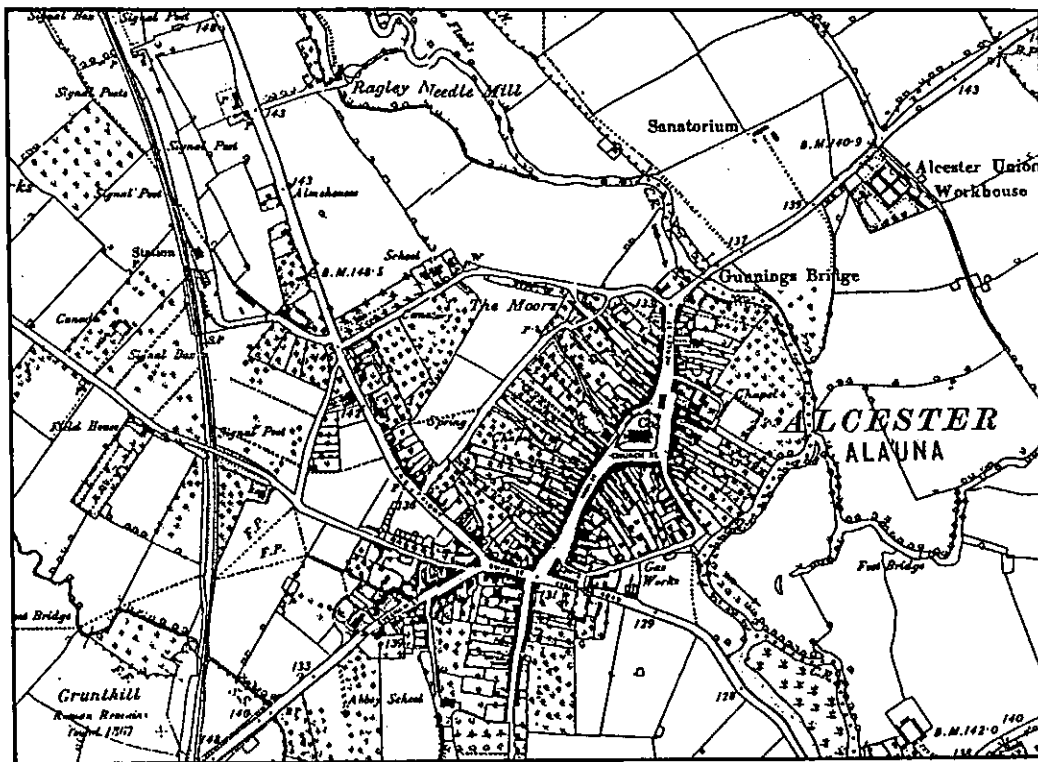


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Archaeological Evaluation at  
The Bell Inn, Evesham Street,  
Alcester, Warwickshire



October 1999

Inv# 11862  
EWA 6769  
MWA 497 - extend area

# Archaeological Evaluation at The Bell Inn, Evesham Street, Alcester, Warwickshire

## Contents

- Summary
- 1. Introduction
- 2. Location
- 3. Aims and Methods of the Evaluation
- 4. Archaeological and Historical Background
- 5. Excavation of Trenches
- 6. Finds
- 7. Conclusions

Acknowledgements

Bibliography

Appendix A: List of Finds

## List of Figures

Cover: Detail from the First Edition 1:10560 Ordnance Survey map of 1886

Fig. 1: Site Location

Fig. 2: Location of Trenches

Fig. 3: Plans

Fig. 4: Sections

Fig. 5: Trench 1, from south (Neg 1/21)

Fig. 6: Trench 3, from east (Neg 1/33)

Report 9937  
October 1999

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## Summary

1. 8. 13 spot  
Iron ore head

Archaeological evaluation of land behind The Bell Inn, Evesham Street, Alcester involved the excavation of three trial trenches. The site lies within the extramural area of the Roman town and previous observations to the rear of the Inn had recorded a stone floor with Roman pottery, some pits, gravel surfaces and the grave of a child of about six. The extent of gravel surfaces over this area of the town has led to suggestions that there was a market place here. All three trial trenches also encountered surviving Romano-British remains including further gravel surfaces and traces of the foundations of up to three stone buildings. A post-medieval boundary ditch was also recorded.

### 1. Introduction

1.1 A pre-planning application enquiry has been made regarding residential development on land to the rear of The Bell Inn, Evesham Street, Alcester, Warwickshire. Because the site of the proposed development lies within the area of the Romano-British town of Alcester, an area of potential archaeological importance, it was recommended that an archaeological field evaluation should take place prior to a decision being made over any planning application.

