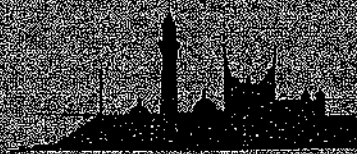


BIRMINGHAM UNIVERSITY
FIELD ARCHAEOLOGY UNIT

An Archaeological Evaluation at
Hill House, Elstree, Hertfordshire

B.U.F.A.U.



Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit

Report No. 194.01

December 1994

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by

I.M. Ferris and L.R. Jones

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Introduction

In January 1992 Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit (B.U.F.A.U.) was commissioned by Chapman Warren Town Planning and Development Consultants, acting on behalf of Ashbourne Homes PLC, to undertake an archaeological evaluation of land to the rear of Hill House, Elstree, Hertfordshire (NGR TQ 177951) (Figure 1a), ahead of a proposed redevelopment for a nursing home. A further stage of evaluation was carried out, in November 1994 on land to the south of Hill House, prior to its proposed redevelopment as a staff car park and service area.

The Site and its Potential (Figure 1b)

Hill House today is a composite structure consisting of elements belonging to four main phases of building activity; around 1700 was constructed a two-storey building, perhaps the original Hill House; in 1779 the main two-storey Georgian brick house was built; c. 1800 further buildings were added to the complex; and between 1850-1870 more buildings, relating to Elstree School which occupied the premises between 1842 and 1939, were constructed (Museum of London 1991).

The complex is set back from Elstree Hill South road, a short distance away from the main crossroads formed by the meeting of High Street and Barnet Lane, the presumed nucleus of the medieval village of Elstree.

In addition to the obvious potential for the Hill House development site containing archaeological deposits and/or features relating to the development of medieval and post-medieval Elstree village, and former features or structures relating to the development of Hill House itself, there was also the possibility of Romano-British deposits being present in this area, the site lying adjacent to the line of Watling Street, c.0.80km north of the substantial Roman Settlement of *Sulloniacae*, at present-day Brockley Hill, and within 400m of the site of a Roman kiln.

The Evaluation

The first stage of evaluation consisted of the digging of six trial trenches, with a further four trenches being dug during the second stage of evaluation (Figure 1b). The trenches were positioned to take full account of the layout of the proposed development, largely following the evaluation brief prepared by the then Museum of London Department of Greater London Archaeology and approved by the Planning Department of Barnet Borough Council. A subsequent brief, by Hertfordshire County Council Archaeology Office, was followed for stage two of the evaluation. Trenches 1-5 were excavated in a walled garden to the rear of the southern portions of Hill House, and Trench 6 outside, and to the north, of the walled garden in an area scheduled for the extension of the northern part of the present house. Trenches 7-10 were excavated during the second stage of evaluation, and were located in the grounds to the south of the house.

All trenches were opened by a JCB mechanical excavator to remove the garden soil/topsoil horizon and then excavation proceeded by hand. The trenches varied in length, depending on the proximity of trees, laid paths, and/or greenhouses. Trenches 1-6 were all 3m in width and trenches 7-10 were 1.5m wide. The results

from each trench will first be presented below and then the overall significance of the results from the evaluation as a whole will be considered.

Trench 1

Aligned north-south. Under a 0.28-0.35m depth of garden soil (1000) was revealed the natural subsoil, a yellow clay with flints and stones. A number of irregular dark patches in the surface of the natural were examined and proved to be shallow, irregular hollows, probably the result of plant disturbance. An irregular linear anomaly (F1) to the south of the trench was interpreted as an infilled tree root channel. Sherds of 19th century pottery were recovered from the garden soil.

Trench 2

Aligned east-west. Under a 0.2-0.45m depth of garden soil (2000) was revealed, over most of the trench, the natural subsoil. At the east end of the trench, where the garden soil was thinnest, was exposed a wedge-shaped ramp of gravel (2001) overlying a spread of crushed brick and mortar (2004), this ramp doubtless being associated with garden landscaping. At the west end of the trench were cut into the natural two features (F2, F3), one being an irregular, sub-circular hole (F2) with uneven sides and an undulating base, 0.40m in diameter and 0.10-0.20m deep, and backfilled with a loose dark grey-brown loam (2002), and the other a circular ?post-hole (F3), 0.40m in diameter and 0.12m deep, backfilled with a single deposit of black loam (2003). While the first feature is undoubtedly the result of root disturbance, the regularity of the second makes its identification as a post-hole possible. Both feature fills contained fragments of 19th century pottery and bottle glass.

