

# Heritage Research

## Ryebank Fields & Nico Ditch

**Client:**

Friends of Ryebank Fields

**Technical Report by:**

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**Report No:** 2021/04



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# Summary

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In December 2020 Dr Michael Nevell, archaeology consultant, was commissioned by the Friends of Ryebank Fields to produce a Heritage Research Statement for the Ryebank Fields and its relationship with Nico Ditch. Nico Ditch is a curvilinear earthwork running for c. 5km from east to west across the southern part of the City of Manchester from the Audenshaw/Denton border in the east to Platt Brook in the west. It is believed to be Early Medieval in origin. Where it survives as an earthwork it comprises a U-shaped ditch 2m to 3m wide and 1.5m to 2m deep, with a low bank on its northern side. Although not absolutely dated, it has been inferred on typological and etymological grounds to be of Pre-Norman Conquest in origin. The section of earthwork in Ryebank Fields is c. 26m long and, between 10m and 12m wide and roughly 0.5m deep, with a broadly U-shaped profile. It forms part of a continuous series of field boundaries and ditches west of Hough Moss, through Longford Park, and ending at Chester Road in Stretford, a distance of 2.64km. The association of this landscape feature with Nico Ditch was made in the 20<sup>th</sup> century due to its position on a similar alignment west of the last known extant section of Nico Ditch in Platt Fields.

This report sets out to; assess the historical development of the Ryebank Fields earthwork and the fields within which it sits; review the historical development of Nico Ditch; describe the archaeological investigations of the Nico Ditch earthwork; and assess the relationship of the Ryebank Fields earthwork to Nico Ditch.

It concludes that the Ryebank Fields earthwork was part of an alignment of field boundaries and ditches running east to west between Hough Moss in Withington and Chester Road in Stretford. That this alignment was an early landscape feature, since later field boundaries run from this alignment but do not cut it. That the alignment predated its re-use as a canal feeder for the Bridgewater Canal in the 1760s. That the earthwork is the only part of this alignment to survive as an above-ground monument, and that the relationship of this earthwork to the larger landscape feature known as Nico Ditch depends upon an understanding of its topographical location and context.

The location of the termini of Nico Ditch is crucial to any assessment of the archaeological context of the Ryebank Fields earthwork. If the alignment of Nico Ditch included only that section from Hough Moss in the west to Ashton Moss in the east, then, despite the fact that this route forms a continuous barrier from peat bog to peat bog, the monument could have been bypassed to the west of Hough Moss and Platt Brook by a landward route along the line of the present A56 and marking the line of the Roman road between Manchester and Chester. A defensive interpretation or an interpretation as a territorial marker for Nico Ditch's origins would thus make more sense if the alignment was continued west of Hough Moss. In this regard the Hough Moss to Longford Park/Chester Road alignment can be seen as blocking this remaining gap. Together, these two stretches of ditch would have formed a series of moss-ditch-moss-ditch-moss barriers from the River Irwell in the west to the River Medlock in the east.

# 1. Introduction

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## 1.1 Background

This research document studies the relationship of a short section of earthwork in Ryebank Fields, Chorlton, Manchester (centred SJ 8107 9457), to the ancient monument known as Nico Ditch (Figs 1 & 2). The earthwork at Ryebank Fields was visited for the current study on 12<sup>th</sup> February 2021.

## 1.2 Aims of the Report

The section of earthwork in Ryebank Fields is c. 26m long and, between 10m and 12m wide and roughly 0.5m deep, with a broadly U-shaped profile. The association of this stretch of earthwork with Nico Ditch was made in the 20<sup>th</sup> century due to two main reasons. Firstly, its position on a similar alignment west of the last known extant section of Nico Ditch in Platt Fields, and secondly the location to the west of a long straight ditch on the boundary between Urmston and Stretford described on mid-20<sup>th</sup> century mapping as 'Nico Ditch'.

This report sets out to:

- Assess the historical development of the Ryebank Fields earthwork and the fields within which it sits;
- Review the historical development of Nico Ditch;
- Describe the investigations of the Nico Ditch earthwork;
- and assess the relationship of the Ryebank Fields earthwork to Nico Ditch.

## 2. Ryebank Fields Setting & Historical Development

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### 2.1 Introduction

The Ryebank Fields earthwork lies on the border between Chorlton and Stretford, on the edge of Longford Park at a height of c. 28m AOD (Figs 1 & 2). It sits within an area of c.4ha of rough open pasture. This area of rough pasture is defined on its northern and eastern sides by housing and a school, its southern side by Longford Road, and its western edge by Longford Park. This is a broadly flat area with the River Mersey lying 1.3km to the south and the River Irwell (now the Manchester Ship Canal) roughly 1.5km to the north and north-west. The drift geology is glacial boulder clay lying over sandstone solid geology. The Chorlton/Stretford boundary forms the western edge of Ryebank Fields. This boundary also forms the edge of two post-medieval estates associated with Longford Hall in Stretford and the Egerton family lands in Chorlton-cum-Hardy.

### 2.2 Chorlton-cum-Hardy and Ryebank Fields

The township of Chorlton-cum-Hardy lies on the northern bank of the River Mersey, its western and northern boundaries being formed by the township and manor of Stretford, and its eastern edge by the township and manor of Withington. The township is divided by Platt Brook which runs east to west into the River Mersey at Turn Moss, south of the historic core of Chorlton village. The village green, although much altered, still stands at the centre of Chorlton.

The place-name Chorlton is first referred to as 'Cholreton' in a document from 1243, and is thought to be an abbreviation of an Old English name such as Ceolferp. Thus, the name probably means 'Ceolferp's enclosure or farm' (the '-ton' element) (Smith 1956). The form Chorlton-cum-Hardy does not occur before the early 18<sup>th</sup> century (Hayes 1989). Chorlton township was part of the late medieval Manor of Withington, which was a sub-manor of Manchester, probably a late Saxon landscape unit in origin. It was also part of the parish of Manchester, and had its own chapelry by 1512, provided by the Barlow family (Farrer & Brownbill 1911, 297-302; Nevell 2008, 59; Simpson 2012).

In the late medieval period and the 16<sup>th</sup> century the principal families holding land in the township were the Barlow family, the de Trafford family, and the lords of Withington. The de Trafford lands were sold about 1590 to Gregory Lovel and others, the Mosley family acquiring land here in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, and later the Egertons of Tatton (Farrer & Brownbill 1911, 297-302). The village of Chorlton emerged in the early post medieval period around the chapel of St Clements on the road from Stretford to Withington. By the 1920s the urban expansion had united the village with Withington to the east and Hulme to the north, although the fields along the northern side of the River Mersey remained unbuilt (Simpson 2012).

Ryebank Fields lies to the north-west of the historic post-medieval village of Chorlton-cum-Hardy, bordered by Longford Brook to the north and the Stretford manor boundary to the west. This area remained open throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, despite the encroachment housing to the south along Longford Road by the 1900s, and housing to the north of Longford Brook and east of the brick works (see below section 2.4) by the 1920s.

### **2.3 Stretford and the Longford Hall Estate**

Stretford is a large township lying between the northern bank of the River Mersey and the southern bank of the River Irwell, between 20m AOD and 32m AOD. Its southern boundary is formed by the River Mersey, its western boundary by a series of ditches across Moorside and Trafford mosses (long since filled in), its northern edge by the River Irwell (now the Manchester Ship Canal) and its eastern edge the Cornbrook, the western edge of the wetland area known as Moss Side and the western edge of Tum Moss (Nevell 1997).

The manor of Stretford is not mentioned in the Domesday Survey and is not recorded until the year 1212 when it was held by Hamon de Mascy (Farrer & Brownbill 1911, 330). The name itself means 'the ford on the road' (Mill 1976, 137) and refers to Stretford's position on the Roman road from Manchester to Chester. Around 1250 another Hamo de Masey gave the whole of Stretford to his daughter Margery, who afterwards granted the manor to Richard de Trafford. Along with the neighbouring manor of Trafford, the area descended in the de Trafford family until the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Farrer & Brownbill 1911, 333).

The Stretford survey of 1782, which included a full list of field-names as well as tenancies, indicates that arable agriculture in medieval Stretford was concentrated in the southern part of the township. These open-field place-names are concentrated around the village of Stretford (Crofton 1901, 119). This suggests that the medieval agricultural landscape of Stretford was dominated by a nucleated village clustering around the medieval chapel, rather than by dispersed farmsteads. St Matthews was a chapel of ease for Manchester, and is first referred to in a lease of 1413, although it was completely rebuilt in 1842 (Farrer & Brownbill 1911, 334).

Stretford remained a largely rural area until the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. The hearth tax returns of 1666 record 117 hearths in the township, the principal residence, Trafford Old Hall, having by far the most with 24 hearths (Farrer & Brownbill 1911, 330). The survey of Trafford land in the township in 1782 lists 127 holdings rented by 271 tenants (Crofton 1901, 120-54). The de Trafford's continued to hold most of the land in Stretford, although a survey in 1649 indicated that there were 24 freeholdings in the township (Farrer & Brownbill 1911, 333).

Until 1720 the chief residence of the family was Trafford Old Hall in Trafford but in that year the family moved to Trafford Hall in Trafford Park on the Stretford/Barton-upon-Irwell border (Farrer & Brownbill 1911, 330).

Despite the building of the Bridgewater Canal through the township in the 1760s and the opening of Throstle Nest Paper Mill by 1772 (Crofton 1899, 175), Stretford remained a rural area until the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. In 1801 the population of the township was 1477, and this had grown to 4,998 by 1851, when there were 959 inhabited houses in the township. The

Manchester South Junction and Altrincham railway opened its station in Stretford in 1849 and this may have been responsible for the surge in population, which reached 8,757 in 1861. Most of this growth was concentrated around the village of Stretford, although there was some linear development eastwards along Edge Lane towards Chorlton cum Hardy. In recognition of this growth Stretford received its own local board in 1868 (Farrer & Brownbill 1911, 330).

The Cheshire Lines Railway was opened through the township in 1873, and two further stations were opened, one on this line, and a second on the Manchester to Altrincham line by the end of the century. These new stations, coupled with the sale of Trafford Park to the Manchester Ship Canal Company and the Trafford Park Estate Company (Crofton 1903, 43) encouraged further growth in the township and by 1901 the population had climbed to 30,436.

The census in that year noted that 'the large increase in the population of Stretford Civil Parish is attributed mainly to its proximity to the City of Manchester'. In 1891 there were 4,167 inhabited houses in Stretford, and Stretford was upgraded to an Urban District Council in 1894. Most of this new urban development was in Old Trafford in the north-eastern part of the township, east of Seymour Grove. The rapid urban growth of the township continued into the first three decades of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, with further linear development of building between Stretford and Old Trafford along Chester Road. The population rose from 30,436 in 1901 to 46,572 in 1921, reaching 56,817 in 1931. The rapid population and urban growth of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century eased after 1931, the population peaking at 61,874 in 1951, and thereafter falling back to 54,167 in 1971 (Nevell 1997).

### *Longford Hall estate*

This estate lies along the south-eastern border of Stretford and was bought from the de Trafford family by the Lovells in 1587. A survey in 1649 indicated that of the 24 freeholdings within the township (Crofton 1903, 71), the largest was that of the Lovells, who held the Turf Moss estate as well as the lands around Longford Hall (Farrer & Brownbill 1911, 333).

Longford Hall is said to have originally been a farmhouse (Bailey 1878, 24), and this may have been the 'messuage on Adam's Field' (later the site of Longford Hall), which in 1787 James Lowe, yeoman, sold to Thomas and Richard Walker, merchants (Crofton 1903, 83). It was later the home of Thomas Walker, who died here in 1817 (Crofton 1903, 84), and was sold to John Rylands by Thomas's son Charles James Stanley Walker who also resided here.

The Longford estate of the Walker family comprised a long narrow area of land running northwards from Edge Lane, with a screen of trees planted along its boundaries. The early 19<sup>th</sup> century house was one of a group of several buildings, clustered towards the centre of the site. The size and arrangement of these buildings is more suggestive of a farm than a merchant's house but on the northern side was a feature which must have been added by the Walkers, a large walled kitchen garden.

Longford Hall is best known for its association with the Manchester cotton magnate John Rylands. He bought the Longford estate in 1855 and built a mansion here, which was his

residence from 1857 until his death in 1888. It was later the home of his widow Enriqueta Augustina Rylands who first assembled a collection of books and manuscripts here which were then transferred to the purpose-built John Rylands library on Deansgate, Manchester, named in memory of her husband.

Douglas Farnie, in his biography of Rylands, writes: 'At Longford Hall he paid special attention to irrigation and to horticulture. All the water draining off the roof was collected in a deep well and was then pumped up to a high-level tank. The meadows fronting the hall were irrigated by subterranean piping. Extensive gardens and conservatories were laid out on the pattern of Chatsworth. A large staff of nineteen gardeners was employed and special cottages were built for them, Longford Cottages, to the rear of the hall. The kitchen garden was doubled in extent from two acres in 1862 to four in 1867. Fourteen conservatories with three-quarters of an acre under glass in 1862 were doubled in number to thirty-one by 1875, with two miles of steam-pipes, serviced by six boilers, a steam engine and a gas-works. Exotic fruit such as grapes, peaches and pineapples were cultivated on a large scale, regularly carrying off prizes at exhibitions between 1874 and 1878. Above all, he grew vegetables for sale, to the astonishment of the more traditionally minded' (Farnie 1993, 19-20).

Ordnance Survey mapping shows that Rylands's glasshouses ran in a continuous band along the eastern side of his house and outbuildings, around three sides of the site of the old kitchen garden and continued to the east. In 1912 the hall and its grounds, amounting to 63 acres, were sold to Stretford UDC for use as a public park. A further 18 acres were added in 1925. The hall was extended in 1933 (Massey 1976, 103).

In 1995 Longford Hall was demolished, leaving parts of the ground floor façade, including the porticoed entrance. The site of the building's interior was laid out in 1996 as the Larry Sullivan Garden.

## **2.4 Cartographic Evidence for Ryebank Fields (Figs 3 -9)**

The earliest map to show Ryebank Fields, its earthwork, and the surrounding landscape, dates from the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century (Fig 3). Recent research by local historian Richard Bond (*pers comm*) suggests that an undated Egerton estate map (M24/1/2) which shows the earthwork was probably surveyed around 1758. Samuel Hill purchased lands in Chorlton and Withington in 1755, which were then inherited by Samuel Egerton in 1758. As the plan is of the Withington demesne and Chorlton estates, it would make sense that the plan was drawn up when Egerton inherited. The estate map shows that west of Manchester Road, originally a country road that led into the northern side of Chorlton village, there was a watercourse heading south from the Longford Brook and then heading west. This is the later line of a canal feeder as recorded on 20<sup>th</sup> century Ordnance Survey maps held by the Manchester city estates department and now in Manchester library archives (see below section 2.5). The watercourse only extended to the end of plot V12 as marked in blue on the c. 1758 map. Bond suggests that water was diverted from Longford Brook to provide water for irrigating fields V11 and V12, and that the earthwork through Ryebank Fields was re-used as part of this system. Beyond field plot V12 on the map a single line of dots becomes a double line and then a single line through the current area of Ryebank Fields, on the earthwork alignment (plot Z8), suggesting it was visible as an earthwork at this date. This map also shows a large number of

ponds, especially around the area of Redgate Farm (bottom right-hand corner of Fig 3). These may be either marl pits or old pits let over from digging clay for brick making, or more likely a mixture of both activities.

The next map to show the Ryebank Fields area in detail is the Ordnance Survey First Edition Six Inch map, surveyed in 1848 (Fig 5). This shows the landscape in and around Ryebank in a similar state to that seen on the c. 1758 map, with one exception. A kidney-shaped pond had been dug at the eastern end of Ryebank Fields and the water course of which the earthwork was a part diverted to the south, presumably in order to fill it. There are also fewer ponds on this map. To the east of Ryebank, towards Manchester Road, ponds at Redgate Farm are named as 'Brick Kiln Pits' and as 'Marl Pits'. Longford Brook to the north is shown as an open water course. The 1838 Stretford Tithe map (Fig 4) and the 1847 Chorlton-cum-Hardy tithe map (IR 30/18/73) both show a very similar landscape of ditched and hedged enclosures with open water courses and dis-used brick and marl pits.

The first edition Ordnance Survey 25-inch map for the Ryebank Fields area, surveyed in 1892, shows the earthwork as an open water course. It also shows in detail the kidney-shaped pond at the eastern end of the site, which the water course had been diverted to fill. To the east, urban encroachment had begun with the building of Fielden Terrace off Manchester Road, whilst housing to the west of Longford Hall had been built along Cromwell, Harriet, and Steven Streets. Detached and semi-detached houses had been built by this date along Edge Lane to the south of the Longford Park estate. The Ordnance Survey 6-Inch revision map for 1892-4 (Fig 6) shows the same landscape at the start of urbanisation.

By the time of the 1904-5 Ordnance Survey 6-inch map revision this urbanisation had extended further (Fig 7). Longford Road had been built to the south of Ryebank Fields, although with housing only at its eastern end. A row of semi-detached housing had been built on the western side of the newly built Rye Bank Road, which met the western end of Longford Road. North of the new Longford Road was a row of ten terraced houses on Cardiff Road, at the south end of the Present Ryebank Fields. To the east of this was an area named as 'Brick Works', with a quarry area south of the Ryebank Earthwork accessed by a tramway running to the east towards brick processing buildings. This tramway presumably brought clay to the brick works. This industrial site was run by the Chorlton Brick Company, and probably owned by Thomas Harrison (who occurs in Kelly's Trade Directory of Manchester in 1923; Kelly 1923, 526), functioning into the 1940s (Simpson 2012, 15). Beyond this towards Manchester Road were new terraced houses along the newly built Lynton and Hartley roads, whilst Oswald Road, running parallel to Manchester Road, had been laid out with housing on its eastern side. Redgate Farm survived but the fields around it along Manchester Road were now built upon.

