

*A Watching Brief on Alterations to the
**Whitchurch Civic Centre, Whitchurch,
Shropshire, 2013***

by
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Archaeology Service



**A WATCHING BRIEF ON ALTERATIONS TO THE
WHITCHURCH CIVIC CENTRE, WHITCHURCH, SHROPSHIRE, 2013**

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A Report for

**COMMISSIONING AND PROCUREMENT,
SHROPSHIRE COUNCIL**

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SUMMARY

In 2013 the Archaeology Service, Shropshire Council carried out a watching brief on groundworks associated with alterations to the Whitchurch Civic Centre on the High Street, Whitchurch, Shropshire. The watching brief recorded a post medieval surface and yard deposits to the rear of the Civic Centre, and some undated deposits on the frontage.

The writer would like to thank Paveaways Ltd and their staff for their co-operation and assistance with the watching brief

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 In September 2013 work began on alterations and improvements to the Civic Centre, High Street, Whitchurch, Shropshire (NGR SJ 5414 4160). The High Street lies within the historic core of the town.

1.2 The area around the High Street, Whitchurch, is known to have been occupied since Roman times. The Civic Centre lies within the area of an early Roman fort (Historic Environment Record [HER] no. 00909) and the heart of a later Roman civil settlement (HER 02702) alongside the Wroxeter to Chester Roman road (HER 00066). The study area also lies at the core of the medieval town (HER 05959) and post-medieval town (HER 05960) of Whitchurch. Previous episodes of building work on the development site in the 19th and 20th centuries have produced finds of Roman pottery. Archaeological evaluations and watching briefs immediately opposite and adjacent to the site have revealed surviving significant archaeological deposits. It was considered probable therefore that archaeological remains relating to the Roman, medieval and post-medieval development of this part of the town might survive within the study area.

1.3 Because of the potential archaeological significance of the proposed development site, an Archaeological Desk-Based Assessment was carried out as part of the planning application for the scheme. The assessment recommended that the development be accompanied by a programme of archaeological work in the form of a watching brief on destructive groundworks in order to record any archaeological deposits that might be disturbed by the development.

1.4 The Archaeology Service, Shropshire Council, was commissioned by Commissioning and Procurement, Shropshire Council, to carry out the programme of archaeological work. The watching brief was undertaken between October and December 2013.

2 THE HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 A full desk-based assessment for the development of the Whitchurch Civic Centre was produced to accompany the planning application for the work. An abbreviated version of the historical assessment is reproduced here.

2.2 Roman period (43AD – 410AD) Whitchurch has its origins in the Roman period. The Roman road from Wroxeter (Viroconium Cornoviorum) to Chester (Deva) (HER 00066) runs through the town and is followed by the modern High Street. A Roman auxiliary fort (HER 00909) was constructed on the line of the road in the first century AD, and is thought to have covered the area that is today bounded to the southwest by Newton, by Yardington and St Alkmunds to the northwest, by St Mary's Street to the northeast, and by Pepper Street and Bluegates to the southeast (Buteux, 1996, pp6-7). The fort appears to have gone out of use by the end of the 1st century AD, and was succeeded by a civilian settlement (HER 02702), occupying the area of the fort, but also spreading out along the road to the south. Industrial activity and stone buildings of Roman date (HER 02718) have also been seen during their destruction by building work in the early 1980s to the north of Yardington. The main axis of the Roman street pattern (HER 05869) appears to have been Watling Street, followed by the modern High Street. There have been several sightings of Roman road surfaces, including one just to the southwest of the development site (Buteux, 1996, pp6-7). In the later 2nd century, town defences were constructed, comprising a ditch and rampart, with a stone wall added to the rampart at a later date (HER 05868). The study area lies within the circuit of these defences. In the 2nd and 3rd centuries timber buildings in the area to the west of Watling Street (HER 05914) were replaced by stone structures set back from the street frontage. Roman pottery of 2nd century date and a coin of Trajan (AD 98-117) have been found at the Victoria Hotel, High Street (HER 05912, site 32). Industrial activities including metalworking and salt production, dating to the 4th century, have also been recorded within the defences in the Newtown area to the west of Watling Street. Less is known about the occupation of the area east of Watling Street (HER 05915) - which includes the development site - although there have been a number of finds of Roman material from this area. In 1984, late 1st – early 2nd century Roman pottery was found during foundation work to the rear of no. 33 High Street (HER 05832, site 33). Finds have also been recovered from the site of the Civic Centre itself (section 4.2.2, above).

