

**Firs Cottage, Haseley
Green, Warwickshire:
an archaeological
watching brief 2000.**

Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit
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by
Roy Krakowicz

For further information please contact:
Simon Buteux or Iain Ferris (Directors)
Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit
The University of Birmingham
Edgbaston
Birmingham B15 2TT
Tel: 0121 414 5513
Fax: 0121 414 5516
E-Mail: BUFAU@bham.ac.uk
Web Address: <http://www.bufau.bham.ac.uk>

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1.0 Summary

An archaeological watching brief was undertaken in July 2000, on the site of a new four-bedroom dwelling, designed as a replacement for, and adjacent to, the existing Firs Cottage in Haseley Green, Warwickshire (centred on NGR SP 235695). The rural site lies within an area of undated earthworks (Warwicks SMR WA 2628), hence planning permission was granted by Warwick District Council on the condition that an archaeologist be in attendance during any groundworks associated with the scheme. Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit was commissioned by the owners of the property to carry out a watching brief whilst the contractors, McVeigh Construction Ltd. undertook the groundworks.

Preparation of the land, prior to the commencement of construction work, involved topsoil-stripping and landscaping of the site. No features of archaeological relevance were uncovered during these operations. Artefacts within the machine-removed soil layers were, in the main, of little archaeological interest, consisting predominantly of relatively modern building debris and domestic detritus.

2.0 Introduction

Warwick District Council granted planning permission for a new four-bedroomed replacement dwelling to be erected on a site adjacent to the existing Firs Cottage (centred on NGR. SP 235695), Haseley Green, Warwickshire (Fig.1). As a result of the development site being within an area of undated earthworks, permission was granted on condition that an archaeological watching brief be undertaken during any groundworks, prior to building construction and laying of the access road. Consequently, Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit (BUFAU) was commissioned by the owners of the property to carry out a watching brief in liaison with the contractors, McVeigh Construction Ltd.

The purpose of the watching brief was to record any archaeological deposits or features exposed during groundwork on the site. An archaeologist visited the site on July 17th, 18th and 19th, in order to monitor topsoil stripping and subsequent excavation of subsoil to form a level surface on which to erect the buildings. This report describes the results of the watching brief.

3.0 Site Location and History

Haseley Green is situated three miles (5 km) southwest of Kenilworth town centre and some four miles (6.5 km) northwest of the centre of Warwick. The development site covers less than one hectare and is centred upon National Grid Reference SP 235695 (Fig.1). The planned location of the new dwelling lies to the northwest of, and immediately to the rear of, the existing cottage, which fronts onto the single lane that passes through the community (Fig.2). The northeast boundary of the development area runs along the line of the garden fence of Pound Cottage, the neighbouring dwelling.

As regards the site topography, the land under development is on an incline, with the highest point situated in the extreme-north corner. From there, the land drops away over the rest of the site, but most markedly towards the existing Firs Cottage, i.e. to the southeast. The British Geological Survey Map of the area (Sheet 183, Redditch, Solid and Drift Geology) indicates that the underlying geology of the site comprises a deposit of Till (Boulder Clay).

The Warwickshire Museum Field Services brief for archaeological work at Firs Cottage (issued September 1999) reported that the development is located within an area of undated earthworks (Warwickshire Sites and Monuments Record No. WA 2628). They suggest that the latter may represent the visible remnants of a deserted medieval settlement. In addition, an Ordnance Survey map of 1887 shows the presence of a smithy in that part of the site earmarked for the access driveway.

4.0 Methodology

A suitably qualified archaeologist from Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit attended the construction site at Firs Cottage on July 17th, 18th and 19th, 2000. The first and second visits were in order to continuously monitor the topsoil stripping by a mechanical excavator fitted with a toothless ditching bucket. The removal of a subsurface layer, overlying the natural subsoil in the eastern and southeastern sectors of the site, was also monitored. The third visit coincided with the levelling of the development area. The latter was achieved principally by removing natural Boulder Clay from the northern quadrant of the site and depositing it in the eastern quadrant to build-up the ground level there.

