

ST HELENS CENTRAL STATION, ST HELENS

Archaeological Watching Brief



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SUMMARY

An archaeological watching brief was carried out by Oxford Archaeology North (OA North) on the 21st and 23rd November 2007 during ground works involved in the excavation of a car park directly to the north of St Helens Central Station, St Helens, Merseyside (NGR SJ 51631 95374). The work was commissioned by C Spencer Ltd.

An earlier desk-based assessment undertaken by OA North (2004) for the purposes of the redevelopment of St Helens Central Station, identified a total of 97 sites of archaeological interest within the vicinity, of which almost all related to industrial activity, including sites associated with the Huyton line railway and St Helens canal. Consequently, recommendations for further work were made for those sites likely to be impacted upon by the proposed development. In this instance, the canal arm (Site **94**) was the main site likely to be affected by the ground works.

An archaeological presence was maintained during the removal of a concrete building base. Due to the thickness of the concrete and the size of the machine needed for its removal, it became very difficult to see if any archaeological features were present. However, it is possible that archaeological remains still exist at a deeper level than the present ground works. Consequently, no further archaeological work is therefore recommended unless any additional groundworks are to be undertaken to a greater depth.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

OA North would like to thank C Spencer Ltd for commissioning the project. Thanks are also due to Dawn Hadley, of C Spencer Ltd, for her logistical help on site.

The watching brief was undertaken by Phillipa Haworth, whom also wrote the report. The drawings were produced by Marie Rowland. The project was managed by Emily Mercer, who also edited the report.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 CIRCUMSTANCES OF PROJECT

1.1.1 Oxford Archaeology North (OA North) was commissioned by C Spencer Ltd, to undertake a watching brief during ground works for a car park adjacent to St Helens Central Station, St Helens, Merseyside. The ground works comprised the removal of concrete building footings and hard standing, and the subsequent levelling of the area. These were carried out under archaeological supervision due to the potential for disturbance to any surviving archaeological remains or deposits, which were identified during a desk-based assessment undertaken in 2004 (OA North 2004). The site most likely to be affected by the ground works is the infilled arm of the relict St Helen's canal (Fig 2) (Site 94; *ibid*). The archaeological watching brief took place on the 21st and 23rd November 2007. This report sets out the results of the watching brief in the form of a short document.

1.2 SITE LOCATION, TOPOGRAPHY AND GEOLOGY

1.2.1 The area of the ground works was positioned directly north of St Helens Central Station (NGR SJ 51631 95374; Fig 1), which in turn is located to the north-east of the town of St Helens, Merseyside.

1.2.2 The solid geology is primarily made up of red and grey Triassic Sandstone of the Sherwood Sandstone Group. This is for the most part overlain by stagnogleyic argillic brown earths (Ordnance Survey 1983), although this is mainly obscured by the relatively urban nature of the topography. Glacial processes have resulted in the deposition of large amounts of boulder clay, in many cases totally obscuring the underlying solid geology (Countryside Commission 1998, 21).

1.3 HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

1.3.1 **Introduction:** the background history is mostly derived from the desk-based assessment of the site undertaken in 2004 (OA North 2004), and is primarily concerned with providing an historical context to the station and its related features.

1.3.2 **Industrial Development of St Helens:** until the middle of the eighteenth century St Helens was still very rural; most of its population were probably farmers, although there were a few craftsmen producing pottery and there was limited coal mining (Barker 2002, 38). Nevertheless, the potential profit in coal and the allied industrial processes that would develop from its extraction led to the construction of the Sankey Brook Navigation, begun in 1755, Lancashire's earliest canal (*ibid*). The increased need for coal initially spurred on the construction of the canal. However, it was the production of glass that promoted the growth of St Helens. Small-scale glass manufacture had been occurring in the region for some time but it was the establishment of a number

of larger glass companies at the end of the eighteenth century that caused massive growth in this particular industry (Krupa and Heawood 2002, 9). The production of glass continued to grow throughout the nineteenth century, with the large St Helens Crown Glass Company being established in 1826 (Parkin 2000, 13).

