

*An Archaeological Watching Brief on  
the Site of Compensation Reedbeds at  
Salwarpe, Worcestershire*

*A Report for Halcrow UK on behalf of British Waterways*

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**Project: PJ 198**

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Telephone / Fax: 01905 420087

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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, 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. As part of the scheme British Waterways undertook to provide compensation reedbeds, at a site close to the north of Salwarpe village (NGR 387361, 262100; Figure 1).

## 1.2. Project Details

Mercian Archaeology were commissioned by Halcrow UK on behalf of British Waterways to undertake an archaeological watching brief during the excavation of compensation reedbeds, which were designed to compensate for loss of wetland habitat when the canal is dredged during the restoration process. The new reedbeds, when established, would provide wetland habitat for bird species such as the reed warbler, reed bunting, bitterns, roosting starlings, waders, rails, crakes and water fowl.

The new beds were located in an area of former rough pasture adjacent to the River Salwarpe, close to existing established reedbeds. The layout of the new beds is shown in Figure 2.

Prior to the commencement of ground moving works and the excavation to provide the artificial water channels for the new reedbeds, a programme of archaeological investigation was carried out. This was undertaken because the site lies within an area of possible prehistoric activity focused on the River Salwarpe. A geophysical survey was carried out on the site by GSB Prospection Ltd in 2006; this indicated that the site was mainly underlain by alluvial and geological clay, though two areas of possible significance were identified (GSB 2006): -

1. A sand / gravel bank, which may have provided a focus of activity on dryer ground (i.e. temporary camps, flint knapping sites, observation of game, fishing etc), or may represent an island within an area dominated by braided water channels (palaeochannels from the late glacial or early post-glacial period). These would have flowed through the valley before the river reverted to its present course.
2. A possible pond adjacent to the proposed bank.

An auger survey carried out by Worcestershire Archaeological Service identified the sequence of deposits at the site, which broadly complimented the geophysical survey. This concluded that there were pockets of organic material within the alluvial clays (WHEAS 2006), which may represent dryer areas between palaeochannels, such as reedswamp or wetland scrub,

which have been preserved by the layers of alluvium laid down by floodwaters during wetter periods.

### 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 formation of the reedbed profile may be made and placed into context using our current archaeological knowledge of the area. The work also allowed further 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 Watching Brief

### 3.1. The Fieldwork Methodology

The watching brief was undertaken during September 2007.

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 weather conditions during the period of the watching brief were adverse, with torrential rain quickly flooding the excavated areas; visibility was often poor too, with mist lying over the river valley for long periods. However, the methodology adopted with the cooperation of the groundworks contractors, meant that the aims and objectives of the brief could be met and the fieldwork was successfully concluded.

### 3.2. The Results

The watching brief was carried out during the excavation of a new reedbed profile, which was located within a low-lying area of rough pasture adjacent to a meander in the River Salwarpe. The excavation was carried out by a pair of 360 mechanical excavators, with spoil carried away to the adjacent tipping area by dumpers.

The excavation comprised a series of long narrow curved ‘fingers’ radiating from a central amorphous shaped pond area; differences in depth of excavation was used to create steps within the area, which were designed to allow wildlife species ingress and access to the finished waterlogged area. The excavated area is shown in Figure 2 and plates 1-4.

Excavation revealed a topsoil [100] of around 30-centimetres thick; this was a mid to dark brown blocky silty-clay containing rare round and sub-round stones. Occasional brick fragments and charcoal deposits were also noted.

A 30 to 40-centimetre layer of subsoil was identified below [101]. This was derived from alluvium, but had probably been modified by ploughing during the past. The soil was a light-brown silty clay with rare charcoal flecks, some fine roots, rare small rounded stones and occasional inclusion of brick and broken land drain fragments. This layer had been cut through by an extensive pattern of land drains of two types; orange hand made ceramic pipes and drain fills of gravel. Both types are likely to date from the past century or so.

Sealed below the subsoil was a thick layer of sterile grey silty alluvial clay [102]. The clay was generally sterile, with only a rare small round stone within the matrix.

There were no archaeological features, deposits or artefacts encountered during the watching brief.

## 4. Comment

The watching brief determined that there were no cut archaeological features or deposits within the area of the new reedbeds.

The evidence suggests that the area has been subject to episodic waterlogging over a long period, making it unsuitable for permanent settlement. An previous auger survey and a geophysical survey on the site identified the possibility of areas of dryer ground within the floodplain, suggesting there were once elevated tracts of land between braided channels. However, the excavations for the new reedbeds were probably not deep enough to encounter such evidence; the auger survey carried out prior to the watching brief (WHEAS 2006) identified organic deposits (peat) at between 0.65 metres and 1.40 metres below the surface, though this appears to have been localised as the deposit did not appear in adjacent auger holes. This supports a braided palaeochannel theory, but does not in itself prove human activity in the area.

