

Northamptonshire Archaeology

An archaeological watching brief
at St John's Hospital Chapel
Northampton
2005



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Report 06/104

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QUALITY CONTROL

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OASIS REPORT FORM

PROJECT DETAILS		
Project title	An Archaeological Watching Brief at St John's Hospital Chapel, Northampton	
Short description	An archaeological watching brief was undertaken during groundworks connected with the refurbishment of St John's Hospital Chapel. Floors dated to the 18th- and 19th-centuries were removed. An occupation surface was revealed which had been cut by the south wall of the chapel. Outside the chapel medieval walls were exposed as were medieval or post-medieval graves.	
Project type	Watching brief on change of use of premises	
Previous work	Watching brief 1989 (NCCAUI) Desk-based assessment 1995 for adjacent, related site (Northants Archaeology)	
Future work	Unknown	
Monument type and period	Medieval Hospital, post-medieval alms houses	
Significant finds	None	
PROJECT LOCATION		
County	Northamptonshire	
Site address	St John's Hospital Chapel, Northampton	
Easting	47543	
Northing	26019	
Height OD	58m	
PROJECT CREATORS		
Organisation	Northamptonshire Archaeology	
Project brief originator		
Project Design originator	Northamptonshire Archaeology	
Director/Supervisor	David J. Leigh	
Project Manager	Iain Soden	
Sponsor or funding body	The Richardson Group	
PROJECT DATE		
Start date	September 2004	
End date	March 2005	
ARCHIVES	Location (Accession no.)	Content (eg pottery, animal bone etc)
Physical	Northampton Borough Museum	Pottery, animal bone, clay tobacco pipe, architectural stonework
Paper	Ditto (+ report to NCC- SMR)	Site written and drawn records, photographs, report
Digital	NCC-SMR	Digital report

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**AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF AT
ST JOHN'S HOSPITAL CHAPEL
NORTHAMPTON
SEPTEMBER 2004 - MARCH 2005**

Abstract

An archaeological watching brief was undertaken by Northamptonshire Archaeology during the refurbishment of St John's Hospital Chapel, Northampton. Floors dated to the 18th and 19th centuries were removed to insert under-floor heating and new flooring. During the course of the watching brief post-medieval makeup layers were excavated and an undated occupation / floor layer was exposed. Medieval (probably 13th-century) pottery sherds were found beneath this surface, which was cut by the south wall of the building. Outside the building service trenches exposed a major east to west-aligned medieval wall which was extremely shallowly buried and extended the long axis of the chapel eastward; it was encroached upon by human burials of the post-medieval period further east. The work facilitated a re-appraisal of understanding of this important medieval monastic building and enabled aspects of its known history to be updated.

1 INTRODUCTION

An archaeological watching brief was undertaken by Northamptonshire Archaeology between September and October 2004 during groundworks associated with the refurbishment of St John's Hospital Chapel, Northampton (NGR: SP 7543 6019; Fig 1; Plate 5). The work was carried out on behalf of The Richardson Group to fulfil the requirements of an agreed project design for an archaeological watching brief in pursuance of conditions applied to planning consent.

2 BACKGROUND

2.1 Location and Topography

St John's Hospital Chapel is situated within the historic core of Northampton on land at about 58m above Ordnance Datum sloping down towards the River Nene. It lies to the immediate east of Bridge Street, which runs south-west from the medieval town centre and crosses the south bridge where it becomes London Road. The British Geological Survey has mapped the underlying geology as Northampton Sand with Ironstone. The standing buildings and the ground on which they stand comprise a Scheduled Ancient Monument (County no 64).

2.2 Historical background

The Chapel or church

There are few institutions in Northampton which have received as much antiquarian attention as St John's Hospital. First surveyed by Sir Henry Dryden in 1871 (1875), the hospital complex was subsequently researched by Poynton (1905) and Rev R M Serjeantson (1912 [131, 132] and 1913). The former Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England have published a

summary of the architectural development of the buildings (RCHME 1985). Some desk-based collation of pertinent aspects of previous research was carried out for a nearby development in 1995 (Soden 1995) and aspects of that are relevant here, in reconstructing the immediate hospital remains. Dryden's work remains immensely valuable. Otherwise, it is not within the remit of the current report to assimilate all of the previous research on the hospital as an institution into the present watching brief. For such an exercise, the reader is referred to the bibliography of the present report.

