

**Hillfield Hall, Solihull.**

**An Archaeological  
Excavation 2003**

Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit  
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by  
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# **Hillfield Hall, Solihull:**

## **An Archaeological Excavation 2003**

### **Summary**

*An archaeological excavation on land at Hillfield Hall, Solihull (SMR 3134, centred on NGR SP 4151404 278080) was commissioned by Fairclough Homes. The work was undertaken by Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit in March 2003, prior to the proposed development of the site. Two areas were excavated targeting areas where the moat had been identified in a previous evaluation of the site. The archaeological excavation has helped to understand the timescale of the renovations and re-landscaping of the moated site from the early post-medieval period onwards. Further analysis and recording of the standing building will complement the below-ground archaeological results, and add important information concerning its history and original layout. For, whilst the history of the Hall's owners and tenants is well documented, the history of the actual building is less well understood.*

### **1.0 Introduction**

This report describes the results of an archaeological excavation undertaken on land at Hillfield Hall, Solihull (centred on NGR SP 415040 278080, Fig. 1). 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 excavation was conducted in accordance with the Institute of Field Archaeologists Standards and Guidance for Field Excavation (Institute of Field Archaeologists 1999).

Although moated sites are a numerous class of monument across the West Midlands their numbers have decreased rapidly in latter years. However, whilst they were so numerous, they remain poorly understood. A previous evaluation of the site (BUFAU 2003) identified the moat and bank which had a later revetment wall constructed up against it. However, the moat deposits could not be securely dated to the medieval period.

Two areas where the evaluation had identified the moat and associated features were targeted for further investigation. It was hoped that this further work would help to define the nature and extent of the surviving archaeological features and deposits, and to date the sequence by the recovery of artefactual material, as well as to characterise the palaeoenvironmental history of the moat through sampling.

## **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 and restaurant.

## **3.0 Archaeological Background**

A desk-based assessment (Williams 2002) revealed that the site 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. They 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. Subsequently, in the 1970s, a large extension was added to the southern elevation of the Hall, the grounds were also landscaped at this time and car parks created. The remaining outbuildings, including the stables, may date from the late 17<sup>th</sup> century.

An archaeological evaluation carried out prior to the excavation (Ramsey 2003) showed that archaeological deposits relating to the moat still survived in discrete areas within the development area.

## **4.0 Objectives**

The objectives of the archaeological work were to:

- examine further the moat, bank and associated features.
- define the nature, extent and significance of surviving deposits and features.
- recover artefactual material for dating the sequence.
- characterise the palaeoenvironmental history of the moat through an appropriate sampling policy.

## **5.0 Method**

The excavation consisted of two areas, each up to 100m<sup>2</sup>, which were located to target areas where the moat and associated features had been previously identified during the evaluation (Fig. 2). Tarmac and modern overburden was mechanically removed by JCB, under direct archaeological supervision, to the top of the uppermost archaeological deposits. The exposed horizon was defined and hand cleaned. Sections were hand excavated through the moat in both areas, in order to confirm the structural record and stratigraphic relationships of the moat with the bank and other associated features.

supplemented by scale drawings (at a scale of 1:20 and 1:50), and black and white and colour print, and colour slide photography. These, together with recovered artefacts, form the site archive.

## 6.0 Archaeological Results

### 6.1 Area 1

The red clay subsoil (7003) was identified at a depth of approximately 0.9m below the modern surface at 129.07m AOD. A large linear feature (F700, Fig. 3), aligned north-south, was visible in plan cutting the red clay subsoil in the centre of Area 1. The ditch was approximately 7m wide and 1.2m deep and was identified as the truncated remains of the moat. It had an asymmetric profile with a steeper slope on the eastern edge than the western edge, and a flat base. The earliest fill (7006) was a clean grey sandy silt containing pebbles and organic material as well as pottery dating to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This was overlain by a deep layer of clean red re-deposited clay (7004) with occasional stones and brick and tile fragments, it appeared to represent a single episode of deliberate infilling. The pottery from this deposit included fragments dating to the late medieval period, including a fragment of Cistercian ware face cup. These early fragments were obviously residual, and were mixed with late-17<sup>th</sup> and early-18<sup>th</sup> century fragments. A ceramic drain and associated cut (F701, 7007) cut through the centre of the infilled moat, and a layer of grey sandy clay silt with pebbles and brick and mortar fragments (7005) was visible in the south facing section, overlying the redeposited red clay and the fill of the drain cut.

A second drain (F702) was identified cutting the subsoil in the eastern corner of the area. The drain cut was approximately 1m deep, and was filled with redeposited red clay with rounded stones (7008). A cobbled surface (7000) was also identified on the eastern lip of the moat. This surface directly overlaid the natural subsoil and sealed drain F702. It was visible across the whole width of the area, and was approximately 0.2m deep. The cobbles were small and rounded and set into a red silty clay. Fragments of brick and tile were also present within the surface composition. Pottery dating to the 19<sup>th</sup> century was recovered from the surface. The evaluation had shown that in places the cobbled surface continued part way down the slope of the moat, under the main fill (7004). However, this was not the case in the excavation area.