The evidence from the upper levels indicate that the land has been used for rough grazing with periodic ploughing over a long period of time, with a build up of some 40-centimetres of subsoil below the present topsoil.

## 5. Conclusion

*An archaeological watching brief was carried out during the excavation of compensation reedbeds on the floodplain of the River Salwarpe, close to Salwarpe village. The work encountered no archaeological deposits, features or artefacts within the excavated areas. The evidence suggests that the area has been subject to episodic flooding over a long period, indicating that it has always been unsuitable for permanent settlement, though evidence from a previous auger survey and geophysical survey, suggest that during the past, the river may have ran in braided channels, with channels drying up to be replaced by other channels, as the water took the easiest route through the valley. This type of terrain is often associated with the hunters and gatherers of the Mesolithic period, who would have used the dryer islands within the terrain for temporary camps, observation places and for fishing platforms, though there was no evidence for Mesolithic activity noted during the watching brief.*

## 6. Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank the Simon Griffin of Halcrow UK, David Viner of British Waterways and John Bourke of Ove Arup. Thanks are also due to site foreman Leo Taylor and James Frew the site agent.

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Plate 1: The new reedbeds area under construction, view to the north-west



Plate 2: The general soil profile (scale 1-metre)





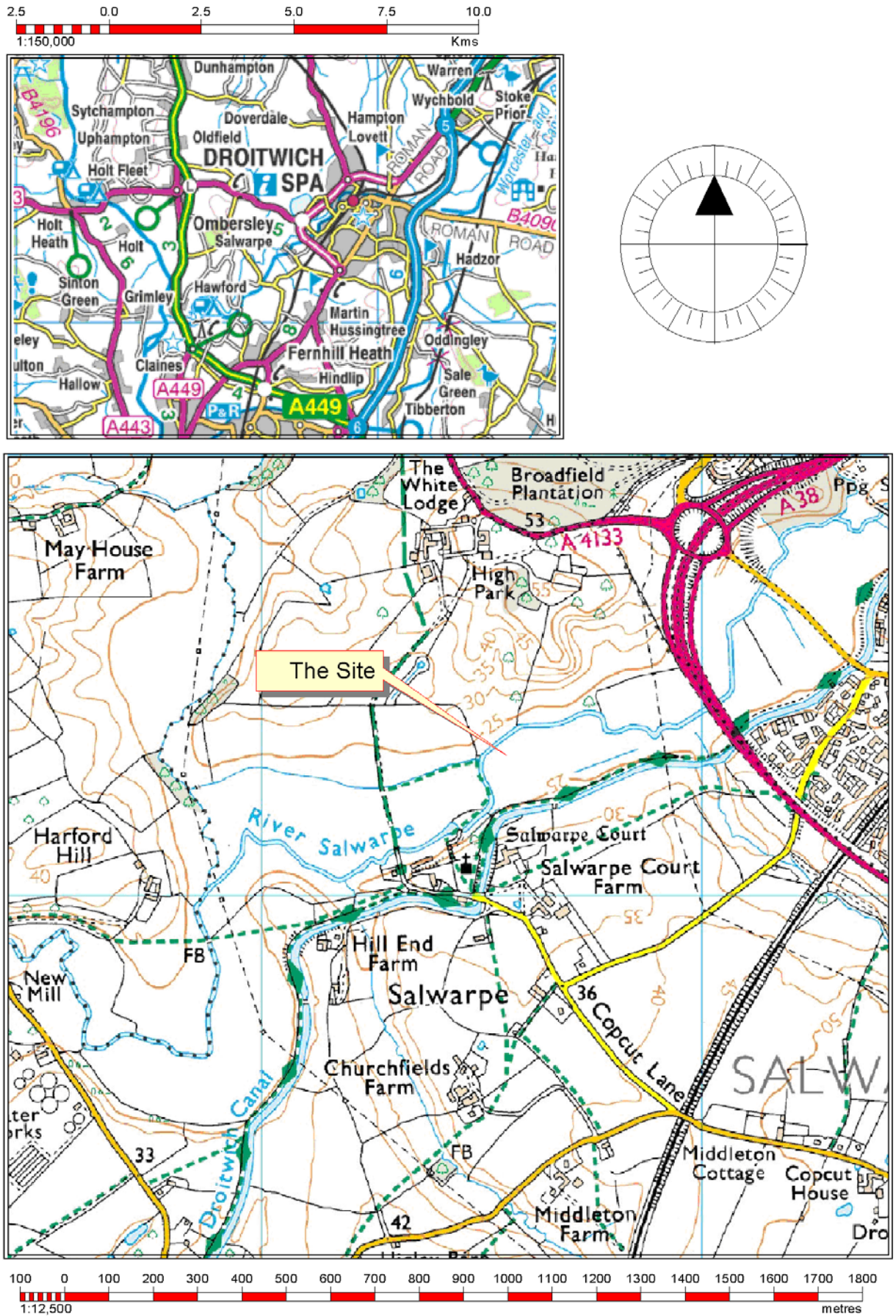
Plate 3: Waterlogged nature of the site



Plate 4: Stone rubble land drain (scale 2-metres)



