



Old Rectory, Fleet Marston

Archaeological Watching Brief Report

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Old Rectory, Fleet Marston

Archaeological Watching Brief Report

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Summary

In June and July 2019 Oxford Archaeology was commissioned by Emery Planning Partnership acting on behalf of Broadwood Residential Ltd to undertake an archaeological watching brief at the Old Rectory, Fleet Marston. The site is centred at SP 77740 16099 to the north-west of Aylesbury. It comprises a rectangular plot of land with the A41 road to the west and a railway line to the east.

The watching brief took place in two phases. The first phase, undertaken in June 2019, involved monitoring of the excavation of a soak-away in the front lawn of the Old Rectory (trench 1) and the footprint of an extension to the eastern building (trench 2). The second phase, undertaken in July 2019, consisted of the excavation of a pipe trench in the eastern part of the site (trench 3).

No archaeological deposits or finds were detected during the watching brief. Modern demolition materials were uncovered in trench 1. There was also evidence of modern truncation of the archaeological horizon within this part of the site.

Acknowledgements

Oxford Archaeology would like to thank Sarah Sands, Senior Consultant at Emery Planning Partnership, and Broadwood Residential Ltd for commissioning this project. Thanks are also extended to Lucy Lawrence and Phil Markham who monitored the work on behalf of Buckinghamshire County Council.

The project was managed for Oxford Archaeology by Joakim Thomasson. The fieldwork was directed by Robert McIntosh and Tamsin Jones. Digitising was undertaken by Gary Jones and the archive was prepared under the management of Nicola Scott.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Scope of work

- 1.1.1 The Old Rectory comprises a dwelling and two associated outbuildings that are currently used as a care home. Oxford Archaeology (OA) was commissioned by Emery Planning Partnership acting on behalf of Broadwood Residential Ltd to undertake a watching brief at the site of a proposed extension of an outbuilding. The applicant altered the plans. Instead the outbuilding was demolished and replaced with a single smaller modular building, which limited the ground intrusive work at the site.
- 1.1.2 The work was undertaken as a condition of Planning Permission (planning ref. 18/04417/APP). A specification was set by Lucy Lawrence, Archaeology Officer at Buckinghamshire County Council, and a written scheme of investigation (WSI) was produced by OA (2019) detailing the Local Authority's requirements for work necessary to discharge the planning condition. This document outlines how OA implemented the specified requirements.

1.2 Location, topography and geology

- 1.2.1 The Old Rectory is located to the north-west of Aylesbury at SP 77740 16099 (Fig. 1). The site comprises a rectangular plot of land measuring c 38m by 55m. The A41 Bicester-to-Aylesbury road lies immediately to the west, and a railway line extends north-west/south-east about 280m to the east. The site is bounded by trees and bushes and surrounded by arable fields with an area of scrub immediately south. St Mary's Church lies c 270m to the south-east. An eastward-flowing stream is located to the north and east of the site and a small pond is situated c 30m east of the plot boundary.
- 1.2.2 The bedrock geology of the area is mapped as mudstone of the Ampthill Clay formation, and a band of alluvial clay, silt, sand and gravel extends along the site's northern boundary (BGS nd). The site is situated at approximately 72m above Ordnance Datum (aOD).

1.3 Archaeological and historical background

- 1.3.1 The archaeological and historical background of the area has been described in detail in a desk-based assessment (PCA 2009a). This contains a review of archaeological records held in the Buckinghamshire Historic Environment Record, the Buckingham History Centre and other relevant sources within a 2km radius of the site. Additional information has been added from later geophysical surveys and evaluation trenching in the area (OA 2011a; 2011b; PCA 2009b), an extensive excavation at Berryfields Farm c 750m east of the site (Biddulph *et al.* 2019), and from an updated search of the Buckinghamshire Historic Environment Record comprising a 1km study area surrounding the site (OA 2019). The following summary derives from these sources and provides a context for the proposed works.

Neolithic/Bronze Age (c 4,000–800 BC)

- 1.3.2 The first evidence of human activity in the area dates from the Neolithic period and were uncovered at the Berryfields Farm site. There is evidence for limited occupation

during the Bronze Age, including two barrows and field boundaries also found at Berryfields Farm. One preserved barrow and one visible as a cropmark have been recorded on higher ground 750m south of the site.

