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Old Bowling Green, Parsons Hill,
Kings Norton, Birmingham
A Desk-Based Assessment 2005

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**Old Bowling Green, Parsons Hill, Kings Norton, Birmingham
A Desk-Based Assessment 2005**

by

John Halsted

For further information please contact:

Alex Jones (Director)
Birmingham Archaeology
The University of Birmingham
Edgbaston
Birmingham B15 2TT
Tel: 0121 414 5513
Fax: 0121 414 5516
E-Mail: bham-arch@bham.ac.uk
Web Address: <http://www.barch.bham.ac.uk/bufau>

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1.0: SUMMARY

An archaeological desk-based assessment was undertaken by Birmingham Archaeology in September 2005 examining the area of a proposed development at the Old Bowling Green, Parsons Hill, Kings Norton, Birmingham (NGR 40567, 27895). All available documentary and published sources were examined as part of the assessment and a site visit was made in order to identify features of the topography which may influence the presence of *in situ* archaeological deposits. The assessment highlighted that the site was in close proximity to a Roman road and excavated Roman settlements in the locality, together with several medieval settlement foci. The cartographic sources and site visit suggested that the site had not been subject to any significant development in its recent history and that the potential for the survival of *in situ* archaeological deposits remained high.

2.0: INTRODUCTION

This archaeological desk-based assessment has been prepared by Birmingham Archaeology in advance of a proposed residential development at the Old Bowling Green, former Sporting Parson Public House, Parson's Hill, Birmingham (NGR 40567, 27895). The assessment has been undertaken on behalf of Cordwell Property Group, following a requirement by Birmingham City Council Development Directorate as a response to Planning Policy Guidance Note 16, *Archaeology and Planning* (DoE 1990) and in accordance with Policy 8.36 of the Birmingham Unitary Development Plan. This desk-based assessment forms the first stage of an assessment of the impact of the proposed development. The site has the potential to contain archaeological deposits which may be affected by the proposed development (Birmingham City Council 2005). An archaeological desk-based assessment was therefore required in order to summarize the known archaeological record for the site and its immediate locality, and to assess the potential for the presence of *in situ* archaeological deposits. The significance of any potential archaeological deposits has also been assessed through an examination of their regional context. This desk-based assessment conforms to guidelines set out in the *Standard and Guidance for Archaeological Desk-Based Assessments* (Institute of Field Archaeologists 2001). The work followed a design brief prepared by Birmingham City Council (Birmingham City Council 2005) and a written scheme of investigation prepared by Birmingham Archaeology (Birmingham Archaeology 2005).

2.1: Location of the proposed development

The proposed development site is located in south Birmingham in a generally built-up area to the east of Kings Norton (Fig. 1; NGR 40567, 27895). The site boundary lies c. 20m to the north of the modern road Parsons Hill, and occupies the site of a former bowling green and an area of surrounding trees, immediately west of the former Sporting Parson Public House (Fig. 2).

2.2: Topography and geology

The site is located at *c.* 164m AOD on the lower slopes of a southwest to northeast aligned ridge rising up to 200m AOD to the south, and falling away to *c.* 140m AOD in the Rea Valley to the north and west. The River Rea is located *c.* 600m to the north of the proposed development site. The site is located on superficial deposits of glacial Boulder Clay and drift, forming an island over an expanse of Triassic Keuper Marl (BGS map sheet 168).

2.3: Site inspection

The site lies to the north of Parsons Hill road and is bordered to the east by the site of the former Sporting Parsons inn (currently a McDonald's and car park) and to the west and north by residential properties (Fig. 2). The area of the bowling green is surrounded by a dense area of trees, bushes and undergrowth (Plate 1). The area of the bowling green is defined by a tree-lined bank. The trees on this bank are closely set (Plate 2). The bank has a low revetment wall along its inner edge (Plate 3), clearly associated with the former bowling green. The bowling green is currently overgrown, with some young tree growth on the area of the green (Plate 4). Access to the site is at present severely restricted by the presence of the tree-lined bank and the trees and undergrowth beyond.

