

Sion Chapel, Friarn Street, Bridgwater

I: Written Scheme of Investigation



"ABOUT 30 YEARS SINCE a malt house on the spot of land on which the present Chapel now stands was procured and fitted up by the exertions of the Revd Tho. Tatton as a place of public worship where he continued to labour until the day of his death

1818

The little Church remaining at his death united in choosing the Revd Joseph Corp late a student at the Western Academy to be their pastor. After preaching in the above place of worship for about 3 years the congregation had so considerably increased as to render it necessary either to enlarge or build a new Chapel. It being found impracticable to enlarge the old place it was agreed on to use every exertion to build a new one. Weekly subscriptions were commenced and donations were promised to help forward the work of the Lord. Providence in an unexpected manner appeared just as the plan was formed in raising up a Gentleman, Mr Thomas Hellier who came forward in a most liberal manner and chiefly through him the Chapel was built much sooner than the congregation could otherwise have expected. The foundation stone was laid March 6th 1822 and the Chapel was opened for Divine Service August 20th the same year - A Church was formed consisting of twelve members over which the Revd J. Corp was ordained on the same day on the same day on which the Chapel was opened.

Revd Tho. Golding of Tulkwood delivered the introductory discourse; Revd Jas Western of Sherborne offered up the ordination prayer; Revd Jas Small, Tutor of the Western Academy, axminster gave the Charge; and the Revd Saml Lowell of Bristol preached both morning and evening. Revd Meps Buck, Cuff, [unclear] engaged in the other parts of the services."

Extract from "A Brief Account of the Interest at Sion Chapel - Church History and Roll 1822-1827"
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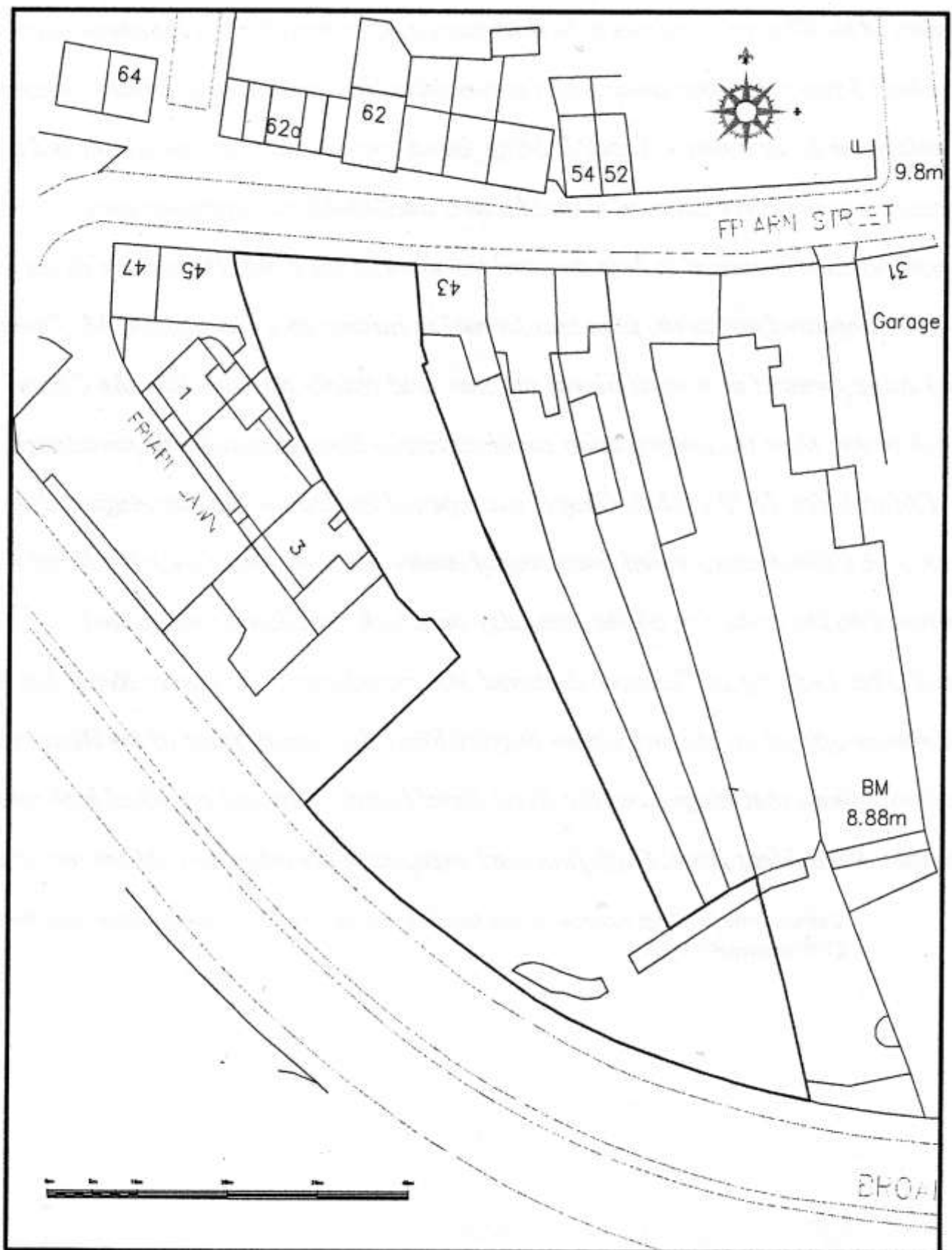


