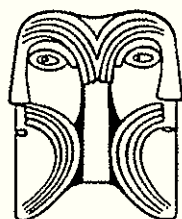


THE  
OXFORD ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT



WITNEY; THE WEAVERS 1990  
ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT REPORT

# **THE WEAVERS (PHASE 2)**

## **WITNEY, OXON.**

### **ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT, SEPTEMBER 1990**

In early September 1990 the Oxford Archaeological Unit carried out an assessment of the archaeological deposits on the site of The Weavers development, Witney, Oxon., in advance of the construction of Phase 2 by Tarmac Provincial Properties PLC. The site lies SE of the town centre and is bounded on the N by Farm Mill Lane, on the W by the Mount House grounds, and on the E by a ditch roughly parallel to the river Windrush (Fig. 1). Phase 1 was under construction at the time of this assessment, and Phase 2 will be constructed in the eastern portion of this site.

#### **1. PEDOLOGY, GEOLOGY AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND**

This site lies above the cornbrash/Forest Marble which underlies most of Witney. The usual soil profile, where it has not been disturbed by later activity, is a dark friable clay loam topsoil over a layer of buttery clay (possibly an alluvial deposit), above a band of crumbly silty clay which seals the upper eroded layer of cornbrash.

Excavations in 1984 in the grounds of the Mount House, immediately to the W of The Weavers, uncovered the substantial remains of the medieval palace of the Bishop of Winchester (Fig. 2). Trial trenching done in 1984, both in Mount House and on the site now being assessed, revealed the palace's outer wall and moat, although at no point was the full width of the moat confirmed. The wall separating Mount House from The Weavers site has had two earlier large stone constructions incorporated into it; these constructions are most likely to be the remains of early medieval towers erected to defend the palace complex, with the wall added in the late medieval period as the last part of the gradual expansion of the palace grounds to the S and E by terracing. All surviving structural remains of the palace complex, including this boundary wall, have been given legal protection as a Scheduled Ancient Monument.

Documentary research since 1984 have shown that the very detailed records kept for the Bishops' estates indicate that a 'barton' or medieval farm tied to the palace lies within The Weavers site. Farm Mill Lane, the route between the palace gatehouse and the estate mill, may also have formed the frontage for a number of medieval cottages. Two structures shown on the 1876 Ordnance Survey map are likely to be a farmhouse and dovecote. At the turn of the 19th century Mount Mills blanket factory was constructed on the site; the plan of the factory would have gradually become more elaborate until its demolition began in 1984. This demolition is still going on; a series of sheds built against the Scheduled Monument wall separating The Weavers from Mount House are earmarked for imminent removal.

## 2. STRATEGY

A series of trenches were excavated by a machine equipped with a 5 ft ditching bucket to a width of 1.8 m to investigate the relationship between the stone wall and the palace moat, and to locate any other archaeological deposits (Fig. 2). A large proportion of the archaeological features revealed by this machine excavation were further excavated by hand to discern their size and function, and to recover dating evidence. Soil samples were taken from some of the features to assess the quality of preservation of plant and animal remains.

## 3. RESULTS

### 3.1 Archaeological Features

**Trench 1**, the southernmost of the trenches, contained two small ditches. One of these ditches [1/7], near the W end of the trench and aligned NW/SE, appears to have had its upper portion intentionally backfilled, and this infilling contained domestic rubbish including pottery fragments of late Saxon age (AD 900 - 1050). The other ditch [1/6], aligned N/S, produced no dating evidence.

**Trench 5** contained a brick wall [5/1] and a pipe trench [5/5]; both these features are likely to have formed part of Mount Mills blanket factory. No earlier features were observed.

**Trench 6** was placed to determine the course and full width of the palace moat under the proposed site of the Interpretation Centre, and **Trench 2** was designed to locate the course of the moat at the NE corner of the palace. The inner and outer edges of the moat [6/4] were located in Trench 6, showing it to be 5.8 m wide at the top of the cornbrash, and not the 15 m width found to the N of the palace. Neither edge of the moat was found in Trench 2.