Overlying the whole of Area 1 was a 0.4m deep layer of redeposited red clay (7001) which was similar to the main fill of the moat (7004). Pottery dating to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, including stoneware, coarseware, transfer painted ware, and creamware. Overlying this layer was a 0.3m deep series of levelling layers and car park surfaces (7002).

### 6.2 Area 2

The red and blue mottled clay subsoil (8005) was identified at a depth of approximately 1.3m below the modern car park surface at 128.17m AOD. The moat in this area was identified by a linear deposit of grey brown silt, ash, and modern rubble (8002, Fig 4) which was aligned approximately north-east – south-west. The base of the moat was encountered at approximately 127.16m AOD; the original slope of the south-eastern edge was very gentle. However, material deposited over the natural subsoil on the south-eastern edge of the moat had created a bank that increased

the angle of slope considerably. A section was excavated through the fills of the moat and through the bank material.

The earliest deposit excavated was a grey organic sandy silt with occasional brick and tile rubble (8008), which directly overlay the subsoil. At the very edge of the moat, a deposit of grey silt with large cobbles and stones (8004) was identified. It is likely that this deposit was associated with the rebuilding of the moat revetment. Overlying the revetment and the organic deposit, was a layer of light brown silty sand with occasional cobbles and brick and tile rubble (8007) that contained 19<sup>th</sup>-century pottery. This was sealed by a thin, irregular, layer of redeposited red clay (8006), which was in turn overlain by a deposit of yellow-pink redeposited clay containing silt and pockets of rubble (8003). This deposit formed the upper part of the landscaped bank. The modern moat fill (8002) abutted the bank and comprised the only fill of the moat itself which appears to have scoured clean prior to backfilling. The artefactual assemblage from the moat also included a single sherd of residual pottery, a coarseware fragment dating to the late 17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Sealing the whole area was a series of levelling deposits comprising brick and rubble (8001) which were in turn sealed by the car park layers (8000).

## **7.0 The Artefactual Evidence**

The assemblage was quantified by count and weight, except for the animal bone, which was quantified by weight alone. This was scanned macroscopically for identification purposes. The assemblage was fragmentary, although individual fragments were largely unabraded. A conflated quantification of the finds from the evaluation and the open area excavation can be found in Appendix I.

### 7.1 Medieval and Post-Medieval pottery

The pottery was rapidly scanned, identified and spot-dated by Stephanie Rátkai. She noted two interesting sherds. The first of these was a Cistercian ware cup with applied white clay face pad. This is similar to one from Lichfield (Nichol and Rátkai forthcoming). The second sherd of note was an unstratified tin glazed earthenware sherd, with an external blue and blue-green decoration, possibly from a tea-bowl.

### 7.2 Brick and Tile

A large quantity of tile (67 fragments weighing 8919g) and brick (25 fragments weighing 11692g) was recovered from the site. The tile and brick were well fired and evenly- coloured throughout, although the brick fabric was much coarser than the tile fabric, having very large stone inclusions and being less densely fired. It is probable that this material represents building debris, probably discarded during repairs to the Hall, as most of the items recovered were fragments rather than complete items. The only exception to this was a complete clamp-fired brick (8004), which was dated to the 17<sup>th</sup> Century (S. Litherland, pers. comm.)

## 8.0 Discussion

The Tithe Map, drawn up in 1840 (Fig. 5), depicts buildings to the south-east of the moat and south-west of the Hall itself, but no evidence of these structures were identified during the excavation of Area 1. These ancillary structures were probably service buildings erected in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, but it is important to note that structures of this type were typically located to the rear of the house, rather than at the front. This implies that prior to 1840 the entrance to the Hall from Hillfield Hall Road was the service or servants entrance. The main entrance can also be seen on the Tithe Map, an avenue of trees to the south of the Hall is shown leading towards the Deer Park. Some of the trees survive on the ground today as part of a land boundary immediately south of the Hall, they include a mixture native yew and imported firs. This entrance was destroyed in 1852 by the cutting of the railway line through lands owned by the Hall.

The original Hall was constructed using the new prestigious material of the day, brick. The introduction of brick brought significant architectural changes during this period, led by the stately homes and Royal residences of the period, such as Hampton Court. The construction of Hillfield Hall in brick at this time is thus significant and demonstrates the social aspirations of the occupants as well as wider trends and styles. It may also have been surrounded by newly landscaped parkland, and it was probably at this time that it acquired its grand tree-lined entranceway or drive. The 16<sup>th</sup> century saw great innovations in garden and landscape design, with a move towards the more formal. What we see at Hillfield Hall is a combining of traditions with the formal entrance leading to the much older style of land use, the deer park. The introduction of new species was a key element in this new parkland tradition, which saw a variety of new species, including the Horse Chestnut, established. New species have been noted on similar sites in the area such as Chasewood Lodge, moated site, Exhall, also in Warwickshire, where Cypress needles were noted in a 16<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> century deposit from the moat.