1.2 A programme of fieldwork, in accordance with a brief prepared by the Planning Archaeologist on behalf of the Planning Authority, was commissioned from the Warwickshire Museum and carried out in August 1999. This report presents the result of that programme.

### 2. Location

2.1 The site of the potential development lies to the rear (south) of The Bell Inn, Evesham Street, Alcester, Warwickshire, east of Birch Abbey. It is centred around national grid reference SP 088 572. The total area of the potential proposal affects some 0.20 hectares which is presently the site of a public house and associated car park.

2.2 The underlying geology of the proposed development area is First and Second River Terrace Gravel (British Geological Survey 1974).

### 3. Aims and Methods of the Evaluation

3.1 The evaluation was designed to discover the date, nature and state of preservation of any archaeological deposits which might be present in the area of the potential development.

3.2 The work undertaken involved the examination of historical and early map evidence as well as aerial photographs and records of archaeological remains in the area. This was followed by excavation of three trial trenches located so as to sample the whole of the area under consideration.

### 4. Archaeological and Historical Background

#### *Romano-British occupation*

4.1 In the Romano-British period Alcester was a major town (Warwickshire Sites and Monuments Record No. WA 4495) probably known as *Alauna* (Fig. 1). The first

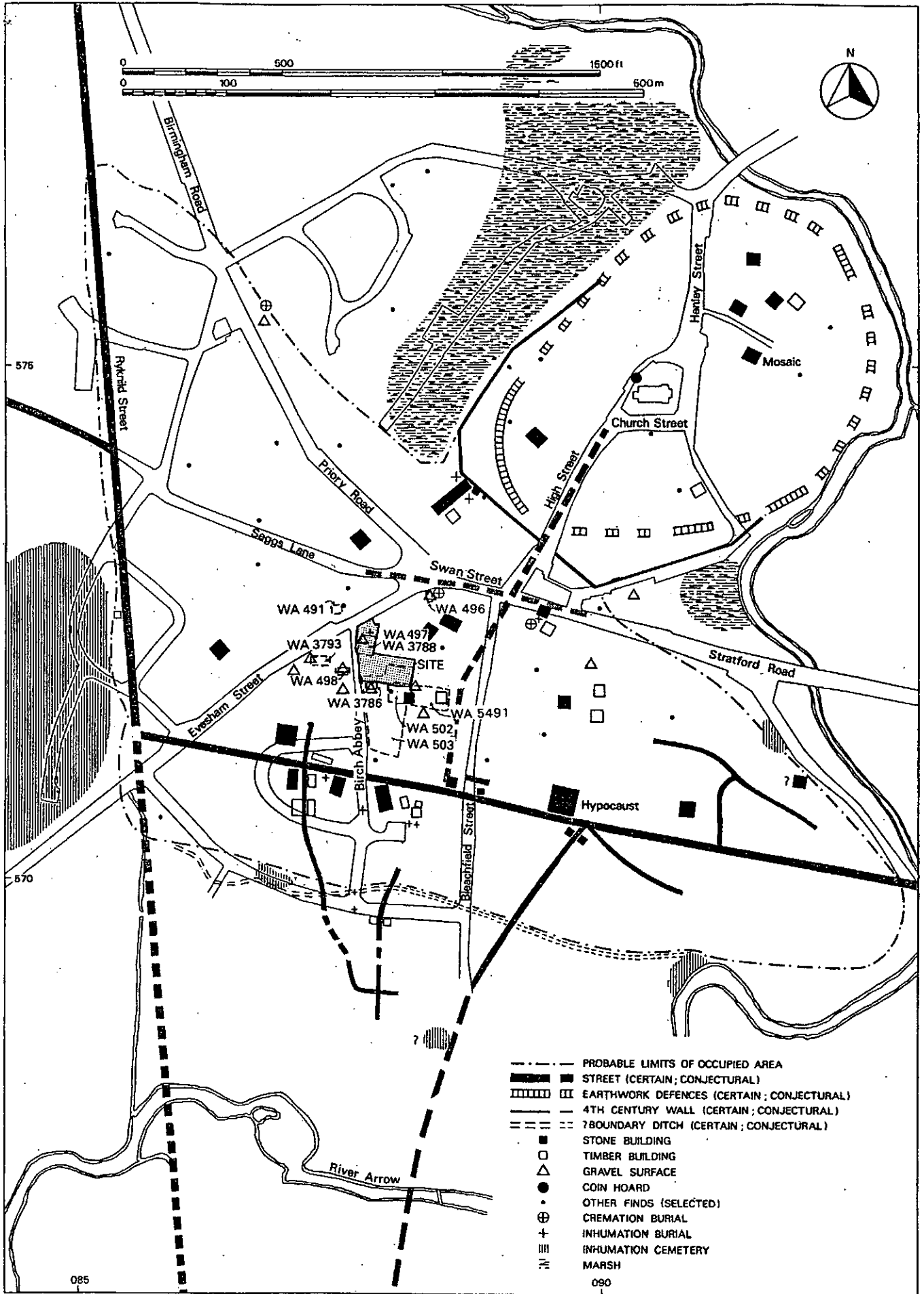


Fig. 1: Site Location

Roman presence was military, with a fort originally established on the hill south of the river and succeeded by another in the Bleachfield Street area. The town seems to have first grown around the latter fort, and then continued to expand as a civilian settlement after the army moved northwards, the occupation lasting through the Roman period until the end of the 4th century at least. The core of the town, which was defended by a rampart in the 2nd century and by a wall in the 4th century, lay on either side of Henley Street and High Street. There was also a large suburban area to the south, extending from east of Bleachfield Street, over the former fort, to north of Evesham Street and Seggs Lane (Warwickshire Museum 1995, 3).

4.2 The site of the potential development lies within the Romano-British town but to the west of the later walled area and outside the parts of the town which are a Scheduled Ancient Monument (Warwickshire No 128). A large number of archaeological excavations and observations have been carried out in the vicinity of the site.

