

**St. Thomas á Becket  
House, Ettington,  
Warwickshire**

**Archaeological Evaluation  
and Watching Brief.**

**Final Report**

Checked by

Supervisor..... date.....

Project Manager..... date.....

Project No. 1783

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**ST. THOMAS À BECKET HOUSE, ETTINGTON**

**ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION and WATCHING BRIEF 2008.**

**CONTENTS**

<b>1</b>	<b>INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>LOCATION AND GEOLOGY.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>AIMS AND OBJECTIVES.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>4</b>	<b>METHODOLOGY.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>5</b>	<b>ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND.....</b>	<b>2</b>
5.1	PREHISTORIC: .....	2
5.2	ROMAN: .....	2
5.3	MEDIEVAL: .....	2
5.4	POST-MEDIEVAL: .....	2
5.5	PREVIOUS WORK.....	3
<b>6</b>	<b>RESULTS.....</b>	<b>3</b>
6.1	TRENCH A.....	3
6.2	TRENCH B.....	3
6.3	TRENCH C.....	4
6.4	TRENCH D .....	4
6.5	THE SHIRLEY CRYPT .....	4
6.6	TRENCH E.....	4
6.7	TRENCH F .....	5
6.8	TRENCH G .....	5
<b>7</b>	<b>FINDS.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>8</b>	<b>DISCUSSION.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>9</b>	<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>10</b>	<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY .....</b>	<b>6</b>
10.1	CARTOGRAPHIC SOURCES.....	6
10.2	ABBREVIATIONS .....	7

*Figures*

- Figure 1: Location plan
- Figure 2: 1887 OS Map
- Figure 3: Site Location
- Figure 4: Trench location plan

*Plates*

- Plate 1: Aerial view of the site
- Plate 2: The south west corner of the mausoleum
- Plate 3: The interior of the mausoleum below the south east transept
- Plate 4: Possible human skull remains
- Plate 5: Foundation trench along northwest side of church footprint

## **SUMMARY**

*During April and June 2008 Birmingham Archaeology carried out an archaeological watching Brief at St. Thomas à Becket House, formerly St. Thomas à Becket Church, Ettington (centred on SP 26545, 49355). The site was approximately 10km south east of Stratford-upon-Avon, Warwickshire. The work was carried out in order to complete the archaeological requirements placed on planning permission to construct residential dwelling on the site.*

*The site was in use as a church and cemetery between 1798 and 1913. All groundwork was excavated under supervision in order to determine if any archaeologically significant remains were present and would be disturbed, including human inhumations. Foundation trenches, a drain trench and septic tank pit were dug using a mechanical excavator with toothless bucket.*

*No significant remains were seen either around the site of the church, nor in the area of the proposed car port or drainage trench. However, a single human skull was found during the excavation of the septic tank pit. The skull was left in situ and it was therefore impossible to tell whether it represented an articulated burial or when it dated to. The location of this pit was subsequently moved so as to avoid any disturbance.*



## **1 INTRODUCTION**

Between April and June 2008 Birmingham Archaeology carried out an archaeological Watching Brief at St. Thomas à Becket House, formerly St. Thomas à Becket Church, Ettington (hereafter referred to as the site). The work was commissioned by Mr Ian L.D. Sleat as part of a proposed residential development (Planning Application refs: S06/02289/FUL, S06/02290/LBC).

This report outlines the results of the watching brief, which was carried out between the 7th of April and the 2nd of June 2008, and has been prepared in accordance with the Institute of Field Archaeologists Standard and Guidance for Archaeological Desk-Based Assessment (IFA 1999).

The assessment conformed to a brief produced by Stratford upon Avon District Council (Stocks 2007) and a Written Scheme of Investigation (Cook 2007) which was approved by the Planning Archaeologist, Warwickshire Museum Field Service, and advisor to the Local Planning Authority, prior to implementation, in accordance with guidelines laid down in Planning Policy Guidance Note 16 (DoE 1990).

## **2 LOCATION AND GEOLOGY**

The site is located on the northern edge of the A422 Banbury Road, directly to the east of the junction with the A429. It is situated at the northwest edge of the village of Ettington in Warwickshire, 10km south east of Stratford upon Avon (centred on SP 26545 49355 (Fig. 1, Plate 1)).

The underlying geology consists of Charmouth Mudstone at the top of the early Jurassic Blue Lias, and is overlain by middle Pleistocene clay Tills (Edina Geology Digimap).

