

AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL
WATCHING BRIEF AT GRIFFIN
CLOSE, NORTHFIELD,
BIRMINGHAM

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Illustrated by Simon Griffin and Carolyn Hunt

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Report 1167
Project 2325
BSMR 20715

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Archaeological watching brief at Griffin Close, Northfield, Birmingham

James Goad

Part 1 Project summary

An archaeological watching brief was undertaken at Griffin Close, Northfield, Birmingham (NGR SP 029 807). It was undertaken on behalf of Crest Nicholson Residential (Midlands) Limited and CgMs Consulting, who were acting as agents for the project. Crest Nicholson intended to demolish the existing Birmingham University Halls of Residence that occupied the site and re-develop the site for housing, for which a planning application had been submitted. The project aimed to determine if any significant archaeological deposits of any sort were present and if so to indicate what their location, date and nature were. The project failed to locate any archaeological deposits.

Part 2 Detailed report

1. Background

1.1 Reasons for the project

An archaeological watching brief was undertaken at Griffin Close, Northfield, Birmingham (NGR SP 029 807), on behalf of Crest Nicholson Residential (Midlands) Limited. Crest Nicholson intended to demolish a former Birmingham University Halls of Residence and re-develop the site for housing. They submitted a planning application to Birmingham City Council, who considered that an area of archaeological interest might have been affected.

1.2 Project parameters

The project conforms to the *Standard and guidance for an archaeological watching brief* (IFA 1999) The project conforms to a written scheme of investigation (Mould 2002a).

1.3 Aims

The aims of the project were to be present during the demolition and construction phases of the project and to locate archaeological deposits and determine, if present, their extent, state of preservation, date, type, vulnerability and documentation.

2. Methods

2.1 Documentary search

Prior to fieldwork commencing a desk-based assessment was produced for the site in question.

2.2 Fieldwork

2.2.1 Fieldwork strategy

A detailed written scheme of investigation was prepared (Mould 2002a). This followed on from a desk-based assessment of the site (Mould 2002b).

Fieldwork was undertaken between 11th December 2002 and 26th June 2003.

During the demolition phase of the project, the foundations of the former university residences were grubbed out using 360° tracked excavators, employing toothed buckets in order to deal with the brick and concrete material involved. Similarly the footprints for the new houses being built on the site were excavated by the same machines. This process was carried out under archaeological supervision. The surfaces exposed by the groundworks were inspected as closely as possible given some health and safety restrictions. Deposits were recorded according to standard Service practice (CAS 1995). As an aid to speeding up the recording process and as the deposits displayed little archaeological value, the scale drawings used to record the trenching were annotated with deposit descriptions.

2.2.2 Structural analysis

All fieldwork records were checked and cross-referenced. Analysis was effected through a combination of structural, artefactual and ecofactual evidence, allied to the information derived from other sources.

2.3 Artefacts

2.3.1 Artefact recovery policy

The artefact recovery policy conformed to standard Service practice (CAS 1995; appendix 2). The single sherd of pottery recovered was not retained.

2.3.2 Method of analysis

The hand retrieved sherd of pottery was examined. It was identified, quantified and dated to period. A *terminus post quem* date was produced for the context. The date was used for determining the broad date of a phase of the site. All information was recorded on *pro forma* sheets.

Pottery fabrics are referenced to the fabric reference series maintained by the Service (Hurst 1994).

2.4 Environment

2.4.1 Sampling policy

There were no archaeological features detected during the course of the groundworks, so no environmental samples were taken.

2.5 The methods in retrospect

The methods adopted allow a high degree of confidence that the aims of the project have been achieved.

3. Topographical and archaeological context

The site was subject to bore holing prior to demolition by Ground Investigation and Piling Ltd who determined that the site is underlain by bedrock comprising Mercia Mudstone of the Triassic Period. A thin band of alluvium (brown pebbly sand and silt) masks the solid geology along the course of Griffin Brook (Mould 2002b).

