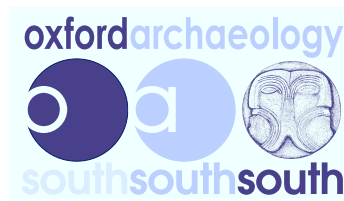


Project Circinus AWE Aldermaston West Berkshire



Archaeological Watching Brief Report



November 2009

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**Project Circinus,
AWE Aldermaston, West Berkshire
NGR: SU 602 640
Watching Brief**

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Summary

In April and August 2009, Oxford Archaeology (OA) carried out a watching brief within AWE Aldermaston, West Berkshire. The fieldwork was undertaken for Atkins Heritage on behalf of AWE during the construction of a haulage road and temporary office and welfare complex along with associated services. The watching brief revealed two undated postholes and a ditch, which may be associated with management of the site as parkland prior to the AWE. In addition the watching brief recorded evidence of landscaping of the area probably associated with the development of the World War II airfield.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Scope of work

- 1.1.1 In April and August 2009 Oxford Archaeology (OA) carried out a watching brief at AWE Aldermaston, West Berkshire during the construction of a new haul road, temporary office and welfare complex and associated services ahead of the High Explosive Fabrication Facility development for Project Circinus (formerly named HEFF).
- 1.1.2 The fieldwork was undertaken for Atkins Heritage on behalf of AWE in respect of planning application reference: 08/01238/COMIND, which deemed that the site had the potential to contain archaeological remains that might be affected by the proposed development. Atkins Heritage produced a brief (Atkins 2007a) in respect of the planning condition requiring a Watching Brief to be undertaken on the development. OA produced a Written Scheme of Investigation (OA 2008) in response to the brief. The monitoring works were carried out in adherence to that methodology.

1.2 Location, geology and topography

- 1.2.1 The development site lies within the AWE Aldermaston Complex, West Berkshire, between Reading and Newbury (SU 602 640 centred - see Fig.1).
- 1.2.2 The site is currently grassland with concrete access roads and intermittently sited buildings. The underlying geology is alluvium over pebble gravel of the "Bagshot" series (Geological Survey of Great Britain sheet no. 268).

1.3 Archaeological background

- 1.3.1 An archaeological background of AWE Aldermaston has been produced for the Heritage Management Strategy by Atkins Heritage (Atkins 2007b). Below is a site-specific background based on a 1 km study area centred on the site and using information obtained from the West Berkshire Historic Environment Record (WBHER).
- 1.3.2 Although West Berkshire is relatively rich in archaeological evidence of the early prehistoric period, particularly Mesolithic remains in the Kennet Valley, there are no

recorded sites or findspots for this early prehistoric period within the vicinity of the site.

- 1.3.3 During the Neolithic period, the region was likely to have been open pasture, used by the local population. Little in the way of artefactual evidence from the Neolithic has been recorded for the study area, however, fieldwork undertaken in 1976 at Raghill Farm 800 m north-east of the development site revealed two worked flints and a sherd of pottery possibly dating from this period (Lobb and Rose 1996).
- 1.3.4 Evidence at Raghill Farm for activity in the Bronze Age and perhaps all of the Iron Age appears to be absent. The site would appear to have been re-settled during the very Late Iron Age or the early Roman period. Evidence of ditched enclosures appears to suggest a series of small enclosed sites dating from the Late Iron Age or early Roman period and continuing to the end of the Roman period. The enclosures included evidence of trackways, ditches, pits and postholes. Works carried out at Raghill Farm during gravel extraction have produced a large quantity of pottery, ironwork and domestic debris (WA 2007).
- 1.3.5 Ermine Street Roman Road is seen on aerial photographs to run in a north-west to south-east alignment through AWE Aldermaston and potentially within 50 m of the development site. The road is known to have survived in good order up until WWII. Indeed Margary notes that the agger was visible in Keyser's Plantation, but the area had been greatly disturbed (Margary, 1973, 131).
- 1.3.6 Probably the most obvious archaeological feature within the AWE Aldermaston is the linear earthwork of Grim's Bank. This Scheduled Ancient Monument survives in excellent condition less than 200 m to the south of the proposed development site. Various investigations and surveys have shown this feature to consist of a large bank and ditch oriented north-east by south-west. A section of the monument in AWE grounds, close to the site in Little Heath is 430 m in length and has been investigated at least three times in the past 50 years. While the evidence is ambiguous regarding the presence or absence of a berm between bank and ditch, none of the investigations have been able to accurately date the monument. Earlier excavators were keen to associate the earthwork with Silchester and its roads, whereas the latest excavation of the ditch fills revealed a small number of slowly accumulated silty fills, indicative of long-term use away from domestic or agricultural activity. On this basis, Grim's Bank is thought to date either from the Late Iron Age or early Roman period (OA 2005).
- 1.3.7 A Saxon settlement at Aldermaston is recorded in the Domesday Book of 1086, as Eldermanestone, the 'Alderman's Town'. It was identified as 'king's land', an estate formerly in the hands of the Saxon Royal Estate. The Domesday survey also records two manors in Brimpton, one of which was later presented to the Knights Hospitallers. It is likely that the population increased during this period and local farming would have needed to expand to support the community. The church of St Mary's in Aldermaston village is Norman in origin.

