

Brinkley Grove

**an investigation of a scheduled earthwork
to the north of Colchester**

June 1998 & February 1999

CAT Report 31

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Brinkley Grove: an investigation of a scheduled earthwork to the north of Colchester

Summary

Brinkley Grove is a wooded area in the northern suburbs of Colchester and forms part of Highwoods Country Park. Within this woodland is a large earthwork (Scheduled Ancient Monument no 177) in the form of a substantial L-shaped ditch (approximately 15 m across), thought possibly to represent part of a large enclosure. Earth mounds on parts of the inner ditch edge may indicate an internal bank, and there are signs of a counterscarp bank also (Sites and Monuments Record 0011). The 1841 tythe map shows the area of the monument to have been part of High Wood rather than Brinkley Grove.

Two small trenches located at the present northern extent of the earthwork's west ditch produced no clear evidence for the date or function of the monument, nor for the existence of an inner bank. A small east-west ditch, probably of post-medieval date, crosses this area and is cut through clean sandy clay. This is probably natural subsoil rather than redeposited material filling a former ditch, and the present limit of the ditch is considered to be its original extent. An auger survey demonstrated that the west ditch is certainly not present 35 m north of its existing limit. The augering also showed that the natural subsoil of this area is sandy clay. Limited observation of the area of the internal 'bank' revealed this to be irregular mounds, which are absent from much of the north-eastern part of the earthwork, and are probably just dumps of upcast soil. A profile of the ditch near the present north terminus indicated the presence of a slight counterscarp mound, though this may also result from upcast spoil accumulation and dumping.

The monument appears to be of no greater extent on its west side than the present earthwork, and this is probably the case for the monument as a whole. This is supported by interpretation of some documentary (map) sources. The earthwork's angular L-shaped plan reflects the corner of two boundaries, an existing one to the south and another indicated by a track and mature trees in line

with the monument's west side. However, its chronological relationship with these boundaries is not known, and the southern boundary (probably of relatively recent origin) may post-date the earthwork. The limited evidence suggests that the monument is possibly the result of clay extraction, and the 1841 tythe map shows field names relating to sand and clay extraction and tile- and pottery-making within 0.5 km of the earthwork. Further documentary research and augering of the site would help clarify this interpretation.

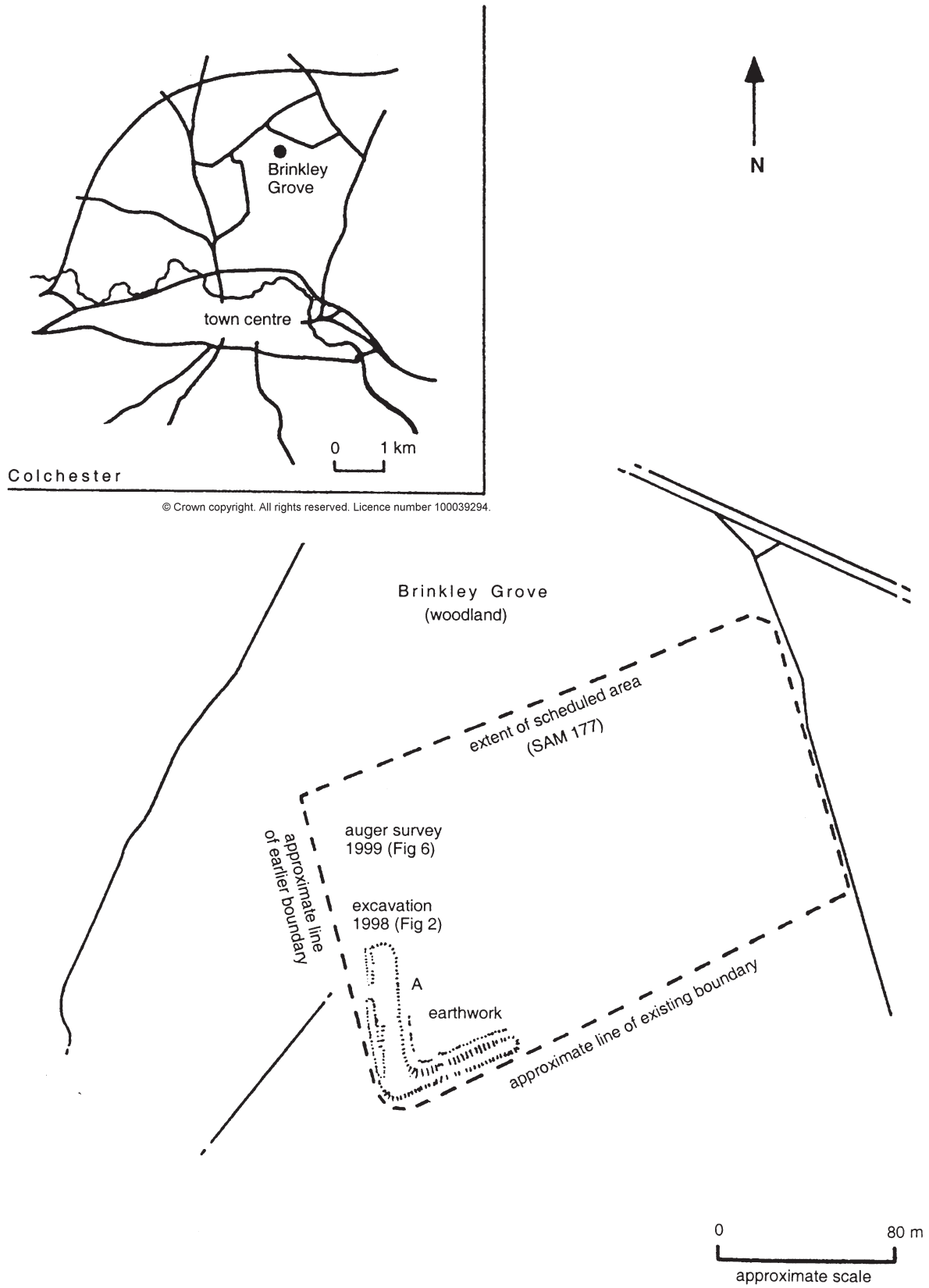


Fig 1 Site location, monument and scheduled area.

