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FIELD ARCHAEOLOGY UNIT

An Archaeological Evaluation At Castle Old Fort, Stonnall, Walsall, 1991

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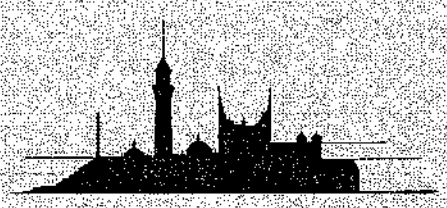

Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit

Report No. 150

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by E.G.Hughes

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1.0 Introduction

This short report outlines the results of a small archaeological evaluation carried out prior to the submission of an application for Scheduled Monument Consent to construct a private swimming pool within the scheduled area of Castle Old Fort, Stonnall (NGR SK 062 033). The work was commissioned by Mr. K.D.Jones and undertaken by Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit on the 13th and 14th of March 1991.

2.0 The Site

Castle Old Fort is a medium-sized hillfort, presumed to be of late prehistoric date. It is situated on Castle Hill, 190m AOD, on the northern outskirts of the West Midlands connurbation, approximately 8km to the northeast of Walsall town centre (Fig. 1a).

The hillfort is egg-shaped in plan, with the broader end to the north (VCH 1908, 341). The earthworks consist of a bank and ditch, which encircle the top of the hill, enclosing an area of approximately 1.5 hectares (Fig. 1b). The site is listed by Hogg (1979, 155) as a univallate enclosure. However, possible indications of a second ditch on the northeast and southeast sides suggest that the fort is bivallate (West Midlands Sites and Monuments Record, Site No. 2613). Traces of an outer defence have also been noted on the RCHM survey.

Birchwood now covers much of the hill, and a timber-framed house occupies the northeast corner of the fort. This was originally built in Wales, and was rebuilt in its present location during the 1920s.

The proposed development will involve the construction of a swimming pool close to the southwest corner of the house, and the provisional plans include the landscaping of an area approximately 10m by 15m (Fig. 2b). This will be enclosed by a wall, which will also act as a revetment for the terraced area. The greatest ground disturbance will be created by the excavation of the swimming pool itself, which will measure approximately 10 metres by 5m. On the east side of the area the construction of the pool will involve a cut approximately 2m deep.

3.0 The Evaluation

3.1 Objective and Method

The objective of the evaluation was to assess the archaeological potential of the area and to determine the extent to which this would be affected by the proposed development. Prior to excavation, there was a suggestion that the area of the proposed swimming pool was on the edge of an artificial platform created prior to the construction of the house.

The original intention was to excavate a single L-shaped trench corresponding to the provisional position of the eastern and southern sides of the proposed swimming pool. The eastern side of this trench would provide information relating to the area likely to be most affected by the cut for the swimming pool and the southern side would provide an opportunity for identifying the original ground profile. In the event the shape of the trench was slightly modified in order to avoid a tree in the southeast corner of the area (Fig. 2a).

The total length of the excavated trench measured 15m, with a width of 0.8m. It was excavated partly by machine and partly by hand.

3.2 Results

A layer of fine red-brown sand (1004) was contacted 0.3m below the present ground surface. Its sterile and homogenous appearance indicated that it represented the natural subsoil. A sondage 1.8m deep, and approximately corresponding to the expected depth of the cut for the swimming pool, was excavated through this material at the northern end of the trench (Fig. 2). Little variation was observed in the character of this material, apart from an occasional thin band of lighter-coloured sand. The sand was overlain by a thin layer of gravel and sand (1003), 0.2m thick. This material filled two shallow cuts in the underlying sand at the northern end of the trench. One of these could only be observed in the extreme northern section of the trench. The cut to the south (F1) could be identified as a linear feature with a gentle U-shaped profile, 2.6m wide and 0.7m deep, orientated at right angles to the trench and running downslope. The sterile nature of the gravel and sand fill (1002) gave no clue as to its purpose. However, it seems likely that such 'channels' may have been caused by either artificial or natural drainage.

No other features were observed cutting the gravel and sand (1003) apart from a shallow scoop (F2), likely to have been caused by natural vegetation.

The uppermost layer consisted of a thin deposit of humic soil and leaf-mould, 0.15m thick (1001).

3.3 Discussion

It seems likely that natural erosion of this steep slope has severely truncated the original ground surface and with it any archaeological features that may have existed. It is highly likely that the suggested drainage channels observed during the evaluation were formed as a result of this natural erosion.

