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An archaeological watching brief at The Birches, Rugeley, Staffordshire 2001

Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit

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Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit
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by
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1.0 Summary

An archaeological watching brief was carried out in May, 2001, in connection with the laying of a sewage pipe from The Birches housing estate (a new development) through Hagley Park, Rugeley, Staffordshire (centred on NGR SK 035175). The groundworks involved the stripping of topsoil and excavation of a pipe trench along the intended course of the pipeline, which for part of its length ran parallel to the course of Rising Brook. As a result of the known industrial archaeology in the Rising Brook area, Staffordshire County Council Development Services recommended that an archaeological watching brief be undertaken during groundworks in the vicinity of the brook. Severn Trent Water Ltd. commissioned Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit to do this work.

Two brick culverts and a number of land drains were observed and recorded during the groundworks. Artefacts recovered from these features suggested that they dated to the 18th and 19th centuries and possibly formed a water transportation system linking the Rising Brook with an industrial complex not itself sited within the area of the watching brief. There was also some evidence of landscaping in the vicinity of the High Fall. No other features of archaeological interest were recorded.

2.0 Introduction

This report describes the results of an archaeological watching brief undertaken during the groundworks for a sewage pipeline running from The Birches housing estate (a new urban development) through Hagley Park, Rugeley, Staffordshire (centred on NGR SK 035175; Fig. 1). The project involved the removal of a wide band of topsoil along the course of the pipeline easement and the subsequent excavation of a pipe trench. The pipe was intended to run parallel to Rising Brook for part of its length (Fig. 2), before cutting across it (at NGR SK 03641760) and following the edge of a field uphill towards Fair Oak School (centred on NGR SK 03501795). As a result of the known industrial archaeology in the Rising Brook area, Staffordshire County Council Development Services recommended that an archaeological watching brief be carried out during groundworks in the vicinity of the brook. All work was carried out in accordance with a Specification prepared by Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit (BUFAU) (Appendix 1), approved by Staffordshire County Council.

Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit (BUFAU) were commissioned by Severn Trent Water Ltd. to carry out the watching brief. An archaeologist attended the site when topsoil stripping began in early May 2001 and further scheduled visits took place throughout May whenever excavation work was in progress along the line of the brook.

3.0 Site location and history (Figs. 1 & 2)

The course of the sewage pipeline runs through landscaped parkland associated with Hagley Hall, Rugeley (Fig. 1). The target of the watching brief, a stretch of land along Rising Brook, is approximately 1km south-west of Rugeley town centre and 0.25km west of Hagley Park School.

Little is known about the archaeology of the site. The Rising Brook may have some association with Slitting Mill and evidence survives along the brook of leats, possibly serving former water wheels. Therefore, there may have been surviving industrial archaeological features in its vicinity, which may have dated to the 17th and 18th centuries. In addition, the brook may have been a medieval land or park boundary associated with Hagley Hall.

4.0 Methodology

Along the course of the sewage pipeline, topsoil-stripping was carried out by a JCB mechanical excavator fitted with a 1.8m-wide, toothless ditching bucket. The excavation of the 1.2m-wide pipe trench was also undertaken by a JCB fitted with a similar bucket.

A suitably qualified archaeologist from BUFAU attended the site throughout the period of groundworks along a 275m-stretch of Rising Brook. The pipeline easement measured between 9 and 10m wide and was up to 9.5m away from the brook. The abandonment was stripped of its topsoil. During and after topsoil-stripping, the exposed subsoil was systematically inspected and hand cleaned to ascertain if features or artefacts were detectable. Whilst the excavation of the sewage pipe trench was in progress, the cut faces were inspected to check if features were visible in section.

Possible archaeological features were hand excavated to provide information concerning the survival and complexity of the feature fills, and to recover artefacts. Any archaeology was recorded on pre-printed *pro-forma* record cards for features and contexts, supplemented by colour print photographs. Plans and sections were drawn at a scale of 1:50 or 1:20, as appropriate. Where no archaeological deposits were identified, a record of the stratigraphy was made. The site records form part of the archive, currently held at BUFAU.

