

ARCHAEOLOGICAL
SERVICES
DURHAM UNIVERSITY

on behalf of
English Heritage

Belsay Hall Play Area
Belsay
Northumberland

archaeological watching brief

report 6017
September 2023



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1. Summary

The project

- 1.1 This report presents the results of an archaeological watching brief conducted for a development at Belsay Hall, Northumberland. The works were part of the Belsay Awakes Project and comprised the excavation of the monitoring of groundworks associated with the creation of a retaining wall and play equipment footings within an area of woodland to the west of Belsay Castle.
- 1.2 The works were commissioned by English Heritage and conducted by Archaeological Services Durham University.

Results

- 1.3 A sandstone culvert was identified during ground reduction at the west end of the site.
- 1.4 No archaeological features were recorded during the rest of the associated works, and no artefacts were recovered.

Recommendations

- 1.5 No further scheme of archaeological works is recommended in relation to this development.

2. Project background

Location (Figure 1)

- 2.1 The site is located at Belsay Castle, Belsay, Northumberland (NGR centre: NZ 08417 78602). It covers an area of approximately 0.38 ha. To the west and north are fields of pasture, to the east are Belsay Castle and precinct and to the south are woodland and quarry gardens.

Development

- 2.2 The development comprises the construction of a retaining wall and play area in woodland to the west of Belsay Castle.

Objective

- 2.3 The objective of the scheme was to record any archaeological resource that was uncovered during groundworks.

Research objectives

- 2.4 The updated regional research framework *North-East Regional Research Framework for the Historic Environment* (NERRF 2.0) (<https://researchframeworks.org/nerf/> accessed 24-08-2023) contains an agenda for archaeological research in the region. The scheme of works was designed to address agenda items:

Medieval

- MD14: How can we better understand the castles beyond viewing them as defensive sites?
- MD15: How can we better understand decline and afterlife of castles?
- MD17: How can we better understand changing settlement patterns in north-east England?

Post-medieval

- Pmed2: How can we better understand the creation and maintenance of social identities in the post-medieval period?
- Pmed3: How can archaeology help us understand life on the Anglo-Scottish border in the post-medieval period?

Specification

- 2.5 The works have been undertaken in accordance with a Written Scheme of Investigation provided by Archaeological Services Durham University (reference 22310rev 010323) and approved by the planning authority.

Dates

- 2.6 Fieldwork was undertaken between 22nd November 2021 and 5th December 2022. This report was prepared for September 2023.

Personnel

- 2.7 Fieldwork was conducted by Jeffrey Lowrey, Jenny Richards and Ronan O'Donnell. This report was prepared by Jeffrey Lowrey, with illustrations by Janine Watson. The Project Manager was Jamie Armstrong.

Archive/OASIS

- 2.8 The site code is **BPA23**, for **Belsay Play Area 2023**. The archive is currently held by Archaeological Services Durham University and will be transferred to English Heritage Trust Archaeology Store at Helmsley in due course. Archaeological Services Durham University is registered with the **Online Access to the Index of archaeological investigations project (OASIS)**. The OASIS ID number for this project is **archaeol3-518649**.

3. Landuse, topography and geology

- 3.1 At the time of these works, the development area comprised woodland.
- 3.2 The area was sloping from 144m OD at the west to 138.6m OD at the east.
- 3.3 The underlying solid geology of the area comprises Carboniferous sandstone of the Stanmore Formation, which are overlain by Devensian diamicton till formed in the Quaternary period (British Geological Survey 2020).

4. Historical and archaeological background

- 4.1 The following information is taken from previous reports on archaeological work at Belsay, including a desk-based assessment on the paddock conducted by Archaeological Services (2022b).

