


**An archaeological watching brief at
The Manor, Donington Le Heath
Coalville, Leicestershire
SK 422 127**

Mathew Morris

For: Leicestershire County Council

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An archaeological watching brief at The Manor, Donington Le Heath Coalville, Leicestershire (SK 422 127)

Mathew Morris

Summary

An archaeological watching brief was carried out at The Manor, Donington Le Heath, Coalville, Leicestershire (SK 422 127) between 5th and 12th November 2007 by University of Leicester Archaeological Services. The work was carried out on behalf of Leicestershire County Council and involved the observation and inspection of hand-excavated electrical service trenches within the grounds of the Manor. The results of the investigation revealed Victorian truncation close to the manor house, otherwise the outcome was negative. The site archive will be held by Leicestershire County Council Museum Services under the accession number X.A.233.2007.

1. Introduction

This document provides details of the results of an archaeological watching-brief at The Manor House, Donington Le Heath, Leicestershire (SK 422 127). The work was undertaken on behalf of Leicestershire County Council by University of Leicester Archaeological Services between 5th and 12th November 2007.

The proposed construction of new external lighting was located within the grounds of the Manor House north of the surviving manorial complex on the corner of Manor Road in Donington Le Heath – located approximately 1km south of Coalville town centre (*figure 1*). This watching-brief was concerned with the excavation of electrical service trenches running from the site's north-east corner, south-west then south towards the manor house. These approximately followed the line of the existing paths providing access from the car-park to the buildings (*figure 2*).

The watching brief was requested by Leicestershire County Council's Historic and Natural Environment Team in their capacity as archaeological advisors to North-West Leicestershire District Council as specified in their *Brief for archaeological attendance for inspection and recording (a watching brief)*, in accordance with Planning Policy Guidelines 16 (PPG16, Archaeology and planning), para.30.

2. Geology

The Ordnance Survey Geological Survey of Great Britain, Sheet 155 indicates that the underlying geology is likely to consist of Middle Pleistocene glaciofluvial sands and gravels capped with glacial boulder clay to the north. These overlay deposits of Triassic mudstone belonging to the Mercia Mudstone Group. The site lies at a height of c.35m above Ordnance Datum.

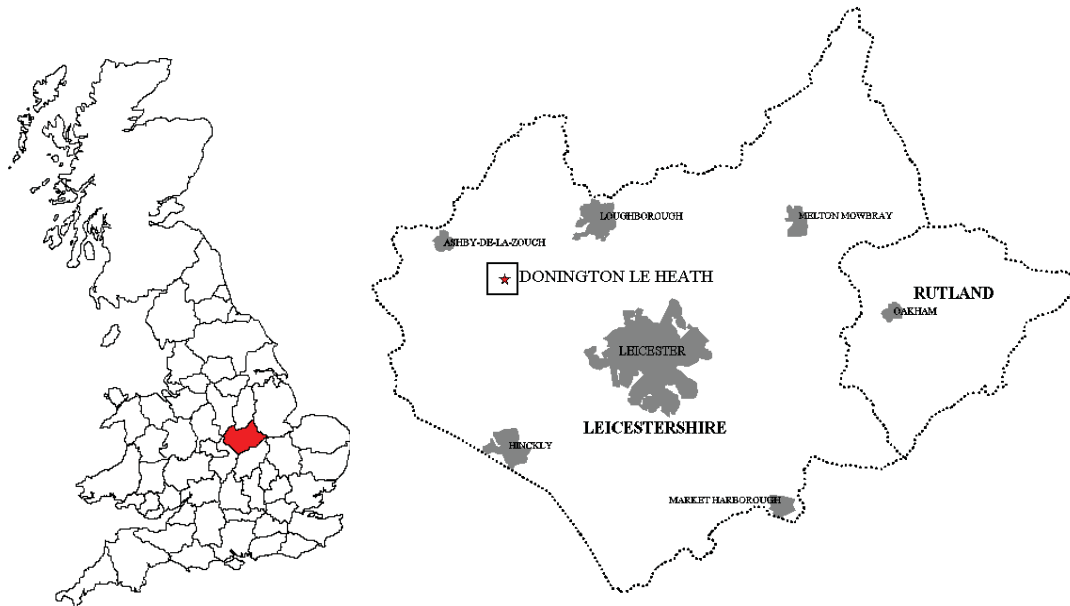


Figure 1: Location plans with development area highlighted

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3. Historical and Archaeological Background

The present Manor House is believed to date to the late 13th century, tree-ring dating fixing some of the timbers within the building to between AD 1288 and 1295. This probably means it was built by Robert de Herle following his purchase of the manor in AD 1293. Donington Le Heath is also mentioned as a *vil* during the Domesday Survey (AD 1086) and had possibly already become a manor before the 13th century. The manor was extensively renovated during the early 17th century by John Digby, younger brother of Sir Everard Digby, executed in 1606 for his role in the Gunpowder Plot, who had also owned the manor. During its later life, the Manor House became a tenant farm before finally becoming derelict. It was scheduled as an ancient

monument in 1963 and in 1965 it was acquired by Leicestershire County Council who began its restoration. It finally opened to the public as a museum in 1973 (Leicestershire County Council).

