

Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit

**Report No. 179**

August 1991

**GREAT YARD, ILCHESTER, SOMERSET**  
**An Archaeological Survey 1991**  
**Report No. 179**

by  
P.J. Leach

For further information please contact:  
Simon Buteux (Manager), Peter Leach or Iain Ferris (Assistant Directors)  
Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit  
The University of Birmingham  
Edgbaston  
Birmingham B15 2TT  
Tel: 021 414 5513

**GREAT YARD, ILCHESTER, SOMERSET**

**An Archaeological Survey 1991**

**Report No. 179**

**by P.J. Leach**

**CONTENTS**

1.00 Introduction .....	1
2.00 The Site.....	1
3.00 The Survey.....	2
4.00 Interpretative Commentary.....	2
5.00 Summary and Recommendations.....	4
6.00 References.....	5

Figures

- 1 Great Yard, hachure survey
- 2 Great Yard, levels and contour survey

**Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit, August 1991**

# GREAT YARD, ILCHESTER, SOMERSET

## An Archaeological Survey 1991

### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Following a request and specification from Somerset County Council, Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit were commissioned by the Ilchester Town Trust to carry out a survey of the field known as Great Yard. The impetus for this survey arose from a proposal from the Town Council to utilise the area as a sports playing field for the local community. In view of the archaeological potential of Great Yard, part of which is scheduled as an Ancient Monument, a surface survey with accompanying commentary was recommended as an appropriate preliminary to any application for planning permission and for Scheduled Monument Consent to enable the site to be converted and utilised. The brief recommended by Somerset County Council required:-

- i) a measured survey of visible earthworks
- ii) a written interpretation
- iii) a levelled survey showing a grid of spot heights and contours.

### 2.0 THE SITE

2.1 Great Yard is a large permanent pasture field of almost 9 hectares, centring upon NGR ST 518229, lying immediately to the west of Ilchester's built-up fringe. North and west it is bounded by the River Yeo, while it has a southern boundary with the field Long Yard and Ilchester's sewage works (Fig.1 and inset). Several sets of earthworks features are visible today on the surface of the field, some of which have been depicted variously on large scale Ordnance Survey sheets, as 'earthworks' or 'intrenchments'. Excepting these, the field is relatively level, situated on the flood plain of the River Yeo and, indeed, subject to occasional periodic flooding. Along its eastern boundary a strip up to 100m

wide between the river and the housing developments has been scheduled as an Ancient Monument (SAM404).

2.2 Archaeological discoveries or records from Great Yard are sparse. Historically it may have been part of 'Ilchester Field', the great open field to the west of medieval Ilchester (VCH.1974,180). There are still traces of ridge and furrow in Great Yard (4.7, below) and in Long Yard, although much of Great Yard would have been most suitable as watermeadows, and both fields were separated from the greater part of Ilchester Field by the medieval Pill Bridge Lane. The most prominent earthwork feature today is an abandoned 'oxbow' meander channel of the river, blocked off at both ends from the River Yeo and now dry. This appears to be a wholly natural feature, although seemingly also a focus for several manmade linear earthworks (4.10, below). The earliest known map of this area (Stukeley 1723) depicts what appears to be a fortification across what should be the eastern end of Great Yard. This feature was probably part of a temporary defensive circuit of the town thrown up during the Civil War and may be the origin for an interpretation of other surviving earthworks in Great Yard as 'intrenchments', on earlier editions of Ordnance Survey Maps. Nothing survives here today which could be interpreted as 17th-century fortifications; possibly since obliterated by the outbuildings and yards of Castle Farm.

As so often elsewhere in Ilchester, the basis for archaeological discoveries and their interpretation in Great Yard has been the work of former local antiquary, James Stevens Cox. His unpublished observations made around 1950 record Romano-British deposits and finds, including building remains and a stone-lined

well, in the eastern part of the field (4.2, below); finds of the same period at the site of the sewage works (4.13); and discoveries of Roman finds and building remains, some partly excavated, in the river bank (4.5 and Fig.1). The latter discoveries in particular, along with some of the earthworks in Great Yard, have contributed substantially to the theory that Roman Ilchester may have had a small port facility based upon the river frontage in this area (VCH 1974,181).

