

# SUTTON PARK'S HEATHLAND ARCHAEOLOGY

*By Roy Billingham*

## *Discovery of Earthworks to the West of Pool Hollies in 2010*

Having completed a survey of sawpits within Sutton Park's Pool Hollies woodland in early 2010, I wanted to take the opportunity to look for a pit I had discovered by chance some distance outside the north-western side of the woods on the heathland during the previous summer at a time when the undergrowth of bramble and ferns was dense. By January 2010 the undergrowth had died down and as I approached the area again I could see quite clearly from the path what I thought was probably the pit that I had discovered in 2009 (Pit 'C' on diagram 1). I measured the parameters of this pit (Fig. 1), which was well preserved, and took a GPS reading of the Ordnance Survey co-ordinates.



**Fig. 1 – Pit 'C' having dimensions of 13ft x 10ft x c.18" deep (4m x 3m x c. 0.5m)  
[OS. Ref. SP 0987 9855]**

On looking around me I was surprised to see within close proximity several other ground disturbances. As I approached pits 'H' and 'J', I could see that there were more pits nearby. What was amazing was that there was so much archaeology contained in such a small area. On the completion of that first exploration I walked downhill a little way to photograph some Exmoor ponies that were lying down in the warm sunshine and saw in front of me, across a path, a cluster of oddly shaped mounds that I photographed and measured (Figs. 2 & 3, and area 'A' on diagram 1).

During my next visit to the site I recorded the outline shapes of each pit, their basic parameters, and their Ordnance Survey map references in order to prepare a sketch that I sent to the City of Birmingham Planning Archaeologist, Dr. Mike Hodder, for his information and comment (see Diagram 2, page 3).

For the next three months I made several site visits to search for further pits and mounds and to map them for the record while the undergrowth was still dormant. By coincidence, all these ground disturbances, with one exception, occur within a 100 metres by 100 metres Ordnance Survey grid. In the hope of finding more archaeology I searched a large area around this site but could find no evidence of

further ground disturbances. Having discovered thirteen pits of various shapes, a solitary mound, plus a cluster of mounds all within a relatively small area, the obvious question arose as to why these mounds and pits should be in this particular isolated part of the Park's heathland and what was their age. What did this remote location offer that was so special?

