

NORFOLK ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT

Report No. 870

**An Archaeological Watching Brief at
Gurney Court, Magdalen Street,
Norwich**

39247 N & 39787 N

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Local Authority No.076759

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Location: Gurney Court, Magdalen Street, Norwich
Grid Ref: TG 2320 0920
NHER No.: 39247 N & 39787 N
Date of fieldwork: 28th and 31st January, 3rd February and 13th June 2003

Summary

An archaeological watching brief in the courtyard of Gurney Court, Norwich, observed the excavation of several service trenches through the main courtyard entrance and around the courtyard itself. No features of archaeological interest were observed, although several bedding deposits were revealed from which sherds of post-medieval pottery were recovered. A Victorian vaulted brick soakaway was also noted.

1.0 Introduction

(Figs 1 and 2)

An archaeological watching brief at Gurney Court, Magdalen Street, Norwich was undertaken to observe the excavation of five service trenches from the street frontage into and around the courtyard.

The work was undertaken on behalf of Colman Bunn LLP of Sprowston, Norwich and carried out by J. S. Hay Ltd.

The site consisted of a courtyard (c.60m²) surrounded on four sides by buildings dating from the early post-medieval period. The trenching was undertaken to enable the existing services to be updated. The work consisted of a single main trench, that entered the courtyard from the street frontage, with four branch trenches. To the rear Gurney House, close the south boundary of the property, an excavation for drainage was also observed.

This archaeological watching brief was undertaken following archaeological evaluation of the rear of the site in December 2002 (Adams, 2003).

The site archive is currently held by the Norfolk Museums and Archaeology Service, following the relevant policy on archiving standards.

2.0 Geology and Topography

The site lay approximately 100m to the north of the River Wensum, on a fairly flat plateau, at a height of c.3m OD. The underlying geology is the gravel terrace of the river valley which lies between 5m and 8m thick over the Upper Chalk solid geology.

The site is bounded by four medieval streets; Fishergate, Blackfriars Street, St Saviour's Lane and Magdalen Street, the latter lies adjacent to the frontage of Gurney Court.

3.0 Archaeological and Historical Background

The Norfolk Historic and Environment Record (NHER) was consulted to determine the level of archaeological activity within the vicinity, the results of which are discussed below.

The site lies within the historic core of Norwich, close-by to the conjectured circuit of the Late Saxon (early 10th century) defensive ditch and rampart which once enclosed the settlement of *Norwic* (Ayers 2003, 40, fig. 17). To the east of the site there is the line of a former watercourse, the Dalymond (Ayers 2003, 13, fig 2), which runs from the north to Fishergate joining the River Wensum and may once have also been incorporated as part of the towns defences.

Two excavations were carried out near-by to the site in the 1970s and 80s when two sites on Magdalen Street were examined and evidence of occupation dating from the 11th and 12th centuries was produced (Atkin, Carter & Evans 2002).

Gurney Court, as well as 31, 32 and 33 Magdalen Street were former courtyard houses and date from the late 16th century (NHER 26139). Also surviving along Magdalen Street are a large number of 17th century buildings (NHER 26346).

Two more recent archaeological investigations have also been undertaken in or adjacent to Gurney Court. In 1996 several trial holes were opened within Gurney Court which recorded 19th-century foundations (Tremlett 2001). An evaluation to the rear of the Gurney Court in 2002 revealed medieval influence and a single sherd of Middle Saxon pottery (Adams 2003).

4.0 Methodology

The objective of this watching brief was to record any archaeological evidence revealed during the excavation of service trenches across the court.

The trenches were initially intended to be machine excavated and a 'mini-digger' had been brought in for the purpose. It was decided, however, that the lack of space for spoil would compromise the manoeuvrability and therefore the safety, of the machine. As a result the trenches were excavated by hand, which necessitated a slightly longer period of groundwork.

The Brief required that all groundworks were to be observed to determine the survival or otherwise of potential archaeological remains.

The work consisted of a single main east to west (9m long) trench that entered the courtyard from the street frontage, with four branch trenches. The main trench was excavated to between c.0.80m and 1.1m deep and 0.90m wide. The branch trenches were between c.0.80m and 0.95m in depth and a width of only 0.50m. Central to the courtyard the trenches then branched out. For identification purposes, the trenches were numbered from 1 to 5 in a clockwise direction with Trench 1 being the central feeder running west to east. The branch trenches (2 to 5) were of various lengths (2.3m, 5m, 6m and 3.2m respectively).

