

## SUTTON PARK ARCHAEOLOGY: UNRAVELLING A COMPLEX OF GROUND DISTURBANCES

*By Roy Billingham*

The discovery of ground disturbances in 2010 has already been published in *The Proceedings of the Sutton Coldfield Local History Research Group*.<sup>1</sup> In the light of recent investigations, my original sketch of the complex of pits and mounds now appears to be very crude and this article aims to correct any original errors by reference to these recent investigations.

In November 2013, I came across what I thought was a new discovery of ground disturbances among a dense ground cover of bracken. After making some preliminary sketches of these earthworks and noting their proximity to two adjoining paths, I realised that they were the same features that I had discovered in 2010. However, this time I detected a purposeful logic to the layout of the earthworks. I was to make several visits to the site in the following weeks in order to draw an accurate plan of the site that lies to the west of Pool Hollies.



*Fig. 1 – The approach to the site of the earthworks*

### THE LOCATION

Figure 1 shows the approach from the south to the site with the earthworks extending from the two trees in the centre of the photograph to the path bearing off to the left towards the Burnt Mounds that lie within the trees in the right background. The path leading off to the right bounds the remainder of the 2010 discoveries that lie on the right hand (southern) side of the path. The site has an appreciable slope from right to left in the photograph, probably in the region of 5 to 8 feet (2 to 3 metres), as the ground falls away towards the Ebrook Valley close to Little Bracebridge Pool. This slope probably had a significant bearing on the choice of site, the age of which is indeterminable but it certainly existed in 1926 when Wilfred Bullows surveyed the Burnt Mounds<sup>2</sup>.



*Fig. 2 – A view looking southwestwards over the earthworks showing the two oaks and the birch tree.*

<sup>1</sup> Billingham, R.J., "Sutton Park's Heathland Archaeology", p. 57f, Ref. 'A' in diagrams, contained in *The Proceedings of the Sutton Coldfield Local History Research Group*, Volume 10, (Autumn 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Bullows, W.F., "Notes on Prehistoric Cooking Site and camping ground, in Sutton Park, Warwickshire, excavated October 1926", contained in *The Transactions of The Birmingham Archaeological Society*, Vol. 52 (1930), pp. 291-300.

The photograph (Fig. 2) was taken in February 2014 when the bracken had died right down and again shows the downward slope of the site towards the path that is just outside the picture on the right hand side. Light and ground conditions in January 2014 identifies the earthworks to good effect as well as the three trees, a silver birch and two oaks, that are shown on the plan of the site in Fig. 4.

The red line on the left-hand side of map (Fig. 3, below) indicates the location of this complex (In square 985098) and its relationship to the remainder of the 2010 Discoveries of ground disturbances that are enclosed in a yellow square (987098 and 987104). It also shows the proximity, 200m due north of the complex, of the Burnt Mounds that straddle the path to the Milking Gate on Streetly Lane. In 1926 Bullows while surveying the Burnt Mounds also located the features that I located in 2010 but did not survey them in any detail. He suggested that the two sites might well have been contemporary and be an ancient camping site.

Other features indicate some of the numerous archaeological sites that lie between Pool Hollies woodland and Streetly Lane.

