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The Woodlands, Middleton Road, Oswestry  
Adjacent to Wat's Dyke

Results of an Archaeological Evaluation

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The investigation was designed and directed by Tim Malim (SLR). Fieldwork was undertaken by Tom Wellicome (Archaeological Landscape Investigation) and Mark Swain (SLR Consulting).

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## **1.0 SUMMARY**

In May 2012 two trenches were excavated at The Woodlands, Middleton Road, Oswestry (NGR SJ 2965 2949) to evaluate the archaeological potential of the site prior to a planning application for residential development. The western side of the application area runs adjacent to a scheduled monument which forms part of the 63km long bank and ditch earthwork known as Wat's Dyke.

The trenches demonstrated that the bank of Wat's Dyke does not continue east into the proposed area of development, and that the highest part of the site at 122m AOD had been subjected to modern disturbance. The northern most trench was excavated through re-deposited material which had been built up into a bank the same height as Wat's Dyke, presumably as part of garden construction associated with The Woodlands when it had been a private house.

The results from this site investigation have demonstrated the absence of archaeological remains preserved within the area of the trenches opened.

## **2.0 INTRODUCTION**

### **2.1 Purpose of document**

This document contains a report on the results of an archaeological site investigation. It is to be submitted as a supplementary statement in support of a planning application for residential development.

### **2.2 Planning background**

Under the National Planning Policy Framework<sup>1</sup> an assessment is required to be submitted by the applicant to inform the planning authority on the potential impacts of the scheme on the setting of a scheduled monument and the physical impact on any surviving buried remains within the property. Scheduled monument number 33876 *Wat's Dyke: 375m long section immediately south of Middleton Road and west of Laburnum Drive*, forms the western boundary to the property.

### **2.3 Scheme design**

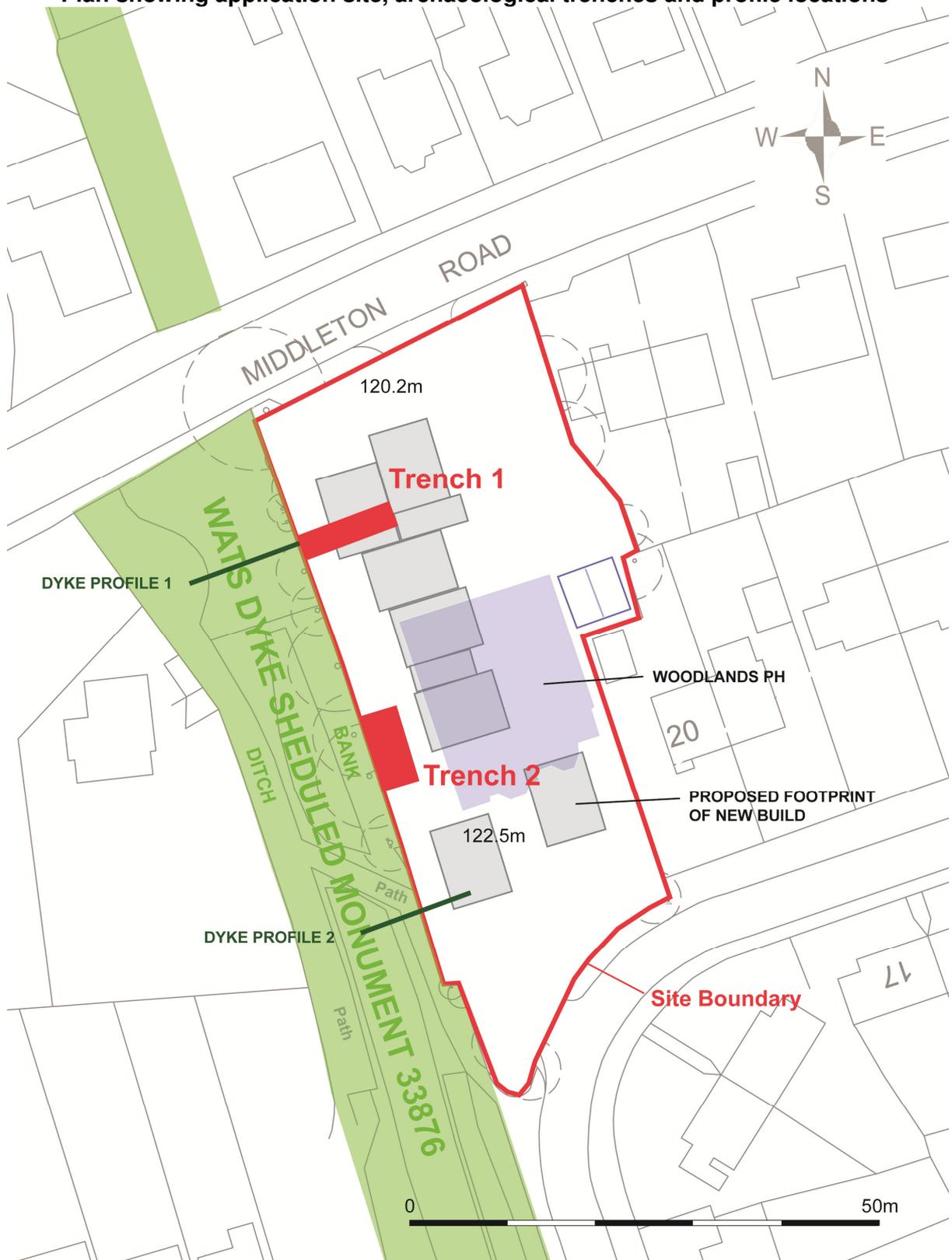
The development comprises demolition of The Woodlands public house and construction of a five unit apartment block within the north-western part of the site, and two detached houses within the southern part. These works will include ground disturbance for foundations and service trenches, and thus potential damage to any buried archaeological remains.