More recently, excavations by Birmingham University in 1985 and 1987 (Leach 1985 and 1987 and SANHS1988) have sampled and demonstrated clearly the presence of an extensive western suburb of the former Roman town at the eastern end of Great Yard (4.1). Regrettably, opportunities for more comprehensive recording or preservation of remains here have been lost as the suburbs of modern Ilchester have encroached upon Great Yard, most recently with the northern extension of Priory Road. The area now designated as a Scheduled Ancient Monument probably corresponds with much of what may still survive of the Romano-British suburbs here. In 1980-81 the construction of a flood alleviation bank across the field (Fig.1 and 4.3) also revealed traces of these suburbs and some medieval remains (Leach 1991, II.7d, in press). This flood bank now corresponds closely with the present southern and eastern boundaries to Great Yard.

### 3.0 THE SURVEY

3.1 The field survey was undertaken in July 1991 in conformity with the specifications outlined in 1.0 (above). A site grid in common with the National Grid was established using a Sokkisha Set 3 'Total Station' electronic distance measurer (EDM). This provided the base for a measured survey of all visible earthworks and the levelling of spot heights on a 5 metre interval grid for the whole field. The data from these surveys is the basis for the annotated earthwork survey (Fig.1) and the spot height and contour survey (Fig.2). These were produced at a scale of 1:500, the originals of which and the logged data are retained for the time being as an archive by BUFAU. At the time of the survey Great Yard was only coarsely grazed by cattle, and vegetation obscured some earthwork features in places. The accompanying interpretation, along

with certain additional details of the field's surface morphology, was made with the assistance of aerial photographs and the author's previous knowledge of the ground and the local archaeological context.

### 4.0 INTERPRETATIVE COMMENTARY

The following commentary is provided with reference primarily to Figure 1. Features or locations of potential archaeological significance are numbered 1-13 and discussed as follows. Additional features of relatively modern origin are considered with reference to the numbered set, as appropriate.

4.1 Trial excavations here in 1987 and occasional records of discoveries within the housing estate to the south have established the existence of an extensive Romano-British suburb outside the western defences of Roman Ilchester (SANHS 1988). Finds of streets, property boundaries, stone-founded buildings, pits, industrial features and burials are accompanied by abundant pottery, coins and other remains of this period. These remains certainly extend into Great Yard and are possibly continuous with the discoveries recorded at locations 2, 3 and 5 (Fig.1).

4.2 James Stevens Cox recorded Romano-British deposits, stone wall foundations and a stone-lined well at several points along a trench cut from Castle Farm to link with the new sewage works in 1950. These discoveries are evidently part of the western suburbs (4.1 above), although there are no clear surface indications surviving in Great Yard.

4.3 The creation of the flood alleviation bank around Ilchester in 1980-81 provided an opportunity to examine sub-surface features along its line crossing Great Yard (Fig.1). Groundworks did not involve any great penetration below the modern surface but deposits of both medieval and Roman date were seen in several places and recorded (Leach 1991, in press). The floodbank which now forms the eastern boundary to the field stands upon slightly higher ground (Fig.2), part of a gradual slope up to the east made by

Great Yard as it approaches the fringe of Ilchester's built-up area. This slope almost certainly reflects the accumulations of past occupation debris and deposits belonging to the town, commencing with the Romano-British western suburbs here.

4.4 A low-spread earthwork bank, aligned approximately east-west, becomes more sharply defined westwards as the shallow ditch running parallel and alongside to the north deepens, and eventually runs into the abandoned river channel (10). This feature was disturbed by the modern flood alleviation bank groundworks, which revealed part of a ditch containing Roman and medieval pottery and a cobbled track corresponding approximately with the earthwork bank. A tentative interpretation of this feature is of a medieval track or roadway with a drainage ditch alongside, linking Ilchester's western suburbs with earthworks and the river further west in Great Yard.

