



# Iain Soden Heritage Services Ltd

Modern living in an historic environment

**Archaeological observation and recording  
on new buildings on Bowler's Yard, Earls Barton,  
Northamptonshire, 2017**

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## Archaeological observation and recording on new buildings on Bowler's Yard, Earls Barton, Northamptonshire, 2017

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### Summary

A programme of observation and investigation during ground-works at Bowler's Yard found some evidence for possible medieval archaeology nearest to adjacent High Street properties, but wider work was constrained by thick 19<sup>th</sup>- to 20<sup>th</sup>-century overburden laid down and modified during the life of a recently-demolished former shoe factory and bottling plant.

### Introduction

Planning Permission was granted to Red Box Developments, for the construction of 11 apartment units to which a condition was applied for a programme of archaeological work on land behind 58 High Street, Earls Barton at a site known as 'Bowlers Yard'. The requirement was set out in a *Brief for a programme of archaeological observation, investigation, recording, analysis and publication of works at Bowlers Yard, 58 High Street, Earls Barton, Northamptonshire*, and dated 28 January 2015. It was mirrored in a Written Scheme of Investigation (12 February 2015), later updated (26 May 2017) after demolitions on the site, by Iain Soden Heritage Services Ltd and approved by Northamptonshire County Council as advisors to Wellingborough Council.

The site formerly contained a three-storey former shoe-industry factory dating from the late 19th century.

The site lies south of the High Street, and is tucked away behind frontage buildings (NGR: SP 8536 6386; Fig 1). The land falls away markedly in a stream valley-side to the south towards the playground of a primary school and the centre of Earls Barton.

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Fig 1: Site location (arrowed).

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### Previous work and constraints upon the evidence

The site was formerly dominated by a factory complex, originally built as part of the boot and shoe industry, for which the county is renowned. However, the factory was not recorded as part of the former English Heritage's Boot and Shoe Survey (2001), possibly because it was only briefly associated with this trade. Similarly, there is little documentary evidence associated with the origin, use or development of the factory, which was demolished in 2016. Prior to demolition, it was the subject of Level 2 Building Recording (Prentice, Walker and Soden, 2015).

The factory buildings were first depicted on the rear part of the site in the late 19th century. Prior to this date, the site had been part of a back-plot associated with buildings fronting onto the High Street; at the time of buildings-recording it was felt that it was likely that the area had been similarly laid-out since the medieval period.

Between c1885 and the turn of the 19th-20th century, the factory building had been altered and in the 20th century it was much extended to the south and east. Following use, as was probably intended, by the boot and shoe trades, it was subsequently used by Birtle's crisps in the 1930s-1947 and by the 1970s it had become a wine and bottle warehouse. Later it was used as a wine warehouse and a warehouse for a number of small construction-related companies, but at the time of recording it was empty.

Although it was originally planned to retain the core 19<sup>th</sup>-century buildings of the factory, in a change of plan in 2016 the former factory buildings were taken down. The superstructure, solid floors and foundations were mostly mechanically removed. At the time of the current construction work (2017), only small patches of residual foundation brick were found to remain, along with sub-surface salt-glaze drains and other, dead, service lines.

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No archaeological watching brief was required or maintained on the demolition and grubbing up process so it is unknown whether any buried remains were exposed at that time. When the current works began, the site had been flattened and pre-prepared for the new-build groundworks to begin.

During the current works, the potential to closely inspect, clean or otherwise investigate remains which were exposed was constrained by the requirements of no deep working/in confined spaces for reasons of Health and Safety.

### **Fieldwork**

The current development began by dividing the site into four areas in which varied ground reduction took place:

1. The northern, upper portion reduced initially by c300mm in order to contain an east-west aligned row of new units (apartments) 1-4
2. The middle portion, not reduced generally which was to contain parking and access between the rows of units
3. The southern portion, reduced by 400-700mm to order to contain an east-west aligned row of new units (apartments) 5-11
4. Cutting an east-west trench for a gabion wall downslope south of units 5-11

The work was carried out by three mechanical excavators, sometimes working simultaneously, the spoil being loaded straight into dumpers.

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Fig 2: The areas of the site, relative to the demolished factory (Andy Isham)

Thereafter the foundations of the new units were marked out and dug by a variety of 360-degree tracked machines fitted mostly with toothless buckets.

While all trenches were closely monitored, only those relating to Units 1-4 could be addressed by hand as the need arose. Those relating to units 5-11 involved trenches dug between 1.2 and 2.3m deep and these depths precluded working or standing in the trench for any purpose whatsoever.

