

Archaeological Watching Brief

on engineers test pits

Robert Gordon's College, Schoolhill, Aberdeen



Site of Test Pit 2 looking South



25th October 2012

Introduction (Illus 1)

This archaeological watching brief on the digging of two engineers test pits at Robert Gordon's College, Schoolhill was carried out for Aberdeen City Council to ensure that any archaeological deposits were monitored and recorded during the work. This work was undertaken to assess the nature of the foundations of Aberdeen Art Gallery. It was undertaken by the author on Tuesday 23rd October 2012 (Site Code AB02) weather conditions were overcast and wet.

Archaeological Background (Illus 2)

There are references in the 18th and 19th centuries to human remains being found on the site of Aberdeen Art Gallery. A short cist was reported in 1883 (Wyness 1965, 292) and in the Old Statistical Account there is a reference to 'Many human bones, among which were 14 or 16 skulls, were found about 1777 when digging foundations at Schoolhill. On some of the skulls was 'long yellow hair, neatly wrapped round and plaited with an woolen fillet or string in form of a queue, which did not appear to be rotten. There were no remains of any coffins, and no appearance from the position of the bones that the bodies had been regularly interred.' (OSA 1797). In the vicinity is the site of a Dominican house founded between 1230 and 1249 by Alexander II, who is said to have bestowed on it his palace and garden situated between Schoolhill, Blackfrairs Street, Woolmanhill, St Andrews Street and Harriet Street. The bounding wall of the property, 'very high but for the most part ruined', was extant in 1661, although both the monastery and its church, dedicated to St. John the Baptist, had been completely destroyed by reformers in 1560. Excavations in 1833 revealed a south-facing building belonging to the monastery, as well as a stone-built grave 6' by 4' of unworked stones cemented with lime and containing three bodies, one of them apparently young. The site is now occupied by Robert Gordon's College. In 2000 excavations at the back of the Robert Gordon's College 'Auld Hoose' (the 18th century hospital) found part of a ditch which may have been related to the fortification of the site when Cumberland's troops were billeted there immediately before Culloden (Cameron 2000, 7). In 2009 further work during landscaping by Robert Gordon College, only a few metres away from the planned trial pits, found traces of walls (robbed and/or rather ephemeral), probably relating to the Dominican Friary, plus disarticulated bone, stone slates and window glass fragments (Cameron 2009).

Watching Brief (Illus 3)

Test Pit 1 (Illus 4 to 7)

This test pit measured 0.50m by 0.50m and was dug in angle of the junction between the Northern wall of the Art Gallery and a property boundary wall that heads to the North. A layer of tarmac (100) 0.10m thick was removed onto a layer of concrete (101) 0.20m deep which overlay a deposit of moderate grey brown silty clay and stones with occasional fragments of broken ceramic drain and mortar flecks (102) which was encountered to the bottom of the test pit at 0.90m below current ground level. The southern wall of the Art Gallery was built of red granite blocks (103) to a depth of 0.55m where it changed to rough sandstone blocks bonded with a lime mortar (104). This different foundation continued to the base of the pit. The excavation of the test pit was halted at a depth of 0.90m when a deposit of sizeable rounded sandstones was encountered (105). These stones had lime mortar adhering to their faces. No finds were recovered from this test pit.

Test Pit 2 (Illus 8 to 14)

This test pit measured 0.85m from North to South by 0.50m East to West and was dug against the main Eastern wall of the Art Gallery at a distance of 9.30m from its junction with the North wall. A layer of tarmac (1) 0.10m thick was removed onto a layer of granite rubble (2) 0.35m thick which overlay a deposit of grey brown sandy clay with frequent mortar flecks and abundant stones (3) which was 0.55m thick and overlay a deposit of orange brown sandy gravel which appeared to be natural (4). Context 3 contained a fragment of splash glazed redware floor tile, a redware brick and two pieces of animal bone; an iron nail was also recovered from this deposit. This section of the Art Gallery wall (5) has a stepped foundation (6) lying directly above the natural ground level.

