

# Offa's Dyke Journal



A Journal for Linear Monuments,  
Frontiers & Borderlands Research

Volume 6

Edited by Howard Williams

## Aims and Scope

*Offa's Dyke Journal* is a peer-reviewed venue for the publication of high-quality research on the archaeology, history and heritage of linear monuments, frontiers and borderlands. The editors invite submissions that explore dimensions of Offa's Dyke, Wat's Dyke and the 'short dykes' of western Britain, including their life-histories and landscape contexts. *ODJ* will also consider comparative studies on the material culture and monumentality of land divisions, boundaries, frontiers and borderlands from elsewhere in Britain, Europe and beyond from prehistory to the present day. We accept:

1. Notes and Reviews of up to 3,000 words
2. Interim reports on fieldwork of up to 5,000 words
3. Original discussions, syntheses and analyses of up to 10,000 words

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Front cover: Photograph of the excavated ditch of Offa's Dyke, Chirk, north-facing section (Ian Grant, CPAT Photo 4565-0134)

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University of  
Chester

# Nico Ditch: A Review of its Form, Function, and Date

Michael Nevell

*Nico Ditch is an enigmatic curvilinear earthwork, the core of which runs for c. 8km across the southern part of the City of Manchester from Hough Moss to Ashton Moss. Although much of its length was built over during the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries, where it survives as an earthwork it comprises a U-shaped ditch 2m to 3m wide and 1.5m to 2m deep, with possibly a low bank on its northern side. This article reviews research into the origins, form, and function of Nico Ditch, drawing on over 140 years of study, as well as discussing grey literature archaeological fieldwork from the 1990s and 2000s. Using this material, it is argued that the line of Nico Ditch extended further west of Hough Moss into Stretford. This longer monument strengthens the argument that the ditch dates from the early medieval period.*

Keywords: Nico Ditch; Manchester; early medieval; boundary; monument

## Introduction

Nico Ditch is an enigmatic curvilinear earthwork, the core of which runs for c. 8km (5 miles) across the southern part of the City of Manchester (Figure 1). Its eastern terminus is commonly agreed to be Ashton Moss, in Tameside, north-east of Denton Golf course (Figure 2), while the western terminus traditionally has been placed at Platt Fields, Manchester, on the edge of the former mossland of Hough Moss (Figure 3). A westerly extension between Hough Moss and Stretford Moss is probably contemporary with the core alignment.

Two pieces of mid-nineteenth century scholarship brought Nico Ditch to the attention of later Victorian antiquarians and historians. The first historical study of the earthwork was made by John Higson in the 1850s. In his 1859 book on the history of Droylsden, a small township between Manchester and Ashton-under-Lyne, he describes a large ditch running into the south-western side of Ashton Moss and forming the eastern boundary of the township. This he associated with a feature he called 'Nicker Ditch', that ran from Hough Moss near Platt Fields (Figure 4) in the west to Ashton Moss in the east (Higson 1859). Writing in the Manchester Guardian nearly a decade earlier in 1850 he observed that 'the formation of Nicker Ditch [sic] was apparently anterior to the general cultivation of the land through which it passes, if not the first colonisation of the District: else why is it that it acts as a mere or boundary to so many townships?' (Higson 1850).

The second Victorian study bringing the Nico Ditch to scholarly attention was by pioneering regional folklorists Harland and Wilkinson. Working in Lancashire in the 1860s, they recorded a local tradition in Denton and Manchester concerning a ditch known as Nico Ditch. This recounted that Nico Ditch was:



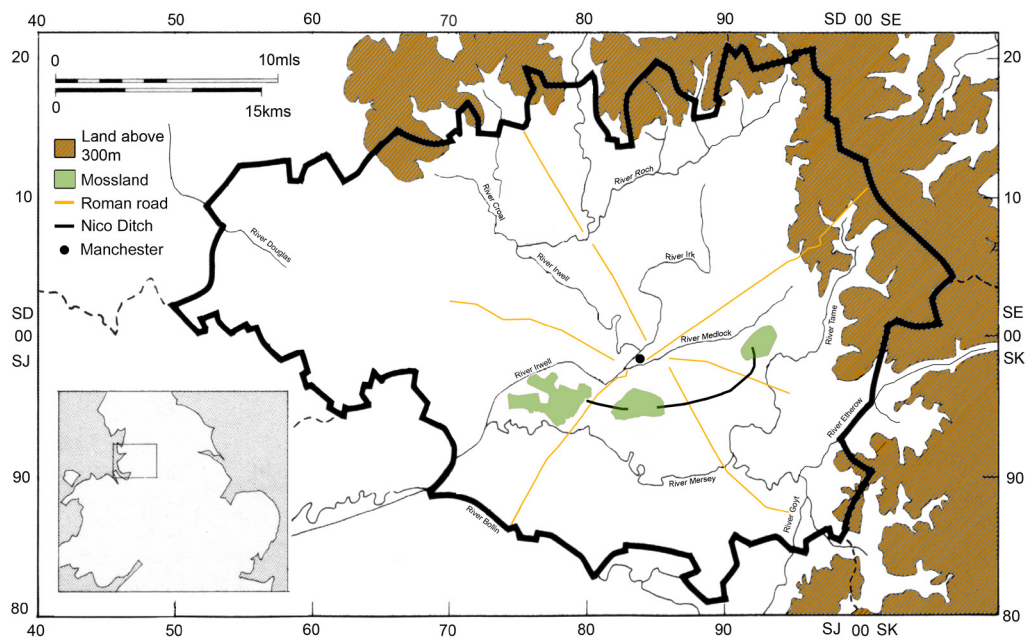


Figure 1: The location of Nico Ditch, Greater Manchester, in relation to topographic and historic landscape features (North upwards)

... made in one night, from Ashton Moss to Ouse [Hough's] Moss; such a number of men being appointed as to cast up each the length of himself, in order to entrench themselves from the Danes, then invading England. The land on one side the ditch is called 'Danes' to this day, and the place in Gorton called 'Winding Hill' is said to take its name from the Briton's winding or going round to drive off the Danes. The township of Reddish (anciently written and still locally pronounced by the peasantry, Red-ditch), adjoining to Gorton and Denton, is said to take its name from the water in this ditch after the engagement being red.' (Harland and Wilkinson 1867: 27).

