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**Land Adjacent to Church Cottage, Wychnor, Staffordshire:
An Archaeological Watching Brief**

by
S.LITHERLAND

For further information please contact:
Simon Buteux, Iain Ferris or Gwilym Hughes (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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Contents

<i>Summary</i>	<i>1</i>
Introduction	1
Archaeological background	2
Aims	2
Method	2
Results	3
Discussion	3
Acknowledgements	4
References	4

List of figures

1. General location plan, based upon OS 1:50,000
2. The development site, based upon OS 1:1,250
3. Foundation trench observation and archaeological features

List of plates

1. View of Wychnor Church
2. General view of the development site clearance
3. The southwest corner of the site after removal of the concrete slab
4. Detail of the north-south-aligned gulley
5. Detail of the tree bole
6. View of the sunken earthwork in the field to the west of the development site

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Summary

An archaeological watching brief was undertaken on land adjacent to Church Cottage, Wychnor, Staffordshire (NGR SK 177 162) in June 2000. The development site lies within the deserted medieval village of Wychnor, recorded on the County Sites and Monuments Record as PRN 00128, and is adjacent to a Scheduled Ancient Monument. The aim of the watching brief was to identify and record any archaeological features affected by a series of foundation trenches for a new stable block and associated accommodation. The watching brief was required by Staffordshire County Council in order to fulfill a condition of planning consent that was required because of the proximity of the development site to the village and 12th-century church. The watching brief followed an archaeological evaluation in March 2000 which found evidence of two medieval drainage gullies (Mather 2000).

A series of foundation trenches was observed. Two further linear gullies were recorded. These were probably further drainage features associated with a former trackway or field boundary. However, differences in alignment between the gullies, and the two gullies found in the archaeological evaluation, suggest that the gullies were not necessarily contemporaneous.

Introduction

This report details the results of an archaeological observation of the foundation trenches for a new stable block, on land adjacent to Church Cottage, Wychnor (NGR SK 177 162, Fig. 1). The work was commissioned by DS Design on behalf of Mr and Mrs Windley, and was undertaken by Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit in June 2000. The watching brief was carried out in order to fulfill a condition of planning consent and followed an archaeological evaluation undertaken in March 2000 in accordance with a brief prepared by Staffordshire County Council (Wardle 2000).

The site lies within the deserted medieval village of Wychnor (Staffordshire Sites and Monuments Record Number 00128), between Church Farm to the north and St Leonard's Church to the south (Fig. 2, Plate 1). Much of the area of the deserted medieval village lies in a field to the south of Wychnor Church that has been designated as a Scheduled Ancient Monument. In addition, there is a further area of earthworks in a field located immediately to the west of the development site. In common with the archaeological sites in the surrounding area, the land for the stable block was under pasture, although the site lies just outside of the area of the Scheduled Ancient Monument.

Archaeological background

Much of the land occupied by the deserted medieval village is currently under pasture. Various earthworks can be seen which probably relate to a former network of sunken roads and rectangular platforms on which medieval buildings would have stood. There are also other banks and ditches, some of which form the remains of ridge-and-furrow field systems and fishponds.

Wychnor is mentioned in the Domesday Book of 1086 as being held by Robert of Stafford (Darby 1977). It is described as consisting of four villagers and two smallholders, with land for four ploughs, a mill, meadow and woodland with a total value of 15s. The village lies on sloping ground immediately above the edge of the floodplain of the River Trent. The drift geology consists of sands and gravels. The basic pattern of settlement in medieval Staffordshire was established early in the medieval period, and did not alter dramatically in the following two centuries. Wychnor bridge was on Icknield Street and provided an important crossing over the marshy valleys of the River Trent (VCH *Staffs. Vol. II*). Such was its importance that it was gifted oak trees from the crown forest at Cannock Chase. However, from the 14th century one in every two villages or hamlets began to disappear in southeast Staffordshire, possibly in response to generalised climatic deterioration, although other localised factors were always important (Palliser 1976).

Aims

The aim of the archaeological watching brief was to record any archaeological remains uncovered during the course of groundworks, in order to contribute to an understanding of the nature, extent and significance of archaeological remains within the area.

Specific objectives were to:

- i. Monitor any ground-breaking activity for the purpose of locating any archaeological deposits or remains.
- ii. Sample and recover any contextual evidence which may assist in the interpretation of such remains.
- iii. Consider the significance of any such remains in their local, regional or national context, as appropriate.
- iv. Report on and make public, as appropriate, the results of any such discoveries.