Founded in about 1140, nothing is known about the form of the first hospital buildings. It has been surmised that they may have originally been centred around a large conventual church lying between the present chapel building and the site of the former Master's House to the east (Serjeantson and Atkins 1906, 156-8; RCHME 1985, 64 and microfiche 342). Prior to the current works the evidence for this has been equivocal and has been based entirely upon the interpretation of medieval documents which refer to four separate altars, possibly denoting a larger church (*ibid*, 342). In the mid-13th century that area was perhaps reserved for Crackbole Lane, stopped up by the hospital and lying between the church and the hospital grange (often assumed to have been the later refectory / master's house). It is thus difficult to support the idea of a large conventual church in that area on the basis of documents alone. No remains were formerly reported, other than the master's house, when the railway station was built (watched by the fastidious Dryden) in 1875.

Certainly the construction of a 'conventual church' was mentioned in 1307-8 (Serjeantson 1912, [131], 233) and again in 1432 (Thompson 1914, 94-5) but of the altars, one in 1432 was stated to be 'next to the conventual church' (*in altari iuxta ecclesiam conventualem; ibid*, 94) and in 1523 another was noted to be in the infirmary (Serjeantson 1912 [132], 283). Four chantries are referred to in an Episcopal visitation of 1520 (*ibid*, 278). Two can be traced back by name to 1339 and both are said to be in the Chapel of our Lady/Lady Chapel (Serjeantson and Atkins 1906, 157). In 1310-11 four newly constructed altars were said to be situated merely "within the precincts of the hospital" (Serjeantson 1912 [131], 234). During the survey of Chantries, colleges, hospitals etc, carried out as the last part of the Dissolution process in 1545-6, the King's commissioners said of St John's "*The said hospitall is no parysh church but onely for the company there inhabytyng*" (Serjeantson 1912 [132], 284). This negative observation would potentially have been a recipe for its destruction since ongoing parochial or quasi-parochial functions were one major criterion for retention of ecclesiastical buildings, an argument used successfully elsewhere to ensure continuance. In this way St John the Baptist's Church and its neighbour Bonds Hospital in Coventry ensured continuance and association, despite very tenuous quasi-parochial rights. However, in practice this amounted to little more than stagnation for some time (Soden 2005, 112). The unreliability of any uncorroborated individual document is brought into sharp focus by the fact that the 1520 visitation also mentions the existence of a chapter house, perhaps the most obvious trapping of a monastic community. However, the compiler of the same document seemed not to know even the nature of the foundation being dealt with, calling it variously a hospital, a college and a monastery (*ibid*, 276-8); perhaps significantly, the Episcopal visitation of 1442 had apparently been undertaken in the chapel vestibule in lieu of a proper chapter house (*visitacio...facta in vestibule ut pro loco capitulari ibidem; Thompson 1929, 247*). This may, however, have any number of reasons, not least the constraints of contemporary building work. It does not necessarily imply that no chapter house had ever existed or would ever exist thereafter.

That there were four altars seems certain, with four chantries attached. However, prior to the current work there has been little other evidence to suggest that they were attached to anything other than the surviving chapel. The evidence for a larger, earlier conventual church is scant on the basis of documents alone.

Commentators are agreed that documents note a change of organisation in the late medieval period, from a hospital in the old sense, caring materially for the destitute and providing board and lodgings for travellers, to one in which the community comprised a Master, two co-brethren and the

brethren, who were largely infirm. Thus, although it continued to entertain guests in the refectory (later the Master's house) it began to take on the aspect of an alms house in the received sense of the word, caring for a set number of poor or infirm persons. To accompany this, the adjacent 'domicile' building was remodelled and took on much of the external aspect seen today. The chapel too was remodelled. Of this period, only the west wall has been said to survive, attributed to the Mastership of Richard Sherd (Master 1474-98). The former RCHME has attributed all other structural elements to post-medieval and more recent remodelling (1985, 65). The Charity Commissioners reported in 1837 that the Chapel (presumably largely as it stands today) "was repaired a few years ago, and is in good condition" (Charity Comm report 1837, 809).

