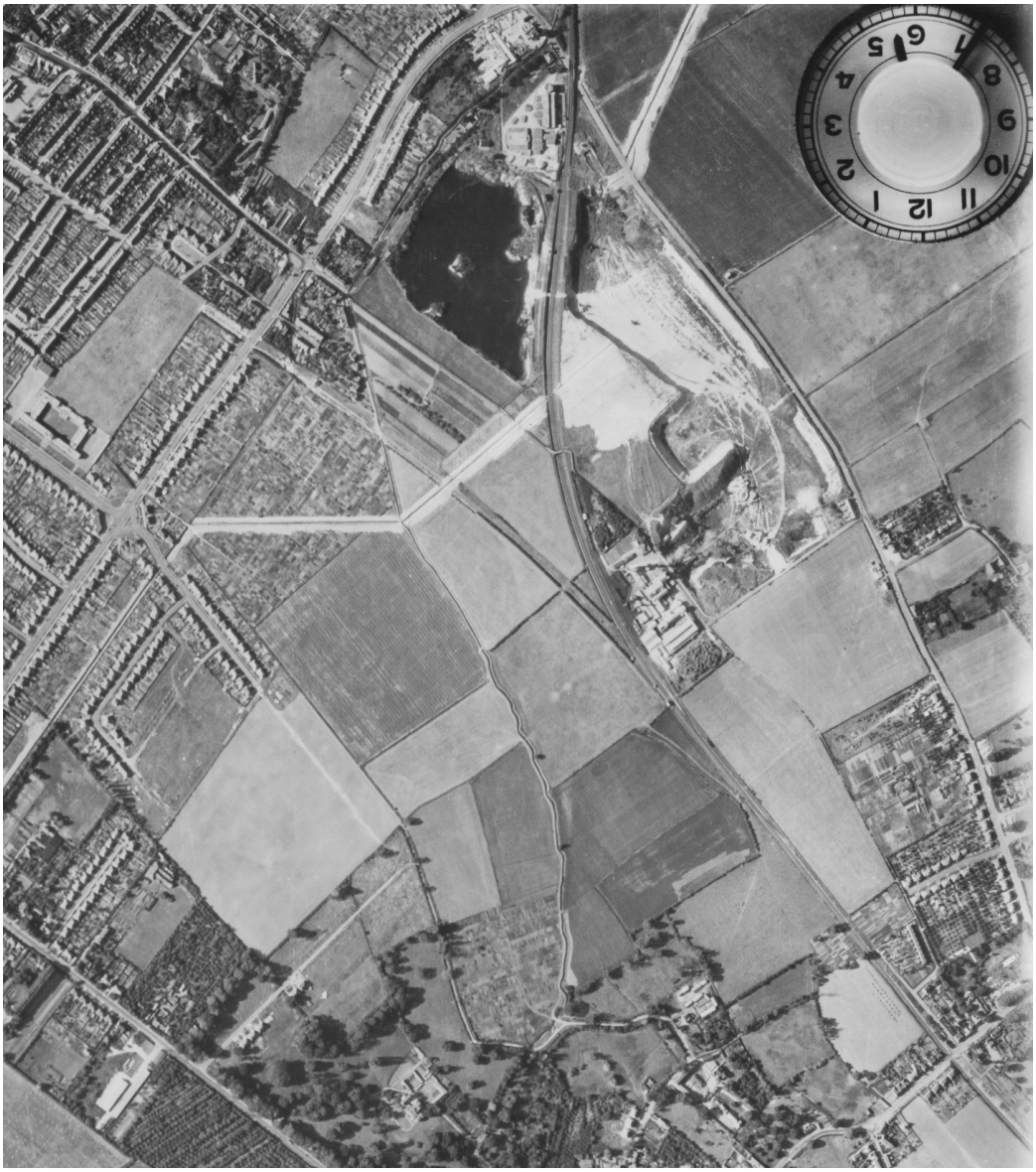
St. Bede's School, Cambridge

An Archaeological Evaluation



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An Archaeological Evaluation at St Bede's School, Cambridge

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Introduction

An archaeological evaluation was undertaken within the site of St Bede's School, Cambridge from 18th August to 20th August, in advance of the construction of two building extensions comprising 900sqm of new development. The PDA is currently open land centred on NGR 547880/256930 being formerly the site of mobile classrooms. The underlying geology comprises West Malbury Marly Chalk Formation (BGS 2002).

