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9-17 CASTLEGATE THIRSK NORTH YORKSHIRE

A Report on an Archaeological Watching Brief

by Isabel Mason

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9-17 CASTLEGATE

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NORTH YORKSHIRE

**A REPORT ON AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL
WATCHING BRIEF**

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April 2005

Cover Illustration:

Part of 1912 Ordnance Survey of Thirsk

CONTENTS

	page
SUMMARY	
1. INTRODUCTION	3
2. METHOD STATEMENT	5
3. ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND	5
4. THE WATCHING BRIEF	8
5. CONCLUSIONS	11
6. BIBLIOGRAPHY	11
7. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	12

Figures

1	Site location	3
2	Location of works	4
3	Part of 1912 Ordnance survey with site highlighted	6
4	South-east facing recorded section	10

Abbreviations

NGR	National Grid Reference
VCH	Victoria County History
YAT	York Archaeological Trust

SUMMARY

The York Archaeological Trust (YAT) undertook an archaeological watching brief at 9-17 Castlegate, Thirsk in order to observe the excavation of service trenches and to record the section of a bank disturbed during the redevelopment. The observation of the service trenches revealed no deposits of archaeological interest. However the recording of the bank revealed evidence of an earlier bank associated with the castle as well as evidence of the 18th/19th century garden archaeology.

