

**ARCHAEOLOGICAL MONITORING AND
RECORDING AT NORTH GATE COURT,
LOWER NORTH STREET, EXETER**

**prepared for
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Exeter Archaeology

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Summary

The principal archaeological remains which were recorded comprised a Roman road, which had previously been recorded immediately outside of the defences of the 1st century Roman military fortress, and elements of the primary and secondary Roman civil town defences of the later 2nd and early 3rd centuries. This included an exposure of the foundations of the Roman city wall towards the front of the site nearest to Lower North Street where the wall fabric has been left in-situ to an unknown depth.

The findings appear to be largely consistent with the results of the earlier observations made at the site during 1978 and with the results of the excavations carried out in Paul Street between 1982 and 1985.

1. INTRODUCTION

This report has been prepared for Comprehensive Design Ltd on behalf of Ashcom Developments Ltd. and presents the results of archaeological monitoring and recording undertaken by Exeter Archaeology (EA) between March and July 2010 at North Gate Court, Lower North Street, Exeter. It represents archaeological work required by the Department for Culture Media and Sport, as advised by English Heritage, to fulfil Scheduled Monument Consent obligations (Ref HSD 9/2/14157) and to fulfil Condition 6 attached to the grant of full planning permission by Exeter City Council (ref: 07/2161/03) for the construction of 11 self-contained flats.

1.1 **The site** (SX 9179 9271, Fig. 1)

The site occupies an approximately rectangular area close to the junction of Lower North Street and Paul Street, directly to the rear of the Roman and medieval city wall and immediately to the northeast of the site of the medieval North Gate. The site is bounded along its northwest side by a surviving section of the city wall and by the gable end of the modern development of North Gate Court. To the northeast and southeast it is bounded by the Harlequins car park and to the southwest by Lower North Street.

1.2 **Background**

The development site occupies an area of major archaeological importance and sensitivity. It lies just outside of the defences of the mid-1st century Roman legionary fortress and extends partly over the buried remains of the rear of the Roman and later city wall, which is a protected Scheduled Monument (SM Devon 136). A section of the wall survives above ground along the northwest boundary of the site which is adjacent to both the possible site of the north gate of the Roman town and the approximate site of the medieval North Gate (demolished in 1769), and to a Roman timber building discovered in 1984. The entire site lies within the statutory Exeter Area of Archaeological Importance, and within the Central Conservation Area of the city.

The archaeological potential of the site is reviewed more fully in the archaeological assessment submitted in support of the planning application (Exeter Archaeology Report No. 05.23).

2. PROJECT SPECIFICATION

Specifications for the archaeological monitoring and recording work were provided by Exeter City Council's Archaeology Officer. A Written Scheme of Investigation was produced by EA in April 2010, in response to those requirements and was submitted for approval under the planning condition and as part of the application for scheduled monument consent... The principal elements of required work were:

- the identification of those areas of buried city wall fabric which lie at or above the formation level of the development, so that they can be protected during the development
- the identification, excavation and recording of all archaeological remains likely to be disturbed or removed by the development;

- the appropriate analysis, reporting, publication and archiving of the results of the project.

3. METHOD

Excavations associated with the development, including area reductions and foundation and service trenches, were carried out using a tracked excavator fitted with a toothless grading bucket. All machining was conducted under the supervision of the attending archaeologist.

Machining continued until either formation level or archaeological deposits were reached. Where archaeological deposits were exposed areas were cleaned back by hand and deposits excavated and recorded before machining continued. Exeter City Council's Archaeology Officer and English Heritage were both consulted at various points during the exercise in order to ensure the well-being of the protected city wall fabric.

Standard EA recording procedures were employed. Stratigraphic information was recorded on pro-forma single context record sheets; a drawn record was compiled in plan and section at scales of 1:10, 1:20 or 1:50 as appropriate and a photographic record was prepared in black and white film and digital (colour) format.

4. RESULTS

Reduction of ground levels within the footprint of the new building and excavations for drainage and strip foundations demonstrated widespread truncation of archaeological remains by 19th-century basements, which occupied almost the entire eastern half of the area and extended to a significant depth below the level of natural subsoil. In addition, deposits had been disturbed in the northern area of the site, and in an area immediately adjacent to North Gate Court, by archaeological excavations of the late 1970s. The general level of surviving deposits broadly followed the slope of the underlying natural subsoil, which dropped sharply from east to west, falling almost 2m over a distance of 13m (a gradient of approximately 1:6). More recent cellaring and terracing of the site appears to have caused severe truncation towards the northeast end, where natural subsoil is highest. However, surviving archaeological deposits were exposed in three separate areas:

4.1 Area 1 (Figs 2 & 3)

Area 1 was located in the eastern corner of the proposed building and extended to the northeast beyond the limit of excavation. Where undisturbed by cellars, archaeological deposits survived within an existing bank extending along the south eastern side of the site adjacent to the car park. To the northwest, deposits had been removed below the level of the current reduced dig during archaeological excavations carried out in 1978.