A sample of evaluation trenches was excavated across the Proposed Development Areas (PDA) in order to determine the presence/absence of archaeological remains and investigate their date, extent, character, significance and state of preservation.

Archaeological Background

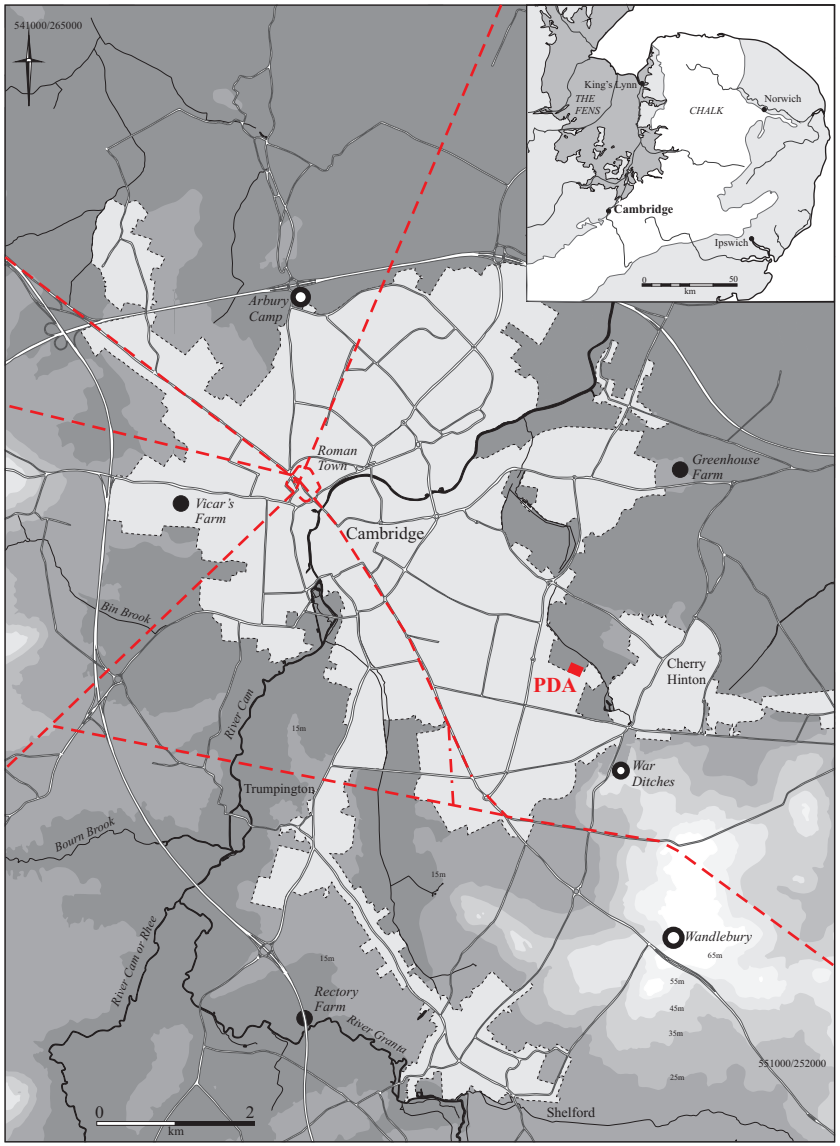
Archaeological remains are known from the surrounding area and have revealed a widely utilised landscape with periods of occupation spanning several millennia.

Early activity from the Neolithic period was recorded in the form of Grooved Ware pottery found in the chalk pits towards the north of the PDA, although only tentatively located (CHER 04900).