Where appropriate, possible archaeological features were hand-excavated to provide information concerning the survival and complexity of feature fills, and to recover artefactual evidence. Recording was by means of pre-printed *pro-forma* record cards for features and contexts, supplemented by black & white, and colour-print photography. Sections and plans were drawn at 1:10 or 1:200, as appropriate. These site records are currently archived at BUFAU. During the groundworks, any artefacts of archaeological interest were recovered and bagged for future reference. The small collection of finds was subsequently cleaned and inspected, and is presently in storage at BUFAU.

5.0 Results

Topsoil stripping of the site began on the afternoon of July 17th, immediately following the removal of vegetation, commencing in the northern corner of the development area. The silty topsoil (context 1000) varied in thickness, but averaged some 0.25m. in depth. It contained a variety of modern detritus, including:- glass bottles and sherds; tile and slate fragments; red building-brick fragments; modern/post-medieval pottery sherds (glazed/patterned); a small number of plastic items; animal bone fragments; a few corroded, iron objects (one was recognisable as a modern padlock). The greatest concentrations of such material were in the area immediately to the rear of the existing Firs Cottage, which also yielded a brown-glazed, stoneware inkwell, a lump of non-metallic slag and a piece of cattle bone, measuring 50mm in length and cut from a humerus. Both ends clearly showed evidence of hand-sawing, thereby indicating that it was most probably a reject from a bone-working operation (Umberto Albarella *pers. comm.*).

Stripping of the topsoil in the north and western quadrants of the development area revealed a pale brown, clayey subsoil (1006), later shown to be a 0.2m-deep layer overlying red Boulder Clay (1001). Cut into the subsoil was a shallow posthole (F002), that contained an infill (1005) of stones, housebricks and topsoil (Fig.3). This feature appeared modern, but some of the stone inclusions (present as bracing for a post ?) showed evidence of working, hence were of sufficient interest to warrant its sectioning and recording. Excavation revealed that the hole was semi-circular in plan and non-symmetrical in profile, measuring 0.17m deep by 0.45m wide. Two sizeable fragments of grey/off-white stone were recovered from the infill. After cleaning, they were examined and their fabric tentatively identified as a close-textured, fossil-free limestone. The larger of the two appeared to have been cut (not chiselled) in one direction to form a flat face, whilst the second was a segment of a carved edge, suggestive of ornamental masonry from a building or monument (Lynne Bevan *pers. comm.*).

A close inspection of the now-exposed subsoil (1006) yielded a loose scattering of seven pottery sherds embedded within its surface a short distance to the east of feature F002. Four of the sherds (including part of a rim) were of a hard, reduced fabric with fine, quartz inclusions. A fifth sherd was from the base of a vessel, with an oxidised fabric, quartz inclusions and a brown glaze on the inner surface. The two remaining sherds, glazed and fitting together, had oxidised surfaces, reduced cores and fine quartz inclusions. They appeared to be from the base of a vessel that had a yellow-green glaze, with some dark green mottling, on the inner surface. All of the sherds are medieval, dating from the 13th/14th century (Annette Hancock *pers. comm.*).

Three fragments of iron-containing slag were found embedded in subsoil 1006 to the northwest of posthole F002 and close to the excavation bank. They were not associated with any visible feature or cluster of artefacts.

As the machine-stripping approached the existing Firs Cottage, the nature of the subsoil changed to that of a brown, clayey deposit (1004), containing flecks of charcoal and detritus similar to that seen in the topsoil. The cleaning operation also yielded more stone

fragments of note, including several whose fabric was identical to that of the worked stones recovered from posthole infill 1005. One such fragment had a uniform thickness of 15mm and appeared to be the corner of a tile or thin slab. A further fragment of tile-shaped stone was recovered, but it was 17mm thick and comprised a yellowish-grey sandstone. Finally, an irregularly-shaped fragment of grey sandstone was found, which had mortar remnants adhering to two surfaces that formed a right-angle.

