

ASCOTT PARK,
STADHAMPTON, OXFORDSHIRE
ANALYTICAL EARTHWORK SURVEY OF A
17TH-CENTURY PARK AND GARDEN

Mark Bowden and Anya Rardin



Archaeological Survey &
Investigation



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century park and garden**

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Mark Bowden and Anya Rardin

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Ascott Park, Stadhampton, Oxfordshire: analytical earthwork survey of a 17th-century park and garden

Archaeological Survey and Investigation Report

Mark Bowden and Anya Rardin

Summary

Survey and investigation of Ascott Park, Stadhampton in 2007 has elucidated the post-medieval history of the site, suggesting periods of park development and building in the later 16th and earlier 17th centuries followed by major re-modelling at the time of the building of the new house c 1660 by Sir William 'the Splendid' Dormer. When this house burnt down before completion in 1662 Dormer's ambitions for the site were ended and the park has been a backwater ever since. Traces of the medieval landscape survive amongst the park and garden features. The early post-medieval phases are represented by earthworks and ponds but also by a number of standing structures including houses, a dovecot, a gazebo and a set of gate piers.

Keywords

Survey; Post-medieval; Garden

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Cover photograph: *aerial view of the park from the west showing the garden terrace and hollow of the cellar of the 1660s house, the octagonal garden buildings and surviving lime avenues; the ponds and walled garden are in the wooded areas to the right; the gate piers are visible adjacent to the road and faint cropmarks in the field to the north suggest that the lines of the avenues were carried out into the wider landscape; the earthworks of the medieval hamlet of Ascot are visible in the top right hand corner, to the south of Ascott Manor (NMR 24480/22)*

Introduction

Ascott Park is centred at NGR SU 611 981, about 12km south-east of Oxford, near the village of Stadhampton, on the south side of the road to Watlington (Fig. 1). It currently forms part of the parish of Stadhampton, but was formerly within Great Milton Parish. The park is approximately 16 ha in size and is bordered on the north side by the B480, on its west side by arable fields, on its east by the Ascott Farm complex and on its south by a partly canalized stream which joins the River Thames at Chiselhampton. Also to the south and not included in the present survey are earthworks of medieval settlement and Newell's Pond.



Fig 1 General location map

The park contains a significant number of earthwork features, mostly from the late 17th-century remodelling of house, park and garden which transformed the landscape. Two surviving buildings and other remains attest to late 16th- and early 17th-century works. There are also minor remains of earlier features, including a medieval chapel and agricultural features relating to the contemporary hamlet of Ascot. Later use of the property has been relatively light and has left the 17th-century evidence well preserved. The park and garden is listed on the Register of Parks and Gardens as Grade II and incorporates the chapel site, late 17th-century manor house site, a series of fish ponds, the formal gardens and landscape park. There are also several listed buildings in the area associated with the neighboring hamlet of Ascot. These include the Grade II listed Ascott Manor with two Grade II ancillary buildings. Listed buildings within the park parameters are a Grade II* listed 16th-century dovecot, a Grade II listed 17th-century building that has been described as a possible granary and icehouse (this is also a Scheduled Ancient Monument) (Fig. 2), six Grade II listed 17th-century gate piers and a Grade II listed garden pavilion located in the north-east corner of the park, now heavily modified and incorporated within Piccadilly Cottage. Most of the park is bordered by a limestone wall, possibly in part contemporary to the 16th- and 17th-century landscape though the parts immediately adjacent to the gate piers are clearly later.

Fig 2 The supposed granary, probably a garden building such as a gazebo (foreground), and dovecote



The two medieval manors of Ascot were united by Robert Dormer in 1510 when he purchased one and exchanged the other for property elsewhere. He subsequently granted the Ascott estate to his uncle Michael. In 1518, Sir Michael Dormer, Lord Mayor of London, established Ascott as one of the Dormer family seats. It gained a historic interest from an alleged attack by John Hampden which is supposed to have damaged the house in 1642. After the Civil War the landscape was extensively remodeled and a new house built but this phase of activity was left unfinished when the new house was accidentally burnt down. The park is currently crossed by a major footpath, but there is no historical interpretation for the public. Oxfordshire County Council, the owner, wishes, in conjunction with the Oxfordshire Buildings Trust, to undertake necessary repairs on the listed gate piers as well as to improve access to the public; this would include applicable interpretation tools, possibly on-site.

Fig 3 One of the surviving lime avenues



An archaeological investigation of the earthworks within the park was carried out in March-May of 2007 by English Heritage at the request of the Oxfordshire Buildings Trust, in advance of the repair work of surviving building features and in order to link it with the improved public access to the grounds. As earthworks have previously been observed, it was thought an accurate plan of the remaining features was warranted. The objective of English Heritage's investigation was to carry out a detailed survey to provide a hachured earthwork plan of the park at 1:1000 scale (see Fig 5) in conjunction with an analytical report.

The survey revealed medieval ridge-and-furrow, probably associated with the contemporary nearby hamlet of Ascot. The majority of garden remains are in the form of earthworks, with several small stone and brick intrusions indicating further structures. Three of the designed landscape's lime avenues have survived with indications of the walks and formal areas of the park (Fig 3).

Brief historical background

Medieval

The first mention of Ascot was in 1086 when two knight's fees were recorded in the Domesday Book. The manorial descents are detailed in the VCH (1962, 126-7). One manor, which became known as Fynes, was held from the end of the 11th century until the mid 13th century by the d'Oilly family. In 1279 the property passed to Jordan the Forrester. Jordan's daughter Joan and her husband John Fiennes inherited the property upon his death. The Fiennes family retained possession of the property until the mid 15th century when it was sold to Richard Quatremain, whose kinsmen owned the other manor, which was known as Quatremains. However, the manors remained separate and in the hands of various individuals until 1510. In that year Robert Dormer bought Quatremains manor and acquired Fynes manor by exchange with property elsewhere.



