



**YORK ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRUST**



**LAND OFF POTTERGATE, HELMSLEY,  
NORTH YORKSHIRE**

**WATCHING BRIEF REPORT**

*by Mark Johnson*

**REPORT NUMBER 2008/48**



# YORK ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRUST

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## **ABSTRACT**

*During April 2007 York Archaeological Trust carried out a watching brief on a block of development land between Bridge Street and Pottergate, Helmsley. Evidence was found for a sequence of garden type soils dating from the medieval to modern periods. Also encountered were three pits, at least two of which were of medieval date. Other deposits related to the dumping of discarded materials within the early modern period.*

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Between 17<sup>th</sup> – 23<sup>rd</sup> April 2007 York Archaeological trust maintained a periodic archaeological watching brief during ground works on a block of land to the rear of the Feathers Hotel, Helmsley, North Yorkshire NGR SE 6140 8380) (Figure 1, Site location map, Figure 2, Works location plan). The watching brief was maintained as part of a condition attached to a planning permission (ref 05/00180/FUL). The works were comprised of a terrace of five houses, to be accessed via an existing drive from Pottergate. The footings of the houses were of strip foundations. At the time of the watching brief this area, which lies approximately mid-way between Bridge Street and Pottergate, was partially overgrown former garden land.

The archaeological works were commissioned by the LHL Group Limited, and followed a Standard Written Scheme of Investigation drawn up by the Heritage Section of North Yorkshire County Council.

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

The watching brief was maintained during the mechanical stripping of vegetation from the site (generally around 0.15m) and the mechanical cutting of strip foundations for the terrace of houses (Figure 3, Plan of footings showing location of sections recorded). The footing trenches were up to 1.0m wide and between 0.9m – 1.14m deep (reaching up to 55.07m – 55.11m OD). In an east – west direction there is very little ground slope or undulation across the area occupied by the new housing. In a north – south direction a slight rise in the ground surface up to the plot boundary was apparent in the northern part of the site. The pre-stripping ground level lay between 56.30m – 56.48m OD. Upon completion of machining of these strip footings the sections were cleaned and the visible deposits were recorded on pro-forma context cards as well as on a series of plans and sections drawn to conventional scales. A series of photographs were taken during all stages of these works. All collected

finds were retained by context number. The records and finds associated with this project are currently stored by York Archaeological Trust under the YAT accession code: YORAT: 2007.16.

