

30 Birch Abbey Alcester Warwickshire

ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF



EXPERTISE WHERE YOU NEED IT

Archaeology Warwickshire Report No 2141
JUNE 2021



*Working for
Warwickshire*

Project: 30 Birch Abbey
Commissioned by: Mr Benny Esler
Site Code: AL146
Planning Reference: 20/03537/FUL
Planning Authority: Stratford-on-Avon District Council
National Grid Reference: SP 08782 57088
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Fieldwork: Frances Bradbury ACI fA, Hannah Child PCI fA
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SUMMARY

An archaeological watching brief was undertaken during the excavation of foundation trenches for new side and rear extensions at 30 Birch Abbey, Alcester, on behalf of Mr Benny Esler.

Nearby excavations in the early 1960s revealed a large Roman villa-type building with multiple rooms. Although not adequately recorded on any surviving plans, the remains could potentially have extended across the site.

The foundations were dug into a thick cumulation deposit, often referred to as dark earth, in which a concentration of animal bone was recorded.

No unequivocally Roman finds or features were identified during the watching brief.

1 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 Planning permission (Ref. 20/03537/FUL) has been granted by Stratford-on-Avon District Council for two single storey extensions to the side and rear and a second floor extension above an existing single storey extension at 30 Birch Abbey, Alcester, Warwickshire. The site lies within an area of significant archaeological potential, within the Roman town of Alcester (*Alauna*).
- 1.2 Archaeology Warwickshire assessed the archaeological potential of the site concluding that there was potential for the development to impact upon Roman archaeological remains (Child 2021). The assessment recommended that a watching brief be required as a condition of the planning permission.
- 1.3 Archaeology Warwickshire were commissioned to carry out a Watching Brief in accordance with a Written Scheme of Investigation included within the Assessment (ibid). The fieldwork was carried out in March 2021 and this report presents the results of that work.
- 1.4 The project archive will be stored at the Warwickshire Museum under Site Code AL146. The work was carried out in accordance with the Chartered Institute for Archaeologists *Standard and guidance for an archaeological watching brief* (2020).

2 SITE LOCATION

- 2.1 The site is centred on National Grid Reference SP 08782 57088 in the south of the town of Alcester. The site includes a semi-detached house which was constructed in the early 1960s on the east side of Birch Abbey. There are further residential properties to the north, south and east of the site. The site lies c.350m north of the River Arrow.

- 2.2 The British Geological Society (BGS 2020) records the bedrock geology as Mercia Mudstone. This is a sedimentary bedrock formed in the Triassic Period, approximately 201 to 252 million years ago. There is also a superficial deposit recorded of sand and gravel from a river terrace, formed up to 3 million years ago.

3 ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Previous archaeological investigations

- 3.1 There have been a significant number of archaeological investigations in the vicinity of the site, including at least two investigations in the 1960s which potentially extended into the site. These investigations recorded extensive evidence of Roman period activity.

Roman

- 3.2 During the Roman period, Alcester was the major town in the region probably known as *Alauna* (MWA 4495). The original Roman presence was military, with a fort initially established on the hill, south of the river and almost certainly succeeded by another in the Bleachfield Street area. While the site lies c.100m west of the Scheduled Monument *Roman Town* (NHLE: 1005738), it is within the extent of the Roman town recorded by the Warwickshire HER (MWA4495).
- 3.3 Salt Way (MWA4757), aligned north-west to south-east from Droitwich, a centre of the salt industry, is purported to lie close to the north of the site. Cobbled surfaces thought to potentially be the remains of 'the east-west Romano-British street known to have run through the area' (although it is not stated by name, it is here interpreted as the Salt Way) were identified during a watching brief in 1995, to the rear of 28 Birch Abbey (EWA4147; Jones 1995).
- 3.4 An excavation by Hughes (EWA1020 & MWA4486) in the early 1960s revealed a large villa-type building with multiple rooms. Although not adequately recorded on any surviving plans, the remains were thought to have extended across the site. The Samian pottery and Roman coins recovered date the building, surrounding pits and wells to the 1st – 4th century, with a worn coin of Honorius indicating occupation into the 5th century. Another excavation by Hughes in the 1962 (EWA3016) appears to have extended into the eastern half of the site and extending c.20m to the east recorded a complex of Roman walls (thought to be separate to the EWA1020 & MWA4486 excavation).
- 3.5 The north-east corner of the site is just within the location of a Roman well (MWA504) which was excavated in 1957 (EWA1087). Located c.10m north of the site, is the location of another Roman well (MWA5497 & EWA1089), excavated in 1956.