A Roman grave and various associated finds were discovered at the Saxon cement works some 400m to the north east of the PDA in the early twentieth century (CHER 04629 on Figure 1). Later development on the neighbouring Norman cement works in 1951 revealed more extensive settlement remains and a well containing complete pots (CHER 05168 on Figure 1).

Medieval and Saxon settlement is well documented at Cherry Hinton including a possible Brigettine priory at Cherry Hinton Hall in the early 15th century (CHER 09927). A major Late Saxon settlement is known at Church End in Cherry Hinton some 800m to the north east (Cessford 2005).

The land surrounding the modern site of St Bede's school was militarised during World War Two as part of plans to defend the city and region against invasion and air attack. The route of the GHQ anti-tank ditch runs some 250m to the west of the site cutting into the northern corner of the current school playing field (Luftwaffe air photo GB 1044 frame L96, Figure 4). This ditch was a national defensive line that enclosed London and crossed East Anglia, forming the last line of defence if coastal defences failed to stop invasion (Foot 2006, Osborne 2002).



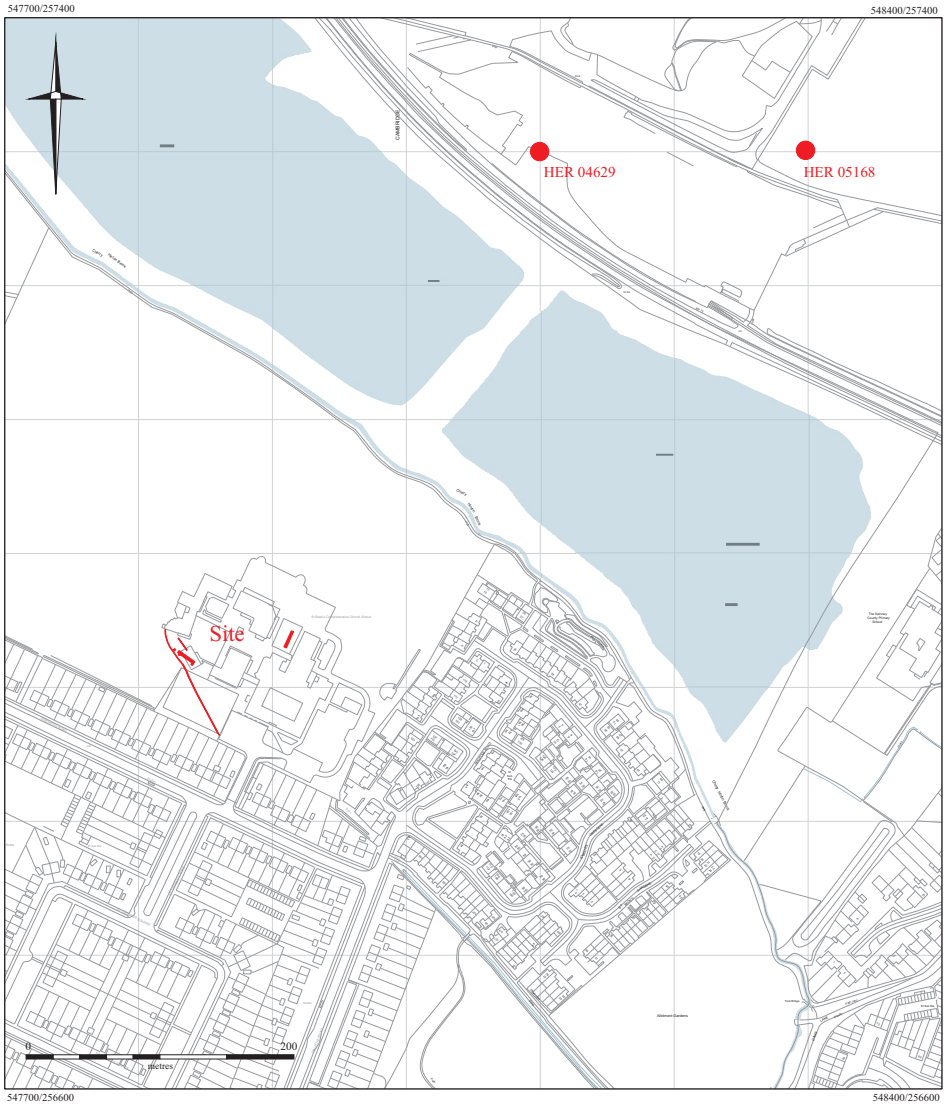


Figure 1. Site location

Methodology

Four trenches were excavated in total, with trenches 1 and 2 (each 15 x 2 metres) comprising the planned 60 square metres or 7% sample of the PDA. A further small box (Trench 3) was excavated to check a feature within a gas pipe trench and Trench 4 was excavated in order to check for continuation of this feature. Two further test pits were excavated by hand adjacent to Trench 1 to check for the recovery of artefacts in the topsoil.