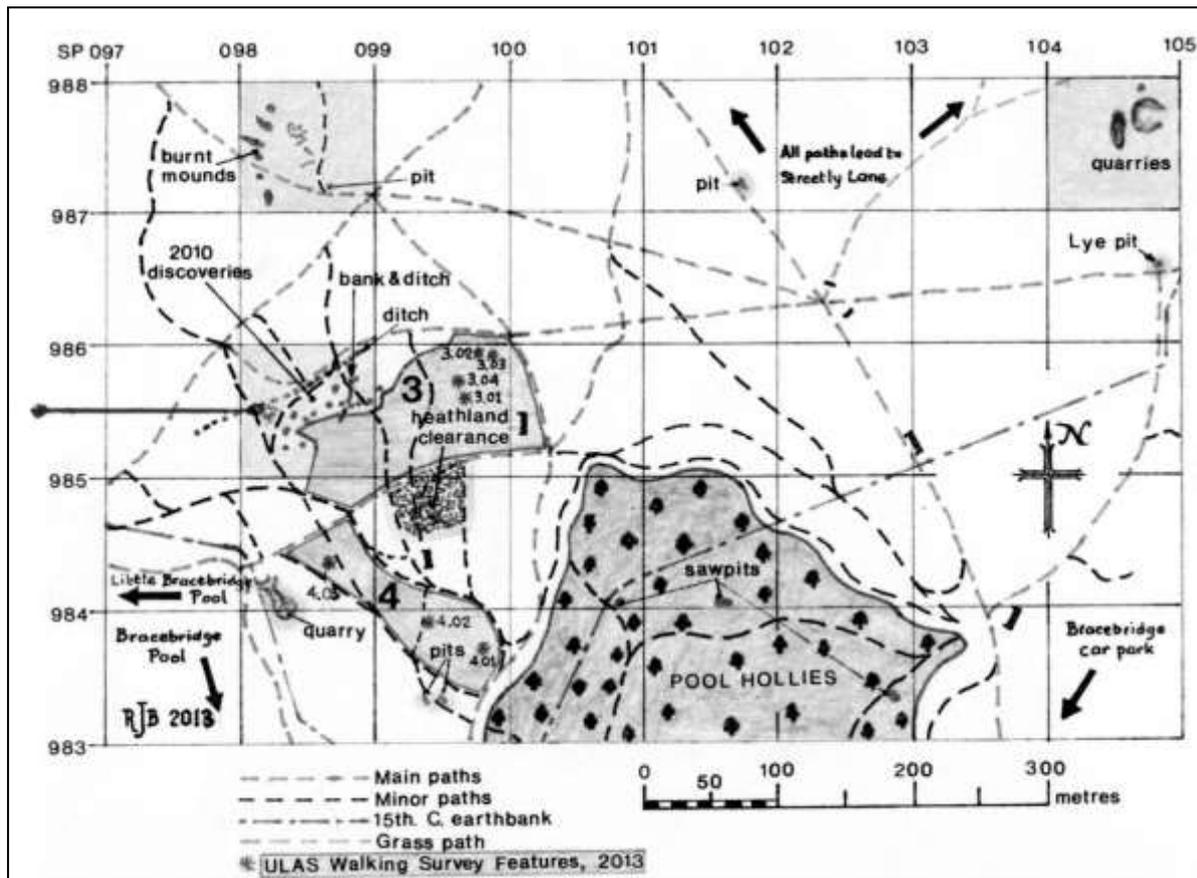


Fig. 3 – A map containing the site of the 2010 Discoveries as well as their proximity to the site of the Burnt Mounds

This map, revised in 2013, now includes two red shaded areas that represent Areas 3 and 4 that were part of a walkover survey carried out by the University of Leicester Archaeological Services<sup>3</sup> (ULAS) in January 2013. This work took place in advance of a programme of

