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Oswestry Railway Lands,
An Archaeological Watching Brief
October 2008

Project No. 1860

**OSWESTRY RAILWAY LANDS
AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF 2008**

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OSWESTRY RAILWAY LANDS: AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF 2008

CONTENTS

1	INTRODUCTION.....	1
2	LOCATION AND GEOLOGY	1
3	ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND	1
4	AIMS AND OBJECTIVES	2
5	METHODOLOGY	3
6	RESULTS.....	3
7	CONCLUSION.....	4
8	ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	4
9	REFERENCES	4

Figures

- 1. Location map of site*
- 2. Watching brief area*
- 3. Sections of the footbridge foundations and balancing pond*

Plates

- 1. Foundation Trench 1 under footbridge*
- 2. Foundations visible during balancing pond excavations*
- 3. Stratigraphy seen in drainage trench*
- 4. Shoring the trenches against collapse.*
- 5. Section through the balancing pond*

Appendix

- 1. Written Scheme of Investigation (Removed)*

SUMMARY

In September and October 2008 Birmingham Archaeology carried out a watching brief on the site of the Cambrian Railways land, Oswald Road, Oswestry (centred on NGR SJ 2952 3002) to determine the location and state of preservation of Wat's Dyke in advance of a proposed new road development. No visible surface remains of Wat's Dyke survived on the site although there is an 80m length to the south, which, along with two cultivation terraces and a hollow way, has been scheduled as an ancient monument.

The earthwork has gradually been reduced due to erosion and development of the surrounding area. The next notable phase of activity on the site was the arrival of the railway in 1848, the scale of which grew exponentially, culminating in the construction of the headquarters of Cambrian Railways. This involved the merging of Oswestry and Newton Railway and the Oswestry, Ellesmere and Whitchurch Railway. The site was extensively developed with the building of a substantial locomotive works, a carriage shed, loading wharf and an impressive stationhouse. The development of the site continued until 1926 when expansion of the railway saw sidings built to the west of the Dyke.

Most of the watching brief area has been comprised of a sandy clay and stone crush material measuring up to 2m deep in places, which is probably a ground levelling material. Any surviving archaeology associated with Wat's Dyke is likely to be sealed beneath this layer, if not destroyed by previous development on the site. No artefacts of any date were recovered during the watching brief.

OSWESTRY RAILWAY LANDS: AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF, 2008.

1 INTRODUCTION

In September 2008 Birmingham Archaeology carried out an archaeological watching brief of Oswestry Railway Lands (hereafter referred to as the site). The work was commissioned by Mouchel in advance of a proposed new road (Planning Application Number 05/13734/OUT).

This report outlines the results of the fieldwork, which was carried out in September 2008, and which was prepared in accordance with the Institute of Field Archaeologists Standard and Guidance for Archaeological Watching Briefs (IFA 2001). The assessment conformed to a Written Scheme of Investigation produced by Birmingham Archaeology (2008) which was approved by 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 proposed development site is centred on NGR SJ 2952 3002 (Fig 1). The site is located at the junction of Oswald Road, Beatrice Street and Gobowen Road on the line of former Cambrian railway line just northeast of Oswestry town centre. The area surrounding the site comprises predominantly residential and commercial properties.

The underlying geology consists of outcrops of carboniferous limestone and the coal measures.

3 ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In the Iron Age the area in which Oswestry is now located lay within the territory of the Cornovii tribe. The most evident Iron Age site in Oswestry is 'Old Oswestry', one of the largest Cornovian hill forts. This is one of several substantial earthworks in the town, the others being the motte of the Norman castle, now covered in trees, and the much-reduced Wat's Dyke. The hill fort represents an important centre for Iron Age occupation in the area. It was occupied right up until the Norman Conquest and possibly beyond, this may even relate to the post-Roman date of the Dyke.

