

Report 2980



nps archaeology

Archaeological Evaluation, Excavation and Watching Brief at West Acre Priory, Norfolk

ENF128624



Prepared for
Alec Birkbeck



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with Mick Boyle BA AIfA

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Location:	Abbey House, West Acre
District:	Borough Council of King's Lynn and West Norfolk
Grid Ref.:	TF 78121514
Planning Ref.:	11/0159/F and 11/01594/LB
HER No.:	ENF128624
OASIS Ref.:	123224
Client:	Alec Birkbeck
Dates of Fieldwork:	Evaluation/Excavation 21-23 February 2012; Watching Brief 29 February 2012

Summary

Archaeological evaluation, excavation and watching brief were conducted for Alec Birkbeck ahead of the construction of a new extension on the eastern side of Abbey House in West Acre. Abbey House is situated within the precinct of the priory of St Mary and All Saints in an area of high archaeological potential.

Trial trench evaluation demonstrated that the area immediately east of the entrance to Abbey House had been subjected to a considerable amount of truncation, caused largely by the insertion of a cistern and sewer pipe in the 19th/20th centuries. These insertions were demonstrated to have truncated many of the earlier deposits. However a short section of wall and a layer of darker soil, both of probable medieval date did survive at the eastern end of the trench. Several layers of post-medieval dumped material, probably associated with more recent occupation of Abbey House were situated above these deposit.

A small excavation to examine the foundations at the base of a damaged gate pier was undertaken in order to facilitate reconstruction of the gate pier.

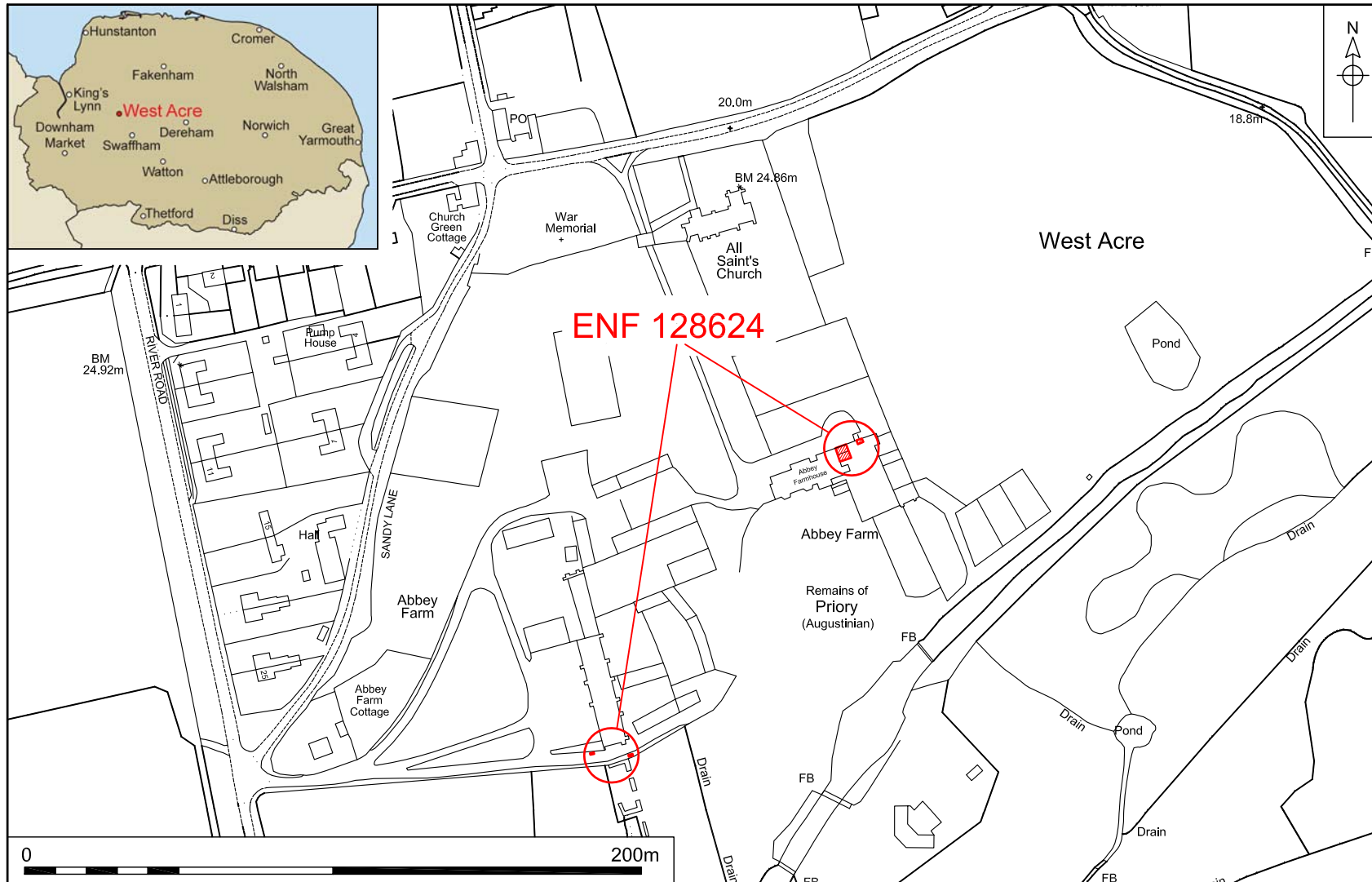
A watching brief was also undertaken to observe two machine-excavated test pits excavated adjacent to the wall of Abbey Farm Barn ahead of structural engineering works to repair subsidence at its southern end.

A large flint and mortar wall was observed within the excavation sondage at the base of the damaged gate pier. This was almost certainly part of the foundation of the western wall of the nave of the Priory church which appears to be situated further west and closer to Abbey House than previously thought. The structure may also represent a wider foundation, offering extra support to the western end of the nave. A smaller masonry structure with a possible post-setting was also observed to abut the Nave wall.

The watching brief unearthed a series of undated layers adjacent to the large post-medieval barn. Some of the layers may have contained building material derived from buildings associated with the priory, which were close by, although the layers may have been modified in the post-medieval period.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Abbey House, which is part of the Abbey Farm estate is located within the precinct of the priory of St Mary and All Saints (Fig. 1), a Scheduled Monument (21325; HER 3881) located in an area of significant surviving archaeological remains, both



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Figure 1. Site location. Scale 1:2500

both standing and sub-surface.

Two elements of new construction were proposed covering an area of around 30m². The most substantial element of the work was the creation of a new entrance/extension at the east side of the house, the building footprint of which measured around 3.5m by 5.0m. As this was in an area with essentially unknown sub-surface archaeological deposits, evaluation was undertaken to examine the nature of the buried remains to facilitate a decision by English Heritage (EH) and Norfolk Historical Environment Service (NHES) about the nature of mitigation works if needed.

Of less potential impact was the proposed rebuilding of a gate pier several metres east of the house. A sondage was excavated at the base of the gate pier, measuring around 1.35m by 2.20m and designed to be slightly larger than the area required for the building works. The relatively limited scope of this work and the more straightforward (and understood) nature of the archaeological resource here meant that EH and NHES could stipulate that an excavation take place to record by archaeological record deposits that could not be preserved *in situ*. The sondage also had a secondary purpose i.e. to determine what level/foundation the builders should use for their reconstruction works.

A late medieval/early post-medieval barn is situated 100m south-west of the Abbey and has serious subsidence problems due to the undermining of the structure by rabbit burrows; structural repairs are required. A number of large fissures have opened in the south and west walls of the barn and the south-western buttress has collapsed. The scope of this element of the project was originally for machine excavation of between three and five test pits at the southern end of the barn. However a decision was taken on-site by the engineer that two pits were sufficient to determine the nature of the sub surface layers. An archaeologist was required to be in 'constant attendance' during excavation of the test pit whilst there were any works affecting areas of below-ground disturbance or above-ground remains.

