

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATION AT
ASCOTT PARK,
STADHAMPTON, OXFORDSHIRE

AUGUST 2009



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Archaeological excavation at Ascott Park, Oxfordshire in August 2009 showed that formal gardens had been laid out in the early eighteenth century, apparently in connection with the building of a new house, which was never brought to completion. The gardens continued in use until towards the end of the century.

INTRODUCTION

ASCOTT PARK lies approximately eight miles (12 km) south-east of Oxford, adjoining the village of Stadhampton but formerly within the parish of Great Milton. It was established as a seat of the Dormer family in the early sixteenth century and later owners created formal gardens and parkland surroundings for the buildings they erected. These included a new house that was begun by Sir William Dormer but burned down in 1662 before it was completed. Two garden structures and several historic walls survive in addition to entrance gate-piers and remnants of historic tree planting (cf. Woodward 1982, 13).

The park, centred upon NGR SU 611 981, is a nationally designated heritage asset (Monument no. 617962) and is registered Grade II under the Historic Buildings and Ancient Monuments Act 1953 within the Register of Historic Parks and Gardens by English Heritage for its special historic interest. It covers almost 40 acres or 16 hectares and is partly surrounded by a limestone wall. The modern B480 road borders it at the north, with arable fields at the west, Ascott Farm on its east, and a partly canalised stream to the south which joins the River Thame at Chiselhampton (FIG. 1).

An archaeological survey of earthworks within the park was carried out in March-May 2007 by English Heritage at the request of the Oxfordshire Buildings Trust. Analytical fieldwork showed there to be several phases of development, and related geophysical survey by Abingdon Archaeological Geophysics indicated the possible presence of formal paths and borders within individual garden parterres (Bowden and Rardin 2007; Ainslie *et al.* 2007). Limited trenching was undertaken in August 2009 in order to increase understanding of the house and garden remains that provide the landscape setting and historical context of the standing buildings that still survive at the site.

The costs of the investigation were funded by the Oxfordshire Buildings Trust with help in kind from Messrs Beards, building contractors. The work was undertaken by kind permission of the Oxfordshire County Council, who is the landowner. An important aim of the project was to involve local amateur participation as well as to incorporate training in the techniques of garden archaeology. Guided tours for visitors and special interest groups were also offered.

The success of the fieldwork owed much to the enthusiasm of individual volunteers, who were ably supervised by John Steane, former Oxfordshire County Archaeologist, and Geert Vynckier of the Flemish Heritage Institute. Special thanks are also due to Messrs

John Griffin and John Sykes of the Oxfordshire Buildings Trust for logistical and practical support, and to Mr Neil Monaghan, Head of Property, Oxfordshire County Council, for arranging access and other help. The assistance and co-operation of Mr and Mrs John Osborne, the current tenant farmer, is gratefully acknowledged, together with the interest shown by their predecessor, Mr John Godfrey and family. Mr Philip Powell, Hon. Associate Curator, Geological Collections, Oxford University Museum of Natural History kindly provided stone identifications and the late Dr Geoff Egan advised upon other finds. Other post-excavation assistance was provided by Northamptonshire Archaeology. The site archive will be deposited in the Oxfordshire County Museums Service Museum Resource Centre at Standlake, Oxon.

EXCAVATION RESULTS

Archaeological excavation took place at Ascott Park between 2-16 August 2009. In all, fourteen individual trenches were dug by hand at various places across the site (cf. FIG. 3) but for convenience of description, trenches 8, 11, 12 and 14 across the central axial path in the main parterre are considered collectively as Trench 8 and trenches 6 and 13 simply as Trench 6.

Trenches 1-4: gateway and entrance

To the visitor, passing Ascott Park along the B480 Stadhampton-Chalgrove road, the most obvious evidence of the former parkland setting are the remains of tree-lined avenues and the semicircular arrangement of stone gate-piers and masonry pillars that defines a sunken area adjacent to the southern kerbside (PL. 1). The intervening ground level appears to have been lowered by quarrying, presumably to excavate material for use in previous road building and repairs, but rises again once inside the park.

The excavation of a 1-m wide trench across the interior at the opening between the two gate-piers in the middle of the semicircle showed that there was no evidence for a made-up drive (Trench 1). Topsoil between 240-270 mm deep rested directly upon the orange-yellowish brown sandy subsoil and there was no trace of ruts or any other grooves, such as might be expected if the ground had been churned up by traffic movement or disturbed from modern ploughing. A separate sondage, 2-m square, was dug to the south in the centre of the wide space formed by the tree-avenues at either side (Trench 4). Beneath a similar depth of topsoil, it too was devoid of disturbance.

The absence of evidence for an entrance driveway at this point seems genuine therefore, so that the ornamental setting may have been intended primarily for landscape effect or to mark a vista. The main access to the property presumably continued to be along the historical route beside Piccadilly Cottage to the east, recalling the layout at places like Combermere Abbey in Cheshire (cf. Harris 1979, no. 137) and other locations where there was also lawn behind the gates (e.g. *ibid*, nos. 55, 128a-b, 148a). Indeed, chaises and other small carriages, such as were often used for driving around parkland, would have no need of metalled roads or tracks (cf. Martin 2004, 296-7).

Where investigated on the eastern side of the central opening (Trench 2), the base of the gate-pier was bonded with mortar onto a shallow limestone offset that had been laid into the subsoil. An identical arrangement was located beneath the easternmost pillar within the semicircle (Trench 3), and presumably a similar type of foundation underpins the other masonry uprights.