The site is a rectangular plot sloping gently down towards the northeast. It is still recognisable as a cemetery, but has recently undergone clearing (eg trees and undergrowth). The tower of the former church stands at the southwest end of the site. The footprint of the former church has been uncovered, along with a 19th century mausoleum (Shirley Crypt – see below) built into the church on its southeast side. A previous hard standing for a large static caravan has been removed, although a driveway and kerbing to provide access to the road remain. The site is bound to the southwest and northwest by 'A' roads, to the southeast corner by a residential dwelling, and to the north and northeast by arable land.

## **3 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES**

The principle aim of the project was to assess the survival and potential significance of any archaeology within the study area and the likely impact upon such deposits from subsequent construction. Information identified from this programme of archaeological fieldwork would be used, if necessary, to help determine a suitable mitigation strategy for further work.

## **4 METHODOLOGY**

A total of four foundation trenches were excavated around the existing foundations of the former church as well as a trench over the proposed location of the car port. A further drainage trench and associated septic tank pit were also excavated. All trenches and pits were excavated using a mechanical excavator with a toothless ditching bucket, ranging from 0.6m to 1.6m wide. The depth of these trenches varied from 0.4m to 3.0m.

All excavation was performed under direct archaeological supervision, with regular stoppages of work to inspect potential archaeological remains.

All stratigraphic sequences were recorded. A record using a continuous numbered context system on *pro-forma* context and feature cards was maintained. Photographs in monochrome and digital were taken of significant contexts where suitable. Finds were recorded, cleaned, marked, and identified by specialists as necessary.

## **5 ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND**

A full archaeological desk-based assessment for the site and its immediate environs has been produced (Cook 2007b), the results of which will only be summarized here.

### **5.1 Prehistoric:**

There is at present no evidence of prehistoric occupation or activity within Ettington or the surrounding area.

### **5.2 Roman:**

Although there is no archaeological evidence for a Roman settlement at Ettington, its location around the A422 which crosses the major Roman military routeway of Fosse Way, may have led to its development. The A422 is also known as Mycelan Straet (MWA 8639), meaning Great Road, and is an early Medieval road running south east from Stratford. It partially follows the line of an earlier Roman road and is mentioned in two charters in 985 and 988 AD. The centre of the village lies at about 1km east of the Fosse Way and a Romano-British coin (MWA 1279) was found approximately 300m northwest of the church at Ettington near the roundabout.

### **5.3 Medieval:**

Ettington was formerly known as Eatington up until 1931. In 1086 the Manors of Lower Ettington were held by Henrey De Ferrers, progenitor of the Earls of Derby. The former owner was not recorded. The Domesday survey records that Saswalo held the Manor of Henrey De Ferrers and was succeeded by his son Fulcher who died in 1105. Fulcher was succeeded by Saswalos second son who moved to Shirley Derbyshire and assumed the name Shirley. Sir William Dugdale in his *Antiquities of Warwickshire* recorded that Ettington was the only hamlet in the county which 'glories in an uninterrupted succession of its owners for so long a tract of time' (Dugdale 1730). The Shirleys' are still residents, and the ancestral home is now known as the Ettington Park Hotel, lying outside the village on the A3400 road from Oxford to Stratford upon Avon.

The first recorded church in Ettington was dedicated to the Holy Trinity and was situated at Ettington Park. The site is now mostly ruins but the south transept was restored in 1825 by E.J. Shirley. The church was built by Saswalo and there was a priest at Ettington in 1086. The church was gifted to Kenilworth Priory around 1150. The chancel, nave and tower may have been added around 1206, and further extension took place in the 14th Century.

### **5.4 Post-medieval:**

The church itself consisted of a tower, chancel and a transept extending from the southeast corner. The earliest reference to the transept is the Shirley Transept, with the Shirley crypt beneath. The church of Thomas à Becket (MWA 1264) was built in 1798 and considered to be 'the ugliest in the county'. In 1883 the Archdeacon of Worcester William Lowe commented in a letter (DR235/4) that the church was in very bad condition with peeling walls, no spouting on the north side and rain coming in through the roof of the Shirley Transept. He also noted the accommodation was too small for the number of parishioners. Thomas à Becket church was replaced in 1903 and was finally demolished

except for the Tower in 1913. The tower was used as a mortuary chapel up to and after 1931.

Very few photographs of the church exist and none show the church as a whole; instead there is a photograph of the inside before demolition showing the Shirley Pew (WCRO); another in the Victoria County History showing the remains of a side wall to the former chancel and one in the County Record Office taken in the 1970's and only showing the tower.

The earliest available maps predating the construction of the church are the Shirley estate map (18 / 19th century) and the Fulford map (1795). Both these maps show that the site was formerly a field in the possession of the Shirely estate. This field, on the edge of the Shirley estate was donated for the construction of St. Thomas à Becket Church, built in 1798. By the time of the first Ordnance Survey in 1887 (Fig. 2) the church was still in use and this is shown again on the Second Edition OS map of 1901. The Shirley estate map is described as 19th century although the church and graveyard is not shown on the map which would suggest that the map is actually earlier, probably 18th century.