An etching of Hillfield Hall, produced in 1853 by A.E. Everitt, and reproduced by Woodall and Varley (1987, Fig. 6), appears to have been reversed in the publication. It shows several later additions to the building, dating to the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, some of which no longer survive. The etching depicts the impressive frontage as it stands today, complete with flanking towers and turrets. However, if the supposition that this is in fact the back of the house is correct, which seems to be supported by the evidence for the tree-lined avenue and the location of the service blocks, then this raises the question as to why the back of the house was so lavish, however, it may have been designed to provide an imposing frontispiece visible from Hillfield Road.

Certainly the archaeological evidence reflects a change in emphasis on the access to the Hall during the later 1800's. The complete removal of the service buildings, the infilling of the moat and the construction of an ornamental pond adjacent to the entrance from Hillfield Road implies that it was the northern entrance that became the main focus from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century onwards. The archaeological evidence also suggests that other landscaping occurred within the area sometime in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Whilst the moat was present in both areas, it had been severely truncated in Area 1 and had been scoured clean and landscaped in Area 2.

Although the width and depth of moats generally varies from site to site, and within the monument type, the width and depth of the moat in Area 1 is consistent with having been truncated. This is also attested to by the cleanliness of the edges and by the 19<sup>th</sup> century date of the lowest fill. Scouring of moats before deliberate backfilling is not uncommon. The cleanliness of the red clay fill of the moat suggests a rapid and deliberate backfilling of the moat in Area 1, perhaps using material from the moat platform itself, which would also explain the residual late-medieval pottery present within the fill. The truncation of the moat also indicates that any buildings in this area were removed completely before the backfilling took place. The cobbled surface identified at the edge of the moat may in fact be a temporary working surface associated with this episode.

The landscaping identified within Area 2 also dates to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The deposits and layers present at the edge of the moat represent the inverted stratigraphy of the original moat fills. The earliest layer of the bank was an organic deposit which was probably the original fill of the moat. This layer was overlain by a sand and silt deposit which is likely to have derived from the initial weathering of the moat when it was first cut, and this were overlain by a layer of clean red clay, which would have been produced by the re-cutting and scouring of the base of the moat in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The stone revetment and bank appear to follow the line of the moat as outlined on the First Edition OS Map, which was visible as a pond until the 1950s.

Thus, the archaeological record corroborates the known history of the Hall. Further analysis and recording of the standing building will complement the below-ground archaeological results, and add important information concerning its history and original layout. For, whilst the history of the Hall's owners and tenants is well documented, the history of the actual building and its immediate environment is less well understood. The archaeological excavation has helped to understand the timescale of the renovations and re-landscaping of the moated site from the early post-medieval period onwards. It is an unusual site in that it was not abandoned during this period when by and large there is a general shift away from occupation of the platform to adjacent areas, such as is the case with Sidenhales Moated Site nearby in Hockley Heath (Nichol 1999). Instead the owner constructed a new style, expensive brick-built structure on the platform, this, then, represents a valuable contribution to the understanding of the later development of moated sites as a genre in the area.

## **9.0 Acknowledgements**

The project was commissioned by Fairclough Homes. Thanks are due to Edward Wilson, Planning Archaeologist for Warwickshire County Council. Work on site was carried out by Bob Bracken, Mary Duncan, Emma Hancox and Eleanor Ramsey. The report was written by Eleanor Ramsey, edited by Kirsty Nichol and was illustrated by Nigel Dodds. Dr Iain Ferris and Kirsty Nichol monitored the project for BUFAU.



## 10.0 References

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## APPENDIX I

Table showing quantification of finds

Feature and Context	Quantification	Spot-date
F100, 1000	1 x tile (254g) 1 x Fe Nail (30g) 1 x glass sauce bottle (267g) 1 x stone (41g)	-
1001	2 x Post-medieval pottery, includes 1 slipcoated ware and 1 blackware (30g) 5 x tile (1083g) 1 x brick (795g)	Late 17 <sup>th</sup> – mid 18 <sup>th</sup> century AD
1002	7 x Post-medieval pottery, includes stoneware x 2; coarseware x2; blackware x1; industrial slipware x1 and modern flower pot (145g) 1 x brick (462g) 1 x lead (198g) 1 x bottle glass (18g) 1 x slate (101g)	19 <sup>th</sup> century AD
1003	1 x Post-medieval pottery, refired bodied earthen ware (8g) 3 x brick (579g) 1 x mortar (152g)	18 <sup>th</sup> or 19 <sup>th</sup> century AD
1004	1 x Post-medieval pottery (21g) 2 x tile (747g) 1 x mortar 215g	-
1005	2 x tile (180g) 2 x brick (386g) 1 x mortar (34g)	-
F400, 4000	2 x tile (73g) 1 x brick (65g)	-
F505, 5016	1 x brick (584g) 1 x bottle glass (27g)	-
F600, 6004	2 x tile (24g) 5 x brick (199g) animal bone (44g) 2 x coal (8g)	-
F601, 6006	1 x brick (<1g) animal bone (31g)	-
7000	14 x Post-medieval pottery, includes brown stoneware x7; coarseware x1; glazed ware x6 (263g) 3 x tile (143g) 1 x shell 94g)	19 <sup>th</sup> century AD

