

# Mercian Archaeology

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*Archaeological Evaluation at  
Cookhill Priory, Cookhill, Worcestershire*



*An Archaeological Evaluation at  
Cookhill Priory, Cookhill,  
Worcestershire*

*A Report for Mr Linton Connell*

January 2006  
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**Project: PJ 154**

**WSM 34779**

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# 1. Project Background

## 1.1. Site Location

Cookhill Priory lies on the northern side of the A442 Worcester to Stratford-upon-Avon road at the staggered junction where the road crosses the A441 Evesham to Alcester road, before it carries on to Stratford (NGR SO 40537 25733; Figure 1). Cookhill lies some 18 kilometres from Worcester to the west and 14 kilometres from Stratford upon Avon to the east. The site lies on the eastern county boundary between Worcestershire and Warwickshire, which skirts the priory precinct perimeter, running along the A441.

## 1.2. Project Details

The site of Cookhill Priory is a Scheduled Ancient Monument (SAM 0256) and is listed on the Worcestershire Historic Environment Record (WSM 03259).

An application for Scheduled Monument consent was presented to the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) by Mr Linton Connell of Cookhill Priory, under the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act (1979), to replace unsympathetic former domestic structures with a new, similar sized building further to the south-west (Ref: HSD/9/2/7638). English Heritage advised the Secretary of State that before any decision could be made to grant the consent, an archaeological evaluation should first be carried out in the proposed area of the new build, in order to determine the existence and nature, or otherwise, of archaeological features and deposits. A proposal and specification for an archaeological evaluation was written by Mercian Archaeology (2004) and subsequently approved by English Heritage.

The evaluation was to comprise a single excavated trench 15 metres in length, with an appropriate programme of background research.

## 1.3. Reasons for the Evaluation

An archaeological evaluation was suggested as the appropriate response to the threat posed to the archaeological site, which is a Scheduled Ancient Monument, by any proposed development.

An archaeological evaluation is defined as:

*‘A limited programme of non-intrusive and / or intrusive fieldwork which determines the presence or absence of archaeological features, structures, deposits artefacts or ecofacts within a specified area on land, inter-tidal zone or underwater. If such archaeological remains are present, fieldwork*

*should determine their character, extent, quality, preservation and their worth at a local, national or international level as appropriate' (IFA 2001).*

An evaluation was proposed so that informed decisions could be made, based on the results and also the present knowledge regarding the site, on the damage to the archaeological integrity of the site that may be caused by any development or ground disturbance.

## 2. Methods and Process

### 2.1. Project Specification

- ❑ The project fieldwork conforms to the Standard and Guidance for an Archaeological Field Evaluation (IFA 2001).
- ❑ The archive conforms to the standards and guidelines established by the Archaeological Data Service.
- ❑ The project conforms to the requirements for Scheduled Ancient Monuments consent as indicated by English Heritage (HSD/9/2/7638), for which a project proposal and detailed specification was produced (Mercian Archaeology (2004)).
- ❑ Mercian Archaeology adhere to the service practice and health and safety policy as contained within the Mercian Archaeology Service Manual (Williams 2003)

### 2.2. Aims of the Project

The evaluation aimed to:

- ❑ Use the results of the archaeological work to produce a report highlighting: -
  1. The survival and location of any archaeological deposits.
  2. Make an analysis and interpretation of all identified natural and cultural deposits
- ❑ Based on the above, establish the significance, survival, condition and period of the archaeological remains and place them within context at local, regional or national level where relevant.

## 3. The Background

### 3.1. A Brief Archaeological Overview

*Abbreviations in this section: -*

*WRO ~ Worcester Records Office*

*VCH ~ Victoria County History*

The history of Cookhill Priory has been comprehensively covered elsewhere and those interested should consult the Victoria County History: Worcestershire Volume III. A brief history of the priory based on the VCH volume is contained in the following paragraphs, unless otherwise referenced.

Cookhill Priory was founded as a Cistercian nunnery and is often also referred to as 'Cookhill Nunnery'.

The date of foundation of Cookhill Priory is unclear, although the modern written history suggests that it was founded by at least 1227, when there was a dispute between Sarah, the prioress of Cookhill and William Boterell and Peter Fitz Herbert concerning the 'advowson' of the church of Alcester (the right to nominate a person to hold a church office in a parish), although the earliest direct reference to the nuns of Cookhill is in an abstract of a deed from 1260. This document refers to a gift made to the nuns of Cookhill by Isabel the countess of Warwick and her family. Isabel later became a nun at the priory (WRO: BA385. ref 705:27, Parcel 80), thus becoming synonymous with patronage of the priory.

The earliest documentary reference to the holdings (endowment) of the priory dates from 1288. It relates to 2 ½ hides at Cookhill (c. 300 acres), with lands held further afield.

