

Land at Sheepy Road, Atherstone, Warwickshire

Archaeological Evaluation



understanding heritage matters

Archaeology Warwickshire Report No 1425
February 2014



*Working for
Warwickshire*

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Unit 9

Montague Road

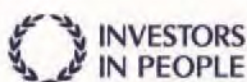
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SUMMARY

Archaeological trial trenches excavated in advance of the construction of 14 new houses on the site of the former Atherstone police station and magistrate's court found no significant archaeological deposits despite the proximity of the medieval town and friary. A single pit was uncovered in a trench on the south side of the area and was dated to the 18th century. A single sherd of residual medieval pottery was also found within the fill of this pit. No other significant archaeological features were exposed and the site was characterised by the severe truncation caused by the construction and demolition of the police station and associated buildings.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Outline planning permission has been granted by the North Warwickshire Borough Council for the erection of a residential development comprising approximately 14 dwellings; associated internal access road, rear parking, and minor alterations to the existing access arrangement (all matters reserved) at Atherstone Police Station, Sheepy Road. The proposed development lies within an area of archaeological potential.

1.2 A planning condition attached to the consent required the applicant to secure the implementation of a programme of archaeological work in accordance with a written scheme of investigation (June 2013) agreed with the County Planning Archaeologist, in her capacity as advisor to the planning authority.

1.3 This report presents the results of the fieldwork which was undertaken in February 2014. The project archive will be stored at the Warwickshire Museum under the site code AS13.

2 SITE LOCATION

2.1 The site is located on the northern side of Atherstone, in the parish of the same name at National Grid Reference SP 3075 9808.

3 ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

3.1 The manor of Atherstone was held by the Countess Godiva of Mercia (widow of Leofric) at the time of the Domesday Survey in 1086 (VCH 1904, 309). That it was a relatively minor place at this time is shown by the fact that it belonged to the parish of Mancetter and had no church of its own. Atherstone, along with most of Godiva's other

lands, subsequently passed into the hands of the Earl of Chester. It was then granted by Hugh the Earl of Chester to the Abbey of Bec-Hellouin in Normandy (VCH 1947, 126-8).

3.2 In 1246 Henry III granted the Abbey of Bec a weekly market in their manor of Atherstone every Tuesday, a fee of 100s being paid to procure the charter. The promotion of markets by lords, both lay and ecclesiastical, was common in this period and was normally accompanied by the laying out of a market place and properties for rental by traders and others drawn to settle by the market. In some cases a whole new town would be created. Atherstone was one of these (Warwickshire Historic Environment Record No. MWA 9488). The 1716 plan of Atherstone by Robert Hewitt shows the market place and, along either side of Long Street (Watling Street; MWA 420), a series of the long thin plots that were typical of medieval town planning. These plots combined a maximum of area with a minimum of valuable frontage space. Many of these properties survive in the modern town plan and 128 Long Street lies in one such plot. Atherstone Friary, a poor friary founded in 1375 and dissolved in 1538, was situated on the northern edge of the town (MWA 267).

3.3 Although there were a number of other market towns in the area Atherstone was well situated to attract custom; the market flourished through the 13th and early 14th centuries and the town grew with it. The later Middle Ages was generally a period of decline when many of the new markets failed. Atherstone, however, survived and by the mid-16th century the population was again on the increase (Watts and Winyard 1988, 13). Many of the original burgage plots were divided up into half or quarter holdings.

3.4 A number of small-scale archaeological investigations of medieval Atherstone have taken place. A small archaeological evaluation was carried out in March 1994 at the junction of Long Street and Station Street (Eyre-Morgan 1994; MWA 7209). This site lay at the west end of the medieval town and covered a number of medieval properties. The two trenches excavated produced medieval pottery and the rear trench revealed some medieval stratigraphy, with two postholes from a timber structure.

3.5 The modern Market Square lies south of St Mary's Church (MWA 269); it is likely that the original market place was rather larger, extending all the way down to Watling Street to attract passing travellers. Archaeological excavation in the market place in 1994 revealed a series of cobbled surfaces belonging to the medieval market place which were cut by post-settings for a medieval timber structure and by medieval and later pits (Warwickshire Museum 1994; MWA 7392). A large quantity of column fragments were also found which derived from the 16th/17th-century market building. Archaeological recording at 45-47 Long

Street in 1994 and 1995 (MWA 7478) uncovered a sherd of medieval pottery and late 15th- to early 16th-century pottery, as well as post-medieval material in 1995 (Cuttler 1995). In 2000, during archaeological observation at the rear of the Dolphin Inn (MWA 8830), the remains of a medieval rubbish pit containing several sherds of 14th/15th-century pottery was recorded, along with a surface spread of 18th-century material (Warwickshire Museum 2000).