A linear ditch (F001), aligned northwest-southeast, was noted cutting subsoil 1004 (Fig.3). The course of the ditch could be traced to a point halfway across the stripped area, where it became indistinct. A box-section was put through the feature and continued downwards until natural Boulder Clay (1001) was encountered. The section showed that the feature was a V-shaped ditch, 0.9m wide and 0.3m deep, infilled with a heterogeneous mix of modern building debris, household detritus and silty soil (1002). There was no evidence to suggest that pipework had been laid in the ditch at any stage.

The section also served as a means of assessing the depth and nature of subsoil 1004. It showed that the latter comprised a 0.3m-deep deposit, throughout which were randomly distributed charcoal flecks, some modern building rubble and household refuse, and rounded pebbles. Glazed/patterned pot sherds and pebbles were also found impressed into the natural clay (1001) underlying the deposit. Subsoil 1004 may therefore be a make-up layer, introduced at some stage to level the ground immediately behind the existing Firs Cottage. Subsoil layer 1006, seen beneath the topsoil in the north quadrant of the development area, seemed to be absent from the stratigraphy.

When the contractors became aware that stripping the topsoil had failed to expose the natural Boulder Clay (1001) over the whole of the site, the excavator removed layers 1004 and 1006. This successfully revealed the red Till (within which were occasional green sandstone inclusions), except in the extreme eastern corner where the natural, underlying geology was predominantly that of red sand. Stripping off layer 1004 also revealed the ethereal trace of a linear feature (F004), aligned northeast-southwest across the site (Fig.3). The regularity of its width, some 0.3m, and its straightness suggested that it was a modern, machine-cut trench. However, no pipework was apparent.

On July 19th, the archaeologist attended the site whilst the latter was being levelled in preparation for building construction. This involved the excavation of the northern quadrant of the development down to a maximum depth of 0.9m beneath the topsoil surface. In the western quadrant, excavations were to an average depth of 0.6m. Both operations generated significant quantities of Boulder Clay spoil and this was deposited on top of the natural clay/sand in the eastern quadrant, to build that part of the site up to the required level. The southern quadrant was already stripped to a depth of 0.3m and needed no further landscaping.

During the levelling operation, no further artefacts were found and only one more feature was discovered. A ceramic (water)pipe was unearthed which was aligned northwest - southeast (Fig.3) and whose course could be traced halfway across the site towards Firs Cottage. However, neither the cut or infill of its trench (F003) could be discerned in the

northwest baulk of the excavation into which the pipework disappeared, some 0.7m beneath the topsoil surface. As the feature was clearly modern, the matter was not investigated further.

6.0 Conclusions

The forms of the features uncovered by the site groundworks indicate that they are of recent origin. Both the ceramic pipework and rubble-filled ditch F001 are aligned downslope, suggesting that their role is one of land drainage, but the purpose of trench F004 is less apparent. It seems to run from Pound Cottage to (and under ?) the garden shed at the rear of Firs Cottage.

