



# Crescent House, Abingdon School, Abingdon, Oxfordshire

## Archaeological Evaluation Report

November 2019

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Abingdon School**

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## Crescent House, Abingdon School, Abingdon, Oxfordshire

### *Archaeological Evaluation Report*

*Written by Robert McIntosh*

*With illustrations by Matt Bradley*

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## Summary

In October 2019 Oxford Archaeology was commissioned by Ridge and Partners on behalf of Abingdon School to undertake an archaeological evaluation for a new boarding house at Crescent House, Abingdon School, Abingdon, Oxfordshire. The main purpose of the evaluation was to investigate any archaeological remains that would be impacted by the proposed development. Prehistoric and Roman activity have been previously discovered in the surrounding area.

No archaeological remains were identified within the evaluation area, which had also been subjected to modern disturbance as part of a formal garden. Previous modern impacts at the site were identified in form of a fish pond, trees and garden landscaping, which will have reduced the survival of any archaeological remains in this area. Based on the results of the evaluation the site is considered to have low potential.

## Acknowledgements

Oxford Archaeology would like to thank Ridge and Partners LLP acting on behalf of the Abingdon School for commissioning this project. Thanks are also extended to Hugh Coddington who monitored the work on behalf of Oxfordshire County Council.

The project was managed for Oxford Archaeology by Carl Champness. The fieldwork was directed by Robert McIntosh, who was supported by Mike Sims and Adam Moffat. Survey and digitising was carried out by Simon Batsman. Thanks are also extended to the teams of OA staff that cleaned and packaged the finds under the supervision of Leigh Allen, processed the environmental remains under the supervision of Sharon Cook, and prepared the archive under the supervision of Nicola Scott.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Scope of work

- 1.1.1 Oxford Archaeology (OA) was commissioned by Ridge and Partners LLP acting on behalf of Abingdon School to undertake a trial trench evaluation at the site of proposed new boarding houses. Two new boarding houses are being proposed at the school, one in Area 1 close to the main school building at Crescent House and one in Area 2 adjacent to Austin House (Fig. 2). The two areas are subject to separate archaeological reporting for each proposed building.
- 1.1.2 The work was undertaken to inform the local planning authority in advance of the submission of a planning application. Although no brief was set prior to the work, discussions between James Kidd, Project Manager at Ridge and Partners, and Hugh Coddington, Principle Archaeologist at Oxfordshire County Council, established the scope of archaeological excavation required. This document outlines the results of the evaluation for Area 1.
- 1.1.3 All work was carried out in accordance with local and national planning policies and Chartered Institute for Archaeologists Guidance (CIfA 2014).

### 1.2 Location, topography and geology

- 1.2.1 The site was situated within the grounds of Abingdon School to the north-west of the historic core of Abingdon in Oxfordshire, which prior to the 1974 boundary changes lay within the county of Berkshire. It is located within the historic parish of Abingdon St Helens, and within the administrative area of the Vale of White Horse District Council.
- 1.2.2 The site, which is approximately 0.26 hectares (ha) in size, is located in the western part of the school grounds, bounded by Park Crescent to the south. The site currently comprises Crescent House and grounds and a laundry building.
- 1.2.3 The underlying bedrock geology is recorded as Amptill Clay Formation which is overlain by Summertown-Radley sand and gravel deposits (BGS, 2018). This geology was confirmed during archaeological investigations undertaken in the site (Evans & Excell 1997, 1999). The site lies approximately 59m above Ordnance Datum (aOD).

### 1.3 Previous Investigations

- 1.3.1 Five archaeological investigations, comprising four excavations and a geophysical survey have taken place within the school. An excavation in 1997 within the south of the school revealed evidence of a Romano-British burial ground (Evans & Excell 1997). A cist, which had been disturbed and robbed by later activity (possibly landscaping in the 18th-century), and an infant inhumation burial were among the Roman remains recorded. A double row of stake holes and likely associated gully/ditch were also excavated. These features, which ran on an east-west alignment are thought to delineate the possible extent of a burial ground. The infant burial lay beyond the potential boundary although this is not necessarily unusual.

