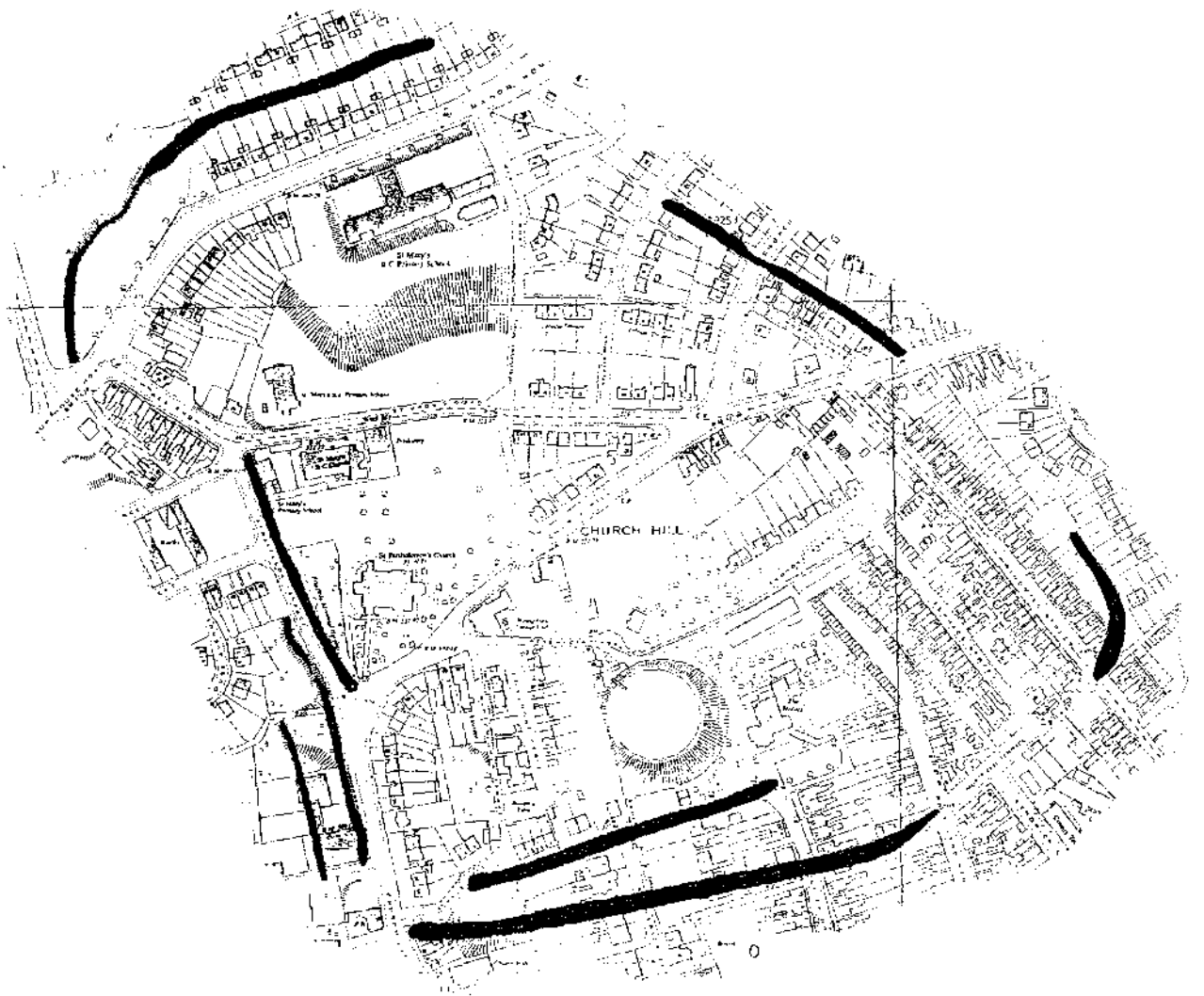


*Birmingham University
Field Archaeology Unit*

CHURCH HILL, WEDNESBURY

An Archaeological Evaluation



B.U.F.A.U.



