

Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit

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**Excavations at Vincent Drive,
Birmingham University:
An Archaeological Evaluation**

by
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Excavations at Vincent Drive, Birmingham University: An Archaeological Evaluation

1.0 : Introduction

In April 1992 Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit (B.U.F.A.U.) was commissioned by Birmingham University to undertake an archaeological evaluation of land off Vincent Drive, on the University campus (centred on NGR. SP 04438386) (Figure 1), in advance of a proposed major redevelopment of the site. Evaluation followed on from demolition of the former Medical School Animal House.

Unfortunately, the Vincent Drive site had been greatly disturbed by extensive foundations, service trenches and cellaring in the former buildings and by a large modern sewer running across the evaluation area. Identification of these disturbances limited the area that could be usefully examined archaeologically and consequently only two evaluation trenches were dug (Figure 1). A mechanical excavator was employed, under archaeological supervision, to remove the topsoil in both trenches; afterwards excavation proceeded systematically by hand, to natural subsoil. A written and photographic record of both trenches was made.

2.0 : The site and its setting

The site is located 5km southwest of Birmingham City centre, in the Queen Elizabeth Hospital complex. Evidence for earlier human exploitation in the vicinity comprises a group of burnt mounds discovered in the valley bottom, a few hundred metres west of the Vincent Drive site, these mounds probably dating to the late Bronze Age, around 1400-600 B.C. (Jones 1989).

Two Roman auxiliary forts lay within 100 metres of the evaluation, to the west. These forts were built at a strategic point, at the junction of roads from Alcester and Droitwich to the south and Wall to the north. The larger fort dates from the mid-40s A.D, succeeded, after perhaps a period of abandonment, by a smaller fort which was occupied until about 120-130 A.D (Rowley 1969, 24).

Roman auxiliary forts often had certain external features and/or buildings (Johnson 1983), especially if the fort was occupied over a long period of time, the main reason behind the evaluation at Vincent Drive being the possibility of encountering Roman period remains here.

In the 17th century a hunting lodge was constructed within the Roman fort, and the site and surrounding area was used for hunting and hence not ploughed. The earthworks of the Roman forts were still clearly visible on Sparry's 1718 plan of the Edgbaston estate (Figure 4). Only later was the area turned over to arable cultivation by the Lords Calthorpe, as seen on the 1852 Tithe map, (Figure 5). Later maps show that the area continued in cultivation and that early field-boundaries remained almost unaltered until the building of the Hospital in the 1930s.

The former Animal House buildings were constructed at the Vincent Drive site in the 1950s. These were single-storey buildings, with numerous linked services. They were demolished in April 1992.

3.0 : The archaeological results

3.1 : Trenches I and II

Trench I was roughly rectangular in shape (Figure 1), 11m long and 2m wide, and orientated east-west. It was situated under the former "Animal House No.1". Modern overburden (1000) was machined off to orange clay natural over most of the trench, and the surface was then cleaned by hand. The sections of the trench showed that the overburden was mixed and was formed by layers which were themselves cut by pits. The overburden (1000) contained brick, clay pipe, glass, iron nails and china, and consisted of building rubble overlying redeposited natural which, in turn, overlay a 0.10m-thick black humic band. The latter overlay the natural subsoil over half the trench. A small, 1m square, sondage was dug below this black humic layer into the orange clay to confirm its identification as natural.

Four small, modern rubbish pits (F1-4) cut both the redeposited natural/black humic layer and the natural in the trench. These pits were filled with dark brown humic soil containing building rubble, bricks, and late-Post-Medieval artifacts.

The natural was encountered 0.95m below the modern ground surface at the east end of the trench and 0.66m at the west end.

Trench II was rectangular in shape (Figure 1), 9m long by 2m wide, and orientated east-west, roughly parallel to Trench I, and also situated under the former "Animal House 1". Machining took off overburden to reveal orange clay natural in places. The trench was then trowelled. As with Trench I the overburden was made up of mixed, redeposited natural and black humic soil with, again, pits cutting into the upper deposits. The artifacts recovered from the overburden (2000) included a struck flint flake, iron nails, glass, clay pipes, pottery and a few sherds of probable 17th/18th-century salt-glaze wares.

The cleaning of the trench revealed the bases of three pits (F5-7) cut through the natural. All were filled with black humic soil and contained building rubble and late-Post-Medieval pottery.

