



# **Chris Butler MfA Archaeological Services Ltd**



## **Archaeological Watching Brief at Vue Valaise, Northbridge Street, Roberstbridge, East Sussex**

**(RR/2012/878)**

**CBAS0340**

**by  
David Atkin**

**July 2013**

### **Summary**

*An archaeological watching brief was carried out during the construction of a new extensions at Vue Valaise, Northbridge Street Robertsbridge. All excavations were carried out using an 0.8 tonne excavator and the excavated area was cut into the natural, exposing the natural geology of the Ashdown Beds. No archaeological features were encountered during the watching brief with the excavation being archaeologically sterile of features. However, a small assemblage of material dating from the late 19<sup>th</sup> to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was recovered from the topsoil and subsoil along with three WW2 barbed wire picket posts and some barbed wire and a strap-end from webbing or a rucksack and which may be contemporary with the pickets and barbed wire.*

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## **1.0 Introduction**

- 1.1** Chris Butler Archaeological Services Ltd had been commissioned by Vicky Thornton (The Client) to carry out an archaeological watching brief during the ground-works associated with the refurbishment and extensions to the existing bungalow including new single storey extensions to both sides, at Vue Valaise, Northbridge Street, Robertsbridge, East Sussex TQ 7383 2415 (Fig. 1).
- 1.2** As a result of the site's location, and the archaeological potential of the area, the local planning authority put a condition on the planning consent for the development (RR/2012/878), requiring an appropriate programme of archaeological work to be undertaken.
- 1.3** The site is situated within a designated Archaeological Notification Area defining Northbridge, a Medieval and Post Medieval suburb of the town of Robertsbridge (Fig. 2), and is just outside the Conservation Area covering Northbridge Street.
- 1.4** Robertsbridge is located some 7km north of Battle, in the valley of the River Rother. Northbridge Street is situated to the north of the town centre, and north of the River Rother. The geology, according to the British Geological Survey (Sheet 304), is Ashdown Beds sandstone, with Alluvium to the south.
- 1.5** The appropriate programme of archaeological work comprised an archaeological watching brief as specified by the Archaeology Team at East Sussex County Council. A Written Scheme of Investigation<sup>1</sup> covering the watching brief, and including HER data provided by ESCC (HER Ref: 028/12), was prepared and was submitted to and approved by the local planning authority.
- 1.6** The watching brief was required to monitor the excavation of the foundation trenches for the new extensions and any other associated ground-works.

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<sup>1</sup> Butler, C. 2012 *A Written Scheme of Investigation for an Archaeological Watching Brief at Vue Valaise, Northbridge Street, Robertsbridge, East Sussex*. CBAS

## 2. Historical & Archaeological Background (Fig. 3)

- 2.1 Prehistoric activity is evidenced by the discovery of a small assemblage of 12 prehistoric worked flints during work on the Robertsbridge bypass in 1985, six of which were Mesolithic. A polished Neolithic axe-head (MES2302) has also been found nearby.
- 2.2 There have been very few discoveries of Roman or Saxon activity in the immediate vicinity of the site. A possible 2<sup>nd</sup> century midden eroded out of the river bank to the north-west of the site in 1969 (MES2304), while a Roman settlement is reputedly located to the south of Robertsbridge (MES2377). A 4<sup>th</sup> century Roman coin (MES8928) and a 6<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> century Saxon coin (MES2929) were discovered to the north-east of the site. Salehurst originated as a Saxon settlement (MES19253).
- 2.3 Robertsbridge is a Medieval village (MES2376) on the River Rother which dates back to 1176 when the only Cistercian abbey in Sussex was founded by Robert de St Martin. A Royal Charter was granted by Richard I in 1198, to what was then known as Rotherbridge. The abbey was dissolved in 1538 when only eight monks remained and the ruins of the abbey now form part of a private house and gardens to the east of the village.
- 2.4 The main business of the village of Robertsbridge was as a stopping and resting place for travellers from Hastings to London. The large numbers of late 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> Century Wealden Hall Houses (e.g. MES2388, 2390, 2393, 2394, 2398 & 2402) in the town, particularly clustered around The High Street, show a period of wealth and expansion, possibly due to the weekly market that was granted the village by Henry III in the 13<sup>th</sup> century<sup>2</sup>. Northbridge Street is situated on this important north-south route at the point where it entered the Manor of Etchingam, after crossing the flood plain of the River Rother.
- 2.5 The importance of Robertsbridge in the later medieval period may have brought about the decline of nearby market at Salehurst, which had declined by 1349<sup>3</sup>, and thus brought about the increase in activity at Northbridge Street, which may have developed as a craft centre at this time within the estates of the Etchingam family<sup>4</sup>. 15<sup>th</sup> century buildings that survive at Northbridge Street include Nos. 5 & 7 (MES2329), Bayham (MES2330), Merry Cottage (MES2331) and Monks House (MES2367). Numerous other medieval houses are recorded as being destroyed or rebuilt along Northbridge Street after 1750 (MES19646 to MES19658)<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Harris, R.B. 2009 *Robertsbridge: Historic Character Assessment Report*, Sussex EUS

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Greg Chuter pers. com.

