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An archaeological evaluation at Showells Farm Moat, Wolverhampton, August 1995

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Introduction

An archaeological evaluation was undertaken by Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit at the site of Showells Farm Moat, Low Hill, Wolverhampton (Figure 1) in August 1995 (SJ 919 008). The work was commissioned by Wolverhampton Metropolitan Borough Council following a proposal to build a day nursery on land to the rear of Guy Avenue and Fourth Avenue. The area has been identified on the West Midlands Sites and Monuments Record as the site of a medieval moat (SMR 2535).

The proposed development lies within an area of land between Guy Avenue, Fourth Avenue and Millington Road. Map evidence indicates that the whole of the moated site formerly lay within this triangle of land. However, twentieth century housing has been built over approximately two thirds of the site. The current development proposal will involve the construction of the main nursery building over the south-eastern corner of the former moat (Figure 2). An access road and parking area will be constructed over the north-western corner of the moat and part of the moat platform.

Objectives and method

The broad objective of the evaluation was to determine the nature, extent, significance and survival of archaeological deposits over the development area. It was intended to answer three specific questions about the site. These were outlined in a brief prepared by the West Midlands Sites and Monuments Record.

1 - the depth of the top of significant archaeological deposits in the area of the entranceway and associated parking.

2 - the survival, or otherwise, and significance of archaeological deposits on the moat platform.

3 - the depth and form of the moat itself and the make up and significance of the deposits within it.

These objectives were to be achieved by a combination of historical and cartographic research and trial trenching. An examination of available primary and secondary documentary and cartographic sources (including the Sites and Monuments Record) was made in an attempt to trace the recorded history of the site , and to place it within its wider local and regional context.

Three trial trenches were excavated (Figure 2). Trench 1, 9m x 1.5m, was located in the area of the proposed access road on the projected line of the north-west side of the moat. Trench 2, 9m x 1.5m, was located in the proposed parking area, on the site of the former moat platform. Trench 3, 18m x 1.5m, was located across the projected south-eastern side of the former moat.

In each of the trenches topsoil, and other modern deposits, were removed by machine. In the case of Trench 2 these deposits overlay the orange-brown clay subsoil. Several features were recorded cutting this subsoil. However, in both Trenches 1 and 3 it became clear that the modern deposits had been used to backfill the moat, possibly when the surrounding housing estate was built. For safety reasons it was not possible to determine the depth of these modern deposits or the top of the underlying archaeological fills. This problem was compounded by the inability to prevent children from the surrounding estate from venturing onto the site. The behaviour of these children severely impeded the progress of the work. Repeated attempts to erect safety fencing and to shore-up the sides of the trenches had to be abandoned due to vandalism. This led to a serious concern for the safety of both the site staff and the children and there became no alternative but to backfill the trenches before they could be fully excavated and recorded. The following report includes a basic outline of the results of the trial trenches before they had to be backfilled.

Following the evaluation, in September 1995, a series of 4 test pits were excavated by Ground Investigation and Piling Limited (1995) in the vicinity of the moat. This work was monitored by Birmingham Univeristy Field Archaeology Unit. The approximate position of these test pits are indicated on Figure 2.

Historic background

Showells Farm Moat belongs to a class of medieval monument common throughout Britain. Well over 5000 moated sites have been recorded varying considerably in shape with the majority having a roughly rectangular form, as is the case at Showells Farm. They are characterised by a surrounding ditch, in most cases intended to be filled with water. The majority of moated sites were medieval manorial or farmstead complexes. However, a moat might also surround a variety of other structures such as a windmill, chapel or barn. The majority appear to have been dug during the 13th and early 14th centuries although earlier and later examples are also known.

The moat, which once lay to the south of Showells Farm, is recorded by the VCH (1908) as square in plan, measuring 260 feet square. On the Bushbury Tithe Award (1852) it is depicted as a square and water-filled homestead moat, with a causeway in the centre of its northern side. The first edition OS map (1886) depicts the moat as a complete earthwork with the western, southern and part of the eastern arm being water-filled. It seems probable that the moat was drained and backfilled immediately prior to the construction of the existing housing estate during the middle part of this century.

The early edition OS maps suggest a further earthwork to the west of the moat. This has the appearance of a small pond. There are also indications of a possible linear earthwork further to the west and possible ditch-like features to the south which may represent boundary definitions. A possible leat is also depicted running from the south-western corner of the moat in a westerly direction. The water from this may have been channelled into the southernmost of these ditch-like features. On the second edition OS map (1919) marshy areas to the west of the moat may be former fishpond sites. This, combined with the possible existence of a series of water channels, might suggest that a complex water system was situated to the west of the moated site.

