Excavations at 12a Bathwick Street, Bath, 2008

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Hierachy of Headings

1 Introduction, 2 Site and situation, 2 Circumstances, 2 Archaeological Setting

1 Results, 2 Stratigraphy, 2 Pottery, 2 Animal Bone

1 Discussion, 2 Archaeological Interpretation, 2 Significance

1 References

Excavation within the footprint of a new house at 12a Bathwick Street in Bath revealed Roman building remains, a ditch and layer stratigraphy, all datable to between 70 and 130 AD. The building and ditch are considered to be broadly contemporary, overlying and cutting through earlier deposits formed in a backwater of the Bathwick meander. The results augment the conclusions of earlier investigations in this area of Bath in demonstrating the existence here of a civilian settlement outside the Aqua Sulis temple complex in the first and early second centuries AD.

INTRODUCTION

Site and situation

Bathwick Street is situated at the eastern edge of the Georgian city of Bath. It runs NW-SE radially across the Bathwick meander of the River Avon between Sydney Gardens and the Cleveland Bridge, in the northeastern quarter of the city. The ground slopes gently downwards from east to west across the natural floodplain of the river, from the base of Bathwick Down at Sydney Gardens to the rivers edge, but has been raised along most of Bathwick Street by as much as 2m during the 18th and 19th centuries to create a more or less even street level. No 12a was a vacant plot of 8m x 16m within the 18th century terrace on the east side of the street, occupied by a lock-up garage, centred on NGR ST7550 6550 (figure 1). Ground levels within the street lie at c. 25mOD, but drop rapidly by 2m – 3m into the back gardens.

Circumstances

The work was commissioned by Lyme Developments (Bath) Ltd in accordance with a condition of planning permission and undertaken by Robin William Moffat assisted by

Michael Heaton. A detailed planning report and Post-Excavation Assessment have been deposited with the Bath HER and are available at www.michaelheaton.co.uk, and the archive has been deposited with The Roman Baths Museum (Acc. BATRM 2008.21)

The excavations were preceded by a limited 'evaluation' using 100mm augers that identified the presence of Romano-British pottery and deep stratigraphy, though made no attempt to characterise the latter, as well as extensive deep modern disturbances. That evaluation was undertaken for estimation purposes only and has not been separately reported.

Archaeological setting

Though the archaeology of Bath has been the subject of several excellent works of synthesis (Cunliffe 1969 & 1995; Davenport 1994, 2000; B&NES n.d.) those works have concentrated on the core of the historic city around the Roman temple complex and the Abbey overlying it, for very good reasons, none of which have identified conclusive or extensive evidence of civilian or military Roman occupation or medieval settlement. More recent work in the city's peripheries, principally by the former *Bath Archaeological Trust* along Walcot Street, have identified extensive and highly complex remains of civilian Roman settlement and later medieval activity, but none have been published to date. Records held by the City's HER suggest Bathwick Street may have formed the axis for a number of Romano-British burials discovered during its development in the late 18th and early 19th century, possibly suggesting the existence of a Roman extra-mural cemetery in the Bathwick area. Recent investigations in Henrietta Road (Bell and Moffat, 2000) and at the former

Gibbs' Garage on the opposite side of Bathwick Street to the present site (TVAS, 2004) have demonstrated the survival of thick unstructured deposits of Romano-British formation at depths of c. 2.5m below present street level, and it is understood that more recent investigations at the corner of Bathwick Street and Henrietta Gardens have confirmed the presence of thick stratified settlement remains of early Romano-British formation.

RESULTS

Stratigraphy

Overburden and disturbances comprised relatively thick deposits of modern made ground and topsoil. These deposits were variously intercut by the foundations of the demolished lock-up garages , their service runs, an inspection pit and various rubbish pits. These deposits sealed some modern features, a major Georgian culvert, a garden soil and substantial late-post-medieval pitting. The deposits were between 1.8 and 1.3 m thick overall, with disturbances extending below the level of the excavations, and were removed rapidly with the minimum of recording. Nonetheless, it is pertinent to observe that these disturbances had removed all underlying archaeological remains across most of the site and severely dissected what remained of the rest of it, making interpretation very difficult.

