

***A Watching Brief at
Much Wenlock Museum,
Shropshire, 2011***

by
H R Hannaford

Archaeology Service



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**A WATCHING BRIEF AT
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SHROPSHIRE, 2011**

by
H R HANNAFORD MifA

A report for
Shropshire Council Museum Service

Archaeology Service

Historic Environment Team, Environment,
Shirehall, Abbey Foregate, Shrewsbury, SY2 6ND
Tel: (01743) 252575 Fax: (01743) 252505



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SUMMARY

In June and July 2011 groundworks were carried out associated with the rebuilding of a first floor extension at the Much Wenlock Museum, Shropshire. The study area lay at the centre of the historic core of the medieval town in an area known to have been occupied since the late Roman or early Saxon period. It was considered possible that archaeological remains, including human remains, might be encountered during the groundworks for the development. A watching brief on the development was carried out by the Archaeology Service, Shropshire Council. The watching brief recorded a pit and the foundation remains of a wall of probable late medieval date, and yard deposits of 18th-19th century date.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Much Wenlock is a small Shropshire town, situated about 18km southeast of Shrewsbury, on the A458 Shrewsbury to Bridgnorth road. Much Wenlock Museum is located on the corner of High Street and Wilmore Street in the middle of the historic town centre.

1.2 The town of Much Wenlock is known to have been occupied since Roman times. Chance finds have provided evidence for Roman settlement, and a late Roman to early Saxon period cemetery has been found at the centre of the modern town. A monastery was founded at Wenlock some time after 654 AD and remains of Anglo-Saxon settlement have been found in The Square. The town was developed by the monastery in the medieval period and was established as a borough with a weekly market by the 13th century. The town declined following the Dissolution, though limestone quarrying and lime burning provided some growth in the 18th and 19th centuries.

1.3 In June 2011 work began on the construction of a first floor extension to Much Wenlock Museum following the removal of an existing first floor extension. The work entailed the reduction in the ground floor level within the area of the extension by about 0.8m depth. A strip 1m wide by a further 0.8m depth was also excavated along the inside of the north wall of the extension.

1.4 It was considered possible that archaeological remains relating to the development of the settlement of the town from Roman times through to the post-medieval period might survive within the study area.

1.5 Because of the potential significance of the archaeological resource it was considered necessary that the groundworks associated with the development be accompanied by the implementation of a programme of archaeological work. The Archaeology Service, was commissioned by Shropshire Council Museum Service to undertake this programme of archaeological work in accordance with a scheme of investigation approved by the Historic Environment Team, Shropshire Council.

1.6 The aim of the programme of archaeological work was to allow for the preservation by record of any archaeological remains that were encountered during the groundworks.

2 ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 The town of Much Wenlock is known to have been occupied since Roman times, and evidence for a Roman settlement has come from a number of chance finds from the town. An antiquarian discovery was made of a Romano-British figurine from near to St Owen's Well, one of the town's three ancient wells, and this gave rise to a suggestion that the town was the centre of a pagan water-cult (Historic Environment Record [HER] 00328). Residual Roman pottery was found in excavations at the Priory in 1991, and possibly from excavations in 1901 and 1962-3. There has also been a suggestion that the earliest phase of building at the Priory Church identified in the 1901 and 1962-3 excavations was of Roman date, although this has been disputed on a number of grounds. (Buteux, 1996, 2-4; Staelens 1985 & 1995)

2.2 A late Roman or early Saxon cemetery within the modern town was discovered in 1983-4, when three burials (HER 03768) were found beneath 23 Barrow Street, and subsequently provided radio-carbon dates ranging from the 3rd to 7th centuries AD. (Buteux, 1996, 2-4; Staelens 1985 & 1995).

2.3 A monastery at Wenlock was founded some time after 654 AD (HER 00307). Anglo-Saxon settlement remains in the form of timber lined pits and Stafford-ware pottery were identified during salvage recording in The Square in 1988 (HER 05013). In c. 1080, the abbey was (again) re-founded as a Benedictine monastery. The religious house and settlement at Much Wenlock were recorded in the Domesday Survey of 1086 (Thorn and Thorn, 1986). A weekly market was established by 1224, and by the mid 13th century the settlement was calling itself a borough (Buteux, 1996, 2). The monastery was dissolved in 1540, and most of the abbey buildings were allowed to decay.