<sup>5</sup> Martin, D & Martin B 2010 *Rape of Hastings Architectural Survey*

- 2.6** A survey of the Manor of Etchingam cum Salehurst dated 1597<sup>6</sup> gives an indication of the size and structure of the suburb at Northbridge Street. It was showing signs of decline, but contained 18 messuages, a further two had by then been converted to agricultural use, one on the north being utilised as an oasthouse and another on the south as a barn.
- 2.7** A forge and furnace were built at Robertsbridge in 1541-2 by Sir William Sidney, who had acquired the abbey grounds in 1539. The forge appears to have continued in operation until the 18<sup>th</sup> century. A second furnace was operating near Robertsbridge in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, and in 1768 was casting guns for the government<sup>7</sup>.
- 2.8** The 1841/3 Tith map (Fig. 4) shows the site to be located within a field to the north of the mill stream, at the south end of the settlement. Two houses opposite the site (Nos. 30 & 34 Northbridge Street) are present, and other properties front Northbridge Street to the north-east of the site. Many of the properties in Northbridge Street were built in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries (e.g. MES2332, 2341, 2342, 2343, 19642 & 19643), whilst others date to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century (MES19644 & MES19645). Hodsons flour mill (MES2305) is shown adjacent to the mill stream to the south-west of the site.
- 2.9** The 1<sup>st</sup> Edition OS map (1873-4) shows a similar situation, with little change having taken place, and this is still the case with the 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition OS map of 1898, although there are more buildings around the mill at this time. By the 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition OS map of 1909 (Fig. 5) the field is still undeveloped, but the mill complex and mill building are much larger, and now served by a siding from the Kent and East Sussex Railway.
- 2.10** The existing bungalow was built on the site in 1937<sup>8</sup>, and is shown on OS maps after the Second World War, the only subsequent change being the addition of a brick garage in 1966. During the Second World War Robertsbridge was a Category A Nodal Point, and defences, including pillboxes, would have covered the road and rail bridges over the River Rother. A pillbox survives to the east at Salehurst<sup>9</sup>, and further pillbox may survive close to the mill<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> ESRO SAS-HC342-347

<sup>7</sup> Cleere, H & Crossley, D. 1995 *The Iron Industry in the Weald*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed., Cardiff, Merton Priory Press Ltd.

<sup>8</sup> Heritage Statement

<sup>9</sup> Butler, C. 2007 *East Sussex under Attack*, Tempus Publishing Ltd

<sup>10</sup> Robertsbridge Historical Society *Pers. Com.*

### **3.0 Methodology**

- 3.1** The archaeological work was carried out in accordance with ESCC's *Standards for Archaeological Fieldwork, Recording and Post-Excavation in East Sussex* dated April 2008 (Recommended Standards).
- 3.2** The ground-works comprised of a topsoil strip down to and into the underlying natural around the existing building on the footprint of the new build. This ground reduction was carried out by the careful scraping-back of the overburden in spits using a small tracked excavator using a flat-bladed 1.2m bucket under archaeological supervision to the top of the natural, a depth of approximately 550mm from the current ground level and approximately 850mm to the limit of excavation.
- 3.3** The spoil from the excavation was deposited towards the rear of the garden and was inspected at regular intervals to recover any artefacts or ecofacts of archaeological interest. A Garrett ACE150 metal detector was also used to scan the spoil derived from the excavations.
- 3.4** All deposits were recorded according to accepted professional standards. Deposit colours were recorded by visual inspection and not by reference to a Munsell Colour chart.
- 3.5** The archive is presently held by Chris Butler Archaeological Services Ltd. A site reference of VVR12 has been allocated, and the archive will be deposited at Bexhill Museum, accession number: BEXHM: 2013/85.

## 4.0 Results

- 4.1** Context 1 was a soft, very dark grey, loamy silt topsoil deposit and was approximately 300mm over the entire excavation area. It was a fairly sterile deposit and its inclusions amounted to bioturbation in the form of roots at 5% and contained material dating to the late 19<sup>th</sup> to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century.
- 4.2** Below Context 1 was Context 2, which was a soft, subsoil deposit, mid-brown in colour and was of a silty-clay composition, approximately 250mm in depth. Its inclusions were ceramic building material (CBM) at <1% and rounded flint pebbles <40mm in size at <1% and contained material dating to the late 19<sup>th</sup> to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century (Plate 1).



Plate 1: Excavation of topsoil and subsoil to rear of property

- 4.3** Context 3 was the natural deposit of the Ashdown Beds below Context 2. It was a soft, silt, mixed mid yellow and grey in colour. Its inclusions were sandstone pieces <100mm size at 1% and was 300mm in depth to the limit of excavation.
- 4.4** A coil of barbed wire was noted wrapped around a tree stump to the north-west of the bungalow and close to it was a WW2 barbed wire picket post that was standing up-right (Plate 1) beside the present day fence for which it had presumably been re-used. A number of further picket posts were noted along the boundary fence to the property.
- 4.5** No other archaeological deposits or features were noted during the watching brief.



