

THE CLWYD-POWYS ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRUST

*The Smithfield, Brecon, Powys*  
ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF



CPAT Report No 338

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**N.W.Jones and W.G.Owen**  
January 2000

Report for Powell Dobson Partnership

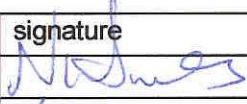
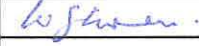
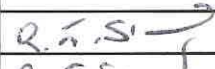

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**CONTENTS**

1	INTRODUCTION
2	LOCATION, TOPOGRAPHY AND SOILS
3	ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND
4	WATCHING BRIEF
5	CONCLUSIONS
6	ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
7	REFERENCES

**APPENDIX 1: SPECIFICATION**

Fig. 1 Development location and overall plan

Plate 1 Collapsed section of boundary wall from NE

Plate 2 Retail store site showing redeposition of material from the railway embankment

Plate 3 Foundation trench excavation for retail store

Plate 4 Stone surface on top of railway embankment

Plate 5 Removal of railway embankment adjacent to Free Street from NW

Plate 6 Removal of railway embankment adjacent to Free Street from SE

Plate 7 Soil layers exposed by gas pipeline alongside the link road

Plate 8 Soil layers exposed by gas pipeline alongside the link road



## 1 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 In September 1997 the Contracts Section of the Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust (henceforth CPAT Contracts) was asked by Powell Dobson Partnership to submit a quotation and specification for an archaeological watching brief at The Smithfield, Brecon, Powys based on a brief (CWAT 321) prepared by the Curatorial Section of the Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust, acting in their capacity as advisors to the local planning authority.
- 1.2 The development involved the construction of a retail store, ancillary buildings, car parking and a link road. A pre-planning archaeological assessment was undertaken by CPAT Contracts in 1996 (Jones and Owen 1996), the results from which revealed limited evidence for possible medieval occupation related to street frontage properties along Free Street.

## 2 LOCATION, TOPOGRAPHY AND SOILS

- 2.1 The development area occupies the former Smithfield Cattle Market and Car Park west of Free Street and south of Alexandra Road, Brecon (fig. 1). Prior to development the site consisted mostly of surfaced car parking and stock pens.
- 2.3 The underlying solid geology consists of Silurian Old Red Sandstones of the Pridoli Series.

## 3 ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

### The Town and Town Defences

- 3.1 The origins of the present town are closely associated with the founding of the castle and its subsequent development as the *caput*, or principle settlement, for one of the great lordships in south Wales, functioning not only as a stronghold, but also as an administrative centre for a large region. The original castle is thought to have been constructed before, or immediately after 1093, with the earliest urban development located within the castle bailey on the west bank of the Honddu, and the Benedictine priory of St John the Evangelist founded soon after. At some later time a town developed to the east of the Honddu, probably with associated defences.
- 3.2 By the 16th century Brecon had become an important urban centre and under the Act of Union of 1536 it was designated one of the four regional administrative centres for Wales. There have been suggestions that by the mid-16th century the population may have been at least 2000, leading to the development of extra-mural settlements in Oldport, Llanfaes and Watton (Silvester 1993, 3-4).
- 3.3 There is no documentary evidence suggesting the foundation of the town defences, but it would seem likely that they originated as earthwork and timber barricades associated with the development of the early settlement during the 12th century. The defences are first mentioned in 1314 and there are records of the ditch being cleared out in 1399 and the gates, walls and ditches being fortified in 1405 (Colvin 1963, 575). In their final form the defences consisted of an encompassing stone wall with ten towers and four gates, and a substantial external ditch. The defences followed an oval course from the castle postern gate through a field called 'Clawdd y Gaer', running behind and roughly parallel to Lion Street as far as the Watton Gate and following the line of Captain's Walk. The earliest surviving cartographic evidence for the defences, as well as for the town itself, is John Speed's map of 1610. The walls appear to have been gradually robbed for building materials and the destruction of the gates was ordered in 1775. During the following century large sections were pulled down (Soulsby 1983, 82).

