

# Report on archaeological investigations in the Braxted folly at Braxted Park Estate, Great Braxted, Essex.



**January 2011**

**report prepared by  
Adam Wightman**

**commissioned by The Morton Partnership for  
Braxted Park Estate.**

CAT project ref.: 10/1c



**Colchester Archaeological Trust**  
12 Lexden Road,  
Colchester,  
Essex CO3 3NF

tel.: (01206) 541051  
(01206) 500124  
email: [archaeologists@catuk.org](mailto:archaeologists@catuk.org)

**CAT Report 555**  
January 2011

## Contents

1	Summary	1
2	Introduction	1
3	Historical background	2
4	Results	3
5	Finds	6
6	Discussion	6
7	Conclusion	8
8	Interpretation of the Braxted folly <i>by Philip Crummy</i>	9
9	Acknowledgements	11
10	References	11
11	Glossary	11

Figures after p 12

## List of plates

Front cover: The supposed 'ice house or cave', view north-east.

Plate 1: Circular patch of bright green grass which could indicate the backfilled cavity of an ice house.

## List of figures

- Fig 1 The location of the structure, shown as red dot.
- Fig 2 The layout of the structure.
- Fig 3 Results.
- Fig 4 Heights inside the structure.
- Fig 5 Section across the structure showing the top of the redeposited clay (L7/L4) and the natural clay (L5) in TP1, TP3 and TP4.
- Fig 6 Section showing the slope in the outer walkway based on the height of the redeposited clay (L7).
- Fig 7 Sections.
- Fig 8 Sections from Test-pit 3.

## 1 Summary

Archaeological investigations were carried out in April and May 2010 in advance of structural repair work to a 19th-century domed structure located on the bank of a lake within Braxted Park Estate, Great Braxted, Essex.

The excavation of four test-pits within the structure produced details on how it was constructed and the nature of the floor levels within both the outer walkway and the central chamber. The structure has been built into a bank (the dam of the lake), resulting in differing levels within the structure and the construction of an internal retaining wall. The internal floor surface was compacted clay, returned to the inside of the structure post-construction. This floor surface exists under a layer of loose debris and modern material. The central chamber was relatively flat and probably originally slightly lower in level than the outer walkway. Layers containing frequent fragments of building material and mortar overlie the redeposited clay in the central chamber and these are interpreted as residue from the demolition of a monument structure or decorative feature that once existed in the central chamber. The demolition may signal the end of use of the structure or perhaps a change in use, perhaps in association with the addition of the lakeside terrace or the Yorkstone platform above. The northern entrance tunnel was probably the original entranceway into the structure before the lakeside terrace and southern access tunnel were constructed. The low roof of the access tunnel appears have been intentional and may have served to add a little mystery and wonder to the process of entering the structure.

The Braxted structure was probably built between 1804 and 1808 when the grounds of Braxted House were re-landscaped by John Johnson for Peter Du Cane II. Its true nature has been in question. The building has been variously described as an ice house, a bath-house, a hermitage or a summer-house. However, a review of the physical and cartographic evidence indicates that it is a folly in the form of an artificial cave. Moreover, the discovery inside the building of blocks of basalt suggests that it was intended to be a modest evocation of Fingal's Cave in Scotland and the poems of Ossian which were popular and fashionable at around the time the folly was built.

## 2 Introduction (Fig 1)

- 2.1 This is the archive report on archaeological investigations carried out by the Colchester Archaeological Trust (CAT) between the 13th April and the 12th May 2010 in a Grade II\* listed domed brick structure located on the north-west edge of a lake within Braxted Park Estate. The work was commissioned by the Morton Partnership in association with Braxted Park Estate, with funding for the project awarded by English Heritage.
- 2.2 Braxted Park Estate comprises around 436ha, of which approximately 200ha lies within the park wall, and is situated in the parish of Great Braxted, Essex, with the nearest town, Witham, being some 2 miles to the south-west (Fig 1). Braxted Park is registered as a Grade II\* listed landscape in the English Heritage 'Register of Parks and Gardens of Special Historic Interest in England'.
- 2.3 In the conservation statement produced by Fiona Wells and Andrew Derrick, it is stated that, although the structure is included in the English Heritage register as an 'ice house' or 'cave', it is unlikely that it was ever intended to be used as an ice house (Wells & Derrick 2009, 49). In the mid 19th century, the building is referred to as a 'hermitage'. Archaeological investigations were undertaken inside the structure with the aim to inform future conservation and restoration and to enable its role in the 19th-century designed landscape to be better understood.
- 2.4 Archaeological investigation was undertaken prior to repair and restoration work on the structure which has been included on the English Heritage Buildings at Risk Register for some years. The structure is suffering from structural movement and partial collapse. Bakers of Danbury undertook preliminary propping of the structure before the archaeological investigations began.
- 2.5 The work undertaken involved the excavation of four test-pits, the cleaning of an exposed floor level and the removal of modern debris from the structure. Two small

test-pits were hand-excavated in the initial phase and the floor level in the central chamber was cleaned. An ornamental stone wall in the north-western bank leading to the southern access tunnel was also cleaned and photographed. Two larger test-pits were excavated in the second phase of the archaeological investigations. Debris in the northern access tunnel and modern build-up in the outer walkway in the south-east part of the structure were also removed during this phase.

- 2.6 This report follows the standards set out in the Institute for Archaeologists' *Standard and guidance for an archaeological evaluation* (IfA 2008a) and *Standard and guidance for the collection, documentation, conservation and research of archaeological materials* (IfA 2008b). The guidance contained in English Heritage's *Management of Research Projects in the Historic Environment* (MoRPHE 2006), and in the documents *Research and archaeology: a framework for the Eastern Counties 1. Resource assessment* (EAA 3), *Research and archaeology: a framework for the Eastern Counties 2. Research agenda and strategy* (EAA 8), and *Standards for field archaeology in the East of England* (EAA 14), was also followed.

### 3 Historical background

The following historical background utilises 'Conservation Statement, Braxted Park, Witham, Essex' by Fiona Wells and Andrew Derrick of The Architectural History Practice (June 2009).

The structure under investigation is located within Braxted Park Estate, a park and woodland of medieval origin. The park was principally developed by three generations of the Du Cane family during the later 18th and early 19th centuries. The Grade II\* listed house was built during the late 17th century and then remodelled and enlarged during the mid 18th century. Recent research suggests that there was probably a house pre-dating the mid 17th century which lay close to or under the site of the present building.

In 1803, following the death of Peter Du Cane I, his second son, also called Peter (Peter Du Cane II, died 1823), immediately set about enlarging and improving the family estate and designed landscape with the help of the architect John Johnson (Surveyor to the County of Essex). Johnson was employed by the estate between 1804 and 1808. The landscaping works implemented by Peter Du Cane II are illustrated in a survey of Braxted Park by W Craggs in 1822. A chain of ponds can be seen on the 1st edition Ordnance Survey map of Essex. This was published in 1805 following field survey undertaken over the previous four or so years (after the completion of the Kent survey). These ponds had been amalgamated and enlarged by the time Craggs' survey had been undertaken. The folly under investigation is situated on the edge of the lake and appears to be marked on the Craggs' survey by the number 32, although the key to the survey has been lost. The design of the folly has been attributed to Johnson, although there are no known surviving plans (Wells & Derrick 2009, 3). The folly is built into an earth dam along the western shore of the lake. This bank of soil was made when the lakes were enlarged and extended. The folly clearly cannot pre-date the bank and, therefore, was presumably constructed between c 1804 and 1808.

A man is said to have lived in the folly for a whole year without washing or shaving after Peter Du Cane II set a wager of £100. This act implies that, from an early date if not the beginning, the structure was intended to be a hermitage (a hermit's dwelling-place), which is how it is referred to in *Whites Directory* of 1848, the earliest documented reference to the structure known to us. In 1861, D W Collier in his *Peoples' History of Essex* also refers to the structure as a 'hermitage' whilst describing its setting (Wells & Derrick 2009, 27).

Next to the folly, a brick Yorkstone-capped wall extends along the western shore of the lake and protects the bank from erosion. Terraced walkways planted on both sides with trees and shrubs are located on the other side of the earth bank and lead to the folly. Above the dome of the structure is a Yorkstone paved platform which appears to be an integral part of the original structure although, like the lakeside terrace, this could conceivably have been a later feature.

