Archaeological Observation and Recording at Wimborne Square, Wimborne

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Archaeological Observation and Recording at Wimborne Square, Wimborne, Dorset

(for East Dorset District Council undertaken by volunteers from the East Dorset Antiquarian Society [EDAS])

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Front cover – EDAS volunteers working on Test Pits in Wimborne Square

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1. Site Location, geological and topographical information

Wimborne Square is in the centre of the town of Wimborne (Grid Reference SU 0095 0006) and is illustrated on Figure 1. The site is located at about 20m OD on a flat river terrace. The geology in this area comprises valley gravels of the Bagshot Bed series.

2. Context of the site

The objectives of the work were to monitor six test pits by observation and recording in order to evaluate the make-up of the ground levels, any prior disturbances and potential archaeological remains. The work was instigated by East Dorset District Council preparatory to a potential 'enhancement scheme' of Wimborne Square. The engineers anticipated that any future groundwork would not be deeper than 0.60m and test-pitting therefore would only go to this depth.

3. Archaeological and historical background

Documentary evidence (Garmonsway 1984, 43) regarding the foundation of Wimborne's Early Saxon 'double' monastery and its coeval buildings implies that it was founded in the early years of the 8th century, around 718 AD. Its exact site, extent and form, has not been located. It was founded by King Ine of Wessex for his sister Cuthberga, her shrine was among the most important in Saxon England, and the double monastery was at the time, the largest in Wessex. Early foundations such as these, were enclosed by a 'vallum monesterii' often a ditch and bank or thorn hedge (Blair, 1992, 232), which was generally sub-circular in plan. An account of Wimborne's monastery is given in AD 836 when it is described as 'old... and surrounded by high and stout walls' (Whitlock 1979, 719). The extent and construction of this physical boundary is also unknown.

The Anglo Saxon Chronicle relates that in the general unrest after the death of King Alfred in AD 901, '*the manor of Wimborne was seized and its gates were barricaded*'. It is not clear whether this royal manor was attached to the monastic buildings or not (usually they were sited away from the religious foundations), but again the extent of this boundary together with its gates, is unknown. The last reference to the monastery as a nunnery is in the Anglo Saxon Chronicle in AD 962. By the early 11th century a college of secular canons had been established.

Early boundaries which have long-since vanished, are often fossilized in later town development and part of these lay-outs may survive in the present street plan.

Although Wimborne, which was held by the king, did not have borough status when Domesday Book was compiled in 1086, houses were noted and burgesses were living there. It is presumed that East and West Boroughs were laid out between 1200 and 1224 (Taylor, 1968, 170), the major thoroughfares

being aligned on the northern extent of what is now the Square; this open area was likely to have been a feature of the medieval town when these suburbs were developed, and depending on the date of the foundation of St Peter's church, may already have been in use as a graveyard.

The church of St Peter, one of five chapels in Wimborne, was sited on the south side of the present Square and is first mentioned in a deed of 1330. However, it must, have been founded well before this date. By 1414 the churchyard, which was alleged to be an acre in extent, was enclosed by a fence or wall (James 1982, 34). The churchwarden's accounts in the early 15th century note that cottages were being rented in what had been part of the churchyard. After the dissolution of the monasteries in the late 1540s, more houses and gardens were built, further encroaching on the old on this space.

By 1544, a church house had replaced the church, but in 1588 this was reported to be '*decayed*'. In 1589, the property was granted to the Minster Corporation who converted part of the upstairs (at the eastern end) into a Town Hall. The ground floor of this building comprised shops and the churchyard was turned into a garden. There was an outside staircase to the upper floor. This needed repairs in 1594 and again in 1680.

In 1638, a devastating episode of plague broke out and about 400 people died (approximately one third of the town's population). They were reputedly buried in the derelict churchyard of St Peter (James *ibid*, 40).

By the mid-19th century, only the east wall of the church house remained standing and in the 1860s, this was pulled down to facilitate the development of what is now Wimborne Square.

4. Fieldwork methodology

Fieldwork was undertaken between 19th and 21st October 2009. This involved the monitoring of six test pits by EDAS volunteers. The upper levels of the pits were excavated by a small mechanical 'mini-digger' (using EDDC personnel) and completed by hand-excavation. At least one archaeological section was drawn for each pit and all spoil was sieved for finds.

5. Results

Each test pit was approximately 1.20m square; the depths varied slightly but were all about 0.60m deep. The consolidated upper levels of each pit were removed by mechanical means and were similar (see Figures 5 to 7 and 9 to11), consisting of an upper layer of concrete (A) and road tarmac (B) overlaying a compacted rubble-base (C). This in turn was laid over a capping layer of sandy gravel (D). The archaeological material and natural geology were below this. The locations of the pits are illustrated on Figure 2

Test Pit 1 located on the north-west corner of the Square

This pit was excavated to the full required depth of 0.60m. The modern road surface and base had an approximate depth of 0.40m. Underneath this was a layer of dark brown gravelly subsoil (7) containing brick fragments, concrete and black granite cobble setts (Figure 3). A black, slightly corroded, cast-iron pipe

was located on the base of the extreme south side of the pit (Figure 4). The insertion of this pipe had resulted in the disturbance of most of the pit fill.

