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**Northcote Farm, Bushbury  
An Archaeological Watching Brief**

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# Northycote Farm, Bushbury: An Archaeological Watching Brief

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## Summary

The recent programme of building work at Northycote Farm involved the stripping of an area of topsoil and other rubbish from around the farmyard and buildings (Areas I and II, fig.1b), and the landscaping and grassing-over of an area to the southeast of the farm complex (Areas III and IV). In the farmyard removal of the build-up of topsoil revealed a set of features dating from the 19th and 20th centuries, including a red brick yard surface, the remains of a large collapsed cess pit, and various outlines of demolished ancillary farm buildings. Nearer the main farm building, in addition to a capped well and various brick surfaces, the probable outline of an infilled cellar belonging to an extension of one of the wings of the house known to have existed in the 19th century was found. Nowhere during excavation were archaeological deposits or features encountered pre-dating the early 19th century, or at the earliest, the late 18th century. The ground levels in the other areas to the southeast of the farm were raised during landscaping and therefore any archaeological deposits here will have been preserved *in situ*.

## Background

Northycote Farm (Grid Reference: SJ 929 032), is a Grade II listed timber-framed building probably built around 1600. Today it is the centre-piece of Northycote Country Park, a conservation area of environmental and historical interest run by Wolverhampton Borough Council, forming part of a wider zone designated the Bushbury Green Wedge (fig.1a).

A previous excavation undertaken by B.U.F.A.U. in 1983 prior to the restoration of the house established that this site has been occupied from at least the 12th/13th century (Roe 1984,87). Its location on the northern boundary between Bushbury and Moseley, of which the earthwork running along the edge of the parkland of Moseley Court may be a relict, the place-name of 'Northycote' or north cottage, and the reported presence

of a Tithe Barn nearby, all indicate that this was a message of more than average importance; structural interpretation of the 17th century timber-framed building reinforces this point (Charles 1979). Unlike the standard farmhouse plan where service accommodation normally exceeds private accommodation, Northycote had no less than three structural bays of private accommodation, which led Charles to argue that it was probably originally a gatehouse. Unfortunately, in the 19th century the most impressive bay of the building fronting onto the road was demolished and rebuilt in brick. Charles maintained that this change was probably associated with the down-grading of the status of the building to a farmhouse when Moseley Court was built c.1820. While many of the present-day farm buildings date from this period, it is likely that farming would always have been an important component of the economy of the Northycote message, and therefore the changes which occurred in the 19th century are perhaps better understood as modernisations rather than as any profound discontinuity in the history of the place.

## Introduction

Given the historic background of Northycote Farm Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit was asked by Wolverhampton Borough Council to undertake an archaeological watching brief while the site was cleared by Charmins, the landscaping contractors, during early August 1991. The following short report outlines the findings of this work. The watching brief had two main aims; firstly, to ensure that no damage was made to any areas of potential archaeological interest, and secondly, to record any features that were revealed, in order to provide a record of this phase of renovation work.

Two basic strategies were adopted, determined by the nature of the 'threat' to the archaeology. In Areas I and II, where building work involved

removal of the extensive build-up of topsoils and rubbish, work was monitored closely and any features or surfaces revealed were recorded on pro-forma record sheets, black and white and colour-slide photographs taken, and site plans drawn at a scale of 1:20. In Areas III and IV landscaping works posed no threat to any archaeological deposits because the ground levels here were raised prior to levelling; therefore documentary and cartographic research were employed to recover any details concerning the earlier shape and development of the farm.

### **The Archaeological Evidence:**

#### **Area I (figs.1 and 2)**

Removal of the topsoil (1000) in this area was undertaken by a combination of hand-digging and JCB machine. The complete removal of this layer was complicated by the presence of a number of modern drains flush with the original ground level, and on the east side of the yard these actually prevented further removal of the topsoil. Directly underneath the topsoil the main horizon was a farmyard surface (F1) made of regular, machine-cut red bricks measuring 9 by 4.5 by 3 inches. This yard surface had a simple form of herring-bone patterning, probably radiating from the centre to the four corners of the yard (fig.2). This surface post-dated the main farm buildings and is either late 19th century or early 20th century in date. The whole area was severely disturbed by the cuts of several modern drains, a disused service trench of unknown function but recent date (F2), and a large depression (F3) into which some of the brick surface appeared to have dished.