Previous archaeological works

- 4.2 Test pits excavated in advance of the upgrading of lightning protection in 2015 identified medieval and probable medieval remains. As part of the 2017 Belsay Awakes Project a detailed landscape survey was completed; this included the study of aerial photographs, LiDAR imagery, information on the Northumberland HER and the results of a GPR survey (Linford *et al.* 2017; Oakey 2017). The LiDAR and GPR detected a rectangular linear feature within the proposed play area, interpreted as a continuation of the castle enclosure wall. Geophysical survey between the coach house and kennels suggested a series of linear features were present. The work also identified earthwork features relating to the medieval village.
- 4.3 An architectural investigation of the Tower House and Castle Court was undertaken in 2017, including some commentary on the Stables/Coach house and Kennels (Historic England 2017). Excavations around the castle at this time included a trench in the walled orchard east of the kennels, a trench to the south of the coach house and a trench against the coach house west wall exterior (Historic England 2018).
- 4.4 From 2019 an evaluation and subsequent strip, map and record was undertaken by Archaeological Services in areas to the west and south of the Stables/Coach house and within the walled garden to the north of the castle (Archaeological Services 2019a; 2021a). These works found a ha-ha wall to the west of the Stables/Coach house which formed the edge of a formal garden. Work at the south end of the Stables also found a large wall extending to the south.
- 4.5 A further archaeological watching brief was recently completed on groundworks within and around the Stables/Coach house, and also with the castle precinct. This work found evidence for a medieval corn drier within the Stables/Coach house, and

also several post-medieval walls extending to the west of the building (Archaeological Services 2023).

The prehistoric and Roman periods (up to 5th century AD)

- 4.6 Mesolithic worked flints have been recovered from the area, and an early Neolithic occupation site is known near Belsay village. Bronze Age activity is also known in the wider landscape, and several Iron Age settlements lie close to the study site. This settlement activity continued mainly undisturbed throughout the Roman period, although a small Roman fortlet, on the route of a suspected Roman road, is located near Slate Hill, to the south of Belsay Hall.

The medieval period (5th century to 1540)

- 4.7 Belsay parish was densely settled during the medieval period, with numerous small settlements spread across what is assumed to have been an extensively cultivated area. Border wars affected the area, with the main Pele tower of Belsay Castle constructed in the 14th century. This fortification is a three-storey Grade I listed building that was later expanded. The core of the deserted medieval village of Belsay is believed to lie to the south-west of the castle.

The post-medieval period (1541 to 1899)

- 4.8 The area was a rich agricultural district throughout the post-medieval era. Belsay Castle was occupied into the early 19th century, when the Hall was constructed and occupied. The castle was converted into a folly, standing in the substantial landscape park which was developed around the Hall, and the village of Belsay was moved to its present location, at some distance to the east of the main house. Both the stable/coach house and kennels are Grade II listed buildings. The stable/coach house is a multi-period structure with medieval walls at the base of the south and north gables. The kennels are 19th-century in date.

The modern period (1900 to present)

- 4.9 Belsay Hall was occupied by the Middleton family until 1962. The site is now administered by English Heritage.

5. The deposit sequence

Introduction

- 5.1 Groundworks associated with proposed retaining walls on the east side of the development area were monitored: these overlapped with ground works associated with the underpinning of the Coach House/Stables (Archaeological Services 2023). In addition, monitoring was undertaken of several clusters of foundations and areas of ground reduction for the installation of playground structures. Locations of these are shown on Figure 2.

Retaining wall area

- 5.2 These trenches were excavated to a depth of up to 0.8-2.5m below ground level (Photo 1). Bedrock [2501=2803], was identified at a depth of 0.3-1.5m, and this was overlain by a brown loam [2505: 0.68-1.5m deep] or a yellow sand and shattered bedrock deposit [2504: over 1.7m long by over 1.5m wide, between 0.14m and 0.2m deep]: similar deposits were found during the ground-reduction to the west of the Coach House/Stables (Archaeological Services 2023, 5). The natural deposits were overlain by an intermittent loose grey sandy clayey silt deposit [2506: 0.37m deep].