Trench 3

Aligned east-west. Removal of the 0.25-0.35m thick garden-soil (3000) revealed that this area had been heavily disturbed by the former presence here of a brick-built structure (Figure 2), with the natural subsoil being exposed only in a small patch in the north-east corner of the trench. The ?northern wall (F6) of the structure was aligned east-west and ran parallel to the south wall of the enclosed garden. Along its line ran a robber-trench (F5), backfilled with a very mixed ash-grey sandy clay with stones, brick, mortar and charcoal flecks (3001). On the north side of wall F6 was a small below-ground room (F4), approximately 1m square with brick flooring and a sandstone drain cover set into the floor, accessed by a set of brick steps at the western corner. The floor of the room was c.1m below the surface of the garden. The room was infilled with a mixed deposit of loam and clinker (3002), containing 20th century finds including, most bizarrely, two bronze fireman's helmets. A large, square recess in the face of wall F6, now infilled with brick and tile rubble (3004) probably marks the former position of a boiler, the small room F4 seemingly being the boiler-room for the operation and maintenance of this feature. There can be little doubt that the structure here represented was a greenhouse or hot-house.

Trench 4

Aligned north-south. Removal of the 0.42-0.45m thick garden soil (4000) exposed a levelled spread of cobbles in a grey-brown clay silt matrix (4001, 4003). This surface was cut, in the south-east corner of the trench, by a shallow ovoid hollow (F7), c.0.60 by 0.40m in size and 0.06m deep, dug to contain an animal burial (4002). The cobbled surface, 0.08-0.10m in thickness, overlay the natural clay, with, in places, a thin skim of compacted black-brown silt with pebbles (4010) separating the two deposits. Only part of this layer was removed to reveal that 4010 contained a number of sherds of 12th-13th century pottery. Cut into the surface of the natural were four features, (Figure 3), comprising two possible

separating the two deposits. Only part of this layer was removed to reveal that 4010 contained a number of sherds of 12th-13th century pottery. Cut into the surface of the natural were four features, (Figure 3), comprising two possible ?beam-slots (F 10 and F 11), a ?Post-hole (F9) and a curving gully (F8). Beam-slot F 10, aligned east-west, had good, almost-vertical edges and was 0.10-0.15m wide and 0.10m deep, backfilled with a light grey sandy silt with pebbles (4007). Beam-slot F11, aligned north-south, was of similar dimensions though with a different fill, a grey-brown mottled sandy silt with pebbles (4008). The curving gully F8, running from south-west to north-east, where its definition became difficult, had gently sloping sides and base and was c.0.40m wide and 0.15m deep, backfilled with an upper deposit of grey clay with pebbles (4004) overlying a grey-brown pebbly clay (4006); it cut beam-slot F11. The ?post-hole F9 was irregular in shape, 0.60m x 0.30m and 0.12m deep, backfilled with a dirty mixed clay silt with charcoal and pebbles (4005).

Pottery was recovered from the backfill of post-hole F9 and from deposit 4010, giving a provisional date to this phase of activity in the 12th-13th century (see below).

Trench 5

Aligned north-south. Under the 0.34-0.42m thick garden soil (5000) was revealed the natural subsoil. Though there was evidence of some disturbance by plants and roots there were no archaeological features present.

Trench 6

Aligned north-south and excavated outside the walled garden, in the north of the development area. Under the 0.17-0.20m thick garden soil (6000) was exposed a levelled cobble spread (6002) which, in turn, overlay the natural subsoil. In the centre and at the north end of the trench the cobbling was cut by a number of negative features. Two east-west aligned, shallow, parallel trenches (F12 and F14), c. 1.20m apart, probably represent garden features; bedding trenches perhaps. Their fills (6003, and 6001 and 6005 respectively) contained modern pottery. Cut into the side and base of F14 was a semi-circular hole (F16), doubtless the setting for a bush or shrub. Bedding trench F14 had been partially truncated by two later cuts (F13, backfilled with building rubble 6004; and F 15, backfilled with light grey yellow-brown sandy clay mixed with pebbles and building rubble 6006).

Trench 7

Aligned north-south. Under the 0.25-0.30m thick garden soil (7000) was a levelled spread of cobbles in a grey-brown clay silt matrix (7001). This surface was 0.10-0.15m thick, and overlay the natural yellow clay sub-soil (7002).