Burials, intramural and extramural

The Chapel is the site of numerous intramural burials, the sites of some of which are generally attested, but unproven. The Master Richard Sherd, who resigned his mastership in 1498, was buried in the Chapel (Serjeantson 1913, 75). The travelling antiquarian John Leland, writing of a visit in 1536, noted "*There ys in the north side of the chirch a high tumber, wher is buried the Lady Margaret* (surname not given). *In the south side lyith buried Elis Pouger, with a French ep[itaph]*" (Leland 1543, I: 10) This stone, and presumably the burial too, was apparently later moved to Piddington Church (where St John's held the advowson) and there the county historian John Bridges recorded the epitaph c1720 as "*Elis Pouger gyt ici, Deu de sa alme eyt merci. Ky por sa alme priera, quarante jours de pardon avera*" (Bridges 1791, 378). In translation the inscription is *Here lies Elis Pouger, may God have mercy on his soul. Whoever shall pray for his soul, shall receive forty days indulgence*. The formulaic French makes it likely that the tomb dates to the period 1250-1350. After the Black Death (1349-64) Latin or English is far more likely for an inscription. The indulgence, a promise of remission from purgatory, makes it probable that Elis Pouger was a cleric, probably of the hospital, possibly even the master, although his name is mentioned nowhere else. The Reformation process removed all recourse to indulgences so the stone must have been moved very soon after Leland saw it in 1536. The inscription would have been an irrelevance within a few short years. The burial itself (but obviously not the tomb superstructure) may still lie in the church but is no longer visible. It was not unknown for significant benefactor's tombs and chantry functions to be moved at the Dissolution, such as the FitzAlan tombs from Lewes Priory moved to Chichester Cathedral and the Copston Chantry from Coventry Cathedral-Priory to the nearby parish church (Soden 2005, 106). The moves, however, bought them only a few years' respite until the Dissolution process caught up with the chantries in 1546.

Leland also records that some of the dead of the battle of Northampton (1460) were buried in the chapel (Leland 1543, I: 10). This is entirely plausible since the battlefield lay a short distance from that side of the town. Leland was also writing just within living memory of the battle (76 years), so there is no reason to doubt his assertion. Wetton (Pretty 1849, 80) records that "*a great many skeletons were found on digging foundations for the new houses adjoining, near the street; they were supposed to have been buried at the time of the battle of Northampton*". His association of those particular burials with the battle, is probably fanciful, merely wishful thinking being aware of Leland's earlier description. Without note of huge bone injuries, a hallmark of battlefield deposits (such as at Towton, Yorkshire, or Visby, Sweden), his identification is unreliable.

Antiquarians note the presence side by side 'before the altar' of two inscribed tomb slabs, one of Dr George Wake (d1682), formerly master of the hospital, and his successor as master John Skelton, Archdeacon of Bedford (d1704) (Serjeantson 1913, 57 *inter alia*). These slabs still occupy a similar position. Access to them has not always been straightforward, since Poynton (1905, 8) states "*The visitor has but to raise the moveable wooden floor upon which the priest stands at celebration and the memorial stone [of Wake] becomes visible*". The final floor of the chapel (at the time of the present works) had no such provision, the slabs being flush with the altar step and the statement seems to relate to an earlier floor of unknown date, still in situ in 1905.

A cemetery is attested on the site at a very early date, since it was recorded as being enlarged in 1286 (Cox 1898, 334). Its size and location are unclear at this time. Both the Charity Commissioners' report of 1837 and Sir Henry Dryden's survey of 1871 record a cemetery attached to the chapel on the south side, its existence corroborated by contemporaries (Wetton, in Pretty 1849, 80; Dicey 1872, 212). The Charity Commissioners reported that "*Mr Williams states that he formerly used to christen and church parishioners of All Saints in this chapel, and bury in the churchyard. Marriages were also celebrated here prior to the Marriage Act [of 1753]*" (Charity Comm. 1837, 809). Richard Williams, Curate, was one of the Co-brethren from 1796 to 1844 (Longden 1942). One of his predecessors as Co-brother, Jonas Whitwam, had been Vicar of Holy Sepulchre (1668-1708) so there was plenty of opportunity for a variety of institutions to help each other out. This extended also to marriages on behalf of Abington in the period 1716-49 (Serjeantson 1913, [134], 58). Following the Great Fire of Northampton in 1675 St John's handled marriages in All Saints Parish on behalf of that church, which had burnt down. During the period of reconstruction, it is reasonable to suggest that other parochial rights were devolved to St John's and this may have included burials. Whether marriage or burial, in the institutions of the Church of England, it was all highly irregular and drew comment from the Charity Commissioners in 1837. It is not clear whether the cemetery known in the 19th century occupies the same location as that attested from the 13th century.

