

# birmingham archaeology

HEALTH SERVICES RESEARCH  
CENTRE, METCHLEY,  
BIRMINGHAM

ARCHAEOLOGICAL  
OBSERVATION, EXCAVATION AND  
RECORDING 2008

UNIVERSITY OF  
BIRMINGHAM



**Project No. 1816**

**HEALTH SERVICES RESEARCH CENTRE, METCHLEY, BIRMINGHAM**  
**ARCHAEOLOGICAL OBSERVATION, EXCAVATION AND RECORDING 2008**

by  
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HEALTH SERVICES RESEARCH CENTRE, MEDICAL SCHOOL, UNIVERSITY OF  
BIRMINGHAM

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## **SUMMARY**

*Archaeological observation, excavation and recording was undertaken in advance of the replacement of a steam main feed to the Health Services Research Centre at the Medical School, University of Birmingham (centred on NGR SP 404197 283717). The area was located within Metchley Roman fort, and in particular within a Scheduled Ancient Monument (SAM 25120). Scheduled Monument Consent (SMC) was obtained in advance of the fieldwork. Birmingham Archaeology was commissioned by the Estate Management Office of the University of Birmingham to undertake the work. The fieldwork was undertaken in August-September 2008.*

*The design of the new steam main was intended to minimise disturbance to below-ground deposits of archaeological importance. Archaeological fieldwork initially involved observation during the machine excavation of overburden along the new steam main. This was followed by hand-cleaning of the machined surfaces, and hand-excavation of archaeological deposits.*

*The only possible Roman deposit identified during the fieldwork was a pebble surface. Other features and deposits were modern in date, probably related to construction of the adjoining Medical School. The scheme design has therefore resulted in only very limited disturbance to archaeological deposits of Roman date.*

**HEALTH SERVICES RESEARCH CENTRE, MEDICAL SCHOOL, UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM**

**ARCHAEOLOGICAL OBSERVATION, EXCAVATION AND RECORDING 2008**

**1 INTRODUCTION**

- 1.1 Birmingham Archaeology was commissioned by the Estate Management Office of the University of Birmingham to undertake archaeological observation, recording and reporting in advance of the construction of a new steam main to the Health Services Research Centre within the Medical School of the University of Birmingham. The site is located within a Scheduled Ancient Monument (WM no. 25120). Scheduled Monument Consent was obtained from the Department of Culture, Media and Sport on 8 August 2008, and the archaeological fieldwork was undertaken in later August 2008 and September 2008.
- 1.2 This report outlines the results of this fieldwork and was prepared in accordance with the Institute of Field Archaeologists Standard and Guidance for Archaeological Excavations (IFA 1999). The work conformed to a Written Scheme of Investigation (Birmingham Archaeology 2008, reproduced as Appendix 1) which formed part of the approved application for Scheduled Monument Consent (SMC) which was also approved by the Planning Archaeologist, Birmingham City Council, prior to submission to English Heritage/ Department for Media, Culture and Sport.

**2 LOCATION**

- 2.1 The site is located on the campus of the University of Birmingham (centred on NGR SP 404170 283734, Figs. 1-2). A number of options for the steam main route were considered. The preferred route ran along part of the western and southern sides of the Medical School Extension, and alongside the Health Services Research Centre, within areas where below-ground archaeological deposits may have been scoured-out during construction of the Medical School. Between the two buildings the chosen route followed the shortest possible distance, across a lawned area.

**3 HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND**

- 3.1 The Roman fort complex at Metchley (Figs. 1-2) was first identified from cartographic sources and antiquarian descriptions, and more recently by extensive trial-trenching and excavation. The fort defences, still surviving as above-ground earthworks in the 18th century were mapped and described in detail at that time (Jones 2001, 10-12). The Roman date of the earthworks was only confirmed in the 1930s when limited slit-trenches were cut in advance of an earlier hospital development (St Joseph and Shotton 1937).
- 3.2 The earliest Roman activity at Metchley (Phase 1A, Area 14, Jones 2007) may belong to a construction camp or marching camp. Large-scale investigations were directed by Trevor Rowley within the fort interior during 1967-9 (Jones 2001). Rowley's excavations identified timber-framed buildings including barrack-blocks, a granary, store building and a workshop associated with the earliest, Claudian fort (Phase 1B-D). Excavations in the 1960s, and latterly in 1998-9 identified Neronian (Phase 2A) annexes added to the