Also of note is the presence of a structure to the south-east of the main house labelled as an ice house on the 25" Ordnance Survey map of 1897. This 'ice house' is considerably closer to the main house than the structure under investigation, whilst also being in close proximity to the lakes to the east of the main driveway. No evidence on the ground survives of any structure in this area today. However, a circular patch of bright green grass is visible on Google Earth in this location which could indicate the backfilled cavity of an ice house. The presence of an ice house here would negate the need for the structure under investigation to be used for that purpose (Wells & Derrick 2009, 37).



**Plate 1: Circular patch of bright green grass which could indicate the backfilled cavity of an ice house.**

#### **4 Results** (Figs 2-8)

Work within the structure took place in two phases. This section combines the findings of both of these phases. For a plan of the layout of the structure with the abbreviations used for different structural features, consult Figure 2.

Much of the internal floor of the structure was cleaned prior to, and in association with, the excavations undertaken by CAT. Four test-pits (TP1-TP4) were excavated within the structure; one in the central chamber (TP1), two in the outer walkway (TP2 and TP4), and one which stretched from within the northern entranceway, through the outer walkway and into the central chamber (TP3) (Fig 2). The locations chosen for the test-pits were influenced by the stability of the adjacent brickwork, with work only carried out where there was no visible cracking or subsidence. Employees of Braxted Park Estate, under archaeological supervision, removed modern material which had been deposited in the structure. This resulted in further cleaning and the recording of a small section in the outer walkway. Outside the structure, an ornamental stone wall constructed from large conglomerate stones was cleaned and photographed.

Investigations identified a difference between the deposits in the central chamber and those in the outer walkway. Thus the results below cover these two areas of the structure separately.

##### **Central chamber**

The ground-level in the central chamber of the structure was flat with the exception of a depression in the centre of the structure and bricks protruding from the surface.

Works began with the removal of loose material within the central chamber to uncover these features. The loose sediment was little more than accumulated dust and leaf matter which overlay a firm surface. Much of the surface, particularly in the east of the central chamber, was covered in a thin light grey/white layer (L1) which was dry and cracked. This layer may have been deposited when the internal brickwork was limewashed white. Elsewhere in the central chamber, a compacted clay layer was the uppermost surface (L2; Fig 3). Patches of gravels and timbers had been pressed into the clay. The timbers had been removed, but three sections of empty beam slot, two with fragments of decayed wood, were identified. One beam slot (F2) was well defined in the east whereas it was more ephemeral to the west. A second beam slot (F3) comprised two opposing sections (although it is possible, based on the angles observed in plan, that they were two separate timbers) (Fig 3). Although few in number, the beam slots indicate that some wooden planks had been pressed into the surface of the floor. Numerous bricks were located on top of and within the clay (Fig 3). However, their *ad hoc* positioning and low numbers suggest that the central chamber had not even partly covered by a brick surface. Just off centre in the central chamber, a partly in-filled pit or large post-hole had caused the floor surface to subside so as to form a depression in it (F4; Fig 3). The depression contained loose soil and brick fragments and was located off-centre from the hole in the domed roof. Also recovered from the feature were three nodules of septaria.

Test-pit 1 was located against RW1 Revetment Wall 1) and IP3 (Internal Pier 3) (Fig 2). The size of the test-pit decreased as depth increased due to the solidity of the clay encountered. The layer of probable limewash (L1) was only 4mm thick and directly overlay the compacted clay layer L2, which contained loose soil and brick fragments (Fig 7). Beneath L2 was a layer of clay with frequent brick and mortar fragments with a dense lens of mortar at the top of the layer (L3). Underlying L3, another clay layer very similar in character to L2 was uncovered (L4). L4 sealed the dark yellow/brown natural clay (L5). Upon discovery of the natural clay, it became clear that the two clay layers previously encountered (L2 and L4) were redeposited natural clay with loose soil and brick fragments incorporated. It is possible that L4 is the backfill material in the foundation cut for the revetment wall, although the presence of brick fragments in the clay at some distance from the wall suggests that L4 was more widespread. All of the deposits within the structure were very dry, in particular where the redeposited clay met the brickwork due to the absorption of moisture from the clay into the bricks. Excavation of TP1 ceased when the lowest course of bricks in the revetment wall was encountered. This roughly corresponded with the bottom of L4 and the top of the natural clay L5 on which the lowest course of bricks was situated (Fig 7).

Excavation in the central chamber in TP3 identified dense deposits of brick and mortar interspersed with clay (L12 and L3; Fig 8a/b). The uppermost layer (L12) had rare brick fragments and frequent mortar (including a notable mortar lens) set in a clay matrix. Also incorporated in L12 was a large basalt block (Fig 8b). Other basalt blocks were observed in the demolition layer as well as lying on the surface in the south-western area of the outer walkway. The redeposited clay layer with rare brick fragments identified in TP1 (L4) was also identified beneath L3. In conjunction with the findings from TP1, the identification of L4 at some distance from the cut for IP8 suggests that the layer probably exists throughout the central chamber as opposed to being backfill material in a wall foundation cut. Excavation continued until the natural clay L5 was reached. The lowest course of the internal brick pier (IP8) was not reached and the cut for the pier was observed in the natural clay.

### **Outer walkway**

The ground-level in the outer walkway rises notably from the north-west of the structure to the south-east (Fig 4). TP3 was located on the lower level of the outer walkway and TP2 and TP3 were located on the slope (Fig 2). A considerable quantity of loose building material (brick, stone, etc) and other deposits had accumulated in the outer walkway. Notably, in the south-east behind Sections 1 and 2 of the revetment wall (RW1 and RW2); in the east near the entrance to the side chamber; and in the northern entranceway where it joins the main structure. Much of

the loose material was removed from the structure or collected into heaps during the second phase of the investigations with the help of the staff of Braxted Park Estate.

In TP2, a layer of soft, loose silt covered the area chosen for excavation (L8). This deposit covered the outer walkway in the east of the structure, being notably thicker at the top of the slope. Finds recovered from L8 included modern teapot fragments, the neck of a modern glass bottle (possibly a milk bottle), and a rabbit femur. Directly beneath L8, a linear mortared brickwork structure positioned radially across the outer walkway (Radial Brickwork 1 - RB1), was uncovered (Fig 2). RB1 was made from two lines of bricks, one laid end to end and one laid side by side, and abutted non-retaining connecting brickwork (NRCB 2) between IP1 and IP2 (Fig 2). RB1 was suffering subsidence due to damage by tree roots. Underlying L8 to the north-west of RB1 was a thin layer of limewash (L6) comparable to L1 in the central chamber (see above). As in the central chamber, the limewash was not present across the whole of the outer walkway surface. L6 overlay compacted redeposited clay containing loose soil and brick fragments (L7) (Fig 7). This layer was comparable to L4 in the central chamber (see above). L4 was 0.8m deep and overlay the natural clay (L5). The bottom of L4 corresponded with the lowest course of bricks in the external wall, which in turn matched the lowest brick course in RB1.

In TP3, the uppermost layer was a sandy silt with occasional stones 60mm thick (L9; Fig 8b). L9 covered a mortared brickwork structure only two courses deep (RB3). The upper course was constructed of a single line of bricks laid flat and side by side. The lower course was a double row of bricks laid lengthways and on their sides. RB3 was overlaid by one course of bricks laid flat and side by side in the entrance to the northern access tunnel (NRCB3; Fig 2). Further subsided brickwork courses beneath appeared to abut RB3 (Fig 8c). RB3 continued into the northern access tunnel and beyond the limit of our excavation. It appeared to end without abutting anything where it met the central chamber (Fig 2). To the west of RB3 in the outer walkway, L9 overlay compacted redeposited clay L7 (Fig 8b). The natural clay L5 was identified below L7. The lowest course of bricks in the external wall was identified below the level of the natural clay within a wall foundation cut which had been backfilled with redeposited clay identical to L7 (Fig 8b). In the northern entrance tunnel, a relatively thick layer of gravel in a sandy silt matrix (L10) overlay the redeposited clay (L7; Fig 8d). The gravel was compacted into the clay forming a metallised surface. The gravel partially covered RB3, and it is assumed that this was present across the whole northern access tunnel which was otherwise covered in loose sediment and debris.