The landscape continued to change rapidly in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, with the Ordnance Survey 6-Inch revision map of 1915-16 (Fig 8) now showing housing along both sides of Longford Road to the south and both sides of Oswald Road to the east of Ryebank, including the new Grange Road and Clarence Road. The southern part of the quarry for the brick works had been filled in, perhaps to allow for the building of houses. The kidney-shaped pond west of the Fields earthwork had been reduced to a single oval water feature. North of the earthwork, which was still an open water course, were a series of allotments stretching to Longford Brook, which was also still an open water course at this date. Redgate Farm to the east on

Manchester Road had been demolished and replaced by a library and school. The 1922 1:2500 map revision shows the same landscape.

The Ordnance Survey 6-Inch map revision of 1933-34 (Fig 9) showed a substantial expansion of both the housing to the east and north of Ryebanks Fields, and on the brick works. Clarence Road had been extended westwards beyond Grange Road and housing around Copley Road built to the north of the allotments. To the south the quarries for the brickworks had been extended to the west, whilst a new clay pit had been dug to the north of the Ryebank Fields earthwork. The earthwork is shown as an open water course as far as the western boundary with Longford Park, but had disappeared under parkland landscaping west of the boundary. The brick works' tramway had also been extended to the north across the Ryebank Fields earthwork to access the northern clay pits, where there were two areas of standing water.

The 1951 1:1250 Ordnance Survey revision map shows that the brick works, marked as disused, had been abandoned. The western and northern clay pits had been filled in and the tramway removed. Two process buildings survived at the eastern end of the site: to the east a large brick kiln, and to the west a second building with a chimney. A ramp, all that remained of the tramway, gave access to the northern end of this building. To the south-west of this building was a pond and a refuse heap. In the south-western part of the site the single row of terraced housing along Cardiff Street, and the street itself, had disappeared by the time this map was revised. The Ryebank Fields earthwork was now marked as a drain. The 1952-55 1:2500 map revision and the 1954-56 1:10,560 map revision both show the same landscape.

The 1966 Ordnance Survey 1:10,560 scale map revision showed further changes. Although the abandoned brick works process buildings and pond survived at the eastern end of the site, to the north the former allotments had been built upon by housing around Peveril Crescent. The 1971 1:1250 map revision shows the construction of St John's Roman Catholic Primary School on the site of the brick works process structures. At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the 1989 1:10,000 revision showed to the south west of the Ryebanks Field earthwork two buildings with an access road are shown on this map.

## **2.5 Ryebank Fields and the 1760s Bridgewater Canal Feeder (Figs 10 to 13)**

A landscape feature shown on Ordnance Survey mapping from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, and mentioned in correspondence held by the Peel Archives, had a direct impact on the earthwork within Ryebank Fields. This was the Bridgewater Canal Feeder.

The southwards branch of the Bridgewater, from Longford Bridge, was authorised by the Third Bridgewater Canal Act, passed in 1762 (Hadfield & Biddle 1970). The construction of the canal through the southern part of Stretford towards the township of Sale was completed by 1766. It would be logical to assume that the canal feeder dates from this period. The fact that the canal feeder is not shown on an estate map of c. 1758 supports Crofton's assertion that this feature was built in the 1760s along with the canal (Crofton 1899, 2-3; M24/1/2). The line of the feeder is shown on Yates' map of Lancashire published in 1786.

Recent research by local historian Richard Bond (*pers comm*) has revealed that the line of this feeder appears to have been causing problems in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Documents held in the Peel Group Archives, in the form of internal Bridgewater Canal correspondence, makes clear that the whole feeder was originally an open feature. A plan annotated in 1953 and studied by Bond show that the canal feeder took water from Longford Brook, diverting it at 90 degrees into pipes running southwards along Manchester Road before turning at 90 degrees westwards just at the junction of Manchester Road and Oswald Lane. The line west of this junction follows a water course that takes it through Ryebank Fields and Longford Park before joining the Bridgewater Canal at the dry dock and boat works, immediately south of Longford canal bridge (Figs 10 & 12). The 1950s correspondence refers to past problems, including flooding, which had arisen regarding culverted sections of the water course, and that any liability for such problems had been placed on the landowners who had put in culverts, or allowed them to be put in.

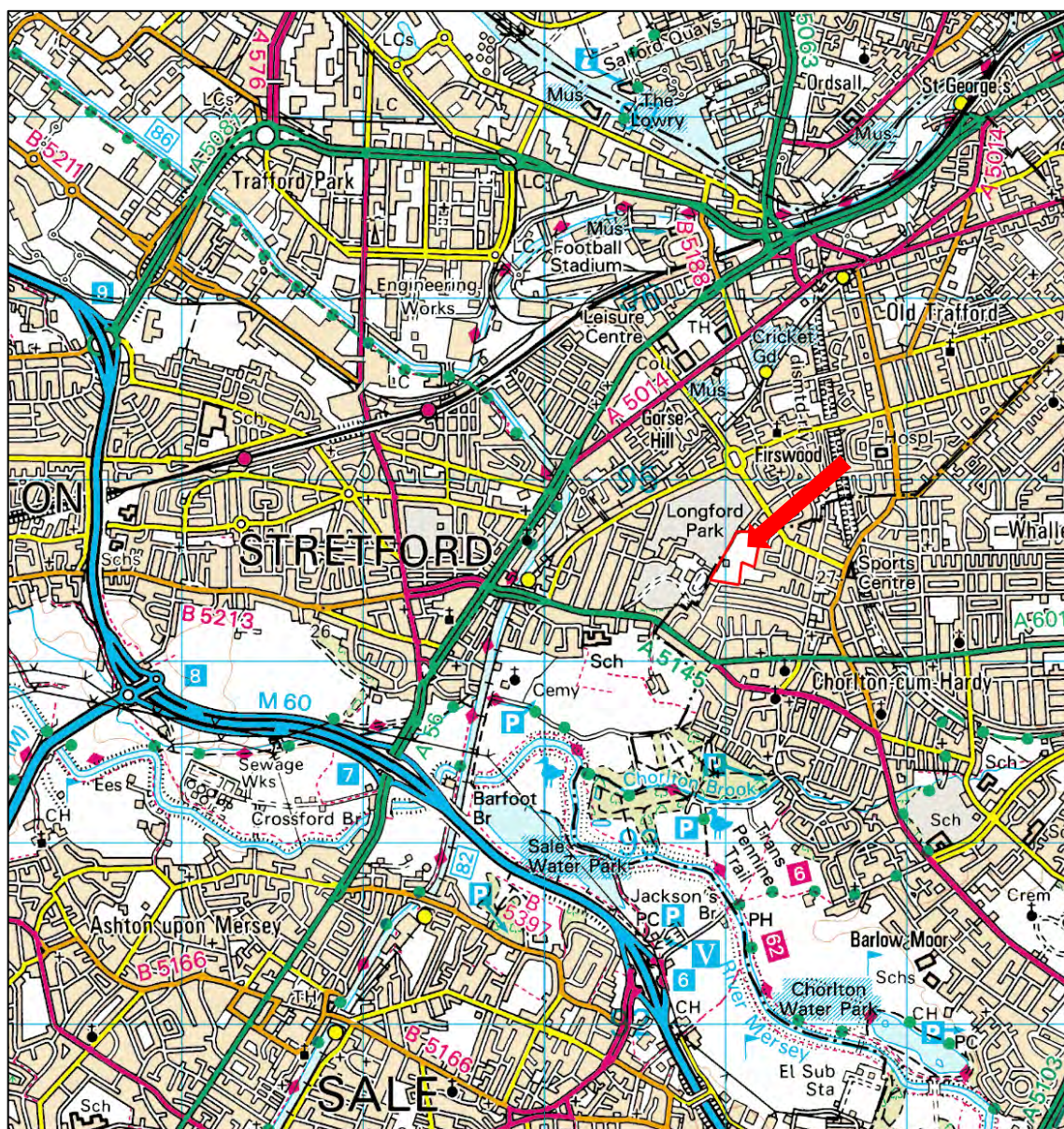


Figure 1: The location of Ryebank Fields (arrowed). The base is the OS 1:1250 survey, 2019. Source: Ordnance Survey Crown Copyright reserved.

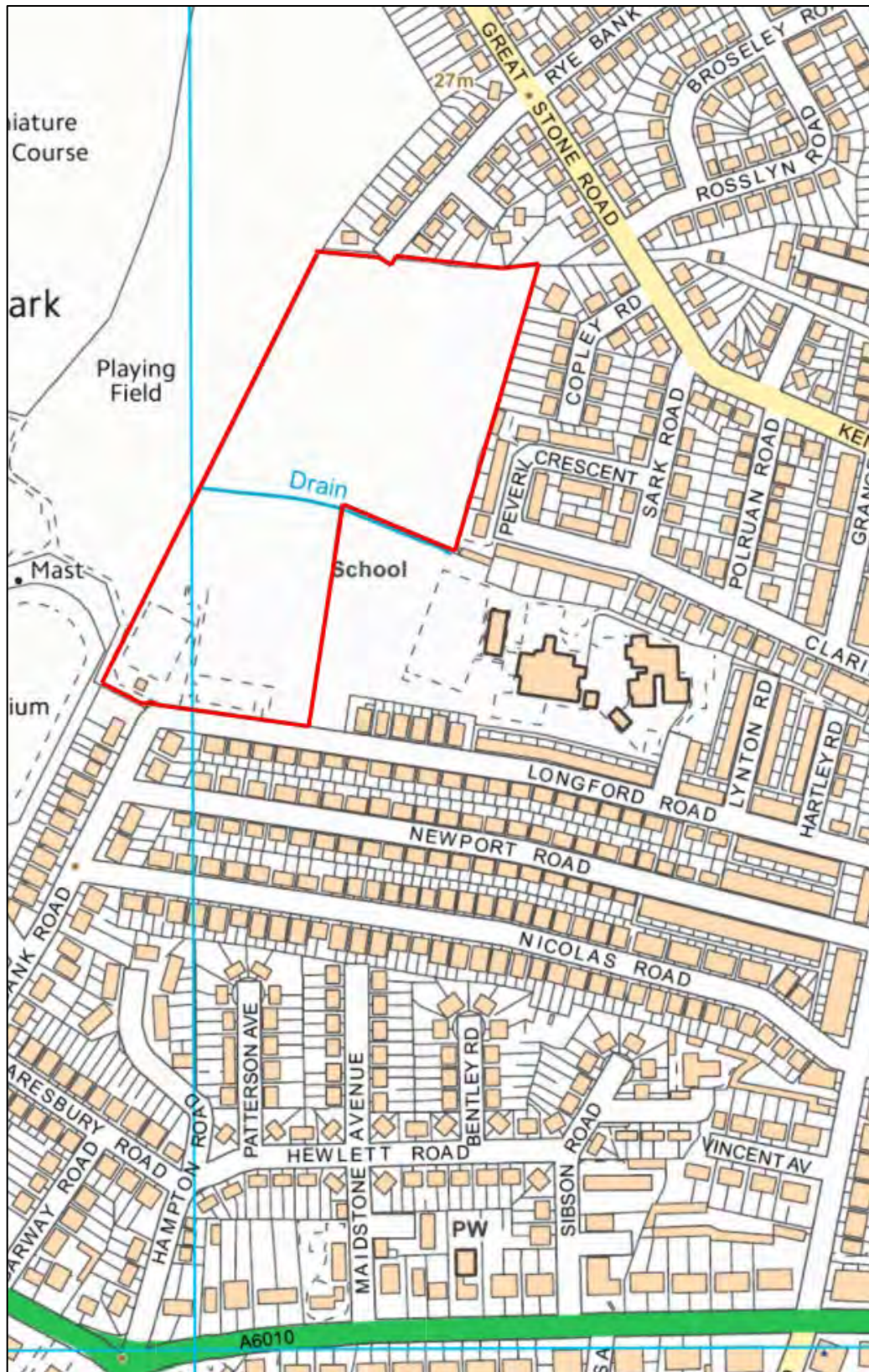


Figure 2: The location of the Ryebank Fields study area, outlined in red. The base is the OS 1:1250 survey, 2019. Source: Ordnance Survey Crown Copyright reserved.



Figure 3: The location of the Ryebank Fields study area, outlined in red on the c. 1758 Egerton estate map for Chorlton-cum-Hardy. Source: Manchester Library Archives M24/1/2.



*Figure 4: The 1838 tithe map for Stretford with Ryebank Fields outlined. Source: image courtesy of Lancashire Record Office, Preston IR 30/18/73.*



Figure 5: Ryebank Fields outlined on the Ordnance Survey 6 in to 1 mile mapping surveyed 1845, Lancashire sheet 111, published 1848.



Figure 6: Ryebank Fields outlined on the Ordnance Survey 1:2500 mapping surveyed 1892 (Lancashire sheet CXI.1, published 1894).



*Figure 7: Ryebank Fields outlined on the Ordnance Survey 6 Inch revised map of 1904-5 (Lancashire sheet CXI.1).*



Figure 8: Ryebank Fields outlined on the Ordnance Survey 6 Inch revised map of 1915-16 (Lancashire sheet CXI.1).



Figure 9: Ryebank Fields outlined on the Ordnance Survey 6 Inch revised map of 1934-5 (Lancashire sheet CXI.1).



Figure 10: Western line of the canal feeder. Source: Peel Archives. Image courtesy of Richard Bond.

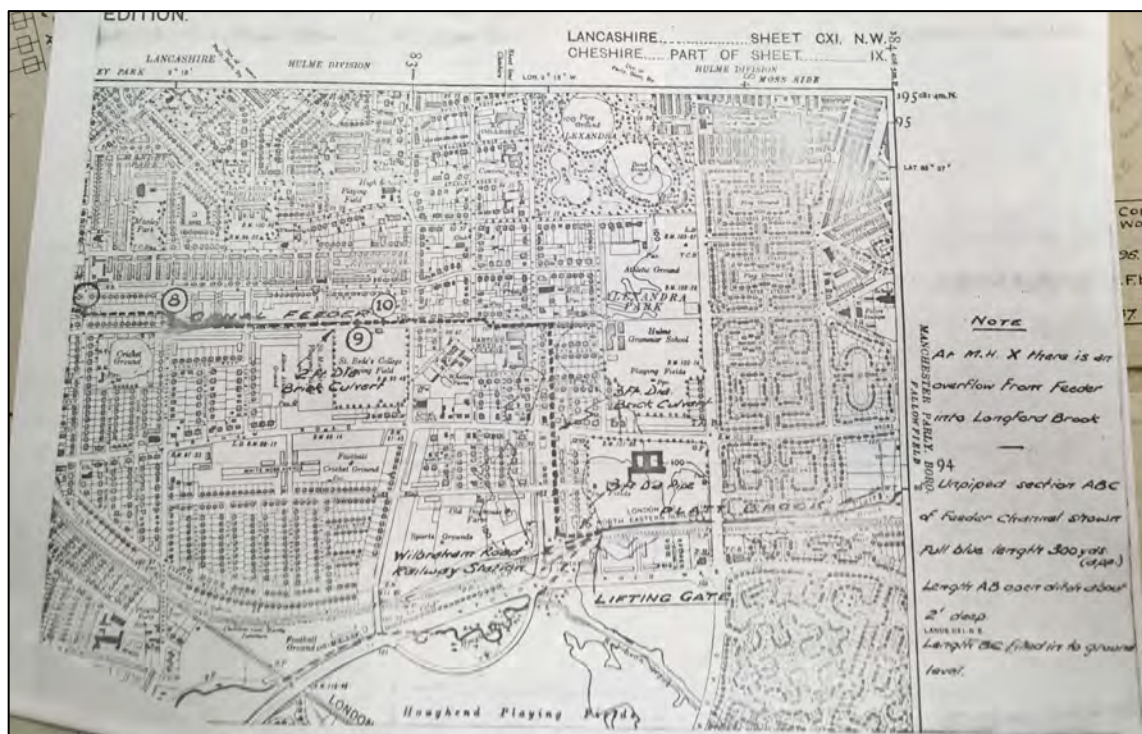


Figure 11: Eastern line of the canal feeder. Source: Peel Archives. Image courtesy of Richard Bond.

