

Earthworks in The Grove, Harrow-on-the-Hill

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THE GROVE IS the present name for a small area of woodland on the north side of Harrow Hill, directly beneath Harrow church (Fig. 1). The wood is on the side of the hill (TQ 154 876), the western end of which is very steep. The trees in the wood vary from old established specimens to recently seeded saplings. Masters at Harrow School, which owns this land, have commented that much of the overgrown nature of the wood is of recent occurrence, within the last ten years or so. Within The Grove are two large linear banks which join to form a substantial single bank at a point approximately 90m (300ft) west of some modern tennis courts. The northernmost of these two banks forms an almost straight east-west line, with the more southerly bank branching off from it at a point about half way along its length. This second bank heads off in a south-easterly direction for about 70m (230ft) before curving round in a south-westerly direction to enclose a hollow depression that continues to follow the line of the more northerly bank on its south side to the west of the point where the two banks meet (Fig. 4). These earthworks have all the superficial appearances of containing fishponds, but the location of such a site, half way up a steep hill, requires explanation if such an interpretation is to be acceptable.

History

The present school house, also known as *The Grove*, which overlooks the site on the south side, is believed to stand on the site of the Rectory Manor, one of the former demesne manors of the Archbishop of Canterbury within the modern Borough of Harrow. It would not have been unusual for such a site to have appurtenances such as fishponds attached to it. Hill top sites, however, would not normally be considered as ideal for constructing fishponds.

Nevertheless, there are mentions of ponds in the 'manor of Harrow', normally associated with the Rectory Manor, in 1323 when an *oyer and terminer* was issued against the persons who 'broke' the Archbishop's parks and 'fished in his stews at Harewe' without consent¹. There is further evidence for stews being present at the Grove in a document of 1554 when it is stated that 100 carp were taken from the 'Harrow Well'².

Curiously the Rectory Manor was leased to Thomas Wriothesley in 1537. Wriothesley was particularly interested in fish rearing and it may be no small coincidence that he acquired, in that same year, the extensive fishponds of the former Premonstratensian Abbey of Titchfield in Hampshire. He is known to have planned to have these ponds stocked with carp with the intention of breeding them and selling them commercially³. The coincidence is even more striking when one considers that carp were believed to have only been introduced into this country in the 15th century and that it was still a fairly uncommon fish by the middle of the 16th century⁴. Taking his evidence from the Journals of Prior More of Worcester, Hickling has suggested that their introduction had only been on a small scale and essentially for experimental purposes by the 1530s⁵. The mention of Harrow having carp within the manor is therefore noteworthy. Whether or not it was directly due to the Wriothesley connection is uncertain as it can be assumed that the Archbishops, being leading clerics expected to set an example, would have been active fish keepers in the medieval period.

In 1645 a survey of the Rectory manor house mentions that it has attached to it 'a grove' and 'stocked fishponds'⁶. Furthermore in 1671 the occupiers of the Rectory are noted as having 'rights of ingress and egress for themselves, servants, carts

1. Patent Rolls 1321-4, 373.

2. VCH, iv, 172n.

3. C. Currie 'Interim report, excavations at Titchfield Abbey 1984' *Hants Field Club Newsletter* new ser. no. 3 (Spring 1985).