Test Pit 2 located on the south-east corner of the Square
The pit was excavated to a depth of 0.65m, the modern road surface and base make-up having an approximate depth of 0.47m. Underlying this was a 0.09m layer of dark brown stony soil (8). The compacted base (9) comprised black, ashy, charcoal-rich sandy soil with abundant lumps of ironworking slag. This layer was 0.09m deep but its true depth extended beyond the base of the pit (Figure 5).

Test Pit 3 located in the middle of the Square on the eastern side
Due to the incessant, torrential rain, there were profound difficulties in fully excavating, and properly recording this pit. There was approximately 0.45m of modern road build-up. Underneath this was a foundation (14), located about a third of the way across the pit, laid in a north-south direction and consisting of a single line of stones (heathstone, limestone, greensand and flint nodules) in two layers. Abutting this to the east, was a 0.15m layer of thick charcoal (10) which was combined with soil towards the southern side of the pit (Figure 6). At the same level in the north-eastern corner, were two rectangular, very dark coloured stones which were left in the pit; their geological origin therefore remains unknown. A discrete layer of charcoal was apparent underneath these stones. Fragments of human bone were found at depths below 0.40m. Two tesserae were recovered from the stone foundation layer, one of these being white limestone, the other, red ceramic. To the west of the line of stones was a clean, gravelly surface and a similar layer was recorded underneath the stones. Figure 7 illustrates the excavated floor of the pit and Figure 8 is a photograph of the stone alignment.

Test Pit 4 located in the middle of the Square on the western side
There were similar difficulties due to the weather in excavating this pit. Of the total 0.60m depth recorded, 0.45m comprised modern road make-up and in the lowest levels of this redeposited building material occurred. The bottom 0.10m (12) consisted of a compacted rubble spread which included granite setts, limestone pieces and brick fragments together with charcoal, bone, broken tile and pottery sherds (Figure 9).

Test Pit 5 located on the north-east corner of the Square
The pit was excavated to a depth of 0.67m, the modern road surface and base make-up having an approximate depth of 0.37m. Underlying this was a 0.09m layer of compacted gravelly soil containing rounded gravel cobbles (Figure 10). What was presumed to be a grave cut [18] was apparent in the natural gravel however some modern road material (tarmac) was contained in the mid-brown sandy, loam fill (17) suggesting at least one period of disturbance. Disarticulated human bone was randomly distributed within this fill as well as being present in the layers above suggesting maybe two periods of re-deposition.

Test Pit 6 located on the south-west corner of the Square
Test Pit 6 (Figure 11) was excavated to a depth of 0.58m. Underneath the 0.12m layer of asphalt and compacted roadstone, the rest of the pit fill was homogenous in nature comprising mixed mid-brown loam and small to medium sized ungraded gravels (16). From a depth of 0.35m to the base of the pit were quantities of disarticulated human bone. The very mixed nature of the layer under the asphalt and the random scatter of skeletal material suggests previous disturbance of the ground.

6. The Finds
The weights and numbers of all finds are listed on Tables 1 and 2 and are discussed under the relevant headings below.

Metal Finds
Iron: Parts of two hand-made iron nails were retrieved from Test Pits 2 and 4.

Copper Alloy: Five items of copper alloy came from Test Pits 1, 2 and 6. Three of the pieces were either broken or scrap, their original form and function is at present unknown. That from Test Pit 1 was roughly shaped, perhaps oval or circular, very thin and with at least two perforations. Two folded pieces came from Test Pit 2; one of these was soot-covered. Two small buttons (both 13mm in diameter) of probable 18/19th century date came from Test Pits 2 and 6 and were extremely corroded and may have been decorated. Both had evidence for a shank on the back.

Ironworking slag
A total of 4494g of ironworking slag was collected as a sample from the base of Test Pit 2 together with two small soil samples. The slag was identified as smithing residue and it was noted that clay was adhering to some of the slag fragments, and in some instances, iron was contained within the slag. The soil samples were tested with a magnet and were highly magnetic with large amounts of hammerscale present, indicating that the smithing of iron was taking place. It is very likely that a smithing hearth and associated workshop would have been very close by. It is not possible to closely date the samples, but medieval or early post-medieval dates are likely for this activity.

Worked flint
In total, 19 pieces of worked flint weighing 431g was recorded from Test Pits 2, 3 4 and 6. The assemblage comprised rough cores and flakes with worked edges. Apart from a very small brown 'banded' broken blade-flake which likely dated to the late Mesolithic/early Neolithic period, the remaining pieces were probably broadly Bronze Age.

Pottery
The amounts of pottery retrieved were very small (16 sherds weighing 58g), as was the sherd size.

Medieval: A single sherd weighing 9g was retrieved from the lower fill of Test Pit 2. The buff-coloured fabric was quartz-rich with ironstone inclusions and the clear external glaze was green/mottled brown in places. The sherd which may be from a 'Surrey Whiteware' type vessel could have come from a jug and may date to the 13th-15th centuries.

Post-Medieval: A total of 15 sherds weighing 49g were retrieved from Test Pits 4 and 6. Those from Test Pit 4 were from a single vessel comprising part of a rim, two body sherds and part of a handle, most likely belonging to a mug with an interior and exterior manganese glaze, dating to the later 17th century. This was probably made at one of the Verwood pottery kilns.