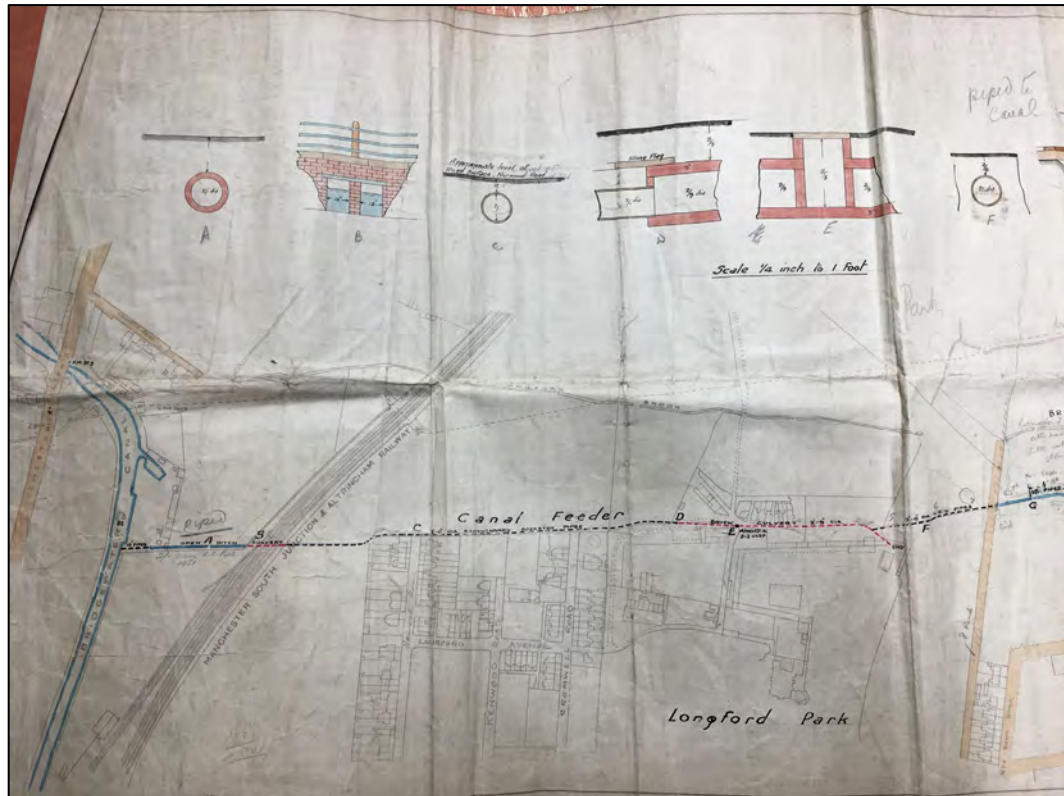


Figure 12: Details of the western line of the canal feeder fabric. Source: Peel Archives. Image courtesy of Richard Bond.



Figure 13: Details of the eastern line of the canal feeder fabric. Source: Peel Archives. Image courtesy of Richard Bond.

## 3. Nico Ditch: History & Excavation

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### 3.1 Introduction

In the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century a link was made between the earthwork at Ryebank Fields, the alignment of field boundaries running between Chester Road in the west to Manchester Road in Chorlton and eastwards towards Platt Fields, and the earthwork known as Nico Ditch.

Nico Ditch is a curvilinear earthwork running for c. 5km from east to west across the southern part of the City of Manchester from the Audenshaw/Denton border in the east to Platt Fields in the west (Fig 14). It is believed to be Early Medieval in origin. Where it survives as an earthwork it comprises a U-shaped ditch 2m to 3m wide and 1.5m to 2m deep, with a low bank on its northern side. Although not absolutely dated, it has been inferred on typological and etymological grounds to be of Pre-Norman Conquest in origin.

### 3.2 Nico Ditch Statutory Designations

Two sections of the course of Nico Ditch are protected as scheduled monuments, Denton Golf Course and Platt Fields. Its eastern terminus is commonly agreed to be Ashton Moss, in Tameside, close to Denton Golf course, while the western terminus traditionally has been placed in Platt Fields, Manchester, on the edge of the former mossland of Hough Moss.

*Denton Golf Course, Scheduled Description, List Entry Number 1016197 (Figs 15 & 16):*

‘The Nico Ditch is a linear boundary of the Anglo-Saxon period. The linear earthwork on Denton golf course survives well in this 205m long section. Such survival is remarkable in this urban and extensively built-up area. Other sections can still be traced as township boundaries and as footpaths in the city. The ditch still retains its ‘U’ shaped profile and the bank stands proud of the surrounding landscape and will have traces of the original ground surface beneath it. In this section where the ditch has been partly infilled and the bank degraded by ploughing the remains will nonetheless retain deposits in the bottom of the ditch and original soil under the bank.’

‘The monument includes a 205m section of a linear earthwork known as the Nico Ditch. The earthwork is a bank and ditch which lies to the south and east of the present city of Manchester. It has been traced as upstanding remains and field boundaries for 5km between the Hough Moss in the west and the Ashton Moss on the east side of the city. It cuts through the low-lying land between these mosslands and defends the land to the north including the site of the Roman fort and Anglo-Saxon burgh of Manchester. Its name has had various forms in the past including ‘mykelldiche’ and ‘magnum fossatum’ in AD 1190-1212. These names point to an Anglo-Saxon origin and mean the ‘great ditch’. The surviving section of the Nico Ditch on Denton Golf Course runs from a point 50m north of the eastern spur of Gorton Rears for around 300m to the north east diagonally across the course, however only a 205m section is included in the scheduling. The ditch is ‘U’ shaped in section and about 1.5m deep at this point and about 4m wide. The bank is on the north side and stands 0.5m high and 5m wide at the base. The ditch no longer carries water even though it is referred to as the Nico Brook by

local people. A well-preserved section runs eastwards for 105m from the western end of the area of the scheduling. Beyond this to the east there is a 100m long section of ditch which has been partly destroyed by agriculture and the formation of the golf fairways and is visible as a rise in the mown grass representing the degraded bank on the north west side and a slight depression where the ditch has been infilled by agricultural activity. This section is included in the scheduling. For about a further 100m to the east the ditch is only traceable as a darker mark in the grass during dry weather conditions; this section is not included in the scheduling. The ditch has been excavated in various places in the past 20 years at other locations and these investigations have established the consistent form of the bank and ditch. Its date and function have been variously described as a boundary for Roman centuriation (a division of allocated land for cultivation), as an early medieval administrative boundary to separate early estates and later parishes and as a defence of the burgh of Manchester reported in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle under the date AD 919. The latter suggested function would have cut off the access to the town by three Roman roads from the south side. Since the ditch effectively forms a barrier to traffic between the Irwell and the Medlock it may have formed part of the boundary of the kingdom of Rheged in the sixth century or it may have been the limit of the kingdom of Mercia in the eighth century.'

*Platt Fields, Scheduled Description, List entry number 1015132 (Figs 17 & 18)*

'The Nico Ditch is a linear boundary of the Anglo-Saxon period. The section of the linear earthwork in Platt Fields survives well and is one of very few sections of the Nico Ditch which remains identifiable. It has been destroyed by urban developments in all but a few locations elsewhere in Manchester. The original profile of the ditch is still evident and the bank is still proud of the surrounding ground surface. The original ground surface will survive beneath the bank.'

'The monument includes a 135m long section of a linear earthwork known as the Nico Ditch. The earthwork is a bank and ditch which lies to the south of the present city of Manchester. It has been traced as upstanding earthwork remains and field boundaries for 5km between the Hough Moss in the west and the Ashton Moss on the east side of the city. Its name has been recorded in various forms in the past including 'mykelldiche' and 'magnum fossatum' in AD 1190-1212. These names point to an Anglo-Saxon origin and mean the 'great ditch'. The section surviving in Platt Fields runs from a point on the north of the Shakespeare Garden where an iron rail fence cuts across the ditch and separates part of the grounds of the school, and eastwards to the Oxford Road wall. At a point 30m from the road it is intersected by another rail fence defining the burial ground of the Unitarian Chapel. The part of the ditch in the burial ground is also included in the scheduling. On the south side of the ditch an iron rail fence has been built along the lip of the ditch to prevent access to the grounds of the school and mark the limits of the park. The ditch is 'U' shaped in section and about 2m deep at this point and about 4m wide. The bank is on the north side and stands 0.5m high and 5m wide at the base. The ditch still carries water through to the lake on the west side of the park. To the west of the area of the scheduling the ditch has been re-cut to allow this water to flow more freely and this has destroyed the profile of the original work. To the east the ditch has been destroyed by development. The ditch has been investigated by excavation in various places in the past 20 years and this has confirmed the consistent form of the monument throughout its length. Its date and function have been previously described as a boundary for Roman

centuriation (a division of allocated land for cultivation), as an early medieval administrative boundary to separate early estates and later parishes and a defence of the burgh of Manchester reported in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle under the date AD 919. The latter suggested function would have cut off the access to the town by three Roman roads from the south side. Since the ditch effectively forms a barrier to traffic between the Irwell and the Medlock it may have formed part of the boundary of the kingdom of Rheged in the sixth century or it may have been the limit of the kingdom of Mercia in the eighth century. The facts are that it forms a demarcation between an area of low-lying ground between two mosslands to the east and west of the site of the Anglo-Saxon town of Manchester, that it forms a boundary between several medieval townships along its length and that its name is firmly Anglo-Saxon in origin. This means that it was constructed during the administration of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms between AD 600 and the tenth century. The gravestones in the yard of the chapel and the iron railings on the southern lip of the ditch and running across the ditch at the western end and at a point 30m from the Oxford road, are not included in the scheduling but the ground beneath them is included.'

### **3.3 Origin of the Name**

Nico Ditch is first mentioned in two versions of a charter of the period 1190-1212 relating to the granting of land in Audenshaw to the monks of Kersal Cell (Farrer 1902, 329; Nevell 1991, 121; Nevell 1992). A 'Mykelldiche' is referred to in the first manuscript, and a 'magnum fossatum' in the second. Since the boundaries described in each charter are the same there can be no doubt that it is Nico Ditch that is referred to in both documents. Around the same time Matthew son of William granted to the Hospitallers a piece of land in Platt Fields, Rusholme, which included amongst its boundaries a 'magnum fossatum' (Farrer & Bronbill 1911, 303, n 8). The name next occurs as 'Meledyche' in 1317 in a deed relating to land in Fallowfield (Booker 1859, 124). The manuscripts of the survey of the manor of Manchester in 1320 or 1322 give three variants of the name, 'Mikeldiche' 'Muchildich', and 'Mocheldich', and locates the monument on the Reddish boundary of the manor. A deed of 1484, which gives the boundaries of lands held in Rusholme by William Birch of Slade Hall, refers to a 'Michewall Ditch'. This particular variant is also found in the original name of this estate, 'Milkewallslade', a form first attested in an undated deed of the c 1270 and still in use as late as 1629 (Booker 1859, 231 & 236).

The origin of the name has been the subject of much debate. The most widely used label in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries has been Nico or Nikker Ditch. This has sometimes been ascribed to the Old English 'nicor' meaning 'a water sprite'. However, it is more likely that it is a corruption of the earliest attested forms, 'Mykelldiche', 'Mekeldyche', and 'Muchildich', which are derived from the Old English word 'micel', meaning 'big' or 'great' (Smith 1956). This would make the term 'magnum fosstum', or 'the great ditch', a direct Latin translation of the earliest Old English name for the monument. Whether this name refers to the line of the monument or its size is unclear.

### **3.4 The Form of the Earthwork**

The earliest references to the monument mention only a ditch. The suggestion that it comprised both a bank and ditch can be traced back to Higson who noted, around 1850, that

a 'hedge is on the Gorton or Manchester side all along. It seems to imply that when the land was first divided into fields the remains of the old breastwork were used as a cop or backing' (Crofton 1905, 155). In support of this physical evidence of a bank Crofton argued that the variants 'Milkewallslade' and 'Michewall Ditch' provided the earliest indication that a bank existed as well as a ditch (Crofton 1905, 154-5). Since Crofton's study it has been assumed that this statement holds good for the whole length of the ditch from Hough Moss to Ashton Moss (Tindall 1982, 1).

While Higson's observation on the hedge alignment is suggestive, the surviving physical and place-name evidence is inconclusive. Among later sources, only Melland records the extant presence of a 'bank', in Levenshulme, where the monument runs along the southern side of Melland playing fields (Melland 1936, 60), and unfortunately no trace of this survives today. The intermittent slight rise noted along parts of the northern edge of the ditch as it crosses Denton golf course might be the remains of an original bank but might also be the result of recent landscaping. While sections of Nico Ditch have been excavated (see below), in each case either the lack of a detailed record or 20<sup>th</sup> century truncation of the early ground surface has meant that the existence of a bank could be neither disproved nor verified.

Difficulty also surrounds the place-name evidence, for while the forms 'Milkewall' and 'Michewall' are found in connection with the Slade Hall estate, there is an absence of similar 'wall' place-names elsewhere along the line of Nico Ditch. Furthermore, although these variants seem to include the Old English element 'wall', usually meaning 'a rampart of stone, earth or other material for defence' (Smith 1976), it is possible that they are a corruption of the original Old English 'micel' rather than an indicator of the existence of a bank at this point.

### **3.5 The Course of the Ditch (Figs 19-26)**

The precise limits of the ditch are problematical, but this question needs to be considered in order to understand its origin and function. The western terminus is commonly believed to be Platt Fields Park and Platt Brook in Fallowfield, which implies that it ran from the eastern edge of Hough Moss. On the other hand, the Ordnance Survey first edition 6 inch to 1 mile map shows a similar alignment of field boundaries running from the western edge of Hough Moss, SJ 8281 9419 towards Stretford. This is discussed more fully in section 4 below. In summary, this alignment seems to finish in Stretford at SJ 7997 9480, on Chester Road. To the west of Chester Road lies the moss known as Moorside. A further length of ditch, known as Carr Ditch, runs on a similar alignment west of this point across the main body of this moss but is offset by 100m to the north, suggesting that it is a later feature. A section across this alignment in 1992 indicated its late medieval origins and proved that it was not part of the original alignment of Nico Ditch (Arrowsmith & Fletcher 1993, 30-1). It is thus possible that in the west a section of Nico Ditch ran from the eastern edge of Moorside Moss across the A56 to Hough Moss, the traditional starting point at Platt Fields being a resumption of this line. As such, the situation at Ashton Moss offers a parallel of sorts to that at the western terminus of Nico Ditch, where the later Ashton-Droylsden boundary ditch, like Carr Ditch, has been described as belonging to the primary alignment of Nico Ditch (Arrowsmith & Fletcher 1993, 31).

East of Hough Moss the line of Nico Ditch can be traced through Platt Fields Park, Fallowfield. Here, alongside the Unitarian Chapel, is the first visible stretch of the ditch, although this has been disturbed by the planting of trees and shrubs. At this point the ditch displays a broad U-profile and survives to c. 2m to 2.5m below the ground level to the north and c. 0.5m below that to the south. Its maximum width is c 5m from lip to lip. Although the ground level is noticeably higher to the north of the ditch, there was apparently no such difference in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century when Gardner was able to confidently assert that 'there is no rampart remaining' at this point (Gardner 1908, 554, n25).

After leaving Platt Fields the course of Nico Ditch can be traced with reference to the present street plan. Its alignment is marked by Old Hall Lane and the unadopted roadway known as Park Grove, before it crosses the A6 (the projected line of the Roman road from Manchester to Stockport) (Margary 1957, 97) at Midway (SJ 872 947). Its course is continued to the east by Matthews Lane until, at Melland playing fields, in Levenshulme, it is once again visible. At this point (SJ 883 949) it is marked by a public footpath, along the southern side of which runs a steep V-profile water-filled ditch, c. 4m in width and c. 1.5m deep. There is no trace of the bank recorded by Melland (Melland 1936, 60-1), although here, as elsewhere, there is a pronounced difference (of 1m to 2m) between the ground levels to the north and south of the ditch. The ditch continues as a property boundary to the houses on the south side of Holmcroft Road, and here (SJ 890 951) coincides with the administrative boundary between the Metropolitan Boroughs of Manchester and Stockport. At this point the ditch is of similar form and dimensions to that at the Melland playing fields. Beyond the eastern end of Holmcroft Road, Nico Ditch is crossed by railway embankments and goods yards. Although, further to the east there is no visible trace of the ditch, its course, along the southern side of Debdale Cemetery and Cranbrook Road and the northern side of Laburnum Road, is clearly marked by its continued coincidence with the Manchester - Stockport boundary. Beyond Reddish Lane the line continues as the boundary between Manchester and Tameside, along the northern side of Laburnum Road.

The coincidence of Nico Ditch and the modern administrative boundary continues as far as Denton Golf course, where the two eventually diverge. At this point (SJ 903 960) the ditch once more becomes visible, although it is heavily overgrown and disturbed by landscaping for the golf course. Nevertheless, this c. 290m stretch represents, after Platt Fields, the best surviving portion of the earthwork. The ditch is c. 3-4m wide at the top and has a broad V-profile 1.5m deep. There is a very slight bank (c. 0.3m high) at some points along its north-western side, although this could in places be the result of recent landscaping. Around this area are traces of ridge and furrow, c. 4m in width, and significantly these are aligned parallel to the line of the ditch.

To the north-east, the Audenshaw Reservoirs have obliterated any sign of the earthwork, although its line is recorded on the Ashton Estate Plan of 1765 as running west of the centre of Audenshaw village as far as Low Ash Farm (Nevell 1992, 80-1). North of this farm it follows the present alignment of Lumb Lane. It is usually assumed that its terminus lies at the northern end of Lumb Lane. However, a large drainage ditch running east of Lumb Lane is named as part of the Nico Ditch system by the Ordnance Survey (OS 1:2500 map, SJ 9098, 1965). Melland describes this western extension of this drainage ditch in the following manner; 'Under the walls of the Droylsden Rectory there is a dry ditch, four or five feet deep,

which is the last sight one gets of it [Nico Ditch] before it disappears on Ashton Moss' (Melland 1936, 62).

