

Museum of Somerset Project - Taunton Castle

Results of Archaeological Evaluation

August 2007

Summary

An archaeological trench evaluation was carried out by the Historic Environment Service of Somerset County Council in the courtyard of Taunton Castle (ST 226247) in advance of the submission of a planning application, listed building consent application and scheduled monument consent application for the construction of a new entrance and gallery as part of the Museum of Somerset Project. The evaluation showed that both areas evaluated had been heavily disturbed by modern services and post-medieval activity but that, in some areas, medieval stratigraphy survived at depth.

1 Introduction

This report sets out the results of an archaeological evaluation at Taunton Castle (Scheduled Monument 22851, NGR 226247). The work was undertaken by Chris Webster of Somerset County Council's Historic Environment Service with the assistance of James Brigers and local volunteers between the 4th and 15th June 2007.

The work was commissioned in advance of the submission of planning and heritage consent applications for extensions to the museum housed in the castle to form the new Museum of Somerset being grant-aided by the Heritage Lottery Fund.

2 Archaeological Background

Taunton Castle lies at the heart of the county town of Somerset and was formerly a possession of the Bishops of Winchester. The site of the castle appears to occupy that of an Anglo-Saxon church as numerous burials have been recorded in the outer ward. More recent buildings, roadways and carparks, occupy most of this outer ward; the inner ward retains most of the medieval fabric. The inner ward comprises the Great Hall on the north side and a range of buildings believed to date to the 13th century on the west and south sides, including a round tower and gatehouse. The east side of the courtyard is bounded by a wall on the outside of which is an area believed to have been occupied by a keep.

The castle area was purchased in 1874 by the Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society to prevent its destruction and they retain ownership of the inner ward, keep area and various gardens in the inner moat. Several excavations have been undertaken by the Society (principally the "keep" area) and their tenants since 1958, Somerset County Council's museum service (mostly in advance of building works). Details of this are given in Webster (2007).

3 Methodology

The evaluation was undertaken in accordance with a specification submitted for Scheduled Monument Consent and comprised the hand excavation of three trenches.

The first trench (Trench E) measured 8m by c1.5m and was sited to cross the area where the new entrance to the museum is proposed, the other two trenches (Trench F, 3.8m by 2m and Trench G, 2.4m by 1.5m) lay in the area where it is proposed to enlarge the existing gallery running along the south side of the Great Hall. The locations are shown on Figure 1 on page 6.

Paving slabs were removed under archaeological supervision from Trench G and part of the area of Trench E but all other deposits were removed archaeologically by hand.

All deposits were recorded using the standard Somerset County Council pro-forma recording system, comprising written, graphic and photographic records in accordance with the General Specification for Archaeological Work in Somerset. All locations were tied into detailed plans of the castle prepared for the project and all levels were tied to the OS benchmark on the gateway (recorded as 18.73m).

4 Results

Trench E

This trench was sited to cross the location of the proposed new entrance building, in an area between the previous excavations of 1992 (see Figure 1 on page 6). These had shown, on the one hand, undisturbed deposits under the resited almshouse, and on the other, that the area of the toilets had previously been disturbed by numerous service trenches. Trench E confirmed this picture with service trenches to the west and less disturbance to the east towards the courtyard wall.

Following the removal of the stone paving and loose gravel which occupied the area, the trench could be seen to be occupied by two deposits: a hard-rammed gravel (216) and a soft black soil (219). The former is interpreted as the gravel surface of the courtyard, associated with the building campaigns of the 1930s and the latter as the edge of the grassed area that was curtailed when the almshouse was sited here in 1992. Three pipe trenches could be seen to cut the gravel. One [224] at the very east end of the trench was filled with concrete and is likely to have been dug during the changes to the heating system in 1988 (Webster 2007) – it was similar in character to that seen under the archway in 2004 leading from the old boiler house in the moat (Webster 2004). This trench also contains plastic ducts that allow cables to be pulled through to connect the main museum buildings with the south range, the ends of these are visible in the 1930s boiler room in the basement immediately to the north of the excavations. This trench cut across another [225] which contained loose plastic-coated electricity cables, some at very shallow depth, which lead to the basement (some, but not all, through the base of the doorway). About 1m to the east of these was a further trench containing a black plastic pipe. The destination of this pipe could not be seen in the basement and its function is unknown. This end of the trench was not excavated further but it is likely to contain further service trenches, seen in 1992, as well as, possibly, the main drain leading (at a depth of 4–5m) to the river.