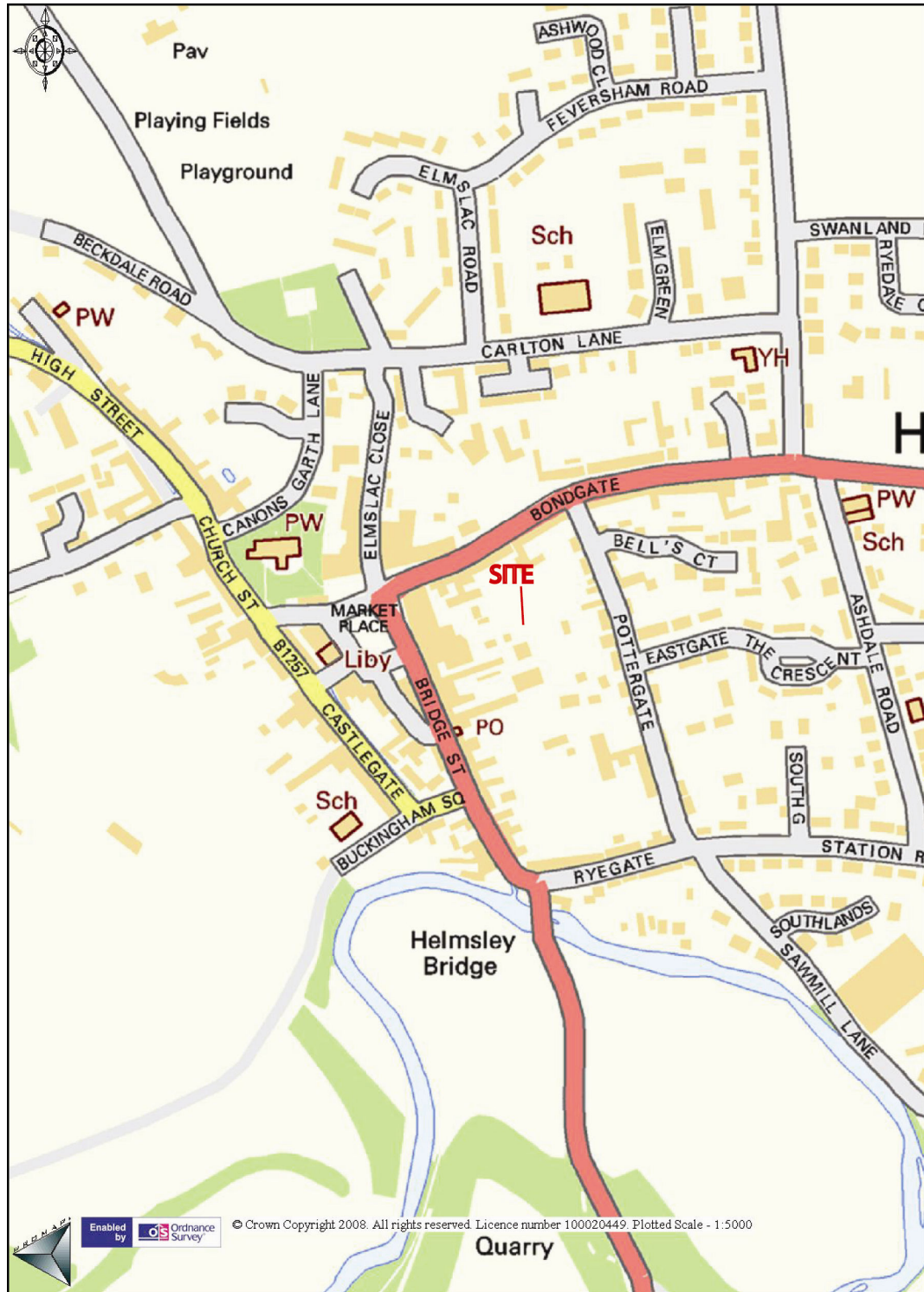


Figure 1 Site location map

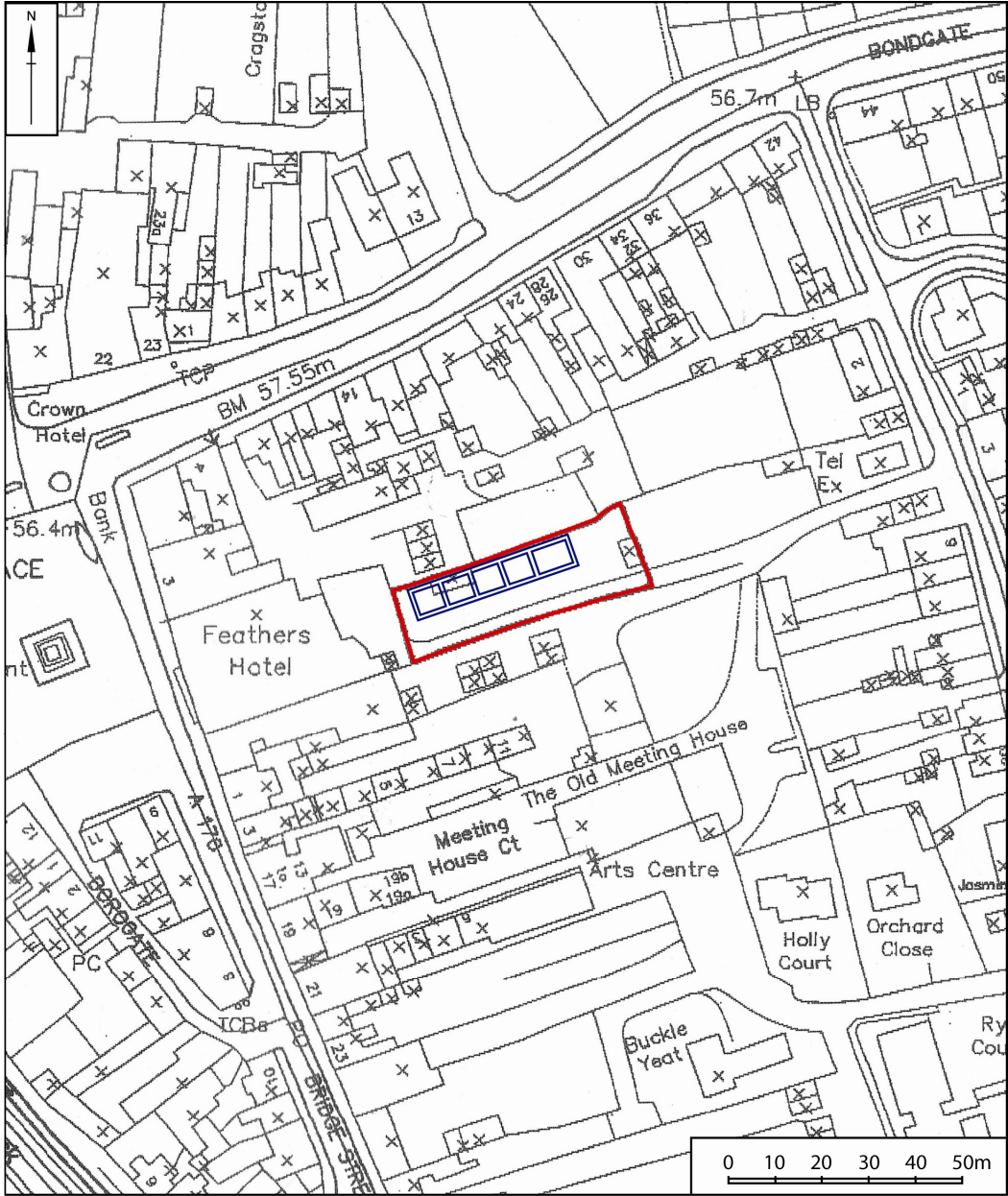


Figure 2 Works location plan

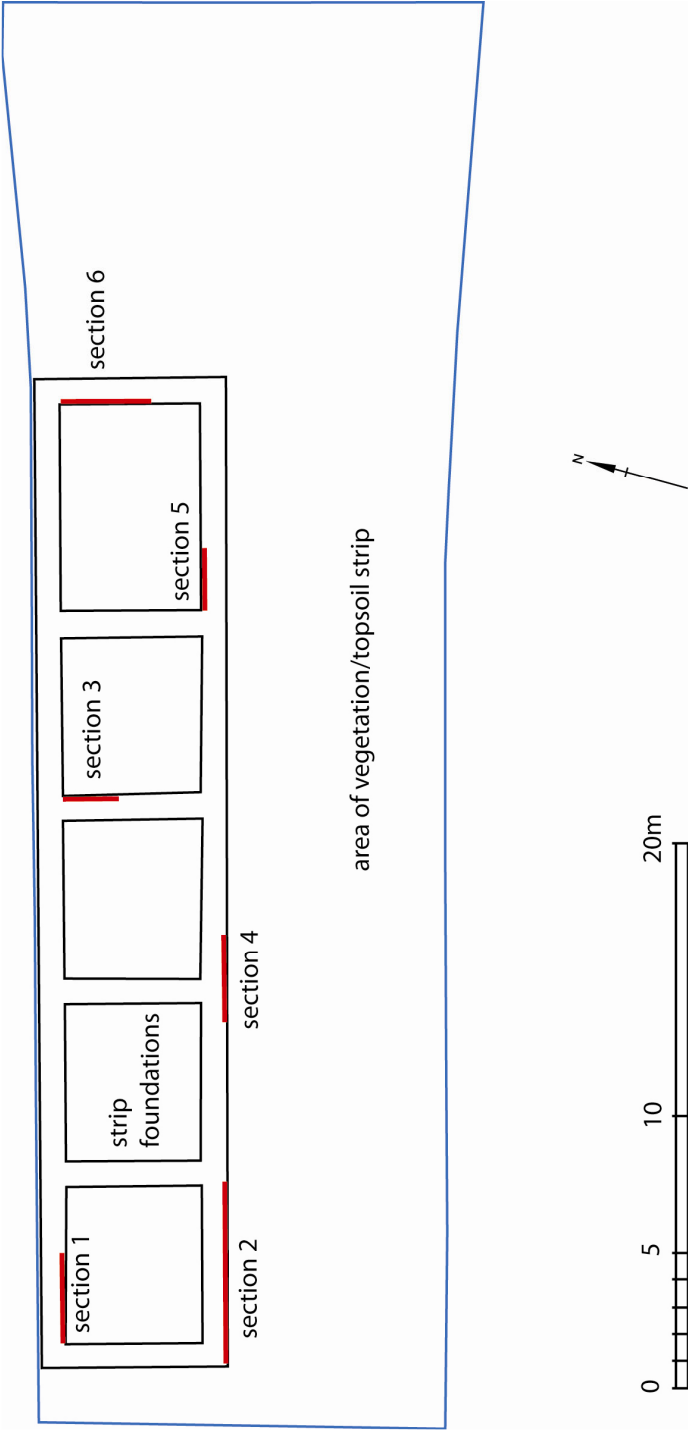


Figure 3 Plan of footings showing location of sections recorded



### **3. LOCATION, GEOLOGY AND TOPOGRAPHY**

The site lies behind the Feathers Hotel, Bridge Street on a plot of land that extends towards Pottergate. This area forms part of the historic core of Helmsley. Pedestrian access to the site can be gained from Bridge Street and vehicular access from Pottergate.

The town of Helmsley is located at the north-western end of the Vale of Pickering immediately below the uplands of the North Yorkshire Moors. The River Rye flows close to the southern limits of the built-up area whilst a small tributary beck flows through the western part of the town. The bulk of the town lies on land that is subject only to gentle undulations. The land in the vicinity of the site lies at around 56m AOD.

