



KDK Archaeology Ltd

Archaeological Observation and Recording Report

42 Merling Croft
Northchurch
Berkhamsted
Hertfordshire



Quality Check

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Summary

Between January 2021 and January 2023 KDK Archaeology Ltd undertook a programme of Observation and Recording at 42 Merling Croft, Northchurch, Hertfordshire, in order to fulfil the requirements of Conditions 4 & 5 of planning permission. Ground reduction was carried out to the southwest of the extant house and three footings trenches were subsequently excavated. No finds or features of archaeological interest were identified, although evidence for extensive modern excavation could be seen in the footing trenches, most probably relating to the construction of the surrounding houses. This modern disturbance may have led to the destruction or truncation of archaeological features during the initial construction of the house.

1 Introduction

1.1 Between January 2021 and January 2023 KDK Archaeology Ltd undertook a programme of Observation and Recording at 42 Merling Croft, Northchurch, Berkhamsted, Hertfordshire. The project was commissioned by Daniele Fornelli, and was carried out at the request of Alison Tinniswood of Hertfordshire Historic Environment Team (HHET), Archaeological Advisor (AA) to the Local Planning Authority (LPA), Dacorum Borough Council. The relevant planning application reference is 4/00350/19/FHA.

1.2 *Planning Background*

This project has been required under the terms of National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) as Conditions 4 & 5 of Planning Consent for the development of the site (4/00350/19/FHA).

1.3 *The Site*

Location

The development site is situated in the civil parish of Northchurch, and is within the administrative district of Dacorum Borough Council in what is now a suburb of Berkhamsted. It is situated at National Grid Reference SP 9726 0894 (Fig. 1).

Description

The site is situated in a modern housing estate on the northwest edge of the suburb of Northchurch. It is bounded to the north, west and east by residential properties and to the south/southeast by the High St (A4251) (Fig. 2). The River Bulbourne and the Grand Union Canal run to the northeast of the site at a distance of c.140m and c.220m, respectively. The railway runs parallel to the canal. Northchurch Common is located to the north of the site, leading on to the Ashridge Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

Geology & Topography

The sedimentary bedrock on the site is chalk of the Holywell Nodular Chalk and New Pit Chalk Formations, overlain by superficial deposits of clay, silt, sand and gravel alluvium (<http://mapapps.bgs.ac.uk/geologyofbritain/home.html>). It lies on the valley bottom at an elevation of approximately 115m AOD.

Development

Planning permission had been granted for the erection of single storey front and rear extensions; however, only work for the rear extension was completed during the project. Remaining work for the front extension has been postponed to a later date (Fig. 3).

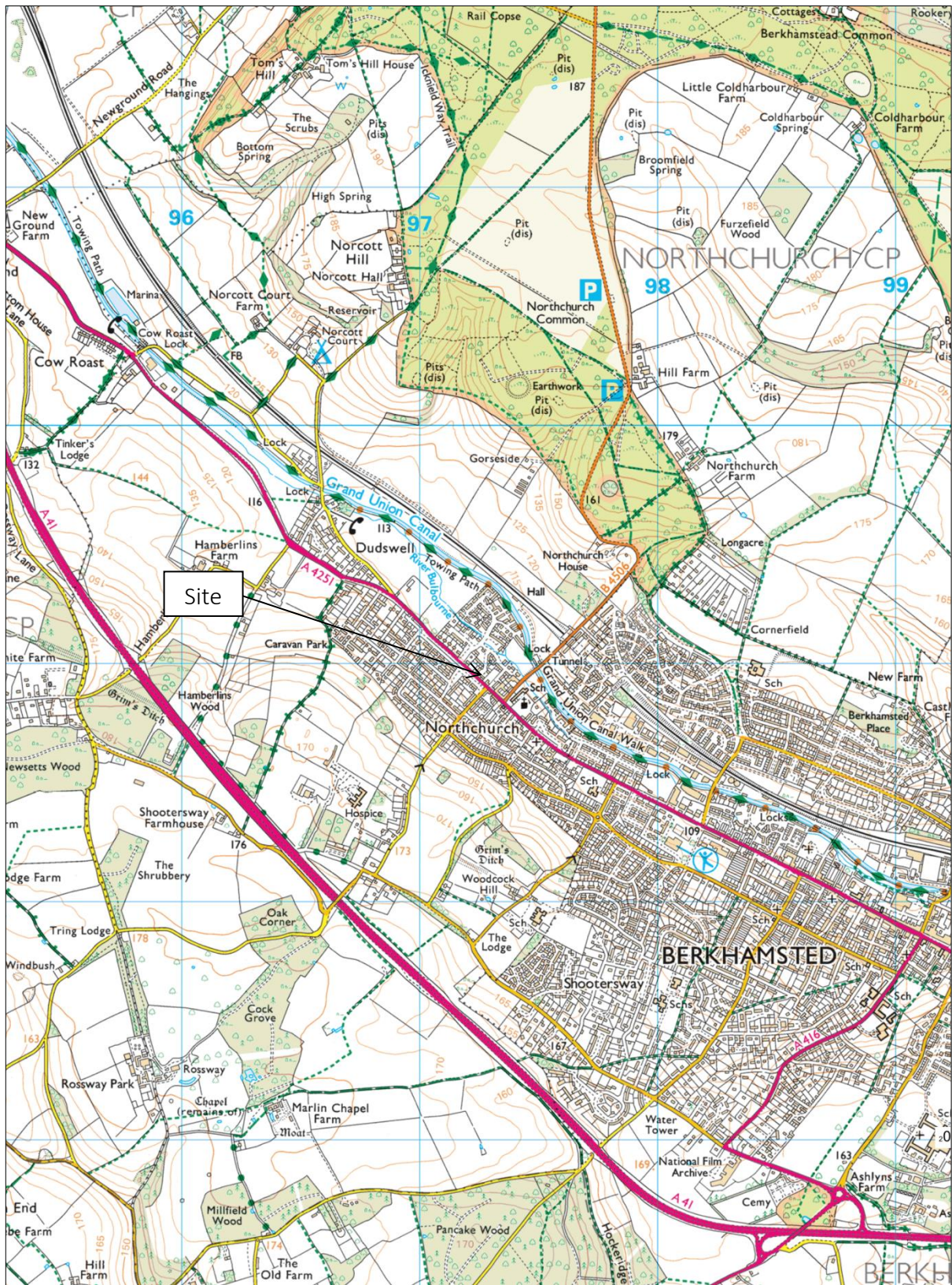


Figure 1: General location (scale 1:25,000)

