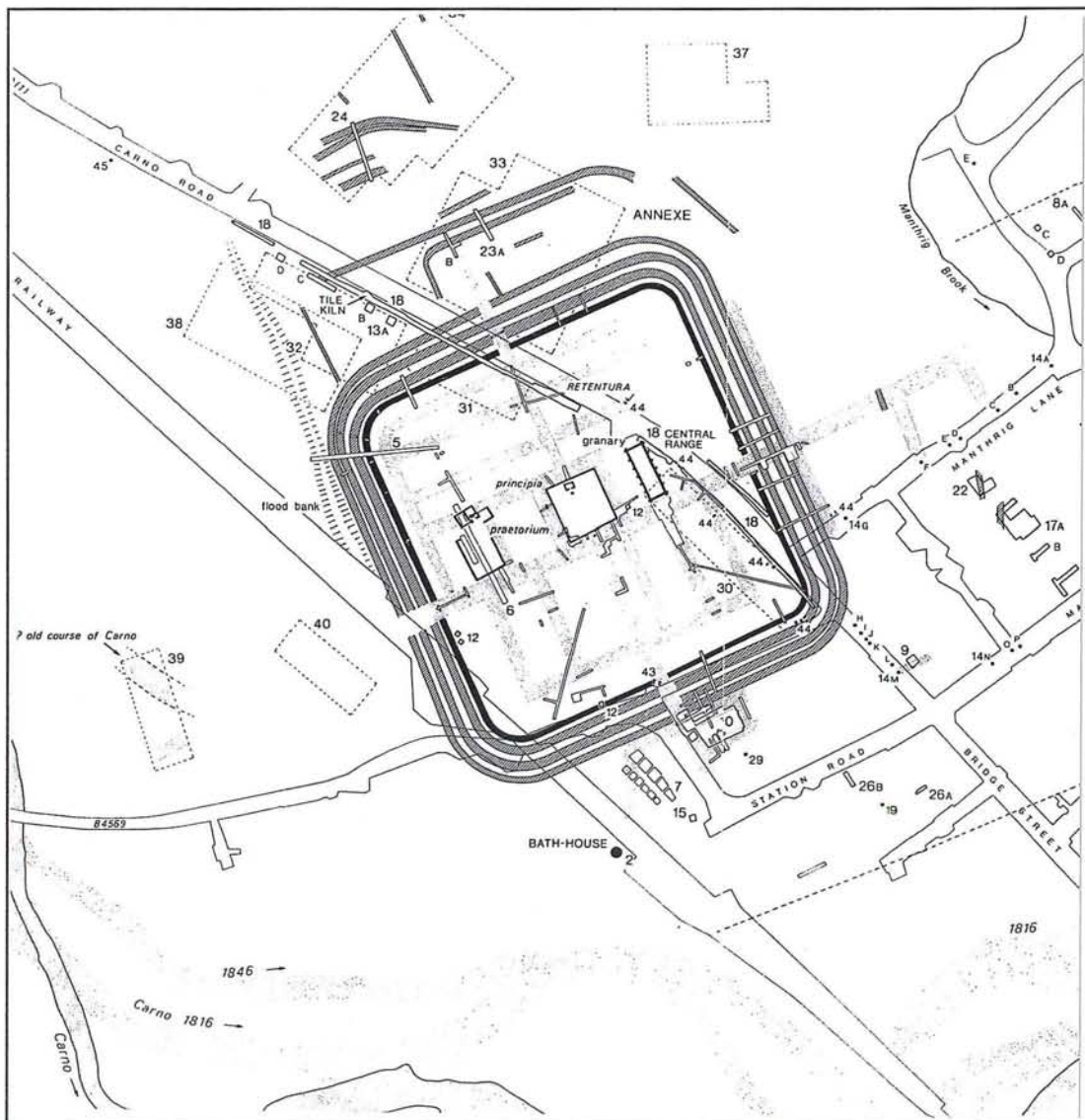


St John Ambulance, Caersws, Powys

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION



CPAT Report No 808

St John Ambulance, Caersws, Powys

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION

F Grant
June 2006

Report for St John Ambulance

The Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust

7a Church Street, Welshpool, Powys, SY21 7DL
tel (01938) 553670, fax (01938) 552179

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CPAT Report Record

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		<i>F. Grant</i>	
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approved by	R.J. Silvester	<i>R.J.S.</i>	19/06/06