2.3 Early medieval (5th century - 1066AD) and Medieval (1066 – 1540) A Saxon settlement is inferred from the Domesday name for the settlement *Westune* (OE "west settlement"). The name *Whitchurch* derives from "white church", and the town was known from the late 12th or early 13th century as *Album Monasterium* and *Blancmustier*. (Thorn & Thorn, 1986, 4,13,1 & notes; Gelling, 1990, p310). At the time of the Domesday Survey of 1086, Whitchurch was held by William de Warenne from Roger of Montgomery, Earl of Shrewsbury; before the conquest it had been a royal manor held by King Harold. It was a large manor, with a number of members and outliers. The manor was held by the de Warennes for the next 200 years, before passing by descent and marriage to the Le Strange and de Bracy families. (Eyton, 1860, p23-5). A castle was built in the northeast part of the town centre, probably around 1100, in the Newtown, Castle Hill, and Yardington area. Archaeological evidence for the existence of town defences (HER 05867) has been found at Newtown Castle Hill. It is thought probable that the town defences date to the 12th century but they appear to have gone out of use by the end of the 14th century. (Buteux, 1996, p12.) The High Street (along the line of the former Roman road, Watling Street) will have continued to be the main thoroughfare through the settlement, and domestic and commercial buildings will have occupied the street frontage. These properties will have occupied burgage plots extending back for

some distance from the High Street frontage (HER 05919 & HER 05920). It is thought that the laying out of these burgage plots was more or less contemporary with the creation of the town defences in the 12th century. Chance finds and archaeological excavation have demonstrated that significant archaeological features and deposits of medieval date survive within the study area (Buteux, 1996).

2.4 Post-medieval (1540 – 1800) and Modern (1800 – present) Post-medieval occupation in the study area has been documented from archaeological excavation, but is principally evidenced by a number of standing buildings along both sides of the High Street. The reliable cartography for the study area dates from 1761 with the production of George Grey's plan of Whitchurch (Grey, 1761). The principal buildings here have been studied in some detail and published by Madge Moran; she describes High Street thus: (there is "no great display of timber framing – where it survives it is hidden behind brick or stuccoed facades", the exception being no. 21-3 High Street "The Old Shop" (Moran, 1999). Nevertheless, a number of the buildings on High Street are of post-medieval date and include several Listed Buildings.