Fig 1.1: The site

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Plate 1.1:
The site seen from
Friarn Street

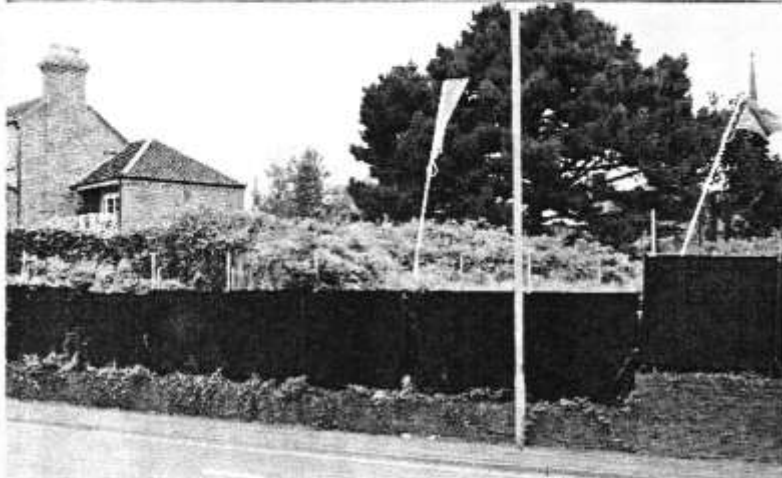


Plate 1.2:
The site seen
from Broadway



Plate 1.3:
Area of former
cemetery,
looking south



Plate 1.4:
Area of former
cemetery,
looking north

I N T R O D U C T I O N

1.1 The Project

1.1.1 This document presents an archaeological assessment, together with a written scheme of investigations (WSI) for an archaeological evaluation (the work) of land between Nos 43 and 45 Friarn Street, in the County of Somerset. The work has been commissioned by the Penpol Group (the Clients) in recognition of the archaeological sensitivity of the site and in order to facilitate future applications for planning permission. This document is for their sole commercial use and may not be used in support of any application for permissions by any other party, or at any site other than that defined below.

1.1.2 The document has been prepared by Contract Archaeology after consultations with the county archaeologists, Mr Bob Croft and Mr Steven Membrey of Somerset County Council; with Mr John Thompson of the Coroners Division of the Ministry of Justice and after a short programme of documentary research carried out by Dr Peter Cattermole (referenced below and presented unedited as Appendix I).

1.1.3 The stipulations of Somerset County Council required the preparation of an assessment of the archaeological potential of the site, and that a field

evaluation be designed suitable to the purpose of verifying that potential. As well as the specifics of the evaluation phase and without predicting the results thereof, outline method statements are included for the *expected* main works, the intention being to facilitate an immediate transition from evaluation to main works should circumstances allow.

1.1.4 While the initial determination of the Coroner's division was that neither the Disused Burial Grounds Act (Amendment) Act nor section 25 of the Burial Act 1857 applied in this case (Thompson 28 August 2007 att. as Appendix II), this position has today (31st August) changed to one of ambivalence, awaiting the production of this document (Gifford, *pers. comm.*) It is understood that the Coroner's Division seeks only to achieve a correct interpretation of the law and intends no obstruction to the works in principle.

