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Enlargement and Regrading of Pond,
University Parks,
Parks Road, Oxford
Archaeological Evaluation Report

NGR SP 518 076



OXFORD ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT

November 1995

ENLARGEMENT AND REGRADING OF POND,

UNIVERSITY PARKS,

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OXFORD

Archaeological Evaluation

Planning Application no. NFH/1613/94

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SP 518 076

Oxford Archaeological Unit

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Abstract

The Oxford Archaeological Unit carried out an archaeological evaluation in the University Parks, Parks Road, Oxford on behalf of Oxford University in respect of a planning application for enlarging and regrading the pond. One trench was dug, which contained two palaeochannels (former courses of the Cherwell), medieval ploughing and a post-medieval ditch and bank which perhaps defined a riverbank.

Introduction

The archaeological work was commissioned in respect of a planning application for enlarging and regrading a pond. The field evaluation followed a Written Scheme of Investigation prepared by R Morse of the OAU in response to a Brief produced by B Durham of the Oxford Archaeological Advisory Service on behalf of Oxford City Council.

Archaeological Background and Desk-top survey

Archaeological background

The principal reason put forward in the Brief for requiring archaeological work in advance of planning determination was the extensive archaeological sites immediately W of the application site (see Fig. 1).

The area of the river gravels adjacent to the Thames has been proved to be rich in archaeological remains. In particular there is evidence of extensive prehistoric, Roman and Saxon activity on the adjacent gravels. The sites W of the application area are mostly evidenced from cropmarks and include Neolithic, Bronze Age, Iron Age and Roman components; three ring ditches likely to be Bronze Age barrows in the Parks and three more barrows on an E-W alignment, to the W of the Banbury Road, are mentioned in a charter of 1160 but are now destroyed. Barrows have been excavated to the N of the Civil War defences on the site of Rex Richards Building. The other cropmarks in the Parks may be the remains of Iron Age settlement. Further late Bronze Age, Iron Age and Roman activity has been recorded around the site. This includes Bronze Age swords from the Cherwell.

At present the area of the site is covered by E-W ridge and furrow which is the remains of medieval strip agriculture, and a large N-S earthwork bank runs roughly parallel to the Cherwell.

Desk-top survey

The pond lies in the NE corner of the parish of Holywell. The manor of Holywell was not a part of the City of Oxford until 1667 although it was owned by Robert d'Oilly, Lord of Oxford, in 1086. The manor was acquired by Merton College in 1294 and parts were purchased by the University between 1853 and 1864. Its exact use between 1086 and the 16th century is unclear but it would appear that it formed the open fields of the parish, a view confirmed by the presence of ridge

and furrow on the site. Meadow and pasture by the Cherwell is documented. For example, following a dispute about the exact boundaries of the manor in 1266 the eastern boundary of the parish/manor was defined as running '....by [the] Charwell *through the medes belonging to the manor* even to the garden of the Hospitall of St John the Baptist....'. The site of the pond was meadow on the edge of the river by the post-medieval period. A 1666 Merton College Estate map shows various enclosures called 'Mr Lazenbee's Ground' and Long Mead, Fourth Leaze. By 1758 the area of the pond is called 'Picked Mead' (see Fig. 3). By the 17th century no arable is documented in the parish and it is likely that from the 17th century onwards the slightly higher ground to the west of the pond was parkland.

Although the acquisition of this area by the University, and therefore the creation of the 'University Parks' proper did not occur until 1864 (see below) the area to the north of Holywell Street and the east of Parks Road, called variously 'Beaumont Fields' and 'The Parks' seems to have been in use as Parks from at least the 17th century onwards. There are reports of Royalist troops drilling in the Parks during the Civil War and Charles II is said to have exercised in the Parks when staying in Oxford in 1685. Plot (1676) called them 'a place for the Recreation of youth and where the pastimes of scholars were solemnised' (although this may be an ironic reference to the cock-pits and bowling greens in Holywell parish). Peshall writing in 1773, says of Holywell 'Before I take my lease of this manor I should speak to a neat Terras Walk made round part of a large field, called the Park, adjoining to the north-east end of the city, extending about a mile....'. By 1876 the site of the pond was part of the University Parks: the pond itself was dug out in 1926.

The map prepared for Wood's Antiquities of Oxford shows two meadows to the east of the Cherwell called 'Great and Little Pond Mead' suggesting that the river may have been dammed for control of the water at this point, i.e. directly upstream of Holywell Mill, Hospital Mill, Kings Mill etc. This would be the best place, where the river flow is strongest before it separates into two channels.

