

# THE HITCHEN PEASEMORE BERKSHIRE

## ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION



December 1993



OXFORD ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT

## PEASEMORE, BERKSHIRE

### THE HITCHEN

(NGR SU 458774)

#### An archaeological evaluation, December 1993

*Summary: An archaeological evaluation of the above site was carried out on 6-7 December 1993 by OAU. Five trenches were excavated amounting to approx 2% sample of the site, which lies towards the Mell Green end of the village. The trenches showed evidence of agricultural usage, including a substantial buildup of hill wash deposits at the lower end (SW corner). Pottery recovered from these levels suggest the deposits had formed since the late Saxon period. Higher up the site the cultivated horizon was progressively thinner, and similarly the clay beneath it, so that chalk was exposed in the floor of the trenches.*

*Interestingly the chalk subsoil seemed to have been exploited in history, because an infilled pit near the present entry to the fields had evidently been a quarry for this material, which could have been used for marling.*

*It is suggested that settlement on this side of the road was limited in the middle ages by the roadside pond and its outflow stream.*

#### Background

Peasemore is first recorded in Domesday (1086), when it was *Praemere*, 'place where a pea-like plant grows near a pond'. The village has a natural centre at the church, (the *VCH* iv, 81 suggests that it was originally within a circular enclosure, of which the church and rectory form the N extremity); the site in question is on a road leading N from that centre. Opposite a small pond at the SW corner of the site the road forks W to Hillgreen; at Mell Green NW of the site the road forks E to Stanmore. The road layout is already in place on Roque's map (1761), when Peasemore is one of the larger settlements in the immediate area; the site in question, The Hitchen, shows as a gap in the series of properties on the E side of the N road.

The solid geology of the area is the dissected dip-slope of the Berkshire downs, chalk covered with a variable thickness of clay with flints which result from solution of the upper layers of chalk, concentrating in pockets; in Trench 3 a natural gully was filled with greenish clay-silt. The soil type is described as palaeo-argillic brown earths.

#### Archaeological Background

The village lies on a slight ridge on the dip-slope of the Berkshire Downs, with dry valleys to E and W. It is clear from the information in the County Sites and Monuments Record that there was early human activity in the area. Some of the findspots are recorded only by a six-figure grid reference, but the control map infers that they come from the village itself, and this seems reasonable.

Three later records relate to intensive fieldwork carried out by the University of Reading on sites N, W and S of the village, and a watching brief by the County Council. Finds include



extensive scatters of worked flint in each location (Berkshire County Sites and Monuments Record, PRNs 2778, 2781, 2783, 2788). Less securely provenanced are a Neolithic polished axehead reworked to a new shape (PRN 2640), and a basalt hammer (PRN 2651).

Roman pottery forms a steady proportion of the finds recovered from the three areas of fieldwalking, suggesting manuring of the fields around a settlement as yet unidentified. Additionally there is pottery recorded from the village itself, but with no further detail.

The medieval period is represented by 13th-15th-century finds from the village (PRN 2657.00.010, 020), sherds from fieldwalking to the SW (030), and there are two 15th-century buildings, Manor Farm and The Cottage (PRN 2657.03, 04).

### **The 1993 fieldwork (Fig. 1)**

Five trenches were excavated in a sequence designed to investigate medieval and other settlement. An electronic detector was used to plot the line of a water pipe to which OAU had been alerted by the landowner. It was found to run W of the reputed line, but was safely below the level of excavation in Trench 3.

#### **Trench 1** (soil profile Fig. 2, lwr rt)

The first trench ran W-E in the SW corner, starting 4 m from the roadside pond. Beneath a humic topsoil (1/1) were layers of silt-clay loam (1/2 above 1/3) which thinned to the E. The lowest part of 1/3 had a component of small flints, and these were concentrated in lenses of similar flints in the clay subsoil, where there were also larger nodules of flint.

It was concluded that the lenses of flint were a natural deposit, the top of which had been affected by ploughing, and that the thickness of the deposit above it was due to soil erosion from the higher parts of the field as a result of cultivation. Pottery was recovered from the lower level 1/3.

#### **Trenches 2 and 4** (not illustrated)

These trenches formed a discontinuous transect up the slope at the rear of the site (ie E side of site). 2/1 was topsoil, 2/2 and 2/3 being comparable to 1/2 and 1/3 respectively. Both thinned to the N of Trench 2, and only one was represented higher up the slope in Trench 4 (4/2).