- 3.6 The former Abbey Works, c.4m to the north-east of the site, were excavated in 2003 (MWA9880, EWA7442 & EWA10034) and revealed a large variety of Roman features. These included a road, hearth, metalworking slag, pits, postholes, gullies, beam slots, ditches, a well and foundations of stone buildings.

Early medieval

- 3.7 It has been suggested that Alcester may have been the site of a settlement in the late Anglo-Saxon period. In 1964, c.40m east of the site, Hughes found a 7th-century silver bracelet, with an unusual zoomorphic design, in his excavation south of the former Bleachfield Street Almshouses (MWA 6461).

Medieval

- 3.8 The site lies just outside of the extent of the medieval settlement of Alcester (MWA9585) as recorded by the Warwickshire HER. This area is based on the extent of the settlement recorded on the 6-inch Ordnance Survey map of 1886 (not reproduced).
- 3.9 A Roman well (MWA5497 & EWA1089), excavated in 1956 c.10m north of the site, was identified as having been re-used during the medieval period and contained medieval tile as well as two human skeletons.

Post-medieval and modern

- 3.10 A possible industrial site (MWA5489), dated to the 19th century, has been identified close to the north-east of the site. The HER provides little further detail but a previous excavation identified a well and two barrels that were set into the ground.
- 3.11 The First Edition Ordnance Survey map of 1887 (Landmark 2003a) depicts the site in a wooded area to the south of Abbey School (MWA510), a post-medieval stone building.
- 3.12 Abbey School was demolished in the early 1960s. The extant residential properties along Birch Abbey, including 30 Birch Abbey within the site were constructed shortly afterwards. The Ordnance Survey map of 1971 (Landmark 2003b) depicts the extent of the development by this date. There has been little change within the site since this date.

4 AIMS AND METHODS

- 4.1 The main aim of the work was to record any significant archaeological deposits revealed by the development, to collate the fieldwork records into an archaeological archive and present the results of the fieldwork for dissemination.
- 4.2 An experienced archaeologist was present for each period of ground disturbance when notified by the client in accordance with the WSI.
- 4.3 The work undertaken involved the examination of early map evidence as well as records of archaeological remains in the area and other publications.
- 4.4 The foundation trenches for the new extensions were excavated by a machine or by hand. The trenches were 0.62m – 0.70m wide and excavated to a depth of between 0.52m – 1.15m.

5 RESULTS

- 5.1 Geological natural light reddish-brown clayey sand (2) was only visible across the northern half of the eastern trench which was located at the rear of the property (Photo2).
- 5.2 A layer of light yellowish brown sandy clay (3) present in patches across the northern trench may also have been natural but this is not certain.
- 5.3 A cumulation deposit, up to 0.75m deep, of very dark greyish brown sandy loam (1) was present in all the trenches (Photos 1, 2, 4 & 5). The deposit included brick, tile and oyster shell fragments as well as a concentration of animal bone (Photo 3).

6 CONCLUSIONS

- 6.1 No unequivocally Roman finds or deposits were recorded in the foundation trenches. Most of the foundations did not penetrate geological natural and it remains possible that Roman features survived below the base of the trenches.
- 6.2 The 0.75m thick cumulation deposit evident across the site has been recorded in many places in Alcester, often as 'dark earth', and it appears to contain a mix of Roman and medieval material. It is closely associated with the urban Roman settlement and appears to be the result of medieval agriculture in soils developed from enriched by Roman detritus.
- 6.3 It remains possible that surviving elements of the Roman buildings identified in the 1960s remain below the base of the foundation trenches.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Archaeology Warwickshire would like to thank Mr Benny Esler for commissioning the work.

