



Halton East, Halton, Cheshire

Archaeological Watching Brief



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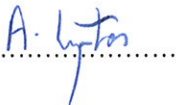
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SUMMARY

In June 2009 Oxford Archaeology North (OA North) was commissioned by United Utilities to undertake an archaeological watching brief at Halton Castle, Halton, Cheshire (NGR 53775 38205). The castle is a designated Scheduled Monument (SM 27611). The watching brief was required to monitor all earth-moving works associated with the slip-lining of an existing water main.

The work comprised the excavation of four pits within the castle grounds. Earth-moving works were restricted largely to a car parking area and a short section of footpath immediately in front of the Castle Hotel. This is within the castle grounds but not within the shell keep itself or the area of the Scheduled Monument. The excavated deposits largely comprised backfill of existing service trenches. No archaeological features were encountered during the course of the watching brief and no finds were recovered. The works did not have a negative impact on the archaeological resource within the site. No recommendations are made for further work.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Oxford Archaeology North (OA North) would like to thank United Utilities for commissioning the watching brief. Ric Buckle carried out the watching brief. Vicky Bullock and Ric Buckle compiled the report, and Mark Tidmarsh produced the drawings. Alison Plummer, who was also responsible for project management, edited the report.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 CIRCUMSTANCES OF THE PROJECT

- 1.1.1 This report presents the results obtained from an archaeological watching brief that was maintained during the slip-lining of an existing water main at Halton Castle, Runcorn (NGR SJ 53775 38205; Fig 1) involving the excavation of a series of pits. Following recommendations made by the Archaeological Planning Advisory Service of Cheshire Shared Services, United Utilities commissioned Oxford Archaeology North (OA North) to undertake the work, which took place in June 2009.
- 1.1.2 Documentary research was also undertaken in order to place the results of the watching brief in an historical and archaeological context. Halton Castle is a designated Scheduled Monument (SM 27611), which incorporates several structures, including the Grade I Listed Shell Keep. The watching brief was required as a condition of the Scheduled Monument Consent obtained from the Department for Culture Media and Sport (DCMS).
- 1.1.3 The monument includes the ruined castle remains at Halton together with an area to the east of the castle, which is likely to retain buried deposits of midden material and the remains of secular settlement located immediately outside the castle. Two concrete platforms for pavilions for the bowling green in the centre of the site are excluded in the scheduling, although the ground beneath them is included. The pits were monitored during the watching brief located outside the Scheduled area.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 WATCHING BRIEF

2.1.1 The watching brief comprised permanent presence archaeological monitoring during the excavation of four pits ahead of the slip-lining of an existing water main. Existing services were located and modern surfacing was removed. All excavation work was undertaken by a mini digger which was operated under close archaeological supervision. Any subsoil horizons exposed during the course of the groundworks were systematically examined, and all archaeological features and horizons were recorded on OA North *pro-forma* recording sheets. The work was carried out in accordance with the relevant IFA and English Heritage guidelines (Institute of Field Archaeologists 2001, *Standard and guidance for archaeological Desk-based Assessments*; English Heritage 2006, *Management of Research Projects in the Historic Environment* (MoRPHE)).

2.2 ARCHIVE

2.2.1 The results of the fieldwork will form part of a full archive that has been prepared to professional standards, in accordance with English Heritage guidelines (*The Management of Archaeological Projects, 2nd edition, 1991*) and the *Guidelines for the Preparation of Excavation Archives for Long Term Storage* (UKIC 1990). The archive for the archaeological work undertaken at the site will be deposited with the Salt Museum, Northwich. This archive can be provided in the English Heritage Centre for Archaeology format, both as a printed document and on computer disks as ASCii files (as appropriate).

3. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

3.1 INTRODUCTION

3.1.1 The following section provides both an outline of the natural setting of the study area, its location both physically and relative to other districts within the town, and the site's historical context in order to place the results of the archaeological watching brief into context.

3.2 SITE LOCATION, TOPOGRAPHY AND GEOLOGY

3.2.1 Halton lies in the eastern suburbs of Runcorn at *c* 56m AOD. The spot height of Halton Castle is 66m AOD. The surrounding landscape is dominated by large conurbations. Halton is one mile from the river Mersey, 15 miles from Liverpool and the same from Chester (Fig 1).