Method

The foundation trenches were cut by a JCB 3CX with a toothed 0.6m-wide trenching bucket under archaeological supervision (Plate 2). A concrete slab was also removed from the southwest corner of the development site, prior to the commencement of trenching (Plate 3). The foundation trenches were excavated to a depth of c.1m. The sections and base of the trench were then manually cleaned and any significant

archaeological deposits were examined, recorded and photographed to provide information concerning the survival and complexity of feature fills, and to recover artefactual evidence. Where no archaeological deposits were identified, the stratigraphy was also recorded and photographed. These records comprise the site archive, which, at the time of writing, is stored at Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit.

Results

The location of the foundation trenches is depicted in Figure 3. Typically, it was found that the top of the clean orangey-red natural sands and gravels occurred at a depth of c.0.6m from the ground surface. The natural was sealed by a 0.3m-thick, weathered subsoil horizon containing organic materials and silt, which in turn was overlain by 0.3m of topsoil.

Three features were observed. The earliest feature was a north-south aligned gully with a U-shaped profile, 0.9m wide and 0.5m deep (Plate 4). It was cut from the weathered subsoil horizon, the fill containing significantly more silty material than the weathered subsoil from which it was largely derived. This gully was at right angles to the two gullies found during the evaluation. Another gully with a similar profile, size and fill was aligned northeast-southwest. The arrangement of the foundation trenches did not coincide with an intersection of the ditches, but in the absence of any datable finds from either trench, it is most likely that the north-south aligned ditch was cut first. The latest feature was a sub-circular tree bole, which contained a quantity of ash and late-19th century/early-20th century-pottery (Plate 5).

Discussion

As in the evaluation, the only coherent archaeological activity appears to be represented by the two linear gullies. The north-south aligned-gully is likely to be the earlier of the two, as it shares a similar general alignment to the two gullies found in the evaluation. One of the gullies found in the evaluation contained pottery dating to the 13th – 14th centuries. It was also noticeable that these gullies shared a similar alignment to an earthwork visible in the field immediately to the west, and which may be a sunken way (Plate 6). Therefore, it is possible that the north-south aligned-gully identified in the watching brief is a drainage feature associated with a ditch on the southern side of the putative sunken way. It seems likely that the northwest-southwest-aligned gully represents a later phase of activity, possibly associated with a reorganisation of the landscape after the demise of the village. None of the deposits examined within the watching brief appeared to be associated with any structural activity. Therefore, it seems most likely that the conclusions of the evaluation report, that activity here was likely to have been related to medieval agricultural activity, have been borne out.

Acknowledgements

The watching brief was carried out by Steve Litherland. The illustrations are the work of Nigel Dodds. The project was monitored by Chris Wardle, the Heritage Data Manager for Staffordshire County Council. Thanks are also due to David Smith (DS Design) for his assistance.