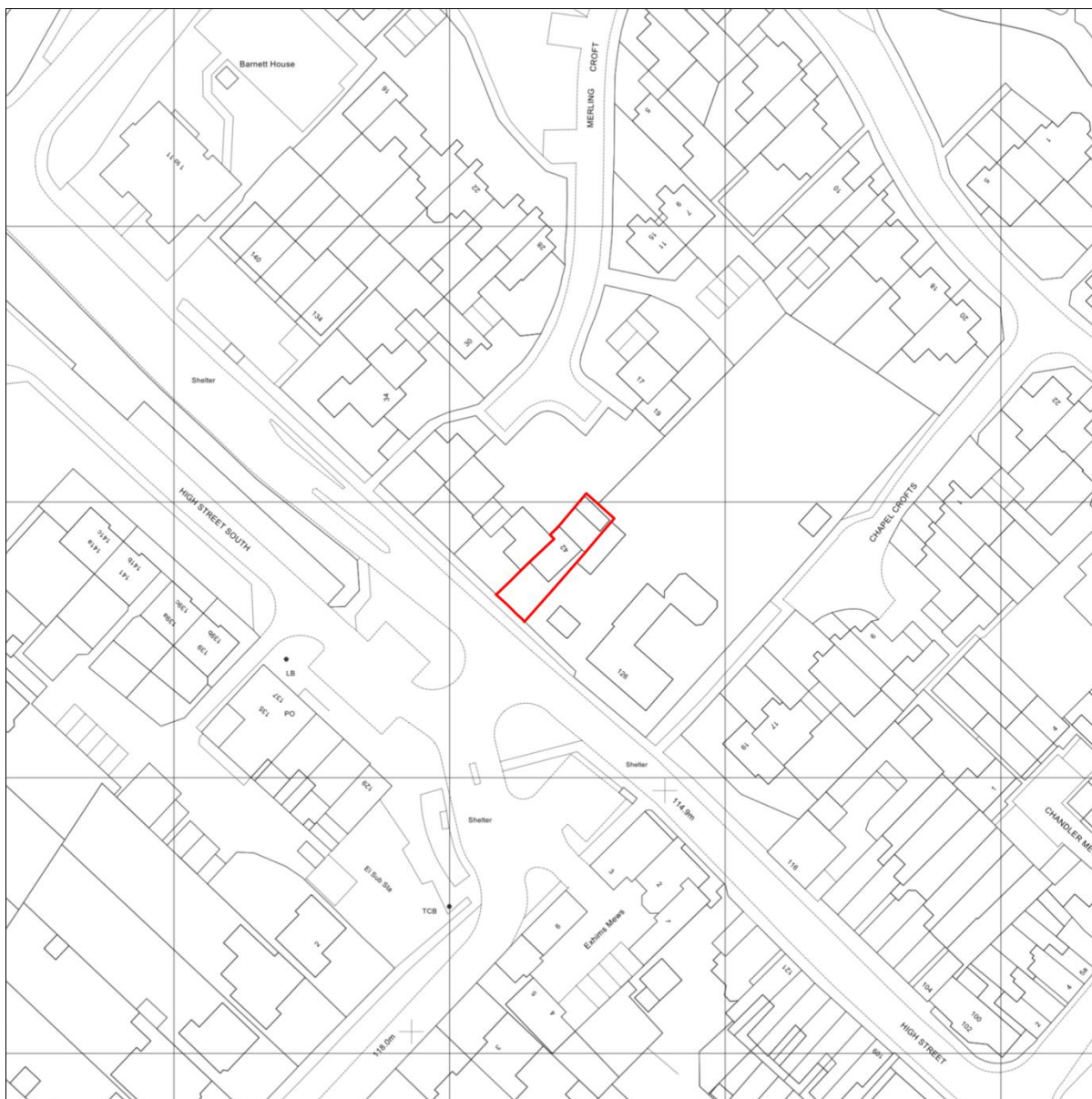


Figure 2: Site location (scale 1:1,250)

