An Archaeological Project at Castle Farm, Holt, Worcestershire

A Report for Richard & Nicky Harper

September 2008

Project: PJ 221

WSM 39884

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1. Project Background

1.1. Location of the Site

Holt is located at the top of a ridge following the western bank of the River Severn, overlooking the floodplain. The settlement at Holt is shrunken from its medieval size and now comprises, the church, castle and a few cottages, which are approached via an unadopted lane off the A443 Tenbury Wells to Worcester road, being situate some 7-kilometres to the north-west of Worcester. Caste Farm (NGR SO 8308 6235) extends to cover the land between the A443 and the river, with Top Barn Farm and an area of sand and gravel quarries marking the extent to the south-east (Figure 1).

1.2. Project Details

A planning application was presented to Malvern Hills District Council for the erection of a detached dwelling with associated infrastructure (MH/08/0653). The planning process determined that the proposed development site lies within an archaeologically sensitive area, which may contain archaeological remains relating to any period from the prehistoric to medieval and later. It was determined that the groundwork associated with the proposed development may pose a threat to any surviving buried remains and as a result, the Planning Archaeologist, Worcestershire County Council, placed a 'programme of archaeological work' planning condition on the application, for which a brief of work was written (WHEAS 2008) and a written scheme of investigation (Mercian Archaeology 2008) for the work was subsequently approved.

1.3. Reasons for the Project

The archaeological work was suggested as the appropriate response to the threat posed to the potential archaeological site by the development process. The condition required the evaluation of the site by the controlled excavation of three-trenches, with further investigation should the trenches contain significant archaeology.

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).*

The archaeological work at the development site was proposed in order that an assessment of the nature, extent, period and condition of any archaeological remains or deposits encountered

could be made and deposits, features and structures encountered be adequately recorded prior to any development taking place.

2. Methods and Process

2.1. Project Specification

- The archaeological project conforms to the *Standard and Guidance for Archaeological Field Evaluation* (IFA 2001).
- The project conforms to a brief prepared by The Planning Archaeologist, Worcestershire County Council (Brief MH/08/0653, WHEAS, 2008), for which a project proposal and detailed specification was produced (Mercian Archaeology 2008).
- Mercian Archaeology adhere to the service practice and health and safety policy as contained within the *Mercian Archaeology Service Manual* (Williams 2003)
- The record archive will be offered to the appropriate museum after discussion with the client and / or archaeological curator.
- *The Code of Conduct of the Institute of Field Archaeologists* (1997) will be adhered to.
- *The Code of Approved Practice for the Regulation of Contractual Arrangements in Field Archaeology, Institute of Field Archaeologists* (1997) will also be followed
- *Guidelines for Finds Work, Institute of Field Archaeologists* (2001) will be followed.
- The project and any recommendations will conform to the government advice contained in *Planning Policy Guidance: Archaeology and Planning* (DoE, PPG 16 1990).
- The documentary research will follow the guidelines contained within the Institute of Field Archaeologists *Standards and Guidance for Archaeological Desk-Based Assessment* (2001)
- *Guidelines for the Preparation of Archives for Long-Term Storage* (Walker 1990) and *Standards in the Museum Care of Archaeological Collections*, Museum and Galleries Commission (1992) will be followed.
- *Conservation Guidelines No 2*, United Kingdom Institute of Conservation.
- *Management of Archaeological Projects 2*, English Heritage 1991
- Environmental Archaeology and Archaeological Evaluations: Recommendation Regarding the Environmental Archaeology Component of *Archaeological Evaluations in England, Association for Environmental Archaeology Working Paper Number 2* (1995)

2.2. Aims of the Project

The archaeological project aimed to:

- Use the results of the archaeological work to produce a report highlighting: -

    1. The survival and location of archaeological deposits from any period.
    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 any archaeological remains and place them within context at local, regional or national level where relevant.

3. The Documentary Research

3.1. The Topography

Holt lies on a ridge above the River Severn, which flows from north to south through the valley below. The underlying geology of the area is of Pleistocene and Devensian glacial drift deposits, which have been terraced by the flow of the river away to the south. Holt sits on the third gravel terrace, which overlies the solid geology of Mercia Mudstone (Keuper Marl) below (British Geological Survey 1990). The overlying soils are permeable, well-drained brown earths of the Hall and Wick series (Beard et al 1986), which lend themselves well to growing crops such as wheat, barley and oats, which historically are the chief crops of the parish, with hops and fruit also being farmed (VCH III 1913).

