

# Archaeological watching brief at Connaught Square, Digbeth Birmingham

Worcestershire Archaeology  
*for The Historic Environment Consultancy*

July 2019



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# CONNAUGHT SQUARE DIGBETH BIRMINGHAM

Archaeological watching brief report

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## SITE INFORMATION

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Site name: Connaught Square, Digbeth, Birmingham

Local planning authority: Birmingham City Council

Planning reference: 2016/08273/PA

Central NGR: SP 077 862

Commissioning client: The Historic Environment Consultancy

WA project number: P5606

WA report number: 2714

Oasis reference: fieldsec1-357396

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## Archaeological watching brief at Connaught Square, Digbeth, Birmingham

By Tim Cornah

Illustrations by Carolyn Hunt

### Summary

An archaeological watching brief was undertaken at Connaught Square, Digbeth, Birmingham (NGR SP 077 862). It was commissioned by The Historic Environment Consultancy to monitor the excavation of geo-engineering test pits in advance of a proposed development for which a planning application has been submitted.

No significant archaeological features or deposits were present within the test pits. Extensive footing removal when the buildings were removed appears to have had a high impact, often truncating as far as the natural strata. Some deposits of likely alluvial origin were also present, particularly in the western half of the site. It is possible that these were the 17th century alluvial flood deposits on top of river terrace gravels recorded within a previous excavation in the western part of the site in 2008.

# Report

## 1 Introduction

### 1.1 Background to the project

An archaeological watching brief was undertaken by Worcestershire Archaeology (WA) in May 2019 at Connaught Square, Digbeth, Birmingham (NGR SP 077 862). This comprised of the observation and recording of 17 test pits. The project was commissioned by The Historic Environment Consultancy to monitor the excavation of geo engineering test pits in advance of proposed erection of new buildings ranging from 4 storeys to 28 storeys to provide 770 residential units and 3,529 square metres of commercial/retail/leisure and community uses (Use Classes A1, A2, A3, A4, B1, D1 and D2) together with car parking, new public square and pedestrian bridges over the River Rea, landscaping, engineering operations and site clearance and associated works. A planning application will be/has been submitted to Birmingham City Council (planning reference 2016/08273/PA).

The archaeological advisor to the local planning authority considered that the proposed development had the potential to have an adverse impact upon possible heritage assets.

No brief was provided but the project conforms to the generality of briefs. A Written Scheme of Investigation was prepared by The Historic Environment Consultancy (2019) and approved by Birmingham City Council. The project also conforms to the industry guidelines and standards set out by the Chartered Institute for Archaeologists in Standard and guidance: for an archaeological watching brief (CIfA 2014).

### 1.2 Site location, topography and geology

The site is located approximately 900m to the south-east of Birmingham city centre within Digbeth to the south of the High Street. It straddles the culverted River Rea on a site totalling up to 13,000 square metres in total area. The site is further bounded to the west by Rea Street, Bradford Street to the south and Birchall Street to the east. The site was formerly occupied by industrial and commercial buildings which were largely demolished, to be replaced by a car park.

The site is broadly flat and located at a height of 103m AOD and the bedrock geology is Sidmouth Mudstone Formation overlain by alluvium such as clay, silt, sand and gravel associated with rivers (BGS 2018).

## 2 Archaeological and historical background

### 2.1 Introduction

The archaeological background was summarised within the Written Scheme of Investigation (The Historic Environment Consultancy 2019). The following background is taken from this.

Digbeth High Street to the immediate north of the site is known to have been the principal route way into Birmingham from the medieval period from the south and south-east. An archaeological excavation took place in 2008 on the western part of the site following demolition of the buildings. The lowest deposit was a layer of 17th century alluvial flood deposits, on top of river terrace gravel with occasional lenses of industrial debris. A broad 18th century ditch cut these alluvial deposits. There was also a discrete area of rubbish pits and containing 18th century industrial debris.

