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## The Mary Erskine School, Ravelston, Edinburgh Results of an Archaeological Watching Brief

Jürgen van Wessel  
MA (Hons)

## Project summary sheet

<i>Client</i>	ERSKINE STEWART'S MELVILLE SCHOOLS
<i>National Grid Reference</i>	NT 2195 7400
<i>Address</i>	THE MARY ERSKINE SCHOOL, RAVELSTON, EDINBURGH
<i>Parish</i>	CITY PARISH OF EDINBURGH
<i>Council</i>	CITY OF EDINBURGH COUNCIL
<i>Planning Application No</i>	N/A
<i>NMRS No</i>	NT27 SW.127.7
<i>SMR No</i>	N/A
<i>HB/SAM No</i>	N/A
<i>Listing Category</i>	N/A
<i>Project Manager</i>	SIMON STRONACH
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<i>Specialists</i>	N/A
<i>Schedule</i>	
<i>Fieldwork</i>	JULY 2008
<i>Report</i>	JULY 2008

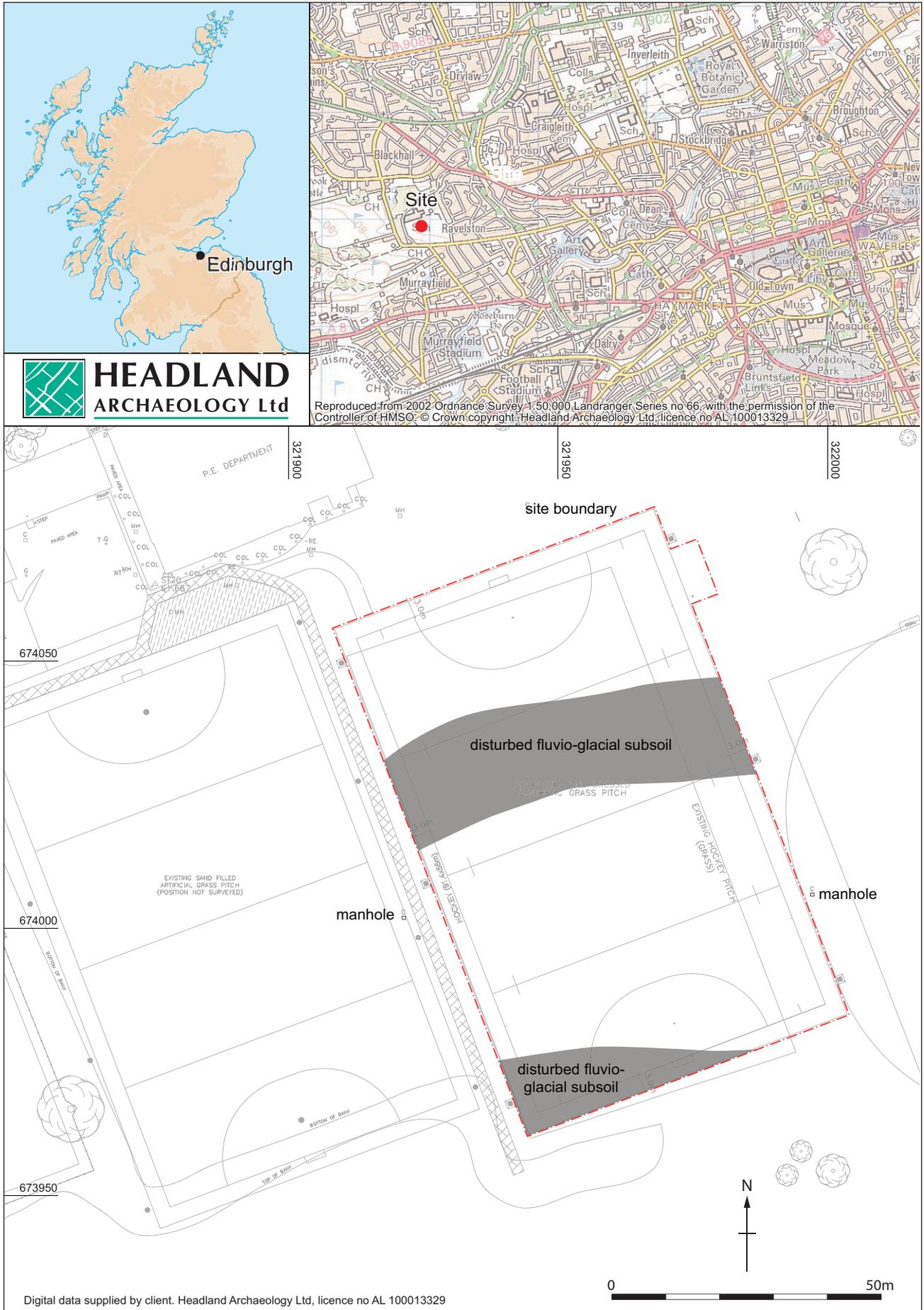
*Signed off by:*.....