4.3 In the 1920s B. Davis excavated in the Abbey or Nursery Gardens (the allotments to the south of the site) finding gravel surfaces and stone walls and quantities of Romano-British pottery, coins and other material (SMR WA 503; Cracknell 1985, 37). The precise location of this work, some of which may have extended into the development site, is however uncertain.

4.4 Immediately to the south on the Birch Abbey frontage an area c.11m x 9.5m was excavated in 1984 (SMR WA 3786; Cracknell 1985, 25-38). This excavation, which produced 0.5-0.7m of preserved Romano-British stratigraphy covered by c.0.50m of post-medieval/modern overburden, gives a good guide as to what remains may be expected in the development area. The earliest features were two parallel beam slots possibly belonging to a building of 1st-2nd century date. In the 2nd-3rd century a gravel surface was laid which was then relaid and patched continually until the 3rd-4th century. A total of at least seven successive surfaces were recorded. Periodically the surfaces were cut by postholes for timber buildings, but these seemed to be short-lived. The animal bone assemblage was distinctive for the number of butchered cattle scapulae, suggesting that cattle may have been dismembered on the site.

4.5 To the south-east a small area was excavated in 1956-8 in the garden of Linby House on Birch Abbey within the former allotments (SMR WA 502; Hughes 1958, 17). This revealed occupation from the late 1st to the 4th century, a considerable area of flag paving with one posthole in the middle of a large paved area. In 1969 and 1972-3 larger scale excavations to the north of the former Bar-o-Mix factory on Bleachfield Street (SMR WA 5491; Taylor 1973; Cracknell 1985, 37) revealed a number of gravel surfaces and timber buildings dating from the Flavian period to the 4th century, some supported by earth fast posts. There was also a stone-walled, mortar-floored building and an early pit with four items of cavalry equipment which may relate to the early fort.

4.6 Another excavation at this time on the west side of Birch Abbey opposite the development site (SMR WA 498; Taylor 1972) revealed a Claudian coin sealed by a series of seven cobbled surfaces covering the whole area. Apart from a small rubbish pit and three postholes there was no trace of structure. Further gravel surfaces were also noted in a watching brief to the rear of 30 Evesham Street in 1983 (SMR WA 3793).