#### **Trench 3** (soil profile Fig. 2, uppr rt)

This trench was expected like Trench 1 to show evidence of a more intensive usage of the front part of the site along the road, but again this was not confirmed. The topsoil was similar (3/1), the early ploughsoil was thinner (3/2), and there were geological features including a gully filled with greenish silt. A later pit was irregular in shape and probably a tree-throw (3/3).

Trench 3 cut across the line of a water pipe notified to us by the landowner (although not on

the line as notified - it was traced with a detector). It proved to be set well down in the subsoil at this point.

### **Trench 5 (see plan Fig. 2)**

This trench was left till last because of its more sensitive position just inside the field gate. It had a lot of builder's rubble (5/1) over the topsoil (5/2), and proved more interesting in having a large infilled pit at its N end. The shape and the nature of the filling (5/5, 5/6) suggested that it had been dug for quarrying chalk, and this would be consistent with the quality of the soil in the field which suggested competent cultivation methods. Marling of the fields might be expected at an early date on these soils, but regrettably there was no dating evidence from the quarry itself. A second tree-throw (5.4, filled with 5.7, qv 3/3) may have predated such agriculture.

### **Discussion and conclusions**

The initial suggestion that the site had been part of early continuous settlement along the E side of the road was not substantiated, and the low incidence of pottery and building material from the ploughsoil would suggest that this was not an example of a settlement which had been ploughed out by subsequent agricultural use.

There is no obvious topographical reason why the pattern of plots along the road, already in place on Roque's map (1761, Fig. 3), should end at The Hitchen on the E side whilst continuing on the W side. The only unusual feature which might explain this break is the pond which, in view of the depth of hill wash in Trench 1, may result from a hollow in the natural topography and may therefore have been a more extensive feature in history. Although no waterlaid deposits appeared in the Trench 1 profile, this is the only pond identified within the village, and it should be borne in mind that the village name is derived from *mere*, a pond. There may therefore be some reason for supposing that a pond was a sufficiently unusual feature in this landscape (perhaps arising from a natural spring) that, together with its outflow stream down the E side of the ridge, it had limited the growth of the village.

The development site is known as The Hitchen, from the Old English *heccing*, interpreted as 'part of a field ploughed and sown while the remainder lies fallow' (Field 1972, 105). This could well apply to the use of this land at some stage in its history.

### **Recommendations**

From the results of this evaluation there seems to be no reason why development of The Hitchen should impact on archaeological deposits. Our only observation would be that the pond adjoining the SW corner of the site may be a significant feature of the early geography of the village, and the detailing of this corner of the development would merit sympathetic treatment.

BD

December 1993

## **Bibliography**

Field, J, 1972 *English field names: a dictionary*, Newton Abbot.

