

**ARCHAEOLOGICAL RECORDING
DURING BUILDING WORK
AT ST NICHOLAS PRIORY, EXETER, IN 2007**

By N. Goodwin

Exeter Archaeology Report No. 07.91

Project 5980

November 2007

Contents

1	Introduction	1
2	Archaeological and historical background	1
3	Method	1
4	Results	1
5	Conclusions	3
	Acknowledgements	3

List of illustrations

- Fig. 1 Plan showing location of observations and depths of internal ducting trenches.
Fig. 2 Plan of observations in the area of the new toilet block.
Fig. 3 Evaluation trench sections.
Fig. 4 Plan of south room.
Fig. 5 Elevation of south wall of south room.

1 INTRODUCTION

This report presents the results of archaeological monitoring and recording undertaken during a programme of building works at St Nicholas Priory between March and August 2007. The site (SX 91737 92471) is currently occupied by Exeter City Museums and the works were carried out by Exeter City Council. The above-ground fabric is Listed Grade I; the below-ground archaeology is protected as a Scheduled Monument. The proposed changes to the Priory required Scheduled Monument Consent by English Heritage (DCMS consent ref: HSD9/2/8820, dated 3.1.2007) and Listed Building Consent (ECC application no. 06/2213/07).

2 ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The west range of St Nicholas Priory is a nationally important and extremely complex building, with many phases of work from c.1100 to the early 20th century. It overlies a deep and well-preserved sequence of archaeological deposits – Roman military and civil, post-Roman and late Saxon.

3 METHOD

The works consisted of three main elements:

(i) The construction of a new staircase in the southern room of the range. This required detailed recording of the floor and the south wall prior to the works because its construction concealed parts of the fabric.

(ii) The construction of a new toilet block in the southern part of the garden. An evaluation trench was excavated within the footprint of the new building. The new service trenches were monitored and recorded. The area to the south of the stair tower was re-surfaced with York stone slabs; the preparatory ground reduction works were monitored and recorded.

(iii) Further recording was required for the introduction of a new electricity supply to the building. A series of shallow trenches for ducting were excavated around the edges of most of the ground-floor rooms. These were investigated and recorded.

Observations were recorded on pro forma context sheets and watching brief sheets. The drawn record was made at scales of 1:20 or 1:50, as appropriate. A photographic record was made in black and white and in digital format.

4 RESULTS

4.1 Southern room

A 1:20 scale detailed plan (fig. 4) was drawn of the floor area. This recorded the 20th-century flagstone floor and the foundations of the 14th-century western tower of the church, observed alongside the south and west walls. The latter consisted of volcanic stone rubble set in white lime mortar. There was no trace of a stone-lined pit seen in c.1913 in the broad western foundations.

A detailed 'stone for stone' drawing (fig. 5) was made of the internal face of the south wall. The stone types were noted (where possible) and any building breaks recorded. The primary fabric consists of regular courses of volcanic trap, Caen and

Beer stone. These are attributable to the 14th-century tower. The areas below and surrounding the windows are also of ashlar, but with much Heavitree stone, attributable to the museum repairs after 1913. The cuts into the medieval fabric made by the creation of window seats below later window are visible elsewhere in the priory; they probably date to the 18th or 19th- century.

The staircase was designed to have a minimal impact on the fabric of the building and only two slots into the walls were required to support the structure.

4.2 Evaluation trench

The evaluation trench was located in the northern part of the footprint of the new toilet block (see plans, figs 1–3). The trench measured 2.4m in length (east to west), a maximum of 1.0m in width and was excavated to a depth of 0.78m. Ground level was at 34.72m AOD. Below the *c.*0.15m deep modern gravel surface and makeup was a thin deposit of mortar (layer 2) that appeared to be the remains of a surface (see sections 1 and 2, fig. 3). Beneath was a *c.* 0.4m deep deposit of dark grey-brown sandy clay (layer 3) that extended across the trench. Finds retrieved from this deposit indicated that it dates from the 20th century. This makeup/levelling layer sealed all the deposits below. In the western end of the trench was a small brick ‘barrel’ culvert (context 4) that was aligned north-west to south-east. This feature is likely to date from the late 19th century. A service trench containing a ceramic drainpipe occupied the southern part of the trench. Several intercutting features were recorded within the remainder of the trench. All of the fills contained varying quantities of brick, slate and mortar. Layer 7 in the centre of the trench, was later found to be the fill of a pipe trench; it is likely to date, at the earliest, from the 19th century. Cut 6 and fill 5 appeared to represent a small pit. Cut 9 and fill 8, in the eastern part of the trench, may represent the robbing and subsequent backfilling of a wall aligned north–south.