This work was undertaken to fulfil planning requirements set by the Borough Council of King's Lynn and West Norfolk (Ref. 11/0159/F and 11/01594/LB) and a Brief issued by Norfolk Historic Environment Service (Ref. CNF42849_2). The work was conducted in accordance with a Project Design and Method Statement prepared by NPS Archaeology (Ref.NAU/BAU2980/NP). This work was commissioned and funded by Alec Birkbeck.

The watching brief was conducted in accordance with a Project Design and Method Statement prepared by NPS Archaeology (Ref.NAU/BAU2957/DW) and a brief issued Norfolk Historic Environment Service (Ref. CNF42849_3). It was commissioned and funded by Henry Birkbeck.

This programme of work was designed to assist in defining the character and extent of any archaeological remains within the proposed redevelopment area, following the guidelines set out in *Planning Policy Statement 5: Planning for the Historic Environment* (Department for Communities and Local Government 2010) and the *National Planning Policy Framework* (Department for Communities and Local Government 2012). The evaluation results will enable decisions to be made by the Local Planning Authority and English Heritage about the treatment of any archaeological remains found.

The site archive is currently held by NPS Archaeology and on completion of the project will be deposited with Norfolk Museums and Archaeology Service (NMAS), following the relevant policies on archiving standards.

2.0 GEOLOGY AND TOPOGRAPHY

The excavation and evaluation were situated in a yard at the east side of Abbey House and the local topography is flat. This site is located in the Nar Valley within 75m of the north of the River Nar itself. The watching brief monitoring of test pits was carried out c.100m to the west of the excavation and evaluation site (Fig. 1).

The bedrock geology of the development area is Holywell nodular chalk and New Pit chalk formation (undifferentiated), with a superficial geology of Lowestoft formation sand and gravel (Open Geoscience 2012)

The ground has been subjected to dumping of material and levelling and no 'true' topsoil or subsoil was exposed. The natural substratum was unobserved during the evaluation and excavation works as it lay below the formation level of the building works.

A mid brown sandy silt topsoil did exist in the area of the watching brief (0.10m thick) and the natural substratum was observed to be an orange/yellow sand.

3.0 ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The historical background presented here is based on the desk-based survey carried out prior to this phase of works (Sillwood 2011) which was largely based on an search of the records held in the Norfolk Historic Environment Record (NHER).

At the *Domesday Survey* of 1086, the village of West Acre was considered alongside Castle Acre and the area was simply known as Acre. Castle Acre was wholly owned by the powerful William de Warenne, whilst West Acre was owned by Ralph de Tosny, another powerful baron, who fought at the Battle of Hastings in 1066, alongside William the Conqueror. (Sillwood 2011).

West Acre was located in the hundred of Freebridge, and is said to be '1 league in length and in width' and is in the valuation of Necton (Brown 1984). It appears to have been a fairly prosperous place, even before the foundation of the religious house, with five salt-houses, woodland, meadow, mills and plenty of livestock. It is the de Tosny, or Toni family, who first endowed and founded the Augustinian priory of St Mary and All Saints, thought to have taken place in the first half of the 12th century; Bates (1998) gives the date as in or before 1135. It appears that there was an earlier, original founding by a priest known as Olivet, who was already living under Augustinian rule before official endowment of the priory by the de Tosny family. The endowment included the manor and church of West Acre and also the church of Godwick (Sillwood 2011).

From its foundation onwards the priory continued to accumulate lands and patronages, and by the Dissolution was a wealthy house. It did however suffer a setback in 1286 when a fire destroyed the church and conventual buildings (Page 1975, 402), although it appears to have recovered relatively swiftly. The priory occasional acted somewhat corruptly; in 1315 it had to pay a fine after it appropriated the church of Rougham without licence, and in 1343 two acres of

common land were enclosed to the detriment of the local population (Sillwood 2011).

The de Tosny family remained patrons of the foundation until around 1309-10 when Alice de Tosny brought it to her husband Guy de Beauchamp, Earl of Warwick (Fairweather and Bradfer-Lawrence 1929, 361). By the late 15th century (when Bishop Goldwell visited the priory in 1494) there were nineteen canons and the house appeared to have become somewhat lax. A report made at the time stated that commands were not observed, that some brethren were lazy and did not apply themselves to their work. There were several subsequent reports into the 16th century on the state of the house which showed that there appeared to have been no improvements, mounting debts and poor moral values. Dissolution of the monasteries in 1538 brought an end to religious activity at West Acre when on 15 January Prior William Wingfield surrendered the priory to Robert Southwell, the attorney of the Augmentation Office. (Sillwood 2011).

Henry VIII granted the priory, with the manor and appropriated rectory to Mary, Duchess of Richmond and Somerset for the duration of her life. Edward VI then granted the lands to Sir Thomas Gresham in around 1553, and from him the lands passed to an Italian named Horatio Palavicini. From his son Sir Toby the lands were sold to Sir Edward Barkham, alderman of London and Lord Mayor in 1621, and by marriage the priory lands came to Charles Yallop Esq. In 1761 the Spelman family owned the land and conveyed it to Richard Hammond Esq., a forebear of the Birkbeck family who currently own Abbey House and surrounding lands. (Sillwood 2011)

4.0 METHODOLOGY

Evaluation

The objective of the evaluation was to determine as far as reasonably possible the presence or absence, location, nature, extent, date, quality, condition and significance of any surviving archaeological deposits within the footprint and to the new formation level of the new entrance extension (Fig. 2).

Previous hand-digging by the client just to the north of the footprint, where it appears that the eastern wall of the toilet block was removed, had revealed traces of a possible medieval wall. NHES and EH were keen to further ascertain the nature and direction of this wall. A large cistern was also known by NHES to be situated in the area of the footprint.

Prior to archaeologists arriving on the site some of the concrete paving slabs were removed and two areas were marked out (Plate 1). To more clearly reveal these elements, the top 150mm of the footprint was initially removed through the use of a tracked 360° type excavator equipped with a toothless ditching bucket and operated under constant archaeological supervision. Further evaluation work was undertaken by hand-digging a slot down the centre of the footprint. The slot measured 2.20m east to west by 1.0m north to south and was designed to reveal more of the known wall and the extent of the truncation due to the cistern. An area previously excavated by Abbey Farm estates on the north side of the building footprint was cleaned and partly recorded as part of the current project to provide extra information and a fuller record. A site meeting was held on the second morning of the project with monitors Will Fletcher and David Robertson from EH