In the late 18th century the River Rea was straightened and the ground was raised by circa 1m of deposits. From the 19th century buildings were constructed on the land and in the mid-19th century the River Rea was culverted.



### 3 Project aims

The objectives of the work were as follows:

To determine if any archaeological remains exist on the development area. It is not anticipated that archaeological remains will be encountered.

To excavate and record any archaeological remains that are present in order for load bearing strata to be exposed. The following will not be excavated:

- Human remains
- Structural remains which are clearly not Georgian or later

### 4 Project methodology

A Written Scheme of Investigation (WSI) was prepared by The Historic Environment Consultancy (2019). Fieldwork was undertaken between 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> May 2019.

A total of 17 test pits were excavated, and four of these were not excavated beyond the extent of the modern crush deposits due to these being extremely compact and tenacious. The location of the trenches is indicated in Figure 2.

Deposits considered not to be significant were removed under constant archaeological supervision using a JCB 3CX wheeled excavator, employing a toothless bucket. Subsequent excavation was undertaken by hand. Clean surfaces were inspected and selected deposits were excavated to retrieve artefactual material and environmental samples, as well as to determine their nature. Deposits were recorded according to standard Worcestershire Archaeology practice (WA 2012).

All fieldwork records were checked and cross-referenced. Analysis was undertaken through structural evidence, allied to the information derived from other sources.

The project archive is currently held at the offices of Worcestershire Archaeology. Subject to the agreement of the landowner it is anticipated that it will be deposited at Birmingham Museum Collection Centre.

## 5 Archaeological results

### 5.1 Introduction

The location of the test pits are shown in Figure 2. The test pit inventory is presented in Appendix 1.

### 5.2 Phasing

#### 5.2.1 Natural deposits across the site

Natural deposits were present in 11 of the 17 test pits (103, 203, 303, 403, 503, 903, 1004, 1203, 1402, 1503 and 1702) and consisted of light orange sands and gravels consistent with terrace material.

#### 5.2.2 Alluvial deposits

Within a number of test pits, particularly in the western part of the site, yellow clay deposits likely to be alluvial in origin were present (302, 402, 502, 1202). These are likely to relate to the channel of the River Rea and were present at a depth of between 2.1 and 2.8m below ground surface. No dating was present within these deposits. Within Test Pit 1, deposit (102) consisted of a dark grey sand and silt with matted organic material likely to have built up within the river channel. This was present at a depth of 2.90m below the ground surface.

### 5.2.3 Modern deposits

Only a single clear structured deposit was present in the form of a concrete and brick foundation (902) of likely 19<sup>th</sup> or 20<sup>th</sup> century date within Test Pit 9 which was aligned NW-SE at a depth of 1.60m below the ground surface.

The majority of the deposits within all of the test pits consisted of mixed grey brown sand silt deposits, typically with brick and concrete and some plastic inclusions (101, 201, 202, 301, 401, 501, 601, 901, 1001, 1002, 1003, 1101, 1201, 1401, 1502 and 1701). These deposits appear to have originated when foundations were grubbed out after demolition of the buildings, though the possibility of some intact deposits, particularly toward the base of the test pits cannot be ruled out.

All of the test pits were covered with a layer of brick and concrete crush of between 0.4 and 1.5m in depth.

## 6 Artefactual evidence

Recovery of artefacts was undertaken according to standard Worcestershire Archaeology practice (WA 2012). In the event no artefacts were identified which were considered to be suitable for analysis.

## 7 Environmental evidence

Environmental sampling was undertaken according to standard Worcestershire Archaeology practice (WA 2012). In the event no deposits were identified or safely accessed which were considered to be suitable for environmental analysis.

## 8 Conclusions

No significant archaeological features or deposits were present within the test pits. Extensive footing removal when the buildings were demolished appears to have had a high impact, often truncating as far as the natural strata. Some deposits of likely alluvial origin were also present, particularly in the western half of the site. It is possible that these were the 17th century alluvial flood deposits on top of river terrace gravels recorded within the previous excavation of the site.

