

# *Marches Archaeology*

## **Games Yard Mill Bank Weobley Herefordshire**

**SMR No. 37124**

**A report on an archaeological watching brief**

October 2005

*Marches Archaeology Series 400*

**This report is produced by**

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The Old Mill  
Games Yard  
Weobley  
Herefordshire

NGR: SO 4023 5148  
SMR No. 37124

Report on a watching brief

**Report by** Nick Tavener

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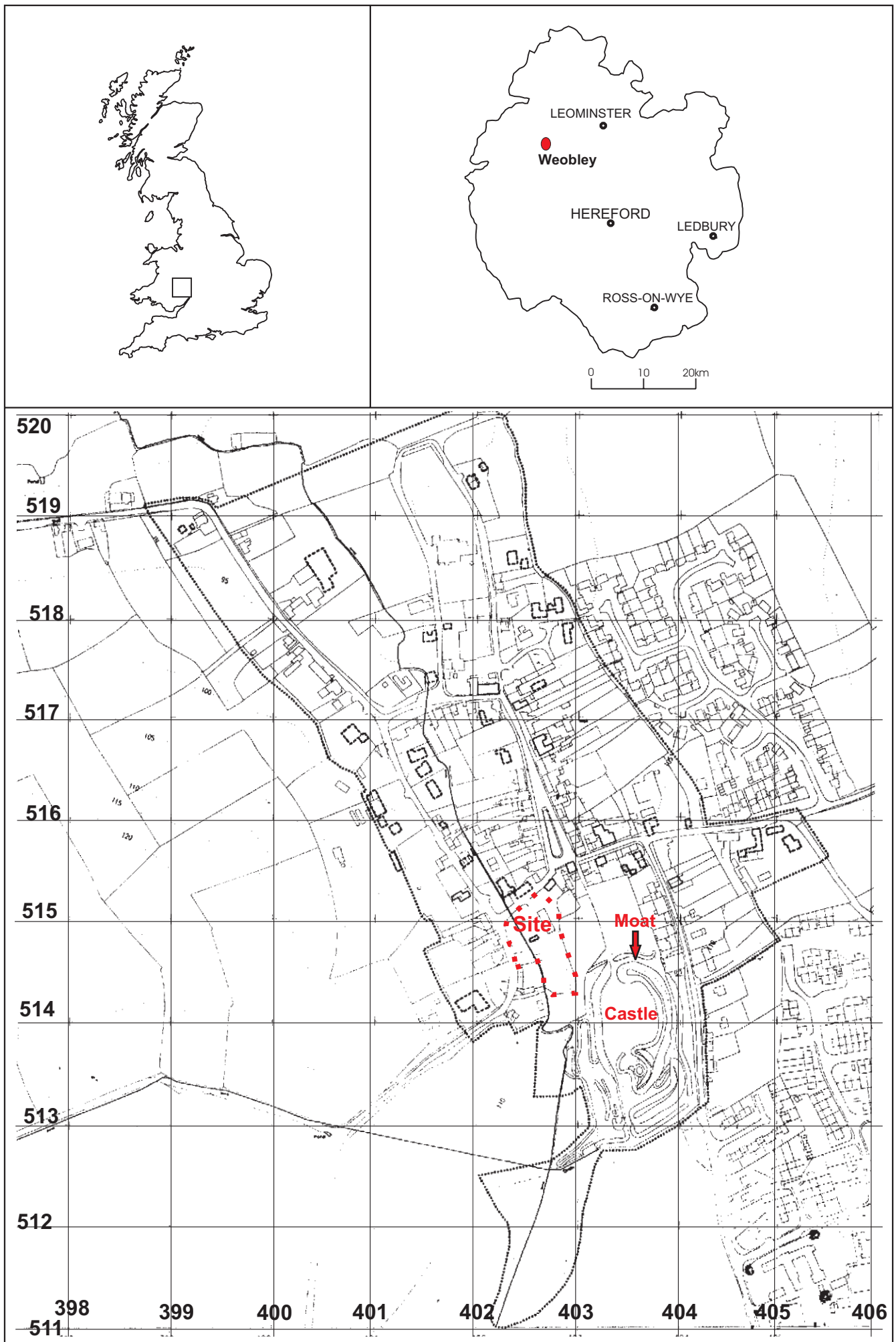