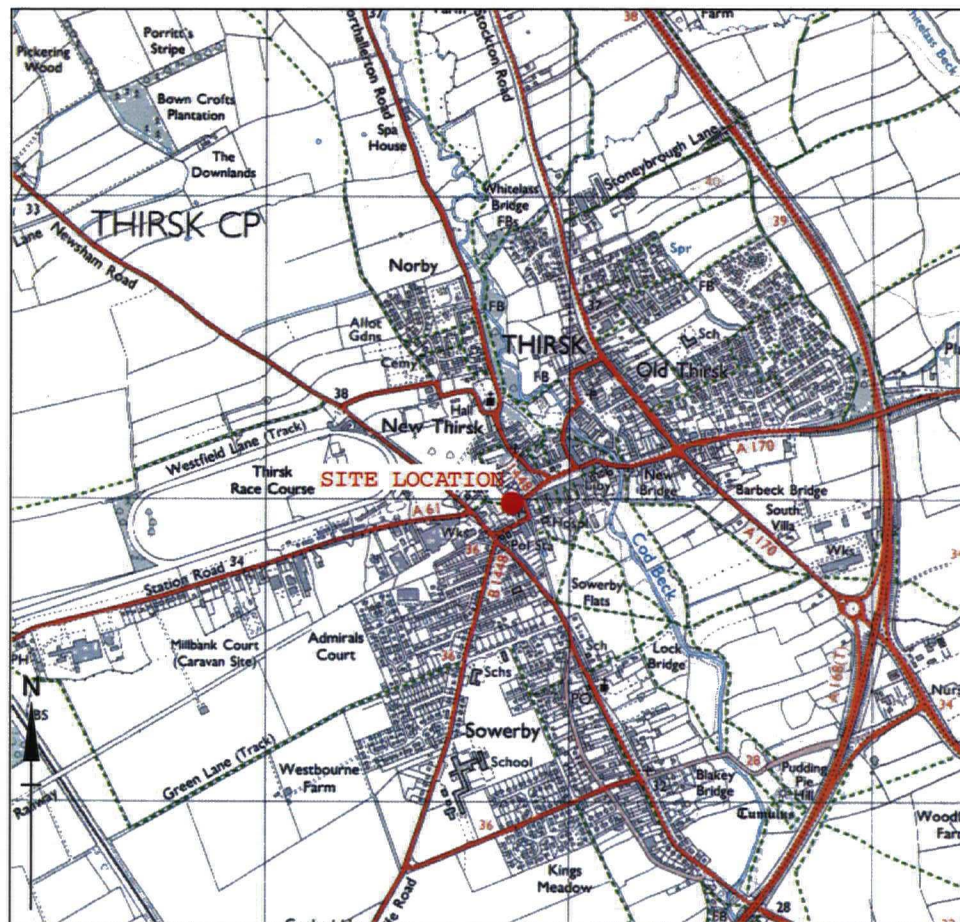


Fig. 1 Site location

scale 1:25 000

1. INTRODUCTION

On the 1 November 2004 and 20 January 2005 York Archaeological Trust (YAT) conducted an archaeological watching brief at 9-17 Castlegate, Thirsk (NGR SE 42768200; Fig. 1). The work was carried out on behalf of Seeger Homes, to the specification supplied by North Yorkshire County Council in consultation with Keith Emerick, Inspector of Ancient Monuments. The aim of the watching brief was to record the depth and character of the surviving archaeological remains encountered during the works.