3.6 The earliest representation of Atherstone is on Robert Hewitt's map of 1716 (WRO P7). This shows Long Street built up on both frontages with long, narrow, burgage plots behind the properties. The town is also shown on two later 18th century plans, a map of 1763 (WRO P8) and the Inclosure Award Plan of 1786 (WRO P26). As the plan of 1716 suggests the town retained its medieval character into the 18th century. However in the 19th century it changed from a market town serving an area whose economy was predominantly based on agriculture to a place whose prosperity was based on the factory manufacture of hats and silk ribbons. In 1828 the town boasted seven hat factories and by the 1880s this had increased to twelve factories which formed the economic base for the modern town.

3.7 Atherstone has long been noted for the number of inns and public houses on its main street and the property to the east, The Hat and Beaver is one such old public house. Before the advent of clean drinking water supplies in the late 19th century ale and beer were the main beverages available to working people (Watts and Winyard 1988, 47). Three types of outlet existed for the sale of beer and ale. The most common of these was the alehouse, which was often little more than a room in a house with ale brewed out at the back. In taverns wine was sold as well as beer. Inns provided accommodation, stabling and food as well as drink. Atherstone had no taverns but had a large number of alehouses and inns from the medieval period onwards. These would have catered for the local residents, travellers and traders along Watling Street and pilgrims visiting the nearby Abbey of Merevale. By 1720 Atherstone had 32 alehouses. In 1906 there was a licence for every 138 inhabitants (including women and children).

3.8 Other sites and finds in Atherstone include a hoard of civil war coins found during the demolition of 151 Long Street (MWA 260), a parish boundary stone at the north-western end of Long Street (MWA 268), the Friends Meeting House on North Street which dates back to 1729 (MWA 2430), the site of an ice house just off Long Street (MWA 375) and the site of a post-medieval windmill (MWA 262). The 1:500 Ordnance Survey map also shows the site of a smithy (MWA 5827 to the west, a corn mill to the east (MWA 5828) and the old workhouse complex to the south-east (MWA 5825). A single sherd of post-medieval pottery was

recovered from amongst the foundations of two 17th/18th-century buildings (EWA 7202) at The Old Surgery in Friar's Gate (Warwickshire Museum 2002). Observation of topsoil removal at the junction of Woolpack Way and South Street (EWA 7310) revealed no evidence of medieval or post-medieval activity (Warwickshire Museum 2003). Observations at 176 Long Street (MWA 8984) revealed early modern features including a soft water tank and pits (Browning 2001). A pit at 8 Holte Road (MWA 8928) contained stonework that may possibly have derived from the Friary. Further watching briefs at no 17 Holte Road (EWA 6890) and 176 Long Street (EWA 6926) were negative. Archaeological observation earlier in 2005, during the development of land to the rear of 8 Long Street, recorded an undated sandstone wall (Warwickshire Museum 2005; EWA 7660); observation in the south-east part of the town recorded an 18th/19th-century rubbish pit (MWA 7419). Archaeological recording to the rear of the Red Lion Hotel revealed evidence for 18th-century buildings that had previously existed behind the main building (EWA 7644). An archaeological desk-top assessment has also been made of a series of buildings, including the former Hatton's factory, in the former Phoenix Yard to the rear of Church Street (Marsden and Finn 1999; EWA 6789). The study established that further work, including trial trenching and building recording will be required before the area is redeveloped. Archaeological observation at 128 Long Street, revealed an undated 3m deep pit with two roof timbers at its base. Evidence for earlier 18th- to 20th-century buildings and yard surfaces was also recorded (Coutts 2007).

3.9 In 1888 Atherstone was mapped at a scale of 1:500 by the Ordnance Survey (Ordnance Survey 1888) when the site is shown as being largely covered in orchards. Aerial photographs from 1945 (Google Earth) show the area as being allotments.