As part of the 1965-1972 restoration, a small archaeological excavation was carried out to assess the survival of medieval levels adjacent to the Manor House prior to new surfaces being laid. This uncovered extensive modern disturbance down to natural subsoils and evidence of modern underpinning of the standing walls (Dornier, 1971/2, 24). An evaluation carried out prior to restoration of the gardens in 1993 uncovered medieval walls and cobble surfaces to the south of the building and further modern disturbance and the footings of a barn demolished during the 1960s to the west (Connor, 1994, 174). The most recent archaeological work carried out on the site was a watching brief conducted during the construction of paths along the northern and eastern sides of the building in 2000. This uncovered a slate scatter with associated 13th-14th century ridge tile to the north and late 19th-20th century cobbling to the east (Liddle, 2001, 142).

4. Archaeological Objectives

The principle objectives of the watching brief were:

- To identify the presence or absence of any archaeological deposits.
- To establish the character, extent and date range for any archaeological deposits to be affected by the proposed ground works.
- To excavate and record any archaeological deposits to be affected by the ground works.
- To produce an archive and report of any results.

5. Methodology

The project required a professional archaeologist to supervise all groundwork likely to impact upon any archaeological remains.

The work involved the inspection and recording of hand-excavated trenches extending north from the north-west and north-east corners of the manor house to connect with a trench running approximately east-west extending towards the car-park in the property's north-east corner (*figure 2*). These trenches were no greater than 0.3m wide, 0.4-0.5m deep and were, in total, c.97.5m in length. They were excavated parallel with the existing paths, offset 0.5m to the north and west. Along the western length, three short branches, 6m apart, extended east to connect with the path. These were dug to similar dimensions to the main trench. A further seven branches, spaced 8m apart, extended south from the east-west length.

All work followed the *Institute of Field Archaeologists (IFA) Code of Conduct* and adhered to their *Standard and Guidance for Archaeological Watching Briefs* and the *Guidelines for Archaeological Work in Leicestershire and Rutland (LMARS)*.

6. Results (*figure 2, 3 and 4*)

The majority of the exposed sub-surface makeup within all lengths of the service trench was very compact mid-brownish orange sandy clay subsoil containing very

frequent pebble inclusions (approximately 25%) situated just 0.1-0.2m beneath ground surface and directly sealed by topsoil/turf. This material was very clean with no evidence of human disturbance and was deemed to be natural in origin. It was noted that land to the north, curving round to the west, terraced down before reaching the paths mirrored by the service trenches. This created a drop of 0.5-1m only disappearing to the east where the path rose to meet it. To the south the ground was flat as if levelled during an unknown phase of landscaping and it is possible any archaeological features may have been removed during this work.

Only three areas of the work produced results differing from this sequence of natural beneath topsoil/turf. At the southern end of the eastern and western north-south trenches, shallow cuts, c0.45-0.5m deep, were observed cut into the subsoil (*figure 2*). The northern edge of these was present in both trenches but the other three sides extended to the south, east and west beyond the edge of excavation. The cuts were both filled with a very dark brownish-grey sandy silt containing stone, pebbles, grit, charcoal, broken brick, glass, clay pipe and Victorian china. The backfill within the western truncation capped further thin fills of charcoal and ash. The third area of difference was a spread of soft dark greyish-brown silty soil, 0.2m thick, capping the subsoil beneath the topsoil/turf (*figure 2*). The western edge of this began c.25m north of the Manor House's north-east corner and spread 11m to the east. It contained six sherds of late 18th century earthenware and modern stoneware weighing 164g (pers. comm. D. Sawday and which was discarded after identification) and appeared to be present only over the rising terraced ground.

7. Discussion

No significant archaeological features were noted during the watching brief. The Victorian truncation adjacent to the north-east and north-west corners of the Manor House is similar to observations made by Dornier (1971/2), Connor (1994) and Liddle (2001) during previous archaeological work on the site and the later 18th century soil possibly relates to undated landscaping to the north of the house.