- 1.3.2 Two small excavations were conducted within the site in 1998 (Evans et al 1999). A small trench excavated within the cellar of Waster Court did not reveal any clear archaeological features but recovered a number of finds including late medieval pottery, tile and bone. The excavation of an old tree hole pit on the upper lawn also recovered medieval pottery sherds.
- 1.3.3 A geophysical survey was conducted across parts of the school grounds in 1998, including two areas within the site (Simpson 1998). A north-west south-east aligned linear anomaly was identified in the northern area and two further linear anomalies were identified in the north-east and south-west corner of the southern area. Six possible circular features, thought to form part of a structure or boundary, and a possible rectilinear feature were also identified within the southern area. Evidence of disturbance from trees and ferrous debris were identified to the north. The features identified suggest the presence of a considerable amount of settlement activity across the areas surveyed and at least two separate phases of archaeology.
- 1.3.4 Six small trenches were excavated within the school in 1999 (Evans & Excell 1999). In Area 1 layers of re-deposited material associated with the landscaping of the terraces were recorded. The deposits contain post-medieval and modern material although Romano-British and medieval finds were also recovered. An inhumation burial thought likely to be Romano-British or Saxon in date was excavated in Area 2. Two, likely 18th-century, gullies were recorded within Area 3 along with finds of that period and a 17th-century lead token. This area was only excavated to a shallow depth. A rubble spread containing Romano-British finds and a pit, post-hole and a possible hearth were excavated in Area 4. A Bronze Age barbed and tanged arrowhead was also recovered from the area. In Area 5 the natural gravel subsoil was observed just below the surface, although residual post-medieval finds were recovered. Area 7 was heavily disturbed although extensive evidence of an 18th-century working area associated with the construction of Waste Court was recorded. The edge of a possible disturbed grave or large pit was also identified.
- 1.3.5 A watching brief prior to the construction of the school swimming pool directly to the north of the site revealed extensive areas of quarrying and a single post-medieval pit. Two watching briefs at Beech Court directly south of the site also recorded evidence of post-medieval activity. Post-medieval features included a late 18th to 19th-century stone wall and piers, a possible arcaded structure, pits, a quarry pit and a brick surface of post-medieval date. Evidence of a known Second World War bunker was also identified. Earlier finds included a medieval tile, several residual sherds of Roman pottery and a residual flint flake of Neolithic or early Bronze Age date.
- 1.3.6 An evaluation took place prior to the construction of the Yang Centre c 190m to the north-west of the site (Oxford Archaeology 2013). The evaluation identified two pits of post-medieval date, a small number of undated features and areas of quarrying not previously identified from historic mapping. A residual sherd of Iron Age pottery was also recovered.
- 1.3.7 Investigations on the western side of Bath Street, c 110m to the south of the site, recorded features indicative of intensive settlement activity from the 2nd-century onwards. Numerous Romano-British, medieval and post-medieval features were

excavated, and residual sherds of Iron Age pottery and a Mesolithic flint core were also recovered. An excavation at 64 Bath Street c 140m south of the site, revealed features and finds ranging from the Mesolithic to post-medieval periods. Romano-British ditches and cremations, Saxon ditches and medieval pits were among the features excavated. A watching brief further west of Bath Street at Amey Hall, c 100m south of the site, did not record any archaeological finds or features.

- 1.3.8 Abingdon town centre has been subject to multiple archaeological investigations which have identified evidence of activity within Abingdon from the Iron Age through to the post-medieval period. This has resulted in Abingdon often being labelled the oldest continually occupied town in England. Other investigations considered relevant to the archaeological potential of the site are discussed, where appropriate, by period below.

## 1.4 Archaeological and historical background

- 1.4.1 The information regarding the archaeological and historical background derives from previous Desk Based Assessment (OA 2007, 2012 and 2016a) and archaeological fieldwork at the school (OA 2016 and 2017).