This large ditch was recorded on the Ashton Estate Plan of 1765 and on subsequent maps, and was mentioned by Higson (Higson 1859, 10) as extending as far as Moor Side Farm. Its antiquity may be suggested by its use as an administrative boundary between Droylsden and Ashton townships, possibly from as early as the 15<sup>th</sup> century when it was probably referred to in a mossland dispute between the Ashtons and the Byrons: the boundary between the Byrons' moss and the Ashtons' moss followed 'streight upon the end of the overmast ditch [Nico Ditch, Lumb Lane I eastward that John the Buron has in Sunderland towards the Lytel Mosse, to the end of the same ditch [ at Moorside]'. Thus, the eastern end of Nico Ditch would appear to run across the north-western edge of Ashton Moss.

### 3.6 Excavating Nico Ditch

Nico Ditch has been the subject of several small-scale archaeological excavations. In 1975 Dr John D Bu'Lock (1928-1996), Chemistry lecturer and Extramural tutor in archaeology at the University of Manchester, excavated a section of it at Denton Golf Course. This work was undertaken with extramural archaeology students. Although no records of the excavation were kept, he recalled in 1991 during a conversation with the current writer (*pers comm*) that the ditch was c. 8ft deep (2.4m) at this point and had been re-cut on numerous occasions. GMAU in summarising the work noted that a clay bank was located but no dating evidence was forthcoming (Tindall 1982, 6-7) (Figs 20-22).

In 1979-80 Dr Mawer of the University of Manchester Medical School conducted a trial excavation of Nico Ditch on the site of the proposed extension to the Shackleton Engineering Company's factory at Reddish (SJ 891 951), immediately west of the Manchester-Stockport border. The results were summarised by the Greater Manchester Archaeological Unit (Tindall 1982, 6). A section through the earthwork revealed that very heavy modern disturbance had removed all trace of the bank, while the ditch, represented by an area of humic material c 2.5m wide, was not fully excavated. No finds earlier than the post-medieval period were recovered and no drawings or photographs of the dig survive.

During November 1990 the Greater Manchester Archaeological Unit (GMAU) undertook trial trenching and small-scale excavation on the line of Nico Ditch at Kenwood Road, North Reddish, Stockport, just 20m east of Dr Mawer 's trench (SJ 8915 9515) (Figs 27 & 28). This revealed a roughly U-shaped cut surviving to a depth of up to 1.30m and at least 3.2m in width. However, it is uncertain whether this cut retains its original profile or indeed represents the first construction of the ditch. In addition, severe truncation of the site had removed any evidence for a bank or contemporary ground surface. Three phases of later recutting were identified, of which the earliest had no associated finds while the others were of either 19<sup>th</sup> or 20<sup>th</sup> century date (GMAU 1990).

In January 1992 two sections were cut across the line of Nico Ditch at Park Grove, Levenshulme (SJ 8723 9468) by GMAU (Figs 29-31). Although badly damaged by a modern culvert, which meant that the depth of the ditch was not recoverable, these sections indicated

that the ditch was between 3.5m and 4m wide, in keeping with the information from Kenwood Road in Reddish (GMAU 1992).

In March 1996 a section across the line of the ditch at Audenshaw Lodge in Denton (SJ 9083 9643) was excavated by the University of Manchester Archaeological Unit (UMAU) in advance of the construction of the M66 (Figs 32 & 33). Here the ditch was found to be 4.65m wide and 1.45m deep, and roughly U-shaped with a flared profile. However, the line of the ditch had been heavily disturbed, with 20<sup>th</sup> century material close to the bottom of the ditch indicating that it had been recently re cut (UMAU 1996, 4-5).

In January and February 1997, the University of Manchester Archaeological Unit (UMAU) excavated one of the two best surviving stretches of Nico Ditch at Platt Fields Chapel, Fallowfield, Manchester (SJ 8550 9445) (Figs 34-36). This was ahead of landscaping works to extend an adjacent the playing field (UMAU 1997). Here, the monument is clearly visible as a U-shaped ditch, with a low bank on its northern side, running westwards from Platt Fields Chapel for a distance of c. 380m. It forms the modern boundary between Platt Fields Park to the south and the grounds of the Manchester High School for Girls to the north. The eastern end of the ditch now lies beneath Platt Fields Chapel and the A6010 (Wilmslow Road) but is continued eastwards by the modern course of Old Hall Lane, whilst the western end is cut off by the 19<sup>th</sup> century boating lake before it reaches Platt Brook. The evaluation was able to demonstrate that the present form of this monument through Platt Fields is the result of many phases of activity. Such a U-shaped, flared, ditch of roughly the same size, 4m to 4.5m wide and c 1.5m deep, can also be seen in the sections cut across Nico Ditch at Levenshulme, Reddish, and Audenshaw Lodge. Although no dating evidence was recovered from the primary ditch at Platt Fields the nature and extent of these early fills indicated that it was of considerable antiquity. No evidence was found for a bank contemporary with this first ditch cut, whilst the existing bank to the north of the ditch was shown to be 20<sup>th</sup> century in origin.

In 2008, a surviving stretch of Nico Ditch was investigated during drainage works in Gorton (UMAU 2008) (Figs 37-39). The ditch ran along the southern side of Melland Playing Field (centred on NGR: SJ 883 949). The drainage works were associated with the Gorton Education Village development. The watching brief observed the construction of a cycle path and handrail on the northern side of the ditch, the construction of a footbridge across the ditch and also the clearing of modern detritus from within the ditch. No significant archaeological remains were encountered during groundworks and no significant disturbance was made to archaeological deposits forming part of the earthwork. The profile of Nico Ditch was also retained and was not altered during the clearing of modern detritus from within the ditch.

In 2013 an archaeological watching brief was undertaken on the line of Nico during building work within Audenshaw Barn, on Denton Golf Course (SJ 9075 9634) (TAS 2013). This work was conducted by the Tameside Archaeological Society, who recorded new foundations being dug within the centre of the barn to a depth of 0.5m. No early deposits were located and there was no sign of the alignment of Nico Ditch.

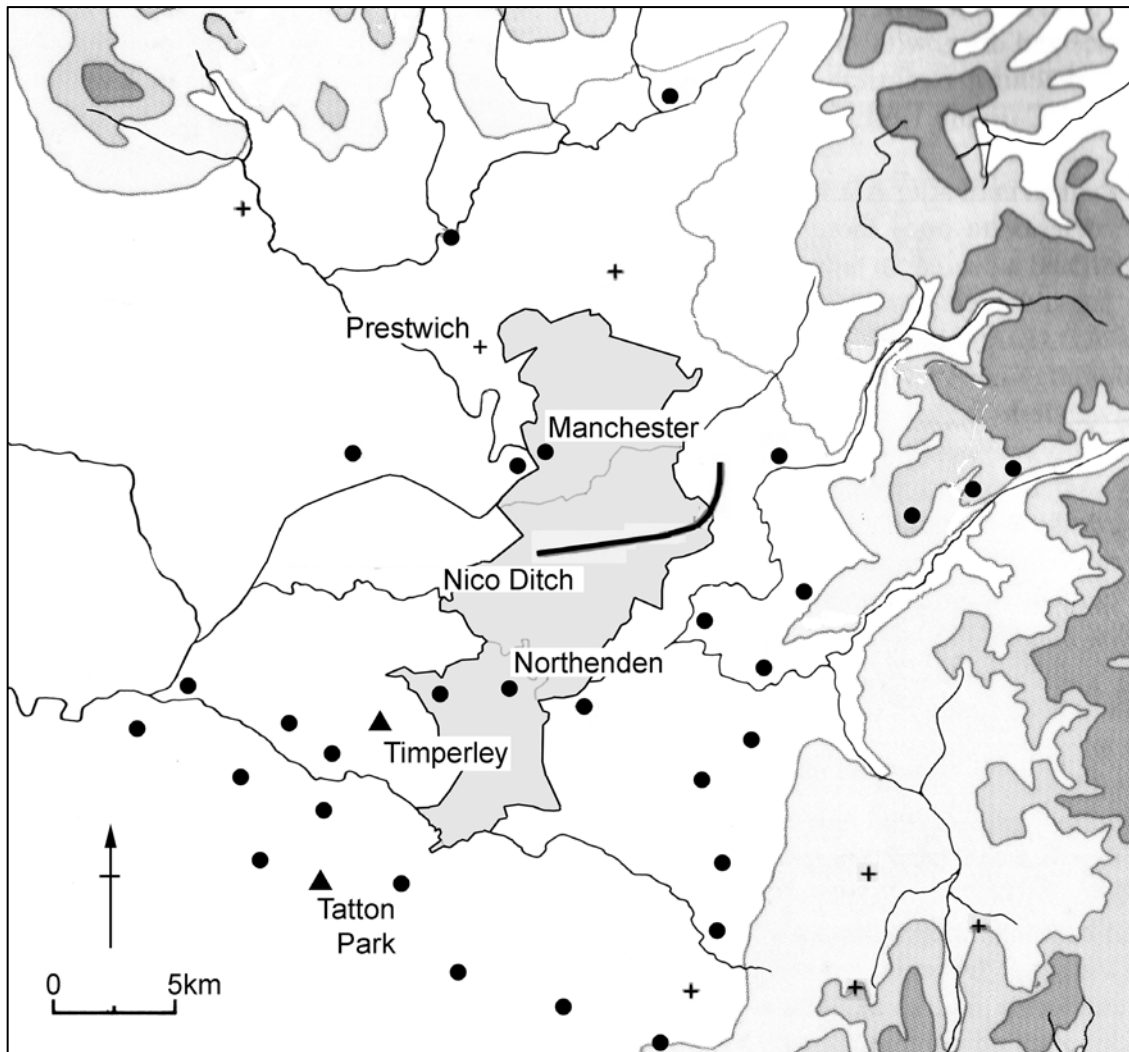


Figure 14: The line of Nico Ditch across southern Manchester showing Early Medieval settlement activity (dots), churches (crosses), and excavated sites (triangles) in the region.

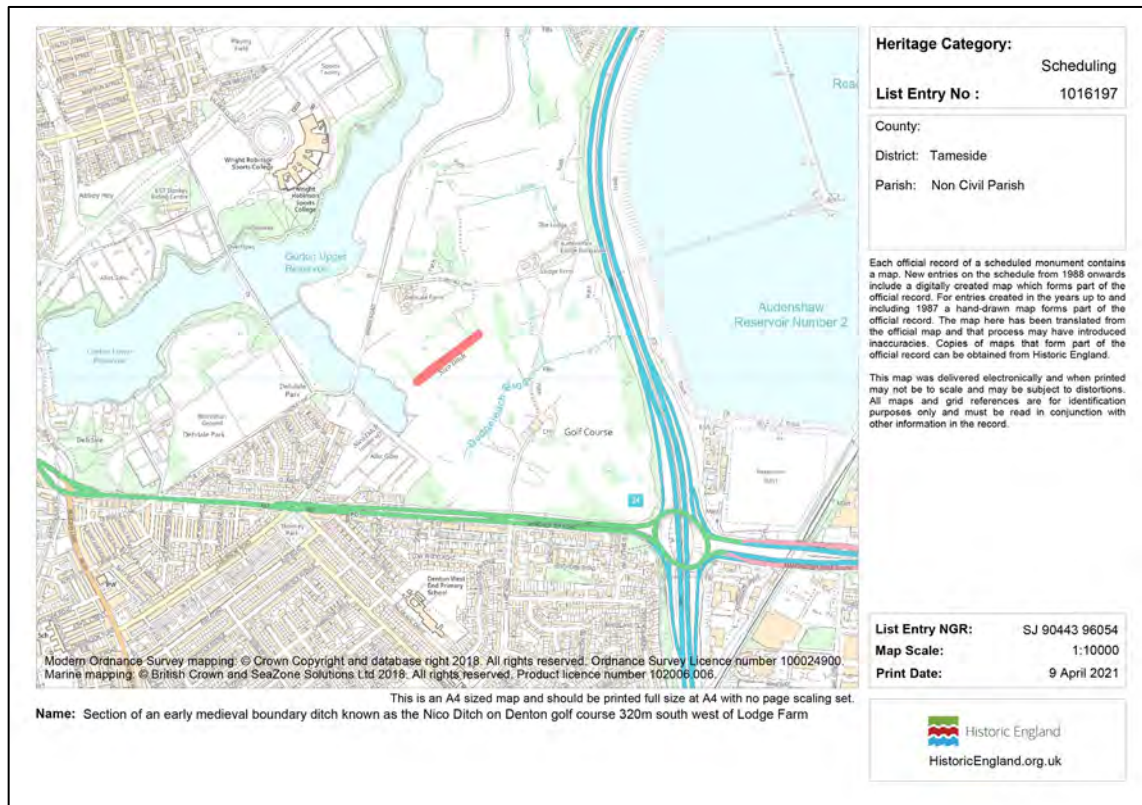


Figure 15: Historic England Scheduled map for Nico Ditch on Denton Golf Course.

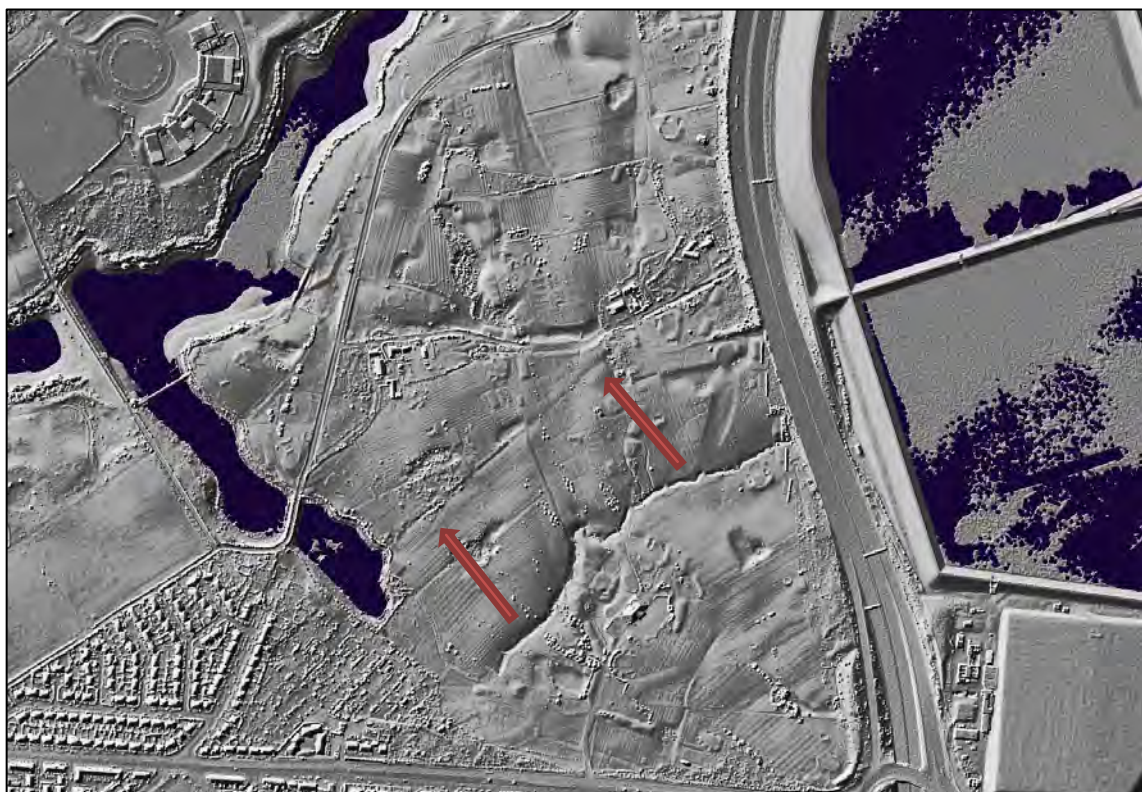


Figure 16: LIDAR plot of Nico Ditch across Denton Golf Course (arrowed).

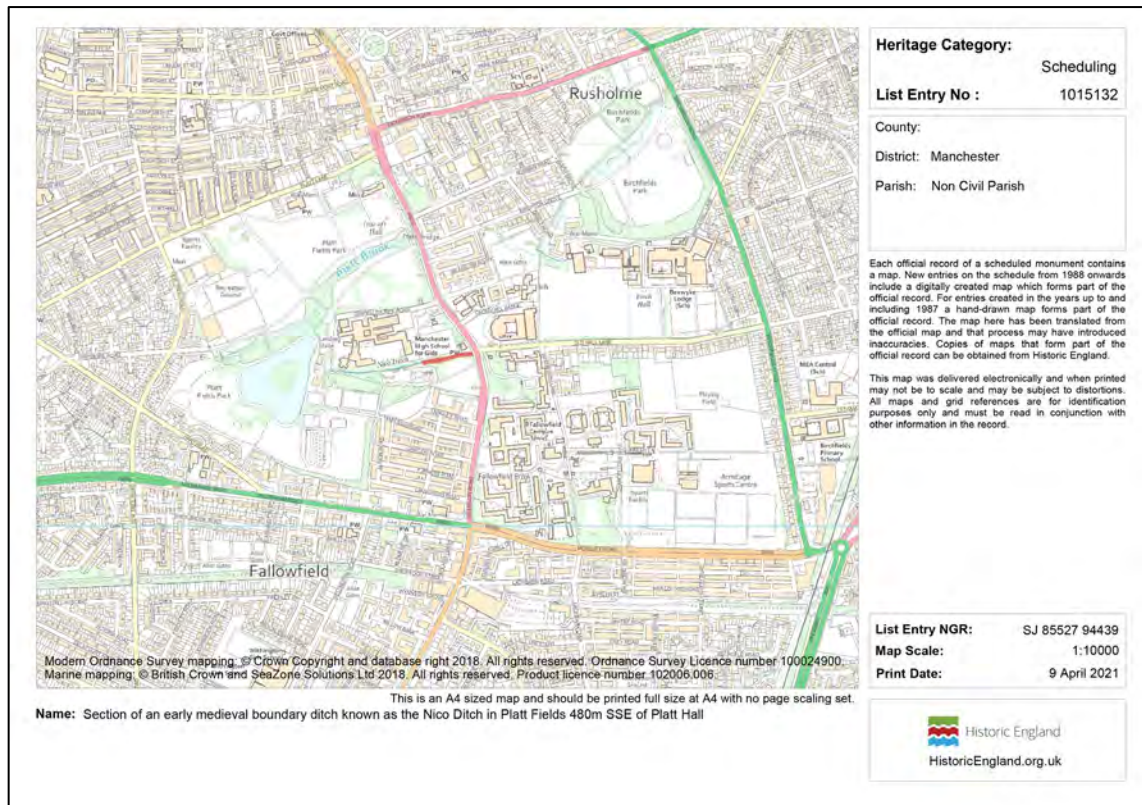


Figure 17: Historic England Scheduled map for Nico Ditch at Platt Fields.



