ARCHEAOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF AT DANESBURY HOUSE, SIDBURY, WORCESTER

Simon Sworn

With a contribution by Alan Jacobs

Illustrated by Carolyn Hunt

29 September 2006

INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

Historic Environment and Archaeology Service,
Worcestershire County Council,
Woodbury,
University of Worcester,
Henwick Grove,
Worcester WR2 6AJ

Project P2917
Report 1458
WSM 101436

Archaeological watching brief at Danesbury House, Sidbury, Worcester

Simon Sworn

Background information

Client	Mr Brandon Weston
Site address	Danesbury House, 55 Sidbury, Worcester
National Grid reference	SO 85199 54446
Sites and Monuments Record reference	WSM 101436
Planning authority	Worcester City Council
Brief	WCC 2006
Project design	HEAS 2006
Project parameters	IFA 1999

Previous archaeological work on the site

Danesbury House stands on the present corner of City Walls Road and Sidbury to the east of the city centre. The Victorian novelist Mrs Henry Wood (1814-1887) lived in a building on the site of 55 Sidbury (WCM 98440), her first novel 'Danesbury House' was published in 1860. The present building was rebuilt in 1889.

There has been no previous archaeological work undertaken on site.

Previous archaeological work on associated sites

Information contained within the SMR (Sites and Monument Record) and a detailed background provided within the brief (WCC 2006), indicates that the site lies within an area of high archaeological activity, known to have been occupied in the Roman, late Anglo-Saxon, medieval and later periods (for location of nearby sites see Fig 2).

Sidbury is first mentioned in 963, though the information on the activities of the occupants becomes plentiful from the 13th century onwards (Carver 1980).

The area of works lie close to a number of significant archaeological sites, the most significant of which were noted during a number of excavations carried out prior to the construction of the City Walls Road in the 1970's. A number of interesting and important finds were observed in this area. A salvage excavation in November 1975 on the site of the former properties 39-47 Sidbury revealed a truncated late medieval barrel-lined cess pit or latrine (WCM 100187), the recorded sections showed a Roman road crossing the site on a north-west to south-east alignment (WCM 96401) together with Roman levels *c* 1m below the then present surface. Also an early Roman (1st century) ditch, running north to south was observed on the western edge of the site (WCM 96547). The ditch was 3m wide and 1.5m deep. It was interpreted as a settlement boundary, and could possibly relate to, or be part of Barker's 1st century ditch at Lich Street (WCM 100284, 96552).

In 2000 a trench excavated for shallow cable ducting as part of the CCTV project exposed directly below the modern road surfaces a compact sandstone structure of definite construction, which has been interpreted as an extant portion of the Sidbury gate through the city wall (WCM 100878).

A watching brief in 2002 (Napthan, WCM 100900), undertaken during the excavation of a large pit on the south side of Sidbury, on behalf of Severn Trent Water, revealed a number of archaeological features that have been inferred as Roman in date. The earliest activity was a ditch running north-west to south-east, it contained no datable finds, but dark green staining suggested cattle manure. It may have been a roadside ditch. A layer of gravel and iron slag, possibly road mettalling, which extended across the whole area, sealed the ditch. The gravel surface was cut by another, also undated ditch, on the same orientation as the first and containing only one sherd of Samian pottery.

A dark grey brown silty clay layer that contained a single sherd of coarse greyware, tentatively identified as Roman, covered the surface.

Aims

The aim of the watching brief was to observe and record any archaeological deposits, and to determine their extent, state of preservation, date and type, as far as reasonably possible.

The brief (WCC 2006) for the archaeological watching brief identified a number of research questions, including the following:

- Roman road network (RP 3.7)
- Roman activity in the Frog Brook valley (RP 2.12)
- Possible late Anglo-Saxon annexe defences at Sidbury, and their interior (RP 4.22)
- The medieval suburbs (RP 5.1)
- Industry and land use patterns in the suburbs (RP 5.14)
- Colonisation of back-plot areas and land in suburbs in the post-medieval period (RP 6.1)

Methods

General specification for fieldwork	CAS 1995	
Sources consulted	SMR/HER	
Date of fieldwork	15th June 2006	
Area of site	*c* 9m² Indicated on Fig 3	
Dimensions of excavated areas observed	Services	length 16.5m
		width 0.5m
		depth 0.85m

Access to or visibility of deposits

Aside from piles (for which observation was not considered to yield any value) significant ground works were restricted to a service trench (pile caps and beams involved only superficial ground disturbance through modern deposits). Observation of the excavated areas was undertaken during/after machine excavation. The exposed surfaces were sufficiently clean to observe well-differentiated archaeological deposits, though any less clear may have not been identified. Selected areas were cleaned by hand to define discrete archaeological deposits.

Statement of confidence

Access to, and visibility of, deposits allowed a high degree of confidence that the aims of the project have been achieved.

Results

For ease of recording, the service trench was divided into three sections (Trenches 1, 2 and 3: Fig 3)

Observations were undertaken during and after the excavation of a single machine service trench by machine, to the north-west of the present building (Fig 2). The trench consisted of an irregular shape, excavated for the insertion of sewer pipes for a new extension to the rear of the present property. The present surface consisted of a loose gravel and sand hardcore layer (100), this surface was recently made ground, imported prior to the building phase of the construction project.