Controlled reduction of the bank extending along the southeast side of the site exposed a sequence of in-situ Roman deposits surviving over an area measuring approximately 3m x 4.5m. Undisturbed natural subsoil was encountered at a height of 27.26m AOD below a sequence of Roman deposits surviving within the existing bank to a maximum height of 28.98m AOD. Exposed Roman deposits (Fig.3, Plan 1)

comprised a thin buried soil layer (119) partially sealed by a thin metallised surface (118). These were in turn overlain by a sequence of dumped layers (112-116 & 123) interpreted as the remains of the primary clay rampart of the early town defences.

Buried soil 119 consisted of firm reddish brown clay with occasional charcoal flecks and small sub angular sandstone fragments. Pottery dating to the 1st to 2nd century was recovered from this layer which appears to represent the Roman ground surface prior to the construction of the city defences. Metallised surface 118 consisted primarily of small to medium sized rounded sandstone pebbles with occasional small worn fragments of volcanic trap pressed into the underlying clay soil layer (119). A single larger piece of volcanic stone was present within the make up of the surface. Its shape was regular and appeared to have been deliberately squared to form a piece of building stone. To the southeast and southwest, 118 had been removed by 19th-century basements and to the northeast it continued beyond the limit of excavation. Its northwest extent appeared to be a true edge traceable for a distance of about 3m on a NE-SW alignment. A small number of Roman pottery sherds of the late 1st to 2nd centuries were recovered from this context.

Overlying surface 118 was a thick layer of mixed reddish brown sandy clay (116), containing frequent volcanic trap fragments, occasional charcoal flecks and small rounded pebbles, representing the base of the early town defensive bank.(Fig.3, Section 1). A small assemblage of Roman pottery and Roman roof tile was recovered from this layer. The remaining *in-situ* bank consisted of successive overlying layers of material (group number 107) comprising the following: a layer of firm, mottled yellowish and red clay (115) containing occasional volcanic trap fragments; a layer of dark brown sandy clay (114) containing occasional charcoal flecks and small rounded stones; a layer of firm reddish brown clay (113) containing occasional volcanic trap fragments and charcoal flecks; a layer of crumbly, dark brown slightly sandy clay (112) containing occasional small volcanic trap fragments, charcoal flecks and rounded pebbles; a layer of firm mottled yellowish and red silty clay (123) containing moderate small-medium sub angular stones and occasional charcoal flecks. A small assemblage of Roman sherds was recovered from contexts 112, 114 & 115 (and several sherds attributed to general group No. 107).

A sub-square pit (103) was cut into the rampart material (Fig.3, Plan 2 and Section 2). The pit contained four silty clay fills (104 & 109-11). A small assemblage of medieval sherds was recovered from the fills of this pit.

4.2 Area 2 (Figs 2 & 4)

Area 2 was located in the approximate centre of the site in an area previously reduced below the proposed depth of the area reduction for the insertion of modern drainage and manholes. To the southeast, deposits had been removed by 19th-century basements. Deposits continued beyond the limit of excavation, but below formation levels of the proposed building in all other directions.

Deposits exposed in this area comprised natural subsoil exposed at a height of 25.4m AOD below a thick layer of reddish clay containing occasional charcoal flecks (131). This deposit appeared to represent a possible pre-Roman colluvial soil. It was overlain by a layer of firm reddish clay soil (128) with occasional charcoal flecks, small stones and rare volcanic trap fragments. This layer appeared to be equivalent to layer 119,

overlying natural subsoil in Area 1. It was in turn overlain by a thin band of slightly olive brown sandy clay with moderate charcoal flecking, rare burnt clay fragments and small pebbles, representing a possible preserved land surface (Fig. 4, Section 3). A mottled yellowish and red clay deposit (130) containing occasional charcoal flecks and frequent small stones and trap fragments overlay 129. It possibly represents the remains of Roman rampart material. All deposits were overlain by modern overburden.

