

CPAT Report No 944

Wrexham Road, Overton

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION



THE CLWYD-POWYS ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRUST

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August 2008

Report for Mr H Jones

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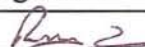

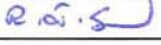
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CPAT Report Record

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1 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 In March 2008 the Field Services Section of the Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust (CPAT) was invited by the development consultant Mr P Aubrey of Holt, acting on behalf of Mr H Jones of Overton, to prepare a specification and quotation for undertaking an archaeological evaluation on a site at Wrexham Road, Overton, in connection with proposals to redevelop the site for residential use. The evaluation was the subject of a brief (CPAT EVB 697) drawn up by Mr M Walters of the Curatorial Section of CPAT, acting in his capacity as archaeological curator for the area.
- 1.2 The first phase of the evaluation consisted of a desk-based study which was completed in July 2008 and this was immediately followed by a programme of strategic trial excavations. The results of both phases of the evaluation form the subject of this report.

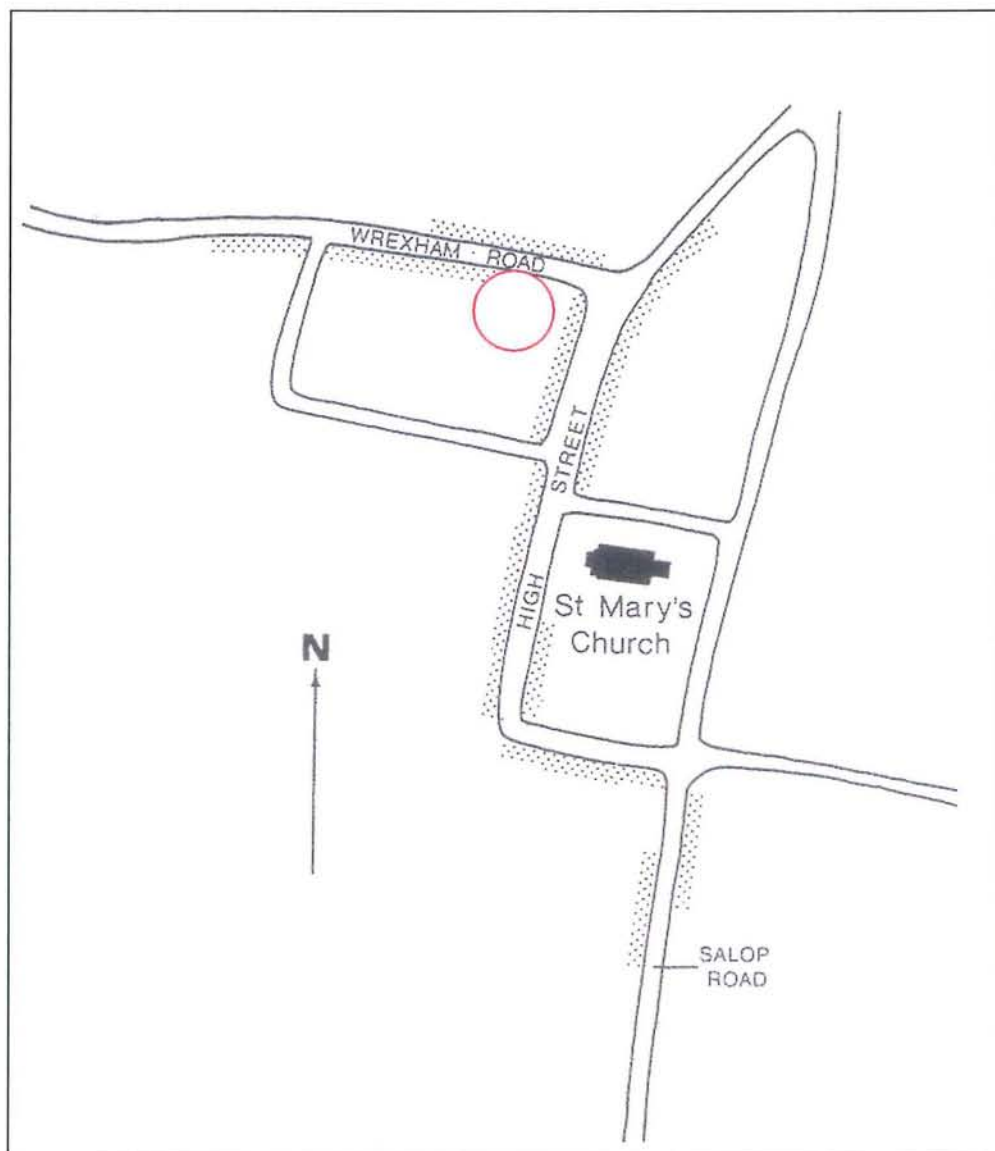


Fig. 1 Location of site (after Soulsby 1983, 212)

