

**An Archaeological Watching Brief on land between 44 - 47 Front Street,  
Witton Gilbert, County Durham**

**Central National Grid Reference: NZ 2327 4569**

**Site Code: WGD 09**

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## **1. NON-TECHNICAL SUMMARY**

- 1.1 An archaeological monitoring and recording exercise was undertaken during groundworks associated with a residential development on land between 44-47 Front-Street, Witton Gilbert, County Durham. The central National Grid Reference for the site is NZ 2327 4569.
- 1.2 The archaeological investigation was commissioned by Hedley Park Developments and undertaken by Pre-Construct Archaeology Limited in January 2009. The investigation involved monitoring ground reduction within the north-western part of the site, where a new garage and access route were to be located.
- 1.3 The main archaeological potential of the site came from its location in the historic core of the village, a settlement of medieval origin, located approximately 5km to the north-west of Durham City. The work was preceded by a trial trenching evaluation undertaken in October 2008. The aim of the investigation was to examine and record any archaeological remains affected by development groundworks.
- 1.4 The investigation recorded part of a substantial pit of likely 19th century date, cut into natural sand and gravel. On its north side, this feature was cut by a stone-lined drain/culvert that had been encountered during the earlier evaluation. No other features, structures or deposits of archaeological interest were recorded.

## **2. INTRODUCTION**

### **2.1 General Background**

- 2.1.1 This report details the results and working methods of an archaeological monitoring and recording exercise (hereafter 'watching brief') carried out on land between 44-47 Front Street, Witton Gilbert, County Durham. The work was undertaken within the north-western portion of the site during initial development groundworks and followed on from an archaeological evaluation conducted in October 2008.<sup>1</sup>
- 2.1.2 The work was commissioned by Hedley Park Developments and was undertaken by Pre-Construct Archaeology Limited (PCA) on 8-9 January 2009. It was undertaken as a planning condition on the recommendation of the Durham County Archaeology Section (DCAS); the site lies within the historic core of the village and thus had potential for post-medieval and medieval activity. The watching brief was undertaken according to an Updated Project Design<sup>2</sup> compiled by PCA and approved by DCAS in advance of the work.
- 2.1.3 At the time of writing, the project archive is housed at the Northern Office of PCA, at Unit N19a Tursdale Business Park, Durham. The completed project archive, comprising written, drawn, and photographic records will be ultimately deposited at the County Durham Archaeological Archive, Bowes Museum, Barnard Castle, County Durham, under the site code WGD 09. The Online Access to the Index of Archaeological Investigations (OASIS) reference number is: preconst1-57514.

### **2.2 Site Location and Description**

- 2.2.1 The overall development site, c. 900 square metres in size, lies on the north side of Front Street, Witton Gilbert, County Durham. It is centred at National Grid Reference (NGR) NZ 2327 4569 (Figure 1). However, the area of investigation herein described (Area B), covering c. 35 square metres, comprised only part of the north-western portion of the site, accessible from the B6312, Sacriston Lane (Figure 2).
- 2.2.2 Development groundworks were well advanced when the investigation herein described was undertaken. Immediately prior to the development, the overall site comprised rough grassland sloping down to Front Street. Prior to that, the site had been developed as part of the northern street frontage of Front Street. At the time of the investigation, ground level across the majority of the site had been reduced, with the north-western portion – the area in which the archaeological investigation was conducted - the only area remaining relatively undisturbed.

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<sup>1</sup> PCA 2008a.

<sup>2</sup> PCA 2008b.