Figure 18: LIDAR plot of Nico Ditch course at Platt Fields (arrowed).



*Figure 19: Nico Ditch full of water by Platt Chapel, Platt Fields, February 2020.*



*Figure 20: Nico Ditch as a water course through Gorton, March 2021.*



*Figure 21: Aerial view of Nico Ditch (arrowed) on Denton Golf Course, 1995. Image copyright: Dr M D Nevell.*



*Figure 22: The Nico Ditch earthwork on Denton Golf Course, 1991. Image copyright: Dr M D Nevell.*



*Figure 23: The line of the scheduled Nico Ditch earthwork at Denton Golf Course (arrowed) in 2021. Image copyright: Dr M D Nevell.*



*Figure 24: The line of the scheduled Nico Ditch earthwork at Denton Golf Course (arrowed) in 2021. Image copyright: Dr M D Nevell.*



*Figure 25: The line of the Nico Ditch earthwork along the southern side of Corn Hill Lane, Denton (arrowed) in 2021. Image copyright: Dr M D Nevell.*



*Figure 26: Audenshaw Lodge Barn, Denton, through which the line of the Nico Ditch runs, 2021. Image copyright: Dr M D Nevell.*



*Figure 27: Above, excavation of Nico Ditch at Kenwood Road in Reddish, Stockport by GMAU in 1990, looking west. Right, excavation of Nico Ditch at Kenwood Road by GMAU in 1990 looking north.*



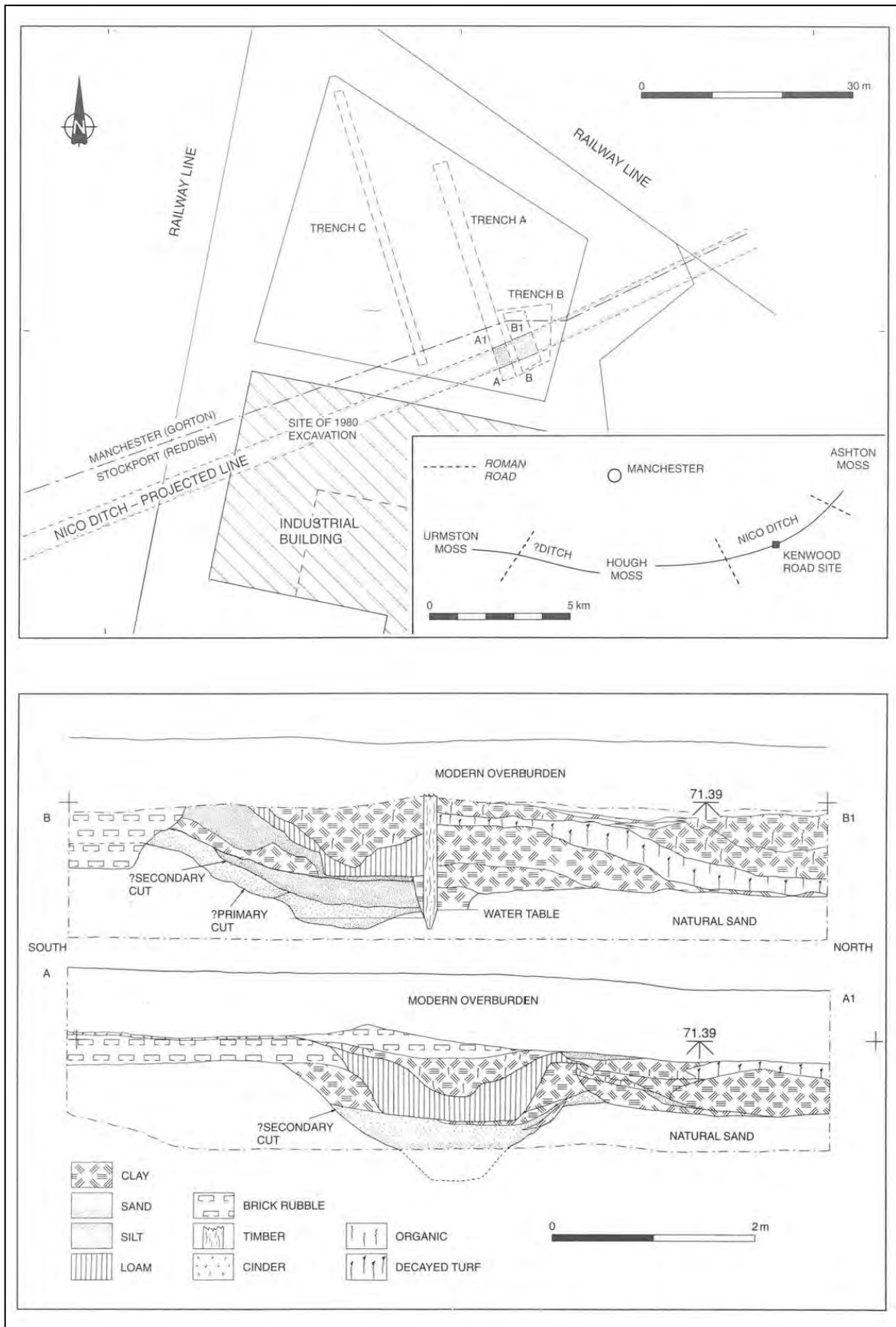


Figure 28: GMAU excavation of Nico Ditch at Kenwood Road, Reddish, in 1990.



*Figure 29: The excavation of Nico Ditch at Park Grove in Levenshulme, Manchester, by GMAU, 1992.*

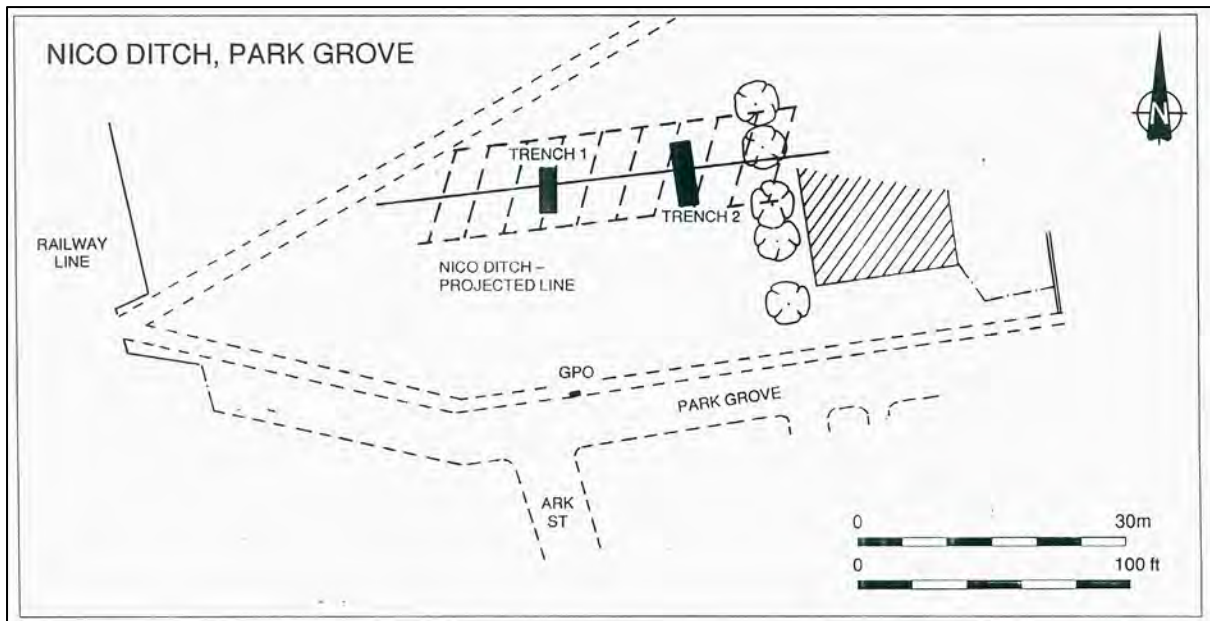


Figure 30: Excavation plan of Nico Ditch at Park Grove in Levenshulme, Manchester, by GMAU, 1992.

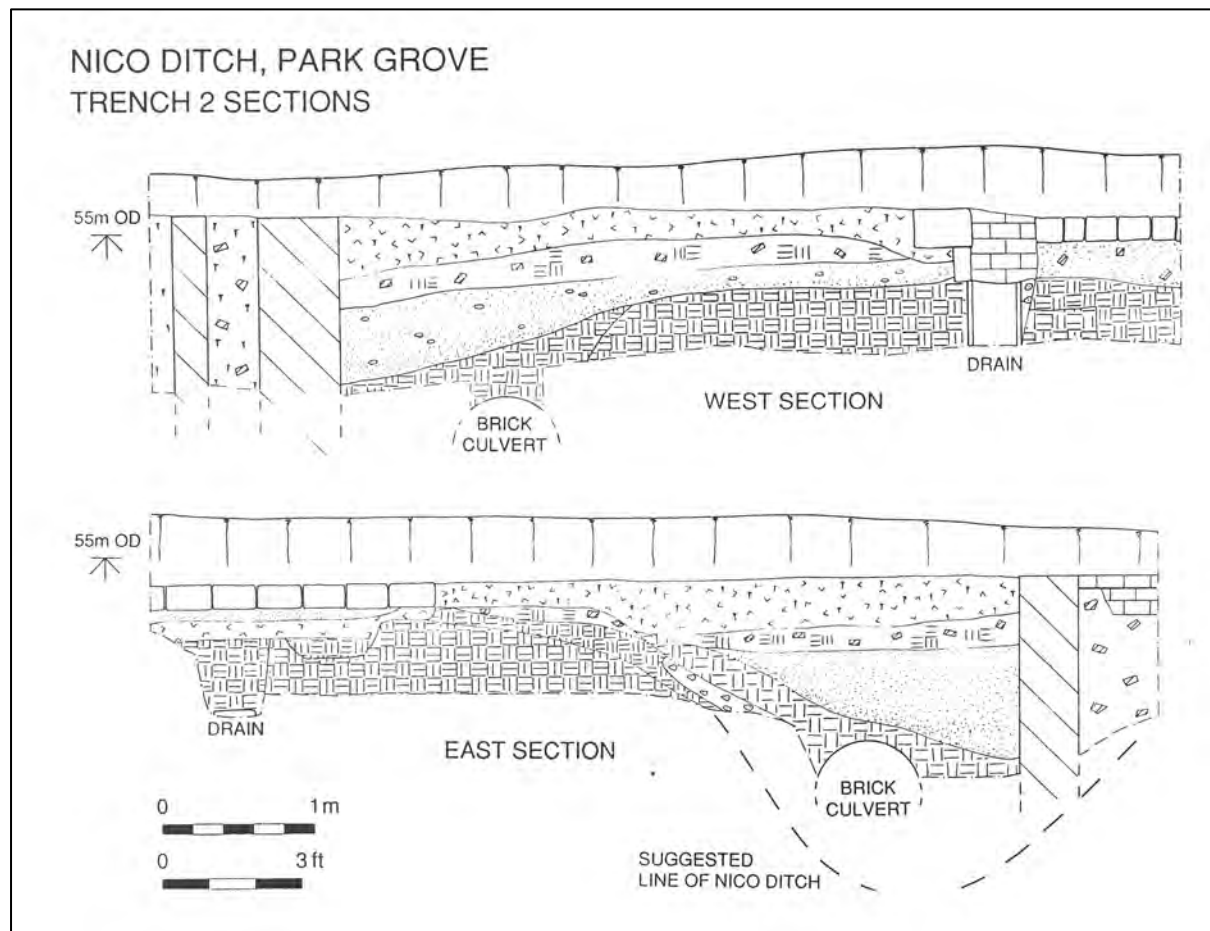


Figure 31: Excavation section of Nico Ditch at Park Grove in Levenshulme, Manchester, by GMAU, 1992.

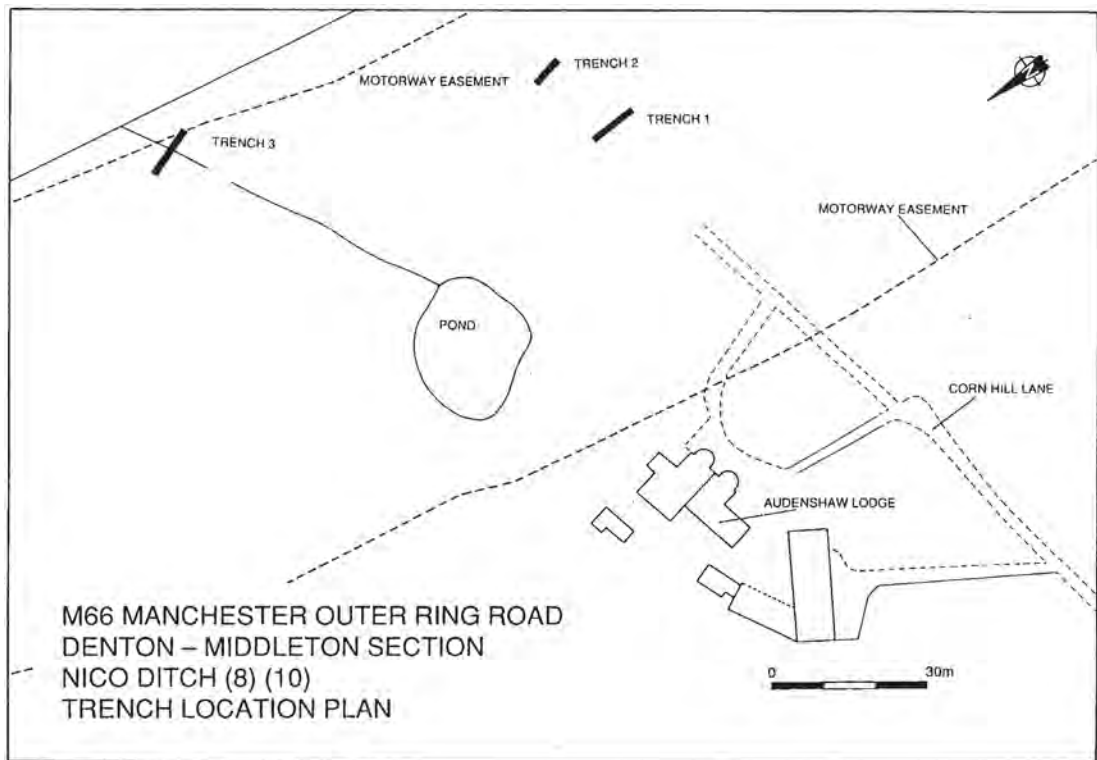


Figure 32: Location of excavation trenches of Nico Ditch at Audenshaw Barn on the M66 route, by UMAU in 1996.

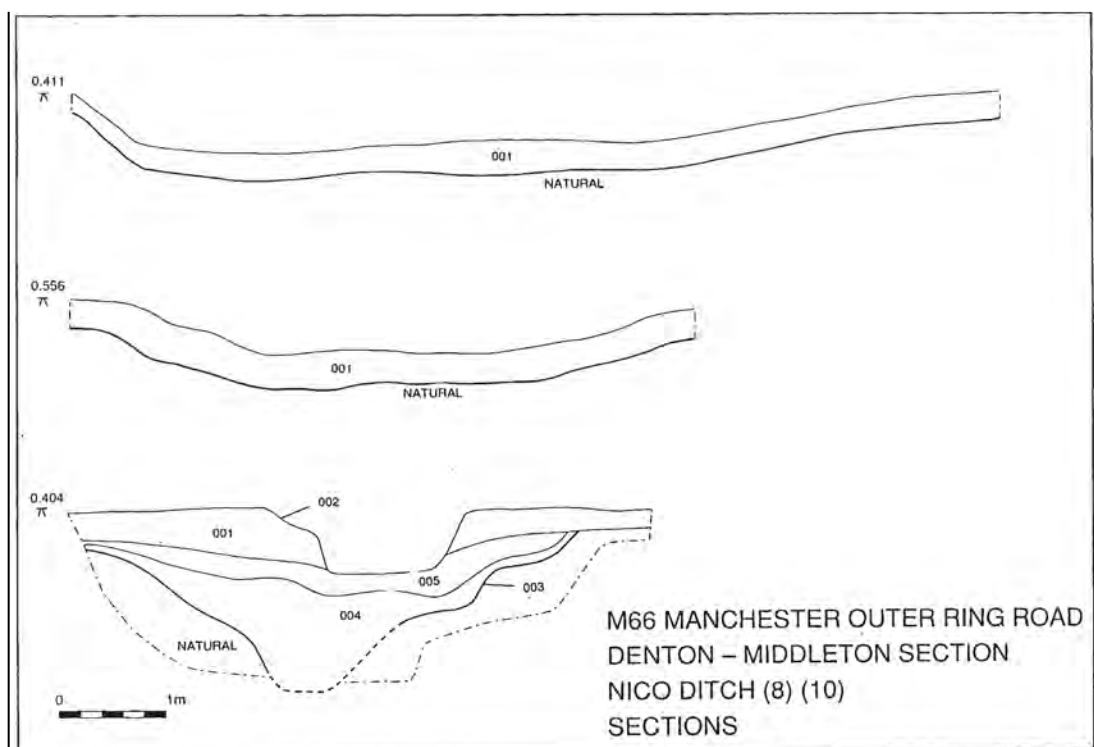


Figure 33: Excavated ditch sections across Nico Ditch at Audenshaw Barn on the M66 route, by UMAU in 1996.