7001	8 x Post-medieval pottery, stoneware x 1; coarseware x 1; transfer painted ware x4; creamware x2 (62g) 1 x Fe Nail (71g) animal bone (12g)	19 <sup>th</sup> century AD
F700, 7004	1 x Medieval pottery, Cistercian ware cup (3g) 8 x Post-medieval pottery, mottled ware x3; blackware x1; slipcoated ware x3; late Medieval/Post-Medieval ware x1 (178g) 5 x tile (681g) 2 x brick (1823g)	Late 17 <sup>th</sup> – early 18 <sup>th</sup> Century AD with residual Late 15 <sup>th</sup> – mid 16 <sup>th</sup> century AD
F700, 7006	16 x Post-medieval pottery, flowerpot x7; stoneware x1; coarseware x1; industrial slipware x 1; 'flow blue' x 5 (267g) 1 x tile (51g) 1 x brick (101g) 2 x Fe Items (97g) 3 x bottle glass (19g) animal bone (53g)	19 <sup>th</sup> century AD
F702, 7008	4 x brick (3305g)	-
F800, 8002	1 x Post-medieval pottery, coarseware x1 (4g) 1 x tile (20g) 2 x bottle glass (528g) 2 x window glass (22g)	Late 17 <sup>th</sup> – 18 <sup>th</sup> century AD
8003	1 x flint (8g)	-
8004	1 x brick (2400g)	-
8007	5 x Post-medieval pottery, industrial slipware x1; coarseware x2; whiteware x2 (230g) 10 x tile (1244g) 2 x Fe Items (628g) animal bone (29g)	19 <sup>th</sup> century AD
8008	9 x tile (858g)	-
Trench 2	3 x tile (730g)	-
Trench 3	9 x tile (1255g) 2 x mortar (6g)	-
U/S	4 x Post-medieval pottery, flowerpot x 2, mottled ware x1; tinglazed earthen ware x1 (38g) 8 x tile (1286g) 1 x brick (845g) 1 x glass (4g)	19 <sup>th</sup> century AD

