

Rooms below the Nisi Prius Court, Shire Hall, Dorchester, Dorset

An Archaeological Field Evaluation



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An Archaeological Field Evaluation

for

West Dorset District Council

by



Brickfield Offices, Maperton, Wincanton, Somerset. BA9 8EG.
T: 01963 824696
F: 07092 259858
E: mail@contextone.co.uk
W: www.contextone.co.uk

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Project Director: Richard McConnell
Fieldwork Manager: Stuart Milby
Project Officer: Daniel Brace
Fieldwork team: Daniel Brace, Lee Newton and Louis stafford
Post-Excavation co-ordinator: Tara Fairclough
Report: Richard Tabor
Research: Richard Tabor
Graphics: Tara Fairclough

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Non-Technical Summary

Context One Archaeological Services Ltd undertook an archaeological field evaluation on rooms below the Nisi Prius Court at Shire Hall, Dorchester (centred on NGR SY 69099 90734). The work was commissioned and funded by Dorset County Council and was carried out in May 2012.

The archaeological investigation was situated in the basement of Shire Hall, built at the end of the 18th century, in an area where the Tolpuddle Martyrs were held during their infamous trial. The conditions in the basement affected access and safety, hence restricted the scope of the work. A well found under rubble is probably broadly contemporary with the construction of the Hall. There was also evidence for strengthening of an original internal wall.

The ground had been levelled by cutting into the natural chalk to provide a stable base for the hall. It is very unlikely that Romano-British deposits would survive and improbable that there might be remains of even large scale monumental Neolithic features of the kind found nearby

1. Introduction

- 1.1 Context One Archaeological Services Ltd (COAS) undertook an archaeological field evaluation on rooms below the Nisi Prius Court at Shire Hall, Dorchester (centred on NGR SY 69099 90734; hereafter referred to as the Site). The work was commissioned and funded by Dorset County Council. It was preceded by a Site visit on 5th May to assess issues of safety and logistics, prior to the work being carried out by two archaeologists on 11th May 2012.
- 1.2 The field evaluation was requested by Mr Steve Wallis (Senior Archaeologist, Dorset County Council), following a consultation request from Mr Steve Woollard (West Dorset District Council), in anticipation of the development of a heritage resource in the space. The purpose of the field evaluation was to determine the archaeological potential of the Site. The trial test pit (TP) locations were agreed with the Mr Wallis and Mr Woollard.
- 1.3 The request for the archaeological work follows advice given by Central Government as set out in *Planning Policy Statement (PPS) 5: Planning for the Historic Environment* (2010). The recommendation also conforms to County Structure and Local Plans.
- 1.4 This report summarises the topographical, geological and archaeological setting of the site, and presents the results of the evaluation.

