

THE CLWYD-POWYS ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRUST

Ruthin Town Hall, Denbighshire

ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF

CPAT Report No 596

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December 2003

Report for Balfour Beatty Construction Ltd

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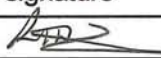
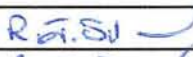
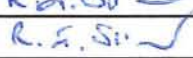
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CPAT Report Record

Report and status

CPAT Report Title	Ruthin Town Hall, Denbighshire: Archaeological Watching Brief		
CPAT Project Name	Ruthin PFI		
CPAT Project No	1059	CPAT Report No	596
Confidential (yes/no)	No	draft/final	Final

Internal control

	name	signature	date
prepared by	R. Hankinson		12/12/03
checked by	R.J. Silvester		12/12/03
approved by	R.J. Silvester		12/12/03

Revisions

no	date	made by	checked by	approved by

Internal memo

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1 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 In February 2003 the Contracts Section of the Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust (CPAT) was invited by Balfour Beatty Construction Ltd to submit a detailed specification and quotation for conducting an archaeological watching brief in Ruthin, Denbighshire. This was to be maintained during groundworks related to the construction of an extension to house a lift serving the town hall. The work had been recommended by Mrs F Gale, the Denbighshire County Archaeologist, acting in her capacity as the archaeological curator, owing to the possibility that groundworks might encounter defensive features constructed after the sacking of the town by Owain Glyndwr in 1400 and again in 1402. The works were the subject of a brief drawn up by Mrs Gale, on which the specification was based.
- 1.2 The specification and quotation were accepted by Balfour Beatty Construction Ltd on 19th March 2003. Contractors' work on the extension was spread out over the period from September to November 2003, with visits being undertaken intermittently in line with the progress of the works. Close consultation with the on-site staff of Balfour Beatty was maintained throughout. This report was compiled in the month following the completion of the groundworks.

2 LOCATION, TOPOGRAPHY AND GEOLOGY

- 2.1 The town of Ruthin is situated in the upper part of the Vale of Clwyd, which runs to the west of the Clwydian Range of hills in north-east Wales. The historic core of the town occupies a low ridge on the valley floor, immediately to the east of the River Clwyd (Fig. 1). The crest of the ridge attains an altitude of 75m OD, some 15m higher than the adjoining land. To the west of the river, the flood plain gives way fairly rapidly to rising ground which forms part of the low hills on this side of the Vale of Clwyd, while on the east side of the town the land shelves upwards gradually from 60m OD to an elevation of approximately 100m OD, before ascending steeply towards the summits of the Clwydian Range, which rise above 500m OD.
- 2.2 The town hall is located at the junction of Market Street and Wynnstay Street at SJ 12475830. The building is positioned slightly to the east of the town centre, on the east-facing slope of the ridge, a slope which appears to increase in steepness beyond Wynnstay Street (Fig. 2). Prior to the construction of the extension on the south-east side of the town hall, a ramp occupied this side of the building, providing access to some of the upper floors from Wynnstay Street.
- 2.3 The solid geology of the immediate area consists of undifferentiated Permian and Triassic sandstones, which have been faulted down to lie against beds of Carboniferous Limestone to both the west and east of the town (1994 British Geological Survey map). The soils on which much of the historic town seems to lie are deep reddish loamy soils of the Salwick Association, lying on a base of reddish till and glaciofluvial drift. The lower ground which borders this part of the town is occupied by silty and clayey soils belonging to the Conway and Teme Associations, while the rising shelf to the east is occupied by coarse loamy and sandy soils of the Wick 1 Association (1983 Soil Survey of England and Wales map).

3 ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

- 3.1 Prehistoric activity in the vicinity of the town is well attested by flint and pottery finds, including two Neolithic stone axes, although as yet no further evidence of any settlement or funerary activity has been recognised in the immediate locality. However, it should be noted that many of the summits of the Clwydian Range are surmounted by hillforts of Iron Age date, and it seems certain that much of the relatively fertile valley floor of the Vale of Clwyd would have been occupied at the time.
- 3.2 Evidence of activity in the Roman period is plentiful in the area, with traces of settlement on the higher ground at the eastern edge of the modern town, beyond the historic core. A

cremation cemetery has also been recorded in this area and there have been suggestions that a fort was sited nearby.

