Land at Bellevue Terrace, Totterdown, Bristol

Archaeological Watching Brief

BHER 25236

on behalf of

Ellson Homes Limited

Nick Corcos BA, MA, PhD, AIFA

Avon Archaeology Limited

Bristol: November 2013

Land at Bellevue Terrace, Totterdown, Bristol

Archaeological Watching Brief

Frontispiece: Probable gatepost of oolitic limestone, possibly Dundry stone, recovered from the topsoil context during machine excavation of house foundation trenches. The quality of workmanship of this object is such that it can only be associated with the two large, 19th century villas which formerly occupied the site.

on behalf of

Ellson Homes Limited

Nick Corcos BA, MA, PhD, AIFA

Avon Archaeology Limited

Bristol: November 2013

CONTENTS

FIGURES

PLATES

and almost certainly related to the two large 19th century villas which formerly occupied it.

1. Composite panoramic view of the site prior to the commencement of work.
2. Trench 1 at full depth, south-western end.
3. South-western section of Trench 1 completed.
4. North-west facing section in Trench 1, showing stratigraphy
5. Wall (103) in plan, Trench 1.
6. Trench 2 completed, view to south-east.
7. South-east facing section in Trench 3, showing stratigraphy
8. South-east facing section in Trench 3, showing section through wall (103)
9. Trench 3 completed, view to south-west
10. North-west facing section in Trench 9 showing section through wall (103).
11. Composite panoramic view of Phase 1 house foundations completed.

ABSTRACT

Avon Archaeology Ltd were commissioned by Ellson Homes Ltd, to undertake a programme of archaeological monitoring and recording (Archaeological Watching Brief) during groundworks associated with the construction of a small development of new housing on the north-western side of Bellevue Terrace, Totterdown, Bristol. The development site occupies a triangular area extending to approximately 0.2ha, centred on NGR ST 59757 71896, and was the subject of an earlier Desk-Based Assessment carried out by Avon Archaeological Unit Ltd. That earlier research found that the greater part of the site had, from about the mid 19th century, been occupied by two large villas and their associated landscaped gardens. These buildings lasted only to about the turn of the 20th century, when they were removed to make way for a new railway cutting. Apart from a temporary use as allotment plots, the site has remained effectively derelict from that time until the present day. However, the desk-based study also suggested various strands of evidence that might point towards the presence of an Iron Age hillfort at Totterdown, as yet completely unidentified archaeologically.

The total development as projected is intended to consist of nine town houses of three storeys each, divided into two phases. The first phase, which is the subject of this report, consists of six houses occupying the south-western two-thirds (in terms of area) of the site. The second phase, consisting of the final three houses at the north-eastern end, may not get underway for up to a year from the date of this report.

The archaeological monitoring took place over the course of three days in late October and November 2013, and was framed around a Written Scheme of Investigation which AAL had previously submitted to, and which had been approved by, the local authority Archaeological Officer. The groundworks themselves involved the straightforward excavation of foundation trenches for poured concrete footings, and these trenches cut deeply into the underlying natural geology on all parts of the site.

The sole feature revealed throughout the course of the work was a (probably) 19th century garden wall running south-east to north-west across the middle of the site, and almost certainly associated with the two large villas which occupied it until the early 1890s.

Otherwise, in no part of the site that was subject to monitoring were any features, deposits or finds of archaeological significance identified, and most explicitly, nothing at all to indicate the presence of occupation or activity of Iron Age date.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Avon Archaeology Limited wishes to acknowledge the assistance given by Geoff Hanson, of Ellson Homes Ltd, and Site Manager Ian Gay, also of Ellson Homes. The author would like especially to thank machine driver Brian Deacon, and groundworker and dumper driver Cai Smith, for their unfailing courtesy, patience and good humour during the course of the work.

NOTES

Whereas Avon Archaeology Limited have taken all care to produce a comprehensive summary of the known and recorded archaeological evidence, no responsibility can be accepted for any omissions of fact or opinion, however caused.

