# Land off Riversfield Drive, Rocester, Staffordshire:

## An Archaeological Watching Brief 2002

Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit
**Project No. 925**
July 2002

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by
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## Summary

An archaeological watching brief was maintained on an area of land off Riversfield Drive on the southern fringe of the village of Rocester, Staffordshire, during the construction of a new housing development (centred on NGR SK 1082739065). Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit was commissioned to undertake this work by Henry Boot Homes Ltd, with the fieldwork being carried out between May 2002 and July 2002. Previous archaeological work on this site had failed to identify any archaeological remains and the objective of this watching brief was to clarify whether or not the Roman settlement at Rocester extended into this area.

The watching brief was maintained on the topsoil strip and during groundworks for the construction of house foundations and the laying of services. Observations in the initial stages of the watching brief indicated that the depth of alluvial deposits over the southern half of the site were such that any groundworks conducted in this area would not disturb any archaeological remains sealed beneath these deposits. In addition, some years earlier a large pit had been excavated in the south-east quadrant of the site, cutting into the natural layer of river gravels. This had been backfilled with spoil generated during the construction of houses along the eastern edge of the site, at that time. As a result of this disturbance and the depth of alluvial deposits, further archaeological monitoring was confined to the northern half of the site.

Foundation and service trenches in the reduced area were duly inspected, but no archaeological deposits or features were identified. Finds were generally limited to sparse scatters of pottery and worked-flints in the topsoil, and in some of the subsoil layers.


## 1.0 Introduction (Figs. 1 and 2)

Staffordshire County Council granted planning permission for the construction of a new housing development on land off Riversfield Drive, on the south-western fringe of the village of Rocester, Staffordshire (centred on NGR SK 1082739065). The site lies adjacent to known Roman Forts (Staffordshire SMR 1803) and was subjected to an archaeological evaluation by Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit (BUFAU) in 1998 (Nichol 1998). The evaluation (trial trenching) of the area failed to reveal any *in situ* archaeological features or deposits.

Staffordshire County Council stipulated that an archaeological watching brief be carried out during groundworks associated with the new housing development. The contractors, Henry Boot Homes Ltd, duly commissioned BUFAU to undertake the monitoring operation. An archaeologist made scheduled visits to the site over a period of time extending from May 2002 to July 2002, inclusive.

This report outlines the results of the archaeological monitoring of groundworks during the construction of the new housing development.

## 2.0 Aims

The overall objective of the archaeological watching brief was to establish whether the development area had been occupied at any period. This would be achieved through the recording of all surviving archaeological deposits and finds, disturbed or exposed by groundworks associated with the erection of the houses and the laying of their services.

## 3.0 Site Location and History (Figs. 1 and 2)

Rocester village is located in Staffordshire, some 4 miles (6km) north of Uttoxeter. It lies on slightly-elevated ground between the River Dove and River Churnet. The development area (centred on NGR SK 1082739065) is sited to the immediate south of Riversfield Drive, on the south-western fringe of Rocester.

The site is situated on the flood plain of the River Dove and lies adjacent to known Roman Forts (Staffordshire SMR 1803) whose extensive archaeological deposits remain *in situ* in the vicinity of the modern village. Previous excavation in the area has shown that the Roman settlement was concentrated on a gravel knoll to the north of the site. However, this occupation is known to extend onto the alluvial plain of the river (Esmonde Cleary and Ferris 1996).

A programme of trial trenching was undertaken on the site in 1998 (Nichol 1998), in order to assess the survival of archaeological deposits on the alluvial plain and the underlying river gravels. Archaeological features were absent from all four of the excavated trenches and this suggested that the flood plain may have been used solely for agricultural purposes from at least the Roman period onwards. However, recent archaeological excavations on the northern periphery of the modern village (Burrows forthcoming) have shown that activity did occur around the fringes of the knoll during the Roman period.