4.7 The common factor in all these excavations has been the number of gravel and cobbled surfaces encountered. These seem to have covered a considerable area stretching from Evesham Street to west of Bleachfield Street, and south from Swan Street to the about a third of the way down Birch Abbey, and it has been

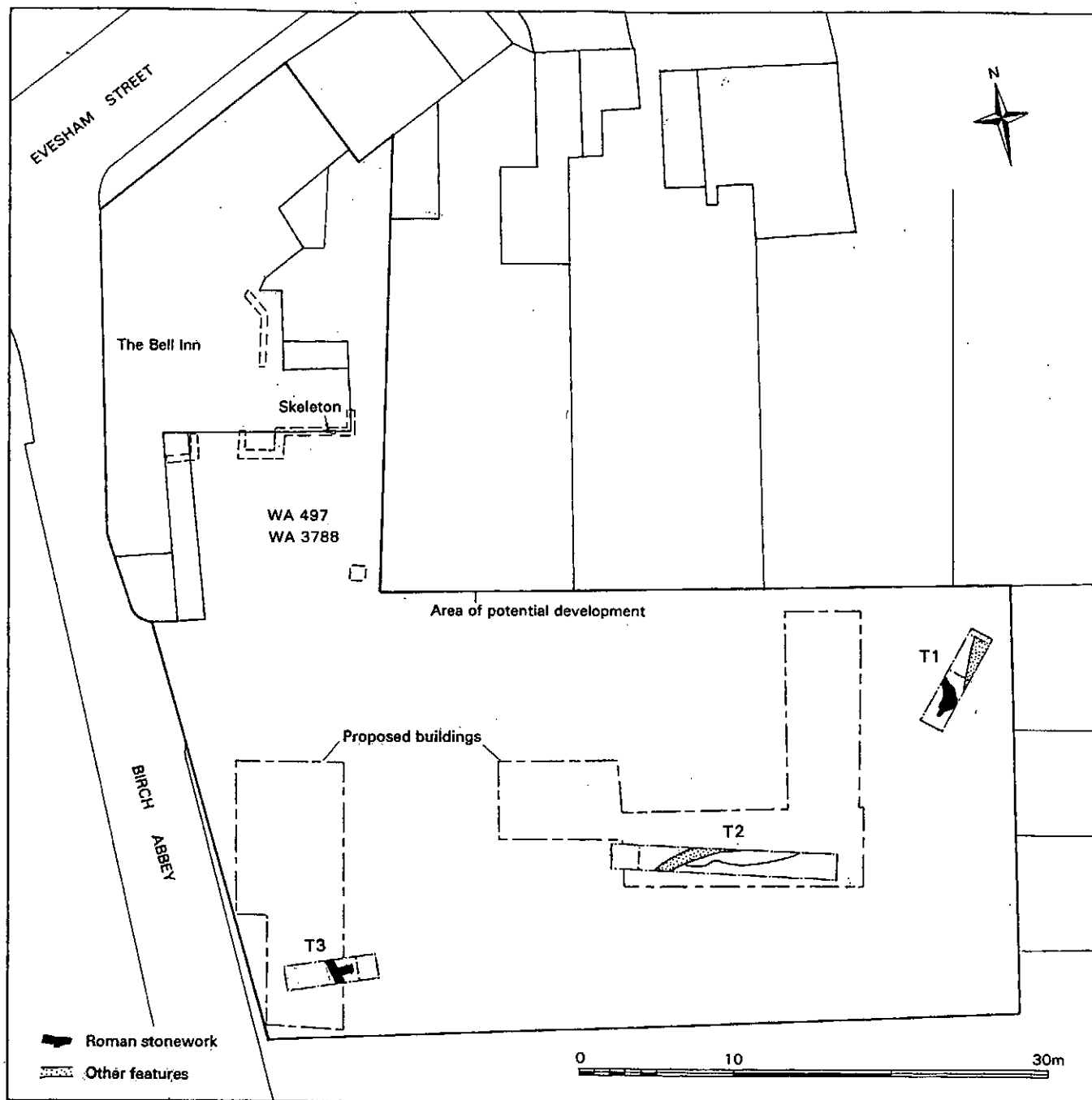


Fig. 2: Location of Trenches

suggested that they represent a market place in the centre of the Roman town (Cracknell 1985, 59-60).

4.8 North of Evesham Street a small excavation in 1956-8 (SMR WA 491; Hughes 1958, 15) revealed a number of Romano-British rubbish pits, while at Swan Street a 3rd/4th century cremation urn was recovered (SMR WA 496). The latter is one of a number of burials of late Roman date which have been recorded from this area and to the south. As burial was not supposed to take place within settlements this may reflect an abandonment of parts of the built up area in the later period.