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Introduction

The purpose of the archaeological evaluation reported on here was to determine, by means of trial trenching, the nature, quality of preservation and date of the apparent remains of ancient earthworks on Church Hill, Wednesbury, West Midlands (SO 987 954). Antiquarian accounts indicate that the earthworks were once more prominent and extensive than the fragmentary remains which survive today (Fig. 1). These earthworks have been variously interpreted as the remains of an Iron Age hillfort, Middle Saxon military camp or Late Saxon *burh* (fortified settlement).

The evaluation was commissioned by Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council and carried out in February 1990 by Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit.

The Site and its Setting

Today, the town of Wednesbury forms part of the urban sprawl of the West Midlands conurbation, but for most of its history Wednesbury was essentially an agricultural settlement, with mining and industry only becoming progressively more important from the 16th century, and still taking place in a largely rural context until the 19th century. It is situated on the South Staffordshire Plateau between two major headstreams of the River Tame and dominated by Church Hill (or Wednesbury Hill), one of a number of hills on the plateau which provided a focus for early settlement. Church Hill, on the crest of which is situated the parish church of St. Bartholomew from which the hill takes its name, is capped with glacial drift and rises to a height of 109m above sea level, commanding extensive views over the surrounding plateau.

Pre-Norman Wednesbury:

placename and documentary evidence

The origins of Wednesbury are obscure, and have been the subject of much debate and speculation. The first unequivocal documentary reference to a settlement at Wednesbury appears in the Domesday Book, when it was an agricultural village with an estimated population of about a hundred, more substantial than Bilston, West Bromwich or Birmingham but smaller than Dudley or Wolverhampton (Ede 1962, 14-21). However, the name 'Wednesbury' (*Wadnesberie* in Domesday) itself provides important, if ambiguous, clues to the earlier history of the site. The name can be read 'Woden's burh', the second element meaning in Old English 'defended place', a term which can encompass anything from 'prehistoric hillfort' to 'defended manor-house' to (in Late Old English) 'town'. Where the term is found, as it is at Wednesbury, in association with a suitable site for a prehistoric hill-top fortification, the balance of probability is in favour of the meaning 'hillfort' (Gelling 1978, 143). Moreover, at Wednesbury the association with Woden, who was linked in the Anglo-Saxon imagination with earthworks (Gelling 1978, 147), strengthens the case, and further suggests the former existence of an Anglo-Saxon pagan shrine on the hilltop, possibly succeeded by the church of St. Bartholomew (Gelling 1978, 161). However, despite the possibility of a Saxon origin, the earliest documentary reference to a church at Wednesbury occurs in the early 13th-century, a date consistent with the earliest medieval work which can be identified in the now mainly 19th-century building (Ede 1962, 54; Pevsner 1974, 298-9).