The walls at either side of the end pier showed a significant difference of construction between the neatly laid horizontal courses of drystone walling that head towards the semicircle and the more roughly built boundary which continues to the east (PL. 2 and FIG. 2). The well-constructed length of wall, still standing over 0.5 m tall and five courses high, had been laid directly on top of the firm subsoil and was precisely levelled off. Its style of building is typical of local 'Cotswold' technique (Garner 2005, 28-9). The later, more loosely constructed walling rested on topsoil and the poor covering and inadequate 'breaking' of joints has caused it to collapse in spite of the incorporation of substantial through stones. A similar weakness is apparent in the upper stonework and packing above the better walling and it is possible that it may have been introduced at around the same time as a repair or replacement of the previous capping, especially if earlier railings had been removed.

Both lengths of wall over-sail a backfilled pit, c. 1.60 m wide and up to 350 mm deep, which was dug to contain the two thick slabs of Wheatley Limestone that make up the pillar-foundation, with slivers of slate being used for final level adjustments. The stratigraphic relationship of the well-built wall, which begins to the west, suggests that it was coeval with the raising of the pillar and therefore intended to be part of the ornamental facade. It would appear that a different kind of boundary originally continued beyond, possibly fence paling or a hedge.

Trenches 5-7: a possible house-site and raised terrace

An earthen bank, up to 1.50 m high, runs perpendicular across the line of the north-south axis that extends from the centre of the gateway. A rectangular hollow, approximately 3.20 m deep, lies along part of its northern edge and the other side overlooks a long rectangular platform that appears to have been created as a garden parterre (FIG. 3. Cf. cover photograph).

Investigation was carried out to test the suggestion that the hollow might represent the site of the house that is known to have burnt down in 1662, and if the surviving garden earthworks were associated with it. A trench c. 32 m long was cut across the full width of the hollow towards its western end and also included a section of the adjacent bank (Trench 7). There was no evidence of burning nor of a quantity of remains consistent with the demolition of a substantial and largely complete building such as that implied by the historical account of the seventeenth-century fire. Instead, the deposits were mostly clean and largely comprised various re-deposited natural soils beneath an increased depth of topsoil in the middle of the hollow, which presumably formed during recent use of the area for making silage.

The base of the hollow was quite flat and on average approximately 0.60 m deep from the present-day surface. It had been dug into natural sand, which was patchily

covered by a thin layer of trampled soil, suggesting that it had not been exposed long enough for silt to accumulate or was possibly covered with a floor that was subsequently removed. There was evidence of a surrounding wall at each side (PL. 3). The base of a robber trench, 1.05 m wide and 140 mm deep, survived beneath the slope along the northern edge, which at this point had been formed by dragging the natural soil from behind into the hollow (ibid, foreground). A line of stonework visible in the surface nearby could represent the more complete survival of the wall that was otherwise taken away; it would repay future investigation.

A steep cut 1.35 m deep indicated where a corresponding wall had been removed from the south side of the hollow (ibid, distant scale-rod). Its edge fell sheer to the base of the original excavation and the way in which it ran out into the floor of the hollow suggests that the wall had formed one side of a sunken room in addition to supporting the terrace-bank. It was covered with material that had spilled over when the bank was no longer retained above. As well as exposing the natural soil profile, its face showed that it - or rather, the construction of the robbed-out wall also truncated an earlier feature, possibly a ditch of roughly V-shaped form but in the absence of finds of uncertain date. Pottery, bottle glass and other finds from the bank above suggest an eighteenth-century *terminus ante quern*, however. They include a base fragment of an imported Westerwald stoneware drinking vessel of the later seventeenth century (Gaimster 1997) in addition to a small number of body sherds of English domestic pottery, comprising Midland Black Ware (Barker 1986), delftware and pancheon-type coarse wares (ASP/09/07/01-03). Pieces of green glass wine bottles dated c. 1680-1730 and bowl fragments of clay tobacco pipes from the same period are also present (G. Egan, pers. comm.).

The vertical cut below the cast-down bank was directly in line with a stretch of walling preserved at the opposite end c. 45 m to the east (Trench 5), and thereby confirming the continuation of a limestone footing first observed in 1969 when an archaeological trench was dug in the intervening area (Unpublished. Cf. Oxfordshire CC Sites and Monuments Record PRN 1797). Unlike that discovery, six courses of brickwork laid to a breadth of three half-bricks (0.35 m, or 13.75 inches) still remained above the stonework which formed an offset foundation c. 0.44 m or 18 inches wide.

The brick wall made a straight joint with another that was perpendicular to it but did not abut against it at an exact right angle (PL. 4). The stratigraphic relationship between the two suggests that the north-south wall already existed when the terrace was added. It was of a similar size and construction but not as deeply founded, so that the new wall rested on part of its footings. Although on almost the same alignment as the eastern boundary of the garden, now shared with Ascott Park Cottage, it is nevertheless slightly out of line and investigation of an area beside the surviving property wall suggests that the continuation southwards is a later extension (Trench 6. See further below).

The corner of the bank enclosed by the walls was filled with a mix of re-deposited natural and other soil, which contained occasional roof tiles made of limestone and clay together with fragments of several green glass bottles of 'onion' type with a small string and short gap beneath the rim suggesting a date range of c. 1680-1730 (ASP/09/05/05-06. Cf. Hume 1970, 60-71; Biddle 2005, 266-96). The deposits contrast with the spread

of mortar and broken bricks which covered the old ground surface around the outside of the walls (AP/09/05/02-03). Magnetometer survey indicates that the scatter of brick rubble continues towards a surviving sixteenth-century building known as the Granary, but perhaps originally a small banqueting house (Ainslie *et al.* 2007). It is possible that amorphous earthworks beside the hollow might also be related, especially since previous excavation through part of the adjacent bank produced demolition rubble and evidence of burning (Oxfordshire CC Sites and Monuments Record PRN 1797). Without further investigation, however, it is impossible to determine whether this debris relates to the building that burnt down in 1662 or a later episode.