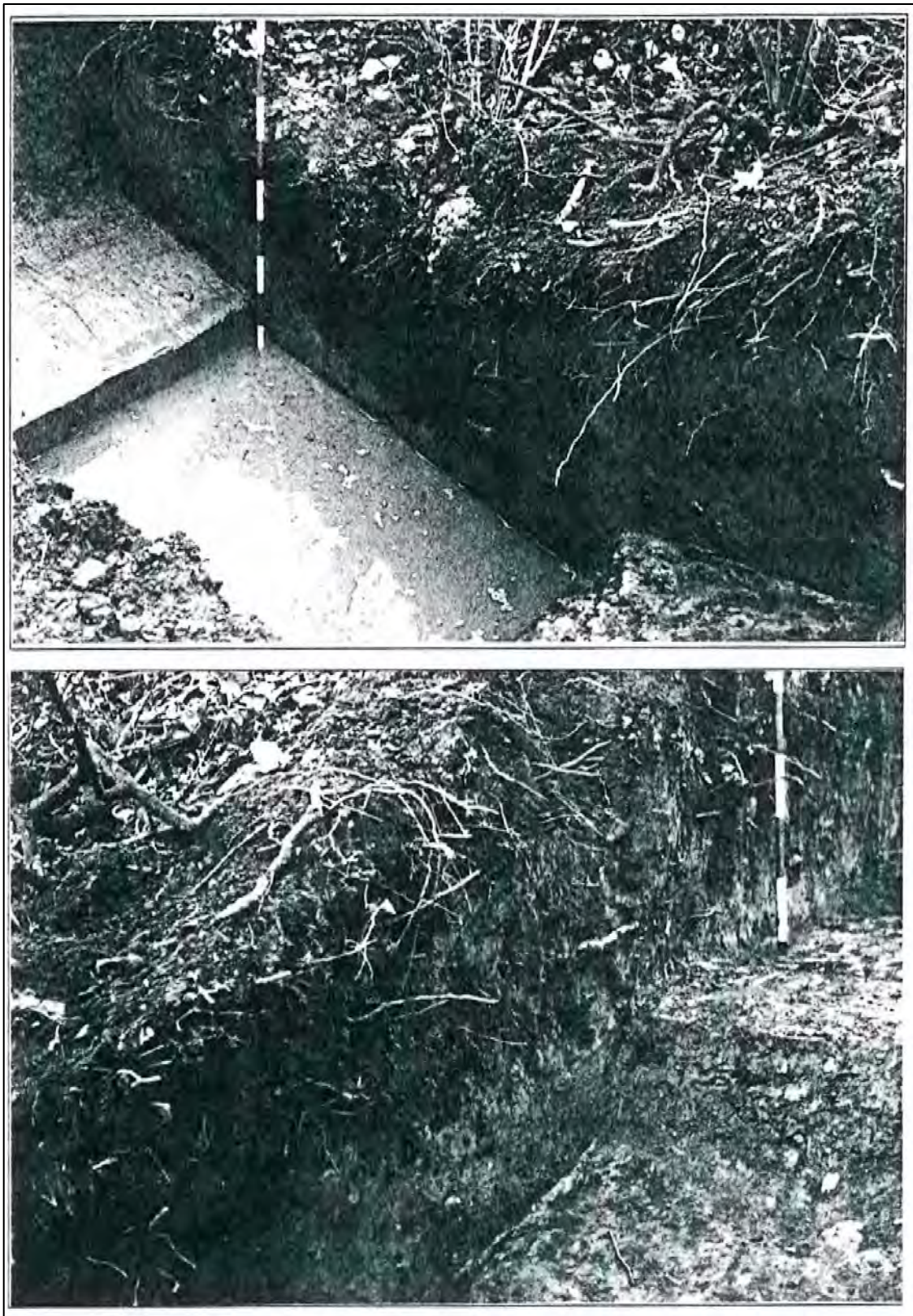


*Figure 34: Excavated ditch sections across Nico Ditch at Platt Fields Chapel, by UMAU in 1997.*

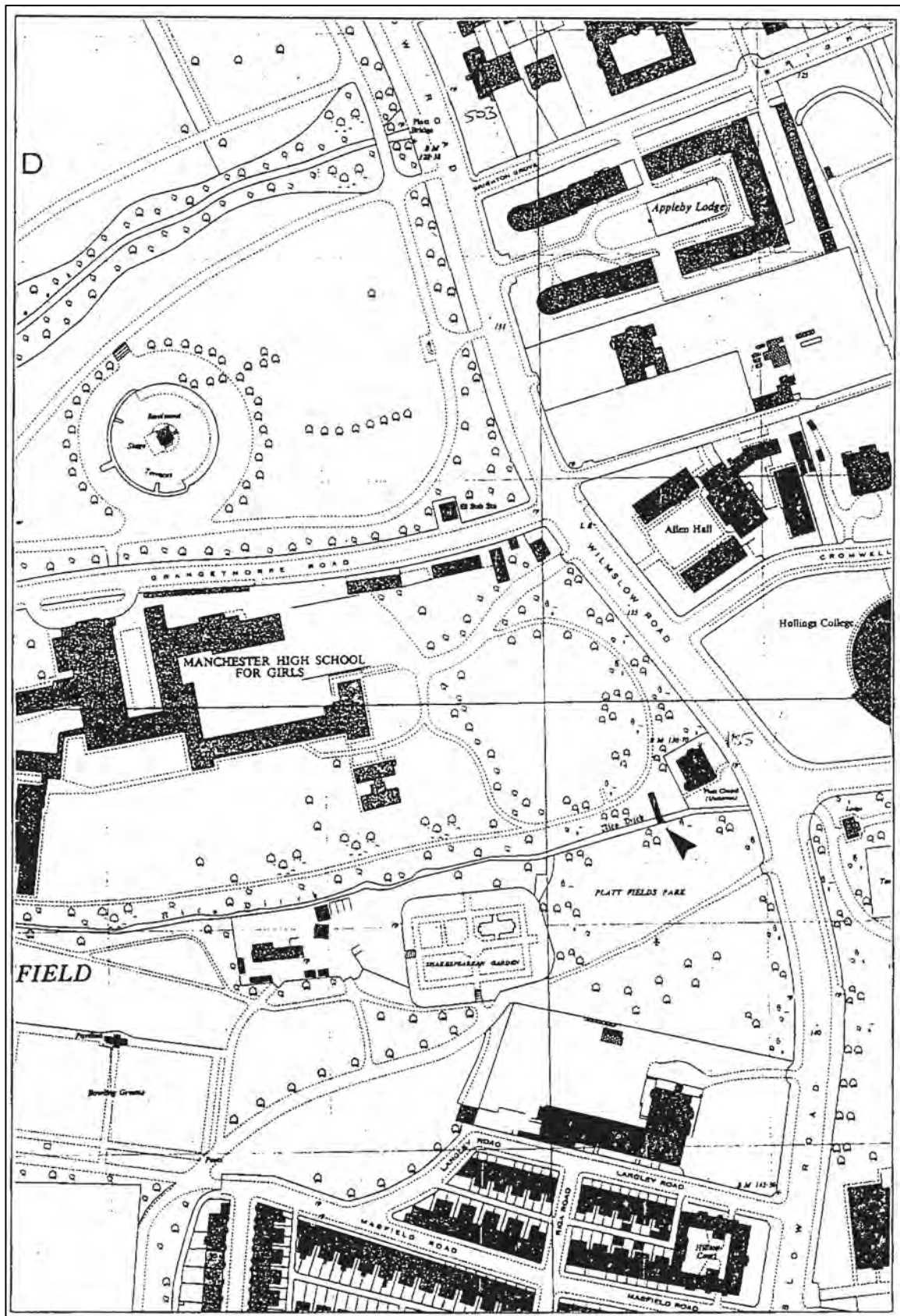


Figure 35: Location of the excavation trench across Nico Ditch at Platt Fields Chapel in 1997.

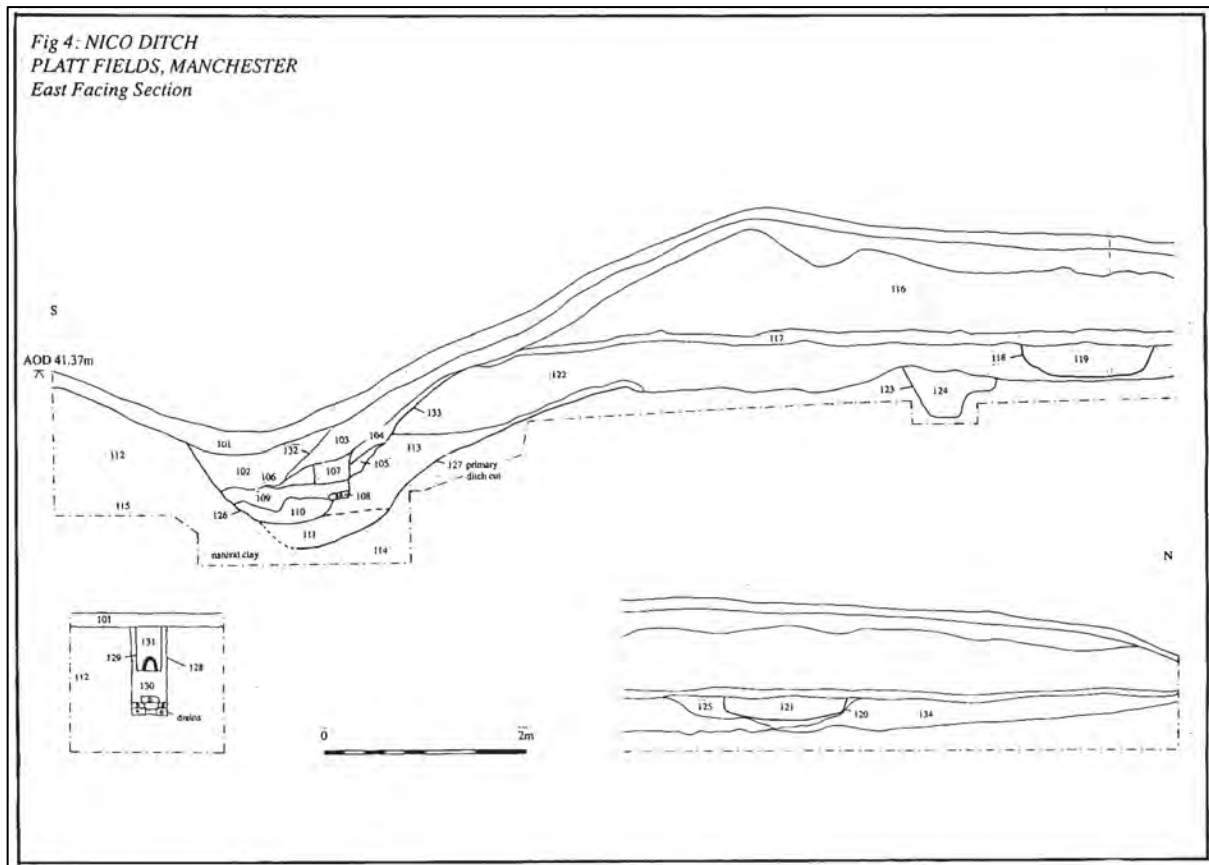


*Figure 36: The excavations section through Nico Ditch at Platt Fields Chapel in 1997.*



*Figure 37: Nico Ditch as a water course along the southern edge of Melland Playing Field, Gorton, 2008 before footpath building work.*



*Figure 38: Clearing work at Nico Ditch at Gorton, 2008 during footpath building work.*



*Figure 39: Recording work by UMAU during footpath building along Nico Ditch at Melland Playing Field, Gorton, 2008 during footpath building work.*

## 4. The Relationship of the Ryebank Fields Earthwork with Nico Ditch

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### 4.1 Function and date

The earliest record of Nico Ditch dates from the late 12<sup>th</sup> century when it was already a significant landscape feature known as the 'Mykelldiche' or 'magnum fossatum'. The original function and date of Nico Ditch have long puzzled scholars. The earliest detailed descriptions can be found in articles by Rev Addison Crofton (1885), George Esdaile (1892), H T Crofton (1905) and C H Melland (1936). From these early studies four suggestions have been made as to the function of the monument:

- as a drainage channel,
- an agricultural boundary,
- an administrative boundary,
- or as a defensive earthwork.

The discussion has been further complicated by the continuing use of parts of the ditch alignment as a drainage channel and an administrative boundary from the late medieval period onwards.

The suggestion that Nico Ditch was constructed for the purpose of drainage was first put forward by Esdaile, who noticed that the general trend of the ditch was trending downwards from east to west, starting at a height of 98m AOD on the edge of Ashton Moss and falling to 34m AOD where it joins Gorebrook in Platt Fields (Esdaile 1892, 219) (Fig 40). This theory was later discredited by Crofton largely on the basis that the ditch has a variable fall, especially immediately west of the Debdale valley in Denton where it rises from 80m to 85m before continuing its westerly trend downwards (Crofton 1905, 156). The course of the ditch also avoids the main local streams (Fig 40), and while sections across Ashton Moss may have been dug for drainage these appear to be later additions to the original alignment which terminated at the edge of the moss. A parallel to this may be the addition of Carr Ditch in Urmston at the western end of the alignment.

The role of Nico Ditch as an agricultural boundary was first put forward by Crofton who suggested that the ditch was related to Roman centuriation, or land division, south-east of the fort at Manchester, a view which has been recently revived by Richardson (Crofton 1905, 158; Richardson 1986, 44). However, in connecting the ditch to this centuriation Richardson overlooks the fact that a number of his projected Roman land divisions are cut by its course. Nevertheless, there are grounds for believing his evidence, in which case since the ditch cuts these features it would have to be of post-Roman date.

The evidence for an administrative function is largely based on the coincidence of the Nico Ditch with a number of early parish and estate boundaries, the ditch presumably being used

as a convenient linear landmark (Crofton 1905, 139-42). At Platt Fields it marked the boundary between the townships of Rusholme to the north and Withington to the south from the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, and still does. East of Platt Fields it marked the southern boundary of the Slade Hall estate, and later divided the townships of Levenshulme and Rusholme. Even where the parish of Rusholme straddled its course, Nico Ditch sub-divided it into discrete, recognisable, areas to the north and south. In AD 1320/2 Nico Ditch formed the boundary between the manors of Manchester and Reddish, and in later times divided the parish of Gorton to the north from the townships of Denton, Reddish, and Levenshulme to the south. Finally, in the period 1190-1212 the north-eastern section of Nico Ditch formed the eastern boundary of land in Audenshaw granted to the Monks of Kersal Cell (Nevell 1991, 121; Nevell 1992). While its significance as an administrative boundary in the late medieval and early modern periods is undeniable, this later use by itself need not indicate its original function and date.

The traditional explanation of the earthwork's origin is that it was created in a single night by the Anglo-Saxon inhabitants of Manchester (each man being instructed to build a bank equal in size to his own height) as protection against the Danish invaders of AD 869-70 (Crofton 1885, 190; Crofton 1905, 155-6). A possible connection has been suggested with the repair and manning of the burh at Manchester in AD 919, reported in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle (Connor et al 1991, 7). If Nico Ditch was of a similar date, it would have enclosed the southern hinterland of the burh, cutting the route of three Roman roads (to Chester, Buxton and Melandra) which may well have continued in use in the post-Roman period (Connor et al 1991, 7). C H Melland (Melland 1936) highlighted the potential role of the ditch as a defensive feature in the early medieval period. He noted that OG Crawford writing in the *Antiquity Journal* (*Antiquity IX (1936), 277-91*) had already observed that 'the highland zone [of England] is defended by a group of six linear earthworks, two of them double, all facing south, south-east, east of north-east, starting from Manchester, across Derbyshire to Sheffield, and thence by Leeds and Aberford to Richmond and Stanwick'. The Manchester reference is to Nico Ditch and Melland observed that 'whatever its tactical value, [Nico Ditch] marked an important strategic line of defence, with its two ends resting on mossland, Ashton Moss to the north and Hoo [sic] Moss, part of the extensive Mersey Valley mossland, to the south, areas of marshy ground which in those early days were practically impassable'.

