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Archaeological Evaluation Report

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Burston Garden Centre, St Albans

Archaeological Evaluation Report

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Summary

In March 2023, Oxford Archaeology undertook a trial trench evaluation at the site of a proposed residential development.

The works comprised the excavation of 17 trenches measuring 30m by 1.8m. No archaeological features or deposits were identified. Evidence of isolated areas of modern truncation were noted in the south-west and centre of the site.

The results of the evaluation suggest the site has little to no archaeological potential.

Acknowledgements

Oxford Archaeology would like to thank WSP for commissioning this project on behalf of St Albans Unit Trust. Thanks are also extended to Richard Havis, Place Services, who monitored the work on behalf of St Albans District Council.

The project was managed for Oxford Archaeology by John Boothroyd. The fieldwork was directed by Daniel Pond, who was supported by Lily Andrews and Alexandra Baranowski. Survey and digitising was carried out by Lily Andrews, Matt Bradley and Marjaana Kohtamaki. Thanks are also extended to the teams of OA staff that 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 WSP on behalf of St Albans Unit Trust to undertake a trial trench evaluation at the site of a proposed residential development.
- 1.1.2 The work was undertaken as a condition of Planning Permission (planning ref. 5/20/3022). The scope of works required to progress the planning condition was agreed between WSP and the Principal Historic Environment Consultant, Place Services (Richard Havis) acting on behalf of St Albans District Council. This document outlines how OA implemented the specified requirements.
- 1.1.3 All work was undertaken in accordance with the Chartered Institute for Archaeologists Code of Conduct (CIfA 2019) and relevant standards and guidance (CIfA 2020), and local and national planning policies.

1.2 Location, topography and geology

- 1.2.1 The site is located in the village of How Wood, which lies between Watford and St Albans in the Civil Parish of St Stephen (Fig. 1)
- 1.2.2 The area to be developed comprises a former plant nursery including glass houses and storage buildings. The site is bordered by Burston Garden Centre to the west, residential properties to the north, and woodland to the east and south.
- 1.2.3 The geology of the area is mapped as undifferentiated Lewes Nodular Chalk and Seaford Chalk formations. Superficial deposits of Lowestoft Formation are recorded across the site (BGS Online).
- 1.2.4 The Superficial deposits were noted in all the trenches at a height of between 84.14m above Ordnance Datum (aOD) and 85.2m aOD.

1.3 Archaeological and historical background

- 1.3.1 The following archaeological and historical background has been reproduced from the Written Scheme of Investigation produced by WSP (WSP 2023) which is derived from an Archaeological Desk-Based Assessment (RPS 2020)
- 1.3.2 *“There have been no known past archaeological investigations within the site and relatively little archaeological work has been conducted in the immediate vicinity of the site. Current understanding of the extent of past human activity is limited, in particular for the prehistoric, Roman and the early Saxon period, for which there is no documentary record.*
- 1.3.3 *The site has an uncertain, low to moderate potential to contain prehistoric remains. Palaeolithic activity is difficult to ascertain as it is typically dependent on the appropriate underlying geology. The Lowestoft deposits beneath are not conducive to in situ early prehistoric remains as they are formed from glacial till and erosion, so even though several displaced handaxes were found 450m to the east, it is unlikely they are indicative of detectable activity. No finds from the Mesolithic period have*

been identified, and one only one residual Neolithic flint implement was recovered, 1km to the south-west. There is more evidence of Bronze Age and Iron Age industrial and agricultural products like kilns, pottery sherds and coins recorded at the nearby Park Street Roman villa and at Junction 21a of the M25 (c.1.1km southeast), but since this activity is concentrated away from the site, the archaeological potential for the site remains low.

