

**AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF
NEAR BINCHESTER ROMAN FORT,
BINCHESTER,
COUNTY DURHAM**

March 2016

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DOCUMENT VERIFICATION

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BINCHESTER ROMAN FORT, BINCHESTER,
COUNTY DURHAM**

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**An Archaeological Watching Brief near
Binchester Roman Fort, Binchester,
County Durham**

National Grid Reference: NZ 21031 31200

Site Code: BRF 15

Commissioning Client:

**Northern Powergrid
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March 2016**

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CONTENTS

	<i>page</i>
1. NON-TECHNICAL SUMMARY	1
2. INTRODUCTION	2
3. PROJECT AIMS AND RESEARCH OBJECTIVES	7
4. ARCHAEOLOGICAL METHODOLOGY	8
5. RESULTS: THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL SEQUENCE	9
6. POTTERY ASSESSMENT	12
7. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS	17
8. REFERENCES	14
9. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS AND CREDITS	16
 List of Figures	
Figure 1 Site Location	3
Figure 2 Pit location	4
Figure 3 Pits 1 and 4; Plans and sections	11

1. NON-TECHNICAL SUMMARY

- 1.1 An archaeological watching brief was undertaken September 30th to October 1st 2015 by Pre-Construct Archaeology Limited on land adjacent to Binchester Roman Fort (*Vinovia*), c. 1.5km to the north of Bishop Auckland in County Durham. The work was commissioned by Northern Powergrid ahead of the renewal of two overhead electricity poles which lie within the boundaries of the Scheduled Monument of Binchester Fort (List No. 1002362). Prior to the work commencing, on the advice of Historic England, the Department of Culture Media and Sport issued a condition of Scheduled Monument Consent for all invasive groundworks.
- 1.2 The site lies at central National Grid Reference NZ 21031 31200, within the boundaries of the scheduled monument of the extramural area of Binchester Roman Fort. The overhead line runs east–west on top of the terrace above the River Wear, to the south of the Roman fort. The line continues down the river terrace to the west and through a belt of woodland. Dere Street Roman road runs NW-SE to the east of the monitored area. Geophysical survey and excavations carried out since 2009 as part of the Durham-Stanford Research Project have demonstrated that extremely well-preserved archaeological remains of the extramural settlement survive on either side of Dere Street to the east of the fort, to the north of the monitored area.
- 1.3 Groundworks for the replacement of the overhead poles involved the mechanical excavation of two pits, one for each designated pole; Pit 1, Pole 88 and Pit 2, Pole 89. Three smaller trenches (Pits 3–5) were also mechanically excavated at the westernmost pole (Pole 89) for the installation of supporting cables.
- 1.4 The archaeological work involved monitoring all invasive groundworks. A deposit of possible Roman date was located within Pit 1, the easternmost pole (Pole 88). Roman pottery was observed within this deposit, but not recovered due to health and safety constraints. One sherd of Roman amphora was collected from the topsoil.
- 1.5 Quantities of stone masonry were observed within the three smaller trenches located near the westernmost pole. The masonry did not appear to be in situ and while no datable evidence was collected, the large size of some of the masonry suggests that they may have come from a Roman structure. The fort was supposedly demolished in the early medieval period and a landslide occurred on the southern bank in the late medieval period. The masonry exposed during the archaeological watching brief may be evidence of either of these events.

2. INTRODUCTION

2.1 General Background

- 2.1.1 This report details the results of an archaeological monitoring and recording exercise (hereafter 'watching brief') undertaken in association with the renewal of two overhead electricity poles near to Binchester Roman Fort, located c. 1.5km to the north of Bishop Auckland in County Durham (Figure 1). The groundworks were undertaken at the top of the river terrace which lies to the south of the Roman Fort and within the boundaries of the Scheduled Monument of Binchester Roman Fort (List no. 1002362). The work was commissioned by Northern Powergrid and undertaken by Pre-Construct Archaeology Limited (PCA) on September 30th to October 1st 2015.
- 2.1.2 The site is of considerable archaeological importance as it is within the boundaries of scheduled area of the extramural zone around Binchester Roman Fort. The fort lies to the north-west of the monitored area and Dere Street Roman road runs NW–SE towards the fort to the east. Geophysical survey and excavations carried out since 2009 as part of the Durham-Stanford Research Project have demonstrated that extremely well-preserved archaeological remains of the extramural settlement survive on either side of Dere Street to the east of the fort, to the north of the monitored area. The archaeological work was required as a condition of Scheduled Monument consent (SMC) on the advice of Historic England. Durham County Council Archaeology Section also provides advice on the historic environment to the local planning authority.
- 2.1.3 Five trenches were excavated in total (Figure 2). Pit 1 was associated with the removal of the replacement of the easternmost pole. The replacement of the westernmost pole required one trench (Pit 2) for the replacement of the old pole, and a further three smaller trenches (Pits 3–5) to install supporting cables for the new pole.
- 2.1.4 The completed Site Archive, comprising written, drawn and photographic records, will be deposited at Bowes Museum. The site code is BRF15. The Online 'Access to the Index of Archaeological Investigations' (OASIS) reference number for the project is: preconst1-236608.

