Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit
Project No. 1025
February 2003

Hillfield Hall, Solihull
An Archaeological Evaluation

by
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Contents

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Summary

An archaeological evaluation on land at Hillfield Hall, Solihull (centred on NGR SP 4151404 278080) was commissioned by Fairclough Homes. The work was undertaken by Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit in February 2003 prior to the proposed redevelopment of the site. Six trenches were excavated, the locations of which were designed to locate and identify any archaeological remains that would be affected by the proposed development.

The evaluation identified a moat, revetment and associated bank within two trenches to the north of the development area, but did not produce any evidence that dated the moat to the Medieval period. No associated structures were identified. Only one of the six trenches excavated displayed any serious truncation by later or modern activity. Within the trenches to the south of the development area a possible cobble surface and three post-holes were identified as being likely to date from the Post-Medieval period, based on the analysis of the brick and tile recovered. Several small linear features were also identified within these trenches. No Medieval pottery and little Post-Medieval pottery was recovered from the evaluation as a whole.

1.0 Introduction

This report describes the results of an archaeological evaluation undertaken on land at Hillfield Hall, Solihull (centred on NGR SP 415040 278080). The work was carried out by Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit on behalf of Fairclough Homes to provide archaeological information in advance of the proposed refurbishment of Hillfield Hall and the erection of 16 dwellings within the grounds.

The archaeological work complied with a Written Scheme of Investigation prepared by Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit (BUFAU 2003), which was approved by the Planning Archaeologist for Warwickshire County Council. The archaeological evaluation was conducted in accordance with the Institute of Field Archaeologists Standards and Guidance for Field Evaluation (Institute of Field Archaeologists 1999).

2.0 Site Location

The site is centred on Hillfield Hall (NGR SP 415040 278080), and comprises the hall, its outbuildings and its grounds. The grounds are bounded by Hillfield Road to the west and residential properties to the north, east and south. The hall was most recently used as a public house/restaurant.

3.0 Archaeological Background

A desk-based assessment carried out prior to the evaluation (Williams 2002) identified that the site itself lies in an area of high archaeological potential which contains a moated site of possible Medieval date and the Hall itself, which is a Grade II* listed building. The land was originally granted to the Hawes family in 1311, who constructed a moated homestead and farmed the surrounding fields. Only a fishpond in the southwestern corner of the site is visible today, although traces of the moat were visible in the northwest corner until recently. A brick-built Hall was built in 1576, although most of this burnt down in 1867, leaving only the front standing. Since then a large extension has been added to the south of the Hall in the 1970s and the grounds landscaped for the construction of car parks. The remaining outbuildings, including the stables, could date from the late 17th century.

4.0 Objectives

The objectives of the archaeological work were to:

- establish the presence or absence of any archaeological deposits and features within the proposed development site.
- define the nature, extent and significance of surviving deposits and features.
- characterise the palaeoenvironmental history of the site.
- provide information to allow the formulation of a mitigation scheme for any further work in advance of development, where appropriate.

5.0 Method

The evaluation comprised six trial-trenches of varying lengths, the location of which was determined in advance by the Planning Archaeologist for Warwickshire County Council. The tarmac and modern overburden was mechanically removed by a JCB, under direct archaeological supervision, to the top of the uppermost archaeological deposit, or natural subsoil where no archaeological deposits were encountered. The exposed horizon was defined and hand cleaned as necessary. A representative sample of all significant archaeological deposits was excavated in order to understand the structural record and stratigraphic relationships of deposits.

All stratigraphic sequences were recorded, and a comprehensive written record was maintained on pro-forma context and feature cards. Contextual information was supplemented by scale drawings (at a scale of 1:20 and 1:50), and black and white, colour slide and digital photography. These, together with recovered artefacts, form the site archive.

6.0 Archaeological Results

Trench 1 (Fig. 4, Plate 1)
Aligned north-west – south-east.