Conclusions

Both of the excavated test pits were in the fill of the foundation trenches for the eastern and northern walls of the Art Gallery but do indicate that archaeological deposits exist to a depth of at least 0.90m below current ground level. There seems to be a suggestion in Test Pit 1 that the Northern wall of the Art Gallery is built on top of a much earlier lime bonded sandstone foundation, this may relate to buildings that shown in this area prior to the construction of the Art Gallery in 1885. The back fill of the foundation trench in Test Pit 2 contained a floor tile fragment of medieval date which must originate from the Blackfriars monastery which formerly stood in the vicinity.

Recommendations

If any further site investigation work is planned it is recommended that this is also monitored by an archaeologist as this will help assess the scale of further archaeological work that may be required as part of the refurbishment of the Art Gallery. The final decision on the need for any further work however rests with the Aberdeen City Council archaeologist.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank the test pit diggers Alan McDonald and Grant for their good humour on a dreich day. He would also like to acknowledge the help of Catherine Smith of Alder Archaeology with the animal bone identification.

Appendices

Context List

Test Pit 1

100 Tarmac

101 Concrete

102 Moderate grey brown silty clay and stones with occasional fragments of broken ceramic drain and mortar flecks

103 Northern wall of Art gallery

104 Rough sandstone blocks bonded with lime mortar

105 Rounded sandstones with adhering mortar

Test Pit 2

1 Tarmac

2 Granite rubble

3 Grey brown sandy clay with mortar flecks and abundant stone

4 Orange brown sandy gravel (natural?)

5 East facing wall of Art Gallery

6 Stepped foundation of Art Gallery wall

Finds List

Test Pit 2

Context 3

One broken piece of glazed floor tile in a Redware fabric (13th/14th century date) (Illus 11)

One complete unglazed ceramic brick (liable to be of 17th/18th century date) (Illus 12)

One fragment of sawn animal bone (large ungulate) (Illus 13)

One piece of animal bone (rib)

One large iron nail (appears to be structural)

References

Cameron, A S 2000 'Robert Gordon's College, Aberdeen' Discovery and Excavation in Scotland, 7

Cameron, A S 2009 'Robert Gordon's College, Schoolhill, Aberdeen Archaeological Watching Brief' Report by Aberdeen Council Archaeology Unit

OSA 1797 'The Old Statistical Account for Scotland Number IV City of Aberdeen'

Wyness, J F 1965 City by the grey North Sea: Aberdeen, 292

Cartographic Sources (<http://www.nls.uk/maps>)

Ordnance Survey Maps - Six-inch 1st edition, Scotland, 1843-1882

Illustration List

Illus 1 Site Location marked in red (based on Ordnance Survey map Crown Copyright 2011. All Rights Reserved. Licence number 100049628)

Illus 2 Buildings existing on site of Aberdeen Art gallery in 1867 (© Trustees of National Library of Scotland).

Illus 3 Location of test pits 1 and 2 (based on supplied architects plan) Scale 1:500

Illus 4 Test Pit 1 under excavation looking South

Illus 5 View of excavated Test Pit 1 showing difference in wall foundation (where lime mortar is visible to left of scale).

Illus 6 Test Pit 1 North Facing elevation of Art Gallery wall Scale 1:10

Illus 7 Test Pit 1 West Facing section Scale 1:10

Illus 8 Location of Test Pit 2 looking South

Illus 9 View of excavated Test Pit 2 looking North with stepped wall foundation visible to left of scale.