The footprint of the proposed new build is shown in Figure 1.

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<sup>1</sup> The NPPF introduced in March 2012 states the relevant government policy in section 12: *Conserving and enhancing the historic environment*, paragraphs 126 – 141.

**Figure 1**  
**Plan showing application site, archaeological trenches and profile locations**



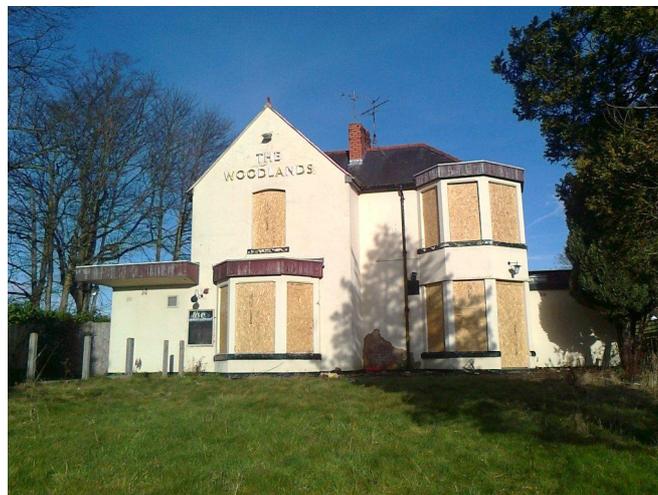
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### 3.0 SITE LOCATION AND DESCRIPTION

#### 3.1 Location and land use

The property is situated off both Middleton Road (to the north) and Laburnum Drive (to the south) in a part of Oswestry largely developed as housing estates during the post-war period (NGR SJ 2965 2949). The western boundary is formed by a bank above a footpath, and to the east lie residential properties. At present the northern part of the site is an asphalt car park, whilst that part south of the public house is part grass and part hard surface access. The centre of the site contains a Victorian house (post 1875 as it is not shown on the 1<sup>st</sup> edition OS map) which has been used as The Woodlands public house for many years (Figure 2), and a small back yard occupies the area west of this building, between it and the western boundary of the property.