Geological maps of the area show Helmsley to lie at the interface of the Kimmeridge Clay within the Vale of Pickering and Corallian Limestones that compose the adjacent parts of the North Yorkshire Moors (Geological Survey 1957).

### **4. BRIEF ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

There is considerable evidence of prehistoric activity within the environs of Helmsley. As an urban settlement however, Helmsley may have originated in the pre-conquest period and it has been suggested that the town may have been the site of an important Anglo-Saxon manor (Tyler 1979). By the 10<sup>th</sup> century a church and burial ground had been established. The building of a castle on the western side of the settlement in the early 12<sup>th</sup> century is likely to have been influential in the towns' early development. In the late 12<sup>th</sup> century a borough was created by Robert de Roos. Although subjected to some subsequent division and alteration, elements of early planning of the borough are still recognisable in the long narrow plots that form the eastern side of Market Street and Bridge Street. With the exception of the church and castle, there is little upstanding fabric of the medieval period surviving in the town though numerous post-medieval buildings still remain (Pevsner 1966). These can be considered as predominantly vernacular in form and fabric, being built of local materials and often in a regional style.

There is little record of previous archaeological work in the immediate vicinity of the site. This appears to be limited to a small-scale excavation carried out at the eastern end of the former Quaker Meeting House in 1996, some 40m to the south (Rahtz and Watts 1996), and a watching brief maintained during building works at the west of the former Meeting House (YAT 2008/39). The former of these works encountered a number of earlier 19<sup>th</sup> century burials directly associated with the Meeting House. The watching brief revealed evidence of

medieval - earlier post-medieval garden type soils, as well as structural remains relating to elements of the Meeting House.