4.3 Landscaping and service trenches

The watching brief of the garden service trenches and landscaping revealed little of archaeological interest due to the shallow depth of the excavations. The ground reduction was to a maximum depth of 0.16m and exposed modern topsoil and deposits of silty clay that contained concrete, brick and mortar (modern makeup/levelling material). One feature was exposed during the ground reduction: a well (context 201) that was located roughly in the centre of the garden and 2.2m south of the stair tower (see plan, fig. 1). It was filled with dark brown silty clay containing brick and concrete fragments. The lining (seen to a depth of 0.25m) was of factory-made bricks bonded with dark brown silty clay. The well was only partially exposed but appeared to have a diameter of between 0.8–1.0m. The bricks that form the lining at the top of the well are likely to date from the 19th century.

The new service trenches appeared to have been cut through earlier service trenches, and exposed only gravel and modern soil to the *c.*0.6m depth required.

4.4 Internal works

The trenches for the new ducting were located alongside the walls of the building (see plan, fig. 1) and were excavated to a maximum depth of 0.17m. In the kitchen and the stair tower the excavations exposed only the makeup for the early 20th century flagstone surfaces. In the ‘Tudor Room’ the works only required the removal of a few floorboards and no excavation. Below the floor joists, at a depth of 0.15m, was a compact deposit of mortar and rubble.

In the undercroft, at a depth of 0.11m below the flagstones and makeup, was a 0.04m thick deposit of ash and cinders. In the western trench this material overlaid a 'surface' of grey-brown mortar/concrete with occasional patches of lime. Below was a compact deposit of dark red-brown clay with frequent angular stones and pebbles and occasional mortar. This clay was also observed in the base of the eastern trench. Similar material was also observed at a similar depth in the room to the south of the undercroft. No finds were retrieved from these lower deposits.

5 CONCLUSIONS

5.1 Southern room

The detailed record allowed the distinction of the medieval and later fabric and the provision of a new elevation drawing. The primary walling does not contain Heavitree stone, so is likely to predate the late 14th century and be part of the priory's early 14th-century western tower. The later blocking below the windows is interpreted as 20th-century restoration work infilling 18th- or 19th-century window seats below earlier windows.

5.2 External excavations

The excavation for the evaluation trench, the service trenches and the general ground reduction exposed mainly 20th-century levelling/makeup material at the rather shallow depths required for the works. The 19th-century deposits and features exposed were probably associated with the buildings depicted on the 1st Edition Ordnance Survey map published in 1876. This map also shows the location of several drains in the area, probably those observed during these works. The well (context 201) exposed by the ground reduction works was lined with factory-made bricks that dated from the 19th century. The demolition of the buildings will have taken place around 1913 as part of the restoration works after Exeter City Council purchased the priory.

5.3 Internal excavations

The flagstone floors were part of the post-1913 restoration of the building. The deposit of ash and cinders observed below the make-up in the undercroft was probably levelling material introduced during these works.

In the western trench of the undercroft a surface of grey-brown lime mortar was observed. The purpose of this deposit was not apparent within the limited range of the excavation. The nature and colour of the mortar indicates a likely post-medieval period for this deposit.

The compact red-brown clay observed in the base of the trenches in the southern part of the building was not excavated and therefore did not yield any dating evidence. The deposit appeared to be fairly 'clean' and may represent an early floor of the undercroft.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project was commissioned by Exeter City Council, based on a 'written scheme of investigation' and Method Statement approved by English Heritage, and administered by J.P. Allan (EA) and A. Pye (ECC). The fieldwork was undertaken by N. Goodwin, M. Leverett, A.J. Passmore and C.S. Wakeham. Illustrations were produced by N. Goodwin and J. Read.

