

THE MOAT HOUSE

Archaeological Observation at The Bishop's Palace, Alvechurch, Worcestershire

Chris Jones and Bryn Gethin



Report 1059

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Summary

Archaeological observations made during the replacement of a sewer at The Moat House, Alvechurch, Worcestershire, revealed no significant archaeological finds or deposits. The trench was cut mostly within an earlier sewer pipe trench, resulting therefore, in minimal damage to any potential archaeological remains. Fragments of ceramic tiles and mortar found in a garden soil layer probably derived from the demolition of the bishop's palace in the late 18th century.

1 Introduction

1.1 A new manhole and foul water sewer were required at The Moat House, Alvechurch, Worcestershire. The site lies in an area once occupied by the medieval bishop's palace of Alvechurch, and is Scheduled as an Ancient Monument (No 30009). A condition of the Scheduled Monument Consent required the applicant to secure the implementation of a programme of archaeological work to be carried out in conjunction with the groundworks.

1.2 A programme of fieldwork, comprising the archaeological observation of the excavation of the drain trench, was commissioned from the Warwickshire Museum Archaeology Projects Group and carried out in November 2010. This report presents the results of that work. The project is archived under the site code BP10.

2 Location

2.1 The Moat House is located on the south-east side of Radford Road on the eastern side of Alvechurch and centred on national grid reference SP 0329 7251 (Fig 1). The groundworks were confined to the private garden.

2.2 The underlying geology of the area is Red Brown Mudstone of the Mercia Mudstone Group (British Geological Survey 1989).

3 Archaeological and Historical Background

3.1 Alvechurch was probably part of the 20 hides at Westhill, Coston Hackett and Rednall granted to the abbey of Bredon by king Offa of Mercia in 780. It passed subsequently to the See of Worcester, along with the rest of the abbey's possessions. The manor was given to the crown in 849 in return for royal protection but was returned to the See of Worcester by king Athelstan in 930 (VCH 1913, 252). The manor is mentioned in Domesday Book (1086) when it had a priest and it is possible that the bishops of Worcester had a residence there by this date (Dalwood *et al* 1995, 2).

3.2 The moated bishop's palace (Worcestershire Historic Environment Record No WSM 17709) probably originated at the same time as the deer park which is first mentioned in the late 12th century, though the palace itself is not recorded until 1236 (WSM 01232). By the 16th century it was in a poor state, though bishop Latimer subsequently repaired it (Dalwood *et al* 1995, 2). Alvechurch was retained by the See until 1648 when it was sold by the parliamentary trustees following the civil war. It was returned to the See of Worcester after the restoration (VCH 1913, 252), but by 1701 the moated site was occupied by orchards, which survived until at least 1927 (Ordnance Survey 1884, 1904, 1927, 1938), while the deer park had been divided up into farms (Dalwood *et al* 1995, 2). The palace itself was finally demolished in 1780

(Oswald 1954, 6), but the manor of Alvechurch remained in the ownership of the See of Worcester until 1860 when it was taken over by the ecclesiastical commissioners (VCH 1913, 252).

3.3 The earliest recorded form of the place name Alvechurch is *Aelfithe cyrce* (Mawer and Stenton 1927, 332-3), meaning "Aelfgyth's church" and may indicate that the church was founded before the 11th century (Dalwood *et al* 1995, 2). The church of St Lawrence (WSM 01830) stands on higher ground to the west of the existing town, and was probably the focus of settlement at Alvechurch in the late Anglo-Saxon period and in the 11th to 12th century (WSM 17221). The existing structure is largely 19th century; though with elements surviving from the 14th century (VCH 1913, 255). The early settlement would have been abandoned when the new town (WSM 29061) was laid out to the east in the 13th century (Dalwood *et al* 1995, 3).

3.4 The mesne borough of Alvechurch was probably formed by the Bishop Walter of Worcester and was laid out at the gate of the palace in *c* 1239 when he was granted a weekly market and annual fair (Dalwood *et al* 1995, 2). The borough is recognised in bishop Gifford's register (1268-1302) and by the 1290s the number of burgage tenements have been estimated at between 74 (VCH 1913, 252) and 76½ (Dalwood *et al* 1995, 2). The borough was never as successful as its neighbour Stratford-upon-Avon, founded by the bishops of Worcester in 1196 and its burgesses do not appear to have acquired any real independence (VCH 1913, 252).