The natural was encountered 0.35m below the present ground level at the west end of the trench and 0.7m at the east end.

Demolition works elsewhere within the

development area revealed natural subsoil close to the present ground surface; this was recorded, both by levelling and in plan.

4.0 : Discussion

The absence of any Roman features or finds in the trenches implies that no external fort features were situated here. There is a possibility that the 17th/18th-century salt-glazed ware found in Trench II derived from the levelling of the 17th century lodge. The finding of bricks and porcelain can almost certainly be put down to the landscaping of the site as part of the building of the Queen Elizabeth Hospital in the 1930s.

5.0 : Implications and recommendations

The lack of archaeological discoveries means that there is no archaeological constraint to the development. No further archaeological work is recommended on the site.

6.0 : Acknowledgements

The archaeological assessment was undertaken by Post-Graduate Diploma in Practical Archaeology students, as a training exercise, with guidance from B.U.F.A.U. staff.

The project was directed by Iain Ferris. Excavation was supervised by Robert Atkins, assisted by Colin Cleverley, David Kendrick and Clare Jones. Jon Sterenberg supervised the surveying and the plotting of the trenches. Alex Jones provided background information on the project, further research being carried out at the Birmingham City Reference Library.

7.0 : References

- | | | |
|----------------------------------|------|---|
| Johnson, A | 1983 | <i>Roman Forts.</i> |
| Jones, A E | 1989 | <i>Metchley, Birmingham: An Archaeological Evaluation 1988: An Interim Report.</i> B.U.F.A.U. Report Number 46. |
| St. Joseph, J K and Shotton, F W | 1937 | The Roman camps at Metchley. <i>Transactions of the Birmingham Archaeological Society</i> 58, 68-83. |
| Rowley, T | 1969 | Metchley Roman Fort, Birmingham. <i>West Midlands Archaeological News Sheet</i> 12, 24-25. |

Figures

- Figure 1 The site with the plan of the trenches overlaying the "Animal House No 1".
- Figure 2 Section in Trench 2.
- Figure 3 Metchley area, from a map of the Lordship of Edgbaston 1701, by William Deeley.
- Figure 4 Part of Sparry's plan of the Edgbaston estate, 1718.
- Figure 5 The Edgbaston Tithe Map, 21st May 1852.
- Figure 6 The Ordnance Survey map, 1939.