Figure 1. Site location  
Scale 1:20,000



Sacriston Lane



monitored area  
(Area B)

evaluation Tr 1

423250/545700

423325/545700

44

evaluation Area A

evaluation Tr 2

47

48

Front Street

— proposed new build

16a

15a

14a

The  
Glendenning Arms

0 20m

Figure 2. Area of investigation  
Scale 1:500

## 2.3 Geology and Topography

- 2.3.1 Witton Gilbert is located in the central portion of County Durham, c. 5km north-west of Durham City. Carboniferous Coal Measures form the solid geology of this area, across which thinly bedded strata of coal, sandstone and mudstone have been eroded to create several river valleys, including that of the River Wear and its largest tributary, the River Browney. Witton Gilbert lies on the northern valley side of the Browney, so that the drift geology of the village comprises alluvial and river terrace sand and gravel deposits, as is found along the corridors of most of the rivers in the county.
- 2.3.2 The site lies on the north side of Front Street, which runs through Witton Gilbert from west to east towards Durham City. On the south side of the site, street level is at c. 102.55m OD, but the ground rises steeply to the north, up the valley side, so that ground level at the north-western corner of the site, on the frontage of Sacriston Lane, stands at c. 106.15m OD.
- 2.3.3 A topographic plan of the site prior to the development scheme indicates that the site was previously open scrubland, rising steeply to the north, with former buildings having been demolished in the late 20th century. Initial development groundworks involved reduction of ground level across the entire site, with the exception of the north-westernmost portion.

## 2.4 Planning Background

- 2.4.1 Planning permission was granted by the Local Planning Authority, Durham City Council, for seven dwellings along the street frontage in the vacant land between 44-47 Front Street, with access and separate garages to the rear. A condition of planning permission, attached on the advice of the DCAS, required a phased scheme of archaeological work to be implemented at the site, prior to development. This was in-line with UK government guidance regarding archaeology set out in *Planning Policy Guidance Note 16: Archaeology and Planning* (PPG 16).<sup>3</sup> In addition, the City of Durham Local Plan (adopted in 2004 but gradually being replaced from 2006 by the Local Development Framework) contains 'Policy E24', which deals with archaeological remains of regional and local importance that may be affected by development proposals.
- 2.4.2 As the first element of the phased scheme of archaeological work, a trial trenching evaluation was undertaken by PCA in October 2008 to establish the archaeological potential of the site. The evaluation comprised two trial trenches (Trenches 1-2) sited within the footprint of proposed new build, along with examination of a standing structure in the western central portion (Area A) of the site (Figure 2). The work concluded that the structural remains were of moderate archaeological significance and that the part of the site in which Trench 1 was sited - the north-westernmost portion, adjacent to Sacriston Lane - retained potential for archaeological remains of medieval and post-medieval date.

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<sup>3</sup> Department of the Environment 1990.

- 2.4.3 DCAS advised the Local Planning Authority that further fieldwork was required at the site ahead of the main development groundworks. The footprint of the area proposed for development in the north-western portion of the site was to be subject to further investigation through archaeological monitoring of overburden removal and the structural remains in the western central part of the site required further exposure and recording. No Specification for the further work was prepared, but an Updated Project Design<sup>4</sup> for the evaluation comprised the 'written scheme of investigation' required by the planning condition.

## 2.5 Archaeological and Historical Background

*This information is drawn mostly from the 'Keys to the Past', the online version of the County Durham Sites and Monuments Record (SMR). Other online and literary sources were also consulted.*