1.1.5 The WSI presents an understanding of the archaeological potential of the site; method statements for the recovery, assessment and presentation of data; the professional personnel likely to be involved; and a standard specification for archaeological projects carried out by or under the supervision of Contract Archaeology

1.2 The Site

1.2.1 The site lies between Nos 43 and 45 on the south side of Friarn Street and extends for approximately 100m south by south east from it, meeting Broadway for approximately 80 metres of its length. It has something of the shape of a carving knife, with the butt against Friarn Street and the blade lying along Broadway. The very tip of the knife is divided from the main body of the site by the Durleigh Brook.

1.2.2 The site is currently completely overgrown (see plates 1.1 -1.4) with extensive patches of scrub, brambles and long grass. While largely fenced off and gated, the gates are open and the site is currently used for fly tipping and informal liaison.

1.2.3 The currently proposed development consists of 23 one bedroom, 8 two bedroom and 1 three bedroom apartments situated in two blocks, one at each frontage (fig 1.5), with parking and services between them and garden areas on the south side of the Durleigh Brook.

1.3 Archaeological Setting

1.3.1 The history of Bridgwater, and

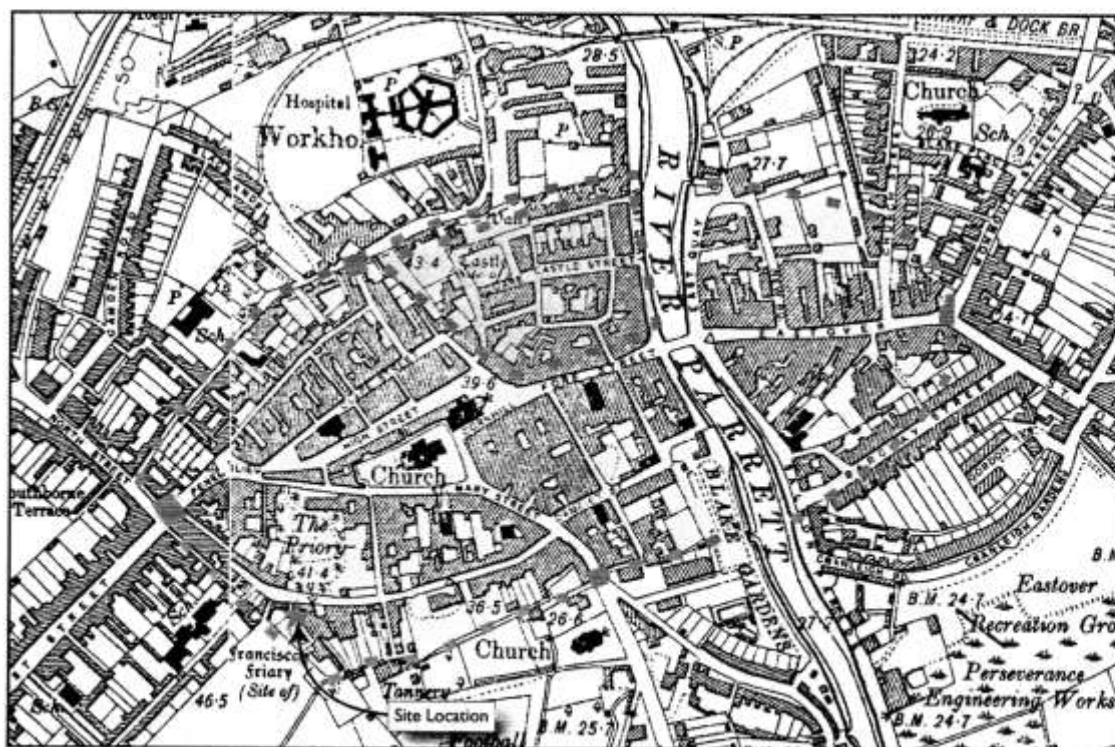


Fig 1.2:

The position of the site within medieval Bridgwater, showing circuit of defences and location of castle.

