Neath College gas pressure induction station: archaeological watching brief

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A report for Transco
by S H Sell

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Summary

An archaeological watching brief was carried out on excavations in connection with a new gas pressure induction station in the grounds of Neath College. Evidence for Roman occupation, including structural material likely to relate to the known vicus on the eastern side of the Roman fort of Nidum, was noted during the watching brief.

Acknowledgments

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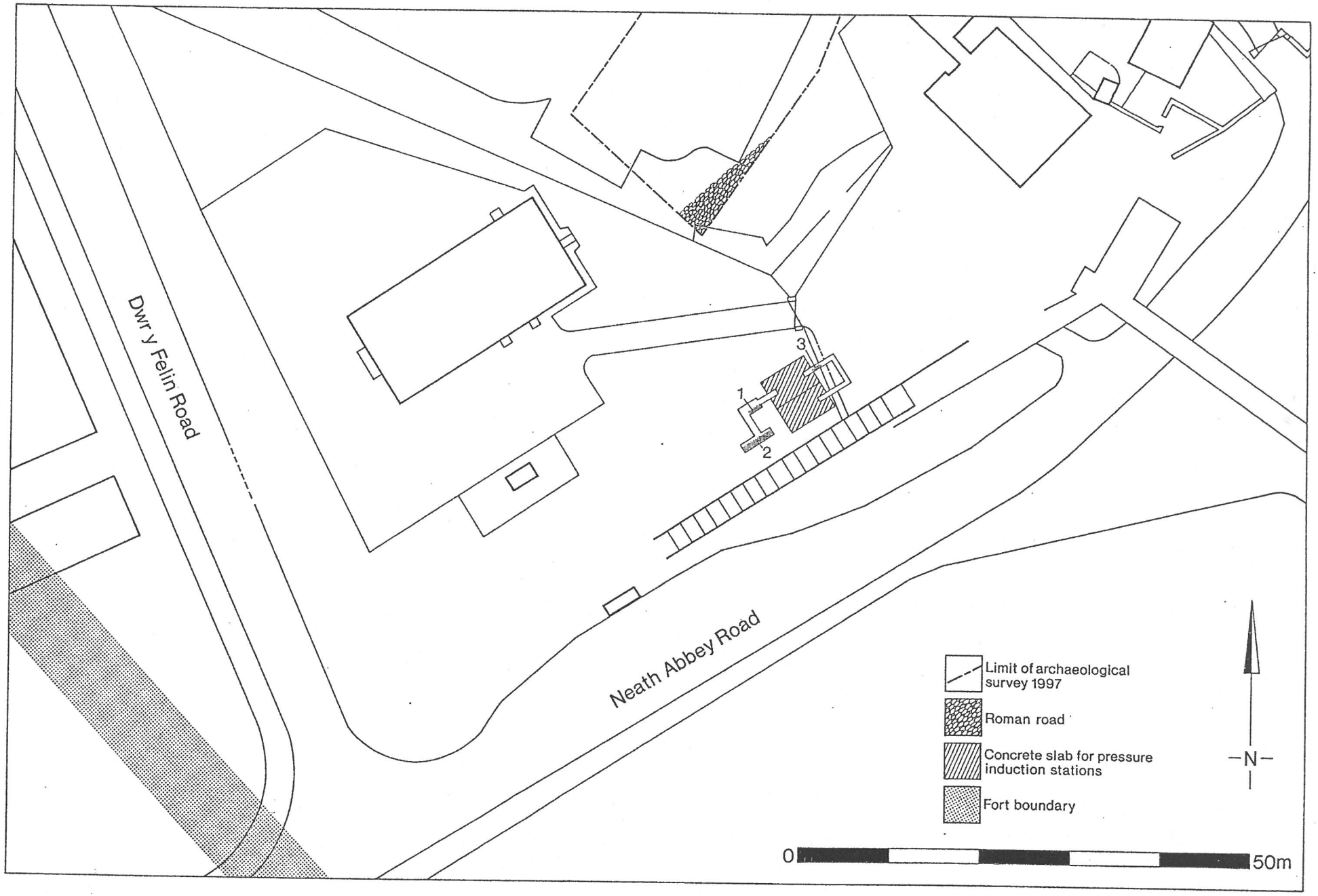

Figure 1. Location plan showing areas of archaeological interest (1-3 in text)

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1 Introduction

1.1 Development proposal and commission

Transco are replacing the existing gas pressure induction station in the grounds of Neath College, at NGR SS 7483 9784. The Glamorgan-Gwent Archaeological Trust, Contracts Division (hereafter GGAT Contracts) was commissioned to carry out a watching brief on the groundworks, which took place between 19th August and 2nd September 2002.

