# An Archaeological Watching Brief During Works at Redstone Close, Meols, Wirral
# Site Code 171.
# Final Report

**Prepared for Mr & Mrs Royden**

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# Non-Technical Summary

This report describes the results of an archaeological watching brief conducted during building works at Redstone Close, Meols between 7 and 8 January 2016.

The project was undertaken during the conversion of an out building attached to the house into domestic accommodation and involved monitoring the excavation of internal floors within the existing structure.

The project found that the cobbled floors within the building had been laid during the late 19th or early 20th century and sealed a layer or made-ground consisting of sands and building debris. Post-settings cut in to these deposits probably related to internal divisions within the building or to a structure pre-dating its construction but were unlikely to pre-date *c.*1850.

In general the finds assemblage was typical of what would commonly be expected on a small farmstead such as Redstone Close. Some elements, in particular the glass, suggest that the site has been occupied since at least the early 18th century and possibly longer. Three fragments of earthenware have been provisionally identified as sections of sugar mould dating to the late 18th or early 19th century. However, these are very unlikely to relate to sugar processing on or near the present site.

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# An Archaeological Watching Brief During Works at Redstone Close, Meols, Wirral. Site Code 171. Final Report

## 1. Introduction

This report describes the results of an archaeological watching brief conducted by Archaeological Services National Museums Liverpool (ASNML) during conversion of an outbuilding to domestic accommodation.

Fieldwork undertaken between 7 and 8 January 2016 by Dr M. Adams (Archaeological Services Manager, ASNML).

The project was conducted on behalf of Mr & Mrs Royden (here after the client) in order to satisfy condition 18 of the planning consent (Planning Application APP/14/00828 http://www.wirral.gov.uk/planning/DC/AcolNetCGI.gov?ACTION=UNWRAP&RIPNAME=Root.PgeResultDetail&TheSystemkey=93913 (consulted Jan 2016)

The site is located on the western side of the northern end of Redstone Close at NGR SJ 2252 8993 and is approached via a drive leading from a turning circle at the end of the close. The site includes the main house, the present outbuilding and former barns (now dwellings) to the south all set within gardens enclosed by hedges (Figs 1 & 2).

Prior to conversion the outbuilding, which is attached to the southern end of the house, was a single storey structure used for storage. It had white painted red sandstone masonry walls and a pitched roof clad in corrugated iron.

The underlying geology comprises mudstones and siltstones of the Triassic Sidmouth Mudstone Formation (http://mapapps.bgs.ac.uk/geologyofbritain/home.html). To the south there are drift deposits of Tidal Flat Deposit which reflect that areas formerly poorly drained nature. However, the site seems to lie on the southern fringe of the 'western depression', glacial feature filled by deposits from former rivers (Kenna 1986, summarised in Griffiths et al 2007, 357-8).

The site and its immediate surroundings lie in an unsurveyed area for soils (Beard et al 1987).

## 2. Methodology

The watching brief monitored the removal of existing floors within the footprint of the outbuilding.

All excavation and recording at this location was undertaken as specified in the Written Scheme of Investigation (Adams 2015). However, because of the restricted headroom within the building it was not possible to determine accurate levels.

# 3. Archaeological and Historical Background

The following summary was compiled from documentation supplied by the client, internal NMLFAU documents and publically available sources.

There are no World Heritage Sites, Scheduled Monuments (SMs), Listed Buildings, Registered Parks and Gardens or Registered Battlefields within the site bounds and no such statutorily protected sites are affected indirectly by the redevelopment.

There is little direct evidence for Palaeolithic and Mesolithic settlement from the area, other than stray finds, though this is likely to be in large part due to the historic lack of fieldwork in the area and the likely nature of the sites which renders site location difficult. Early Prehistoric sites tend to show a bias towards areas under lain by Shirdley Hill Sand, though these are known only from chance finds and surface finds collected by fieldwalking. Topographic changes, largely due to sea level change since the end of the last Ice Age, mean that the landscape has altered significantly since these periods and any evidence which may once have been present in the immediate area is either deeply buried beneath alluvium or disturbed by later activity.

There is also relatively little evidence for Neolithic and Bronze Age activity and settlement from the Wirral, though excavation at Irby *c.* 4.5 km to the south found evidence for round houses radiocarbon dated to the Late Bronze Age (Philpott and Adams 2010) and it is likely that this reflects the general nature of settlement in the Wirral during these periods, when there seems to have been a preference for the lighter, more easily worked soils such as those found in this part of Meols. However, there is no other evidence for deposits of this date from within the site.