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June 1998 & February 1999
(TM 00312785) (CAT Report 31) (Colchester Museum accession no: 1998.139)

Introduction

Brinkley Grove is a woodland area within the northern suburbs of Colchester and forms part of the Highwoods Country Park. Within this wooded area is a large earthwork about 15 m across, which survives as a substantial L-shaped ditch, with indications of a possible small internal bank and possibly a counterscarp bank outside. The earthwork and a substantial rectangular area extending east and north from it are a Scheduled Ancient Monument (SAM no 177) and are recorded on the County Sites and Monuments Record under entry number 0011 (Fig 1).

The original extent and form of the earthwork was unknown, as was its date of construction and purpose. One possibility considered was that it might represent part of the defensive circuit of Fort Suffolk, which was an earthwork fortification built by the Parliamentarian forces during the Civil War siege of Colchester in 1648. This fort is shown on the 17th-century map of the siege (British Library 2390(1)), which does not locate it exactly, but shows that it was toward this area on the north-east of the town. However, the size of the existing earthwork is probably more comparable with that of the well-known Iron Age dykes to the west of the town, and its position is possibly too far back from the ring of known siege forts to be Fort Suffolk. It was therefore hoped that a limited investigation excavation might shed some light on these possibilities. This involved a small excavation in June 1998 and a limited auger survey in February 1999.

The excavation

The original design was to excavate two trenches by hand on the only accessible area of the earthwork within the woodland cover, this being at its northern end (Fig 2.1). This work was undertaken in June 1998. The pre-excavation interpretation of the possible nature of the archaeology and how it could be

accessed in relation to environmental constraints necessitated the location of two trenches on either side of an existing woodland track. Trench 1 was positioned on the area of the internal 'bank' just above the open ditch. It was hoped that if the existence of an internal bank at this point could be confirmed then dateable material might ideally be recovered from beneath it. Trench 2 slightly overlapped the first trench on the line of the ditch, should it continue to the north, and if so material could be recovered from the fill. During the course of the excavation, a third very small hand-dug intervention was made (Trench 3) well back from the area of the earthwork, to look at the normal soil profile of the surrounding area (Fig 2.1). A topographic profile across the general area of the excavation was also recorded (Fig 2.1 & 2.2).

Trench 1 (Figs 2.1, 3 & 4) & Trench 3 (Figs 2.1 & 4)

Trench 1 (4 m x 1 m) was located just beyond the southern edge of the existing woodland track over the position of the internal 'bank' and west edge of the ditch. Here a thin dark humic woodland soil (L1) overlay a slightly thicker band of yellow brown silty sand which appeared to contain some clay (L2) and darker material mixed in from L1 above (Fig 4). Below this was a sequential group of three very similar deposits of sandy clay (L3, L4 & L5) about 0.2 m thick, stratigraphically L3 being the latest. The layers L3 and L5 were separated by a deposit which could only be differentiated by the significantly greater amount of stones which it contained (L4), though L3 also appeared in section to be slightly lighter in hue than L5. Below this was a consistent mottled yellow and orange brown sandy clay (L6) which is interpreted as the natural subsoil. All of the deposits mirrored the surface slope down toward the ditch. The only finds were two small pieces of burnt flint from L2 and L3.

Interpretation of the deposits L3-L5 is not certain from such a small section. It is possible that all three layers are part of a general varied subsoil deposit, though they do not match the natural soil profile in Trench 3 (see below), and their clay content suggests redeposition. Possibly L3 and L4 represent ditch fill or redeposited slippage into the large ditch, with L5 also being redeposited material; however, L5 is not considered to be part of a bank.

A small trench (Trench 3, Figs 2.1 & 4) was excavated well away from the earthwork to look at the surrounding undisturbed soil profile. Trench 3 (1 m x 0.6 m) showed the same thin dark woodland humic soil (L1) over a consistent deposit of medium yellowish-brown silty sand (L2) about 0.4 m thick. At the base of this was a mottled sandy clay subsoil L3 (equivalent to L6 in Trench 1). The thickness of L2 in Trench 3 (0.4 m) is close to that of L3-L5 combined with L2 in Trench 1 (0.35 m). The main difference between the two soil profiles is the homogeneous appearance of the soil in Trench 3 and its lack of clay in relation to Trench 1.