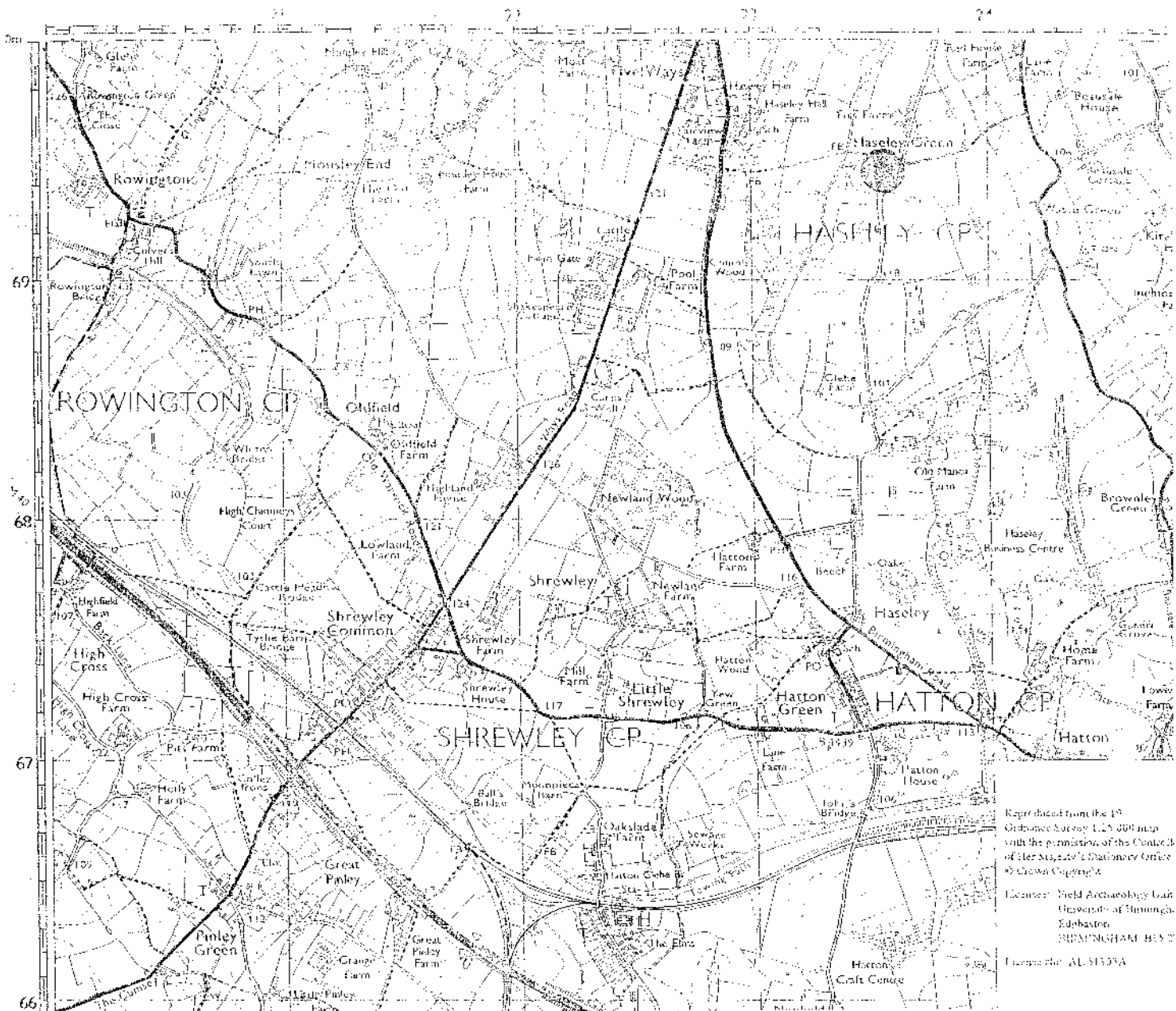
Feature F002 is a modern posthole. The presence of worked limestone fragments within its fill and lightly scattered throughout the topsoil is interesting. However, their origins (structural or monumental) and age are not immediately apparent, nor how and when they were introduced on to site. The same could be said for the two fragments of grey sandstone recovered during the stripping operations.

The seven sherds of medieval pot suggest domestic medieval activity in the area, but no further evidence was found to support the existence of a deserted settlement dating from that period.

Supportive evidence for the presence of a smithy on site was severely limited. Small lumps of corroded iron were encountered on occasion during topsoil stripping, but no more so than might be expected in any domestic rural environment. Three fragments of iron-containing slag were found, in isolation, but deposits of ash and clinker were absent from the area under development.

7.0 Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to McVeigh Construction Ltd. for their co-operation during the watching brief. Roy Krakowicz carried out the fieldwork and wrote this report. The project was managed by Iain Ferris, who also edited the report.



SITE OF FIRS COTTAGE, HASLELEY GREEN

FIG. 1 MAP SHOWING LOCATION OF FIRS COTTAGE, HASLELEY GREEN.

