



# **DIDSBURY FLOOD STORAGE BASIN, GREATER MANCHESTER**

## **Archaeological Watching Brief Report**



**Oxford Archaeology North**

August 2009

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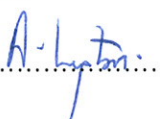
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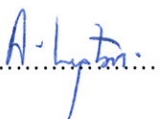
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## SUMMARY

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The Environment Agency commissioned Oxford Archaeology North (OA North) to undertake an archaeological watching brief during preparatory ground works for possible improvements to the flood defences within and around Didsbury, Greater Manchester. The watching brief was required to investigate the potential for preservation of archaeological features and/or deposits around allotment gardens and a Rugby Club car park, and was carried out between 16th March and 19th March 2009. The groundworks carried out under permanent archaeological presence involved the hand-excavation of inspection pits to a depth of 1.2m. This was followed by coring to a depth of approximately 6m, which did not necessitate archaeological monitoring. Nevertheless, due to the schedule of site works the coring was carried out whilst the archaeologist was in attendance and was therefore recorded.

The groundworks revealed a variety of river sediments likely to be associated with a palaeochannel of the River Mersey. Some of these deposits (*105*, *107*, and *109*) recovered from considerable depth (2m to at least 5.9m) contained well-preserved plant material, which has the potential to provide dating and environmental information. Rivers were often a focus for activity during the prehistoric period and, therefore, it is recommended that any further works should be undertaken under archaeological monitoring and any deposits that are revealed that are thought to be of archaeological potential should be systematically sampled for environmental remains and scientific dating purposes.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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OA North would like to thank Beth Gregory and Philip Catherall of the Environment Agency for commissioning the project, and for their provision of information and advice. OA North are also grateful to the site investigation team.

The watching brief was undertaken by Pascal Eloy, who also compiled the report. The drawings were produced by Marie Rowland. The project was managed by Stephen Rowland, who also edited the report.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

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### 1.1 CIRCUMSTANCES OF PROJECT

- 1.1.1 In 2009, the Environment Agency (EA) implemented a series of investigations into possible improvements to the flood defences within and around Didsbury, Greater Manchester. The area of proposed improvement is located within an area of archaeological potential, with the ford and Ford Lane having been used as an early 'saltway' for traders from Cheshire (EA 2009). Consequently, the EA Archaeologist requested that an archaeological watching brief be maintained during any ground disturbance activities. The groundworks comprised the excavation of eleven hand inspection pits (WS101-111), preceding percussion boreholes on land used for allotments. In accordance with the request from EA, all of the pits were excavated under a permanent archaeological presence by Oxford Archaeology North (OA North) between 16th March and 19th March 2009. Given the low impact and limited capacity for interpretation of archaeological deposits associated with the actual boreholes, there was no requirement for archaeological monitoring of that element of the investigation. However, the programme of works meant that the drilling of the boreholes was undertaken when an archaeologist was present on site.

### 1.2 SITE LOCATION, TOPOGRAPHY AND GEOLOGY

- 1.2.1 Didsbury is situated to the south of the City of Manchester (Fig 1), and the site is located at a terminus of Ford Lane, within an area of allotment gardens and the car park of the adjacent Didsbury Rugby club (NGR SJ 8415 9074). Immediately to the south of the area is the River Mersey, which is crossed by Ford Lane.
- 1.2.2 The topography is a low-lying river flood plain with a rise to the north. This rise is curved and indicates the original course of the river Mersey.
- 1.2.3 The solid geology is made up almost entirely of Permian and Triassic undifferentiated sandstones, including Bunter and Keuper formations, and the drift geology is comprised of glacial till and gravels (*ibid*).