Trench 2 (Figs 2.1, 3 & 5)

Trench 2 was 5 m x 1 m in extent with an agreed maximum excavation depth of 1.4 m. The two upper layers in Trench 3 (L1 & L2) were essentially the same as for Trench 1, although with less clay apparent (Fig 5). Layer 1 contained a considerable quantity of laid brick rubble and some timbers (see Fig 2.1 & Appendix 2) which had presumably been placed to metal or infill a soft area of the woodland track around the terminal of the large open ditch. The difficulty in removing this rubble necessitated the narrowing of much of the trench to half its intended width. In excavation, L3 appeared little different to material already encountered in Trench 1, and was removed before it became clear that much of this was material filling the upper levels of a small ditch (F1) running east-west (Figs 3 & 5). This feature could only clearly be recognised where the grey silty or clay sand of its lower fill (L6) cut clean mottled sandy clay (L4). A small piece of clay-pipe stem of probable early date (pre-mid 18th century) was initially thought to have been incorporated by roots or animal action into L4, but almost certainly came from this feature. A small piece of Mayen lava, almost certainly part of a quern, was also recovered from its eastern end in L6.

Though L4 is considered to be natural subsoil, in relation to the soil profile in Trench 3 (confirmed by the identical profiles obtained from the later auger survey, see below) it seems possible that L4 could represent redeposited material. If so, this would indicate that the large ditch originally extended this far north. Sinkage

see below) it seems possible that L4 could represent redeposited material. If so, this would indicate that the large ditch originally extended this far north. Sinkage into backfill may also be the reason that this area has required some stabilisation with the brick rubble and timbers encountered in L1, though this may simply be related to the proximity of the track to the open ditch end. If L4 is fill then the small ditch F1, which cannot be dated more closely than probably post-medieval, must post-date the infilling of this part of the monument ditch.

The auger survey

In February 1999 the line of the monument's western ditch north of the earlier excavation area was tested by an auger survey (Fig 6). Only one part of the line of the ditch was sufficiently clear of undergrowth (brambles) to be accessible, approximately 35 m beyond the existing north end of the ditch. In this area ten auger holes were made (using a 7 cm-core auger); these were spaced over a 4 m-wide strip about 18 m long, oriented north-west to south-east across the ditch line (Fig 7).

The soil profiles for these holes were identical for the upper 0.4 m with a thin (10 cm) surface layer of organic woodland litter in very dark sandy soil covering a homogeneous medium brown silty sandy loam (Fig 7). The subsoil below this was sandy clay, which was either very sandy and mottled with sandy grey streaks, or a thicker orange brown sandy clay. There was no clear pattern to this variability, though the mottled very sandy clay was more common.

All of the auger samples were clean and are interpreted as natural deposits identical to the natural soil profile recorded in Trench 3 during the excavation. The differences in the clay composition (very sandy mottled clay and sandy clay) probably reflect only local variation within the subsoil. The constant level of the base of the silty loam topsoil also indicates no sinkage or settling into any former large feature (Fig 7). There was no evidence of any disturbance to the natural soil profile here, and it is considered certain that there is no continuation of the ditch through this area.

Observation of the area of the internal 'bank'

Much of the western half of the area enclosed by the L-shaped ditch of the monument had been cleared at the time of the auger survey. Brief observation of this showed that the soil mound behind the ditch was probably a number of continuous low soil dumps which varied in size. The largest of these, probably 5 m to 6 m across, was situated at the southern end of the western ditch length. To the north of this there was no sign of any soil mounded along the ditch edge for an approximate 25 m length to the ditch terminal (marked A on Fig 1), which accords with the depiction of the earthwork shown on maps (Fig 1).

Discussion (incorporating limited documentary research)

Unfortunately no clear evidence for the date or function of the earthwork in Brinkley Grove was provided directly by the small excavation. It seems probable that the west ditch does not continue north beyond its present limit; however, this is not absolutely clear as the material in the lower part of Trench 2 could possibly be redeposited subsoil fill, though this is considered unlikely. The auger survey showed that the ditch is certainly not present 35 m north of its existing limit, and therefore certainly does not continue significantly beyond its current extent. The postulated internal bank also appears to be irregular soil dumps rather than a deliberate construction, and the small counterscarp 'bank' is probably also unintentional spoil deposits.

The documentary source of the 1841 Mile End parish tythe map shows that the area of the earthwork was at that time part of High Wood rather than Brinkley Grove, which is shown as a more limited area to the north (Fig 8). On this map, part of the southern boundary of High Wood seems to respect the position of the earthwork, but this area (Hatches, field no 87 in Fig 8) has the appearance of intake into the former area of High Wood and is probably of no great antiquity. This boundary appears to have been adjusted to a straighter course at some time between 1841 and 1977 (Ordnance Survey 1 : 10000, revised 1977). On the ground the vestiges of an unmarked boundary, indicated by a track and mature trees in the woodland, is in line with the outer edge of the west ditch (Fig 1). Two

northern limit of the western ditch appears to respect the position of the earthwork, but follows an irregular diagonal course south-east across its internal area. This suggests that the earthwork pre-dates the track, but that the track is respecting an earthwork of approximately its present extent, and not a larger enclosure. The date of the track is not known. The postulated extent of the monument as an enclosure (reflected in the rectangular scheduled area, Fig 1) also crosses a boundary which on the 1841 tythe map marked the southern limit of Brinkley Grove. This would indicate that any such enclosure should either significantly pre-date that boundary, or probably, and more likely, that the earthwork does not extend to that area. Between 200-600 m to the west of Brinkley Grove, fields shown on the 1841 tythe map have names connected with pottery and tile production (Fig 8). Also sand extraction is indicated by the name of a field 400 m to the south (Sand Pit Field, Fig 8). The monument is unlikely to be much larger than the visible earthwork, and the limited evidence suggests that it is possibly the result of clay extraction.

It is suggested that further documentary research and selected augering of the site would help clarify this interpretation in respect of both the date and extent of the Brinkley Grove earthwork.