Fig. 1 Location of the site

The Old Mill  
Games Yard  
Weobley  
Herefordshire

NGR SO 4023 5148

A report on an archaeological watching brief

*Summary*

*A watching brief on land amounting to slightly less than 1ha along the north-west fringe of the outer defences of Weobley Castle found no evidence for medieval activity or any sign of occupation. In all likelihood, the majority of the site formed an essential part of the 'kill-zone' that would have been kept clear of obstructions to give the archers the necessary field of fire to defend the castle effectively.*

*The entire area is underlain by fluvio-glacial till capped by fairly heavy, silty clay soil. The available cartographic evidence indicates that the study area was used as small fields or orchards until the 19th century when the existing mill building was created.*

## **1. Introduction**

A planning application was submitted to the local planning authority for permission to develop land at the old Games Yard in Weobley. The site is listed on the local Sites and Monuments Record as being a site of archaeological interest (ref: SMR 7371) and lies virtually adjacent to Weobley Castle, a Scheduled Ancient Monument (Hereford & Worcester No. 122).

The site had been the subject of a previous archaeological evaluation by Archaeological Investigations Ltd of Hereford (Boucher, 2003). The results led to the Local Planning Authority's Archaeology Advisor advising that a watching brief should be carried out during ground works for the development to ensure that the archaeological resource could be adequately protected or recorded. That advisor produced a formal written scheme of investigation in the form of a document entitled "Brief for an archaeological watching brief". Rowanwood Homes commissioned Marches Archaeology to provide the archaeological services set out in that Brief.

## **2. Archaeological and Historical Background**

Weobley lies on a gentle north-west facing slope at c. 100m OD. The surface geology of is glacial till (British Geological Survey, 1989) which forms the parent material for the soils that are mapped as typical argillic (i.e. clayey) brown earths of the Escrik 1 Association

(Soil Survey Saff / Ragg *et al*, 1984 and 1:250,000 map). These soils, which occur extensively in southern Herefordshire, are typically deep, well-drained, coarse loamy soils to c. 0.4m depth with clayey horizons from 0.4-0.6m. They develop typically on reddish till or head derived from the Wye Valley glacier and are often calcareous at depth. Beneath the till, the solid geology comprises Lower Red Sandstone beds of the Downtonian series. These may increase through-drainage locally where the till is thin.

The Domesday Book recorded that the manor of Weobley was held by Roger de Lacey in 1086. The form of the place name in 1086 was *Wibelai*, meaning ‘Wibba’s clearing’. This suggests a pre-Norman Conquest settlement founded on land previously under woodland but no direct evidence has ever been found for pre-medieval occupation.

Few documents for the town have survived from the medieval period, so little is known about the local economy. A church is documented in 1101 and the castle may have originated at about that time (Dalwood, 1996). The foundation of the borough appears to date to the mid-thirteenth century. A town ditch was documented at that time. Weobley may have benefited from lying outside the Marches proper, whilst being the most westerly location that merchants could travel to that was still within the jurisdiction of the king (Dalwood, 1996).

Today, Weobley has the finest and most complete collection of late medieval and sub-medieval timber-framed houses in the Central Marches (Morriss, R.K, in Dalwood, 1996). The quality of the surviving medieval houses indicates great prosperity in the medieval period. Weobley continued as a market town into the post-medieval period but had entered economic decline by the late seventeenth century, one source suggesting this may have been brought about by the growth of the nearby market town of Kington (Dalwood, 1996 quoting Richard Blome’s *Britannia* [1698]).

