

Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit
Project No. 361.02
May 1996

**A watching brief at Showells Farm Moat,
Wolverhampton, May 1996**

by
Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit

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An archaeological watching brief at Showells Farm Moat, Wolverhampton, May 1996

By K. Nichol

Introduction

The archaeological work was commissioned by Wolverhampton Metropolitan Borough Council as a result of problems identified during construction work on the site of a day nursery on a vacant plot of land to the rear of Guy Avenue and Fourth Avenue (SJ 919 008 see figure 1). The area was identified by the West Midlands Sites and Monuments Record as the site of the medieval moat of Showell (SMR 2535), thought to be one of the earliest examples of this class of monument in the district. Larkham (1982) suggests that, according to a Domesday Book entry, the Saxon homestead of Lady Godiva may have been situated on the site or somewhere in the locality.

Map evidence indicated that the whole of the moated site formerly lay within the triangle of land defined by Guy Avenue, Fourth Avenue and Millington Road. However, twentieth century houses had encroached over approximately two thirds of the site.

The proposed development involved the construction of the main nursery building, an access road and a parking area. An archaeological evaluation was undertaken by Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit in August 1995 (Hughes, Moscrop, and Strenberg 1995) as part of a planning application. This led to recommendations that building work should not exceed a depth of 0.6m particularly in the vicinity of the moat platform to prevent damage to archaeological remains. Due to the poor ground conditions, and the use of heavy plant on site, this depth was exceeded; especially within the softer waterlogged areas filling the cut of the moat itself. A watching brief was therefore set up to monitor and attempt to minimise the effect of this heavy plant activity on the site.

The watching brief commenced in April/May 1996 and due to the waterlogged nature of the site it was recommended that the design of the ancillary landscaping and parking areas be altered. These alterations involved the importation of hard-core and rubble to build up rather than lower the ground-level over the moat platform. Work continued during May 1996 following a brief for archaeological salvage recording (White 1996).

Objectives and method

The changes made to the development, due to the water-logging of some areas of the site, meant that the principal area of concern became the proposed carpark over the moat platform. The broad objectives of the watching brief were therefore to:

- 1 - estimate the percentage of the moat that had been damaged during construction work.
- 2 - record and minimise the destruction of deposits on the moat platform itself

3 - record the depth of disturbance in the affected area of the moat fill

Due to the disturbance across the moat platform from heavy plant it was proposed that a trial trench be dug to re-establish the height of any existing significant archaeological deposits upon the platform of the moat. A trial pit was machine excavated under archaeological supervision, in the locality of the proposed carpark for the new development. This was necessary to determine a level from which imported stone could be built up from.

Trial trenching

The trial trench was dug by JCB using a 0.6m wide bucket, under archaeological supervision. The trench was located within the south-east corner of the moat platform (see figure 2). The trench measured 8m in length and was cut no deeper than 1m in depth. This trench revealed three different types of deposit:

1 - North end of the trench - potential archaeological deposits associated with the moat platform c.0.2-0.3m beneath the present ground-level.

2 - Middle of the trench -possible structural remains associated with a ?stone revetment around the platform c.0.3-0.4m beneath ground-level.

3 - South end of the trench - modern build up down to a depth of c.0.9m beneath ground-level within the fill of the moat.

Excavation was made difficult by the continual water-logging of the site which was due to surface drainage in the area being trapped by the natural boulder clay. It was thus concluded that the moat had probably relied heavily upon surface drainage for its water which was regulated by a leat, visible at the south-west corner of the moat on the First Edition OS map (1886), running west towards what had become a marsh area by the time of the Second Edition OS map (1919). This water-logging may also have had implications for the building of the surrounding housing estate. The modern overburden found in Trench 1 and visible in the upper fills of Trench 3 during the 1995 evaluation and apparent in the southern section of the trial trench dug in May 1996 seem to represent an episode of levelling upwards on top of the archaeology.

Discussion

Despite the problems with water-logging it proved possible to achieve many of the stated objectives of the brief for archaeological salvage recording drawn up by the West Midlands Joint Data Team (White 1996).

