

Mercian Archaeology

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*Archaeological Watching Brief
on the Line of the Droitwich Canal Link*



*An Archaeological Watching Brief on
the Proposed Route of the Droitwich
Canal Link, Worcestershire*

A Report for Halcrow UK on behalf of British Waterways

June 2006

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Project: PJ 163

WSM 35093

***Mercian Archaeology** undertake archaeological projects across much of the West Midlands and the Welsh Marches. **We specialise in Historic Building Recording and Analysis.** We also undertake archaeological watching-briefs, evaluation and excavation, desk-based assessment, historic landscape assessment and osteological analysis. We now also carry out historic reconstruction and can produce illustrations for publication, website or interpretative panels.*

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1. Project Background

1.1. Location of the Site

The proposed route of the new Droitwich Canal link runs from the River Salwarpe to the north of Droitwich town centre (NGR SO 900 633) in the west, to the Worcester and Birmingham Canal to the east of Droitwich, close to Hanbury Wharf, which lies on the northern side of the B 4090 Hanbury Road (Figure 1). The test-pits were excavated along the proposed route of the canal and the locations are shown in Figure 2.

1.2. Project Details

Mercian Archaeology were commissioned by Halcrow UK on behalf of British Waterways to undertake an archaeological watching brief on a series of test-pits excavated along the proposed line of the Droitwich Canal link.

Worcestershire County Council Archaeological Service monitored a series of 10 trial trenches along the line of the proposed canal link in May 2005. These determined that there was no significant evidence to suggest settlement activity within the immediate vicinity of the trenches. However, the work also concluded that the trial trenching did not represent an adequate sample to categorically state that there was no transitional Mesolithic activity within the development area. Archaeological work at Impney Farm (NGR SO 9060 7670) less than 500 metres to the north of the line of the proposed canal link, identified a pollen sequence dating to the Mesolithic period, preserved in a peat bog. Analysis of this indicated that the area was being cleared of woodland from around the 7th millennium BC and there were indications that people were possibly experimenting with small-scale cereal cultivation by this time (Williams *et al* 2005).

The further test-pits excavated during this project (Test-pits 11-17) were recorded primarily to add to the results of the earlier archaeological work.

1.3. Reasons for the Watching Brief

A watching brief is defined as: -

A formal programme of observation and investigation conducted during any operation carried out for non-archaeological reasons. This will be in a specified area on land, inter-tidal zone or underwater, where there is a possibility that archaeological deposits may be disturbed or destroyed (IFA 2001).

A watching brief was proposed in order that a record of any archaeological remains or deposits encountered during excavations associated with the development may be made and

placed into context using our current archaeological knowledge of the area. The work also allowed a record to be made of naturally derived deposits.

2. Methods and Process

2.1. Project Specification

- ❑ The project fieldwork conforms to the Standard and Guidance for an Archaeological Watching Brief (IFA 2001).
- ❑ The archive conforms to the standards and guidelines established by the Archaeological Data Service.
- ❑ The project conforms to a proposal and detailed specification produced by Mercian Archaeology (2006).
- ❑ Mercian Archaeology adhere to the service practice and health and safety policy as contained within the Mercian Archaeology Service Manual (Williams 2003)

2.2. Aims of the Project

The watching brief aimed to:

- ❑ Use the results of the monitoring to produce a report highlighting: -
 1. The survival and location of any archaeological deposits.
 2. Make an analysis and interpretation of all identified natural and cultural deposits
- ❑ Based on the above, establish the significance, survival, condition and period of any archaeological remains and place them within context at local, regional or national level where relevant.

3. The Documentary Research

3.1. The Topography

The site lies partially on the floodplain of the River Salwarpe, where the deposits are peat alluvial gley soils. Elsewhere, stagnogleys argillic brown earths overlie the solid geology of Mercia Mudstone (formerly Keuper Marl) and drift deposits of sand and gravel belonging to the third terrace of the River Severn (Beard et al 1986).

3.2. A Brief Historic Overview

The development site has been the subject of a desk-based assessment (Woodiwiss 2003) and the following paragraphs offer a brief insight into the background of the project.