A Brief Archaeological Background

Abbreviations used: WSM ~ Worcestershire Historic Environment Record number.

The gravel terraces along the River Severn from Holt Fleet to the north of the site, to Grimley in the south, have provided the focus of continued human activity from the prehistoric period onwards, the well-drained soils being ideal for early farming methods and the river providing communication and further resources. The evidence mainly derives from cropmarks noted on aerial photographs from the 1950's onwards, with later archaeological work associated with sand and gravel extraction adding to our knowledge.

Within 1-kilometre to the west of the site there is a cluster of archaeological sites from the prehistoric and Romano-British period; sites have been interpreted as a Neolithic ring ditch or possible Henge monument (WSM 04524, NGR SO 8237 6217), a double ring ditch of a Bronze Age burial mound (WSM 0524, NGR SO8250 6210), an Iron Age enclosure close to Naunton Farm (WSM 04163, NGR 8230 6230), further Iron Age and Romano-British enclosures at Holt (WSM 04900, WSM 8245 6226) and a Bronze Age cremation burial (WSM

04531, NGR SO 8252, 6126). To the south of the site there is further evidence of prehistoric and Romano-British activity, where an area of enclosures and associated features was designated a Scheduled Ancient Monument in the late 1970's (WSM 04507, SAM 209, NGR SO 8301 6117). Further to the north, a Bronze Age hand-axe was discovered near Holt Fleet (WSM 02599, NGR SO8232 6333) and there is a further area of prehistoric enclosure (WSM 04541, NGR SO 8217 6287). Unfortunately, much of the archaeological evidence to the south of the site has been lost to sand and gravel quarrying, though this has enabled more detailed study of the remains (Deeks 2004).

There is no evidence for activity in this area during the post-Roman or Anglo-Saxon periods. Evidence for medieval activity mainly derives from traces of ridge and furrow agriculture, which has been recorded to the south of the site (Hunt *et al* 1986). At Domesday, Urse D'Abitot held 5 hides at Holt, it was earlier held by Ailric (VCH III, 402). The early medieval settlement of Holt has been proposed as within the field adjacent to the south of Holt Church, which contains faint traces of earthworks (WSM 02601, NGR SO 8293 6247). Adjacent to the east of the church stands Holt Castle, of which the early history is obscure. The earliest upstanding remains are the squat rectangular tower, with further build from the 15th and 18th centuries (*Ibid*). The castle sits within the bounds of a medieval deer park, which is referred to as early as 1420 (WSM 08573 & 08574) and gardens around the castle, which are shown in detail on Doharty's map of 1745 are likely to mirror a much earlier arrangement of garden terraces, which would have been part of the wider parkland landscape.

3.3. The Cartography

The earliest available map of the area was the 1745 Doharty map of Holt Castle and Manor, which shows the area in fine detail. This shows the site as within an arable field known as Little Dove House. Unfortunately this map is copyright, but can be viewed at the Worcestershire Records Office (WRO BA 974/1, s705:114). The later tithe apportionment map of 1840 also shows the site as undeveloped, as does the later 1903 Ordnance Survey map (Worcestershire Sheet XXVIII.3; Figure 2).

4. The Archaeological Project

4.1. The Fieldwork Methodology

The archaeological project was undertaken during the final week of August 2008.

Proforma Record Forms were used to record the site stratigraphy in tandem with site notes to produce the final record contained within this report.

Two 30- metre x 1.60 metre trenches and a single 25 metre x 1.60 metres trench were excavated by a 360° tracked excavator equipped with a 1.60 metre ditching bucket. The trench surfaces and sections were then cleaned by hand tool and recorded following accepted archaeological standards and practice. The location of the trenches is shown in Figure 4.

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.

4.2. The Fieldwork Results

Trench 1

Trench 1 was excavated to a maximum depth of 1.10 metres, at the western end of the trench, with the natural ground profile rising to the east, resulting in the trench being machined to between 60 and 80 centimetres across the remainder. The natural undisturbed glacial deposits [102] were identified at 80 centimetres below present ground level at 35.70m Above Ordnance Datum (Newlyn) at the western end of the trench and 36.10m AOD at the eastern end. The natural material was of mixed reddish-brown sand and gravel, with areas of pea grit at the interface with layer [101] above.