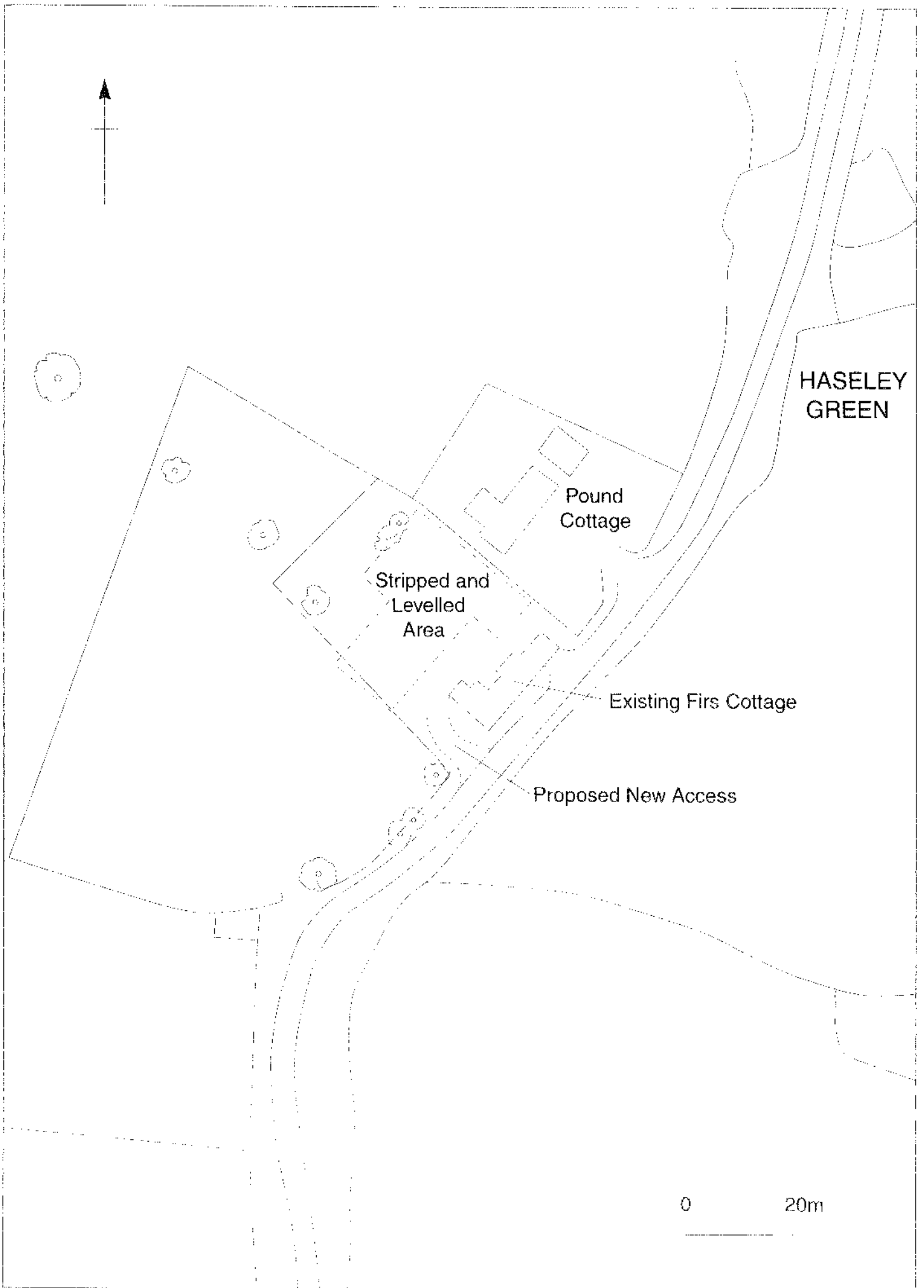


FIG. 2. MAP SHOWING THE LOCATION OF THE DEVELOPMENT AREA.

