

**Alison Clarke**  
*Archaeological Consultant*

18 Ash Grove, Northallerton, North Yorkshire, DL6 1RQ  
Tel : 01609 776501/0860 506062 Fax: 01609 779968

NYCC	
SNY	12030
ENY	4225
CNY	
Parish	2152
Rec'd	

**2A - 4 CASTLEGATE, THIRSK**

**AN**

**ARCHAEOLOGICAL**

**WATCHING BRIEF**

**ALISON CLARKE M.A.**  
**1996**

**AUGUST**

## ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF AT 2A-4, CASTLEGATE, THIRSK

### INTRODUCTION

In May 1995, an agreement was signed in accordance with Section 106 of the 1990 Town and Country Planning Act, regarding archaeological work at 2A-4 Castlegate, Thirsk (Plan 1).

The site is situated on the eastern side of Castlegate, which approaches the Market Place of Thirsk from its south-west corner. The former medieval castle in Thirsk stood in the area of Castle Garth, one hundred metres to the west of the site. Nothing but earthworks remain of this castle, but recent archaeological work has demonstrated a more complex history to the site than had previously been known and, in an area no more than sixty metres from 2A-4 Castlegate, evidence of pre-Norman occupation including burials.

The property at 2A-4 consisted of a single pile early nineteenth century brick building which had originally been divided into two properties. These were subsequently knocked into one and the building was used as a bakery and then a furniture shop in the recent past (Plate 1). Various extensions were built on to the rear of the property, which backs onto a cobbled yard.

The main building has suffered from subsidence, mainly at the rear, which was evident throughout the structure, and was in a state of decay when purchased by the present owners (Plates 1 and 2). At the time the 106 Agreement was made, the owners wished to demolish the building and build new premises on the site. In view of the potential archaeological interest of the site (its proximity to the known remains of the former medieval castle and to recent excavations which produced evidence of pre-Norman occupation of the area), it was required that an archaeologist supervise demolition work and evaluate the extent, character and significance of the archaeological remains. An evaluation report was required to assess the archaeology and to propose further work which might be required adequately to deal with the archaeology of the site.

Subsequent to the Agreement, proposals for the site were modified to include demolition of the accreted extensions behind the original early nineteenth century building, and underpinning of the main building to correct the subsidence which was apparent in the fabric of the main building. The underpinning work was begun, under archaeological supervision, in the autumn of 1995, but was rapidly proved to be impractical as the ground at the back of the building was too soft, and the front half of the building was cellared to a depth of 1.75 metres. The cellars had two staircases leading down from the rear corners of the main building (Plan 2). Test holes around the site showed that the very soft ground did not extend over the whole area, but did underlie most of the main building. It was decided that piling was the only solution to hold up the building, and this was subsequently done late in 1995.

A report on the results of the initial phase of work, including all the test holes and a series of auger holes across the centre rear of the main building, was submitted as part of the evaluation report required by the 106 Agreement.







**ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF** (conducted after the initial report)

1) The remainder of the front cellar wall (i.e. the northern half) was removed to its foundations and a trench, 60 cm. wide and between 45 and 60 cm. below the cellar floor level, was excavated for the new foundations (Plan 2). The section revealed by the removal of the front wall was similar to that on the southern part of the front wall, until it partially collapsed. The soil that came away was the disturbed deposits from the foundation trench of the original wall, and its removal revealed a different sequence of soils beyond.