A *c.*35-centimetre thick subsoil layer of loose to friable, reddish-brown silty-sand containing a small percentage of clay, containing frequent small to medium round and sub-round stones [101] sealed the natural. The layer was noticeably free of artefacts or evidence of human activity. However, the layer also sealed a series of narrow bands of similar, but siltier material [103] and following cleaning of the trench, it became clear that these represented the silty 'run-off' from a series of agricultural ridges, which were oriented north-west to south-east, running down the slope. The remnant ridges [104] were only visible in areas of gravel, where the gravel had been sorted by the plough action and was visible against the silty material in the furrows. However, where the substratum was sand, the ridges would also been sandy and these have been lost to later ploughing.

An iron pipe, probably dating from the 1950's, was seen running north to south through the trench towards the workshops at the foot of the slope, however, this was not noted in the other trenches.

Trench 2

Trench 2 was excavated to an average depth of 70 centimetres, with the natural undisturbed substratum [202] identified at between 35.42 and 35.46 m AOD. The natural material was similar to that seen across Trench 1, but was noticeable for a change to buff coloured clay and mudstone at the eastern end.

A 20 to 25-centimetre thick subsoil layer of reddish-brown silty-sand containing a small larger percentage of clay than the subsoil in Trench 1, which was located higher up the slope. The soil contained frequent small to medium round and sub-round stones [201]. The enveloping topsoil [200] was similar to that described for Trench 1.

A total of five remnant ridges were visible within the trench, though these were very ephemoural.

A single, very-degraded sherd of Romano-British Severn Valley Ware and a sherd of late 18th century ripple rim moulded slipware bowl were retrieved during the machining, though both were unstratified. These were discarded following the fieldwork.

Trench 3

Trench 3 was excavated to a maximum depth of 60 centimetres, with the natural undisturbed substratum [302] identified at 34.60m Above Ordnance Datum (Newlyn). The natural material [302] was of sand and gravel at the western end of the trench, with a deposit of red and mottled grey clay-marl centrally, with a buff clay and degraded mudstone at the eastern end.

The subsoil [301]was noticeably siltier than that in trenches 1 and 2, which probably relates to down-slope movement of water, though the soil was of no greater thickness than in the upslope trenches. The subsoil was sealed with similar topsoil to trenches 1 and 2.

The plough ridges noted in trenches 1 and 2 were not visible in Trench 3.

5. Comment on the Physical and Documentary Evidence

The only archaeological features encountered during the archaeological investigation were a series of gravel plough ridges running approximately north-west to south-east, which were visible in part in trenches 1 and 2 (Plates 3 & 4). These represent the denuded remains of ridge and furrow agriculture. Ridge and furrow is easily recognisable on the surface, and survives in swathes across the clay soils of the midland counties, giving the impression of a corrugated land surface.

The basic principal behind the existence of ridge and furrow is one of co-operative farming, whilst still retaining individual holdings within the common fields. The category of field system pre-dates the enclosed field landscape that forms the mosaic of hedged fields that we see today across the modern rural landscape. A village, or settlement was surrounded by two or three large open fields, which were farmed in ‘strips’, or ‘lands’. These fields were commonly, although not always, named North Field, South Field, West Field or East Field, the name(s) often surviving into the modern day, even if the area has been ‘urbanised’. The Lord of the Manor allocated each farmer within the community strips of land within the fields. The strips would be spread across the fields, so that each farmer had a share of the good and bad land equally and no two strips farmed by an individual farmer were located together. Each farmer’s allocation extended to (generally) around 20 acres across some 70 strips. Each strip measured about a quarter of an acre.

Various nomenclature is used when commenting on ridge and furrow agriculture and this may cause confusion. For example, a furlong, as we know it today, is the length of a ridge, i.e. 200 metres (220 yards). But a furlong when referring to medieval agriculture was the area of a strip, or block of ridges within a field. The extent of an individuals land holding was known as a yardland or virgate in the south and an oxgang or bovate in the north.

The lands were usually farmed on a three year rotation, with one field planted with wheat and barley in the first year, beans and peas the next, and left fallow in the third year and the rotation began again on the second or third field. Animals would then be grazed on the stubble of the fallow field (Hall 1982, 17). The ridges were the result of the action of the plough

throwing the soil into the centre of a two directional plough corridor, but it is without doubt that the method was deliberate and the ridges were created to provide a well drained seed bed with drainage channels either side (furrows), which also acted as boundaries between individually owned strips. The ridges were formed by a clockwise ploughing mode starting in the middle of the strip by a single-directional plough throwing the soil only to the right. During the fallow season the strips were ploughed in an anti-clockwise mode so that some soil was thrown back towards the shallower build up near the furrows, so as to and prevent later cutting into less fertile subsoil.