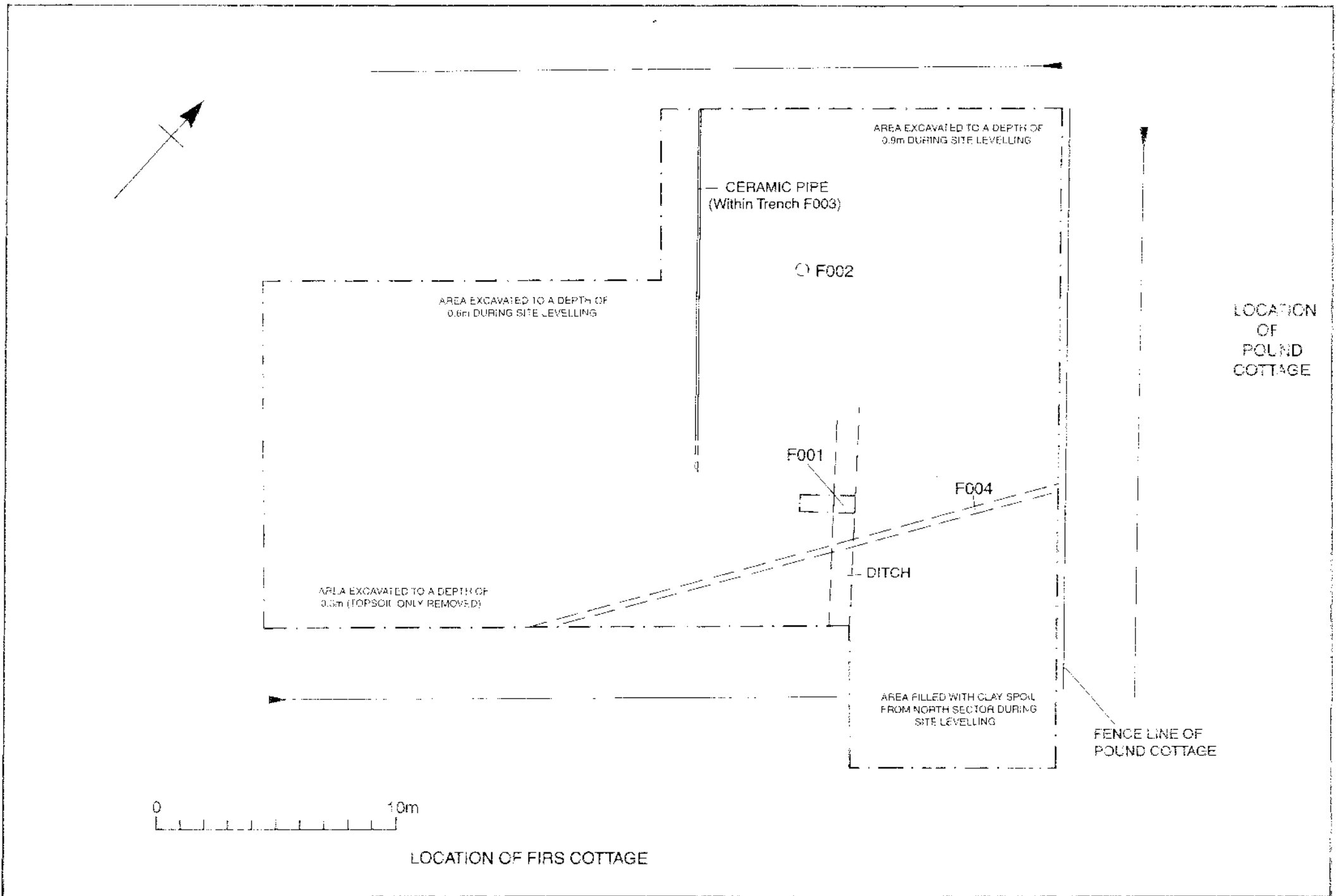


FIG. 3 PLAN OF AREA TOPSOIL-STRIIPPED AND LEVELLED PRIOR TO BUILDING ERECTION