

February 1999

VALE ROYAL PUTTING GREEN CHESHIRE

Watching Brief Report

Vale Royal Putting Green
Cheshire

Archaeological Watching Brief Report

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SUMMARY

On 15th February 1999, an archaeological watching brief was undertaken by Lancaster University Archaeological Unit at Vale Royal Abbey Golf Club (SJ 6385 6985), partly within the Scheduled Ancient Monument of Vale Royal Abbey, Cheshire (Cheshire 76). The watching brief had been commissioned by The Vale Royal Golf Club to fulfil the conditions of a grant of Scheduled Monument Consent during the landscaping works for the construction of a putting green.

The construction of the putting green involved a superficial topsoil strip over an area of some 200m², adjacent to the north-west corner of the Great House. Topsoil was removed by a tracked mechanical excavator under archaeological supervision, and the resultant spoil was used for landscaping nearby to the east of the house. The movement of the spoil was also subject to archaeological supervision.

The topsoil strip extended to a maximum depth of 0.08m and was made through modern deposits; this overlay a hard-standing deposit which was the surface for an earlier car park. No excavation through the hard-standing was undertaken. No archaeological features or finds were encountered and the development has not had any impact upon any significant archaeological resource.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks are due to Andrew Thorp and the staff of the Vale Royal Golf Club, who were helpful and supportive throughout.

The archaeological watching brief was undertaken by Julian Cotton, who also wrote this report. The report was edited by Jamie Quartermaine and Rachel Newman. The project was managed by Jamie Quartermaine.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 CIRCUMSTANCES OF PROJECT

- 1.1.1 The refurbishment of Vale Royal Great House (SJ 6385 6985) and the landscaping associated with the construction of the golf course has, given the sensitivity of the site (*Section 1.2.2*), necessitated an on-going programme of archaeological work. Consequently this watching brief follows on from an extensive programme of archaeological recording. In 1995 the Great House was subject to a detailed fabric survey (LUAU 1998a) and, in 1997, the peripheral areas outside the boundary of the scheduled area were evaluated (LUAU 1997a) in advance of the proposed golf course. A series of archaeological trenches was also dug within the Scheduled Area, prior to the insertion of drains (LUAU 1997b).
- 1.1.2 Of late, Vale Royal Abbey Golf Club have needed to construct a new practice green adjacent to the north-west corner of the existing Club House, which extends partly within the boundary of the Scheduled Area. Following an application to the Department of Culture Media and Sport, Scheduled Monument Consent was granted to build this green on 26th January 1999. Lancaster University Archaeological Unit (LUAU) was commissioned to undertake the watching brief that was a requirement of this consent (*Appendix 1, part 3.vi*).

1.2 TOPOGRAPHICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

- 1.2.1 Vale Royal House is located at SJ 6385 6985, 4km to the south-west of Northwich, and overlooks the canalised course of the River Weaver immediately to the north-east. It lies at an altitude of approximately 40m AOD, and the underlying geological deposits comprise glacial drift. The soils are generally brown sand soils similar to those encountered in Delamere Forest, but Cheshire Plain Stagnogleys are also present (Ragg *et al* 1983, end map).
- 1.2.2 Vale Royal House, a grade II listed building, was formerly the site of Vale Royal Abbey, a Cistercian house founded by Edward I in 1277, and extensively altered in the sixteenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. The abbey church was notable as the longest Cistercian church in the country (Kettle 1990).
- 1.2.3 At the Dissolution, the site of the abbey was sold, and the abbey church was demolished. In addition, the south and west claustral ranges were altered and extended to form a house. In 1616, the house became the property of Mary Cholmondeley, whose family retained the house until 1947. Substantial eighteenth and nineteenth century alterations were undertaken, including the rebuilding of the north-west and south-west wings, the construction of the Blore Wing in the 1830s, the refacing of the Southern Range, and the construction of the Douglas Wing in the 1860s (Mc Neil and Turner 1987).
- 1.2.4 In the early twentieth century, the house was leased to the Hopkirks, and then to the Dempsters. In 1939 it was requisitioned as a sanatorium and subsequently became the Imperial Chemical Industry Salt Division headquarters; it now forms the Golf Clubhouse. The site is a Scheduled Monument (County Monument 76).

