

**Land Adjacent to  
Farnborough Road,  
Castle Vale, Birmingham:**

**An Archaeological Watching Brief  
2002**

Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit  
Project No. 927  
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by  
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## Land Adjacent to Farnborough Road, Castle Vale, Birmingham:

### An Archaeological Watching Brief, 2002.

#### 1.0 Summary

*A watching brief was carried out on land adjacent to Farnborough Road, Castle Vale, Birmingham (centred on NGR SP 146905) in July 2002 by Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit. The work was commissioned by Lovell Partnerships Ltd on behalf of Castle Vale Housing Action Trust. The development area was formerly the site of six tower blocks, football pitches and public open space. The development occupied the site of the former Berwood Hall and moat (Birmingham SMR 02951) and was the subject of trial trenching by Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit (Roberts 1997). No evidence of the hall or moat were recorded, possibly due to modern disturbance and the depth of recent deposits.*

*The removal of topsoil did not reveal any in situ archaeology. Excavation of service trenches did not reveal any remains associated with the hall and moat. Pottery sherds were recovered from a layer of made ground that immediately overlay natural alluvial deposits at a depth of two metres. These artefacts were dated to the 19<sup>th</sup> century.*

#### 2.0 Introduction

The report describes the results of an archaeological watching brief undertaken during the re-development of land adjacent to Farnborough Road, Castle Vale, Birmingham (centred on NGR SP 146909; Fig. 1). Castle Vale Housing Action Trust had proposed the construction of 213 houses, 86 flats and 22 bungalows (Planning Application N/05851/00/Ful) on the land to the south of Farnborough Road. The northern half of the area was formerly the site of six tower blocks, whilst the remaining area was public open space and football pitches. On various occasions during 1994, 1997, 1998 and 1999, the ground conditions across the site were tested by excavating trial pits and/or geo-technical works. All of the exploratory holes revealed that beneath the topsoil lay made ground, of depths between 6 and 1.5m (Gcotech Devs 1999).

An archaeological evaluation in 1996 by Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit (Roberts 1997) was undertaken to locate the remains of Berwood Hall and moat (Birmingham SMR 02951; Fig. 2). Three trial-trenches were excavated and it was established that nothing of archaeological interest was evident to a depth of 2m below the modern ground surface.

The planning permission was granted with the requirement for an archaeological watching brief in the area of the hall and moat. The work was commissioned by Lovell Partnerships Ltd on behalf of Castle Vale Housing Action Trust and undertaken by BUFAU. Groundworks were monitored by a suitably qualified archaeologist on May 1<sup>st</sup>, 27<sup>th</sup>, 30<sup>th</sup>, June 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup>, 2002, during topsoil stripping and the excavation of service trenches

### **3.0 Site Location (Figs. 1 and 2)**

The development area measures approximately 365m by 330m. It lies in the Castle Vale District of Birmingham (centred on NGR SP 146909), 5 miles north-east of the city centre. The northern limit of the area is defined by Farnborough Road, whilst its southern boundary comprises a hedge-line, beyond which is the River Tame, and a railway line. To the east, the site is partially bounded by Plant's Brook. Residential properties form the boundary to the west.

Berwood Hall and the adjacent moat were located in the northern sector of the development area, close to Farnborough Road. The site of the hall was thought to lie between two of the tower blocks, named Lysander House and Argosy House (Fig. 2). This suggests that the moat was located to the north of the hall, between Argosy House and Comet House.

### **4.0 Site History**

A review of the site's history is contained within BUFAU Report No. 454 (Roberts 1997). Geotechnical Developments (UK) Ltd undertook a borehole study of the site (Reports E1378/B62, and E1378/B93). Its historical development may be summarised as follows.

