BICC Developments / tp Management Ltd

The Oracle Site, Reading

Watching Brief on British Telecom Yard

Oxford Archaeological Unit
March 1996

Summary

A watching brief was undertaken on four trenches at the Oracle site, Reading, in the British Telecom yard. The natural gravel was encountered in only one trench, 2.4 m below surface, in the south-east corner of the site. Excavation in the other three trenches stopped at around 3 m. The water table, also only seen in one trench, was at 2 m, although there was some seepage into all trenches.

Deep (to at least 3 m) organic clay on the north side of the site is probably related to the former Minster Mill Stream. A leather shoe (medieval or post-medieval) was preserved in this layer, as well as wood and plant matter. The organic clay was typically overlaid by silty clay, also found on the south side of the site, and probably indicative of drier conditions - it contained occasional bone fragments but was not dated.

A brown silty clay with brick fragments overlay the deposits just described, and is probably the very disturbed post-medieval to early modern ground surface. It was everywhere overlaid by brick rubble and the modern yard surface. One trench, in the site's south-west corner, was disturbed to at least 2 m by a brick building or cellar.

1 Introduction

The Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) carried out a watching brief on behalf of BICC at the British Telecom yard which forms part of the proposed Oracle development site, Reading. Four trial pits measuring approximately 0.5 x 2 m (TP100-103, see Fig. 1) were excavated by mechanical excavator as part of the developer's ground investigations - all fieldwork took place on the 21st of March 1996.

2 Topography and geology

The site lies at SU 7158 7327, and consists of a yard surrounded on three sides by buildings, some of which are open-sided. The yard surface is at approximately 38.2 m OD at the north-western corner of the yard, sloping to 37.65 at the south-east. The southern boundary is formed by the Back Brook, which is still open at this point, although choked with silt and debris.

Geologically, the site lies at the bottom of the second gravel terrace of the River Kennet. The geological sequence consists of river gravels overlain by alluvial clay and silts.

3 Archaeological background

A full statement of the site background is not given here, as this has been covered previously (Tatton-Brown, February 1996; OAU, February 1996). It is important to note however that the site is bounded to north (Minster Mill Stream) and south (Back Brook) by watercourses which are at least medieval in date, if not older.

Previous work around the watching brief area consists of two trial pits lying approximately 30 m to the west and south-east respectively. Both pits were observed by

Wessex Archaeology - Trial Pit A2, to the west, revealed 1.4 m of brick/rubble overburden which overlay 1.4 m of archaeological deposits (undated). Below these deposits was 0.7 m of alluvial clay over gravel, which contained a dressed timber at 35 m OD. To the south-east, Trial Pit HTP11 showed archaeological deposits, possibly an early ground surface, under 1.45 m of brick fill - the trench was not excavated below the water table, which was at 1.5 m (Wessex Archaeology).

4 Methodology

All pits were machine excavated and measured 2 x 0.5 m, with the exception of TP101, which was lengthened slightly to facilitate excavation. The trenches were not shored and all recording was therefore done from surface, for safety reasons. Finds were retrieved from the excavated material as it was brought out of the pits.

A schematic representative section drawing of a 1 m wide column was made at each trench (Fig. 2). Written context sheets were filled in for each context, and a colour slide and monochrome photographic record was made.

5 Trench descriptions

TP100 (Maximum depth 3.2 m)

The lowest deposit revealed, but not fully excavated was a slightly silty grey clay (100/4) containing a small amount of grit and gravel, at least 1 m deep (to 3.2 m below surface), overlain by a more silty clay layer, slightly darker grey in colour (100/3), 1.2 m deep, which included fragments of shell, chalk and small twig and/or root fragments. 100/3 was below a dark brown silty clay (100/2), containing brick and tile fragments, flinty gravel and crushed chalk. This layer was heavily contaminated by diesel fuel, apparently leaking from a tank immediately E of the test pit. It was 0.4 m deep, with its top surface 0.6 m below ground level. Layer 100/2 was covered by modern make-up and tarmac (100/1).