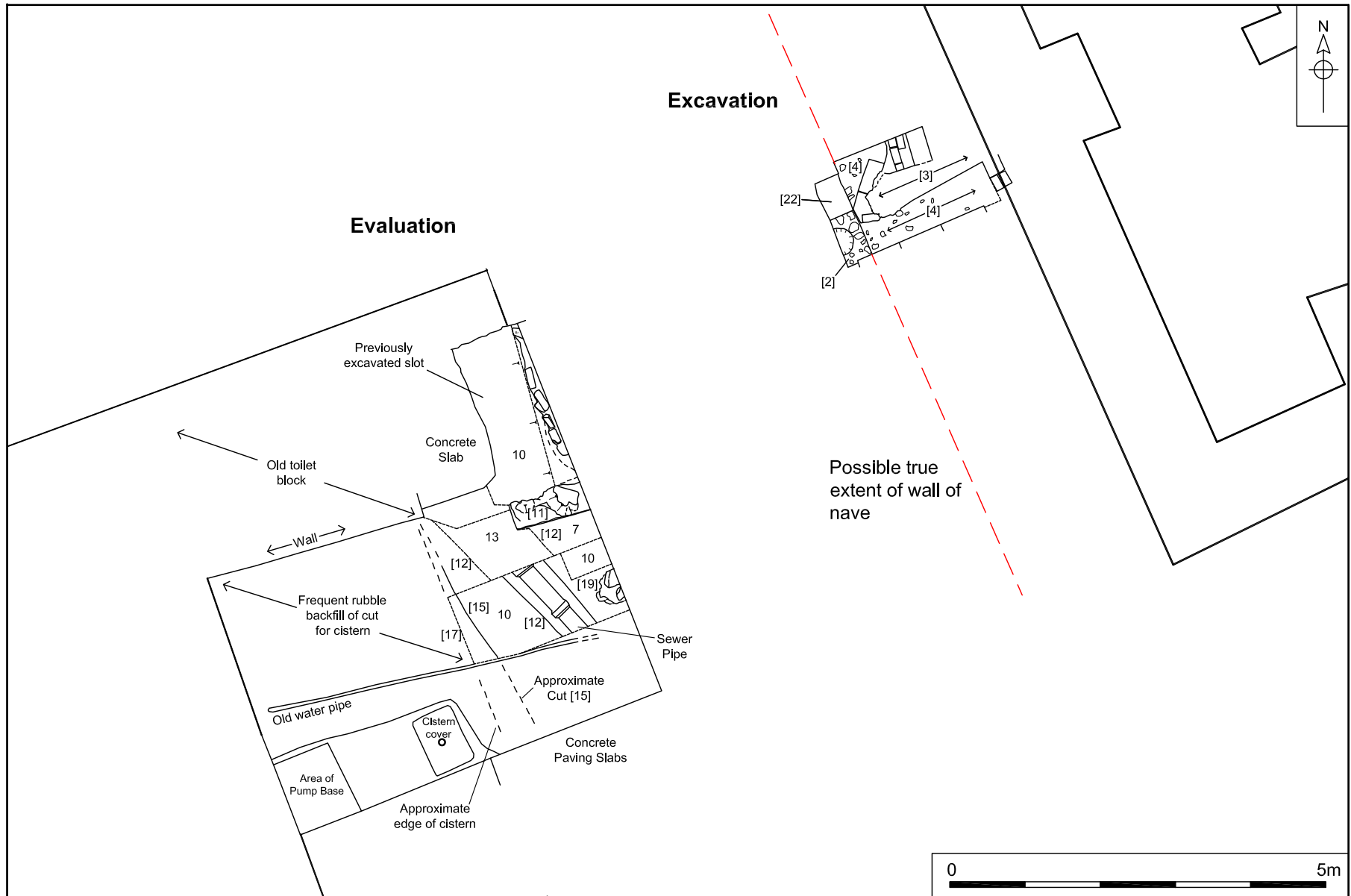


Figure 2. Location of Evaluation and Excavation. Scale 1:75

and NHES respectively in order to decide on any further works. It was established that as many of the original *in situ* deposits had been truncated, further work would involve the hand digging of the surviving deposits and full recording. Part of wall [11] was also removed by hand in the area of the new extension footing, though most of that structure would be preserved. The test pits examined during the watching brief were also excavated using a small tracked 360° excavator.



Plate 1. Location of Evaluation, looking north

Excavation

The objective of the excavation was to record the archaeological layers that were to be removed as a result of the building of a new gate pier. A sondage around the base of the area to be built on was hand dug and then fully recorded (Fig. 2, Plate 2).

Watching Brief

The excavation of two test pits was monitored (Figs 1 and 6) and the results were recorded.

General

Spoil, exposed surfaces and features were scanned with a metal-detector. There were no metal or other finds found through this method.

No environmental samples were taken due to the unsuitability of the deposits.

All archaeological features and deposits were recorded using NPS Archaeology pro forma. Trench locations, plans and sections were recorded at appropriate scales. Monochrome and digital photographs (RAW and JPEG format) were taken of all relevant features and deposits where appropriate.

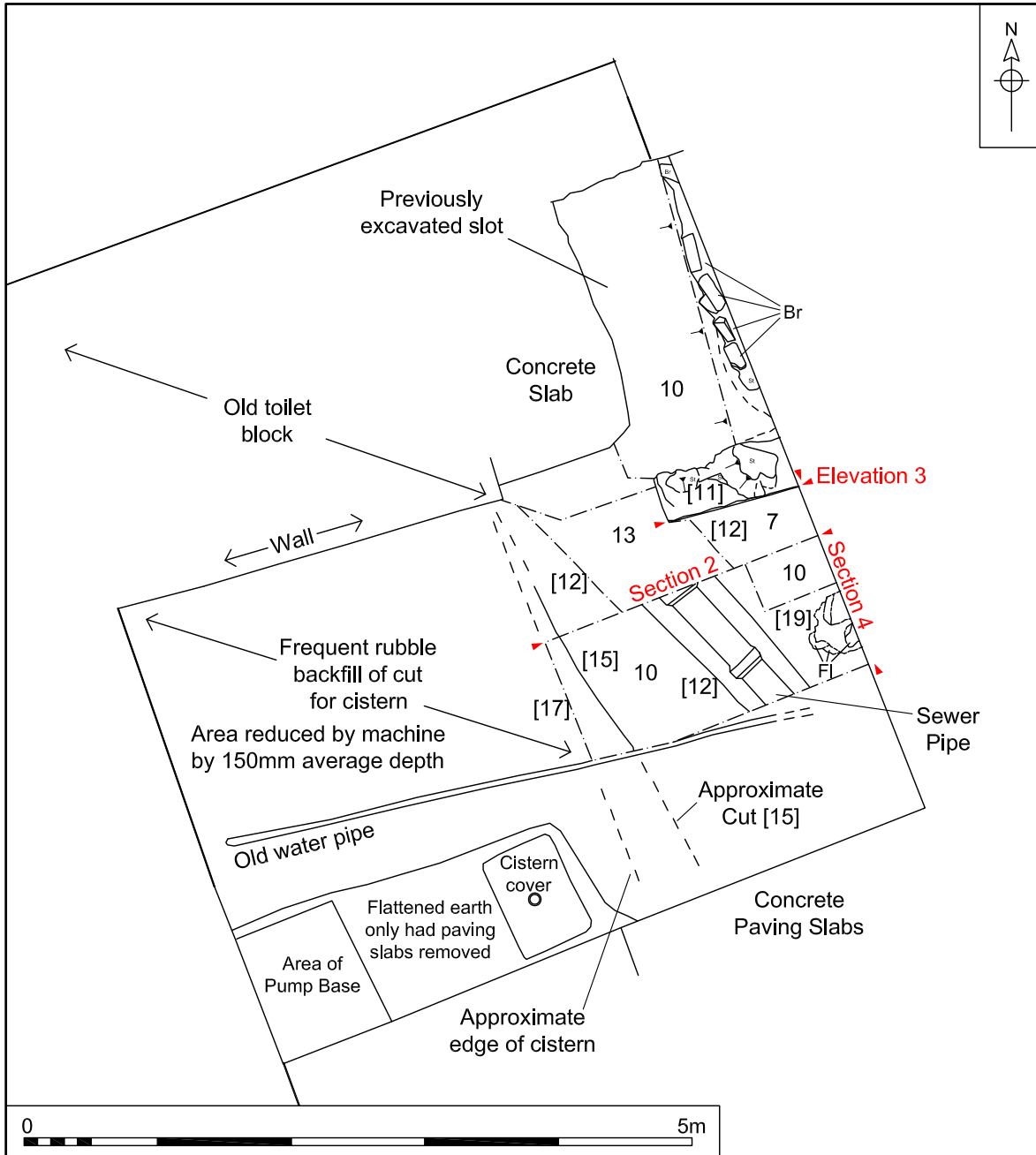
A temporary benchmark with a value of 22.26m OD was sited on the ashlar block within the excavation sondage, and this was used during the course of the work. It

was transferred from an Ordnance Survey benchmark (24.86m OD) situated on the north wall of All Saints' church, 100m north of the proposed development.