Overlying this was a dark grey loam topsoil [2500=2563=2800: 0.06-0.44m deep]. The area to the west of the Coach House/Stables was extensively rutted during previous enabling works to remove the trees: these were then buried by stockpiled soil during initial groundworks around the Coach House/Stables, and several such features were observed during the groundworks. No features of archaeological significance were identified and no artefacts were recovered.

Climbing frame area

- 5.3 The footings for the climbing frame were located on the north side of the site and varied in dimension between 1.0-1.6m long, by 1.0- 1.3m wide and between 0.14m and 1.6m deep (Photo 2). Natural bedrock [2501=2803] was identified at a depth of 0.4m below the ground surface. This was overlain by light grey-brown loam subsoil with crush sandstone inclusions [2564=2801: 0.2m deep]. This was broadly aligned north/south and was not identified in any other footings. Above this and across this area was topsoil [2500=2563=2800: 0.2m up to 0.3m deep]. No features of archaeological significance were identified and no artefacts were recovered.

Swings area

- 5.4 The footings were located at the west end of the site and were between 0.63m long by 0.65m and 1.1m long by 0.9m wide, between 0.27m and 1.1m deep. Natural bedrock [2501=2803], was identified at a depth of between 0.3m and 0.37m below the ground surface within two footings at the south-west of the cluster. This was overlain by subsoil [2564=2801: 0.2m deep]. Natural subsoil was not identified within the remaining swing footings: instead a mixed brown-grey sandy silty clay with frequent angular sandstone fragments [2802] was identified. This was the backfill of an evaluation trench from an earlier phase of archaeological works. Over [2564=2801] and [2802] was topsoil [2500=2563=2800: 0.3m deep]. No features of archaeological significance were identified and no artefacts were recovered.

Climbing cubes area

- 5.5 An area of ground reduction 6.2m long by 3.4m wide, between 0.12m and 0.5m deep was located at the west end of the site. Natural subsoil [2501=2803], was identified at a depth of between 0.12m and 0.5m below the ground surface. Cutting this was a north-west/south-east aligned trench [F2601=F2804: over 5m long by 0.8m wide, 0.35m deep] for a sandstone culvert [F2602=F2805; Photo 3]. This was overlain by subsoil [2564=2801: 0.4m deep] and topsoil [2500=2563=2800: 0.12m deep at the east and 0.5m deep at the west].

6. The artefacts

- 6.1 No artefacts were recovered.

7. The palaeoenvironmental evidence

- 7.1 No material suitable for palaeoenvironmental assessment was identified.

8. The archaeological resource

- 8.1 A sandstone culvert was identified during ground reduction at the west end of the site.
- 8.2 No archaeological features were recorded during the rest of the associated works, and no artefacts were recovered.

9. Recommendations

- 9.1 As no significant archaeological resource was identified, no further scheme of archaeological works is recommended in relation to this development.

10. Sources

- Archaeological Services 2019 *Belsay Hall, Belsay, Northumberland: archaeological evaluation*. Report **5091**, Archaeological Services Durham University
- Archaeological Services 2021 *Belsay Hall, Northumberland: post-excavation assessment*. Report **5420**, Archaeological Services Durham University
- Archaeological Services 2022 *Belsay Hall Paddock, Belsay, Northumberland: desk-based assessment*. Report **5732**, Archaeological Services Durham University
- Archaeological Services 2023 *Belsay Hall Drainage and coach house, Belsay, Northumberland: archaeological watching brief*. Report **5690**, Archaeological Services Durham University
- Historic England 2017 *Belsay Castle and Castle Courtyard, Belsay, Northumberland: an architectural investigation of the Tower House and Castle Court*. Historic England Research report **65-2017**
- Historic England 2018 *Belsay Castle, Northumberland: interim report on excavation results for Belsay Castle evaluation 2018*
- Linford, N, Linford, F & Payne, A, 2017 *Belsay Hall and Castle, Northumberland: report on geophysical surveys July and October 2016*. Historic England Research report **4-2017**
- Oakey, M, 2017 *Belsay Awakes: Historic England Contribution Landscape Survey Report*. Historic England Research report **48-2017**

