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Conisbrough Castle
South Yorkshire

Archaeological Watching Brief

July 2010

Report No. 2096

CLIENT

English Heritage

Conisbrough Castle South Yorkshire

Archaeological Watching Brief

Summary

An archaeological watching brief was carried out at Conisbrough Castle during the hand-excavation of 24 pits to contain the posts of a new metal fence located on the bank between the moat and the southern curtain wall. A thick deposit of rubble, probably evidence of the collapsed curtain wall, and a few fragments of medieval and post-medieval pottery, animal bones and oyster shells from unstratified deposits were recovered. No further archaeological features or finds were identified during the watching brief.



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Report Information

Client: English Heritage
Address: 23, Savile Row, London, W1X 1AB
Report Type: Archaeological Watching Brief
Location: Conisbrough Castle, Conisbrough
County: South Yorkshire
Grid Reference: SK 5137 9885
Period(s) of activity represented: Medieval/Post-medieval
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Date of fieldwork: 8th - 11th of March 2010
Date of report: July 2010
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Contents

Report information	ii
Contents.....	iii
List of Figures	iv
List of Plates.....	iv
1 Introduction.....	1
Site location and topography	1
Soils, geology and land-use	1
2 Archaeological and Historical Background.....	1
3 Aims and Objectives	2
4 Methodology	2
5 Results	2
6 Artefact Record.....	3
7 Discussion and Conclusions	3

Figures

Plates

Appendices

Appendix 1: Inventory of primary archive

Appendix 2: Concordance of contexts yielding artefacts or environmental remains

Bibliography

List of Figures

- 1 Site location
- 2 Location of hand excavated pits

List of Plates

- 1 Removal of old fence, looking south
- 2 Removal of old post, looking south-west
- 3 New fence, looking east
- 4 Stones from a collapsed section of the curtain wall, looking north
- 5 Pits 18 and 19 and the collapsed latrines, looking north
- 6 Pit 18, looking north
- 7 Pit 19, looking north
- 8 Pit 20, looking north
- 9 Pit 24 and top of the Barbican wall footing, looking north

1 Introduction

Archaeological Services WYAS (ASWYAS) was commissioned by English Heritage to undertake an archaeological watching brief in the grounds of Conisbrough Castle, South Yorkshire (see Fig. 1) during the hand excavation of foundation pits for a new fence around the southern curtain wall. The watching brief was undertaken to record and recover any archaeological remains that may have been revealed during the excavation of the pits. The work was carried out between the 8th and 11th of March 2010.

Site location and topography

The site is located in the grounds of Conisbrough Castle on the bank between the moat and the southern curtain wall. The castle is located in the village of Conisbrough approximately 7 miles south-west of Doncaster, centred at SK 5137 9885 (Fig. 1), at 53m above Ordnance Datum.

Soils, geology and land-use

The underlying geology of the site is recorded as Carboniferous Mudstone with interbedded sandstone, overlain by slowly permeable seasonally waterlogged loamy over clayey and fine silty soils over soft rock of the Bardsey association (713a - Soil Survey of England and Wales 1983). The area where the new fence was being installed was at the top of the castle moat slope, in front of the southern curtain wall.

2 Archaeological and Historical Background

The original castle at Conisbrough was built by William, 1st Earl Warren, a chief Knight and supporter of King William during the Norman conquests, but it is believed that the town is much older, the name relating to a substantial Anglo Saxon *burh* located on the hill opposite the castle. The Manor of Conisbrough is known to have been held by King Harold prior to the Conquests (Johnson 1984). In the Domesday survey the Honour of Conisbrough was a large estate, centred on the *burh*.

The castle as it is seen today has three main parts; the keep and the inner and outer baileys, and was built by Hamelin Plantagenet between 1163 and 1202. The keep was built first, followed by the curtain walls and the inner bailey. This period of building may have obliterated traces of an earlier castle, but it is though possible that some traces may survive in the outer ward (Johnson 1984).

By 1539 it is recorded that a 55m section of the curtain wall including the gatehouse, portcullis and draw bridge had fallen into the ditch. Evidence for this collapse was discovered during the excavations at the site in the 1970s, when the remains of the of the fallen gate tower were discovered. The excavations were undertaken between 1973 and 1977 and they covered an area consisting of the basement areas of the ranges of buildings against the inner

face of the south-western curtain wall, the area of the barbican passage and the fallen towers of the main gate that had tumbled down into the moat.

3 Aims and Objectives

The aim of this project was to monitor the hand excavation of pits just outside the southern castle defensive wall in order to determine the presence or absence of archaeological remains. The watching brief would also assess the significance of any archaeology uncovered and report on the findings.

