

# **Trust for Thanet Archaeology**

Land adjacent to  
Bleak House  
Fort Road  
Broadstairs

Planning Application Number: TH/05/1195

NGR TR 639906 167943

## **Interim Archaeological Report**

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Checked by E. J. Boast

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### **Contents**

1. Introduction
2. Site Description
3. Archaeological and Historical Background
4. Methodology
5. The Results
6. Discussion
7. Acknowledgements
8. References

### **Figure Number and Description**

1. Site location plan showing area of excavation
2. Plan of archaeological features excavated

### **Plates**

1. Overview of Cellar 1, Cellar 3 and the flint wall structure.
2. Flint walls lining Cellar 2 with modern cut.
3. Overview of Cellar 3 with flint wall structure and Cellar 1 in background.
4. Mass of Roman pottery vessels filling pit cut through fills of Cellar 2.

## **1. Introduction**

Between the 22nd June and the 28th August 2009 the Trust for Thanet Archaeology carried out an archaeological excavation on land adjacent to Bleak House, Fort Road, Broadstairs, Kent (NGR 639906 167943; Figure 1; planning reference TH/05/1195) in advance of the proposed development of the construction of a part underground split level single storey dwelling adjacent to Bleak House together with alterations to the boundary wall. An archaeological evaluation had already taken place on the site during April 2007 establishing that the site had been considerably built up and terraced over the years and beneath the terracing features of Roman date still survived.

The full excavation of the footprint of the dwelling was commissioned by Mr Jeffrey Laurents, the owner of the site. The work was conducted in accordance with a specification issued by Adam Single, Archaeological Officer of Kent County Council Heritage Conservation Group (Single 2009).

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## **2. Site Description**

The site is located on a promontory whose eastern edge is eroding from wave action; the southern slope has been truncated by Viking Bay cutting inland from the sea. Located on the south east facing slope at an elevation of approximately 16m AOD, the natural advantages of such a position are numerous in particular clear visibility of the sea which would have been attractive to settlers through the ages.

An Orchard that formerly occupied the site had been cleared prior to the evaluation carried out in 2007. When the evaluation was carried out the site was reasonably level and was overgrown in places with grass and small plants, it was partially laid to hard standing forming a level platform. The site remained in a similar, slightly overgrown condition until the groundworks for the excavation were carried out in 2009.

To the rear of the site; on the southern side; are the terraced gardens of Bleak House with Bleak House itself located immediately to the east overlooking the beach between Stone Bay and Viking Bay. To the west of the site is the relatively recent development of Micawber House. The site is bordered to the north by Church Road and the properties of Sea Croft and Coastguard Cottages.

### **3. Archaeological and Historical Background**

Relatively few archaeological sites are known within 500 metres of the Bleak House site although much is known in the areas to the north along Stone Road and in the North Foreland area ranging from Early Bronze Age to Roman in date. From the Medieval and later periods the area around Bleak House was known as Crow Hill, now one of the historic parts of Broadstairs.

#### *Roman*

A Roman inhumation accompanied by pottery vessels was located approximately 50 metres to the north east of the site, on the Eastern Esplanade possibly on the present site of Sea Croft (Philp 1971; TSMR 261). No further records are available for this reference. Roman settlement is well recorded to the north of the site along Stone Road and in the 'Chessboard' estate to the west of Stone Road. A Roman building was found on Bishops Avenue to the north of the site in 2004.

#### *Medieval*

The name Broadstairs probably derived from there being a broad way or stairs down the cliff at this point. Medieval Broadstairs is first heard of as a hamlet attached to St Peter's circa 1450. The earliest focus of the town was centred on Union Square located immediately to the south west of the site.

Approximately 120 metres to the south west of the site the remains of St Mary's Chapel, a building of medieval date is now used by the Albion Bookshop (TSMR 294).

#### *Post Medieval/Industrial*

Approximately 60 metres to the south of the site are the remains of the late medieval/post medieval York Gate built in 1540 by Richard Culmer as a defence of the settlement against privateers (TSMR 424). 250 metres to the south of the site is the Grade II\* listed Dickens House (TSMR 961).