2.5 The Whitchurch Civic Centre and Library. The present Whitchurch Civic Centre and Library is in the centre of the east side of High Street. The High Street and Bull ring continued in use as a market place throughout the post-medieval period. In 1637 Richard Hyde, bailiff to Thomas Egerton, the lord of the manor, built a market hall (HER 05872) at the bottom of the High Street "a little place in Whitchurch where poore people may sit in the dry and sell butter and cheese" (Anderton, 2009, p97). This was replaced in 1718 by a new brick and sandstone Town Hall and Corn Market (HER 12577). By the mid-19th century, the need for a new, larger, market hall was pressing, and in 1869 the Coach and Horse Inn and neighbouring houses were bought by the Local Board for the construction of a new Town Hall and Market (Anderton, 2009, p102). The layout of the buildings on the Coach and Horses site is shown on a plan of 1761 (SA 212/479/4), and a rare early photograph survives of the Coach and Horses Inn before its demolition, showing it to have a plain, brick frontage. The Town Hall and Market (HER 05870) was built by John Stringer of Sandbach to designs by the architect Thomas M Lockwood of Chester, was completed at a cost of £6,100, and was opened in 1872, the occasion being marked by a ball (with tickets on sale at 10s 6d). The Local Board had offices on the ground floor, on the High Street frontage, alongside a corn market, with a general market and a small fish market behind. On the first floor was a large hall, the Assembly Rooms. The layout of the ground floor of the Market Hall, Corn Exchange, and Fish Market is shown on the Ordnance Survey Town Plan of Whitchurch of 1880 (OS, 1880;). The Market Hall was enlarged in 1902 (OS 1901). In 1941 fire destroyed the Assembly Rooms (then in use as the Regent Cinema), and considerable damage was done to the Corn Exchange underneath and to the reference library (although exhibits from the museum and art gallery housed there were rescued). Nevertheless, the market continued in use into the 1950s. Plans made of the Town Hall and Market in 1956 and held by Shropshire Archives show that cellars covered the whole of the front of the Town Hall building for a distance of 15.9m back from the street frontage (SA DA15/701/29). Soon after 1970 the site was cleared and the present Civic Centre was erected in 1982. Two town houses on St Mary's Street (Nos 10 and 12) were also demolished (HER 14048). (Anderton, 2009, p104-7).

3 THE WATCHING BRIEF

3.1 In October 2013 an excavation was carried out to the rear of the Civic Centre for the relocation of an electricity substation. A trench 3.5m by 3m in plan by 0.6m deep was excavated by mechanical excavator under archaeological supervision.

3.2 The lowest deposit disturbed by these excavations was a former yard soil (Fig. 2a; 5 & 10) composed of a dark grey brown sandy loam containing brick and tile fragments. This deposit was seen at a depth of about 0.5m below the present ground surface; the contents indicated that it was post-medieval in date, and suggests the probable survival of earlier deposits lying underneath. In the northern part of the trench a cobble surface (8) on a bedding of orange sand (9) was seen at a depth of 0.35m below the existing ground surface. The cobbles were in turn covered by traces of a tarmac surface (7) 0.3m below present ground level. These surfaces and deposits were all cut by a number of drain runs (3, 11) and sealed by the hardcore (2) and tarmac (1) of the present car park

3.3 In December 2013 a trench was excavated along the frontage of the Civic Centre and Library for the foundations for the new frontage. The trench was inspected following excavation. The lower levels of trench were not seen as the concrete for the new foundations was laid before a record could be made. The southern end of the trench ran across the cellars of the former Town Hall, and could be seen to have been cut into the backfill of these cellars. At the northern end of the trench, beneath 0.5m of a modern concrete surface (Fig. 2b; 13), hardcore (14), and disturbed ground (15) was a deposit of dark reddish brown sandy silt (16). This was not a natural deposit, but no dateable finds were visible in the exposed section. The deposit was seen to extend 2.5m south from the northern boundary of the site, before being cut by service trenches and the former Town Hall cellars. The deposit was only visible in the west side of the foundation trench as the eastern side coincided with disturbed soil from the construction of the existing Civic Centre frontage.

