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**Land Adjacent to the
Queen's Arms Public
House, Ashbourne Road,
Rocester, Staffordshire:**

**An Archaeological
Watching Brief 2002**

Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit



Institute of Field
Archaeologists

Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit
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1.0 Summary

In 1996, Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit (BUFAU) conducted an archaeological evaluation of a parcel of land to the north of the Queen's Arms Public House, Ashbourne Road, Rocester, Staffordshire (centred on NGR SK 10973952), prior to a planning application for a residential development of the site. Four trial trenches were excavated by machine, hand-cleaned and inspected. No archaeological features were in evidence, but several Roman pottery sherds were recovered from a subsoil layer, which was located within 0.65m of the existing ground level and hence likely to be affected by groundworks associated with the proposed development. The results of the evaluation were detailed in BUFAU Report No. 450, which recommended that an archaeological watching brief be undertaken during any such groundworks.

At the beginning of November 2001, East Staffordshire Borough Council granted planning permission (PA/05734/005) to Hamlet New Homes for the erection of twelve dwellings on the site, plus the construction of vehicular access. The developers contracted BUFAU to carry out a watching brief whilst groundworks were in progress. A qualified archaeologist subsequently undertook scheduled visits to the site throughout a seven-month period, extending from November 2001 to May 2002 inclusive.

The initial machine-stripping of the topsoil was of insufficient depth to expose any surviving archaeology. Excavation of the foundation trenches revealed that a substantial, V-shaped ditch, with a north-south alignment, ran across the site. Its infills yielded pottery sherds of the Roman and Medieval periods, indicating that the ditch dated to the later period.

A second ditch, of similar shape and dimensions, but of northwest-southeast alignment, was also revealed by the current excavations in the centre of the site. Another section of foundation trench, located in the northern part of the development area, appeared to show a third ditch, aligned northwest-southeast. The infills of the second and third ditches yielded pottery sherds that dated to the Roman period. A V-shaped cut of unknown purpose was visible in a section of trench in the western sector and a copper-alloy fibula brooch (dated to the 1st century AD), plus sherds of Roman pottery, were recovered from its infill.

2.0 Introduction

This report describes the results of an archaeological watching brief undertaken during the residential redevelopment of land located to the immediate-north of the Queen's Arms Public House, Ashbourne Road, Rocester, Staffordshire (centred on NGR SK 10973952; Figs. 1 and 2). The work was carried out by Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit (BUFAU) on behalf of the developers, Hamlet New Homes, who were erecting twelve dwellings on the site (East Staffordshire Borough Council Planning Application PA/05734/005). This work followed on from an initial archaeological evaluation of the site in 1996 (Mould, 1996) when four trial trenches were excavated. No *in situ* archaeological features were detected at that time, but a small number of Roman pottery sherds was recovered from subsoil deposits.

The purpose of the watching brief was to record any archaeological deposits or features exposed during groundwork in the development area. A qualified archaeologist initially attended the site on November 16th, 2001, followed by visits on the 20th, 23rd and 28th of the same month. Further scheduled visits took place on December 6th, 12th and 13th, 2001. In 2002, an archaeologist attended the site on January 16th, March 12th, and May 13th and 14th.

3.0 Site Location and History (Figs.1 and 2)

The parcel of land under redevelopment, centred on NGR SK 10973952, is located on the eastern side of Ashbourne Road and immediately to the north of the Queen's Arms Public House. Prior to the commencement of building work, the physical appearance of the site was that of overgrown, rough pasture, with some dumping of modern waste materials (domestic refuse and building debris) on the ground surface.

The site lies to the east of the known limits of the Roman fort (Esmonde Cleary and Ferris, 1996) and away from the Roman *vicus* (Bell, 1986). It is also situated outside the medieval centre of Rocester, but within an area from which prehistoric material has been recovered (Staffordshire SMR PRN 02533). Historic maps contain no reference to any structural activity on the site and it appears that the land has been under pasture since the mid-19th century (Mould, 1996).

4.0 Methodology

Surface stripping had already been completed when the archaeologist undertook the first visit to the site, but a residual layer of topsoil was evident over much of the area, effectively masking any surviving archaeology. Subsequent excavations, for the building foundations and service trenches, were undertaken by a mechanical digger, fitted with a 0.6m-wide, toothed bucket. Wall foundation trenches were typically excavated to a depth of 0.75-0.85m.

