

Marches Archaeology

Lymedale Business Park Holditch Newcastle-under-Lyme Staffordshire

Report on an archaeological watching brief

September 2005

Marches Archaeology Series 397

Marches Archaeology

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Archaeological Consultants and Contractors

**Lymedale Business Park
Holditch
Newcastle under Lyme**

NGR: SJ 830 480

A report on an archaeological watching brief

Report by

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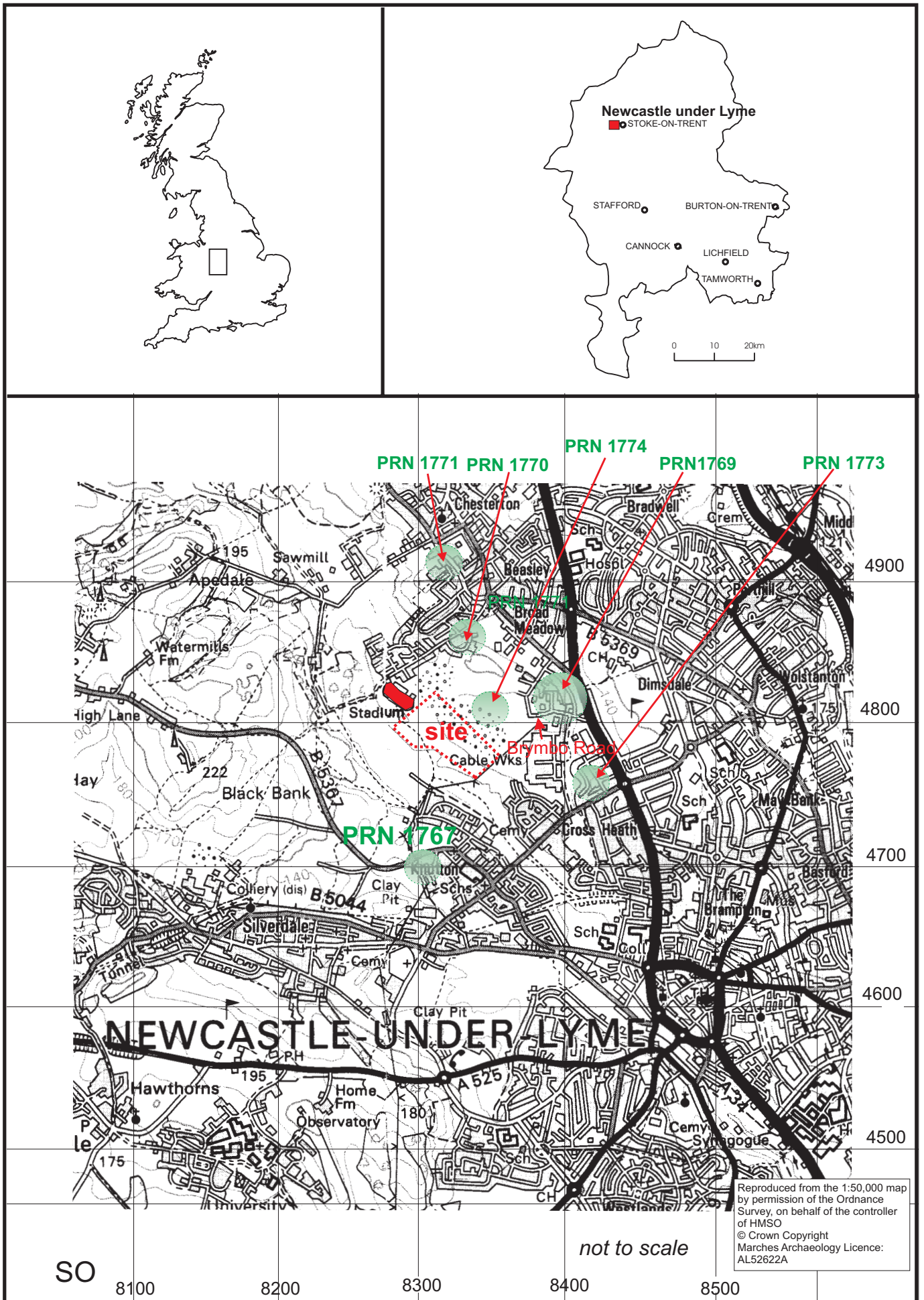


Fig. 1: Location of site showing positions of Roman sites in the immediate area

Lymedale Business Park Holditch Newcastle under Lyme

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Summary

A Roman fort lies c. 1km to the north of the site and other Roman buildings and settlements c. 300-500m to the north and east of the site. In all likelihood, the old Whitfield Farm was founded before the agricultural revolution on productive ground. In all likelihood the area was probably part of the Romano-British settlement. Whether it was occupied or simply agricultural land remains unknown. Area 1, a large part of the site, was not satisfactorily monitored due to a failure in communications. There were no finds other than 3 sherds of late 18th century Staffordshire pottery. Archaeological features and deposits could have been present – there was simply no way of telling following the damage done by c. 6 weeks of vehicle movements across the stripped surface.