4. C. Currie 'Carp beginnings' *Carp Fisher* (Journal of the Carp Society) 7 (1984) 64-7.

5. C. F. Hickling 'Prior More's Fishponds' *Medieval Archaeol* 15 (1971) 118-123.

6. J. Golland 'The Grove', notes presented to the Archaeological Society of Harrow School (1977).

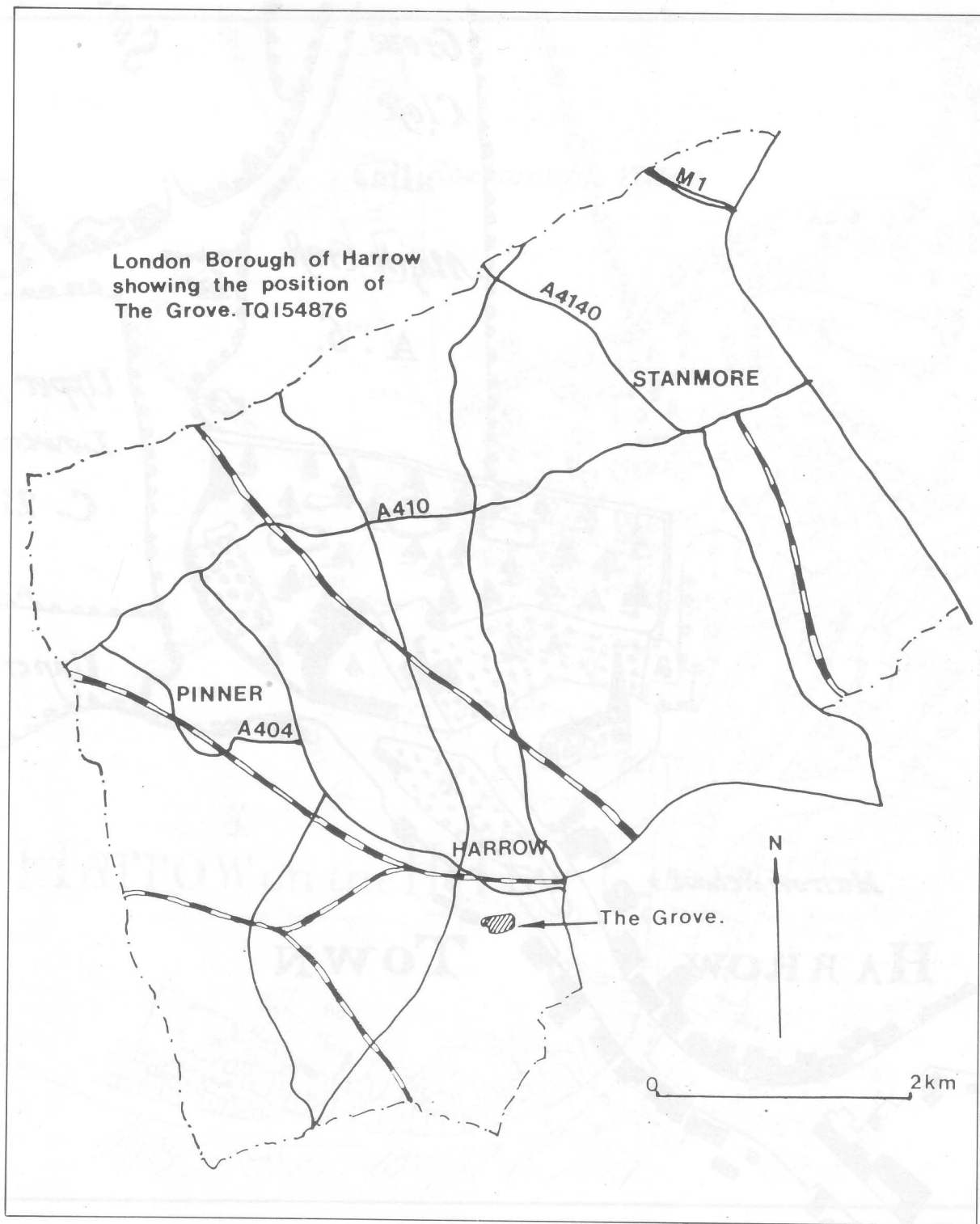


Fig. 1: London Borough of Harrow, showing location of The Grove.