- 1.3.4 *The site has a low to moderate potential to contain Roman remains. Evidence of frequent Roman occupation is apparent nearby, notably at the Park Street Roman villa, 1.1km to the southeast, along Watling Street, the road between London and St Albans, 1.2km to the east and from the settlement of Verulamium 2.7km south. However, evidence of Roman activity consisting of more isolated discoveries like a small timber framed structure and brick and coin finds to the west and east of the site (HER Ref: 88-, TL 1378 0385), indicates that the site lay within a settled agricultural landscape with low to moderate activity.*
- 1.3.5 *The site has a high potential to contain early to late medieval remains. The site lies within a LPA 'Area of Archaeological Significance' relating to the potential early medieval remains associated with Burstone Manor. Although dated to the 12th century and absent in the Domesday survey of 1086, it is likely related to the land mentioned in a 795 charter by King Offa (AD 757–796) to the monastery of St. Albans, which was later reaffirmed in a charter of King Aethelred in 996 (London, British Library, Cotton Nero D I, ff.149v–150r), suggesting continued settlement. Although no nucleated village is recorded surrounding the manor, it is possible that an agriculturally focused hamlet, as has been discovered around 'Burstone Manor House' (NHLE UID: 1102862, Grade II* Listed) and outbuildings (NHLE UID: 1347270, Grade II Listed), extends into the site. In the later Middle Ages localised activity continued to expand, with various medieval farmhouses and cottages, as well as important waypoints for pilgrims to the west and south of the site. Therefore, the likely presence of medieval agricultural occupation is high in the area.*
- 1.3.6 *The site has a low to moderate potential to contain post-medieval remains. During this period the site likely remained predominantly agricultural. Evidence from 1766 Andrews and Dury map (not reproduced) show the development of Burston Manor Farm immediately to the north, but the site itself remained open ground (likely cultivated). There are few changes evident on early 19th century mapping aside from the addition of an access lane and then field boundaries running southwest to northeast through the centre of the site. The 1838 Tithe Map (not reproduced) records the plots within the site as either clay pits, orchards or fields. The site remained unchanged from 1898 until 1960 (aside from a curvilinear pond (or former moat) from the manor extending into the access road and residential development appearing to the north, east and south)."*

2 AIMS AND METHODOLOGY

2.1 Aims

- 2.1.1 The aims of the evaluation were to clarify the presence, nature, date and extent of any archaeological remains that might be present within the areas of impact, where archaeological survival was expected to be higher.
- 2.1.2 The objective of trial trench evaluation as defined by the Chartered Institute for Archaeologists (CIfA) is to ‘determine and report on, as far as is reasonably possible, the nature of the archaeological resource within a specified area using appropriate methods and practices’ (CIfA 2020). The results of the evaluation will inform an appropriate mitigation strategy for any archaeological remains, if required.
- 2.1.3 This is further explained as ‘a limited programme of non-intrusive and/or intrusive fieldwork which determines the presence or absence of archaeological features, structures, deposits, artefacts or ecofacts, and their research potential, within a specified area or site.... If such archaeological remains are present field evaluation defines their character, extent, quality and preservation, and enables an assessment of their worth in a local, regional, national or international context as appropriate.’
- 2.1.4 The work was undertaken in consideration of the *East of England Research Framework* (EAA 2011). Based on the known archaeological background, the site was considered to have potential to inform the following research objectives:
- What additional evidence can be ascertained about the early to post-medieval Burston Manor Farm? Are there any surviving early to late medieval artefacts or features which further substantiate our understanding of the early medieval manor and what do these tell us rural settlement locally? What is the density, type, size?
 - What evidence is there for prehistoric activity? Does the site contain any evidence for dispersed settlement or are there any artefacts relating to casual losses, as found in the surrounding area?
 - What evidence could be recovered of any agricultural or industrial activity related to the later prehistoric into the Roman period? Can any links be made with the Roman villa and byways nearby?
 - What is the nature and depth of natural (in m OD) and the extent of modern disturbance on potential archaeological remains, if there is any at all? Have the modern nurseries and horticulture had a significant impact on earlier deposits?

2.2 Methodology

- 2.2.1 A total of 17 trenches were excavated across the accessible development area, representing a 4% sample. Each trench measured 30m by 1.8m with the exception of Trench 15 due to the presence of deep made ground. The trenches were laid out in accordance with the WSI except where minor adjustments were required due to the presence of obstructions.

- 2.2.2 The trenches were excavated using a 13-ton tracked 360° mechanical excavator fitted with a toothless bucket under the direct supervision of an archaeologist. Spoil was stored adjacent to, however at a safe distance from the trench edges.
- 2.2.3 Machining continued in even spits down to the top of the undisturbed natural geology or the first archaeological horizon, depending upon which was encountered first. Once archaeological deposits were exposed, further excavation proceeded by hand.
- 2.2.4 The exposed surface of trench was sufficiently cleaned to establish the presence or absence of archaeological remains. A sample of each feature or deposit type, for example pits, postholes, and ditches, was excavated and recorded.
- 2.2.5 All features and deposits were issued with unique context numbers, and context recording was in accordance with established best practice and the OA field manual. Small finds and samples were allocated unique numbers. Bulk finds were collected by context.
- 2.2.6 Digital photos were taken of any archaeological features, deposits, trenches and the evaluation work in general.
- 2.2.7 Sections of features were drawn at a scale of 1:10 or 1:20. All section drawings were located using a GPS with sub-15mm accuracy. The absolute height (m OD) of all principal strata and features, and the section datum lines, was calculated, and shown on the drawings.
- 2.2.8 Upon completion of the works and in agreement with the Principal Historic Environment Consultant, Place Services, the trenches were backfilled with the arisings in reverse order of excavation.