northern, eastern and southern sides of the Phase 1 fort (Jones 2005). Deliberate clearance of the Phase 1C-D buildings was followed as a single operation by the construction of temporary structures, and fenced compounds associated with a military stores depot (Phase 2B, Jones 2001, 43-54). Subsequently, after a period of abandonment, the fort was re-occupied, and a smaller fort of Flavian date (Phase 3) was laid out within the interior of the Phase 1-2 fort. After the disuse of the Phase 3 fort later in the 1st century, continued, if not continuous Roman activity was recorded through the 2nd century, either small-scale military or civilian in nature. This latest suite of Roman activity (Phase 4) may be associated with a possible *mansio* or *mutatio* on or near the site, serving traffic on routes leading to Wall, Droitwich and Alcester, although occupation by a specialist military force is also a possibility. Metchley lay within an early post-medieval hunting park until piecemeal enclosure in the later 18th century. The fort defences continued to be visible in places as upstanding earthworks until the 1960s.

- 3.3 No Roman features have been identified within the northern annexe interior. Only small parts of the northern annexe interior have been excavated. Recent excavation within the eastern annexe (Jones 2005) identified pebble surfaces, pits and hearths/ovens - features types which may be anticipated within a Roman military annexe.

#### **4 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES**

- 4.1 Following the careful design of the new main to minimise its impact on below-ground archaeological features, and deposits, the purpose of the archaeological fieldwork was to preserve by record any below-ground features and deposits (Appendix 1). The particular aims of the project were:
- To provide an understanding of the range, and sequence of activities undertaken within the northern annexe.
  - To provide datable finds that may contribute towards an understanding of the chronology of activity within the northern annexe, and within the Metchley complex as a whole.
  - To provide details of past environmental conditions.

#### **5 METHOD**

- 5.1 The excavation work was designed to take place in three stages (Birmingham Archaeology 2007, 3-4, Appendix 1). Stage 1 involved the removal of the overburden using a mechanical excavator with a toothless ditching bucket, working under continuous direct archaeological supervision. Stage 2 of the fieldwork involved the hand-cleaning of the base and sides of the machine-cut trench as a preliminary to a meeting including representatives of English Heritage, Birmingham City Council, University of Birmingham Estate Management Office, and Birmingham Archaeology, to agree the strategy of later stages of fieldwork. Stage 3 was defined to include the hand excavation of deposits either to the level of the natural subsoil, or the maximum depth of the new service.
- 5.2 All stratigraphic sequences were recorded, even where no archaeology was present. A comprehensive written record was maintained using a continuous numbered context system on *pro-forma* context and feature cards. Written records and scale plans were supplemented by photographs using digital, monochrome, and colour slide photography. Plans (1:20 and 1:50) and sections (1:20 and 1:50) were prepared.
- 5.3 Because of the limited fieldwork results it was agreed that the results will be described in an archive report, without the requirement for a post-excavation assessment, or for full

post-excavation analysis of the results and publication in a recognised archaeological journal. A summary of the results will be provided for *West Midlands Archaeology*.

- 5.4 The site archive will be prepared according to guidelines set down in Appendix 3 of the Management of Archaeology Projects (English Heritage 1991), the Guidelines for the Preparation of Excavation Archives for Long-term Storage (Walker 1990) and Standards in the Museum Care of Archaeological Collections (Museum and Art Galleries Commission 1992). Subject to approval by the landowner, the archive will be deposited with Birmingham City Museum and Art Gallery.

## **6 RESULTS**

- 6.1 Area 1 ran approximately north-south, its southern end adjoining the western wall of the Health services Research Centre. Area 2 was aligned approximately east-west, adjoining the southern frontage of the Medical School Extension, and turning to the north, following the west wall of the Extension.