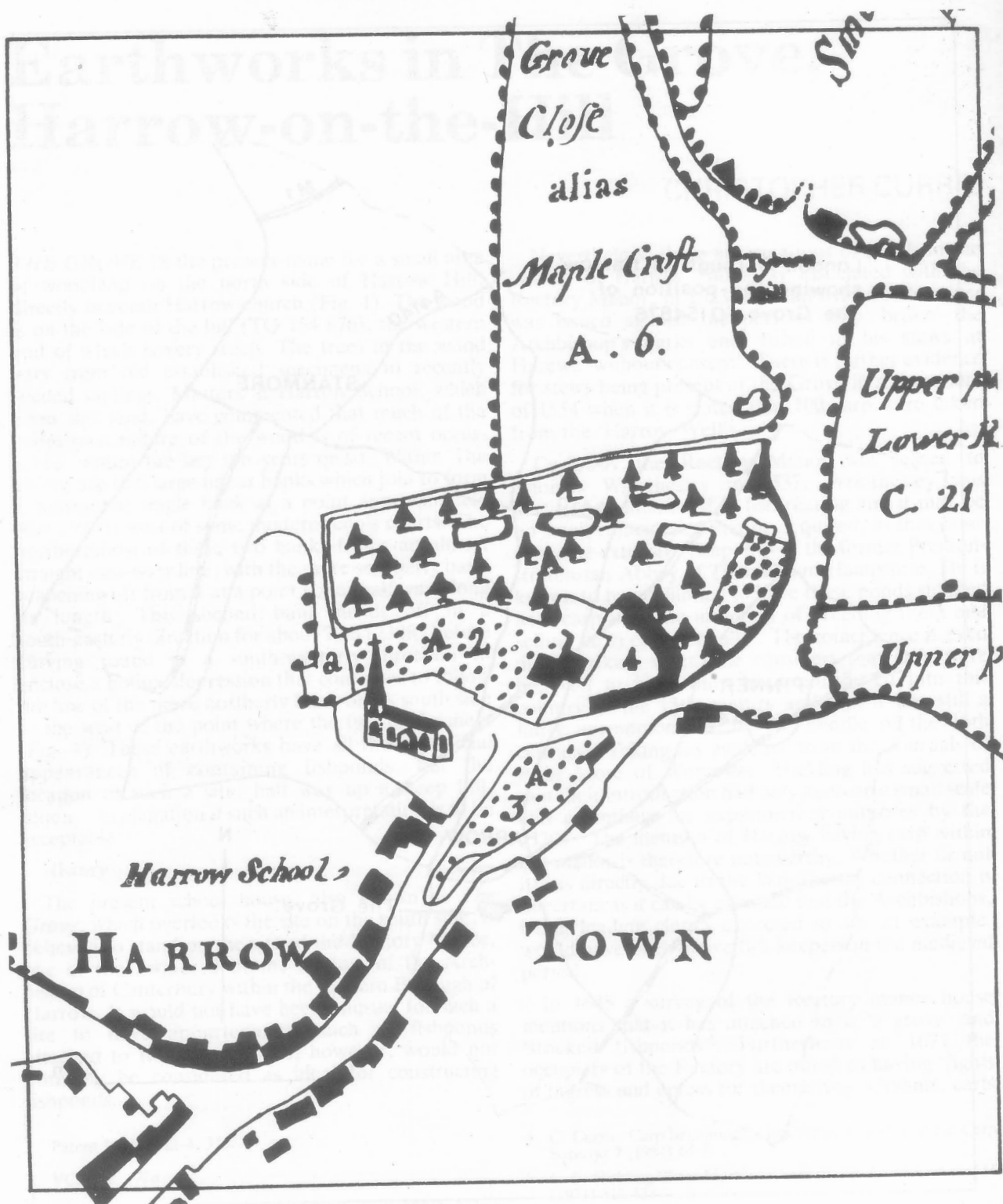


Fig. 2: Messeder's map of Harrow, 1759, showing fishponds at The Grove.

