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ARCHAEOLOGICAL

S E R V I C E S

**Blenheim Palace Pleasure Garden,
Woodstock, Oxfordshire**

Archaeological Evaluation

by David Sánchez

Site Code: BWG21/99

(SP 4476 1566)

Blenheim Palace Pleasure Garden Woodstock, Oxfordshire

**An Archaeological Evaluation
for Blenheim Palace Heritage Foundation**

by David Sánchez

Thames Valley Archaeological Services Ltd

Site Code BWG 21/99

**January 2022
Revised February 2022**

Summary

Site name: Blenheim Palace Pleasure Garden, Woodstock, Oxfordshire

Grid reference: SP 4476 1566

Site activity: Archaeological Evaluation

Date and duration of project: 26th-28th January 2022

Project coordinator: Tim Dawson

Site supervisor: David Sánchez

Site code: BWG 21/29

Area of site: 1.64ha

Summary of results: The archaeological evaluation undertaken in the south-east corner of the kitchen gardens of Blenheim Palace revealed no features or finds of archaeological interest. A series of made ground deposits were recorded overlying the mudstone natural geology and are dated between 19th and 20th century. One field drain of 18th to 19th century along with modern services were the only features uncovered. The site is therefore considered to have no archaeological potential.

Location and reference of archive: The archive is presently held at Thames Valley Archaeological Services, Reading and will be deposited with Oxfordshire Museum Services in due course.

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|---------------------------|--------------------------|
| Report edited/checked by: | Steve Ford ✓ 31.01.22 |
| | Steve Preston ✓ 31.01.22 |

Blenheim Palace Pleasure Garden, Woodstock, Oxfordshire An Archaeological Evaluation

by David Sánchez

Report 21/99c

Introduction

This report documents the results of an archaeological field evaluation carried out in the Pleasure Garden located at Blenheim Palace Estate, Blenheim Palace, Woodstock (SP 44764 15655) (Fig. 1). The work was commissioned by Mr Matthew Neilson of Blenheim Estate Office, Blenheim Palace, Woodstock, OX20 1PP.

Planning consent is to be sought from West Oxfordshire district Council for development of the south-east corner of the walled Kitchen Garden within the Blenheim Palace complex. The development aims to introduce a small adventure play site to be called the Blenheim Palace Pleasure Garden which will include garden/landscape designs and a large water feature fitting with the Blenheim Estate.

Due to the potential disturbance of below ground archaeological features, a geophysical survey followed by an archaeological evaluation has been recommended to inform the planning application or further investigation. This is in accordance with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government's *National Planning Policy Framework* (NPPF 2021), and the Council's policies on archaeology.

This report refers only to the archaeological evaluation undertaken on the site with the results of the geophysical survey detailed in a separate report (Beaverstock 2021). The results of the geophysical survey have been used to identify targets for the trenching.

The field investigation was carried out to a specification approved by Mr Richard Oram, Lead Archaeologist of Oxfordshire County Archaeological Service, the archaeological adviser to the District. The fieldwork was undertaken by David Sánchez and Emily Gibson, between 26th and 28th January 2022 and the site code is BWG 21/99. The archive is presently held at Thames Valley Archaeological Services, Reading and will be deposited with Oxfordshire Museum Services in due course.

Location, topography and geology

Blenheim Palace and its parklands are situated directly west of Woodstock in Oxfordshire, 12km to the north-west of Oxford (Fig. 1). The site itself consists of an almost rectangular parcel of land located in the south-east corner of the kitchen gardens between the south internal wall and east and south external walls of the Walled Kitchen Garden of the Blenheim Palace Estate *c.* 500m south-east of the palace itself (Fig. 2). The site covers

1.64ha currently used for chicken coops with a number of small trees. The topography of the site is relatively flat at a height of *c.* 88m above Ordnance Datum (aOD) though it drops significantly down towards the south of the site to 82m aOD at the southern estate walls, and the underlying geology is mapped as Forest Marble Formation – Mudstone (BGS 1982) which was observed in the excavated trenches.

