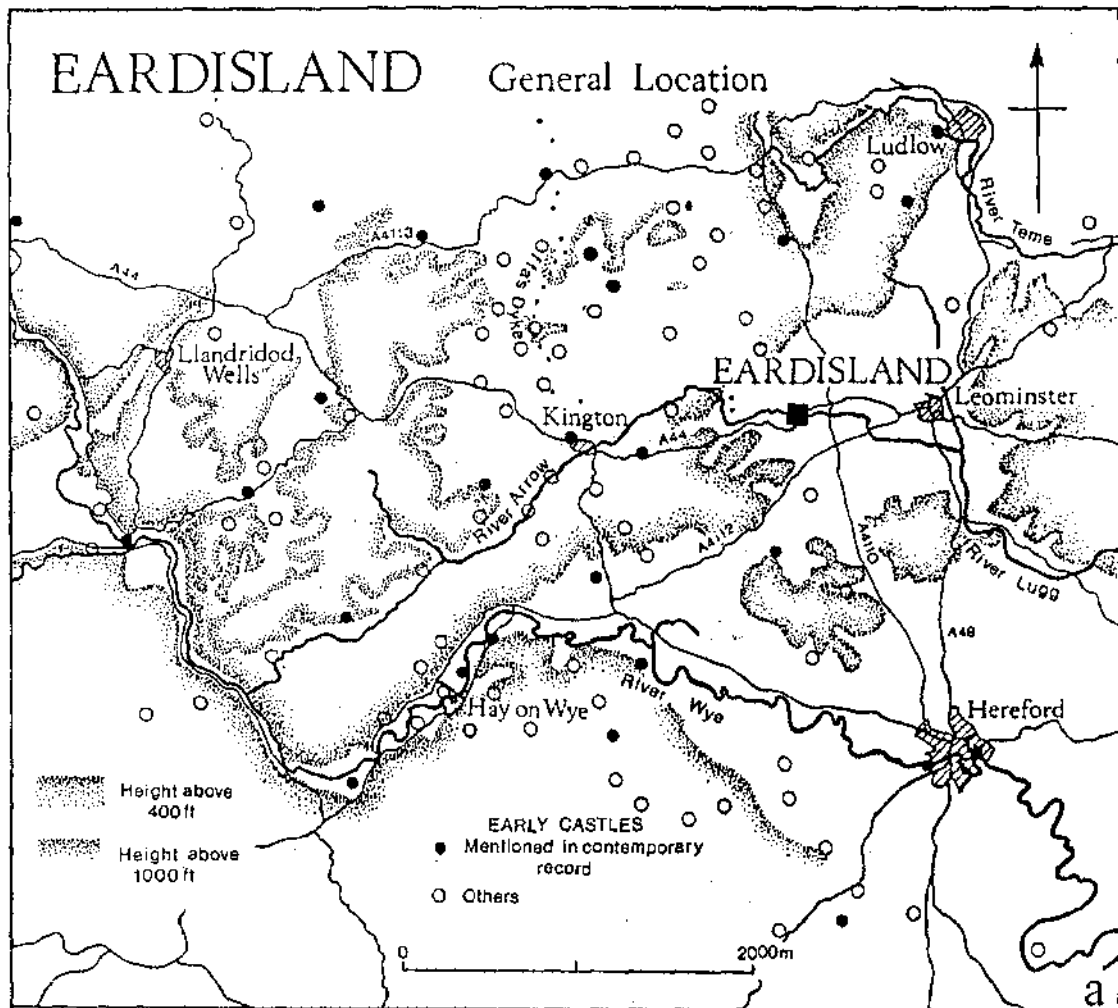


Fig.1

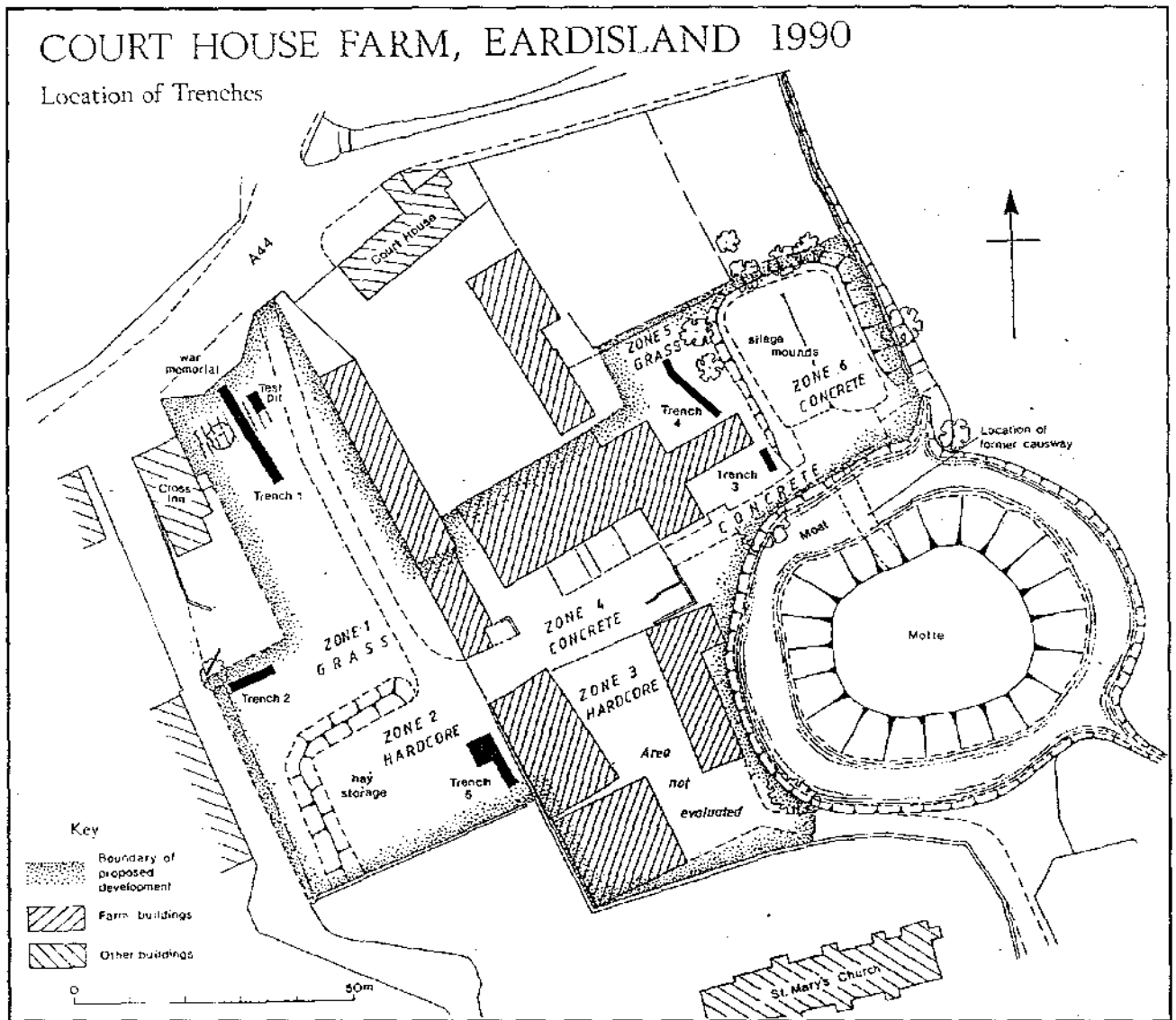


Fig 2

in the 14th century, the west tower rebuilt in the 18th century following collapse, and the whole heavily restored in 1864 (RCHME 1934, 45-7). To the east of the farmyard and motte is a field under grass, the indistinct and amorphous undulations on the surface of which might suggest the former presence of earthworks or ridge-and-furrow but are, perhaps, more likely to be natural or recent in origin. A second, smaller, flat-topped mound, possibly another motte (HWCM 1685), is situated in grassland some 230m to the north west on the other side of the river (Fig. 1b). It has a diameter at the base of about 28m and a height of about 1.4m; there are faint traces of a ditch on the north side but no trace of a bailey.

The suggestion that a bailey may occupy the area of the farmyard at Court House Farm was

made by Dr Anthony Streeten of English Heritage (Inf. SMR). There are no clear extant physical features indicating a bailey, nor have any recorded excavations or surveys been undertaken on the site until now, but the former existence of a causeway across the moat, providing access to the motte from the farmyard (Fig. 2), suggested this to be a likely general location for a bailey, while an otherwise unexplained dogleg in the lane to the church might be accounted for by the fact that it respected the line of a former rampart; the ditch connecting the River Arrow to the moat perhaps indicates the line of another boundary. The causeway no longer survives above the surface of the moat but it was a very prominent feature until recently, clearly indicated on the Royal Commission plan (RCHME 1934, 48).

