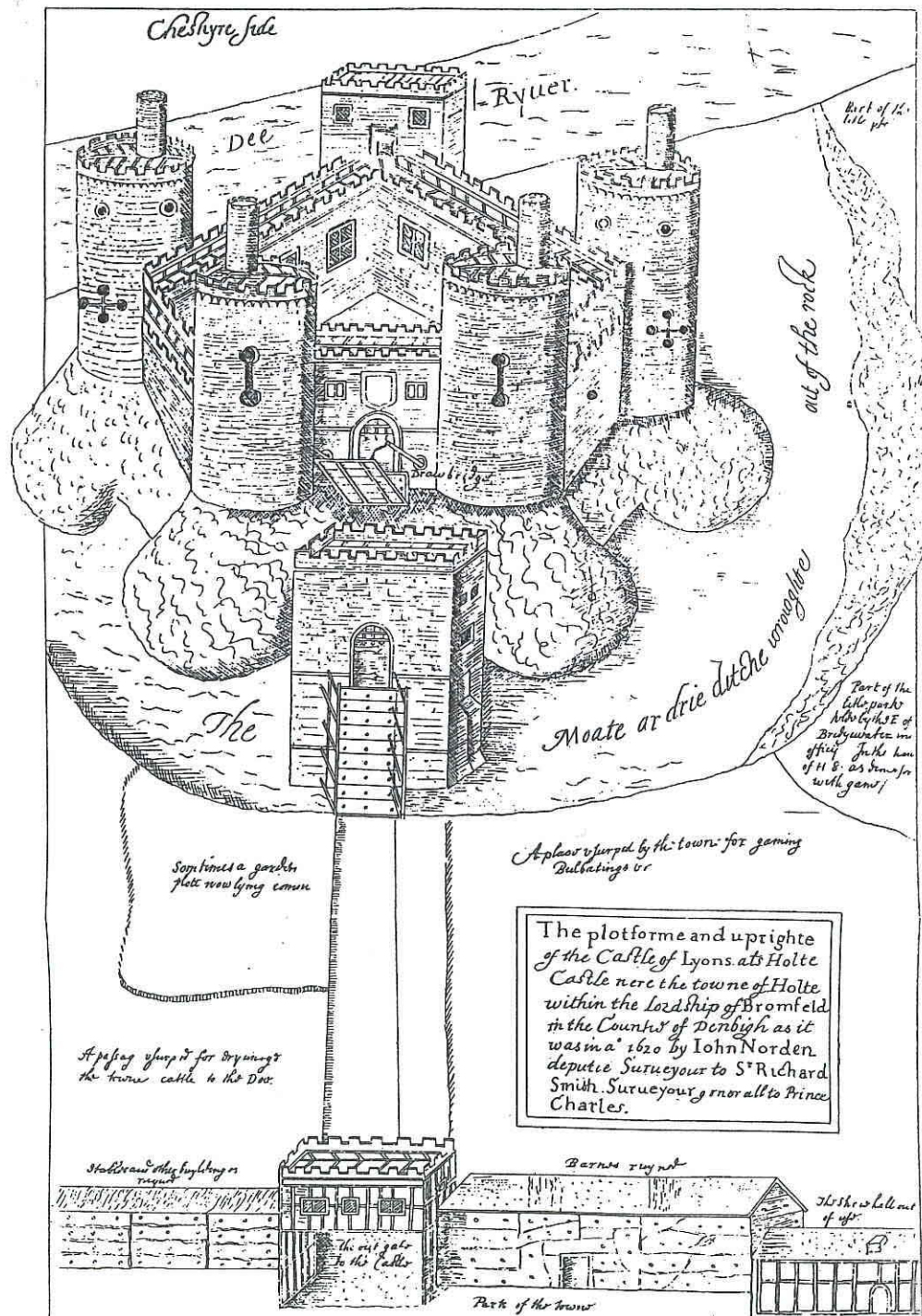


Castle Mews, Holt

ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF



CPAT Report No 366

Castle Mews, Holt
ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF

W.G. Owen
June 2000

Report for Clutton Bros.

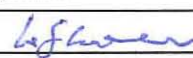


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Fig. 1 Location 1:2,500

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1 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 In May 1999, Mr CE Clutton of Clutton Bros. Builders requested the Contracts Section of the Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust (hereafter CPAT Contracts) to submit a quotation for carrying out an archaeological watching brief during the course of groundworks at Castle Mews, Castle Street, Holt. The watching brief, which was included as a condition of planning consent on the recommendation of Wrexham Archaeology Service, was to be undertaken during the excavation of foundations, service trenches and the construction of a new access.
- 1.2 The quotation given was duly accepted and CPAT Contracts were commissioned to carry out the watching brief.

