

***A watching brief at the
Birchmeadow Centre, Broseley,
Shropshire, 2010***

by
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Shropshire
Council

**A WATCHING BRIEF AT THE
BIRCHMEADOW CENTRE, BROSELEY,
SHROPSHIRE, 2010**

by
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A Report for
Broseley Town Council

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CONTENTS

	Page No
SUMMARY	1
1 INTRODUCTION	2
2 ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND	2
3 THE WATCHING BRIEF	3
4 DISCUSSION	4
5 REFERENCES	5

ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1: The location of the study area

Figure 2: The Birchmeadow Centre

Figure 3: Plan view, showing the location of the pump trench and burials; scale 1:100

Figure 4: Burials 7 and 9, plan view; scale 1:20

Figure 5: Burial 11, plan view; scale 1:20

Figure 6: Burial 14, plan view; scale 1:20

Table 1: Context summary

PHOTOS

Photo 1: The Birchmeadow Centre

Photo 2: Burial 7

Photo 3: Burial 11

Photo 4: Burial 14

SUMMARY

The Birchmeadow Centre, Broseley, Shropshire is located on the site of a former 19th century Baptist chapel and burial ground. The centre buildings incorporate the remains of the former chapel. In 2010 renovation work was carried out on the centre. This work involved the excavation of a number of drainage trenches in the car park on the west side of the centre, the site of the former burial ground. In the course of this work human remains were found. An analysis and report on this initial find was carried out by Teresa Gilmore, Finds Recording Assistant-Headley Trust at the Shropshire Museum Service. A watching brief was carried out by the Archaeology Service on the remaining excavations for the new drains. The partial remains of four skeletons were revealed and lifted. One of these was the upper half of the original find. The top of the skull of a fifth burial was revealed in the base of the contractor's excavations, but was left in situ.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Broseley is situated in east Shropshire on the south side of the River Severn about 7km south-southwest of Telford town centre. The Birchmeadow Centre in Broseley Shropshire is located on the site of a former 19th century Baptist chapel and burial ground.

1.2 In 2010 renovation work was carried out on the centre. This work involved the excavation of a number of drainage trenches in the car park on the west side of the centre, the site of the former burial ground. In the course of this work human remains were found. An analysis and report on this initial find was carried out by Teresa Gilmore, Finds Recording Assistant-Headley Trust at the Shropshire Museum Service (Gilmore, 2010).

1.3 A licence for the removal of human remains was obtained from the Ministry of Justice (Licence No. 10-0156) and the Archaeology Service, Shropshire Council, was commissioned by Pleydell Smithyman Ltd on behalf of Broseley Town Council to carry out an archaeological watching brief on the excavation of the remaining drainage works. The work was carried out between 22nd – 24th September 2010.

2 ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 Nonconformity in Broseley can be traced back to the Commonwealth period, and there are records of Quakers living in Broseley in 1660. By c. 1800 there were apparently flourishing Baptist and Wesleyan societies in the town. A chapel for Particular Baptists was built in 1741 in what became known as Chapel Lane. Following a dispute between the members in c. 1801, a separate chapel was opened at Birch Meadow. The Birchmeadow Baptist Chapel was built in 1803 jointly by John Guest (of the GKN steel company) and George Crompton (a draper). The chapel had 100 free and 250 paid seats, and on the Census Sunday in 1851 the morning service was attended by 90 adults, the evening service by 120. As at the Old Baptist chapel in Chapel Lane, numbers attending the Birchmeadow chapel declined in the later 19th century, when Calvinism was preached, and there were just 33 members in 1872. The chapel went out of use as a religious house in c. 1927, and the burial ground was (supposedly) cleared shortly afterwards. The chapel building has seen other uses since being decommissioned, including use as the Elite Cinema, a night-club, and sports club. During WW2 it was used by the local ARP and Home Guard. The chapel is now a community centre owned by Broseley Town Council. (Currie *et al*, 1998; Gilmore, 2010; Cox, 2008)

3 THE WATCHING BRIEF

3.1 In September 2010, following the initial discovery of human remains on the Birchmeadow site, a watching brief was carried out by the Archaeology Service on the remaining excavations for the new drains and a pit for a pumping machine adjacent to the road frontage. It was in the course of the excavation for the pump that the first human remains had been encountered prior to the watching brief.

