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Installation of C.C.T.V. at Aston Hall, Birmingham
An Archaeological Watching Brief
2002

by
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Summary

An archaeological watching brief was carried out at Aston Hall, Aston, Birmingham (NGR SO 078 899) in October 2002 by Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit (BUFAU). The work was commissioned by Birmingham City Council and consisted of the excavation of new service trenches and security post bases in order to install C.C.T.V. cameras. It was considered that the previously undisturbed ground, in close proximity to the hall, had the potential to provide archaeological evidence relating to structures no longer extant. Therefore, a watching brief was undertaken during the excavation of three new cable trenches and the bases for six security posts. Trench 2 provided evidence of the depth and construct of the foundations of the garden walls to the front of the hall and possible evidence of landscaping. Evidence for a wall, constructed from bricks of 17th Century date or earlier, near the northwest corner of the hall, was observed in Trench 3. This wall appeared to be related to the existing garden wall at the rear of the main building and the date of the brickwork suggests that this wall existed along the same alignment as part of the original layout of the Jacobean hall. No earlier deposits were observed during these groundworks.

1.0 Introduction

An archaeological watching brief was undertaken by Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit (BUFAU) at Aston Hall, Aston, Birmingham (NGR SO 078 899) in October 2002 on behalf of Birmingham City Council. The watching brief was carried out during the excavation of new service trenches and security post bases associated with the installation of C.C.T.V. cameras. In all, three trenches and six beam towers were to be excavated in previously undisturbed ground.

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; Plate 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 Aston Hall is available in Fairclough (1984) and the following is a summarised version.

Contents

Summary	1
1.0 Introduction	1
2.0 Site Location	1
3.0 Archaeological and Historical Context	1
4.0 Aims	2
5.0 Method	2
6.0 Results	3
6.1 Trench 1	3
6.2 Trench 2	3
6.3 Trench 3	3
6.4 Security Posts 1-6	4
7.0 Discussion	4
8.0 Acknowledgements	4
9.0 References	5

List of Figures

- Figure 1. General location
Figure 2. Site Plan
Figure 3. Sections

List of Plates

- Plate 1. Aston Hall, general shot, looking eastwards
Plate 2. Trench 1
Plate 3. Trench 2

W. H. G. S.

Aston Hall is a Grade I Listed Jacobean Building with a surrounding Grade II Listed park (see Plate 1).

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 (Martin 2002).

Previous archaeological work at the Hall located evidence of the North Stable Range and of terracing activities (Archaeological Investigations 1999 and 2002) and the screen wall belonging to the Privy Garden (Martin 2002).

4.0 Aims

The objective of the watching brief was to provide a record of any archaeological deposits or features encountered during excavations which would assist in the clarification of the developmental history of the site. Groundworks were monitored in order to record the location, extent, quality and significance of any archaeological remains encountered.

5.0 Method (Fig. 2)

Three trenches, measuring approximately 0.30m wide and of varying lengths, were excavated. Trenches 1 and 2 were excavated by hand and Trench 3 with a mechanical mini-digger. A tarmac cutter was required for the initial stage of excavation in all three trenches. In addition to the trenches, 6 bases for security posts were excavated by hand, all of which measured 1.0m x 1.0m.

All below ground works were monitored by a suitably qualified archaeologist. All archaeological deposits were recorded using pro forma context and feature cards and monochrome and colour print photography. Scale drawings were made of each trench at 1:50 and 1:10 and of each security post base at 1:20. This record forms the site archive, which is currently stored at B.U.F.A.U.

6.0 Results

6.1 Trench 1 (Fig. 2; Plate 2)

Trench 1 was located approximately 15m to the west of North Lodge, passing under the archway in the garden wall along the northern side of the hall and was aligned approximately north-south. The trench measured 8.70m in length and 0.30m in width.

The earliest layer encountered in this trench was a brownish orange silt-sand containing fragments of rubble (1001) with the rubble content lessening towards the northern end of the trench. Overlying 1001 was a 0.07m thick layer of modern tarmac (1000). At both ends this trench joined onto a previously existing cable trench.

6.2 Trench 2 (Figs. 2 & 3; Plate 3)

Trench 2 was located approximately 12.5m to the west of South Lodge, 2.80m from the archway in the garden wall along the south side of the hall. The trench measured 6.0m in length and 0.30m in width.

