

CPAT Report No. 1289

# Land North of Lower House Farm, Knockin, Shropshire

## ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION



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## Summary

An archaeological evaluation, comprising the excavation of four trenches with a total combined length of 80m, was undertaken in connection with proposals for a development on land to the north of Lower House Farm, Knockin, Shropshire (SJ 3327 2234). The site lay within an area which is thought to have formed part of a potentially planned medieval village and the evaluation was intended to examine the possibility that traces of medieval settlement survived.

No traces of dwellings were revealed in the evaluation, although evidence of what seemed to be a former field or plot boundary was found in Trench C. The most significant discovery was a substantial ditch, measuring up to 6.0m wide and 2.5m deep, which crossed the eastern end of the proposed development area and was observed in two trenches. Finds from the fill of the ditch suggested it was probably of medieval date, and it may represent a surviving section of the defences of a large outer bailey associated with the medieval timber castle at Knockin.

## 1. Introduction

- 1.1 In July 2014 the Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust was commissioned by Bidwells, on behalf of the Trustees of the Lord Bradford (1987) Settlement, to undertake an archaeological evaluation on a proposed development site in Knockin, Shropshire. The evaluation followed on from earlier stages of work which included a desk-based assessment (Kelleher 2011), geophysical survey (Roseveare and Fry 2014) and an assessment of the potential visual impacts of the development on local receptors (Jones 2014).