Any *in situ* archaeology exposed by the groundworks was hand-cleaned, then detailed on pre-printed *pro-forma* record cards for features and contexts, supplemented by plans, section drawings (1:200 or 1:20 scale, as appropriate), and photography. Where archaeological features were absent, stratigraphic sequences of the soil layers were recorded. All artefacts recovered from individual contexts or spoilheaps were bagged and transported to the BUFAU Finds Room at Birmingham University, where they were cleaned, identified, and catalogued. These records and finds form part of the site archive, at present held by BUFAU, but eventually to be deposited at the Potteries Museum, Stoke-on-Trent.

5.0 Results

During the initial visit on November 16th, the archaeologist observed that the land had been stripped of vegetation and the upper level of the topsoil (5000) scraped off, in preparation for building work to commence. However, the developers were not intending to strip-away the remaining topsoil residue, which covered much of the site and effectively masked any surviving archaeological features that may have been present. A systematic inspection of the topsoil spoilheaps yielded pottery sherds dating from the Roman, Medieval and Post-Medieval periods. One worked flint flake was also recovered from the spoil.

On the next three visits (November 16th, 20th and 23rd), the archaeologist observed a mechanical digger excavating two service trenches, aligned east-west and in close proximity to an existing, ceramic service pipe of similar alignment. Once the site has been fully developed, all three services would lie beneath the scheduled public road providing access to the houses (Fig. 2). The sides of the freshly-cut trenches were closely inspected, but no features of archaeological interest were apparent. However, these excavations did serve to illustrate the site stratigraphy in that locale. The bottom of the trench cut into a layer of river gravels (5003), some 0.6m below the surface of the topsoil. Overlying the gravel was a thin, irregular layer of orange-brown, silty-sand (5002) which, in turn, was overlain by a 0.25m-thick layer of brown, clayey-silt (5001). Above context 5001 was the topsoil (5000), which had an average thickness of 0.3m.

With the exception of layer 5003, all contexts contained a sparse scattering of charcoal flecks throughout their matrices. One sherd of Roman pottery was recovered from layer 5002, whilst context 5001 yielded a number of sherds dating from the Roman and Medieval periods. The topsoil (5000) contained large amounts of Post-Medieval household detritus, including numerous pottery and glass sherds, plus fragments of modern building debris.

On November 28th, the archaeologist attended the site to watch the completion of the building foundation trench in Plot 2. Inspection of the sides of the excavation revealed that an archaeological feature (F500) had been encountered in the extreme northeast corner of the trench (Fig. 2). The V-shaped cut of F500, which contained one fill (5004), could be seen in subsoil layers 5002 and 5003, but did not extend up through layer 5001.

The purpose of the feature was not immediately apparent and the trench was not of sufficient depth to expose the full profile of the cut. Whilst cleaning the sections, in preparation for recording, four sherds of Roman pottery, part of the jawbone of a small animal and a lump of fired clay were recovered from deposit 5004. Similar cleaning of 5004 in the base of the trench yielded part of a copper-alloy fibula brooch, in a good state of preservation.

In addition to recording feature F500, the full extent of the foundation trench and the spoil from its excavation were checked for artefacts – a practice used by the archaeologist on every visit to the site. Layer 5001 yielded several large sherds of Roman pottery and the bowl of a clay pipe, whilst a worked flint was recovered from layer 5002.

The next scheduled visit to the site was on December 6th. The foundation trenches for dwellings in Plots 10 and 11 had been dug, and partly backfilled with concrete. Unfortunately, the level of concrete was such as to mask subsoil layers 5002 and 5003, and there was no sign of features in any sections of layer 5001 that were still exposed. A check of the spoil from the excavation produced no finds.

The archaeologist attended the site on the afternoon of December 12th, when the foundation trenches for adjacent Building Plots 7, 8 and 9 were under excavation. Inspection of the excavated lengths of trench confirmed that a number of features had been cut at various locations (Fig. 2). These features were hand-cleaned and recorded, a task that necessitated a further visit to the site on the following day.

The largest feature took the form of a V-shaped, linear ditch (F503), cut into subsoil layers 5002 and 5003, and sealed beneath layer 5001. It ran through the three plots and had a north-south alignment. The ditch varied in width from 1.6-2.0m, but its full depth and profile were not ascertained. By the end of the day, the network of foundation trenches had dissected this feature in three locations, namely:- F503.00, F503.01 and F503.02. On the following day, the ditch was intersected for a fourth time, but introduction of concrete into the foundation trench prevented its detailed recording.

It was noted that the compact deposits now filling the original ditch-cut varied along its length, but were predominantly silty in nature. Two infills (5010 and 5011) were apparent in section F503.00. The lower deposit, 5011, yielded a single sherd of Medieval pottery during cleaning. Section F503.01 contained one infill (5006), which yielded sherds of Roman pottery, whereas ditch section F503.02 contained three infills (5007, 5008 and 5009). Four pottery sherds were recovered from deposit 5007, one clearly identifiable as Samian ware and the others were dated as Medieval, whilst 5009 yielded one sherd of Roman pottery.