Taxation documents of the late 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> century tell us more regarding the state of the priory at that time. In 1291 the nuns of Cookhill were exempt taxation due to their poverty and in 1330 the church of Bishampton (with its assets) was set aside for the use of the nuns at Cookhill to alleviate their poverty. There are many other references concerning the poverty of the nuns of Cookhill and it seems likely that the nuns were of poor backgrounds before taking the veil. It appears that the nunnery was always of a small-scale with no more than 8 or 9 nuns incumbent at any one time.

It seems unlikely, due to the deprived nature of the foundation, that Cookhill Priory had monastic granges (satellite farms) away from Cookhill, but only land they rented out to smallholders. A transcript of the rental of Cookhill Priory dating from 1539 shows the average holdings of the tenants to be of a single messuage with a croft of pasture of around 2 acres. The estate clearly held a greater proportion of pasture than arable land (WRO: BA 9828. ref 850 Inkberrow, Parcel 23).

The precinct at Cookhill was very small in comparison to most and is likely to have used timber as the main type of building material (Aston 2000, 114).

Cookhill Priory appears to have survived suppression in 1537 but succumbed to the Dissolution over the following few years, evidently surrendering scant assets to the ministers' accounts for 1542.

### 3.2. The Cistercians

The Cistercian order was a reformation of the order of Saint Benedict (Benedictine) and the first foundation in England was Fountains Abbey in 1123. The Cistercian order made a conscious move towards a way of life involving hard labour and enterprise. They often located monasteries (etc) in desolate places, although their choice of location seems to be well informed with regard to possible exploitation of natural resources and the order were masters of water management and use of water to provide power, which would often be used for industrial practices such as iron working and tanning (Coppack 1998, Chapter 5). The Cistercians became great agriculturalists and relied upon agriculture to maintain their existence, thus by the middle of the 13<sup>th</sup> century they had become Britain's main exporter of wool ([www.wikipedia.org/wiki/cistercian](http://www.wikipedia.org/wiki/cistercian)).

The economy of the Cistercian houses was also reliant on the enrolment and use of lay brothers to help work the land and maintain the infrastructure; in return the uneducated labouring class was offered a way into religious life (Coppack 1998, 95). The lay brothers would work the monastic granges, which initially were in reasonable travelling distance of the foundation, in order that the overall operation could easily be managed (*ibid*, 111).

It was not until 1213 that Cistercian nuns were officially recognised by the General Chapter, the governing body of the Cistercian order, which met at Citeaux. However, the popularity and expansion of the nunnery foundations meant that in 1228 the foundation of any further Cistercian nunneries was outlawed by the General Chapter, although after this date many 'unofficial' Cistercian nunneries were founded throughout Europe (<http://cistercians.shef.ac.uk>).

### 3.2. The Scheduled Ancient Monument

The extent of the Scheduled Ancient Monument (SAM) is shown in Figure 4. The defined boundaries of a SAM reflect a modern perspective of the extent of an archaeological site based on the knowledge available at the time of scheduling. Often extant earthworks may mark ancient boundaries defining areas of activity, but more often the ancient landscape has been overlain by a modern landscape, which complicates the interpretation of the extent of a site. At Cookhill Priory, the SAM is the area determined as the priory precinct and outer precinct, although, the priory holdings may have spread further than the delineated area. Much of the acknowledged precinct appears to be contained within low earthwork boundary banks, which still stand to a height of around a metre with a parallel quarry ditch on the outside (WSM 03266). The bank may contain buried masonry from a precinct wall, although as stated above, timber was probably the favoured building material at the priory. Roads, field-boundaries, watercourses and property boundaries are other features, which appear on modern maps that are used to delineate a SAM. This is based on an acceptance that these forms of land division have often passed through centuries un-altered. For example, the A 441 Evesham Road, which

marks the eastern boundary of Cookhill Priory as it stands today, also forms the ancient county boundary between Worcestershire and Warwickshire. This is in no way ‘accidental’, the line of the boundary follows a ridgeway (WSM 03294), which is likely to have prehistoric origins and indicates that the priory boundary on this side respected the line of the trackway, demonstrating its known existence and importance as a route in the early 13<sup>th</sup> century. On the other hand, the curving line of the A442 Stratford road, which now marks the southern boundary of the SAM, appears to be a realignment of the road, which originally ran in a straight line towards the junction of the A441 and the A435 Alcester Road. This road is thought to be a possible Roman road or salt way (WSM 03292). A series of salt ways are known to have radiated out from the Roman (and later) salt production centre of Droitwich, salt being an important commodity (Taylor 1979, 95). The landscape evidence indicates that the road must have been realigned when the priory was founded, as it now skirts the earthen boundary banks, therefore indicating that the original straighter road predates the early 13<sup>th</sup> century.