3.2 The contractor's trench was excavated through the existing yard surface (2) of dark grey chippings and sand over a layer of orange sand (3), and through a buried disturbed dark grey silty loam (4) 0.2m thick, representing a buried yard soil. This lay over a deposit over 1m thick of a buff to light yellowish grey clay (5), which had clearly been disturbed or re-deposited. The nature of the excavations however prevented identification of the cuts for individual features within this deposit. The remains (Figure 4 & Photo 2; 7) of the burial found earlier in the drainage work lay within this clay deposit. The remains were contained in a thin lens of dark brown sandy silt (6) – probably the decayed remains of a coffin - at the bottom of a grave (8) cut into the clay deposit. The remains of the burial were excavated, recorded, and lifted by hand, and bagged. Only the upper half of the skeleton from above the pelvis survived, though some of the lower parts (24) had been retrieved earlier by the building contractor and sent to Ludlow MRC for identification (Gilmore, 2010). The remains were those of a young child of about 5 years old.

3.3 To the west were the remains of a brick burial vault (Figure 3; 21). The roof was originally barrel-vaulted with a rectangular opening. The vault was filled with rubble and loose soil, and part of the top of the roof, the rectangular opening, and a cast iron cover-plate, had collapsed into the vault, confirming perhaps that the burial ground had at least been partially cleared in the past. Part of the northeast wall of the vault was removed, but the back-fill of the vault was not re-excavated. The excavation then revealed a second burial, alongside the outer face of the northeast wall of the vault. The lower half and right side of the burial had been disturbed by the construction of the vault, and had been further disturbed by the drainage work prior to the watching brief. Some of the leg bones of this burial survived disturbed and disarticulated in a mixed deposit of buff clay (Figure 4; 12). The remainder of the skeleton (Figure 4; 9) were in a deposit of clay with some organic sandy silt (8) in the base of the grave cut (20). The bones were in a poor condition, but from their size suggested they were of an adult. The fill (8) also contained a pair of very corroded iron coffin handles on either side of the skeleton.

3.4 The lower half of the cut for this burial had cut through the upper part of an earlier burial. This burial (Figure 5 & Photo 3; 11) lay within a fill of buff to light brown clay (10) with a lens of brown sandy silt which contained the skeleton. This skeleton was complete apart from the feet (which lay beyond the excavated area), and again was of a young child, again probably of about 90cms – 95cms height and about 3 – 5 years of age. Some very corroded iron coffin handles again were the only finds associated with this burial.

3.5 The cut (22) for this burial cut the buff – yellowish grey clay fill (13) for another lower and earlier burial (Figure 6 and Photo4; 14). This burial again lay within a thin lens of brown sandy silt at the bottom of the grave cut (15). This burial was probably that of an adult female of perhaps about 135cms – 140cms height, though again as the lower parts of the leg from above the knees lay beyond the excavated area this is only a very approximate estimate. Two small circular patches of copper alloy fragments lay beside the spine at the centre of the chest and at the neck of the skeleton, presumably the remains of buttons.

3.6 The clay into which this grave had been cut appeared to be the undisturbed natural clay (19) subsoil. However, as this was excavated, the top of the skull of yet another burial (17) was revealed at the base of the southeast edge of the excavated area. As this lay slightly below the contractor's required depth excavation ceased here, and this burial was re-covered and not excavated or recorded further.

3.7 The excavations for the remainder of the drains beneath the car park did not penetrate below the disturbed yard soil, and no further human remains or other significant archaeological features were encountered.

3.8 The human remains have been returned to Broseley Town Council for re-burial. The remainder of the site archive will be deposited with the Shropshire Museum Service.

4 DISCUSSION

4.1 Four incomplete burials were recorded and removed for re-burial during the course of the watching brief. All the burials were compressed by the heavy clay which formed the back-fill of the grave cuts, and the bones were mostly in a fragmentary condition. All the burials had traces of what appeared to be the remains of wooden coffins in the form of a lens of brown sandy silt. Two of the burials had associated iron coffin handles, of 19th century pattern. The skeletons represented the remains of two adults, and two children. A fifth burial, encountered at the base of the excavated area, was not removed.