Only a thin layer of loose sediment (L8) overlay the redeposited natural clay (L7) in TP4. L7 was notably thin in TP4, with undisturbed natural clay (L5) uncovered 200mm below the existing ground-level (Fig 7), notably higher than it had been identified elsewhere in the structure. A feature containing dense mortar and frequent brick fragments (F5) was cut through L7 and L5 in the southern end of TP4. The feature may be associated with the addition on the lakeside terrace. At the southern end of TP4, the natural clay was softer, darker, and moist (L11; Fig 3). The clay was homogeneous, contained no inclusions, and had an ephemeral edge with the solid natural clay L5. This may have resulted from a natural water-carrying feature such as a stream once flowing across the site where the structure stands today.

Isolated cleaning in the south-western area of the outer walkway uncovered another radial brick structure (RB2) which was directly opposite RB1. It was of the same construction as RB1, although the upper course was damaged and partly missing. Alongside RB2 were further basalt blocks and an area of gravel compacted into the clay forming a metallised surface. Metallised surfacing was not observed elsewhere in the outer walkway. At the base of three of the outer piers (OP1, OP2, OP8), an offset course of brick was observed. A search for probable offsets on the other outer piers was not achievable in the time available.

In the eastern area of the outer walkway, Braxted Park Estate staff removed the loose material L8 (see above), putting to one side any artefacts encountered. The artefacts were all modern and included batteries and a plastic carrier bag. Faunal disturbance (burrowing) had badly affected the floor in this part of the structure and created the illusion that L8 was quite deep. This was not the case and, at the top of the slope (behind RW2), the natural clay (L5) was uncovered after only

approximately 200mm of L8 had been removed. Further down the slope, near to IP2 where numerous burrow entrances were located, a section was recorded across the walkway (Fig 3). A thin layer of L8 overlay the limewash (L6), which sealed redeposited clay (L7; Fig 7). L7 was thick in this area, probably because it had been used to create a gradual slope from the high point behind IP3 down towards the northern entranceway as no evidence for any steps in the structure was observed.

## 5 Finds

Find type	Context	Finds number	Qty	Weight (g)	Description
septaria	F4	1	3	2229.4	large fragments, not worked
pot	L8	2	2	42.7	Fabric 48d modern ironstone, probably from a teapot
glass			1	44.4	neck fragment from a modern bottle, probably a milk bottle
bone			1	3.2	rabbit femur
pottery	L6/L7	3	1	3.4	Fabric 48d modern ironstone, probably from a teapot
wall-plaster			1	56.8	wall-plaster fragment, possibly painted red
peg-tile	L7	4	2	63.8	
			1	152.1	Fabric 40 post-medieval red earthenware, 17th/18th century
peg-tile	L10	5	1	72.1	peg-tile
			1	35.1	Fabric 40 post-medieval red earthenware, 17th/18th century

## 6 Discussion

The archaeological investigations revealed evidence about the construction of the folly and its internal floor (Phase I) as well as later activity within the structure (Phase II). The findings for each phase will be discussed below.

### Construction (Phase I)

Conducting excavations in four different areas and excavating against the brickwork of the structure has provided information on how the structure was constructed. Information about the level at which the natural clay was encountered, the height of the lowest course of bricks, and the nature of the deposits adjacent to the brickwork (in particular the redeposited clay), have been used to make the following observations.

The principal factor influencing the construction methodology was the location of the structure on the north-west facing slope of the large earth dam of the adjacent lake. To facilitate construction on the slope, soil and clay were excavated from the bank to create at least one, possibly more, flat and level construction surfaces or 'terraces'. Depending on how far up the slope or where on the 'terrace' the brickwork was being laid, the bricks were either laid directly onto the natural clay in the bank (ie TP1 & TP2) or into wall foundation cuts (ie in TP3). The ground-level outside the structure would also have influenced whether a wall foundation cut was required. The clay which had been removed from the bank prior to construction was subsequently deposited throughout the structure, having had loose soil and brick fragments incorporated into it, to support the walls and piers. The same clay was redeposited throughout the outer walkway (L7) and the central chamber (L4) and, in most locations investigated, it directly abutted the brickwork of the structure. The redeposited clay overlay what was interpreted to be natural clay (L5). Whether this natural clay had actually been redeposited to create the dam/bank was not



ascertained. However, it was distinguishable from the overlying layers by the absence of brick and mortar and its greater solidity. The only place in the outer walkway where redeposited clay does not overlie the natural clay is at the highest point within the structure, behind RW2 in the south-east. Instead of removing a considerable quantity of soil and clay from this area and then using bricks to build up the height of the wall, this section of the outer wall has been constructed on higher ground than that to the north-west. Consequently, the outer walkway in the south-east is notably higher than to the north-west. This can be seen by comparing the height of the redeposited clay L7 and the natural clay L5 in TP3 and TP4 (Fig 5). Revetment walls were constructed between four of the inner piers in the south-east so that the central chamber could be made level (Figs 2 & 5). The desire to construct a level surface in the central chamber is indicated by the comparable heights at which the natural clay (L5) was encountered in TP1 and TP3 (28.58m AOD and 28.55m AOD respectively; Fig 5). Redeposited clay was used to grade the slope between the higher and lower areas of the outer walkway to create a ramp (Fig 6).

The absence of evidence for a floor surface overlying the redeposited clay suggests that this was the intended finished floor level. In most places in the outer walkway, all that overlay the redeposited clay was a thin layer of loose sediment and building material that had accumulated in the structure. In some parts of the outer walkway, the top of the clay was covered in limewash (L6), and the top of the redeposited clay also matched the bottom of the limewashing on the walls themselves. This indicates that the redeposited clay was the floor-level in the outer walkway when the walls were limewashed, and that limewash was either spilt onto the clay or the floor was itself limewashed to match the walls. Limewashing reflects the fashion for cooler stone colours as opposed to fiery red, and similarly painted brickwork was used for a number of buildings erected in Braxted Park Estate in the 1820s (Wells & Derrick 2009, 25). The top of the redeposited clay also lines up with the top surfaces of the radial brickwork structures, as well as three brick offsets which were noted on the outer piers (OP1, OP2, OP8).

The mortared brickwork structures which were uncovered either concentrically connect piers or brickwork in a non-retaining manner (NRCB 1-3), or link the outer wall with the inner chamber in a radial pattern (RB 1-3) (Fig 2). The depth and solidity of RB 1 and RB 2 suggest that they may have a structural purpose, perhaps as internal braces, although their positioning against the non-retaining connecting brickwork, rather than against an internal pier, does not make good engineering sense. If NRCB 1 and NRCB 2 are substantial in depth, then they may fulfil a structural role. Otherwise they may simply be shallow steps from the outer walkway down into the central chamber (see below). RB 3 does not have a structural purpose as it does not abut brickwork in the central chamber and is only two courses deep. Whether RB 3 and NRCB 3 were functional or just for aesthetic purposes is unclear. Further brickwork structures probably exist within the floor of the structure and may be uncovered when the loose sediment and debris are removed from the structure.

### **Use (Phase II)**

The top of the redeposited natural clay (L4) in the central chamber is relatively flat (there is a slight decline to the north-west), and it is lower than the top of the corresponding redeposited clay in the outer walkway (Fig 5). In TP1, the lowest course of limewashed brick in the revetment wall roughly corresponded with the top of L4. This suggests, as was concluded for the outer walkway, that the redeposited clay L4 was the post-construction floor level in the central chamber. As such, there would have originally been a step down into the central chamber from the outer walkway. The deposits above the redeposited clay L4 are deposited on top of the original floor level and post-date the limewashing of the walls. These deposits are rich in mortar and fragments of building material (L3, L12) and resemble demolition material, perhaps originating from the demolition of a monument or other structure which once stood in the central chamber. As well as frequent mortar and brick fragments, basalt blocks were identified in L12. The presence of large blocks of ornamental stone further supports the idea that a monument stood in the central chamber. The blocks are a similar shape and size to the interlocking basalt column blocks from the 'Giant's Causeway' exposure on the northern coast of Northern

Ireland and from the corresponding exposures of the same lava flow found on the island of Staffa off the west coast of Scotland. The basalt may have been supplied by the Chelmsford stonemason George Wray who supplied a Portland stone cornice to John Johnson in 1806. Septaria nodules were recovered in the base of the depression in the centre of the chamber (F4), but these could have entered the building at a later time. Further brick fragments and basalt blocks in the outer walkway also probably came from a feature in the central chamber. Ornamental stone in the form of a conglomerate stone, not dissimilar to puddingstone, has also been used in the bank that leads to the southern access tunnel. This is likely to be a later addition associated with the addition of the lakeside terrace (Fig 2).