The trenches was stripped to the archaeological level using a 360° tracked excavator with a toothless ditching bucket under supervision of an experienced archaeologist. The CAU-modified version of the MoLAS recording system was used; features were planned at 1:50, with sections drawn at 1:10. Archaeological features were assigned a unique number (e.g. **F.1**; bolded upon introduction within the text) and each stratigraphically distinct episode (e.g. a cut, a fill) was recorded with a unique context number (e.g. [001]).

All work was carried out in strict accordance with statutory Health and Safety legislation and following the recommendations of SCAUM. The site was surveyed into the Ordnance Survey Grid and Ordnance Datum by means of a RTK GPS unit.

Results

The initial two trenches were excavated within the areas of the proposed building extensions (Figure 2) and did not locate any archaeological remains. The mobile classrooms that previously occupied the development areas had a variety of below ground service pipes resulting in some disturbance to the soil sequence of the study areas.

The informal observation of a contractor's trench that was being excavated for the insertion of a gas pipe led to the discovery of three undated features bordering the PDA. These features were sampled and recorded and a further trench was cut to check if they continued into the PDA. No further features were found.

Trench 1

This trench was on an east-west orientation and was 2 metres wide and 15m in length. The soil sequence in this area comprised some 55 cm of topsoil onto a firm Marly chalk, with some mixing and disturbance to the topsoil from past development. No archaeological features were present; although a modern field drain on an east-west alignment was sampled. Two hand-dug test pits at either end of the trench were used to test background densities of artefacts in the topsoil, but no finds were made other than pieces of $19^{th}/20^{th}$ century china which were not retained.