The present garden wall is built of brick in English Garden Wall bond above an offset foundation, 0.25 m or c.10 inches thick, composed mainly of Wheatley Limestone laid in un-mortared courses, presumably to facilitate drainage. A scar c. 9 m from the north corner indicates that a separate wall stood at a right angle to it on the opposite side of the bank (PL. 5). This had been at least 1.50 m high and 0.38 m wide (15 inches) and originally retained the southern or outer edge of the bank, thus forming a terrace to overlook the garden beyond. The junction between the two was bonded in alternate courses, showing them to be coeval and indicating a single purpose of design in spite of limited toothing in the brickwork above. The northern or back face of the brick retaining wall is flush with the adjacent boundary wall but the insertion of a header course at foundation-level may hint at some form of re-facing or an attempt at strengthening. Unfortunately, confirmation is not easily obtained since further evidence may have been lost through subsequent robbing-out or has become obscured during rebuilding the corner of the modern shed on the neighbouring property.

Although the brick superstructure of the terrace wall had been dismantled and part of the adjacent bank was damaged, a partially mortared limestone foundation 0.44 m or 18 inches wide remained (Trench 6). A large rectangular block of ashlar, reddened by burning along one edge and clearly re-used, had been placed along the outer edge of the wall, possibly to form the base of a step (PL. 6).

The projection of the wall westwards along the outer edge of the terrace, on a line parallel with the wall on the other side of the bank, was demonstrated by the continuation of the partially mortared limestone footing revealed in the southern end of Trench 7. As elsewhere, it was constructed of Wheatley Limestone and was approximately 0.44 m or 18 inches wide (PL. 7). It had been covered over with material drawn down from the bank above, which contained several large iron nails or staples and pieces of tile, including a glazed floor-tile fragment that may be residual (ASP/09/06/02).

That the wall foundations had originally been incorporated in the make-up of the garden is implied by a localized increase in the volume of soil, which denotes the presence of an adjacent border at least 1.40 m or 4 feet 6 inches wide (ASP/09/07/04). The related discovery of a number of unclenched, hand-wrought iron nails, all about 40 mm or 1.5 inches long, suggests that they may have been driven into the mortar joints of brickwork to tie plants as an aid for training them against the south-facing wall. Other associated finds include a numbered lead tag, with a second unstratified example also recorded; they could relate to a lost list or inventory of fruit trees (FIG. 6).

Trenches 8-10: the gardens

The raised terrace-bank overlooks two rectangular platforms forming long broad terraces, which descend one after the other along the naturally sloping ground to terminate at a series of now-overgrown ornamental ponds in the valley bottom. These former parterres are still bounded by the original garden wall at the east but low scarps define the long sides opposite. A well-marked scarp up to 0.90 m high separates the two gardens (cf. FIGS 1 and 3).

Excavation in the middle of the upper garden area revealed a north-south axial path, which was 4.90 m or about 16 feet wide and consisted of a broken limestone and coarse gravel foundation 180 mm deep (c. 7 inches), which had been surfaced with 80-90 mm (3.5 inches) of shingly gravel and rounded chalk (Trench 8. FIG. 4). A small collection of body and base sherds of pottery from the top of the path comprises Staffordshire cream ware and Pearlware of the second half of the eighteenth century but also includes a fragment of banded ware that began to be manufactured towards the end of that period (AP/09/08/02. Cf. Hildyard 2005). There was no evidence of a cross-path.

A separate but parallel path bordered the western side of the garden where the edge of a similar band of shingle was exposed at the top of the present bank (Trench 10. FIG. 4). The slope itself replaces a robbed-out wall that appears to have been the counterpart of that which is still standing on the opposite side of the garden. The hole dug to remove its footings was 1.25 m wide and up to 350 mm deep. The backfill contained a piece of cream ware and an un-diagnostic sherd of orange-red earthenware together with iron nails and other scrap metal (ASP/09/10/02). The remains of a further path of gravel shingle survived at the base of the slope, where it forms the edge of an alley that was probably lined with trees according to the evidence of planting pits close by (cf. FIG. 3).

A series of irregular shallow depressions at the southern end of the upper garden terrace close to the scarp dividing it from the lower parterre similarly denote the presence of trees, which either by their planting or removal appear to have disturbed a further path that had existed there. An area of brickwork exposed along part of the slope proved to be the remains of steps which connected the path at the higher level with another in the garden below; both were composed of the same shingly gravel used elsewhere (Trench 9).

The steps were offset from the line of the central north-south path but it remains uncertain whether this was intentional or a mistake of laying out, or if they formed part of a pair at either side of the main path. The surviving structure formed an approximate rectangle 5.20 m long and 2.60 m wide (c. 17 feet by 8 feet 6 inches) and had been built into the slope with slightly concave sides and splayed lower corners, which may have been intended to support the stop-ends of a parapet (PL. 8).

The foundation was made up of eleven strips of brickwork slanting longitudinally down the slope, with the spaces between them presumably for drainage. Within each line a few courses of un-mortared brick had been stepped into the ground and spot-bedded onto a layer of sand - structurally strong enough, but with no evidence of a deeper foundation. The individual stone treads had been bonded onto this arrangement and enough survived to indicate that the flight originally contained seven steps made out of the local Portland Stone from the area of the Miltons and Haseleys. Some of the stones appear to have been robbed for re-use but others were left behind where they had broken or shattered, including a large bottom slab 1.70 m by 0.35 m (c. 6 feet 6 inches by 14 inches).

Although their individual profiles seem to have been cut fairly accurately, the detail of the individual step treads was nevertheless quite plain and their finish was rather uneven, with rough claw-tooling along the outer face below the simple moulding of the top edge (FIG. 5). Thus, while the distant effect would be pleasing, closer scrutiny would show up their local, possibly cheap, workmanship.

