



YORK ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRUST



**BUILDINGS ADJACENT TO
NORTH CHOIR AISLE, CHAPTER HOUSE YARD,
YORK MINSTER**

BUILDING RECORDING & WATCHING BRIEF REPORT

by Mark Johnson and Ian Milsted

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YORK ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRUST

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ABSTRACT

A short programme of building recording and a watching brief were conducted during alteration works on the northern side of the north choir aisle within an existing range of single storey 19th century, and later, buildings. The structural remains of a former single storey range with vaulted ceiling whose construction was contemporary with the north choir aisle were recorded, along with some elements of the north choir aisle itself and a sequence of earlier deposits surviving in a soil section behind an internal wall. A number of factors raise some uncertainty as to whether construction of the 15th century single storey range was ever completed.

1. INTRODUCTION

Between 29th February and 2nd March 2012 building recording work and a watching brief were carried out within the single storey range of 19th and 20th century buildings that abut the northern eastern transept, north choir aisle and south-eastern corner area of the north transept. Although the remains are under no threat of damage or loss the opportunity to record was provided by their fuller, but temporary, exposure. The detail of recording broadly equates to Level 2 / 3 of English Heritage guidance (English Heritage, 2006). This area encompasses three buttresses of the north choir aisle. At the present time this range of buildings is undergoing renovation and conversion of usage. Until recently these spaces functioned as ladies and gents toilets, a Minster Police office and storage areas providing access to the large subterranean boiler rooms underneath Chapter House Yard. There are two doorways providing access to this range from the exterior. One of these leads into the storage areas, the other to a passage providing access to the police office and toilets and, via an elaborate double doorway, into the north choir aisle.

Certain of the architectural elements that are the subject of this report appear in a plan survey of the Minster dating to 1977 and in a more recent survey of 2008 (Brown, 2003). However, there is little documentation relating to their description or interpretation. This appears to be limited a few lines and a reference within Sarah Brown's Architectural History of the Minster (Brown, 2003, 188).

The origins and development of York Minster have been discussed at considerable length in a number of publications and for background information the reader is referred to these. For the immediate post Norman conquest period see Derek Phillips' 'The Cathedral of Archbishop Thomas of Bayeux' (RCHME 1985). For the most up to date architectural history

background to the development of the medieval Minster the reader is referred to Sarah Brown's history cited above.

2. METHODOLOGY

Hand drawn measured and levelled elevations were made of the lower parts of the northern face of the north choir aisle as they survived within the modern building range. Although in some places this was of bare stonework, in other places much of the elevation is obscured by thick layers of paint and modern features. At a minimum the extent of all visible historic stonework was drawn. Where jointing could unambiguously be identified this was also drawn. The drawn record was accompanied by a series of photographs, notes and annotations. A soil section, created when basement of the westernmost storage area was originally excavated, was re-exposed during these works, and was also recorded.

3. RESULTS

3.1 BUILDING SURVEY BY MARK JOHNSON

The elevation, Figure 2, shows the outline of a number of architectural features that were contemporary with the building of the north choir aisle and other elements of the eastern end of the Minster around the cusp of the 14th and 15th centuries. These features are of an internal, rather than external, character.

A wall-bench some 0.32m wide and with a simple cavetto moulding can be seen to extend fully across the intra-buttress spaces at a low level, excepting that is for a gap in area of the double door entrance to the north choir aisle. Where fully revealed there are two courses of stonework below the wall-bench, with foundation material below this. The distance between the top of the wall-bench and the top of foundation material is generally around 0.6m. Original floor level is likely to be a little way above that of the top of the foundations. In several places the wall-bench can be seen to be fully keyed into the faces of the adjoining buttresses. The western end of the wall-bench butts up to the eastern side of the north transept.

