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**Archaeological watching
brief during groundworks
for the
Office Development,
Lafarge Alrewas Quarry,
Staffordshire
2001**

Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit



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**An archaeological watching brief during groundworks for
the Office Development,
Lafarge Alrewas Quarry, Staffordshire**

by
Gary Coates

For further information please contact:
Simon Buteux or Iain Ferris (Directors)
Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit
The University of Birmingham
Edgbaston
Birmingham B15 2TT
Tel: 0121 414 5513
Fax: 0121 414 5516
E-Mail: BUFAU@bham.ac.uk
Web Address: <http://www.bufau.bham.ac.uk>

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An archaeological watching brief during groundworks for the Office Development at Lafarge Alrewas Quarry, Staffordshire

Summary

An archaeological watching brief was undertaken during the excavation of service trenches and a soakaway sump for a new office building at Alrewas Quarry, Staffordshire (NGR SK 179 148), between April and June 2001. This was carried out by Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit and commissioned by Phoenix Archaeology Consulting Ltd. on behalf of Lafarge Aggregates Ltd. The location of the new office building was within the limits of a Scheduled Ancient Monument (S.A.M. ST 220b), believed to contain a possible prehistoric cursus monument indicated by cropmarks on aerial photographs. Prior to the office development, an extensive archaeological evaluation and watching brief had been carried out adjacent to the site of the new offices, in advance of the construction of a new recycling unit. This work failed to find evidence of the cursus monument. The site of the new offices had also been subject to gravel extraction and reinstatement prior to the current development. As a condition of Scheduled Monument Consent, any groundworks were to be monitored by an archaeologist in order to identify and investigate any archaeological features which may have survived any previous gravel extraction. No archaeological deposits were identified during the watching brief. There are two probable explanations for this. Firstly, it may be because the monument was not within the bounds of the development. Alternatively, the monument may have been excavated away during previous gravel extraction operations. Considering the negative evidence from the archaeological investigations in advance of the recycling unit, the former explanation may be more valid.

Introduction

The following report details the results of an archaeological watching brief undertaken in accordance with a condition of Scheduled Monument Consent for the location of a new office building at Alrewas Quarry, Staffordshire (centred on NGR SK 179 148, Fig. 1). The work was commissioned by Phoenix Archaeology Consulting Ltd. on behalf of Lafarge Aggregates Ltd. and was undertaken by Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit between April and June 2001. It was carried out during excavations associated with new service connections for the office building. The watching brief was carried out in accordance with the Institute of Field Archaeologists' 1999 *Standard and Guidance for an archaeological watching brief*.

Archaeological background (Figs. 1 & 2, Plate 1)

The site lies within a kilometre of the village of Alrewas, Staffordshire, to the west. The northern extent of the site is bounded by the quarry processing plant and weighbridge. The eastern edge is defined by the quarry conveyor belt and the National Memorial Arboretum site. The quarry access road and Croxhall Road define the southern and western boundaries. The River Tame is approximately 0.6 km to the east of the site. The site has previously been subject to gravel extraction and reinstatement, which is likely to have disturbed any possible archaeological deposits.

Information on past settlement and land use on the gravel terraces of the Rivers Trent and Tame has primarily been obtained from aerial photographic survey, notably by Jim Pickering and Rowan Whimster (1989). These surveys have demonstrated extensive and intensive human activity on the gravel terraces since at least the Neolithic (Gaffney and Hughes 1993).

The site itself lies within a Scheduled Ancient Monument (ST 220b; see Fig. 2), which is believed to be a Neolithic cursus monument. This is a type of rectangular ditched enclosure that can range from hundreds of metres upwards in length; the longest recorded is the Dorset cursus, at almost 10km (Whittle 1999, 71-2). Archaeological evaluation was carried out adjacent to the site by the Trent Archaeological Committee in 1973, but no record of their results can be traced (Howlett 2000, 2.2.4-5). However, archaeological evaluation work adjacent to this site in 1991 failed to identify the cursus ditch or any other related archaeological features (*ibid.*, 2.4.1). Trial trenching on another adjacent site (see Fig. 2) carried out by Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit in 2000 also failed to identify the monument; as did a subsequent watching brief (Coates 2000, 2001).