One further feature was visible at this level, an irregular pit, which on excavation proved to lead down to a cast-iron pipe. Although at the very edge of the trench, the pipe could be seen to narrow in section at this point and it seems likely that this pit represents a trench cut to replace the pipe with one of smaller cross-section. Further excavation uncovered the rest of the original pipe which carried the date 1934 on a collar at the north end (into which the narrower pipe was concreted). This pipe trench had cut across a complex of deposits which appeared to be filling a large irregular pit whose edges lay, for the most part, outside the trench. The pit was crossed towards its east side by an early 20th-century electricity cable, presumably in a trench but only the east side could be discerned. The lower parts of the pit appeared to have been filled with rubble and earth with

occasional trampled surfaces. It was not completely excavated.

The area to the east of this was left undisturbed but a further area was excavated against the wall (285) to see if a continuation of the wall line, known from old photographs, had survived the construction of the Wyndham Gallery in 1934. This revealed a similar picture to that seen in Trench C (Webster 2005), with three foundation courses below the lowest chamfered course; again only the top of these was well laid and dressed. Below these was a wide offset (292) of two courses (it is possible that there were more but this was not confirmed) similar to that seen in 2005 and which appeared to turn around the end of the wall (although slightly narrower). The foundation also continued with a slightly different character, to the north (295). The stone of 295 was more mixed than that of 292, containing chert, lias and sandstone in contrast to the uniform sandstone of 292; the stones were also smaller. Above both foundations was a deposit of redeposited red marl which continued to the west to an unknown depth. Above this were deposits relating to building work on the wall: degraded sandstone chips, sand and a layer of mortar, probably from drops when pointing. Above this was a further layer of redeposited marl on which lay the foundations of a further wall (286) continuing the line of the courtyard wall (285) but clearly divorced from the foundations below (295). This wall comprised a rough foundation course on which lay a single chamfered course and then a vertical course. These were not coursed with wall 285 but the evidence of the early photographs, which show the wall dipping to the north, and the damaged end of wall 285, suggest that this wall has sunk by about half a course at the south end and more to the north.

It appears clear that the courtyard wall (285) originally returned east at this point, with a continuation to the north. The continuation was subsequently removed but later replaced with an ill-founded wall to match the alternate chamfered and vertical coursing further to the south.

Trenches F and G

These two trenches were opened in the area of the western gallery along the south side of the Great Hall, Trench F outside and Trench G inside the gallery. The aim of these two trenches was to assess the archaeological potential of an area where no previous excavations have been recorded. The nearest, the courtyard pipeline of 1978 (Clements 1984, 32–34), showed human burials in the so-called marl bank close to the Wyndham entrance block with courtyard surfaces to the south cut by a variety of service trenches. No record appears to have been made when the glazed gallery wall was erected in the 1930s.

Excavation in trench F proceeded through a very compact gravel layer forming the courtyard surface immediately below the present loose gravel. The gravel was in three distinctive layers: the base was formed of yellow gravel, succeeded by a layer of limestone scalplings and topped by a finer orange gravel. The two layers of gravel appeared to correspond to those found in Trench E (where, however, the scalplings were absent). Below this, excavation was immediately constrained by the presence of a rain-water drain in a trench [205] running diagonally across the trench. A further drain [236] was recognised later, running across the southern end of the trench; the similarity of the fill of this to its surroundings meant that it was not recognised at the higher level from which it was cut. The origin of this drain is not clear (it is aligned on the entrance door to the Harold St George Gray room) but to the east it appeared to lead to a damaged concrete slab covering an access chamber. The first drain [205] ran from a down-pipe within the gallery which drains the gutter of the Great Hall. Its south-east end was not aligned on the concrete cover. Both drains were constructed of salt-glazed stoneware pipes but were of different colours suggesting that they were not contemporary. It appears likely that 205 is related to the construction of the gallery whilst 236 may have been constructed to serve domestic accommodation known to have existed in the Somerset Room.