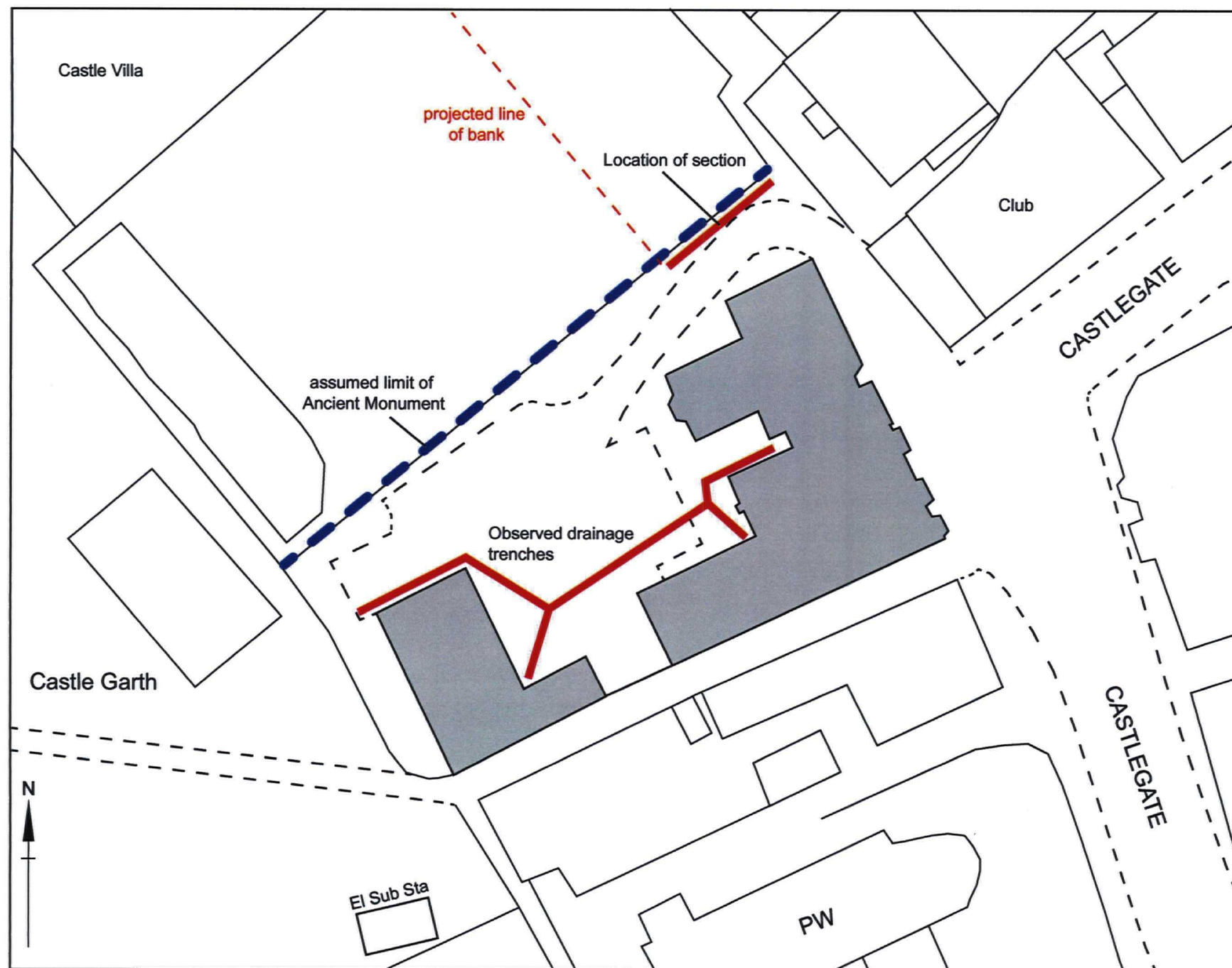


Fig. 2 Location of works

0 20m
scale 1:400

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2. METHOD STATEMENT

The watching brief at 9-17 Castlegate, Thirsk was undertaken in three phases. The first phase was undertaken on 1 November 2004 to observe and record any surviving archaeological remains during the excavation of service trenches in the yard at the rear of the properties fronting onto Castlegate during the conversion of these buildings and their associated outbuildings into residential accommodation. The area of the yard was formerly cobbles but these were removed prior to an archaeologist being present. Three new service trenches were then excavated in the yard prior to the reinstatement of the cobbles. The service trenches were on average 0.7m deep (Fig. 2).

The second phase of the project was also undertaken on 1 November 2004 and involved the recording of a 7.5m section of scheduled bank after machining. The third phase of the project was carried out on the 20 January 2005 in order to record a further 2.5m of this bank.

3. ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

9-17 Castlegate is located within the historic core of Thirsk, close the market place and forms part the presumed castle complex (Fig. 3). The watching brief was carried out initially because of the historical significance of Thirsk and this site in particular (summarised below) and due to an alteration to the access route which required unforeseen work to be undertaken on the edge of the Scheduled Ancient Monument known as Thirsk Castle.

Pervious archaeological work in Thirsk has revealed evidence of settlement from the prehistoric through to present. Prehistoric activity has been recorded to the south of Thirsk at Pudding Pie Hill near Sowerby, where there is a Bronze Age round barrow. Aerial photography has identified crop marks of enclosures and prehistoric field systems in the same area (Tyler 1978). Within Thirsk, during construction of new houses at St Mary's Walk a collection of Bronze Age metal work was recovered. At the castle site the excavations by MAP (MAP1995) identified two linear features thought to date to the prehistoric period based on their stratigraphic position; two residual pieces of worked flint were also recovered from later deposits and thought to suggest a prehistoric presence in the area.

A Roman road, running north-south is thought to have crossed Cod Beck near to Thirsk and ran roughly parallel to Dere Street for part of its route. A disused route known as Saxty Way is thought to represent a link between the two (Tyler 1978). No evidence for settlement from this period has been recovered from the town, although Roman burials have been discovered at the nearby earthwork at Pudding Pie Hill. Archaeological investigations within the Castle Garth revealed a small cemetery comprising seven graves with associated inhumations and three disinterred burials. A group of grave goods, including a cruciform brooch, suggest an early 6th century date. A post-hole, slot and pit from the same period were identified (MAP 1995). This evidence suggests that there was settlement activity in the vicinity at this time, although its

form, character and extent is unknown.

In the Anglo-Scandinavian period, Thirsk was held as two separate manors on either side of Cod Beck. A fortified house is supposed to have been built in 979AD (VCH 1913), but its location is not known. Settlement on the west side of the Beck was focused around the church. On the eastern side settlement was possibly centred on pre-Conquest defences on the site of the later castle. It has been suggested that this settlement may have taken the form of a burgh, although there is no direct evidence to support this. Evidence from the castle excavations suggest that in the period between the 6th and 11th centuries part of the site of the later Castle Garth may have been cultivated land, followed by its use as pasture before another layer of accumulated deposits preceded the construction of the castle on the site (MAP 1995).