The existing flag and cobbled surface was lifted in the vicinity of the trench lines and the underlying bedding material removed. The flags were of sandstone and measured 750mm x 340mm x 60mm. Several existing services were within the soil and the effect of this was that the underlying soil was heavily disturbed.

Spoil, exposed surfaces and features were scanned with a metal detector. All metal-detected and hand-collected finds were retained for inspection, other than those which were obviously modern.

All archaeological features and deposits were recorded using NAU *pro forma* sheets. Trench locations, plans and sections were recorded at appropriate scales and colour and monochrome photographs were taken of all relevant features and deposits.

Site conditions were cold and wet with occasional heavy snowfall. Access to the site was reasonable with the site itself restricted in space and manoeuvrability due to the necessity of keeping the not inconsiderable amount of spoil onsite.

5.0 Results

Introduction

The upper deposits recorded in all five trenches were broadly similar. Beneath the courtyard flagstones was a bedding layer ([1]) 0.3m thick, consisting of a mid grey-brown sandy silt and containing brick fragments and particles of mortar. Beneath this layer another make-up deposit ([2]) containing post-medieval and modern building rubble, pottery, bottle glass and occasional fragments of animal bone (some butchered) was observed to a depth of c.0.70m. The pottery consisted of late post-medieval blue and white transfer printed wares and flower pot fragments.

Trench 1

Trench 1 was slightly deeper than the other trenches at 1.1m. Below deposit [2] several layers were recorded consisting of a chalk surface ([3]) c.0.5m thick, containing charcoal flecks and mortar fragments which overlay a rammed brick rubble layer ([4]) 0.5m thick, beneath which was a soft sandy silt ([5]) c.0.1m thick containing charcoal flecks and clay patches. At this depth the main sewer pipe was observed filling the width of the base of the trench and running along it to the courtyard. A lead water pipe was also observed within the trench running in the same direction. Access to this trench was restricted as it was excavated within a narrow passage and observations were made between bouts of digging.

Trench 2

(Fig. 3)

Trench 2 terminated against the north (south-facing) wall of the courtyard at a depth of 0.80m. Beneath the base of the wall, showing above ground, was a foundation consisting of bricks (measuring on average 150mm by 60mm) resting on a single layer ([7]) of flint cobbles (measuring on average 70mm by 70mm). The cobbles were set in a sand silt matrix which overlaid a sandy silt rubble layer containing brick and mortar fragments and frequent small flints ([2]).

Trench 3

The trench was excavated close to a modern manhole access and brick wall base to the doorway in the north-east corner of the courtyard. Two large sandstone slabs were located at the base of the doorstep which were lifted to allow the trench to continue to the door. Beneath the slabs was a sand bedding layer ([1]) and the rubble filled makeup deposit [2].

A number of half-round scalloped stone blocks marked the course of a probable 19th-century drainage course which could be traced in section for approximately 3m from the corner of the building towards the courtyard gate.

Trench 4

(Fig. 3)

The sequence of deposits in Trench 4 was better preserved than in the other trenches examined.

At the same level as the courtyard flagstones was a layer of flint cobbles ([8]) set in sand, 0.11m thick. This overlaid a deposit of crushed brick and tile fragments ([9]), 0.10m thick, as well as make-up layer [2] which contained a lens of fine mid yellow sand ([10]). Beneath the make-up layer [2] was a deposit of mid yellow-brown silty sand ([11]), 0.17m thick, containing occasional small stones. The deposit at the base of the trench was a loose pale brown clay sand ([12]), 0.15m thick, containing moderate gravel inclusions. The basal deposit was quite damp which suggested that the water table was almost breached, at a depth of 0.93m from the surface.

Trench 5

No structural features relating to the building were seen, nor was there evidence of the chalk surface ([3]) seen in Trench 1 to the east.

At the base of the trench a damp light yellow sand deposit ([6]) was observed containing flecks of mortar and brick beneath the make-up deposit [2].

Several fragments of animal bone and pieces of bottle glass were recovered from the spoil of the trench.

Drainage Pit

To the rear of Gurney House, an excavation for drainage revealed a vaulted Victorian drain (39787 N) close to the southern boundary of the property.

The brick-vaulted chamber was observed to have an entry point from Gurney House in its west end. The north and east walls had gaps in the brickwork laid in a diamond pattern, the gaps being the width of a brick. The brick walls were laid on several stone blocks of varying sizes at the foundation of the chamber. These blocks appeared to be reused stone, bonded by a strong cream-coloured mortar. Brick rubble and soil filled the base of the chamber with several oyster shells in evidence. Other than this, the chamber was empty and the walls were quite clean. No dating evidence was observed from the surface, access into the pit being restricted.

