

R.S.P. B. Reserve Aveley Marsh Essex



Archaeological Watching Briefs and Recording Actions 2002



Oxford Archaeology

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**AVELEY MARSHES
ESSEX**

***ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF
AND RECORDING ACTIONS
2002
REPORT***

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SUMMARY

Between July and November 2002, Oxford Archaeology carried out the second phase of archaeological watching brief within the disused MOD rifle range on Aveley Marsh. The work was commissioned by The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds during the ongoing development of the marsh as a nature reserve. The work involved monitoring of additional topsoil stripping and the excavation of new and existing drainage ditches. The deposits revealed consisted wholly of Late Holocene estuarine silty-clay alluvium. Excavations did not expose peat or organic deposits, and no significant archaeological remains were identified during the ditching works.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Location and scope of work

- 1.1.1 Oxford Archaeology (OA) was commissioned by The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) to undertake an archaeological watching brief on Aveley marsh, during the ongoing development of the land as a nature reserve.
- 1.1.2 The investigation, carried out between July and November 2002, was the second season of excavations on the marsh. The results of the initial phase of work, carried out between August 2001 and February 2002, have been detailed in a previous interim report (OA 2002).
- 1.1.3 The reserve is located in the borough of Havering in Greater London (the northern part of the site) and in Thurrock in the County of Essex (the southern third of the site). Figure 1 shows the location of the site. The site is bounded by the London, Southend and Tilbury railway and the Channel Tunnel Rail Link (CTRL) to the north, a disused Army camp and range munitions magazines to the east, the River Thames to the South, and Wennington Marsh to the west. The site is accessed via Tankhill Road to the east.
- 1.1.4 The programme for the development of the nature reserve continued the work from the previous season, with small scale topsoil stripping in certain areas, and excavation of existing and additional drainage ditches (Figure 2).

1.2 Geology and topography

- 1.2.1 The site lies at approximately 1.00m above OD. It is situated on a low-lying alluvial floodplain in a meander of the River Thames. Immediately to the north-east of the reserve lies the higher ground of the gravel terrace at 5-10m OD.
- 1.2.2 Modern landuse is characterized by the disused rifle range structures (brick-built firing butts and firing points comprising low earthworks) and low intensity cattle grazing. The marsh is covered by rough grass, reed beds and shallow areas of open water. It is criss-crossed by a series of drainage ditches and low earthworks associated with medieval, and later, land reclamation.

1.2.3 The drift geology of the site consists of Holocene alluvial clay-silts and peat, overlying Pleistocene fluvial deposits at depth. The solid geology consists of Cretaceous Upper Chalk in the eastern part of the site, Palaeocene Thanet Beds and Woolwich/Reading Beds in the center, and London Clay to the west. (British Geological Survey sheets 257 and 271)

1.3 Archaeological and historical background

1.3.1 The archaeological background to the watching brief has been detailed in *Rainham, Wennington and Aveley Marshes, Desk-based Assessment*. (OAU 2001 Client Report) as well as the previous interim report (OA 2002) and will not be repeated here.

2 PROJECT AIMS AND METHODOLOGY

2.1 Aims

2.1.1 To identify and record the presence/absence, extent, condition, quality and date of archaeological remains in the areas affected by the development works.

2.1.2 To make available the results of the archaeological investigation.

2.2 Methodology

2.2.1 *Description of works:*

- *Drainage ditches:* The works included recutting 1170m of existing ditch around the Wennington Creek earthworks in the central area of the reserve. This involved cleaning the vegetation and accumulated silt in the base, and excavation of a 1.10m deep, 1.0m wide wedge of deposits on one side of the ditch. Small new sections of ditch were excavated occasionally to link the watercourses. These measured on average 3.0 - 5.0m wide at ground level, excavated to a depth of 1.30 - 1.80m. Excavation was carried out by the backactor method. No dewatering was carried out during excavation. None of the excavations impinged on the existing medieval and post-medieval earthworks. The spoil was transported clear of the earthworks and leveled in order to retain the original profile of the earthen banks.
- *Topsoil stripping:* Small scale removal of topsoil, occasionally exposing the underlying silty clay alluvium, took place periodically. This was undertaken by a mechanical excavator fitted with a ditching bucket.
- *Area excavation:* Additional excavations were carried out in order to create larger, shallow bodies of water to encourage wildlife. This included a 30 x 8m irregularly shaped area to the south of the Wennington earthworks that was

excavated to a depth of 0.50m BGL, the form of which included three 'islands' to create habitats for water voles. In addition, sizeable excavations occurred over approximately 100m sq in the southern part of the reserve. Here the topsoil and c.0.20m of silty clay alluvium were removed in a series of connected sub-oval and kidney shaped 'lagoons' This was undertaken by a mechanical excavator fitted with a toothed bucket.