- 1.3.8 The later medieval and post-medieval periods in the Aldermaston area are represented by a smattering of surviving farmsteads such as Aldermaston Court Farm and Court Farm, which are thought to have been founded in the late 18th century. A similar small farm, now disappeared, was located at Park Farm approximately 1 km from the site.
- 1.3.9 Grade II* listed Aldermaston Court and Aldermaston Court Park are largely 19th century in date, although a deer park was first granted in 1202 by royal permission. Saxton's 1574 Map of Berkshire depicts a park. The house also has earlier origins, Aldermaston Court house (1848-51) incorporates a chimney from a previous building dated to 1636. The park was changed from a hunting park to an ornamental park in the 18th century.
- 1.3.10 In the 20th century, Aldermaston was the site of an airfield for use during WWII. After the war, the site remained in use as a civilian airfield until 1950 when Aldermaston was chosen to become a permanent site for Britain's nuclear deterrent programme. Throughout the 1950s and 60s, the site was expanded and the former airstrips and hangers were given over to stores and workshops and space was made to accommodate the hundreds of labourers required on the building works. Since the 1950s the site has been in use as a manufacturing and research base for the Atomic Weapons Establishment (formerly AWRE), and with Burghfield and Blacknest has played a major role in Britain's military history.
- 1.3.11 A field evaluation was undertaken for the HEFF development in July 2005 by Oxford Archaeology. The field evaluation revealed evidence of the construction of the WWII airfield and a possible post-medieval field boundary ditch (OA 2005).

2 WATCHING BRIEF AIMS

- To determine whether any features or deposits associated with Grim's Bank and/or Aldermaston parkland survive within the development site.
- To preserve by record archaeological remains of any period that might be removed or damaged by works within the areas of the haulage road and contractor's welfare complex.
- To signal, before the destruction of the material in question, the discovery of a significant archaeological find, for which the resources allocated are not sufficient to support a treatment to a satisfactory and proper standard.
- To make available the results of the watching brief.

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Scope of observed works

(See Fig.2)

Haulage Road

- 3.1.1 All works were monitored by an archaeologist.
- 3.1.2 The works consisted of the reduction of topsoil and subsoil to 0.45 m below existing ground level within the footprint of the haul road. Deeper excavations were required for the services associated with this road including a swell drainage channel excavated to a depth of 0.80 m for a distance of 80 m along the northern limit of the haul road. Additional excavation work was carried out to remove soft spots in the revealed gravel horizons.
- 3.1.3 To the east of the development reduction for the haul road was shallower and did not reveal potential archaeological horizons. No further monitoring was carried out once this was established as working practice in this area.

Office and Welfare Complex Area

- 3.1.4 The watching brief observed the excavation of five test pits in the corners and centre of the complex. The test pits provided information on the depth of the potential archaeological horizon (gravel at 0.85 m below ground level) and the character of soil overburden. No monitoring of post pads or service trenches was undertaken because the depth of construction impacts was above the archaeological horizon.

3.2 Finds

- 3.2.1 No finds were recovered during the watching brief.

4 RESULTS

4.1 Haulage road and drainage ditch

- 4.1.1 Excavations for the haulage road at 0.45 m below ground level revealed natural gravels with localised sandy deposits.
- 4.1.2 At the gravel horizon a single posthole was discovered (see Fig 3). The posthole was excavated and measured 0.30 m in diameter by 0.35 m deep. It had no diagnostic characteristics and contained no artefacts. To the east of the posthole a 1.5 m wide north east to south west aligned ditch was recorded. This feature was undated, but was similar to the ditch found in Trench 3 during the evaluation. It may relate to parkland management prior to the development of AWE Aldermaston.
- 4.1.3 A second possible posthole was revealed during the cutting of a drainage ditch north of the line of the haulage road (see Fig 3). This feature measured 0.60 x 0.40 m in

plan and was 0.30 m deep. It was filled with silty-gravel with charcoal inclusions. No artefacts were present.