2 LOCATION, TOPOGRAPHY and GEOLOGY

- 2.1 The development area (SJ 4103 5382) lies within the village of Holt (Fig. 1), which is located c. 8 km north-east of Wrexham and c. 13 km south of Chester. It occupies an area of approximately 3,000m² and is located immediately north-west of Holt Castle (PRN 101260, Scheduled Ancient Monument No. De106) and fronting Castle Street (B5102) on its north-west side. The site is bounded to the north-east and south by private housing and to the south-east by Holt Castle quarry ditch, which separates it from further private housing.
- 2.2 Holt lies on the Cheshire Plain with the River Dee curving around its northern and eastern edge, and which forms, in this area, the boundary between Wales and England. Prior to the development of two new houses, already built on the north side of the development area, the site comprised flat, turf-covered land c.10m above Ordnance Datum, and appears to have been formerly used as a strawberry field. The house 'Castle Mews' formerly occupied the north-western half of the site, with the remainder of the site comprising overgrown unoccupied ground and spoil dumps prior to the commencement of the development.
- 2.3 The solid geology of the area comprises Bunter sandstone pebble beds of Permo-Triassic Age, which are exposed in the river cliffs (Hains and Horton 1969, pl. II). The western perimeter of the development area is bounded by the quarried red sandstone face, which was the source of stone for the castle. The drift deposits are a mix of glacial till and boulder clay, overlain by loamy and sandy soils (Rudeforth *et al.* 1984) which have recently supported an extensive market gardening economy.

3 ARCHAEOLOGICAL and HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

- 3.1 The development area lies within the historic core of the planted medieval town of Holt (Silvester *et al.* 1992, 47-50). The town appears to have been developed at the same time as the castle, which was built by John de Warenne, Earl of Surrey, from 1282. De Warenne was granted the lordship of Bromfield and Yale and presumably constructed his castle on this strategic site on the River Dee to take advantage of trading possibilities. During the medieval period, the River Dee was navigable as far as Holt, which was visibly a very prosperous borough at the time. A borough charter was issued in 1285 according to later sources, and was confirmed by a subsequent grant in 1411. The survey of the lordship of Bromfield and Yale in 1315 reveals a rapidly expanding settlement: there were 204 tenements and 159 burgesses (Soulsby 1983, 145). Soulsby estimated a population in excess of 1000 at this time, but the figure of c.650 inhabitants has been suggested by Pratt (1974, 116).
- 3.2 In its street plan, Holt bears a resemblance to the true *bastide* (fortified planted town) of south-western France, with the river bridge at one end of the developed area and the castle and market place at the other. The triangular market place is still clearly discernible as a focus for the main streets. Burgage plots ran off the main streets, almost without exception on an east/west alignment. The boundaries of some of these are visible in the modern pattern of landholdings within the town.
- 3.3 As with many Welsh towns, Holt went into decline in the late medieval period. During the mid-15th century the population was estimated at less than 300. Hostility between the English and Welsh inhabitants appears to have played a part in the decline. By 1620, when John Norden surveyed the town there were only 65 freeholders. Norden's survey of the burgages and lands at Holt (republished

by Palmer in 1910) reveals burgage plots laid out along the regular street pattern which spread out from the market place.

- 3.4 The development site occupies a street frontage location which it was thought might contain evidence for medieval or later occupation. A pre-planning archaeological evaluation was undertaken by CPAT in March 1998 (Owen and Frost 1998), consisting of three excavation trenches. The results yielded little information, with the exception of a possible ditch of unknown date and function in Trench C which was located in a position adjacent to the modern street frontage.