2.2.2 *Monitoring:* All construction activities involving intrusive works (i.e. ditch recutting and excavations) have been subject to the watching brief. The level of monitoring typically consisted of weekly site inspections, depending upon the topographic location, formation level, method of excavation and the resultant level of archaeological visibility. Inspections generally consisted of walkovers to examine excavations, their impact levels and profiles, as well as inspection of spoil heaps. All excavations immediately adjacent to the Wennington earthworks were closely monitored to ensure the profile and structure of the banks remained intact, and in the event that archaeological remains were exposed.

2.2.3 *Recording:* A detailed record has been kept of all activities associated with intrusive works, comprising as a minimum:

- *Site code*
- *Date*
- *Personnel present*
- *Location of areas observed and marked on relevant plans.*
- *A description of works observed*
- *Type and extent of any activity including:*
 - *Depths*
 - *Measure of confidence that any archaeological remains would be observed and reasons.*
 - *All areas and horizons unaffected by construction activity*
 - *Reasons why any particular area of the works was not observed*
 - *Summary location and description of any modern features.*

3 RESULTS

3.1 Description of deposits

3.1.1 The deposits exposed during excavations were generally consistent with those previously observed on the site. 0.25 - 0.30m of modern topsoil overlay 0.50 - 0.55m of mid orangey brown silty clay alluvium. This deposit was tenacious and firm although the upper 0.30m was bioturbated by modern roots. This deposit graded into gleyed mid bluish grey silty clay alluvium with moderate Fe mineralization within root channels. In the excavations inspected, the base of this minerogenic alluvium was not penetrated. No peat or organic deposits were exposed either during the ditching works or during the area excavations.

3.2 Distribution of Archaeological Deposits

3.2.1 No significant archaeological features or deposits were identified during the excavations

3.3 Finds

3.3.1 The only finds identified during the watching brief were fragments of 20th century pottery, none of which were retained.

3.4 Palaeo-environmental remains

3.4.1 No palaeo-environmental samples were retrieved during the watching brief.

4 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

4.1 Reliability

4.1.1 Monitoring took place on the basis of weekly visits to inspect the excavations. Continuous machine watching was not considered justified due to poor visibility. This was largely a result of the method of excavation i.e. the use of a mechanical excavator fitted with a toothed bucket, as well as consistently poor ground conditions due to high groundwater levels. No dewatering took place during excavation and the ditches generally flooded during or soon after excavation. Modern disturbance appeared to be minimal over much of the area. The modern marsh topsoil directly overlay *in situ* minerogenic alluvium..

4.1.2 The absence of identified archaeological remains or finds within the upper silt-clays, is not unusual considering the nature of the estuarine depositional environment and the distance from the edge of the floodplain. Although at the outset there was the potential of recovering evidence associated with the Wennington Creek earthworks, or evidence of other phases of Medieval to Post-mediaeval land reclamation, at no point did the works impinge on extant features. In addition, the peat deposits that generally underlie the silty-clays in this area, known for producing evidence of prehistoric activity, artifacts and structures such as wooden trackways, were not exposed, probably due to the shallow depth of the excavations.

4.2 Summary of results

4.2.1 1170m of ditch recutting and a limited amount of topsoil stripping and shallow area excavation have been monitored during this phase of works. Deposits exposed consisted wholly of later Holocene minerogenic silt-clay estuarine alluvium. During this phase of work, no peat or organic deposits were exposed.