Those disturbances cut into a complex sequence of alluvial soils, paved surfaces, wall foundations, ditches and fluvial transgressions, the spatial and stratigraphic layouts of which are illustrated on Figures 2-4. Those remains were stratigraphically more complex and varied at the southern edge of the site against Bathwick Street, grading into a simple sequence of alluvial soils at the northern edge. The principal deposits were: a thin, but widespread layer of rubble (105) which sealed all Roman material north of the culvert and seems to form the

upper horizon of Romano-British activity; fine alluvial silts (106) and (107) sealing a roughly surface (108) which itself sealed a lower alluvial silt (109); a wall foundation [112] and its robber trench [129] oriented normal to Bathwick Street and parallel with a narrow gully or boundary ditch [147] and its possible re-cut [150], apparently cutting into a sequence of soil layers (115), (116), (117) and (118). In the southern half of the site these had been removed by a broad, gently-sloping feature [153], the profile of which is shallow enough to have been a river transgression. Beneath Feature [153], in the southern half of the site, and paved surface (108) in the north, was a sequence of evenly bedded and, in places, homogenous alluvial soils (143, 114 119 etc.) that sealed a culturally sterile yellowish brown sand interpreted as 'natural' Holocene parent material.

The soils consisted predominantly of relatively heavy silty clay loams, becoming progressively finer and more sandy with depth. The deposits at the base of the southern sequence were all sands. All contained relatively high concentrations of calcite and other calcareous concretions, particularly on and around the artefacts and bone, indicating recurrent immersion in mineral-rich water

Pottery

Mark Corney

A relatively small assemblage of Roman pottery comprising 211sherds with a total weight of 5998gms was recovered from 11 deposits. The material displayed a restricted range of forms, fabrics and date. Full details of the quantification are available from the Post-Excavation assessment report. The pottery was in good condition with little or no sign of abrasion or post-depositional re-working, and the sherds were of good size with an average sherd weight of 28.5g. Refitting sherds were observed from half of the deposits examined with significant proportions of individual vessels surviving in contexts 113, 144, 145 and 146.

The range of identified forms is limited. In the coarse ware assemblage cordoned-neck jars represent the majority of the closed forms based on rim counts; these being more common than everted rim jars by a ratio of 3:1. The cordoned-neck jars range from quite fine, thin-walled examples to the robust cordoned-neck storage jars from the Savernake production centres and overall this form accounts for 72% of the coarse ware assemblage by vessel number. Everted rim jars are present and display profiles typical of the earlier second century. The proportion of closed forms over open types is also evident with only four examples of the latter, three shallow simple flanged bowls and one plain rim dish. Mortaria and flagons, the latter largely of local origin, are also present. No beakers or cups were identified apart from a single Samian Ware Drag. 33.

The assemblage is restricted in forms and date. The dominance of cordoned-neck jars over everted rim jars and the restricted date range of the Samian Ware is suggestive of an assemblage of late first to early second century date. The Savernake forms are fully in keeping with this date, all of the identified vessels being types current at the end of the first century (Timby 2001). The simple flanged bowls from contexts143 and 144 and the plain rim dish from 143 are the latest dateable forms, being types that begin to appear in the first half of the second century. There is a single sherd of Les Martres de Veyre Central GaulishSamian dated to *c*100-120, but no Lezoux products; the latter should dominate Hadrianic and later assemblages. This significant absence is not contradicted by the other ceramic material, including the mortaria; all of which could date to the first quarter of the second century. The total absence of pre-Flavian forms strongly suggests an overall date range of *c*70/80-120/130 for the assemblage with a deposition date of no later than *c*120 - 130AD.

Animal bone

Lorraine Higby

A total of 106 bone fragments were recovered. Relatively large groups of material were retrieved from the secondary fill (113) of ditch [147], and spits (143), (144) and (145) of the lower soils in the southeast corner of the site, together with a small number of bone fragments from layer 114)

The condition of the material was generally quite good however, a significant number of fragments, notably those from (114), had a limey deposit adhering to their surface. This did not generally affect identification to either species or element, but is likely to have obscured surface details such as butchery marks.