- 2.5.1 The village of Witton Gilbert and its vicinity have produced a broad range of archaeological remains. Several fragments of prehistoric rock art – most unusual for an area beyond the uplands of the North Pennines – have been recovered from the area. For the Roman and Anglo-Saxon period there is relatively little evidence of activity, although it has been argued that the place name is of Saxon origin.<sup>5</sup>
- 2.5.2 Witton – as 'Wyton' – first appears in documentary records (the Boldon Book) in 1195 and there are a number of buildings of certain medieval origin in the village. Witton Hall (or Holmes' Farm), located c. 300m to the south-east of the site, is mainly of later 18th century date, but includes masonry of 12th or 13th century date. This is believed to be the remains of the leper hospital of St. Mary Magdalene, founded in the 12th century. To the south of Witton Hall is the parish church, St. Michael and All Angels, occupying a peninsula of higher ground surrounded by the flood plain of the River Browney; it dates from the Norman period, being much altered in the 14th century. At the time of the Boldon Book, the settlement comprised two farms, with associated cottages, one in the vicinity of the church.
- 2.5.3 Later in the medieval period, the core of the village moved up the valley side, to the north of the buildings described above, with Front Street probably representing the main east-west through route by the late medieval period. Therefore, the street is of likely medieval origin, hence the archaeological sensitivity of the area in which the development site lies.
- 2.5.4 Coal mining is recorded in the parish as early as the 15th century and by the 18th century there were four small pits, all probably drift mines, in the vicinity of the village.<sup>6</sup> By this time, the road through the village became a turnpike road. As new and bigger pits were sunk in the area in early modern period - for example at Bearpark, Langley Park and Sacriston - the settlement grew quickly, with the population of the village increasing from just over 400 in 1831 to more than 1,200 in 1841. By 1862 the village had a railway station, and two brick and tile works were in operation around the same time.

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<sup>4</sup> PCA 2008b.

<sup>5</sup> 'Witton Gilbert, The Story of Our Village' on the website [wittongilbert.com](http://fast-trax.50megs.com/wgHistory.html), available on-line at: <http://fast-trax.50megs.com/wgHistory.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Members of the Witton Gilbert Women's Institute no date.



2.5.5 It is evident that the frontage buildings along the northern portion of Front Street in which the site is located have been 'terraced into' rising ground on the valley side. The street frontage of the site is shown on the Ordnance Survey map series as being developed from the 1st edition (1850s) until the 1950s. The precise date of origin of the properties shown on this mapping is uncertain, although they are probably of later post-medieval date. By the 1960s, only the easternmost portion of the frontage at the site remained developed and, by the 1970s, even this had been cleared of buildings. Given the location of the site within the historic core of the village, there is certainly potential for evidence of post-medieval, and possibly medieval, street frontage occupation.

## 2.6 Aims and Objectives

- 2.6.1 The archaeological investigation was threat-led and, therefore, was designed to allow preservation by record of any archaeological remains exposed.
- 2.6.2 Given that the site lies within the historic core of the village, a specific Research Objective to be addressed by the project was: can any sub-surface archaeological remains at the site provide evidence of medieval occupation in this area? *Shared Visions: The North-East Regional Research Framework for the Historic Environment (NERRF)*<sup>7</sup> identifies the following priorities within the research agenda for the 'Later Medieval' which are of relevance to the project:
- MDi - Settlement
  - MDvii - Medieval ceramics and other artefacts
  - MDviii – Other medieval industries
- 2.6.3 NERRF identifies the following priorities within the research agenda for the 'Post-Medieval' which are of relevance to the project (given the likely period of origin of the structures encountered at the site in the evaluation):
- PMviii – Industrial intensification 1790-1830. The peak of industrial intensification witnessed between 1790 and 1830 had many profound impacts on working populations. Long-established rural settlements, such as Witton Gilbert, located within an increasingly industrialised landscape saw a rapid expansion in working class housing and facilities. The structural remains recorded at the site may originate from this period.

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<sup>7</sup> Petts and Gerrard 2006.

