



Northamptonshire  
County Council

# Northamptonshire Archaeology

Excavation of a Romano-British ditch  
at Shefford Lower School  
Shefford, Bedfordshire

November 2007

Accession no. BEDFM 2007.618



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December 2007

Report 07/191

## Northamptonshire Archaeology

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**NORTHAMPTONSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL  
NORTHAMPTONSHIRE ARCHAEOLOGY  
DECEMBER 2007**

**EXCAVATION OF A ROMANO-BRITISH  
DITCH AT SHEFFORD LOWER SCHOOL  
SHEFFORD, BEDFORDSHIRE  
NOVEMBER 2007**

**STAFF**

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Small Find: Tora Hylton

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**QUALITY CONTROL**

	Print name	Signed	Date
Checked by	Pat Chapman		
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Approved by	Andy Chapman		

**OASIS REPORT FORM**

<b>PROJECT DETAILS</b>		
Project title	Excavation of a Romano-British ditch at Shefford Lower School, Shefford, Bedfordshire	
Short description (250 words maximum)	A small archaeological excavation was undertaken by Northamptonshire Archaeology on a playing field at Shefford Lower School, Shefford, Bedfordshire prior to the proposed construction of a pre-school. The work was carried out subsequent to an earlier evaluation, during which a Romano-British ditch was found. The excavation area was positioned over the trial trench and uncovered a longer length of the ditch, which continued on the same north-east to south-west alignment. The ditch is possibly a field boundary or enclosure ditch located some distance from any settlement. Finds from the ditch fills from both the evaluation and excavation included a small quantity of Roman tile and an opaque blue glass globule, possibly a fragment of decoration from a 1st century AD glass vessel. A medieval bronze buckle was recovered from the subsoil.	
Project type	Excavation	
Previous work (reference to organisation or SMR numbers etc)	Evaluation by Northamptonshire Archaeology	
Future work (yes, no, unknown)	Unknown	
Monument type and period	Roman	
Significant finds (artefact type and period)	None	
<b>PROJECT LOCATION</b>		
County	Bedfordshire	
Site address	Shefford Lower School, School Lane, Shefford, Bedfordshire	
OS NGR	TL 1379 3872	
Area	180m <sup>2</sup>	
Height aOD	c 45m	
Land use	School playing field	
<b>PROJECT CREATORS</b>		
Organisation	Northamptonshire Archaeology	
Project brief originator	Bedfordshire County Council	
Project Design originator	Anthony Maull, Northamptonshire Archaeology	
Director/Supervisor	Anthony Maull, Northamptonshire Archaeology	
Project Manager	Anthony Maull, Northamptonshire Archaeology	
Sponsor or funding body	Porter Consulting and Management Services Ltd	
<b>PROJECT DATE</b>		
Start date	17th August 2007	
End date	17th August 2007	
<b>ARCHIVES</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Content (eg pottery, animal bone etc)</b>
Accession no. BEDFM2006.749		
Physical		
Digital		
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b>		
Journal/monograph, published or forthcoming, or unpublished client report (NA report)		
Title	Excavation of a Romano-British Ditch at Shefford Lower School, Shefford, Bedfordshire	
Serial title and volume	07/137	
Author(s)	Charlotte walker	
Page numbers	8 text, 4 figs, 2 plates	
Date	December 2007	

## Contents

<b>1</b>	<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>BACKGROUND</b>	<b>2</b>
	<b>2.1 Topography and geology</b>	<b>2</b>
	<b>2.2 Historical and archaeological background</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>EXCAVATION METHODOLOGY</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>4</b>	<b>EXCAVATION RESULTS</b>	<b>4</b>
	<b>4.1 The Romano-British ditch</b>	<b>4</b>
	<b>4.2 The medieval/post-medieval furrow</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>5</b>	<b>FINDS</b>	<b>5</b>
	<b>5.1 Ceramic tile</b>	<b>5</b>
	<b>5.2 The medieval buckle</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>6</b>	<b>DISCUSSION</b>	<b>6</b>
	<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b>	

