Neath Roman Fort SAM Gm 215

Proposed Classroom, Neath College, Archaeological Field Evaluation

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A report for Neath-Port Talbot County Borough Council
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GLAMORGAN GWENT ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRUST LTD

Contracts Division

General view of trial excavations within scheduled area

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An archaeological field evaluation was carried out at Dwr-Y-Felin Comprehensive School, Neath (NGR SS 7473 9781), in advance of the determination of an application for Scheduled Monument Consent for the construction of a double demountable classroom within Neath Roman Fort (SAM Gm 215 (NEP), PRN 620W). The Glamorgan Gwent Archaeological Trust was commissioned to carry out the work, which took place between 18th and 26th April 2000. Evidence for Roman occupation and probable structural features were noted in each test pit dug within the proposed building footprint, at a minimum depth of c0.40m. Alternative mitigation options are provided within this report.

Acknowledgments

The evaluation was carried out by S H Sell of GGAT Contracts, with the assistance of Gerald Gregory and John Richards. Thanks are also due to Frank Clark of Dwr-Y-Felin Comprehensive School and to Paul Woodward of Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council for their help during the project. I am also grateful to Paul Jones of GGAT for the artwork, and to Andrew Marvell and Martin Locock, both of GGAT Contracts, for their advice and assistance with the production of this report.

1 Introduction

1.1 Development proposal and commission

Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council want to construct a double demountable classroom at Dwr-Y-Felin Comprehensive School, Blaenhonddan, Neath, to replace an existing demountable which will be demolished. The site of the proposed new classroom, in the southwest corner of the Dwr-Y-Felin school complex, lies in the northern corner of the Roman fort of Nidum, within the scheduled area SAM Gm 215, at SS 7473 9781.

In order to test the possible effects of the proposed development Cadw: Welsh Historic Monuments have given permission using the Class Consents Procedure for an archaeological evaluation to take place in advance of determination of an application for Scheduled Monument Consent. Neath Port Talbot CBC commissioned GGAT Contracts to carry out the proposed evaluation, which consisted of four test pits to match the dimensions (0.9m x 0.6m) of four of the pillars within the footprint of the proposed building (Fig. 2).

1.2 Location and historical background

The proposed classroom would be built in the southwest corner of the comprehensive school complex, c60m from the junction of Dwr-Y-Felin Road and Neath Abbey Road. The site lies on river gravels at 11m OD, in the northern corner of the Roman fort of Nidum, which is situated to the west of the modern town, *c*100m from the western bank of the Afon Nedd.

Although evidence of the name and mileages given in the Antonine Itinerary (Margary 1973) indicated the existence of a fort at Neath, the Roman fort of *Nidum* was only discovered during construction work for a housing estate in 1949. VE Nash-Williams carried out excavations which revealed the southeast side of the southwest gateway (Nash-Williams 1950a); the southeast gate was discovered the following year (Nash-Williams 1950b). Further excavations took place in 1958 on the northwest and northeast ramparts (Heywood and Marvell 1992, 171-201) and more extensive work was undertaken during the 1980s on the school playing field and also at Dwr-Y-Felin House, on the east side of Neath Abbey Road (*ibid.* 201ff). Both areas lie within the northern and eastern parts of the fort.

On present evidence the first fort at Neath was in timber, covering a larger area than the later stone phase, and was built during the conquest of south Wales by Julius Frontinus in the period 74-78AD. It appears to have been replaced in stone between *c*80-90AD, with further alterations taking place during the period 90-100AD. This was followed by a short period of abandonment and subsequent rebuilding during the period *c*120-125AD, when the stone fort appears to have been realigned and reduced in size. A further period of abandonment was followed by reoccupation at some point between *c*140-170AD, when further alterations took place, before final abandonment towards the end of the Antonine period.