### **3. ARCHAEOLOGICAL METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1 Fieldwork**

- 3.1.1 The archaeological fieldwork was undertaken in accordance with the aforementioned Updated Project Design compiled by PCA, as well in accordance with the relevant standard and guidance document of the Institute for Archaeologists (IfA – formerly the Institute of Field Archaeologists).<sup>8</sup> PCA is a 'Registered Organisation' with the IfA.
- 3.1.2 It was not possible to further investigate the structural remains encountered during the earlier evaluation in Area A, in the central western portion of the site. Due to their fragmentary condition these remains had not survived development groundworks undertaken since the evaluation. Thus the archaeological investigation was reduced to monitoring of ground reduction within the north-western portion of the site, the location of a new build garage and access route. This area was designated Area B.
- 3.1.3 Overburden was removed across the area of investigation under archaeological supervision by a c. 5-tonne tracked mini-excavator equipped with a wide blade, ditching bucket. The overall area of investigation, covering c. 35 square metres, is shown on Figure 2; this area encompassed the area of Trench 1 from the earlier evaluation. Following overburden removal, the area was cleaned and archaeological remains examined, recorded and sample excavated, as appropriate. The Updated Project Design should be consulted for full details of methodologies employed regarding archaeological excavation, recording, and sampling.
- 3.1.4 A Temporary Bench Mark (TBM) was established close to the area of investigation using survey data provided by the groundworks contractor; this TBM had a value of 103.70m OD. The survey data was checked during the earlier evaluation using an Ordnance Survey Bench Mark (103.89m OD) cut into the brickwork forming the western elevation of a bus shelter on the north side of Front Street, to the east of the site.

#### **3.2 Post-excavation**

- 3.2.1 The stratigraphic data for the project is represented by the written, drawn and photographic record. A total of three contexts were assigned during the watching brief, these, in conjunction with the numbers allocated in the aforementioned evaluation, gave a total of 21 context numbers allocated during the project as a whole. A written summary of the archaeological sequence was compiled, as described below.
- 3.2.2 No artefactual material was recovered. No biological material was recovered. The project's palaeoenvironmental sampling strategy was to recover bulk samples where appropriate, from well-dated (where possible), stratified deposits covering the main periods or phases of occupation and the range of feature types represented. To this end, no features of significance were encountered to warrant the recovery of bulk samples. No material was recovered that required specialist stabilisation or an assessment of potential for conservation research.

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<sup>8</sup> IfA 2001.

- 3.2.3 Survival of all materials from archaeological fieldwork depends upon suitable storage. The complete Site Archive, in this case comprising only written, drawn and photographic records (including all material generated electronically during post-excavation), will be packaged for long term curation.
- 3.2.4 In preparing the Site Archive for ultimate deposition, all relevant standards and guidelines documents referenced in the Archaeological Archives Forum guidelines document *Archaeological Archives. A guide to best practice in creation, compilation transfer and curation*<sup>9</sup> will be adhered to, in particular *Standard and guidance for the creation, compilation, transfer and deposition of archaeological archives*<sup>10</sup> and *Guidelines for the preparation of excavation archives for long-term storage*.<sup>11</sup> The depositional requirements of the receiving body, in this case the County Durham Archaeological Archive at Bowes Museum, will be met in full.

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<sup>9</sup> Brown 2007.

<sup>10</sup> IfA forthcoming.

<sup>11</sup> Walker, UKIC 1990.

## 4. RESULTS: THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL SEQUENCE

*During the investigation, separate stratigraphic entities were assigned unique and individual 'context' numbers, which are indicated in the following text as, for example, [101]. The archaeological sequence is described by placing stratigraphic sequences within broad phases, assigned on a site-wide basis in this case. An attempt has been made to add interpretation to the data, and correlate these phases with recognised historical and geological periods.*

### 4.1 Phase 1: Natural Sub-stratum

4.1.1 Natural river terrace sand and gravel, [107], was the basal deposit exposed across the area of investigation. The material comprised loose, mid orange brown to mid yellowish brown, coarse sand, pea grit and fine and medium sub-angular and sub-rounded pebbles with moderate large and occasional very large sub-rounded cobbles. At the northern end of the investigation area, natural sand and gravel was recorded at 106.05m OD (c. 0.10m below existing ground level).

### 4.2 Phase 2: Post-medieval (19th-early 20th century)

4.2.1 The westernmost portion of a large sub-circular, flat-bottomed pit, [118], was exposed adjacent to the eastern limit of excavation (Figures 3 and 4). It measured 2.54m north-south, truncated to the north, by 1.36m east-west, continuing beyond the limit of excavation to the east. The feature was recorded at a maximum height of 106.10m OD and had an overall depth of 0.83m. It was filled by two deposits, [119] and [120].

