British Crepe Factory, Finney's Lane, Middlewich, Cheshire

Archaeological evaluation 2003

Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit **Project No. 1021** February 2003

British Crepe Factory, Finney's Lane, Middlewich Cheshire

Archaeological Evaluation

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Site of the British Crepe Factory, Finney's Lane, Middlewich, Cheshire An Archaeological Evaluation

Summary

An archaeological evaluation was carried out in January 2003 by Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit on the site of the former British Crepe factory at land off Finney's Lane, Middewich, Cheshire (NGR SJ7010 6685), ahead of the proposed redevelopment of the site for housing. The site lies in an area of archaeological potential, being situated close to Harbutt's Field, the site of a Roman fort which is a Scheduled Ancient Monument, and areas which have produced evidence of settlement and industrial activity of the Roman period. Seven trial trenches, located in the western and eastern halves of the site, were excavated. Those in the eastern half revealed very deep layers of made-up ground, whilst those in the western half produced evidence of a possible linear ditch, waterlogged deposits, a well and a number of animal burials in rectilinear grave-cuts. The animal burials would appear to be relatively modern in date.

1.0: Introduction

This report describes the results of an archaeological evaluation undertaken by Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit (BUFAU) on behalf of RSK Environmental Ltd., ahead of the proposed redevelopment of a site, formerly occupied by the British Crepe Factory, at Finney's Lane, Middlewich, Cheshire (Fig.1). The location of the proposed development (NGR SJ7010 6685) lies in an area which is close to the site of a Roman fort at Harbutt's Field and it was, therefore, considered possible that it contained evidence relating to this period.

The evaluation was carried out in accordance with a Brief prepared by Cheshire County Council on behalf of RSK Environmental Ltd. (Brief 2002), and an Archaeological Specification prepared by Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit (BUFAU 2002). All work on site was carried out in accordance with the Institute of Field Archaeologists Standard and Guidance for Field Evaluation (Institute of Field Archaeologists 1999).

2.0: Site Location and Description

The proposed development site occupies an area of 2ha on the northern outskirts of Middlewich. The eastern half of the site is for the most part occupied by factory buildings, whilst the western half is open ground. To the east the site is skirted by the Trent and Mersey canal and the canalised course of the River Croco. The rest of the surrounding area is largely taken up by residential housing (Brief 2002).

3.0: Historical Background

The Roman settlement at Middlewich may be identified with the placename Salinae, which appears in the Ravenna Cosmography. This suggests that the site was concerned with the exploitation of the area's salt deposits. Recent work has done much to clarify the layout of the settlement and it is now clear that the fort, which is a Scheduled Ancient Monument, lay close to the Finney's Lane site, on the opposite side of the canal, immediately to the west of King Street, the Roman road leading to Northwich. An extensive area of settlement and industrial activity lay to the south and east of the fort, evidence for which has been recovered from several sites in recent years. Excavation of an extensive area to the south of the fort has revealed evidence for intensive activity, including pits and wells, buildings, floors, hearths, and a well-preserved section of road (Brief 2002).

Work on the eastern periphery of the settlement has revealed evidence of ditches, pits connected to salt making, a cremation and a Roman road running towards the northeast, probably towards Manchester. The Finney's Lanc site has not previously produced evidence of Roman activity but its proximity to the fort and settlement meant that it had the potential to produce evidence relating to this period (Brief 2002).

4.0: Aims

The aims of the archaeological evaluation were to:

- establish the likely presence or absence of any archaeological deposits and features within the proposed development site (in particular relating to Romano-British occupation and activity associated with the nearby Roman fort)
- define the nature, extent and significance of surviving deposits and features
- provide information to allow the formulation of a mitigation scheme for any further work in advance of development, where appropriate

5.0: Method

These aims were to be achieved through the excavation of seven archaeological trial trenches located in the eastern and western halves of the site (Fig. 2). Five were to measure 1.8m x 20m, one 1.8m x 5m and another 1.8m x 15m.

Modern overburden was removed by a JCB excavator fitted with a toothless ditching bucket. Machining was done under archaeological supervision, to expose the uppermost horizon of significant archaeological deposits, or the surface of the natural subsoil. The machined horizon was then manually cleaned to define archaeological features and deposits. A representative sample of features and deposits was hand excavated.

The Cheshire County Record Office was consulted for additional map and documentary evidence.