4 WATCHING BRIEF (Figs 2-3)

- 4.1 The watching brief was carried out between May and September 1999 when foundation trenches were excavated for Plots 1-4, 5, 6 and 7, although the development was not completed until June 2000, and this report prepared immediately thereafter. In each case, topsoil and modern overburden was removed and trenches excavated to the level of the natural sand/sandstone subsoil or below, generally at depths varying from 1.0 to 1.3m. All exposed surfaces were then examined for the presence of archaeological features and where these occurred they were drawn at an appropriate scale and a photographic record made in monochrome and colour.
- 4.2 No features of archaeological significance were exposed in Plots 5, 6 or 7. In the block comprising Plots 1-4, an approximately NE-SW aligned ditch (fig. 3) was either partly or entirely exposed in the bases and sides of the internal foundation trenches. At the western end of Plot 4 where it was most clearly exposed, the ditch (2), which was flat-bottomed, 1.40m wide at its base and cut into the natural subsoil and bedrock, extended to a depth of 0.80m below the modern overburden (1). The fill of the ditch (3) consisted of an uniformly textured greyish-brown sandy loam which lacked stratigraphy. No finds were recovered from the fill at this point, but elsewhere in the ditch fill a few late post-medieval pottery sherds were found.
- 4.3 Close to the south-western corner of Plot 2, examination of the outer face of the outer foundation trench section revealed a steep sided pit-like feature (fig. 3) 0.68m deep and 1.10m wide at its base which was cut into the natural sandstone. The fill (5) consisted of a greyish-brown sandy loam which showed no stratigraphy within it. Finds recovered from it contained both modern and late post-medieval pottery sherds. The feature was interpreted as either a pit or the end of a ditch or gully which extended beyond the trench to the north-west.

5 CONCLUSIONS

- 5.1 The watching brief revealed little of archaeological significance, with only two features being identified. A ditch and possible pit both contained finds of late post-medieval date, and may have been deliberately back-filled. The function of both features remains uncertain. The general lack of archaeological features tends to support the tentative conclusion of the 1998 evaluation that the area has had little other than agricultural use in past times (Owen and Frost 1998).

6 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

- 6.1 CPAT would like to thank Clutton Bros. for their assistance throughout the project.

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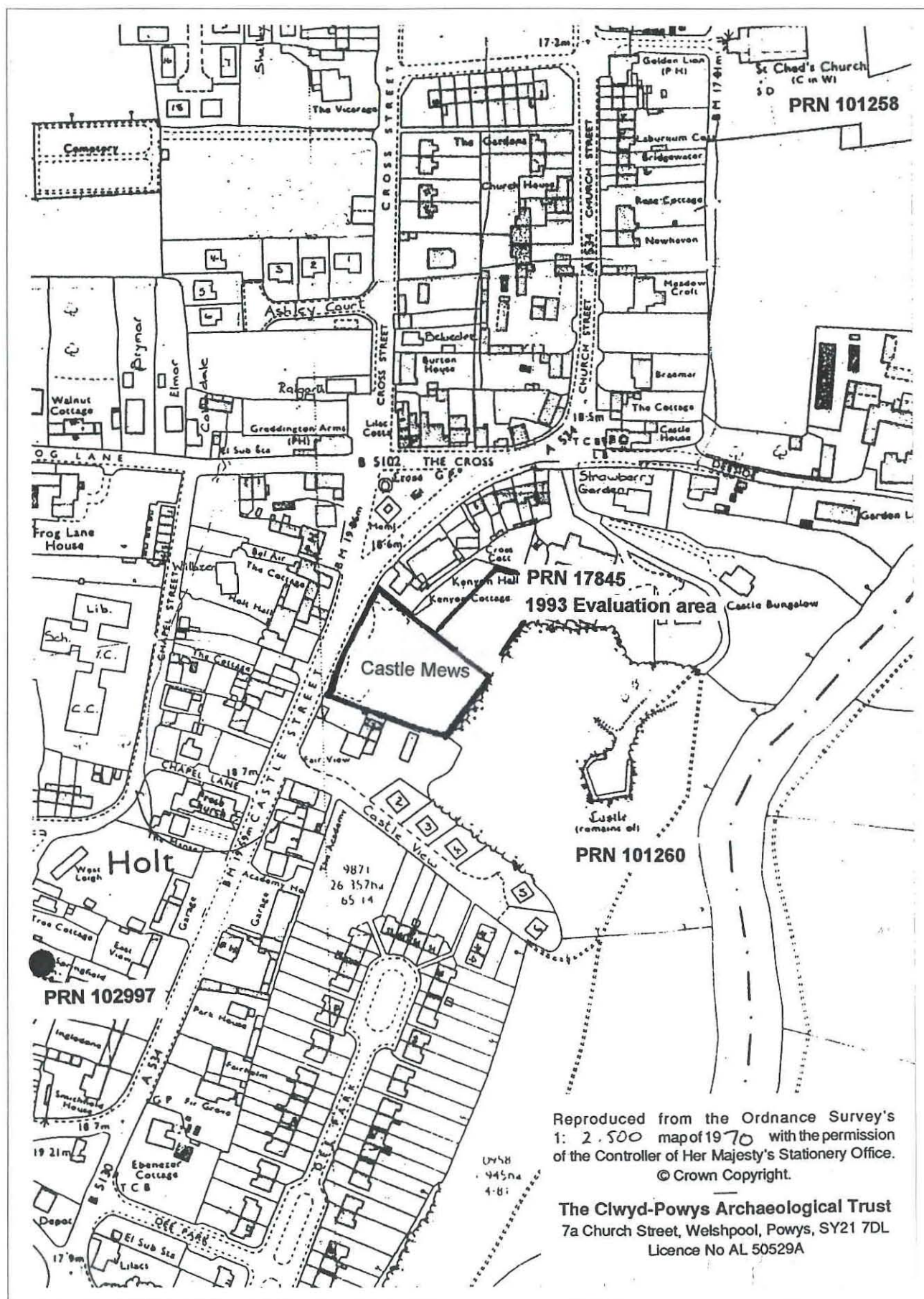