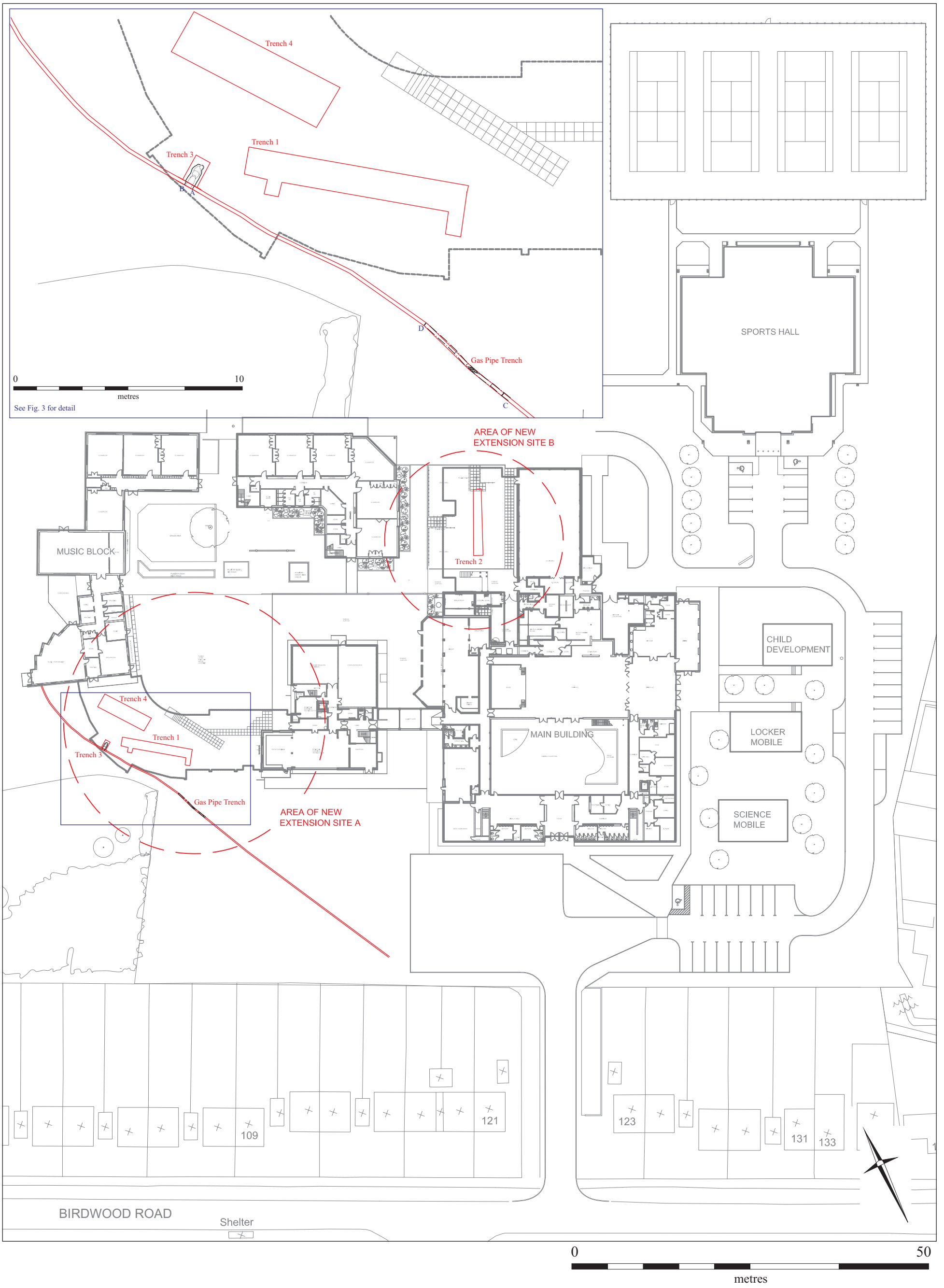
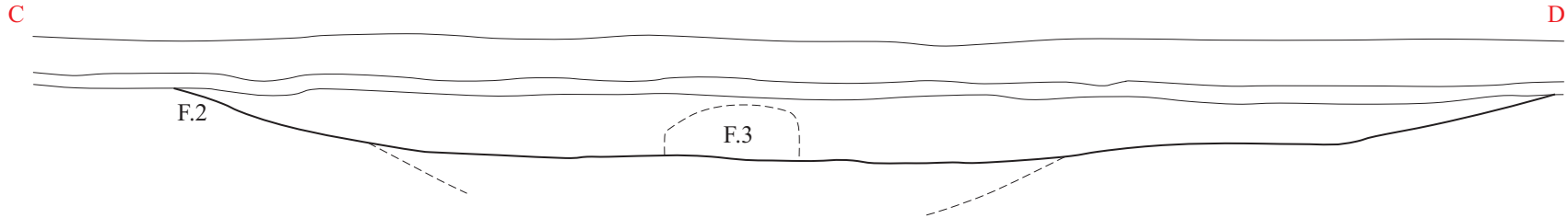
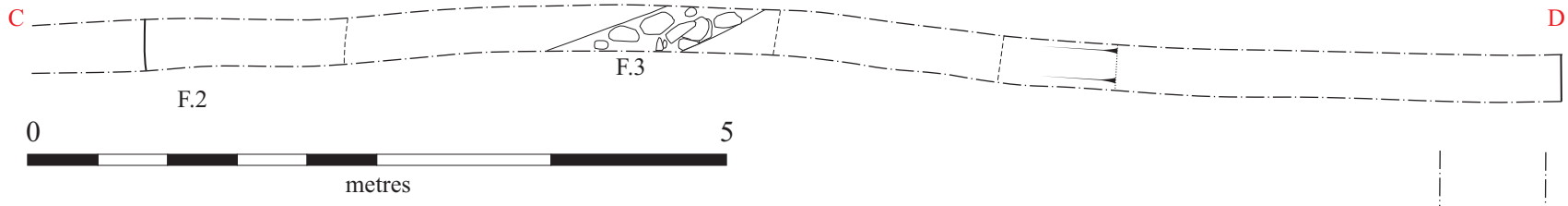


