

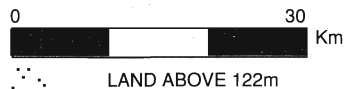
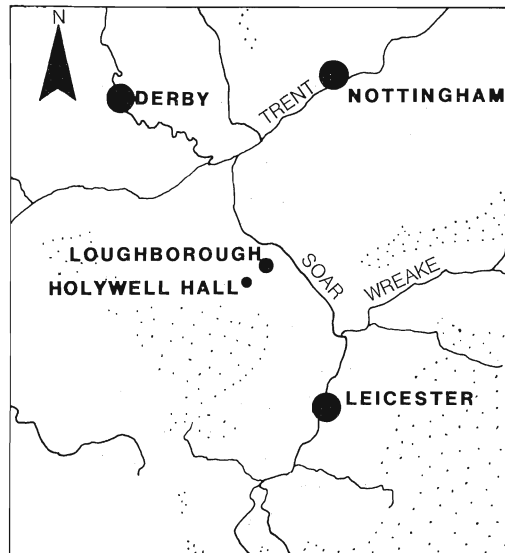
Holywell Hall, Loughborough: An Archaeological Evaluation

by *Josephine Sharman and David Mackie*

An archaeological evaluation was carried out in advance of development affecting earthworks adjacent to the moated site at Holywell, near Loughborough. A medieval date for the earthworks was confirmed, with the possibility of Saxon origins. A detailed micro-contour survey was produced using an EDM theodolite linked to computer software.

Background

Holywell Hall is located 2 miles south-west of Loughborough, just off the A512 Loughborough to Ashby road (SK 508 180). The site covers an area of three hectares. It consists of the multi-period hall, now a farmhouse, within a moat, and, to the north of this, an area of earthworks including possible house platforms, ridge and furrow and fishponds. Holywell is referred to in 1240, when it was held by the Abbot of Garendon, the head of the Cistercian abbey situated a mile to the north (Nichols 1800,122). The



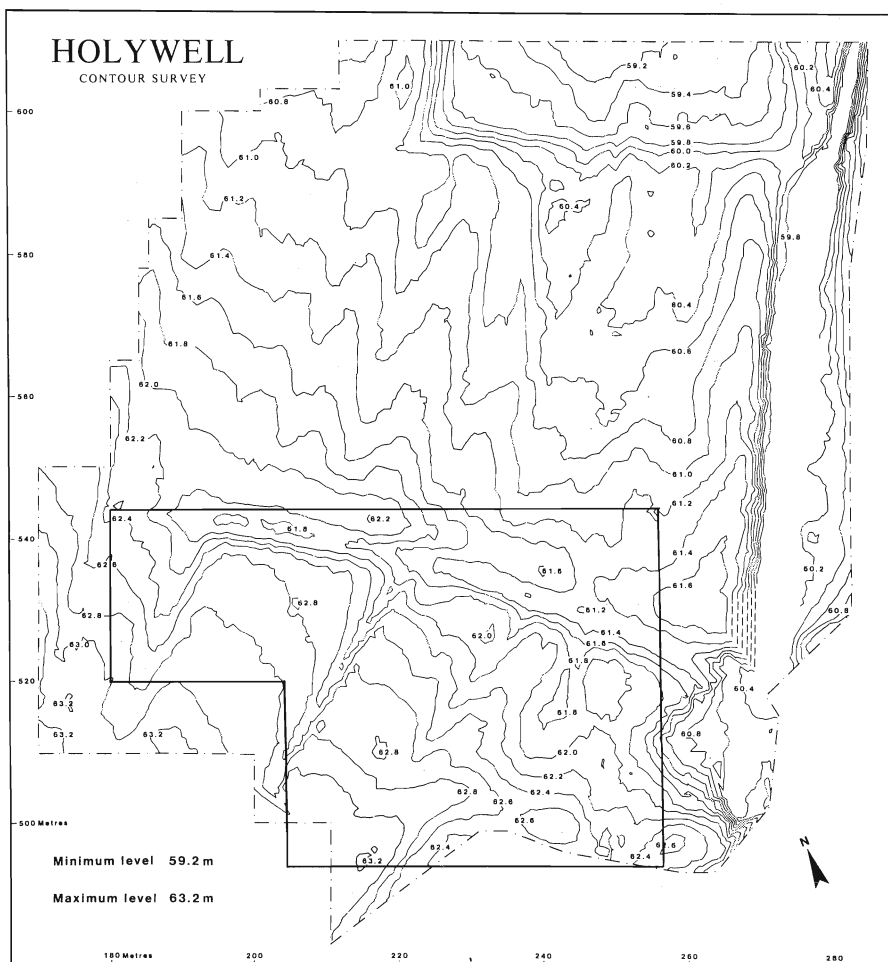
1. Holywell Hall in its regional setting

