

Using a project design, preferably from a completed project with which you have had direct involvement, critically assess how successfully the design delivered a contextualised research design, appropriate methodology, effective project management and communication within and beyond the project team, and a suitable outcome in terms of publication and archive.

“Success depends on who is measuring” (Young, 2010, p. 8).

This may be cautionary advice to project managers or encouragement to ‘think outside the box’, however, the divergent outlooks to which it alludes are rarely left undefined. Within professional archaeology, standards, guidance and notes establish coherent and explicit parameters for successful project design and delivery (ClfA, 2020; HE, 2015; ADS, 2024; HE, 2008). The ability to balance providing value for clients, meeting targets as contractors and conducting ethical research as archaeologists is difficult to navigate. Therefore, it is essential to continuously review the suitability of archaeological project designs to improve investigation methods, team responsibilities and research dissemination. This conforms to ClfA’s *Standard and guidance for archaeological excavation*, where the purpose of excavation is defined as “examin[ing] the archaeological resource [...] within a framework of defined research objectives, to [...] compile a lasting record [...], to analyse and interpret the results, and disseminate them” (2020, p. 4). Throughout this essay the terms ‘archaeological project’ and ‘project design’ will be used as defined by Barclay *et al.* (2016, p. 20-21); ‘archaeological investigation’ will refer to research/inquiry at all stages. Where applicable, acronyms will be introduced and used thereafter.

This essay critically assesses the project design of a specific archaeological excavation in north Rushden and evaluates to what extent it delivered a contextualised research design and suitable methodology, as well as the effectiveness of the project’s management and communication, and whether it produced a satisfactory output of published and archival material.

The archaeological project

To provide a thorough critical assessment of its methods, the archaeological investigation must be outlined. The project selected for appraisal is an

archaeological strip, map and sample investigation [SMSI] known as ‘Land off Prospect Avenue, Rushden, Northamptonshire’ [hereafter ‘Prospect Avenue’], which was enacted by Cotswold Archaeology [CA] between March and April 2022. The excavated area measured 0.25ha within the 3.3ha site, located in the northern part of Rushden, 0.5km west of the A6 (CA, 2023, p. 5).

The site had previously undergone a geophysical survey (Magnitude Surveys, 2020), desk-based assessment (RPS, 2021) and trial-trench evaluation (CA, 2022a); digital data is on the *Archaeological Data Service* [ADS] (2023). Previous work identified anomalies of possible archaeological origin (Magnitude Surveys, 2020); trial-trenching revealed these to be a possible rectilinear enclosure and a cluster of Roman features on the southern half of the proposed development site, which informed the placement and extent of the SMSI (CA, 2022a; CA, 2023, p. 5).

The excavated area uncovered ditches, pits and two limestone surfaces dated to the Early to Mid-Roman period, potentially representative of agricultural or rural settlement elements, followed by a hiatus until the implementation of a medieval ridge-and-furrow system. A moderate (mostly Roman) artefactual and environmental assemblage was recovered (CA, 2023, p.4).

My contribution to the ‘Prospect Avenue’ investigation was to record, analyse and report on the ceramic building material [CBM], fired clay, lithics and clay tobacco pipes (Pearson, 2023a-d). The aim was to characterise and quantify the assemblages in sufficient detail to produce records worthy of dissemination, enhancing the basic ‘Finds Quantification’ with more detailed recording where merited (CIFA Toolkit; CA, 2022b).

The excavation’s aims and objectives are outlined in the *Written Scheme of Investigation* [WSI] (CA, 2022c, p. 8-9) and *Strip, Map and Sample Investigation* report (CA, 2023, p. 10). General aims involved identifying, investigating, and recording “any significant buried archaeological deposits/features” prior to destruction, recovery and analysis of artefactual and environmental evidence to better understand past land use and economy, publishing the results, and compiling a “stable, ordered, accessible project archive” (CA, 2022c, p. 8). The project’s specific objective was to further investigate the enclosure and feature

cluster in trenches 14 and 17 identified by previous works (Magnitude, 2020; CA, 2021). These goals were consistent with three East Midlands's Research Frameworks, including the online *East Midlands historic environment research framework* [EMHERF] (RFN, 2024a; Cooper, 2006; Knight *et al.*, 2012). An additional target involved contributing (if appropriate) to the EMHERF Wiki Initiative.