Larkham (1982) records the name of the site as changing frequently in the past from Show Hill to Sewall to Seawall. He 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, and that the moat was later the "seat of the Huntbaches for many years". In his brief description he also states that the new farmhouse was built in the late 18th century. Shaw (1801) in his discussion of the manor of Seawall says that "this old seat of the Huntbaches has been many years dilapidated, and a neat farm-house erected on its site, surrounded by the moat". A visit by the RCHM(E) in 1958 failed to identify any above ground remains within the area of the moat that has not now been masked by the housing development.

Trial trenching

Trench 1 - This trench was excavated to a depth of 1m and consisted entirely of modern rubble and dark brown soils. These deposits were comparable with the upper fills of Trench 3 and it seems almost certain that they represent a recent, twentieth century, backfill of the moat ditch.

Trench 2 - An orange-brown clay was encountered at a depth of 0.6m. A sondage, 0.5m deep, excavated through this clay at the eastern end of the trench suggested that this was the natural subsoil rather than a redeposited material. Several features were observed cutting the clay. These included a linear feature, 1.0m wide, and orientated north-east - south-west, and several sub-circular features, possibly pits. Unfortunately, there was insufficient time to sample these features (due to the interference outlined above). However, the dark brown sandy-clay fills contained fragments of brick and coal suggesting that they were post-medieval in date. These features were overlain by 0.6m of grey-brown, clay-loam containing fragments of post-medieval and modern brick, pottery and glass.

Trench 3 - This trench was located across the south-eastern side of the moat ditch and was excavated to maximum depth of 2.5m. It was not possible to properly define the edges of the ditch. However, traces of the sides were identified towards either end of the bottom of the trench and these suggested that it was over 15m wide. The eastern side of the moat ditch, identified at a depth of 2.3m, was associated with grey-brown waterlogged silts. These may represent the uppermost part of the medieval silt deposits. Unfortunately, the circumstances of the excavation (in particular safety considerations) made it impossible to examine these deposits in detail. The uppermost

fills of the moat ditch consisted of a series of slumped modern deposits containing post-medieval and modern brick, pottery, glass and metalwork.

Test Pits (See also technical report by Ground Investigations and Piling Limited 1995)

Test Pit 1 - This was excavated to a depth of 3.5m. In the eastern side of the Trial Pit the natural red clay was overlain by up to 0.8m of modern rubble and topsoil. The upper edge of the cut for the moat ditch was visible in the western side of the Trial Pit. The lower fill of this cut was a dark brown waterlogged deposit with organic inclusions (fragments of wood). This was overlain by a red-brown rubble deposit.

Test Pits 2 - This was excavated to a depth of 3m. The natural clay was overlain by up to 0.6m of modern rubble and topsoil. There were no indications of the moat fill or any other features.

Test Pit 3 - This was excavated to a depth of 4m. In the eastern part of the Trial Pit, the clay natural was overlain by up to 1.4m of modern rubble and topsoil. However, there were indications of the upper part of the cut for the moat ditch in the northwestern side of the Test Pit, filled with dark brown/grey silt with some waterlogging.

Test Pit 4 - This was excavated to a depth of 3.3m. The natural clay was recorded at a depth of 2.5-3m. This was overlain by a waterlogged, red-brown sandy silt with traces of organic material (largely twigs) and by 0.9m of grey-black silt with organic inclusions. These presumably correspond with the lower fills of the moat. The uppermost layers consisted of 1.45m of red-brown sandy silt and 0.15m of topsoil.

No finds were recovered form any of the waterlogged deposits recorded in Test Pits 1-3. No finds earlier than the 19th century were recorded in any of the upper deposits in the Test Pits.

Discussion

Despite the problems encountered during the fieldwork, it proved possible to achieve many of the stated objectives of the evaluation. It was clear from Trench 2 that at least 0.6m of modern rubble seal any potential archaeological deposits that might survive on the moat platform. Although several features were identified cutting the natural subsoil in this trench, it seems likely that these are post-medieval in date. It seems probable that they represent back-yard activity (possibly including rubbish pits) associated with the 18th and 19th century Showells Farm. The depth of the modern rubble may make it possible to ensure that any other potential deposits will not be threatened by the proposed access road and parking area.

The modern rubble deposits encountered in Trench 1 appear to confirm the projected location of the north-west side of the moat. The depth of the comparable fills recorded

in Trench 3 makes it extremely unlikely that any archaeologically significant moat fills will be adversely affected by the proposed development.

Trench 3 gave some indication of the substantial size of the moat suggesting that it was at least 15m wide and well over 2.5m deep. The evaluation trench and Test Pit 4 provided indications of waterlogged silt deposits at a depth of 2.3m or more. It seems likely that at least some of these deposits may have accumulated during the occupation of the moat platform and may contain important artefactual and environmental information. Of particular interest will be any dating evidence from these primary fills.