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site is thought to have been a small hermitage with a complex series of waterworks feeding the moat and fishponds.

Although the documentary evidence and the visible earthworks belong to the medieval period, the fact that the name Holywell is attached to the site as early as the 13th century, suggests the possibility that this may have been a sacred site from much earlier times.

In 1989, British Gas put forward proposals for the redevelopment of the site, involving the construction of a research station. The moated site was not threatened, but the medieval earthworks and field system would be destroyed. All the land was under pasture, precluding field-walking as a survey method, and making aerial reconnaissance unlikely to yield results. The magnetometer and resistivity surveys undertaken by British Gas were inconclusive, as the clay subsoil is unhelpful for geophysical techniques. Therefore, it was decided that the only satisfactory way of evaluating any archaeology beneath the ridge and furrow and earthworks was by limited excavation. The trench positions were chosen on a judgemental basis.



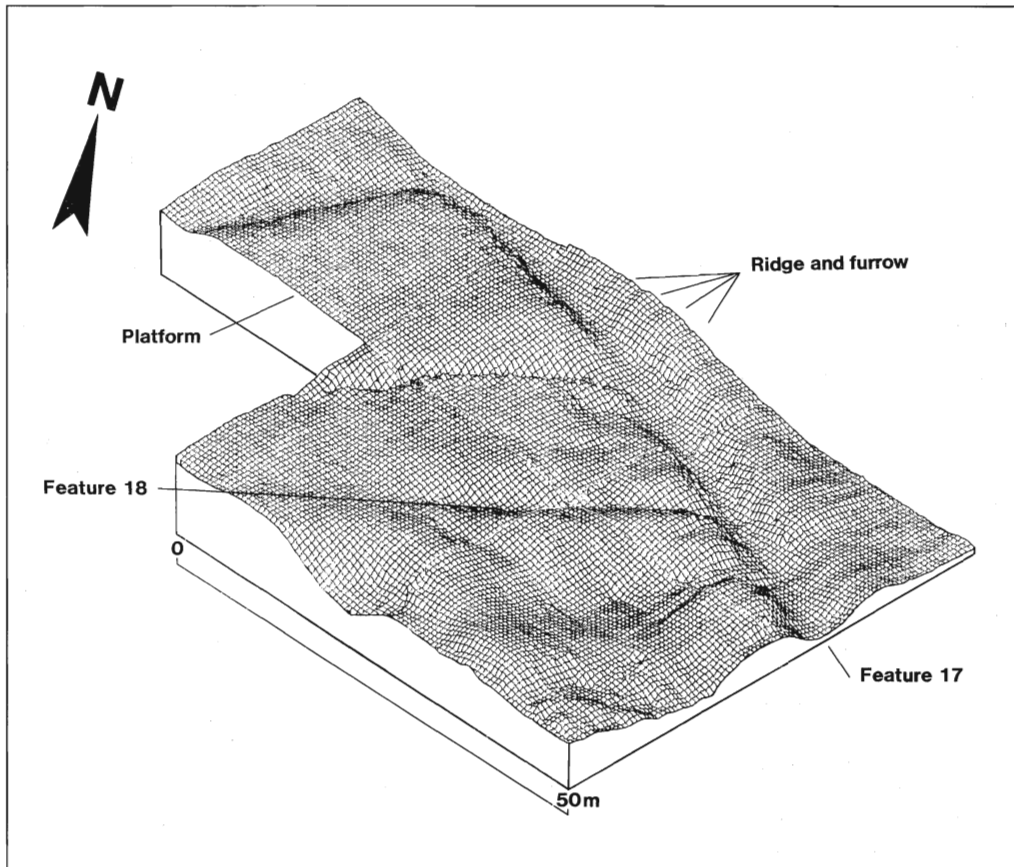
2. Micro-contour Survey of earthworks

The work was financed by British Gas and Leicestershire County Council, and carried out over nine weeks from the end of November, 1989, by Leicestershire Archaeological Unit under the direction of Josephine Sharman. The finds and site records are with Leicestershire Museums; A78.1989.