Project design and research questions

The 'Prospect Avenue' WSI summarised existing knowledge through the archaeological background by referencing the Historic Environment Record [HER] (CA, 2022c, p. 4-6) and characterising previous investigations (Magnitude, 2020; CA, 2021; CA, 2022c, p.7-8), as well as defining the site's geology (CA, 2022c, p. 4).

The project's aims and objectives were identified, including general and specific goals, which were connected to relevant Research Frameworks (CA, 2022c, p. 8-9), as noted above. However, the aims/objectives were not posed as questions nor numbered to quickly link to the methodology or task list (HE, 2008, p. 36, p. 38, Table 2). The 'Aims and Objectives' proposed using the Frameworks to implement "a project-specific research agenda" but this was not elaborated upon. If, however, it is the aforementioned investigation of the possible rectilinear enclosure and Roman pit/ditch cluster, then the objectives are narrow or limited. This is not inherently flawed and may be the result of sparse archaeological features worthy of investigation.

In the WSI, the methodology was appropriately linked to the aims and objectives, albeit without numbers (CA, 2022c, p.9). It discussed reducing the stripped area "should the extent of the remains be shown to be smaller [...] than anticipated" (*ibid.*). The methodology suitably detailed excavation and recording strategies (CA, 2022c, p. 9-10); it referred to standards/guidance for artefact and environmental remains recovery (CA, 2022c, p.10), as well as best practice for the care and removal of treasure (DMCS, 2022) and human remains (APABE, 2017; ClfA, 2017; HE, 2018; CA, 2022c, p.11-12). The project design did not affix

a full list of *Standards and Guidance* in the Appendices, which “in all CA WSIs [...] are included as standard” (Wolf, 2024).

Implementation and management

The WSI outlined the proposed staff for fieldwork and analysis (CA, 2022c, p. 12-13). ‘Prospect Avenue’ was managed by CA Project Manager Adrian Scruby. During the fieldwork, Adrian directed the excavation’s overall conduct; the on-site “day-to-day responsibilities [rested] with the Project Leader”, Supervisor Eilidh Barr (*ibid.*, p.12; CA, 2023, p.25-26, 71, Appendix K).

Paradata is available for the first seven working days on-site (Monday 28th March to Tuesday 5th April 2022) via Day Record Sheets, documenting site set-up and machine stripping (CA, 2022d). They conscientiously log staff attendance, travel logistics, break timings, and daily summaries. Occasionally, information was not recorded, but was usually discernible from the summary notes.

There are a couple of discrepancies in the paperwork. A reoccurring error is the result of using outdated forms and not correcting the pre-printed year to ‘2022’. At the close of the first day, the departure time is recorded as ‘4pm’. However, the daily summary specifies that “T.C. goes home 4pm. E.B. [Eilidh] + E.C. off site by 5pm” (CA, 2022d, p. 2). The delay was caused by the welfare cabin arriving at 15:50, mere minutes before the workday ended. Earlier that day, the team encountered problems prior to stripping; Eilidh recorded “machine too big to fit under tree” (*ibid.*). She liaised with Adrian to get a smaller machine, which arrived at 14:00, and conducted training in the meantime.

As Project Leader, Eilidh was flexible, pro-active, resourceful, and dedicated to the task, regardless of issues and delays; these are traits characteristic of ‘Shaper’ and ‘Implementer’ team roles (Belbin, 2024). Furthermore, following the machine driver’s late arrival and slow progress on day two, Eilidh provided “tips to the driver to speed up” (CA, 2022d, p. 4), and was similarly pro-active in arranging the substitution and retention of drivers for 30th and 31st March (*ibid.*, p. 4, 8). In order to host a back-to-back county meeting and site visit for representatives from North Northamptonshire Council [NCC] and RPS Consulting, Eilidh implemented appropriate cover for machine stripping (CA,

2022d, p.14). “Opportunities to visit the site and check on the quality and progress of the work” were assured within the WSI’s ‘Monitoring’ commitments and successfully delivered (CA, 2022b, p.17).