Fig 4 the medieval chapel, drawn by Charles Ellis in 1811 (Parker 1846, 320). The chapel was founded c 1200 and probably re-fenestrated in the 14th century; it was demolished in 1823

A chapel was built in about 1200 and survived until the early 19th century (Fig 4). Whether this chapel served both medieval manors is not known; there is currently no evidence for another ecclesiastical building. In any case, assuming that this chapel did not have parochial status the inhabitants of Ascot will have had to use their parish church at Great Milton. The population of Ascot seems to have reached a peak in the 14th century and declined drastically by the mid 16th (Allison *et al* 1965, 30-1).

16th-17th Century

In 1518, Sir Michael Dormer, Lord Mayor of London, acquired the estate by grant from his nephew Robert. The present Ascott Park Cottage is probably a remaining fragment of the manor house of this period. It was probably Dormer's grandson, also Michael, who built the dovecot. The matching octagon is of later date and is possibly the work of his cousin, Robert Dormer II, who bought the estate in 1609. This Robert is probably also responsible for the ornamental gate that is now in the V&A; the earliest surviving phase of the present Ascott Manor House, a substantial lobby-entry plan house of the early 17th century, is possibly also his work. The alleged raid on the house and property in 1642 by John Hampden, which is said to have caused considerable damage, and the subsequent history of the site are bedeviled by contradictory historic accounts (Delafield 1818; VCH 1962; SHS 2001; *Oxford Mail* 6th November and 30th December 1970); the VCH (1962) is followed here. Sir William 'the Splendid' Dormer inherited the property from his father Robert II in 1653. He built a new house and began a major re-landscaping which now dominates the park. However, the house burnt down

(probably in 1662) before its completion. This house, or its cellar, is represented by a large rectangular hollow on the axis of the new formal park. It has been assumed that by 1665 a new manor had either been rebuilt from remains of the structure or another structure was established, because tax records for that year indicate a payment for 12 hearths (Weinstock 1940); however, this is probably accounted for by the existing manor house (now surviving in part as Ascott Park Cottage) which had been retained while the new house was under construction. This house is shown, with varying footprint, on Plot's map of 1697, Davis' map of 1797, and all editions of the Ordnance Survey map.

Post 17th Century

In 1784 the property was sold to the Blackall family of Great Milton. The chapel continued to stand in the park until 1823 when it was torn down and the stones disbursed and reused in structures throughout the area (Parker 1846, 320). In 1850, Edward Franklin, the tenant farmer, purchased and lived at Ascot House, now Ascott Manor. The Ascott estate was purchased in 1920 by Oxfordshire County Council to establish small holdings for veterans returning from the First World War. The estate and property was part of Great Milton Parish until 1932 when it was incorporated in the newly formed Stadhampton Parish.

Previous Archaeological Work

Little archaeological work has been done at Ascott Park. In 1968 a field investigation was undertaken for the Ordnance Survey Archaeology Division. In the following year an excavation is recorded as having been conducted by S. Everett and R.D. Hodgkins on Ascott Manor and the results of this intervention are held by Oxfordshire County Council. The precise location is not recorded but a cut across the garden terrace surviving as an earthwork almost certainly marks the site of the trench. Ploughing of the Chapel Field in 1976 revealed buried stones, which seem to have been cleaned and recorded (SHS 2001, 127). No other archaeological interventions are known to have taken place but the earthworks of Ascott hamlet to the south of Ascott Farm have been surveyed (*ibid*) – when and by who seems to be unrecorded. In 1986 a brief inspection was carried out by JM Steane for Oxfordshire Department of Museum Services. At the same time as the earthwork survey reported here, in 2007, two geophysical surveys were conducted under the direction of Roger Ainslie. An aerial photographic reconnaissance was also undertaken by English Heritage in November 2006.

The grade II and II* Listed buildings and features of archaeological interest are listed below with their NMR numbers:

Feature	NMR Number
Medieval chapel	SU 69 NW 9
16 th -century manor house	SU 69 NW 10
Ponds	SU 69 NW 11
16 th -17 th century formal gardens and landscape park	SU 69 NW 17
Ascot medieval settlement	SU 69 NW 32
17 th -century farmhouse	SU 69 NW 43
16 th -century farmhouse	SU 69N W 44
16 th -century garden wall	SU 69 NW 45
16 th -century dovecot	SU 69 NW 46
Early 17 th -century garden building	SU 69 NW 47
Piccadilly Cottage, former garden pavilion	SU 69 NW 48
18 th -century walled garden	SU 69 NW 58
Six 17 th -century gate piers	SU 69 NW 59 – SU 69 NW 64

Earthwork description and interpretation

General Description

The earthwork features of Ascott Park are primarily from the final phases of garden works during the late 17th century. However, there is clear evidence of 16th-century and medieval activity within the park boundaries, including ridge-and-furrow and the likely location of the medieval chapel. Finally, there is some post-17th-century intrusion. Though this report covers all aspects, primary focus is given to the evidence for the phases of the 16th-17th-century garden. Each phase probably took place within a short period and previous earthworks were often re-used in consecutive constructions; absolute dating of many features is impossible. The most distinct features are the remains of the 1660 house and surrounding garden features. It is probable that most of the remaining garden earthworks that share the alignment and the axis of this house stem from the works which took place during this period. Three of the four lime avenues of this phase are nearly intact and several of the 17th-century garden pathways are still evident. As there is no remaining estate plan before the 19th century (with the exception of the enigmatic 'Mrs Dighton's Plan' – see below) and little historic documentation, any interpretation must be based on the remaining earthworks. These will be described in greater detail below according to period of construction. The numbers correspond to specific features found on Fig 5. It must be noted that few of the remaining earthworks are large, most averaging less than 0.5m in maximum height; those that exceed this dimension are noted within the text.

Medieval Landscape

The earliest distinguishable phase is associated with the medieval agricultural community. There is a clear, though slight, indication of ridge-and-furrow in at least two of the fields. The most easily distinguishable remains, with several furrows running in a north-south direction, lie to the west side of the park (1). Later features can be seen intruding on these, often obscuring them. In the north-east are further elements of ridge-and-furrow (2), but because of 20th-century use and ploughing, these have all but been destroyed. There remain only seven short sections of furrow to indicate the former presence of possible medieval agriculture. Due to the heavy degradation of these remains of ridge-and-furrow, the exact relationships and dating of them are impossible to determine certainly.