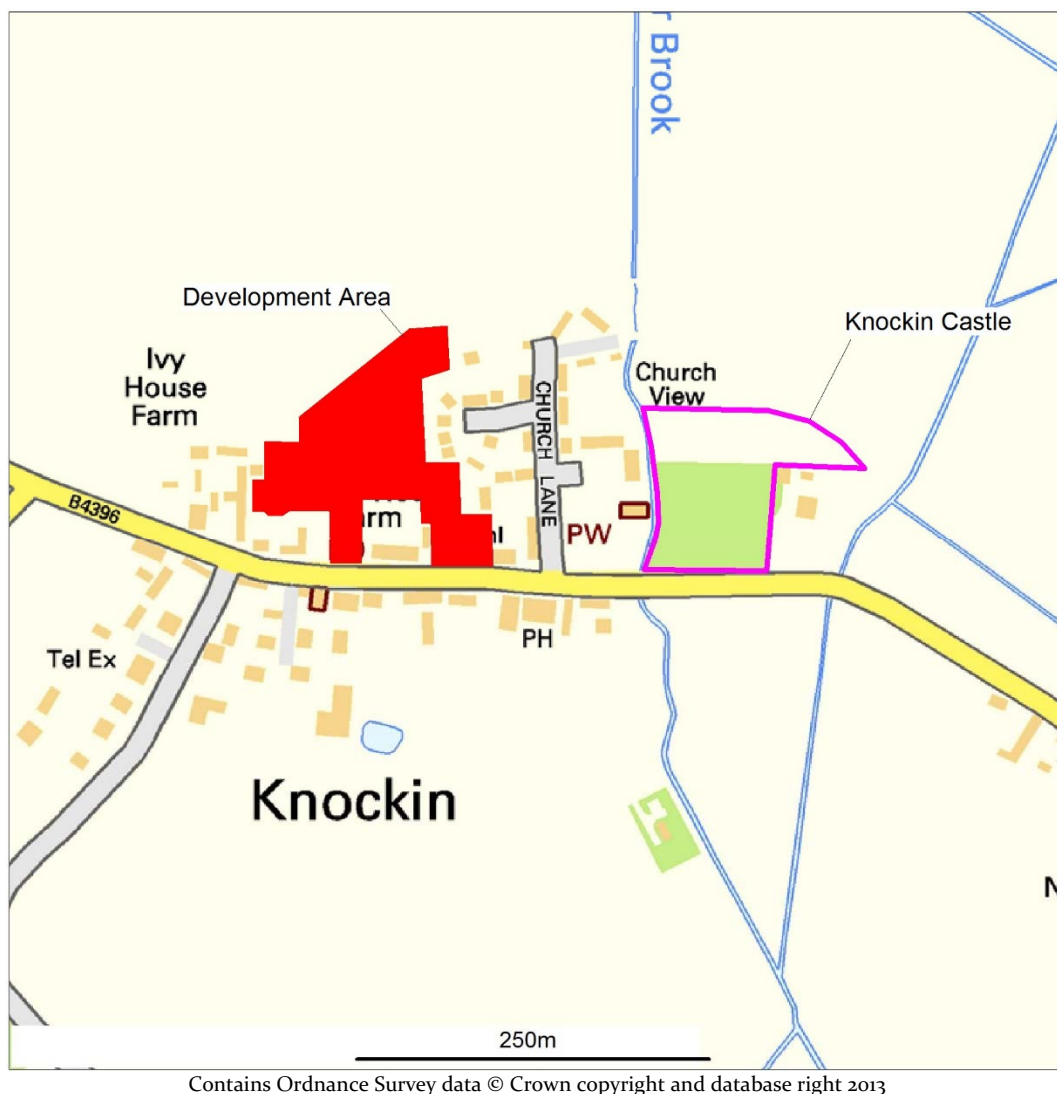


Fig. 1: The location of the proposed Development Area showing designated heritage assets within 1km. The scheduled area of Knockin Castle is outlined in purple.

- 1.2 The village of Knockin is situated in north-west Shropshire, 7.5km south-east of Oswestry and 18km north-west of Shrewsbury. Knockin village is a predominantly linear settlement which occupies both sides of the B4396 and the development site occupies up to 1.4ha on the northern side of the village, centred at SJ 33187 22382 (Fig. 1). The site has an irregular shape, the southern portion of which faces onto the B4396, the main road through Knockin village, and contains portions of two road-frontage plots, on either side of Lower House Farm. The northern part of the site consists of pasture fields.

- 1.3 The village is considered to be a planned settlement dating from the medieval period, particularly as there is no mention of a settlement here in the Domesday Survey of 1086. The earthworks of the medieval castle, established between 1154 and 1160 (Watson and Musson 1993, 71), lie just to the east of the village, with the church occupying an adjacent plot to the west, between the castle and the village. The original layout of the village has, to a large extent, been retained to the present day; the main street, now the B4396, runs from west to east and is flanked by property boundaries which extend on either side of the road as far as what were originally a pair of back lanes, which have been fossilised either as present-day roads, or as public footpaths.