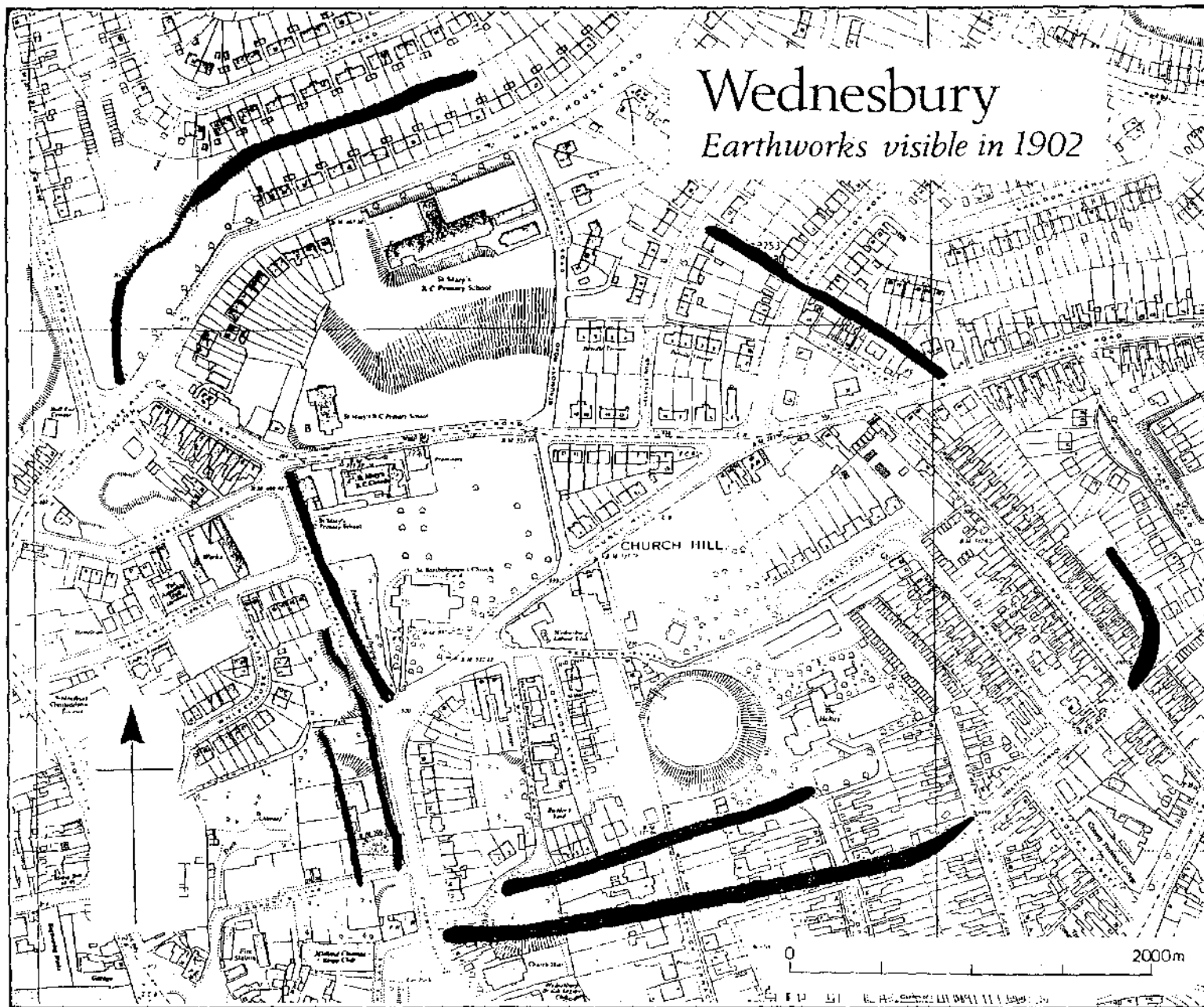


Fig.1

Beyond the inference from the placename that Wednesbury was the probable site of a prehistoric hillfort later succeeded by an Anglo-Saxon pagan shrine dedicated to Woden, nothing more of substance can be inferred about pre-Norman Wednesbury from documentary sources. The theory that Wednesbury was a military camp built by the great West Saxon king Ceawlin rests ultimately on the identification of Wednesbury with the site of the battle of *Wodnesbeorg*, recorded in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle under the year 592; this identification has been dismissed by modern philological authorities (Ede 1962, 6-8). Equally unacceptable on philological grounds is the identification of Wednesbury with *Weardbyrig*, a burh founded by Ethelfleda in 915 and listed in the Mercian Register, a series of annals incorporated in some versions of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle (Ede 1962, 10-14). This erroneous identification appears to have been first made by the famous antiquary Camden (1551-1623), has been followed by many authorities since and is still popularly believed today. Indeed, Ethelfleda finds herself in the more legitimate company of Woden in providing Wednesbury with modern street names.