Archaeological background

The archaeological potential of the site has been highlighted in a desk-based assessment (St John-Brooks 2021). In summary, the Blenheim Palace Estate is a World Heritage site, and the area for the proposed development is located to the south-east of the Kitchen Gardens, beyond the listed walls. From a study of cartographic sources, this area beyond the inner and listed walls has been relatively untouched since the kitchen garden was built in the early part of the 18th century (work on the palace and gardens began in 1705–6 but took many years). This area remained an orchard until it was cleared in the early 1900s to make way for a scrubbed area for keeping chickens.

Although relatively little formal archaeological work has been carried out within the Blenheim estate, there is archaeological potential for a range of periods in the wider area. Although the evidence is somewhat equivocal, there may also be a Bronze Age barrow in close proximity, and the findspot of a Bronze Age shield 1km to the north-east of the site suggests some potential for that period. There is significant Iron Age and Roman evidence across the A44 to the east and north-east, including Scheduled Monument Blenheim Roman Villa (or Begbroke Villa) *c.* 1km to the north-east of the proposal site, and settlement in those periods may have been extensive in the wider environs of the site. The Palace and grounds were the work of Sir John Vanbrugh and Henry Wise initially, though not completed by them and the most extensive landscaping is later, by Lancelot ‘Capability’ Brown. The kitchen gardens appear to have been among the earliest works completed, or at least begun, in 1705–6 (VCH 1990, 430–1).

A geophysical survey of the site has been undertaken (Beaverstock 2021) which identified relatively little of likely archaeological interest. A weak positive anomaly suggests the presence of a possible field boundary or enclosure ditch which does not correspond to anything shown on historical mapping (St John-Brooks 2021). However, a large proportion of the data was impacted by strong magnetic readings which may have a masking effect on weaker anomalies of archaeological interest.

Objectives and methodology

The purpose of the evaluation was to determine the presence/absence, extent, condition, character, quality and date of any archaeological or palaeoenvironmental deposits within the area of development.

The specific research aims of this project were:

- to determine if archaeological deposits of any period were present;
- to determine if any deposits relating to the earlier periods of the Palace's construction and land use were present;
- to determine if any prehistoric, specifically Palaeolithic, Neolithic or Bronze Age, or Roman deposits were present on the site; and
- to provide information to allow the preparation of a mitigation strategy if necessary.

The potential and significance of any such deposits located was to be assessed according to the research priorities such as set out in Historic England Research Agenda (HE 2016) or any more local or thematic research priorities as necessary such as the Solent Thames Research Agenda (Hey and Hind 2014).

Four trenches were to be dug, each 10m long and 1.8m wide. A contingency for the equivalent of an additional 15m length of trenching was included, but this was not required. Topsoil and any other overburden was to be removed by a 360° type mini-digger machine fitted with a toothless ditching bucket under constant archaeological supervision. The excavation had to be undertaken in spits, to enable the recovery of artefactual and ecofactual remains from individual layers and spoilheaps were to be searched for finds. Where archaeological features were certainly or probably exposed the stripped areas were to be cleaned using appropriate hand tools. Sufficient of the archaeological features and deposits exposed were to be excavated or sampled by hand to satisfy the aims of the brief.

Results

A total of 4 trenches were dug during the course of the archaeological evaluation. Trenches 1, 2 and 4 were located as intended and trench 3 was slightly relocated northwards to avoid the continuation of an electricity cable uncovered in trench 2. The trenches ranged in length between 9.10m and 10.60m, with a width of 1.90m and a depth between 0.70m and 1.05m. A complete list of trenches giving lengths, breadths, depths and a description of sections and geology is given in Appendix 1.

Trench 1 (Figs 3, 5 and 6; Pl. 1 and 5-7)

Trench 1 was aligned W - E and was 10.60m long and 0.75m deep. The stratigraphy consisted of 0.25m of topsoil, 0.18m of mid greyish brown silty clay made ground with frequent modern brick and tile fragments,

pottery sherds and glass bottles, and 0.25m of mid orange brown silty clay made ground with occasional modern tile fragments and pottery sherds overlying light greenish grey mudstone natural geology. One linear feature was uncovered at 9m from the west end of the trench with a width of 0.38m and perpendicular to the trench. This followed a similar alignment to the linear anomaly recorded in the geophysical survey but its location is not a close match so it is likely to correspond with the former. Its investigation showed this to be a field drain (Pls 5 and 6) from which two fragments of brick and two sherds of porcelain were recovered suggesting a date of 18th to 19th century. No other features were uncovered in the trench and no finds of archaeological interest were recovered.