The results of the watching brief show that there are two main areas where archaeological deposits have been disturbed (see figure 2). The first is the site of the nursery building and immediate area surrounding it. The structure itself has been constructed on piles which have been rammed down onto bedrock. Five rows of double piles were constructed, each pair at

3m intervals, and c.1.0-1.5m of top soil was removed here in order to construct a rubble platform for the piling machine. Although this represents only a small percentage of the site, all moat fill deposits here will have been disturbed. The second significant area is the location of the access road from Fourth Avenue where deposits were dug out down to a depth of 3m in places, again within the fill of the moat.

The results of excavation of the trial trench in 1996 showed that potential archaeological deposits existed at a depth of c.0.2-0.3m below ground level on the platform. Thus there were clear archaeological implications for the construction of the carpark. Any archaeological features and deposits surviving below this level have therefore been capped by hard core and preserved in situ below the new tarmac surface of the carpark.

Despite some disturbance of the moat fill sediments in some areas of the site there remains a band of undisturbed deposits running around the edge of the development area. As well as this it seems likely that other undisturbed archaeological deposits remain in-tact beneath the gardens of the housing estate around the development area.

It seems likely that c.26 % of the moat fill and c.36 % of the moated platform have been disturbed during this development. Therefore a significant sample of undisturbed archaeological sequences, which are relatively likely to contain valuable environmental information due to the water-logging on the site, still survive in situ.

It should also be noted that excavation is extremely difficult on this site. There are constant problems of water-logging and significant archaeological deposits within the moat ditch probably occur at depths in excess of 3m beneath the present ground-level. Finally, the site is situated within one of the most run-down parts of Wolverhampton. Unless this situation were to dramatically improve no further archaeological work would be recommended here. In future area excavation of the moat platform may be the next appropriate method for recovering information about the site.

Acknowledgements

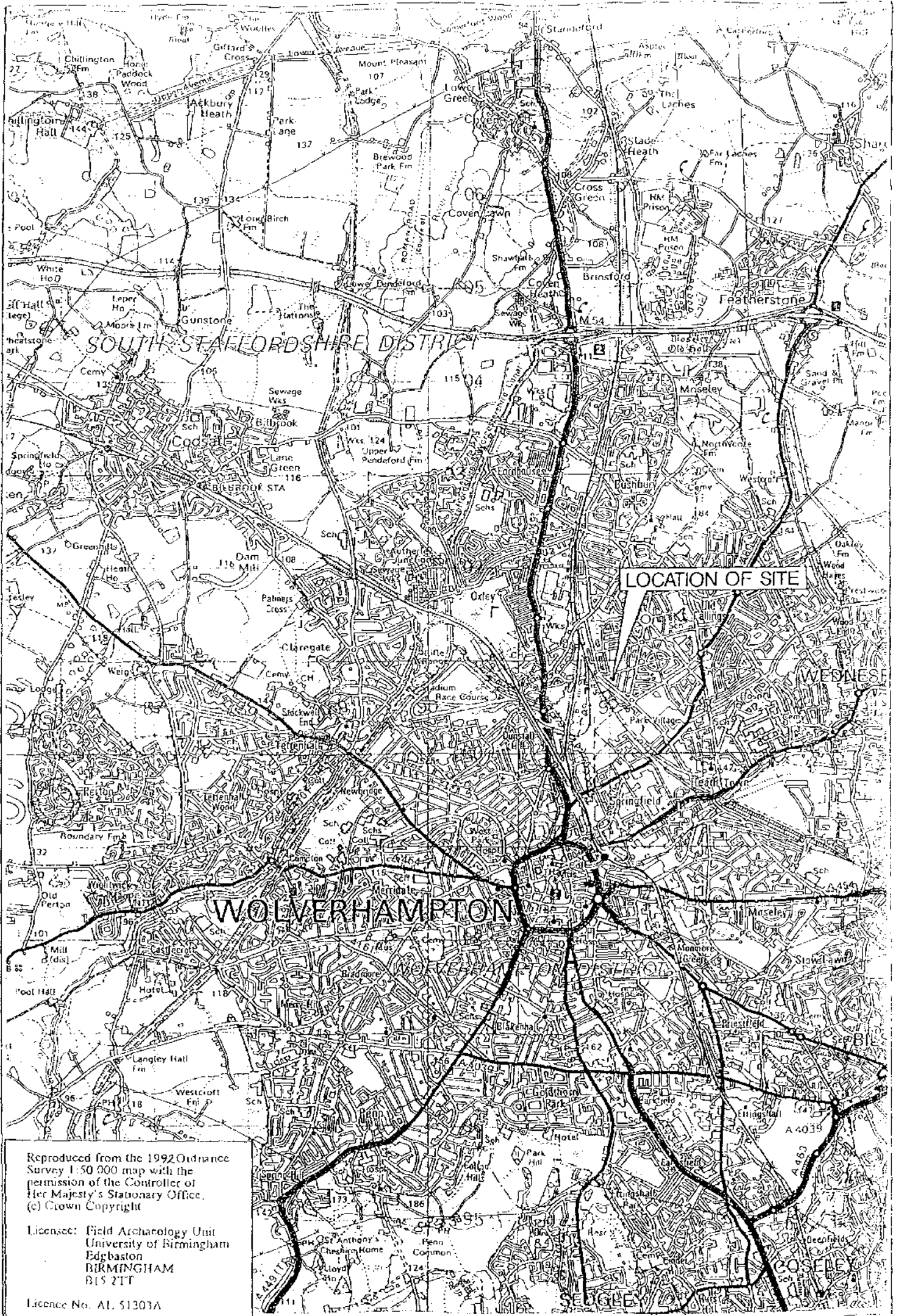
The watching brief and trial trenching was supervised by S. Litherland. The report was compiled by K. Nichol and edited by S. Litherland.