4.2.2 The primary fill, [119], consisted of compact dark bluish grey clay with frequent lenses of dark orange brown sandy silt and gravel, frequent medium and large sub-rounded and sub-angular stones and moderate small and medium sized pieces of coal. Three small pieces of red brick and occasional patches of degraded chalky mortar were observed within the deposit, but these were not retained. The deposit had a maximum thickness of 0.54m. The upper fill, [120], comprised firm mid orange brown sandy silt and gravel with occasional small coal fragments. The function of the pit is unclear, but it is assumed to be of 19th or early 20th century date.

4.2.3 More of the stone-lined drain/culvert, [106], recorded during the earlier evaluation was exposed by the ground reduction within the monitored area. It ran on a general NE-SW alignment and a length of c. 5.0m was exposed. The structure was trench-built within a construction cut, [106], up to 0.53m wide and up to 0.89m deep. The construction cut was recorded at a maximum height of 106.12m OD, while the masonry was recorded at a maximum height of 105.84m OD.

4.2.4 The lowermost portion of the construction cut for the drain/culvert had been infilled with stiff, mid bluish brown clay, [105], up to 0.12m thick and forming a levelling/bedding deposit. Upon this material stood the walls of the structure, up to c. 0.25m high and comprising roughly squared sandstone blocks, unmortared and randomly coursed, with occasional fragments of red brick.