4.3 Area 3 (Figs 2 & 4)

Area 3 was located in the western corner of the site. Survival of deposits to the southwest and to the northwest below North Gate Court remains uncertain. To the northeast and southeast, deposits continued beyond the limit of excavation and below the formation levels of the proposed building. Archaeological remains subsequently exposed were overlain by brick rubble and debris from the demolition of former buildings.

An area measuring 4m long and 3m wide was stripped of modern overburden exposing archaeological deposits at and just above formation levels for the proposed building. Natural subsoil was not encountered in this area. The remains of the foundations of the Roman town wall (142) were exposed at a height of 25.97m AOD. These remains comprised mud bonded irregular volcanic trap rubble (Fig. 4). A series of dumped deposits (135-6, 140-1 & 143-5) appeared to abut this masonry to the southeast and almost certainly represent surviving rampart material associated with the wall. The composition of this material was investigated by limited excavation, dictated by the position and depth of proposed groundbeams and drainage. Layers 143-5 were exposed at or below formation level and comprised two layers of mixed reddish clay with occasional charcoal lenses (143 & 145) and a layer of small trap fragments (144). Successive layers of mid grey brown sandy clay (140) and reddish brown sandy clay (141) appeared to abut the southeast face of wall foundation 142 at the southern extent of area 3. Deposit 136 was a layer of reddish brown compact silty clay, overlying layers 140-1 and 143-5. It was observed to have been pressed deeply into the masonry of foundation 142 and appeared to overlie it. The final and stratigraphically latest deposit (135) consisted of compact greyish brown silty clay containing abundant medium – large volcanic trap blocks, some of which had been deliberately squared. This layer appeared to represent stone working debris (Fig.4, Section 4).

The apparent abutment of the exposed wall foundation by dumped layers 135-6 and 140-1 and the absence of a cut for foundation 142 support a conclusion that these layers were all deposited after the construction of wall foundation 142. Layer 136 extended over the top of foundation 142 (Section 4, Fig. 4) and appeared to have been partly removed by a modern intrusion. It seems possible that the apparent ‘cut’ of this intrusion is the result of extraction of stone from foundation 142, rather than removal of layer 136 which may have extended little further over the *in situ* foundation. All deposits in area 3 were overlain by modern overburden.

5. THE FINDS

The finds principally comprised an assemblage of Roman sherds and tile fragments broadly dating to the 1st- to 2nd- centuries AD. A smaller group of medieval sherds

were recovered from the fills of a single pit (103). A small assemblage of animal bone was recovered from both Roman and medieval contexts in addition to isolated finds of slag and worked stone. Two worked bone small finds (SF1 and SF2) were also recovered.

The finds are quantified in table 1 and described below.

Context	Date	Roman Pot		Medieval pot		Roman tile		Bone		Slag		Worked bone	
		Qty	Wgt	Qty	Wgt	Qty	Wgt	Qty	Wgt	Qty	Wgt	Qty	S.F. No.
104	C11th-C12th			4	40			11	94				
107	Pre 250AD	3	19										
108	C1st-C2nd	1	8			1							
110	Late C10th-early C14th	1	6	2	16			3	14				
111	Late C10th-early C14th			2	25			2	31				
112	Late C1st-C2nd	2	17			1							
116	Late C1st-C2nd	5	73			22		2	14				
118	Late C1st-C2nd	5	40			3							
119	Late C1st-C2nd	4	35					4	66			1	
124	Roman					1							
127	C1st	1	8										
136	Late C1st-C2nd	12	78			1		8	109			1	1
137	Roman							3	28				
138	Late C1st	2	57										
140	Roman					1						1	2
141	Late C1st-C2nd	4	59			2				3	46		
142	c.200AD	1	12										
Totals		41	412	8	81	32		33	356	3	46	3	

Table 1: Quantification of finds by context and category. Weights are in grams.

Roman pottery and tile

Coarse wares

This assemblage included 24 sherds of BB1, 2 white flagon sherds, a mica greyware bowl sherd, 5 greyware sherds, and one South Devon ware sherd. They date from the late 1st to 2nd century. Although they can be used to date deposits as broadly Roman, they are of limited use in distinguishing between phases of activity within the Roman period. The use of these fabrics spans both the military and earlier civil period in Exeter and their ubiquitous nature within Roman contexts means that they are also likely to appear as residual material in later deposits.

Fine wares

Three plain Samian sherds including 1 of form DR 37, 3 Samian sherds of form DR 29 including 1 decorated and 2 sherds of Fortress ware including 1 fine handle. These sherds date broadly to the late 1st century AD and, with the exception of a Fortress ware sherd from context 118, were recovered from the 2nd- and 3rd-century city defences. They are considered to be residual.