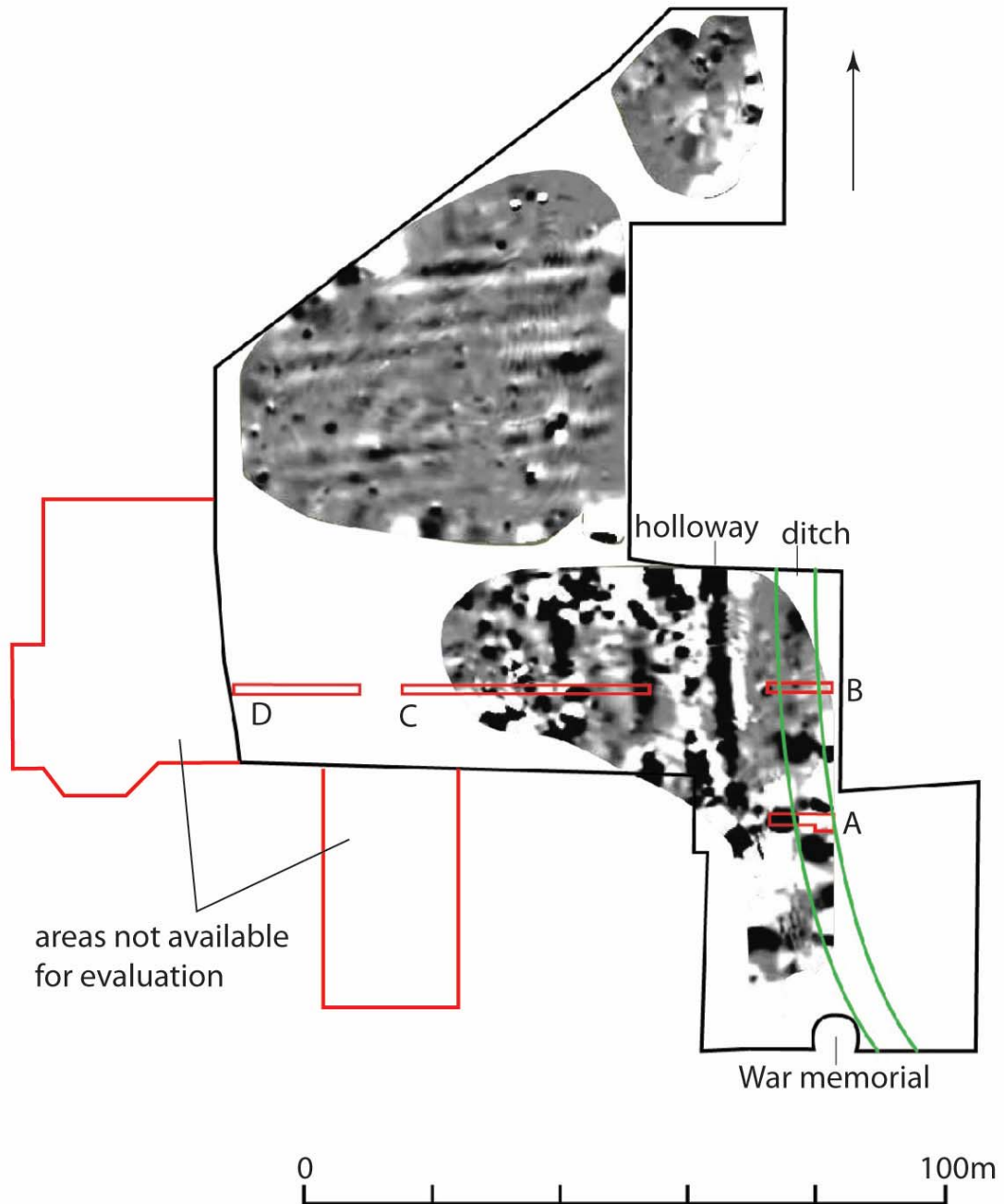


Fig. 2: The location of the evaluation trenches within the development plot compared to the geophysics results derived from Roseveare and Fry, 2014. Residential occupation prevented the evaluation of the full development area.

## 2 Evaluation

2.1 The evaluation (Fig. 2) comprised some four trenches (A-D), respectively 10m, 10m, 40m and 20m in length. All were aligned approximately east/west and sited in a single grass-covered field to the north of Lower House Farm. Trench A encountered a small water pipe at about 0.5m deep and was repositioned slightly to the north to avoid it; the trenches were excavated by machine to a width of approximately 1.6m.

### Trench A (10.0m east/west by 1.6m wide: Figs 3 and 4)

2.2 The natural subsoil (5) comprised red sand with overlying patches of red-grey sandy silt containing small stones and was exposed in the western half of the trench. The natural subsoil in this area was overlain by a deposit of reddish-brown sandy silt (2), up to 0.35m thick. In the eastern half of the trench layers 2 and 5 had both been cut by a substantial ditch (7) which was at least 6.0m wide. It was excavated to a maximum safe depth of about 1.2m and was then investigated by augering. It proved to be 2.40m deep, with a U-shaped profile and sloping sides. Its eastern extent was not determined.