3.5 Although further post-medieval tenement plots have been identified, documentary evidence suggests that there was a period of economic decline in the 17th century, after which the settlement was demoted to village status (Dalwood *et al* 1995, 9). The borough was in further decline by the end of the 18th century (Dalwood *et al* 1995, 9) by which time its market had ceased to function (VCH 1913, 253).

3.6 The bishop's palace (WSM 17709) today consists of the rectangular moated site, surrounding two platforms/islands, which housed the main palace buildings (WSM 01829). The Moat House now stands on the northern platform (Fig 1). This is recorded as having origins in the late 18th century (English Heritage 1998; Appendix C) but the existing structure dates largely from the late 19th century (Ordnance Survey 1884). Adjacent to the moated site were enclosures and agricultural buildings (WSM 01932, WSM 01933; see below, 3.7) and a dovecot (WSM 03303). To the north, east and south are the remains of a series of fishponds and islands (WSM 01831), a pond dam (WSM 01832), probable mill site (WSM 02071) together with leats (WSM 17190, WSM 17191) and an overflow channel (WSM 31962) related to the waterworks. A holloway (WSM 16713) runs to the east of the main fishponds. The bishop's deer park (WSM 01232) was adjacent to the palace (Dalwood *et al* 1995, 4). A full description is available in the Ancient Monument Schedule (see Appendix C).

3.7 Archaeological excavations carried out in 1951-2 to the north-east of the moated platforms recorded a large building, with stone foundations and cobbled floors, of probable 13th century origin that was rebuilt in the early 16th century (Oswald 1954, 6, 8; WSM 01932, WSM 34875). This was interpreted as a probable barn or other agricultural structure. Earthworks in the area were dated to the late 17th century, while a section through part of the moat indicated that it had been cleaned out in the 17th century and lined with clay in the 19th century (Oswald 1954, 6).

3.8 The site of the medieval bishop's palace of Alvechurch is Scheduled as an Ancient Monument (No 30009).

4 Observation of Groundworks

4.1 The groundworks consisted of the excavation of a manhole and trench for the replacement drain using a tracked mini-excavator with a toothless bucket (Figs 2-7). The trench measured 0.50m wide by 1.10m-1.25m deep, being deepest in the area of the new manhole (Fig 5) where it also widened out to c0.85m for a c2.5m stretch. The majority of the trench was cut entirely within the fill of a pre-existing pipe trench and thus did not expose any earlier deposits. This was apart from a widened area for the new manhole at the south-west end of the trench (Fig 5), and the dog-leg stretch running west from the north-east end of the pre-existing pipe towards the house (Figs 6 & 7).

4.2 In the area of the manhole (Fig 5) the geological natural strong brown clay (4) was recorded at c0.54m below the existing ground surface. This was overlain by a c0.10m thick layer of greenish grey sandy clay (3) that may itself have been a variation of the geological natural. Layer 3 was overlain by a c0.14m thick layer of greyish brown clay loam (2) that contained frequent small fragments of ceramic roof tile (not retained) and mortar flecks. This probably represents demolition material derived from a former building within the contemporary garden soil. Layer 2 was cut by the pre-existing sewer pipe trench, aligned roughly south-west to north-east. It was backfilled with a ceramic pipe (7) that lay at c1m below the existing ground surface. The pipe was overlain by a mixed deposit of greyish brown clay loam, strong brown clay and ash (6) from which a single sherd of 19th century willow pattern pottery and an iron object were noted. Pipe trench fill 6 was overlain by the c0.30m thick layer of dark greyish brown clay loam of the existing garden soil (1).