## 5.5 Previous Work

Previous investigative work has been carried out in Ettington. Excavation and observation was undertaken in 2001 at land to the west of Hockley Lane, Ettington. Three areas at the front of the site were excavated and revealed medieval pits and ditches containing 12th to 14th century pottery. Several recorded slots may represent structural evidence for a medieval building, but this was not particularly clear (Thompson, 2001).

Further observation was undertaken in 2002 and recorded four possible buildings including a complete plan of a medieval barn or other agricultural building, possibly of cruck construction. The remains of further segments of wall foundation close to the site boundary suggested three further buildings fronting onto Hockley Lane. These may have belonged to a single farm complex or several separate houses, some of which were occupied in the 12th and 13th centuries (Thompson, 2002).

As part of a continuing programme of investigation, two further areas on the Banbury Road frontage within the medieval village were excavated in 2004. A possible medieval yard surface was recorded and a series of gullies and post holes across the southern part of the site, many containing 12th to 14th century pottery, probably formed fence or palisade structures along property boundaries (Thompson, 2004).

## 6 RESULTS

### 6.1 Trench A

A 1.5m wide trench was dug alongside the southeast wall of the church running from the existing tower to the corner of the Shirley Crypt (Fig. 4). On the southeast facing section natural grey sandy-clay (**1003**) was seen at a depth of 0.9m. This was overlain by the foundations of the church (**1002**). On the northwest facing section natural (**1003**) was identified at the base of the trench up to a depth of 0.9m which, in turn was overlain by a mixed pink-grey sandy-clay (**1001**). This was sealed by a topsoil layer (**1000**) 0.25m thick.

### 6.2 Trench B

Trench B was excavated to a maximum depth of 0.9m along the wall of the Shirley Crypt (Fig. 4). The crypt wall (**1004**) extended to a depth of 1.7m where it cut into the natural clay (**1003**). At the base of the wall, running parallel to it, was a late 18<sup>th</sup> or early 19<sup>th</sup> century disused drainpipe (**1007**). The drainpipe was formed from two curved ceramic

pieces of red tile laid to form a tube. Each tile was 0.3m long. The trench fill comprised entirely of re-deposited clay (**1001**), which in turn was sealed by topsoil (**1001**).

### 6.3 Trench C

Trench C was located along the apse foundations at the northeastern end of the church. The trench was dug parallel to the wall (Fig. 4) to a maximum depth of 2.7m whereupon the natural bedrock was encountered. During the clearing of rubble that had fallen back into the trench, a corner of the apse wall (**1005**) was clipped and a void was revealed. The interior of the void had a depth of roughly 0.3m, but there was no indication of the function of the structure.

### 6.4 Trench D

This trench was continued from the end of Trench C along the northwest side of the church (Fig. 3) all the way to the existing tower structure at the west corner of the church (Plate 5). It was stepped from 2.7m to 2.5m, then to 2.0m, and finally to 1.5m as it reached the tower. No features were seen in this stretch of trench. One piece of late 18<sup>th</sup> / early 19<sup>th</sup> century glazed pottery was recovered from (**1001**) The final 5m of trench was along an area previously disturbed in modern times. A quantity of concrete had been placed into the ground disturbing it, but the trench was able to be dug. The depth of the wall and the natural was consistent with that of the south wall, on the opposite side of the structure, remaining at a depth of 0.9m throughout the trench. The natural, subsoil and topsoil levels remained consistent.

### 6.5 The Shirley Crypt

The exterior walls were constructed from the same blue sandstone as the rest of the church, but the interior structure (including the arched roof, supports and ledges) were constructed of unfrogged red brick (Plates 2 and 3).

Exterior dimensions were measured as length 6.6m, width 5.5m, depth below ground 1.8m. The internal dimensions were measured as length 5.0m, width at base 3.8m, height at centre 2.15m. The interior of the crypt was formed by an arched roof running along the length of the structure. A central brick column on each side of the structure supported the roof and the coffin ledges. There were eight ledges in total in addition to four spaces on the floor for coffins to be placed. No remains were present. The ledges were 2.2m long, 1.25m wide, and were 0.11m thick at the centre (one brick depth). The top of the lower ledge was 0.55m from the present floor level, whilst the top of the upper ledge was 1.23m from the floor. The stairwell leading down into the crypt was in a state of disrepair. The wall retaining earth on each side of the stairway was not bonded into the main structure. It was built from similar stone, but the workmanship appeared different, the blocks were smaller, and was capped by three courses of red 19<sup>th</sup> century unfrogged brick. It is likely that this was a later addition, or possibly part of later repair work on the crypt.