While the identification of Wednesbury with *Wodnesbeorg* or *Weardbyrig* cannot be accepted, it does not follow that the idea that Wednesbury was the site of an Anglo-Saxon fortification must be dismissed. Ede (1962, 8-10), for example, speculates that Wednesbury may have originated as a military camp of the pagan Mercian king Penda (c.632-54), who indeed claimed divine descent from Woden. Furthermore, Iron Age hillfort and Anglo-Saxon camp are not mutually exclusive interpretations of defensive earthworks: there are several documented examples of the reuse of prehistoric fortifications in the Anglo-Saxon period.

The Earthworks

Apparently the first published mention of earthworks on Church Hill appeared in *the Topographer* in 1780, where it was stated: "Around the churchyard is a large graff in which the vestiges of the ancient fort may be distinctly traced" (quoted in Hackwood 1920, 15). In his *History and Antiquities of Staffordshire* (1798) Stebbing Shaw, who followed the erroneous

tradition that Wednesbury was fortified by Ethelfleda, makes a very similar statement, asserting that some remains of the fortress were still visible "in a large graff round the Churchyard hill" (Stebbing Shaw 1798, II, 83). The similarity of the phrasing in these two accounts suggests a single source rather than two, independent, first-hand observations. These statements are repeated in later accounts of Wednesbury, although by 1813 it was reported that "no part of that antiquity now remains, except a few traces of its foundations", the local historian Hackwood (1920, 15) attributing the apparent obliteration of part of the "graff" to the erection of houses (now demolished) on the east side of Ethelfleda Terrace.

In 1902 Hackwood published a sketch plan of the earthworks on Church Hill (the lines of the ramparts indicated by Hackwood are shown on Fig. 1 of this report, superimposed on a modern street plan) (Hackwood 1902). In 1920 he reproduced the plan again, accompanied by a somewhat fuller description. Nevertheless, despite stating that although "all evidences of piled-up ramparts have disappeared" there remains "what are palpably the artificial carvings of a naturally curved and sloping hillside" (Hackwood 1920, 13), it is difficult to assess to what degree Hackwood's plan is based on actual observation rather than on vague reports or supposition. For example, although he indicates the line of the ramparts on all four sides of the hill he states that "only two of its four sides are now in any way traceable", these being portions of the western and southern escarpments.

Hackwood's plan and description of the earthworks have to be taken in the general context of his writings, where elaborate and colourful historical statements are built on the slightest of evidence, frequently of the most dubious kind, and sometimes on no evidence whatsoever. It would be entirely consistent with Hackwood's method if parts of his plan of the earthworks were based rather on what he felt should be there than what he could actually see or had firm evidence for. Furthermore, the fact that the earthworks are described as taking the form of "artificial carvings" rather than "piled-up ramparts" brings into question whether the earthworks are the remains of ramparts at all. The effect of "artificial