4.3 In the dog-leg trench (Figs 6 & 7) geological natural strong brown clay (4) was recorded at c1m below the existing ground surface. A further pipe trench (8) ran aligned roughly south-west to north-east, parallel to pipe 7 and slightly north-west of it. Pipe trench 8 had a ceramic pipe (10) in its base overlain by a backfill (9) identical to trench fill 6. Pipe trenches 5 and 8 were thus probably contemporary. Trench fill 9 was overlain by the c0.24m thick dark greyish brown clay loam (11) of the existing flower bed.

5 Conclusions

5.1 No medieval deposits were disturbed by the groundworks. A large number of small fragments of ceramic roof tile were recorded that may have been of medieval date and possibly derived from the demolition of the bishop's palace, but these were too small to be diagnostic.

5.2 The new pipe trench was cut largely through the backfill of an earlier sewer pipe trench and thus sheds no light on the survival, or not, of any significant archaeological remains in the area.

Acknowledgements

The Warwickshire Museum would like to thank Tracy and Michael Fallon of The Moat House for commissioning the work. The project was managed by Stuart Palmer and work on site was carried out by Bryn Gethin. This report was written by Chris Jones with illustrations by Andy Isham. It was checked by Pete Thompson.

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Appendix A List of Finds

<i>Context</i>	<i>Material</i>	<i>Quantity</i>	<i>Date/Comments</i>
6	pottery	1	19th century willow pattern (not retained)
6	iron	1	19th century plate with bolt attachment (not retained)

Appendix B List of Contexts

<i>Context No.</i>	<i>Description</i>
1	topsoil
2	greyish brown clay loam layer
3	greenish grey clay, possible geological natural
4	strong brown clay, geological natural
5	sewer pipe trench
6	fill of trench 5
7	ceramic pipe in trench 5
8	sewer pipe trench
9	fill of trench 8
10	ceramic pipe in trench 8
11	dark greyish brown clay loam garden soil

Appendix C Extract from the Record of Scheduled Monuments

MONUMENT: Moated site and fishponds at the Bishop's Palace

PARISH: ALVECHURCH

DISTRICT: BROMSGROVE

COUNTY: WORCESTERSHIRE

NATIONAL MONUMENT NO: 30009

NATIONAL GRID REFERENCE(S): SP03297251

DESCRIPTION OF THE MONUMENT

The monument includes the buried and earthwork remains of the palace of the bishops of Worcester and the moat, fishponds and mill sites associated with it. The double-island moated site of the palace lies in the north western part of the monument and is rectangular in shape. To the south east of the palace lies a second, single-island, sub-rectangular moat. To the north, east and south of this moated site is a large area of fishponds and other water management features bounded on the west and south by the River Arrow. The palace is documented from around AD

1230, although the park is recorded from about AD 1160 and manorial records survive from the time of King Offa. In the 16th century Leyland recorded that the decayed timber palace had been recently restored by Bishop Latimer. An estate map of 1701 recorded both parts of the moat as orchards and the buildings had certainly been demolished by around 1780. A late 18th century house now stands on the site. The park had been divided into several farms by the mid-19th century. The palace site, now known as The Moat House, measures 190m by 80m and is orientated north west-south east. The northern island is the larger, measuring approximately 80m by 60m. The main domestic building was sited on this island in the vicinity of the modern house, and some traces of earlier structures have been recorded in the gardens. Part excavation on the moat island has confirmed that domestic remains survive on the platforms. The island to the south east has an uneven surface with large depressions indicating the survival of either building or garden remains. It measures approximately 60m square. The surface of both islands is lower than that of the surrounding land.

The circuit of the moat is complete except along the north western arm, parallel with the road, where it has been partly infilled to provide access. The moat is waterlogged and is 5m to 10m wide across the top and 1m to 2m deep. There are traces of an external bank on the eastern and southern sides. To the south east of the palace, across a tributary of the River Arrow, lies a second sub-rectangular moated site, known as the 'Bishops Garden'. This moated site is built into steeply rising ground and forms a terraced area adjacent to the gorge of the stream. The moat has substantial external banks and is steep-sided and waterlogged. The island measures approximately 15m by 10m and its surface is uneven. The moat was supplied by a substantial leat, terraced into the slope and leading off the stream to the east and running parallel to it. An outlet lies in the north western angle of the moat.