ST NICHOLAS' PRIORY
Plan of observations

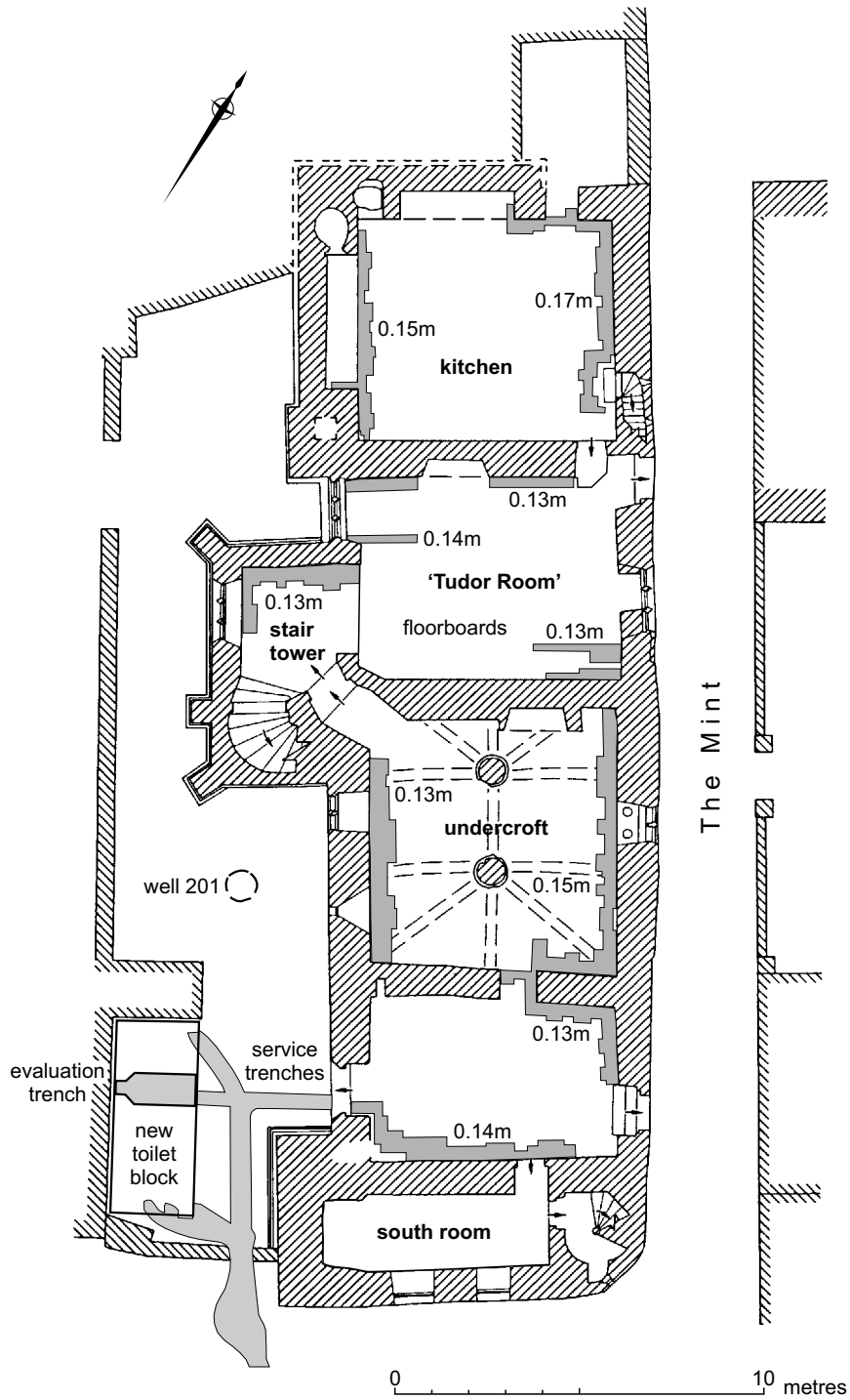


Fig. 1 Plan showing location of observations, with depths of internal ducting trenches. Scale 1:200.