Fig. 3 Part of 1912 Ordnance Survey with site highlighted

The first reliable documentary evidence for settlement at Thirsk is found in the Domesday Book, 1086, where there are two entries that reflect the fact that the land was held as two separate manors on either side of Cod Beck.

The castle lies on level ground to the west of the market place. The date of its foundation is not known with certainty, but there is no substantive evidence of pre-Conquest foundation. The

earliest documentary reference to it dates from between c.1092 and 1130. Excavations at the castle site recorded evidence of the construction of the rampart banks dated to the 11th century that sealed the Anglo Saxon burials. This confirms the historical evidence for the construction of the castle, but to the south the bank may have been of later date and to the north it may represent a remodelling in the 11th century of an already extant earthwork (MAP 1995).

The castle precinct is thought to consist of an area bounded by Westgate, Castlegate, Kirkgate and Masonic Lane and provided a new focus away from the church for settlement (i.e. New Thirsk), with a manorial villa developing around it (VCH 1913). The northern, western and southern extents of the outer ditch of the motte and bailey castle have been traced, but the eastern extent has been obscured by development along the Kirkgate and Market Place frontage. Excavations (Johnson 1998) at the rear of 25 Kirkgate uncovered a probable pit and adjacent garden type soil with pottery suggesting a possible 11th-12th century date for this feature. The northern end of the western edge of the rampart runs beneath the 19th century Masonic Hall. To the east of the rampart is an open area that formed the interior of the bailey. The life span of the castle was quite short since Henry II ordered its destruction in 1176 after Robert de Mowbray held it against the Crown in 1174. In 1376 Castle Garth is recorded as being used as a garden, but by the end of the century it was laid to grass (Clarke 2000). When William Camden visited Thirsk in 1695 nothing could be seen of the castle except the rampart which are probably the earthworks visible in an open area the immediate west of the site.

It is not known for certain when the settlement at Thirsk acquired borough status. It is referred to as a borough by Henry II, who held the manor some time after 1106 (VCH 1913), and there is some contradictory evidence for the location of the borough to the west or east side of Cod Beck. It is thought that it was located on the east side and became known as Old Thirsk, as the manor passed to the King at the time of the Conquest, and it was during the 12th century, that it became a royal borough with burgesses and a market place (Tyler 1978). It is not known when markets began at New Thirsk, but in 1398 the market place in Old Thirsk is recorded as the "Oldermerkat Sted", indicating that before the end of the 14th century a market place had been established.

Upstanding medieval monuments lie close to the castle site including a moated site. Small scale archaeological work at this site has produced a number of probable 13th century pottery sherds, but did not reveal any archaeological structures or features (Robinson 1993). The 15th century church of St Mary, located to the north is thought to include 12th century fabric (Thompson 1913).

Archaeological evaluation of the area to the rear of 23-25 Kirkgate recorded post-medieval structural features thought to be associated with a building or outhouse and later yard surfaces were also revealed. An intriguing subterranean domed brick structure, possibly an icehouse or well, was dated as a post 17th century construction (Johnson 1998, 19). Evaluation trenches in the garden of 23 Kirkgate (ibid) revealed loamy soils directly over the pale, sandy natural sub

soils (indicative of old garden or horticultural soils) that were in turn sealed by later build-ups of soils. Within the excavated trenches features of either medieval or post-medieval date were found to cut the subsoil.

4. THE WATCHING BRIEF

Phase 1 (1 November 2004)

The service trenches at the eastern side of the yard closest to the Castlegate frontage exposed existing services associated with the buildings that were being redeveloped. In the service trenches in the western area of the yard the only deposit exposed was a firm brown clay.

Phase 2 and 3 (1 November 2004 and 20 January 2005)

During the second and third phase of the project a section of bank, thought to be part of the castle complex, was recorded. The machining of this bank was not observed and the deposits were only seen in section.