4.5 Observations and unpublished records by Mr. James Stevens Cox in the late 1940s suggest that Romano-British deposits and building remains are subject to erosion on the west bank of the river at several points downstream from Castle Farm. A horizon of Roman occupation and several contemporary features cut deeply into the underlying gravel deposits, were seen in 1985 by the author, following bank clearance, sealed by more recently deposited river alluvium. No building remains were recorded then but this evidence suggests structures and occupation close to or actually fronting onto the river here in the Roman period. These remains are potentially linked directly with Ilchester's suburbs documented to the south west (1 and 2), and once again there appear to be no surface indications of their presence (but see 4.6, below). This apparent surface invisibility may be largely accounted for by the post-Roman alluviation affecting Great Yard in times of periodic flood. Romano-British levels may in places be sealed by as much as 0.50m of such deposits, although alongside the river bank levels are raised by periodic cleaning of the bank sides (as in 1985). This has created a low embankment which follows closely the course of the river bordering Great Yard throughout, and is of post-Roman and perhaps relatively recent origin (Fig.1).

4.6 A very low, broadly-spread and indistinctly-defined platform lies between the river and the north east edge of the old river channel. This has no distinct shape or obvious explanation in this position, although its location relative to Romano-British occupation revealed in the adjoining river bank (5) may be significant. The burial of substantial Romano-British remains beneath alluvial deposits which have blurred their former outline, is suspected here.

4.7 Between the linear earthwork (4) and the modern flood bank to the south is a set of narrow ridge and furrow cultivation earthworks. These are now very slight and difficult to detect, though clearly visible on aerial photographs. They lie almost north-south and appear to respect the east-west earthwork/trackway? to the north. To the south they are now obscured by the modern flood bank but appear to have continued as far as the boundary of Great Yard with Long Yard. These are potentially of medieval origin but could be more recent.

4.8 North of the abandoned river channel, between it and the present river are two lengths of narrow ditch joined at 90° to each other. Together, these appear to create a link between the river and its old course, although more recent river embankment obscures this potential link to the north. The date and function of this ditch is unknown although it could have acted as a channel bringing in water from the River Yeo to the old river channel (10) when water levels were relatively high.

4.9 A small and indistinctly-defined area of ridge and furrow earthworks occupy the neck between the two northern arms of the abandoned river channel. Aligned approximately NW-SE, these are presumably of medieval origin but could be more recent. They are barely visible on the ground, though seen on aerial photographs, and are overlain to the north by a small sub-circular mound of suspected recent origin.

4.10 Abandoned river channel preserved as a steep-sided and flat-bottomed cut-off meander or 'oxbow'. Its former links with the present River Yeo are now partly obscured by more recent earthworks, including the river edge

embankment and two stretches of a low but clearly defined modern field bank to the north west and south west (Fig.1). Three linear ditch earthworks are linked with this otherwise natural feature (4, 8 and 11), potentially bringing water into or leading it out from the old channel. In times of flood this abandoned watercourse fills up to form a temporary 'oxbow' lake, and it is possible that this function was maintained artificially at one time by channelling in water, either for a reservoir or to create a fishpond.

4.11 A clearly defined, straight ditch section leading off from the south west corner of the old river channel (10), to link westwards with a sub-rectangular earthwork depression (12). A low, spread bank follows its southern edge, continuing east to follow the south eastern side of the old river channel, and possibly link with the bank 4, further east. This feature appears to have been a water channel draining south westwards from the old river course.

4.12 A shallow, sub-rectangular depression with relatively well-defined edges to the east and south, is the termination westwards of the ditch 11. To the north and west its extent is now obscured by the river-edge embankment and the modern flood alleviation bank. It appears to have functioned in common with the ditch 11, perhaps draining water westwards into the river or acting as a shallow reservoir, but its true function or date is unknown.