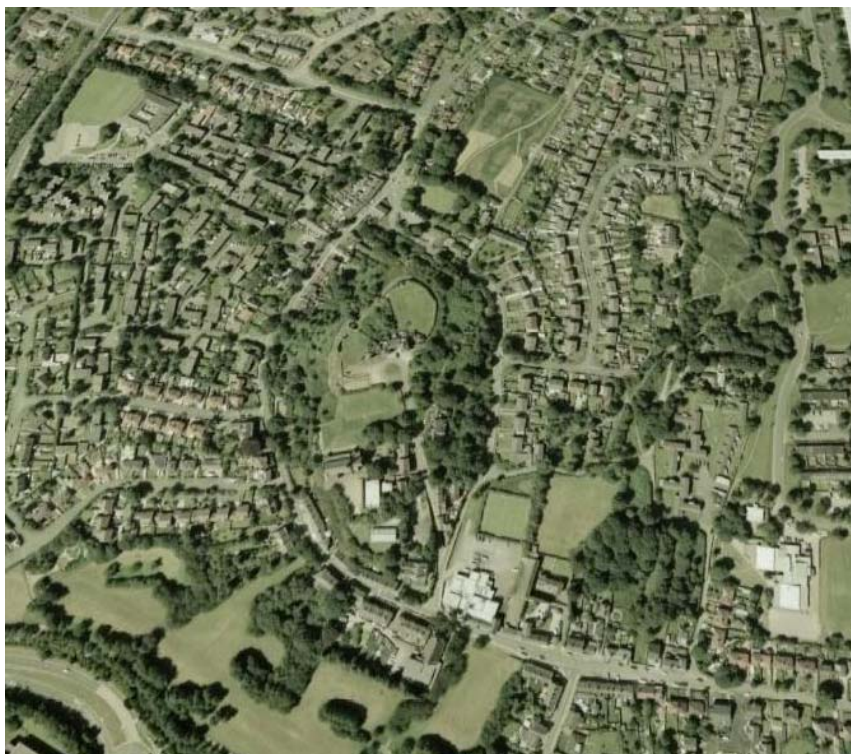


Plate 1: Aerial view of Halton Castle

3.2.2 Halton Castle stands on a prominent hill of red sandstone, 99m above sea level, overlooking the estuary of the river Mersey to the north and east and the low marshlands at the foot of the hill on the western and eastern sides. It stands in a strategic position overlooking the Runcorn Gap. The underlying geology consists of a band of Keuper Sandstone with Upper Mottled Sandstone to the north and Waterstones to the south. The overlying drift geology is predominantly Boulder Clay and the soils are a combination of brown earths and argillic stagnogley soils (British Geological Survey 1977, cited in Devine and Clark 2003, 1).

3.3 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

- 3.3.1 The historical background has been compiled primarily from secondary sources including the extract from English Heritage's record of scheduled monuments. In addition, the Archaeological Assessment of Runcorn and Halton, undertaken as part of the Cheshire Historic Towns Survey (Devine and Clark 2003), and the Halton Village Conservation Area Appraisal and Management Plan (Halton Borough Council 2008) were consulted. Halton Castle stands in the centre of a Conservation Area which excludes the twentieth century housing surrounding Castle Hill, the boundary of which roughly falls along Main Street, Millenium Green, Castle Hill and Halton Common.
- 3.3.2 The Barony of Halton was a Norman creation, administered from the eleventh century Halton Castle. Included amongst the Barony's vast lands were the small settlements of Higher and Lower Runcorn (Devine and Clark 2003). Halton Castle is one of a series of castles built on the sandstone ridges of Cheshire, including one to the south at Beeston Castle, which usually served a dual purpose: they had a military and strategic role, but their place as the headquarters of local administration and of the management of landed estates was of equal, and with time greater, importance (Crosby 1996, 36). The local administration of the medieval county was based on the system of hundreds and lordships. At Domesday, Cheshire was divided into ten hundreds, which were based on long-established units (Harris and Thacker 1987). The first castle on the site was a motte and bailey timber castle built by Hugh Lupus, Earl of Chester, *c* 1070 and occupied by Nigel fitz William, the 1st Baron of Halton. This was formed by cutting off the highest part of the promontory on the north-western side by a ditch 8m wide and utilising the natural platform on the rest of the hilltop as a bailey.

