

## Archaeological Services & Consultancy Ltd

**WATCHING BRIEF:  
PURWELL NINESPRINGS NATURE RESERVE  
PURWELL LANE  
HITCHIN  
HERTFORDSHIRE**

NGR: TL 20595 29320

*on behalf of Herts & Middlesex Wildlife Trust*



Bob Zeepvat BA MIFA

November 2010

ASC: 1351/PNS/2



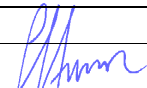
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## Site Data

<i>ASC project code:</i>	PNS	<i>ASC Project No:</i>	1351
<i>OASIS ref:</i>	Archaeol2-8352	<i>Event/Accession no:</i>	
<i>County:</i>	Hertfordshire		
<i>Village/Town:</i>	Hitchin		
<i>Civil Parish:</i>	Hitchin		
<i>NGR (to 8 figs):</i>	TL 20595 29320		
<i>Extent of site:</i>	0.01 ha		
<i>Present use:</i>	Nature Reserve		
<i>Planning proposal:</i>	Creation of two ponds and viewing platform with access from public footpath		
<i>Planning application ref/date:</i>	1/01256/09		
<i>Local Planning Authority:</i>	North Herts District Council		
<i>Date of fieldwork:</i>	26 <sup>th</sup> & 27 <sup>th</sup> October 2010		
<i>Client:</i>	Herts & Middlesex Wildlife Trust Grebe House St Michael's Street St Albans AL3 4SN		
<i>Contact name:</i>	Alison O'Dea		

## Internal Quality Check

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## CONTENTS

Summary.....	4
1. Introduction .....	4
2. Aims & Methods .....	7
3. Archaeological & Historical Background.....	8
4. Results & Conclusions. ....	10
5. Acknowledgements .....	12
6. Archive .....	12
7. References .....	13

### Appendices:

1. ASC Watching Brief Monitoring Sheets .....	14
2. Photo List.....	15
3. ASC OASIS Form .....	16

### Figures:

1. General location .....	3
2. Site plan .....	5
3. Proposed development.....	6

### Plates:

#### Cover:

1. The pond under excavation.....	11
2. The pond under excavation.....	11
3. Section through pond deposits.....	11





Figure 1: General location (scale 1:25,000)

## Summary

*In October 2010 a watching brief was maintained on the excavation of a former wetland area to create a pond at Purwell Ninesprings Nature Reserve, Hitchin. Excavation of the former wetland area, undertaken under less than ideal conditions, encountered only organic deposits of probably relatively recent origin. On the south side of the pond, where the excavation extended beyond the original wetland deposits, some Roman pottery was recovered from the subsoil. Given the proximity of Ninesprings Roman villa, this was not surprising, and indicates that Roman activity probably extended over 150m north of the focus of the villa.*

## 1. Introduction

1.1 In October 2010 *Archaeological Services and Consultancy Ltd* (ASC) carried out a watching brief at Purwell Nine Springs Nature Reserve, Hitchin, Hertfordshire. The project was commissioned by the *Herts & Middlesex Wildlife Trust*, and was carried out according to a brief (Instone 2010) prepared on behalf of the local planning authority (LPA), *North Herts District Council*, by their archaeological advisor (AA), *Hertfordshire County Council Historic Environment Unit*, and a project design prepared by ASC (Sammelmann 2010). The relevant planning application reference is 1/01256/09.

### 1.2 *Planning Background*

This watching brief was required under the terms of *Planning Policy Statement 5* (PPS5), as a condition of planning permission for the development of the site.

### 1.3 *Archaeological Services & Consultancy Ltd*

ASC is an independent archaeological practice providing a full range of archaeological services including consultancy, field evaluation, mitigation and post-excavation studies, historic building recording and analysis. ASC is recognised as a *Registered Organisation* by the Institute for Archaeologists and is also accredited ISO 9001, in recognition of its high standards and working practices.

### 1.4 *The Site*

#### 1.4.1 *Location & Description*

Purwell Ninesprings Nature Reserve lies on the eastern edge of the town and parish of Hitchin, which is in the administrative district of North Hertfordshire. The National Grid reference (NGR) is TL 20595 29320 (Fig. 1)

The nature reserve, which comprises wetland with fen meadow and alder woodland, covers an area of approximately 7ha. It is bounded by the River Purwell to the west, Gypsy Lane to the east, Purwell Lane and woodland to the north. There are watercress beds to the south (Fig. 2).