The Iron Age is generally under-represented in the archaeological record in North-West England with very few excavated settlement sites. Hill forts such as those on the mid-Cheshire Ridge probably originated in the late Bronze Age and continued to be occupied into the Iron Age though the closest to the Wirral is at Helsby. The North-West is generally regarded as aceramic (i.e. pottery was not used) during this period which makes site location by conventional means such as fieldwalking difficult or impossible.

Consequently the possible Iron Age port or trading post at Meols is of additional significance. Although known only from finds of coins, brooches and other artefacts mainly collected during the erosion of the north Wirral coast during the 19th century and supplemented by antiquarian records (Griffiths et al 2007) the site clearly had international trading connections and will have had a significant impact upon settlement within its immediate hinterland. Unfortunately little is known of the site's extents and the nature of its wider impacts, though it appears to have been centred upon a small headland known as Dove Point which has been destroyed by coastal erosion since the mid-19th century. However, occasional finds of Iron Age objects are still made in the area.

Until *c.* 20 years ago little was known about Roman rural settlement in the lowland North-West. Although the military sites and their associated road network were well documented civilian settlement was poorly understood. This has changed since the excavation of sites such as the farmstead at Irby (Philpott and Adams 2010) and the area is now viewed as having been much more densely occupied during this period then was previously suspected. The port at Meols appears to have continued to operate throughout the Roman occupation and the area around the site therefore has

some potential for remains of this date, though this is still primarily understood from 19th century antiquarian accounts.

Post-Roman settlement in the North-West suffers from similar problems of site visibility to the Iron Age; in fact until recently the finds from Meols represented a very rare example of direct evidence for settlement from the period.

Meols continued to operate as a port until at least the 12th century and probably into the 13th. Although the contemporary documentary evidence is sparse, the rich assemblage of finds from this period hints at an extensive and important trading network. However, it seems to have operated as an informal, 'unofficial' place of exchange, just outside the jurisdiction of Chester, and there appears to have been little in terms of associated infrastructures such as quays and wharfs. Although the antiquarian accounts allow little of its physical form to be established, the site is probably best seen 'an area of activity' which extended across an area of approximately 8 km east-west and 1 km north-south (Griffiths et al 2007, 430).

The later history of the site is summarised in a document supplied by the client (Fraser 2015). The farm pre-dates the 1840s because it is depicted on the 1844 Tithe Map, earlier mapping of the area is available from the late 17th century onwards (Griffiths et al 2007) but does not show the present site. Whilst this may suggest that the site was empty until *c.* 1750 (a date suggested by the architectural form of the main house), all of the earlier mapping of the area consists of navigational charts and it is possible that the site was not considered a sufficiently prominent landmark to warrant inclusion. In general the site is typical of the small farms which formed the dominant settlement type in Meols during the Post-Medieval period. The development of these are presently poorly understood, though it is likely that a proportion of them originated in earlier periods.

The outbuilding is also shown on the 1844 Tithe Map though there is evidence to suggest that it has undergone at least one phase of rebuilding since. There is no evidence (for example former chimneys) to suggest that it ever served as a domestic dwelling and it is likely that it originated as a small barn, shippon or other ancillary farm building during the 18th, or possibly early 19th century.

## 4. Results of the Watching Brief

The existing surfaces within the standing building were lifted by hand under the supervision of the author.

The floor in the southern room consisted of a *c*. 10-30 mm thick layer of concrete which had been laid over an earlier cobbled surface (context 8) which was extant across the whole of the room apart from the north-western corner. The cobbles averaged *c*. 50-100 mm across up to a maximum of c. 300 mm but could not be recorded in detail because they were unavoidably disturbed during removal of the concrete (Plate 1). The surface also included occasional fragments of hand-made brick and red sandstone suggesting that it had been laid during the late 19$^{th}$ century or later. This date is supported by the finds evidence (see Section 5) which suggests a date after *c*. 1850. The cobbled floor butted the walls of the building, which shows that it was laid after the walls were constructed.