2. Definition and objectives of a Field Evaluation

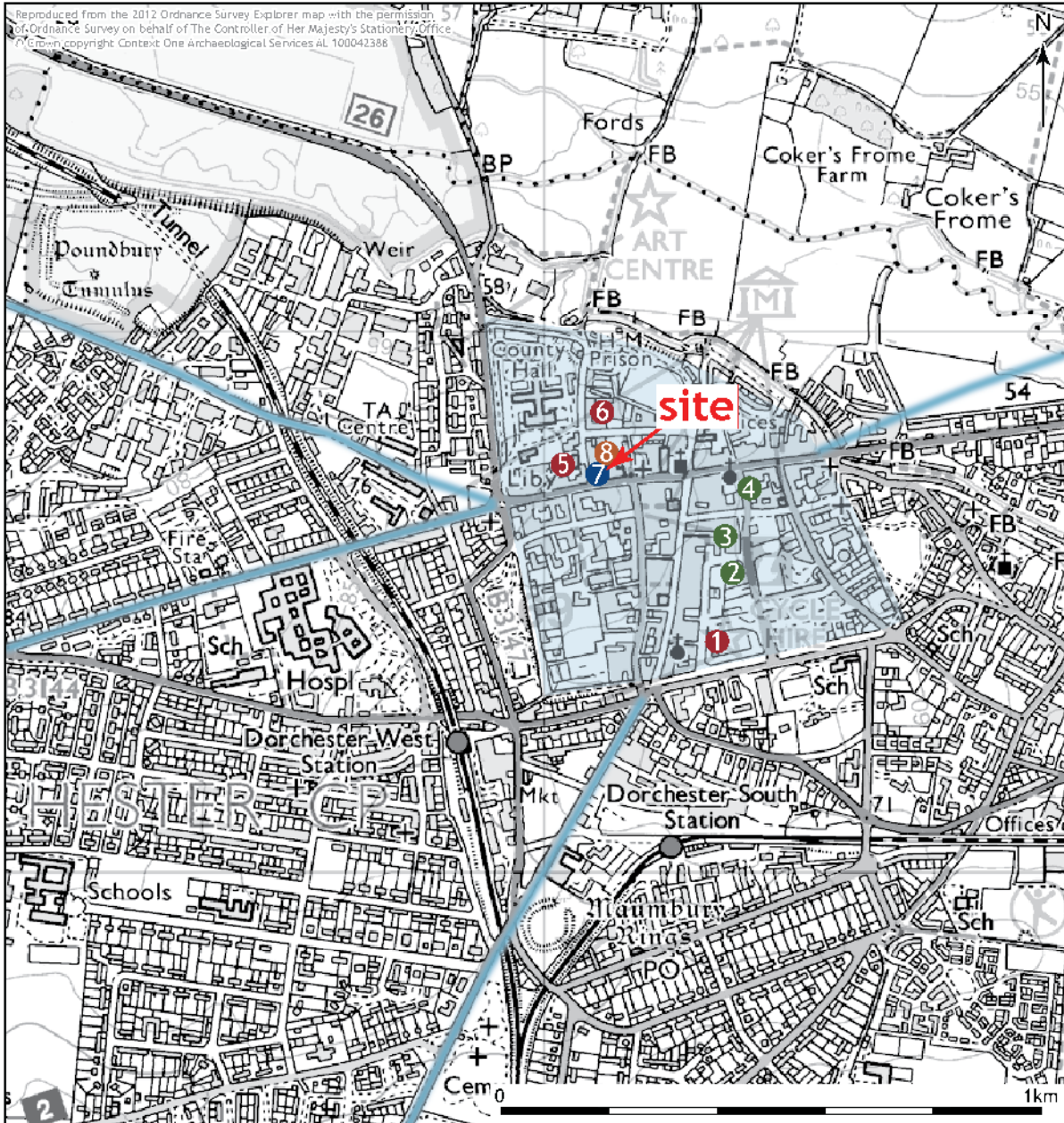
- 2.1 An Archaeological Field Evaluation is defined by the Institute for Archaeologists (IfA) (formerly the Institute of Field Archaeologists) as:

“a limited programme of non-intrusive and/or intrusive fieldwork which determines the presence or absence of archaeological features., structures, deposits, artefacts or ecofacts within a specified area or site on land, inter-tidal zone or underwater. If such archaeological remains are present field evaluation defines their character, extent, quality and preservation, and enables an assessment of their worth in a local, regional, national or international context as appropriate.” (IfA 1994 rev. 2008).

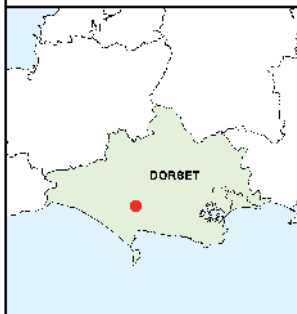
- 2.2 The purpose of a Field Evaluation is also defined by the IfA as:

“...to gain information about the archaeological resource within a given area or site (including presence or absence, character, extent, date, integrity, state of preservation and quality), in order to make an assessment of its merits in the appropriate context, leading to one or more of the following:

- *the formulation of a strategy to ensure the recording, preservation or management of the resource;*
- *the formulation of a strategy to initiate a threat to the archaeological resource; and*
- *the formulation of a proposal for further archaeological investigation within a programme of research (IfA 1994 rev. 2008).*



- | | |
|--|--|
| 1. SMR No. MDO 18235 Roman Road | 5. SMR No. MDO 18732 Timber structure |
| 2. SMR No. 1 041 400 Post Hole, Timber Circle | SMR No. MDO 18737 Wall |
| SMR No. 1 041 401 Ditch | SMR No. MDO 18741 Conduit |
| 3. SMR No. 1 041 295 Post Alignment, Timber Circle | 6. SMR No. MDO 18761 Chalk surface |
| SMR No. 1 041 296 Ditch | 7. SMR No. DDD 11458 Shire Hall, Grade I listed building |
| 4. SMR No. MDO 18814 Post Hole, Timber Circle | 8. COAG evaluation 2011 |



- Neolithic
- Romano-British
- extents of Roman town
- Roman road
- Post-medieval
- modern

PROJECT TITLE

Shire Hall, Dorchester, Dorset

FIGURE TITLE

Site setting showing relevant archaeological landscape

SCALE

as shown

PROJECT CODE

C1/EVA/11/SHD

FIGURE NO.