4.9 Apart from the unlocated work in the allotments, other observations have been carried out previously within the potential development site itself. In 1930 a rough stone floor at a depth of 3ft (0.91m), together with some Romano-British pottery, was

observed by B. Davis in the bottom of a trench dug at the back of the Bell Inn (SMR WA 497; Booth in Cracknell 1985, 39), though again its precise location is unknown. In 1982, following the discovery of a human skull in a foundation trench for a new toilet extension a watching brief was carried out which recorded a probable pit sealed by a series of gravel surfaces and make up layers which were cut by another pit and a late Roman burial of a child of about six, together with quantities of 2nd century pottery (SMR WA 3788; Booth in Cracknell 1985, 39). A stanchion pit to the south revealed further gravel surfaces.

### *Post-Roman activity*

4.10 There is little evidence for post-Roman activity in the area, which lay towards the western extent of the medieval town of Alcester. The main area of the medieval town lay again either side of Henley Street, Church Street and High Street. The long narrow properties along either side of the northern half of Bleachfield Street also have the appearance of medieval planning. The properties along Evesham Street, including The Bell, look as though they were laid out at a later date, although this could have been in the medieval or early post-medieval periods. They are shown on the earliest detailed maps of the town which date to the mid-18th century (Sutton 1754). At this time the southern part of the development area was part of a separate property which appears to have been open space (or a paddock) between the open field to the west and the built up area to the north and east. Birch Abbey may have existed as a track leading to a building on the site of the later Abbey School.

4.11 By 1887 the southern part of the site is shown as orchard, while there were buildings along both frontages of The Bell to the north (Ordnance Survey 1887, Cover). By 1905 (Ordnance Survey 1905) the southern part of the site formed part of allotment gardens along the east side of Abbey Lane (Birch Abbey). By 1971 the southern part of the site had become a separate property unit; were a few small outbuildings around its edge, but the frontage has remained unbuilt-up (Ordnance Survey 1971).

## 5. Excavation of Trenches

5.1 Trench 1 was located on the eastern edge of the site, while Trenches 2 and 3 were largely within the footprints of the proposed buildings to the south and south-east of The Bell Inn (Fig. 2).

### *Trench 1 (Figs 3-5)*

5.2 Trench 1 measured 5m long by 1.6m wide and was aligned roughly NE-SW in the north-east corner of the potential development area. The geological natural sand and gravel (110) was encountered at a depth of 1.8m below the present ground surface (c.40.91m aod). At the north-east end of the trench was a wide linear cut (111), probably a foundation trench as in the bottom there were the facing stones of a wall (108) aligned roughly north-south (Fig. 3, 1a; Fig. 4, Section B). Behind the wall face there was a layer of gravel (107). The wall was undated, but presumably Romano-British.

5.3 Following the demolition of the wall the foundation cut was levelled up with a layer of compact gravel (106) which spread out to form a surface which covered the whole trench area (Fig. 3, 1b). A single sherd of Romano-British pottery was recovered from this layer, which was itself overlain by a spread of stone rubble (105). This stone spread may have been the remains of *in situ* walling or may have originated in a nearby building. A further undated gravel surface (104) overlay the rubble 105. Although little dating evidence was recovered there seems little doubt that these features were Romano-British. They correlate with gravel surfaces