The cobbled surface in this room was laid over a very loose pale brown sand (context 9) which in turn over lay a more compact sand with frequent inclusions of white lime mortar and lenses of mid-brown silty sand with coal and charcoal flecks, brick and

red sandstone (context 13, Fig. 3). This was excavated as a spit to a layer of pale brown sand with fewer lenses of darker material which was probably the base of the same deposit. Several potential cut features were identified and excavated rapidly though most appeared to be lenses of the overlying material intruded into the pale brown sand which was interpreted as a geological deposit representing Flandrian beach or dune deposits. The only exceptions were the cuts for two posts which retained large fragments of badly decayed wood (contexts 15 and 16). Lenses of darker material (contexts 10, 17, 18, 19 and 20) were of uncertain origin but were probably related to gardening and possibly ploughing of the area prior to construction of the building (Plates 2 & 3, Fig. 3).

Test-pits excavated against the southern and western walls showed that they were constructed without foundations, though no dating evidence for the walls was obtained (Plates 4 & 5).

In the northern room the cobbles and sandstone slabs which surfaced the room (context 1, Plates 6 & 7) were excavated to an identical set of soft sand deposits contaminated with mortar and hand-made brick to those seen in the southern room (Plate 8). Cut into these were settings for three timber posts (contexts 3, 4 and 5) which survived as badly decayed fragments of timber and voids within the sand (Fig. 3). Cobbles used as packing for post 4 were present within the cut (context 6) which was c. 300-400 mm in diameter and a similar depth, though the edges of the other cuts were very difficult to distinguish in the poor lighting conditions.

The survival of organic material and finds evidence within context 2 suggests that these posts are no earlier than *c*. 1850. However, they were sealed by the cobble floor and therefore pre-date that and show that the internal layout of the building has been altered at least once. Their function has not been determined.

A 0.1 m thick layer of context 2 was excavated across the room but no change was noted in the underlying deposits.

## 5. Finds Evidence

Pottery was examined and catalogued by C. Ahmad and J. Speakman and the text written by M. Adams. All other classes were examined and assessed by M. Adams.

*Pottery*

A total of 55 sherds of pottery weighing 2394.7 g were recovered from 17 contexts, all make-up for the internal cobbled floors.

The majority of the assemblage (27 sherds weighing 1581.7 g) were late dark-glazed vessels in coarse and fine wares though the only identifiable form was a pancheon rim (SF19) found in context 1. The date range of this element of the assemblage is c.1750-1900.

Perhaps the most interesting element of the assemblage consisted of three fragments of unglazed earthenware weighing a total of 325.5 g and found in context 28. The size, plain rim form and slight burnishing on internal faces of these sherds is characteristic of sugar moulds in use in the region between *c.* 1750 and 1850 (J. Speakman pers. comm; McNeil 1983, 94) and although insufficient of the profile

survives to be certain of this identification it is unlikely that they are sections of flower-pot or similar unglazed earthenware vessel.

The remainder of the pottery assemblage consisted of small quantities of stonewares, mottled wares, slipwares and self-coloured wares ranging in date from 1700 to 1900.

*Glass*

A total of 9 fragments of glass weighing 661 g were found in six contexts, all sand deposits sealed by the cobbled floors.

The most significant of these was SF 2, the base of an onion bottle with a shallow kick. No other diagnostic features were present so it impossible to give anything other than a broad date of c. 1630-1750. SF 3 was a body sherd in a similar metal to SF 2 and probably part of the same vessel.

SF 6 consisted of three joining base and body sherds from an octagonal case bottle in a pale green metal. One of the broad faces retained traces of a rectangular recess, presumably for a label. The absence of diagnostic elements such as the neck and finish make it difficult to date but the absence of seams and the quality of the glass suggest that it is 18$^{th}$ or early 19$^{th}$ century.

*Clay Tobacco Pipes*

A total of 15 fragments of clay tobacco pipe weighing a total of 38.6 g were found in four contexts, all make-up for the cobbled floor in the southern room.

Most of the assemblage consisted of stems and fragments of bowl with few diagnostic features though the narrow bore of all stems suggests a date in the late 18$^{th}$ to 19$^{th}$ century. One bowl fragment with a flattened heel is probably 18$^{th}$ century (SF 10).

*Industrial Waste*

A single piece of suspected industrial waste (SF 1) weighing 0.80 kg was recovered from context 2. It was broadly 180 mm in diameter, up to 60 mm thick and was broadly plano-convex in form. The material was a vesicular, slightly friable very dark grey to black finely crystalline material with occasional inclusions of rounded fragments of red sandstone up to 8 mm across and fragments of what appear to be carbonised grain. Testing with a magnet showed that the item was at most weakly magnetic and there was no evidence of iron corrosion products. The flattened upper surface was densely packed with partly carbonised and mineralised organic material which appeared to be straw and chaff.