Although most of the alignment of Nico Ditch was built over during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, where it survives as an earthwork it comprises a U-shaped ditch 2m to 3m wide and 1.5m to 2m deep, with possibly a low bank on its northern side. Two sections of the course of Nico Ditch are protected as scheduled monuments, at Denton Golf Course (a 205m long section was scheduled in 1997 as a result of research undertaken for the Tameside Archaeological Survey) and at Platt Fields (a 135m long section was scheduled in 1997 as a result of the 1996 excavation). In the absence of scientific dating the whole ditch has been inferred, on landscape, typological, and etymological grounds, to be early medieval in origin (A. Crofton 1885, H. Crofton 1905; Hart 1977; Higson 1859; Melland 1936).



Figure 2: The best-preserved section of Nico Ditch lies on Denton Golf course, where the ditch and low bank are still visible. This section was scheduled in the 1990s (Photograph: Michael Nevell, 2023)

This article reviews research into the origins, form, and function of Nico Ditch, drawing on over 140 years of study, as well as discussing grey literature archaeological fieldwork from the 1990s and 2000s (held by the Greater Manchester Archaeological Advisory Service). Using this fresh data, it is argued that the line of Nico Ditch extended further west of Platt Fields, into Stretford, thereby the entire monument was blocking the lines of three Roman roads running south from the Roman fort at Manchester (Margary 7a, 71b and 711) and thus strengthening the argument that the ditch dates from the early medieval period.

Around fifty substantial boundary features have been identified as territorial markers in the Early Medieval period in England. These include examples in Derbyshire, East Anglia, southern England, Yorkshire, and along the Welsh border. These monuments range from under a kilometre in length as at Grey Ditch, Bradwell, in Derbyshire, to 240km in the case of Offa's Dyke. They survive both as earthworks and as buried features (Garland *et al.* 2021). In the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries Nico Ditch was identified as being one of these monuments by regional scholars such as A. Crofton, H.T. Crofton, Esdaile, Gardener, Melland, Hart, and Tindall, but its origins, form, and length remain matters for debate.



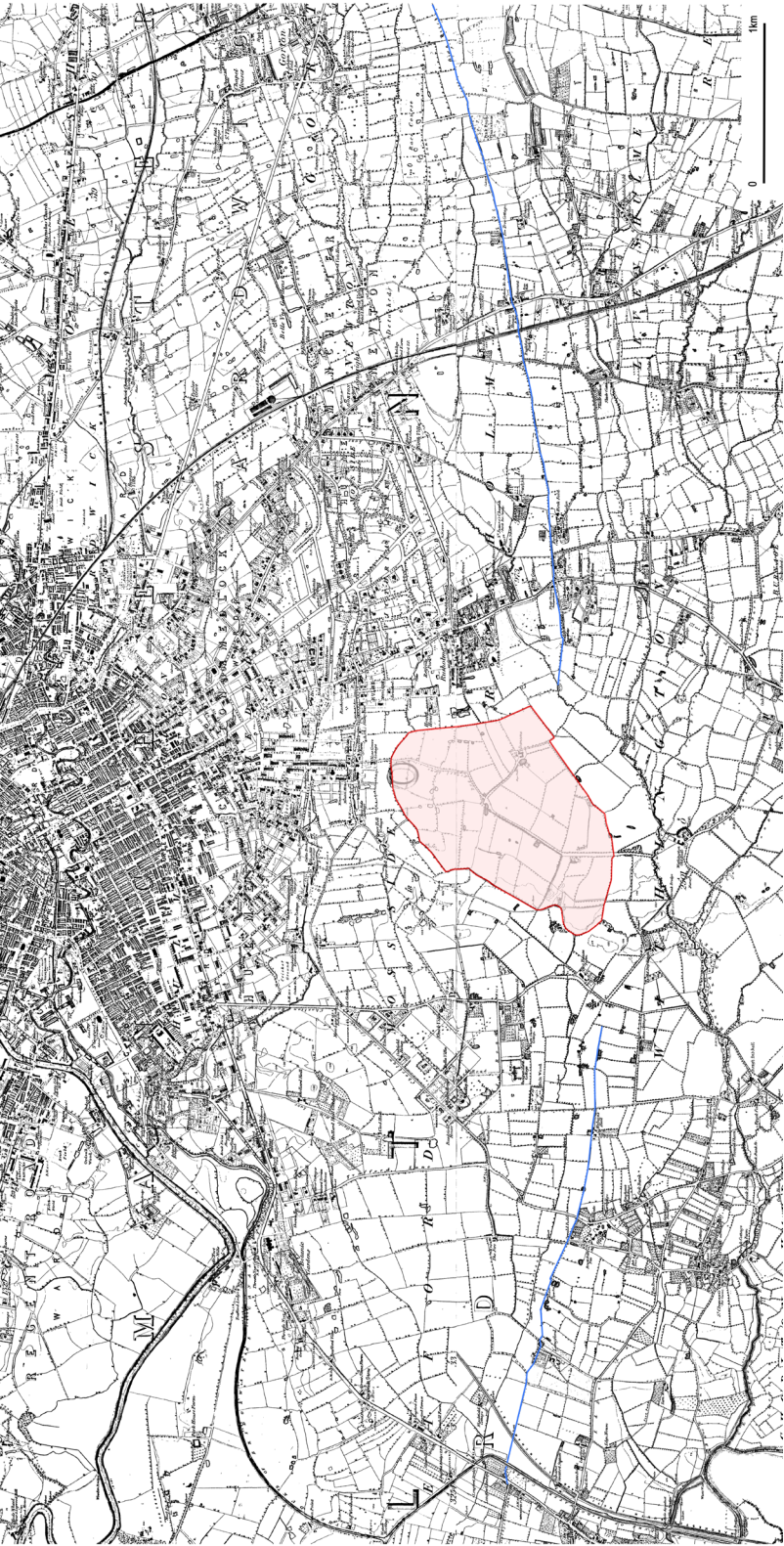


Figure 3: The course of Nico Ditch (in blue) as show by field boundaries on the Ordnance Survey Six Inch map for south Manchester (Sheet 104), surveyed 1843–1845. The extent of Hough Moss, shaded pink, is shown based upon mid-twentieth century drift geology data (N upwards)





