

***A Watching Brief at  
Sebastians Hotel and Restaurant,  
43–45 Willow Street, Oswestry, Shropshire***

by  
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Archaeology Service



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SEBASTIANS HOTEL AND RESTAURANT,  
43–45 WILLOW STREET, OSWESTRY, SHROPSHIRE**

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A report for  
SEBASTIANS BOUTIQUE HOTEL AND RESTAURANT

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## **ILLUSTRATIONS**

Figure 1: Location of the study area

Photo 1: The study area and foundation trenches, looking northeast

Photo 2: The deposits in the foundation trenches, looking southeast (scale bar: 1m)

## **SUMMARY**

*In December 2011 groundworks were carried out for an extension to Sebastians Hotel and Restaurant, 43–45 Willow Street, Oswestry, Shropshire. The study area lay within the historic core of the medieval and post-medieval town, and it was considered possible that archaeological 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. No significant archaeological features or deposits were seen during the course of the watching brief.*

## **1 INTRODUCTION**

**1.1** Oswestry is situated in northwest Shropshire about 25 km northwest of Shrewsbury town centre. In December 2011 work began on the erection of an extension following the removal of an existing building to the rear of Sebastians Hotel and Restaurant, 43–45 Willow Street, Oswestry, Shropshire (NGR SJ 2887 2972).

**1.2** The proposed development site lies within the historic core of Oswestry, as defined by the Central Marches Historic Towns Survey (Dalwood, 1996), and within a group of tenement plots which are thought to have been present by at least the 14th century (Shropshire Council Historic Environment Record [HER] no. 05797). Willow Street is documented in an Extent of 1393 as Wyllya Strete (Dalwood, 1996). 43-45 Willow Street (HER 18713) is a Grade II Listed Building (no. 255600) of timber framed construction of 17th century date faced with an 18th century brick frontage. The building is currently in use as a hotel and restaurant.

**1.3** 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.

**1.4** The Archaeology Service, Shropshire Council, was commissioned on behalf of the owners of Sebastians Boutique Hotel and Restaurant to carry out this programme of archaeological work in accordance with a written scheme of investigation (WSI) approved by the Historic Environment Team, Shropshire Council.

**1.5** 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 Prehistoric and Roman Activity** Human activity in Oswestry in the Bronze Age is evidenced by a burial site found near the modern town centre. In 1811 two Bronze Age urns (HER 04287) were dug up in Coney Green (NGR SJ 293 295), the smaller of which contained human bones (presumably cremated). By the late Bronze Age (c. 1000-700BC) there was a settlement at Old Oswestry hillfort. The hillfort appears to have been occupied through to the late Iron Age, and there is some evidence also for Roman occupation in vicinity of the hillfort (Hughes, 1991). In the modern town itself, a 4th century Roman coin and a roof-tile (HER 05700) have been found at The Cross (SJ 2901 2958), the roof-tile suggesting the presence of a Roman building in the vicinity (Dalwood, 1996, 6 & 17). At the end of the Roman period, the linear boundary earthwork known as Wat's Dyke was built, running for approximately 65km from the River Morda at Maesbrook, near Oswestry, to the Dee Estuary at Holywell. The line of the dyke runs through the eastern side of the modern town.

**2.2 The Medieval Town** Oswestry is not mentioned by name in Domesday, and it would appear that until the Norman Conquest the town was a minor settlement within the manor of Meresberie (Maesbury). However, a reference to "luvre" in the entry for Maesbury has been identified as the Norman castle at Oswestry, built by Reginald the Sheriff in the late 11th century (Thorn, 1986). Following the Norman Conquest, Oswestry became an important strategic military site. The castle was used as a depot for major campaigns against the Welsh and was a base for defensive cavalry (Dalwood, 1996). The town was burnt by King John in 1215 and by Llewellyn ap Iorwerth in 1233; it was attacked by the Welsh twice in 1282; and burnt again by Owain Glyndywr in 1400

*A Watching Brief at Sebastians Hotel and Restaurant, 43–45 Willow Street, Oswestry, Shropshire* (Dalwood, *ibid.*). In the English Civil War the castle was re-fortified by Royalist forces in 1643, but was captured and slighted by the Parliamentarians the following year.