- 3.3 Excavations carried out in the same area as that mentioned in the previous paragraph also revealed a small early medieval inhumation cemetery, demonstrating a continuation of settlement into the post-Roman period. This tends to suggest that the area was recognised to be one of some importance, and it is believed that Ruthin was the administrative centre, or '*maerdref*' of the commote of Dyffryn Clwyd until the Edwardian conquest of Wales towards the end of the 13th century (Jack, 1978, 245).
- 3.4 Following the Edwardian conquest, a castle was built at Ruthin, which became the centre, or '*caput*', of an extensive lordship. The planned medieval town which surrounded the castle was laid out using the centre of the existing Welsh settlement as a focus (Silvester, 1995, 95). The town was granted a charter and became prosperous in the late 13th and 14th-centuries, with regular markets and fairs.
- 3.5 As a result of the lordship being one of the possessions of the Grey family, who were originally from Herefordshire (Jack, 1978, 257), and also the perceived connections of the town with the English establishment, Ruthin was attacked by Owain Glyndwr in 1400 and again in 1402. It should be noted that, in fact, a large proportion of the burgesses were of Welsh origin (Jack, 1978, 250), which may suggest that some local rivalries had led to the attacks. As a result of these attacks, a defensive ditch was constructed around the town, with the grant to levy a murage, or tax, to build and repair the defences being recorded in 1407 (Silvester, 1995, 95). Soulsby (1978, 233) suggested that the line of the defences on the east side of the town followed the present course of Wynnstay Road.
- 3.6 The prosperity of Ruthin continued to increase in the 15th century, leading to the creation of guilds relating to the cloth and shoemaking industries (Jack, 1978, 255). The town continued to expand, a trend which culminated in the acquisition of the lordship by Henry VII in 1508 (Jack, 1978, 245). The rise of other clothmaking centres, particularly Shrewsbury, in the 16th century (Jack, 1978, 261) saw a gradual decline in the importance of the town, but it nevertheless functioned as one of the main towns of Denbighshire following the Act of Union in 1536.
- 3.7 Ruthin was one of the Royalist strongholds besieged by Parliamentary forces during the Civil War of the 1640s. It finally fell in 1646, following which much the castle was demolished (Soulsby, 1983, 234). Despite these setbacks, the town continued to be a major local centre, holding Great and Quarter Sessions courts and being the chosen site for the county gaol, which was built in 1775. A town hall was built in 1663, which was replaced by the present building in 1863 (Soulsby, 1983, 233).
- 3.8 The 19th and 20th-century history of Ruthin largely demonstrated a continuation of the pattern of settlement which had preceded it. Greater demand for housing in recent times has led to the construction of estates to the west, east, and south-east of the historic core of the medieval town.

4 WATCHING BRIEF (Fig. 2)

- 4.1 The watching brief comprised a series of site visits during the construction phase of the extension to the town hall, to record any features of archaeological interest that might be revealed. Features that were encountered were sketched, described and photographed, as and when appropriate. In part, the nature of the recording was determined by the method of working used in the excavations being examined. Health and Safety considerations rendered detailed drawn recording of the features encountered impracticable.
- 4.2.1 The first phase of the watching brief entailed the examination of three test pits on the south-east side of the retaining wall for the ramp leading to the rear of the town hall and was undertaken on the 2nd of September by Mrs F Gale herself, as it was not possible for CPAT to make available an archaeologist at short notice.

4.2.2 *Test Pit 1* (1.7m deep)

The removal of a concrete surface revealed an upper layer of rubble of 19th-20th century date. Beneath this was a redeposited layer of red clay which had flecks of charcoal within it and had been partly cut by a large pit or ditch. The feature was filled by dark, wet soil which contained some burnt wood, but the test pit was not sufficiently deep to encounter its base.

4.2.3 *Test Pit 2* (1.1m deep)

The excavation of the pit revealed disturbed ground adjacent to the retaining wall, containing a mixture of soil, clay, rubble and brick. The foundations of the wall extended to a depth of 1.1m and a layer of yellow mortar was revealed at the base of the wall. No sign of a foundation cut for the wall was evident.