### Development Site

- 3.4 Cartographic evidence studied during the pre-planning assessment (Jones & Owen 1996) suggested that the majority of the development area remained undeveloped until the construction of the Cattle Market by 1878, and the opening of the railway in 1863. Prior to this, the area, known as Clawdd y Gaer, appears to have been open ground, presumably a meadow as described in the Tithe Survey of 1840. The only exceptions appear to be several buildings shown along Free Street, Mount Street and Alexandra Road at the time of Speed's survey in 1610 and a building identified on John Wood's survey of 1834, which was demolished by the time of the Ordnance Survey 1st edition 25", surveyed



in 1883. However, since the earliest evidence dates from 1610, we have no indication of the nature of the site throughout the medieval period. Although lying mostly outside the defences, and therefore unlikely to have been developed as part of an expanding settlement, the existence of extra-mural settlements elsewhere at Llanfaes, Oldport and Watton indicate that the town was not restricted to the confines of the defensive circuit.

#### **Trial excavations (fig. 1, A-E)**

- 3.5 Five trenches were excavated during the initial assessment, the results from which shed some further light on the history of the development area. Although no direct evidence was revealed for any buildings within the areas investigated, Trench A produced evidence of possible medieval occupation in the form of two pits containing medieval pottery, as well as an undated posthole. The nature and position of these features would be consistent with an interpretation as pits to the rear of a property fronting Free Street, not identified within the areas investigated, but possibly one of those shown on Speed's survey of 1610. Similar features have been excavated within a number of Welsh medieval towns, including Montgomery (Britnell and Jones 1989) and New Radnor (Jones 1999).
- 3.6 Four trial pits were also excavated (fig. 1, B-E), which revealed the area to consist of made-up ground extending beyond the base of the pits at 1.3m below present ground level. Features and layers recorded within these trenches indicate successive dumping of material, possibly from the early 16th century until the construction of the cattle market in the late 19th century. Alternatively, this material could represent a short period of dumping which contained residual finds within this date range.

### **4 WATCHING BRIEF (fig. 1)**

- 4.1 The watching brief was undertaken intermittently during construction works between June and October 1999, with site visits being dependent on the contractor's programme of work. The development consisted of work on two main areas: the site of the retail store and associated works, and the new link road between The Struet and Free Street. the nature of the construction work meant that the watching brief was at times restricted due to safety considerations which inevitably affected the format of recording.

#### **Retail Store**

- 4.2 During initial ground clearance work, a section of retaining wall along the line of the former town wall collapsed along the south-western boundary of the development area (fig. 1). The section concerned was not actually part of the original medieval town wall, but rather a later, possibly 19th-century replacement following the same line. The collapse of the 10m-long section of wall revealed a section exposed to the rear of the wall, in the area of the council offices. However, the unstable nature of the remaining wall and adjacent ground meant that no detailed recording could be undertaken although a full photographic record was maintained (see plate 1). It is understood that further work will need to be undertaken in order to render the area safe and eventually rebuild the wall, during which time it is to be hoped that an opportunity will arise for archaeological investigation and recording.
- 4.3 Following the clearance of the site, the general level of the area to be occupied by the retail store was raised by the dumping of up to 1.2m of material derived from the former railway embankment nearby (see below; plate 2).
- 4.4 Foundation trench excavations (plate 3) observed on the eastern side of the site (centred at SO 04701 28555), extended to a maximum depth of 1.5m below the built-up ground surface level. Material redeposited from the railway embankment occupied the upper level of the trench with the lower 0.3m below the concrete/asphalt surface of the former cattle market possibly consisting of disturbed soil at or near the former ground surface. In the north-western part of the site foundation trenches also extended below the asphalt and concrete surface of the former market but revealed only hardcore of the sub-base.

#### **Link Road**

- 4.6 The line of the link road generally followed that of the former railway embankment to the south of Alexandra Road, from Free Street at the south-eastern end and rising to Mount Street at the north-western end. The nature of the construction work meant that the watching brief was restricted due to health and safety considerations and that recording was at times limited to photography from a safe distance, rather than a drawn and written record.