## 5.0 Finds

**5.0.1** A small assemblage of finds was recovered during the watching brief and is summarised in Table 1 below.

**5.0.2** The assemblage is not considered to hold any potential for further analysis and is recommended for discard.

**Table 1:** Quantification of finds

Context	Pottery (by period)	Ceramic Building Material	Other	Comments
<b>1</b>	1750-1900+: 5/95g	-	Clay pipe 1/3g Mortar 1/9g Metal 1/12g	c. 1875-1925+
<b>2</b>	1750-1900+: 1/16g	Brick 1/226g Peg tile 6/468g	Mortar 1/36g	c. 1875-1925+

### 5.1 The Pottery by Luke Barber

**5.1.1** The pottery recovered from the site all appears to be of later 19<sup>th</sup> to early/mid 20<sup>th</sup> century date. The material is in good condition suggesting it has not been subjected to any significant degree of reworking. Context **1** produced two sherds from unglazed flower pots (50g) and three sherds from a refined white earthenware plate (45g). Context **2** produced just a single sherd of unglazed flower pot.

### 5.2 Clay Tobacco Pipe by Luke Barber

**5.2.1** Context **1** produced a single slightly abraded stem fragment of 19<sup>th</sup>- century date.

### 5.3 Ceramic Building Material by Luke Barber

**5.3.1** The brick fragment is well formed and medium fired and is probably of 18<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> century date. It is tempered with sparse fine sand and common/abundant iron oxides to 3mm.

**5.3.2** Two types of peg tile were recovered, though both appear to be from well formed and fired tiles of mid-18<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> century date. There is a single piece (119g) tempered with sparse fine sand and abundant iron oxides to 1mm and copious streaks of marl. The other tiles have similar tempering agents, but the iron oxides and marl streaks are notably scarcer.

#### **5.4 Mortar** by Luke Barber

**5.4.1** The fragments of mortar from Contexts **1** and **2** consist of the same abundant sandy pink render with common flint grits to 3mm. A later post-medieval date is suspected.

#### **5.5 Military Artefacts** by Chris Butler

**5.5.1** Military items include a sample of barbed wire taken from the tree stump, and other pieces from Context **2**. The wire barbs were four pronged, at 65mm spacing (2.5"), with a prong length of 12mm (1/2"), which is typical of military type barbed wire<sup>11</sup>.

**5.5.2** A number of long type Barbed Wire Screw Pickets, each with four eyes and a five-twist screw, approximately 5'6" (1.7m) in length, were found along the boundary fence of the property. These were used to construct Barbed Wire entanglements around military emplacements.<sup>12</sup>

**5.5.3** An alloy strap-end, possibly from a military rucksack or webbing belt, was also found in Context **1**.

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<sup>11</sup> [www.westernfrontassociation.com](http://www.westernfrontassociation.com)

<sup>12</sup> Manual of Field Engineering. Vol. II. (R.E.) – 1936.

## 6.0 Discussion

- 6.1 Given the presence of the military barbed wire (Plate 3) and picket posts (Plate 2) on-site, and the location of the site overlooking the bridges over the River Rother, and Robertsbridge's status as a Nodal Point during WW2<sup>13</sup> it is tempting to see Vue Valaise as a focus for military activity, either for regular troops or the Home Guard. A pillbox survives to the east at Salehurst<sup>14</sup>, and further pillbox may survive close to the mill<sup>15</sup>, although a brief search could not locate it.
- 6.2 Its location by the bridge makes it an ideal location to site a position covering the bridge. However, we cannot be certain that the barbed wire pickets and the barbed wire looped around a tree stump, are in their original locations or were even located on-site during the war. They may well have been relocated and re-used after the war, although it is tempting to speculate that these artefacts have not moved too far from their original location and reflect part of the history of the site. Further historical research may help to elucidate on this interesting subject.



Plate 2: Barbed wire picket post



Plate 3: Barbed wire

- 6.3 The lack of material and features from other periods suggests that the site was not exploited as Northbridge grew and remained as farmland as suggested by map evidence. It was noted during the excavation that the topology of the field to the north of the site appeared to suggest lynchets or field boundaries still surviving in the landscape close by (Plate 4).

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<sup>13</sup> Butler, C. 2007 *East Sussex under Attack*, Tempus Publishing Ltd

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Robertsbridge Historical Society *Pers. Com.*



Plate 4: Possible lynchets in adjacent field

- 6.4** No other material or features were noted from the site and, with the exception of the WW2 material, the site was virtually sterile.

## **7.0 Acknowledgements**

- 7.1** I would like to thank the client, Vicky Thornton for commissioning the archaeological watching brief. Luke Barber and Chris Butler reported on the finds. The project was managed for CBAS by Chris Butler and monitored for ESCC by Greg Chuter.