From the Day Record Sheets, it is evident that Adrian was an attentive manager and supported Eilidh’s activities, both logistical and archaeological. He was diligent in his duties to attend appropriate meetings (CA, 2022d, p.14).

It was not possible to review Monitoring or Progress Reports for this critical assessment. Nevertheless, based on the available evidence, the project was efficiently implemented and managed, despite challenges. The on-site leader adhered to direction from the Project Manager, updated him of changing circumstances, and acted in agreement on how to proceed (CA, 2022d, p.14).

Within the Publications team, meetings and emails between specialists, officers and managers played a crucial role in maintaining the timely and successful delivery of the project (Banks, 2023a-c; Pearson, 2023e-g).

Reporting and archiving

The ‘Prospect Avenue’ SMSI produced a comprehensive report (CA, 2023), including the WSI’s detailed archaeological background. The aims and objectives are reiterated *nigh verbatim* (*ibid.*, p. 10). The contents page (*ibid.*, p. 1) and corresponding numbered sections/sub-sections provide a coherent layout, appropriately structuring the subject matter in an accessible order, and chronologically expanding on the results (*ibid.*, p. 13-17) and discussion (*ibid.*, p. 23-25). The report is supplemented by Appendices A-K (*ibid.*, p. 31-71) and Illustrations (*ibid.*, p. 3, Figures 1-8). Font, colour, size and spacing support legibility. Bullet-pointed lists and tables provide clarity to datasets (e.g ‘The Finds’, *ibid.*, p. 18). Information is sufficiently referenced in-text and can be traced to the reference section (*ibid.*, p. 28-30).

The report’s discussion immediately and directly corresponds to the WSI’s research questions:

The archaeological strip, map and sample excavation confirmed the results of the previous geophysical survey [...] and trial-trench evaluation [...] that

Roman-dated features were present within the south-west area of the development site (Fig. 2) (CA, 2023, p. 23).

Given the brevity of the aims and site-specific objectives, relevant results were largely forthcoming. Regarding the general aim to better understand “past land use and economy”, the discussion concludes that the “Roman activity [...] was not directly associated with a domestic core” but the enclosure was peripheral to a settlement (CA, 2023, p.25). It was part of a wider “swathe” of Late Iron Age and Roman activity in the vicinity of the site, including a succession of small farmsteads (Carlyle and Flavell, 2007, p. 16). The artefacts reflect this interpretation and improved understanding (CA, 2023, p. 18-20).

The report states, “a contribution will be made, if appropriate, to the [EMHERF] Wiki Initiative” (CA, 2023, p. 10). However, no discernible contribution has been made to date (RFN, 2024b). Nor do any records regarding ‘Prospect Avenue’ appear on the Northamptonshire HER (Heritage Gateway, 2024). This absence is unsurprising; in early 2022, “91% of HERs report[ed] having a backlog” (HE, 2022).

Reflections on the archaeological investigation

It is unlikely an alternative approach would have been more effective. The methodology forthrightly states the investigation area’s location was deliberately selected to “investigate the features identified by the [...] survey and confirmed during the [...] evaluation phase” (CA, 2023, p. 9). This was the third successive stage of investigation into these tentatively identified and dated features. Intrusive fieldwork was necessary; non-intrusive means would not have answered the research questions. Considering the proposed development, thorough investigation was essential to determine the extent, function and date of the archaeological features (CA, 2023, p. 5).

The ‘Prospect Avenue’ research design was not overambitious. The project pursued a closely defined site-specific objective: “to further investigate and record” the unconfirmed enclosure and Roman feature cluster (CA, 2023, p. 10). This goal was formulated following discussions between RPS Consulting and the Archaeological Advisor at NCC, which were informed by previous archaeological

research (*ibid.*, p. 5). Consequently, the WSI was realistic about potential findings. Furthermore, the design outlined an alternative objective if no evidence for the enclosure was found, acknowledging that features might be non-existent, unidentifiable, or underwhelming (CA, 2022c, p. 8).