## The Archaeological and Historical Context

The motte at Court House Farm belongs to a class of monument which is extremely common in the Welsh Marches (Fig 1a), being a characteristic feature of the historic landscape of numerous villages and the outstanding symbol both of the Norman Conquest and the feudal system of social organisation. Mottes are generally thought of as one element of the motte and bailey castle, the type of castle which predominated in England and Wales in the late 11th and first half of the 12th centuries. These earthwork monuments comprise the motte itself, a flat-topped mound surrounded by a wet or dry ditch which served both a defensive function and acted as a quarry for the construction of the motte, and an attached or encompassing courtyard – the bailey – often of roughly oval shape and defended by a bank and ditch. The original castle buildings were, apart from a few exceptions, of timber and therefore do not survive, their form being known only from contemporary descriptions and illustrations, most notably the Bayeux Tapestry, and from archaeological excavation. The motte, the strong point of the castle, was generally surmounted by a rectangular tower or a palisade around the lip, or both, while the bailey could contain such buildings as the lord's hall, a chapel, smithy, stables, barns and other outbuildings. The rampart of the bailey would probably be surmounted by a palisade while access to the motte from the bailey was usually by means of a timber bridge.

Generalisation is, however, both difficult and dangerous: difficult because of the great variation in size and layout which the earthwork monuments now present and dangerous because of the still rudimentary state of knowledge concerning the plan, function and degree of variability of the original timber buildings. Mottes vary greatly in size from more than twenty metres in height to less than two, this variation reflecting differences of both social status and function. Large mottes, of more than ten metres in height are comparatively rare, while mottes of less than five metres in height, such as the two Eardisland mottes, are common, particularly so in the Marches. Large motte-and-bailey castles at strategic locations, or in the hands of great lords, can be long-lived and rebuilt in stone,

while some of the smaller mottes, requiring only a few weeks labour to construct, might be thrown up at a time of specific danger and have seen only temporary occupation.

The development of the motte-and-bailey castle is the subject of much scholarly debate (Clarke 1984, 116-127). The traditional view is that the motte-and-bailey was introduced into England, fully developed, by William the Conqueror in 1066, although a handful – including Richard's Castle and Hereford – were introduced earlier into the Welsh borderland by Norman courtiers of Edward the Confessor (r.1042-65). An alternative view is that the motte-and-bailey castle developed in England after the Conquest by means of the addition of a mound (the motte) to 'ring works' (enclosures defended by an earthen bank), a type of castle possibly in use by Anglo-Saxons before the Conquest (Clarke 1984, 121). Of more relevance to Eardisland is the question of the number of mottes which were, from the outset, unaccompanied by baileys, although this is a question of functional rather than chronological relevance. Unfortunately, contemporary documentary sources, where they exist, are seldom specific enough to determine the form of a castle. However, the frequency of minor mottes in Herefordshire and Shropshire with no visible bailey has prompted the suggestion that these form a distinct class of monument, simple tower mounds for overnight refuge (Stanford 1980, 211). Of course, the earthworks of baileys are much more vulnerable to levelling and destruction than are mottes, so the true frequency of the free-standing motte is impossible to determine and in each individual case the possibility that a bailey formerly existed must be considered. As has been suggested for Court House Farm, Eardisland, it is possible that although all physical trace of a bailey has disappeared it has left its imprint in the pattern of roads or property boundaries in the modern town or village plan.

The broad historical context for the extraordinary density of castles in the Welsh Marches lies in the great challenge the Normans faced, like their predecessors, in dominating this restless borderland. William the Conqueror established a system whereby the Marches were

divided into three great earldoms based on Chester, Shrewsbury and Hereford, each subdivided into lordships with one or more castles. In return for the conquest and defence of the Marches, the Marcher lords were granted a considerable degree of autonomy and many privileges, including the right of unlicensed castle building. Indeed, contemporary chroniclers attributed much of the Normans' success to their castles, which were not only defensive strongholds but also bases for attack from which the Norman cavalry could dominate the surrounding countryside (Rowley 1986, 98-102). Many of the smaller castles, Eardisland among them (Hogg and King 1963, 98), are not mentioned in contemporary sources, so the precise historical context of their construction must remain a matter of conjecture.