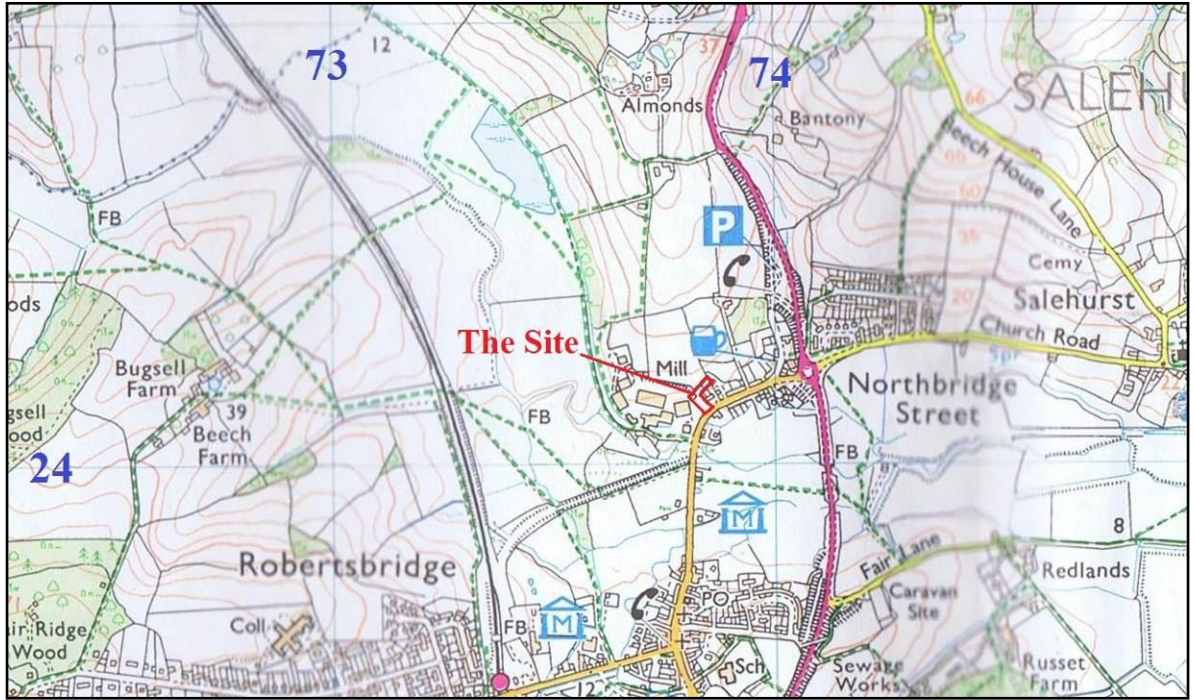


Fig. 1: Vue Valaise, Robertsbridge: Site location map  
Ordnance Survey © Crown copyright 1997. All rights reserved. Licence number 100037471