VINCENT DRIVE, BIRMINGHAM 1992

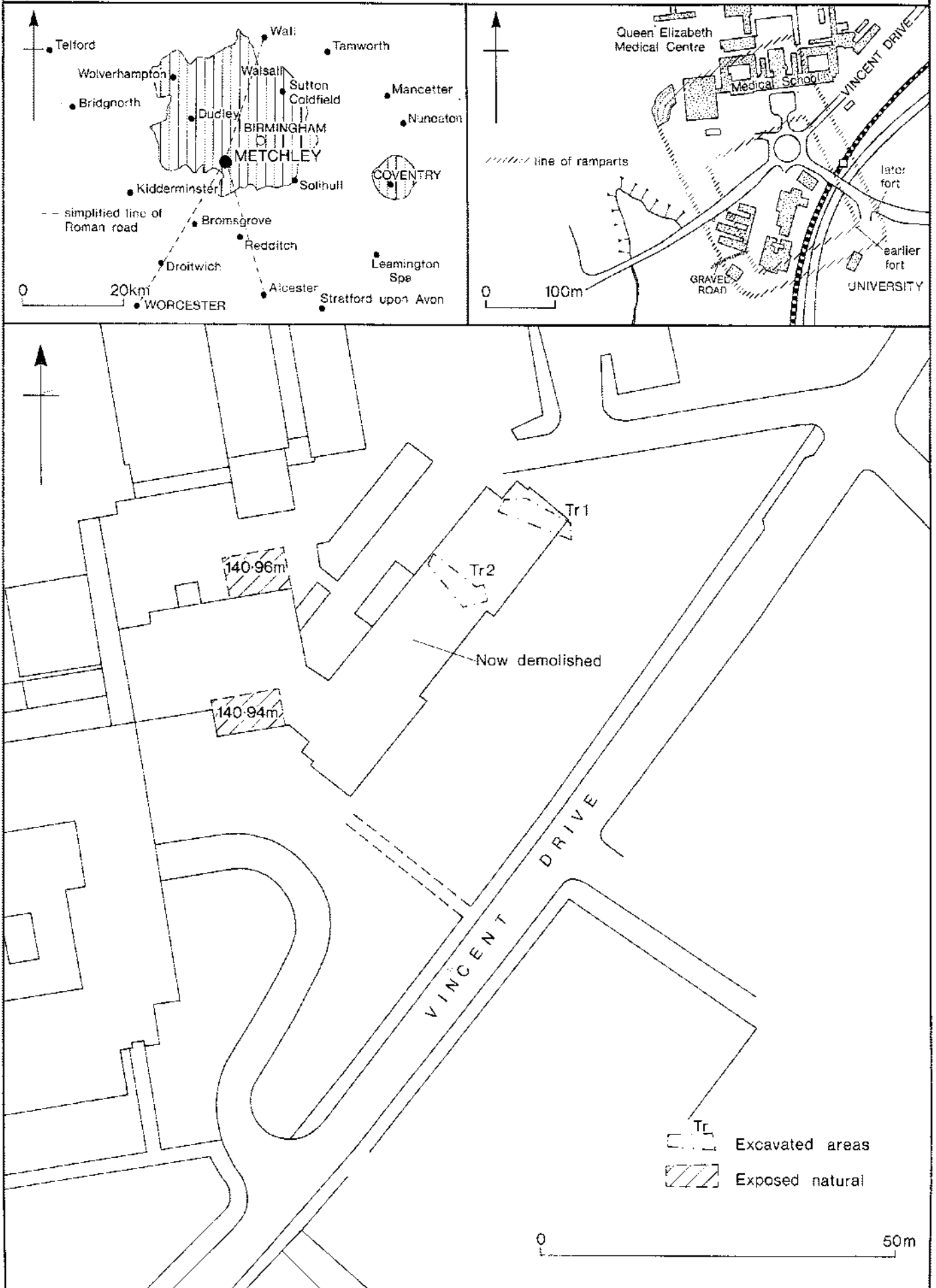


Figure 1