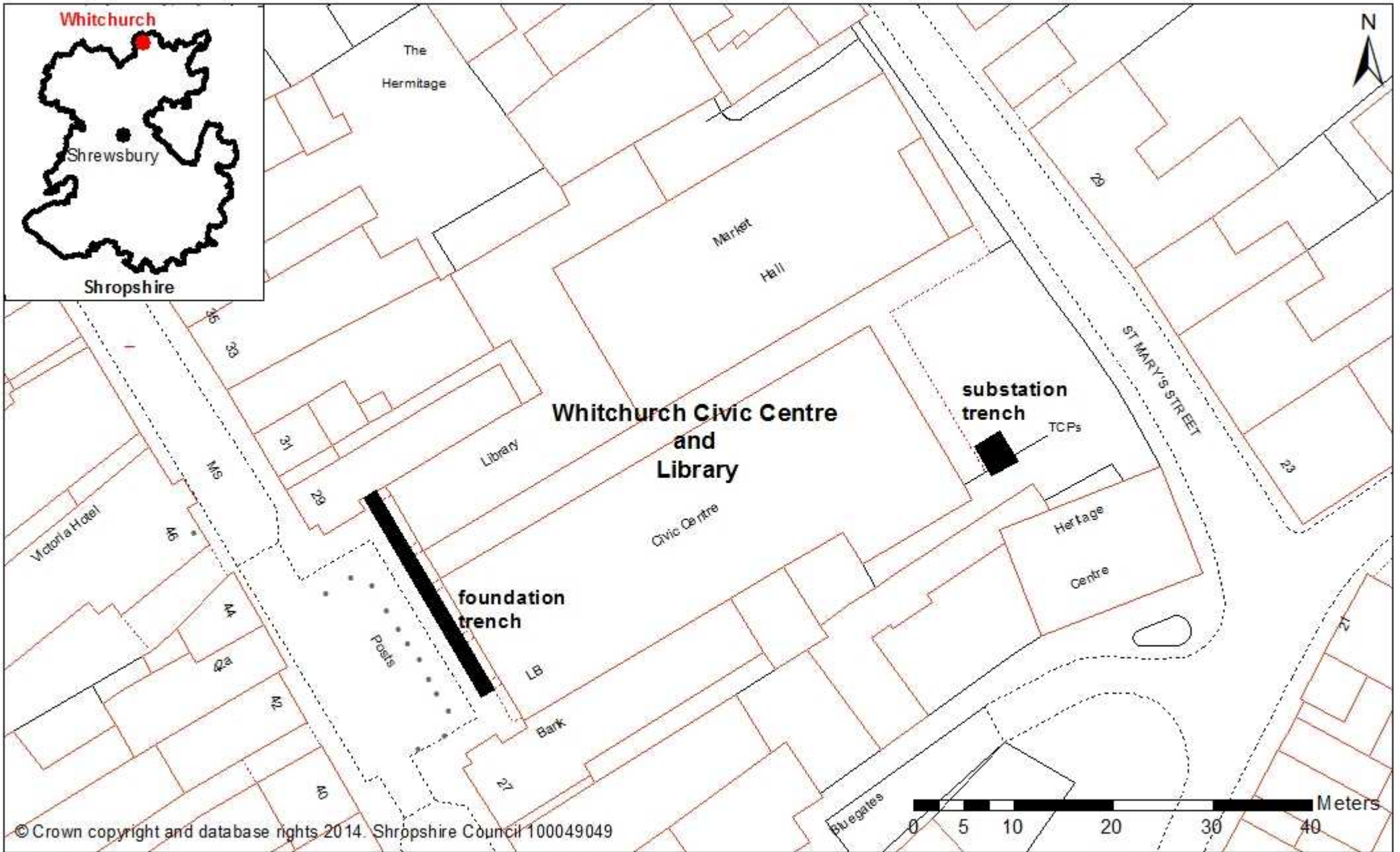
3.4 No other significant archaeological features or deposits seen in the work on the Civic Centre.