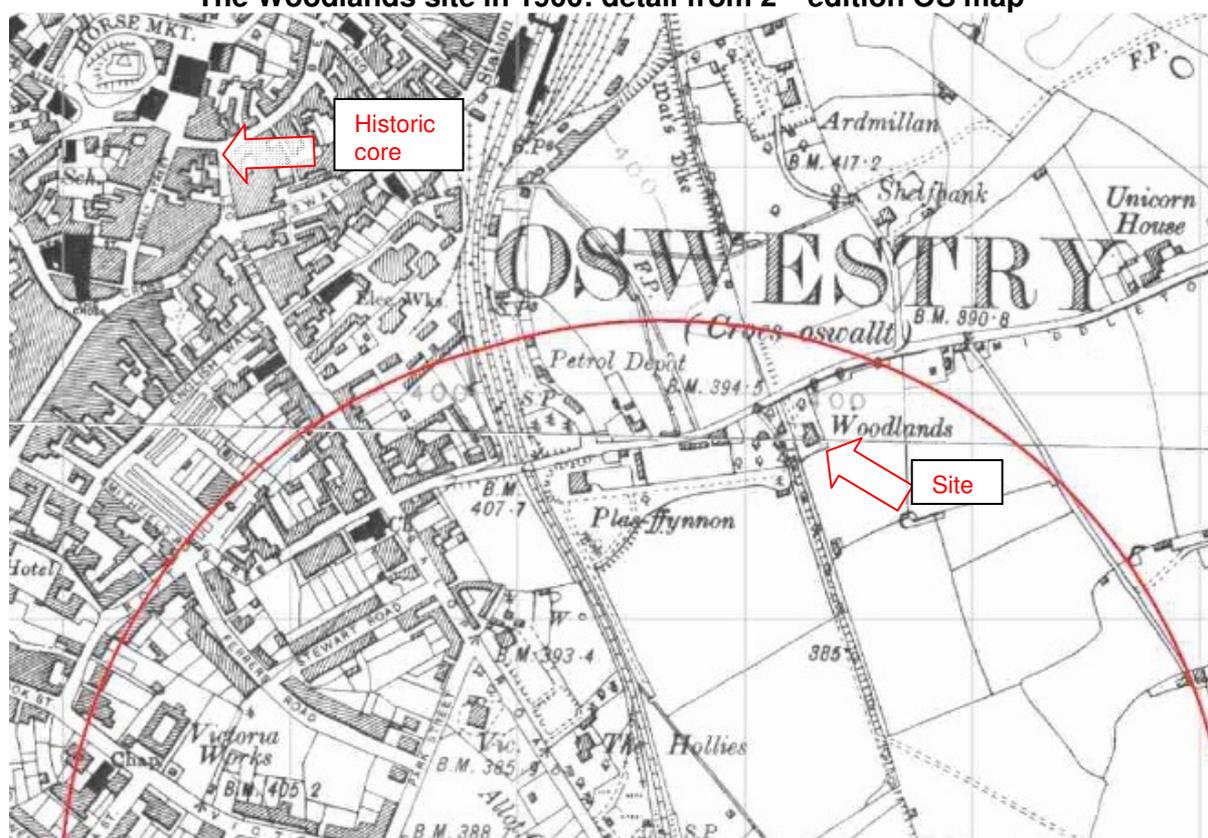
**Figure 2**  
**The Woodlands, southern elevation**



#### 3.2 Geology and topography

The site is located on Glacial Till, overlying red sandstone of the Erbistock Formation. The land rises from both Middleton Road and Laburnum Drive to form a local high point or knoll on which the pub has been situated.

**Figure 3**  
**The Woodlands site in 1900: detail from 2<sup>nd</sup> edition OS map**



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### 3.3 Archaeological background

The site lies 0.5km southeast of the historic core of Oswestry (Figure 3), but is adjacent to the north-west south-east aligned Wat's Dyke, a Mercian boundary created by a bank and ditched earthwork. This monument runs for 63km from Maesbury to Holywell on the Dee Estuary and has been dated at Gobowen to the early 9<sup>th</sup> century AD<sup>2</sup>. To the south, in the industrial estate at Mile Oak, previous excavations had obtained a radiocarbon date from a hearth sealed by the bank, which gave a wide range for its construction, from 268 – 630 cal AD<sup>3</sup>.

