

ALTOWWS (ST)
815/99

Nathaniel Lichfield & Partners

The Dark Ride, Alton Towers, Farley, Staffordshire

NGR SK 0719 4315

ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF REPORT

Planning Ref. No. SM98-0981

Oxford Archaeological Unit

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Prepared by: *[Signature]*

Date: *30/7/99*

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Date: *6/8/1999*

Approved by: *R. Williams* HEAD OF FIELDWORK

Date: *6/8/1999*

Oxford Archaeological Unit

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Summary

In June 1999 the Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) undertook a watching brief at Alton Towers, Farley, Staffordshire. No significant archaeological remains were discovered; the watching brief confirmed that the development area had previously been stripped down to bedrock prior to the construction of a car park. The watching brief also confirmed that natural deposits had been heavily truncated by modern services.

1 Introduction

The development proposal (planning application no. SM98-0981) comprised the excavation of foundations in advance of the construction of a new ride at the Alton Towers theme park. An archaeological watching brief was required in accordance with PPG 16, as the site is located within an area of archaeological potential.

The watching brief was commissioned by Nathaniel Lichfield & Partners on behalf of Alton Towers. It was undertaken to a brief set by and a WSI agreed with Staffordshire County Council.

2 Background (Fig. 1)

The archaeological background to the watching brief has been the subject of a separate Desk-Based archaeological assessment (OAU 1999a) the results of which, with particular attention to Bunbury Hillfort, are summarised below.

There was no evidence for occupation or activity dating to the Palaeolithic, Mesolithic or Neolithic periods within 1 km of the development area. There was some evidence, however, for Bronze Age activity. Several early prehistoric finds have been discovered including a leaf-shaped bronze sword, a Bronze Age perforated hammer and a 'fine' stone. A Bronze Age barrow can be seen at Rainroach Rock, c. 1 km to the south-west of the site.

Bunbury hillfort (SAM 21633) is an important site in that it is one of a relatively small number of univallate hillforts in the country and one of even fewer within the north-west. It has been described in antiquity by Plot (1686), prior to the construction of Alton Towers, as having "no regular feature encompassed with a double and sometimes treble ditch on the north, north-west and north-east sides, all the rest being naturally inaccessible, the whole including about 100 acres". A small excavation was carried out within the hillfort in the 1960s.

The surviving ramparts to the west and south of the development area, and a strip of c. 1.5 m extending out from the ramparts into the interior have been scheduled on the assumption that the main areas of surviving archaeology lay within this curtain. The development area, although within the hillfort interior, falls outside what is considered to be the areas of best preserved archaeological deposits.

The proposed development site lies within Bunbury Hillfort, c. 10 m to the east (and outside) of the western section of the scheduled rampart and its associated envelope (Fig. 1).

The watching brief was undertaken in order to confirm the conclusions of the field evaluation (OAU 1999b), which consisted of five trenches and test pits dug across the area to be reduced. At the time of the watching brief the area of investigation was a tarmac car park, with the general area being used as a workshop facility for the Alton Towers theme park. It was bounded to the north-east, north-west and west by late 20th century buildings comprising workshops, a staff common room and associated structures. Approximately 200 m to the south-west of the tarmac lies the southern rampart of the hillfort and the vehicle entrance to the workshop area.

The Alton Towers leisure park is located on an escarpment above and to the north of the River Churnet (SK 0719 4315). The village of Alton lies c. 1 km to the south. The underlying geology is Triassic Hollington formation sandstone overlying Hawksmoor sandstone (GSGB 1983, sheet 124). The site lies at approximately 189 m OD.

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 two separate inspection visits; all excavation was by JCB mechanical excavator supplemented by occasional hand digging.

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 utilises standard charts for the approximation of percentage of inclusion types in soil deposits.

5 Results (Fig. 2)

The footprint for the new ride was revised subsequent to the evaluation (see Fig. 2), its north-eastern end now being located immediately to the south-east of the old estate office. Excavation commenced by JCB, which defined the limits of the footprint before reducing the internal area. Decayed bedrock (3) was encountered at a mean depth of 0.75 m, sealed by a mixture of crushed and whole Type 1 hardcore, (2), which in turn was sealed by the tarmac surface of the car park, (1). Excavation then proceeded through the natural geology to the contractor's cut-off point of c. 3 m depth. Neither archaeological features nor deposits were seen.

6 Finds

The presence of a very few modern finds, principally in close association with the modern services, was noted and these pieces were examined on site but not retained. No finds earlier than 19th-century in date were seen.