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 PUTTING GREEN

- 2.1.1 The planned position of the putting green was 20m to the north-west of the north-west corner of the Clubhouse (Fig 2). The layout of the green was sub-triangular in shape, with sinuous sides and the western edge close against a sandstone wall, defining the edge of a car parking area. The proposed putting green was approximately 200m² in area, and required a shallow soil strip to allow a stone carpet drainage layer to be inserted in the ground, prior to the area being covered with imported soil and seed.

2.2 ARCHAEOLOGICAL RECORDING

- 2.2.1 A permanent archaeological presence was maintained during the soil strip, in order to record the deposits and features exposed, and to ensure that the works adhered to the provisions of the Scheduled Monument Consent.
- 2.2.2 The stratigraphy and archaeological features were recorded using methods in accordance with those recommended by English Heritage's Central Archaeology Service (CAS). Recording was in the form of context sheets. Scale drawings (plans at 1:50) were made where appropriate, and photographs (black and white prints and colour transparencies) were taken as necessary. On-site assessment of the deposits suggested it was not necessary to take environmental samples. Any finds were handled and stored according to standard practice (following current Institute of Field Archaeologists guidelines) in order to minimise deterioration.
- 2.2.3 The stripped surfaces and displaced spoil were scanned for the presence of displaced artefacts, and where appropriate the nature of exposed deposits and their relationships to other deposits were clarified by manual cleaning,
- 2.2.4 The position of the works and all the features observable within the stripped area were mapped by manual survey techniques.

2.3 ARCHIVE

- 2.3.1 The results of the watching brief will form the basis of a full archive to professional standards, in accordance with current English Heritage guidelines (English Heritage 1991). The archive will be deposited with the Chester County Archive Service and a copy of the report will be forwarded to the Cheshire Sites and Monuments Record.

3. RESULTS

3.1 SOIL STRIP

- 3.1.1 The principal deposit removed during the soil strip was a coarse dark brown silt loam topsoil [1] containing occasional small to medium-sized fragments of limestone and occasional small fragments of brick, slates, and plastic. This deposit encompassed the whole extent of the working area, and an average depth of 0.06m was removed. The depth of excavation did not exceed 0.08m, and, at the maximum depth of excavation, modern materials (not retained) were still present in the soil.
- 3.1.2 A certain degree of variation was observable in respect of the surface exposed by the soil strip (Fig 3). In the mid western part of the stripped area, a small patch of medium limestone gravel [2] was observed, which was aligned north/south and measured 8m by 1.5m in extent. On investigation, it was established that the limestone gravel formed a surface extending beneath deposit [1]. Following discussions with the green staff it was evident that this surface was the remains of a former car parking area, and that much of deposit [1] was infill of very recent date.
- 3.1.3 Towards the eastern corner of the stripped area a deposit of greyish-white cement mortar and gravelly clay was encountered [3]. This deposit appeared to form a deliberately flat and compacted level, and, although not fully understood, clearly represented another recent hard-standing. In places strands of polythene sheeting could be seen protruding from the deposit, which measured 5m by 2m in area.
- 3.1.4 Along the north-eastern perimeter of the stripped area, a zone of slightly lighter-coloured sandier-textured soil [4] was observed. Deposit [4], although difficult to differentiate from [1], appeared to have fewer inclusions and gave the impression of being a comparatively undisturbed soil horizon. It is possible, however, that deposit [4] was merely a lens within the general top-soil deposit.

3.2 OTHER SITE WORKS

- 3.2.1 The soil strip was the only ground-intrusive item of works being undertaken. All other activities took place on the present ground surface and were thus not archaeologically destructive. Some of the landscaping (using spoil from the putting green soil strip) was monitored to ensure that the movement of plant across grassed areas did not lead to the formation of deep ruts, or would otherwise endanger the archaeological resource. In the light of the trial trenching programme within the Scheduled Area (LUAU 1998b), it was evident that this machine disturbance was too shallow to have an impact upon archaeological deposits.

4. DISCUSSION

4.1 IMPACT

- 4.1.1 The landscaping works were undertaken in accordance with the requirements of the Scheduled Monument Consent and the works in relation to the construction of the putting green had a minimal ground impact. The soil strip was shallow, and most of the material that was removed was clearly and unambiguously modern in date. No evidence was found of any archaeological features, deposits, or artefacts within the scope of the works.
- 4.1.2 Although it is probable that significant archaeological remains do exist at greater depths in this part of the site, the nature of the present works meant that there was no impact upon such deposits or features.