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The Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust

7a Church Street Welshpool Powys SY21 7DL

tel (01938) 553670, fax 552179

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1 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 In November 2005 the Field Services Section of the Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust (CPAT) was invited by Morris, Marshall & Poole to prepare a specification and quotation for undertaking an archaeological evaluation on land adjacent to the St John Ambulance Hall, Caersws, Powys. The area of the evaluation has been designated as a scheduled ancient monument (SAM Mg 222) and the work was required by Cadw to assist in their determination of an application for scheduled monument consent to erect an extension to the existing building.
- 1.2 The CPAT specification for the work was approved by Cadw, and the associated quotation was accepted by Morris, Marshall & Poole, acting on behalf of St John Ambulance. The archaeological evaluation was carried out in June 2006 and this report compiled immediately thereafter.

2 LOCATION, TOPOGRAPHY AND GEOLOGY

- 2.1 The excavation was located at SO 02609186, immediately adjacent to the present St John Ambulance, at the junction of Station Road and the B4569 road in the village of Caersws in Powys (see Fig. 1).
- 2.2 Caersws lies on the valley floor of the River Severn, at the confluence of the river with its tributary streams of Afon Carno and Afon Cerist/Trannon. The area is relatively level and low-lying, varying in elevation between 120m OD and 125m OD.
- 2.3 The solid geology of the area consists of mudstones and siltstones belonging to the Telychian phase of the Llandovery Series of rocks, the earliest division of the Silurian era (1994 British Geological Survey map), although these rocks are locally overlain by fluvio-glacial silts and gravels of the Pleistocene era. The soils in the immediate area of the evaluation consist of fine loamy soils over gravel belonging to the Rheidol Association (1983 Soil Survey of England and Wales map).

3 ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

- 3.1 Caersws occupies a focal point in the system of Roman forts, controlling access to and from central Wales. As part of the early Roman campaigns a large auxiliary fort, Caersws I, was founded before AD 70 in a strongly defended position on a spur overlooking the River Severn, to the north-east of the present village. This fort was relatively short-lived and was replaced by a more permanent fort, Caersws II, during the 70s AD, which was situated on the flood plain near the confluence of the Severn and Carno. Caersws II has been the subject of a series of excavations, most recently during the 1990s, the results from which have suggested that the main phase of activity lasted until the late 2nd century AD and that by the early 3rd century the military tenure was effectively at an end, although some form of activity continued into the early 4th century (Jones 1993, 87).
- 3.2 A civilian settlement, or *vicus*, developed in association with Caersws II fort, and evidence from various excavations, geophysical survey and aerial reconnaissance suggests that it may have covered an area of at least 7ha on the south and east side of the fort (Fig. 1). Excavations just outside the south gate of the fort in 1985-6 (Britnell 1989) identified part of a flourishing commercial centre, revealing timber buildings and associated finds suggesting a possible tavern, shops and metal working workshops (Fig. 1, 10). This commercial activity appears to have continued until the 130s AD, its decline possibly being associated with a withdrawal of troops to the northern frontier, as elsewhere in Wales (Jones 1993, 88).
- 3.3 The present excavations are located within 50m of the south gate of the fort, in an area close to previous excavations in 1968 which revealed intensive occupation by timber buildings from AD 75 to the latter half of the 3rd century, as well as extensive metallised surfaces which included a road branching off the fort perimeter road towards the bath-house (Fig. 1, 7). These excavations were subsequently published

(Daniels *et al.* 1970). Further investigations which confirmed these findings were carried out in August 2003 (Hankinson 2003).

4 EVALUATION (Fig. 2)

4.1 Discussions with Cadw concerning the nature of the evaluation resulted in the work comprising a total of three 1 by 1.5m trenches (1-3), within the footprint of the proposed extension. It was specified that the evaluation should be entirely non-destructive in regard to features and layers belonging to the Roman period. The aim of the evaluation was to identify the depth below the existing ground surface at which Roman deposits were first encountered, their condition and their likely significance.

4.2 The modern overburden in each trench was removed by machine under close archaeological supervision, with all subsequent cleaning onto the top of the Roman deposits being carried out by hand. The interpretation of the archaeological deposits at the base of each trench can only be provisional as these deposits could not be investigated (see above). The numbers in brackets in the following text refer to contexts given to those features and layers which were identified during the excavation. A drawn, written and photographic record was maintained throughout.