### 1.3 ARCHAEOLOGICAL POTENTIAL

- 1.3.1 Didsbury was originally a small agricultural hamlet within the sub-manor of Withington. The earliest recorded reference is provided by the granting of land for the building of a chapel in 1235. This became the parochial church of St Oswald, later changing its name to St James in 1855 (Farrer and Brownbill 1911). Close to this on Stenner Lane, which runs approximately east/west through the proposed improvement area, was a spring or well that, through its provision of easily accessible water, enabled the hamlet to grow over the successive centuries (manchester.gov.uk).

1.3.2 Didsbury is traversed by Ford Lane which crosses the Mersey at one of its lowest points in the area and, hence, is thought to have been used as a saltway by traders from Cheshire. This route is also said to have been used by Bonnie Prince Charlie in 1745 (Farrer and Brownbill 1911). The area of the watching brief, in and around the allotments, was used in World War II as a military base according to locals.



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## 2. METHODOLOGY

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### 2.1 WATCHING BRIEF

- 2.1.1 All works were consistent with the standards of the Institute for Archaeologists (IfA) and generally accepted best practice.
- 2.1.2 The groundworks were conducted under constant archaeological supervision, and comprised the hand excavation of 11 inspection pits to a depth of 1.2m, followed by coring to a depth of 6m (Plate 1). All exposed soil horizons were examined and recorded, and spoil heaps were carefully checked for any unstratified finds.
- 2.1.3 A programme of field observation recorded accurately the location, extent and character of any surviving archaeological features and/or deposits exposed during the course of the excavation. The work comprised the systematic examination of all subsoil horizons exposed, and the recording of all archaeological features and horizons, and any artefacts, identified during observation.
- 2.1.4 A daily record of the nature, extent and depths of groundworks was maintained throughout the duration of the project. All archaeological contexts were recorded on OA North's *pro-forma* sheets, using a system based on that of the English Heritage Centre for Archaeology. A monochrome and colour slide photographic record was maintained throughout, with digital photographs taken for illustrative purposes. Where appropriate, scaled profiles were produced at a scale of 1:20.

### 2.2 ARCHIVE

- 2.2.1 A full professional archive has been compiled in accordance with current IfA and English Heritage guidelines (English Heritage 1991). The paper and digital archive will be provided in the English Heritage Centre for Archaeology format and will be submitted to the County Record Office on completion of the project. Copies of the report will also be submitted to the Greater Manchester Historic Environment Record. The Arts and Humanities Data Service (AHDS) online database *Online Access index of Archaeological Investigations* (OASIS) will be completed as part of the archiving phase of the project.

### 3. RESULTS

#### 3.1 WATCHING BRIEF

- 3.1.1 The following section summarises the results of the watching brief; detailed context descriptions are provided in *Appendix 1*. Eleven hand-excavated inspection pits (WS101-111) were carried out under a permanent archaeological presence, the locations of which are shown on Figure 2. The sequence of deposits was monitored and measurements of soil depths were taken for each pit, shown in Table 1 below. No finds of any particular archaeological significance were recovered.
- 3.1.2 WS101 to WS104 and WS110 were excavated initially through tarmac (Plate 2) and hardcore, onto a dark organic silty-clay subsoil **101**. This subsoil was present across the whole site, except for WS104, WS106 and WS108, with little variation, and was seen to contain modern building material and general refuse; no subsoil was present in WS106 and WS108 and a deposit of mid grey-brown silty-clay with modern brick fragments (**108**) was seen in WS104 below the modern overburden. WS103, WS104 and WS110 were situated on the paths surrounding the allotment, and WS101 and WS102 were within the Rugby Club car park. WS111 was also situated in the car park but did not contain any surfacing material. In the remainder of the pits the subsoil was overlain by a dark brown topsoil, **100** (Plate 3).
- 3.1.3 The subsoil deposits, **101** and **108**, were seen to vary in depth and consistency, from a sandy-gravel to a silty-clay at 0.5m depth to 1.9m depth. The underlying deposits beneath the subsoil varied around the site, and included waterlogged clays, sand, gravel, and pebbles, which are likely to be fluvial deposits associated with a palaeochannel of the River Mersey. Some of these deposits, specifically **105** (seen in WS101 and WS102), **107** (seen in WS109), and **109** (seen in WS111), at depths of 2m to 5.9m (see *Appendix 1*), contained preserved plant material. These were, therefore, sampled from the extracted cores (Plate 4), and were visually examined by the OA North environmental archaeologist for comment.
- 3.1.4 Deposits **105**, **107** and **109**, at depths of between 2m-3m, 4.7m-5.9m, and 4m were all organic silty-clays and were seen to contain frequent wood and herbaceous plant stem fragments. From their appearance, it is believed that the deposits probably accumulated in a low energy backwater channel.

