

**ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION
AND HISTORIC BUILDING RECORDING
AT THE CUSTOM HOUSE, EXETER**

**Prepared on behalf of
Exeter City Council**

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Summary

Archaeological recording at the Custom House, Exeter (SX 9197 9215) was undertaken by Exeter Archaeology between April and November 2007, prior to and during the redevelopment of the site. The work comprised a reduction in the floor level of the Wharfinger's Kitchen by means of controlled archaeological excavation, building recording and a watching brief on groundworks for new services.

The Custom House is located at the northern end of the Quay, at the junction with Commercial Road and Quay Hill. It was built by the City in 1680–81 to provide accommodation for H.M. Customs on the Quay and a house and office for the Wharfinger, the City official who collected the Town Customs. It is the oldest purpose-built Custom House in England and one of the earliest surviving brick buildings in Exeter. Previous archaeological work in the entrance lobby and to the south of the main building had identified a cobbled surface from the 1680–81 arcade and quay. Possible remains of an earlier structure were found below the stair hall, while an earlier cobbled surface was identified in the hallway of the café that occupies the western bay of the building.

The excavation inside the Wharfinger's House revealed the remains of a cobbled surface and Heavitree stone foundations pre-dating the Custom House, as well as later re-builds and additions to the 17th- century building fabric. Monitoring of alterations to the building and recording of any previously unidentified or unrecorded historic architectural fabric was also undertaken.

A watching brief on a service trench to the north of the building revealed no significant new exposures of building fabric or deposits associated with the building or earlier quay. A service trench for new floodlighting to the south of the building exposed the footing of an early 19th-century boundary wall and post-medieval reclamation deposits.

1. INTRODUCTION

This report presents the results of an archaeological investigation and historic building recording carried out at the Custom House (SX 9197 9215) by Exeter Archaeology (EA) between April and November 2007. The work was part of a programme of work laid out in a Written Scheme of Investigation prepared for Exeter City Council (ECC) by EA in March 2007, and was a requirement of Listed Building Consent (No 5270/3996:1) for the modification of the existing Wharfinger's House and subsequent alterations to the Custom House.

1.1 The site

The Custom House (Fig. 1) is located at the northern end of the Quay, at the junction with Commercial Road and Quay Hill. It is a Grade I Listed Building and lies within the Riverside Conservation Area and the Exeter Area of Archaeological Importance. The underlying geology of the immediate area consists of sandstones with breccias, mudstones and siltstones of the Whipton formation, the oldest sequence of Permian sediments in the Exeter district (Bristow *et al.* 1985).

2. AIMS

The aims of the archaeological investigations were:

- to record any historic building fabric not already observed during previous investigations prior to and during the alterations and repairs
- to determine the presence, extent, character and date of any archaeological deposits or features of historic importance that would be disturbed or removed by the proposed reduction of the floor level in the back room of the Wharfinger's House (the 'Wharfinger's Kitchen'). This was to be achieved through controlled archaeological excavation, and by recording any archaeological features or deposits exposed during the process
- to determine the presence, extent, character and date of any archaeological deposits or features of historic architectural importance that would be disturbed or removed by the proposed excavation of three new service trenches, and to record any archaeological features or deposits exposed by these groundworks.

3. METHODOLOGY

The work was undertaken in accordance with a method statement prepared by EA (Dyer 2007), submitted to and approved by the Exeter City Council Archaeology Officer (ECC AO) prior to the commencement of work on site. This document is included as Appendix 2.

3.1 Building survey

The repair and renovation work was monitored and any exposures of historic fabric not seen during previous investigations was recorded. Architect's plans provided by the ECC Architect were annotated, and individual features were drawn at an appropriate scale (1:20). A photographic record was made of the exposed features using black-and-white film and colour digital images. A photographic record was also made of any historic fabric that was likely to be significantly altered by the renovations.

3.2 Excavation

The existing concrete screed and wooden floor joists inside the Wharfinger's Kitchen were removed by the contractor prior to the start of the archaeological works. Following this, a controlled archaeological reduction of the floor level was undertaken by the site archaeologists. This uncovered significant archaeological deposits, which were exposed and recorded by hand.