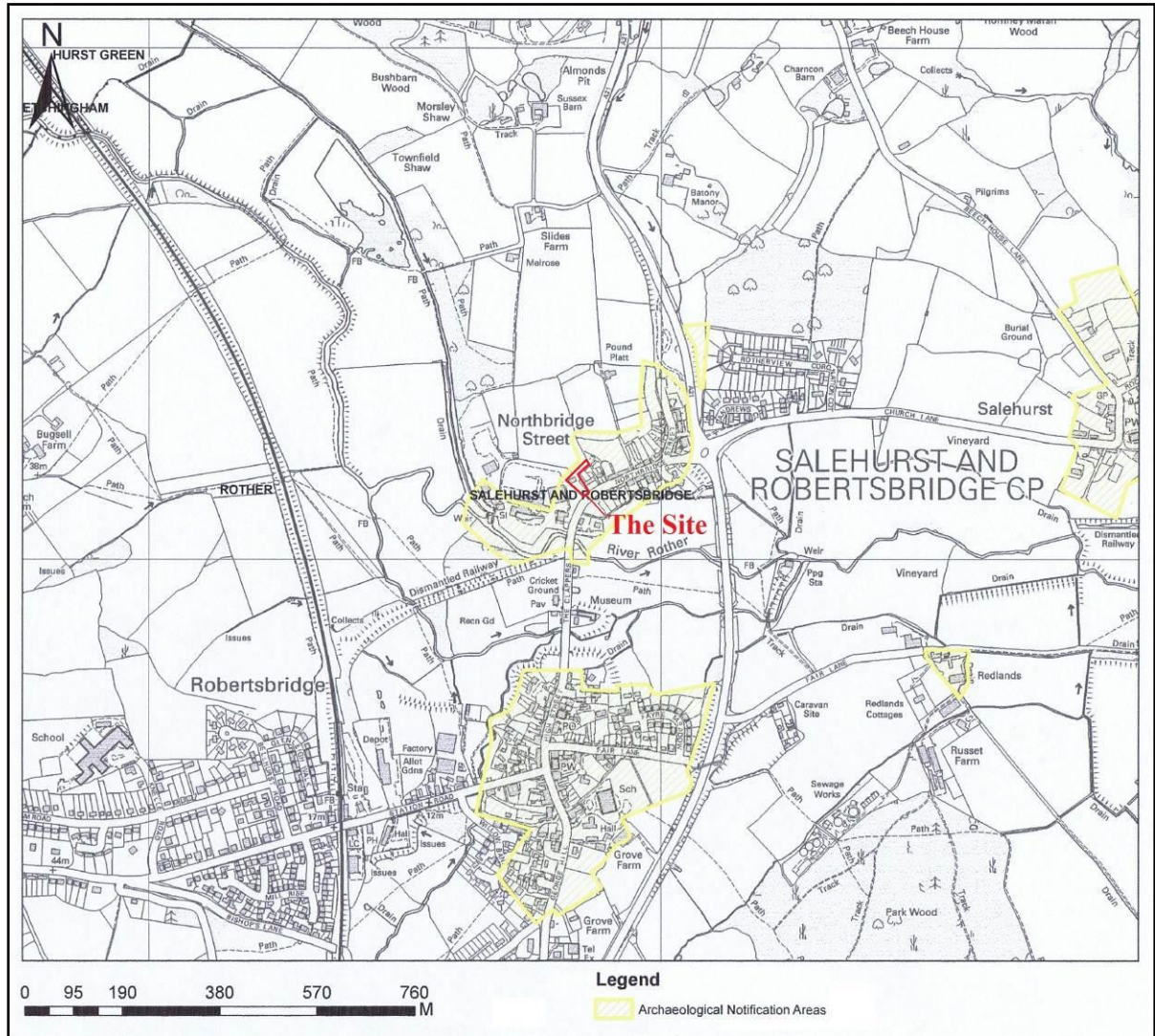


Fig. 2: Vue Valaise, Robertsbridge: Archaeological Notification Area  
(Adapted from map provided by ESCC)  
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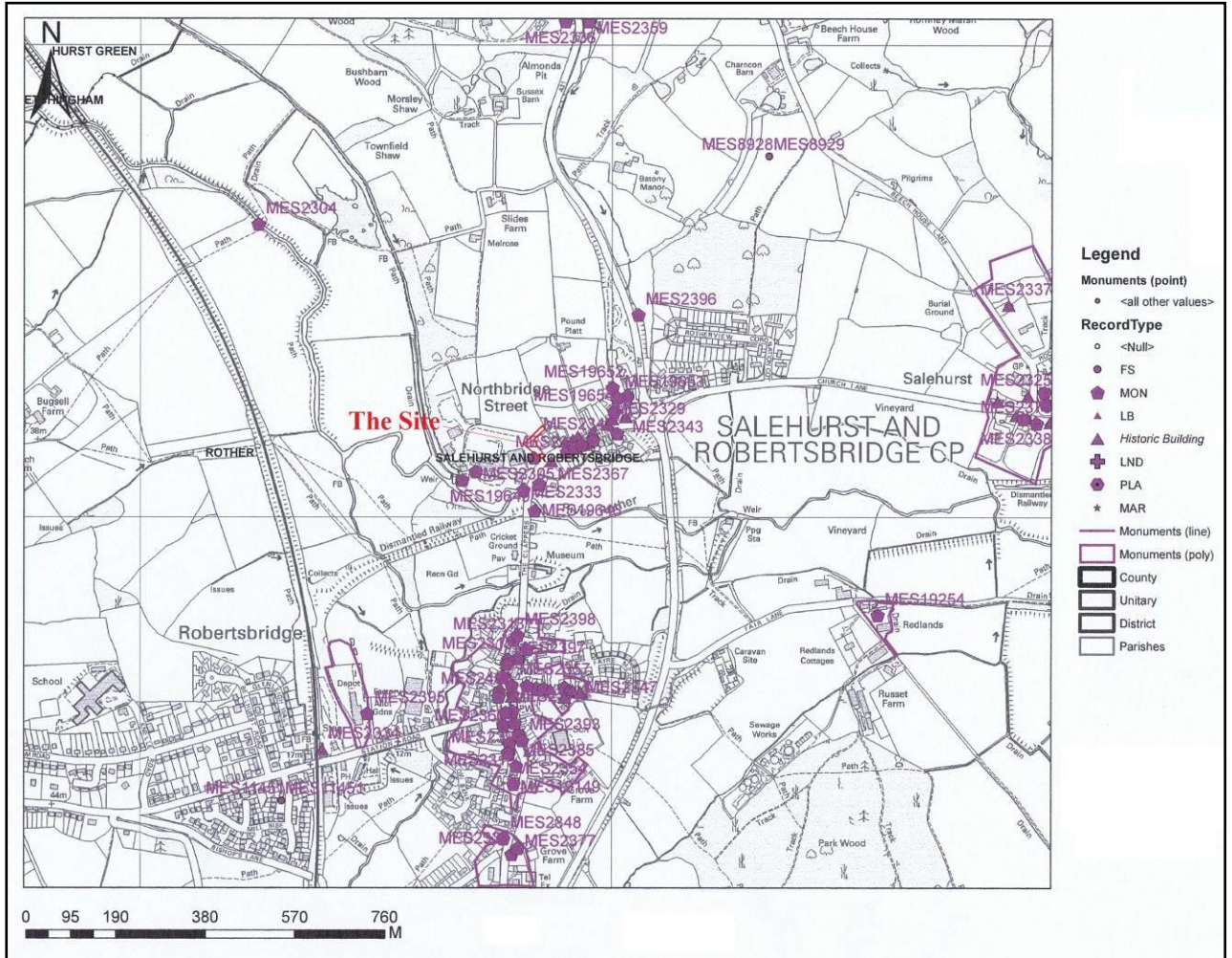


