

3. LOCATION, GEOLOGY AND BACKGROUND

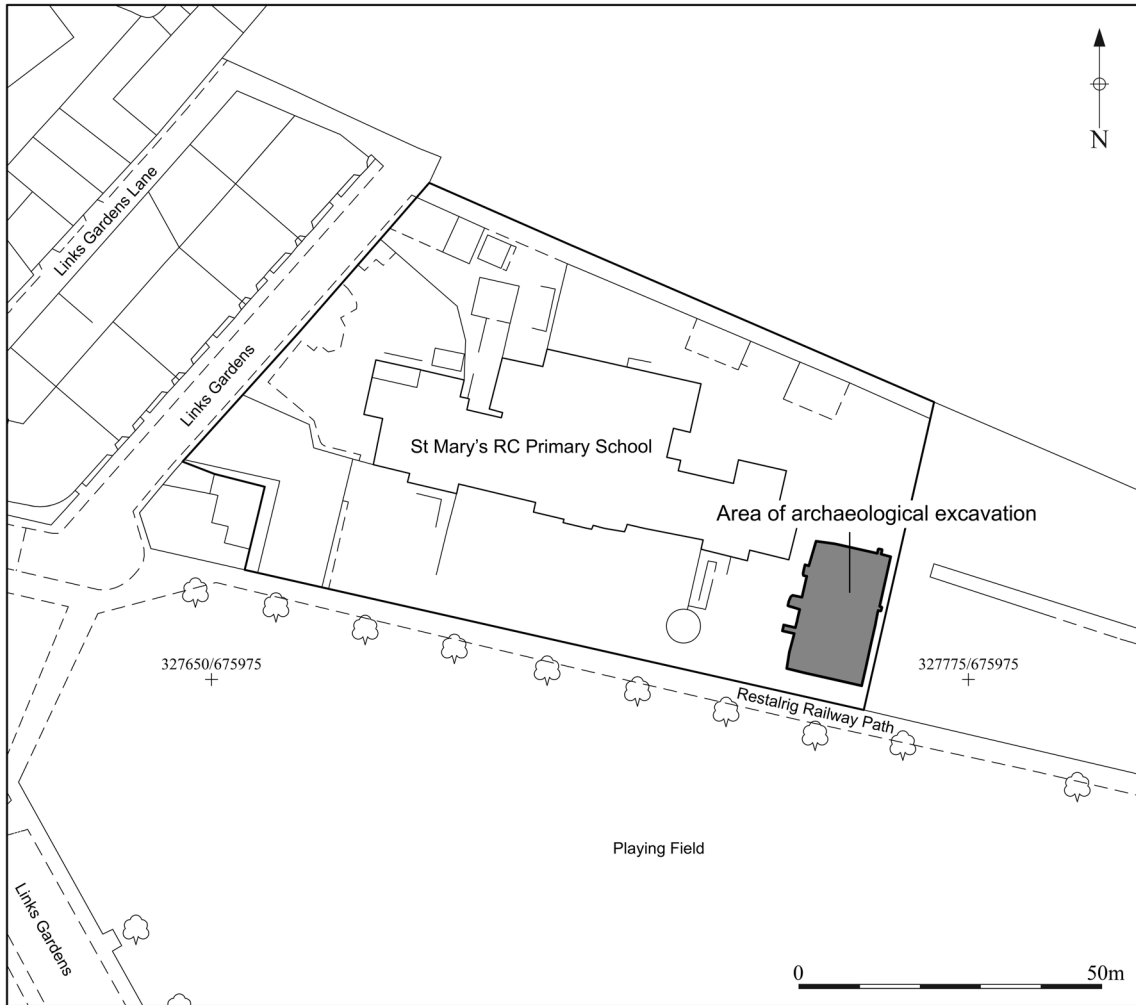
Leith is now a district situated in the north of the city of Edinburgh, on the coast of the Firth of Forth and positioned at the mouth of the Water of Leith, though before 1920 it was an independent burgh. Leith is Edinburgh's port; it is characterised by its extensive port facilities and is heavily industrialised along its coast. The site, St Mary's (Leith), is located just inland from the coastal strip in the area known as South Leith, on the north side of Leith Links (Illus 1). Initially an area of sand dunes, Leith Links was

later an early golf course and is now a public park (Illus 2).

