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**An Archaeological
Watching Brief During
Test Pitting at
Aston Hall, Aston,
Birmingham
2002**

Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit



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**An Archaeological Watching Brief During Investigative
Test Pitting at
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by
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Summary

An archaeological watching brief was carried out at Aston Hall, Aston, Birmingham in July 2002 by Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit (BUFAU). The work was carried out on behalf of Rodney Melville and Partners, Chartered Architects, who have been commissioned by Birmingham City Council to undertake the construction of a visitor/education centre to the north of the hall and the rebuilding of an original wall, which enclosed the privy gardens to the south of the hall. It was considered likely that the gardens around the hall had the potential for providing archaeological evidence relating to buildings, no longer extant, and to the creation of the surrounding formal gardens. Therefore a watching brief was undertaken during the excavation of five test pits in the gardens surrounding the hall. Evidence of a building, most probably a stable block, was observed during test pitting to the north of the hall and bowling green, whilst the wall, which once enclosed the privy gardens to the south of the hall, was partially exposed. The test pits to the north of the hall also provided evidence of the importation of large quantities of dumped material used to raise and level areas of the formal gardens.

1.0 Introduction

A watching brief was undertaken by Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit at Aston Hall, Aston, Birmingham (NGR 407750/289950) on behalf of Rodney Melville and Partners, Chartered Architects, who are under commission to Birmingham City Council. The watching brief was carried out in July 2002 during test pitting in advance of the construction of a visitor/education centre and the rebuilding of an original garden wall, now grassed over.

No brief was prepared for the archaeological work but it was carried out on the recommendation of Dr. Mike Hodder, Planning Archaeologist, Birmingham City Council and in accordance with the guidelines set out in the Institute of Field Archaeologists *Standards and Guidance for Archaeological Watching Briefs* (Institute of Field Archaeologists 1999).

2.0 Site Location (Fig. 1)

Aston Hall is located in inner city Birmingham to the west of Spaghetti Junction and the A38(M), Lichfield Road, which passes the front of the house at a distance of approximately 500 metres (Fairclough 1984).

3.0 Archaeological and Historical Context

A complete history of the Hall is available in Fairclough (Fairclough 1984) and the following is a summarised version.

Aston Hall is a Grade 1 Listed Jacobean Building with a surrounding Grade II Listed park. Aston Hall was built by Sir Thomas Holte, whose family had gained possession of the manor of Aston in 1367. The Holte family resided in Duddeston until they moved to Aston in 1631 and took up residence in Aston Hall, where they remained for almost two hundred years.

During the Civil War, the Holte family were Royalists and, as a consequence of the house being set up as a Royalist garrison it was stormed and sacked by Parliamentary forces in 1643.

The Holtes were a prominent local family and were much involved in the administration of the county during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, fulfilling such offices as High Sheriff and Justice of the Peace. However, with the growth of Birmingham as a great manufacturing and industrial centre the Holte family's local influence began to wane, although in 1774, Sir Charles Holte, the last of the line, was elected as an MP for Warwickshire.

In 1817 the house was sold and then leased in 1819 by James Watt, son of the famous engineer. In 1858, the Hall and part of its parkland was opened to the public by Queen Victoria.

Previous archaeological work at the Hall located evidence of the North Stable Range and of terracing activities (Archaeological Investigations 1999 and 2002)

4.0 Aims

The watching brief was intended to provide a record of any archaeological deposits or features that may have been present beneath the modern ground surface and to help elucidate further the history and development of the site as a whole. The test pits were monitored in order to record the location, extent, date, character, quality and significance of any archaeological remains encountered.

5.0 Method (Fig. 2)

Five test pits, measuring approximately 0.4m x 0.6m were excavated using a JCB mechanical excavator fitted with a toothed bucket. Three of the pits (Test Pits 1-3) were located to the north of the hall and two (Test Pits 4-5) to the south. All the below ground works were monitored by a qualified archaeologist. Any archaeological deposits were recorded using *pro forma* context and feature cards and colour and monochrome

photography. Section drawings were drawn at a scale of 1:20 and plans at a scale of 1:50. All artefacts were recovered and recorded. Access to the test pits was not possible and, therefore, all plans and sections were diagrammatic.