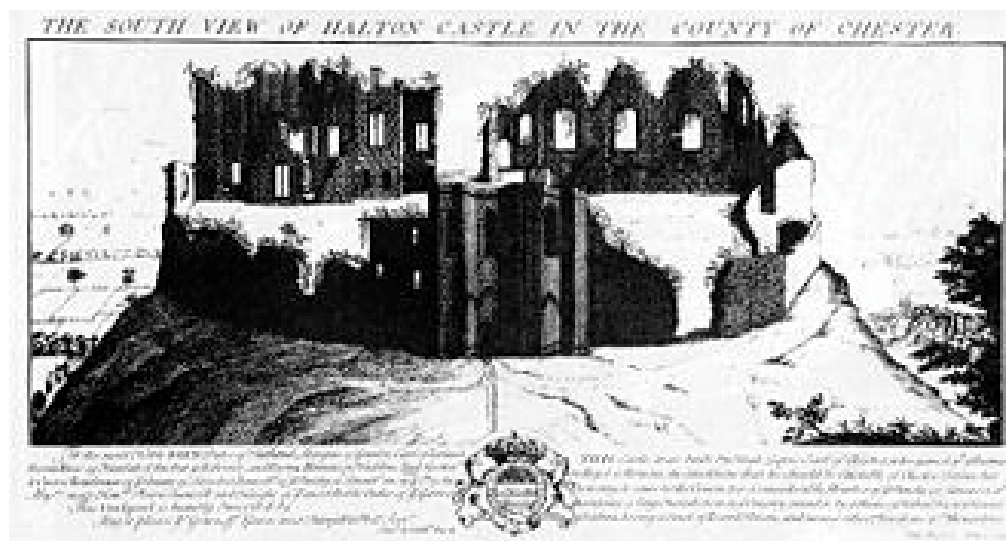


Plate 2: An engraving of Halton Castle by the Bucks brothers, 1727

- 3.3.3 Evidence for the subsequent three centuries of rebuilding is obscured, since all rebuilding took place after scraping the previous phase off the bedrock and rebuilding on that foundation. Any surviving remains from these demolitions

will lie at the bottom of the slope outside the curtain wall on the east, north and west sides. By *c* 1250 the curtain wall had been built, together with a square tower on the west side, over the earlier ditch (which had been infilled). In addition, a round tower was constructed at the north end, and a range of stone buildings (possibly the kitchen range), along the north-western side. During this period, from the eleventh to the thirteenth centuries, ownership passed to the Lacy family, the Lords of Pontefract, who became Dukes of Lancaster in 1311 (Beaumont 1873). During fifteenth century a gatehouse was constructed, which was used as a prison for Roman Catholic recusants in 1579 (*op cit*).

- 3.3.4 Halton deer park (or Northwood) spread south and west of the castle across much of the area now occupied by the new town estates. Throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries the park was gradually assarted, and in 1476 an official inspection reported that woodland had been drastically reduced and that the number of deer had lessened considerably (Starkey 1990, 20, cited in Devine and Clark 2003).
- 3.3.5 The castle was besieged twice during the Civil War and on Cromwell's orders was partially demolished in 1644. A Parliamentary survey of 1650 describes the castle as very ruinous. It was recorded that it consisted of one courtyard, five rooms above the gatehouse, one room where the records are kept, one great hall with two ranges of buildings about it containing nine rooms, unfurnished, four of which were roofed with lead (McNeil 1987, 8). In 1738 a new courthouse and prison, and a series of small lock-ups built in the castle interior replaced the gatehouse and removed traces of the earlier timber phase. Again, the previous remains were cleared from the bedrock on the site prior to the erection of the new buildings. In *c* 1800 the walls of a folly were constructed to the east of the courthouse where they still form a castellated feature (McNeil 1987).