Historic Maps

Maps from 1610-1886 have been consulted, plus the 1871 unpublished Dryden survey (in Northampton Central Library's Local Studies section), only summarised in his 1875 paper. The buildings of the Chapel and adjacent church (formerly dormitory), are unchanged in plan so far as can be ascertained during this period, given the stylised nature of earlier depictions. The 1871 survey is the only one to have valuable detail, not shown by predecessors so this has been most consulted for the current report (Fig 3). Surrounding buildings to the north (a pub and houses) went through numerous alterations but all have long since been swept away. In 20th century maps the buildings adjoining to the south have been a garage and a warehouse and their parking areas (currently retail sheds and parking).

The area adjoining the east end of the former dormitory (south of the chapel) was the chancel of the former Roman Catholic Church of St John, which met in the complex after 1875. Further modern buildings adjoining the east of this constituted a toilet block. It is not known whether any of their construction works disturbed burials. No record is known of archaeological work in relation to this.

3 OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

The aims of the watching brief were to:

- ◆ Observe ground-works associated with the refurbishment and to record all archaeological deposits uncovered
- ◆ To determine the date, character, state of preservation and depth of any archaeological deposits observed and to retrieve all datable artefacts.

The fieldwork comprised regular visits to the site during ground-works. A photographic record in both black and white negative and colour slide was kept along with supplementary photographs in digital format. The written record employed Northamptonshire Archaeology pro-forma sheets.

Ground-works were undertaken both inside the buildings and outside. The works inside comprised the removal of the existing floor of the Chapel and the laying of a new surface. During the course of these works an opportunity was taken to dig a single test-pit against the south wall of the chapel to ascertain the stratification within the building before concrete for new sub-floors was poured. Outside, ground-works comprised the excavation of substantial service trenches. Ground-works were undertaken using a tracked 360° mini-digger fitted with a combination of both toothed and toothless buckets.

4 THE RECORDED EVIDENCE

4.1 The interior

The final floor was of simple Edwardian quarry tiles laid in a chequerboard of alternating blue and red, stamped as made in Staffordshire but the maker was not known. They are undated but probably derive from the early 20th century when the chapel was a place of worship for Roman Catholics. However, they must post-date 1905 since the antiquary Poynton relates a wooden floor-scheme in that year. These and up to 440mm of underlying material were stripped using a small machine fitted with a toothless bucket across the entire chapel interior (Plate 1). This exposed a mixed layer comprising numerous fragments of modern ceramic building material within a matrix of grey/brown silt loam. At the eastern end two tomb ledger-slabs exposed in the floor were left in situ. However, it could be seen that they are themselves *ex-situ*, since they related to the tiled floor and its sub-base. There was no sign of a tomb or cyst beneath their edges at any point.

An elongated test-pit was hand-excavated along the southern wall of the chapel (Fig 2). This measured approximately 2m x 1m with a maximum depth of 900mm. Within it, the base comprised a very thin (20mm) floor of soft grey/white lime mortar. This was overlain by grey/brown silt loam containing numerous fragments of post-medieval ceramic building material with occasional fragments of unworked limestone and ironstone up to 400mm thick. This in turn was sealed with a mixed layer comprising numerous fragments of modern ceramic building material within a matrix of grey/brown silt loam, up to 440mm thick. The wall which formed one long side of the test pit was that of the long axis of the main chapel. This contained numerous architectural fragments of probably 13th-century origin. As such the wall above appears to have been substantially rebuilt later in the medieval period. Pottery dated to the 13th century derived from below the mortar floor.

4.2 The exterior

Trench 1

Adjacent to the north wall of the chapel a 900mm-wide drainage trench was excavated which extended along the whole length of the chapel up to 1.3m deep (Fig 2). The stratigraphic sequence comprised mid grey/brown silt loam containing occasional fragments of limestone. This was overlain by compact mid grey clay loam containing numerous fragments of modern ceramic building material mixed with fragments of corroded iron associated with modern structural components. Sealing this was up to 0.22m of modern material.

A change in stratification was noted at the eastern end of the trench where an undated layer of grey/brown silty loam contained an *ex-situ* Romanesque foliate column-capital in limestone. Overlying this was a wall c400mm high by c260mm wide. This ran across for the full width of the trench and to the north-west for 1.2m. The wall was unbonded in rough ironstone fragments. It was sealed by modern material.

Trench 2 and soakaway

Trench 2 contained a wall of large ashlar blocks situated immediately below the modern ground surface (Fig 2; Plate 2). This was set on an east-west alignment and extended for the full depth of the trench and was bonded with soft grey/white mortar (Plate 3). At its mid-point a second abutted it and extended north beyond the trench (Plate 2). This wall, 1m wide, was of similar construction to the east-west wall, to which it was bonded.