Another layer of clay (L2) overlay a large area of the brick- and mortar-rich deposits in the central chamber (ie TP1). The clay resembled redeposited natural and included lots of large building material fragments, once again probably from a demolition episode. The deposition of the brick- and mortar-rich 'demolition' layers raised the floor level in the central chamber to match that of the outer walkway. This may have been associated with a change in use of the structure. The clay (L2) appeared to have limewash on the surface (L1). However, the depth of the limewash on the adjacent revetment wall implies that, if this is a limewash layer, then it was deposited during a subsequent limewashing episode. The presence of a floor surface above L2 is suggested by beam slots left by timbers pressed into the clay (F2, F3) and the frequent bricks. However, neither are present in sufficient quantity to suggest that there was either a brick or timber floor. The hole in the centre of the chamber (F4) could have held a structure or a post that once stood inside the structure but is more likely to have been caused by erosion due to rain water entering through the hole in the roof above.

In the northern access tunnel, a thick and widespread layer of gravel has been laid as a floor surface. Gravel was identified pressed into the clay elsewhere in the structure but only in isolated patches. The gravel may have been used to provide grip, perhaps in areas prone to becoming slippery. Gravel was also present in the sandy silt layer L9. This deposit may have been deposited by water from the lake flowing through the structure during periods of heavy rain as recalled by Duncan Clark of the Braxted Park Estate. Alternatively, the gravel may have come from the nearby northern access tunnel. The gravel in the northern access tunnel represents the only widespread intentionally laid surface in the structure, and confirms that the northern entranceway was very low indeed.

The artefacts recovered from the structure represent the deposition of cultural material in the structure from the time of its construction (the post-medieval red earthenware sherds), through to modern times (teapot and glass fragments). However, there was no stratification of finds within the central chamber to assist in dating the 'demolition' layers or the overlying clay. Finds of greatly varying age were found stratified closely together in the outer walkway, attesting to the minimal accumulation of material and the constancy of the floor level in this area. The discovery of a rabbit femur in L8 represents the use of the structure use in recent times as a refuge for local wildlife.

Sediment (originating from leaf matter, brick dust, animal waste, etc) has been accumulating in the structure since its construction. Other material, such as L8 which includes modern rubbish, has subsequently been placed in the structure to remove it from sight.

## 7 Conclusion

Details on how the building was constructed were produced during the archaeological investigations. The sloping floor level in the outer walkway reflects the bank into which the structure was constructed, and the redeposition of natural clay excavated from the bank. Little alteration, including no substantial floor surfacing, has occurred in the outer walkway since the structure's completion. Whatever the intended purpose of the structure, it appears to have required the central chamber to be level, resulting in the construction of revetment walls between four of the inner piers. Originally there would have been a step down from the outer

walkway into the central chamber where, as suggested by the demolition material, there probably once stood some kind of monument or other, possibly decorative feature. The ornamental nature of the feature which once stood in the structure is indicated by the presence of several basalt blocks. Further evidence of decoration is minimal; the walls are only limewashed and the structure is quite plain and architecturally modest. The demolition material raised the floor level in the central chamber to match the level of the outer walkway. This may have been done intentionally and could correspond with a change in use of the structure, perhaps in association with the addition of the lakeside terrace or the Yorkstone platform above if it is not an integral part of the original structure. Alternatively the deposition of the demolition material may simply have corresponded with the structure no longer being used. The northern entrance tunnel was probably the original entranceway into the structure before the lakeside terrace and southern access tunnel were constructed. The low roof of the access tunnel appears to have been intentional and may have served to add mystery to the experience of entering the structure.

It may well prove necessary to remove dumps of later material which have accumulated in the structure as part of the restoration programme which is planned for the future. However, if this happens, then ideally any material removed in this way should be scanned for fragments of building material or decorative material which may throw some light on the structure and its use. The removal of loose debris may also uncover further structural features such as more brickwork which should be included on the plans if they are not to be left on display.

## 8 Interpretation of the Braxted folly

by Philip Crummy

The true nature of the Braxted folly has been in question. The building has been variously described as an ice house, a bath-house, a hermitage or a cave. However, the map evidence is clear, because on the Ordnance Survey maps published from 1874/5 to at least 1974, the folly is referred to as 'The Cave'. Other evidence takes us further and points to the folly as being not just a cave, not even just an artificial cave - which it is - but a *special* artificial cave, one with pretensions way beyond its realisation. The Cave at Braxted Park was to be the Ossian connection in Essex - a romantic, but very modest, evocation of Fingal's Cave on the island of Staffa in Scotland. Proof of this extravagant claim is not absolute, but it is hard to avoid this conclusion when the circumstances are closely examined.

The Braxted folly was probably built between 1804 and 1808 when the grounds of Braxted House were re-landscaped by John Johnson for Peter Du Cane II. There is little about the folly to indicate that it was an ice-house. Structurally it does not resemble one. It stood at an inconvenient distance from the main house and, more to the point, early maps show that the estate did possess such a building and that this was only about 175 m away from main house. (The precise site of the ice house appears to be indicated on Google Earth where it shows up as a greenish circular patch on the ground (Plate 1).) Similarly, too, the idea that the folly had been a bath-house seems unsustainable in terms of the physical remains which survive today. Four factors are crucial to its interpretation: 1) the likely date of its construction, 2) its relationship to the lake and the water-level in the lake, 3) the fact that it looks like a cave because of the way the folly sits in relation to the earth bank into which it was cut and, above all, 4) the presence inside the building of blocks of basalt.

To understand the folly, we need to go back to the late 17th and 18th centuries. Three key 'discoveries' are very relevant here. These turned out to be gifts to tourism in Scotland and 'Celtic' culture generally and were subjects of considerable academic and popular interest. First came the Giant's Causeway in Ireland in 1692. Then in 1762-5 came Ossian and his epic poems about the Scottish hero Fingal. Finally, only a few years later, in 1772, came Fingal's Cave off the west coast of Scotland. These 'discoveries' all dovetailed beautifully together to produce some compelling mythology about Ireland and Scotland's long-lost Gaelic past set in some of the most romantic natural settings imaginable.

The Giant's Causeway was discovered or at least brought to the public's attention supposedly by the Bishop of Derry in 1692. In academic circles, intense debate followed as to how the causeway had been formed. Possible explanations included natural forces, men with tools, and even a giant named Finn MacCool. In the years to follow, the site became a major tourist centre.

Between 1761 and 1765, James Macpherson famously published his translations of a cycle of ancient Scottish poems which he claimed to have found in oral and documentary forms. The most influential of these was an epic about a heroic Scottish king called Fingal. The poems were very well received and enjoyed considerable international attention (Napoleon and Thomas Jefferson were enthusiasts) although, from the beginning, doubts were expressed about their authenticity. The poems were narrated and supposedly composed by the blind bard Ossian who was Fingal's son. The poems were so highly regarded by some that Ossian was seen as Scotland's equivalent of Homer.

Fingal's Cave, although off the coast of Scotland, is formed from the same volcanic outflows that make up the Giant's Causeway in Ireland and has the same basaltic columns. The cave was a later and accidental 'discovery', this time by botanist Joseph Banks in 1772. It is a sea-cave, meaning that the floor of the cave was formed by the sea. At that time, the cave was practically unknown even in the Hebrides. Banks was bowled over by what he saw and heard - walls of tall columns of black basalt, a high, arched roof, and eerie echoes of the sea. 'Compared to this what are the cathedrals and palaces built by men!', he wrote (Banks in Pennant 1774, 302 - see below). The cave soon became famous and, despite being isolated and difficult to reach, developed into a fashionable tourist spot for the affluent. By the time Braxted folly was built c 1805, the public interest in Ossian, Fingal and the Giant's Causeway was intense. Inevitably, complaints followed about the way its atmospheric solitude was being spoilt by too many tourists. But still they came, including the great and the creative in search of inspiration and a desire to experience the magic of the place. The list is an impressive one and includes Walter Scott (in 1810), John Keats (in 1818), Felix Mendelssohn (in 1829), J M W Turner (in 1832), William Wordsworth (in 1833), Jules Verne (in 1839), Queen Victoria and Prince Albert (in 1847), Alfred Lord Tennyson, Alice Liddell of *Alice in Wonderland* (in 1878), Robert Adam, David Livingstone (in 1864), and Robert Louis Stephenson (in 1870).

Peter Du Cane II must have been caught up in all the excitement to the extent that he wanted to create his own piece of the legend. Perhaps he, too, had been a visitor to Fingal's Cave. But his creation would not have been unique. There are at least four Ossian Caves, in Scotland. Three are natural structures (Glen Coe, Arran, and Aonach Dubh), whereas the famous Ossian Cave in Dunkeld is an 18th-century folly.