Trench 2 (Figs 3 and 5; Pl. 2)

Trench 2 was aligned NW - SE and was 10.10m long and 0.70m deep. The stratigraphy consisted of 0.28m of topsoil, 0.22m of mid greyish brown silty clay made ground with frequent modern brick and tile fragments and pottery sherds, and 0.20m of mid orange brown silty clay made ground with occasional modern tile fragments and pottery sherds overlying light greenish grey mudstone natural geology. A service trench for an electricity cable was uncovered at 7m from the NW end of the trench. No features of archaeological interest were uncovered and no finds were recovered from this trench.

Trench 3 (Figs 3 and 5; Pl. 3)

Trench 3 was aligned SW - NE and was 9.10m long and 0.80m deep. The stratigraphy consisted of 0.23m of topsoil, above 0.17m of mid greyish brown silty clay made ground with frequent modern brick and tile fragments, pottery sherds and glass bottle fragments, and 0.30m of mid orange brown silty clay made ground with occasional modern tile fragments and pottery sherds overlying light greenish grey mudstone natural geology. At the SW end of the trench a, extending only 2m and with a thickness of 0.10m, a layer of dark blue grey silty clay with frequent charcoal flecks and occasional modern pottery was recorded overlying the natural geology. No features of archaeological interest were recorded and no finds were recovered from this trench.

Trench 4 (Figs 3, 4, 5 and 7; Pl. 4 and 8)

Trench 4 was aligned W - E and was 10.00m long and 1.05m deep. The stratigraphy consisted of 0.30m of topsoil (51), 0.15m of dark brownish grey silty clay made ground with modern brick and tile fragments and pottery (52), above 0.15m of dark grey/black sandy silt made ground (53), over 0.12m of light yellowish grey silty clay (54) and 0.21m of mid orange brown silty clay with modern brick and tile fragments, pottery and glass bottles (55), overlying light greenish grey mudstone natural geology. At 3.80m from the west end of the trench

and perpendicular to it, a thick plastic pipe was uncovered at a depth of 0.38m and left in a plinth. No features of archaeological interest were observed and no finds were recovered from this trench.

Finds

Hand cleaning and exploratory investigation of a possible field drain in trench 1 returned two brick fragments of 18th to 19th century date along with two sherds of porcelain dated to the 19th century. Spoil heaps of trenches 1 to 4 all returned brick and tile fragments, glass bottles and pottery sherds dated between the 19th and 20th centuries from made ground deposits overlying the natural geology. These finds were recorded and subsequently retained on site.

Conclusion

The archaeological evaluation undertaken at the rectangular parcel of land located in the south-east corner of the kitchen gardens of Blenheim Palace revealed no features or finds of archaeological interest. A series of made ground deposits overlying the mudstone natural geology returned frequent finds of 19th to 20th century date and are possibly connected with the last change of use of the site in the early 1900s, with the clearance of a former orchard to make way for a scrubbed area for keeping chickens. Nothing specifically suggests that these layers, or the drain in trench 1, were part of the original construction of 1705–6.