5.0 Results (Figs. 2 & 3, Plates 1 & 2)
5.1 Topsoil strip of the easement

Removal of the 0.3-0.4m deep layer of topsoil (1000) revealed natural deposits (1001) of mixed sands and gravels, in which were occasional lenses of clay.

Thirty metres upstream of High Fall bridge, a brick built structure (S1) was encountered immediately beneath the topsoil (see Fig. 3, Plate 1). Structure S1 was constructed of parallel walls, aligned west-northwest to east-southeast, of red, clamp-formed bricks, and extended for 8.9m across the stripped area. The walls were 0.35m thick and ended in

returns approximately 1.4m in length. There was no evidence to suggest that they had originally been longer. The bricks used in the construction varied slightly in size, but generally had dimensions of 0.235 x 0.115 x 0.075m (9.25" x 4.5" x 3"), which is a typical size for 19th/20th century manufactured bricks. They were bonded together with mortar. It had a flat base, formed by a layer of bricks laid on their sides. The cut for the culvert had been backfilled with a mixture of topsoil and building rubble (1002). A section excavated through the infill (Fig. 3), close to the northernmost baulk, showed that there were three deposits. The culvert had been initially filled with a grey silt (1004), which was below a thin layer of yellow-brown sand (1003). Both these deposits were beneath a mixed rubble and topsoil deposit (1002).

Whilst excavating the soil-rubble infill (1002), a few intact bricks were uncovered. Most were of the same dimensions as those in the surviving walls, but a small number were only 2" thick. One moulded brick had a smooth, curved face, perhaps indicating that the culvert had an arched roof. In addition to the rubble, 1002 also contained post-medieval glass sherds. Deposit 1004 contained a heavily-corroded horseshoe of unknown date.

The culvert's opening into the Rising Brook was situated approximately 30m upstream of High Fall.

The culvert was filled with two deposits at this end. The upper deposit (1005) was a mixture of topsoil and building rubble, similar to context 1002 in the first section, and beneath this was a brown-grey silt (1006). The lower deposit yielded a single post-medieval pottery sherd which had an outer yellow-brown glaze and a white glaze on its inside. The sherd was dated to the 19th or 20th centuries (Annette Hancocks *pers. comm.*)

Two field drains (F001 and F003) were observed during the topsoil strip. One sherd of glazed pottery, dated as 17th or 18th century (Annette Hancocks *pers. comm.*) was recovered form F001, but this may have been residual as the land drains are likely to have been of a later date.

No other archaeological features or deposits were noted during the remainder of the topsoil strip.

5.2 The pipe trench

Machine excavation of the pipe trench revealed a deeply-buried, circular culvert (S2) which originally opened into the Rising Brook some 9.5m downstream of High Fall. The end of the culvert is now hidden by tree roots, but the brickwork of a possibly-related structure is still visible (Plate 2). Only a short stretch of the culvert was revealed, but it appears to be aligned east-west.

The trench (F002) for the culvert had been cut through the natural sand and gravels (1001). The culvert had been sealed by a sand and gravel subsoil (1012), beneath the topsoil (1000). F002 was filled with a mixed deposit of sand and gravel (1013) and a

previous topsoil horizon (1012). Landscaping had taken place around the approach to the bridge at High Fall and this was visible in section as a layer of re-deposited natural sand and gravel (1011) and further topsoil (1000).

Culvert S2 was lined with a single layer of clamp-formed red bricks, of the same length and width as those in culvert S1, but only 0.05m thick. They were positioned on their sides, ends facing inwards. There was no evidence of mortar bonding. The structure was slightly asymmetrical, with an internal diameter averaging 0.5m.

The interior of the culvert, itself, was filled with three deposits. A 0.11m thick bottom layer of leaf mould (1016), beneath a 0.14m thick layer of sand-gravel mixed with brown soil (1015). Both 1016 and 1015 were below an upper layer of redeposited natural (1014). No finds were recovered from these deposits.