- 4.7 The construction of the link road involved, in part, the removal of embankment material for use as base formation in the retail store area and elsewhere on the link road. The exposed sections of the embankment extended from its base to the upper surface (plates 5-6), showing tip-lines separating different materials used during its construction. These revealed that the upper 2-3m generally consisted of a reddish clay overlying a much stonier material which included brick fragments and 19th-century glazed pottery in a reddish clay matrix. There were occasional patches of grey stony soil throughout. The embankment base overlay apparently natural subsoil, consisting of reddish-coloured silty gravels which were exposed during the excavation of a foundation trench for the construction of a retaining wall on the south-western side of the embankment.
- 4.8 At a point 130m north-west of Free Street and 8m south-west of Alexandra Road (fig. 1, site 1) a pitched stone surface covering approximately 4.0m<sup>2</sup> was located on the surface of the railway embankment (plate 4). Excavation showed that the stone was set on a very dark brown gravelly horizon containing slag and brick fragments. Underlying this was a redeposited reddish clay containing small stones and pockets of blackish coloured gravel. Both horizons below the stone appeared to represent the upper surface of the embankment. The function of the stone surface is unknown. Examination of a south-west facing section of the link road retaining wall, 30m to the south-east of this area (SO 04728 28625), revealed a similar soil stratigraphy to the above.
- 4.9 At the south-eastern end of the area, for a distance of 30m north-west from Free Street (centred at SO 04775 28555), the embankment overlay a layer of dark grey to brown clayey loam some 0.4-0.5m thick. The upper 0.20m of this layer was very dark in colour and yielded finds including 19th-century glazed pottery, clay pipe fragments, animal bone and coke suggesting that formerly this layer possibly represented a garden soil overlying orange-brown gravel in a clean clayey silt matrix, which was interpreted as a natural, undisturbed soil horizon.
- 4.10 Two sections, respectively aligned north-east/south-west and south-east/north-west, were exposed during the course of trench cutting for a gas pipeline and for the link road retaining wall adjacent to the junction of Free Street with Alexandra Road (fig. 1, site 2). These exposed a dark brown, humic soil up to 0.45m thick below modern overburden and the concrete footings of the stone wall above, and overlying apparently undisturbed silty gravel subsoil (plates 7-8). This humic soil yielded finds which included a clay pipe bowl fragment, glass fragments and sherds of late post-medieval date. A single green glazed sherd of medieval date was recovered from the base of this layer. The north-west/south-east aligned section showed that this humic layer extended some 8m to the north-west and rose quite sharply until, beyond that point, it was truncated by modern overburden.

## 5 CONCLUSIONS

- 5.1 The results from the watching brief have revealed some additional information about the general development area. Significant archaeological stratigraphy was recorded at the south-eastern end of the link road in the region of Free Street and Alexandra Road (see 4.8 and 4.9 above), which suggested activity in the post-medieval period and possibly earlier. Trench A excavated some 40m to the south-west during the course of the 1996 Archaeological Evaluation (Jones & Owen, 1996), exposed a humic soil (Context 3), similar to that exposed during the watching brief, and finds recovered from it, which were of post-medieval date, were in many respects quite similar. The single sherd of medieval green glazed pottery (see 4.9 above) was identical to those recovered from the earlier evaluation. It would be reasonable to suppose, therefore, that there is a continuity of medieval and post-medieval activity along the north-west side of Free Street. The lack of structural features might suggest that the areas examined were to the rear of the former street frontage.
- 5.2 The watching brief carried out in the Retail Store area was unrewarding as foundation trenches and pads did not reach a depth where archaeologically significant horizons could be anticipated due to the dumping of up to 1.20m of material during the initial phase of construction. Excavation trenches B, C and D of the 1996 Archaeological Evaluation and data from trial pits and boreholes indicated, in any case, that material below the concrete/asphalt surface consisted of dumped material of post-medieval date.
- 5.3 The removal of part of the former railway embankment revealed it to be composed of successive dumps of stony clay containing 19th-century pottery. The stone surface uncovered on top of the embankment is presumably associated with the railway, although its function remains uncertain.

## 6 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

- 6.1 CPAT wish to thank Jeff Tucker and Barrie Jones of Powell Dobson Partnership, and Julian Birt, Terry Edwards and Rob Sydenham of Brunswick Construction Ltd for their help and co-operation during the course of the watching brief.

## 7 REFERENCES

### Published sources

- Britnell, JE, & Jones, NW 1989. Pool Road, Montgomery: excavations within the medieval town. *Montgomeryshire Collections* 77, 41-72.
- Colvin, HM 1963. *The History of the King's Works, 2: The Middle Ages*. London: HMSO.
- Jones, NW, & Owen, WJ 1996. *The Smithfield, Brecon, Powys: archaeological evaluation*. CPAT Report No 246.
- Jones, NW 1999. Excavations within the medieval walled town at New Radnor, Powys, 1991-2, *Archaeological Journal* 155 (1998), 134-208.
- Silvester, RJ 1993. *Brecon Town Study*. CPAT Report No 58.
- Soulsby, I 1983. *The Towns of Medieval Wales*. Chichester: Phillimore & Co. Ltd.