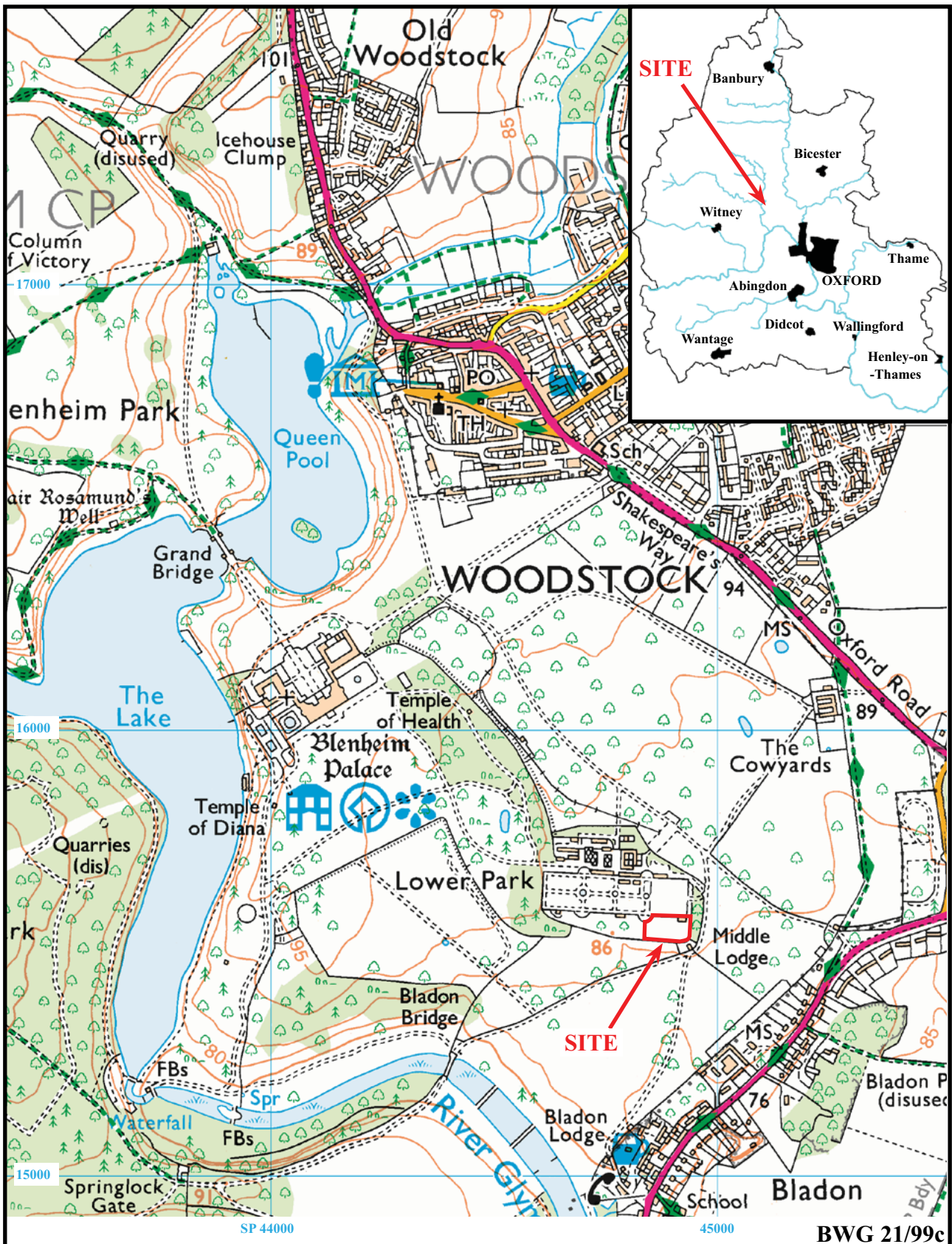
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APPENDIX 1: Trench details

0m at W, SW and SE end

| <i>Trench</i> | <i>Length (m)</i> | <i>Breadth (m)</i> | <i>Depth (m)</i> | <i>Comment</i> |
|---------------|-------------------|--------------------|------------------|---|
| 1 | 10.60 | 1.90 | 0.75 | 0–0.25m topsoil; 0.25-0.43m mid greyish brown silty clay made ground; 0.43-0.68m mid orange brown silty clay made ground; 0.68m+ mid greenish grey mudstone natural geology [Pl. 1 and 5-7]. |
| 2 | 10.10 | 1.90 | 0.70 | 0–0.28m topsoil; 0.28-0.50m mid greyish brown silty clay made ground; 0.50-0.70m mid orange brown silty clay made ground; 0.70m+ mid greenish grey mudstone natural geology [Pl. 2]. |
| 3 | 9.10 | 1.90 | 0.80 | 0–0.23m topsoil; 0.23-0.50m mid greyish brown silty clay made ground; 0.50-0.70/0.80m mid orange brown silty clay made ground; 0.70-0.80m dark blue grey silty clay with frequent charcoal flecks (only between 0 and 2m at the east side of trench); 0.80m+ mid greenish grey mudstone natural geology [Pl. 3]. |
| 4 | 10.00 | 1.90 | 1.05 | 0–0.30m topsoil (51); 0.30-0.45m dark brownish grey silty clay made ground (52); 0.45-0.60m dark grey/black sandy silt made ground (53); 0.60-0.72m light yellowish grey silty clay made ground (54); 0.72-0.93m mid orange brown silty clay made ground (55); 0.93m+ mid greenish grey mudstone natural geology [Pl. 4 and 8]. |