The western service trench (Trench 1), extending from the rear of the property in a north-easterly direction contained the majority of significant archaeological remains, the other two smaller trenches (Trench 2 and 3) were not excavated to a depth that revealed any significantly earlier deposits, these trenches were mainly cut through modern made ground material.

Trench 1

Extending for 9m, this trench was excavated to a depth of 0.85m below the present ground surface. In the southern end of this trench, nearest to the present building, a large extent of rubble (101) was observed. This deposit consisted of brick, stone, sand and other modern material that probably related to the construction of the present building.

Underlying the predominantly modern deposits a substantial layer of friable dark sandy silt (111), containing frequent charcoal flecks and occasional small sub-angular pebbles were observed. This dark deposit was truncated from above by a number of later features.

Towards the centre of Trench 1 a redundant ceramic sewer pipe (112), aligned roughly north to south, cut through earlier deposits.

In the south-east section of the trench a number of other features were observed, these included a small pit (109) with steep/vertical sides and a clear concave base, filled by a loose dark brown silty sand (108) with a high quantity of small animal bone and occasional charcoal flecks. This pit also truncated a thin band of charcoal set within a firm dark brown/black clay matrix (107) to the south-west (Fig 4: Plate 3).

The substantial dark deposit (111) was also truncated by the construction cut (106) for a tile hearth (104). This feature was only partially exposed on the eastern edge of the trench (Fig 4: Plate 2). It appeared that the hearth was constructed from re-used roof tiles, set on edge, within a concave cut and bonded by a friable dark grey and red/brown silty clay matrix, heavily stained from charcoal and *in situ* burning. The hearth appeared to have been sealed by a thin layer of clay and charcoal (103), this in turn was overlain by a thicker band of firm orange brown silty clay containing occasional sand and charcoal flecks. This upper layer of clay was truncated to the south-west by the modern deposit (101).

In the far north-west corner of this trench the extant remains of a circular brick well (117), set within a vertically sided cut, were observed in section (Fig 4: Plate 4).

Below the dark deposit (111), a layer of cobbles were observed (113), these cobbles were roughly 0.05m in diameter, sub-rounded and set within a yellow/brown sandy clay matrix containing occasional charcoal flecks (Fig 4: Plate 5). This layer was only observed within Trench 1 and was not fully excavated, so the thickness and full extent of the deposit was not established.

Trench 2

This short section of service trenching furthest away from Danesbury House, running in a north-west to south-east direction, contained no archaeological remains, the majority of the trench cut through a redundant sewer pipe (112), the rest of the observed deposits were clearly of a modern date.

Trench 3

This trench, located to the south-east of Trench 1, revealed only limited archaeological deposits. The trench was only excavated to a depth of 0.35m. In the central section of the trench two parallel brick walls were exposed in plan. These walls, roughly 1.40m apart, ran in a north-west to south-east direction, and were constructed from bricks measuring 240 x 110 x 70mm and bonded with a hard yellow lime mortar. Between the two walls was a single fill of crushed mortar, brick fragments and gravels. To the south-west of the walls deposit 111 was observed under the overlying modern made ground. Deposit 111 was only partially visible and no pottery or other artefacts were recovered from this area.

Artefact analysis by Alan J Jacobs

Artefact recovery policy

All artefacts from the area of salvage recording were retrieved by hand and retained in accordance with the service manual (CAS 1995 as amended).

Method of analysis

All hand-retrieved finds were examined and a primary record was made on a Microsoft Access 2000 database. Artefacts were identified, quantified and dated and a *terminus post quem* date produced for each stratified context.

The pottery was examined under x20 magnification and recorded by fabric type and all sherds have been grouped and quantified according to fabric type defined by the county type series (Hurst and Rees 1992; Hurst 1992).

Artefactual analysis

The pottery assemblage retrieved from the excavated area consisted of 2 sherds of pottery weighing 19g; in addition fragments of bone, ceramic tile and iron slag were recovered. The group came from three stratified contexts and could be dated from the medieval period (see Table 1). Level of preservation was generally fair with the majority of sherds displaying low levels of abrasion.

Context	Material	Type	Total	Weight (g)
104	Tile	Medieval	6	1252
108	Bone	Mammal	32	22
108	Slag	Iron	1	4
111	Bone	Mammal	1	2
111	Pottery	Medieval	2	19
111	Slag	Iron	1	12

Table 1: Quantification of the assemblage

Discussion of the pottery

No diagnostic form sherds were present therefore sherds were datable only by fabric type to their general period or production span. The discussion below is a summary of the finds and associated location or contexts by period. Where possible, *terminus post quem* dates have been allocated and the importance of individual finds commented upon as necessary.

The pottery assemblage dates from the medieval period only. The medieval pottery consisted of only two sherds of Worcester-type glazed ware (Fabric 64.1; context 111) dating from the 12th-14th century. These had been burnt and were glazed on the exterior with one example displaying indented decoration.

Other finds

A total of six fragments of medieval roof tile were recovered with a single nail hole (Fabric 2b; context 104) and dating to the 13th-15th century. In addition a number of fragments of small

mammal bone were recovered (contexts 108 and 111) as well as two pieces of iron slag (contexts 108 and 111).

Significance

The lack of dateable artefacts limits any interpretation of this assemblage beyond dating the archaeological features to the medieval period. However, significant archaeological deposits clearly survive in this area of the city.