A substantial earthen bank or dam measuring 4m to 6m high and 4m wide across the top, runs across the floor of the valley from the gorge of the stream on the north west towards the rising land opposite, curving to run parallel to the valley sides on the south east. This acted as a causeway across the fishponds and also retained the water of the fishpond system.

A leat was formed between the valley sides to the south east and the earthen dam. Several sluices were cut through the earthen dam which widens to form building platforms adjacent to the sluices. The sluices served to feed the fishponds and may also have been used to power water mills. The platforms are believed to preserve building remains associated with the functions of the fisheries and mills. The floor of the valley formed the site of a series of three fishponds which survive as waterlogged hollows lying along the course of a second stream or leat which entered the site in the north eastern corner near the earthen dam and which may have also been fed from the sluices. The valley widens to the south providing a large area of low-lying waterlogged ground which could be flooded by sluices in order to create further fishponds and water meadows.

On the rising ground to the south east are medieval ridge and furrow cultivation remains with hollow ways providing routes between the fields and the fishpond sites. This area is important for understanding the economy of the community and is therefore included in the scheduling. The rising ground to the south west is bounded by the River Arrow and its tributary on the south and west, forming a broad, gently rising terraced platform above the flood plain, the surface of which has low level earthworks thought to represent the remains of building platforms.

The 18th century house, associated structures and modern surfaces, the wooden footbridges and all modern fencing are excluded from the scheduling although the ground beneath all these features is included.

ASSESSMENT OF IMPORTANCE

Bishops' palaces were high status domestic residences providing luxury accommodation for the bishops and lodgings for their large retinues; although some were little more than country houses, others were the setting for great works of architecture and displays of decoration.

Bishops' palaces were usually set within an enclosure, sometimes moated, containing a range of buildings, often of stone, including a hall or halls, chapels, lodgings and a gatehouse, often arranged around a courtyard or courtyards. The earliest recorded examples date to the seventh century. Many were occupied throughout the medieval period and some continued in use into the post medieval period; a few remain occupied today. Only some 150 bishops' palaces have been identified and documentary sources confirm that they were widely dispersed throughout England. All positively identified examples are considered to be nationally important. The moated site of the Bishop's Palace is associated with a complex of fishponds, a moat system and mill sites. Fishponds are artificially created pools of slow moving fresh water constructed for the purpose of cultivating, breeding and storing fish to provide a constant and sustainable supply of food. They were created by damming narrow valleys, embanked above ground or dug into ground level, and were fed by means of streams and leats. Sluices controlled the flow of water, and overflow channels prevented flooding. Ponds of different sizes and depths were used for different ages and breeds of fish and had separate functions such as storage or spawning. Islands were commonly used for wild fowl breeding, to provide shallow spawning grounds and for buildings used in the fisheries which might include provision for storage and processing and for equipment and accommodation of fishermen, water bailiffs, or reeves. The practice of constructing fishponds began during the medieval period and peaked in the 12th century with some continuing in use until the 17th century. Many were reused as ornamental features into the 19th and 20th centuries. Fishponds were usually the property of the wealthier sectors of society, with magnates, monasteries and bishops often owning large complexes which acted as much as status symbols as practical resources. The moated site at the Bishop's Palace is a rare example of a manorial site with a documented history prior to the Norman Conquest. The associations with the Bishops of Worcester will provide an insight into the management of a large ecclesiastical estate. Part excavation on the moat island has confirmed that domestic remains survive on the platforms, and the waterlogged ditches will retain a high level of archaeological and environmental deposits. The moats provide an example of the engineering skills involved in providing water through a leat up slope from the River Arrow to the moat. The moated site's association with an extensive complex of fishponds and associated water management features increases its importance.