Figure 2. Trench plan

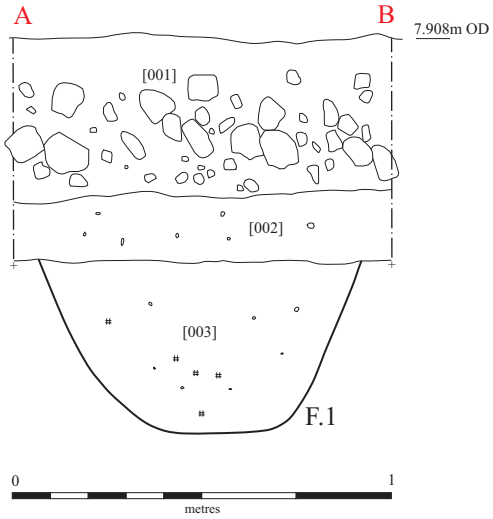
East facing section of Gas Pipe Trench



Gas Pipe Trench



Southeast facing section of Trench 3



Trench 3

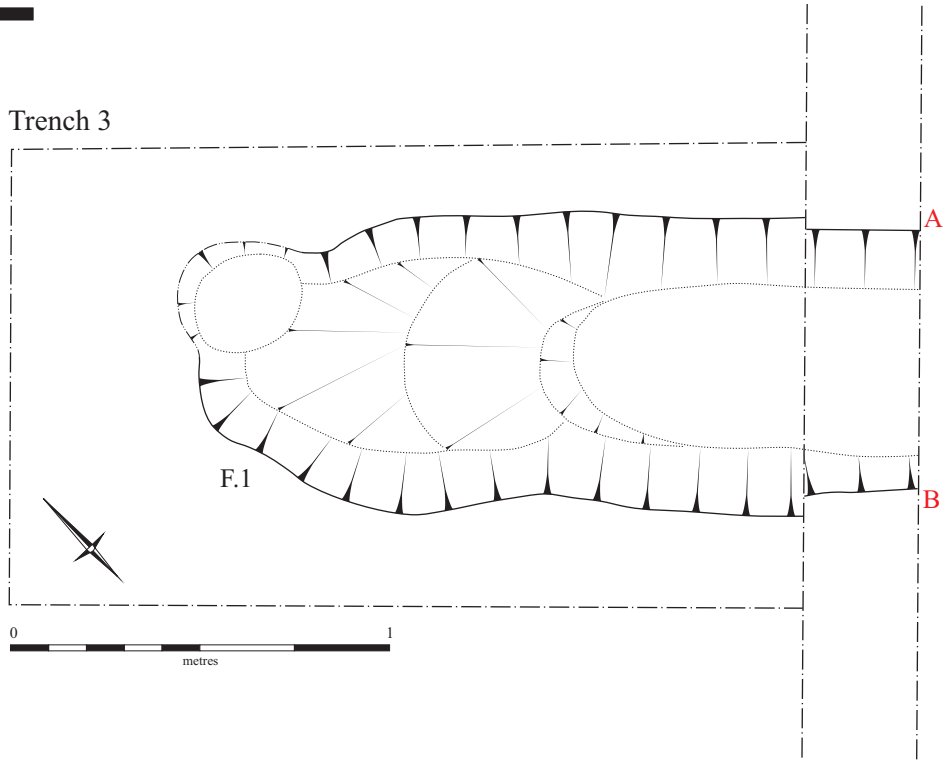


Figure 3. Features in Trenches 3 and 4.