The methods adopted allow a fairly high degree of confidence that the aims of the project have been achieved, though the deep and confined nature of the test pits did not always allow clear visibility. It is however considered that the results provide an accurate characterisation of the development site as a whole.

## 9 Project personnel

The fieldwork was led by Tim Cornah (ACIfA). The project was managed by Tom Rogers (MCIfA). The report was produced and collated by Tim Cornah. Specialist contributions and individual sections of the report are attributed to the relevant authors throughout the text.

## 10 Acknowledgements

Worcestershire Archaeology would like to thank the following: The Historic Environment Consultancy for commissioning the project and the staff of Applied Geology their help during the fieldwork. The project was monitored by Chris Patrick of the City of Birmingham Council.

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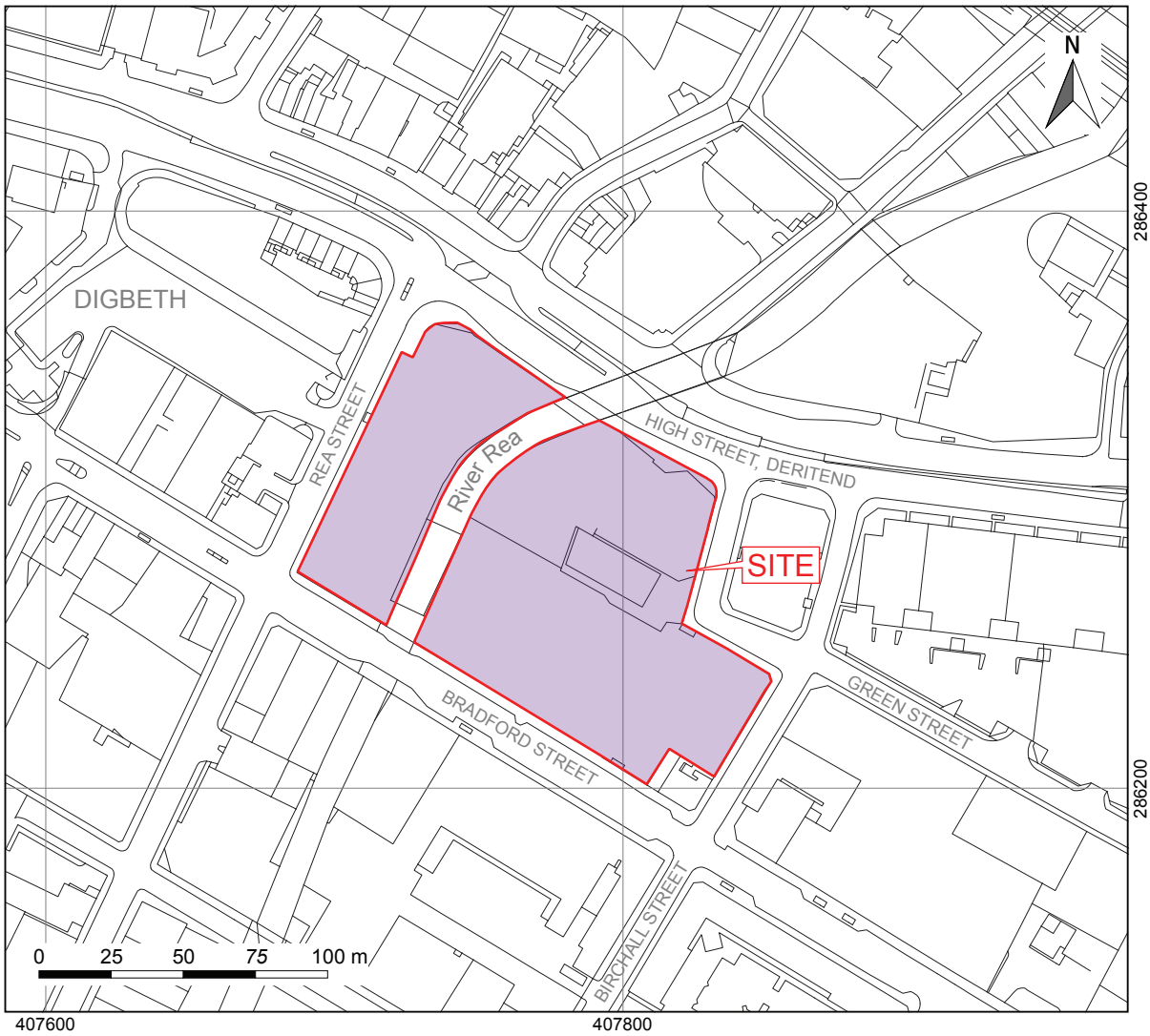
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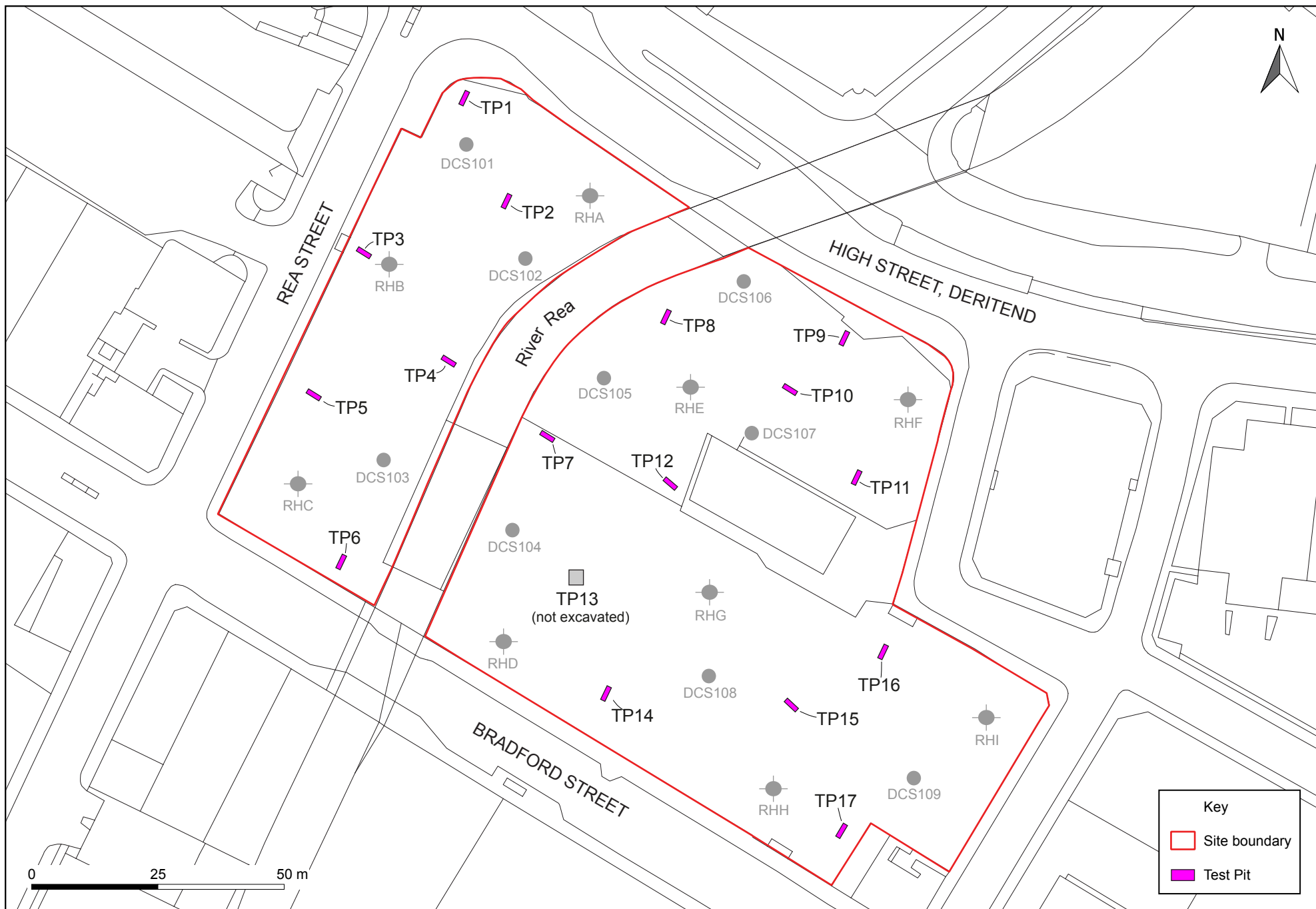
## Figures