*Victoria County History of Berkshire*, iv, 1924

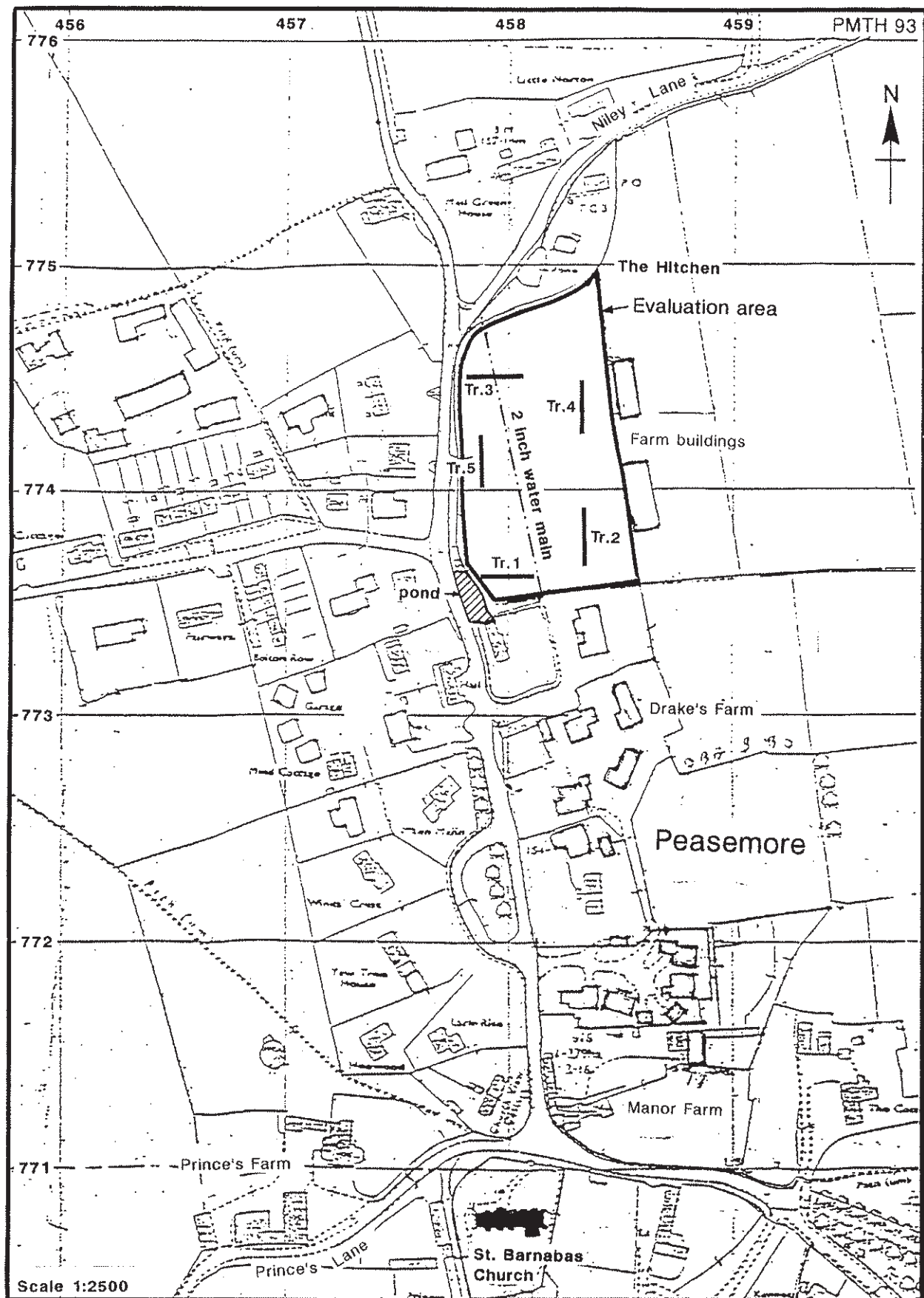
## **Illustrations**

- 1 The site, showing evaluation trenches and location of pond.
- 2 Trench 5, showing fill profile of quarry 5/8, and typical profiles in Trenches 3 (above) and 1 (below).
- 3 Detail of John Roque's map of Berkshire, 1761.

## Appendix 1: Archaeological Results

Context No	Description	Finds	Date
<b>Trench 1</b>			
1/1	topsoil	brick, soft red e/w	post-medieval
1/2	cultivation/ hillwash	thin e/w, sgraffito with slip (poss. OX <u>AG</u> )	medieval
1/3	hillwash	cooking pot, flint- tempered (OX <u>AQ</u> )	12-15th C
<b>Trench 2</b>			
2/1	Topsoil	glazed red e/w	18-19th C
2/2	cultivation/ hillwash	tile, brick	post-med
2/3	cultivation/ hillwash		
<b>Trench 3</b>			
3/1	topsoil		
3/2	cultivation soil		
3/3	possibly tree-throw hole		
<b>Trench 4</b>			
4/1	topsoil		
4/2	cultivation soil		
<b>Trench 5</b>			
5/1	building rubble		
5/2	topsoil		
5/3	cultivation/ hillwash		
5/4	fill to tree-throw hole		
5/5	fill to quarry		
5/6	fill to quarry		
5/7	tree throw hole		
5/8	cut of quarry		

(Pottery identifications by Lucy Bown, Maureen Mellor)