The project's outcome was a satisfactory conclusion to a well-informed investigation with a narrow, specified focus. The products and outputs, primarily the report (CA, 2023), the physical archives (CA, 2023, p. 27), and the digital archive on the ADS and CA websites (*ibid.*), fulfilled the WSI's aims to "report on and publish the archaeological results at a level appropriate to their significance [and] compile a stable, ordered, accessible project archive" (CA, 2022b, p. 8). As per the development proposal, the construction of 133 dwellings, roads, landscaping, and other ancillary works would result in tremendous disturbance or destruction of the archaeology. The new research results and interpretations afforded by this investigation better substantiate NNC's decision to grant or refuse planning permission, and, if granted, will inform the design of future obligatory archaeological works (*ibid.*, p. 3; NNC, 2023).

Conclusions

This essay has investigated the successfulness of the 'Prospect Avenue' WSI in delivering suitable archival and publication outcomes due to effective management adhering to appropriate methods based on a contextualised project design within a relevant research framework. The fieldwork set-up faced challenges (CA, 2022d), however, enterprising and attentive management enacted solutions and accomplished the project's objectives. Instances for improvement within the project design, e.g. not numbering or posing aims/objectives as questions, did not inhibit the successful completion of the research, dissemination and archival goals, partly owing to its restricted scope. 'Prospect Avenue' embodied MoRPHE's Good Practice principles by assembling a capable team who conformed to a flexible plan with clear objectives which sought to create and share knowledge (HE, 2015, p. 5); this was underpinned by the initial design stage, which is "critical to [the] success" of any project (ClfA, 2020, p. 7).