In the N end of **Trench 3**, a layer of very dark silt [3/5] produced a 19th-century potsherd, and probably marks the bottom layer of a large shallow pond. This was cut into a layer of buttery clay [3/6] which held a single piece of medieval pottery. Under this layer and farther to the south, an undated E/W ditch [3/9] and two undated postholes [3/10, 3/11] mark a former field boundary. This trench also contained an undatable animal burial [3/13] (probably a sheep) and, at its southern end, a rectangular stone building [3/18]; the artefacts in the footing trenches for this stone building show it to be post-medieval, and it is almost certainly part of the Mount Mills factory. A building is known from the 1876 OS map to have been in this area of the site before the construction of the blanket factory, but no features associated with this building could be traced.

**Trench 4**, parallel to the N wall of the site, produced a large number of archaeological deposits (Fig. 4). Two stone footings [4/6, 4/9] in the W end of this trench are the remains of the walls for one of the two Mount Mills buildings along the N edge of the site. The deposit [3/5] formed in the bottom of the pond found in the N end of Trench 3 also occurs in this trench, but is less dark and more clayey [4/4]. A stone-built drain [4/12], which produced no finds, marks the eastern extent of the pond deposit.

The drain [4/12] also marks the western edge of a layer of stony loam [4/13] containing large numbers of early roof tiles, including several pieces of ridge tiles with glazed decoration. This layer is the last step in a complex sequence of past events (Fig. 3). Removal of this layer revealed two dry-stone wall

footings [4/16, 4/24], a possible footing [4/26], a substantial ditch [4/27], a layer of rubble [4/17], and a large stone-lined and heat-reddened pit [4/25] with a stone-capped flue, probably a lime kiln. The rubble layer [4/17] overlaid a surviving piece of floor [4/19], a short portion of mortared wall [4/18], and a wall footing [4/21]. Another floor or trampled surface [4/23] lay under [4/19] and was cut by the trench [4/20] in which the footing [4/21] was built; it had been locally fire-reddened by its use as a hearth [4/22]. Enough artefacts have been recovered from these deposits to conclude tentatively that they are the remains of a series of structures which began in the 12th century and were abandoned near the end of the 13th century (M Mellor, pers. comm.).

In the E end of this trench, a dry-stone wall footing aligned WNW/ESE through an area of disturbed soil, sand and coal [4/28] lies just E of the planned E extent of one of the Mount Mills buildings. This footing and disturbance are probably the surviving deposits of an earlier Mount Mills structure. Under the disturbed soil [4/28] and a layer of loam [4/29], a cobbled surface [4/30] was revealed. The age and extent of this cobbling could not be determined, but it is likely to have been in use at the same time as the medieval structures already discussed.

### **3.2 Environmental Indicators**

Samples of the infilling of ditch 1/7 and the stone drain 4/12 were processed to determine whether seeds and other organic matter preserved by carbonization were present. The drain sample contained large amounts of modern uncarbonized seeds introduced through the existing open space in the drain, but the ditch sample did contain carbonized seeds and snail shells, which can be used to establish the past ecology and agricultural uses.

The excavation of the moat in trench 6 showed that most of the deposits within this feature are under the water table. By excluding the oxygen required by the bacteria responsible for decay, waterlogging preserves organic materials that usually quickly rot. There is therefore the possibility that artefacts constructed from wood and leather, and plant parts and snail shells reflecting the past environment, may survive in the moat.

The good preservation of animal bones recovered from the various hand-excavated features shows that the calcareous nature of the soils will allow the type and number of animals consumed in the past on the site to be reconstructed.

### **3.3 Pottery Dating**

All pottery from the site was shown to Maureen Mellor, who has made a provisional record for archive purposes. She pointed out that the assemblages show no indication of the change in fabric type that marks the end of the 13th century elsewhere in Oxfordshire. The absence of Brill potsherds was reminiscent of the results of the 1984 palace excavations, and may indicate that pottery fabrics with calcareous gravel inclusions may continue to be used into later centuries in Witney as a result of special local factors, perhaps a local pottery-making tradition. If this is so then the accurate dating of assemblages from this part of Oxfordshire will have to wait for more information on the evolution of vessel forms, and it may be that the present site could hold the key to this question.

## **4. CONCLUSIONS**

### **4.1 Field Boundaries and Saxon Evidence**

Several of the trenches produced ditches and gullies, probably marking agricultural boundaries. Some included dating evidence, and overall they must reflect a changing patterns of field size, shape and use through time.