1. Introduction

Staffordshire County Council proposed to extend Lymedale Business Park. The site, which occupied an area of 28.15 hectares, was situated to the west of Brymbo Road (Fig 1). The Hooters Hall Farm buildings lie at NGR: SJ 830 480.

The site had already been the subject of a Desk Based Assessment and walk-over survey. This identified a high potential for the presence of Roman remains in the area (Frost, 2003). The Local Planning Authority's Archaeology Advisor advised that an archaeological watching brief be carried out during ground works associated with the proposed development in order that the archaeological resource be adequately protected.

The Local Planning Authority's Archaeology Advisor produced a "Brief for an archaeological watching brief". Staffordshire County Council (the client) commissioned Marches Archaeology to provide the archaeological services detailed in the Brief.

2. Archaeological and historical background

The previous desk-based study (Frost, 2003) concluded:-

Hard evidence for prehistoric activity in the area is confined to the discovery of an iron knife at Knutton (PRN 1767 – see Figs 1 and 2).

There is considerable evidence for occupation of the area in Roman times. The local entries on the County Sites and Monuments record are (see Figs 1 and 2):-

PRN 1769 Holditch Roman settlement – NGR SJ 830 470

PRN 1770 Romano-British settlement or Roman army marching camp – NGR SJ 834 487
PRN 1771 Chesterton Roman Fort and settlement - NGR 8312 4907
PRN 1773 Coin hoard – Roman coins found at NGR 842 476
PRN 1774 Roman coins found at NGR SJ 835 481

The Roman settlement or marching camp (PRN 1770) was sited in the 1st century AD on the line of a Roman road (PRN 5168) running to the Chesterton fort PRN 1771. Most of the other sites and settlements are related to the road. The site was excavated from 1957 to 1961 by Professor Charlton of Keele University (Charlton, JMT, 1961 and 1962). More recent excavations in the angle formed by Holditch Road and Spencroft Street have revealed another Romano-British site (PRN 1769). An important stone building (PRN 1774) of high status and dating to the 2nd century AD was discovered by Gifford & Partners in 1998 on the former Holditch Colliery site. Roman material regularly turns up in gardens all along the line of the A34 through Holditch (PRN 4430).

There are no recorded Saxon or early medieval sites in the immediate vicinity. Hooters Hall Farm was previously known as Whitfield Farm and was important enough to be shown by the local Cartographer Yates on his map of Staffordshire of 1775. It was deemed likely that the farm had medieval origins and there might be possible Roman activity. Sir Nigel Gresley's canal (finished 1778) runs through the area c. 200m to the north-east of the farm (PRN .

Aerial photographs taken in June 2000 (Fig. 4) clearly show the old field boundaries set in pasture land all across areas 1, 2 and 3. The photo also shows that area 4 was considerably disturbed. This had occurred only a few years previously when large quantities of coal extraction wastes were moved onto the site during clear-up works on the Holditch open-cast mine. This was located just to the west of Hooters Hall and is now the Apedale Country Park.

3. Scope and aims of the project

The scope of the project was defined in the Brief as:

- ◆ archaeological supervision of all soil and overburden stripping
- ◆ inspection of sub-soil for archaeological features
- ◆ rapid investigation of any archaeological features/deposits
- ◆ all sub-soil stripping to be under archaeological supervision
- ◆ examination of all service and foundation trenches with appropriate recording
- ◆ examination of spoil heaps for archaeological material
- ◆ a programme of post fieldwork analysis, archiving and publication
- ◆ if significant archaeology was identified the archaeologist on site should inform the County Archaeological Officer and Project Engineer immediately in order that appropriate action could be taken to minimise the damage to such deposits and to record them appropriately.

The purpose of an archaeological watching brief is defined by the Institute of Field Archaeologists as-

:

‘to allow, within the resources available, the preservation by record of archaeological deposits, the presence and nature of which could not be

established (or established with sufficient accuracy) in advance of development or other potentially disruptive works’

and:

‘to provide an opportunity, if needed, for the watching archaeologist to signal to all interested parties, before the destruction of the material in question, that an archaeological find has been made for which the resources allocated to the watching brief itself are not sufficient to support a treatment to a satisfactory and proper standard’.