H. White (West Midlands SMR) and N. Beavan (Wolverhampton MBC) provided valuable support and advice.

References

Hughes, Moscrop, Sterenberg, 1995. An archaeological evaluation at Showells Farm Moat, Wolverhampton, *BUFAU Report*.

Larkham, P. J. 1982 'Moated sites in South Staffordshire', *Transactions of the South Staffordshire Archaeological and Historical Society* 24, 8-65.



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Fig.1

SHOWELL'S FARM MOAT

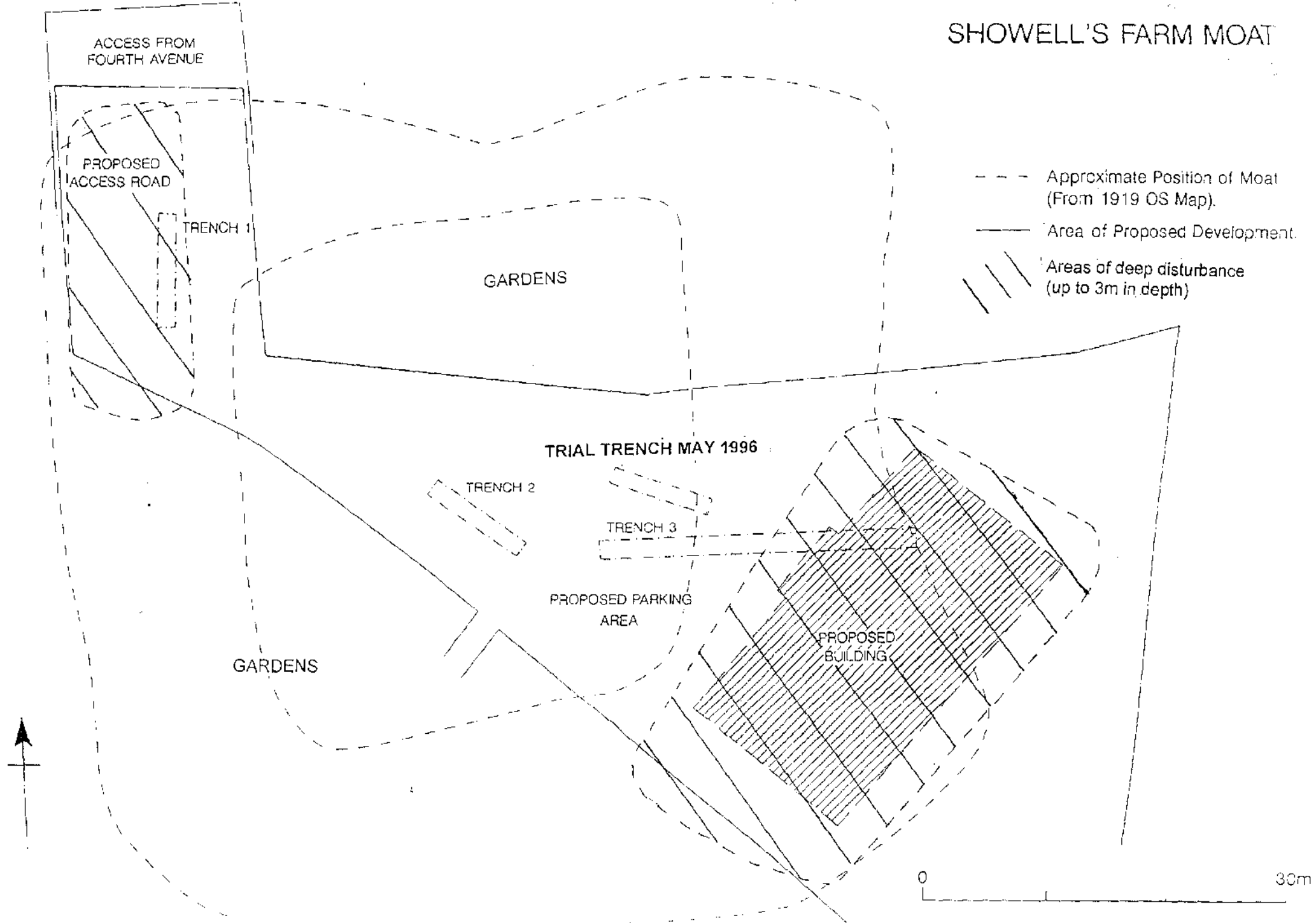


Fig.2

BRIEF FOR ARCHAEOLOGICAL SALVAGE RECORDING AT SHOWELLS MOAT; LOW HILL, WEST MIDLANDS (SMR 2535)

Introduction

Wolverhampton MBC is building a day nursery on land to the rear of Guy Rd and Fourth Ave, Low Hill at SJ919008. This has been identified as the site of the medieval moat of Showell (SMR 2535). An archaeological evaluation led to recommendations that building foundations should not be below a certain depth to prevent damage to archaeological remains. Building has commenced and due to the water logged nature of the site, design of the ancillary landscaping and parking areas has been altered. Archaeological deposits across the moat platform will be totally removed during building works. It is now proposed that the removal will be undertaken by archaeologists.

The aim of the programme of salvage recording is to totally record the archaeological deposits and structures that remain on the moat platform in the development area (delimited on the accompanying map), prior to development in the area.

The site is as described in a previous brief (White, 1995): Brief for an Archaeological Evaluation at Showells Farm Moat, Low Hill, Wolverhampton. The evaluation took place, in part, in August 1995 (Hughes; Moscrop & Sterenberg).

Requirements:

The following requirements are necessary to fulfil the aims of the salvage recording and achieve best practise.

- 1) The work will be undertaken by suitably qualified and experienced archaeological staff.
- 2) The Code of Conduct of the Institute of Field Archaeologists will be followed.