6.0 Discussion

The presence of the red-brick culverts in the vicinity of High Fall indicates that some form of industrial activity took place adjacent to the site in the post-medieval period. Bricks used in the construction of culvert S1 are of a type commonly manufactured in the 19th and 20th centuries, whereas the smaller bricks of culvert S2 may date to the 18th century.

Whether the culverts were designed to take water from Rising Brook or feed into the latter is open to debate. Their openings in the bank of the brook are now overgrown and some distance away from the water, as a result of silting. Both constructions are aligned approximately 90 degrees to the watercourse, although it may be argued that culvert S1 is slightly angled as if to receive water. Their positioning above and below High Fall could be significant and may imply that at some stage they were part of a common water-transportation system, serving some industrial function.

Culvert S1 has clearly been partially demolished.

Landscaping has certainly occurred around High Fall, as indicated above. Surplus spoil from the excavation trench of culvert S2 appears to have been used to build up the land leading to the bridge at High Fall, burying the original topsoil in the process. A new layer of topsoil was then introduced.

7.0 Acknowledgements

The watching brief was carried out by Mary Duncan and Roy Krakowicz and managed by Gary Coates and Alex Jones, who also edited this report. Thanks are due to Annette Hancocks for her comments on the pottery. The illustrations were prepared by Mark Breedon.

The project was monitored by Chris Wardle, on behalf of Staffordshire County Council Development Services.

Iain Ferris, Archaeological Consultant for Severn Trent Water Ltd., commissioned the fieldwork, on whose behalf John Mills, from Charles Haswell & Partners Ltd., liaised. Thanks are due to all on-site contractors for their cooperation.

Appendix 1

Sewer construction at The Birches,

Rugeley, Staffordshire,

Written Scheme of Investigation for an Archaeological Watching Brief

1.0 Introduction

This document outlines the programme of work required to undertake a watching brief at the above site. It forms a written scheme of investigation requested by the Development Services Department, Staffordshire County Council. Any variation in the scope of work would be agreed with Chris Wardle, Heritage Data Manager for Staffordshire County Council, before implementation.

The work will be carried out during the topsoil strip and excavation of the trenches associated with the construction of the sewers in the area of Rising Brook.

2.0 Aims

The archaeological watching brief is intended to provide a record of any archaeological deposits or features which might be present below the modern ground surface, and to provide an understanding of the history and the significance of the archaeology of the site as a whole.

These aims will be achieved through a programme of archaeological monitoring visits to the site during contractors below-ground works.

3.0 The Site

The site (centred on SK 035 175) is approximately 1km south-west east of Rugeley town centre and just to the west of Burnthill Lane. It lies within the landscaped park associated with Hagley Hall.

Little is known about the archaeology of the site. The Rising Brook may be associated with Slitting Mill and there is likely to be industrial archaeological features associated with this, which may date to the 17th and 18th centuries. The stream may have also been a Medieval land or park boundary associated with Hagley Hall.

4.0 Archaeological Watching Brief

4.1: Aims

The objectives of the archaeological watching brief will be to monitor all below-ground works, including topsoil stripping, downcutting of existing levels, foundation and service trenches, and to record the location, extent, date, character, condition, significance and quality of any surviving archaeological remains affected by the development works.

4.2: Method

All groundworks will be monitored by a qualified archaeologist. This will be complemented by salvage recording of any archaeological deposits and features revealed by contractors groundworks. All artefacts will be recovered and recorded.

5.0: Staffing

The fieldwork will be monitored for BUFAU by Gary Coates (Project Officer, BUFAU).