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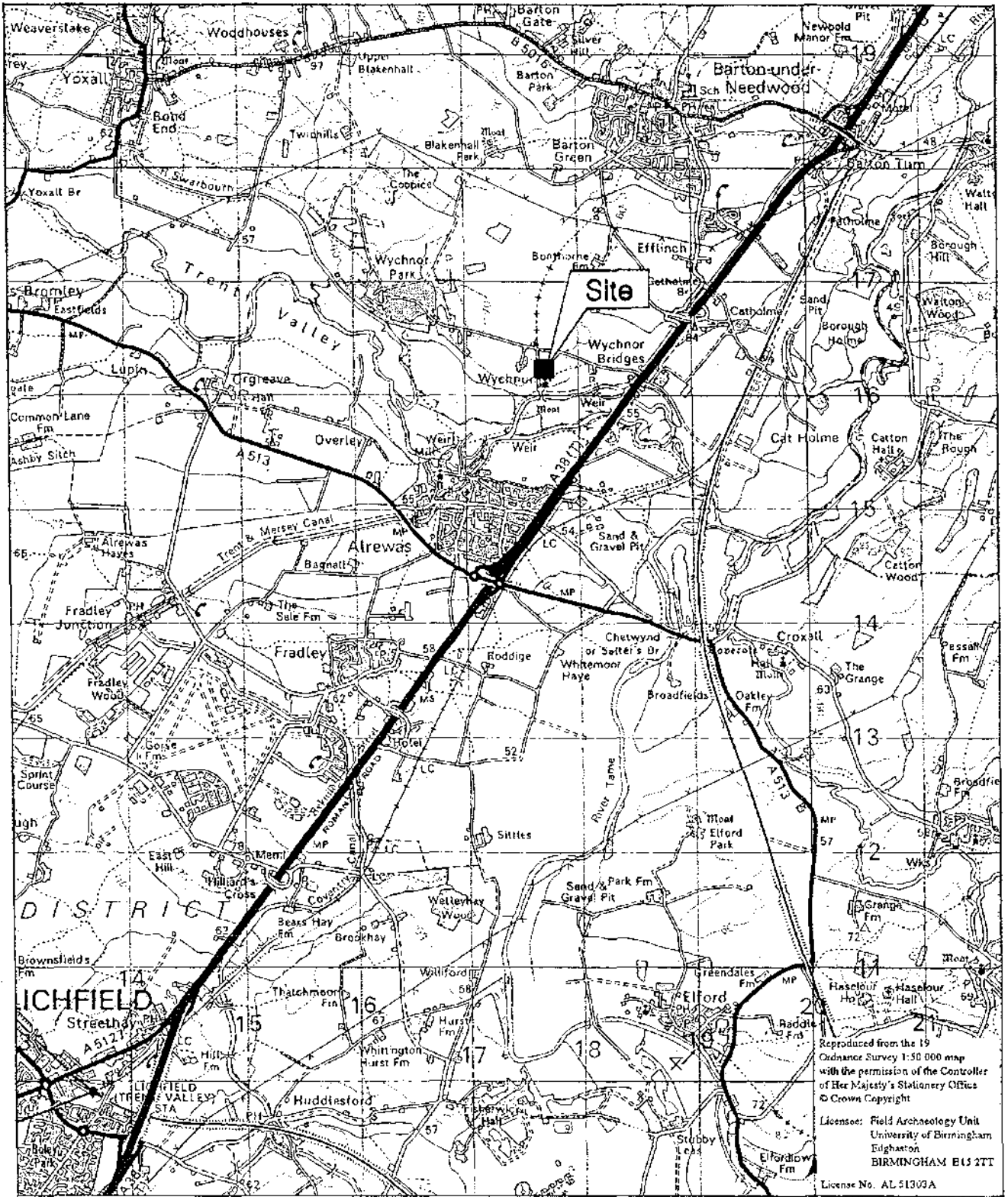