The place name Oswestry has been interpreted as 'Oswald's tree', possibly in reference to a significant boundary marker, rather than a wooden cross said to have been erected by King Oswald prior to the battle of *Maserfelth* (Gelling 1992, 74-75). The town or a place nearby has in fact traditionally been associated with the site of the battle of *Maserfelth* in AD642, when the Christian King Oswald was defeated by the pagan Penda, King of Mercia. The alliance between Penda and the Welsh allowed the rise of Mercia to continue, allowing Penda to assume an 'overlordship of England south of the Humber' (Charles-Edwards 2001, 94).

The creation of great bank and ditch boundaries was no new thing but it is the scale and level of preservation that is impressive. The possibility that the dykes along the Welsh border, such as Wat's Dyke, are immediately post-Roman has not been discounted as noted below. Larger earthworks such as Offa's Dyke are generally considered to be a later development, having an eighth century date.

Wat's Dyke has traditionally been interpreted as dating to the Mercian period and despite numerous excavations along its length there is still no reliable date for its construction. In 1997 radiocarbon determinations deriving from possible hearth remains found buried beneath the bank material at Maes-y-Clawdd provided dates which gave a broad *terminus ante quem* for the monument (AD411 - 561 at 1 σ range; AD268 - 630 at 2 σ range). These do not, however, provide a date for its construction (Hannaford 1997; Matthews 2001). Wat's Dyke is commonly understood to have been a precursor to Offa's Dyke, constructed by his predecessor Aethelbald (Stanford 1980). The structure was built on a smaller scale than Offa's Dyke and was a simpler design with no evidence of complex revetting in the bank construction, a factor which would have increased the likelihood of rapid erosion. Whilst the monument was a significant feat of construction, the V-shaped ditch measuring up to 8.0m wide and 4.0m deep, with the addition of a bank on its east side, it was probably a short-lived structure (Cane 1996). It may well have been designed more as an expression of territorial significance than as a defensive installation and was probably superseded later on by Offa's Dyke. If, however, the radiocarbon dates are taken into consideration the interpretation that Wat's Dyke belongs to the reign of Aethelbald could seem a little narrow (Welch 2001:158). The possibility exists that the true period of construction could actually date between the latter part of the Romano-British period, through to the post-Roman kingdom of the Cornovii or into the Anglo-Saxon period. Without any additional corroborating evidence no more specific interpretation is valid.

No visible surface remains of Wat's Dyke survive on the site although there is an 80m length to the south, which along with two cultivation terraces and a hollow way, has been scheduled as an ancient monument. It is this portion of the monument that best illustrates the way the natural features of the landscape were used in its construction (Hill 1974:104).

The earthwork has gradually been reduced due to erosion and development of the surrounding area. The next notable phase of activity on the site is the arrival of the railway in 1848, the scale of which grew exponentially, culminating in the construction of the headquarters of Cambrian Railways. This involved the merging of Oswestry and Newton Railway and the Oswestry, Ellesmere and Whitchurch Railway. The site was extensively developed with the building of a substantial locomotive works, a carriage shed, loading wharf and an impressive stationhouse. The development of the site continued until 1926 when there was an 'increase in the number of sidings to the southeast of the station resulting in the expansion into the fields west of Wat's Dyke' (Hislop 2002, 5). Over time the station gradually became less important and was significantly scaled down with the demolition and removal of the additional tracks and associated buildings in the late 1960s (Krawiec 2006).

4 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The principle aim of the project was to assess the survival and potential significance of any archaeology within the study area.

More specific aims were to:

- To locate and record the level of survival of Wat's Dyke within the development area.
- Ensure the preservation by record of any archaeological remains to be impacted on by the proposed development.

5 METHODOLOGY

The groundworks on site were carried out by a team from McPhillips using two 360° tracked excavators with both toothed and toothless buckets and a JCB 3CX type excavator. Prior to the drainage trenches being excavated the footings around the bridge supports were exposed using a 3CX excavator to determine the construction and size of materials used. The site was cleared of bramble undergrowth along the route of the new road beneath the existing footbridge, and the kerbstones from a carpark to the northwest of the footbridge were also removed. Excavation of the storm drain trenches was undertaken using a two foot wide toothed bucket and a one foot wide toothless bucket, the balancing pond was excavated using a 4 foot wide toothless ditching bucket. The area of the new road under the footbridge was stripped using a 360° tracked excavator with a toothless ditching bucket. Metal shoring was used during the excavation of the drainage trenches in this area due to the depth of the trenches and the compaction of the ground, which was minimal and as a result the sections kept collapsing.