2 GEOGRAPHICAL BACKGROUND

- 2.1 The town of Overton lies six miles to the south-east of Wrexham, on an escarpment overlooking a meander in the valley of the Dee to the west. The area of the assessment is centred at NGR SJ 3728 4195, towards the north-western side of the town, on the south side of Wrexham Road just west of its junction with High Street (Fig. 1).
- 2.2 Geologically, Overton lies on the boundary of Triassic conglomerates to the east and sandstones belonging to the Permian period to the west. Westphalian 'Coal Measures' Red Beds of the Carboniferous period become dominant slightly further to the west (1994 British Geological Survey map). It is perhaps more relevant that in this area the underlying rocks are covered by a significant amount of drift consisting of fluvio-glacial sands and gravels. The soils of the area are mostly derived from the fluvio-glacial drift, generally consisting of brown earth soils belonging to the Wick 1 Association, and brown alluvial soils of the Teme Association (1983 Soil Survey of England and Wales map).

3 DESK-BASED STUDY

- 3.1 The desk-based study involved the examination of all the readily available primary and secondary documentary, cartographic, pictorial, and photographic sources for the immediate area. Repositories consulted included the following: the Regional Historic Environment Record (HER), held by CPAT at Welshpool; the National Monuments Record, maintained by the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales (RCAHMW) in Aberystwyth; and the National Library of Wales in Aberystwyth.

The Prehistoric and Roman period

- 3.2 Very little prehistoric or Roman material has been identified in the vicinity of Overton, although traces of early Bronze Age activity were revealed recently in an evaluation at Willow Street (see paragraph 3.12). Approximately 1.5km to the north of the village are the earthworks of a small promontory hillfort of late prehistoric date in Gwernheylod Wood on the south bank of the river.

Early medieval period

- 3.3 Although no structural or archaeological evidence has been identified from this period, the place-name, which means 'a farmstead on a river bank', suggests a settlement that acquired this name from Mercian colonisation during or after the 8th century AD, in common with many other *tun* place-names in Maelor Saesneg (Pratt 1977; Britnell 2003, 33). Subsequently, Overton was included in the Domesday survey in 1086 as a manor, formerly in the holdings of a Saxon lord but granted by William the Conqueror to Robert Fitz-Hugh (Lewis 1849), although it was not mentioned by name until 1201 when *Overtone* appears in the records (Mills 2003, 358).

Medieval period

- 3.4 A castle at Overton, founded it is claimed about c.1138, was held by the prince of Powys, Madoc ap Maredudd. The probable site of this on the banks of the River Dee in the Asney area, some two kilometres from the town, has since been eroded away, though Leland in the 16th century saw a small portion of the castle defences surviving (Smith 1964, iii, 67; Soulsby 1983, 211). It is in the later 13th century that the origins of the layout of the current town may be found, although Pratt (1978) suggested that an earlier *maerdref* might exist beneath the current settlement, an important manorial centre forming part of the estate of Gruffudd Maelor, the Welsh ruler of northern Powys in the early 13th century. By 1279, when a market charter

was awarded by Edward I, the manor was held by Robert de Crevequer. Towards the close of the 13th century, Overton became a royal estate held by Edward's wife, Queen Eleanor, who commissioned the construction of windows for the church of St Mary. In 1292 the town was awarded a borough charter by Edward and the distribution of burgages took place the following year, supervised by Reginald de Grey who had previously been responsible for over-seeing the founding of Ruthin. During a Welsh revolt in 1294 substantial damage was inflicted on Overton, resulting in repair and rebuilding. In 1403 the town was largely destroyed during the Glyndwr rebellion, and it has been suggested that this led to a dramatic reduction in population when the town was abandoned by its English inhabitants; by the second quarter of the 16th century it is said to have held only twenty houses (Smith 1964, iii, 67). In the light of this apparent reduction in occupation of the town, it is interesting to note that the church of St Mary, a rebuild of an earlier structure, dates predominantly to the 15th century.