A large depression measuring c.6 by 2 metres, backfilled with topsoil and modern rubbish, dominated the central area of the farmyard. Based on the descriptions of some of the workmen who had cleared part of this feature two years ago, it was initially interpreted as a sheep dip. However, excavation revealed that it was, in fact, the backfilled remains of an extremely large cess pit originally completely covered by the farmyard surface which had subsequently partly collapsed into it. Excavation was curtailed at a depth of c.0.5 metres due to severe waterlogging and the feature had to be backfilled with rubble. Examination of the structure revealed a number

of drains feeding into it and the general method of construction was seen to be of tar-faced brick walls with an arched ceiling sealed by a layer of clean red clay (1003), covered by a bedding layer of clinker (1002), into which the brick farmyard surface was bedded. The bottom of the feature appeared to be approximately 1.5 metres below the yard surface.

Various other features were also exposed under the topsoil. Seven large cobblestones (F4), aligned roughly northwest-southeast, appeared to pre-date the brick surface which butts up against them. To the southwest of these cobbles another red brick surface ran southwards but on a different alignment to F1; further interpretation of this feature is impossible because all its other stratigraphic and physical relationships had been obliterated by modern disturbances.

Slightly to the west of, and cut by, the present perimeter wall was a set of features which appeared to be the remains of a small ancillary building. The remains of a double-thickness brick wall (F5) were truncated to the east by a service trench (F2), but a surface of small, closely-packed pebbles (F6) was clearly contemporary with the wall. Both features abutt a floor surface (F7) of blue, engineering-bricks, measuring 8.75 by 4.25 by 2.5 inches, arranged to facilitate water-flow into a drain. The structure, comprised of F5, F6 and F7, clearly post-dates the brick surface (F1) which it cuts in a crude fashion.

The outline of a second ancillary structure abutted the back wall of the stable-block. One wall (F9), two bricks in width and running northwards from the stable-block, was excavated to a depth of five courses. The bricks were smaller and older-looking than those used in the farmyard surface F1, and were similar in appearance to those of the stable-block itself, and it is likely that this structure is roughly contemporary with the main farm buildings and therefore predates F1. Curiously, there is no trace of any junction between the stable-block and F9, but this may be explicable if the back wall of the stable-block was extensively rebuilt after F9 was demolished. A spur wall running at right angles to F9 is only one course thick and of noticeably later brick, the spur wall defines the extent of an area of mixed, brick and stone slab

flooring. The brick and stone flooring may have been part of a latrine because it appears to feed into a drain (F11), although modern drain disturbance has destroyed the precise relationship. The drain F11, c.0.40 metres. wide, was lined with polished, concrete slabs at the bottom with pitched-bricks forming the sides; it probably fed into the main cess pit (F3), but this relationship has been destroyed with the collapse of its top.

## Area II

Stripping of the topsoil in Area II revealed a number of isolated features, mainly floors, associated with the farm complex. A number of polished concrete slabs similar to those in F11 formed a floor (F12) outside a shed, tacked onto the side of the main stable-block, and are clearly of recent date. There were three other areas of brick flooring, each distinct from the other; the oldest (F14) consisted of a small area of hand-cut brick which appeared to extend towards the back of the stable-block. On either side of F14 were a floor and the remains of a wall, each of later bricks which probably represent the remains of another lean-to structure abutting the main stable-block. Again, while no structural sign of a junction was observed in the back wall of the stable-block, an area of soot-blackened brick suggests that some form of chimney existed in this building.

The concrete-capped top of a large, circular well (F17), c.1 metre in diameter, was exposed in the middle of Area II, another floor surface (F16) of engineering brick, immediately adjacent, had a shallow drain probably running into the well. Both these features probably post-date the demolition of part of a wing of the main farm building which can be seen on the Tithe Map of 1848. Another floor surface (F13) lay further north, made of red machine-cut bricks, measuring 8.75 by 4.25 by 3.25 inches and coated in whitewash, it is undoubtedly the remains of another, recent small ancillary farm structure.

Finally, when the topsoil abutting the gable-end wall of the cellared structure to the west of the stable-block was removed the truncated remains of a brick arch for a cellar were found (F18). While only extending c.0.20 metres from the gable wall the bricks were sealed by a layer of clean red clay (1005), which formed a

component of the matrix of the mixed soils backfilling the cellar (1006). The present gable wall is probably contemporary in build with the rest of the structure, because an infilled access point to the cellar (F19), similar to one on the east side of the building, is probably a later addition made when the wing to the north was demolished. This had been subsequently crudely infilled when the ground level in this area was raised above the height of the cellar opening.