Approximately 22% of bone fragments could be identified to species and a further 48% were assigned to general size categories, of these the majority were classified as 'large mammal'. Eighty-seven per cent of identified bones (or NISP) are from cattle and it is therefore assumed that most of the 'large mammal' group also belong to cattle.

Identified cattle bones include the scapula, humerus, metacarpal, metatarsal, mandible and loose teeth. Scapulae are the most common element, they account for half of all cattle bones and a significant proportion of fragments in the 'large mammal' category. The largest concentration is from spit (144), which includes scapulae from at least five separate animals. A small number of scapulae fragments were also recovered from (113), (143) and (145).

Butchery marks were observed on eight scapulae, mostly those from (144). The marks include trimming around the glenoid cavity, removal of the spina, and cut and nick marks on the margocervicalis and margothoracalis. The pattern of marks is typically Roman (Maltby 1985; 1989; Seetah 2006) and indicates that these joints had been preserved either by a process of cold or hot smoking (Dobney et al 1996, 27). Damage caused by a butchers hook was also noted on two blade fragments and could indicate the means by which joints were hung in a smoker or brine vat (Lauwerier 1988, 156).

DISCUSSION

Archaeological Interpretation

Interpretation of these results is severely hampered by the small extent of the site, the intensely dissected nature of the stratigraphic data and the relatively small size of the animal bone assemblage. Nonetheless, limited guarded conclusions can be volunteered. Firstly, the data, notwithstanding its limitations, is of high quality. The stratigraphic assemblage is varied and thick; the pottery assemblage is chronologically specific and un-mixed and the animal bone assemblage, whilst small, also shows no sign of post-depositional mixing. This compares favourably with, for instance, the geomorphologically comparable sites on the west side of Bath at Kingsmead (B&NES HER: EBN 2932), where *Bath Archaeological Trust* recovered large quantities of heavily abraded and mixed artefacts from a sequence of riparian dumps and alluvial transgressions lacking evidence of *in situ* cultural activity. The material there was Romano-British, but it had been derived from elsewhere: the evidence at Bathwick Street is *in situ* and undisturbed.

Secondly, it is settlement evidence, possibly civilian settlement. The wide range of deposit types, particularly the rubble wall foundations (albeit robbed), roughly paved surfaces and multiplicity of interleaving soil layers, together with the pottery and animal assemblage, are characteristics of settlement as opposed to, for instance, cemeteries or the temple structures of the city centre; whilst the apparent absence of post-built structures suggests this is not a military site (although we must be careful how far we push that particular conclusion). The site contained relatively large quantities of material from the date range 70 -120 AD. Most of the finds were recovered from a single phase of building remains and a boundary ditch cut through layers of water-lain sands and sandy silts. The character of the material appears to be domestic, rather than industrial or military - although the presence of cured beef is not

uncommon at military sites. The archaeological narrative of the site appears to have been one of relatively early use of the lower riparian margins and its subsequent inundation. That, together with the tightly dated pottery assemblage, strongly suggests Bathwick Street overlies a late first century – early secondary century civilian settlement immediately outside the temple complex of *Aqua Sulis* – one of a number on the eastern side of the city. The early Roman land surface lay c. 2m below the present street level and was rapidly raised through floor construction and river transgression, the latter depositing silts and removing them (eg. Feature 153).

Significance

The importance of the work derives not so much from the detail of the results themselves, but from what they indicate about the archaeological character of the Bathwick Street area in general. Firstly, deposits such as these do not develop in isolation: the surfaces, wall foundations and soil build-ups clearly extend beyond this site, particularly to the south, west and east. However, their survival to the south and east – along Bathwick Street – will have been determined largely by the effects of 18th century construction: as the natural pre-Roman ground level rises to the east, the impact of cellars will worsen in that direction, whilst the quality and thickness of early Roman remains is likely to improve to the north and west as the ground level falls away below the late 18th and early 19th century cellar floors.