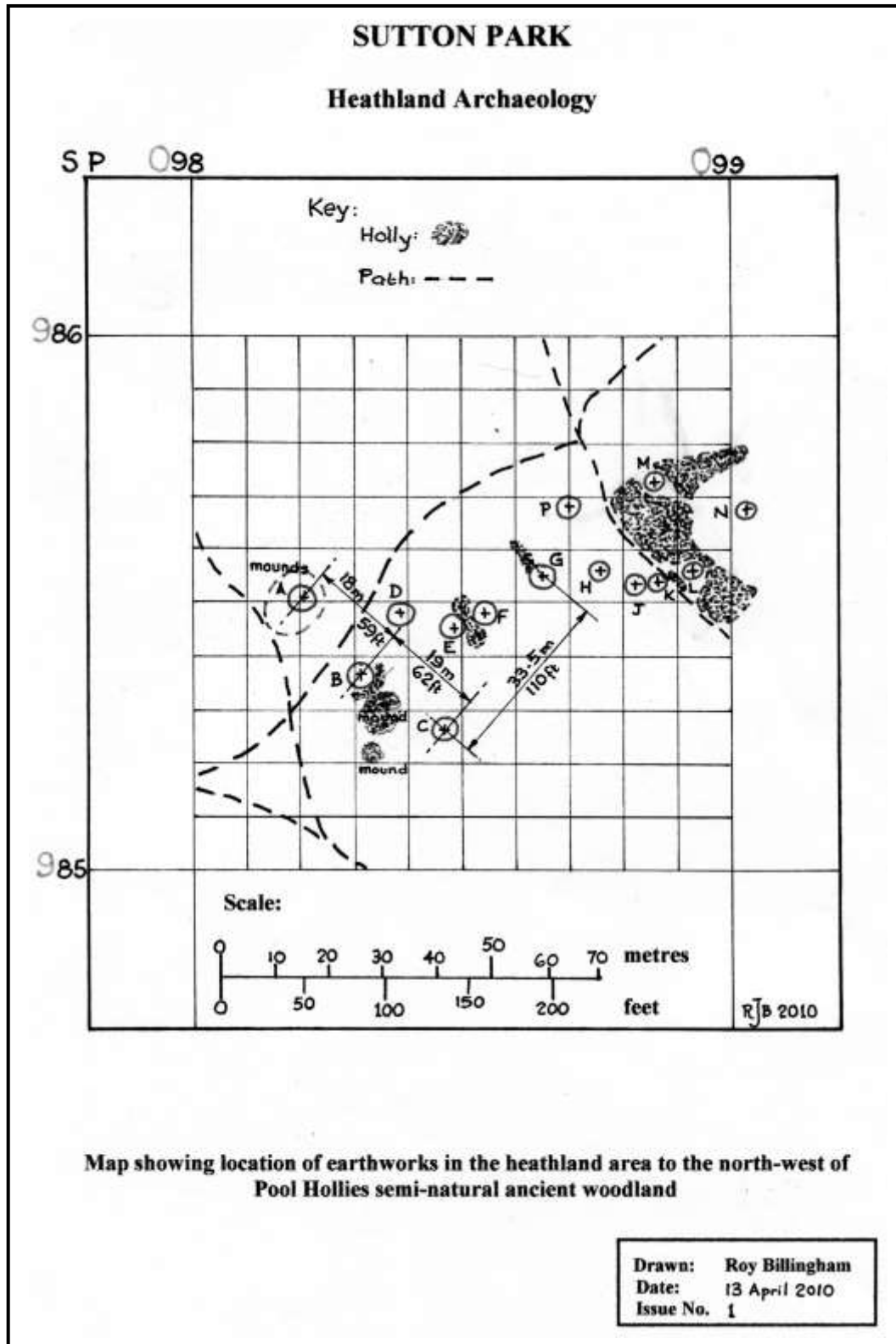


Diagram 1: A plan of the archaeological site described in the text

If one studies the diagram below there appears to be some major differences among the different shapes except for pits C, D, H, K and L. E could almost be a Q-pit which was used for making white coal as opposed to charcoal. The other pits, G, J, M and N, that are not illustrated are also essentially circular pits.










Ref.	O.S. Reference	Outline	Dimensions
<b>A</b>	SP 09814 98546		25ft x 32ft spread (7.6m x 9.8m)
<b>B</b>	SP 09830 98540		20ft x 9ft (6.1m x 2.7m)
<b>C</b>	SP 09870 98551		10ft x 13ft (3m x 4m)
<b>D</b>	SP 09846 98521		10ft x 8ft x c.18" (3m x 2.4m x c.0.5m)
<b>E</b>	SP 09867 98553		16ft x 11ft (5m x 3.4m)
<b>F</b>	SP 09869 98566		20ft x 10ft (6.1m x 3m)
<b>H</b>	SP 09902 98568		8ft dia. (2.4m dia.)
<b>K</b>	SP 09882 98570		14ft x 9ft (4.3m x 2.7m)
<b>L</b>	SP 09885 98551		11ft x 10ft (3.4m x 3m)

Diagram 2: Parameters and shapes of most of the pits and mounds referred to in the text

In April 2010 Dr. Hodder made a visit to the site with me and took photographs for his records. He had no idea of the age or purpose of the disturbances but thought that the topography of the site, the slope southwards towards the Little Bracebridge area, had certain similarities to the encampment site between the Bracebridge car park and the railway line, an area that we subsequently visited on this occasion for comparison.