Stephen Benfield

Colchester Archaeological Trust, July 1998 and March 1999



COLCHESTER ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRUST

Appendix 1

Brinkley Grove, Colchester - 1998.139: excavation finds

Trench 1

Layer 2, small piece of burnt flint

Layer 3, small piece of burnt flint

Trench 2

?Feature 1, small piece of clay-pipe stem, length 35 mm, diameter (total) of stem
8 mm, diameter of bore 2.5-3 mm (?pre-mid 18th century)

Feature 1, fragment of lava quern (pre-1000 AD) (*CAR 5*, pp 36-9)

Abbreviations

CAR 5 Nina Crummy (ed), *The post-Roman small finds from excavations
in Colchester, 1971-85.*

Appendix 2

Brinkley Grove, Colchester - 1998.139: brick types from rubble spread in Trench 2

(note: all bricks discarded)

Yellow/cream bricks:

Pale yellow unfrosted brick - 8.5 x 3.5 x 2.25 inches

Pale yellow-yellow brick with small frog - 9 x 3.75 x 2.5 inches

Pale yellow unfrosted brick - 9 (9.25) x 2.5 x 2.5 inches

Pale yellow evenly tapering unfrosted brick (mortar on surfaces) -
9 x 4-3.25 x 2.5 inches

Pale yellow unfrosted brick - 9 x 4.25 x 2.5 inches

Red bricks:

Pale red-red brick with frog - ? x 4 x 2.5 inches

Orangey red unfrosted soft brick - ? x 4.5 x 2.5 inches

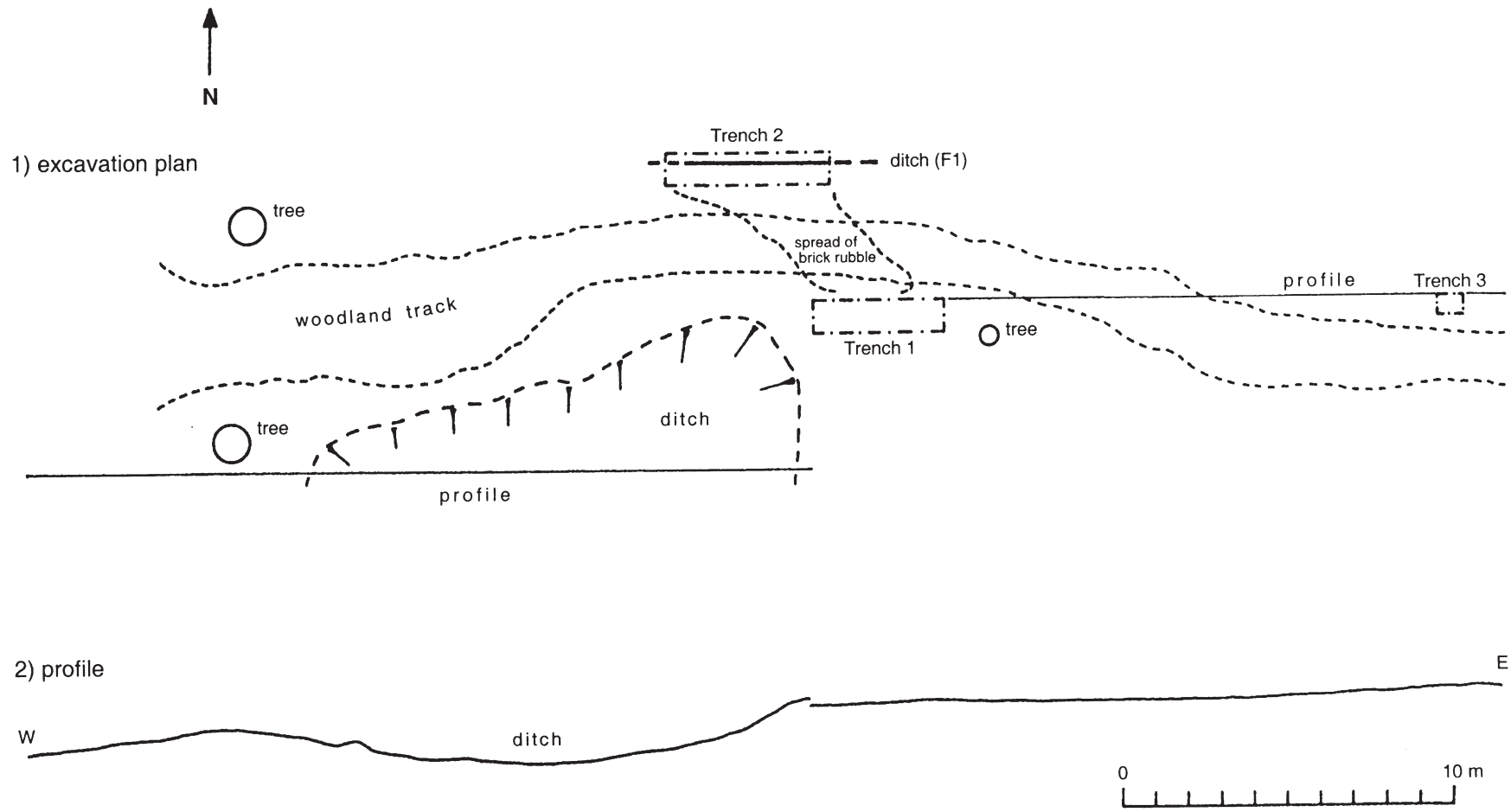


Fig 2 Plan of excavation trenches and profile across earthwork.