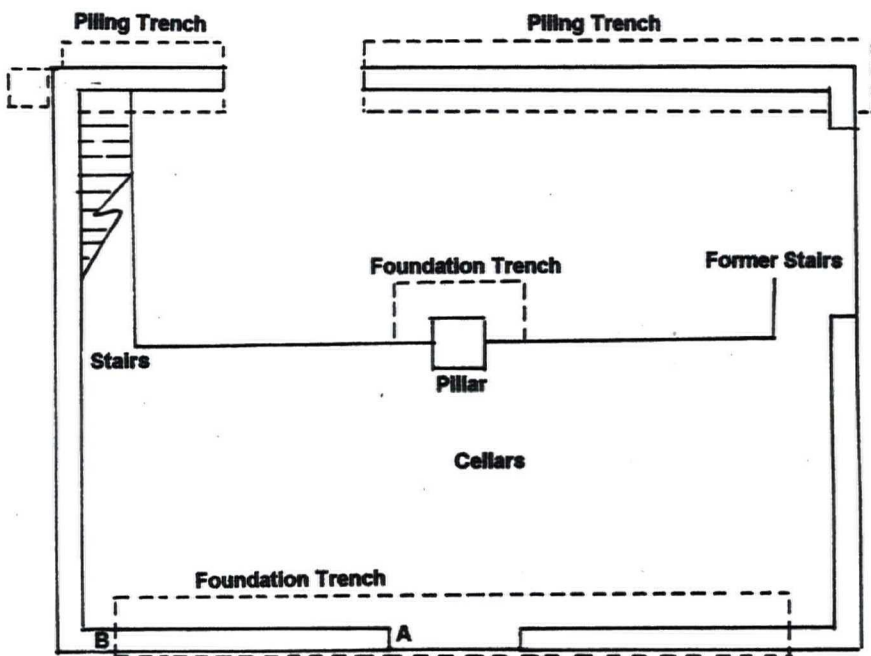
The section revealed (Plan 5) showed disturbed deposits of sands and silts containing brick, tile and mortar rubble, with the remains of a coal chute to the north and associated coal dust. These deposits extended to around 90 cm. below the level of the footpath. Beneath them were layers of grey and brown silty clays and sand, stretching to 1.8 metres below the footpath and containing some cobbles and animal bone fragments towards the base. The base of the section, which was below the level of the cellar floor, consisted of undisturbed yellowy-orange silty clay which sloped down to the north and east.

2) At the rear of the main building, a trench 80 cm. deep was excavated on both sides of the rear wall, from which the piles were driven (Plan 2). The fill of the inside trench was a brown disturbed silty clay and sand contained brick and mortar fragments. Towards the northern end the ground was much drier and contained large quantities of brick rubble at the top of the cellar stairs. The trench on the outside of the building was much disturbed by drains and modern debris, and consisted of soft brown wet silt on the southern side, and drier brown silty sand with building rubble to the north.

On the southern side of the main building, where a former cobbled passageway extended between the site and No 6 Castlegate (Plate 3), the piling trench removed the cobbles which appear to butt up to the building, below which was a brown loamy fine sand mixed with much mortar.

A further hole for piling was dug outside the north wall of the main building. This contained cobbles beneath an 8 cm. skim of concrete, below which was brown clay with brick and stones which extended to the base of the hole at 50 cm.

3) In the centre of the building, the central pillar was removed after the cellars had been filled with hardcore. This involved the excavation of a hole immediately to the east of the cellars, around the pillar, to take the foundation of a new supporting pillar (Plans 6, 7 and 8). The fill of the majority of this hole was a fine soft sandy brown silt with occasional stones, very soft for the first 70 cm. Below 70 cm. from the floor level, the fill on the south side of the hole was a firmer clayey silt with stones, containing cobbles and occasional fragments of animal bone. Towards the base of the hole, from 40 cm. above the cellar floor level, the clayey silt extended across the hole, gradually becoming paler and less disturbed on the north side. The base of the hole was 45 cm. below the cellar floor level, at which point the soil was sandy



Scale 1:100

**CASTLEGATE PLAN 2 MAIN BUILDING**



clay. A 4" glazed drain ran north-south across the hole at a depth of 20 cm. below the cellar floor level.

4) Piles were sunk all around the eastern, northern and southern sides of the main building. Those towards the front (west side) reached a depth of 4.5 metres from the cellar floor before gaining solid ground. Those at the rear of the building reached a depth of 5 metres from the floor surface (i.e. 1.25 metres higher than those in the cellared area). This indicates that although the ground at the front of the building appeared to be less disturbed than that at the rear, it is nevertheless soft and unstable to a depth of over 6 metres from the ground surface (Plan 4).