### *Upper Palaeolithic to Late Iron Age (30,000 BC to AD 43)*

- 1.4.2 Struck flints of Mesolithic date (8,000-4,000 BC) were recovered from the Spring Road cemetery east of the Larkhill Stream, showing that Mesolithic hunter-gatherers visited this area.
- 1.4.3 Pottery and struck finds of early and middle Neolithic date (4,000-2,900 BC) and a late Neolithic pit (2,900-2,500 BC) were found at Spring Road east of the Larkhill Stream, again showing activity by the earliest farmers in this area.
- 1.4.4 A Beaker burial of the Copper or earliest Bronze Age, dated between 2450 and 2200 cal BC, was found at Spring Road in a grave that was not marked by a surrounding ditch or mound. Closer to the site, a cemetery of former burial mounds of early Bronze Age date (2500-1500 BC) is likely to be represented by a group of four cropmark ring ditches identified from aerial photographs in the field on the north side of the Faringdon Road immediately opposite to the school. The mounds have been ploughed away, but the surrounding infilled ditches remain.
- 1.4.5 The largest of these would have extended into the school, but this is the area on the north-west that has been completely quarried away. A fifth, smaller cropmark ring ditch, again probably indicating a former barrow, was identified within the north-eastern half of the school.
- 1.4.6 Excavations at the larger barrow cemetery of Barrow Hills, Radley on the north-east of Abingdon have shown that the ditches of such barrows often contain burials, as well as any inside, and that additional burials or pits containing offerings often exist in a peripheral zone outside the ditches (Barclay and Halpin 1999).
- 1.4.7 Later Bronze Age and Iron Age settlement (1500 BC – AD 43) is known at Spring Road to the west and at Thornhill Walk to the north of the site, and cropmark enclosures some 200m north of the site may also represent a settlement of this period, but

nothing has been found closer than this. To the south, Abingdon town centre was the site of a thriving settlement throughout the Iron Age (800BC-AD43).

### ***Roman (AD 43 – AD 410)***

- 1.4.8 For the Roman period (AD43-410), Abingdon town centre continued to thrive, and there appears to have been Roman settlement extending along what is now Bath Street to the north. Cemeteries were often placed at the periphery of such settlements, and both cremation and inhumation burials have been found on the west side of Bath Street, including a coffin from within the school, to the north-east of the site. Further Roman activity is also known from Spring Road to the west, and the cropmark enclosures to the north of the site may also be Roman.

### ***Early Medieval (AD 410 – AD 1066)***

- 1.4.9 Anglo-Saxon (AD 410-650) settlements are known from Spring Road to the west and Abingdon Town Centre to the south, and inhumation burials from the Horse and Jockey pub 300m to the south-east of the site. Inhumation burials are also recorded immediately east of Spring Road. Activity dating between AD650 and the Norman conquest is much sparser, and is concentrated in the town center.

### ***Medieval (AD 1066 – AD 1500)***

- 1.4.10 Medieval settlement was focused on the town to the south, and on the manor of Fitzharris. Medieval buildings still survive along Bath Street south of Abingdon School, and Bath Street is likely to have been a medieval routeway, but there is no evidence of medieval occupation close to the site. A medieval cemetery at the junction of Spring Road and Farrington Road to the west may have been the site of a chapel at a crossroads. The area of the site was probably used as arable or pastoral land during this period, and possibly also for quarrying.

### ***Post-Medieval (AD 1500 – AD 1900)***

- 1.4.11 Rocque's map of Berkshire in 1761 illustrates the site on the periphery of the north-west urban extent of Abingdon. Buildings face onto Bath Street (previously Bore Street (VCH 1924) to the east with garden plots and outbuildings to the rear. What appears to be cultivated land lies to the west.
- 1.4.12 Waste Court, renamed in 2015 as Austin House, was constructed within the site in 1779 and is first illustrated on the 1843 tithe map of the parish of Abingdon St Helen's. The tithe map also illustrates a trackway/road running directly to the south of the building, along the southern boundary of the site. The northern edge of the trackway is consistent with the parish boundary between Abingdon St Helen's and St Nicolas' parishes, more clearly illustrated on the first edition Ordnance Survey (OS) map, which passes through the site. Two further buildings, situated within the north-eastern corner of the site, are also illustrated by the tithe map.
- 1.4.13 The first edition OS map of 1874 shows an alteration to the footprint of Waste Court, which is thought to have been modified during the 19th-century (Historic England 2019, 1368292). The trackway/road to the south of the site also appears to have

narrowed by this time. The remainder of the site appears to comprise a garden area of lawn, paths and trees.