Websites

www.bgs.ac.uk

<https://researchframeworks.org/nerf/>

Appendix 1: Data table

Table 1.1: Context data

No	Area	Description
2500	All	Topsoil
2501	All	Natural
F2502		Void
2503		Void
2504	Retaining wall	Yellow sand and sandstone horizon
2505	Retaining wall	Brown loam horizon
2506	Retaining wall	Grey horizon
F2507		Void
2508		Void
2509		Void
2563	All	Topsoil
2564	Climbing frame footings	Subsoil
2565		Void
F2601	Cubes	Cut of culvert
F2602	Cubes	Culvert
2800	All	Topsoil
2801	Cubes	Subsoil
2802	Swings	Backfill of previous evaluation trench
2803	All	Natural
F2804	Cubes	Cut of culvert
F2805	Cubes	Culvert

Appendix 2: Stratigraphic matrix

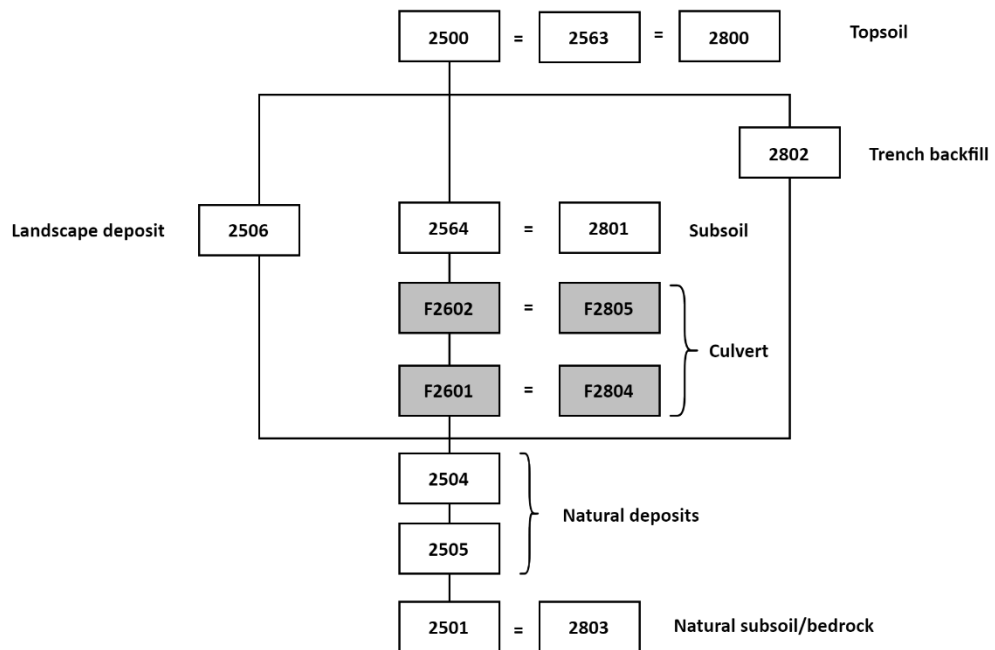




Photo 1: Retaining wall trench 6, looking south



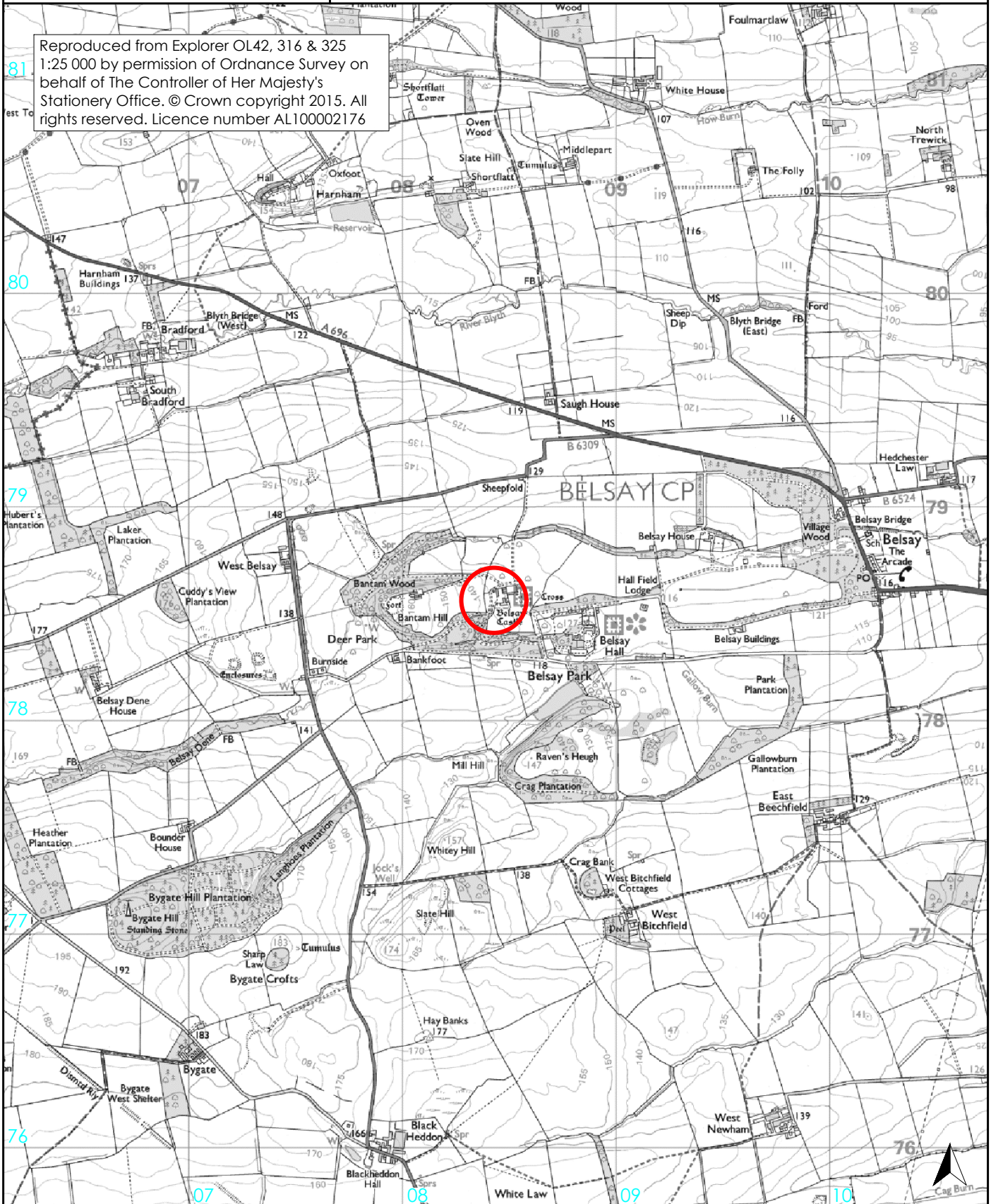
Photo 2: Climbing frame pit, looking north




