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birmingham archaeology

Former Railway Lands

Oswald Road, Oswestry, Shropshire

An Archaeological Evaluation, 2006

UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

May 2006

Project No. 1442

FORMER RAILWAY LANDS

OSWALD ROAD,OSWESTRY
SHROPSHIRE

AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION, 2006.

By

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FORMER RAILWAY LANDS, OSWALD ROAD, OSWESTRY, SHROPSHIRE.

AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION, 2006.

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SUMMARY

An evaluation was carried out on the site of the Cambrian Railways land, Oswald Road, Oswestry to determine the location and state of preservation of Wat's Dyke. The trench was situated in a former rail yard in an area which had been less intensively developed than the majority of the remaining study area. The trench was orientated northeast - southwest and the Dyke was exposed in the southwest end of the trench. Although none of the original bank material had survived at all, the ditch itself was fairly well preserved. No artefacts or organic remains were recovered. A full profile of the feature was not excavated on health and safety grounds, however, its general character and orientation were recorded and it is likely that further lengths of the ditch survive well in this part of the site.

In addition to the trenching programme a comprehensive walkover survey of the rail yard site was also undertaken. The remains of a carriage shed and a loading wharf were recorded. The concrete floor of the former survived, in which three pairs of rails and a number of associated iron fixtures were located. An aerial photograph of the site depicts the carriage shed and several smaller wooden buildings to the south as well as a larger building of similar size to the station though no evidence of these structures was found during the walkover survey.

FORMER RAILWAY LANDS, OSWALD ROAD, OSWESTRY, SHROPSHIRE:

AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION

Planning Application Number 05/13734/OUT

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background to the project

Birmingham Archaeology was commissioned by Mouchel Parkman Services Ltd to undertake a programme of trial trenching and field survey and recording ahead of a proposed residential development (Planning Application Number 05/13734/OUT) on the former railway lands, Oswald Road, Oswestry, Shropshire (hereinafter referred to as the site,). This stage of evaluation followed a desk-based assessment of the site (Hislop 2002).

This report outlines the results of trial trenching carried out in May 2006, and has been prepared in accordance with the Institute of Field Archaeologists Standards and Guidance for Archaeological Evaluations (IFA 2001).

The evaluation was carried out in accordance with guidelines laid down in Planning Policy Guidance Note 16 (DoE 1990). Michael Watson monitored the work on behalf of Shropshire County Council.

1.2 Location and geology

The site is located to the north of Oswestry town centre on the eastern side of the railway line at Oswald Road (NGR SJ 2952 3002, Figs 1 and 2) and occupies an elongated area of land measuring *c*.2.1ha, which is broadly aligned northeast-southwest, centred on the former Cambrian Railway line. The area surrounding the site comprises a former railway depot to the east, now the premises of an antiques business, and the remains of platforms and a carriage shed to the south, now rough ground. The surviving earthwork associated with Wat's Dyke lies to the southeast, along the foot of a hill (Fig. 2).

The site is predominantly flat, lying at *c*.123m AOD, though rises somewhat on its eastern side. It is no longer used by the main railway system and most of the tracks have been removed, with the exception of one line which extends through the whole site, some sidings utilised by the Cambrian Railway Society and tracks associated with the former carriage shed.

2 ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

In the Iron Age the area in which Oswestry is now located lay within the territory of the Cornovii tribe. The most evident Iron Age site in Oswestry is 'Old Oswestry', one of the largest Cornovian hill forts. This is one of several substantial earthworks in the town, the others being the motte of the Norman castle, now covered in trees, and the much-reduced Wat's Dyke. The hill fort represents an important centre for Iron Age occupation in the area. It was occupied

right up until the Norman conquest and possibly beyond, this may even relate to the post-Roman date of the Dyke.

The place name Oswestry has been interpreted as 'Oswald's tree', possibly in reference to a significant boundary marker, rather than a wooden cross said to have been erected by King Oswald prior to the battle of *Maserfelth* (Gelling 1992, 74-75). The town or a place nearby has in fact traditionally been associated with the site of the battle of *Maserfelth* in AD642, when the Christian King Oswald was defeated by the pagan Penda, King of Mercia. The alliance between Penda and the Welsh allowed the rise of Mercia to continue, allowing Penda to assume an 'overlordship of England south of the Humber' (Charles-Edwards 2001, 94).