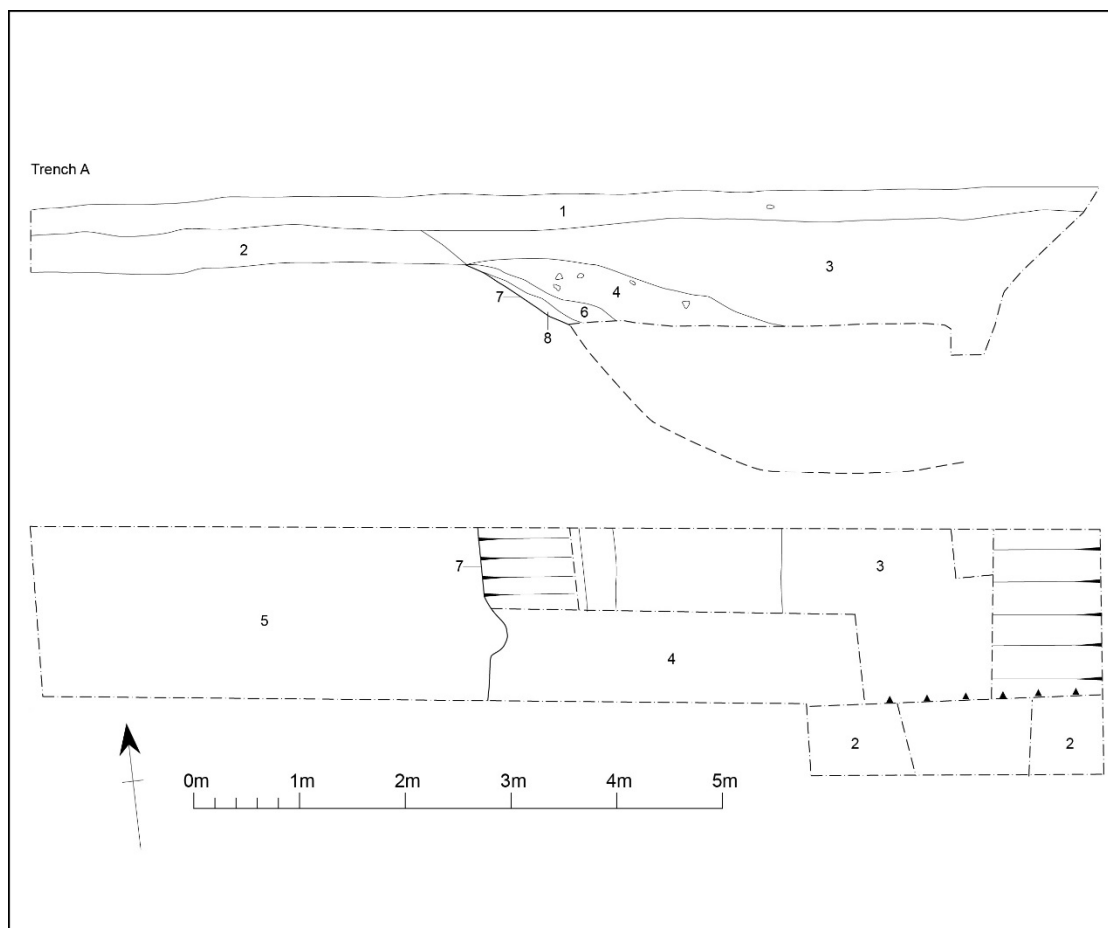


Fig. 3: Trench A plan and section. The base and profile of the ditch was established through augering.

2.3 Ditch 7 was investigated to the maximum safe trench depth and found to contain at least four distinct layer; it is quite possible that further layers may lie at lower levels. Of the deposits exposed, the earliest was a soft reddish-brown sandy silt (8), up to 0.10m thick where visible, and this was overlain by up to 0.20m of dark grey-brown sandy clay silt (6). The subsequent fill comprised a layer of mixed yellow-brown clay and reddish-

brown silty sand (4), of 0.45m maximum thickness. It contained fragments of sandstone, which were of particular interest as these may represent demolition rubble/material used deliberately to infill the ditch. Finally, grey-brown silty sand (3), at least 1.0m in maximum thickness, was dumped to fill the ditch. Layers 3 and 4 contained sherds of medieval pottery and these and layer 2 were overlain by the local topsoil, a grey-brown sandy silt (1).