By the end of the eighteenth century Weobley was no longer considered to be a ‘town’ even though it still returned a Member of Parliament. It had degenerated into a ‘pocket borough’ in which most of the ‘vote houses’ were owned by the Marquess of Bath. The Reform Act of 1832 disenfranchised all the old ‘rotten boroughs’. As a result, many houses in Weobley fell into disuse; 84 houses were pulled down in 1844-5. The survival of medieval houses can probably be explained by the Marquess’s need for tied ‘vote houses’, presumably maintained at very low cost. This meant that Weobley largely escaped the remodelling undertaken in most other towns during the ‘Great Rebuilding’ of the post-medieval period.

The current study area lies on the south-west side of the medieval borough. The castle’s outer defensive rampart and ditch lies within 20m of the south-east corner of the development area. This is likely to have had major implications for the usage of the site in the medieval period.

The northern boundary of the site fronts onto Weobley High Street, the western edge onto Millbank. The mass demolition of 84 houses in 1844-5 just pre-dates the first cartographic evidence, the tithe map of 1846, so there was always the chance that some or all of both the High Street and Millbank frontages were occupied by buildings before 1844. The Salutation Inn adjoins the east boundary of the site and is an historic timber-framed building. This means that the area immediately adjacent to the north-east corner of the site has been occupied for several centuries.

The title map of 1846 (Fig 2) showed a stream running through the site. This had been confined within a culvert before 1887 (Fig. 3). To the west of the stream, the site comprised two small fields (636 and 634 on Fig. 3) in 1846, the latter containing Mill Bank Cottages. The mill building was shown as lying at their north end. On the east side of the stream were two orchards 635 and 637. The present mill building was shown in 1887, marked as a corn mill. Little changed in the years up to the 2nd edition Ordnance Survey map of 1904, but the site became increasingly more occupied by light industrial buildings and sheds through the 20th century (Fig 4).

The evaluation by Archaeological Investigations Ltd comprised five trial trenches. Two were located in the northern half of the site (trenches 1 and 2) and three (trenches 3-5) in the southern part. The edge of the old stream channel were identified in trenches 1 and 2. The only archaeological features found were:-

1) an undated ditch c. 0.6m deep at the extreme southern end of the site. The ditch seems to have held running water.

2) a possible foundation trench or boundary ditch running parallel to the northern edge of the site. A sherd of glazed pottery of 14th or 15th century date was recovered from the fill of this feature along with a piece of ceramic roof tile of possibly more recent date.

◆Ostensibly, the results of the evaluation would be consistent with an area of either low or intermittent occupation rather than full-blown development from the medieval period onwards. The relatively sparse findings from the evaluation led to the scope of future archaeological works being confined to a watching brief. The areas deemed to be of greater or lesser importance were identified by the Local Planning Authority's Archaeological Advisor in advance of the watching brief. The areas are shown on Fig 4.

### **3. Scope and aims of the project**

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

archaeological observation and recording of all ground-disturbing operations forming part of the development, excepting where it can be proven in advance that such operations will only affect manifestly modern deposits.

a short documentary study

Archaeological monitoring of all ground and below ground works forming part of the development.

Contingency for full archaeological excavation if, and only if, significant archaeological entities were present.

Provision to be made for the archaeological contractor to have unobstructed and uninterrupted access to the site for an agreed period if significant archaeological entities that will be destroyed or severely damaged by ground-disturbing operations forming part of the development are present

If the chosen archaeological contractor had good reason for believing that such entities are present, he shall without delay consult with Herefordshire Archaeology and the developer and/or the developer's agents to decide whether the contingency should be activated. If a consensus is not achieved by such consultation

Herefordshire Archaeology will itself decide if the archaeological deposits and features that are present are “significant”.

Full processing of archaeological materials and the production of an appropriate report

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 documentary research undertaken by Archaeological Investigations Ltd. (Boucher, 2002) was comprehensive. In addition, the archaeological and historical evidence for Weobley has been fully reviewed (Dalwood *et al*, 1996). The results of the watching brief did not warrant any further primary research.