Secondly, whilst the Bathwick Street area has long been assumed to be a focus of early Roman civilian settlement (Davenport, 1994), this site represents the first concrete modern indicator of intensive urban or proto-urban activity in the area. The excavations at Henrietta Road (Bell & Moffat 2000) produced material of similar date, but the site was of more rural character and did not contain refuse in the quantities identified at 12a Bathwick

Street; whilst the works carried out at the former Gibb's Garage (TVAS, 2004) appear to indicate circumstances similar to those discovered here, but are as yet unpublished.

The results also have a methodological significance, particularly with regards site identification and evaluation. Despite the site's situation at the edge of the historic urban core of Bath, the features and deposits revealed here are fundamentally 'urban' in character and immediately comparable to early Roman remains in London in being formed of texturally similar alluvial soils laid in considerable thicknesses at depth. There are fragmentary masonry structures here – wall foundations and rough paved surfaces – but these appear to have lacked the lime mortar that colours Roman strata elsewhere in central Bath (cf. Jordan, 2007) and have been comprehensively robbed, leaving a sequence of superficially unremarkable, but stratigraphically complex, alluvial soils. Comprehensive evaluation of such remains will require deep trenches and consideration of the abstract stratigraphic complexity of the lowermost deposits, rather than the identification of interpretable structural remains. Ideally, trial trenches should be preceded by borehole augering, if only to establish the depth BGL of the natural land surface on which early Roman remains lie.

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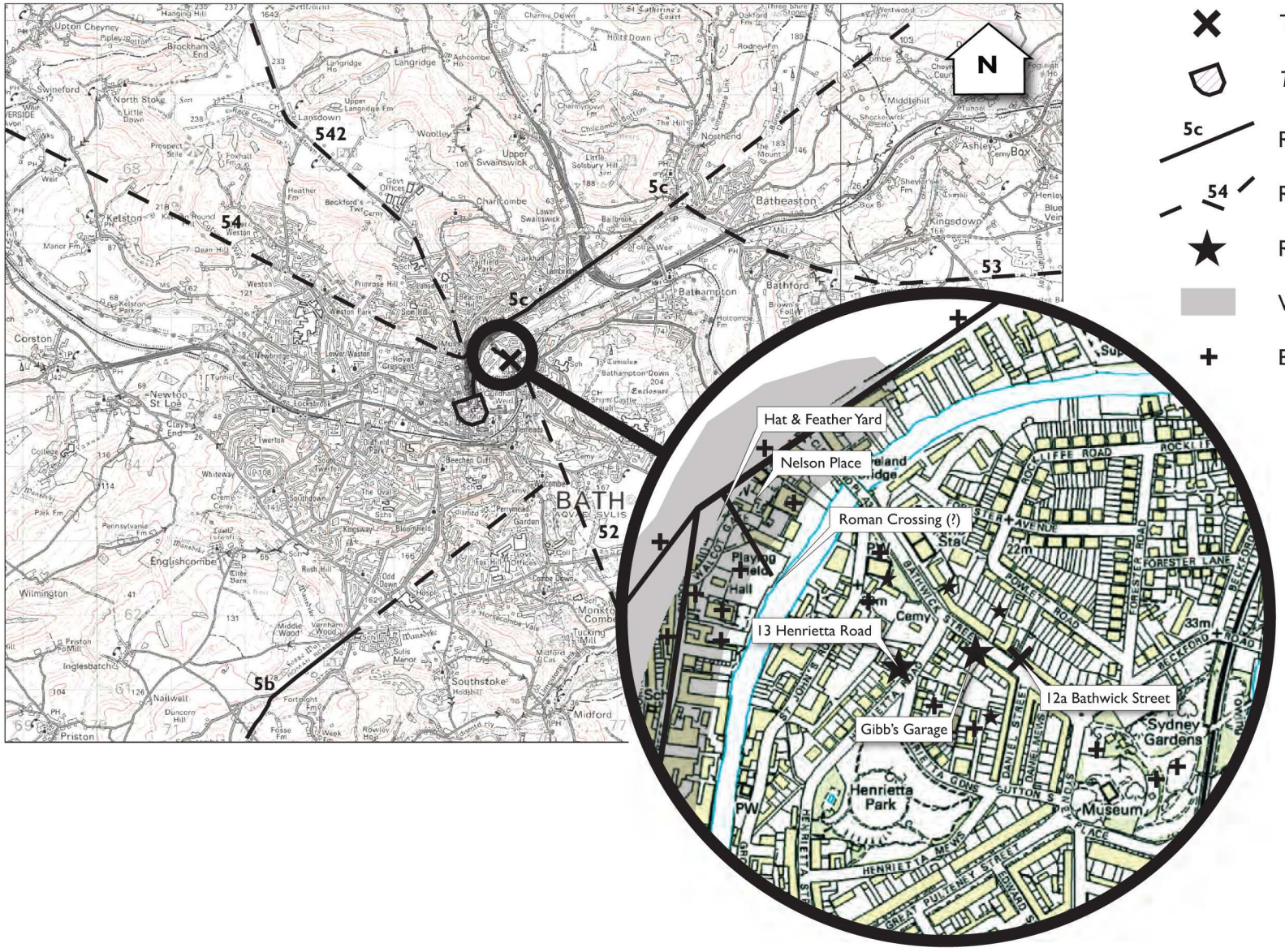