COPYRIGHT

All enquiries should be addressed to:
Avon Archaeology Limited
Avondale Business Centre
Woodland Way, Kingswood
Bristol BS15 1AW
Telephone and Facsimile 0117 960 8487.
Email: mail@avonarchaeology.co.uk.

ABBREVIATIONS

AAL	Avon Archaeology Ltd
aOD	Above Ordnance Datum
CBM	Ceramic Building Material
HER	Historic Environment Record
NGR	National Grid Reference

1. INTRODUCTION

Avon Archaeology Ltd were commissioned by Ellson Homes Ltd, to undertake a programme of archaeological monitoring and recording (Archaeological Watching Brief) during groundworks associated with the construction of a small development of new housing on the north-western side of Bellevue Terrace, Totterdown, Bristol. The development site occupies a triangular area extending to approximately 0.2ha, centred on NGR ST 59757 71896, and was the subject of an earlier Desk-Based Assessment carried out by Avon Archaeological Unit Ltd. (Corcos 2011). The site is bounded along its entire south-eastern side by Bellevue Terrace, along its short south-western side by a house at the north-eastern end of Richmond Street, and along its entire north-western side by a sloping revetment associated with the railway network immediately to the south of Temple Meads station (Figures 1 and 2). The formal planning application relating to this development has been allocated the reference 11/040970/F by the local planning authority, which is Bristol City Council.

The archaeological monitoring took place over the course of three days in late October and November 2013, and was framed around a Written Scheme of Investigation which AAL had previously submitted to, and which had been approved by, the local authority Archaeological Officer (Potter 2013). A digital photographic record was made during the work, and a selection of these images are reproduced here as the Cover, Frontispiece, and Plates 1 to 11.

2. ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The desk-based assessment previously undertaken (Corcos 2011) identified the site as lying in an area of possible but completely unproven archaeological potential, to the extent that circumstantial evidence pointed towards at least the possibility of the existence of an Iron Age hillfort occupying the high ground on which Totterdown now stands. That earlier research also found that the greater part of the site had, from the mid 19th century, been occupied by two large, semi-detached villas. Prior to that point, historical records, and especially early maps and including the mid 19th century tithe records, indicate that the

entire hillside in this area had been used for pasture.

As originally constructed, these dwellings had only limited garden space attached to them, but by the time of the large-scale (1:500) OS plan of the early 1880s, what are clearly fully landscaped gardens, presumably associated with these houses, occupy the entire area to their north-east, for the whole of the remaining length of the north-western side of Bellevue Terrace. It is perfectly possible that the establishment of these gardens may have involved extensive terracing to take account of the gradient of the site, which slopes towards the north-east. So much, indeed, is strongly implied in the appearance of a set of steps visible on the OS plan, immediately to the north-west of a large glass-house lying to the north-east of the villas, and giving access to the main garden area on this side, which must by definition have been at a lower level than the houses themselves.

However, as events transpired, these buildings were relatively very short lived, and probably in the early 1890s, they were swept away to make way for a new railway cutting. Apart from a temporary use as allotment plots, the site has remained effectively derelict from that time until the present day. The composite image presented here as Figure 3 shows how the ground plan of the modern development relates to the layout of the 19th century houses and a part of their garden space; and comparison with this figure, and Figure 4, will immediately show that no part of the 19th century house foundations, even if any survived, would have been seen in any of the trenches monitored for the purposes of the present work. Indeed such remains also lie outside the area of the trenches which will need to be excavated for the remaining three houses at the north-eastern end of the site, for the second, but as yet unscheduled phase of the work. It should also be noted, very importantly, how Figure 3 shows that the three houses making up the second phase of the work, occupy an area which probably underwent a certain level of landscaping to establish the formal lawns which spread out in front (ie to the south-east) of the 19th century villas.

A single feature which is likely to have been associated with the villas was recovered by machine as an unstratified find from the topsoil layer (100), and this was a very fine gatepost made of oolitic limestone, possibly from the quarries at Dundry, and displaying a plain decorative rebate on what was presumably intended to be its front side (Frontispiece).