2.4 Cloth manufacture was the town's principal industry in the medieval period, and continued to be so through the earlier post-medieval period. The manufacture of clay tobacco pipes had become the town's chief industry by the early 18th century. Stagnation in the 18th century was followed by a period of growth in the early 19th century resulting from increased limestone quarrying and lime burning. Although some limestone quarrying continues on Wenlock Edge just outside the town, lime-burning in the area had ceased by the early 20th century (Buteux, 1996, 2).

2.5 A watching brief was carried out on work at the Museum in 1970, though there are no records of the results. The Museum lies within the area of the town covered by the Central Marches Historic Towns Survey (Buteux, 1996). Between January and May 2000, the Archaeology Service, Shropshire County Council, carried out a watching brief on the refurbishment of the culvert which carries a brook through the town. The culvert, of limestone rubble construction, was seen to have been built piecemeal in several stages between the late 17th and the late 19th centuries (Hannaford, 2000). In September/October 2001, the Archaeology Service undertook three site visits to a development at 65 High Street, which adjoins the current study area. The remains of a stone cellar set 7.5m back from the street frontage were recorded beneath the existing concrete yard surface. A small stone-lined culvert and a stone-lined well were also recorded in the yard at the rear of the plot (Hannaford, 2001; HER 08068).

3 THE WATCHING BRIEF

3.1 The groundworks for the redevelopment of the Museum's annexe involved the excavation of two test pits, a trench for reinforcing the north wall of the structure, and the reduction of the existing floor level to accommodate a new floor. This work took place in June 2011 and was carried out by machine under archaeological supervision.

3.2 Two test pits were excavated inside the northwest and the northeast corners of the annexe (Fig. 2a). Test pit A was located in the northeast corner and was excavated to a depth of 1.4m. The lowest deposit encountered was a very dark grey brown silty clay loam (Fig. 3a; 12) 0.45m thick which lay below a very dark grey loam (14) 0.25m thick with charcoal and mortar flecks, probably a yard soil. On top of this layer was a stone surface (7) of limestone fragments in a dark grey loam, in turn covered by a further layer of very dark grey loam (6) yard soil. Above this were a hardcore layer (5) and a thin mortar surface (4) beneath more hardcore (3) and surface debris (1) resulting from the removal of the modern concrete floor (2) just before the watching brief commenced.

3.3 Test pit B was sited in the northwest corner of the annexe and was excavated to depth of 1.3m. The natural subsoil was seen at the base of this test pit and comprised a buff clay (Fig. 3b; 17); above the natural lay a dark grey brown silty clay loam (12). This in turn lay beneath a deposit of very dark grey loam (14) with charcoal and mortar, which in turn lay beneath a very dark grey sandy silty loam (13). The foundations of the north wall (10) of the annexe had been cut into this layer, although the deposits here had been disturbed by drainage trenches.

3.4 A trench for reinforcing work was also excavated between the pits alongside the internal face of the building's north wall (10). The trench was excavated to width of 0.7m and a depth of 1.6m below the original floor level (or 0.8m below the reduced floor level). The natural buff clay subsoil (Fig. 2b; 17) and the dark brown silty clay loam (12) were seen in the lower part of the trench, beneath a thin layer (0.10m thick) of light greyish brown clay loam (21) with charcoal and mortar flecks, which produced two sherds of 14th-16th century medieval pottery. In the northwest corner of the building, a large boulder (22) and smaller rock fragments had been cut into these deposits. Further to the east, a flagstone (15) had been set on end in a pit (19) filled with a grey silty sandy clay (18), which produced a sherd of 14th-16th century medieval pottery. The bulk of the pit lay beyond the trench line and was not explored. Further to the east again, the clay loam (12) had been cut by the foundation cut (25) for a limestone wall (24) aligned north/south at right angles to the existing annexe. The boulder and the top of the wall was sealed by the dark grey loam layer (14), within which lay a stack of stones which may have represented demolition material derived from this wall. The top of the upright flagstone protruded up into the soil layer (14).

3.5 The floor level was reduced by c.0.8m throughout the annexe. The light greyish brown clay loam (21) was seen to extend south into the central and western parts of the site, as did the dark grey sandy loam (14) which here produced some 17th-18th century pottery, a fragment of medieval floor tile, and a single sherd of 14th-16th century medieval pottery. This deposit had the appearance of a yard soil. In turn it lay below a very dark grey sandy silty loam (13) which produced a slightly later collection of 18th – 19th century pottery and glass, and again was typical of a late post-medieval yard soil.

