



Iain Soden Heritage Services Ltd

Modern living in an historic environment

An archaeological evaluation at the former Amalgamated Tyres site, St John's Street, Northampton

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Summary

An archaeological evaluation shows that the former Amalgamated Tyres garage has been very destructive of sub-surface deposits and features on the corner between St John's Street and Fetter Street. The site stands in marked contrast to the previous adjacent excavations on Project Angel. A single evaluation trench has provided topographical information to compare with Project Angel. Despite widespread destruction, a small area of the site retains archaeological potential, albeit very limited, to preserve back-yard features cut into natural geology.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Katie Mills of Northampton Borough Council for her commission and discussions. To Lesley-Ann Mather and Liz Mordue of Northamptonshire County Council goes appreciation for their discussions and monitoring. To Peter Tomas, demolition contractor for use of their machine. To Joe Prentice and Andy Isham thanks for their hard work and endless good humour.

Introduction

The site, which lies at NGR: SP 7556 6029, was the subject of a Desk-Based Archaeological Assessment in 2014 (Walker and Soden 2014). It occupies a site which lay at the boundary between long back-plots fronting Bridge Street to the west and Swan Street to the East. At some point St John's Street (formerly Three Potts Lane) was laid out between the two, while Fetter Street was subsequently laid out angled upslope along that early boundary.

Historic frontages lie partly under the current roads, all having been cut back since the 17th century; that of the southern end of Fetter Street (east side) as late as the 1930s.

The contents of an approved foregoing Written Scheme of Investigation (WSI) provided for two-phase below-ground investigation as appropriate (Soden 2017).

The first phase, evaluation, followed the demolition of Amalgamated Tyres, a former garage, which was constructed in the 1930s and has since been adapted but not extended. The evaluation is set out in this report.

The siting and ground preparation for the former garage has ensured that no historic Fetter Street frontage lay within the garage building.

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There was considerable documentary evidence for widespread disturbance within the northern half of the Amalgamated Tyres building which has thought to have reduced any archaeological potential considerably. Work to break out and remove the floors and associated buried features showed that modern disturbances extend to most areas of the plot.

By way of context and local archaeological background, archaeological work on the adjacent Project Angel site (2010-15) has shown that a set of former factory buildings along St John's Street had cut into the natural hillside but in part had utilised an existing terrace into the slope. Surviving archaeological levels there were concentrated along the St John's Street frontage as a result, where extensive excavation located the back of former frontage buildings, together with some of the rear yards and outbuildings (on the terrace) containing outbuildings and malting kilns.

Mapped historical background

The first building depicted as standing on or close to the site was an isolated house at the corner of St John's Street and Fetter Street in John Speed's Map of 1610. It lay outside the current site, however. This may have been a medieval building but there is no further evidence. Thereafter it had disappeared from a map of 1746 (Noble and Butlin) which shows a row of three equidistant buildings with gardens between and behind up Fetter Street. St John's Street at that time was called Three Potts Lane. That layout persisted on a map of 1807 (Roper and Cole).



Fig 1: The site (approximate) on Noble and Butlin's map of 1746. Fetter Street was formerly much narrower and its historic frontage was lost when the street was widened eastwards

From around 1831 the site became more built up, with an emphasis on the Fetter Street frontage. This is borne out by a further small-scale map of 1847 (Wood and Law), which is confirmed in maps of just before 1875 and by the Ordnance Survey in 1885.

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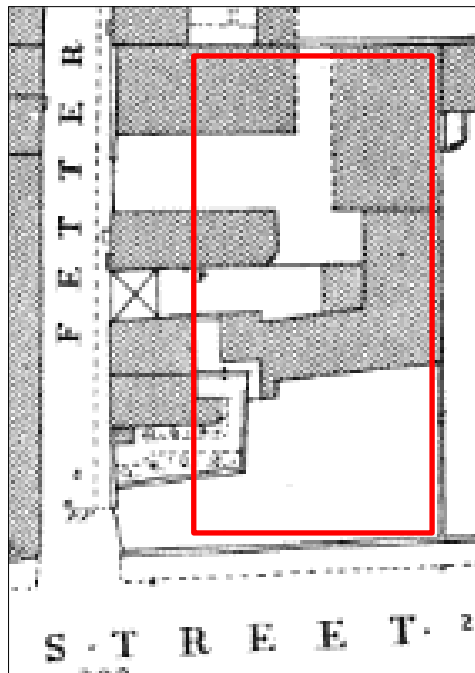


Fig 2: Fetter Street/St John's Street corner surveyed at 1:500 scale by the Ordnance Survey, 1885. The approximate site is outlined. Even at this date there is no cellar (or building above) on the St Johns Street frontage, such as was found in evaluation.