Although the general form and composition of this object is broadly similar to samples of early metal working waste, in particular Romano-British smithing hearth bases (Adams 2010) its significantly larger than is common (most examples are 100-120 mm across) and does not appear to be of the correct mineralogical composition. It is possible that it was slag which had been chemically altered but it is more likely to be vitrified fuel ash (Historic England 2015, 59). Whilst this material can derive from metallurgical processes, it is not considered diagnostic and can be formed during a range of high temperature processes using organic fuel.

*Other Finds*

Small quantities of animal bone and iron were also recovered but were all non-diagnostic and 19th century in date and are not reported in detail.

## 6. Conclusions

No direct evidence was obtained for the date of construction of the building though the cobbled surfaces within in it were laid after the walls had been built and post-dated *c.* 1880. Map evidence shows that the building was constructed prior to the 1840s, so the floors were later replacements. The evidence for post-settings beneath the cobble floors might relate to an earlier structure on the site but could equally be related to internal subdivisions predating the insertion of the cobbled floors.

Linear features beneath the cobbled surface in the southern room were of uncertain origin but were too shallow and closely spaced to be structural and probably related to gardening activity.

The finds assemblage is typical of domestic debris found on post-medieval farms of this type; its main significance is that the earlier fragments, such as the onion bottle base, suggest that the farm was occupied from at least c. 1650-1700.

The presence of three fragments of probable sugar mould is difficult to account for. Although sugar refining was an important aspect of the economy of the region during the Industrial Revolution, with sugar houses in Liverpool and Chester, there are no documented sugar houses on the Wirral and the known mould production sites were in Prescot and Central Liverpool. The most likely explanation for their presence is that they arrived on site with other material brought in from Liverpool or Chester.

The large fragment of vitrified fuel ash is not diagnostic of date or the process used. However, it is relatively fragile and is unlikely to have been brought to the site from elsewhere. It hence provides an indication of some form of high temperature process probably related to craft activity and using straw as a fuel at the farm.

## 7. Recommendations for Further Mitigation

No further mitigation is required on this site and construction can proceed with no further archaeological requirements.

## 8. Acknowledgements

The role of Mr. and Mrs. Royden as project sponsors is gratefully acknowledged, as is the assistance of the main contractor. The text was read and checked by National Museums Liverpool.

# 9. Figures


Fig.1. Site Location.