Context	Ceramic TPQ
104	13th-15th century
108	Undated
111	12th-14th century

Table 2: Context dating

Discussion

Though limited in extent, a number of interesting archaeological features were noted, mainly in Trench 1.

The dark deposit (111) contained only two shards of pottery, both dating from the 12th–14th centuries, though only a limited assemblage was retrieved, yet allied to the nature of the deposit this may possibly be inferred as a post-Roman/medieval buried soil horizon. These types of deposit have been referred to as a 'dark earth', which has been noted in other locations around the city (Macphail 1994; Dalwood 2004; Sworn 2006). These 'dark earth' deposits are common late Roman and sub-Roman deposits in urban situations in Britain and are thought to have formed when habitation and craft areas were converted to market gardens towards the end of the Roman period. The dark colour reflects the input of manure, cess and other organics to improve fertility (Wilkinson and Marter 2006).

'Dark earth' from Worcester has also been studied in detail by Dr Richard Macphail (2004) at the Deansway site, and he suggests the deposits originated as midden material mixed with large quantities of silty soil and peat brought in by grazing animals that were penned on the site during the later Roman period. The extent of dark earth deposits in Worcester suggests that cattle formed an important part of the settlement economy (Dalwood 2004, 47).

In this location, however, outside of the post-Roman city, landuse of agriculture continued until the area was incorporated within the medieval city with the construction of the 13th-14th century bank and ditch and the 14th-15th century wall, during which time, the dark earths were continually reworked and deepened which, elsewhere (Farrier Street) has limited their potential significance (Macphail 1994, 84). The limitations on the extent of the watching brief at Danesbury House meant that it was not completely feasible to establish the exact nature of this deposit, though its interpretation as a 'dark earth' is likely.

Cut into or overlying deposit 111 were a number of other features, stratigraphically these would be likely to post-date the 12th – 14th centuries.

The only datable feature was the tile hearth; this was constructed from roof tiles dating to the 13th – 15th centuries. It would appear that these tiles had been re-used as one of the tiles had a single nail hole that would have been used to attach it to the roof rafters. This suggests that the hearth was constructed at a later date, yet comparisons to other hearths of this type elsewhere in Worcester suggest a late medieval date (Newport Street: WCM 101372). As the hearth was only partially exposed in the south-eastern section of Trench 1, it was not possible to establish its original

function. Tile hearths like this are primarily used in a domestic context. There were no associated walls or other structures visible that would suggest that this hearth was constructed within a building. It is possible that the hearth originally functioned as something more industrial, such as a dying vat for cloth or a bread or malting oven, which would have been likely to have been located in an open area/yard to the rear of properties fronting Sidbury. The hearth structure appeared to be overlain by two deposits, the lower of which (103) consisted primarily of charcoal and is likely to have originated from the usage of the hearth. The other deposit was of a thicker band of clay and sealed the hearth, though there was no datable artefacts retrieved from this deposit it would post-date the usage of the hearth.

The 'dark earth' deposit (111) was overlying a layer of rounded cobbles (112) in Trench 1, though undated these have been tentatively interpreted as being deliberately emplaced during the Roman period. Though only a very small fragment of this cobble surface was exposed, the surface appeared to have to same from, and stratigraphical sequence as other similar cobble surfaces in and around Worcester (Napthan 2002, Burrows and Cutler 2004, Sworn 2006). The surface may represent a continuation of similar sections of probable Roman roads/tracks/surfaces that have been noted in previous nearby excavations (Fig 2).

The partially exposed brick structure in the far north-western edge of Trench 1 appeared to be the extant remains of a Victorian well. Only a partially section of the eastern elevation was visible in section so further discussion remains limited.

The depth of the trenching in Trenches 2 and 3 exposed mainly modern make-up layers, though the upper surface of the dark deposit 111 was revealed across most of Trench 3. In the central section of Trench 3 a later brick structure had been cut through this deposit. Though only exposed in plan this brick structure, consisting of two parallel walls running north-west to south-east, with a loose yellow brown sand with frequent brick and stone rubble (121) between appeared to be an in-filled 18th or 19th century cellar.

Conclusion

Though the area of the watching brief at Danesbury House was of a limited size, the nature of the archaeological deposits was interesting. The survival of both the possible late-Roman/post-Roman 'dark earth' and the extant remains of a cobble surface of a probable Roman date only 0.12 – 0.80m below the surface is of importance and interest. Though considerable modern truncation has taken place in the area of the evaluation, the survival of these deposits indicate the potential to extend the knowledge of both the Roman infrastructure and the later land usage on the periphery of the early medieval city.

Publication summary

The Service has a professional obligation to publish the results of archaeological projects within a reasonable period of time. To this end, the Service intends to use this summary as the basis for publication through local or regional journals. The client is requested to consider the content of this section as being acceptable for such publication.

An archaeological watching brief was undertaken on behalf of Mr Brandon Weston at Danesbury House, 55 Sidbury, Worcester (NGR ref: SO 85199 54446; SMR ref: WCM 101436). Observations were undertaken during and after the excavation of a single service trench to the north-west of the present building (Fig 2). The trench consisted of an irregular shape, for the insertion of sewer pipes for a new extension to the rear of the present property.