Tile

An assemblage of 32 largely undiagnostic fragments, including some examples of Roman roof tile, both *imbrex* and *tegulae*.

Medieval pottery

Six sherds of medieval fabric 20 dating from the 10th to 14th century.

Bone

Roman

In total, 17 whole or part bones were recovered, representing the following species; cattle, sheep/goat, pig and bird (possibly domestic fowl). One cattle bone bore the marks of butchery.

Medieval

Sixteen pieces of animal bone were recovered comprising principally sheep/goat bones, including a mandible with wear pattern attributed to a mature individual, at least 28 months at the time of death. It was possible that this animal was kept for secondary sources, such as milk, however, with only one individual it is not possible to conclude this. Also recovered were two pieces of sawn antler likely to be red deer.

Worked bone

Three pieces of worked bone were recovered from Roman contexts; these include a bone button or counter (SF 1 from context 136), the head of a bone pin (SF 2 from context 140) and a male pig canine with notches along the lingual side of the enamel. The turned bone button or counter is without obvious comparison (within readily available literature) from Roman Exeter.

6. DISCUSSION AND INTERPRETATION

Previous excavations, both on this site (Salvatore 1993) and along Paul Street, (Bedford and Salvatore 1993) have demonstrated a sequence for the Roman town defences. Broadly speaking this comprised an earthwork bank erected *c.*160-200 followed by the construction, in the earliest years of the 3rd century at the latest, by a stone wall cut into the face of the bank, with a clay and earth rampart built up against its inside face (Holbrook and Bidwell 1991, 9-11). These defences enclosed a larger area (*c.*37.5ha) than the earlier legionary fortress (*c.*16.6ha). However, the relatively steep nature of the topography on the north side of the town, particularly above the confluence of the Longbrook Valley with the River Exe, drew the circuit of the town wall close to that of the earlier fortress defences and the major expansion of the town was primarily achieved on the other three sides. In addition, the excavations at Paul Street (where The Harlequins shopping centre now stands) exposed elements of the fortress defences and demonstrated the existence of a road extending around the outside of the outer (second) fortress ditch which may have continued in use into the early Roman civil period perhaps up until the insertion of the new defences. The road is discussed by Henderson (in Webster 1988, 92).

The results of the current work appear to include exposures of deposits relating to each of the phases outlined above and these are discussed in more detail below:

Late Pre-Roman Iron Age and Roman fortress period – first century AD

Two soil layers, identified in the 1978 excavation, were believed to represent the land surface immediately prior to the erection of the legionary fortress *c.* AD55 believed to have been constructed by the IInd. Legion Augusta. They comprised a clay soil layer (18) below a thin olive brown clay loam layer (17) thought to represent an occupation layer (Salvatore 1993). A single Durotrigian coin was found at the base of the lower layer (18). These layers would appear to be equivalent to soil layers 119 (in Area 1) and 128 (in Area 2) respectively.

Layer 119 overlies natural subsoil and is clearly the earliest deposit in the sequence presented in section 2. The expected thin layer above it is absent however, and this appears to have been replaced by a light metallised surface (118). It seems probable that this surface is the extra-mural road running along the outer edge of the fortress ditch seen in four trenches of the Paul Street excavations of 1982-85 (Bedford and Salvatore 1993).

In Area 2, layer 128 does not overlay natural subsoil directly but instead seals a thicker layer of probable pre-Roman colluvial soil (131) accumulated on the slope down towards Lower North Street. A thin decayed turf layer (129) overlies soil 128.

Mid-late second century AD

Deposits representing the early 2nd century expansion of the Roman town beyond the confines of the fortress defences (which remained in place albeit in a decayed state well into the 2nd century) overlay the earlier deposits in Areas 1 and 2. These comprise mixed clay layers 112-6, & 123 in Area 1 and layer 130 in Area 2. Given their stratigraphic position in the deposit sequence, these layers are all interpreted as part of the primary bank of the early town defences pre-dating the construction of the town wall. The earlier road would have gone out of use with the expansion of the town.