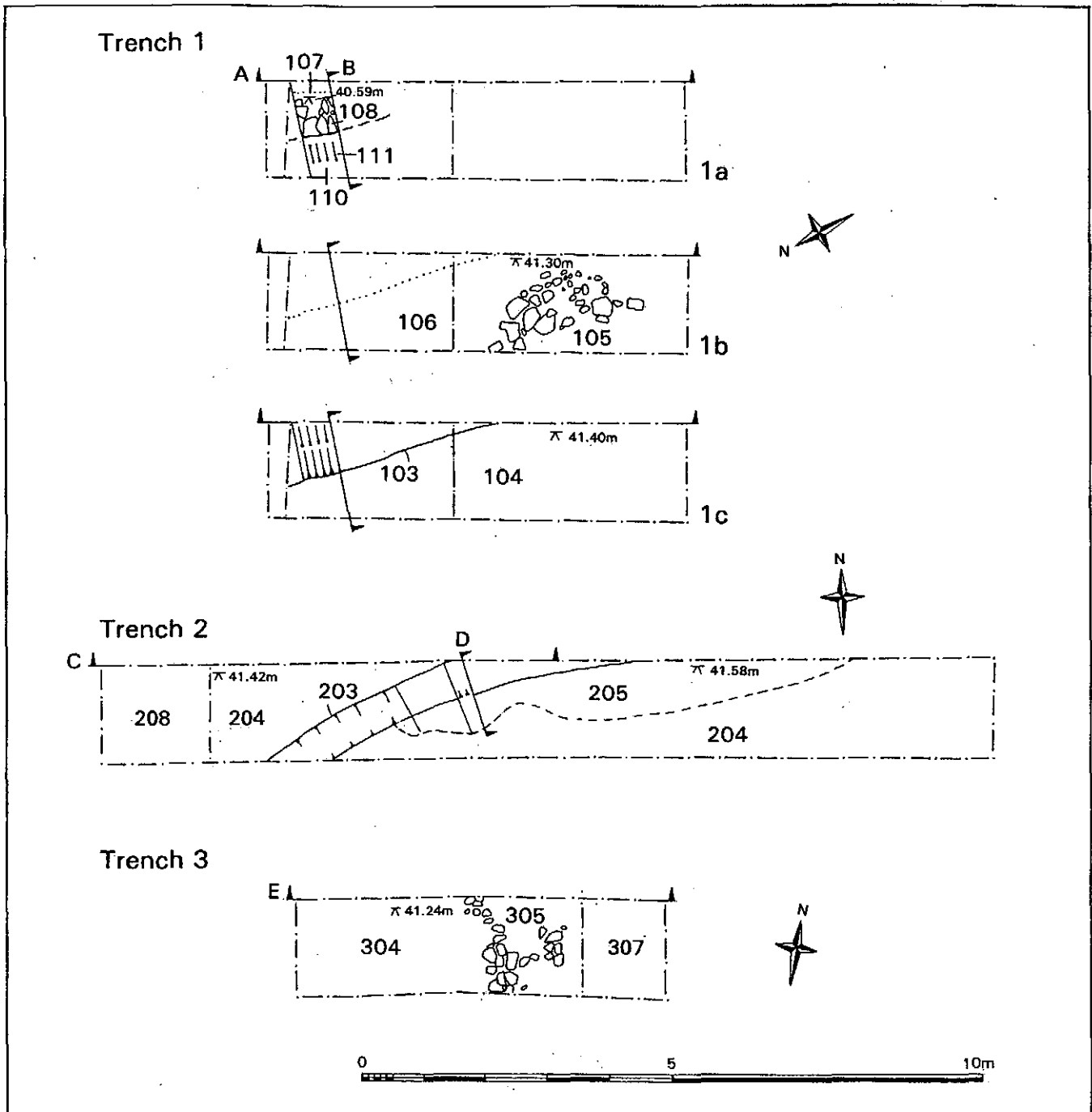


Fig. 3: Plans

recorded in Trenches 2 and 3 and with similar layers recorded from previous excavations in the vicinity.

5.4 Gravel surface 104 was cut by a north-south ditch (103), coincidentally on the same alignment as Wall 108 (Fig. 3, 1c). The brown silty clay ditch fill (109) contained pottery of 17th-early 18th century date along with some residual Romano-British sherds. This ditch ran 1m from the existing eastern site boundary, and along with a fence or bank may have formed the boundary at this earlier period.

5.5 Following the infilling of Ditch 103 a thick layer of black sandy silt loam (102) up to 0.85m deep developed over the whole of the trench. Some of this, at least, was levelling material deposited here in recent times, according to the local inhabitants,