DISCUSSION

The arrangement of earthworks and associated walls identified through recent excavation can be compared with that depicted in an early eighteenth-century manuscript estate plan of Ascott (cf. Sotheby's 1994, no. 137: *Survey of the Lordship of Ascote in the County of Oxon, belonging to John Dormer, Esq.*). From the impaled coat of arms it contains, it must date from some-time between 1712 when John Dormer married Alice Dighton and his death in 1727/8, and indeed the map is inscribed as "Mrs Dighton's Plan" on the reverse.

It shows a regular, revetted terrace lying across the axis between the garden and a large square building located in the area of the present hollow. This is a typical location for the main dwelling at this period, with the doors of the house opening onto the middle of a raised terrace walk that was at the same level, and from which steps descended into a large parterre.

The archaeological evidence found within the hollow for the removal of surrounding walls (and possibly also a floor) is consistent with the creation of a former basement or cellar in the early eighteenth century, with the spoil from its excavation apparently being used to build the adjacent terrace. The cleanliness of the site and absence of signs of sustained building activity and subsequent occupation suggest that the project was unfinished, and possibly abandoned at any early stage. Financial difficulty and other family problems at the time could have contributed to the work being stopped and eventually given up. The survey plan therefore may show unexecuted building proposals as well as designs that were actually implemented.

The construction of the gardens seems to have been largely completed, however, and as laid out they formed a series of rectangular areas extending from the terrace at the north with free-standing walls and paths along each side as well as in the centre. Indeed, the extraordinary width of the main axial path and the absence of a central cross-path confirm the layout shown in the historical plan. The areas at either side might

therefore be expected to contain elements of the former broderie that was also depicted and is hinted at by recent resistivity survey (Ainslie et al. 2007).

Likewise, the lower path discovered to the west corresponds with the walk that the early map shows running beside the outer edge of the gardens and heading towards the canal at the south. A series of tree pits and a few surviving lime trees attest the former planting along its western border, which was possibly recently introduced and may have been planted in the early eighteenth century if the convention used in the historical survey is so interpreted.

A separate row of trees previously ran across the southern end of the upper garden and although recorded by early Ordnance Survey mapping, was not shown in the original estate survey drawing. Instead, the area was depicted to contain a cross-path running at right angles to the main axial paths, with a central flight of steps providing access into the garden below. The excavated steps, however, are not exactly in the middle of the connecting slope.

The arrangement of steps at the opposite or top end of the garden also appears to have differed from the ideal represented in the historical plan. Although robbing had damaged the top of the foundation of the brick wall in front of the terrace and part of the adjacent bank, a re-used large ashlar block next to the corner could have served as a sill at the base of a narrow flight of steps. The survey, however, shows only central steps that are so far unproven.

When the brick retaining walls were demolished, material appears to have been deliberately pulled down from behind in order to create the present slopes but their uneven appearance and slightly sinuous edges indicate that there was no intention to form an ornamental glacis. This implies that the gardens had already fallen into disuse, and if they were given over to animal grazing would explain the need to remove the precipitous edges. An indication of the date of their abandonment is provided by sherds of mid- to late-eighteenth-century tableware recovered from the latest levels in the garden.

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SCHEDULE OF ILLUSTRATIONS

COVER PHOTOGRAPH

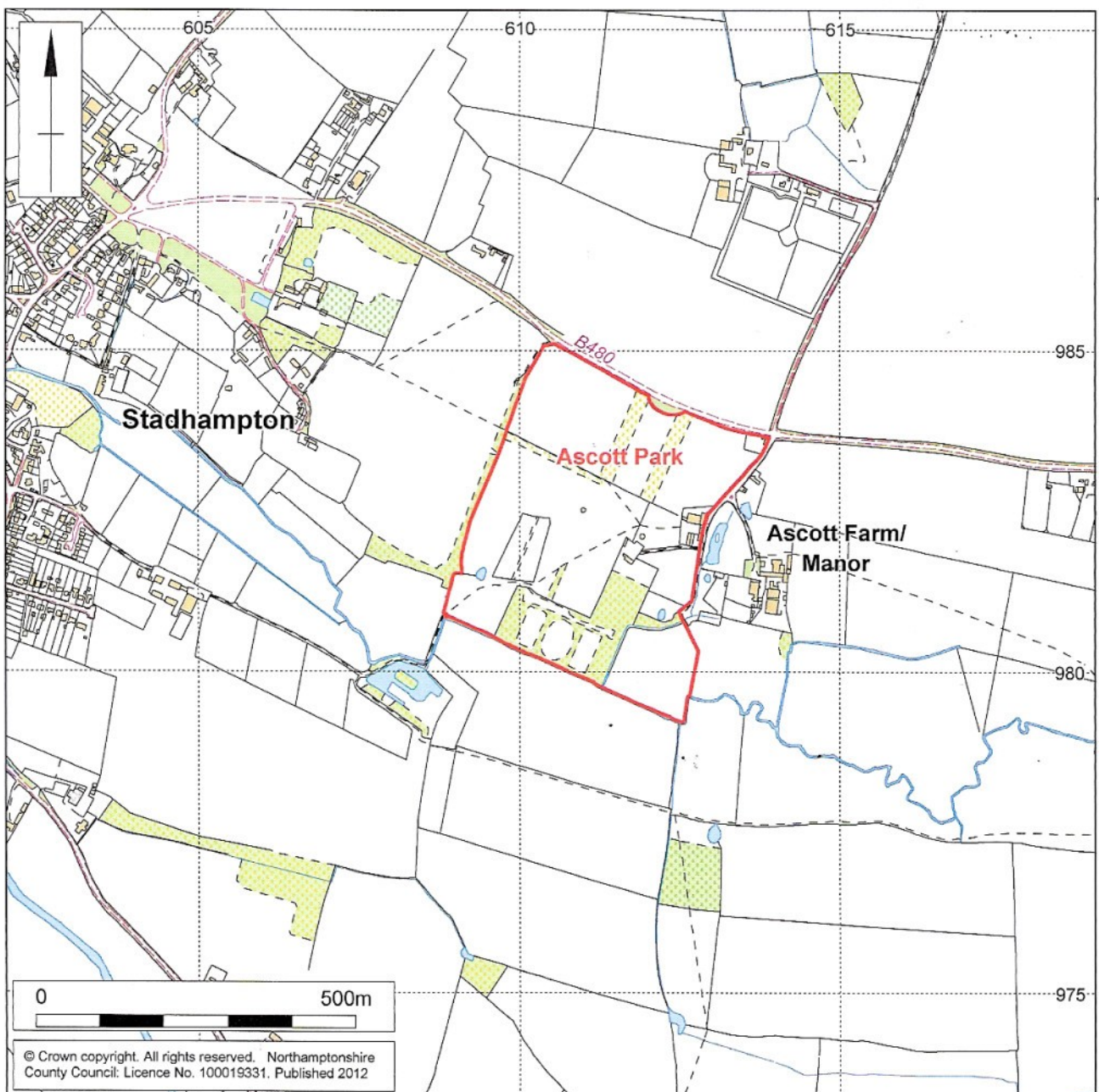
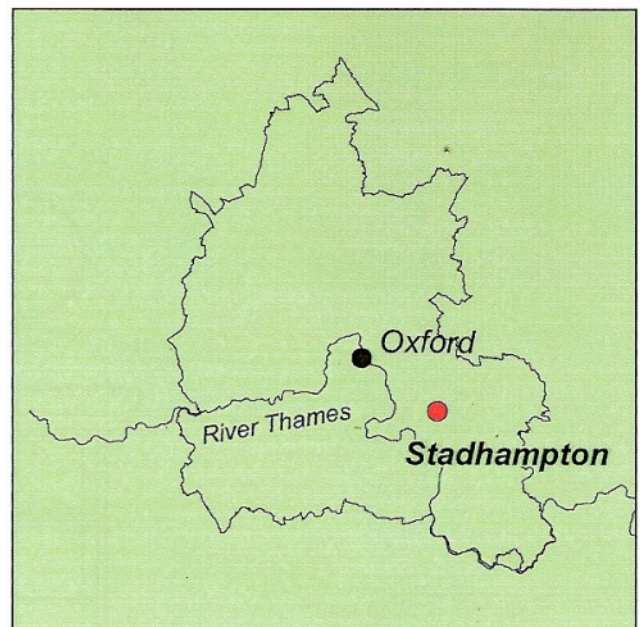
Possible house site with raised terrace to right, 'Granary' building and Ascott Park Cottage in the background.