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Location of the site

Figure 1



## Plates



*Plate 1 Test pit 17, looking north-east*





*Plate 2 Test pit 12, looking west*



*Plate 3 Test Pit 2, looking north-west*

## Appendix 1: Trench descriptions

### Test Pit 1

Length: 3m

Width: 0.8m

Depth 4m

Orientation:

NE-SW

#### Context summary:

| Context | Context type | Interpretation    | Depth      | Deposit description  |
|---------|--------------|-------------------|------------|--|
| 100     | Layer        | Made ground       | 0-1.5m     | Very compact layer of brick and concrete crush with a piling mat at its base |
| 101     | Layer        | Made ground       | 1.5-2.9m   | Dark grey brown sandy silt with occasional brick inclusions                  |
| 102     | Layer        | Alluvial deposit? | 2.90-3.20m | Dark grey black sand silt with organic matted material.                      |
| 103     | Layer        | Natural           | 3.20-4m    | Light orange sands and gravels   |

### Test Pit 2

Length: 3m

Width: 0.8m

Depth 4.2m

Orientation:

NE-SW

#### Context summary:

| Context | Context type | Interpretation | Depth    | Deposit description  |
|---------|--------------|----------------|----------|--|
| 200     | Layer        | Made ground    | 0-0.6m   | Very compact layer of brick and concrete crush with a piling mat at its base |
| 201     | Layer        | Made ground    | 1.5-2.9m | Orangey grey sand and gravel   |
| 202     | Layer        | Made ground    | 2.9-3.2m | Dark grey brown sandy silt with occasional brick and concrete inclusions     |
| 203     | Layer        | Natural        | 3.2-4.2m | Light orange sands and gravels   |

### Test Pit 3

Length: 3m

Width: 0.8m

Depth 3.7m

Orientation:

NE-SW

#### Context summary:

| Context | Context type | Interpretation    | Depth    | Deposit description  |
|---------|--------------|-------------------|----------|--|
| 300     | Layer        | Made ground       | 0-1.6m   | Very compact layer of brick and concrete crush with a piling mat at its base |
| 301     | Layer        | Made ground       | 1.6-2.2m | Dark grey brown sandy silt with occasional brick and concrete inclusions     |
| 302     | Layer        | Alluvial deposit? | 2.2-2.7m | Mid orangey silt clay  |
| 303     | Layer        | Natural           | 2.7-3.7m | Light orange sands and gravels   |

### Test Pit 4

Length: 3m

Width: 0.8m

Depth 3.4m

Orientation:

NW-SE

#### Context summary:

| Context | Context type | Interpretation    | Depth    | Deposit description  |
|---------|--------------|-------------------|----------|--|
| 400     | Layer        | Made ground       | 0-1.4m   | Very compact layer of brick and concrete crush with a piling mat at its base |
| 401     | Layer        | Made ground       | 1.4-2.1m | Dark grey brown sandy silt with occasional brick inclusions                  |
| 402     | Layer        | Alluvial deposit? | 2.1-2.4m | Mid orangey silt clay  |

|     |       |         |          |                                |
|-----|-------|---------|----------|--------------------------------|
| 403 | Layer | Natural | 2.4-3.4m | Light orange sands and gravels |
|-----|-------|---------|----------|--------------------------------|