3. GEOLOGY AND TOPOGRAPHY

The site lies on the southern side of the River Avon, and its centre is at about 38m aOD. However, it also slopes gently from south-west to north-east, from about 41m aOD at its south-west corner, on the street frontage, dropping to about 37m aOD at the extreme north-eastern corner. As already noted however, the northern side of the site, faced by the stone revetment wall, drops away very sharply to the railway line below, and outside the immediate vicinity of the site, the land also slopes away quite steeply to the south, east and north, the surface of the main Wells Road, at its junction with Bellevue Road, lying at about 25m aOD. Indeed, the area covered by the small group of terraces including not only Bellevue Road and Terrace and their associated small streets, but also Cambridge Street, Richmond Street, Hill Street and William Street, can be seen to occupy a striking high point forming a distinct eminence which looks north and north-west. Historically, this was known as Pylle (or Pile) Hill.

The geological map, however, reveals the wider context, and it becomes apparent that the study area occupies a site that is merely the north-eastern outlier of a much longer ridge running south-west/north-east for a distance of about 1.5km from end to end, and which includes Windmill Hill, very close by to the south-west and the highest point of which is at about 34m aOD. South-and east of this ridge the solid geology is composed of deposits of the Triassic Mercia Mudstone series, and north of it the solid geology is subsumed beneath the alluvial valley deposits of the River Avon, although heavily disturbed and modified by artificially raised ground, as might be expected of a site so close to the centre of the city of Bristol; and in the area immediately north-west of the ridge, a large body of Redcliffe Sandstone, lying stratigraphically beneath the Mercia Mudstone, also outcrops. The ridge itself, however, represents a highly localised deposit of resistant Wilmcote Limestone, also forming the top of Windmill Hill, and which is a member of the Rhaetic group of deposits lying above the Mercia Mudstone, at the very top of the Triassic, and forming a transitional series between it and the lowest beds of the Jurassic (BGS). It is quite clear from the geological map that the north-eastern, ‘Bellevue Terrace’ element of this ridge forms a discrete topographical entity in its own right, and in an unmodified form would have appeared like a promontory, with slopes in all directions from its highest point, from which there would have been commanding views over the valley of the River Avon.

The river itself, in its natural form, would probably have been navigable at least as far as Keynsham.

4. METHODOLOGY

Contexts were allocated where necessary on a single context basis, and as already noted, a digital photographic record was kept of the progress of the work. The majority of images included either one-metre scales, or a telescopic surveying staff, except in the case of site-wide shots. Trenches were monitored as they were actually being dug, and were then double-checked on completion of excavation. Occasional sample sections were cleaned to test and clarify the stratigraphy. The paper archive resulting from the work will be retained at the offices of Avon Archaeology Ltd where it will be freely available for consultation. A copy of this final report will also be deposited in the City of Bristol HER, where it will have the reference BHER 25236.

5. THE MONITORING

The excavation of the foundation trenches proceeded from the highest part of the site, progressively downslope, ie from south-west to north-east, and trenches were numbered in the order in which they were dug, using the developer s own ground plan, supplied in CAD format, as a base plan (Figures 3 and 4). Trenches were dug with a 60cm toothless bucket, and decreased in depth as the site sloped to the north-east. The deepest trenches were, therefore, Trench 2, and the south-western ends of Trenches 1 and 3. These latter two trenches also represented the longest continuous excavations carried out during the work, and they were progressively stepped downwards throughout their length to take account of the direction of slope, ie to the north-east.

It should be noted that the most south-westerly of the intended footings as shown on the developer s plan, was not excavated at the time of the monitoring reported on here, and indeed may be delayed indefinitely, because of possible difficulties relating to its proximity to the party wall which bounds the south-western side of the site. The south-western end

of Trench 1 was therefore begun 5m to the north-east of the party wall, and the first of the north-west/south-east trenches to be dug was Trench 2. This trench, and the south-western ends of trenches 1 and 3, extended to a total depth of 1.7m. The most north-easterly footing, Trench 8, at the lowest point of this first phase of the site, was 0.9m depth. Unusually, two of the foundations of internal walls, here Trenches 9 and 10, were treated as though they were part of the external, load-bearing structure, and were dug to full width and full depth.