6.0 Results

6.1 Test Pit 1 (Fig. 3)

Test Pit 1 was located at the southeastern corner of the footprint of the proposed visitor/education centre and was aligned approximately north to south.

The earliest layer encountered was the natural subsoil, a fine to coarse orange/brown sand (1000), which was reached at a depth of approximately 1.2m below ground level. A brick culvert with sandstone capping (F100) was observed, cut into the natural subsoil, on an approximate northeast to southwest alignment. The culvert was approximately 0.3m wide, though its depth could not be ascertained, and square in profile. The culvert appeared to be intact and free of fill, and was made up of courses of fairly even, regular red bricks with white mortar bonding. The sandstone slab capping, however, did not appear to have been mortared onto the brick channel of the culvert. No cut for the culvert was visible in section. A 0.75m band of orange/brown sand with mortar flecking, brick fragments, charcoal and clinker (1001) sealed the culvert. Overlying layer 1001, was a narrow band of brown sandy silt with a substantial mixture of clinker, mortar flecking, brick fragments and charcoal (1002). Towards the northern end of the test pit the uppermost section of a red-brick wall (F101) running east to west, was observed. Layer 1002 and wall F101 were sealed by topsoil and turf (1003).

6.2 Test Pit 2 (Fig.3)

Test Pit 2 was located near to the northwestern corner of the footprint of the proposed visitor/education centre and was aligned approximately east to west.

The natural subsoil, a fine to coarse orange/brown sand (2000), was encountered at a depth of approximately 0.3m below ground level directly below the topsoil (2001). The remains of an old root channel (F200), extending for at least 1m into the natural subsoil and filled with a dark brown silt (2003), produced two intact stoneware beer bottles of later nineteenth century date from its base. The root channel was sealed by the topsoil 2001.

6.3 Test Pit 3 (Fig. 3)

Test Pit 3 was located approximately midway along the western edge of the Bowling Green and was aligned approximately north to south.

The natural subsoil, a fine to coarse orange/brown sand with gravel (3000) was encountered at a depth of approximately 1.4m below ground level. This was overlain by a thick band, up to 1m deep, of dark brown sandy silt with pebbles, brick fragments, pieces of mortar and charcoal flecks (3001). Layer 3001 was sealed by a narrow band of

clinker mixed with ashy material, powdered mortar and small fragments of brick and tile (3002). Overlying layer 3002 was modern topsoil and turf (3003).

6.4 Test Pit 4 (Fig. 3)

Test Pit 4 was located approximately midway along the western edge of the Privy Gardens and was aligned approximately east to west. It was placed on the line of the eastern embankment of the raised pathway and at a right angle to it in order to confirm the presence and condition of an original garden wall running beneath the embankment.

The earliest layer encountered was the natural subsoil, a fine to coarse orange/brown sand (4000). Cut into the natural subsoil were the sandstone footings (F400) for a wall. The sandstone blocks appeared to be roughly-hewn and sealed by a levelling layer of mortar (4001) used as a base for the red-brick wall (F401) above. The bottom half of the wall, 6 courses high, projected out slightly from the upper half of the wall, also 6 courses high, and gave the wall a slightly stepped appearance in profile. The bricks appeared even and regular in shape, with finely jointed mortar-work. From the base of the sandstone footings to the top of the brick wall measured approximately 1.2m-1.3m. Butting against the east-facing elevation of wall F401 was a layer of brown silty soil with pebbles and charcoal flecking (4002). This had, in turn, been sealed by a mixed band of brown sandy silt with bricks and mortar (4003). Layer 4003 and wall F401 had been sealed by topsoil and turf (4004).

6.5 Test Pit 5 (not illustrated)

Test 5 was positioned in the same way as Test Pit 4 but located further to the south along the western edge of the Privy Gardens. It was intended to verify that the garden wall observed in Test Pit 4 was continuous.

Test Pit 5 revealed exactly the same stratigraphic sequence as that encountered in Test Pit 4, although at this point the wall (F500/F401) appeared to be wider and more substantially built than it was in Test Pit 4.