## The Cartographic Evidence:

### Areas I and II

Because no large-scale estate maps were made of this area the first map of sufficient resolution to be able to discern the plan of Northcote is the Tithe Map of Bushbury of 1848, while from c.1880 the 6 inch editions of the Ordnance Survey map continue the story up to the present day (figs.3b, 4 and 5: Tithe Map 1848, OS 6 inch 1st ed c.1880, and 3rd ed c.1930). Therefore the plan of Northcote prior to the alterations made when Moseley Court was built is not recoverable. Examination of these maps shows that the basic plan of Northcote did not change dramatically in the century between c.1850 and c.1950, the main changes consisting of the draining of a pond to the northwest of the house, between 1848 and 1880, and the demolition of part of the westernmost annexe around the turn of the century. Unfortunately, the story of the minor ancillary structures revealed during the watching brief cannot be followed because even the Ordnance Survey is not of a sufficiently large scale to pick these out.

### Areas III and IV

To the east of the main farmhouse and yard the changes are more pronounced; lesser farm structures located on the periphery of a complex having generally a less robust build and consequently shorter life span. The building reputed to be a Tithe Barn, which Charles noted in 1979 but which unfortunately has since been demolished, was the exception. Maps show that this timber-farmed building was probably L-shaped in plan and located approximately 30 metres to the east of Northcote Farm, adjacent to Underhill Lane. Ordnance Survey maps show it had other buildings built up against its northern side in the mid 1800s to form a large square block

Charles noted that the 'Tithe Barn' was probably roughly contemporary in date to the main farmhouse (Charles 1979,1); sadly no other information on the building was discovered, but the probability that photographs exist must be high.

The trackway skirting the southeast of Moseley Court has clearly constrained the easterly expansion of the farm complex, and the northern boundary, which used to be brick garden wall subsequently demolished to ground level, was firmly established by the mid 19th century, if not earlier. Within this area a number of farm buildings have been built and demolished. A series of shed-like structures backed up against the north wall until recently; again these appear to have been too small to have been recorded on the Ordnance Survey maps. Their foundations are preserved under the present ground level. Further east, abutting the trackway, two small structures, which have since disappeared, can be seen on the maps.

### Conclusions

All the archaeological information recovered from the watching brief relates to the comparatively recent history of Northcote Farm. In the main this evidence has cast some light on the small details of change around the farm, especially of such ephemeral structures as minor ancillary buildings, too small for even the 6 inch Ordnance Survey map to record in detail. These changes probably reflect the influence of both localised factors and the wider agricultural scene in Britain in the 19th century. Clearly the construction of nearby Moseley Court by the Whitgreave family was the key determinant in the formation of the present plan of Northcote Farm, and it seems likely that the modifications made to the house itself would have been reflected in the farm buildings surrounding it. Indeed, it seems likely that the stable-block, for instance, must date from around this time. Improvements to, and rebuilding of, farm buildings seem to have been widely carried out in this region of Staffordshire in the early 19th century, probably reflecting the relative prosperity of the times, and in particular, the opportunities offered by the

growing urban markets of the West Midlands. The relative stagnation of building work at Northcote after the 1880s, in turn probably reflects the generally depressed state of agriculture in these years, coupled with the increasing colonisation of agricultural land in this part of Wolverhampton in order to house the increasing population which greatly reduced the viability of farming in the area, culminating today in its conversion to a conservation/leisure orientated function.

A great deal more can be said concerning the archaeological constraints to further development at Northcote following the recent phase of work, and these will be dealt with area by area. In Area I, unless archaeological deposits pre-dating the 19th century are sealed under the extensive layer of red clay which underlies the remains of the brick farmyard surface then development of this area seems to impose no archaeological threat. The bottom of this layer was not exposed in the recent phase of work, but it seems likely to extend to at least 0.5 metres beneath the present ground level, and, in addition, appears to have an important function in ensuring the proper drainage of an area that seems to be prone to waterlogging. Again the intensive disturbance of the area by various drains, and, in particular, by the cess pit, will have already largely destroyed any once-present archaeological stratigraphy.

Area II is more complicated; only topsoil was removed in this area and early 19th century features were exposed immediately underneath in places. Clearly the possibility that earlier deposits have survived at a lower level exists, especially as here was a series of floor surfaces. In addition, the proximity of this area to the house means that there is likely to be a greater concentration of activity. Therefore, if any work was to be carried out here some form of archaeological monitoring would be appropriate, probably along similar lines to the recent watching brief.

