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Beechcroft Construction Ltd

Downton Tannery, Downton, Wiltshire

NGR SU 180 215

ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF REPORT

Oxford Archaeological Unit

February 2001

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Summary

In January 2001 the Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) undertook a watching brief at Downton Tannery, Downton, Wiltshire. The site has already been the subject of a comprehensive building survey by OAU (report in production), but provision for a watching brief during the groundworks was attached to the planning permission due to the potential disturbance of below ground archaeological deposits, and in order to monitor the demolition of the existing structures. All deposits observed during the watching brief appeared to be associated with the early 20th-century Tannery.

1 Introduction

Downton Tannery lies toward the centre of the town (centred at NGR SU1800 2150). It is bordered by open land to the north, St Lawrence's Church and The Manor House to the east, the B3080 to the south and by the River Avon to the west. The underlying geology is Upper Chalk, with the eastern part of the site containing drift deposits of river terrace gravel and the western part alluvium overlying the gravel.

2 Background

The development site is located within the historic core of the town, but also lies in an area with potential for earlier archaeological activity. Excavations in the mid 1950's revealed a evidence of Mesolithic activity to the south of the Moot (see below). A Roman villa has also been recorded, some 200 m to the south of the mound. The existing settlement had its origins in the Saxon period and evidence of this has been recorded close to the development site. Downton was the chief settlement within an estate granted to the Bishop of Winchester in the 11th century. St Lawrence's Church dates to the later medieval period, but is thought to have been located on the site of an 11th century church. The Moot, a ringwork and bailey - probably constructed in the 12th century - lies to the south of the development site. The Moot was re-landscaped in the 18th century and now forms part of a formal garden.

The existing Tannery buildings date to the early 20th century, although it is believed that tanning has been undertaken on the site since the early 17th century. The Tannery ceased operation in 1998 and it would appear from the surviving features that it was not significantly modernised before its closure. The complex therefore retained many of its original features - such as the lime pits, lime stores, vats, water wheel and line shafting - which remain in-situ. Some of the features relating to the Tannery are to be retained, including the existing water wheel and the former offices, warehouse and drying room which form the main building (Fig. 2).

The building survey identified several areas of potential for earlier industrial activity. It was suggested that the existing waterwheel would not have been an efficient power source for the shafting observed within the northern wing of the main building, and that evidence for an earlier/alternative steam engine or water wheel may have been present beneath the floor of the wing, possibly associated with the brick culvert which runs across the site (see below). It was also suggested that the culvert itself may be revealed during the groundwork.

The large quantity of water required for the tanning process was supplied from a distributary channel of the River Avon. This was a wide open channel known as the Barford Carrier which was enclosed as it entered the Tannery from the north. The covered channel narrowed sharply and passed beneath the main tannery building as a brick culvert (Fig. 2).

3 Aims

The aims of the watching brief were to identify any archaeological remains exposed on site during the course of the works, and to record these to established OAU standards (Wilkinson 1992), in order to secure their preservation by record.

4 Methodology

The watching brief was undertaken by means of separate inspection visits; all digging was undertaken by mechanical excavator.

Within the constraints imposed by health and safety considerations the deposits exposed were cleaned, inspected and recorded in plan, section and by colour slide and monochrome print photography. Written records were also made on proforma sheets. Soil description utilised standard charts for the approximation of percentage of inclusion types in soil deposits.

5 Results

The results of the groundwork have been divided into two phases. Phase one covers the demolition of the existing buildings, while phase two concentrates on the excavation of drainage trenches and other intrusive works.

Phase One

No significant archaeological remains were observed following the demolition of the existing buildings. Particular attention was given to the areas which the building survey had highlighted as potentially sensitive, but no evidence was observed for a steam engine or water wheel associated with the northern wing of the main Tannery building.

Phase Two

Construction of the foundations for the new buildings involved the deposition of at least 1 m of made ground. Piles were then driven or augered through the made ground and any underlying archaeological deposits could not be observed.

Drainage trenches were primarily excavated through the new made ground, but where they did impact below this, they were cut exclusively through demolition rubble or an earlier deposit of made ground - presumably associated with the construction of the Tannery. The only trench which impacted significantly upon this earlier deposit was to the west of the east wing of the existing Tannery and was excavated to a depth of approximately 2 m (Fig. 2). This exposed the footings for the demolished north wing of the building and partially exposed the brick culvert.