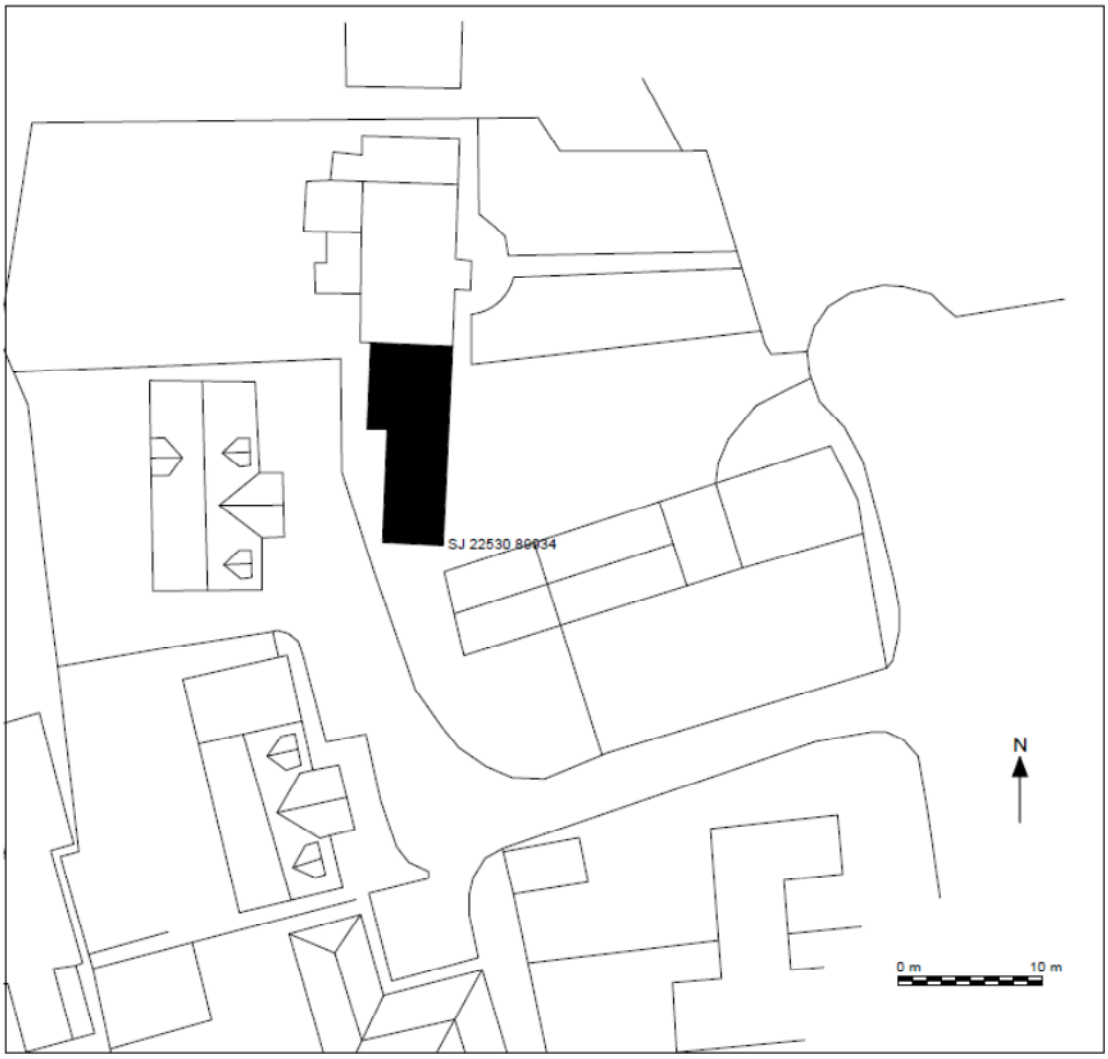


Fig. 2. Location of outbuilding.