The bases for two shafts directly atop the wall-bench survive in that part between the two easternmost buttresses. In plan these are sub-square with rounded corners and have simple floriate moulding. The shafts they once supported had a diameter of around 0.10m. Two further shaft bases of the same form are present to the east of the double doors whilst

another lies to the west of these doors. It is probable that further bases and shafts originally existed though no traces of these were observed.

Directly above the wall-bench there is a single skin of stonework, typically around 0.2m deep, the rear side of which for the most part butts against the remaining stonework of the north choir aisle rather than being keyed into it. This stonework is all tight-jointed ashlar of magnesian limestone. The elevation shows that quantities of this skin of stonework, which forms the southern side of the range, are not present, particularly in the eastern parts. However, between the two western-most buttresses the arc of stonework marking the position of the vaulted ceiling still largely survives. It is probable that this arrangement was originally mirrored, or intended to be mirrored, in the spaces to the east where it is absent. Three springers for vaulting survive as large corbels in the western parts, these being set uniformly at a height of 1.36m above the top of the wall-bench.

Although later post-medieval works mask some stratigraphic relationships those that are evident are of some interest. The coursing of the skin of stonework that forms the southern side of the range ubiquitously lines through with that of the buttresses to which it is keyed in. By contrast the coursing of the walling of the north choir aisle behind the stonework skin does not line through with that of the buttresses and these latter can be seen in many places simply to butt up against the walling of the north choir aisle. Whilst these stratigraphic relationships appear confusing, there is little reason to see the choir aisle, buttresses and former range of buildings as anything other than contemporary. Where tool-marks are visible on the former range these are of claw tooling. Three blocked up recesses or openings, each between 0.80m – 0.88m wide and 1.14m – 1.28m tall, and set around 0.20m above the wall bench, survive. These are not tall enough to have functioned as doorways and whilst it is possible that they served as apertures allowing sight and sound it is perhaps more likely that they were intended to function as cupboards. A fourth, somewhat smaller, recess is present to the west of the westernmost buttress. This recess is also of greater depth, seemingly separated from the interior of the north choir by a thin line of stonework.

3.2 WATCHING BRIEF BY IAN MILSTED

The recorded soil section survived below the former Minster Police office (Figures 2 and 4 for location; Figure 5 and Plates 7 and 8 for the section). This was re-exposed when a modern internal wall was demolished and an in-fill deposit of soil behind it removed during the current works. This operation also exposed a concrete floor, context 102, which overlay a banded sequence of limestone rubble, contexts 103-105, that contained re-used 12th century fabric (Mark Johnson, pers. comm.). This material formed part of the original 19th century basement floor of the building (Plate 9), along with the northern external wall, context 101, and its

construction cut and backfill, contexts 112 and 111. The construction of this basement is probably responsible for original creation of the section recorded here.

The earliest deposits identified in section were a series of clayey silts and sandy silts containing charcoal and limestone flecks, contexts 130, 129 and 128, up to 0.50m thick. These were overlain by two dumps of loose mortary sand, 127 and soft clay silt, 126, which appeared to form a coherent surface at around 14.70m AOD, and were interpreted on the basis of the rest of the sequence as relating to the external ground surface associated with the 11th century Norman cathedral, which was constructed after 1080 (Brown, 2003, 3). At the southern end of the excavated area, an isolated deposit of firm dark grey-brown sandy silt, context 132, was exposed in a void in the 19th century floor (Figure 4, Plate 9), which contained human bone and was interpreted as a probable 11th century graveyard soil associated with the 11th deposits seen in section on the grounds of its relative depth at 14.61m AOD.