4.13 Although strictly beyond the remit of this survey, the presence of Romano-British finds on the sewage works site at the western end of Long Yard should be noted. Although unproven, these probably relate these to a broad earthwork feature following the northern axis of Long Yard and suspected as the site of a suburb and western route exiting from a postulated West Gate of Roman Ilchester (Leach 1982, 6-7). The relative invisibility of Romano-British features or remains elsewhere in Great Yard has already been shown, and the possibility that more are concealed towards its southern and western margins, cannot be discounted.

## 5.0 SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Without the benefit of further investigative

techniques such as geophysical survey or more extensive archaeological excavation, it is difficult to provide a full interpretation or chronology for all the surface features surviving and recorded in Great Yard today. The archaeology of Great Yard can, however, probably be broken down into three principal phases; broadly, Roman, Medieval, and Post-Medieval.

Of these, the earliest, which may indeed have a pre-Roman element to it, is the least visible. Most of the evidence for Roman remains catalogued previously has resulted from deep ground disturbance, as at 2, 3, 5 and 13 (Fig.1); only 1 and possibly 6 appear to reflect the presence of Roman structures and deposits as surface-visible features. Excepting beneath Ilchester itself, there is now widespread evidence for post-Roman alluviation in the surrounding valley (Leach 1988), within which Great Yard belongs. Thus it would appear that while remains of Roman or earlier periods survive here, buried in places beneath up to 0.50m of alluvium and topsoil, knowledge of their full extent and configuration is very uneven and imperfect.

Elements of a medieval landscape appear to survive in the form of earthworks, relating either to ridge and furrow cultivation (Fig.1, 7 and 9) or as components of a system of water channels (4, 8, 11 and 12). With the possible exception of 4, a medieval date for any of these features is unproven, although they are overlain in places by more recent earthworks. The effect of alluviation in the river valley upon Romano-British remains suggests that they will be post-Roman creations. The origin and function of the most substantial feature, the river meander channel 10, has already been considered above. The date of its formation is unclear, although from its association with the channels 4, 8 and 11 it must have been cut off from the river by the medieval period. Subsequent flooding and alluviation has blurred its outline somewhat but it is possible that the cut off occurred during the Roman period, when there is some evidence to suggest artificial straightening of the river's course, probably to improve navigation (Thew in Leach 1991, in press). As suggested previously, these features (4, 8, 10, 11 and 12) all appear to have functioned as a single operational unit at some time, the channelling of

water being a common link. There is no clear evidence for an association with the operation of a water mill here, although fishponds and connecting leets are a possibility, owned perhaps by one of medieval Ilchester's monastic houses.

The post-medieval elements in Great Yard are relatively obvious and easily interpreted at present. These have not been included specifically in the gazetteer and commentary (4.0, above), but are connected primarily with management of the river. The earthworks which follow closely the present river's course have evidently been created largely through cleaning of the banks and perhaps the river bed, periodically in the past. Some of this may have been a deliberate attempt to keep floodwater off of the field, and there are portions of other field banks, now partly obscured, cutting off the two loops of the river to the north west, which might have been part of an earlier levee bank around the field. Of more recent and documented origin is the flood alleviation bank created in 1980-81 as part of flood protection works around the town, and now a prominent earthwork around the southern and eastern margins of Great Yard.