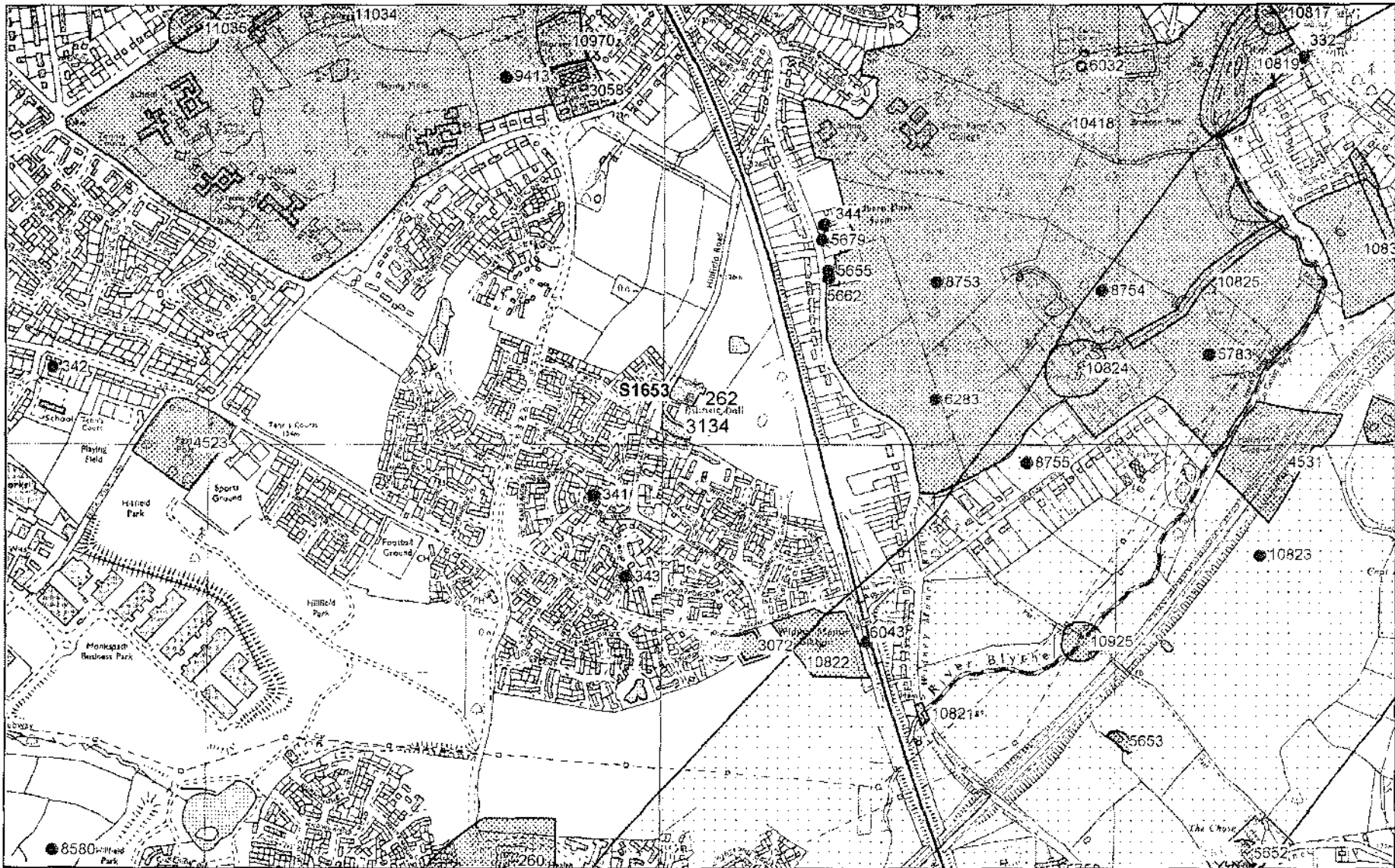


Fig.1

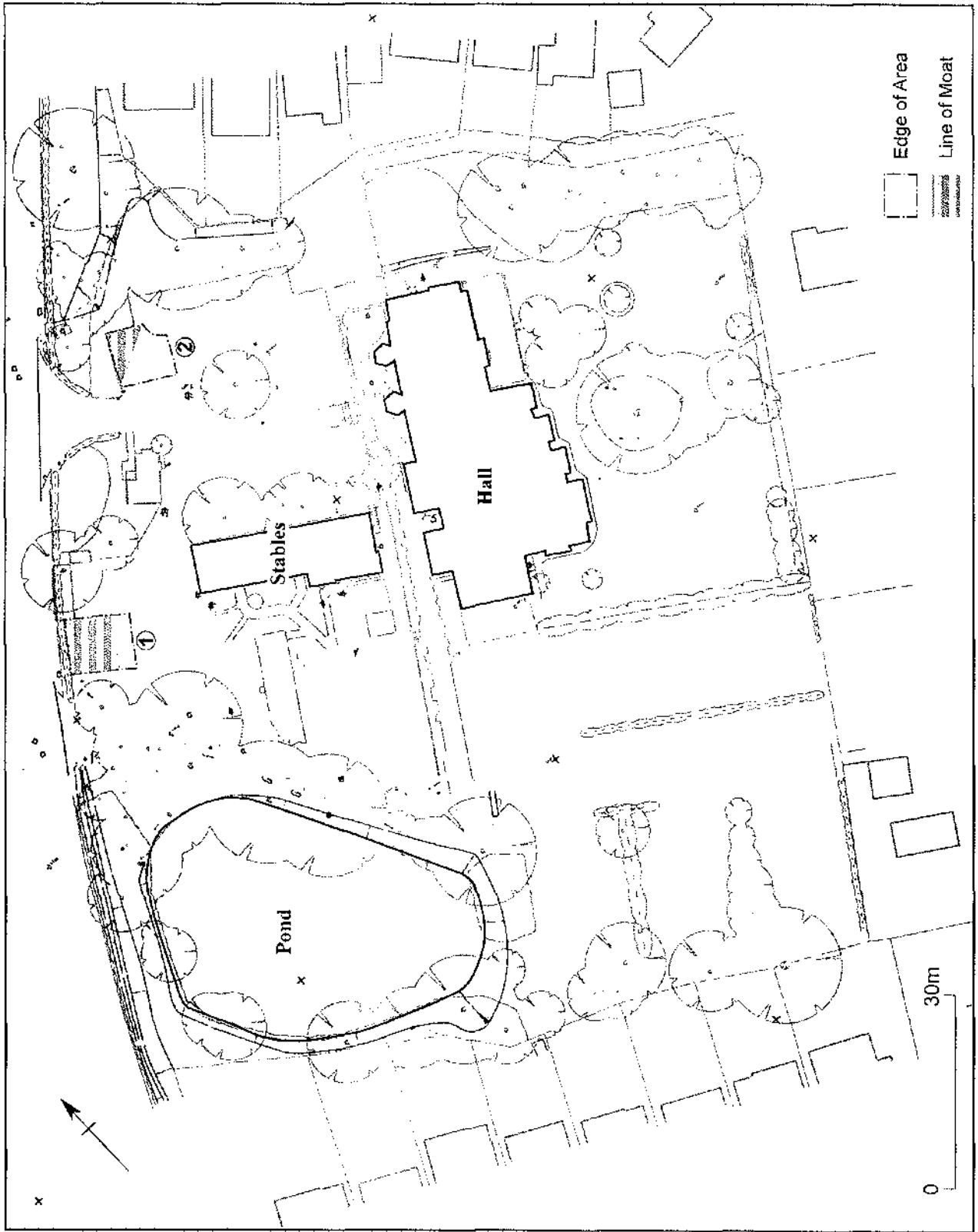