**Fig. 2 - A view looking southwards with the cluster of small earth mounds ('A' in Diagram 1) in the foreground. This photograph was taken on a fine March morning in 2010 with some of the Park's Exmoor ponies enjoying the warm, sunny weather.**



**Fig. 3 – A view in the opposite direction to Fig. 2 showing the earth mounds in more contrast. This general view is looking towards the area containing the burnt-mounds. The fall of the land southwards from right to left in this photograph towards Little Bracebridge is clearly shown. During the summer the ground cover of ferns and brambles obscures most ground features.**

Below the Bracebridge car park on the sloping ground above the railway line and on the opposite slope down to the old boundary wall of the former Four Oaks Hall are numerous pits that are ancient in origin. The grassland alongside the road and opposite to the old boundary wall is a damp area containing peat deposits. These deposits are important because they provide an opportunity for core samples to be extracted so that analysis of pollen can be undertaken to establish the types of plants that were growing in the Park in ancient times.

Some fascinating earth features were discovered a year or two ago after an earlier heathland clearance programme just south of the Bracebridge car park. This clearance revealed an extensive circular ditch of scalloped outline that was thought to have some military connection (Fig. 4). The latest thinking is that the feature was

probably the result of a military exercise in training soldiers to dig trenches prior to the First World War.



**Fig. 4 – Part of an unusual scalloped outline feature, south of the Bracebridge car park.**

Below this feature and towards Network Rail's bridge No. 40 is a quarry scrape (Fig. 5) that was uncovered by a team of Park Rangers a few years ago. This area has been further cleared in subsequent programmes. It is likely that its existence is associated with the construction through the Park of the Midland Railway line prior to 1879.



**Fig. 5 – A quarry scrape south of the Bracebridge car park and opposite Network Rail's bridge No. 40 [O.S. Ref. SP 10299 97765] viewed after a light snowfall. Pool Hollies woodland is in the background.**

This particular area has an abundance of earthbanks associated with the Pool Hollies woodland. The creation of the Midland Railway line cut across the southern extremity of the woodland and part of it lies on the southwestern side of the embankment. There is also evidence of an earthbank alongside the Ebrook stream that flows from Bracebridge Pool under *The Boathouse* restaurant towards the railway embankment.

### ***The Emergence of part of a Late Medieval sub-division***

As a result of a period of extensive heathland clearance in the winter of 2010 some above-ground archaeology was uncovered that was part of the late Medieval subdivision of the Park that extends from the north-east side of Pool Hollies towards the Gum Slade and westwards and sweeps round the northern side of the Gum Slade before turning south, passing to the east of Ladywood\*, and then to Keepers Pool and the eastern side of Holly Hurst to join up with the ancient track from Wyndley water splash to Streetly Gate.

The extent of this 15<sup>th</sup> century boundary sub-division can be clearly seen on a map produced by Dr. Mike Hodder and taken from his book *BIRMINGHAM The Hidden History*<sup>1</sup> where the boundary sub-division is towards the top of the map (see Fig. 8).

As a keen countryside walker, I find that a combination of walking added to observation of unusual items such as archaeological features can double the pleasure of this healthy activity. On this theme I recommend the following investigatory walk that can easily be undertaken by locating this historic boundary earthbank and ditch (O.S. Ref. SP 09327 98670) on the southern side of the drainage ditch near to the pony corral, and following it in a south-easterly direction towards Pool Hollies (Figs.



