

55 SIDBURY, WORCESTER –
ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF

WCM102293



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16th June 2022

Summary

An archaeological watching brief during groundworks at the rear and side of 55 Sidbury occurred in several visits between 2017 and 2022.

The site proved to have been deeply disturbed during construction of City Walls Road, and there was only extremely limited exposure of potentially archaeologically significant deposits in the form of probably post-Roman cultivation soil exposed more than 1.2m below current pavement level. Most of the area of the new extension had been disturbed by numerous service trenches and a substantial modern cast concrete foundation of unknown purpose

Nothing was seen in the groundworks that would suggest the presence of surviving archaeologically significant deposits or structural remains within 1.5m of current surface levels in the immediate area. Previous excavations prior to the construction of City Walls Road demonstrated the survival of archaeologically significant deposits of Roman date overlain by post-Roman cultivation soils; these deposits seem to have been subsequently truncated, though it is possible that some archaeologically significant remains may survive at greater depth than the present observations.

1 Introduction

1.1 This report has been prepared to provide an archaeological record of deposits seen during groundworks at 55 Sidbury Worcester (NGR SO 85200 54453 Fig1). Planning permission has been granted in two applications- the works were started under consent .W P14D0330 subsequent changes to the scheme are covered by approval W 21/01127/REM following a refusal to a similar scheme (W20/00724/REM). Both the 2014 and 2021 approvals have similar archaeological conditions and similar extent of groundworks. In the event the proposed foundation trenching was replaced by raft and piling due to the extent and depth of relatively recent disturbance in the area of the former roadside of City Walls Road The site is in the Historic Core of the Roman and medieval City Archaeologically Sensitive Area.

1.2 This report represents the findings of a watching brief undertaken during groundworks – HER reference WCM102293 The extent of the watching brief is indicated on Fig 3 . The project was undertaken on behalf of Burgoyne Properties (the Client).

2 Archaeological Background

2.1 A number of archaeological interventions have occurred nearby in Sidbury; the earliest being an investigation of Sidbury Gate in 1907 (Spackman 1907) Subsequent investigations occurred during bridge widening works in the 1950s (Richardson 1955 and Russell 1958). The most substantial investigations occurred in 1975-76 before and during construction of the City Walls Road - Sidbury junction (Carver 1980). The natural geology of the area is varied, with marked differences in observations of natural from site to site – at 34 Sidbury directly opposite the present site natural marl was noted at a level approximately 2.6m below current street level whereas natural sand has been noted (eg Hirst 1980) closer to the surface nearby – natural vels undoubtedly fall towards the former Frog Brook valley just to the east of no 55. Carver's observations at 39-47 Sidbury (approx 15m from the present works) indicated the presence of natural silt and silty gravel at a depth of 3m, and observations of a Roman road surface apparently at a depth of around 2.1m (nb the vertical scale in the published drawing Fig 40 is clearly wrong) – Carver 1980.

2.2 The City wall to the south of Sidbury ran south then roughly southwest across the area of the former Royal Worcester Porcelain car park before turning north-west to run under the RWP seconds shop (a former school) and then beneath the Dyson Perrins Museum to the site of Frog Gate in Severn Street. The eastern walls probably dated from a major 13th-century re-walling of the city. There is however a 969AD reference to “the haga by the south wall towards St Peter's Church” (Beardsmore, 1980, 54), which may imply that the Sidbury burh defences included this area. The medieval walls (WCM 96123, 96130) enclosed the (now demolished) church of St Peter in their south-east corner. This was bounded by the ditch on the outer side (the canalised Frog Brook; WCM 96133). They were in places built over and in front of earlier earthwork fortifications, those in Sidbury possibly associated with the Saxon burh (Shearer 1959, 60-64). Also in Sidbury and elsewhere there is some evidence that earthworks were later built up behind the walls. Little is known about the defences between Sidbury and the Frog Gate. Cartographic evidence gives few clues - a round drum tower is shown on both Speed's (1610) and Vaughan's (1660) maps at the corner of the wall behind St Peter's church. After the Civil War the walls generally were levelled or fell into disrepair, the City ditch being infilled gradually between the late 17th C and early 19th C in most areas. Sidbury Gate was demolished in 1768, (Green, 1796). There are no surface remains of the defences between Sidbury and Severn St but geophysical survey followed by a number of evaluations (WCM 100456, WCM 100386, WCM 100146 WCM100172 and WCM 1000185 have revealed that parts of the wall have been almost entirely robbed away.