4 Methodology

An archaeologist was present to monitor the removal of the old fence, all hand excavations and inspect any upcast material. Appropriate written, drawn and photographic records were made in accordance with ASWYAS watching brief guidelines and site recording manual (ASWYAS 2003, 2006) and IfA standards and guidance (IfA 2008). The contents of the primary archive are listed in Appendix I.

5 Results

To minimize the impact of the works on the ancient monument, the new fence was laid out in the same position as the previous metal fence. The posts supporting the previous fence were removed and the pits containing them were widened and deepened to accommodate the posts supporting the new fence.

Twenty four pits were hand excavated from east to west along the collapsed section of the southern curtain wall at the top of the moat slope. The dimensions of the square pits varied between 0.50m and 0.70m in width and between 0.80m and 0.95m in depth. In pits 1-17 and 21-24 (see Fig. 2) a 0.20m deposit of topsoil overlaid a 0.20m thick deposit of rubble in a brown sandy matrix (102). In the excavations undertaken in the 1970s this deposit was identified as the residue of the collapsed portions of the superstructures of the gatehouse (Johnson, 1980, pg.60). Under this deposit, evidence of the collapsed curtain wall (101) was identified.

In pits 18, 19 and 20 (see Fig. 2, Pl.6) the topsoil appeared to be overlying a rich, organic, black deposit containing fragments of animal bones, oyster shells and a few fragments of pottery. This deposit may be related to the collapsed latrine double chute just metres away.

The natural deposits were not identified.

6 Artefact Record

Pottery spot dating by C.G. Cumberpatch BA PhD

Five items from two contexts (103 and 104) were submitted for spot-dating. The details are summarised in the catalogue below.

Context 103: One sherd of Coal Measures Purple ware with thick purple glaze externally; 15th to 16th century.

Context 103: One sherd of fine Coal Measures Whiteware, unglazed and undecorated; Late 13th to late 14th century.

Context 103: one small, abraded sherd in a fine buff/orange fabric containing abundant fine rounded quartz grit and occasional dark non-crystalline inclusions, probably a Coal Measures ware but much finer than normal; probably later 13th to 14th century.

Context 104: Two joining sherds in a fine Coal Measures whiteware fabric; hard, fine, unglazed and undecorated; Late 13th to late 14th century.

Discussion

A brief overview of extant collections from excavations at Conisbrough Castle (Cumberpatch 2010) indicated that amongst the later medieval pottery from the site, Coal Measures wares were predominant. This observation is reflected in the types of pottery identified here. The Coal Measures Whitewares were unusually fine for this type of pottery and this may indicate a date earlier in the range indicated above rather than later.

The Firsby Hall Farm pottery, one of two known sources of these wares, lay close to the boundary of the Conisbrough deer park and may have had some connection with the castle. Further documentary evidence might cast further light on the nature of this connection and the supply of pottery to the castle.

8 Discussion and Conclusions

Despite the few fragments of medieval pottery, animal bones and oyster shells recovered from unstratified deposits during the hand-excavation of 24 pits, no archaeological evidence related to the original structure of the castle were identified during this watching brief.

