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Southampton Archaeology Unit

Report 990

Archaeological watching brief at 84 High Street,
Portsmouth. 2010/439

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Client: Colas



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Archaeological watching brief at 84 High Street, Portsmouth.

By Dr A Russel BA PhD

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1. Summary

The Archaeology Unit of Southampton City Council carried out an archaeological watching brief at 84 High Street, Portsmouth on behalf of Colas. The brief was to record an underground chamber at 84 High Street, as revealed by excavations for repaving. Following recording, the upper part of the vault over the chamber, probably a coal hole, was removed.

2. Introduction

The Archaeology Unit of Southampton City Council carried out an archaeological watching brief at 84 High Street, Portsmouth (figure 1) on behalf of Colas on 11 June 2010. The works were required to record the exposed remains of part of the house that once stood at 84 High Street, and had been buried under the pavement in the post-war period. The observations were made by Dr A Russel BA PhD.

3. Aims of the investigation

The aims of the investigation were to make a record of the extant remains and to oversee partial removal of the structure in order to provide a safe and level footway.

4. Watching brief methodology

All archaeological records were made using the Southampton City Council archaeological recording system.

5. Site location and geology

The site is in the historic core of the town of Portsmouth. It is located on the north side of the High Street, to the southwest of Portsmouth Cathedral (figure 1).

The site is on Portsea Island which has Valley Brickearth above Plateau Gravel as the surface geological deposits (GSGB 1976). They are above the Bagshot Beds. The modern ground surface is at approximately 3.7m OD.

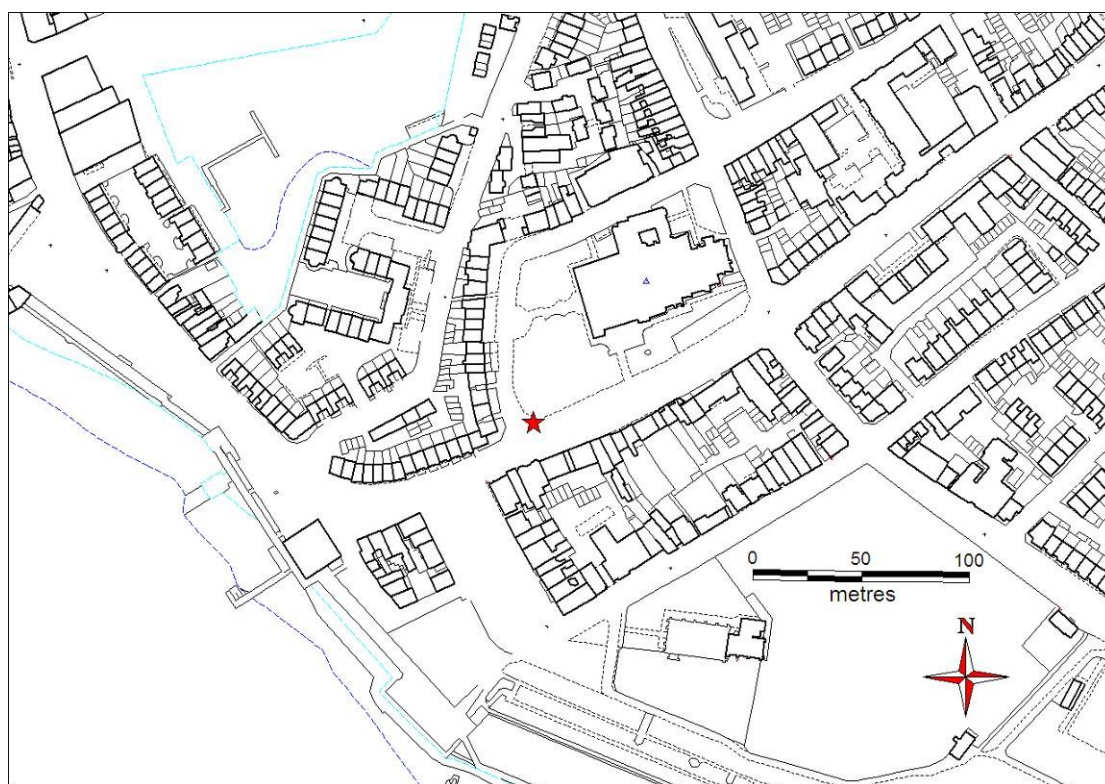


Fig 1: Site location (site shown as red star).