4.2.2 Although substantial ditch recutting took place adjacent to the earthwork complex at Wennington Creek existing features were not impinged upon. No additional archaeological remains were identified during the excavations.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1 BIBLIOGRAPHY AND REFERENCES

OA (2002) *Aveley Marshes, Essex. Archaeological Watching Brief and Recordings Actions 2001-2002.* (Phase 1. Client report)

OAU (2001) *Rainham, Wennington and Aveley Marshes. Desk-based Assessment.* (Client report)

APPENDIX 2 SUMMARY OF SITE DETAILS

Site name: Rainham, Wennington and Aveley Marshes

Site code: RWAM-02

Grid reference: TQ 540800

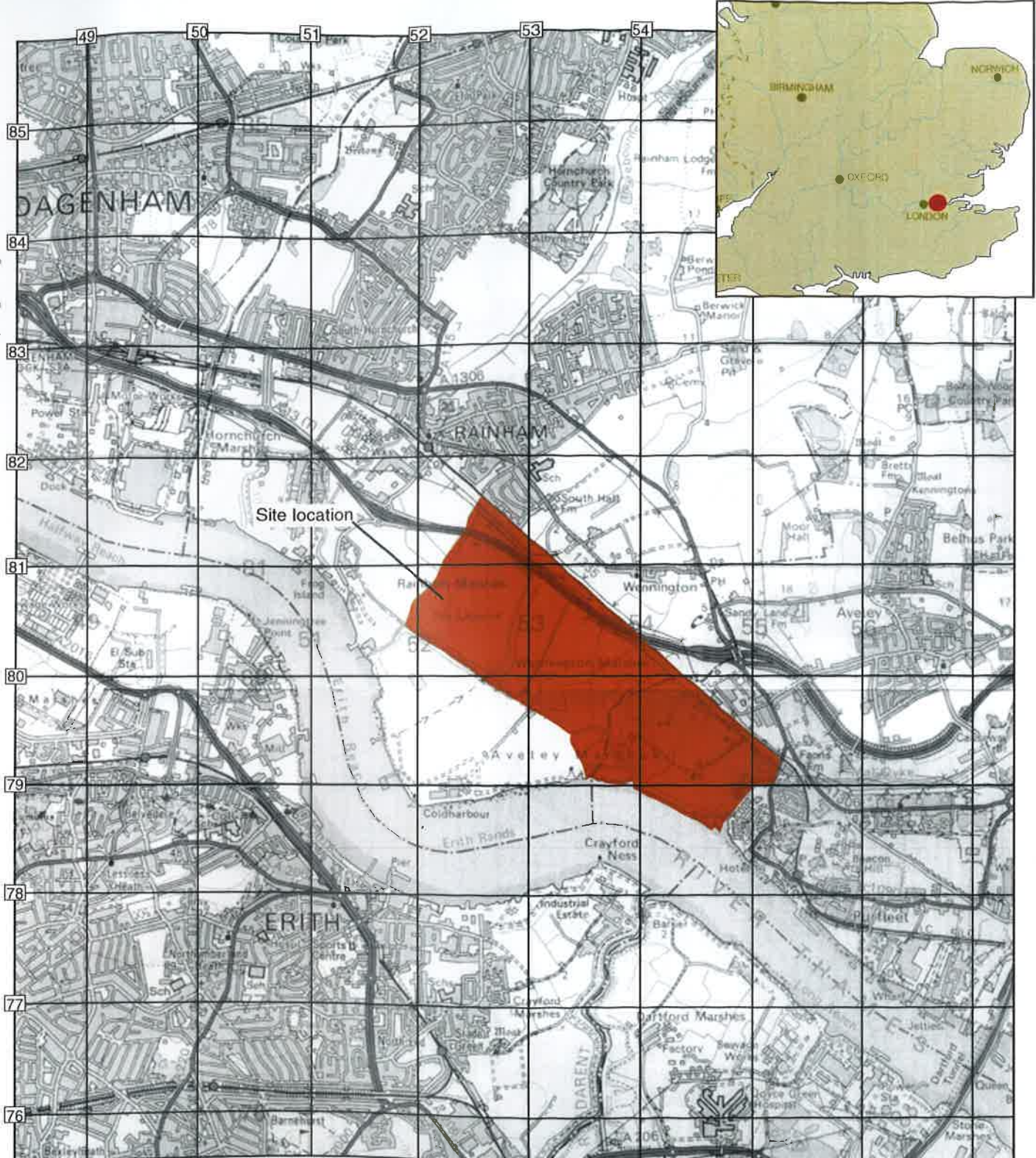
Type of watching brief: General

Date and duration of project: July 2003-November 2003

Summary of results: OA carried out the second phase of archaeological watching brief within the disused MOD rifle range on Aveley Marshes. The work was commissioned by The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) during the ongoing development of the marsh as a nature reserve. The work involved the continued monitoring of topsoil stripping and excavation of new and existing drainage ditches. Late Holocene estuarine silt-clay alluvium was exposed but no peat or organic deposits due to the shallow depth of excavation. No significant archaeological remains were identified during the ditching works.