Trench 8

Aligned north-south. Under the 0.30-0.35m thick garden soil (8000) was a levelled spread of cobbles in a grey-brown clay silt matrix (8001). This surface was 0.15-0.20m thick, and overlay the natural yellow clay sub-soil (8002). The cobbling was cut by four features (Figure 4). At the south end of the trench was a construction trench (F21), backfilled with a clay loam (8004) containing 19th century pottery, for an east-west orientated wall (F20) made of modern bricks and mortar (8003). Further to the north, were two shallow oval negative features (F22 and F23) of either post-medieval or later date. F22 was 0.80m by 0.60m and 0.08m deep and filled with a dark brown silty clay (8005) containing fragments of brick and mortar. F23 was 1.10m by 0.35m and 0.28m deep, filled with a yellowish-brown silty clay (8006) containing brick and mortar fragments. In the east-facing section of the trench (Figure 4) was seen a brick structure (F25), 1m

wide and 0.30m deep, made of modern bricks and mortar (8007). The base of this structure sat directly on top of the cobbles 8001.

Trench 9

Aligned east-west. Under two layers of garden soil, each 0.30m in depth (9000, 9001), was the natural yellow clay sub-soil (9002). No archaeological features were present.

Trench 10

Aligned north-south. Two layers of garden soil (9100, 9101) each 0.30m in depth, were removed to expose the disturbed natural yellowish clay sub-soil (9102). Two modern brick conduits, orientated north-south, cut the natural clay. Near the northern end of the trench a layer of modern demolition rubble (9103), 0.30m thick, overlay the natural clay and was obviously associated with the south-west corner of a partially-demolished modern brick structure (F26).

The Pottery (identifications by V. Buteux)

The pottery assemblage from the evaluation trenches was very small. The earliest pottery recovered was medieval and came from Trench 4 (16 sherds from layer 4010; 2 sherds from layer 4005, the backfill of post-hole F9). This was highly abraded and in small fragments, with the single rim form and decorated sherds being undiagnostic. Without immediate reference to the pottery from the other sites at Elstree and in the locality, it is not possible to tie down the pottery from Hill House to a tight date, though provisionally 12th-13th century seems likely.

Pottery from the other trenches, a total of 28 sherds, was exclusively post-medieval, the majority of 18th-20th century date, the only note-worthy sherd being a piece of 17th-18th century stoneware from the garden soil in Trench 1.

Conclusions

Of the ten trial trenches excavated, three (Trenches 1, 5, and 9) were completely sterile of archaeological deposits or features, and three (Trenches 2, 6 and 7) contained only features relating to late garden activity. Three trenches (Trenches 3, 8 and 10) contained shallow late features and/or the remains of late 19th century/early 20th century brick-founded ancillary, greenhouse or hothouse buildings, those remains in Trench 3 being fairly substantial. Only one (Trench 4) contained significant archaeological features.

The features in Trench 4, beneath the cobbled surface 4001/4003, were structural and broadly medieval in date though they represent a number of phases of activity rather than strictly contemporary structures. The form, nature and function of these structures cannot be gauged at present due to the small size of the area examined; they nonetheless fit into the previously discovered pattern of medieval structures at Elstree, with settlement extending southwards from the nucleus (Museum of London 1991). The shallowness of the medieval features at Hill House suggests that they have been truncated, perhaps during the levelling of this area in preparation for the laying of the cobbled surface 4001/4003.

Cartographic Evidence

The 1935 edition Ordnance Survey 25" to 1 mile map shows a greenhouse and associated structure occupying the southern part of the walled garden. An outhouse or ancillary structure is depicted immediately west of the south wing of Hill House and another greenhouse is shown south of Hillside Cottage. The brick structures located in Trenches 3, 7 and 10 are almost certainly associated with these buildings.