The site of the proposed development is close to the town of Droitwich where extensive archaeological remains dating from the Iron Age onwards have been recorded during archaeological work over many decades. The town has been a salt-production centre from at least the late-Iron Age, when the natural brine streams that flow beneath the town were first exploited. Salt has supported the economy of the town at least until the early 20th century, both as a saleable commodity and as a healing property in the leisure/ health boom of the late 19th century, when Droitwich became a spa town. The Droitwich Canals (Droitwich Navigation and Droitwich Junction Canal) were a direct result of this salt industries longevity, the transport system replacing an earlier network of salt roads. The Navigation Canal (also known as the Barge Canal) opened in 1771 linking Droitwich Spa to the River Severn at Hawford Mill and the the Droitwich Junction Canal was not opened until 1854 making it one of the last canals built in the period of canal mania (www.britishwaterways.co.uk/droitwich). Inevitably, improvements in the fabric of the road network and the coming of the railway during the mid-late 19th century, led to a decline in the canal system and transport by canal became economically unrealistic considering the alternatives. The decline continued into the 20th century and the canal was finally abandoned in 1939 (Woodiwiss 2003).

The Droitwich Canals Trust was formed in 1973 and began to work towards the restoration of the canal. The recent elevated interest in canal and industrial heritage, especially noticeable in conjunction with modern living and leisure, has resulted in the ongoing project to restore the Droitwich canals and make a navigable link with the Worcester and Birmingham Canal and the River Severn.

3.3. A Brief Archaeological Overview

An archaeological desk-based assessment was undertaken on the proposed route of the canal link and archaeological sites within the vicinity ranging from Mesolithic activity to post-medieval structures were highlighted (Woodiwiss 2003). This requires little further comment here.

Archaeological work at Impney Farm over the last 7 years has raised the possibility that the Mesolithic inhabitants of the area were experimenting with domesticating crops. Prehistoric flint tools have also been found close to the site and the ceramic finds suggest later Roman and medieval activity in the area (WSM 72908; WSM 31577; WSM 28772; WSM 07108).

Further prehistoric activity has been identified, for example, to the west of Westfields Farm (WSM 33882). Later Roman activity was also evidenced; for example, the line of the modern Hanbury Road closely follows a Roman road in this area (WSM 30584). Evidence for Anglo-Saxon activity is Lacking, but later medieval sites and findspots are abundant, for example, possible medieval settlement at Droitwich Rugby Club (WSM 04098).

The archaeological work carried out by Worcestershire County Council Archaeological Service on test-pits 1 –10 identified only scatters of post-medieval pottery, but highlighted organic deposits, which may contain evidence of earlier climate, land-use and subsidence (Sworn, 2005; WSM 34367).

4. The Watching Brief

4.1. The Fieldwork Methodology

The watching brief was undertaken on 5th and 6th June 2006.

The site photography was carried out using digital format. A 1-metre scale was used where possible.

Proforma Record Forms were used to record the site stratigraphy in tandem with site notes to produce the final record contained within this report.

The methodology adopted and the favourable working conditions meant that the aims and objectives of the brief could be fully met and the fieldwork was successfully concluded.

4.2. The Results

The watching brief was carried out on seven excavated test-pits aligned along the proposed route of the Droitwich Canal link, in pre-determined locations. Six of the seven pits were excavated by JCB and the remaining pit was excavated by hand. The pits were excavated by White Young Green Environmental as part of a scheme of geotechnical investigation. Richard Cherrington monitored the work for Mercian Archaeology.

Natural undisturbed parent material was seen in all test-pits, observed variously between 0.20 to 2.70 metres below the present ground surface.

The general stratigraphic sequence across the site was a 20 centimetre thick layer of topsoil overlying a subsoil, naturally formed layers below and the parent material (natural). There were no archaeological features observed.

The test-pits monitored were numbers 11 to 17 and the results are shown in tabulated form below. The location of the test-pits is shown in Figure 2.

