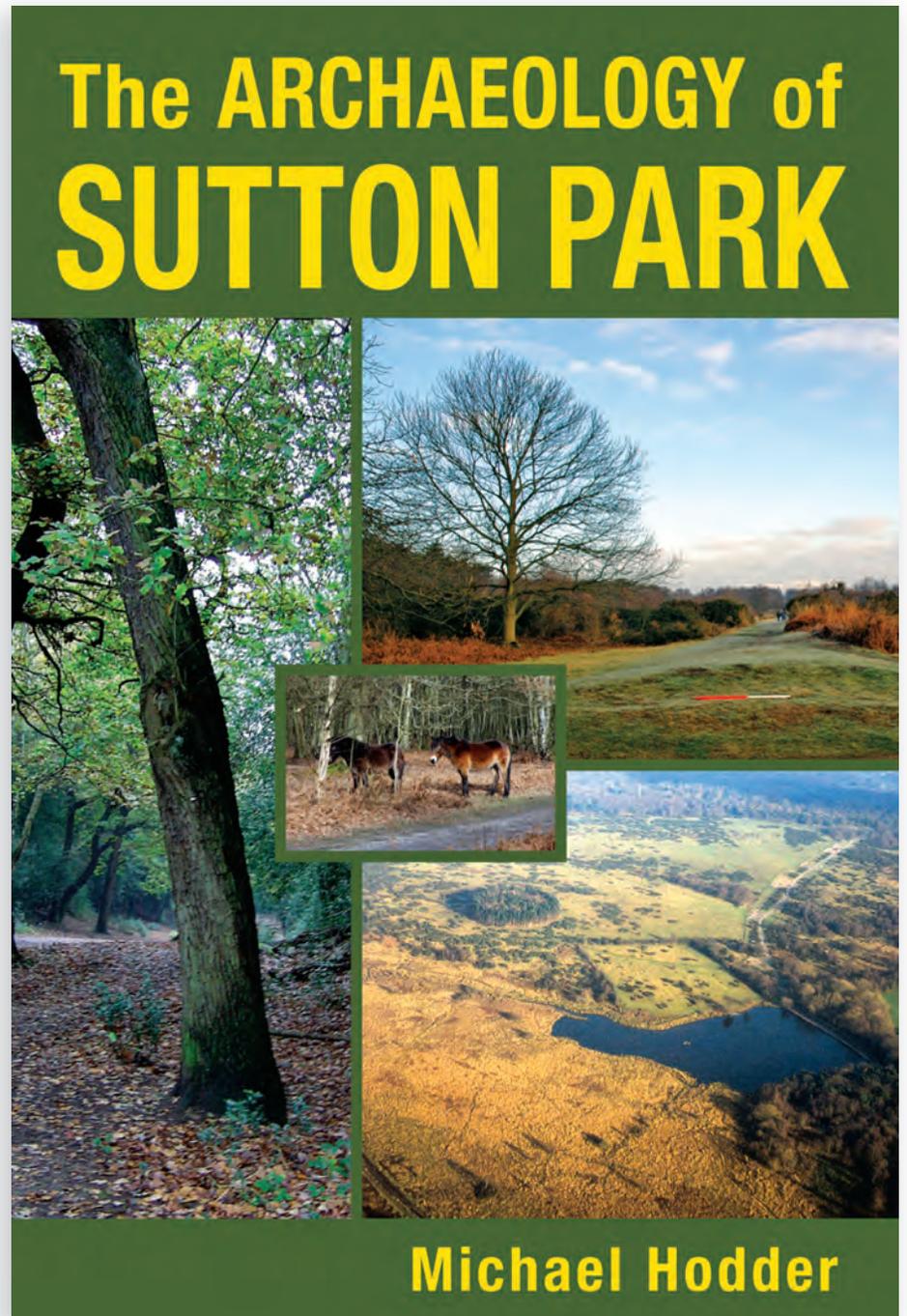# SUTTON PARK: A MEDIEVAL LANDSCAPE

Mike Hodder

Sutton Park is one of Birmingham's public parks, but its historic development and present character are very different from all the others. It was created as a deer park in the twelfth century and its subsequent use has resulted in excellent preservation of archaeological remains of various dates. These remains include former boundaries visible as banks and ditches which show how the present vegetation patterns are determined by medieval management of the deer park.