Location of archive: The archive is currently held at OA, Janus House, Osney Mead, Oxford, OX2 0ES.

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Figure 1: Site location

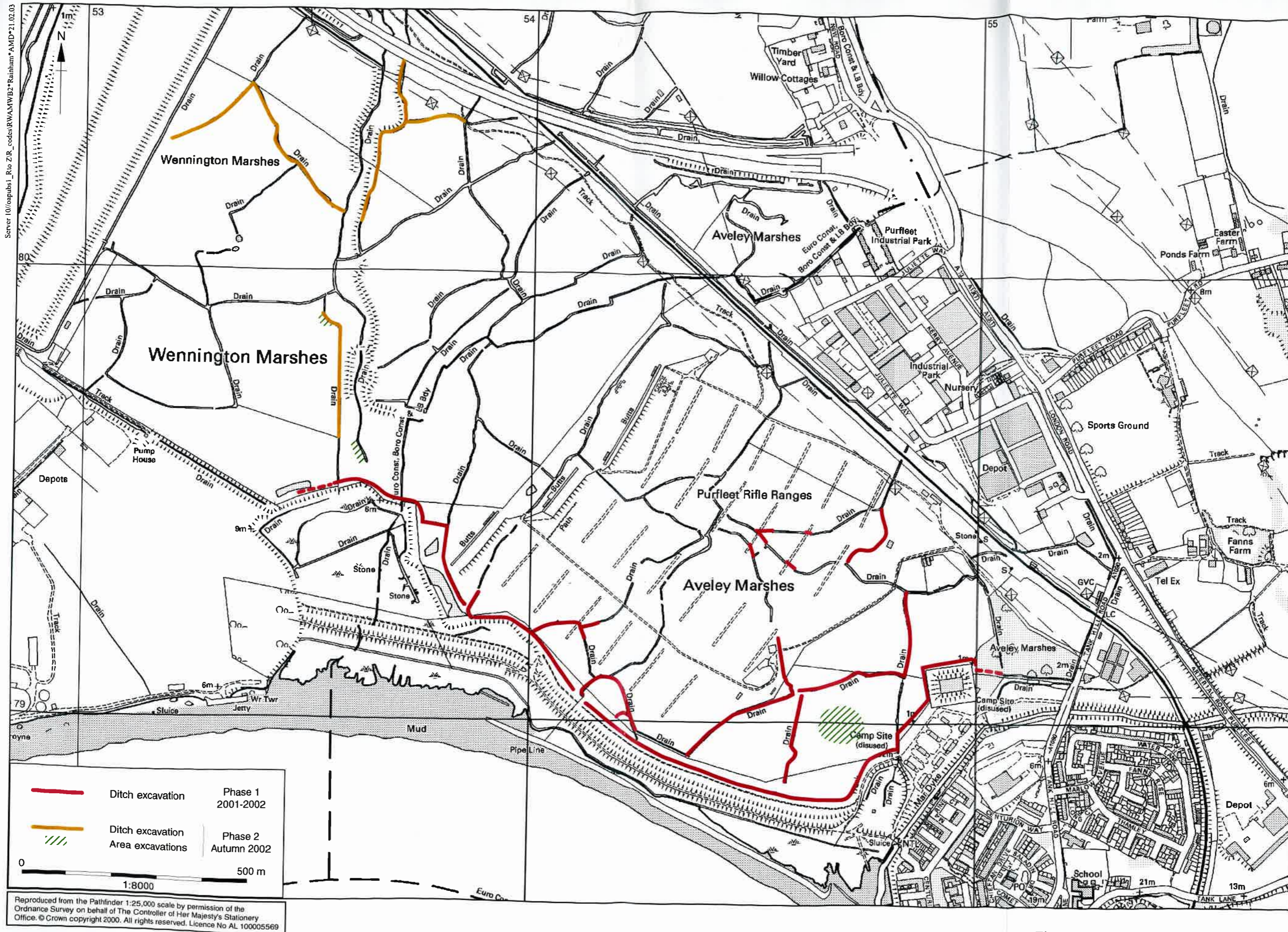


Figure 2: Site plan of area of Watching Brief



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