## 4.0 Methodology

The groundworks were undertaken by a number of mechanical diggers, fitted with toothed and toothless ditching buckets of various widths. The wall foundation trenches were normally 0.8m in width, but of varying depth. The watching brief was conducted in several stages, in order to fit in with the contractor's programme of works.

Before recording the sections, hand cleaning of excavated trenches was carried out where it was deemed appropriate and safe to do so. The extreme depth of some of the service trenches meant that there were some occasions when it was only possible to perform limited investigation of subsoils due to danger of collapse from the unstable overlying deposits.

Stratigraphic sequences and individual deposits were recorded using pre-printed *pro-forma* record cards for contexts, supplemented by section drawings (1:20 scale) and colour photography. These records form part of the site archive, which is currently stored at BUFAU.

## 5.0 Results

**Topsoil Stripping**
Following an initial meeting between representatives of Henry Boot Homes and BUFAU on 20th May 2002, an archaeologist attended the site during the last week of May and the first week of June, to monitor the topsoil stripping operation and commencement of trenching.

The topsoil (1000) comprised a 0.3 - 0.5m-deep layer of dark-brown, sandy silt, containing occasional fragments of (modern) building debris and household detritus. Removal of the topsoil layer revealed an orange-brown, sand-silt alluvium (1004) across much of the site. However, in the south-eastern quadrant the immediate subsoil was found to comprise a dark, reddish-brown silt (1001). This deposit was apparent in Building Plots 8, 9 and 10 (Fig. 2).

There was no evidence for archaeological features cutting into either the alluvial layer (1004) or silty deposit 1001. Repeated inspection of the topsoil spoilheaps on subsequent occasions, after weathering and mechanical disturbance had occurred, yielded a very small number of artefacts. These included abraded sherds of Roman pottery, several worked flints and fragments of clay pipe.

**Excavation of Wall Foundation Trenches (Fig. 2)**
Excavation of foundation and service trenches took place during June and July 2002. An archaeologist attended the site on scheduled dates in this period, to monitor relevant groundworks.

Foundation trenches in Plots 1, 2 and 3 were typically of one metre depth. The bases of the trenches cut into a deposit of natural river gravels (1003) that was overlain by the orange-brown alluvial layer (1004). The alluvium, which varied in thickness from 0.3 – 0.5m, was devoid of archaeological features and did not yield any artefacts. In Plot 3, a shallow seam of black, peaty subsoil (1007) of unknown origin was evident in the west-facing section of the foundation trench for the house's east wall. It was only 0.1m in thickness and was sandwiched between layers 1003 and 1004. No finds were recovered from context 1007.

Excavation of foundation trenches in Plots 4, 5, 6 and 7 revealed a similar stratigraphic sequence to that seen in Plots 1 and 2. However, inspection of the groundworks in the area to the south of Plot 7 showed that an abrupt change in the subsoil deposits occurred in Plot 8, and continued on through Plots 9 and 10.

The subsoils exposed by the foundation trench for the north wall in Plot 8 were as per Plots 1 and 2. In contrast, the somewhat-deeper trench for the south wall cut through different

deposits. The base of the trench was cut into natural sand and river gravels (1003), which the digger bucket first encountered at a depth of circa 1.2m below the original ground level (i.e. topsoil surface). Overlying the natural deposit (1003) was a 0.3m-deep layer of clayey silt (1002), with large river pebbles distributed throughout the matrix. Deposit 1002 was sealed beneath a 0.6m-deep layer of reddish-brown silt (1001, referred to earlier in the text), which had originally lain beneath the topsoil (1000).

Subsoil layers 1002 and 1001 were also visible in the foundation trenches in Plot 9, and in some of those in Plot 10. They were not apparent in the trenches for the west and south walls of the building in Plot 10, but they appeared in section as the natural gravels (1003) fell away in northerly and easterly directions. During hand-cleaning of the trench sides prior to recording, sherds of pottery (including Roman and Medieval) were recovered from layers 1001 and 1002.

