

# birmingham archaeology

Aston Hall, Aston,  
Birmingham:

An Archaeological Watching Brief  
of the Privy Gardens, 2006

Project No. 1478

**Aston Hall, Aston, Birmingham:  
An Archaeological Watching Brief of the Privy Gardens, 2006**

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## **Aston Hall, Aston, Birmingham: An Archaeological Watching Brief of the Privy Gardens, 2006**

### **SUMMARY**

*An archaeological watching brief was carried out at Aston Hall, Aston, Birmingham (NGR SO 078 899) in July 2006 by Birmingham Archaeology (BA). The work was commissioned by Birmingham City Council and Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery and consisted of the excavation of two machine-dug trial trenches and two hand-dug test pits in a car parking area immediately to the south of the hall. Further information was required concerning the provenance and construction history of the southern and eastern retaining walls of the former Privy Gardens in order to inform design proposals for their reinstatement. These gardens were situated on a terrace to the south of the hall and overlook landscaped pleasure grounds and an access route to the hall immediately on their eastern side. Excavation revealed that the wall had been modified on several occasions, most recently when the car park was constructed, presumably at some point in the later half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The lower brick courses of the original wall footing were laid in English Garden Wall bond, and were built off sandstone foundations. This design is similar to that of the hall and parts of the northern service range that have been investigated previously. Subsequently the wall was underpinned and strengthened with concrete foundations.*

### **1 INTRODUCTION**

An archaeological watching brief was undertaken by Birmingham Archaeology at Aston Hall, Aston, Birmingham (NGR SO 078 899) in July 2006 on behalf of Birmingham City Council and Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery. The watching brief was carried out during the excavation of four test pits located against the former southern and eastern retaining walls of the Privy Gardens which were situated to the south of the main hall. A total of 18 window samples and a programme of dynamic probe tests were also carried out at various locations within the grounds. These were not to be monitored, but a summary report on these is included in the project archive.

No specific brief was prepared for this phase of archaeological work as it falls within a much broader programme of works involved with the on-going refurbishment of the hall and gardens. However, the work was carried out on the recommendation of Dr. Mike Hodder, Planning Archaeologist, Birmingham City Council and was undertaken in accordance with the guidelines set out in the Institute of Field Archaeologists *Standards and Guidance for Archaeological Watching Briefs* (Institute of Field Archaeologists 1999).

## **2 SITE LOCATION (FIG.1)**

Aston Hall is located in inner city Birmingham to the west of Spaghetti Junction and the A38(M), Lichfield Road, which passes the front of the house at a distance of approximately 500 metres (Fairclough 1984). The former Privy Gardens were situated immediately to the south of the main hall.

## **3 ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT**

A thorough history of Aston Hall is provided in Fairclough (1984) and the following is a summarised version only. Aston Hall is a Grade 1 Listed Jacobean Building with a surrounding Grade II Listed park. It was built by Sir Thomas Holte, whose family had gained possession of the manor of Aston in 1367. The Holte family resided in Duddeston until they moved to Aston in 1631 and took up residence in the newly built hall, where they remained for almost two hundred years. The Holte family was much involved in the administration of the county of Warwickshire during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, fulfilling such offices as High Sheriff and Justice of the Peace. However, with the growth of Birmingham as a great manufacturing and industrial centre their influence began to wane, although in 1774, Sir Charles Holte, the last of the line, was elected as an MP for Warwickshire. In 1817 the house was sold and then leased in 1819 by James Watt Junior, a son of the famous engineer. In 1858, the Hall and part of its parkland was opened to the public by Queen Victoria and it has remained a public park ever since.

Previous archaeological work at Aston Hall has included watching briefs, trial excavations, building analysis and landscape survey carried out between 1999 and 2002. In addition a set-piece excavation was conducted on the former service range situated in the Stable Courtyard to the north of the hall.

## **4 AIMS**

The objective of the watching brief was to provide a record of any archaeological deposits or features encountered during excavations which would assist in the clarification of the developmental history of the site. Groundworks were monitored in order to record the location, extent, quality and significance of any archaeological remains encountered.