Recording was by means of pre-printed *pro-forma* record cards for contexts and features, supplemented by plans (at 1:20 and 1:50), sections (at 1:10 and 1:20), and monochrome print and colour slide and colour print photography. Finds were retained by context and soil samples were to be taken from suitable contexts.

The paper records, together with finds, comprise the site archive, which, at the time of writing, is stored at Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit. This will be deposited at a suitable repository following the completion of the project.

6.0: Results

Trench 1

Trench 1, measuring 1.8m by 20m, was orientated roughly northwest to southeast and was located along the western edge of the site (Fig.2). Access to the trench was prevented due to its depth.

The earliest deposit encountered in Trench 1 was located at a depth of approximately 2m below ground level, and consisted of a black, waterlogged material (1007). A machine dug sondage indicated that this deposit continued to a depth of at least 2.8m below ground level, at which point flooding prevented further excavation. Waterlogged deposit 1007 was overlain by a red/brown re-deposited clay (1006) which had been cut by a linear feature (F100) which was orientated roughly northwest to southeast. Linear F100 measured approximately 2.5m in width and was filled with a grey/brown silty sand with pebbles throughout (1008). This had been sealed by a layer of grey/yellow mottled silty sand with pebbles throughout (1005). At the northwestern end of the trench layer 1005 had been cut by a northeast to southwest aligned linear feature (F101), which was partially exposed in plan. Linear F101 measured approximately 2m in width and contained a very dark brown to black organic fill (1004). A band of dark brown to black clean silty soil (1002) sealed the aforementioned features and deposits in Trench 1. Overlying layer 1002 was a thick band of modern rubble containing a mix of ashy soil with brick, iron, pipe, plastic and clinker (1001) which had, in turn, been sealed by topsoil (1000).

No dating evidence was retrieved from Trench 1, apart from a piece of post-medieval tile from layer 1007.

Trench 2

Trench 2, measuring 1.8m by 20m, was orientated roughly northwest to southeast and was located in the northwestern sector of the site (Fig. 2).

The earliest deposit encountered in Trench 2 was the natural subsoil which was located at a depth of approximately 1m below ground level and consisted of a red/yellow sand (2007). This had been cut by two features which were located towards the centre of the trench. The first of these was a sub-circular feature (F200) with sloping sides and a flat base. It measured 0.3m in depth, contained a mid-grey silty sand fill (2008) and had been cut on its northern edge by a rectilinear feature

(F203) which was partially exposed in plan. Feature F203 was U-shaped in profile, measuring 0.25m deep by 0.4m wide, and was orientated roughly east to west. It contained a dark brown sandy silt fill (2011) which contained traces of very degraded bone. These features were sealed by a light brown, clayey sand layer (2006) which had been cut by a further rectilinear feature (F201) located at the northeastern end of Trench 2. Feature F201, which was partially exposed in plan, measured 0.65m deep by 0.6m wide, and had a very regular, squared profile. It contained a dark brown to black silty soil (2009) which produced fragments of bone. A dark brown silty layer (2005) sealed feature F201 and was itself overlain by a thin band of brown sand (2004). Layers of modern mixed rubble and levelling material (2003, 2002, 2001) sealed layer 2004 and the rubble layers were overlain by topsoil (2000).

Feature F201 produced a sherd of brown glazed pottery of 17th-18th century date.

Trench 3

Trench 3, measuring 1.8m by 20m, was orientated roughly southwest to northeast and located at a right angle to Trench 2 (Fig. 2).

The earliest deposit encountered in Trench 3 was the natural subsoil (3012), located at a depth of approximately 1m below ground level, and consisting of a fine, loosely-packed yellow sand which merged with an area of very compacted orange sand and degraded sandstone at the northeastern end of the trench (Fig. 3)

A rectilinear cut (F305), aligned north to south, was partially exposed in plan towards the northeastern end of the trench and measured 0.56m wide (Fig. 4). It was filled with a dark grey/brown silty clay sand (3005) which contained an articulated animal burial. Burial F305 had been sealed by a light grey/brown silty sand with charcoal flecking throughout (3011). At this end of the trench layer 3011 had also been cut by a number of other features (F304, F303, F309) which were rectilinear in plan and aligned roughly north to south. All of these features contained a dark grey/brown silty clay (3004,3003, 3013), which produced large amounts of animal bone, and measured between 0.4m and 0.6m wide. A small circular cut (F306), measuring 0.4m in diameter, was also noted at this end of Trench 3. The bones recovered from the dark grey/brown silty clay fill (3006) of F306 were very well preserved.