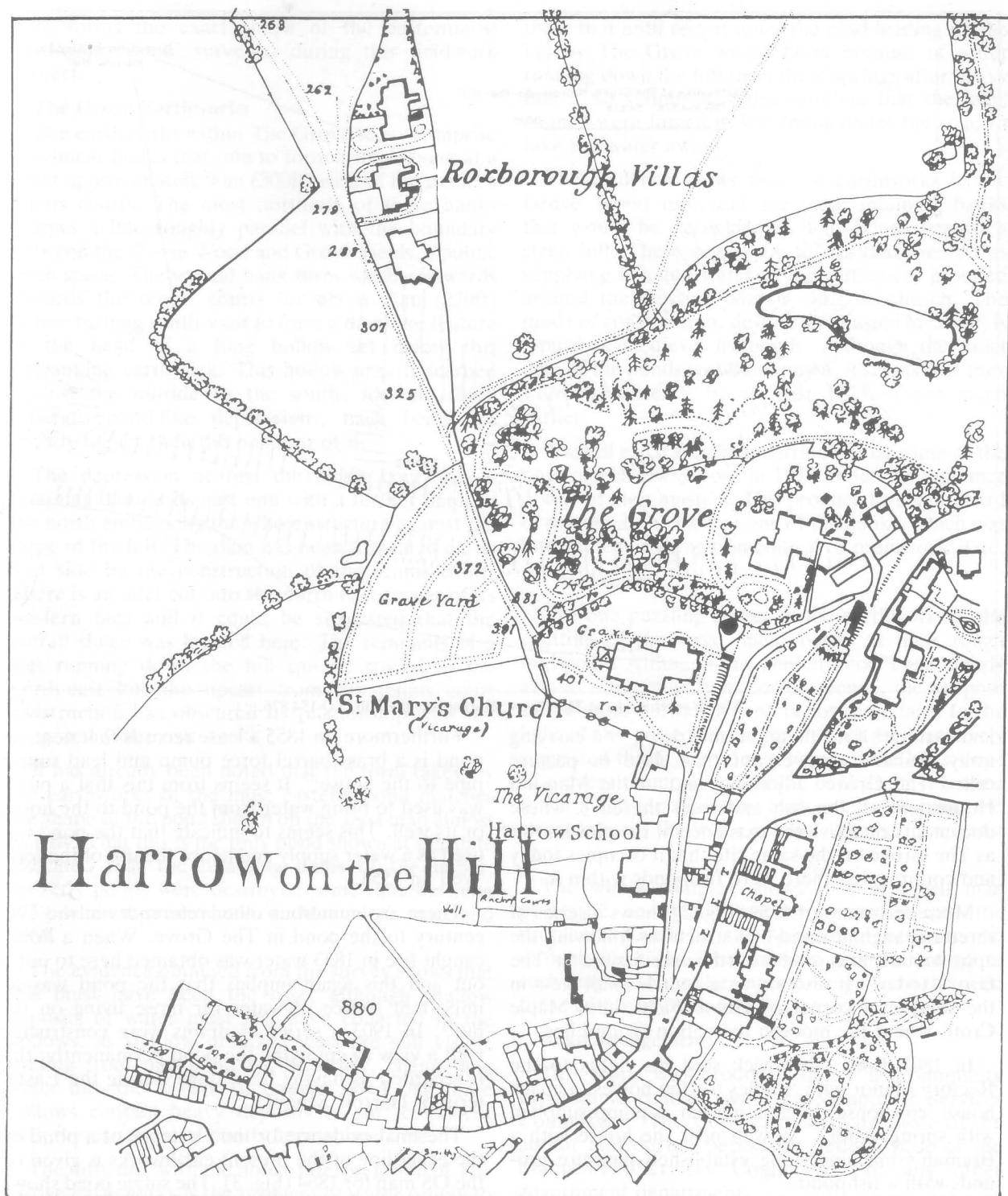


Fig. 3: the 25" O.S. map of 1864, showing The Grove fishpond.