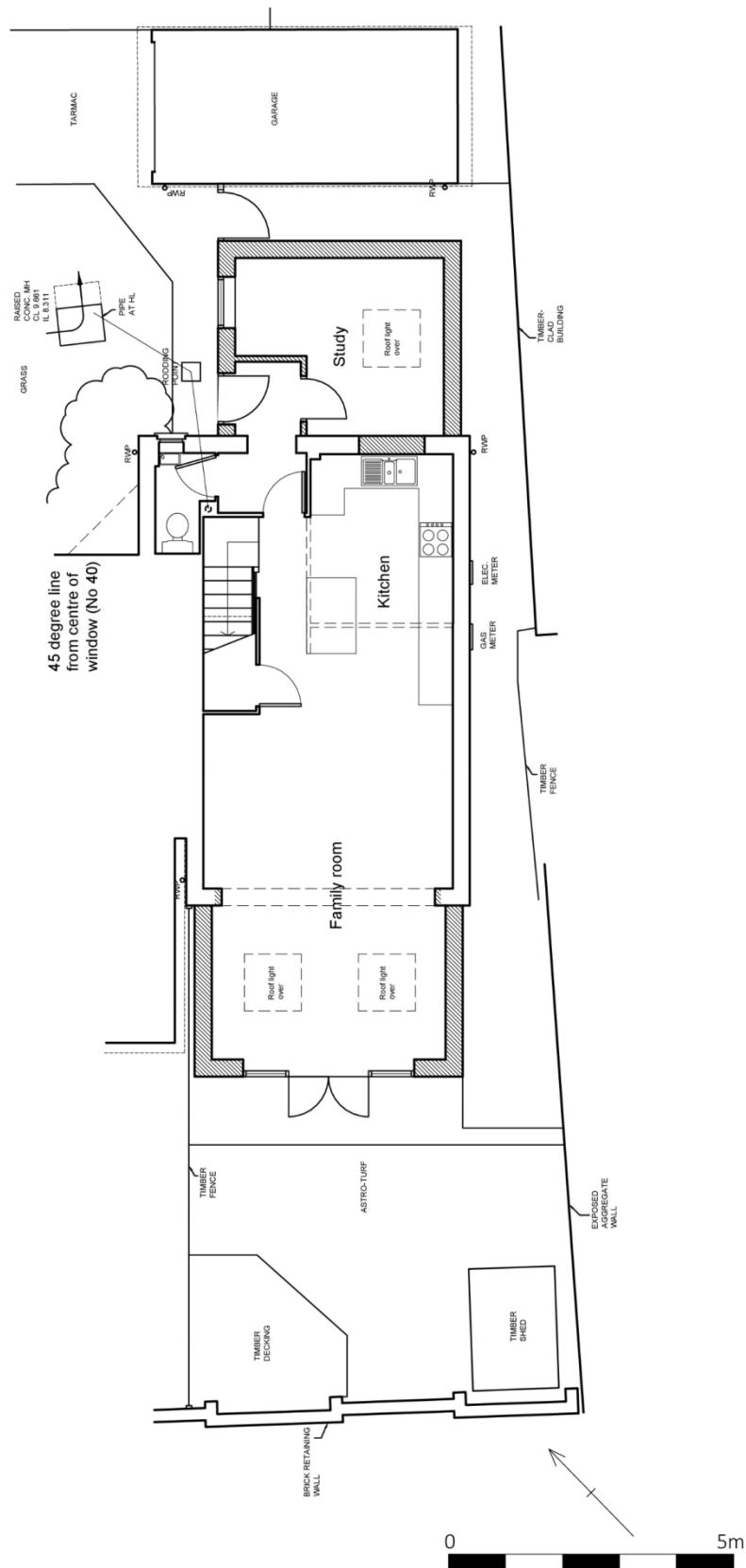


Figure 3: Development plan (scale 1:125). The extensions shaded grey.



2 Aims & Methods

2.1 Aims

The aims of this project as defined in the approved WSI (Watson 2020) were:

- To establish the date, nature and extent of activity or occupation within the development area
- To establish the relationship of any remains found to the surrounding contemporary landscape
- To recover palaeo-environmental remains to determine local environmental conditions.

2.2 Methods

In line with the requirements of the WSI, the methods used were as follows:

- All of the groundworks associated with the development were monitored for archaeological remains.
- The groundworks were recorded where appropriate.

2.3 Standards

The work conformed to the following requirements:

- The WSI
- The relevant sections of the Chartered Institute for Archaeologists' *Standard & Guidance for an Archaeological Watching Brief* (CIfA 2020)
- The Chartered Institute for Archaeologists' *Code of Conduct* (CIfA 2019)
- Current English Heritage guidelines (HE 2015, EH 2008)
- The Association of Local Government Archaeological Officers East of England Region *Standards for Field Archaeology in the East of England* (ALGAO 2003)



3 Archaeological & Historical Background

- 3.1 The modern village of Northchurch lies in the valley of the river Bulbourne, immediately northwest of the town of Berkhamsted. It may be the older of the two settlements, as it possesses a Saxon church, and was once known as Berkhamsted St Mary, illustrating the close ties between the village and its larger neighbour. The valley of the Bulbourne has been the location of human activity from prehistory to the present. The proposed development site is in an Area of Archaeological Significance (No.21), as identified in the Local Plan, which includes the historic core of the medieval settlements of Berkhamsted and Northchurch, and substantial evidence of Roman occupation alongside Roman Akeman Street (the modern High Street).

What follows is a brief review of this varied history, drawn from sources such as the Hertfordshire Historic Environment Record (HER; Request No. 116/20), the Extensive Urban Surveys for Berkhamsted and Cow Roast (Thompson 2002; Thompson & Bryant 2005), and the Victoria County History (Page 1908). The HER data is shown, with a 500m search radius, in Fig. 4. A total of 15 listed buildings (Grades I, II* & II) and various 'site of' monuments are situated within the HER search area, but as these will not be impacted by the current project, which primarily focuses on sub-surface remains, most have been excluded from this summary.

3.2 *Prehistoric – Iron Age* (before AD43)

Whilst there is no known evidence of prehistoric occupation in the study area around the site, the resources of the river valley were probably exploited from an early period. Scattered finds of Neolithic material have been found at a number of sites around Berkhamsted, and there is some evidence of Bronze Age settlement, including the ditch and bank known as Grim's Ditch (HER 50), which was probably constructed in the Late Bronze Age (Thompson & Bryant 2005: 2-3). There is increasing evidence for Iron Age settlement in the valley, including finds of various coins and a possible hoard (HER 7320), a large Iron Age settlement (HER 11480), and finds related to a developing iron production industry (Thompson & Bryant 2005: 3).

3.3 *Roman* (AD43-c.450)

By the Roman period, the Bulbourne valley had become a thriving industrial and agricultural area. The main road through Northchurch runs along the line of Roman Akeman Street (HER 4595), the road from St Albans to Cirencester, and evidence of Roman settlement is found throughout the area. Most significantly for the current project, a villa complex was excavated in the 1970s, approximately 320m northwest of the proposed development site (HER 1859). The villa was partially excavated and revealed periods of occupation from the 1st to the 4th centuries. A 3rd century coin hoard was discovered in one of the rooms (HER 448). A circular structure, located c.30m northeast of the villa, contained eighty 3rd and 4th century coins. This structure was interpreted as a possible shrine (HER 182; EHT 3985). Roman Features (HER 11776) were encountered at 142 High Street where the archaeological observation of footings for a new house revealed Roman pottery, brick and tile, and iron; the builders' spoil heap yielded 49 Roman potsherds, two early medieval sherds, a glass rim, and iron slag. The site is approximately 70m northwest of the development and fronts onto Akeman Street.

Northchurch is just down the valley from the Roman settlement at Cow Roast, where there is evidence of large-scale iron production and iron working, and other industrial activity (Thompson 2002: 7-11).



3.4 **Saxon** (c.450-1066)

The evidence for Saxon occupation in Northchurch is confined to the presence of the Church of St Mary, which has surviving Saxon elements in the south and west walls (HER 4447; EHT 1394, 5235, 8589). It is believed that the original settlement of Berkhamsted was near this church, as both Berkhamsted Castle and St Peter's Church are post-Conquest in origin it is the possible site of a late Saxon estate centre (HER 9317). According to the Domesday Book 1086, the manor belonged to Edmer Atule, a thegn of Edward the Confessor (Page 1908). The manor had 88 households, land for 26 ploughs, woodland for 1000 pigs, and 2 mills (<http://opendomesday.org/place/SP9907/berkhamsted/>).

3.5 **Medieval** (1066-1500)

Following the Conquest, the manor was given to Robert, Count of Mortain, half-brother of William the Conqueror. He is believed to have begun the construction of the motte and bailey castle that still stands on the north side of Berkhamsted (HER 39/Scheduled Ancient Monument 20626). In the 11th or 12th century, Berkhamsted parish was created out of St Mary's parish (Thompson & Bryant 2005: 7) and the settlement at what is now Berkhamsted began to dominate the smaller settlement that came to be known as Berkhamsted St Mary's, and then Northchurch.