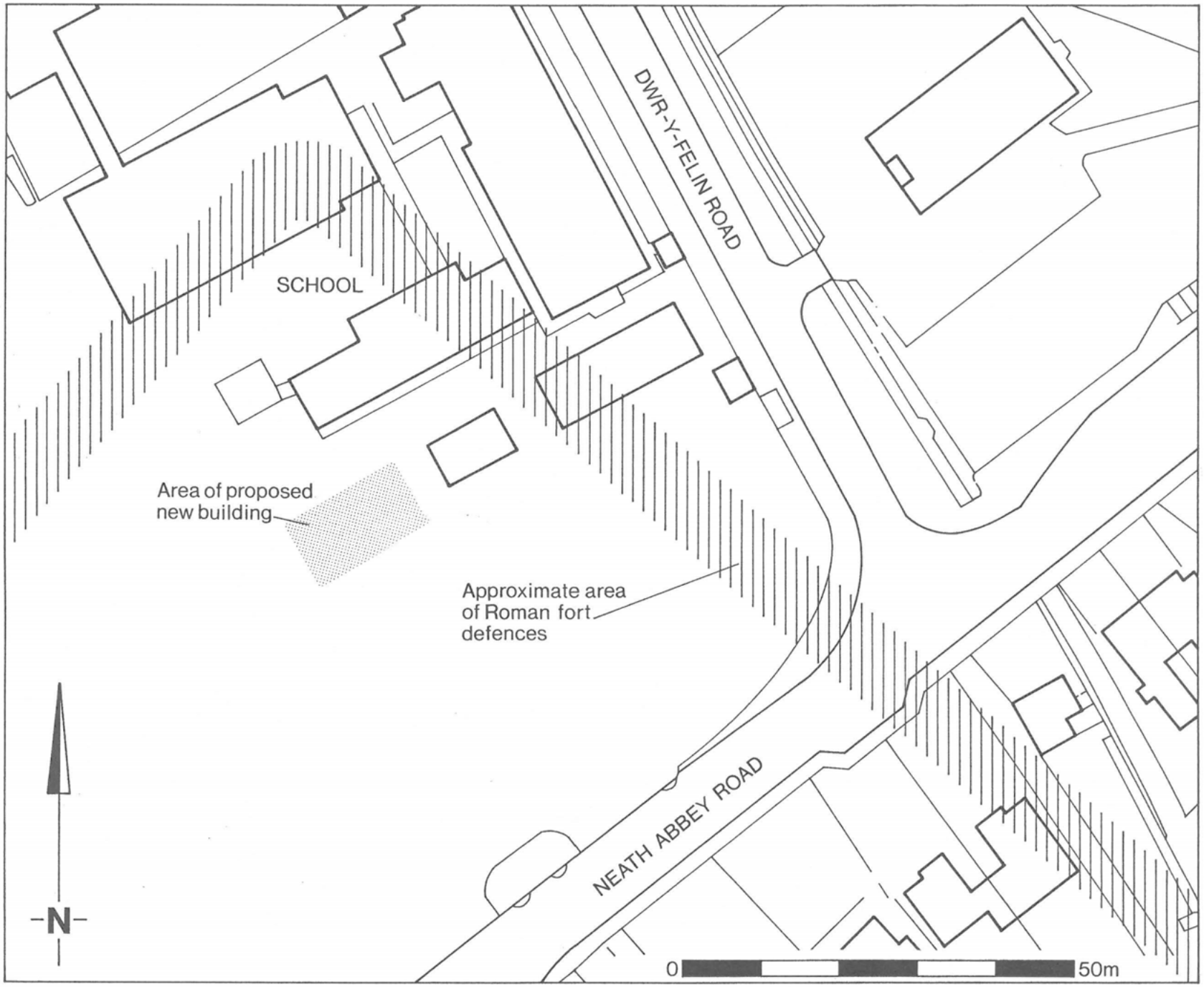


Fig 1 Location plan

Evidence from the excavations of 1984-5 within the fort indicated some level of reoccupation during the late 3rd and early 4th centuries, although it is not known whether this was military or civilian. It is possible that Neath formed part of a defensive system employed by the usurpers of the Gallic Empire, and subsequently the Carausian secession. As with most other coastal sites in south Wales, activity does not appear to have extended beyond *c*320AD.

The later fort was almost square, with a side of *c*160m, but little is known of its internal arangements, with the exception of a possible *praetorium* belonging to the first period of construction and part of the *principia* associated with the later stone fort.

Little post-Roman activity has been recorded; the area occupied by the fort appears to have been used for agricultural purposes until the construction to the north of the former Neath Boys Grammar School in 1928. Subsequent construction for the school has brought the complex further to the south and east, with the northern corner of the fort being encroached upon following the excavations of 1958; temporary buildings of the 1970s and 1980s, as well as an adjacent car park, now lie well within the area of the fort.