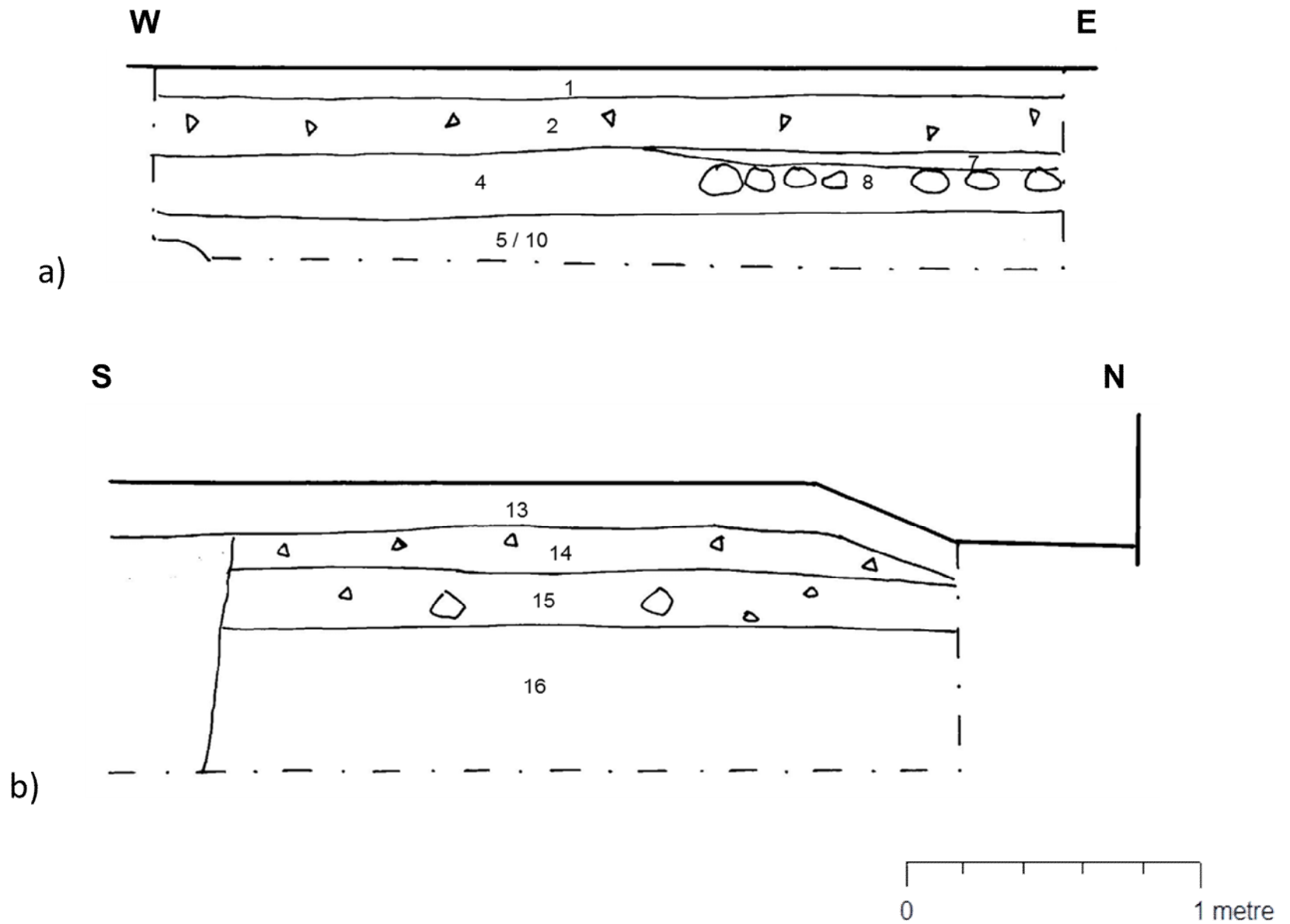
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ABBREVIATIONS

AOD	Above Ordnance Datum
BGS	British Geological Survey
CMHTS	Central Marches Historic Towns Survey
OS	Ordnance Survey
HER	County Historic Environment Record, Shirehall, Shrewsbury
SA	Shropshire Archives, Castle Gates, Shrewsbury
SNS	Shropshire News Sheet, Shropshire Archaeological Society
TCSVFC	Transactions of the Caradoc and Severn Valley Field Club
TAHS	Transactions of the Shropshire Archaeological and Historical Society
TSAS	Transactions of the Shropshire Archaeological Society
WHAG	Whitchurch History & Archaeology Group





WHITCHURCH CIVIC CENTRE 2013

Figure 2: a) South-facing section of the substation trench; b) east-facing section at the north end of the foundation trench; scale 1:20



Photo 1: The substation trench at the rear of the site, looking W



Photo 2: The cobble surface (8) in the substation trench, looking N



Photo 3: The deposits at the north end of the frontage foundation trench, looking NW