The location of the site adjacent to a scheduled section of Wat's Dyke is of added interest due to the proximity of an ancient route which came from Middleton, through Llwyd to Oswestry, from which Middleton Road has originated. A crossing point or access through Wat's Dyke could have existed immediately north of the application site, and the raised nature of the landform in this location would have made an ideal position for a strong-point along the Dyke, enabling views westwards whilst also controlling access along the routeway.

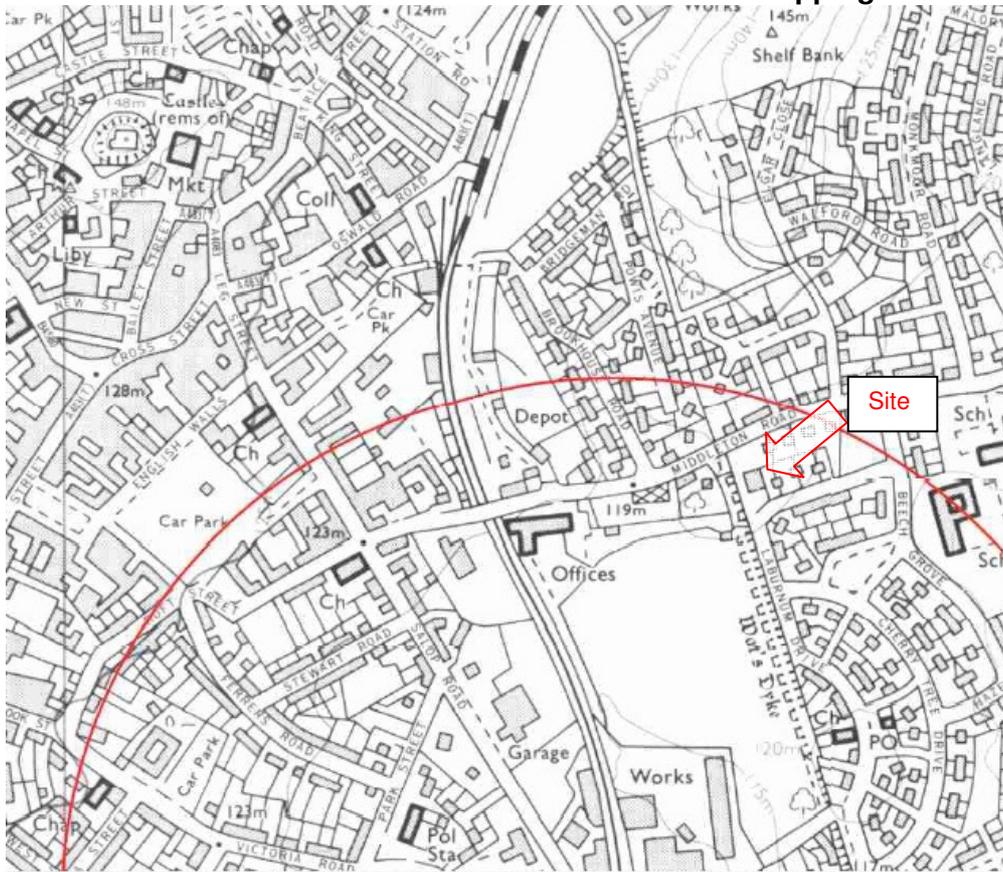
Even though the area has been extensively built upon in post-war years to accommodate waves of housing expansion (Figure 4), Wat's Dyke has survived as a footpath and property

<sup>2</sup> Malim T and Hayes L 2008 the Date and Nature of Wat's Dyke: a reassessment in the light of recent investigations at Gobowen, *Shropshire Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History Volume 15*, p.147-179

<sup>3</sup> Hannaford H 1998 An Excavation on Wat's Dyke at Mile oak, Oswestry, *Shropshire Transactions of the Shropshire Archaeological and Historical Society Volume 73*

boundary connecting Old Oswestry hillfort to the north with the Mile Oak industrial estate south of the B4579 and beyond.