#### 1.4.2 *Geology & Topography*

The site lies within a side valley of the river Purwell, at an elevation of c.63m AOD. The Soil Survey of England and Wales has not surveyed the soils on the site (Soil Survey 1983, Sheet 4), but the Landscape Character Assessment



states that poor draining gleyed soils over alluvial drift predominate ([http://www.north-herts.gov.uk/river\\_oughton.pdf](http://www.north-herts.gov.uk/river_oughton.pdf) ; see also BGS, Sheet 221).

1.4.3 *Proposed Development*

The development proposal is to create two ponds and a viewing platform with access from the public footpath (Fig. 3).

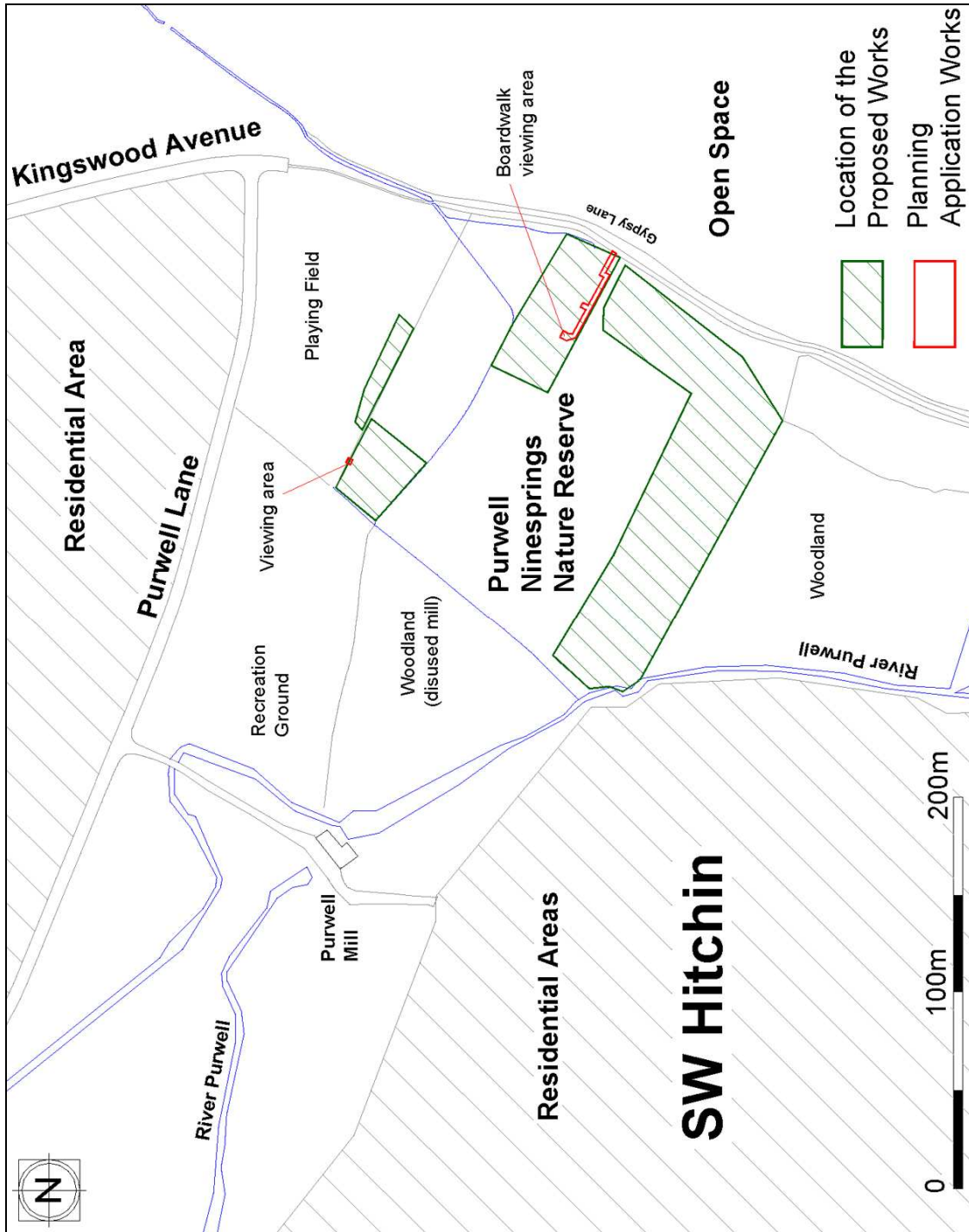


Figure 2: Site plan (scale as shown)