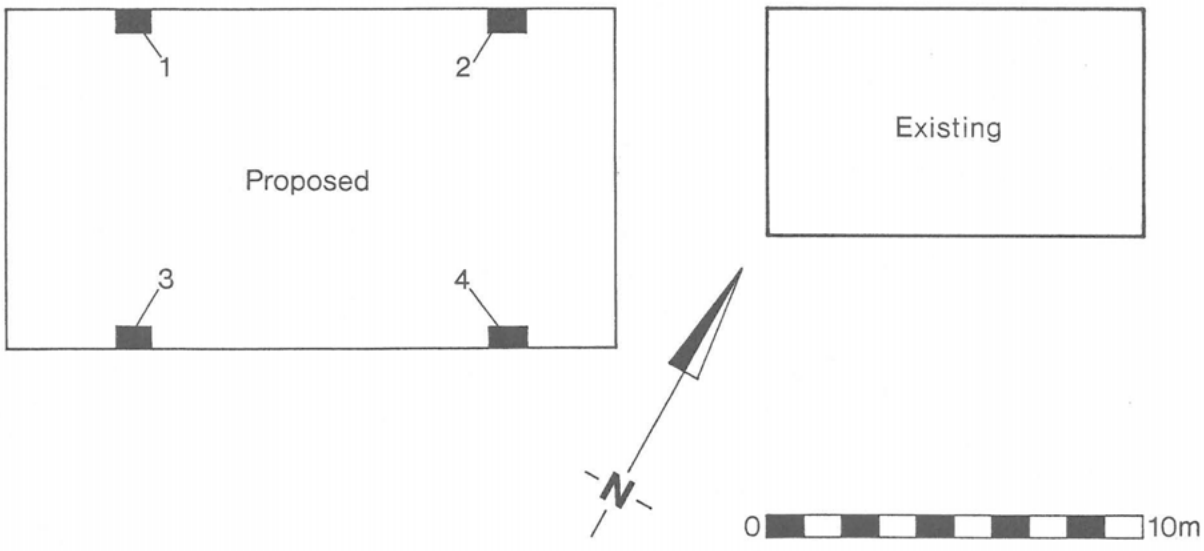


Fig. 2 Building footprint showing position of test pits

2 Fieldwork results

2.1 Methodology

The four test pits, each 0.9m x 0.6m, were dug by hand in the agreed positions (see Fig. 2) down to the uppermost level which could be interpreted as being of Roman date with a reasonable degree of certainty. Each pit was then fully recorded photographically and drawn in plan and section as appropriate.

2.2 Results

The greater part of the footprint of the proposed classroom, forming the northeastern part of the study area, had been covered with a deposit of clay subsoil, presumably brought in to level up uneven ground for the siting of a temporary classroom, which has now been removed.

Test Pit 1

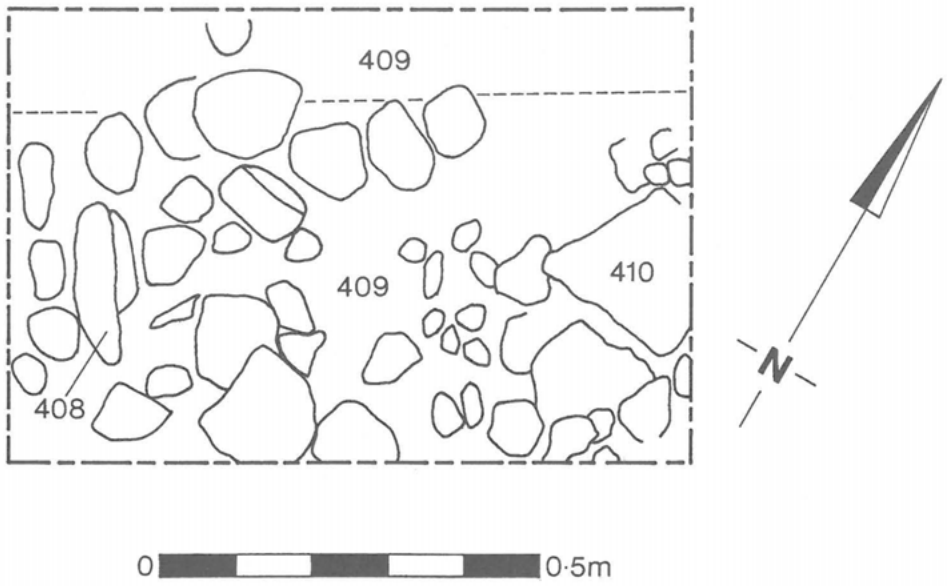
This pit had not been levelled up. Beneath a very dark sandy loam topsoil with turf of a depth averaging 0.20m (101) was a layer 0.05m thick with a higher proportion of small coal, charcoal etc., probably the result of descent through cultivation (102). Layer 102 overlay a lighter coloured, sandier loam, with sparse coal fragments (103). Flecks of fired clay, possibly daub, were noted in the equivalent layer in Test Pit 4 (405). This layer, thickness 0.06m, overlay a mixed mid-brown silty clay matrix with a high proportion of rounded and angular stone, mostly up to 0.10m in diameter/length (104). This layer, like those above, occurred with some variation in all four pits, giving more or less the appearance of a spread of rubble or building material which probably represents destruction debris from the fort much disturbed by later ploughing. Finds, from this layer and those above, although very sparse, were all of 18th century or later date.