- 3.5 References to grants awarded during the early 14th century in Overton refer to Walle Street/Welle Strete (1316) and Le Wallistrete (1326) (Elwes Coll 2 & 8). A grant of land on Wall Street is also noted in 1553 (Done & Williams 1992, 3). It is curious that despite these street names no physical evidence of a town wall has been found at Overton, even though a murage grant was awarded in 1300 (Soulsby 1983). In the absence of any evidence to the contrary, it must be assumed that the construction of town defences never occurred here. These references also appear to indicate that Overton was thriving in the earlier part of the 14th century with one grant referring to half a burgage plot, implying that land available within the town was much sought after.

Post-medieval and modern

- 3.6 Several large houses were until recently situated within the town of Overton and its environs, and the houses and their estates provided employment for the residents of the town. Bryn y Pys Hall, the home of the Price and Peel families, originally dated from the 16th century, although the drive, lodge and ornamental gates onto Wrexham Road were added in the later 19th century. Overton Hall on the south side of Willow Street was demolished to provide a development site for housing in the 1970s, and Malim (2003, 13) suggests that this site may represent a continuation of a long-standing manorial holding, directly opposite the church. Despite the reduction in population in the early post-medieval period, Overton retained a market, held in the wide High Street, right through to the 19th century. Many of the buildings in Overton today date from the 18th century and later, including the cottages to the north of the Post Office which display a moulded, dated keystone of 1741 (Clwyd County Council Planning Department 1975), and Ivanhoe cottage on Willow Street.

Cartographic Evidence

- 3.7 The Tithe survey of 1838 (Fig. 2) shows properties clustering around High Street and the area to the north of the church, and also along Salop Road to the south. The proposed development site is occupied by two gardens attached to houses fronting onto High Street, with a further building to the west. It is clear that the arrangement of the gardens reflects the layout of the two medieval burgage plots extending westwards from the High Street; those immediately to the west would have extended southwards from Wrexham Road.

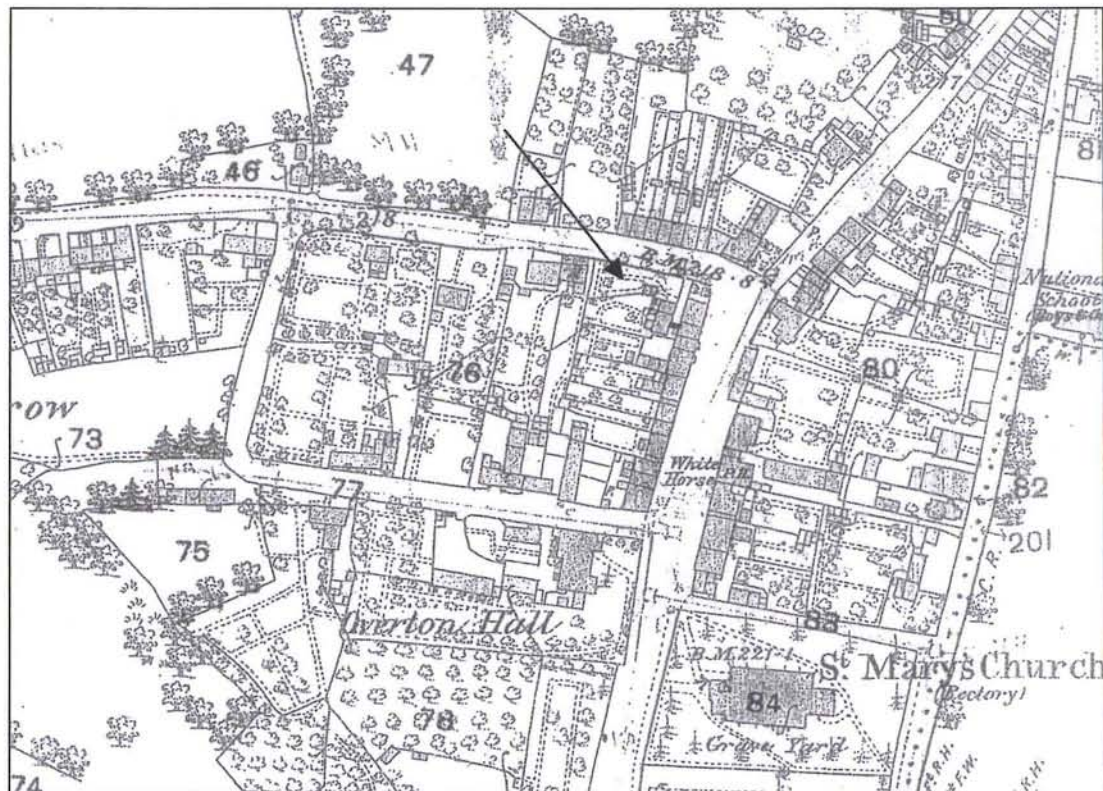


Fig. 3 Ordnance Survey 1st edition map of 1873 (site arrowed)