Trial-pit 11

The solid geology (reworked Triassic Mercia Mudstone) was encountered at a depth of 2.00m below the present ground surface. No features of archaeological significance were identified, and no artefacts were recovered. Organic material was noted in contexts 1103, 1104 and 1105.

Deposit Summary

Context/ feature number	Context/ feature description	Depth of deposit	Context/ feature type
1100	Brown sandy clayey loam	GL to 0.20m	Topsoil
1101	Brown/grey clay with occasional gravel	0.20 to 0.60m	Subsoil
1102	Grey clay	0.60 to 0.80m	Deposit
1103	Dark brown organic clay	0.80 to 1.00m	Deposit
1104	Black fibrous peat	1.00 to 1.70mm	Deposit
1105	Grey slightly organic clay	1.70 to 2.00mm	Deposit
1106	Reddish brown clay and gravel (Grade V reworked Mercia Mudstone)	2.00m to bottom of pit at 3.50m	Solid geology

Trial-pit 12

The solid geology (reworked Triassic Mercia Mudstone) was encountered at a depth of 2.20m below the present ground surface. No features of archaeological significance were identified, and no artefacts were recovered. Organic material was identified in context 1203 (peat).

Deposit Summary

Context/ feature number	Context/ feature description	Depth of deposit	Context/ feature type
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	description		
1200	Brown clayey loam with occasional gravel	0.20m	Topsoil
1201	Brown clay	0.50m	Subsoil
1202	Grey clay with occasional gravel	0.80m	Deposit
1203	Black/grey fibrous peat with occasional gravel	1.20m	Deposit
1204	Grey clay	1.50m	Deposit
1205	Reddish brown/mottled grey clay and gravel (Grade V reworked Mercia Mudstone)	2.20m to bottom of pit at 2.80m	Solid geology

Trial-pit 13

The solid geology (reworked Triassic Mercia Mudstone) was encountered at a depth of 0.90m below the present ground surface. No features of archaeological significance were identified, and no artefacts were recovered.

Deposit Summary

Context/ feature number	Context/ feature description	Depth of deposit	Context/ feature type
1300	Reddish-brown clayey loam with occasional gravel	GL to 0.20m	Topsoil
1301	Brown clay with occasional gravel	0.20 to 0.90m	Natural subsoil
1302	Reddish brown/mottled grey clay and gravel (Grade IV de-structured Mercia Mudstone)	0.90 to 1.30m at bottom of test-pit	Solid geology

Trial-pit 14

The solid geology (reworked Triassic Mercia Mudstone) was encountered at a depth of 2.00m below the present ground surface. No features of archaeological significance were identified, and no artefacts were recovered. Organic content was noted in context 1403.

Deposit Summary

Context/ feature number	Context/ feature description	Depth of deposit	Context/ feature type
1400	Dark brown sandy clayey loam with modern debris (made ground)	GL to 0.3m	Topsoil
1401	Brown clay with occasional gravel and cobbles	0.30 to 1.20m	Natural subsoil
1402	Grey clay	1.20 to 1.60m	Deposit
1403	Grey brown organic clay	1.60 to 2.00m	Deposit
1404	Reddish brown clay and gravel (Grade III weathered Mercia Mudstone)	2.00 to 3.00 at bottom of test-pit	Solid geology

Trial-pit 15

The solid geology (reworked Triassic Mercia Mudstone) was encountered at a depth of 1.40m below the present ground surface. No features of archaeological significance were identified, and no artefacts were recovered. Organic silt was identified in context 1503.

Deposit Summary

Context/ feature number	Context/ feature description	Depth of deposit	Context/ feature type
1500	Brown sandy clayey loam occasional gravel (made ground)	GL to 0.2m	Topsoil
1501	Brown sandy clay	0.20 to 0.50m	Natural subsoil
1502	Reddish-brown clay	0.50 to 0.90m	Deposit
1503	Dark brown organic silt	0.90 to 1.00m	Deposit
1504	Grey clay with gravel	1.00 to 1.40m	Deposit
1505	Reddish-grey clay and gravel (Grade IV de-structured Mercia)	1.40 to 2.20m at bottom of test-pit	Solid geology

	Mudstone)		
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Trial-pit 16

The solid geology (reworked Triassic Mercia Mudstone) was encountered at a depth of 2.70m below the present ground surface. No features of archaeological significance were identified, and no artefacts were recovered. Organics were present in contexts 1602, 1603 and 1604.