4. Methodology

Documentary research

The desk-based study contained all necessary information. No further primary or secondary sources were consulted in order to inform the fieldwork phase.

Fieldwork

Observations and appropriate recording was undertaken of all ground breaking activity in association with this proposed development, unless otherwise prior agreement was made between Marches Archaeology, the Local Planning Authority’s Archaeological Advisor and the client.

The recording system included written, drawn and photographic data. The primary written record was by means of site notes, accompanied by sketches. No context numbers were allocated. The photographic record was made using black and white negative and colour transparency film. No deposits considered to have environmental, technological or scientific dating potential were encountered so no samples were taken. A metal detector will be used for the examination of the spoil heaps and any other appropriate areas.

5. The results

Initial site work commenced in July 2004. Areas 2, 3 and 4 were cleared first but due to the presence of newts area 1 was left until 2005. Observation of the first three areas produced negative evidence. The whole area having been disturbed by the mining activity in the vicinity. Area 1, around Hooters Hall Farm, appeared to have escaped the ravages of the surrounding area. It was left that the contractors would contact Marches Archaeology when the work was to be undertaken. After a break of several months, Marches Archaeology was informed in a telephone call from the client on the afternoon of 13th March 2005 that ‘the ground-works were nearly complete’. The site was visited early on the 14th March.

The fleet of heavy earthmoving machinery was at the north end of the site (Plate 1) in the process of finishing off the topsoil stripping of the whole Area 1 (Fig. 4) Plates 1-?). The whole of area 1 had been stripped to sandy marl subsoil in an operation which had taken the previous five or six weeks with six 30 or 45 ton diggers, five or six Caterpillar D6 bulldozers (mainly blades) and a fleet of 8-10 Volvo six-wheel tippers (‘Moxies’). The area had been rolled for several days prior to the site visit by a Caterpillar D6 towing a 15 ton vibrating roller. The D6 had left strong sharp trackmarks all across the area, whilst the roller had polished the top of the clay to a shiny finish. Area 1 was carefully field-walked for the

remainder of the day. It is not accurately known what depth of material was removed. The surviving topsoil sections around ponds 5, 6 and 7 (in the distance on Plate 2) were c. 0.5m high, the site being cut 0.2m down into the marl subsoil at those positions. The depths were about the same near pond 4 (Plate 2) but considerably deeper on the north edge of the site (Plate 5).

There were no obvious signs of any archaeological activity, but it there is no possibility of being able to state whether or not there had been any archaeological deposits or features.

It was known that area 3 was buried below landfill (project brief, para 3.3). The whole of area 3 was reduced by c. 4m, the material being relaid on areas 1 and 2 to raise the ground level down the gently sloping valley side. The tracked excavators used to load the Volvo tippers were mainly 45 ton 'quarry' diggers with large toothed buckets. They sat on top of the redeposited coal tip, digging in front of themselves, pulling backwards and upwards, working a face c. 3-4m high (Plates 3 & 4). The excavator placed the spoil into large Volvo tipper lorries that reversed in at the lower dig level. Thus, the fairly recently redeposited coal tip was simply ripped out along with the 1990s ground surface and its underlying soil profile to c. 0.5m into the subsoil with each sweep of the digger. The 1990s soil surface was never exposed as such. Falling material from the working face of the coal tip continually prevented anything meaningful from being seen. The active working location was a hive of reversing Moxies and, as such, dangerous. There was very little point in closely watching this operation.

6. Discussion

A Roman fort lies c. 1km to the north of the site and other Roman buildings and settlements c. 300-500m to the north and east of the site. As noted in the desk-based study (Frost, para. 4.1), the Lyme Brook runs down a fault line. To the immediate east of the fault is good agricultural land. To the immediate west of the fault are coal measures. These have been massively exploited in recent centuries but the overlying soils may have been less useful for agriculture in earlier times. In all likelihood, the old Whitfield Farm was founded before the agricultural revolution (and possible arrival of cheap lime via the nearby canal). The farm was obviously on productive ground and in all likelihood the area was probably part of the Romano-British settlement. Whether it was occupied or simply agricultural land will now, unfortunately, remain unknown for Area 1, a large part of the site was not satisfactorily monitored due to a failure in communications.

A field visit on 14th March permitted only a simple walkover survey of the area with the ground works virtually completed. Any real hope of seeing features or deposits had been dashed by erosion of the surface by weeks of intermittent typical winter weather compounded by continual tracking by mechanical excavators, large Volvo tippers and bulldozers. This had been finished off with a comprehensive and intensive mechanical rolling of the area, thereby obscuring the soil colours. There were no finds other than 3 sherds of late 18th century Staffordshire pottery but features could have been present – there was simply no way of telling.

