

Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit

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**OAK HOUSE, WEST BROMWICH
A Further Archaeological Evaluation 1991**

by
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Introduction

This report describes the results of an archaeological evaluation carried out in advance of the development of an area adjacent to Oak House, West Bromwich (N.G.R. SO 997908), for use as a visitor centre. The evaluation was commissioned by Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council and was carried out by Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit (B.U.F.A.U.) between February 25th and March 4th, 1991. The development will consist of the renovation of two barns, to the west of the house, formerly part of the Oak House farm complex; the construction of a new building to the northeast of the larger barn; and landscaping to the south of the barns. The objective of the evaluation was to assess the archaeological potential of the area to be affected by the construction of the new building and its associated services. An archaeological evaluation was carried out by B.U.F.A.U. to the south of the barns in June 1990, to assess the likely effects of landscaping here (Hughes 1990).

The Site

Situated less than 1 kilometre to the southwest of West Bromwich town centre (Fig. 1a), Oak House is a timber-framed building, dating from the late 16th century with 17th-century additions. It was originally situated on the edge of Bromwich Heath, which became the site of the new town centre of West Bromwich in the early 19th century.

Map evidence indicates that at the same time as the house was restored and opened as a museum in 1898, the farm buildings to the west of the house were turned into small industrial workshops. The larger barn dates from the 19th century, and the smaller to the 17th century. The Ordnance Survey 25" map of 1938 indicates that the workshops had by that date become the site of the Reliance Joinery Works, with buildings occupying all four sides of a courtyard, with extensions added to the south side of the 19th-

century barn. A rubble mound to the northeast of the workshops consists of the landscaped debris of 18th-century houses, fronting onto Oak Road and demolished in the early 20th century. The report on the previous evaluation contains a fuller description of the history of the site (Hughes 1990).

The Evaluation

The archaeological evaluation comprised the excavation of two 10m x 2m trenches (Trenches 5 and 6) in the area of the former workshops (Fig 1b). Trenches 1-4 were excavated in the 1990 evaluation. Trench 5 was located inside the courtyard, on an approximately north-south alignment, in the area which will be affected by service trenches for the new building. Trench 6 was located to the north of the 19th-century barn, on the edge of the rubble mound, and was aligned approximately east-west (Fig. 1b), at the proposed location of the new building. The upper, most-recent, deposits were removed by machine in both trenches and the lower deposits excavated by hand.

In Trench 5 (Fig. 2), the natural boulder-clay (5004, 5007) was located approximately 1.10m beneath the surface of the courtyard (158.81m A.O.D.). This was overlain, at the northern end of the trench, by a layer of brown silty clay (5006), in turn overlain by the remnants of a badly-damaged cobbled surface, approximately 0.15m thick (5003). Above the cobbles was a layer of gravelly silt (5002), overlain by a thin layer of light brown silt (5001). Cutting the silt (5001) was a small, vertical-sided feature (F50), filled with modern brick, tile and ash (5005). At the south end of the trench, the boulder-clay (5004) was directly overlain by the gravelly silt (5002). Sealing the upper silt (5001) was a thick layer of modern debris consisting of bands of brick rubble, silt and ash (5000). Hand excavation

down to undisturbed natural throughout the trench was impossible due to waterlogging, which occurred soon after the initial machine excavation. The only finds recovered from Trench 5 consisted of 19th–20th-century pottery.

In Trench 6 (Figs. 3 and 4), the natural clay (6025) was located at a depth of 2m below the present ground surface (159.16m A.O.D.) and was overlain by a layer of yellow, charcoal-rich clay (6024) approximately 0.4m thick, into which was cut a shallow depression (F64), filled with brown silt (6026). The only find from the yellow clay (6024) was a piece of glass slag. Above the clay was a layer of red-brown silt (6021), containing three sherds of 18th–19th-century pottery, in turn overlain, in the west of the trench, by a layer of orange sand (6019) and, in the east, by a mixed deposit of dark-brown silt (6013), containing large quantities of 18th–19th-century pottery and some animal bone. Above the orange sand (6019) was a surface (F56) of cobbles (6011), whose matrix contained a few sherds of 19th–20th-century pottery.