Fig. 3: Vue Valaise, Robertsbridge: Sites on the HER  
(Adapted from map provided by ESCC)  
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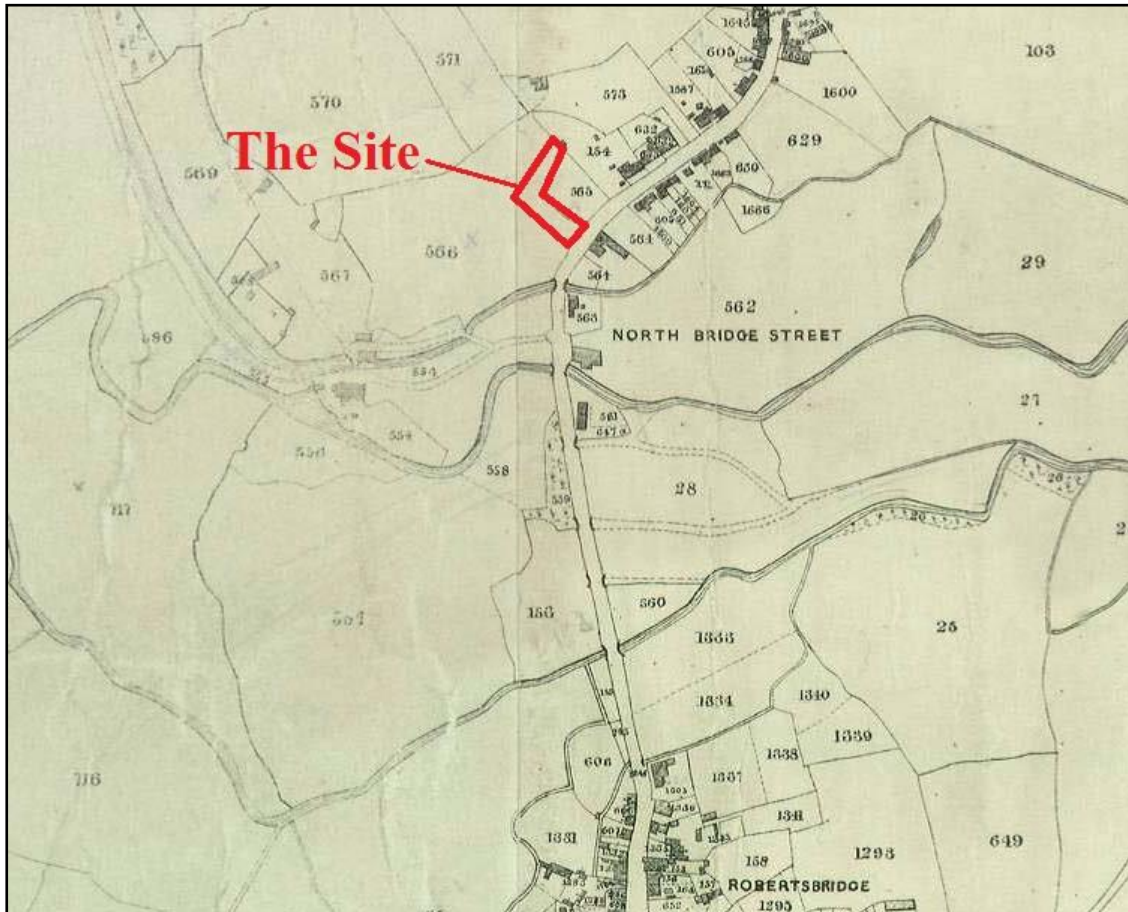


Fig. 4: Vue Valaise, Robertsbridge: 1841-3 Tithe Map  
(Reproduced with permission ESRO - TD/E 86)