6 Finds

The deposits observed during the watching brief contained concentrations of 20th century building material which was not retained.

7 Environmental results

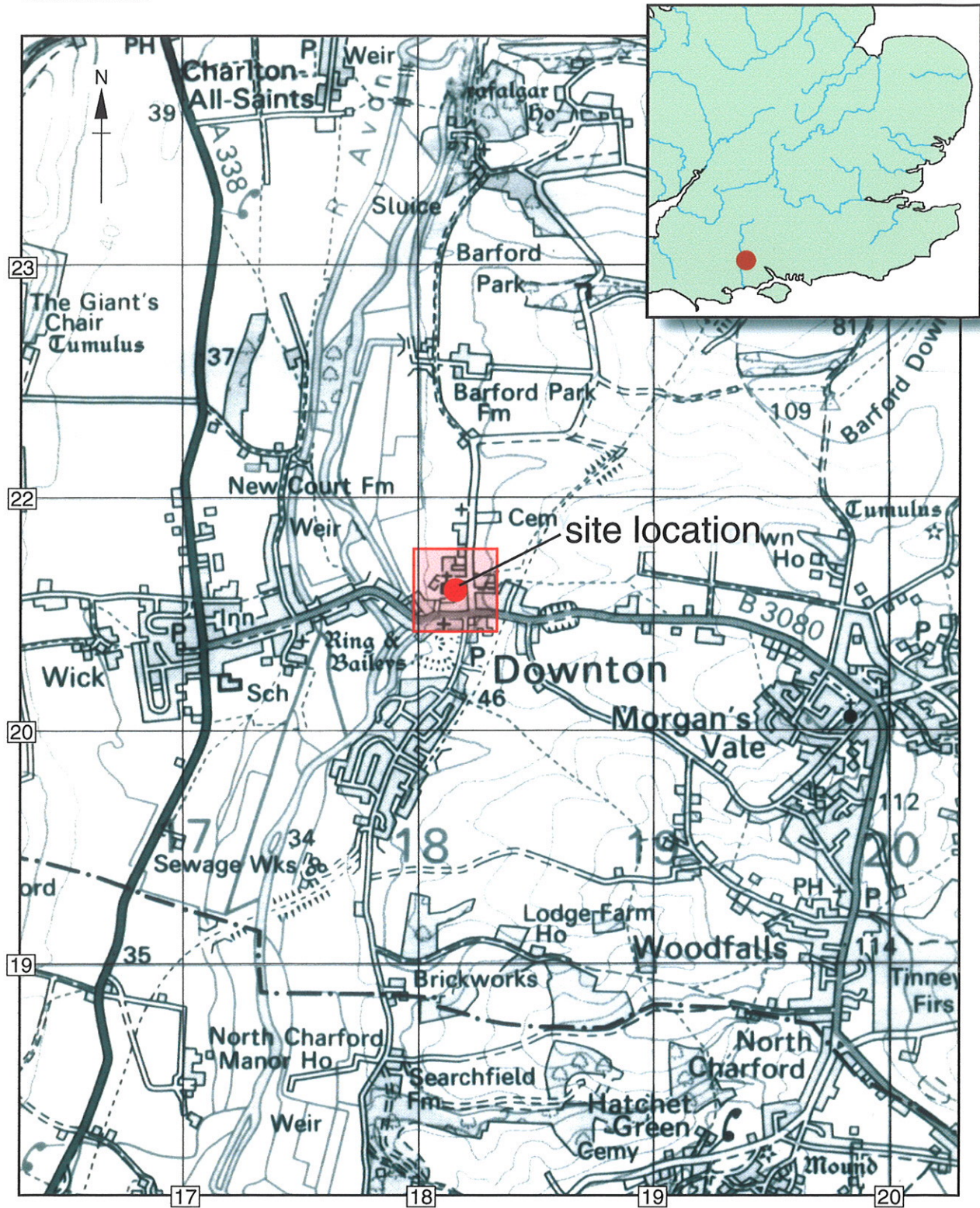
None of the deposits observed during the watching brief were considered to have potential for environmental sampling.

8 Discussion

It is possible that any archaeological deposits or features which pre-date the tannery have been truncated during its construction. However, as the majority of the groundwork did not impact below the level of the made ground, this is purely conjectural and it is possible that archaeological remains survive intact below the new development. The nature of the pile foundations negated the possibility of observing any archaeological deposits below the level of the made ground.