7.0 Discussion

No cut for the brick culvert (F100) was visible in section and it therefore seems likely that the culvert was constructed prior to being sealed by the layer of build up material (1001) above, perhaps as part of a single phase of terracing activity on the northern slope. The culvert is most likely to be part of a drainage system intended to carry water away from the buildings and the terraced area to a point further down the slope. Layer 1001, which sealed the culvert, seems to represent material imported for the purpose of building up the ground. This would have created a raised, level area either for the construction of a building, or, perhaps, a formal garden. The culvert did not appear to be contemporary with the Hall and dating the culvert could provide, at the least, a *terminus post quem* for layer 1001. Although the culvert could not be examined closely, the brickwork looked likely to be eighteenth or nineteenth century. Layer 1002 appears to be a

demolition/levelling layer, possibly used as the bedding for a yard surface (perhaps a stable-court) associated with the range of buildings here. The section of walling (F101) may be part of the north stable range, constructed along the edge of the terrace, or a later feature. The stables, originally built in the seventeenth century, were subject to alterations during later periods. Unfortunately, the wall's stratigraphic relationship to the layers of build up and levelling could not be ascertained with certainty. The wall is most likely to belong to the series of walls and surfaces revealed in previous excavations (Archaeological Investigations Ltd 2002) but further investigation would be necessary to clarify this.

Test Pit 3, located within the confines of the Bowling Green, provided similar evidence to that from Test Pit 1 in that the layers encountered (3001/3002) were most likely to have been connected to terracing and levelling activities on the north facing slope. The clinker layer 3002, being fine and fairly free draining would have been particularly effective as the bedding for a yard surface, or equally effective for the laying of a garden lawn.

Landscaping and terracing in the park around the Hall most likely began with the advent of the Holtes in the seventeenth century and probably continued throughout its history into relatively recent times. It is, therefore, difficult on the basis of the watching brief and lack of datable material, to assign the layers of build up and levelling to any sort of chronology and more investigation would be necessary for this purpose.

Test Pit 2, provided no evidence of terracing or of any building activity in this area. The recovery of two intact, later nineteenth century stoneware beer bottles from the base of a root channel, suggests tree felling and clearance activities.

Test Pits 4 and 5 affirmed the existence of the screen wall belonging to the Privy Gardens. The lower half of the wall appeared to have been used as a retaining wall for a raised pathway or terrace, which ran from the southwest corner of the Privy Garden, northwards behind the hall and along the western edge of the Bowling Green. Later the upper half of the screen wall appears to have been partially dismantled and used as the base for a nineteenth century balustrade. Layer 4002 could represent buttressing material brought in to counteract pressure against the wall from the banked earth of the raised pathway. Alternatively, it could have been ramping material used to build up the bank when the balustrade finally went out of use and the wall was incorporated into the bank. Layer 4003, which contained bricks and mortar, perhaps resulting from the top of the wall being levelled off, was again part of the ramping process to build up the bank sloping down from the raised pathway to the Privy Garden lawn. The more substantially built section of the wall observed in Test Pit 5 may represent brick buttressing. Alternatively, the wall may have been constructed or reinforced at this point in such a way as to act as a base for one of the square brick piers of the nineteenth century balustrade above. Either possibility has implications concerning the appearance of the original wall. Layer 4003 produced a mix of brick types, some late and well-made, others early and clamp-made and obviously contemporary with the date of the Hall. The early bricks may have been brought in with spoil from elsewhere and been added to the

wall tumble in order to provide additional volume to the bank. This may point to the demolition of a structure contemporary with the Hall.

No evidence of earlier i.e. medieval, deposits or features was encountered during the test pitting. However, as the pits were located in areas where a considerable amount of landscape remodelling had taken place, such evidence may have been removed. This does not necessarily mean that there is not the potential for such evidence to exist elsewhere within the environs of the Hall.