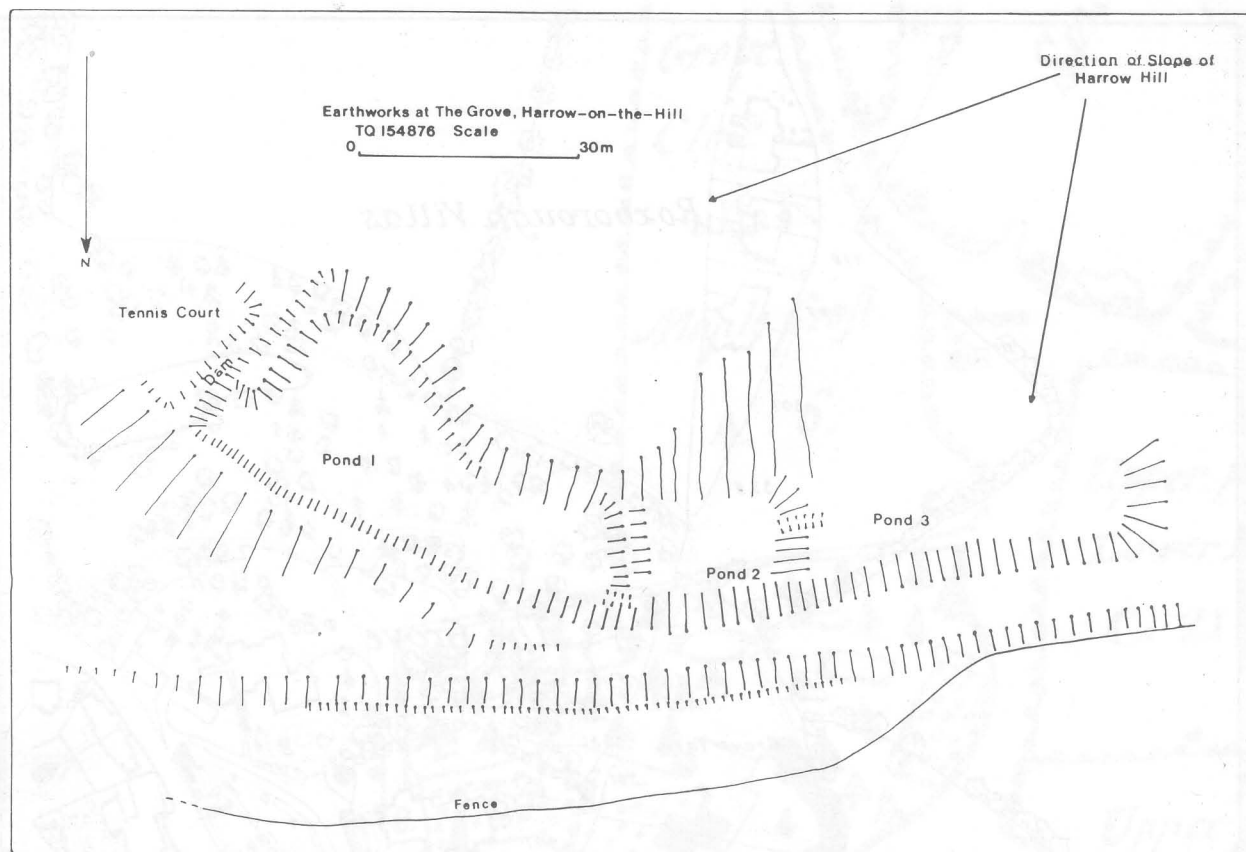


Fig. 4: earthworks at The Grove, Harrow-on-the-Hill, TQ 154 876.

and carriages for felling, cutting down and carrying away timbers trees except that close or pasture called The Grove, adjoining next to the Mansion House and all the fish and trees therein⁷. These documents establish the existence of the plot known as The Grove on the same site that it occupies today and confirm that there were fishponds within it.

Messeder's map of 1759 (Fig. 2) shows a series of three rectangular pond-like structures following the approximate line of the earthworks visible in The Grove today⁸. It also shows a fourth small stew in the south-east corner of Grove Field, alias Maple Croft, where the modern recreation ground lies.

In 1807 Lord Northwick sold his rights to the Rectory Manor with 'stables for ten horses, a coach house, cowhouse, kitchen garden, a pump supplied with spring water ... a well near the house with a Bramah's machine, long established pleasure grounds with a fishpond...'⁹.