## ILLUSTRATIONS

- Fig 1: Site location  
Fig 2: Trench location  
Fig 3: The Romano-British ditch  
Fig 4: The Romano-British ditch (Section 4)  
and the medieval furrow (Section 3)

## PLATES

- Front cover: The excavated area, looking north  
Plate 1: The Romano-British ditch, looking north-east  
Plate 2: The furrow, looking south-east

# EXCAVATION OF A ROMANO-BRITISH DITCH

## AT SHEFFORD LOWER SCHOOL

### SHEFFORD

### BEDFORDSHIRE

NOVEMBER 2007

Accession No. BEDFM 2007. 618

#### *Abstract*

*A small archaeological excavation was undertaken by Northamptonshire Archaeology on a playing field at Shefford Lower School, Shefford, Bedfordshire prior to the proposed construction of a pre-school. The work was carried out subsequent to an earlier evaluation, during which a Romano-British ditch was found. The excavation area was positioned over the trial trench and uncovered a longer length of the ditch, which continued on the same north-east to south-west alignment. The ditch is possibly a field boundary or enclosure ditch located some distance from any settlement. Finds from the ditch fills from both the evaluation and excavation included a small quantity of Roman tile and an opaque blue glass globule, possibly a fragment of decoration from a 1st century AD glass vessel. A medieval bronze buckle was recovered from the subsoil.*

## 1 INTRODUCTION

In November 2007, an archaeological excavation was carried out by Northamptonshire Archaeology (NA) on a playing field at Shefford Lower School, Shefford, Bedfordshire (TL 1379 3872; Fig 1). The work was commissioned by Porter Consulting and Management Services Limited, who have been granted planning permission for the construction of a pre-school and children's centre adjacent to Shefford Lower School (Planning Permission No: 07/01489).

The site lies within an area of significant archaeological interest and sensitivity so an archaeological evaluation was carried out prior to determination of the planning consent (Carlyle 2006). Given the discovery of a Romano-British ditch, a programme of archaeological excavation within the footprint of the proposed building was implemented following consultation with the Bedfordshire County Council Heritage and Environment Section (BCCHEs).

The excavation was carried out to the requirements of the brief for archaeological excavation issued by BCCHEs (2007) and the specification prepared by NA (2007). This report considers evidence from both the evaluation and excavation stages.

The specific aims of the project were to:

- Establish the date, nature and extent of activity or occupation on the development site in addition to the Romano-British ditch already identified in the evaluation, recovering artefacts to assist in the development of type series within the region
- Place the archaeology of the site within its local, regional and national archaeological context.

The national framework for research is set out by English Heritage (EH 1997). The broad research frameworks for the eastern counties of England are set out by Brown and Glazebrook (2000); this does not as yet include Bedfordshire, although it is envisaged it will be included in future revisions. A research framework for Bedfordshire currently exists in draft form (Oake in prep). This report complies with the framework for archaeological reports set out in Appendix 7 of *Management of Archaeological Projects 2* (EH 1991).

## **2 BACKGROUND**

### **2.1 Topography and geology**

The proposed development site, which covers an area of approximately 180m<sup>2</sup> and lies at approximately 45m aOD, is situated on level ground in the south-east corner of a playing field at Shefford Lower School, Shefford, Bedfordshire. In its wider setting, the site is located close to the western margins of the town, between the A507 and Ampthill Road, on the north-facing slope of an east to west ridge that lies between the River Flit to the north and a small tributary stream to the south.

The underlying geology is Lower Greensand with superficial deposits of Boulder Clay; alluvium and gravel deposited by the River Flit occur to the north of Ampthill Road (BGS 1996). The soils are of the Evesham 3 (411c) soil association, comprising slowly permeable calcareous clayey and fine loamy over clayey soils (SSEW 1983).

### **2.2 Historical and archaeological background**

A study of sites listed in the Bedfordshire Historic Environment Record was undertaken for the evaluation (Carlyle 2006). A number of known sites in the vicinity date from the prehistoric to modern periods, although sites dating to the Roman period dominate. The

archaeological work carried out around Shefford Lower School has been given a single group number (HER 379).