## 5. RESULTS

### 5.1 VEGETATION/TOPSOIL STRIP

The initial site strip of the area was limited to the removal of vegetation and the uppermost part of the topsoil. Across the bulk of the site this seldom extended beyond a depth of 0.1m and was frequently less than this. In the area towards the northern boundary, where the ground rose slightly, stripping was up to a depth of 0.27m in order to create a more level surface for the construction works. Across this mechanically stripped area the finished level was still fully within the extant topsoil and no features were visible. A few finds of the 18<sup>th</sup>/19<sup>th</sup> - 20<sup>th</sup> centuries (not retained) were noted within the stripped parts of the topsoil.



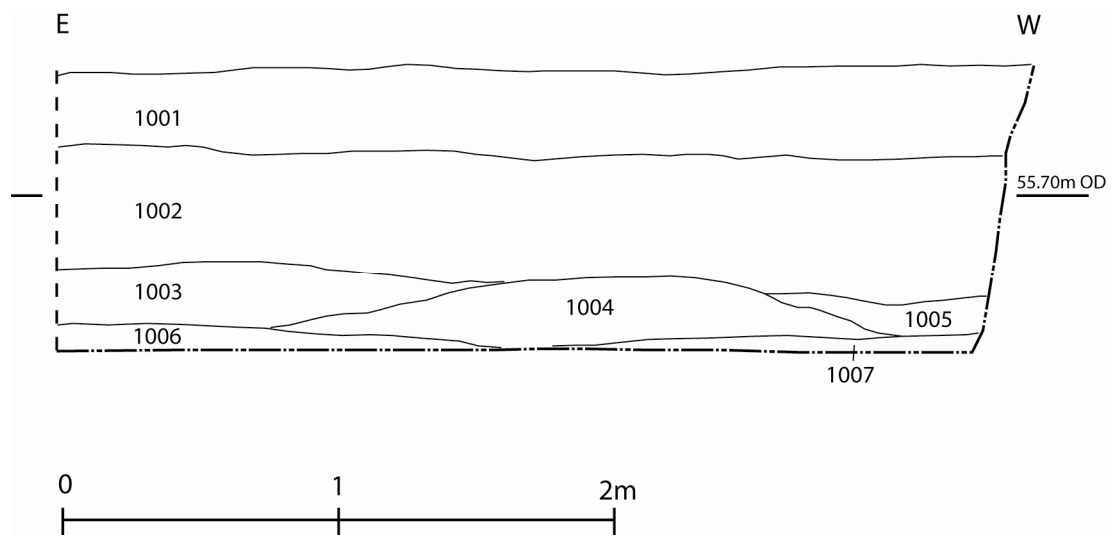
*Plate 1 Site after vegetation/partial topsoil strip, looking W*

### 5.2 STRIP FOOTINGS

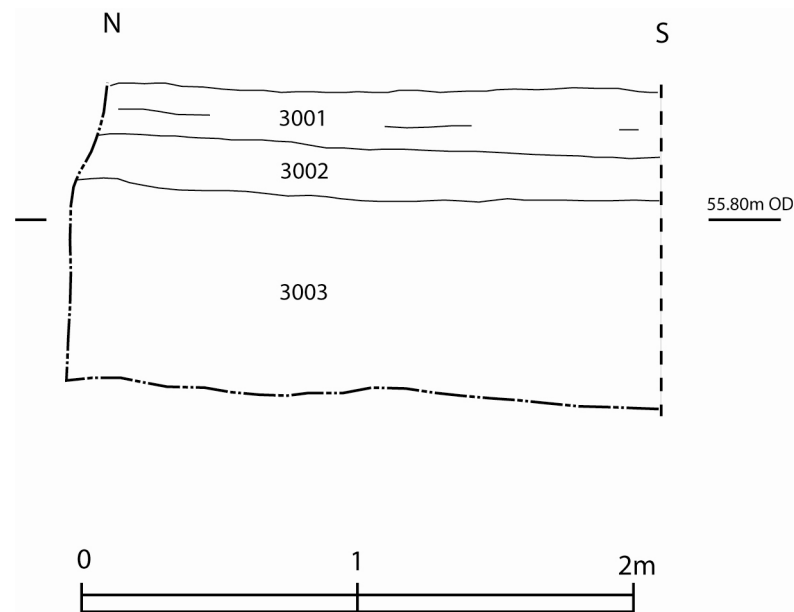
All archaeological features observed during the stripping process were recorded in section and plan. Where no features, other than garden type soils, were observed, representative parts of sections were recorded. Separate systems of numbering were used for each section

recorded, and so all numbers beginning with a '1' relate to section 1, all numbers beginning with a '2' relate to section 2, etc.