4.2.4 *Test Pit 3* (c.1m deep)

The retaining wall was found to have a coursed and battered stone foundation, 0.2m wider than the wall itself. A yellow mortar layer, similar to that found in test pit 2, was reached at the base of the foundation. The material removed from the test pit consisted of a mixture of soil, clay, rubble and brick.

4.3.1 Subsequently, the watching brief was undertaken by CPAT staff. The next phase of work consisted of the excavation of two further test pits (4 and 5) in the ground south-east of the retaining wall, and this was undertaken on the 2nd of October.

4.3.2 *Test Pit 4* (3.0m deep)

A modern layer of gravel and concrete, 0.3m-0.4m thick, was first removed to reveal a layer of red-brown clay silt containing 19th-century material. This sealed a pit or gully, of unknown date, which was 0.6m deep, filled with dark peaty material and some wood, and possibly also some matted rushes. The feature had been cut into the natural red stony clay subsoil.

4.3.3 *Test Pit 5* (3.0m deep)

A modern layer of gravel and concrete, 0.3m thick, was first removed, revealing a layer of brown silty clay. Removal of the silty clay demonstrated that it was 0.5m thick at the north end of the pit, sloping down at its base to reach a maximum thickness of 0.7m at its south end. The silty clay overlay natural red stony clay. A thin lens of concrete was revealed at the top of the natural subsoil at the south end of the trench, demonstrating that the other layers in this test pit were a result of relatively modern disturbance.

4.4 The final phase of the works consisted of the excavation of the foundations for the extension to the town hall. Various works, including the excavation of a trench for a drain surrounding the footings of the extension and the excavation of the footings themselves, were observed. Work on this part of the scheme was completed by the end of November.

4.5 Excavations on the site of the lift shaft resulted in the removal of a section of the ramped access path on the south-east side of the town hall. The excavations revealed a pit or ditch, 1.1m wide and 0.45m deep, containing a humic fill with plentiful amounts of animal bone, horn etc. The feature continued beneath the wall of the town hall, so predates the construction of the building in 1863, although no datable material was found within it. The nature of the feature was difficult to determine with any certainty as, to the south-east, it had been removed by groundworks relating to the installation of a petrol tank. Anecdotal evidence from a local resident confirmed that this site was formerly occupied by an abattoir, which was apparently only closed during the 20th century. A single sherd of green-glazed pottery was recovered from disturbed ground on the line of the foundation for the former access ramp, representing part of an internally and externally glazed jar of a type similar to vessels manufactured at Ewloe during the late medieval period.

5 CONCLUSIONS

- 5.1 No certain evidence was obtained which confirmed that the proposed line of the town defences followed the line of Wynnstay Street. Also, none of the features which were recorded during the monitoring of the building works could be ascribed to the medieval period, although some of these remain undated.
- 5.2 The ground on the Wynnstay Street frontage had been heavily disturbed by the installation of a petrol tank and other features, believed to relate to an abattoir which used to occupy the site. One of the features contained bone and horn and was situated beneath the wall of the town hall, demonstrating that it was probably a waste pit which had been created prior to 1863, when that building was constructed.
- 5.3 One feature was recorded in Test Pit 1, containing humic material and burnt wood, and may represent a pit or gully of over 1.5m in depth; the fact that no similar feature was recorded in Test Pit 5 suggests that the feature was a pit. A second pit or gully, 0.6m deep, was recorded in Test Pit 4 and also contained humic material. Neither of these features could be readily ascribed a date from the material contained within them, but it may be that either or both of them represent waste pits which relate to the period when the site was used as an abattoir.
- 5.4 The only evidence of medieval occupation consisted of a single sherd of green-glazed pottery, which was recovered from disturbed ground on the line of the foundation for the former access ramp. No deposits of this period were encountered.

6 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

- 6.1 The writer would like to thank the following people for their assistance during the project: Mrs F Grant, CPAT, for assistance with the watching brief; Mrs F Gale, Denbighshire County Archaeologist; and the site staff of Balfour Beatty and their sub-contractors for their help in facilitating the programme of work.