##### *Fieldwork*

Observations and appropriate recording was undertaken of all ground-breaking activity in the areas identified as being potentially important (Fig 4).

The recording system includes written, drawn and photographic data. The primary written record was by means of site notes, accompanied by sketches. Context numbers were allocated and context record sheets completed as appropriate. Plans (normally 1:20), sections (normally 1:10) and other appropriate drawings of significant data were made. 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 soil samples were taken.

#### **5. Results of the watching brief**

##### *Plot 1 - house and garage*

The natural subsoil was heavy, hard, pale red clay marl (03). Across the site, this contained several peri-glacial features such as cryoturbation cracks and layering caused by water sorting. The top of the marl occurred at about 0.6m below ground level and the layer was



seen to extend to below 1.3m below ground. The subsoil was overlain by the original topsoil (02), a dark greyish brown clayey silty loam. This was up to 0.7m thick and contained finds indicating that it had been cultivated or disturbed up to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

A simple rubble-stone wall (04), two feet (0.66m) thick and constructed from random platy local mudstone crossed the south-west corner of house 1 in a north-easterly direction. This had no mortar bonding and would seem to have been a simple dry-stone garden wall of late 19<sup>th</sup> century date that had almost been truncated down to ground level before the area was covered by a spread of landfill c. 0.2m deep and comprising broken bricks and other demolition materials in a matrix of brown clayey silt (01).

#### *Plot 3 garage and Plots 6 - 9 and 10-11*

The same soil sequence as described above was observed in all these footings areas. There were no archaeological features. Locally, there was considerable disturbance from groundworks associated with the construction of the various light industrial buildings that occupied the site until 2003.

#### *The new extension to the mill and its garage*

The same soil profile also occurred within much of the new extension along the north edge of the old mill building. Map evidence indicates that the stream has been moved even after it was first placed in a culvert. The groundworks for the garage at the north end of the mill extension were undertaken entirely within fairly modern landfills and were not deep enough to provide further information about the original stream, which may have been a moat at this point (see discussion below).

## **6. Discussion**

A gridded pattern of long, narrow properties set out at right angles to main streets usually indicates the presence of medieval 'burgage' plots. These are highly evident in the main core of Weobley to the north-east of the site, especially off Broad Street (see Fig 3). Burgage plots possibly exist on the west side of Mill Bank opposite the site entrance (Chamber Walk on Fig. 3). These burgage plots are notably absent from the site area, suggesting that it was not developed in the medieval period. The Salutation Inn (Fig 3) would seem to occupy the nearest identifiable burgage plot.

There may be a fairly logical reason. The site may have lain largely within the castle defences. The slope at the south east corner of the plot rises with increasing steepness to meet the outer rampart of the castle defences some 30m to the south-east. Medieval castles were invariably surrounded by open ground acting as a 'kill zone' for archers and usually extending out to the effective range for an arrow or bolt fired from a bow or cross-bow. On the opposite (eastern) side of the castle, there was a large and impressive moat still clearly evident in 1846 (and named as the moat (enclosure 630 on the tithe map of 1846 - see Fig. 3 and Boucher, 2003). The layout of the castle defences as surviving in 1846 strongly suggests that the moat must have had some counterpart on the west side of the castle and the stream running through Games Yard, i.e. the old mill stream (Fig. 3), would have formed a good natural defence for the north west corner of the castle. It is highly unlikely that a medieval

Norman lord would have allowed the castle's defensive capability to be compromised by housing up against the defences.

The planned town was probably set out in the 13th century (Dalwood, 1996), a period of massive economic and population expansion. This resulted in the colonisation of many heavy clay lands (such as around Weobley), in many instances for the first time, as they had previously been too difficult to cultivate (Harvey, 1984). This period of expansion was stopped by a downwards spiral of decreasing yields, worsening weather, disastrous harvests (six years out of seven between 1314 and 1321) and widespread cattle plague from 1319-21, all of which conspired to bring terrible famine (Lake, 1989, 16). Before the country really recovered, it was devastated by the Black Death which was as deadly in Herefordshire as elsewhere. In many areas, the population probably didn't regain its former size until c. 1500. The net effect was that the full 'planned extent' of many rural market towns, as envisaged by their founders, was never fully realised and that may be the case here, especially as Weobley seems to have been increasingly supplanted by Kington once the Marcher border started to become a safer place following the unification of England and Wales under the Tudors in 1536.