Fig. 1 Castle Mews location, scale 1:2,500

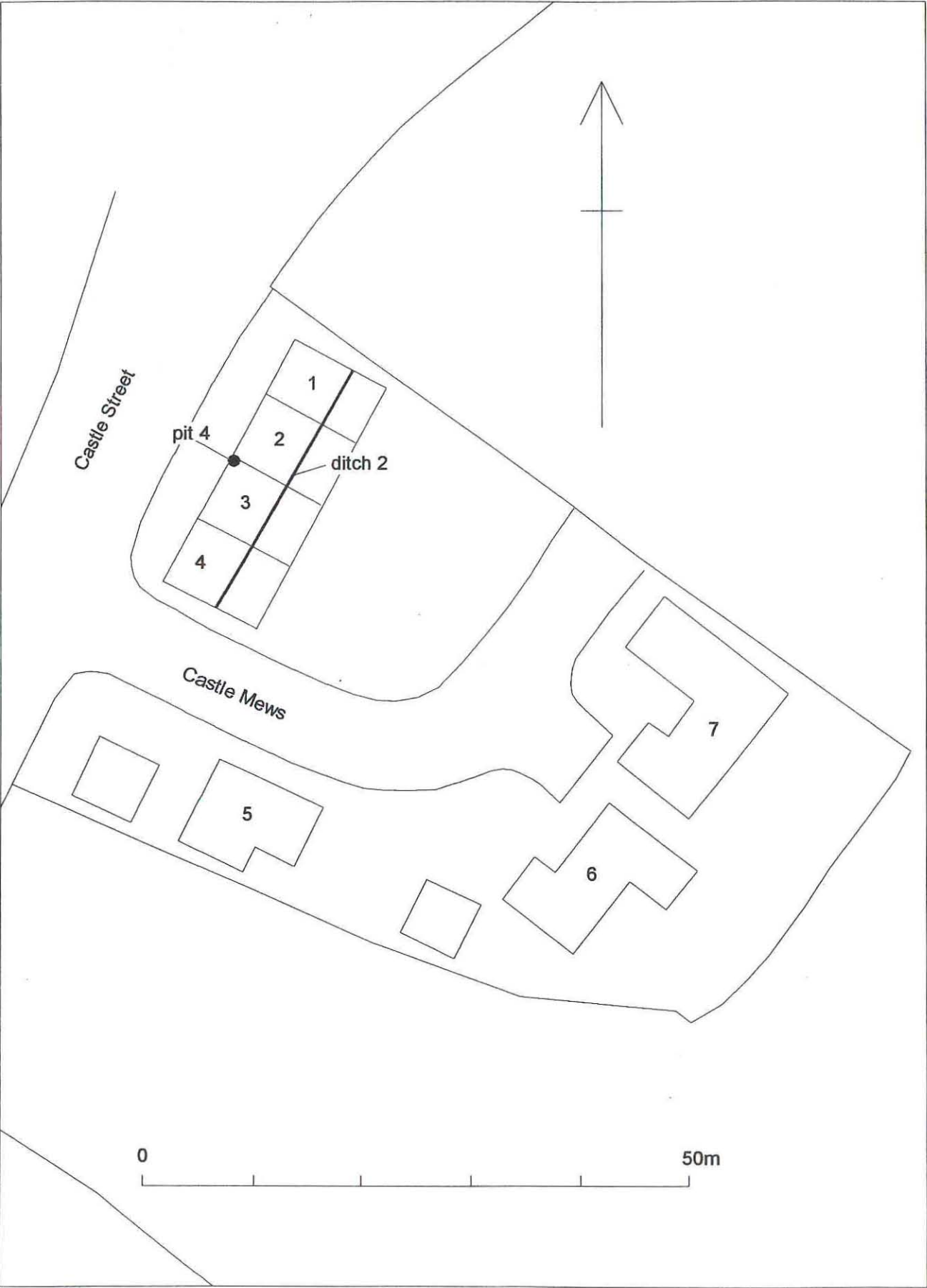


Fig. 2 Castle Mews site