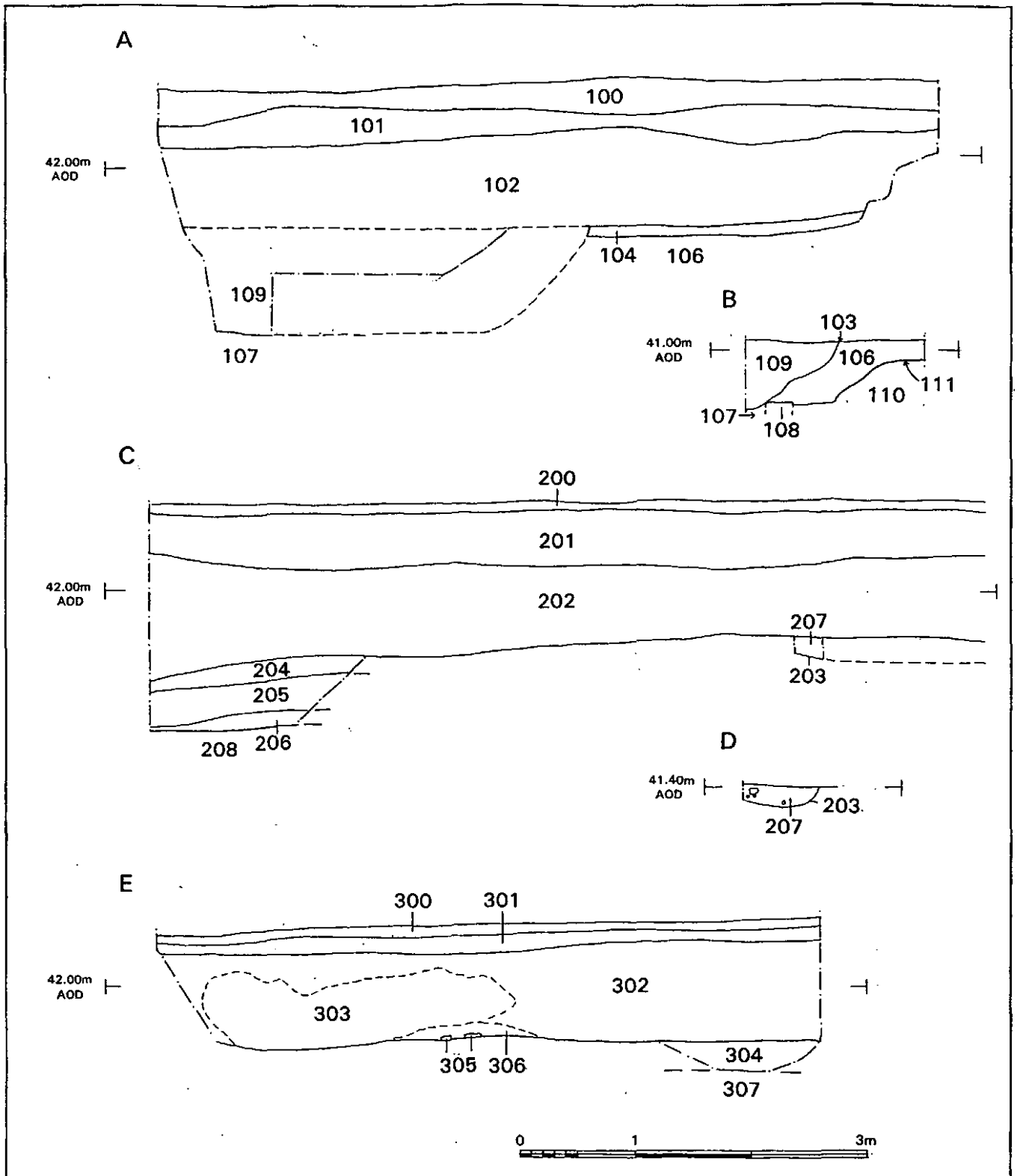


Fig. 4: Sections

but its character probably derives from the former use of the site as allotments. This deposit was overlain by the hardcore make-up (101) and tarmac (100) of the modern car park.

#### Trench 2 (Figs 3-4)

5.6 Trench 2 measured 15m long by 1.6m wide and was aligned roughly east-west in the centre of the potential development area (Fig. 2). The geological natural (208)

was encountered at the west end of the trench at a depth of 1.96m below the present ground surface (40.78m aod). It was overlain by a two undated gravel layers (206 and 204), separated by a layer of black silty clay (205). The gravel layers were probably Romano-British surfaces similar to those recorded in Trenches 1 and 3.

5.7 The upper surface 204 was cut by a small ditch (203) aligned SW-NE which may once have formed the rear boundary for properties fronting onto Evesham Street to the north-west. Unfortunately no datable material was recovered from the fill of the ditch (207) but it is likely to have been of medieval or post-medieval origin. The backfilled ditch was overlain by a black sandy silt loam layer (202), similar to 102 in Trench 1. This was overlain by the hardcore make-up (201) and tarmac (200) of the modern car park.

### *Trench 3 (Figs 3-4, 6)*

5.8 Trench 3 measured 5m long by 1.6m wide and was aligned roughly east-west in the south-west corner of the site (Fig. 2). At the east end of the trench the geological natural (307) was encountered at a depth of 1.32m below the present ground surface (c.41.23m aod).

5.9 This was overlain by a gravel layer (304), undated but similar to those recorded in Trenches 1 and 2. The gravel was overlain in the centre of the trench by a spread of rubble blocks (305) which appeared to represent the remains of a wall aligned NW-SE with a possible spur running off it at right angles to the north-east. The wall may have belonged to a Romano-British building or possibly have formed part of a boundary. Wall 305 was overlain by a spread containing frequent pebbles (306) along with a quantity of Romano-British pottery and a fine iron axehead of typical Roman form. It is not clear whether this was the remains of yet another yard surface or make-up over the wall.