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 trenches. The 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 sequence in the trenches was fairly uniform. The natural geology of light brownish yellow silty sand was observed at between 84.14m aOD and 85.2m aOD. The natural geology as overlain by a mid-yellowish brown subsoil, which in turn was overlain by topsoil (Plates 1 and 2).

3.2.2 Variations in this sequence were noted in the south-western portion of the site where modern made ground deposits were observed overlying the topsoil, and large thick deposits (greater than 0.9m) of demolition material were noted in Trench 15 (Plate 3).

3.2.3 Ground conditions throughout the evaluation were favorable and did not hinder the works allowing for deposits to be easily differentiated. The site remained dry throughout.

3.3 General distribution of archaeological deposits

3.3.1 No archaeological features were identified during the evaluation. Several tree throws or areas of root disturbance were noted in Trenches 1, 6, and 10 (Plates and 5). These are of non-anthropogenic origin and hold no archaeological significance.

3.3.2 Larger areas of modern disturbance / truncation were noted in Trenches 5, 8 and 17 (Plate 6). Hand excavation of these features was undertaken but ceased on discovery of modern glass and plastic.

3.4 Finds summary

3.4.1 Artefactual evidence recovered during the evaluation was limited to material of a modern origin including glass, plastic, wood and brick. This material was noted but not retained.

4 DISCUSSION

4.1 Reliability of field investigation

- 4.1.1 The trenches provided a comprehensive coverage of the available site area and were located to maximise the potential for exposing archaeological remains. The ground and site conditions were generally good throughout the course of the evaluation and the machining was carried out cleanly, providing clear visibility of the deposits within the evaluation trenches.
- 4.1.2 Although no archaeological features were identified, natural geology was identified cleanly in all trenches except the southern end of Trench 15 due to made ground. Features of potential archaeological origin were investigated where identified and confirmed to be of either modern or non-anthropogenic origin.
- 4.1.3 Overall, the evaluation should be considered to provide a reliable assessment of the archaeological potential of the proposed development area.

4.2 Evaluation objectives and results

- 4.2.1 In general the evaluation aimed to assess the potential for archaeological remains to survive within the development area and, if present, establish the significance of any remains. No archaeological features were identified within the site and the absence of any residual artefactual evidence pre-dating the modern period suggest the site has no archaeological potential.
- 4.2.2 The presence of significance made ground within the area around Trench 15 and identification of modern truncation in Trench 5, 8 and 17 suggest the site has partially be disturbed / truncated further removing the potential for archaeological remains to be present. It is unclear if this truncation relates to the construction or demolition of the plant nursesey.

APPENDIX A TRENCH DESCRIPTIONS AND CONTEXT INVENTORY

Trench 1							
General description						Orientation	E - W
Trench devoid of archaeology but did contained three tree throws. Consisted of topsoil and subsoil overlying natural geology.						Length (m)	30
						Width (m)	1.8
						Avg. depth (m)	0.57
Context No.	Type	Fill Of	Width (m)	Depth (m)	Description	Finds	Date
100	Layer		1.8	0.33	Topsoil. Soft, Mid brownish yellow. Silty clay		
101	Layer		1.8	0.24	Subsoil. Soft. Light brownish yellow. Silty clay		
102	Layer		1.02		Other Layer. Light yellowish-brown, soft, silty clay.		
103	Layer				Other Layer. Natural variation. Soft, light brownish-yellow clay.		
104	Layer				Other Layer. Natural variation. Soft, light brownish-yellow clay.		
Trench 2							
General description						Orientation	NW-SE
Trench devoid of archaeology. Consisted of topsoil and subsoil overlying natural geology.						Length (m)	30
						Width (m)	1.8
						Avg. depth (m)	0.52
Context No.	Type	Fill Of	Width (m)	Depth (m)	Description	Finds	Date
200	Layer		1.8	0.38	Topsoil. Soft. Mid yellowish brown. Silty clay.		
201	Layer		1.8	0.2	Subsoil. Soft. Mid brownish yellow. Sandy clay.		
202	Layer		1.8		Natural. Soft. Mid reddish yellow. Sandy clay.		
Trench 3							
General description						Orientation	SE-NW
Trench devoid of archaeology. Consisted of topsoil and subsoil overlying natural geology.						Length (m)	30
						Width (m)	1.8
						Avg. depth (m)	0.43
Context No.	Type	Fill Of	Width (m)	Depth (m)	Description	Finds	Date
300	Layer		1.8	0.25	Topsoil. Soft. Mid yellowish brown. Silty clay.		
301	Layer		1.8	0.18	Subsoil. Soft. Light yellowish brown. Silty clay.		