The earliest definite remaining upstanding (masonry) fabric within the priory precinct survives in the eastern and northern elevations of the chapel and dates from the late 14<sup>th</sup> century (WSM 03289), the chapel, like the other buildings of the priory appears to have been partially destroyed at the Dissolution of the Monasteries in 1542 and the upstanding buildings we see today, post-date this episode and need no further comment here. On the north-eastern side of the site there is a mound seemingly built into the precinct boundary bank. This had formerly been interpreted as a ‘motte’ of a motte and bailey castle, presumably with the precinct boundary representing the bailey. However, excavations into the mound revealed the characteristic cruciform stone foundation of a post-mill (windmill), which may be medieval and, therefore, part of the monastic estate (WSM 03261). Those interested in the present buildings should consult Pevsner 1968 and Deeks 2004.

There are a series of wet ponds across the scheduled monument and the wider area that have been variously interpreted as fishponds and moats (WSM 03262; WSM 03263; WSM03264; WSM 03265; WSM 30984), but it is clear from the records that the configuration of the ponds is not yet fully understood and interpretation and phasing is vague. Fishponds were common at medieval manorial and monastic sites as fish provided part of the staple diet and farming fish was commonplace; for example, it is recorded that in 1571 the Cistercian Abbey at Waldsassen in Germany had 159 fishponds (Evans 1996, 7). Usually, fish were reared in a series of linked ponds connected in some way to a watercourse, which provided a steady flow of fresh water through the complex of ponds, providing water movement and preventing stagnation. A fishpond was often called ‘stew’ or ‘stew pond’ during the medieval and post-medieval period.

### **3.2. The Cartography**

The earliest available map of the area was the Inkberrow Inclosure Award plan of 1818 (WRO BA 307, r143/51.1). This shows the road configuration around the site as today, adding weight to the hypothesis that the proposed former road alignment through the nunnery precinct (see above Section 3.1) predates the foundation of the nunnery. Ponds are also shown on the map, but are schematic and cannot be related to the modern mapping, although the long narrow ‘L’ shaped pond (Figure 2) appears to be an ornamental arrangement and is probably a post Dissolution re-construct, essentially a garden feature. Field-names of interest include Upper Fishpool Ground (No. 781), Fishpool Ground (782) and the field adjacent to the boundary



road (Inkberrow to Stratford) was known as Brick Kiln Ground, indicating the former presence of a brick kiln. A slightly later plan of 1824 cast no further light regarding the ponds.

Only the 6” to 1 mile 1<sup>st</sup> edition Ordnance Survey map of the area was available at Worcester Records Office (WRO) at the time of the documentary work. This did not show enough detail to be of use.

The detailed 25” edition Ordnance Survey map of 1904 appears to support the theory that some of the pond features depicted as ‘moats’ are later ornamental features, with three large rectilinear ponds in the centre of the site giving the appearance that they formed a moat; there is a clear distinction between these and a series of three smaller ponds running off to the west, which are likely to be monastic fishponds. The northern boundary earthworks are shown on the map, as is the windmill mound, but the southern boundary banks do not appear (Figure 3).

### **Cartographic Sources Used**

<b>Source</b>	<b>Reference Number</b>
Inkberrow Inclosure Award plan of 1818	WRO BA 307, r143/51.1
Plan of Cookhill Estate (1824)	WRO BA 385, 705:27, parcel 63
Ordnance Survey 2nd Edition 25” (1904) Warwickshire XXXVI.16 Worcestershire XXX.16	

### **Sources Consulted of Little Use**

<b>Source</b>	<b>Reference Number</b>
Notes on the history of Cookhill (1825)	WRO BA 385, 705:27, parcel 80
Glebe Terrier	WRO BA 385, 705:27, parcel 62
Transcription of the rental of Cookhill Priory (1539)	WRO BA 9828, 850 Inkberrow, parcel 23

Other sources used are referenced within the report.

## **3.4. The Fieldwork Methodology**

The archaeological evaluation was undertaken on 14<sup>th</sup> January 2006.

The areas to be trenched were surveyed using a Garrett Ultra GTA metal detector configured to detect all metals to a maximum depth of 15 centimetres. The spoil was also scanned during the excavation process.

The evaluation trench, totalling around 32 square metres, was excavated by JCB equipped with a 1.80 metre-ditching bucket. The trench location is shown in Figure 4

Paul Williams carried out the evaluation for Mercian Archaeology assisted by James Goad.

The methodology adopted and the favourable working conditions meant that the aims and objectives of the brief could be fully met and the fieldwork was successfully concluded.

## 4. The Evaluation

The metal detector survey of the area to be trenched produced no signals to suggest the presence of metals of any type. The only metal encountered during the work was an iron nail from within context [202] (see below).

One 15 metre x 1.8 metre trench was excavated by a JCB fitted with a ditching bucket. The trench was laid out in the suggested location in the revised brief for work (WHEAS, November 2005) The trench location is shown in Figure 4.