Word Count: 2,230 words

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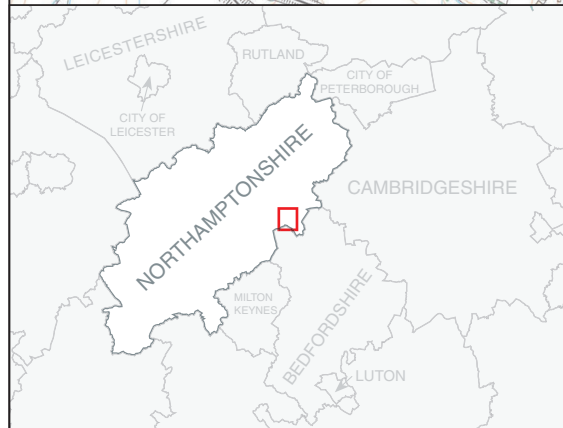
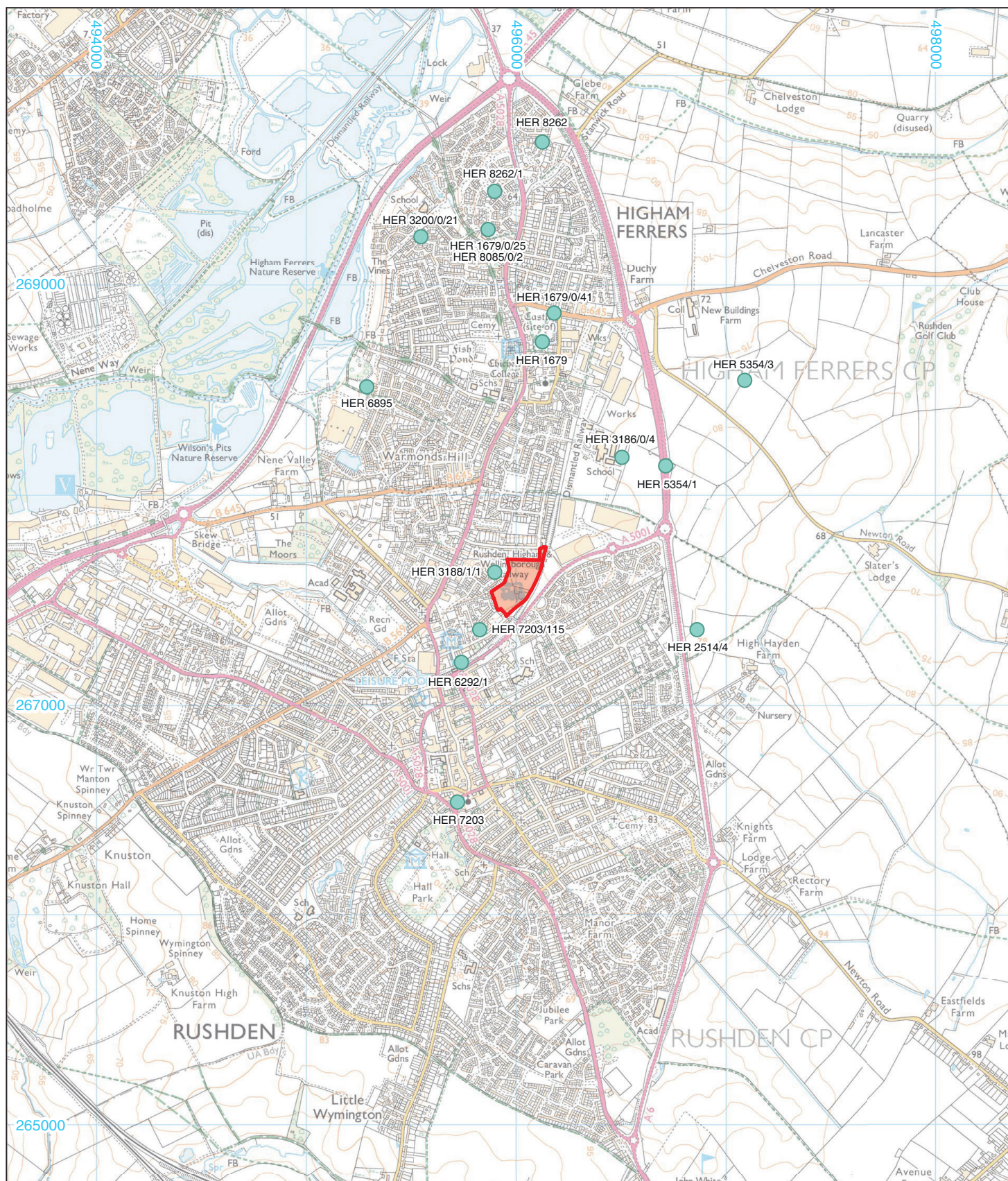
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- Site boundary
- HER point