The 11 sherds weighing 42g from Test Pit 6 were from four different vessels. The earliest were four very small, British delftware mug or jug sherds in tin-glazed earthenware, decorated in blue and white and of probable 17/18th century date. Four sherds were from a red earthenware vessel with an internal amber glaze and external incised lines, possibly an early 19th century salting pan. This may be a Donyatt or Verwood pot. A single blue, transfer-printed, white glazed earthenware sherd was likely also to be of this date. The remaining two unglazed, red earthenware sherds were too small to attribute form, function or date.

Clay tobacco pipe
Two pieces of clay tobacco pipe stems weighing 4g came from Test Pit 6. The bore on both was approximately 1/16th of an inch suggesting that they were likely to be 18th/19th century in date.

Building material
There was no building material recorded in Test Pit 5, otherwise varying amounts of granite setts, fragments of limestone, heathstone, burnt stone, hand-made brick and ceramic roof tile, indicative of paving material and demolition rubble were present in the other pits. The total weight was 2721g. This is a token sample and not an accurate record of the amount of material present. In addition two tesserae were collected.

Tesserae: Two tesserae were retrieved from the area of the wall foundation in Test Pit 3. The larger piece, of red ceramic material, possibly derived from a tile and measured approximately 28mm by 25mm by 22mm and weighed 31g. The smaller piece, of white limestone measured approximately 24mm by 20mm by 18mm, weighed 26g. and had remnants of white mortar adhering to one surface. Both tesserae are within the Roman upper size range for such items.

Human bone
A total of 270 pieces of human bone weighing 916g was recorded in Test Pits 2, 4, 5 and 6. The bone was in relatively good condition and comprised skull, mandible and teeth, vertebrae, leg bones and foot bones from at least four individuals. The assemblage comprised disarticulated material demonstrating comprehensive post-burial disturbance. 'Chop' marks noted on some vertebrae were also probably caused by disturbance after burial.

Animal bone
The animal bones from cattle, sheep and/or goat, comprised 22 fragments weighing 295g and were retrieved from Test Pits 1, 2, 3, 5 and 6. The assemblage is likely to have derived from food waste. Some bones displayed cut marks which could be either from butchery or caused by post-depositional disturbance.

Shell
A total of 24 fragments of oyster shell weighing 128g were retrieved from all pits except Test Pit 5. The pieces were generally small and in some cases fragmentary. The largest number (20) came from the lowest layer of Test Pit 2 and may have had a chronological association with the ironworking activity. They were no doubt from food waste when oysters were a cheap and plentiful source of protein.

7. Conclusions
The results from each of the six Test Pits confirmed the presence of archaeological remains in 'The Square', prior to its formation in the 1860s. Flintwork suggests background prehistoric activity, not surprising as the underlying gravels were an easily available source of material for tools.

The two tesserae from Test Pit 2 were of probable Roman date and compare with those in the small fragment of mosaic in nearby Wimborne Minster. These are also red and white and of similar size. It is not clear whether the mosaics from the minster are of Roman or early Saxon date. It is possible that they were associated with the construction of a floor in the Early Saxon double monastery. It is not possible to say whether or not the tesserae belonged to the chapel of St Peter or an earlier building on the site, or if indeed they were 'stray finds'. The incorporation of the Roman tesserae may also suggest that the possibility that its foundation may be coeval with that of the Saxon minster.

This church was first mentioned in 1330 but its foundation and dedication were earlier; there is even a possibility that it was founded in the Saxon period. The structural remains in Test Pit 4 may belong to the east wall of this building or perhaps a boundary wall which enclosed it. The building was reused in the early post-medieval period firstly as a church house, then as a Town Hall. By 1800, it was derelict and only part of the east wall remained. The building material in Test Pit 3 suggested demolition debris and may belong to the period around 1860 when the church and Town Hall ruins were finally cleared.

The graveyard of the chapel initially extended to an acre. After the chapel was abandoned, the burial ground was encroached on for house building, particularly on its south side. During 1638, about 400 people who had succumbed to the plague were interred in the old burial ground. To date, this site has not been located. None of the human remains uncovered during the excavation were *in situ*, suggesting periods of ground disturbance. If the charnel pit of the plague victims had been encountered, large quantities of bone would have been present. It seems likely therefore, that the material from the Test Pits dates to the medieval use of the graveyard. Most of the human remains occurred in Test Pits 5 and 6.

The ironworking debris in the form of slag, hammerscale and charcoal, hints at smithing and the production of iron implements occurring very close by. Unfortunately, the slag is undateable, but it could be of medieval or early post-medieval date.

The post-medieval pottery and clay pipe, together with finds of animal bone and shell point to small amounts of rubbish being disposed of in an open area. The cast-iron gas main encountered in Test Pit 1 was a relic of the town's first gas supply in 1837. A single lamp standard was erected opposite the New Inn in the High Street (next to the Priest's House Museum), and the exposed pipe was probably originally connected to this.

By 1860, the original acre of the burial ground had shrunk to half this size and the present shop and other building frontages reflect modern development and encroachment. The black granite sets are probably the remains of the earliest road surface of the Square when it was laid out in the 1860s.

8. Recommendations

All six test pits despite their small size, produced good archaeological material. In particular, the 'footings' from Test Pit 3 suggested that part of the chapel of St Peter survived and continue both north and south of this pit. It is crucial that any further work in the Square should be preceded by monitoring, excavation and recording where necessary. This would extend and illuminate the findings in this report.