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APPENDIX 1
SCHEDULED MONUMENT CONSENT

ILLUSTRATIONS

- Fig 1 Vale Royal Location Map
- Fig 2 Putting Green Location
- Fig 3 Putting Green Soil Strip



based upon the Ordnance Survey 1:50000
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0 500 1000
 metres

Fig 1 : Location Map

**VALE ROYAL
GREAT HOUSE,
CHESHIRE**

PLAN NAME:

**VALE ROYAL
PUTTING GREEN**

COMMISSIONED and FUNDED BY:

Vale Royal Golf Club

FIGURE 2

THIS DRAWING IS BASED ON
DIGITAL DATA SUPPLIED BY TACP.



DRAWN BY: JQ and JC

DATE: 02/99

Putting Green



Scheduled Area



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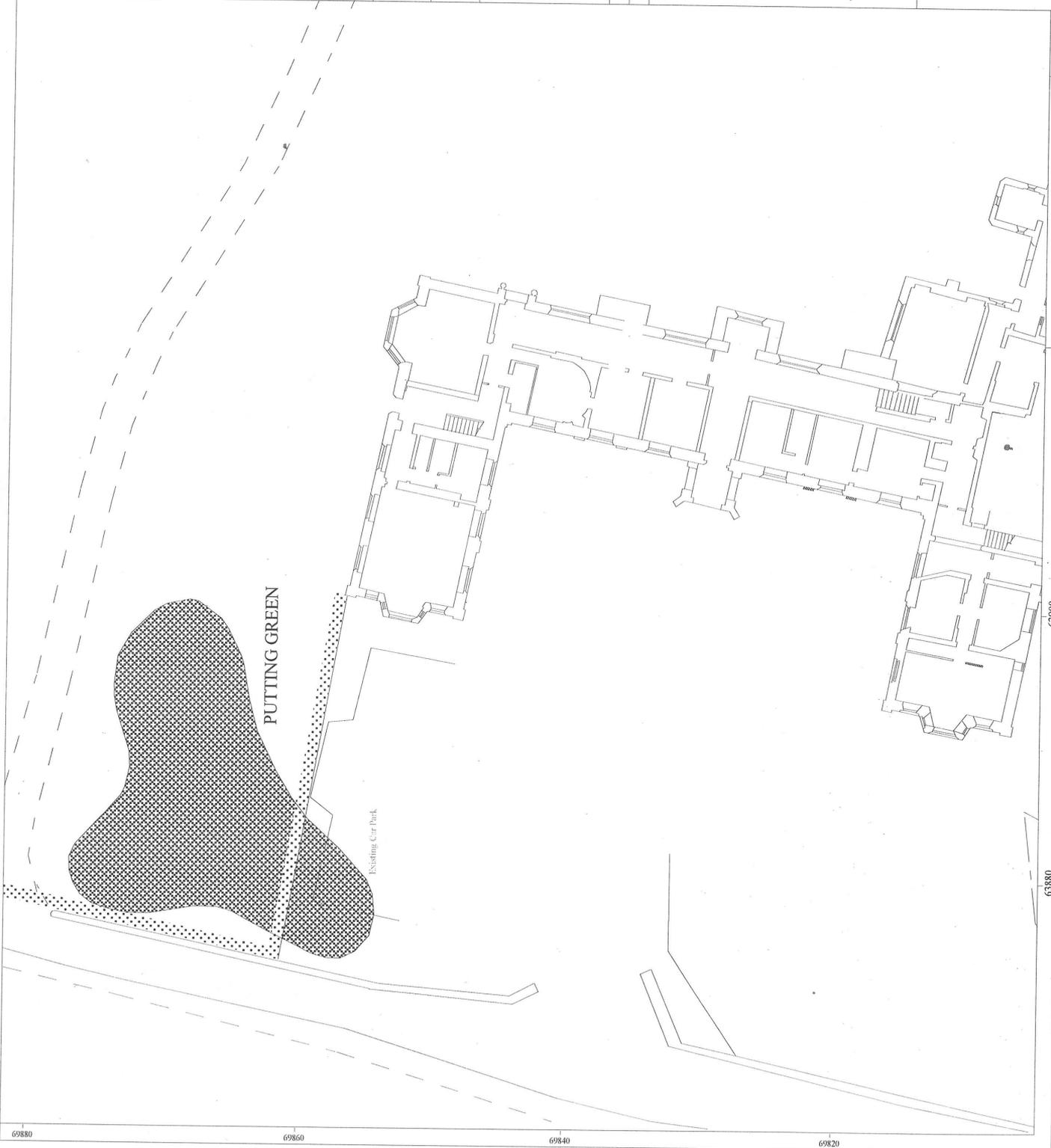