The site was overlain by a well-developed turf and thin mid-brown topsoil with roots and occasional small rounded stone [100]. The layer was around 5 to 10 centimetres thick.

Below the turf and topsoil was a layer that displayed evidence of having been redeposited and spread across the area. This was a mixture of mid-greyish brown silty-loam with pockets of yellowish-grey silty clay, on average around 18 centimetres thick [101]. One sherd of 19<sup>th</sup> or early 20<sup>th</sup> century pottery was found in this layer.

Layer [101] sealed a 22 to 30-centimetre thick layer of greyish-brown silt with a small percentage of sand [102]. This layer was noticeably darker in colour towards the southern end of the trench at the lower level of the slope; the reasons for this are discussed below. The layer included moderate small round, sub-round and angular stones, with frequent charcoal flecks, although these were concentrated to the south of the trench where the soil was darker. There were three finds from this layer, an iron nail and two pieces of ceramic roof tile, which can only be dated to between the 13<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Layer [102] sealed a substantial build-up of light greyish-brown silt with a very small percentage of fine sand and an occasional small rounded stone [103]. This layer was sterile and was noticeably siltier at lower levels [104]. This layer represents a weathering of the (natural) parent material [105], which lay below, at around 80-90 centimetres below the present turf line. The natural matrix was of orange and mottled grey silty clay, with a small percentage of fine sand. The weathering process and deposition of silt indicates that the area has been subject to periodic flooding over a long period of time.

There were no significant archaeological cut features encountered during the evaluation and there were no stratified dateable artefacts recovered during the work apart from the roof tile, which can only be dated to a span of some 500 years.

## 5. The Artefacts

### 5.1. Aims

The brief required an assessment of the quantity, range and potential of artefacts from the excavation.

The aims of the finds assessment were: -

- To identify, sort, spot date, and quantify all artefacts
- To describe the range of artefacts present
- To preliminarily assess the significance of the artefacts

### 5.2. Method of analysis

All hand-retrieved artefacts were examined and identified, quantified and dated to period. Pottery fabrics are referenced to the fabric reference series maintained by the Worcestershire County Council Archaeological Service (Hurst and Rees 1992).

### 5.3. Results of analysis

The assemblage retrieved from the site was minimal, containing a total of four individual finds consisting of one sherd of pottery, two fragments of roof tile and an iron nail. Finds came from two stratified contexts and displayed moderate levels of abrasion. The group gave an overall date range of between the 13<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

### 5.4. Discussion

The discussion below is a summary of the artefacts and associated location or contexts by period. Where possible, dates have been allocated and the importance of individual finds commented upon as necessary.

#### 5.4.1. Medieval to Post-Medieval

The roofing tile consisted of two fragments of flat tile from context [102]. The fragments displayed characteristics commonly associated with tiles of the Malvernian industry, including un-sanded undersides and inclusion of crushed Malvernian stone. Unfortunately, this type of tile can only be dated to between the 13<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries.

The iron nail was very corroded, but nevertheless was identifiable as a handmade square headed nail measuring 11 centimetres in length. Again, accurate dating was impossible.

#### 5.4.2. Modern

One sherd of 19<sup>th</sup> or early 20<sup>th</sup> century flat plate was retrieved from context [101]. The sherd was of a well-fired white fabric with a yellowish glaze.

#### 5.5. Significance

In general, the limited quantity of finds from the evaluation trench indicates that the area was likely to have been used as permanent pasture during the lifespan of the nunnery and probably until the present day. Had the field been ploughed on a regular basis, or formed part of a wider occupation area, more cultural material would most certainly have been found, either resulting from the spread of a 'manufactured' manure created from domestic waste, or as the result of disposal of waste from domestic activity.

It is possible that there has been a certain amount of movement through the profile as a result of animal burrowing, which is widely evident on the surface.

## 6. Discussion of the Physical and Documentary Evidence

The evaluation determined that there were no cut features or buried remains with the evaluation trench associated with domestic/monastic activity that may have taken place in the immediate vicinity, i.e. fish processing, cultivation, cottage industry etc. A buried soil [102] was identified below a disturbed layer [101], which was probably created during dumping and spreading during the mid to late-20<sup>th</sup> century. The buried soil was fairly thick (22-30 centimetres), but displayed no characteristic evidence of having been ploughed (see Plates 1 and 2). The soil was noticeably darker towards the southern end of the trench and this may have been that charcoal in the soil, probably from episodic clearance and burning, had moved down the natural slope into the wetter hollow on the southern side. The natural topography of the site forms a bowl with slopes down towards the southern end of the trench from the north and west, with the fishpond features set out along the lowest levels. During the evaluation it was noticed that water was percolating upwards through the silts [103/ 104] at this end of the trench.