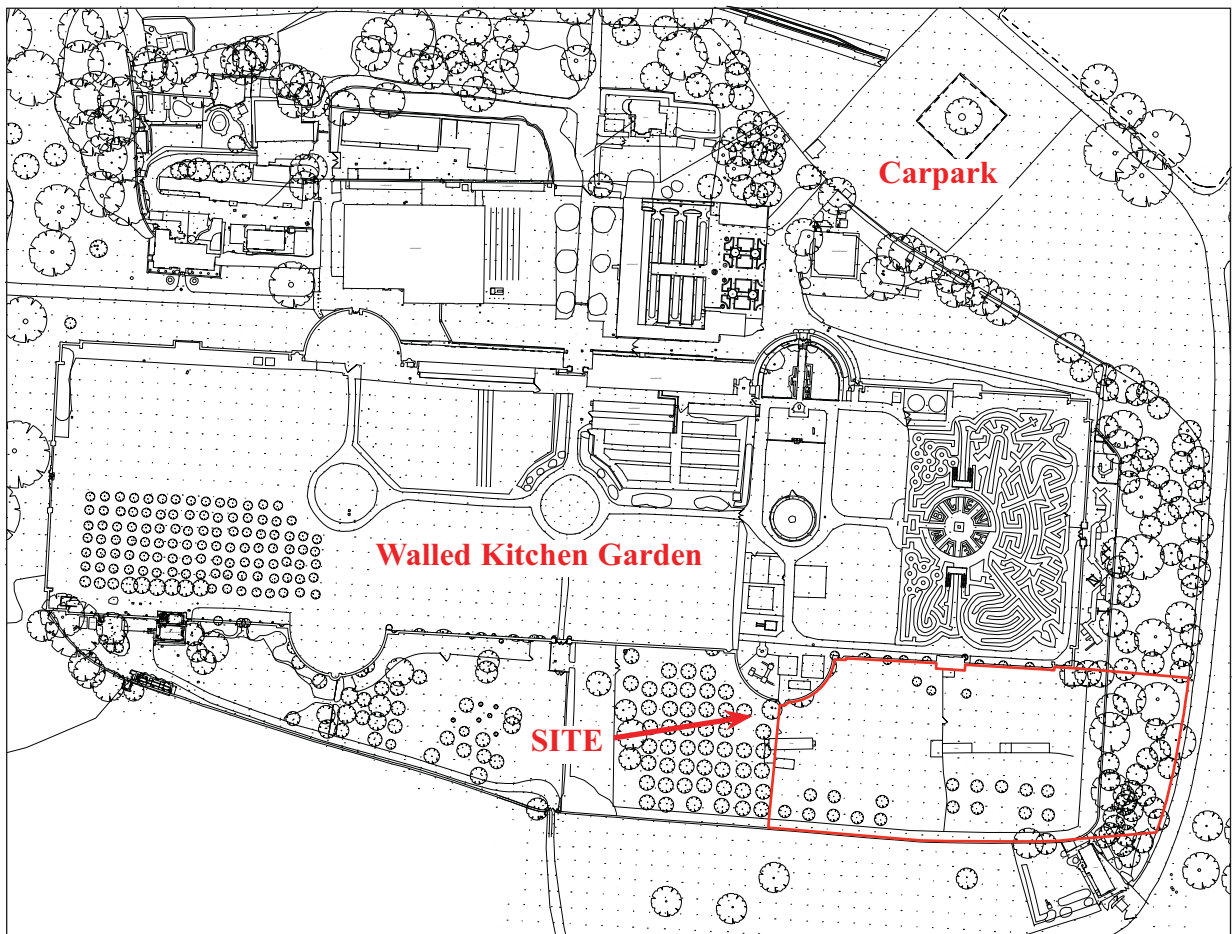
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Figure 1. Location of site within Woodstock and Oxfordshire.