In subsequent discussions between the on-site archaeologist and the Site Manager, Mr. M. Tune, the latter reported of hearing that a large pit had been excavated in the southern sector of the site some time in the past. It had been backfilled with spoil from groundworks associated with the construction of houses that currently border the east edge of the development area. Such events could explain the stratigraphic sequences observed in Plots 8, 9 and 10. They also brought into question the need to continue the watching brief in the southern half of the site and it was decided to concentrate on monitoring the groundworks in the development area to the north of Plot 7.

The next series of foundation trenches to be excavated were those of Plots 28 to 33. Close inspection of the exposed alluvial subsoil (1004) in that area, prior to the commencement of groundworks, revealed that weathering had uncovered a number of artefacts embedded within its machined surface. These included sherds of pottery (some of which were Roman), worked flints and fragments of fired-clay tile. Subsequent excavation of the trenches did not uncover any archaeological features or deposits, nor produce further finds, but it did expose the subsoil stratigraphy.

At a depth of 1.3m (below the topsoil surface) the trenches had cut into a deposit of multi-hued (pink-red-yellow) sandy clay (1006), in which were occasional sand lens. Overlying the deposit was a 0.6m-deep layer of similarly-coloured, silty sand (1005), containing a few large pebbles randomly-distributed throughout the matrix. This was sealed by a 0.45m-deep deposit of the orange-brown alluvium (1004), which underlay the topsoil (1000).

**Excavation of Service Trenches (Fig. 2)**

At the beginning of the housing development, the contractor's on-site facilities were located on the northern edge of the site, adjacent to Riversfield Drive. As work progressed, they were relocated to a fenced compound in the centre of the development area, where a Public Open Space was scheduled (Fig. 2). This necessitated the laying of temporary service lines across the site and a trench was therefore excavated to accommodate them.

The temporary service trench was some 40m in length and varied from 1.2 to 1.5m in depth. It was aligned approximately north – south and passed to the west of the planned locations

of the houses in Plots 28 to 33. An inspection of the trench sides revealed that no archaeological features or deposits had been encountered and no artefacts were recovered from the subsoil layers. Despite the lack of archaeology, the excavation did provide more information on the subsoil stratigraphy in the area. At one metre below ground level, the digger bucket had encountered natural deposits of river gravels (1003) or a compact layer of mottled clay (1006). Overlying these deposits was a 0.7-1.0m-deep layer of mixed (yellow and red) silty sands (1005), which were sealed beneath a 0.2m-thick layer of light-brown, sand-silt alluvium (1004). The overlying topsoil (1000) was up to 0.5m deep in this area.

On July 5th 2002, workmen began the excavation of a trench for a deep culvert, commencing at Riversfield Drive. The trench was aligned north- south and its profile varied to accommodate junctions and access points. It was up to 4.0m wide at the top and typically 2.0m in depth (excluding the removed topsoil). As the trench was excavated, its sides were inspected, but were found to be devoid of archaeological features. Spoil from the excavation was checked for artefacts, but no finds were recovered. In the absence of archaeology, the subsoil stratigraphy was recorded.

The bottom of the trench was cut into deposits of river gravels (1003), which the digger bucket had encountered at a depth of 1.5m below the stripped surface. Overlying the gravel was a 1m-deep layer of multi-hued, sandy clay (1006), which in turn was overlain by a 0.5m-thick deposit of the orange-brown sand-silt (1004) seen across most of the site. Where the trench cut through the existing road/footpath, a shallow bed of hardcore and a top layer of tarmac sealed deposit 1004. Elsewhere, the layer of sand-silt (1004) had originally lain beneath the topsoil (1000).

## 6.0 **The Finds** (with contributions by Lynne Bevan)

**Topsoil Layer 1000**

The topsoil yielded artefacts of various dates. Nine items of humanly-struck flint were recovered from the topsoil spoilheaps, of which 7 (including one retouched flake) were not chronologically diagnostic. A blade core fragment was identified as being of Later Mesolithic date and a small blade fragment may be of Later Mesolithic or Early Neolithic date.