At the southwestern end of the trench three more rectilinear cuts (F300, F301, F310) were encountered cutting layer 3011 (Fig. 4) They contained fills (3000, 3001, 3014) similar to those in the features at the northeastern end of the trench and also produced animal bone. They measured between 0.4m and 0.6m in width However, only one of the cuts (F301) at the southwestern end of Trench 3 was orientated north to south, the remaining two (F300, F310) being orientated roughly east to west. A further two east to west aligned cuts (F308, F307) were exposed in the northeastern-facing section of Trench 3 at a higher level than F310 and F300. They were U-shaped in profile and measured approximately 0.4 m wide and both produced animal bone.

In the southwestern half of Trench 3 a large sub-rectangular feature (F302) was partially exposed in plan, measuring approximately 2m in width (Fig. 4). A machine-dug sondage revealed that this feature (which could not be bottomed) was of considerable depth. The earliest fill noted was a dark red/brown silty clay (3016)

which was overlain by a dark grey, waterlogged deposit which produced cow bones (3017). The upper fill was a very mixed yellow and orange silty sand with lumps of redeposited orange/brown clay (3002).

All of the aforementioned features were scaled by a layer of medium to dark grey brown silty clay (3010) which contained fragments of brick, ash and mortar. Layer 3010 had been sealed by modern build-up and levelling material containing tarmac, brick and sand (3009) and this was overlain by topsoil (3018).

A small amount of pottery was retrieved from the features in Trench 3, the earliest of which was a large piece of yellow slipware of mid-17th-century date from feature F304. A sherd of buff coloured ware from a strap handle of 17th-century date was also recovered from feature F308. A small sherd of white glaze pottery of 19th-century date was recovered from feature F305 and a small glazed fragment of 18th-19th-century date was produced by feature F302.

Trench 4

Trench 4, measuring 1.8m by 20m, was orientated northeast to southwest and located along the northern edge of the site (Fig. 2)

A machine-dug sondage revealed that a considerable depth of made-up ground, consisting of massive quantities of redeposited clay (4000), was overlain by modern rubble and levelling material (4001). The trench was excavated to a depth of 3m and then immediately backfilled.

No dating evidence was retrieved from Trench 4.

Trench 5

Trench 5, measuring 1.8m by 5m, was orientated northwest to southeast and located in the northeastern corner of the site (Fig. 2).

This trench was not excavated due to lack of access.

Trench 6

Trench 6, measuring 1.8m by 15m, was orientated northwest to southeast and was located along the eastern edge of the sitc (Fig. 2).

A machine-dug sondage revealed that a considerable depth of made-up ground, consisting of massive quantities of redeposited clay (6000), was overlain by modern rubble and levelling material (6001). The trench was excavated to a depth of 3m and then immediately backfilled.

No dating evidence was retrieved from Trench 5.

Trench 7

Trench 7, measuring 1.8m by 20m, was orientated east to west and located along the southern edge of the site (Fig. 2).

Flooding prevented excavation of this trench to any depth. At approximately 1m below ground level a concrete ramp which rose towards the eastern end of the trench was partially revealed. The upper horizon of a clinker layer (7002) overlay the concrete ramp and this was, in turn, overlain by a band of dark ashy soil with brick and rubble inclusions (7001).

No dating evidence was retrieved from Trench 7.

7.0: Interpretation

Trench 1

The black waterlogged deposit 1007 at the southeastern end of the trench may have represented the fill of a large ditch or pond, and the redeposited clay layer 1006, which had sealed it, probably represented build-up or levelling material. The wide linear feature F100, which had been cut into layer 1006, may have been the truncated remains of a ditch. The linear feature F101 at the northwestern end of the trench seems likely to have been a northeast to southwest aligned ditch, and its dark brown to black organic fill 1004 suggested waterlogging. The ditch was only partially exposed in plan but this was sufficient to indicate that it was likely to have been of substantial dimensions. Unfortunately, no dating evidence was retrieved from ditch F101 and, therefore, it was not possible to set it into any historical context, though in terms of function it might represent an old boundary. The dark brown to black silty soil 1002, which sealed the features in Trench 1, was noticeably clear of inclusions such as brick or rubble and might be interpreted as an old topsoil or cultivation layer, but again lack of dating evidence precluded any dating. The remaining layer 1001 was a thick band of rubble which suggested demolition and levelling activities on the site.