Site conditions were generally good, though the first day had prolonged fine rain in the afternoon. Access to the site was excellent.



Plate 2. Location of Excavation, looking north



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Figure 3. Plan of Evaluation. Scale 1:50



Plate 3. Working shot, cleaning area north of evaluation, looking north-east

5.0 RESULTS

5.1 Evaluation

(Figs 3 and 5)

The base of the excavated sequence, which corresponded to the base of the formation level for the building works, consisted of reasonably thick, mid to dark brown, sandy silt [10] which contained only occasional small stones as inclusions. The layer appeared to slope downwards from north-east to south-west and was partly truncated by the cut [21]. It had a visible extent of the base of the slot at the centre of the footprint. The layer was also observed to the north of wall [11] in the area previously excavated by estate workers. A small amount of the deposit was excavated at the end of the project in order to try and retrieve dating evidence however the layer was devoid of any pottery.

Next in the observed sequence was cut [21] for wall [11]. Because layer [10] was sloping down from north-east to south-west the cut was only visible where this deposit was at its highest point. In the south-west part of the slot, for example, the rest of wall [11] appeared to have been built directly from the top of layer [10], without the need for a cut. Where the cut did exist it measured just 1.0m east to west presumably by the width of the wall. It was 0.20m thick at its deepest part. The cut was vertical, where it was observed on the southern side of wall [11] and appeared to contain a thicker layer of mortar preparation which suggested that the base of the wall had been trench built at this point.



Plate 4. East end of evaluation after initial machining, looking north-east



Plate 5. Initial section (Section 2) across evaluation trench, looking north



Plate 6. Evaluation area showing position of trench, looking west



Plate 7. Evaluation area showing position of trench, looking north-east

Wall [11] was formed from a combination of roughly hewn and neatly worked limestone fragments. It was 1.0m long east to west and 0.41m thick (north to south) and was orientated slightly on an angle from true east to west. The blocks were neatly faced on the south side and only roughly hewn on the northern side which suggested that its southern face was the outer face, designed to be visible. There were three visible courses to the wall. The largest of the blocks was 220mm by 240mm by 140mm and the smallest was 220mm by 100mm by 100mm. One of the stone blocks in the top course contained a fragment of carved detail which indicated that it was re-used and derived from a larger piece of masonry, probably

deliberately reduced in size for re-use. The blocks were bonded with a reasonably soft sandy light brownish yellow mortar which had occasional small chalk inclusions. The mortar also contained a fragment of ceramic building material (CBM) which was prised away from the wall hopefully to provide dating evidence. Where the wall had been built within a small construction cut (see above) the thicker mortar here contained moderate amounts of small limestone fragments 100mm by 0.60mm across on average. The wall had been slightly truncated on its northern side by previous hand excavations to the north of the extension footprint and possibly foundations for the small toilet block.



Plate 8. Section 4, adjacent to wall [11], looking east



Plate 9. Close-up of wall [11], looking north

A sloping layer of friable mid brown sandy silt ([9]) which contained frequent amounts of stone was next in the sequence. The layer corresponded with the top of the observed cut [21], although it was unclear whether it had been truncated itself. The layer also sloped from north-east to south-west and became 0.10m thick at its deepest observed point. The stone inclusions could best be described as naturally thin fragments of schist and they were on average 20mm to 30mm thick by 150mm long and 100mm wide. The layer had almost certainly been deliberately deposited.



Plate 10. Close-up of carved block removed from wall [11]

A thick levelling layer was observed next in the sequence. It consisted of a friable and gritty mid grey sandy silt ([8]) which contained occasional chalk flecks, stones and very occasional fragments of CBM. The layer extended at least 0.97m north to south and 0.83m east to west and was truncated on its western side by the cut for the sewer drain ([12]). The layer was 0.30m thick at its thickest part and butted against wall [11] and had probably been deliberately deposited in the post-medieval period. A further layer of mid greyish brown gritty sandy silt ([14]) was observed at the centre of the building footprint. It was essentially the same as layer [8] and had probably been deliberately deposited at the same time. It extended at least 1.10m by 0.38m and was truncated on its east and west sides by cuts [12] and [15] respectively. The layer was 0.20m thick. A fragment of early brick was recovered from the deposit and a sherd of 20th century pottery.

A reasonably thin layer of light grey sandy silt ([7]) which contained a large rounded sandstone 'cobble' (140mm across) came next. It was probably deliberately deposited and was observed to but against the top of wall [11]. It extended at least 0.90m north to south and 0.83m east to west and was 0.04m deep. The layer may have been deposited in the later post-medieval period, possibly as a yard surface, or preparation for a surface. The top of the deposit is consistent with the level to which wall [11] had been reduced and this was significant.

A possible wall or kerb appears to have been constructed next. A shallow irregular cut ([20]) truncated layer [7]. The base of the cut was extremely irregular and appears to have been dug to remove a layer of dumped, large unworked flint nodules. The depth was 0.17m and it extended 0.57m east to west by 0.46m north to south. The end of the structure was very loose as it had been disrupted by drain cut [12] at its western end. The foundation ([18]) consisted of a layer of badly bonded large flint nodules which were 80mm to 140mm across in size range surmounted by a layer of very hard creamy yellow sandy mortar with moderate small chalk inclusions. There were some elements of surviving structure above it ([19]) which consisted of a large neatly shaped limestone block and flint nodule. The limestone block was at least 150mm across and 120mm thick and the flint nodule was 150mm across. Other looser flint nodules were of a similar size. The lack of bonding at the top of these in-situ stones makes suggests the structure was formed from a single course and may have been a low wall or of low kerb situated in the back yard of Abbey House for an unknown purpose, and its position in the developmental sequence suggests it was of probable late post-medieval or 19th-century date.