Berwood is first mentioned in the reign of Henry II (circa 1160), when Sir Hugh de Arden bequeathed the manor and a hermitage to the canons of Leicester Abbey. A chapel at Berwood Hall is mentioned in the 13th century, but it apparently fell into disuse by the 15th century. A survey at that time refers to buildings on the moat island and describes an old house standing outside of the moat. Following the dissolution in 1540, the property reverted to the crown and the buildings were presumably allowed to fall into disrepair. Berwood Hall was probably located outside the moat, possibly to the south, where Berwood Hall Farm is shown on the Ordnance Survey 25" map published in 1887. This map also shows three sides of the moat to be extant at that time. Additionally, a map included in the 1730 edition of Dugdale's *Antiquities of Warwickshire* shows Berwood Hall, (V.C.H. 1947, frontispiece).

By the 1880's, a railway line had been laid along the southern edge of the site and some 20 years later the area fell within the boundary of a sewage farm, run by Birmingham Tame & Rea District Drainage Board. Between 1877 and 1901, the main method of disposal of the treated sewage involved irrigation onto the surrounding land. During this period, it appears that the course of Plant's Brook was artificially altered and channelled through part of the site.

Berwood Hall farm was still standing in 1926 and was described as being of late 17th century date, although no longer in use as a farm (Mitchell, *l.c.* 1926, page 28). The site came within the City of Birmingham following boundary changes in 1931 (V.C.H. 1947, pages 61-63). By 1938 a soap factory had been erected in the northwest quadrant of the site and a fertiliser works occupied land in the south, close to the railway line. A large building, identified as an Exhibition Hall, was located 250m to the west.

During World War II, the site was utilised as an airfield. The land would have been levelled in preparation for the construction of the runways, plus associated structures (e.g. hangars, servicing areas, gun emplacements, etc). The groundworks may have impacted on any archaeological remains that had survived up to that time. Further disturbance of archaeology may have occurred when six tower blocks were erected forming part of the Castle Vale estate circa 1970. The site then remained substantially unchanged from the completion of the estate in 1972 until 1999 when the tower blocks were demolished.

## 5.0 Methodology

The removal of topsoil and the excavation of service trenches was carried out by a mechanical excavator fitted with ditching buckets. An archaeologist attended the site between May and June 2002 during groundworks. Despite the sides of some of the trenches being partially obscured by shoring, it was possible to provide a full stratigraphic record.

The watching brief was undertaken in compliance with the conditions of the Written Scheme of Investigation (BUFAU 2001). *In situ* archaeology was hand cleaned and described on pre-printed *pro-forma* record cards for features and contexts. These written records were supplemented by section drawings and plans (1:20 or 1:50, as appropriate), and monochrome/ colour print photography. Where archaeological features were absent, stratigraphic sequences of the soil layers was recorded. All artefacts, recovered from stratified contexts and spoil heaps were washed and marked, and form part of the site archive. Project records form part of the site archive, at present held at BUFAU.

## 6.0 Results

*Northeast-southwest aligned services, Trenches FW1 and SW1 (Fig. 2)*

These were excavated to a maximum depth of 2.4m and confirmed the borehole results that much of the subsoil stratigraphy consisted of made-ground. The deepest deposits comprised heterogeneous mixtures of gravel (pebbles) and silts with occasional dark silty ash that yielded no dating evidence. This was overlain by layers of silty soil, ashy and/or gravelly deposits mixed with varying amounts of demolition debris (red bricks, mortar fragments), which was evident from depths of 1.6m - 2.0m to the surface.

No features of archaeological interest were identified in Trench FW1.

*Northwest - southeast aligned service, Trench SW2 (Fig. 2)*

A second storm-water sewage trench (SW2) crossing the approximate site of the moat was excavated to a depth 2m. This exposed a heterogeneous deposit of soil and gravel containing building debris fragments, but no other dating evidence. This layer was overlain by deposits of silty soils and orange sand, all containing fragments of building debris and small pebbles.

A foul-wearer sewer (FW2) was excavated to the south of the site of Berwood Hall. In order to pass beneath an existing conduit, the service trench was excavated to a

depth exceeding 3.5m. Although lying outside the area of immediate interest, the trench presented an opportunity to inspect the natural subsoils and the overlying made-ground.