In the surrounding area, the earliest archaeological activity relates to the Neolithic period, with evidence of occupation at Whitemoor Haye (Coates 1999a; Lupton 1995; Neilson 2000) and Fisherwick (Smith 1979) to the south. Immediately north of the site, Catholme and Fatholme also produced evidence of Neolithic activity, including a possible henge (Hughes & Coates 1999). This activity continues into the Bronze Age, with ring ditches showing as cropmarks along the gravel terraces of the River Tame. However, some of these cropmarks that have been examined turned out to be later Iron Age hut circles (Coates 1999b). The strongest evidence of Bronze Age activity comes from Fisherwick and Whitemoor Haye to the south of the site.

The 2000 B.U.F.A.U. evaluation and watching brief in advance of the recycling unit (Fig. 2)

In the evaluation phase, a total of fifteen trenches was excavated (Coates 2000). These provided a total sample of greater than 10% of the proposed development area. The rationale for each of the trench locations was principally based on the results of a geophysical survey and cropmark plot.

The ploughsoil over most of the site varied between 0.3 and 0.4m deep. This sealed a subsoil layer that varied in depth between 0.1 and 0.3m. The natural horizon was an orange-brown sand and gravel. In the eastern end of the site, there was a considerable degree of truncation created by the previous construction of a gravelled compound area.

No archaeological features were recorded during this trial trenching phase. North-south aligned medieval and post-medieval plough furrows were prevalent in most trenches and were sampled.

No further archaeological features were identified during the subsequent watching brief (Coates 2001).

Aims

The objective of the watching brief at the office development site was to attempt to establish the presence/absence, character, extent, state of preservation and date of any archaeological features or deposits that may have survived previous gravel extraction operations; in particular, any evidence for the presence of the cursus monument (S.A.M. ST 220b).

Method

All service trenches were excavated with a J.C.B. or tracked excavator, fitted with an appropriate bucket. This was monitored with a continuous archaeological presence. Where appropriate, possible archaeological features were hand excavated to provide information concerning the survival and complexity of feature fills, and to recover artefactual evidence. A detailed context record on individual pro-forma record cards was maintained and all features were photographed using both colour and black and white film. Sections and plans were drawn at a scale of 1:50 or 1:20 as appropriate. Where no archaeological deposits were identified, a record of the stratigraphy was made.

Results (Fig.3)

Service Trenches

Several lengths of service trenches were excavated under archaeological supervision (see Fig. 3). These were approximately 0.6m wide and had a maximum depth of 0.9m. The trenches were excavated into re-instated ground, which appeared to consist of 0.5m of mixed soils containing sub-soils, sand and gravel, sealed by approximately 0.4m of topsoil. No evidence of archaeological deposits was recorded.

Soakaway Sump (Plate 2)

This was a machine excavated sump, measuring approximately 3m by 3m in area and over 2.5m deep. Apart from a 0.4m depth of re-instated topsoil deposit, there was a deep

deposit of very mixed soils containing some modern refuse items. This appeared to be land-fill material.

There was no evidence of any surviving archaeological or undisturbed natural deposits.

Discussion

No evidence of the cursus monument or any archaeological features was recovered.

The absence of the cursus monument was not unexpected as the extensive trenching exercise and watching brief in advance of the adjacent recycling unit (Coates 2000, 2001) had also failed to identify this feature. More importantly, the recorded stratigraphy during this watching brief confirms that the site had been subject to extensive disturbance during gravel extraction and land-fill operations. If any archaeological deposits had existed, it is very likely that they have been lost during previous activity on the site.

Acknowledgements

Gary Coates managed the project, carried out the fieldwork and wrote this report. The illustrations were prepared by Nigel Dodds. Simon Buteux edited the report.