302	Layer				Natural. Soft. Light yellowish brown with orange patches in the natural. Silty clay.		
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Trench 4

General description					Orientation	NE-SW
Trench devoid of archaeology. The trench consisted of topsoil and subsoil overlying natural geology.					Length (m)	30
					Width (m)	1.8
					Avg. depth (m)	0.49

Context No.	Type	Fill Of	Width (m)	Depth (m)	Description	Finds	Date
400	Layer			0.25	Topsoil. Soft. Mid yellowish brown. Silty clay		
401	Layer			0.17	Subsoil. Soft. Light brownish yellow. Silty clay		
402	Layer				Natural. Soft. Light brownish yellow clay		

Trench 5

General description					Orientation	N-S
Trench devoid of archaeology. Consisted topsoil and subsoil overlying natural geology.					Length (m)	30
					Width (m)	1.8
					Avg. depth (m)	0.35

Context No.	Type	Fill Of	Width (m)	Depth (m)	Description	Finds	Date
500	Layer			0.2	Topsoil. Soft. Mid yellowish brown. Silty clay.		
501	Layer			0.16	Subsoil. Soft. Mid brownish yellow. Silty clay.		
502	Layer				Natural. Soft. Mid yellowish brown with oranges patches in the natural. Silty clay.		
503	Cut		9.5	0.31	Pit – modern truncation		
504	Fill	503	1.33	0.14	Secondary Fill. Soft. Mid grayish brown. Silty clay.		
505	Fill	503	1.25	0.12	Secondary Fill. Soft. Mid yellowish brown. Silty clay.		

Trench 6

General description					Orientation	SW-NE
The trench is devoid of archaeology but did contain a tree throw at it's southern end. Consisted of topsoil and subsoil overlying natural geology.					Length (m)	30
					Width (m)	1.8
					Avg. depth (m)	0.4

Context No.	Type	Fill Of	Width (m)	Depth (m)	Description	Finds	Date
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600	Layer			0.24	Topsoil. Soft. Mid yellow brown. Silty clay		
601	Layer				Subsoil. Soft Light brown yellow. Clay		
602	Layer				Natural. Light yellow with manganese mottle		
603	Cut		0.5	0.16	Pit		
604	Fill	603	0.5	0.16	Secondary Fill. Soft mid yellow brown silty clay with rare sub angular pebbles.		

Trench 7

General description						Orientation	E - W
Trench devoid of archaeology. Consisted of topsoil and subsoil overlying natural geology.						Length (m)	30
						Width (m)	1.85
						Avg. depth (m)	0.46
Context No.	Type	Fill Of	Width (m)	Depth (m)	Description	Finds	Date
700	Layer			0.36	Topsoil. Soft. Mid yellowish brown. Silty clay.		
701	Layer			0.17	Subsoil. Soft. Light brownish yellow. Silty clay		
702	Layer				Natural. Soft. Light brownish yellow clay		

Trench 8

General description						Orientation	N-S
Trench contained a large pit of modern origin in the centre. 8. Consisted of topsoil and subsoil overlying natural geology.						Length (m)	30
						Width (m)	1.85
						Avg. depth (m)	0.43
Context No.	Type	Fill Of	Width (m)	Depth (m)	Description	Finds	Date
800	Layer			0.27	Topsoil. Soft. Mid yellowish brown. Silty clay.		
801	Layer			0.21	Subsoil. Soft. Mid yellowish brown. Silty clay		
802	Layer				Natural. Soft. Light yellowish brown clay.		
803	Cut		9.1	0.53	Pit – modern truncation		
804	Fill	803	1.12	0.14	Secondary Fill. Friable. Mid yellowish brown. Sandy clay.		
805	Fill	803	1.5	0.22	Secondary Fill. Soft. Mid grayish brown. Sandy clay.		
806	Fill	803	1.43	0.21	Secondary Fill. Soft. Light yellowish brown. Sandy clay		