## 4.2 Palace Moat

For the first time the full width of the Witney moat has been confirmed, and it is clearly much narrower at this particular point than even the smallest of the estimates for the N moat. Its course on the present site at the NE corner of the palace complex has not been learnt, and is not fully understood on the SE corner. It is possible that there is a double moat along the E wall here, or alternatively that the moat was progressively moved S and E in association with the expansion of the terracing. At no point has the full evolution of this outer defensive line been properly studied at Witney by integrating artefactual and environmental evidence, deposit by deposit, down its full profile.

## 4.3 Medieval Structures

As in the 1984 trenching, there were no traces of a medieval structure near the site of the presumed house shown on the 1876 map (S end of Trench 3); such remains if any have been destroyed by Mount Mills construction. To the N however there were floors, walls, a drain and a lime kiln forming a complex history spanning the 12th and 13th centuries in Trench 4. The orientation, function and overall plan of these structures could not be determined from the small area exposed, however, nor was it possible to say conclusively whether these are the remains of cottages fronting on to Farm Mill Lane, outbuildings for the barton, or buildings for some other use.

## 4.4 Saxon Material

A small number of late Saxon potsherds were found to have been incorporated into the 12th- to 13th-century features in Trench 4, and together with the similar material from a ditch [1/7] to the S they are the first clear evidence of Saxon activity in the neighbourhood of the palace site. This is a significant advance in understanding the nature of the pre-Conquest settlement which must have predated the palace of the Norman bishops. 'Queen Emma's Palace', the presumed centre of the Witney estate which was in royal hands from AD 969 to 1044, does not appear to have been on the same site as the medieval bishops' palace, but clearly any evidence on the distribution of material of this period, and any Saxon structures lying beneath the medieval deposits along Farm Mill Lane, will all help in the effort to locate it.

## **5. AREAS OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE INDICATED BY ASSESSMENT**

This assessment has therefore identified four areas of the site where important information about the past is preserved (Fig. 5).

- 5.1 The area adjoining Farm Mill Lane contains a sequence of early medieval structures and associated features (Trench 4). The deposits are near the surface and fairly fragile; heavy earthmoving or construction vehicles would almost certainly damage them to the point where they could no longer be



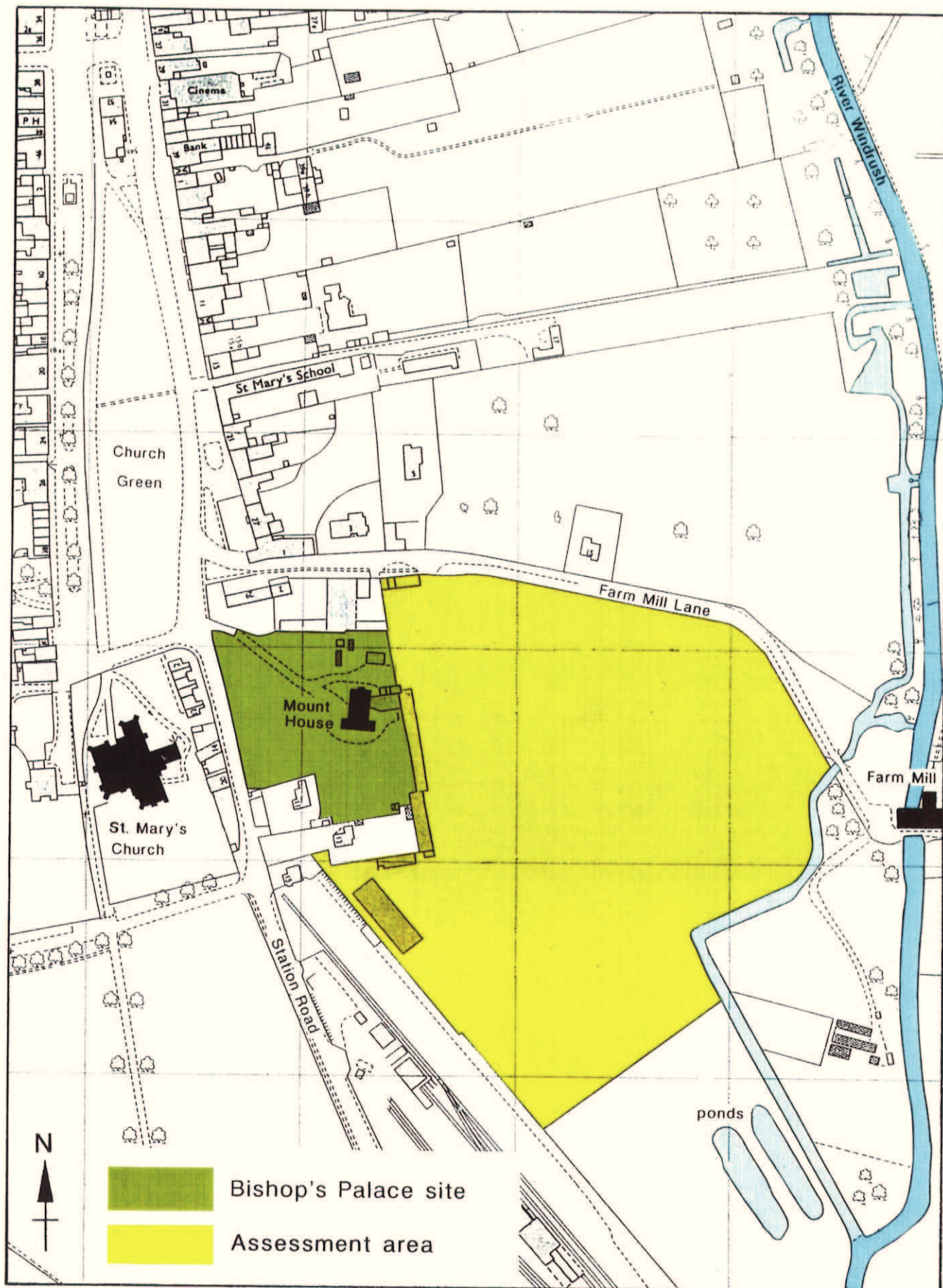
interpreted and any such activity here should either be avoided or should be preceded by archaeological excavation and recording.