WS	LAYER	DESCRIPTION	DEPTH BELOW GROUND LEVEL (M)
101	Tarmac and hardcore	-	0-0.48
	Subsoil <b>101</b>	Dark brown silty-clay	0.48-1.0

<b>WS</b>	<b>LAYER</b>	<b>DESCRIPTION</b>	<b>DEPTH BELOW GROUND LEVEL (M)</b>
	Silty-clay <b>104</b>	Mid brown-grey silty-clay	1.0-2.0
	Silty-clay <b>105</b>	Green-grey blue-brown silty-clay	2.0-3.0
	Sand	Beige grey sand	3.0-3.9
	Pebbles	Pebbles and sand	3.9-6.0
102	Tarmac and hardcore	-	0-0.3
	Subsoil <b>101</b>	Dark brown silty-clay	0.3-1.9
	Silty-clay <b>104</b>	Brown-grey clay	1.9-2.8
	Silty-clay <b>105</b>	Grey-blue clay	2.8-4.0
	Pebbles and sand	Blue-grey sand and pebbles	4.0-5.0
103	Tarmac and hardcore	-	0-0.64
	Subsoil <b>101</b>	Dark brown silty-clay	0.64-1.7
	Clay	Light brown clay	1.7-2.8
	Sand	Light brown sand	2.8-3.9
	Pebbles and sand	Pebbles and sand	3.9-6.0
104	Tarmac and hardcore	-	0-0.5
	Subsoil <b>108</b>	Grey-brown silt-clay	0.5-2.8
	Sandy-gravel	Fine gravel with sand	2.8-4.9
	Sand	Red/brown sand	4.9-6.0
105	Topsoil <b>100</b>	Dark brown silty-clay	0-0.3
	Subsoil <b>101</b>	Yellow-orange-brown silty-clay	0.3-0.75
	Clay <b>103</b>	Red-orange silt-clay, turning more blue	0.75-2.7
	Sand	Yellow-brown sand	2.7 -6.0
106	Topsoil <b>100</b>	Dark brown silty-clay	0-0.3
	Orange sand	Orange sand	0.3-1.2
	Pebble-rich sand	Orange sand with pebbles	1.2-4.0
107	Topsoil <b>100</b>	Dark brown silty-clay	0-0.6

<b>WS</b>	<b>LAYER</b>	<b>DESCRIPTION</b>	<b>DEPTH BELOW GROUND LEVEL (M)</b>
	Subsoil <i>101</i>	Dark brown silty-clay	0.6-1.3
	Clay <i>102</i>	Orange-brown clay	1.3-2.5
	Pebble-rich sand	Orange sand with pebbles	2.5-3.0
108	Topsoil <i>100</i>	Dark brown silty-clay	0-0.2
	Sand	Yellow-brown sand	0.2-2.5
	Pebble-rich sand	Orange sand with pebbles	2.5-3.7
	Sand	Orange-brown sand, turning pink	3.7-6.0
109	Topsoil <i>100</i>	Dark brown silty-clay	0-0.5
	Subsoil <i>101</i>	Mid brown silty-sand	0.5-2.7
	Silty-sand <i>106</i>	Grey-brown silty-sand	2.7-4.7
	Silty-clay <i>107</i>	Blue-grey-brown silty-clay	4.7-5.9
	Gravel	Fine gravel with sand	5.9-6.0
110	Tarmac and hardcore	-	0-0.66
	Subsoil <i>101</i>	Dark brown silty-clay	0.66-1.57
	Sand	Brown sand	1.57-2.8
	Pebble-rich sand	Orange sand with pebbles	2.8-5.2
	Sand	Pink sand	5.2-6.0
111	Topsoil <i>100</i>	Dark brown silty-clay	0-0.25
	Subsoil <i>101</i>	Mid brown silty-clay	0.25-1.35
	Clay <i>109</i>	Blue-grey sandy-clay	1.35-4.0
	Pebbles	Sandy pebbles	4.0-4.8
	Sand	Compact pink sand	4.8-6.0