The proposed development site is situated within an archaeologically sensitive area which has been subject to archaeological investigation since the early 19th century, when Thomas Inskip, a local antiquarian, found a Roman cremation cemetery in the area now occupied by Shefford Lower and Middle Schools. The finds included a wide range of artefacts, including high quality pottery, glass vessels and coins. Subsequent investigations identified a rectangular stone building, initially described as a temple (Fig 2). During the building of the school in 1940s, the 'temple' was re-interpreted as a probable villa building with a hypocaust (Simco 1984). Between 1993 and 2005 the area has been subject to various archaeological investigations (Albion 2001, 2003 and 2005; Archaeological Solutions 2003; BCAS 1993, 2000a, b and c).

To the north of the current excavation area a 2nd-century aisled building was partially excavated by Albion Archaeology in 2003 (Fig 2; Luke *et al* 2003). It was at least 11m wide and 18m long, although the full length of the building was not excavated. A substantial ditch to the west of the building may have defined a large enclosure around it. This ditch was subsequently observed to the south of the open area excavations during further evaluation and small excavations undertaken in 2003 and 2004 (Fig 2; Luke *et al* 2005). The ditch measured 2.00m wide and 0.55m deep and contained large amounts of pottery, ceramic building material, painted wall plaster and roof tile. It is thought that the ditch may have originated before the conquest, with the Roman buildings later utilising the enclosure it defined.

Evaluations in the surrounding area and subsequent excavation have also identified activity ranging from the Iron Age through to the medieval period (Albion 2005). Several Roman roads have also been listed in the area (HER 717, 5342 and 10480) in the Viatores' *Roman Roads in the South-East Midlands* (1964), although these are presently unproven.

### **3 EXCAVATION METHODOLOGY**

The footprint of the proposed area was excavated using a JCB-type mechanical excavator fitted with a 1.8m wide toothless ditching bucket. The area measured 18m by 10m (180m<sup>2</sup> in total). The topsoil and subsoil were removed under archaeological supervision to reveal the natural substrate. The topsoil and subsoil were stacked separately at the side of the excavated area. All procedures complied with Northamptonshire County Council Health and Safety provisions and Northamptonshire Archaeology Health and Safety at Work Guidelines.



The area was cleaned sufficiently to define the exposed features, and the features were then excavated by hand to determine their date and character. The excavated area and spoil heaps were scanned with a metal detector to ensure maximum finds retrieval.

All archaeological deposits were fully recorded, following standard NA procedures. The archaeological features and deposits were given separate context numbers in a sequence continuing from those allocated during the evaluation. They were described on *pro-forma* context sheets to include details of the context, its relationships and interpretation. Artefacts and ecofacts were collected by hand and retained, receiving appropriate care prior to removal from site (Watkinson and Neal 1998). Unstratified animal bones and modern material were not retained.

The site was planned at a scale of 1:50 and the location of the trench was surveyed and related to the Ordnance Survey National Grid. Sections or profiles through features were drawn at a scale of 1:10, and related to Ordnance Datum. A full photographic record comprising both 35mm black and white negatives and colour transparencies was maintained, supplemented with digital images. The field data, including that from the evaluation, has been compiled into a site archive with appropriate cross-referencing.

Monitoring of the programme of fieldwork was carried out by BCCHEs. All works were conducted in accordance with the *Standards and Guidance for Archaeological Field Evaluation* (1994, revised 2001) and the *Code of Conduct* of the Institute of Field Archaeologists (1985, revised 2006). In addition, all works complied with the guidelines detailed in *Standards for Field Archaeology in the East of England* (Gurney 2003).

## **4 EXCAVATION RESULTS**

The natural substrate was glacial till (Boulder Clay), a light to mid brownish yellow clay with light greyish blue veins, containing shattered flint nodules and chalk flecks. It occurred at approximately 0.5m below ground level. Slight differentiations in the natural were noticed across the site; one of these was observed during the evaluation and interpreted as a tree-throw.