REFERENCES

British Geological Survey (BGS) 2020 *Geology of Britain Viewer*, accessed January 2021
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Jones, C, 1995 *Archaeological Observation at 28 Birch Abbey, Alcester Warwickshire County Council Report*

Landmark 2003a *First Edition Ordnance Survey map, 1887, 1:2500, digitised version*

Landmark 2003b *Ordnance Survey map, 1971, 1:2500, digitised version*



1: Trench at south of the site, looking west, showing dark grey soil (1)



2: Trench on east side of the site, looking north, showing natural (2) at north end



3: Assemblage of animal bone within (1)



4: Trench at north of the site, looking west



5: Trench to the west of the site, looking north

APPENDICES

A List of contexts

Context	Description	Depth	Interpretation
1	Dark greyish brown layer containing small fragments of brick and tile, animal bone and oyster shell	Up to 0.75m	Soil (dark earth)
2	Light reddish-brown clayey sand		Geological natural
3	Light yellow brown sandy clay		Possible natural

B List of Finds

Context	Material	Quantity	Date/Comments
1	CBM	1	
1	Animal Bone	57	4 cattle mandible ramus fragments 10 cattle molars 1 cattle talus 2 cattle unfused distal metatarsal fragments 4 sheep metatarsal fragments (all one bone) 3 sheep mandible body fragments 2 sheep mandible ramus fragments 1 sheep distal humerus fragment 4 sheep molars 1 sheep proximal femur fragment 1 horse distal metacarpal fragment 1 horse mandible body fragment 1 large mammal long bone fragment 18 large mammal mandible fragments 4 medium mammal mandible fragments 1 medium mammal tooth
1	Shell	8	Oyster shell fragments

Summary for archaeol27-501919

OASIS ID (UID)	archaeol27-501919
Project Name	30 Birch Abbey Alcester Warwickshire: Archaeological Watching Brief,
Activity type	Watching Brief
Project Identifier(s)	AL146 30 Birch Abbey Alcester
Planning Id	20/03537/FUL
Reason For Investigation	Planning: Post determination
Organisation Responsible for work	Archaeology Warwickshire
Project Dates	01-Mar-2021 - 31-Mar-2021
Location	30 Birch Abbey NGR : SP 08782 57088 LL : 52.2119422794406, - 1.87289105639037 12 Fig : 408782,257088
Administrative Areas	Country : England County : Warwickshire District : Stratford-on-Avon Parish : Alcester
Project Methodology	An archaeological watching brief was undertaken during the excavation of foundation trenches for new side and rear extensions at 30 Birch Abbey, Alcester, The work was carried out in accordance with the Chartered Institute for Archaeologists Standard and guidance for an archaeological watching brief (2020).
Project Results	No unequivocally Roman finds or deposits were recorded in the foundation trenches. Most of the foundations did not penetrate geological natural and it remains possible that Roman features survived below the base of the trenches. It remains possible that surviving elements of the Roman buildings identified in the 1960s remain below the base of the foundation trenches.
Keywords	
HER	Warwickshire HER - unRev - STANDARD
HER Identifiers	
Archives	