5.2 Subject to any detailed proposals for the conversion or adaption of Great Yard for recreational purposes the following is recommended:

i) The disturbance or removal of surviving earthworks by excavation works should be

avoided if at all possible. This includes less clearly-defined platforms as at 6, or general areas of rising slope as towards 1. In the latter area at least, archaeological remains are known to survive within 0.30m of the modern surface.

ii) Should any excavation works be required beyond the removal of surface vegetation and turf, this should be preceded by a proper archaeological investigation, subject to specifications approved by the County Field Archaeologist and/or the Department of the Environment in the case of the Scheduled Ancient Monument.

iii) It would be preferable to raise levels and thus bury any upstanding archaeological features in those areas where buildings or the creation of level playing fields and other features are envisaged.

iv) It will be necessary to discuss in some detail with English Heritage and the County Archaeologist the specifications and proposals for any works affecting the Scheduled Ancient Monument within Great Yard, and preferably also areas beyond its boundaries, before any application for planning permission or Scheduled Monument Consent is submitted.

v) Should a satisfactory scheme be approved and proceeded with there may yet be a requirement for archaeological monitoring at the early stages of construction.

## 6.00 REFERENCES

- |                                       |      |  |
|---------------------------------------|------|--|
| Leach, P.J.                           | 1982 | <u>Ilchester Volume 1: Excavations 1974-5</u> Western Archaeological Trust (Bristol).  |
| Leach, P.J.                           | 1985 | <u>Ilchester. Archaeological Excavations 1985: An Interim report</u> BUFAU.  |
| Leach, P.J.                           | 1987 | <u>Ilchester Great Yard 1987: An Interim Report</u> BUFAU.   |
| Leach, P.J.                           | 1988 | 'The Ilchester Hinterland: Archaeology, Alluviation and Ancient Landscapes' in Balaam, M., Levitan, B. and Straker, V. (eds.) <u>Studies in Palaeoeconomy and Environment in South West England</u> British Archaeological Reports 181, 115-124. |
| Leach, P.J. (in press)                | 1991 | <u>Ilchester Volume 2: Archaeology, Excavations and Fieldwork to 1984</u> Sheffield Excavation Reports 3.  |
| Leach, P.J. & Ellis, P. (forthcoming) |      | <u>Ilchester Archaeology: Excavations on the Western Defences and Suburbs. 1985.</u> S.A.N.H.S.  |
| S.A.N.H.S.                            | 1988 | 'Somerset Archaeology in 1987' <u>Somerset Archaeology and Natural History Society Proceedings</u> 131, 212-3.   |
| Stukeley, W.                          | 1724 | <u>Itinerarium Curiosum</u> (London).  |
| Thew, N. (in press)                   | 1991 | 'The Geological and Geoarchaeological Setting of the Yevo Valley at Ilchester' in Leach 1991.  |
| VCH                                   | 1974 | 'Ilchester' <u>Victoria County History of England, Somerset, Vol. III.</u>   |