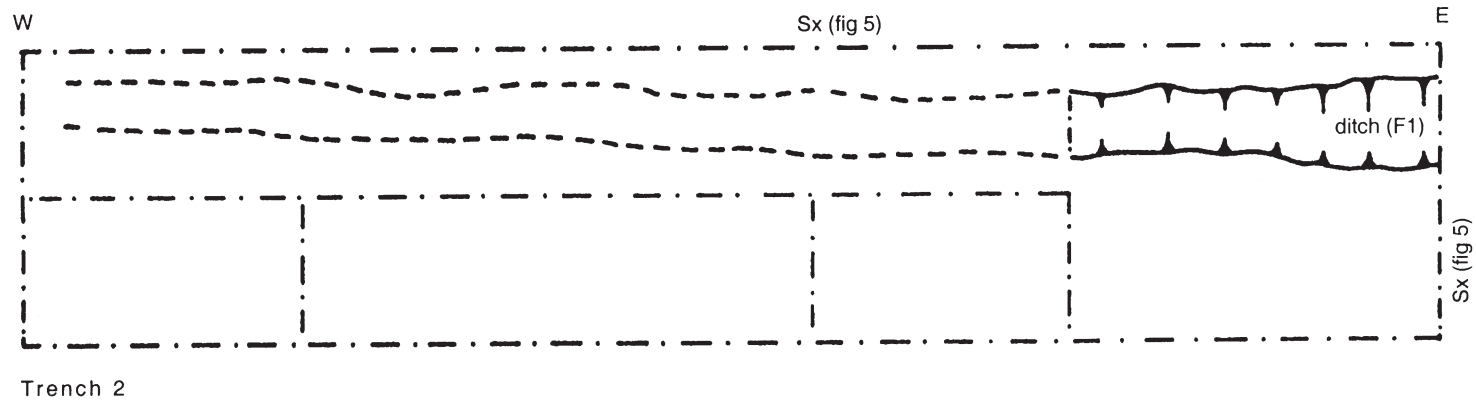
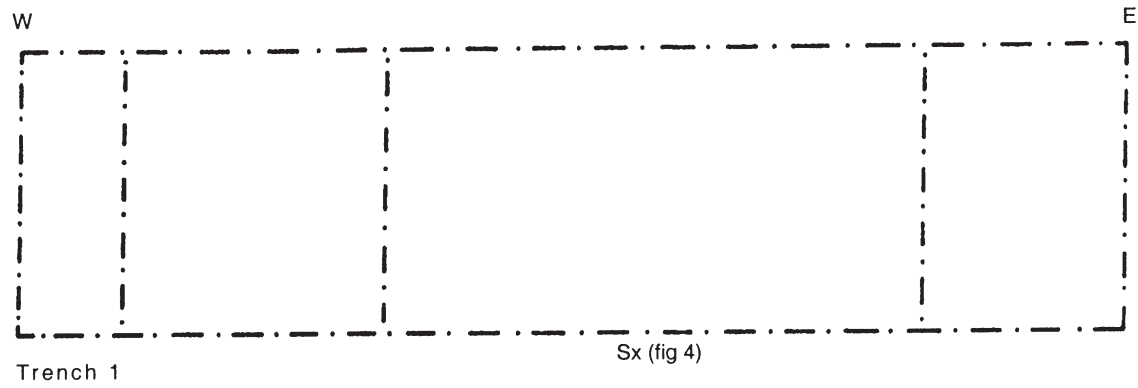
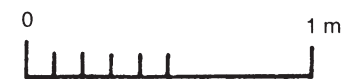


Fig 3 Excavation trench plans.



Trench 1 layers

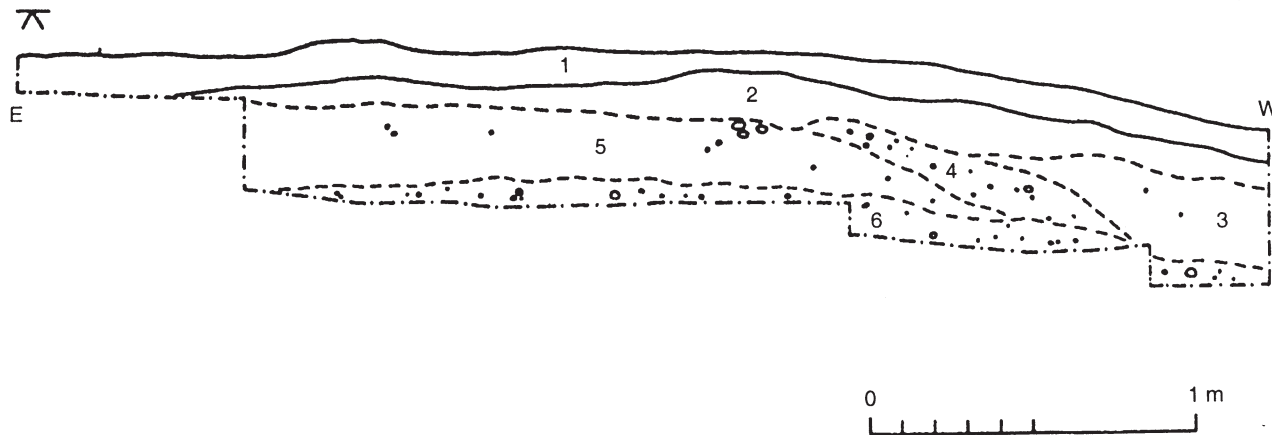
- 1 very dark brown silty sand and organic material
- 2 dark yellow brown silty sand/sandy clay
- 3 yellow brown sandy clay
- 4 yellow brown silty sandy clay
- 5 yellow brown sandy clay (darker than layer 3)
- 6 grey, yellow and orange brown mottled sandy clay