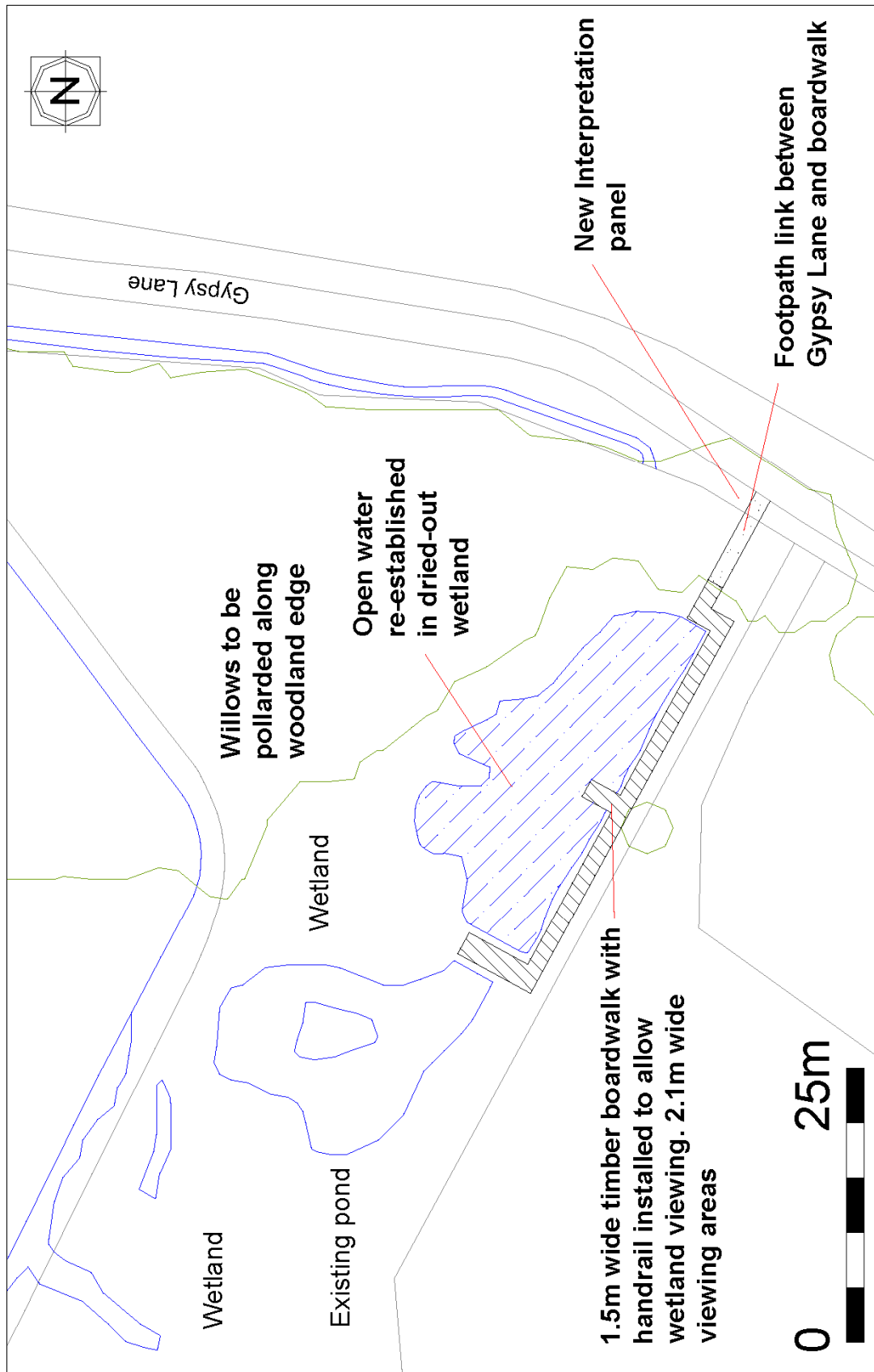


Figure 3: Proposed development (scale as shown)

## **2. Aims & Methods**

### **2.1 Aims**

In line with the project design (Section 3), the aims of the project were:

- To ensure the archaeological monitoring of all aspects of the development programme likely to affect archaeological remains.
- To secure the adequate recording of any archaeological remains revealed by the development programme.
- To secure the analysis, conservation and long-term storage of any artefactual/ecofactual material recovered from the site.