The site comprises an area of approximately 6.8 hectares of heavily landscaped topography, having been the site of university halls of residence with associated roads and car parks. Mature trees also surround the site. Griffin's Brook actually forms the northern boundary of the site. The natural topography has been altered since the construction of the halls in the late 1960's. There was a certain amount of ground reduction around the footprint of the former university residences and the stockpiling of this material between the buildings. As a whole the ground level falls from the Bristol Road South (A38) down towards Griffin's Brook. The site lies at approximately 145m AOD at the A38, falling to 138m AOD at Griffin's Brook (Mould 2002b).

The Birmingham SMR indicates that there is a series of Bronze Age burnt mounds within 150-1600m of the site. Two to the south-east of Griffin Close in Woodlands Park are designated Scheduled Ancient Monuments (SAM 35109). Burnt mounds of heat-shattered stones and charcoal rich soil-typically in a horse-shoe or crescent-shape were originally located beside streams or brooks, or on the alluvial deposits of former stream courses. Their location within floodplains and with a characteristic absence of artefacts makes it unlikely they formed part of a permanent settlement. The mounds measure up to 20m across and 1m high. There is often evidence for a central pit or tank in which heated stones were placed and perhaps water poured on them to make a steam bath or sauna (Mould 2002b).

The northern boundary of the site is defined by Griffin's Brook which is known to contain evidence for burnt mounds to the north-east and south-west of the site. A moderate potential for the survival of burnt mounds was identified (Mould 2002b).

There isn't a record for Roman sites on the site in question but there are for artefacts from this period in the vicinity of the site. The Bristol Road (A38) follows the line of a former Roman road which led south-west to Droitwich. To the north it connected with Rycknield Street, close to Metchley Roman fort, some 3km to the north-east of the site. Other Roman remains exist in the area in the form of a Roman road recorded 350m north of the site (SMR 03312) and two coins found 600m south and 50m north of Griffin Close, SMR 02991 and 03317 respectively (Mould 2002b).

There is little evidence for later activity until the post-medieval period. This is detailed mostly through cartographic sources (see Figures 4 and 5). The 1840 Tithe map (Figure 4) shows the site consisted of three open fields. The site lay within a post-medieval agricultural landscape until the construction of the university residences in the late 1960's and early 1970's (Mould 2002b).

4. **Description**

The results of the contexts recorded are presented in Tables 1-5. The trenches and areas recorded and observed are shown in Figures 1-3.

5. **Results of artefactual analysis**

A single piece of pottery was recovered during the watching brief. This was taken from context 300 and was a surface find (unstratified context). The pottery was fabric 85, modern stone china and dateable from the late 19th century to 21st century (L Griffin pers comm).

6. **Discussion**

6.1 **Phase 1 Natural deposits**

Various natural deposits were located during the course of the groundworks. Most of these were clays and gravels and are listed in the tables in Appendix 1.

6.2 **Prehistoric**

The site had a moderate potential for the presence of Bronze Age burnt mounds in the vicinity of Griffin's Brook but during the course of the watching brief none were discovered.

6.3 **Roman**

The site was adjacent to an original Roman thoroughfare (A38) and had a low potential for locating something from the period. Unfortunately nothing from this period was found during the course of the groundworks.

6.4 **Medieval**

No evidence of features or finds from this period were located on the site.

6.5 Post-medieval

No evidence, in the form of features or artefacts, were noticed during the course of the groundworks.

6.6 Modern

There were quite a few pottery sherds from this period scattered over the site and a couple of these were processed to represent their presence in the archive. Otherwise all the material from the site related to the former university residences which were in the process of being demolished.

The scale of the groundworks, both relating to the demolition and the construction, were very substantial but it seems from the areas observed that no significant archaeological features were disturbed.

7. Publication summary

The Service has a professional obligation to publish the results of archaeological projects within a reasonable period of time. To this end, the Service intends to use this summary as the basis for publication through local or regional journals. The client is requested to consider the content of this section as being acceptable for such publication.

An archaeological watching brief was undertaken on behalf of Crest Nicholson Residential (Midlands) Ltd at Griffin Close, Northfield, Birmingham (NGR SP 029 807; SMR 20715). The project covered both the demolition of the former university residences and part of the construction phase for the new housing. No archaeological features were detected during the course of the groundworks, despite there being varying potential for the existence of archaeological deposits from a variety of periods.