Figure 4: Nico Ditch at Platt Fields, Fallowfield, in February 2020, where it functions as a drainage channel (Photograph: Michael Nevell, 2023)

### Origin of the name

During the nineteenth century the name ‘Nico’, ‘Nicker,’ or ‘Nikker’ is first recorded to describe the ditch alignment running from Hough Moss on the western edge of Platt Fields in southern Manchester eastwards to Ashton Moss on the Droylsden/Ashton boarder (A. Crofton 1885; H.T. Croften 1905; Esdaile 1892; Higson 1859; Higson 1850: 124–125, Manchester Central Library Archives). A. Crofton linked this name with a series of late medieval and sixteenth and seventeenth-century documents that mentioned a ‘magnum fossatum’, or ‘Mykelldiche’, ‘Mekeldyche’, and ‘Muchildich’ (great ditch) as a boundary in the following townships along its length from west to east: Fallowfield, Rusholme, Reddish, and Audenshaw. He also suggested that ‘Nico’, ‘Nicker’ or ‘Nikker’ were likely corruptions of the Middle English names used in these documents: ‘Mykelldiche’, ‘Mekeldyche’, and ‘Muchildich’ (A. Crofton 1885; H.T. Croften 1905). These place-names include an element derived from the Old English word ‘micel’, meaning ‘big’ or ‘great’ (Smith 1956). This would make the terms ‘Mykelldiche’, ‘Mekeldyche’, and ‘Muchildich’, direct Latin translations of the earliest Latin name for the monument, ‘magnum fossatum’. The variants of ‘Nico’, ‘Nicker’ or ‘Nikker’ are first noted in the nineteenth century. Whether these names refer to the whole length of the monument or just its size is unclear.

Nico Ditch is first mentioned in two versions of a charter from the period 1190–1212 relating to the granting of land in Audenshaw south-west of Ashton Moss to the monks Kersal Cell (Farrer 1902: 329; Nevell 1991: 121; Nevell 1992: 78). 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 the same landscape feature (now known as 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 and Brownbill 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 form of the earthwork

These late medieval references to the monument mention only a ditch. The suggestion that it comprised both a bank and ditch can be traced back to John Higson who noted in 1859 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' (Higson 1859: 55). In support of this physical evidence of a bank H.T. Crofton argued that the variants 'Milkewallslade' and 'Michewall Ditch' provided the earliest indication that a bank existed as well as a ditch (H.T. Crofton 1905: 154–155). Since H.T. 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) (Figure 5), 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 twentieth 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 1956), it is possible that they are a corruption of the original Old English ‘micel’, meaning great, rather than an indicator of the existence of a bank at this point.

### The course of the ditch

When A. Crofton (1885) first described in detail the course of Nico Ditch in the 1880s he was able to trace a near continuous ditch alignment from Platt Fields in the west to Ashton Moss in the east. This is the route mentioned in brief by Higson in 1850 (Owen MSS, volume lxxx: 124–125, Manchester Central Library Archives) and its course can be traced on the Ordnance Survey six inch to one mile first edition maps (Lancashire sheets 104, 105, and 111, surveyed in 1843–1845) along its entire length.

A. Crofton and Higson both believed that the western terminus of the ditch was Hough Moss, by Platt Brook, on the western side of what is now Platt Fields Park in Fallowfield. On the other hand, the Ordnance Survey first edition 6 inch to 1 mile map (Lancashire Sheet 104) shows a similar alignment of field boundaries running from the western edge of Hough Moss, SJ 8281 9419, towards Stretford (Figure 3). This is discussed more fully below.

East of Hough Moss the line of Nico Ditch can be traced through Platt Fields Park in 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-shaped profile and survives 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 twentieth century when Gardener was able to confidently assert that ‘there is no rampart remaining’ at this point (Gardener 1908: 554, n.25).

After leaving Platt Fields the eastern course of Nico Ditch as far as Denton is largely built over but can be traced with reference to the early twenty-first century street plan and a section where the ditch is visible. This visible section is at SJ 883 949, Melland playing fields, where it is marked by a public footpath, along the southern side of which runs a steep V-shaped water-filled ditch, c. 4m in width and c. 1.5m deep. At this point there is no trace of the bank recorded by Melland in the mid-twentieth century (Melland 1936: 60–61), 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.

Its inferred alignment (where it is no longer visible) east of Platt Fields 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; Margary Road Number 711) at Midway (SJ 872 947). Its course is continued





Figure 5: Nico Ditch at Melland Playing Fields in Levenshulme, spring 2021. The ditch is heavily modified at this point, although there is a pronounced difference in ground level between the northern and southern sides. This stretch was investigated during landscaping works in 2008 to rebuild the footpath (on the right of the image) by the University of Manchester Archaeological Unit (Photograph: Michael Nevell, 2023)

to the east by Matthews Lane until, at Melland playing fields, in Levenshulme, it is once again visible. East of these playing fields, the ditch continues as a fenced property boundary, but without any sign of the ditch itself, behind the houses on the southern side of Holmcroft Road, the alignment here (SJ 890 951) coinciding with the administrative boundary between the Metropolitan Boroughs of Manchester and Stockport, the medieval Levenshulme/Reddish boundary, where it is again a visible landscape feature. At this point the ditch is of similar form and dimensions to that seen 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 historic Gorton (Manchester)-Reddish (Stockport) boundary (Figure 6). Beyond Reddish Lane the line continues as the boundary between the medieval townships of Gorton (Manchester) and Denton (Tameside), along the northern side of Laburnum Road, although the ditch is no longer visible.