## Results

### Area 1 -Units 1-4

Machine-stripping in this area exposed the natural geology of the Northampton Sand with Ironstone east-west along the southernmost boundary of the site for about 20m, in a swathe c5m wide. There was some disturbance of this by former services associated with the demolished factory, but in this area the natural geology lay close to the working surface.

The stripping exposed an east- to west-aligned row of post-holes ([2], [4], [6] and [8]). All were sub-circular and of a similar 300-400mm diameter. Their fills (3, 5, 7 and 9) were of an identical mid brown friable granular soil, very much the same as the thin subsoil, where it survived in discontinuous patches on the natural ironstone. All of the post-holes were emptied and were found to be 250-300mm deep, straight-sided and flat-bottomed. None but [4] produced any finds.

The fill of [4] produced a single tiny sherd of pottery (5). This was found to be a tiny body sherd of pottery, probably of Iron Age or Romano-British coarseware, having smooth matt black surfaces with moderate mica, not at all a local late Saxon or medieval characteristic.



Fig 3: Stripping the northernmost swathe for Units 1-4, looking south. A post-hole is showing up (arrowed).

At the eastern end of –but not aligned with- the post-hole row lay about half of a larger, probably sub-circular, pit [10], some 900mm in diameter and with straight sides. This was dug out to a depth of 400mm but not bottomed. Its fill (11) was a soil identical in colour and texture to that which filled



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all of the nearby post-holes. It produced a single large body sherd of shell-tempered St Neot's-type coarseware (Northamptonshire CTS 100/200) of the 10<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> century from a sooted storage jar/cooking pot.



Fig 4: Post-hole [2]; scale 300mm



Fig 5: Post-hole [6]; scale 300mm



Fig 6: Pit [10] at the site edge; scale 300mm

The pit and post-holes may relate to a former boundary demarking the back plot edge of the High Street. The paucity of finds might suggest that they were dug at some distance from any occupation or rubbish disposal and the incorporation of two sherds of pottery is more happenstance residuality than any evidence for deliberate dumping at any period. As to postulating a date, they are certainly pre-factory, so pre-19<sup>th</sup>-century. However two sherds of pottery between five features is hardly conclusive. A medieval date seems plausible if not certain.



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As mechanical stripping and ground-preparation moved south, less overburden was removed in order to achieve desired formation levels, leaving the only exposure of the natural geology to the actual digging of the foundation trenches. These continued to be watched. A wide, deep Victorian pit was exposed in the trenches at the west end of the site, which physically must have lain beneath the earliest part of the former factory.

Both the pit and the overburden generally contained pottery of the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (not retained). This included an English stoneware cider jar, blacking bottles and other stoneware.

Residual amongst this Victorian debris were two green-glazed medieval sherds of pottery (not retained) – one was a sherd of oolitic Lyveden/Stanion B ware (Northamptonshire CTS 320) and the other a base sherd from a vessel in Potterspury ware (Northamptonshire CTS 329).



Fig 7: Units 1-4, foundation-digging after stripping, looking east. To the left was the swathe where all the early features were previously exposed and recorded.

### Area 2- Car parking and access road.

No ground reduction was aimed at this central portion of the site but was rather built up by the importation of hoggin to form the sub-base. No archaeology was exposed.