The creation of great bank and ditch boundaries was no new thing but it is the scale and level of preservation that is impressive. The possibility that the dykes along the Welsh border are immediately post-Roman, such as Wat's Dyke has not been discounted. Larger earthworks such as Offa's Dyke are likely to be later, having an eighth century date.

Wat's Dyke has traditionally been interpreted as dating to the Mercian period and despite numerous excavations along its length there is still no reliable date for its construction. Recent radiocarbon determinations deriving from possible hearth remains found buried beneath the bank material at Maes-y-Clawdd have provided a *terminus ante quem* for the bank of AD446, though do not provide a date for its construction (Mathews 2001). Wat's Dyke has been postulated as a precursor to Offa's Dyke, constructed by his predecessor Aethelbald, it was a structure on a much smaller scale and did not contain any evidence of complex revetting in the bank construction. If, however, the radiocarbon dates are to be considered valid this interpretation now seems unlikely (Welch 2001:158). If the radiocarbon dates reflect the ditch's true period of construction it could instead be associated with the post-Roman kingdom of the Cornovii.

No visible surface remains of Wat's Dyke survive on the site although there is an 80m length to the south, which along with two cultivation terraces and a hollow way, has been scheduled as an ancient monument. It is this portion of the monument that best illustrates the way the natural features of the landscape were used in its construction (Hill 1974:104).

The earthwork has gradually been reduced due to erosion and development of the surrounding area. The next notable phase of activity on the site is the arrival of the railway in 1848, the scale of which grew exponentially, culminating in the construction of the headquarters of Cambrian Railways. This involved the merging of Oswestry and Newton Railway and the Oswestry, Ellesmere and Whitchurch Railway. The site was extensively developed with the building of a substantial locomotive works, a carriage shed, loading wharf and an impressive stationhouse. The development of the site continued until 1926 when there was an 'increase in the number of sidings to the southeast of the station resulting in the expansion into the fields west of Wat's Dyke' (Hislop 2002, 5). Over time the station gradually became less important and was significantly scaled down with the demolition and removal of the additional tracks and associated buildings in the late 1960s.

4 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

Specific aims are to:

- Provide information that will enable an informed and reasonable decision to be taken regarding the Phase Two archaeological provision for any archaeological remains affected by the proposed development.

- Ensure the preservation by record of any archaeological remains to be impacted on by the proposed development.

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Fieldwork

In order to achieve the aims of the Phase One investigation one 20m x 1.5m wide trench was excavated across the postulated line of Wat's Dyke (Fig. 2). The trench was surveyed-in using an EDM total station.

All modern overburden was removed in level spits using a JCB mechanical excavator fitted with a toothless ditching bucket, under direct archaeological supervision, down to the top of the uppermost archaeological horizon or the subsoil. Subsequent cleaning and excavation was by hand. A representative sample of archaeological features and deposits was manually excavated sufficiently to define their character, date, preservation and extent, and with the aim of obtaining suitable dating evidence. The depth of archaeological deposits across the trench was assessed where possible, although the full width of the Wat's Dyke was not excavated down to natural subsoil. Following the fieldwork element, the trench was backfilled.

All stratigraphic sequences were recorded, even where no archaeology was present. Features were planned at a scale of 1:20 or 1:50, and sections were drawn of any cut features and significant vertical stratigraphy at a scale of 1:20. A comprehensive written record was maintained using a continuous numbered context system on *pro-forma* context and feature cards. Written records and scale plans were supplemented with photographs using monochrome and colour slide photography.

A minimum of 10 litre soil samples were taken from potentially datable archaeological features for the recovery of charred plant remains and technological evidence. The environmental sampling policy followed the guidelines contained in the Birmingham Archaeology Guide to On-Site Environmental Sampling and the *Report of the Association for Environmental Archaeology Working Party on Sampling and Recovery,* September 1995.

The full site archive included all artefactual and/or ecofactual remains recovered from the site. The site archive was prepared according to guidelines set down in Appendix 3 of the Management of Archaeology Projects (English Heritage, 1991), the Guidelines for the Preparation of Excavation Archives for Long-term Storage (Walker 1990) and Standards in the Museum Care of Archaeological collections (Museum and Art Galleries Commission, 1992). Finds and the paper archive will be deposited with an appropriate repository, subject to permission from the landowner.