### **6.1 Area 1 (Fig. 3)**

- 6.1.1 The natural subsoil (1015, not illustrated) was only encountered towards the southern end of Area 1. This was recorded towards the southern end of Area 1 (Plate 1). This consisted of very compact yellow sandy clay with pebbles and cobbles throughout. This was encountered at 148.96m AOD towards the northern extent and 148.72m AOD at the southern extent, having a downward slope to the south.
- 6.1.2 The only stratigraphic sequence of any depth was recorded towards the northern end of Area 1 (Figure 3 and Plate 2). The earliest deposit encountered here consisted of a layer of soft grey sand rich silt (1016), with some pebbles. This was recorded at a depth of 0.7m below the modern surface (at 149.1m AOD), but was not excavated. Above this was a layer of brown sandy silt (1009) 0.2m deep, which contained fragments of 19th century porcelain. This was sealed by a stone-rich layer (1003) which measured a minimum of 0.15m in depth. It was difficult to interpret this deposit because it was truncated by a modern service. Layer 1003 contained fragments of brick, glass and porcelain. Above this was a layer of dark brown sandy silt (1002), measuring 0.24m in depth. This had been cut by a modern pit or gully terminal (1006). This feature was aligned east-west, and measured 0.25m in width and 0.5m in depth. Feature 1006 had steep sides and a rounded base and was filled with a brown sandy-silt (1005) with brick and pebbles throughout.
- 6.1.3 Sealing this feature and layer 1002 was a narrow lens, 0.1m deep, of brown sandy silt rich in charcoal (1002). This was cut by a large disturbance (1010). It was located between the buildings of the Medical School Extension and the Health Services Research Centre. The disturbance was 5m wide and was hand-excavated to a depth of 0.75m below the ground surface, although its full depth was not found. This was filled by lenses of brick and concrete with silt and clay in lenses (1008).
- 6.1.4 Above layer 1002 was a mixed deposit comprising clay and rubble with some brown sandy silt and stones (1001), measuring 0.2m in total depth, and including lenses of crushed brick. Layer 1001 was cut by a modern drain (not numbered). Layer 1001 was overlain by a layer of turf (1000), with a deposit of rich humic topsoil (1007) recorded towards the north of Area 1. No finds of Roman, or possibly Roman date were collected.

## **6.2 Area 2 (Fig. 3)**

6.2.1 The earliest deposit exposed in Area 2 was a layer of brown sandy silt rich in charcoal (1002, See Area 1 above), but this deposit was unexcavated. This had been cut by a series of concrete footings (Fig. 3 and Plate 3 and 4) which formed part of the foundations of the Medical School Extension. Layer 1002 was sealed by a mixed layer (1001), also recorded in Area 1, see above). No finds of Roman, or possibly Roman date were collected.

## **7 DISCUSSION**

- 7.1 The archaeological strategy for this project, which involved selection of those areas thought to have been disturbed by Medical School construction for the route of the new steam main has been successful. Within Area 2 the levels exposed related to construction of the Medical School Extension. Within this area the new steam main was slightly re-designed to run over the concrete footings revealed by this project. Therefore no *in situ* Roman, or possibly Roman deposits would have been affected by the project.
- 7.2 Similarly, in Area 1 most, if not all of the deposits exposed belong to the construction of the Medical School Extension and/or the construction of the Health Services Research Centre. A possible exception was the layer of sand-silt (1016) which contained some pebbles. It is possible that this deposit could represent part of a pebble surface, although it was not recorded sufficiently extensively to support this information. Similar pebble surfaces were recorded within the interior of the eastern annexe of Metchley forts (Jones 2005). Such an interpretation of surface 1016 on the present limited information is, of course, entirely speculative.

## **8 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

- 8.1 The project was commissioned by Birmingham University Estate Management Office. Thanks are due to, David Drew and Nigel Drinkwater (Birmingham University Estates Management) and Ian George (English Heritage) for their co-operation and assistance throughout the project. Thanks also go to Dr. Mike Hodder, who monitored the project on behalf of English Heritage and Birmingham City Council. The field work was undertaken by Paul Collins and Mary Duncan, who produced the written report which was illustrated by Nigel Dodds, and edited by Alex Jones who also managed the project for Birmingham Archaeology.