Trench 2

The circular feature F200 located towards the centre of the trench may have been a truncated pit, of uncertain date. The two rectilinear features F203 and F201 both produced fragments of degraded animal bone and this suggested that they were gravecuts for animals. The dark brown silty layer 2005 which sealed these cuts was probably the same old topsoil or cultivation layer observed in Trench 1. Similarly the layers of mixed rubble which sealed layer 2005 represented the same phases of demolition and levelling as those in Trench 1.

Trench 3

The rectilinear cuts F300, F301, F303, F304, F305, F307, F308, F309 and F310 all contained substantial amounts of articulated animal bone and, as in the case of Trench 2, may be interpreted as grave-cuts for animals. The small circular animal burial F306 appeared to be anomalous, though others may exist beyond the area of

excavation. The large sub-rectangular feature F302 in the southwestern half of Trench 3 appeared to be of considerable depth and was most likely to have been a well. The dark red/brown clay 3016 observed in the lower section of the well may have been material used as deliberate backfill and its similarity to the massive quantities of redeposited clay used as build up material, noted in Trenches 4 and 6, might suggest that the backfilling of the well and the building up of the ground on the eastern side of the site were part of the same phase of activity. The waterlogged deposit 3017, which overlay layer 3016 in the well, produced a substantial amount of bone from cow, which, in this, case, appeared to have been discarded rather than systematically buried. Dating evidence from the features in Trench 3 was exiguous in the extreme and may represent residual material of 18th and 19th-century date. In only one case, gravecut F304, did pottery come from well down in the fill, thus indicating a date after the mid-17th century. Layer 3010, which sealed the features in Trench 3, produced rubble and dating evidence belonging to the 18th and 19th centuries, thus providing a terminus ante quem for those features. Oral accounts of a piggery operating on the site (pers. comm. Helena Smith), confirmed by British Crepe board minutes of 1933, suggest that some or all of these animal burials could, in fact, be quite recent.

Trenches 4 and 6

Both of these trenches produced evidence of considerable depths of made-up ground in the form of layers 4000 and 6000, which consisted of massive quantities of redeposited clay. This probably represented activity connected to the levelling and remodelling of the eastern half of the area for the construction of buildings (probably the 19th-century milk condensing factory, Figs. 5 and 6) It is likely that this was contemporary with the canalising of the River Croco, when the upcast from its construction was used as build up material. The overlying rubble layers 4001 and 6001 probably resulted from the demolition of the 19th-century milk condensing factory (Figs. 5 and 6, CCC 1993) which occupied the eastern half of the site.

Trench 5

Although Trench 5 was not excavated, its location along the eastern edge of the site suggests that a similar stratigraphy to that encountered in Trenches 4 and 6 would have been encountered.

Trench 7

The concrete ramp encountered in Trench 7 may have been part of the 19th-century milk condensing factory which was located in this part of the site. The clinker and rubble layers 7002 and 7001 are likely to have resulted from the demolition of this factory.

8.0; Pottery by L. Bevan

F302, 3002 – glazed fragment, probably from the edge of a plate – 18th-19th century F304, 3004 – yellow slipware-17th century, white patterned and brown glazed fragments-17th – 18th century

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F305, 3005 – whitewave fragment-19<sup>th</sup> century
F308, 3008 – buff ware from strap handle of 17<sup>th</sup> century
F302, 3002 – clay pipe stem-17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> century
F201, 2009 – brown glazed fragment-17<sup>th</sup> –18<sup>th</sup> century
1007 – ceramic tile, not generally dateable, probably post-medieval
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9.0: Animal bones by E. Hancox

Factual Data

A small amount of bone was hand collected from the excavation, amounting to one small box. The assemblage was not weighed as the bones were still wet. Bulk samples were taken for sieving, but these had not been processed at the time of the assessment. Bone was recovered from 12 contexts, nine of which contained recordable elements. The majority of the assemblage was in poor condition. With the exception of the remains of a cat and some cow ribs, all the bone in the assemblage was of pigs. No evidence of butchery, pathology, gnawing or burning was found. However, the bones were still covered in mud when assessed and evidence may be uncovered when the bones are washed.

All the contexts came from distinct cuts, and appeared to represent the remains of complete animals. The dating of these contexts is unclear, although post-medieval pottery was recovered from the fill of one grave cut, though there is written evidence, in the form of an entry in British Crepe board minutes of a piggery operating on part of the site in the 1930s.