- 3) Before the project commences a specification should be presented by the archaeological contractor detailing approaches (sampling, treatment of artefactual and environmental material, report structure & deposition etc). This should be agreed with the sponsor Wolverhampton MBC and the West Midlands SMR before work commences.
- 4) Any variation in specification must be agreed in writing with all relevant parties.
- 5) A written report will be prepared as part of the recording, this will detail:
 - location, aims and methods of recording
 - assessment of the state of deposit preservation
 - assessment of the quantity and range of the artefactual material
 - discussion of the results of the recording
- 6) Two copies of the report should be submitted to the West Midlands SMR. Copies should be supplied to Wolverhampton MBC as requested.
- 7) A written report should be submitted to the appropriate national and/or local journals

Site Specific Requirements:

19th-20th century overburden can be removed mechanically under archaeological supervision.

All other archaeological deposits are to be totally excavated.

The sponsor (or their building contractors) will be responsible for providing plant machinery, pumping equipment etc.

Reinstatement of the site, after archaeological excavation has ceased, will not be required as part of this contract.

The archaeological excavation will be run in conjunction with development on other areas of the site, appropriate health and safety measures will be taken.

Notes for Guidance

The IFA standards and guidance can be used as a guide to good practise.

It is recommended that the West Midlands Sites and Monuments Officer is consulted prior to the submission of the specification and before the start of work.

An appropriate recording strategy shall be used and the method and justification for this stated in both the tender estimate and the report.

* * * * *

This brief has been prepared for the sponsors by the West Midlands Sites and Monuments Record on 15.5.1996

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