## **9 BIBLIOGRAPHY**

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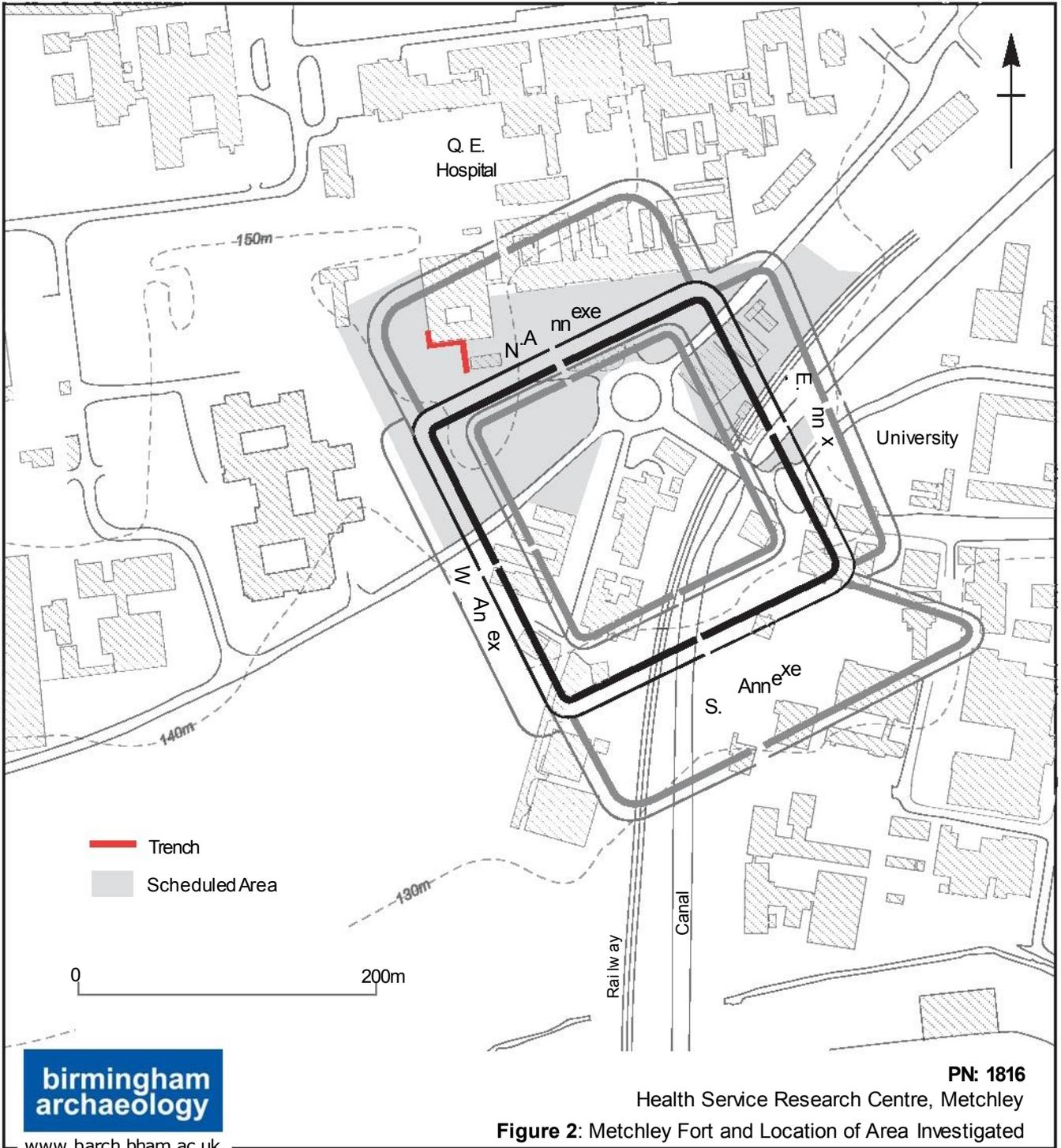
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**PN: 1857**  
Boiler House Drive, Metchley  
**Figure 1: Site Location**

[www.barch.bham.ac.uk](http://www.barch.bham.ac.uk)