Table 1: Depths of deposits encountered in each pit (WS). The contexts vary according to soil characteristics and the presence of plant remains.

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## 4. CONCLUSIONS

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### 4.1 DISCUSSION

4.1.1 The excavation of the inspection pits WS101-111 revealed evidence for a palaeochannel of the River Mersey and has produced organic material deposited at a considerable depth, between 2m to at least 5.9m. The variety of deposits observed indicate the differing stages of river deposition and any plant materials are most likely representative of flooding events, landscape changes and the possible growth of a wet fen carr woodland or reed swamp. More detailed environmental assessment and analysis of sediment sequences from such deposits has the potential to provide information regarding the environmental conditions of the area. Furthermore, rivers are known to be focal points for prehistoric activity, which offers the potential for possible sites of archaeological significance to be discovered as a result.

### 4.2 IMPACT AND RECOMMENDATIONS

4.2.1 The watching brief maintained across the site did not appear to disturb any archaeological features, but the relatively restrictive size of the investigations for archaeological purposes may have also hindered this. The identification of sediment sequences from a former channel of the River Mersey is significant, however, and it is recommended that further works should again be archaeologically monitored, and any deposits that are revealed that are thought to be of archaeological potential should be systematically sampled for environmental remains and scientific dating purposes.

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[manchester.gov.uk/info/511/conservation\\_areas/924/didsbury\\_st\\_james\\_conservation\\_area/2](http://manchester.gov.uk/info/511/conservation_areas/924/didsbury_st_james_conservation_area/2)

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## 6. ILLUSTRATIONS

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### 6.1 FIGURES

Figure 1: Site location

Figure 2: Plan of site showing location of hand inspection pits and boreholes.