Figure 1: Site Location

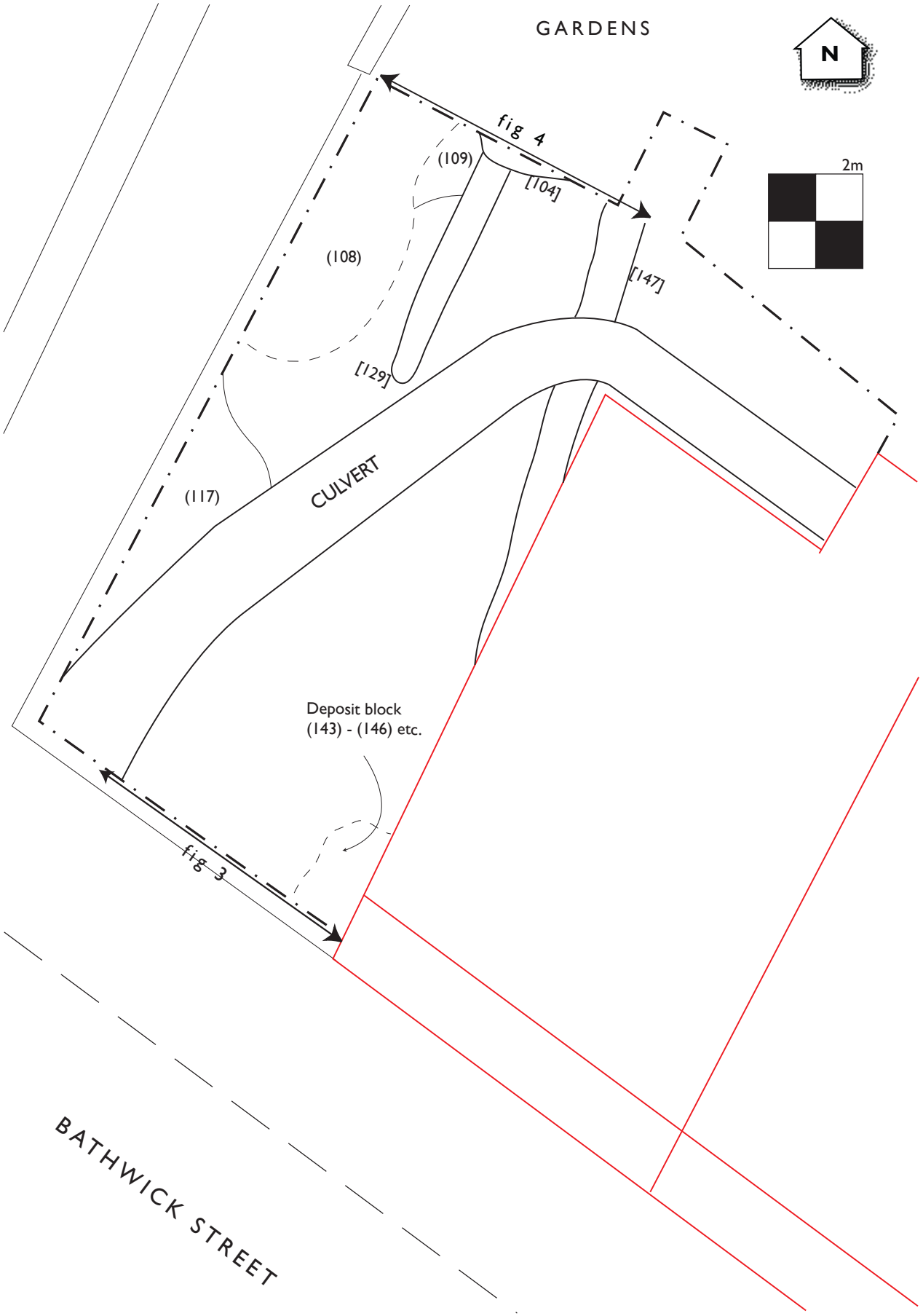

Figure 2: Site plan