3.6 No other significant archaeological features or deposits were seen during the watching brief.

4 DISCUSSION

4.1 A number of features were seen in the study area which probably dated to the later medieval period. These comprised the boulder (22) set into deposits in the northwest corner of the study area, which was sealed by a yard soil (14) of post-medieval date. The fill (18) of the pit (19) with the upright flagstone (15), also located in the northwestern corner of the area, produced a single late medieval pottery sherd. Neither the precise form nor the purpose of the pit were determined, as it mostly lay beyond the area of excavation for the reinforcing trench. The foundation remains of a wall (24) were also seen to run from north to south into the study area. No direct dating evidence was recovered for this wall, but it had evidently gone out of use and been demolished by the time it was sealed by the post-medieval yard soil (14).

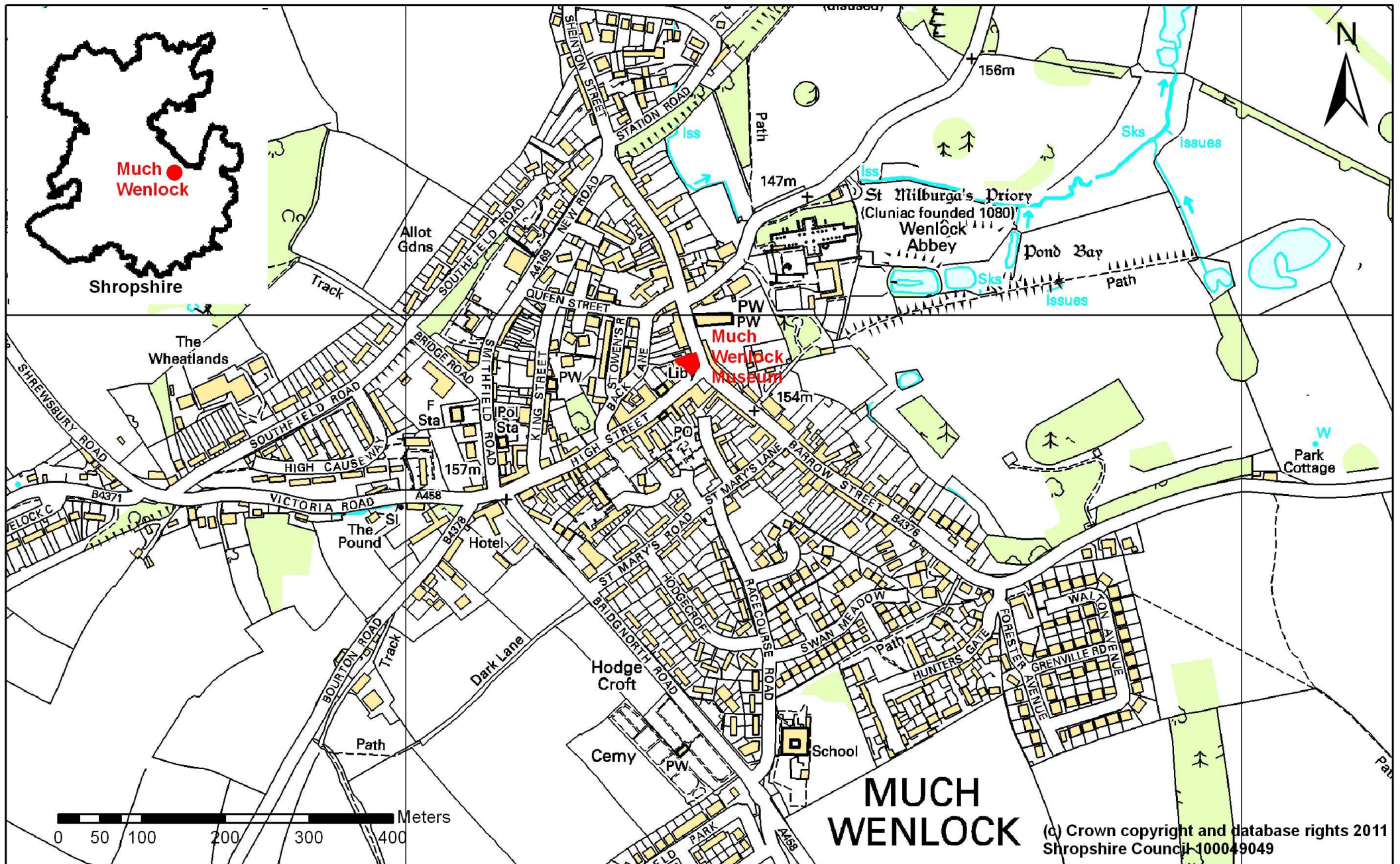
4.2 In the post-medieval period the study area would appear to have been part of an open space or yard, as evidenced by a sequence of yard deposits and surfaces of 18th and 19th century date (14, 7, & 13). These yard deposits had been cut into by the foundations of the north wall of the annexe, which presumably dates to the later 19th century.