Further medieval remains exist in the form of possible plough headlands. A low bank (3) in the north-west corner of the park might have originated as a headland, though it is perhaps more properly a parkland feature. The second plough-head (4) is much clearer. Here the avenue along the northern side of the field seems to be partly occupying a headland defining the northern end of the ridge-and-furrow (1). A distinct rise, up to 1.0 m high, at the southern edge of the field is possibly the southern boundary of this furlong but no direct relationship could be determined due to heavy rutting and other disturbance of the ground in this area. Many of these features are aligned with or connected to later 17th-century garden features. Therefore, it is highly likely that the original medieval plough headlands were re-used in the garden design and have been further obscured.

The final earthworks remaining which can be associated with the medieval period are those which lie in the north-east corner of the park, which contains two irregularly shaped features (5). Their location between a tree throw hole and Piccadilly Cottage is a clear indication, despite the rather amorphous shape of the earthworks, that this is what remains of the medieval chapel site. The significant degradation on the site is mostly due to 20th-century ploughing, which has blurred the edges of the features. However, due to the existence of antiquarian illustrations (especially that reproduced in SHS 2001, 126) that show Piccadilly Cottage to the north-east and an elm tree known as Chapel Tree to the south-west of the chapel, we are reasonably confident that this is the position of the chapel. Further research may provide a more definitive answer. The final earthwork, mentioned briefly above, is a tree throw hole (6) which is the probable location of the Chapel Tree associated with the medieval church. The interpretation of this earthwork must be cautious, as it is known that the Chapel Tree has been replaced, possibly more than once. It is recorded as being positioned in the same location; however, whether the remaining scarp was left by the original or a replacement tree cannot be ascertained.

16th – 17th Century Park and Garden Earthworks

The earliest park and garden features probably stem from Sir Michael Dormer's occupation around 1518 or that of his grandson later in the 16th century. However, due to the slightness of the features, and the considerable re-orientation of the landscape during the garden expansion proposed and at least

partly executed by William Dormer in the later 17th century, exact dating of the earthworks cannot be determined.

There are very few recognizable earthwork features from this period in the north-west part of the park. This is probably due to some 20th-century ploughing which took place in this field. Three significant earthworks remain. The first is a long, but low ridge (7) running east-west along the northern border of the park and continuing to the east. This is probably a designed path or carriageway through the grounds. However, it has clearly been cut by the arrangement of the late 17th-century grand entrance with its gate piers (8), so it must relate to an earlier period of park design. Another ridge (3, mentioned above) runs north-south near the western border wall of the park. Though this does not have the appearance of a carriageway, its location between the northern walkway and other possible paths to its south (see below) indicates that the possibility cannot be eliminated entirely. The final feature in this area is a small mound (9), approximately 1m high, located beyond the south end of ridge (3). It has been partly levelled by ploughing and cut by a modern drain, but its basic characteristics seem to mirror several similarly shaped mounds scattered throughout the park and garden (see below). It rests near the possible convergence point of the previously noted paths, so could possibly have contained a display, such as statuary.

The earthworks immediately to the south of this include the low ridge (4), possibly originally a plough headland (as mentioned above), which coincides with one of the lime avenues. This feature may have been re-used in the construction of the garden as a connecting east-west path. This is further demonstrated by the feature's southern edge which turns at a near right angle to the south, leading to features aligned on a similar trajectory. Though it possibly forms a path, the fact that it crosses through the avenue makes it unlikely that these are contemporary features. The path might relate to the 16th-century design. As only a small section remains, this is far from a definitive conclusion.

The further features within this area are a series of three mounds of similar size but different shapes (10, 11 and 12) which border a possible north-south walkway alongside a pair of ponds (13 – not surveyed). The northernmost (10) remains as only a small scarp which indicates its similarity in size and structure to those lying south of it. The second feature (11) is a prominent rise and is almost perfectly circular; it lies at the north-west corner of the western pond. From this, two parallel scarps form what appears to be a north-south walkway which connects it to the final feature to the south (12). This walkway also is in alignment with the southern limb of the path mentioned above (4). The scarp to the east of this path drops about 1m to the pond below. The final feature lies near the south-west edge of the pond about half way along its length and is approximately square. It is also highlighted by a small gully which encircles it on the north and the western edge and terminates to the south. Another small scarp lies just to the south of this, but the relationship between the two cannot be determined. A final small scarp (14) represents the continuation of the path. Though no visible structural remains are present, this series of small mounds which appear to be aligned along a designed walkway are possibly the remaining groundwork features for garden architecture such as statuary or small ancillary buildings.

The central area of the park north of the two ponds (13) mentioned above contains several features. The south-west corner is heavily rutted due to recent use. Most of the features here do not clearly align with the other park features of the late 17th century (those aligned with the gate piers and house site). Therefore, this area probably dates to the earlier designed landscape of the 16th century. It contains a substantial north-south scarp (15) along its western edge with indications of two to three former access slopes to the west. Though these are slight, particularly the northernmost, they are clearly visible on the ground and the middle and southern slopes are highlighted by modern trackways which possibly re-use former paths which are obscured by their recent use. Just south of the avenue runs an east-west aligned scarp (16) that turns south at its eastern end; here it becomes the backslope of a distinct and very substantial ridge (17 – see below). The purpose of these scarps is unclear and the best determination is that they are features from the 16th-century phase of the garden whose use has been obscured by the later park and garden works.

The large north-south aligned ridge (17), 0.7m high, lies to the south and east of the western avenues and contains one tree on its north-west corner. It is rectangular. It was later utilised as an expansion to the avenue which seems to have taken place in the 18th century (on map evidence) and a series of tree throw holes lines its western edge. This ridge, which is a substantial mound of material, aligns with the late 17th-century garden construction. Geophysical survey shows that it contains considerable quantities of stone and it may be the site of a building, though no wall lines were identified (Ainslie *et al*

2007, fig 8j). Its exact use cannot be determined, but it may have served as a viewing point for the rest of the park, and surrounding countryside.

The final feature in this area runs along its southern border, just north of the ponds (13). Two slight parallel scarps appear to form a raised path (18). This is not on the 1660s alignment but it does appear to lead from the main garden terrace (22 – see below) towards one of the mounds (11) and may therefore be contemporary with the later 17th-century garden expansion. This feature has been disturbed by recent vehicle rutting.