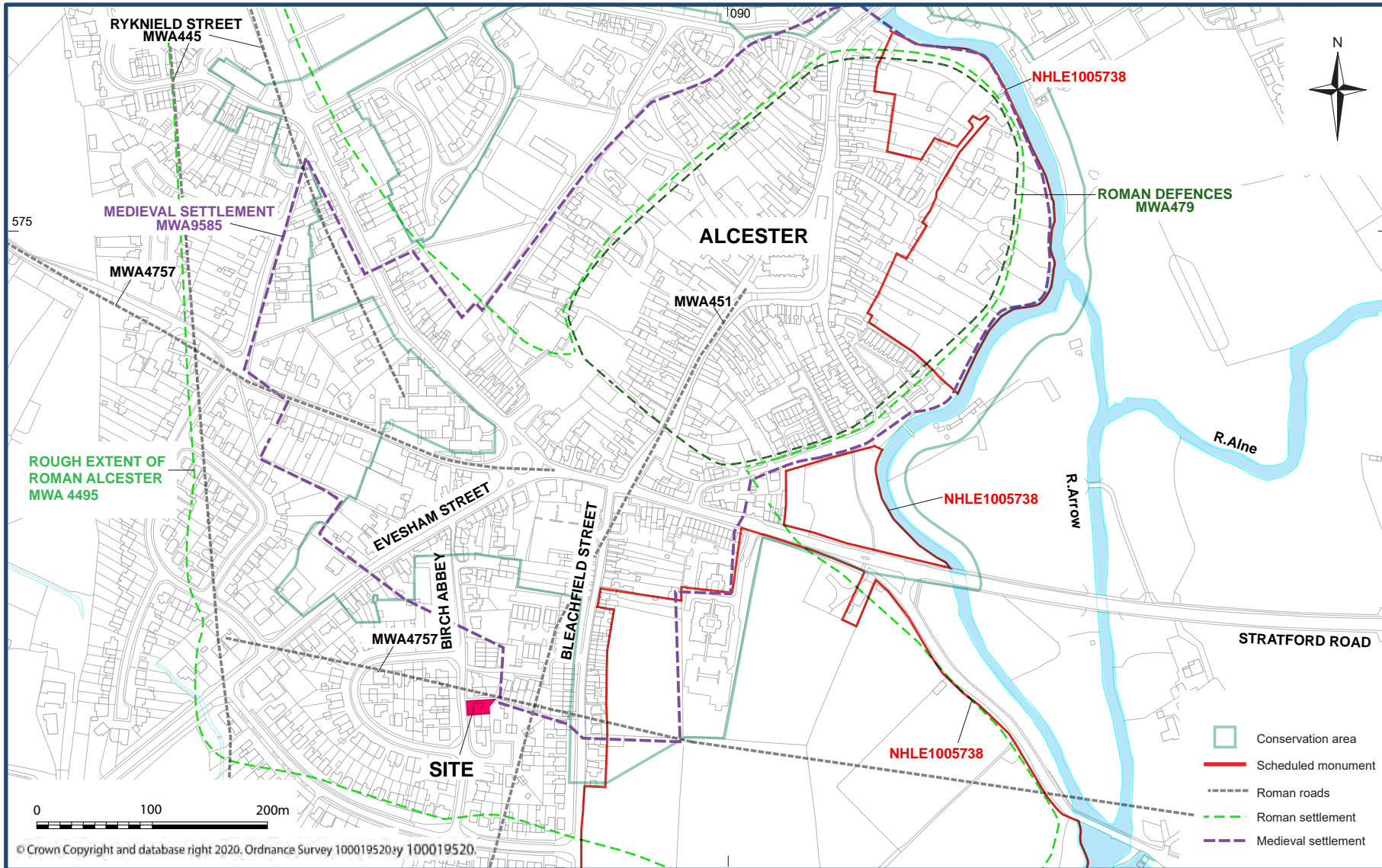


Fig 1: Location of site

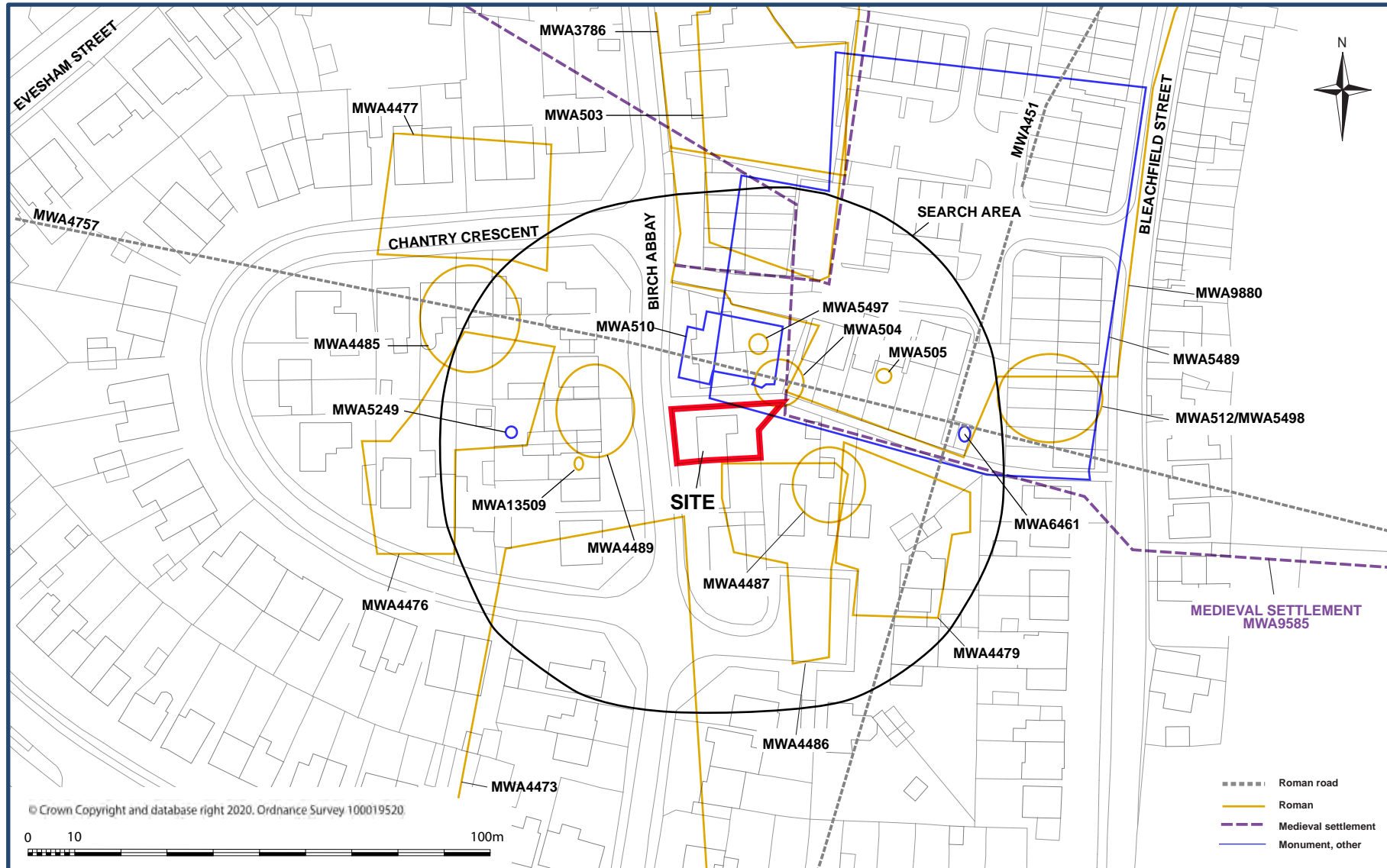