4 AIMS AND METHODS

4.1 The main aim of the evaluation was to determine if there were any significant archaeological remains in the area of development, to form an understanding of their value and their potential to shed light on the subsequent development of Atherstone.

4.2 Secondary aims included placing the results in their wider local and regional contexts as appropriate.

4.3 The objective was to locate, record and analyse archaeological materials and deposits and to disseminate the results in an appropriate format.

5 RESULTS

5.1 Prior to the evaluation taking place the site had been cleared of buildings and all rubble had been crushed to small fragments to enable its re-use as hardcore. However, large piles of hardcore were still present on site in positions earmarked for trial trenches. In addition, the site had been secured behind a fenced boundary which enclosed a smaller area than the development plans and all the trenches were confined by the fence.

Trench 1

5.2 This trench was 20m long and 1.6m wide. Geological natural strong brown clay with brownish yellow clay patches (101) was exposed in the base of the trench some 0.8m below the current ground surface. No significant archaeological features were observed cutting the natural clay which was overlaid by between 0.68 and 0.80m of modern hardcore chippings (100).

Trench 2

5.3 This trench was 20.17m long and 1.6m wide. Geological natural strong brown clay with brownish yellow clay patches and occasional gravel patches (201) was exposed in the base of the trench some 0.95m below the current ground surface. No significant archaeological features were observed cutting the natural clay which was overlaid by hardcore chippings (200).

Trench 3

5.4 This trench was 21.40m long and 1.6m wide. Geological natural strong brown clay with brownish yellow clay patches (301) was exposed at the southern end of the trench. Some 0.78m below the current ground surface. In the centre of the trench a large pit 302, at least 12.5m wide and containing brown clay loam (303) with modern brick and concrete rubble, seems likely to have been created when the Police Station was built. This was overlain by hardcore chippings (300).

Trench 4

5.5 This trench was 23.60m long and 1.6m wide. Geological natural strong brown clay (402) was exposed in patches in the base of the trench at 1m below the current ground surface, but had been heavily disturbed by a modern layer consisting of concrete, brick and occasional metal mixed with a greyish brown clay (401). No significant archaeological features were observed cutting the natural clay which was overlaid by 0.85m of hardcore chippings (400).

Trench 5

5.6 This trench was 14.46m long and 1.6m wide. It was excavated to a depth of between 1.38m and 1.48m. Geological natural strong brown clay (504) was exposed in the base of the trench. At the western end of the trench an irregular pit 505 cut the natural. This pit had a near vertical eastern edge and a flattish base and was up to 0.36m deep over 2.1m wide. However, most of the feature was beyond the limits of the evaluation trench. It was filled by a brown sandy clay (506) from which a single sherd of 13th-14th century pottery but also two sherds of 18th century pottery along with a single roof tile and brick fragment were recovered. The feature seems most likely to be 18th century in date but its function was unknown.

5.7 Sealing pit 505 was a 0.16m to 0.25m layer of greyish brown clay loam (503). This was covered by a layer of very dark greyish brown sandy clay loam (502), thought likely to represent the pre-police station topsoil. Three sherds of late 18th and 19th century pottery were recovered from this layer. This was overlaid by between 0.64m and 0.72m of brownish yellow clay (501) which itself was covered by up to 0.15m of brown clay loam topsoil (500).

Trench 6

5.8 This trench totalled 21.08m long and 1.6m wide. Geological natural strong brown clay with brownish yellow clay patches (602) was exposed in the base of the trench. The geological natural was overlaid by 0.4 - 0.5m of hardcore chippings (601) across most of the trench but on the east side only it was overlaid by up to 1.15m of very dark greyish brown sandy loam topsoil (600).

6 CONCLUSIONS

6.1 A single archaeological feature, pit 505 in Trench 5, was encountered. Although of 18th century date it also contained a sherd of medieval pottery. Trench 5 lay outside of the area previously occupied by buildings and car-park and was notably the only trench which did not exhibit considerable debris associated with the former buildings and their demolition.