1

3. Site Location, Topography and Geology

- 3.1 Situated in Dorchester in Dorset, the Site (centred on NGR SY 69099 90734) is north west of the centre of Romano-British *Durnovaria* (Figure 1), as bounded by the town walls. It comprised two basement rooms, B6 and B7, midway along the west side of Shire Hall, on the east side of the south end of Glyde Path Hill.
- 3.2 The underlying geology comprises Cretaceous chalk of the Portsdown Chalk Formation, which may include marl seams and bands of flint. The marls do not occur towards its upper boundary (BGS 2012). The area is characterised by freely draining, lime-rich, loamy soils and shallow lime-rich soils over chalk or limestone (Multi Agency Geographic Information for the Countryside (MAGIC), 2009).
- 3.3 The road to the west of the Site is at ca. 74m above Ordnance Datum (aOD). The natural forming the Site floor is at ca. 71m aOD.

4. Archaeological and historical background

- 4.1 Dorchester is a town rich in archaeology both within its boundaries and in the wider landscape, including sites of national importance ranging from the Neolithic to Romano-British periods. Relevant archaeological background within the environs of the Site has been drawn from secondary sources. They comprise records held by Dorset County Council as part of the County Historic Environment Record (HER). The principal items and areas of interest are located on Figure 1 and summarised in Appendix 1 alongside their corresponding HER number and reference number for the figure.
- 4.2 The intensity of activity is reflected in the large number of sites recorded in the Dorset County records so only those considered relevant to the present project have been used. The considerable number of entries for Medieval features and Post Medieval listed buildings have been omitted entirely from the maps and from the subsequent presentation of the archaeological and historical background. A fuller summary is presented in Tabor 2011, but for detail a number of books deal material from in and around the area (i.e. Woodward 1991)

Prehistoric

- 4.3 The Neolithic is represented by a ring of massive post pits at Greyhound Yard and Church Street (Figure 1, 2-4; Woodward et al. 1993, 23-30), 300m south of the Site and Maumbury Ring, 800m south south east (not shown). Neolithic and Iron Age discoveries at Maiden Castle hillfort (3km south west) have formed an important part of European archaeological literature for over seven decades. A second hillfort, Poundbury (Figure 1, north west corner), lies 800m west north west of the Site.

Romano-British

- 4.4 Excavations from 1968 to 1988 within a 300m arc south of the Site have added greatly to the knowledge of the area within the town walls of *Durnovaria* (Woodward et al. 1993, fig. 1C) and publication of older excavations of the bath house within the south east walls are eagerly anticipated.
- 4.5 Since then there has been further work within the Romano-British walled town which has shed light on the defences (Smith 1990, 110), buildings dating from throughout the period and less substantial features such as pits, post holes and gullies (Davis 1990, 110). A mosaic and tessellated pavement was discovered to the rear of a house in Glyde Path Hill in 1957 (Farrar 1960). The pavement and mosaic were within a 5m radius of a COAS evaluation trench (Tabor 2011, trench 2). Neither feature has been more closely dated than to the Romano-British period.