TP101 (Maximum depth 2.6 m)

Low light in the vicinity of the pit due to the overhanging roof of a nearby building hampered the clarity of the revealed stratigraphy. The earliest deposit appeared to be 101/5, a dark grey brown silty clay, with a high organic content, at least 0.6 m deep (down to 2.4 m below ground level), revealed at the N end of the pit. Tile, bone and fragments of at least one leather shoe were recovered from the material excavated. The shoe is not obviously medieval or post-medieval and may be as late as the 19th century.

At the south end of the pit layer 101/5 was below 101/4, a surface, possibly of brick, extending to the S of the pit. The level of this surface was approximately 2.0 m below present ground level. Overlying this and 101/5 was a 1.3 m deep layer of dark brown silty clay, loosely mixed with 20 - 30% gravel, brick and tile fragments and large animal bones (101/3). Its top surface was 0.7 m below ground level. Layer 101/3 was sealed by a 0.20 m deep layer of compacted crushed chalk (101/2) which itself was overlaid by 101/1, a 0.50 m deep modern make up and tarmac layer.

TP102 (Maximum depth 3.4 m)

The earliest deposit revealed was a layer of very dark grey silt, with a high organic content (102/5), at least 1.5 m deep (to 3.4 m below ground level). The contents of the layer included plant matter and twigs. Part of a medieval or post-medieval leather shoe was recovered from the excavated material. This layer was under 102/4, a dark grey brown silty clay, 0.80 m deep with inclusions of flinty gravel. Overlying 102/4 was a dark brown silty clay layer (102/3), 0.60 m deep, with inclusions of brick fragments and gravel, and with its upper surface at 0.6 m below ground level. This was overlaid by a rubble make up layer (102/2) and the modern concrete surface.

TP103 (Maximum depth 2.6 m)

Natural coarse flinty gravel (103/4) was revealed at a depth of approximately 2.5 m, overlaid by a 1.2 m deep layer of mid grey silty clay (103/3) with inclusions of chalk flint and gravel. A few bone fragments, apparently deriving from this layer, were noted during the excavation. Due to safety considerations, and the rapid inrush of water once the gravel was reached, it was not possible to retrieve them.

Layer 103/3 was below 103/2, a 0.60 m deep layer of mixed dark brown silty clay and gravel, with inclusions of brick and chalk fragments; its upper surface was 0.5 m below ground level. This was covered by a modern make up and tarmac layer (103/1).

6 Discussion

The natural gravel terrace was only reached in the south-east corner (TP103). The presence of a west-east stream channel (the Minster Mill stream) cutting through the gravel across the N half of the site is indicated by the deep organic deposits in TP101. The equally deep grey clay in TP100 may indicate the south edge of such a stream. The northern part of the site therefore has some potential for understanding the Minster Mill stream (which may well have its origins in an ancient watercourse) through excavation coupled with palaeoenvironmental studies. The proposed evaluation trench ATP8 (Figure 1) should provide further information about this aspect.

TP 100, 102 and 103 displayed a similar later stratigraphy of a grey/dark grey silty clay with gravel and chalk inclusions, overlaid by what could represent the postmedieval/early modern topsoil, heavily disturbed and contaminated by construction or demolition material. No dating was retrieved from the lower silty clay layer with the possible exception of the bone fragments in TP103. Whether this silty clay represents the accumulated alluvium of seasonal flooding, or a deliberate dumping of material to raise the general ground surface is unclear on the evidence to hand - it may well be that a combination of the two processes has taken place.

The relatively modern dumped deposit and brick feature in TP 101 probably relate to a building against the western boundary of the site recorded on the 1st ed OS Map (1876), and, from the fragments of shoe in the apparently earlier deposit 101/5, it could be argued that this building may succeed earlier domestic activity at this point on the site.

The general picture which emerges from the watching brief work is that of a low-lying, very wet area which gradually became drier in the areas between channels. No evidence has yet emerged to indicate what, if any, activity was taking place here in the early medieval and medieval periods.