**Figure 4**  
**The Woodlands site in 1977: detail from OS mapping**



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## **4.0 AIMS AND METHODOLOGY**

### **4.1 Aim**

The aim of the site investigation was to characterize the nature, date, extent and condition of preservation of any archaeological remains within the site, particularly those relating to Wat's Dyke and any associated features.

### **4.2 Trial trenching and test pitting**

#### ***4.2.1 Strategy and general approach***

Targeted trenching of the area closest to Wat's Dyke, rather than blind sampling of the whole development area, was agreed with Shropshire Council's Archaeological Advisor since this approach focused on the area of greatest sensitivity.

Two trenches were excavated, one towards the northern end of the site where an upstanding bank is visible, and the second within the courtyard on the western side of the pub, at the highest part of the site and surrounding landscape. A further trench had been proposed towards the south end on a grassed area near Laburnum Drive, but due to the number of signals picked up by the Cable Avoidance Tool (CAT) from services, it was decided too hazardous to excavate in this location.

The trial trenches were excavated using a mechanical excavator equipped with a toothless ("ditching") bucket 1.5-2m wide, under the supervision of an experienced archaeologist. The machine excavator removed the topsoil and overburden down to natural geological deposits. A hand-excavated slice through the natural geological deposits and re-deposited garden soil was undertaken in each trench to ensure that there were no archaeological remains masked by overlying deposits resembling naturally derived sediments.

The investigation was guided by the Institute for Archaeologists' *Standard and Guidance for Field Evaluation* 2008.

#### ***4.2.2 Fieldwork Recording***

Trenches were recorded along one long face to illustrate the stratigraphic sequence, a Trench Recording Form was completed for each trench, and each was drawn and digitally photographed before backfilling. Deposits and modern intrusions were recorded using a pro-forma recording system, and fully cross-referenced.

The drawn record includes plans of the site at scale 1:500 for trench locations, 1:50 for trench plans and profiles over Wat's Dyke, and 1:20 for sections. The altitude was established through a survey loop from a benchmark near the south-eastern corner of the railway bridge which carries Middleton Road over the railway. The 1900 OS map records this benchmark with a value of 407.2 feet, and a TBM was established on site with a reduced value of 122.27mOD.

## 5.0 RESULTS

### 5.1 Trench 1

Trench 1 was 10m x 1.6m oriented southwest – northeast, located 13m south of the north-western corner of the property boundary with Middleton Road (Figures 1 and 5). It was located to investigate the bank visible within the garden of The Woodlands, which could have formed part of an eastern continuation of Wat's Dyke.