Iron Age (c 800 BC–AD 43)

- 1.3.3 Excavation at Berryfields Farm uncovered remains of a middle Iron Age settlement characterised by roundhouses, enclosures and four-post structures. An earlier late Bronze Age boundary ditch was replaced by a trackway, probably during the late Iron Age, which survived into the initial decades of the Roman period.
- 1.3.4 The geophysical survey at Fleet Marston detected linear features in an NNW-SSE orientation within a 1.2km-long area from Fleet Marston Farm in the north to Putlowes Cottages in the south. Subsequent evaluation uncovered ditches and other features dating to the Iron Age.

Roman (AD 43–410)

- 1.3.5 Roman activity in the area dates to the mid-1st century AD, following the establishment of a fort at Alchester to the south of Bicester in Oxfordshire. Akeman Street was probably constructed to provide a military supply and communications route between Verulamium and the Alchester fort. A north-south road extends through the centre of the Fleet Marston area joining with Akeman Street further to the south.
- 1.3.6 In the early Roman period, activity at Berryfields Farm expanded beyond the focus of the prehistoric settlement to form a wider landscape of fields, trackways and enclosures either side of Akeman Street. A series of conjoined ditched plots, forming a so-called 'ladder settlement', was established along an adjacent minor road during the 2nd century AD. Other minor roads were laid out and, over time, the area formed an intersection of routeways. This period also saw deposition in a wetland area to the side of Akeman Street. Activities ceased by the late 4th century.
- 1.3.7 Apart from the settlement clusters at Berryfields Farm, the main bulk of Roman findings in the area are clustered along Akeman Street by Putlowes Cottages. The observations, mostly consisting of unstratified finds of coins, metalwork, pottery and tile scatters, range in date from the 1st to the 4th century and suggest the presence of Roman settlement.

Early medieval (AD 410–1066)

- 1.3.8 Aylesbury was one of the centres from which local British rulers established control after the Roman period. In the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, it is recorded as falling to the Saxons in AD 571. Several 6th- and 7th-century cemeteries have been recorded around Aylesbury and a large early Saxon settlement existed at Walton to the south-east of the town centre. Old English place names are well represented in the area.
- 1.3.9 No evidence of Anglo-Saxon activity was recovered at Berryfields Farm and only ephemeral signs were noted from pottery at Fleet Marston.

Medieval (AD 1066–1550)

- 1.3.10 Along with Hartwell, Stone, Quarrendon and Waddesdon, Fleet Marston is recorded in the Domesday Survey of 1086, which suggests a substantial presence in the area.

However, only scarce archaeological evidence has been recovered, mostly consisting of finds of metalwork, pottery and burials.

- 1.3.11 The place name 'Fleet Marston' derives from 'fleet', meaning 'place at stream, pool or creak' and 'Mersce' meaning 'farmstead in or by marsh' (Mills 2011). The Domesday Survey of 1086 records a population of 12 households (Open Domesday 2019).
- 1.3.12 The later medieval landscape north of Aylesbury is characterised by nucleated villages and extensive open-field systems (identified from ridge-and-furrow earthworks observed on aerial photographs). Thirteen medieval villages are recorded in the neighbouring area. Fleet Marston and a further eight of these villages have evidence of desertion, shrinkage or settlement shift during the late Middle Ages. By the end of the medieval period, during the late 15th and early 16th centuries, enclosure of the open fields had begun in Fleet Marston, Quarrendon and Upper Winchendon.
- 1.3.13 Fleet Marston was part of the Bernwood Ancient Royal Hunting Forest, thought to have been established in the 10th century. The forest was reduced in size gradually and by the late 16th and early 17th centuries it had lost its royal status and had disappeared as a discreet entity. Covering such a large area it would have consisted of forest and open areas of heath, grassland and wetland.
- 1.3.14 St Mary's Church was built during the 12th and 13th centuries and is sited on the highest point of land in the immediate area. Aerial photos show the outline of possible building platforms and an enclosing ditch to the west and south of the church. Although it could not be established by the evaluation undertaken in the area (OA 2011b), it is possible that these remains represent a manor site.

Post-medieval/modern (AD 1550+)

- 1.3.15 The Grade II listed Fleet Marston farm, to the north of the site, was probably built around 1650. The Old Rectory Cottage was originally constructed in the early 17th century as a two-storey house. It was converted into two tenements in the late 19th/early 20th century. It is evident that the house had been converted back into a single residence at some point after 1912.
- 1.3.16 The Aylesbury and Buckingham Railway, connecting Aylesbury and Calvert Junction, was opened in 1868 and its route runs c 280m east of the Old Rectory.