4 RESULTS

4.1 Trench 1

The trench was positioned directly across the postulated location of Wat's Dyke, which was informed by the orientation of the surviving earthwork to its south (Fig. 2). The natural clay-mudstone was located at 121.45 AOD and was cut by a north-south orientated ditch (1003) at the southwest end of the trench. A section was excavated through the ditch to a depth of 1.2m but was not bottomed for health and safety reasons (Fig. 3). The earliest recorded deposit (1007), a silt clay stone fill was overlain by a sterile silt clay fill (1006; Plate 1). This was in

turn overlain by a compacted limestone clay deposit with evidence of iron panning (1005). The uppermost ditch fill (1004) was similar in composition to deposit 1006 although occasional flecks of charcoal were evident. None of the deposits yielded artefacts or organic remains.

A layer of clinker and ash (1001) 0.30m thick sealed the ditch. This was cut at the northeast end of the trench by a brick structure (1008) with a concrete floor (1010) underneath which lay a possible drainage culvert. This brick structure had been filled with a mixed black-brown silt and clinker deposit (1011). A sandstone and concrete wall (1012) was observed opposite the brick structure and is likely to be associated with it. Finally, a layer of demolition rubble (1000) proved to be the most recent deposit.

4.2 Walkover survey

A field survey of the area to the south of the site was undertaken in order to locate the remains of structures associated with the former Cambrian Railways Headquarters which may have been overlooked during the previous site assessment (Plate 3). The concrete hard standing for a carriage shed was observed immediately to the east of Wat's Dyke (Fig. 2). The shed itself no longer survives, which may be due to its original superstructure being of wood. The concrete hard standing that survives had three sets of tracks with buffers at the north end. Perforated manhole covers in the centre of each of the tracks connect to a central manhole between the two sets of tracks to the eastern side to form the main drainage system for the shed.

Three gas and oil outlets, which were set into circular collars in the concrete survived at the northern end of the shed (Plate 2). A monogrammed plate would originally have covered these though they are now missing (Date 2006, pers. comm). Along the eastern edge of the shed hard standing there was an iron gas pipe, which had originally connected the outlets to the main gas supply.

Along the eastern edge of the railway sidings were the remains of sleepers from a loading wharf, now covered in foliage. No other structures were observed.

5 DISCUSSION

The evaluation trench was located in the northern edge of Wat's Dyke, and whilst it is likely that the feature is preserved across its full width it was not recorded on this occasion. The ditch has been excavated previously at several points along its 49 mile length and measures between 4.0m to almost 8.0m wide and is up to 4.0m deep. On this occasion the Dyke was not fully excavated primarily for health and safety reasons. It was excavated to a depth of 1.2m, however, it is likely the true depth is more substantial, in line with previously excavated sections elsewhere. The fills, although sterile, could perhaps be waterlogged below the 1.2m observed in the evaluation. No bank material had survived as the level of the ground has been reduced and this is likely to be the case across the remainder of the proposed development area. There was also only a very thin deposit of overburden, in the form of clinker, sealing the archaeology.

The dating of Wat's Dyke remains somewhat speculative, based primarily on one radiocarbon determination (Mathews 2001). The ditch has yet to yield any datable pottery although given its size, and its proximity to the hill fort, it is possible that further excavation may provide this information. The proposed development which consists of a road network which will be excavated to a depth of 0.5m and associated balancing pond, which will be excavated to a depth of 2.2m, are substantial enough to warrant further archaeological investigation.

The surviving structural features from the rail yard, specifically the carriage shed and loading wharf, have been recorded both graphically and photographically and are included in a comprehensive topographical survey of the site. The gas and oil outlets on the concrete hard standing of the carriage shed are of interest to the railway museum and should be retained if the pad is to be removed. The 1910 scale plan of the rail yard shows four sets of tracks in the carriage shed whereas only three were observed during the walkover survey. This, along with a lack of corresponding evidence on the ground suggests that it is probable these pre-construction plans were never fully adhered to.

6 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The project was commissioned by Paul Barker of Mouchel Parkman Services Ltd. Thanks are due to Roger Date and Henry Thomas of the Cambrian Railway Society for their comments and information. Thanks are also due to Michael Watson, who monitored the project on behalf of Shropshire County Council. Work on site was supervised by Kristina Krawiec and assisted by Mark Middleton. Kristina Krawiec produced the written report, which was illustrated by Nigel Dodds, and edited by Mark Hewson who also managed the project for Birmingham Archaeology.