2.3 It has been reported that there has been a gate at Sidbury since before 1197 (Baker and Holt, 2004, 188, Beardsmore, 1980, 59). Records show that it was repaired several times during the Middle Ages. Contemporary descriptions show that the gate was clearly a large structure with several rooms. The gate was damaged during the Civil War and was repaired in 1661. Green (Green, 1796) states that it was demolished in 1768. In 1907 the base of a large round tower (Spackman 1907 WCM 100042) was exposed to the north of the roadway and still survives in the cellar of the building between the King's Head and Sidbury Lock. The tower extends mainly under the northern pavement, and part of the carriageway at this point. The location of the southern tower remains uncertain, but it must lay within the footprint of the 19th C frontage buildings on the south side of Sidbury between St Peter's St and the modern bridge (Fig 1)..

2.4 Post 1960s archaeological observations within the Sidbury/City Walls Road roadway have been very limited. A watching brief on CCTV trenching in 2001 observed no significant

deposits in the roadway, but the trench depth was very limited (WCM 100876; Napthan 2002a). The most significant recorded observation to date was the identification of a possibly Roman or sub Roman pebbled surface on the southern side of Sidbury at a depth of less than 1m below current ground level (WCM100900; Napthan 2002b). This observation was made at a point that lay to the west of the later medieval roadway (SO 8519 5441) indicating that either the roadway was formerly much wider at this point or possibly that there was an open market place in this area. The construction of the City defences, (including a gate at Sidbury) in the 13th C presumably constricted the roadway to a single carriageway, encouraging encroachment from the plots to the south.

3 Cartographic Evidence

3.1 The site lies in an area that was previously developed as a continuous building line on the northern side of Sidbury (Figs 1 and 2) . The presently empty plot adjoining no 55 was until the late 1960s entirely built up with a mixture of residential, retail and industrial usage. The pattern of building reflected burgage plots established in the medieval period in an area that had probably served some form of roadside market function in the later Roman to post Roman period. The available historic mapping and historic photographic evidence suggests that most of the structures cleared for the City Walls Road junction were of 18th to mid 20th Century date . No 55 was itself re-built towards the end of the 19th Century retaining only a rear domestic wing from the early 19th Century (demolished at the end of the 20th Century)

4 Observations

- 4.1 The watching brief was undertaken in a number of stages, each being an observation of a relatively small excavated pit at various stages of the design process, with final observations during construction groundworks. All of the observations found the upper 1.2-1.5m of deposits to be disturbed by recent activity and largely replaced by a thick stratum of crushed roadstone which seems to have been used to level the site after clearance of the historic buildings in the late 1960s and 1970s. The depth of disturbance suggested that both cellars and foundations were grubbed out across a wider zone than the present carriageway.
- 4.2 Level reduction of the area of the former roadside verge reduced levels by an average of 0.8m, all of which was disturbed modern (post 1960s) deposits. Additional excavations were made to re-route a number of existing service runs (including gas and BT) to beneath the pavement. These trenches revealed roadstone and modern disturbed ground to a depth of at least 1.2m
- 4.3 Excavation of a larger test pit against the existing side wall of No 55 revealed approximately 1.2m of recent soil deposits cut by a cast concrete foundation determined by probing to be 2.2m deep. The foundation had been cast in a trench supported by metal sheet piling, the shape of the withdrawn piles being clear in the sides of the cast concrete. Remarkably the foundation showed no signs of having been ever built on, and the upper part of the trench had been infilled with material including blue clay. The clay would appear to have been imported to the site and was mixed with late 20th C building materials. The presence of this foundation (close to but not below the side wall of No 55) led to a design change in the proposed foundations, and the proposed piles in this area omitted.
- 4.4 Observations against the side of the existing concrete foundation revealed disturbed archaeologically significant deposits consisting of around 1.2m of dark sandy cultivation type soils without visible ceramic inclusions. The absence of tile fragments in these soils suggests a pre-15th Century date, as tile became abundant in the City by the late 14th -early 15th

Century. No excavations were made into these deposits, which had been previously disturbed by withdrawal of the 1970s temporary sheet piling. Piling operations identified sand at 2.2m.