In the areas of the trench that were not disturbed (or made inaccessible) by the pipe trenches the area appeared to have been occupied by a group of intercutting pits. The fills of these were similar and appeared to comprise building debris, particularly slate. There was little in the way of domestic debris (although a few animal bones, pottery sherds and glass wine bottles were recovered) and the pits appeared from preliminary analysis of the pottery to be fairly contemporaneous and to date from the early 18th century. One large dump of stone (265),

superficially resembling a construction, also appeared to have been dumped in a pit, later cut by others. Natural alluvial deposits were reached in the bases of pits 251 and 245. The only other feature was a posthole (233) which was later than all the pits and retained the void of a post 7 inches by 4 inches (178 x 102mm).

Inside the gallery, the footings of the wall of the Great Hall were exposed beneath the make-up for the slab floor. No construction trench was visible but to the south the edge of a large feature [275] was seen running parallel to the walls. The fill of this feature contained a posthole [246] with a clear post-pipe, possibly associated with scaffolding during some phase of the repair of the Great Hall (wooden scaffolding poles are shown in the photographs of the construction of the Wyndham block in 1931). To the west of this was a block of Ham stone, interpreted as the base of a column shown in Houghton Spencer's plan of 1875 (Somerset Record Office DD/SAS/c1207/2). This appeared embedded in the fill of the large feature as no cut could be seen during any stage of the excavation. The fill of feature 275 was similar to that of the pits encountered outside, containing similar amounts of roofing slate, pottery and glass bottles, apparently tipped from the north. At the base the feature appeared to be filled with broken stone which was considerably wetter than the layers above. It is possible that this was a natural deposit as at this point the north side of the feature appeared to be composed of a similar deposit. It was not, unfortunately, possible to be certain of this in the cramped, dark conditions at the base of the excavation.

It is possible that the large feature [287] is a pit, similar to those outside, but with a more regular edge. It is also possible that it represents robbing of the presumed southern wall of the early Great Hall which should lie in this position. The straight vertical side could argue for this but the fill did not contain typical robbing backfill.

A full report on these, and previous, excavations is in preparation for the *Proceedings of the Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society*.

5 Conclusions

Taken together with the results from the work carried out in 1992, the results from Trench E appear to show that the northern and western parts of the area proposed for the new entrance have been substantially disturbed by service trenches. It is also possible that further services will be found at depth as a sewer is reported to have crossed the courtyard at a depth of 4–5m and may have exited the castle through this area. It is likely that medieval deposits do survive here below c.1m and there are also reports of walls being seen at 1.2m in the late 19th century. The southern and eastern areas appear to contain more intact medieval stratigraphy, although Trench C (2005) suggests that there is 0.2–0.3m of post-medieval levelling deposits in this area.

The area of Trench F appears to have been very comprehensively pitted in the early 18th century and no surviving medieval deposits were located. Medieval finds were similarly scarce and no human bone was recognised. This may suggest that the pits were backfilled with non-local material, otherwise redeposited medieval finds and burials might be expected (as has been the case elsewhere). It is not possible to say whether intact medieval deposits, burials or important post-medieval deposits survive elsewhere in the area but they clearly do immediately to the east (Clements 1984).

Inside the present gallery a similar picture of deep pits filled with early 18th century rubbish was seen, although the pit may also represent the robbing of the medieval wall of the first phase of the Great Hall. Closer to the present south wall of the Great Hall, there appear to be intact medieval deposits at shallow depth.