### 6.6 Trench E

This trench was located within the area of the proposed car port. The area contained a number of upstanding grave stones, although it is unclear as to whether they were in their original positions. The trench ran diagonally across the area and was dug to a depth of 0.4m. This was to establish the likelihood of shallow graves being disturbed by the placement of a concrete platform. No features were visible, and the topsoil (**1006**) formed the majority of the fill of the trench along with some modern debris, including concrete slabs.

## 6.7 Trench F

Trench F formed the drainage trench which was repositioned from the originally proposed location so as to minimise the chance of encountering any archaeological remains. The trench followed the route of a former footpath through the cemetery (Fig. 4). Due to the build up of modern material to the northeast of the church footprint (placed as a levelling layer as part of this development), only 5.5m of the drainage trench cut through *in situ* deposits. This was dug to a depth of 0.40m. No archaeologically significant remains were identified. Subsoil consisting of a pink-grey sandy clay (**1009**) was overlain by topsoil (**1008**).

## 6.8 Trench G

The pit for the septic tank was also located within the area of the pathway, at the eastern end of Trench F. An initial 2 x 2m square pit was excavated to a depth of 1.4m. At a depth of approximately 1.3m below the ground surface a skull was found. The size and shape were consistent with that of a small human skull (Plate 4). The skull appeared to lie at the end of a shallow grave shaped cut (**1013**). Once the skull was uncovered, no further excavation was undertaken and it was therefore impossible to tell if this was part of an articulated skeleton or just charnel remains. The standing gravestones in the cemetery indicate a direction of burial aligned towards the northeast (as with the nave of the church), however the position of the skull within the cut would suggest that the skeleton was aligned generally towards the southwest, suggesting a different burial phase to the main graveyard.

The location of the septic tank was moved to the south in order to avoid disturbing this potential burial. No further remains were encountered. The trench was sealed by a layer of subsoil (**1008**).

## 7 FINDS

A single piece of pottery was recovered during the watching brief as detailed below. Spot dated by Stephanie Rátkai

Context	Description
1001	One coarseware bowl sherd, internal dark brown glaze, external and internal underglaze red-brown slip 17 <sup>th</sup> -18 <sup>th</sup> c

This was found in a subsoil layer and is consistent with the date for the construction of the church around 1798

## 8 DISCUSSION

Given the presence of the church and burial ground, the site had the potential for archaeological remains, especially inhumations, to be disturbed during the excavations. Careful planning to avoid all known graves led to very little human remains being discovered during the watching brief. The skull located at the bottom of the septic tank pit may have been part of an articulated skeleton, however it was not excavated and was left *in situ*. Due to the orientation of the grave cut (**1013**) it is possible that this grave predates the church. However it is also possible that the skull represents charnel thrown into the grave once the main burial had taken place, which was a fairly common occurrence during the medieval period.

The line of a drainage trench to the septic tank runs through recently built-up ground so the development will not disturb any buried archaeology in this area. Where it does cross undisturbed ground, no archaeological remains were identified. The exploratory trench

across the car port area revealed that the depth necessary to install a 'floating' concrete floor would only disturb recently built up ground and topsoil.

The Shirley Crypt that lay under a transept on the southeast side of the church is still present, although is susceptible to flooding. Foundation trenches around the remaining church footprint showed that the original stonework remains intact, except for some modern disturbance (late 20<sup>th</sup> century) around the southwest of the church adjoining the tower. This stonework will remain *in situ* and will be encased by the new foundations.

## 9 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The project was commissioned by Mr Ian Sleat. Thanks are due to Dean Broad of BRC & Sons (Civil Engineering) Ltd. for his co-operation and assistance throughout the project. Thanks also go to Anna Stocks, who monitored the project on behalf of Warwickshire County Council. The Watching Brief was undertaken by Paul Collins. The report was written by Paul Collins and Dave McNicol and illustrated by Nigel Dodds. It was edited by Kevin Colls who also monitored the project for Birmingham Archaeology.

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Thompson, P. 2004. Ettington, West of Hockley Lane, in Watt, S., (ed) *West Midlands Archaeology, Warwickshire*, CBA West Midlands, **47**, 70.