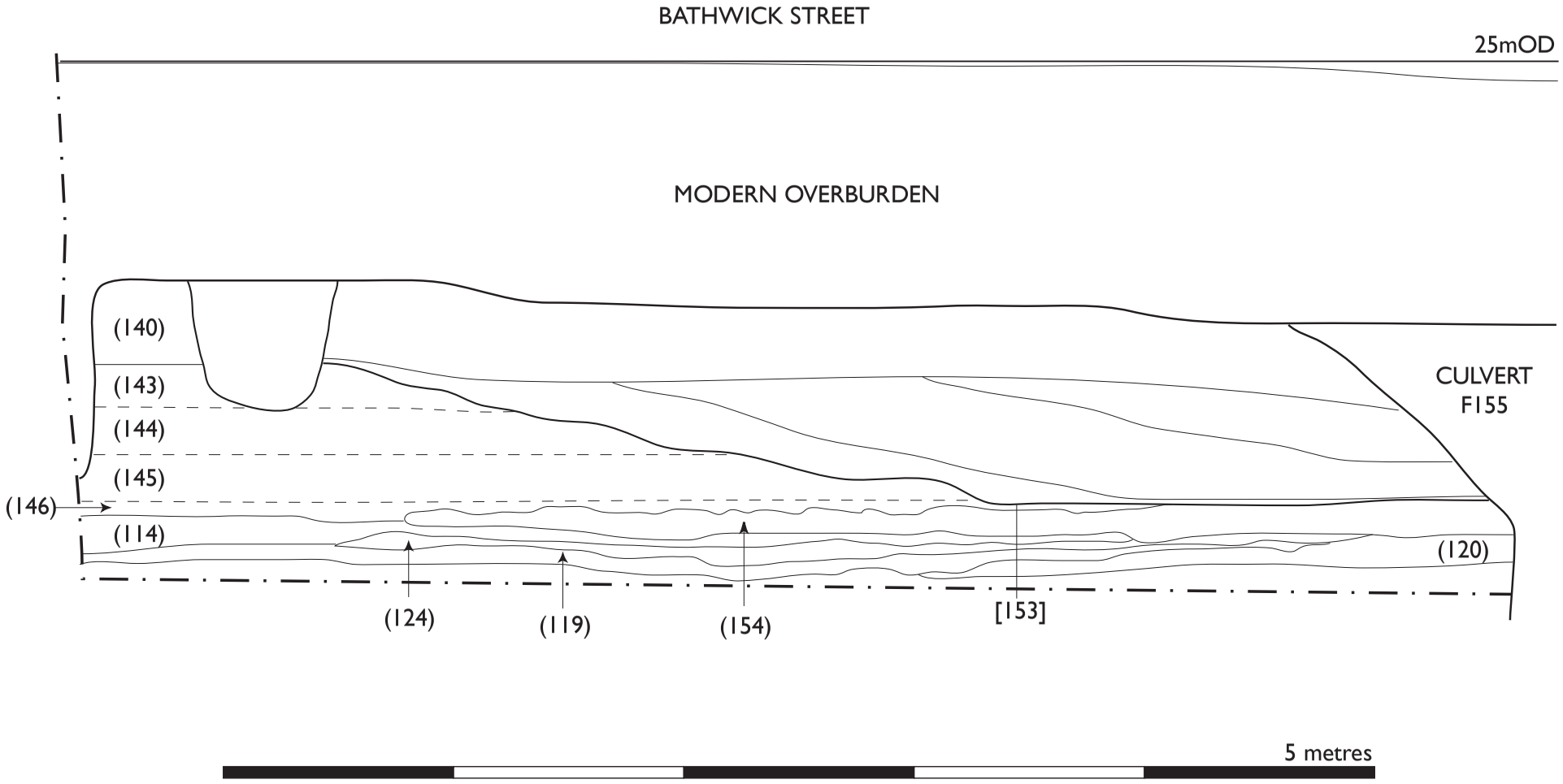

Figure 3: North facing section