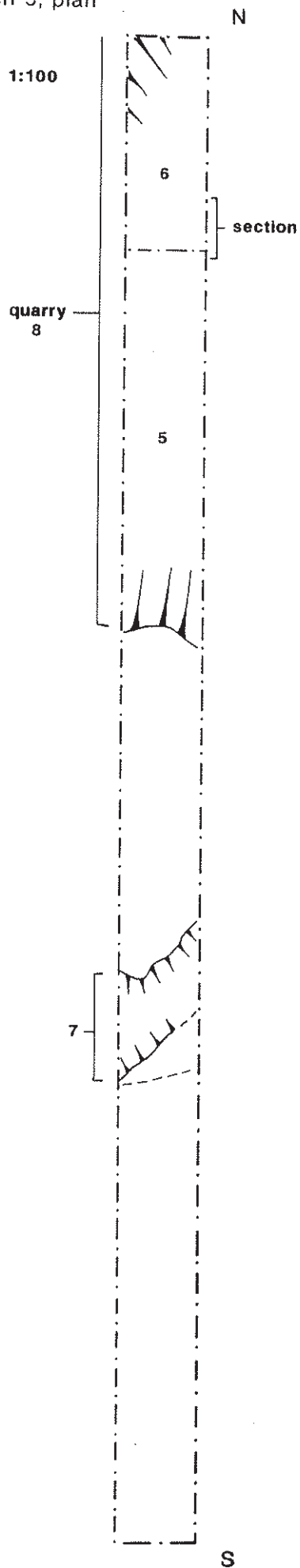


Site location

figure 1

Trench 5, plan

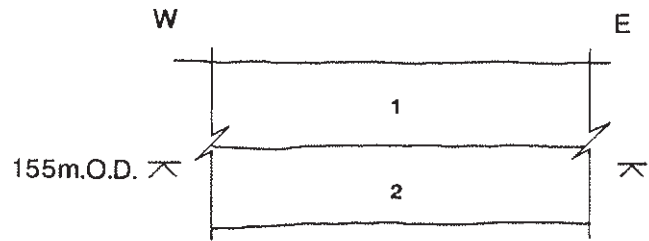
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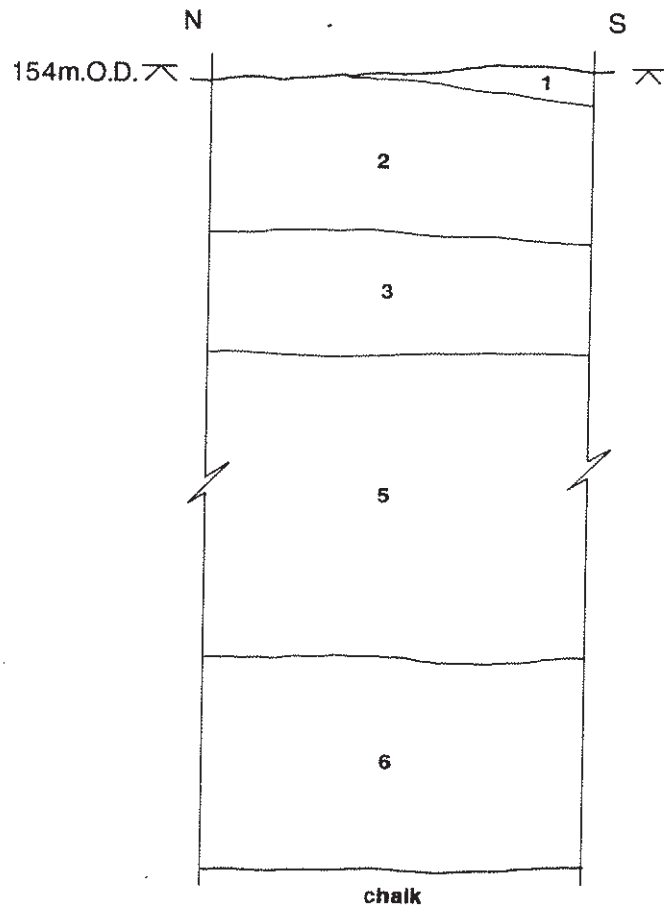
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Trench 3