2.2 Site Location and Description

- 2.2.1 Binchester Roman fort lies c. 1.5km north of Bishop Auckland in County Durham. All groundworks were undertaken on top of a river terrace above the valley of the River Wear to the south of Binchester Roman Fort, within the scheduled area of the extramural zone around the fort. The most easterly designated pole was located on the edge of the elevated ground while the westernmost was located on the bank at the top of the river terrace. Parts of the south-eastern ramparts of the fort survive as earthworks, however landslips associated with the river terrace have destroyed large parts of the south-west side and part of the extramural settlement.



Figure 1
 Site Location
 1:2,000,000 & 1:20,000 at A4



2.3 Geology and Topography

- 2.3.1 The solid geology of the site comprises of mudstones, siltstones and sandstones of the Pennine Middle Coal Measures formed in the Carboniferous period. The superficial geology of the fort and parts of the extramural settlement comprise Devensian Till with alluvial clays, silts, sands and gravels being present within the valley of the river in the vicinity of the monitored area (information from the *British Geological Survey* website).
- 2.3.2 The poles are located approximately 0.25km north of the River Wear. The River Wear at this point runs east to west, before turning to run south to north c. 1.25km west of the monitored area. The top of the river terrace in the vicinity of the extramural settlement to the east of the fort lies at c. 95m OD.

2.4 Planning background

- 2.4.1 The site is of considerable archaeological significance as it is situated within the boundaries of the Scheduled Area of the extramural settlement attached to Binchester Roman Fort (SM DU 23, HA 1002362).
- 2.4.2 Because the site has Scheduled Monument status, and thus has statutory protection under *The Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act 1979*, any intrusive ground works require SMC from DCMS prior to the start of works. In accordance with the 1979 Act, the Secretary of State for DCMS consulted with Historic England before granting SMC (Historic England reference S00114321).
- 2.4.3 Accordingly, SMC was granted by the Secretary of State, advised by Historic England, subject to a series of conditions set out in a letter dated 21st September 2015 to Northern Powergrid. Condition d) of SMC states *'No ground works/building works shall take place until the applicant has confirmed in writing the commissioning of a programme of archaeological work before and/or during the development in accordance with a written scheme of investigation which has been submitted to and approved by the Secretary of State advised by Historic England'*. Condition g) of SMC requires a report on the archaeological recording to be submitted to the relevant Historic Environment Record and to Historic England within three months of the completion of the fieldwork. Condition h) stipulates that an entry on OASIS will be made prior to the completion of the project, and that a digital project report will be deposited with the Archaeological Data Service.
- 2.4.4 As part of a Scheduled Monument, any archaeological remains affected by this scheme fall within the category of 'designated heritage assets' as defined within current guidance on the historic environment set out within *National Planning Policy Framework* (NPPF) (Department for Communities and Local Government 2012).
- 2.4.5 Heritage assets - those parts of the historic environment that have significance because of their historic, archaeological, architectural or artistic interest - remain a key concept of the NPPF, retained from the previous national planning policy *Planning Policy Statement 5 'Planning for the Historic Environment'* (PPS5) (Department for Communities and Local

Government 2010a). PPS5 has now been replaced by *Historic Environment Good Practice Advice in Planning; 2 Managing Significance in Decision Making in the Historic Environment* (Historic England 2015) which now supplies the necessary planning guidance.