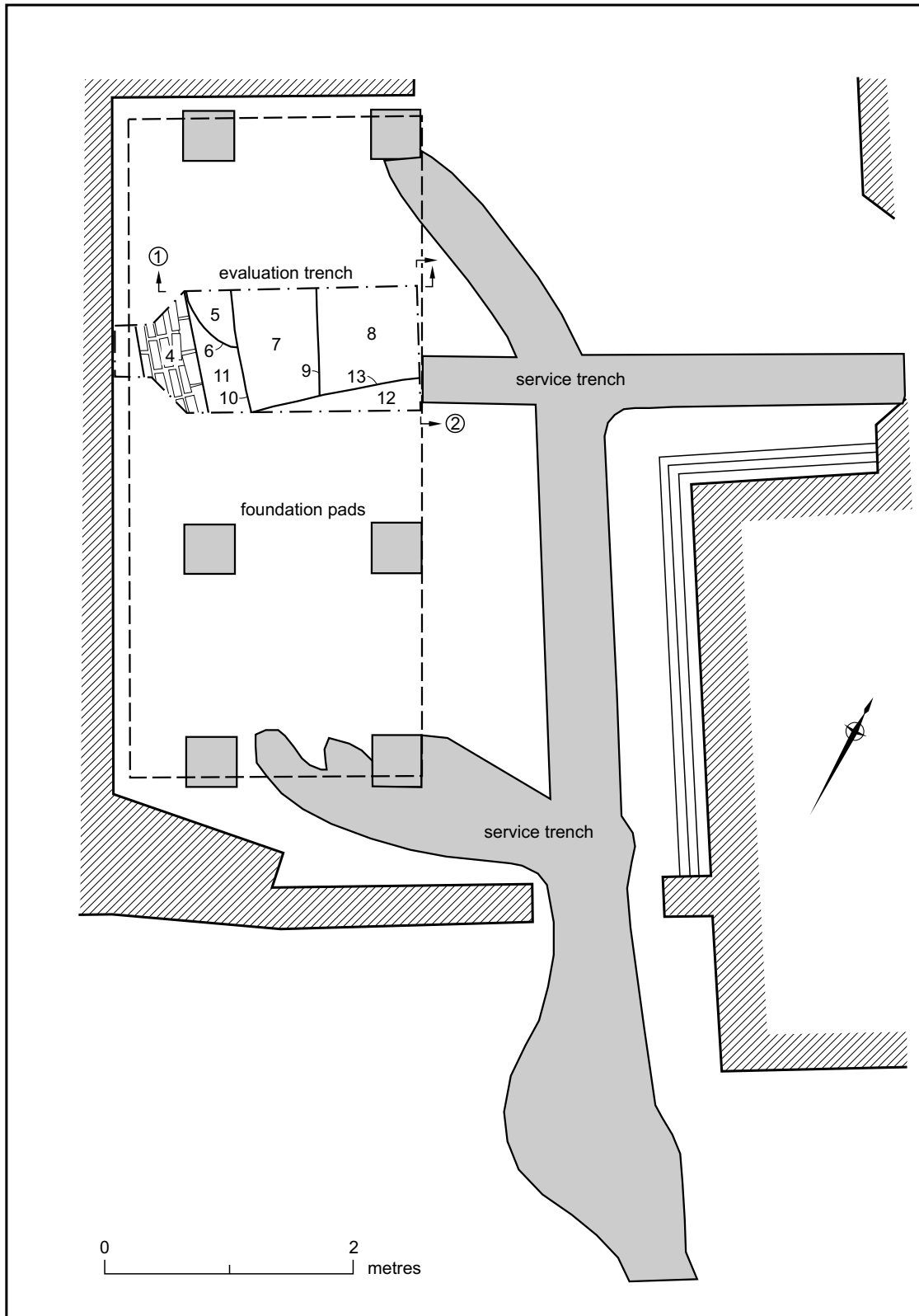


Fig. 2 Plan of observations in the area of the new toilet block. Scale 1:50.