The town of Oswestry developed rapidly as a regional market centre after the Norman conquest. It was granted a charter in 1189, the right to hold a fair in 1228, and a market in 1262 (Watson, 1986). There were 46 burgages in 1276 and 127 by 1301, and by the end of the 14th century the town had expanded beyond its gates. There is documentary evidence for various trades within the medieval town, but the mainstay of its economy in the late medieval and post-medieval periods was the sale of Welsh cloth. (Dalwood, *ibid.*)

**2.3 The Town Walls** The town walls were probably built in the second half of the 13th century; a murage grant was made in 1257, and there were further grants in 1277-8. By 1602, the town walls were in a poor state of repair (Dalwood, *ibid.*), and they were demolished in c.1660 after the Civil War, although the gates survived until the end of the 18th century (HER 00493).

**2.4 The Post-medieval Town** The wool trade continued to be an important element of the town's economy in the post-medieval period - in the 16th and 17th centuries it held a monopoly in the trade. Trade in cattle was also important to the town, and a number of other trades are documented. There were three major fires in the middle of the 16th century, the latest of which, in 1567, affected the area around St Oswalds's Church, and another in 1742. The turnpiking of the roads from the town in the late 18th century, and the arrival of the railway in the mid-19th century led to further marked economic development.

**2.5 Willow Street** Willow Street is one of the town's principal streets, and was once guarded by a gate in the town walls. The street has been known variously as *Wyllya Strete*, *Stryd Wylyw*, *Wulli-Gate*. It has been suggested that both street and gate took their names from the Welsh word 'gwaliau' meaning "walls" and referring to the town walls or the walls of the castle's outer bailey. Most of the medieval houses in Willow Street were demolished in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Like the other gates the Willow Gate was demolished in 1782. (DSH, Oswestry Town Trail - Willow Street)

**2.6 Previous archaeological work** There has been no previous archaeological work on the current development site itself. The town wall was observed during construction work prior to 1920 in a rear garden of a house somewhere between 55 and 65 Willow Street. The wall was 6 feet thick and 4 feet high, bonded in hard mortar (Watkin, 1920, p111). In c. 1980 trial excavation in the garden to the rear of 55 Willow Street, 40m to the north of the study area, located a wall of large stone blocks (HER 05710), interpreted as part of a medieval building, associated with 15th century pottery (Pratt, 1980, p39-40). And a watching brief in 2003 on a housing development to the rear of Castle House on the east side of Willow Street revealed stone foundations and post-medieval deposits.

### 3 THE WATCHING BRIEF

**3.1** The foundation trenches for the current development were excavated by machine under archaeological supervision. The trenches were excavated to a width of 0.5m and a depth of between 0.7m and 1.0m.

**3.2** The natural subsoil consisted of a light brown sandy clay (Table 1; 5) which lay at a depth of about 0.7m below the existing yard surface. The natural lay beneath a deposit

of former yard soil (4) of a very dark brown loam, which contained brick and slate fragments and mortar, and some 18<sup>th</sup> & 19<sup>th</sup> century pottery. This yard soil had been reduced in level on the southeast side of the study area in the past, and here lay beneath a modern yard surface of brick pavers (1) on a bedding of orange sand (2) and grey stone chippings (3).

**3.3** Along the northwest side of the study area, running back from the southwest end of the existing building was a limestone and brick wall (6) bonded in lime mortar. The wall ran southwest for about 3.5m before apparently turning to the southeast. The wall had been cut into the natural subsoil and may have marked the site of a former cellar.

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

Text Ref	Context No.	Category	Description	Finds
1	1001	Surface	Brick pavers – modern yard surface	N/a
2	1002	Layer	Orange sand – bedding for modern yard surface	None
3	1003	Layer	Grey stone chippings – bedding for modern yard surface	None
4	1004	Layer	Very dark brown loam – buried yard soil	Ctp (18thC); Pottery (18 <sup>th</sup> -19 <sup>th</sup> C) (discarded)
5	1005	Layer	Light brown sandy clay – natural subsoil	None
6	1006	Wall	Limestone & brick (19thC) in lime mortar – 19 <sup>th</sup> C wall	N/a

Table 1: List of contexts recorded during the watching brief

## 4 REFERENCES

**Dalwood, H**, 1996: *Archaeological Assessment of Oswestry, Shropshire*, Hereford and Worcester County Council Archaeology Service Report no. 333

**Discovering Shropshire's History** website: Oswestry Town Trail - Willow Street  
<http://www.shropshirehistory.org.uk/html/search/verb/GetRecord/theme:20070306160549>)

**Frost, P**, 2003: *Castle House Yard, Willow Street, Oswestry: Archaeological Watching Brief*, Castlering Archaeology Report No. 153