6. Historical and archaeological background

The harbour town of Portsmouth was in existence by the late 12th century and received a charter from Richard I in 1194. It developed into an important port

for trade with Europe. During The Hundred Years War it was raided and burnt by the French in 1338 and 1369. The adoption of Portsmouth by Henry VII as a base for the building and repair of the king's ships and the threat of war with France led to expansion of the town from the late 15th century. In the post-medieval period Portsmouth was the base for the British Navy. The town's fortunes fluctuated with the state of Britain's foreign policy, seeing major investment in times of war. The centre of the town suffered heavily from bombing in the Second World War.

The plot of 84 High Street, assigned a postal number in the 19th century, was situated on the corner of High Street and Oyster Street, the latter running along the quay to the west of the Camber, the harbour for medieval Portsmouth's commercial trade. A building is shown occupying the corner plot on a map of Portsmouth of circa 1584 (Fox and Barton 1986) but there is archaeological evidence of occupation along Oyster Street from the 12th/13th century (Fox and Barton 1986, 40).



Fig 2: The structures occupying the site in 1842.

The earliest picture of the building at no 84 is in Charpentier's Guide to Portsmouth, dated to 1842 (fig 2). It was then a dispensing chemist owned by Blunden & Padwick (Backhouse 2010). The building appears to have been built as one with the adjacent 85 High Street. The frontage of No 85 High Street shows evidence of a cellar, but there is no sign of a cellar beneath no 84. The 1861 OS map however does cellar entrances (fig 3). Hunt's Directory

of 1852 records Thomas Drewett & Co., chemist, at 84 High Street; by 1859 it was occupied by Francis James Dreweatt, chemist; and by 1861 the census records George Pasmore (38, Chemist and Druggist) with his wife Harriett (41), sons George (11), John (8) and Charles (5) with a boarder William Pollen (21) and two servants Eliza Nicholes (19) and Eliza Smith (21). The premises were still a chemists in 1913 according to the Kelly's Directory of that year, where it lists Holttum Ltd as the owners.



Fig 3: No 84 High Street as shown on the 1861 OS map.

7. Results of the watching brief

7.1. Introduction

The bombed buildings, and a few surviving structures along the west side of the High Street were cleared in the post-war period. The backfilled cellar entrances have since subsided resulting in concavities in the footway, some of which were investigated in 2009 (Russel and McDonald 2009).

The present site was being repaved by Colas when removal of the old paving revealed a brick arch beneath the footway. To create a level footway it would have been necessary to remove most of the thickness of the crown of the arch, which would have weakened it considerably. It was considered that the weakened arch might collapse at a future date, particularly if a heavy vehicle

mounted the pavement, so Colas wished to remove enough to consolidate the soft fill of the chamber and then backfill it. The structure was not listed, nor was it a Scheduled Monument so neither Listed Building Consent, nor Scheduled Monument Consent was required to remove the structure. It was agreed with John Pike of Portsmouth City Council that the central section of the arch would be removed after archaeological recording.

7.2 The structural remains

The frontage of No 84 was present as a brick wall (context 1) some 330mm thick, composed of a solid wall 1.5 bricks thick (Fig 4). The bricks were red, 223mm by 102mm by 65mm thick, in a strong, white, sandy mortar. They did not appear to have been laid in a particular bond. There was a door opening in the wall some 750mm wide. The footings of the wall were not exposed, but the lower visible parts of the wall included some brick of “Tudor” type being only 45mm thick.

Wall 1 was butted on its south side by a vaulted brick structure (context 3), aligned approximately north-south. The vault was built from red bricks 230mm by 104mm by 64mm thick, set in a hard, light grey, lime mortar, possibly used as a lime putty. The soffit was built in alternate rows of headers and stretchers. Many of the headers were dark blue/grey, but not all. The full extent of the vault was not exposed, its maximum dimension north-south was 1.6m; it could have extended up to 1.6m further which would have brought it to the present pavement edge. This area was occupied by a number of modern services that would have removed the vault if it had extended that far.

Wall 2 was a sleeper wall on the top of the vault. It was built out of the same bricks as the vault.

Plates 1-8 below show the structure before and after removal of the central section of the vault. After removal of the central section the fill of the vault was compacted and then backfilled with type 2, compacted to Highways Standards.