As work progressed it quickly became apparent that the site had been heavily disturbed. Throughout the monitored area, there were only three deposits seen in all of the trenches, and these were the same throughout. This was a topsoil (100), a subsoil (101), and the natural (102). A typical section is shown in Plate 7. The topsoil throughout was 0.20 to 0.30m in depth, and consisted of a dark to black, soft clayey silt, with intense root activity, and numerous gritty inclusions and stone fragments. This layer was full of modern detritus, including plastic, fragments of concrete, breeze block, and CBM derived from a very wide range of material. The topsoil was, then clearly modern, and may in part derive from the site s use as allotment gardens, which dated only from the post-war period.

The subsoil layer (101) was developed only towards the north-eastern and north-western sides of the site, and by contrast, in the south-western and south-eastern areas, the topsoil layer could be seen to lie directly on top of the natural (102). Plate 4 shows a typical example. The subsoil, shown clearly in Plate 7, was a mid, greyish-brown silty clay, highly friable and with moderate root activity, with numerous gritty inclusions, numerous flecks and larger fragments of charcoal, and moderate occurrence of white flecks of what was clearly lime mortar. The subsoil layer was typically 0.20m to 0.30m in thickness. Despite much searching, the only find retrieved from this context was a small fragment of fully glazed pottery, a rim sherd of light buff colour, which was certainly no earlier than the 18th century and may well be far more modern. Although not entirely diagnostic in this respect, the find came from a well-sealed part of the context, and it at least demonstrates that the layer has been disturbed in relatively modern times.

The natural (102) was a stiff, plastic, mid to light buff sticky Lias clay, the top of which varied somewhat in depth throughout the site but was generally seen at about 0.5 to 0.6m

where the subsoil (101) occurred, and much shallower where the topsoil (100) lay directly on top of it, the latter especially at the south-western and south-eastern sides of the site. In places throughout the entire site, the trenches cut through Lias limestone bedrock, at varying depths, and it was clear that this was intermittently interbedded with the clay.

The captions attached to the remainder of the plates should, it is hoped, be pretty self-explanatory. However, it is most important to state that at no point during the monitoring of this initial phase of the development was any indication seen whatsoever of anything resembling stratigraphy, deposits or features that might have been related in any way whatsoever to an Iron Age hillfort, but especially slumped bank material or ditch cuts. Particular care was also taken, so far as it was possible, to spot any material that might have even remotely resembled late prehistoric ceramic, but again, this was to no avail. It seems clear that in the higher parts of the site, towards the south-west, the complete lack of a subsoil indicates that the top of the natural may well have been truncated to an unknown extent in relatively modern times. And even in those parts of the site where the subsoil layer (101) occurs, it seems pretty clear, as we have already noted, that this also is a relatively modern deposit, or has at least been subject to modern disturbance. In addition, we might wonder whether at least some of the topsoil has at some point actually been brought onto the site from elsewhere, possibly during the site s relatively very recent use for garden allotments.

The work revealed a single feature which might be considered to have any archaeological significance at all, and this was a wall (103) which ran north-west to south-east across pretty much the middle of the site, virtually, and by coincidence, parallel to the excavated foundation trenches also running in that direction. The wall was seen in plan in Trench 1, and in section in Trenches 1, 3 and 9, and its line coincided very closely with that of Trench 10, so that the excavation of that trench also involved effectively the complete removal of the wall along that part of its length. By definition the wall itself could only be examined in section, and at no time was either face visible for inspection. The best view was revealed in the south-east facing section of Trench 3 (Plate 8). Its construction was therefore somewhat problematic, but it was clear that it was, at least, of extremely rough build. A maximum of six surviving courses, to a total height of 0.56m, were seen in the Trench 3 section, and its south-western face appeared intact. Its north-eastern side had,