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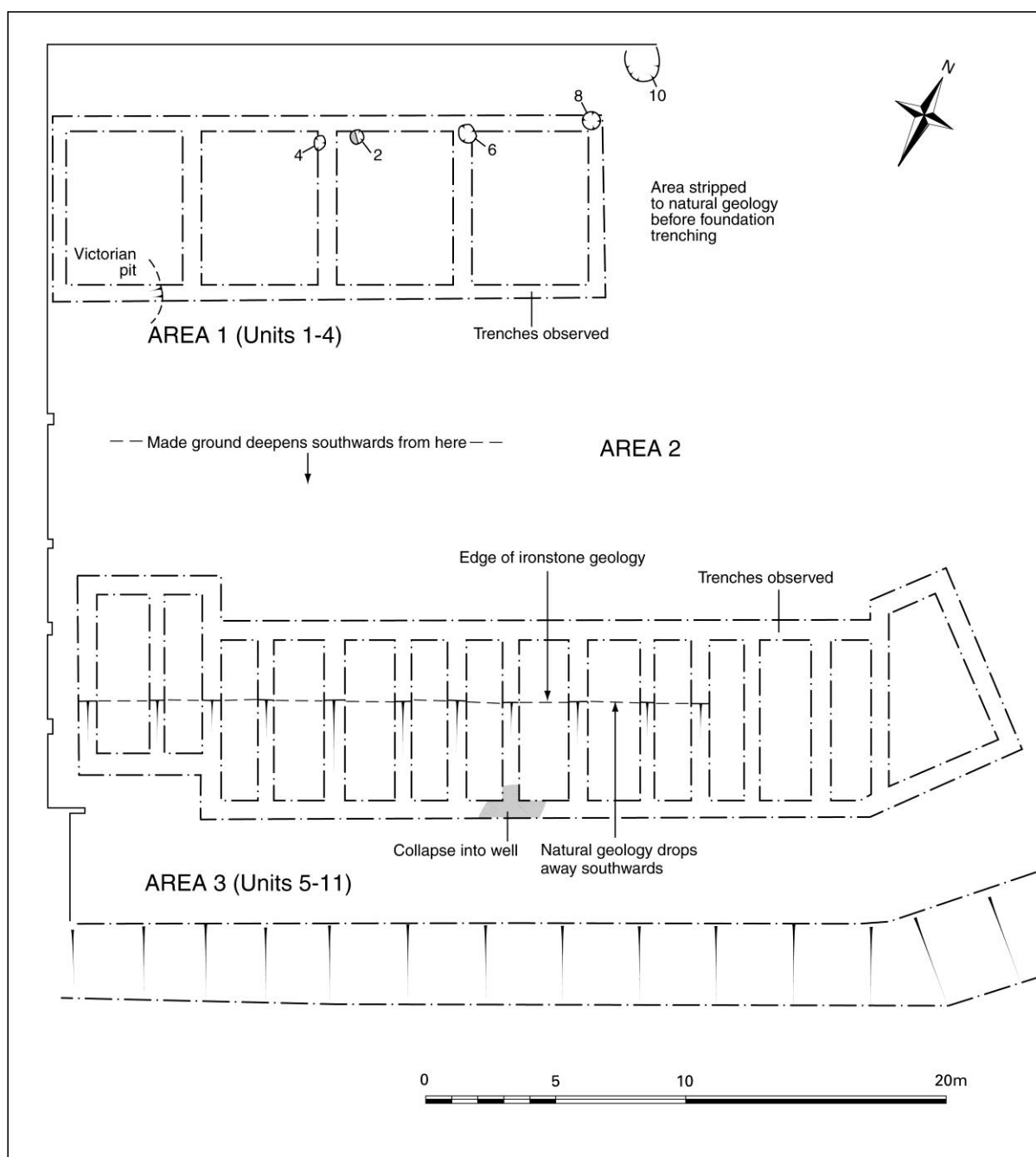


Fig 8: Plan showing Areas 1-3, strip, foundations as dug and archaeology encountered (Andy Isham)

## Area 3 - Units 5-11

In this area the overburden was found to be much thicker than the northern portion of the site, and was here characterised by containing large quantities of 20<sup>th</sup>-century bottles and jars, mostly broken, but occasionally complete or nearly complete. This is a substantial deposit up to 1.5m thick which derives from the use of the site in the 1960s and 70s as a bottling plant. It appears to have been used to extend the site southwards as it thickens down the slope in a widespread tip over the edge. The most recent extension of the former factory had seemingly then been erected on a concrete raft over it.

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Almost all observations in this area took place during the digging of the foundation trenches, since very little wholesale reduction was necessary in respect of Units 5-11.

The glass-bottle layer averaged 500mm thickness, beneath which lay a medium-brown buried soil containing both Victorian pottery and further bottle glass. This was the sub-base associated with the original factory, before the modern extensions and the widespread hard-standings were added.

Upon digging the foundations it became clear that the natural Northampton Sand with Ironstone lay some 500-600mm below the formation level at the northern edge of this area, but which then thickened and deepened rapidly to about 1m half way through the range.

At this point the ironstone geology ended abruptly in an apparent cliff-edge, over which the buried soil had tumbled thickly down a long east-west slope which lay under the south side of the new units. This was the steepening gradient of the underlying Jurassic Lias clay.

This appears to be the southern edge of a hillcrest or cap of Northampton Sand with Ironstone.

Dug through all the dumped material and the soils of the hill-side a Victorian brick-built well was located 2.3m down. It was at least a further c3m deep. It was not accessible for further scrutiny.

