

# **7 Tibbets Close, Meeting Lane, Alcester, Warwickshire**

## **Archaeological Watching Brief**



*understanding heritage matters*

Archaeology Warwickshire Report No 1427  
February 2014



*Working for  
Warwickshire*

**Project:** 7 Tibbets Close  
**Commissioned by:** Mr David Wade  
**Project Report No.** 1427  
**Site Code:** AL134  
**Planning Reference:** 13/01587/FUL  
**National Grid Reference:** SP 0921 5753  
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## SUMMARY

*An archaeological watching brief at 7 Tibbets Close revealed no significant archaeological deposits associated with the Roman town. A single sherd of Roman Oxford mortaria recovered from the topsoil dates from the latter part of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century.*

## 1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Planning permission has been granted by Stratford on Avon District Council for the demolition of an existing garage, the erection of single storey side extension, front porch, single garage and rear conservatory at 7 Tibbets Close, Alcester. The site lies within the defended Roman town of Alcester (Scheduled Ancient Monument Warwicks 128) and there was a potential for archaeological remains to be disturbed during the work.

1.2 Scheduled Monument Consent (Ref S00064380) for the development is subject to the applicant securing the implementation of a programme of archaeological work to be carried out in conjunction with the development.

1.3 Archaeology Warwickshire were commissioned to undertake an archaeological Watching Brief, in conjunction with the groundworks phase of the permitted development. This report presents the results of that work. The project archive will be stored at the Warwickshire Museum under temporary accession number T/??.

## 2 SITE LOCATION

2.1 The site is located at national grid reference SP 0921 5753 in the parish of Alcester. The development site is a private house and garden.

2.2 The underlying geology of the area is Alluvium (British Geological Survey 1974).

## 3 ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

### **Prehistoric**

3.1 There is currently no evidence for Palaeolithic hunter-gatherer activity at Alcester but possible Mesolithic (c 8000-4000 BC) flintwork is recorded from topsoil and a pit group at nearby Oversley Mill (Warwickshire Historic Environment Record MWA 6399; Warwickshire Museum 1990). Within Alcester, evidence for pre-Roman activity is elusive and fragmentary. A possible Neolithic and perhaps Bronze Age settlement that was recorded in Meeting Lane

in 1927 (MWA 5495; Figure 2), is far from convincing and may more accurately pertain to an isolated flint find spot; one of only a few within Alcester, although a Neolithic pit was recorded in Bleachfield Street (MWA 4492).

3.2 A small group of postholes and a pit found in Tibbet's Close were broadly dated to the Iron Age by Cracknell (1989, 12-25), and if the identification is correct, the site may have been part of one of a number of Iron Age settlement foci in the area; although more substantial evidence comes from Cold Comfort Lane (Jones and Palmer 1995, 1999). In addition, a number of undated cropmarks visible on air photographs of the area surrounding the town could represent activity in this period.

### **Roman (AD 43 – 410)**

3.3 During the Romano-British period Alcester was an important town, probably known as Alauna (MWA 4495; Fig 1). The town probably grew from an ad hoc settlement (vicus) surrounding a mid-first century fort in the Bleachfield Street area on the junction of two important roads, Ryknild Street and the Droitwich Salt Way. If it existed then this fort will have succeeded a short lived fort, indicated by a cropmark at Lower Oversley Lodge on a high ridge that overlooks Alcester from the south (Booth 1996, 32). The Bleachfield Street fort may have been used as late as the early second century by a small garrison in (perhaps) winter quarters, whereas the town continued to expand and was inhabited throughout the period of occupation (Palmer 1997).

3.4 It is generally assumed that the Ryknild Street on the far west side of the town was an early military road, and that the Roman road to Stratford (MWA 446) was later, but perhaps still earlier than the fort (Booth 1994, 167). This road became a significant thoroughfare; its embankment (agger) was still evident as an earthwork in 1958 (Hughes 1960, 11). A large public building, possibly an official stopover place (mansio), was built across the road (Booth 1994).

3.5 The Roman settlement was extensive, being far larger than the medieval settlement and comparable to 21st century Alcester. However, a number of areas that have remained free from modern development in the town are collectively Scheduled as an Ancient Monument (Warwickshire No 128: Alcester Roman Town).

3.6 A large part of the town was defended by a rampart in the 2nd century and by a wall in the 4th century (Cracknell 1996). This 'defended area' lay to the south of an area of marshland.