Fig. 4: Trench A after excavation, from the west. Photo CPAT 3876-0015

**Trench B** (9.6m east/west by 1.6m wide: Figs 5 and 6)

- 2.4 The natural subsoil (15) comprised orange-red sand with overlying patches of yellowish silt and gravel and was exposed at the east and west ends of the trench. In the central part of the trench a ditch (12), measuring about 6.0m in width was excavated down to a safe working depth; subsequent auger sampling showed that it was about 2.0m deep and formed a broad U-shape with sloping sides and a slightly irregular base. At the eastern end of the trench the natural subsoil was overlain by a deposit of yellow-brown clay silt (11), up to 0.60m thick, which may represent the remains of a bank.
- 2.5 The earliest material visible in the ditch was a grey-brown sandy clay silt (14), at least 0.50m thick, which was excavated to the maximum safe working depth of the trench. In a central position above this was a lens of yellowish silt (13), no more than 1.70m wide and 0.10m thick; this may have originated from the erosion of deposit 11. The final fill of the ditch comprised reddish-brown sandy silt (10), which also extended beyond the ditch to the west and was therefore clearly a more general spread of material, not specific to the ditch. Layer 10 was up to 0.90m thick above the ditch, diminishing to 0.35m in thickness where it overlay the natural subsoil at the west end of the trench. Layers 10 and 11 were covered by the topsoil, a grey-brown sandy silt(9), about 0.25m thick.



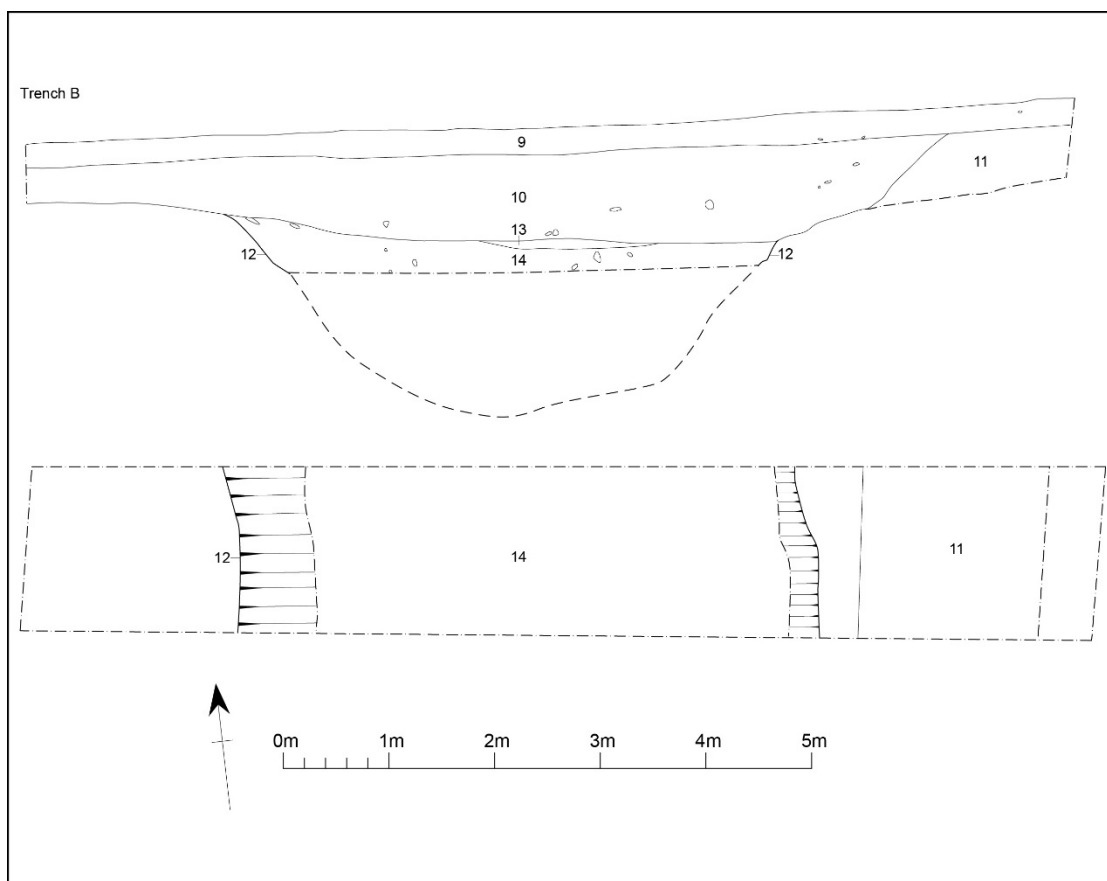


Fig. 5: Trench B plan and section. The base and profile of the ditch was established through augering.