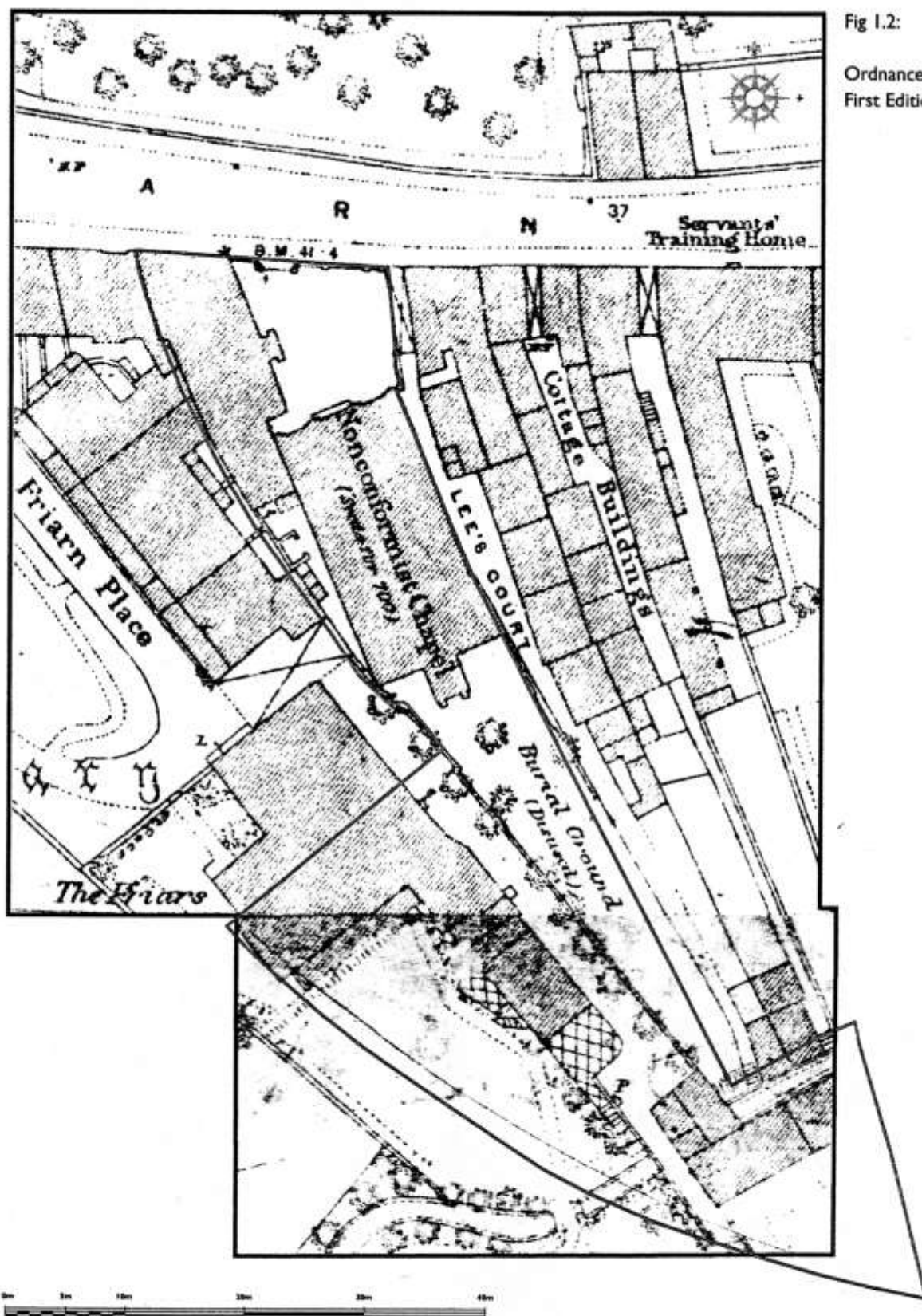


Fig 1.2:

Ordnance Survey
First Edition 1887

academic discussion of its layout, are discussed extensively in the Bridgwater volume of the English Heritage Extensive Urban Survey (Gathercole 2002 - freely available at: <http://www.somerset.gov.uk/somerset/cultureheritage/heritage/projects/eus/bridgwater/>) and in the Somerset Heritage Environment Record (HER). Details therein are not repeated here except in summary. Relevant entries from the HER are included as Appendix IV.

1.3.2 The precise foundation date of the town is unknown, but at around 1200 William Brewer was granted a charter to build the Castle and free borough, to hold Markets and an 8 day fair. The town grew quickly, and by the end of the century had extra-mural suburbs, of which Eastover is one, and two ecclesiastical foundations, the Abbey of Greyfriars and the Hospital of St John the Baptist. The town continued to prosper during the fourteenth century, becoming one of the most important towns in Somerset. The following centuries were marked by plague and civil unrest, culminating in significant involvement in the Civil War, when the town changed hands twice before being besieged and taken by the New Model Army under Fairfax. Contemporary estimates suggest that the town lost at least a third of its buildings, including the Castle, as a result of the siege. Bridgwater's post-Restoration history is characterised by a growth in light industry, particularly brick and tileworks. Alongside this industrial growth, the town saw Georgian redevelopment and a decline in its importance as a port. This shift from a mercantile focus to an industrial, professional one defined the town's modern growth and continues to characterise it today.

