

T H A M E S V A L L E Y

ARCHAEOLOGICAL

S E R V I C E S

**New Music Hall, St Albans High School for Girls,
Townsend Avenue, St Albans, Hertfordshire**

Archaeological Watching Brief

by Tim Dawson and Susan Porter

Site Code: SSG11

(TL 1516 0774)

**New Music Hall, St Albans High School for Girls,
Townsend Avenue, St Albans, Hertfordshire**

An Archaeological Watching Brief

For St Albans High School for Girls

by TimDawsonandSusanPorter
ThamesValleyArchaeologicalServices
Ltd

SiteCodeSSG11

May 2011

Summary

Site name: New Music Hall, St Albans High School for Girls, Townsend Avenue, St Albans, Hertfordshire

Grid reference: TL 1516 0774

Site activity: Watching Brief

Date and duration of project: 21st April–10th May 2011

Project manager: Steve Ford

Site supervisor: Tim Dawson and Susan Porter

Site code: SSG11

Summary of results: A ditch containing medieval pottery of 12th-14th century date, two undated pits, two undated possible postholes were found along with a large, deep feature of unknown date or purpose. A single sherd of Roman pottery was also recovered.

Location and reference of archive: The archive is presently held at Thames Valley Archaeological Services, Reading and will be deposited at St Albans Museum in due course, with accession code SSG11.

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Report edited/checked by:	Steve Ford ✓ 31.05.11
	Steve Preston ✓ 31.05.11

New Music Hall, St Albans High School for Girls, Townsend Avenue, St Albans, Hertfordshire An Archaeological Watching Brief

by Tim Dawson and Susan Porter

Report 11/22

Introduction

This report documents the results of an archaeological watching brief carried out at St Albans High School for Girls, Townsend Avenue, St Albans, Hertfordshire, AL1 3SJ (TL 1516 9774) (Fig. 1). The work was commissioned by Mr Mark Smith, of Acanthus Clews Architects, Acanthus House, 57 Hightown Road, Banbury, Oxfordshire OX16 9BE, on behalf of St Albans High School for Girls.

Planning permission (5/2010/0224) has been granted by St Albans City and District Council for the construction of new classrooms and a music hall. This is subject to a condition which requires the implementation of an archaeological watching brief.

This is in accordance with the Department for Communities and Local Government's Planning Policy Statement, *Planning for the Historic Environment* (PPS5 2010), and the Council's policies on archaeology. The field investigation was carried out to a specification approved by Mr Simon West, District Archaeologist at St Albans City and District Council. The fieldwork was undertaken by Tim Dawson, Susan Porter and Andrew Weale between 21st April and 10th May 2011 and the site code is SSG11.

The archive is presently held at Thames Valley Archaeological Services, Reading and will be deposited at St Albans Museum in due course, with accession code SSG11.

Location, topography and geology

The site is located c.300m to the north-east of the modern city centre of St Albans and c.1.3km north of the River Ver, which passes through southern St Albans (Fig. 1). It is bounded to the north and east by St Albans High School for Girls, to the south by Hall Place Gardens and to the west by a doctors' surgery and private housing (Fig. 2). The area is near the summit of a hill which slopes downwards to the south and west and the site sloped gently down from the north-west at a height of 121m above Ordnance Datum, with the centre and eastern area levelled for a Tarmaced games court. The western corner of the site was originally a grassed area planted with occasional trees and containing a rectangular safety surface with climbing frames. The southern end of the site was previously in use as the back garden of a private dwelling. The underlying geology is described as Glacial

Gravel (with Bunter Pebbles) (BGS 1978). This was observed in some areas of the groundworks, however, in other areas a brown-red silty clay, with few stones was noted.

Archaeological background

The archaeological potential of the site stems from its location on the north-eastern margins of the historic core of St Albans, encompassing the Saxon, medieval and post medieval City, though there were no known archaeological finds nor deposits on the site. This potential is reflected in the area's incorporation within an archaeological priority area within the City (ASR25). The Roman City of *Verulamium* and its Iron Age precursor lie to the west of the modern city but with the proposal site clearly within their hinterland. The site is on or close to the northern line of Tonmans Ditch, which is considered to be the defensive boundary of the medieval town. To the west lies a medieval moated site at St Peter's Grange and to the south the church and churchyard of St Peter.

Objectives and methodology

The purpose of the watching brief was to excavate and record any archaeological deposits affected by the groundworks. This was expected to comprise any ground reduction and the digging of trenches for foundations and services.