The site archive and finds will be deposited at the Priest's House Museum, Wimborne and after study, the human remains will be transferred to Wimborne Minster for reburial.

9. References

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10. Acknowledgements

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Finally, thanks to East Dorset District Council staff - Robert Heaton who initially set up the project and Borough Engineers Brian Nippard and Trevor Thomas who made the work possible.

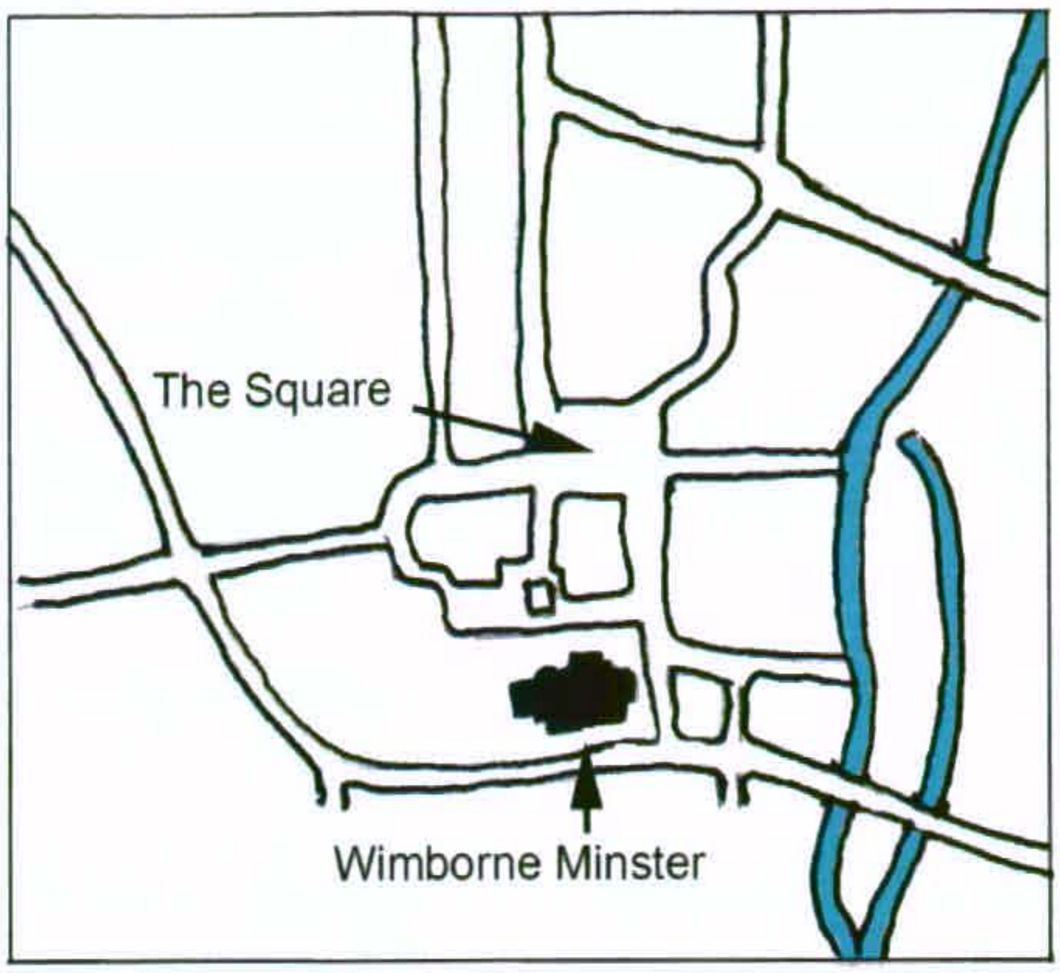

Figure 1: Location of Wimborne Square

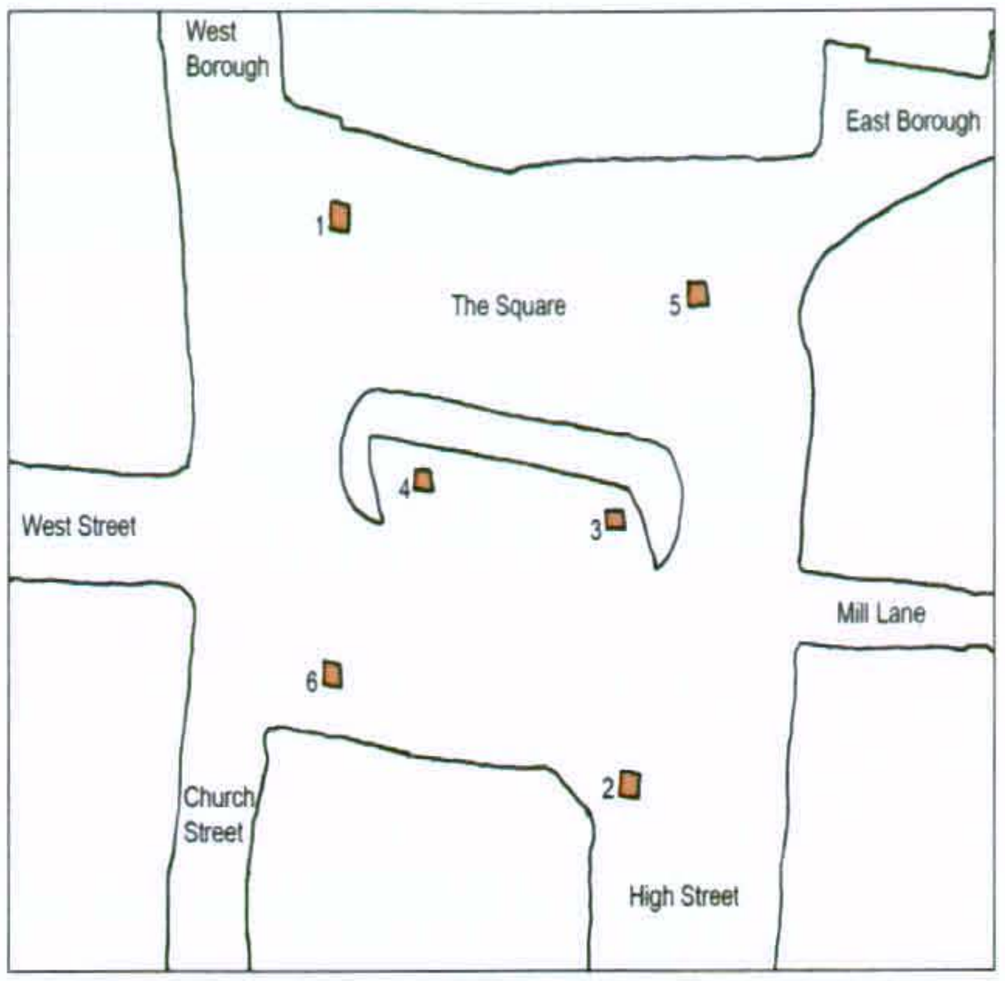

Figure 2: Location of Test Pits

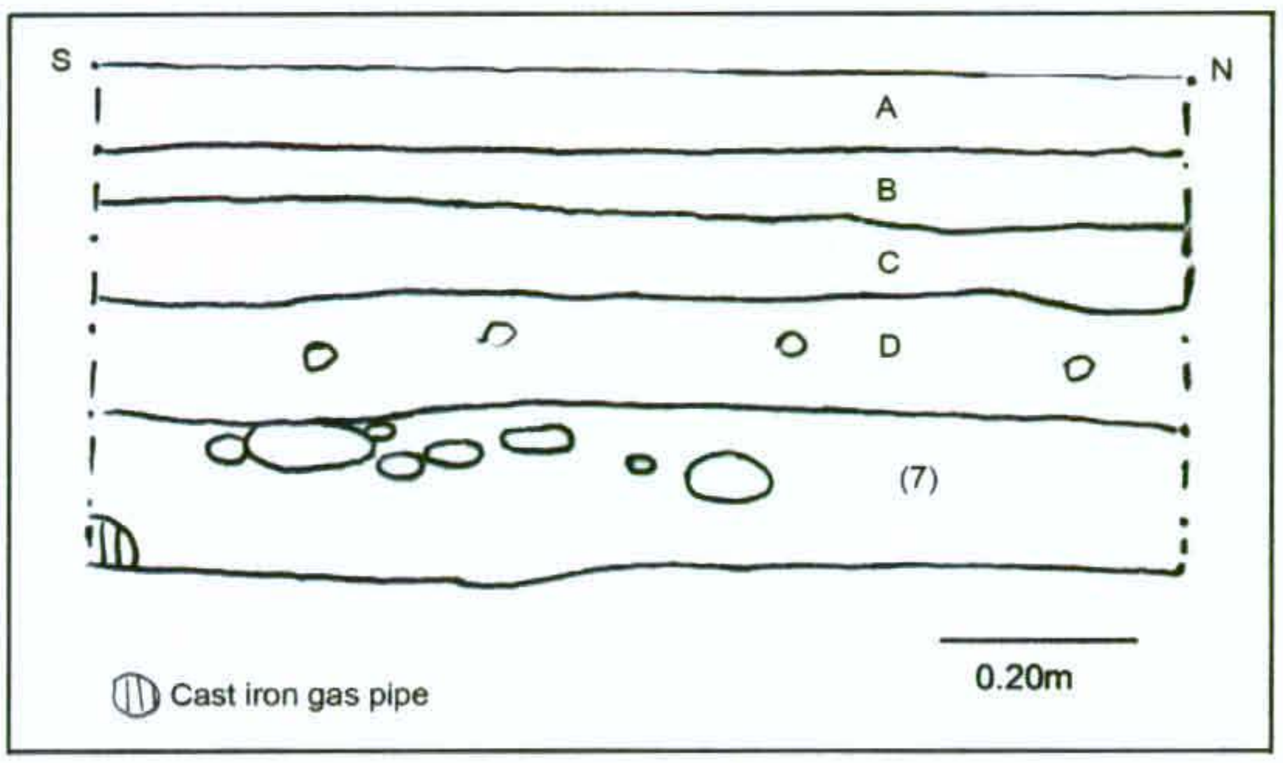

Figure 3: Test Pit 1 – east-facing section

Figure 4: Test Pit 1 – cast-iron gas pipe on the base of the pit, view south