From the air, the pattern of medieval ridge and furrow appears as a reverse 'S'or elongated 'C' pattern in plan. This is because there was a tendency of the oxen plough-team to veer to the left in preparation for making a turn at either end of the strip (Muir and Muir 1989, 61-2). At the end of each ridge a 'head' was formed by accumulation of soil from the plough coming up out of the earth and being cleaned off. This is noticeable where strips are orientated end to end and a double head is formed, also referred to as a 'joint'. Where a series of strips lies at right angles to another, a wider and flatter ridge was created, this was known as a 'headland' and it would have been used as an access track and turning area.

From the late 14th century narrow strips of un-ploughed land were left to demarcate 'special' strips, such as those belonging to the church or the lord of the manor. Other groups of strips were left to generate permanent grass, which were known as 'leys'. These areas are now recognisable as they have a now have a lower profile than frequently ploughed ridges (much of the above is based on Hall 1998).

The origins of ridge and furrow agriculture lie in the Anglo-Saxon period, although the form is commonly associated with post-conquest agricultural practice. Excavation and fieldwork at Hen Domen in Powys has revealed evidence for a pre-Norman ridge and furrow field system (CPAT; Aston 1985, 121) and other early ridge and furrow has been noted at Gwithian in Cornwall and on the Somerset uplands (Aston 1985, 122). Anglo-Saxon charters of the 10th - 11th centuries often contain references to furrows and headlands. Sometimes, these can be located on modern maps and associated with modern parish boundaries, which remain in the same place as Anglo-Saxon boundaries. A charter of AD 903 concerning boundaries at Compton Beauchamp in the Vale of the White Horse, refers to the boundary travelling along two furrows and over a headland (Hooke1998, 126), indicating that the furrow were already a permanent fixture in the landscape at this time.

However, dating individual systems without historic sources is problematic as it generally relies on the dating of features cut into or crossing the field system, therefore, proving the ridge and furrow to be earlier. For example, at Hen Domen, the early timber-framed motte and bailey castle built in AD 1070 was constructed directly over ridge and furrow.

There are also suggestions that ridge and furrow has a much older origin and may date from the Iron Age. Ridges lying around a deserted settlement on Haystack Hill on the Cheviot Hills of Northumberland, are said to 'respect' dated Iron Age landscape features, including boundary ditches, dykes and hut circles, suggesting that the ridges were formed when the features were still in use (Adams 1996), although, it is difficult to see how the Iron–Age and medieval forms can be related. If this were the case, then surely there would be expanses of ridge and furrow readily dateable to the intermediate Roman period. Perhaps the term 'ridge and furrow' confuses questions of development, as the simple act of ploughing will create a ridge and a furrow, although some forms are more distinct than others. The long straight narrow plough ridges that appear to be earlier than the laying out of the Bronze Age stone circle of Mitchell's Fold, near Chirbury in Shropshire, clearly differ in form from the wide

reverse ‘S’ profile of the medieval ridge and furrow that swathe the landscape across the clay soils of the midland counties. Earlier medieval (Anglo-Saxon) ridge and furrow, seems to have been narrower (Taylor 1975), as does a further type of ridge and furrow created by the Victorian steam plough, which formed long narrow straight and uniform ridges (Hall 1982).

This report is not the place for commentary on the social aspects of the common field system and ridge and furrow agriculture. However, it is easy to see that, whilst the theory of co-operative farming sounds commendable, this type of common farming must have had social implications at a local level. For example, where a farmer with more than one male heir died, the lands may have had to be split, creating smaller holdings. This was usually overcome by ‘impartial inheritance’, where the lands would be passed entirely to the eldest son (Taylor 1975). Also, the fact that the farmers were allocated land by the lord of the manor, meant that they were indelibly tied to the land and the feudal system that developed through into the middle ages.

The ridge and furrow at Holt appears to have extended almost to the boundary of the castle, though it may have also encroached upon the park at sometime; ridge and furrow (SMR No. 7583 and SMR 8536) is recorded within the pale park at Cradley, West Midlands (SMR No. 2713) and it may have often been that the limits of parks expanded and contracted according to the economic situation of the owners (Mercian Archaeology 2007).

The lack of other archaeological features at the site is unlikely to be due to removal of evidence by the medieval ploughing, as the machining for the current project removed ridges to reveal nothing below. It can therefore be assumed that pre-medieval activity was concentrated elsewhere in the area, as attested by the data contained in the Worcestershire Historic Environment Record, as outlined above.