Fig. 6: Trench B after excavation, from the west. Photo CPAT 3876-0019

**Trench C** (38.6m east/west by 1.6m wide: Figs 7-9)

- 2.6 The natural subsoil consisted of a brownish-yellow clay silt (20) and was exposed throughout the trench, although its surface displayed two changes in level, running north/south, one at about 5m from the east end of the trench which appeared to be related to an underlying band of natural sandstone and a second about 7m further west which may represent a former field boundary. The possible boundary comprised a shallow, undated gully (18) running north/south with vertical sides and a near flat base; it measured 1.85m wide by 0.40m deep and was filled with a brown clay silt (19). A shallow gully (23), up to 0.46m wide and no more than 0.06m deep, lay some 7m to the west and was filled with brown sandy silt (24). The gully was aligned north/south but had a fairly irregular profile; its function remains unknown. Immediately to the west of the gully was a similarly irregular pit (25), measuring 0.97m long by 0.74m wide and 0.19m deep, with a fill of brown sandy silt (26).
- 2.7 The fills of the above features, together with the natural subsoil over the rest of the trench, were covered by a layer of slightly yellowish-brown clay silt (17), up to 0.50m in thickness and containing finds of post-medieval date. This and the natural subsoil were cut by four further pits (Nos 21, 27, 29 and 31), the fills of which (respectively 22, 28, 30 and 32) were clearly of relatively recent date. In the case of pit 21, its fill contained skeletal material from an animal burial and it is possible that the other pits were of similar origin. All of the fills of these features lay beneath the local topsoil, a dark grey-brown silt (16), some 0.30m in thickness and containing material of 19<sup>th</sup>-century and probably later date.