References.

Wilkinson, D (ed) 1992 Oxford Archaeological Unit Field Manual, (First edition, August 1992).



Scale 1:25,000

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Figure 1: Site location.

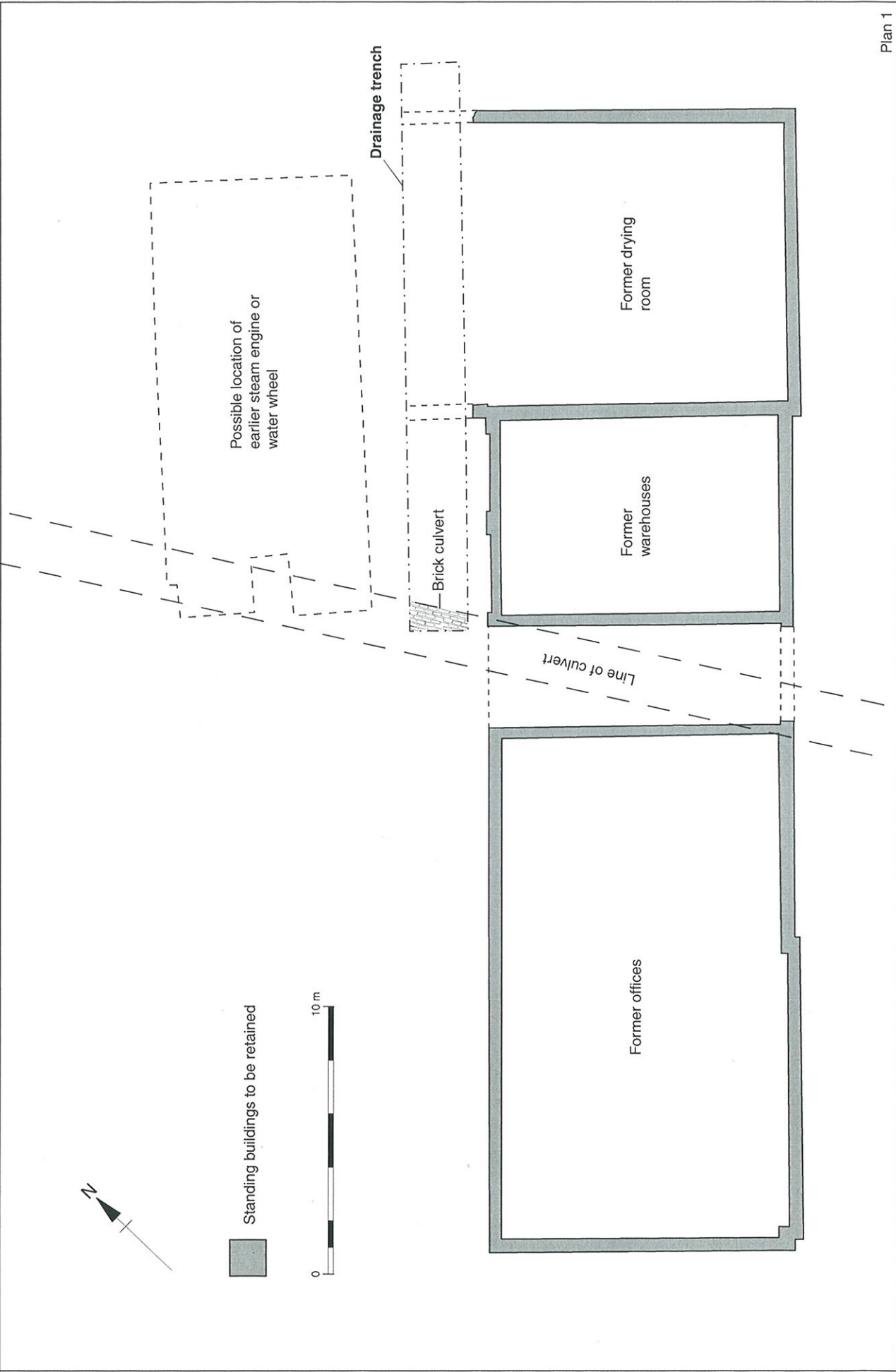


Figure 2 : Location of drainage trench.



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