6.2 The majority of the site appears to have been graded down to natural when the Police Station was constructed. It is not certain if archaeological deposits were destroyed in this process but it may well be significant that the single surviving feature in the area not previously graded to natural contained a medieval pottery sherd and 18th century sherds. Such finds could indicate the former presence of a medieval or later activity foci but the

weight of evidence would suggest that these were extraneous to both the medieval town and the nearby friary.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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WRO P8 *Map of Atherstone Fields* by M. Baker, 1763, Warwickshire County Record Office,

Warwick

WRO P26 *Atherstone Private Inclosure Award Plan*, 1786, Warwickshire County Record Office, Warwick

APPENDICES

A List of contexts

<i>Context</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Comment</i>
100	Hardcore layer	Modern
101	Layer	Geological natural
200	Topsoil	Modern
201	Layer	Modern
202	Layer	Geological natural
300	Hardcore layer	Modern
301	Modern pit	Modern
302	Pit fill	Modern
303	Natural	Geological natural
400	Hardcore layer	Modern
401	Layer	Modern
402	Layer	Geological natural
500	Topsoil	Modern
501	Layer	Modern
502	Layer	18th/19th century
503	Layer	18th/19th century
504	Layer	Geological natural
505	Pit	18th century
506	Pit fill	18th century
600	Topsoil	Modern
601	Hardcore layer	Modern
602	Layer	Geological natural

B List of finds

<i>Context</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Comment</i>
503	Pottery	3 x 18th-19th century
506	Pottery	1 x Medieval, 2 x 18th century
506	Brick	1 x 18th century
506	Tile	1 x roof tile