7 REFERENCES

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APPENDIX 1

FORMER RAILWAY LANDS, OSWALD ROAD, OSWESTRY, SHROPSHIRE. (PHASE ONE)

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION:
WRITTEN SCHEME OF INVESTIGATION

Planning application reference
05/13734/OUT

Client: MOUCHEL PARKMAN SERVICES LTD.

Archaeological Contractor: Birmingham Archaeology

THE UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

Birmingham Archaeology

1 INTRODUCTION

This document describes the programme of work required to undertake Phase One of an archaeological investigation at the above site. It forms the written scheme of investigation for the work, which is a requirement of the brief prepared by Shropshire County Council (Shropshire County Council 2006). Any variation in the scope of work would be agreed with the Historic Environment Officer, Shropshire County Council before implementation.

A planning application (reference no. 05/13734/OUT) has been submitted to Shropshire County Council for the proposed development of land on Oswestry Railway Lands, Oswalds Road, Oswestry, Shropshire. As the proposed development site is of possible archaeological significance the Historic Environment Officer, Shropshire County Council, has recommended a field evaluation. This follows government advice contained within PPG 16 (DoE 1990) and consultation of the Historic Environment Record (HER).

2 SITE DESCRIPTION AND LOCATION

The proposed development site (hereafter referred to as 'the site') is centred on NGR SJ2952 3002 (see attached plan). The site covers an area of *c*.2.1ha, which is aligned northeast-southwest on the eastern side of the railway line just north of Oswestry town centre. The area surrounding the site comprises predominantly residential and commercial properties.

3 ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

It was confirmed following a desk-based assessment that the proposed development site is crossed by the line of the linear monument of Wat's Dyke (Hislop 2002), although no evidence survives of the monument above ground. A proposed new access road will cross the presumed course of the monument and a new balancing pond will also impact on it.

The site also contains remains relating to the historic railway usage of the site when it formed part of the sidings associated with Cambrian Railways' headquarters. These remains include the base of a railway carriage shed.

4 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

Specific aims are to:

- Provide information that will enable an informed and reasonable decision to be taken regarding the Phase Two archaeological provision for any archaeological remains affected by the proposed development.
- Ensure the preservation by record of any archaeological remains to be impacted on by the proposed development.

5 METHODOLOGY

Field evaluation
In order to achieve the aims of the Phase One investigation one 20m x 1.5m wide trench will be excavated across the postulated line of Wat's Dyke (see attached plan). The trench will be

surveyed-in using an EDM total station or other appropriate survey instruments.
All modern overburden will be removed in level spits using a JCB mechanical excavator fitted with a toothless ditching bucket, under direct archaeological supervision, down to the top of the uppermost archaeological horizon or the subsoil. Subsequent cleaning and excavation will be by hand. A representative sample of archaeological features and deposits will be manually sample excavated sufficiently to define their character and to obtain suitable dating evidence. Generally, 50% of pits or postholes and a 1m section of linear/ curvi-linear features will be excavated. Archaeological deposits will not be completely excavated unless this is unavoidable. The depth of archaeological deposits across the trench will be assessed, although the full length will not necessarily be excavated down to natural subsoil. Following the fieldwork element, the trench will be backfilled as dug, with no compaction or reinstatement undertaken.

All stratigraphic sequences will be recorded, even where no archaeology was present. Features will be planned at a scale of 1:20 or 1:50, and sections will be drawn of all cut features and significant vertical stratigraphy at a scale of 1:10. A comprehensive written record will be maintained using a continuous numbered context system on *pro-forma* context and feature cards. Written records and scale plans will be supplemented with photographs using monochrome and colour slide photography.

A minimum of 10 litre soil samples will be taken from suitable datable archaeological features for the recovery of charred plant remains and technological evidence. The environmental sampling policy will follow the guidelines contained in the Birmingham Archaeology Guide to On-Site Environmental Sampling and the *Report of the Association for Environmental Archaeology Working Party on Sampling and Recovery,* September 1995. Recovered finds will be cleaned, marked and remedial conservation work will be undertaken as necessary. Treatment of all finds will conform to guidance contained within 'A strategy for the care and investigation of finds' published by English Heritage.

The full site archive will include all artefactual and/or ecofactual remains recovered from the site. The site archive will be prepared according to guidelines set down in Appendix 3 of the Management of Archaeology Projects (English Heritage, 1991), the Guidelines for the Preparation of Excavation Archives for Long-term Storage (Walker 1990) and Standards in the Museum Care of Archaeological collections (Museum and Art Galleries Commission, 1992). Finds and the paper archive will be deposited with an appropriate repository, subject to permission from the landowner.

