

CPAT Report No 1158

Weston Lane/Maesbury Road, Oswestry

Archaeological Evaluation



THE CLWYD-POWYS ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRUST

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Archaeological Evaluation

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July 2012

Report for Dennis Edwards

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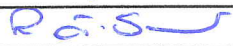
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CPAT Report Record

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1 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The Field Services Section of the Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust was invited by Mr Dennis Edwards to undertake an archaeological evaluation in advance of a new industrial development and access on land adjoining Weston Lane and Maesbury Road, Oswestry in Shropshire. The Historic Environment Team at Shropshire County Council had determined that a programme of assessment was required as a condition of planning consent to determine the potential impact of the development on the cultural heritage and provide sufficient information to enable a decision to be made regarding any further investigations which might be required. The condition of planning permission (Ref. OS/07/15105/OUT) stated that:

6 No development approved by this permission shall commence until the applicant has secured the implementation of a programme of archaeological work in accordance with a written scheme of investigation which has been submitted by the applicant and approved in writing by the Local Planning Authority. Such a programme must be prepared and carried out under the supervision and with the agreement of an archaeologist approved in writing by the Local Planning Authority.

- 1.2 Accordingly, the evaluation comprised a desk-based study, geophysical survey and trial excavation.
- 1.3 The site occupies 2.2ha of pasture located on the southern side of Oswestry, bounded to the north by Weston Lane, the east by Maesbury Road, the south by the A483 and the west by the former Oswestry to Llanymynech railway (SJ 3008 2765).
- 1.4 The eastern boundary of the development site is thought to run along the western side of the archaeological monument known as Wat's Dyke, a linear earthwork which traditionally is thought to mark the western boundary of the kingdom of Mercia during the Early Medieval period, predating Offa's Dyke, which here lies some distance to the west. Whilst this section of the monument has not been designated as a Scheduled Monument, scheduled sections of the dyke exist both c. 320m to the north and c. 200m to the south of the development site.

2 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

- 2.1 The principal archaeological interest in the development site lies in the position of Wat's Dyke along the eastern boundary. The Dyke is a linear earthwork which stretches intermittently for around 60km from the River Morda at Maesbury, 7km south of Oswestry, to the Dee Estuary at Holywell. The earthwork consists of a substantial ditch with a corresponding bank along the eastern side. It is traditionally presumed to predate Offa's Dyke, largely as a result of its shorter length and more easterly position and has been attributed by some to Offa's predecessor, Athelbald (AD 716-757).
- 2.2 In 1997 a section of the Dyke was excavated around 100m to the north of the development area at Maes-y-clawdd. This identified the eastern half of the ditch, together with a full profile of the bank, which survived to a height of up to 0.8m, with a width of around 10m. The ditch was 2.3m deep and was estimated to have a full width of around 7.4m. Significantly, the bank sealed a small area of in situ burning, possibly a hearth, on the surface of a buried soil. Unidentified charcoal from the burnt area produced a radiocarbon date of 1571 ± 69 (UB-4158), which has been calibrated to AD 268 - 630 at the 95% confidence level. On the basis of the radiocarbon date it was suggested that Wat's Dyke was likely to have been constructed during the 5th century AD and was therefore not an immediate predecessor of Offa's Dyke, but rather an achievement of the post-Roman kingdom of the northern Cornovii (Hannaford 1998). This is, however, currently the only dating available for the monument and rather than providing a clear date for its construction should perhaps been seen as giving a *terminus post quem*, a date after which it

was built, particularly since the charcoal species used for the analysis is not known, raising the possibility that the wood may have been of some age at the time it was burnt.