### **4.1 The Romano-British ditch**

Crossing the southern end of the trench on a north-east to south-west alignment and cutting the natural, was a ditch (Figs 3 and 4, Section 4 [15]; Plate 1). The excavated section measured 2.7m wide by 0.79m deep and had a steep-sided U-shaped profile, which splayed out near the top. The primary fill (12) was compacted grey silty clay with frequent limestone flecks and occasional pieces of gravel. A secondary fill (11) consisted of moderately brown

grey clay silt with frequent orange-brown mottling occasional snail shells and rare flecks of charcoal. Several pieces of Roman ceramic roof tile, including *tegulae* and *imbrices*, were recovered from this deposit. The mottling effect may indicate that the ditch was waterlogged at some point. The upper fill (10) was greyish brown clayey silt with occasional pebbles and snail shells; it also contained Roman ceramic roof tile.

This ditch may form the part of the south-western corner of a large enclosure containing the aisled building excavated in 2003 (Luke *et al* 2003). The western boundary ditch has been observed several times in various evaluations and excavations (Fig 2). If this new ditch does form the southern side of the enclosure near the south-western corner, this would mean the enclosed area would measure at least 140m north-west to south-east.

#### **4.2 The medieval/post-medieval furrow**

To the north of the Roman ditch was a medieval/post-medieval furrow, part of a former ridge and furrow field system (Figs 3 and 4, Section 3 [9]; Plate 2). The excavated section measured 1.8m wide and 0.2m deep and had a shallow dish-shaped profile. The fill was mid brown clay silt with occasional small flint pebbles.

The ditch and furrow were both sealed by the subsoil, which was c0.3m thick and comprised mid brown slightly sandy clayey silt. A late medieval bronze buckle, dating to the 15th or 16th centuries, was recovered from this layer. The topsoil was approximately 0.23m thick and consisted of dark brownish grey organic slightly sandy silt. The Roman ditch was cut on its southern edge by a modern slot for a land drain.

## **5 FINDS**

### **5.1 Ceramic tile by Pat Chapman**

This assemblage of 19 sherds of ceramic roof tile weighs 3217g. The majority came from the uppermost and secondary fills of the Roman ditch, with two from the subsoil and three from the fill of the furrow. Fourteen of these are Roman roof tile and of the five remaining sherds, two are probably medieval in date. The surfaces and edges have been worn very smooth, indicating exposure to the weather and movement through the land as manure deposits over a long period of time.

#### ***Roman roof tile***

These fourteen sherds comprise seven *tegulae*, three *imbrices* and four body sherds, all in the same fabric. The *tegulae* are between 22-25mm thick, the surviving flanges are 25-30mm thick and 25-30mm high, being both narrow and broad. The three curved *imbrices* are 11mm

and 15mm thick and the body sherds are 18-22mm thick. The fabric is hard fine silty sand with some quartz and flint inclusions up to 3mm and grog up to 2mm and occasionally up to 8mm. They have been fired to a pale orange or a slightly darker orange red.

One of the remaining sherds is made from a similar fabric to the Roman tile, but is a corner fragment 11mm thick, while the remaining two small sherds, 12mm thick, are made from a slightly coarse red fabric.

### ***Medieval roof tile***

One small tile sherd is probably medieval in date, from the subsoil. It is 10mm and 11mm thick. It is made from a hard coarse red brown fabric and has mortar traces on one side.

## **5.2 The medieval buckle by Tora Hylton**

A small buckle with double-looped frame (20 x 14mm) was recovered from subsoil deposits. The outside edges of this distinctive buckle are serrated, giving the impression of teeth; although the frame is cast, this form of ornamentation must have been undertaken by hand. Buckles of this type were in use during the 15th and 16th centuries.

## **6 DISCUSSION**

An 11.5m length of a Romano-British ditch, possibly an enclosure boundary ditch, was recorded during the excavation. The dimensions of the ditch are very similar to a substantial ditch found to the north-west of the current site, which is thought to represent the western boundary of a large enclosure containing an aisled building and associated structures. It is therefore possible that the ditch observed on this site formed the southern boundary of this enclosure near the south-western corner. Few domestic artefacts were recovered from the fills of the ditch implying it was situated some distance from any area of settlement. However, the comparatively large quantities of tile recovered from the uppermost and secondary fills of the ditch may relate to the demolition of the buildings situated within the enclosure.