The trench was excavated into the natural river terrace deposits which consisted of iron-stained sand-gravel (1005), encountered at a depth of 3.6m. Overlying this deposit was a moulded (reddish-brown to greenish-brown) alluvial layer of compact clay-silt (1004), which in turn lay beneath a grey-green deposit of clay-silt (1003). Contexts 1004 and 1003 may have been a single layer of alluvium in which gleying had occurred.

Overlying the natural clay-silt was a layer of black ash/ carbon (1002), encountered at a depth of 2m below ground surface and averaging 0.3m in thickness. The deposit yielded a number of pottery sherds, a bone fragment, fragments of bottle glass, corroded iron and metallic/non-metallic slag. The pottery was of several types (including stoneware and glazed/ printed-wares) and was dated as being no earlier than the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Annette Hancocks *pers. comm.*).

Overlying the carbon-rich layer (1002) were heterogeneous deposits (1001) of brown, clayey-silty soil admixed with varying amounts of modern building debris. For the much of the trench, these deposits extended up to the ground surface, but occasionally were overlain by shallow layers of hardcore.

Clearance of the topsoil in the approximate location of Berwood Hall and moat exposed made ground of recent date.

#### **Summary of geotechnical boreholes**

A report by Geotechnical Developments (Geotech Devs 1999) summarised the ground investigations detailing the location of geo-technical works and their results. A number of the boreholes and trial pits were located in or near to Berwood Hall and moat.

Trial Pit 8 was excavated near to the approximate site of the moat, by Farnborough Road (Fig. 2). Excavation terminated when a concrete surface was encountered at a depth of 1.2m.

Borehole 5 was located to the west of Trial Pit 8 within the locale of the moat (Fig. 2). River Terrace deposits (sand and gravel) were encountered at a depth of 3.2m. Overlying these was a shallow deposit of gravel and sand, which in turn lay beneath 3m of a sandy-gravel topsoil intermixed with rubble and red-brown sandy-clay. Deposits likely to be in-fill of a silted moat were absent.

Borehole 3 was located close to the presumed site of Berwood Hall (Fig. 2), but the borehole core gave no indication of *in situ* structural remains. Natural gravels were found at a depth of 4.2m overlain by a 0.7m-thick layer of sandy-gravelly clay. This was sealed beneath a 1m-deep deposit of clayey sand (containing ash and gravel). Overlying the latter deposit was a layer of mixed sand and gravel, within which were pieces of wood, lumps of concrete and small amounts of clay. The uppermost layer,

which extended from a depth of 1.4m up to the ground surface, was described as a brown topsoil mixed with red-brown silty clay.

Borehole 122, was located within the area of the former moat (Fig. 2). The borehole log showed that natural river terrace deposits (sand and gravel) were encountered at a depth of 2.9m. Overlying the sand and gravel was a deposit described as "organic made ground". This comprised a 0.35m-thick layer of mottled (red-brown and grey), sandy-silty clay, which had occasional quartzite pebbles, rootlets and roots within the matrix. It is possible that this represents material from the remains of a silted moat.

The 'organic' sandy-silty clay was sealed beneath a 0.35m deep layer of silty-sandy clay, within which were occasional pockets of black ash and sand. The remaining overlying deposits to ground level, appear to be recent made-ground from their borehole log descriptions.

## 7.0 Acknowledgements

The watching brief was commissioned by *Lovell Partnerships Ltd on behalf of Castle Vale Housing Action Trust* and undertaken by Roy Krakowicz, and S. Williams. The report was written by Roy Krakowicz and edited by Richard Cuttler, who managed the project on behalf of BUFAU. The figures were produced by John Halsted. Thanks are due to Ian Davies of Lovell Partnerships for his assistance during the watching brief and for the provision of supplementary information and geo-technical data. Excavation of the service trenches was conducted by Friel, whose on-site staff must be thanked for their assistance during the monitoring of the groundworks.