Natural was encountered at a depth of c. 36.41m OD and was found to be a mixed deposit of sands and gravels. This was overlain by a deposit of light grey brown silt sand with occasional flecks of charcoal and moderate root disturbance (1029). This deposit ranged in depth from between 0.3m on the north-eastern end to 30mm on the south-western end. Context 1029 was overlain by 1026 which was a firm/plastic yellow grey clay, with a maximum depth of 0.14m. 1026 was in turn overlain by a mixed deposit of yellow brown sandy silt (1025), with a maximum depth of 0.22m, which was overlain by c. 0.23m of loose mid brown sand (1024). It is a possibility that these deposits form the base of a bank that ran north-west/south-east respecting the line of the north-east edge of the Castle precinct. If this was the case then the bank has subsequently been slighted and later features cut into it.

Context 1029 was cut through by 1028 which was a shallow pit truncated from above by cut 1023 and surviving 0.9m wide with a maximum depth of 0.2m. The break of slope was unseen due to the truncation but it had gentle sloping sides and a concave base. 1028 had been filled by a dark grey silt sand with occasional inclusions of sandstone (1027), this deposit revealed evidence of moderate root disturbance.

Contexts 1024 and 1027 were cut through by wide shallow pit (1023) which measured 2.7m wide and had a maximum depth of 0.3m. On its south-eastern edge this pit revealed a sharp break of slope and a steep side leading to slightly concave base with a gentle break of slope and a very shallow edge on its south-western side. Pit 1023 had been filled by several deposits; the earliest of which was a small deposit, c. 40mm, of loose mid grey silt with occasional inclusions of small pebbles (1021). Stratigraphically, the next deposit was another c.40mm of angular and sub-angular pebbles within a matrix of loose, mid grey silt (1022). This was overlain by 1020

which was the main deposit to have filled 1023 and was c. 0.26m of loose light brown sand with frequent inclusions of pebbles. The function of this pit is uncertain.

Towards the north-eastern edge of the section Context 1029 was overlain by c.0.54m of stiff/plastic pale pinkish brown silt with occasional inclusions brick, mortar and limestone fragments and charcoal flecks (1018). This deposit may have been associated with the bank deposits described above although this is far from certain. Contexts 1018 and 1020 were overlain by c. 0.23m of loose dark grey silt sand with occasional inclusions of small rounded pebbles (1017), which in turn was overlain by a deposit of loose, mid brown silt sand with frequent rounded and sub-angular stone inclusions (1016). Context 1016 had a maximum depth of 0.46m on its north-eastern side and gently tapers downwards towards the southwest. The deposits described in this paragraph were possibly the result of weathering down the back of the postulated bank.

Context 1020 was also overlain by a shallow deposit of mid-brown silt sand (1019) only 50mm in depth. It is unclear whether this deposit was associated the pit 1023 or part of the accumulation of material described above. This deposit and 1016 were both overlain by 1015 which was a loose mid grey brown silt sand with frequent inclusions of small rounded stones with a depth of 0.33m. Overlying 1015 was a deposit (1014) that had a maximum depth of 0.34m and was a mid-grey brown silt sand with occasional inclusions of small stones and occasional root disturbance. This deposit was the same as 1033 but as they were only seen in section and were separated by a cut (1013) have been given individual numbers.

At the south-western end of the section and cut into Context 1014, was a sequence of deposits thought to be associated with garden archaeology. These features appeared to be set on a terraced area perhaps set into the rear of the possible bank. Context 1013 was a small pit and cut contexts 1033 and 1014. It had a maximum depth of 0.37m with reasonably steep sides and a concave base. The basal fill of this pit consisted of c.0.12m of firm mid orange brown silt sand with frequent inclusions of mortar flecks and occasional medium sized cobbles (1012). The upper fill of this pit was c.0.25m of loose mid brown silt sand with moderate inclusions of brick and limestone fragments, and occasional inclusions of slag (1011). Cut 1013 was possibly a post-medieval tree bole perhaps associated with the cobble path (1010). This path (1010) overlay 1033 and consisted of c. 0.14m of rounded regular cobbles within a matrix of loose, light grey brown silt sand. These cobbles measured c.100mm x c.200mm and were interpreted as a path associated with the 18th/19th century buildings in the vicinity .