**Fig. 6 – The 15<sup>th</sup> century boundary earthbank and ditch. This view is towards Streetly Lane.**

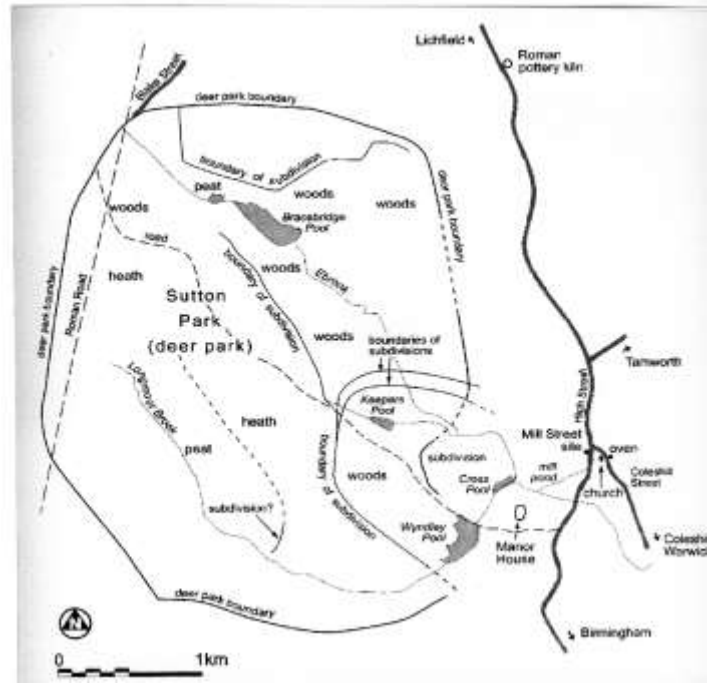


**Fig. 7 – Looking in the opposite direction towards Pool Hollies. Much of the earthbank is colonised by Birch and heather.**

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\* Sutton Park originally had seven hays, or hursts. They comprised Holly Hurst, Lower and Upper Nut Hursts, Darnel Hurst, Pool Hollies, Ladywood and Streetly Wood. Ladywood plus a strip of 6 acres near the upper end of the present Hartopp Road were given to Sir Edmund C. Hartopp, the then owner of Four Oaks Hall, by the Warden and Society of Sutton Coldfield in exchange for 93 acres of other land in the Hartopp Exchange of 1827. Of the other land, 51½ acres were brought into the Park, i.e. 36½ acres near Powell's Pool and some 15 acres near the Meadow Platt, the remaining 42 acres on Tudor Hill providing income for the Sutton Charities.

6 & 7). After a short distance it crosses a well-trodden path (Fig. 7) that leads from Streetly Lane past the pony corral towards Little Bracebridge before it joins a path that passes the fish stewes at Little Bracebridge Pool and continues under the railway line towards Streetly Wood.



**Fig. 8 – Medieval Sutton Coldfield and Sutton Park with the 15<sup>th</sup> century earthbank shown at the top of the map as ‘boundary of subdivision’.**  
 (Reproduced by kind permission of Dr. Mike Hodder)



**Fig. 9 – The quarry scrape looking from its entrance towards its face**  
 (O.S. Ref. SP 0983 9840)

Alongside a junction of paths (Streetly Lane to Little Bracebridge and the path leading to the beach at Bracebridge Pool), is a large pear-shaped quarry scrape (Fig. 9) that has dimensions of 50ft (15.2m) in length by 35ft (10.7m) at its widest point and a depth of 4ft (1.22m) at its face. It is clear that the scrape is very overgrown with holly and gorse although its entrance, which connects directly with one of the paths, is clear of undergrowth. I discovered this feature quite by chance one day when I chose to keep to the higher ground above the adjacent path in order to avoid the muddy conditions.

This fairly large scrape is certainly not isolated but, instead, is sited at the junction of a multiplex of paths which would be convenient in transporting whatever mineral – gravel or sand – was being extracted from it. Although hidden by vegetation and therefore not easily seen from adjacent paths, the earth scrape is not insignificant.

From this junction of paths the earthbank and ditch follows the line of the path that leads towards the area of the sandy beach at Bracebridge Pool where it turns northwards to enter the fringes of Pool Hollies woodland (Fig. 10). It follows the perimeter of the woodland for some little way before turning NNE through the woods to exit on the northern edge. This would seem to suggest that Pool Hollies woodland was somewhat smaller in the 15<sup>th</sup> century than it is today.