During the medieval period, the woodland around Berkhamsted was exploited for timber. Other local industries mentioned in the documentary record include the manufacture of roofing tiles in the 13th century and the presence of lime kilns in the 15th century (*ibid*).

3.6 **Post-Medieval** (1500-1900)

By the early Tudor period, Berkhamsted Castle was essentially a ruin, but the manor remained in the possession of the royal family. It was granted to Katherine of Aragon upon her marriage, then to Anne Boleyn and Jane Seymour, in succession. Edward VI granted Berkhamsted to his sister, Princess Elizabeth, in 1550, who then leased it to Edward Carey in 1580. Carey quarried the old castle for stone to build Berkhamsted Place (Page 1908).

There are several post-medieval houses surviving along the high street in Northchurch, including the Church Houses (HER 9301), Grade II* listed, 15th to 16th century almshouses. In the graveyard of St Mary's Church is the grave of Peter the Wild Boy, an 18th century court curiosity, who was supposedly discovered as a feral child in the forest of Hertswold near Hanover. Brought to the English court in 1726, Peter was eventually sent to live in Northchurch, where he eventually died at the age of approximately 72. Modern interpretations of Peter's condition suggest that he suffered from Pitt-Hopkins Syndrome (Historic England). His gravestone is Grade II listed (NHLE 1412381). The Grade II Rosemary Cottage (List Entry No. 1078103), a 16th or early 17th century timber framed house, is situated c.30m southeast of the development.

An Archaeological Evaluation (EHT5190) of the garden and orchard behind no.97 High Street in 2002 found a ditch (HER 12050), running roughly north-south, which contained a rim sherd of glazed red earthenware dated to the 16th to 18th centuries. This may have been a boundary ditch.

The Bulbourne valley remained an important transportation route. The George & Dragon Public House (HER 18190) is a 16th century building that provided food and lodging to travellers on Akeman Street. The Grand Union Canal, originally called the Grand Junction Canal (HER 241), reached Berkhamsted in 1798, eventually linking the town to both London and Birmingham. It is traversed by a road bridge (HER 5230), and it has a Pumping House (HER 7086) beside the Canal Lock (HER 7192). However, the coming of the railway in 1838 led to the decline of the



canals, and Northchurch, which did not have its own station, became increasingly subordinate to Berkhamsted.

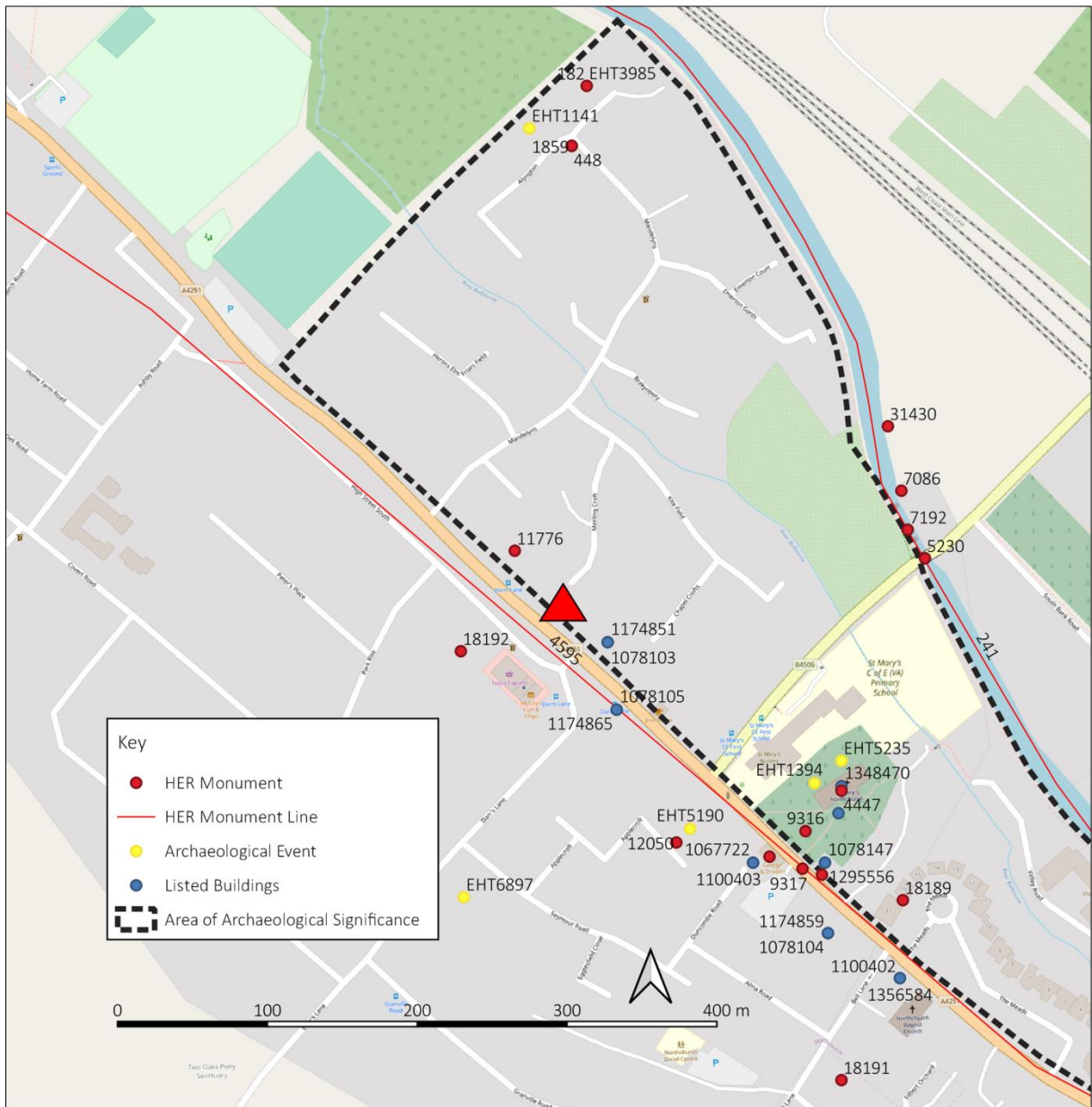


Figure 4: HER data plan (scale as shown; red triangle = development site)



4 Results

4.1 Introduction

The development to the rear of the property was preceded by ground reduction. This comprised an area measuring 6.5 x 2.5m wide and 0.5m deep, located immediately to the southwest of the development footprint, as the garden rose sharply towards the rear boundary. This was followed by the excavation of three footing trenches abutting the existing house. Trenches 1 and 3 were 3.1m long and Trench 2 was 4.9m long. All footing trenches were 0.7m wide and 1.1m deep. Limited site access and the hardness of the natural geological deposits meant that the groundwork was carried out with a 0.8-tonne machine fitted with a 0.6m wide toothed bucket.