A second ditch (F502) was visible in the foundation trench for the west-facing, house wall in Plot 8 (Fig. 2). Only a short section of ditch was apparent, but it appeared to have a northwest-southeast alignment. In common with ditch F503, the feature cut subsoil layers 5002 and 5003, and was sealed by subsoil 5001. It contained one infill (5005), a

sandy silt, which yielded a number of pottery sherds of the Roman period (including mortaria, amphora and Samian ware), a tile fragment and a piece of bone.

An east-west stretch of trench, excavated for the foundations of the partitioning wall between houses on Plots 8 and 9, had truncated an earlier feature (F504; Fig.2). The feature consisted of a U-shaped cut, in subsoil layers 5002 and 5003, visible only in the south-facing wall of the trench. The exact purpose of F504 was not readily identifiable, but it was most probably the terminal of ditch F502, on whose alignment it ran. Its infill comprised a compact, sandy-silt deposit (5012), which yielded a small lump of fired clay during hand-cleaning. No artefacts were found within the spoil from this section of the trench.

An archaeologist next attended the site on January 16th 2002, when excavation of the foundation trenches for the building in Plot 3 (Fig. 2) was scheduled. The sides of the trenches were closely examined for archaeological features and artefacts, but none of any antiquity was apparent. Artefacts within the excavation spoil were limited to Post-Medieval household detritus and building debris, principally from modern disturbances within subsoil layer 5001, and topsoil residues (5000).

The archaeologist's site visit on February 20th was scheduled to coincide with further groundworks, but the planned excavations were postponed. Foundation trenches in Plots 4, 5 and 6 were partially dug on March 12th 2002, with an archaeologist in attendance. The foundation trench for the south-facing wall in Plot 6 cut through a V-shaped ditch (F505) aligned north-south and sealed beneath subsoil layer 5001. The feature was visible in both sides of the trench and contained two fills (5013 and 5014), neither of which yielded artefacts. When F505 was plotted on the site plan (Fig. 2), it was found to have the right alignment and location to be a continuation of ditch F503.

An inspection of the foundation trench for the north-facing wall of Plot 6 failed to reveal any further evidence for ditch F505/F503, indicating that the feature terminated within this plot. However, a large, U-shaped cut (F506) was evident in the north-facing section of the trench (Fig. 2), which was infilled with a root-congested, silty deposit (5016; buried topsoil), plus a heterogeneous mix of silty soil and red sand (5015). No finds were recovered from either context, but the feature had the appearance of a modern cut.

Excavation of the foundation trench for the south-facing wall of the dwelling in Plot 5, lying to the north of Plot 6, revealed the existence of a non-symmetrical, U-shaped ditch (F507; Fig.2). It was visible in both sides of the trench and seemed to be aligned northwest-southeast. The marked differences in depth of the opposing cross-sections of the ditch showed that the feature was rapidly shallowing-out at this point, terminating immediately to the south of the foundation trench. This observation was supported by the absence of the feature in the foundation trenches in Plot 6, approximately one metre to the south. Ditch F507 contained one infill (5017), which yielded sherds of Roman pottery.

The foundation trench for the north-facing wall of the dwelling in Plot 4 (Fig.2), to the north of Plot 5, showed no evidence for a continuation of ditch F507. Unfortunately, the actual point at which feature F507 terminated was not ascertained, as excavation of further trenches that cut across its expected course (i.e. those for the north-facing wall in Plot 5 and the south-facing wall in Plot 4) were undertaken later than planned. As a consequence, an archaeologist was not able to attend the site whilst these trenches were being dug, or during the short period they remained open, prior to back-filling with concrete.

Groundworks for the dwelling in Plot 1 and the on-site garages (Fig. 2) took place in May 2002. A day-visit to the site, by an archaeologist, was duly scheduled for May 13th, when trenches would be open and/or in the process of being excavated. However, the foundation trenches for Plot 1 were not completed during the visit and, as a result, an archaeologist also attended the site on the following day. No features were observed in the foundation trenches of Plot 1, but a number of Roman and Medieval pottery sherds were recovered from subsoil layer 5001.

6.0 The Finds

The artefacts from the site were placed in labelled, self-seal bags and taken to the BUFAU Finds Room, where they were cleaned, marked, identified and catalogued.

Pottery Sherds

As regards the pottery sherds, the finds were dated and quantified, and are tabulated below for ease of comparison.