Five abraded pottery sherds were found in topsoil spoilheaps, and identified as dating to the Roman (2 sherds), Medieval (1) and Post-Medieval (2) periods. The bowl of a clay pipe was similarly recovered from the spoil, but fragments of modern building debris and household detritus, also present, were not collected.

**Subsoil Layer 1001**

A total of four sherds of Roman (2) and Post-Medieval (2) pottery were found whilst hand-cleaning this layer in the foundation trenches of Plot 10. Included within this very small pottery assemblage was a sherd of Samian ware. Also recovered, from layer 1001, was a degraded fragment of fired-clay tile of unknown date.

**Subsoil Layer 1002**
This layer (seen in Plots 8,9 and 10) yielded 19 sherds of Roman pottery, including Samian ware (2) and mortaria (5).

**Subsoil Layer 1004**
Subsoil 1004 lay beneath the topsoil (1000) over most of the site and a number of artefacts were found embedded into its upper surface. Eight items of humanly-worked flint were recovered from this deposit. Two cores, both single-platform cores used to produce narrow blades, were of Later Mesolithic date. A small scraper, which had been retouched on opposing sides, also appeared to be of Later Mesolithic date. The remaining items, comprising two chunks and three flakes, were not datable.

In addition to the flints, a total of 19 sherds of Roman (13), Medieval (4) and Post-Medieval (2) pottery were recovered, principally from the area within Building Plots 28 - 33. The deposit in this area also yielded fragments of fired-clay tile.

**Comments on the Flint Assemblage** (by Lynne Bevan)
Small quantities of worked flint have been found during previous excavations in the Rocester area. Mesolithic and Neolithic flints were found at the New Cemetery site (Esmonde Cleary and Ferris 1996, 39, 182-183), Dove First School (unpublished 1986), and Orton's Pasture (Bevan 2000). Recently, a much larger assemblage of predominantly Neolithic to Bronze Age flint from Northfield Avenue, Rocester, included a quantity of Later Mesolithic blade cores, blades and a microlith (Bevan and Hudson 2002).

The small blade cores described above are very similar to some of those recovered from previous excavations in Rocester (Bevan 2000), particularly some examples from the Northfield Avenue assemblage (Bevan and Hudson 2002). Although small, the Riversfield Drive flint assemblage, together with the Later Mesolithic material from Northfield Avenue and the other Rocester sites, will help to place the overall Rocester assemblage into its wider local and regional context, and elucidate a period previously under-represented in this area.

## 7.0 Conclusions

No archaeological features or deposits were revealed by the current groundworks, thus suggesting that the Roman settlement had not extended this far south of the gravel knoll on which the Roman encampment is located. Finds were limited to scatters of artefacts in various soil layers, and some of the soil deposits (i.e. 1001 and 1002) appear to be recent introductions to the site stratigraphy. The finds in this area are therefore probably derived from spoil dumped here during the construction of the Riversfield Drive estate itself. All of the pottery recovered, with the exception of the mortaria from layer 1002, was heavily abraded.
The watching brief therefore confirms the findings of the archaeological evaluation (trial trenching) of 1998, which concluded that the site lies outside of the Roman settlement and

in an area possibly utilised for agricultural purposes during (and after) the Roman period (Nichol 1998).

## 8.0 Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to the on-site staff of Henry Boot Homes Ltd. and sub contractors, for their assistance in carrying out the watching brief.

The fieldwork was undertaken by Steve Williams, Melissa Conway and Roy Krakowicz. The report was written by Roy Krakowicz, with assistance from Melissa Conway, and incorporates comments from Lynne Bevan on the finds. Figures were produced by Nigel Dodds. The report was edited by Iain Ferris, who also acted as Project Manager on behalf of BUFAU.