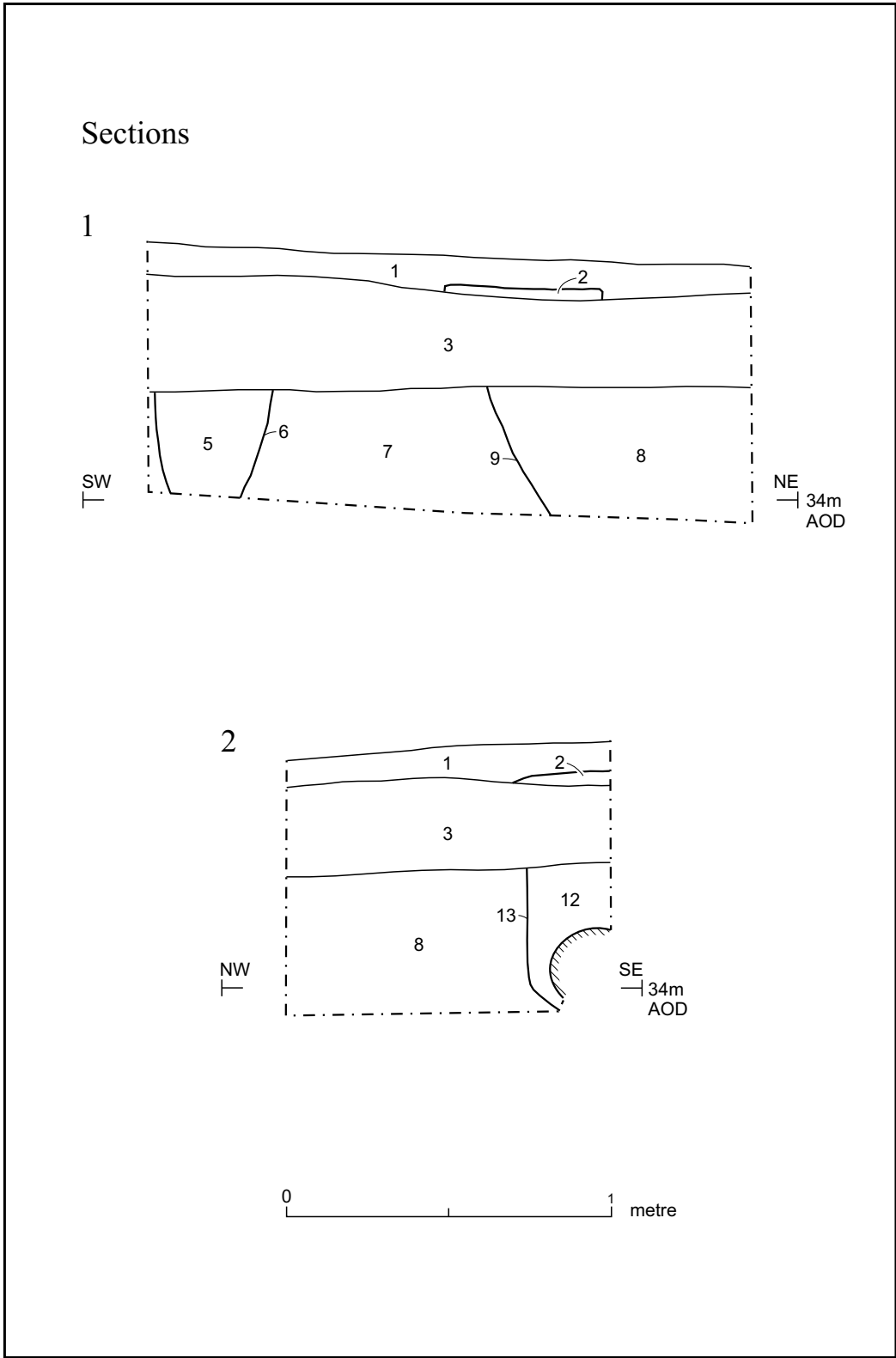


Fig. 3 Evaluation trench sections. Scale 1:20.