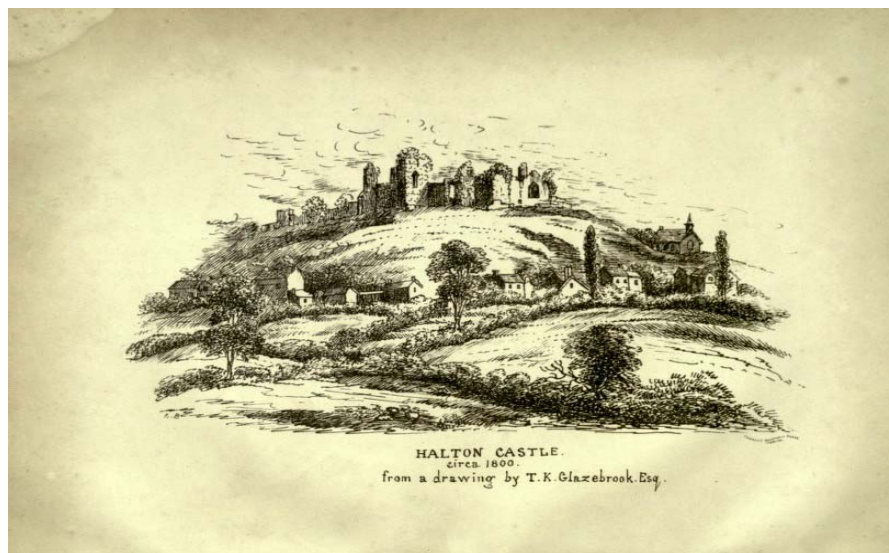


Plate 3: Halton Castle from a drawing *c* 1800

3.4 PREVIOUS ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS

- 3.4.1 The site was investigated in 1986-7 by the North West Archaeological Trust, when nine trenches were excavated mainly in the north and west of the site. Nothing remained of the earlier timber phase of building and the ditch of the early motte site was infilled during the thirteenth century. The curtain wall only survived as foundations with some courses of stone remaining on the north-west side and the south side up to the west wall of the courthouse building (Plate 4).
- 3.4.2 The castellated remains of an eighteenth century folly remain to the east of the courthouse. In the interior of the platform of the former castle there is now a walled garden dating from the nineteenth century and the cells of the lock-ups have been incorporated in the east side of this enclosure. In addition, the eastern half of the enclosure was laid out as a bowling green in the nineteenth century levelling the interior and obscuring the remains of earlier buildings (McNeil 1987).



Plate 4: The former courthouse, now a hotel

- 3.4.3 Between 1994 and 1997 four watching briefs were undertaken by Gwynedd Archaeological Trust during consolidation works on the curtain wall at Halton Castle. A drawn archaeological record of the curtain wall was also made by the Trust (Gwynedd Archaeological Trust 1994; 1995a; 1995b; 1995c; 1997). The work successfully revealed a medieval wall 1.1m high that extended more than 5.4m into the outer bailey. The top course lay 1.25m below a deposit of makeup, which appears to have been associated with the nineteenth century curtain wall (Devine and Clark 2003, 3).

3.5 CARTOGRAPHIC EVIDENCE

- 3.5.1 Consultation of historic maps identified a number of buildings within the Castle grounds, which have disappeared since production of the Ordnance Survey First Edition map of 1871-3 (Plate 5). A large building aligned east/west, not shown on the Halton tithe map (1845), is marked as a National

School on both the First Edition 1871-3 map and the 1910 Ordnance Survey map. A longer building to the east is shown on the tithe, and both the 1871-3 and 1910 Ordnance Survey Edition maps but is not named.