Although much recent archaeological research has been devoted to early earthwork castles they remain only partially understood. Furthermore, most work has been concentrated on the motte rather than the bailey (Clarke 1984, 116-127). Philip Barker's long campaign of excavation of the bailey at Hen Domen, Montgomery (Barker and Higham 1982), has demonstrated, however, the enormous amount of information which can be recovered. A bailey packed with a variety of timber buildings was revealed, which went through several phases of rebuilding during an occupation spanning up to 200 years. The traces of these buildings were revealed by a variety of excavated evidence, much of which could not have been recovered except in the context of a meticulous archaeological excavation: beam slots, rows of pebbles and pebble surfaces, shallow beam slots, deep post holes, dumps of clay, etc. Despite the fact that Hen Domen was a large and important castle (the motte stands 8m high and the bailey is defended with a double bank and ditch) with a comparatively long life, the pottery and other finds were sparse.

These brief notes on the archaeology and historical context of earthwork castles in the Marches provide some suggestion of the character of the remains which might be anticipated at Eardisland. First, if the motte at Eardisland was raised as a temporary refuge (and contemporary sources suggest that a motte could be thrown up in a few weeks) it is quite possible that it was

never accompanied by a bailey. Second, if the motte was accompanied by a bailey it is likely that any remains which survive, both in terms of the traces of former buildings and in terms of pottery and small finds, will be insubstantial, although it must be stressed that this would not diminish their importance. Indeed, if a comparison can be made between Hen Domen (a large, well documented and comparatively long-lived castle) and Eardisland (a small, undocumented and possibly short-lived castle) it might be anticipated that any remains of a bailey at Eardisland could be very slight even if reasonably preserved - the levelled remains of a bank and ditch, a few post-holes and a handful of potsherds. These considerations add difficulty to the interpretation of the results of the trial excavations, particularly to the degree of weight to be placed on the largely negative results of the necessarily limited trenching.

### **Evaluation Strategy and Method**

The area of the proposed development was divided into six zones, the zones differentiated primarily on the basis of present use and the character of the ground surface - grass, hardcore or concrete (Fig. 2). With the exception of the sheds immediately adjacent to the west side of the moat, floored with hardcore, all the farm buildings in the development area have concrete floors and are in daily use: excavation beneath these buildings was therefore not a practical possibility. Furthermore, concrete surfacing and/or other obstructions prohibited evaluation of Zone 4 and Zone 6, while hay bales restricted access to the western part of Zone 2. While evaluation of Zone 3 was possible, this was not attempted as it is understood that it is not now proposed to build in this area, on the grounds of a potentially adverse effect upon the setting of the motte and church. Therefore, disturbance here of any surviving archaeological deposits is not anticipated. Despite the necessary restrictions thus imposed on the scope of the evaluation it is believed that it was possible to obtain a sufficient sample to assess the potential survival of archaeological deposits in the various zones.

Five trial trenches were excavated. Three factors in combination determined the location of the trial trenches: the postulated position of

bailey defences and important internal features; the position and probable extent of works associated with the proposed development likely to cause significant ground disturbance; and the position of modern buildings, features and surfaces preventing or limiting access. In each trench the topsoil or other overburden was removed with a JCB, the initial width in each case being 1.6m (the width of the machine bucket); further deposits were generally removed by hand to the surface of the natural sub-soil and any features revealed fully excavated or sampled. The features and contexts were recorded using proforma record cards and a drawn and photographic record maintained.

#### Trench 1 (Figs 2 & 3)

Trench 1 was situated at the northern end of Zone 1, a grassed area on the north western side of the farm yard. It was positioned across a gentle, linear east-west swelling in the ground surface which it was thought might possibly represent the much eroded remnant of the former northern defensive bank of a bailey. The trench was 20m long, extending a little to the north of the supposed bank, in order to test for the existence of a ditch, and about 10m to the south of the supposed bank in order to pick up any traces of former buildings ranged along the rear of the bank (a characteristic location for buildings on analogy with other castle sites). In the event no evidence was revealed which suggested that the linear swelling was the remains of an ancient rampart or any other significant construction; it may be a wholly natural feature (Fig 3, Trench 1 Sections).