Fig.2

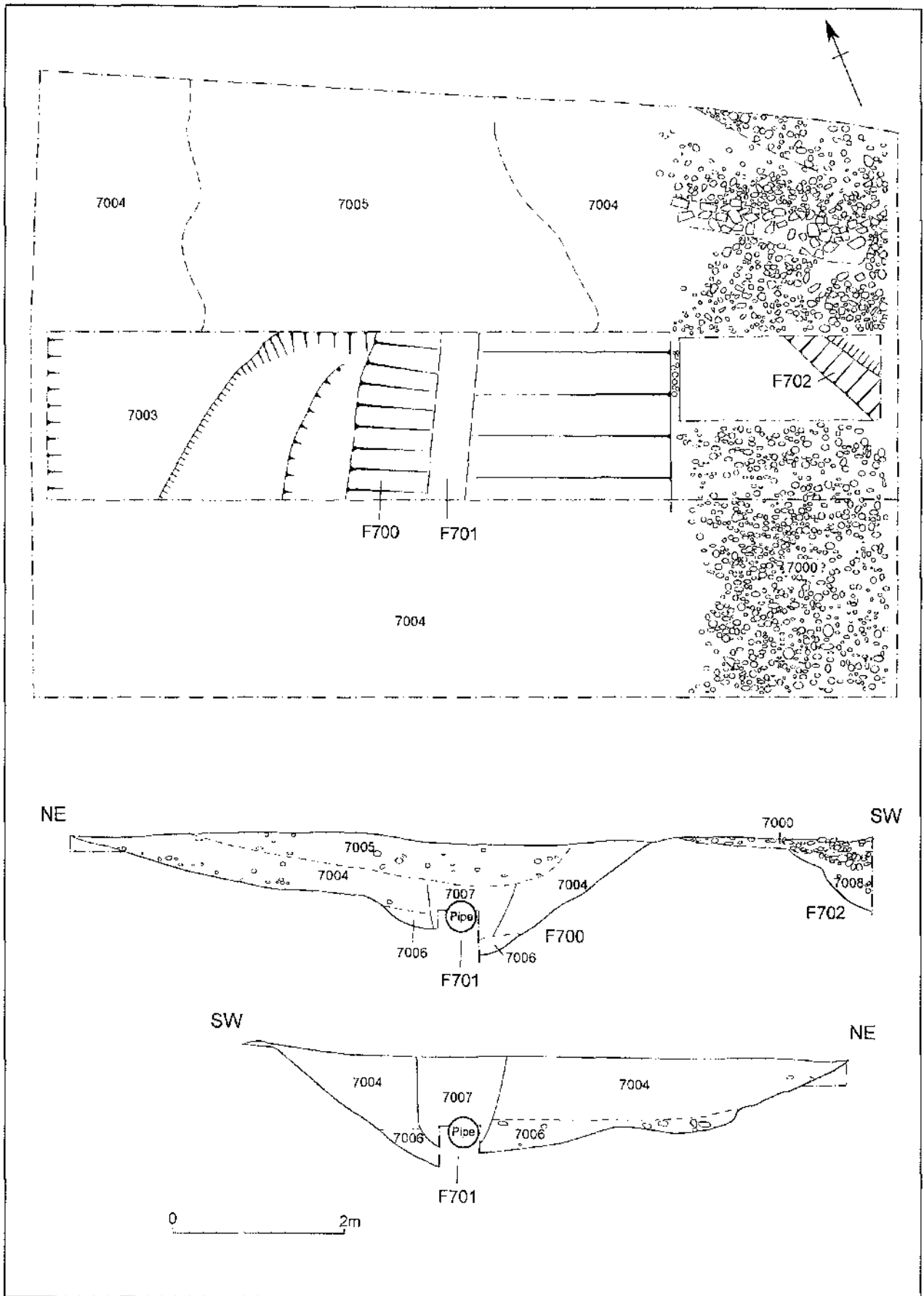


Fig.3