Areas III and IV are now effectively safely-sealed underneath modern ground make-up, and as long as this remains the case, no further work is required here.

## References

- Brunskill, R.W. 1982 *Traditional Farm Buildings of Britain.*  
Charles, F.W.B. 1979 *A Report on Northcote Farm.*  
Litherland, S. 1990 *An Archaeological Survey of Bushbury Green Wedge.* BUFAU  
Peters, J.E.C. 1969 *The Development of Farm Buildings in Western Lowland Staffordshire up to 1880.*

## Figures

- Fig. 1 Location plans  
Fig. 2 Area I, plan  
Fig. 3 a. Area I, sections  
b. Tithe map extract  
Fig. 4 Ordnance Survey map c.1880  
Fig. 5 Ordnance Survey map c.1930

# NORTHYCOTE FARM Location Plan

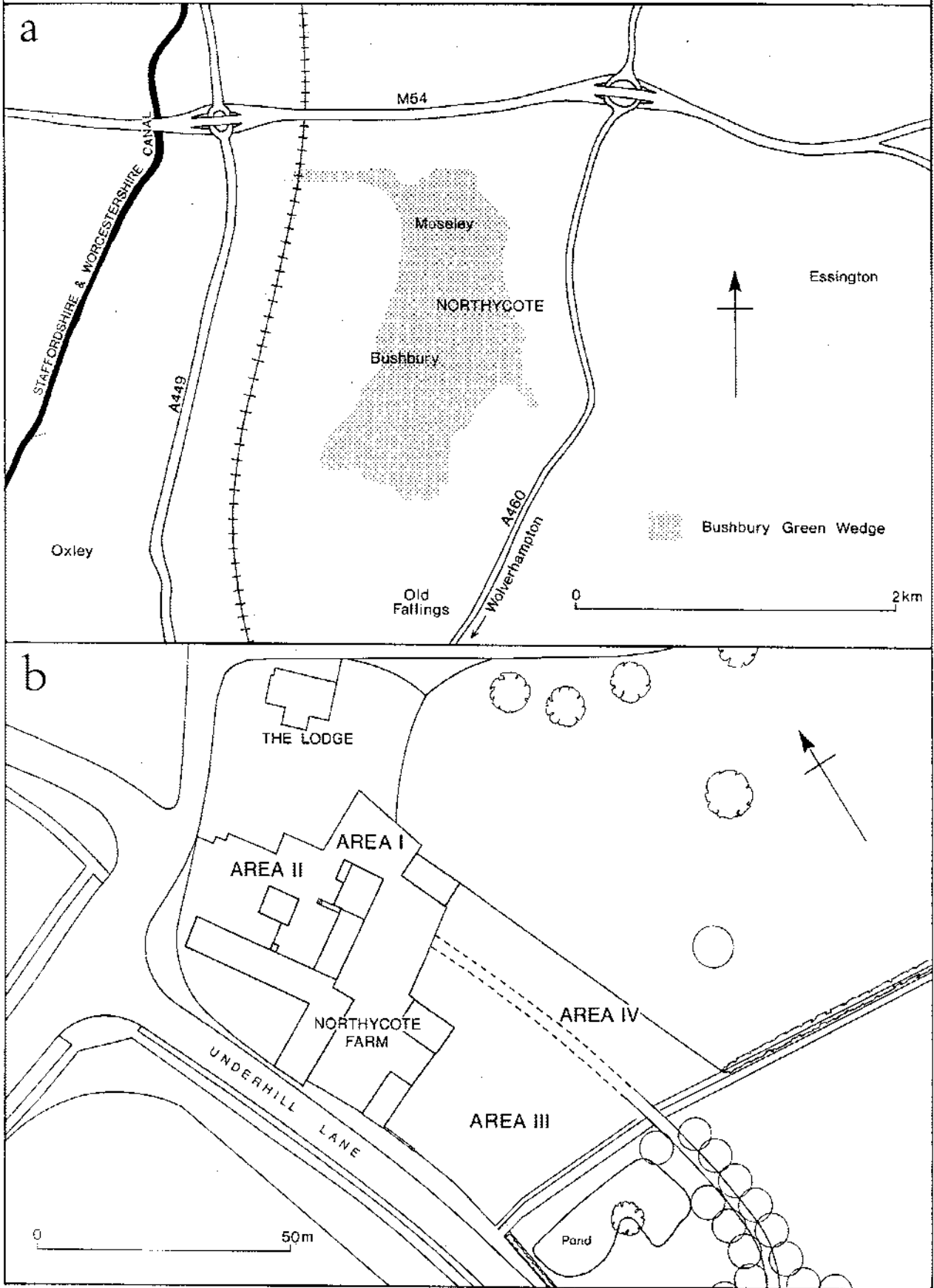


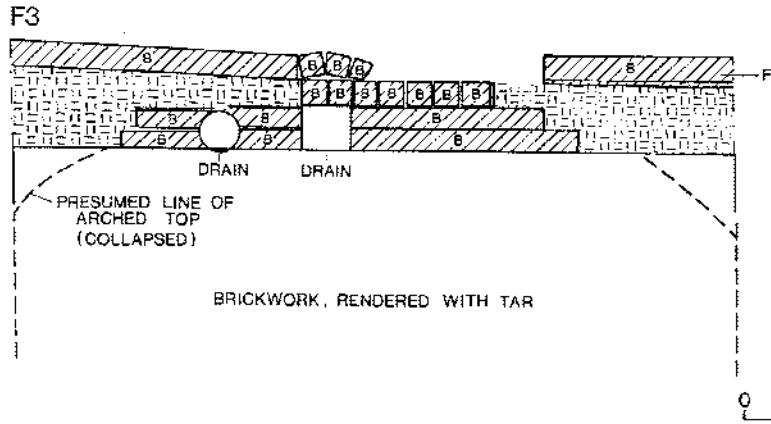
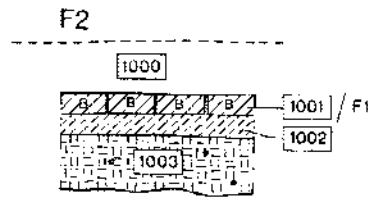
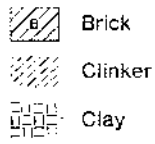
Fig. 1