Implications and Recommendations

Proposed building work in the areas around Trenches 1, 2, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, and 10 will, on present evidence, have no effect on archaeological deposits or features. The building contacted in Trench 3, while it is interesting as a former element of the Hill House complex, should again not be seen as a barrier to new build in this area, though its presence may create structural engineering difficulties. But the demonstration of the presence of medieval features, albeit truncated, in Trench 4 has implications for construction along the western side of the walled garden; the exact nature of the response to these implications must be formulated by the County Planning Department acting upon archaeological advice. However, some options will here be considered; firstly the archaeological deposits and features could be retained in situ by the adoption of building design options, but both the relative shallowness below present ground surface (i.e. c.0.50-0.55m) of the horizon into which the features are cut could conspire against this, and they have in any case previously been truncated; secondly these and related features could be preserved by record, that is excavated and recorded ahead of development, which, over a larger area than was available during the evaluation, could lead to their formal identification and interpretation.

Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to Tony Hurley from Hertfordshire County Archaeology Office. The evaluations were supervised by Iain Ferris, Jon Sterenberg and Laurence Jones assisted by Kerry Allen, Bob Burrows, Mark Hewson, Steve Litherland, Eric Langham and Derek Moscrop. Comments on the pottery were made by Victoria Buteux and drawings prepared by Colette Paterson, Liz Hooper and Laurence Jones. The text was typed by Ann Humphries and the report put together by Laurence Jones.

References

- 1991 Suggested Methodology for an Archaeological Evaluation at Hill House, Elstree. Museum of London.
- 1994 Brief for an Archaeological Site Evaluation at Hill House, Elstree. Hertfordshire County Archaeology Office.

Figures

- Figure 1, Location plans
- Figure 2, Trench 3, plans and profiles
- Figure 3, Trench 4, plan and sections
- Figure 4, Trench 8, plan and section

ELSTREE, Hill House.