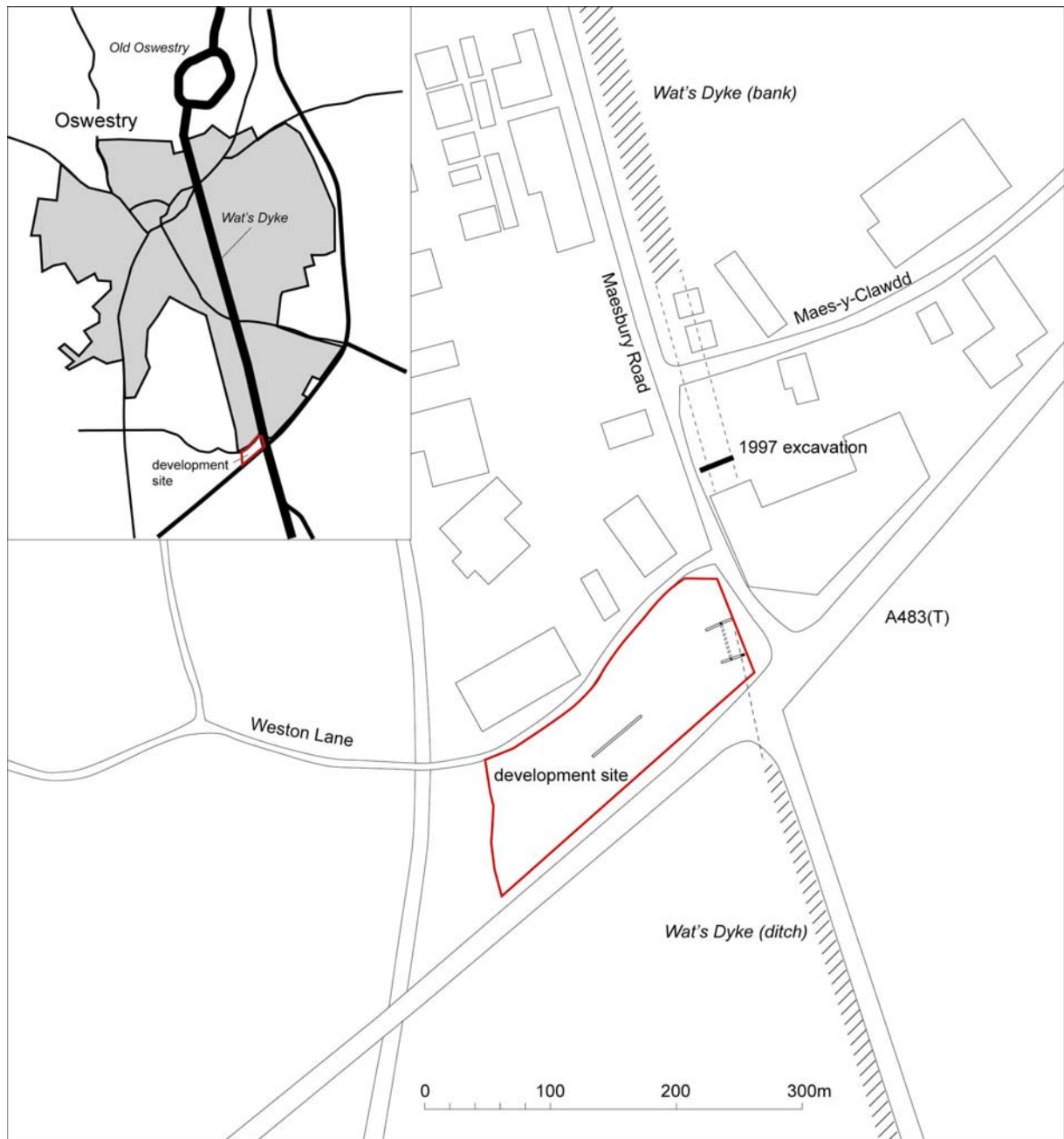


Fig. 1 Site location showing the position of Wat's Dyke and the 1997 excavation

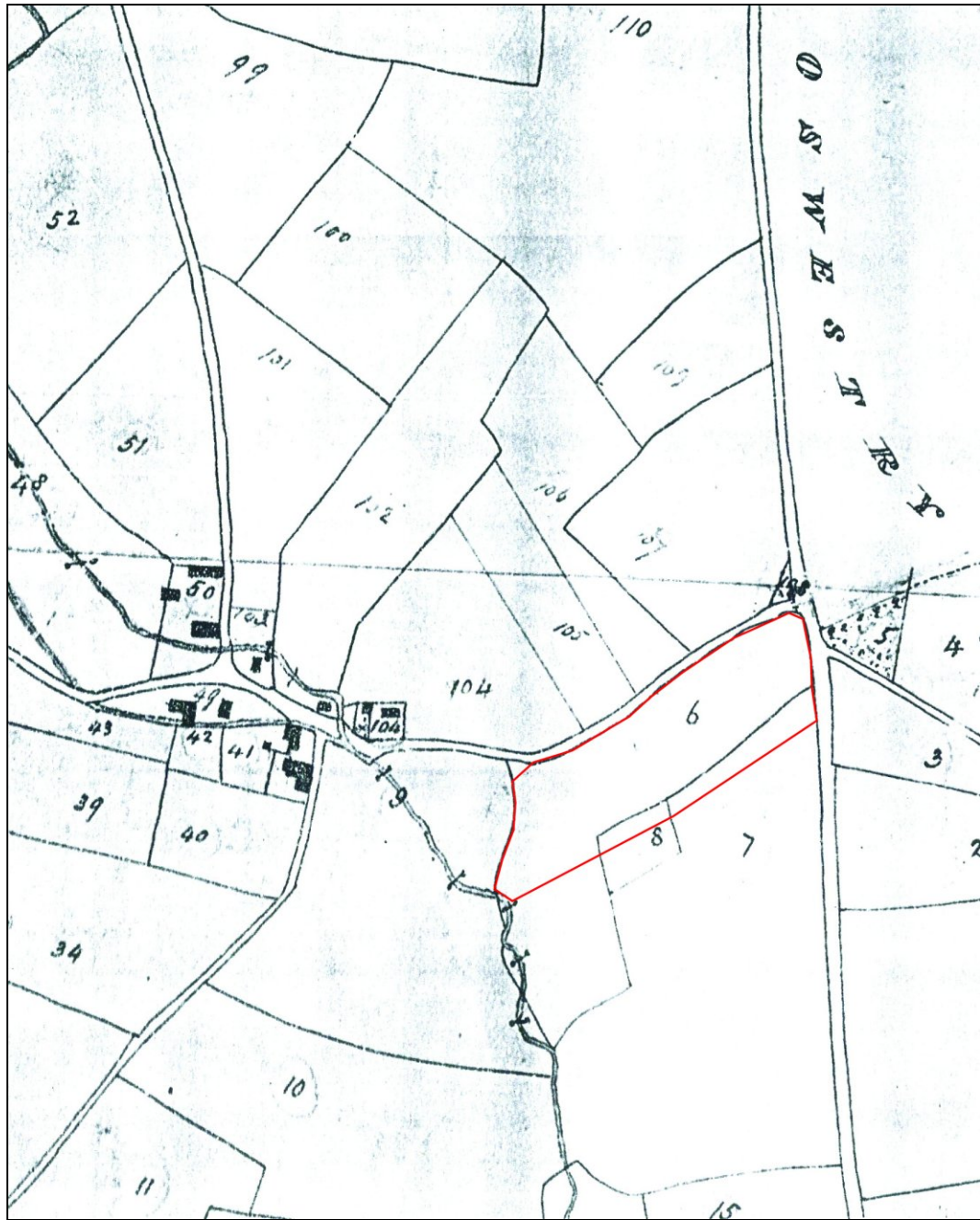


Fig. 2 Extract from the 1839 Tithe Survey for Oswestry, Weston and Cotton Township showing the Development Area outlined in red

- 2.3 The 1839 Tithe Survey for Oswestry, Weston Cotton Township (Fig. 2), identifies the development plot as falling within two fields, 'Maes Afon Ganol' and 'Big Field adjoining Brook'. Mapping by the Ordnance Survey in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Fig. 3) shows the bank of Wat's Dyke surviving on the eastern side of Maesbury Road immediately to the north of the development site, with the road presumably lying within the ditch. Further to the south, however, the ditch is depicted with the road now running along the line of the bank.