All features and deposits were excavated and recorded using the standard EA recording system, comprising single context record sheets. Sections and plans were drawn at a scale of 1:10, 1:20 or 1:50 as appropriate. A detailed black and white print and colour digital record was made. Registers were maintained for photographs, drawings and context sheets on *pro forma* record sheets.

3.3 Watching brief

Further groundworks associated with the restoration of the Custom House were carried out to the north and south of the building, and it was agreed with the Client and the ECC AO that a watching brief would be maintained on these. Observations were recorded on *pro forma* watching brief record sheets and exposed fabric and features were drawn at an appropriate scale (1:100; 1:50). Trench locations were plotted. A photographic record was made using black-and-white film and colour digital images.

4. HISTORY OF THE SITE

4.1 Introduction

The development of Exeter Quay started in 1564–7, with a sequence of successive quays and warehouses being constructed during the following 450 years. The Custom House was built by the City Chamber in 1680–81 to provide accommodation for H.M. Customs on the Quay and an office for the Wharfinger, the City official who collected the Town Customs. It was rented from the City Chamber by H.M. Customs until 1989 when they moved to new premises, and the majority of the building had lain empty since then. It is the oldest purpose-built Custom House in England and one of the earliest surviving brick buildings in Exeter.

4.2 The development of Exeter Quay (Fig. 5-7)

Exeter possessed no quay prior to the late 16th century as the river is thought to have been too shallow during the Roman and early medieval periods to allow the passage of anything more than the smallest craft (Hoskins 1974, Henderson 1991). It is thought that a port situated near the head of the estuary handled most of Roman Exeter's trade and that likewise in the later medieval period all goods destined for the city passed through the port of Topsham (Henderson 1991). It was not until the completion of the Exeter Canal in 1566, which allowed lighters to carry goods to the city from sea-going vessels anchored in the estuary, that a proper quay and dockside facilities were built.

The earliest quay was built during the Tudor period between 1564 and 1565 within a bend in the River Exe just below the confluence of the Higher and Lower Leats and the main river channel. It was built on a pre-existing sand bank and took the form of a simple stake and wattle revetment, which was infilled with river gravels (*ibid.*). By 1567 the earlier wooden revetment had been replaced by a proper stone quay, while a

small sand bar to the west, known as ‘Little Island’, was subsequently converted and used as a wharf. A crane was installed at the same time, but the first warehouse, which was probably timber-framed, was not constructed until 1574.

This earlier warehouse was replaced by 1598 with a larger stone-built structure known as the Quay House. In addition, a large timber-fronted quay had been built against the cliff downstream from it; this quay was subsequently refaced with stone (ibid.).

In the mid 1620s, a downturn in the City’s overseas trade with northern France, its main trading partner during the 16th and early 17th century, and the subsequent upheaval caused by the Civil War in the 1640s, meant that few new facilities were built on the Quay during this period (ibid.).

With the Restoration came a period of renewed prosperity for the City, with the volume of trade, in woollen cloth especially, increasing rapidly (ibid.). This in turn led the City Chamber in 1676 to start work on improving the Exeter Canal and Quay that continued piecemeal until 1701 (ibid.). The canal was extended and new facilities built to provide relatively sheltered conditions in which to transfer cargo (ibid.). By 1676 the area of the quay was considerably enlarged by the inclusion of the earlier ‘Little Island’ wharf, while a whole series of new warehouses replaced the earlier Quay House. These were quickly superseded by a new two-storey Quay House, which was built in 1680, and provided a covered section of quay (ibid.). This coincided with the construction of a new Custom House on the Quay. It was probably around 1678 that the Quay compound was enclosed for the first time with the construction of a wall and gate. This is attested by payments in the City Receiver’s accounts for money expended in ‘*paving between the two Water gates*’, i.e. between the gate in the city wall and the one giving access to the compound (DRO/ECA/RAB, Feb. 1678).