Deposit Summary

Context/ feature number	Context/ feature description	Depth of deposit	Context/ feature type
1600	Brown sandy clayey loam with occasional gravel	GL to 0.3m	Topsoil
1601	Reddish-brown gravelly clay	0.3 to 0.70m	Natural subsoil
1602	Grey organic clay with gravel	0.70 to 1.30m	Deposit
1603	Dark brown fibrous peat with occasional gravel	1.30 to 1.70m	Deposit
1604	Grey organic clay with gravel	1.70 to 2.70m	Deposit
1605	Reddish brown clay and gravel (Grade IV de-structured Mercia Mudstone)	2.70 to 3.50 metres at bottom of test-pit	Solid geology

Trial-pit 17

The natural was encountered 20 centimetres below the present ground surface. No features of archaeological significance were identified, and no artefacts were recovered.

Deposit Summary

Context/ feature number	Context/ feature description	Depth of deposit	Context/ feature type
1700	Dark brown sandy clayey loam	GL to 0.20m	Topsoil

1701	Reddish-brown gravely clay (Grade III weathered Mercia Mudstone)	0.20 to 0.60m at the bottom of test-pit	Weathered natural
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5. Discussion of the Physical and Documentary Evidence

The watching brief determined that there were no significant cut archaeological features or deposits within the test-pits, although organic deposits noted within test pits 11, 12, 14, 15 and 16 may contain invaluable information regarding local paleoenvironments, land-use, management and subsidence.

The subsoil across the area is likely to have been formed mainly by natural processes, as the tract of land across which the proposed canal link route runs, lies in an area of mainly pasture, which due to its low level on the floodplain has probably been utilised as permanent grassland since clearance. The soil may have, however, developed with some input from man. Manuring and watering would have resulted in a more productive and fertile grassland and periodic ploughing has probably also contributed to its make-up.

Peat deposits were noted in test-pits 11, 12 and 16, indicating that the archaic landscape in this area had been periodically boggy, the peat being formed in acidic and anoxic conditions, which prevents total decay of plant material. These deposits may be useful to archaeological research as they can determine climate change and may preserve evidence of human involvement in landscape management. The deposits are unlikely to represent deposits within palaeochannels, but rather discreet areas of bog, marsh and episodic flooding.

A wide range of biological data may also be recovered from the organic content in silts and clay, which again may be used to recreate palaeoenvironments and supplement the archaeological record of cultural material. These deposits would have been laid down during periods of flooding.

The lack of cultural material recovered during the watching brief cannot be taken for granted as definitive evidence for lack of human activity in the area. The mechanism of digging the test-pits is not conducive to identifying small artefacts, such as Mesolithic microliths, which often can only be retrieved during sieving.

6. Conclusion

An archaeological watching brief was carried out on seven test-pits along the line of the proposed Droitwich Canal link. The results demonstrated that there are discreet pockets of buried organic silts and peat across the proposed development site, which may contain evidence for past climates, land management and subsistence at a local level. There were no cut archaeological features identified and no artefacts recovered during the monitoring, although the nature of a watching brief often means that smaller artefacts may be removed without being noticed.