Maps consulted

Agas' Map of Oxford 1578
Merton College Estate map 1666
Loggan's Map of Oxford 1675
Merton College Estate map 1758
Davis' map 1799
Wood's Antiquities of Oxford 1662 map for 1889 edition

1814 Ordnance Surveyors Drawing
1830/1833 1st edition OS 1"
OS 1st ed 25" (1876)
All Editions of the OS 25" between 1876 and 1958

Archaeological methodology

Aims

The aim was to establish the presence or absence of archaeological remains within the development area.

- i) To determine the extent, condition, character, quality and date of any archaeological remains present.
- ii) To record a profile of the natural gravel deposits.
- iii) To record any loess/brickearth deposits capping the gravel.
- iv) To record any alluvial deposits of the Cherwell.
- v) To record any colluvial deposits or ploughsoil, with particular reference to any which may interleave with alluvial deposits.

Strategy

Field evaluation by trenching was required as the site has been a park for some time and no find scatter prospective techniques (eg fieldwalking) could be employed and no aerial photographs existed showing cropmarks in the area to be turned into pond.

The evaluation was to consist of one 40 m long, 1.55 m wide machine-dug trench placed across the application site. The trench represents a sample of 7.5% of the application area. The trench was machine-excavated to the first archaeologically significant horizon, or top of the gravel, or a depth of 1.2 m. No artefacts were retrieved from the machine-excavated soil. During a site visit by Dr Mark Robinson, head of English Heritage's Environmental Archaeology Unit, University Museum, Oxford, one environmental sample of waterlogged material was taken. The trench was planned at 1:100. Sections of the features and sample sections of the trench were drawn at 1:20.

Description of Results (see Fig. 2)

Two palaeochannels were seen. The first (1 and 7) was 3.2 m deep (from the present surface) and its lowest fill (1) was waterlogged material from an open briskly flowing channel which was situated in an unwooded landscape with animals present. This had silted up with clay. The clay fill (2) of this channel contained no organic material and so is likely to have been laid down in a relatively dry channel. The water table had subsequently risen and turned this clay a vivid blue-grey. The second channel (3) was shallower due to the higher water table at 1.2 m deep. The organic material it contained suggests a reed-swamp type environment. This channel had filled with buff clay (4) and was capped by shelly grey-brown clay (5).

A reddish brown subsoil (18), derived from the Sutton series of soils, was present over the gravel. This had been disturbed (probably by cultivation) as it

contained small fragments of burnt flint which presumably derive from the nearby archaeological sites. As the trench was aligned along a ridge there was a considerable depth of medieval ploughsoil (16 and 17) overlying the subsoil. The cultivation which formed the ploughsoil continued into the shelly clay (5); there were no distinctions between ploughsoil and alluvium. This probably indicates cultivation extending as far as was possible into the margins of the river.

Two N-S ditches (9 and 14) were recorded cutting into the ridge and furrow and the upcast from these must have formed the N-S bank visible on the site. The earlier of the two ditches contained one sherd of East Wiltshire Type Ware of late 12th- to mid 15th-century date, which is likely to be residual, and the other contained mid 18th- or 19th-century pottery (one sherd of Pearlware and one of Mocha ware. The three sherds were identified by L Whittingham).

Deposit Survey

The site has been landscaped slightly for use as a park. A gravel path on a slight rise runs N-S, parallel to the earthwork bank, but otherwise the survival of ridge and furrow indicates that the area has not been disturbed since enclosure.

The presence of palaeochannels is only to be expected so close to the Cherwell. The earlier of the two appears to be Bronze Age or later in date. This date is based on comparative environmental work. It is not known when the later of the two channels silted up and was ploughed over. This could have been in the medieval period when dams, weirs or mills downstream would have produced a substantial rise in the water table.

The filling of the first channel could have been due to slower water at the river's margin rather than any change in water regime. The cutting of the second, wider, channel could have been caused by the change in water flow for mills downstream; for example Holywell Mill is first mentioned in documents in about 1200 and St John's Hospital was refounded in 1231 and had extensive washing facilities requiring water. This wider channel may have filled quite swiftly. The ridge and furrow is a result of the expanded agriculture in the parish stimulated by Merton College.¹ The fact that the ploughing extends over wet river channel indicates the pressure on land use for this intensive agriculture.