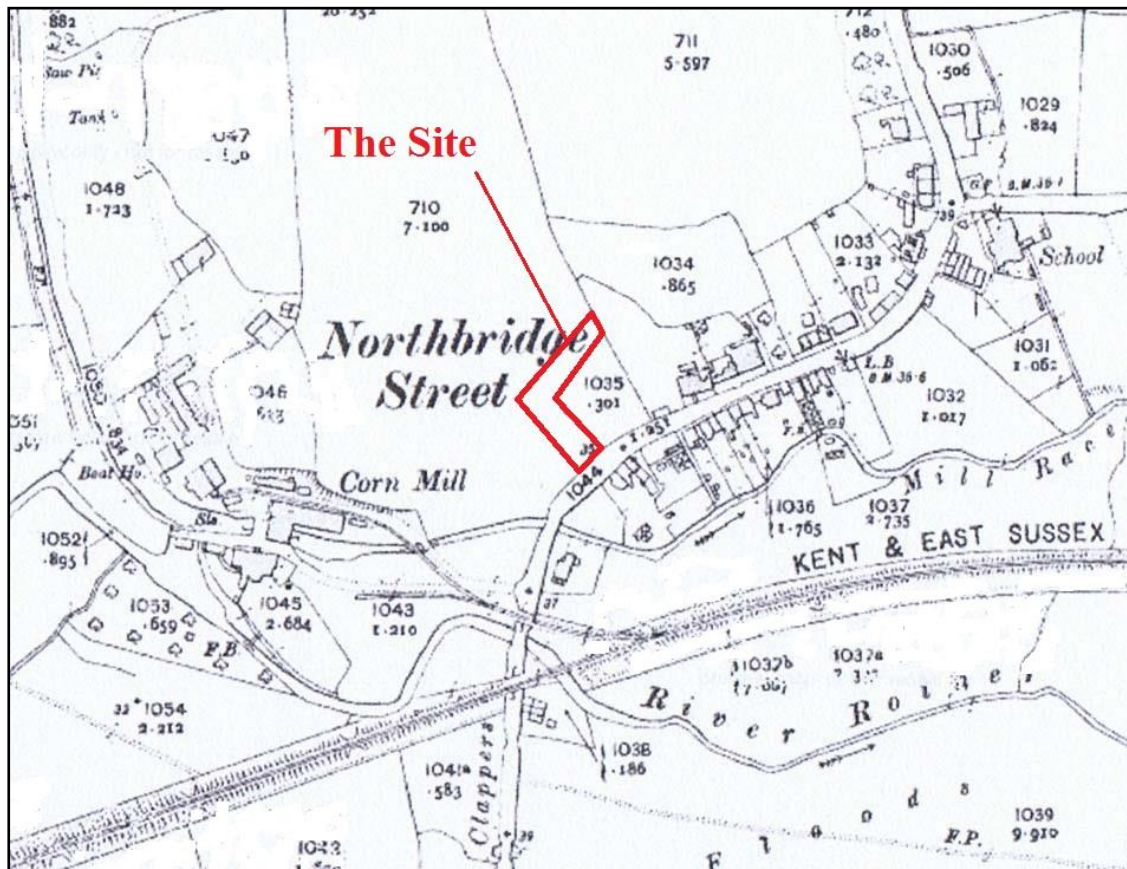


Fig. 5: Vue Valaise, Robertsbridge: 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition OS Map 1909