## 2 AIMS AND METHODOLOGY

### 2.1 Aims

2.1.1 The project aims and objectives were as follows:

- i. To determine the presence or absence of any archaeological remains which may survive;
- ii. To determine or confirm the approximate extent of any surviving remains;
- iii. To determine the date range of any surviving remains by artefactual or other means;
- iv. To determine the condition and state of preservation of any remains;
- v. To determine the degree of complexity of any surviving horizontal or vertical stratigraphy;
- vi. To assess the associations and implications of any remains encountered with reference to the historic landscape;
- vii. To determine the potential of the site to provide palaeo-environmental and/or economic evidence, and the forms in which such evidence may survive;
- viii. To determine the implications of any remains with reference to economy, status, utility and social activity; and
- ix. To determine or confirm the likely range, quality and quantity of the artefactual evidence present.

2.1.2 Specific research aims;

- x. To attempt to determine whether features of early or later prehistoric date are present within the area;
- xi. To examine whether any remains of the prehistoric burial landscape identified to the north of the School extended into this area;
- xii. To identify evidence of Roman or later activity;

### 2.2 Methodology

2.2.1 Two trenches measuring 30m by 1.8m were originally proposed within the footprint of the proposed development within Area 1 (Figs 2 and 3). The trenches were located to provide a representative sample of the archaeological potential of the site in order to help inform any future mitigation strategy. Trench 1 could not be excavated as location of the trench proved to be both inaccessible and the current location of a pond and buried services, where there was nowhere the trench could be safely relocated.

2.2.2 Trench 3 had to be shortened by 4m due to flower beds, and the southern end was shifted to the west to avoid a rabbit hutch. Again, the area was fenced off prior to excavation and plastic sheeting laid down onto which the spoil was placed. For the machine to access the lawn a wooden fence had to be dismantled and then re-instated when the trench was backfilled.

2.2.3 The trench was excavated using a mechanical excavator fitted with a toothless bucket under the direct supervision of an archaeologist. Spoil was stored adjacent to, but at a safe distance from trench edges. Machining continued in spits down to the top of

the undisturbed natural geology or the first archaeological horizon depending upon which is encountered first. Once archaeological deposits were exposed, further excavation proceeded by hand and the appropriate use of a machine excavator.

- 2.2.4 The exposed surfaces were sufficiently cleaned to establish the presence/absence of archaeological remains. Excavation and recoding was sufficient to resolve the principal aims of the evaluation in line with the approved WSI (OA 2019).

## **3 RESULTS**

### **3.1 Introduction and presentation of results**

3.1.1 The results of the evaluation are presented below, and include a stratigraphic description of the trench. The full details of trench 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 sequence in the trench was fairly uniform. The natural geology of light yellow sand with patches of grey gravel it was overlain by a reddish brown silty sand and gravel subsoil, which in turn was overlain by topsoil.

3.2.2 Ground conditions throughout the evaluation were generally good, and the site remained dry throughout. Archaeological features, if present, would have been easy to identify against the underlying natural geology.

### **3.3 General distribution of archaeological deposits**

3.3.1 No archaeological features were found during the evaluation.

### **3.4 Trench 1 (Fig. 3; Plates 1-2)**

3.4.1 The proposed location of Trench 1 was found to be located within a fenced ornate garden, with small trees and a pond area (Plates 1-2). A buried electrical cable meant that the area away from the pond was also inaccessible. Although the trench could not be undertaken as planned, the nature of the modern disturbance present in this area would have had a significant impact on any archaeological remains.

### **3.5 Trench 3 (Fig. 3; Plates 3-4)**

3.5.1 Trench 3 was located within the garden of Crescent House and was restricted by surface obstructions (Plate 3). Natural sands were encountered in the base of the trench at a depth of 0.87m, overlain by a thick subsoil and modern topsoil (Plate 4). No archaeological features or finds were recovered from the trench.

### **3.6 Finds and environmental summary**

3.6.1 No finds were recovered from the trench or features identified that would be suitable for environmental sampling.

## **4 DISCUSSION**

### **4.1 Reliability of field investigation**

4.1.1 Only a partial coverage of the development area was achieved with the evaluation due to access issues, but the results can still be considered a fairly reliable reflection of the archaeological potential of the site. Areas that could not be accessed by the trenching were found to have been subject to significant modern truncation.

### **4.2 Interpretation and conclusions**

4.2.1 The evaluation identified no significant archaeological remains in the area of the development. Previous landscaping of the area with the construction of a walled garden and pond, will have reduced the survival of any archaeology in other areas. Based on the results of the evaluation the archaeological potential of the site is considered to be low.