The bank observed defining the perimeter of the green may have been created by levelling the bowling green when it was constructed. This may have truncated any archaeological deposits here, though the extent of any truncation cannot be assessed prior to a field evaluation of the site. The site also lies upon an area of raised ground (Plate 5) to the north of Parsons Hill road. It appears that this area of ground is a natural rise in the topography which may have been terraced into during the construction of Parsons Hill road running down into Kings Norton to the west.

2.4: Objectives

The objective of this report is to assess the potential for the survival of *in situ* archaeological deposits within the proposed development site, and the significance of any such deposits in a local, regional or national context, as appropriate. The results of the assessment will inform a subsequent archaeological field evaluation of the site (Birmingham City Council 2005). This assessment therefore will constitute the first part of a two-stage strategy to assess the impact of the proposed development, which will serve as a basis for any subsequent requirements for the preservation *in situ* or further excavation of archaeological deposits (*ibid.*).

2.5: Method

This desk-based assessment is based upon sources contained in the Birmingham Sites and Monuments Record, published documents relating to excavations and historical research and available cartographic sources. An area of *c.* 500m diameter around the site at Parsons Hill was examined for sites and monuments, whilst relevant archaeological sites within both the local area and the region were also examined through published sources where appropriate.

3.0: ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

This section of the assessment describes the archaeological and historical evidence from the locality of the proposed development site at Parsons Hill in a chronological sequence. The historical development of the site is then assessed through an examination of the available cartographic evidence. Both the local and site-specific archaeological and historical evidence is then discussed and its significance assessed within a regional context.

3.1: Prehistoric

The earliest activity recorded within the locality of Parsons Hill is represented by a stone axe found at Druids Lane, Kings Norton (Birmingham SMR 20152, hereafter SMR; Fig. 3), to the southeast of the proposed development. The axe is likely to belong to the Neolithic *c.* 3000-2200 BC. A burnt mound, comprised of heat-shattered pebbles (SMR 20062) was recorded in the bank of the River Rea at Wychall Lane, Kings Norton, to the west. These features are usually ascribed a Middle Bronze Age date (*c.* 1500-1200BC) in the West Midlands based on excavated examples in Birmingham and Shropshire (e.g. Hodder 1990; Hannaford 1999) and represent the heating of stones in fires for heating water. The function of burnt mounds is ambiguous and has been interpreted both as a method of cooking or for use within sweat lodges (Barfield and Hodder 1987). These features are consistently recorded in association with streams and bogs.

3.2: Roman

The site at Parsons Hill lies *c.* 60m to the east (Birmingham City Council 2005) of the Roman road, Ryknild or Icknield Street (SMR 20064; Margary 1967, road 18b, 284-285). The road follows a route (Fig. 4) from Bourton-on-the-Water (Gloucestershire) through the Roman fort and major nucleated settlement at Alcester (Booth 1996, 30-35), northwards via a Romano-British farmstead at Longdales Road, Kings Norton (Williams 2003a; 2003b) which lies *c.* 1km south of the proposed development site. Further to the north the road adjoins the Roman fort at Metchley, Edgbaston (Jones 2001 and 2005) and through to the Roman town at Wall, Staffordshire. A significant branch of Icknield Street has been recorded travelling south-westwards through Roman settlements at Droitwich and Worcester from a point to the south of Birmingham (Margary 1967, 287), though to the north of Parsons Hill.

The Roman fort at Metchley, Edgbaston lies 5km to the northwest of Parsons Hill. The fort was established in the 1st century AD and in common with forts at Wall (Staffordshire), Droitwich (Worcestershire) and Alcester (Warwickshire) also witnessed military activity into the 2nd century AD (Hodder 2004, 57-58). The fort at Metchley incorporated not only a system of defensive banks and ditches but also a civilian settlement or *vicus* (Jones in preparation). Buildings within the fort have been recorded in the form of beam slots, together with areas of industrial activity.

A significant fort and subsequent Roman town has been excavated to the south of Parsons Hill at Alcester in Warwickshire (Booth 1996), which appears to have had a greater longevity and intensity of settlement than that recorded at Metchley with a small town occupied into the 4th century. This settlement represents an important

centre of population in the region with public buildings, successive circuits of defence and economic prosperity reflected in the presence of significant stone buildings (*ibid.* 32-35).