## **7. Conclusions**

The initial evaluation by Archaeological Investigations Ltd found no direct or provable evidence of occupation of the site in the medieval period. The watching brief reported on here found no medieval features or artefacts.

The site probably formed part of an essential 'kill zone' during the period that the castle retained a valued defensive function. The stream across the site, known in more recent times as the mill stream, would probably have formed a useful natural barrier in medieval times that could have also been adapted as part of the outer castle defenses, e.g. in the form of a moat. Ground works in the area of the mill stream were nowhere near deep enough to provide any information on the true course of the stream. This would appear to have been altered since 1887 (see Fig 4).

Even if the site was largely within the castle's defences, there were still areas around the north-western periphery that could have been occupied in the medieval period without interfering too seriously with the castle's defensive strength. This periphery was outside the areas prioritised for the watching brief and the ground works were not watched.

## **8. References**

BGS, 1989, British Geological Survey 1:50,000 series - England and Wales sheet 198 - Hereford (Solid and Drift).

Boucher, M, *The Games Yard, Weobley, Herefordshire, Archaeological evaluation*, November 2002, Hereford Archaeology Series 556.

Dalwood, H *et al*, 1996, *Archaeological assessment of Weobley, Hereford and Worcester*. for The Central Marches Historic Towns Survey (County Archaeological Service Report 352, May 1996).

Harvey, Nigel, 1984, *A History of Farm Buildings*. David & Charles

Lake, J, 1989, *Historic Farm Buildings*. Blandford Press.

## **9. Contents of the site archive**

The Marches Archaeology site code was OMW 04A. The Herefordshire Sites and Monuments Accession No. was 37124.

The archive will shortly be deposited with the Herefordshire Sites and Monuments Record and comprises:-

- 1 colour film and record sheet
- 1 black and white film and record sheet
- 2 site drawings being annotated photocopies of the site engineer's drawing
- 1 trench record sheet
- There were no finds (Victorian and later finds were not kept)
- 1 copy of this report
- 1 Cd containing a digital copy of the site archive