SCHEDULING HISTORY

Monument included in the Schedule on 25th October 1974 as:

COUNTY/NUMBER: Hereford and Worcester 195

NAME: Site of Bishop's Palace at The Moathouse

The reference of this monument is now:

NATIONAL MONUMENT NUMBER: 30009

NAME: Moated site and fishponds at the Bishop's Palace

SCHEDULING REVISED ON 13th March 1998

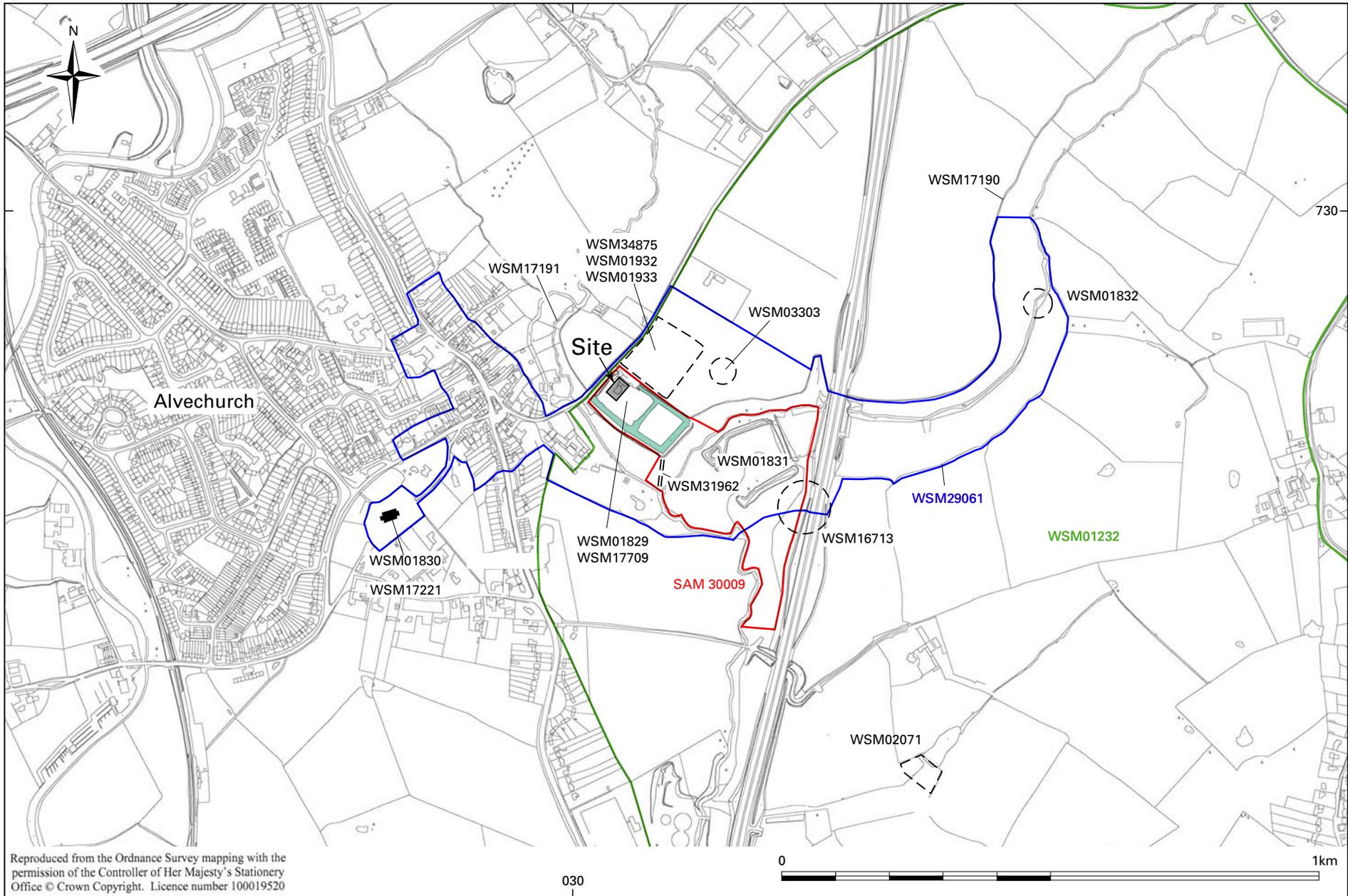


Fig 1 Site Location

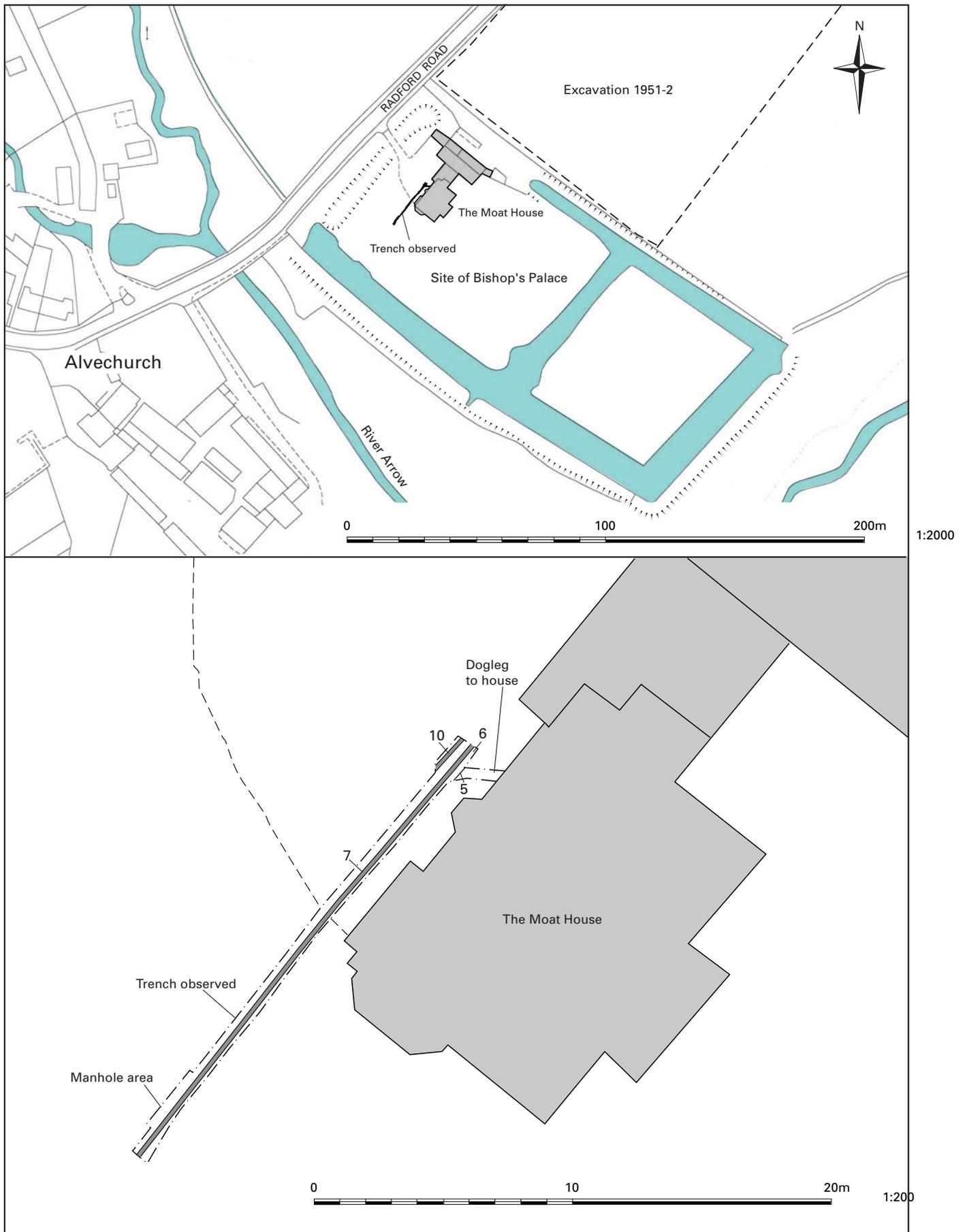


Fig 2 Trench observed



Fig 3 Trench looking north-east



Fig 4 Trench looking north-east (detail)



Fig 5 New manhole area looking north-east, layers 1-4



Fig 6 Dog-leg trench looking north-east



Fig 7 Trench looking south-west