6 Acknowledgements

We would like to thank James Brigers, Liz Caldwell, Nick Dawson, John Matthews and Nic Wall for their assistance with the excavation.

References

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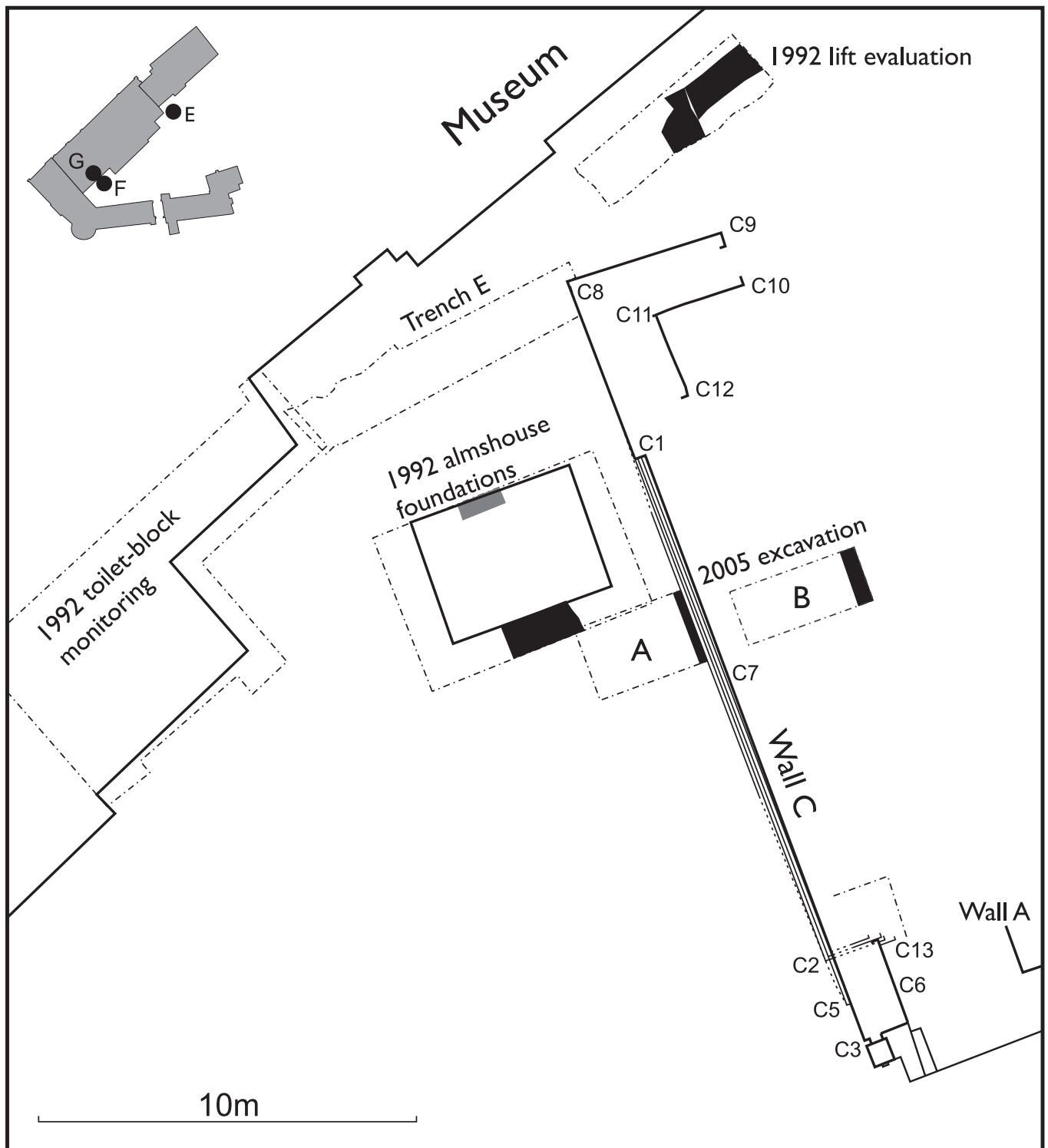


Figure 1: Location of trenches E, F and G within Taunton Castle and details of other excavations in the area of Trench E.