Icknield Street therefore linked both significant Roman forts and constituted an important military road (Booth 1996, 28). In turn Icknield Street also served to connect a number of major nucleated settlements and administrative centres. It has been suggested that the quantities of Romano-British ceramics recovered on excavations at the farmstead site at Longdales Road, Kings Norton, may reflect its close proximity to this significant communications route (Hodder 2002, 2). The presence of this ditched farmstead may reflect not only its local importance, but also its economic relationship with Icknield Street and centres of population such as Alcester to the south or the Roman town at Wall to the north (*ibid.* 3). It is the relationship between rural sites, however, that is perhaps less well understood in the region (Booth 1996, 44).

The line of Icknield Street is variously preserved across the landscape, with stretches of existing roads following the same alignment as the Roman route in places, such as the road east of Lilycroft Farm c. 1.5m to the south of the Parsons Hill site, the line of Broad Meadow Lane (Margary 1967, 285) and Lifford Lane (Hannaford 1989, 1), to the north of the site. Elsewhere the road line is marked by the line of hedgerows (Margary 1967, 284-285) which may reflect the line of original boundaries to either side of the Roman road (Figs. 5-8). Icknield Street also remains preserved within Sutton Park in northeast Birmingham, within a park established in the medieval period (Hodder 2004, 60). The road has been recorded as having an earth core with a surfacing of coarse gravel and pebbles (Margary 1967, 286) and a maximum width of 18m between the flanking ditches (Hodder 2004, 61).

At Parsons Hill (SMR 02939; Fig. 3) 'sloping gravel floors surmounted by burnt layers containing charcoal and daub' were recorded in 1949 in association with Romano-British pottery dating to between the 1st and 3rd centuries AD. This site represents a focus of Romano-British occupation and it is also possible that the gravel surfaces recorded here may represent part of Icknield Street (Hodder 2002, 2). It has been noted that the quantity of pottery recovered from this site at Parsons Hill is significant when compared to quantities recovered from Roman sites in the north of Birmingham (*ibid.*). A further significant assemblage of Romano-British pottery has been recovered from recent excavations at Longdales Road, Kings Norton, c. 1.2km to the south of Parsons Hill. An initial evaluation at the site (Vaughan 2002) recorded enclosure ditches associated with Romano-British ceramics. Subsequent open area excavation (Williams 2003a and 2003b) recorded a triple-ditched Romano-British enclosure associated with curvilinear and rectilinear structures in the form of beam-slots and gullies, together with metallised surfaces. Ceramics dating to between the 2nd and 4th centuries AD (Williams 2003a, 11) were recorded from the excavations which revealed three phases of Roman activity. The first phase represented an unenclosed period of activity, possibly representing a farmstead associated with a field system (*ibid.*, 9). The second phase represented the most intensive phase of activity within a triple ditched enclosure (*ibid.*, 10). Further more limited activity was represented by a third phase which saw the continued use of the enclosure, as demonstrated by the re-cutting of the enclosure ditches (*ibid.*). The main period of activity at the Longdales

Road site appears to date to between the 3rd to 4th centuries on the basis of initial assessment (*ibid.*, 15).

Trial-trenching (Williams 2003a) and further open area excavation (Williams 2003b) demonstrated the presence of a wider field system at this site together with further areas of settlement to the north and east of the triple ditched enclosure. The area of further settlement was again represented by beam slots, gullies and metalled surfaces in association with boundary ditches, divided into three phases dating to between 2nd-4th centuries AD (*ibid.*). Metalled surfaces were also recorded through trial trenching (Williams 2003a, 5) immediately west of the line of Icknield Street at Longdales Road and further west within the second open area excavation (Williams 2003b). Further areas of metalling recorded during the watching brief on the site were suggested to be aligned perpendicular to Icknield Street (Mason 2004, 3).

A Romano-British track was also recorded broadly perpendicular with Icknield Street, orientated approximately northwest to south-east, to the southeast of the triple ditched enclosure at Longdales Road (Patrick and Darch 2002). It is possible that this track connected the triple ditched enclosure with the Roman road. Further Romano-British activity was also recorded in a trial trench located in a field to the south of this feature and west of the line of Icknield Street (*ibid.*). The activity in this area demonstrates an extensive Romano-British presence to the west of Icknield Street on the ridge overlooking the Rea Valley.