Below a number of modern make-up layers and service features, a substantial dark deposit was noted. This deposit may possibly be the remnants of a late-Roman/post-Roman 'dark earth' deposit, commonly found in urban situations in Britain and thought to have formed when habitation and craft areas were converted to market gardens towards the end of the Roman period. The dark

colour reflects the input of manure, cess and other organics to improve fertility. At Danesbury House this deposit was found to contain pottery dating from the 12th – 14th centuries, suggesting prolonged re-use and turning of the soils into the medieval period.

Cut into this dark deposit were a number of later features, these included a partially exposed tile hearth, constructed from re-used medieval roof tiles, a small bone filled pit of unknown date, a circular brick well of possible Victorian date and an in-filled brick cellar, probably dating from either the 18th or 19th century.

Below the dark deposit was a layer of partially exposed sub-rounded cobbles. This cobble layer, though undated, may be inferred as a Roman surface. The area around the site has, in the past, revealed a number of similar surfaces that have been identified as Roman roads/tracks.

The survival of both the possible late-Roman/post-Roman 'dark earth' deposits and the extant remains of a cobble surface of a probable Roman date only 0.12 – 0.80m below the surface is of importance and interest. Though considerable modern truncation has taken place in the area of the evaluation, the survival of these deposits indicate the potential to extend the knowledge of both the Roman infrastructure and the later land usage on the periphery of the early medieval city.

Archive

Fieldwork progress records AS2	1
Photographic records AS3	1
Digital photographs	31
Trench records AS41	1
Scale Drawings	4
Boxes of finds	1

The project archive is intended to be placed at: Worcestershire City Museum

Acknowledgements

The Service would like to thank the following for their kind assistance in the successful conclusion of this project, Brandon Weston, Dave Johnson (Glazzard Architects) and James Dinn (Worcester City Archaeologist).

Bibliography

Burrows, B, and Cutler, R, 2004 *14-20 The Butts, Worcester. Post-Excavation Assessment and Research Design*, Birmingham Archaeology, Project number 1097, November 2004

Carver, M 1980 *Medieval Worcester: An archaeological framework, reports, surveys, texts and essays.* Transactions of the Worcestershire Archaeological Society, Vol **7**

CAS 1995 (as amended) *Manual of Service practice: fieldwork recording manual*, County Archaeological Service, Hereford and Worcester County Council, report, **399**

Dalwood, H, and Edwards, R, 2004 *Excavations at Deansway, Worcester, 1988-89. Romano-British small town to late medieval city. CBA Research Rep **139***

HEAS 2006 *Proposal for an archaeological watching brief at Danesbury House, 55 Sidbury, Worcester*, Historic Environment and Archaeology Service, Worcestershire County Council, unpublished document dated 4th May 2006, **P2917**

Hurst, J D, 1992 Ceramic building material, in S, G, Woodiwiss (ed), *Iron Age and Roman salt production and the medieval town of Droitwich. CBA Res Rep* **81,** pp 155-157

Hurst, J D, and Rees, H, 1992 Pottery fabrics; a multi-period series for the County of Hereford and Worcester, in Woodiwiss, S G (ed), *Iron Age and Roman salt production and the medieval town of Droitwich*, CBA Res Rep, **81**

IFA, 1999 *Standard and guidance for an archaeological watching brief,* Institute of Field Archaeologists

Macphail, R, 2004 Soils and land-use history: results and potential of soil micromorphology, in Dalwood and Edwards, 77-9

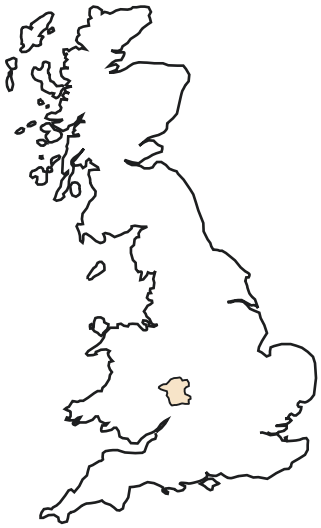
Macphail, R, 1994 Soil micromorphology, in Dalwood, C H, Buteux, V A, and Darlington, J 1994 Excavations at Farrier Street and other sites north of the City Wall, Worcester 1988-1992, *Trans Worcestershire Archaeol Soc,* 3 ser, **14**, 75-114