The furrow in the northern part of the excavated area is part of a ridge and furrow field system showing that the site was cultivated during the medieval and post-medieval periods.

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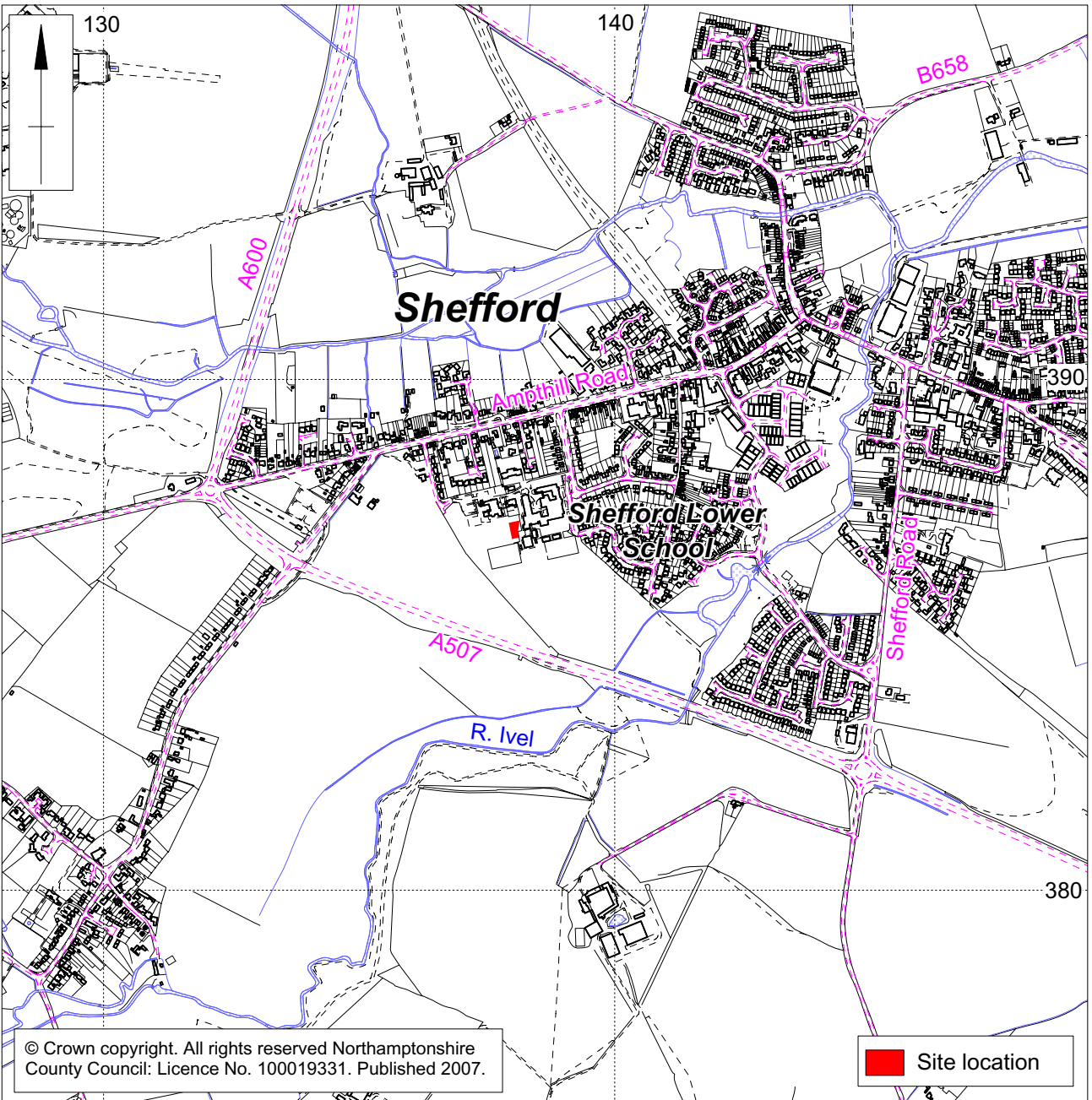
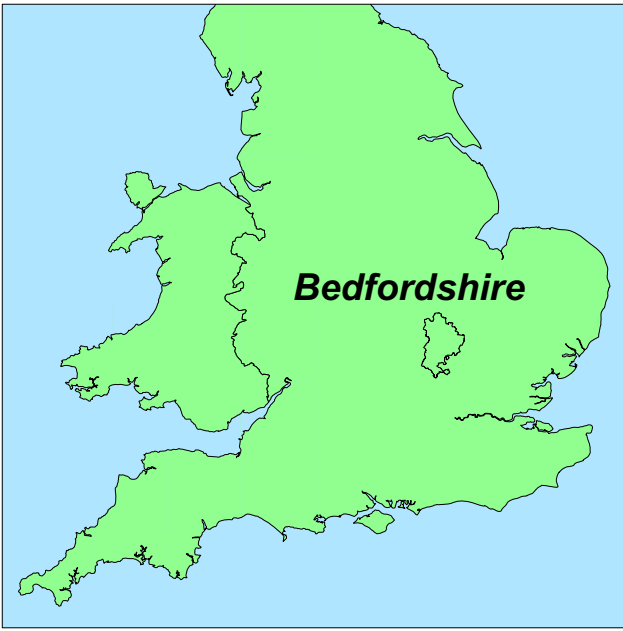
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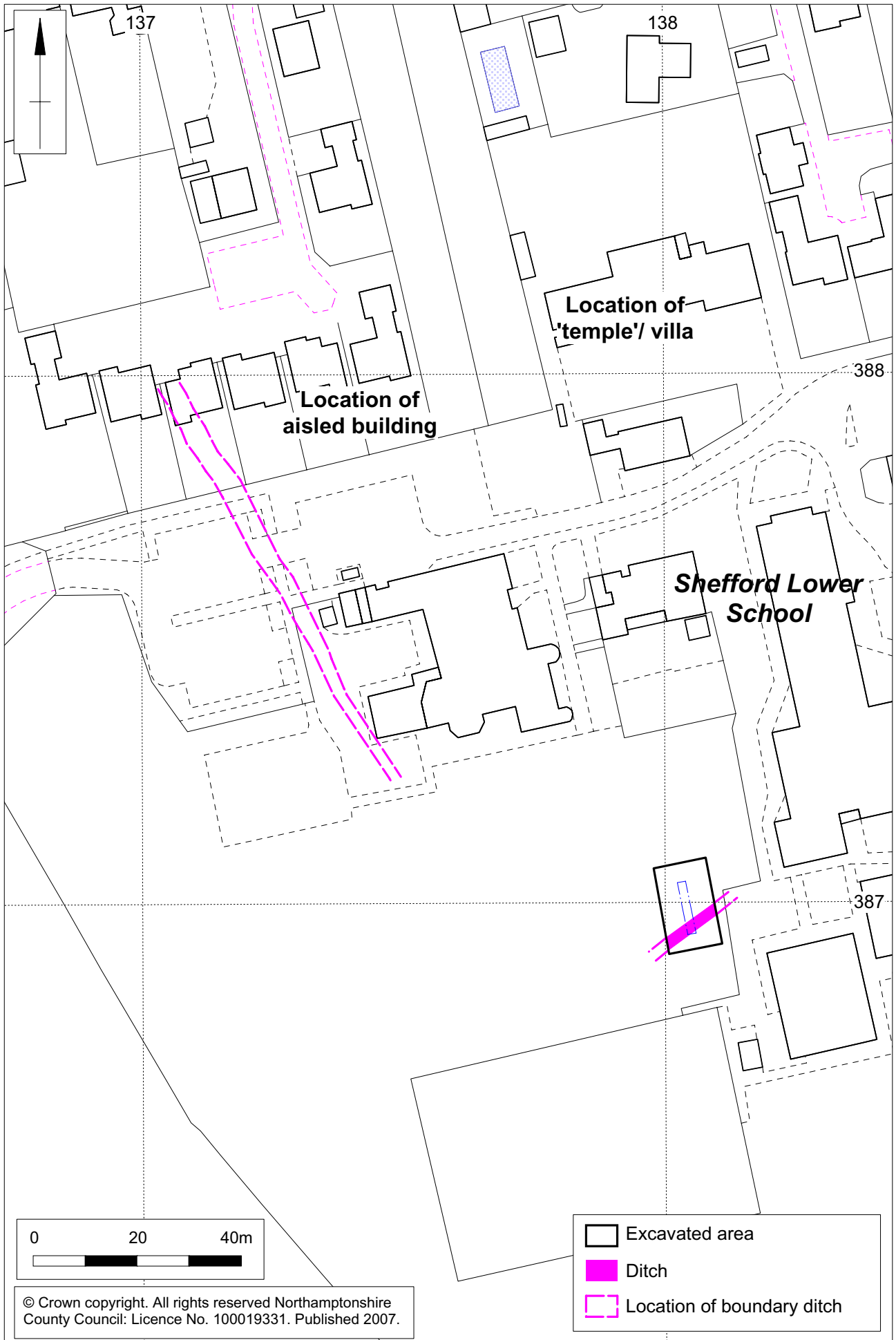
## **Maps**