Micro-contour Survey

Creation of a permanent record of the existing site was accomplished by a micro contour survey of the main earthworks, prior to their destruction by the proposed development. A plan had already been produced using hachures to indicate the position of the earthworks, but this method of representing features suggests that the topography being recorded is clearly definable, which is not always the case. In reality, the surveyor has to make decisions as to where a feature begins and ends; at times it is impossible to see or make sense of features due to light conditions or ground cover.

A more objective survey was undertaken using a Topcon GTS-3B EDM (electronic distance measurer) theodolite and a portable Husky Hunter computer, programmed with ELLAR databuild. This enables the precise three dimensional location of any point to be recorded in a few seconds, to a higher degree of accuracy than is possible using



3. Computer generated three dimensional model of part of the earthwork area.

conventional survey methods. The recorded data was processed using PC-Survey Software (Milne 1987) to produce a final contour map.

A grid was set out over the site to assist the surveyors in covering the area methodically. Readings were taken at one metre intervals, though the program could cope with random points or closely spaced points across steep slopes. In all, 10,800 points were recorded and stored on disc. These files were later merged and processed to produce the final map (illus. 2) with contours plotted at 0.2m intervals. The merged files of the small area outlined on the contour map, were used to produce a three dimensional model (illus. 3). This model shows the platforms and associated ditches (F17 and F18) clearly, as well as the start of the ridge and furrow, which, with other features, was not visible during the survey. Some vertical exaggeration is used to enhance the perspective of the model.

The Evaluation

Trenches 1-5 were stripped of topsoil by machine, and the 48 smaller trenches were excavated by hand (illus. 4).

The Ridge and Furrow

Trenches 1-4 were designed to locate any archaeological evidence beneath the medieval field system. The trenches were cut at right-angles to the ridge and furrow. Removal of the topsoil revealed no archaeological levels, with the exception of the medieval furrows showing every 9-10m. A metal detector survey of the trenches produced similarly negative results. Consequently, this area was not investigated further.