FIGURES

- FIG. 1 Site location.
- FIG. 2 Trench 3, wall elevations and section of pillar foundation.
- FIG. 3 Trench locations within the main area of garden earthworks.
- FIG. 4 Sections and plan details of trenches 8 and 10.
- FIG. 5 Profile of step-tread of Portland Stone from Trench 9.
- FIG. 6 Lead tags, actual size.
Above, unstratified; *below*, with iron nails for attachment -
from early eighteenth-century planting bed in Trench 7 (ASP/09/07/04).

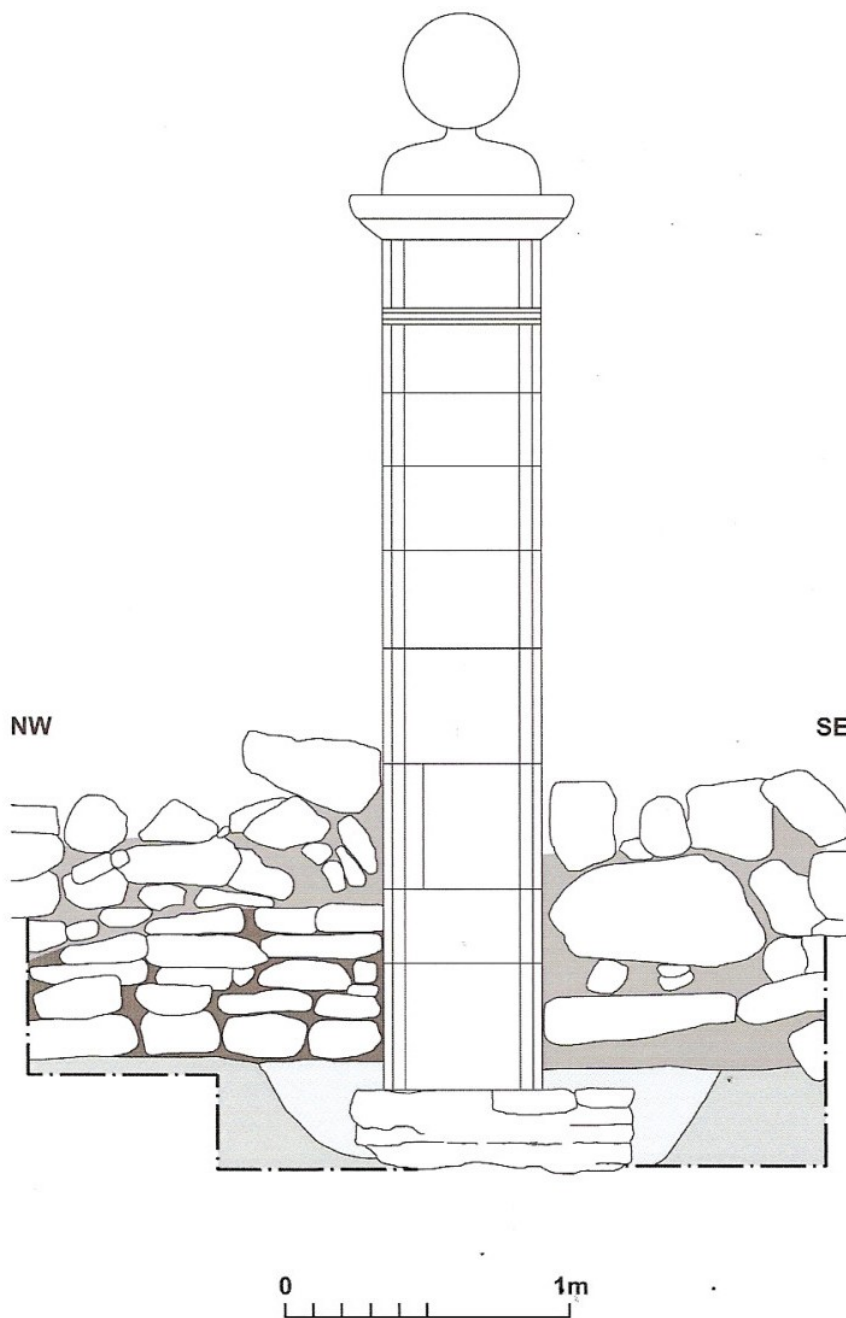
PLATES

- PL. 1 View looking west across semicircular entrance to Ascott Park.
- PL. 2 Trench 3, wall elevations and pillar foundation. Scale-rod 1-m long.
- PL. 3 Trench 7. Scale-rods in 0.5-m divisions mark the location of robber-trenches.
- PL. 4 Trench 5. Relationship between terrace retaining wall at right and existing boundary. Scale-rod 1-m long.
- PL. 5 Junction of terrace outer wall and present garden wall (Trench 6). Scale-rod 1-m long.
- PL. 6 Trench 6. Footings of terrace outer wall and possible step foundation Scale-rod 1-m long.
- PL. 7 Trench 7. Stone foundation of terrace outer wall with soil-filled border in foreground, Scale-rod 1-m long.
- PL. 8 Trench 9. Remains of steps.



Scale 1:10,000

Site Location, Ascott Park Fig 1



Scale 1:25 (A4)