4.2 Welfare and Office Complex Area

4.2.1 Natural gravels were revealed in the five test pits at a depth of *c* 0.85 m below ground level. The gravel was overlaid by layers of clay silt. The first layer overlying this natural contained modern graded limestone chippings. It was noted that the area had previously been subject to stockpiling of coal and later demolition debris (*pers comm*-site construction manager).

4.2.2 The depth of gravels (in relation to those observed in the haulage road) and the character of the material overlying the gravel (fairly deep homogenous layers containing modern material) and the absence of any historic interface (buried ploughsoil, flood episode deposits, buried soil etc) suggest that the area had been landscaped and the existing modern strata imported. This would be in accord with the development of the WWII airfield and similar evidence found during the evaluation phase.

4.2.3 No evidence of prehistoric activity or remains associated with Grim's Bank were observed.

4.3 Conclusions

4.3.1 The watching brief revealed no significant archaeological deposits or remains. Two undated postholes and a ditch were recorded, which may be associated with management of the site as parkland prior to the AWE. In addition the watching brief recorded evidence of landscaping of the area probably associated with the development of the World War II airfield. No evidence of prehistoric activity or remains associated with Grim's Bank were observed.

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SUMMARY OF SITE DETAILS

Client name: Atkins Heritage for AWE plc

Site name: Project Circinus, AWE Aldermaston, Watching Brief

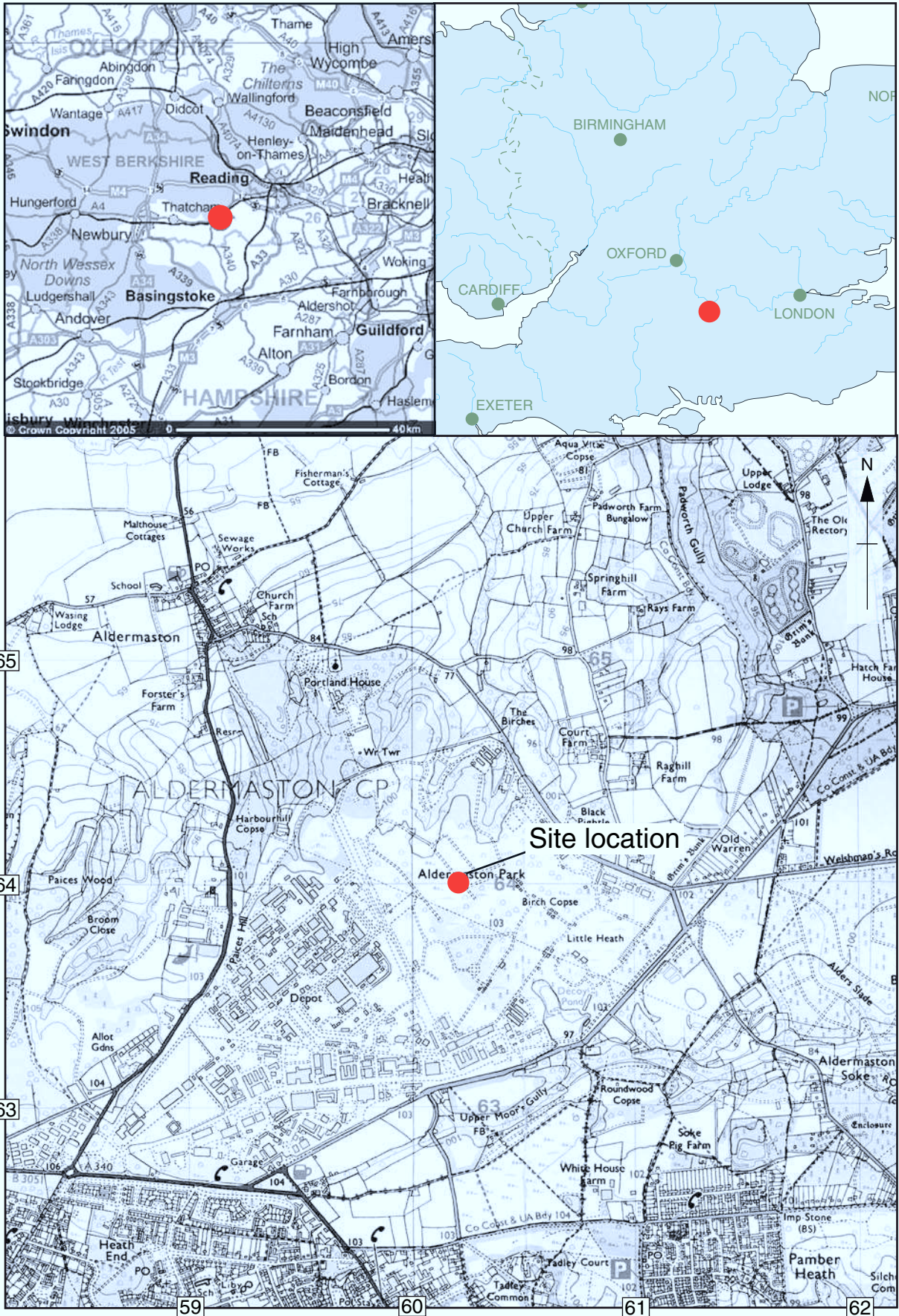
Site code: ALDHEF08

Grid reference: NGR: SU 602 640

Date and duration of project: Visits in November 2008, January, April and August 2009

Summary of results: The watching brief revealed two undated postholes and a ditch, which may be associated with management of the site as parkland prior to the AWE. In addition the watching brief recorded evidence of landscaping of the area probably associated with the development of the World War II airfield.

Location of archive: The archive is currently held at OA, Janus House, Osney Mead, Oxford, OX2 0ES, and will be deposited with the appropriate Museum's Service in due course.



Scale 1:25,000

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Figure 1: Site location

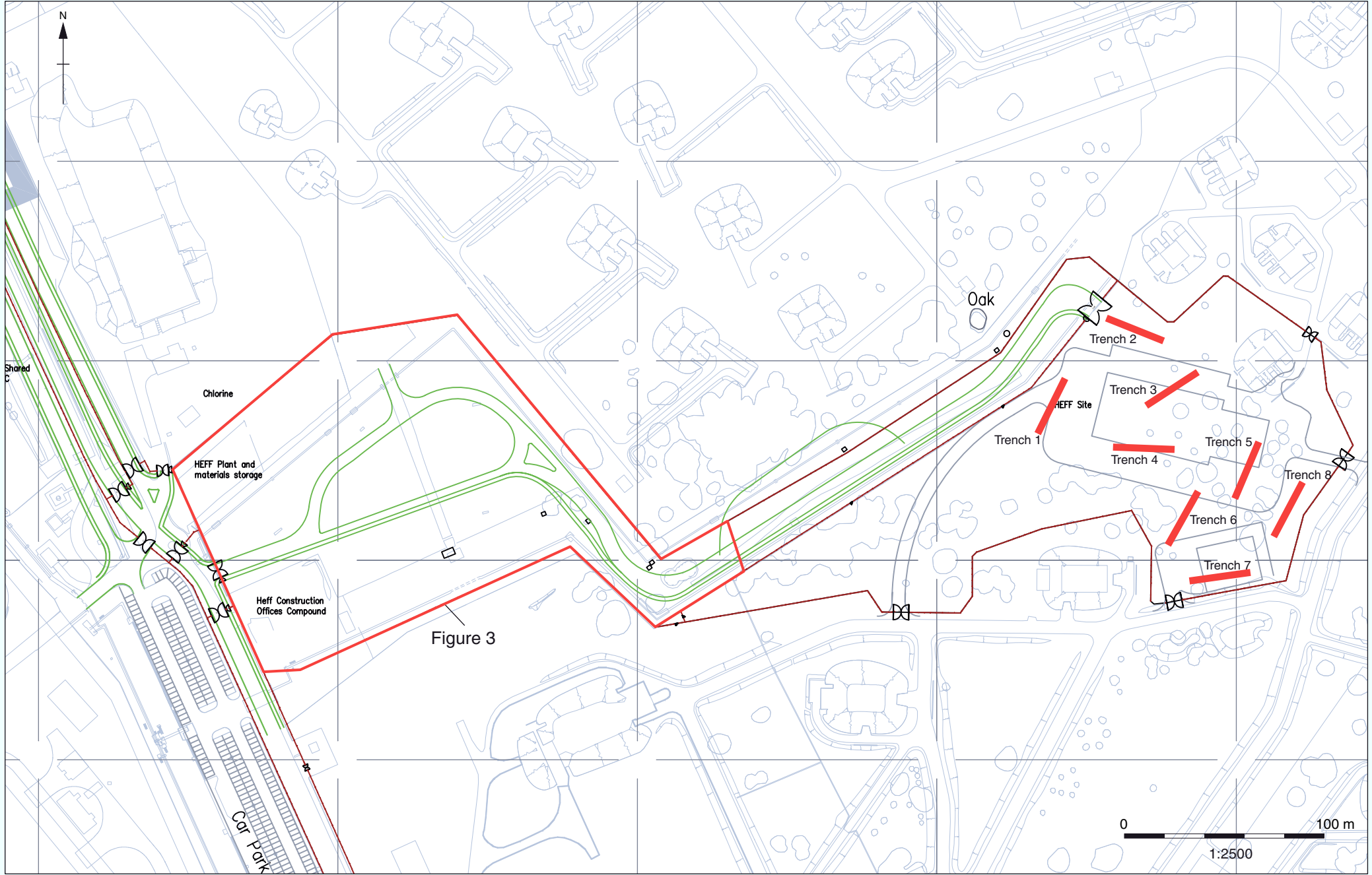


Figure 2: Area of HEFF development (extract from AWE drawing nr 226266/C/HWY/001)