Late second to early third century AD

The *in situ* volcanic stone foundations, exposed principally in Area 3 and to a lesser extent in Area 2, represent the remains of the Roman town wall believed to have been built in the latter years of the 2nd century or the earliest years of the 3rd century AD. Dumped clay layers to the southeast of the wall (135-5 140-1 & 143-5) are probably the remains of the secondary rampart raised behind the stone wall during or immediately after its construction. Layer 135 is of particular interest. It is comprised of larger, and in some cases clearly worked, pieces of volcanic trap blocks almost certainly quarried from nearby Rougemont a source of building stone throughout the Roman period. This layer represents stone working debris from the construction of the wall supporting the interpretation that these deposits are part of the contemporary rampart.

Medieval

The medieval period is represented by a single square pit (103) containing pottery and bone representing domestic refuse of the 11th-12th centuries.

7. PROJECT ARCHIVE AND 'OASIS' REPORT

A fully integrated project archive has been compiled and will be deposited at the Royal Albert Memorial Museum, Exeter, under museum accession number RAMM 144/2010

A report of the evaluation (including a pdf version of this document) will be submitted to the on-line database OASIS (On-line Access to the Index of archaeological investigationS), under OASIS ID: exeterar1-83600.

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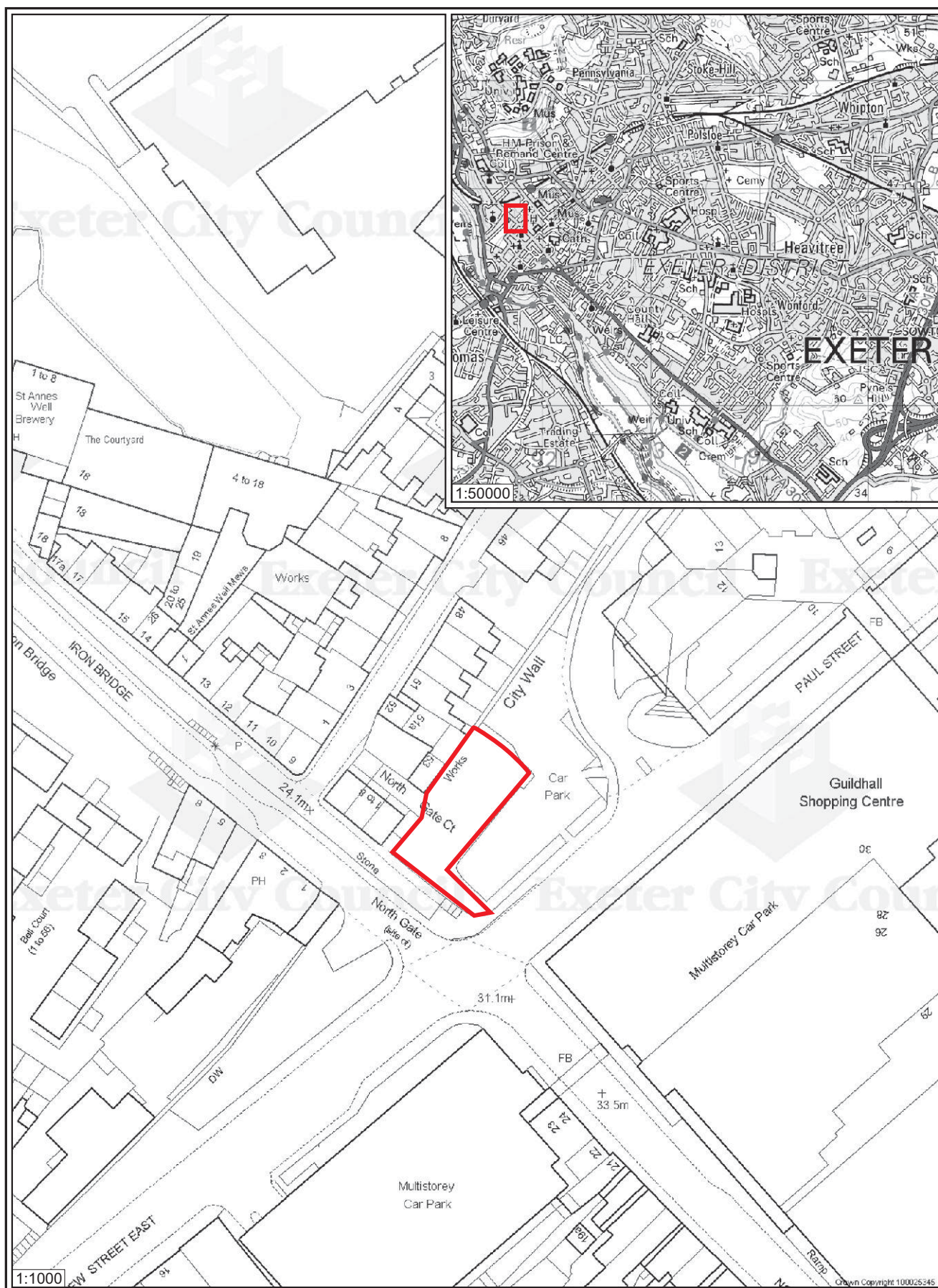


Fig. 1 location of site.