At the west end of the trench was a stone wall-footing (F62), the top of which lay at a depth of 159.79m A.O.D. It was constructed of two courses of dressed stone blocks, the largest approximately 0.45m x 0.25m in size. This was cut into and overlain the yellow clay (6024), and possibly also cut into the red-brown silt (6021). On top of the stone wall-footing was built the east wall of a small, rectangular brick structure (F53), approximately 1m x 1.5m in area, abutted by the cobbled surface (F56). The north, south and west walls of this structure were built entirely of brick. The interior of the structure consisted of a spread of light-brown, silty material (6007), yielding sherds of 19th–20th-century pottery. Immediately to the west of F53, and continuing into the section face, was a brick surface (F61), which appeared to be part of another brick structure (F52) exposed in the east-facing section. In the south-facing section were the remains of another brick wall (F51), on the same alignment as the east wall of F53. All these walls were overlain by a deposit of tile and ash rubble (6002) containing sherds of 19th–20th-century pottery.

Cutting layers 6019 and 6021 was a steep-sided trench (F63), approximately 1m wide and

0.9m deep and filled with a compact, red clay (6020), from which several sherds of 18th–19th-century pottery were recovered, as well as a few pieces of vessel glass. Although the top of this feature lay at a lower level than the cobbled surface (F56), the cobbles appeared to respect the trench. To the east of trench F63, and cutting 6013, were two walls (F57 and F58), the earliest being a three-course brick wall (F58) aligned northeast–southwest. Running at right angles to, and cutting, F58 was a single-course wall (F57) made of large, unmortared stones (6017), approximately 0.3m x 0.2m in size. Inside the angle formed by these two walls was a deposit of mixed brick and cobbles (6016), containing a few sherds of 18th–19th-century pottery. Overlying wall F57, the cobbles F56 and the trench F63 was a layer of dark brown pebbly silt (6010). Overlying this was a series of modern levelling dumps and demolition layers (6001), up to 1m thick in places, consisting of dark brown silt mixed with brick rubble and bands of mortar and sand. Cut into this material, in the southeast corner of the trench, was a brick drain (F60). Sealing the trench was a layer of topsoil (6000), varying from 0.2m to 0.05m in thickness.

Discussion

Summary and Interpretation

The results from Trench 5 suggest that any early archaeological features that may have once been present have been destroyed by subsequent industrial activity. The layers removed by machine appear to represent a series of surfaces associated with the workshops of the 19th and 20th centuries, the only layer of any significance being the cobbled surface (F65), presumably a yard. However, since all the finds recovered from Trench 5 came from the upper rubble deposit, it was not possible to firmly date this surface.

Trench 6 showed evidence of considerable activity on the eastern side of the courtyard, much of it datable, on the basis of associated pottery, to the 18th and 19th centuries. It is not possible to assign a precise date to the stone wall F62 on the basis of such a small sample, nor on finds recovered from the contexts (6024 and possibly 6021) cut by the wall. However, the

rectangular brick structure F53, overlying the stone wall, seems rather small to require such a substantial foundation and it is likely that the stone wall represents the foundations of an earlier building, possibly on the same alignment as the 19th-century barn, which became incorporated into the brick structure at a later date.

The other walls (F57, F58) in Trench 6 are also slightly problematic in terms of dating. The brick wall F58 is clearly earlier than the stone wall F57, and may possibly be associated with the demolished 18th-century cottages that fronted onto Oak Road. The lack of mortar in the stone wall, and the wide spacing of the stones, suggests some sort of garden feature, a theory supported by the documentary evidence for ornamental gardens around Oak House during the 19th century.

The cobbled surface F56 was probably a yard surface contemporary with the brick structure F53 and the trench F63. These features, along with the brick features F51, F52 and F61 could be attributed to the industrial workshops that became established here in the 19th century. The Ordnance Survey 25" maps of 1919 and 1938 both show small buildings in the area of Trench 6, and it seems likely that they are partially represented by the brick structures in the western end of the trench.

Although there is no documentary or map evidence to suggest an earlier building in the area of Trench 6, the smaller barn on the west of the courtyard contains timbers of 17th-century date, and it is possible that a contemporary building opposite, forming part of a courtyard barn-complex, did exist. However, much of the evidence for early activity in this area may have been disturbed both by the demolition and landscaping of 18th-century houses, and by the recent industrial workshops. The eastern half of the trench in particular had been subject to heavy dumping and levelling in the 20th century.

Implications and recommendations

The evidence from Trench 5 indicates that there is little potential for surviving significant archaeology in the courtyard area, currently enclosed by the security fence. Since the service trenches proposed for this area are unlikely to be particularly deep, there is little chance of disturbing any early features, and no further archaeological work other than a watching brief would appear to be necessary here.