The present pavement lies at 63.7m aOD at the Fetter Street junction with St John's Street (rounded up to 1sf) gently rising to 63.9 further east.

In the nearby Project Angel excavations in 2015, the natural substrate was encountered between 61-62m aOD at the southern end of the site adjacent to Bridge Street. The deposit model created for the Urban Archaeological Database suggested significant archaeological deposits would be encountered there at 62m aOD.

The Project Angel evaluation of 2010 indicated that on that adjacent corner, significant archaeology lay at between 1.2m and 1.5m below the modern ground surface, which equates to archaeology lying at between 62.2m and 62.5m above Ordnance Datum.

By comparison, and in contrast, the interior floor surface of the Amalgamated Tyres building lay at c64.0m above OD, in its southern portion, stepping up to 64.44 at the north end. The floor concrete and sub-base together were 200-300mm thick.

The evaluation trench below the Amalgamated Tyres building showed that the natural geology, where undisturbed, slopes gently and almost imperceptibly down from north to south, with no evidence for any terracing such as that which characterised the Project Angel site (a swathe in which stratified medieval and later archaeology lay). The natural geology in the evaluation trench lay at 62.9m aOD at its north end, and c62.5 at its south end (this latter point commensurate with Project Angel evaluation at its highest). This is a slope of 400mm in c8m, or 1 in 20 (5%). The principal difference between the planning histories of the two sites therefore, has been the early digging of a terrace in one (Project Angel), but not in the other (Amalgamated Tyres).

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Fieldwork

By agreement, a single archaeological trench was machine-dug under archaeological control in an area thought to be relatively free from garage-related disturbance, up the mid-line of the site (Fig 5). The machine was a 20-ton tracked excavator fitted with a 2m-wide toothless ditching bucket, already on site for the last of the garage demolition works (*Thanks to Peter Tomas for its use*). The trench measured 12m long x 2m wide, although it was found that cellar- and tank-disturbance had destroyed the archaeological sequence at the south end. Only 8m x 2m of the trench remained unaffected.



Fig 3: The site during breaking-out of floors and sub-surface impediments, looking south.

The work was carried out in fine weather and in good ground conditions. However, even this trenching exercise discovered garage-related disturbance not previously suspected, such as a buried oxygen cylinder and an inspection chamber. An undefined further brick-and-concrete chamber filled with broken roof tiles lay at the north end of the trench at its terminal.

Known constraints or discovered on the day of trenching were:

1 cellar c1900, 1 cellar 1930s, 4 fuel tanks, 1 oxygen tank, 2 inspection chambers, 2 vehicle inspection pits, 1 rolling road. Anything with a depth of over 1m had penetrated into the natural geology (Fig 5).