Specialist staff will be, where appropriate:
Lynne Bevan - Flint artefacts and small finds.
Lisa Moffett - charred plant remains.
Umberto Albarella, Birmingham Environmental Laboratory - animal bone.
Dr James Greig - pollen and plant macro-fossils.
Dr David Smith - micro-fauna.
Dr Susan Limbrey - soils.
Dr Ann Woodward - prehistoric ceramics.
Annette Hancocks - Romano-British ceramics.
Stephanie Ratkai - medieval and Post-medieval pottery.
Kirsty Nichol – medieval and Post-medieval pottery

6.0: Report

The results of the archaeological fieldwork will be described in an illustrated report, which will contain the following:

(a) Description of the archaeological background.
(b) Method.
(c) A narrative description of the results and discussion of the evidence, set in their local and regional context, supported by appropriate plans and sections.
(d) Summary of the finds and environmental evidence.
(e) Specialist assessments of the finds and environmental evidence.

The written report will be made publicly accessible, as part of the West Midlands Sites and Monuments Record within six months of completion. A summary report will be submitted for inclusion in *West Midlands Archaeology*.

7.0: Archive

The site archive will be prepared according to the guidelines set down in Appendix 3 of the Management of Archaeology Projects.

8.0: Timetable

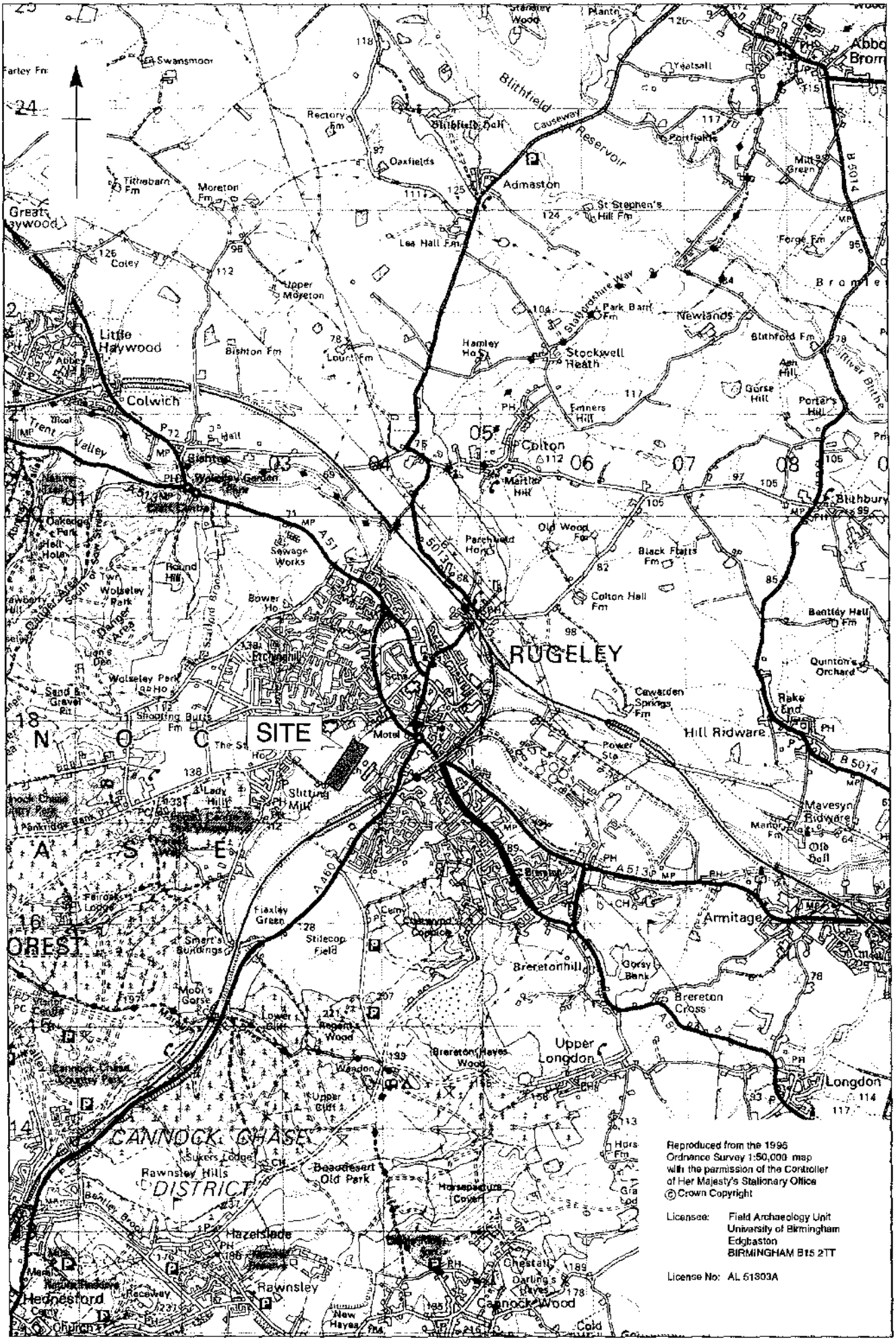
An archaeological watching brief will be maintained throughout below-ground works. A precise timetable is not available at present, although work on the pumping main is due to begin in the week commencing 26th March 2001.