Fig 6 Three of the gate piers

The central approach route of the late 17th-century scheme is bordered on its western and eastern sides by the four lines of lime trees which form avenues for the entrance drive to the 1660s house. The main gate piers (Fig 6) retain their hinge pins and the 10m gap between them probably demands that there were two separate gate leaves. This is supported by the presence of a scarp running south from a central point between the gates, possibly the result of a double entrance drive, though this scarp might also result from the cambering of a single narrow drive. It should be noted that faint cropmarks visible on aerial photographs (e.g. see front cover and Fig 7) indicate that the lines of the avenues were carried out beyond the gates into the wider landscape.

The area to the east of this contains few remains from the park and garden era of this site, probably due in part to ploughing in the 20th century. The northernmost edge is marked by the ridge of the probable carriageway (7). The south-western scarp of this feature has several small scarps running southward from it, only two of which are surveyable. Though these seem to stem from different phases, it is impossible to determine the time of their construction. Their use within the garden landscape is also unknown. There are three slight features (19) located in the south-eastern corner of this area, which may have formed part of the park landscape, but which may equally be due to later disturbance. The final features which appear to date to the 17th-century garden are a series of small scarps (20) near the present southern field edge. Though heavily obscured, two of these seem to form a small pathway leading from a path to the south (see 30 below). It is very slight but gives a clear indication that it would follow a northern route along the outside of the avenue.

To the south of this are the most significant earthworks within the park, indicating the location of the later 17th-century house which burned down in 1662 (21). Though only a fragment of barely visible

stonework remains in the eastern edge of the earthworks, the shape and extent of the feature clearly represents a rectangular cellar (lowest depth approximately 3.2m below present ground level), while shallower hollows to the east and west probably show the extent of the building. Immediately to the south is the most notable earthwork on the site (22), a raised terrace (Fig 7). The northern scarp of this terrace is flush with the southern edge of the cellar. This terrace overlooks the southern garden area. The terrace itself contains several modern intrusions, including erosion pockets, partly created by burrowing animals, on the western terminus, a recent path and a scar which probably marks the location of the 1969 excavation trench. The remains of a brick-built structure are located at the north-east corner of the terrace; an L-shaped structure at least three bricks wide emerges to the north from the existing wall and turns west into the foot of the terrace itself where it is obscured. It probably forms part of the structure of the terrace. (A profile across the cellar and terrace is included in the plan.)

Fig 7 Aerial photograph of Ascott Park, looking north-west; the terrace (22) shows distinctly in the centre with the rectangular hollow of the cellar against its northern edge. The octagonal buildings can be seen to either side. The ponds are in the wooded area to the left (NMR 24480/20)



Further earthworks in this area are a series of small scarps (23) located to the north of the cellar. A bank runs north-south with an, apparently original, bull-nosed terminal at its southern end, while two parallel scarps run east-west at right angles from its northern end. These features could be part of the arrangements of an entrance court fronting the house. However, while any further earthwork remains have been lost to foot, animal and vehicle traffic in this area, geophysical survey (Ainslie *et al* 2007, fig 8j) shows a low resistance feature which is more-or-less coincident with the earthworks but continues to create a complete rectangle. This arrangement shares the alignment of the 1660s layout but not its crucial axis, being set to the east of the centerline. It might therefore be an earlier feature or perhaps, more probably, a later yard utilizing the general orientation of the burnt-out house and its associated gardens.

The earthwork remains to the south of the house site consist of the remains of the late 17th-century formal garden. A long scarp (24) runs from the south-west end of the terrace. This defines a rectangular area approximately 90m in length and approximately 60m in width. The southern edge is marked by a substantial scarp (25) approximately 0.9m in height. This wide raised platform has very few earthworks other than a series along its southern border. The area of flat ground in the northern part of the platform (26) might be taken as the possible location of a bowling green, for instance, a common feature of gardens of this period. However, the geophysical survey indicates that it was divided into separate compartments with ornamental borders and paths. The earthworks in the southern part of this raised area indicate that these formal garden compartments extended throughout the platform. Those to the western side appear to be possible tree throw holes, while the centrally located depression is circular and has a linear projection to the east. There are some scarps north of

this centrally located circular depression, one a linear scarp, the second a circular depression with a small S-shaped scarp emerging from its northern edge. This set of earthworks form a pattern; the series of circular depressions connected by linear earthworks probably indicate the former presence of formal paths. These would have led from the house south through the garden and then divided east and west. The circular depressions along them could indicate the placement of decorative garden features such as statuary, seats or trees. This scheme is further enhanced by two slopes leading from the raised platform through scarp (25) into the lower ground and the formal ponds (36 – see below) beyond. As each of the possible paths seems to be directed toward these features, particularly that of the eastern walkway which is cut slightly by the access slope, they probably represent the sites of flights of steps. The southern face of the platform also contains a line of brick which was clearly part of a former built structure, probably the retaining wall. However, there is a limited amount of exposed brick and no definitive brick-dating or relationship can be determined without further investigation.

To the south of the raised platform there are no datable remains, though a series of scarps (27) along the western edge of this section are aligned with the other later 17th-century park features and are probably contemporary. The first is the southward scarp which extends from the end of path (18). A similar scarp is found running parallel for a limited length and then continuing southward toward the fence which now divides this pasture from the heavily wooded area of the formal ponds. As this area was obscured by nettles and fallen trees, the exact relationship between these scarps, as well as a distinct ridge running east-west, could not be determined at the time of survey, though all appear to be contemporary and are likely to be part of the 1660s designed landscape. A distinct scarp runs along the western edge of this area and marks the edge of the ponds (13), which are obscured by woodland. The scarps marking the outer edges of these two ponds does not line up with the orientation of the 1660s design and the ponds here might therefore have an earlier origin and be part of the pre-existing, perhaps 16th-century, design. A final distinct earthwork found in this area is an elongated, east-west aligned, mound (28). It is oval and though no specific purpose can be identified, the fact that it was purpose-built is unmistakable. It probably formed the basis for a garden structure or feature, or possibly served as a viewpoint to the pond areas both to the west and to the south. It is not, however, in alignment with the mounds (11 and 12) on the west side of the ponds.