Fig 2: Location of site and Historic Environment information, monuments

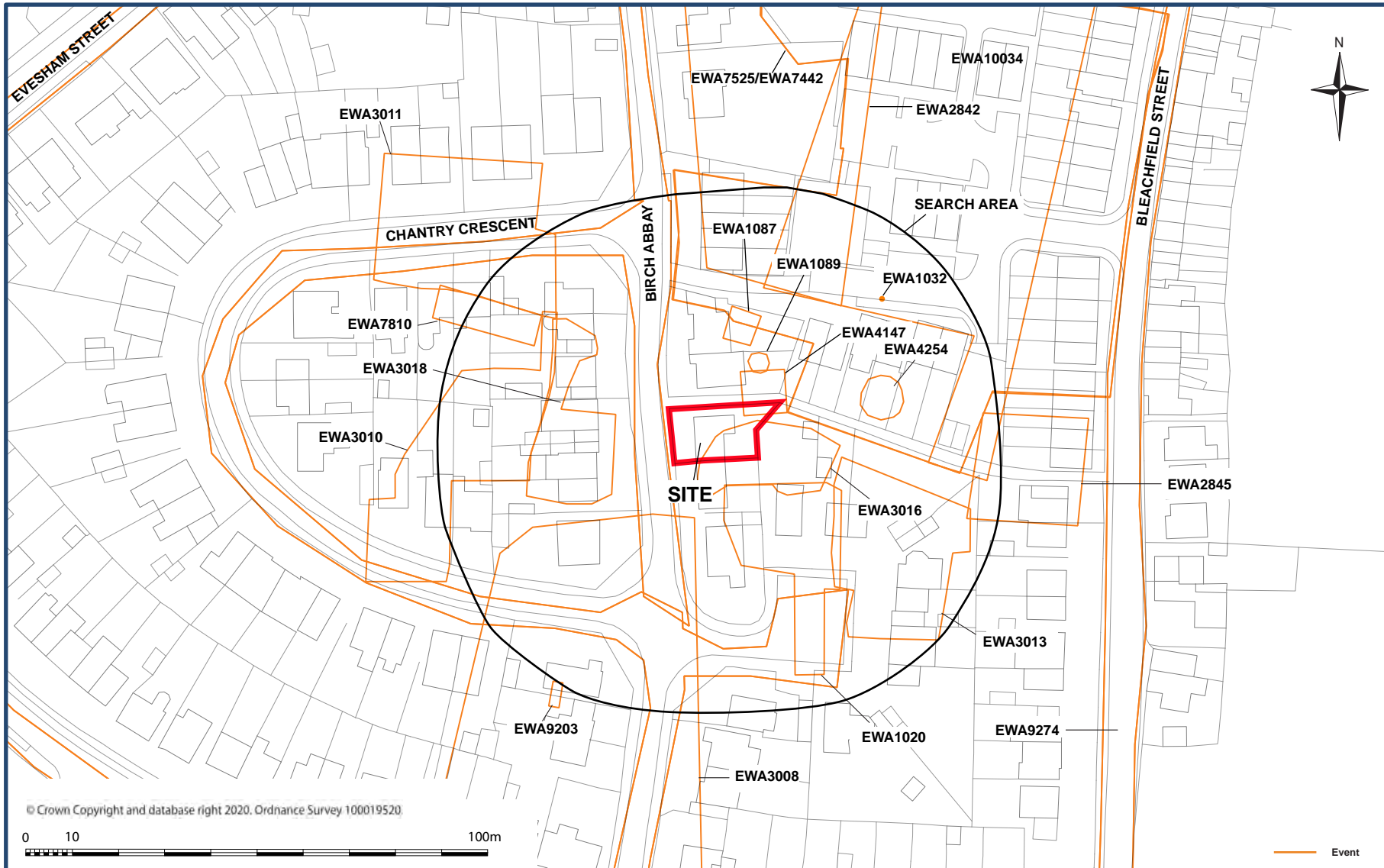