Illus 10 Test Pit 2 East Facing elevation of Art Gallery Wall Scale 1:10

Illus 11 Test Pit 2 South Facing section Scale 1:10

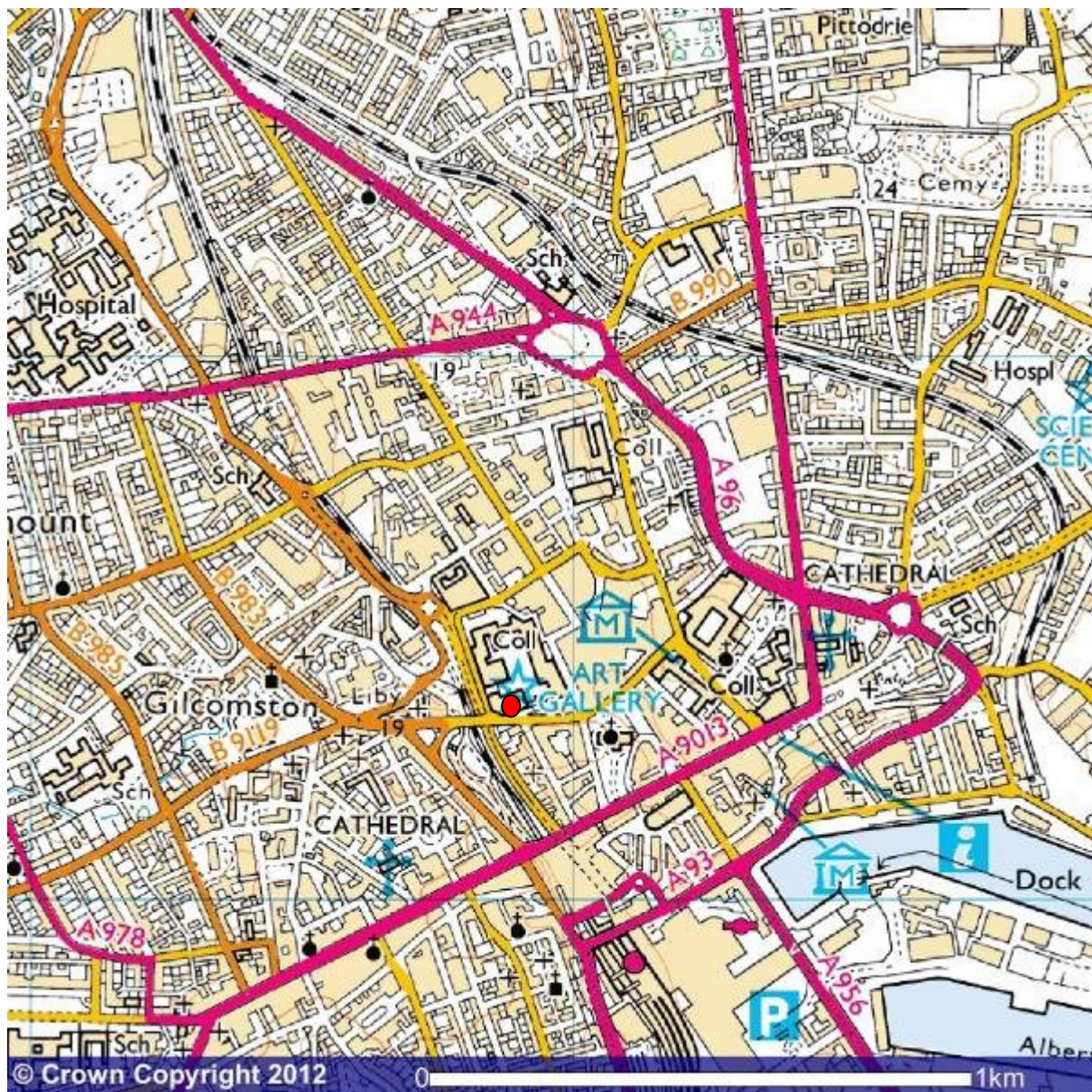
Illus 12 Fragment of glazed redware floor tile from Context 3 in Test Pit 2 (Pound coin as scale)