Discussion

One possible explanation of the pig burials is that they relate to ritual activity. The ritual burial and cremation of animals is recorded throughout history in Europe from the prehistoric through to the medieval period (Bond 1996; Wilson 1992; Lauwerier and Hessing 1992; Prummel 1993). No evidence of burning or charring was found in this assemblage, suggesting that the animals were not cremated. The pigs may have been treated as pets, and buried with care when they died. This seems unlikely, as all the pigs were approximately the same age. Eight ageable mandibles were recovered (from four contexts and probably representing four individuals, 3000, 3001, 3005, 3013), all of which had a fully erupted, but not worn, first molar, with the second molar just starting to erupt through the jaw. None of the post-cranial bones had fused. The fact that all the animals were roughly the same age might suggest ritual activity in other contexts, though here a relatively recent date and a documented reference to a piggery here in the 1930s probably suggests a more mundane explanation for the burials. Bond (1996, 82) noted that pigs are often killed at ages consistent with their use as food animals i.e. when young.

Butchery marks have been noted on pigs at Anglo-Saxon animal cremation sites (Bond 1996), possibly suggesting the removal of parts for consumption. It would be useful to determine whether there is any evidence for this here. Bones from all areas of the body were recovered and the remains appeared to be articulated when excavated, suggesting that they had been buried whole.

The remains of the cat could also relate to the ritual activity or they may relate to the interment of a family pet. The dating of this context may help to determine this, though, again, the cat burial is probably also relatively recent in date.

10.0: Discussion

No direct evidence of Romano-British occupation or activity associated with the Roman fort at Harbutt's Field was encountered during the evaluation, and it is possible that archaeological deposits of this period were scoured out by later activity, had they ever been present. Saxon or medieval deposits might also have been similarly removed, if ever present. In the eastern half of the site, which had been subjected to large-scale levelling up, it is possible that archaeological deposits could have been sealed by the dumped material. However, if the levelling-up process involved cut and fill methods to raise the ground level, then any archaeology would have been removed, though, again, there is no evidence for it having been present. The canalisation of the River Croco along the eastern side of the site and the levelling-up of the ground here were probably contemporary phases of activity, and the milk condensing factory may have been sited here in order to utilise the canal for transportation.

In the western half of the site the pottery evidence would seem to point to activity dating from around the mid-17th century onwards. Unfortunately, the 19th- and early 20th-century map (Figs. 5 & 6) and documentary evidence (CCC 1993) did not provide any supplementary information which may have enhanced an understanding of the date and function of the features located here.

The uniform shape and dimensions of the cuts in Trenches 2 and 3, all of which contained animal bone (much of it appearing to belong to in situ articulated skeletons), and the apparent care taken in the deposition of the animals in the cuts, would suggest systematic animal burial. Moreover, the animal burials appeared to belong to at least three phases of activity, suggesting a prolonged use of the area for this purpose. Questions regarding the reasons for such systematic and careful animal burial remain unanswered, especially in light of the fact that the bones in all but one case (the circular gravecut containing a cat), appear to have been young pigs. Ritualised burial seems unlikely in a post-medieval context, and the disposal of diseased animals or butchered animals was more likely to have involved dumping into pits. The presence of a cat skeleton from the anomalous circular grave cut may indicate that the pigs were being treated as domestic pets, although this seems unlikely. The sentimentalisation of animals is normally associated with more modern times, but the pottery indicated a date of at least the mid-17th century for the beginning of the animal burials on the site. The 19th- and early 20th-century maps (Figs. 5 & 6, CCC 1993) provided no additional information concerning any later activity which might throw light on the reasons for the pig burials in this location. However, following the circulation of a draft report on the burials, the Chairman of British Crepe located a company minute, dating from 1933, which confirmed that a piggery, operated by Mr Colin Fox, existed at Finney's Lanc (Helena Smith pers. comm.). This might now offer a secure date and archaeological context for the burials.

11.0: Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to Helena Smith, archaeological consultant to RSK Environmental Ltd., for her assistance during fieldwork. Thanks are also due to Mark Leah, Archaeological Officer (Development Control), who monitored the site on behalf of Cheshire County Council. The fieldwork was supervised by Helen Martin, with the assistance of Robert Burrows and Andy Walsh, and the project was monitored on behalf of BUFAU by Iain Ferris. This report was written by Helen Martin and edited by Iain Ferris. The illustrations were prepared by Nigel Dodds.