Wednesbury 1990

Location of trenches A;B

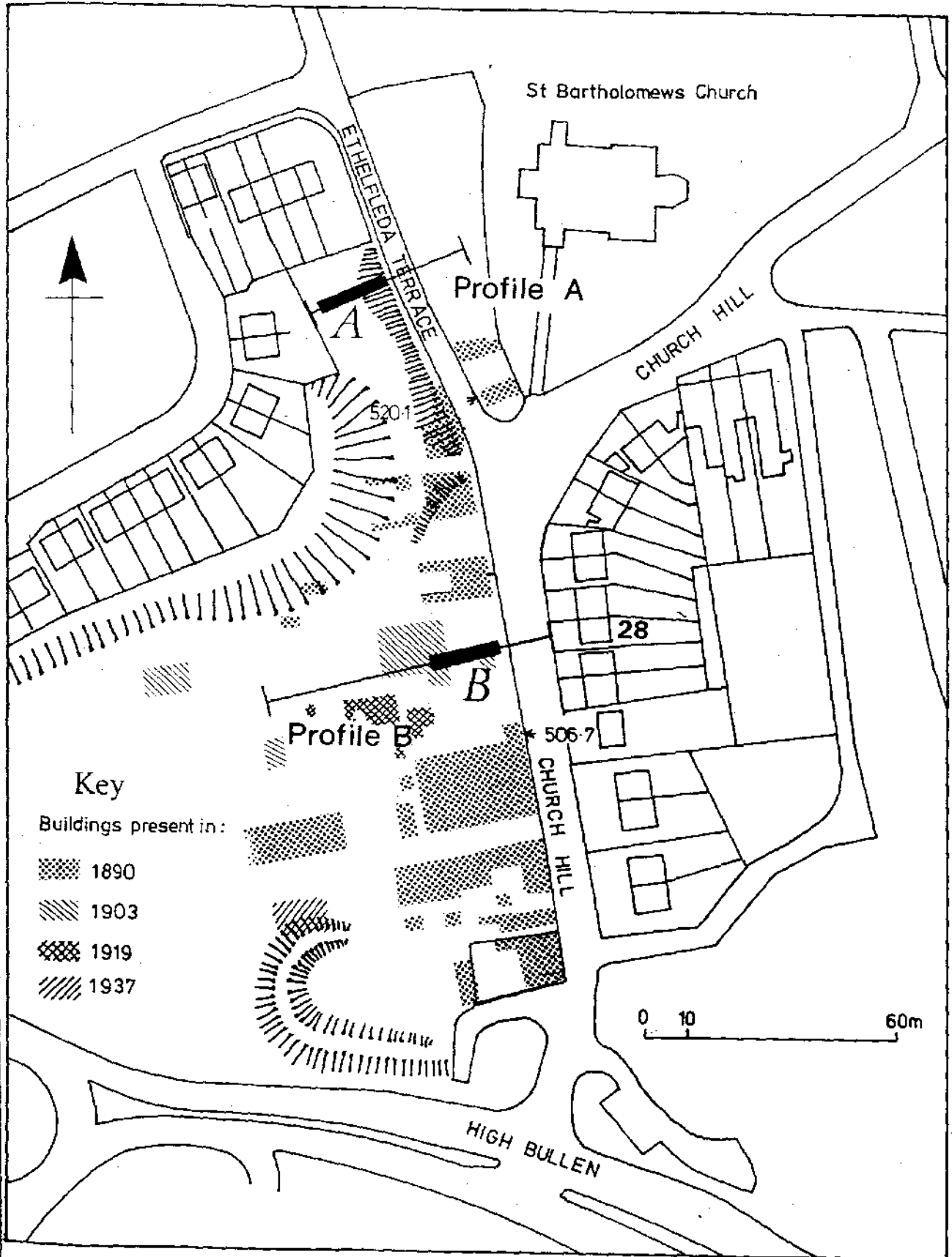


Fig2

carvings" might be caused by the down-slope erosion of ramparts and consequent infilling of an external ditch, although the construction of ramparts, without an external ditch, by means of creating steep artificial scarps on a naturally defensive slope, is an alternative technique of fortification, found both in the prehistoric period and later. However, a similar effect is created by terracing a hillside to create flat platforms for the construction of buildings, roads or even for agriculture (when the effect is gradually enhanced by ploughing). The effect might also be entirely natural.

Parts of the supposed defensive circuit are visible today, for example at Moatfield Terrace on the southern side of the hill or along Manor House Road on the north side, although the observed position today does not always correspond exactly with the position shown by Hackwood (Fig. 1). The apparently best preserved and most accessible fragment of the supposed rampart is situated on the west side of Ethelfleda Terrace directly opposite the church. It was this stretch of the earthworks that was selected for trial excavation.