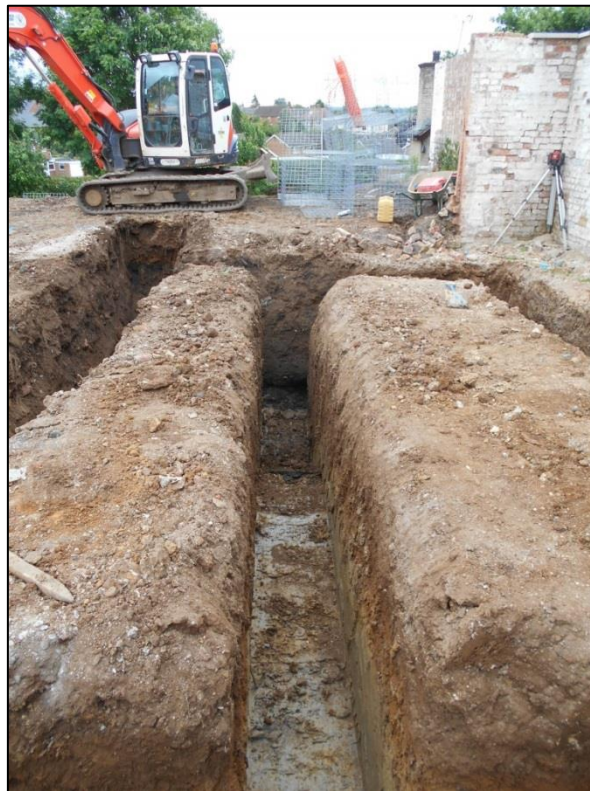


Fig 9: Foundation digging on units 5-11, looking south at the west end of the row.





Fig 10: A break in foundation-digging on Units 5-11 (some concreting also), looking east; note the trench collapse in the middle ground on the site of the Victorian well

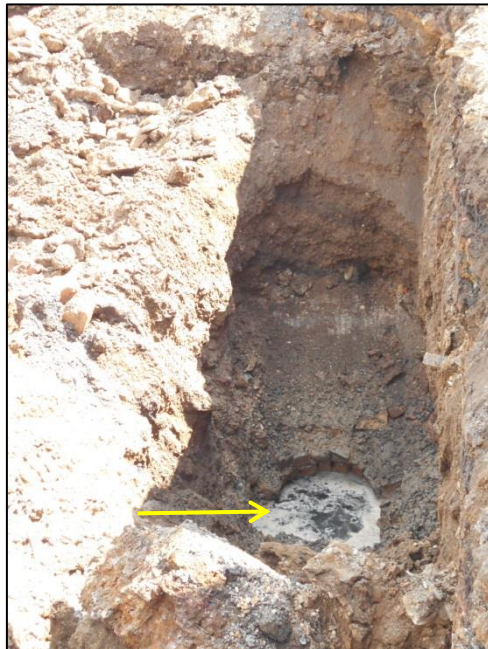


Fig 11: The brick-built well. Discovered 2.3m down, it was plumbed a further 3m before obstruction was encountered.

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## Area 4 - The Gabion Wall

At the lowest part of the site, where a garden of a 20<sup>th</sup>-century house traverses the foot of the former factory slope, the ground workers put in a new gabion wall to both demarcate the new development and to provide some fresh retainer to the modified hillslope. This was fitted into a machine-cut trench through the garden turf and topsoil down to the natural clay geology. The trench uncovered brick rubble mixed into the soil and a single clay tobacco pipe with a simple moulded bowl of 19<sup>th</sup>-century design.



Fig 12: Digging the gabion wall trench, looking west; this view shows the upper factory level, almost as high as a bungalow beyond and the unmodified slope of the garden

## **Conclusions**

The site of Bowlers Yard, Earls Barton has clearly contained some pre-modern, probably medieval archaeology, but which was severely affected by the erection of a factory in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, later expanded. The demolition of that factory and removal of its foundations affected buried remains further, while new buildings in 2017 have taken a further turn in denuding what was there. The site retains some further potential for the future, but probably any remains would, like those found and related above, be limited to small, damaged 'islands', which are few in number and limited in extent.

There is probably some similar potential for many of the back gardens along the south side of High Street, Earls Barton, of which Bowlers Yard is just one part. Behind the evolving frontage, open spaces along the street are numerous and may contain similar remains, which differ only in the variations and details of individual plot-histories.

## **Bibliography**

Prentice J, Walker C and Soden I, 2015 *Archaeological Buildings recording at Bowler's Yard, Earls Barton, Northamptonshire 2015*, IS Heritage report



# Bowlers Yard, Earls Barton

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## Appendix *OASIS data*

Project Name	Bowler's Yard, Earl's Barton
OASIS ID	iainsode1-288563
Project Type	Watching Brief
Originator	Iain Soden Heritage Services Ltd
Project Manager	Iain Soden
Previous/future work	Yes/ No
Current land use	Derelict
Development type	Residential
Reason for investigation	Planning Condition
National grid reference	SP 8536 6386
Start/end dates of fieldwork	31 May 2017-13 June 2017
Archive recipient	Northamptonshire Archive
Study area	c2500 sq m



Iain Soden Heritage Services Ltd

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