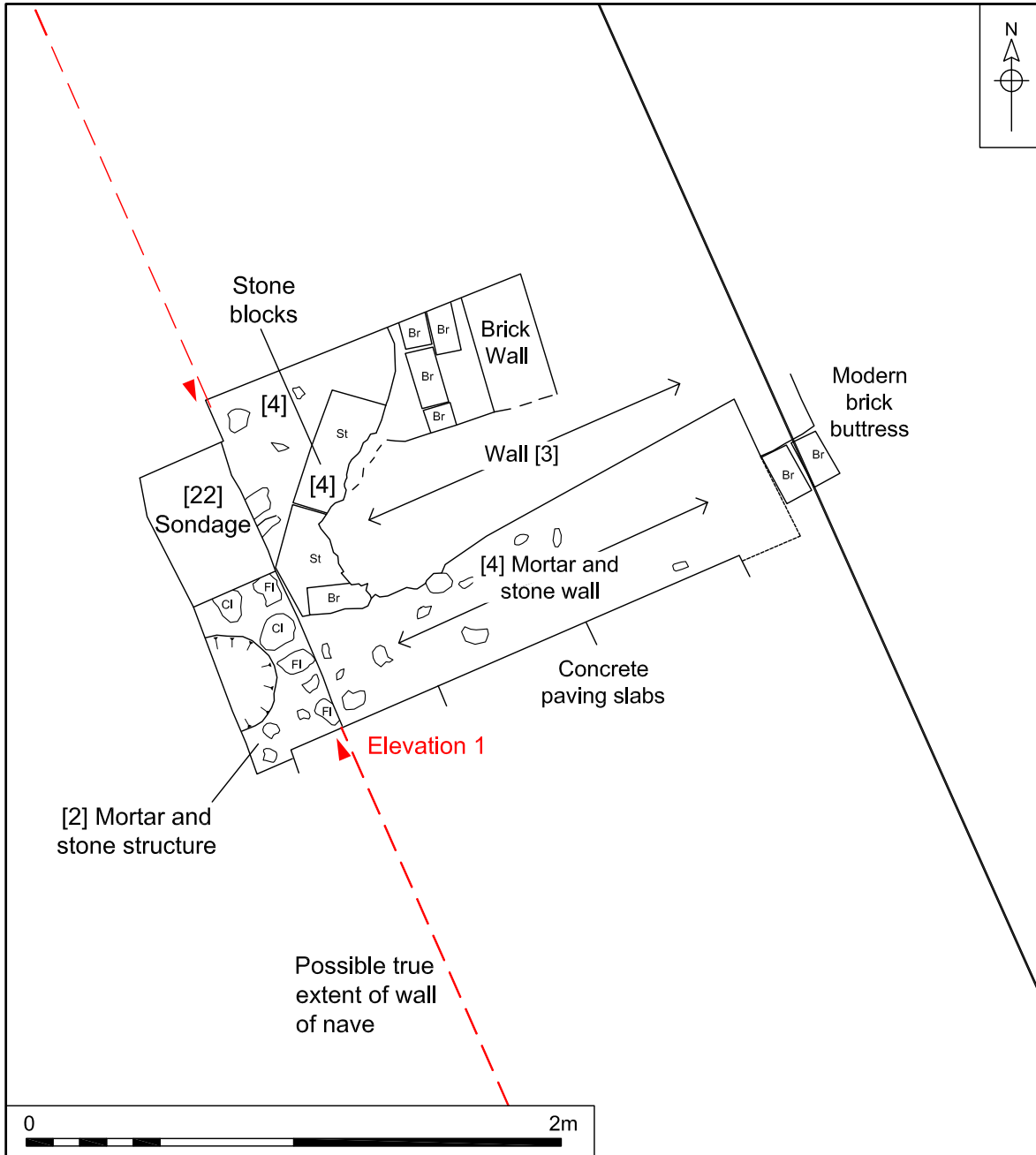
Structure [19] was abutted and overlain by a layer of interleaved tips of material consisting of lenses of charcoal rich material and crushed chalk, clinker, ash and soils ([6]). The layers are almost certainly the dumps of material belonging to the life of Abbey House and they were probably deposited in the 19th century. The layer extended 0.87m by 0.80m and was 0.10m thick. A sherd of 18th to 19th century pottery was recovered from the layer.

There were two large probable 19th-/early 20th-century cuts which truncated large areas of the building's footprint.

The largest ([15]) was for a large brick, mortar and concrete cistern the cut of which extended 3.30m by 3.47m and which had truncated all of the archaeological layers at the top of the sequence. The cistern itself ([16]) was a little smaller and appeared to be at least 3.0m deep, though an accurate measurement was impossible to take. A covered opening within the building footprint was used to examine the interior of cistern, though for obvious reasons little further recording of it could be undertaken. The cut was backfilled with a light brown gritty sandy silt matrix ([17]) which held frequent recent brick fragments amongst other dumped inclusions.

Towards the eastern side of the footprint was the cut ([12]) for a sewer pipe. The cut was at least 3.63m in length and was 0.86m at its widest point. The depth was at least 0.30m, although it extended below the formation level. It was backfilled with a light brown gritty sandy silt ([13]) and the large ceramic pipe had a diameter of 320mm. The service appeared to link the old toilet block next to the house and a manhole cover several metres to the south east and though not currently in use, it had been used reasonably recently. It was left undamaged in position.

Context [5] was attributed to the three recent layers observed at the top of the sequence. A thin layer of earth preparation (0.03m thick) surmounted by a soft yellow builders' sand (0.07m thick) and concrete paving slabs (0.05m thick). These layers presumably cover most of the yard of the property.



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Figure 4. Plan of Excavation. Scale 1:25

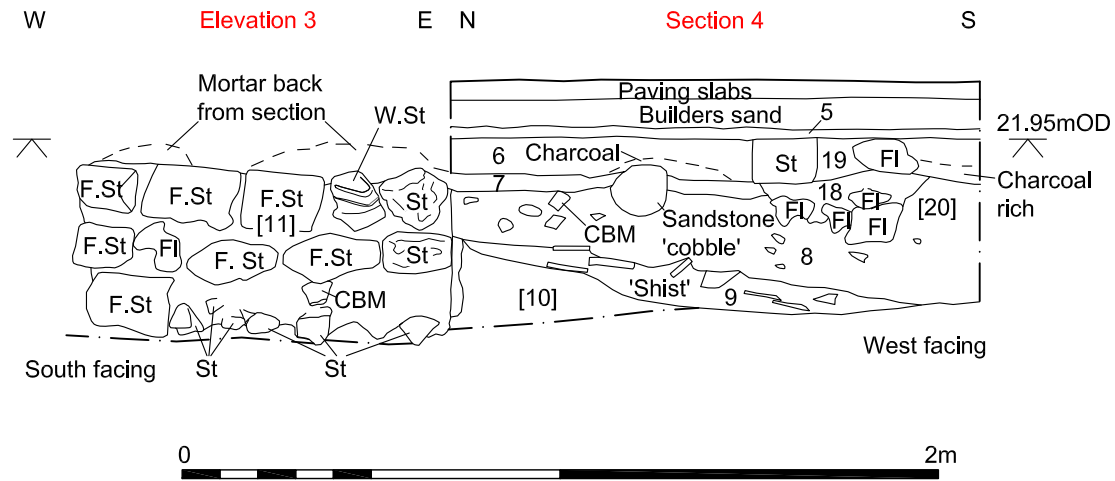
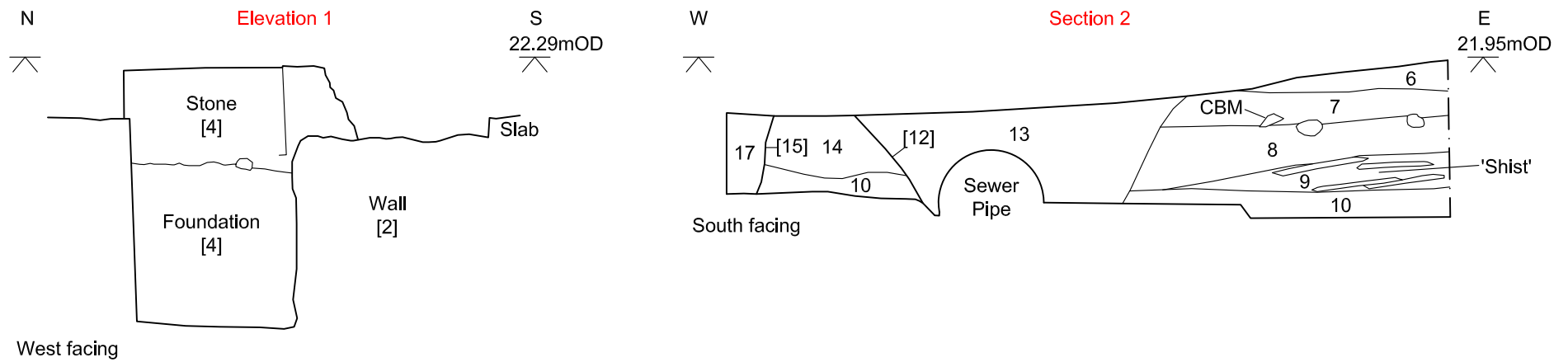


Figure 5. Elevations and sections. Scale 1:20

5.2 Excavation

(Figs 4 and 5)

The large wall observed running roughly north-west to south-east (Fig. 4) was probably the base or foundation of the large west wall of the Nave of the priory church. It had an observed extent of 1.30m north-west to south-east by 1.83m north-east to south-west. The deeper part of the sondage excavated alongside the wall revealed that it was at least 0.52m deep, though the base of the wall itself was not observed.