5.10 The whole of the trench was overlain by a layer of black sandy silt loam (302), containing medieval and 17th/18th century pottery, similar to those in Trenches 1 and 2 (102, 202), though here it contained more pebbles towards the western end of the trench (303). The soil layer was overlain by the hardcore make-up (301) and tarmac (300) of the modern car park.

## **6. Finds**

6.1 The finds from the trial trenching included Romano-British pottery, ironwork, animal bone and shell, and Post-medieval pottery, ironwork, clay pipe, glass and animal bone (for a full list see Appendix A). The most significant find was an iron axe head from layer 306. This was a typical Romano-British form (Manning 1985, 14-16, Type 4, Pl. 17, B5), found in contexts of the late Iron Age and throughout the Roman period. The relatively small (24 sherds) and undiagnostic group of Roman pottery recovered included Severn Valley ware, Black Burnished ware (BB1) from Dorset, brown slipped colour coat, and pink grogged ware from the Milton Keynes area.

6.2 The clay tobacco pipe fragments were all stems but one was encased in a fragment of probable kiln structure, suggesting pipe manufacture somewhere in the vicinity.

## **7. Conclusions**

7.1 Evidence for Romano-British occupation was recorded in all three excavated trenches. Stratified deposits from this period were encountered at between 0.90m



Fig. 5: Trench 1, from south (Neg 1/21)



Fig. 6: Trench 3, from east (Neg 1/33)

and 1.35m below the present ground surface and measured 0.25-0.90m thick. This corresponds to the earlier observations in the north part of the site where the child skeleton found in 1982 lay at a depth of 0.7-0.8m and the 1930 record of a stone floor at about 0.9m (3ft) down.

7.2 The majority of the remains were in the form of gravel surfaces, which are similar to others encountered by previous excavations in the vicinity and which have been interpreted as forming a possible market place. However Trenches 1 and 3 also located the remains of possible stone buildings, in addition to the possibly building related 'floor' recorded to the north. The finds represent a small but fairly typical group from this part of Alcester. The only notable object was the iron axe head, but the largish quantity of animal bone was in reasonable condition.

7.3 It is likely that similar well-preserved, stratified Romano-British remains extend over the rest of the area of the potential development. The one exception to this is the area of the existing buildings of the public house, where the remains are likely to have been disturbed or destroyed by cellarage, wall foundations and service trenches. By contrast, the southern part of the site has always remained relatively undeveloped, the only recorded buildings being some small 20th century outbuildings to the rear of the plot.

7.4 The child skeleton found in the 1982-3 foundation trench is likely to reflect a general scatter of late Roman burials across the town rather than a cemetery in this vicinity. However the possibility of other burials within the site cannot be ruled out.

## Acknowledgements

The Warwickshire Museum would like to thank Rushton Trading Ltd for commissioning this work and Stansgate Planning Consultants for supplying copies of the plans. Work on site was carried out by Chris Jones, Rob Jones, Kevin Wright and Elaine Jamieson. This report was written by Chris Jones with drawings by Andy Isham, and edited by Catherine Coutts and Nicholas Palmer.

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## Appendix A: List of Finds

<i>Context</i>	<i>Material</i>	<i>Quantity</i>	<i>Date/Comments</i>
<b>Trench 1</b>			
Unstratified	Pottery	2	Romano-British
106	Pottery	1	Romano-British (2nd-4th cent)
106	Animal Bone	2	Cattle
106	Iron strip fragment	1	
109	Pottery	21	17th/early 18th century (18), Romano-British (3)
109	Animal Bone	4	Dog skull, Sheep
109	Iron buckle loop	1	
109	Iron nail?	1	
109	Clay Pipe	3	Stems
109	Glass	2	Post-medieval bottle
<b>Trench 2</b>			
202	Pottery	5	Romano-British
202	Animal Bone	15	Cattle
202	Glass	1	20th century
<b>Trench 3</b>			
302	Pottery	5	20th century (1), 17th/early 18th century (3), RB (1)
302	Clay Pipe	6	Stems + kiln fragment
306	Pottery	13	Romano-British
306	Animal Bone	12	Cattle
306	Iron nail	1	
306	Iron Axe head	1	Roman, Manning 1985, Type 4
306	Shell	1	Oyster



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