4.3 The Custom House (Fig. 5 and 7)

Before 1680 the Custom House had been in South Street, and, with the renewed prosperity following the Restoration and the increase in foreign trade, was both inadequate in size and inconvenient in its location (Allan *et al.* 1990). Following the improvements to the Exeter Canal and the Quay in the 1670’s it was decided to relocate the Custom House to the quay (Henderson 1991). The Custom House was built by the City in 1680–81 to provide accommodation for H.M. Customs and a house and office for the Wharfinger, the city official who collected the Town Customs. The building also provided independent cellars and lofts for the use of citizens.

The original building had an open arcaded front with recessed bays at either end, so that incoming goods could be inspected under cover. The main entrance was set back from the façade. The ground floor comprised two secure cellars, or storerooms, and the first floor was approached via the central stair hall and a grand staircase. This floor contained the Long Room and the Surveyor’s Room, which were located partly over the arcade and featured ornamental plaster ceilings of outstanding quality made by John Abbott of Frithelstock (Parker 2000). The stair hall also had a ceiling by John Abbot. Further rooms, more plainly decorated, occupied the areas above the two cellars and the west bay, also a bonded cellar (Parker 2000). A separate warehouse was attached to the western end of the building. The eastern end of the arcade was

filled-in in 1684–5 to provide an office for the Wharfinger. The western half of the arcade was infilled in the early 19th century to create an additional office.

The Wharfinger's House occupied the recessed bay at the east end of the building. In 1711 it was extended forward, bringing the façade in line with the central arcade (Thorpe 1990). In 1778 a separate office building for the Wharfinger was built between the Custom House and Quay House and the original accommodation in the Custom House taken over by H.M. Customs.

5. BUILDING RECORDING

5.1 The interior

5.1.1 First floor of the Custom House (Fig. 3, Pl. 1, 4-5)

The first floor was approached via the stair hall, with the staircase rising against the east wall of the ground floor and returning across the north and west wall to the landing. This gave access to a series of offices, the most important of which were the Long Room and the Surveyor's Room.

Long sections of wooden flooring were pulled up in almost every room to install central heating and electrical wiring. This permitted a closer inspection of the floor joists and allowed the identification of areas that contained original joists and areas where these had been replaced.

The landing showed evidence of minor replacements, with three of the original joists possibly replaced in the 19th century. The original joists consisted of adzed timbers with suffit tenons to connect them to the main beams. This method had also been used for the replacement joists, although these consisted of sawn timbers. This intervention also revealed that the main beam supporting the head of the stairs and the banister was original.

Only a small area of flooring was lifted along the north wall in the West Back Office. This revealed that although they were in a fairly bad condition all the original floor joists were still in place. The timbers showed signs of horizontal cracks, which might indicate that there were problems with damp penetration, which had caused movement within the brickwork. Furthermore, the four joists in front of the window showed signs of later repairs. These took the form of additional short planks of wood added to their western sides to strengthen the bearing of the timbers in the wall. These repairs were modern in date, although they may well have been replacing earlier ones. What is more, all of the joists showed traces of limewash. This would suggest that they were originally exposed and that the ceiling of the cellar occupying the west bay was a later addition. Further modern runners had been added to the joists in front of the fireplace, which might suggest that the fireplace is a later addition.

The floors of the Long Room and the Surveyor's Room rest on what was the front wall of the building before the arcade was infilled. The top of this wall was raised between the floor joists using bricks capped with lime mortar. These raised sections were removed in five places in the Long Room to lay central heating pipes or cable ducts. This required the floorboards to be lifted along the line of the wall for the entire length of the room, exposing the top of the wall and the joists.