Fig 2: Location of site and Historic Environment information, events

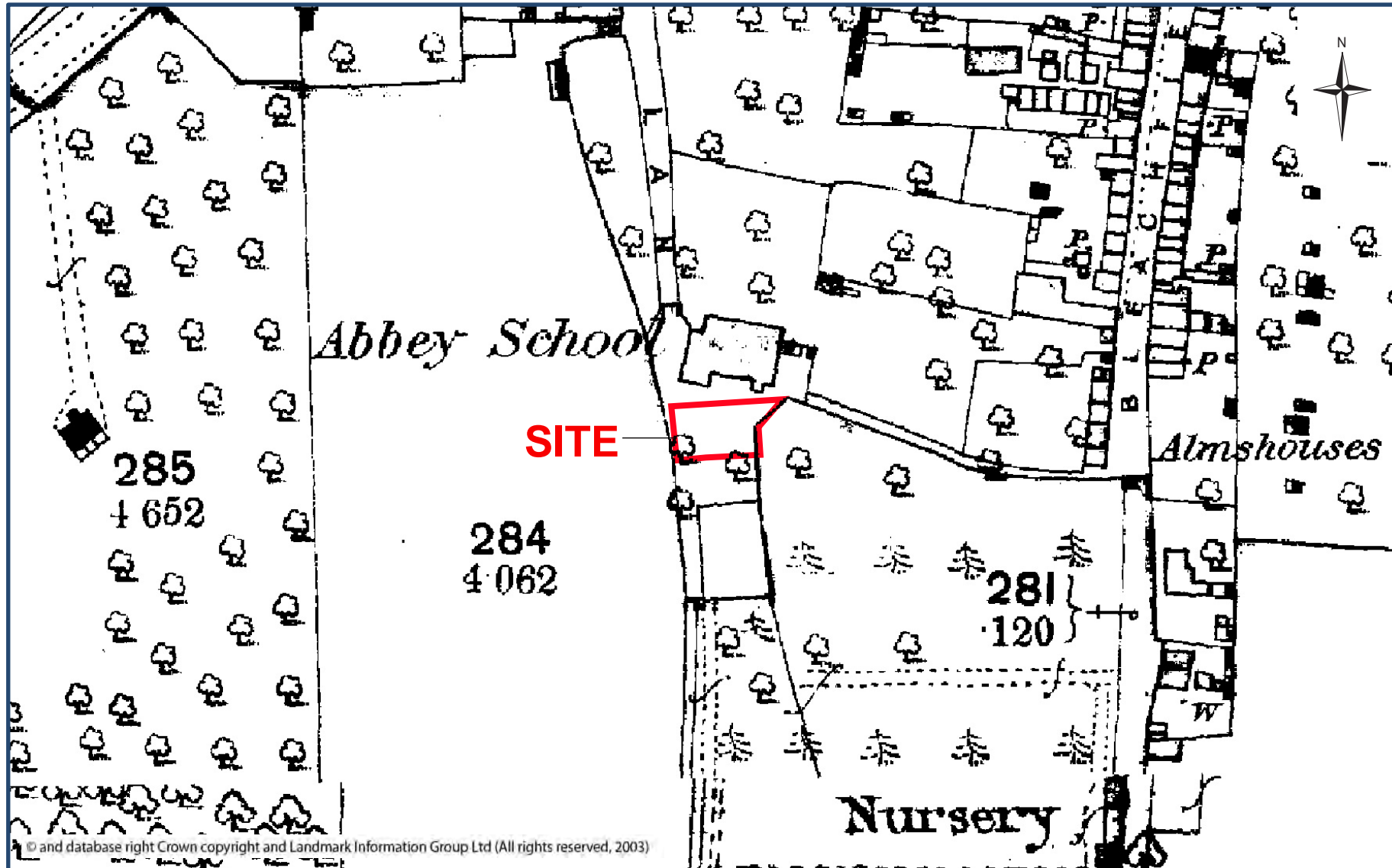