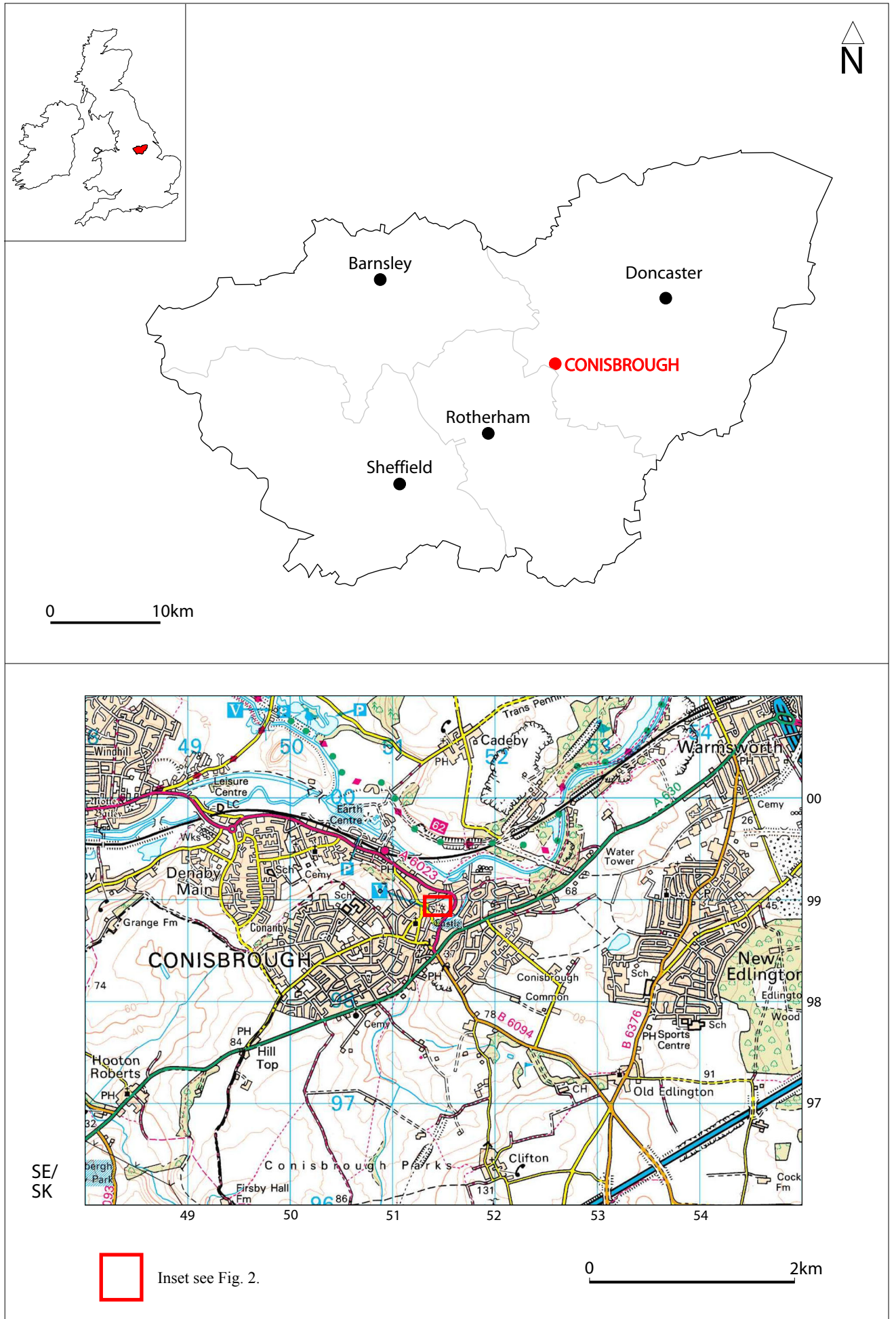