## 8.0 References

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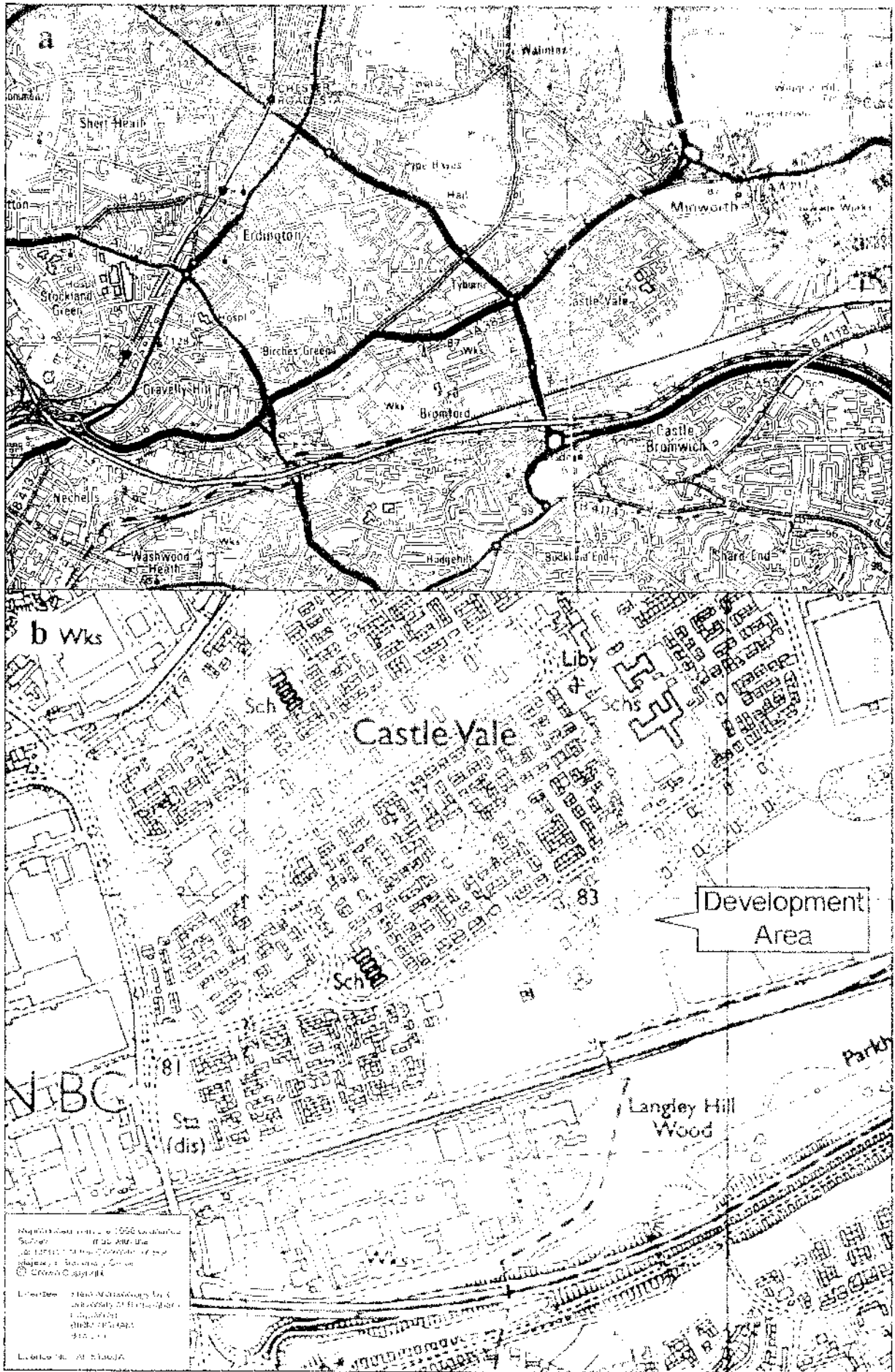