plan, scale 1:500

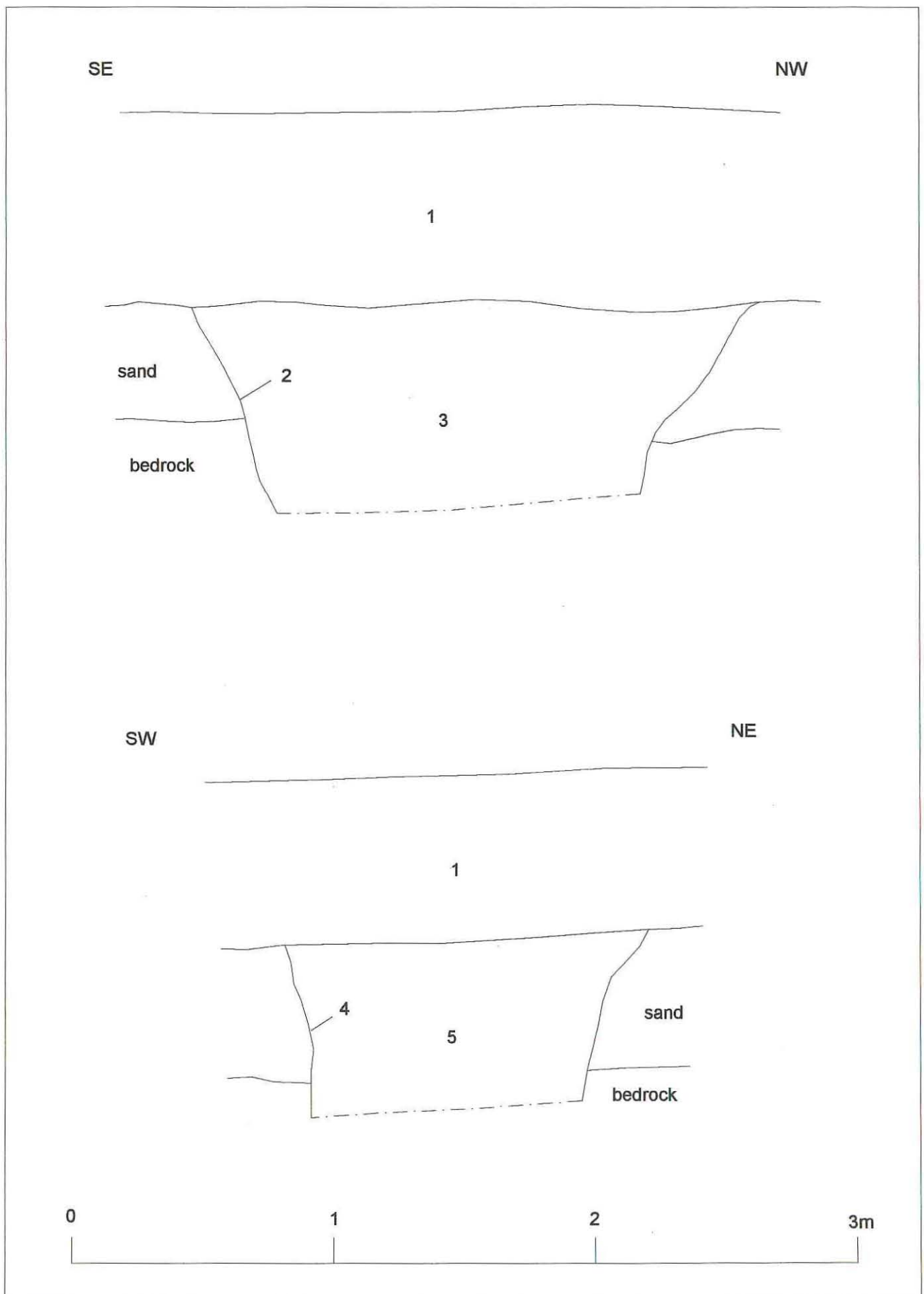


Fig. 3 Sections of Ditch 2 and Pit 4, scale 1:20