7 Environmental results

Due to the absence of any significant archaeology, no environmental soil samples were taken.

8 Discussion

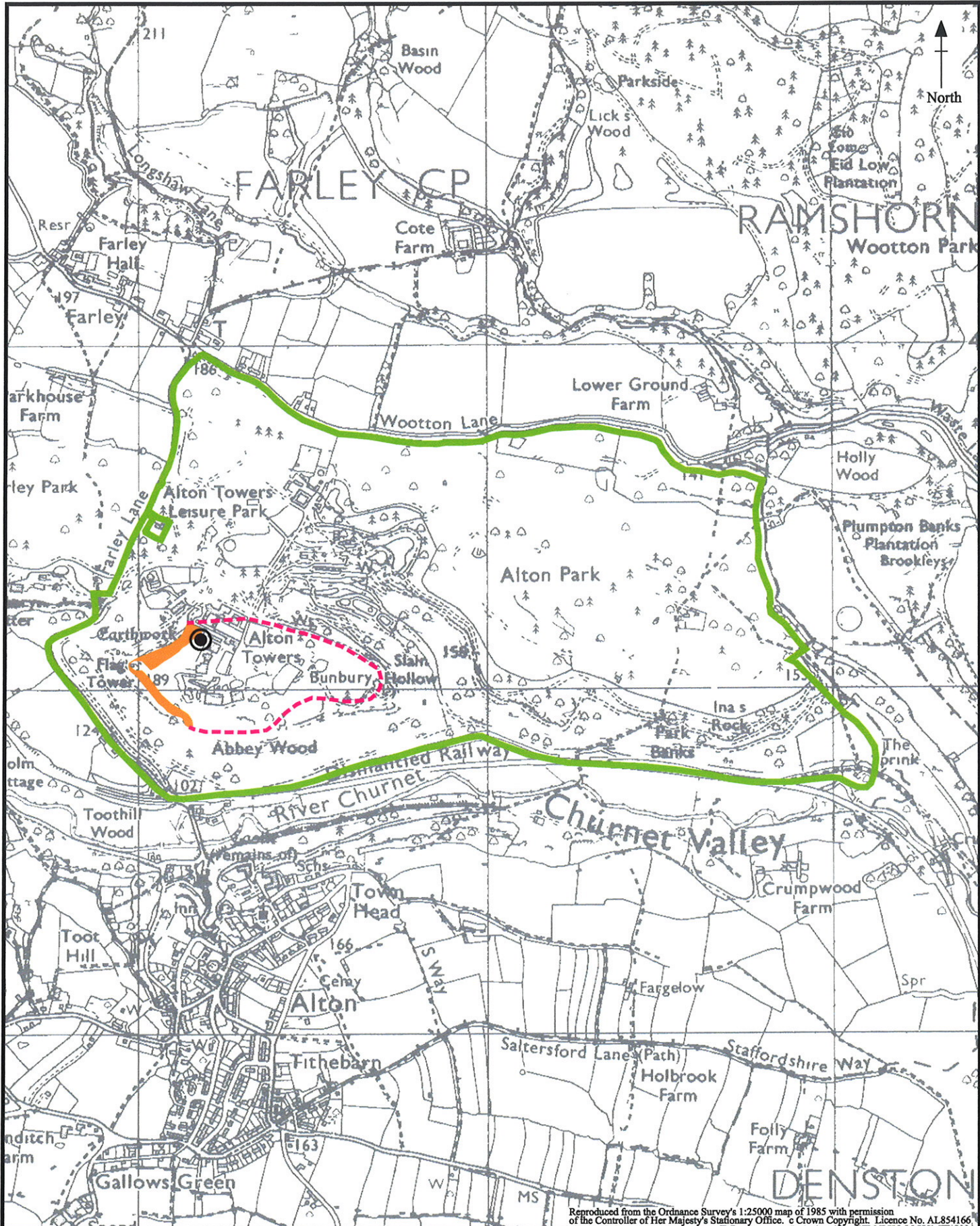
The watching brief found nothing to contradict the findings of the evaluation; it is clear that the site has been heavily truncated, both during the creation of the car park and during the periodic installation of modern services. The development site is located immediately to the south of a building which until recently served as the estate office for the theme park, and this is the principal reason for the large number of services concentrated in this area.

References.

OAU January 1999a Proposed New Ride at Alton Towers, Desk-Based Archaeological Assessment.

OAU February 1999b Proposed New Ride at Alton Towers, Farley, Staffordshire, Archaeological Evaluation Report.