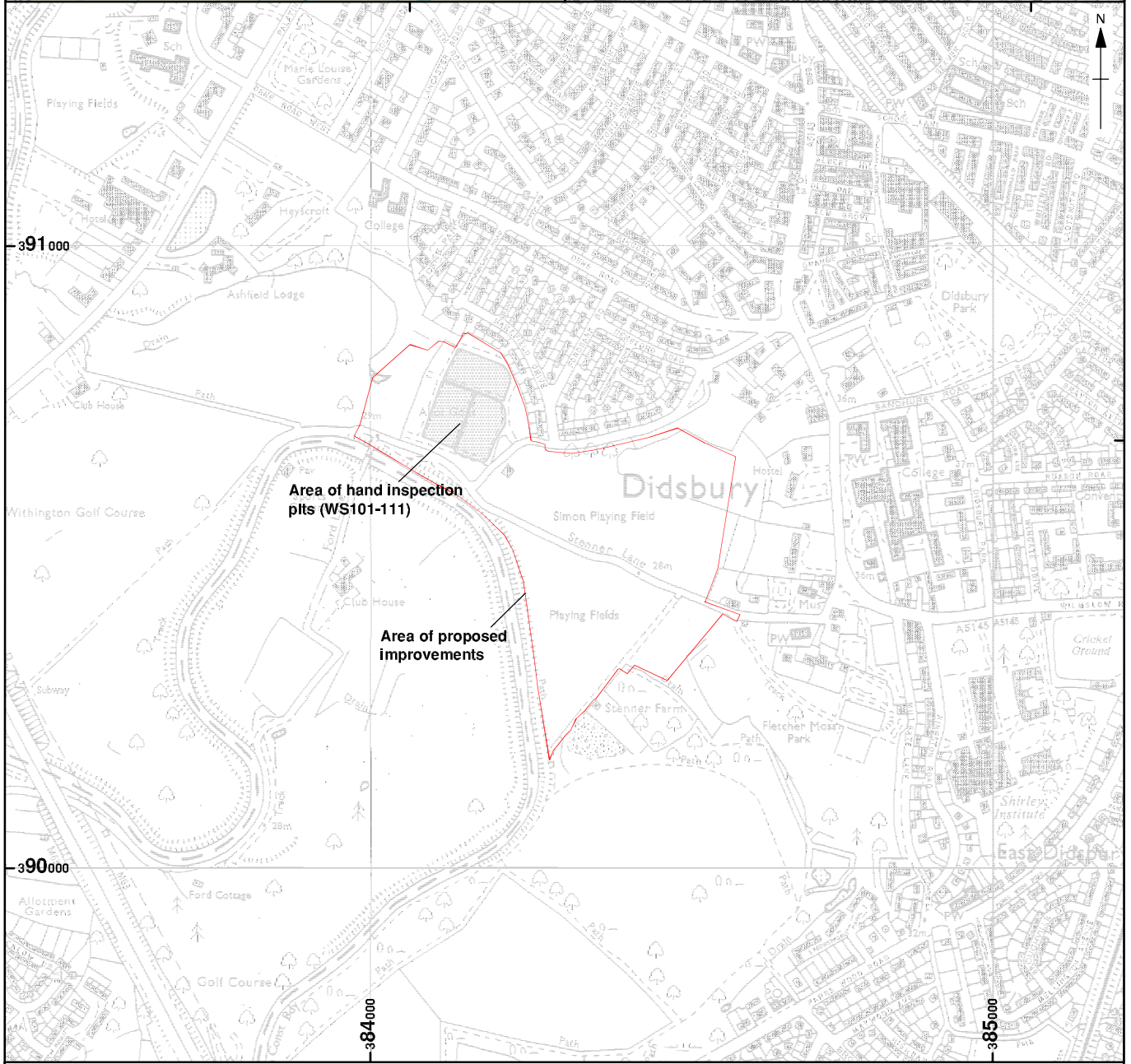
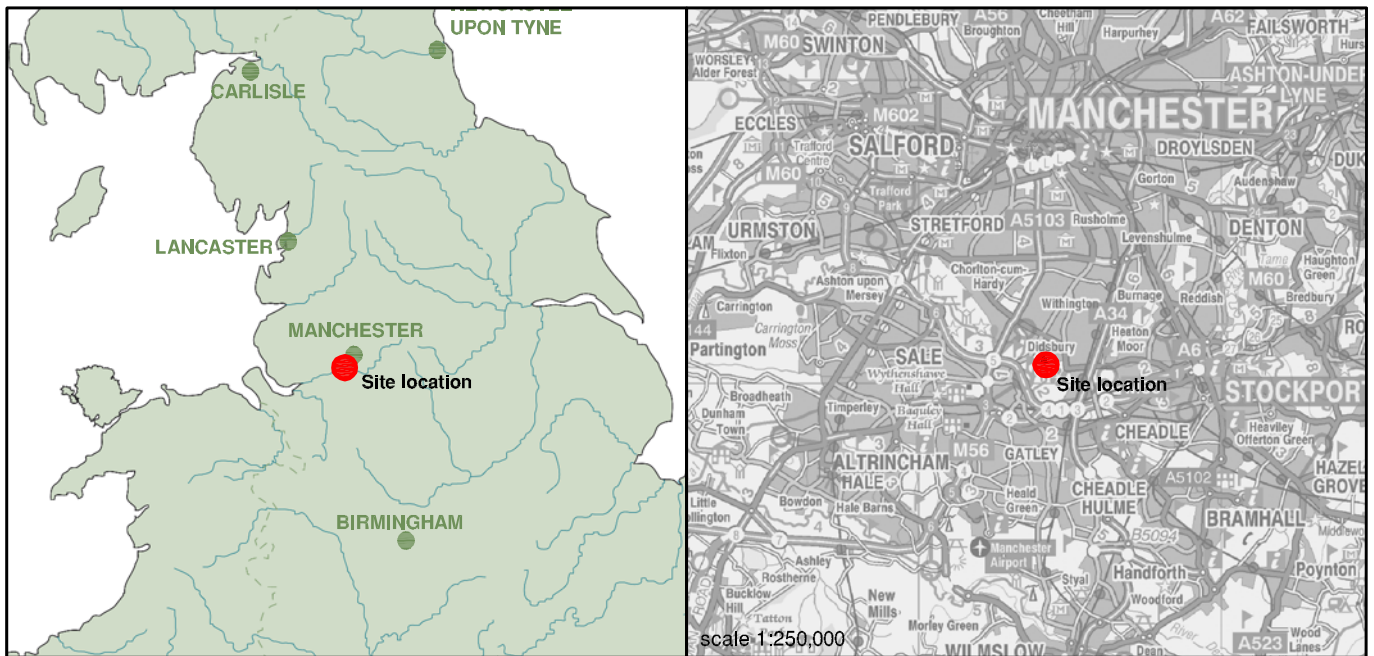
### 6.2 PLATES