Natural deposits across the site, were seen to be comprised predominantly of bright yellow clayey sands, contexts 1007, 2007, 3002, 3003, 4006, 5005, 6005. The clay content was varied across the site whilst medium sized gravel was also present within this material (in certain areas and in variable quantities), particularly in the uppermost parts. The only other deposits believed to be of natural origin were located in the north-west part of the footings in section 1 and are comprised of contexts 1006, 1004, 1005, 1003. These materials ranged from dull red sands with gravel to brown silty sands and mid brown sandy silts. Each of these deposits was exceptionally 'clean' and markedly different from all deposits of human origin at the site. It is possible that the contrast between these deposits and the bright yellow 'natural' may relate to their forming a part of a peri-glacial feature? Contexts 1003 - 1006 were sealed by garden type soils, contexts 1002, 1001. Across the site the upper horizon of natural deposits was seen to vary, generally between 55.74m – 55.85m OD. The exception to this was in the south-western part of the footings where natural was seen to tail-off downwards towards the west to a height a little above 55.20m OD. This slight anomaly may relate to the putative peri-glacial feature detailed above. Sections 1 and 3 are representative areas where only natural deposits and garden soils were observed.



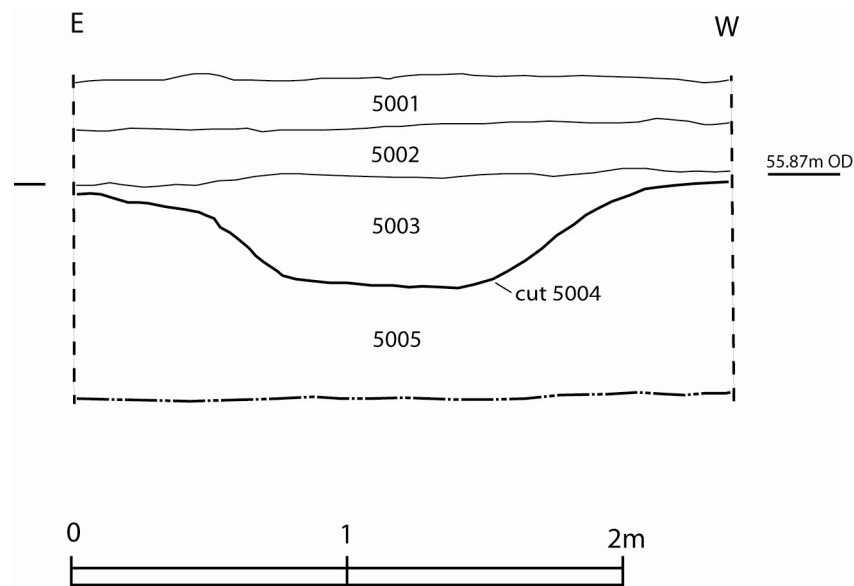
**Figure 4** Section 1, north facing



**Figure 5** Section 3, west facing

A number of cut, and probably cut, features were observed in the areas of sections 2, 4, 5 and 6. Those in sections 5 and 6 could only be seen as cutting directly into natural deposits.