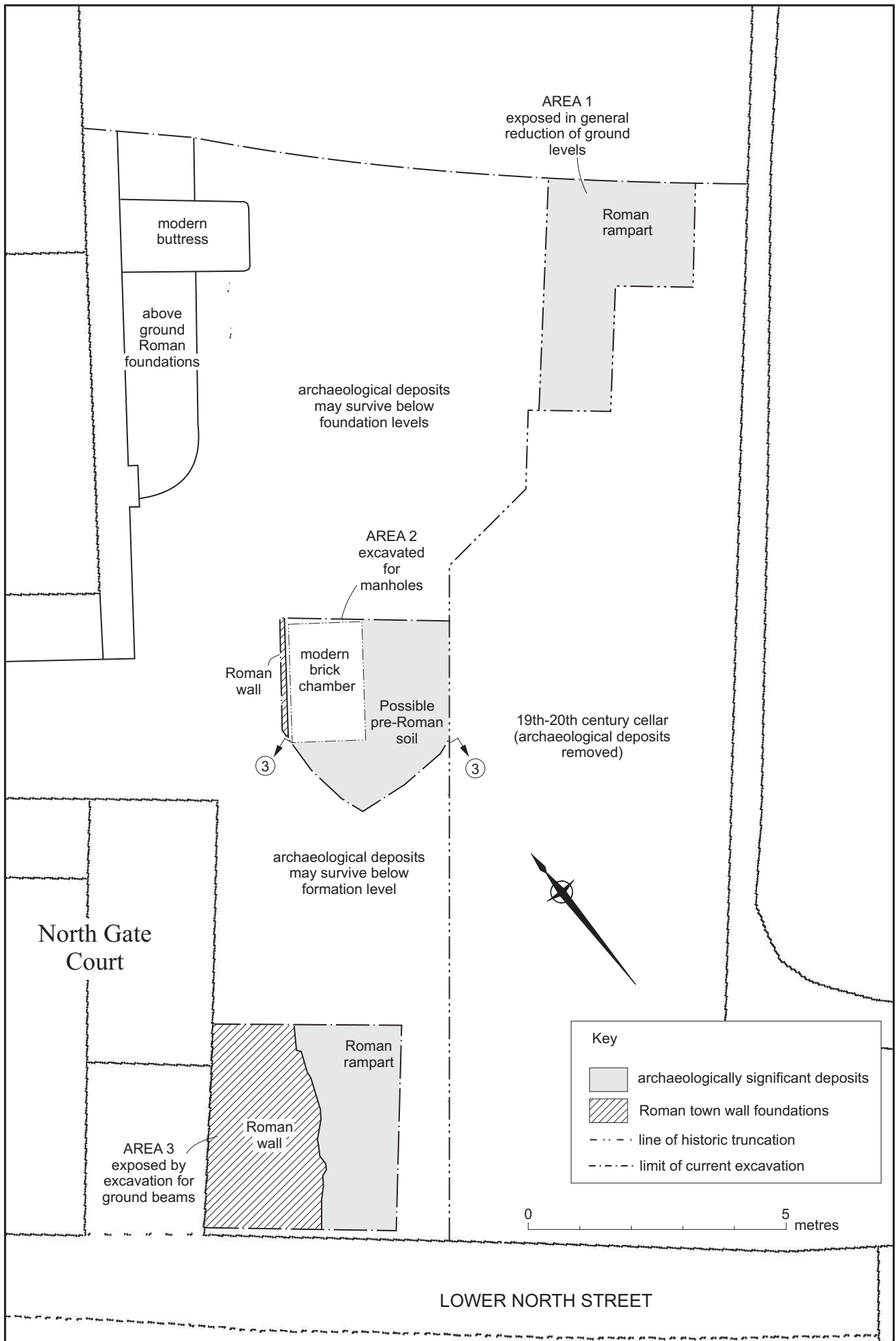


Fig. 2 Plan of North Gate Court showing areas of archaeological exposure.