- 5.2 The area immediately NE of Mount House ought to include the NE corner of the palace moat, and failure to find it in Trench 2 of this assessment means either that it cuts back very close to the palace wall, or it is discontinuous: either way it is significant and would repay investigation.
- 5.3 Near the more northerly of the two tower fronts of the palace outer wall the full width of the moat is considerably smaller than previously estimated; there must be a possibility that this was a double moat, which would again repay an investigation.
- 5.4 The inner edge of the moat as observed in 1984 at the SE corner of the palace site was tight up against the terrace wall, and as with the NE corner it needs to be investigated in case it reflects an anomalous relationship with the upstanding terraces. Assuming that this is to be the site of the proposed Interpretation Centre there would be a case for excavating those areas which would be affected by the foundations, which would thereby provide the first full section across the Witney moat, and to judge from the results of the hand excavation on the Mount Mills site in 1984 it would provide some finds worthy of display.

Greg Campbell  
Brian Durham  
OAU September 1990

#### List of Illustrations

- 1 Site Location Plan. The 'Assessment Area' embraces all three phases of the development, including Phase 1 to NE (Watching Brief June-July 1990), Phase 2 (present report) and Phase 3 (proposed).
- 2 Assessment Trench Plan
- 3 South Face of Trench 4
- 4 Trench 4 Plan
- 5 Areas of archaeological significance which would justify further study.