4.0 Recommendations

The proximity of the natural subsoil to the present ground surface and its apparent truncation by natural erosion suggests that this area has very little archaeological potential. However, it is just possible that truncated archaeological features, such as pits, might have survived elsewhere within the area of the proposed development and that the suggested drainage channels may have been artificially constructed. It is recommended that a watching brief is appropriate to oversee the removal of the uppermost humic level (1001) within the area of the proposed landscaping, allowing time for the recording of any features that might be identified.

5.0 Acknowledgments

The evaluation was carried out by Gwilym Hughes, Ed Newton and Sally Finter. Caroline Gait prepared the illustrations and Simon Buteux edited the report, which was produced by Liz Hooper. Many thanks to Mr K.D. Jones and Neil Lang for their assistance and advice.

Gwilym Hughes

6.0 References

Hogg A.H.A. 1979 *British Hillforts:An Index* B.A.R. British Series 62

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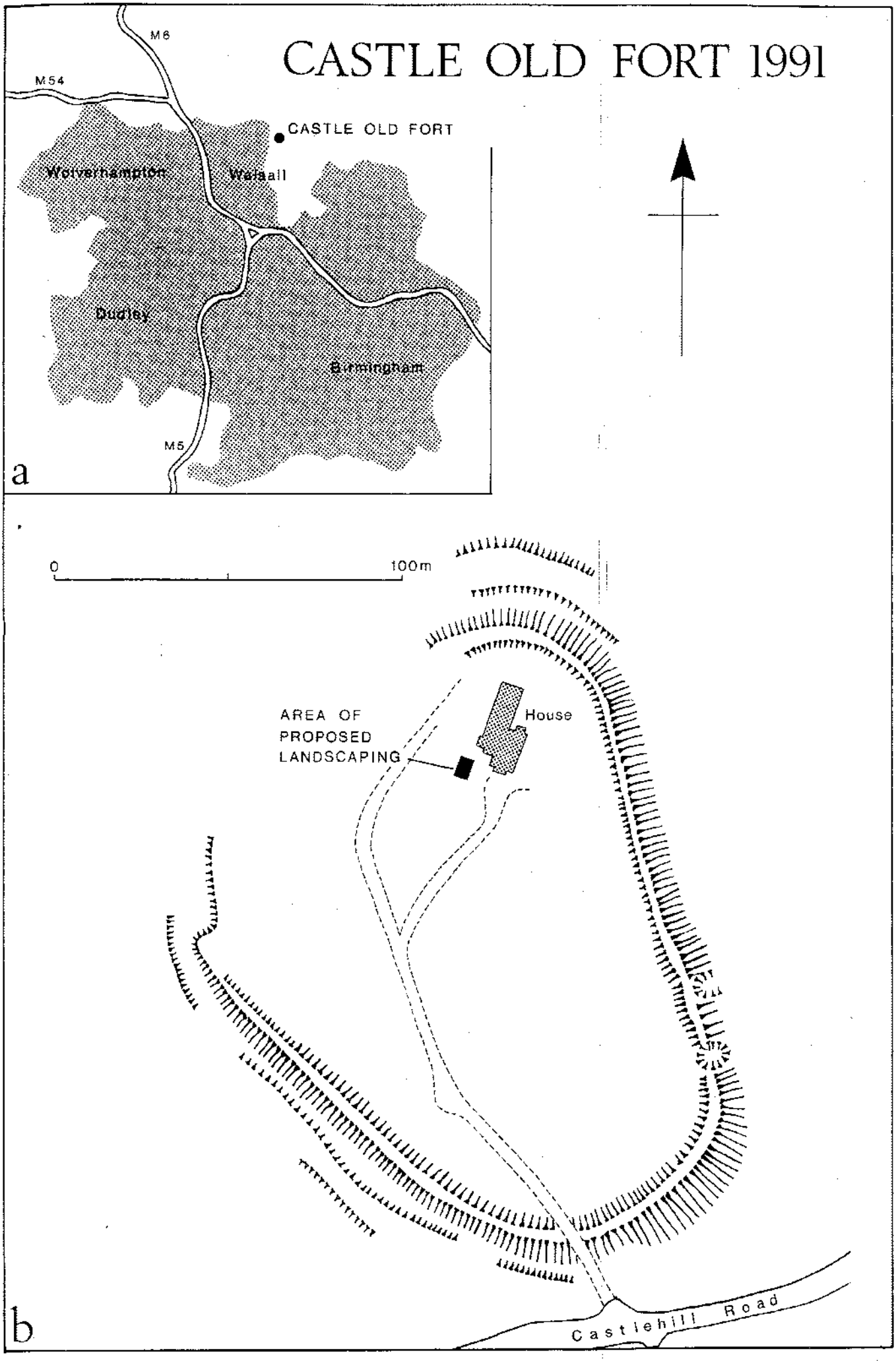
CASTLE OLD FORT 1991
M6
M54
CASTLE OLD FORT
Wolverhampton
Walsall
Dudley
Birmingham
M5
a
0
100m
AREA OF
PROPOSED
LANDSCAPING
House
Castlehill Road
b