## APPENDIX A TRENCH DESCRIPTIONS AND CONTEXT INVENTORY

Trench 3						
<b>General description</b>					<b>Orientation</b>	NE-SW
Trench devoid of archaeology. Consists of topsoil and subsoil overlying natural geology of sand and gravel.					<b>Length (m)</b>	11
					<b>Width (m)</b>	1.6
					<b>Avg. depth (m)</b>	0.87
<b>Context No.</b>	<b>Type</b>	<b>Width (m)</b>	<b>Depth (m)</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Finds</b>	<b>Date</b>
300	Layer	-	0.47	Topsoil, dark brownish grey sandy silt	-	-
301	Layer	-	0.40	Subsoil, reddish brown silty gravel and sand	-	-
302	Layer	-	-	Natural, light yellowish sand and grey gravel	-	-

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**APPENDIX C****SITE SUMMARY DETAILS**

<b>Site name:</b>	Abingdon School, Boarding Houses, Bath Road, Oxfordshire
<b>Site code:</b>	ABSBH19
<b>Grid Reference</b>	SU 49444 97443
<b>Type:</b>	Evaluation
<b>Date and duration:</b>	2 days: 21st–22nd October
<b>Area of Site</b>	0.26ha
<b>Location of archive:</b>	The archive is currently held at OA, Janus House, Osney Mead, Oxford, and will be deposited with Oxford Museum Service in due course, under the following accession number: OXCMS: 2019.131
<b>Summary of Results:</b>	<p>In October 2019 Oxford Archaeology was commissioned by Ridge and Partners on behalf of Abingdon School to undertake an archaeological evaluation for a new boarding house at Crescent House, Abingdon School, Abingdon, Oxfordshire. The main purpose of the evaluation was to investigate any archaeological remains that would be impacted by the proposed development. Prehistoric and Roman activity have been previously discovered in the surrounding area.</p> <p>No archaeological remains were identified within the evaluation area, which had also been subjected to modern disturbance as part of a formal garden. Previous modern impacts at the site were identified in form of a fish pond, trees and garden landscaping, which will have reduced the survival of any archaeological remains in this area. Based on the results of the evaluation the site is considered to have low potential.</p>