7. Acknowledgements

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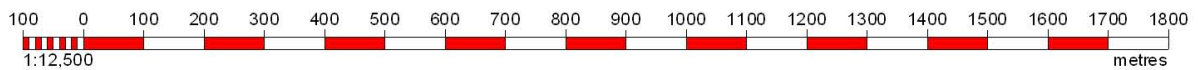
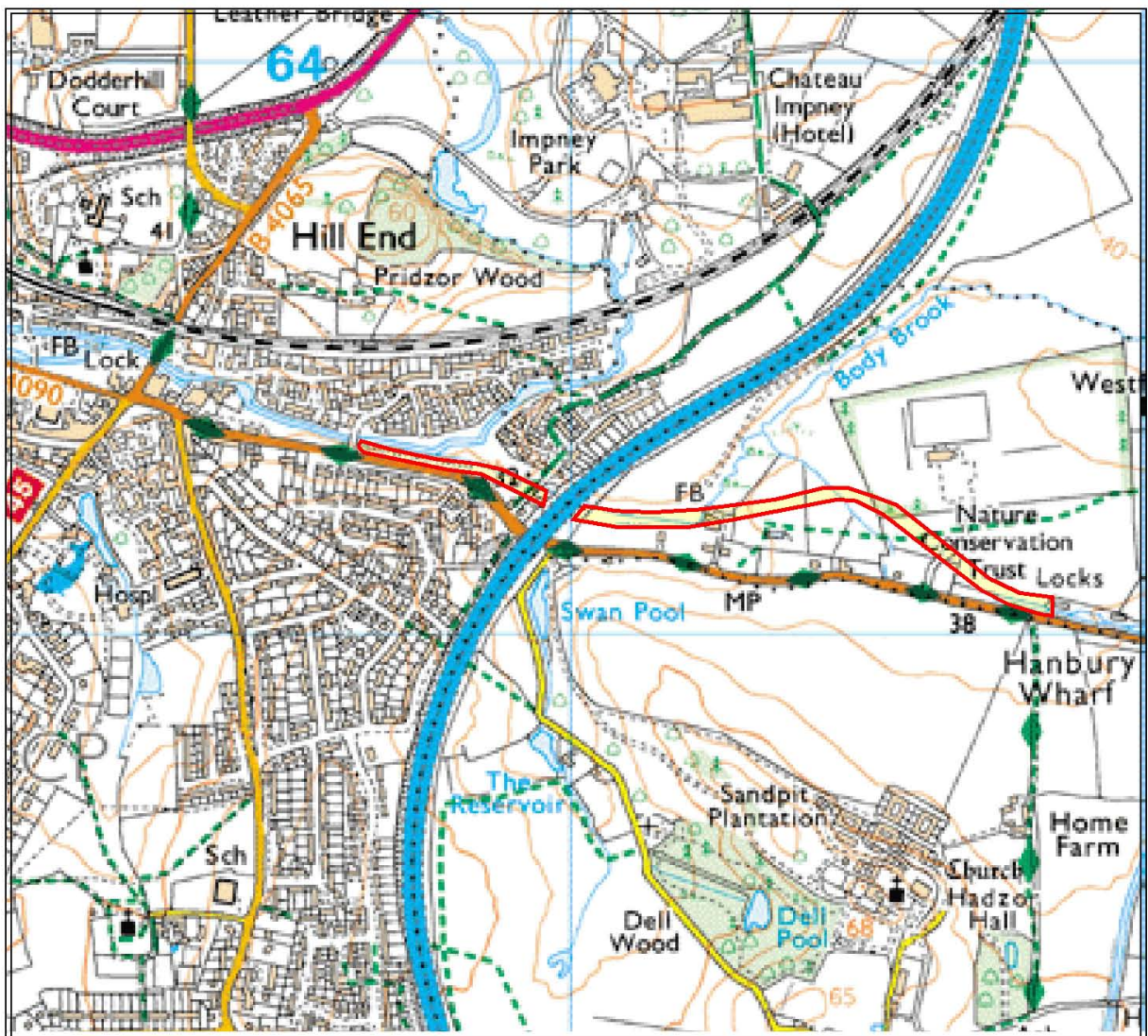
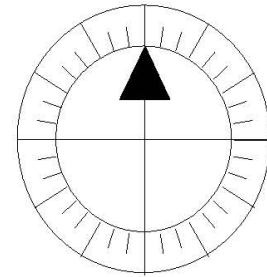
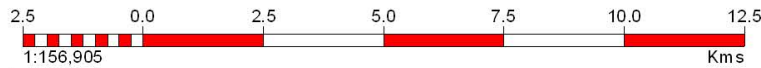
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Figure 1: Location of the Site