6.0 The Finds

The total amount of pottery located on the site within the courtyard consisted of fifteen sherds of glazed blue-and-white post-medieval transfer printed ware dating from between the 18th to 19th centuries. All of which came from a single context ([2]).

7.0 Conclusions

The sandy silt deposit containing building rubble ([2]) was represented in all five of the trenches cutting through the courtyard and was the most abundant underlying deposit within the court. The purpose of this deposit appears to be a make-up layer to consolidate the courtyard. It was observed to overlie former possible bedding layers and may have replaced an earlier deposit of make-up, perhaps one of a less substantial nature.

The sparse pottery found in this deposit dates it to the 18th or 19th centuries. The rubble content probably represents a period of rebuilding or renovation for the buildings in the vicinity.

The brick chamber to the rear Gurney House was a lined soakaway pit, evidenced by the gaps in the walls, utilised as a drain during the 19th century.

Acknowledgements

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Appendix 1: Context Summary

Context	Category	Description	Period
1	Deposit	Flagstone bedding layer	Post-medieval
2	Deposit	Sand silt make-up with building rubble	Post-medieval
3	Deposit	Compacted chalk surface	Post-medieval
4	Deposit	Brick surface	Post-medieval
5	Deposit	?Bedding layer	Post-medieval
6	Deposit	?Bedding layer	?Post-medieval
7	Masonry	Foundation base of north building	Post-medieval
8	Deposit	Courtyard flint cobbles set in sand	Post-medieval
9	Deposit	Layer of crushed brick and tile	Post-medieval
10	Deposit	Fine yellow sand lens	Post-medieval
11	Deposit	Yellow-brown silt sand	Unknown
12	Deposit	Pale brown clay sand	Unknown