The projected line of Nico Ditch and the late medieval and modern administrative boundary continues as far as edge of 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 (Figure 7). The ditch is c. 3–4m wide at the top and has a broad V-shaped 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 (Ashton Estate Plan 1765; Nevell 1992, 81: 80–81). 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 the north-eastern 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 (Ashton Estate Plan 1765; Higson 1859: 10) as extending as far as Moor Side Farm. Its antiquity may be suggested by its use as a late medieval administrative boundary between Droylsden and Ashton townships, possibly from as early as the fifteenth century when it was 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] eastward that John the Buron has in Sunderland towards the Lytel Mosse, to the end of the same ditch [at Moorside]’. However, it is not clear that this alignment is much earlier than the fifteenth century. Thus, the original eastern end of Nico Ditch would appear to run into Ashton Moss (Nevell and Wilson 1998).

### The Hough Moss to Longford Park alignment

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 twentieth century, it was suggested on topographical grounds 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 (a Roman road) in Stretford (H.T. Crofton 1905; Nevell 1997: 37) (Figure 3). The presence of a large expanse of mossland at Moorside, Urmston, immediately west of Chester Road, seems to provide a western terminus.

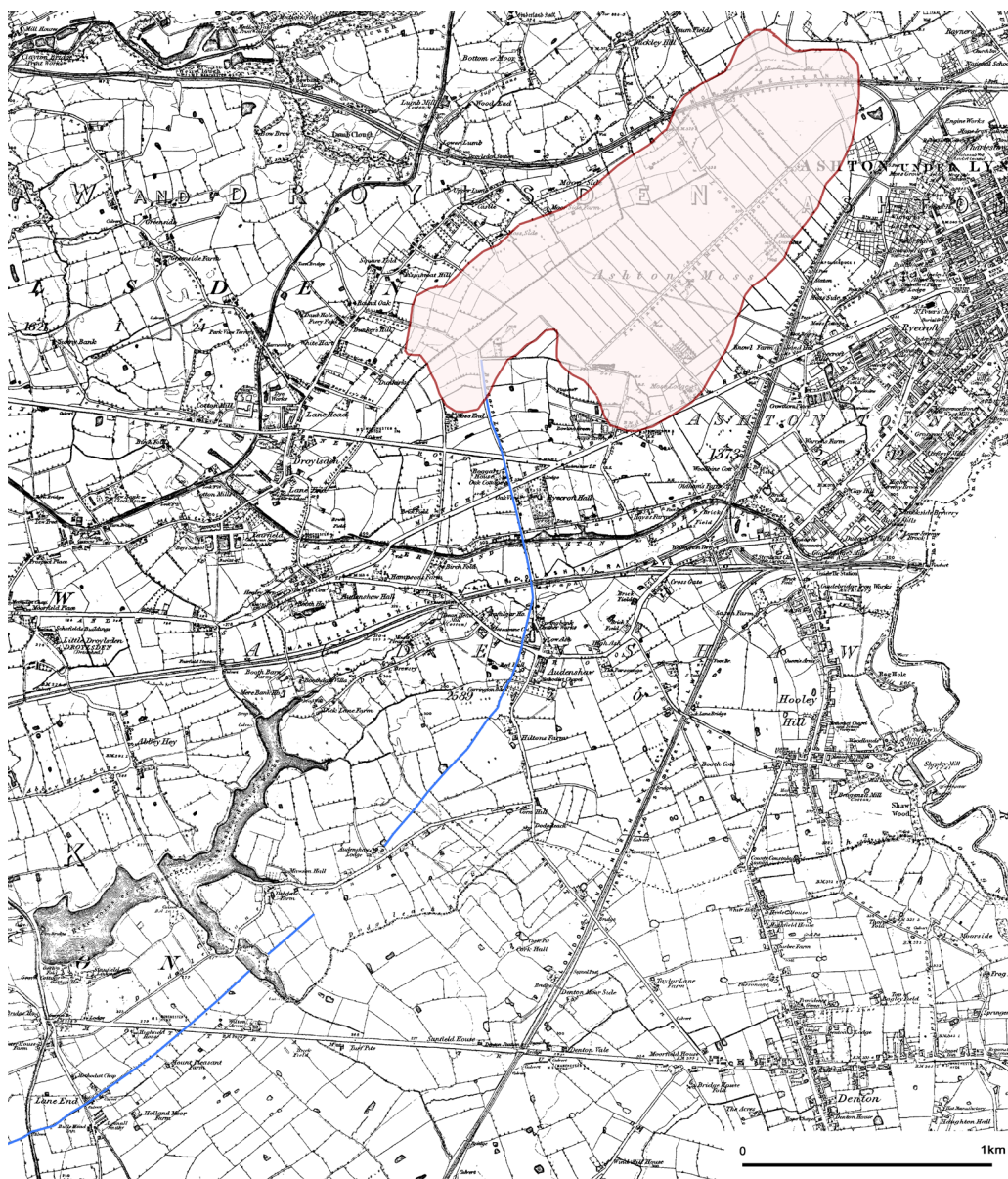


Figure 6: The course of Nico Ditch (in blue) as show by field boundaries on the Ordnance Survey Six Inch map in Denton and Ashton-upon-Lyne (Sheet III), surveyed 1843–1845. The extend of Ashton Moss is shown, shaded pink, based upon mid-twentieth century drift geology data (N upwards)

The only section of this alignment that survives in open ground as an earthwork is the stretch through Ryebank Fields, on the eastern side of Longford Park (H.T. Crofton 1899). However, an estate map from the mid-eighteenth century shows the alignment running through the Egerton lands in Longford, Stretford (M24/1/2 Egerton of Tatton Muniments, John Ryland Library). This map, though undated, was surveyed around 1758, the context