Further Romano-British activity in the vicinity of the site at Parsons Hill can be evidenced to the north and west of the site. Roman coins have been found to the north of Parsons Hill at Lindsworth Road (SMR 03263) dating to the 3rd century, and at Broad Meadows Lane (SMR 03262), dating to the late 3rd century (Fig. 2). These finds appear to relate to the line of the Roman road, Icknield Street. To the west of the proposed development site a near complete Romano-British pot was discovered by chance at Westhill Road, Kings Norton (Hodder 2004, 70).

3.3: Early medieval and medieval

The earliest references to the area appear to be contained within an Anglo Saxon charter of AD 699-709, possibly relating to Lindsworth Farm (SMR 20754; Fig. 3). Kings Norton and the surrounding area may have belonged to a pre-Conquest royal estate, forming the northern portion or north *tun* of an estate centred on Bromsgrove (Jones and Ratkai 2000, 102). No further evidence of early medieval archaeology has been recorded from the locality. The area of Kings Norton was subsequently held by William the Conqueror. This royal estate comprised a large tract of land covering a large area of southwest Birmingham (*ibid.*).

The site at Parsons Hill lies within the vicinity of several medieval moated sites and a mill, with the medieval church and settlement of Kings Norton on the lower ground to the west. The Church of St Nicolas at Kings Norton dates structurally to the 13th century, with later medieval additions, though may have origins in the 12th century (*ibid.*, 102). Medieval settlement features have been recorded at excavations at The Green, Kings Norton (*ibid.*; SMR 20388; 20700) to the southwest of the medieval church. Here three phases of medieval activity in the form of structures dating to between the 13th and 14th centuries have been recorded (Jones and Ratkai 2000, 106-

109). Earlier 12th century ceramics have also been recorded, indicating settlement in this period also (*ibid.*, 120). The wide-ranging ceramic assemblage has been used to suggest the presence of a medieval market at Kings Norton (*ibid.*). Medieval agriculture is represented in the locality by two areas of recorded ridge and furrow at Kings Norton (SMR 20065; 20066). A holloway (SMR 20067) may also date to this period. Later medieval settlement can be demonstrated by the presence of the Saracens Head, a 15th century standing building on The Green, Kings Norton (Hislop and Hewitson 2005).

To the north of the site at Parsons Hill is Lifford Mill, with mill races associated with the River Rea. The site has a number of phases of activity, including a 17th century hall (SMR 01261) and a later 19th century mill (Hannaford 1989). However, excavations here have also produced medieval ceramics pre-dating later post-medieval mill features (Litherland 1990, 3). Indeed, a medieval grant of 1317 records the presence of a mill at this site (*ibid.*, 6).

To the east of Parsons Hill a possible medieval moated site has been recorded at Bells Farm (SMR 03006), though recent excavations were unable to detect the location of a northern arm of the moat (Duncan 2003). Further moated sites have been recorded at Pool Farm to the south (SMR 03007), and at The Moats, Cotteridge, to the northwest (SMR 20069).

The medieval moated sites in the vicinity of Parsons Hill probably reflect, population expansion into more marginal land in the 13th century. The presence of moated sites may suggest that their occupants had acquired a degree of status, either during this period, or following the economic and population dislocations of the 14th century. The medieval church and associated settlement at Kings Norton clearly provided the focus for activity in this period in the locality of Parsons Hill.

A 13th century coin of Edward I found in the vicinity of Parsons Hill (SMR 04765; Fig. 3) may suggest contemporary activity in the vicinity, in particular the medieval use of the Parsons Hill route into the village of Kings Norton. No specific medieval occupation within the area defined by the proposed development site is apparent from available documentary sources.

3.4: Post-medieval (not illustrated except where stated)

Evidence of continued occupation of the area around Parsons Hill in the 16th and 17th century is represented by the farmhouse at Bells Farm (SMR 01159, Fig. 3), the early 17th century Lifford Hall (SMR 01261, Fig. 3) together with a 17th century structure recorded at Redditch Road, Kings Norton (SMR 20700, Fig. 3). The area witnesses a significant period of development in the 18th century associated with the industrialisation of the region in this period. Significant features of the landscape include the Stratford Canal (SMR 20337), the Worcester and Birmingham Canal (SMR 05851) and the associated Lifford Bridge (SMR 01778). Small scale industrial activity in the locality during the 19th century includes the rolling mill at Lifford Hall (Hannaford 1989) and Sherbourne Mill (SMR 05650). Canal House (SMR 03587) and Moundsley Lodge (SMR 03840) can also be dated to the 19th century.