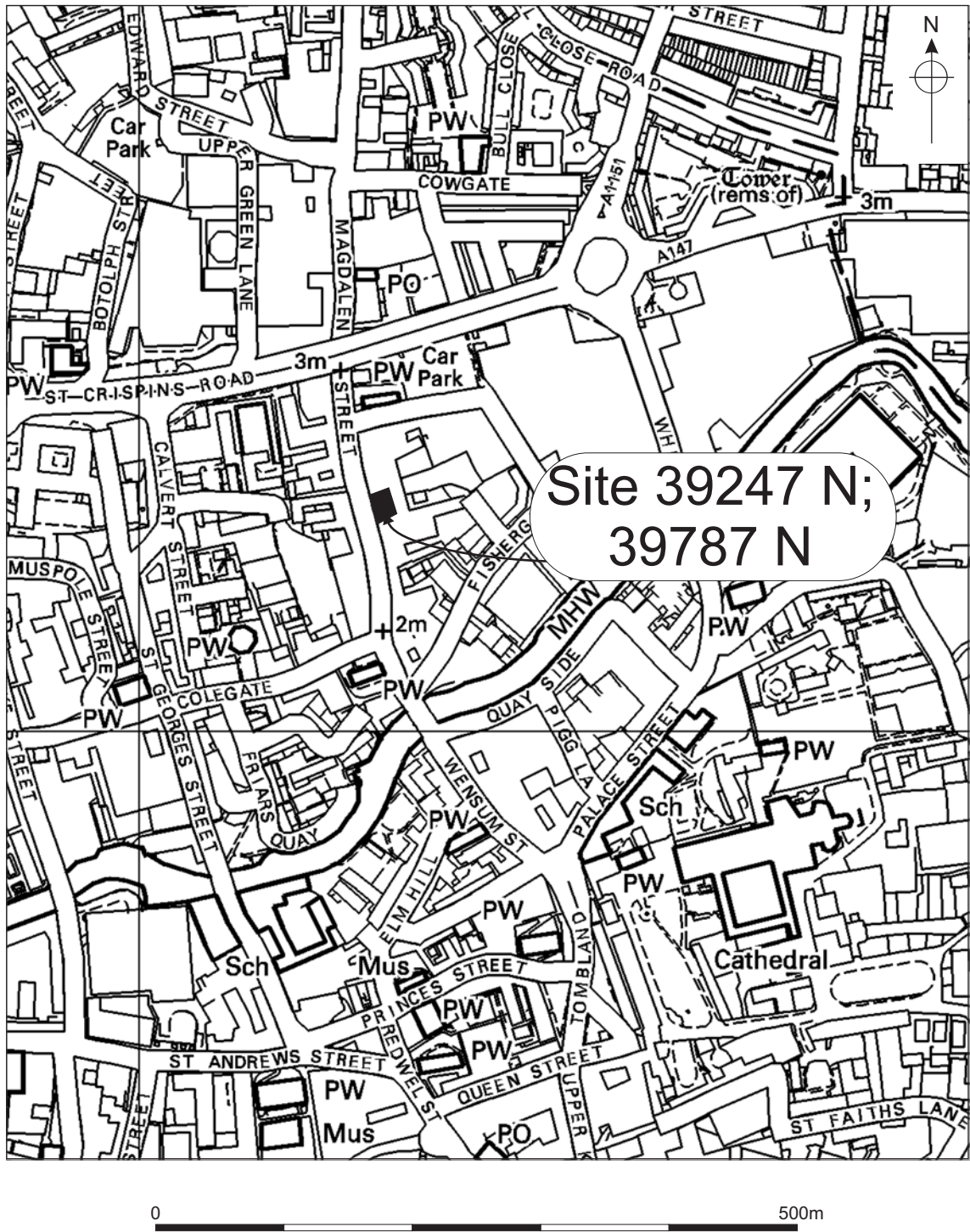


Figure 1. Site location. Scale 1:5000

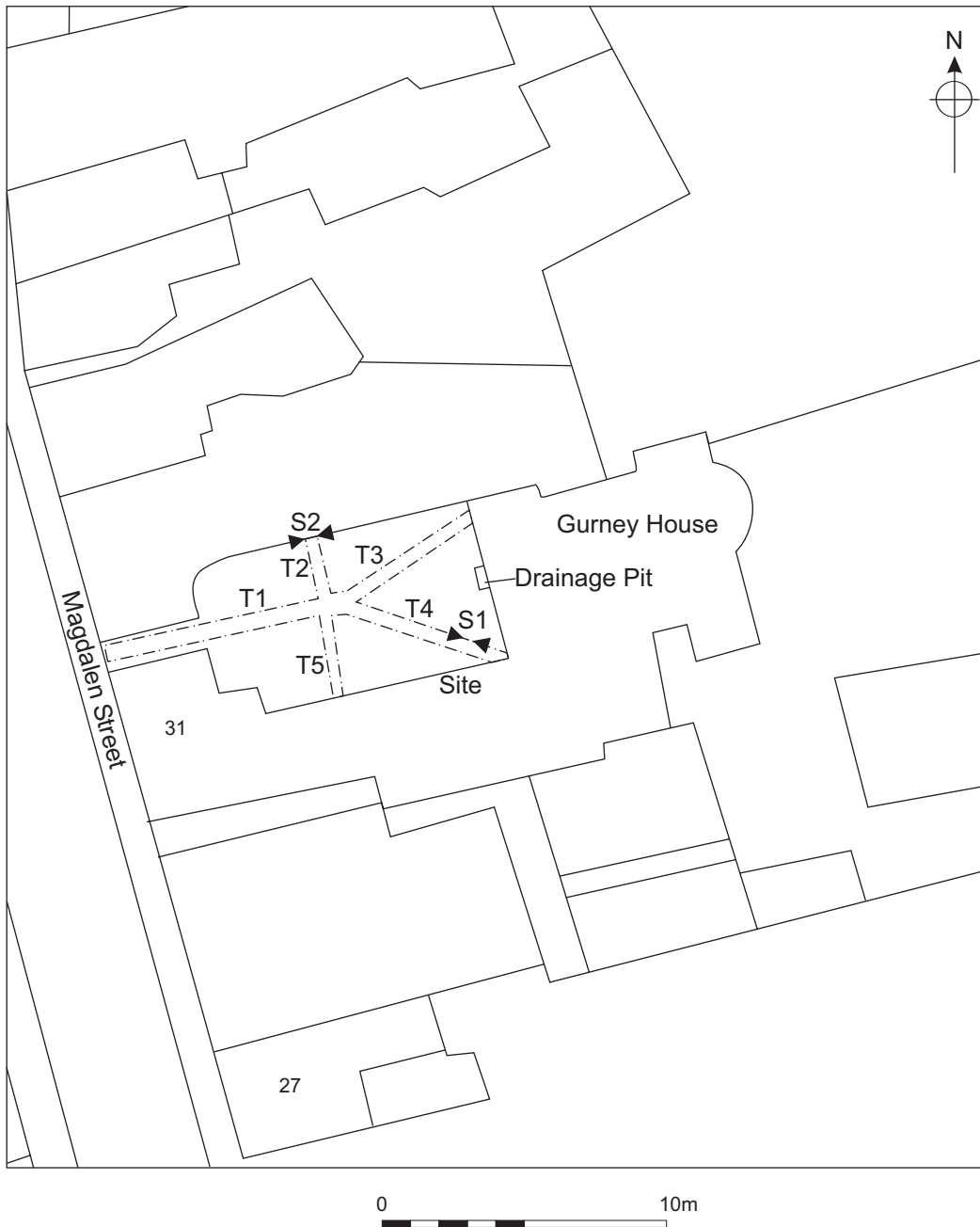
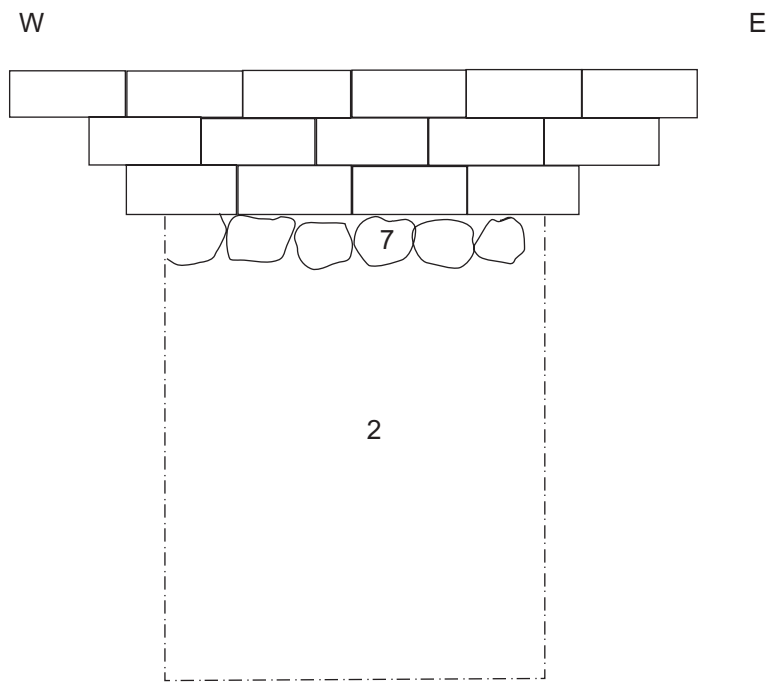