The front extension also required the excavation of three footing trenches and the reduction of the intervening ground level by 0.25m. Trenches 4 and 6 measured 3.60m long and Trench 5 measured 4.50m. The depth of the trenches ranged between 0.45m and 1.10m below modern ground level.

4.2 Description

Rear extension (Plates 1-9; Figs 5 & 7)

Following the 0.5m ground reduction, the remaining stratigraphy comprised 0.1m of dark brownish-grey, silty loamy clay topsoil (Plates 1-6; Fig. 7). Beneath this was 0.1m of mixed yellowish brown, sandy chalky clay subsoil. However, this was only present on the south-eastern side of the footings in Trenches 2 and 3. It may have been truncated by previous, modern, ground reduction. At the base of the sequence, was the Holywell Nodular Chalk Formation, which was excavated to a depth of 1m (Plates 7 – 8, Fig. 7).

Several cuts were identified, all of which had a similar fill and two contained modern finds.

Contexts [104] and [110] were located on the northwest and southeast sides of the footprint, respectively (Plates 7 & 9). They were relatively shallow cuts filled with chalky clay backfill (105) and (111), similar to the subsoil (102), as well as a large quantity of modern CBM and debris, including plastic. As these cuts were wide with concave sides and flat bases, these were most likely areas of machined ground reduction, possibly as part of the construction of the nearby houses. Cut [106] was rectangular with sheer sides and a flat base (Plate 8). The backfill (107) was virtually identical to the aforementioned modern deposits, although it did not contain any finds or modern debris. The feature appeared on both sides of the trench and may have been a test pit or a soakaway. Cut [108] had steep, straight sides, and was located in the corner of Trenches 2 and 3 (Plate 9; Fig 5). The fill (109) was also homogenous and contained no finds. Its function is not known but may have been an excavation for services.

Context Table:

Context Number	Type	Dimensions (max. in metres)			Description
		Width	Length	Depth	
101	Layer	>6	>6.5	0.6	Dark brownish grey silty loamy clay topsoil
102	Layer	>2.1	>4.9	0.1	Yellowish brown sandy chalky clay subsoil
103	Layer	>3.1	>4.9	>1	Light grey natural chalk
104	Cut	>1	>3.1	0.4	Modern ground reduction in Trenches 1 and 2
105	Fill	>1	>3.1	0.4	Backfill of [104]
106	Cut	>0.7	1	0.9	Possible modern test pit in Trench 2
107	Fill	>0.7	1	0.9	Backfill of [106]



Context Number	Type	Dimensions (max. in metres)			Description
		Width	Length	Depth	
108	Cut	>0.5	>0.5	1	Excavation in the corner of Trenches 2 and 3
109	Fill	>0.5	>0.5	1	Backfill of [108]
110	Cut	>0.7	>2.6	0.6	Modern ground reduction in Trench 3
111	Fill	>0.7	>2.6	0.6	Backfill of [110]

Front extension (Plate 10-13; Fig. 6 & 8)

It was obvious that a large amount of ground disturbance had taken place during the construction of the adjacent modern houses. Several services were observed including gas, electric, water and drainage, and all cut features observed within the trenches were associated with these groundworks.

The stratigraphy comprised 0.15m of dark brownish grey, silty loamy clay topsoil, which lay on top of a 0.26m thick layer of made-ground formed, in Trench 4, from heavily disturbed brownish orange clay. The latter contained frequent chalky deposits, occasional dumps of charcoal, and moderate quantities of modern detritus such as plastic and brick. The made ground in Trench 5, was formed from a dark grey, sandy clay, which also contained small quantities of modern building materials and rubbish. Large bands of chalk were noted within this layer, which also appeared to be related to the construction of the buildings and general landscaping of the area. Part of a soakaway was noted within Footing Trench 4.

Unlike the rear of the property, the natural chalk geology was not consistently revealed across the base of all footing trenches. The excavation was terminated at a naturally formed dark grey firm sandy clay deposit.

Context Table:

Context Number	Type	Dimensions (max. in metres)			Description
		Width	Length	Depth	
201	Layer	>4.50	>3.60	0.15	Dark brownish grey silty loamy clay topsoil
202	Layer	>0.50	>3.60	0.26	Made ground. Brownish orange clay with frequent chalk and occasional charcoal deposits
203	Layer	>0.50	>4.50	0.54	Made ground. Dark grey sandy clay
204	Layer	>3.60	>3.90	>0.15	Dark grey firm sandy clay
205	Layer	1.50	>0.60	>0.10	Light white/grey natural chalk



Plate 1: Rear extension - Ground reduction, facing south-southeast



Plate 2: Rear extension - Footings trenches overall, facing north



Plate 3: Rear extension - Trench 1, facing northeast



Plate 4: Rear extension - Trench 2, facing northwest



Plate 5: Rear extension - Ground reduction stratigraphy, facing southwest



Plate 6: Rear extension - General stratigraphy and [104], facing northwest



Plate 7: Rear extension - [104], facing southwest



Plate 8: Rear extension - [106], facing southwest



Plate 9: Rear extension - [110] and [108], facing southeast



Plate 10: Front extension - Groundworks at the front of the property, facing southeast