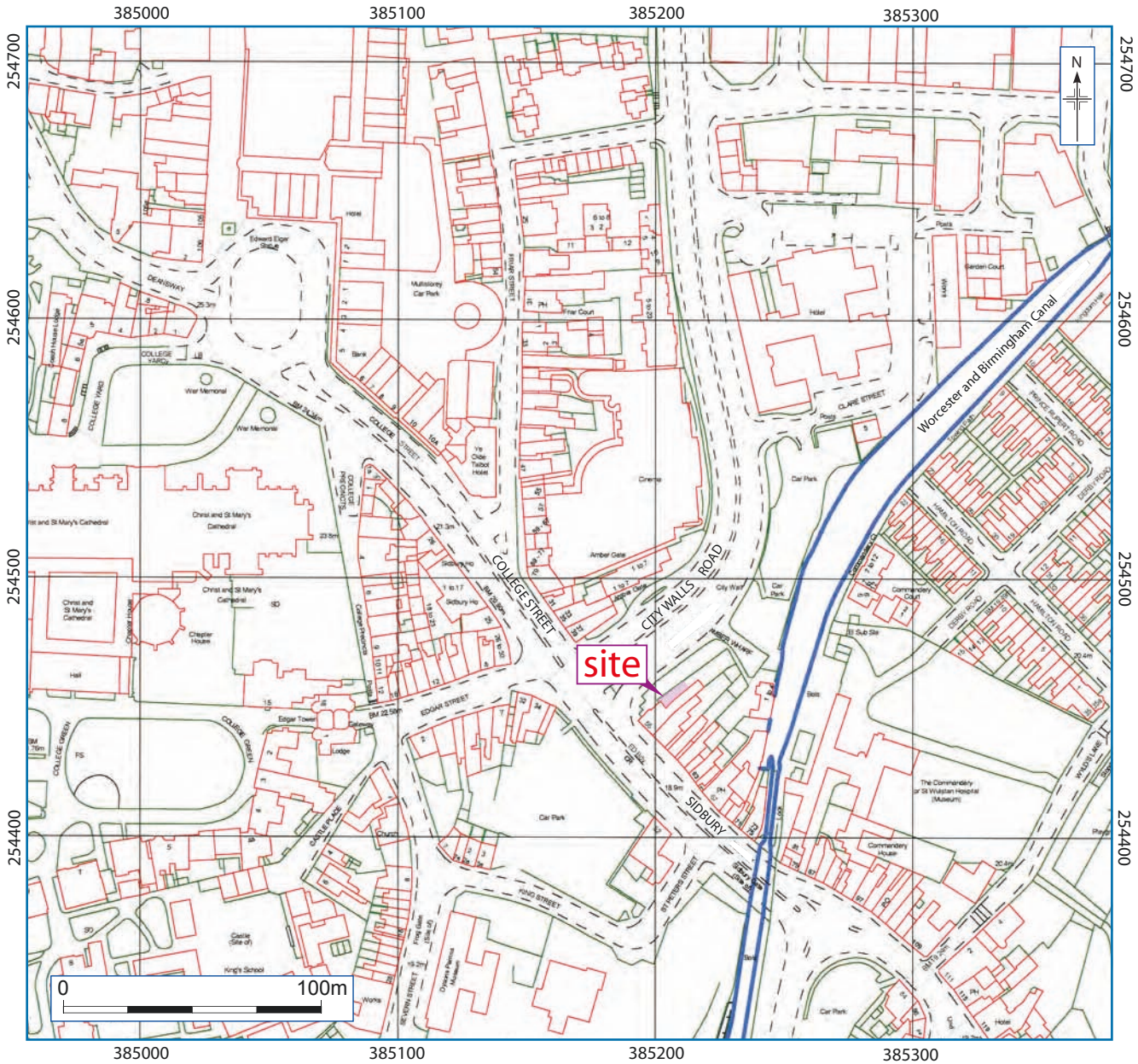
Napthan, M, 2002 *Archaeological salvage recording of STW water main valve pit, Sidbury, Worcester*

Sworn, S, 2006 *Archaeological evaluation at the site of the new library and heritage centre, The Butts, Worcester.