Post-medieval

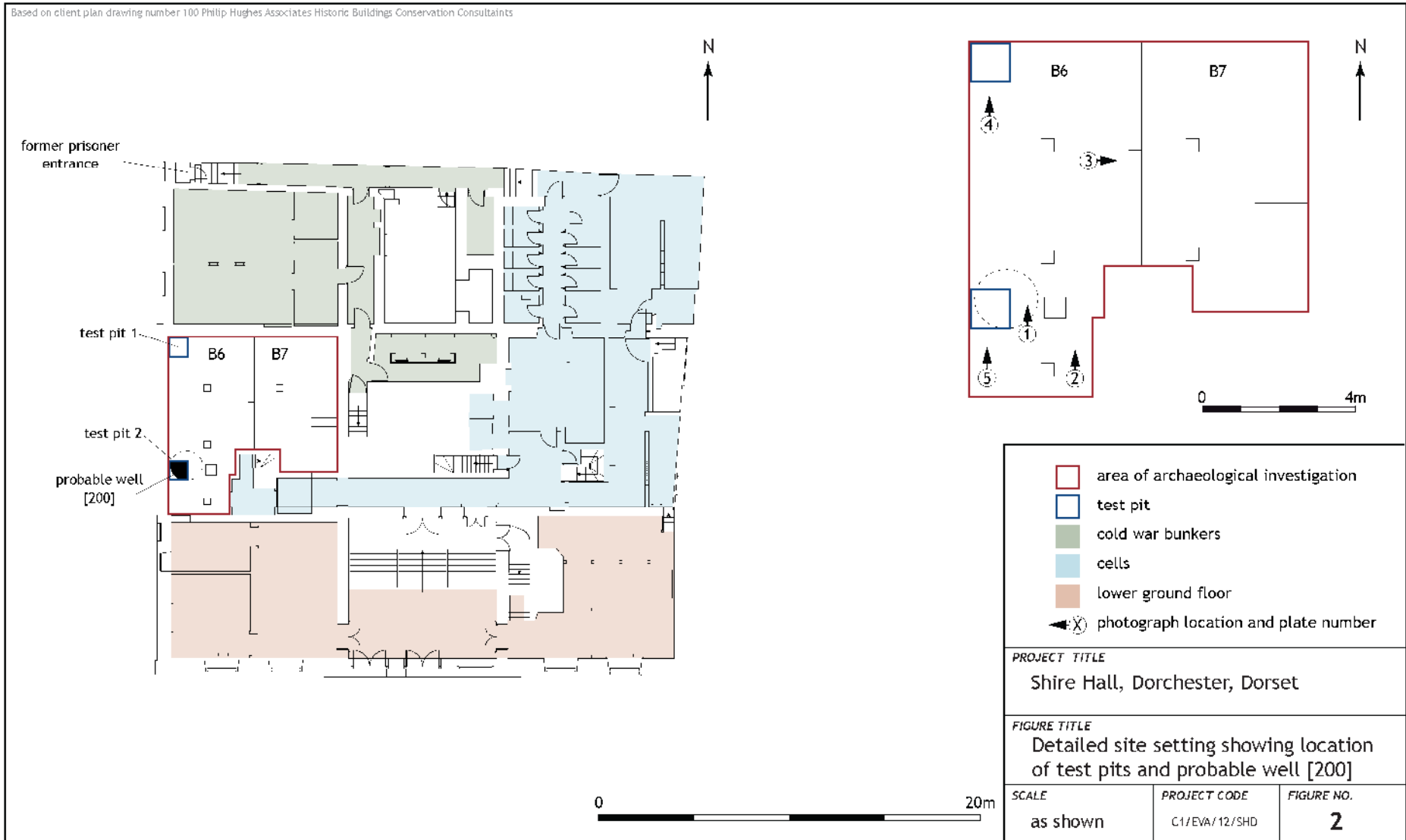
- 4.6 The Shire Hall within which the Site is set was designed by architect Thomas Hardwick and built ca. 1797. The court on the ground floor is infamous as the location of the trial of the Tolpuddle Martyrs 1834, hence remaining a site of great significance for British Trade Unionism. The six men, who were kept in a holding cell in the basement, which is part of the Site, were transported to Australia for trying to organise a combination of rural workers who had little security in their employment and whose wages had been cut.
- 4.7 No map regression analysis was undertaken as the Shire Hall building predates all maps of sufficient detail to be of use.