### Test Pit 5

Length: 3m

Width: 0.8m

Depth 3.7m

Orientation:

NW-SE

#### Context summary:

| Context | Context type | Interpretation    | Depth    | Deposit description  |
|---------|--------------|-------------------|----------|--|
| 500     | Layer        | Made ground       | 0-1.5m   | Very compact layer of brick and concrete crush with a piling mat at its base |
| 501     | Layer        | Made ground       | 1.5-2.5m | Dark grey brown sandy silt with occasional brick inclusions                  |
| 502     | Layer        | Alluvial deposit? | 2.5-3.0m | Mid orangey silt clay  |
| 503     | Layer        | Natural           | 3.0-3.7m | Light orange sands and gravels   |

### Test Pit 6

Length: 3m

Width: 0.8m

Depth 3.7m

Orientation:

NE-SW

#### Context summary:

| Context | Context type | Interpretation | Depth  | Deposit description  |
|---------|--------------|----------------|--------|--|
| 600     | Layer        | Made ground    | 0-1.7m | Very compact layer of brick and concrete crush with a piling mat at its base |

|     |       |             |           |  |
|-----|-------|-------------|-----------|--|
| 601 | Layer | Made ground | 1.7->3.7m | Dark grey brown sandy silt with occasional brick and concrete inclusions |
|-----|-------|-------------|-----------|--|

### Test Pit 7

Length: 3m      Width: 0.8m      Depth 1.2m      Orientation:      NE-SW

#### Context summary:

| Context | Context type | Interpretation | Depth   | Deposit description                            |
|---------|--------------|----------------|---------|--|
| 700     | Layer        | Made ground    | 0->1.2m | Very compact layer of brick and concrete crush |

### Test Pit 8

Length: 3m      Width: 0.8m      Depth 1.4m      Orientation:      NE-SW

#### Context summary:

| Context | Context type | Interpretation | Depth   | Deposit description                            |
|---------|--------------|----------------|---------|--|
| 800     | Layer        | Made ground    | 0->1.4m | Very compact layer of brick and concrete crush |

### Test Pit 9

Length: 3m      Width: 0.8m      Depth 3.6m      Orientation:      NW-SE

#### Context summary:

| Context | Context type | Interpretation | Depth    | Deposit description  |
|---------|--------------|----------------|----------|--|
| 900     | Layer        | Made ground    | 0-0.3m   | Very compact layer of brick and concrete crush with a piling mat at its base |
| 901     | Layer        | Made ground    | 0.3-3.2m | Dark grey brown sandy  |

|     |           |              |                            |  |
|-----|-----------|--------------|----------------------------|--|
|     |           |              |                            | silt with occasional brick and concrete inclusions   |
| 902 | Structure | Wall footing | 1.60m Below ground surface | 19 <sup>th</sup> to 20 <sup>th</sup> century brick and concrete wall footing aligned NW-SE |
| 903 | Layer     | Natural      | 3.5-3.6m                   | Light orange sands and gravels   |

### Test Pit 10

Length: 3m

Width: 0.8m

Depth 3.6m

Orientation:

NW-SE

### Context summary:

| Context | Context type | Interpretation | Depth    | Deposit description   |
|---------|--------------|----------------|----------|---|
| 1000    | Layer        | Made ground    | 0-0.4m   | Very compact layer of brick and concrete crush with a piling mat at its base    |
| 1001    | Layer        | Made ground    | 0.4-1.0m | Mixed grey brown sandy silt with yellow clay banding                            |
| 1002    | Layer        | Made ground    | 0.4-1.4m | Mixed red clays with brick and wood inclusions                                  |
| 1003    | Layer        | Made ground    | 1.8-3.6m | Dark brown sand silt with concrete and plastic of 20 <sup>th</sup> century date |
| 1004    | Layer        | Natural        | 3.6->4m  | Light orange sands and gravels  |

### Test Pit 11

Length: 3m

Width: 0.8m

Depth 3.6m

Orientation:

NW-SE

#### Context summary:

| Context | Context type | Interpretation | Depth    | Deposit description  |
|---------|--------------|----------------|----------|--|
| 1100    | Layer        | Made ground    | 0-0.3m   | Very compact layer of brick and concrete crush with a piling mat at its base |
| 1101    | Layer        | Made ground    | 0.3-3.4m | Dark grey brown clay silt with brick, concrete and plastic                   |

### Test Pit 12

Length: 3.5m

Width: 0.8m

Depth 3.5m

Orientation:

NW-SE

#### Context summary:

| Context | Context type | Interpretation    | Depth     | Deposit description  |
|---------|--------------|-------------------|-----------|--|
| 1200    | Layer        | Made ground       | 0-1.7m    | Very compact layer of brick and concrete crush with a piling mat at its base |
| 1201    | Layer        | Made ground       | 1.7-2.8m  | Dark grey brown sandy silt with occasional machine made brick inclusions     |
| 1202    | Layer        | Alluvial deposit? | 2.8-3.4m  | Mid orangey silt clay  |
| 1203    | Layer        | Natural           | 3.4->3.5m | Light orange sands and gravels   |



### Test Pit 14

Length: 3.5m

Width: 0.8m

Depth 3.5m

Orientation:

NE-SW

#### Context summary:

| Context | Context type | Interpretation | Depth     | Deposit description  |
|---------|--------------|----------------|-----------|--|
| 1400    | Layer        | Made ground    | 0-1.3m    | Very compact layer of brick and concrete crush with a piling mat at its base |
| 1401    | Layer        | Made ground    | 1.3-3.6m  | Dark grey brown sandy silt with occasional machine made brick inclusions     |
| 1402    | Layer        | Natural        | 3.6->3.7m | Light orange sands and gravels   |

### Test Pit 15

Length: 3.0m

Width: 0.8m

Depth 3.8m

Orientation:

NW-SE

#### Context summary:

| Context | Context type | Interpretation | Depth     | Deposit description  |
|---------|--------------|----------------|-----------|--|
| 1500    | Layer        | Made ground    | 0-0.4m    | Very compact layer of brick and concrete crush with a piling mat at its base |
| 1501    | Layer        | Made ground    | 0.4-1.1m  | Compact red brick crush deposit  |
| 1502    | Layer        | Made ground    | 1.1-3.20m | Dark grey black sandy silt with frequent brick, some frogged                 |

|      |       |         |            |                                |
|------|-------|---------|------------|--------------------------------|
|      |       |         |            | 20 <sup>th</sup> century       |
| 1503 | Layer | Natural | 3.20>3.80m | Light orange sands and gravels |

### Test Pit 16

Length: 3m      Width: 0.8m      Depth 1.2m      Orientation:      NE-SW

#### Context summary:

| Context | Context type | Interpretation | Depth   | Deposit description                            |
|---------|--------------|----------------|---------|--|
| 1600    | Layer        | Made ground    | 0->1.2m | Very compact layer of brick and concrete crush |

### Test Pit 17

Length: 3.0m      Width: 0.8m      Depth 3.9m      Orientation:      NE-SW

#### Context summary:

| Context | Context type | Interpretation | Depth     | Deposit description  |
|---------|--------------|----------------|-----------|--|
| 1700    | Layer        | Made ground    | 0-0.4m    | Very compact layer of brick and concrete crush with a piling mat at its base |
| 1701    | Layer        | Made ground    | 0.4-1.1m  | Mid grey brown silty sand with inclusions of frogged machine made brick      |
| 1702    | Layer        | Natural        | 1.1-3.20m | Light orange sands and gravels   |

## Appendix 2: Summary of project archive

| TYPE                        | DETAILS*  |
|-----------------------------|---|
| Artefacts and Environmental | None  |
| Paper                       | Context sheet, Diary (Field progress form), Photograph, Report, |
| Digital                     | Images raster/digital photography, Text , Plan                  |

*\*OASIS terminology*