All intrusive groundworks were observed where possible. The ground reduction and footings were dug using 360°-type mechanical diggers equipped with 2.00m and 0.60m wide ditching buckets. Where possible, spoil was monitored as it was removed from the ground. Archaeological deposits uncovered during the ground reduction were hand-cleaned and excavated but those seen during the digging of the footing trenches were only observed, because of the depth of the trenches and loose nature of the ground through which they were dug. Where possible measurements were taken and sketch plans and sections were drawn.

Results

Ground reduction

The ground level across the whole site was reduced to create a level below the original ground level of *c.*0.25m at the eastern edge of the site and *c.*1.45m at the western edge. This was excavated in several stages with each section being reduced to the site level before moving onto the next one. The stratigraphy that was exposed across the areas of the site not in use as a Tarmac games court consisted of 0.20m of topsoil mixed with building rubble

and flint, above 0.43m of sandy clay made ground with chalk, flint, gravel and modern rubble, over 0.26m of buried topsoil with modern rubble and 0.23m of subsoil. This all overlying the brown-red gravel and silty clay natural geology.

Along the south-eastern edge of the site and in the area of garden to the rear of the house on Hill Place Gardens the reduction was to a depth of c.0.25m and exposed only modern made ground. This is likely to have been laid down as part of the construction of the games court and the house and garden.

Five certain or possible archaeological features were exposed during the reduction of the ground in the western area of the site (Fig. 3). A ditch (1) was identified extending north-eastwards from its terminal end in the centre of the western area and two pits (2 and 3) and two postholes (4 and 5) were recorded to the west of ditch 1. The terminal end of the ditch was excavated and it was found to be 1.28m wide and 0.28m deep and was visible for c.2.50m of its length only due to the area to the north being covered by overburden which was not removed. The ditch was filled with a firm mid grey-brown silty sand (53) from which five sherds of later medieval pottery and a single sherd of Roman pottery were recovered. A 10 Litre soil sample was taken and sieved. This produced a little wood charcoal and a few cereal grains.

The four features considered to be pits and postholes were half-sectioned (Fig. 4). Pits 2 and 3 were 0.40m and 0.35m in diameter and 0.12m and 0.08m deep respectively. Both pits were filled with a loose dark brown-grey sandy clay with c.20% small rounded pebbles (deposits 54 and 55 respectively) but contained no finds. The two postholes, 4 and 5, were both 0.30m in diameter and had depths of 0.07m and 0.05m respectively. Their fills (56 and 57), were the same in composition as fills 54 and 55. Neither posthole contained any finds and it is unclear whether they were in fact archaeological features.

Footings trenches

The footings were dug as a series of square pads connected by trenches. Each pad was 2.20m square and 1.60m deep and the trenches were 0.60m wide and 1.20m deep. In the northern corner of the site one pad and the trench were c.1.90m deep (Fig. 5). The stratigraphy exposed by the excavations varied depending on the extent of the ground reduction in that area. In the north-western corner of the site the reduction did not expose the natural geology so the stratigraphy visible in the footings consisted of 0.27m of rubble levelling over c.0.30m of dark brown silty clay, all of which sealed the natural brown-red silty clay and gravel. In the south-eastern area of the site the dark brown silty clay was overlain by c.0.20m of modern made ground which contained brick rubble and plastic. The southern area within the garden was very disturbed with a large amount of the ground having been built up using rubble and several services cutting across the area.

Two possible features were observed in section within the footings although the task of identifying others was made difficult by the uneven nature of the surface of the natural geology creating irregular depressions which had filled with dark brown silty clay. The section of footing in which the two features were visible was only observed once the trench had been excavated to its full depth at which point they could not be closely examined due to the depth of the groundworks and the unstable nature of the sides.

The first of the possible features was observed as a *c.*0.30m deeper section of the dark brown silty clay layer which had a width of *c.*1.00m. It was in rough alignment with ditch 1 where it was recorded in the centre of the site but, due to its inaccessibility, it was not cleaned or investigated and may have been a natural depression in the geology. The second possible feature was rather more substantial where it was visible in the northern corner of the site. It consisted of a large ditch or pit (6) which continued beneath the 1.90m depth of the footings, extended for over 20m west-east and was *c.*7.9m north-south (Figs 3 and 5). By plotting the extents of the feature in plan (Fig. 3), it would appear that it was a large pit or possibly a ditch, either aligned east-west and terminating at the west, or possibly with a right-angled bend heading north. The feature appeared to be filled with two deposits. The lower (58) consisting of mid brown silty sand and the upper (59) being a dark black-brown sandy silt with a thickness of *c.*1.20m (Fig. 5). Further along the feature to the southeast, the boundary between 58 and 59 became more indistinct until they appeared to blend into one another. No finds were observed in the exposed sections of the feature although close examination could not be made due to the depth of the footings.