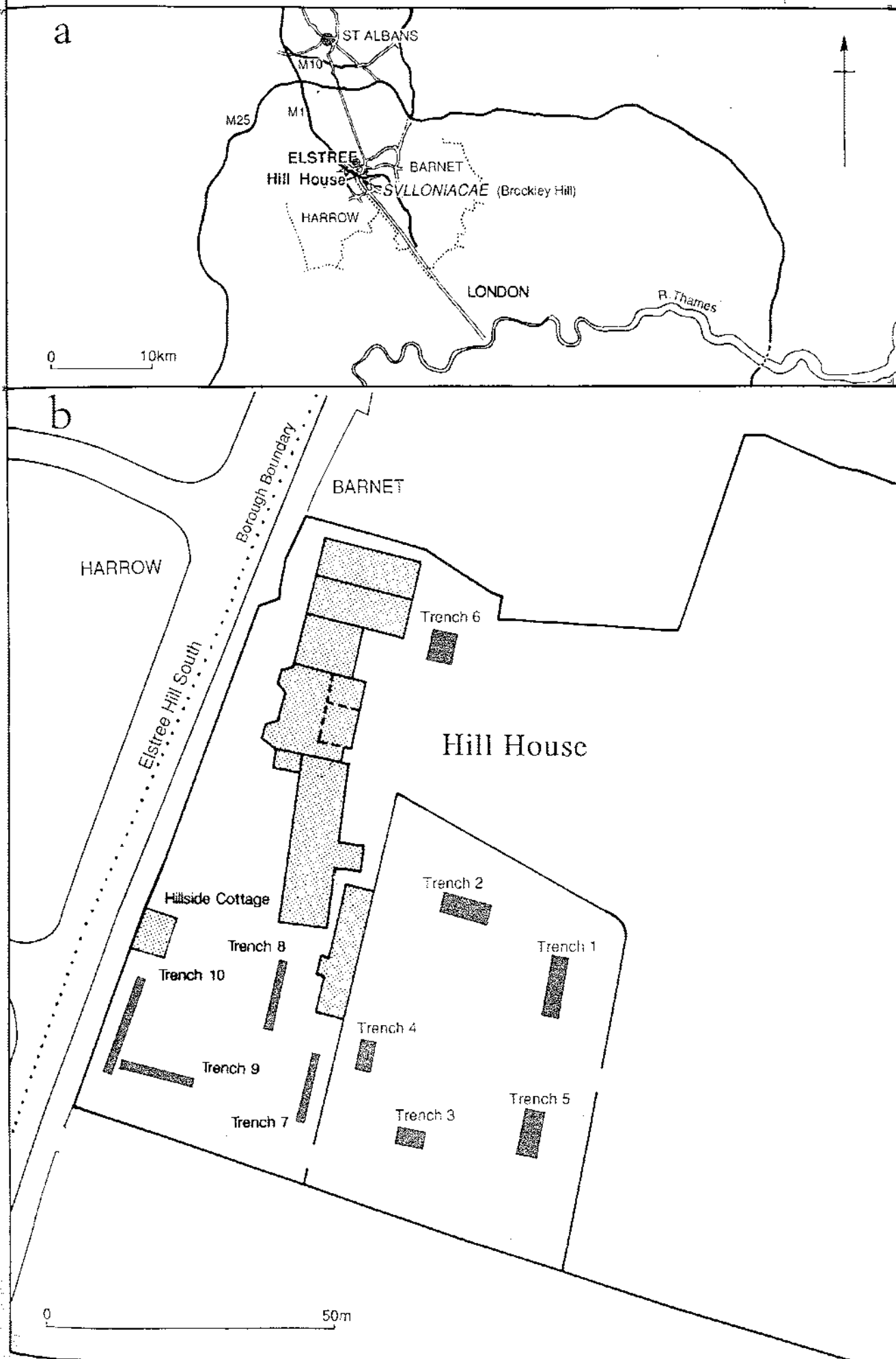
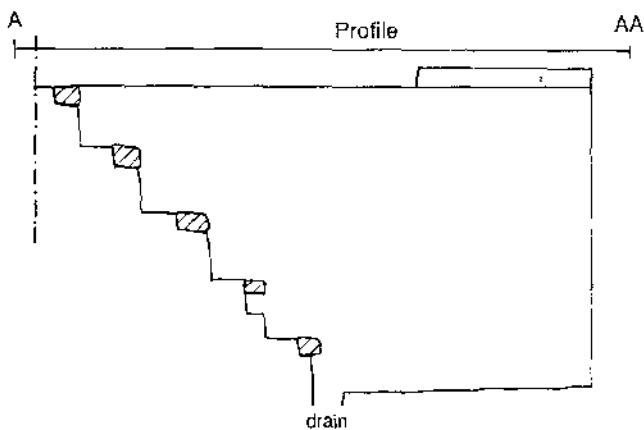
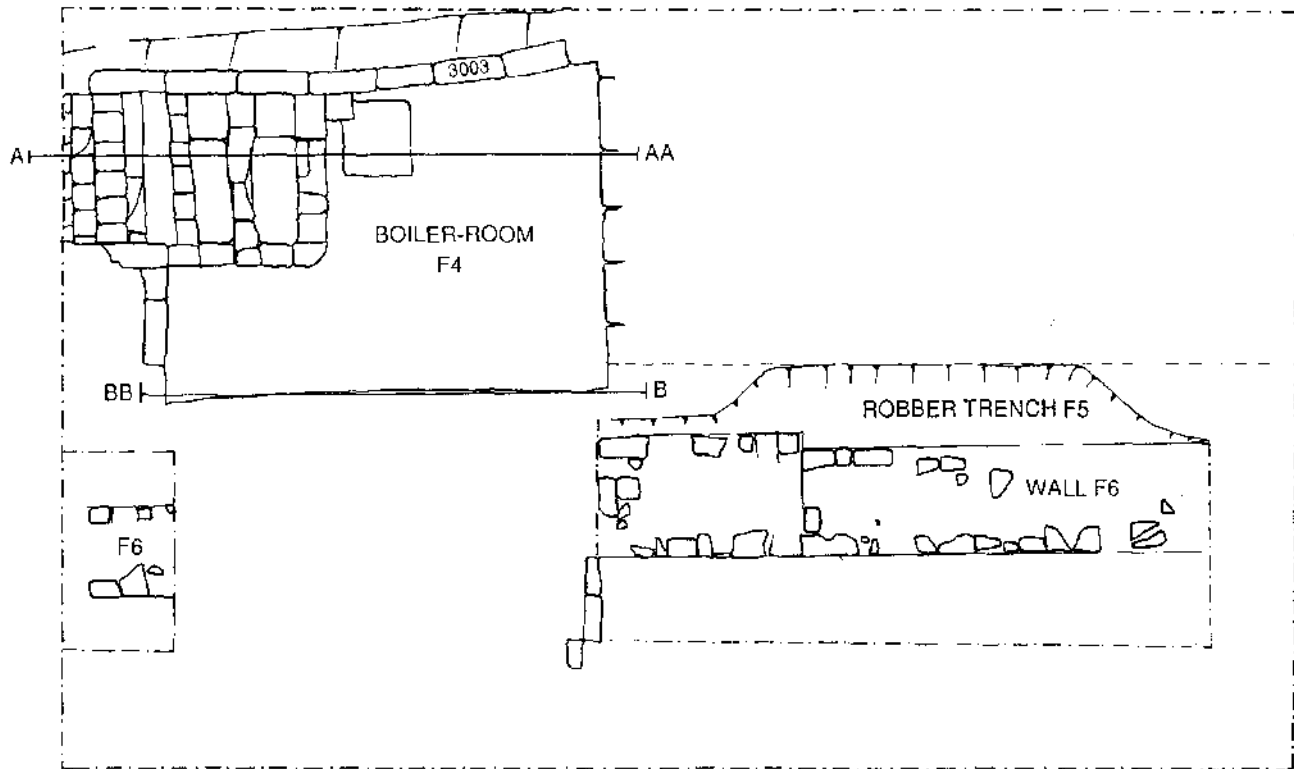