**Pratt, D**, 1980: *Oswestry Town Wall*, Border Counties Archaeology Group Report

**Thorn, F and C (eds)**, 1986: *Domesday Book: Shropshire*, Phillimore, Chichester

**Watkin, I**, 1920: *Oswestry*, Oswestry

## ABBREVIATIONS

<b>CPAT</b>	Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust
<b>DSH</b>	Discovering Shropshire's History website
<b>HER</b>	Historic Environment Record, Shropshire Council
<b>OS</b>	Ordnance Survey
<b>SA</b>	Shropshire Archives, Castle Gates, Shrewsbury
<b>TSAS</b>	Transactions of the Shropshire Archaeological Society
<b> TSAHS</b>	Transactions of the Shropshire Archaeological and Historical Society

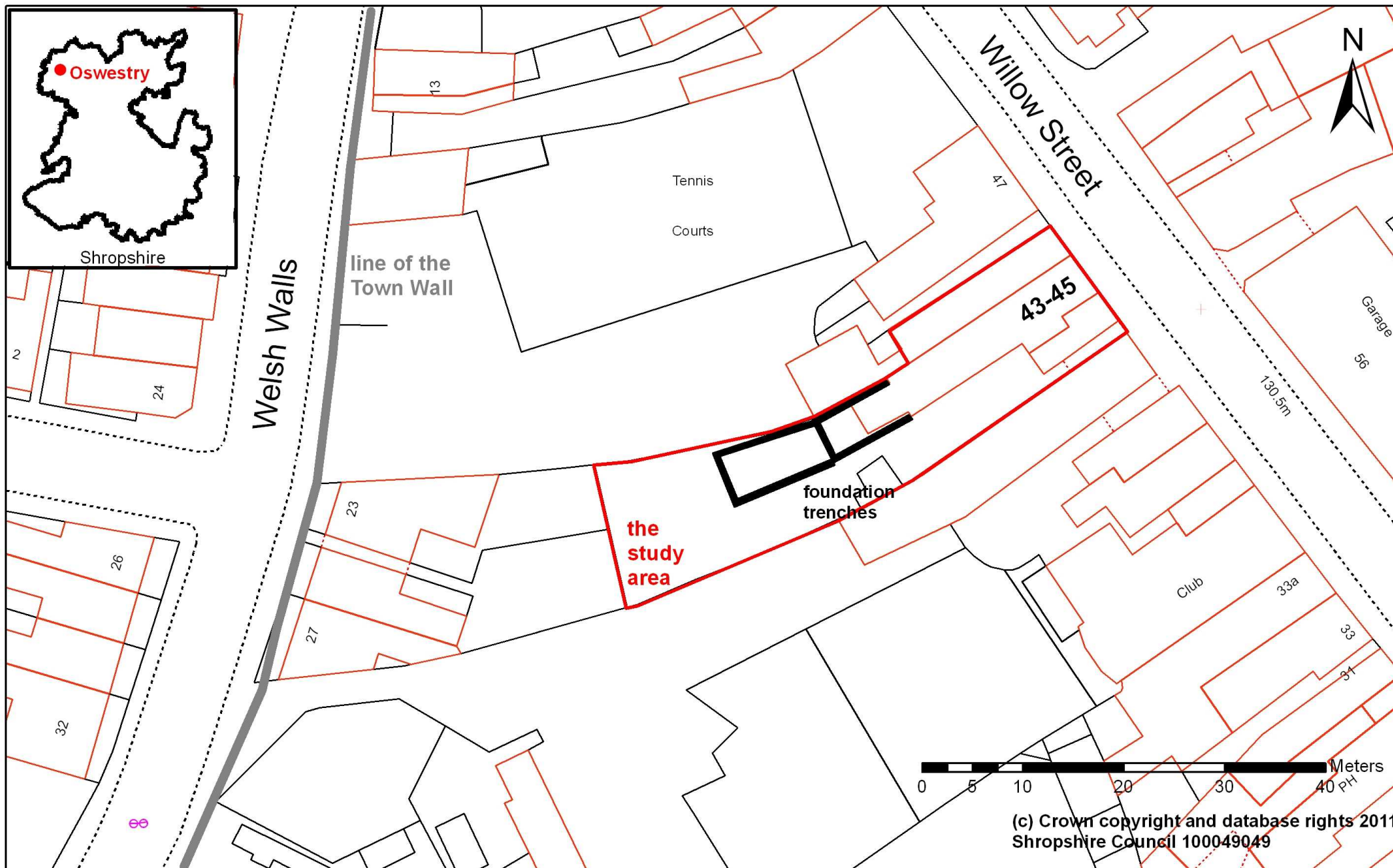






Photo 1: The study area and foundation trenches, looking northeast



Photo 2: The deposits in the foundation trenches, looking southeast (scale bar: 1m)