Finds

Pottery by Paul Blinkhorn

The medieval pottery assemblage comprised 5 sherds with a total weight of 46g. It all came from ditch 1 (53), and consisted entirely of Hertfordshire Grey Ware, a reduced sandy ware, probably from a number of sources, some of which are as yet unknown. The material is generally dated to the mid 12th – 14th century, and is a common find on medieval sites throughout the region (Turner-Rugg 1993). A sixth, residual sherd of probable Roman pottery weighing 28g occurred in the same context.

Two of the medieval sherds were rimsherds from jars, possibly from the same vessel, with the rest being plain bodysherds, one of which had sooting on the outer surface. They were all fresh and unworn, and appear reliably stratified.

Charred plant remains by Joanna Pine

The 10 Litre sample recovered from ditch 1 was wet sieved and the flots recovered using a 0.25mm mesh. This recovered a small quantity of wood charcoal but with two unidentified cereal grains present

Conclusion

Three archaeological features were positively identified during the groundworks on the development site. The two possible postholes may have been natural depressions in the underlying geology as several more irregular examples of this were seen across the site. Of these features, only the ditch could be dated from the medieval pottery it contained. The two pits yielded no dating evidence. The large feature (6) is difficult to interpret and no dating evidence was recovered. From the areas where it is visible in section it appears to be a large pit but could conceivably be a right-angled ditch traversed very obliquely. It is not yet possible to determine if is of archaeological interest or whether it is a product of relatively modern disturbance, or of mineral extraction. It appears unlikely to be a ditch, and is probably not Tonmans Ditch.

Other areas of the site previously in use as the games court and garden were significantly disturbed by previous landscaping works and truncation to the extent that no archaeological features would have survived.

References

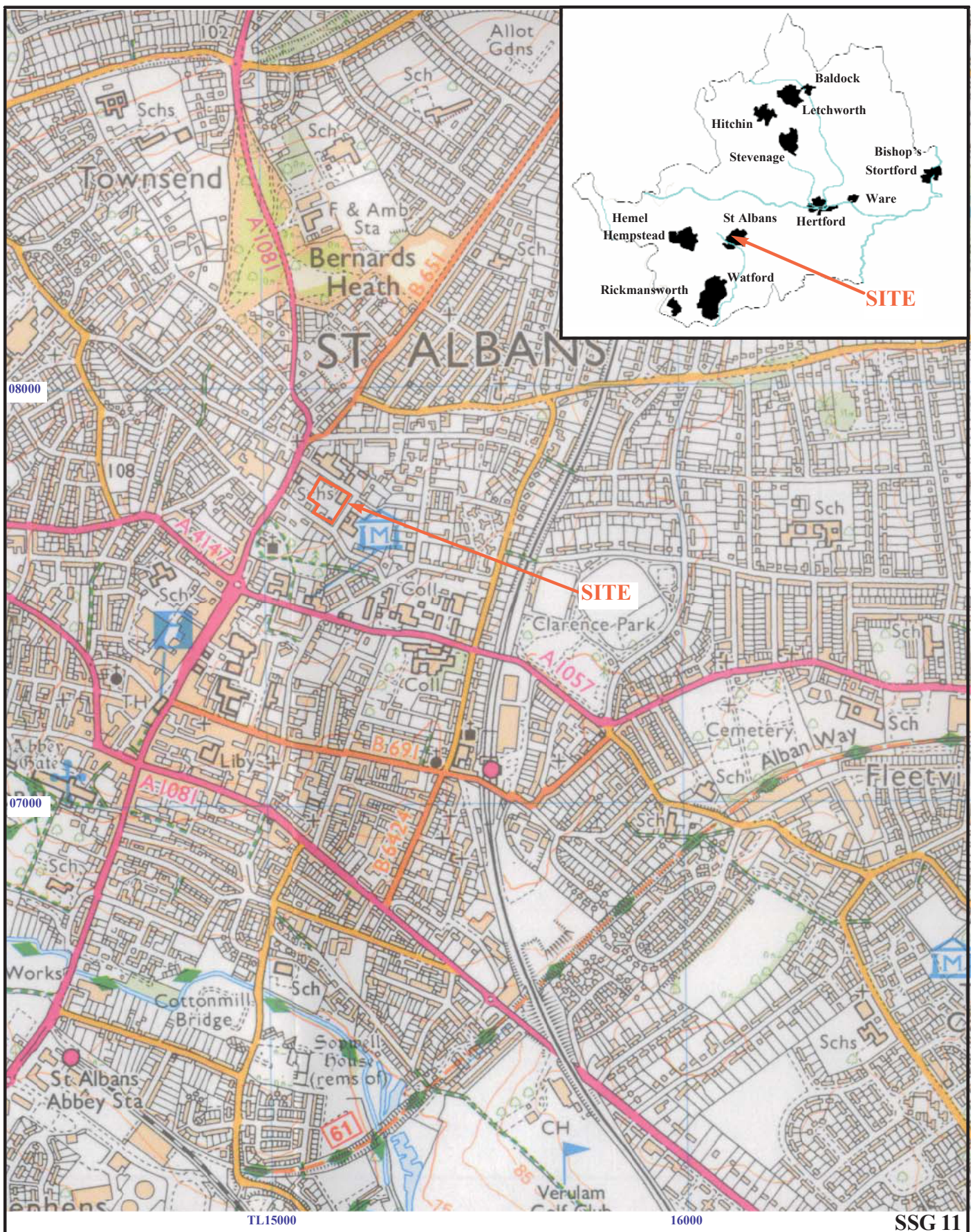
- BGS, 1978, *British Geological Survey*, 1:50 000, Sheet 239, Solid and Drift Edition, Keyworth
PPS5, 2010, *Planning for the Historic Environment*, The Stationery Office, Norwich
Turner-Rugg, A, 1993, 'Medieval Pottery in Hertfordshire: a gazetteer of the principal collections', *Hertfordshire Archaeol* **11**, 30–53