All stratigraphic sequences were recorded, even where no archaeology was present. Features will be planned at a scale of [1:20 or 1:50], and sections were drawn of all cut features and significant vertical stratigraphy at a scale of 1:10. A comprehensive written record was maintained using a continuous numbered context system on *pro-forma* cards. Written records and scale plans were supplemented by photographs using black and white monochrome, colour slide and digital photography.

6 RESULTS

Two trenches were excavated around the footings of the bridge supports to determine the construction and size of materials used. Footing Trench 1 was 3.4m in length, 1.4m in depth and 0.7m wide. Mid dark brown silt sand and mortar layer **102** was cut by the foundation for the footing and filled by very hard brick and lime mortar mix **103**. Large sandstone block (0.9 x 0.8 x 0.34m) **104** was placed on top of **103** to form the anchor point for the metal bridge support **105**. Compacted mid brown silt sand clay layer **101** was infilled around the sandstone block **104** and was sealed by dark brown silt sand clay layer **100**. A concrete block was located in the very top of layer **100** 0.7m NE of **105** (Plate 1).

Footing Trench 2 was 2.8m in length, 0.8m in depth and 1m wide. Brick stone and lime mortar layer **202** formed the base of the footing with sandstone block (0.85 x 0.85 x 0.24m) **203** bedded into it. Metal support **204** was anchored into **203** and sealed by mid brown silt sand clay layer **201**, which in turn was sealed by dark brown silt sand clay layer **200**.

Drainage Trench 1 consisted of mid brown sand clay **302**, which was sealed by dark grey loose silt sand overburden **301**. Dark grey tarmac hardcore layer **300** sealed **301**.

Drainage Trench 2 consisted of light to mid beige-brown clay sand **402** sealed by mid grey silt sand clay with small rounded stones **401**. Mixed mid grey friable silt sand layer **400**, containing brick and cable fragments, sealed **401**.

The balancing pond section consisted of a mid brown sand clay layer **503** overlain by bluey grey possibly waterlain silty clay layer **502**. Dark grey overburden layer **501** sealed **502** and was sealed by hardcore layer **500**. The remains of red brick foundations, comprising 8 courses of orange red brick, c 0.6m in depth, were also recorded on the western side of the balancing pond (Plates 2 and 5).

Two sections were recorded along the route of the proposed new road during the excavation of drainage trenches. Both sections were comprised of levelling or build up material (crushed stone). Section 1 was a total of 0.94m in depth at the time of recording, however depth will increase when the drainage trenches are excavated. A mixed layer of brown and mid grey sand and crushed stone (**600**) comprised the bulk of the section, and was sealed by a thin layer (0.1m) of dark grey hardcore/tarmac material **601**.

Section 2 measured approximately 2m in depth. Access around and to the trench was denied due to the instability of the stone crush material making up the ground. Very loose layer of mid orangey brown sand clay with crushed stones and brick fragments (**703**) comprised the bulk of the section. Mid grey loose stone and brick crush layer **702** sealed **703**, and was in turn sealed by dark grey sand clay crush layer **701**. Light brown sand clay and stone crush layer **700** sealed **701** (plate 3).

7 CONCLUSION

Much of the material covering the development site, sand clay crushed stone and brick, appears to be ground levelling or build up material, most likely associated with the development of the area for the railway, or after the removal of the railway tracks. The area around the balancing pond to the southwest of the footbridge was comprised mainly of mid brown sandy clay which looked natural and undisturbed by human activities. No artefacts of any kind were recovered in this area. Both manhole trenches in this area were excavated into a similar material to the balancing pond, suggesting that the likelihood of finding surviving archaeology in this area to be slim. It is possible that the sandy clay material is another levelling layer, in which case any surviving archaeology associated with Wat's Dyke is most likely sealed beneath it, if not completely destroyed by the railway.