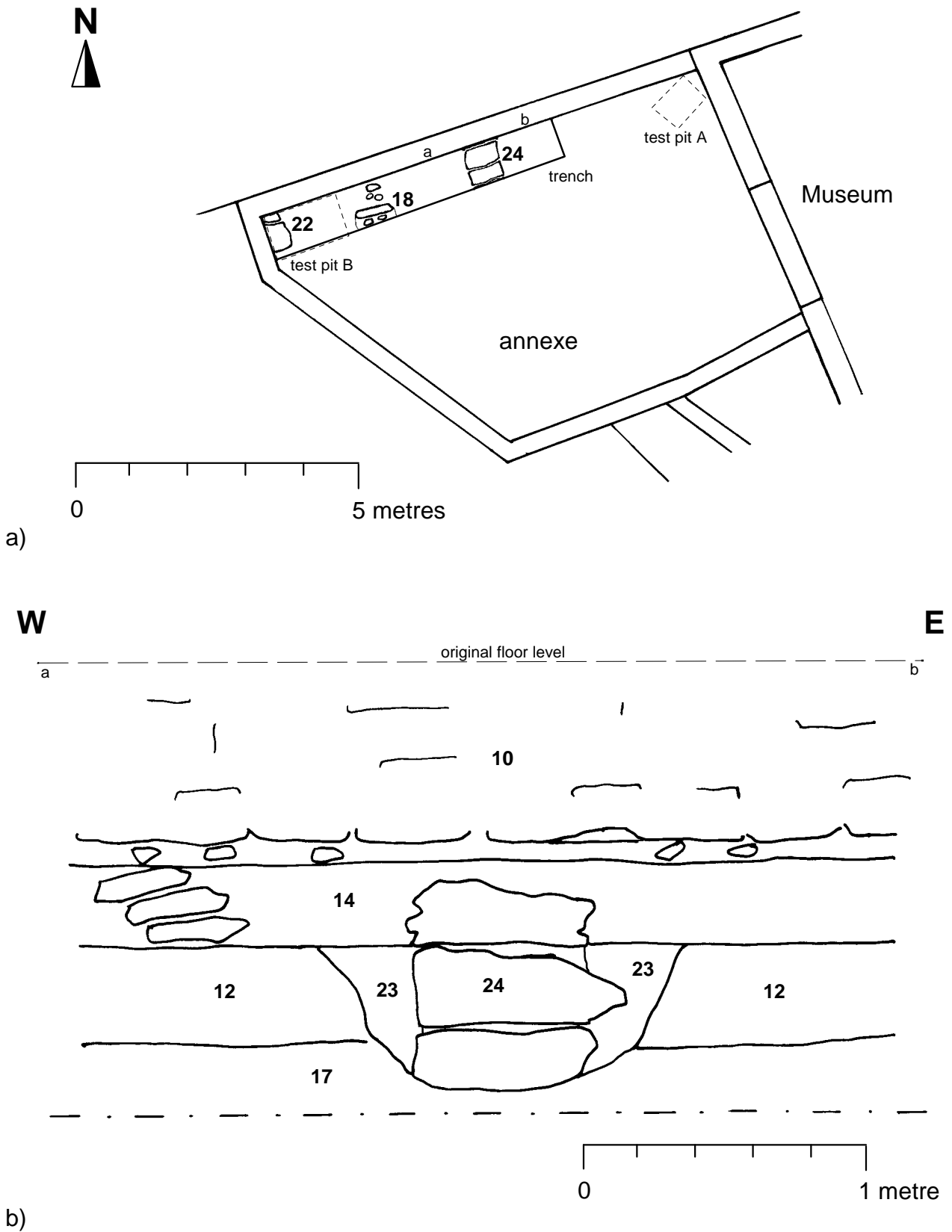
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ABBREVIATIONS