APPENDIX 1: Feature details

<i>Cut</i>	<i>Fill (s)</i>	<i>Type</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Dating evidence</i>
	50	Topsoil		
	51	Subsoil		
	52	Made ground	Modern	Plastic, brick
1	53	Ditch terminal	Medieval (12-14th century)	Pottery
2	54	Pit	Unknown	
3	55	Pit	Unknown	
4	56	Possible posthole	Unknown	
5	57	Possible posthole	Unknown	
6	58, 59	Pit (or ditch)	Unknown	

APPENDIX 2: HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT RECORD SUMMARY SHEET

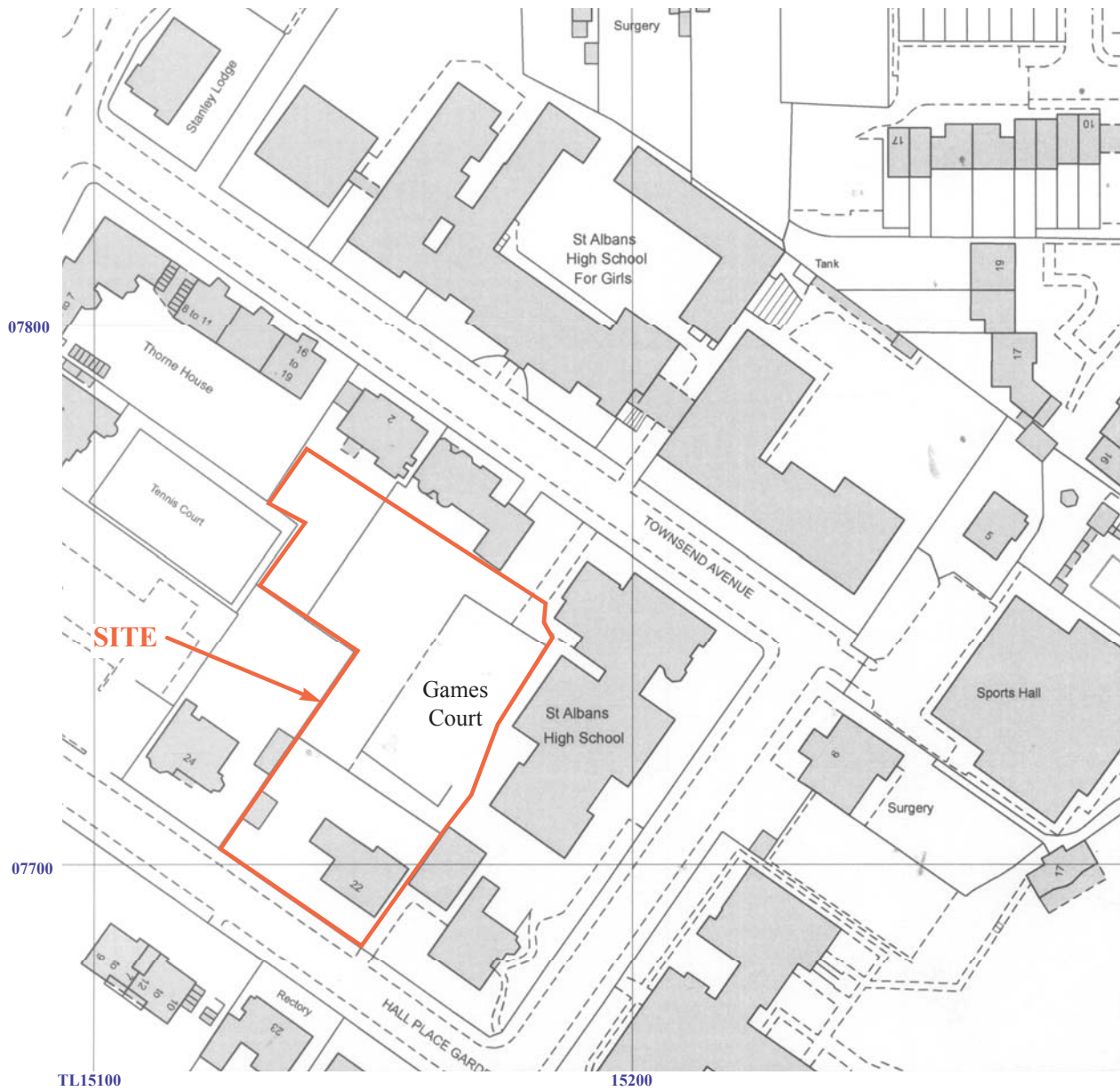
Site name and address: New Music Hall, St Albans High School for Girls, Townsend Avenue, St Albans, Hertfordshire, AL1 3SJ		
County: Hertfordshire	District: St Albans	
Village/Town: St Albans	Parish: -	
Planning application reference: 5/2010/0224		
Client name, address, and tel. no.: Fraser Campbell (Bursar), St Albans High School for Girls, Senior School, Townsend Avenue, St Albans, Hertfordshire, AL1 3SJ. (01727) 792 540		
Nature of application: Construction of new recital hall and art technology block.		
Present land use: School games court and gardens		
Size of application area: c.0.2ha	Size of area investigated: c.0.2ha	
NGR (to 8 figures): TL 1516 9774		
Site code (if applicable): SSG11		
Site director/Organization: Tim Dawson/Susan Porter, Thames Valley Archaeological Services		
Type of work Archaeological watching brief		
Date of work:	Start: 21st April 2011	Finish: 10th May 2011
Location of finds & site archive/Curating museum: Thames Valley Archaeological Services, Reading		
Related HER Nos:	Periods represented: Medieval, Modern	
Relevant previous summaries/reports		
Summary of fieldwork results: A ditch containing medieval pottery of 12th-14th century date, two undated pits and two undated possible postholes were found along with a large pit of unknown date or purpose.		
Author of summary: Tim Dawson	Date of summary: 31st May 2011	



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Figure 1. Location of site within St Albans and Hertfordshire.