Excavations around the footings of the footbridge revealed that it was bedded into a similar material to that seen during the excavations for the balancing pond, a sandy clay layer, suggesting that the entire development area was levelled after the closure of the railway lines.

Due to the depth of the levelling material across the site it is likely that any archaeology not destroyed by the construction of the railway and associated buildings in this area is buried beneath this layer, and not likely to be disturbed by any development.

8 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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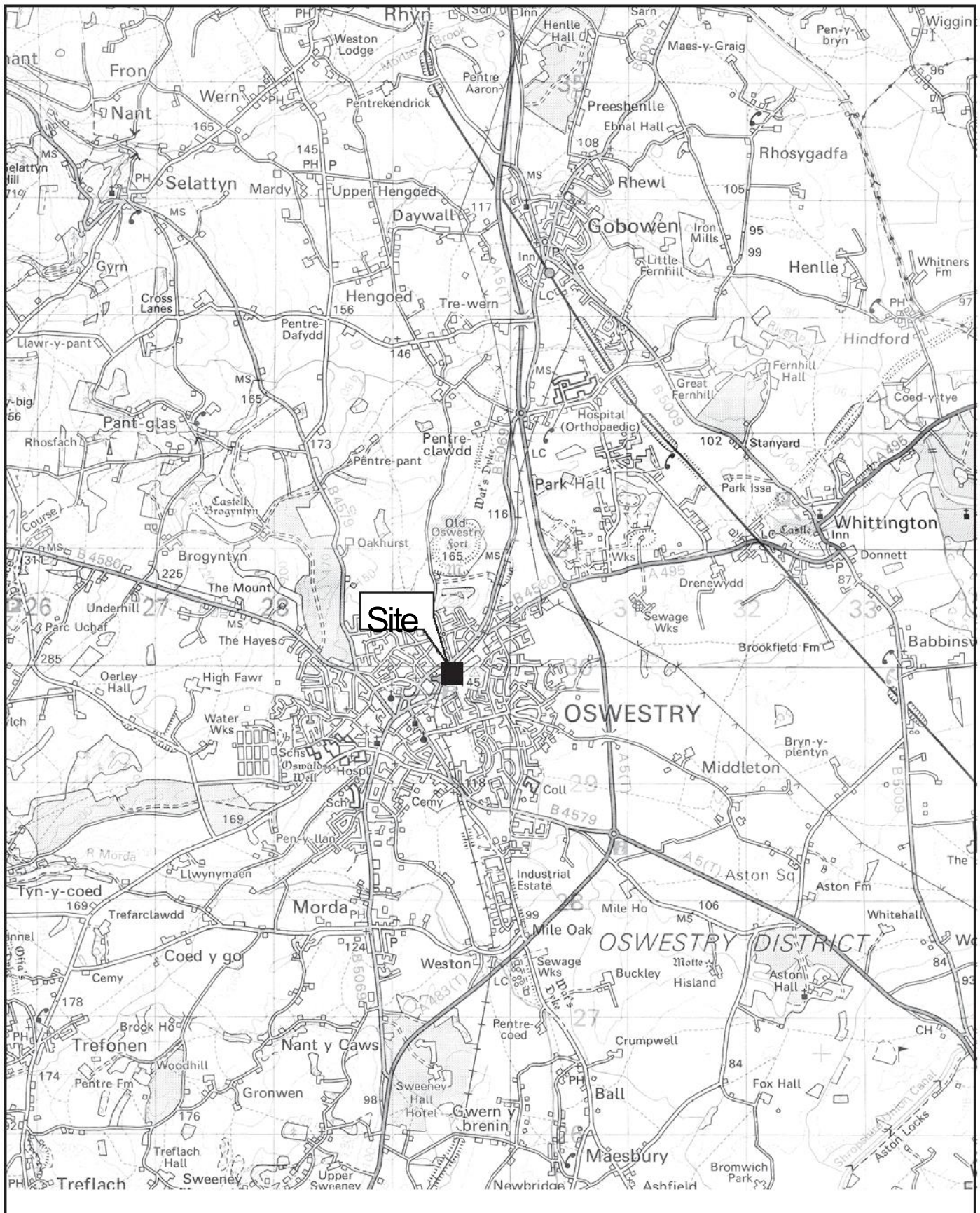
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Appendix 2 - Table of Stratigraphic Contexts