A clear difference was identified between the western and eastern side of the floor. This was mainly in the type of timber used and the way the floor had been built. Of the ten joists that made up the eastern part of the room at least one was likely to be a 19th-century sawn timber replacement. All of the remaining joists consisted of two pieces of adzed timber, with scarf joints located on top of the wall crown. These joists are interpreted as part of the original 1680–81 construction of the building, as the top of the wall was built up tightly around the joints. They differed markedly from the eleven joists that made up the western half of the room that consisted entirely of sawn timbers. No scarf joints were visible, suggesting that they spanned the full width of the room. They were also not as wide as the original wooden joists and the majority of them had oak plates attached to both sides to secure them firmly into the wall crown or to protect against damp penetration. This would suggest that at some stage the whole of the western half of the floor joists were replaced. The most likely time for this would be around 1840 when the western arcade was finally blocked and converted into an office. As the joists would have been partially exposed to the open air until then, it is possible that they would have needed replacing.

Work in the Surveyor's Room also revealed signs of extensive floor joist replacements, with only four joists being part of the original construction. These consisted of adzed timbers, while the replacements were composed entirely of sawn timbers. A small section of flooring was lifted in front of the right hand window, exposing the decayed ends of two of the original joists, which had been repaired with metal shoes as part of a programme of work undertaken in 1991–92. At this time all the joists in the Surveyors Room and the Long Room were investigated and strengthened in the same way as necessary, but no joists were replaced (M.J. Baldwin *pers. comm.*).

5.1.2 First floor of the Wharfinger's House (Fig.3, Pl. 2, 6-7)

Observations on the first floor of the Wharfinger's House were confined to alterations to the doorway between the rear room and the Back Centre East Office of the Custom House, exposure of the floor joists in the same room (to install a lift shaft), and exposure of a smaller section of floor joists in the front room.

The existing 20th-century doorframe and lintel of the doorway were removed to install a new fire door. This exposed the earlier timber doorjamb and a lintel set 1.9m above floor level. A strip of grey and red floral pattern wallpaper of 20th-century date had been preserved behind the wider modern jamb on the south side of the doorway.

The doorway was probably created in the late 18th century when H.M. Customs took over the entire building. Before then the Wharfinger's House and the Custom House were completely separate. A plan of the Custom House that dates from some time between 1901 and 1953/in the earlier 20th century with later additions (ECC n.d. *a*) shows the doorway as blocked and the annotation: '*reinstate access*'. None of the rooms in the Wharfinger's House are described on the plan, possibly indicating that H.M. Customs did not occupy it at this date. A later plan (ECC, 1966) also shows the doorway as blocked. At this date the Wharfinger's House was being used to accommodate tenants of the City Council, and the first floor was divided into two bedrooms and a W.C. A *c.* 1968 plan (ECC n.d. *b*), shows a proposed change of use from accommodation to additional office space for H.M. Customs, with the first floor

divided into a front office, a central 'Excise store', a toilet at the back, and the doorway reinstated.

There is good evidence that the existing stairway in the Wharfinger's House is original despite the primary function of the ground floor as a bonded store. The staircase would have provided integral access to the first floor and attic so that there was no need for a doorway between the Wharfinger's House and the Custom House on this level at this time. Connecting doorways would have been required after 1778, when the Customs took over both buildings. Evidence that the doorway between the Surveyor's Room and the Wharfinger's House was installed by the early 17th century was provided by original wallpaper surviving in an adjacent cupboard in the Surveyor's Room.

The presence of a fireplace immediately north of the stairway on the first floor of the Wharfinger's House has been used to argue that the staircase was inserted later. However, this arrangement may have simply been dictated by the constricted nature of the space.

The exposed floor joists in the rear room of the Wharfinger's House were entirely original. The joists had suffit tenons at their northern ends, with the ends of the joists additionally scribed to fit the profile of the crossbeam. These were then fitted into open housings along the southern beam.

In the front room of the Wharfinger's House the exposed joists are all likely to date to 1711, when the front of the recessed east bay was brought forward. This rebuilding would have also seen further changes to the internal use of space. The remains of five rectangular sockets (0.05m long, 0.03m wide and 0.03m deep) for an E-W stud partition wall were identified in the floorboards of the front room of the Wharfinger's House. Located 0.2m south of the 1960's partition, they were in line with a short E-W return of the central N-S dividing wall. They are likely to date to the early 18th century.