1.2 Location and historical background

The development site is located on land in the grounds of Neath College, on the northwest side of Neath Abbey Road and some 40m from the junction with Dwr-y-Felin Road, at 11m OD. The site lies on river gravels on ground which originally fell away towards the River Nedd to the southeast, but is now fairly level

The development area lies to the northeast of the Roman auxiliary fort of Nidum, which was constructed *c* AD75. The fort was only discovered during construction work for a housing estate in 1949, when part of the southwest gate was discovered; the southeast gate was discovered the following year (Nash Williams 1950a,b). Further excavations took place in 1958 and during the 1980s within the northern and eastern parts of the fort (Heywood and Marvell 1992).

The possible presence of a *vicus* (a civil settlement under military control) to the northeast of the fort was established without doubt in 1993/4, when archaeological evaluation work revealed part of the road approaching the fort from the northeast and traces of buildings and other features in a strip to the northwest of the road. This area was the subject of an archaeological survey in 1997, prior to development of the college facilities, which confirmed the presence of a substantial civilian settlement (Sell 1997). This settlement, which probably had an industrial or supply function, lay along a corridor which may have extended some distance from the northeast gate of the fort, with evidence for occupation not only concurrent with the use of the fort but probably into the late second century, or even later.

2 Fieldwork results

2.1 Methodology

The groundworks involved cutting new trenches to the northeast and southwest of the replacement pressure induction station, reopening the existing gas main trenches, and linking the two (Fig 1). Excavation of the trenches was carried out by a JCB excavator with 40cm bucket (20cm in some areas) to an average width of 0.50m, although this width was increased in places to facilitate access. Average depth was 1.50m, but up to 2.0m to the northeast of the induction station, where the ground level has been further raised for use as a car park.

The trench sides were carefully inspected for evidence of archaeological features, and the excavated spoil was checked for the presence of artefacts. All material of archaeological significance was recovered, and the presence of archaeology, when noted, was photographed, plotted in plan and recorded in section as appropriate to the circumstances, taking into consideration the condition and depth of the trench and the time available.

2.2 Results

Excavation to the southwest of the new pressure induction station initially showed no evidence for the presence of archaeological features. A depth of 0.30m of modern levelling overlay the former topsoil, which averaged 0.20m in depth, and in turn overlay a silty clay subsoil up to 0.40m in depth. Below this lay mixed silty clays and gravels characteristic of river deposits to the base of the trench, a depth of 1.50m.

This sequence, however, was interrupted by a substantial cut feature of Roman date, probably a pit or ditch, which appeared to cross the trench on an approximately east-west alignment at a depth below the present surface of 0.90m (Fig 1, Area 1). A number of layers were noted dipping towards the southwest, containing varying quantities of charcoal and burnt clay in a silty loam matrix characteristic of occupation and destruction deposits. The feature appeared to have been levelled up with up to 0.40m of silty, gravelly material, beneath old topsoil and modern levelling as elsewhere (Fig 2, 001-003).

One layer contained quantities of pottery, and it seems likely that the Roman samian ware noted initially among the excavated spoil originated from this layer (Fig 2, 006). A mid-second century date seems likely for this group. This feature, whether pit or ditch, appears to represent the deposition of Roman material likely to have originated from the *vicus* known to have existed on the northwest side of the road leading from the fort, but it is difficult to say more about the precise nature

Excavation to the northeast of the slab upon which the two pressure induction stations were sited revealed a sequence similar to that first noted, but with much less gravel in the riverine deposits, which were noted at a minimum depth of 0.80m. The surface rises up to 0.50m towards the northeast to form the surface of a car park, with up to 1.60m of modern overburden noted in places. There was no trace of any

archaeological features or artefactual evidence apart from a small area of red burning within the upper part of the clayey silts which underlay the made ground (Fig 1, Area 3), and above the burning, some evidence of residual occupation (flecks of charcoal, burnt clay etc) within a loamy silt (018, 019).

The trench containing the original gas main to the southwest of the slab was widened for access to the pipe itself, and beyond the limits of the original trench further archaeological features were noted (Fig 1, Area 2). At a depth of 1.0m a horizontal bed of partly reddened plastic clay underlay a deposit of Roman brick, now much broken but perhaps originally part of a floor (Fig 3, 010, 011). It lay adjacent to a sandstone slab, 0.32m x 0.06m in section (012) and was butted on its other side by a deposit of fired clay and charcoal in a loamy matrix (013), similar to Fig 2, 006. A thick deposit (0.14m) of buff silty clay (015) continued the section towards the southwest. Deposits of silty gravelly material, perhaps redeposited, underlay these features, with the limit of excavation, at 1.40m, showing a more gravelly matrix in keeping with natural deposits of this area. It was possible to record these archaeological deposits only as a sketch section (Fig 3), but the elements appear to be structural rather than represent redeposition of any kind. Clearly much of the Roman levels had already been removed during excavation for the original gas main, and evidence for further slabs and more of the clay ?bedding 010 was noted in the excavated spoil.