Though little could be seen south of the ponds (13) due to heavy vegetation, the location of a low stone wall (29) must be noted. It runs north-south, but its relationship to the surrounding features cannot be determined and it is uncertain if it was part of the garden landscape or inserted at a later date.

The features to the east of the house site (21) are heavily disturbed by modern usage. However, a series of scarps (30) create what appear to be a crossroads of paths, one section leading north-south and the other east-west. The north-south arm appears to be directed to a corresponding feature (20, noted above) forming a possible path along the avenue of trees. Though it is uncertain if this is a single or multiple phase complex, they are probably from a contemporary period of garden construction. Located at the north-east corner of the crossroads is a low rise (31), which is currently irregularly shaped due to heavy truncation, but was probably square. Due to its location at the crossroads and the similarity in shape and size to other garden features throughout the park, it is also possibly a groundwork base for a park structure, such as a statue or pavilion. To the south of this complex is a low but distinct elongated mound (32) curving from west to south. It passes out of the surveyed area and can be distinctly seen where it is crossed by the track to Ascott Park Cottage. It merges into other earthworks (not surveyed) in the paddock beyond (see Discussion below).



Fig 8 The dovecote

The final 16th-17th-century features to be mentioned within the park and garden are the remaining structural elements. The first are the two octagonal buildings, one clearly a dovecot with very fine diaper brickwork and a nearly full set of brick-built nesting boxes (33) (Fig 8) and the other which has been interpreted as a two-storey icehouse and granary (34) (see Fig 2). However, the basement of this building is too small and insufficiently deep to be an ice house and, while the upper part might have been used as a granary at some time this is clearly not its original purpose. It consists of two storeys, the upper one truncated and with a modern roof. The ground floor is lit by stone-mullioned windows which match the quality of the doors; the upper storey had a skirting board and an opening above the door (SHS 2001, 126); this, which was probably not an original feature though its detailing appears to have matched the doors below, has been removed and blocked in with plain brickwork. Otherwise the fenestration of this upper storey cannot now be determined. Both structures also contain distinct modern elements. The dovecot has an inserted window and door; the position of the original door is unclear but it must have been either a smaller opening in the current position (facing due south) or in the adjoining face where the window now is. The other building contains a power line, probably for the piece of agricultural machinery now within. It has also had a quadrilateral brick structure of unknown purpose inserted into the basement. The dovecot dates to the later 16th century and the quality of its brickwork and detailing is extremely fine. It retains what seems to be its original roof structure, though with repairs, with dormer entrances for the pigeons to north and south as well as a cupola. The other building is later, a somewhat pale imitation in terms of its brickwork, perhaps dating to the early 17th century. Though its brickwork is plain its doorcases and fenestration are of very high quality. Its purpose is surely as a garden building, the basement, though probably not an ice house, being for cool storage, the upper storeys for recreation; it would perhaps be best described as a gazebo, despite the lack of evidence for fenestration of its upper floor.

The final complete structure is the garden pavilion, probably of later 17th-century date and part of the 1660s design, located in the north-east corner of the park and now incorporated within Piccadilly Cottage (not investigated). It has been heavily altered but retains high quality mullioned windows. It is

of one build with the immediately adjacent park wall. The park wall has therefore been assumed to be contemporary but clearly alterations were made, particularly in the area of the entrance drive with its six piers (8), when it was created in the later 17th century. Further investigation is needed on the walled garden (35), which adopts the 1660s orientation but which is probably of later date. The final areas which warrant further investigation are the ponds, which were inaccessible at the time of the current survey due to the density of vegetation. There are two parallel ponds mentioned above (13) located centrally within the park. Their position and orientation suggest that in origin they pre-date the 1660s landscaping. The other group is a series of three ponds, two rectangular and one oval, with a long narrow canal, located at the south end of the garden (36 – see Fig 11). This group is precisely aligned on the principal north-south axis of the 1660s design and clearly forms part of that scheme.

One other element of the 17th-century park survives, but not on site. This is the gateway which was removed to the Victoria and Albert Museum in the 19th century (see Discussion below).

Post 17th Century Earthworks

Most of the remaining features are later than the 17th-century landscaping and in general are associated with the modern use of the park for agricultural purposes. However, there are several features which are distinct but undated; these features will also be described in this section. The most notable modern features include a series of east-west drains (37), as well as a possible associated pond (38) located in its north-west corner. The construction of this pond, by the 1940s on aerial photographic evidence (e.g. 106G/UK913 3106/3073 11th October 1945), has obscured the evidence for any previous garden features or structures which may have been located there. A relatively recent pipe trench (39) remains a prominent feature. Some modern trackways have been noted above and it should be re-iterated that they may in part be re-using existing paths. The final post-17th-century features of note are the extended avenues and earthwork remains of them. To the south of scarp (25) are two distinct tree throw holes (40) evenly aligned (and there are possibly at least two more). The third edition OS map (1921) depicts a series of trees in the southern area of the park and it is possible that these are their remains, dating the features after the second edition of 1901 (though possibly the trees existed but were too small to include on the second edition). Furthermore, to the west of this are the remains of the extended tree avenue, known to have been planted by the 1890s as shown on the 1st edition OS map, but not depicted on any earlier map or plan.



*Fig 9
Dressed
stone blocks
built into the
garden wall of
Ascott Manor*

A series of small scarps located in the south-western corner of the park, though possibly associated with garden construction in the 16th or 17th centuries, have been disrupted by later extensions and modern use. There is a small hollow way (41), approximately 1.0m deep, located in the south-west corner and a distinct mound (42), 1.8m high, in the south-east corner of this same area. There is nothing to indicate when these features were included in the landscape though the latter is possibly part of the dam for the ponds (13); the rest of this dam is obscured by dense vegetation. The final features which warrant mention are two areas of parched ground containing earthfast stone blocks (43).

The stone walls surrounding the park have not been studied in detail as part of this project. However, some dressed and carved stone blocks have been built into the corner of the garden wall of the present Ascott Manor (Fig 9); these are probably derived from the 1660s house.