5.1.3 The Attic of the Wharfinger's House (Fig. 4, Pl. 3)

Before the current alterations, the attic of the Wharfinger's House was entered through a loft hatch at the north-western end of the rear first floor room. The attic was divided into three rooms by timber-partition walls. These are shown as bedrooms on the 1966 plan (ECC 1966).

We know from the external building elevation that the attic was part of the original late 17th-century construction. The original access was by means of a newel staircase that emerged onto a landing opposite the centre attic room. This attic staircase was removed during the late 1960s refurbishment and new floor joists were installed in the void. These were simply nailed to the original beams. The boarded stairwell/space was subsequently used as a cupboard until the stairs were reinstated as part of the current renovations.

Extensive rewiring of the attic was undertaken. This work exposed sections of the floor joists in the front room. Although the floor was partially restored in the 20th century the original extent of the attic could still be established. As with the rest of the Wharfinger's House, it was originally set back from the façade of the Custom House,

but in 1711 was brought forward in line with the rest of the building. Unlike the first floor, which was rebuilt during the early 18th century using full-length joists, a new cross beam was installed in the front attic room and a new line of thinner sawn joists added for the extension. The northern joists in the front attic were wider and some retained their suffit tenons. They are likely to be part of the original construction, while the southern joists probably date to the rebuilding of 1711. The new cross beam collapsed during the 1960's refurbishment and was replaced with a steel beam, which the floor joists then simply rested on. It is unclear to what extent the two sets of joists were affected by the collapse, although they were subsequently re-connected by wooden joining plates. This would suggest that the floor didn't collapse entirely, as the joists would otherwise have been completely replaced.

6. EXCAVATION AND WATCHING BRIEF

6.1 Excavation

6.1.1. Pre-1676 (Fig. 8, Pl. 10-12)

The earliest archaeological deposit uncovered during the excavation consisted of the truncated remains of a cobbled surface (5022/3), measuring 5.3m in length and 4.1m in width. This consisted of large water-worn stones on a bed of sand that overlay a levelling layer (5039). An E-W aligned cobbled drain had been included as part of the initial construction. The underlying deposits revealed no sequence of earlier quay surfaces, as had been the case with the Quay House excavation (Henderson 1991). This can be explained by the fact that this area was well back from the edge of the quay, and is therefore unlikely to have undergone many alterations. Although no finds were recovered from the underlying deposits the surface is likely to date to the late 16th to early 17th century.

The quay surface was truncated along its southern edge by the footings of a structure that also pre-dated the Custom House. This was composed of the robbed-out remains of a NE-SW aligned beam-slot (5024) and a heavily truncated E-W aligned Heavitree stone (breccia) foundation (5021). Both the beam-slot and the stone wall showed evidence that the cobbles had been carefully reinstated and placed on end against the edge of the completed foundations. The care taken over this might indicate that this was not just a temporary structure but something altogether more permanent. It is unclear whether this building would have stood for more than a couple of years or even what function it would have had.

A number of shallow depressions, possibly postholes or post bases, were cut into the cobbled surface (5022/3). They had been backfilled with general levelling material (5034/5) for the floor of the Custom House. A group of four (5008-5011), 0.10–0.12m deep and forming a rectangular pattern, were located at the north edge, and two others (5012 & 5025), 0.16 and 0.10m deep respectively, were located to the north and south of foundation (5021) and beam slot (5024). The features are difficult to interpret because of the limited extent of the exposed surface. They could be holes from scaffolding for the construction of the Custom House. Alternatively they could be settings for timbers associated with structure 5021/5024. The group formed by 5008–5011 is on the same alignment as beam slot 5024, and 5012 & 5025 are positioned on either side. Holes 5008–5011 could possibly represent the base of a timber quayside structure.

6.1.2. 1678 (Fig. 9 and 11)

Following the stripping of the room aspects of the construction of the walls and their relationship to the exposed archaeology became clear. Part of the northern wall was constructed of roughly squared Heavitree breccia blocks (5014), laid in courses and bonded with orange-brown lime mortar, which was markedly different to the eastern wall, which represents the original phase of the Custom House construction. This was entirely built of bricks (5020) resting on roughly squared Heavitree stone foundations (5019). What is more, the two walls were not keyed together, suggesting that they represented different phases of construction.