Illus 13 Ceramic brick from context 3 in Test Pit 2 (Pound coin as scale)

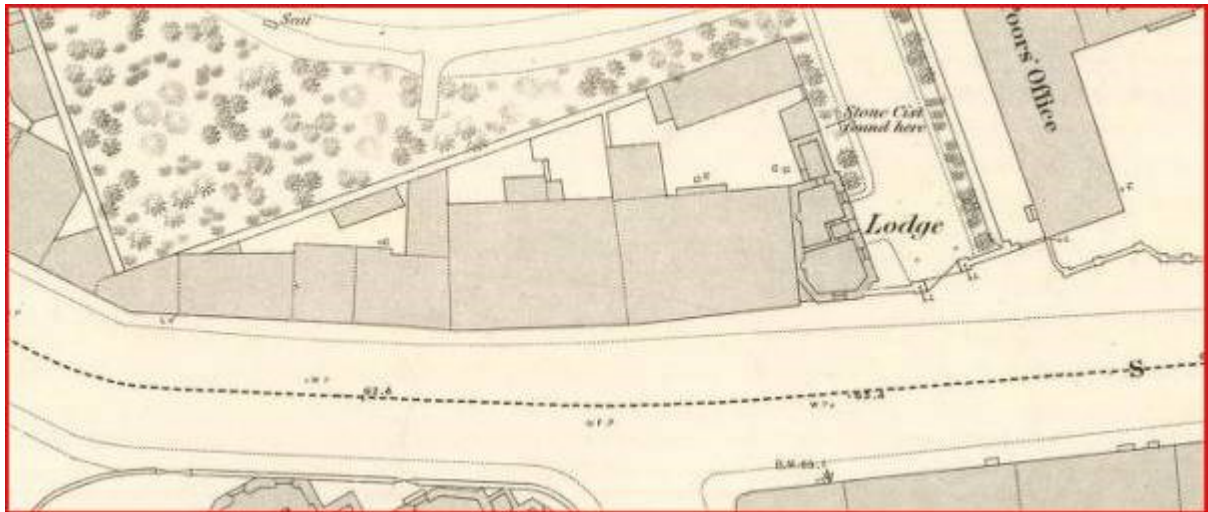
Illus 14 Piece of animal bone with sawn ends from context 3 in Test Pit 2 (Pound coin as scale)

Discovery & Excavation in Scotland Entry

LOCAL AUTHORITY:	Aberdeen City
PROJECT TITLE/SITE NAME:	Archaeological watching brief on engineers test pits, Aberdeen Art Gallery, Schoolhill, Aberdeen
PROJECT CODE:	AB02
PARISH:	Aberdeen
NAME OF CONTRIBUTOR(S):	Derek Hall
NAME OF ORGANISATION:	Derek Hall, archaeologist and ceramic specialist
TYPE(S) OF PROJECT:	Archaeological Watching Brief
NMRS NO(S):	NJ90NW 180
SITE/MONUMENT TYPE(S):	Aberdeen Art Gallery
SIGNIFICANT FINDS:	Floor tile, ceramic brick, bone
NGR (2 letters, 6 figures)	NJ9334 06372
START DATE	23rd October 2012
END DATE	23rd October 2012
PREVIOUS WORK (incl. <i>DES</i> ref.)	None
MAIN (NARRATIVE) DESCRIPTION: (May include information from other fields)	A watching brief was undertaken on the digging of two engineers test pits against the Northern and Eastern walls of Aberdeen Art Gallery. Test Pit 1 which was against the North facing wall located an earlier lime bonded sandstone foundation to this wall and Test Pit 2 which was against the East facing wall located a stepped foundation lying above a natural orange brown gravel which was encountered at 0.90m below modern ground level. The fill of the wall foundation trench in Test Pit 2 contained a single broken fragment of glazed redware floor tile of medieval date, a Post Medieval ceramic brick, two pieces of animal bone (one with saw marks) and a structural iron nail.
PROPOSED FUTURE WORK:	None
SPONSOR OR FUNDING BODY:	Aberdeen City Council
CAPTIONS FOR ILLUSTRS	N/A
ADDRESS OF MAIN CONTRIBUTOR:	34 Glenfarg Terrace, Perth, PH2 0AP
ARCHIVE LOCATION (intended)	NMRS
EMAIL ADDRESS:	Derek.hall1@blueyonder.co.uk