Discussion

The oldest visible features which remain within the park probably date to the medieval period – traces of ridge-and-furrow with headlands. These arable fields presumably belonged to the small hamlet of Ascot. This was located primarily to the south-east of the park, near the current Ascott Manor House, though there is some evidence that there were also buildings adjacent to the chapel (SHS 2001, 127; Mr

John Osborne, pers comm). Though the chapel no longer exists its position can be pin-pointed with a degree of confidence and a fragment of window tracery, probably of 14th-century date, is incorporated in the wall of an outbuilding at the current Ascott Manor (Fig 10); this is likely to have come from the chapel.

The exact date when the park was enclosed is unknown, as are its original size and possible extensions; however, there is no indication that a medieval deer park was established and the conclusion must be drawn that the park itself dates from the 16th century onward. It is suggested here that the house now existing as Ascott Park Cottage was the manor house in the 16th century; whether this was a manor house before 1510 is not known and, if it was, whether it was the house pertaining to Fynes Manor or to



*Fig 10
Fragment of
window
tracery,
probably of
14th-century
date; it may
have come
from the
chapel though
it might also
have been
part of a
secular
manorial
building*

Quatremaisons Manor. The position of the other manor house is completely unknown, though it could have been on the site of the present Ascott Manor. Another likely position is adjacent to the chapel but the slight evidence of other buildings there so far available does not amount to a manorial complex.

The existing structures suggest two main phases of formal landscaping activity, early and late in the 17th century, with a preceding late 16th century episode (Fig 11). The 16th-century and earlier 17th-century activity revolves around the then manor house, the building which is now known as Ascott Park Cottage (which was not investigated as part of this project). This is a fragment of what was once a larger building (as evidenced, for instance, by the exposed brick chimney on the northern gable wall, which was clearly designed to be an internal structure). Interesting evidence is provided by a sketch, apparently of early 19th-century date, reproduced in the *Oxford Mail* (30th December 1970). This shows a substantial house with a central three-storey porch block, mullioned windows and three tall chimneys; to the right is a small octagonal building and to the left, just visible, the edge of a structure with a stepped profile and the suggestion of a finial. It is possible to read this drawing as showing the east front of the manor house (now largely demolished), its ground floor obscured by a high wall or fence. The octagonal building on the right could be the gazebo but the perspective is rather poor and it might equally be intended to represent the dovecot. The structure to the left could be the gate now in the V&A. If this is correct it would indicate that the principal entrance to the manor was from the east, from a lane that is now an overgrown hollow way (though still a public footpath) but which was probably a major medieval route through Ascot. The earthworks in the paddock between this lane and Ascott Park Cottage include scarps which could be defining a broad access way leading to the entrance to the house. Also, 'Mrs Dighton's Plan' (see below) shows an avenue here.

The very fine dovecote with its diaper brickwork (see Fig 8) and quasi-gothic cornice dates to the late 16th century. The vitrified headers forming the diaper have been fired to extremely high temperatures, almost melting in some cases. It is a building which proclaims high status – 'dovecotes were expensive prestige buildings whose only economic function was to provide an additional delicacy for those who already had plenty of other fresh meat' (McCann 1991, 95). It is designed to be seen but not too close to the principal dwelling; dovecotes need to be sufficiently far from domestic buildings that the pigeons are not unnecessarily disturbed and to have a clear field of view so that the pigeons can see birds of prey approaching (*ibid*, 125) – this suggests that the dovecot had ceased to be used by the time the lime avenue was planted up against it, as shown on early OS maps and by the existing tree holes. In fact, if

the manor house was orientated with its main front to the east, as suggested here, the dovecot was directly behind the house but its diminutive door would have been visible from the house – this was the usual arrangement, designed for security; the small size of the door was also typical, for practical reasons (*ibid*, 127, 135). The dovecote was probably the work of Michael Dormer II who held the property from 1566 until 1609.

Two features which seem to belong together in date and style indicate considerable building activity in the earlier part of the 17th century. These are the possible octagonal gazebo (see Fig 2) and the gate now in the Victoria & Albert Museum. To these might be added the earliest surviving part of the present Ascott Manor.