Fig.1

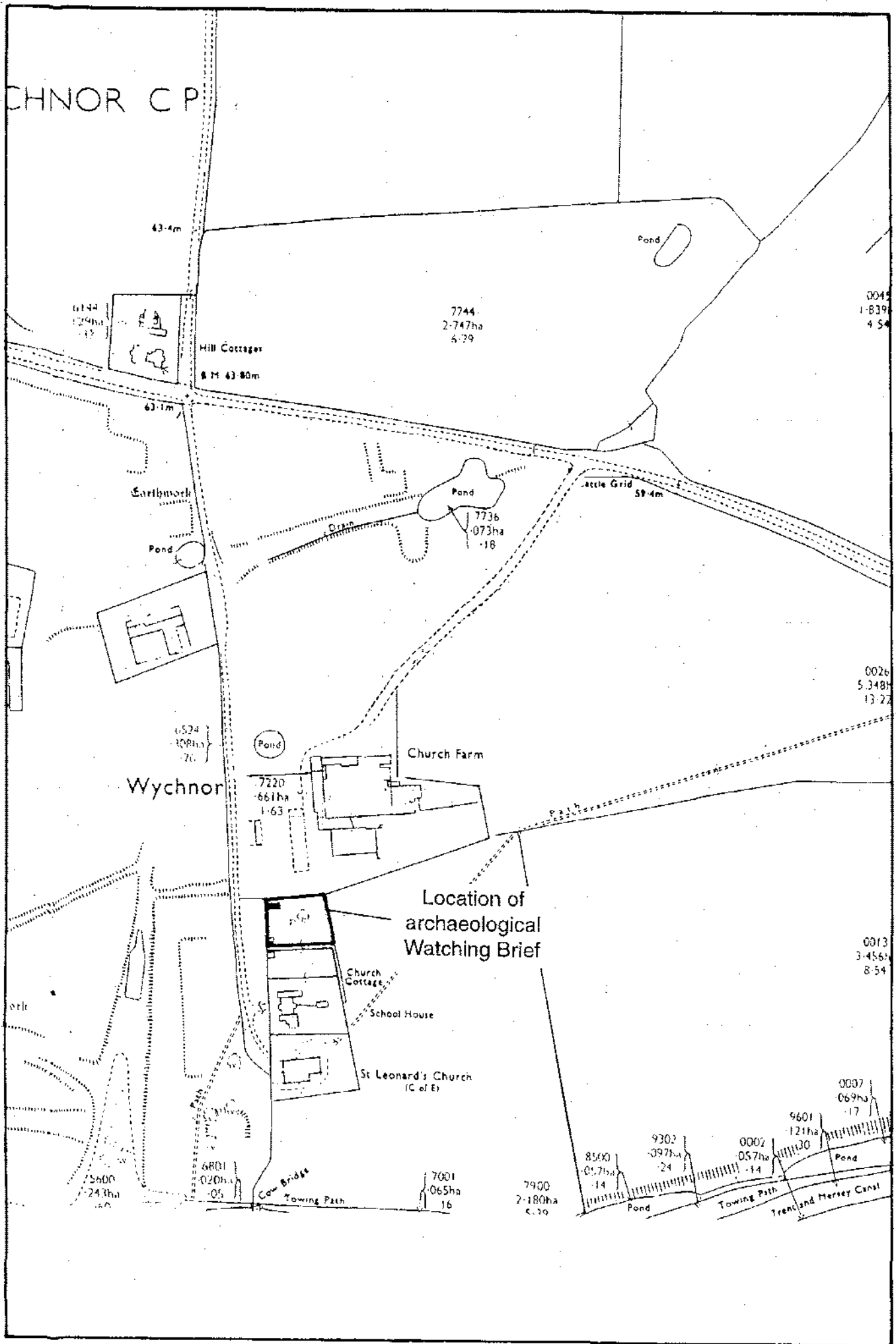


Fig.2

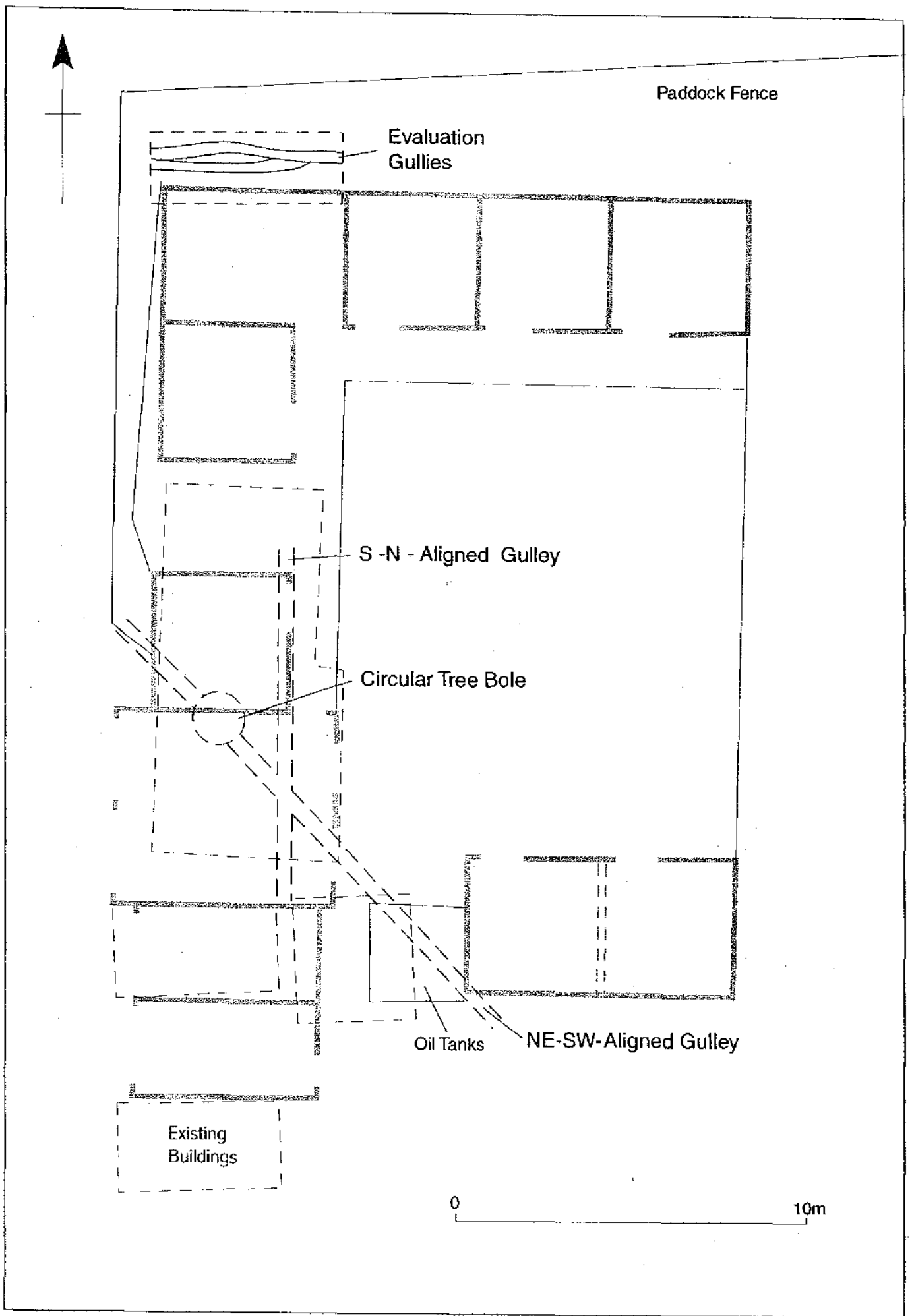


Fig.3



Plate 1



Plate 2