2 WATCHING BRIEF AIMS AND METHODOLOGY

2.1 Aims

2.1.1 The project aims and objectives are as follows:

- i. To reveal the archaeologically significant horizon (or natural horizon) at the site and determine the presence or absence of any archaeological remains.
- ii. To determine or confirm the general nature of any remains present.
- iii. To determine or confirm the approximate date or date range of any remains, by means of artefactual or other evidence.

2.1.2 The specific objective of the watching brief was to identify and record any archaeological remains, paying particular regard to the potential for deposits related to Iron Age, Roman or medieval settlement activities and the historical use of the Old Rectory.

2.2 Methodology

2.2.1 The work was carried out with an archaeologist present to monitor the excavation. Sufficient time was given to follow up when there were indications of preserved archaeological remains in the trenches.

3 RESULTS

3.1 Introduction and presentation of results

- 3.1.1 The watching brief was undertaken in three trenches as shown on figure 2.
- 3.1.2 The results are presented below and include a description of the trenches. Full details of all trenches with dimensions and depths of all deposits can be found in Appendix A.

3.2 General soils and ground conditions

- 3.2.1 The soil sequences were fairly uniform. Only topsoil was present in trenches 2 and 3, with a mixture of modern gravel found in the latter. In trench 1 the natural geology of grey clay was overlain by a demolition layer of modern building rubble, which in turn was overlain by a layer of built ground consisting of grey clay with frequent brick and tile inclusions plus some blue-white china. This layer was overlain by topsoil.
- 3.2.2 Ground conditions throughout the watching brief were generally good, and the site remained dry throughout.

3.3 General distribution of archaeological deposits

- 3.3.1 No archaeological features were present within the site.

3.4 Trench 1: Soak away and pipe trench

- 3.4.1 Trench 1 measured 3m by 3m and was located in the middle of the lawn in front of the Old Rectory building (Plate 1). An adjacent pipe trench was excavated from its northern corner running north as far as the driveway. No archaeological features were cut into the natural clay, located 0.85m below ground level (Plates 2 and 3). Evidence of the demolition of a 19th/20th-century building and a following levelling-off of the ground for the present lawn was found below the topsoil.
- 3.4.2 The pipe trench was 0.4m deep at its southern end and 0.2m deep at its northern end. The natural here was, therefore, not reached.

3.5 Trench 2: Extension of eastern building footprint

- 3.5.1 Excavation of the footings for the extension of the eastern building went to a depth of between 0.1 and 0.2m, but exposed only topsoil (Plate 4).

3.6 Trench 3: Pipe trench

- 3.6.1 The pipe trench to the south-east of the eastern building measured 4m by 0.5m in plan. The services had been laid and the trench backfilled before the watching brief could be undertaken. It was partially re-excavated to allow for archaeological investigation and recording. The re-excavated slot measured 0.5m by 0.8m and was 0.2m deep. At this depth only topsoil mixed with modern backfilled gravel was present and therefore no natural/archaeological horizon was reached (Plate 5). No finds, ceramic building material or other indications of archaeology were detected in the backfill and spoil.

4 DISCUSSION

4.1 Reliability of field investigation

4.1.1 The weather conditions were good throughout the monitoring; the soils were not waterlogged although the water table was reached at the same height as the natural geology. The natural geology was a very distinct clay where visible, easily identifiable from the overlying layers.

4.2 Watching Brief objectives and results

4.2.1 No archaeological features were observed during the watching brief.

4.2.2 Modern demolition rubble recorded in trench 1 was used as levelling for the garden area just outside the main building of the Old Rectory. This directly overlay the natural geology without any intervening buried soils and suggests a degree of modern truncation.

4.2.3 In trenches 2 and 3, the excavations were not deep enough to impact the archaeological horizon.

4.3 Interpretation

4.3.1 The watching brief was limited to narrow and shallow trenches. Expected archaeology in this area, as found in a previous evaluation immediately south of the site, is generally sparsely distributed and requires larger and deeper trenches to be detected. Therefore, the results of the watching brief can not exclude that the settlement remains uncovered to the south also extended into the area of the site. However, the high water-table and the nearby stream suggest that the area is low lying and perhaps less suitable for settlement.