Fig 2

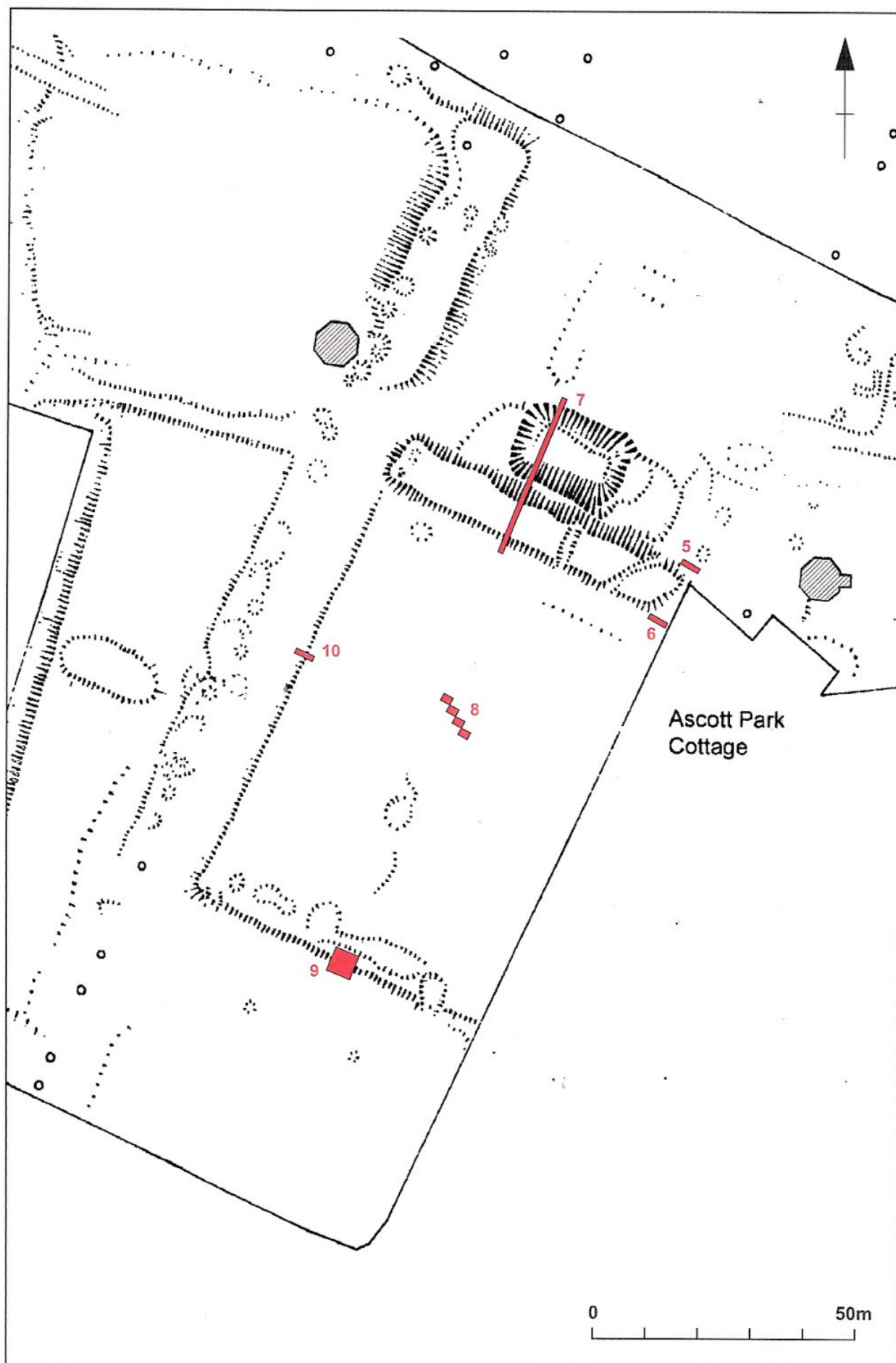