FIG 1

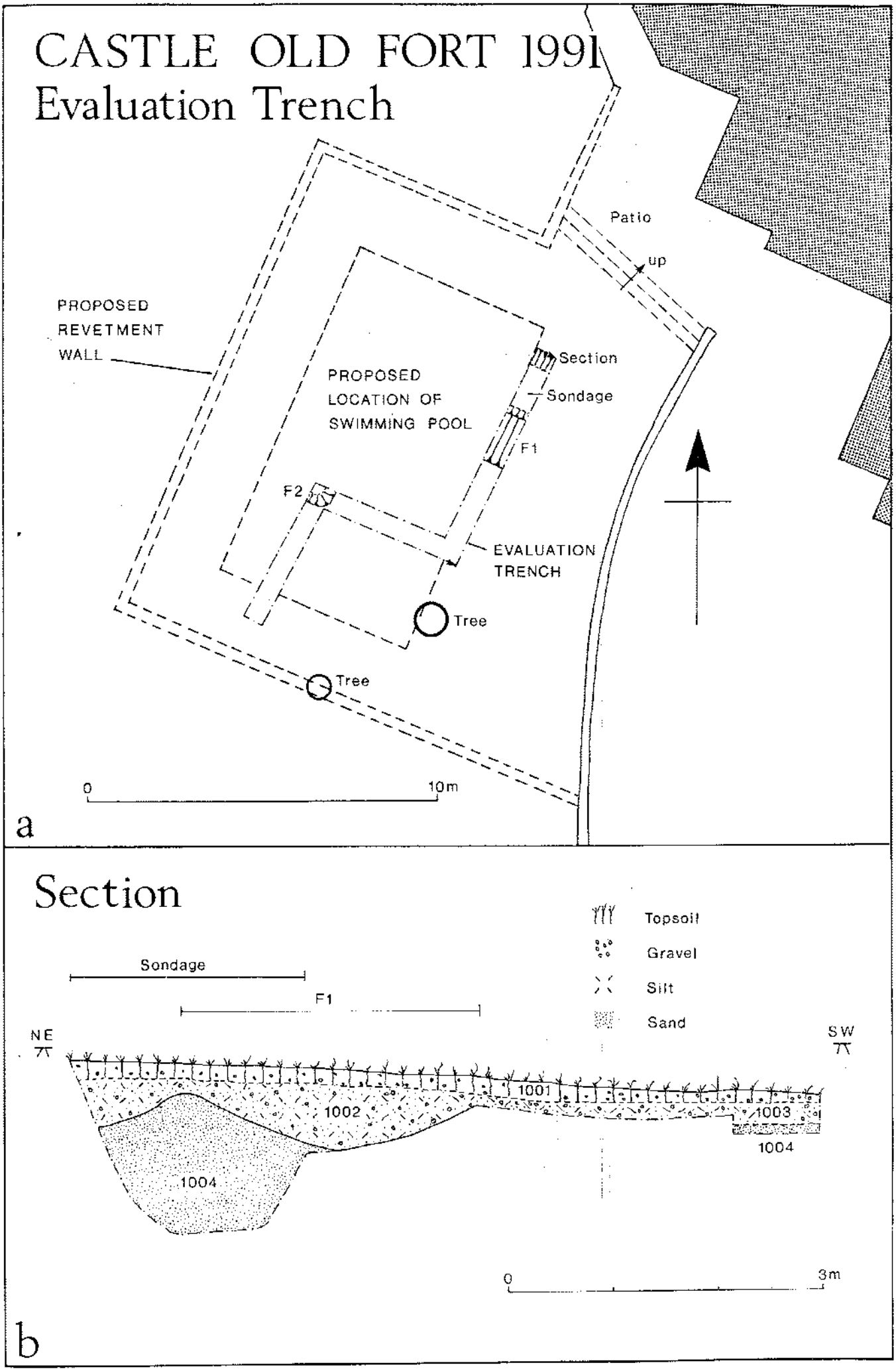
CASTLE OLD FORT 1991
Evaluation Trench
Patio
up
PROPOSED
REVETMENT
WALL
PROPOSED
LOCATION OF
SWIMMING POOL
Section
Sondage
F1
F2
EVALUATION
TRENCH
Tree
Tree
0
10m
a
Section
Topsoil
Gravel
Silt
Sand
Sondage
F1
NE
SW
1001
1002
1003
1004
1004
0
3m
b

FIG 2