APPENDIX A DESCRIPTIONS AND CONTEXT INVENTORY

Trench 1						
General description					Orientation	-
Soak away devoid of archaeology. Consists of topsoil overlying built ground, which overlay a layer of rubble which in turn overlay a natural geology of grey clay.					Length (m)	3
					Width (m)	3
					Avg. depth (m)	0.85
Context No.	Type	Width (m)	Depth (m)	Description	Finds	Date
100	Layer	-	0.25	Topsoil, very dark grey brown silt	-	-
101	Layer	-	0.3	Built ground, grey clay with brick, tile, and blue/white china	-	19th/20th C.
102	Layer	-	0.3	Demolition, stone, brick and tile	-	19th/20th C.
103	Layer	-	-	Natural, grey clay with some flint inclusions	-	-

Trench 3						
General description					Orientation	-
Pipe Trench with no archaeology present. Natural level not reached. Consisted of topsoil mixed with modern laid gravel to create school garden.					Length (m)	0.80
					Width (m)	0.52
					Avg. depth (m)	0.20
Context No.	Type	Width (m)	Depth (m)	Description	Finds	Date
100	Layer	-	0.20	Topsoil, very dark grey brown silt, friable with frequent gravel.	-	-

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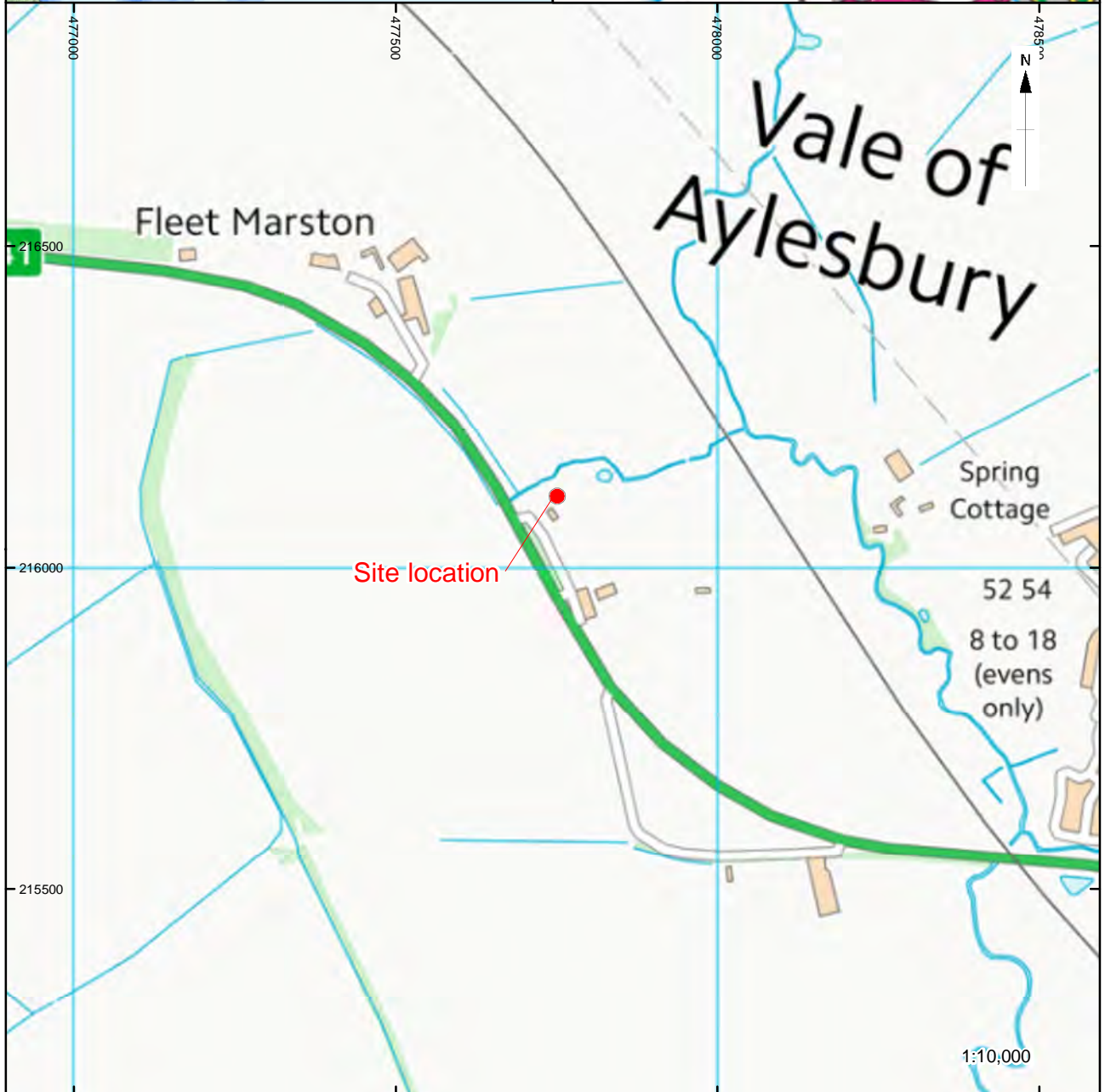
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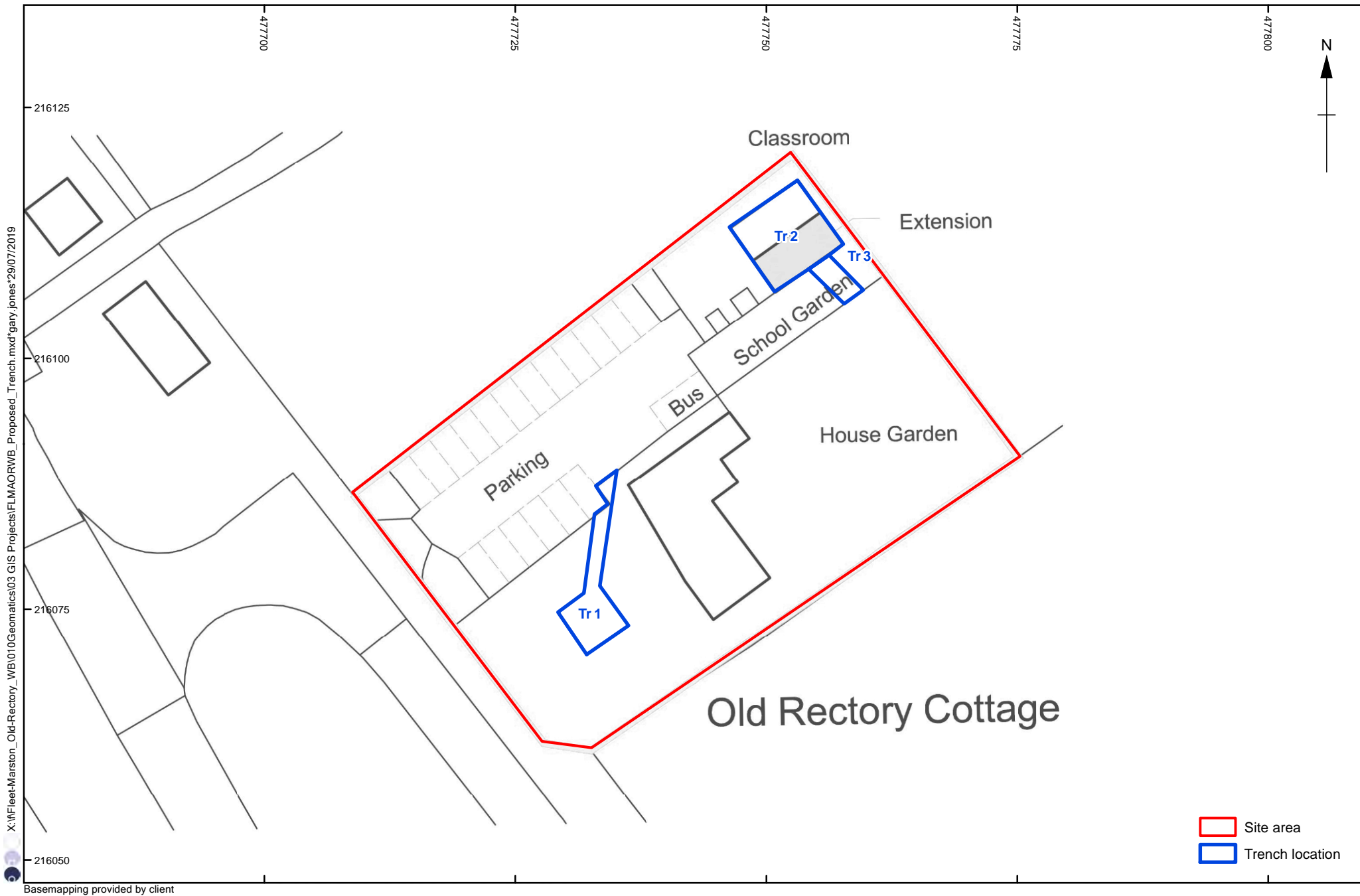
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Figure 1: Site location



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Basemapping provided by client

Figure 2: Trench locations



Plate 1: Trench 1, soak-away and partial pipe strip, looking north-west



Plate 2: Trench 1, representative section in soak away, looking north-east



Plate 3: Trench 1, soak-away stripped to natural, looking north



Plate 4: Trench 2, eastern building footprint, looking north-east



Plate 5: Trench 3, pipe trench, looking north-west



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