

THE CLWYD-POWYS ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRUST

# St Winefride's Well, Holywell, Flintshire

ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF



CPAT Report No 317

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**St Winefride's Well, Holywell, Flintshire**  
**ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF**

**N.W.Jones and W.G.Owen**  
March 1999

Report for Flintshire County Council

**The Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust**

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## CPAT Report Record

### Report and status

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	name	signature	date
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## 1 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 In February 1999, the Department of Planning and Development of Flintshire County Council invited the Contracting Section of the Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust (hereafter CPAT) to prepare a specification and quotation to carry out a watching brief during the course of ground excavations adjacent to St Winefride's Well, Holywell, Flintshire. The area affected by the scheme abuts the scheduled area of St Winefride's Well (Scheduled Ancient Monument Flintshire 101), and the watching brief was imposed by Cadw: Welsh Historic Monuments as a condition of granting Scheduled Monument Consent for the works.
- 1.2 The specification and quotation were accepted by Flintshire County Council at the end of February 1999, and the watching brief was subsequently carried out during the following month.

## 2 LOCATION, TOPOGRAPHY AND GEOLOGY

- 2.1 St Winefride's Chapel and Well are located to the west of St James's Church at SJ 1850 7637 (fig. 1), at an altitude of 244m OD.
- 2.2 Topographically the site is located on a steep hill which slopes from the town northwards towards the River Dee. The area affected by the scheme lies along the pavement on the eastern side of Greenfield Street. At this point the street is considerably higher than the ground level within the chapel and well precinct to the east (plate 2).
- 2.3 The local geology consists of drift over Palaeozoic Limestone.

## 3 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

- 3.1 St Winefride (Gwenfrewi) was the niece of the seventh century St Beuno. The legend associated with her, according to Thomas Pennant (Pennant 1796) recalls that for reason of his unrequited passion, she was decapitated by the Welsh prince Cradocus. St Beuno took the severed head and miraculously rejoined it to the corpse and at that place a spring burst from the ground which had great healing powers. St Winefride survived a further fifteen years before she died and was buried at Gwytherin in Denbighshire. In the reign of King Stephen (1135-1154), she was re-interred at the abbey of St Peter and St Paul in Shrewsbury. In 1093 the well and chapel were granted by the Countess of Chester to the monastery of St Werburg. Its possession then reverted to the Welsh lords and in 1240 Dafydd ap Llewelyn granted it to the monks of Basingwerk Abbey. The well and chapel were the subject of many pilgrimages and in 1189 Richard I sheltered at Basingwerk when attacked by the Welsh while he was on a pilgrimage to the well. In 1416 Henry V went on foot in pilgrimage there from Shrewsbury, and Edward IV (1461-83) is also said to have made a pilgrimage to it (Jones 1992).
- 3.2 There is no record of the well failing until 1917 when, during the course of driving the Milwr Tunnel, some 2.5 miles to the south, which was constructed to drain the mines of Halkyn Mountain, its flow was disrupted (Ebbs 1993). It was later restored by pumping from the Holywell Boat Level (SJ 183 764).

## 4 THE WATCHING BRIEF (fig. 2)

- 4.1 The watching brief was undertaken between March 11th and 17th 1999, with the base and all sections of the excavated area being examined for archaeological deposits. Numbers in brackets in the following text refer to individual context records in the site archive.
- 4.2 The foundation trench for the new retaining wall was excavated by hand and extended for 26m from the entrance to St James's church downslope towards the Well House. The trench, which was 0.8m wide, was located against the external face of the wall which forms the boundary to the Well precinct and also marks the boundary of the scheduled area (plate 2). Due to the slope involved, the base of

the trench was stepped to provide a series of level sections being deepest at the southern end where it extended to 1.3m below the surface of the pavement.