Plate 11. Excavation, looking east

The wall was formed from flint cobbles and occasional fragments of clunch bonded with a cream coloured lime mortar. Two neatly shaped ashlar blocks of Barnack limestone were situated on top of this foundation. The larger of the two blocks was 480mm across and 140mm thick, with the second only slightly smaller. They were positioned on an angle and it was not clear at first if they were *in situ* or whether they had been re-positioned during building works for later wall [3].

A further structure [2] was next in the sequence. It was 0.60m across (north-west to south east) by at least 0.34m (north-east to south-west) and was 0.60m thick although the base was not observed. The structure clearly butted against wall [4]. There was a circular deep depression at the centre of the masonry which had a diameter of 0.34m and a depth of around 0.50m. This depression may have represented a post-setting.

Butting up against the base of both structures [4] and [3] there was a layer of yellowish cream sandy mortar ([22]), although the base of the mortar was not observed as it lay below the probable formation level for the building works. The layer extended at least 0.34m by 0.52m. The mortar may have filled the construction cut for wall [4], although this was impossible to prove due to the confines of the work.



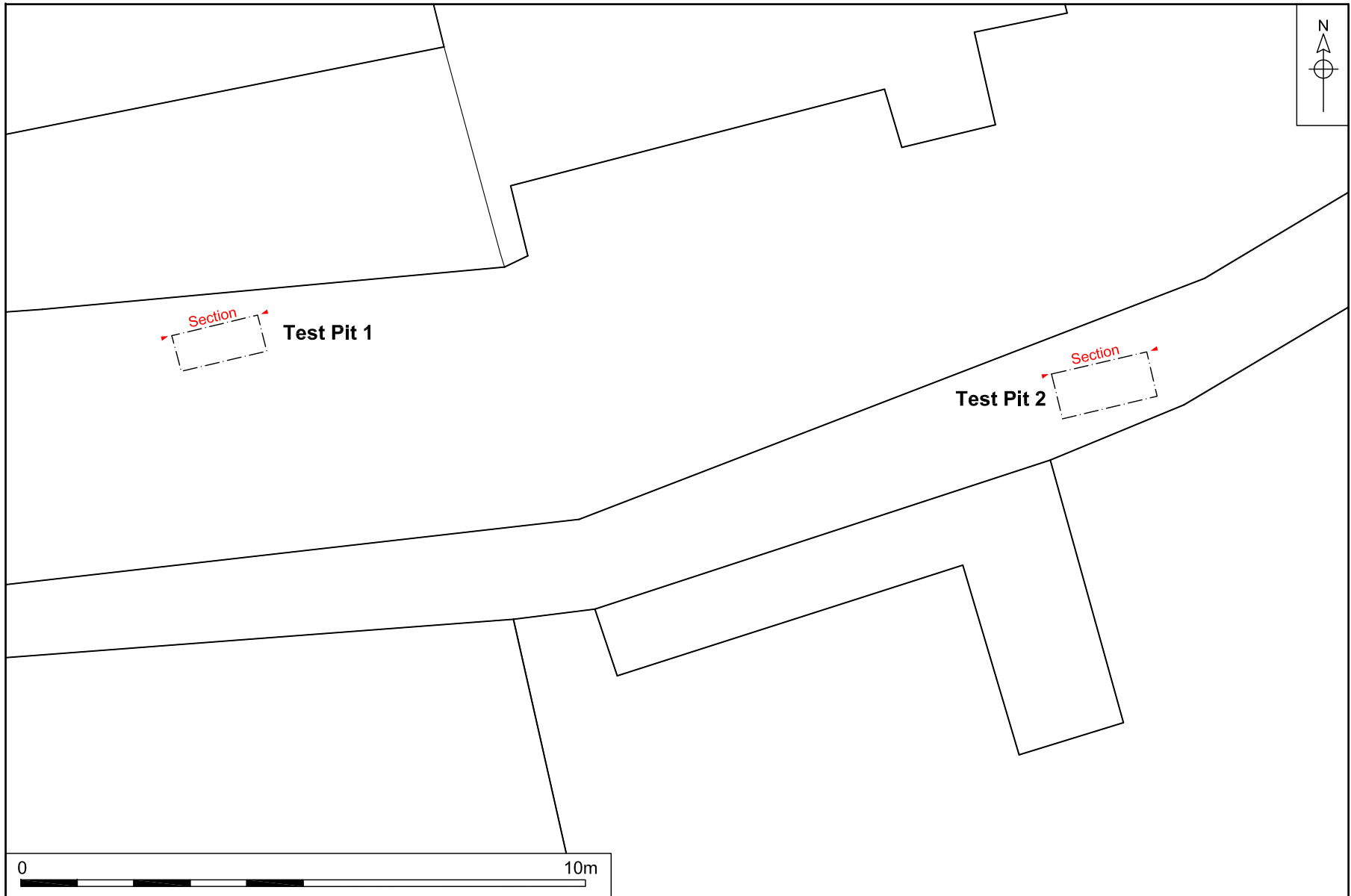
Plate 12. Excavation, looking north



Plate 13. Excavation, looking east

The post-medieval wall built directly on wall [4] was next in the sequence. It was built of 9 inch red bricks which appeared to be machine made. The wall itself was constructed on a slight angle from the medieval walls and was probably constructed in the 19th century.

A layer of mixed modern soils sealed all of the above structures and layer [22]. It consisted of a mid brown gritty sandy silt which contained occasional modern or recent inclusion. The entire area had been subject to landscaping works and this soil was probably deliberately deposited at that time.



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Figure 6. Location of Watching Brief Test Pits. Scale 1:100