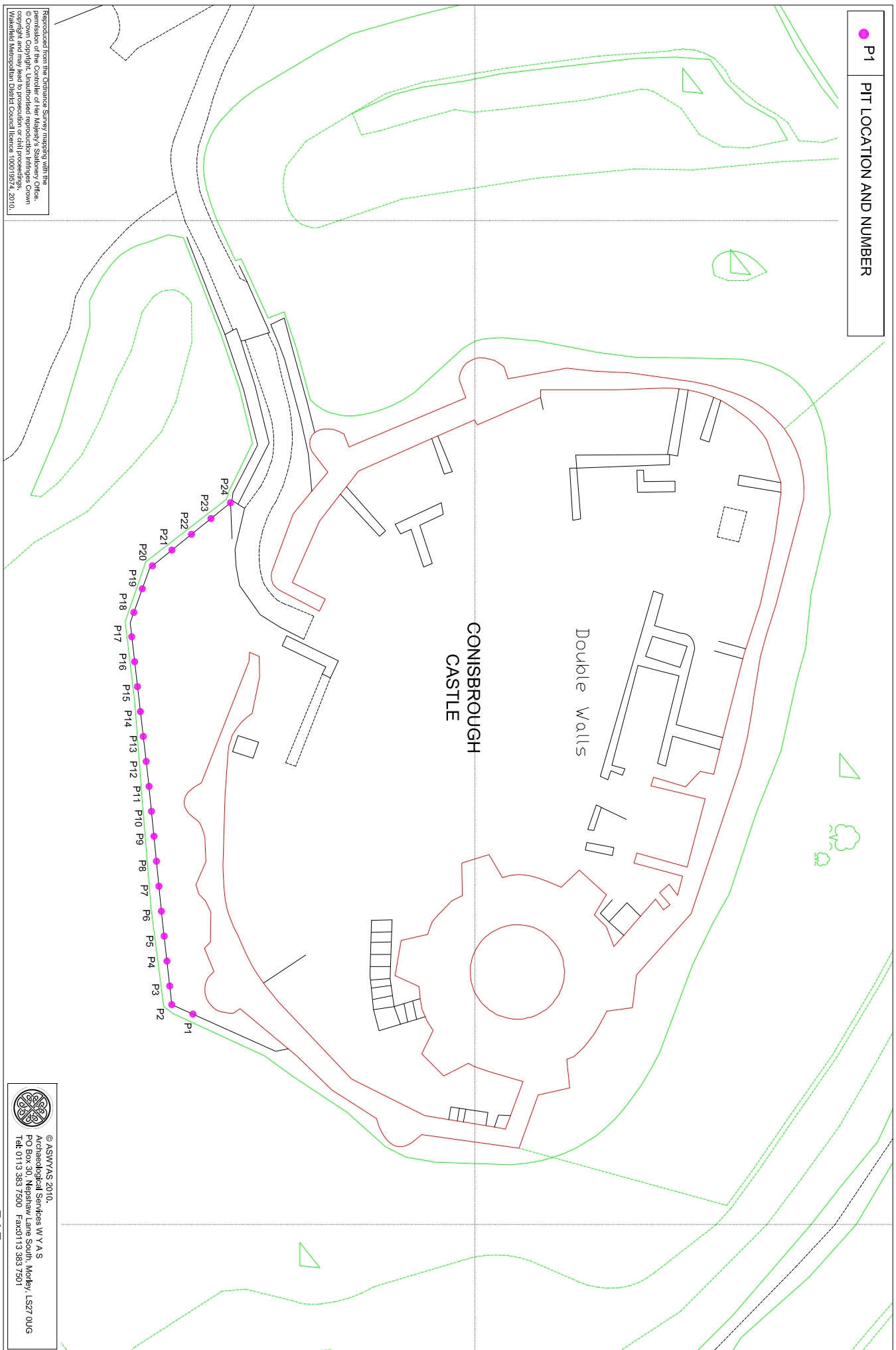