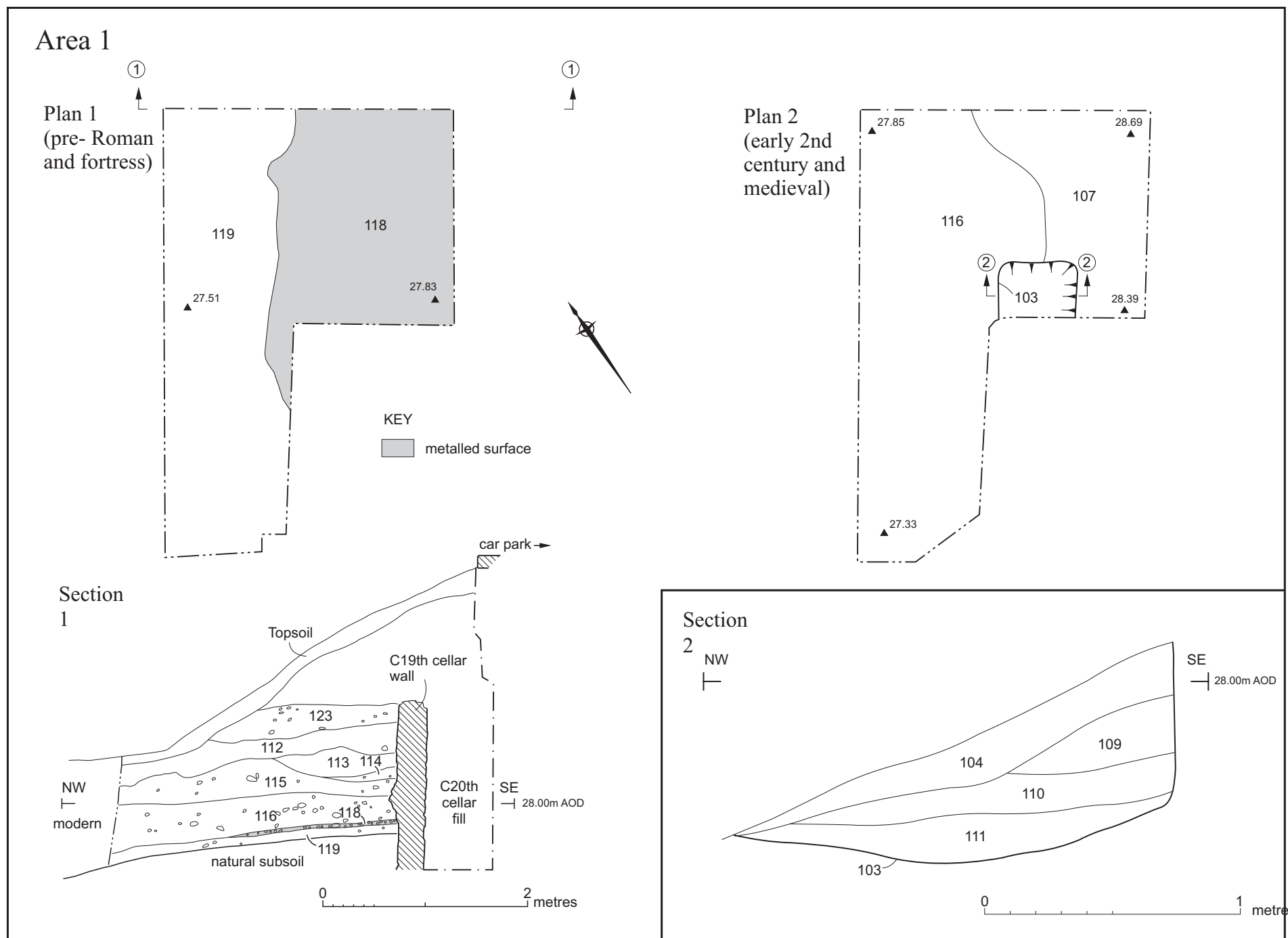
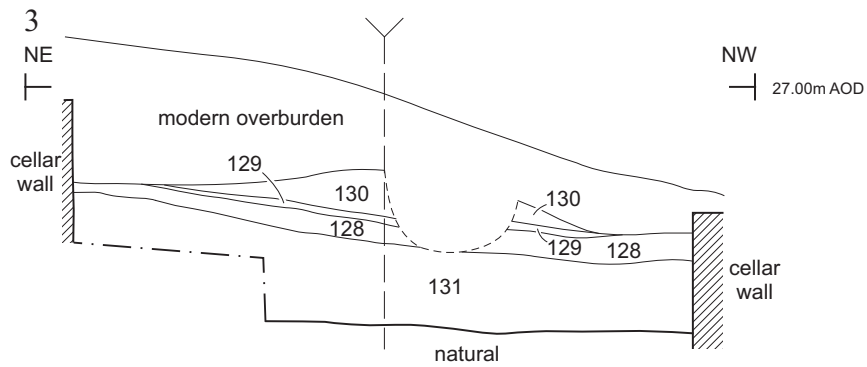