Previous Excavations

- 3.9 Relatively little archaeological work has been undertaken in Overton in the recent past. A watching brief on Dark Lane in the early 1990s revealed three pits containing late medieval and early post-medieval pottery, as well as fragments of roughly dressed, red sandstone blocks (Walters 1993). Further excavations in an area immediately south of the church failed to identify any early features, aside from three sherds of medieval and one sherd of early post-medieval pottery from unstratified contexts (Malim 2003).
- 3.10 A more recent evaluation was carried out on the north side of Willow Street (Grant 2006), some 30m to the south-south-west of the development area. This revealed gullies and a pit containing ceramic finds of 13th to 14th-century date. More significantly, a pit or linear feature containing material tentatively dated to the Bronze Age was revealed, the antiquity of the feature being confirmed by the fact that it had evidently silted up prior to the commencement of medieval activity in Overton. Further examples of medieval material were recovered from secondary contexts, confirming more general activity in the locality.

4 EVALUATION

- 4.1 The evaluation consisted of two trenches (Fig. 4) of approximately 7m to 8m in length, the locations of which were determined following discussions with the archaeological curator. Trench 2 was moved to the south of its intended location to avoid an earth cable originating from the nearby electricity pole. Both trenches were located in a grassed lawn area accessed from Wrexham Road.