It is sometimes said that Fingal's Cave was given its name by Mendelssohn who composed his evocative *Fingal's Cave (Hebrides Overture)* as a result of his visit there in 1829. If this were true, then this would present us with a problem because it would mean that the Braxted Folly as a cave would have been too early to have been associated with Ossian, Fingal and hence (crucially) blocks of basalt. But Mendelssohn did not give Fingal's Cave its name. The cave was known by this title when Joseph Banks discovered it in 1772. The evidence for this lies in a revised version of a travel book, *A Tour in Scotland, and voyage to the Hebrides 1772*, by a botanist called Thomas Pennant. Published in 1774, the book includes an account by Joseph Banks himself of his discovery of the cave (pp 299-309). Banks describes a conversation with one of his guides in which he was told the cave was known as Fingal's Cave. He also gave Pennant permission to publish an engraving of a drawing which John Frederick Miller, one of his draftsmen, made of the cave at the time. The illustration is captioned in Pennant's book as 'Fingal's Cave', making no doubt about the early date of the name.

Peter Du Cane II offered a hundred pounds to anybody who would spend a year in the cave in Braxted Park without washing or shaving. Plainly he also saw the cave as a hermitage as well as a place to be associated with the Fingal legends. Interestingly and significantly, the builder of the Ossian Cave in Dunkeld tried to find a hermit for his cave, too. Evidently Peter Du Cane was successful in his search

(Wells & Derrick 2009, 27) but, given this was just a temporary exercise, it seems that we should be content to regard the building as a folly which was evidently known for many years known as The Cave.

## 9 Acknowledgements

This project was commissioned by The Morton Partnership and funded by English Heritage, to whom the Trust is grateful. Site work was undertaken by Adam Wightman aided by Chris Lister and Nigel Rayner. Illustrations by Chris Lister. We would also like to thank Bakers of Danbury for stabilising the building prior to archaeological investigations and for providing the generator and lights during the first phase of the works.

## 10 References

- |                       |       |  |
|-----------------------|-------|--|
| Coller, D W           | 1861  | <i>Peoples History of Essex</i> , pp 385-8   |
| EAA 3                 | 1997  | <i>Research and archaeology: a framework for the Eastern Counties 1. Resource assessment</i> , East Anglian Archaeology, Occasional Papers, <b>3</b> , ed by J Glazebrook                    |
| EAA 8                 | 2000  | <i>Research and archaeology: a framework for the Eastern Counties 2. Research agenda and strategy</i> , East Anglian Archaeology, Occasional Papers, <b>8</b> , ed by N Brown & J Glazebrook |
| EAA 14                | 2003  | <i>Standards for field archaeology in the East of England</i> , East Anglian Archaeology, Occasional Papers, <b>14</b> , ed by D Gurney  |
| IfA                   | 2008a | <i>Standard and guidance for archaeological field evaluation</i>   |
| IfA                   | 2008b | <i>Standard and guidance for the collection, documentation, conservation and research of archaeological materials</i>  |
| MoRPHE                | 2006  | <i>Management of Research Projects in the Historic Environment</i> (English Heritage)  |
| Wells, F & Derrick, A | 2009  | 'Conservation Statement, Braxted Park, Witham, Essex'  |
| White                 | 1848  | (Great Braxted) <i>Directory of Essex</i>  |

## 11 Glossary

AOD	above ordnance datum
context	on an excavation site, a specific location (especially of finds)
feature	an identifiable thing like a pit, a wall, a floor; can contain 'contexts'
IfA	Institute for Archaeologists
layer	distinct or distinguishable deposit of soil
modern	period from c AD 1800 to the present
natural	geological deposit undisturbed by human activity
NGR	National Grid reference
peg-tile	rectangular thin tile with peg-hole(s) used mainly for roofing, first appeared c AD 1200 and continued to present day, but commonly post-medieval to modern
post-medieval	after c AD 1500 to c AD 1800
prehistoric	the years BC



**Colchester Archaeological Trust**

12 Lexden Road,  
Colchester,  
Essex CO3 3NF

tel.: (01206) 541051  
(01206) 500124

email: [archaeologists@catuk.org](mailto:archaeologists@catuk.org)

checked by: Philip Crummy  
date: 17.01.11

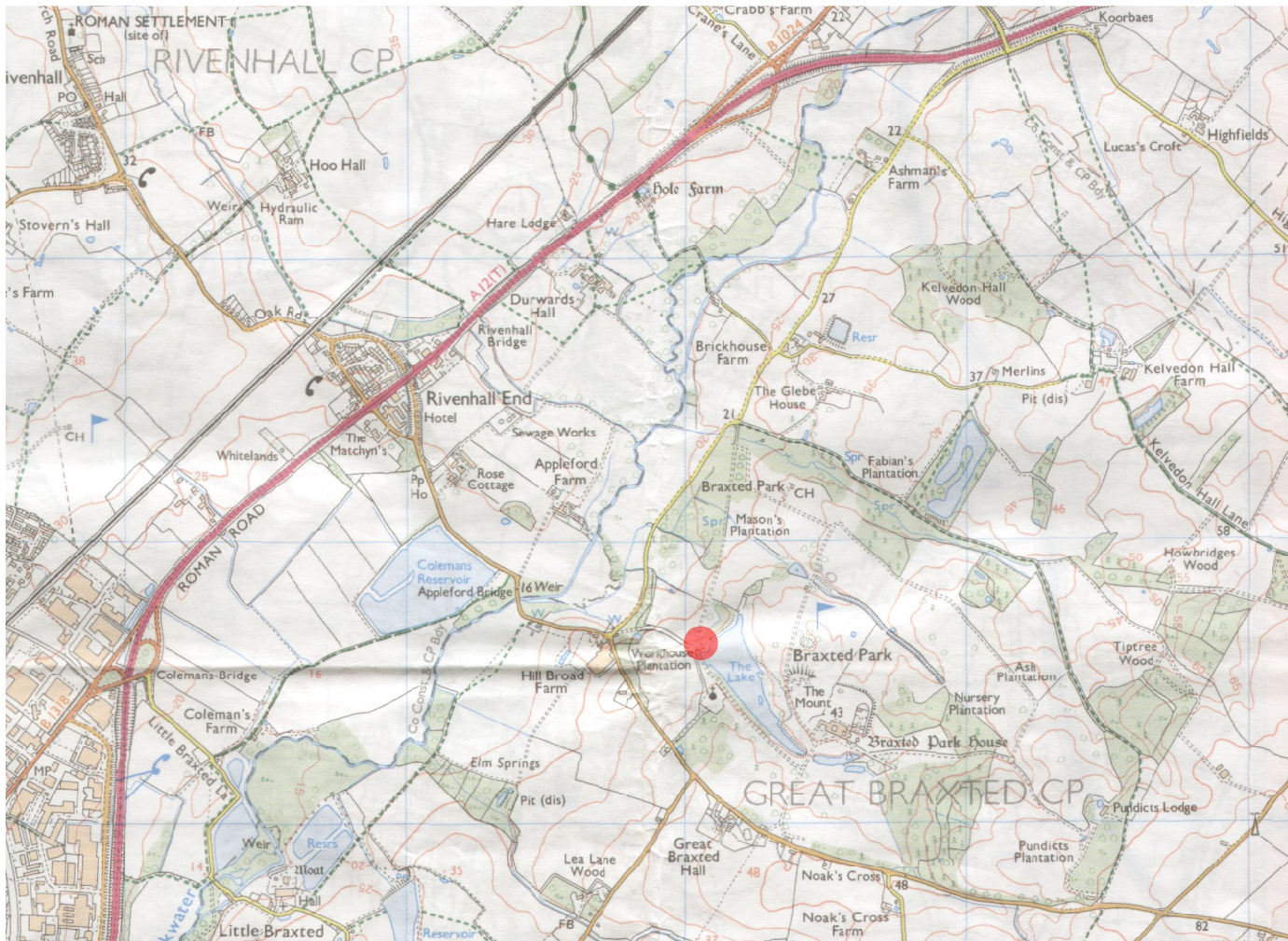


Fig 1 The location of the structure, shown as red dot.

© Crown copyright. All rights reserved. Licence number 100039294.