The overall evidence suggests that the soil represents the gradual degradation and regeneration of permanent pasture, probably grazed and fertilised by sheep for much of the year and the layer would have developed between the 13<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. It is possible that the grass may have been turned over by light ploughing perhaps once every generation and may even have been purposely flooded periodically to encourage rapid growth, although this is speculation. The fishpond complex undoubtedly has its origins in the medieval period of monastic occupation, although there has probably been much alteration of the layout since the 16<sup>th</sup> century for aesthetic rather than functional reasons.

The line of the proposed former road (WSM 03292) is to the south of the evaluated area is likely to be the earliest feature on the site, predating the foundation of the nunnery in the early 13<sup>th</sup> century.

There is no documentary evidence relating to a brick kiln in the adjacent field, which bears the fieldname 'Brick Kiln Ground'

## 6.1. Archaeological Potential

The buried soil represents a development over a long period rather than a single episode. For this reason the potential for radiocarbon dating of the organic debris (charcoal) in the layer is poor.

It has been proven elsewhere, that sieving soil is likely to identify artefacts that are missed during usual manual archaeological procedures. However, again, any finds will not result in a narrowing of the date range of the build up of soil and as the site history is well known, again there is little potential for such work.

The archaeological work has also highlighted the possible presence of the line of a former road/track to the south of the evaluated area and the site of a former brick kiln in the adjacent field to the west. The brick kiln is likely to date from circa mid to late 17<sup>th</sup> century or even into the late-18<sup>th</sup> century, when bricks were used to construct farm buildings (WSM 32518; WSM 31116) and follies (WSM 31099; WSM 29008). Clay was probably quarried locally for the manufacture of bricks for local use. It is likely that the kiln(s) were merely clamp kilns (temporary structures), although more permanent structures cannot be ruled out.

The site approach track from the A442 to the south appears to run in a Holloway, which may date from the monastic period or even earlier, although it is unclear how much material has been 'thrown-up' from later works to improve the track.

## 7. Conclusion

*The archaeological evaluation at Cookhill Priory revealed no significant below ground archaeological deposits or features within the evaluation trench. A buried soil, which was encountered below 20<sup>th</sup> century spread material, represents periodic degradation and regeneration of a permanent pasture over many centuries. The pasture would have been managed by rotational grazing, enrichment with manure and possibly even controlled flooding. Natural processes (weathering, worm-action, animal disturbance and slope-movement) would also have helped ensure a sufficient grass crop and contributed to the depth of the soil layer. The pasture was set aside adjacent to a complex of monastic fishponds that would have provided fish as part of the staple diet of the nuns and probably for sale at local markets. The ponds were altered during the post-Dissolution period for aesthetic purposes, as part of the landscaping for the later house.*

## 8. Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Mr Linton Connell of Cookhill Priory for his hospitality and interest in the project. Thanks are also due to Tony Fleming of English Heritage; Miss A.R.Middleton of English Heritage, Mike Glyde, Planning Archaeologist, Worcestershire County Council, the staff of Worcestershire Historic Environment Record and Worcester Records Office and James Goad for his assistance on site.

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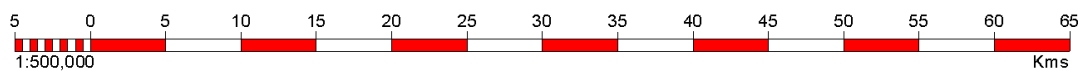
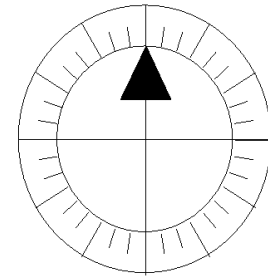
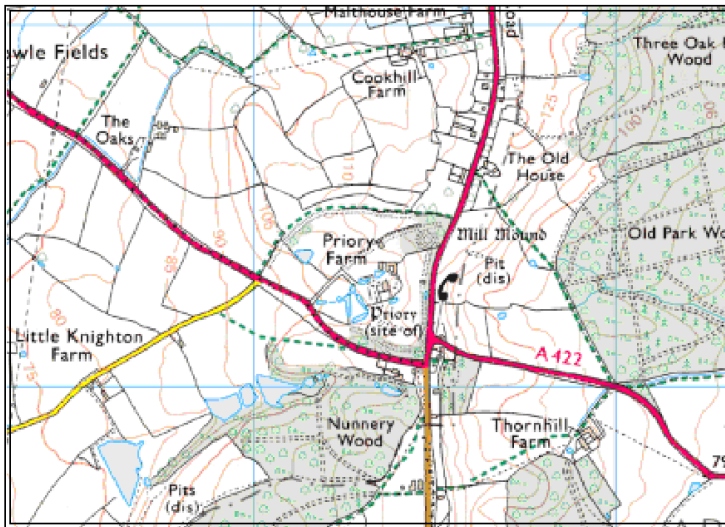
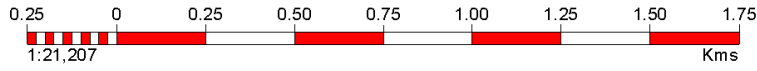
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# Figure 1: Location of the Site