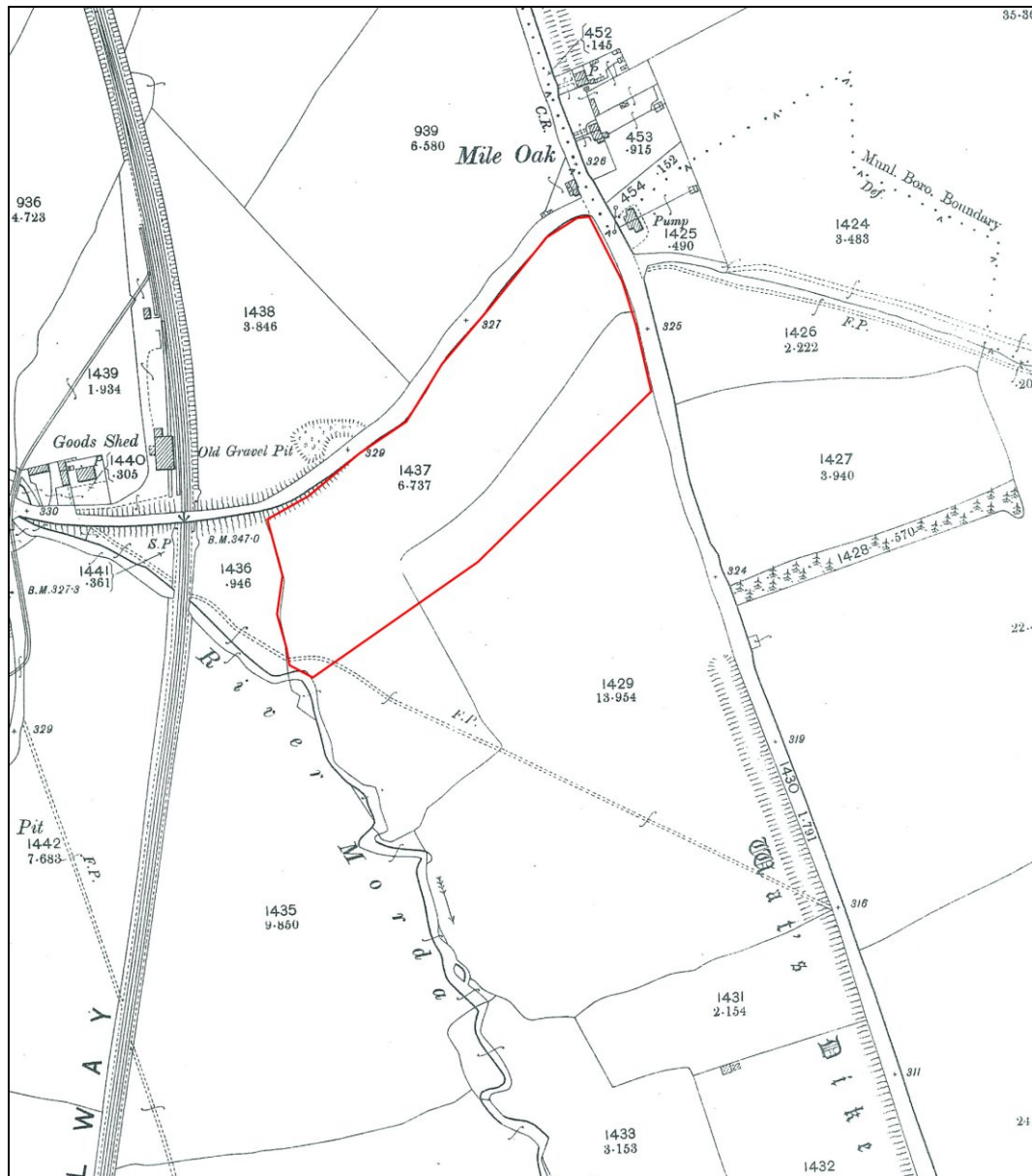


Fig. 3 Extract from the 1901 Ordnance Survey 25'' map showing the Development Area outlined in red