The surface of the natural subsoil, a mottled brown/orange gravel, was encountered at a depth of 0.5m - 0.7m below the modern ground level. Apart from the turf line, the top soil (a mid-brown clayey loam with few pebbles) displayed an undifferentiated profile. From it was recovered a small but varied assemblage of artefacts, primarily 18th-20th century potsherds and other material of similar date but including two sherds of Roman pottery, one a large rim sherd of a Severn Valley Ware storage jar.

A number of features were cut into the surface of the gravel subsoil. At the north end of the trench was a shallow, vertical-sided rubbish pit

(F4), containing, in addition to 17th-19th century potsherds and clay pipe fragments, considerable quantities of building materials such as brick, mortar and sandstone fragments, and lenses of dark silty soil suggestive of decayed organic material. South of the rubbish pit was a shallow V-shaped ditch (F5) on a roughly east west alignment, interpreted as a boundary ditch. The fill of the ditch was practically indistinguishable from the topsoil and no dating evidence was obtained. With the exception of the indistinct traces of a possible gully (unexcavated) at the south end of the trench, the other features encountered appeared to be natural in origin and included a possible tree root pit (F7) and a comparatively deep but irregular linear feature (F6), perhaps of glacial origin.

#### Test Pit (Figs 2 & 3)

A test pit (4.5m long x 1.6m wide x 1.3m deep) was excavated by machine adjacent to Trench 1 with the purpose of confirming the identification of the orange/brown gravel as the undisturbed natural subsoil. A layer of more densely packed gravel towards the bottom of the test pit was suggestive of banding within the naturally deposited gravel.

#### Trench 2 (Figs 2 & 3)

Trench 2 (8m long) was also located within Zone 1 and positioned with reference to the suggested line of a possible western boundary to a bailey, represented by the lane leading to the church. There was a greater depth of topsoil here (c.0.9m) than to the north, but no archaeological features were encountered. The trench was carried down into the gravel subsoil to a maximum depth of 1.4m below the present ground surface, again to establish the nature of the soil profile but also to check whether any archaeological features could be discerned in section which were not visible in plan. The only features revealed were disturbances probably attributable to root action.

#### Trench 3 (Fig 2)

Trench 3 (3m long) was located in the closest practical position to the former causeway across the moat. The usual mid-brown clayey loam topsoil directly overlay the gravel subsoil, which was contacted at a depth of 0.95m below the