Trial Trench A (Figs 2 and 3)

Trial Trench A, 15m long by 3m wide, was excavated into a steeply sloping bank running down from Ethelfleda Terrace to the back-garden wall of modern houses on Whitehouse Avenue. The height of the drop from Ethelfleda Terrace to the bottom of the bank is c.3.5m. At the foot of the bank there is a vertical drop of c.2.5m, retained by a terrace wall, into the gardens below. The trench was excavated to a maximum depth of 3m, the work being carried out entirely by JCB due to the instability of the material of which the bank was composed, and the top half of the trench was backfilled almost immediately for safety reasons.

The excavation showed the bank to be composed of recent dumped deposits, including sands and gravels, loam and building debris, with much ash and charcoal. Fragments of brick wall indicated the former presence of post-Medieval structures. At the west end of the trench, at the foot of the bank, a layer of sand and gravel was encountered at a depth of 2-3m below the modern ground surface; this may have been

the surface of the natural subsoil but detailed investigation was not possible.

Trial Trench B (Figs 2 and 3)

Trial Trench B was located some 90m to the south of Trial Trench A, also on the west side of the road (here Church Hill). Hackwood's plan clearly shows that the supposed rampart investigated in Trial Trench A continued along this line, although there is now no trace of any earthworks. The trench was c.15m long by 3m wide and was again excavated entirely by machine due to the instability of the deposits, work being stopped at a maximum depth of 3.5-4m for safety and practical reasons. The street frontage here had in the past been heavily cellared and the entire profile comprised modern dumped deposits - rubble, clay, sand and gravel, loam, charcoal and general debris - with modern artefacts, including fragments of linoleum and the remains of a pram, occurring at the maximum depth of excavation.

Conclusions

The trial excavations showed the supposed rampart on the west side of Ethelfleda Terrace to be a modern bank, while any rampart which may have survived further to the south will probably have been completely erased by building activity followed by demolition, levelling and dumping along the road frontage and for a considerable distance behind. Although this latter area is now an open grassed park it was formerly heavily built up, the 1890, 1903, 1919 and 1937 Ordnance Survey Maps showing it to have been occupied by schools and a range of other buildings (see Fig. 2). Both local informants and Hackwood (1920, 14) testify that the school playground was many feet below the level of the road, and it seems probable that the bank interpreted by Hackwood as a rampart was, in fact, the result of terracing into the natural slope to provide a level platform for building. When these buildings were demolished the whole area was landscaped to provide the present gentle slope, the bank being eradicated by dumping.

The fact that the supposed ramparts on the western side of Church Hill can be shown to be almost certainly the result of recent terracing must throw the whole of Hackwood's plan of the