8. The archive

The archive consists of:

9	Context records AS1
7	Fieldwork progress records AS2
4	Photographic records AS3
4	Colour transparency films
2	Black and white photographic films
8	Scale drawings
1	Computer disk

The project archive is intended to be placed at:

Birmingham City Museum

9. Acknowledgements

The Service would like to thank the following for their kind assistance in the successful conclusion of this project, Crest Nicholson Residential (Midlands) Ltd, CgMs Consulting and Mike Hodder (curator).

10. **Personnel**

The fieldwork and report preparation was led by James Goad. The project manager responsible for the quality of the project was Simon Woodiwiss. Fieldwork was undertaken by James Goad, finds analysis by Erica Darch with illustration by Carolyn Hunt.

11. **Bibliography**

CAS, 1995 (as amended) *Manual of Service practice: fieldwork recording manual*, County Archaeological Service, Hereford and Worcester County Council, report, **399**

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Hurst, J D, 1994 (as amended) *Pottery fabrics. A multi-period series for the County of Hereford and Worcester*, County Archaeological Service, Hereford and Worcester County Council. report **445**

Mould, C 2002a *Written scheme of investigation, Griffin Close, Birmingham*, CgMs Consulting, November 2002

Mould, C, 2002b *Archaeological desk-based assessment, Griffin Close, Birmingham*, CgMs Consulting, October 2002

12. **Abbreviations**

- | | |
|------|---|
| BSMR | Numbers prefixed with 'BSMR' are the primary reference numbers used by the Birmingham Sites and Monuments Record. |
| WCRO | Worcestershire County Records Office. |
| NMR | National Monuments Record. |
| SMR | Sites and Monuments Record. |

Appendix 1 Trench descriptions

Table 1

Block 22

Location on site: North-east corner of Griffin Close, 30m west of A38. See Figure 3

Maximum dimensions: Length: 13.50m Width: 11.50m Depth: 0-2.60m

Orientation: North-south

Main deposit description

Context	Classification	Description	Depth below ground surface (b.g.s) – top and bottom of deposits
100	Made ground	Friable mid brown silty sand. Moderate small to medium rounded stone inclusions. Occasional brick and modern material within the fill too. Probably a dump of material contemporary with the construction of the university residences.	0.30-1.20m
101	Concrete footings	Deep concrete footings for university residences. The depth of the footings contrasts with the much more shallow ones elsewhere. This is due to the high water table present on this side of the site, necessitating more substantial concrete foundations.	0-2.60m
102	Natural	Blue grey clay layer. Cut into by 101	1.40-2.60m
103	Redeposited/disturbed natural	Clay cut through by services and with rubble inclusions.	0m-

Table 2

Unstratified contexts

Location on site: Across the site

Main deposit description

Context	Classification	Description	Depth below ground surface (b.g.s.) – top and bottom of ground deposits
300	Rubble surface	Surface of site covered with demolition material	0m-

Table 3**Water holding tank/storm drain trench**

Location on site: At northern limit of Griffin Close, immediately adjacent to the brook. See Figure 3

Dimensions: Length: 60m Width: 10m Depth: 1.80-1.90m

Orientation: North-west-west to south-east-east

Main deposit description

Context	Classification	Description	Depth below ground surface (b.g.s) – top and bottom of deposits
400	Machine cut		
401	Turf and topsoil	Mid grey silty sand	0-0.15m
402	Rubble layer	Layer of brick rubble	0.15-0.65m
403	Former palaeochannel	Dark and mid grey alluvial silts	0.65-1.85m
404	Natural clay	Orangey red sandy clay. Occasional small to medium rounded stones	0.70-1.60m
405	Natural clay	Light grey sandy clay with moderate to abundant medium rounded stones	1.45-1.80m
406	Mixed layer. Alluvial material. Part of palaeochannel	Mid to dark grey silt. Very alluvial material.	0.65-1.80m
407	Natural gravels	Alternate brown and grey sandy gravels	1.80m-
408	Natural gravels	Light grey natural sandy gravels	1.80m-