# Figure 1: Location of the Site

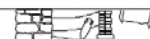


Location of the Site at Salwarpe (Arrowed)

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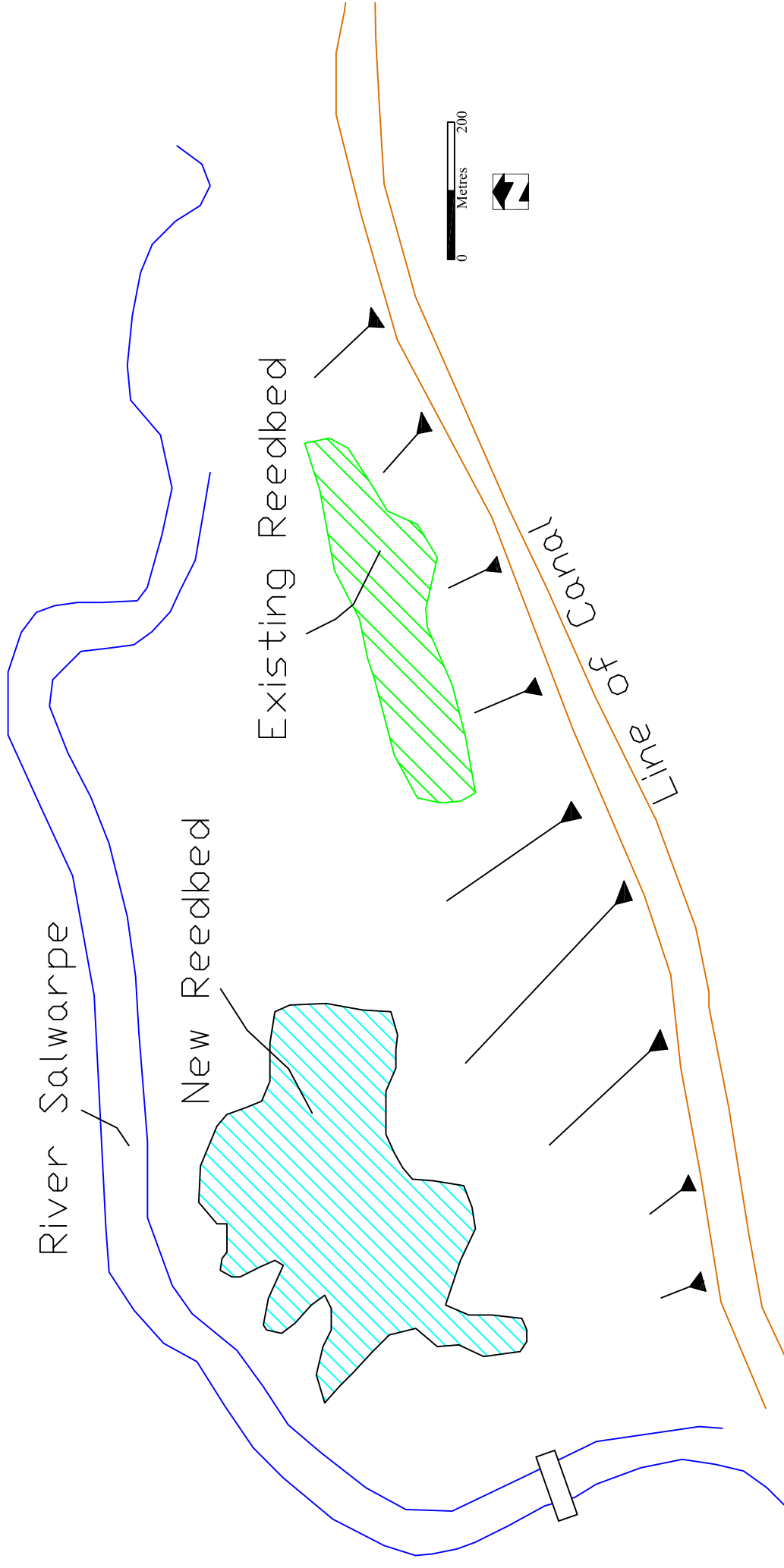


Figure 2: Location of the Reedbeds