Context 126 was overlain by contexts 125 and 124, which formed a 0.60m thick mixed sequence of firm dark grey sandy silt and yellow-brown silty sand, both of which contained frequent angular fragments of limestone and a significant quantity of crushed mortar fragments. These were overlain by context 123, a friable mortar with crushed limestone, and context 122, a compact brown sand, which together formed a distinct surface at 15.12m AOD. Contexts 123 and 122 were interpreted as temporary surfaces created during a construction operation, with the underlying 125 and 124 interpreted as probable demolition deposits. Taken as a group, they are felt to represent the demolition of the 11th century choir and its replacement from 1154 under Archbishop Roger Pont l'Evêque (Brown, 2003, 4), as this represents the most significant known construction campaign in this area prior to the building of the current quire from c.1394 (Brown, 2003, 169). Overlying the construction surfaces were 121 and 120, a 0.40m thick sequence of sandy silts with frequent mortary lenses which suggest construction deposits and levelling relating to the 12th century building campaign.

These construction deposits were sealed by context 119, a 0.40m thick soft friable dark grey-brown silty sand which was interpreted a make-up deposit, bringing the ground level up to 15.50m AOD. This was cut by a probable grave, context 118, identified by its rectangular profile and the human bone projecting from its fill, 117. This was in turn sealed by 116, a firm-friable mid grey-brown silty sand which contained a significant quantity of human bone, some of which appeared to be *in-situ*, suggesting a graveyard soil in use after the 12th century re-construction of the east end and possibly associated with the burials encountered in Chapter House Yard during the 1980s extension of the buildings currently being renovated

(unpublished records in the York Minster Archaeological Archive). 116 was sealed by context 115, a 0.24m thick layer of compact dark grey-brown sandy silt containing limestone, interpreted as a levelling deposit associated with a possible later use of the graveyard north of the cathedral.

The next feature in the section sequence was the construction cut, 114, for the 15th century buttress footing, contexts 106, 107 and 108 (Figures 4 and 5, Plates 5 and 6), built when the 12th century east end was demolished and replaced from c.1394 (Brown, 2003, 169). The cut point was identified at 15.75m AOD but as the deposits had all been truncated by a modern internal wall, 110, and its construction cut, 131, this is not thought to be the 15th century ground level. The joint between the buttress itself, 109, and the uppermost section of its footing, 108, occurs at 16.27m AOD; the original construction level is therefore somewhere between these two points but has not survived in this area. The buttress footing was exposed to a depth of 14.49m AOD, the depth limit of the excavation, but it clearly extended to an unknown depth below this level. The lowest exposed element, 106, was built of rough dressed blocks of limestone in a chamfered profile and was 1.6m deep. Sitting on this was 107, a 0.70m deep course constructed chiefly of re-used capitals of 12th century date, which derive in the main from the Archbishop Roger's choir of 1154 (Stuart Harrison, pers. comm.). This was topped by 108, which was 1.2m deep and consisted of three courses of mixed squared limestone blocks and re-used 12th century fabric. The main wall of the buttress itself, 109, was set on this at 16.27m AOD. The construction backfill, deposit 113, exhibited lenses of mortar and tip-lines of limestone fragments typical of the construction debris observed by the author in the other major 14th and 15th century Minster construction trenches, as recorded during the engineering programme of the 1960s and 1970s.

The 15th century deposits had been truncated by 112, the construction cut for the 19th century works described above, that is thought originally to have created the section. These were in turn cut by the modern internal features already described.

4. DISCUSSION

The architectural elements surviving against the north choir wall relate to what was probably a suite of rooms. The stratigraphic relationships described above indicate that they were contemporary with the building of this part of the north choir aisle. This is further borne out by the fact that the buttress that forms their eastern limit has deeply moulded courses to its east and north sides but not to its western side where the range of buildings begin. All buttresses east of this example have continuous moulding. Conversely, and owing to their 'interior location', all buttresses within the former range are devoid of moulding. The range must have

been of a single storey as above this level it would have obscured the windows of the choir aisle. The western extent of the range is not known.