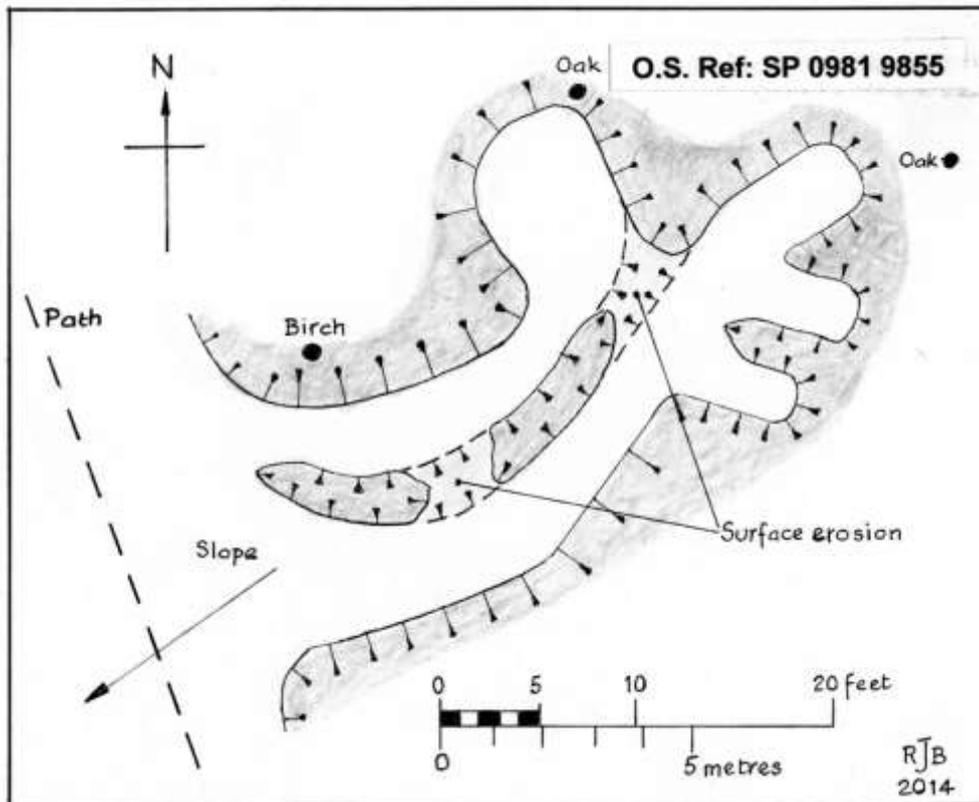
<sup>3</sup> Hyam, A., (2013), "An Archaeological Walkover Survey at Sutton Park", ULAS Report No. 2013-005, pp. 12-15, Area 3.

heathland restoration and maintenance with the aim of identifying and evaluating any potential archaeological and historical features within those areas targeted for restoration.

Further heathland restoration and maintenance was carried out in January 2014 in an area adjacent to the north of Area 3 although, to date, no evidence of any further archaeological features have been uncovered.

### THE PLAN OF THE EARTHWORKS

Instead of being a random collection of pits and mounds as I first thought in 2010, the plan of my new ground survey (Fig. 4) depicts a purposeful design that suggests some form of process



was intended. What this process was is open to speculation, not least because it is impossible to put a date on the construction of the earthworks. What is more likely is that there is a connection between these earthworks and those other pits in the immediate vicinity to the south of the site and that they are likely to be contemporaneous.

*Fig. 4 – A plan of the earthworks at O.S. Ref. SP 0981 9855*

The earthworks comprise what appear to be four cells, three on the eastern side and a larger cell on the northern side. They are all rectangular in shape and of equal depth which would appear to rule out any form of mineral extraction. What is more, they are relatively intact showing minimum erosion. Each cell opens onto one of two channels that are separated from each other by a shallow splitter earth-barrier that sweeps down the slope from the cells following the contours of the site to exit at the adjoining path (Fig. 7). The earth barrier does have two areas of erosion. The extent of the slope of these channels suggests that the process taking place within the cells required the removal of dry residue from the cells to the adjoining path for onward transportation.

The three trees, two oaks and a birch, are shown on the site plan because they were used as triangulation points to assist in measuring the parameters of the site.



*Fig. 5 – This view over the earthworks looking southwest depicts the gradient of the site declining towards the path (Photograph taken in January 2014).*

### THE POSSIBLE USE

Being completely baffled by the reason for the creation of these earthworks, one might be tempted to suggest that the process could have involved the production of potash or lye for agricultural purposes although the shape of the cells does not conform to what we normally associate with the production of these materials, i.e. an embanked circular pit. In addition, if fire were involved in the process, which would certainly be the case in the production of potash or lye, then we might expect there to be some traces of burning on the exposed eroded surfaces although there is no such evidence on the pit to the north of the Gum Slade Path thought to be a likely lye pit.



*Fig. 7 – Taken in February 2014, this is a view of the earthworks from the path, showing the birch tree on the extreme left foreground and the two oaks in the central middle distance. The two channels can be seen separated by the splitter earth-barrier which sweeps round towards the path in the bottom centre of the photograph.*

If the site was not used for a process involving fire then what was the purpose of it? Were the two channels dug at the same time or was one a part of some later expansion? Whatever its purpose, it seems probable that this site was chosen in order to exploit the gradient as well as the proximity to the conjunction of two paths (both shown in Fig. 1) which would assist in transporting the processed material elsewhere. If one studies Fig. 7, one can appreciate the extent of the slope down to the path in the foreground.