* Historic Environment and Archaeology Service, Worcestershire County Council, report **1408**

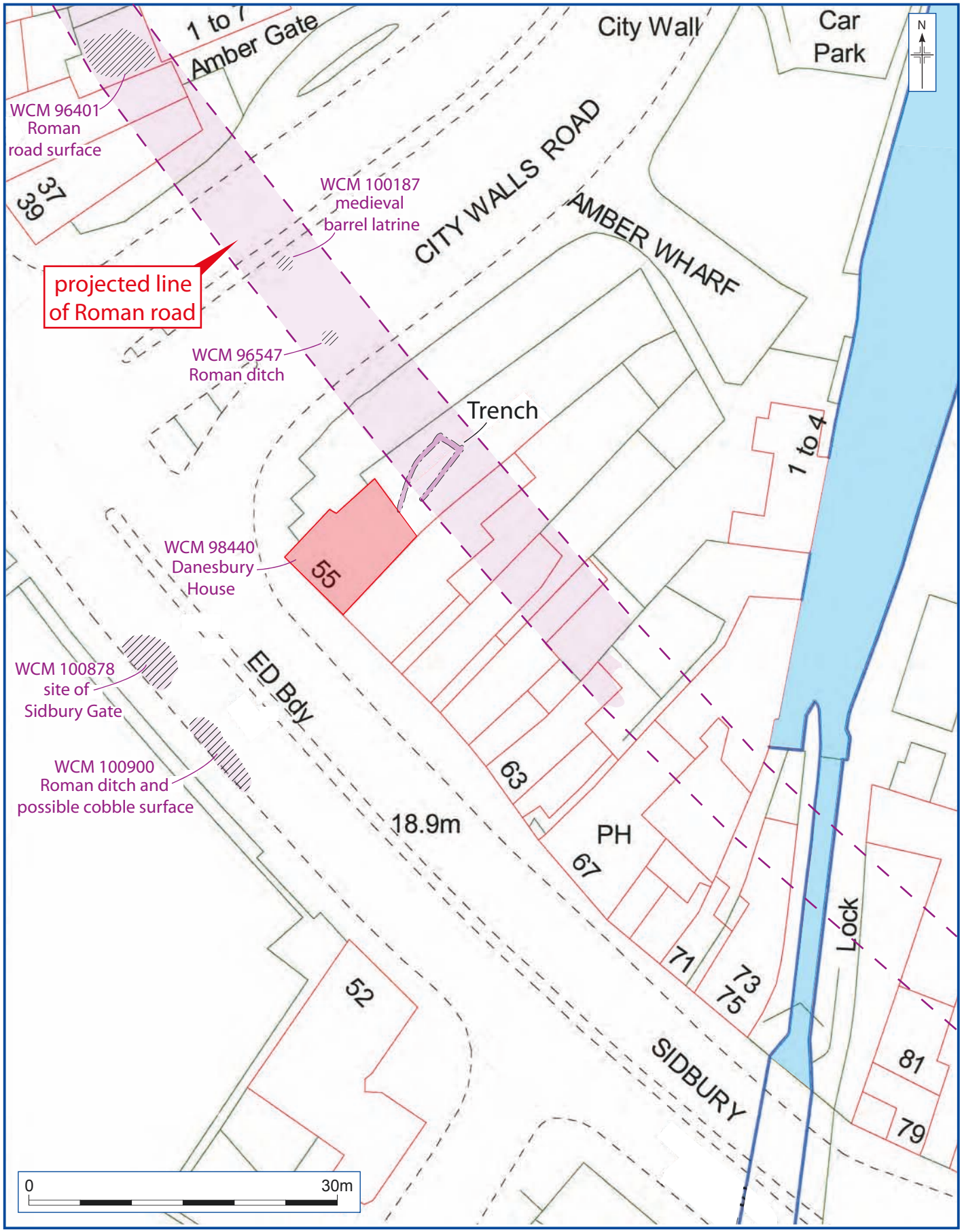
WCC 2006 *Brief for an archaeological watching brief at Danesbury House, 55 Sidbury, Worcester,* Worcester City Council unpublished document dated 4th May 2006