Plate 1: General working shot

Plate 2: View of WS 105

Plate 3: View of the extracted cores from WS111

Plate 4: View of WS 110



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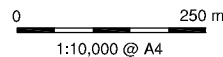
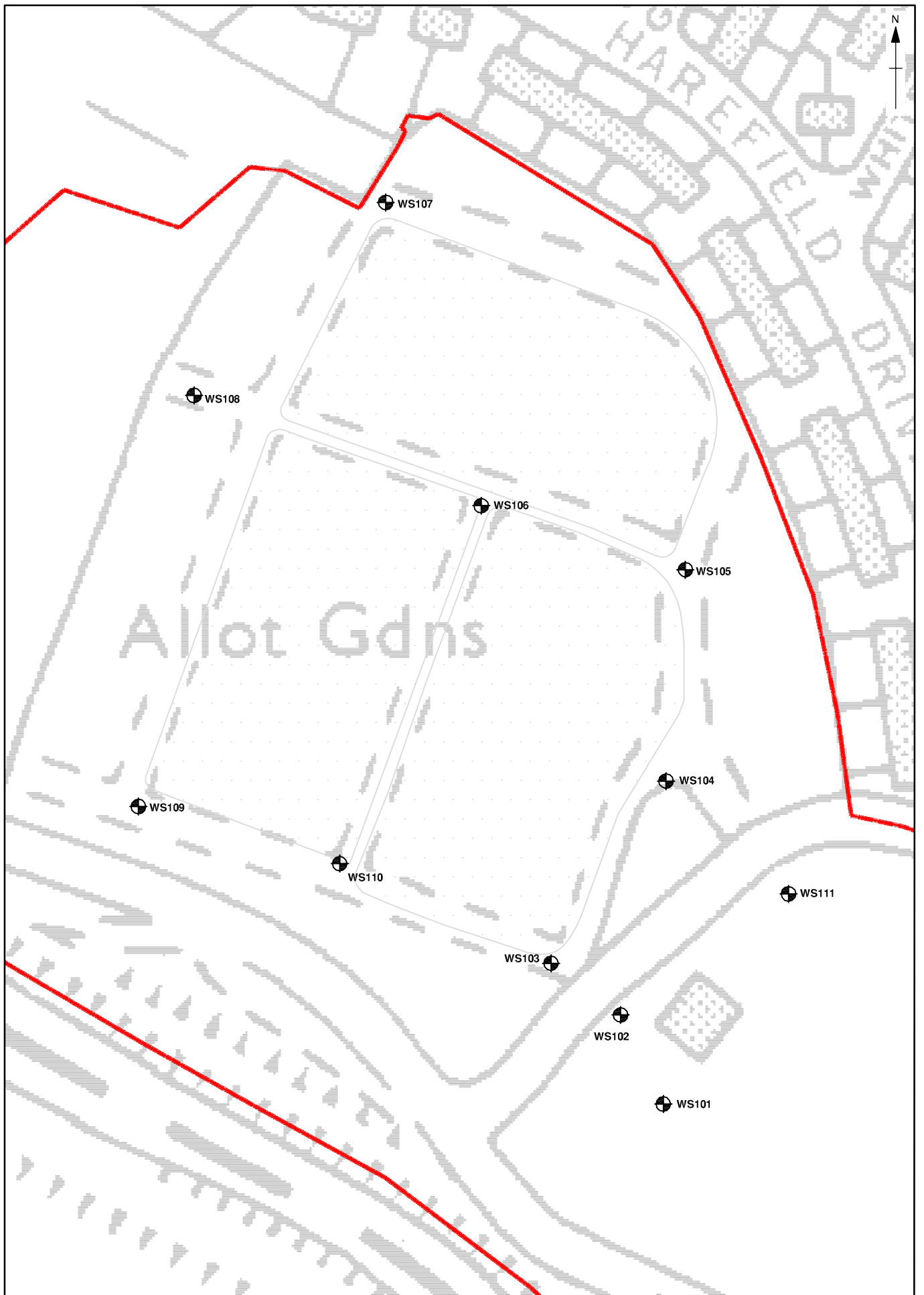