Figure 1

ELSTREE, Hill House.

TRENCH 3



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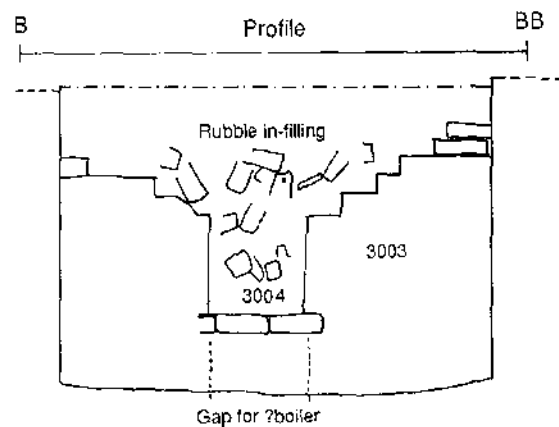
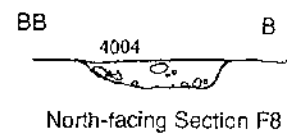
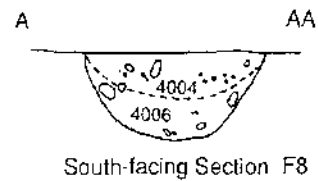
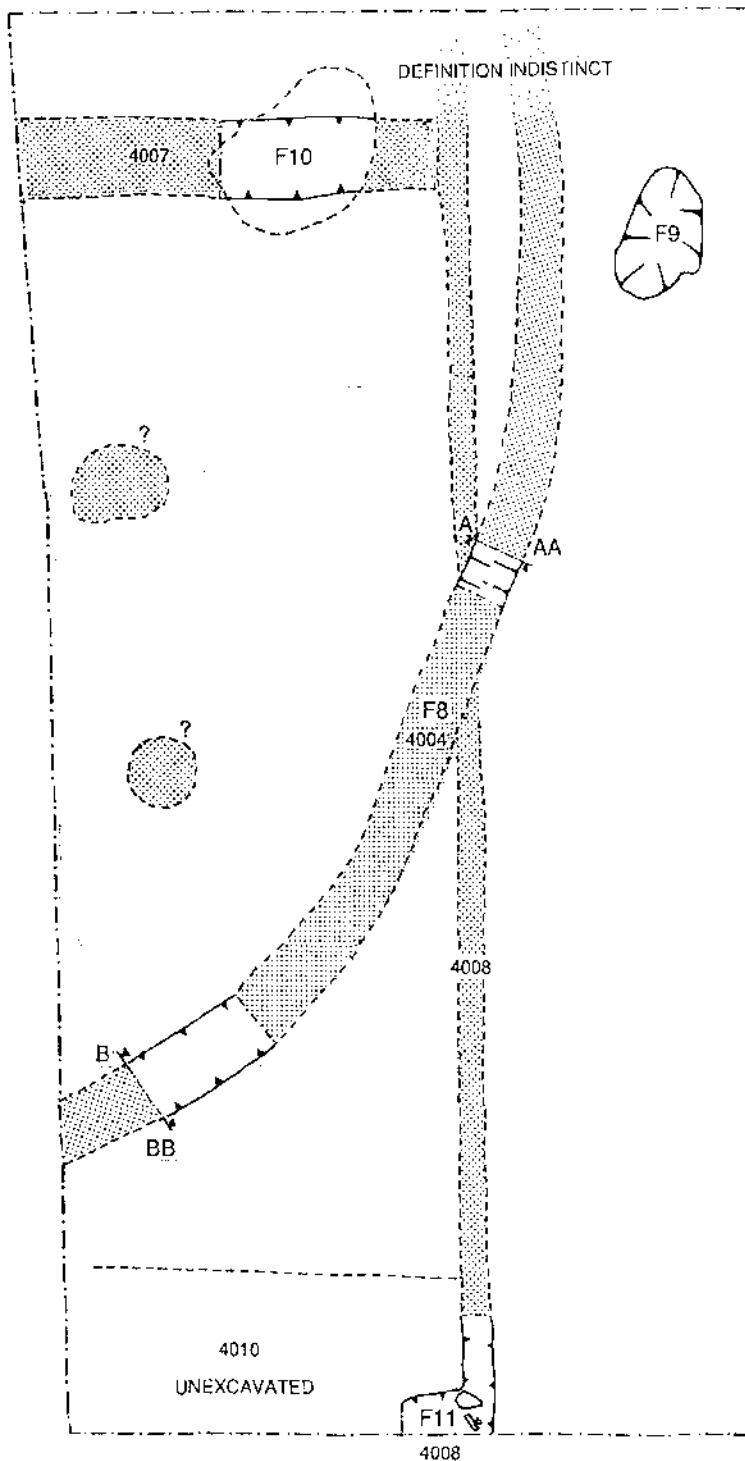