4.2 The burial whose discovery occasioned the watching brief lay slightly to the west of the other burials. These (including the one left *in situ*) lay one above the other. The insertion of a burial vault of later 19th century brick cut the latest of these, which had also been disturbed by other unidentified groundworks. This sequence and the associated finds suggest that all the burials encountered were of early to mid 19th-century date, the period when the congregation of the Birchmeadow chapel was at its height.

Ref. no. in report	Site Context	Category	Finds
1	1001	Unstratified finds	Disarticulated bone
2	1002	(Yard) surface	
3	1003	Layer	
4	1004	Layer	
5	1005	Layer	
6	1006	Fill	
7	1007	Skeleton	
8	1008	Fill	Fe coffin handles
9	1009	Skeleton	
10	1010	Fill	Fe coffin handles
11	1011	Skeleton	
12	1012	Layer	Disarticulated bone
13	1013	Fill	
14	1014	Skeleton	
15	1015	Grave	
16	1016	Fill	
17	1017	Skeleton	
18	1018	Grave	
19	1019	Layer (natural)	
20	1020	Grave	
21	1021	Vault	
22	1022	Grave	
23	1023	Grave	
24	1024	Skeleton	

Table 1: Context summary

5 REFERENCES

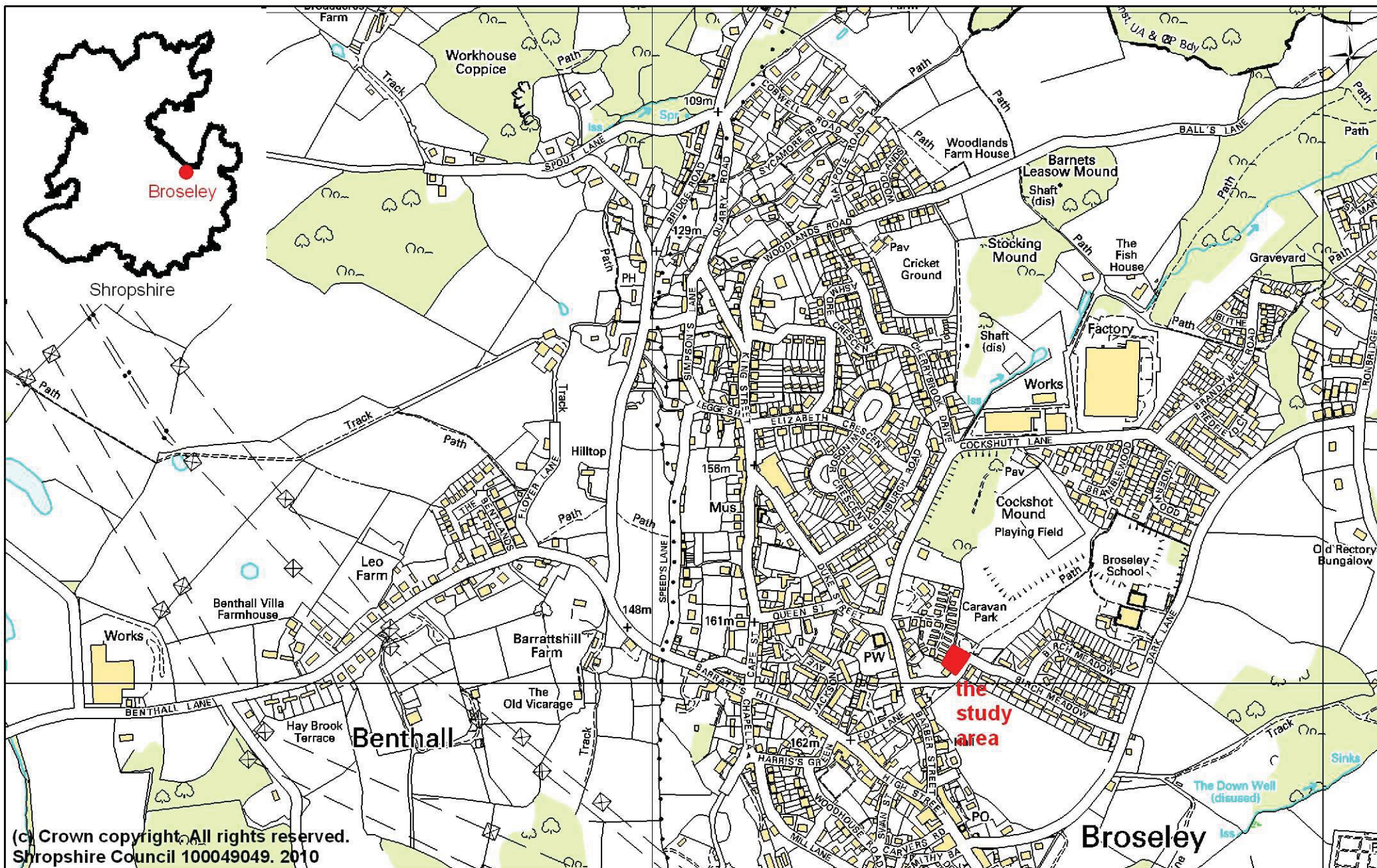
Cox J, 2008: *Shropshire's Nonconformist Chapels*, www.users.waitrose.com/~coxfamily/index.html