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



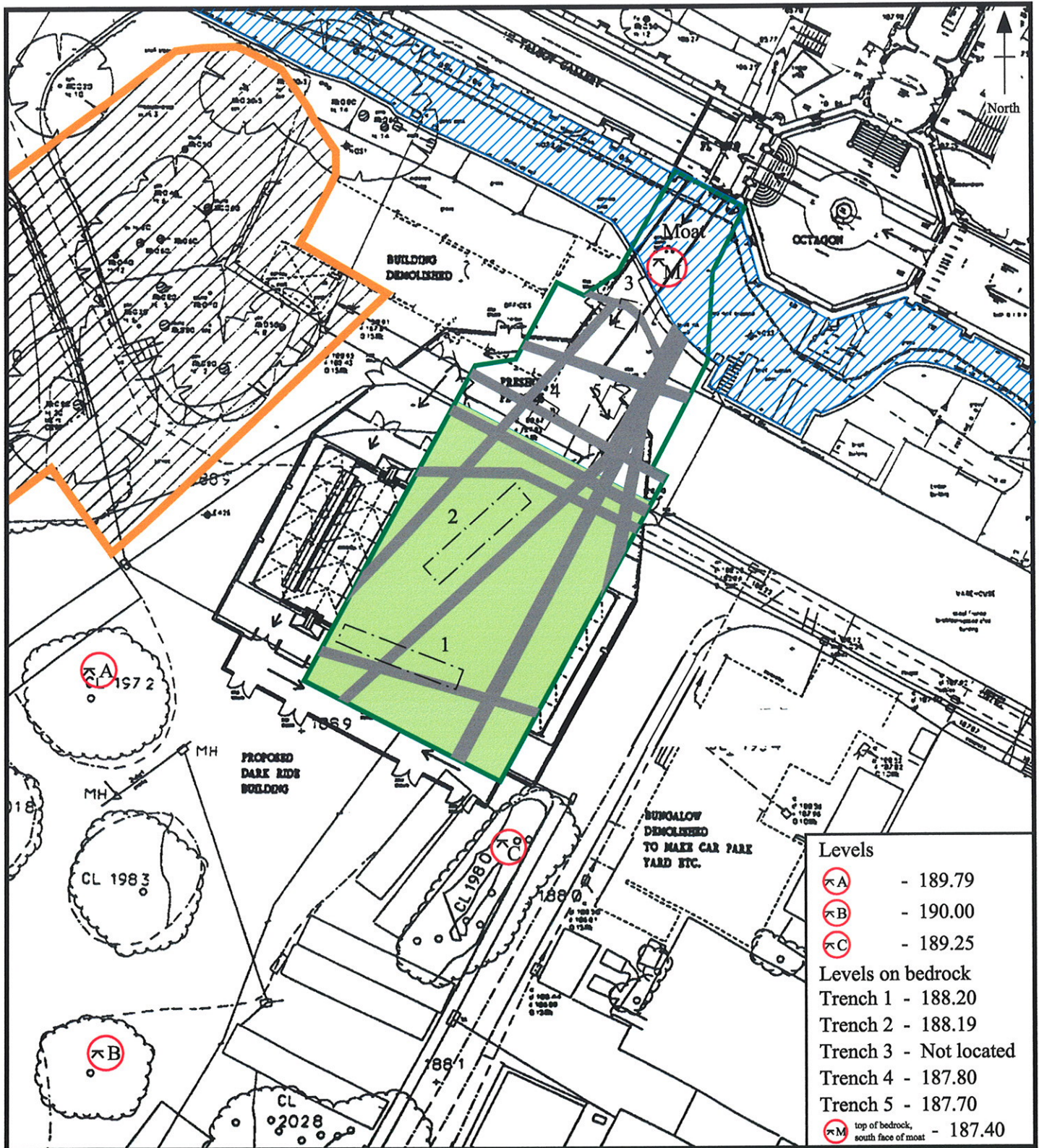
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Key:

- Development area
- Bunbury Hillfort - SAM
- possible extent of hillfort
- ▭ Alton Park

Scale 1:15,000 at A4

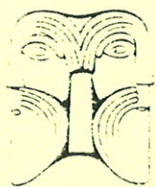
Figure 1: Site Location Plan



Key: 1:250 at A4

- Area of proposed development
- Moat
- Evaluation trenches 1 - 5
- Area of excavation
- Area of SAM - Bunbury Hillfort
- Modern services
- ⊖A Levels taken at the base of tree

Figure 2: Trench Location Plan



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