To some degree this range on the north choir aisle mirrors the range on the south choir aisle. However, whereas the latter was built and is still extant, some question remains as to whether this southern range was in fact ever completed. There is, for example, no scarring or even stonework irregularities, to the east or west faces of the buttresses indicative of a former roof. Again, whilst the stepped appearance of the eastern parts of the range may relate to recycling of stonework, it may equally relate to 'unfinished' work. It is of course possible that future documentary study may find reference to use of buildings in this location and refute the suggestions above. It is noteworthy though that no direct documentary reference to this northern range is cited in Sarah Brown's extensive medieval survey.

The re-exposed soil section provides an interesting and potentially valuable window on the construction sequence of the York Minster from 1154, along with the associated phases of land use. An alternative interpretation to the one offered above is that the lower surface, represented by deposit 126 at c.14.70, AOD, represents the 12th century works, with the sequence of demolition and construction deposits above that relating instead to the replacement of the North Transept from c.1225 (Brown, 2003, 13) . However, the section is some distance from the North Transept, and the extent of construction material identified suggests a major operation close by, with the 12th century east end campaign of Archbishop Roger Pont l'Evêque the most obvious explanation. Additionally, the possible 11th century surface at c.14.70m AOD broadly accords with the pre-1154 ground level identified elsewhere in the Minster archive and associated with the landscape of Archbishop Thomas of Bayeux (Mark Johnson, pers. comm. and unpublished research notes). The possible 12th century construction deposits 121 and 120 overlying the 'construction surfaces' 123 and 122 are also, at c.15.30m AOD, comparable with the approximate ground level of the 1154 east end seen elsewhere (Mark Johnson, pers. comm. and unpublished research notes). On balance, along with the known evidence for extensive 12th century burials seen around York Minster (Minster archaeological archive records), the original interpretation offered above seems the more likely.