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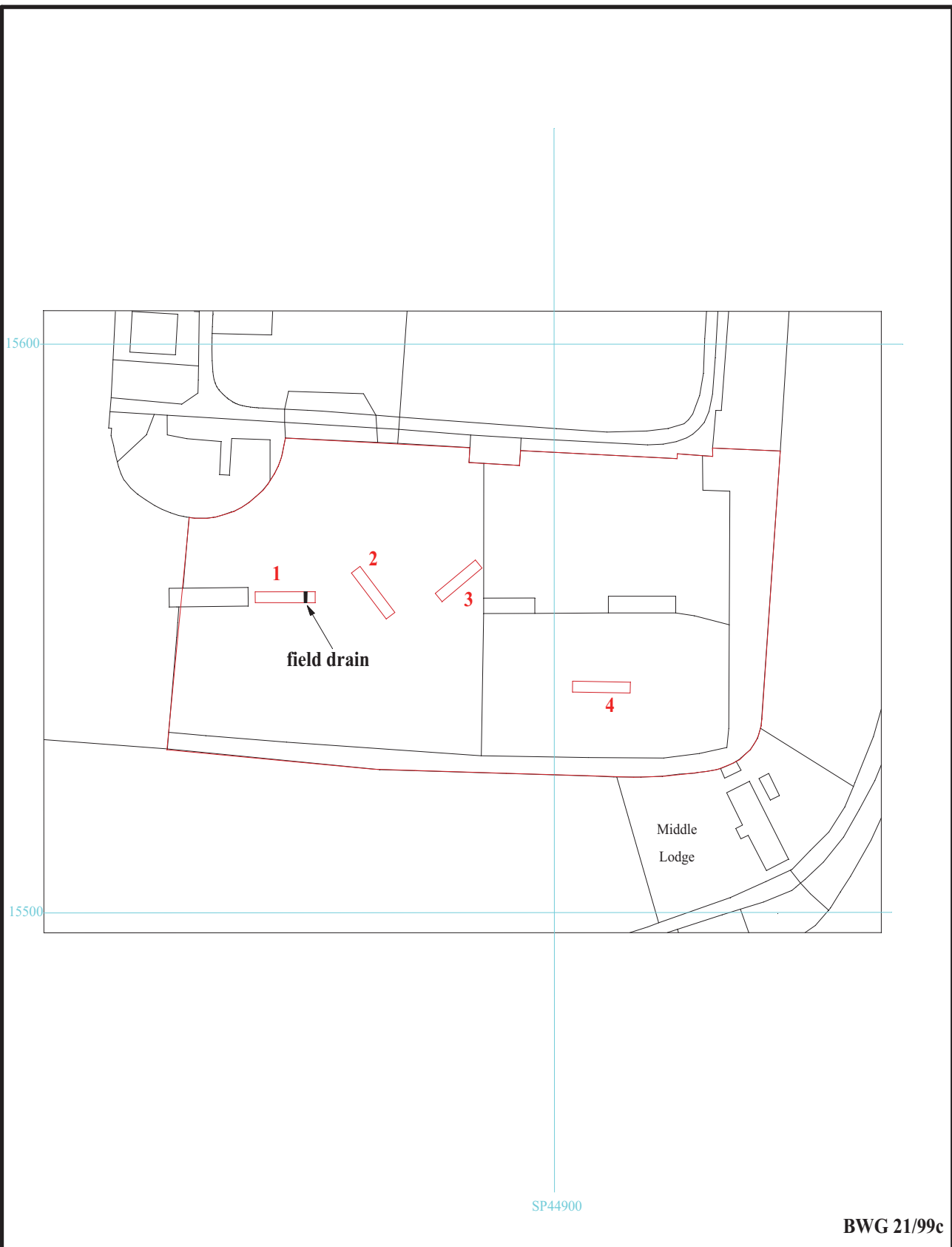
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Figure 2. Detailed location of site and proximity to the Walled Kitchen Garden at Blenheim Palace. Current Layout.