We know from looking at the outside of the Custom House that the north-east corner incorporated the western jamb of the Quay Gate. We also know from documentary evidence that the Quay was provided with a wall and gate in 1678. This could suggest that wall (5014) represents part of this earlier compound. This is entirely consistent with the fact that the wall had cut the earlier cobbled surface.

6.1.3. 1680-81 (Fig. 9-10, Pl. 8 and 9)

This period represents the main phase of building activity in 1680–81. The compound wall (5014) was partially demolished, and the rear wall (5015) built up in brick with an arched window (5050). The Heavitree stone foundations (5019) were laid, offset from the rear wall and much more crudely built. This footing supported the main N-S brick wall (5020). The area within the walls was then infilled (5034/5) to accommodate a new floor, which had not survived. This interpretation appears to be supported by the scant collection of pottery sherds (17 in total) and clay pipe fragments (3 in total) that were recovered from the infill (5034/5) during the excavation. The majority of the pottery sherds were of types commonly found in Exeter, i.e. North Devon and South Somerset coarsewares, dating to the mid to late 17th century. The only unusual finds were 4 sherds of Portuguese tin-glazed earthenware, a very uncommon find in Devon. The absence of later transfer-printed wares, Staffordshire salt-glazed stoneware, and creamware appears to support a 17th-century date.

We know from pictorial and structural evidence that the ground floor of the Wharfinger's House mirrored the arrangement of the west bay in being set back from the main frontage of the building. The western bay was a large bonded cellar, or store with a wide doorway at the front and traces of cobbling surviving on the inside. It is possible that the ground floor of the Wharfinger's House would also have been a bonded store originally. A large doorway in the south wall would have been used for moving goods in and out of the cellar. The blocked doorway (5038) in the east wall may have been part of the original layout, providing access for the Wharfinger to the cellar and the apartment above by means of the stairs. The cobbled floor (5000) below the staircase may represent the only surviving element of the original 1680-81 floor, the level of which coincides with the top of the breccia wall foundations (5019). A large window (5050) was originally located in the recess in the northern wall. This was subsequently blocked and was entirely obscured by modern plaster. During the excavation a N-S aligned trench [5027], measuring 4.4m in length, 0.5m in width and 0.3m in depth, with steep sides and a flat base, was exposed along the western edge of the room, cutting the cobbled surface (5023). The function of the cut is unclear, and a lack of finds from the fills (5003 & 5028) makes it difficult to date accurately. There is a fall of around 0.25m between the floor level in the Wharfinger's House and the

East Bonded Store, indicating that the foundation platform for the main Custom House building was established at a lower level than the Wharfinger's House. This might explain 5027 as being the eastern edge of the cut for the east wall of the main building, which removed the western continuation of the earlier quay surface (5022/3). This survived inside the Wharfinger's House because of the difference in level.

6.1.4. 1711 (Fig. 10, Pl. 8 and 9)

In 1711 the Wharfinger's House underwent a period of extensive alteration, with the recessed front brought forward in line with the arcade, and two windows built into the south wall. This meant that the bonded store was converted into two separate rooms with the construction of an E-W aligned partition wall. This consisted of a single course of Heavitree breccia blocks (5017) with a face to the south only, bonded with clay and set on a bed of compacted crushed Heavitree stone (5016).

A new doorway (5013) was constructed in the eastern wall, immediately south of the partition wall (5017), as the main entrance to the house. The brick pier (5047) on the south side of the doorway was probably constructed at the same time to tidy up disturbance to the original brickwork caused by inserting the new opening. It is unlikely to be later blocking, as the arch of the doorway is the same width as the present opening. The original doorway (5038) was possibly blocked and converted into a window at this time, providing additional light for the back room following the insertion of the partition wall.