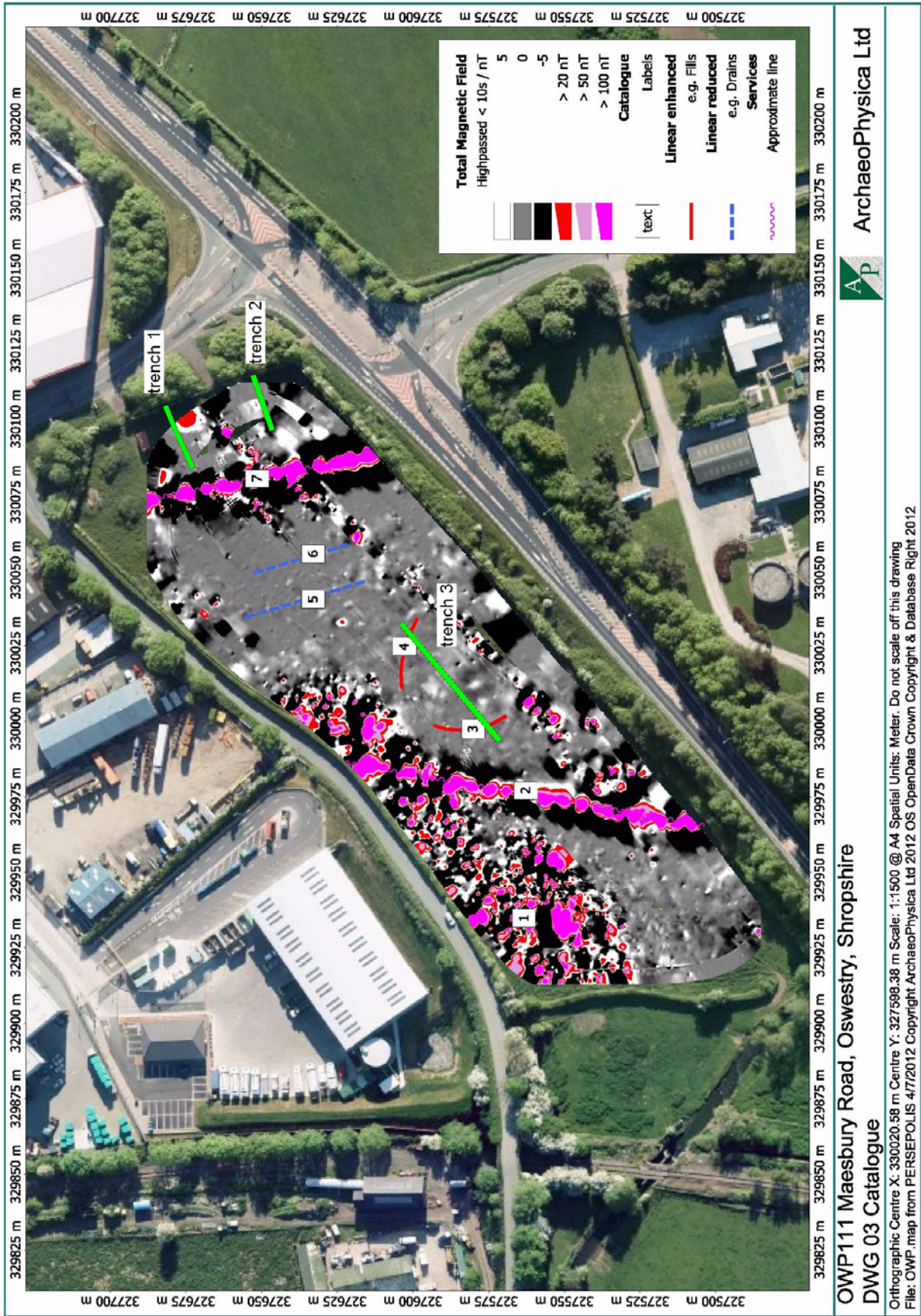


Fig. 4 Geophysical survey results and trench location

3 GEOPHYSICAL SURVEY

- 3.1 The geophysical survey was undertaken on 28 June 2012 by a team from ArchaeoPhysica. Full details of the results are contained in a separate report (Roseveare 2012). The survey employed caesium vapour magnetometry using a sledge-based system with an array of Geometrics G858 MagMapper configured as a dual magnetometer with sensors approximately 0.3m off the ground. The system included geo-location embedded in the data in real time from an onboard GNSS receiver.
- 3.2 The results, which are presented in Fig. 4, produced no evidence to confirm the location of Wat's Dyke along the eastern boundary of the field, although the magnetic field close to the boundary was strongly distorted by fencing, and the huge anomaly created by an underground service.
- 3.3 The survey identified no anomalies of obvious archaeological significance, except possibly (3) and (4) which, considered as a pair, might mark the line of a ditch enclosing an oval area measuring approximately 40m across. However, these anomalies are weak, possibly discontinuous and are identifiable mainly in plan form, and it is possible that their appearance is fortuitous.
- 3.4 The only other features which were apparent were two probable field drains (5 and 6) and two buried pipelines (2 and 7) associated with the sewage treatment works on the south side of the A483.

4 EVALUATION

- 4.1 The evaluation, conducted between 16-19 July 2012, consisted of three trenches, two against the eastern boundary of the plot and the third located to investigate two anomalies which were revealed by the geophysical survey (Fig. 4).
- 4.2 In all three trenches the upper deposits were removed by machine, under close archaeological supervision, to reveal the undisturbed natural subsoil or the first recognisable archaeological horizon. Thereafter all excavation was undertaken by hand. During the excavation a written, drawn and photographic record was maintained, a summary of which is provided in Appendix 1. The numbers in brackets in the following text refer to individual context records that form part of the site archive; this will be deposited with the regional Historic Environment Record in Shrewsbury.

Trench 1 (Fig. 5)

- 4.3 Trench 1 measured 22.5m by 1.5m and was located close to the eastern boundary of the plot. The topsoil (1), which was around 0.25m thick, was removed by machine along with a natural silty clay deposit (2), up to 0.35m thick, which was originally thought to be an old ploughsoil. This exposed the natural glacial gravels (11) within which two features of archaeological significance were identified. Neither of them contained any finds or other dating evidence.