Plate 11: Front extension - Trench 4, facing northeast



Plate 12: Front extension - Trench 6, facing southwest



Plate 13: Front extension - Trench 5 stratigraphy, facing northeast

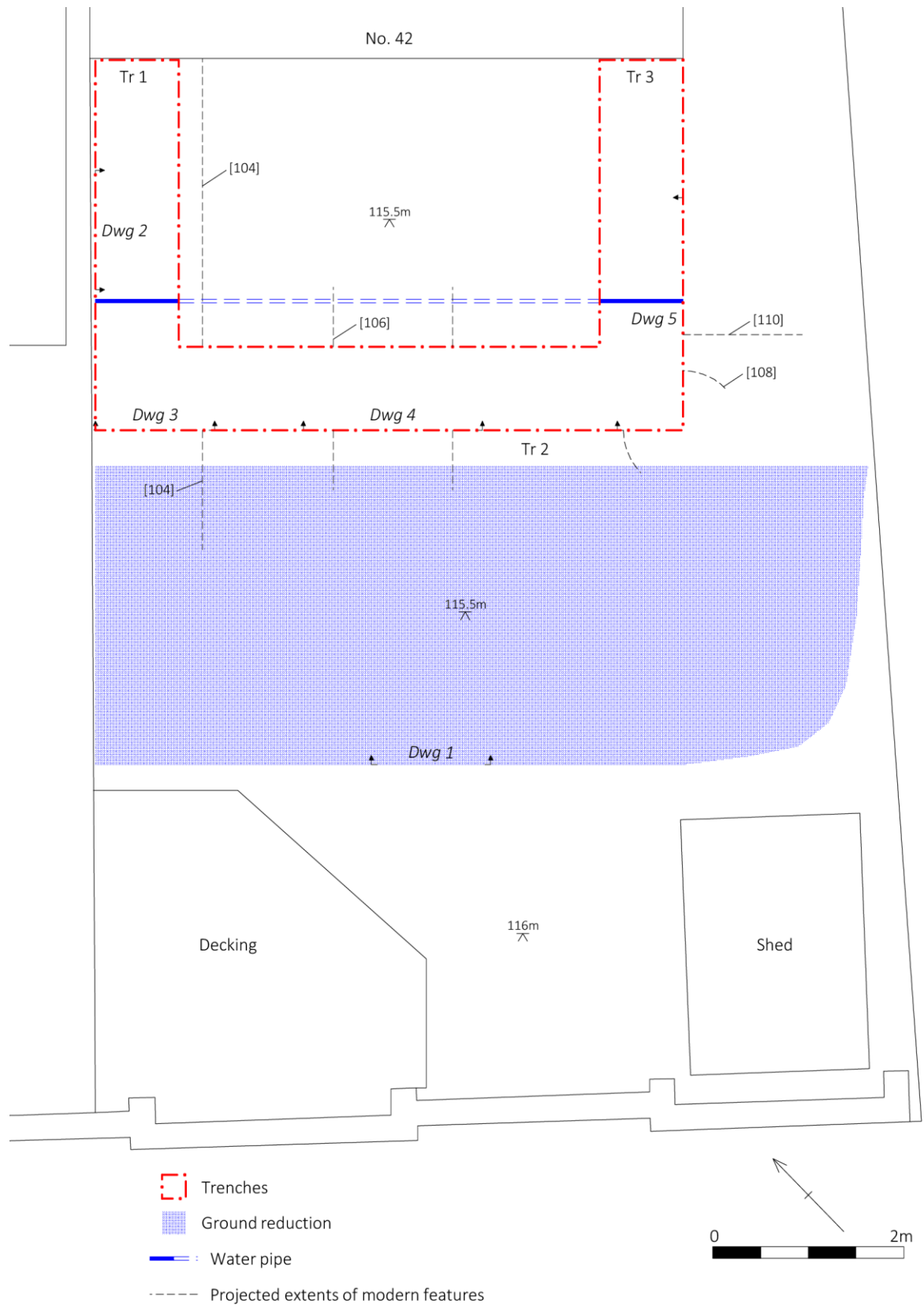


Figure 5: Excavation plan to the rear of the property (scale 1:50)

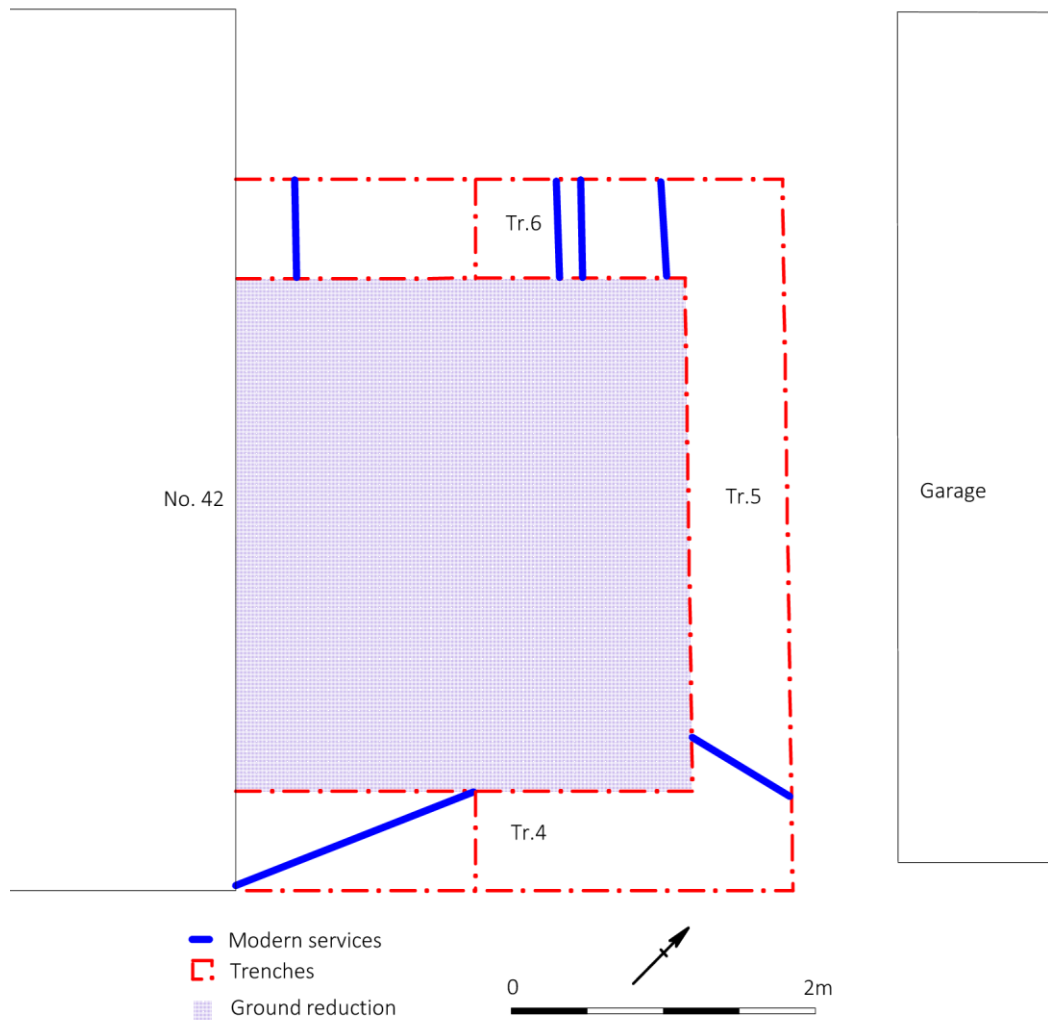


Figure 6: Excavation plan to the front of the property (scale 1:50)