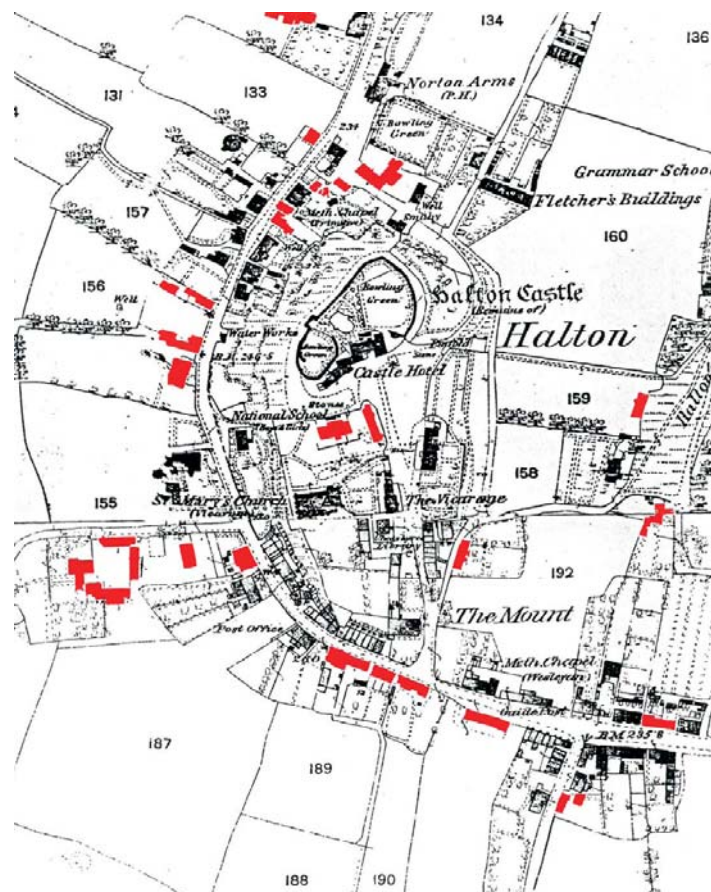


Plate 5: Extract from Ordnance Survey First Edition map of 1871-3 showing buildings lost since production of the map taken from the Halton Conservation Area Appraisal and Management Plan (2008)

3.5.2 The present castle dates from the thirteenth century but it is clear from excavations that it supersedes a motte and bailey castle, which occupied the north-western side of the site. The ruins survive well despite the later insertion of a courthouse on the site of the gatehouse and the creation of a folly garden. It has within the western half of the interior the buried remains of an extensive range of late medieval domestic buildings, as well as the remains of six lock-ups from the eighteenth century refurbishment of the site as courthouse and prison. When the castle is considered together with the priory and later abbey at Norton, and the remains of the medieval village of Norton and those of Frodsham to the south, it is clear that there are the vestiges of an extensive surviving medieval landscape. Many of the features of this landscape survive in an area of extensive twentieth century development for the new towns of Widnes and Runcorn (Devine and Clark, 2003).



Plate 6: View of Halton Castle c 1850-60 (Halton Library Image Collection)

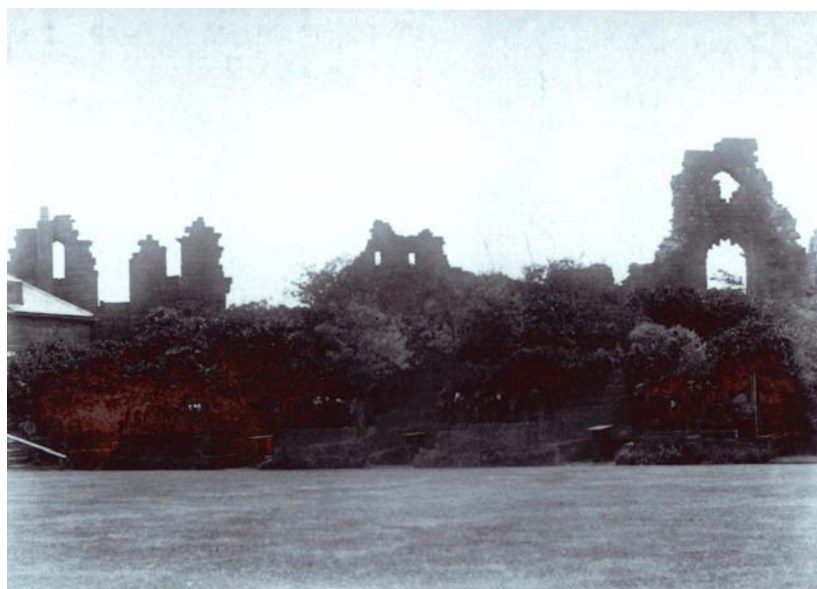


Plate 7: View of Halton Castle c 1900 (Halton Library Image Collection)