6.1.5. Late 18th (Fig. 10, Pl. 8 and 9)

In 1778 a separate office building for the Wharfinger was built between the Custom House and Quay House and the original accommodation in the Custom House taken over by H.M. Customs. No evidence of this phase was observed in the fabric of either wall.

6.1.6 19th century (Fig. 10, Pl. 8 and 9)

A horizontal sliding sash window (5046) was inserted into the previously blocked doorway (5038), probably replacing an earlier window.

Due to the extensive re-use of bricks it is difficult to determine at what date the window (5050) in the northern wall was bricked up. It is possible that this coincided with the demolition of the Quay Gate during the early 19th century and the subsequent raising of the road level.

6.1.7. 20th century (Fig. 9-10, Pl. 8)

In 1968 the Wharfinger's House was significantly refurbished and it was during this time that the main N-S wall between the Wharfinger's House and the Custom House was knocked through and a doorway inserted at ground floor level. A brick pier (5048) was afterwards built to support the staircase and the new lintel for the doorway, while a concrete pad (5049) was laid on the inside of the door between the East Bonded Store and the Wharfinger's House. The staircase was further encased in stud partitions and plasterboard, while several new partition walls divided up the rest of the ground floor. The 1966 plan of the house (ECC 1966) shows the ground floor with a living room at the front and a kitchen at the rear, divided by a cross passage. It also shows a fuel store under the stairs that corresponds with the cobbled area (5000).

Further works included the underpinning of the door in the east wall by pouring 0.6m of concrete. It is unclear whether the raising of the door level was replacing an earlier structure or represented a complete reshaping of the doorway. The back room was completely refloored with boarding on timber battens bedded in 0.2m of concrete screed.

6.2 Watching Brief

The watching brief (see Fig. 2) was maintained during all subsequent groundworks on site (April-November 2007). This included the excavation of a foul drain along the back wall of the building, the replacement of a section of existing gas pipe at the front of the west bay, and the excavation of a service trench across Quay Hill and along the front of the building for the installation of floodlighting.

A new foul drain was excavated for approximately 20m along the northern side of the building, with a pit for an inspection chamber excavated beside the building at the western end of the trench. It was intended that the new drain, to be dug along the line of an existing French drain installed in 1991, would be excavated to a depth of 0.15m below the base of this earlier trench. Following a change of design, the level of the new drain was raised, and consequently very little of the rear elevation was exposed.

A replacement gas connection to the new kitchen in the small room that projects from the West Front Office was monitored. The trench, some 5m long, 0.4m wide and 0.4m deep, and located mainly within the line of an earlier gas pipe, was dug through largely indistinct, indeterminate modern made ground.

A service trench and integral pits for the installation of four floodlights at the front of the Custom House were monitored. The trench was 32.5m long, 0.25-0.5m wide and 0.4-0.5m deep, and extended along the front of the building and then across and along the east side of Quay Hill Road. The remains of a mortar bonded brick foundation were exposed at a depth of 0.26m in two light pits immediately east of the entrance. The foundation consisted of lime-mortared, unfrosted red brick. It was exposed for a length of 3.5m, but its full extent was not established. The north edge was truncated along its whole length by a modern drain. This was the base of one of the low brick walls with railings that enclosed the front of the Custom House in the early 19th century. They are shown in a pencil drawing of the building of *c.* 1825-30 by Emmanuel Jeffrey, held in the Westcountry Studies Library, Exeter.

Immediately south east of the building the trench was dug through modern surfaces and make-up overlying 19th- or 20th-century levelling deposits. Further south east and within the line of the road, a deposit of coarse grey sand and pebbles containing shell and roof slate fragments was exposed below the modern surfaces and levelling material at a depth of 0.40m. This was probably late 16th- or early 17th-century reclamation material associated with the establishment or subsequent extension of the Quay.

7. CONCLUSIONS

The observations made during the renovation work on the building have confirmed the sequence of construction for the Custom House established through previous studies and monitoring episodes.