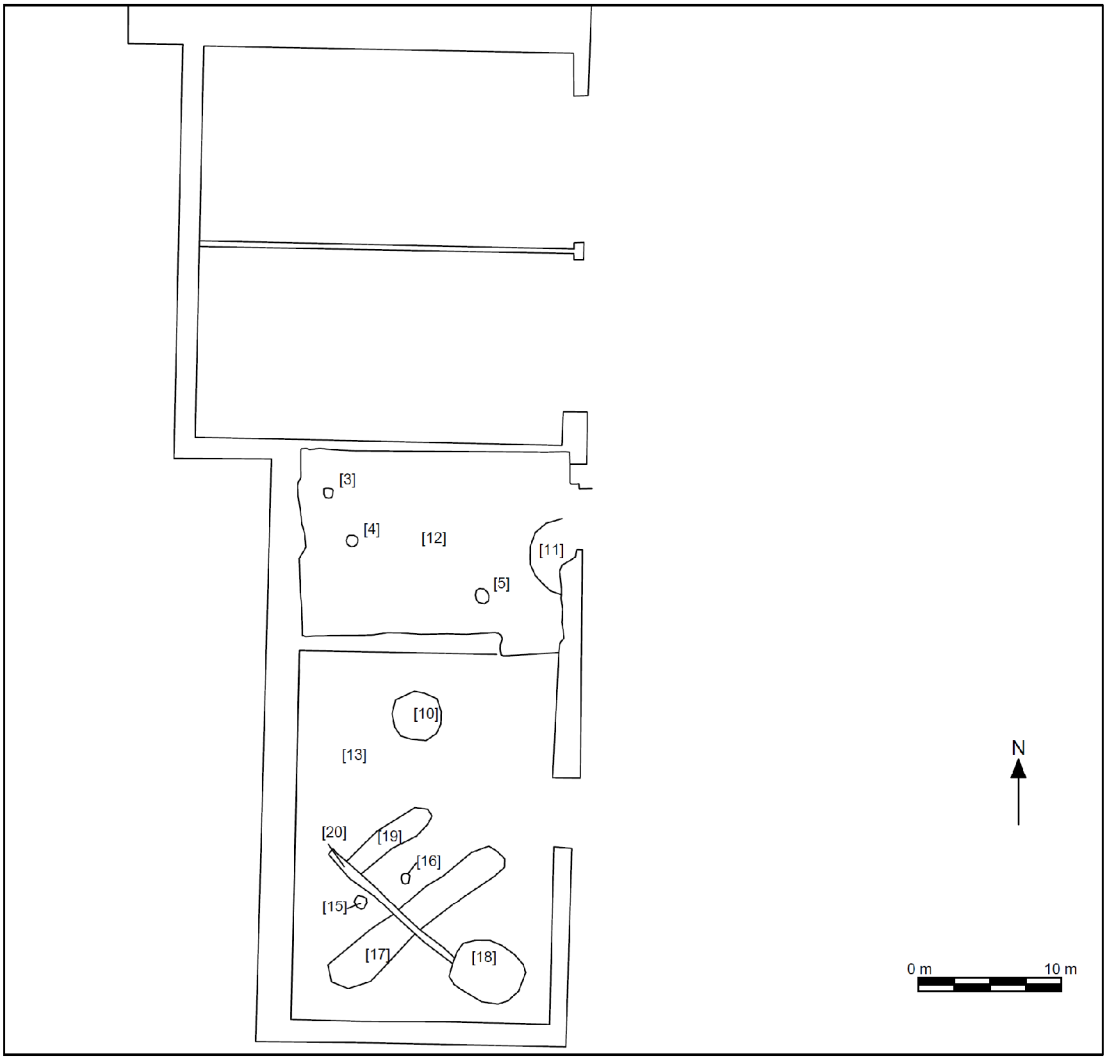


Fig. 3. Location of features discussed in the text.

# 10. Plates

Plate 1. Cobbled surface exposed under concrete floor in southern room.

Plate 2. Cut features in southern room (arrow is pointing east). Scales = 1m.

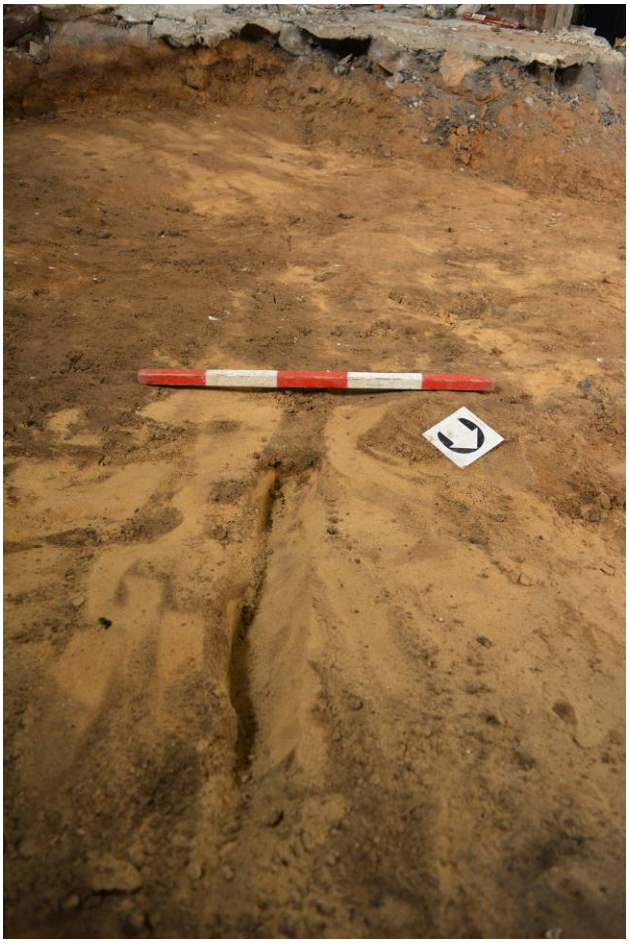

Plate 3. Sample section across plough mark in southern room (arrow is pointing east). Scale =0.5 m.

Plate 4. Sondage cut into sands in the south-west corner of southern room. Scale = 0.5 m.

Plate 5. Sondage cut into sands in the south-eastern corner of southern room. Scale = 0.5 m.

Plate 6. Cobbled floor in northern room. View looking east. Scales = 1m.

Plate 7. Cobbles in northern room. View looking west. Scales = 1m.

Plate 8. Deposits below cobble floor in northern room. View looking west (arrow is pointing east). Scales = 1m.

## 11. Bibliography

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## 12. Archive Catalogue

The archive is retained and curated at National Museums Liverpool.