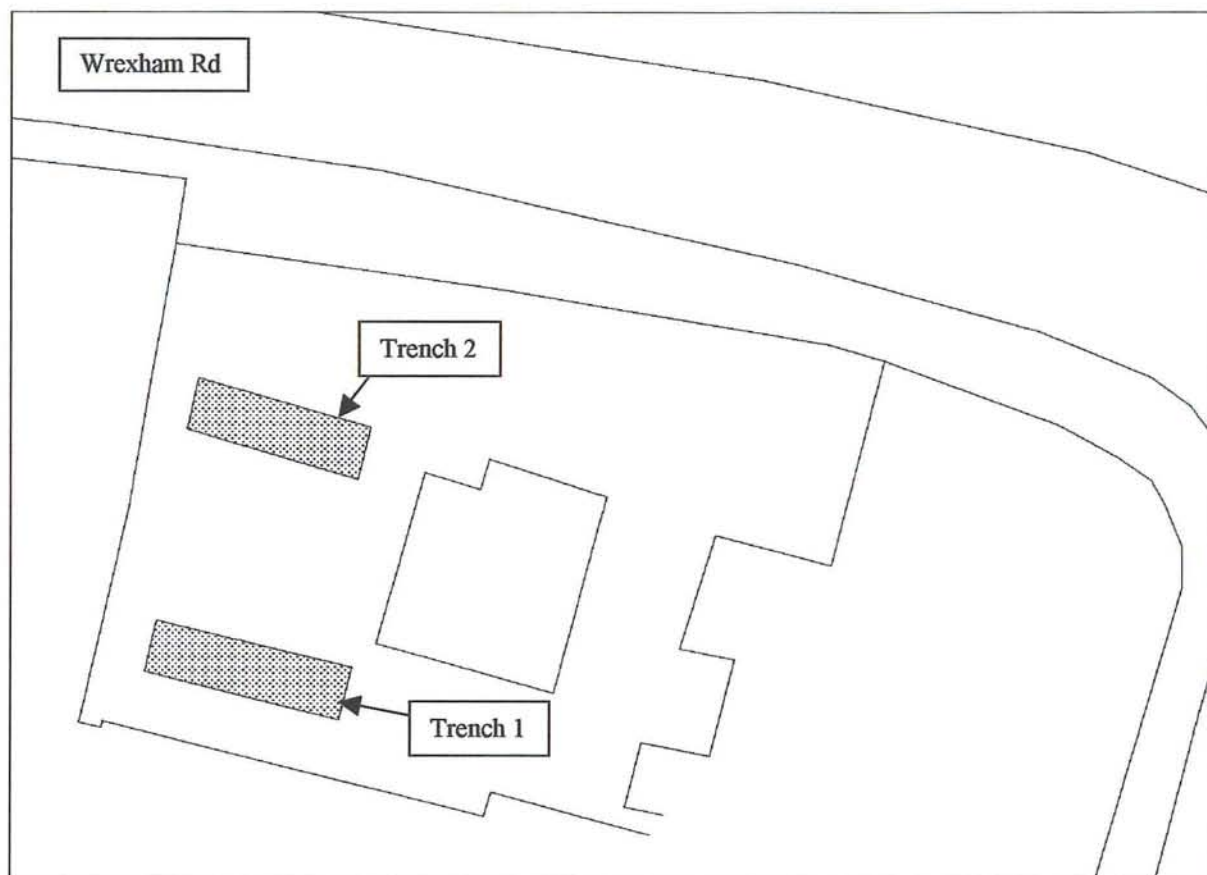


Fig. 4 Location of evaluation trenches Scale 1:250

- 4.2 In both of the trenches the modern overburden was removed by machine under close archaeological supervision, down to the surface of either the natural subsoil or the uppermost significant archaeological horizon, whichever was encountered first. Thereafter, all excavation was undertaken by hand. The evaluation was essentially non-destructive and designed to determine the depth at which any archaeologically sensitive deposits might have survived, together with as much information as possible about their nature, condition and significance. Contexts were recorded on individual record forms and drawn and photographed as appropriate. Numbers in brackets in the following text refer to individual context records in the site archive, a summary of which is provided in Appendix 1.

Trench 1 (Fig. 5)

- 4.3 Trench 1 was located in the southern part of the garden plot, and measured 7.7m east-north-east/west-south-west by 2.0m. No significant archaeological horizons were identified as it was being initially cleared, so the trench was machined down to the top of the natural subsoil.
- 4.4 The natural subsoil (5), consisting of a mix of orange sandy silt, pale grey clay silt and orange gravel, was identified throughout the excavated area; it was overlain by a deposit of pale orange-brown silt (3), between 0.35m and 0.5m in thickness, which contained finds dating to the post-medieval period. A probable former topsoil layer composed of mid-brown gritty sand (2), which was up to 0.18m in thickness, overlay layer 3 and was itself covered by modern, imported, topsoil comprising very dark grey sandy silt (1), up to 0.25m thick, that formed the base of the lawn.



Plate 1 Trench 1 after cleaning from west-north-west (Photo CPAT 2617-009)

- 4.5 The upper surface of the natural subsoil appeared to be largely undisturbed, except where it had been cut by three post-holes. At the eastern end of the trench, post-hole 7, 0.4m in diameter, was cut into the subsoil to a depth of 0.25m. However, this had first been recognised during the machining of layer 3, through which it had been cut, suggesting its original depth was about 0.6m. The appearance of the base of the post-hole suggested that the post would have been approximately 0.3m in diameter. The other two post-holes (9 & 12) were obviously fairly recent to judge by their fills, and even post-pipe, 0.16m in diameter, was still intact in post-hole 9, filled with very loose material (11). Post-hole 9 measured 0.70m by 0.38m, whereas post-hole 12 measured 0.50m by 0.33m. Neither was excavated owing to their obviously recent origin.
- 4.6 A small pit (5), perhaps 0.35m across and 0.25m deep, was recognised in the north-facing section of the trench, but it was evident that this too had been cut from the top of layer 3 and could not therefore predate the post-medieval period.

Trench 2 (Fig. 6)

- 4.7 Trench 2 was located in the northern part of the lawn area, where it fronted onto Wrexham Road. As in Trench 1, no significant archaeological horizons were identified as it was being initially cleared, so the trench was machined down to the top of the natural subsoil. Just to the east of the centre of the trench, a band of more silty orange subsoil was examined in a small sondage, but this proved that the material was of natural, probably fluvio-glacial, origin.
- 4.8 The natural subsoil (31) in this trench was effectively the same material as layer 4 that had been encountered in Trench 1. It was overlain by a deposit of pale orange-brown silt (17), between 0.35m and 0.5m in thickness, again matching the equivalent layer (3) in Trench 1. The probable former topsoil layer was also present, although in this case composed of mid-grey-brown sandy silt (16), up to 0.4m in thickness. This was covered by modern, imported, topsoil comprising very dark grey sandy silt (14), up to 0.1m thick, that formed the base of the lawn.