As it leaves the woodland the earthbank becomes barely visible as it crosses the recently cleared heathland in a northeasterly direction towards the area north of the Gum Slade. At this point in the walk a compass would be an advantageous item of kit because it would enable the walker to follow the direction of the somewhat indistinct earthbank. Damage to the earthbank was incurred during an earlier programme of heathland clearance in the 1980s. Patience will reward the walker as the earthbank reappears beyond some secondary woodland.

Eventually the earthbank and ditch crosses the path (Pool Hollies to The Gum Slade) illustrated in Fig. 11, turns immediately parallel to the path in the direction of Streetly Lane and then disappears briefly at a junction of paths. It reappears close to the top of the western side of the Gum Slade Path and, on the other side of the path, skirts the northern edge of the Gum Slade towards the Streetly Lane boundary and turns sharply southwards following the Park boundary fence towards the former Ladywood woodland, now the Four Oaks Estate.

This earthbank and ditch was probably built in the early 1400s by the tenant of the Manor and Park, Ralph Bracebridge of Kingsbury, in order to enclose the woodland of the Park and to protect the water supply and it is remarkable that it still exists in such fine condition for most of its length. Ralph Bracebridge paid the Earl of Warwick an annual rent for the tenancy of £10 or 120 bream which was a highly prized fresh-water fish widely used by the households of the great at times when the consumption of red-blooded meat was forbidden during Lent and at other times. The bream were almost certainly sourced from Bracebridge Pool and we know that there are existing fish-stews adjacent to Little Bracebridge Pool where young fish would have been fattened for future stocking of the main pool.





**Fig. 10 – In this view the earthbank and ditch runs along the edge of Pool Hollies alongside the woodland perimeter path that commences at the beach at Bracebridge Pool that is behind the camera.**



**Fig. 11 – The earthbank can be seen highlighted by the sunlight (centre right) as it crosses the path (O.S. Ref. SP 1049 9856) and then turns parallel to the path towards the camera and continues towards Streetly Lane.**

The walk tracing this medieval boundary is full of diverse interest and in the particular area described above you are very likely to encounter many of the Park's herd of Exmoor ponies that are managed by English Nature and the Park Ranger Service (Fig. 12).

The use of Exmoor ponies, which are an endangered species on the Rare Breeds Survival Trust's list, in itself has some historic significance since part of the woodland and heathland management in ancient times would have involved the use of omnivores as a means of controlling the undergrowth. These ponies are more efficient grazers of the undergrowth than cattle and are sturdy, weatherproof animals.

Low level grazing has been a feature of the Park for centuries and it assists in maintaining the variety of habitats seen within the site. The area grazed, east of the railway line, has a number of distinct communities. The upper area is dominated by wavy hair grass and ling heather, these being some of the drier areas, and the lower wetter areas consist mainly of purple moor grass, which can make up to 75 per cent of the diet of a horse or cow when available in adequate quantities, cross-leaved heath which cattle and horses tend to shun, and sphagnum moss.

Apart from their usefulness in keeping the undergrowth under control, the Sutton Park herd acts as a bloodstock bank for this rare breed whose genealogy can be traced back to prehistoric times. In the writer's opinion they also contribute to the recreational delights of Sutton Park.



**Fig. 12 – Some of the Park's Exmoor ponies displaying their bay/brown double-layered winter coats with black points, blue hooves, mealy colour on their muzzles, around their toad-eyes and inside their flanks. In winter with less grass available the ponies eat large quantities of gorse.**

### ***Large Quarry Scrapes near Streetly Lane***

The location of these large ground features can be found by following the tree line eastwards from the location illustrated in Fig. 10 to the north of the Gum Slade, then towards the Streetly Lane boundary fence. They lie about 150 yards (137m) from this boundary fence and just north of the 15<sup>th</sup> century earthbank boundary referred to previously.