Plate 8: Ruined remains of Halton Castle as it stands today

4. RESULTS

4.1 INTRODUCTION

- 4.1.1 In June 2009, OA North monitored the slip-lining of an existing water main at Halton Castle, Halton, Cheshire. The work involved the excavation of a series of pits outside the Scheduled Monument area (SM 27611). The work necessitated the excavation of four trenches; A-D (Fig 2).
- 4.1.2 Trench A was excavated in the car park, directly in front of the Castle Hotel. The trench was excavated to a maximum depth of 1.80m. The solid geology was not exposed at the base of the trench, as the depth of the excavation was determined by the requirements of the water main. From a depth of 0.49m a sequence of modern services and associated backfills was discovered. No archaeological features were encountered.
- 4.1.3 Trench B, to the south-west of the Castle Hotel was 2.80m in length and 1m in width. The trench was excavated to a maximum depth of 1.30m. The solid geology was not exposed at the base of the trench, as the depth of the excavation was determined by the requirements of the services. A layer of made ground 1.10m was deposited as backfill over an existing water main. This layer was sealed by a compacted 0.15m thick levelling layer of limestone overlain by the 0.08m thick tarmac surface of the car park. No archaeological features were encountered.



Plate 6: Working shot of Trench B

- 4.1.4 Trench C, was excavated on a path immediately to the south-east of the Castle Hotel, adjacent to a pumphouse. The trench was 0.50m wide and 0.70m long and was excavated to a maximum depth of 0.42m. The solid geology was not exposed at the base of the trench, as the depth of the excavation was determined by the requirements of the services. A layer of gravel in the centre of the trench 0.72m wide, to a depth of 0.42m, had been presumably deposited as backfill following the insertion of a modern, plastic water pipe. Surrounding the gravel layer was a layer of made-ground comprising loose, greyish brown, silty-sand to a depth of 0.42m which incorporated a worked sandstone block, 0.18 by 0.16m, jutting out of the base of the trench at an oblique angle. The

oblique position of the stone suggests that it was deposited with the backfill. Similar stones were observed in the walls, houses and gardens of the neighbouring area. The backfill layers were sealed by a layer of topsoil 0.10m thick. No archaeological features were encountered.



Plate 7: Working shot of Trench C showing position of worked stone

4.1.5 Trench D was excavated on the driveway leading to the entrance of the Castle Hotel, to the north of the Vicarage. The trench was 2m wide and excavated to a depth of 0.60m. A 0.52m layer of orangey, red sand deposited as backfill covered a modern service pipe and was sealed by a 0.08m layer of tarmac. No archaeological features were encountered.

4.2 FINDS

4.2.1 No finds were recovered from any of the four trenches monitored as part of the watching brief.

5. CONCLUSIONS

5.1 CONCLUSION

- 5.1.1 The monitoring of the scheme within the grounds of the castle revealed no new archaeological information, since the trenches were placed entirely within the footprint of existing service trenches. No archaeological features, or evidence of any former buildings was encountered and no finds recovered. It is, therefore, concluded that the slip-lining process did not have a negative impact on the archaeological resource of the scheduled monument. No recommendations are made for any further work.