## **4.2 The Hough Moss to Longford Park Alignment**

Late medieval and post-medieval documentary references to Nico Ditch, from 1190-1212 onwards, refer to sections of a large ditch, and perhaps occasionally a bank, between Audenshaw in the east, close to Ashton moss, and Platt Fields in the west. The western terminus of Nico Ditch has traditionally been placed at Platt Brook in Platt Fields, south of Manchester city centre, on the eastern edge of the former mossland of Hough Moss. In the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, it was suggested that a further section of the ditch ran westwards from Hough Moss as a series of field boundaries through Longford Park as far west as Chester Road in Stretford, a distance of 2.64km (Figs 41 & 42).

A section of open ditch on this alignment in a former boatyard between the Bridgewater Canal and the Altrincham to Manchester Railway is named as Nico Ditch on Ordnance Survey mapping from 1955 (Fig 43). The presence of a large expanse of mossland at Moorside,

Urmston, immediately west of Chester Road, would seem to provide a western terminus. The only section of this alignment that survives in open ground as an earthwork is the stretch through Longford Park and Ryebank Fields (Fig 44). The earthwork through Ryebank Fields is described by Historic England as being part of the Nico Ditch alignment in correspondence with the Friends of Ryebank Fields from 2020 and 2021 and is named as such on the National Register of the Historic Environment.

This western alignment runs parallel but to the south of Longford Brook and it has been suggested (Ashworth 1987, 50) (Fig 41) that its straightish course is the result of diverting the brook into an earlier manmade earthwork as part of the water feeder for the Bridgewater Canal. Recent research by Richard Bond (see above section 2) has shown the detailed route of this canal feeder but has also shown that this alignment pre-dates the canal feeder, confirming an earlier origin of the field boundary alignment from Hough Moss to Longford Park/Chester Road.

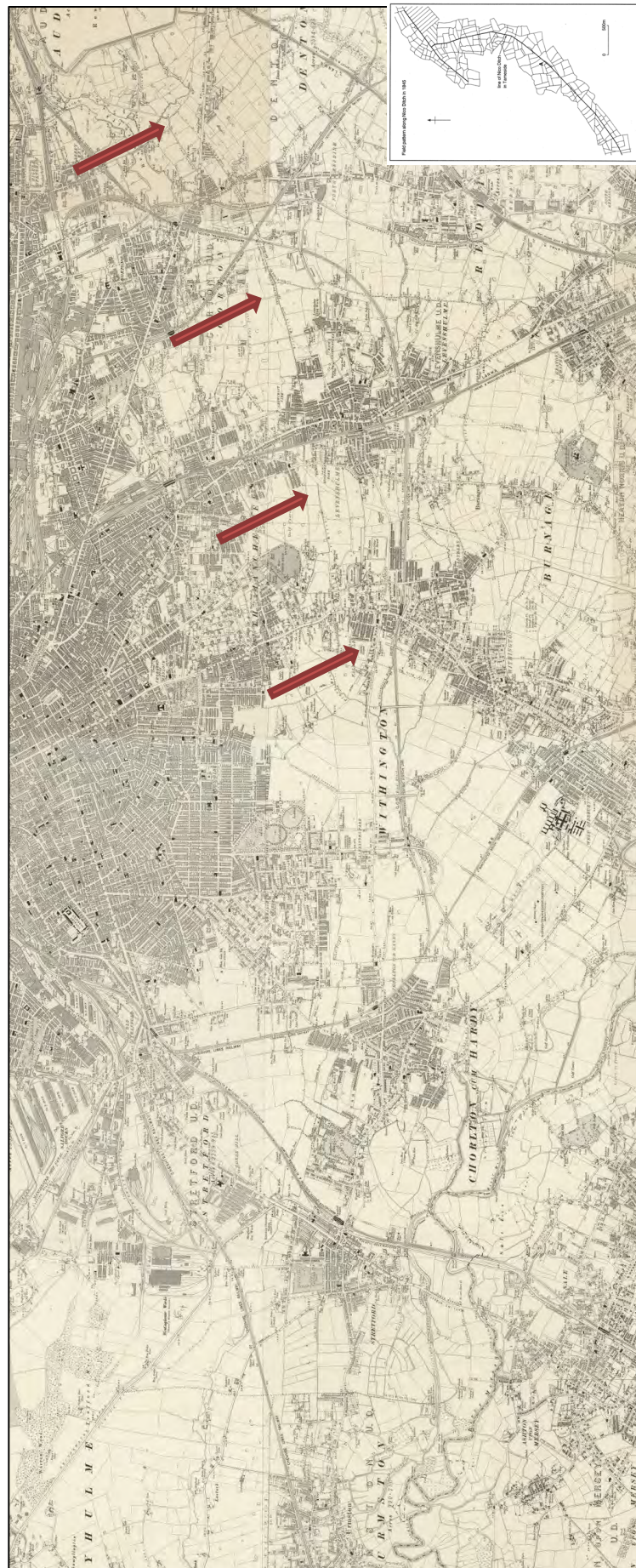
The Hough Moss to Longford Park/Chester Road alignment is physically separate and almost certainly chronologically earlier than the ditch known as Carr Ditch (Nevell 1997, 37). Carr Ditch marked the boundary between the townships of Urmston and Flixton on its southern side and Barton-upon-Irwell on its northern side. This landscape feature lay west of the Hough Moss to Longford Park/Chester Road ditch alignment but is offset to the north by around 100m. Carr Ditch crosses an area of mossland and moorland, unlike the Nico Ditch route which ran between such areas. Arrowsmith and Fletcher argue that this was a late medieval drainage and administrative boundary feature with no relationship to Nico Ditch (Arrowsmith & Fletcher 1995, 26-31).

#### **4.3 Longford Park Excavations 2014**

The only archaeological excavations on the Hough Moss to Longford Park/Chester Road alignment of Nico Ditch took place in 2014 by University of Salford archaeologists working on the Dig Greater Manchester community archaeology project in Longford Park (UMAU 2015). As part of the exploration of the remains of Longford Hall survey work in the grounds of the hall was undertaken. This involved excavating two trenches on the projected line of the ditch within the park.

These two small trenches (1m by 1m) (Fig 46 & 47) were located on former fields immediately west of the Ryebank Fields earthwork in an area landscaped as part of the park in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Ground disturbance was detected to the full depth of each trench, 0.5m. No evidence for the line of the earthwork, which remained an open feature in this area until the landscaping, was uncovered. This was due to the extensive ground disturbance encountered. However, recent LIDAR data from 2019 (Fig 48) shows both the Ryebank Fields earthwork and to the west a shallow depression, less than 1m deep and c. 10m wide, on the buried alignment suggestion that further excavation work on a larger scale should reveal the form of the ditch in this area.

Figure 40: The line of Nico Ditch as recorded on the Ordnance Survey 6 Inch map for Manchester (Sheet 111) published in 1848, arrowed in red. Inset – the line of the ditch across Ashton Moss.



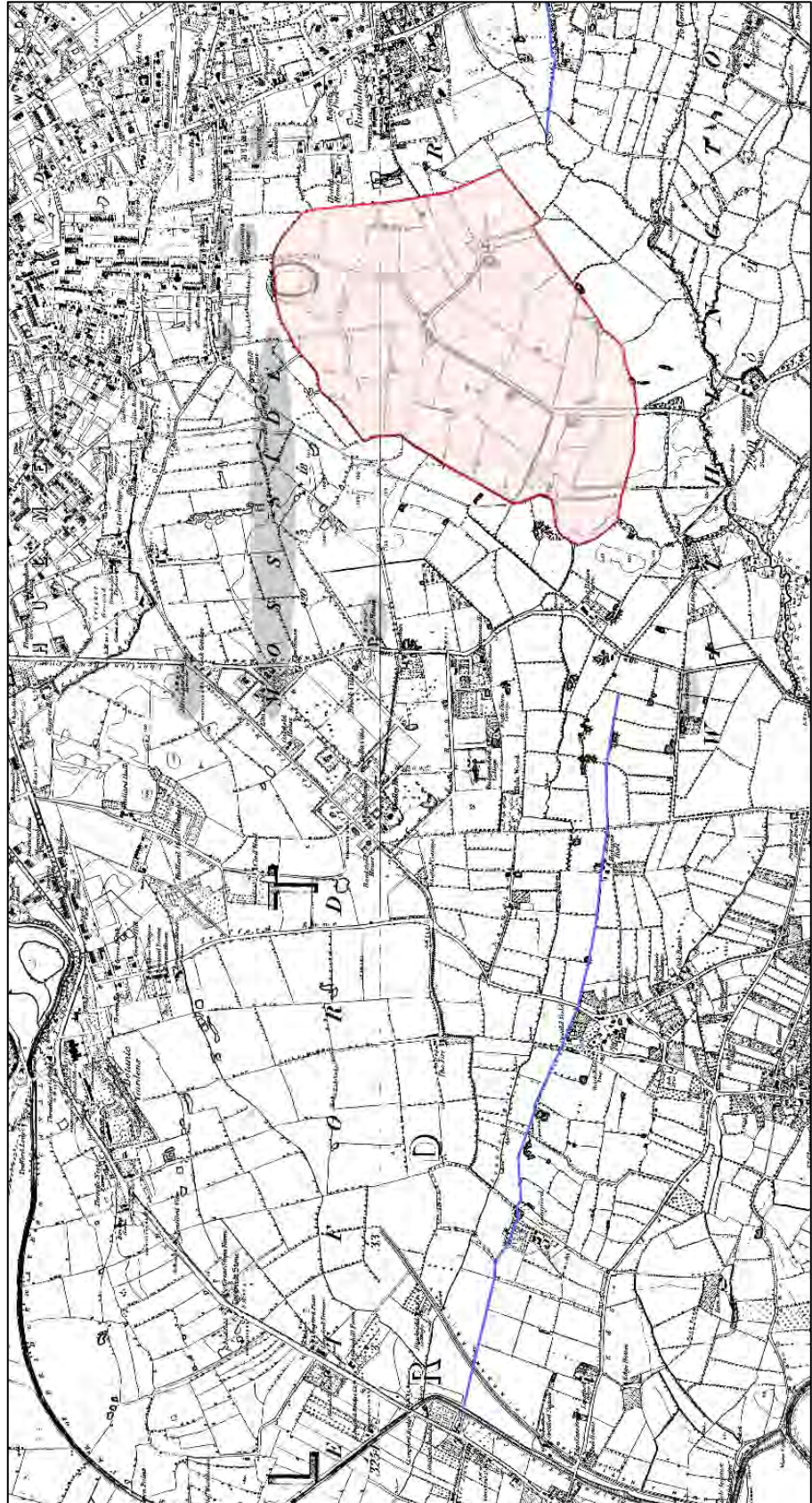


*Figure 41: The Hough Moss to Longford Park/Chester Road alignment shown in blue on the OS 1848 6 Inch map. A reconstruction of the extent of Hough Moss in the post-medieval period is shown in red.*



Figure 42: The projected line of Nico Ditch (in red) across Ryebank Fields and Longford Park. Reproduced from modern OS mapping by permission of Ordnance Survey on behalf of The Controller of Her Majesty's Stationery Office. © Crown Copyright reserved.

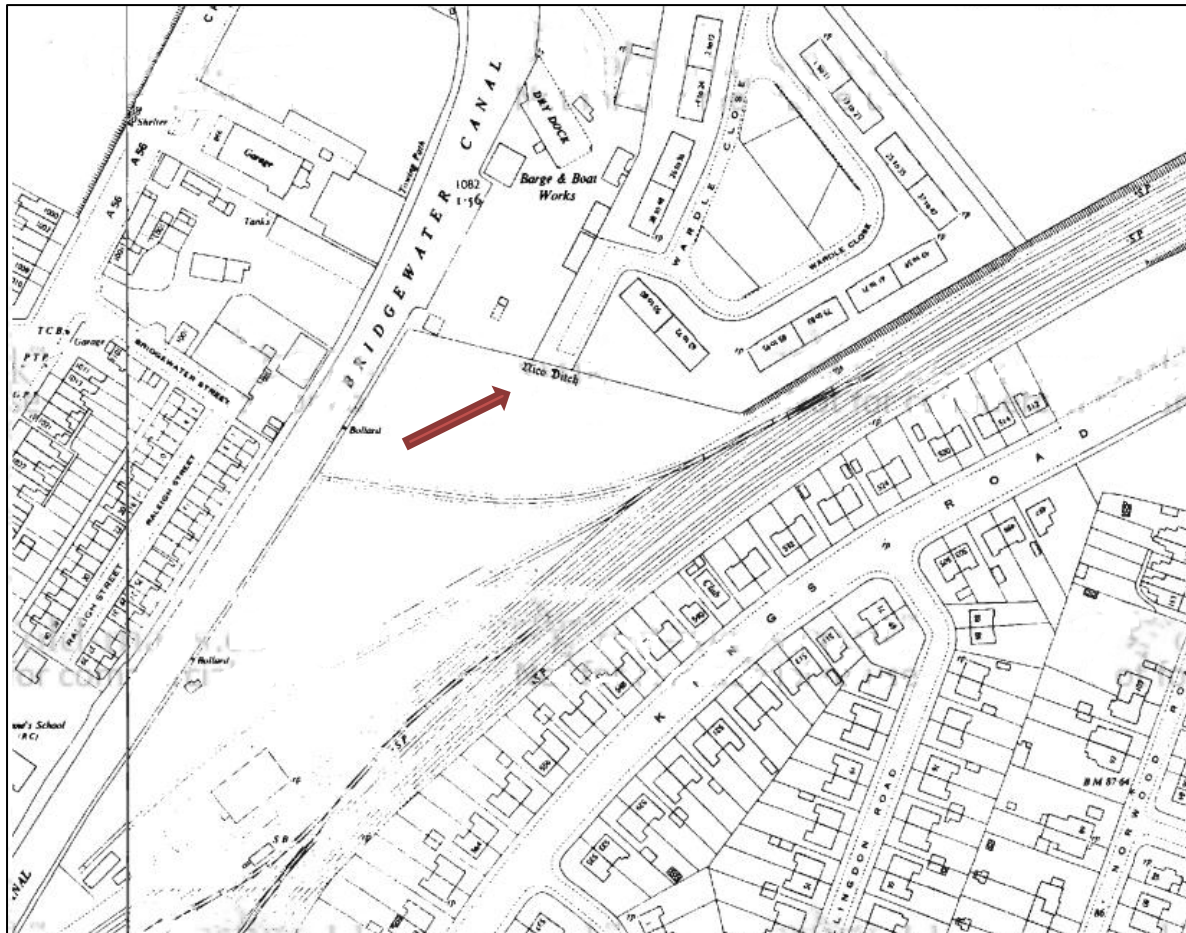


*Figure 43: The section of ditch by the boat yard on the Bridgewater Canal in Stretford marked on the OS 1:1250 map of 1955 as 'Nico Ditch' (arrowed).*



*Figure 44: The Ryebank Fields earthwork (between the trees on the left and bushes on the right) looking east in February 2021.*

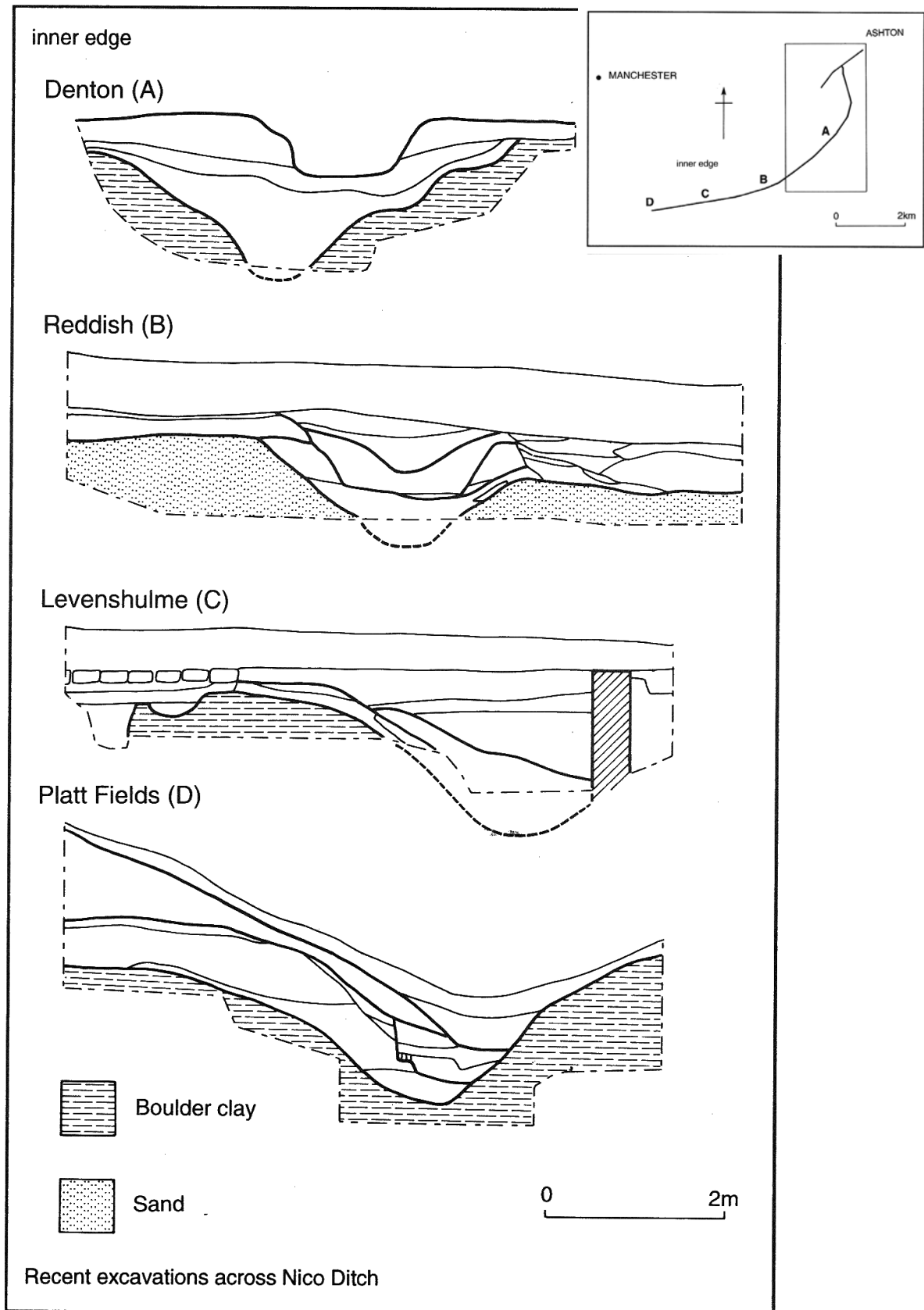


Figure 45: Four cross-sections through Nico Ditch from the 1990s. Inset – the location of the excavations along the course of the monument.