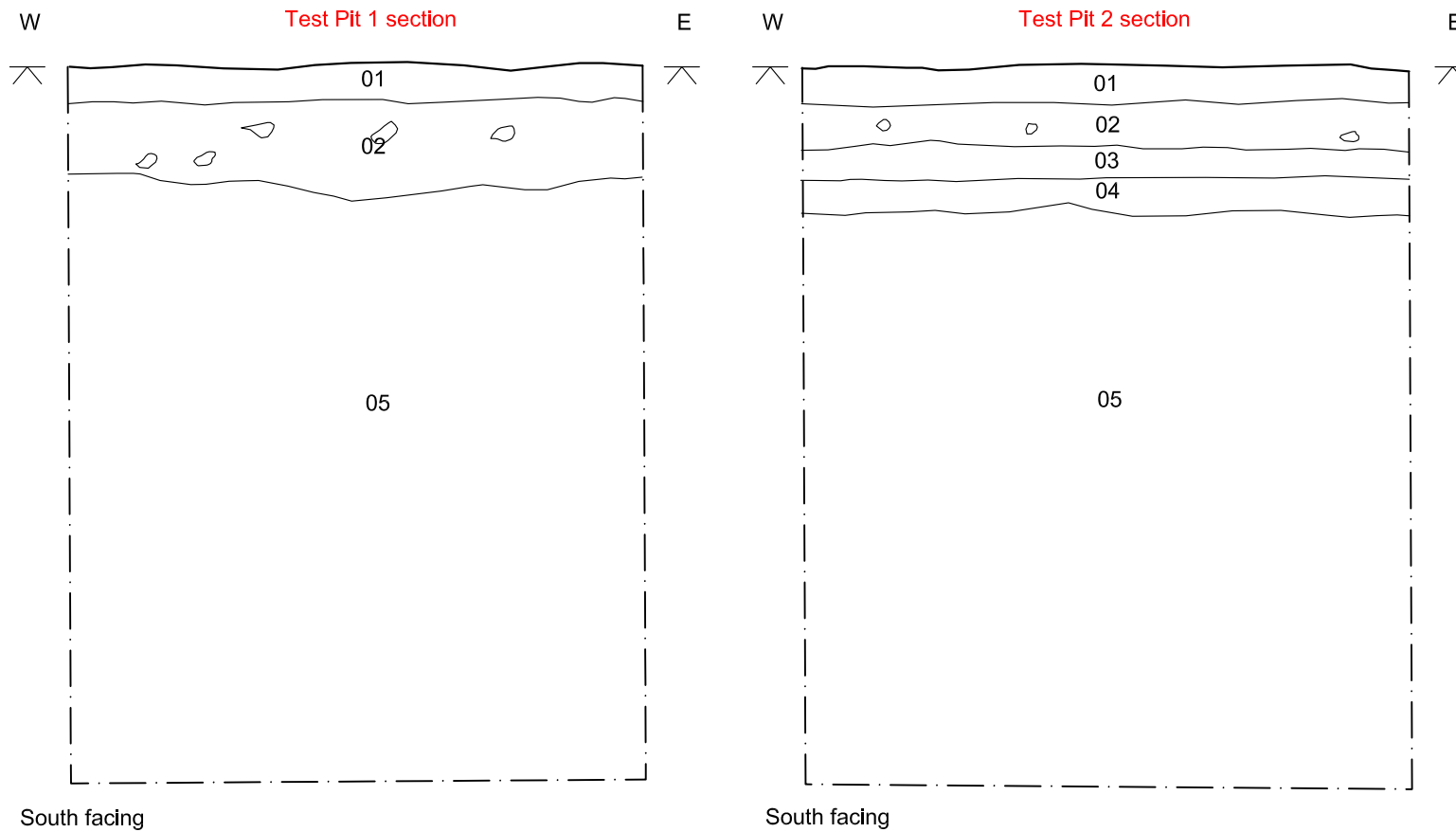


Figure 7. Watching Brief sections. Scale 1:20

5.3 Watching Brief

(Figs 6 and 7)

Two test pits adjacent to the wall of Abbey Farm Barn were excavated ahead of structural engineering works to repair subsidence at the southern end of the barn.

Test Pit 1

Test pit 1 was 1.60m by 0.70m and was excavated down to a depth of 2.0m by machine. The natural substratum was 0.35m below the ground surface.

On excavation of Test Pit 1 a 0.1m thick, mid brown, sand silt topsoil [01] was removed. This deposit sealed a pale to mid brown silt sand with frequent flint stones and cobbles bearing traces of lime mortar [02].

The deposit was interpreted as a layer of demolition or possibly construction debris possibly used as make-up/levelling material. The material probably derives from buildings associated with the priory. The layer, an average of 0.25m thick, overlay the surface of the underlying geology which consisted of a mid orange, medium grained sand [05].

There were no finds recovered.



Plate 14. Test Pit 1, looking north

Test Pit 2

Test Pit 2 was 1.70m by 0.70m and was excavated down to a depth of 2.0m by machine. The natural substratum was 0.40m below the ground surface.

On removal of the topsoil [01] a 0.13m thick layer [02] consisting of a pale brown silt sand with flint gravel and stones was revealed. The material although containing fewer larger cobbles was essentially the same material [02] recorded in Test Pit 1. Underlying deposit [02] was a 0.09m thick deposit [03] consisting of a compacted crushed chalk with some flint gravel inclusions.

The deposit may represent material laid down to form a now obsolete track or path. The possible track was underlain by a possible preparation layer [04] consisting of a pale brown sand silt with flint gravel. The preparation material was removed and found to overlay the natural geology [05].

There were no finds recovered.



Plate 15. Test Pit 2, looking north



Plate 16. The location of the watching brief, looking east

6.0 FINDS

All finds from the evaluation, excavation and watching brief sites were processed and recorded by count and weight, and an Excel spreadsheet was produced outlining broad dating. Each material type has been considered separately and is included below organised by material and then chronologically within that category. A list of finds ordered by context can be found in Appendix 2a.

6.1 Pottery

by Sue Anderson

Five sherds of pottery weighing 157g were collected from two contexts. Table 1 shows the quantification by context.

Context	Fabric	No.	Wt/g	Description	Spotdate
6	LGRE	4	137	brown-glazed body sherds, pale orange	18-19th c.
8	REFW	1	15	body sherd, transfer printed, ?mug	20th c.
Total		5	157		

Table 1. Pottery quantification by context

Key: LGRE – Late glazed red earthenwares; REFW – refined factory-made whitewares

Dump layer [6] contained four sherds of a glazed redware vessel, probably a large jar, in a fine pale orange fabric with brown glaze. A single body sherd of a possible mug with a modern transfer-printed design was found in layer [8].

6.2 Ceramic Building Material

by Sue Anderson

Four fragments (1434g) of ceramic building material (CBM) were collected from two contexts, as shown in Table 2.

Context	Fabric	No.	Wt/g	Description	Spotdate
8	est	1	663	early brick frag, W 115mm, T 150mm.	13-15th c.
8	wfsh	1	105	roof tile	pmed
8	wfx	1	87	roof tile	pmed
11	est?	1	579	?early brick, covered in fine lime mortar, W 123mm, T 75+mm	13-15th c.
Total		4	1434		

Table 2. Ceramic building material quantification by context

Layer [8] contained an abraded fragment of an early brick of medieval date, together with two gault clay roof tiles of post-medieval date.

A fragment of brick collected as a sample from wall [11] appears to be a piece of a large early brick, but it is covered in fine lime mortar which is likely to be post-medieval, suggesting that the brick was re-used in a later wall.

6.3 Clay Pipe

by Rebecca Sillwood

A single fragment of clay tobacco pipe stem (2g) was recovered from mixed layer [8]; this piece is undiagnostic, and cannot be more closely dated than post-medieval.

6.4 Glass

by Rebecca Sillwood

A single fragment of post-medieval bottle glass (4g) was recovered from 19th-century dump layer [6].

6.5 Faunal Remains

by Rebecca Sillwood

A single fragment of sawn animal bone (11g) was recovered from the 19th-century dumping layer [6]. This is likely to be food waste and is part of a limb bone, possibly from a sheep or goat.

6.6 Shell

by Rebecca Sillwood

A single cockle shell (4g) was recovered from the 19th-century dumping layer [6]. This shell can provide no further information, other than the likelihood that it was consumed as food and has subsequently been discarded

7.0 CONCLUSIONS

The work that is the subject of this report is significant in that very few archaeological interventions have taken place within the Priory precinct (NHER 3881) at West Acre since investigations in 1927-8 by F.H. Fairweather.

The Evaluation

As the evaluation was limited in depth - to formation level of the proposed building works - the results are somewhat limited, though the project did achieve its main aim, which was to inform on the impact of further works. The area of the evaluation, once opened, excavated and cleaned, did demonstrate that only at the eastern end were there surviving *in-situ* layers and a wall ([11]).

Layer [10] was undated during the works although it pre-dates wall [11]; layer [9] may be associated with it. The undulating nature of layer [10] (and possibly [9]) may suggest that these layers are the results of landscaping exercises. As each of the deposits was notably free of inclusions this indicates that they had not been subjected to the deposition of cultural material. This could also suggest that they represent layers associated with a relatively early phase of the life of the priory.

Wall [11] had been observed during previous hand digging just to the north of the new building footprint, but during the current excavation it was possible to fully record its position and character.

The date of the wall was more problematic. Unfortunately there are no layers which are associated with the wall itself, and in particular there were no floor surfaces, which may have helped date the wall. An earlier evaluation in 1997 (Bates 1998) suggested that the medieval floor surface was nearly two metres deeper than the present ground level however it is likely that the floor level within the building itself was far lower than the outside level. The range itself has been identified as the cellarer's buildings. The thin nature of wall [11] suggests that it was not load-bearing, or at least it was for a simple one-story structure, however it was neatly finished with faced stones on its south side (a facing on the north side may have been disturbed) which may point towards a medieval date. The fact that the wall appears to be slightly 'off alignment' from the major Priory complex indicates that the wall may not be from the earlier foundation of the priory, but rather, a later medieval addition. The fragment of re-used detailed stone, does suggest that the wall was constructed after the date of the fire in 1286 and the carved fragment was possibly an element re-used from the damaged church. Fairweather (1929) found 'several loose remoulded stones in the Abbey House Garden, which pointed towards the destruction of part of the buildings in the fire of 1286.