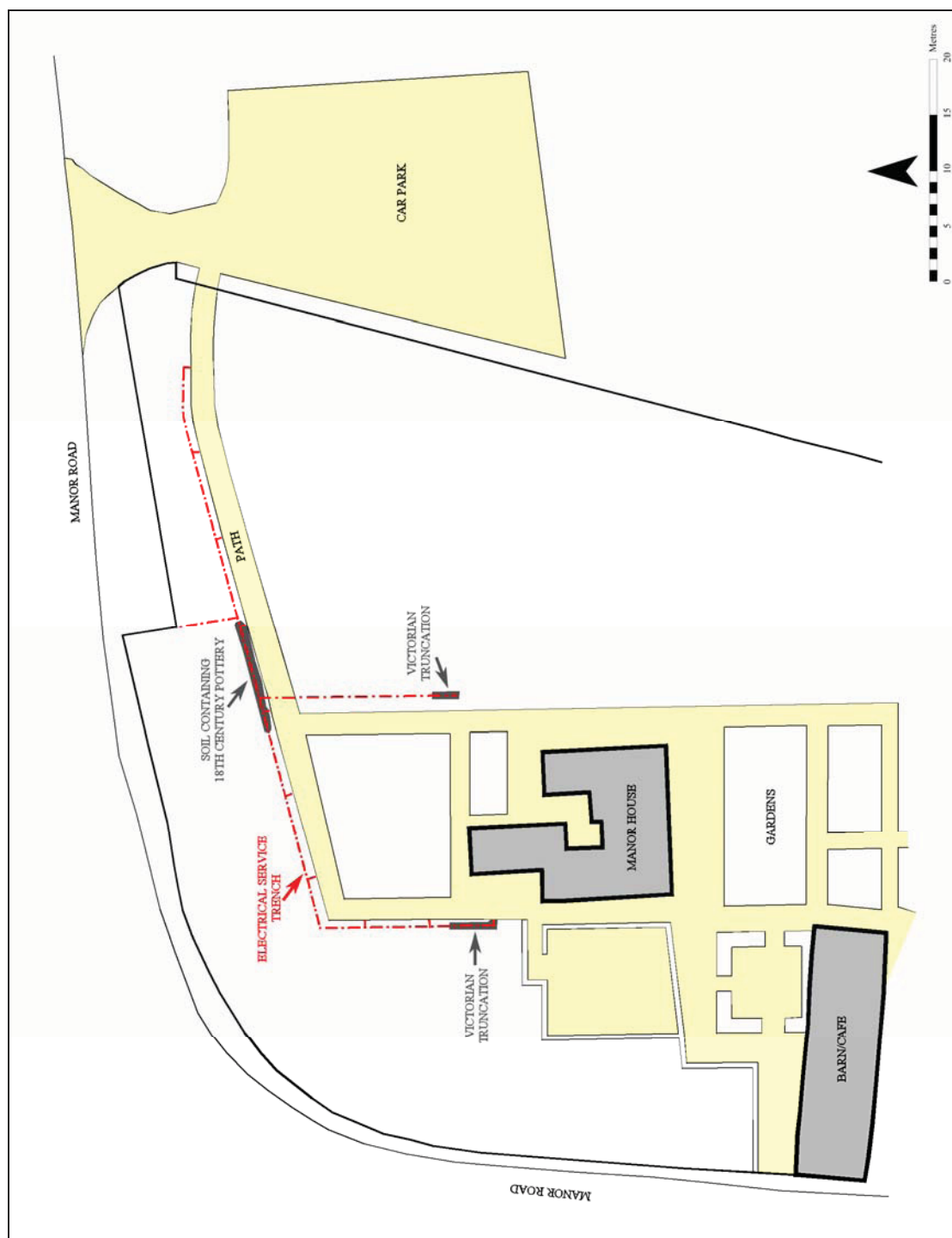


Figure 2: Plan of the Manor grounds showing the location of the service trench and exposed features
Figure adapted from image provided by client.



Figure 3: General view of the site, looking south-east, showing the excavation of the western north-south trench.



Figure 4: View of western north-south trench, looking south. the subsoil can be seen in the foreground whilst the darker soil to the back represents the Victorian truncation.

8. Sources

Connor, A 1994 note in 'Archaeology in Leicestershire and Rutland 1993' in *Transactions of the Leicestershire Archaeological and Historical Society*, **68**, 174

Dornier, A 1971/2 "Donington Le Heath" in *Transactions of the Leicestershire Archaeological and Historical Society* **47**, 22-42

Leicestershire County Council *The History of Donington-le-Heath Manor House*
http://www.leics.gov.uk/print/donington_le_heath_history_of_the_house (11/12/07)

Liddle, P 2001 note in 'Archaeology in Leicestershire and Rutland 2000' in *Transactions of the Leicestershire Archaeological and Historical Society* **75**, 142

9. Archive

The site archive consists of 11 digital photographs, 6 watching brief recording forms and an annotated plan. The archive will be held by Leicestershire County Council Museum Services under the accession number X.A233.2007.

10. Acknowledgements

Thanks to the staff of Donington Le Heath Manor House and the contractors, A & J Bartlett Limited, for their co-operation and assistance on site. Fieldwork was undertaken by Mathew Morris. The project was managed by Richard Buckley.

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