5) After the piling was completed, all the extensions and outbuildings to the rear of the main building were demolished (Plate 4). The concrete ground surface was then cleared by machine and levelled up to 70 cm. down, to provide the base for a new building to be erected over the whole of the remainder of the site. This clearance and the subsequent excavation of foundations were watched by the archaeologist.

6) Much of the area was covered in cobbles below the concrete base of the former outbuildings. Near to the main building the foundations of the former extensions and extensive remains of drains had effectively destroyed any earlier levels, and here there were no cobbles remaining. In the passage to the south of the building all the cobbles were removed and the soil below to a depth of 50 cm. below the former surface. The soil here was brown sand with mortar flecks and contained modern pottery, clay pipe fragments and pieces of sheep and pig bone.

The cobbles over the main part of the site were also set in a brown loamy sand, and varied in depth. At the edges of the site they were immediately below the concrete, and 40 to 50 centimetres below the cobbles which cover the yard around the site, but centrally they were deeper, and the ground was substantially softer. Some of the cobbles in the central area were very large, and may have been laid to provide a firmer footing. Heavy rain during the clearance work meant that soil differences were hard to see and the machine churned up the ground to a depth of up to one metre, but the brown loamy sand generally overlay a harder cleaner sand of variable colour at a depth of around 70 cm. below the ground surface of the cobbled yard.

7) Foundations for the new building were machine excavated around the edges of the site running back from the rear of the main building (Plan 3). Over the majority of the site these cut through an average of 40 cm. of mixed rubble and brown loamy sand into a sub-base of variable sands, fine gravel and clay up to 1.3 metres below the external ground surface.

At the western end of the site, however, nearest to the main building, the foundations trenches revealed deep deposits of very soft structureless brown silt. On the southern side of the site, these stretched for over five metres eastwards from the back of the building, and on the northern side for 1.7 metres. The underlying sands and clays sloped very steeply down beneath these deposits, and although the foundation trench on the southern side was deepened to 1.8 metres, the base of the sort silt was not reached (Plan 9). Although the deposits were clearly disturbed ground, archaeological material was scant,