Photo 3: Culvert [F2602], looking north

Figure 1: Site location

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 site location

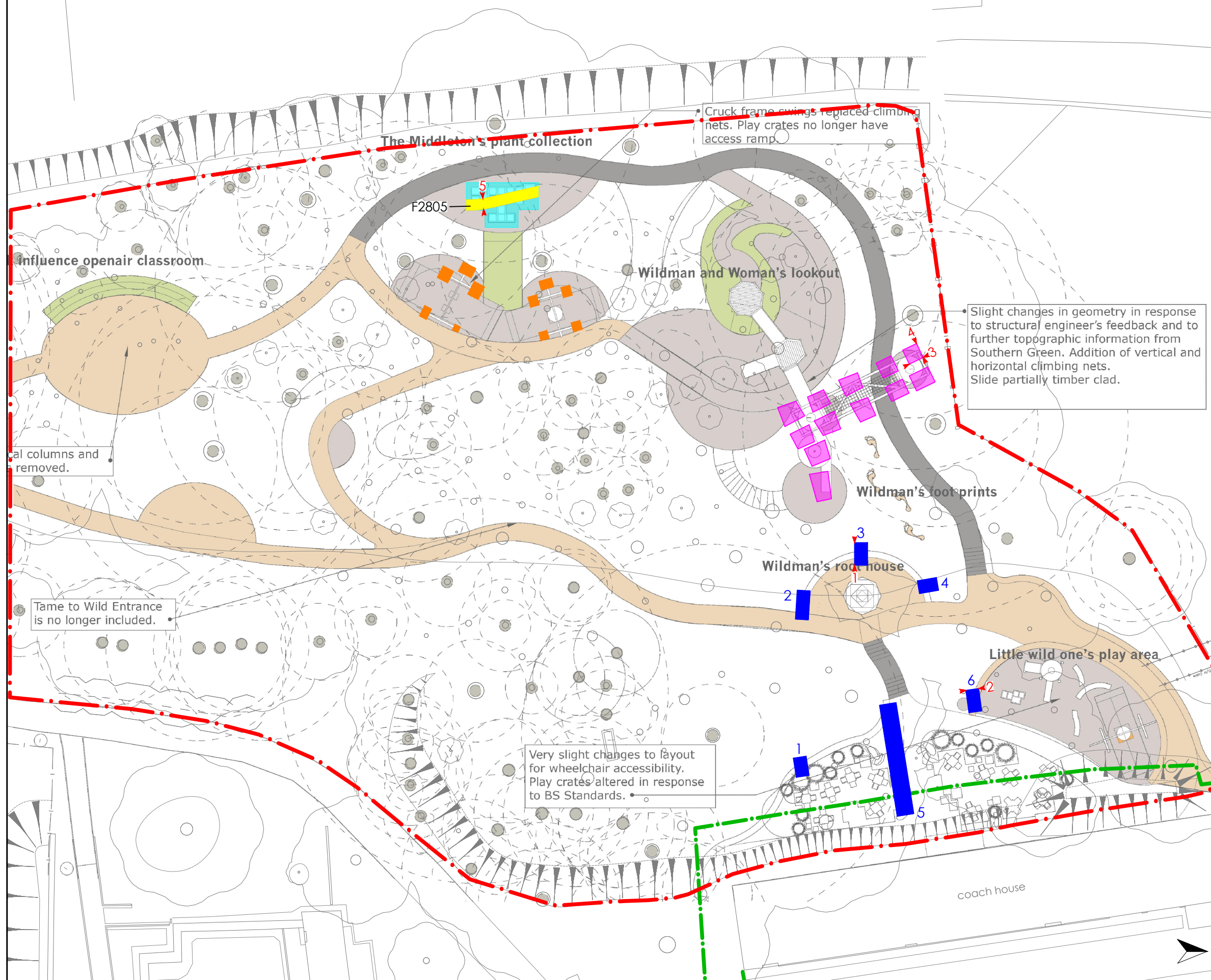
0  1km
scale 1:25 000 for A4 plot

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






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Figure 2: Location of archaeological watching brief



0 15m
scale 1:300 for A3 plot

-  area of monitoring
-  previously monitored area
-  section
-  retaining wall area
-  climbing frame
-  swings
-  cubes
-  culvert

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Figure 3: Plans and sections