Illus 1 Site Location marked in red (based on Ordnance Survey map Crown Copyright 2012. All Rights Reserved. Licence number 100049628)



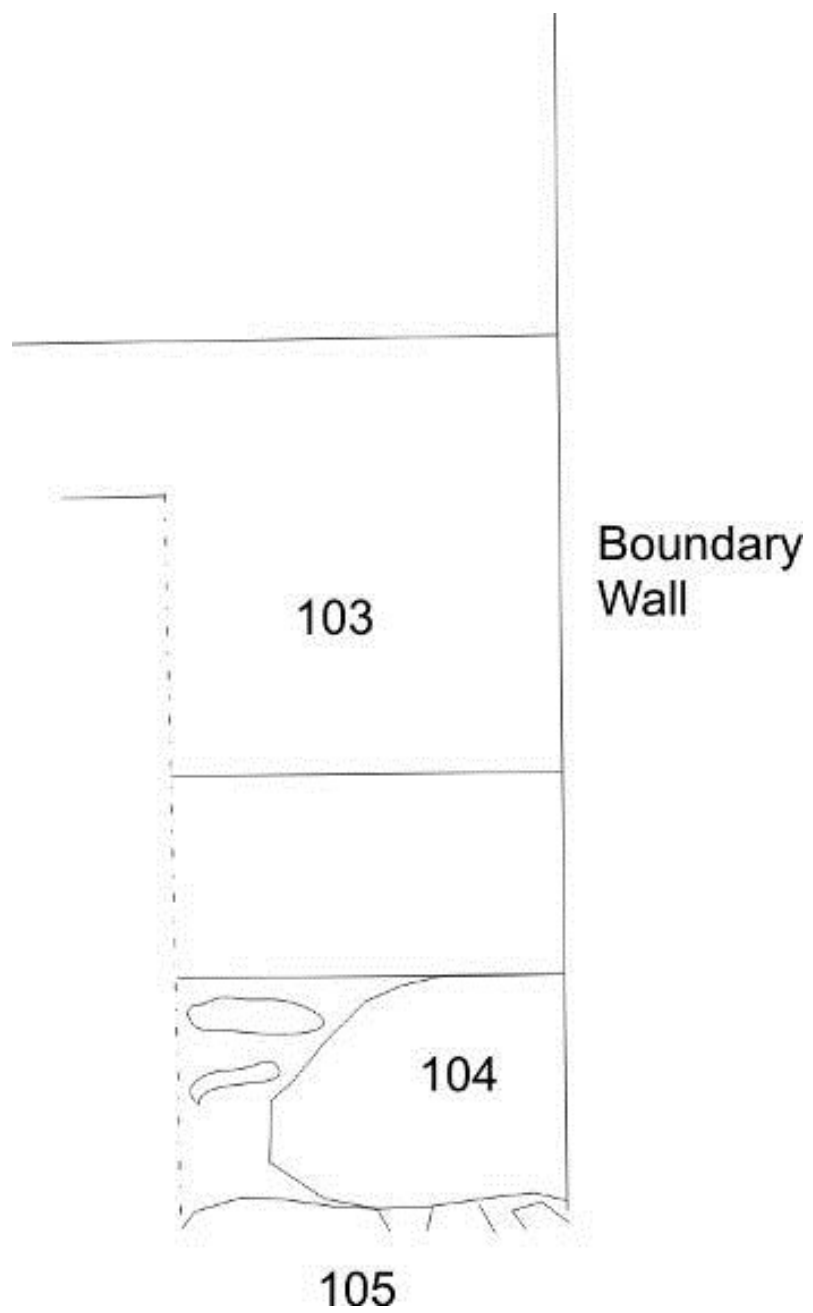
Illus 2 Buildings existing on site of Aberdeen Art gallery in 1867 (© Trustees of National Library of Scotland).