Many other listed buildings are located in and around the site notably Bleak House itself which dates from the late 18th -19th Century. Bleak House was formerly Fort House and was originally the home of an officer commanding a cliff top fort near the house. The house has been much extended over the years. Charles Dickens stayed at the house in the 19th century and is reputed to have written parts of David Copperfield and Bleak House there. Fort House was renamed after one of his more famous literary works.

### *Undated*

Recent excavations carried out 200 metres to the north west of the site on Dickens Road exposed two undated linear features (TSMR 923). A Watching Brief carried out in 2002 during the construction of a new house 50m to the north west at Fort Cottages did not reveal any archaeological remains (TSMR 834).

## **4. Methodology**

The site was stripped of the overburden sealing the archaeological horizon using a tracked 360° excavator with a wide toothless ditching bucket. The deposits removed consisted of construction debris and rubble derived from the remodelling of the property next door and redeposited soils that had been used to form the upper terrace adjacent to the road. The overburden was excavated from the lower elevation of the site south toward the higher ground at the north and completely removed from site in lorries to leave the site clear for excavation. The exposed surface of the site was cleaned by hand to define the archaeological features and all the archaeological features were excavated by hand in the following four weeks.

All archaeological features were recorded on pro-forma recording sheets and recorded in plan and section. All features were photographed using digital and colour slide formats. All features were surveyed using a Leica TC600 Total station. Levels were taken on the features using a Temporary Benchmark related to an Ordnance Survey benchmark on the nearby Church of the Holy Trinity with a value of 17.25m A.O.D.

## **5. The Results (Figure 2)**

Although the building discovered this summer has suffered from the later terracing of the site in recent years, a sequence of features was established showing something of the progress of Roman settlement in the valley overlooking the bay at Broadstairs.

The earliest feature was a steep sided rectangular pit, excavated into the chalk. The pottery from the fills indicated an early Roman date for this feature, which was regular enough in plan to have been cut as a cellar (Cellar 1; Plate 1). Later the backfills of the cellar were cut by the foundation for a wall (Flint wall Structure 1), constructed of water-worn cobbles laid over courses of massive flint nodules.

These large cobbles formed a right angled foundation with one end pressed against the northern face of the earlier cellar cutting. It seems that the material filling the earlier feature was not well compacted and the new wall subsided into the deposit creating a steep angle in profile. It is possible that the flint wall encountered was built as a deep foundation to some later building whose floor levels had been raised above the upper edge of the cellar cut. The

extra bracing may have been required to support the corner of the building where it crossed the fill of the earlier cellar.

Further to the north east another steep sided cut into the chalk marked the location of a second cellar (Cellar 2). A raised ledge survived and on the southern and eastern edges of the cut, supporting courses of rounded flint cobble, held within chalky silt that perhaps replaced an original clay bonding (Plate 2). On the eastern side, the wall was constructed in two stretches, orientated at slightly different angles and tapering to only a single course at the northern end. The two walls were separated by another massive flint nodule standing upright and possibly acting as a pad for a post from a superstructure above. Later the cellar had been backfilled with compact, gritty chalk silt. The angle at the south east corner had been destroyed by a modern trench. Again this structure appears to have been a cellar, associated with a superstructure long since cleared by the activity on the site over many years. A third deep cutting into the chalk (Cellar 3) showed as a rounded rectangle in plan with a flat base and steeply sloping sides, this pit cut away the chalk edges of the first cellar showing that it belonged to a later phase of activity (Plate 3).