ARIS 2152  
E 4225  
S 12030



**PLATE 1**  
**FRONT OF 2A-4 CASTLEGATE BEFORE WORK STARTED**



**PLATE 2**  
**REAR OF 2A-4 CASTLEGATE, SHOWING OUTBUILDINGS AND DECAY ON MAIN BUILDING**



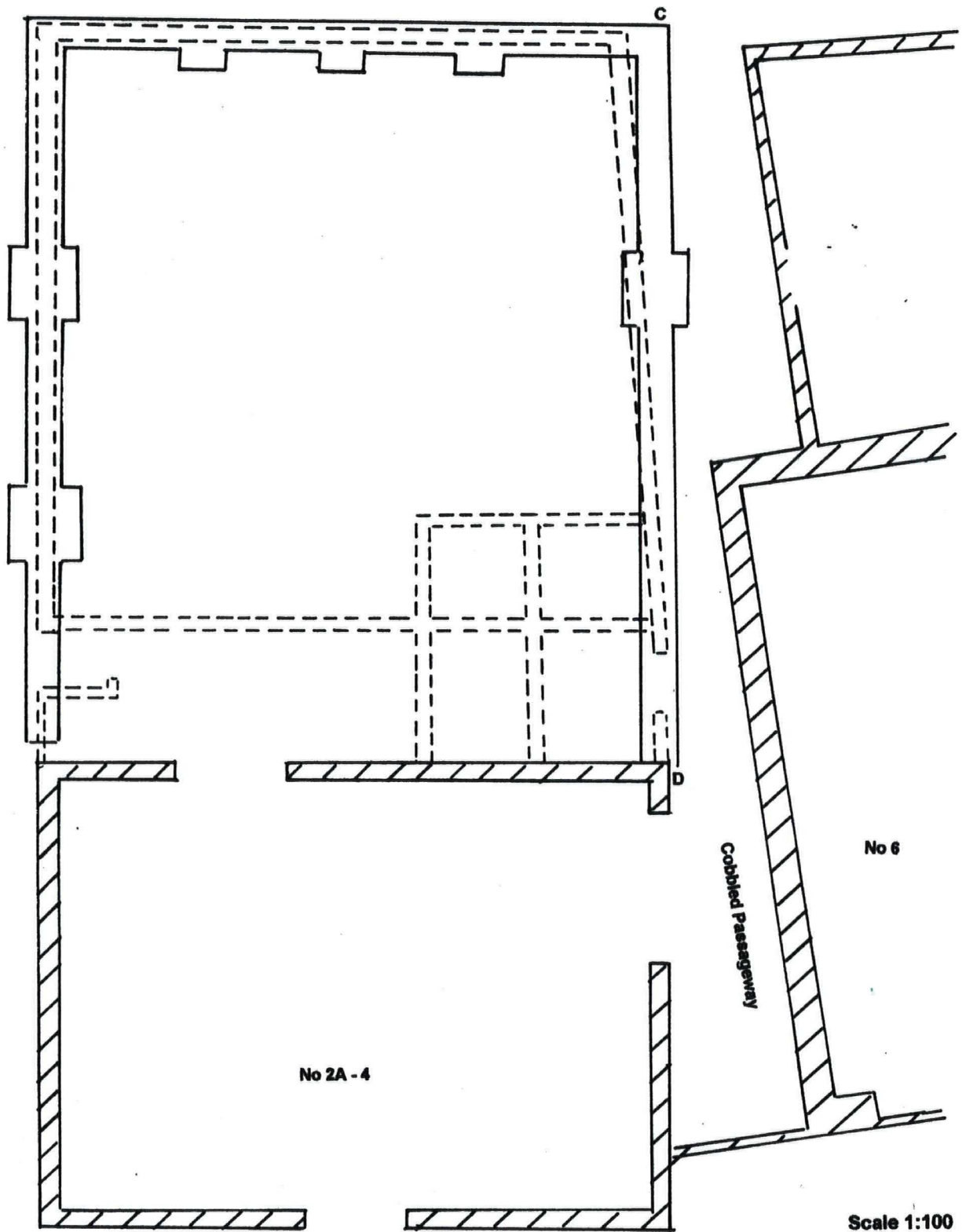


**PLATE 3**  
**PARTIALLY CLEARED COBBLED PASSAGEWAY BETWEEN 2A-4 AND 6**  
**CASTLEGATE**



**PLATE 4**  
**REAR OF NO 2A-4 CASTLEGATE LOOKING WEST,**  
**SHOWING MAIN BUILDING AND DEMOLISHED OUTBUILDINGS**








No 2A - 4

No 6

Cobbled Passageway

Scale 1:100

Key

-  Existing Buildings
-  Foundation Trenches
-  Demolished Outbuildings

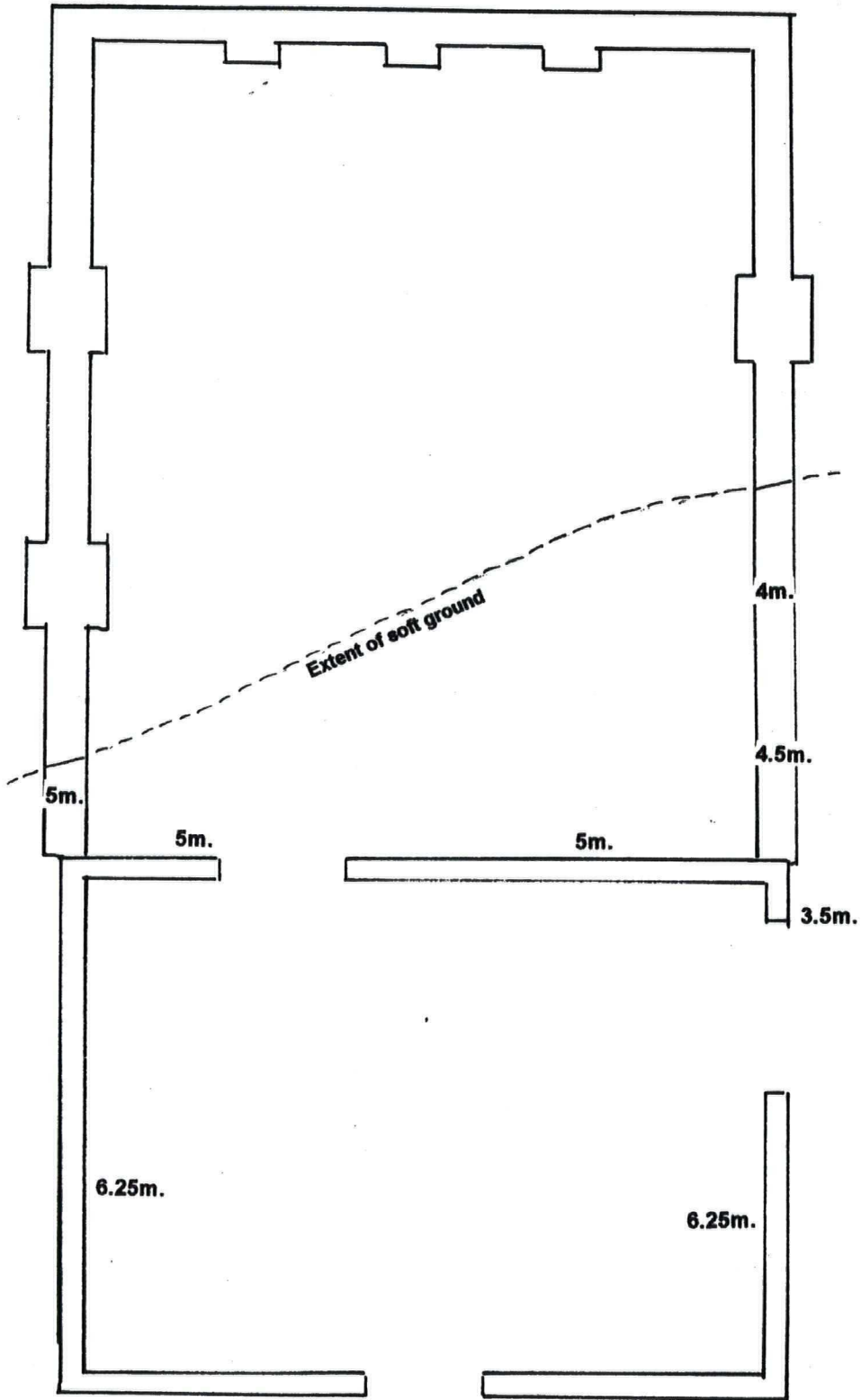
**CASTLEGATE PLAN 3 NEW EXTENSION**



consisting of a group of cattle bone fragments at a depth of c. 1.8 metres, and a few fragments of post-medieval pottery in the upper levels. The soft ground was very similar to that encountered inside the building in the original trial holes for underpinning.

8) As a result of encountering this soft ground, it was decided to pile the western end of the new building to provide firm foundations, so the total depth of the soft ground was not determined. The piles subsequently driven in this area reached a depth of 4 to 4.5 metres on the southern side and 5 metres on the northern side.





Scale 1:100

CASTLEGATE PLAN 4 PILING DEPTHS



## CONCLUSIONS

Despite the lack of archaeological dating evidence, the watching brief provided important information about the history of the site and its vicinity.

There was strong evidence that a large and deep depression had formerly occupied much of the site. The eastern edge of this depression was clearly visible in the foundations trenches for the new building behind the main building (Plan 4), but its remaining sides are less well defined. It appears to have continued to the north and south of the site, and verbal information from the builder indicated that some subsidence has occurred towards the rear of No 6 Castlegate next door to the south.

The evidence for its western edge is somewhat conflicting. The very soft structureless silts which form the fill of the depression to the east were not observed in the excavations for the foundations of the new central pillar, which would indicate that it does not extend that far to the west. However, the depth to which the piles around the building could be driven gives a different picture. The piles are driven down until they reach hard or solid ground. At the eastern end of the site, this would have occurred within 1.3 metres from the surface, where hard clean sands were encountered in the foundation trenches. In the areas where the soft silts were known to occur, the piles reached a depth of between 4 and 5 metres below the surface. At the eastern end of the building, beyond the apparent extent of the soft silts, the piles reached a depth of 6.25 metres from the surface, indicating that hard ground was deeper here than towards the rear of the building (Plan 4).