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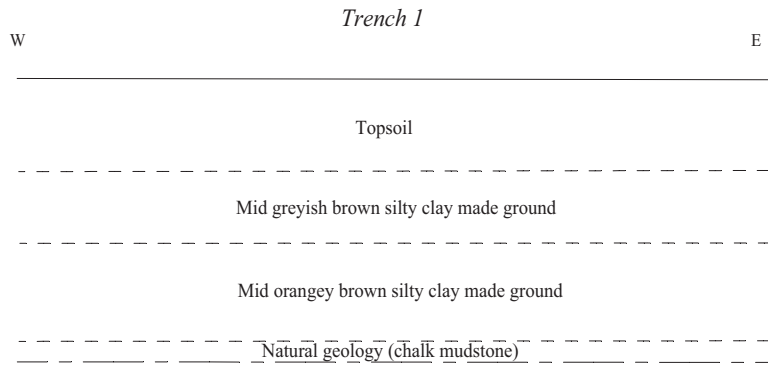


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Figure 3. Location of trenches showing investigated feature.



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Figure 4. Representative sections.





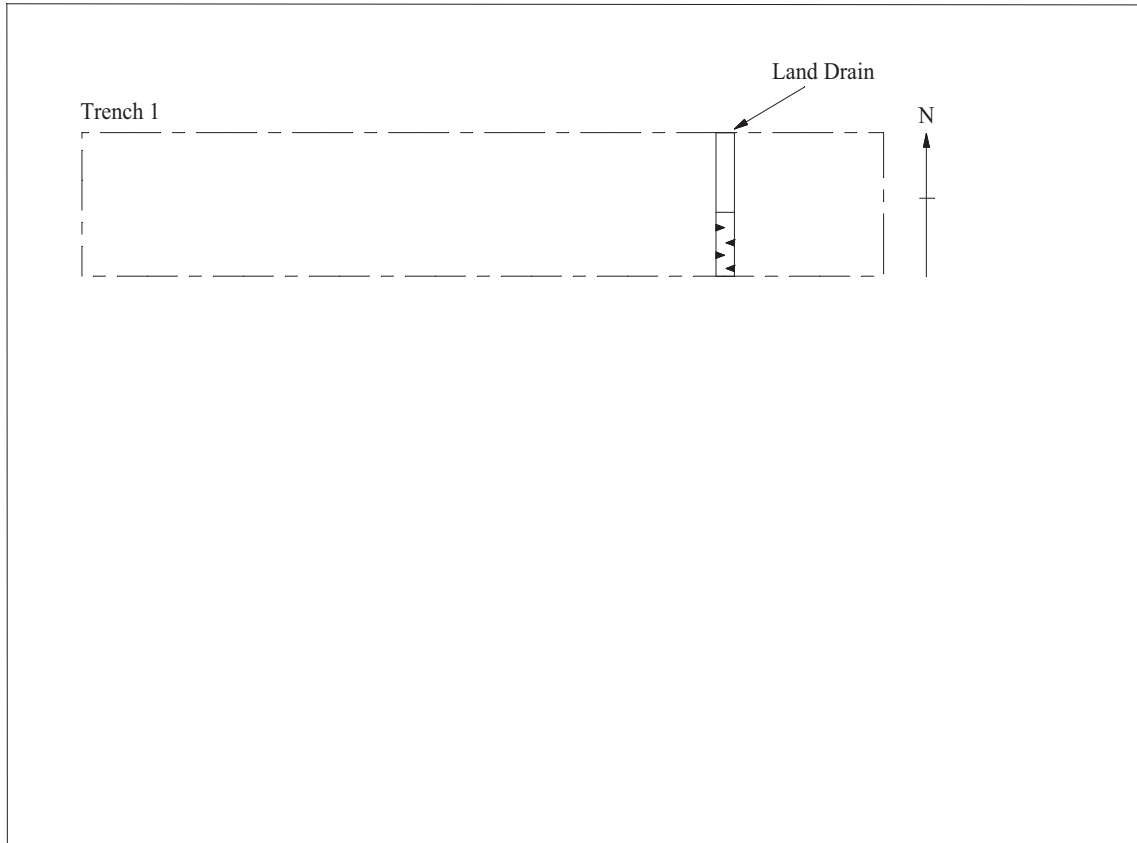
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Figure 5. Trench location and investigated feature showing results of geophysical survey.