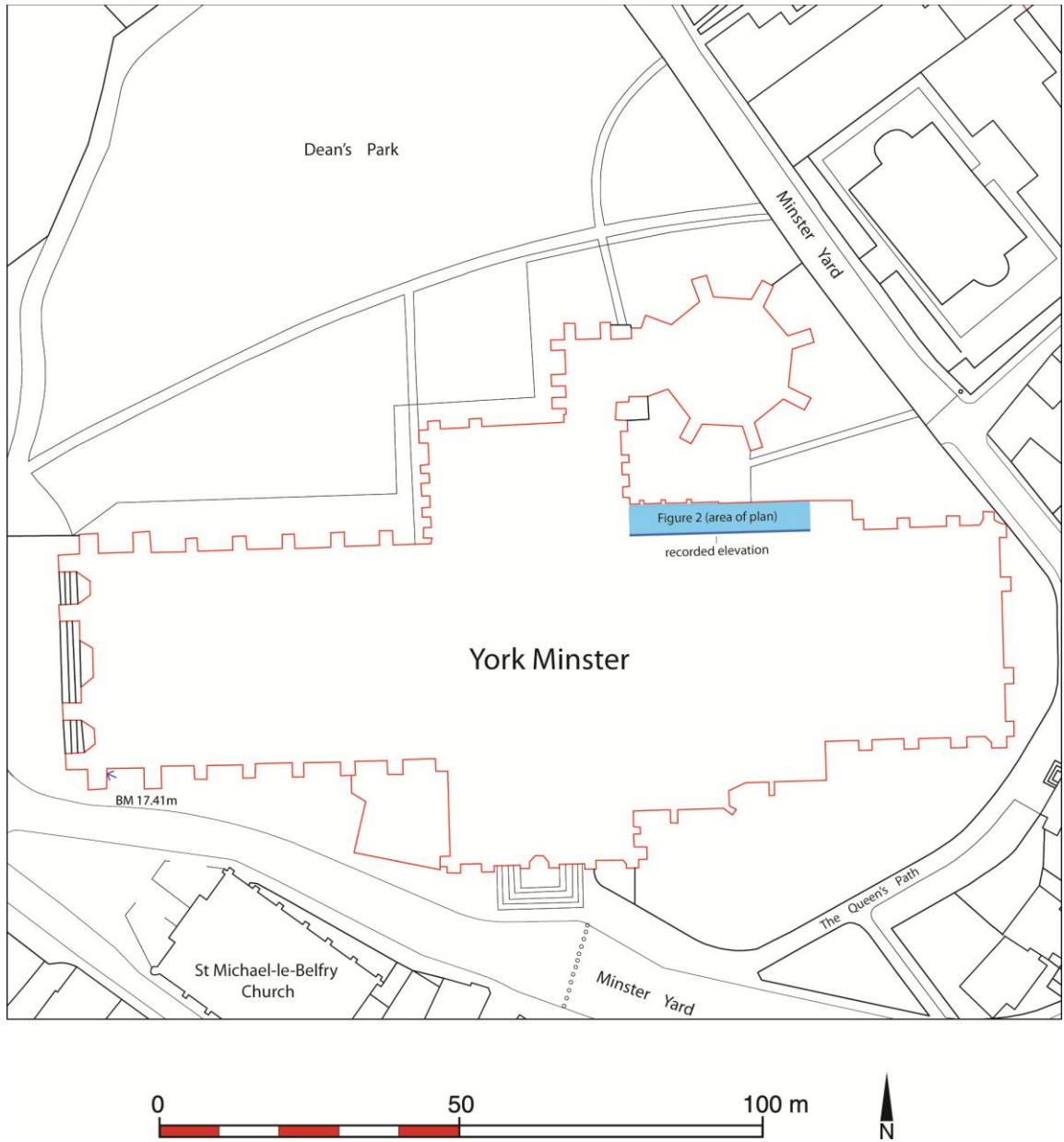


Figure 1 York Minster, showing location of building recording works

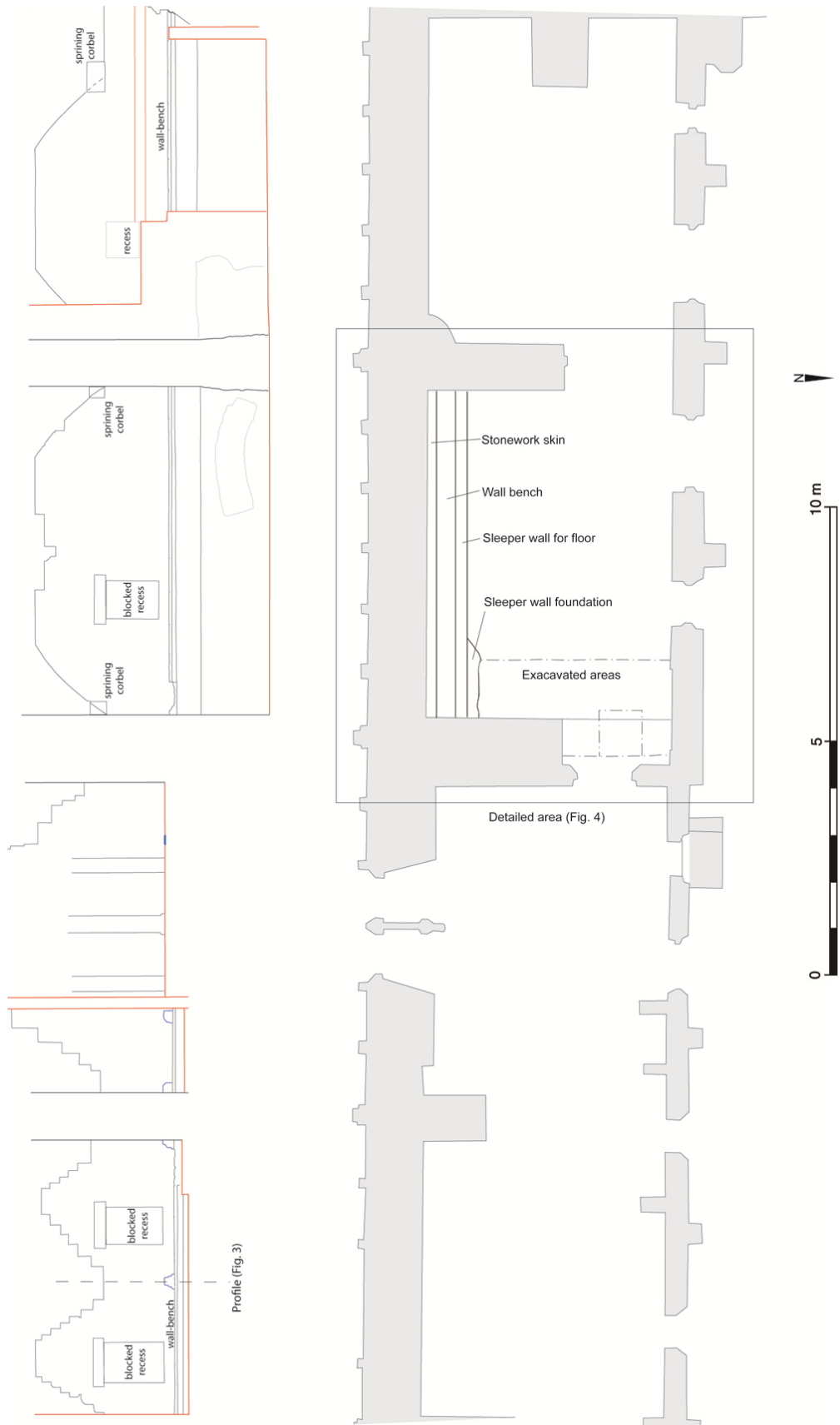


Figure 2 N facing elevation of