### 10.1 Cartographic Sources

Ordnance Survey First Edition 1887 1:2,500

Ordnance Survey Second Edition 1901 1:2,500 OS/51/1

Shirley Estate map (18 / 19<sup>th</sup> century) WCRO CR229/117/10

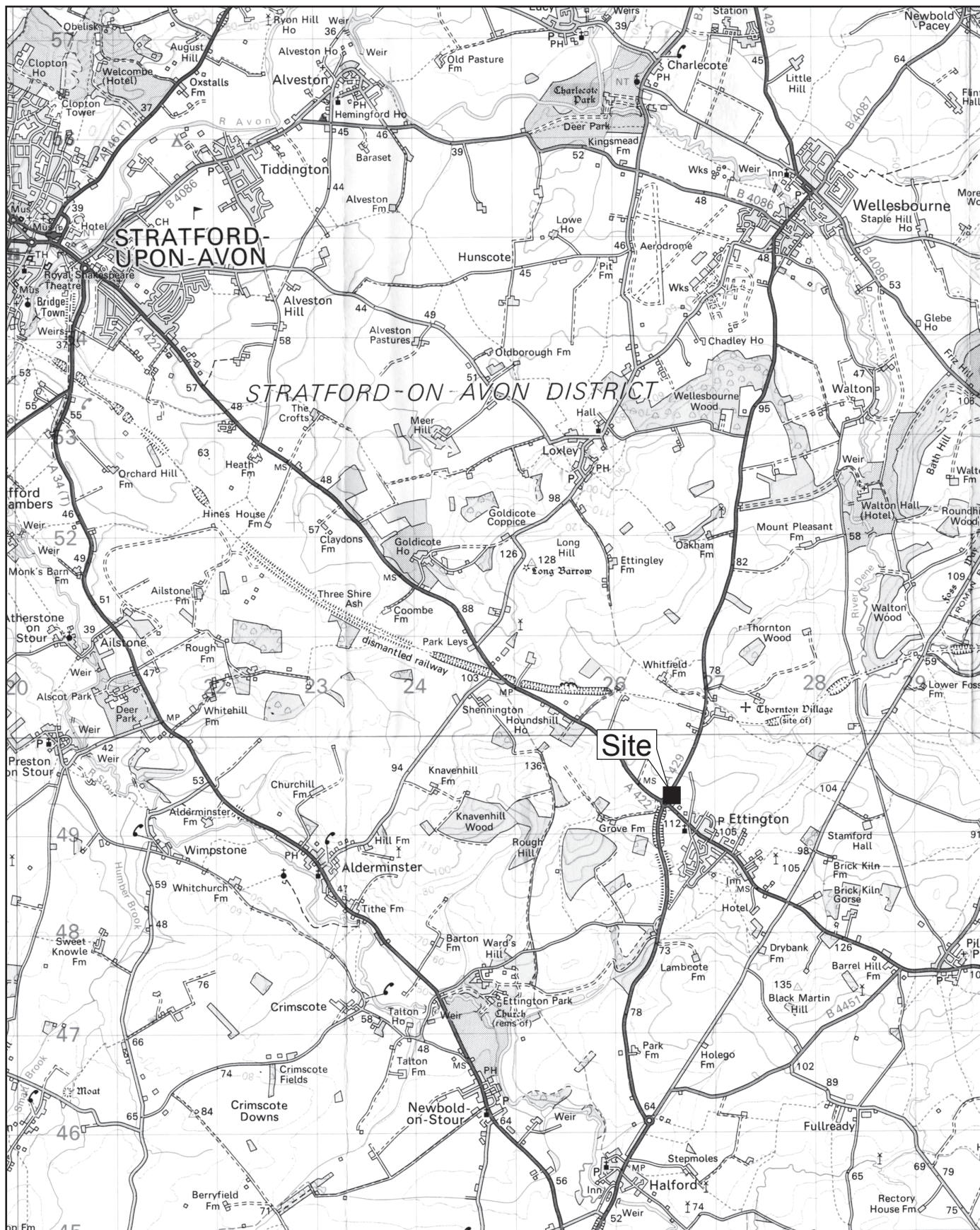
Fulford map (1795) WRCO CR229/117/2

Edina (Geology) Digimap

## **10.2 Abbreviations**

Warwickshire County Record Office (WCRO)