Andy Richmond monitored the watching brief on behalf of Phoenix Archaeological Consulting Ltd. and Dr. Paul Stamper on behalf of English Heritage. We are grateful for the co-operation and assistance of the quarry staff, Len Mudd and Ross Halley from Lafarge Aggregates. We are also grateful to the construction contractors, J.F.Harrington and Son, for their co-operation and assistance.

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Figures

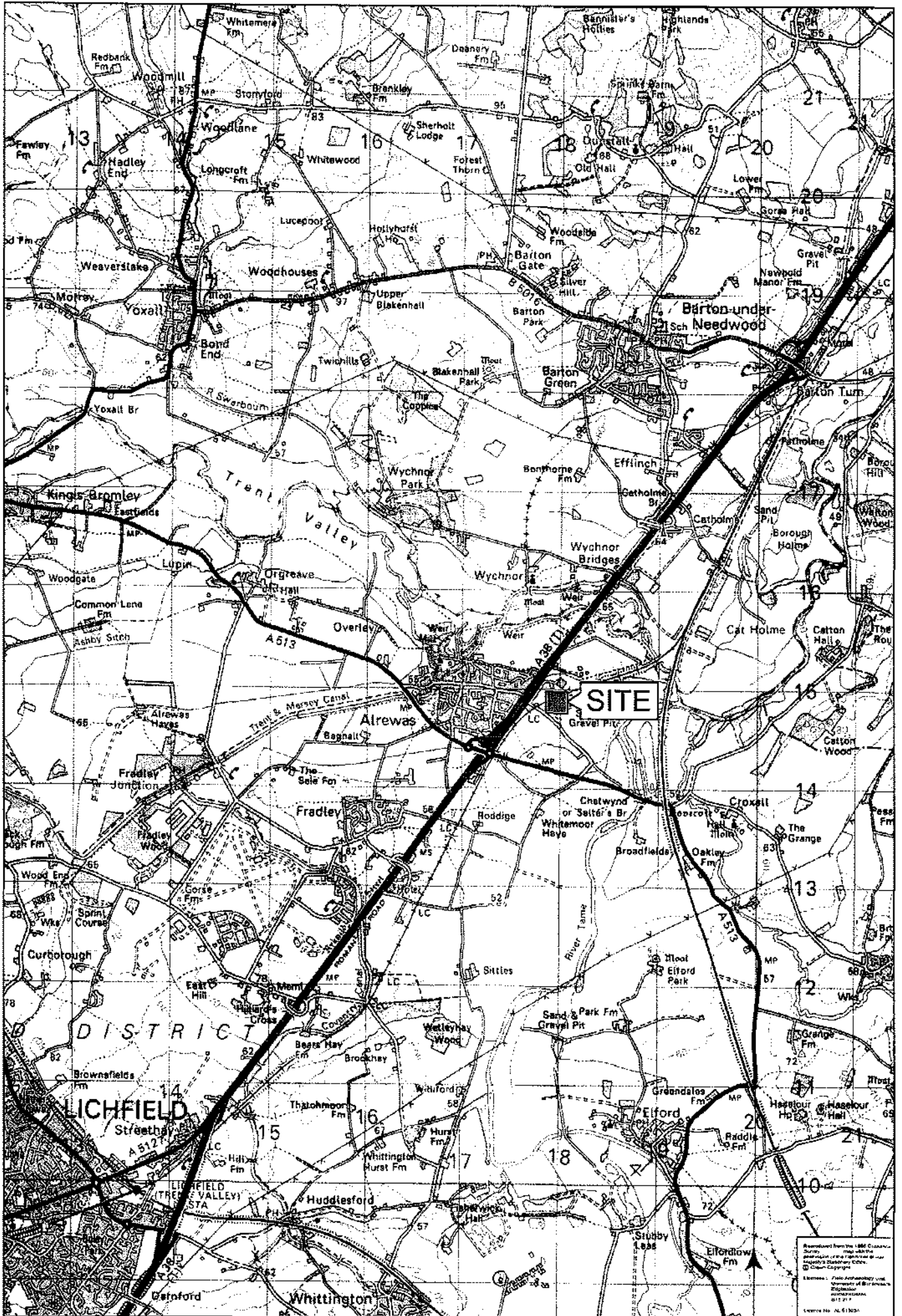


Fig.1

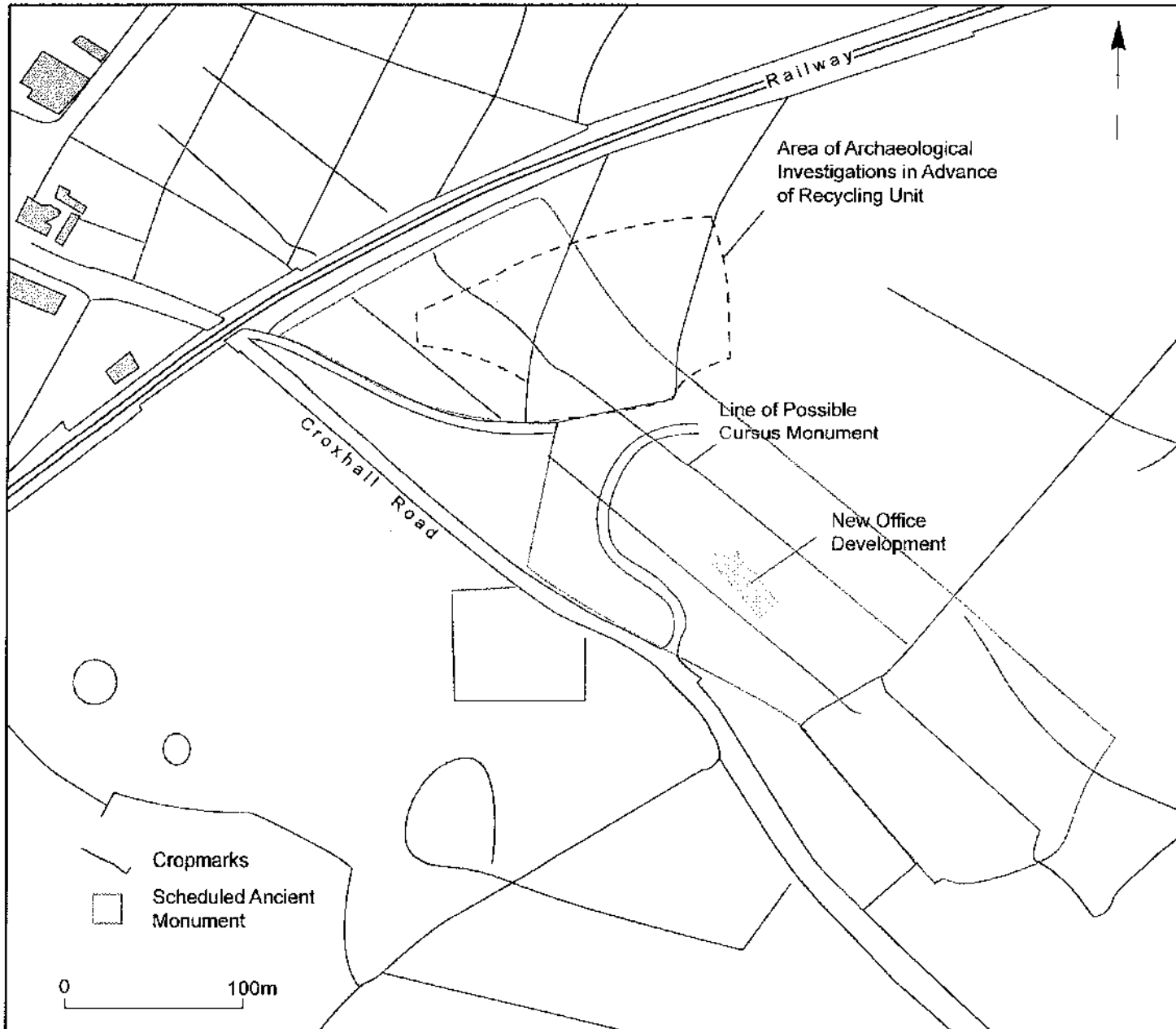


Fig.2

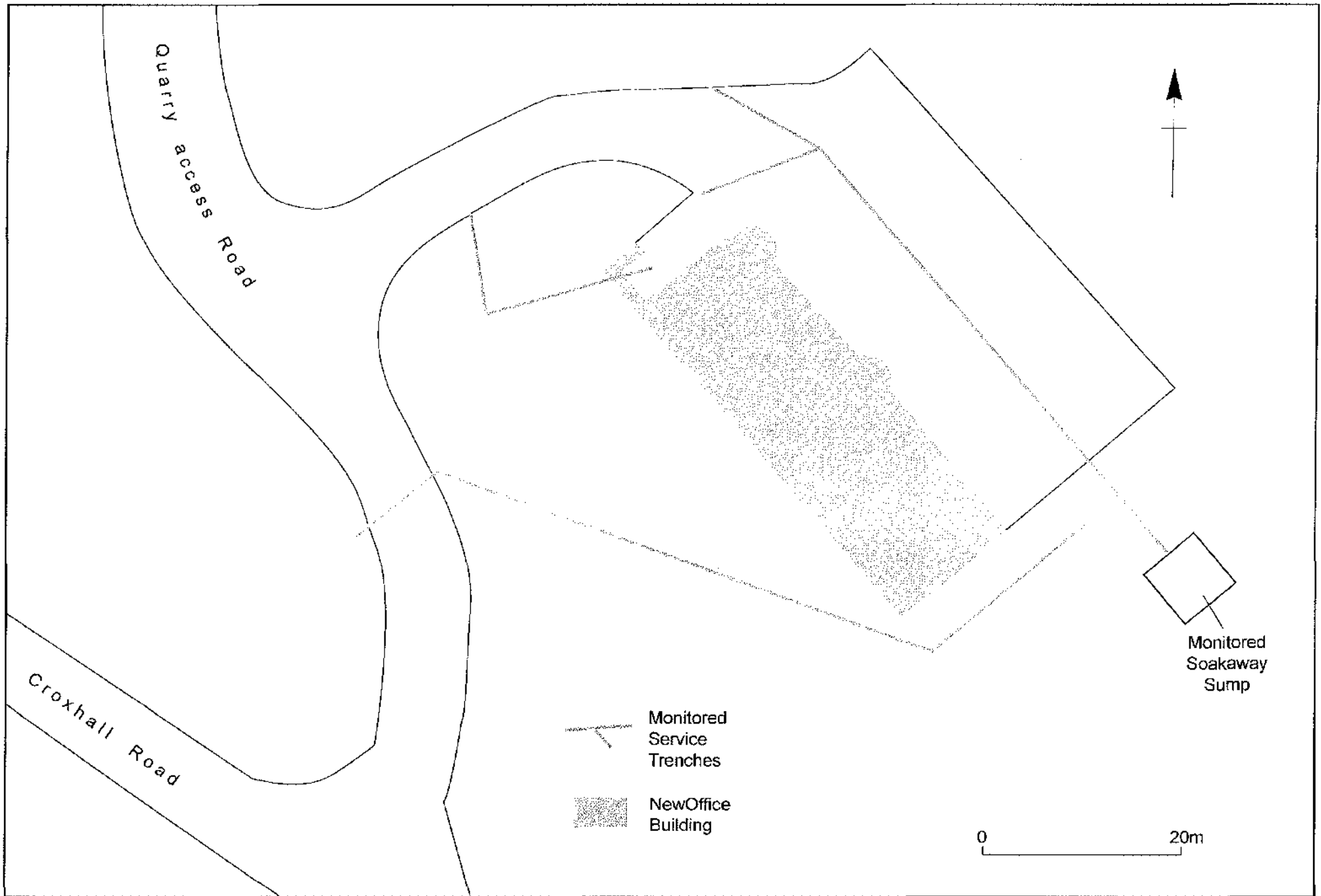


Fig.2

Plates



Plate 1



Plate 2