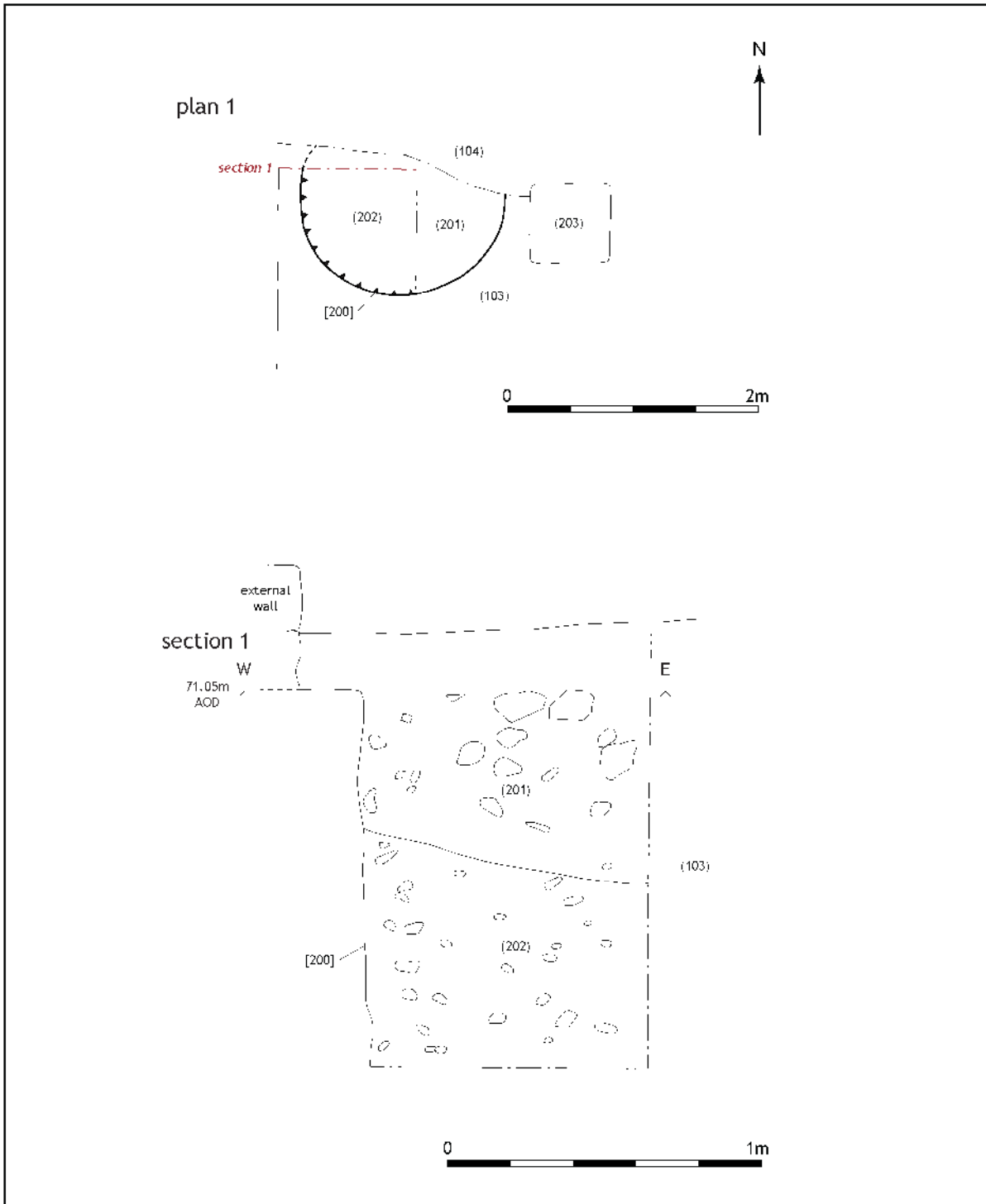
5. Methodology


- 5.1 The programme of archaeological work was carried out in accordance with the *Standards and Guidance for Archaeological Field Evaluation* published by the Institute for Archaeologists (IfA) in 1994 (revised 2008). COAS adhered to the *Code of Conduct* issued by the IfA in 1985 (revised 2008), and *Code of Approved Practice for the Regulation of Contractual Arrangements in Field Archaeology* (1990, revised 2008) at all times during the course of the investigation. Current Health and Safety legislation and guidelines were followed on site.
- 5.2 The evaluation comprised the machine excavation of two ca. 1m X 1m test pits (TP) in room B6 (**Figure 2**). It had been intended to excavate a third TP in room B7 but due to the overburden of unstable rubble material over the floor it was judged unsafe to proceed (**Plate 1**).
- 5.3 All work was by hand and carried out by the archaeologists. In the first instance two areas were cleared of the overburden and the surface then cleaned to natural chalk or to the surface of archaeological deposits, according to whichever was first encountered. Following cleaning, the archaeological features were sampled by hand excavation.
- 5.4 The archaeological features and deposits were recorded using standard COAS pro-forma context recording sheets. Photographs were then taken of representative profiles (**Figure 2**).
- 5.5 No finds were recovered, and was deemed unnecessary to collect any environmental samples.