Trench 5



Trench 1

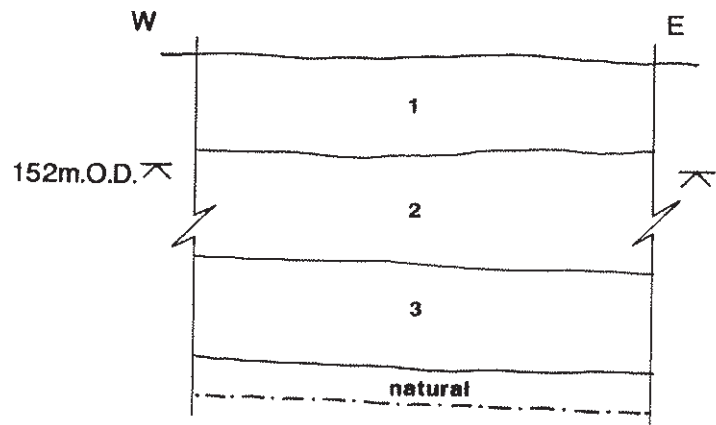
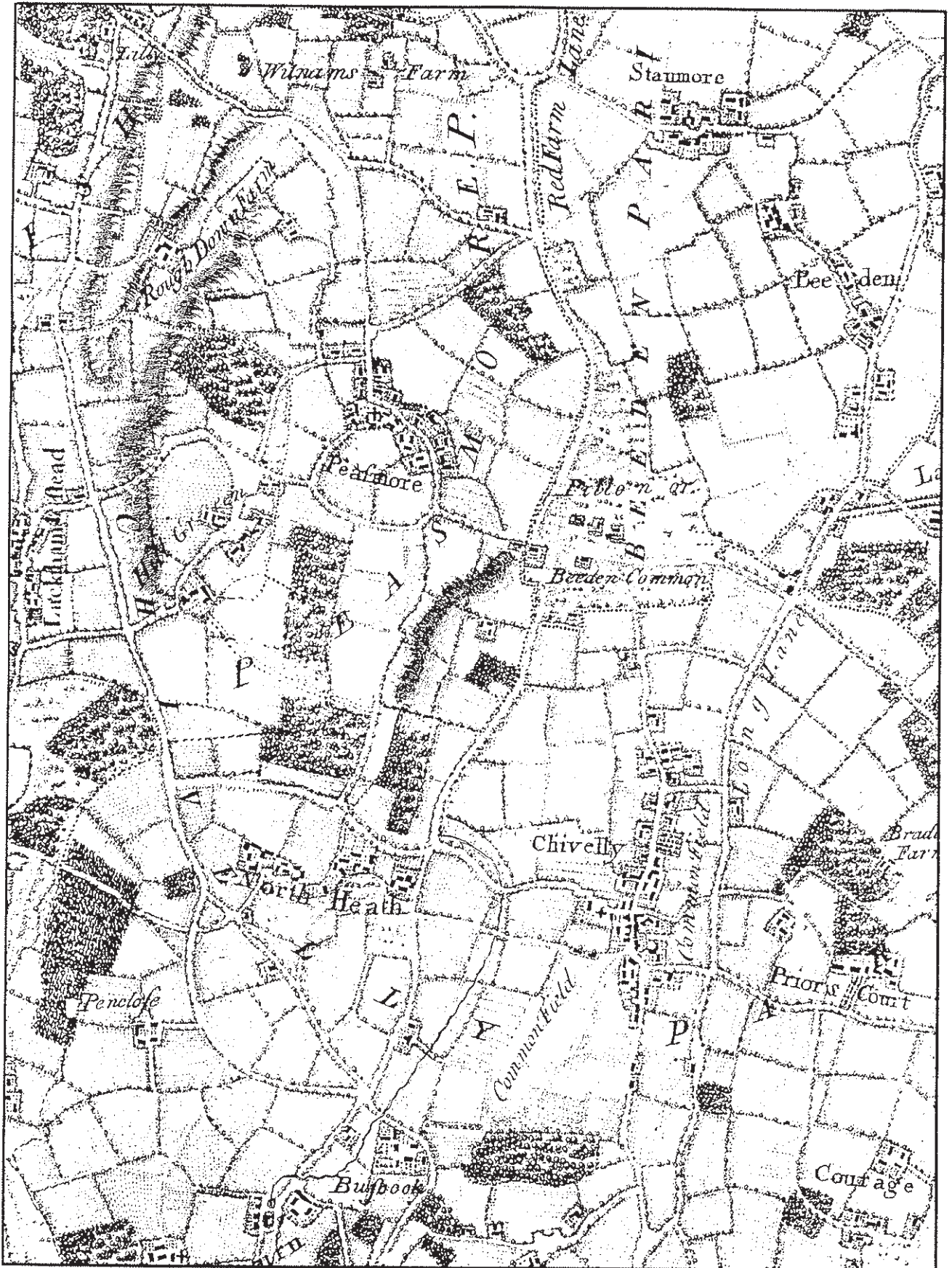


figure 2





Roque's map of 1761

figure 3