Location of the Site at Cookhill Priory,  
Cookhill, Worcestershire

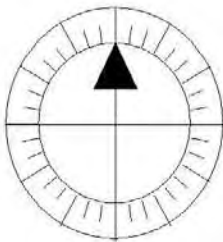
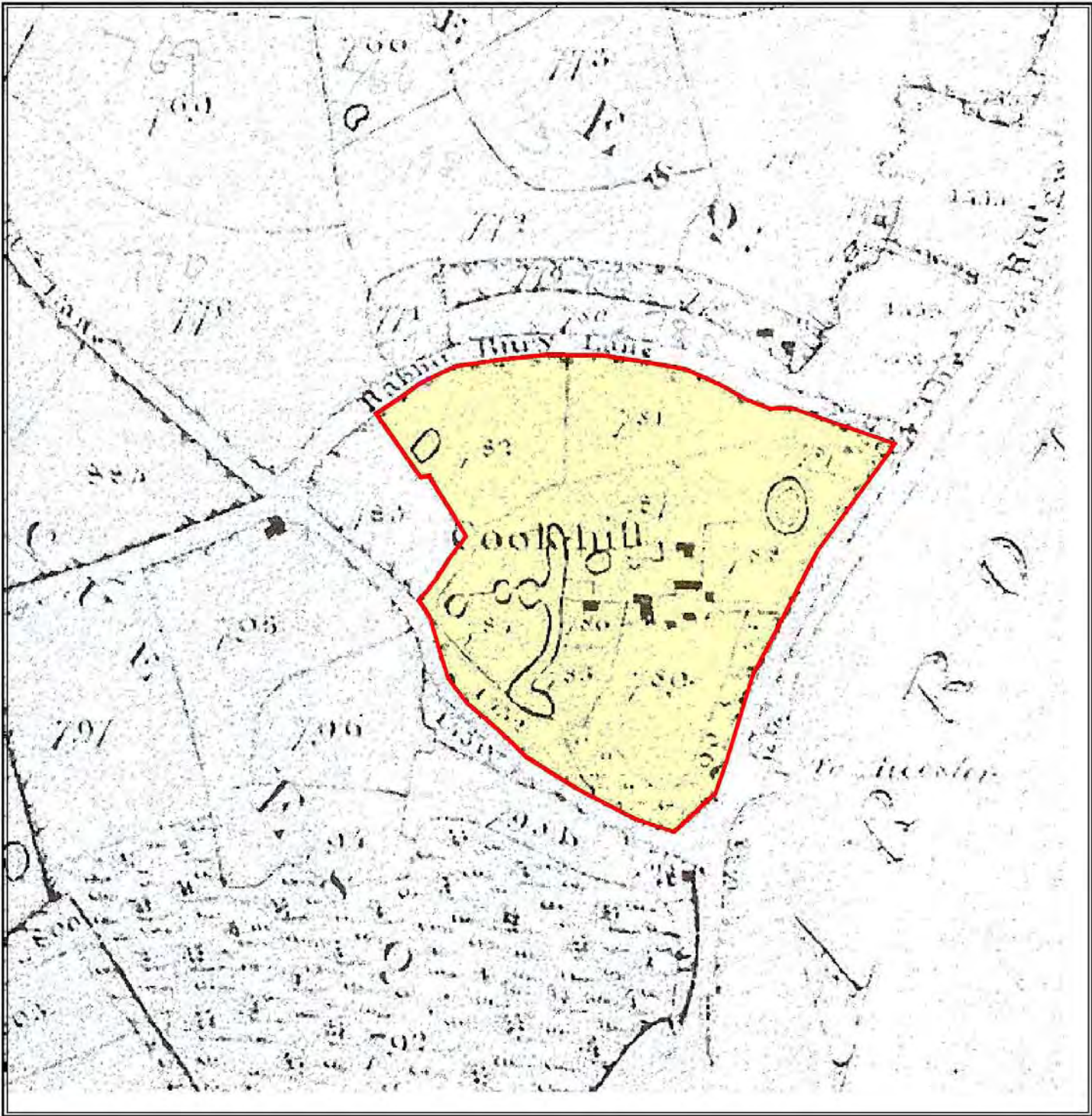
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Figure 2: Extract from the 1818 Inclosure Award Plan of Inkberrow



The 1818 Inclosure plan of Inkberrow with the SAM highlighted.