Historic Development and Present Character

Sutton Park lies on the west side of Sutton Coldfield town centre. It was a royal creation, judging by its probable original size of about 3,000 acres which is comparable to that of other royal parks like Woodstock (now Blenheim). It is first mentioned in 1126 when Henry I gave the manor of Sutton Coldfield to Roger Newburgh, Earl of Warwick.

By the sixteenth century it was again under royal control and in 1528 Henry VIII gave the park to the town of Sutton Coldfield and allowed the townspeople to graze their animals in it and collect wood. The woods were enclosed and managed as coppices, and fields created by encroachments reduced the size of the park, although it was subsequently extended to include some of these former fields.

Grazing continues today, but public recreation has been the main use of Sutton Park since the nineteenth century. The present vegetation of the park is predominantly heathland in the west, ancient woodland in the centre, and grassland in the east.

Archaeological remains in Sutton Park survive as upstanding earthworks, rather than buried features. In addition to the park pale or outer boundary of the deer park,

Cover of *The Archaeology of Sutton Park* by Michael Hodder, 2013.

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these earthworks include the entire lengths of successive banks and ditches subdividing the park; complete circuits of sixteenth-century woodbanks around coppices; and field boundaries resulting from encroachments into the park. The function of the banks and ditches is interpreted from their form, size and course, and their relative dates can be observed where they run across, are crossed by, or incorporate and reuse others.

Extent and Subdivisions of the Deer Park

The present extent of Sutton Park corresponds closely to that of the medieval park, which in common with many deer parks was roughly circular to enclose the maximum area for the minimum perimeter. The fence on the smooth north and west sides of Sutton Park runs along the bank (originally topped by a close-set oak paling fence) which with its accompanying ditch formed the boundary of the deer park.

On the south, the present edge of Sutton Park partly follows the banks and ditches of sixteenth-century encroachments but the original medieval boundary, now covered by residential development, can be identified on historic maps as a continuous field boundary. On the east, archaeological and field-name evidence suggests that the park originally extended right up to the town centre. Other fields resulting from encroachment, their boundaries partly following medieval subdivisions, were subsequently returned to the park.

The land which was enclosed as the deer park in the twelfth century may already have been used for hunting. It contains four prominent valleys which converge on its eastern side, and archaeological evidence suggests that the park originally extended further east to include a fifth valley. The topography is particularly clear on images generated from LiDAR data (aerial survey by laser). It was deliberately selected for the 'bow and stable' method of hunting in which deer would have been driven down the valleys by beaters and then shot by archers.

Boundaries subdividing the park would have increased the efficiency of this

The bank and ditch boundary in Upper Keepers Valley

method. The first subdivision, later enlarged to the north, is centred on the manor house, to the south-west of the town, and includes a valley occupied by a medieval fishpond, Keeper's Pool. It is bounded by a bank and ditch.

The bank may originally have been topped by a moveable but stock-proof dead hedge rather than a permanent fence. It was entered from the manor house along a hollow way, and it also includes a north-south path which provided a route between valleys. A subsequent medieval subdivision of the deer park, also bounded by a bank and ditch, extended and modified the earlier subdivision. It includes most of the east and north of the park and most of the woodland which was later enclosed as coppice.

Woodland

In the sixteenth century the ancient woodland was divided into separate enclosures, each bounded by a bank with an external ditch (a woodbank), to exclude animals which would otherwise graze coppice shoots and to provide access for livestock between the enclosures. The extent of the ancient woodland as a whole conforms to the medieval boundaries – the woodbanks cross the earlier boundaries in places and directly follow them in others.

The curving western and eastern boundaries of Holly Hurst follow the earlier and later medieval subdivisions respectively, and the south-western boundaries of Lower and Upper Nut Hursts and Darnel Hurst follow the later subdivision. Part of the earlier medieval subdivision, however, runs through dense woodland in Lower Nut Hurst, which must have been more open when it was constructed.

The woodland in the medieval deer park was probably wood pasture rather than coppice, consisting of trees and grassland in which deer and other livestock grazed. The later medieval subdivision may have been created to prevent woodland depletion: with heathland to its west and grassland to its east, it resulted in the threefold vegetation pattern that survives today. ●

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Further Reading
Michael Hodder, *The Archaeology of Sutton Park* (The History Press, 2013)
Sutton Park LiDAR, air photographic and ground surveys and palaeoenvironmental assessment http://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/archives/view/suttonpark_eh_2010/