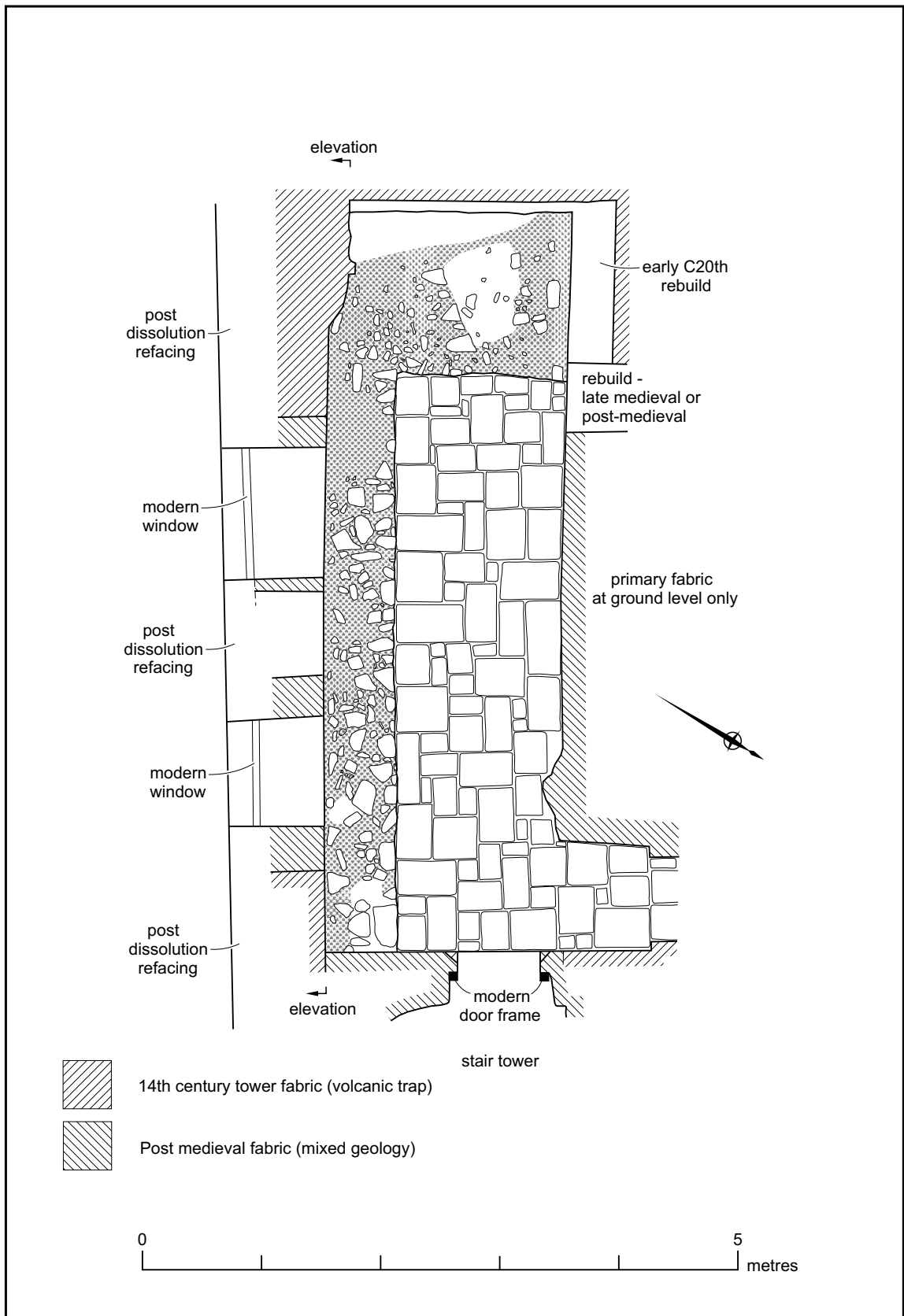


Fig. 4 Plan of south room. Scale 1:50.