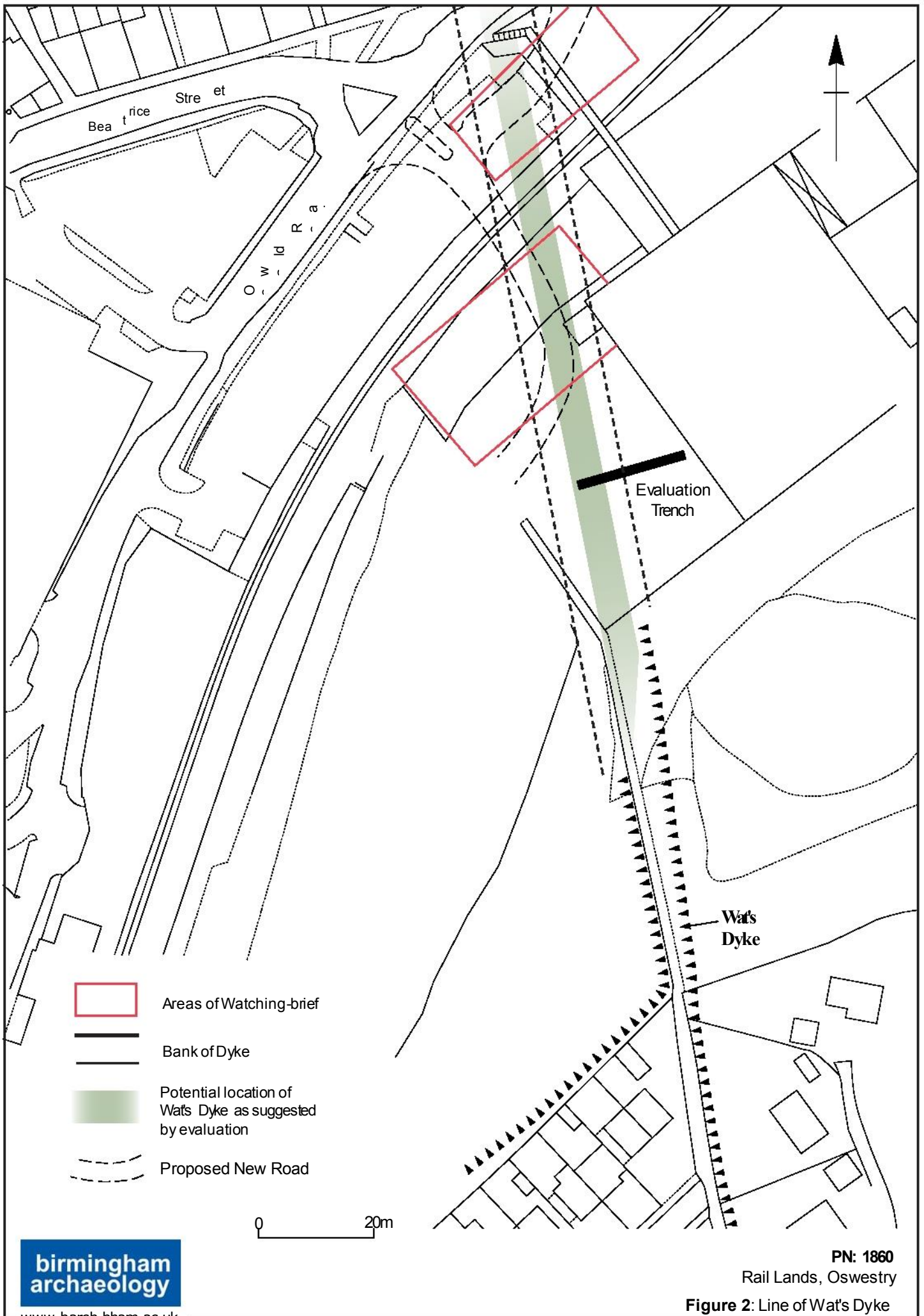
Area	Context Number	Context Description	Dimensions (depth)
Foundation Trench 1	100	Dark brown silt sand clay, very friable	0.72m
	101	Mid brown silt sand clay, compact	Up to 0.35m
	102	Mid dark brown silt sand and mortar mix	0.45m
	103	Very compacted brick and lime mortar mix	Up to 0.7m
	104	Hard buff/ off yellow sandstone block	0.35m
	105	Metal bridge support	0.44m (represented in drawing)
Foundation Trench 2	200	Dark brown silt sand clay	Up to 0.3m
	201	Mid brown silt sand clay	Up to 0.3m
	202	Compacted lime and brick mix	0.5m
	203	Hard buff/off yellow sandstone block	0.24m
	204	Metal bridge supports	0.22m (represented in drawing)
Drainage Trench 1	300	Tarmac/hardcore	c. 0.25m (all measurements in Drainage trenches 1 and 2 <u>approximate due to no access to trenches</u>).
	301	Dark grey loose overburden	c. 1m
Drainage Trench 2	302	Mid brown sand clay, quite clean and <u>undisturbed</u>	c. 0.45m
	400	Mixed mid/dark grey friable looking <u>silt sand overburden</u>	c. 0.4m
	401	Mid grey silt sand clay with small stones	c. 0.3m
	402	Light/mid beige brown clay sand	c. 1m
Balancing Pond	500	Very dark grey hardcore material	0.3m
	501	Dark grey silty sand loose <u>overburden</u>	0.5m
	502	Bluey grey waterlain silt clay	0.45m
	503	Mid brown sand clay	0.8m