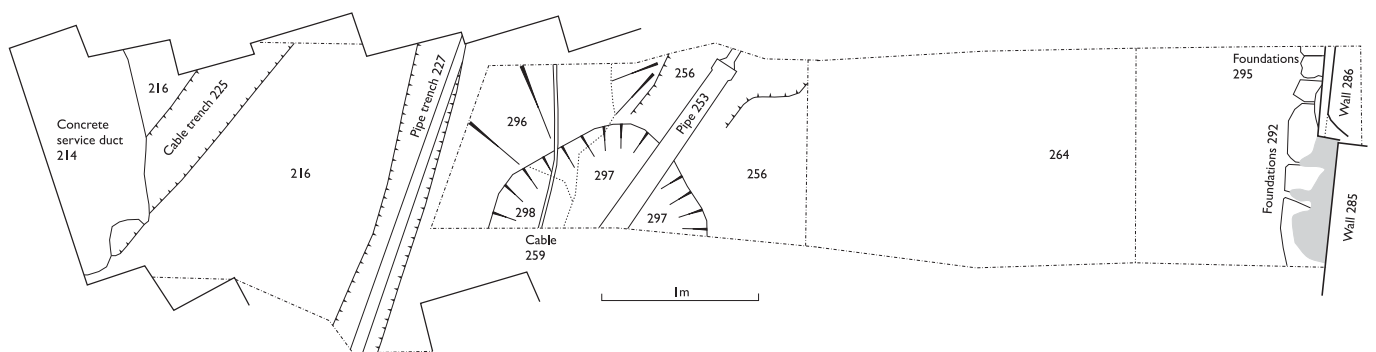


Figure 2: Plan of Trench E



Figure 3: Wall C at the east end of Trench E showing its continuation (286) at a higher level