The excavation of Trench 6 has demonstrated the survival here of a stone wall-footing and other features, of an uncertain date, which may be part of an early farm yard building, and might be worth preserving in situ, at least until firmer dating evidence is available. As the make-up of recent deposits overlying these features has a depth of not less than 1.1m, it may be possible to limit the depth of disturbance to within this zone.

Acknowledgements

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References

- Hughes, G., *Oak House, West Bromwich: An Archaeological Evaluation* 1990
B.U.F.A.U.
- Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council,
no date *Oak House, West Bromwich: A History and Guide.*

WEST BROMWICH

Showing Location of Oak House

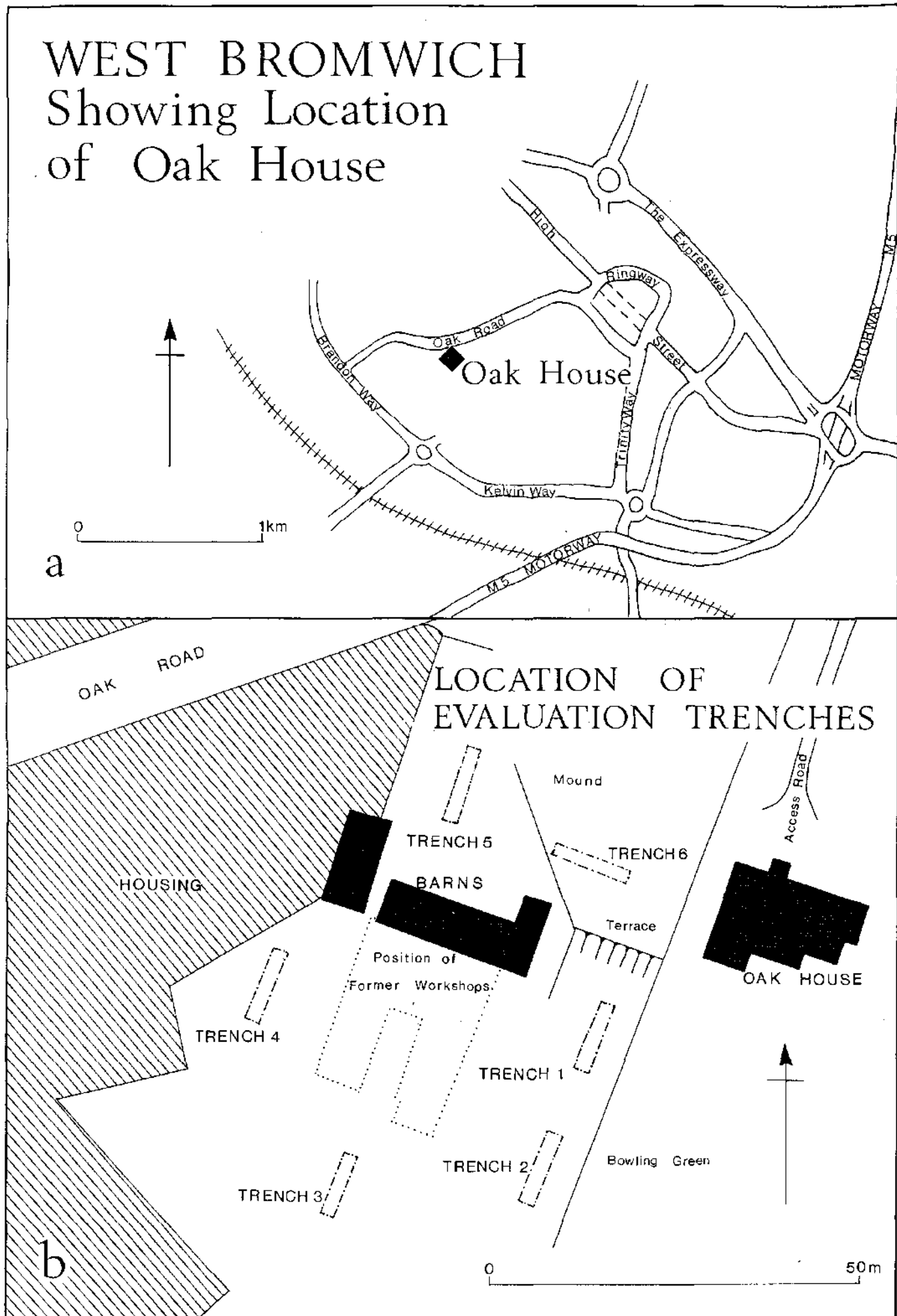
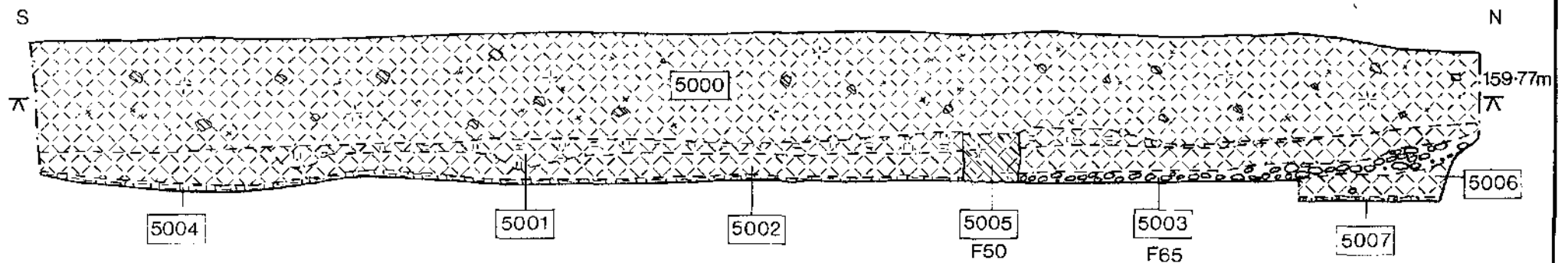