VINCENT DRIVE, BIRMINGHAM 1992

Trench 2

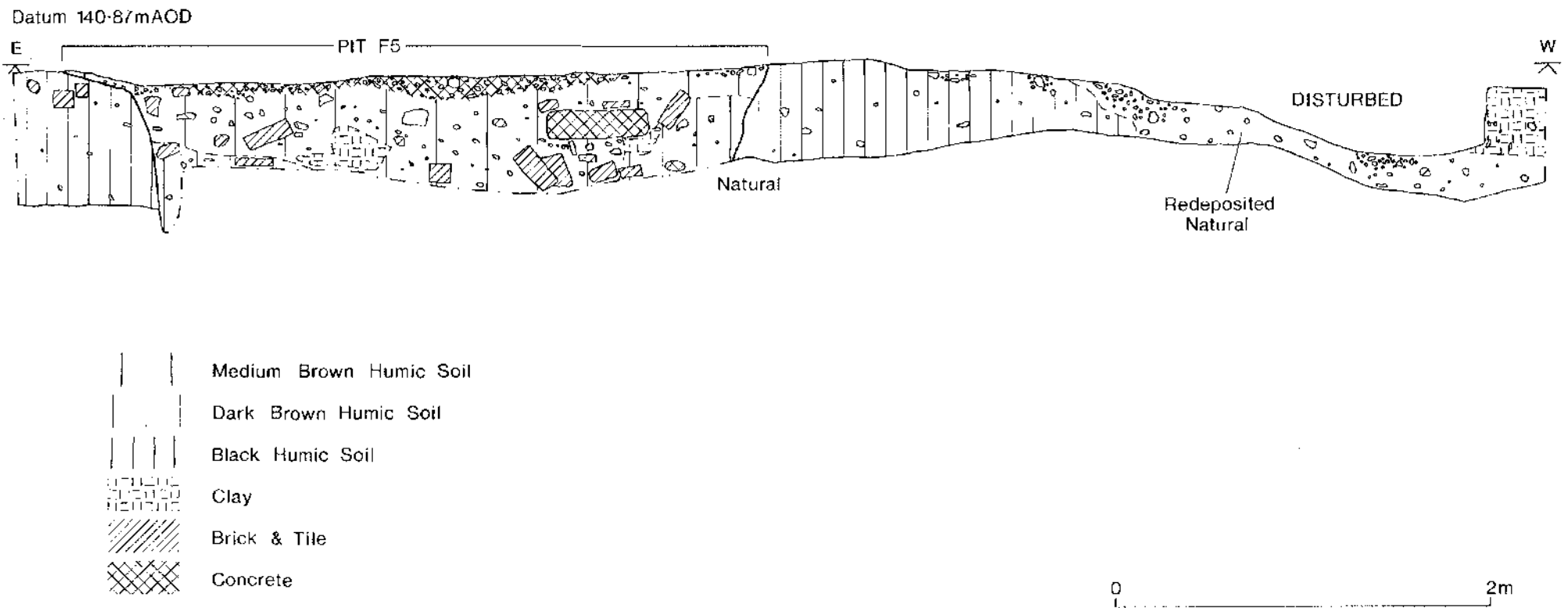


Figure 2