8.0 Acknowledgements

The watching brief was carried out by Helen Martin. This report was written by Helen Martin and edited by Gary Coates. The illustrations were prepared by Nigel Dodds. Thanks are due to Dr. Mike Hodder of Birmingham City Council for his comments and advice. Thanks are also due to Mark Balkham of Rodney Melville and Partners, Chartered Architects and to Gary Willis of Gifford Consulting Engineers.

9.0 References

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Figures



Fig. 1

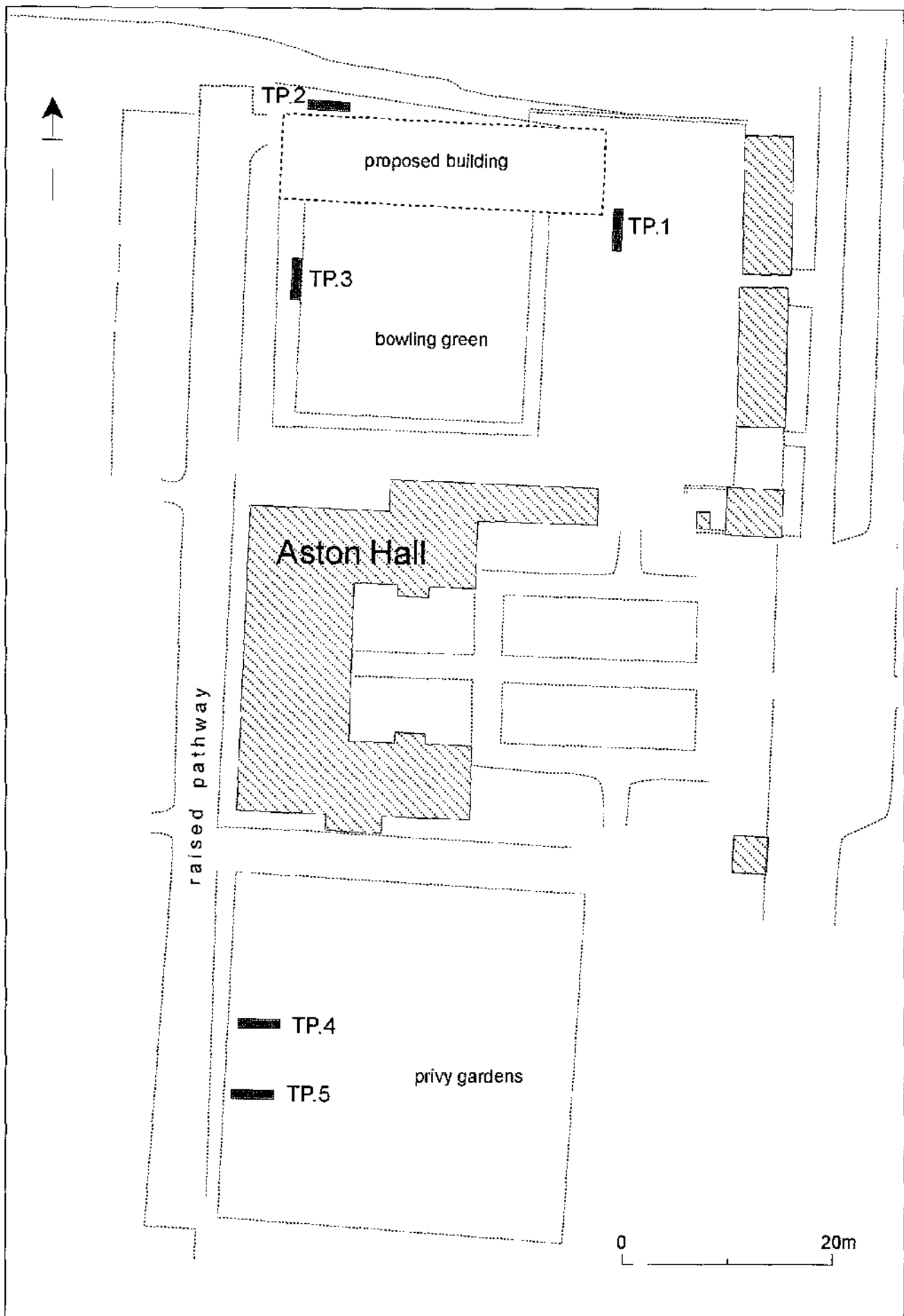


Fig.2

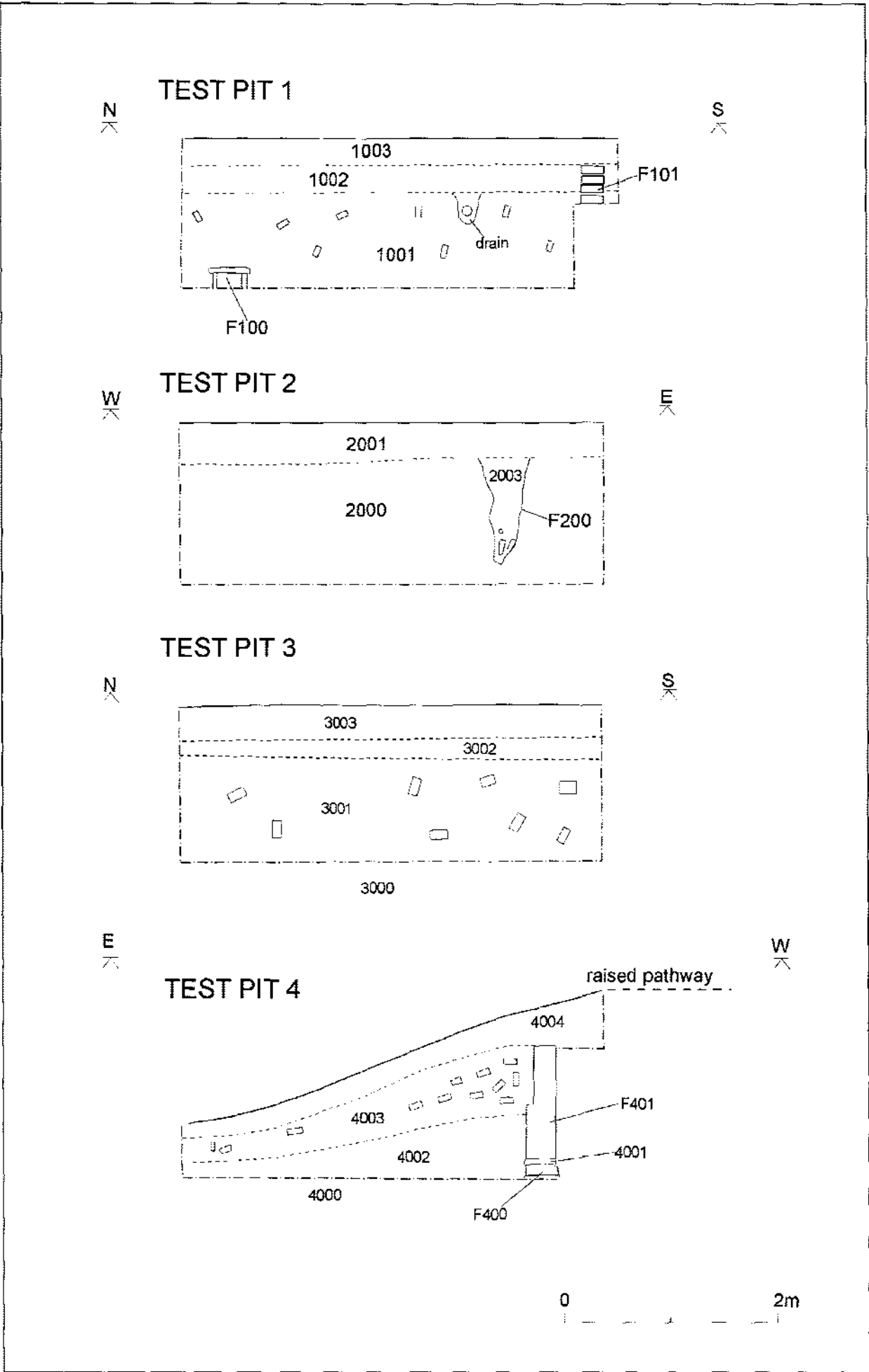


Fig.3