Location of the Site at Droitwich

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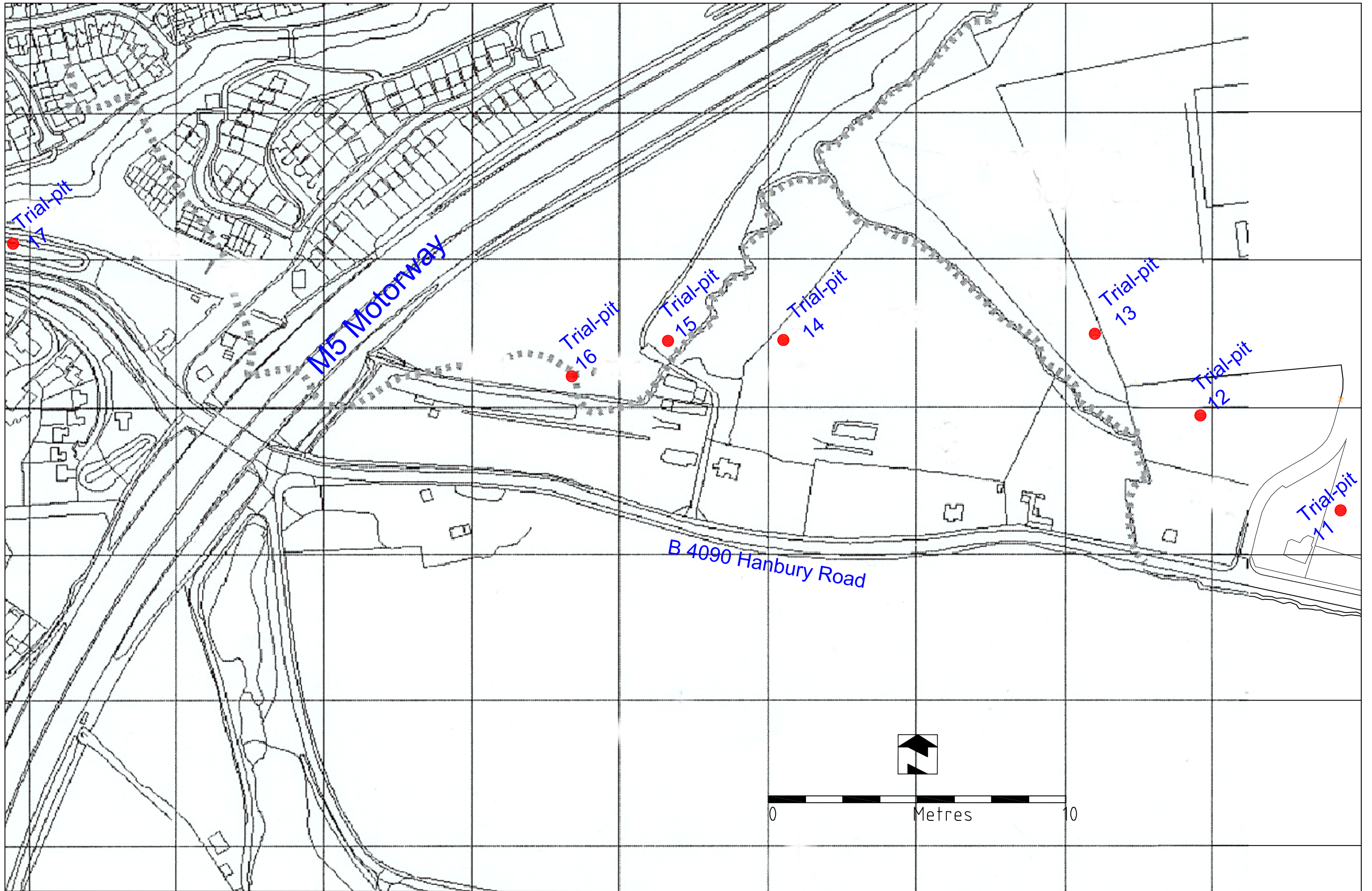


Figure 2: Test-pit Locations