1.3.3 The site lies on the southwestern edge of the historic core of the town (fig 1.2). On the 1887 First Edition Ordnance Survey map (fig 1.3) the site area is occupied by a substantial building on the Friars St frontage, with a Non-Conformist Chapel and attached Disused Burial Ground situated to its rear. The southwestern part of the site is occupied by The Friars, a substantial building of uncertain origin date. The buildings of Friars Lawn (then Friars Place) adjoin the site on its western boundary. The site was the target of an earlier evaluation (Ellis 1985).

1.3.4 Ellis' evaluation located the buildings of The Friars and the Chapel and some of its attendant graves (fig 1.4). Various

cut features were discovered beneath the Chapel: a very broad trench of apparently 18th century date; a 13th century ditch and a cluster of five postholes. The works also established that the southwestern boundary followed essentially the same line as the medieval defences. These consisted of a broad and deep ditch, parallel to and beneath Broadway, with its inner edge approximately 5 metres inside the property; flanked by the remains of a bank, which extended a further 5 metres inward before being obliterated by later disturbance. The upper surviving surface of the bank lay at approximately 1.5m BGL.

1.3.4 The site first came to the author's attention in 2003, at which time it was accepted that the Chapel on the site had been the second Unitarian Church in Bridgwater - an adjunct to Christ Church on Dampier Street and the cemetery for the Unitarian population. On that basis, it was believed that some cemetery clearance had been carried out, but it was unclear how comprehensive it had been. An article in the Bridgwater Mercury, 1992, told of the removal of more than 68 individual burials and their reinterment in the municipal cemetery. Preliminary enquiries made during the research for this document have established (Cattermole 2007, Appendix I) that the site was not the Unitarian Chapel as thought, and have shown that the Unitarian site was in fact across the road in the Armoury and that the clearance mentioned took place there. That site now forms part of the access road to Priory Close, a modern housing development.

1.3.5 Dr Cattermole has been able to establish that the site was, in fact, initially a dissenters', or independent, chapel, the congregation of which became congregationalist and moved to a new site in Fore St in 1865. The modern ministry of the congregation is the Westfield United Reformed Church. There is no evidence currently available of any cemetery clearance on the site.

1.3.6 The site first came into use as a dissenters' chapel in 1792, when the property, which then consisted of two cottages and a malthouse was purchased for that purpose. At or about the same time further congregations of Independents were meeting at Roper's Lane (Albert St) and Salmon Lane. Reverend Tatton, the first pastor, died in 1818 and his place was taken by Revd. Corp, (who had previously preached at Salmon Lane), who by means

of "a most aggressive evangelism" expanded the congregation to such an extent that it outgrew the confines of the malthouse then used. Moneys were collected for the construction of a new chapel and this was constructed - in the form on the 1887 map - in 1822. It remained in use until 1865, when the congregation moved to Fore St. Subsequently the property was used as a skating rink and later as the citadel for the local Salvation Army, before falling into disuse and its ultimate demolition in 1971.

1.3.7 As built in 1822, the Chapel had seating for 700, but the vigorous Revd Corp was still able to fill it to overflowing. At the Tea held at its closure in 1865 there were 1100 attendees.