THE COMPLETE AREA OF THE 2010 DISCOVERIES

At the same time as constructing a plan of these earthworks, I thought that it would be helpful to redraw the map that originally appeared in Volume 10 of The Proceedings of the Sutton Coldfield Local History Research Group, (page 58, Diagram 1) to include more accurately the earthworks and their geographical relationship to the cluster of pits and mounds that lie a few metres away to the south of the earthworks (Figure 6 below). These pits and mound appear randomly in terms of shape, size and position relative to each other.

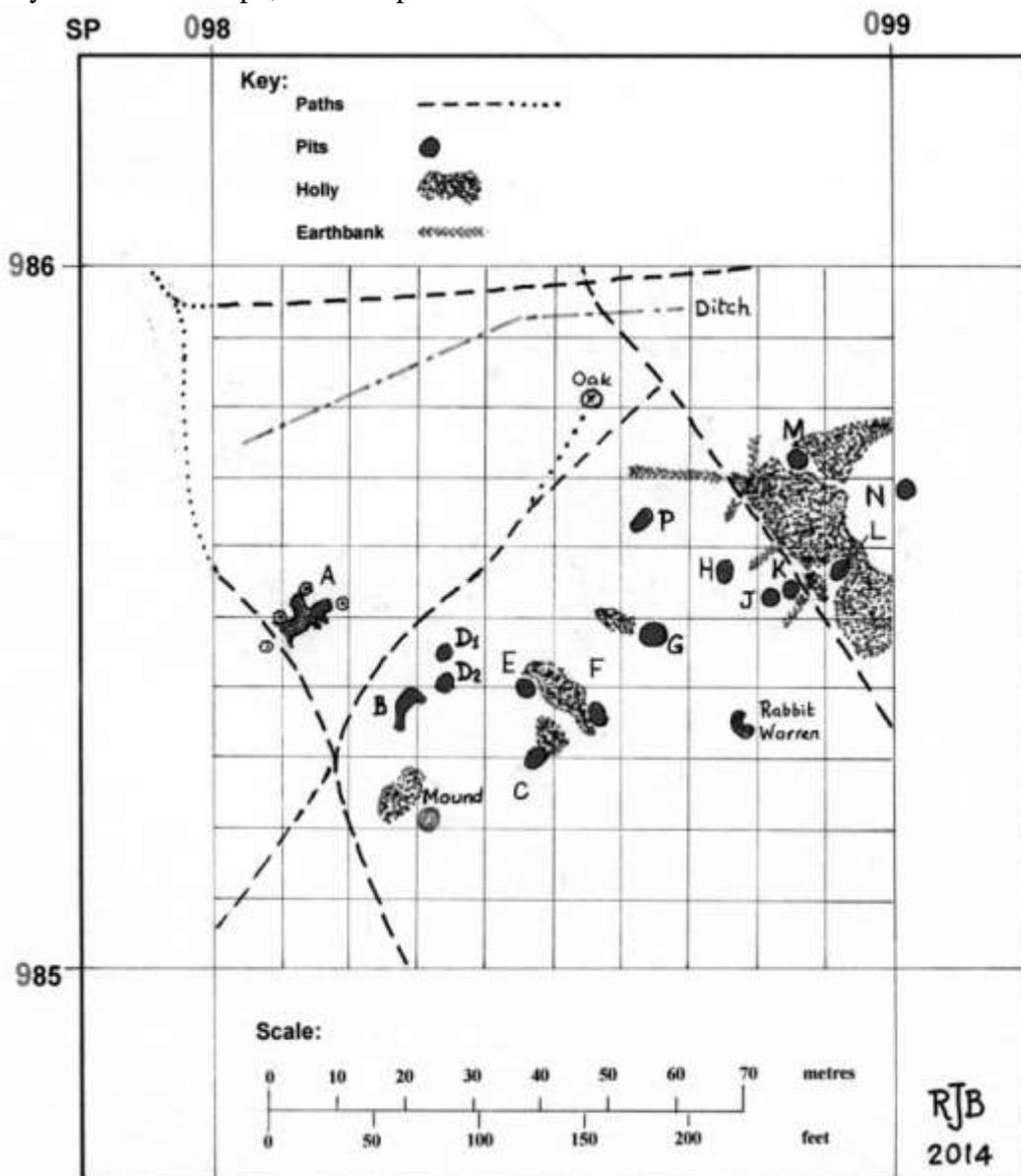


Fig. 6 – Map of earthworks (A) plus pits B to P, earthbanks, a mound, a ditch and a raised rabbit warren.