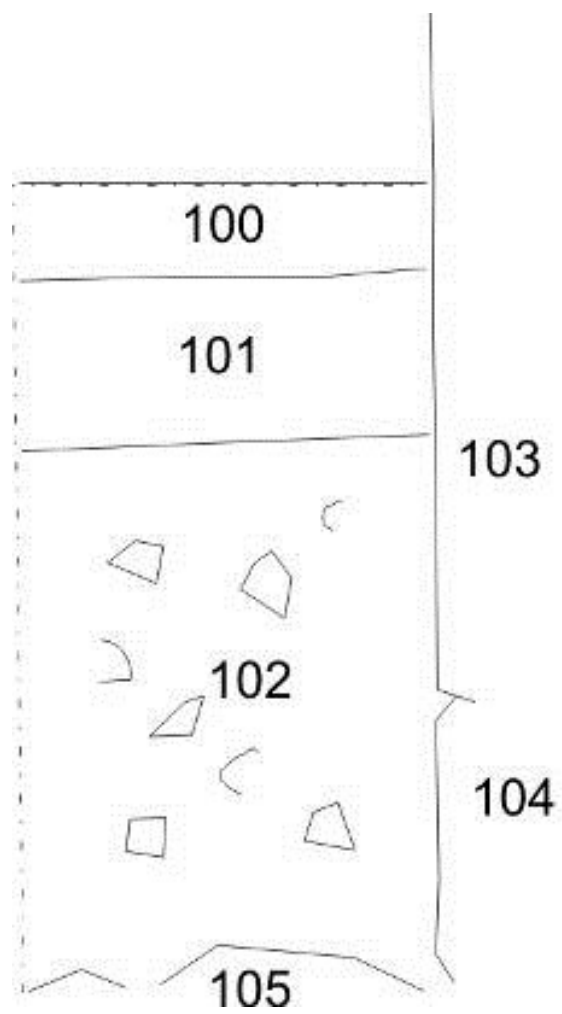
Illus 4 Test Pit 1 under excavation looking South



Illus 5 View of excavated Test Pit 1 showing difference in wall foundation (where lime mortar is visible to left of scale).