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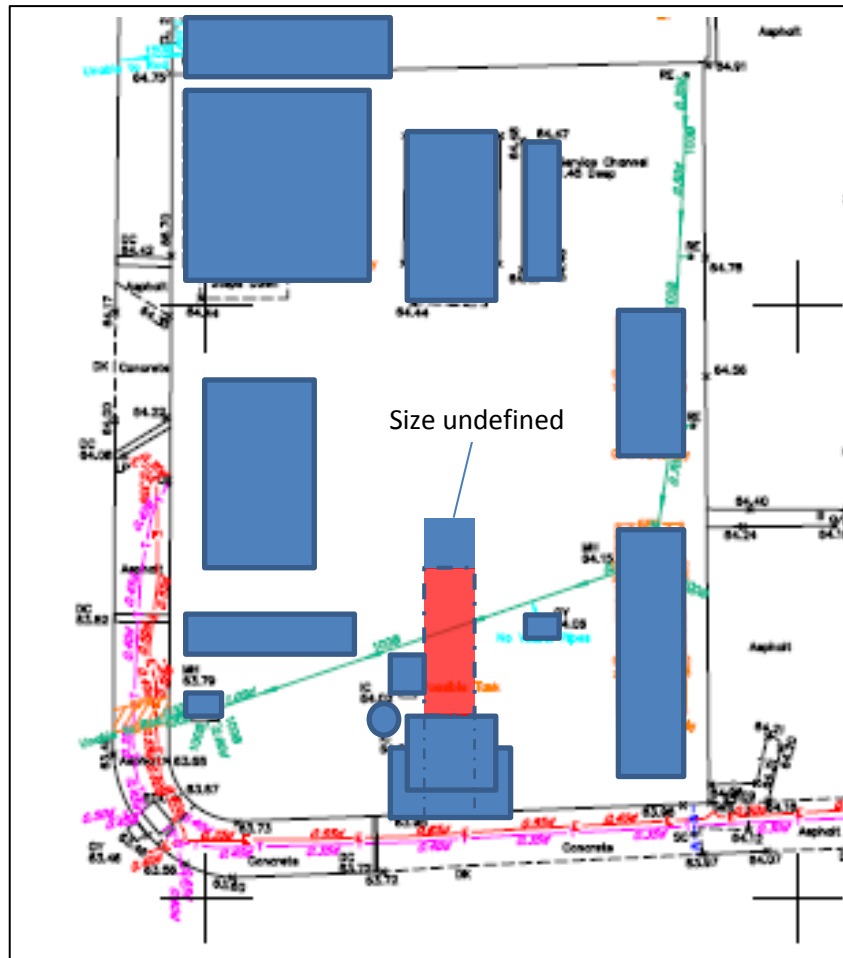


Fig 4: The Amalgamated Tyres plot with principal areas of garage truncation in blue. The un-truncated part of the evaluation trench is shown red. A ceramic drain-pipe, shown in turquoise here, was the only garage feature to lie above the natural geology. This plan shows nothing of the 19th and early 20th-century house foundations mapped in Fig 2. Note the unanticipated cellar at the foot of the figure, itself disturbed by a tank. A disturbance at the north end of the trench was not further defined and its extent is unknown.



Fig 5: The site during trench backfilling. The trench lay directly between the camera and the machine.

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Results

Machining from south to north the trench first of all encountered an ironstone and brick cellar adjacent to the St John's Street pavement, which had itself been broken open by the burial and placement of a large steel fuel tank which the demolition contract removed. The cellar post-dates the first edition Ordnance Survey of 1885, but must have gone out of use when the garage was built. It was thus perhaps in use for a mere 30 years or so. There was 19th-20th century willow-pattern china protruding from its lowest course (not removed). The cellar was otherwise emptied (since its backfill was falling in), cleaned and its extant sides photographed (Fig 6).



Fig 6: The cellar, looking east along St John's Street. The back (north) wall broken open by insertion and removal of a fuel tank. Scales - 2m horizontal and 1m vertical.



Fig 7: The trench looking north. The area in the foreground is all backfill from the cellar and fuel-tank. Together these reduced the natural geology in the southernmost 4m of the trench. Scales 2m (horizontal) and 1m (vertical)

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In the main body of the trench the sequence comprised as follows:

The residue of demolition (1) overlay an area of densely-packed former disturbance, probably in the construction of, or alterations to the garage (2). Further north lay the upper of two barely-distinguishable and homogenous garden soils (3, and the lower one 4); each was some 400mm thick and both contained 19th-20th-century china as well as occasional residual medieval potsherds. Below these soils lay the natural Northampton Sand with Ironstone geology (5).

While the south end of the trench was disturbed by the ironstone-and-brick cellar [8] and inserted modern fuel tank (subsequently removed), the north end of the trench terminated in a modern brick wall edging a cement-screeded chamber [7]. This is a sub-surface feature of unknown extent (to east, west and north); what was seen of it was filled with roof tiles, including pan-tiles. Its base appears to be just below the level of the natural geology and it was set in through all later layers as indicated by its construction trench [6].



Fig 8: The trench looking south. Two discoloured semicircles of pits 9 and 11 can just be made out either side of the 2m horizontal scale. The vertical scale is 1m.