The original late 17th-century building had an open arcaded front with recessed bays at either end, with the main entrance set back from the façade. This is supported by evidence from the observations in both the first-floor front room and the front attic room of the Wharfinger's House. The first-floor room showed evidence that the wooden floor joists had been completely replaced during the rebuild of 1711, while, in the attic, a new set of joists were joined to the existing floor. The western half of the arcade was finally infilled in about 1840. This is supported by evidence from the Long Room where the whole western section of floor joists was replaced. The most likely time for this would be around the mid 19th century, as the joists would have been exposed to the open air until then and it is likely that they would have needed replacing.

The extensive replacement of floor joists in the Surveyor's Room is less easy to date, as there is no obvious historical reference mentioning such work. The surviving joists were suffering from severe decay and had been repaired by fitting them with metal shoes. While this explains why the rest of the timber joists were replaced it is unclear when this work was undertaken. This would certainly have been very intrusive, especially with regards to the ceiling in the room below. Although the cornice in the front office is entirely consistent with a late 17th-century date it is possible that the main surface of the ceiling is a later rebuild.

7.1 Building recording

A number of sections of the floor joists were exposed on the first floor of the Custom House and the Wharfinger's House. Differences in the timbers may represent phases of replacement or alteration of the building.

Original oak joists of 1680–81 were observed on the first-floor landing, the Long Room, the Surveyor's Room, the West Back Office and the rear room of the Wharfinger's House. These timbers were adzed rather than sawn.

The joists in the Long Room and Surveyor's Room rest partly on the top of the original front wall of the building, which was exposed for the whole length of the Long Room. The joists in the eastern half of the room had been spliced with scarf joints set over the wall, and were thought to be original timbers of 1680–81. Those in the western half were sawn timbers spanning the full width of the room, and were interpreted as early 19th-century replacements, possibly dating to 1840 when this section of the arcade was infilled. What were interpreted as original joists were also identified in the Surveyor's Room, the main staircase landing and the rear room of the Wharfinger's House. Sawn timber joists on the landing and in the Surveyor's Room were thought to be 19th-century replacements. Evidence of the major repair work carried out on the joists in the Long Room and Surveyor's Room in 1991–2, when all the decayed south ends were strengthened with metal shoes, was also seen.

The joists in the front room of the Wharfinger's House were different in character to the ones in the rear room, and were thought to belong to the 1711 extension of the frontage. This extension to the house was also reflected in the joists in the attic, where there were adzed timbers in the rear and sawn timbers added at the front. Strengthening work from 1991–2 was also seen in the front room, where a steel beam was inserted to replace the failed timber cross beam that linked the two sets of joists.

7.2 Excavation and watching brief

The results of both the archaeological excavation and the building survey demonstrated that earlier elements of the quay survived below the Wharfinger's House. The cobbled surface was probably present on the site from at least the first half of the 17th century, while the footings of an earlier building were more difficult to date. The excavation also showed that the rear wall of the Custom House was probably built on the line of the earlier quay compound wall, accounting for the irregular plan of the building. Further rebuilds and additions to the late 17th-century building fabric in the Wharfinger's House were also exposed.

The results of the excavation have demonstrated that earlier surfaces and structures survive below the Wharfinger's House. The cobbled quay surface (5022/3) probably dates from at least the first half of the 17th century. The footings of the earlier building or quay structure (5021/5024) are more difficult to date. A number of shallow postholes or post bases were cut into the cobbled surface. These could be the remains of scaffolding for the construction of the Custom House, of timbers associated with structure 5021/5024, or of other wooden quayside structures.

The excavation also supported the proposition that the rear wall of the Custom House was built on the line of an earlier quay compound wall (5014), accounting for the irregular plan of the building. Further rebuilds and additions to the late 17th-century building fabric in the Wharfinger's House were also exposed; the most important being the insertion of a partition wall on a Heavitree stone footing (5017) following the extension of the house in 1711.

The watching brief on a service trench to the north of the Custom House exposed no significant new areas of building fabric or any deposits associated with the building or earlier quay. A service trench for new floodlighting to the south of the building exposed the footing of an early 19th-century boundary wall and post-medieval quay reclamation deposits.

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