Fig 4: Detail from First Edition Ordnance Survey 1:2500 map of 1887

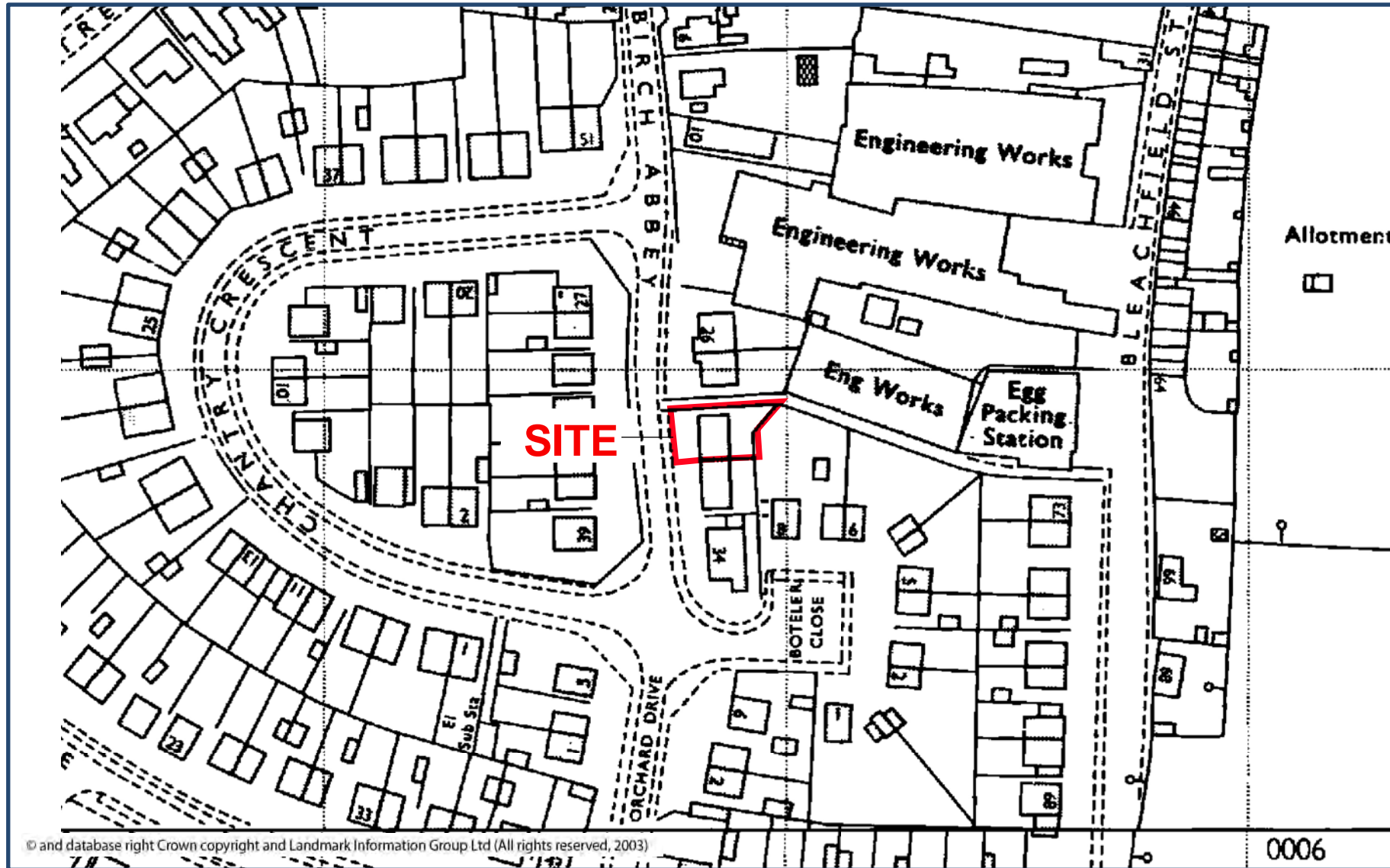


Fig 5