### **Anglo-Saxon (AD 410 – 1066)**

3.7 There is no unequivocal evidence for continued settlement in Alcester in the early Saxon period, although Anglo-Saxon pottery was recovered from excavations at Lloyds Bank in 1975 (Booth and Evans 2001, 116-123) and 1997 (MWA 501, MWA 8176). In 1964 Hughes recovered a 7th-century silver bracelet from his excavation south of the former Almshouses on Bleachfield Street (MWA 6461) and Alcester may have been that 'celebrated place called Alne' where an ecclesiastical council was held in AD 709 to consecrate the foundation of Evesham Abbey by Ecgwin, Bishop of Worcester. An Evesham Chronicle account of c 1125, had Ecgwin preaching to the wealthy, hard-hearted people of Alcester, but being drowned out by the smiths hammers and anvils. Ecgwin's invocation of divine retribution summoned an earthquake which swallowed up both town and smiths. The vacant site was therefore given to Evesham Abbey and though many had since tried to follow the trade of a smith in Alcester, none had succeeded (VCH 1945, 9-22).

### **Medieval and Post-medieval (1066 – 1800)**

3.8 In the medieval period Alcester was a prosperous small town concentrated around the parish church and the present High Street (MWA 9585). The medieval plots fronting on to High Street formed a series of extended narrow properties, and another group of these continued along the north end of Bleachfield Street. The surviving lines of these boundaries may be seen on 18th century estate maps (Sutton 1754; Eyre 1760). A number of late medieval and early post-medieval buildings survive within the town (VCH 1945, 9-12). The parish church has a 14th century tower but was largely rebuilt in the 18th century (MWA 541). Gunnings Bridge stands on the site of one of the medieval bridges of Alcester, but the present structure is of probable 19th century date (MWA 538).

3.9 Immediately to the north of the town was the Benedictine abbey of St Mary and St John the Baptist, founded in 1140 by Ralph le Boteler (Scheduled Ancient Monument Number 21562; MWA 534). The abbey would have been an economic as well as religious centre. The financial fortunes of the abbey suffered through the negligence of later abbots, and its status was reduced to a cell of Evesham Abbey in 1465. It was dissolved in 1536 (VCH 1908, 59-61). After this time the site was used as a source of stone for Beauchamp Court and by the 18th century was in agricultural use. The site of the town's water-powered medieval corn mill survives just to the north of the abbey site. This was converted into a needle mill in around 1805 and most of the existing buildings date from the 19th century (MWA 5023, not on plan).

## **Site Specific**

3.10 As stated above, there have been a number of prehistoric deposits and finds recorded close by the current development. Several hearths, predating Roman deposits, were recorded to the northern end of Tibbets Close (MWA 4491). These included burnt material, quernstones and pottery of possible Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age date. Pottery of probable Middle Iron age date has been recorded west of Tibbets Close (MWA 5679) while slightly further south other probable prehistoric materials including pot boilers, worked flint and 'black' pottery were recorded, although here the dating was uncertain (MWA 5495).

3.11 The development site lies in the north-eastern part of the defended area of the Roman town. The core of the defended part of the town lay in the region of the present Henley Street and Church Street. In the 2nd century an earthen rampart was constructed inside a defensive ditch (MWA8150) and an area of marshland and a former river channel to the north of the town added to its defences. A defensive wall constructed in the 4th century (MWA479) is possibly one of the last built in Roman Britain (Cracknell 1996, xvi). The southern half of the defensive circuit has been identified with some degree of confidence (MWA464), but further north it is uncertain as to whether some clay deposits, recorded in isolation immediately north of the present development (MWA7402) and further north still (MWA4831) represent the remains of the 2nd century defensive bank.

3.12 Extensive excavations have been conducted within the town (Booth 1989a, 1989b, 1996; Booth & Evans 2001; Cracknell 1989, 1996; Cracknell & Mahany 1994; Mahany 1994).

3.13 At the northern end of Tibbets Close a large Romano-British building was recorded (MWA 475) whilst to the south further evidence for buildings in the form of painted wall plaster, tesserae from a mosaic floor and hypocaust tiles (MWA 476, MWA 477, MWA 7854), roof and hypocaust tiles (MWA 9662) have been recorded. Timber and stone wall-lines were identified north-west of the present development (MWA 3790) and a tessellated pavement to the west (MWA 474). Immediately south of the current development a gravel surface of Roman date (MWA 5835) was found. To the south-west Roman paths and pottery were recorded (MWA 471) and an undated post-built building with a gravel floor (MWA 465).