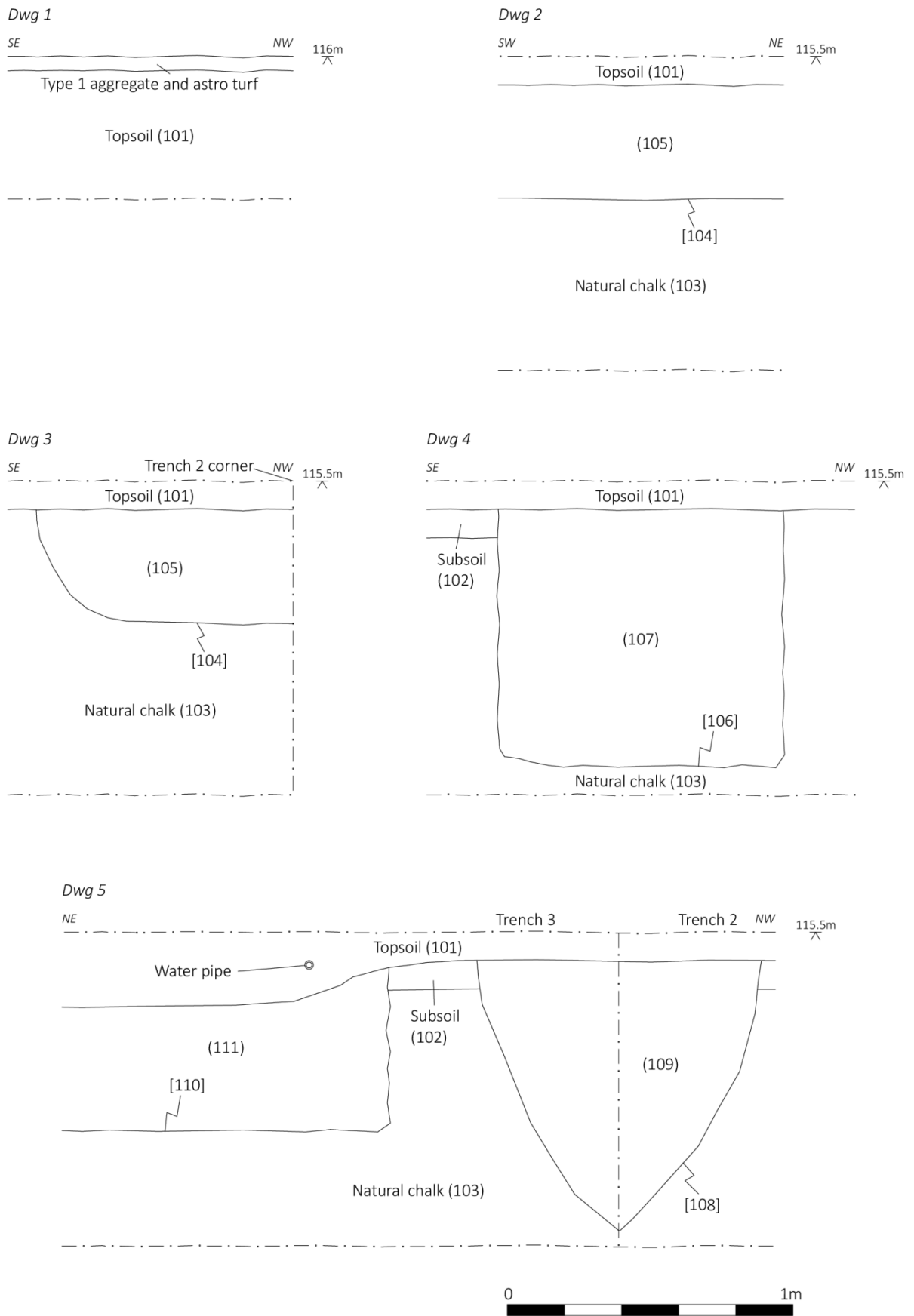


Figure 7: Stratigraphy and section drawings, locations shown in Figure 5 (scale 1:20)

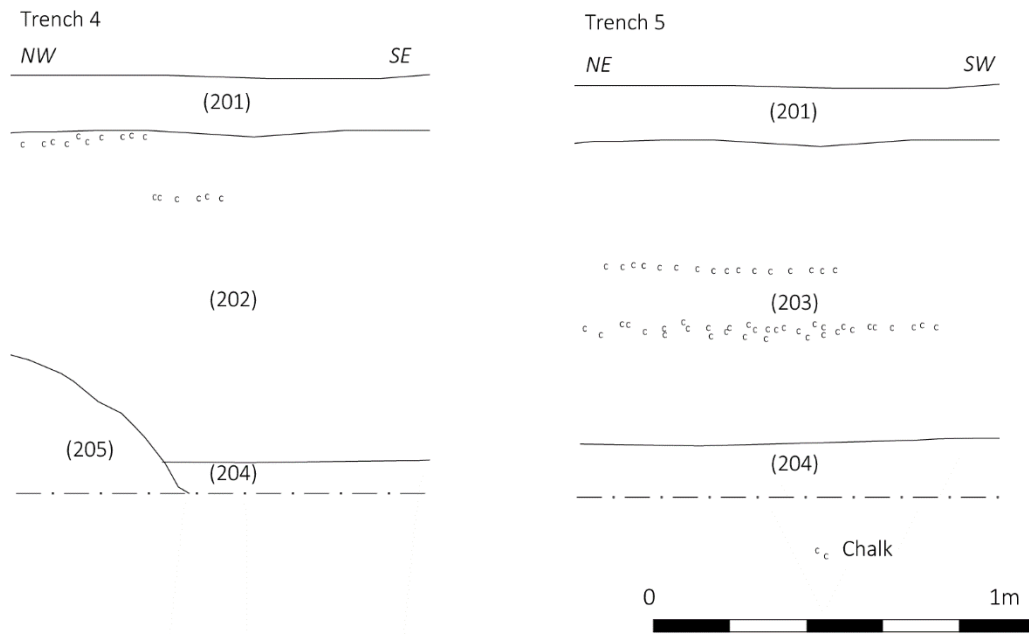


Figure 8: Stratigraphy of front extension (scale 1:20)



5 Conclusions

Northchurch is a village with Saxon origins, indicated by stylistic structural elements of the Church of St Mary, and it may be the original location of the settlement of Berkhamsted. In addition, there is significant evidence of Roman activity in the surrounding area. The High Street, situated immediately to the southwest of the development site, runs along the line of the Roman road of Akeman Street, and Roman features were discovered at another development site approximately 70m to the northwest.