The stratigraphy in the test pits suggested that Test Pit 4 was located within the central area of the moat and Test Pits 1 and 3 were located close to the outer edge. This would appear to correspond with the expected location of the moat edges suggested by the earlier OS maps (see Figure 2). Test Pit 2 was clearly located in the area of the natural boulder clay beyond the outer edge of the moat.

The depth and scale of the moat will clearly have implications for the method of construction of the proposed nursery building. This might in turn have archaeological implications. For example, it may be considered necessary to use foundation piles dug into the primary moat fills.

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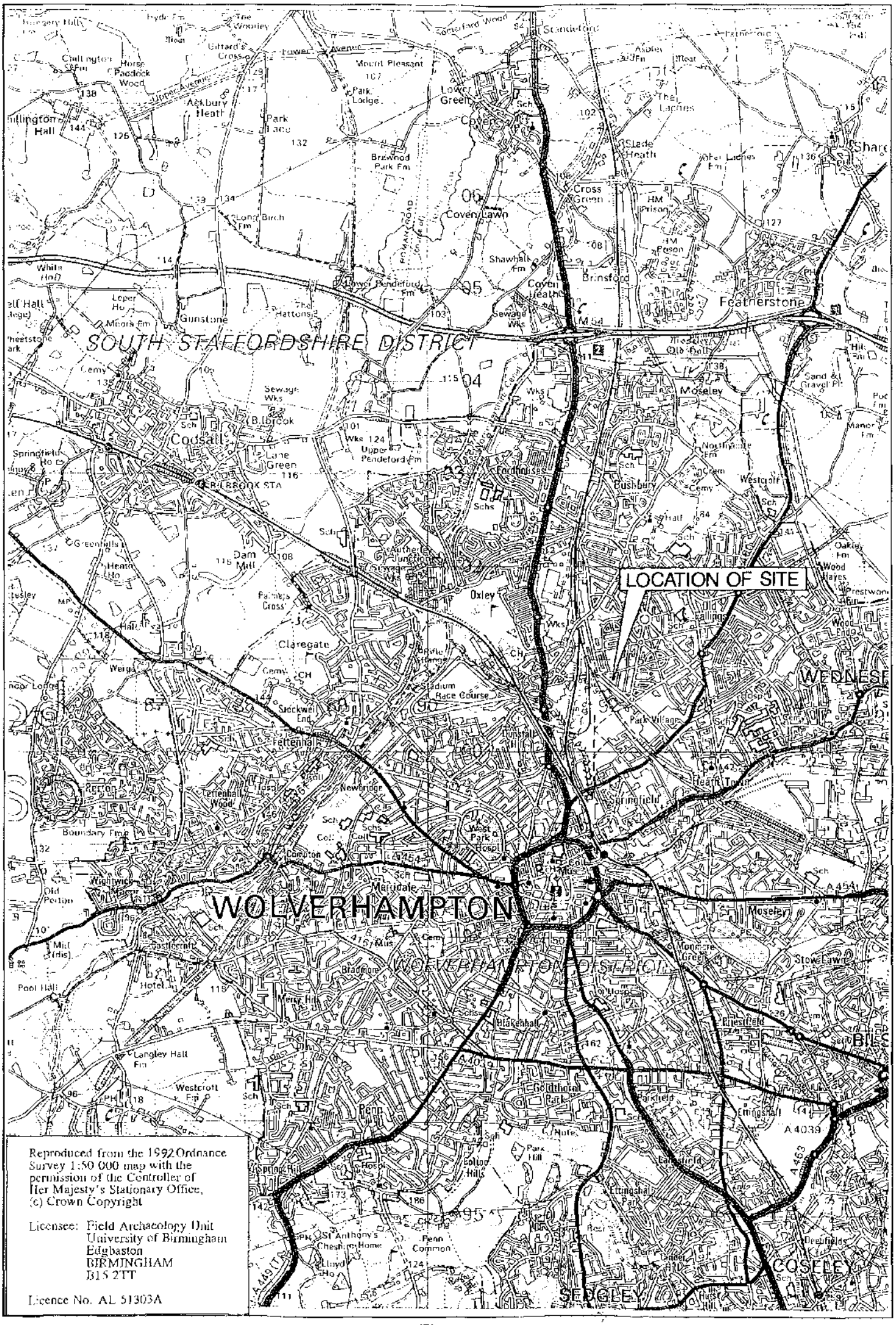
LOCATION OF SITE
SOUTH STAFFORDSHIRE DISTRICT
WOLVERHAMPTON
WOLVERHAMPTON DISTRICT
Coseley
Sedgley
Featherstone
Moseley
Codsall
Bushbury
Oxley
Claregate
Merridale
Penn
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Figure 1