Context	Roman Pottery	Medieval Pottery	Post-Med Pottery
5000 (Topsoil)	6 (2 G; 4 O)	6	1
5001 (Subsoil Layer)	12 (1 G; 3 O; 1 D; 3 S; 3 M; 1 W)	31	4
5002 (Subsoil Layer)	2 (1 G; 1 O)	-	-
5004 (Infill, F500)	4 (1 G; 1 O; 2 W)	-	-
5005 (Infill, F502)	13 (1 G(R); 2 S; 3 M; 1 A; 6 W)	-	-
5006 (Infill, F503.01)	2 (G)	-	-
5007 (Infill, F503.02)	1 (S)	3	-
5009 (Infill, F503.02)	1 (G)	-	-
5011 (Infill, F503.00)	-	1	-
5017 (Infill, F507)	4 (1 G; 1 O; 2 W)	-	-
Unstratified	3 (2 G; 1 O)	1	-
Totals	48	42	5

Key: G = Grey ware; (R) = Rusticated; O = Oxidised; D = Derbyshire ware; S = Samian; M = Mortaria; A= Amphora; W= White ware.

Animal Bone

Single animal bones were recovered from contexts 5002, 5004, and 5005, and one bone was found on a spoilheap (i.e. unstratified).

Tile

Tile fragments were found in contexts 5001 and 5005 (2 fragments), but they were small and undiagnostic.

Fired Clay

Three fragments of fired clay were recovered from contexts 5012 and 5017 (2 fragments). They were small and abraded, and of no diagnostic value.

Flint

Four pieces of flint were recovered, namely: a retouched flake of high quality black flint (from the topsoil, 5000); an undiagnostic, recorticated waste flake (from subsoil 5001); a retouched blade and another undiagnostic flake (both from subsoil 5002). These were all worked in antiquity and are possibly of Neolithic date (Lynne Bevan *pers. comm.*).

Clay Pipe

Two intact clay pipe bowls were recovered from the site. Context 5001 yielded an Oswald Type 22 (Oswald, 1975, Fig 4) dated to circa 1810–1840. An Oswald Type 24 (Oswald, *op. cit.*), dated to 1730–1780, was recovered from a spoilheap (i.e. unstratified).

Slag

One small piece of non-metallic slag was recovered from subsoil layer 5001.

Iron

One (partial) iron nail head was recovered from subsoil layer 5001. Although the nail was heavily corroded, the shape was still identifiable.

Copper Alloy

One copper-alloy fibula brooch was recovered from context 5004. The brooch was decorated with a lozenge-shaped design on the bow and was in excellent condition under the encrusted soil. The brooch is similar to one recovered from Langton Down, Dorset (Hattatt, 2000, Fig 159:905) and is dated to the 1st Century AD.

7.0 Disussion

The topsoil and immediate subsoil layers across the site had been heavily-disturbed by Post-Medieval activity. This was evidenced by a large number of modern service trenches, a proliferation of shallow disturbances and dumpage of building debris/household detritus within the area. Not surprisingly, the topsoil layer (5000) contained artefacts dating from the Neolithic, Roman, Medieval and Post-Medieval periods. This was also true of subsoil layer 5001, which underlay the topsoil. Subsoil layer 5002, sandwiched between context 5001 and natural deposits of river gravels (5003), yielded prehistoric flints and sherds of Roman pottery.

Features of archaeological interest were apparent at a depth of circa 0.5m beneath the current ground surface, cutting deposits 5002 and 5003, and sealed beneath subsoil 5001. A north-south aligned ditch (F503/F505) ran across the site, whose infills contained both

Roman and Medieval pottery. The lower infill (5011) in ditch section F503.00 yielded a single sherd of Medieval pottery, but no artefacts were recovered from the upper fill (5010). Section F503.01 contained one infill (5006), which yielded two sherds of Roman pottery. Three deposits infilled the ditch-cut in section F503.02 and the earliest of those (5009) yielded a single sherd, dating to the Roman period. The middle fill (5008) produced no finds, but the upper infill (5007) yielded one sherd of Roman pottery and three sherds from the Medieval period. The dating evidence for ditch F503/F505 is therefore not conclusive and there is a number of possible scenarios. The feature may be Medieval in origin and the Roman pottery sherds in the infills are residual. A less-likely alternative is that the ditch may have been cut during the Roman occupation, but not substantially backfilled until the Medieval period.

Feature F500 (a cut of unknown purpose) contained a single infill (5004), which yielded a number of Roman pottery sherds. The same was true of ditch F502 (infill 5005) and ditch F507 (infill, 5017). All three features are therefore of the Roman period. If, as the evidence suggests, section F504 was the terminal of ditch F502, then that feature must also date to the Roman period.