The significance of the feature relates to its position near the former medieval castle to the west (and the recently discovered evidence of pre-Norman activity only sixty metres to the west of the site) (Plan 1). It has generally been assumed that any moat around the castle must have run north - south in the vicinity of Castlegate, and the discovery of this depression seems to confirm that hypothesis. The size of the depression indicates a substantial moat which must have been levelled before any development took place in the vicinity. It may be significant in this respect that as late as 1792 there was only one building on Castlegate, at its northern end (Plan 10). There were very few finds of archaeological material in the excavated parts of the depression, which might indicate that it was not open for a very long period, and was backfilled deliberately rather than silting up gradually.

The depth of the piles at the western end of the building may imply that the soft silty fill of the eastern side is but part of the fill of the whole, and that the depression continues and deepens westwards, presumably underlying Castlegate itself. The pronounced rise in ground level on the western side of Castlegate opposite the site would therefore once have been much more extreme. A further possible explanation is that two processes have taken place. First, a large natural depression may have existed in the area, which was wholly or partially filled with soft sands and silts. This could subsequently have been partly excavated to form the moat of the castle, which was then backfilled with the very soft grey silts observed in the area of the back of the building on the site. This would account for the change



in the fill, and for the presence of apparently natural sands at a depth of around 2 metres from the surface at the front of the building.

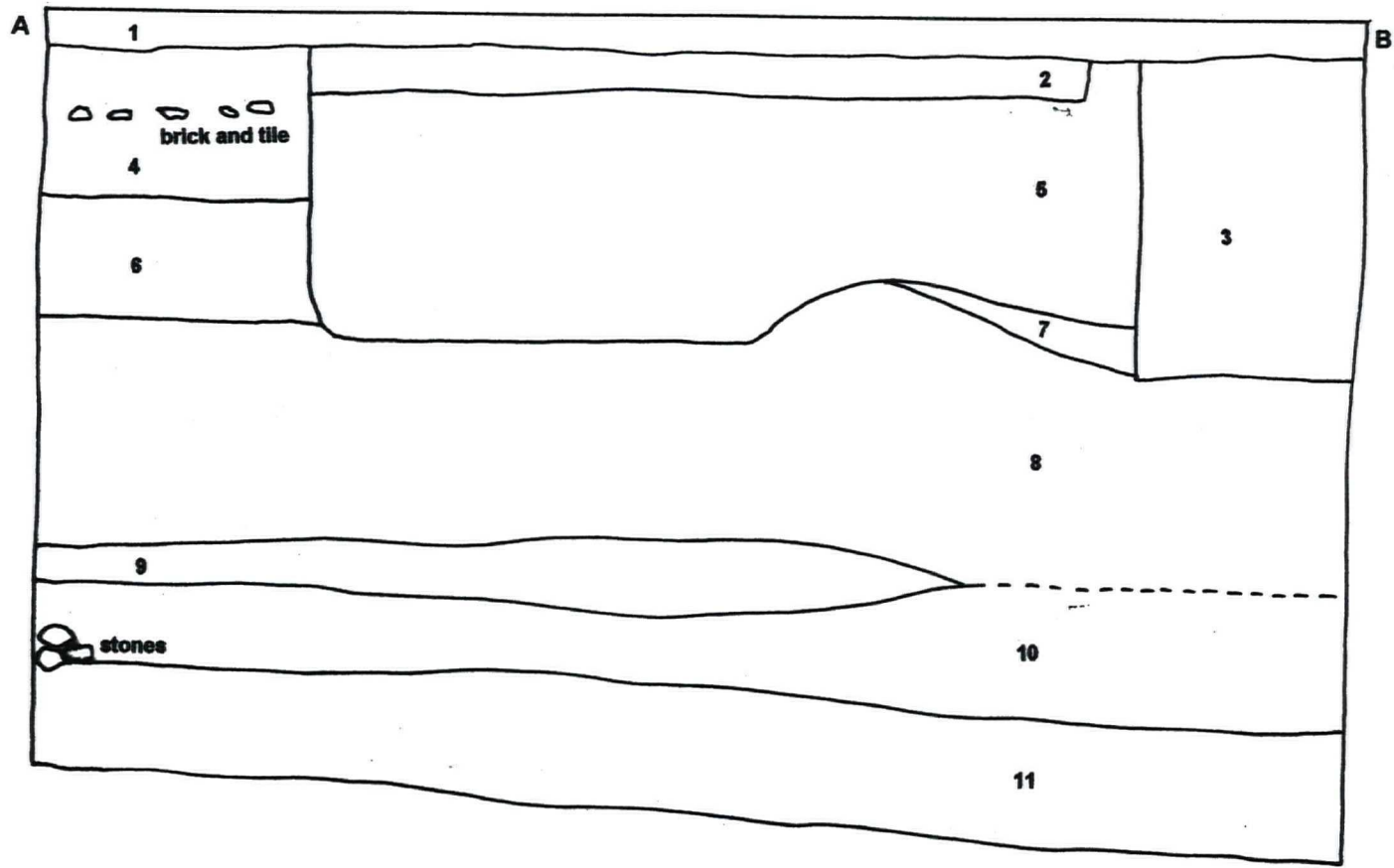
Further evidence would be required to prove either hypothesis, and any opportunity to explore the extent and nature of the feature encountered in this project should be pursued. Borehole evidence could be as useful as archaeological observation. Aspects of the early history of Thirsk are proving to be present in the archaeological record, and are beginning to present a picture of some complexity and interest.