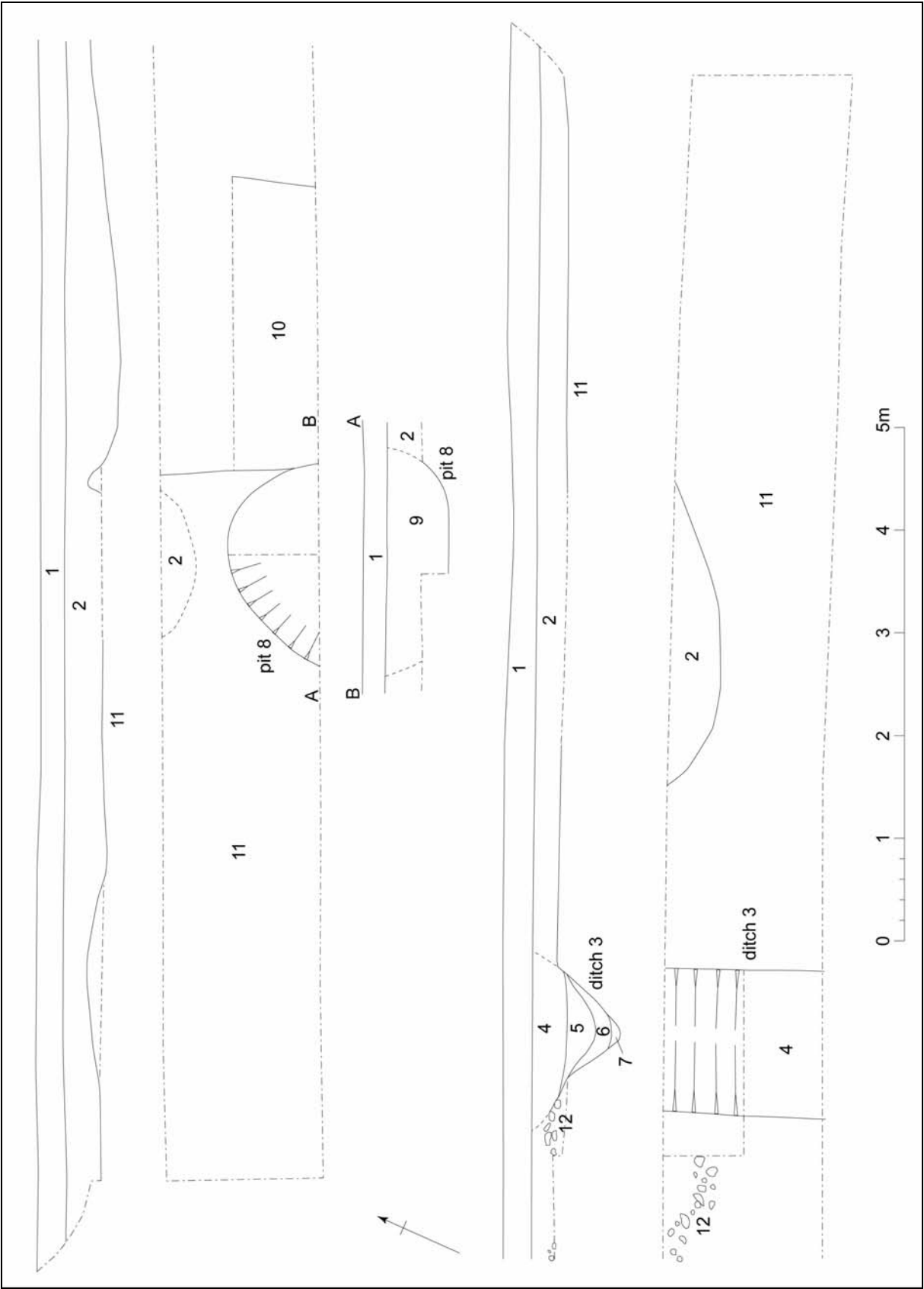


Fig. 5 Trench 1 plan and section

- 4.4 A narrow, V-shaped ditch (3), around 1.7m in width and 0.85m deep, was aligned approximately north to south (Fig. 6). The basal fill consisted of a layer of fine grit and silt (7), which represents a period of initial weathering, sealed beneath a stony deposit in a clay silt matrix (6), the profile of which suggests a period of stabilisation after its deposition. Later infilling consisted on a 0.26m-thick deposit of brown clay silt with frequent small stones (5) and an upper fill of relatively stone-free clay silt (4).



Fig. 6 Ditch 3 viewed from the south. Photo CPAT 3487.0035

- 4.5 Towards the western end of the trench part of a pit (8), or possibly a butt-ended ditch, was identified extending beyond the southern limits of the excavation (Fig. 7). The pit, around 2.2m across and 0.6m deep, was filled by a deposit of reddish-brown clay silt (9).
- 4.6 An irregular band of silty clay (10) was also investigated, although this was found to be a natural deposit within a slight hollow in the gravel subsoil. Similarly, an area of large, rounded stones (12) also proved to be a natural deposit.



Fig. 7 Pit 8 viewed from the north-west. Photo CPAT 3487.0032

Trench 2 (Fig. 8)

- 4.7 Trench 2 measured 19.5m by 1.5m and was located close to the eastern boundary of the plot, 27m south of Trench 1. The machine removal of the topsoil (13) and an underlying deposit of reddish-brown clay silt (14) with a total depth of up to 0.45m to 0.7m revealed the natural subsoil, consisting of a deposit of clay silt (25), which was also removed to expose mixed glacial gravels (23) at a depth of around 0.7m below the present ground surface.
- 4.8 At the eastern end of the trench, and extending beyond its limits, a large ditch cut into the natural deposits, of which only the upper deposits were investigated (Fig. 9). The ditch was at least 3.2m wide and 0.9m deep and ran across the trench at a slight angle. The western edge of the ditch had a stepped profile, having been cut through the upper deposit of subsoil (25) and onto the surface of the underlying gravels (23) before being cut into the gravel at a point 1.2m from the ditch edge. The upper fill consisted of a uniform deposit of brown clay silt (16), up to 0.9m thick, which contain occasional stones, including several fragments of burnt limestone and was indistinguishable from the general deposit (14) below the topsoil. This sealed a layer of compacted fine gravel (17) on which a number of large stones (18) had evidently come to rest. No further excavation was undertaken to investigate the underlying deposits.