The post-medieval ditch is likely to be the boundary between Picked Mead and either Wrenches Garden or Long Mead (see Fig. 3). It may be seen on Loggan's Map of Oxford from 1675 in the view of Oxford from the East where it runs diagonally from bottom right towards Magdalen Bridge in the left centre (see cover).

¹ See Postles, 1993, Revenues from sales of grain often exceeded £30 and in 1347-8 were £48 meanwhile in 1337 as many as 54 pigs and 8 sows, belonging to cottagers, strayed into the demesne corn. It may be that agricultural surplus, produced by contract labour rather than manorial serfs, was sold in Oxford.

ASSESSMENT OF IMPORTANCE

Following the Secretary of State for the Environment's published criteria for the scheduling of Ancient Monuments.

- i) **Period** The palaeochannels revealed in the evaluation trenches may be Bronze Age or medieval, or they may be open from the Bronze Age on. The strip cultivation is medieval.
- ii) **Rarity** Common on the floodplain.
- iii) **Documentation** None for the palaeochannels or ridge and furrow but limited map evidence for the ditches/field boundary.
- iv) **Group value** No further potential.
- v) **Survival/condition** Extensive areas of these deposits will survive to the S of the pond enlargement.
- vi) **Vulnerability** Threat from development.
- vii) **Diversity** See group value.
- viii) **Potential** The evaluation has fully explored the research potential of the site.

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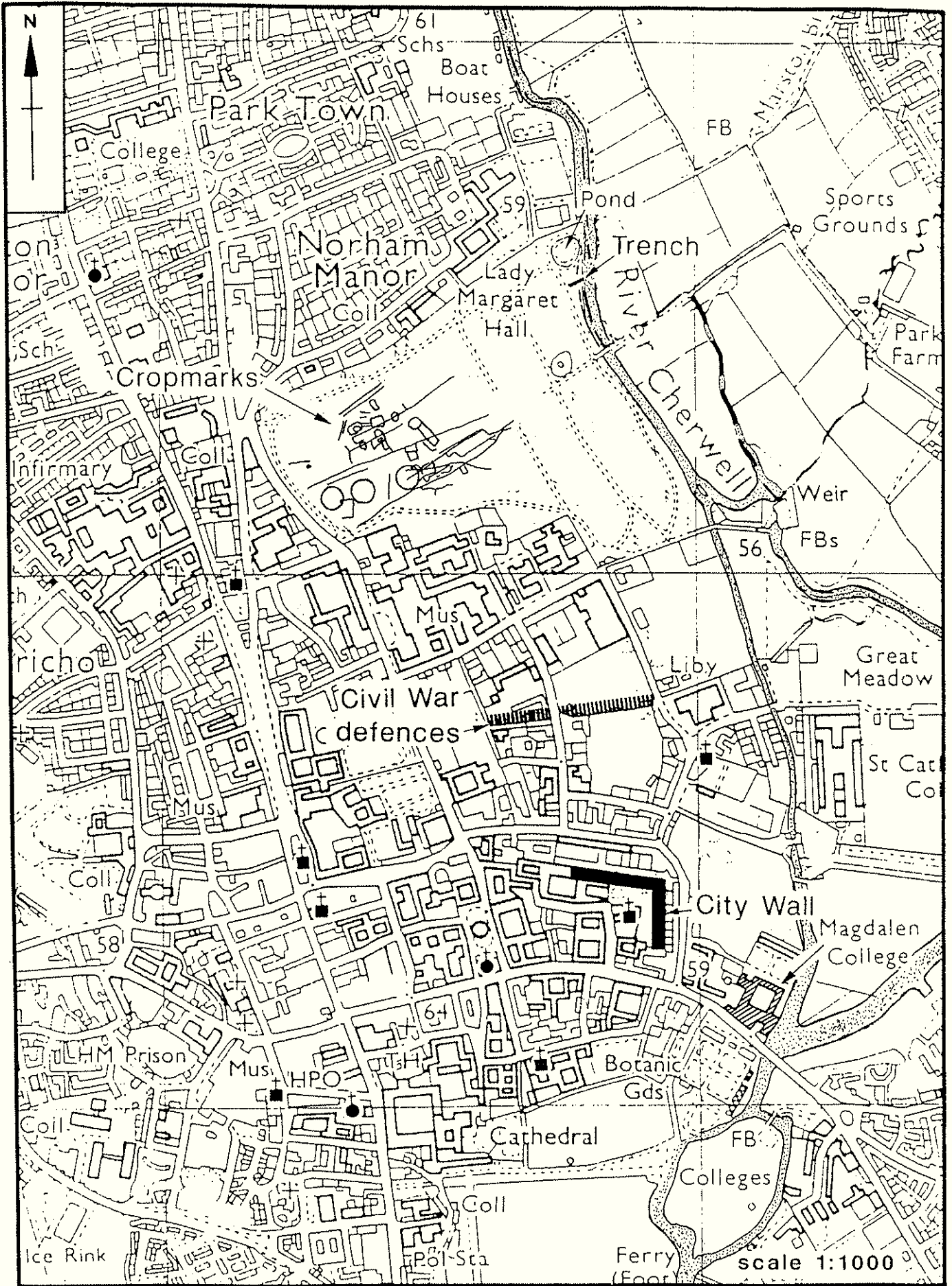
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Curator of the University Parks, Oxford