The solid geology of the area comprises Gullane Formation sedimentary rock of the Strathclyde group type, which are predominantly sandstones, interbedded with siltstones, mudstones, limestones, ironstones, coals and seatearth. This bedrock is overlain by Flandrian raised marine sand and gravel deposits (British Geological Survey (BGS) 2019). The superficial deposits at the site also consisted of an overlying layer of wind-blown sand. Such material would have been attractive for digging graves. Although within a sand matrix the burials



Illus 1 Site location © Wardell Armstrong LLP



Illus 2 Location of the archaeological excavation © Wardell Armstrong LLP

were deposited at or below the existing water table, which ensured good conditions for the preservation of wood and some other organics. Conditions for the survival of human bone were variable across the site, but generally poor.

One of the earliest records of Leith is found in exchequer rolls produced during the reign of David I (1124–53) approving the construction of the Abbey of Holyrood in 1128, and also detailing Leith’s emerging role as an important trading centre, notably for cattle, fish and cereal crops (Russell 1922). By the 13th century, two distinctly administered halves had emerged to the settlement, north and south, with the north governed by the Abbot of Holyrood, and the south by the Lairds of Restalrig (Russell 1922: 9). The Links area lay to the south of the southern part of historic Leith. Between 1548 and 1560 Leith was fortified by its French garrison with *trace italienne* defences encircling the

town (Paton and Cook 2016). These were built under the instruction of Mary of Guise, with the seat of government temporarily being transferred from Edinburgh to Leith.

In the 16th century, the Links area lay outside the town defences to the east. Consequently, they formed an important part of the siege of Leith in 1559–60 as demonstrated by contemporary accounts and a map held at Petworth House, Sussex (Steer 1961; Harris 1991; Paton and Cook 2016). The Links have been the subject of some past archaeological research into the siege (Pollard 2008). Previous archaeological works have uncovered the earthworks of Somerset’s and Pelham’s batteries as well as below-ground evidence of siege works.

The 17th century was a time of political, social and economic upheaval in Leith; the district witnessed several periods of famine in the early 17th century, with four recorded episodes of famine between 1620

and 1625 (Mitchinson 2002: 291–3). The strongly pro-Presbyterian Covenant petition was signed by the population of Leith in early 1638, which was both anti-Laudian Anglicanism and anti-Catholic in sentiment (Henderson 1937: 167). The plague epidemic swept through Leith in 1645, commencing in April and ending in the autumn months, with smaller episodes of the outbreak occurring in the following months (Russell 1922). As a consequence of the overwhelming number of deceased, bodies were buried along the Leith Links. The warmer weather of the summer months would likely have increased the spread of the disease, and the outbreak didn't peter out until some time in 1646. The plague epidemic decimated the population of Leith, killing over 50% of the population in the southern district alone (Electric Scotland (ES) online 2019: XXV). The civil wars of the 1640s and 1650s led to the fortifications of Leith being modified and extended (*ibid*).

Map regression analysis indicates that the area of the site may have been associated with the property of the Williamson and Gavin's ropery by 1822

(Thomson 1822). The area that forms part of the eastern boundary of the site is marked as drying grounds on the 1895 Second Edition Ordnance Survey map; it is likely that this was for drying hemp after the fibres had been separated through retting, the dried hemp then being used in rope manufacture.

A later 19th-century smallpox hospital was established directly north of the site. The development area impinges upon the site of a building associated with the wooden hospital that was erected between 1894 and 1905. There was a quaiting ground to the immediate east of this building range (OS One-Inch Scotland (2nd edition) Edinburgh Hills 1885–1900). This structure may also have been an insubstantial structure, and had certainly been demolished along with the wooden smallpox hospital by 1912 (OS One-Inch Scotland (3rd edition) Edinburgh Hills 1903–12). By 1931, St Mary's (Leith), then known as the Links School, had been established and the development area from then on was part of a playground (OS 1:25,000 Maps of Great Britain (1937–61) Edinburgh).