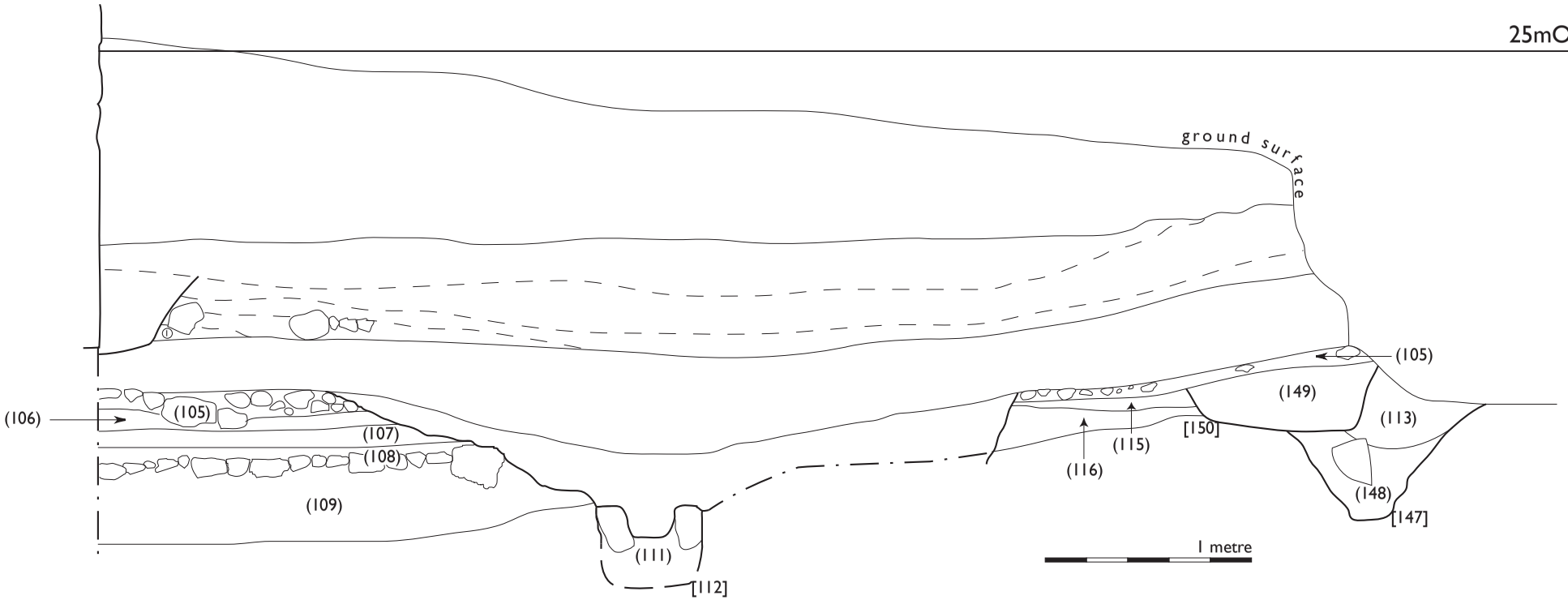

Figure 4: South facing section