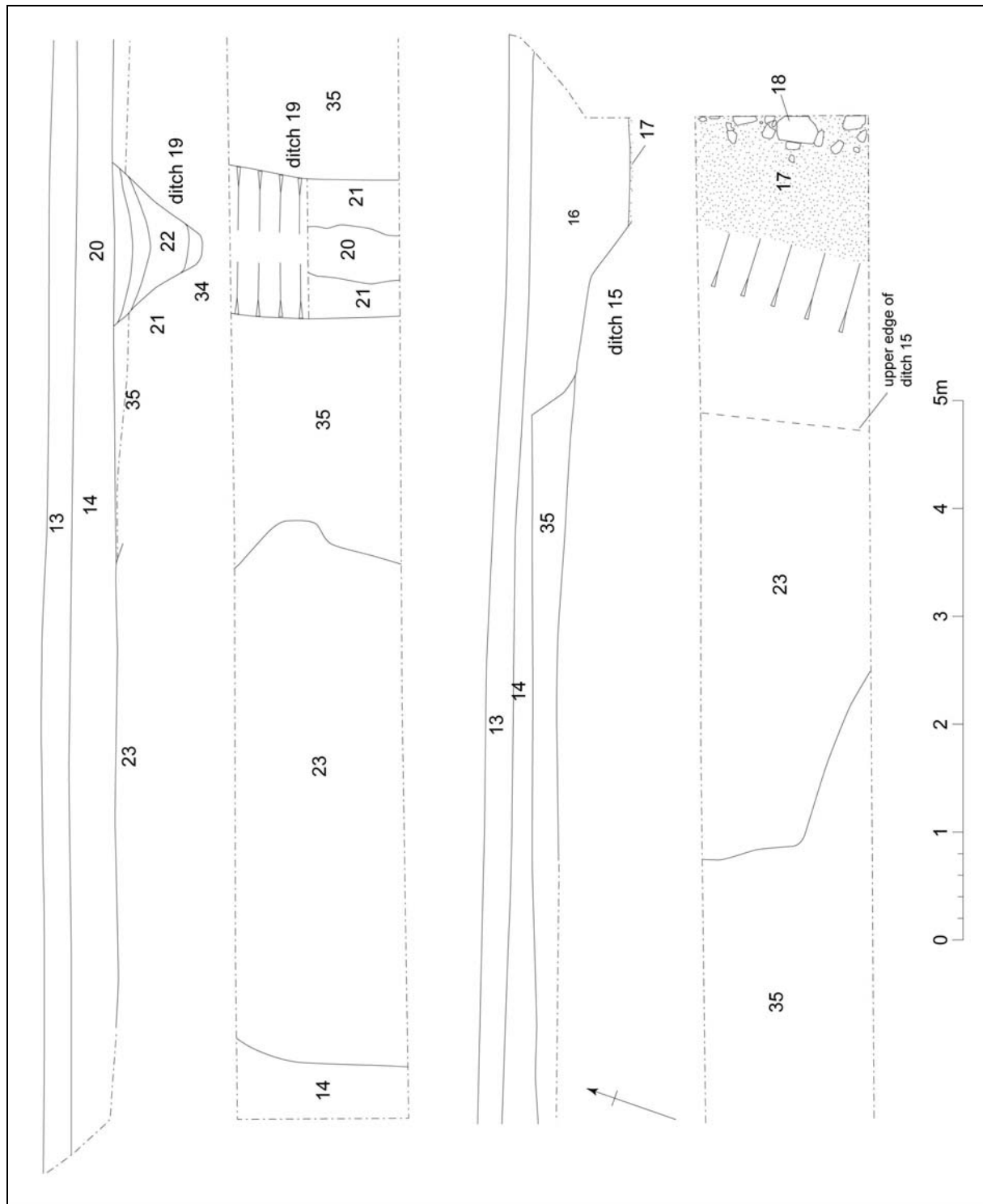


Fig. 8 Trench 2 plan and section

- 4.9 Around 8m to the west of the large ditch a narrow, V-shaped ditch (20) was identified (Fig. 10), the character and alignment of which suggest that it was a continuation of ditch 3, recorded in trench 1. The ditch was 1.5m wide and 0.82m deep with a basal fill (34) of grey brown silty gravel, representing initial weathering from the sides of the ditch, sealed beneath a 0.35m-thick deposit of clay silt (22). The upper fills consisted of a heavily iron-panned deposit of clay silt (21) and a layer of pale yellow brown clay silt (20) which contained frequent charcoal flecks.



Fig. 9 Ditch 15 viewed from the south-west following the removal of the upper fill.
Photo CPAT 3487.0010



Fig. 10 Ditch 20 viewed from the south-west. Photo CPAT 3487.0039

Trench 3

- 4.10 Trench 3, which was 50.5m long and 1.5m wide, was positioned to investigate two anomalies identified by the geophysical survey (Fig. 4, nos 3 and 4). Following the removal by machine of the topsoil (24) and an old ploughsoil (25) with a total depth of up to 0.53m, hand-cleaning of the exposed glacial gravels (11) identified several deposits of potential archaeological significance, each of which was investigated.
- 4.11 A narrow, linear gully (26) towards the eastern end of the trench, was aligned north to south and measured 0.74m wide and only 0.1m deep; it was filled by a deposit of grey gravelly silt (27) which produced no dating evidence. It is possible that this was a naturally occurring feature rather than an archaeological feature.