- 1.3.3 During the nineteenth century St Helens expanded rapidly, and the area around what is now St Helens Central Station became home to numerous industries, many associated with glass production, but also furnaces, copper works, smithies and all manner of more minor processes (Rees 1991). The importance of the canal was soon superseded by the construction of railways in the 1830s (Farrer and Brownbill 1906, 374; Townley and Peden 1999, 217). Numerous alterations to the railway network were made, the most significant to the study area being a connection to Rainford constructed in 1858 (Tolson 1983, 68; Townley and Peden 1999, 217). The first station within the study area was a simple siding connecting to industries south of Raven Street (now part of Church Street) (*ibid*). The station built c 1858 on the Rainford line, called Shaw Street Station, was replaced in the later 1860s when a new Huyton Line was constructed (this had been proposed as early as 1845) and a new, larger station was constructed in 1871 for both freight and passengers (Tolson 1983, 71).
- 1.3.4 However, by the twentieth century many of these industries were beginning to decline. The Sankey Brook Navigation, later named the St Helens Canal, recorded little use during the twentieth century, and several miles of it were closed by 1931 (Barker 2002). Despite a number of sections being filled in and built over during the later twentieth century (Ordnance Survey 1972; 1980), schemes were put in place to renovate and make use of sections outside of the study area (Tarry 1963). At approximately the same time Shaw Street Station was rebuilt in an ‘all glass’ design (OA North 2004), presumably intended to celebrate St Helens’ industrial past, and this sentiment has been continued in recent years with archaeological recording, curation and display of artefacts at the Pilkington’s Glass site (Krupa and Heawood 2002).

1.4 DEVELOPMENT OF ST HELENS CENTRAL STATION

- 1.4.1 Prior to the construction of the railway line the area was a busy industrial site. There were numerous coal pits linked by the Sankey Brook/St Helens Canal, which runs along the east side of the development area. The original proposed route for a railway in 1829 ran through part of the development area, but this was never completed, and the main line was eventually positioned further to the south.
- 1.4.2 St Helens Central Station is not actually the earliest station in St Helens, nor was it originally called St Helens Central. A ‘Central Station’ already existed elsewhere, prior to the current St Helens Central Station, serving the town centre, and a branch line with a goods station at Raven Square also served several industries to the south of Church Street. Unfortunately, there is little information regarding this station, and it was probably in use for less than 20 years, but it was thought to be possibly situated to the south of the present station and proposed development site. Following reorganisation in the 1860s

and the construction of the Huyton Line, a larger station was constructed in 1871 (Rolled Plans 94/A-J c1850-1880). As this was situated along Shaw Street it was named Shaw Street Station. This new station was considerably larger than the original and plans from the 1870s show details of waiting rooms, the booking office and other rooms. A goods shed and other buildings are also shown at this time. The station seems to have retained much of this form into the twentieth century, although shelters covering the platforms may have been added between 1882 and 1894. Some form of glass entrance porch or foyer also appears to have been added at about this time (Ordnance Survey 1894). In 1960 the main station building and platforms were redeveloped with a glass and timber structure (Ordnance Survey 1972). The redevelopment was evidently not extensive, however, as many of the former sidings remained to the east and several original buildings were retained. A pair of north-east/south-west orientated brick walls were constructed, one along the west side of the platforms and one along the east side, presumably intended to screen off some of the original, and now derelict, parts of the station. These, in a sense, severed the original station buildings from the new. The station was named Shaw Street until 1987 (as evident on the Ordnance Survey map of 1980) when it was re-named St Helens Central (PH/16/113/1 1987; PH/16/113/2 1987).

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 WATCHING BRIEF

2.1.1 An archaeological presence was maintained during the removal of the concrete base for a previous building upon the site and the subsequent levelling of the site area. Recording was by means of OA North's standard context recording system, with trench records and supporting registers and indices. A full photographic record in colour transparency and monochrome formats was undertaken.

2.2 ARCHIVE

2.2.1 A full professional archive has been compiled in accordance with current IFA and English Heritage guidelines (English Heritage 1991). The paper and digital archive will be deposited in the Liverpool Museum, National Museum and Galleries on Merseyside, on completion of the project.

3. RESULTS

3.1 INTRODUCTION

3.1.1 The objective of the watching brief was to identify any potential archaeological features or deposits revealed during the removal of a concrete building base and levelling of the excavation area for a new car park associated with St Helen's Central Station, and to record their presence or absence, character and extent, integrity, state of preservation and relative quality.