The trench was aligned roughly northwest-southeast and abutted the garden wall at the northwest end. At this point the trench widens into a 0.50m square. This trench terminated at a junction with an extant cable trench.

The earliest layer encountered in this trench was an orange-brown sandy silt (2001) which was immediately overlain by the modern tarmac surface (2000). At its northwest end the trench opens out into a 0.50m square, the southern facing section of which revealed the footings for the wall (F200), against which the trench butts. The foundations could be seen to extend to 0.40m below the modern ground surface. Each brick measured approximately 0.22m long by 0.08m high and had been crudely mortared in a stretcher pattern (2002). The bricks were predominantly red in colour however some variations existed within this. The red bricks forming the majority of the wall appear to be of mid-19th Century date. The variations in size and colour of some bricks in the wall suggest that these had previously been used in other walls forming standing buildings or garden structures.

6.3 Trench 3 (Figs. 2 & 3)

Trench 3 was located approximately 8m from the northwest corner of the hall and was aligned east to west. The trench extended from an existing cable trench, in the east, and ran 25m west, to a junction with a previously excavated trench. The trench passed centrally between an access in the garden wall that runs north-south at the rear of the hall.

The earliest layer encountered in this trench was a mid-light brown silty sand, which contained occasional isolated areas of brick rubble and lenses of clean orange sand (3003). Within this layer, 11.60m from the eastern end of the trench, the remains of a wall (F300), 0.75m wide and aligned north-south, were identified (see Fig 3). The bricks (3002) measured 0.24m long by 0.04m high by 0.10 m wide. The outer bricks appear to have been laid out in stretcher bond, whilst the central bricks were laid out with the headers facing outward. A thick layer of mortar covered most of the visible bricks. The bricks were red in colour and, judging by their size and shape, appear to date to the 17th Century or earlier (M. Hislop, pers. comm.). Both the top of the

remains of the wall and layer 3003 were sealed by a sand and gravel layer (3001). Immediately above 3001 was the modern tarmac ground surface.

6.4 Security Posts 1-6 (Fig. 2)

Six bases for security posts were excavated by hand, each measuring 1m x 1m and up to a maximum depth of 1m. The bases were located around the perimeter of the hall (see Fig. 2). The sections of each base revealed very similar stratigraphic layers. The earliest layer, where encountered, appeared to be an orange-brown sand (4002) immediately overlain by a sandy-silt layer, containing some small stones and occasional rubble fragments (4001). The latest episode of deposition, above (4001), was a fine, dark brown silty topsoil (4000) and sometimes, modern tarmac (4003). Bases 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6 were all cut by modern service trenches.

7.0 Discussion

The brick wall seen in Trench 2 formed part of the foundations to a garden wall (F200) which, from the morphology of the majority of the bricks, appears to be mid-19th Century in date. However, some of the bricks used to construct the wall appear to be different in both size and colour. This suggests that during the construction of this wall, bricks from previously standing buildings or garden features were re-used.

The wall identified in Trench 3 appears to be associated with the enclosure of the hall with garden walls. The standing garden wall has an access through which the trench passed, however, the wall (F300) seen in the trench is in direct alignment with the standing wall. It seems reasonable to assume, therefore, that the wall was originally continuous, or that an earlier wall stood on the same alignment. On examination the bricks from this wall appear to be of 17th Century date or earlier, possibly contemporary with the original Jacobean Hall. No visible cut for the wall in Trench 3 was identified in section and it seems likely, therefore, that the wall was constructed prior to being sealed by the layer of build-up material (3003) which surrounds it.

Both the trenches and the bases for the security posts displayed similar stratigraphy. The rubbly subsoil suggesting a phase of landscaping prior to the more modern installation of the tarmac surface. No evidence of earlier, i.e. medieval, deposits or features were discovered during the archaeological monitoring of the installation of the C.C.T.V system. However, the groundworks were all quite shallow and the area appears to have been subjected to extensive landscaping activities, which may have either destroyed or masked any earlier deposits.