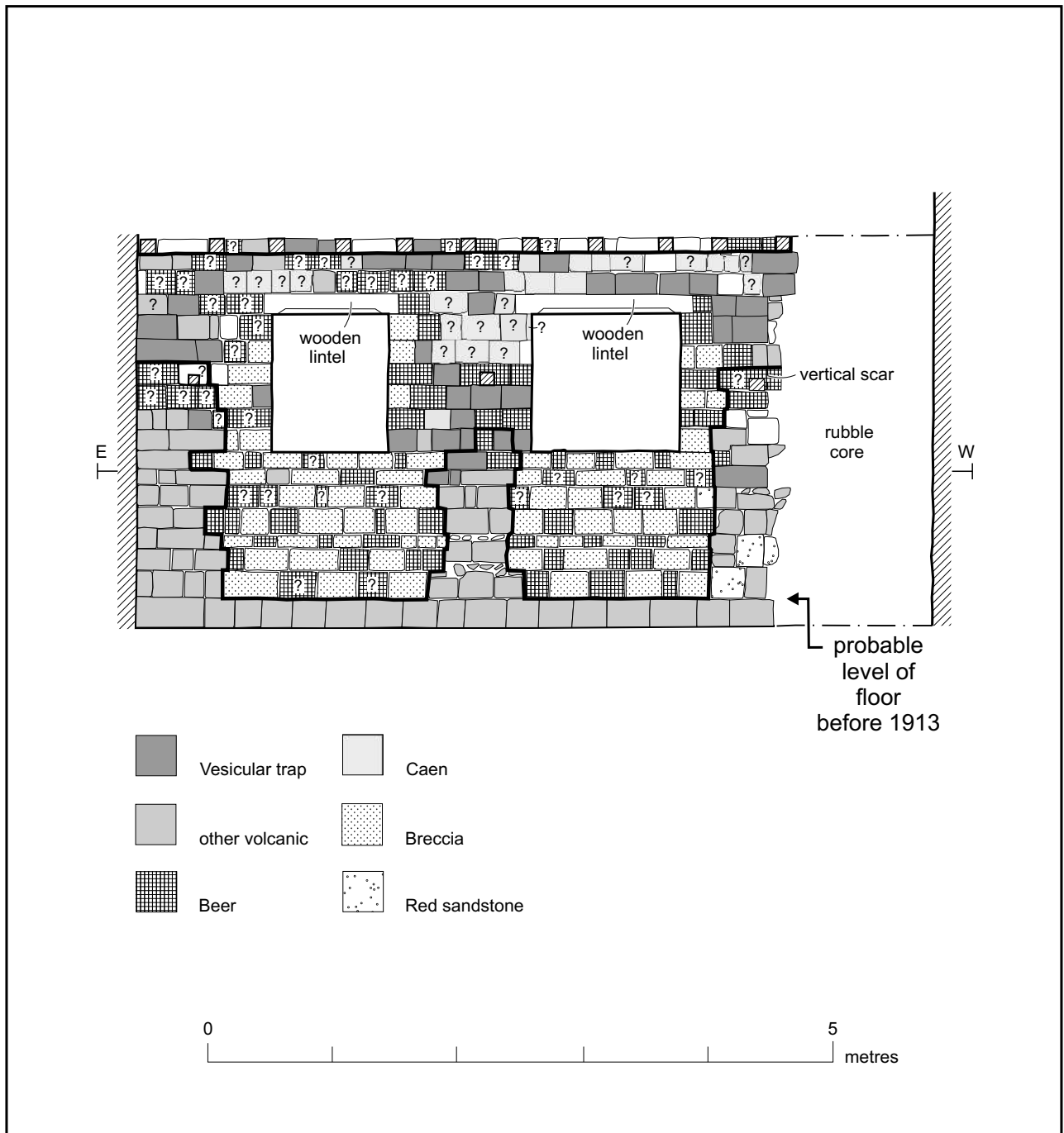


Fig. 5 Elevation of south wall of south room. Scale 1:50.