however, tumbled badly, and as a consequence its full width, as built, was difficult to determine. It could have been a minimum of 0.24m in width or a maximum of 0.58m, but is perhaps more likely to have been the latter, and on balance to have been of double skin construction with a mortared rubble core. It should be noted that, as seen in plan at the north-eastern end of Trench 1 (Plate 5), its measured width appeared to be 0.33m, but this was only along a 0.60m length (ie the width of the digger bucket), and it may well be that collapse had resulted in some loss of width here, as well as that seen in the Trench 3 section.

The individual stones appeared to have been of rubble, with perhaps only the facing stones having been given some rough dressing. Because the faces were not seen, it was not possible to determine coursing, or lack thereof. The stone itself appeared to be a mixture of Pennant sandstone and Lias limestone, and the bonding material was a highly friable, light, dirty greyish-brown gritty, sandy mortar, with occasional small fragments of charcoal, and moderate flecks of dirty white lime mortar. There was no sign of any clear construction cut in any of the sections examined; the topsoil layer (100) seems clearly to have butted against the wall, but without sample excavation, its relationship with the subsoil (101) was rather more problematic; it seems equally possible that (101) butted against the wall, as that the wall was cut through the subsoil. It was certainly cut into the top of the natural (102).

It is, in any event, quite clear that not only was the wall a relatively late feature, its very rough construction indicates that it was not intended to be load-bearing it is most likely to have been a boundary and/or a garden wall. The composite plan presented here as Figure 3 suggests that the most likely candidate is what appears to be a garden/boundary wall running north-west/south-east a little distance to the south-west of the more south-westerly of the two large 19th century villas. The wall separated this house from a large garden which lay on the other (ie south-west) side of it, but which clearly belonged to the house, as is shown by a gap at its north-western end; this open gateway gave access to the south-western garden via a path which is clearly depicted on the OS plan. However, it will be noted that the alignment of this wall as depicted on the First Edition 1:500 OS plan, and that of Trench 10, are by no means coincident, although it seems unlikely that this can be attributed to significant inaccuracies in either the historic map, or the modern survey plan.

The possibility must remain open, therefore, that the monitoring work has recorded a wall which is not shown on the available historic cartography, although by the same token, the recorded wall, in its construction and general nature, does look very much like a (probably) uncoursed, rubble built, 19th century garden wall.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The watching brief reported here was carried out in fulfilment of a condition imposed on a planning application relating to the construction of a new housing development at Bellevue Terrace, Totterdown, Bristol. Of a total intended construction of nine houses, groundworks related to the first six only (Phase 1 of the project) are reported on here. Phase 2 relates to the remaining three projected houses, but there is as yet no formal schedule for the commencement of that part of the development.

The condition arose mainly from the suggestion, outlined in an earlier desk-based assessment relating to the site, that the elevated area of Totterdown may have been the site of an as yet archaeologically unproven Iron Age hillfort. Part of the site had also, in the second half of the 19th century, been occupied by two large, semi-detached villas and their associated, and very extensive landscaped gardens.

The work involved the monitoring of a series of ten machine cut foundation trenches. Only three stratigraphic units were seen during the course of the monitoring: topsoil, subsoil, and natural clay and limestone. The only feature of any small archaeological interest that was recorded during the work, was a roughly-constructed, and clearly non-load-bearing wall which was almost certainly of 19th century date. It is not entirely clear, however, whether this structure can be directly correlated with a garden/boundary wall depicted on the late 19th century OS large-scale plan of the site.

Aside from this, in no part of the site that was subject to monitoring were any features, deposits or finds of archaeological significance identified, but most explicitly, at no point was any indication seen of anything resembling stratigraphy, deposits or features that might have been related in any way to activity or occupation of Iron Age date.