Trench 3 layers

- 1 very dark brown silty sand and organic material
- 2 medium brown silty sand
- 3 grey, yellow and orange brown silty sand

Trench 1

Datum as for Trench 2



Trench 3

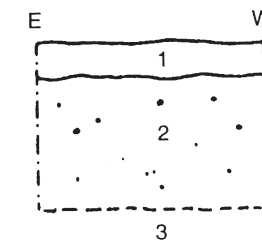


Fig 4 Sections for Trench 1 and Trench 3.

Trench 2 layers

- 1 very dark brown silty sand and organic material
- 2 dark to medium brown silty sand
- 3 medium yellow brown silty sand
- 4 grey and orange brown mottled sandy clay and silty sand

Feature 1 fills

- 5 yellow brown and grey brown mottled silty sand
- 6 grey silty sand/sandy clay

Datum as for Trench 1

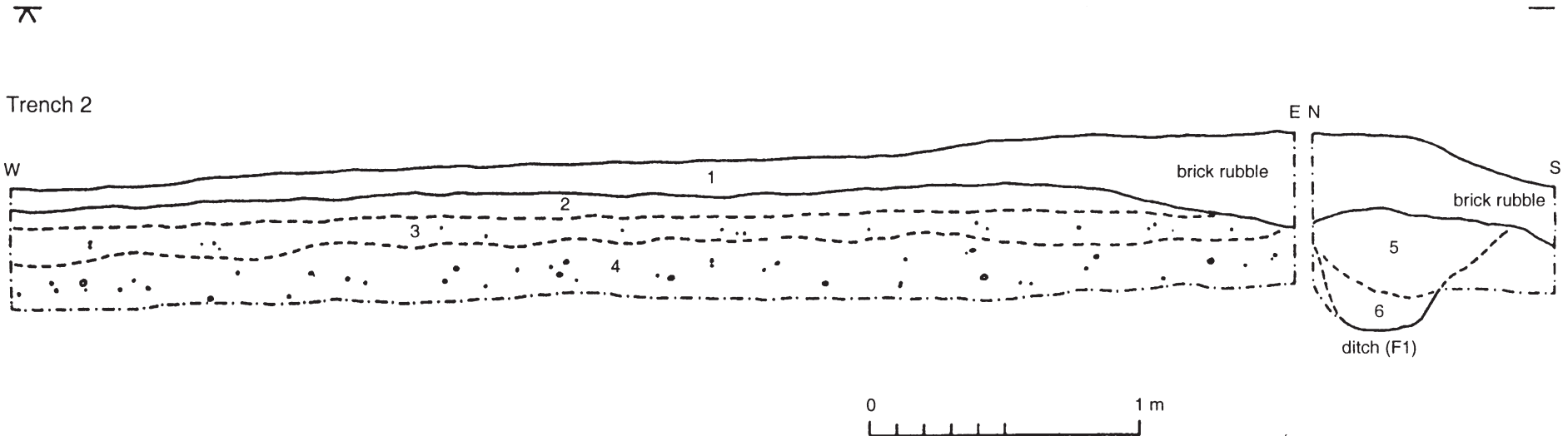


Fig 5 Sections for Trench 2.