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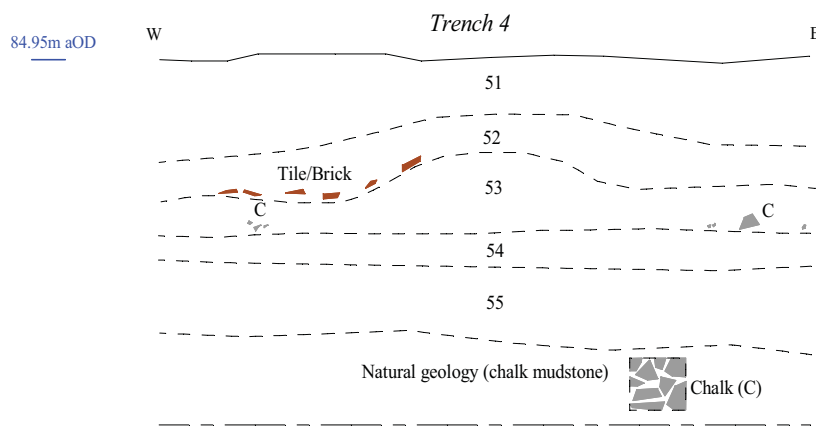
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Figure 6. Plan of Trench 1.



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Figure 7. Sections.





Plate 1. Trench 1, looking east,
Scales: 2m, 1m and 0.3m.



Plate 2. Trench 2, looking south,
Scales: 2m, 1m and 0.3m.



Plate 3. Trench 3, looking north east,
Scales: 2m, 1m and 0.3m.



Plate 4. Trench 4, looking east,
Scales: 2 m, 1m and 0.3m.

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Plates 1 to 4.**

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Plate 5. Trench 1, unexcavated land drain, looking south,
Scale: 1m.



Plate 6. Trench 1, excavated land drain, looking north,
Scales: 0.3m and 0.1m.



Plate 7. Trench 1 section, looking south east,
Scales: 1m and 0.3m.



Plate 8. Trench 4 section, looking north,
Scales: 2m and 1m.

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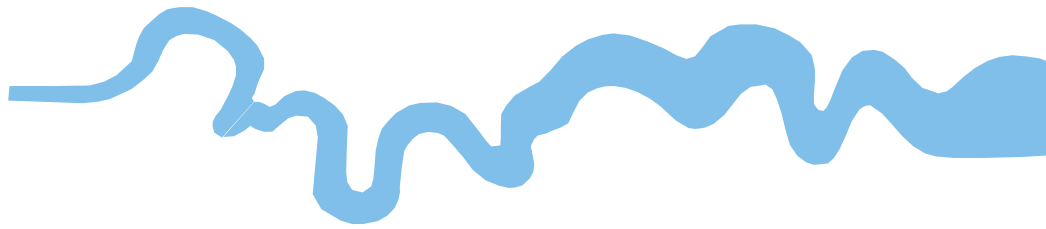
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Plates 5 to 8.**

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TIME CHART

| | Calendar Years |
|----------------------------|------------------|
| Modern _____ | AD 1901 |
| Victorian _____ | AD 1837 |
| Post Medieval _____ | AD 1500 |
| Medieval _____ | AD 1066 |
| Saxon _____ | AD 410 |
| Roman _____ | AD 43 AD 0 BC |
| Iron Age _____ | 750 BC |
| | |
| Bronze Age: Late _____ | 1300 BC |
| Bronze Age: Middle _____ | 1700 BC |
| Bronze Age: Early _____ | 2100 BC |
| | |
| Neolithic: Late | 3300 BC |
| Neolithic: Early | 4300 BC |
| | |
| Mesolithic: Late | 6000 BC |
| Mesolithic: Early | 10000 BC |
| | |
| Palaeolithic: Upper | 30000 BC |
| Palaeolithic: Middle | 70000 BC |
| Palaeolithic: Lower | 2,000,000 BC |





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