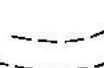


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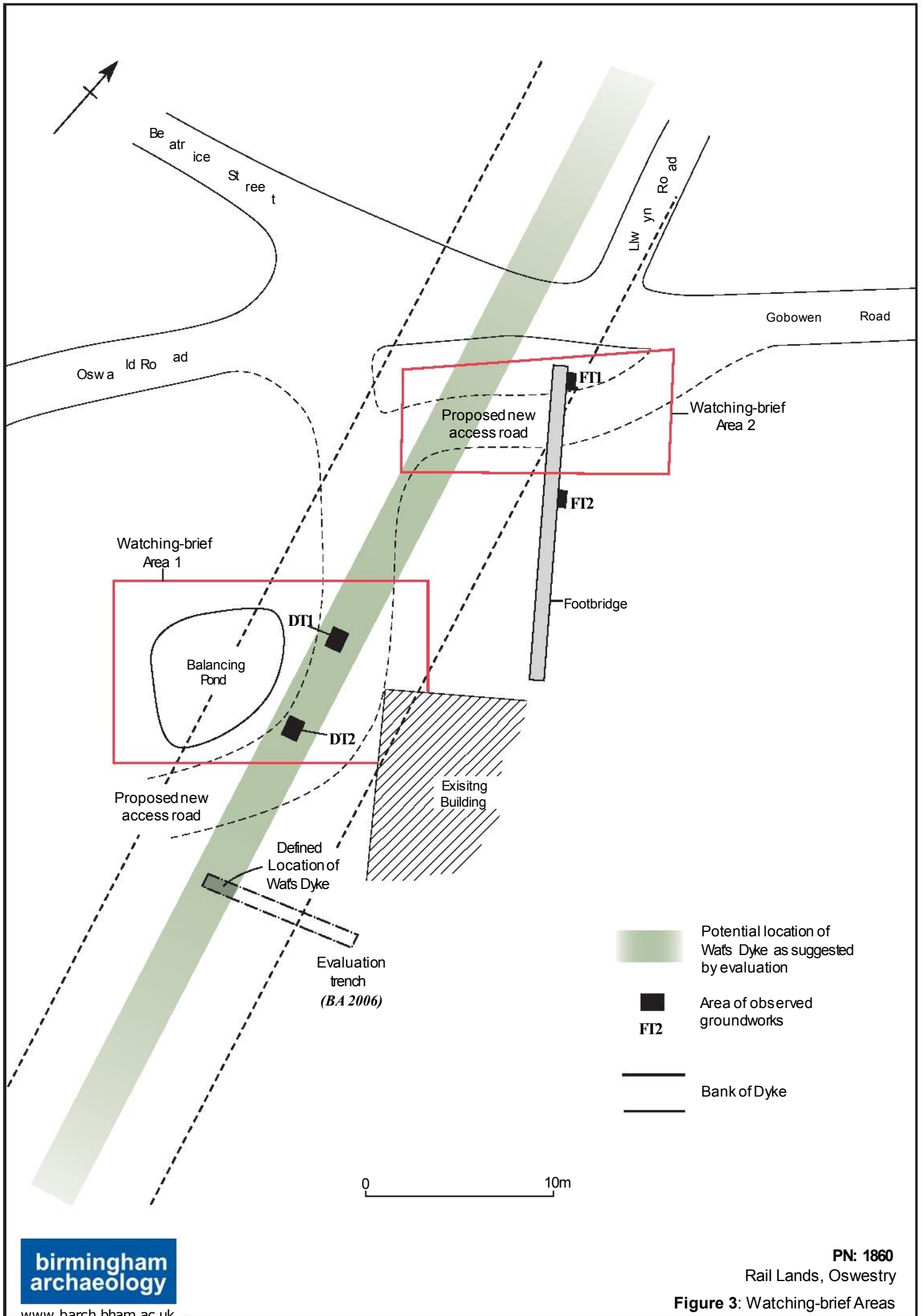
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 Rail Lands, Oswestry
Figure 1: Site Location