Scale unknown

Source: WHEAS Library parish boxes

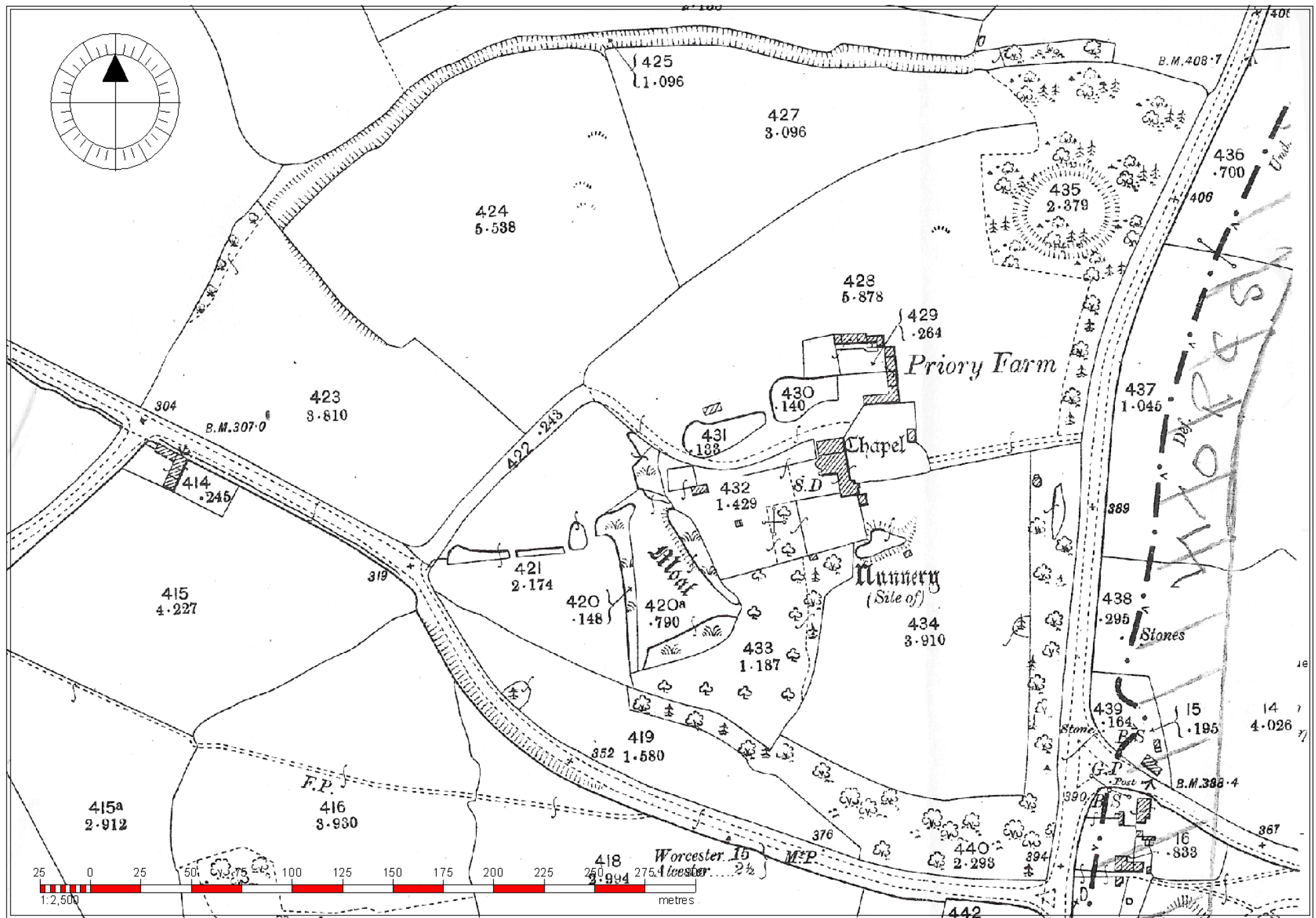


Figure 3: 2nd Edition Ordnance Survey Map (1904)