*Figure 46: The two test pits dug by University of Salford and community archaeologist at Longfords Park in 2014 along the Nico Ditch alignment.*



*Figure 47: The northern test pit dug by University of Salford and community archaeologist at Longford Park in 2014 showing early 20<sup>th</sup> century dumping deposits.*

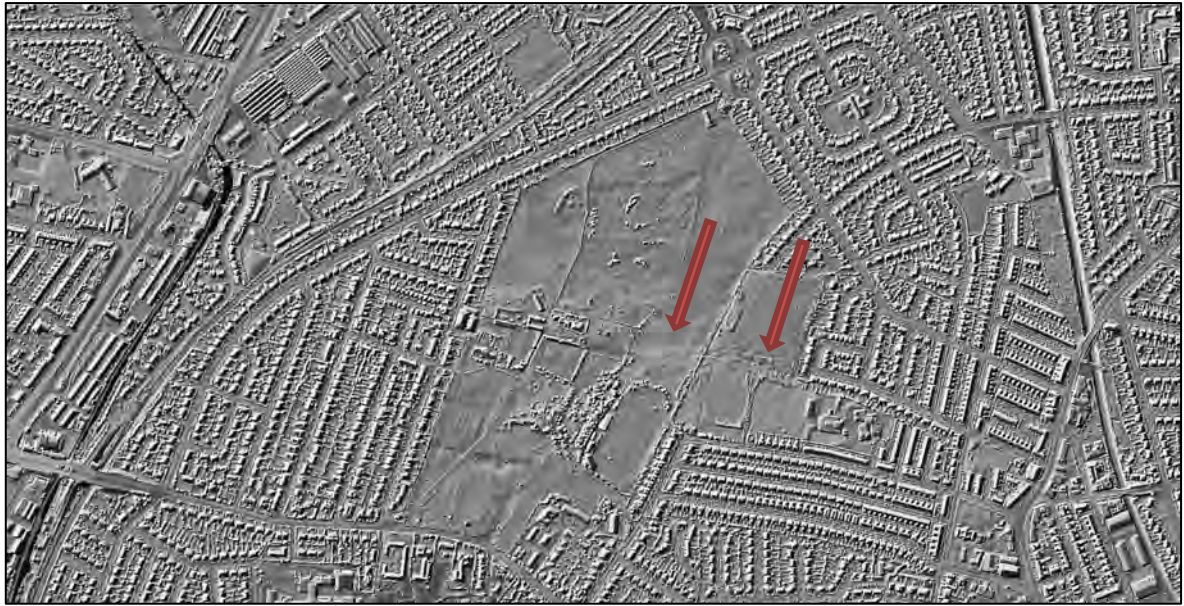


*Figure 48: Lidar of Nico Ditch through Ryebank Field and Longford Park (arrowed).  
Source: 1m DSM LIDAR survey data, UK Government.*

## 5. Conclusion

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### 5.1 The Context of the Hough Moss to Longford Park/Chester Road Alignment & Nico Ditch

The present study has demonstrated that the earthwork at Ryebank Fields was:

- a) part of an alignment of field boundaries and ditches running east to west between Hough Moss in Withington and Chester Road in Stretford;
- b) that this alignment was an early landscape feature, since later field boundaries run from this alignment but do not cut it;
- c) that the alignment predated its re-use as a canal feeder for the Bridgewater Canal in the 1760s;
- d) that the earthwork is the only part of this alignment to survive as an above-ground monument;
- e) that the relationship of this earthwork to the larger landscape feature known as Nico Ditch depends upon an understanding of its topographical location and context.

The location of the termini of Nico Ditch is crucial to any assessment of the archaeological context of the Ryebank Fields earthwork. If the alignment of Nico Ditch included only that section from Hough Moss in the west to Ashton Moss in the east, then, despite the fact that this route forms a continuous barrier from peat bog to peat bog, the monument could have been bypassed to the west of Hough Moss and Platt Brook by a landward route along the line of the present A56 and marking the line of the Roman road between Manchester and Chester. A defensive interpretation or an interpretation as a territorial marker for Nico Ditch's origins would thus make more sense if the alignment was continued west of Hough Moss. In this regard the Hough Moss to Longford Park/Chester Road alignment can be seen as blocking this remaining gap. Together, these two stretches of ditch would have formed a series of moss-ditch-moss-ditch-moss barriers from the River Irwell in the west to the River Medlock in the east, as can be seen on the Ordnance Survey drift geology map covering the south of Manchester (Fig 49) and by a comparison of both alignments with the distribution of mosslands in Greater Manchester (Fig 50).

Whether such a line can be appropriately described as defensive is open to question given the inconclusive nature of the evidence for the monument comprising a ditch and bank. Whilst not necessarily providing a defensible line, it may, however, have been extremely useful as a territorial marker. Thus, Crawford (1936), Melland (1936), and Nevell (Nevell 1992, 83) all suggest that Nico Ditch may represent part of an early network of ditches, covering the whole of northern England and including the dykes at Grey Ditch, in northern Derbyshire (Wild 1967, 160), and Aberford Dyke and Grim's Ditch, both in west Yorkshire (Faull & Moorhouse, 1981, 172-3). The location of the Aberford Dykes-Grim's Ditch complex is consistent with the delineation of the boundary of the British kingdom of Elmet in the face of Anglo-Saxon expansionism in the early 7<sup>th</sup> century. It is possible that Nico Ditch represents a similar expression by the British in the North West, perhaps by the Rheged kingdom against the Anglo-Saxon incomers in the early 7<sup>th</sup> century. Equally, the monument may have been built in the 8<sup>th</sup> or early 9<sup>th</sup> centuries to mark the boundary between Northumbria and Mercia, at a

time when the two kingdoms were at odds (Kenyon 1991, 78). In any case an interpretation that describes Nico Ditch as a territorial marker needs to include the western Hough Moss to Longford Park/Chester Road alignment in order for it to make strategic sense.

## **5.2 The Form of the Nico Ditch Monument**

Documentary and map evidence for the earthwork at Ryebank Fields suggest that like much of the rest of the Nico Ditch alignment this landscape feature has been reworked over many centuries. The only way to assess the level of survival of archaeological deposits at this site is to excavate the monument. The excavations at Platt Fields in 1997 revealed it had the best-preserved section of Nico Ditch, with none of the massive later reworking and drain intrusions seen at the excavated sections at Levenshulme, Reddish, and Audenshaw Barn. The evaluation was thus able to demonstrate clearly that the present form of this monument through Platt Fields is the result of many phases of activity. Such a U-shaped, flared, ditch of roughly the same size, 4m to 4.5m wide and c 1.5m deep, can also be seen in the sections cut across Nico Ditch at Levenshulme, Reddish, and Audenshaw Barn, and possibly at Ryebank Fields. At Audenshaw, Reddish, and Levenshulme the pattern of activity was similar to that seen at Platt Fields with a primary cut followed by almost complete silting, before a much later series of re-cuts. Although no dating evidence was recovered from the primary ditch at Platt Fields the nature and extent of these early fills indicated that it was of considerable antiquity. No evidence was found for a bank contemporary with this first ditch cut, whilst the existing bank to the north of the ditch was shown to be 20<sup>th</sup> century in origin.

As has already been discussed in Section 4 of this report four theories have been suggested for the origin of Nico Ditch;

- as a drainage channel,
- an agricultural boundary,
- an administrative boundary,
- or as a defensive earthwork.

Excavation at five sites in the 1990s and 2000s suggested that the surviving form of the monument implies a likely origin as a territorial marker. Indeed, the morphology of the primary ditch, with its gently sloping sides and flat base, is essentially inconsistent with the 'V' shaped ditches commonly used in antiquity for military purposes. This still leaves the problem of the archaeological context for this monument and its length. In the absence of secure dating evidence, we are forced to rely on historical and typological evidence, which suggests that this monument dates to either the early medieval or late prehistoric periods. If this is so, then it falls within a group of roughly fifty such monuments dating to these periods. These are distributed widely throughout the country, ranging in size from those which extend for as little as a few hundred metres, to those which run for tens of kilometres, such as Offa's Dyke on the Welsh border. The Catrail in Roxburghshire, Wansdyke in Wessex and Wat's Dyke, again on the Welsh border, are further examples. Commonly they are considered bifunctional, serving both defensive and administrative roles. If this is the case with Nico Ditch, then strategically the Hough Moss to Longford Park/Chester Road alignment must have formed part of this primary alignment, cutting off the three major road routes across the River Mersey between the River Irwell in the west and Ashton Moss in the east (Fig 50).

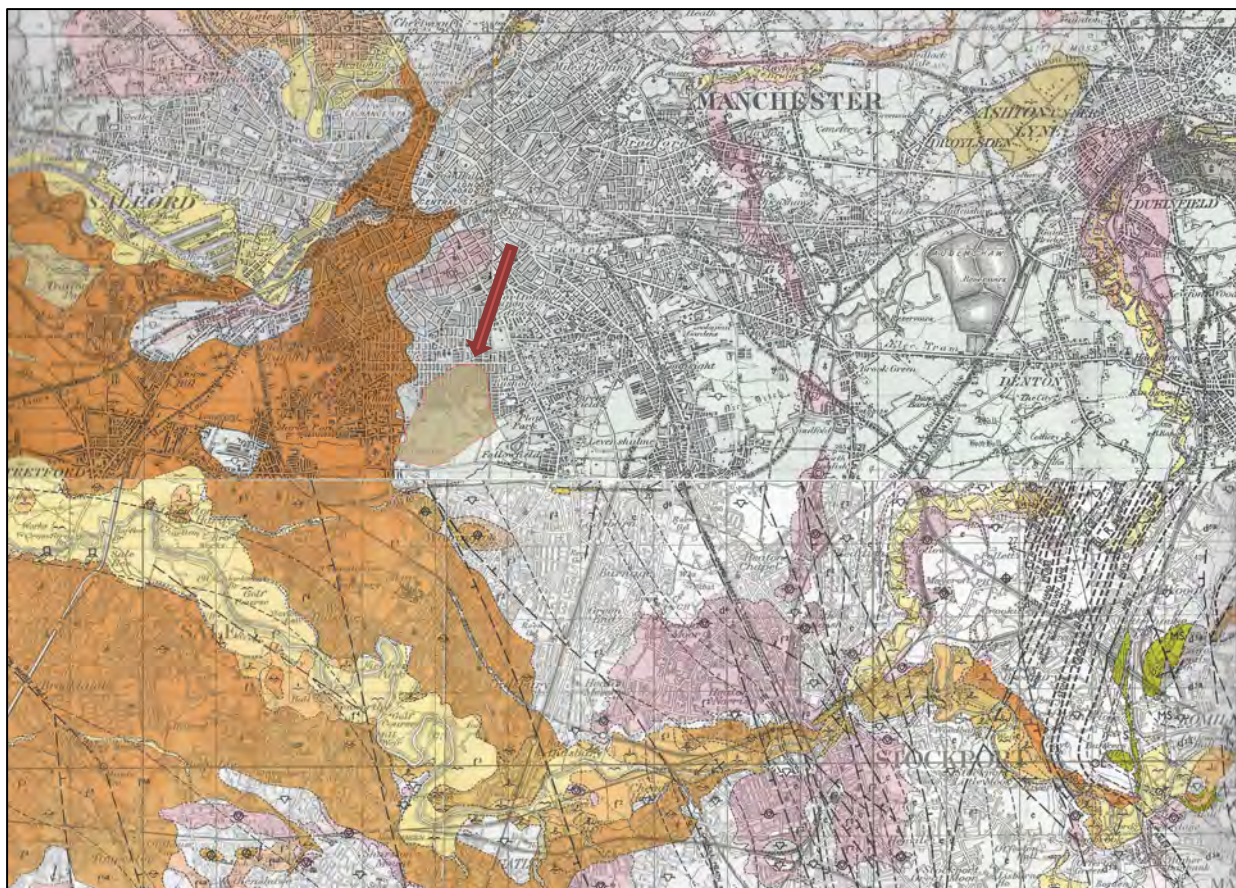


Figure 49: The drift geology of south Manchester as shown on the British Geology Survey sheet for Manchester (Sheet 85), from 1970. The extent of post-medieval Hough Moss has been added (see red arrow).

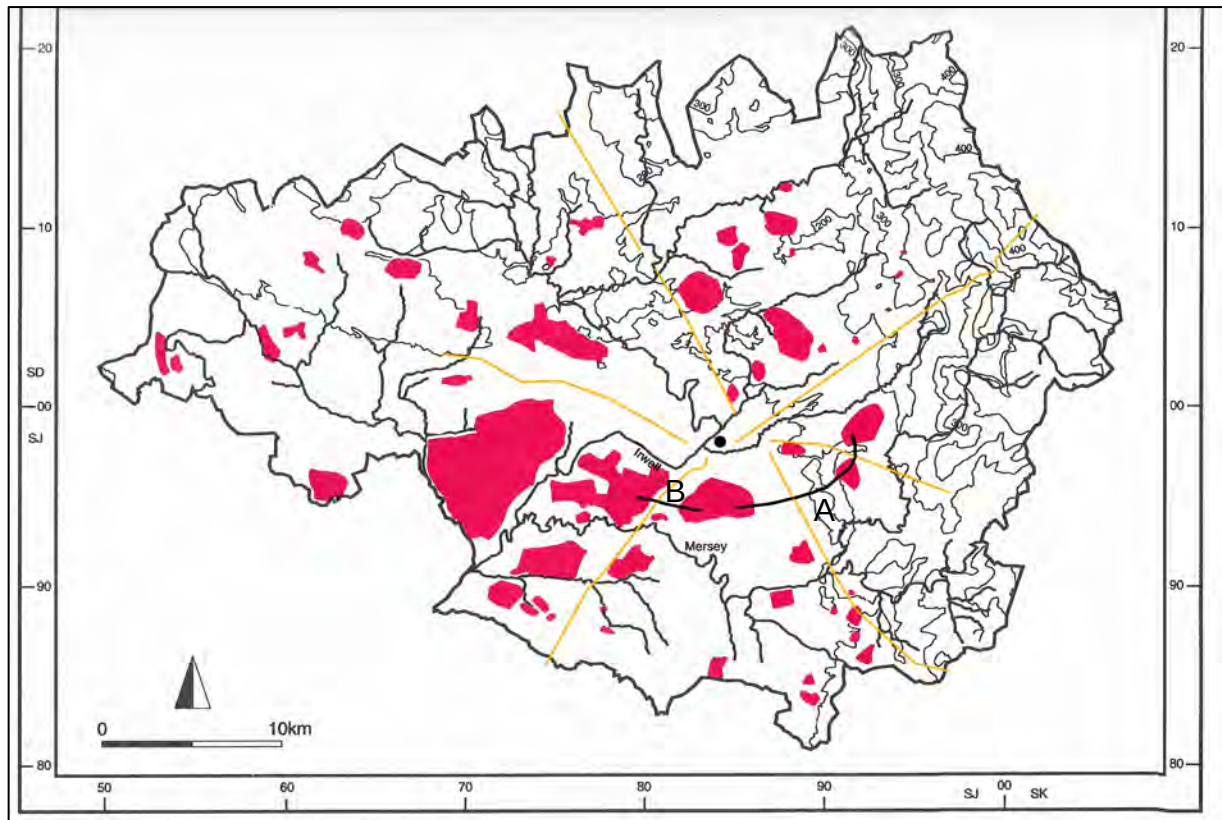


Figure 50: The topographical context of Nico Ditch (A) and the Hough Moss to Longford Park/Chester Road extension (B) in relation to the known lowland mosses of Greater Manchester (in red) and the Roman road system (in yellow). Base map after Hall, Wells & Huckerby 1995.

## 6. Sources

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### 6.1 Cartographic Sources

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Ordnance Survey 1892 First Edition 25 Inch map, Lancashire Sheet 111.1.  
Ordnance Survey 1892-94 Second Edition 6 inch map revision, Lancashire Sheet 111.  
Ordnance Survey 1904-5 6 inch map revision, Lancashire Sheet 111.  
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## 7. Acknowledgements

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