The Pond

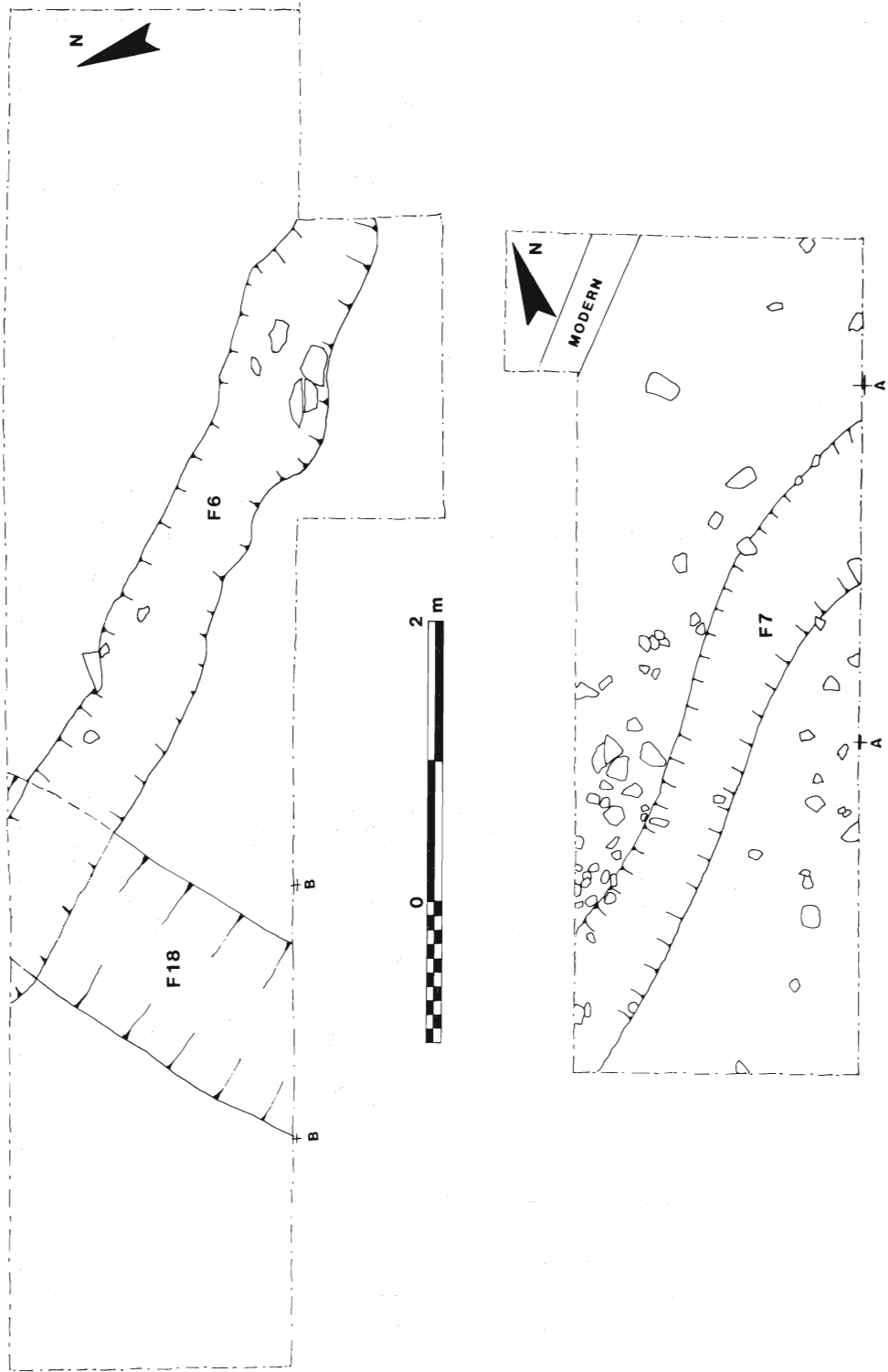
The pond, in the north-east quarter of the site, was approximately 45 metres wide, 70 metres long and 1.5m deep. It is very roughly rectangular, narrowing at the north end and would have filled from its south-east corner, where the gap between pond and stream is narrowest. Investigation of the pond was expected to uncover a layer of silt, perhaps with preserved organic material, and some trace of the sluice system by which it would have filled.

In trench 5, the topsoil was removed by machine from a section of the bank and pond base. Immediately below the topsoil was undisturbed natural subsoil; there was no buried land surface beneath the bank and no silt in the pond. It seems likely that the soil originally dug out of the pond must have formed the mounds that dammed the north-east end of the pond. These mounds flanked a dam wall, built of eighteenth century brick, which was breached about 50 years ago, to drain the pond. The ends of the wall followed contours of mounds which have since settled or eroded.

Most of the trenches in the pond were down to natural subsoil within 0.30m, with no trace of the anticipated silts (trenches 6,9,10 & 21), their absence may indicate that the pond was cleaned a short time before it went out of use. In trenches 19, 20 and 22, the steeply sloping sides of a deep (and malodourous) channel were uncovered. The silty-clay fill of the channel was removed to a depth of 0.85m and sherds of post-medieval pottery were recovered. Before the sections could be drawn or the fill sampled, the trenches filled to the top with water. The channel seemed to be approximately 10m across. It proved impossible to verify this or investigate the area further because the wintry weather conditions ensured heavy waterlogging for the duration of the excavation.