Fig. 11 The possible gully (26) at the eastern end of Trench 3. Photo CPAT 3487. 0042

- 4.12 Four irregular bands of silty clay (28, 29, 31 and 33) were also investigated, although all proved to be of natural origin. It is worth noting, however, that deposits 29 and 31 lay within irregular, steep-sided features cut into the natural gravels; their appearance suggested that they were perhaps fluvio-glacial channels, or possibly a frost wedges, rather than archaeological features.
- 4.13 A comparison between the geophysical survey results and the total station survey conducted to locate the trenches confirmed that the eastern geophysical anomaly (4) corresponded with gully 26, while the western anomaly (3) corresponded with deposit 31.

5 CONCLUSIONS

- 5.1 The evaluation identified the western edge of a large ditch close to the south-eastern corner of the development site which is likely to be part of the Early Medieval boundary known as Wat's Dyke. Although the ditch was not investigated to its full depth, and the majority of the feature lay between the development boundary and Maesbury Road, a comparison between the position of the ditch and the projected line of the dyke indicates that this is likely to be part of the monument. The presence of a layer of compacted gravel within the ditch, beneath the upper fill, may indicate that the ditch had perhaps been adopted by a former course of Maesbury Road. It is interesting, however, that although the present course of Maesbury Road runs approximately along the line of the ditch further to the north, to the south of the A483(T) it lies further to the east, along the line of the bank.
- 5.2 Only two other archaeological features were identified within the three evaluation trenches, comprising a V-shaped ditch around 1.5m wide and 0.8m deep which followed an alignment parallel to Wat's Dyke at a distance of 8m, and a small pit. Both of these remain undated.
- 5.3 A geophysical survey, conducted as part of the evaluation, revealed little of archaeological potential, with the exception of two possible curving ditches. Excavation subsequently demonstrated that they were both likely to be fluvio-glacial features.

6 ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

- 6.1 The writer would like to thank the following people for their assistance during the project: Jenny Britnell, Ian Davies and Brian Williams CPAT; Mr Dennis Edwards; and Dr Andy Wigley, Principal Archaeologist, Historic Environment Team, Shropshire County Council.

7 REFERENCES

Published sources

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Transactions of the Shropshire Archaeological and Historical Society 73, 1-7.

Roseveare, M J, 2012. *Maesbury Road, Oswestry, Shropshire: Geophysical Survey Report*.
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Cartographic sources

1839 Tithe Survey for Oswestry, Weston Cotton Township (PF 214/9/1)

1873-74 Ordnance Survey 1st edition 6" map, Shropshire 19NW

1901 Ordnance Survey 2nd edition 25" map, Shropshire 19.6

APPENDIX 1 PROJECT ARCHIVE

Site records

38 context record forms
Context Register
Drawing Register
1 A1 site drawing
2 A3 site drawing
2 A4 site drawing
49 digital photographs, CPAT film 3460
Photographic register

Context Register

Context	Trench	Type	Comment
1	1	Deposit	Topsoil
2	1	Deposit	Silt deposit below topsoil
3	1	Ditch	V-shaped ditch. Same as ditch 19
4	1	Fill	Upper fill of ditch 3
5	1	Fill	Fill of ditch 3
6	1	Fill	Fill of ditch 3
7	1	Fill	Basal fill of ditch 3
8	1	Pit	Pit or ditch butt-end
9	1	Fill	Fill of pit 8
10	1	Deposit	Natural silty clay
11	1	Deposit	Natural gravels
12	1	Deposit	Natural river cobbles
13	2	Deposit	Topsoil
14	2	Deposit	Silt deposit below topsoil
15	2	Ditch	Large ditch, presumed to be part of Wat's Dyke
16	2	Fill	Upper fill of ditch 15
17	2	Fill	Compact gravel layer within ditch 15
18	2	Fill	Stones within ditch 15 on top of gravel fill 17
19	2	Ditch	V-shaped ditch. Same as ditch 3
20	2	Fill	Upper fill of ditch 19
21	2	Fill	Fill of ditch 19
22	2	Fill	Fill of ditch 19
23	2	Deposit	Natural gravels
24	3	Deposit	Topsoil
25	3	Deposit	Silt deposit below topsoil
26	3	Gully?	Possible gully, assumed to be fluvio-glacial
27	3	Fill	Fill of 26
28	3	Deposit	Natural silty-clay
29	3	Deposit	Natural silty-clay
30	3	Gully?	Possible gully, assumed to be fluvio-g
31	3	Fill	Fill of 30
32	3	Deposit	Natural gravels
33	3	Deposit	Natural silty-clay
34	2	Fill	Basal fill of ditch 19
35	2	Deposit	Natural silty-clay