- 4.3 The western section of the trench revealed a consistent stratigraphy throughout its length, with the exception of the extreme northern end where it was disturbed by a gas pipe (14) and disused electricity conduit (15). The upper layer consisted of 0.05m of tarmac (1) forming the existing pavement, beneath which lay a further 0.06m of tarmac resting on a layer of hardcore (3) 0.08m thick. The hardcore layer rested on a bed of mortar/concrete (4) 0.05m thick, beneath which lay a further layer of hardcore (5), 0.27m thick, above a layer of clean sand (6) 0.07m thick. Beneath this two former road surfaces were observed in the lower part of the section. A thin layer of tarmac (7) lay beneath the sand layer and sandwiched a layer of sand and gravel (8) which was 0.08m thick. Beneath this was a second surface composed of compacted small stones (9) resting on a significant layer of dumped material consisting mainly of stone in a silty clay matrix (10) at least 0.6m thick, extending beneath the base of the trench. Finds from this layer included clay pipe stems, Buckley coarsewares and 19th-century whitewares suggesting a 19th-century date for the layer.
- 4.4 The eastern side of the trench was formed by the boundary wall (11). This was constructed of coursed, mortared stone, with sandstone coping and iron railings. The eastern, internal face of the wall extended considerably below the level of the base of the trench although it was not possible to gain access to measure the difference. In the southern half of the trench the wall face extended below the base of the trench. However, adjacent to the west end of the chapel nave the wall had been constructed on foundations (12). This was composed of mortared stone and brick, protruding 0.12m out from the face of the wall (plates 3-4). The foundations had been constructed in a series of steps to take account of the slope. The interior face showed no evidence for these foundations, the wall face continuing down to the present ground surface.

## 5 CONCLUSIONS

- 5.1 The results from the watching brief suggest that the present road level is considerably higher than it might have been at the time the chapel was constructed during the 15th century. It would appear that this is largely due to the deliberate dumping of material at some point during the 19th century to raise the road surface. This may have been undertaken in order to achieve a more even gradient on the hill. Successive resurfacing has further raised the road surface by up to 0.5m.
- 5.2 Consequently, the excavation for the new wall foundation did not extend beneath modern deposits. However, it was interesting to note that the existing boundary wall had been constructed on foundations which were only apparent adjacent to the west end of the chapel nave and only on the external face of the wall. The existence of the foundations at this point might suggest that at the time of construction the external ground surface was higher adjacent to the chapel than further to the south.

## 6 BIBLIOGRAPHY

Ebbs, C., 1993. *The Milwr Tunnel*. Llanferres.

Jones, F., 1992. *The Holy Wells of Wales*. Cardiff.

Pennant, T., 1796. *The History of the Parishes of Whitford and Holywell*. London.

## APPENDIX 1

### ST WINEFRIDE'S WELL, HOLYWELL SPECIFICATION FOR AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF BY CLWYD-POWYS ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRUST

#### 1 Introduction

- 1.1 The proposed development at St. Winefride's Well involves the construction the removal of an existing stone wall bounding the main road, and the construction of a replacement.
- 1.2 This area lies in an area of potential archaeological sensitivity and may impact upon deposits related to the Well or associated structures. The works are subject to Scheduled Monument Consent, for which Cadw: Welsh Historic Monuments have determined that an Archaeological watching brief is necessary to record any archaeological deposits revealed during the works.

#### 2 Objectives

- 2.1 The objectives of the archaeological works are:
  - 2.1.1 to record the nature, condition, significance and, where possible, the chronology of any archaeological deposits and/or features revealed within the area of the proposed development during the development works in so far as these aims are possible;
  - 2.1.2 to prepare a report outlining the results of the watching brief.

#### 3 Methods

- 3.1 The watching brief will involve the examination of all the groundworks in the archaeologically sensitive areas.
- 3.2 All archaeological deposits and/or features noted during the watching brief will be recorded by drawn section and/or photography.
- 3.3 Following the on-site work an illustrated and bound report will be prepared according. This will be in A4 format and contain conventional sections on: Site location, Topography and Geology; Historic Background; Catalogue of sites identified with notes on their condition and significance, Conclusions and Recommendations and References, together with appropriate appendices on archives and finds.
- 3.5 The site archive will be prepared to specifications laid out in Appendix 3 in the *Management of Archaeological Projects* (English Heritage, 1991).

#### 4 Resources and Programming

- 4.1 The watching brief will be undertaken by a skilled and experienced archaeologist. Overall supervision will be by Mr R.J.Silvester, a senior member of CPAT's staff who is also a member of the Institute of Field Archaeologists.
- 4.2 All report preparation will be completed by the same field archaeologist who conducted the watching brief.
- 4.3 It is anticipated that the watching brief will take no more than 3 days in all and that the subsequent report would be prepared immediately thereafter, dependent on the client's instructions and the arrangement of a suitable timetable. The date of commencement, at the time of writing, has yet to be agreed with the client, and will be dependent on the state of the site and negotiated access. The

archaeological curator will be informed of the detailed timetable and staffing levels when agreement has been reached with the client.