Table 4

Block 7

Location on site: At western edge of site. See Figure 3

Trench dimensions: Length: 32m Width: 1.40m Depth: 0.85m

Orientation: North-south

Main deposit descriptions

Context	Classification	Description	Depth below ground surface (b.g.s.) – top and bottom of deposits
500	Machined trench		
501	Made ground	A very mixed layer. Predominantly sandy material with a lot of brick rubble and other detritus	0-0.40m
502	Natural clay	Orangey brown natural clay.	0.40-0.85m
503	Natural clay	Reddish clay	0.85m-

Table 5

Pipe trench (only one segment observed)

Location on site: On western side of the site. See Figure 3

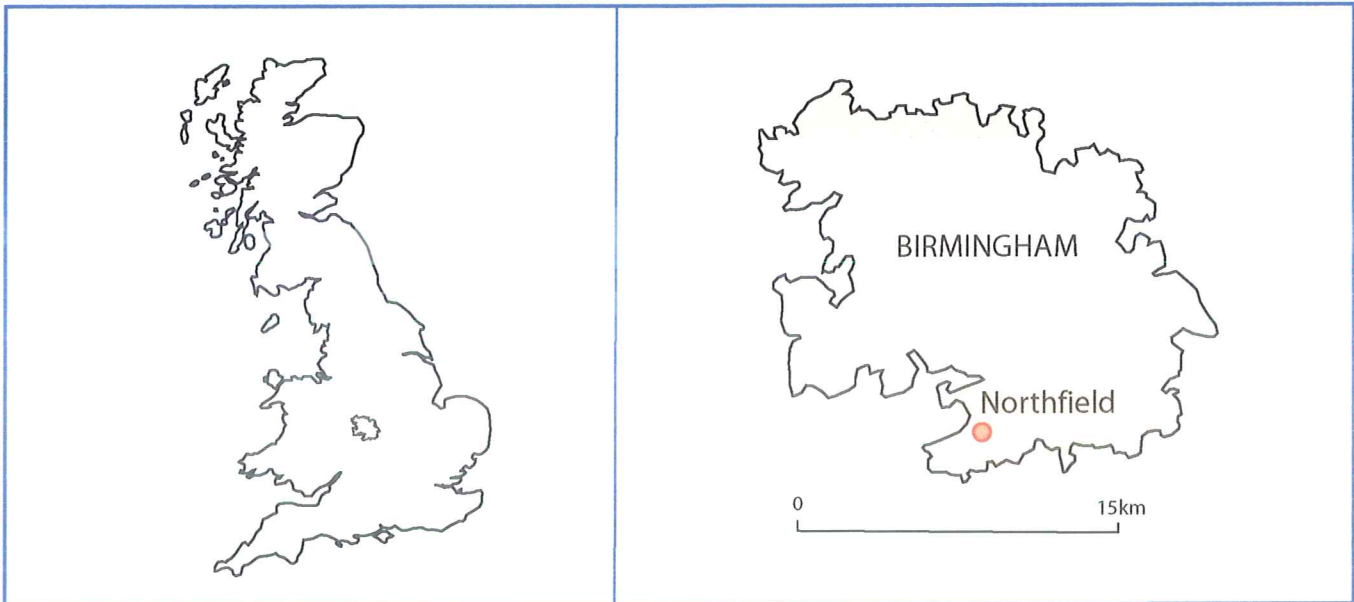
Dimensions: Segment length: 15m Width:0.40m Depth:1m

Orientation: North-east to south-west

Main deposit descriptions

Context	Classification	Description	Depth below ground surface (b.g.s.) – top and bottom of deposits
600	Machine cut		
601	Made ground.	Light grey sandy silt with occasional brick rubble inclusions	0-0.75m
602	Natural clay	Mid brown clay.	0.75-1 .m

603	Concrete service	Cuts 601 and 602	0-1m
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Location of Griffin Close.