Alison Clarke M.A.

August 1996

S

N



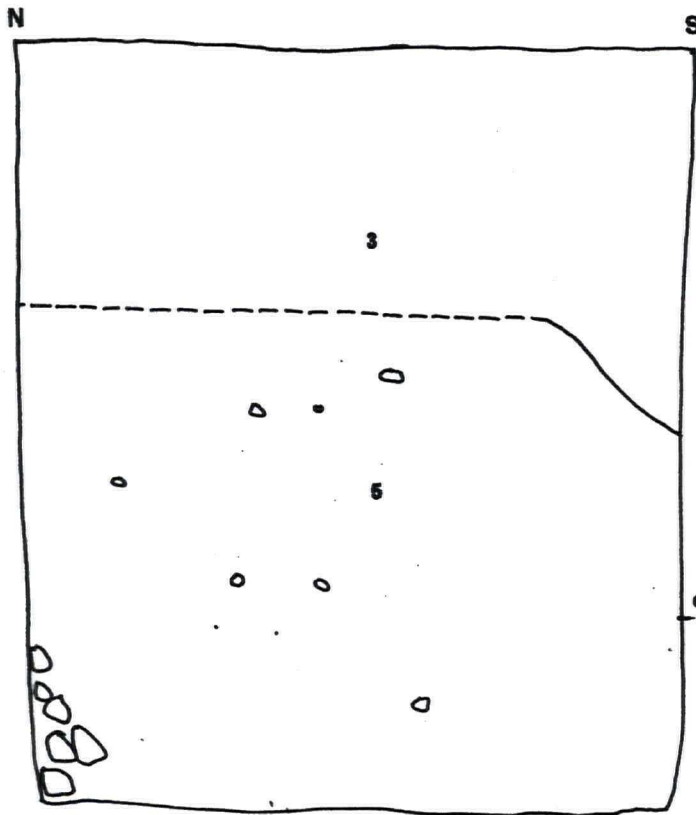
Key

Scale 1:20

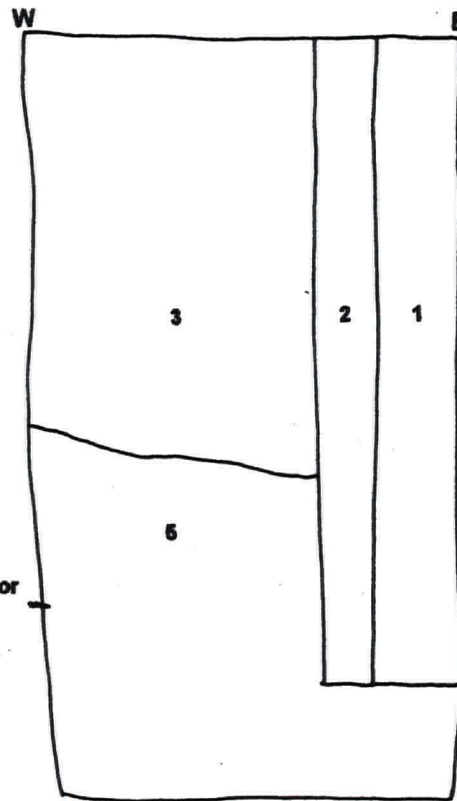
- 1 Concrete
- 2 Bricks
- 3 Coal Chute
- 4 Sand with building rubble
- 5 Mortary brick-filled silt with rubble
- 6 Loamy sand with occasional tile and brick fragments
- 7 Black silt - coal dust
- 8 Grey-brown silty clay
- 9 Orange-brown gritty fine sand
- 10 Grey silty clay
- 11 Yellow-orange silty clay

CASTLEGATE PLAN 5 EAST-FACING SECTION A - B, MAIN BUILDING (SKETCH SECTION)