Pl 1 Test Pit 2

Layer 104 merged with a more gravelly, coarser sandy silt (105), with a combined thickness of 0.15m. At a depth of 0.47-0.50m, beneath 105, part of a slab floor or drain (106) occupied the northeastern half of the test pit (Fig. 3, upper), with cobbles and broken stone to the southwest at the same level, which possibly represents part of an area of levelling (107); it has less the appearance of metalling than the surface encountered within Test Pit 4 (406). Where the cobbles of 107 were absent a silty claysoil, flecked with charcoal and fired clay (108) was noted; this layer presumably underlay contexts 107 and 106.

Test Pit 2

Layer 201, a dumped claysoil up to 0.20m thick, overlay a thin layer of scalpings (202) which may relate to resurfacing immediately to the north. The underlying loam (203) appeared to be a single homogenous layer combining the characteristics of



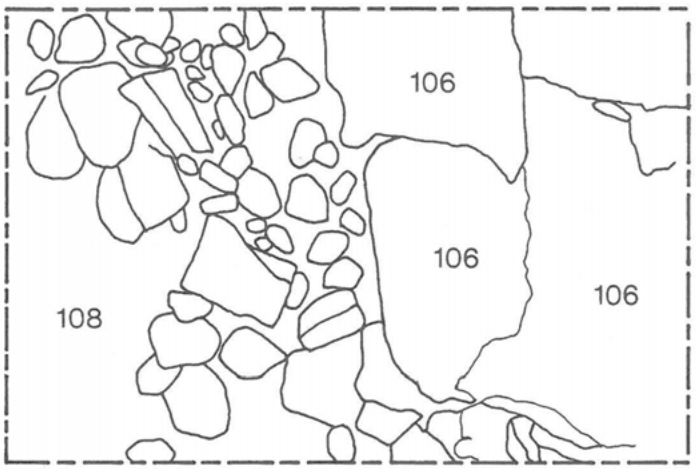


Fig 3 Plans of Test Pits 1 (upper) and 4 (lower). Scale 1:10

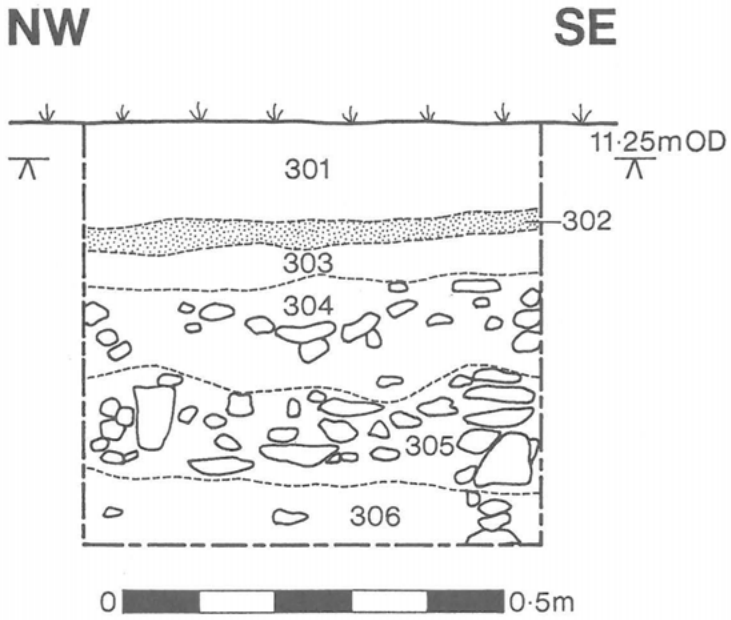


Fig 4 Northeast section of Test Pit 3. Scale 1:10

layers 102 and 103; there was no discernible former turfline. Layers 204-206 appeared to be close parallels of 103-105 (see above). the lower stony, gravelly layer (206) appeared to give way on to a silty claysoil, as 108, at a depth of 0.60m below the present surface at the southwestern end. The greater depth and size of rubble, however, at the northeastern end might indicate a localised dump or even a cut feature (207); a well-cut slab of sandstone, possibly part of a drain, was noted lying at a shallow angle at this end of the test pit.