3.14 A number of chance finds dating from the Roman period have also been found within the area of the Roman defences. These include pottery (MWA 470, MWA 473), coins (MWA 5933) and even a bronze military cart fitting in the shape of an eagle's head (MWA 2246).

3.15 Alcester was a small market town in the medieval period. Very little is known about the intervening Anglo-Saxon period. The main focus of the medieval town was along High Street, Church Street and Henley Street with long, narrow 'burgage' plots typical of medieval town planning, stretching back from the frontage (Ordnance Survey 1887).

3.16 Evidence for medieval activity in the vicinity of Tibbets Close includes a malting kiln cutting Roman deposits to the north-west of the site (MWA 5678). To the south probable medieval boundary ditches were discovered during archaeological work (MWA 5836).

3.17 Alcester remained a small market town throughout the medieval and post medieval periods. A layer of sandstone found beneath 19th-century footings during the excavation of test pits at 4 Meeting Lane may possibly have belonged to an earlier, post-medieval building (Warwickshire Museum 2002). Map evidence from 1754 onwards (Sutton 1754) shows that the area around the site has been one of the least developed within the former defended area (Ordnance Survey 1831, 1887, 1902, 1905).

3.18 A few small-scale archaeological observations have taken place in the area around Meeting Lane and Tibbets Close. In 2002 a watching brief discovered three adjoining stone walls (MWA 9652) at 4 Meeting Lane (Gethin & Newman 2002). A secure date could not be determined during the excavations as the orientation of the walls suggested a medieval date whilst their depth below the surface was more consistent with a Roman one. During the construction of a new garage at Orchard House, Tibbets Close (Coutts & Gethin 1997), excavations did not penetrate into archaeological layers (MWA 7941). In 2010 archaeological observation at 10 Meeting Lane revealed a layer of redeposited red clay that was similar to deposits found in previous nearby excavations that have been considered as the possible remains of the Roman town defensive rampart. No finds were recovered and the redeposited layer was not penetrated sufficiently to determine its depth or extent (Rann 2007).

## 4 AIMS AND METHODS

4.1 The main aim of the work will be to record any archaeological remains that are disturbed by the development, to collate the records in an archaeological archive and present the significant aspects of the archive in a report for dissemination.

4.2 The secondary aim will be to form an understanding of the remains recorded in terms of their character and date, and to place the evidence in its local and regional context.

4.3 The objective of the work will be a programme of controlled excavation to development formation levels, or the geological natural, whichever the higher.

4.4 The work undertaken involved the examination of early map evidence as well as records of archaeological remains in the area and local historical journals and other publications.

4.5 An experienced archaeologist was made available for each day of ground disturbance when notified by the client in accordance with the WSI.

## 5 WATCHING BRIEF

5.1 The garage, on the western side of the existing house, was demolished prior to the archaeological observation and the existing concrete base had been broken before the watching brief had started. New foundations, around the edge of the concrete floor of the old garage, were machine-dug by a 1.7 tonne, 360-degree, mechanical excavator. The excavator used a 0.60m wide, toothless, ditching bucket and dug down to a depth of 1.20m in the northern and western trenches. Due to the close proximity of nearby trees, the Building Inspector insisted that the southern trench was at least 1.30m deep. This was because the geological natural was seen to be red clay and tree roots absorb moisture, causing the clay to contract and potentially damage the concrete foundations.

5.2 After the concrete foundations had been poured, an area of topsoil adjacent to the west of the new foundations was reduced by machine. The area measured 7.50m long (N-S), 4.80m wide (E-W) and 0.28m deep.

### **Deposit sequence**

5.3 Geological natural red clay (6) was achieved at a depth of 1.00-1.20m below the modern surface; above the clay, was 0.20m of reddish brown silty gravel (5). A 0.42m deep layer of greyish brown sandy loam (4) overlay the natural but contained no finds or datable remains. The topsoil on the site was very dark grey sandy loam (3). It was 0.40m deep and one sherd of Roman pottery (mortarium) was recovered from it. Cutting the topsoil was the concrete floor of the previous garage which was bedded on a 0.10m deep layer of sand (2) that contained a very high proportion of roof tile (approximately 50%). The concrete floor (1) that remained, at the top of the trench, was 0.08m deep and was being retained as the floor of the new building.

## 6 ROMAN POTTERY - Dr Phil Mills MIfA

6.1 Only one sherd of pottery of Roman date was recovered from the site. This was a single 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD Oxford mortaria rim from context 3.