7. GLRO 76/201.

8. GLRO 643/2nd deposit.

9. See fn. 6.

Furthermore, in 1855 a lease records that near the pond is a brass barrel force pump and lead supply pipe to the house¹⁰. It seems from this that a pump was used to bring water from the pond to the house or its well. This seems to indicate that the pond was used as a water supply and hence the use of the term 'well' in 1554.

There are numerous other references in the 19th century to the pond in The Grove. When a house caught fire in 1833 water was obtained here to put it out and this again implies that the pond was an important source of water for those living on the hill¹¹. In 1903 a series of drains were constructed with a view to emptying the pond permanently; this is recorded as having been done during the Easter term of Harrow School.

The final evidence for the existence of a pond on the exact line of the present earthworks is given on the OS map for 1864 (Fig. 3). The single pond shown

10. *Ibid.*

11. *Ibid.*

here forms the exact shape of the easternmost earthwork 'pond' surveyed during this fieldwork project.

The Grove Earthworks

The earthworks within The Grove today comprise two linear banks that join to form a single bank at a point approximately 90m (300ft) west of the modern tennis courts. The most northerly of these banks follows a line roughly parallel with the boundary between the Grove Wood and Grove Fields, a public open space. The second bank turns south-eastwards towards the tennis courts for about 70m (230ft) before turning south-west to form a dam-like feature at the head of a long hollow set below this embanking earthwork. This hollow area is scarped against the hillside to the south, forming three separate pond-like depressions, each being set slightly higher than the one east of it.

The depression nearest the tennis court has a retaining dam at its east end with a further bank to the north embanking the whole structure against the slope of the hill. The dam has been truncated on its east side by the construction of the tennis court. There is an inlet cut into the north-east corner of its western face and it could be suggested that the outfall sluice was located here. The remnants of a leet running down the hill can be traced to the north-east but the upcast from the tennis court construction has obscured its relationship with the supposed sluice exit.

It has already been noted that the form taken by the earthworks of the most easterly pond matches the shape of the pond shown on the 1864 map almost exactly. That this is the only pond shown at this date indicated that the retaining dams of the upper, westerly ponds were destroyed some time between 1759, when they are shown on Messeder's map, and 1864.

The evidence obtained from the survey shows that this must have been the case, although shallow deposits of water must still have collected in the hollows, as shallow drainage leets are still visible leading from one pond to the other, channelling water into the lowest, or eastern pond. All three hollows contain heavy deposits of silt, consistent with the existence of ponds here at one time.

The difficulty with the above interpretation of The Grove earthworks is the problem of water supply to the ponds. This is explained by the existence, even to this day, of spring lines on the hill. So prolific are

these that until recent times the road leading up the hill by The Grove would flood because of water running down the hill from these springs after heavy rain¹². So serious was this problem that the local council were forced to lay drains under the road to take the water away.

The evidence shows that the earthworks in the Grove Wood represent the large retaining banks that would be necessary to hold ponds against a steep hill. These ponds are amply documented as supplying fish and water to the settlement grouped around the Rectory Manor and the church. The mode of construction, despite its unusual location, is typical of medieval fishponds. Although the exact date of the ponds is still unknown, it seems that they were in existence by at least 1323, if not much earlier.

A small excavation was carried out by some of the boys of Harrow School in 1977 under the guidance of one of their masters. This produced a single sherd of pottery at the base of one of the banks, which was interpreted as being of medieval or prehistoric date.

Conclusion

The one puzzling aspect of the earthworks is the splitting of the large linear banks at their rough mid-point. Although the southernmost bank clearly acts as a retaining bank for the ponds, the purpose of the more northerly bank is not so certain. In the light of the present evidence, it must be tentatively suggested that it served as a break in the hill's slope to prevent the pond's retaining bank from subsiding down a hillside that may have otherwise been too steep to resist the water pressure on the uppermost bank.

The whole complex shows that medieval man possessed no mean engineering insight into the problems posed by the 'pounding' of water in difficult locations. That he was prepared to go to such lengths shows the importance given to the need for a supply of fresh fish.

Acknowledgements

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12. Harrow School Estates Bursar, *pers. comm.*