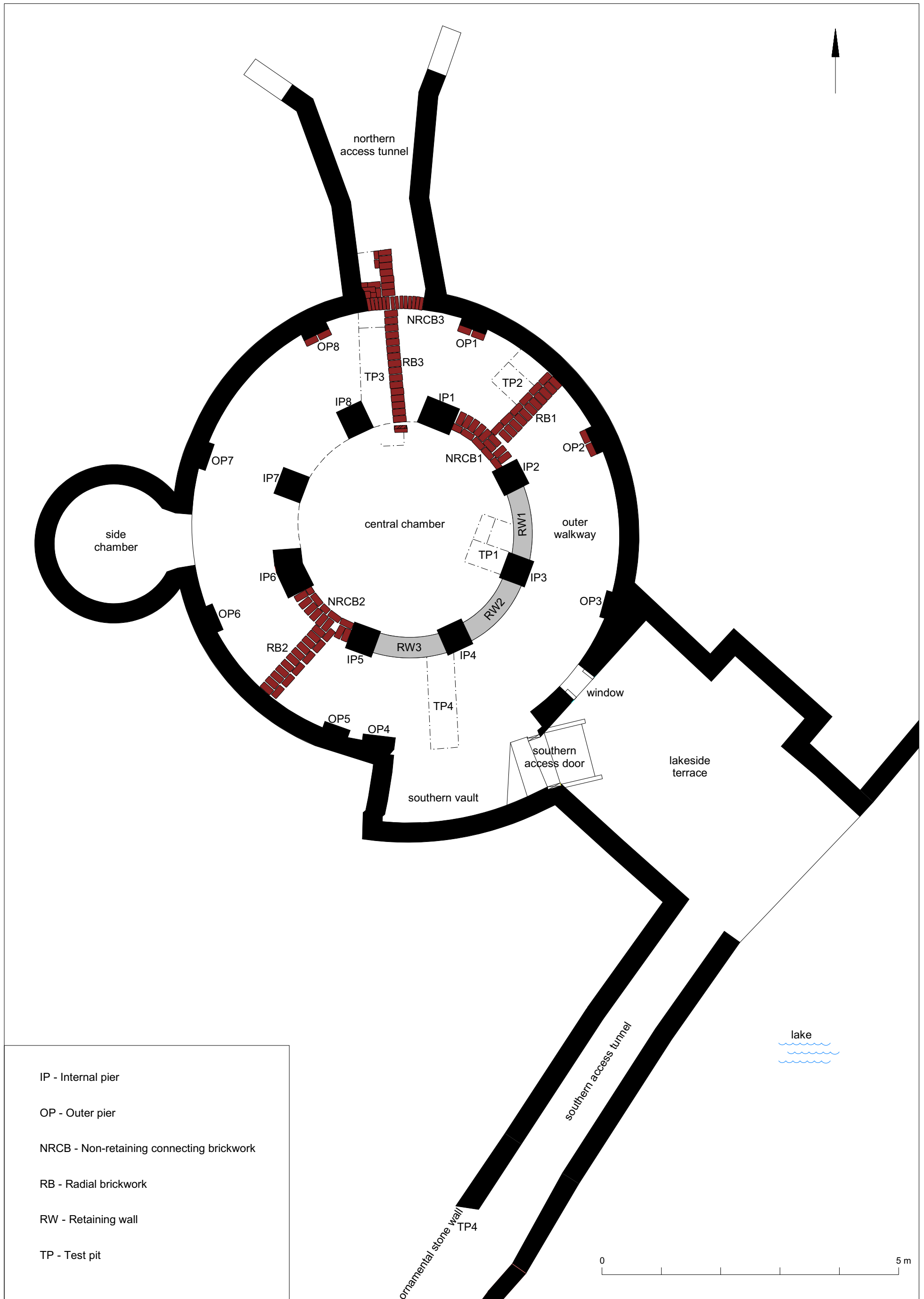


Fig 2 The layout of the structure.



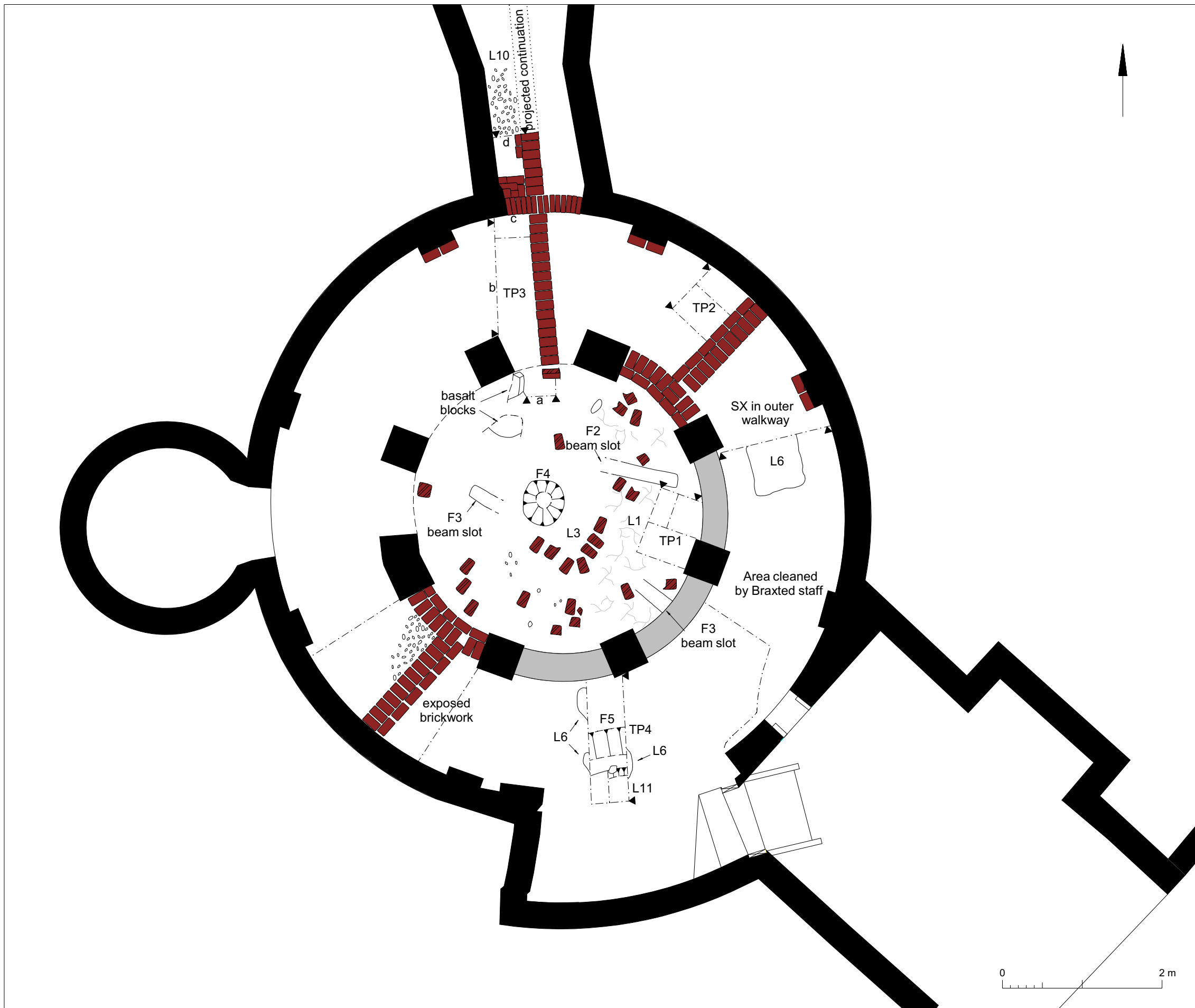


Fig 3 Results.