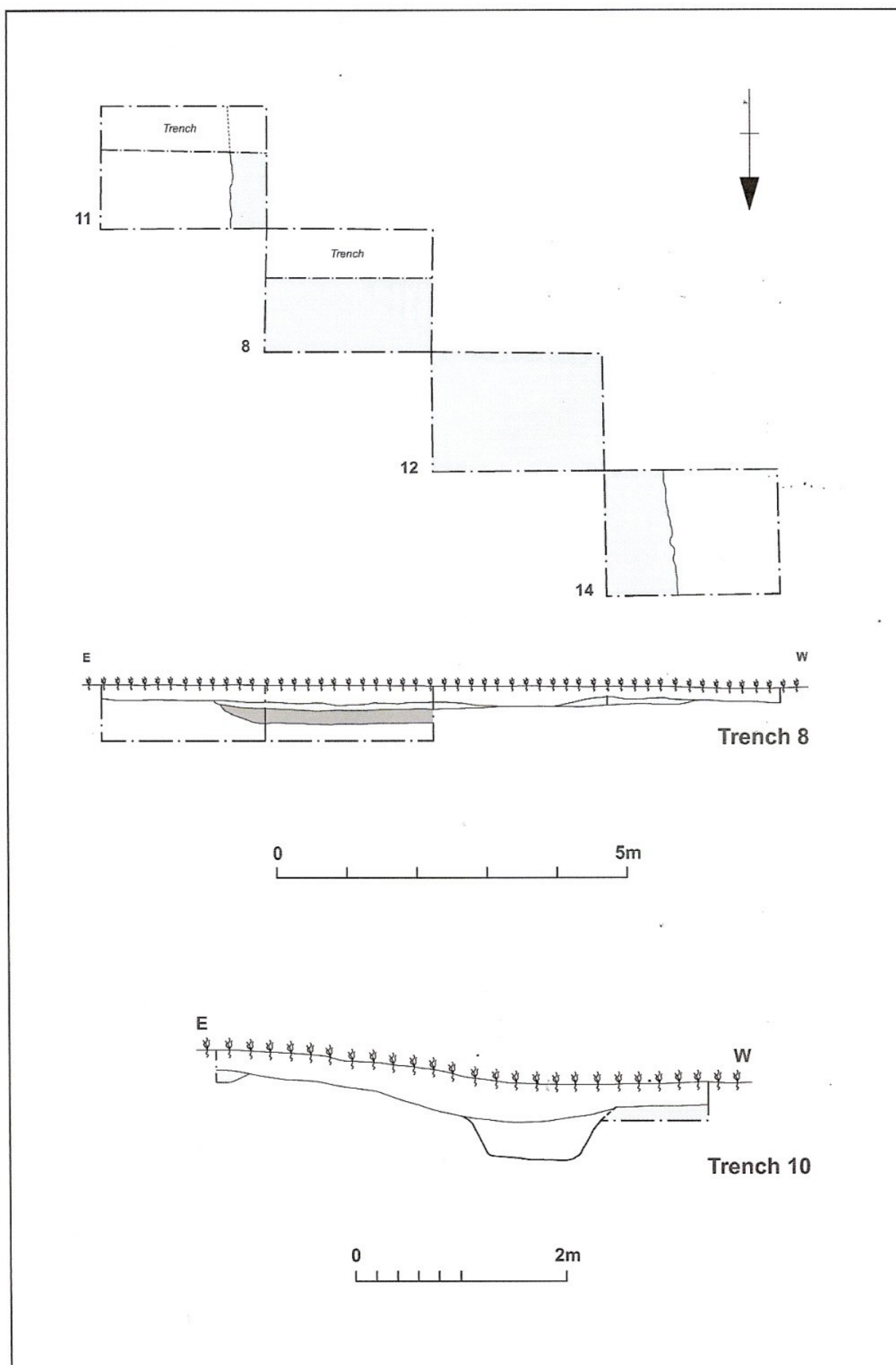
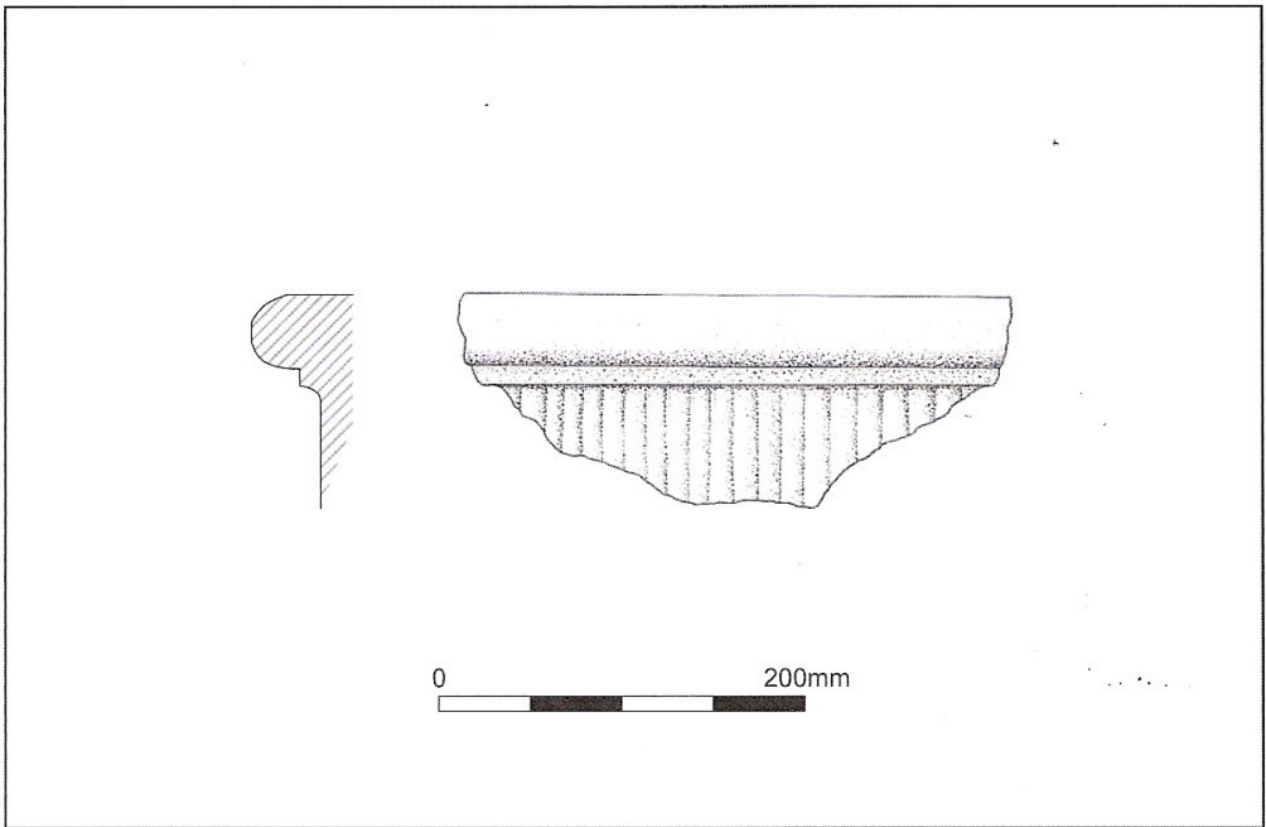