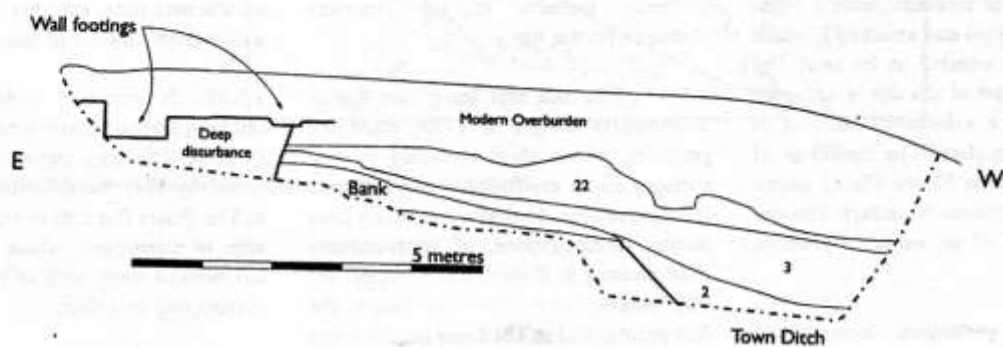
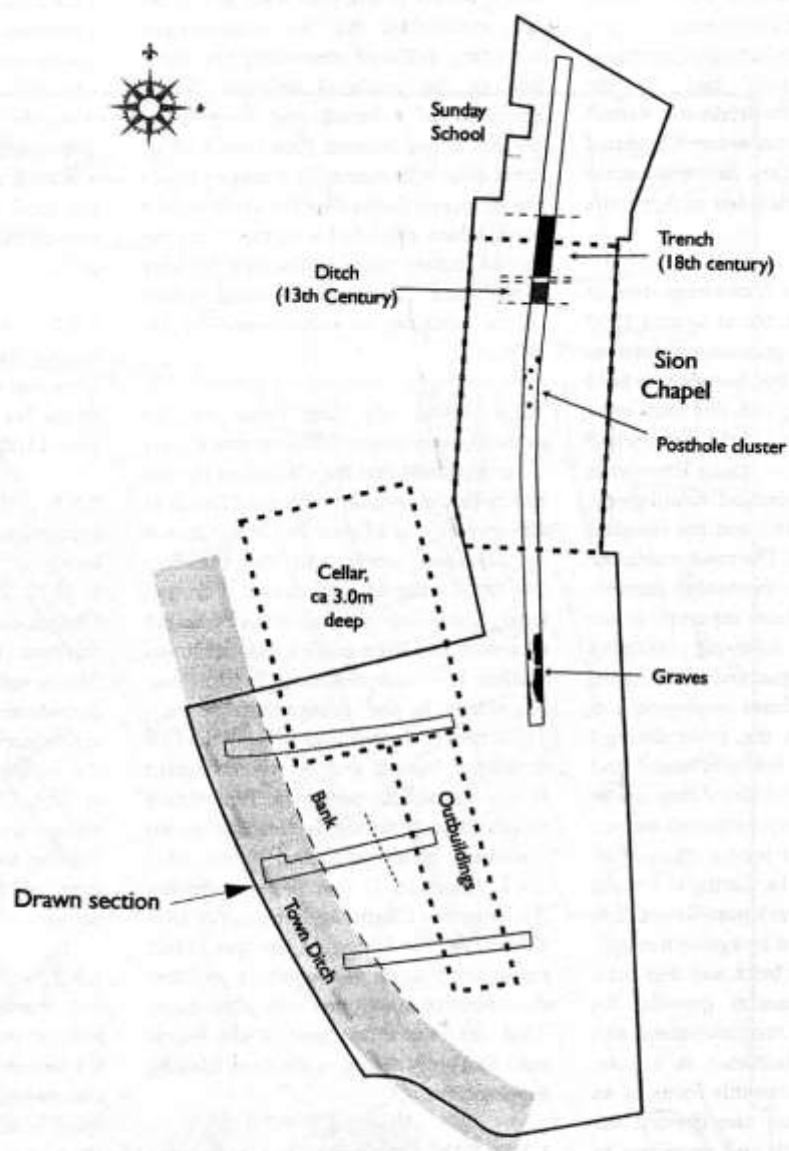
1.3.8 These figures suggest a congregation of approximately 700 at inception and rising to over a thousand at 1865. The Westfield United Reformed Church collection (SRO) and its rolls and registers (1822 onwards) may shed some further light on these figures, which are of considerable importance in establishing a reasonable estimate of the numbers of the buried dead. The Registry of Burials at Sion Chapel (part of a single bound volume including those for marriage and baptism also) records roughly 350 burials from 1822 to 1865. No earlier records survive.

1.3.9 There is no reason to suppose that burials would have taken place without record in the period covered by the Registry, however there is no evidence covering the previous thirty years. The mean number of burials per year 1822-1826 was 8.14. If we accept the same figure for 1792 - 1821 (allowing that as the death rate increases towards 1792 from 1821, so does the congregation decrease) then it might be reasonable to expect that 200 - 250 burials may have taken place in that time. It would thus be prudent to assume that there were 500 - 600 burials on site over time, and that 350 represents a minimum number of burials.