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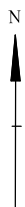
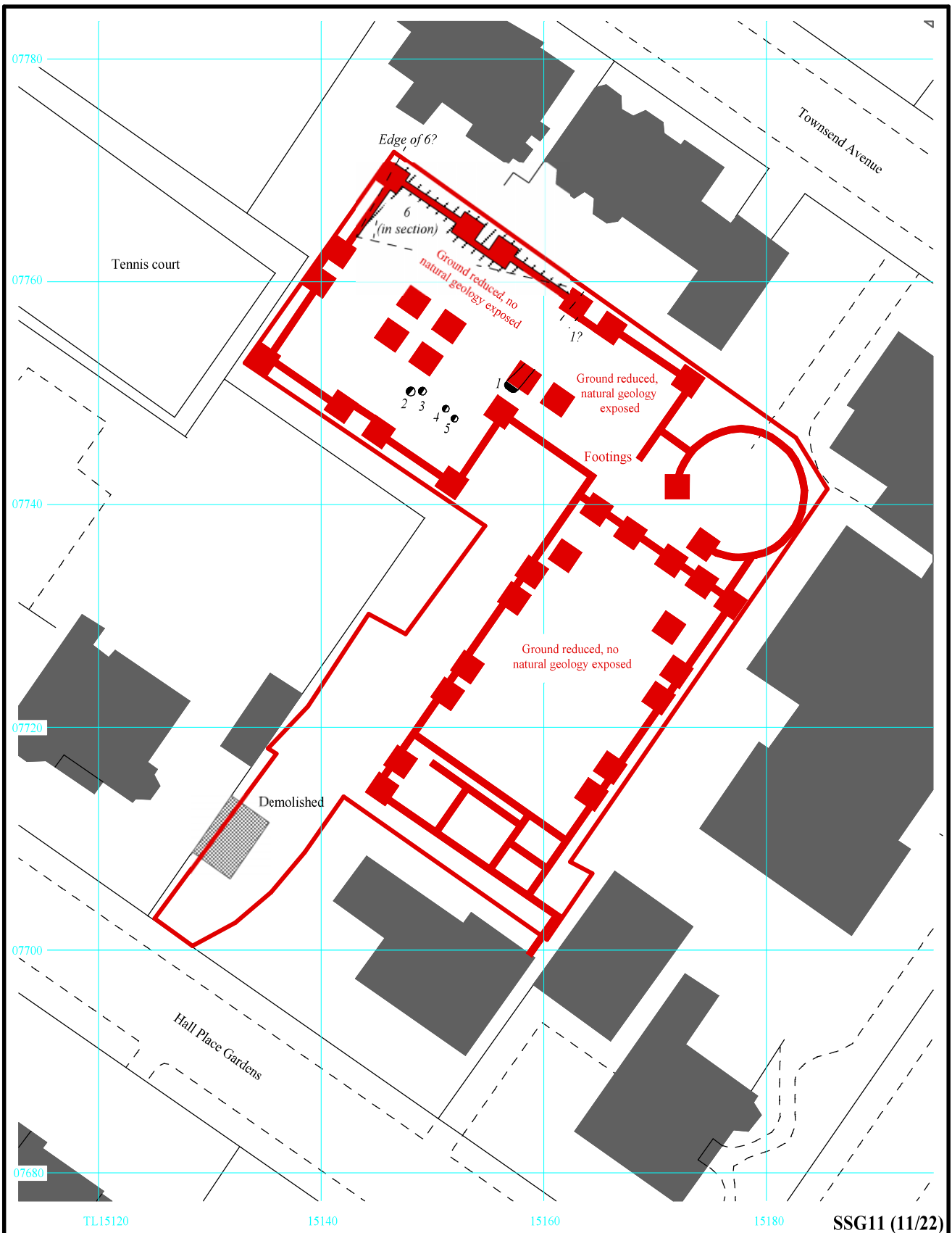
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Figure 2. Detailed location of site off Townsend Avenue.

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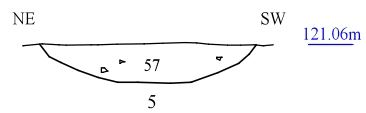
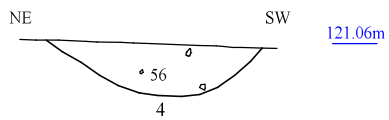
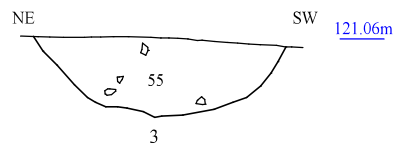
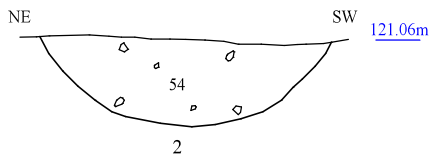
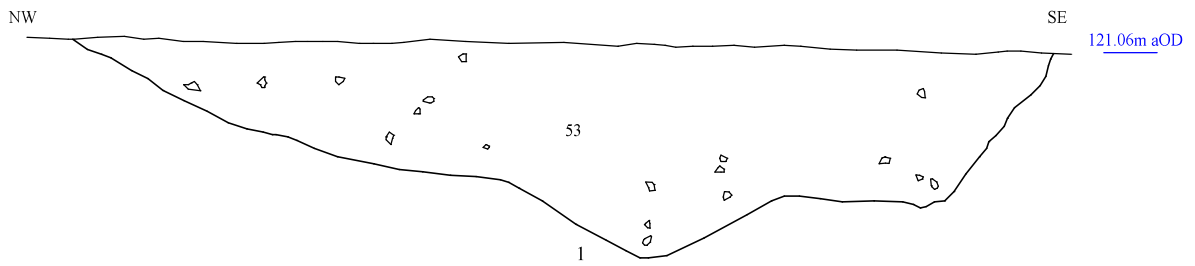




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Figure 3. Location of areas observed during watching brief.