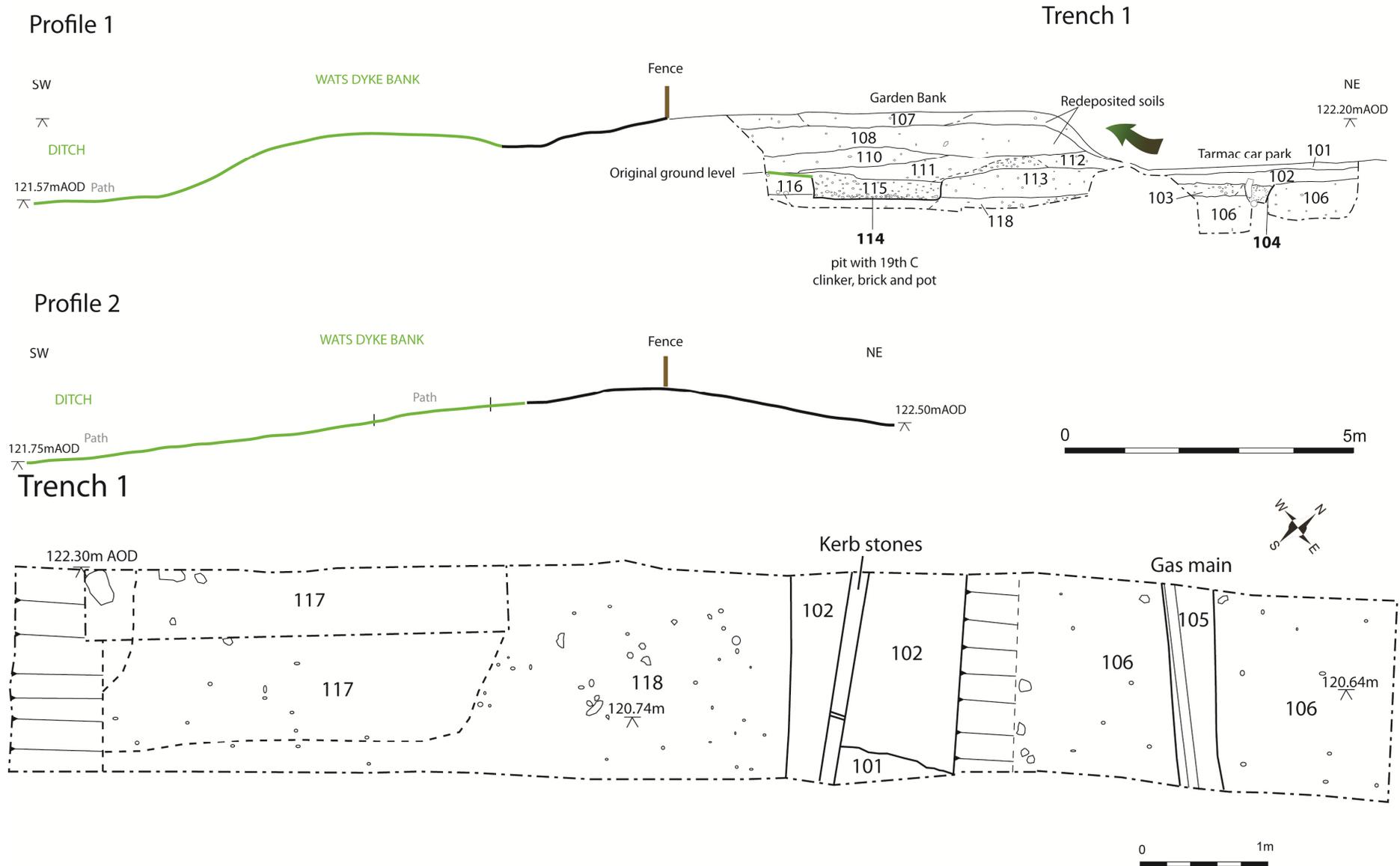
**Figure 5**  
**Location of Trench 1 on the garden bank looking west towards Wat's Dyke**



At the western end the top of the trench was at 122.20 AOD and it was excavated to a depth of 1.6m mostly by machine, but with the final part hand excavated to produce a cleaned trench side along the south-facing section for recording purposes. The eastern end sloped steeply into the car park, and beneath the asphalt surface at 121m AOD sondages were taken to a depth of 0.9m depth.

At the western end of the trench a sequence of seven layers have been recorded (Figures 6, 7 and 8), with garden topsoil (107) overlying re-deposited dumped material consisting of sandy clay silt with pebbles and grit (108, 110, 111 and 112). These layers sealed a rectangular vertical-sided pit (114) c.2m wide by 0.40m deep, filled with a loosely compacted mix of clinker, soot, brick and angular stones. Late 19<sup>th</sup> century ceramic remains were also found. The pit had been cut through a compacted mid-brown sandy clay (116) at its western end, and a similar but more stony deposit (113) at its eastern end. Basal deposits were very firm mottled sandy clays with occasional stones (117 and 118), interpreted as the top of the natural geological sequence.