3.5: Cartographic sources (19th and 20th century)

The Ordnance Survey maps of 1887, 1905, 1919-1921 and 1938 were examined for the area of Parsons Hill and its immediate vicinity. These cartographic sources demonstrate a lack of activity within the area of the proposed development.

The 1887 map demonstrates that the present road network was in existence by this time. The proposed development site occupied a field within a predominantly agricultural landscape (Fig. 5) Several properties can be seen along the line of Broad Meadow Lane and Icknield Street, to the south of Parsons Hill. The Laurels and Hill Top, situated to the east and south of the Parsons Hill Site respectively, represent the nearest occupation, though not encroaching upon the proposed development area. The line of Icknield Street, recorded as a stretch of road to the south, can also be seen to be respected by 19th century hedge lines in fields to the south of Parsons Hill (Margary 1967, 285). It is worth noting that the western boundary of the proposed development site had been established by 1887.

No significant development appears to have taken place when the area was mapped in 1905 (Fig. 6). Some new properties are apparent along the line of Monyhull Hall Road to the east, and a brickworks has been established to the west of Parsons Hill. No buildings are recorded on the site of the proposed development. The line of Icknield Street continues to be apparent both in the road system and in the line of hedgerows to the south of Parsons Hill. The western boundary of the site and the associated field system remain constant.

The map of 1919 to 1921 records further development to the west of Parsons Hill with the creation of Baldwin Road and associated properties, and an expansion of the brickworks to the south (Fig. 7). The proposed development site, again, remains undeveloped.

A more significant expansion of development is apparent on the 1938 map of the area (Fig. 8) with several roads having been constructed off the existing Baldwin Road, forming what appears to be a housing estate to the north and west of the Parsons Hill site. This development does not, however, encroach upon the proposed development site.

The line of Icknield Street is clearly apparent to the north and south of Parsons Hill on all maps examined. The mapped line of the road, as represented by field boundaries to the south of Parsons Hill is, perhaps more ambiguous in terms of tracing the exact alignment of the Roman route. The line of Lifford Lane in the north of the area appears to subtly differ in alignment from that of the Icknield Street road in the vicinity of Lilycroft Farm to the south. This may suggest that the road changes alignment in the vicinity of Parsons Hill. On the basis of the map evidence, it appears that the line of Icknield Street runs to the west of the proposed development site. However its course, as reflected in hedge boundaries, remains ambiguous, and it is possible that a change of alignment in the road may occur at Parsons Hill.

4.0: CONCLUSIONS

It is clear that the potential significance of the proposed development site at Parsons Hill is defined by its proximity to the line of the Roman road Icknield Street. The possibility exists that the road itself may lie in close proximity to the proposed development site, and its course may have been sited upon a natural hill here.

Extensive Roman settlement has been recorded on the higher ground to the south of Parsons Hill at Longdales Road (Williams 2003a; 2003b; Mason 2004), with two settlement foci *c.* 150m and 250m to the west of Icknield Street, with further Romano-British features (Williams 2003b) present between these sites and the Roman road. A trackway running off the main route of Icknield Street was also recorded (Patrick and Darch 2002). Trial trenching also recorded a wider Romano-British field system within this area (Williams 2003a) and it has been suggested that some recent field boundaries may follow the same alignment as Romano-British systems of enclosure (Williams 2003b, 7).

Using the site at Longdales Road, Kings Norton as a precedent, the location of the proposed development site at Parsons Hill has the potential to reveal Romano-British activity in association with the Roman road, Icknield Street. Romano-British activity has the potential to survive within the area of the bowling green both in the form of ditched enclosures associated with settlement locales or more extensive field systems.

The potential for archaeology of both the Romano-British period and other periods is heightened by the fact that the site does not appear to have been significantly developed since the late 19th century, barring the construction of the bowling green.