# EARDISLAND : Trench Plans and Sections

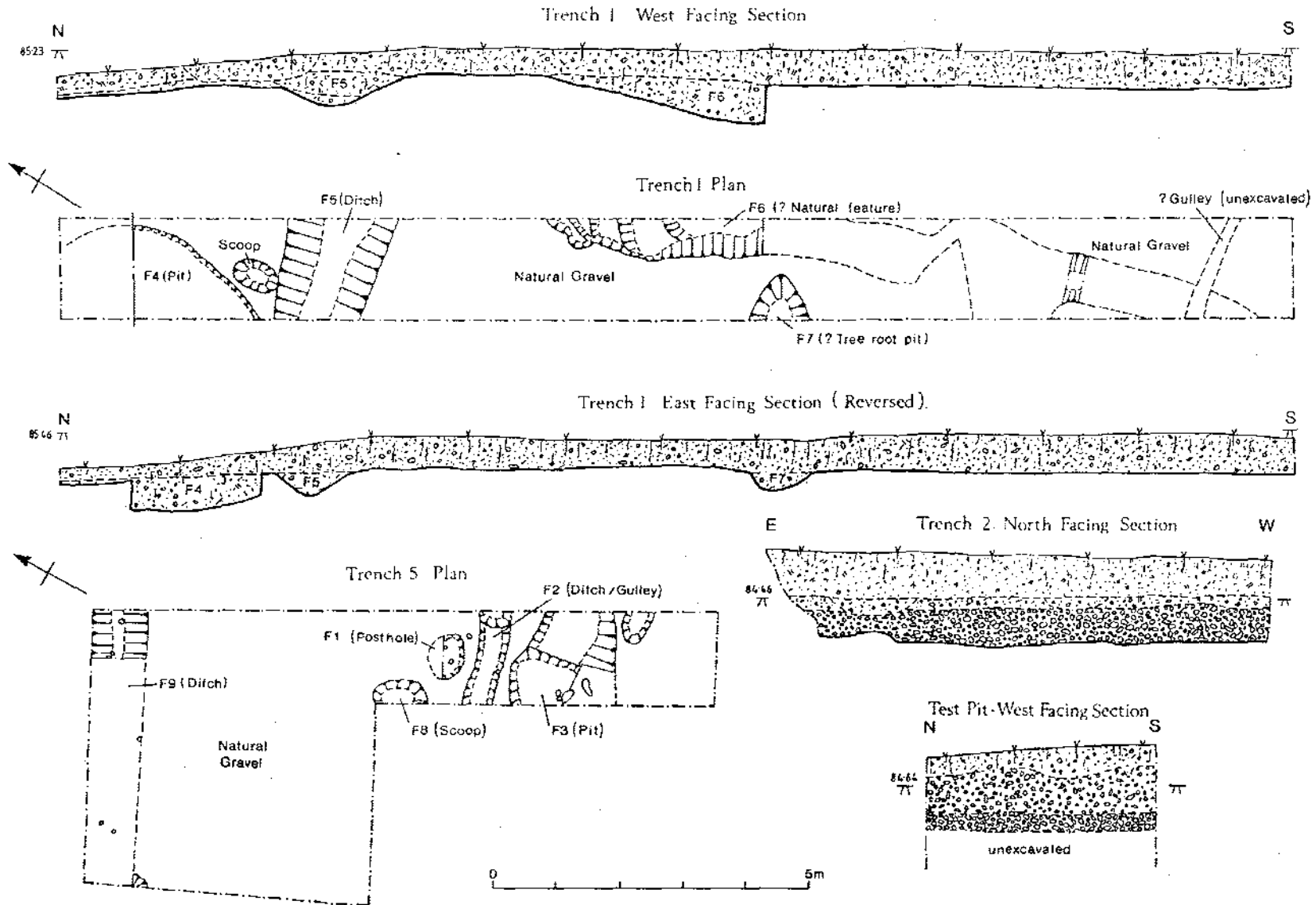


Fig.3

present ground surface. No features other than modern service trenches were detected either in plan or section and no finds were recovered.

#### Trench 4 (Fig 2)

Trench 4 (9m long) was located in Zone 5, a grassed area which, due both to its proximity to the motte and the apparent absence of recent ground disturbance, was held prior to excavation to be of relatively high archaeological potential. In the event, despite careful cleaning, the trench was archaeologically sterile, the undisturbed surface of the gravel subsoil underlying a 0.85m depth of undifferentiated topsoil. Two small sherds of iron-rich pottery with green speckled glaze – possibly Late Medieval in date – were recovered from the topsoil in addition to two post-Medieval sherds.

#### Trench 5 (Figs 2 & 3)

Trench 5 was located in Zone 2, an area which has been recently levelled and laid with hardcore, and is now used for hay storage (the L-shaped bank shown on Fig. 2 is a result of the levelling operation). The trench was positioned in the south-east corner of the area which, lying adjacent to a public footpath leading to the church, remains grass-covered and relatively undisturbed. The trench was initially 4.5m long and 1.6m wide, the surface of the gravel subsoil being encountered 0.5m - 0.6m below the modern ground surface. A variety of features cut into the subsoil, some of which were probably tree root disturbances (local information testified to the presence of trees here in the recent past), but they included a well-defined posthole (F1), 0.5m – 0.75m in diameter with a surviving depth of 0.25m; a round-profiled ditch or gully (F2), 0.5m wide and 0.2m deep, from which a single abraded sherd of Roman coarse pottery was recovered; and an irregular pit (F3), c.0.3m in depth, containing 5 sherds of medieval cooking pot in addition to a sherd of 18th-century 'china' and a clay-pipe stem.

In an effort to determine whether these features, and in particular the post hole, formed part of a larger group, an extension 4.7m N-S x 4.3m E-W was opened at the north end of the trench. This involved cutting through a hardcore surface 0.15m - 0.20m thick. The undisturbed gravel subsoil was carefully cleaned but only one

additional feature was identified, a steep-sided V-shaped ditch (F9) with a depth of 0.5m and an estimated width of 1.3m, interpreted as a boundary ditch. The only finds recovered from the small excavated sample of the ditch were two sherds of medieval cooking pot.