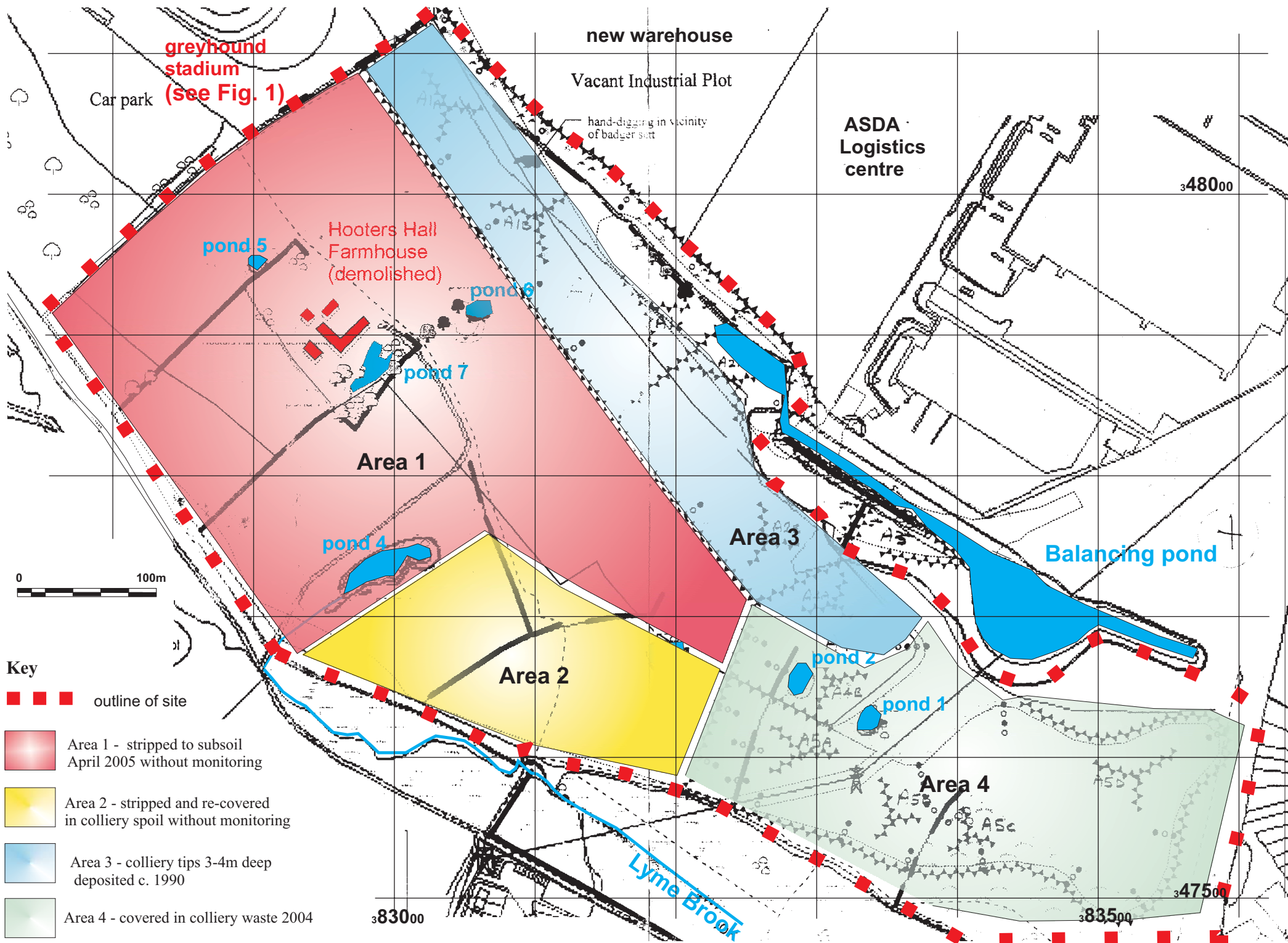
7. References

Charlton, JMT, 1961, *Excavations at the Roman Site at Holditch, 1957-59*. Transactions of the North Staffordshire Field Club, Vol I, 26-50.

Charlton, JMT, 1962, *Excavations at the Roman Site at Holditch, 1960-61*. Transactions of the North Staffordshire Field Club, Vol 2, 60-72.

Frost, P, 2003 *Lymedale Business Park. Proposed extension (former Hooter Hall Site). Holditch, Newcastle-under-Lyme, Staffordshire. Archaeological desk-based assessment and walk-over survey*. Castlering Archaeology report No 150. May 2003.