The red clay subsoil (1021) was exposed at a depth of approximately 0.8m below the modern carpark surface. Pressed into the subsoil, central to the trench, was an area of rounded cobbles with occasional brick fragments (1005) which may comprise a surface. Overlying this possible surface was a layer of dark brown silty clay with brick fragments (1001), which obscured the surface except where exposed in a sondage. At the north-western end of the trench, a large feature aligned approximately north-east – south-west was identified (F100), and was interpreted as part of the moat. This feature was excavated to a depth of 1.9m below the modern carpark surface and continued under the north-west end of the trench and was not fully excavated due to safety considerations. The majority of the fills of the moat feature (F100) were modern deposits containing plastic, metal and concrete etc (1000, 1002, 1006, 1008 and 1020). This is not surprising, given that the moat in this area was visible as an open feature as late as 1950 (Williams 2002). At the edge of the moat (F100) was a deposit of redeposited red clay (1007), which in section was evident as a 7.5m wide bank. A revetment of hard grey angular stone (1022 not illustrated) was identified within the section through the moat abutting the redeposited red clay, but was not continuous throughout the section. A deposit of light grey brown silt clay with tile (1003) was also identified overlying the redeposited clay at the edge of the moat, and possibly represents an earlier episode of backfilling. One fragment of Post-Medieval pottery was recovered from this context, which was sampled for environmental assessment (see below). Central to the trench a layer of rounded cobbles, brick and grey-brown silty clay (1018) was identified. This layer abutted and respected the southern edge of the bank of redeposited red clay (1007). The brick recovered from this context (1018) was identified as dating from the 18th century. Overlying this layer was a series of levelling layers and deposits and former tarmac surfaces (1009, 1012, 1013, 1016 and 1017). Cutting these layers was a series of drains aligned north-west – south-east, and north-east – south-west. Overlying the whole trench was a levelling layer of angular gravel and crushed brick (1014) and a tarmac surface (1010).

Trench 2 (Fig. 5, Plate 2)
Aligned north-north-west – south-south-east.

The location of this trench was slightly altered to avoid a live service identified prior to machining.

The red and blue mottled clay subsoil (2008) was encountered only in two machine-excavated sondages, one at the southern end of the trench, one at the northernmost end of the trench. A large feature (F204) was also encountered at the northernmost end of the trench, and was identified as the continuation of the moat. The southern edge of this feature had a steeply-sloping side, and was tested to a depth of approximately 2.5m using a mechanical excavator. At the base of the machine-excavated sondage a layer of dark grey-brown organic silt (2010) was encountered, though for safety reasons this layer could not be sampled. Overlying the sloping edge

of this feature and extending horizontally to the south was a layer of cobbles (2005), approximately 0.1m deep, with brick and tile pressed in to the top. It is possible that this layer represents part of a weathered bank and revetment of the moat feature (Nichol, pers. comm.). Overlying the layer of cobbles (2005) was a layer of redeposited natural subsoil, a pink-red clay mixed with yellow sand with occasional brick and tile fragments (2004). The brick from this context is likely to date from the 18th – 19th century (Litherland, pers. comm.). This layer continued throughout the trench and was approximately 0.2m – 0.3m deep, except at the northern end of the trench where it also comprised the main fill of the moat feature (F204) overlying the fill 2010. A shallow, irregular feature (F203) was identified cutting the re-deposited clay layer (2004) at the northern end of the trench. The fill of this feature was a loose, light brown sandy silt with roots present (2009). It is likely that this feature represents disturbance by root activity and is not of archaeological origin.

A linear feature (F202), aligned north-east – south-west, was also identified cutting the redeposited layer (2004). This feature was approximately 1.2m wide and 0.4m deep with a U-shaped profile. The fill of this feature was a hard grey black silt with occasional brick fragments and pebbles (2006).