Wilkinson, K, and Marter, P, 2006 *The Butts, Worcester: a geoarchaeological assessment.* ARCA Report 0506-5, in Sworn, S 2006



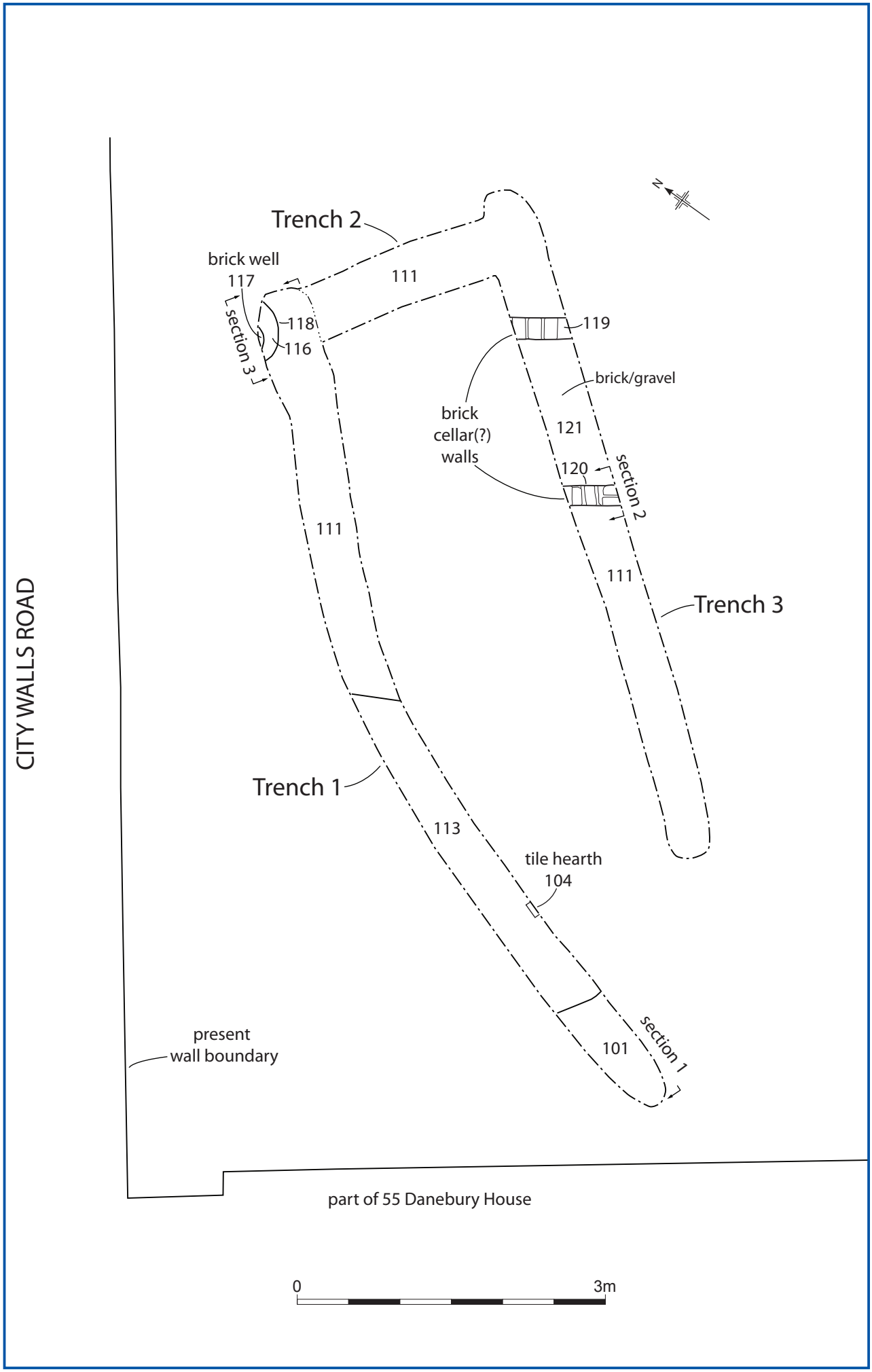


Location of the site. *Figure 1*



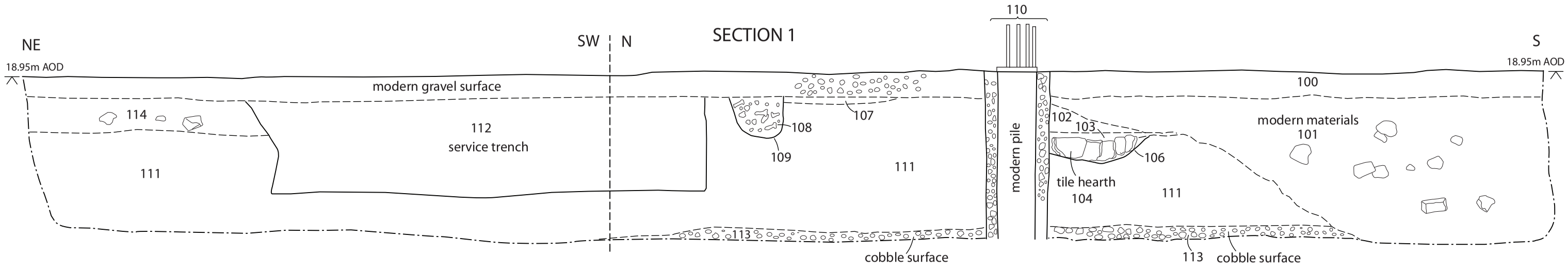
Trench location plan with adjacent sites indicated

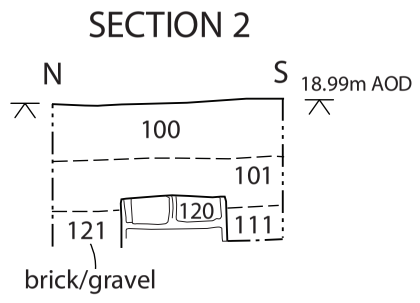
Figure 2

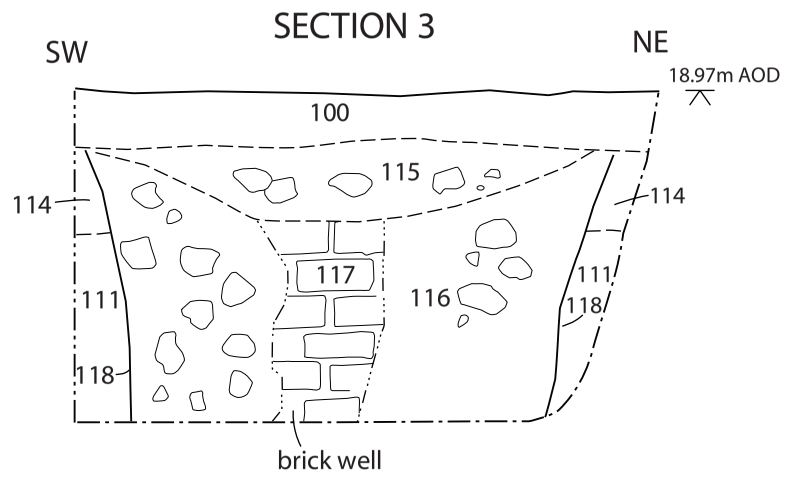


Trench plan

Figure 3







Sections

Figure 4

Plate 1: General view to rear of Dansbury house. (Facing south-west)

Plate 2: Detail of hearth (104), scale at 0.3m. Scale at 0.3m. (Facing north-east)

Plate 3: 'Dark earth' deposit (111) below modern made ground, service cut (112) and pit (109) to the left and modern pile (110) to the far right. Scale at 1m. (Facing north-east)

Plate 4: Section 3, partially exposed brick well (117). Scale at 1m. (Facing south-west)