Cut into the natural geology, and sealed by the homogenous dark brown garden soils, were two sub-circular pits [9 and 11], each extending under opposite sections. At about 1m diameter, neither had been dug purposefully and was about 300-400mm deep and the soil fills (10 and 12, respectively), almost indistinguishable from the homogenous garden soil (4) above them, contained a few sherds of medieval pottery, but no more. There was no suggestion of industry present.

A nearby line of ironstone blocks [13] probably represents a wall foundation, but may be associated with 19th-century brick strewn about, where the east-facing section collapsed when an Oxygen

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cylinder was unexpectedly pulled out by the machine. Although damaged, this feature might be the back wall foundation of a building of c1900, otherwise represented by the cellar.

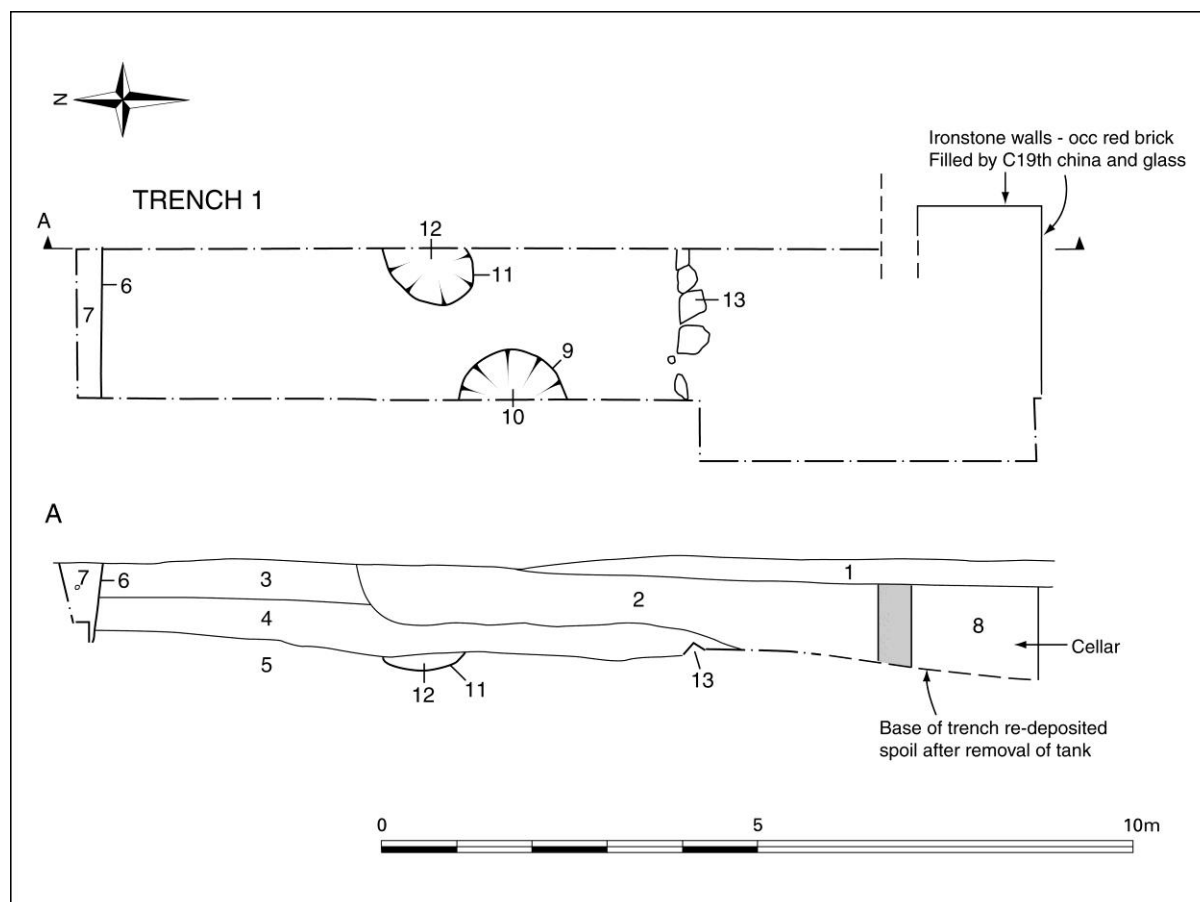


Fig 9: Plan of the evaluation trench and its west-facing section (Andy Isham)