former range in relation plan of existing. Red = modern works

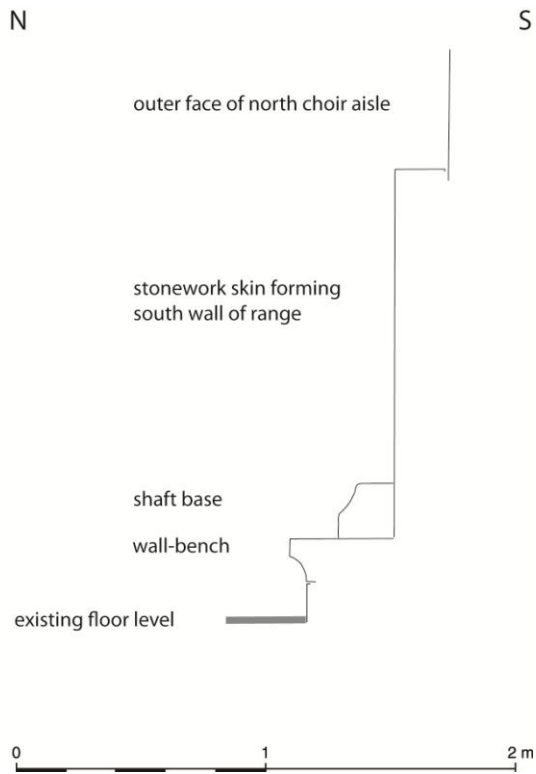


Figure 3 Profile across W part of former range (see Figure 2 for location)