Field survey and recording
A field survey of the study area shall be undertaken. This will include a measured survey of all archaeological surface remains associated with the historical railway usage of the site. The recording will be in accordance with a Level 3 Record as defined by the *Recording Archaeological Field Monuments*: *A Descriptive Specification*, RCHM(E), 1996.

To facilitate this record limited excavation and site clearance work shall be undertaken to fully expose, clean and interpret any remains.

A comprehensive and detailed photographic record, both monochrome and colour, of all remains shall be undertaken in addition to the drawn record. All remains shall be photographed in relation to their setting and other features. The record shall also document overall appearance and any details, structural or decorative, as well as the evidence on which any analysis or interpretation is made.

6 STAFFING

The project will be managed and directed for Birmingham Archaeology by Dr. Mark Hewson BA, Ph.D, AIFA and supervised in the field by Kevin Colls BA, assisted by a team of experienced site assistants.

Specialist staff will be, where appropriate:

Dr Lawrence Barfield- Flint artefacts, freelance consultant lithics specialist.

Dr Ann Woodward- Prehistoric pottery, Research Fellow, Birmingham Archaeology, University of Birmingham.

Dr Jeremy Evans- Roman pottery, Honorary Research Fellow, Birmingham Archaeology, University of Birmingham.

C. Jane Evans- Roman pottery, freelance consultant pottery specialist.

Stephanie Rátkai- Saxon, medieval and post-medieval pottery, Honorary Research Associate and Finds Researcher, University of Birmingham.

Erica Macey-Bracken- Small finds, Birmingham Archaeology, University of Birmingham.

Dr Andrew Howard– Archaeo-Geomorphology, Lecturer in Archaeo-Geomorphology and Remote Sensing, Institute of Archaeology and Antiquity, University of Birmingham.

Dr James Greig- English Heritage Archaeological Scientist - pollen and plant macro-fossils.

Dr Wendy Smith- Charred plant remains, Honorary Research Fellow in Archaeo-Botany, University of Birmingham.

Matilda Holmes- Animal bone, freelance consultant archaeozoologist.

Dr David Smith- Micro-fauna, Institute of Archaeology and Antiquity, University of Birmingham.

Dr Megan Brickley- Human Bone, Institute of Archaeology and Antiquity, University of Birmingham.

Dr Roger White- Coins and brooches, Project Manager, Lecturer and Assistant Director (Development), Institute of Archaeology and Antiquity, University of Birmingham.

Jane Cowgill- slag and industrial residues, freelance consultant.

Rowena Gale- charcoal and wood. freelance consultant.

7 REPORT

On completion of the fieldwork, post-excavation work, including finds processing/ conservation, analysis and primary research, will be undertaken. A site archive will be compiled and an

illustrated report will be prepared. This report would be in the format required by the *Management of Archaeological Projects 2* (published by English Heritage), to include:

(a) Summary.
(b) Description of the archaeological background.
(c) Method.
(e) A narrative description of the results and discussion of the evidence, set in their local, regional and national research context, supported by appropriate plans, sections and photographs.
(f) Summary of the finds and environmental evidence.
(g) Specialist assessments of the finds and environmental evidence.
(h) Integration of geophysical survey results with the results of the evaluation.
(i) Impact assessment and recommended mitigation strategy.
(j) A copy of the Activity and Source Submission Form.

A copy of the project report shall be provided to the Historic Environment Officer, Shropshire County Council and one also to the Shropshire Sites and Monuments Record. An OASIS data capture form will be completed at the appropriate time following the completion of Phase One of the project.

8 TIMETABLE

Fieldwork is due to commence on Tuesday 30th May and continue until Friday 2nd June 2006. Advance notice of the start of fieldwork has been given to the Historic Environment Officer, Shropshire County Council. A monitor's meeting is arranged for Friday 2nd June at 14:00hrs.

9 GENERAL

All project staff will adhere to the Code of Conduct of the Institute of Field Archaeologists. The project will follow the requirements set down in the *Standard and Guidance for Archaeological Field Evaluation* (Institute of Field Archaeologists 1994, revised 2001).

A detailed Risk Assessment will be prepared prior to the commencement of fieldwork. All current health and safety legislation, regulations and guidance will be complied with. The excavation will conform to the *Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1992* and *Health & Safety in Field Archaeology Manual* (SCAUM 1991).