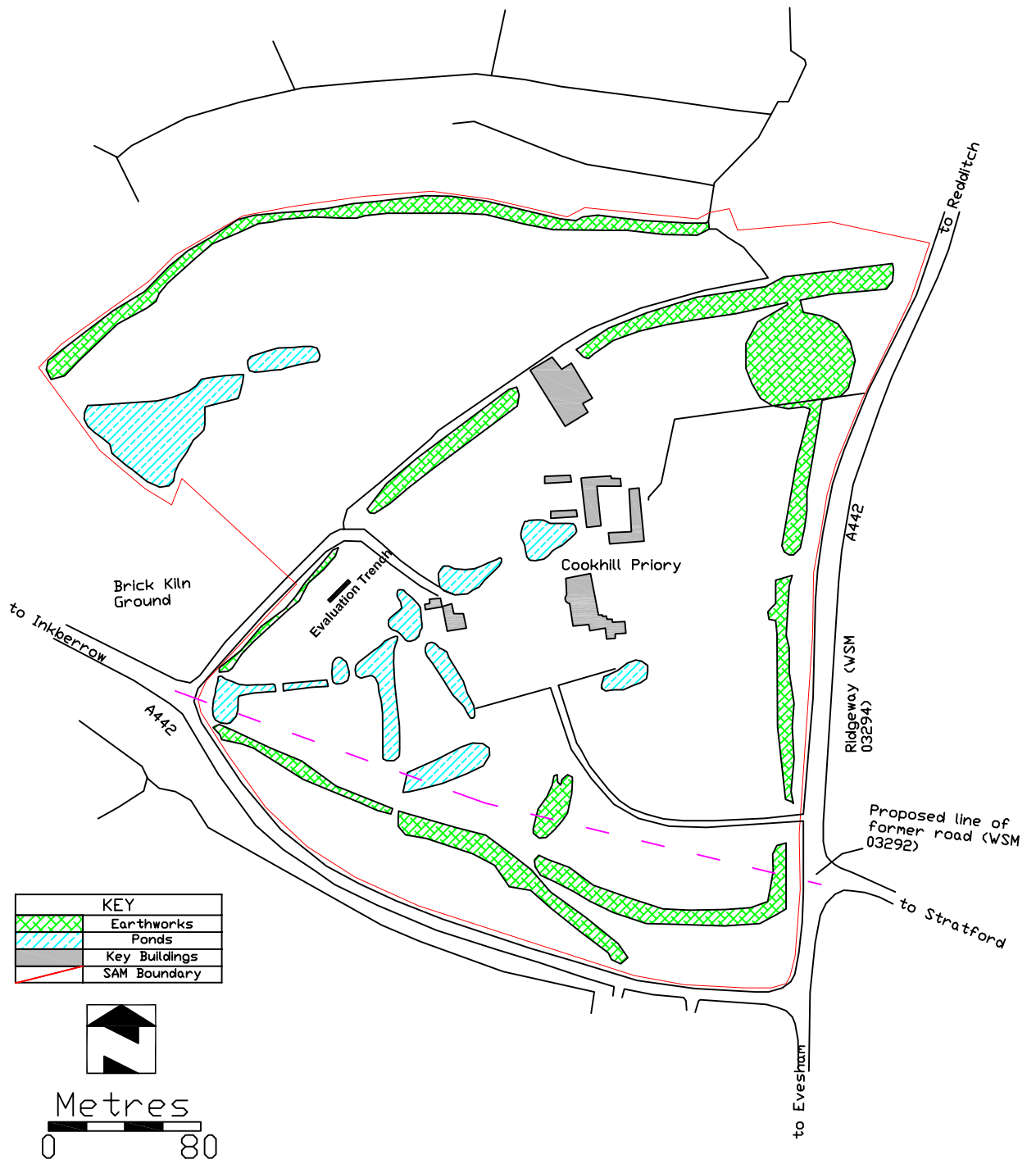


Figure 4: Trench Location and Site Plan

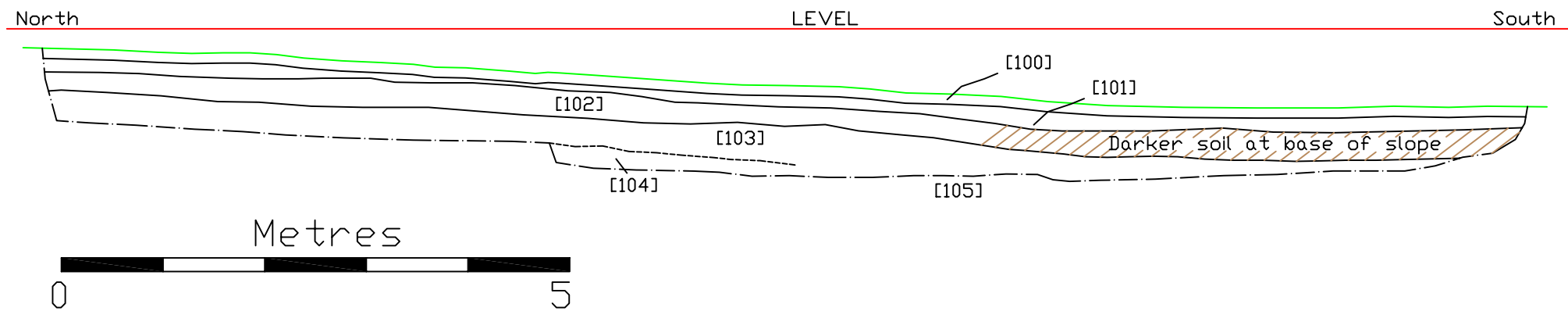


Figure 5: West Facing Section: See text for context description

**Plate 1**



*The evaluation trench at Cookhill Priory looking south*

**Plate 2**



*Evidence of ploughing seen in section at another site (furrows arrowed)*