5 Discussion and Conclusions

- 5.1 Whilst the watching brief did not reveal any additional information about the historic landuse or archaeology of the site it did reveal something of the level of peripheral disturbance caused by the construction of City Walls Road. The construction zone here was clearly much wider than the eventual roadway, and possibly the layout was changed during construction. The presence of a never-used cast concrete foundation on the site of 56 Sidbury is intriguing – it may possibly relate to temporary shoring of the neighbouring building, or more likely represents an abandoned plan to construct a narrow corner building south west of No 55. In the event the foundation was nearly 50 years premature, but now serves a similar purpose.
- 5.2 The potential for archaeologically significant remains surviving within the site appears to be only moderate. It appears that there is near zero potential for archaeologically significant deposits in the top 1.2m and therefore the present raft and piled foundation design has reduced the archaeological impact to an absolute minimum. Piling did not encounter any hard spots (which would potentially represent the former Roman road slag surface), and it would appear probable that any potential relatively undisturbed archaeological remains will be between 1.5 and 2.2m depth within the historic plot of No 55. The area of the 1970s road scheme would appear to have effectively removed all archaeological stratigraphy at this point.

6 Bibliography

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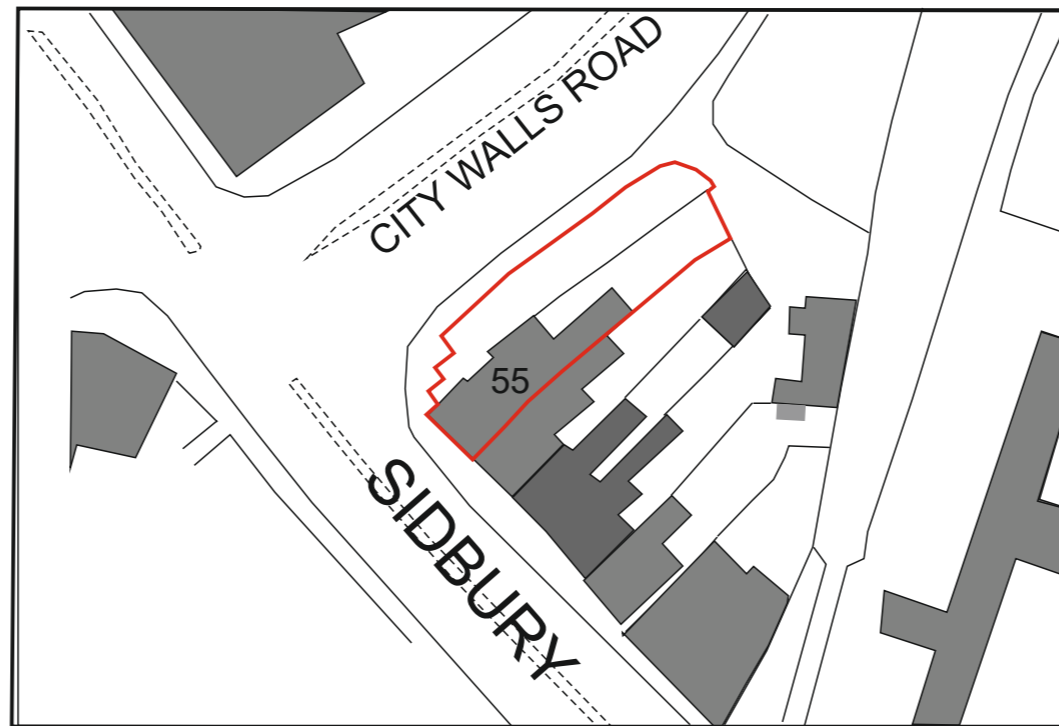
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1883



1904



1947

Figure 1: Site location 55 Sidbury and historic mapping showing area pre clearance for City Walls Rd and widening of Sidbury