Illus 6 Test Pit 1 North Facing elevation of Art Gallery wall Scale 1:10



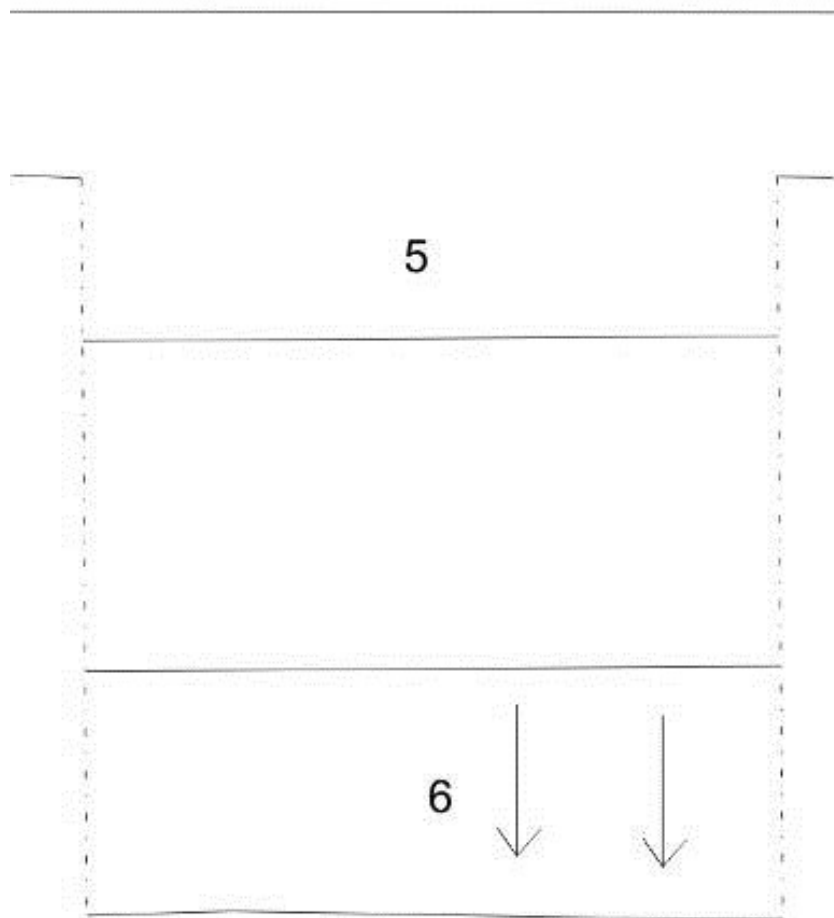
Illus 7 Test Pit 1 West Facing section Scale 1:10



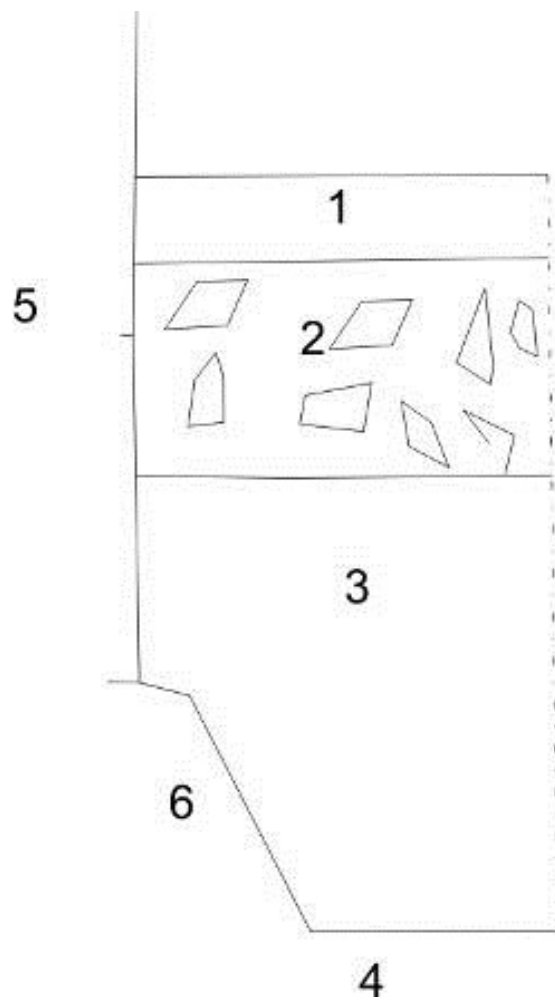
Illus 8 Location of Test Pit 2 looking South



Illus 9 View of excavated Test Pit 2 looking North with stepped wall foundation visible to left of scale.