At its eastern end the trench was widened to form a new soakaway. This revealed extensive modern disturbance caused by modern drainage on the northern side of the wall, however, a few traces of a 30mm-thick reddish pink plaster floor survived, overlying the foundation offset of the wall.

On the southern side of the wall there was black topsoil. In the north and east-facing sections there was grave-earth, comprising grey/black silt loam containing numerous fragments of human bones. A single grave-cut was revealed in the east facing section. The grave-cut extended down directly from below the present concrete hardstanding and was set on east-west alignment. Whilst this remained unexcavated, preserved *in-situ*, the foot bones were exposed projecting just into the area of the new soak-away (Plate 3, top left).

5 DISCUSSION: RECONSTRUCTING THE HOSPITAL

In his 1871 survey Dryden recorded the interior (Dryden 1875, 230-2), and it is his observation which was relied upon by the more recent RCHME summary. However, it is unclear whether he saw the interior of the chapel walls with or without plaster. He states that, in the restoration attested by the Charity Commissioners a few years prior to 1837, "*the whole south wall was rebuilt. The present windows are said to have been indicated by fragments found in the wall* (with an implication that they were no longer there), *but the windows in the south wall, previous to the rebuilding, were round-headed single lights of the seventeenth or eighteenth century*".

Observation in the current works makes it clear that no trace of any round headed windows can be seen either inside or outside; Dryden remains our only source for these. However, there exist more than mere traces of former gothic windows of full height, visible on the interior, closely emulated, but not removed, by the existing fenestration (Plate 4). The south wall cannot therefore have been a complete rebuild, containing as it does a redundant medieval gothic scheme. The short-lived, round-headed windows of which Dryden speaks must have been removed totally, encompassed entirely within the gothicising replacements of c1830, which survive today. If the interior walls had lacked any plaster, as they do today, Dryden would have noted this himself.

Observation of the upstanding fabric, combined with excavation below the 18th- and 19th-century floors in the present works has shown that the south wall stands as built, with only the fenestration altered. A sequence of three former floor levels was noted. The earliest, of beaten-earth, is probably medieval, and has been cut through by the construction of the south wall. The second, best seen east of the step to the former altar-rail, was of stone flags laid upon soil makeup, imported in the 18th century and could be traced by the bottom edge of the wall plaster. The latest, a chequerboard of black and red tiles, was laid on a bed of mortar over a widespread dump of ironstone rubble. This had supported pews either side of a central aisle and was laid after 1905, incorporating the old tomb slabs of Wake and Skelton flush with its surface. There was probably a preceding wooden floor of which no trace remained, mentioned by Poynton as still current in 1905. The new floor is concrete and up to 500mm thick.

Architectural stonework built into the sub-floor fabric of the south wall foundations indicate that the wall was built no earlier than c1450 (Photographs in archive). The subsequent floor makeup confirms that it was the wall to which all the later floors (for which evidence survived) related.

The tomb slabs of George Wake and John Skelton remain at the location mentioned by the antiquaries, Poynton and Serjeantson, before the former altar. Their surface related exactly to the final floor and they rested, not on the walls of burial vaults, but on the rubble which formed the base of that floor. Dryden in 1875 made no mention of these slabs, a curious omission for such a meticulous recorder. It is possible that he never saw them (perhaps they were carpeted over or he had not been told of the trapdoor described by Poynton in 1905) but he can hardly have been unaware of their previous record by the county historian John Bridges. It seems, therefore they have been raised with the floors and no indication of their original level was forthcoming. It is uncertain whether their position in front of the final altar, against the wall, really does point to that of the burials themselves, since the altar position might itself have moved back. No other graves were exposed although a few fragments of disarticulated human bone were present in the archaeological sequence and have been reburied at the site.

The exterior walls uncovered in the watching brief lend particular weight to the previous assertion (VCH and RCHME) that the current chapel building is a much contracted version of a former, larger conventual church which stretched eastwards from the current building. If so then this has been covered by late medieval and post-medieval graves which continued to be demarked by a cemetery boundary until as late as 1871. If the structures did form part of a church, then they too will contain contemporary graves. It is likely that there is widespread survival of the later cemetery levels and, extrapolating from where they have been seen, underlying stonework of the former hospital structures seems to be well preserved under as little as 300mm of modern overburden.