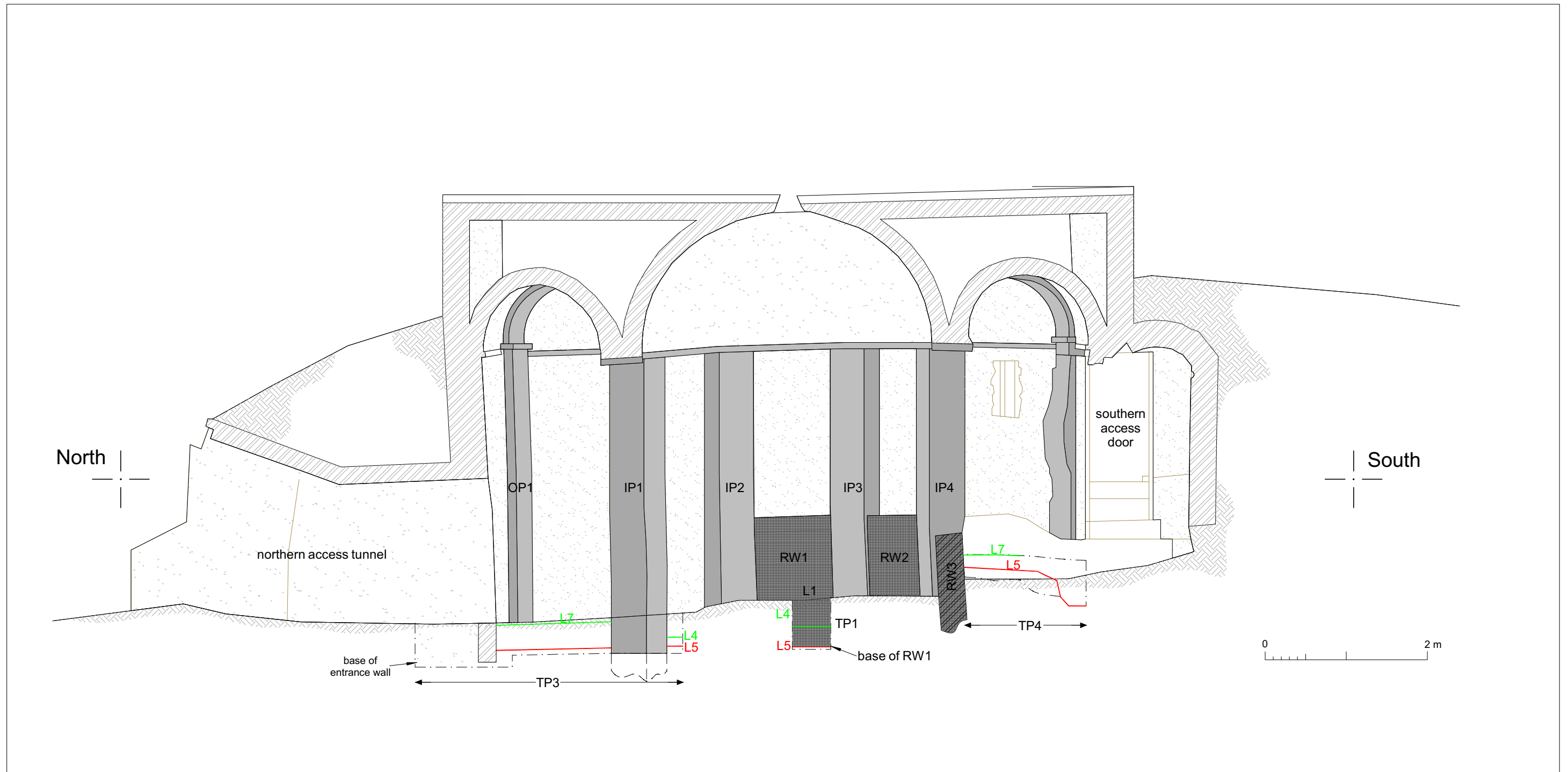


Fig 5 Section across the structure showing the top of the redeposited clay (L7/L4), and the natural clay (L5), in TP1, TP3 and TP4.

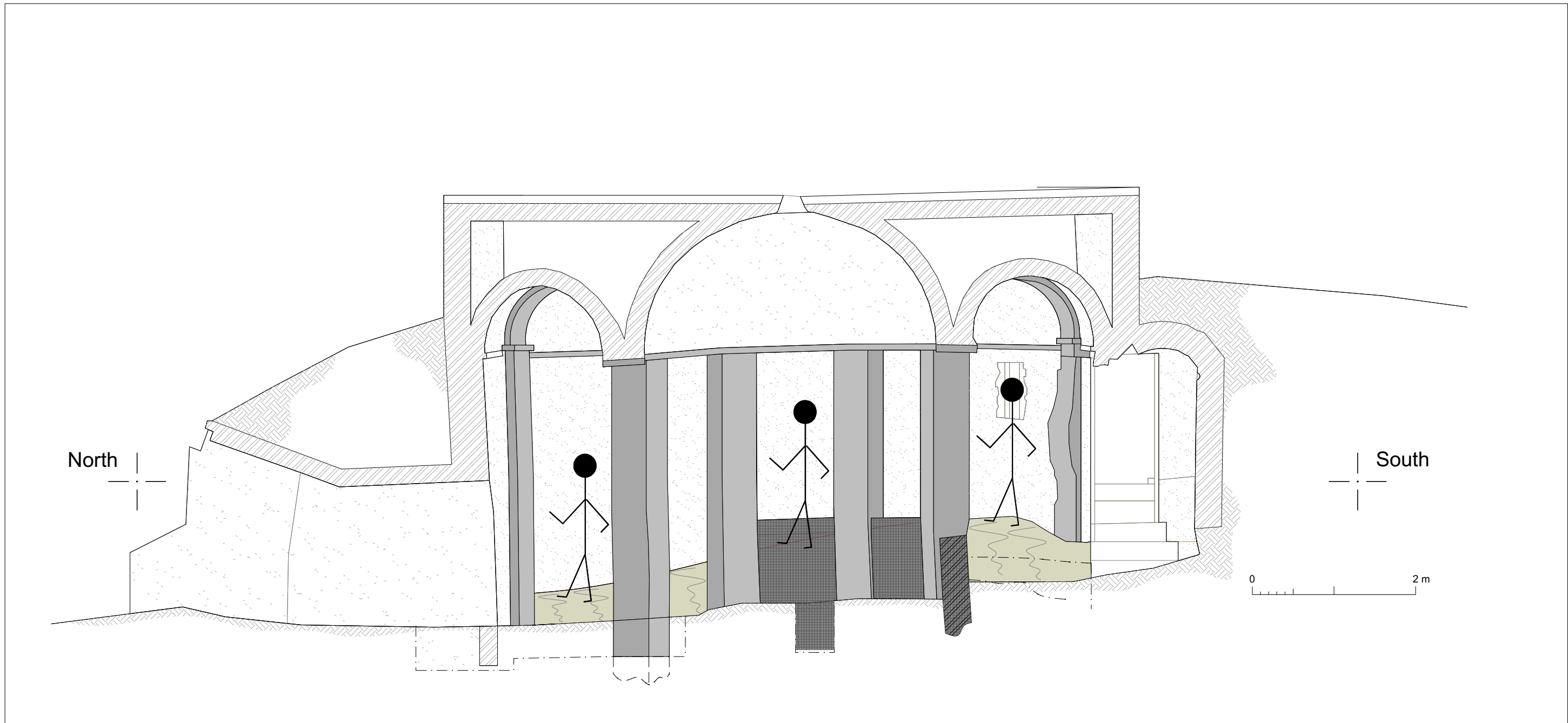
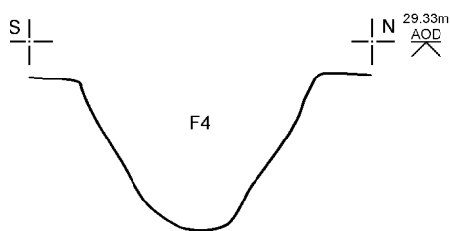
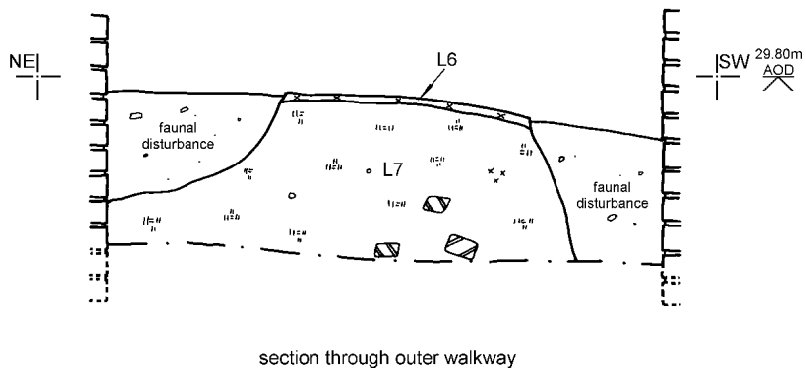
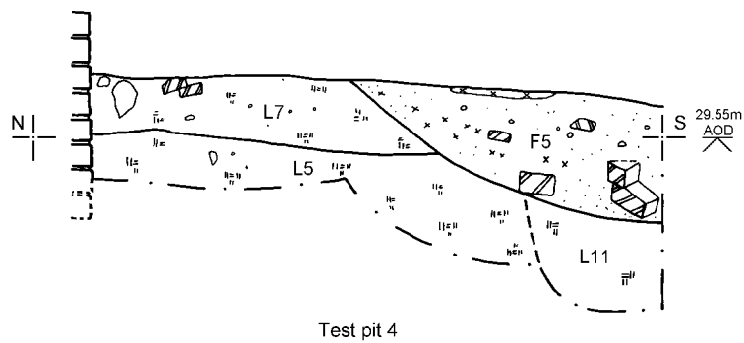
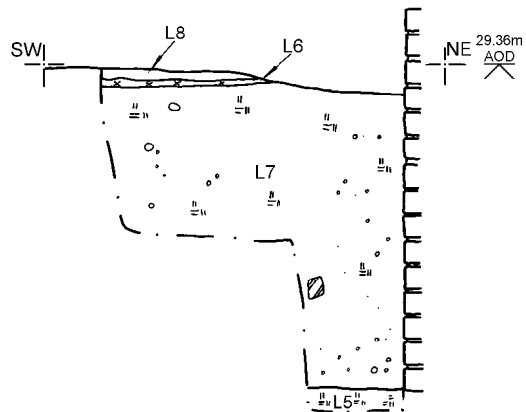
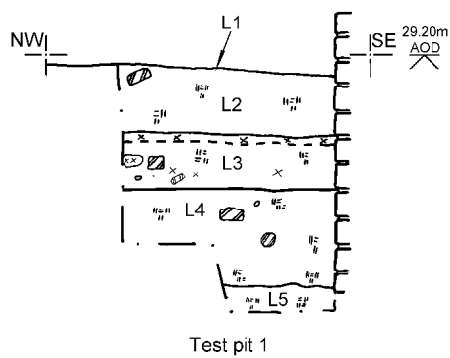