Any human remains encountered will be initially left *in situ* and covered. In the event that human remains need to be removed this will be carried out under the terms of a Home Office Licence and adhering to relevant environmental health regulations. All finds which may constitute 'treasure' under the Treasure Act, 1997 will be removed to a safe place and reported to the local Coroner. If removal is not possible on the same working day as discovery, appropriate security arrangements will be provided to keep the finds safe from theft.

10 REFERENCES

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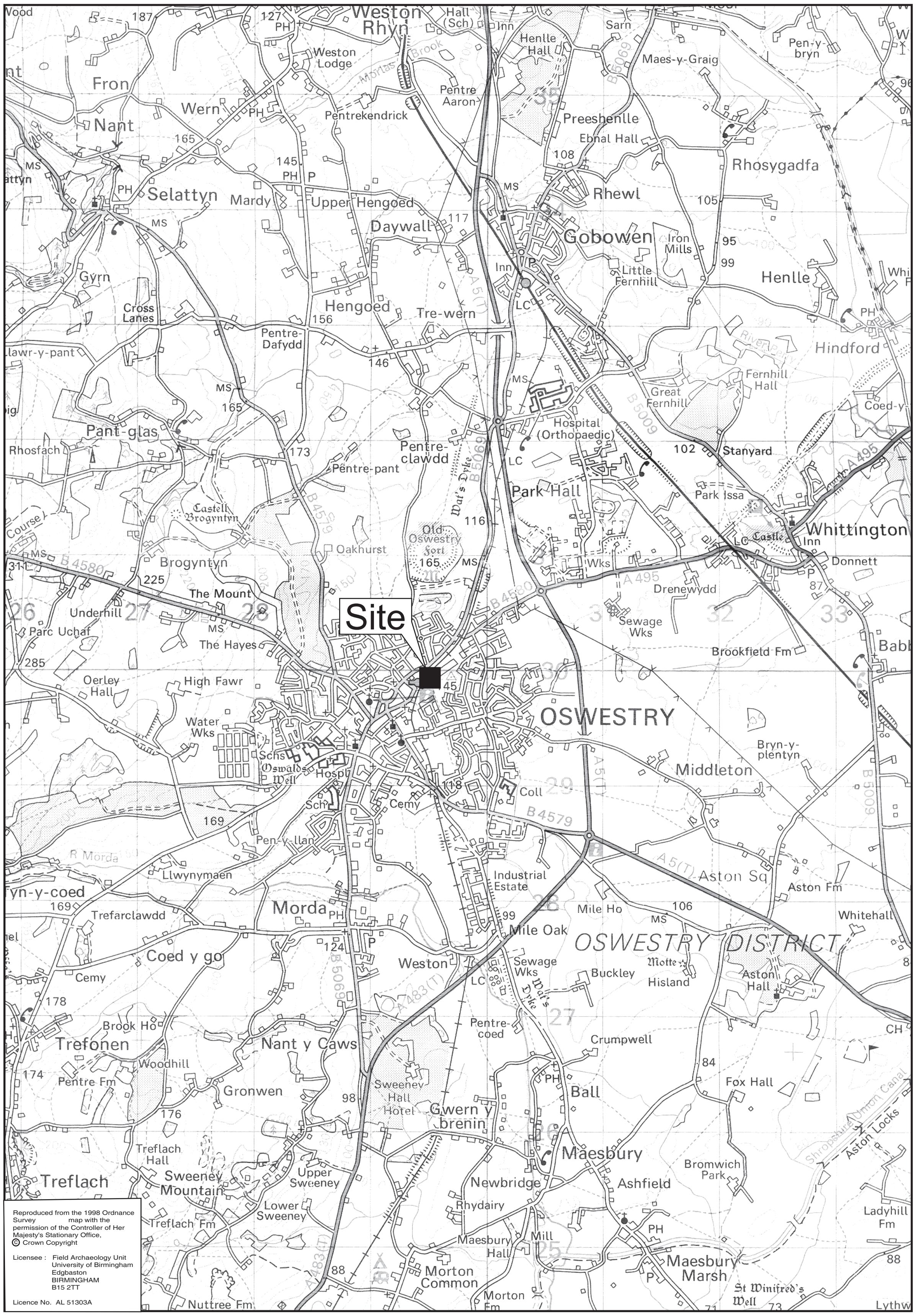
Birmingham Archaeology 22nd May 2006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Pentre-Dafydd
Pant-glas
Pentre-clawdd
Park Hall
Whittington
Brogyntyn
The Mount
Old Oswestry Fort
Middleton
Morda
Weston
Mile Oak
Trefonen
Nant y Caws
Ball
Maesbury
Maesbury Marsh
Morton Common
Treflach
Sweeney Mountain
Aston Hall
Henlle
Hindford
Rhosygadfa
Stanyard
Sweeney Hall Hotel
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Newbridge
Ashfield