## **5 METHOD**

Two trial pits measuring 2.00m x 1.00m and two test pits measuring 0.60m x 0.50m were excavated. Trial Pits 1 and 2 were excavated using a mechanical digger, and Test Pits 3 and 4 were excavated by hand. A breaker was used on the concrete kerb foundation located in Trial Pit 1 for the initial stage of excavation.

All below ground works were monitored by a suitably qualified archaeologist. All archaeological deposits were recorded using pro forma context and feature cards and monochrome and colour

print photography. For health and safety reasons sketch drawings were made from the top of each trench due to their excessive depth and narrow profile. This record forms the site archive, which is currently stored at Birmingham Archaeology.

## 6 RESULTS (FIG. 2)

### 6.1 Trial Pit 1

Trial Pit 1 was dug back from the west-facing side of the eastern retaining wall to a depth of 2m. At the base of the excavations was a clean orange-red sand (1004). Not enough of this deposit was investigated to sure whether this may have naturally weathered from the sandstone bedrock on which Aston Hall is built, or alternatively if it was redeposited material used to level the south terrace. The sandstone foundations of the retaining wall (1007) were constructed from this level and a red-brown silty layer (1003) had subsequently built up against them. Overlying this was a thick dark brown silty layer (1002) that contained brick, tile, stone and plastic and was material imported to form the car park. Cut through this layer, and bonded with the retaining wall (1005) was a concrete reinforcement (1006) measuring 1m in depth. This foundation was stepped out from the wall to a distance of 0.43m. Overlying 1005 was a bedding deposit of yellow sand (1001) for the brick pavioured car-park surface.

### 6.2 Trial Pit 2

Trial Pit 2 was dug back from the north-facing side of the southern wall to a depth of 2.4m. At the southernmost end of the trench a red brick wall (2006) was built from the natural orange-red sand horizon (2004). It survived to a height of 0.8m (or 1m beneath the modern ground surface), but its width was unclear as it was not fully exposed within the trial pit. Sealing this wall and the stepped concrete foundations of the retaining wall (2005) was a deep dark brown silty levelling layer (2003) that contained brick, tile, stone and plastic. This layer was overlain, in turn, by a pink-red stoney layer (2002), and then a grey stone bedding deposit (2001) for the tarmac car park surface.

### 6.3 Test Pits 3 and 4

Two hand dug test pits, each measuring 0.6m x 0.5m, were further excavated against the east-facing side of the eastern retaining wall of the Privy Garden. Because the ground here was much lower on this side of the wall the first of these test pits (TP 3) was only excavated to a depth of 0.6m before the clean orange sand layer (3004) was found. This was immediately overlain by a dark brown silty layer (3003), which had accumulated against the sandstone foundations of the retaining wall (3001). The foundations were 0.5m deep and upon these a red brick retaining wall (3000) was built. The second test pit (TP 4) was excavated to a depth of 0.90m below ground level and the stratigraphy was identical to TP 3.

## 7 DISCUSSION

The sandstone foundations seen in Test Pits 3 and 4 formed the base of the eastern retaining wall around the former Privy Garden. Likewise, the sandstone blocks found in Trial Pit 1 were also probably part of this original foundation, although the later concrete underpinning

obscured most of the original build. This was certainly the case in Trial Pit 2 where the concrete underpinning completely masked the original build of the southern retaining wall. The smaller wall (2006) to the south of the southern retaining wall may also have demarcated the edge of a walkway around the outside of the former Privy Gardens.

The results from Trial Pits 1 and 2 also indicted that extensive levelling had taken place on the western side of the eastern retaining wall of the former Privy Gardens, which in some places was up to at least 1.7m in depth. No evidence of earlier deposits or features was discovered during the archaeological monitoring, although because of the extensive landscaping here any possible features may either have been quarried away or are masked under the levelling material for the terrace.

## 8 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The site work was carried out by Phil Mann. This report was written by Phil Mann and edited by Steve Litherland, who also managed the project. The figures were prepared by Nigel Dodds. Chris Rice commissioned the project on behalf of Birmingham City Council, which was monitored by Dr Mike Hodder, Birmingham City Planning Archaeologist. Thanks are due to the staff of Aston Hall for their assistance and co-operation, to Peter Cox Building Contractors, who carried out the groundwork and Steve Wisham of Gifford who co-ordinated the project.