**Fig. 13 – The larger of the two quarry scrapes located close to the Streetly Lane boundary of Sutton Park. (O.S. Ref. SP 1047 9877)**



**Fig. 14 – The smaller of the two quarry scrapes located close to the Streetly Lane boundary of Sutton Park. (O.S. Ref. SP 1046 9877)**

The larger one of the two (Fig. 13) is a horseshoe-shaped depression dug into a steep embankment. The mouth of the scrape is about 65ft wide (19.8m) and extends about 25ft (7.6m) into the embankment that is in the region of 6ft (2m) in height at its face (Fig. 8). Just to the north of this depression is a small circular pit having a diameter of 7ft (2.1m).

On top of this embankment and about 25ft (7.6m) away on the western side of the larger depression is a smaller pear-shaped depression (Fig. 14) about 29ft in length x 17ft at its widest point x c.4ft deep (8.8m x 5.2m x c.1.22m).

What was the purpose of these significant quarry scrapes in this particular location? Could they have some connection with the construction in c.1680 of Four Oaks Hall, or are they of more modern origin, say the Second World War, when the Park was utilised for a multitude of military purposes, particularly by the U.S. Army. They are larger than other quarry scrapes within the Park and therefore must have some significant purpose.

Another pit can be found close to Streetly Lane alongside the path that runs from Bracebridge car park to an entrance to the Park off Streetly Lane (Fig. 15). This pit has spoil heaped on three sides and the length of the spoil heap on the west side parallel to the path is 21ft (6.42m). The approximate dimensions of the pit are 18ft x 10ft x c.12ins (5.5m x 3m x c.0.305m).

Again, one wonders what was the purpose of this randomly located pit. It is near to a path as well as the nearby road so maybe this was simply a convenient extraction pit for a local construction project. My own theory is that this is possibly the remains of a lye pit used for burning bracken and wood for the purpose of manufacturing potash so that farmers on the north side of Streetly Lane could transport it easily by horse and cart to use as fertiliser on their fields. There is another possible lye pit site to the north of the Gum Slade which is extremely well preserved. Another suggestion has been that it might have some Second World War connection.



**Fig. 15 – A pit alongside the path from Streetly Lane to Bracebridge car park, (O.S. Ref. SP 1017 9874). Pool Hollies woodland is on the horizon.**

### *Conclusions*

The purposes of the sawpits that I have recently recorded in the woodlands of the Park and the military tent drainage rings uncovered by the heathland clearance programme in the Longmoor Valley are obvious but, with the exception of the fifteenth century

earthbank, the ground features described in this paper have no easy answers to the question of either their date of origin or their purposes. However, I think that it is important that we are aware of their existence for the benefit of future researchers. What is certain is that more and more archaeology is being discovered in the Park and the 2009 airborne LiDAR<sup>2</sup> survey, funded by English Heritage and undertaken by Cambridge University for Landscape Modelling, has uncovered much additional archaeological information to add to what is already known.

For the latest interpretation of the archaeological features that exist in Sutton Park we must patiently wait for the publication of a new book by Dr. Mike Hodder specifically about this subject. It will be published by The History Press towards the end of 2013 in time for a good Christmas read.

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<sup>1</sup> Hodder, M., "BIRMINGHAM The Hidden History", (Reprinted with amendments 2011), Stroud, The History Press, p. 97.

<sup>2</sup> LiDAR: This acronym stands for Light Detection and Ranging which is an optical remote sensing technology analogous to Radar. It uses an active laser beam transmitted in pulses from an aircraft with sensors recording the returning reflection. The measurement of the time taken for a pulse of light to reach the target and return is used to record the location of points on the ground with a very high degree of accuracy, typically 100-150mm in both plan and height. The laser beam scans across the ground surface recording 100,000 points or more every second. For archaeological benefits it has the ability to penetrate tree canopies and vegetation even in densely foliated areas.