Overlying the redeposited clay layer (2004) at the southern end of the trench was a layer of light red-brown silty clay with occasional rounded stones (2003). Overlying this layer (2003) was a layer of coke/charcoal, brick and rounded stones (2002). Overlying layer 2003 in the northern end of the site was a brick surface (2001), comprising one layer of red and yellow modern bricks laid on their sides over a layer of coke and ash. Two parallel walls (F200 and F201) and the associated construction trench (2007) were identified truncating the brick surface (2001). These walls were aligned north-east – south-west. A large ceramic drain was identified at the northern end of the trench, truncating the moat cut F204. Overlying the whole of the trench were levelling layers of clinker, sand and tarmac that comprised the modern carpark surface.

Trench 3 (Fig. 6, Plate 3)
Aligned east – west.

The red clay subsoil (3007) was identified at a depth of approximately 0.5m below the modern carpark surface. Overlying the subsoil at the eastern end of the trench was a layer of dark orange-red silty clay (3006), which was approximately 0.2m deep. Cut through this layer (3006) was a shallow linear feature (F302) which was filled by light brown silty clay with much brick rubble (3005). Cut through this was a brick drain (F300). Overlying the subsoil (3007) and F302, and respecting the alignment of F300 was a thin layer of black silt and coke (3004). This layer was approximately 0.12m deep. Cut through this layer (3004), central to the trench, was a linear feature (F301). This feature (F301) was approximately 0.25m wide and was filled with a mixed reddish pink clay (3009), and is likely to represent another drain cut.

At the western end of the trench two walls were identified (F304 and F306). These walls survived directly beneath the hardcore and tarmac of the carpark surface and appeared to be late Post-Medieval in construction. They were severely truncated and disturbed by a large cut for a modern service/concrete manhole (F303) and a trench

for a ceramic drain (F308). This later cut (F303) also truncated the black silt and coke layer (3004) and the linear feature (F301). The depth of disturbance at the western end of the trench was greater than the depth of the natural subsoil (3007) at the eastern end of the trench, suggesting that any archaeological features or deposits which may have been present in this area had been destroyed by later activity.

Trench 4 (Fig. 6)
Aligned north-east – south-west.

The red clay subsoil in Trench 4a (4005) was exposed at a depth of approximately 0.4m below the modern carpark surface. Overlying the subsoil was a layer of grey-brown silty-clay (4001), which was approximately 0.2m deep throughout the trench. Cut through this layer (4001) was a small linear feature (F400). This feature was approximately 0.55m wide and 0.05m deep, and was aligned north-west – south-east. It was filled with a mid-grey-brown clay-silt with brick and tile fragments and occasional charcoal (4000). To the north-east of F400, another feature was investigated (F401). This feature was very shallow (less than 0.01m deep) and irregular and is unlikely to represent an archaeological feature.

Trench 4b continued to the south-west of the public footpath. This section of the trench comprised modern backfill of the former eastern edge of the pond (which still exists to the west, Fig. 3). Concrete, brick and metal etc were identified to a depth of 2.5m in a machine-excavated sondage. The subsoil was identified at a depth of 3.5m, and the former northern edge of the pond was identified as being in line with the existing edge.

Trench 5 (Fig. 7, Plate 4)
Aligned north-east – south-west.

The red clay subsoil (5008) was exposed at a depth of approximately 0.5m below the modern carpark surface. Cutting the subsoil (5008) at the north-eastern end of the trench (Trench 5a) was a shallow linear feature (F503). This feature was aligned north-west – south-east and was approximately 1.9m wide and 0.25m deep, with an irregular base. The fill (5004) was a brownish-yellow silty clay with frequent stones. To the south of F503 was a small, sub-circular feature (F501). This feature was approximately 0.4m wide and 0.2m deep and was filled by a grey silt with many cobbles (5005). Sealing these features, and overlying the subsoil (5008), was a layer of mid-yellow-brown silty sandy clay (5003). This layer was approximately 0.2m deep (maximum) and was continuous throughout the trench.