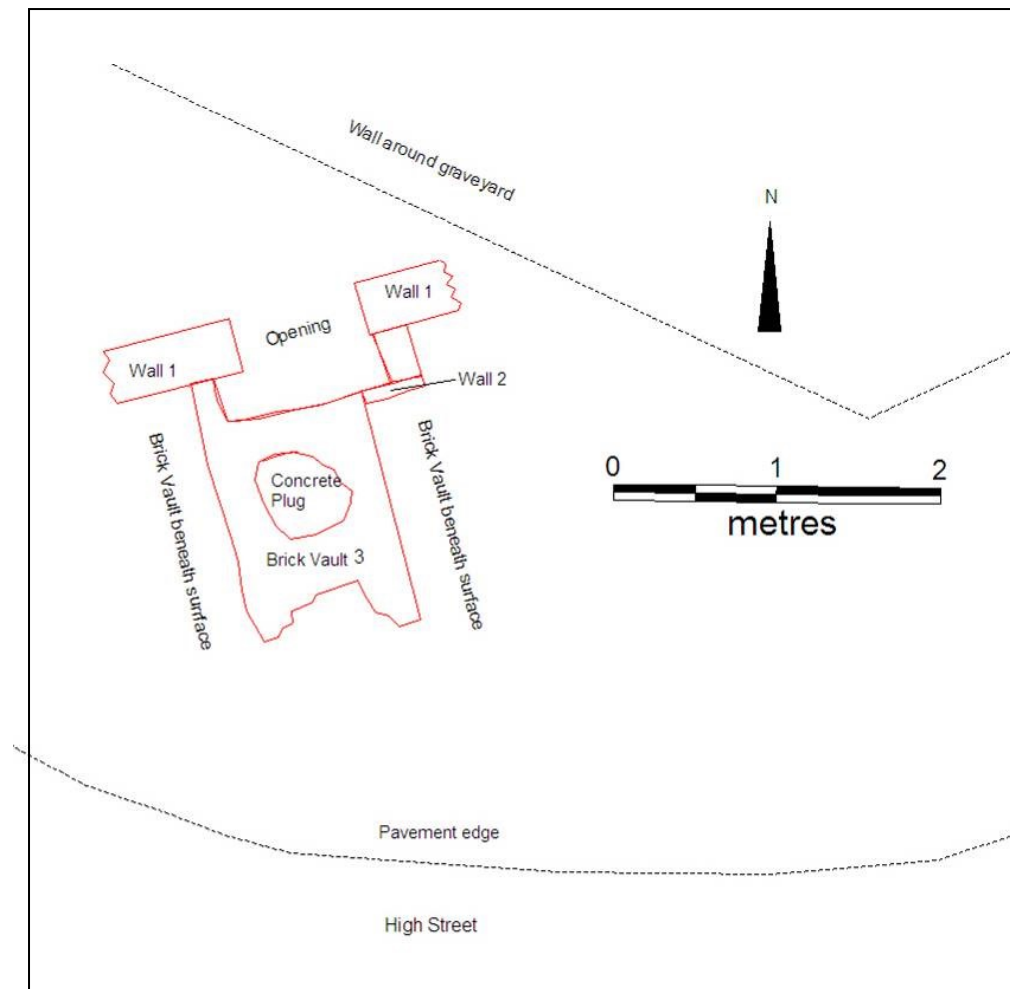


Fig 4: location of remains to south and west of the Cathedral graveyard.

8. Plates



Plate 1: Site location shot



Plate 2: Looking north along the top of the vault towards the door opening in Wall 1.



Plate 3: looking north-east across the brick vault, with wall 1 to left.



Plate 4: looking south along brick vault 3, with door opening in wall 1 in the foreground. Sleeper wall 2 sits on the left-hand side of the vault.



Plate 5: looking southwest across vault 3, door opening to right.



Plate 6: soffit of vault looking southwest, wall 1 to the right.



Plate 7: looking southwest after removal of central section of vault.



Plate 8: looking south after removal of central section of vault

9. Conclusions

The brick vault probably covered a coal hole that lay beneath the pavement of the High Street. No sign of an opening to shoot coal into the chamber was found; it probably lay further out into the pavement, in an area now traversed by modern services that have removed that part of the structure.

The vault was entered by an opening in the house front wall. The sleeper wall built on the vault perhaps supported steps into the house, or perhaps supported the large bow window shown on Charpentier's elevation.

The date of the structure is not known, but the thickness of the bricks and the presence of blue header bricks suggest a date in the 18th century. The presence of the opening in the front wall of the cellar of No 84 suggests that it was always planned to have the coal hole there, although the front wall and the brick arch are built in different materials.

A similar chamber was found beneath the High Street by George Court in the High Street in 2009.

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