Wednesbury 1990 Profiles of trench A;B

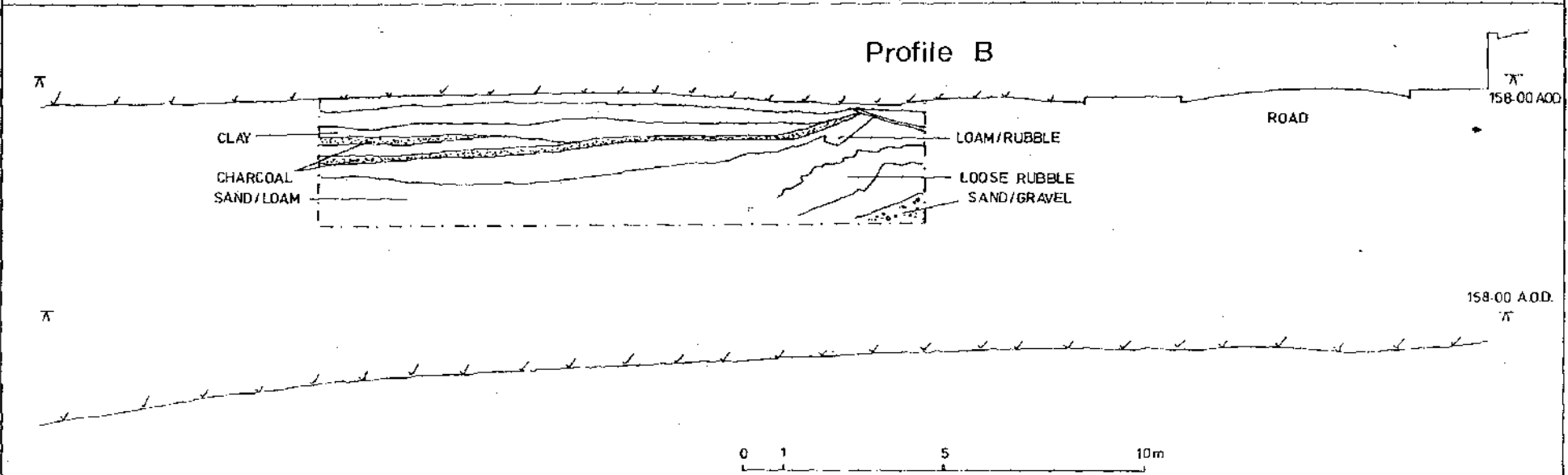
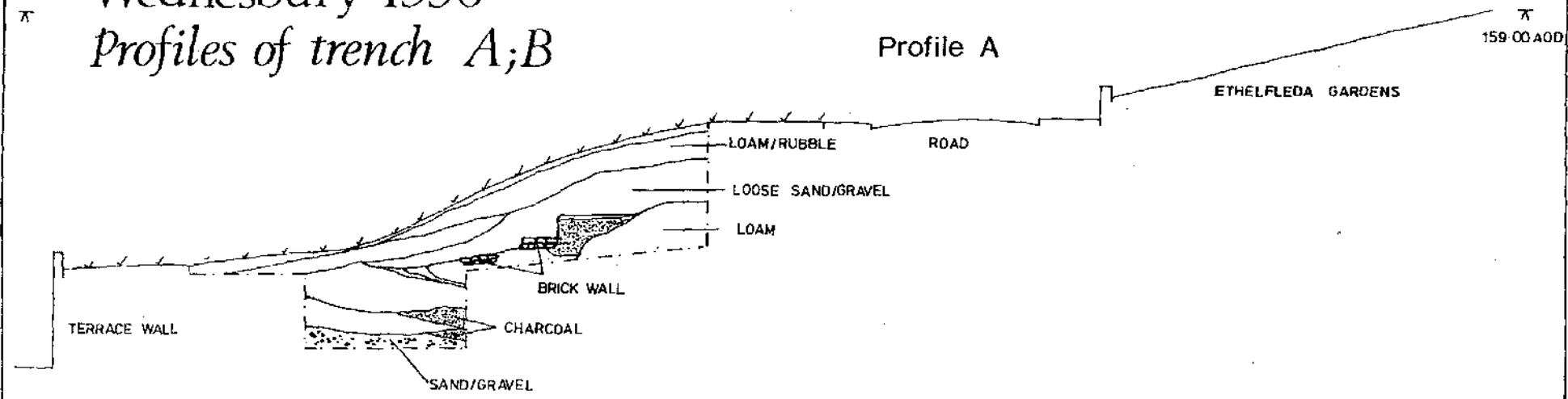


Fig 3

'ancient earthworks' into doubt; many other stretches of supposed rampart could be similarly explained, and the fact that together they appear to form a circuit around the hill may well be no more than a consequence of the natural topography. Nevertheless, Church Hill remains a very suitable location for a hillfort and the placename evidence is strong. While it may be that no physical traces of a hillfort can now be confidently identified, this must not be taken as firm evidence that no such hillfort once existed.

Acknowledgements

The work was supervised by Jon Sterenberg and carried out by Laurence Jones and Quentin Hutchinson. Dr Mike Hodder of Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council provided much useful advice and background information. Steve Litherland researched the topographic and geological background. The figures were drawn by Jon Sterenberg and Sonia Hodges. Peter Leach and Iain Ferris read and commented upon a draft of a text and the report was produced by Liz Hooper.

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