*Simon Stronach BSc (Hons) AIFA, Project Manager*

*Date:*.....

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Illus 1  
Site location

# The Mary Erskine School, Ravelston, Edinburgh

## Results of an Archaeological Watching Brief

By Jürgen van Wessel

*Headland Archaeology Ltd undertook a watching brief on a topsoil strip in advance of the construction of an artificial hockey pitch at the Mary Erskine School, Ravelston. The work was commissioned by Erskine Stewart's Melville Schools in response to a planning condition, and undertaken in accordance with a Written Scheme of Investigation agreed with the City of Edinburgh Council Archaeology Service.*

*The topsoil was removed by machine under archaeological supervision over three days. This revealed that 1960s ground works for the construction of an earlier grass pitch had removed the original ground surface, and disturbed much of the weathered glacial till subsoil. No remains of archaeological significance were encountered. This may suggest that no remains were ever present in the exposed area, or that any such remains had been completely truncated by the previous development.*

### INTRODUCTION

An archaeological watching brief was undertaken in response to a planning condition placed on the development of playing fields at the Mary Erskine School, Ravelston by the City of Edinburgh Council. The fieldwork was commissioned by Erskine Stewart's Melville Schools, and was undertaken from the 2nd to the 4th of July 2008.

The works were carried out in accordance with a Written Scheme of Investigation prepared by Headland Archaeology Ltd and agreed with the Council Archaeology Service (CECAS) prior to the commencement of fieldwork.

### BACKGROUND

The development area lies to the south of the Mary Erskine School, which comprises a 1960s structure (with subsequent extensions) joined to the older Ravelston House to the northwest. The latter building was constructed around 1790 and replaced an earlier structure marked broadly in the same location on Roy's plan of 1747-55. Some 17th century features survive within 18th century ancillary structures such as stables and coach-houses, to the northwest of Ravelston House (Gifford, McWilliam, Walker & Wilson, 1984).

Several grass sports pitches had been constructed in association with the 1960s school building. The development intended to directly replace one of these with a modern artificial pitch, similar to two other such facilities immediately to the west. Historic mapping suggests that previous uses of this area have been for agriculture or as parkland associated with Ravelston House. An earlier alignment of Ravelston Dykes, a main access road, can be seen as a double row of mature trees in an area of parkland immediately south of the development area.



**Illus 2**

View looking S-W showing extent of terracing. The trees in the background mark the former line of Ravelston Dykes.

### METHOD

#### Objectives

The objectives of the watching brief were:

- To identify any archaeological remains within the development area and, where possible, to propose arrangements for their preservation in situ.
- Where this is not possible, to record any archaeological remains threatened by the development works.

#### Methodology

The area for the pitch (some 6000m<sup>2</sup>) was to be stripped of topsoil prior to grading, drainage works and pitch construction. Initially, the turf was broken up by a small tractor-mounted rotavator. It was agreed that the bulk of the topsoil could be removed by bulldozer and re-used for landscaping. The final strip to underlying sediments was performed using a 13 ton 360° tracked excavator equipped with a flat ditching bucket, under constant archaeological supervision. This was undertaken in 5-10m wide strips,

running from south to north, with the spoil from one strip deposited on the previous (recorded) strip.

## Recording

All recording followed Headland Archaeology Ltd standard procedures and was in accordance with the codes of practice of the Institute of Field Archaeologists. All contexts were to be given unique numbers and all recording was undertaken on pro forma record cards that conform to accepted archaeological norms. All stratigraphic relationships were recorded.