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ABBREVIATIONS

ASSC	Archaeology Service, Shropshire Council
CBA	Council for British Archaeology
HER	Historic Environment Record, Shropshire Council
OS	Ordnance Survey
PRO	Public Record Office
SA	Shropshire Archives, Castle Gates, Shrewsbury
TSAHS	Transactions of the Shropshire Archaeological and Historical Society
TSAS	Transactions of the Shropshire Archaeological Society
VCHS	Victoria County History (Shropshire)



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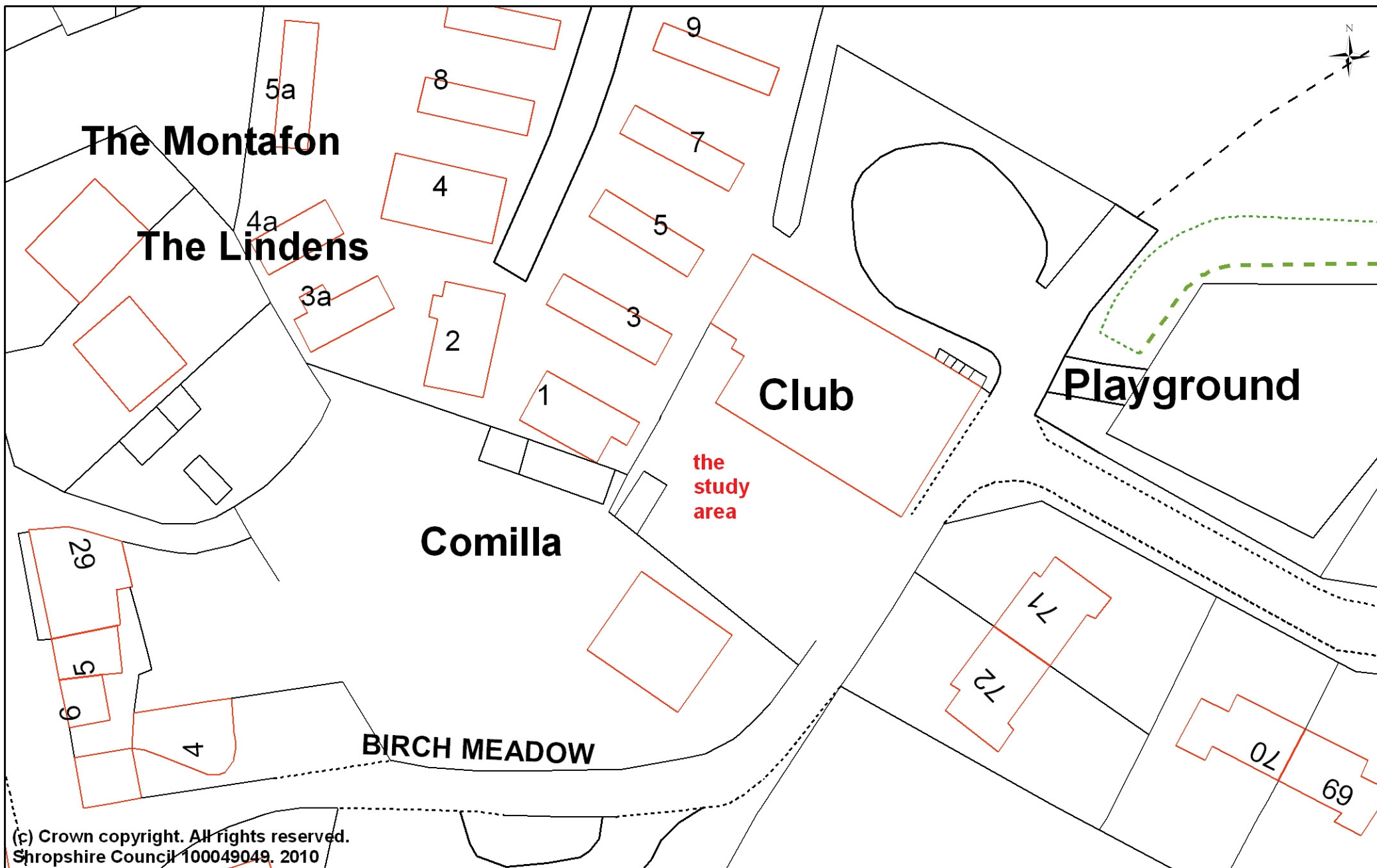
The Birchmeadow Centre, Broseley 2010