Trench 9							
General description						Orientation	E-W
Trench devoid of archaeology. Consisted of topsoil and subsoil overlying natural geology.						Length (m)	0.3
						Width (m)	1.8
						Avg. depth (m)	0.49
Context No.	Type	Fill Of	Width (m)	Depth (m)	Description	Finds	Date
900	Layer			0.2	Topsoil. Soft. Dark grayish brown. Sun-angular pebbles. Sandy clay.		
901	Layer			0.24	Subsoil. Soft. Mid yellowish brown. Silty clay		
902	Layer				Natural. Soft. Light yellowish brown. Silty clay.		
Trench 10							
General description						Orientation	NW-SE
Trench devoid of archaeology but a tree throw was excavated and recorded in the centre of the trench. Consists of topsoil and subsoil overlying natural geology.						Length (m)	30
						Width (m)	1.8
						Avg. depth (m)	0.55
Context No.	Type	Fill Of	Width (m)	Depth (m)	Description	Finds	Date
1000	Layer			0.25	Topsoil		
1001	Layer			0.3	Subsoil. Mid yellow brown silty clay.		
1002	Layer				Natural. Light brown yellow clay.		
1003	Cut		0.54	0.08	Tree Throw		
1004	Fill	1003	0.54	0.08	Secondary Fill. Soft. Mid yellowish brown. Silty clay.		
Trench 11							
General description						Orientation	NE - SW
Trench devoid of archaeology. Consisted of topsoil and subsoil overlying natural geology.						Length (m)	30
						Width (m)	1.8
						Avg. depth (m)	0.57
Context No.	Type	Fill Of	Width (m)	Depth (m)	Description	Finds	Date
1100	Layer			0.26	Topsoil. Soft. Dark grayish brown. Common sub-angular pebbles. Sandy clay.		
1101	Layer			0.31	Subsoil. Soft. Mid yellowish brown. Silty clay.		
1102	Layer				Natural. Soft. Light yellowish brown. Silty clay		
Trench 12							
General description						Orientation	E - W

Trench devoid of archaeology. Consisted of topsoil and subsoil overlying natural geology.						Length (m)	30
						Width (m)	1.8
						Avg. depth (m)	0.47
Context No.	Type	Fill Of	Width (m)	Depth (m)	Description	Finds	Date
Trench 13							
General description						Orientation	E-W
Trench devoid of archaeology. Consisted of topsoil and subsoil overlying natural geology.						Length (m)	0.3
						Width (m)	1.8
						Avg. depth (m)	0.64
Context No.	Type	Fill Of	Width (m)	Depth (m)	Description	Finds	Date
1300	Layer			0.42	Topsoil. Soft silty clay. Dark yellow brown with occasional sun angular pebbles.		
1301	Layer			0.22	Subsoil. Soft silty clay. Mid brown yellow.		
1302	Layer				Natural. Mid yellow with orange mottle.		
Trench 14							
General description						Orientation	N-S
Trench devoid of archaeology. Consisted of topsoil and subsoil overlying natural geology.						Length (m)	0.3
						Width (m)	1.8
						Avg. depth (m)	0.4
Context No.	Type	Fill Of	Width (m)	Depth (m)	Description	Finds	Date
1400	Layer			0.26	Topsoil. Soft, silty clay, dark yellow brown with occasional sub angular pebbles.		
1401	Layer			0.14	Subsoil. Soft silty clay. Mid brown yellow.		
1402	Layer				Natural. Mid yellow with orange lenses		
Trench 15							
General description						Orientation	ESE-WNW
Trench devoid of archaeology. The western half of the trench was abandoned due to a mixture of hard-core and demolition that truncated the geology 0.9 down from the surface level. The toothed bucket for the 360° sustained damage during the excavation. The area the trench is located has been built up by 0.5m.						Length (m)	15
						Width (m)	1.8
						Avg. depth (m)	1
Context No.	Type	Fill Of	Width (m)	Depth (m)	Description	Finds	Date

1500	Layer		1.8	0.5	Other Layer. Modern demolition built upon current surface level.		
1501	Layer		1.8	0.4	Other Layer. Dark layer of modern demolition that truncates 0.4m below the current ground level. Blackish-grey, loose, brick and gravel demolition.		
1502	Layer		1.8	0.5	Other Layer. Lower modern demolition layer. Extends down to 0.9m below surface level. Mid yellowish-brown, loose, gravel and brick demolition deposit.		
1503	Layer		1.8		Natural. Mid greyish-yellow, firm, clay.		