Figure 6 Trench 1 top: south-facing section and profiles over scheduled monument; base: plan of trench



**Figure 7**  
**Trench 1 looking west**



A step was left in the trench between the western and eastern ends because of a signal from the Cable Avoidance Tool which suggested the presence of a service utility. Adjacent to this step, three metres from the eastern end of the trench, a tightly compacted cobbled surface was revealed (103) immediately beneath the asphalt car park surface, c1m in width and 0.2m thick, and which was on a north-south orientation. This had been heavily disturbed on both sides by services, as a gas pipe service trench (104, 105) was encountered perpendicular to the trench on its eastern side. The (naturally derived) basal deposit consisted of compacted sandy clay (106) with occasional stones.

**Figure 8 a - c**  
**Trench 1 south-facing section from west to east**



a) Western end of Trench 1



b) Mid part of Trench 1



c) East end of Trench 1

## 5.2 Trench 2

Trench 2 was c.8 x 3m oriented northwest – southeast, located 33m south from the north-western corner of the property boundary with Middleton Road (Figures 1 and 9). It was positioned on the highest part of the property to investigate if the bank of Wat's Dyke, and any structural elements associated with a possible strongpoint, survived at this location.

**Figure 9**  
**Location of Trench 2 looking north**



The ground level was at 122.5m AOD and consisted of an asphalt surface, with a gravel foundation (201). The trench was excavated to a depth of approximately 0.5m, with some areas going deeper to ascertain whether archaeological remains existed beneath modern disturbance. Within the south-eastern part of the trench a sondage was sunk to 1.3m below the existing ground surface to confirm the natural origin of the deposits (Figures 9, 10 and 11).

**Figure 10**  
**Trench 2 sondage and cobbling; west-facing section**



A ceramic drainage pipe cut across the northern part of the trench (contexts 203 and 204). A layer of compacted cobbles (202) set in a matrix of ash and soot was found to extend over the eastern side (Figure 10 line of cobbles beneath asphalt surface), and partially over the rest of the trench. Beneath this layer a single possible post-hole (205, fill 206 (Figure 11)) measuring 0.23m diameter and 0.04m in depth, was detected. This had been cut into the natural geology which formed the basal deposit throughout the trench, a loose to moderately compacted sandy clay with frequent stone inclusions (207).

**Figure 11**  
**Trench 2 post hole and east-facing section**



### 5.3 Profiles across Wat's Dyke

To confirm that the eastern edge of Wat's Dyke did not continue into the application site, a survey was conducted to record the profile of the surviving monument from the footpath eastwards to the fence boundary with The Woodlands. Profile 1 was located directly west and in line with Trench 1, and Profile 2 was located 56m south of the north-western corner of the property boundary with Middleton Road (Figure 6). They were 12m and 15m long respectively.

Profile 1 showed the bank rising at a 35° angle over 3m, that it survived to 1.1m above the level of the footpath at 121.57m AOD for a distance of 3m, and that it extended in length for 6m along the base before the top of the bank started to dip at its eastern extent. A shallow depression occurs for 5m, before the profile rises again to meet with the north-west corner of Trench 1 at 122.20 AOD.

Profile 2 had a gradual rise over a distance of 9m to its highest point at 123.10m AOD, 1.35m above the level of the footpath. A short plateau of 1.2m distance exists before it starts to dip eastwards. The fence boundary is situated at the eastern end of the plateau.

## 6.0 INTERPRETATION

The underlying natural geology consisted of undifferentiated sandy clays with stone inclusions, of glacio-fluvial origin. Evidence for human activity was restricted to 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century deposits. A pit filled with semi-industrial and domestic waste in Trench 1, two utility trenches for gas and foul water pipes in Trenches 1 and 2, a cobbled surface in both trenches, and a possible post-hole in Trench 2. In addition dumped deposits sealing the pit were found in Trench 2. Asphalt surfacing was found in both trenches.

The majority of this activity can be attributed to construction of The Woodlands when it was built as a Victorian House, related infrastructure including a probable cobbled driveway, and service connections between the house and Middleton Road. As part of the original or subsequent landscaping, soil was dumped in the north-western part of the property, forming a large bank. Apart from sealing the pit in Trench 1, this episode also covered a possible buried ground level represented by layers 113 and 116 in Trench 1. The small, shallow isolated post-hole in Trench 2 could be of earlier origin, but there is no evidence to substantiate this.