8.0 Acknowledgements

The site work was carried out by Kate Bain and Erica Macey. Malcolm Hislop commented on the bricks. This report was written by Kate Bain and edited by Gary Coates who also managed the project. The figures were prepared by Nigel Dodds and the plates by Gary Coates.

Chris Rice commissioned the project on behalf of Birmingham City Council.

Mike Hodder, Birmingham City Planning Archaeologist, monitored the work.

Thanks are due to the staff of Aston Hall for their assistance and co-operation.

Thanks are also due to Peter Cox Building Contractors, who carried out the groundwork.

9.0 References

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Fig. 1

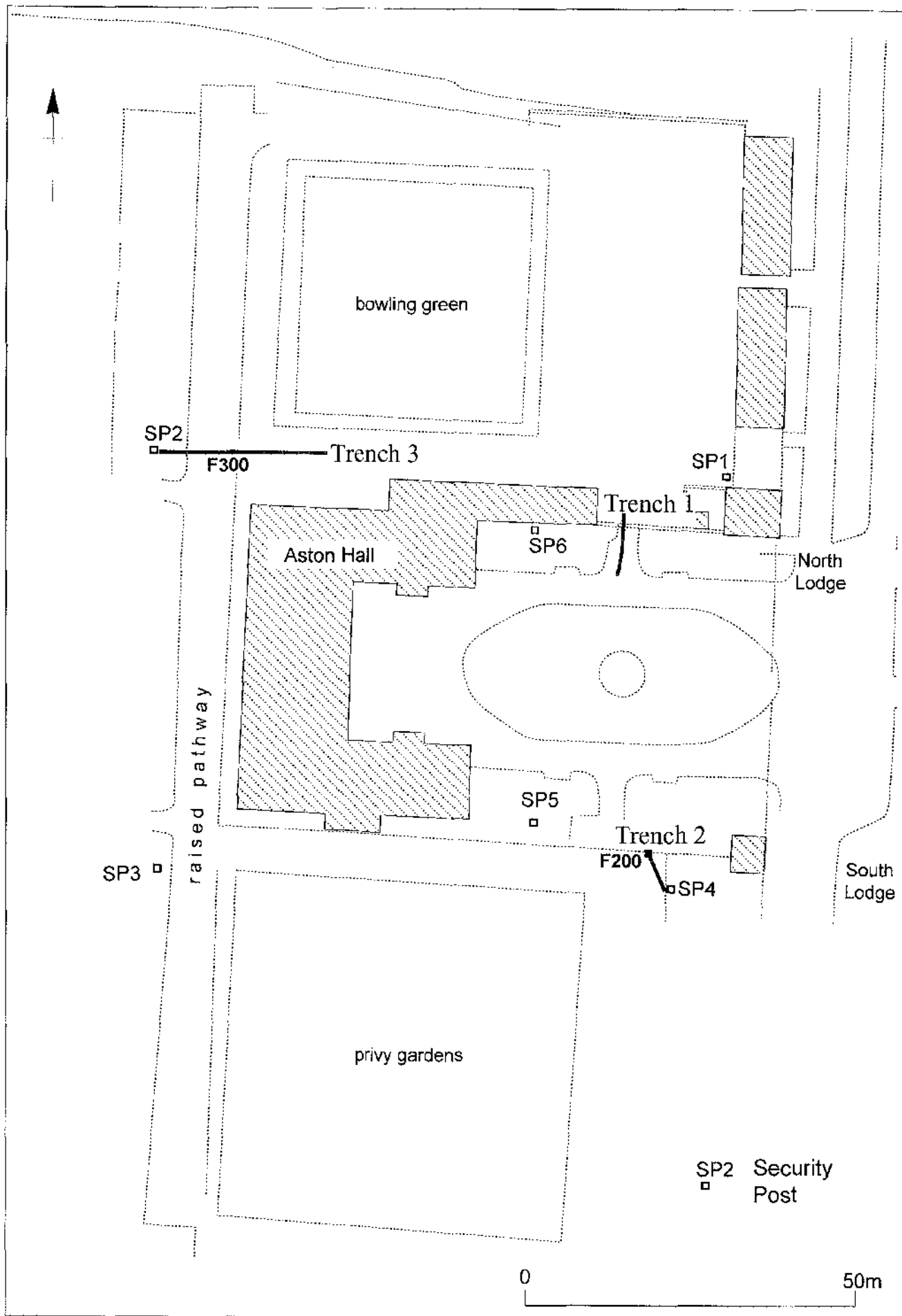


Fig.2

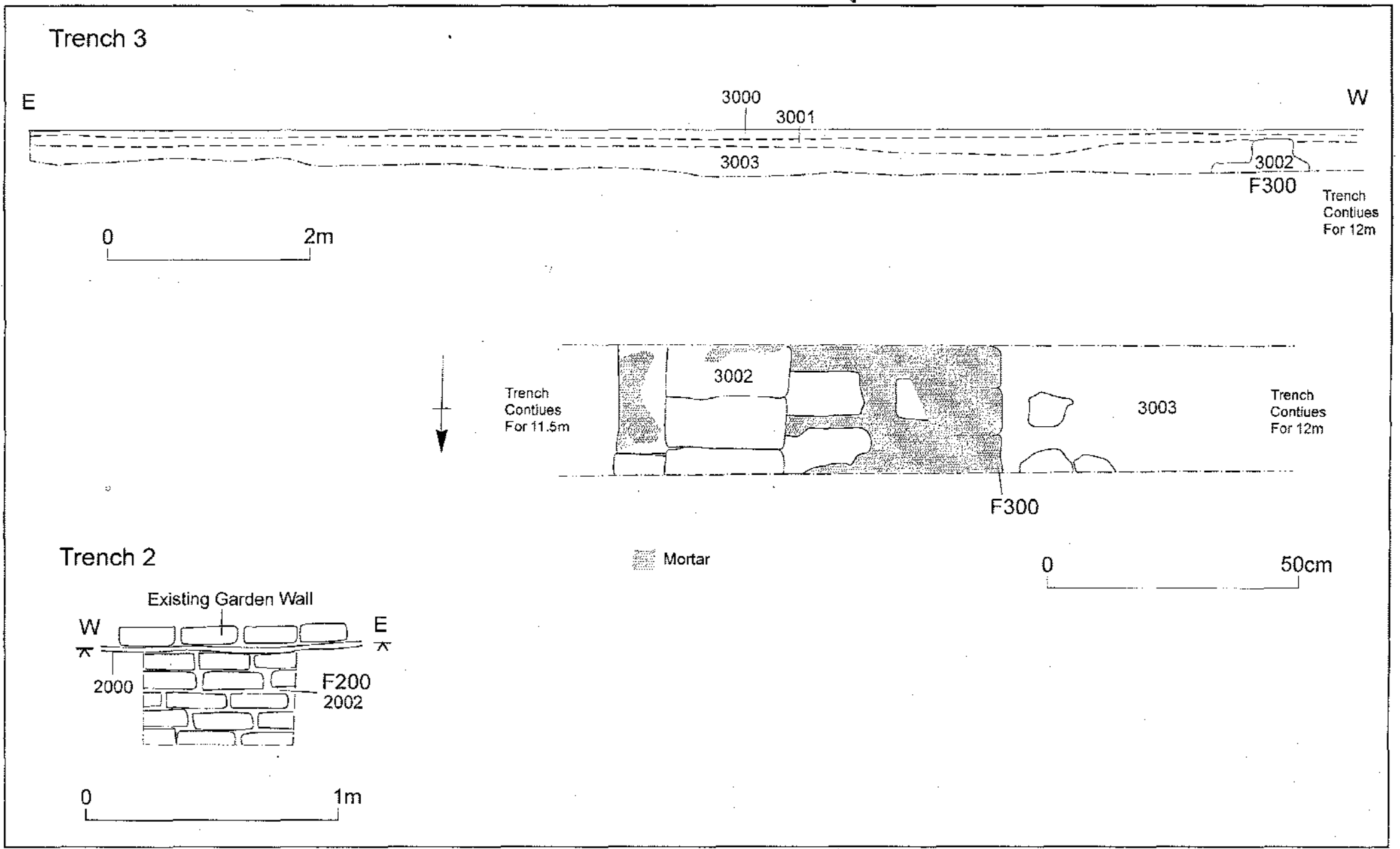


Fig.3



Plate 1



Plate 2



Plate 3