Trench 16

General description						Orientation	N-S
Trench devoid of archaeology. Consisted of topsoil and subsoil overlying natural geology.						Length (m)	30
						Width (m)	1.8
						Avg. depth (m)	0.48
Context No.	Type	Fill Of	Width (m)	Depth (m)	Description	Finds	Date
1600	Layer			0.2	Topsoil. Soft. Dark grayish brown. Sub-angular pebbles. Sandy clay.		
1601	Layer			0.25	Subsoil. Soft. Mid yellowish brown. Silty clay.		
1602	Layer				Natural. Soft. Light yellowish brown. Silty clay		

Trench 17

General description						Orientation	N -S
The trench revealed a modern pit at its southern end that was excavated and recorded. The trench consisted of topsoil, modern demolition and a subsoil overlying natural geology.						Length (m)	30
						Width (m)	1.8
						Avg. depth (m)	0.8
Context No.	Type	Fill Of	Width (m)	Depth (m)	Description	Finds	Date
1700	Layer			0.38	Topsoil. Soft silty clay ,dark brown grey		
1701	Layer			0.2	Other Layer. Soft, silty clay. Dark yellow brown with common rounded pebbles. Made ground		
1702	Layer			0.3	Subsoil. Soft, silty clay. Mid yellow brown.		
1703	Layer				Natural. Light brown yellow clay.		