Figure 1: The location of the study area

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Scale: 1:7,500



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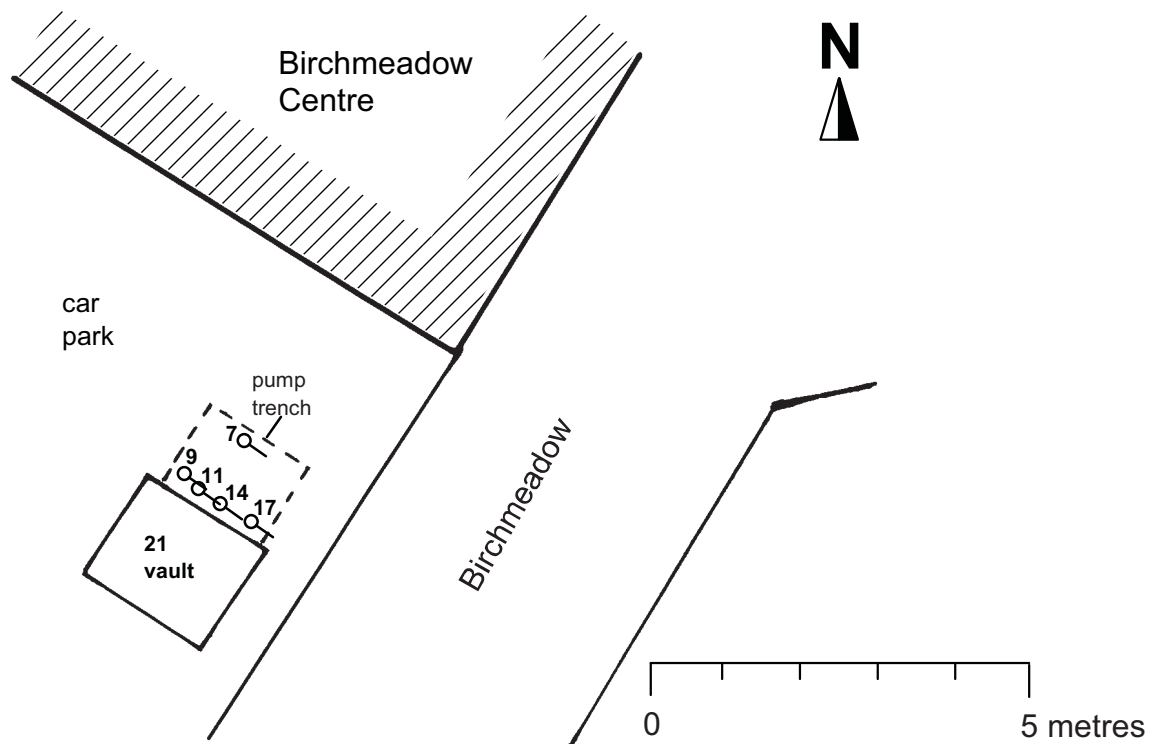


Figure 3: Plan view, showing the location of the pump trench and burials; scale 1:100