### Cartographic Sources

- 1610 map of Brecon by John Speed
- 1834 Map of Brecon by John Wood
- Ordnance Survey 1st edition 1:2,500 1889, surveyed 1883 (Brec. 28.9 and 13)



## APPENDIX 1

### BRECON LIVESTOCK MARKET SUPERMARKET SITE SPECIFICATION FOR A CONTRACTED ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF BY THE CLWYD-POWYS ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRUST

#### 1 Introduction

- 1.1 The proposed development involves the construction of a retail store, ancillary buildings and car parking, within the area of the livestock market and car park west of Free Street and south of Alexandra Road, Brecon.
- 1.2 An evaluation of the development site was undertaken during 1997 (Jones and Owen 1997), the results of which revealed that the majority of the area had remained undeveloped until the later 19th century. Trial excavations revealed no direct evidence for buildings within the areas investigated, but did produce evidence of Medieval occupation within the general area. Two pits containing medieval pottery were interpreted as being in association with a property fronting onto Free Street. No evidence was revealed for the course of the Town Ditch.
- 1.3 Following the evaluation, the Curatorial section of the Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust, acting in their role as archaeological advisors to the local authority, have determined that a watching brief should be carried out during all ground works associated with the supermarket itself, the petrol station, the construction of a new access and the realignment of Alexandra Road. Accordingly, a Brief (CWAT 321, dated 25/5/99) has been prepared detailing the scheme of works required.

#### 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 be undertaken to include all groundworks, foundation trench excavation, service trench excavation and construction of a new access associated with the supermarket itself, the petrol station, and the realignment of Alexandra Road.
- 3.2 Limited excavation of all significant contexts will be undertaken where possible following negotiations with the developer. All significant archaeological deposits and/or features noted during the watching brief will be recorded by drawn plan/section and photography. All features will be tied in locationally to the Ordnance Survey as accurately as possible.
- 3.3 Following the on-site work an illustrated and bound report will be prepared according to the principles detailed in Section 8 of the Brief. 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. Further publication of the results in an appropriate regional or national journal will be undertaken at a later date and as considered appropriate depending on the nature of the findings.
- 3.5 The site archive will be prepared to specifications laid out in Appendix 3 in the *Management of Archaeological Projects* (English Heritage, 1991). Following agreement with the landowner,

arrangements will be made for the long term conservation and storage of all artefacts in an appropriate repository.

#### **4 Resources and Programming**

- 4.1 The watching brief will be undertaken by a skilled and experienced archaeologist. Where necessary, a second archaeologist may be brought in to assist should the watching brief reveal significant archaeological deposits which could not be adequately recorded/excavated by one person. This would only be undertaken following consultation with the client. 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. A contingency has been allowed to cover any specialist reports on artefacts etc. should the need arise and following consultation with the client.
- 4.3 The duration of the watching brief will depend entirely on the developers programme of work. The subsequent report will be prepared immediately following completion of on-site recording, 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.

#### **References**

Jones, N.W. & Owen, W.G. 1997. *The Smithfield, Brecon, Powys: Archaeological Evaluation*. CPAT Report No 246.