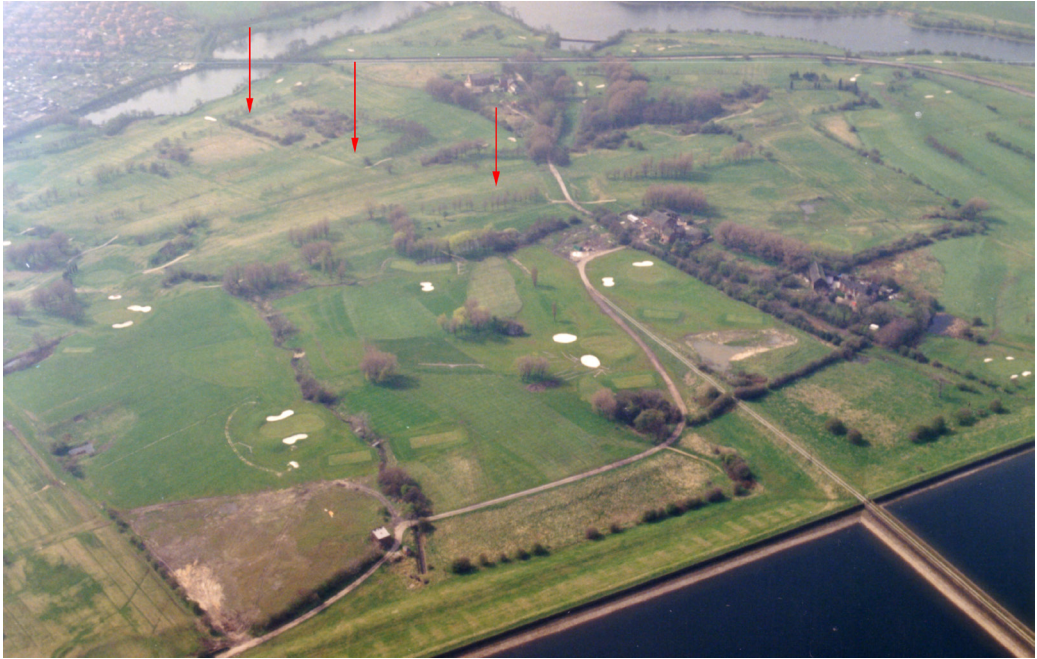


Figure 7: Aerial view from 1996 of the alignment of the Nico Ditch earthwork across Denton Golf Course (Copyright Dr Michael Nevell)

being, according to local historian Richard Bond (Nevell 2021: 8–11), the purchase by Samuel Hill of 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 an open watercourse heading south from the Longford Brook and then heading west along this western alignment.

In the twenty-first century, the only visible feature on this western alignment is a stretch of earthwork is c. 26m long and, between 10m and 12m wide and roughly 0.5m deep, with a broadly U-shaped profile. It formed part of a continuous series of field boundaries and ditches, visible on the Ordnance Survey map Lancashire Sheet 111 published in 1848, running west of Hough Moss, through Longford Park, and ending at Chester Road in Stretford, a distance of 2.64km. This alignment seems to finish in Urmston at SJ 7829 9504, on the western side of Chester Road, a point which marks the eastern edge of 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 the moss but is offset by 100m to the north, suggesting that is a later feature. An excavated 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 and Fletcher 1993: 30–31; Nevell 1997: 37).



The research undertaken by Richard Bond (pers. comm.) has mapped the route of this canal feeder in the process showing that the earthwork at Ryebank Fields pre-dates it, being present on the 1758 Egerton estate map, thereby confirming an earlier origin for the field boundary alignment from Hough Moss to Longford Park/Chester Road. This western alignment runs parallel to, but south of, Longford Brook and Bond has further suggested 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 in the early 1760s (quoted in Nevell 2021: 10–11).

## Excavating Nico Ditch

### *Denton Golf Course, 1954*

Denton Golf Course contains one of the two best sections of the Nico Ditch to survive as an earthwork (which is why it is a Scheduled Monument, see above) (Figure 2), and the earliest one to be investigated archaeologically (Nevell 1992: 82). In 1954 Dr J.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 (Figure 8). This work was undertaken with extramural archaeology students. Although no records of the excavation were kept other than a rough sketch of the dig cross-section (Figure 9), 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). This bank is still visible. This marked the eastern end of the Nico Ditch alignment and confirmed the presence of a ditch running north-eastwards towards Ashton Moss as seen on the OS 6 Inch to 1 mile first edition map (published 1848, Lancashire Sheet 105).

### *Shackleton Engineering Company site at Reddish, 1979–1980*

In 1979–1980, 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. Only below-ground remains survived. The results were summarised by the Greater Manchester Archaeological Unit (Tindall 1982: 6). A section through the earthwork revealed no bank, which he interpreted as having been removed by extensive twentieth-century disturbance, 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. This confirmed the presence of a ditch running east-west in this area as seen on the OS 6 Inch to 1 mile first edition map (published 1848, Lancashire Sheet 105).

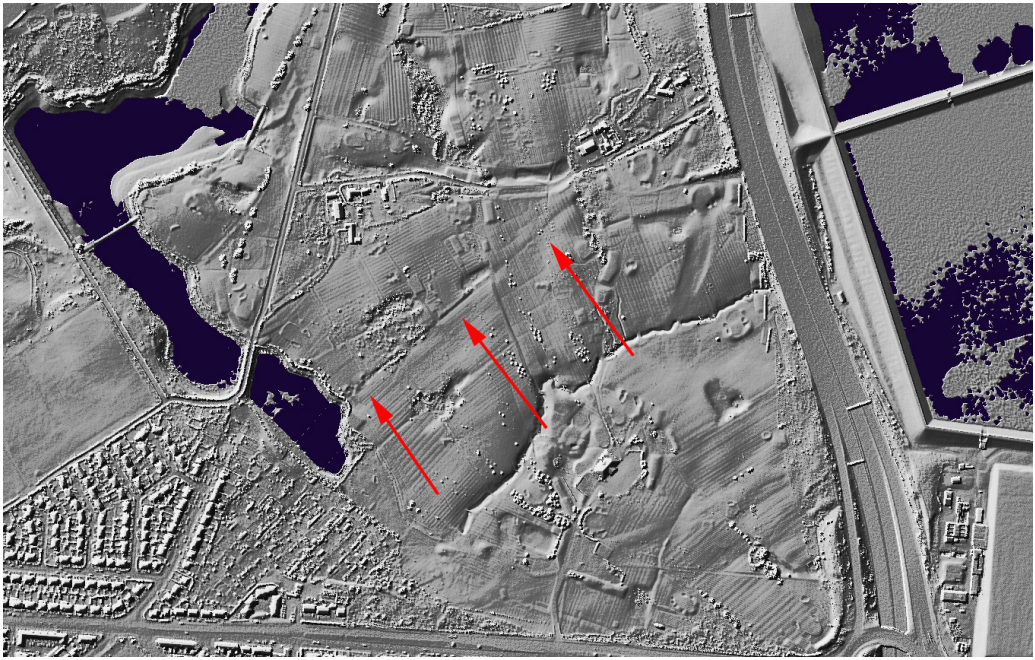


Figure 8: The 1m LIDAR data from 2021 showing the surviving shallow earthwork of Nico Ditch (arrowed) across Denton Golf Course (N upwards)