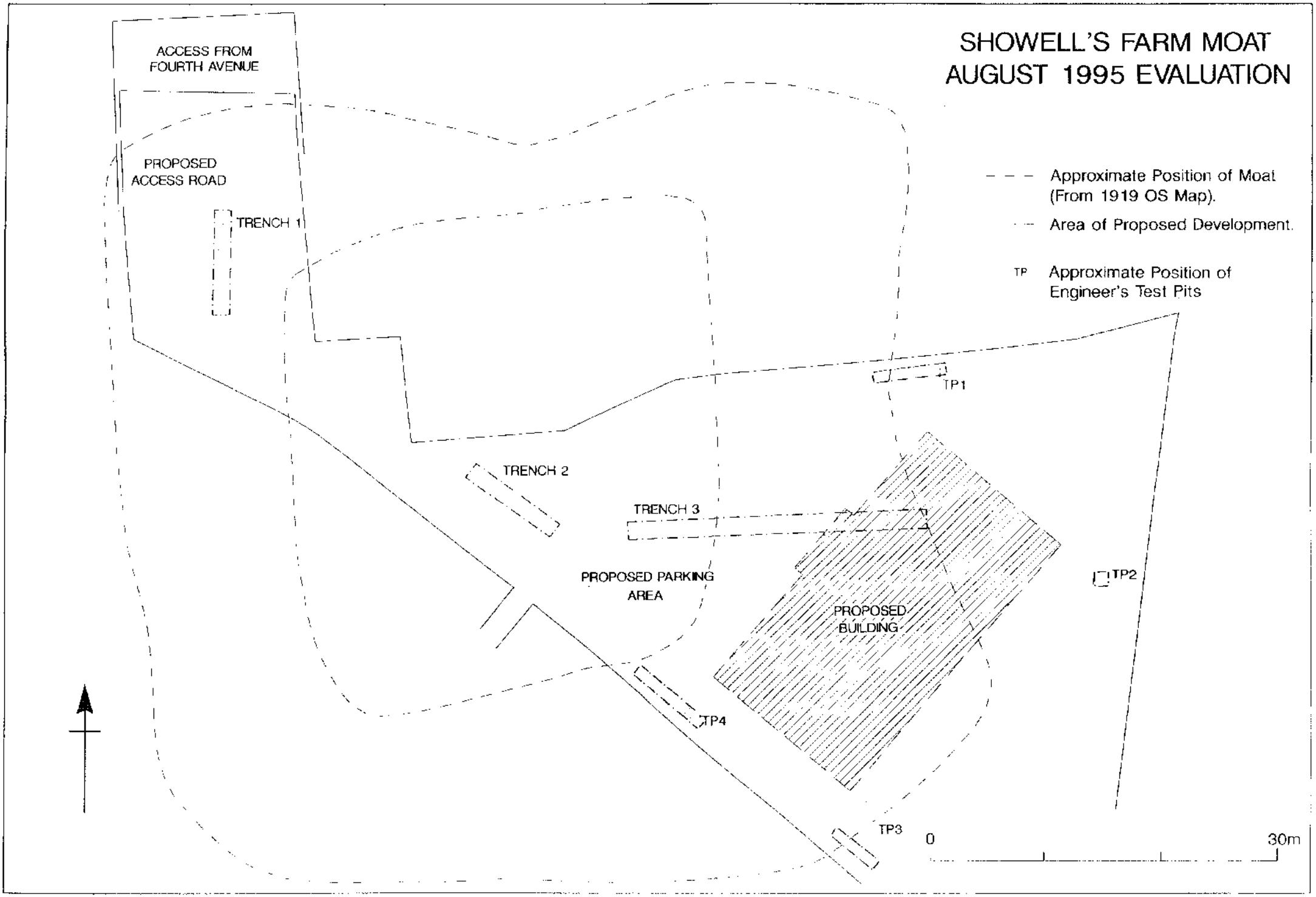
SHOWELL'S FARM MOAT
AUGUST 1995 EVALUATION
ACCESS FROM
FOURTH AVENUE
PROPOSED
ACCESS ROAD
TRENCH 1
TRENCH 2
TRENCH 3
PROPOSED PARKING
AREA
PROPOSED
BUILDING
TP1
TP2
TP3
TP4
Approximate Position of Moat
(From 1919 OS Map).
Area of Proposed Development.
TP Approximate Position of
Engineer's Test Pits
0
30m

Figure 2