# NORTHYCOTE FARM

## a Sections of F2, F3



## b Tithe Map 1848

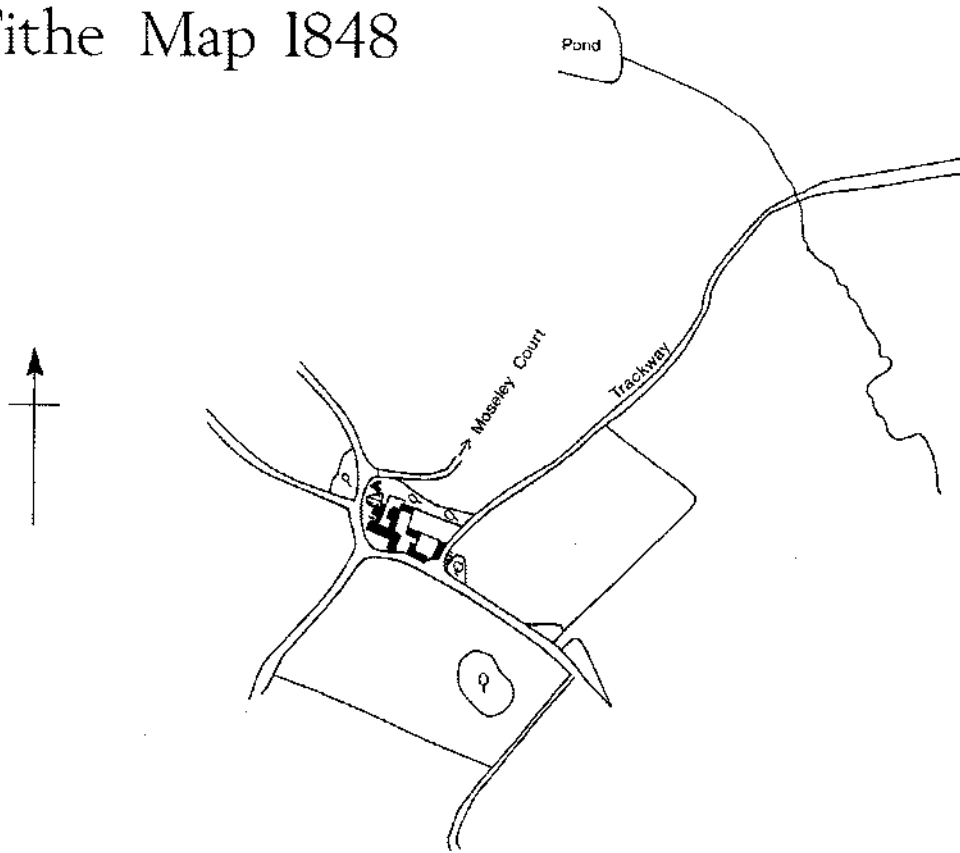