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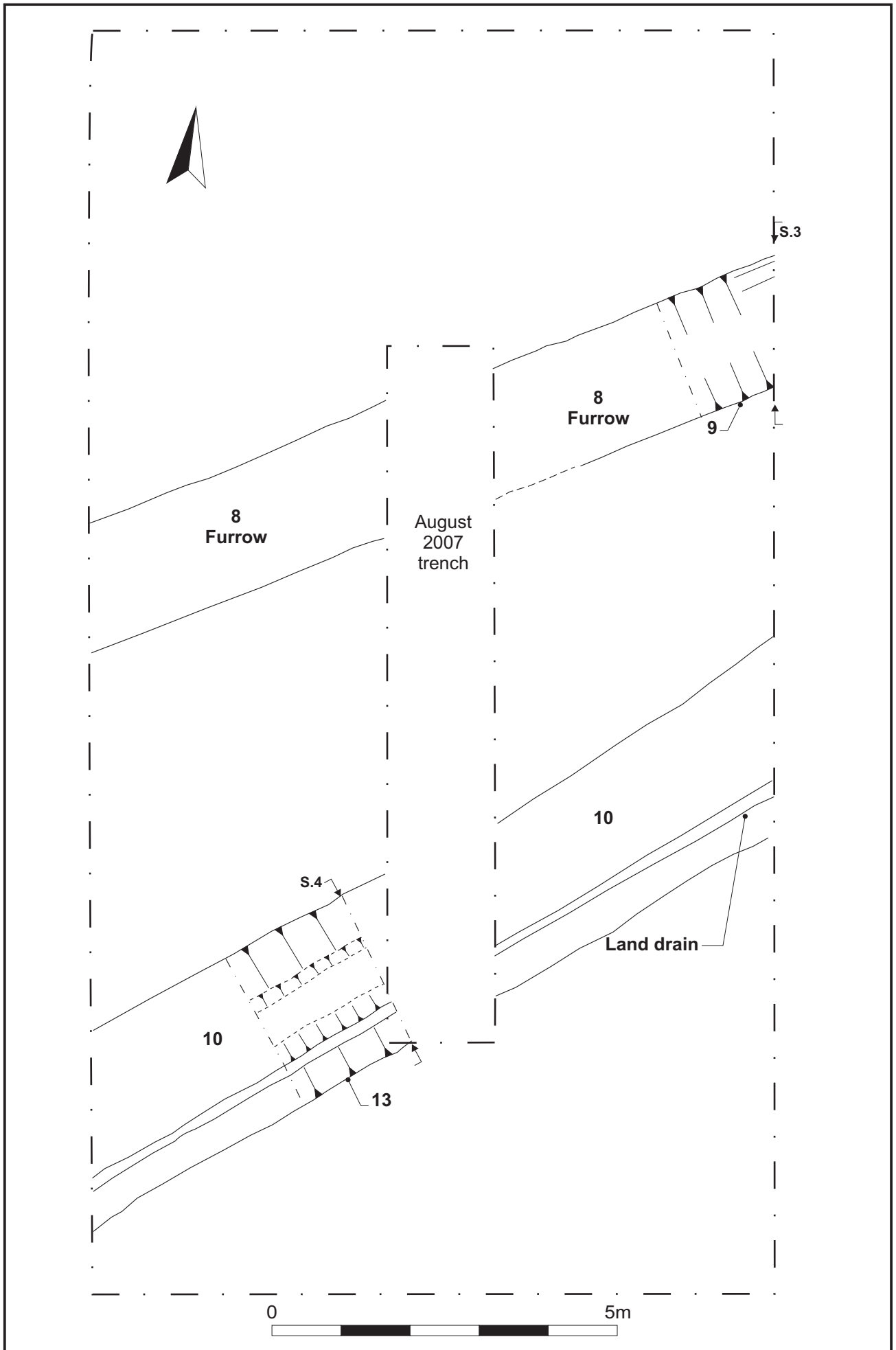
Scale 1:12,500