Figure 1

Watching Brief at Griffin Close, Northfield, Birmingham

BSMR: 20715
Project number: P2325
Drawing number: 2
Revision number

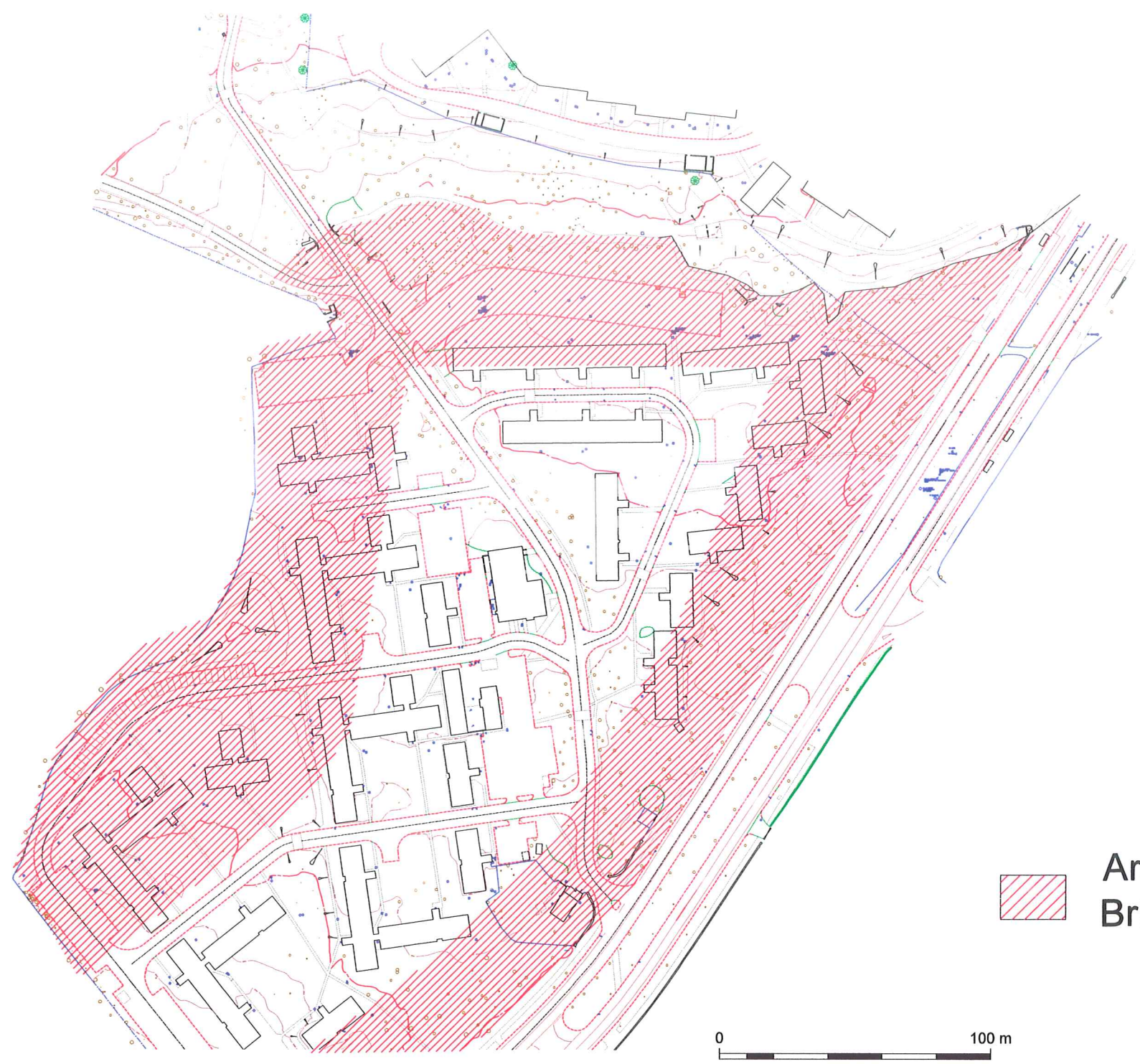
Date: 14.7.03

Client: CGMS
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 Area of Watching Brief