Fig. 3

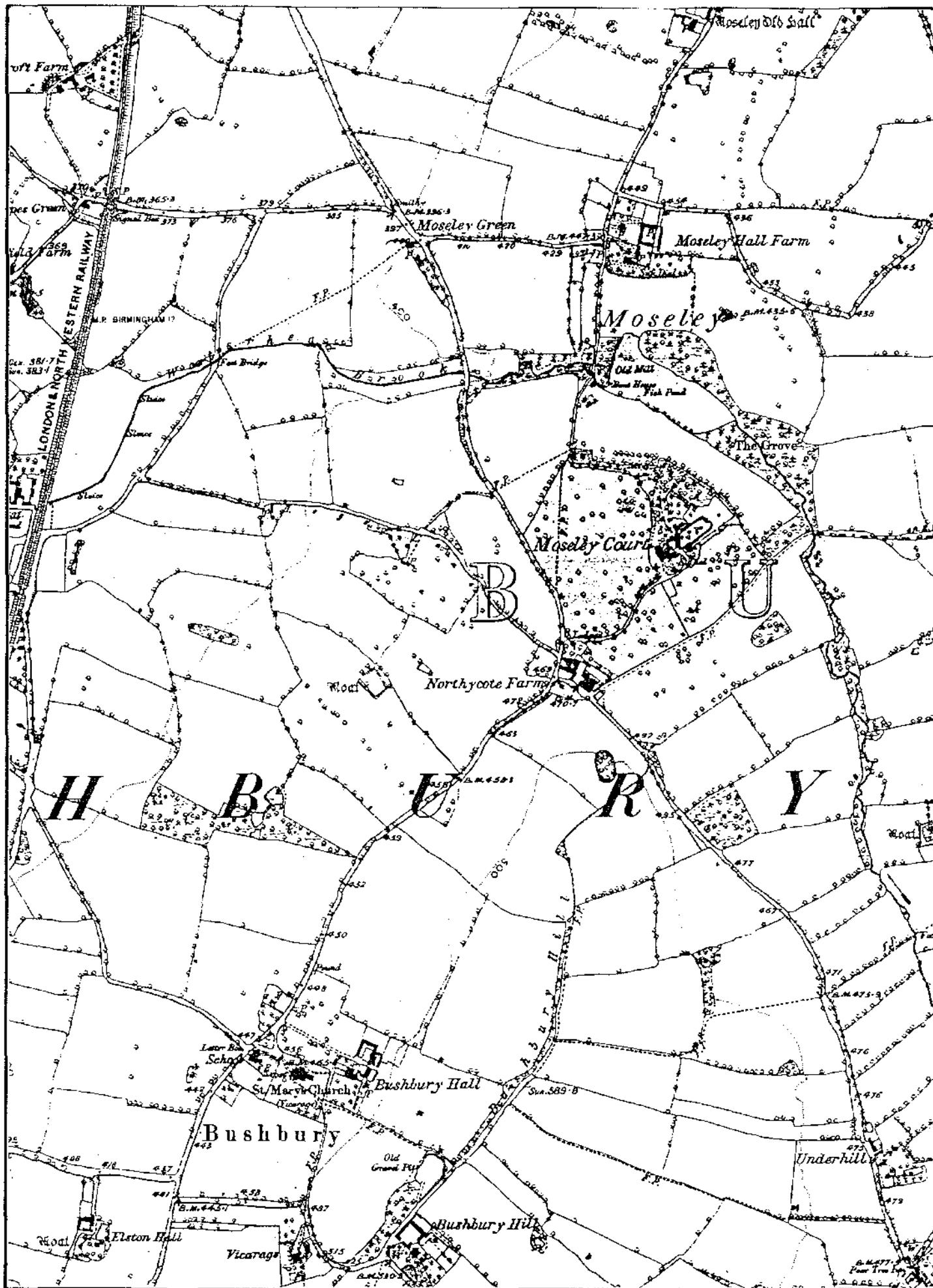


Fig. 4



Fig. 5