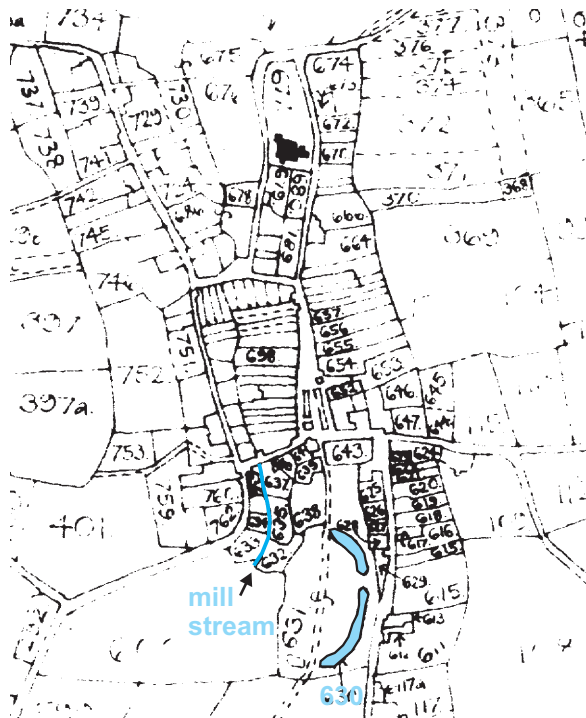


Fig 2 detail from the tithe map of 1846

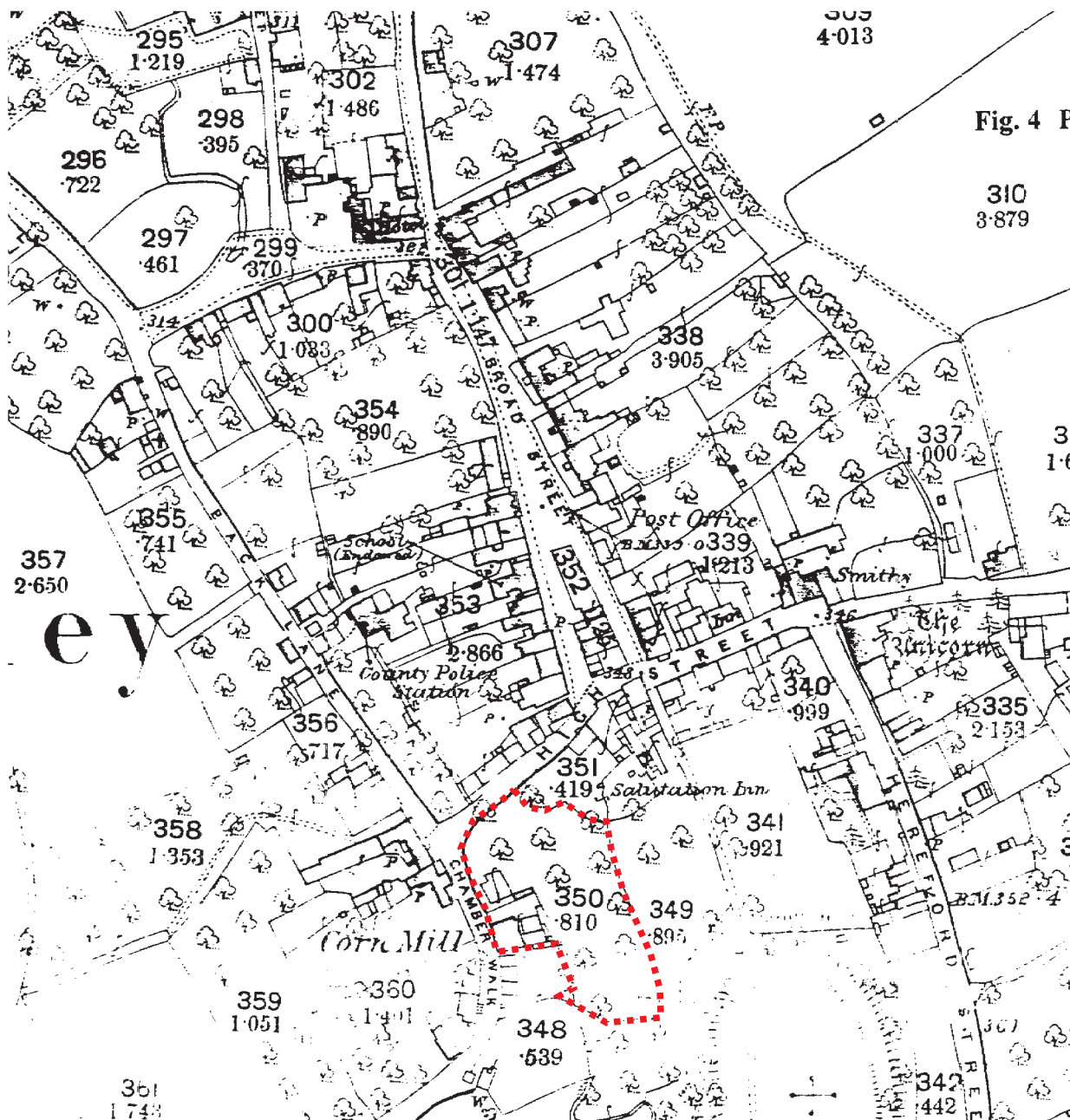