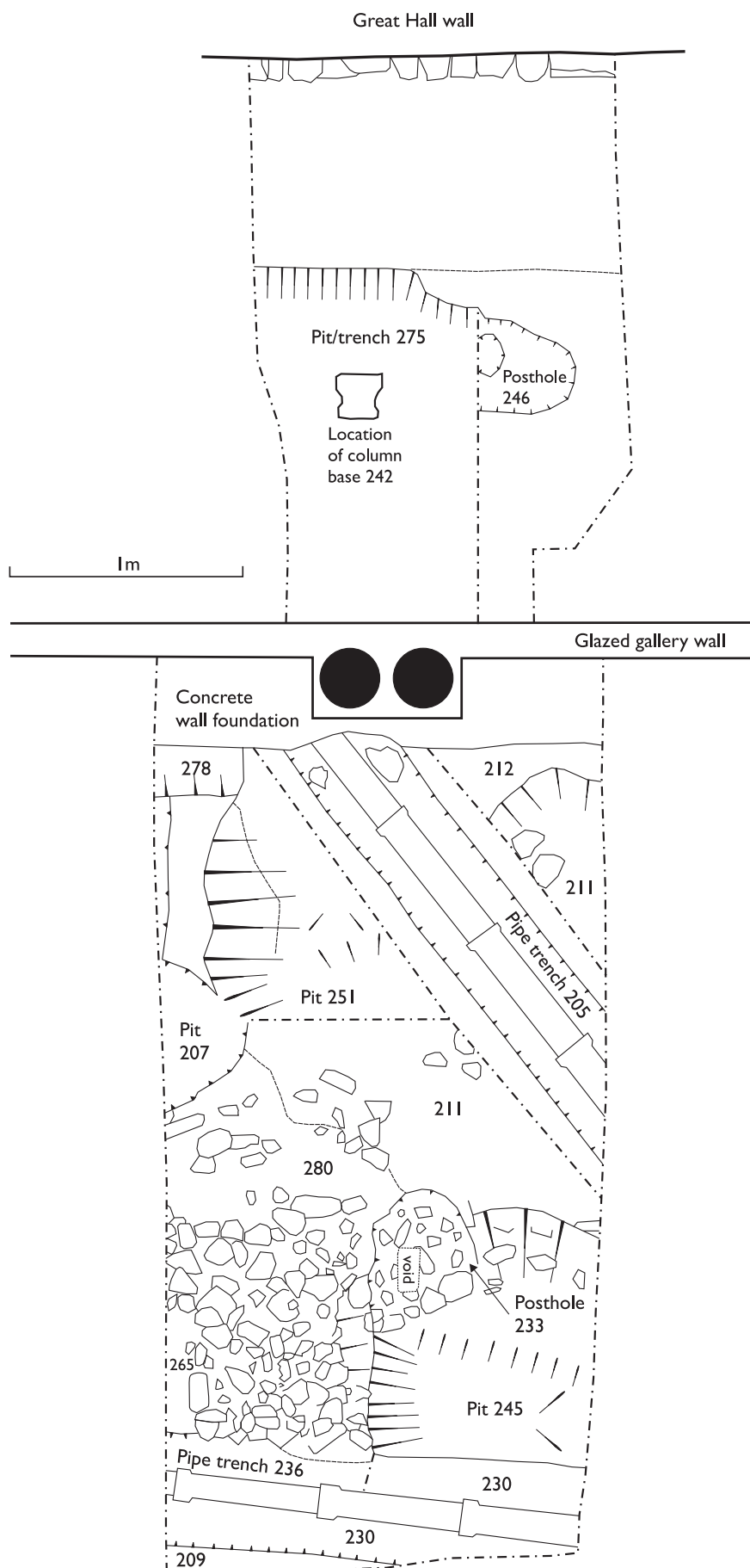


Figure 4: Plan of Trenches F and G



Figure 5: Trench F

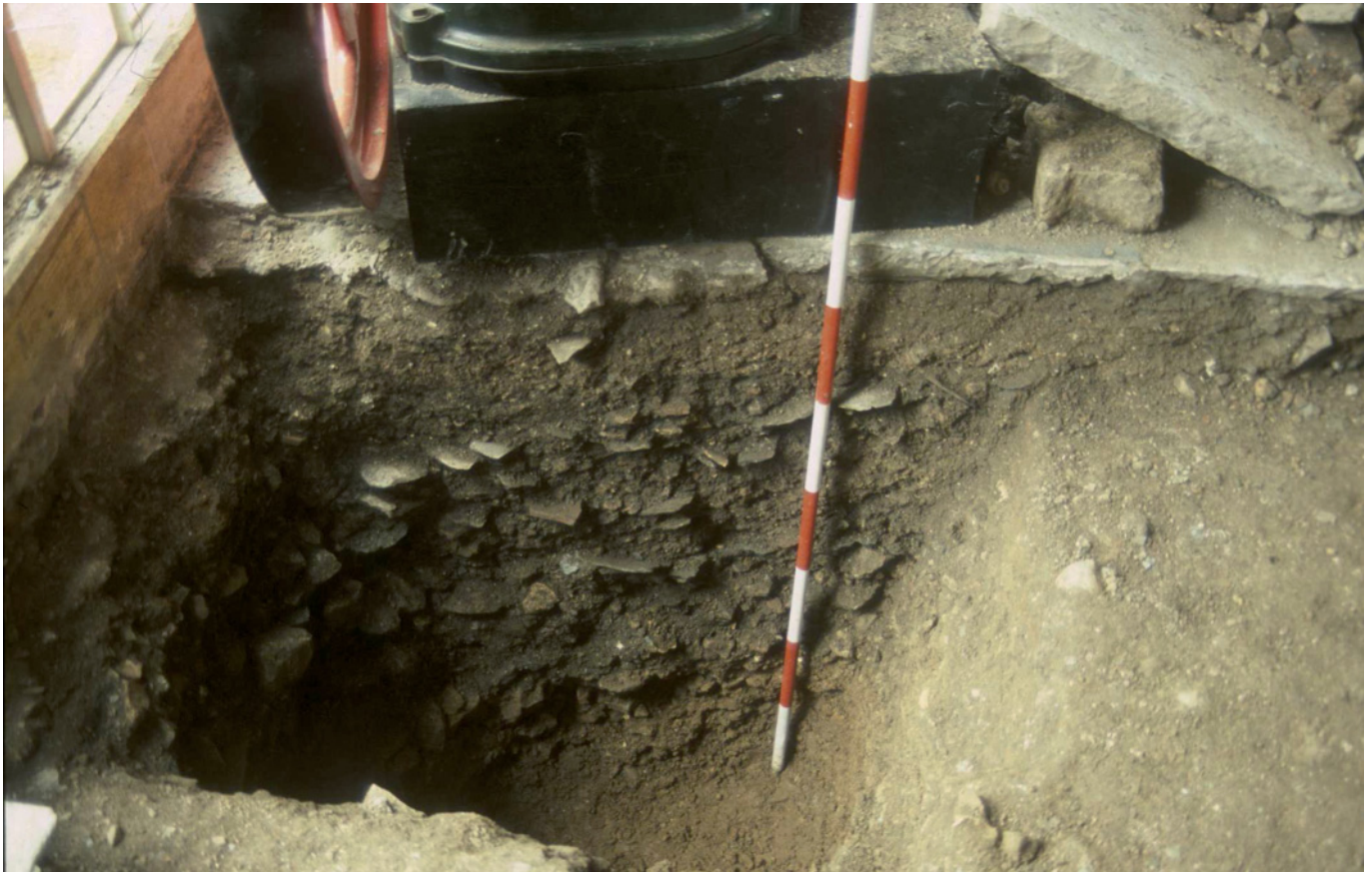