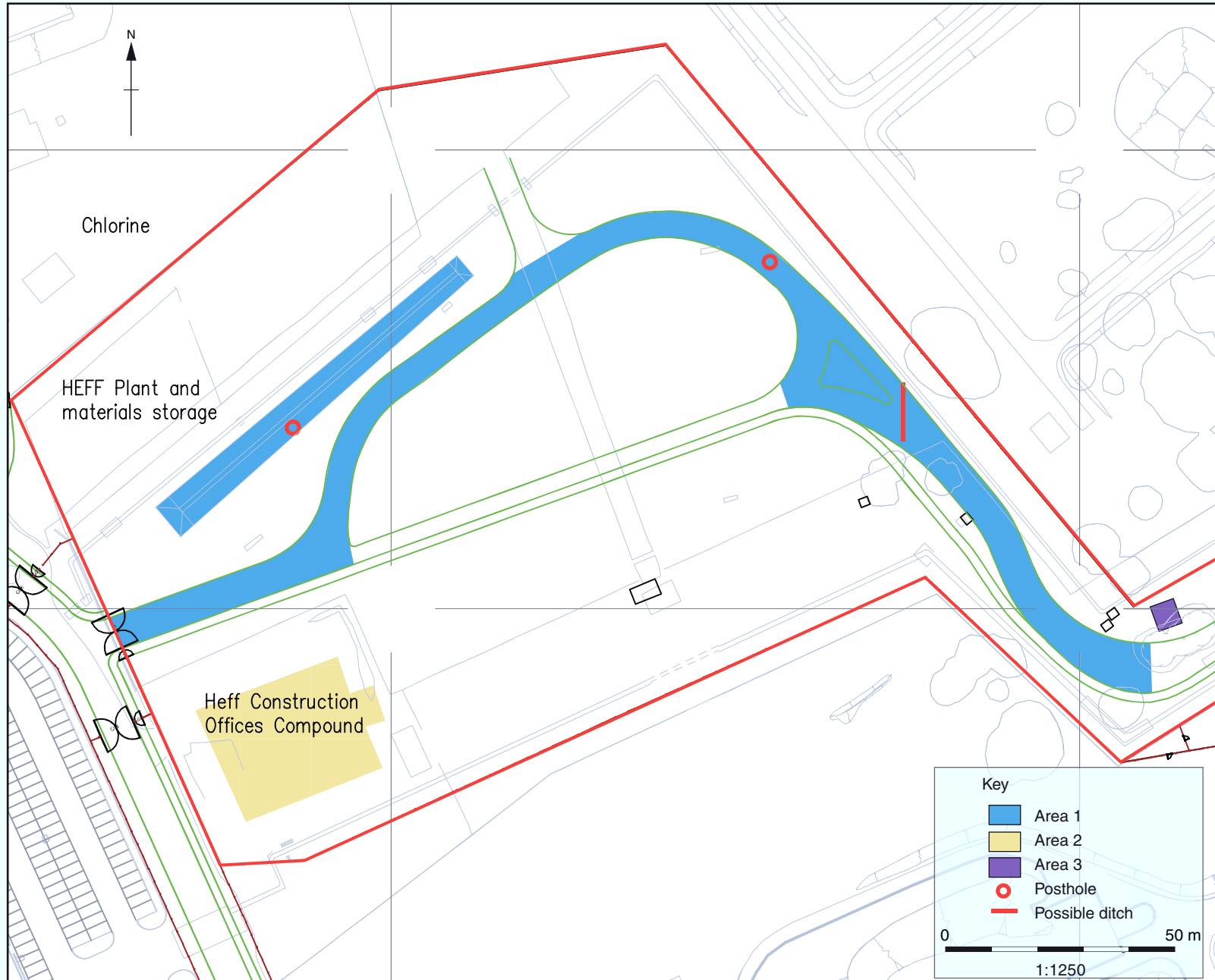


Figure 3: Location map of monitored areas