Fig. 7: Trench C after excavation, from the east. Photo CPAT 3876-0019

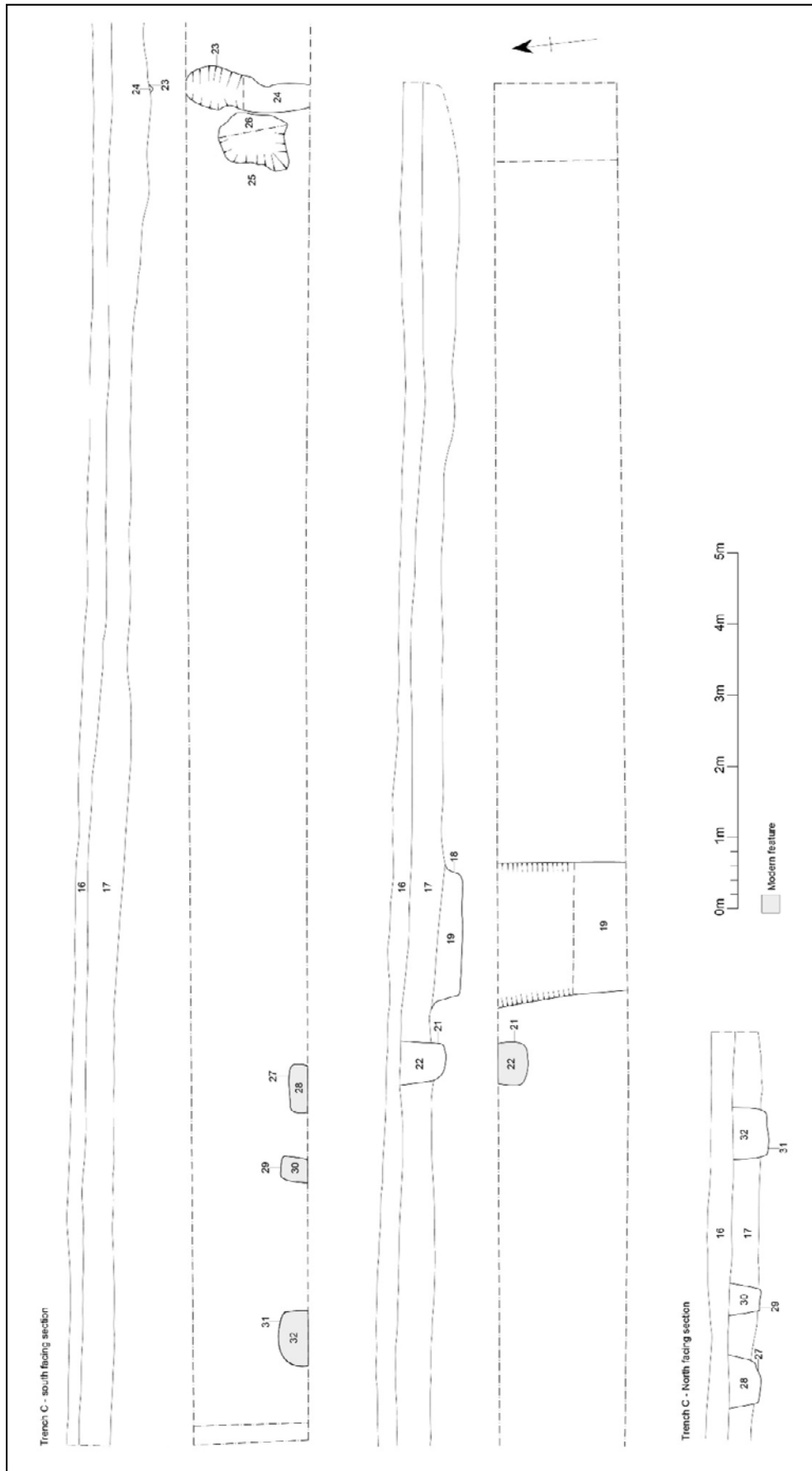


Fig. 8: Trench C plan and section.



Fig. 9: Probable former boundary gully (18) in Trench C after excavation, from the south. Photo CPAT 3876-0022

**Trench D** (20.3m east/west by 1.6m wide: Figs 10 and 11)

- 2.8 The natural subsoil comprised a brownish-yellow clay silt (35) of the same character as that in Trench C and was exposed throughout the trench. It was overlain by a layer of brown, occasionally yellowish, sandy silt (34), up to 0.40m in thickness, which was itself covered by the modern topsoil, a layer of dark grey-brown sandy silt (33), that averaged 0.3m in thickness.
- 2.9 A group of five small pits (36, 38, 40, 42 and 44) were observed, all of which were probably cut through layers 34 and 35. They were up to 0.66m across and contained sandy silt fills (respectively 37, 39, 41, 43 and 45) which suggested the features were of relatively modern date.