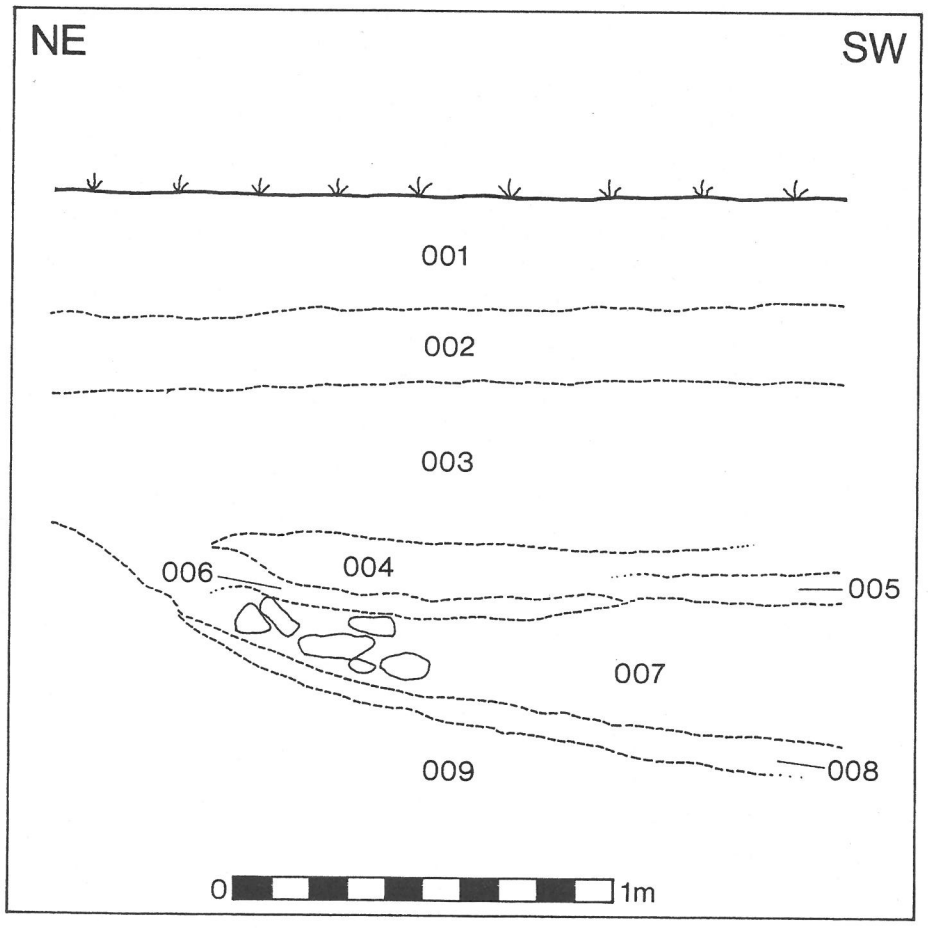

Figure 2. Section (Fig 1,1)

3 The finds

The only datable finds from the watching brief were parts of a decorated samian bowl, form Dragendorff 37, produced in central Gaul in the mid-second century, and associated undiagnostic fragments of greyware, Black burnished ware and Spanish amphora. The Roman deposits also yielded quantities of brick, used as flooring or as levelling courses in the construction of military and other buildings, fired clay (?daub) and part of a sandstone roofing tile. Ceramic roofing materials appear to be absent from the fort, and thus the *vicus*, at Neath, but part of a sandstone roofing tile was noted.

A small quantity of 19th century or more recent ceramics and glass was also noted; the earlier finds may have been brought in with levelling material and the more modern finds included with backfill and recent disturbances.