*Kenwood Road, North Reddish, 1990 (Figures (9 and 10))*

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) (Nevell 1992: 82). Only below ground remains survived. 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 nineteenth or twentieth century date (GMAU 1990). The work confirmed the presence of a ditch running east-west in this area as seen on the OS 6 Inch to 1 mile first edition map (published 1848, Lancashire Sheet 105).

*Park Grove, Levenshulme, 1992 (Figures 9 and 11)*

In January 1992 two sections were cut across the line of Nico Ditch at Park Grove, Levenshulme (SJ 8723 9468) by GMAU, as seen on the OS 6 Inch to 1 mile first edition map (published 1848, Lancashire Sheet 105). Only below ground remains survived. These were badly damaged by a twentieth-century culvert, which meant that the depth

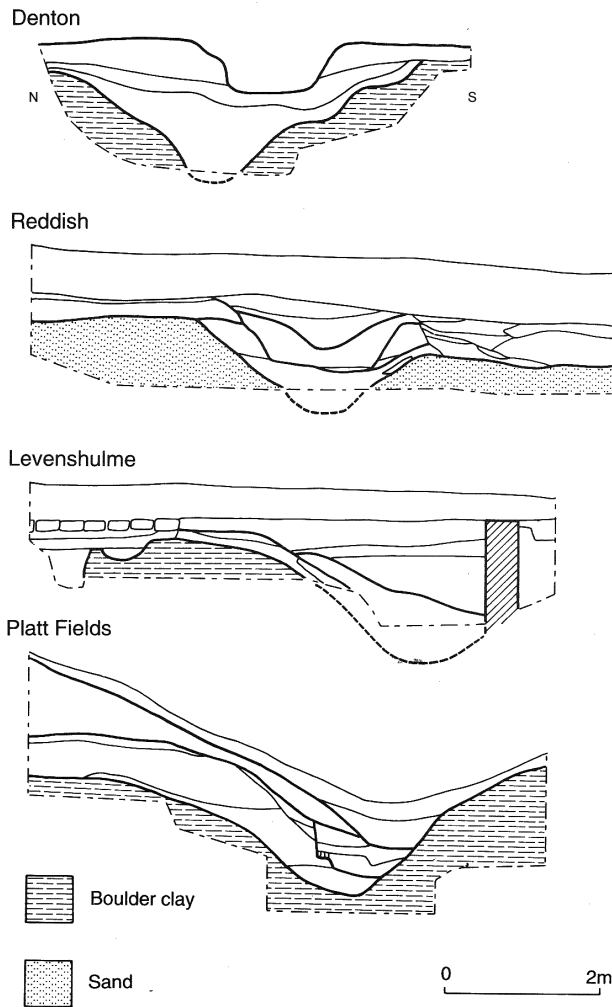


Figure 9: East facing sections across Nico Ditch as excavated in 1996 (Denton Golf Course), 1990 (Kenwood Road, North Reddish), 1992 (Park Grove, Levenshulme) and 1997 (Platt Fields) (Drawings: Michael Nevell, 2023)

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). There was no evidence for a bank.

#### *Audenshaw Lodge, Denton, 1996 (Figure 12)*

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. Only below ground remains survived. 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 twentieth-century material close to the bottom of the ditch indicating that it had



Figure 10: The excavation of Nico Ditch at Kenwood Road, North Reddish in 1990 by the Greater Manchester Archaeological Unit. (Image courtesy of the Greater Manchester Archaeological Advisory Service)

been recently re cut (UMAU 1996: 4–5). There was no evidence for a bank, but the work did confirm the presence of a ditch running south-west to north-east in this area as seen on the OS 6 Inch to 1 mile first edition map (published 1848, Lancashire Sheet 105).

*Platt Fields, Fallowfield, 1997 (Figures 9 and 13)*

Platt Fields Chapel, Fallowfield, Manchester (SJ 8550 9445) has one of the two best sections of the Nico Ditch to survive as an earthwork (hence its scheduling as an ancient monument), and lies at the traditional western end of the monument near Hough Moss. In January and February 1997, the University of Manchester Archaeological Unit excavated a single trench across the monument 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. 280m. 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 nineteenth 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: the existing bank to the north of the ditch was shown to be twentieth century in origin. However, the work did confirm the presence of a ditch running south-west-to north-east in this area as seen on the OS 6 Inch to 1 mile first edition map (published 1848, Lancashire Sheet 105).