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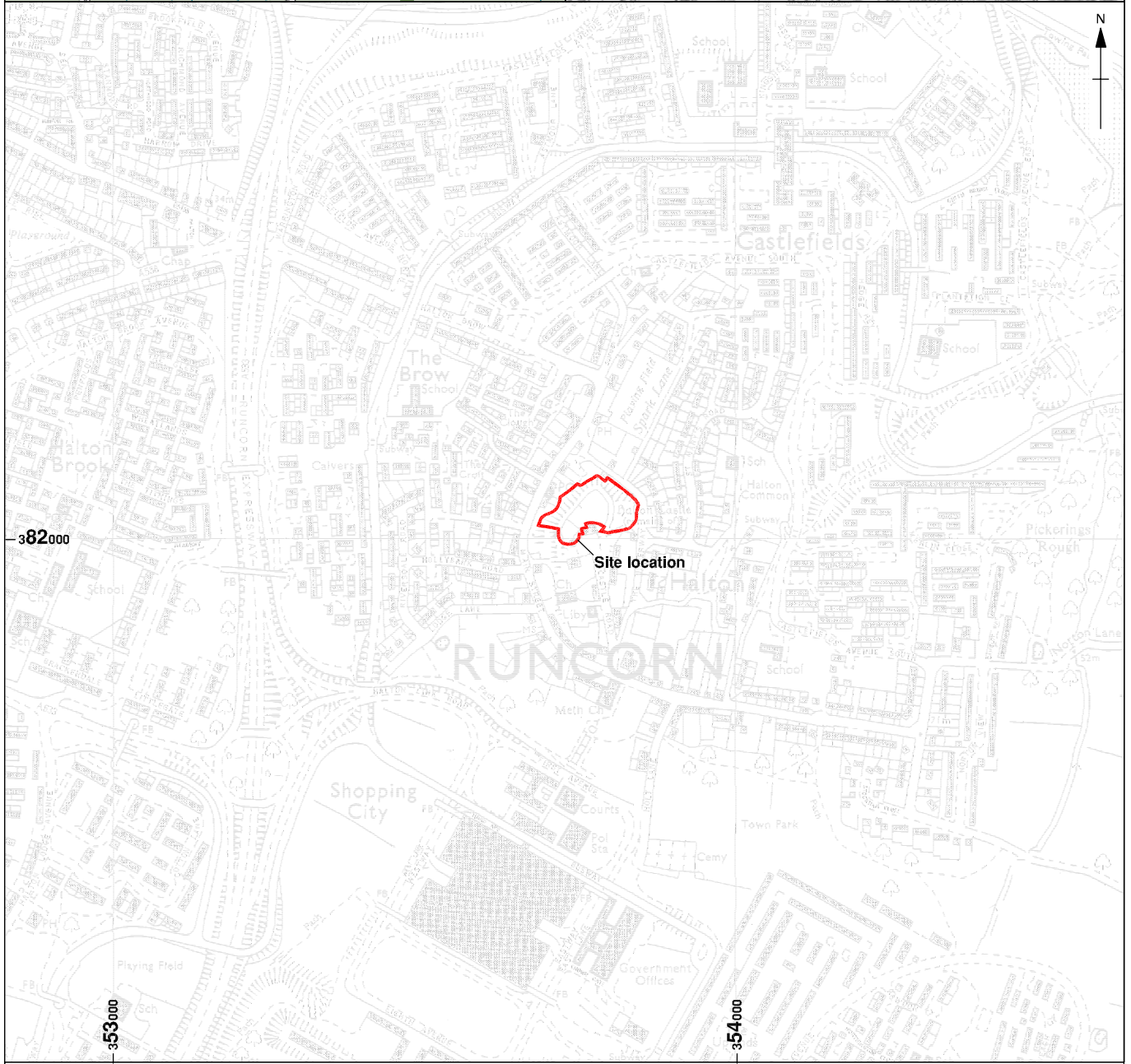
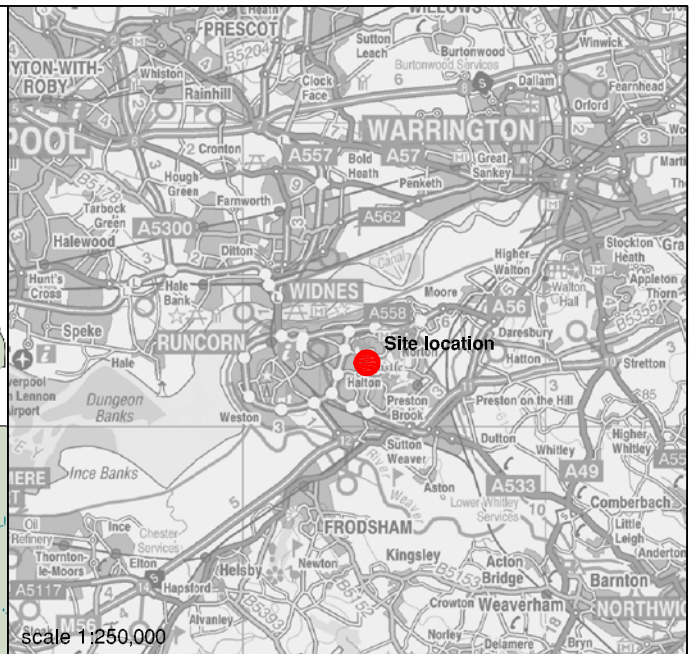
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7. ILLUSTRATIONS