7. BIBLIOGRAPHY

BGS
British Geological Survey Online Viewer.http://www.bgs.ac.uk/discoveringGeology/geologyOfBritain/viewer.html

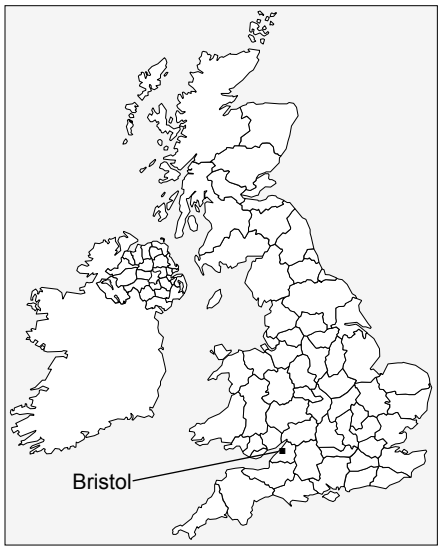
Corcos, N. J., 2011
Land at Bellevue Terrace, Totterdown, Bristol: Archaeological Desk-Based Assessment. Unpublished report, Avon Archaeological Unit Ltd.

Potter, K., 2013
Land at Bellevue Terrace, Totterdown, Bristol: WSI for Archaeological Watching Brief. Avon Archaeology Ltd.