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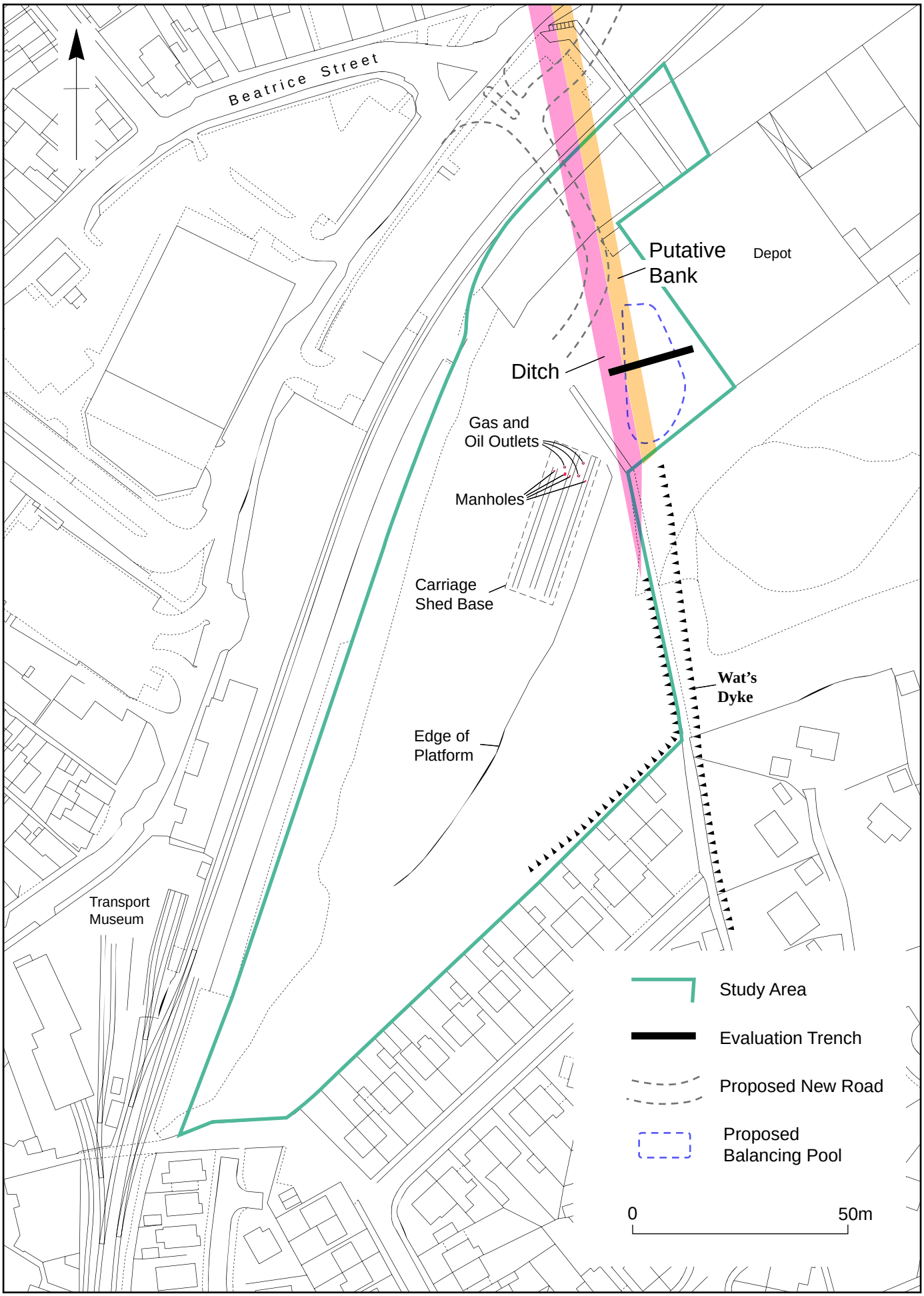
Fig.1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Platform
Transport
Museum
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Evaluation Trench
Proposed New Road
Proposed
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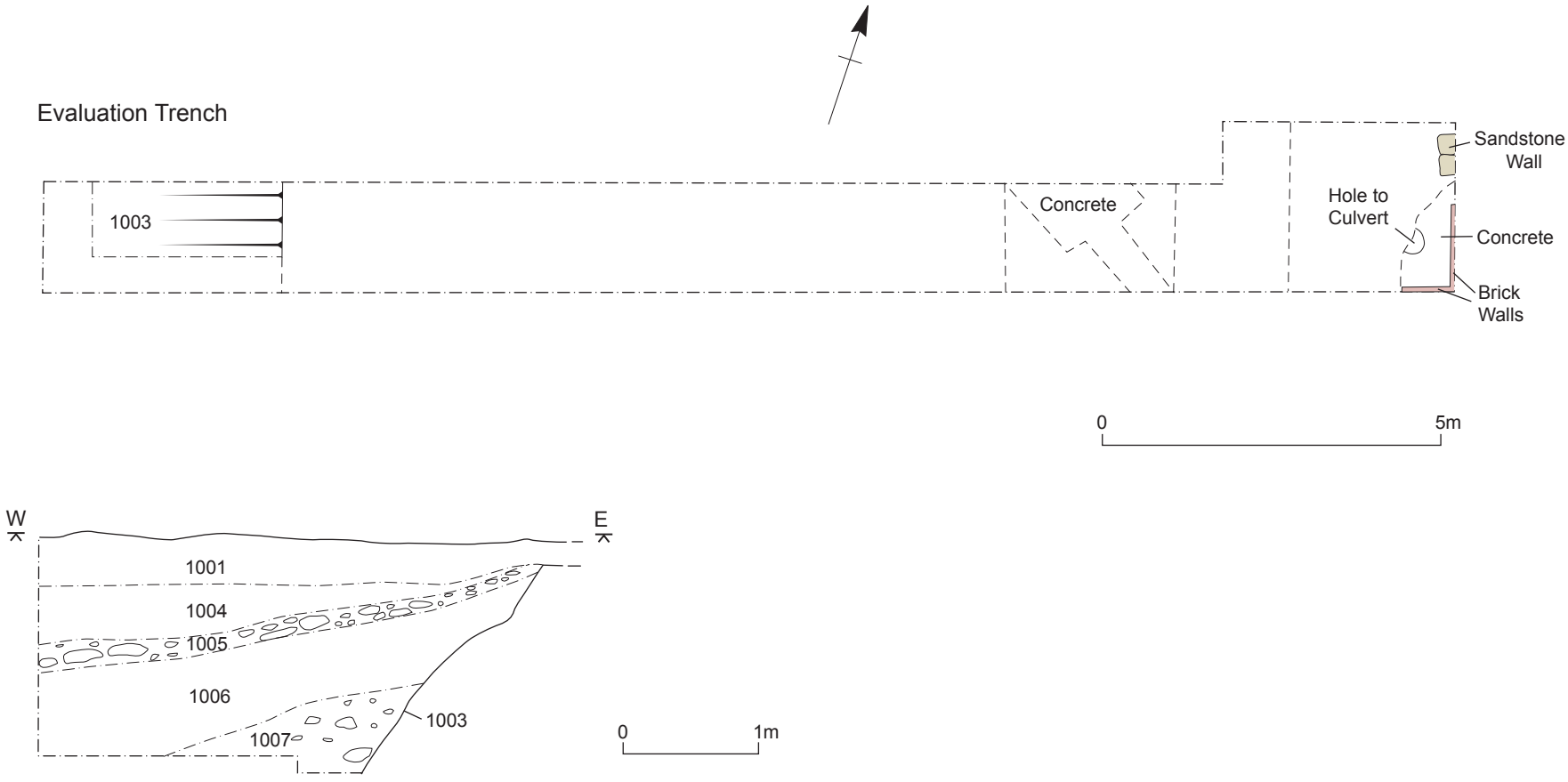
Fig.2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Concrete
Sandstone Wall
Hole to Culvert
Concrete
Brick Walls
0
5m
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E
1001
1004
1005
1006
1007
1003
0
1m

Fig.3

Plate 1

Plate 2

Plate 3