4.4 Requirements relating to Health and Safety regulations will be adhered to by CPAT and its staff.

4.5 CPAT is covered by appropriate Public and Employer's Liability insurance.

N.W.Jones  
Projects Officer  
26th February 1999



**APPENDIX 2**

**SITE ARCHIVE**

15 context record forms

1 A1 site drawing

1 black and white negative film, contacts and archive prints

1 colour print film

Photographic catalogue

Correspondence

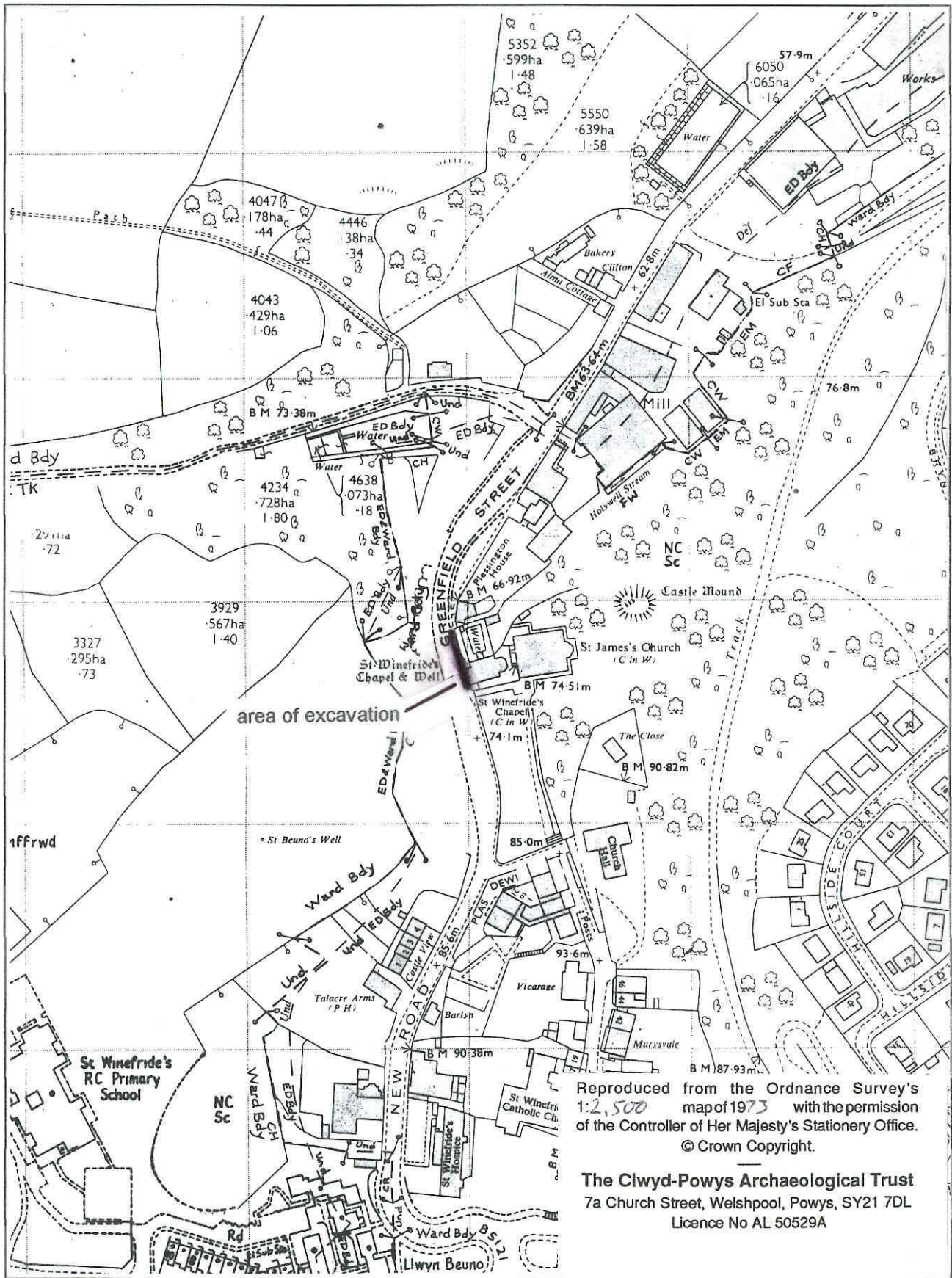


Fig. 1 Site location. Scale 1:2,500