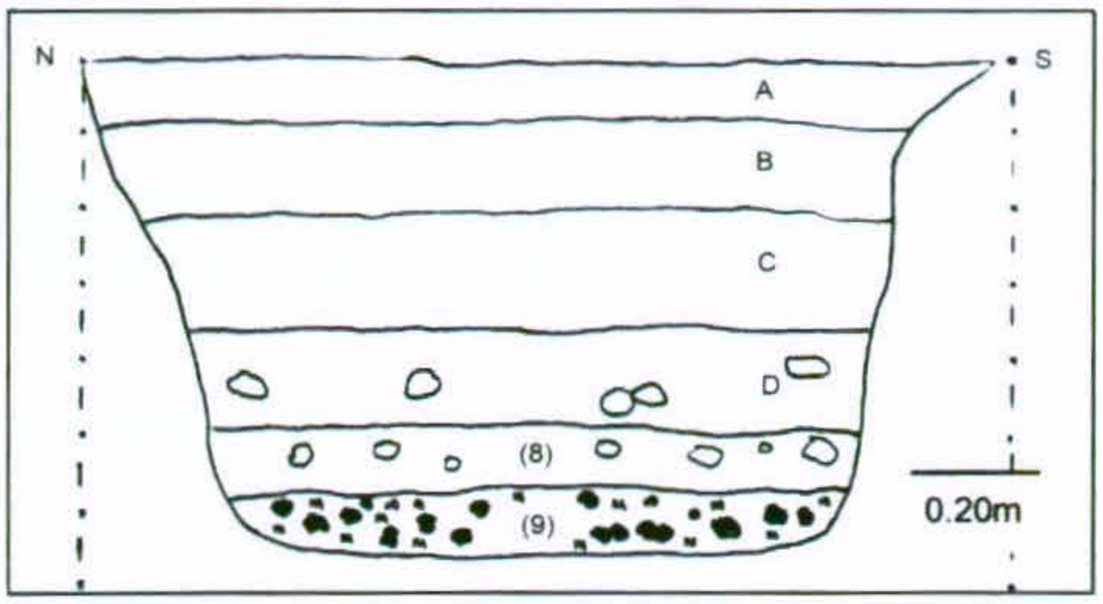

Figure 5: Test Pit 2 - east-facing section

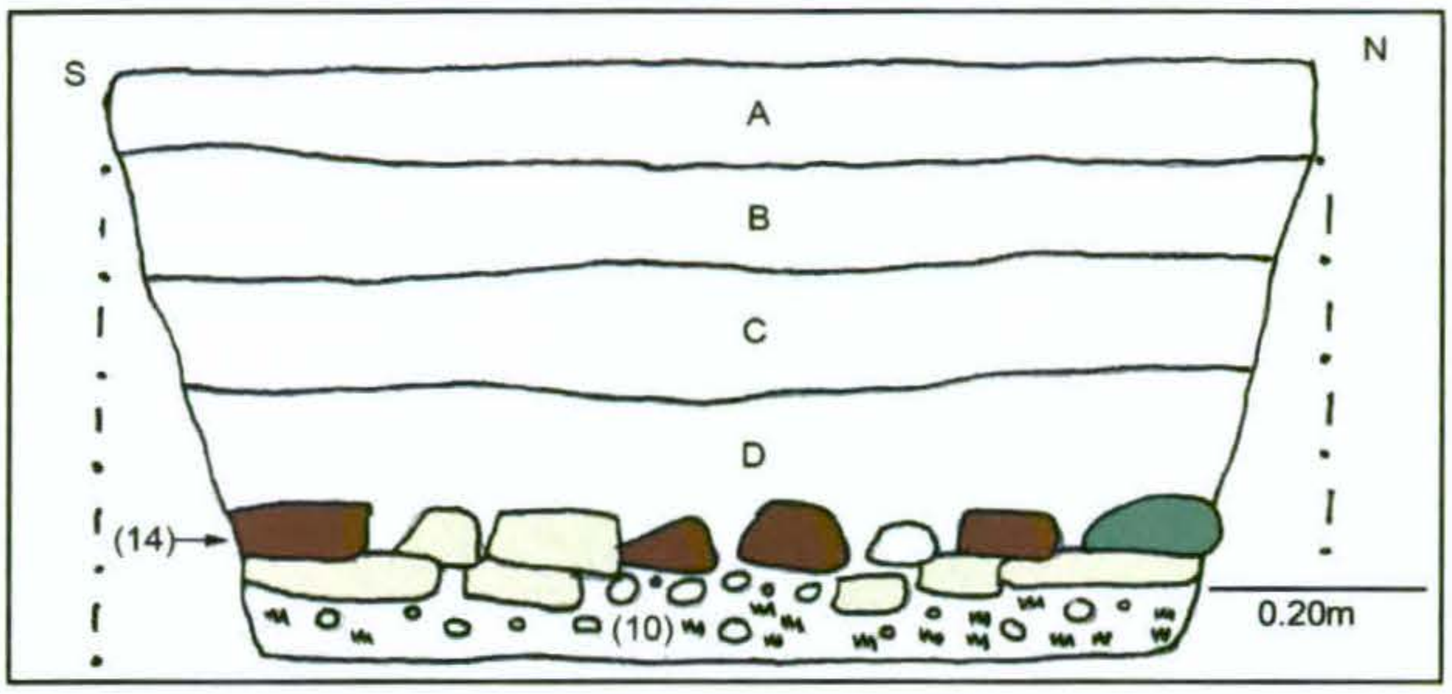

Figure 6: Test Pit 3 – west-facing section

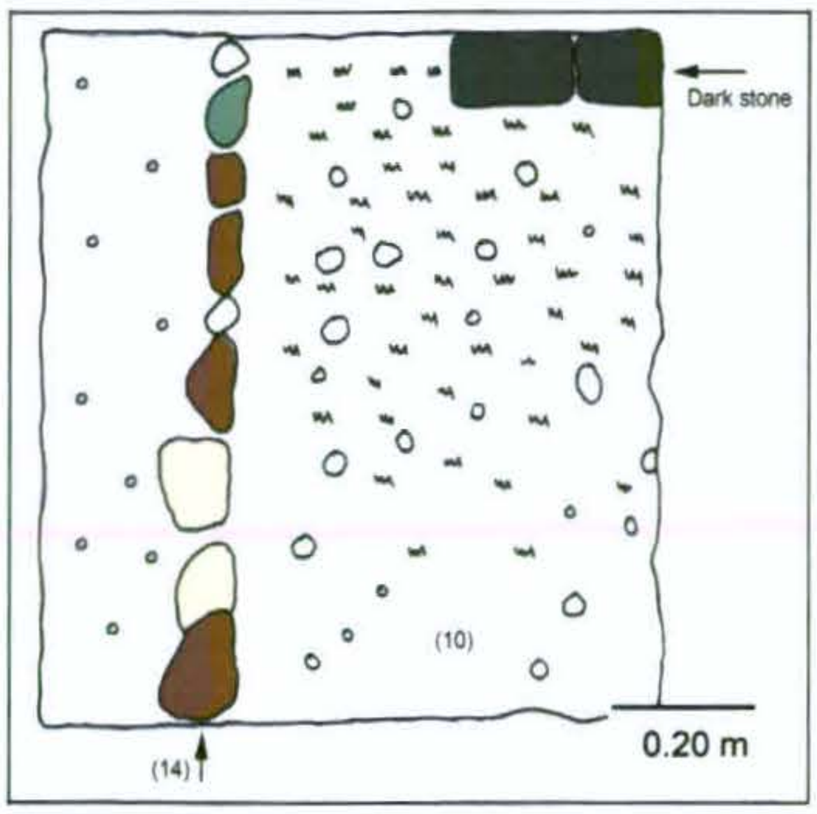

Figure 7: Test Pit 3 – plan of the excavated base of the pit

Figure 8: Test Pit 3 - uncovered 'footings' centre left and 'dark' stones on the back edge of the pit, view north