ILCHESTER, Great Yard  
 Hachure Survey 1991

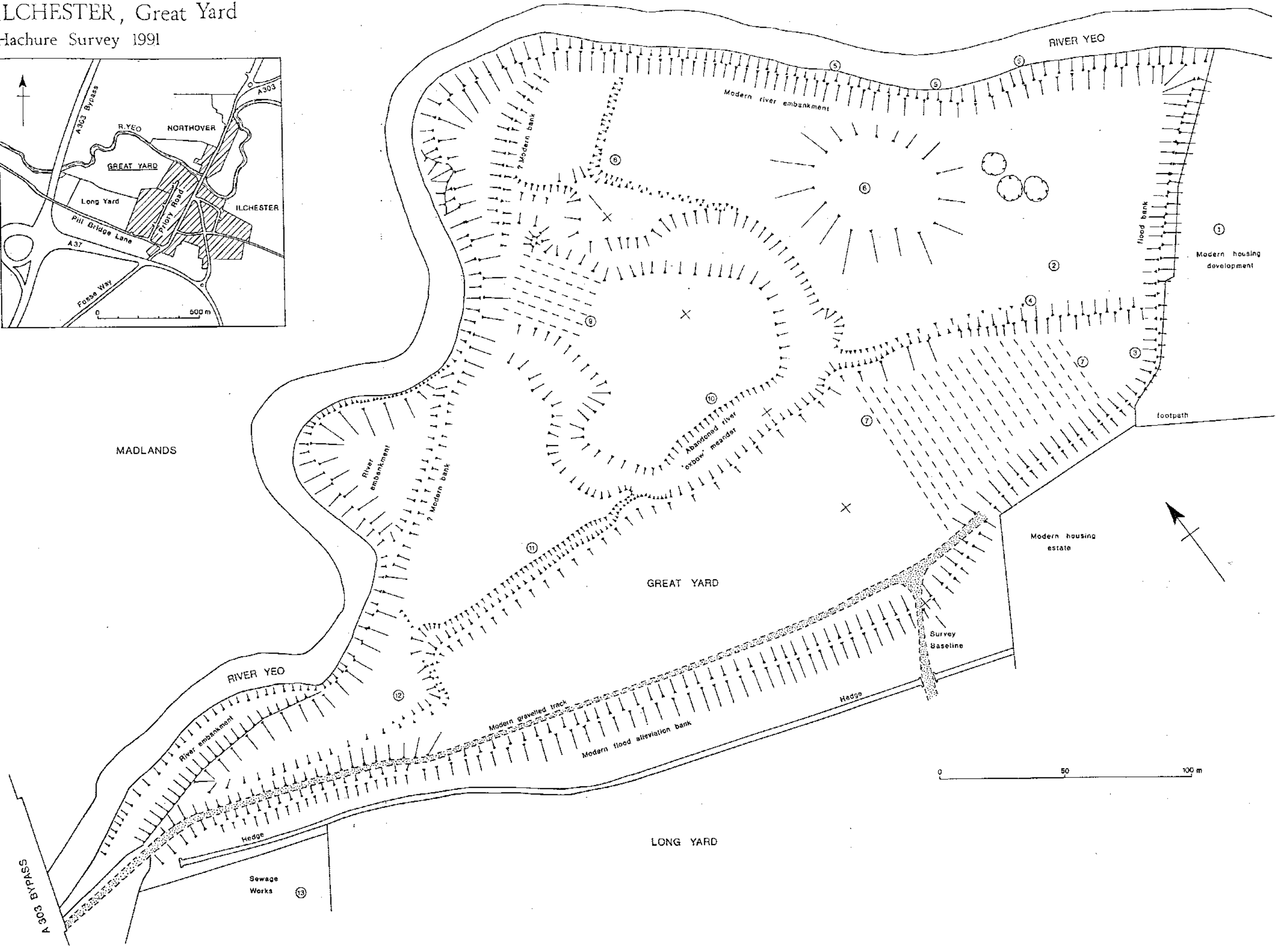
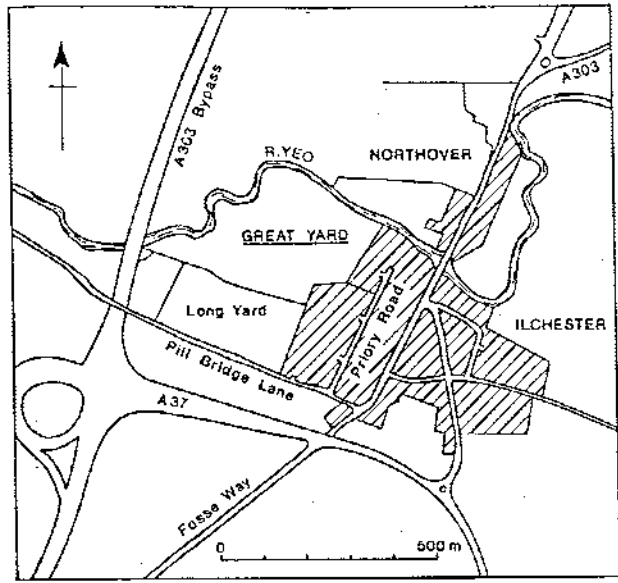