Colour transparencies and colour print photographs were taken to record archaeological contexts and to illustrate the progress of the works. A graduated metric scale was clearly visible in record photographs of contexts. All photographs were recorded by individual print number and included information on the context and direction taken.

An overall site plan was recorded by measured sketch, and overlaid onto the CAD drawing supplied by the client.



Illus 3

One of several areas of rubble infill.

## RESULTS (see Illus 1)

Beneath the turf, the topsoil averaged 0.2m in depth, and consisted of a fine, mid-brown slightly clayey silt. Below this, a more clayey layer (containing frequent small-medium stones and occasional fragments of modern china) of around 0.4m in depth masked an orange–grey weathered fluvio-glacial silty-clay subsoil. The area slopes down somewhat towards the east and the earlier pitch had been terraced into this slope by up to 1m on the western side (see illus 1). This would have removed much of the subsoil - in one place it had been removed entirely, leaving a mid-dark grey stony till exposed. In some areas, the subsoil appeared to have been redeposited, and contained occasional fragments of modern ceramics. This suggests that some of the excavated subsoil had been re-used to level the site (see illus 2). Localised

hollows had been filled with mixed rubble, including bricks, metal wire, metal fence posts, and in one instance, an uprooted concrete water-mains marker (see illus 3). In two places, these areas of infill took on a more linear shape but appeared to run for only a few metres, and so are probably not culverts (see below). They may, however act as sumps draining the surrounding areas.

The presence of a culvert linking two manhole covers, one on either side of the pitch, was discussed during the site briefing. It was constructed to control the flow of a burn running from Clermiston Hill to the south-west. The culvert was not identified during the watching brief, although it is likely to have been coarsely built and possibly indistinguishable from surrounding drainage features.

An extensive system of modern drainage was visible at various depths. The drains were of ceramic or plastic pipe, in narrow trenches filled with various grades of gravel. Some were clearly arranged in herringbone fashion, others appear to have been installed to cater for more specific drainage issues.

## DISCUSSION

A brief review of historic mapping had suggested the possibility of field or park boundaries, or signs of ploughing in this area; however none were found during the watching brief. With the construction of the playing fields in the 1960s, the original ground surface was removed and the fluvio-glacial subsoil re-graded by up to 1m to create individual pitches. Whilst it is possible that some deeply cut features could have survived this process, none were observed. It must be concluded that either there were never any archaeological features present in the area or that they had been removed by truncation.

## SOURCES

Gifford, J., McWilliam, D., Walker, D. & Wilson C. (1984). *The Buildings of Scotland: Edinburgh*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

## APPENDICES

## Photo Register

Photo no	Colour Print	Colour Slide	Direction Facing	Description
1	Y	Y		ID shot
2	Y	Y	SW	General view of site prior to work. Line of old road can be seen in background
3	Y	Y	NW	General view of site prior to work. Manhole cover visible to right
4	Y	Y	NE	General view of site prior to work. Shows terracing of current pitch
5	Y	Y	SE	General view of site prior to work
6	Y	Y	N	Shot of 4th strip
7	Y	Y	S	Shot of 4th strip
8	Y	Y	NW	Area of infill with water main marker
9	Y	Y	N	Shot of 5th strip
10	Y	Y	W	Working shot
11	Y	Y	W	Working shot

## DES Entry

The Mary Erskine School, Ravelston, Edinburgh

Watching Brief

Jürgen van Wessel, Headland Archaeology

NT 2195 7400.

An archaeological watching brief was undertaken in July 2008 on a topsoil strip in advance of the construction of an artificial hockey pitch at the Mary Erskine School, Ravelston. The work was commissioned in response to a planning condition. There was a potential for uncovering the remains of field or park boundaries relating to Ravelston House (NT27SW 127.00).

The topsoil was removed by machine under archaeological supervision over three days. This revealed that 1960s ground works for the construction of an earlier grass pitch had removed the original ground surface, and disturbed much of the weathered glacial till subsoil. No remains of archaeological significance were encountered. This may suggest that no remains were ever present in the exposed area, or that any such remains had been completely truncated by the previous development.

Funder: Erskine Stewart's Melville Schools