: Detail from Ordnance Survey 1:2500 map of 1971

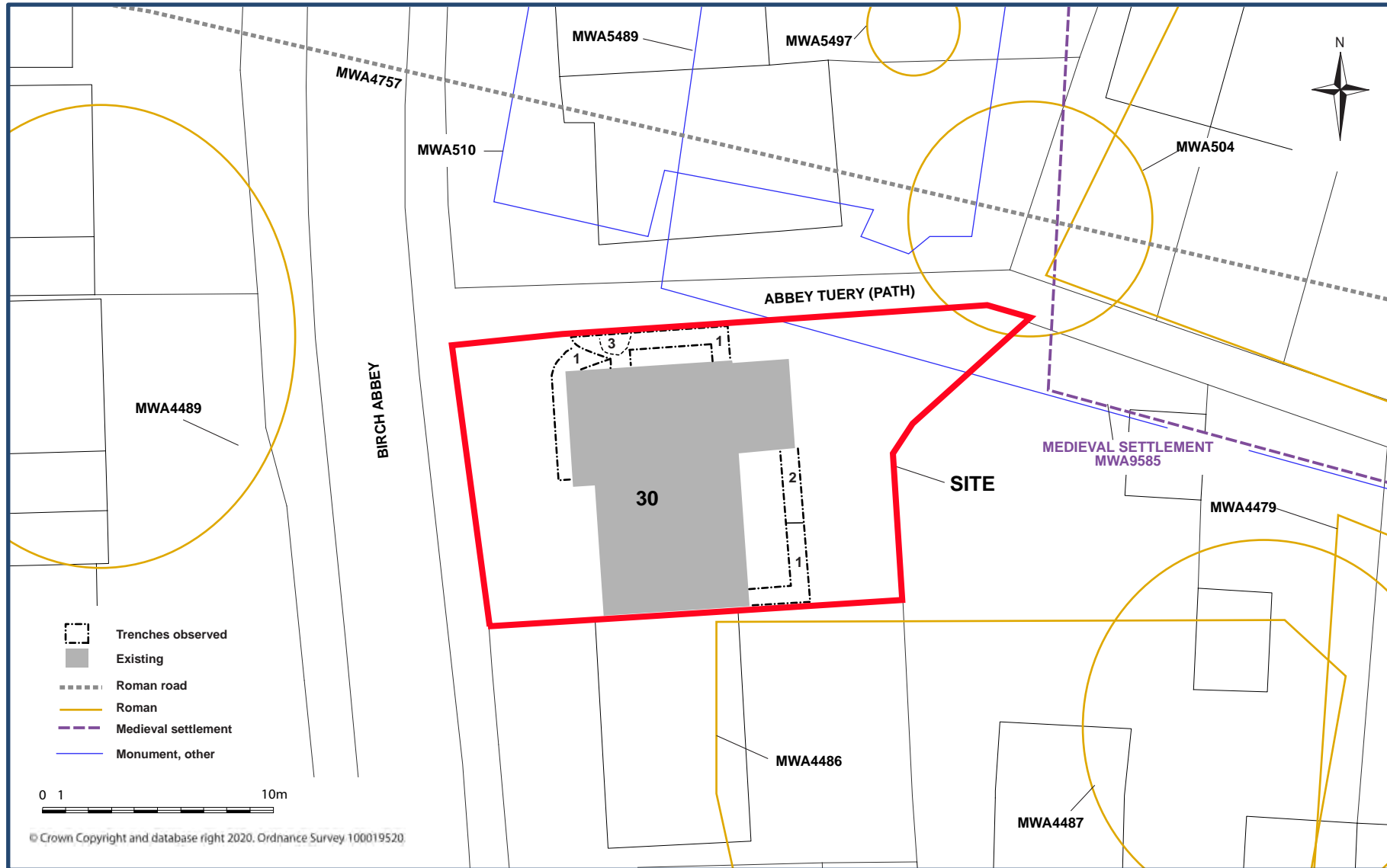


Fig 6: Location of trenches observed