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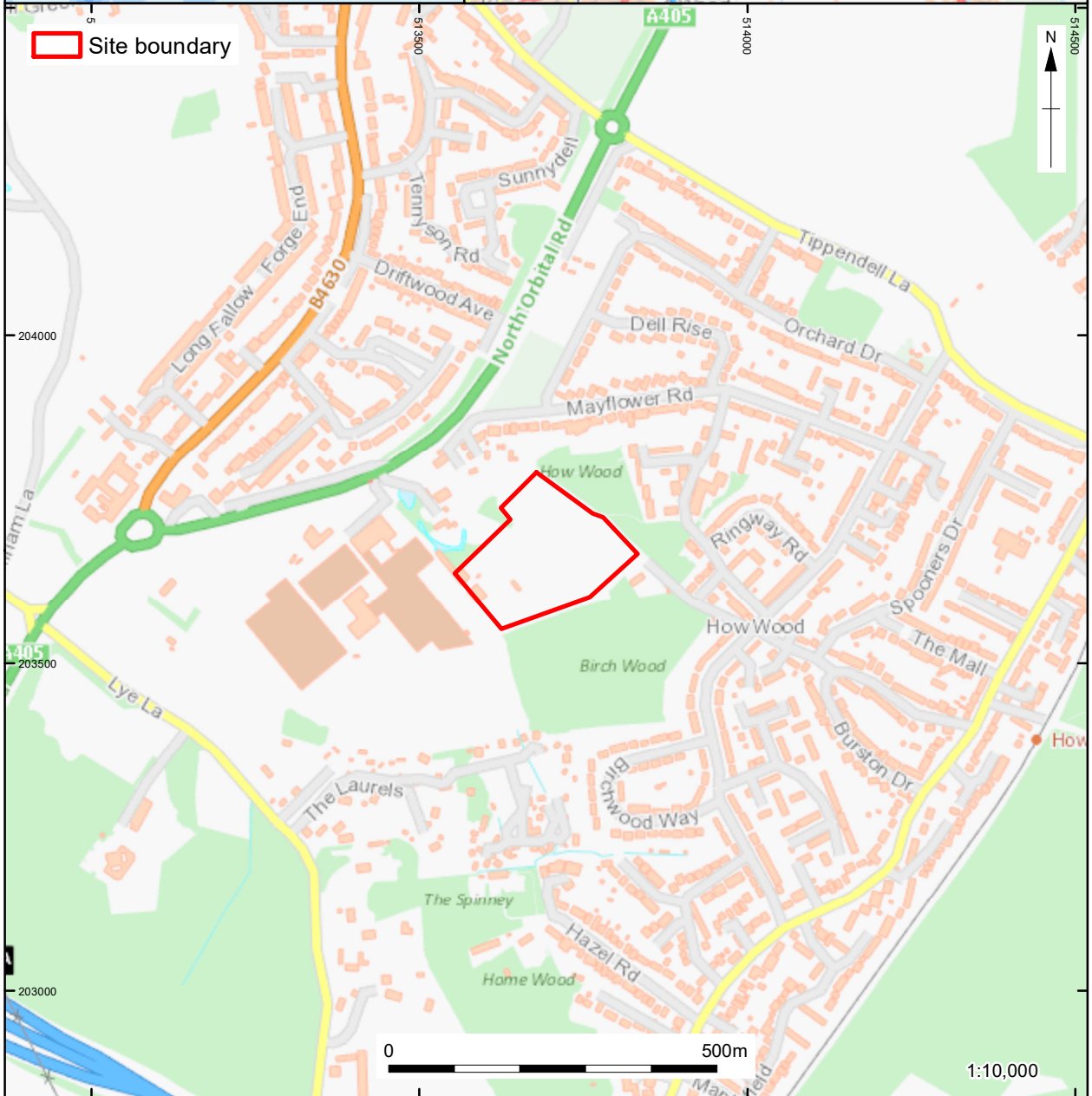
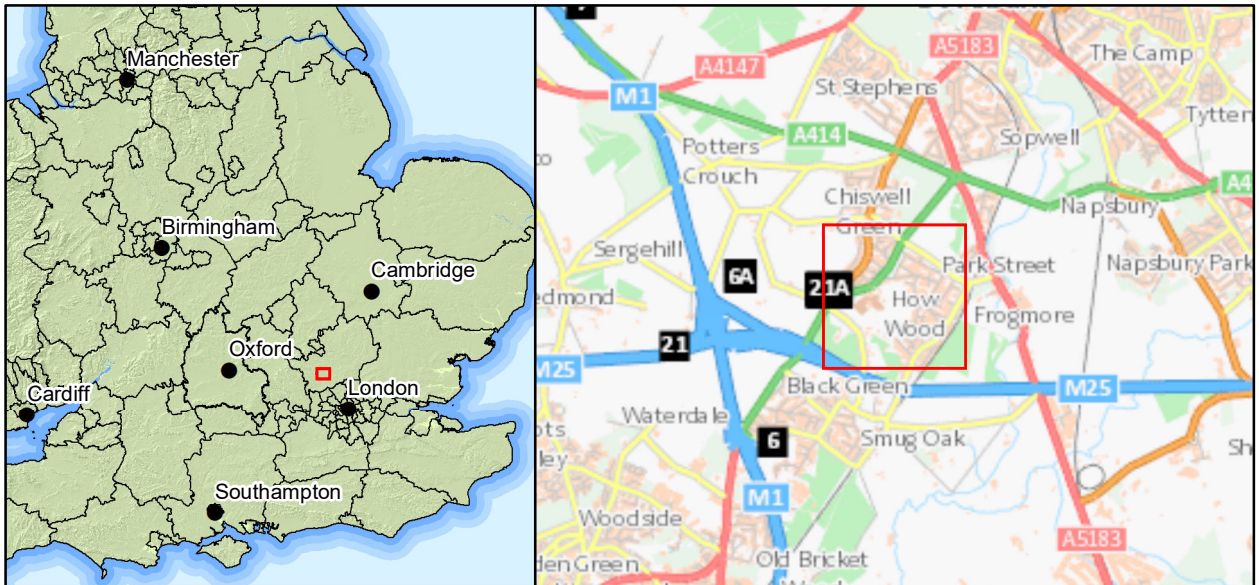
APPENDIX C SITE SUMMARY DETAILS

Site name:	Buston Garden Centre
Site code:	BGHC23
Grid Reference	TL 13692 03643
Type:	Evaluation
Date and duration:	8 Days, March 2023
Area of Site	C. 3.5ha
Location of archive:	The archive is currently held at OA, Janus House, Osney Mead, Oxford, OX2 0ES, and will be deposited with Verulamium Museum in due course, under the following accession number:TBC.

Summary of Results: In March 2023, Oxford Archaeology undertook a trial trench evaluation at the site of a proposed residential development.