6. Conclusion

The results of the archaeological work demonstrated that there were no archaeological deposits or features within the evaluated area that dated to earlier than the medieval period. Medieval features were limited to the denuded remains of ridge and furrow agriculture, which was detected in two of the three trenches, oriented approximately north-west to south-east.

7. Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank the clients Richard and Nicky Harper for their help and hospitality. Thanks are also due to Laura Griffin for her comments on the finds, Oliver Russell of Worcestershire Historic Environment and Archaeology Service for undertaking the Historic Environment Record search, Mike Glyde, Planning Archaeologist, Worcestershire County Council and the staff of Worcester Records Office.

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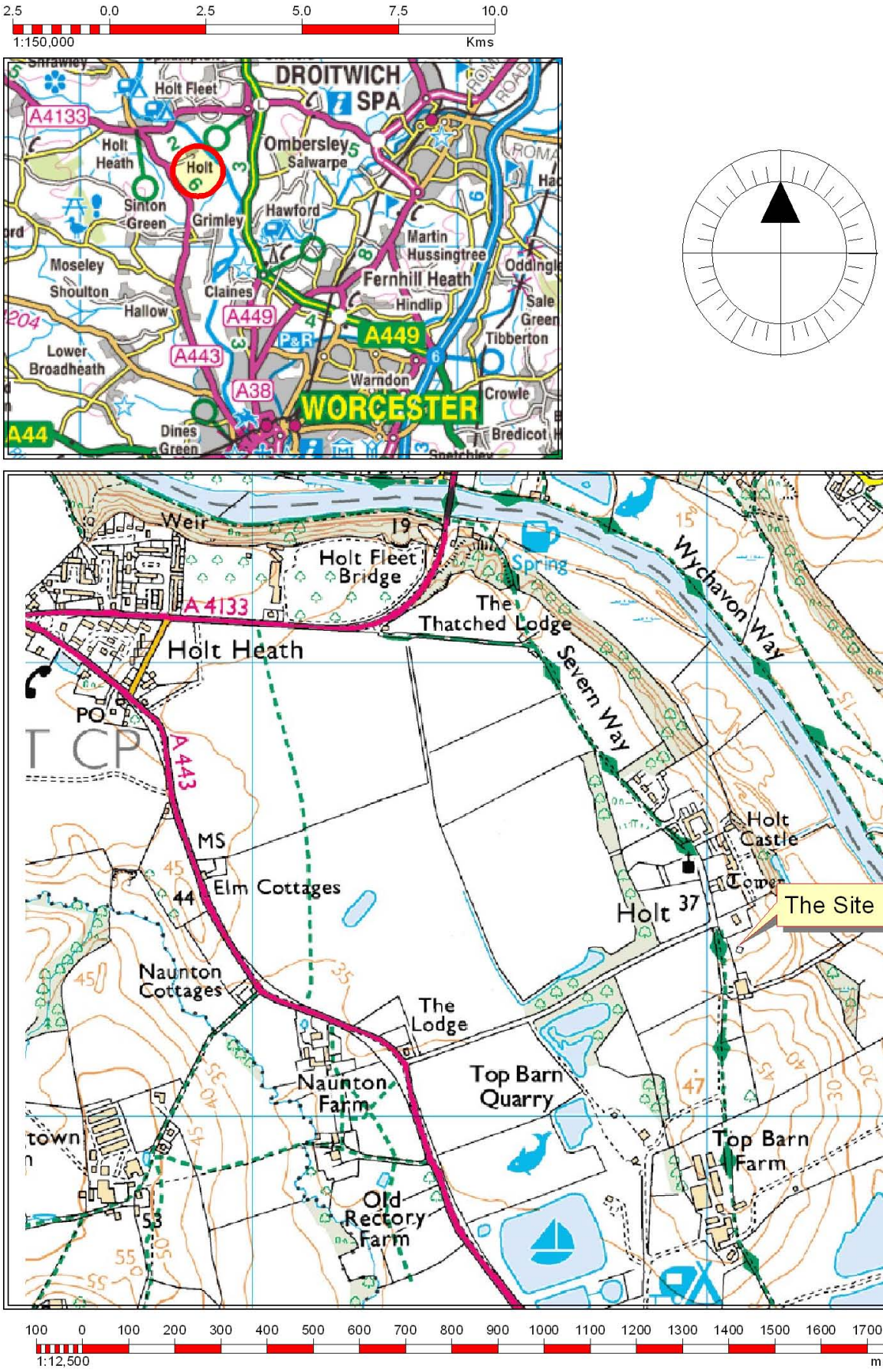
Plate 1: The site looking south-east