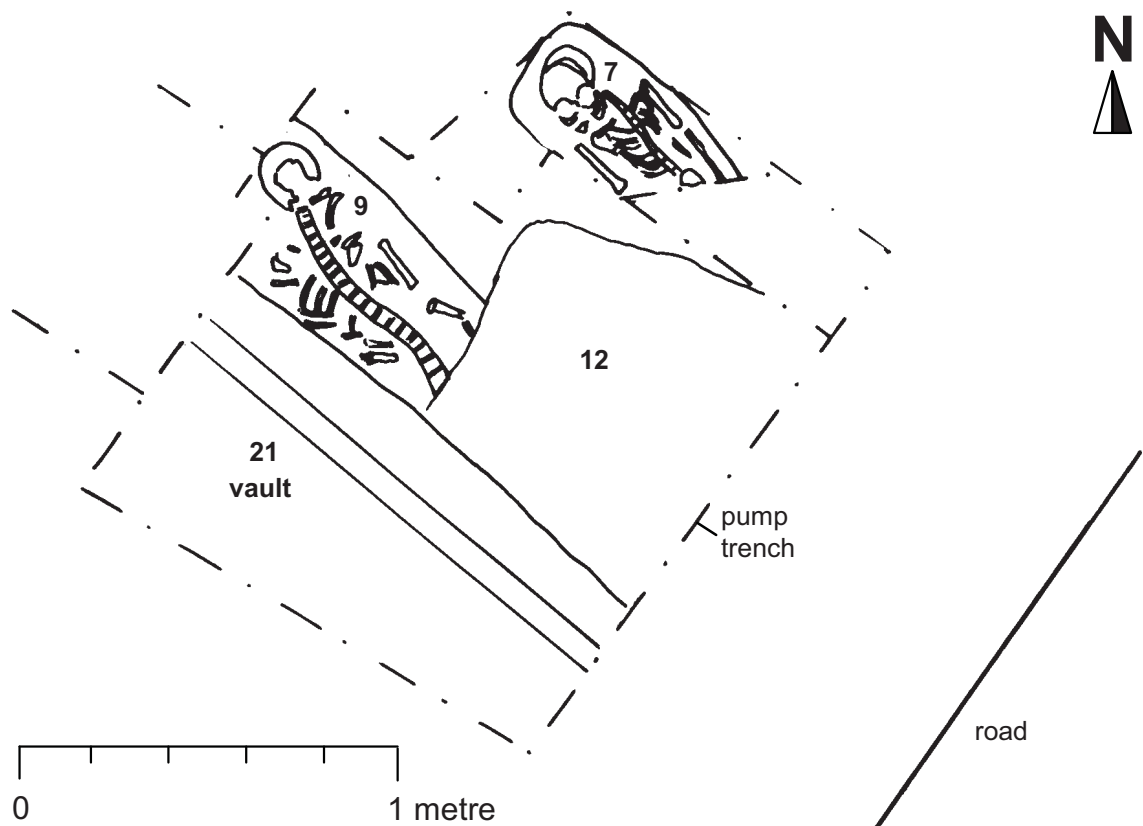


Figure 4: Burials 7 and 9, plan view; scale 1:20

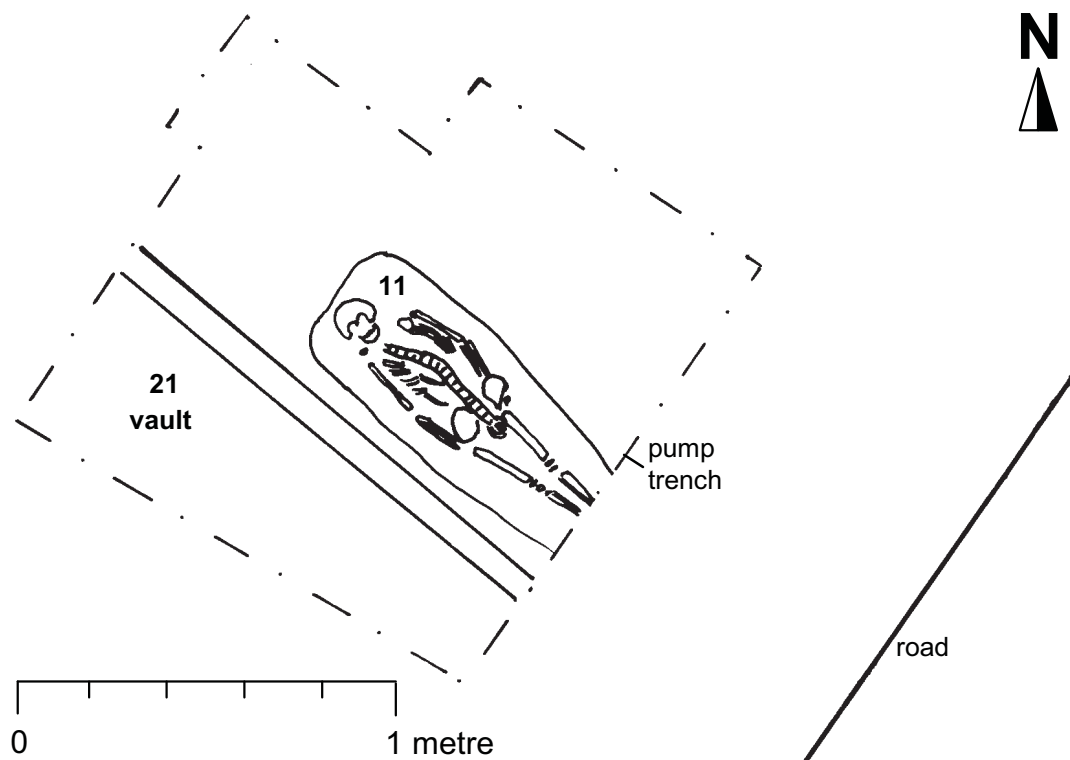


Figure 5: Burial 11, plan view; scale 1:20

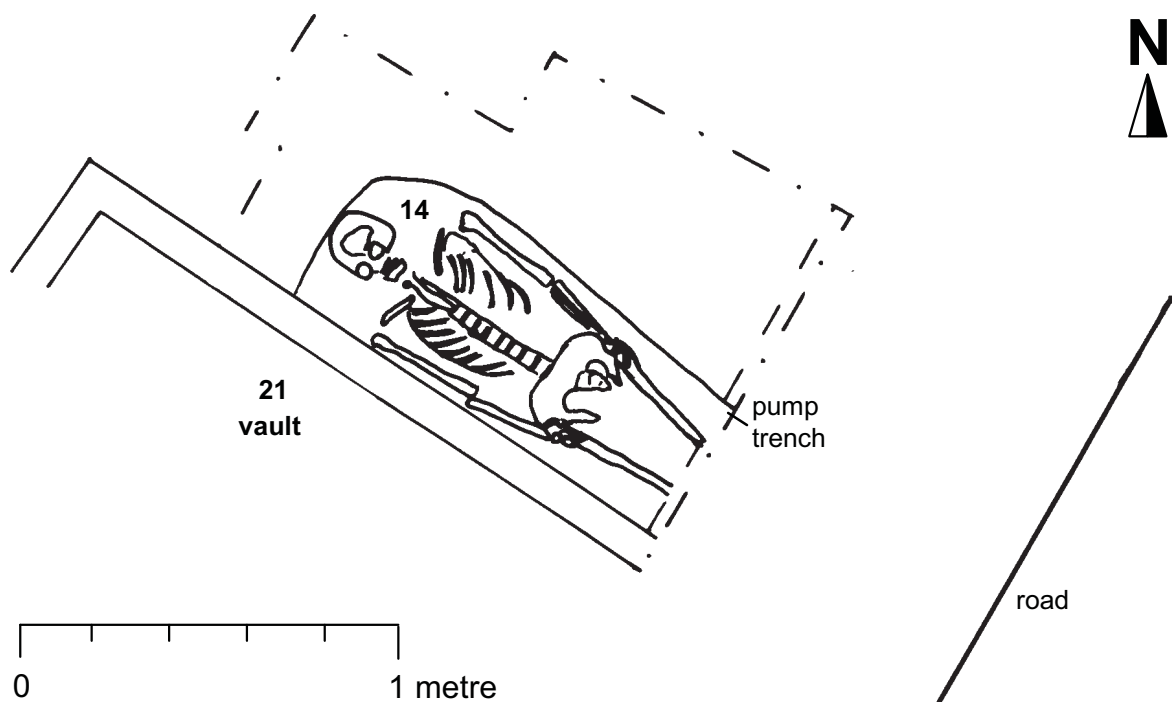


Figure 6: Burial 14, plan view; scale 1:20

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Photo 1: The Birchmeadow Centre



Photo 2: Burial 7



Photo 3: Burial 11



Photo 4: Burial 14

The Birchmeadow Centre, Broseley 2010