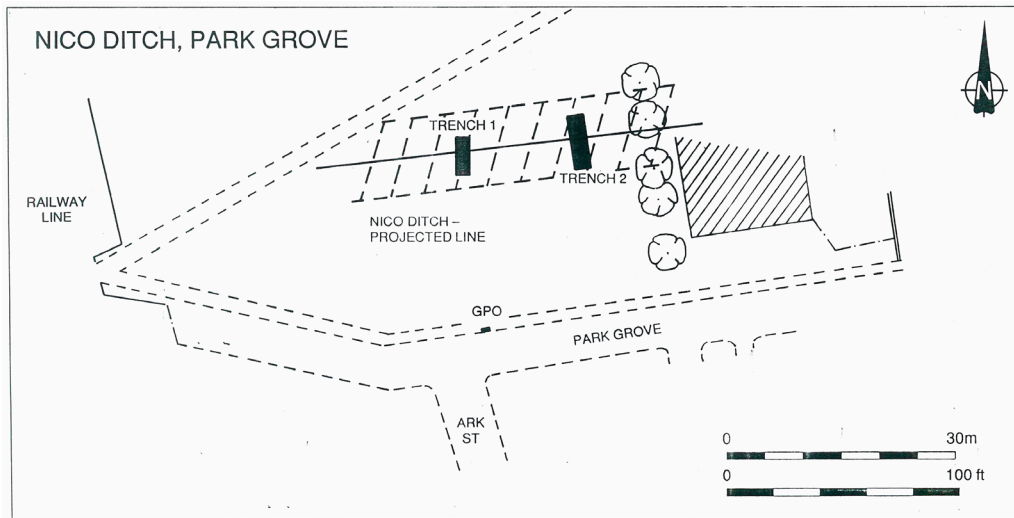


Figure 11: Plan of the 1992 excavation of Nico Ditch at Levenshulme by the Greater Manchester Archaeological Unit. (Image courtesy of the Greater Manchester Archaeological Advisory Service)

#### *Melland Playing Field, Gorton, 2008*

In 2008, a surviving earthwork stretch of Nico Ditch was investigated during drainage works in Gorton (UMAU 2008). The ditch ran along the southern side of Melland Playing Field (centred on 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. No bank was recorded, but the work did confirm the presence of a ditch running west– east in this area as seen on the OS 6 Inch to 1 mile first edition map (published 1848, Lancashire Sheet 105).

#### *Audenshaw Barn, Denton, 2013*

In 2013, an archaeological watching brief was undertaken on the line of Nico Ditch during building work within Audenshaw Barn, on Denton Golf Course (SJ 9075 9634) (TAS 2013). This work was conducted by the Tameside Archaeological Society (TAS), on the alignment of Nico Ditch as shown on OS 6 Inch to 1 mile first edition map (published 1848, Lancashire Sheet 105). TAS 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, possibly because of the shallow nature of the excavations.

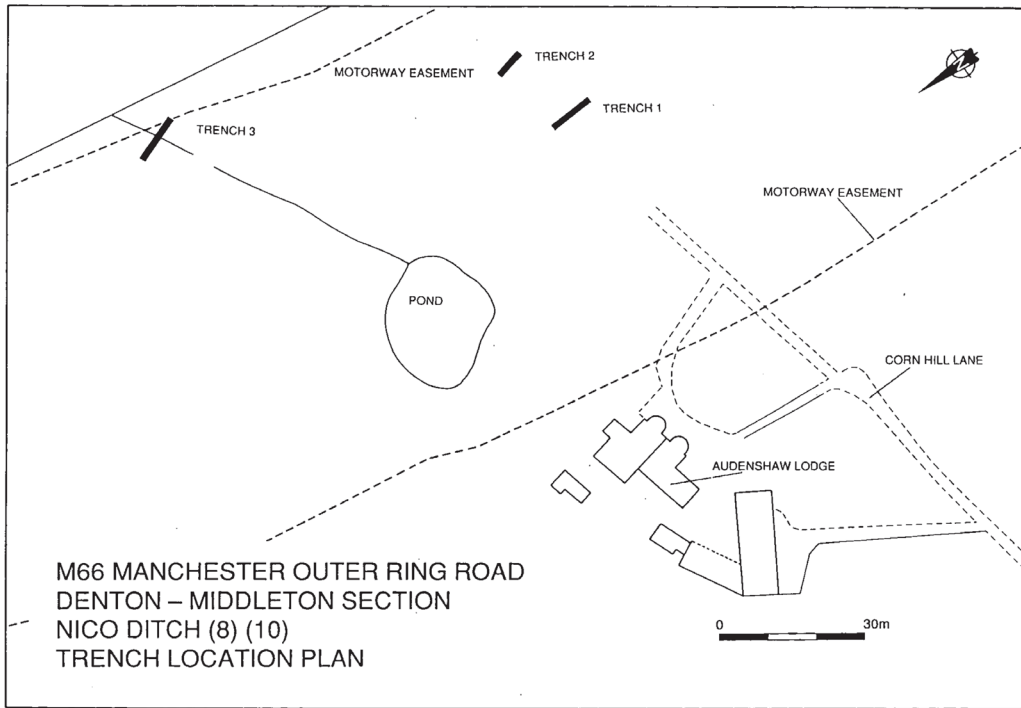


Figure 12: Plan of the 1996 excavations of Nico Ditch at Audenshaw Lode, Denton Gold Course. The Nico Ditch alignment runs through trenches 1 and 2, by the University of Manchester Archaeological Unit. (Image courtesy of the Greater Manchester Archaeological Advisory Service)

#### *Longford Park, Stretford, 2014*

The only archaeological excavations on the Hough Moss to Longford Park/Chester Road alignment of Nico Ditch, as recorded on the OS 6 Inch to 1 mile map of Lancashire (published in 1848, Sheet 105). This research was undertaken by University of Salford archaeologists working on the Dig Greater Manchester community archaeology project in Longford Park in 2014 (CfAA 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 test pits (1m by 1m) on the projected line of the ditch within the park. These were located in former fields immediately west of the Ryebank Fields earthwork (Figure 14) in an area landscaped as part of the park in the early twentieth 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 landscaping in the early twentieth century, was uncovered. This was due to the extensive ground disturbance encountered. However, LIDAR data from 2019 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 shown on the 1848 OS map (Figure 15).



Figure 13: The excavations of Nico Ditch at Platt Fields in 1997, by the University of Manchester Archaeological Unit. (Image courtesy of the Greater Manchester Archaeological Advisory Service)

### Conclusion: function and date

The original function and date of Nico Ditch have long puzzled scholars. 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. Since the 1880s 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 suggestion that Nico Ditch was constructed for the purpose of drainage was first put forward by Esdaile, who noticed that the drainage of the ditch from east to west, starting at a height of 98m AOD on the edge of Ashton Moss and falling to 34m





Figure 14: The surviving earthworks associated on the alignment of Nico Ditch at Ryebanks Fields on the Streford/Chorlton border in February 2020 (Photograph: Michael Nevell, 2023)

AOD where it joins Gorebrook in Platt Fields (Esdaile 1892: 219). This theory was later discredited by H.T. 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 (H.T. Crofton 1905: 156). The course of the ditch also avoids the main local streams, and while sections across Ashton Moss in the east and Streford Moss in the west may have been dug for drainage these appear to be later additions to the original alignment which terminated at the edge of the moss.