Fig. 1. Site location

P1
PIT LOCATION AND NUMBER



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451400

451500

398900

Fig. 2. Location of hand excavated pits (1:500 @ A4)

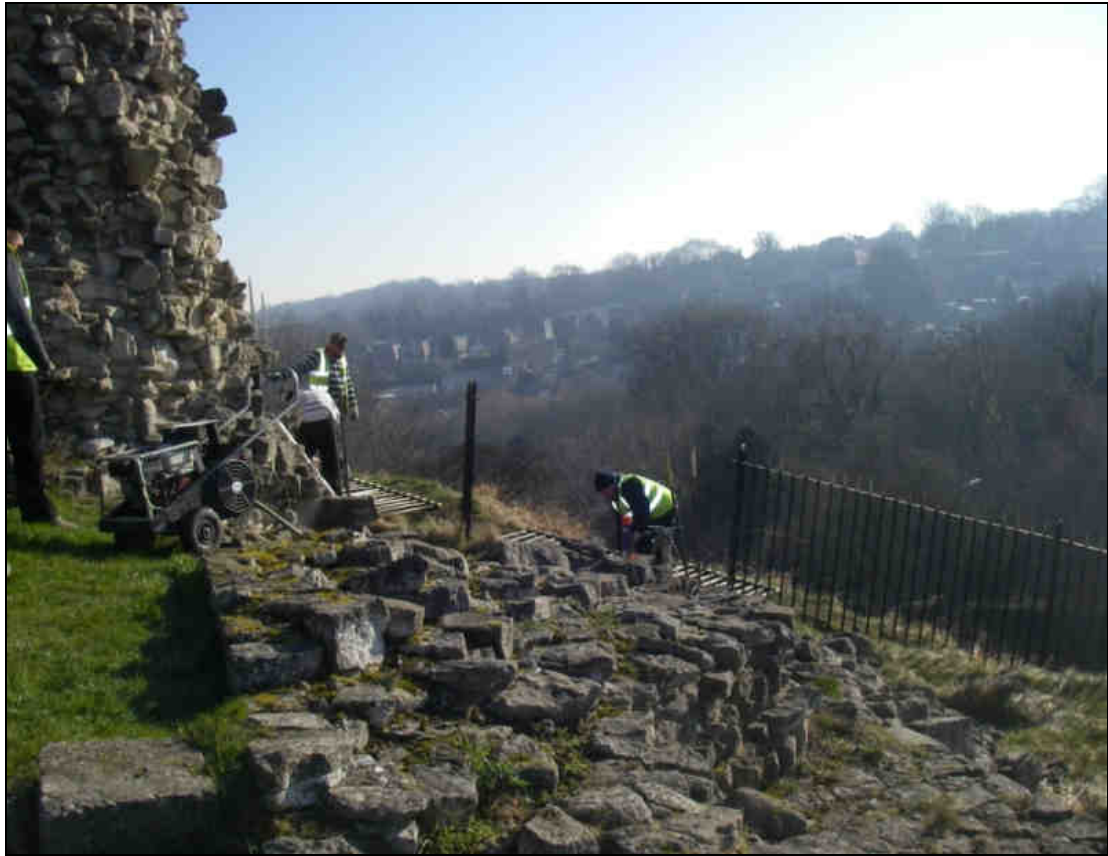


Plate 1. Removal of old fence, looking south

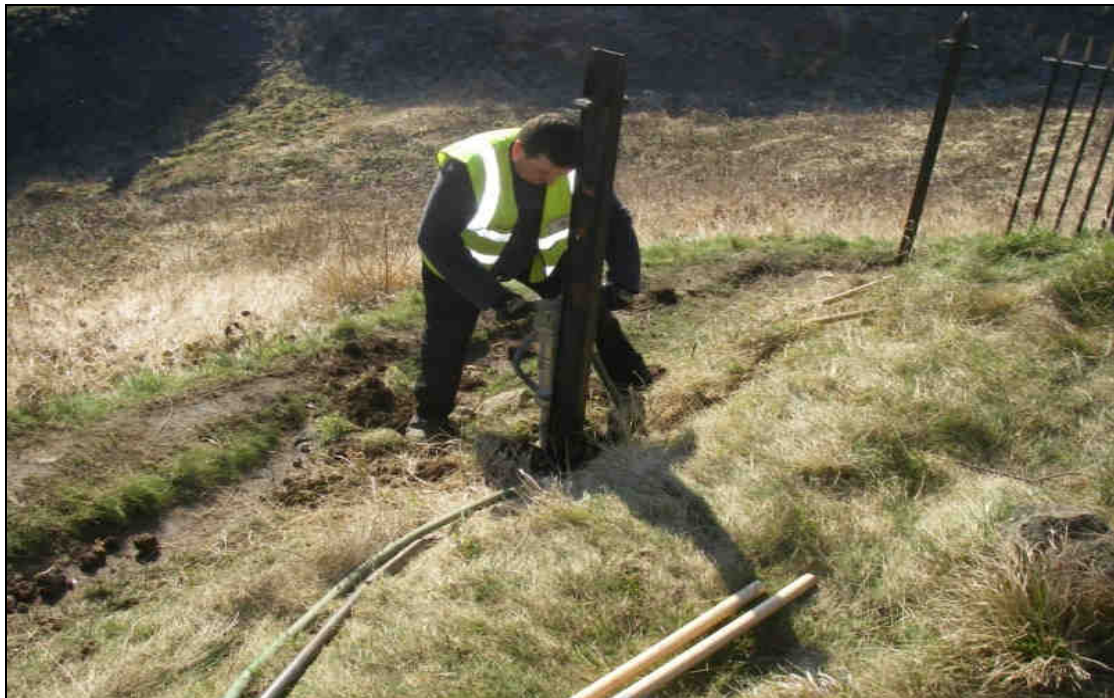


Plate 2. Removal of old post, looking south-west



Plate 3. New fence, looking east



Plate 4. Stones from a collapsed section of the curtain wall, looking north



Plate 5. Pits 18 and 19 and the collapsed latrines, looking north



Plate 6. Pit 18, looking north



Plate 7. Pit 19, looking north



Plate 8. Pit 20, looking north



Plate 9. Pit 24 and top of the Barbican wall footing, looking north

Appendix 1: Inventory of primary archive

Phase	File/Box No	Description	Quantity
Watching Brief	File no.1	Context register sheets	1
		Watching brief monitoring	4
		Site Plan	1
		Digital photo register sheets	2
		Sample register sheets	1
		Context sheets (nos. 100 - 105)	6
		Risk Assessment	1

Appendix 2: Concordance of contexts yielding artefacts or environmental remains

Context	Pit	Description	Artefacts and environmental samples
100	all	Topsoil	
101	1-17,21,22, 23	Stones from collapsed wall	
102	1-17,21,22,23	Rubble	
103	18	Black organic deposit	GBA 2, oyster shells, animal bones, 1 fragment of pottery
104	19	Black organic deposit	GBA 1, oyster shells, animal bones, 1 fragment of pottery
105	20	Black organic deposit	GBA 3, oyster shells

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