Fig 2 Detail of the site



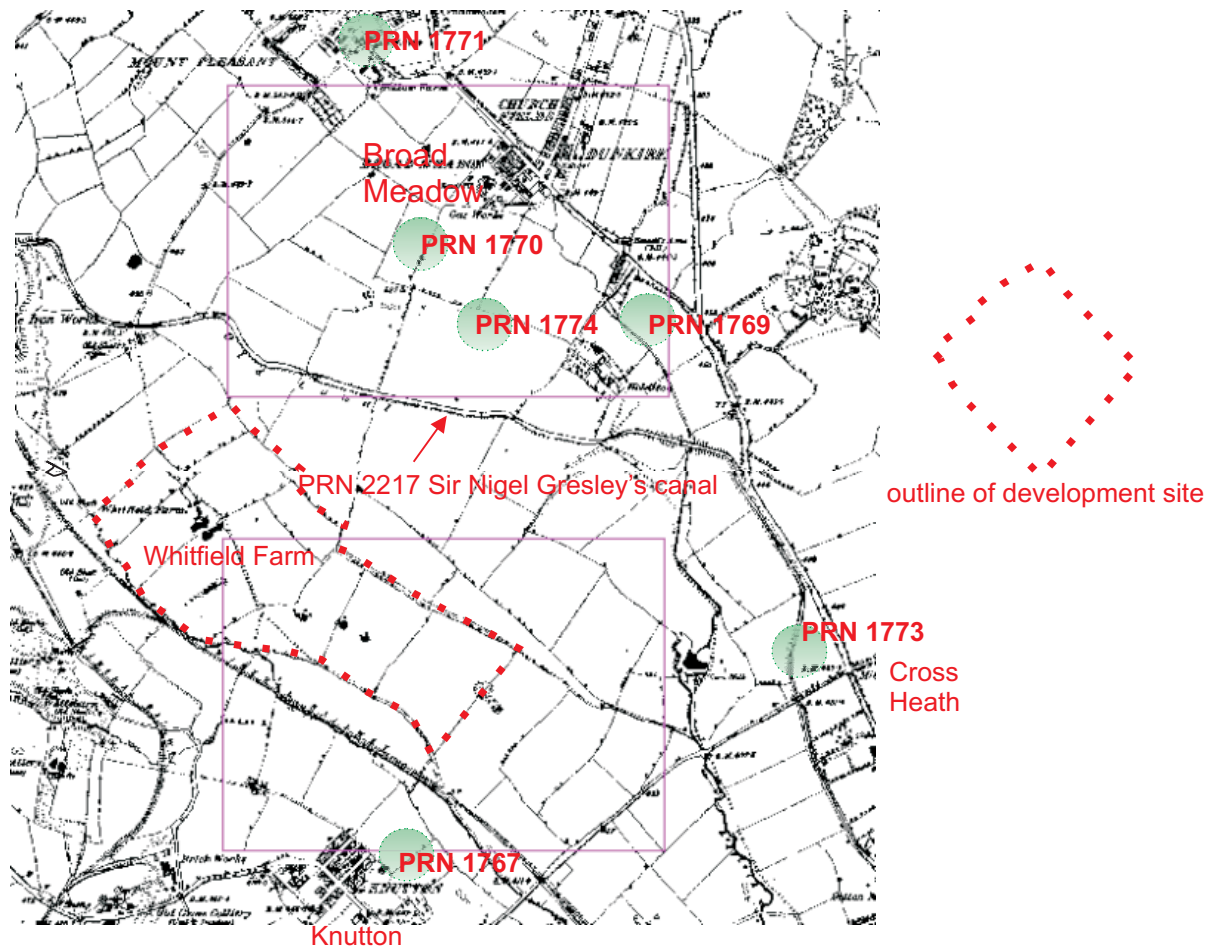


Fig 3 - detail from 1890 Ordnance Survey 1:10560 (not to scale)



Fig. 4 - detail from an aerial survey - taken June 2000 (note coverage area is exactly the same as Fig. 3)



Plate 1 - view northwards across Area 1 showing extent of ground works already undertaken
(from the north edge of area 2)



Plate 2 - Pond 4 on first visit
(from c. 50m northwards of the camera position for plate 1)



**Plate 3 - detail of the section through the redeposited colliery wastes on area 2
(note no sign of ground surface at bottom of profile)**



ground surface
& old topsoil
buried c. 1990

**Plate 4 - detail at the base of the profile of the colliery waste in area 3
(showing the soil profile buried c. 1990 below the colliery waste)**



**Plate 5 - detail of the soil profile at the north edge of Area 1
(showing topsoil over mauve clay marl)**