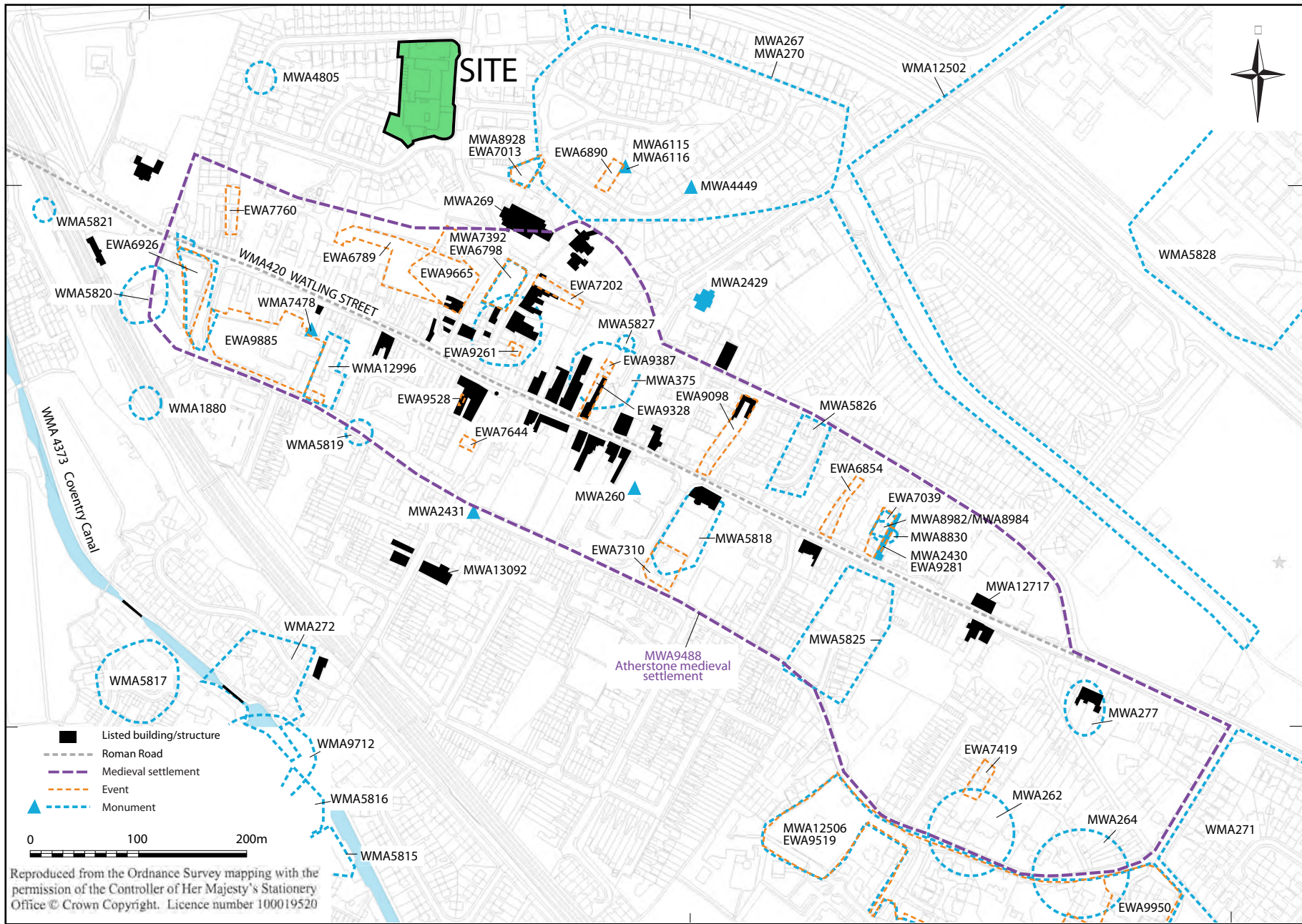


Fig 1: Site location

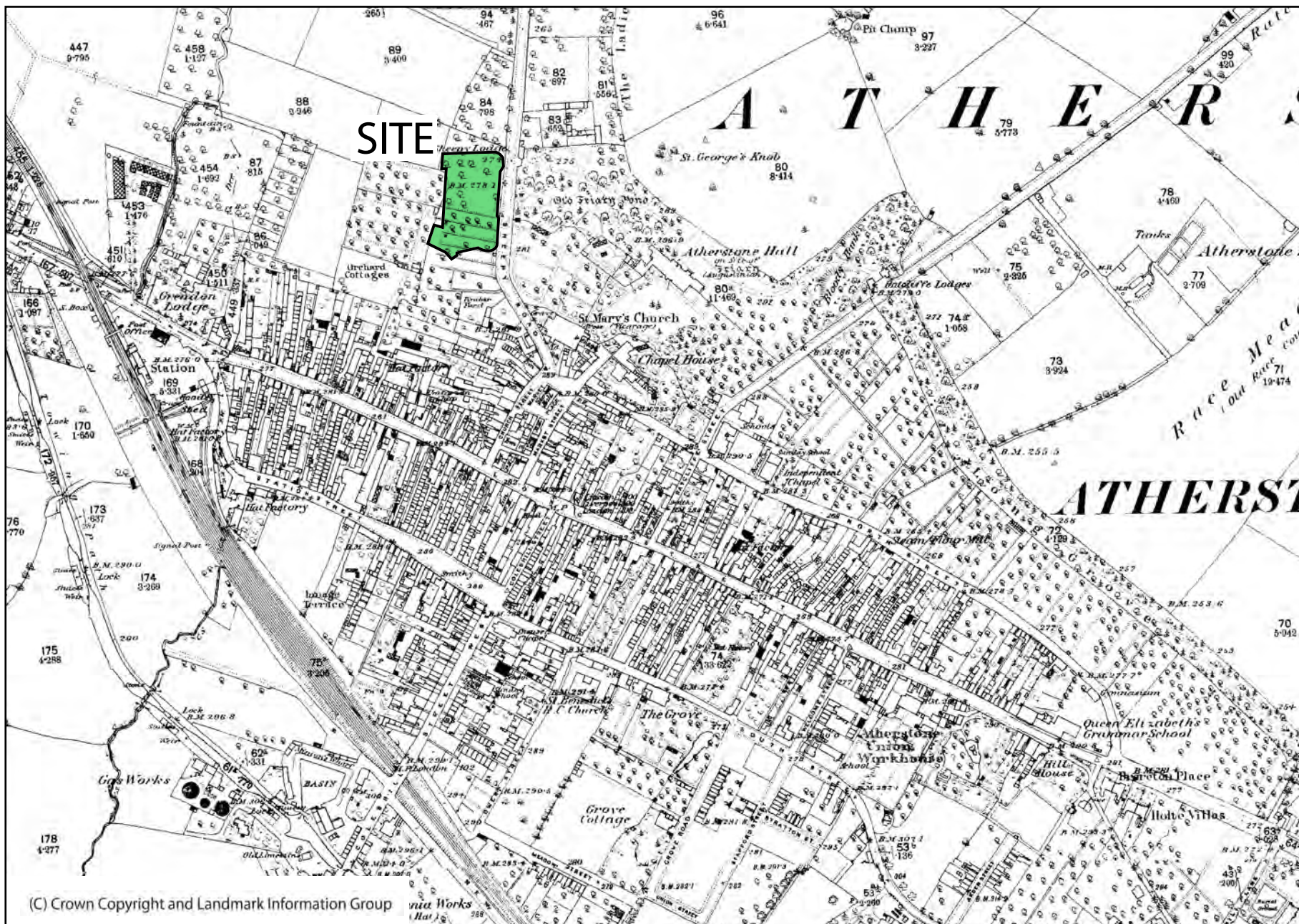


Fig 2: Detail from First Edition Ordnance Survey map of 1888

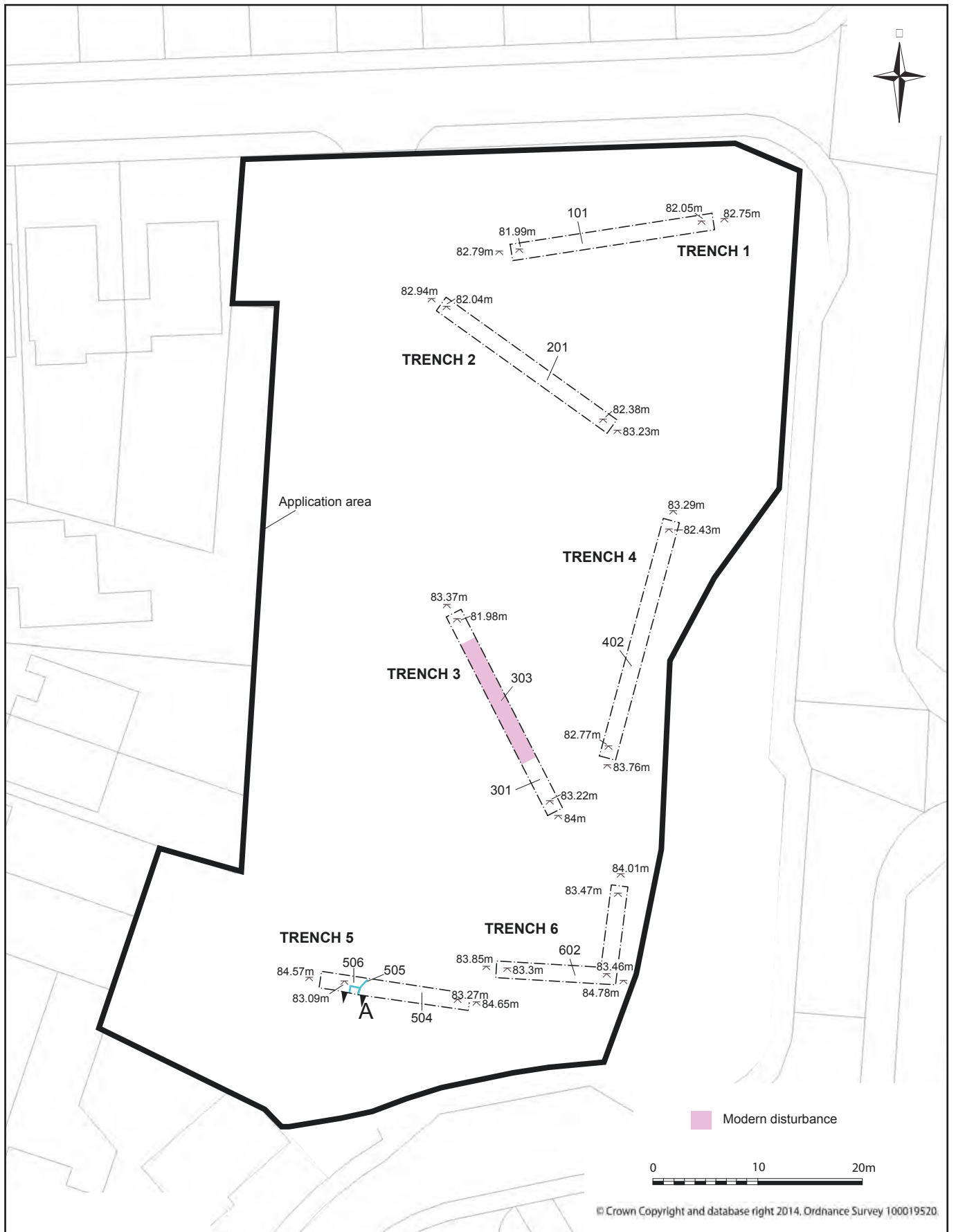