4.3 Trench 1

Trench 1 was located towards the eastern side of the evaluation area. Machine removal of the mid greyish-brown silty clay topsoil (01) and the underlying layers of greyish gravel (02) and a dark brownish-black soft clay silt (03) revealed a rough metallised surface (04) comprising c.80% rounded and sub-angular cobbles between 0.10-0.20m in diameter and smaller pebbles set into a light yellowish grey silty clay matrix. Excavation stopped at the upper surface of this layer. Disturbance of the surface was apparent in the form of a posthole (06) containing fragmented brick within its fill (05). The total thickness of overburden in this trench was 0.30-0.38m.

4.4 Trench 2

Trench 2 was located towards the south-western edge of the evaluation area. Similar deposits to those identified in Trench 1 were encountered. The modern topsoil (08), gravel and cinder levelling material (09) and underlying dark soil (09) were removed by machine to reveal a rough metallised surface (14). This comprised cobbles and smaller pebbles in a yellowish-grey silty clay matrix forming a relatively level surface which then dipped slightly towards the north. The northern end of the surface had been completely truncated by the insertion of a ceramic drain pipe (11). The resulting disturbance of the cobbled surface revealed an underlying deposit of mid yellowish-brown, firm silty clay (15), which might represent ditch fill. This could account for the dipping nature of the surface of the cobbles where it overlies this material. Further post-Medieval disturbance of the cobbled surface was apparent in the form of a posthole (13) and associated fill (12) in the western side of the trench. The total thickness of overburden in this trench was 0.26-0.35m.

4.5 Trench 3

Trench 3 was located towards the north-eastern edge of the evaluation area. Topsoil (16) and a relatively thick (up to 0.12m) band of loose gravelly material (17) were removed by machine, revealing a firm, compacted 40mm-thick layer of dark brownish black clay silt (18). This material lay directly atop a very compacted, level area of metallised surface (28) comprising distinctly smaller stones than those revealed in Trenches 1 and 2, but set into a similar matrix of light yellowish-grey silty-clay. Disturbance of this surface consisted of at least two phases of postholes. The earlier phase comprised two, apparently contemporary, small diameter (0.16m), circular postholes (25) and (27), aligned north-west to south-east. The later postholes (21) and (23) were somewhat larger being at least 0.60m wide, square in plan, and associated with a recently removed north-east to south-west aligned fence-line attested to by the client. The total thickness of overburden in this trench was 0.20-0.30m.

5 CONCLUSIONS

- 5.1 The evaluation demonstrated that archaeologically significant deposits associated with the Roman fort and *vicus* are present within the area of the proposed development. These deposits were recorded at a minimum depth of 0.20m (in Trench 3) below the existing ground surface, beneath relatively modern overburden.
- 5.2 It was evident that the exposed deposits represented metalled surfacing from the later phases of Roman activity in Caersws, and more particularly from the perimeter road around the fort. The somewhat more irregular nature of the surfaces in Trench 1 and 2 suggest they might represent patching or repair, whereas that in Trench 3 is of a much more regular and compacted nature, suggestive of the road surfacing itself. Alternatively, the upper Roman road layers from Trenches 1 and 2 might have been truncated in the past and the remaining material represents the lower road make-up. Possible upper ditch fill was identified in the northern end of Trench 2, underlying the northern extent of the surfacing in this trench. It is likely that this material represents the upper fill of the former outer ditch of the fort, which was later surfaced over.
- 5.3 There was evidence of some previous disturbance on the site, predominantly in the form of postholes associated with former fence-lines and from the insertion of a drain associated with the current hall building.
- 5.4 The only possible Roman find was a fragment of a whetstone from deposit (09) in Trench 2. However, the nature of this object and the context in which it was found makes secure dating impossible and it may equally be of later or earlier date.

6 REFERENCES

Published Sources

Britnell, J E, 1989. *Caersws vicus, Powys: Excavations at the Old Primary School, 1985-86*. British Archaeological Reports 205.

Daniels, C, Jones, G D B, & Putnam, W G, 1970. Excavations at Caersws, 1968, *Montgomeryshire Collections* 61, 37-42.

Jones, N W, 1993. Caersws Roman Fort and Vicus, Montgomeryshire, Powys, 1984-92, *Montgomeryshire Collections* 81, 15-96.