Fig 3



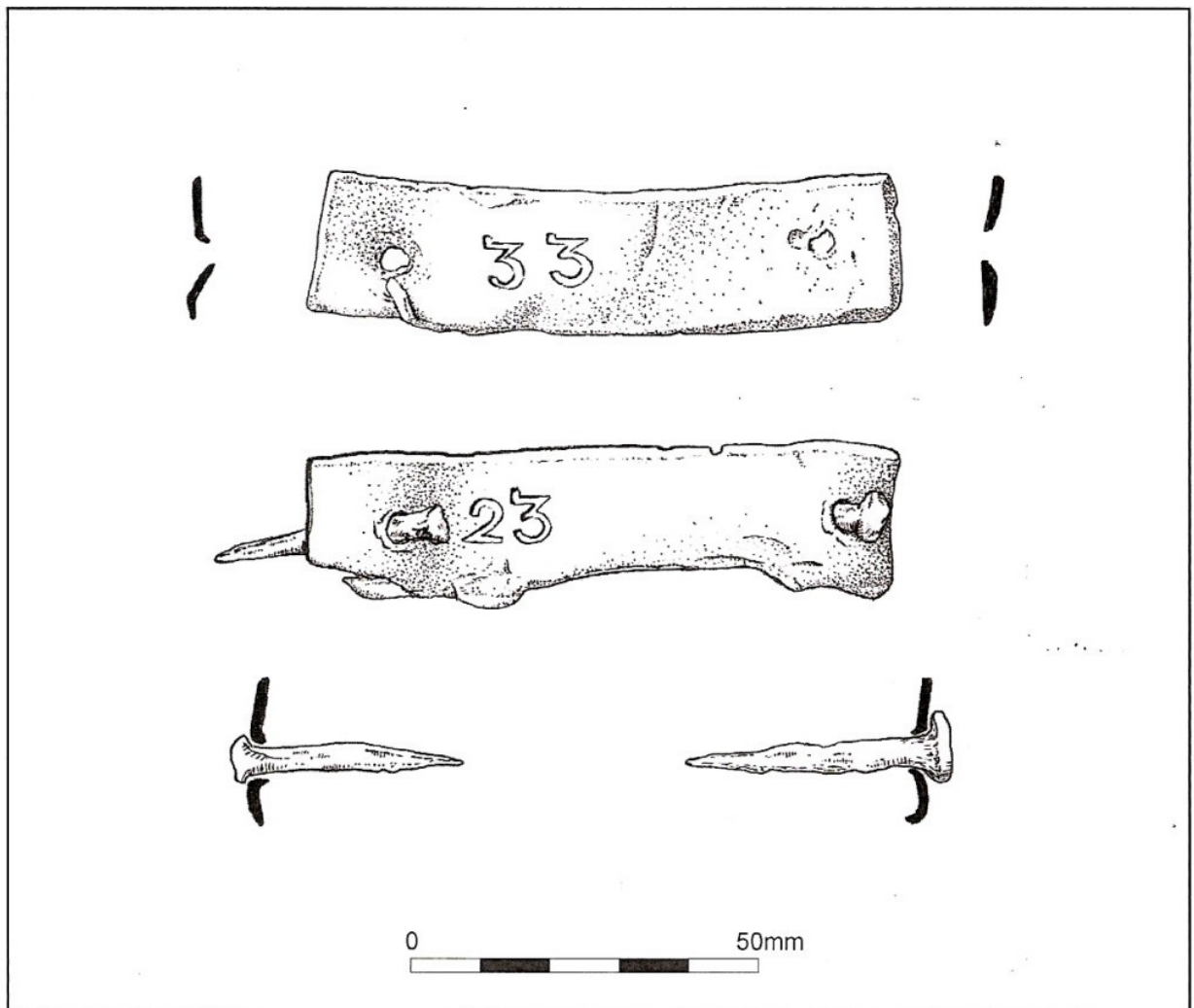
Scales 1:75 & 1:50 (A4), path remains shaded

Fig 4



Scale 1:4

Fig.5



Scale 1:1

Fig 6



PLATE 1



PLATE 2

PLATE 3, right

PLATE 4, below



PLATE 5, right

PLATE 6, below





PLATE 7



PLATE 8