In section 5 a flat-based cut with moderately steep sides, context 5004, was observed. This feature, which was up to 1.52m in width and 0.31m in depth, did not extend as far as the opposite side of the footing trench and appeared to be of sub-circular – ovate plan-form. A single fill was noted in this cut, context 5003, a mid brown, clayey sandy silt containing occasional pebbles and fragments of charcoal. A single sherd of glazed later medieval pottery was recovered from this fill. Fill 5003 appeared to extend beyond the limits of cut 5004. If this was not the case it must be assumed that the fill was indistinguishable from adjacent deposits. Feature 5003/4 appears to have formed a pit, dug either for the extraction of the gravelly sand natural deposits in this area or for the disposal of unwanted materials. Deposits overlaying this feature were comprised of soils 5002 and 5001, both of which represent garden type soils.



**Figure 6** Section 5, north facing

In section 6 parts of a large steep-sided, flat-based cut measuring some 2.30m across and around 0.60m deep, context 6004, was observed cutting directly into natural deposits. Only the north, south and east sides of this feature, which may be sub-circular in plan-form, were seen. Two fills occupied this cut. The lower of these, context 6003, was a dark greyish brown, sandy silt containing occasional fragments of charcoal, pebbles, and clumps of re-deposited natural clayey sandy. A sherd of medieval pottery was recovered from this fill. The upper fill, context 6002, was a dark brown, clayey silt of clean appearance. Feature 6004/3/2 would appear to have formed a pit, whether this was dug primarily for the extraction of natural deposits or for the disposal of unwanted debris is uncertain.



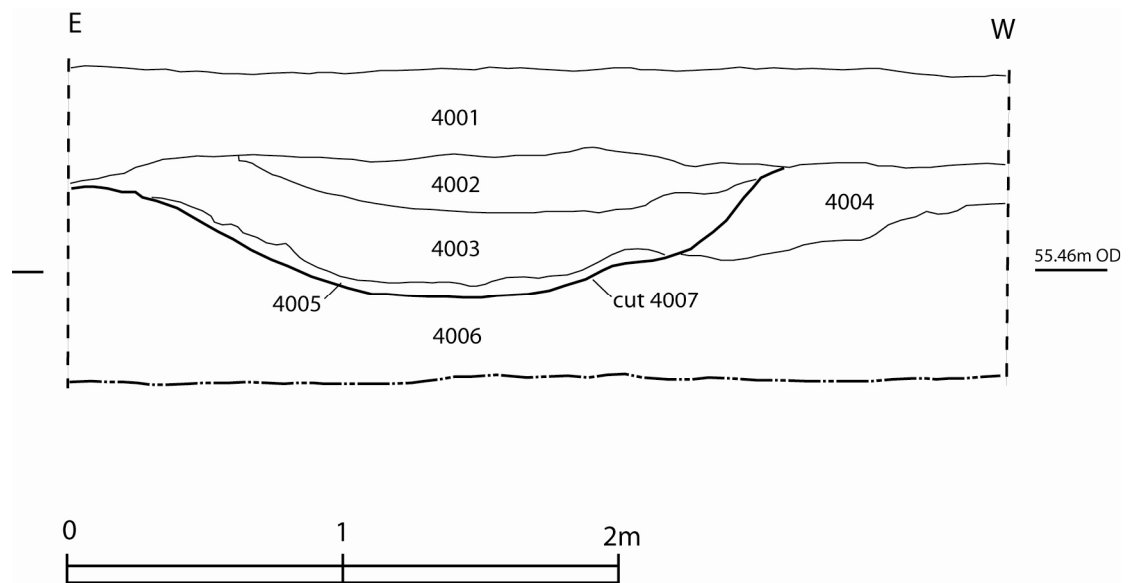
**Plate 2** Pit 6004 in section 6, looking NW