Trench 2

This trench was on a north-south orientation and was 2 metres wide and 15m in length. The soil sequence in this area comprised some 60cm of topsoil onto a Marly chalk, with some mixing and disturbance from past development. No archaeological features were present. A field drain was sampled as well as an area of modern disturbance.

Trench 3

This trench was on a northeast-southwest orientation and was 2.40m in length; it was placed to investigate a possible archaeological feature that was observed in the gas pipe trench. The feature, **F.1** was the terminal end of a ditch on a northeast – southwest orientation (Figure 3). The ditch was hand excavated and no artefacts were recovered from the fill apart from some small and degraded fragments of burnt clay/daub.

F1: ditch terminal, 2 metres of which was exposed in plan. Butt end partly truncated by an animal burrow. The ditch had steep concave sides with a moderate break of slope and a flat base. Contained a single homogonous fill [003], a firm mid-grey clay silt with rare flint inclusions and flecks of charcoal. Sealed by subsoil [002], a firm mid brown/grey clayey silt with occasional flint and overlain by topsoil [001] which was mixed with road stone and brick rubble.

Trench 4

This trench was 7 metres long and 2 metres wide and was excavated in order to establish whether F.1 was part of an entranceway or segmented ditch that continued into the PDA. No features were found, and the soil sequence was observed to be the same as Trench 1.

Gas pipe Trench

The digging of a gas pipe trench outside the limits of the PDA was also subject to informal observation as the work occurred in tandem with the archaeological evaluation. The trench was approximately 30cm wide by 0.80-1m deep and c.70m long, crossing a gravel car park area which appeared to have had topsoil removed prior to construction. The dimensions of the trench and use of a toothed bucket limited clear observation of the entire length, although some useful results were obtained from cleaning a representative sample.

A single large feature, **F.2** was partially revealed by the pipe trench and exposed in section for ten metres (Figure 3). This large depression contained a homogenous water lain silt, although the base was not reached. It was thought that this represented either a former pond or some kind of spring-fed hollow.

F.2: large depression visible in section some 9.5 metres wide with gently sloping sides. Excavated to arbitrary depth of c.80cm with full dimensions and depth of feature not determined. Contained a homogenous browny-grey clay silt with frequent dark grey mottling, sealed by remnants of a subsoil