A post-hole and a possible pit/post-hole were identified cutting this layer (5003). The post-hole (F500) was approximately 0.5m wide and 0.6m deep. An upright timber remained *in situ*, packed with stones, brick fragments and brown silt (5007). The small pit (F502) was visible mainly in section, and was approximately 1.05m wide and 0.5m deep, with sloping sides and a rounded base. The fill was a dark brown black organic clay silt with frequent stones (5006). Post-Medieval pottery was recovered from this context.

Sealing these features and overlying layer 5003 was a layer of dark brown grey silty clay with occasional cobbles, rubble fragments and charcoal flecks (5002). This layer was approximately 0.1m deep, and was in turn sealed by a levelling layer of crushed brick and sand (5001), and by the modern tarmac carpark surface (5000).

The stratigraphy within Trench 5b was similar to the stratigraphy in Trench 5a. The red clay subsoil (5008) was identified approximately 0.5m below the modern carpark surface. A discrete spread of cobbles (F506, 5016) was identified central to the trench directly overlying/pressed into the subsoil. The cobble spread was irregular in plan and approximately 4m wide, 0.05- 0.1m deep, and contained fragments of brick and one fragment of vessel glass. No other features were identified within this section of the trench. Sealing the cobble spread and overlying the subsoil was a layer of mid-brownish yellow silty clay (5013). Overlying this layer (5013) was a layer of brownish black mixed clinker, ash, charcoal with brick rubble (5012) which in turn was sealed by modern levelling layers of yellow hardcore and sand (5011) and the modern carpark surface (5010).

Trench 6 (Fig. 7)
Aligned north-east – south-west.

The red clay subsoil (6005) was identified approximately 0.5m below the modern car park surface. Overlying the subsoil (6005) was a layer of yellow brown sandy clay (6003). This layer was approximately 0.15m deep, and undulated throughout the trench. In Trench 6a, a shallow linear feature (F600) was identified cutting this layer. This feature was aligned north-west – south-east, and was approximately 0.8m wide and 0.2m deep with a U-shaped profile. It was filled with a soft grey black silty sand with brick fragments (6004). In Trench 6b, two shallow linear features were identified, also cutting layer 6003. The first linear feature, F601, was aligned north-west – south-east. It was approximately 0.8m wide and 0.3m deep with a U-shaped profile. The second linear feature (F602) was mis-aligned with F601 and was irregular in plan. It was approximately 0.7m wide and 0.25m deep, with a V-shaped profile. Both linear features were filled by a yellow-grey clay-silt (6006 and 6007 respectively) and displayed evidence of disturbance due to root activity. Two other potential features were examined and determined not to be of archaeological origin.

Sealing the features, and overlying layer 6003 throughout Trenches 6a and 6b, was a layer of grey brown sandy silt, with frequent large bricks and charcoal (6002). This layer was approximately 0.2m deep. Overlying this layer was a levelling layer of orange hardcore and brick rubble (6001) and the tarmac car park surface (6000).

6.1 An evaluation of the biological remains from Hillfield Hall, Solihull By Marina Ciaraldi

One soil sample, collected by the excavator during the evaluation excavation at Hillfield Hall, Solihull, is here assessed in order to establish:

- the preservation of organic remains
- the potential of the plant assemblage in understanding the site economy

- the potential of reconstructing the palaeoenvironment of the site

The sample examined was taken from a ditch/moat (Tr.1/ F100 1003) and it is dated to the Post-Medieval period by the associated pottery. The soil matrix consists of a dark-brown loam. Ten litres of soil were processed by manual flotation. The flot was recovered on 0.5mm mesh. It was then dried in the oven at 40^0 degrees and scanned under a low-power stereomicroscope. The residue was recovered on a 1mm mesh and sorted by eye.

The flot contains mainly fragments of bark and rootlets, clearly representing modern contaminants. It also contains fragments of coal and occasional charcoal too.

On the basis of the sample examined it would seem that preservation by charring is very poor in the archaeological deposit from Hillfield Hall. It is, however, possible that charred remains, as well as waterlogged remains are preserved in different types of features and in different areas of the excavation. It is therefore recommended that in any future excavations the sampling strategy should include looking at a larger representation of archaeological features and deposits.