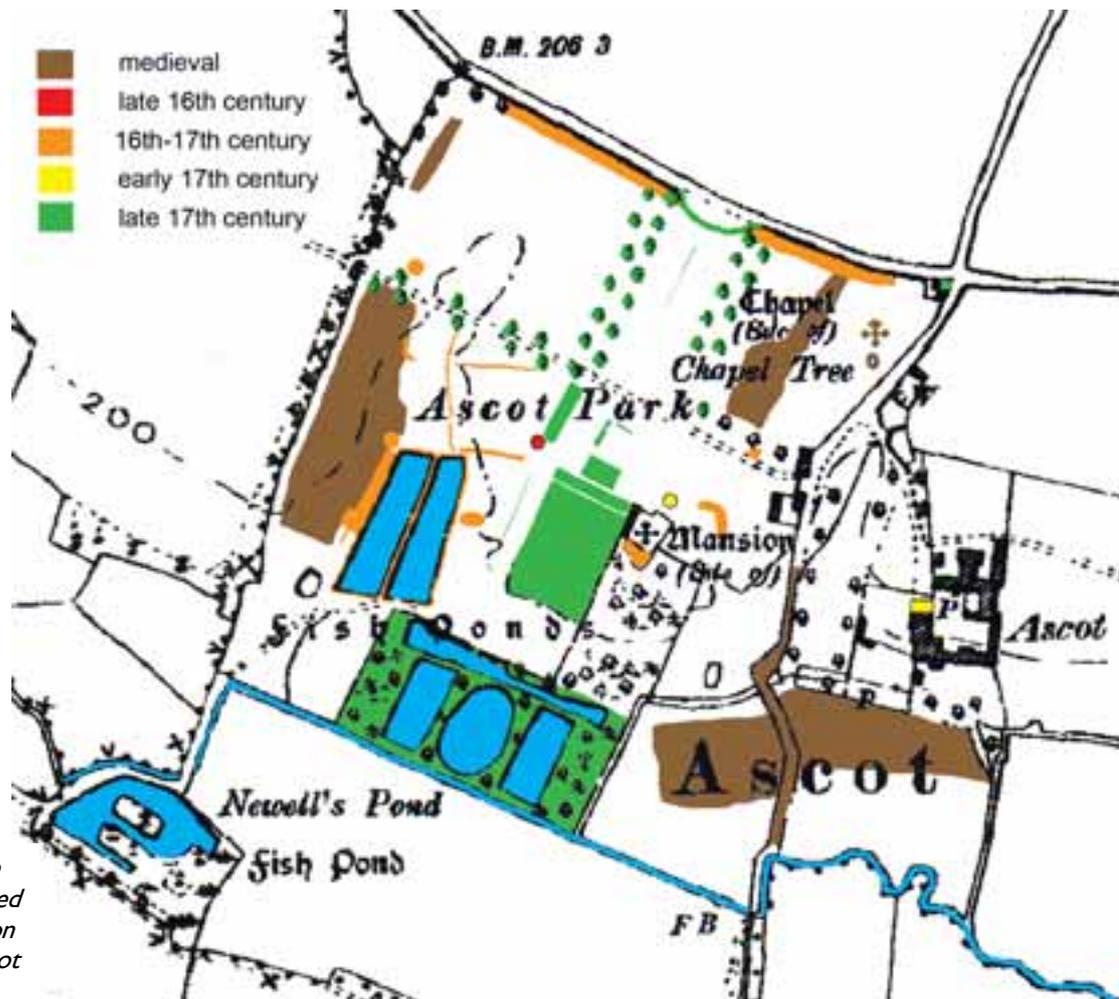


Fig 11 Phase diagram based on 2nd edition OS map – not to scale

Although by no means as fine a building as the dovecot which its ground plan imitates, the gazebo is a building of high quality marked by its fine stone door cases and window mullions. The purpose of the vaulted basement (an exceptionally well built structure) is unclear. Its brick floor incorporates a drainage channel which suggests possibly wet, cool storage but the suggestion that this was an icehouse is probably untenable on practical grounds; it is too shallow. The building is most likely a garden feature intended for leisure activities including, no doubt, feasting. The orientation of the doors, which is due east, is puzzling as it does not connect obviously with any other feature in the contemporary landscape; however, it does lead onto the end of the elongated mound (32) which might form a raised path leading around to the front of the manor house. The gate in the Victoria & Albert Museum is exceptionally fine and in style not inconsistent with the gazebo. The position it occupied at Ascott is unknown and the suggestion put forward here that it stood to the east of the manor house is somewhat tentative. It is, of course, possible that it stood at different places at different times; that this might have been the case is perhaps suggested by an early photograph of the gate showing it with high brick stub walls but built into an otherwise fairly rough and much lower stone rubble wall (SHS 2001, 125). The earliest surviving part of the present Ascott Manor is, as described above, a lobby-entry house of late 16th- but

more likely early or mid 17th-century date; it is substantial, on two-and-a-half storeys, and contains good quality details including fireplaces, beams and windows. It could be part of the same building programme as the other structures mentioned here. It was extended, probably within 50 years of its original construction, and then again in the early or mid 19th century when it was the home of Edward Franklin. All the early 17th-century park buildings and structures were presumably the work of Robert Dormer II who held the property from 1609 until the middle of the century. The lobby-entry (Ascott Manor) house may have been the work of a tenant farmer rather than of Dormer himself.

Robert's son, William Dormer 'the Splendid' intended, and to some extent achieved, a major transformation at Ascott after the Civil War, not just by building a new house but by re-orientating and re-modelling the entire park landscape. The gate piers, provincial in design but very pleasing, and lime avenues are the most obvious survivor of his works but there are also the earthworks of the house and gardens and the complex of ponds (36). The geophysical survey suggested that the house was a massive courtyard complex (Ainslie *et al*/section 5, fig 8j) but this is hardly what we would expect to find in a house of 1660; much more likely is a compact box-like building such as Ashdown House on the Berkshire Downs. This is what the earthworks (21) suggest, a central rectangular cellared building with a relatively small footprint, perhaps with diminutive wings to either side; the approach along the main axis of the entire parkland landscape would lead to external stairs to a principal first floor entrance; the garden entrance would also be on this floor and would lead directly onto the terrace which survives as the principal earthwork feature of the site (22). From here the gardens extended down the slope, maintaining the same axis, to the ponds perched above the valley floor beyond. There is one piece of cartographic evidence which supports this interpretation, a plan, said to be of c1700 (Sotheby 1994, 61) but probably slightly later, which shows a compact square for the house with the gardens laid out much as the geophysical and earthwork surveys suggest. This is not a plan of Sir William's design but apparently a later proposal for modifications that were not carried out. At some time the name of Mrs Dighton – Alice Dighton, second wife of Sir William's son John – has been attached to it. An interesting facet of this plan is that it does not show the octagonal buildings or the old manor house. Presumably the Dormers retained the old house to live in while the new one was being built, with the intention of demolishing it later; only the accidental destruction of the new house saved the old one. It is also possible that the octagons were marked for demolition; they fit the axis of the new landscape design and indeed, they might have been used as survey markers in laying it out, with a perpendicular bisector raised between them to form the principal axis of the new landscape; however, their individual orientation does not fit the new design and they might subsequently have been seen as rather too intrusive within it, with their now unfashionable styling and brick construction (it is perhaps relevant that the geophysical survey found little evidence of brick rubble in the area of the house and concluded that limestone was the main building material used). The large areas of rubble found by the geophysical survey to the north and west of the entrance court might relate to the destruction of buildings of other phases or to the dumping of rubble in areas away from the buildings, or it may be that formal ornamental garden features in these areas did contain a lot of stonework. It must not be forgotten that ancillary buildings, especially stables, are always needed but in the type of highly structured formal layout that seems to have been adopted at Ascott in 1660 these are likely to have been sited elsewhere, away from the main house and gardens.

The pavilion at Piccadilly Cottage was not investigated as part of the current survey. Its mullioned windows suggest a 17th-century date and its position probably suggests that it belongs with the later 17th-century landscaping. Whether there was a matching pavilion at the opposite corner of the park is unknown; there are no earthworks or other indications of such a structure but this location is now at least partly occupied by the pond (38).