3.2 WATCHING BRIEF

3.2.1 The concrete building base was 0.4m in thickness, with concrete support girders every 3m. The excavation continued for 0.3m below this level through made ground, which mainly consisted of building debris. The size of the mechanical excavator needed for the removal of the concrete impeded the watching brief, making the survival of any remains in the higher ground very difficult to observe.

3.3 CONCLUSION

3.3.1 The watching brief encountered many difficulties, which were mainly due to the logistics required for the ground works. No archaeological features, deposits or finds were observed during this watching brief. However, if further ground works were to take place in the area, especially any ground works to a greater depth, it is recommended that a further archaeological presence may be needed.

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5. ILLUSTRATIONS

5.1 FIGURES

Figure 1: Site location

Figure 2: Detail of St Helen's Station showing the Watching Brief area and development plans

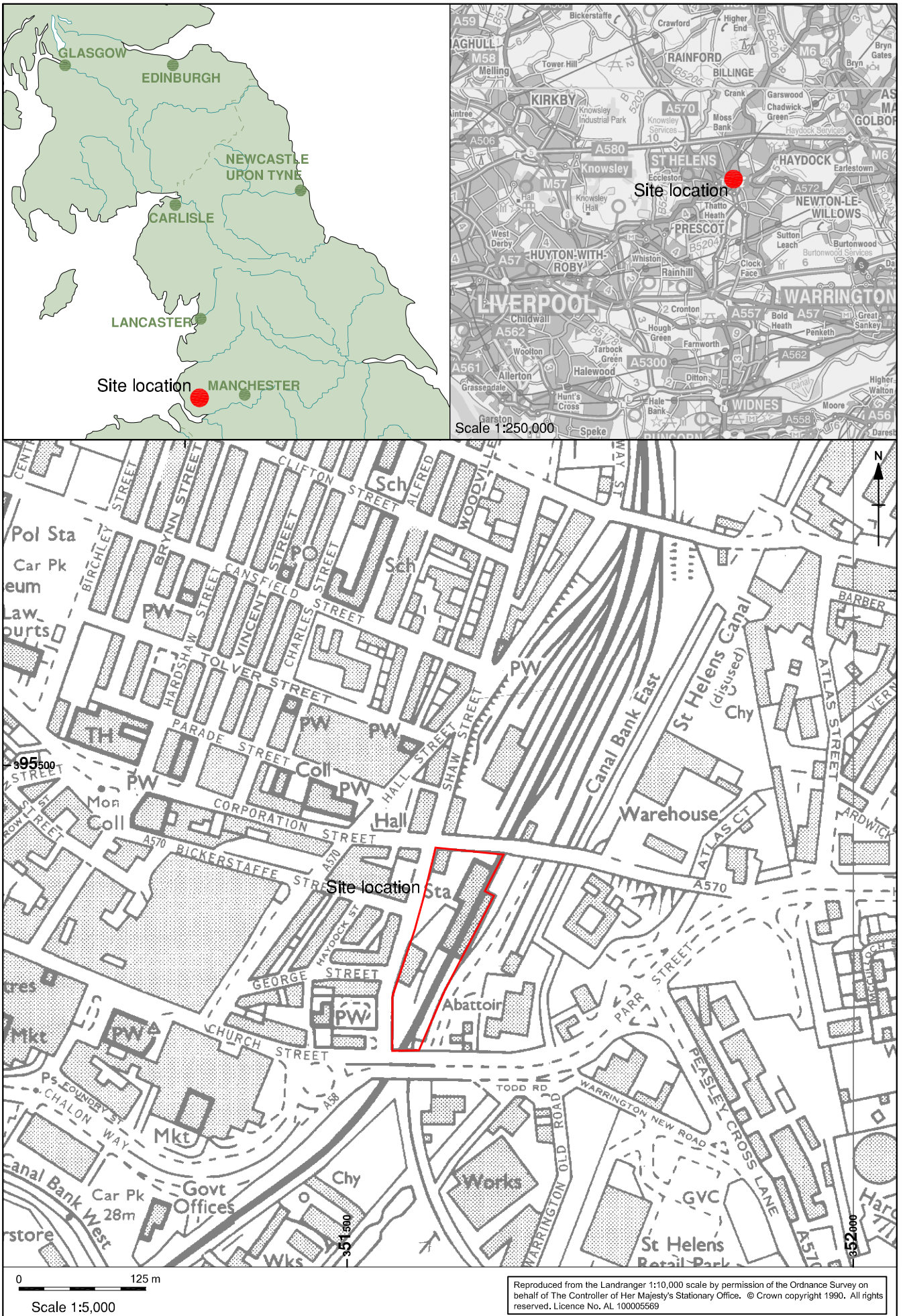


Figure 1: Site location

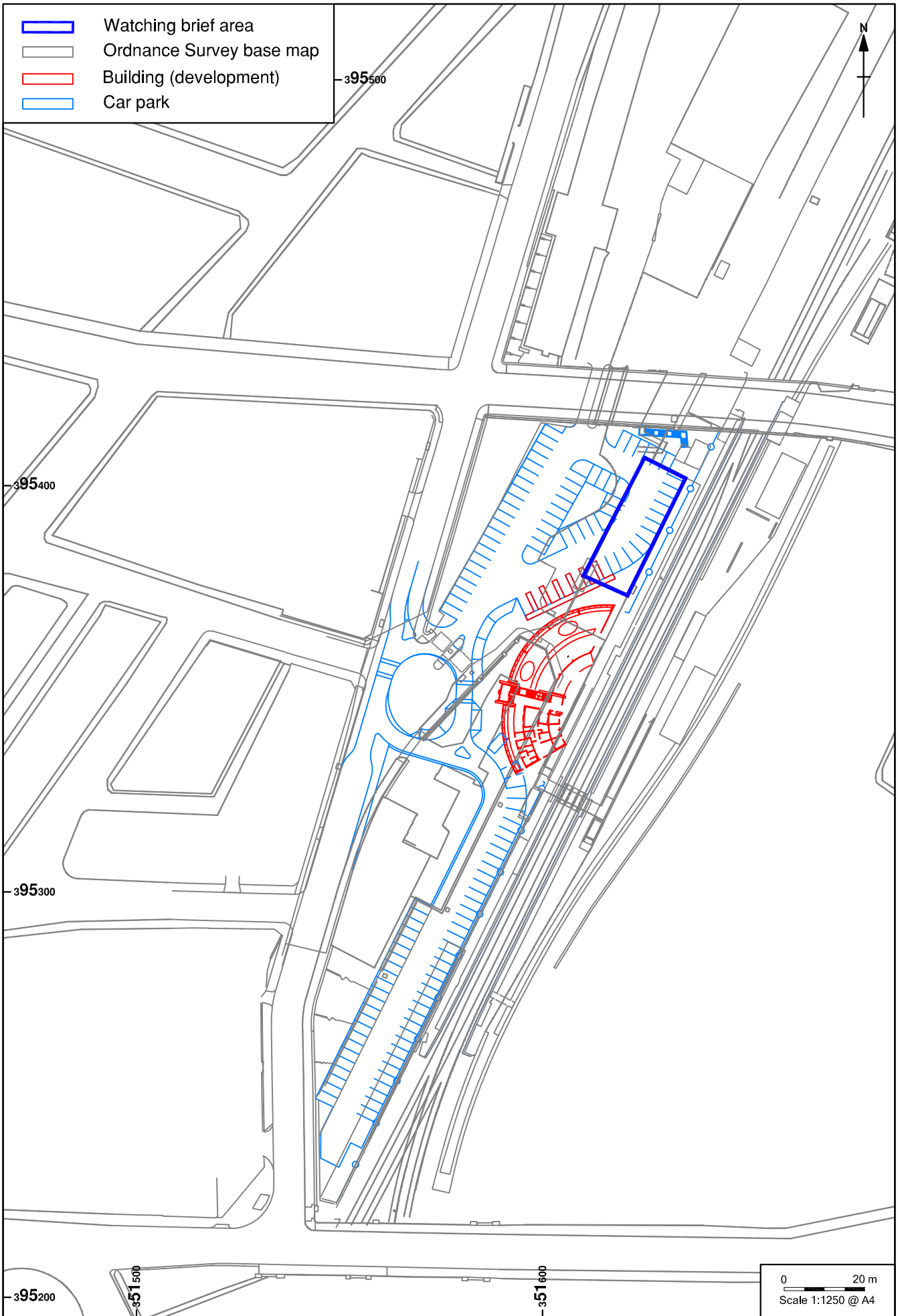


Figure 2: Detail of St Helen's Station showing the Watching Brief area and development plans