9.0: General

All project staff will adhere to the Code of Conduct of the Institute of Field Archaeologists.

The project will follow the requirements set down in the Standard and Guidance for Archaeological Watching Briefs (Institute of Field Archaeologists 1994).

Figures


SITE
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CANNOCK CHASE
DISTRICT
Admaston
Colton
Colwich
Little Haywood
Stockwell Heath
Hill Ridware
Armitage
Brereton
Upper Longdon
Longdon
Rawnsley
Hednesford
Cannock Wood
Hazelslade
Blithfield Reservoir
Trent Valley
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Fig.1

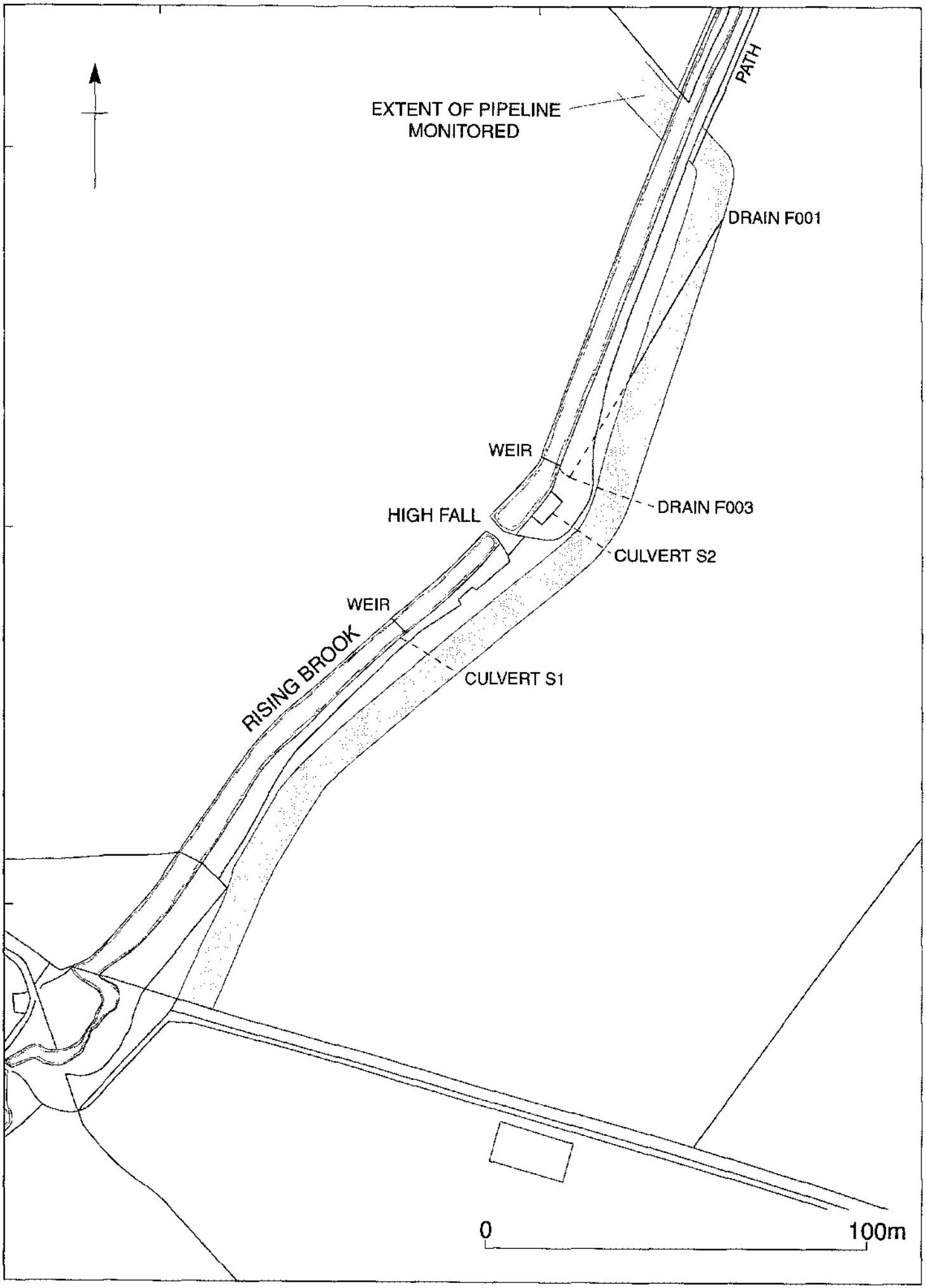
EXTENT OF PIPELINE
MONITORED
PATH
DRAIN F001
WEIR
HIGH FALL
DRAIN F003
CULVERT S2
WEIR
RISING BROOK
CULVERT S1
0
100m