Figure 4 Detailed plan of excavated area

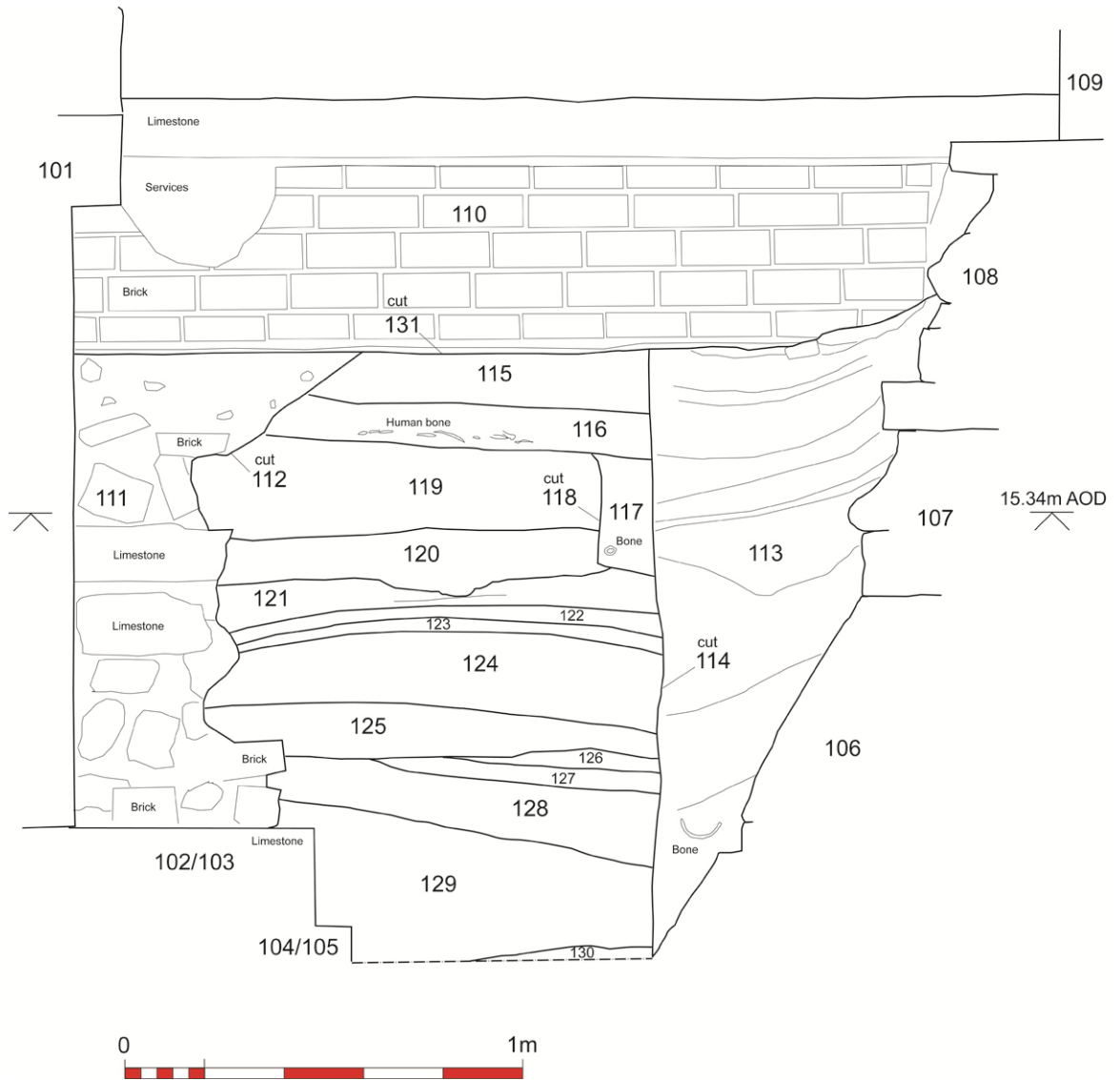


Figure 5 West facing section



Plate 1 Easternmost elements of former range. Note shaft bases atop wall-bench and two blocked openings, looking SE



Plate 2 Elements of former range immediately to east of doorways, looking S



Plate 3 Elements of former range to west of doorways. Note springing corbels, looking SE



Plate 4 Westernmost elements of former range, north transept is to right, looking SW



Plate 5 15th century buttress footing, looking south-east



Plate 6 Detail of reused 12th century masonry in 15th century buttress footing, looking east



Plate 7 West facing section, top part



Plate 8 Base of west facing section



Plate 9 View of excavated area, looking south-east

5. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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