Plate 3

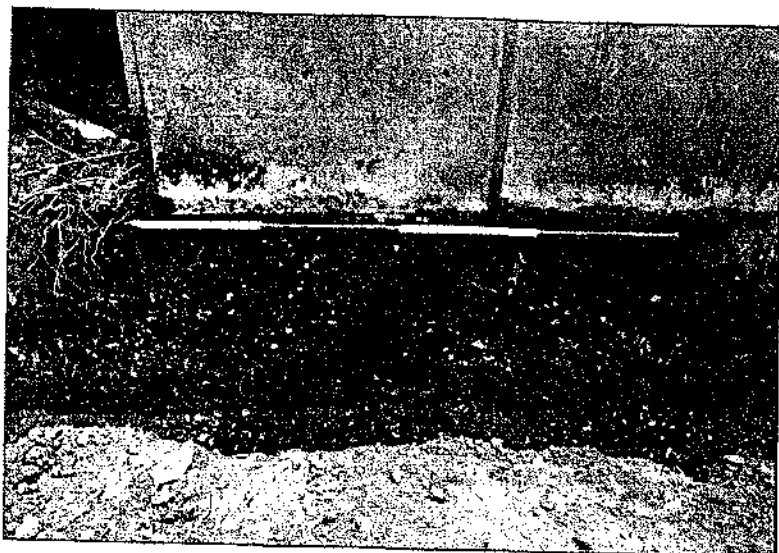


Plate 4

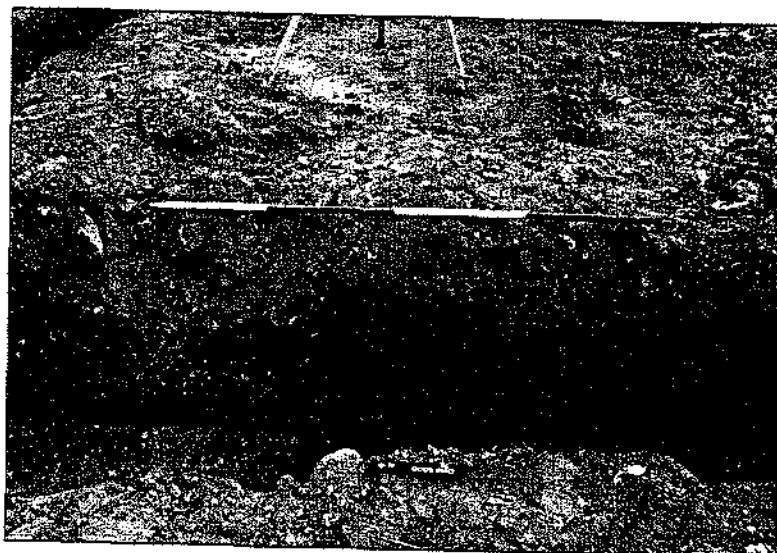


Plate 5



Plate 6