The two profiles across Wat's Dyke demonstrate that the footpath follows the ditch, and that a bank over 1m in height survives for at least 6m in width. The projected descent of its eastern face in Profile 1, mirrored from the western side, would take it 3m further, and would terminate before reaching the boundary with The Woodlands. The dumped deposits found in Trench 1 clearly extended as landscaping west of the property boundary, and have masked much of the eastern side of the bank. Dimensions previously recorded for Wat's Dyke bank are around 4m - 8m in width<sup>4</sup>.

Profile 2 is more difficult to interpret as it has a gentle incline eastwards to meet with the boundary for the application site. The footpath separates before this profile and proceeds in two directions to the southwest and southeast. The southwestern footpath alters course to skirt the ditch of Wat's Dyke further south, whilst the southeastern path is cut diagonally across the bank to provide access to Laburnum Drive. It is possible that the creation of this latter footpath has severely disturbed the dyke, but it is also possible that the highest point is also the eastern end of the surviving bank, in which case the property boundary for The Woodlands may overlap slightly in this southern part of the application site.

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<sup>4</sup> Malim T and Hayes L 2008 the Date and Nature of Wat's Dyke: a reassessment in the light of recent investigations at Gobowen, Shropshire *Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History Volume 15*, Table 5 p.170

**Figure 12**  
**Wat's Dyke from footpath looking north towards The Woodlands;**  
**infilled ditch on east side with bank beyond**



## 7.0 DEVELOPMENT IMPACT AND SETTING OF MONUMENT

The archaeological site investigation has not identified any surviving parts of Wat's Dyke or associated features within the envelope for the proposed development. It is therefore concluded that there will be no impact from the proposed scheme on known archaeological remains. The scheduled monument of Wat's Dyke appears to include all physical traces of the bank, but the proposed development is within the setting of a designated heritage asset, and therefore according to NPPF section 128 an assessment of indirect impact is also required.

The existing situation is that the site contains a Victorian House (post-1875), latterly used as a public house and its associated car park to the north. These existing conditions will be changed through demolition of the public house, and construction of a series of residential units. English Heritage guidance *The Setting of Heritage Assets* (October 2011) defines setting as "the surroundings in which the asset is experienced".

The bank of the scheduled section of Wat's Dyke survives as an overgrown earthwork feature, with trees and low vegetation masking it (Figure 12). The ditch has been infilled and a hard surface placed over it to form a public footpath. The dyke is a linear monument and appreciation of its form and function is achieved through walking along it and experiencing the variety of landscape forms and features that it runs through, or approaching it from the side and seeing it as a physical barrier in the landscape. Within this part of Oswestry the line of Wat's Dyke has been preserved as a footpath and property boundary, but the post-war development of housing estates has completely altered the physical surroundings so that the Dyke has lost its landscape context. Existing conditions at the Woodlands allowed views of the trees that marked the boundary and the bank of Wat's Dyke, and a garden bank that rose to meet the bank. Construction of the apartment block and houses will reduce the amount of visibility presently available, but it will do little to diminish the ability to appreciate the monument in the changed setting created by urban expansion. The best method to experience the surviving monument is via the footpath on the far side of the bank beyond the proposed development, and this will remain unchanged. It is therefore concluded that there will be change to the setting of the scheduled monument, but there will be only very slight adverse impact on the ability to experience what is of significance to appreciate the monument.

Historic mapping shown in Figure 13 demonstrates the strategic importance of The Woodlands site in relation to the Dyke and to ancient routes, including that from Llys to St Oswald's Church, a route now known as Middleton Road. Llys was a nodal point in the network of routes, presumably reflecting its importance, which is also apparent in its Welsh name which means "Court". The Woodlands site would have been a local high point from which control of access along the road through the Dyke could have been administered, but if this hypothesis is true and a strongpoint located there, the disturbance caused by Victorian building work appears to have removed such physical evidence.



## **8.0 CLOSURE**

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