Figure 2

ELSTREE, Hill House.

TRENCH 4



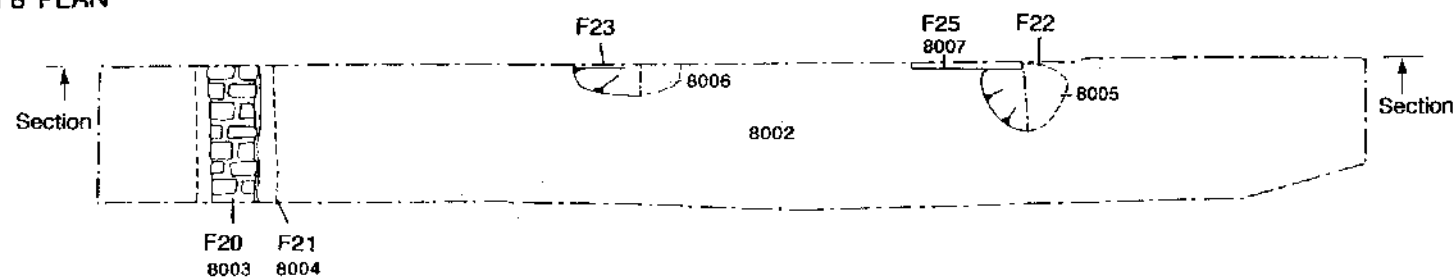
Presumed position/line of features

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Figure 3

ELSTREE, Hill House.

TRENCH 8 PLAN



TRENCH 8 SECTION

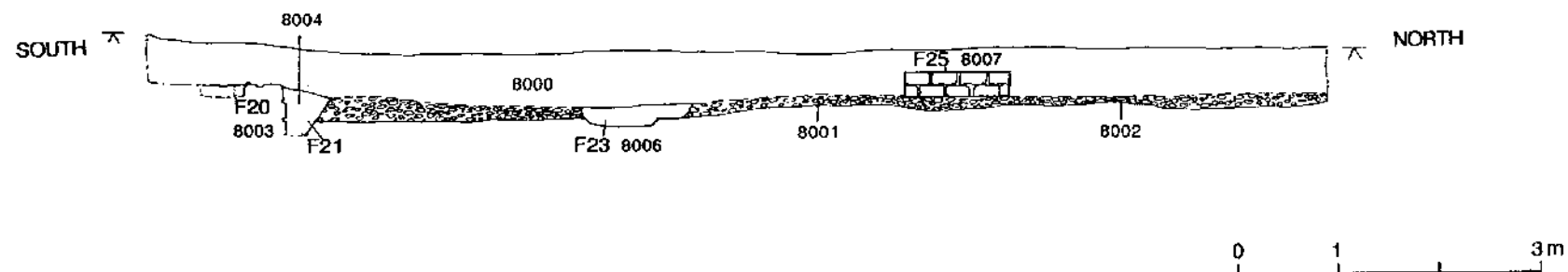


Figure 4