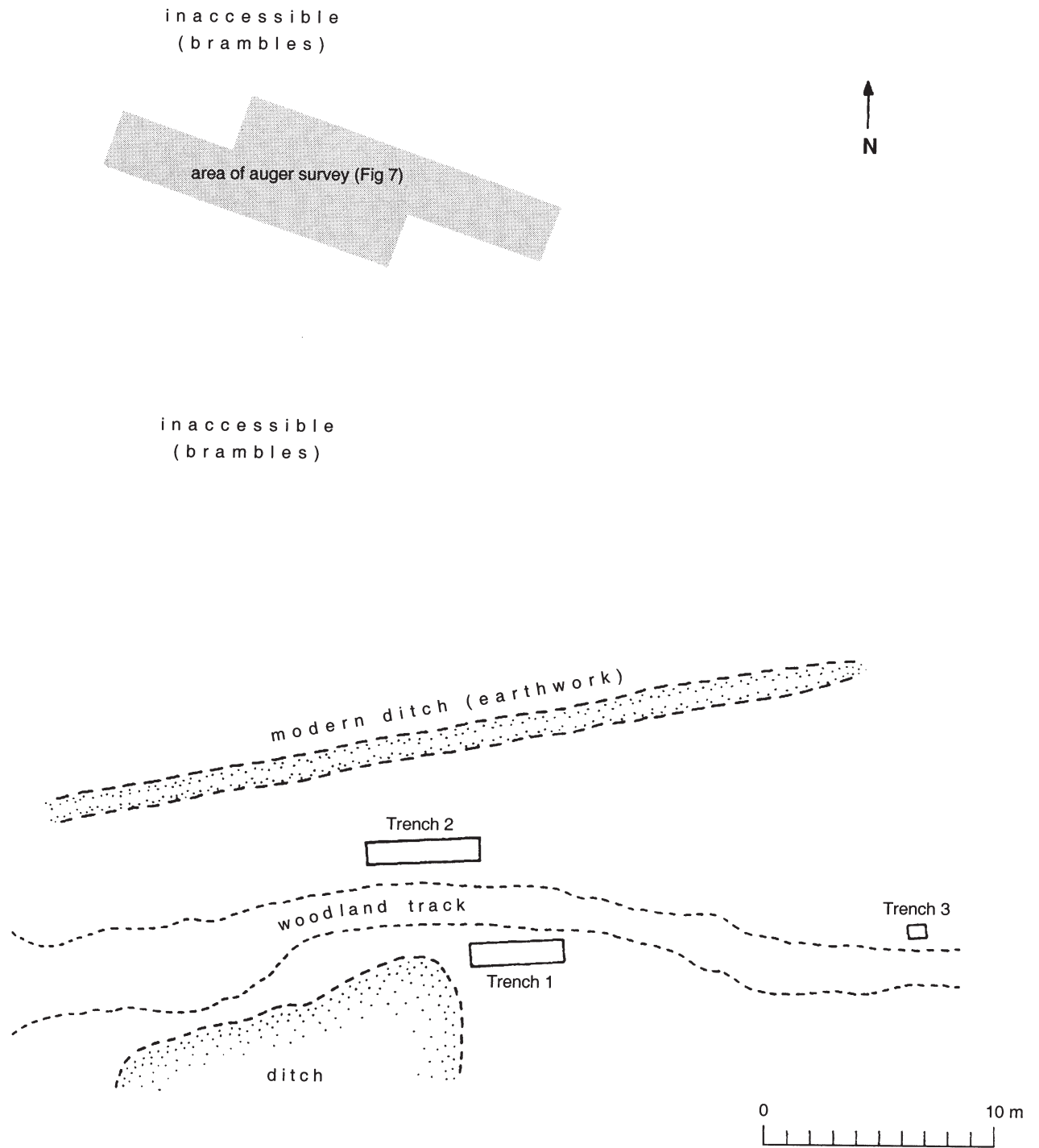
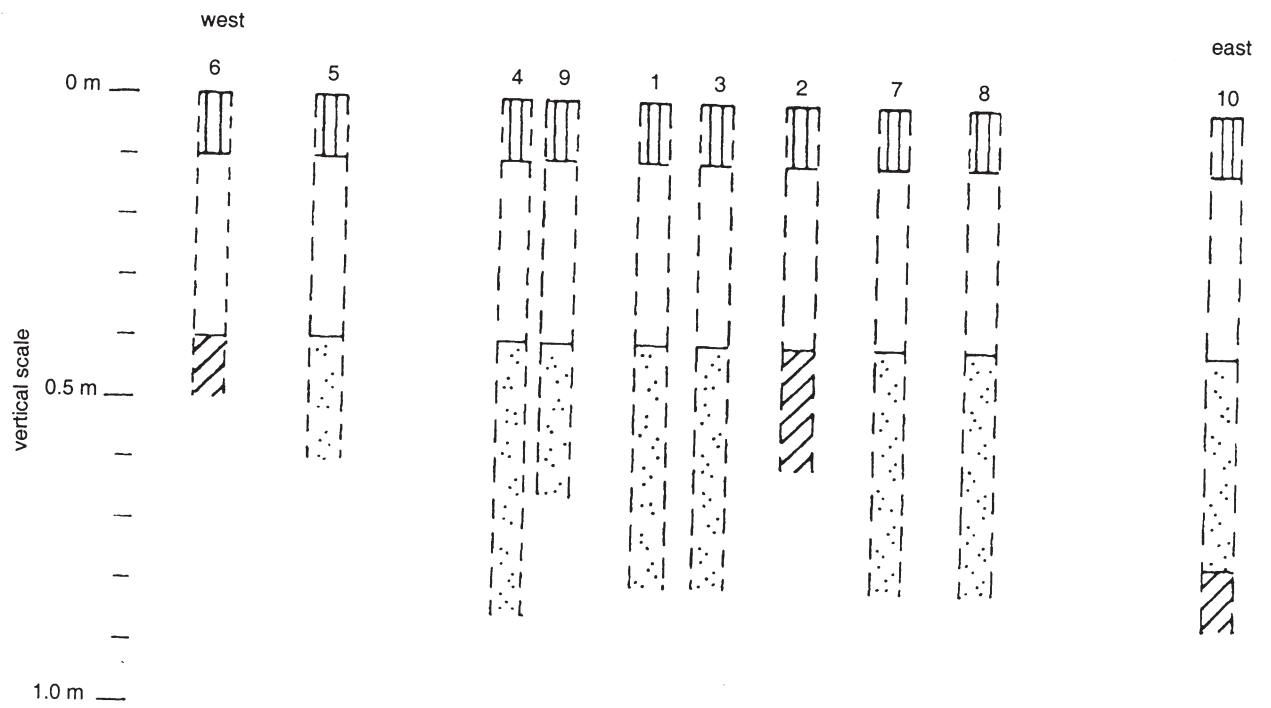
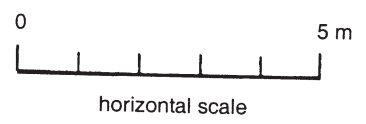
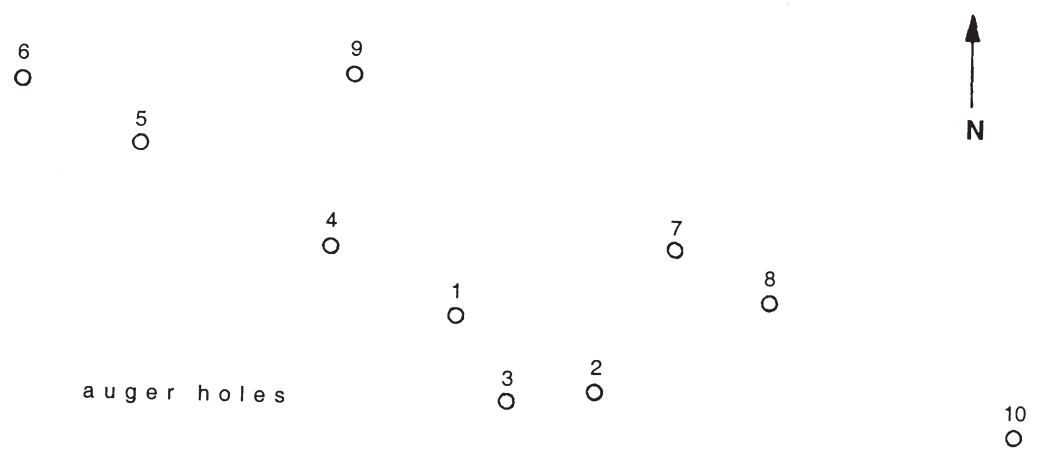