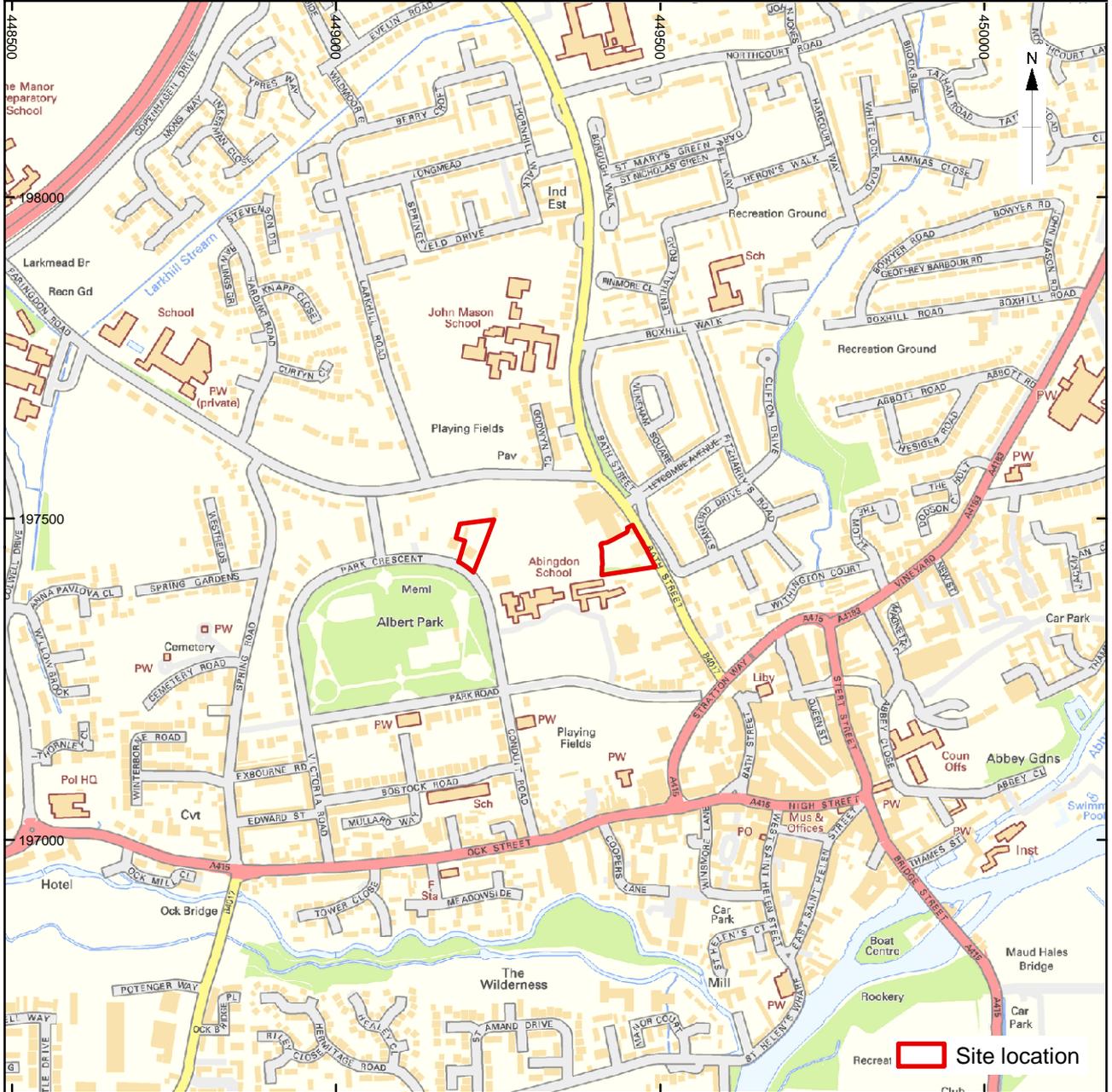
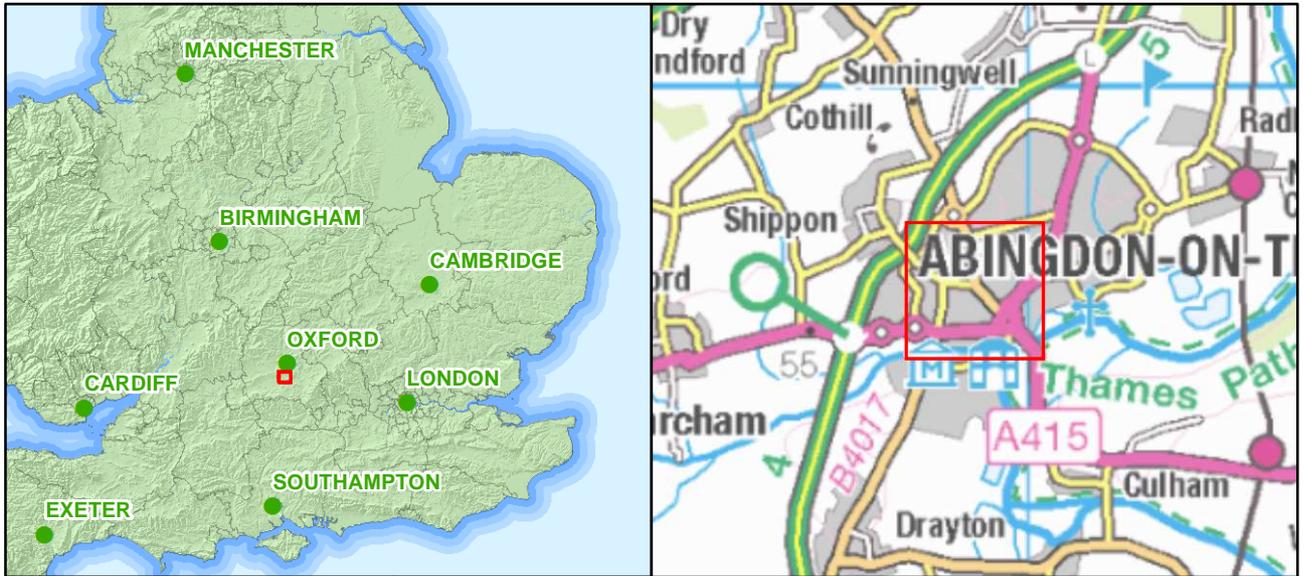