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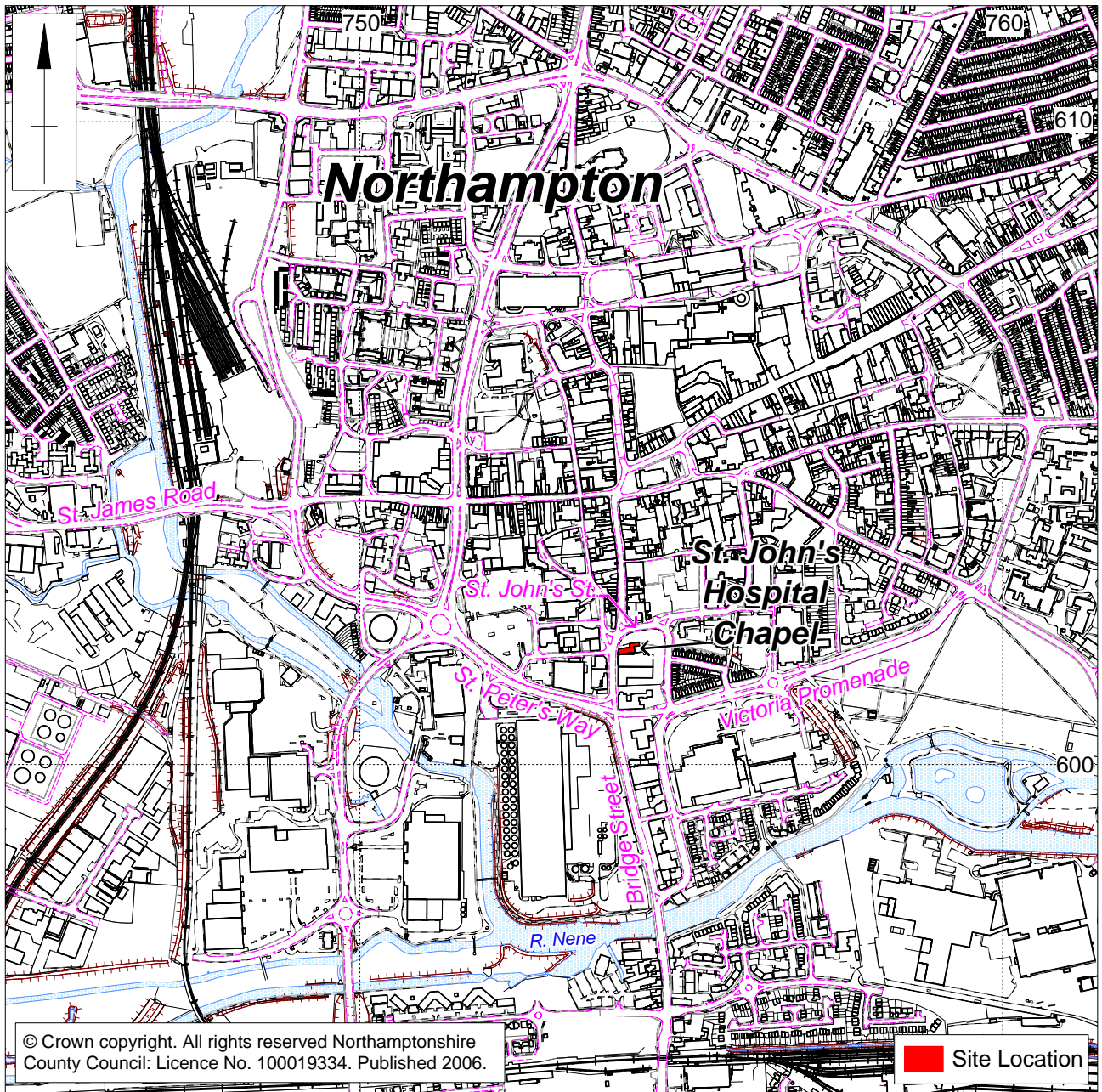
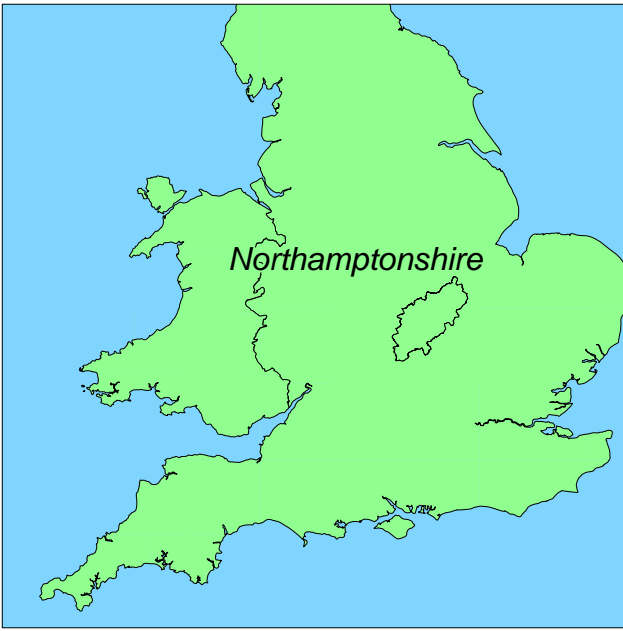
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