Site location Fig 1



Scale 1:1000

Trench location Fig 2



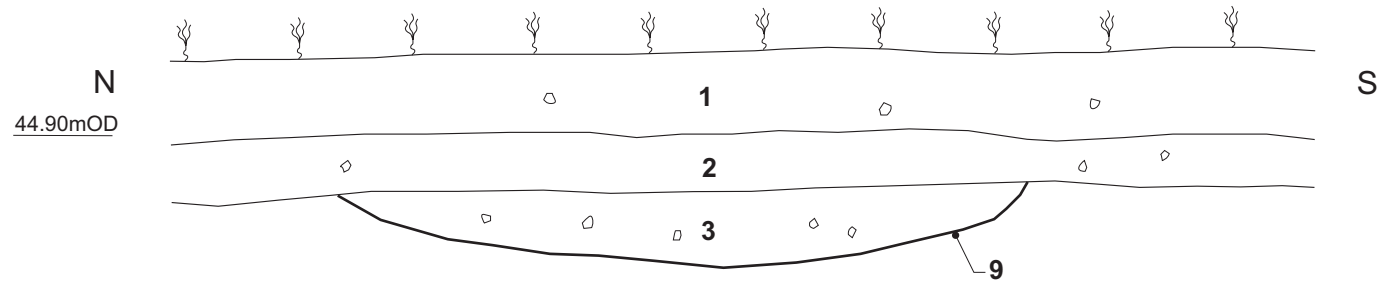
The Romano-British ditch Fig 2



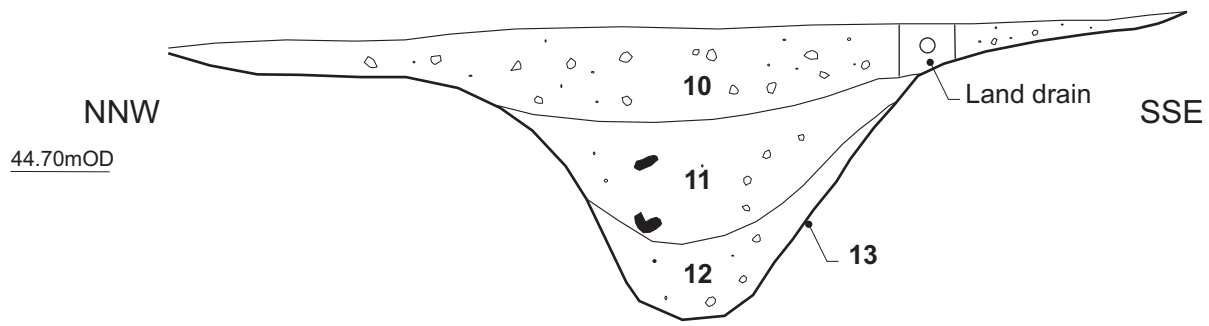
The Romano-British ditch (Section 4) and the medieval/post-medieval furrow (Section 3)

Fig 4

Section 3



Section 4



Tile





Plate 1: The Romano-British ditch, looking north-east



Plate 2: The medieval furrow, looking south-east