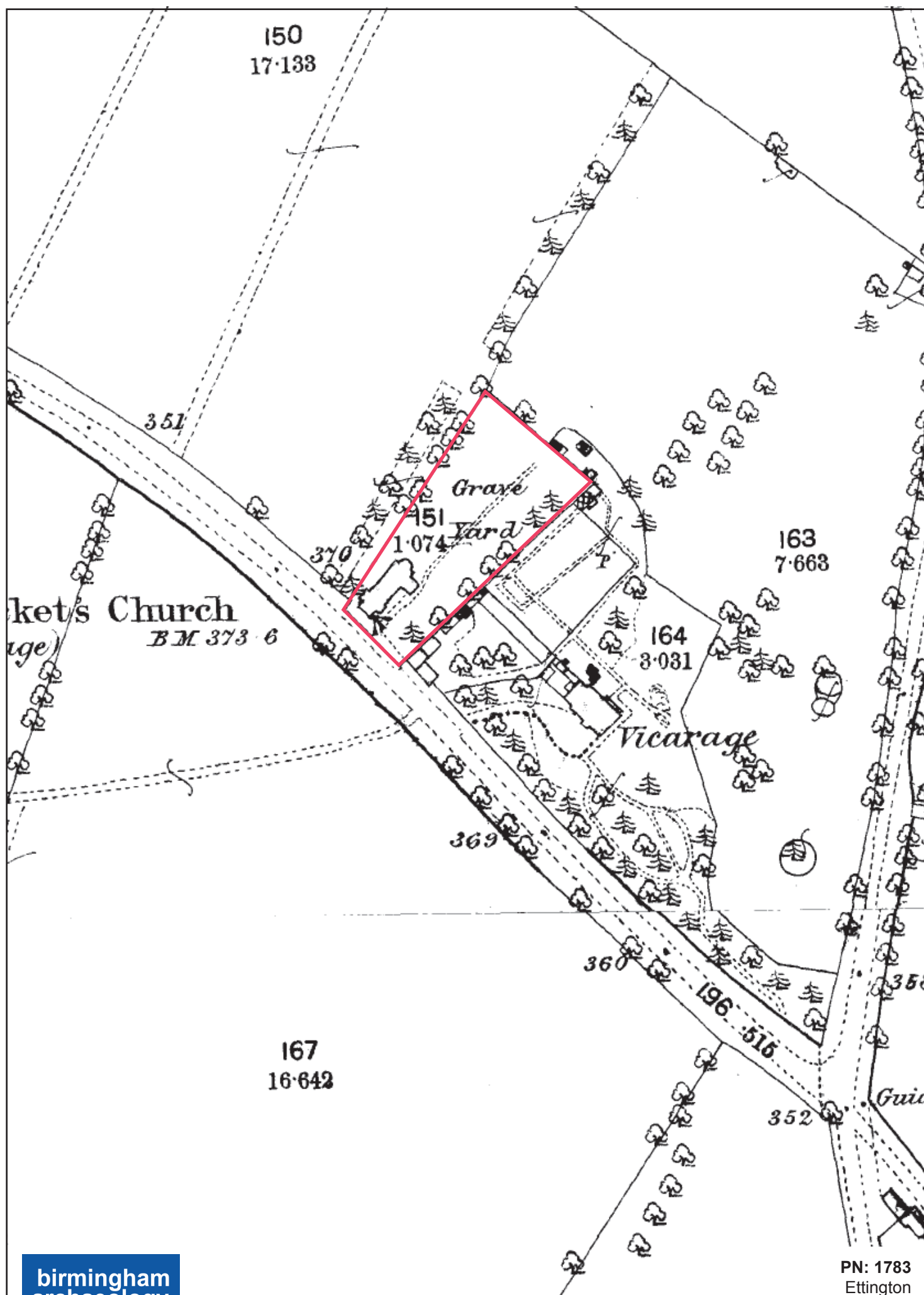
**birmingham  
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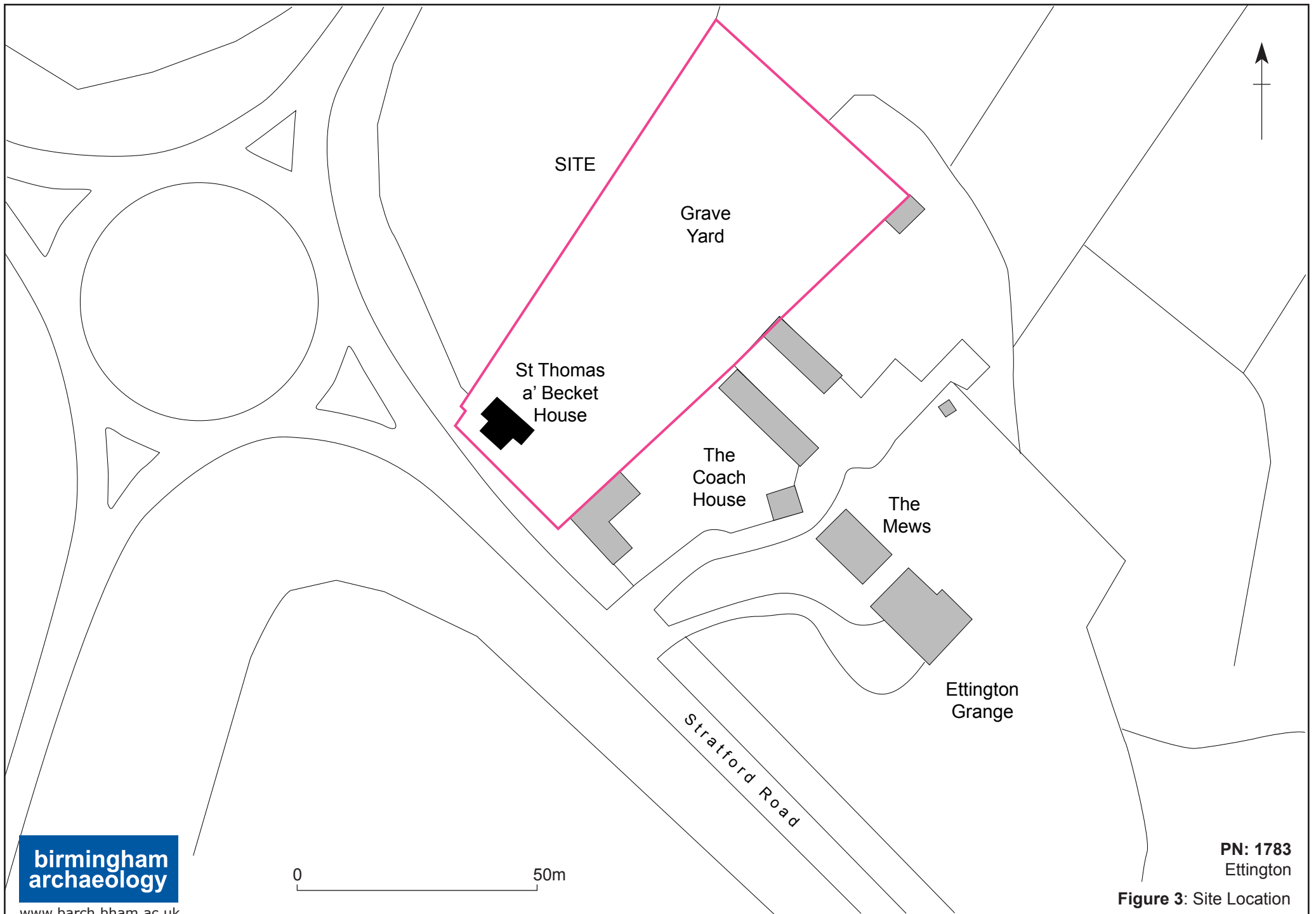
Reproduced from the 1998 Ordnance Survey 1:50,000 map with the permission of the Controller of Her Majesty's Stationary Office.  
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**PN: 1783**  
**Ettington**