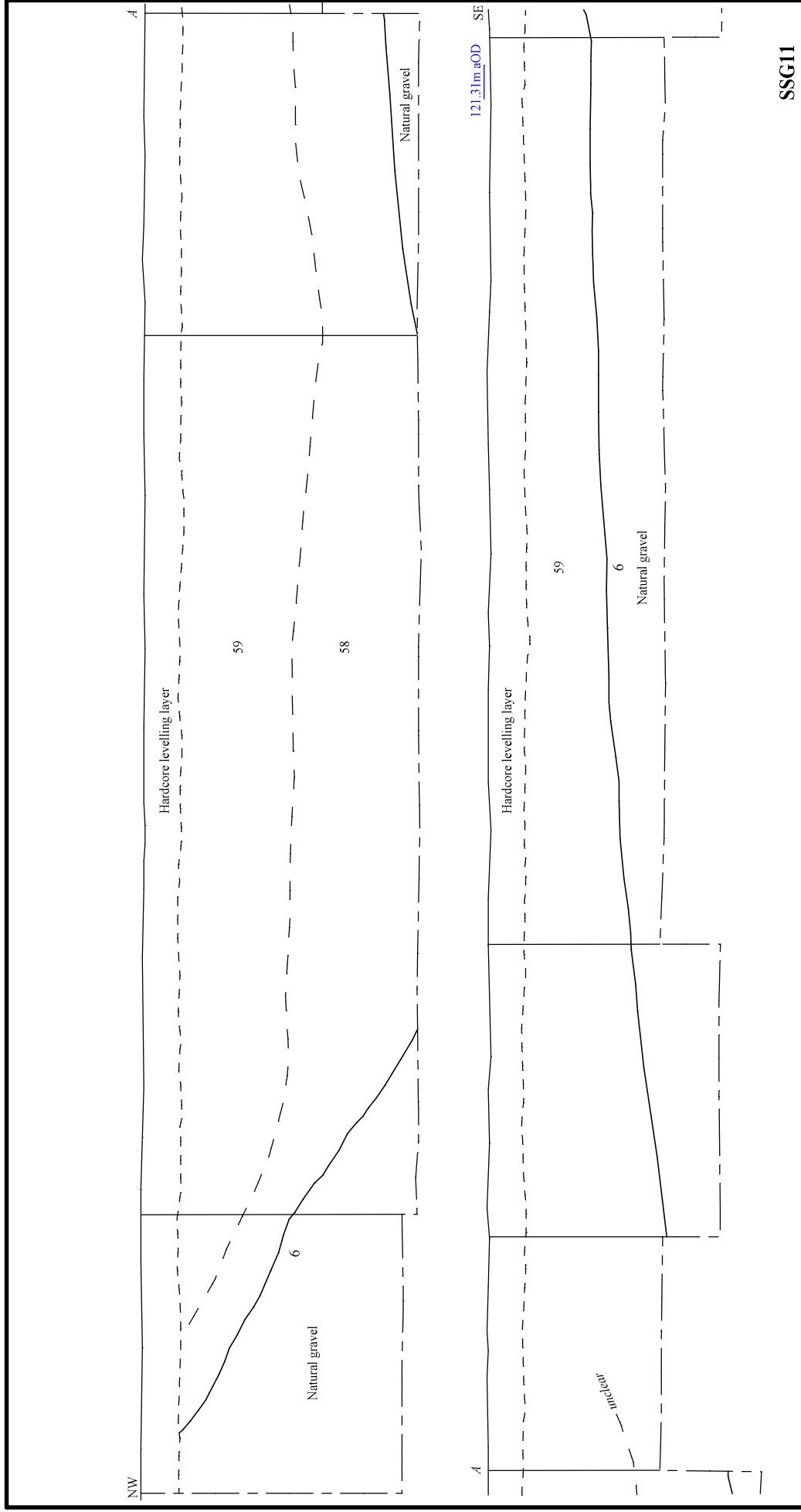
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Figure 4. Sections.