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Fig. 1



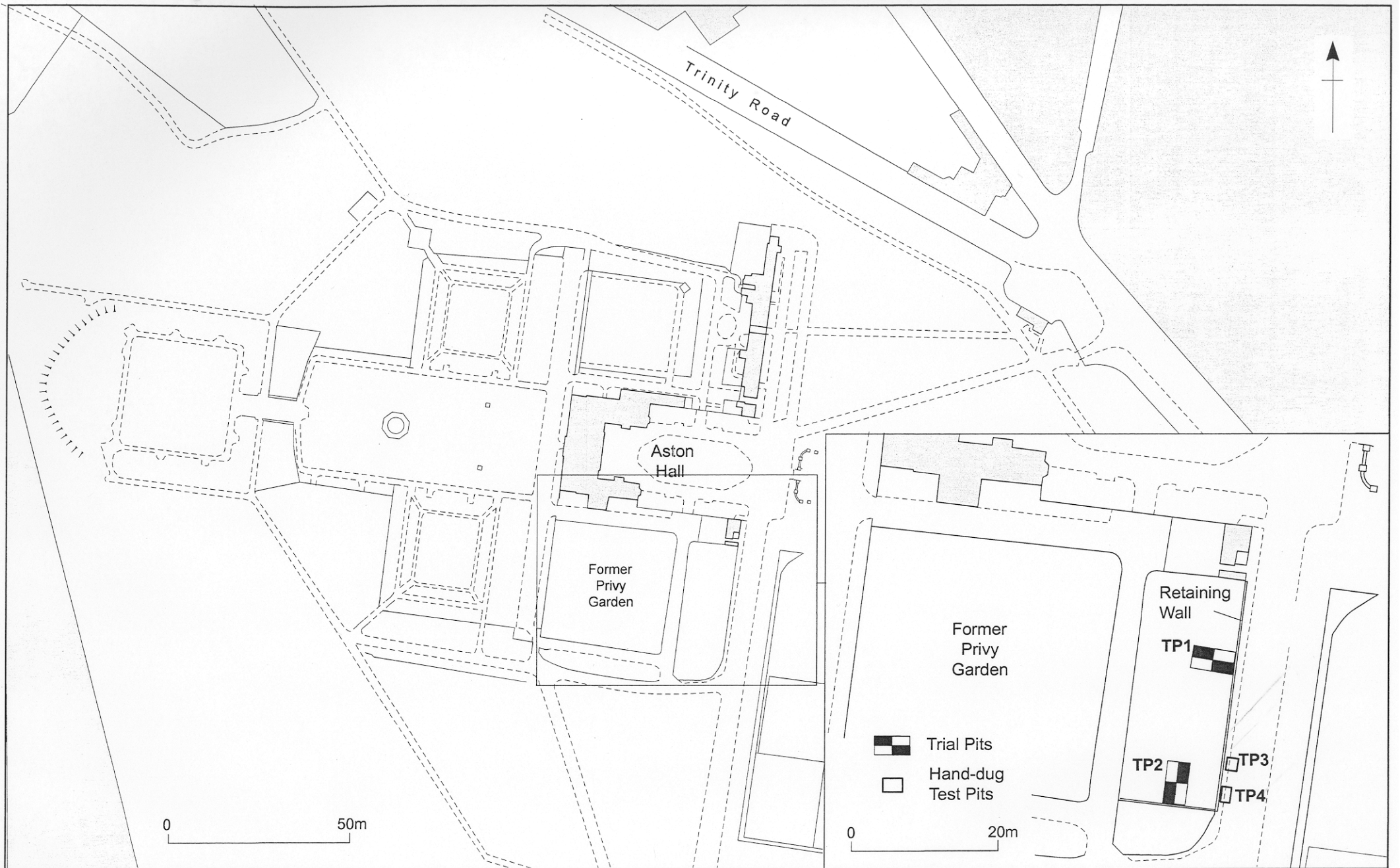


Fig.2