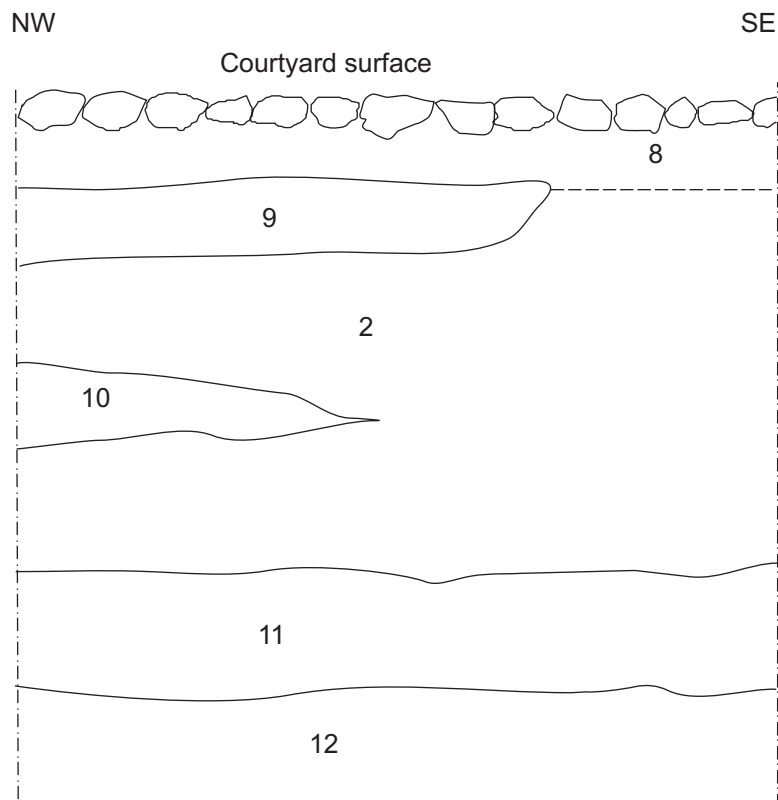


Figure 2. Trench location. Scale 1:250



Trench 2 south facing section



Trench 4 south-west facing section



Figure 3. Trenches 2 and 4, sections. Scale 1:10