A final phase of activity on the site in the Roman period was demonstrated by a chalk-capped pit, cut through the fill of the construction trench for the western flint wall, and a second larger pit cut through the backfill of the Cellar 2, probably removing part of its original western edge. Massive wall stones were dumped at the base of this pit, and dispersed irregularly throughout the fill, above the lowest deposit of stones was a thick layer of ashy material containing oyster and whelk shells as well as animal bones and other domestic debris. Interspersed with this material were large sherds and segments of pottery vessels (Plate 4). The pots must have been nearly complete when they were deposited; odd sherds from later fills completed the partial remains of some of the vessels. The pottery ranged from a very large comb-decorated storage jar, a well preserved mortaria, dishes, bowls and cups. At least one decorated Samian bowl was present along with a small undecorated cup, together with dishes in Dorset Black-Burnished ware. Rather than a deposit of rubbish it appears that a group of pots from a kitchen or store had been tipped into the hole with the burnt debris and midden material.

The quantity of stone present on the site perhaps indicates the destruction of the building above the cellar. One of the few finds of roof tiles was also made near to the dumped pottery. The third cellar was also filled with layers of chalky silts interspersed with compact deposits of building stone, capped near the top with a very dense deposit of large rounded cobbles. Fine quality pottery from these layers indicated that they originated in a building of high status.

## **6. Discussion**

The post excavation work that is currently in progress on the finds and site archive has already revealed some striking parallels with the building found at Bishop's Avenue, close to its junction with Stone Road in 2004 where the underground elements of buildings, cellars lined with coursed water-rolled cobble stones were preserved. A similar deep Roman pit or cellar also preserving large quantities of large building stones within its fill was discovered by the Trust at Upton, Broadstairs in 2006 (Moody 2007). The Bishop's Avenue building and the present site are linked by Stone Road. Although little could be determined of the nature of any building in the area, Upton is located on the trackway that follows the chalk ridge from the north eastern tip of Thanet, curving west toward Sarre (Moody 2008). The valleys occupied by the buildings at Bishop's Avenue/Stone Road and Broadstairs rise to reach this trackway just to the north of the Upton site.

Each of the three sites was heavily truncated; the superstructure of any buildings present had long since been destroyed. What remained of the underground structures suggests the buildings were of considerable size and sophistication, lasting through a number of structural phases. At the building at Bishop's Avenue/Stone Road quantities of painted plaster indicated a rich decorative finish, comparable with the plasterwork from the Villa at Minster. Wall tumble there sealed demolition material and evidence for a fire in the last phase of occupation; this was deposited over a number of small ovens which suggested the cellar was part of a kitchen or bakery. The destruction phases at Stone Road indicated an abrupt end to the site in the later third century. Although the vessels in the late pit cut through Cellar 2 have not yet been firmly dated, the observed presence of Dorset Black Burnished Ware dishes parallels the later assemblage at Stone Road and may be evidence of a similarly abrupt ending, explaining the completeness and range of the vessels.

Further research is needed to draw together the sites in the area but already the strategic significance of the east coast of Thanet and the North Foreland peninsula provide clues to the purpose and character of Roman settlement along this coast. The parallels between the three sites at Upton, Stone Road and Broadstairs now contribute a considerable body of evidence to the understanding of the Roman settlement of Thanet's east coast.

## **7. Acknowledgements**

The Trust would like to thank Mr Jeffrey Laurents for commissioning the Trust to carry out the evaluation. The Trust would also like to thank Mr Laurents, Philip Dadds and Martin Burt-Davies of Philip Dadds Architects and John Elvidge of John Elvidge Planning Consultants for their support during the archaeological process.

The excavations were directed by Ges Moody, assisted by Paul Hart and variously by Trust staff members Emma Boast, Lee Cunningham, Lauren Figg, Julie Martin and Adam Webber. The Trust was assisted by volunteers from the Isle of Thanet Archaeological Society; Matt Axon, Becky MacDonald, Geoff Orton, Julie Perrin, Margaret Symonds, Gordon Taylor, Marianne Tucker and John Villette.