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27th May 1999



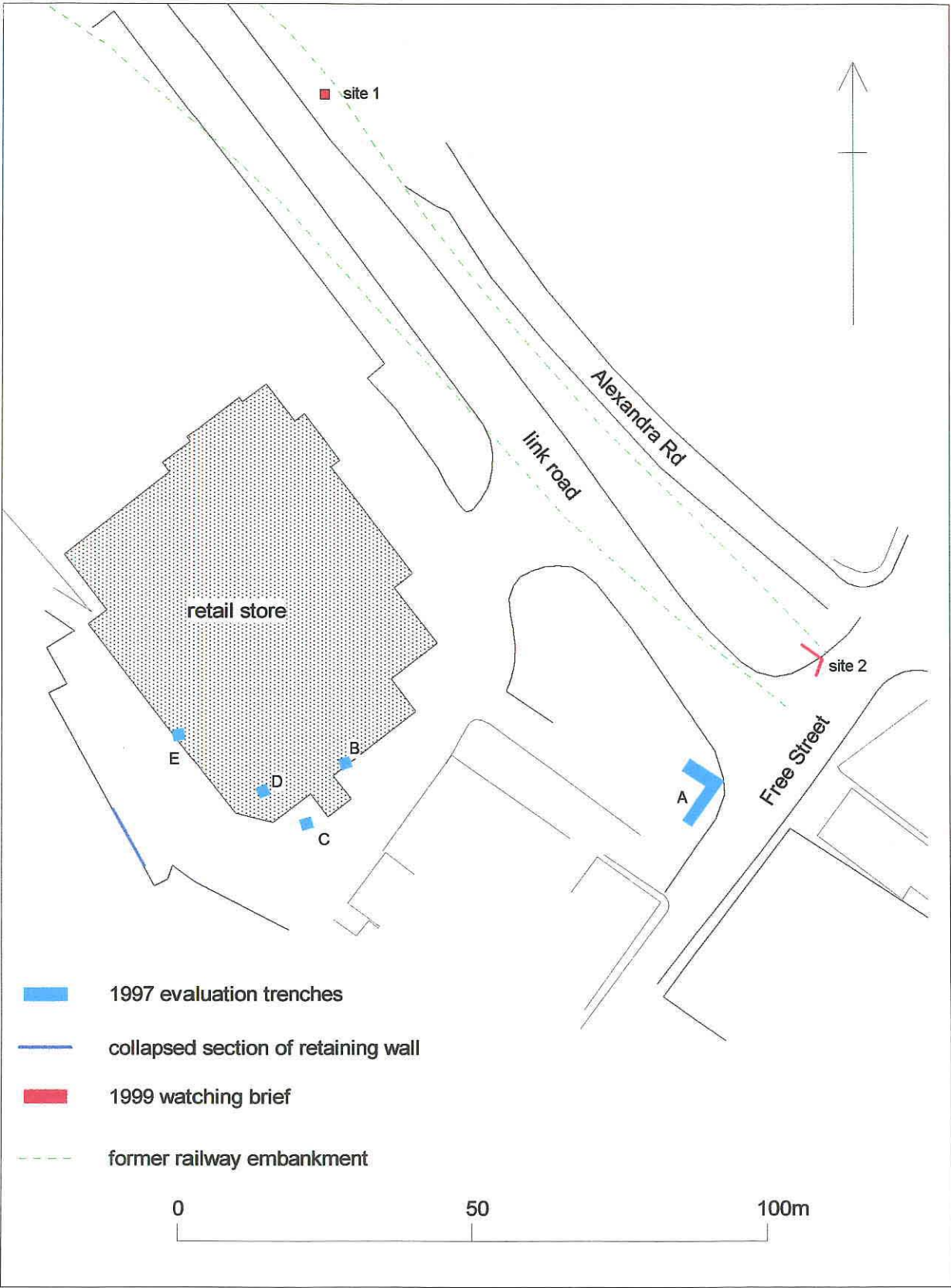


Fig. 1 Development location and overall plan



Plate 1 Collapsed section of boundary wall from NE. Photo CPAT 824.1



Plate 2 Retail store site showing redeposition of material from the railway embankment. Photo CPAT 824.7