Fig 1

OAK HOUSE Trench 5

S1
West-Facing Section



Key

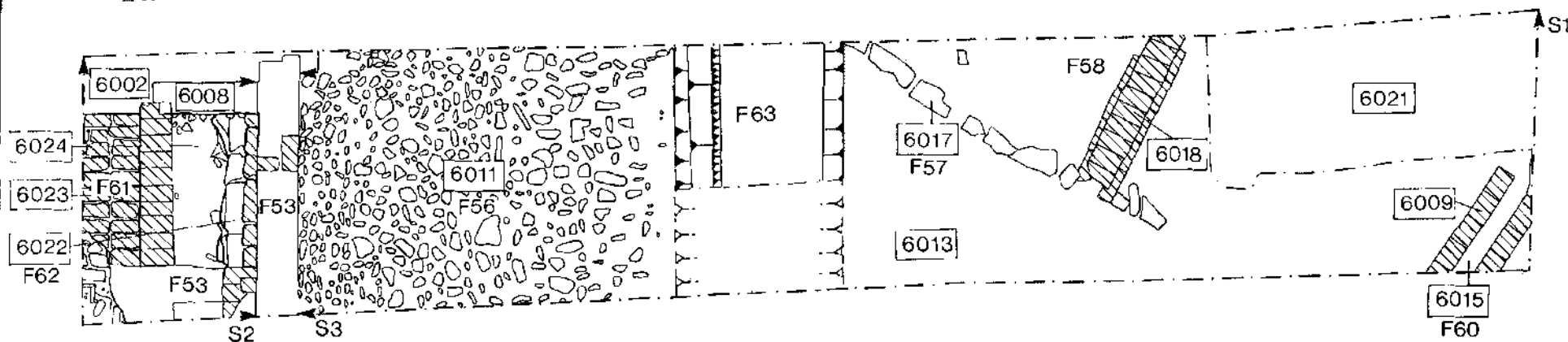
- | | | | |
|--|-------|--|--------|
| | Silt | | Mortar |
| | Clay | | Ash |
| | Brick | | |