#### **Summary and Conclusions**

Of the five trenches excavated only two, Trenches 1 and 5, revealed features of potential archaeological significance cut into the surface of the gravel subsoil: no stratified archaeological deposits survived above the level of the subsoil. The quantity of finds recovered from the excavated features was too small to enable the features to be dated with any confidence; all of the small amount of stratified medieval cooking pot (which cannot be more precisely identified than that) could be residual, and the single, very abraded, stratified Roman sherd is almost certainly so. The two pits, F3 and F4, are post-medieval in date, other features, such as F6 and F7, are probably either recent tree root pits or of otherwise natural formation (Zone 1 was an orchard until recent years). When these features have been 'screened out' only four features remain which are possibly of medieval origin: the two V-shaped (?) boundary ditches (F5 and F9), the ditch or gully (F2) and the post-hole (F1). Features of this nature would be appropriate to a castle bailey but would also be appropriate to innumerable other contexts.

In short, from an archaeological point-of-view, the results were inconclusive. The largely negative results of the evaluation cannot be taken as clear evidence of the absence of a bailey (or other settlement form), both because of the small size of the excavated sample and because consideration of the character of the remains which might be anticipated (see above) suggests that these, even if well preserved, might be sparse and insubstantial. Equally, no evidence emerged from the evaluation which might add weight to the suggestion that a bailey formerly existed.

The evaluation did, however, provide useful information on the potential survival of archaeological deposits. First, it would appear that any archaeological deposits will survive only in the form of features cutting into the

surface of the gravel subsoil; there is no indication of the survival of stratified archaeological deposits above the level of the subsoil. It follows that any building works which do not involve the disturbance of the subsoil should present no threat to the archaeology. Second, the excavation of the trial trenches enables a rough estimate of the depth of the gravel subsoil, and therefore the potential for survival of any archaeological remains, to be made for each of the six zones into which the proposed development area has been divided:

Zone 1 (Grass):

the depth of the subsoil surface varies from a minimum of 0.3m at the north end of the zone (but more generally 0.5m) to a maximum of 0.9m along the south-west side.

Zone 2 (hardcore):

depth of subsoil surface c.0.4m - 0.6m below present ground level. Despite levelling and the laying of hardcore (c.0.2m thick) the subsoil surface would appear to be largely undisturbed.

Zone 3 (hardcore):

although this area was not evaluated it is reasonable to project the circumstances of Zone 2 and assume that the surface of the subsoil will be undisturbed across much of the area.

Zone 4 (concrete):

again not evaluated, but the results from the excavation of Trench 3 suggest that the surface of the subsoil may lie as much as 0.95m below the present ground level and may therefore survive beneath the recent surface of concrete founded on hardcore.

Zone 5 (grass):

depth of undisturbed subsoil surface c.0.85m below present ground level.

Zone 6 (concrete):

not evaluated, but depth of subsoil surface may be assumed to be similar to Zone 5, and therefore survival beneath the concrete base of the silage mounds is possible.

To conclude, the trial trenches suggest that the construction of the modern farm buildings and surfaces has resulted in less disturbance to the surface of the natural gravel subsoil, and therefore to any potential archaeological deposits, than was anticipated prior to the evaluation.

## **Recommendations**

In the writer's view, insufficient evidence of the existence of significant archaeological deposits within the proposed development area has emerged from the evaluation to present a constraint on the proposed development on the grounds of a threat to the preservation of below-ground archaeological remains. However, given the potential for the survival of archaeological remains which the evaluation has demonstrated, it is recommended that where works are to be carried out which will involve extensive disturbance of gravel subsoil an opportunity be provided for archaeological monitoring of such works. It is further recommended that the design of the development should take account of the archaeological potential and ensure that such disturbance is minimised.

## **Acknowledgements**

The trial excavations were supervised by Jon Sterenberg and carried out by Laurence Jones and Quentin Hutchinson. Simon Woodiwiss of Hereford and Worcester County Archaeology Section advised on the conduct of the evaluation and kindly made available the relevant data from the County Sites and Monuments Record. Victoria Buteux advised on the identification of the pottery. The figures were drawn by Sonia Hodges and the report produced by Liz Hooper. Iain Ferris and Peter Leach read and commented on a draft of the text.

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