### **2.2 Standards**

The work conformed to the project design, to the relevant sections of the Institute for Archaeologists' *Code of Conduct* (IFA 2000) and *Standard & Guidance Notes* (IFA 2001), to the Association of Local Government Archaeological Officers East of England Region *Standards for Field Archaeology in the East of England* (ALGAO 2003), and to the relevant sections of ASC's own *Operations Manual*.

### **2.3 Methods**

The work was carried out according to the project design (Section 3.3), which required:

- Soil and overburden stripping under archaeological supervision;
- Inspection of subsoil deposits for archaeological features;
- The rapid investigation and recording of any archaeological features/deposits including environmental;
- Subsoil stripping under archaeological supervision;
- Examination of any service and foundation trenches and the subsequent recording/investigation of any exposed archaeological deposits including environmental;
- Examination of spoil-heaps for archaeological material;
- A programme of post-fieldwork analysis, archiving, and publication.

### **2.4 Constraints**

No constraints were encountered in the execution of this watching brief.



### 3. Archaeological & Historical Background

- 3.1 The following section provides a summary of the readily available archaeological and historical background to the development site and its environs. The site lies within an area of archaeological and historical interest, and has the potential to reveal evidence of a range of periods.

This section has been compiled with information from Hertfordshire County Council Historic Environment Record (HER), ASC's reference collection and the internet.

3.2 ***Prehistoric*** (before 600BC)

The earliest archaeological evidence for human activity in the area is a Neolithic or Bronze Age flint scraper (HER 309), which was found in the vicinity of Purwell Mill, to the west of the nature reserve.

3.3 ***Iron Age*** (600BC-AD43)

More permanent settlement is suggested by the discovery of a bronze coin of Cunobelin, c.AD10-40 (HER 466), which was found on the site of Ninesprings Roman Villa (HER 467). A Late Iron Age butt beaker and two amphorae (HER 108) were also found on Purwell housing estate to the north of the reserve.

A series of cropmarks indicate the presence of a number of features of uncertain date in the vicinity. A possible trackway (HER 1642) and 3 parallel linear ditches (HER 1638) lie to the north of a ring ditch (HER 6354). This was approximately 35m in diameter and had two internal maculae but no apparent entrance. To the immediate south is Ninesprings Roman villa [467] with three possibly associated ditches [6122] to the east of it.

2.4 ***Roman*** (AD43-c.450)

Ninesprings Villa (HER 467) was partly excavated in 1884, revealing seven rooms, three hypocausts, and a tessellated pavement. The villa is located on a slight SW-facing slope c.150m south of the site and had further buildings to the north of it (HER 468). A hoard of approximately 67 coins (HER 586) dated AD 193-392 was also found on the site during the excavations: 62 have survived.

Another Roman settlement is inferred by the pottery fragments found 500m from the site, in the parish of Wymondley (HER 2888).

2.5 ***Saxon - Medieval*** (c.450-1500)

There is no archaeological evidence for Saxon activity on or close to the site, but Hitchin itself appears to have been settled from the early Saxon period. In the late Saxon period, Hitchin Manor was the chief of a group of manors held by King Harold. These included Wymondley Manor, the parish of which is adjacent to Purwell Ninesprings. Wymondley Manor had been held by the church of St Mary of Chatteris, Cambs, but around the year 1063 Earl Harold, as he was then, annexed the manor (VCH online). After the Norman Conquest, William I owned Hitchin Manor and its dependencies, and they were farmed out together by the sheriff.

The development of Hitchin and its hinterland is likely to have had little impact on Ninesprings area other than, perhaps, the siting of a watermill, which may have its origins in the medieval period.

2.7 ***Post-Medieval*** (1500-1900)

Purwell watermill (HER 5793), which was formerly a corn mill, dates from the 18<sup>th</sup> or early 19<sup>th</sup> century. The mill house, which dates to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, is Grade II listed. The 18<sup>th</sup> century cottage is of whitewashed brick with some exposed timber framework. The mill was in use until 1924 and the buildings have since been converted into private dwellings.

2.8 ***Modern*** (1900-present)

Two watercress beds to the south of Purwell Ninesprings are the last remnants of the commercial enterprises within and of the local environment.

## **4. Results & Conclusions**

### **4.1 Results**

The watching brief was carried out over two days (Appendix 1). Observations were made during the excavation of a silted former area of wetland to create an area of open water (Fig. 3). Deposits encountered during this process mostly comprised wet, very dark, organic soils c.0.4m deep, related to the former wetland area. No archaeological finds were noted from these deposits.