0 1km

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PROJECT TITLE

Land off Prospect Avenue, Rushden,
Northamptonshire

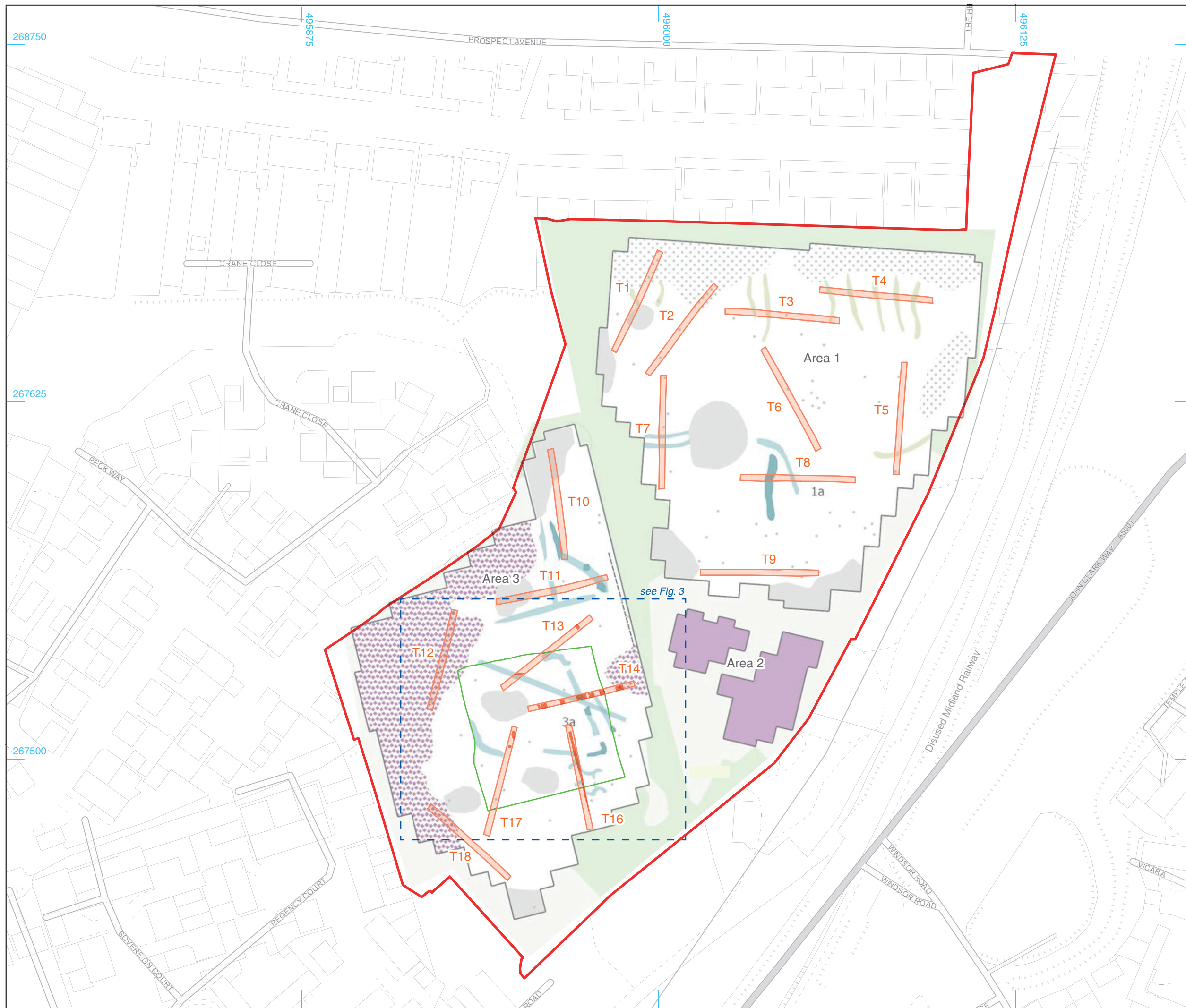
FIGURE TITLE

Site location plan

DRAWN BY HMM
CHECKED BY DJB
APPROVED BY AS
PROJECT NO. MK0675
DATE 27/02/2023
SCALE@A4 1:25,000

FIGURE NO.

1



- Site boundary
- Evaluation trench (CA 2021)
- Archaeological feature (CA 2021)
- Excavation area

Geophysical survey results
Magnitude Surveys (2020)

- Undetermined (Strong)
- Undetermined (Weak)
- Hardstanding
- Industrial/Modern (Spread)
- Natural (Weak)
- Magnetic Disturbance
- Ferrous/Debris (Spread)
- Ferrous (Spike)