Overlying the pit 1013 and deposits 1014-16 was a sequence of deposits thought to be associated with a later reworking of the bank. Overlying the pit 1013 was a deposit (1009), with a maximum depth of 100mm, of loose light grey silt sand which revealed considerable evidence of root action.

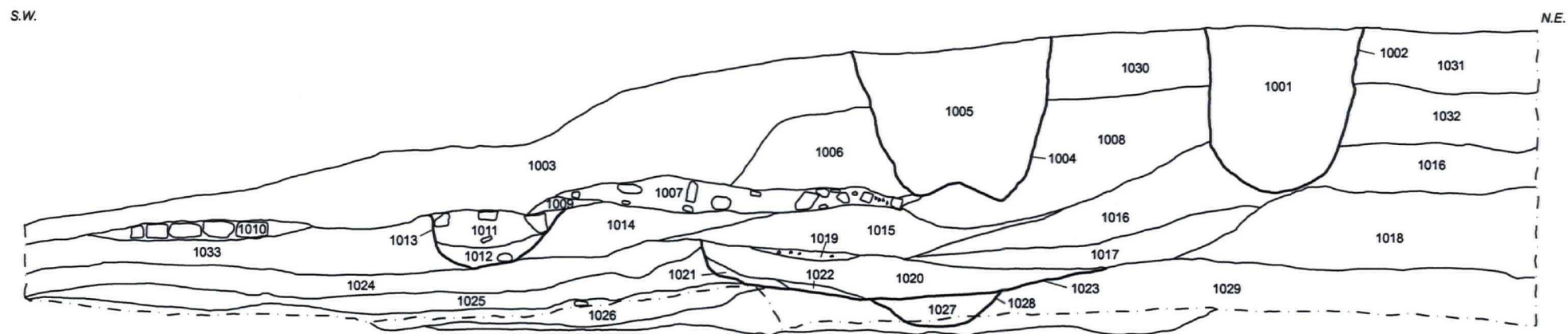
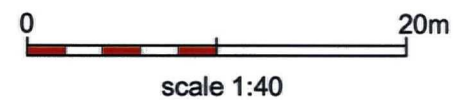


Fig. 4 South-east facing recorded section



Overlying Contexts 1015-16 and was a loose, mid orange brown silt sand with heavy root disturbance (1008), with a maximum depth of 0.70m although it had been truncated by both 1004 and 1002. Context 1008 was the same as 1032, although the truncation by Cut 1002 means that they cannot be given the same number. Context 1007 overlies 1008-1009 and it is c.0.24m of loose, mid yellow brown silt sand with frequent inclusions of brick and limestone fragments. This in turn was sealed by Context 1006 which is c. 0.5m of loose, mid grey brown silt sand with frequent inclusions of small pebbles revealing evidence of heavy root disturbance.

Stratigraphically the last deposit in the bank was the modern topsoil (1003=1030). These deposits were found to be loose roots within a matrix of mid grey silt sand, c. 0.50m in depth, covering the 10m length of the bank. These deposits had been cut by two features; 1004, filled with 1005, and 1002, filled with 1001. Both of these features were deep pit cuts with steep sides and both were interpreted as tree boles. Pit 1004 was filled by a loose mid grey brown silt sand (1005) and Pit 1002 was filled by friable mid-dark grey clay sand with frequent inclusions of modern rubbish, brick and concrete fragments.

5. CONCLUSIONS

No deposits of archaeological interest were encountered during the excavation of the service trenches. However, the section of bank recorded revealed deposits that may be consistent with a bank running north-west/south-east. This alignment would respect the layout of the castle complex and, as such, is thought to be part of the remains of the castle defences. Although no dating evidence was recovered, this bank may well have been medieval in origin.

It appears as though this bank was slighted at some stage and later features were cut into it, although their date and function are unknown. The garden features at the north-west end of the bank are thought to be associated with the 18th/19th century redevelopment of the area as the path appears to be heading towards Castle Villa to the north-west.

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