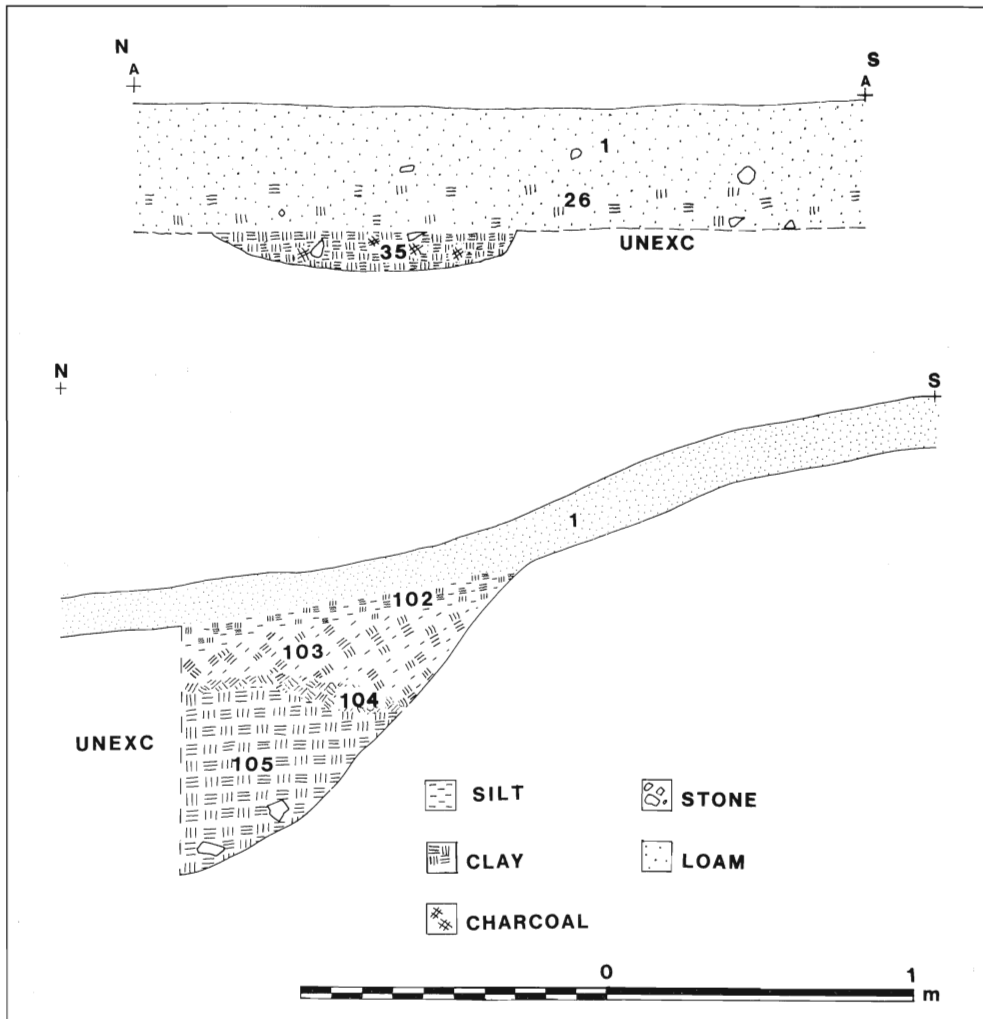


4. Location of trenches



5. Plans: Trench 15 (above), Trench 29 (below)

Trench 38, at the south eastern edge of the pond, was placed at the narrowest point between pond and stream. This seemed the most likely place for there to have been a sluice-gate for filling the pond. Unfortunately, there were no traces of the sluice-gate, nor of any deeper channel connecting stream and pond. Instead, above the natural clay, there was a broad band of cobbles 2.5 - 3m across, running north-south. The cobbles were of irregularly shaped charnian stone interspersed with broken tile and brick. Some parts of the cobbling were deliberately packed with pancheon ware sherds, dating it to the 18th century or later. This may represent an attempt to consolidate boggy ground on the approach to a sluice system which has left no other trace. Although this pond may originally have been constructed as a fishpond in medieval times, subsequent cleaning, at the least, has removed all vestiges of stratification from this period.