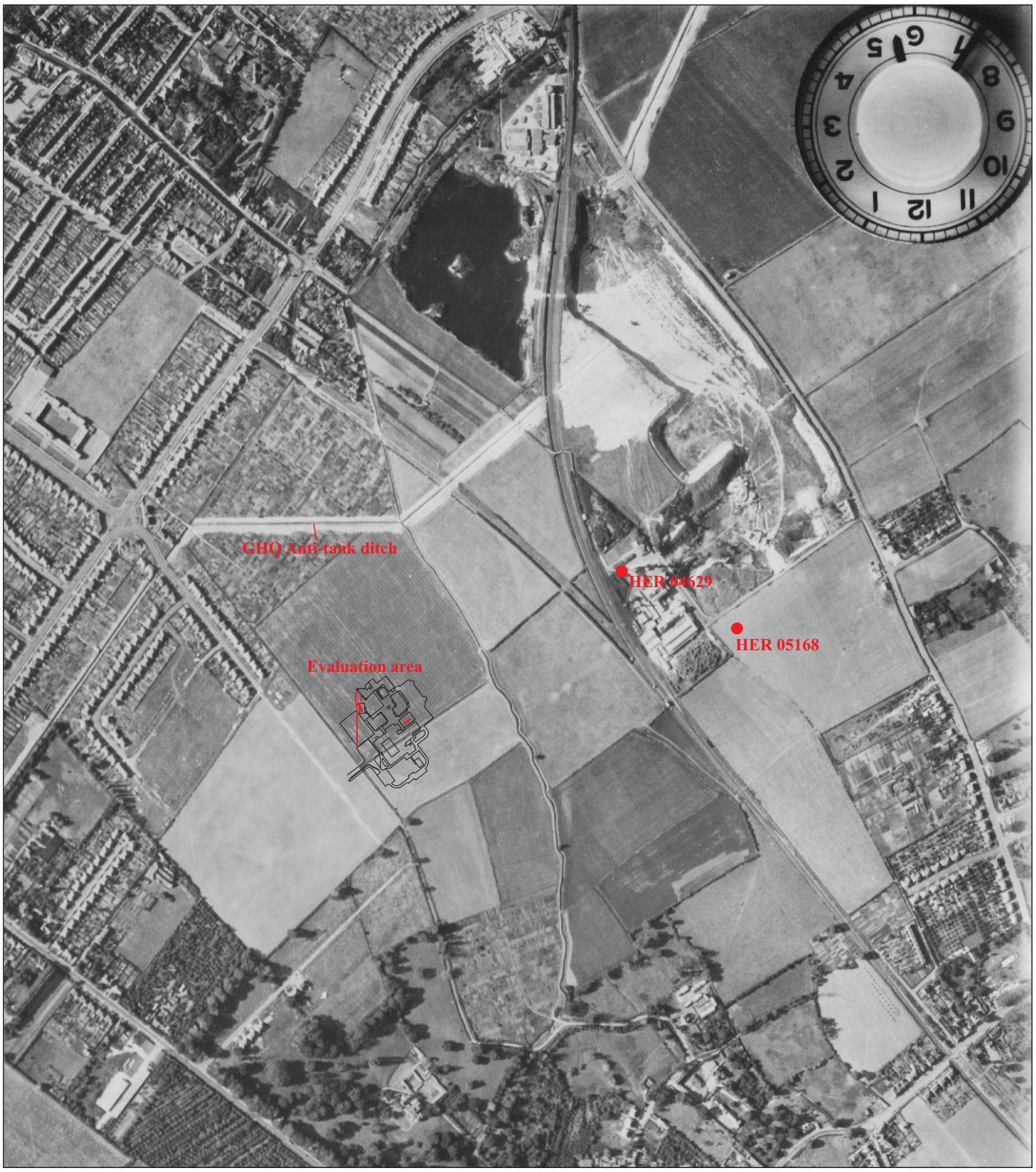


Figure 4. Location of PDA against Roman settlement and World War Two anti-tank ditch. Luftwaffe air photo GB1044 L96 of 31/8/1940.

and a disturbed topsoil/rubble/gravel layer. The pipe trench was excavated to the base of the silt deposits revealing lenses of silty sand mixed with brown mottling. No finds were made.

F.2 was cut by **F.3, a** narrow square-sided linear feature containing chalk rubble and a chocolate-brown organic silt. The pieces of chalk were too irregular and loose to be part of a wall for a structure, and the feature was interpreted as an early form of field drainage. No dating evidence was recovered although the feature was cut by a later ceramic field drain thought to be 19th century in date. The feature cut was only partially visible in section and relationship with F.2 could not be clearly ascertained.

F.3: narrow square-sided drain cut 30cm wide and 30cm deep filled with blocks of chalk rubble of size 15cm x 15cm surrounded by a chocolate-brown organic silt. Aligned northwest-southeast.

Discussion

No archaeological remains were found within the three trenches excavated within the proposed building footprints.

However, the potential of other parts of the school site was indicated by the find of a ditch terminal and large depression outside of the proposed building area. Background research for the evaluation also revealed the precise location of a hitherto unrecorded World War Two anti-tank ditch that crosses part of the school playing field (Figure 4).

The limited nature of the monitoring and lack of associated artefacts precludes a clear interpretation of the recorded features. However, ditch F.1 was noted to be sealed by subsoil deposits and on a different alignment to the post-medieval boundaries shown on the 1886 OS map (still shown on Figure 4). It is therefore possible that the ditch is evidence of medieval or Roman drainage / land division.

Acknowledgements

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