The Roman pottery does not include many diagnostic sherds, but a mid-2nd-century date, possibly Antonine, for most of the material would place Roman activity at the Queen's Arms site contemporaneous with the third fort at Rocester, which lies to the east of the site.

8.0 Acknowledgements

The watching brief was undertaken by Roy Krakowicz, supplemented with a single site visit by Melissa Conway. This report was written by Roy Krakowicz and edited by Iain Ferris, the Project Manager at BUFAU. The finds were processed under the supervision of Erica Macey, who also collated data on their identification and dating. The figures were prepared by John Halsted.

Thanks are due to the on-site contractors for their assistance and patience throughout the period of the watching brief.

9.0 References

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Fig. 1

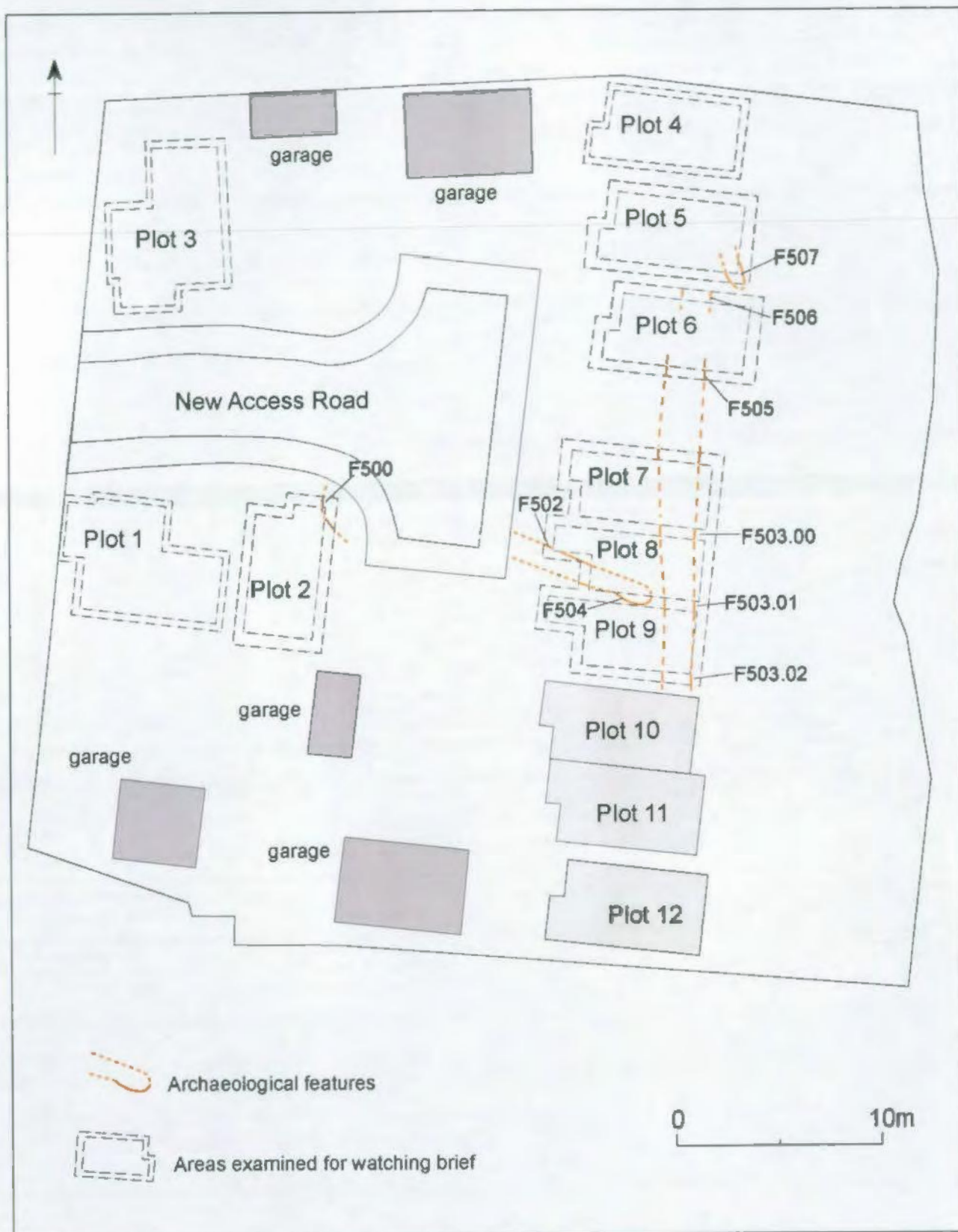


Fig. 2

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