The current park has been little altered since abandonment in the 17th century following the fire. Most of the boundaries appear to be the same, other than that around Ascott Park Cottage. This house, now in separate ownership, as argued above almost certainly contains elements of the manor house that existed by the late 16th century and was re-used by the Dormers when their new house burned down in 1662; it is probably this house that accounts for the 12 hearths mentioned in the hearth tax return of 1665 (Weinstock 1940). The walled garden is clearly visible on the 1797 Davis map, as is Ascott Park Cottage (albeit with a different footprint to its current one). There appear to have been relatively few developments from the 18th century until the early part of the 20th century, probably due to a degree of benign neglect by the Blackalls though, as noted above, map evidence suggests that the avenues were extended in the 19th century.

Method of Survey

The field survey was carried out by Anya Rardin (a student from the Oxford Master of Science in Professional Archaeology course on placement), Mark Bowden, Michael Fradley and Graham Brown. Control points were established using a Trimble 5600 total station theodolite. Detail was surveyed into this control framework by tape-and-offset survey and by use of a plane-table with Wild RK1 self-reducing alidade. The plan was drawn on-site at a scale of 1:1000. Architectural investigation was undertaken by Barry Jones.

The ponds within woodland were not surveyed. The earthworks of Ascot deserted settlement to the south-east and 'Newell's Pond' to the south-west were also excluded.

Documentary research was carried out by Anya Rardin. Site photography was taken by Anya Rardin and Mark Bowden. Aerial photography was taken by Damien Grady. The main survey drawing (Fig 5) was prepared by Mark Bowden based on an original drawing by Anya Rardin. Fig 11 was prepared by Mark Bowden.

The project archive has been deposited in English Heritage's National Monuments Record, Great Western Village, Kemble Drive, Swindon SN2 2GZ, where it can be consulted.

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cl700 William Burgess 'Survey of the Lordship of Ascote in the County of Oxon, belonging to John Dormer, Esq' endorsed on the reverse 'Mrs Dighton's Plan' (copy held by Dane Clouston)

- 1881 1st Edition OS 25" Map
- 1901 2nd Edition OS 25" Map
- 1921 3rd Edition OS 25" Map

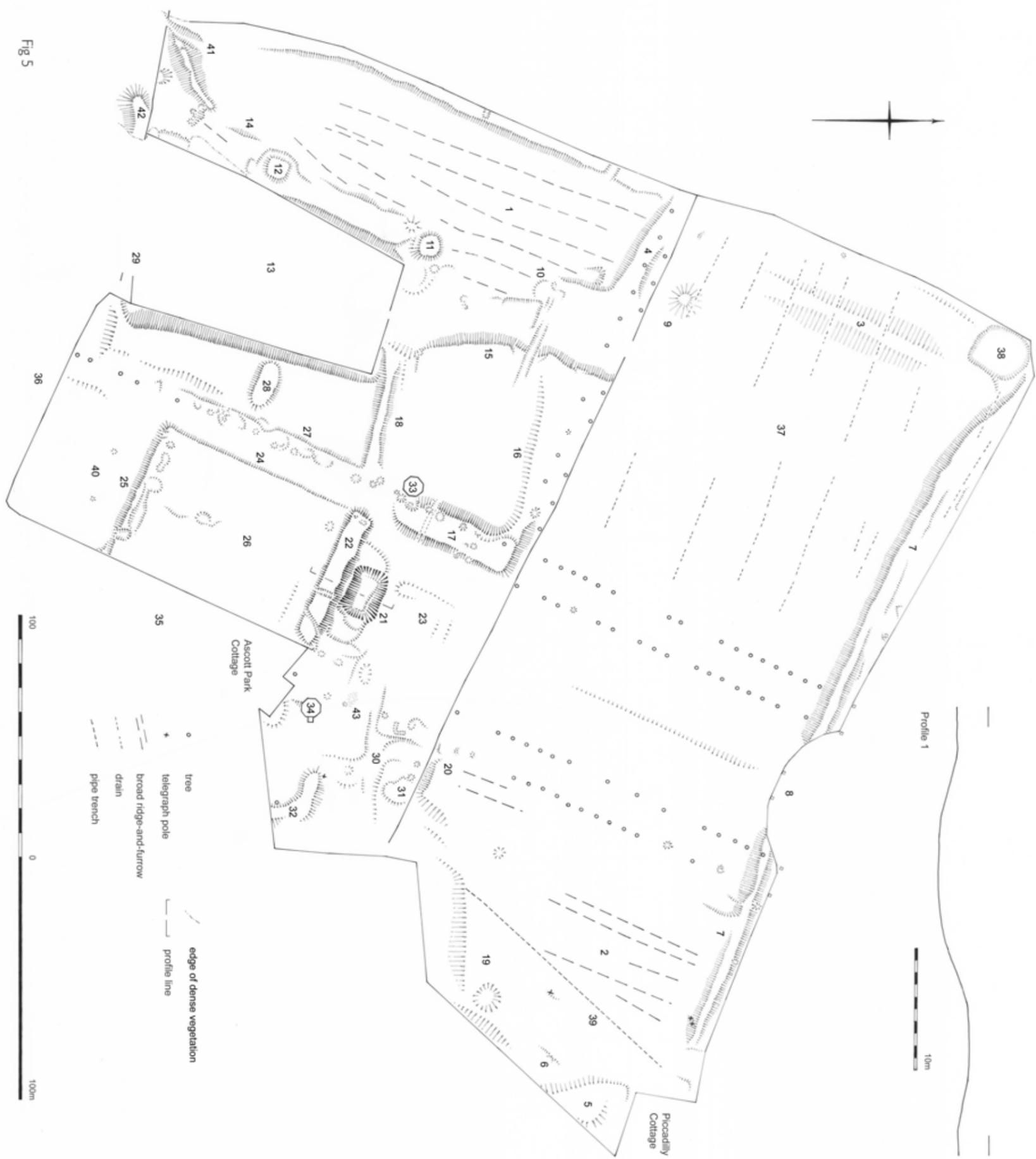


Fig 5



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