Unpublished Sources

Hankinson, R, 2003. *Station Road, Caersws, Powys, Archaeological Evaluation*, CPAT Report 566

Cartographic sources

1983 Soil Survey of England and Wales map (Sheet 2 - Wales) and Legend (1:250,000 scale)

1994 British Geological Survey map of Wales (Solid edition at 1:250,000 scale)

APPENDIX 1

PROJECT ARCHIVE

Site archive

28 Context record forms

14 digital images

Photographic catalogue

1 A1 site drawing

Digital archive

Penmap location plan: 1091.pts

Finds

Trench 2 Context 09 Fragment of whetstone

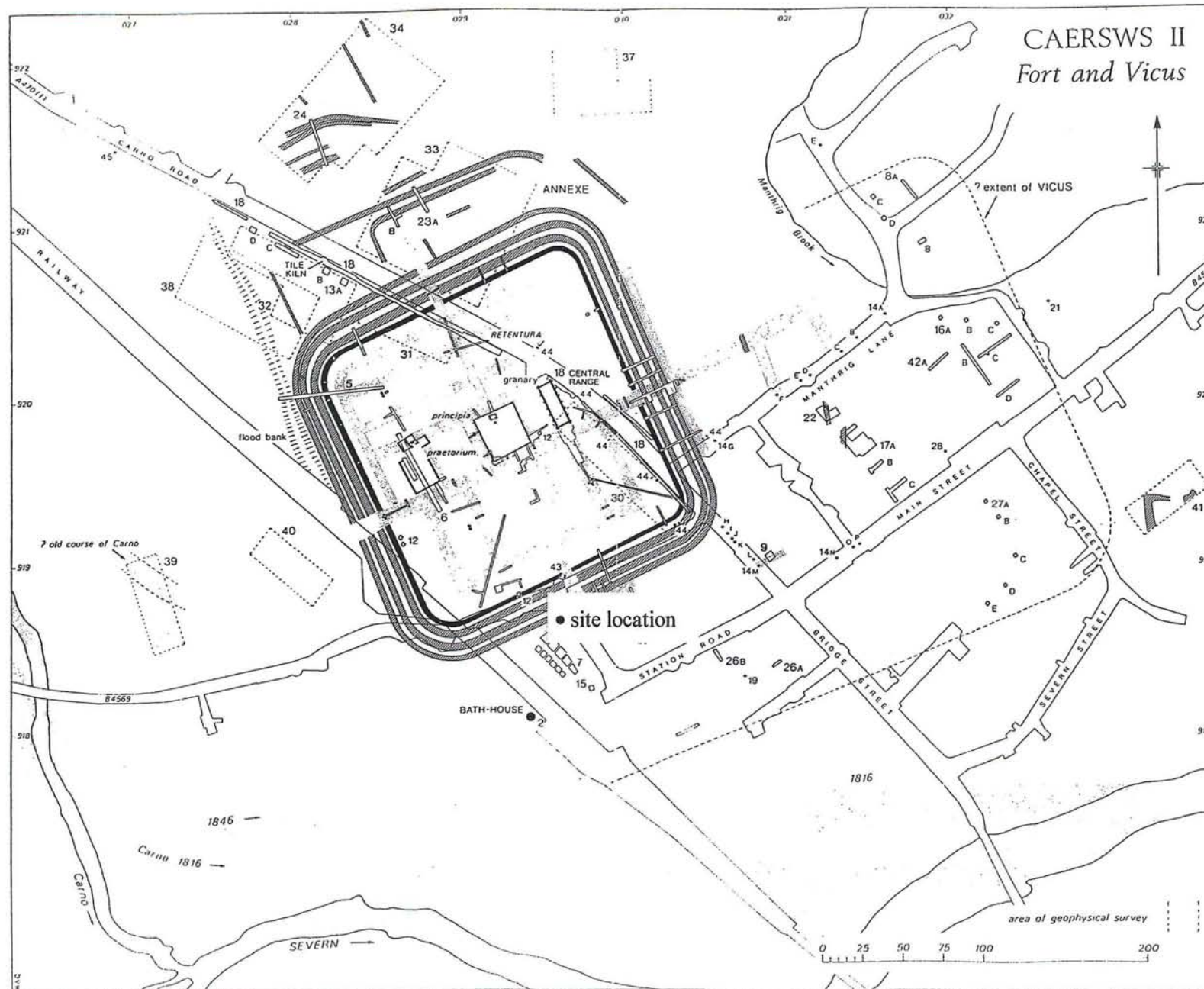


Fig. 1 Caersws Roman fort and vicus showing evaluation location (after Jones 1993, Fig. 2)