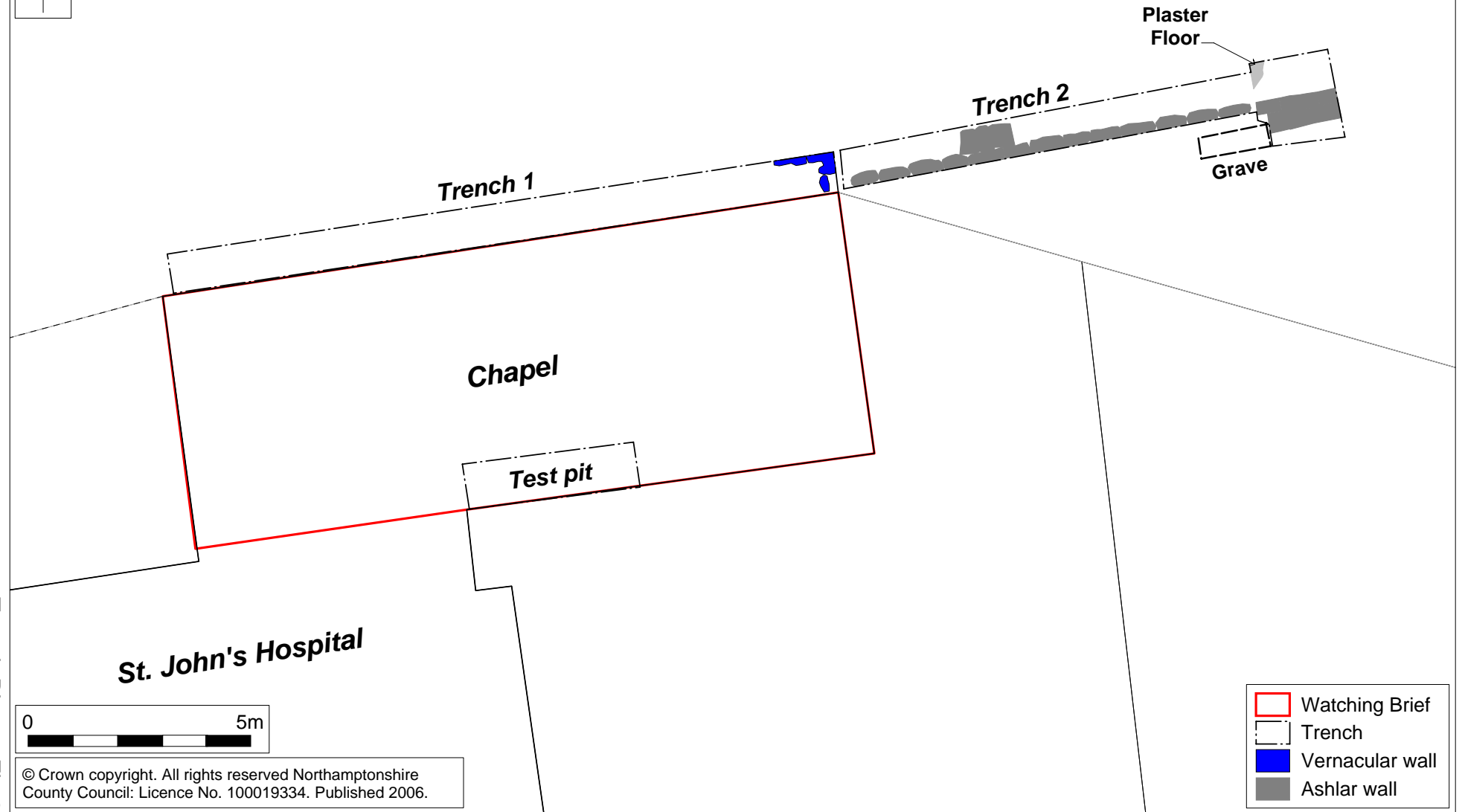
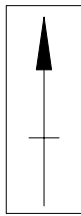
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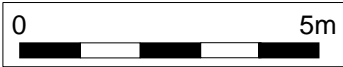
Site Location Fig 1