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Figure 5. Section of feature 6.





Plate 1. General view across north-western area of site, looking north, Scales: 1m and 2m.



Plate 2. Footings in south-east area of the site, looking south-west, Scales: 1m and 2m.

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Plates 1 and 2.

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Plate 3. Ditch 1, looking north, Scales: 1m and 0.1m.



Plate 4. Part of feature 6, looking north east, Scales: 1m and 2m.

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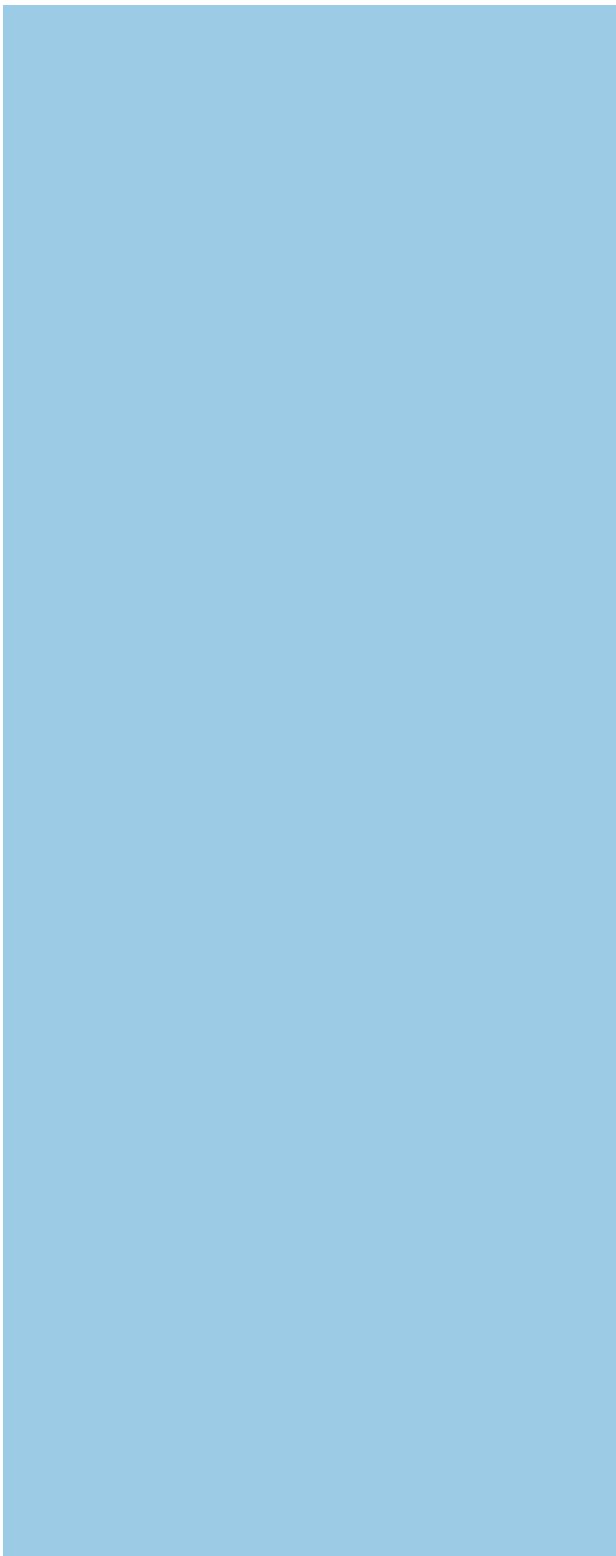
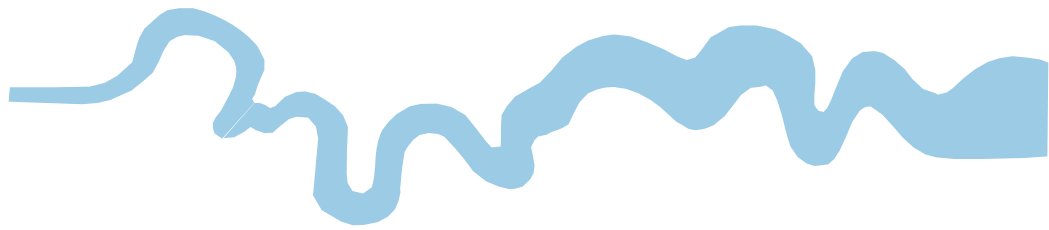
Plates 3 and 4.

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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
Iron Age _____	BC/AD 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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