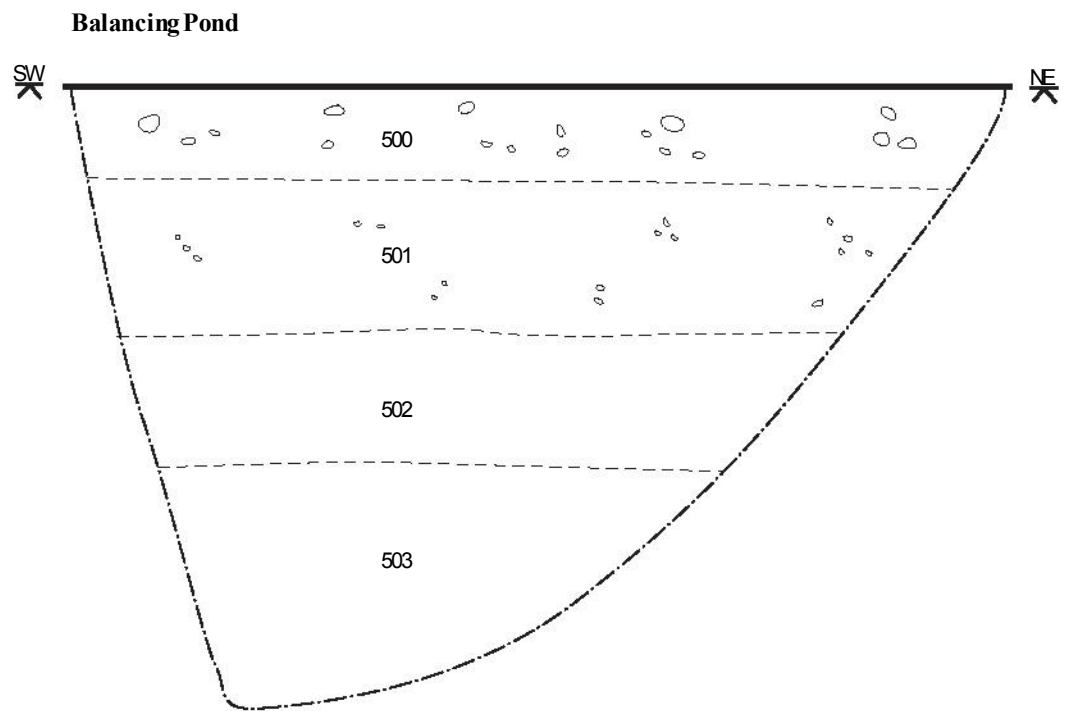
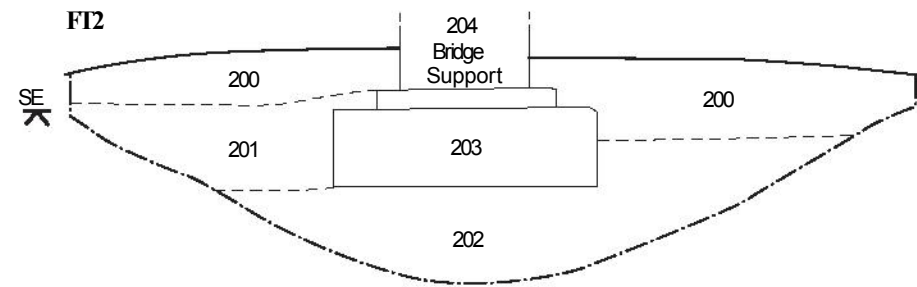
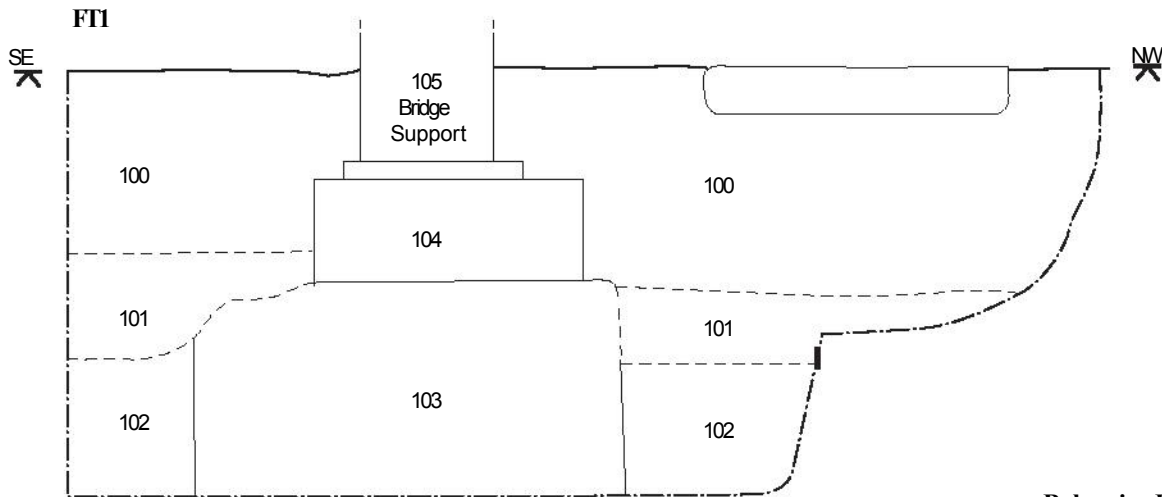


-  Areas of Watching-brief
-  Bank of Dyke
-  Potential location of Wat's Dyke as suggested by evaluation
-  Proposed New Road

0 20m

Figure 2: Line of Wat's Dyke





0 1m

Plates.



Plate 1: Foundation Trench 1 showing the footing of the footbridge.



Plate 2: Foundations visible during the balancing pond excavations.



Plate 3: Stratigraphy in the drainage trench along the new road. Depth approx 1m.



Plate 4: Shoring the trenches to prevent collapse.



Plate 5: Section through the balancing pond.