Plate 2: The site looking north-west

Plate 3: Ridge and furrow in Trench 1 looking south-east (Scales 1-metre)

Plate 4: The ridge profile in Trench 1 (Scales 1-metre)

Figure 1: Location of the Site



Location of the site at Castle Farm, Holt, Worcestershire

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Figure 2: 2nd Edition Ordnance Survey (1903)

The 2nd edition Ordnance Survey map with the approximate site location shown

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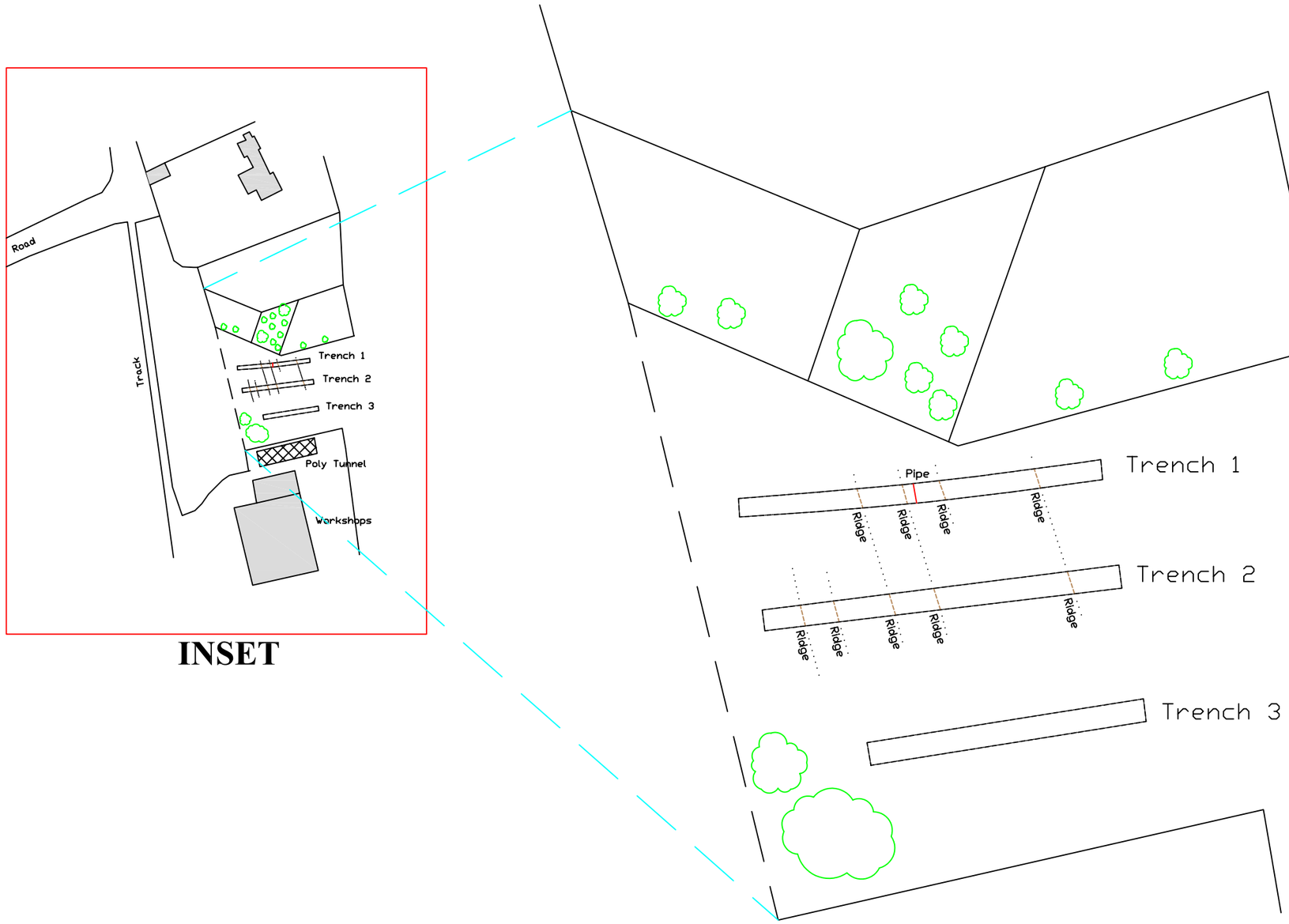

Figure 3: Trench Location Plan