7 REFERENCES

7.1 *Documentary sources*

- Jack, R I, 1978, 'Ruthin', in Griffiths, R.A.(ed), *Boroughs of Medieval Wales*, Cardiff: UWP
- Silvester, R J, 1995, *Glyndwr District Historic Settlements*, Welshpool: CPAT
- Soulsby, I, 1983, *The Towns of Medieval Wales*, Chichester: Phillimore

7.2 *Cartographic sources*

- 1983 Soil Survey of England and Wales map (Sheet 2 - Wales) and Legend (1:250,000 scale)
- 1994 British Geological Survey map of Wales (Solid edition at 1:250,000 scale)

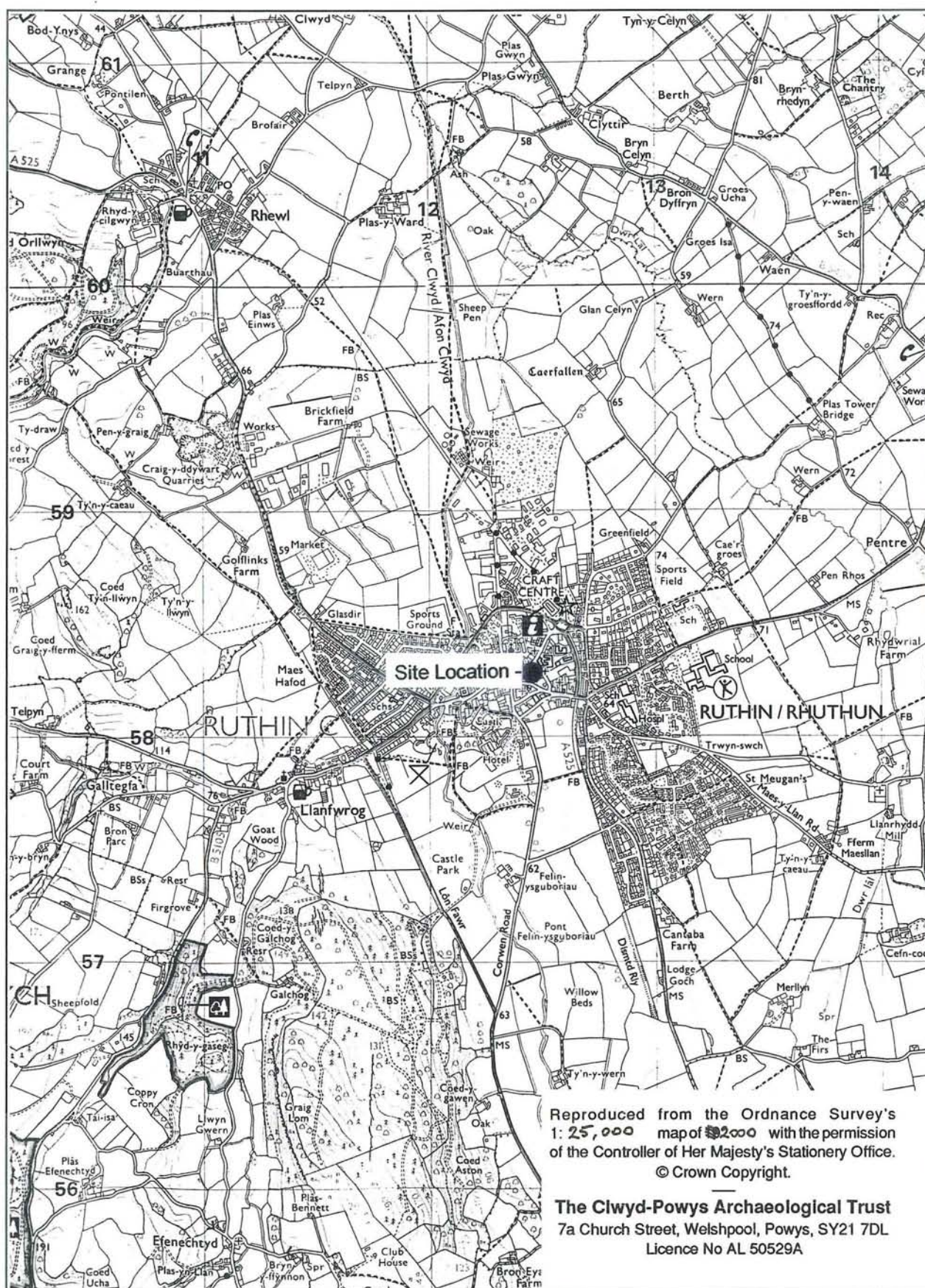


Fig. 1 Site Location Scale 1:25,000

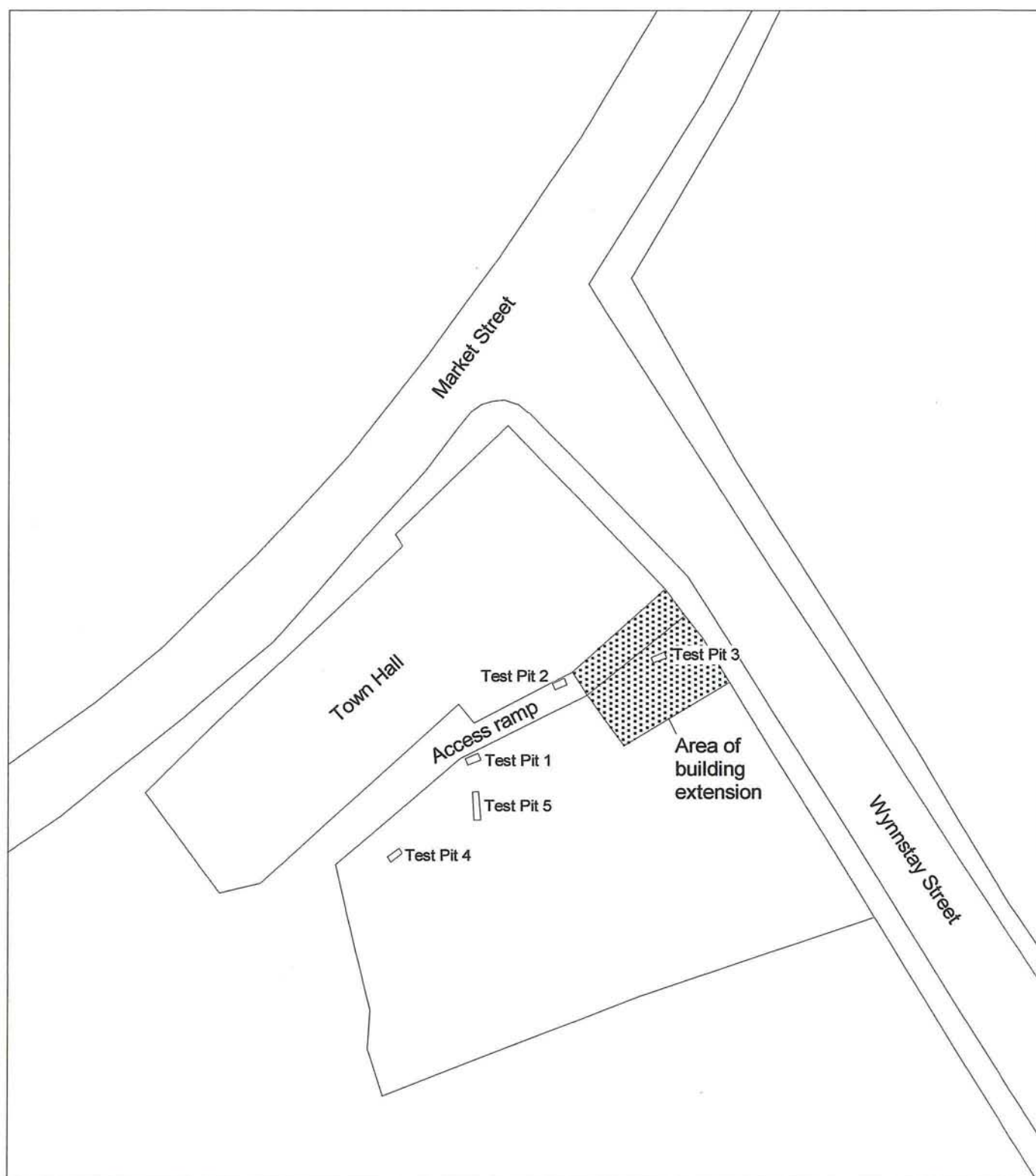


Fig. 2 Location of test pits and building extension (Scale 1:500)



Plate 1 Ditch/gully running beneath the foundations of the Town Hall. Photo CPAT CS04/01/06.



Plate 2 Foundations of the south-east wall of the Town Hall. Photo CPAT CS04/02/10.