There are several possibilities as to what the wall represents, although these generally fall into two options - either part of the claustral range or part of the Prior's house.

In the typical lay-out of Benedictine and Augustinian religious houses, the claustral range (to the west of the cloister) often contained an outer parlour, cellar and kitchen. There was a similar priory at Castle Acre which belonged to the Cluniac order which had a wider claustral range on the south-western side of the priory and a more extensive Prior's house just to the west. A wall found by Fairweather running westwards from the cellarer's building (Fig. 2) does seem to suggest that

the range here at West Acre was larger and possibly similar to that observed at Castle Acre priory. The wall may have formed part of any one of those buildings.

A typical priory often had a Prior's house on the western side of the complex, used for greeting important guests. Fairweather thought that the present Abbey House contained possible medieval walls which represented 'a portion of the Prior's lodging' (1929) and he compared the position to that at Thetford priory. The position of the house opposite the gatehouse is also supporting evidence. The wall may be part of that house.

However, the wall may have simply been a garden or yard wall, possibly situated around an area of garden or linking the Priors house with the claustral range. A kitchen garden in the area presumably just to the north of the kitchen would be one suggestion.

The upper level of the surviving wall is reasonably consistent with the top of layer [8]. This is a significant level as the later wall/kerb [19] also appears to have been constructed around this time. The dating recovered from the layer suggests that it was deliberately deposited in the later post-medieval period possibly during landscaping and construction works to do with the new Abbey House. Any surviving elements of wall [11] were probably reduced at this time. Some of the building materials may in fact have found their way into wall [19].

The thin layer [7] appears to contain a large possible cobble and this in any case may represent a rough yard surface designed to cover the dumped levelling layer [8] and the reduced top of wall [11]. Wall [19] either represents a simple non-load bearing wall of an out-building built around this time, or a yard wall or low kerb of some kind associated with building works at Abbey House.

Layer [6] represents a series of interleaved dumps of ash, charcoal, soil with some broken pottery and almost certainly represents the backyard dumping representing life in the later 19th/early 20th century Abbey House. The dumping appears to have been done directly - as the area is opposite the kitchen end of the house the same arrangement may have been in place for several hundred years. Small amounts of coke, charcoal etc may have been taken from various kitchen fires etc and dumped close by in the backyard. The dumps may also have derived from burning activities in the garden.

The Excavation

This small excavation was useful in that it appears to indicate that the western wall of the nave ([3]) of the large priory church was further west than previously thought. Though small in scale, the present work may indicate that some of the extrapolations by Fairweather in the 1920s may be 'out' by several metres. However it is also possible that there was a wider foundation or buttress here at this point -particularly needed next to one of the towers situated at this part of the nave wall. The layer of mortar which appears to butt against the wall at a deeper point may be a layer within the construction cut for that wall although it was not possible to fully check this hypothesis.

The small unusual block of masonry ([2]) is interesting as it contains a steep depression which probably represents a 'post setting'. Although the masonry abuts wall [3], its form suggests it does derive from the life of the Priory. It also may have had a connection with the same building ranges mentioned above, namely the

outer parlour, cellar or possibly kitchen. It could also be connected with a Prior's House although this may be too far to the east. As the masonry abuts wall [3] this may imply that it represents a later addition to the initial priory structure. If a large wooden post was situated here, was it supporting an entrance to a backyard or garden, if so how does it fit in with wall [11] discovered in the evaluation? Unfortunately the soil covering the structures observed in the excavation was simply the result of recent landscaping and contained no clues to the date of this masonry. There is the interesting possibility that this masonry may have been connected with the changes wrought to the large church in September 1286 'a great disaster befell the Priory when the church and the adjacent convent buildings were destroyed by fire' (Fairweather 1929). Could the post-setting even have been utilised as the base of a crane or similar contraption for either re-building after the fire or removing damaged stones from the partially damaged church. Due to the limited nature of the work this can only be surmised.

The Watching Brief

This was a very limited piece of work which gave a clear view of the layers adjacent to the historic barn, although due to the lack of dating evidence little further can be added.

Layer [02] is interesting as it may hold fragments of building material derived from parts of the extant Priory to the south. Due to the considerable amount of landscaping on the site however this layer could have developed at any time.

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The finds were processed and recorded by Rebecca Sillwood. The pottery and ceramic building material was reported on by Sue Anderson. The clay pipe, glass, faunal remains and shell were reported on by Rebecca Sillwood.

This report was illustrated and produced by David Dobson and edited by Jayne Bown.

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Appendix 1a: Context Summary (Evaluation and Excavation)

Context	Category	Cut Type	Fill Of	Description	Period
1	Deposit			Modern soils	Modern
2	Masonry			Wall with post setting	Medieval
3	Masonry			Upstanding wall (over 4)	Post-medieval
4	Masonry			Foundation and nave wall	Medieval
5	Deposit			Modern paving slabs	Modern
6	Deposit			19th century dumping	Post-medieval
7	Deposit			19th century dumping	Post-medieval
8	Deposit			mixed post-medieval layer	Post-medieval
9	Deposit			post-medieval dumping	Post-medieval
10	Deposit			Mid to dark brown medieval? Soil	Medieval
11	Masonry			East to west wall (medieval?)	Medieval
12	Cut	Pipe Cut		Cut for sewer pipe	Modern
13	Deposit		12	Fill of [12] Inc. pipe	Modern
14	Deposit			mixed soil-like [8] but disturbed	Post-medieval
15	Cut	Construction		Cut for large cistern	Post-medieval
16	Masonry			cistern structure	Post-medieval
17	Deposit		15	rubble fill around cistern	Post-medieval
18	Masonry			flint and mortar foundation	Post-medieval
19	Masonry			stone structure-rough wall	Post-medieval
20	Cut	Construction		Cut for foundation [18]	Post-medieval
21	Cut	Construction		Cut for part of wall [11]	Medieval

Appendix 1b: Context Summary (Watching Brief)

Context	Category	Cut Type	Fill Of	Description	Period
01	Deposit			Topsoil	Unknown
02	Deposit			Pale brown silty sand	Unknown
03	Deposit			Crushed chalk and flint gravel	Unknown
04	Deposit			Pale brown sandy silt	Unknown
05	Deposit			Natural Substratum	Unknown

Appendix 1c: OASIS Feature Summary

Period	Material	Total
Medieval	Wall	3
	Construction Cut	1
Post-medieval	Wall	2
	Construction Cut	1
Modern	Cistern	1
	Construction Cut	1
	Pipe cut	

Appendix 2a: Finds by Context

Context	Material	Qty	Wt	Period	Notes
6	Animal Bone	1	11g	Unknown	
6	Glass	1	4g	Post-medieval	Bottle fragment
6	Pottery	4	137g	Post-medieval	18th-19th-century
6	Shell	1	4g	Unknown	Cockle - DISCARDED
8	Ceramic Building Material	1	663g	Medieval	13th-15th-century
8	Ceramic Building Material	2	192g	Post-medieval	
8	Clay Pipe	1	2g	Post-medieval	Stem
8	Pottery	1	15g	Post-medieval	20th-century
11	Ceramic Building Material	1	579g	Medieval	13th-15th-century

Appendix 2b: Oasis Finds Summary

Period	Material	Total
Medieval	Ceramic Building Material	2
Post-medieval	Ceramic Building Material	2
	Clay Pipe	1
	Glass	1
	Pottery	5
Uncertain	Animal Bone	1
	Shell	1