Fig 6 Auger survey location.



- topsoils:
- very dark brown humic soil
 - medium brown silty loam

- subsoils:
- mottled very sandy clay
 - orange brown sandy clay

Fig 7 Auger survey.

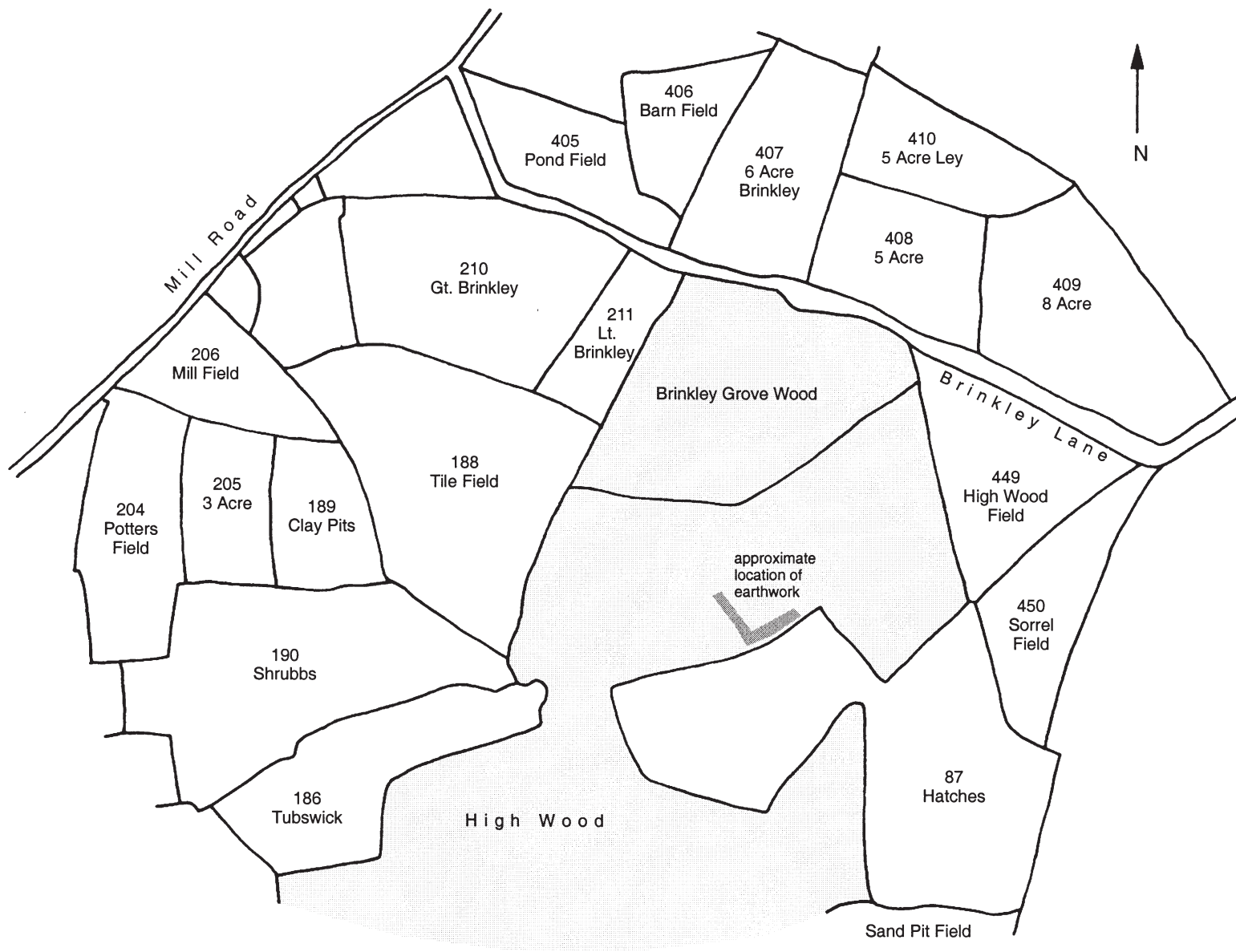


Fig 8 Names of fields around Brinkley Grove from Mile End parish tythe map 1841.