- 2.4.6 No Specification for the archaeological work was produced by Historic England or the local planning authority, instead a Written Scheme of Investigation (WSI), as required by SMC, which was submitted for approval by Historic England prior to works commencing (PCA 2015).

2.5 Archaeological and Historical Background

- 2.5.1 Excavations at Binchester fort and extramural settlement were carried out in the late 19th century (Hooppell 1891). In the 1970s and 80s a significant campaign of excavation was carried out in the baths and praetorium area (Ferris 2010). The final season of a seven year research project which involved excavations in the fort and extramural settlement as part of the Durham-Stanford Research Project was completed in 2015.
- 2.5.2 The fort is likely to have been founded in the early Flavian period and was sited on a hilltop overlooking the point where Dere Street crosses the River Wear on the route from York to Corbridge (Bidwell and Hodgson 2009, 152).
- 2.5.3 The Roman fort became a focus of local activity and a large extramural settlement soon grew around the fort to the south-east of the fort, along either side of Dere Street. Excavation in the 19th century revealed stone strip buildings along the road including some of exceptionally large size 60m distant from the fort. Recent geophysical survey suggests that for at least 255m out from the fort's defences the settlement along Dere Street was enclosed within a double-ditched defensive annexe (*ibid.*, 153). As well as strip buildings, the recent excavations have revealed part of an extremely well-preserved bathhouse on the northern side of Dere Street in the extramural settlement to the south-east of the fort (Mason 2014).
- 2.5.4 Various campaigns of archaeological excavation have demonstrated that the fort continued to be used in some form or another after it was abandoned by the Romans sometime around AD410. At first, the buildings were used by the local population and that the commandant's bathhouse was used as a butcher's slaughter house (Ferris and Jones 1979) but by AD500 much of the fort appears to have been demolished. Around AD 550, pagan Anglo Saxons had taken to burying their dead within the remains of the fort (Webster and Cherry 1979, 236) and some 100 years later many of the remaining structures buildings were demolished to provide stone to build the church at Escomb (Conyers Surtees 1922). During the later Anglo-Saxon period a small village developed in the vicinity which survived until the end of the medieval period (Ferris and Jones 1979). However at some time during this period a large part of the fort overlooking the River Wear was destroyed by a landslide; only the excavated buildings and the earthwork remains of the north-eastern ramparts survive above ground.

3. PROJECT AIMS AND RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

3.1 Project Aims

3.1.1 The aim of the project was to ensure that important archaeological remains were not destroyed without first being adequately recorded.

3.1.2 The project aimed to fulfil the specific requirements of SMC by undertaking an appropriately specified scheme of archaeological investigation in association with the pole replacement programme.

3.1.3 Additional aims of the project were:

- to compile a Site Archive consisting of all site and project documentary and photographic records, as well as all artefactual material recovered;
- to compile a report that contains an assessment of the nature and significance of all data categories, stratigraphic, artefactual, *etc.*

3.2 Research Objectives

3.2.1 The archaeological work aimed to identify, investigate and record any archaeological remains through a watching brief - conducted in association with all intrusive groundworks associated with the scheme.

3.2.2 In addition, the investigations were carried out with reference to *Shared Visions: the North East Regional Research Framework for the Historic Environment* (NERRF) (Petts and Gerrard 2006), specifically the following research priorities for the Roman period, as set out in the NERRF Research Agenda:

- Riii Roman Military Presence
- Riv Native and Civilian Life
- Rv Material Culture
- Rx Roman to Early Medieval Transition

4. ARCHAEOLOGICAL METHODOLOGY

4.1 Fieldwork

4.1.1 The watching brief was undertaken 30th September to 1st October 2015. The work was undertaken in compliance with the relevant guidance document of the Chartered Institute for Archaeologists (CIfA) (CIfA 2014a). PCA is a CIfA-Registered Organisation.

4.1.2 Groundworks at the easternmost pole (number 89) involved the mechanical excavation of a pit for the new pole. Groundworks at the westernmost pole (number 88) involved the mechanical excavation of four pits. The initial pit, measuring 2.00m x 2.80m to a depth of 2.50m, allowed for the placement of a new pole. Three smaller pits were opened approximately 6m due north of the initial pit for the placement of three supporting cables for the pole. The dimensions for these pits are listed below:

Pit	Pole	Length	Width	Depth
Pit 1	88	3.50m	2.80m	2.50m
Pit 2	89	2.80m	2.00m	2.50m
Pit 3	89	2.20m	0.50m	2.10m
Pit 4	89	3.20m	0.70m	1.60m
Pit 5	89	3.00m	0.40m	2.10m

4.1.4 Any archaeological remains of possible significance exposed during groundworks were examined, cleaned, excavated and recorded, to an appropriate level and in accordance with the methodology set out in the CIfA guidelines and *Fieldwork Induction Manual. Operations Manual I* (PCA 2009).