7.0 Discussion

The archaeological evidence recovered from the evaluation most importantly highlights the location and preservation of archaeological deposits within the north of the development area. The identification of the moat, revetment and bank within Trench 1 is not surprising, as this had been a visible earthwork until 1950, and the modernity of the backfill confirms this. The layer of cobbles, brick and silt that overlies the natural and abutts the south-eastern edge of the bank is likely to be a Post-Medieval levelling deposit. The small amount of cobbled surface identified beneath this layer within Trench 1 was undated, and not enough was exposed to confirm or reject any hypothesis concerning date and function. Although only Post-Medieval and modern deposits were encountered within the moat fill in this trench, it is possible that earlier deposits survive at a lower depth.

The continuation of the moat with associated revetment and weathered bank at the northern end of Trench 2 was identified as having been infilled, sealed and thus preserved by a substantial layer of redeposited clay natural. This suggests that while no earlier structural remains or deposits were encountered during the evaluation itself, the preservation of such remains within this trench is possible, as the majority of this trench was excavated to the top of the redeposited clay layer. It is also possible that the lowest fill identified at the base of the moat within the machine-excavated sondage relates to an earlier fill. Where the brick and tile within the redeposited clay layer was complete enough to enable dating, it was determined to be hand-made and bonded with lime mortar and is likely to be 18^{th}-century in date at the earliest (Litherland pers. comm.). It is possible that the redeposited clay relates to the excavation of the pond feature to the west of this trench. All other features identified in this trench truncated the redeposited layer.

Although the walls identified within Trench 3 were severely truncated, their alignment and construction suggests that they represent the remains of later

outbuildings associated with the rebuilding of the Hall. The depth at which these walls survive, and the subsequent truncation by modern services within this trench suggests that any earlier features are no longer present in this area.

The three trenches located to the south of the Hall (Trenches 4, 5 and 6), that targeted the area of most intense development, produced little in the way of archaeological evidence. The post-holes encountered were securely dated to the Post-Medieval period, and it is likely that the cobble spread encountered within Trench 5b is also of this date. The linear features identified were not securely dated.

8.0 Implications and Recommendations

Although moated sites are a numerous class of monument across the West Midlands their numbers have decreased rapidly in later years. However, whilst they were so numerous, they remain poorly understood. In light of this it is hoped that further excavation on the site may aid in the understanding of the function and economy of the site, in both a local and regional context.

The archaeological evidence produced by the evaluation suggests that the survival of archaeological deposits relating to the Medieval moat and manor house is possible in discrete areas within the development area as a whole. Although the evaluation produced no remains or dating evidence from this period, the identification of the moat, revetment and bank in the two most northerly trenches suggests further work in the form of discrete area excavation will be required in these areas, especially when considering the likely preservation due to later levelling deposits overlying the natural subsoil. The size and location of these areas will need to take into account logistical problems such as tree preservation, access and live services. In the areas investigated during the evaluation where severe truncation by later activity was present, or where little or no archaeological remains were encountered, it is likely that no additional archaeological work will be required. The final decision concerning further archaeological mitigation will be made by the Planning Archaeologist for Warwickshire County Council.

9.0 Acknowledgements

The project was commissioned by Fairclough Homes. Thanks are due to Edward Wilson, Planning Archaeologist, who monitored the project on behalf of Warwickshire County Council. Thanks are also due to Steve Litherland for his help in identifying and dating the brick and tile, and to Dr. Marina Ciaraldi for her assessment of the environmental potential of the moat. The evaluation was supervised by Eleanor Ramsey with the assistance of Kate Bain, John Halsted and Erica Macey. Dr Iain Ferris managed the project for BUFAU and edited the report. The illustrations were prepared by Bryony Ryder.

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Plate 1 Moat and bank in Trench 1

Plate 2 Moat and revetment in Trench 2

Plate 3 Trench 3

Plate 4 Cobble surface in Trench 5b