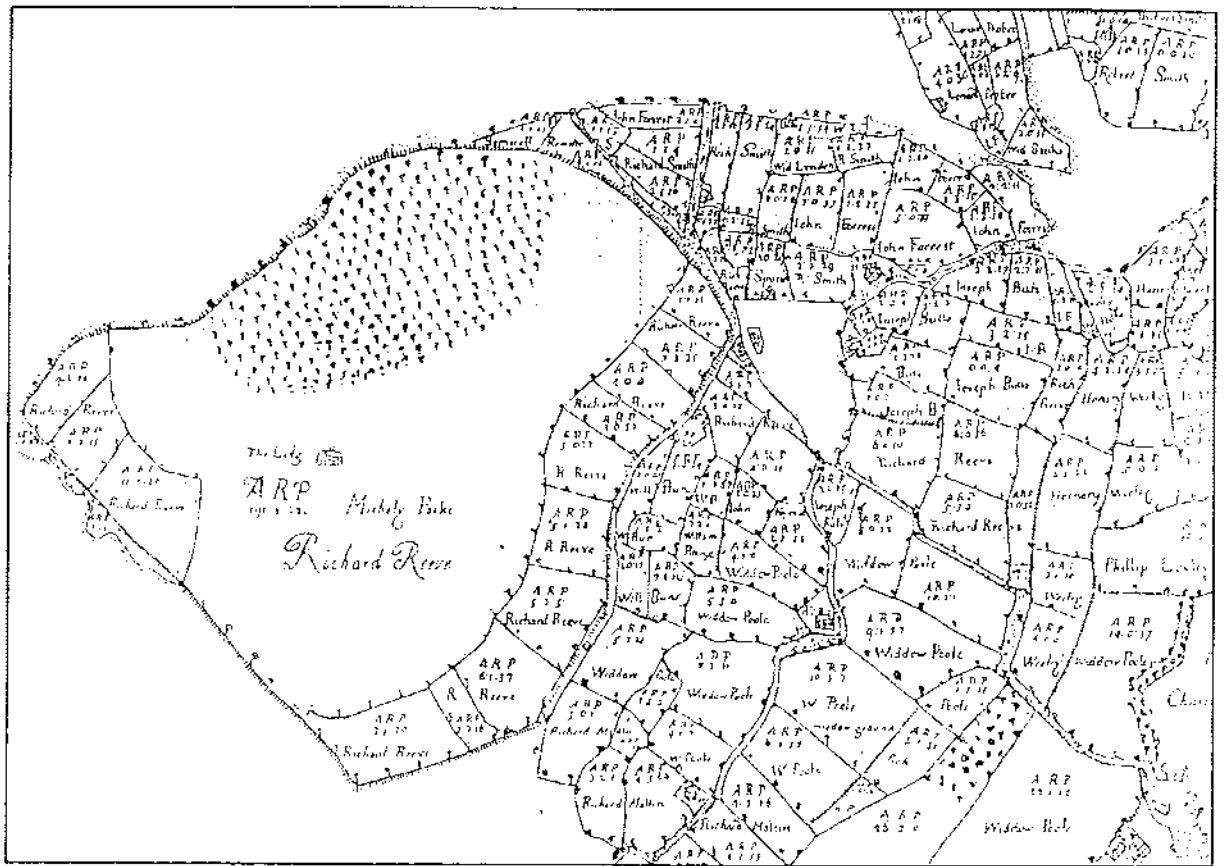


Figure 3

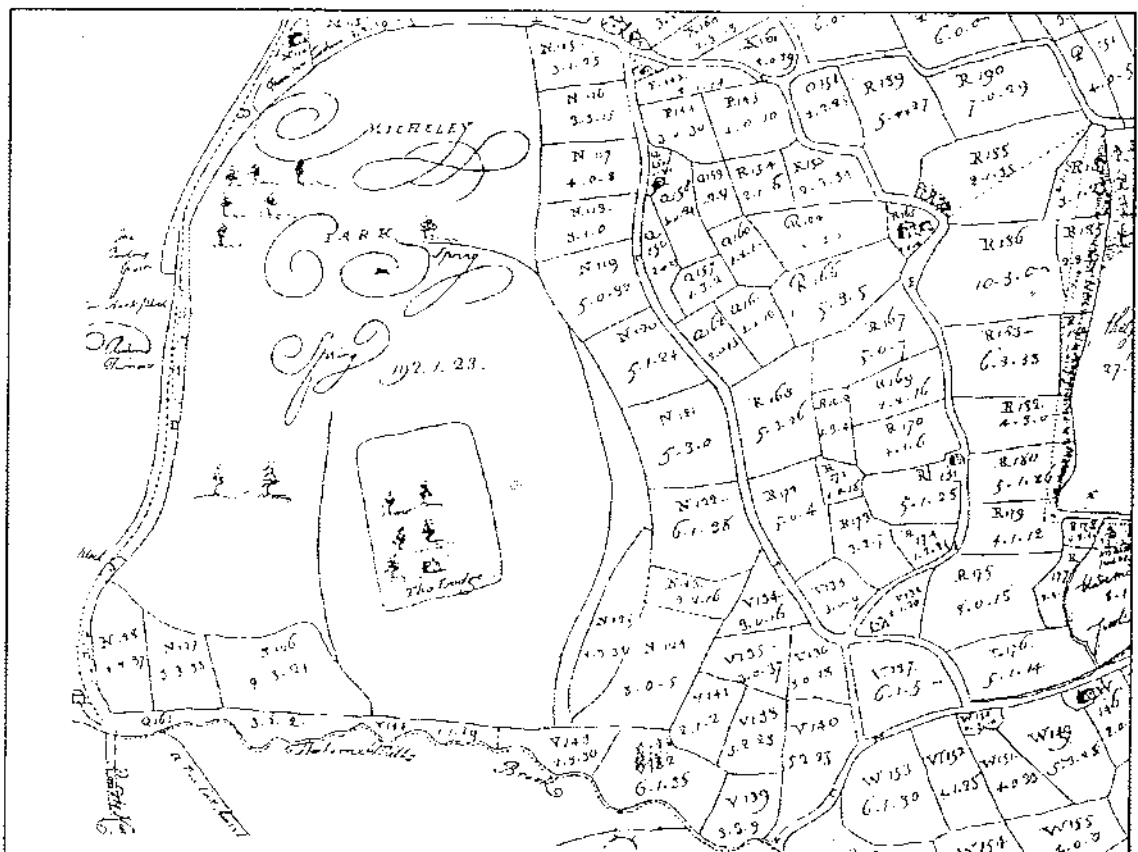


Figure 4