1.3.10 It remains possible, though unlikely, that no burials were interred prior to 1822. The very steep and abrupt cut found by Ellis beneath the outbuildings to The Friars (fig 1.4) is suggestive of the edge of a cemetery, where only the edge cut remains clear, with all individual cuts overlapping over time.

1.3.11 In summary, the site contains:

Fig 1.3: Ellis' evaluation of 1985



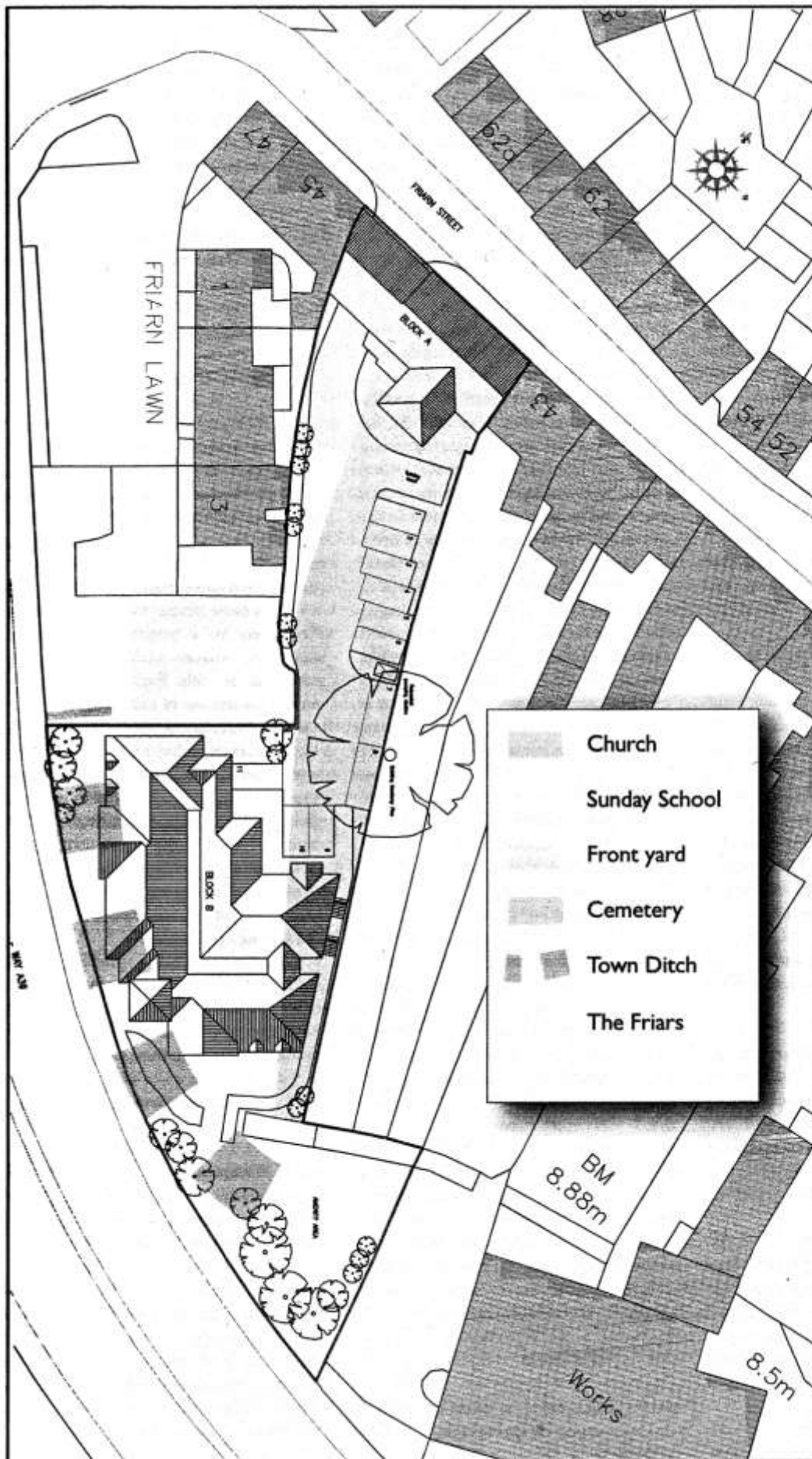








Fig 1.4:

The proposed Friarn Mews development, showing its location in relation to the major archaeological elements.