The role of Nico Ditch as an agricultural boundary was first put forward by H T Crofton who suggested that the ditch was related to Roman centuriation, or land division, south-east of the fort at Castlefield in Manchester, between the River Medlock in the north and the River Mersey in the south (H.T. Crofton 1905: 158). This suggestion was revived by Richardson in the late twentieth century (Richardson 1986: 44). Since his work regular Roman land divisions have been identified around Chester at Saighton Camp (Wood 2016) and in the Manchester city region at Barton in Salford (Philpott 2023: 88–96). However, in connecting Nico Ditch to this centuriation Richardson overlooked the fact that a number of his projected Roman land divisions are cut by the ditch's course, in which case it would have to be of post-Roman date.

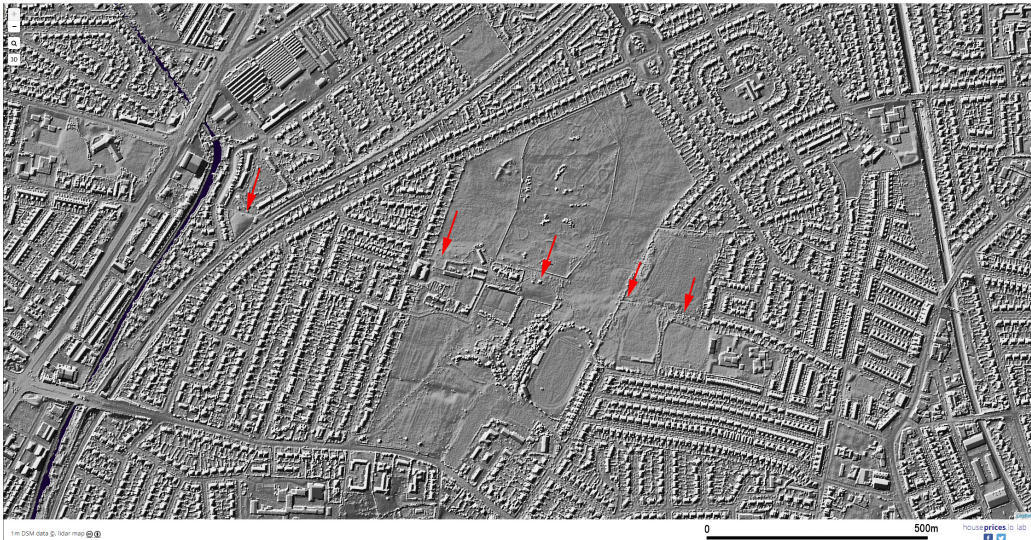


Figure 15: The line of Nico Ditch through Ryebanks Fields and Longford Park, Stretford, can be seen as shallow earthwork at several points (red arrows) on this LiDAR scan from 2021. Data Source: National Libraries Scotland, resolution 1m (N upwards)

The evidence for an administrative function is largely based on the coincidence of the Nico Ditch with a number of early parish, township, and estate boundaries, the ditch presumably being used as a convenient linear landmark (H.T. Crofton 1905: 139–142). 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 twelfth 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: 78). 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 mid-nineteenth-century folklore explanation of the earthwork's origin is that it was created in a single night by the Anglo-Saxon inhabitants of Manchester as protection against the Danish invaders of AD 869–870 (A. Crofton 1885: 190; H.T. Crofton 1905: 155–156; Harland and Wilkinson 1867). A possible context for its construction as a defensive feature has been suggested as the repair and manning of the burh at Manchester in AD 919, as reported in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, as part of the reconquest of the Danish areas of eastern and northern England by the kingdom of Wessex (Connor *et al.* 1991: 7). If



Nico Ditch was contemporary with this event, it would have enclosed the southern hinterland of the burh, although there are no other examples of such outworks around or close to a Saxon burh, cutting the route of three Roman roads (to Chester – Margary 71, Buxton – Margary 71b, and Melandra – Margary 711), routes that continued in use in the post-Roman period (Connor *et al.* 1991: 7; Kenyon 1991: 78). However, the absence of a confirmed bank along most of its length argues against its use as a defensive feature, although a use as some form of territorial marker is a possibility.

The location of the termini of Nico Ditch is crucial to any assessment of the archaeological context of the 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, marking the line of the Roman road between Manchester and Chester through Stretford (Margary 7a). 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 and by a comparison of both alignments with the distribution of historic mosslands in Greater Manchester (Hall *et al.* 1995).

Such a discontinuous boundary monument is a feature of many early medieval boundary markers, such as Grey Ditch in Derbyshire (Wild 1967), Grim's Ditch in Oxfordshire (Malim 2020), Offa's Dyke (Williams 2023), and Wat's Dyke (Williams 2021). Many early medieval boundary monuments consisted of a single bank and flanking ditch but they each vary considerably in their form and dimensions depending upon local topography. Evidence from contemporary documentary sources, excavation, and survey suggests that they were constructed in the early medieval period between the fifth and eighth centuries AD (Garland *et al.* 2021). The origin of Nico Ditch is likely as one of these landscape monuments, although in the absence of secure dates from intact early ditch deposits, this cannot be conclusively proved. If Nico Ditch can be interpreted as a territorial marker built during the early medieval period, then the context for this might be as a boundary marker between the kingdoms of Northumbria and Mercia. Perhaps it was constructed at the time when those kingdoms were at odds with each other under the kings Edwin and Oswald of Northumbria and Penda of Mercia in the mid-seventh century. Nico Ditch is the only early medieval linear monument so far identified in North West England. Furthermore, its relationship to the building of Offa's Dyke and Watt's Dyke has yet to be explored. Such analysis might form a useful next stage of research in the exploration of the wider context of this monument.

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