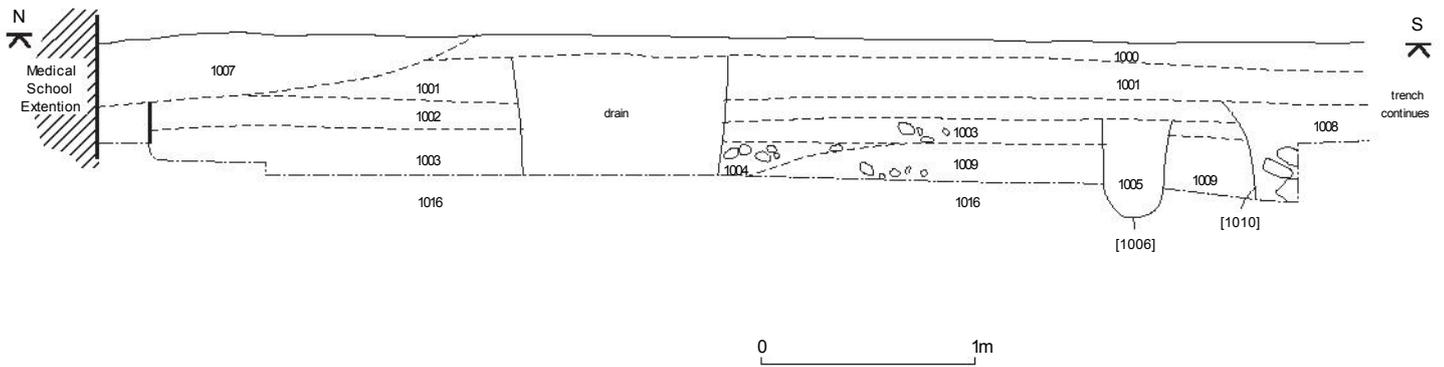
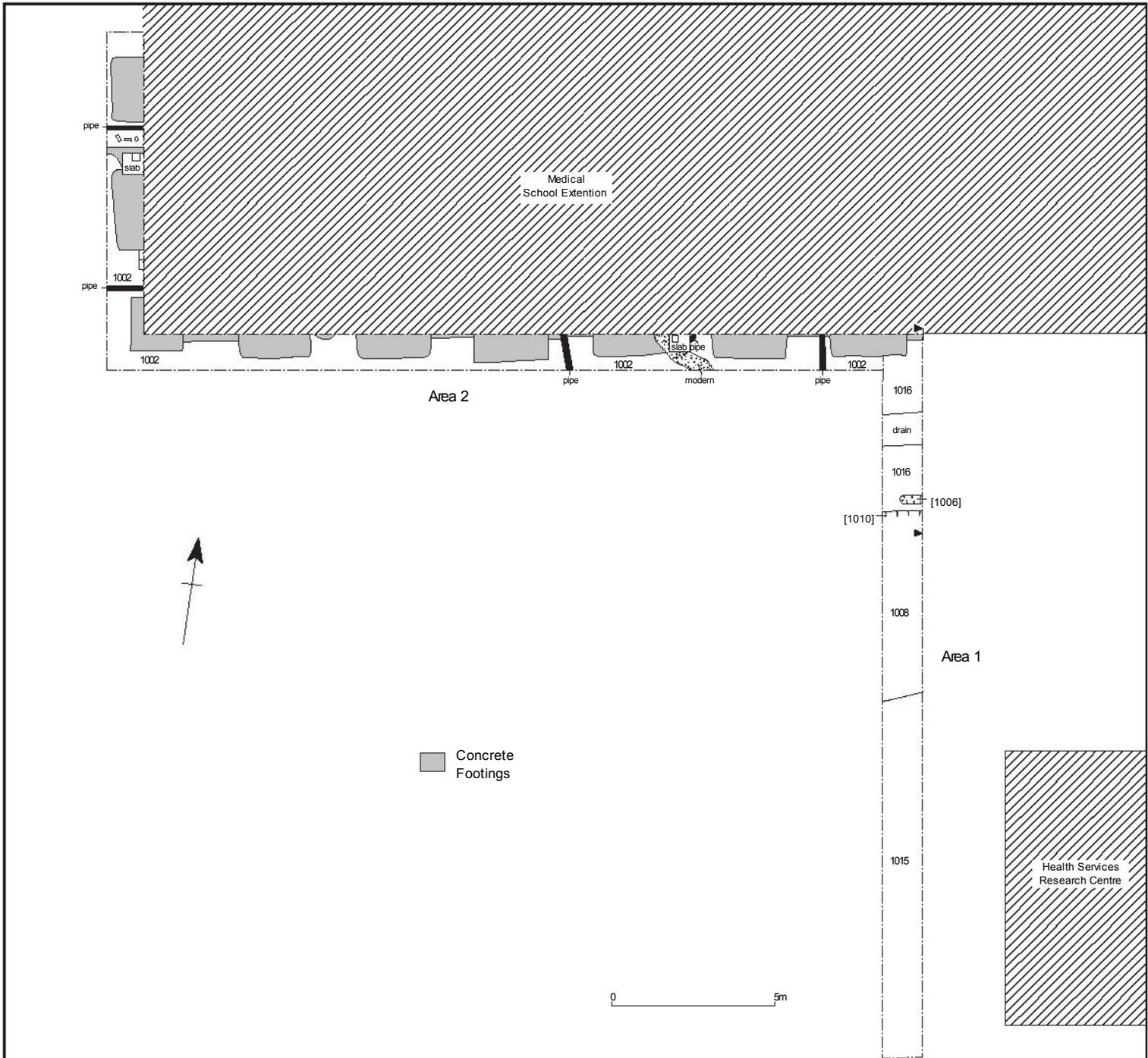