Fig 1



ILCHESTER, Great Yard  
Levels & Contour Survey 1991

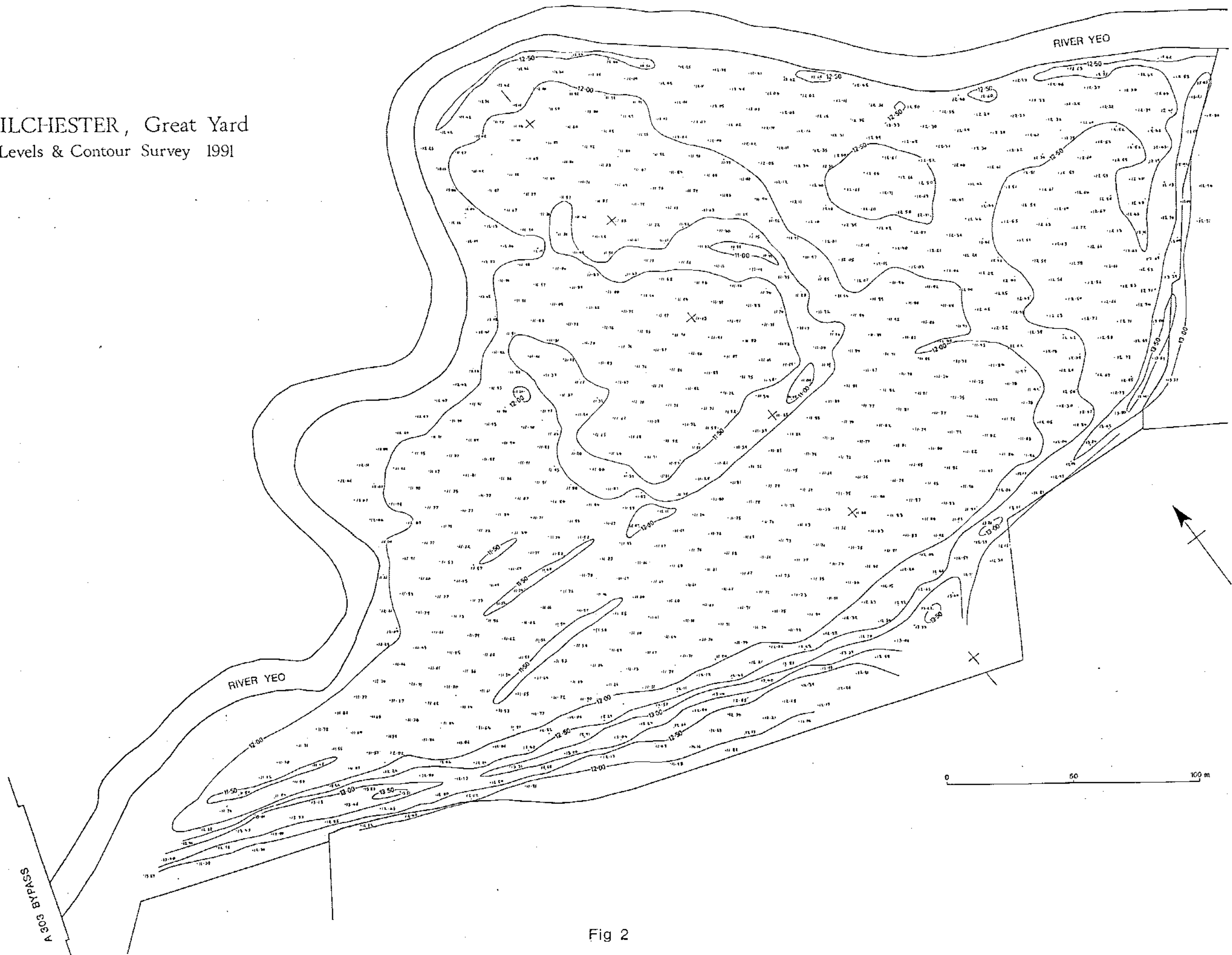


Fig 2