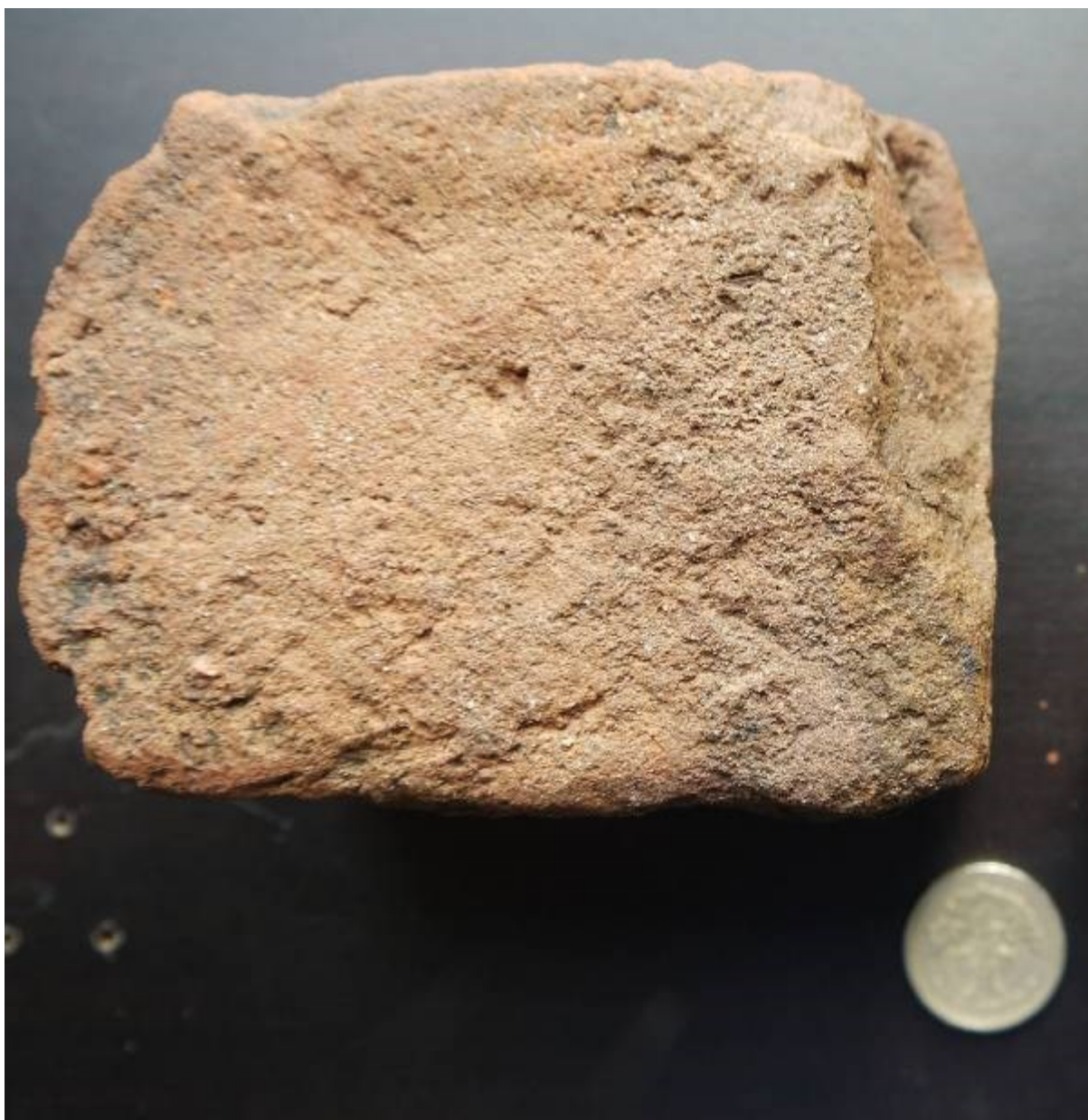
Illus 10 Test Pit 2 East Facing elevation of Art Gallery Wall Scale 1:10



Illus 11 Test Pit 2 South Facing section Scale 1:10



Illus 12 Fragment of glazed redware floor tile from Context 3 in Test Pit 2 (Pound coin as scale)



Illus 13 Ceramic brick from context 3 in Test Pit 2 (Pound coin as scale)



Illus 14 Piece of animal bone with sawn ends from context 3 in Test Pit 2 (Pound coin as scale)