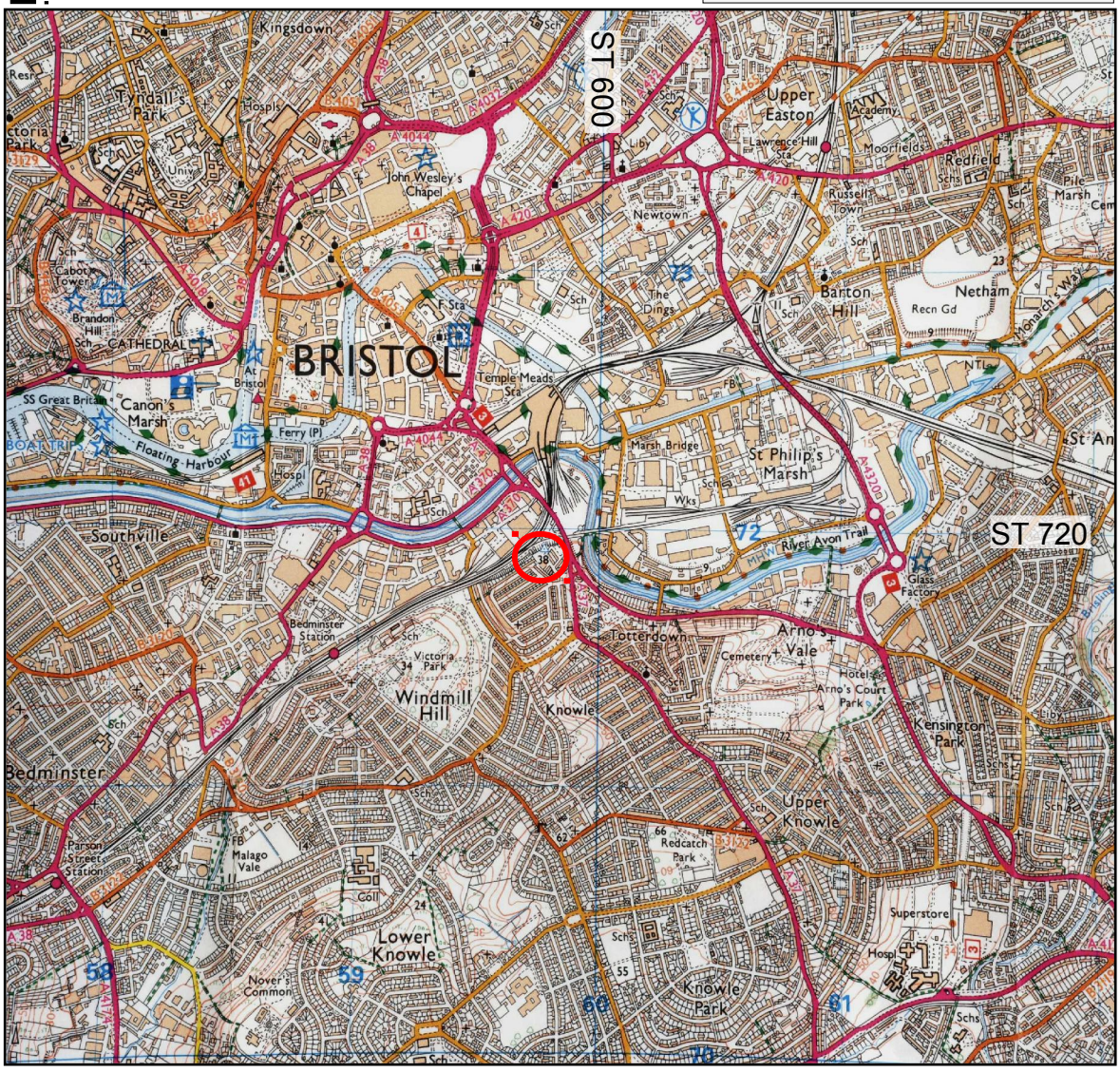
Location of the Study Area

Figure 1

The Study Area



N



Scale: 1 : 2500

Figure 2

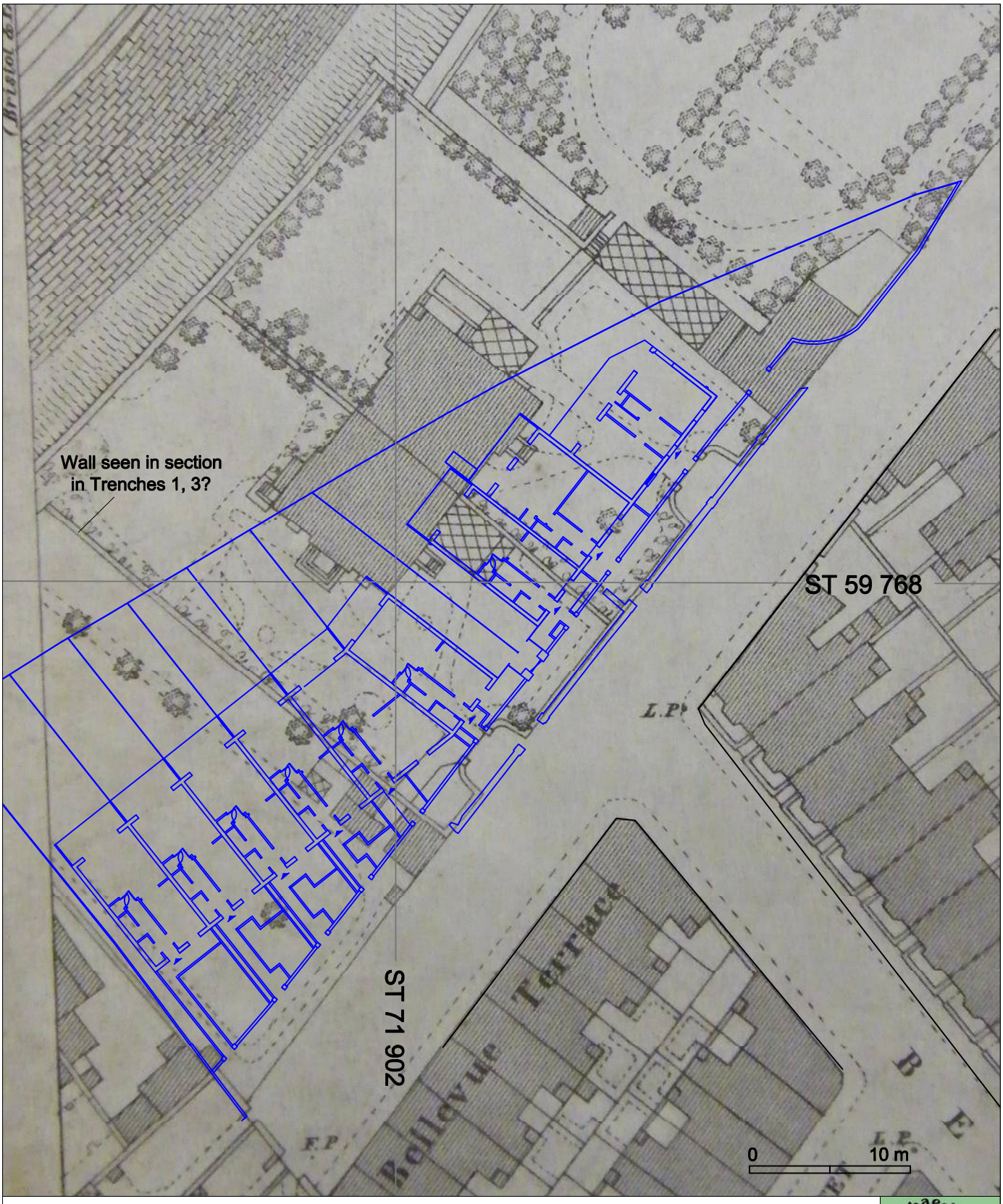
Site Location Plan. Study area outlined in red