Figure 9: Test Pit 4 – west-facing section

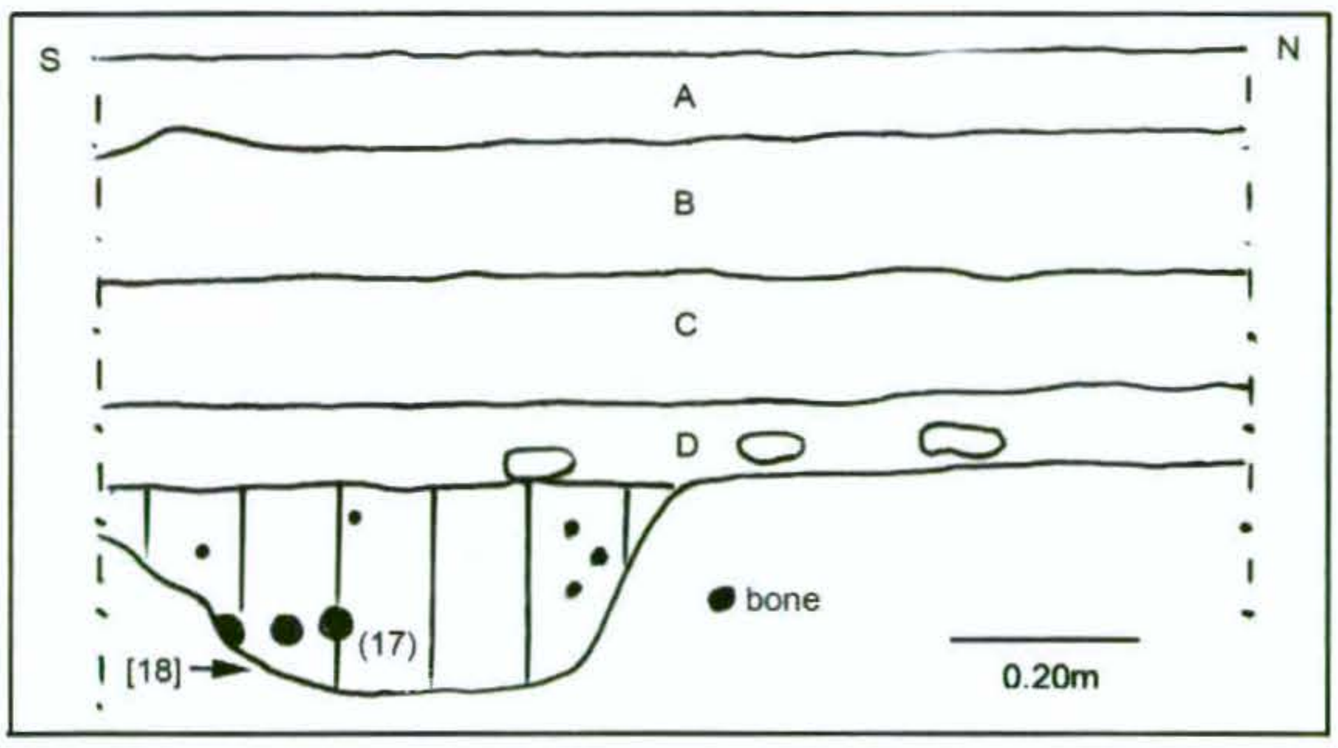

Figure 10: Test Pit 5 – east facing section

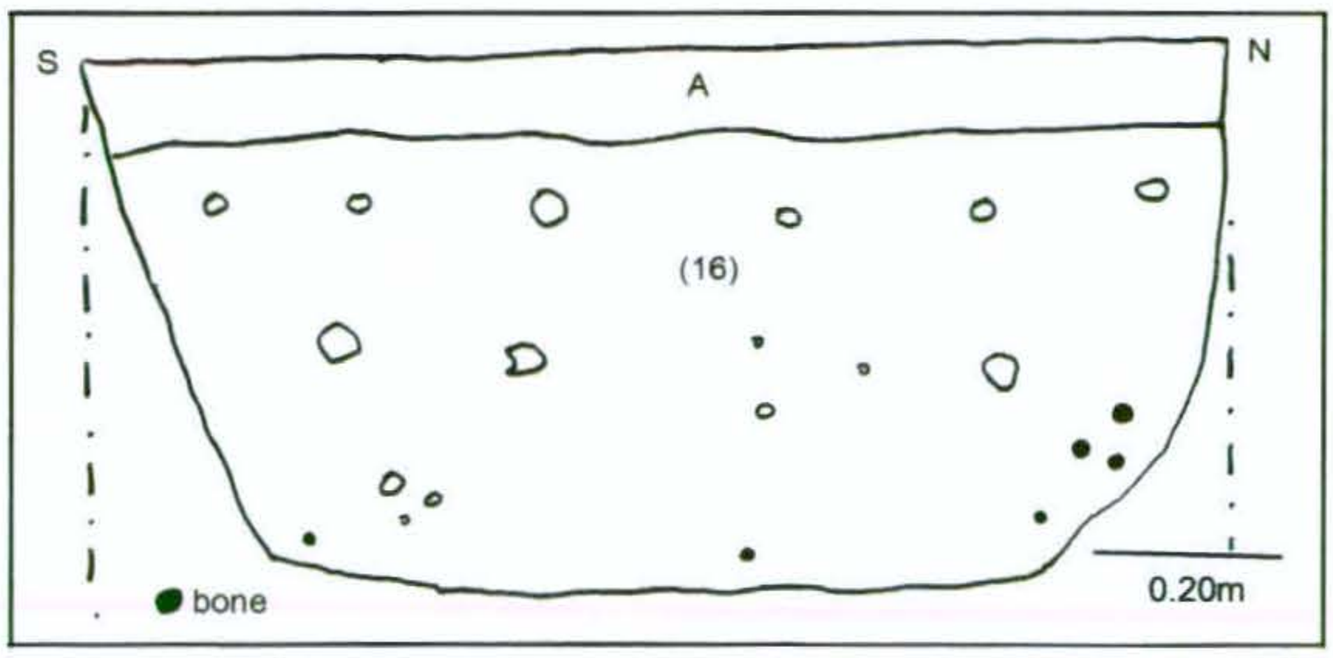

Figure 11: Test Pit 6 – east-facing section

Test Pit	Context	Cu All	Fe	Slag	Med pot	PM pot	Clay pipe	W flint	Burnt stone	Heath stone	Lime stone	Gran -ite	Tess -era	Cer. tile	brick	H. bone	A. bone	shell
1	7	1										188			8		7	
2	8	2	7	144				285	131								9	
2	9	9		4350	9			126	148							101	16	118
3	10							7		48	62	141		108			19	5
3	14												57					
4	11		11			6		5	12	15	181	309		225	217	15		1
4	12					1					784	166		227	200	4		
5	15															180	136	
6	16	1				42	4	8	53	30				21	18	423	108	2
6	17															193		
Totals		13	18	4494	9	49	4	431	354	93	1027	804	57	581	443	916	295	128

Table 1: Weights of finds from excavated contexts

Test Pit	Context	Cu All	Fe	Slag	Med pot	PM pot	Clay pipe	W flint	Burnt stone	Heath stone	Lime stone	Gran -ite	Tess -era	Cer. tile	Brick	H. bone	A. bone	shell
1	7	1										1			1		2	1
2	8	1	1	1				3	20								2	
2	9	2		81	1			5	5							19	4	20
3	10							2		2	1	1		3			4	1
3	14												2					
4	11		1			3		2	2	2	4	3		6	8	3		4
4	12					1					5	2		6	10	1		
5	15															101		
6	16	1				11	2	4	6	4				1	4	73	7	1
6	17															73		
Totals		5	2	82	1	15	2	16	33	8	10	7	2	16	23	270	22	24

Table 2: Numbers of finds from excavated contexts

Abbreviations used in tables:

Cu All	copper alloy	Med	medieval pottery	W Flint	worked flint	H. bone	human bone
Fe	iron	PM	post-medieval pottery	Cer. Tile	ceramic tile	A. bone	animal bone