Test Pit 3

There was no superficial dumping on the surface of this pit; the sequence (301-305) here was as in Test Pit 1, contexts 101-105, with what appears to be the ubiquitous silty claysoil (306, equivqlent to 108, 208) underlying the lower, gravelly layer (305). Fig. 3, bottom, shows the sequence in more detail. The Roman horizon was probably reached at a maximum depth of 0.47m-0.50m, although no structural evidence was noted.

Test Pit 4

Trench 4 was situated at the very edge of the "landscaped" area, with the thickness of claysoil overburden (401) varying from 0.18m to the northwest to 0.04m to the southeast. The old turfline could be discerned sealing the dark sandy loam topsoil (402). The northeastern part of this pit contained a mixture of the lower layers (405-407) which, although difficult to define clearly, proved to be the backfill of a recent service trench (404). Layers 405-407, as 103-105 and elsewhere, overlay a layer of cobbles (up to 0.15m), pebbles etc., probably equivalent to 107, to the southwest. At this level the remainder of Test Pit 4 was occupied by a mixture of cobbles and larger worn stone (410) very similar to the road surface noted during work prior to development at Neath College on the northeast side of Dwr-Y-Felin Road, outside the fort (Sell 1997), with a matrix of typical occupation material, a silt heavily flecked with charcoal and fired and unfired clay (409). The uppermost part of this probable road surface lay at a depth of 0.40m (or 0.30m below the level of the former turfline).

Pl 2 Test pit 4

2.3 The finds

The quantity of finds recovered was very small, but also very varied; most of the ceramics belong to the 18th century or later, but there was a small percentage of Roman material and a single fragment from a medieval unglazed vessel (context 205). This context also produced fragments of redware, tile and ?window glass, all of probable Roman date. Part of the wall of a redware ?flagon was noted in 305, and a fragment of South Gaulish samian ware came from context 204. The only datable sherd of Roman date was the flange from an Oxfordshire whiteware mortarium, form M14.2 (Young 1977, 72, Fig.20) with a date range of 180-240AD, the period following final military abandonment.

3 Conclusions and recommendations

3.1 Conclusions

It is not possible to say exactly what type of structures lay beneath the footprint of the proposed classroom. It is likely, however, that part of a road surface survives in Test Pit 4, at 10.85m aOD, and that the stone slab structure in Test Pit 1 may be part of a drain (at 10.82m aOD). Possible destruction material was noted in Test Pit 2, and the underlying ?occupation horizon was noted in three of the four pits (contexts 108, 208, 306). Roman material was negligible, however, but there seems little doubt that Roman stratified deposits exist at a minimum depth of 0.40m below the present ground surface, beneath the general spread of stone rubble/levelling which appears to mark the start of the post-Roman build-up.

The depth of the uppermost Roman deposits is confirmed by work elsewhere in the fort (Heywood and Marvell 1992), which has demonstrated that at least 0.5m of Roman deposits still survive. Any foundations penetrating to a depth of more than 0.40m will therefore adversely affect the considerable archaeological resource.

3.2 Recommendations

A construction using the grid of twenty four piles (each 0.9m x 0.6m) as presently proposed which pierces the archaeological resource is considered to be unacceptable. Excavation of the individual foundations would be unable to produce data which can be satisfactorily interpreted, and excavation with such severe limitations will have the additional effect of devaluing the adjacent resource. Excavation of the entire footprint would have the advantage of presenting a better opportunity for interpretation of the archaeological evidence, but this kind of piecemeal erosion must still be regarded as an undesirable devaluation of such an extensive archaeological resource.

Three mitigation options may be considered:

- The ground level over the building footprint could be raised
- The piles for the proposed classroom could be restricted to a depth of 0.35m or less from the existing ground surface
- An alternative construction design could be used (e.g a raised slab foundation on shallow beams
- The proposed classroom could be relocated away from the scheduled area.

Relocation or 'preservation engineering would clearly be preferable to excavation.

In the longer term the piecemeal erosion of the scheduled area should be halted by directing future development towards the west, and not towards the junction of Neath Abbey Road and Dwr-Y-Felin Road as at present.

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