4.1.5 Deposits were recorded using the PCA *pro forma* 'Context Recording Sheet'. A photographic record of the work was compiled.

4.2 Post-excavation

4.2.1 The stratigraphic data for the project comprises written, drawn and photographic records. A total of 11 archaeological contexts were defined. Post-excavation work involved checking and collating site records.

4.2.2 A total of one sherd of Roman pottery was recovered during the fieldwork. No suitable deposits were encountered to warrant the recovery of bulk samples for palaeoenvironmental material.

4.2.3 The complete Site Archive will be packaged for long-term curation. In preparing the Site Archive for deposition, all relevant standards and guidelines documents referenced in the Archaeological Archives Forum guidelines document (Brown, 2007) will be adhered to, in particular a well-established United Kingdom Institute for Conservation (UKIC) document (Walker, UKIC, 1990) and the relevant CIfA publication (CIfA 2014b). The depositional requirements of the receiving body, in this case Bowes Museum, will be met in full.

5. RESULTS: THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL SEQUENCE

During the watching brief, separate stratigraphic entities were assigned unique and individual 'context' numbers, which are indicated in the following text as, for example [123]. The archaeological sequence has been assigned to broad phases on a site-wide basis.

5.1 Pit 1, Pole 88 (Figure 3)

5.1.1 Phase 1: Possible Roman deposit

A deposit comprising reddish brown coarse sand [101] was exposed for a maximum thickness of 0.80m at a depth of 1.70m below ground level in Pit 1, continuing below the base of excavation (Plate 1). This deposit contained moderate amounts of charcoal and what appeared to be Roman pottery was visible in section, but was unrecoverable due to the depth at which it was situated. This suggests that the deposit may be of Roman origin.

5.1.2 Phase 2: Modern deposits

The topsoil [100] in Pit 1 which overlay deposit [101] comprised dark brownish grey silty sand up to 1.70m thick. One sherd of Roman amphora was recovered from this deposit some animal bone was also observed. The substantial thickness of this deposit suggests that it is highly likely that the ground in this area was disturbed when the original electricity pole was installed. There was no cut visible for the installation of the original pole within the excavation area.

5.2 Pits 2–5, Pole 88 (Figure 3)

5.2.1 Phase 1: Potential Roman demolition material

Within the three pits excavated for the supporting cables (Pits 3, 4 and 5) was a mid-greyish brown silty sand [301] [401] [501], recorded for a maximum thickness a thickness of between 1m and 1.70m, encountered c. 0.50m below ground level (Figure 3, Plate 2). Within these deposits, a large amount of stone masonry was noted, some measuring up to 0.80m in length with a thickness of 0.30m. The masonry did not appear to be *in-situ* and have been heavily disturbed by tree roots. The absence of any mortar may also suggest that the masonry was not *in-situ*. Due to the very small size of the trenches it was not possible to discern if any *in-situ* masonry was found at lower levels. No datable evidence was obtained with only small amounts of animal bone being found. This deposit may represent material from Roman structures such as the fort walls which could have been deposited in this area following the erosion of the bank and landslip.

5.2.2 Phase 2: Modern

The earliest deposit exposed in Pit 2 comprised a mid-brownish grey silty sand deposit [202] encountered at a depth of c. 1.20m below present ground level and exposed for a maximum thickness of c. 1.30m. This was overlain by 0.60m thick deposit of mid-reddish brown silty sand [201]. These deposits may be associated with the installation of the original pole in this

area. The topsoil in Pits 2–5 [200] [300] [400] [500] comprised mid greyish brown silty sand with an average thickness of 0.55m.