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TSMR            Thanet Sites and Monuments Register

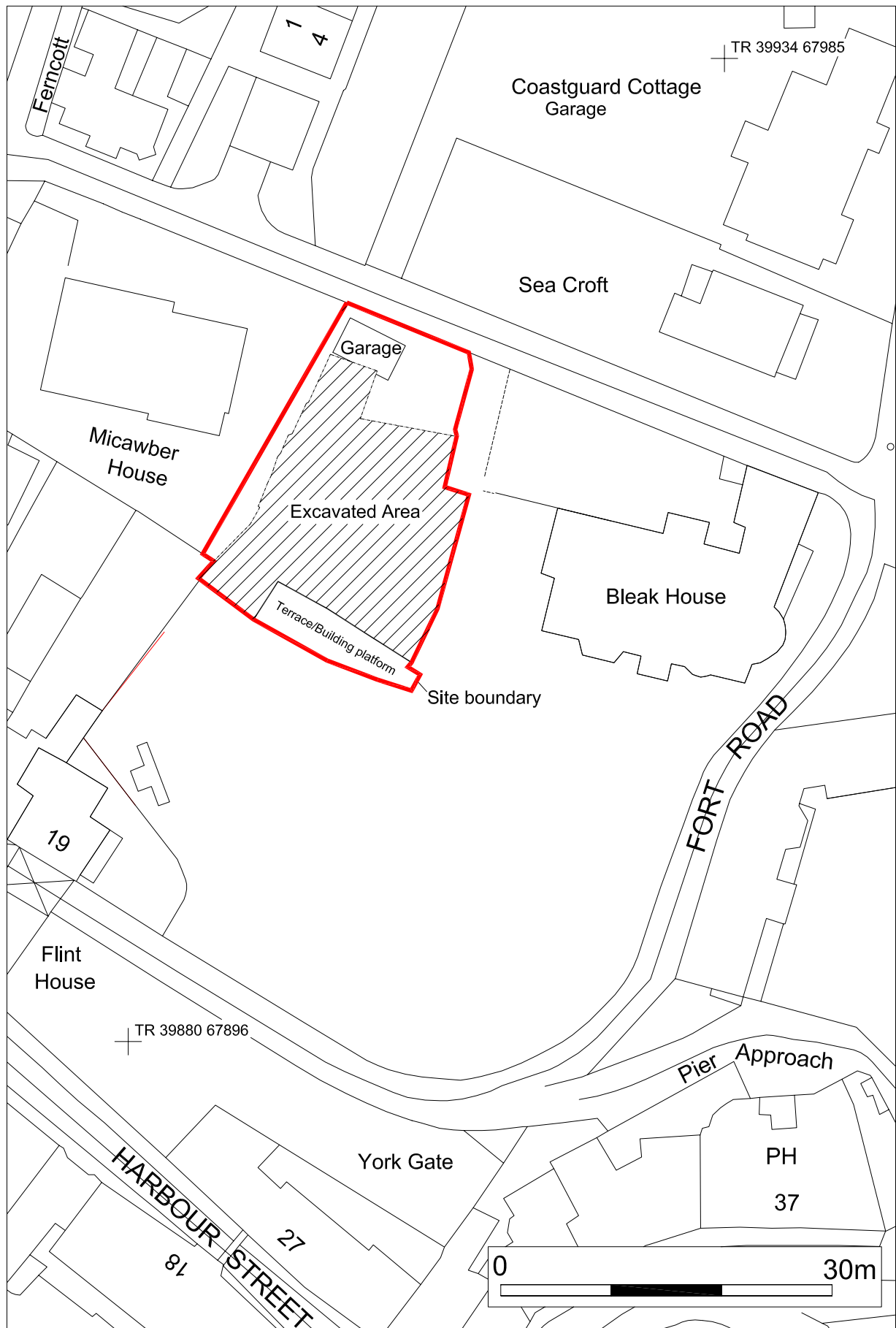


Figure 1. Site location plan showing area of excavation.