The works comprised the excavation of 17 trenches measuring 30m by 1.8m. No archaeological features or deposits were identified. Evidence of isolated areas of modern truncation were noted in the south-west and centre of the site.

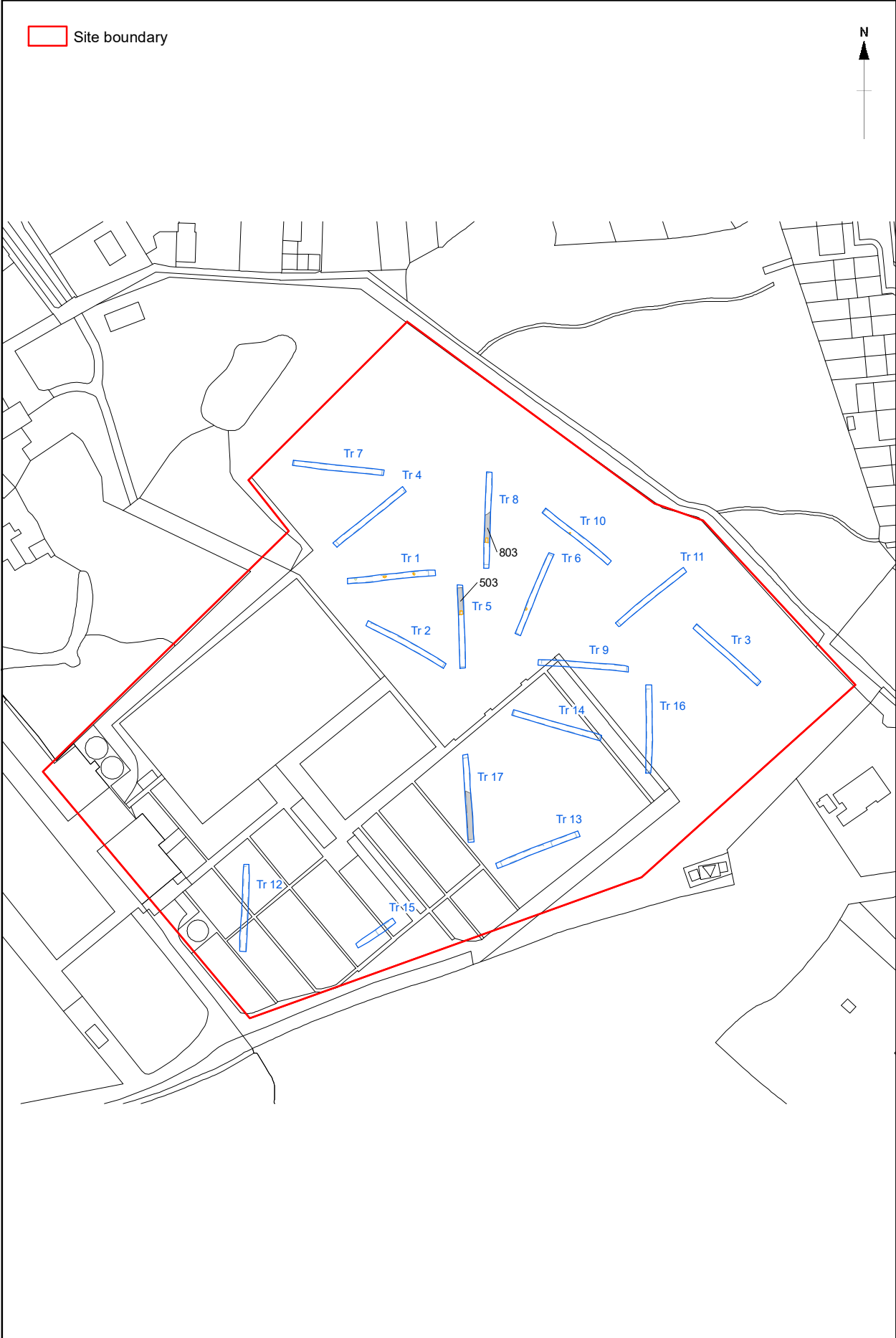
The results of the evaluation suggest the site has little to no archaeological potential.



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Figure 1: Site location



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Figure 2: Trench locations and results



Plate 1: Trench 1 view to east



Plate 2: Trench 10 view to south



Plate 3: Trench 15 made ground, view to south-east



Plate 4: Trench 1 natural feature, view to south



Plate 5: Trench 10 tree throw, view to north-west



Plate 6: Pit 800 – modern disturbance



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