Figure 1: Site location

SR\* L10130\* APS\* 23.07.09





- Development Area
- ++++ WS103 Hand inspection pit and borehole

0 25 m  
1:1250 @ A4



SR\*L10130\*APS\*23.07.09

Figure 2: Plan of site showing location of hand inspection pits and boreholes



Plate 1: General working shot



Plate 2: View of WS110





Plate 3: View of WS105



Plate 4: View of the extracted cores from WS111

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**APPENDIX 1: CONTEXT INDEX**


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<b>CONTEXT NO</b>	<b>DEPTH BELOW GROUND LEVEL (M)</b>	<b>DESCRIPTION</b>
<b>100</b>	0.25-0.6	Topsoil. Dark brown gravel-rich silty-clay
<b>101</b>	0.75-1.0	Subsoil. A gravel and sand-rich, yellow-orange-brown subsoil. Contains water-worn pebbles
<b>102</b>	1.3-3.0	Compact silty-clay with blue-grey lenses, showing some waterlogging, below subsoil <b>101</b>
<b>103</b>	2.7	Waterlogged blue-grey silty-clay observed in WS105
<b>104</b>	1.0-2.8	Rich organic mid brown-grey silty-clay seen below Rugby Club car park in WS101 and 102. Becomes more blue-grey with depth due to waterlogging and above <b>105</b>
<b>105</b>	2.0-3.0	Green-grey to blue-brown silty-clay with plant material. Seen below <b>104</b> in WS101 and 102
<b>106</b>	2.7-4.7	Compact grey-brown sandy-silt, overlying <b>107</b> in WS109
<b>107</b>	4.7-5.9	Organic-rich, blue-grey-brown silty-clay beneath <b>106</b> in WS109
<b>108</b>	1.8	Mid grey-brown silty-clay with modern brick fragments and charcoal seen in WS104 beneath modern overburden
<b>109</b>	1.35-4.0	Mid brown-grey-blue, wood-rich, sandy-clay seen in WS111