*Mortaria is one of a class of Roman pottery kitchen vessels. They are hemispherical or conical bowls, commonly with heavy flanges, and with coarse sand or grit embedded into the internal surface. They were used for pounding or mixing foods and are an important indicator of the spread of Romanised food preparation methods. The pottery was retrieved from the garden topsoil (3) and not from a Roman layer or deposit.*

M23 Oxford whiteware mortaria rim and spout of type Young (1977) M17.4, AD 240-300, with Weight 324g and rim diameter of 260mm and rim equivalent of 15%.

## 7 CONCLUSIONS

7.1 The watching brief was able to establish that no significant Roman deposits or remains were disturbed by the permitted development.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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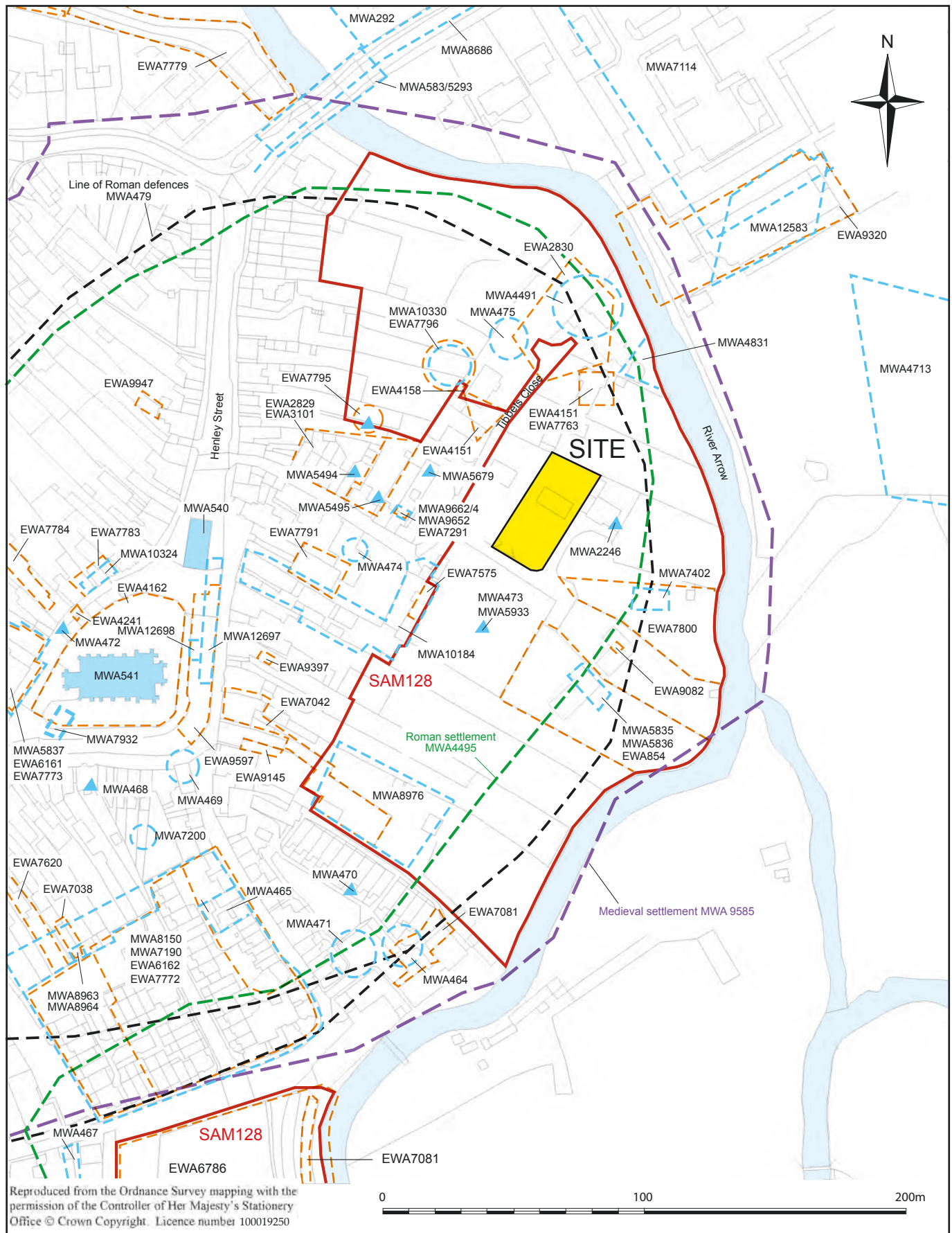
## APPENDICES