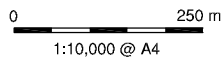
7.1 LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Site location

Figure 2: Plan showing watching brief trenches



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Figure 1: Site location

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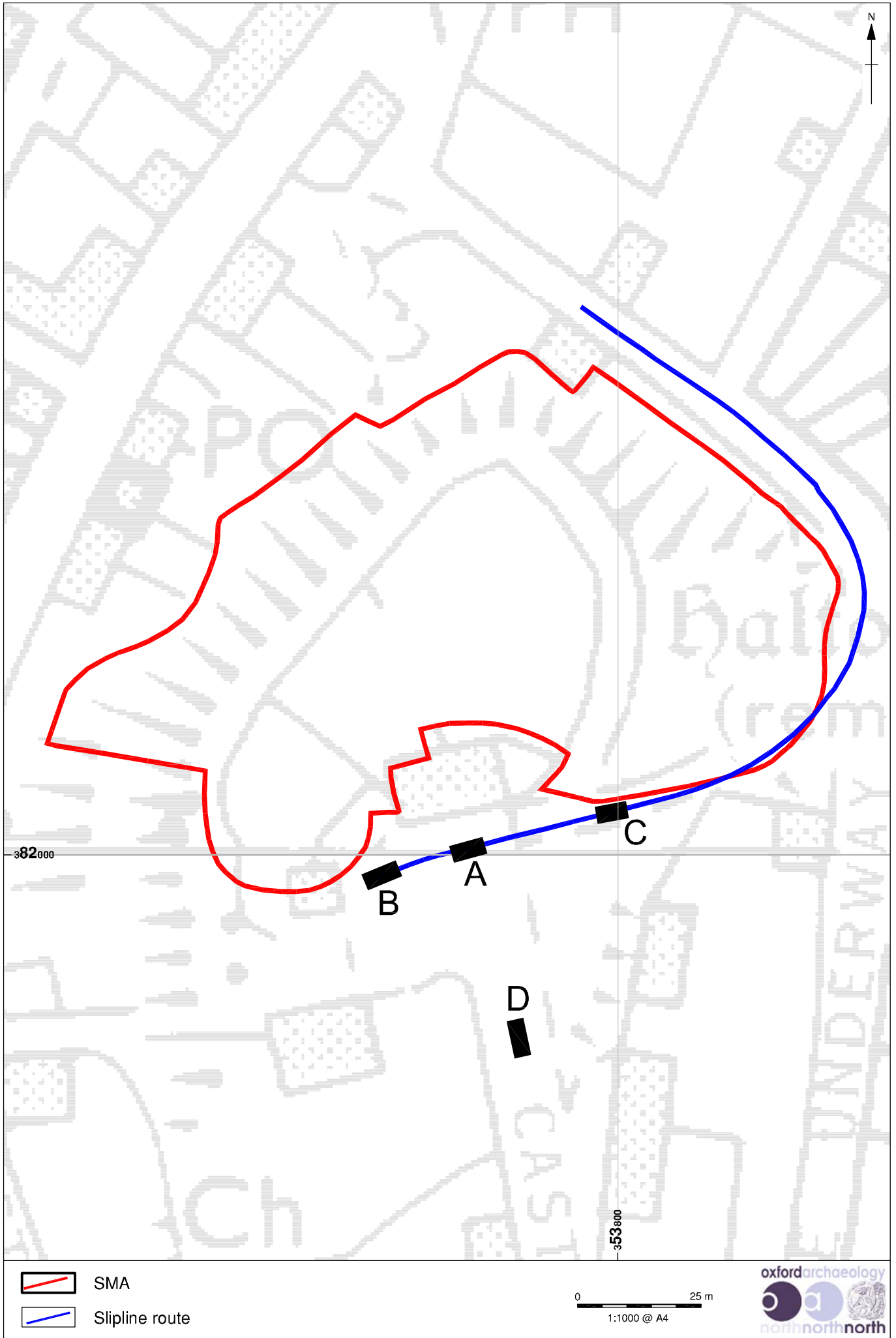


Figure 2: Plan showing watching brief trenches