Avon Archaeology Limited
November 2013

Figure 3

Developer's Ground Plan superimposed on historic OS Plan, 1883 (Published scale 1:500)

N



Trench Location Plan

Figure 4

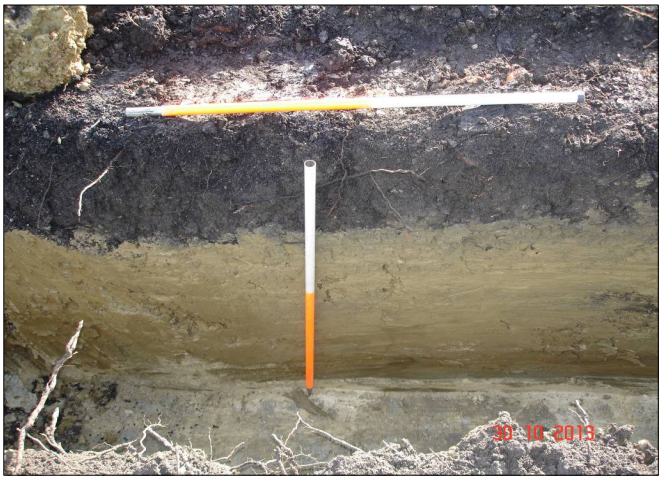
Avon Archaeology Limited
November 2013

PLATES

1 Composite panorama showing the Phase 1 site (six houses) prior to commencement of groundworks, taken from the extreme south-western corner. The view pans round from north-west (left) to north-east (right). The Phase 2 site, of the remaining three houses, lies to the north-east beyond the white hoarding in the background.

2 Trench 1 at full depth, 1.7m below ground level, at its south-western end. View of south-east facing section.

3 South-western section of Trench 1 completed. View to south-west.



4 North-west facing section in Trench 1, taken 8m from its south-west end, showing the topsoil layer (100) lying directly on top of natural clay (102). Scale 1x1m.

5 Wall (103) in plan, seen towards the north-eastern end of Trench 1.

6 Trench 2 completed, view to south-east.

7 South-east facing section in Trench 3 close to its junction with Trench 4, showing topsoil (100), subsoil (101), and natural clay (102).

8 South-east facing section in Trench 3 showing section through wall (103). South-western face appears intact. Scales 2x1m

9 Trench 3 completed, view to south-west.

10 North-west facing section at south-western end of of Trench 9 showing section through wall (103). The sawdust line running from the horizontal scale marks the intended line of Trench 10, coincidentally taking virtually the same line as the wall. Scales 2 x 1m.

11 Composite panoramic view of the Phase 1 house foundations completed, taken from the extreme north-west corner. The view pans round from north-east (left) to south-east (right).