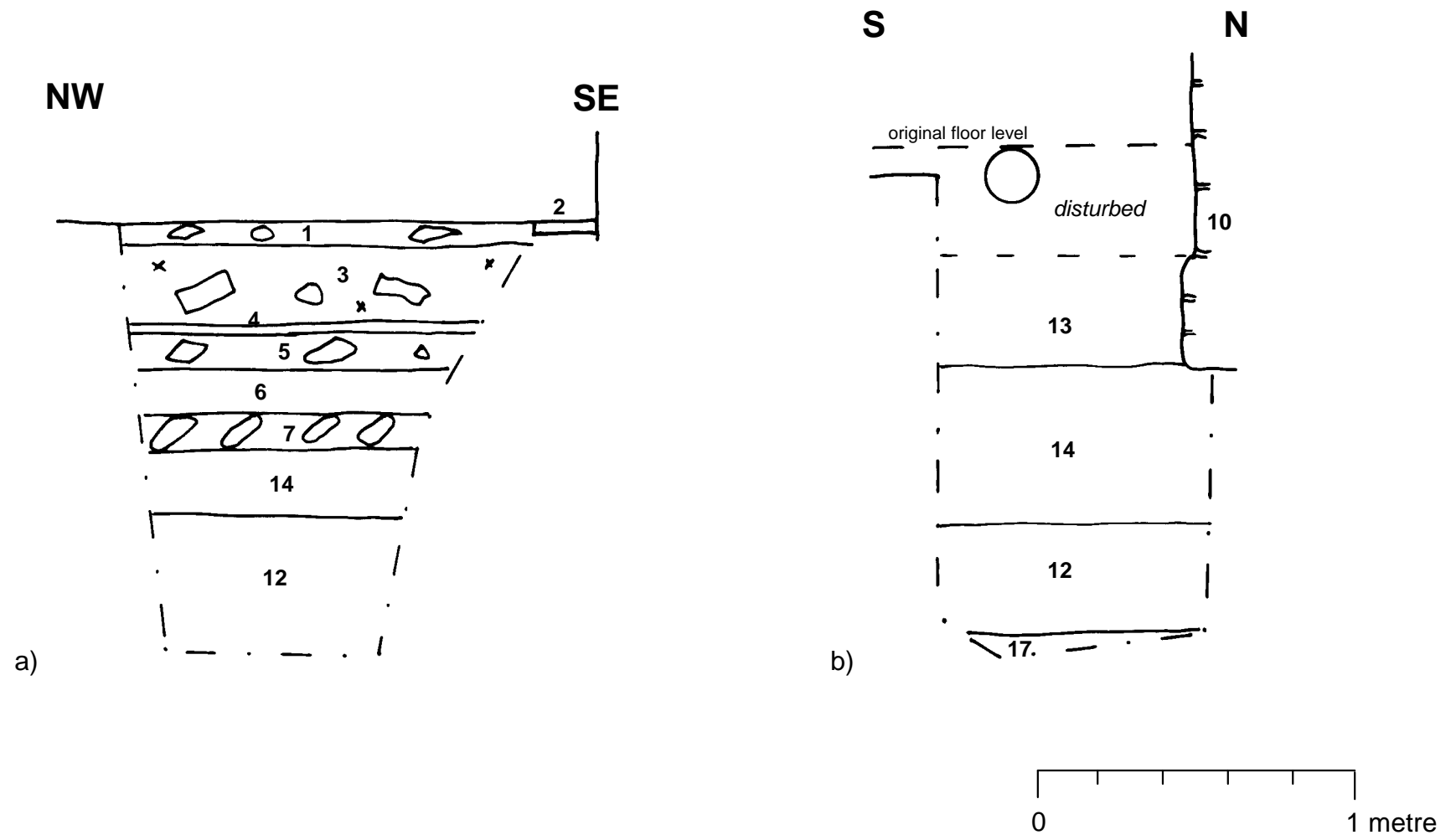
HER	Historic Environment Record, Shropshire Council
OS	Ordnance Survey
SA	Shropshire Archives, Castle Gates, Shrewsbury
TSAS	Transactions of the Shropshire Archaeological Society
TSAHS	Transactions of the Shropshire Archaeological and Historical Society





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Figure 2: a) The study area, plan view, showing principal features; 1:100 scale; b) the foundation remains of wall 24, south-facing section; 1:20 scale



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Figure 3: a) Test pit A, east-facing section; b) test pit B, southwest-facing section; 1:20 scale