## 9.0 References

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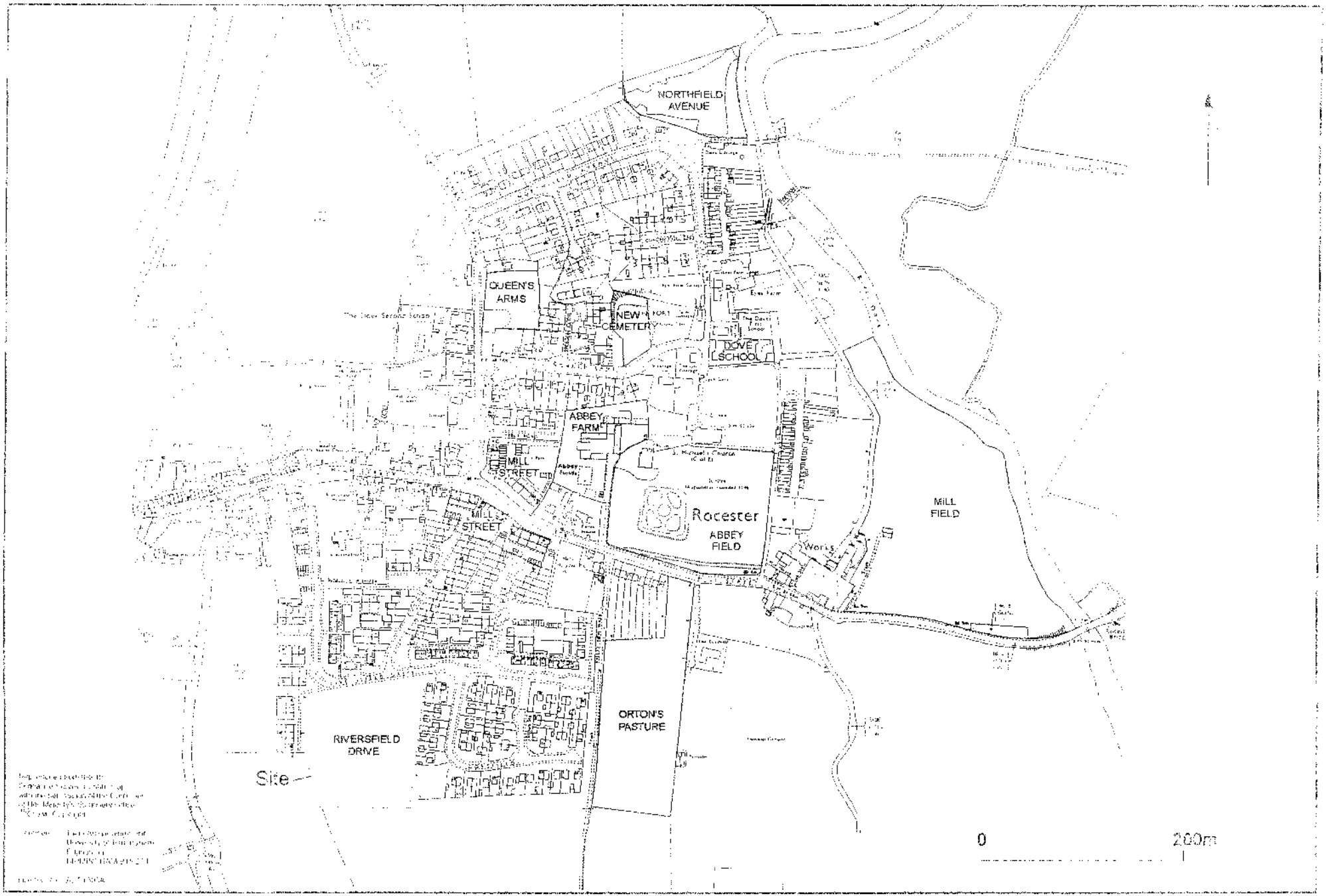
NORTHFIELD AVENUE
QUEEN'S ARMS
NEW CEMETERY
DOVE SCHOOL
ABBEY FARM
MILL STREET
MILL STREET
Rocester
ABBEY FIELD
MILL FIELD
ORTON'S PASTURE
RIVERSFIELD DRIVE
Site
0
200m