Plate 1



Plate 2



Plate 3

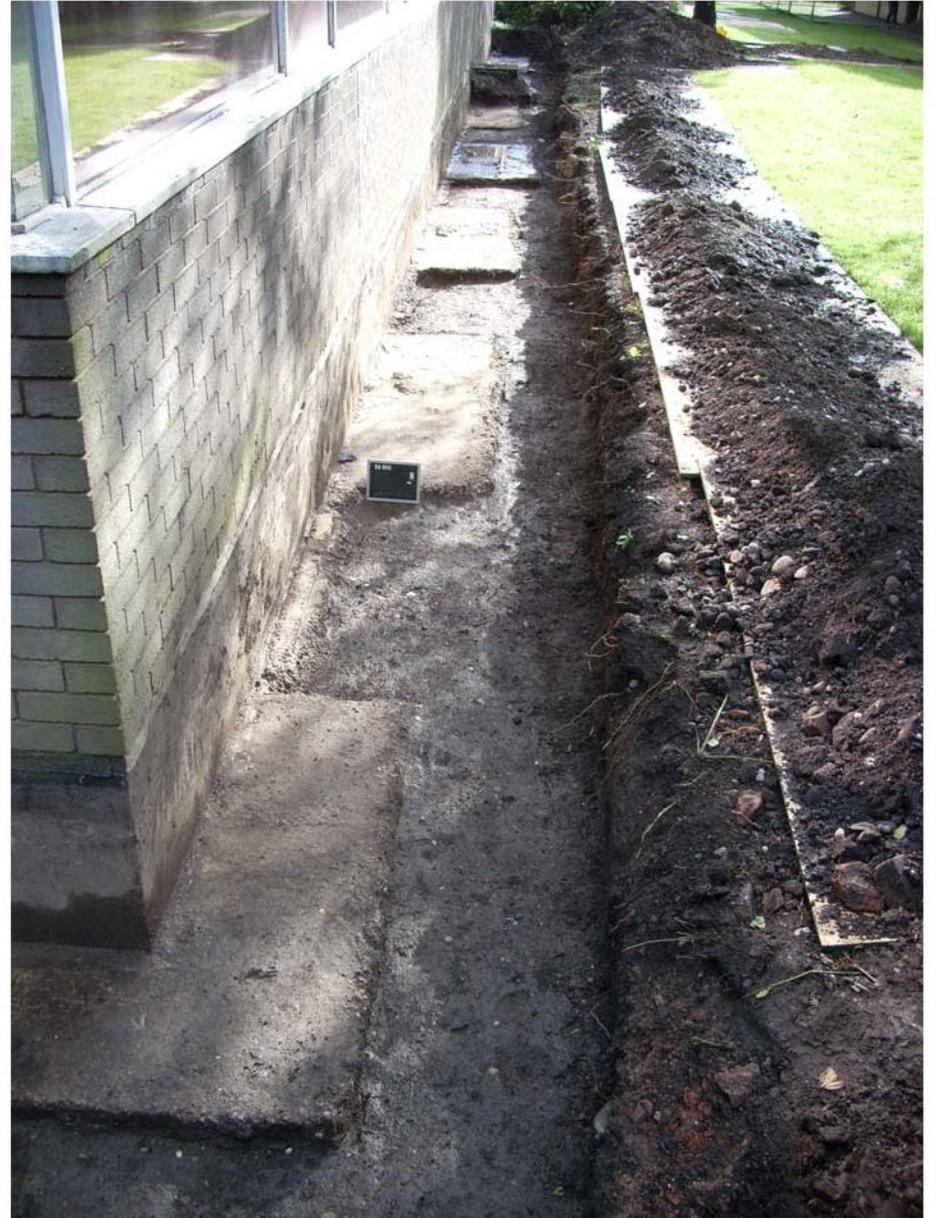


Plate 4