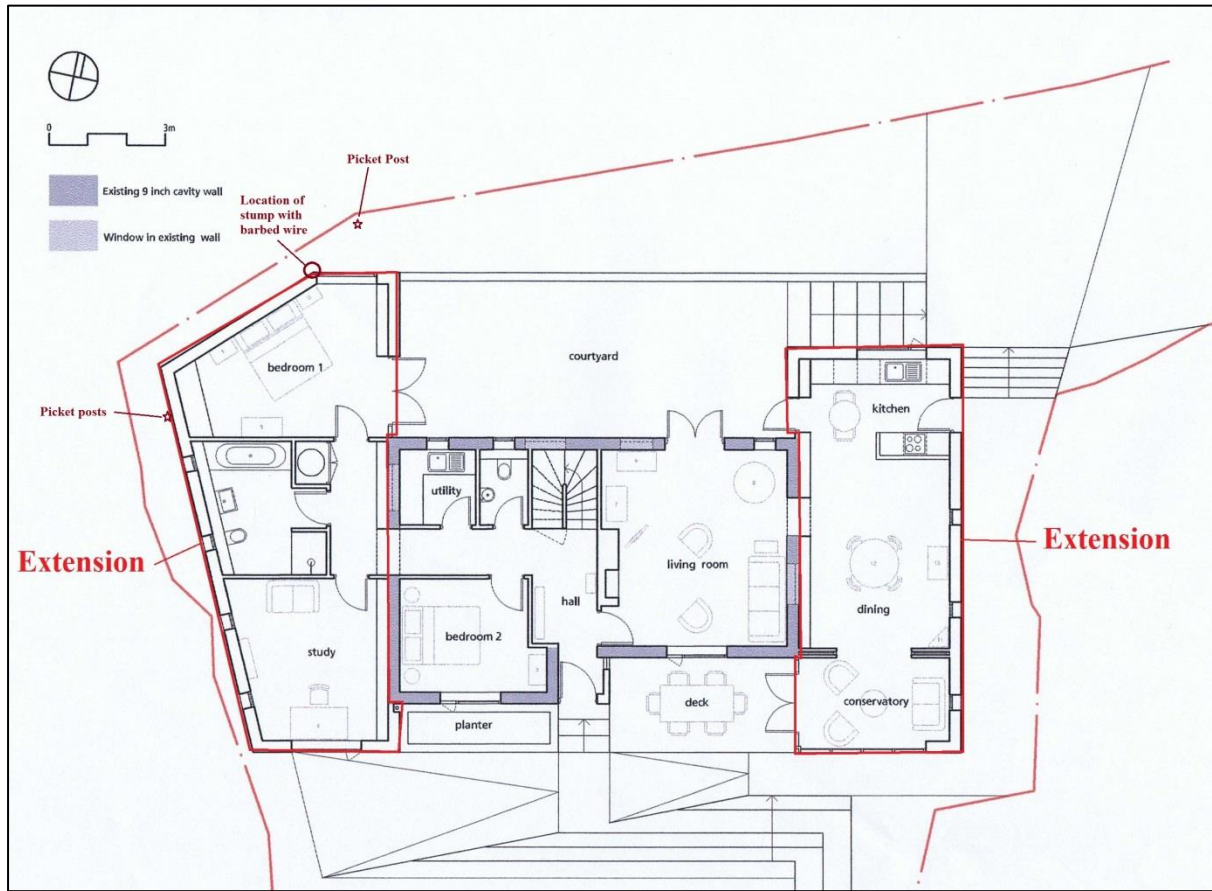


Fig. 6: Vue Valaise, Robertsbridge: Development Plan showing areas monitored  
(Adapted from architects drawing)

### Appendix 1 HER Summary Form

Site Code	VVR12					
Identification Name and Address	Vue Valaise, Northbridge Street, Robertsbridge, East Sussex.					
County, District &/or Borough	Rother District Council					
OS Grid Refs.	TQ 7383 2415					
Geology	Ashdown Beds.					
Type of Fieldwork	Eval.	Excav.	Watching Brief <b>X</b>	Standing Structure	Survey	Other
Type of Site	Green Field	Shallow Urban <b>X</b>	Deep Urban	Other		
Dates of Fieldwork	Eval.	Excav.	WB. 19.11.12- 20.11.12	Other		
Sponsor/Client	Vicky Thornton					
Project Manager	Chris Butler MIFA					
Project Supervisor	David Atkin					
Period Summary	Palaeo.	Meso.	Neo.	BA	IA	RB
	AS	MED	PM <b>X</b>	Other		
<p>100 Word Summary.</p> <p><i>An archaeological watching brief was carried out during the construction of a new extensions at Vue Valaise, Northbridge Street Robertsbridge. All excavations were carried out using an 0.8 tonne excavator and the excavated area was cut into the natural, exposing the natural geology of the Ashdown Beds. No archaeological features were encountered during the watching brief with the excavation being archaeologically sterile of features. However, a small assemblage of material dating from the late 19<sup>th</sup> to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was recovered from the topsoil and subsoil along with three WW2 barbed wire picket posts and some barbed wire and a strap-end from webbing or a rucksack and which may be contemporary with the pickets and barbed wire.</i></p>						

## **Chris Butler Archaeological Services Ltd**

Chris Butler has been an archaeologist since 1985, and formed the Mid Sussex Field Archaeological Team in 1987, since when it has carried out numerous fieldwork projects, and was runner up in the Pitt-Rivers Award at the British Archaeological Awards in 1996. Having previously worked as a Pensions Technical Manager and Administration Director in the financial services industry, Chris formed **Chris Butler Archaeological Services** at the beginning of 2002.

Chris is a Member of the Institute of Field Archaeologists, and a committee member of the Lithic Studies Society. He was a part time lecturer in Archaeology at the University of Sussex, and until recently taught A-Level Archaeology at Bexhill 6<sup>th</sup> Form College having qualified (Cert. Ed.) as a teacher in 2006. He continues to run the Mid Sussex Field Archaeological Team in his spare time.

Chris specialises in prehistoric flintwork analysis, but has directed excavations, landscape surveys and watching briefs, including the excavation of a Beaker Bowl Barrow, a Saxon cemetery and settlement, Roman pottery kilns, and a Mesolithic hunting camp. He has recently undertaken large landscape surveys of Ashdown Forest and Broadwater Warren and is Co-Director of the Barcombe Roman Villa excavation project.

His publications include *Prehistoric Flintwork*, *East Sussex Under Attack* and *West Sussex Under Attack*, all of which are published by Tempus Publishing Ltd.

**Chris Butler Archaeological Services Ltd** is available for Flintwork Analysis, Project Management, Military Archaeology, Desktop Assessments, Field Evaluations, Excavation work, Watching Briefs, Landscape and Woodland Surveys & Fieldwalking, Post Excavation Services and Report Writing.

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