### A List of Contexts

<i>Context</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Comment</i>
1	Concrete	Modern concrete floor of demolished garage
2	Layer	Sand and tile bedding for concrete floor
3	Topsoil	Very dark grey sandy loam, currently garden soil
4	Layer	Greyish brown sandy loam, below topsoil
5	Natural	Brownish red silty gravel, possibly alluvial deposit
6	Natural	Red clay, geological deposit

### B List of Finds

<i>Context</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Comment</i>	<i>Number</i>
1	Pottery	Roman, Mortarium	1



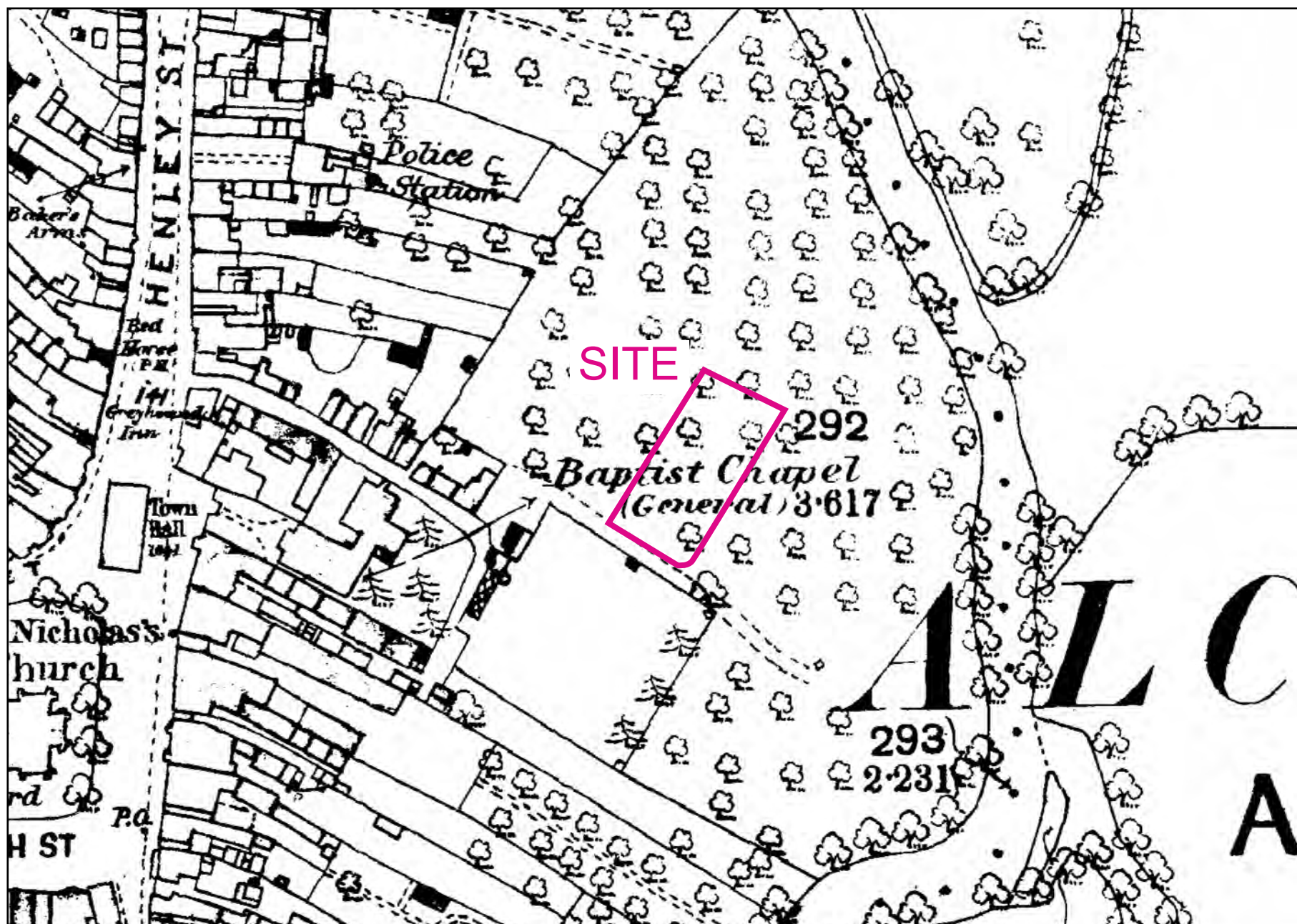


Fig 2: Detail from First Edition Ordnance Survey map of 1886-1887

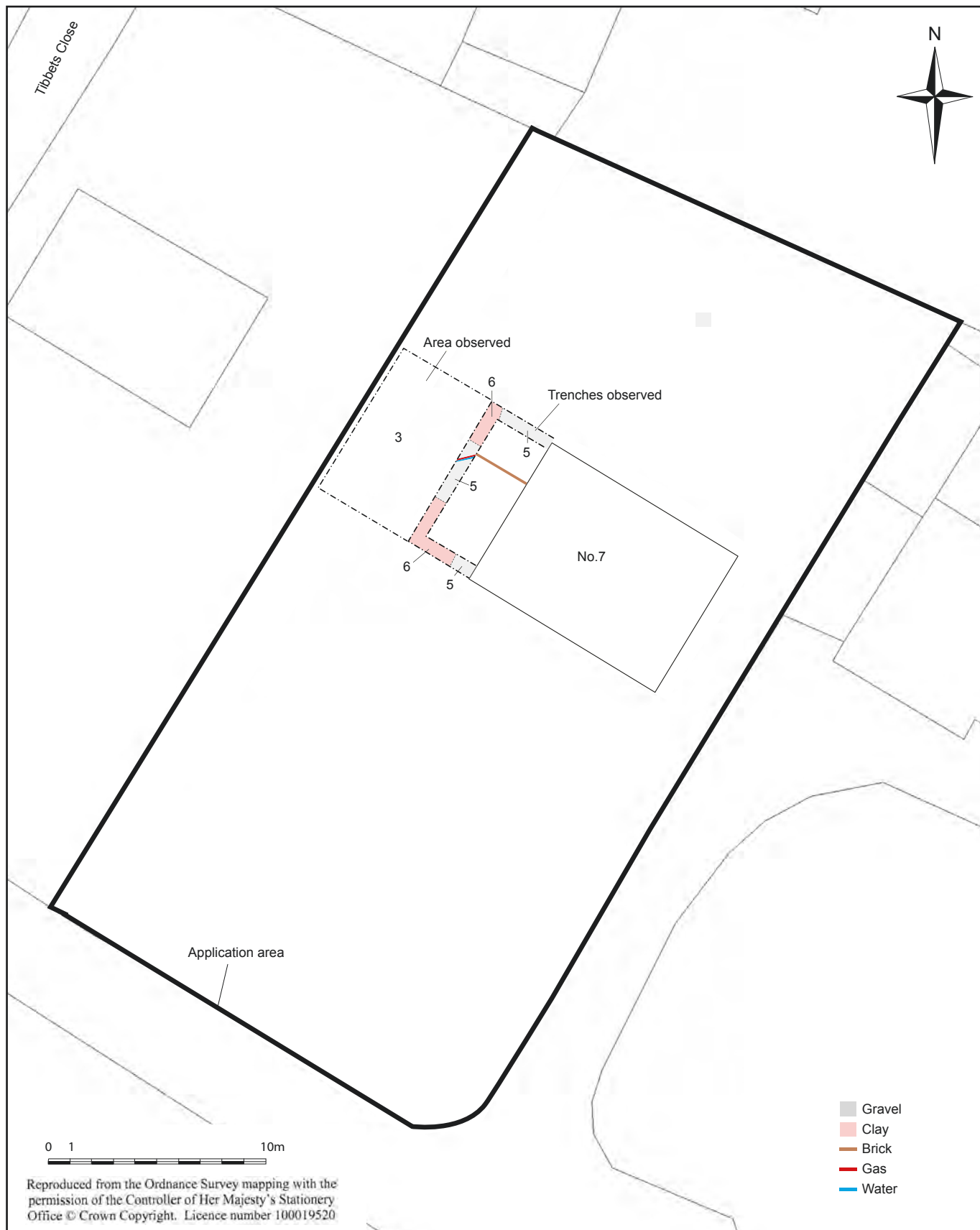


Fig 3: Location of trenches and area observed



Fig 4. General view of the site from the driveway, looking North



Fig 5. Natural gravel (5) overlain by (4) in NE corner of site, looking North



Fig 6. Natural clay (6) overlain by (4) in SW corner of the trench, looking South