Excavations to the front and rear of the property showed extensive truncation throughout. Several forms of modern made-ground were encountered and several cuts containing modern material were revealed in the footing trenches, suggesting that the site was extensively disturbed when the house was constructed in the 1980s. As a result, although the project had high potential for encountering Roman remains, no features or finds of archaeological significance were discovered.



6 Acknowledgements

KDK Archaeology is grateful to Daniele Fornelli for commissioning this report. Thanks are also due to Rebekah Hart of Hertfordshire Historic Environment Team for providing historic environment records and other relevant documents, and to Alison Tinniswood of Hertfordshire Historic Environment Team for monitoring the project.

Special thanks go to the staff of Judge Paving Company for their assistance during the project.

The fieldwork was carried out by Chris Martin-Taylor BSc and Laura Dodd MSc MCIfA. The report was written by Chris Martin-Taylor and Laura Dodd, and edited by Derek Watson PhD.



7 Archive

7.1 The project archive will comprise:

1. Written Scheme of Investigation
2. Initial report
3. Monitoring sheets
4. Site drawings
5. Client's site plans
6. List of photographs

7.2 As no archaeological features or finds were encountered, this archive would not be accepted by the local museum. The report will instead be uploaded to OASIS and report deposited with the Hertfordshire HER. The project archive will be retained by KDK Archaeology.



8 References

Standards & Specifications

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Williams A. & Martin G.H. 2002 *Domesday Book: A Complete Translation*. London: Penguin London.



Appendix 1: Photograph List

SITE NO/CODE: 556/NMC			Site Name: 42 Merling Croft, Northchurch, Berkhamsted, Hertfordshire
Shot	View	Digital number	Subject
1	SW	5240	NE facing section of modern feature[104]
2	NW	5241	Overall shot of Trench 1 and modern feature [104]
3	W	5242	Overall shot of Trench 1 and modern feature [104]
4	NE	5243	Overall shot of Trench 1
5	SSW	5244	Overall shot of topsoil ground reduction
6	SW	5245	Topsoil ground reduction stratigraphy
7	SW	5246	NE facing section of modern feature [106]
8	NW	5247	Overall shot of Trench 2
9	SE	5248	NW facing section of modern features [108] and [110]
10	S	5249	Overall shot of Trench 3
11	N	5250	Overall shot of footings trenches
12	N	5251	Overall shot of footings trenches
13	NE	0279	Trench 4
14	SE	0280	Trench 5
15	SW	0281	Trench 6
16	SSW	0282	Groundworks to the front of the property
17	NE	0283	Stratigraphy Trench 5



Appendix 2: OASIS and Site Data

PROJECT DETAILS			
Project Name & Address	42 Merling Croft, Northchurch, Berkhamsted, Hertfordshire	Project Site Code	556/NMC
OASIS reference	kdkarcha1-405763	Event/Accession no	N/A
OS reference	SP 9726 0894	Study area size	55.15m ²
Project Type	Archaeological Observation & Recording	Height (mAOD)	115m
Short Description	Between January 2021 and January 2023 KDK Archaeology Ltd undertook a programme of Observation and Recording at 42 Merling Croft, Northchurch, Hertfordshire, in order to fulfil the requirements of Conditions 4 & 5 of planning permission. Groundworks for the new extensions to the front and the rear of the property revealed extensive modern truncation and disturbance associated with the construction of the present house in the 1980s. No finds or features of archaeological interest were identified, possibly as a result of earlier building works on the site.		
Previous work	None	Site status	None
Planning proposal	Single storey front and rear extensions.	Current land use	Garden
Local Planning Authority	Dacorum Borough Council	Planning application ref.	4/00350/19/FHA
Monument type	N/A	Monument period	N/A
Significant finds	None	Future work	Yes
PROJECT CREATORS			
Organisation	KDK Archaeology Ltd		
Project Brief originator	N/A	Project Design originator	KDK Archaeology Ltd
Project Manager	Karin Kaye MA MCIfA	Director/Supervisor	Chris Martin-Taylor BSc
Sponsor/funding body	Daniele Fornelli		
PROJECT DATE			
Start date	13.01.2021	End date	18.01.2023
PROJECT ARCHIVES			
	Location	Content (e.g. pottery, animal bone, files/sheets)	
Physical	-	None	
Paper	HER	Report	
Digital	OASIS	Report	
BIBLIOGRAPHY (Journal/monograph, published or forthcoming, or unpublished client report)			
Title	Archaeological Observation & Recording: 42 Merling Croft, Northchurch, Berkhamsted, Hertfordshire		
Serial title & volume	556/NMC/2.2		
Author(s)	Chris Martin-Taylor BSc & Laura Dodd MSc MCIfA		
Page no's	23	Date	20.01.2023



Appendix 3: Hertfordshire Historic Environment Record Sheet

Site name and address: 42 Merling Croft, Northchurch, Berkhamsted, Hertfordshire		
County: Hertfordshire	District: Dacorum	
Village/Town: Northchurch	Parish: Northchurch	
Planning application reference: 4/00350/19/FHA		
Client's name, address, & tel. no: Daniele Fornelli, 42 Merling Croft, Northchurch, Berkhamsted, Hertfordshire		
Nature of application: Single storey front and rear extensions.		
Present land use: Garden		
Size of application area: 165m ²	Size of area investigated: 55.15m ²	
NGR (to 8 figures): SP 9726 0894	Site code: 556/NMC	
Site director: Chris Martin-Taylor BSc	Organization: KDK Archaeology Ltd	
Type of work: Archaeological Observation & Recording		
Date of Work:	Start: 13.01.2021	Finish: 18.01.2023
Curating museum: Paper copy to HER and digital to OASIS		
Related HER no's: N/A		Periods represented: Modern
Relevant previous summaries/reports: N/A		
Summary of fieldwork results: Between January 2021 and January 2023 KDK Archaeology Ltd undertook a programme of Observation and Recording at 42 Merling Croft, Northchurch, Hertfordshire, in order to fulfil the requirements of Conditions 4 & 5 of planning permission. Groundworks for the new extensions to the front and the rear of the property revealed extensive modern truncation and disturbance associated with the construction of the present house in the 1980s. No finds or features of archaeological interest were identified, possibly as a result of earlier building works on the site.		
Author: Chris Martin-Taylor BSc & Laura Dodd MSc MCIFA	Date: 20.01.2023	