On the south side of the pond, where a boardwalk is to be constructed (Fig. 3), excavations for the pond extended beyond the former wetland area. Below c.0.3m depth of topsoil was a mid grey, very fine soft clayey silt layer, c.0.3m deep, containing a few fragments of Roman ceramics, animal bone, and a flint core. No archaeological features or structures were noted in this area.

### **4.2 Conclusions**

The watching brief did not reveal any features or deposits of archaeological significance. Much of the area that was excavated for the new pond was within an area of former wetland, which had presumably dried up during the last century. Conditions during the watching brief were too wet and messy to permit any detailed examination of the excavated material. On the south side of the pond, where excavations extended beyond the former wetland area, a few Roman sherds were found, though no associated features or deposits were present. The presence of Roman pottery can perhaps be explained by the site's proximity to Ninesprings villa, which lies 150m to the south of the watching brief area, but has outbuildings extending northwards towards it. Other villas in similar topographical settings have been shown to have outbuildings and related features extending over some distance from the house: a good example of this is at Bancroft, Milton Keynes (Williams & Zeepvat 1994), where evidence of contemporary activity has been shown to extend over 250m down the valley from the farmhouse.



**Plate 1:** The pond under excavation



**Plate 2:** The pond under excavation



**Plate 3:** Section through pond deposits

## **5. Acknowledgements**

The project was commissioned by the Herts & Middlesex Wildlife Trust. The writer is grateful to Alison O’Dea of the Trust for her assistance. The project was monitored by Andy Instone of the Herts CC Historic Environment Unit, on behalf of the local planning authority.

The project was managed for ASC by Bob Zeepvat BA MIFA. Fieldwork was carried out by Andrew Hunn. The report was prepared by Bob Zeepvat and edited by Jonathan Hunn BA PhD MIFA.

## **6. Archive**

6.1 The project archive will comprise:

1. Brief
2. Project Design
3. Initial Report
4. Clients site plans
5. Site Monitoring Sheets
6. Finds records
7. Finds
8. Sample records
9. Site record drawings
10. List of photographs
11. B/W prints & negatives
12. Original specialist reports and supporting information
13. CDROM with copies of all digital files.

6.2 The archive will be deposited with North Herts Museum Service



## **7. References**

### ***Standards & Specifications***

- ALGAO 2003 *Standards for Field Archaeology in the East of England*. East Anglian Archaeology Occasional Paper **14**.
- EH 1991 *The Management of Archaeological Projects*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. English Heritage (London).
- IFA 2000a Institute of Field Archaeologists' *Code of Conduct*.
- IFA 2000b Institute of Field Archaeologists' *Code of Approved Practice for the Regulation of Contractual Arrangements in Field Archaeology*.
- IFA 2001 Institute of Field Archaeologists' *Standard & Guidance documents (Desk-Based Assessments, Watching Briefs, Evaluations, Excavations, Investigation and Recording of Standing Buildings, Finds)*.
- Semmelmann, K 2010 *Purwell Ninesprings Nature Reserve, Hitchin, Hertfordshire: Project Design for Watching Brief*. ASC doc ref 1351/PNS/1.

### ***Secondary Sources***

- BGS *British Geological Survey 1:50,000 Series, Solid & Drift Geology*.
- Soil Survey 1983 *1:250,000 Soil Map of England and Wales, and accompanying legend* (Harpenden).
- Page, W (ed.) 1912 *Victoria County History: Hertfordshire Vol.3* London: Dawsons of Pall Mall  
<http://www.british-history.ac.uk>
- Williams, R J & Zeepvat, R J 1994 *Bancroft: a late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age settlement, Roman villa and temple-mausoleum*. Buckinghamshire Archaeol. Soc. Monog. Ser. **7** (Aylesbury).  
<http://www.harthouse.u-net.com/nature.html#about%20purwell>
- North Hertfordshire and Stevenage Landscape Characterisation Assessment  
URL: [http://www.north-herts.gov.uk/river\\_oughton.pdf](http://www.north-herts.gov.uk/river_oughton.pdf)