Fig. 3 detail from the 1st edition Ordnance Survey 1:2500 map of 1887

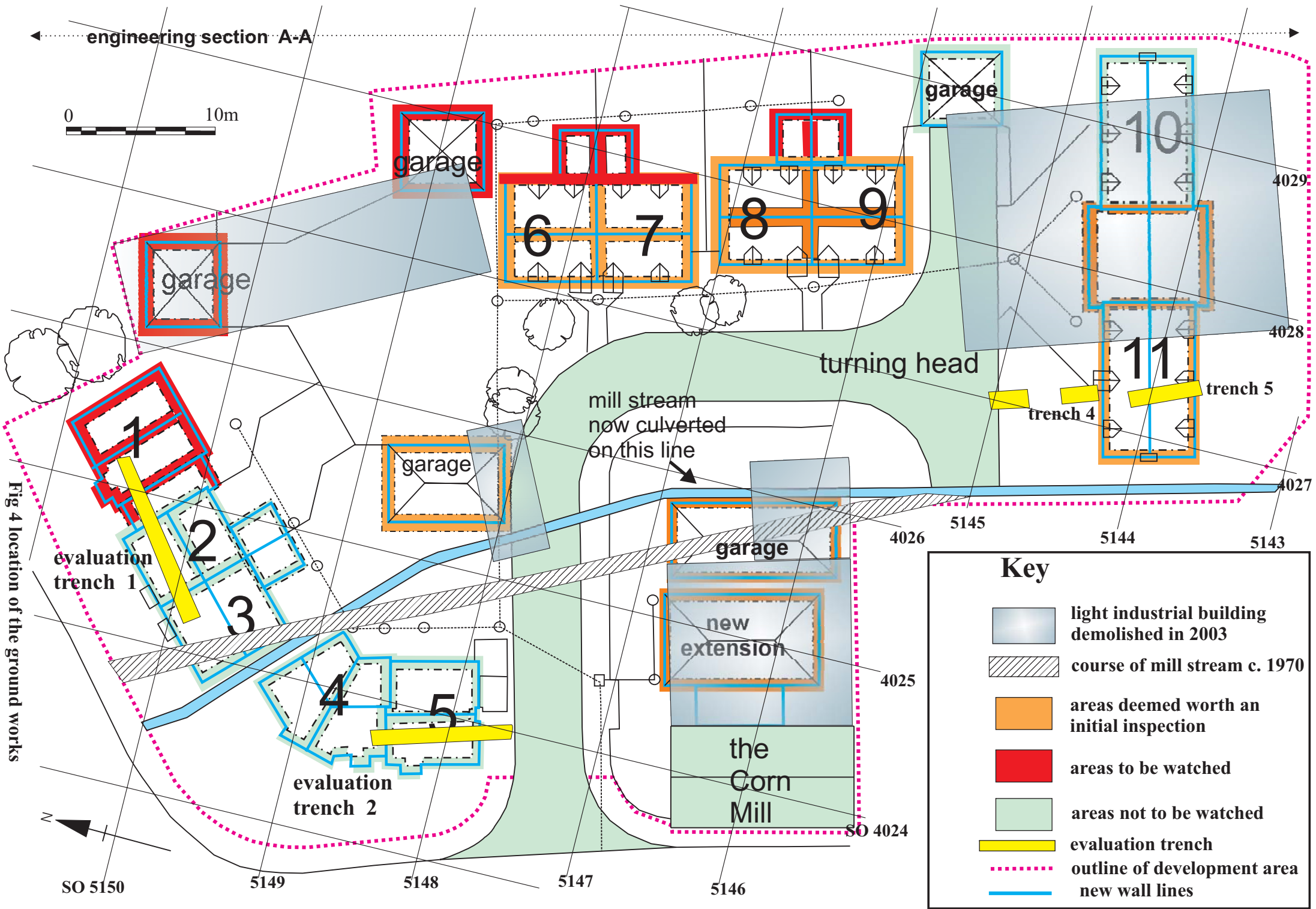


Fig 4 location of the ground works