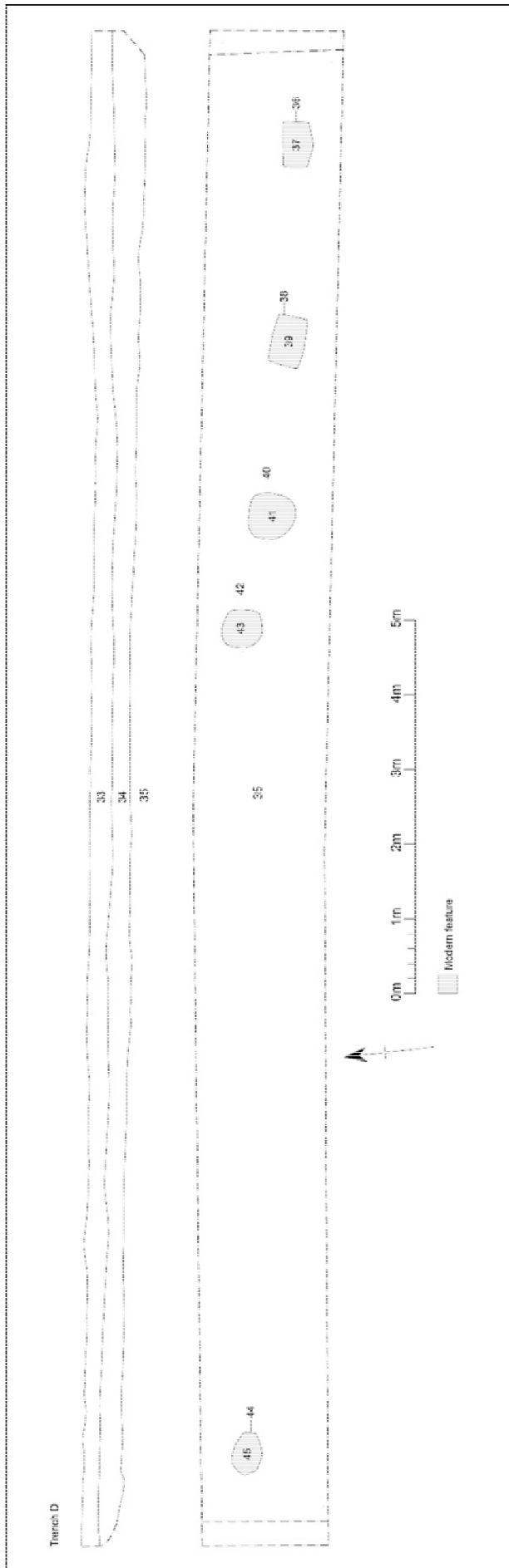


Fig. 10: Trench D plan and section



Fig. 11: Trench D after excavation, from the east. Photo CPAT 3876-0014

### 3 Conclusions

- 3.1 The overall appearance of the modern village from the air (Fig. 12) is highly suggestive of a medieval planned settlement, an assumption supported by earlier observations from Watson and Musson (1993, 71). No direct evidence for dwellings within the settlement was revealed by the evaluation, but ditch 18 in Trench C could define a burgage plot boundary on a north/south alignment. It is likely that those areas evaluated lay within the garden plots to the rear of any dwellings, these presumably having been located on or close to the main road frontage to the south. A holloway running north/south across the might represent part of the former street pattern but could have simply provided farm access to the village's fields and pastures. It was not possible to evaluate the holloway as it is a public footpath.
- 3.2 The large ditch exposed in Trenches A and B, measuring up to about 6.0m wide and 2.5m deep, was perhaps the most significant feature revealed. There was evidence in Trench B of an associated bank on its eastern side and together these imply a defensive earthwork, whose nature and possible origins are discussed below.
- 3.3 The Shropshire Historic Environment Record has a reference to a curving ditch (PRN 03723) on the north side of the medieval timber castle and it has been previously speculated that this formed part of an earthwork surrounding the borough of Knockin (Turner 1980). A combination of the evaluation results with the examination of aerial photographs (see Fig. 12) seems to suggest, however, that there was an enclosure, potentially ovoid in shape and of about 2.2ha, on the west and north side of the castle.

Perhaps this was a disproportionately large outer bailey although its true nature will only be revealed by further study.



Fig. 12: Aerial view of Knockin village from the west-south-west, with the castle in the wooded area at the centre top of the image. A continuation of the ditch revealed by the evaluation (indicated by the red arrow) probably continuing further to the north and east as a fossilised boundary. Photo CPAT 92-c-0520.

- 3.4 The continuation of the course of the ditch observed in trenches A and B can be clearly seen in Fig. 12, which predates modern housing developments. It formerly extended further to the north as a visible earthwork before continuing to the north and then east as a fossilised boundary. The adjoining field to the east of Trench A still retains evidence of the earthwork, which curves to the south-east as it approaches the main road through the village.

## 4 Acknowledgements

- 4.1 The writers would like to thank their colleagues Sophie Watson, Viviana Culshaw, Rachel Nicholson and Chris Matthews for their assistance with the evaluation and Mr I Turner, the tenant of the evaluation area, for his help in facilitating the work.

## 5 Sources

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### Aerial photographs

CPAT oblique images: 92-c-0519 and 0520, 92-MB-298.