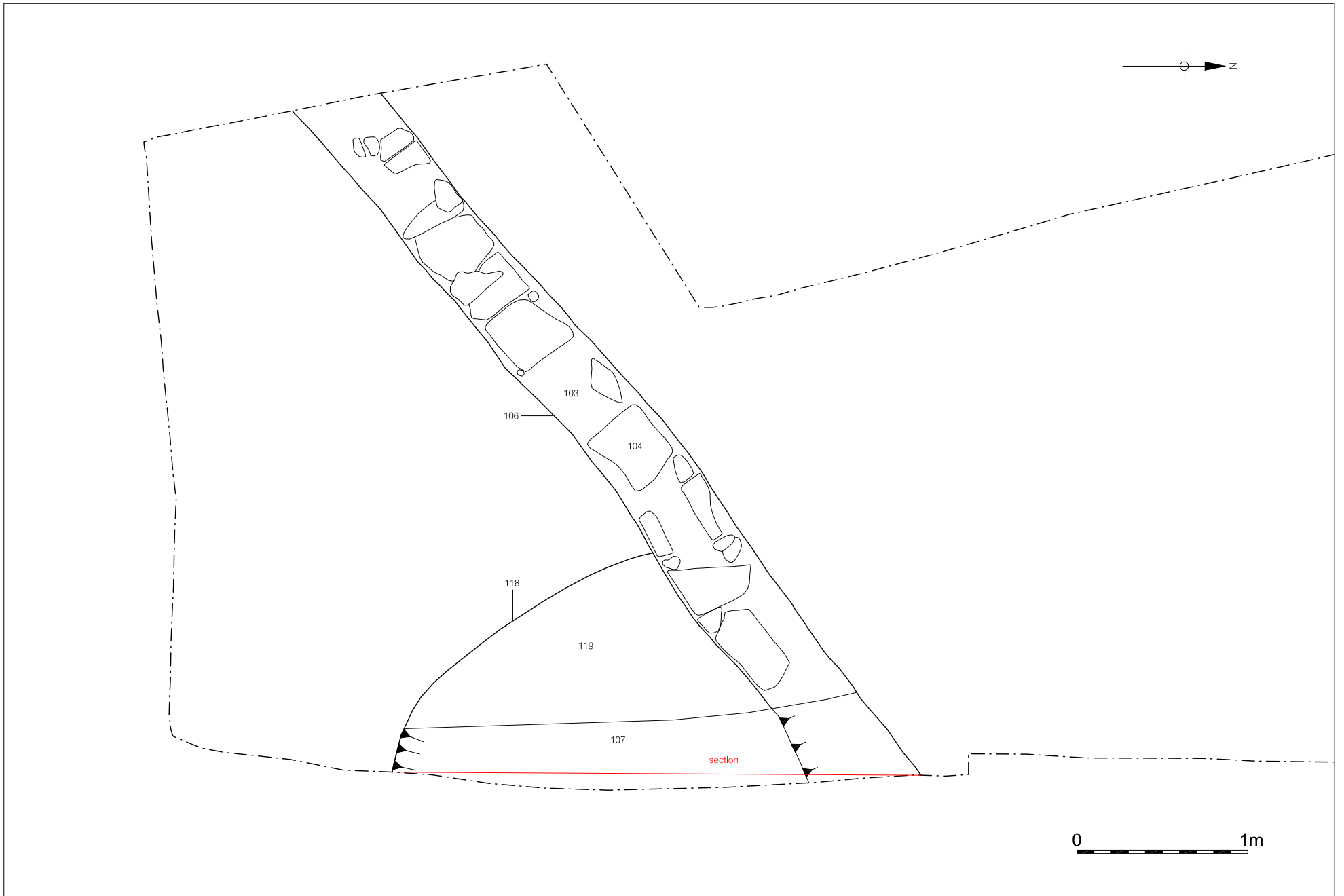
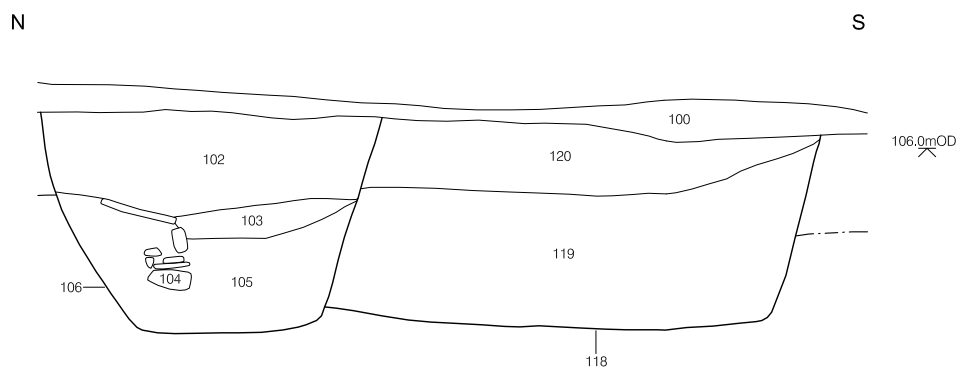


Figure 3. Plan, south part of area of investigation  
Scale 1:30





West facing section across [106] and [118].



Figure 4. Section  
Scale 1:30

- 4.2.5 The capping of the culvert, which survived only partially along the length of the structure, comprised mostly large, generally irregular, sandstone slabs. The uppermost portion of the construction cut had been infilled with a deposit, [102], comprising loose, dark grey sand and gravel, up to 0.23m thick. Within the culvert had accumulated a deposit, [103], comprising stiff, mid greyish brown silty clay, up to 0.13m thick, which represents disuse of the structure.
- 4.2.6 Although it was not possible to date the culvert closely, its general form and the brick fragments within its walls indicate that it is of later post-medieval, probably 19th century or early 20th century, origin. It is likely to have been installed, running across the higher ground to the rear of the street frontage properties of this period, to aid drainage.