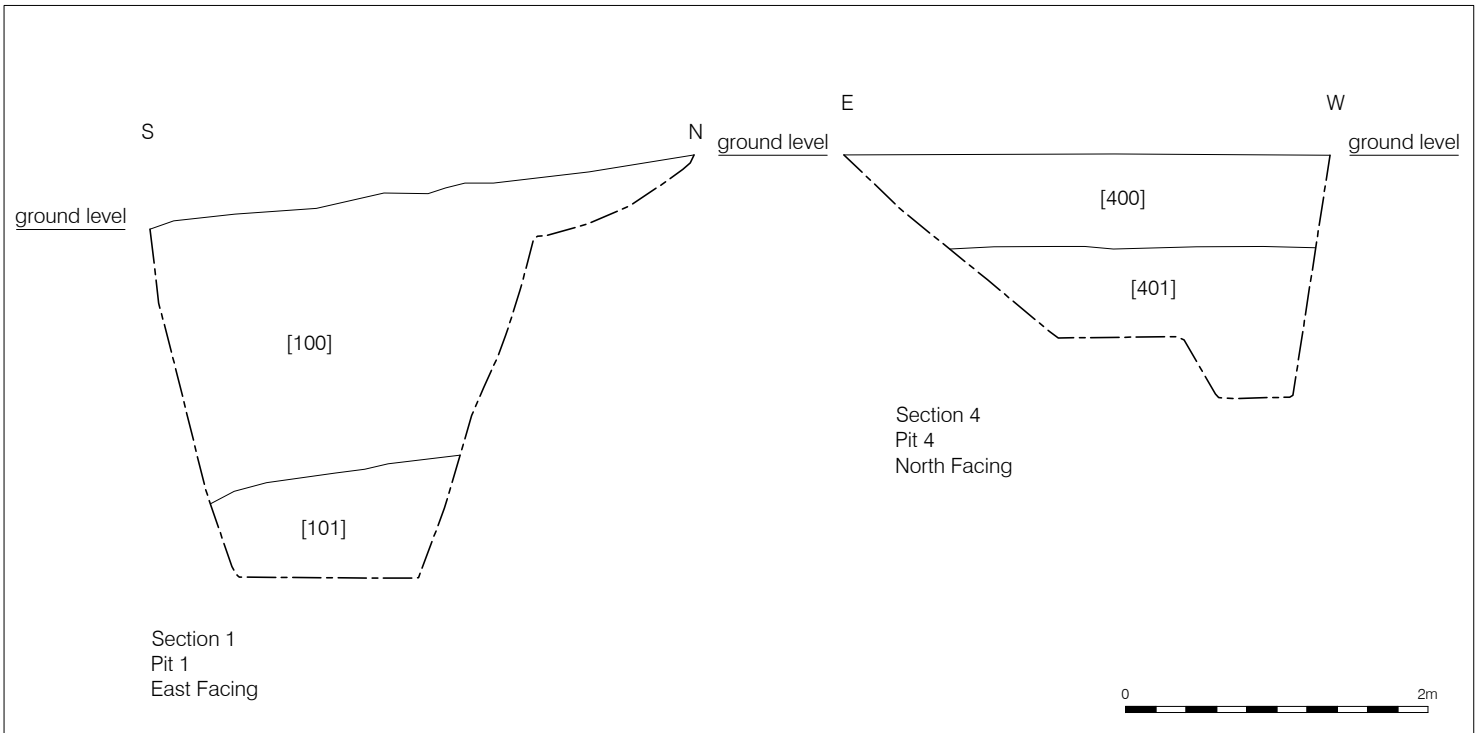
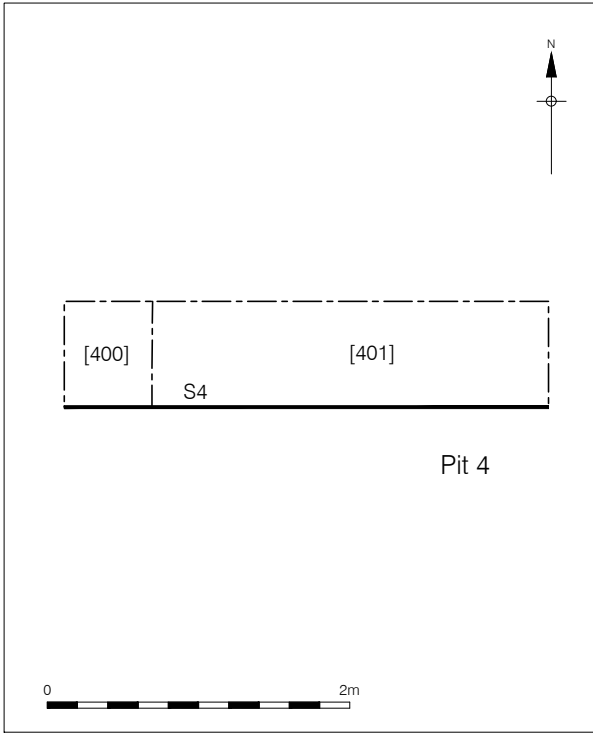
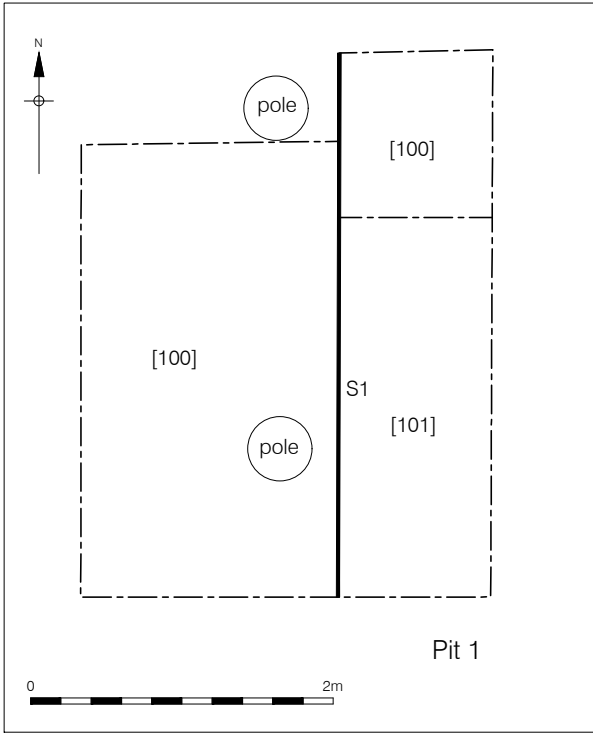