Fig.2

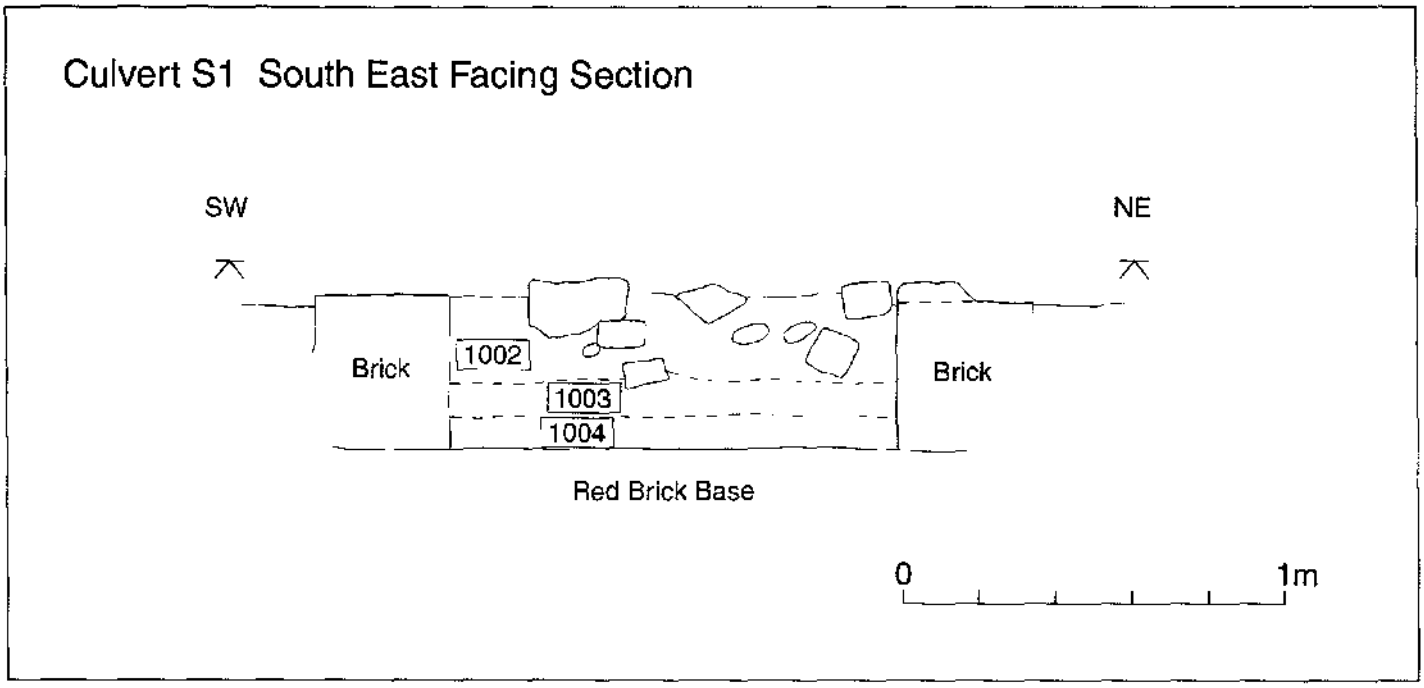
Culvert S1 South East Facing Section
SW
NE
Brick
1002
1003
1004
Brick
Red Brick Base
0
1m