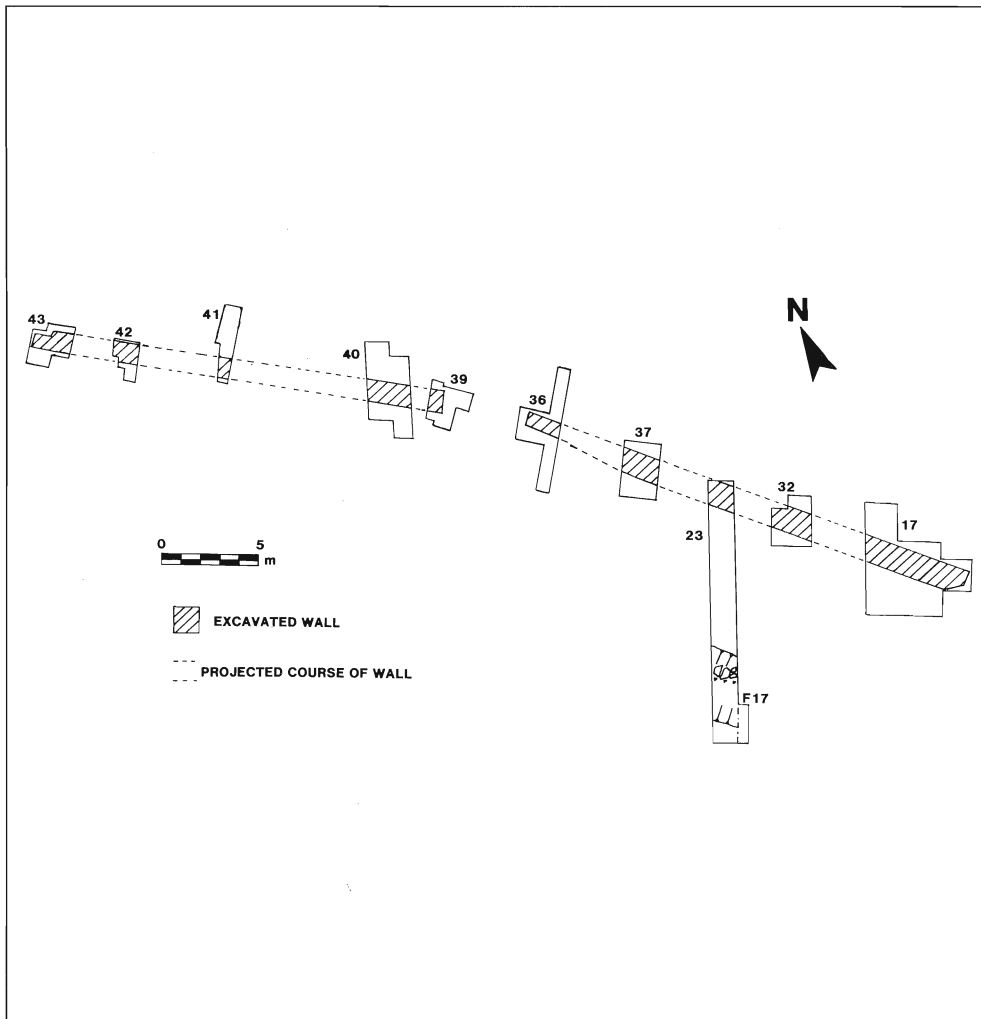


6. Section of Trench 29, with gully, F7 (above) and section of ditch, F17 (below).

The Earthworks (illus. 4)

The aim, in the investigation of the earthworks closest to the moat and the well, was to ascertain whether they represented house platforms, or a series of closes, gardens or orchards associated with the Hall. House platforms developed in the medieval period and were most common in the Midland clay lands where each toft was built up as a platform surrounded by a ditch which was often quite large (Hurst 1971,117). The level of the house platform would gradually rise as drainage ditches and roads were cleaned and the resulting spoil piled onto the platforms. Obviously, on a heavy clay soil drainage of gardens would also be necessary and could bring about a similar effect.

The trenches on these earthworks produced no evidence of buildings or occupation levels. The natural subsoil of boulder clay was at an average depth of 0.60m, deep enough to indicate that this area might have been cultivated as a garden. Medieval



7. Plan of trenches showing wall footings, F8.

pottery and floor tile fragments were recovered from the trenches in this area and perhaps indicate manuring in the medieval period. There was also one small sherd of Roman grey ware pottery. A copper alloy hooked mount, possibly Romano-British, was recovered from the topsoil of trench 15.