Fig 3: Trench location

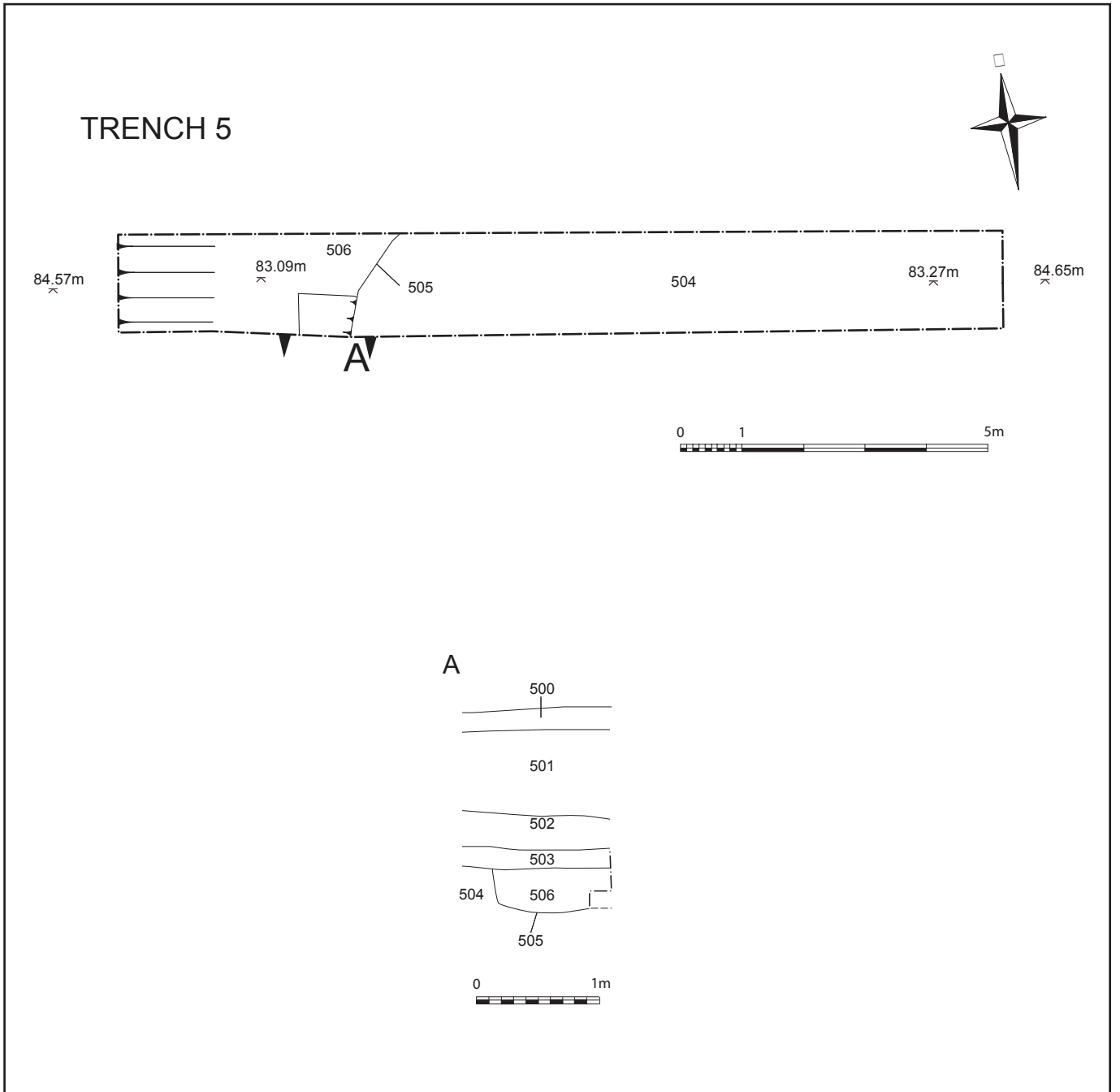


Fig 4: Trench 5 and section A



Fig 5: General view of site looking south-west



Fig 6: Trench 1. Looking west



Fig 7: Trench 2 looking north-west



Fig 8: Trench 3 looking north-west



Fig 9: Trench 4 looking north



Fig 10: Trench 5 looking east



Fig 11: North facing section of pit 505



Fig 12: Trench 6 looking east



Fig 13: Trench 6 looking north