0 2m

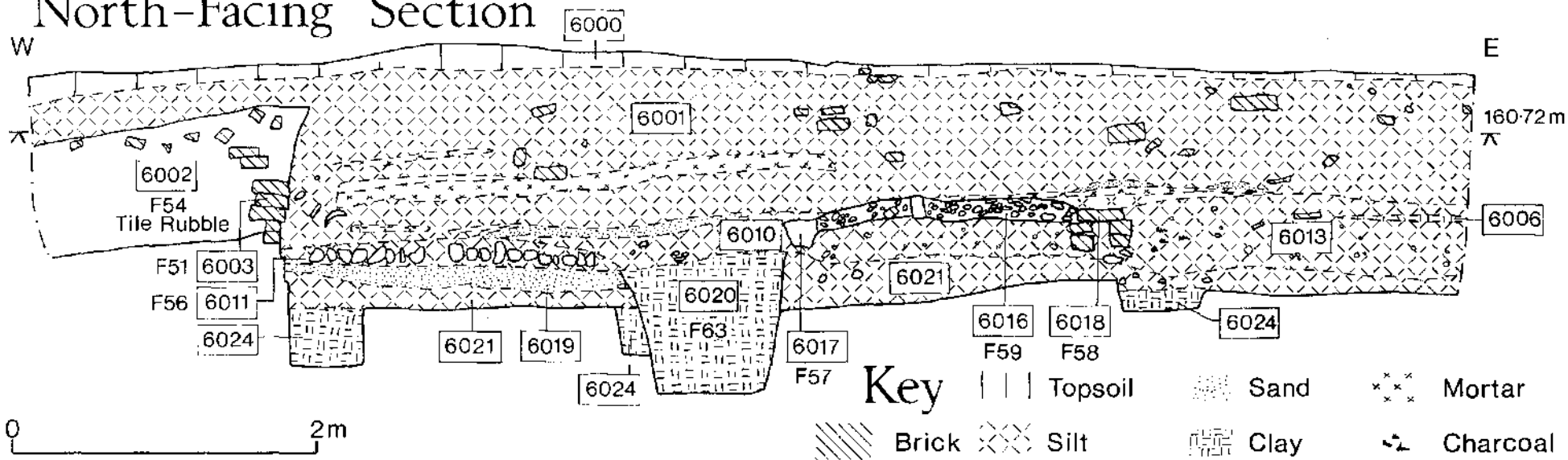
Fig 2

OAK HOUSE Trench 6

Plan



North-Facing Section



Key

- | | | | | | | | |
|--|-------|--|---------|--|----------|--|--------|
| | Brick | | Topsoil | | Sand | | Mortar |
| | Silt | | Clay | | Charcoal | | |

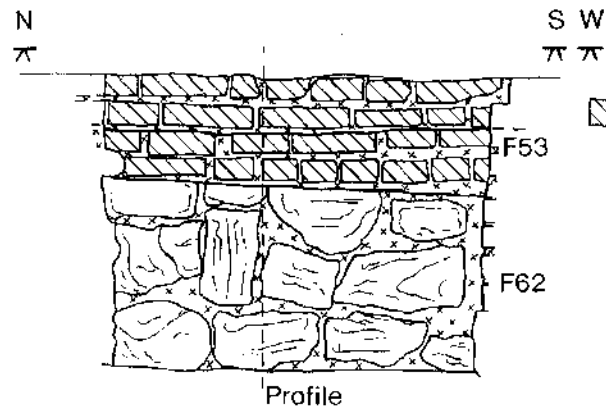
Fig 3

OAK HOUSE

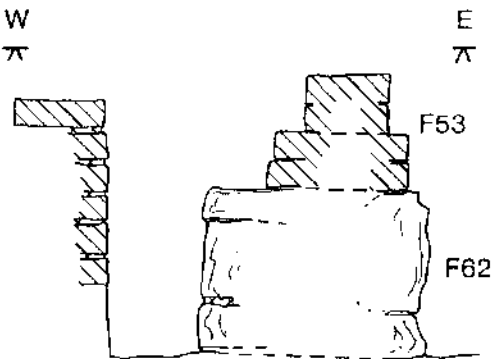
Trench 6

F53/F62

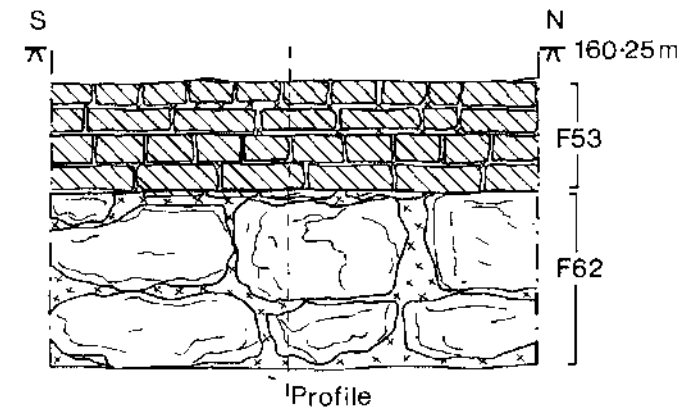
S2
West-Facing Section






Profile



S3
East-Facing Section



Key

-  Brick
-  Stone
-  Mortar

0 1m

Fig 4