Scale 1:125



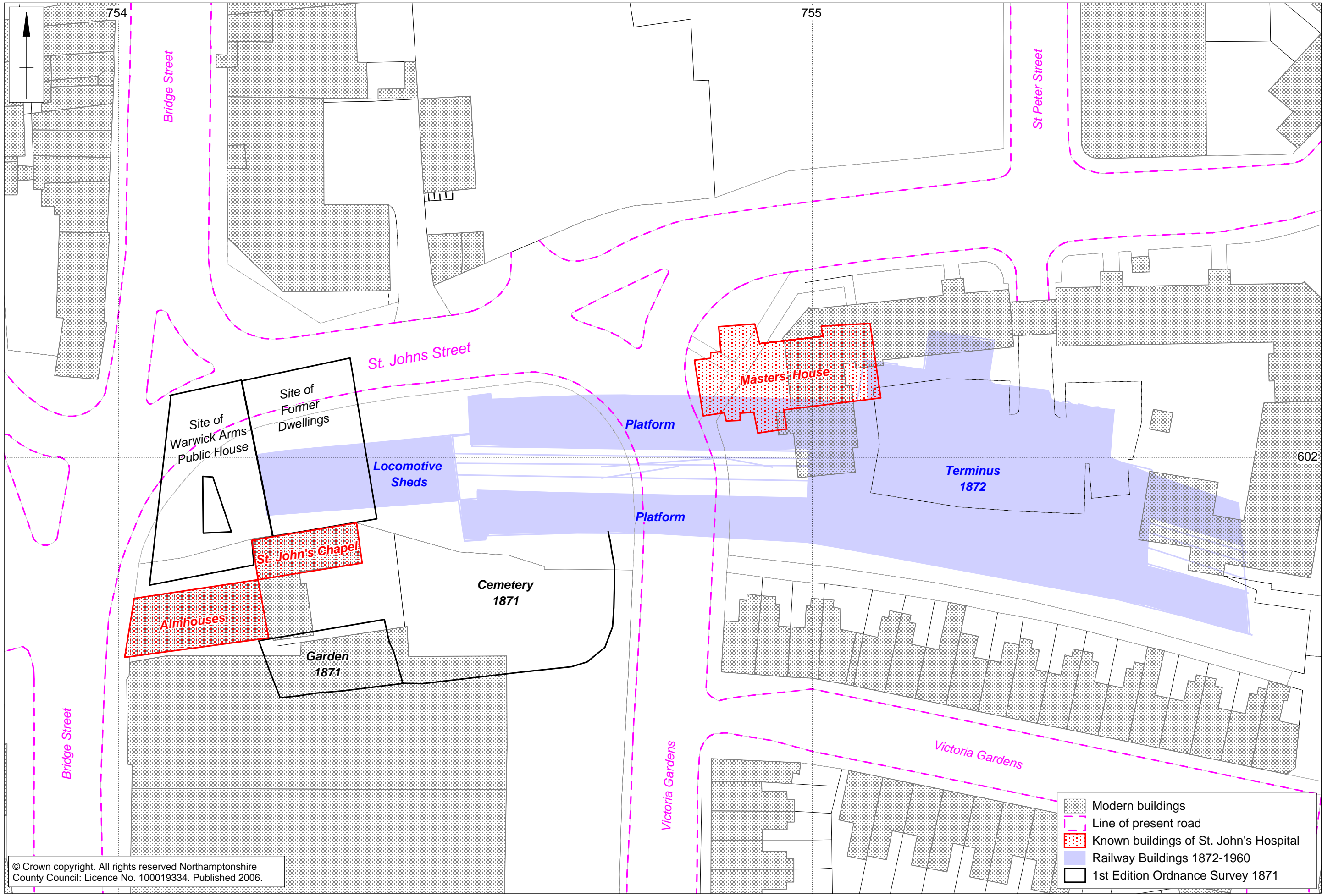
Trench Plan

Fig 2



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- Watching Brief
- Trench
- Vernacular wall
- Ashlar wall



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Scale 1:500

Plan of previous St. John's Street buildings Fig 3



Plate 1: The works of conversion, interior of chapel.



Plate 2: Trench 2, detail of wall west of chapel.



Plate 3: Trench 2, medieval wall, looking west and feet of burial.



Plate 4: Window in south wall of chapel, showing previous embrasure in wall.



Plate 5: Chapel west front.