The bowling green and associated trees may have truncated archaeological features, but the extent of such truncation cannot be established without an archaeological field evaluation of the site.

5.0 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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6.0 CARTOGRAPHIC SOURCES

British Geological Survey map sheet 168, Birmingham (Drift), surveyed 1924.

Ordnance Survey 1st edition 1887

Ordnance Survey 2nd edition 1905

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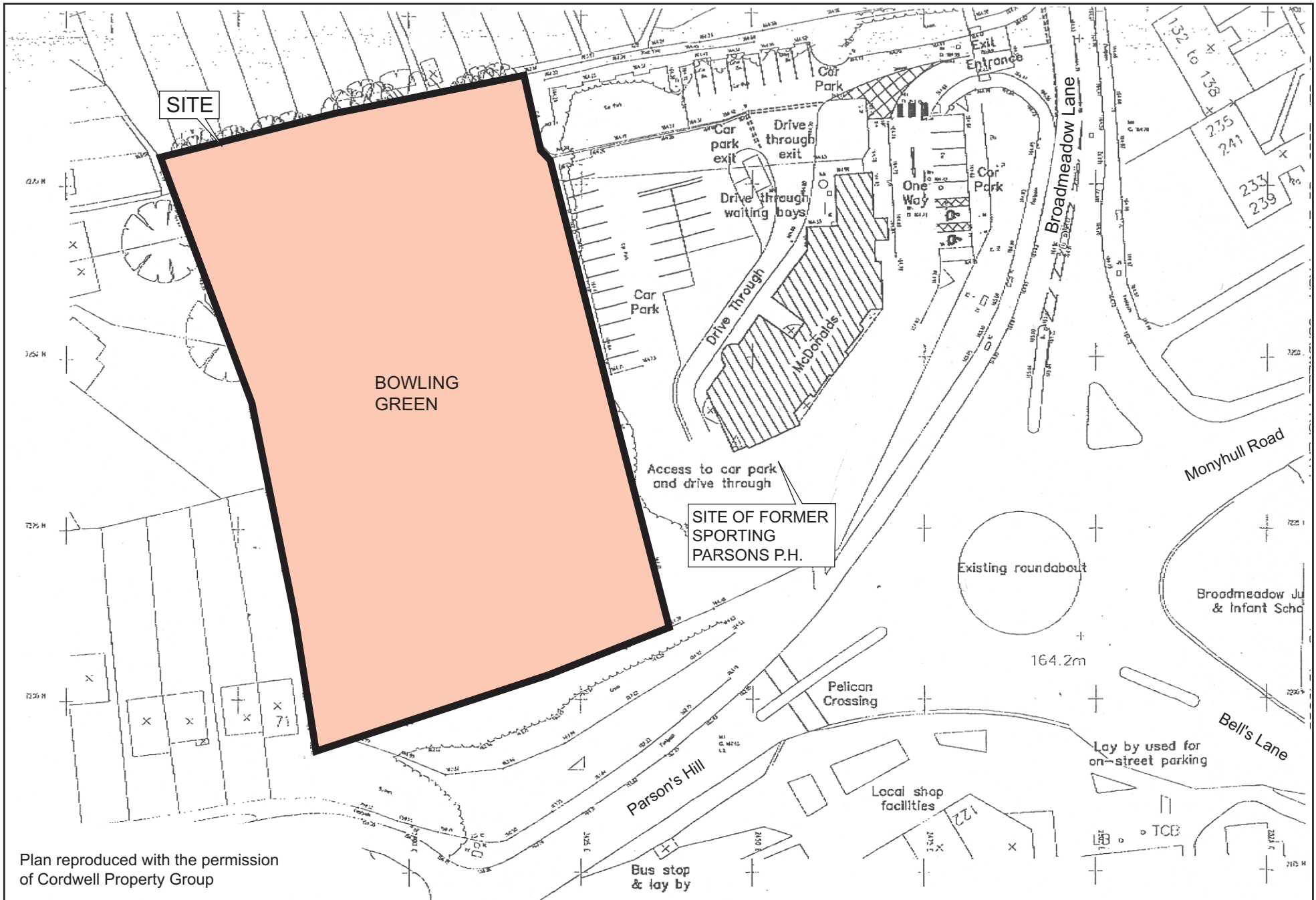
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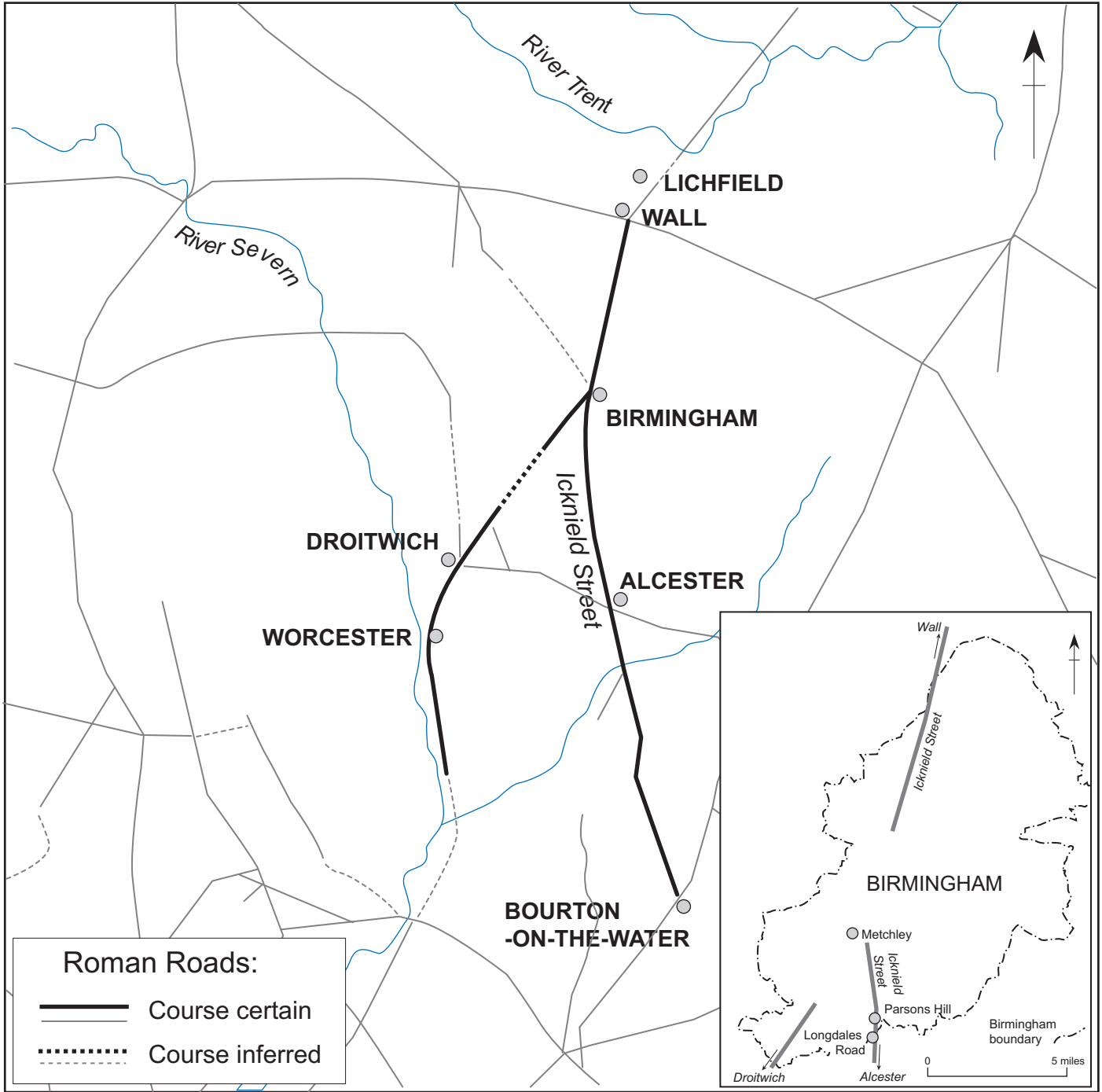


Fig.1



Plan reproduced with the permission of Cordwell Property Group

Fig.2



After: Hodder (2004); and Margary (1967)

Fig.4



Plate 1



Plate 2



Plate 3



Plate 4