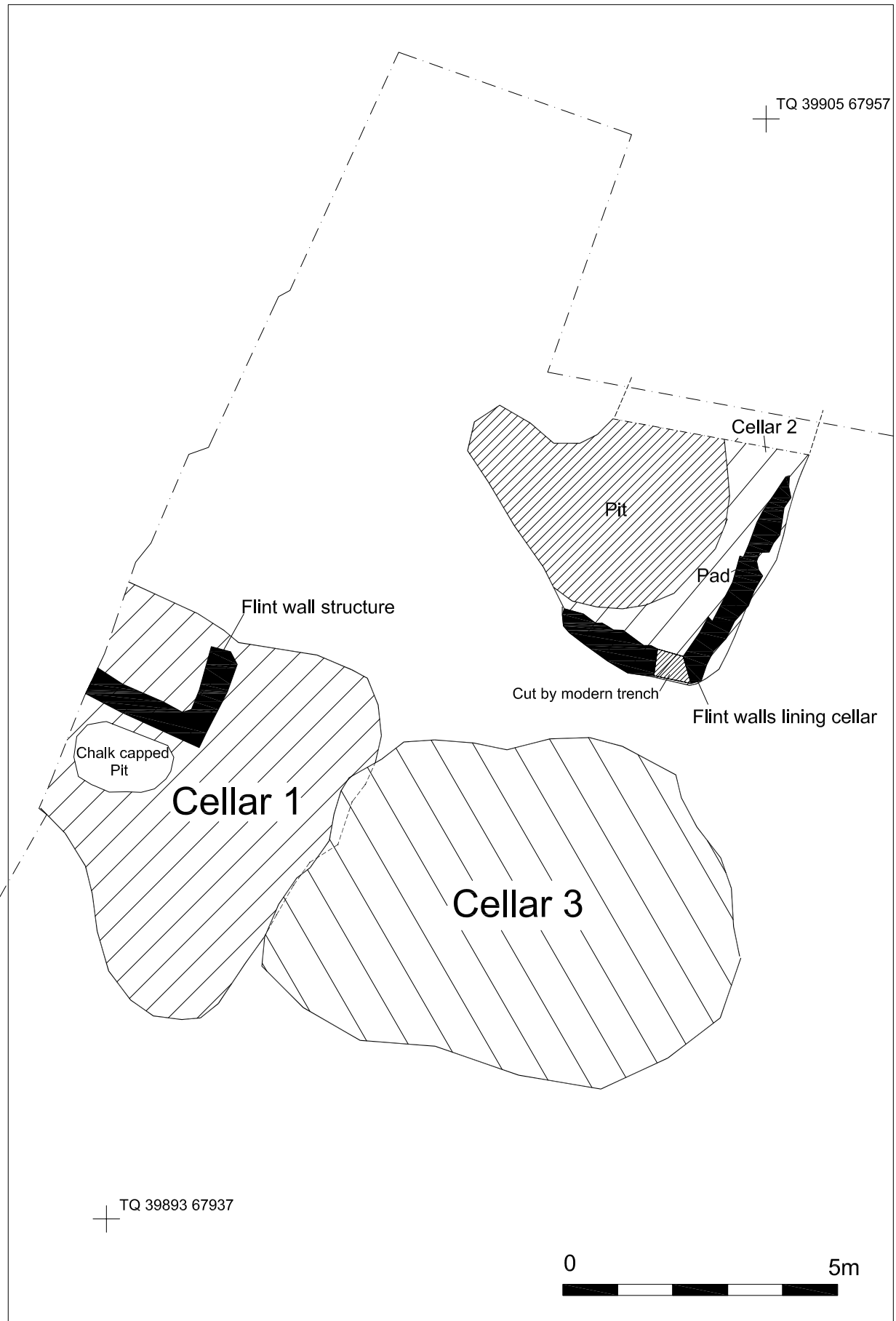


Figure 2. Location plan of archaeological features excavated.

### Plate 1

Overview of Cellar 1 (foreground)  
Cellar 3 (top left) and the flint  
wall structure (bottom right)

View facing south east



### Plate 2

Flint walls lining Cellar 2 with  
modern cut (upper centre)

View facing south west



### Plate 3

Overview of Cellar 3 (foreground)  
with flint wall structure and  
Cellar 1 in background

View facing north west



### Plate 4

Mass of Roman pottery vessels  
filling pit cut through fills of  
Cellar 2

View facing north east