Finds and dating

The fills of the two stratified pits, 10 and 12, produced 30 sherds of medieval pottery, comprising:

Pit fill 10

- 6 sherds of CTS 100/200 (St Neots-type ware) – cooking pots
- 8 sherds of CTS 330 (Shelly Coarseware) – mainly cooking pots, one jug sherd

Pit fill 12

- 1 sherd of CTS 100/200 (St Neots-type ware) – prob cooking pot
- 14 sherds of CTS 330 (Shelly Coarseware) – cooking pots
- 1 sherd of CTS 329 (Potterspury ware) – jug

The pottery spans a period of c1000/1200 AD (as indicated by the *residual* St Neots-type ware) through well into the 13th or 14th centuries, when Shelly Coarseware was the predominant local unglazed kitchen ware. The single sherd of Potterspury jug indicates a date probably after c1250 and possibly well into the 14th century.

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Pottery from disturbed and un-stratified deposits above the natural geology was not retained. No finds suggest the presence of industry on the site. The site is dry and well-drained and is felt to have very poor potential for preservation of environmental data.

Conclusions

The former Amalgamated Tyres site is a very denuded archaeological resource.

As suspected, this site contains many deep, garage-related disturbances, comprising a large modern cellar, four buried steel fuel tanks, two inspection pits, a rolling-road, and a buried oxygen tank, in addition to the garage foundations. There was also a Victorian cellar close to the St John's Street frontage. Some, but not all, of these were surmised from a variety of documentation and a previous site inspection, but more became apparent during the demolition of the garage.

Following the removal of the garage concrete floors, it was found that all the above features were sufficiently deeply-dug in to have penetrated deep into the natural geology.

Otherwise there is just less than a metre of overburden between the former garage floors and the natural ironstone geology.

The single archaeological evaluation trench was placed where some integrity was thought to have still survived all the garage-related damage. This proved to be a good choice and there is a small area *comparatively* undamaged towards the middle of the site but this swathe may measure only 8m across from north to south. It never became deeply-buried (less than a metre) and its dimension east-west is likely to be some 10m at the most.

As suggested in the foregoing Desk-Based Assessment and Written Scheme of Investigation, borehole-data and the known difference in the comparative modern uses of the two sites, Amalgamated Tyres was thought to contain topographically higher archaeology in a potentially much thinner band than the adjacent (deeper and thicker) terraced Project Angel site. As such its vulnerability was highlighted and the likelihood of its truncation suggested.

This scenario has proved to be so. Only a small area has any potential to retain medieval archaeological features cut into the natural geology at a depth of c900mm, at 62.5m aOD at the south and climbing gently at a gradient of 1 in 20. There is evidence of homogenous garden soils above this but no evidence for early structures or a significant stratigraphic sequence have been found. It is therefore likely that this area comprises medieval back-plots or gardens, whether related to Swan Street to the east or St John's Street to the south is unclear. Widespread garage-related disturbance is to be expected, over and above that already known.

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Fig 10: Evaluation trench shows a narrow swathe of undisturbed natural geology and a few cut features lie at c900mm depth



Fig11: Project Angel depths for comparison -1.5-2m depth and a terrace into the hillside. Note the former garage building across Fetter Street.

Comparing Amalgamated Tyres and Project Angel is a useful and pertinent exercise. It shows that even back to the late medieval period, the creation of Fetter Street part way along St John's Street had physically separated the plots to west and east and introduced separate planning-stories for the plots. While that to the west acquired a deeply terraced frontage and rear yards given over in part to brewing, that to the east was comparatively little-used and, more importantly, never terraced, leaving what little medieval and post-medieval archaeology it had acquired riding high and very vulnerable to both Victorian development and the construction of the 20th-century garage with its range of buried equipment and fuel storage.

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Appendix

OASIS data

Project Name	Former Amalgamated Tyres Site
OASIS ID	iainsode1-314450
Project Type	Evaluation
Originator	Iain Soden Heritage Services Ltd
Project Manager	Iain Soden
Previous/future work	Unknown
Current land use	Vacant plot
Development type	Urban commercial
Reason for investigation	Planning Condition
National grid reference	SP 7556 6029
Start/end dates of fieldwork	22 March 2018
Archive recipient	Northampton Museum
Study area	c2000 sq m



Iain Soden Heritage Services Ltd

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