Plate 1. Room B6 showing rubble (104) (from S; 1m scale)





<p> fragmentary brick</p> <p>(000) deposit/fill number</p> <p>[000] cut number</p> <p>XX.Xm AOD height above ordnance datum (AOD)</p>	<p>PROJECT TITLE</p> <p>Shire Hall, Dorchester, Dorset</p>		
	<p>FIGURE TITLE</p> <p>Plan 1 and section 1</p>		
	<p>SCALE</p> <p>as shown</p>	<p>PROJECT CODE</p> <p>C1/EWA/12/SHD</p>	<p>FIGURE NO.</p> <p>3</p>

6. Results

6.1 Where a feature is discussed, it is referenced with its cut and associated fill numbers. A tabulated description of individual contexts is given in **Appendix 2**. The deposits and features encountered during fieldwork are listed and described below. In the text, context numbers for cuts appear in square brackets, e.g. [104]; layer and fill numbers appear in standard brackets, e.g. (102).

Soil Sequence and Geology

6.2 The most recent deposit (**Plate 1**) in both rooms was of rubbly material (104), mainly chalk, which covered almost the entire surfaces of rooms B6 and B7 (**Figure 2**) and butted against modern brick pillars (**Plates 1 - 3**), a stone plinth (203) (**Figure 3**, plan 1; **Plate 2**) and the external and internal walls, original and later (**Plate 3**), of the building. Underneath was a natural chalk surface (103). The fills of two cuts were sealed between the rubble (104) and natural (103). The two rooms were divided by a modern brick partition.

6.3 A narrow slot [100] on the north side of TP1 appeared to have been dug to access an area of weakness underneath internal wall (105) to enable the insertion of a slightly arched underpinning layer of pitched bricks (102) (**Plate 4**).

6.4 Following cleaning in TP2, the south half of a circular cut [200] was exposed in plan (**Figure 3**, plan 1). It was excavated to a depth of ca. 1.2m from the natural surface, below which it was judged to be unsafe to proceed. Two successive loose fills were identified, (201) distinguished from (202) by in the inclusion of larger fragments of brick (**Figure 3**, section 1). The cut was a well-defined cylinder and was probably for a well (**Plate 5**).

6.5 The fragments brick within [200] and incorporated in the overburden (104) all appeared to be 19th century or modern and none was collected. There were no other finds.

7. Discussion

7.1 Although the Site lies close to the heart of Romano-British *Durnovaria* it was within a substantial building which is likely to have been built onto a graded natural surface. Given that rooms B6 and B7 are in the basement it is unlikely that any features or deposits would survive.

7.2 The situation of the underpinning structural detail (102) has of necessity reversed the apparent stratigraphic sequence. One of the archaeologists thought the bricks were handmade (Stafford, pers. comm.) so they may represent a repair carried in the 19th century, although his colleague thought they were probably later.

7.3 It is possible that the probable well [200] predated the building and had been truncated when the ground surface was prepared, however, the modern character of the fills make such an interpretation highly unlikely. It is much more probable that it was integral to the original design, allowing access to water within a secure setting for the prisoners awaiting trial and for their gaolers.

8. Conclusions

8.1 The restriction to two test pits in one room limits the potential for extrapolation from the results. The situation of rooms B6 and B7 render it very unlikely that Romano-British deposits would be encountered but it remains conceivable, if improbable, that some large scale monumental Neolithic features might survive at such a depth. Clearly, the space itself is of major historical importance because of its association with the Tolpuddle Martyrs.



Plate 2. Plinth (203) (from S; 1m scale)



Plate 3. View into room B7 (from W; 1m scale)



Plate 4. Underpinning (102) (from S; 1m scale)



Plate 5. Probable well (200) (from S; 1m scale)

9. Archive

- 9.1 The site archive is currently held at the offices of Context One Archaeological Services Ltd and consists of 26 digital images in .jpg format, two drawn plans and sections on stable drawing film and the written paper record, including 5 context and profile sheets and various photographic, drawing and finds registers. The archive will be prepared to comply with guidelines set out in *First Aid for Finds* (Watkinson and Neal 2001) / *Standards in the Museums Care of Archaeological Collections* (Museum and Galleries Commission 1992) / *Management of Archaeological Projects 2* (English Heritage 1991). Arrangements will be made to deposit the archive with Dorset County Museum within 12 months following the submission of this report.