Fig. 3 Area 1, Plans and Sections

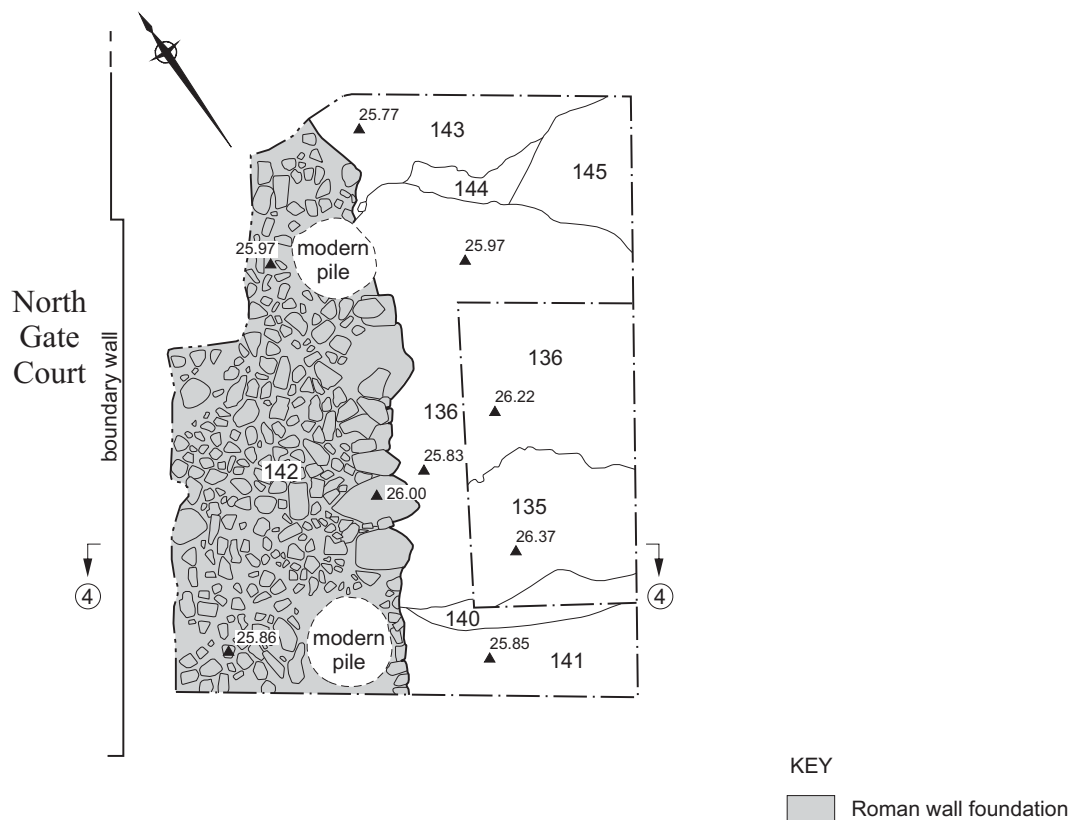
Area 2

Section



Area 3

Plan

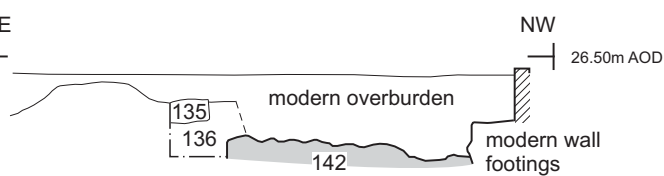


Section

4

SE

NW



0 2 metres

Fig. 4 Areas 2 & 3, Plans and Sections.



Photo 1 Area 1, section through primary bank, looking northeast. 1m scale.



Photo 2 Area 1, metallised surface 118, looking southeast. 1m scale.



Photo 3 Area 1, detail metallised surface 118, looking southeast. 25cm scale.



Photo 4 General site view, showing Area 3 in background. Looking southwest.



Photo 5 Area 3, showing Roman wall foundation 142 and associated rampart material, looking west. Scale 1m.



Photo 6 Area 3, after excavation for ground beams and drainage, looking west. Scale 1m.