Figure 1: Site location



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"matt.bradley" 15/11/2019

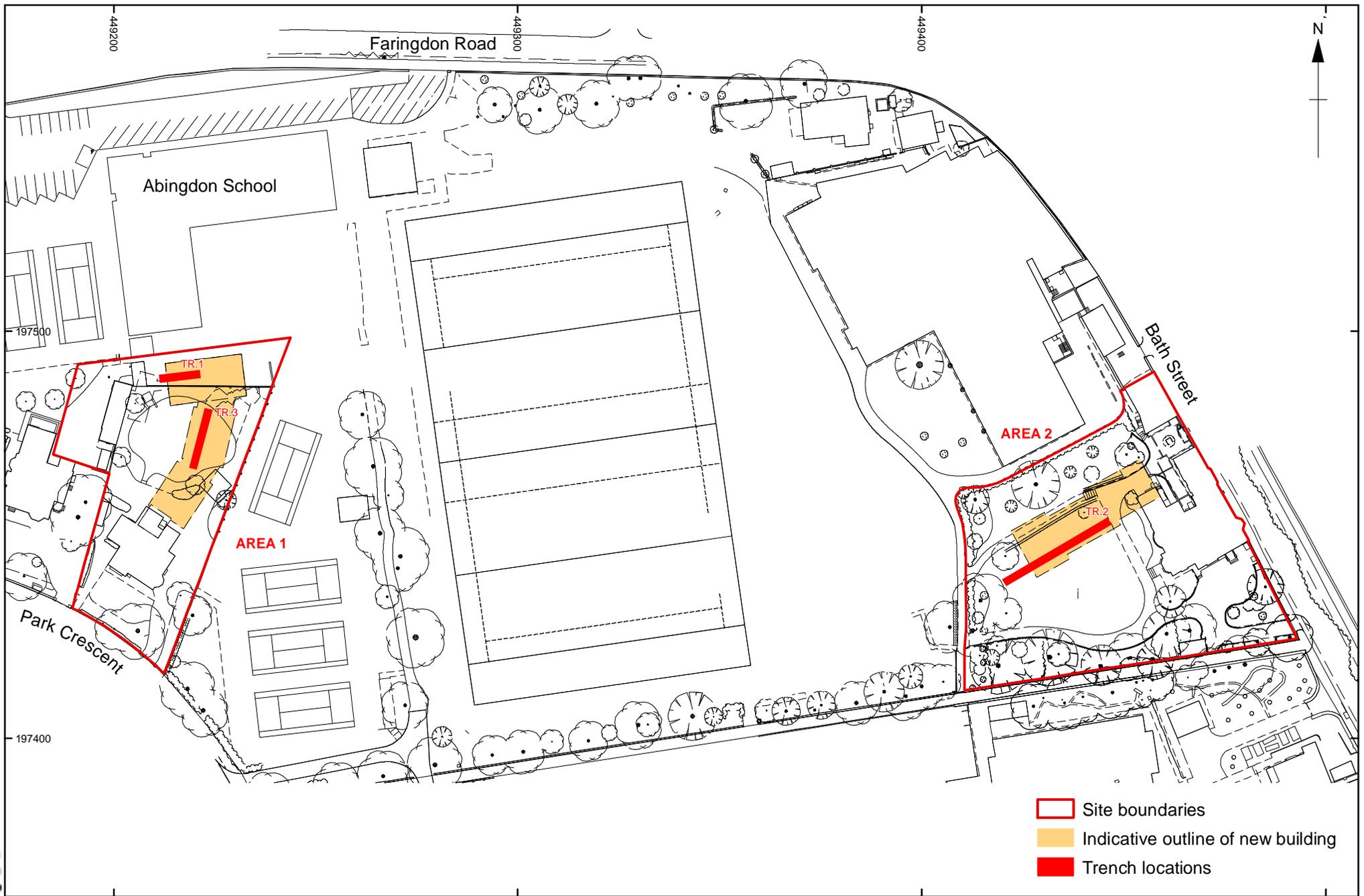


Figure 2: Trenches with proposed development

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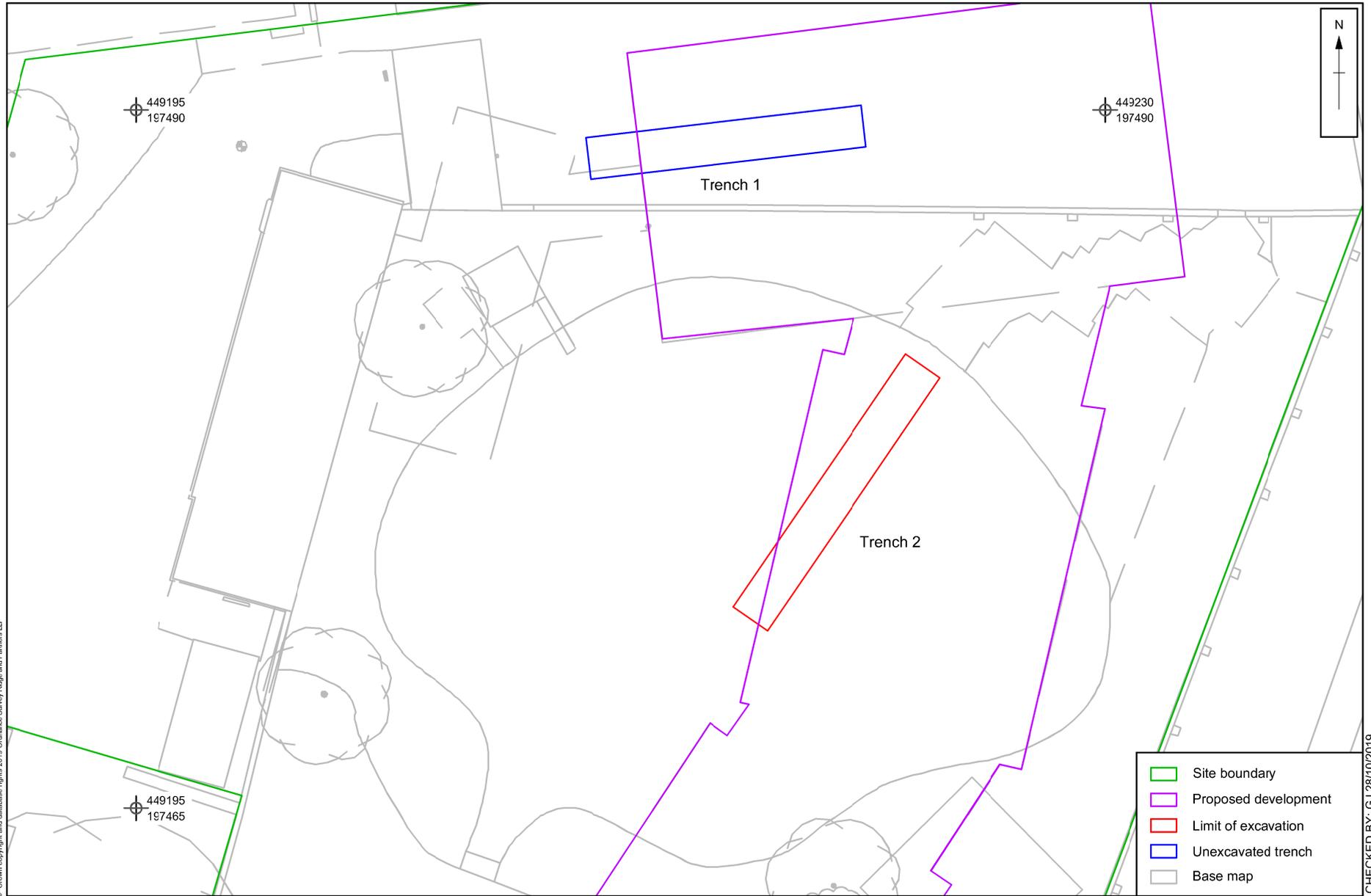


Figure 3: Plan of trenches 1 and 3 with proposed development





Plate 1: Proposed location of Trench 1



Plate 2: Pond within the proposed location of Trench 1





Plate 3: Trench 3 location within the gardens of Crescent House



Plate 4: Photo of Trench 3 looking north-east (1m and 2m scales)







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