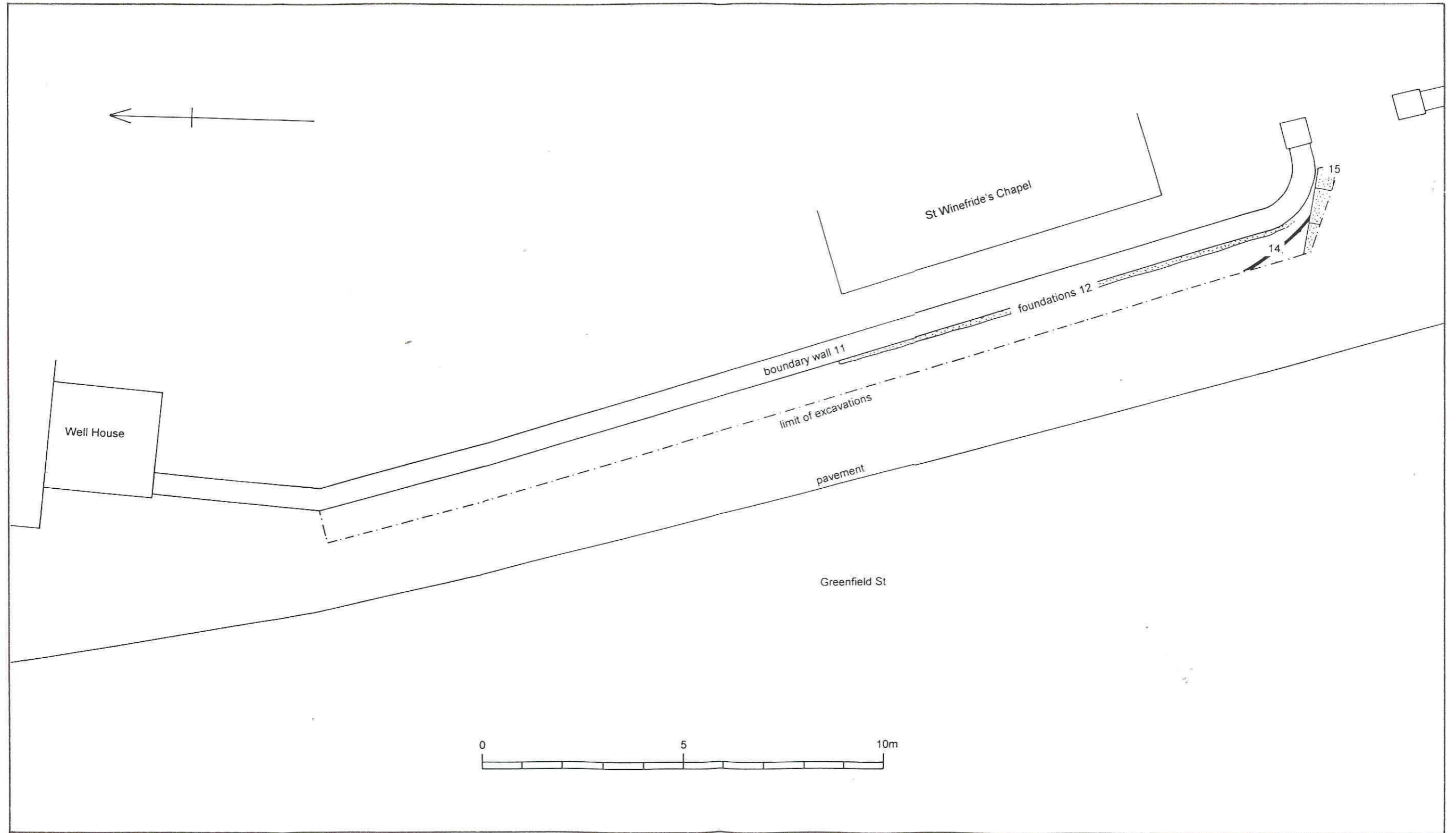


Fig. 2 Excavation plan showing position of foundations (12). Scale 1:100



Plate 1 St Winefride's Well precinct and trench location from E. Photo CPAT 792.15



Plate 2 Trench location showing the Well House, St Winefride's chapel and St James's church from W. Photo CPAT 792.3



Plate 3 Boundary wall (11) external face with foundations (12) from NW. Photo CPAT 792.17



Plate 4 Boundary wall (11) external face with foundations (12) from S. Photo CPAT 792.21