A linear depression running in a north-easterly direction was investigated in trench 15 and proved to be the top of a silted up ditch, F18, from which no dating evidence was recovered. The ditch was cut by a shallow gully running east-west (F6). Shallow gullies, F7 (illus. 6 and 7) and F15, were also discovered in trenches 29 and 31. Presumably, the gullies were for drainage purposes. All contained Nottingham ware type sherds of the late 13th or early 14th century (20 sherds in total). F15 also contained four sherds of Saxon pottery dating, from the 6th or 7th centuries.

The three trenches closest to the moat (trenches 12, 14 and 26) had less than 0.20m of sediment above boulder clay. It is possible that this boulder clay could represent natural subsoil dug out of the moat and redeposited to form an exterior bank. Trench 34, adjacent to the Holy well, contained only modern features including five postholes, some packed with Victorian brick, which must mark a recent predecessor of the fence which stands around the well at present.

A large linear depression running west-east forms the northern boundary of the garden earthworks. Excavation, in trenches 23 and 52, showed the gully to be the top of a silted-up ditch, F17 (illus. 6). The north side of the ditch was cut by a large stone-built drain (still in use) by which it was evidently superceded. A sample from the bottom silt of the ditch was wet sieved and found to contain a large amount of waterlogged plant material. Seeds of rushes (*Juncus*) and spike rush (*Eleocharis*) were identified, indicating these plants were growing either in the ditch or on wet ground nearby. Caddis fly larvae cases were also found indicating that there was permanent water in the ditch for at least one season. There was no dating evidence from the ditch.

Seven metres to the north of the gully, excavation of trenches 43, 42, 41, 40, 39, 36, 37, 23, 32 and 17, revealed a wall foundation (illus. 7) running roughly parallel to the ditch, F17. This wall was of random rubble construction, the stone used being local volcanoclastic charnian stone from the Charnwood area. There was no mortar in the wall; either it was not used in the construction, or a clay mortar has washed out and left no trace. It is likely that this formed the base to a cob wall. The wall, F8, undulates independently of the ridge and furrow above it, as though following an earlier pattern of ridge and furrow on a slightly differing alignment. There is no cut or foundation trench, and no dating evidence was recovered. Both ends of the wall seem to have been disturbed. There is also a break of 5m, between trenches 39 and 36, which could represent a gateway, or just a disturbance.

This may have been the base of a boundary wall between the gardens of Holywell Hall and the open fields beyond. After it fell into disrepair and was ploughed over, the parallel ditch (F17) must have fulfilled both boundary and drainage functions. Excavation failed to reveal any archaeological relationship between wall and ditch.

The area between the cob wall and the pond proved to be another area of ridge and furrow, much disturbed by post medieval attempts at drainage, by a large rectangular slurry pit (now filled in) and its successor, a modern cesspit with attendant sewage and slurry pipes running into it. Trenches 46 and 53 uncovered no features and came down onto undisturbed natural subsoil at a depth of 0.40m.

Summary

The 53 trenches examined in the area of the proposed redevelopment revealed no serious archaeological implications. In view of the largely negative evidence, it seemed that little would be gained from any further excavation, and this was not recommended. The earthworks in the southern part of the site probably represent gardens enclosed by ditches and, with the wall footing, were the only surviving medieval levels discovered. The total of five sherds of Saxon pottery may indicate that there was early Saxon activity nearby. However, the likelihood is, that all the buildings associated with the hermitage at Holywell were within the moated area, which, for the present, remains unthreatened.

The Post-Roman Pottery

Deborah Sawday

Contexts 77, 35 and 22, fills of drainage gullies for the gardens, produced 20 sherds of post Roman pottery; all dating from the 13th or early 14th century, save four sherds of Saxon pottery, dating perhaps from the 6th or 7th centuries. This and the remaining unstratified medieval pottery was predominantly in Nottingham wares, with a few possible Chilvers Coton products, and sherds of unknown, but presumed local, provenance in Medieval Sandy ware. Reduced and Oxidised Sandy wares dating from the early medieval period, and of uncertain provenance, were also recovered, with another sherd of Saxon pottery, and a possible continental import -perhaps a French greyware- from context 5, a spread over one of the platforms.

Acknowledgements

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