Appendix

environmental

by Dr Mark Robinson

One sample was taken from waterlogged organic material at the bottom of a palaeochannel. It contained remains of 29 species of plant and invertebrates. Freshwater snails and the seeds of true bullrush and water droplet indicate a reed-swamp type environment although the sandy nature of the deposit suggests briskly flowing water. The channel flowed through an open landscape which is indicated by seeds from weeds normally associated with disturbed ground and beetles normally found in grassland. There are also dung beetles but these could be from either domesticated or non-domesticated animals.



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Figure 1

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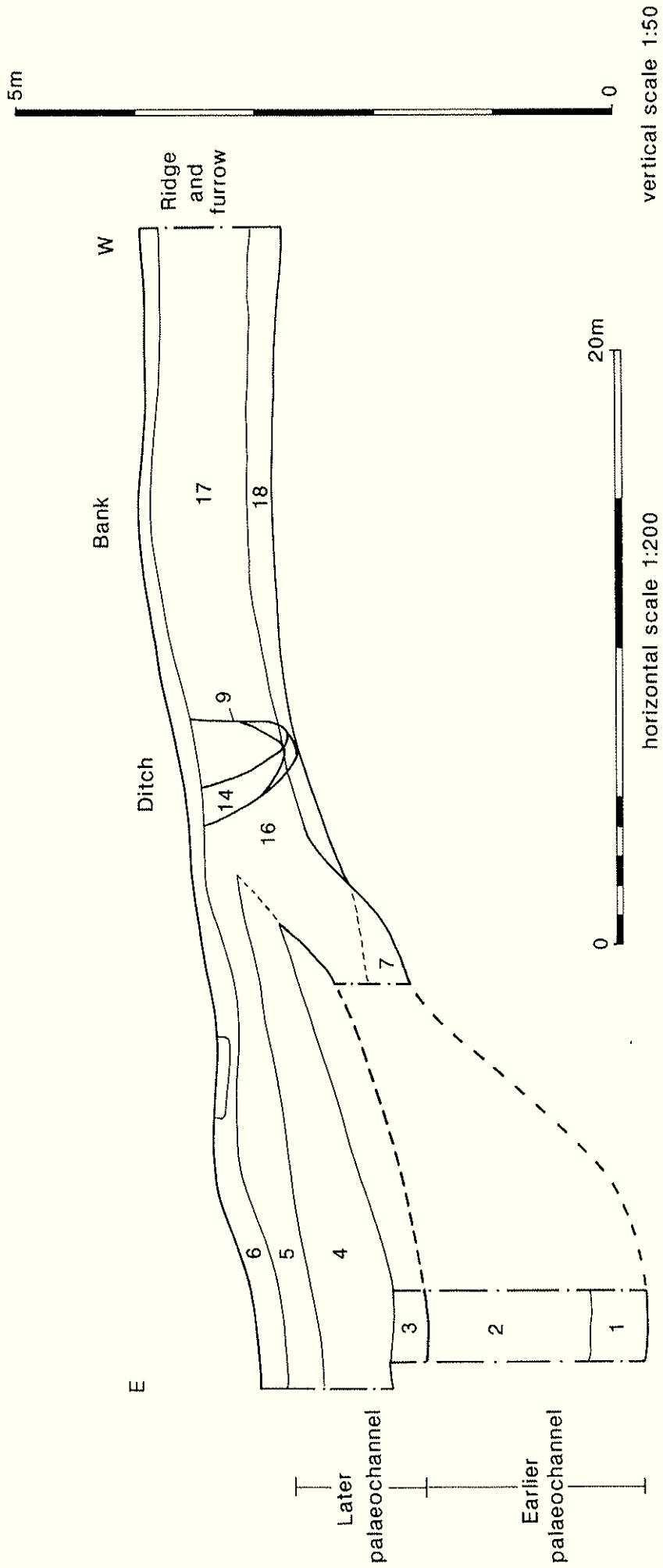