## Appendix 1: Monitoring Sheets



A.S.C. LTD

### ARCHAEOLOGICAL FIELD MONITORING RECORD

Project: (PNS 1351) Purwell Ninesprings Nature Reserve, Hitchin		Project No/Code: 1351 / PNS	Sheet: of
Client/Developer: Herts + Thixax Wildlife Trust		Date of visit: 26 Oct 2010	
Contact: Alison O'Dea		Phone: 01727 855901 x231 07876 508034	
Duration of Visit (inc. travel):	Start: 8.50	Finish:	
Completed by: A. HUNN			
Development Type:			
Footings	Services	Roads	Levelling
			Quarrying
			Pipelines
			Other (specify): Digging out of silted-up wetland
Site & weather conditions: v. waterlogged, organic, anaerobic, stagnant, reedy wetland; gentle rain all day;			
Observations: RAIN ALL DAY. (Poor ground with little) note Oct 26: Machining concentrated on N side of new pond. N side bounded by sinuous bank c. 3.5m W x 0.60m H (containing wet, v. slowly running ditch - poss. a springline) Deposits here were v. dk, organic (incl. extant leaf roots, willow, hawthorn etc) + young-looking - also v. soft-sludgy. Water ran into machined deeper ponds almost immediately S. side of project identified as of higher potential due to presence of higher, firmer ground. Removal of willow stumps + de-sludging of churned-up ground took 90% of day; 9% grading/battering of pond sides; 1% machining of viable archaeological potential holes Oct 27: machining of S. side to 900mm initially revealed mid grey v. fine soft clayey silt layer (002) containing occ scattered flint nodules, CBH, occ CER, v. occ bone frags ABOVE pale grey layer (003) characterised by v. few finds + sporadic, occ. s/a chalk frags up to 35mm. 003 = c 0.20m D. ABOVE 002 Comments: dark brown peat silt (depth unknown)			

## **Appendix 2: List of Photographs**

SITE NAME: Purwell Ninesprings Nature Reserve			SITE NO/CODE: 1351/PNS
Shot	B&W	Digital	Subject
1-27		✓	General views of pond under excavation
28		✓	North side of pond after excavation
29-38		✓	Various sections through pond deposits
39-46		✓	General views of completed pond and surrounding area

### Appendix 3: ASC OASIS Form

PROJECT DETAILS			
Project Name:	Purwell Ninesprings Nature Reserve	OASIS reference:	Archaeol2-8352
Short Description:	In October 2010 a watching brief was maintained on the excavation of a former wetland area to create a pond at Purwell Ninesprings Nature Reserve, Hitchin. Excavation of the former wetland area, undertaken under less than ideal conditions, encountered only organic deposits of probably relatively recent origin. On the south side of the pond, where the excavation extended beyond the original wetland deposits, some Roman pottery was recovered from the subsoil. Given the proximity of Ninesprings Roman villa, this was not surprising, and indicates that Roman activity probably extended over 150m north of the focus of the villa.		
Project Type:	Watching Brief		
Previous work: (eg. SMR refs)	none	Site status: (eg. none, SAM, listed)	none
Current land use:	Nature reserve	Future work: (yes/no/unknown)	unknown
Monument type:	n/a	Monument period:	n/a
Significant finds: (artefact type & period)	none		
PROJECT LOCATION			
County:	Hertfordshire	OS reference: (8 figs min)	TL 20595 29320
Site address: (+ postcode if known)	Purwell Ninesprings Nature Reserve, Hitchin		
Study area: (sq. m. / ha)	7 ha	Height OD: (metres)	63
PROJECT CREATORS			
Organisation:	Archaeological Services & Consultancy Ltd		
Project brief originator:	Andy Instone (HCC)	Project design originator:	Karin Semmelmann (ASC)
Project Manager:	Bob Zeepvat BA MIFA (ASC)	Director/Supervisor:	Andrew Hunn (ASC)
Sponsor / funding body:	Herts & Middlesex Wildlife Trust		
PROJECT DATE			
Start date:	26 <sup>th</sup> October 2010	End date:	27 <sup>th</sup> October 2010
PROJECT ARCHIVES			
	Location (Accession no.)	Content (eg. pottery, animal bone, files/sheets)	
Physical:	North Herts Museums Service	none	
Paper:		Brief, WSI, site notes & drawings, photos, report	
Digital:		CD with all digital files	
BIBLIOGRAPHY (Journal/monograph, published or forthcoming, or unpublished client report)			
Title:	Watching Brief: Purwell Ninesprings Nature Reserve, Hitchin, Hertfordshire		
Serial title & volume:	ASC Ltd Report ref. 1351/PNS/2		
Author(s):	Bob Zeepvat BA MIFA		
Page nos	16	Date:	12 <sup>th</sup> November 2010