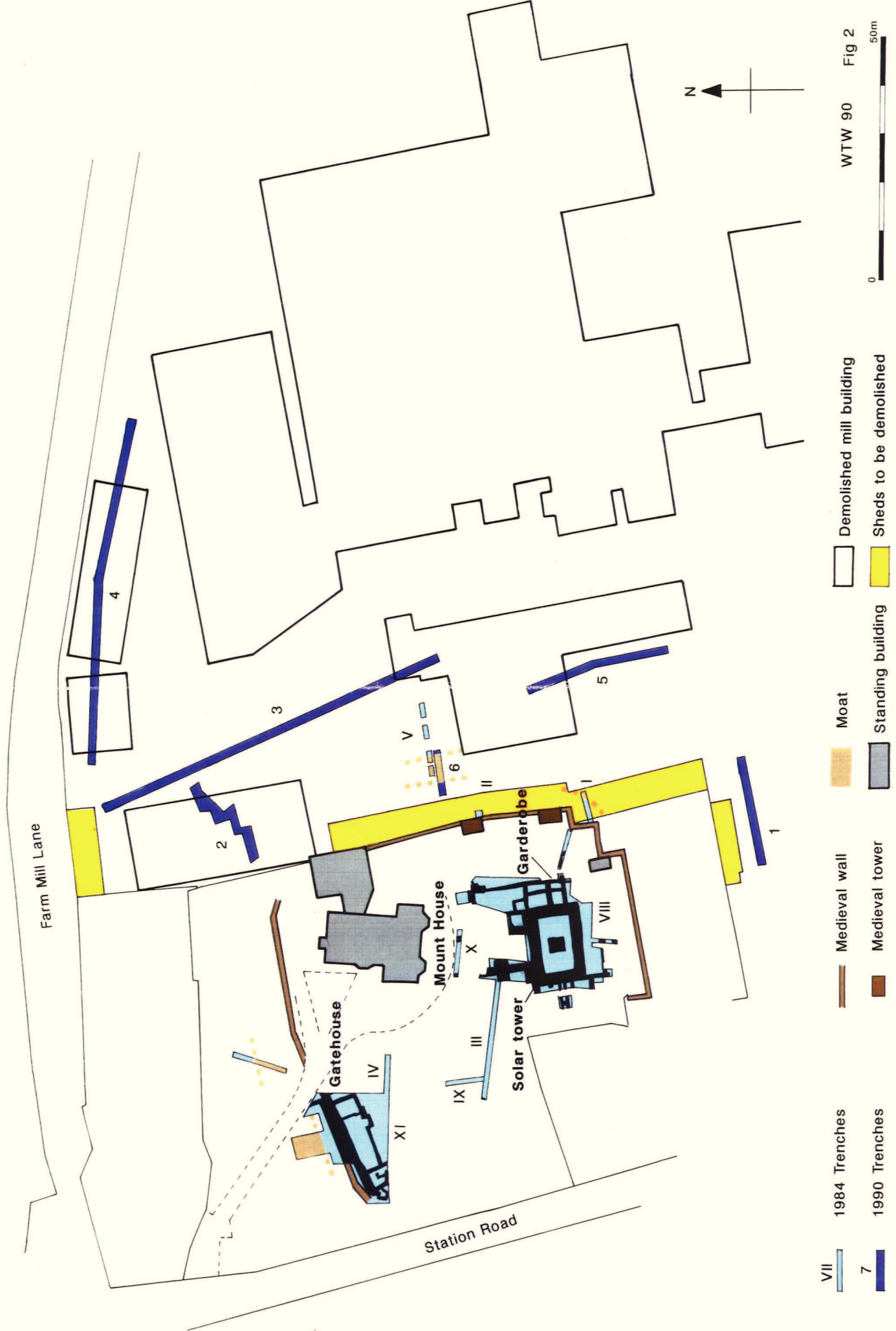
Site Location

Scale 1:2500

Phase 2 assessment WTW 90

Fig. 1







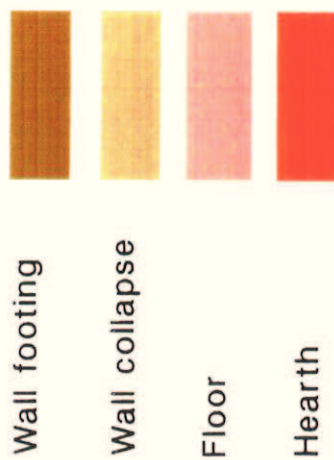
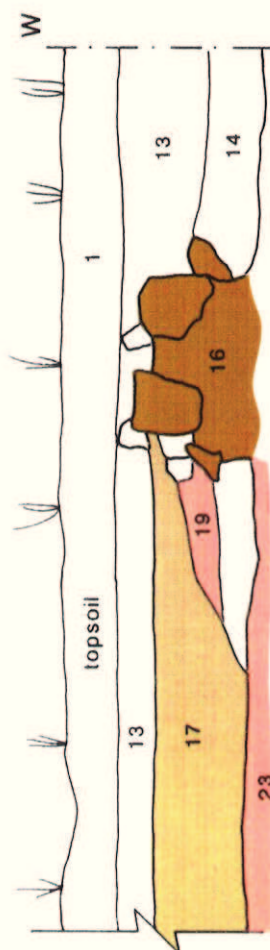
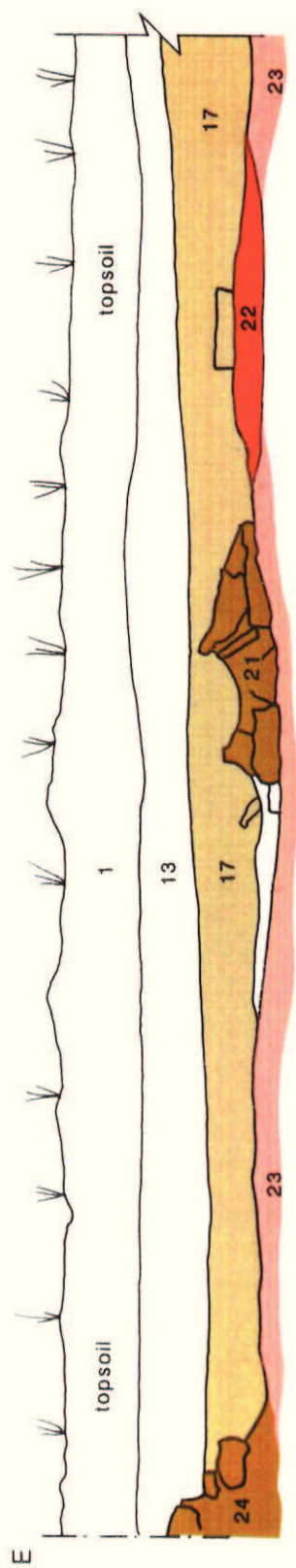
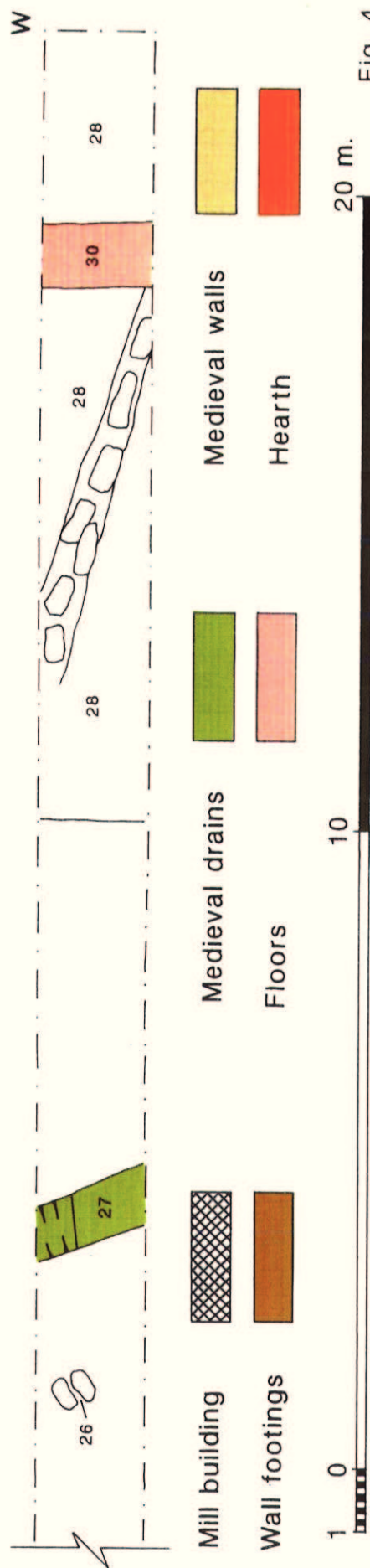
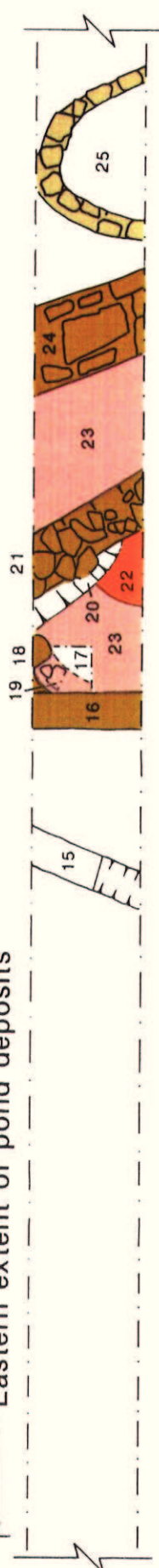


Fig. 3

# WTW 90 Trench 4



## Eastern extent of pond deposits



- Mill building
- Medieval drains
- Medieval walls
- Wall footings
- Floors
- Hearth



Fig. 4



Medieval structures surviving



Course of palace moat



WTW 90 Fig 5





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