Figure 2

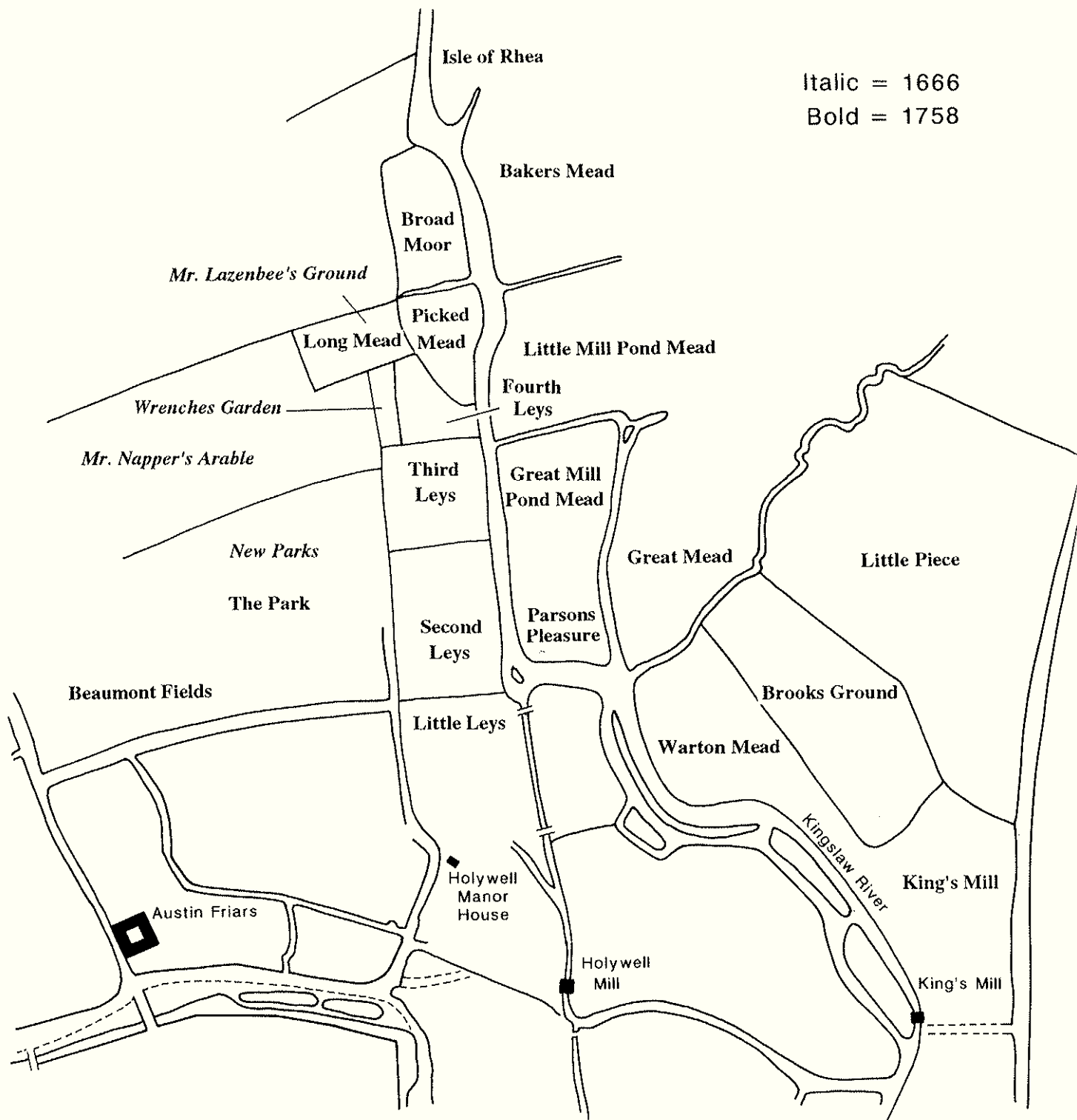


Figure 3



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