### **4.3 Phase 3: Modern**

- 4.3.1 A layer, [100], of loose, dark grey silty sand and gravel, was recorded in section, sealing the stone-line drain/culvert, at a maximum height of 106.15m OD (Figure 3). Up to 0.10m thick, it was modern overburden, forming the existing ground surface in this part of the site.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

- 5.1 Archaeological deposits, structures and features recorded during the investigation have been assigned to three main phases of activity:
- **Phase 1**; comprising the basal deposit across the investigation area, this being natural sand and gravel.
  - **Phase 2**; comprising remains of likely later post-medieval date, including a stone-lined drain/culvert which had been first encountered during the earlier evaluation;
  - **Phase 3**; comprising modern overburden.
- 5.2 Part of a large pit of uncertain function and a SW-NE aligned stone-lined drain/culvert, both of likely later post-medieval date, were the only archaeological remains of any note encountered during the investigation.
- 5.3 No further work is recommended on the data collected during the investigation and the Site Archive will be deposited with the appropriate body in due course.

## 6. REFERENCES

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### **PCA Credits**

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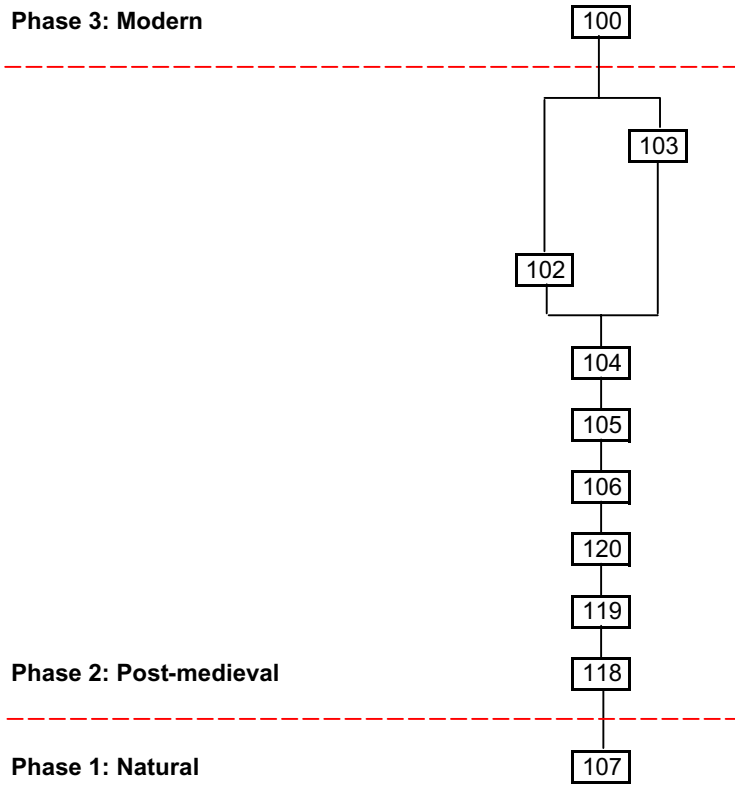


**APPENDIX A**  
**STRATIGRAPHIC MATRIX**

**WGD 09: STRATIGRAPHIC MATRIX**

**Trench 1/Area B**

**Phase 3: Modern**



**APPENDIX B  
CONTEXT INDEX**

**WGD 09: CONTEXT INDEX**

<b>Context</b>	<b>Trench/Area</b>	<b>Phase</b>	<b>Type 1</b>	<b>Type 2</b>	<b>Interpretation</b>
100	Trench 1	3	Deposit	Layer	Overburden in Trench 1
101	Not used	-	-	-	-
102	Trench 1	2	Deposit	Fill	Backfill of construction cut [106]
103	Trench 1	2	Deposit	Fill	Silting-up fill of culvert [104]
104	Trench 1	2	Masonry	Structure	Stone-lined culvert
105	Trench 1	2	Deposit	Fill	Basal fill of construction cut [106]
106	Trench 1	2	Deposit	Cut	Construction cut for culvert [104]
107	Trench 1	1	Deposit	Layer	Natural sand and gravel in Trench 1
108-117	Area A and evaluation Trench 2				
<b>Continuation for Watching Brief</b>					
118	Area B	2	Cut	Discrete	Pit?
119	Area B	2	Deposit	Fill	Primary fill of pit [118]
120	Area B	2	Deposit	Fill	Secondary fill of pit [118]