Fig 2 Area of watching brief

Watching Brief at Griffin Close,
Northfield, Birmingham

BSMR: 20715
Project number: P2325
Drawing number: 3
Revision number

Date: 14.7.03

Client: CGMS
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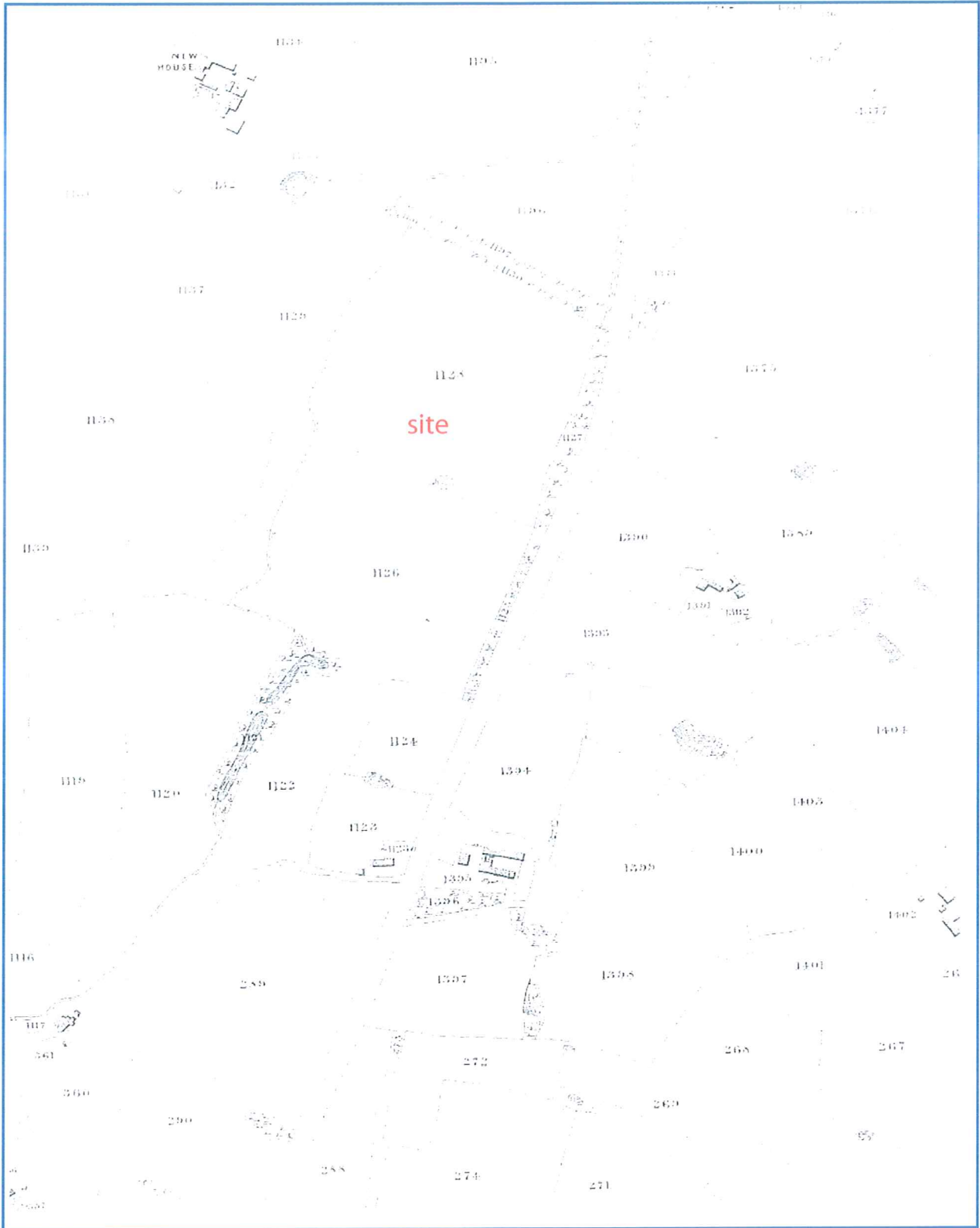
-  Groundworks observed during construction phase
-  Groundworks observed during building demolition
-  Groundworks observed during water tank trench excavation

Fig 3: Areas of Groundwork observation



Extract from 1840 Tithe Map (not to scale).

Figure 4



Plate 1: Water tank trench looking west.



Plate 2: Block 22, working shot looking west.



Plate 3: Block 6 demolition phase, looking north.