0 1:1250 50m

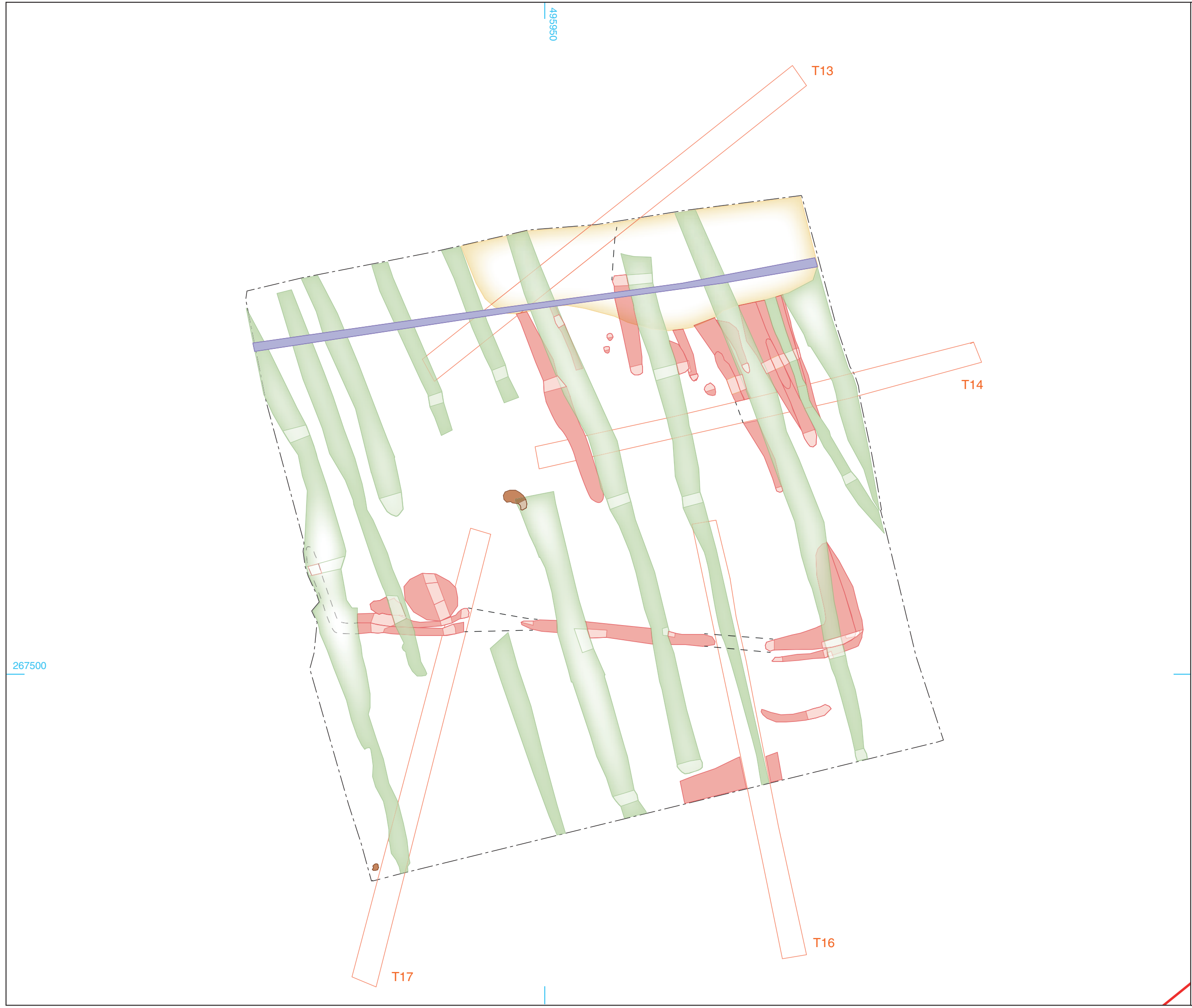
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PROJECT TITLE
Land off Prospect Avenue, Rushden,
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FIGURE TITLE
Plan of the development site showing
the excavation area, geophysical
survey results and trial trench location

DRAWN BY	HMM	PROJECT NO.	MK0675	FIGURE NO.
CHECKED BY	DJB	DATE	27/02/2023	2
APPROVED BY	AS	SCALE@A3	1:1250	



- Excavation edge
- Previous excavation trench
- Period 1 - Roman (unexcavated/excavated)
- Period 2 - medieval/post-medieval (unexcavated/excavated)
- Plough furrow (unexcavated/excavated)
- Modern
- Projected feature
- Tree-throw (unexcavated/excavated)

0 1:300 15m
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PROJECT TITLE
Land off Prospect Avenue, Rushden,
Northamptonshire

FIGURE TITLE
Site plan showing archaeological
features of all periods

DRAWN BY	HMM	PROJECT NO.	MK0675	FIGURE NO.
CHECKED BY	DJB	DATE	27/02/2023	3
APPROVED BY	AS	SCALE@A3	1:300	