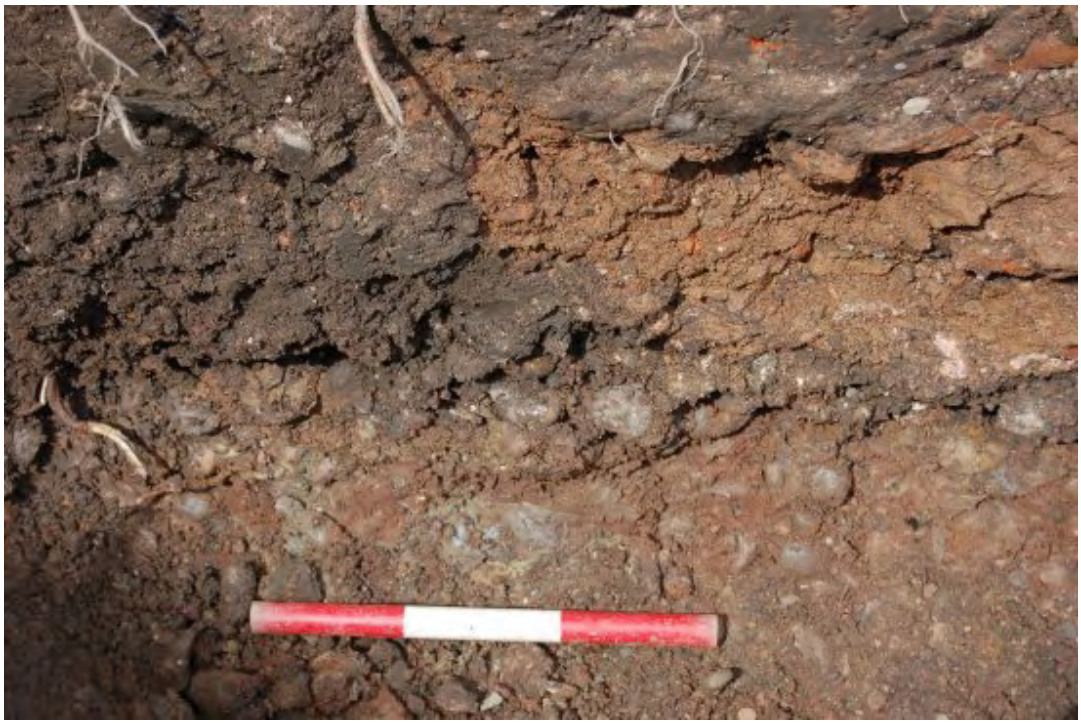


Plate 5: Cobble surface (113), below 'dark earth' (111), construction cut (112) visible to top right. Scale at 0.3m. (Facing south-west)

Plate 6: Trench 3, cellar wall (120). Scale at 0.3m. (Facing south-west)

Plate 7: Rear of Danesbury House, post-excavation. (Facing south-west)

Appendix 1

Trench description

Trench 1

Maximum dimensions: Length: 8.80m Width:0.60m Depth: 0.90m

Orientation: Various

Main deposit description

Context	Classification	Description	Depth below ground surface (b.g.s) – top and bottom of deposits
100	Made ground	Loose angular gravels and sand.	0.00m-0.14m
101	Modern dumped deposit	Loose modern rubble consisting of brick, stone and sand.	0.14m-0.90m
102	Layer	Firm orangey brown silty clay with occasional sand and charcoal inclusions.	0.17m-0.32m
103	Layer	Friable charcoal with occasional clay inclusions.	0.32m-0.34m
104	Structure	Stone and tile oven. Sandstone blocks with medieval roof tiles set on edge. Evidence of *in situ* burning. Fill of 106. Not fully exposed.	0.34m-0.48m
105	Fill	Friable dark grey and red/brown silty clay matrix heavily stained from charcoal and *in situ* burning below 104 and filling cut 106.	0.34m-0.48m
106	Cut	Construction cut for oven 104. Gently sloping sides with concave base. Filled by 105 and 104. Width = 0.50m. Depth = 0.12m.	0.34m-0.48m
107	Layer	Spread of charcoal and firm dark brown/black clay.	0.12m-0.16m
108	Fill	Fill of pit 109. Loose dark brown silty sand. Frequent bone and charcoal inclusions.	0.13m-0.34m
109	Cut	Pit cut. Steeply sloping / vertical sides with a concave regular base.	0.13m-0.34m
110	Structure	Modern piling structure.	0.00m-0.90m
111	Buried 'dark earth' plough soil	Friable dark brown sandy silt; occasional sub-angular stones and frequent charcoal inclusions.	0.13m-0.90m
112	Structure	Modern sewer pipe.	0.12m-0.61m
113	Layer	Medium sub-rounded pebbles in yellowish brown	0.78m-0.87m

Context	Classification	Description	Depth below ground surface (b.g.s) – top and bottom of deposits
		sandy clay; occasional charcoal inclusions.	
114	Layer	Loose brick and mortar rubble.	0.11m-0.29m
115	Layer	Dark brown silty sand with frequent rubble, brick and charcoal inclusions.	0.14m-0.34m
116	Fill	Rubble backfill of construction cut 118. Not fully exposed.	0.16m-0.86m
117	Structure	Brick well, viewed in section only. Curved bricks of visible dimensions: 235mm x 72mm. Not fully exposed.	0.34m-0.88m
118	Cut	Construction cut for brick well 117, viewed in section only. Steeply sloping / vertical sides. Width = 1.40m. Not fully exposed.	0.16m-0.88m
119	Cellar wall	Brick wall, aligned north – west to south – east, bricks 220 x 110 x 70m, bonded with a firm yellow lime mortar.	0.24m +
120	Cellar wall	Brick wall, aligned north – west to south – east, bricks 220 x 110 x 70m, bonded with a firm yellow lime mortar	0.24m +
121	Cellar backfill	Loose yellow brown sand with frequent brick and stone rubble, fill between brick walls 119 and 120	0.27m +