View facing NE along former boundary line - stripped area all recent deposits

Note imported blue-grey clay infill over concrete



Area of deepest excavation



Trench for earlier concrete foundation
(note no sign that the foundation had previously been built on)

Figure 2: Site photos

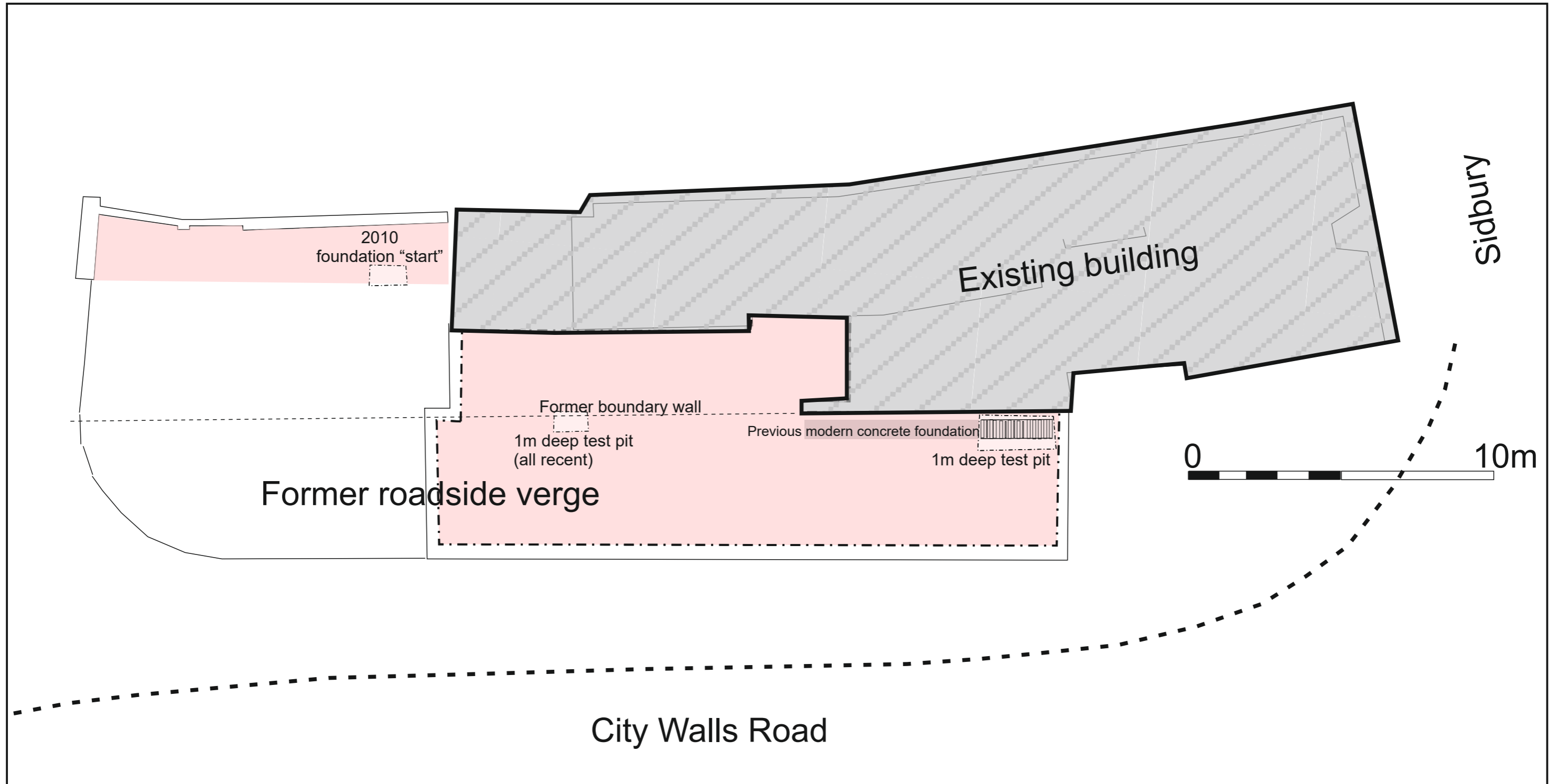


Figure 3: Site plan - area in pink represents level reduction for new buildings