Fig 1

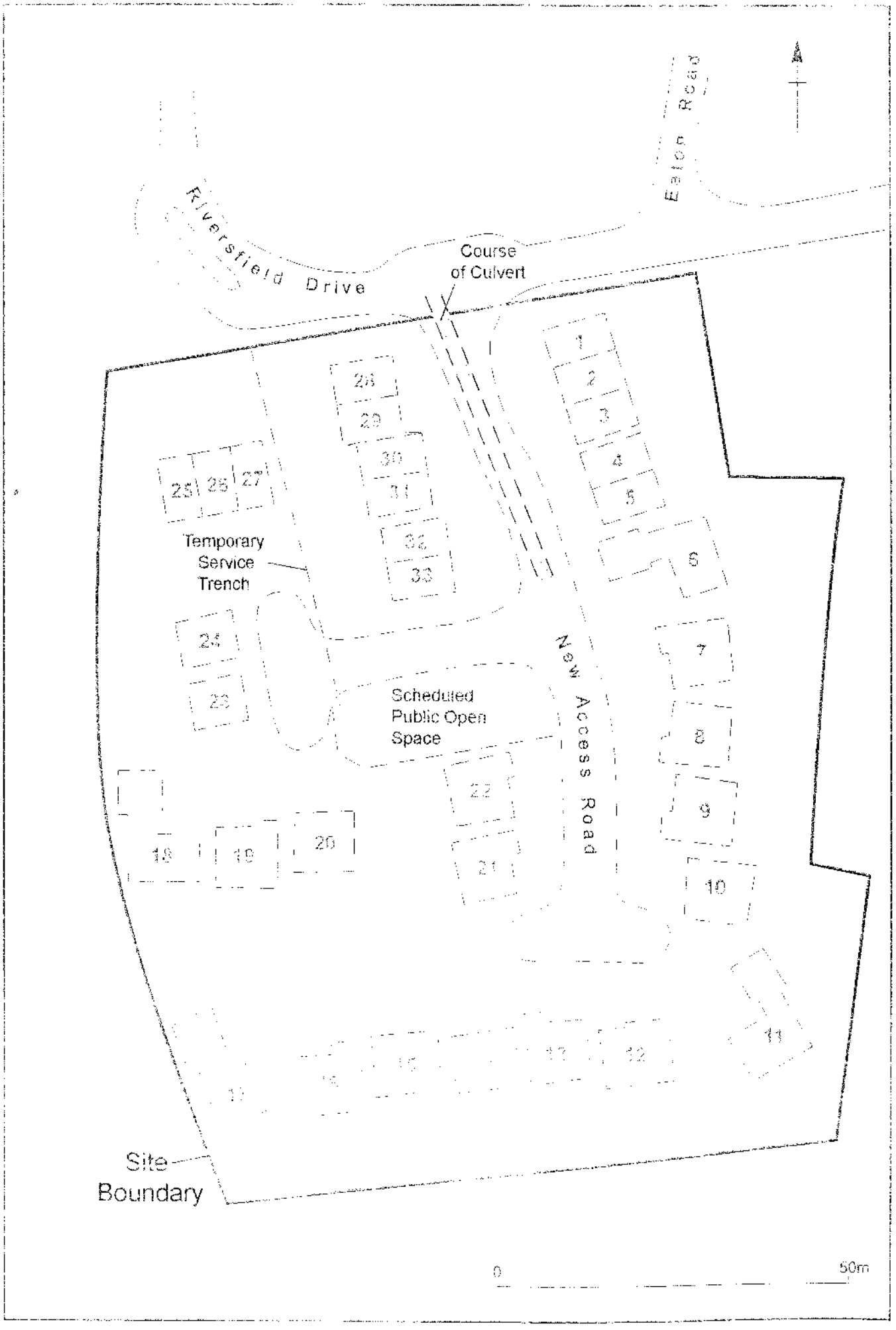
Eaton Road
Riversfield Drive
Course of Culvert
Temporary Service Trench
Scheduled Public Open Space
New Access Road
Site Boundary
0
50m

Fig.2