Fig.1



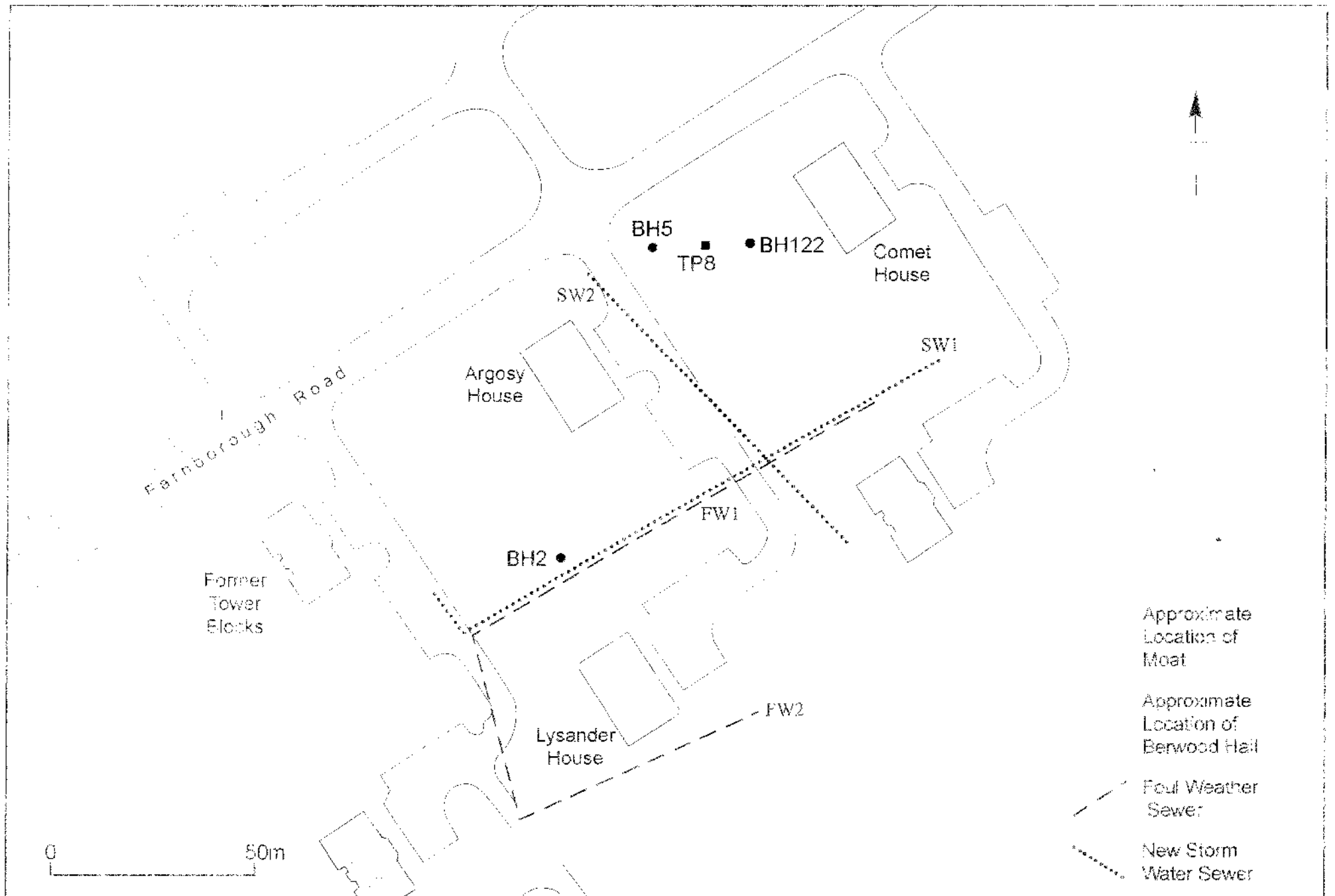


Fig.2