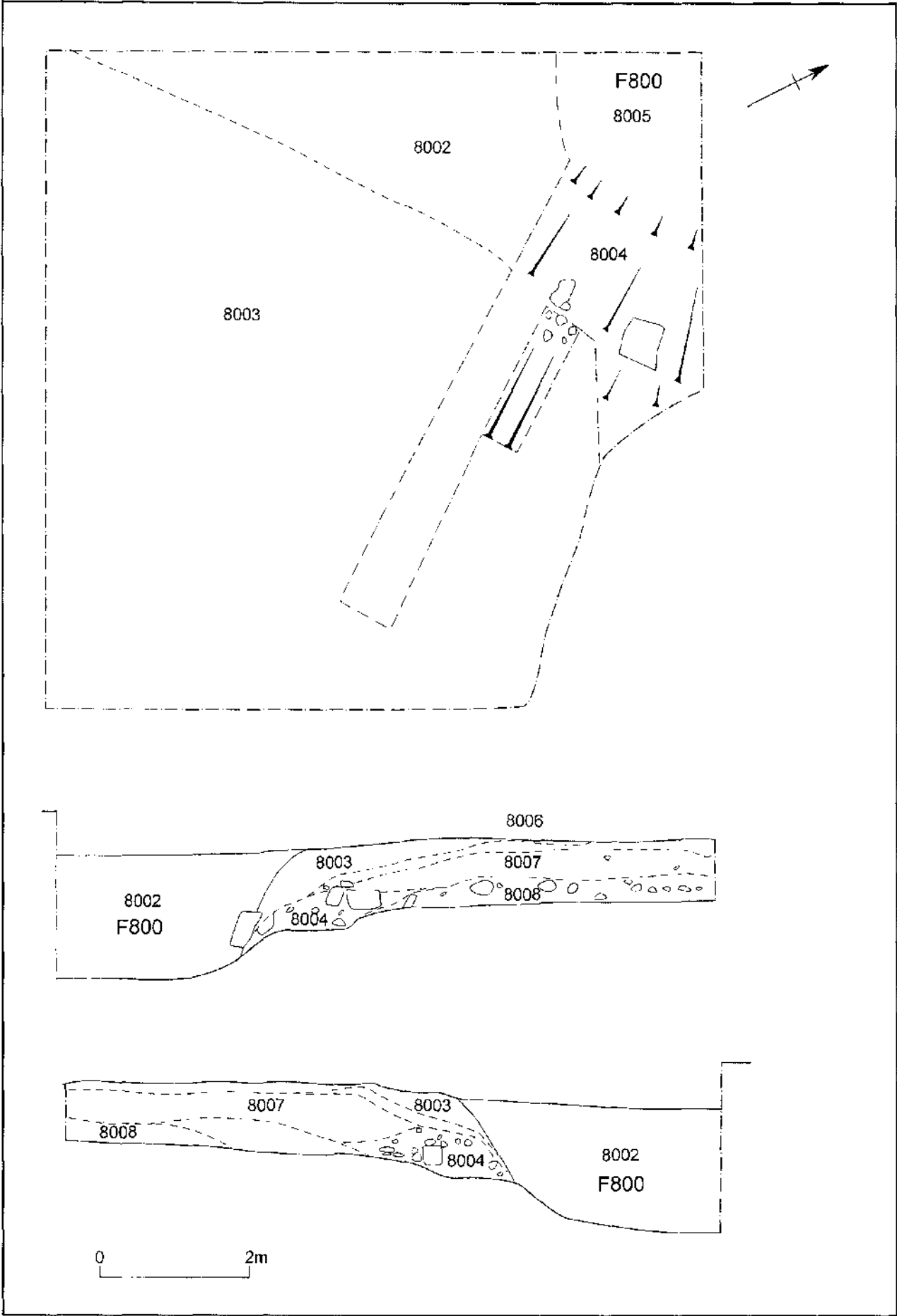
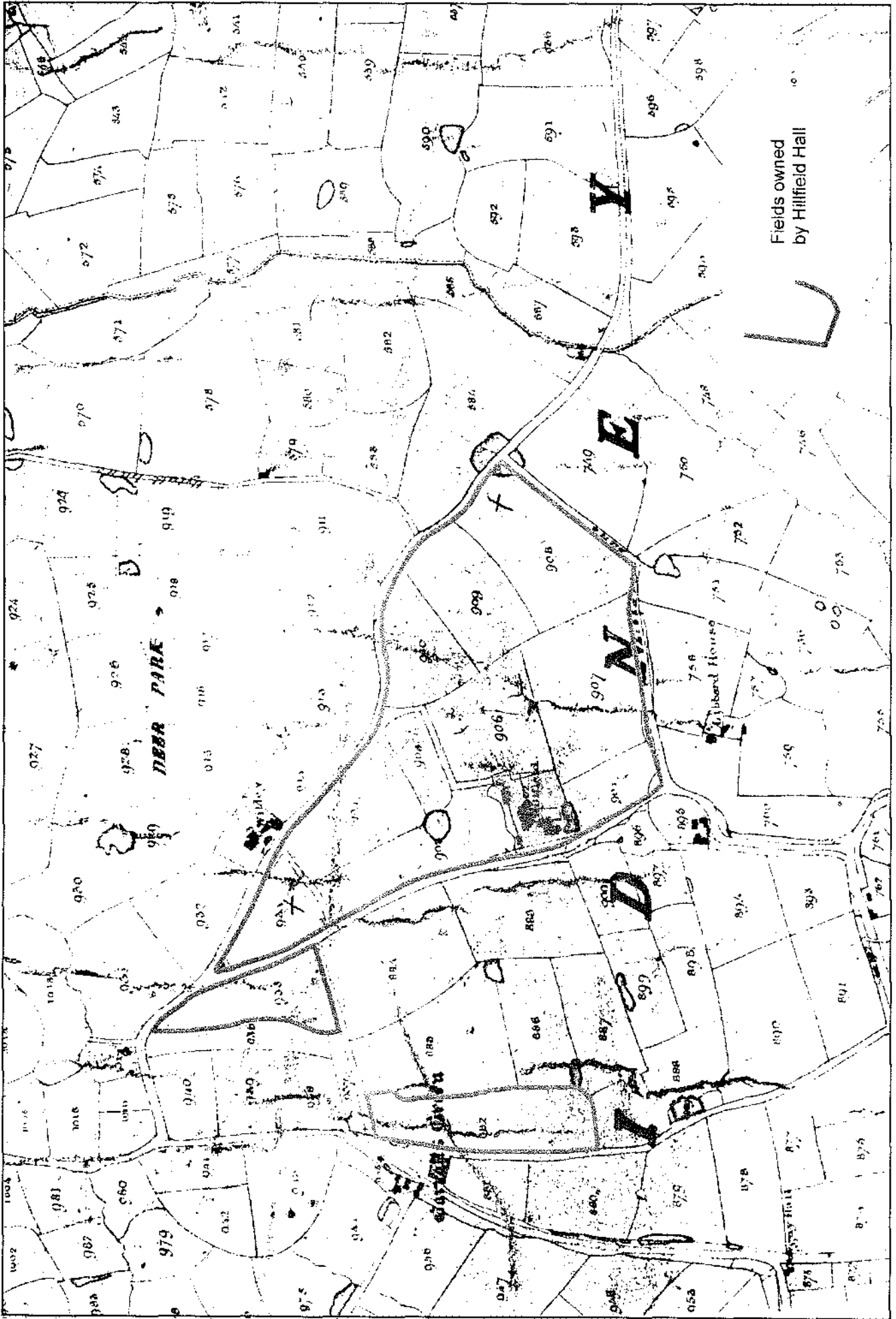