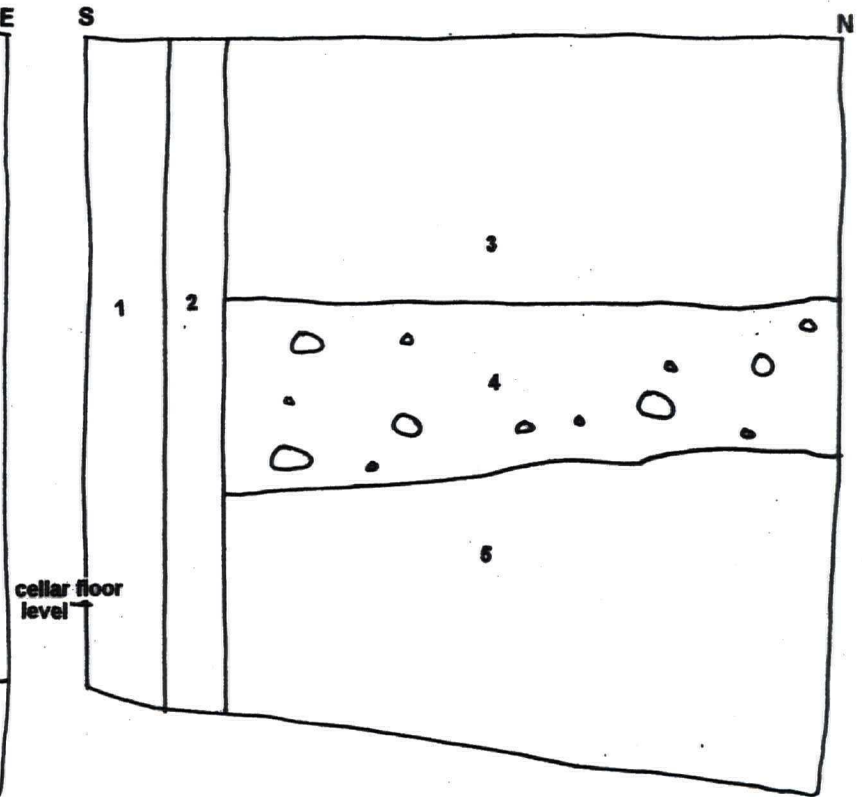




**CASTLEGATE PLAN 6**  
**WEST-FACING SECTION, CENTRAL PILLAR**  
**(SKETCH SECTION)**



**CASTLEGATE PLAN 7**  
**SOUTH-FACING SECTION, CENTRAL PILLAR**  
**(SKETCH SECTION)**



**CASTLEGATE PLAN 8**  
**EAST-FACING SECTION, CENTRAL PILLAR**  
**(SKETCH SECTION)**

Scale 1:20

**Key**

- 1 Brick wall
- 2 Brick rubble in sandy loam - trench for wall
- 3 Fine dark brown sandy silt
- 4 Cobbles and stones in brown sandy loam
- 5 Mid-brown clayey silt with stones