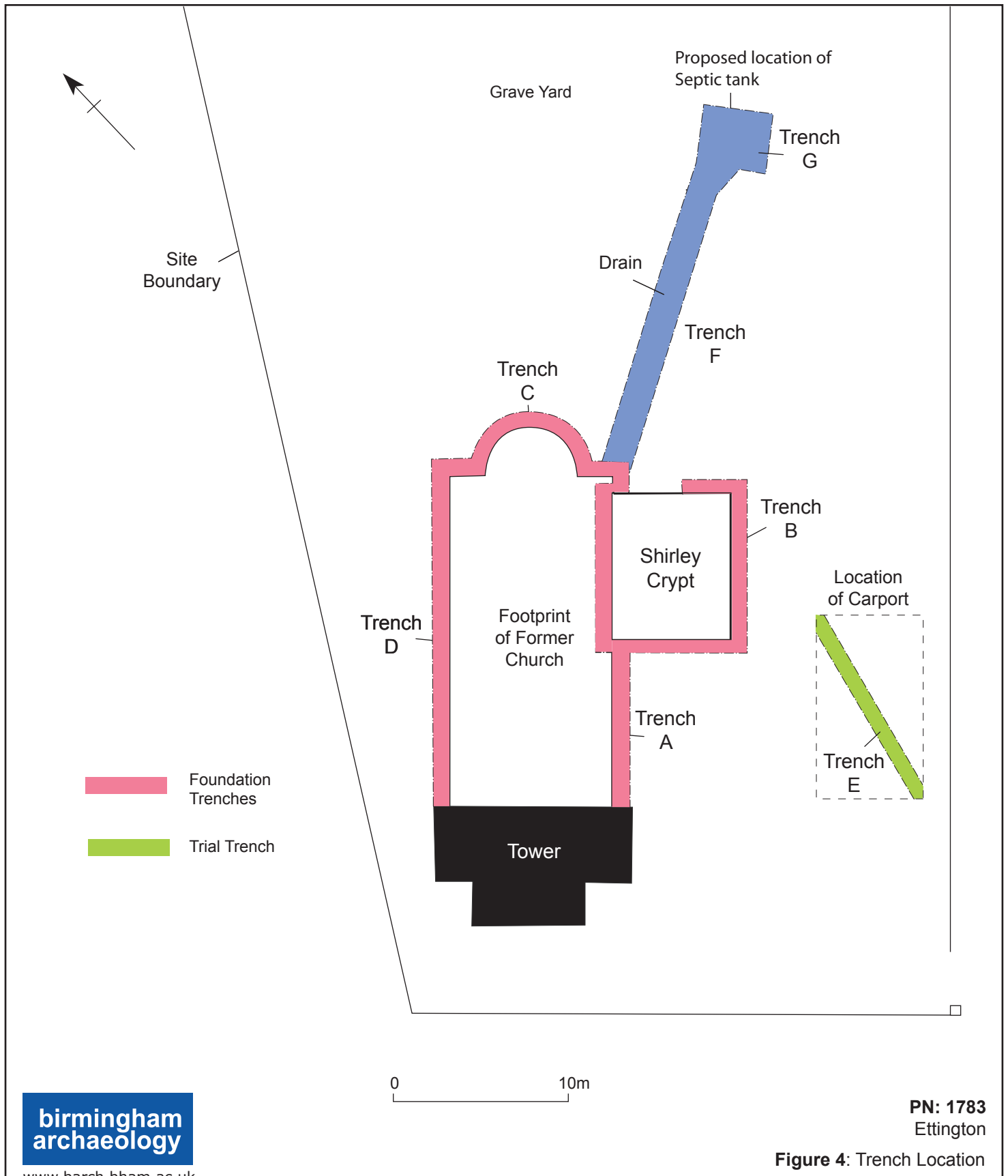
**Figure 1: Site Location**







**Figure 3:** Site Location



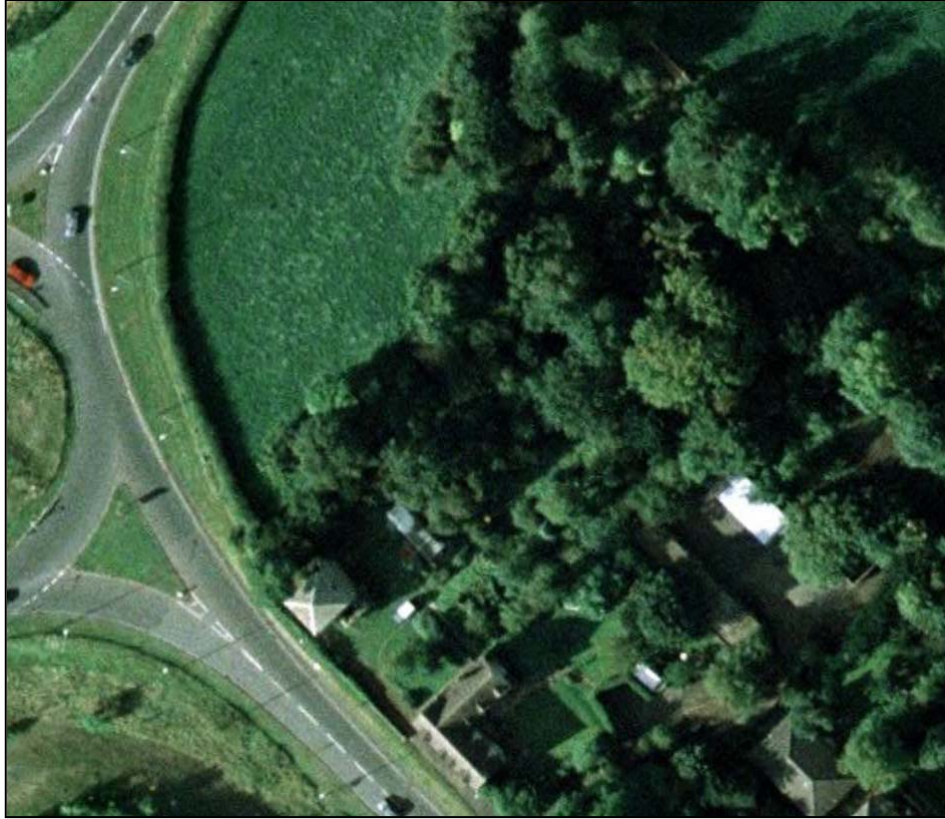


Plate 1: Aerial view of the site



Plate 2: The south west corner of the mausoleum





Plate 3: The interior of the mausoleum below the south east transept





Plate 4: Possible human skull remains



Plate 5: Foundation trench along northwest side of church footprint