Fig.4



Fields owned  
by Hillfield Hall

Fig.5



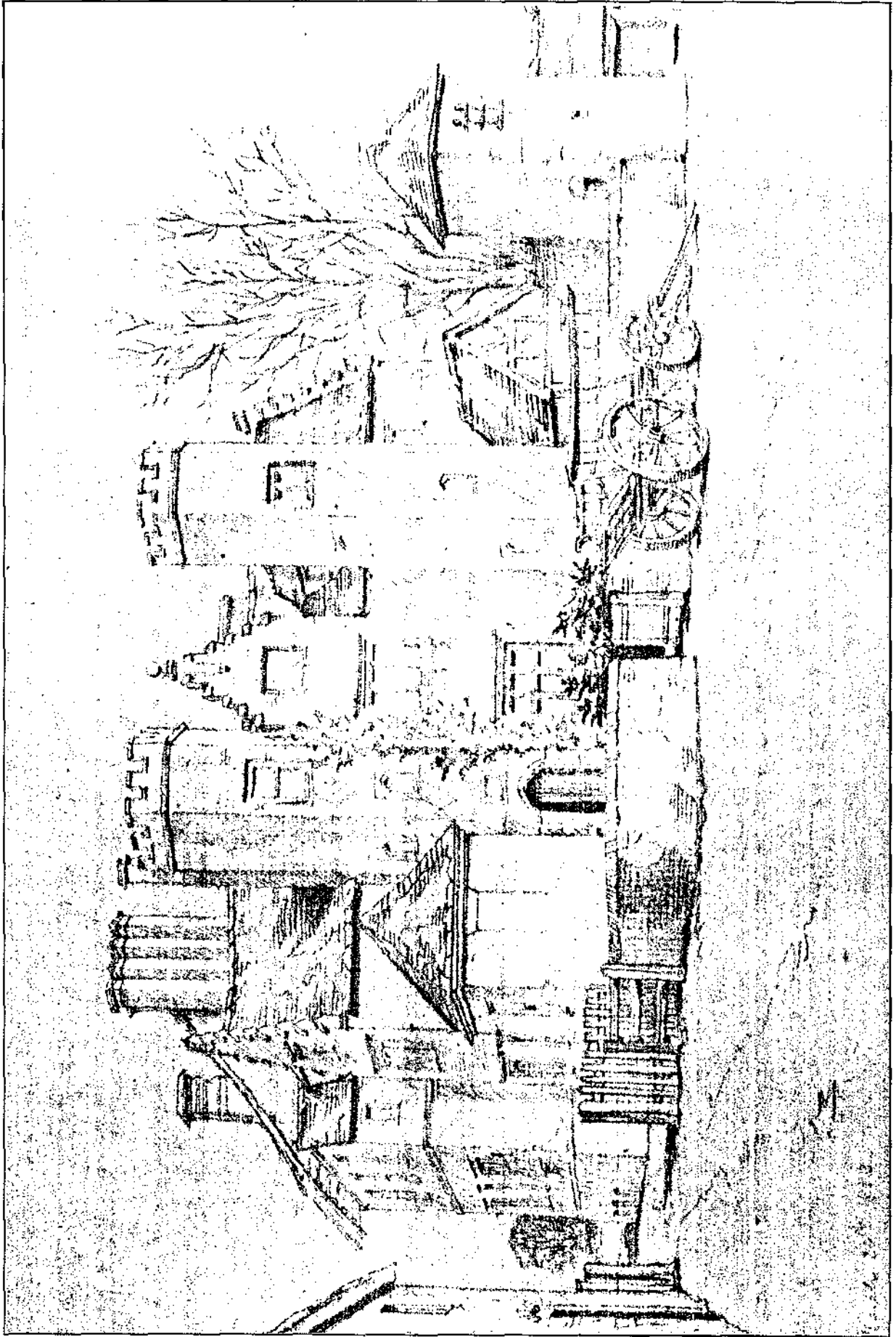


Fig.6