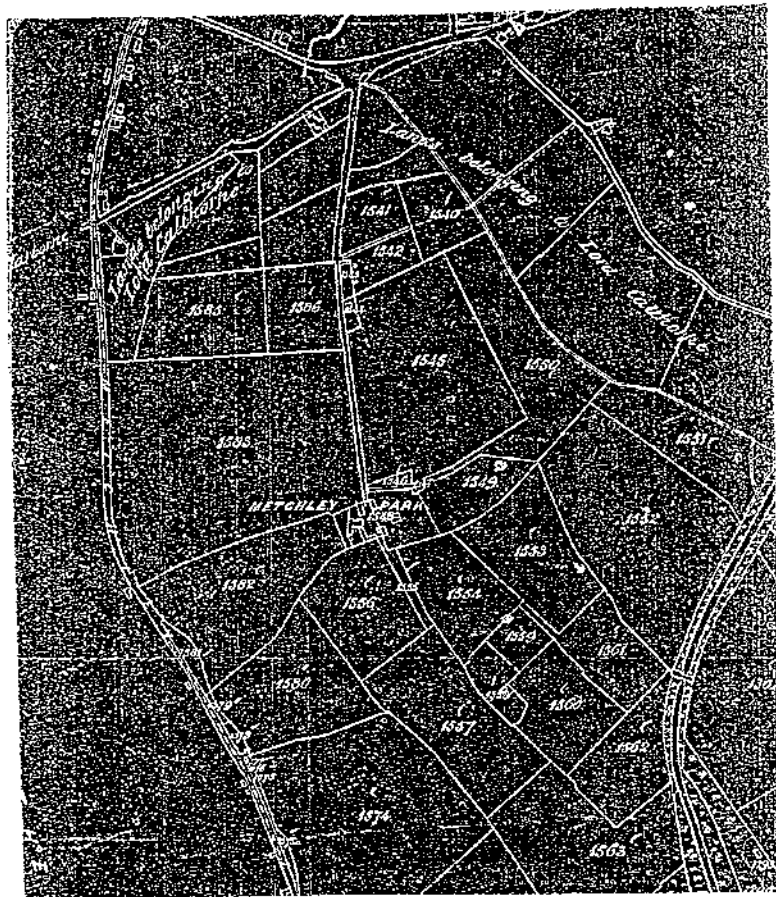


Figure 5

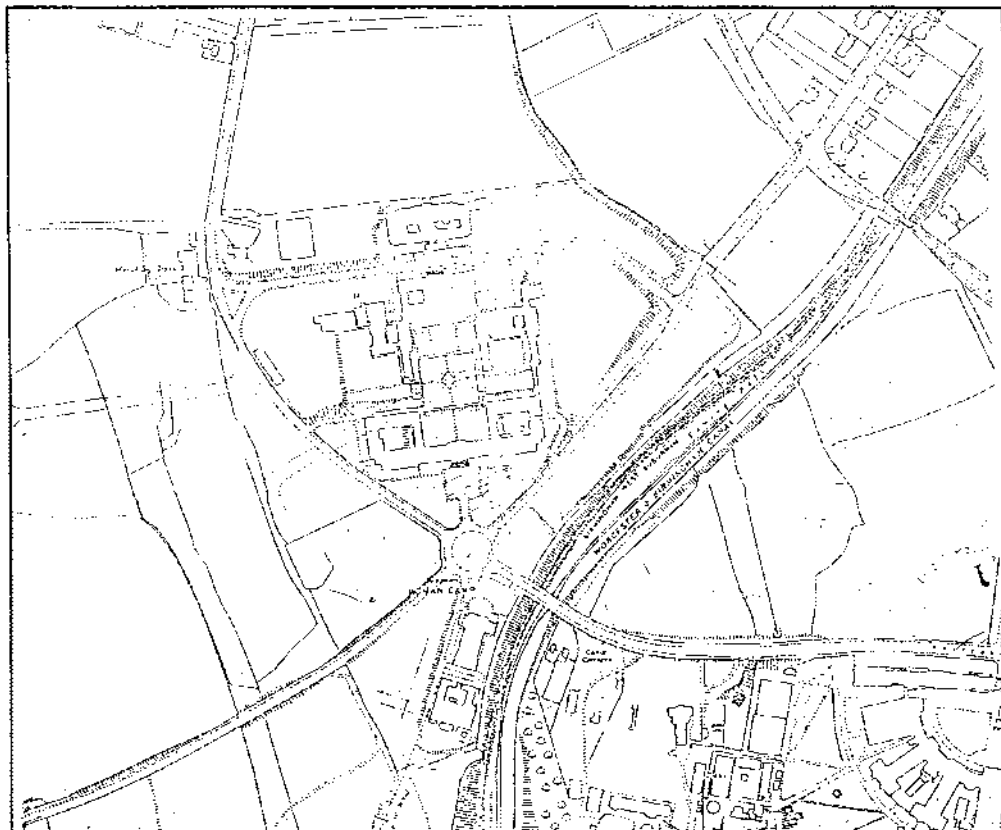


Figure 6