Fig 2 Putting Green Location

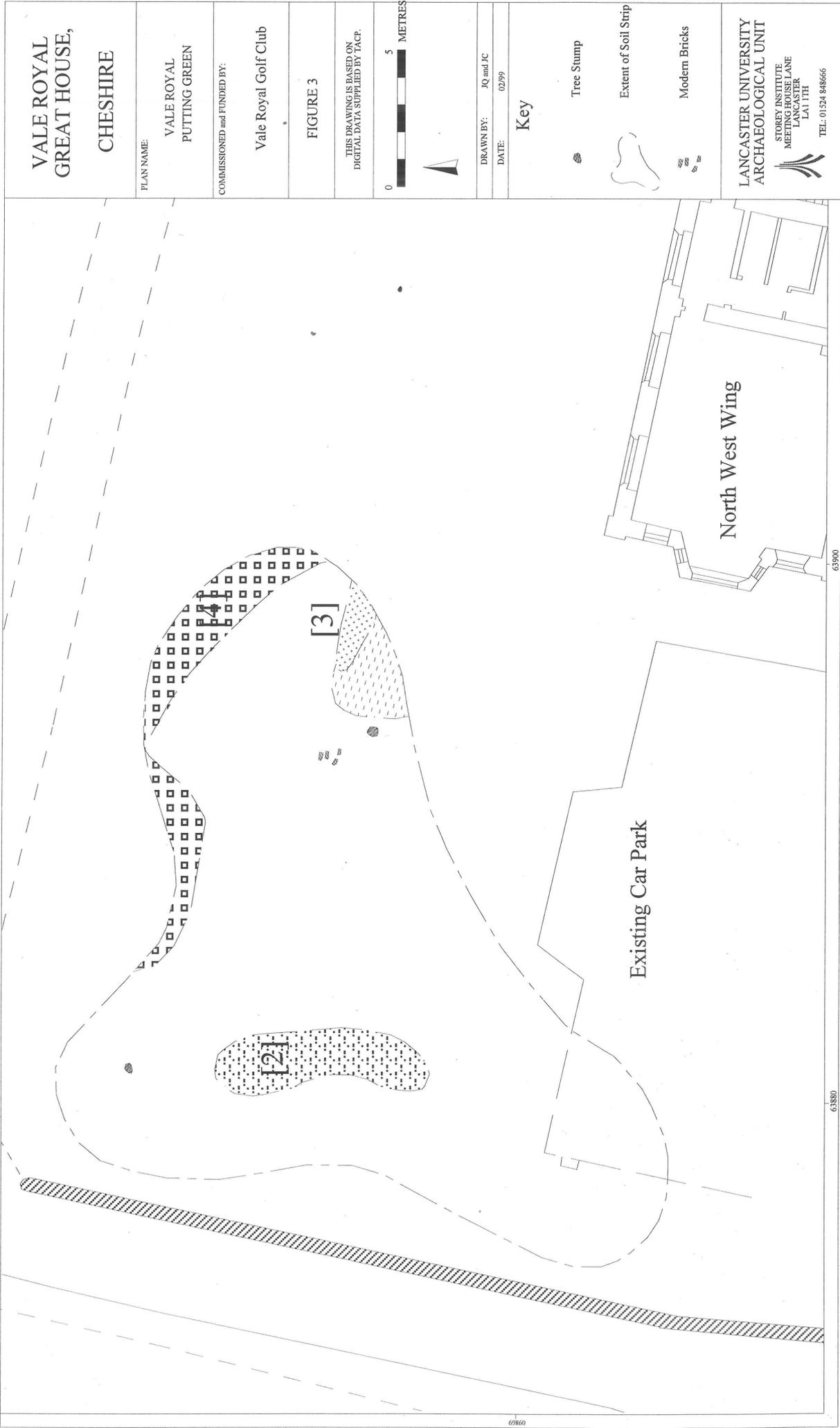


Fig 3 Putting Green Soil Strip

PLATES

Plate 1 General view of putting green following soil strip



Plate 1 General view of Putting Green following soil strip > south-east