9.2 Copies of the Field Evaluation report will be deposited with:

West Dorset District Council
Stratton House
58-60 High West Street
Dorchester
Dorset DT1 1UZ

Dorset History Centre
Bridport Road
Dorchester
Dorset DT1 1RP

10. COAS Acknowledgements

10.1 Context One Archaeological Services Ltd would like to thank Mr Steve Woollard (West Dorset District Council) for his cooperation throughout the evaluation and Mr Steve Wallis (Senior Archaeologist, Dorset County Council) who liaised closely with COAS staff.

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- | | |
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Appendix 1. Dorset County Council Sites and Monuments Record report for archaeological events within the environs of the Site

HER No.	Description	NGR	Figure 1 ref
Neolithic (4000BC – 2300BC)			
MDO 1041 400/401	Upright timber setting and ditch.		2
MDO 1041 295/296	Upright timber setting and ditch.		3
MDO 18814	Upright timber setting.		4
Roman (AD43 – AD450)			
MDO 18235	Roman road. The remains of a NE-SW aligned Roman road were found during excavations at Wessex Court, Charles Street. It was probably constructed very early in the history of the Roman town and continued in use into the 4th century, having probably been used throughout the life of Roman Durnovaria. Further parts of this same road have been traced both to the NE and SW of this exposure during other projects.	SY 69326 90429	1
MDO 18732	Timber structure. Evidence comprised a N-S aligned beam slot, containing a post hole, cut into the rubble layer sealing the late 3rd-early 4th century masonry of a building.	SY 69040 90752	5
MDO 18737	Wall. N-S aligned wall with footings of unbonded large flints under three courses of limestone slabs set in decayed yellow-cream mortar, offset from the western external face of the wall. 3 rd century AD or later	SY 69041 90752	5
MDO 18741	Conduit. Conduit of date was built alongside a contemporary N-S street. Cut to a depth of ca. 4m. into the solid chalk and was 1.15m wide at the bottom with a lining of roughly dressed limestone blocks surviving to a height of ca. 0.5m. Probably late 1st century AD.	SY 69038 90752	5
MDO 18761	Chalk surface. <i>Opus signinum</i> surface probably representing elements of a domestic building of late-2nd to 3rd century AD date.	SY 69110 90850	6
Pending	Evaluation trenches. Roman remains (Tabor 2011)	SY 69106 90775	8
Post-medieval (AD1547 - AD1799)			
DDO 11458	Building. The Shire Hall. Built ca. 1797. Designed by architect Thomas Hardwick. Famous as location of the trial of the Tolpuddle Martyrs.	SY 69101 90736	7

(© Dorset County Council)

Appendix 2: Context Table

Context no.	Period	Type	Description	Earlier than	Contemp. with	Later than	Length	Width/ Diameter	Thickness / Depth
100	Modern	Layer	Underpinning cut. Thin cut along north side of TP1 adjacent to arched underpinning	101		103	<0.70m		<0.15m
101	Modern	Fill	Underpinning cut [100]. Dark grey brown, firm, silty sand	102		105	<0.70m		<0.15m
102	Modern	Structure	Underpinning. Slightly arched arranged of bricks pitched on end, bonded crudely with mortar			102, 104, 105	<0.70m		<0.15m
103	Cretaceous	Layer	Natural. White chalk	104					
104	Modern	Deposit	Rubble layer. Chalk rubble and occasional brick fragments			105			<1.0m
105	Post-medieval	Structure	Internal wall. Irregularly bonded ashlar	104		103			
200	Undated	Structure	Well cut. Cylindrical cut. Probably Post-medieval or Modern	202		103		<1.80m	
201	Undated	Fill	Upper well fill [200]. Light orangey brown friable silty sand including predominately broken brick (<0.25m) with rare chalk and flint.	104		202		<1.80m	
202	Undated	Fill	Lower well fill [200]. Light orangey brown friable silty sand including predominately broken brick (<0.25m) with rare chalk and flint.	201		200		<1.80m	
203	Undated	Structure	Plinth. Cube of bonded ashlar blocks	104		103	Ca. 0.60m		