Fig 6 Section showing the slope in the outer walkway based on the height of the redeposited clay (L7).



- clay
- mortar
- small stones
- sand
- post-Roman brick

Fig 7 Sections.



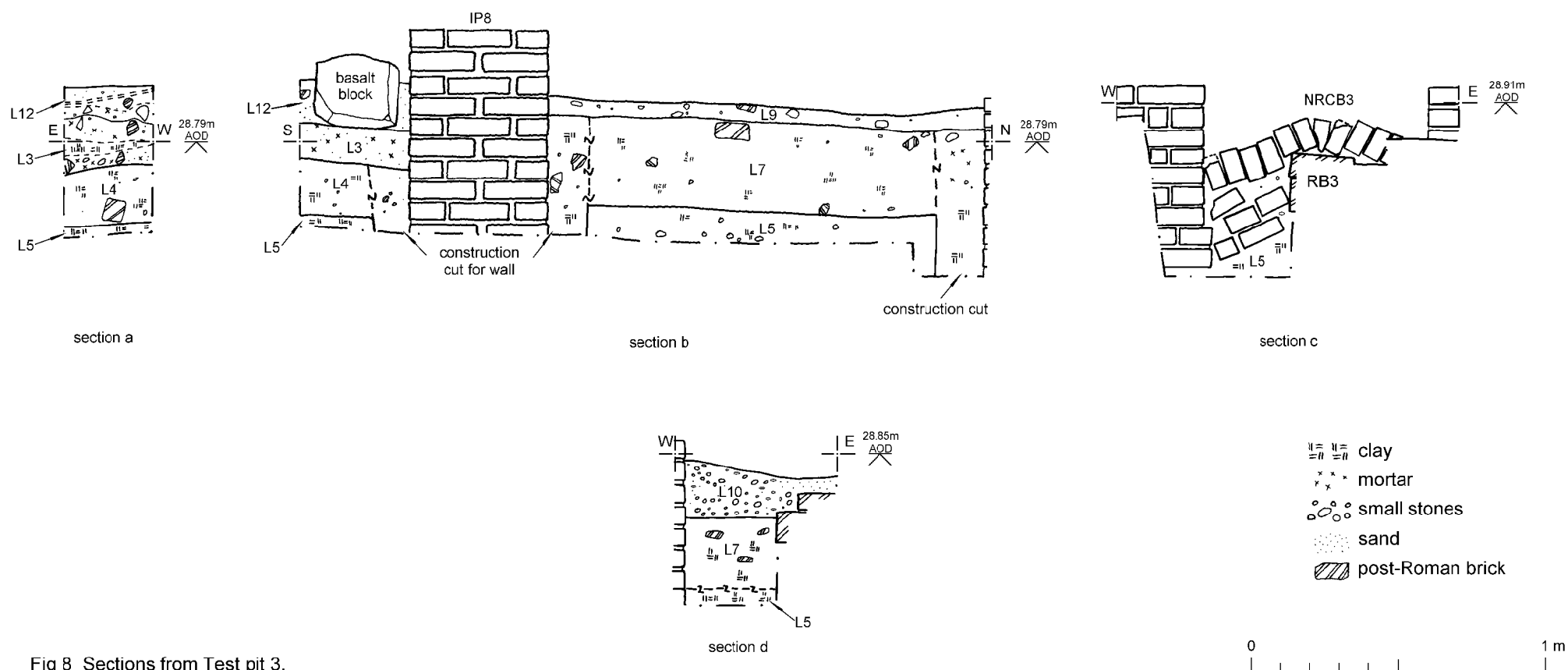


Fig 8 Sections from Test pit 3.

# Essex Historic Environment Record/ Essex Archaeology and History

## Summary sheet

### CAT Report 555

<b>Address:</b> Braxted Park, Great Braxted, Essex	
<b>Parish:</b> Great Braxted	<b>District:</b> Uttlesford: Planning ref: n/a
<b>NGR:</b> TL 85080 15639	<b>Site code:</b> CAT project code – 10/1c
<b>Type of work:</b> Watching brief	<b>Site director/group:</b> Colchester Archaeological Trust
<b>Date of work:</b> April-May 2010	<b>Size of area investigated:</b> 25 sq m
<b>Location of curating museum:</b> Chelmsford – n/a	<b>Funding source:</b> Owner (Braxted Estate)
<b>Further seasons anticipated?</b> No	<b>Related EHER number:</b> -
<b>Final report:</b> CAT Report 555	
<b>Periods represented:</b> 19th and 20th centuries	
<p><b>Summary of fieldwork results:</b></p> <p><i>Archaeological investigations were carried out in April and May 2010 in advance of structural repair work to a 19th-century domed structure located on the bank of a lake within Braxted Park Estate, Great Braxted, Essex.</i></p> <p><i>The excavation of four test-pits within the structure produced details on how it was constructed and the nature of the floor levels within both the outer walkway and the central chamber. The structure has been built into a bank (the dam of the lake), resulting in differing levels within the structure and the construction of an internal retaining wall. The internal floor surface was compacted clay, returned to the inside of the structure post-construction. This floor surface exists under a layer of loose debris and modern material. The central chamber was relatively flat and probably originally slightly lower in level than the outer walkway. Layers containing frequent fragments of building material and mortar overlie the redeposited clay in the central chamber and these are interpreted as residue from the demolition of a monument structure or decorative feature that once existed in the central chamber. The demolition may signal the end of use of the structure or perhaps a change in use, perhaps in association with the addition of the lakeside terrace or the Yorkstone platform above. The northern entrance tunnel was probably the original entranceway into the structure before the lakeside terrace and southern access tunnel were constructed. The low roof of the access tunnel appears have been intentional and may have served to add a little mystery and wonder to the process of entering the structure.</i></p> <p><i>The Braxted structure was probably built between 1804 and 1808 when the grounds of Braxted House were re-landscaped by John Johnson for Peter Du Cane II. Its true nature has been in question. The building has been variously described as an ice house, a bath-house, a hermitage or a summer-house. However, a review of the physical and cartographic evidence indicates that it is a folly in the form of an</i></p>	

*artificial cave. Moreover, the discovery inside the building of blocks of basalt suggests that it was intended to be a modest evocation of Fingal's Cave in Scotland and the poems of Ossian which were popular and fashionable at around the time the folly was built.*

***Previous summaries/reports:***

***Keywords:*** folly, cave, basalt,  
Fingal's

***Significance:*** \*\*

***Author of summary:***  
Adam Wightman

***Date of summary:***  
January 2011