Plate 3 Foundation trench excavation for retail store. Photo CPAT 843.17

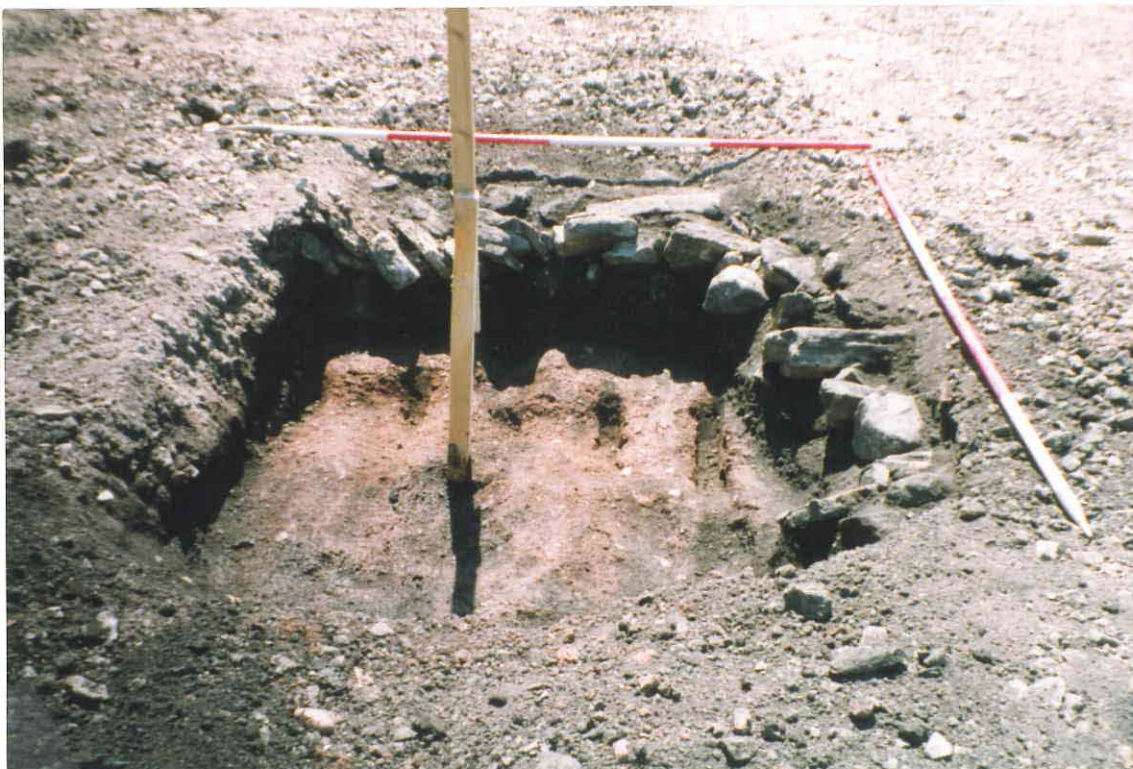


Plate 4 Stone surface on top of railway embankment. Photo CPAT 843.2





Plate 5 Removal of railway embankment adjacent to Free Street from NW. Photo CPAT 824.4



Plate 6 Removal of railway embankment adjacent to Free Street from SE. Photo CPAT 843.8



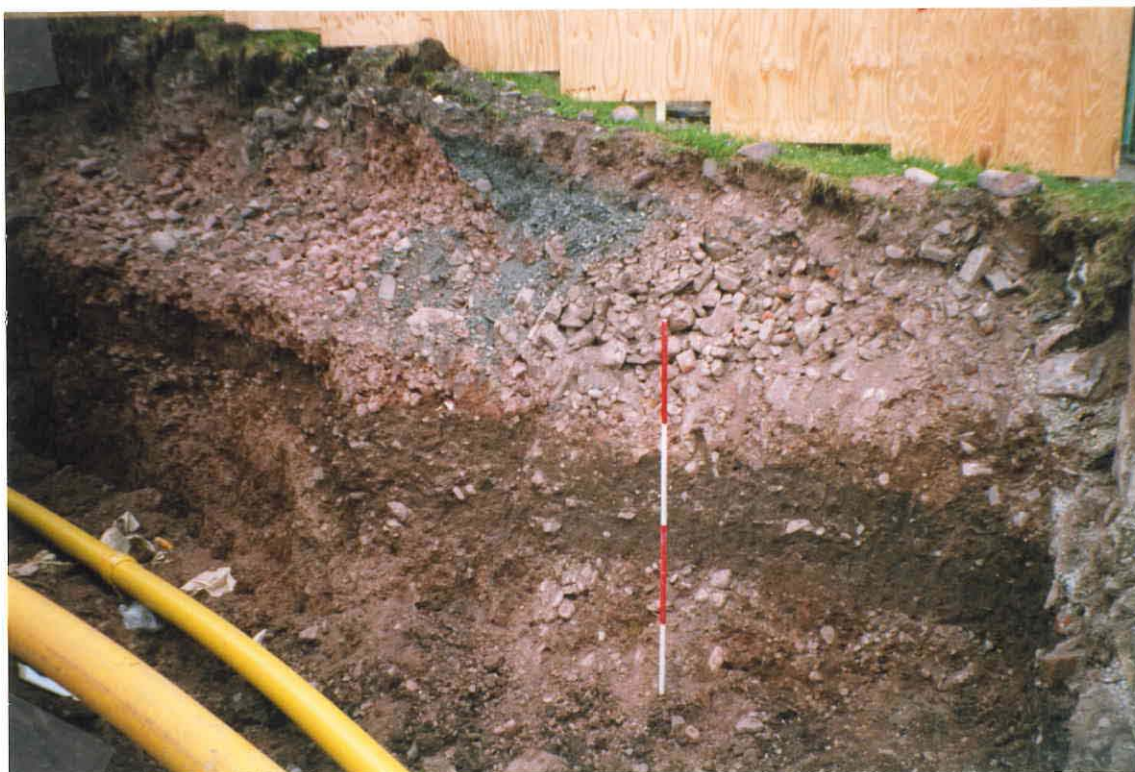


Plate 7 Soil layers exposed by gas pipeline alongside the link road. Photo CPAT 843.15



Plate 8 Soil layers exposed by gas pipeline alongside the link road. Photo CPAT 843.15