The features in sections 2 and 4 both cut through earlier deposits. In section 2 a deposit of soil up to 0.37m deep, context 2006, was seen to overlay natural deposits. This material was a mid brown sandy silt containing small quantities of pebbles, charcoal and fragments of animal bone and contained 5 sherds of 14<sup>th</sup> century pottery. This was in turn overlain by a thin deposit comprised largely of flecks of lime mortar and fine sand, context 2003. Overlaying this was a more extensive deposit of mid greyish brown sandy silt containing occasional pebbles and charcoal, context 2002 which contained sherds of pottery dating from the later medieval to 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. A deposit composed of lime mortar fragments and silty sand, context 2005, overlay the southern part of 2002 and was noted as having a distinct slope down to the west. It is probable, from the arrangement of these deposits, that 2005 occupied a shallow scooped area. A dark greyish brown sandy silt, context 2004, directly overlay 2005 and was in turn sealed by the basal remnants of the extant topsoil context 2001. This sequence of deposits is of some interest in so far as it demonstrates a build-up of deposits over time. Some of these, such as 2006 and 2001, appear to represent what were once garden type soils with the former likely to have been in active use within the medieval period. Others, particularly 2003 and 2005, are best interpreted as spreads of discarded materials with the upper components of the depositional sequence relating to the early modern period.



**Plate 3** *Part of section 2, looking SW*

In section 4 a deposit of greyish brown sandy silt containing small amounts of charcoal, lime mortar and pebbles, context 4004, is likely to represent a relict garden type soil. This was truncated on its western side by a cut feature with moderately steep sides and a flattish base, context 4007. This measured in excess of 2.3m across and was up to 0.51m deep. Only the north and parts of the east and west sides of this feature were seen and its true shape could not be determined. The lowest fill of this cut was context 4005, a thin spread composed predominantly of charcoal with lesser amounts of dark greyish brown clayey silt that adhered to the edges of 4007. Fill 4005 was overlain by context 4003, a mid brownish grey clayey silt containing an amount of charcoal. This fill was in turn overlain by the uppermost fill, context 4002. This material was light greyish brown clayey silt containing flecks of lime mortar and charcoal together with a quantity of pebbles. This feature is interpreted as a pit, though again, it is not entirely certain whether it was dug primarily for the extraction of materials or for the disposal of detritus. That this feature extends only some little way into natural deposits may argue the case for the latter. The extant topsoil, context 4001, overlay pit 4007.



**Figure 7** Section 4, north facing

## 6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The watching brief has provided information regarding the height of natural deposits and of the date, character and significance of later, human derived, deposits. These latter deposits were comprised of a number of garden type soils – seemingly dating in active use from the medieval to modern periods together with a number of pits and shallow scoops and dumped deposits. It cannot be stated with any certainty whether or not the pits were excavated primarily for the extraction of materials or for the disposal of waste; or possibly even for both. Of the three pits, two provided finds of medieval date whilst the third contained no firm dating evidence. The probable dumped deposits containing fragments and flecks of lime mortar (presumably discarded demolition or building debris) and the deposits occupying the scoop in section 2 are securely dated within the post-medieval period.

Such a mixture of multi-period deposits and cut features is characteristic of many 'backland' areas within tenement plots. The absence of medieval and post-medieval structural features in this location need engender little surprise given the distance of the stripped area, around 50m, from the Bridge Street frontage, and an even greater distance from the Pottergate frontage. In this respect the results mirror those of recent observations at the Arts Centre a short distance to the south.



## 7. POTTERY REPORT

The pottery assemblage from this site was very limited both in scale and potential. A total of thirteen sherds were recovered, many of them abraded or un-diagnostic. The date range covered broadly the medieval and post-medieval periods but few sherds could be assigned to known wares.

The assemblage has no potential for further research and it is not recommended for retention.

Context	Find	Quantity	Spotdate	Details
2002	BF00004	3	19th c.	1 fragment of stoneware bottle 2 late med/early post-med body sherds
2006	BF00006	5	? 14th c.	3 Brandsby-type ware sherds 2 undiagnostic glazed body sherds
3001	Bf00005	2	16th c.	1 late medieval green glazed (probably Ryedale ware) 1 undiagnostic late medieval oxidised ware
5002	BF00009	1	Medieval	1 abraded glazed grey ware - medieval
5003	BF00007	1	? 15TH c.	1 late medieval glazed buff ware
6003	BF00008	1	Medieval	1 unglazed grey gritty fabric with oxidised surfaces – medieval?

*Table 1 Recovered pottery by context*

## 8. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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