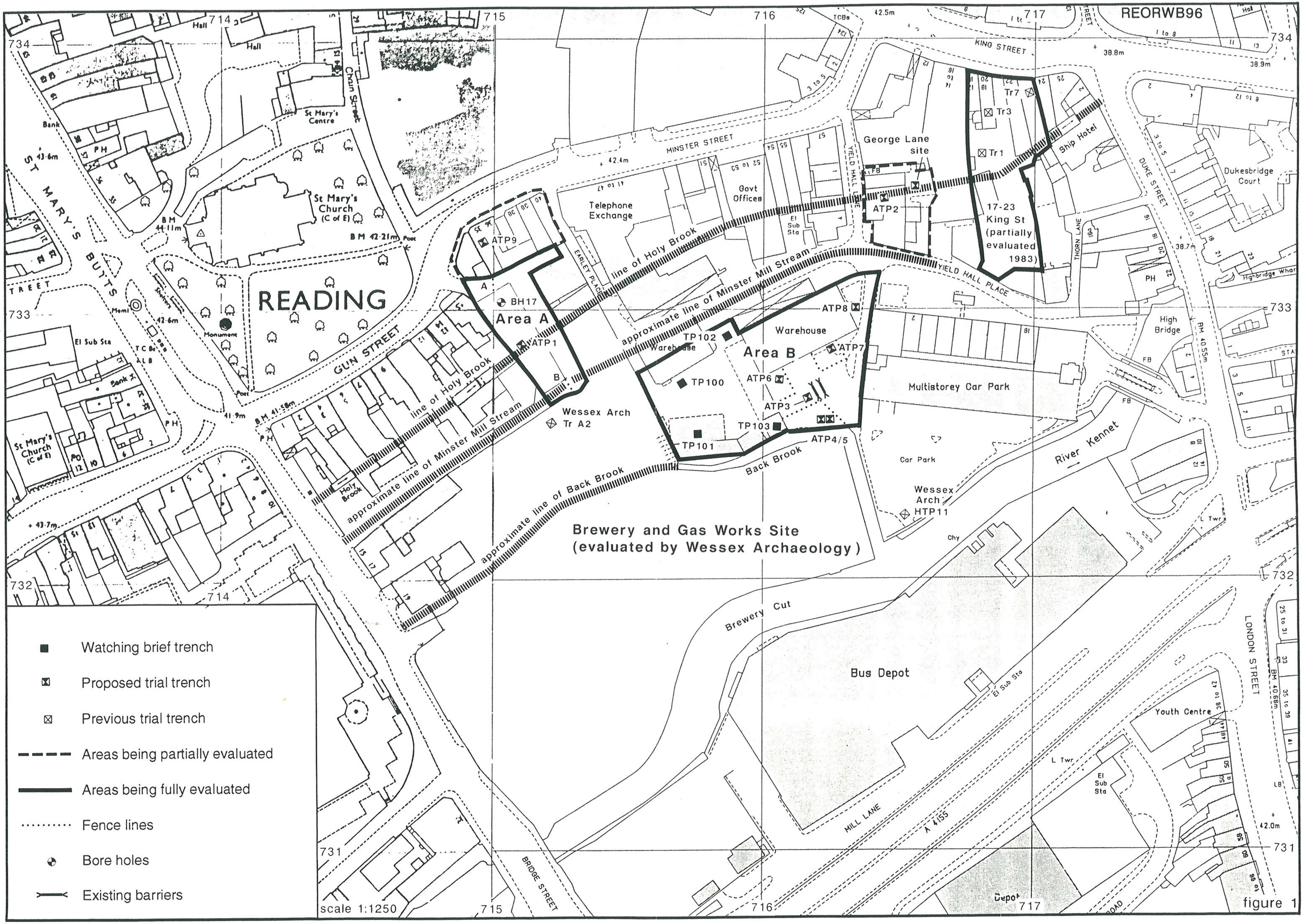
A. Hardy / D. Wilkinson - March 1996

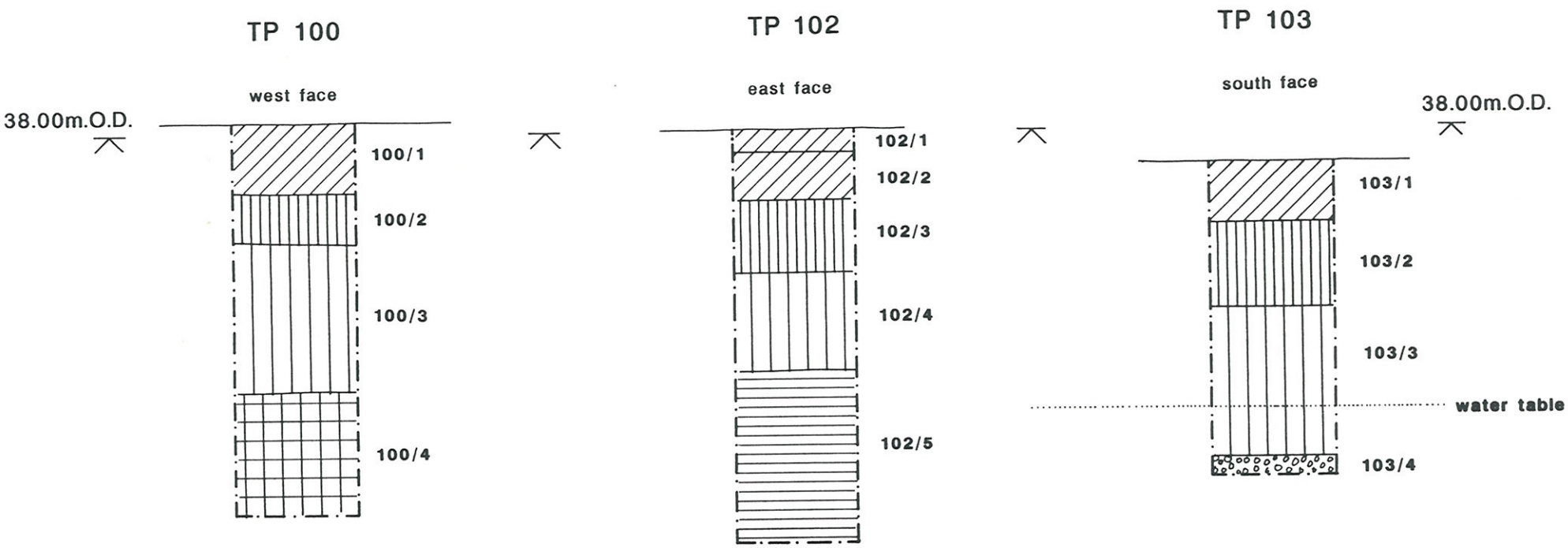
Bibliography

OAU, February 1996 *The Oracle site, Reading - Tender for archaeological services.*

Tatton-Brown, T, February 1996 *The Oracle site, Reading - Notes for archaeological brief for trial trenches and for full excavation programme.*

Wessex Archaeology 1990 *Oracle: boreholes and trial pits* (Unpublished Report).


REORWB96
READING
ST MARY'S BUTTS
St Mary's Church (C of E)
St Mary's Centre
Chain Street
MINSTER STREET
KING STREET
GUN STREET
Telephone Exchange
Govt Offices
George Lane site
ATP2
Tr7
Tr3
Tr1
17-23 King St (partially evaluated 1983)
Ship Hotel
Dukesbridge Court
DUKE STREET
THORN LANE
YIELD HALL PLACE
YIELD HALL LANE
EARLEY PLACE
ATP9
BH17
Area A
ATP1
line of Holy Brook
approximate line of Minster Mill Stream
Wessex Arch Tr A2
ATP8
Warehouse
TP102
Area B
ATP7
ATP6
TP100
ATP3
TP103
TP101
ATP4/5
Back Brook
approximate line of Back Brook
Multistorey Car Park
Car Park
Wessex Arch HTP11
River Kennet
High Bridge
Brewery and Gas Works Site
(evaluated by Wessex Archaeology)
Brewery Cut
Bus Depot
MILL LANE
A 4155
Youth Centre
LONDON STREET
BRIDGE STREET
Holy Brook
Depot
Watching brief trench
Proposed trial trench
Previous trial trench
Areas being partially evaluated
Areas being fully evaluated
Fence lines
Bore holes
Existing barriers
scale 1:1250
figure 1



Interpretative sections scale 1:50

figure 2

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