Fig.3

Plates

Plate 1

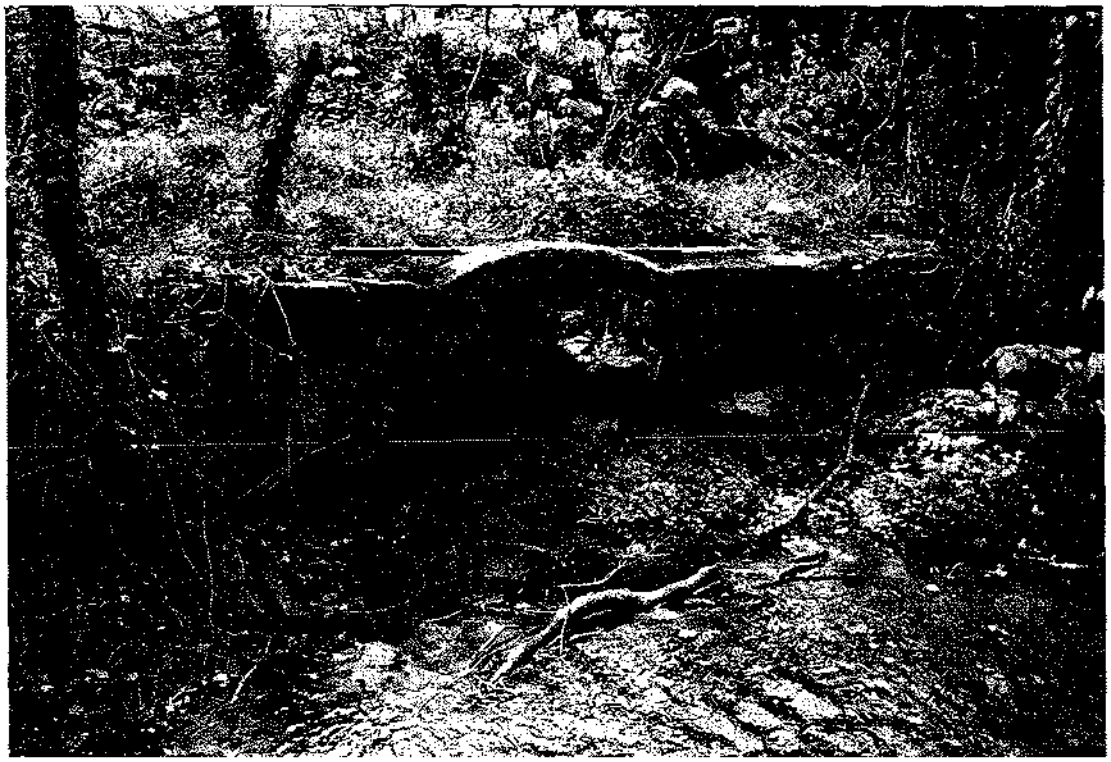

Plate 2