The map also includes earthbanks that appear to have some alignment with the path on the eastern side of the main site. The ULAS Report<sup>4</sup> highlights one earthbank: **Feature 3.05 linear mound**. It states, ‘this feature consisted of an elongated mound running north to south for approximately 10.4m. It had a maximum height of 1m and a maximum width of 6m and was cut at the northern end by a well-used pathway. Traces of the bank could be seen extending northwards into a clump of holly bushes where it disappeared. The feature became much lower and less distinct at its southern end as it followed the slope of the ground down to the south. There were no traces of any associated ditches with this feature but otherwise it had the appearance of the remains of a boundary feature’.

The map (Figure 6) shows my interpretation of these linear mounds that lie to the east of the map seemingly interlinked and some cut in at least two places by a well-worn pathway. This suggests that the mounds predate the pathway although the pathway probably has some antiquity as do most of the paths in the Park. This pathway runs in a southeast to northwest direction from Pool Hollies woodland towards the Burnt Mounds area. Figure 7 shows this pathway cutting the mounds in two places with the clump of holly bushes in the extreme background.



*Fig.7 – A view of the pathway running l. to r. in the centre of the picture over a series of mounds.*

The nearest and largest pit to the earthenworks complex is Pit ‘B’ with approximate dimensions of 20ft x 9ft x 18ins (6.1m x 2.7m x 0.5m). It lies just south of the pathway that separates the complex from the rest of the earthworks and is overgrown with birch and beech trees as can be seen from Fig. 8. The form of this pit is most unusual in that it is in the shape of an elongated ‘0’ with what appear to be two outlets top and bottom and to one side of the ‘0’. Is this another form of pit for processing some unknown material?



*Fig. 8 – Pit ‘B’ photographed from the pathway*

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid: Hyam, A., p. 14

Pit 'C', Fig. 9, (ULAS –Feature 3.08 Depression/hollow – p. 15) is quite evident from several aspects and was how I came in 2010 to spot the site from a distance. The almost circular pit has approximate dimensions of 13ft x 10ft x 18ins (3m x 4m x 0.45m). The ULAS Report states, 'Feature 3.08 was the clearest of all the hollows and depressions seen in Area 3. It was visible as a 3m wide by 4m long oval shaped hollow with no evidence of a bank around it. At the deepest point, in the centre, it was 0.45m deep.'



*Fig. 9 - A view of Pit 'C', looking eastwards*  
**THE DITCH**

The map also reveals the long mysterious ditch to the immediate north of the area which I can only think was some form of drainage because its western extremity stops just short of a path that runs from Streetly Lane downwards to the Little Bracebridge Pool area. Also, the area towards the eastern end of this ditch is very prone to waterlogging which might be the reason for its construction.



*Fig. 10. The eastern extremity of the ditch looking eastwards. Does the ditch have any relevance to the rest of the earthworks in this area?*

In January 2014 the area north and east of the ditch was subject to a programme of heathland clearance and as a result the eastern extremity of the ditch has been exposed. It is likely that some erosion and infill has occurred over time but nevertheless the ditch is quite clearly evident.

These earthworks together with the adjacent thirteen pits and a mound add to a list of archaeological mysteries for this small area of the Park hopefully to be resolved at some future date. For the current thinking on their origins I would recommend the reader consults the recent publication by Dr. Mike Hodder of his book about the archaeology of Sutton Park<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Hodder, M., *The Archaeology of Sutton Park*, (2013), Brimscombe Port Stroud, The History Press, pp. 137-8, [Chapter 4, Section:- Boundaries and Pits].