Figure 6: Trench G showing the large pit or wall trench 287

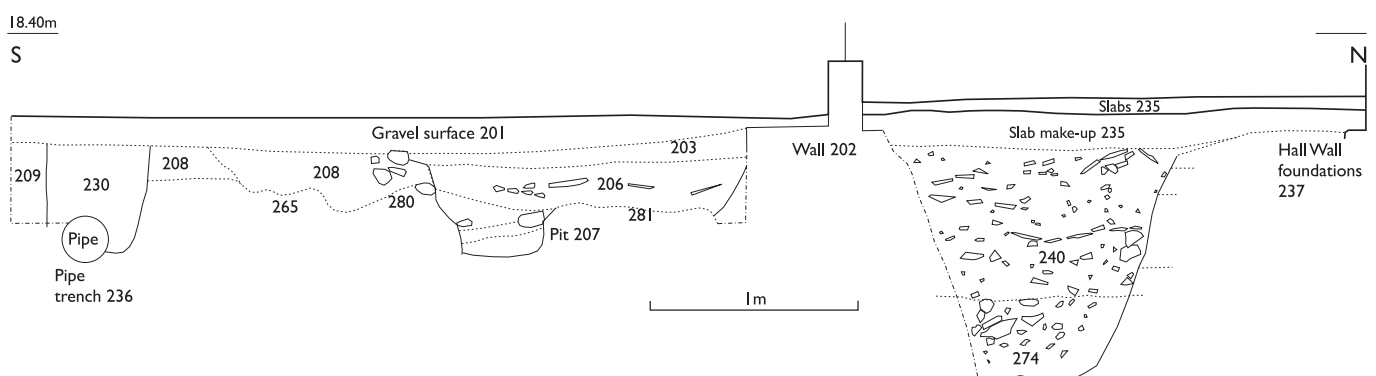


Figure 7: Section of Trenches F and G