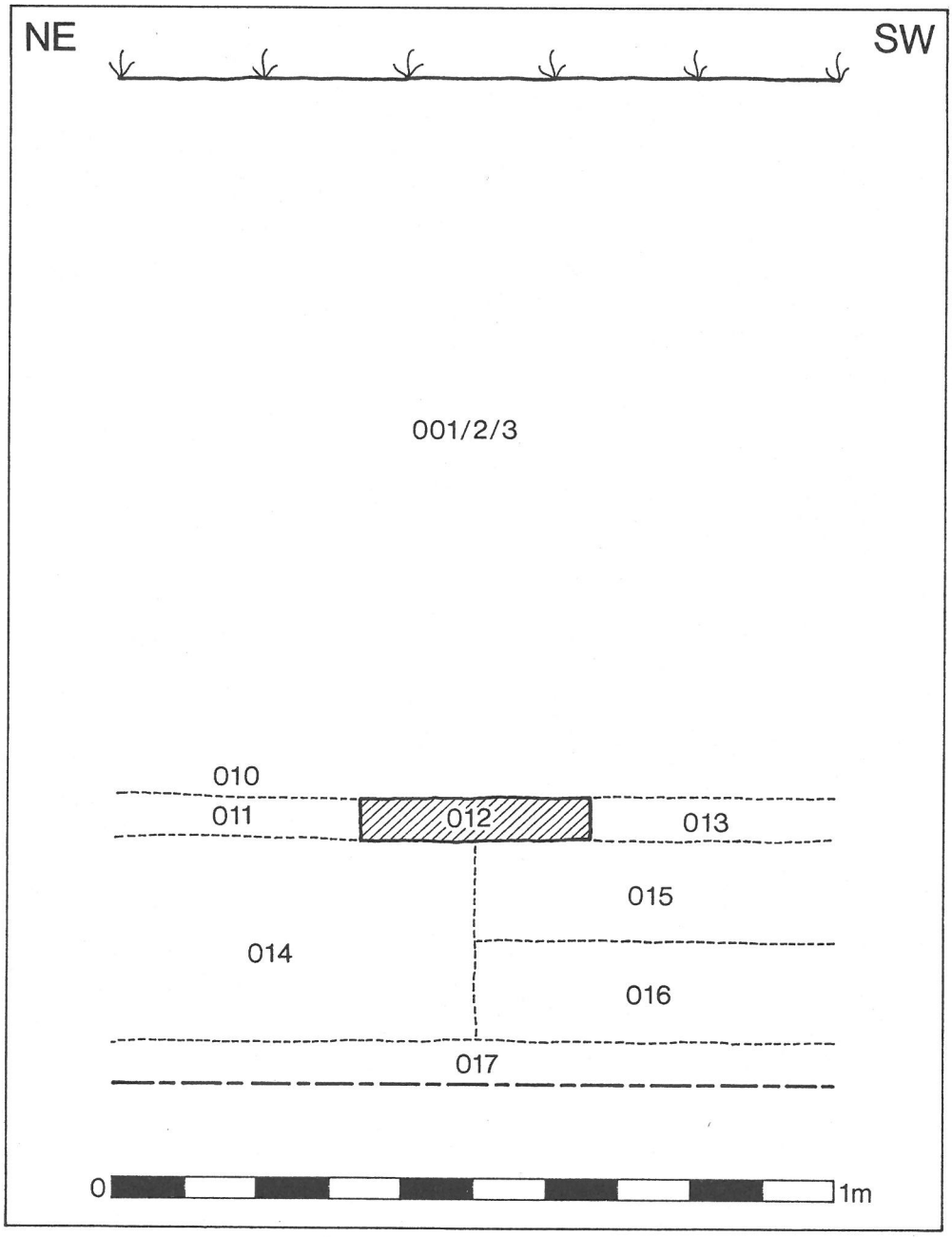

Figure 3. Schematic section (Fig 1,3)

4 Conclusions

The results of the watching brief indicate the certainty of Roman occupation on the southeastern side of the road, with the strong possibility of structural evidence, although the limitations of the work prevented the establishment of these facts in greater detail. A date around the middle of the second century AD seems likely for the ditch/pit deposit, but no close dating was available for the structural material noted adjacent to the existing gas main, to the southeast of the slab.

References

Heywood B and Marvell AG 1992 Excavations at Neath, *Bull Board Celt Stud* **XXXIX**, 171-298

Nash-Williams VE 1950a The Roman Stations at Neath (Glamorgan) and Caer Gai (Mer.), *Bull Board Celt Stud* **XIII**, 239-245

Nash-Williams VE 1950b The Roman Station at Neath, Further Discoveries, *Bull Board Celt Stud* **XIV**, 76-9

Sell SH 1997 Neath College Archaeological Survey *(GGAT report* **97/018***)*

Appendix One: Context index

001	Made ground/levelling, turfed (all areas)
002	Earlier topsoil level
003	Silt and gravel levelling/subsoil
004	silty loam rich in fired clay/daub destruction material
005	pale buff silty clay
006	silty loam rich in charcoal, some fired clay flecks, and Roman pottery
007	silty loam with some charcoal and fired clay flecks
008	gravelly silt with a little charcoal and fired clay flecking
009	silty gravel/silt/gravel (natural riverine deposits) (all areas)
010	Roman brick layer
011	plastic clay with some burning (?floor/bedding layer for 010)
012	sandstone slab(s)
013	silty loam with fired/unfired clay, charcoal etc., equiv. 006
014	silty gravely loam
015	buff silty clay, equiv. 005
016	sandy silty loam with flecks of charcoal and fired clay, equiv. 007
017	sandy silty gravel with occasional large cobbles (?equiv. 009, natural)
018	sandy silty loam with occasional charcoal, fired clay flecks and unfired clay, ?equiv. 006, 013
019	area of silt 009 with red burning/heating