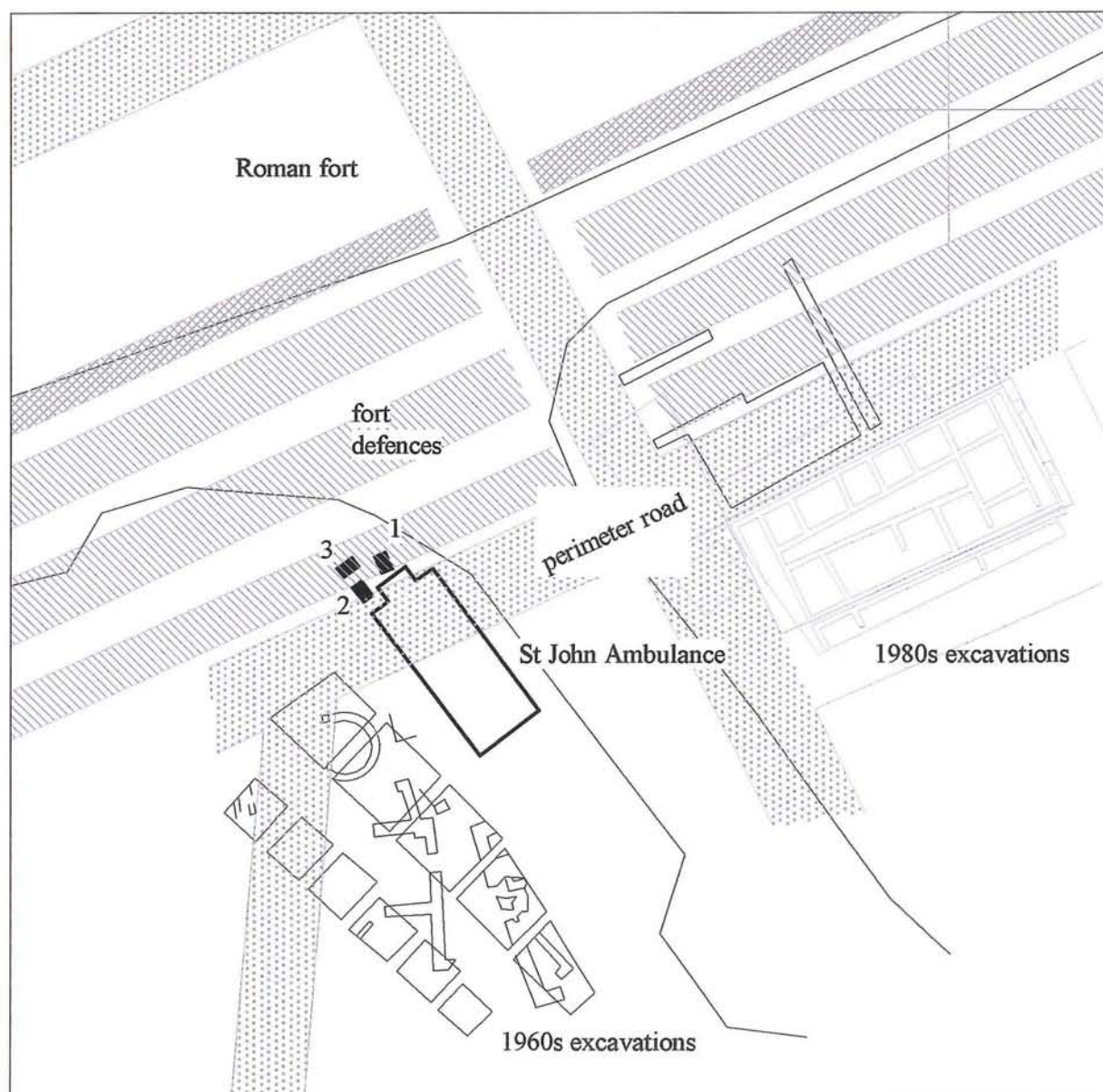


Fig. 2 Trench location and known archaeology, scale 1:500