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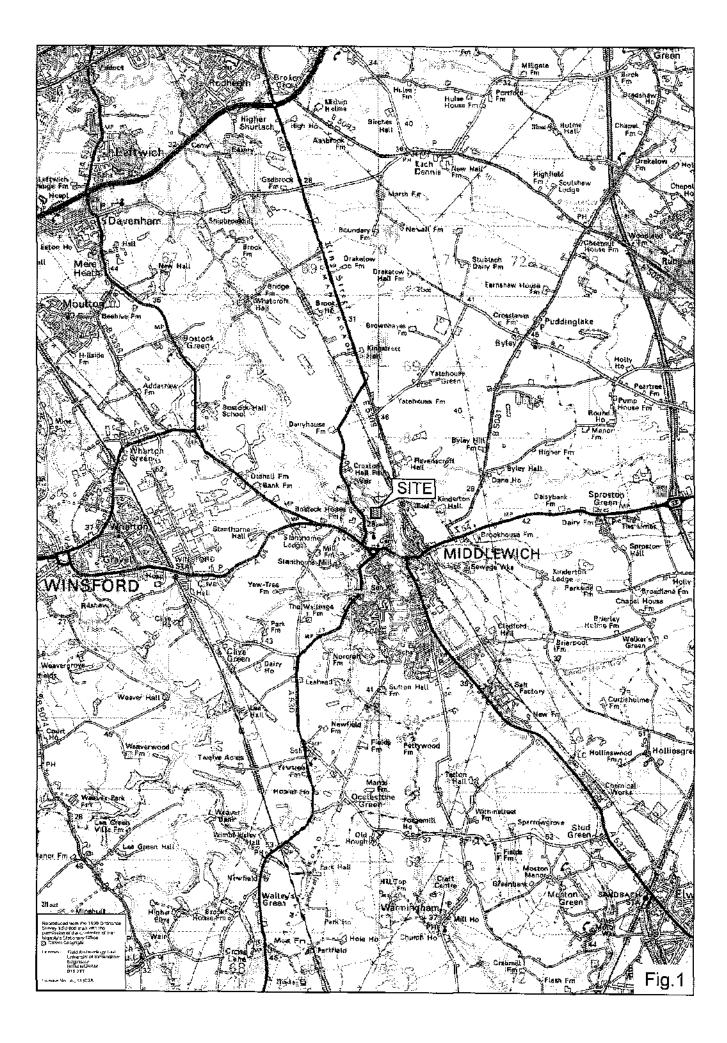
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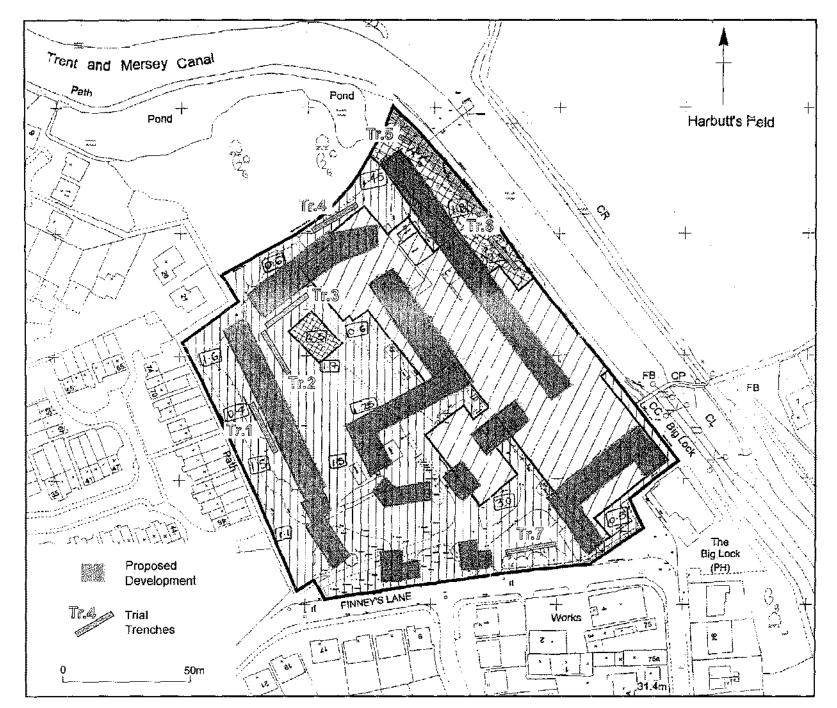


Fig.2