-  Church
-  Sunday School
-  Front yard
-  Cemetery
-  Town Ditch
-  The Friars

1 A dissenters' cemetery, containing at least 350 burials and a notional maximum of 600.

2 Sion Chapel, a dissenters' chapel built in 1822 and subsequently used as a skating rink and Salvation Army citadel.

3 A Sunday School, attached to the chapel.

4 Two cottages and a malthouse, the latter converted for public worship in 1792. Their origin date and precise location is unknown.

5 Features beneath Sion Chapel: these include a medieval ditch and a cluster of postholes as well as an enigmatic 18th century trench underlying the north wall of the chapel.

6 Elements of the main house and outbuildings of The Friars, a building of uncertain origin date.

7 Elements of the Medieval town defences.

All of the above will require archaeological recording, with the cemetery representing the element of principal importance (see below). The site may also be expected to contain:

8 Deep cess and other rubbish pits dating from the construction of the two cottages and malthouse up to 1865

9 Other domestic, agricultural and quasi-industrial elements and structures of the same date.

10 Other medieval features either part of the cluster observed by Ellis, or part of the ditch/defences complex.

Again, all will require archaeological recording.

1.4 Significance

1.4.1 The principal significance of the project is that it provides an opportunity for the recovery and analysis of a complete burial assemblage, from a tightly constrained temporal and social group. This will have both historical and scientific value.

1.4.2 In the first analysis, the burials will provide data relating to the mortality profile of the dissenters' population in

Bridgwater in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. The skeletal data alone may provide some information about relative social status across the burial group and may even provide some indication of the livelihood of a number of the dead. It is also likely that the dead will have been coffined, and that further social data may be collected in the form of the relative ornament of those coffins. This information will certainly be of at least local importance.

1.4.3 Their scientific value is related to the precision with which their burial date and age at death can be determined. Analysis of the advancement of taphonomic processes over a burial period of 215-140 years may provide useful forensic data. The quality of this data will be enormously increased by the presence of named coffin plate, which will enable first, the excavated dead to be cross-identified with entries in the Chapel Registries and, second, to be traced through analysis of census returns and other primary records. The establishment of a precise age at death and precise lifestyle data will contribute to the continuing refinement of techniques of osteoarchaeology alone. Precise dates of burial will allow more precise taphonomic analysis, which may help to refine forensic techniques. Where named coffin plate exists in sufficient quantity the burial assemblage may prove to be of national importance. (Cox 1996 & 2004, Molleson & Cox 1993, Reeve & Adams 1993.)

1.4.4 The recording of the structures associated with the cemetery - in both its phases will provide useful data relating to the burial context both socially and liturgically. As ancillary data to the burial group itself, this data is also potentially of national importance.

1.4.5 The other, medieval remains are of not inconsiderable interest although their precise form and extent is unclear. Their recording will provide further specific data relating to the site's history and are likely to provide data which clarify the wider picture of Bridgwater's medieval and later development. At the very least, they will be of local importance.

1.4 Definition

1.4.1 The form of work specified by this document is "archaeological field evaluation" as defined by the Institute of Field Archaeologists, thus:

"A limited programme of ...fieldwork which determines the presence or absence of archaeological features, structures, deposits.....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."

(IFA, 2000)

1.4.2 The aim is to establish to a satisfactory degree the state of survival of the elements summarised above 9 and to identify the presence or absence of any other archaeological remains) and to develop further the outline strategy for their removal presented here (section 4 Required Outcomes, below).

1.4.3 In most similar cases this would be achieved by a programme of trial trenching - broadly analogous to that carried out by Ellis. Such an approach would be ineffective in this case, because the level of information derived would be unlikely to exceed that already retrieved and presented here and, more specifically, the key issue lies in the number of graves preserved and burials within them. This is almost impossible to establish by trial trenching.

1.4.4 The aim will be achieved through the following objectives

a. **Site Strip:** the removal of overburden from the entire area of the Sion Chapel site and the total exposure of the dissenters' cemetery.

b. **Data Collection:** the recording of all features and deposits thus exposed

c. **Sampling:** the investigation of a representative sample of the exposed graves in order to determine the numbers of burials contained within them

d. **Briefings:** regular contact with the development control archaeologist in order to agree the need for, and nature of further work. Similar regular contact with the URC and any identified living relatives in order to determine their wishes.