Figure 3
Pits 1 & 4; Plans & Sections
Plans and Section 1:50 at A4

6. POTTERY ASSESSMENT

Dr James Gerrard (Centre for Interdisciplinary Artefact Studies, Archaeology, Newcastle University)

- 6.1 The watching brief produced a single large fresh sherd (169g) of Baetican amphora (Tomber and Dore 1998, BAT AM) [100]. It is probably derived from a large Dressel 20 olive oil jar. It is, however, rather thin walled and might be from the slightly later Dressel 23 variant. The sherd is likely to date between AD43 and 200/250.

7. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

7.1 Conclusions

- 7.1.1 A deposit of possible Roman date was encountered within Pit 1. Health and safety constraints prevented a full investigation of this deposit however moderate amounts of charcoal were clearly visible within the deposit as well as some sherds of what appeared to be Roman pottery. Within Pits 3, 4 & 5 possible Roman demolition material was encountered. As these deposits had been heavily disturbed by tree roots and no obvious coursing was visible, it is most likely that these are not *in-situ* deposits. The small size of the trenches hindered investigation and it was not possible to establish if any of the lower masonry blocks were *in-situ*. The fort was supposedly demolished in the early medieval period and a landslide occurred on the southern bank in the late medieval period. The demolition deposits exposed during the archaeological watching brief may be evidence of either of these events.
- 7.1.2 Phase 2 represents modern deposits, including some which may represent ground disturbance from the installation of the original overhead poles, along with top soil. Within the topsoil in Pit 1, a sherd of Roman amphora was recovered. Due to the proximity to the Roman fort, combined with possible, finding Roman material within the topsoil would not be unusual.
- 7.1.3 The limited area of the watching brief restricted how much information could be gathered from the archaeological remains. The presence of possible Roman deposits over 1m below ground level would be a useful guide to inform any future archaeological work in the area.

7.2 Recommendations

- 7.2.1 No further work is required on the information recovered during the watching brief, with the Site Archive, including this grey literature report, forming the permanent record of the investigations.

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9. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS AND CREDITS

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Plate 1. Pit 1, east facing section showing possible roman deposit [101]



Plate 2. Pit 4 showing possible roman demolition material [401], looking south. (scale 1m)

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