Plate 2 Trench 2 after cleaning from west-north-west (Photo CPAT 2617-006)

- 4.9 A small number of features were visible where they had been cut into the natural subsoil in the base of the trench, although some of these had been cut from higher in the sequence of deposits and were of fairly recent origin. At the south-east corner of the trench, a gully (21), about 0.7m wide and 0.2m deep, was recorded on an approximate east/west alignment. This had a fill of mid-grey-brown silt (22) containing ceramic finds of both post-medieval and medieval date.



Plate 3 Gully 21, from north (Photo CPAT 2617-018)

- 4.10 Towards the western end of the trench a feature (27) was revealed with the initial appearance of a pit measuring 1.2m east/west by at least 0.5m. Its fill of mid-grey-brown, perhaps slightly orangey, sandy silt (28) contained a single sherd of possible medieval pottery. The south side of the feature ran beneath the trench section so all of the visible portion was excavated, proving that it was actually a hollow where the root of a tree had been removed or rotted in-situ.



Plate 4 Tree-bowl (27), from north-north-east (Photo CPAT 2617-024)

- 4.11 A number of later features were revealed in the trench which are described here from west to east, for convenience. A post-hole (29), up to 0.8m across and 0.65m deep, had been cut through layer 17 into the fill (28) of the tree bowl, its fill (30) of dark grey-brown stony silt confirming an origin in the 20th century. At the approximate centre of the trench, a further post-hole (25), 0.4m in diameter, also originated at the top of layer 17, perhaps even higher in the sequence. Material in its fill of dark grey gritty silt (26) confirmed a fairly modern origin and the feature was therefore not excavated.
- 4.12 A very recent rubbish pit (23), up to 1.0m in diameter and 0.7m deep, had been cut from the top of layer 16 near the eastern end of the trench. The material in its fill (24) included tin cans and it was therefore not excavated. At the eastern end of the trench layer 16 was overlain by a small lens of very dark grey gritty silt (15) whose origin is unknown, but which is certainly of fairly recent date. Both this and layer 16 were truncated by a cut (19) of unknown size containing mixed dark grey gritty silt (18) containing brick fragments. Fill 18 seemed to have formed the base for a concrete slab (20), which occupied the extreme eastern end of the trench and may have supported some kind of small structure.

5 FINDS

- 5.1 A small number of sherds of medieval pottery were found during the evaluation, although in all cases these were recovered from post-medieval and later contexts. They are, nevertheless, significant in demonstrating a reasonable level of medieval activity in the locality.
- 5.2 Early post-medieval pottery was also in evidence, but the only examples which could be securely attributed to a particular feature were recovered from the fill of gully 21. An approximate 17th-century or early 18th-century date for this gully was suggested by the material, which included a sherd of Midlands Purple ware normally attributed a 15th- to 17th-century date.

6 CONCLUSIONS

- 6.1 The earliest stratigraphic features revealed by the excavations were the gully (21) and tree bowl (27) in Trench 2, both of which were sealed by layer 17, finds from which suggested a post-medieval date. The remaining features and layers revealed by the excavation were of late post-medieval or modern date, one pit (23) even containing tin cans in its fill.
- 6.2 It is significant that a boundary is depicted in the same position and with an identical alignment to gully 21 on the first edition Ordnance Survey map of 1873, although, despite the correlation, it cannot be firmly stated that the boundary and gully are one and the same; the line of the gully might have been respected by later boundary features that were then depicted on the late 19th-century mapping. The finds recovered from the gully do, however, confirm that it belongs, at the earliest, to the post-medieval period. The Ordnance Survey map also demonstrated that the proposed development area had some tree cover at the end of the 19th century, although this cannot be directly linked to feature 27.
- 6.3 The proposed development lies at the extreme rear of two medieval burgrave plots associated with dwellings fronting onto High Street. However, with the exception of a number of sherds of pottery recovered from later contexts, no evidence of medieval occupation was revealed by the excavation. It seems evident that the western ends of the two plots saw little activity in the medieval period and they were only firmly subdivided in post-medieval times.

7 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

- 7.1 The writer would like to thank Eleri Farley of CPAT, for her help and assistance with the evaluation; also the staff of the Historic Environment Record, CPAT; National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth; and the staff of the National Monuments Record, Aberystwyth.

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- 1899 Ordnance Survey 1:2,500 second edition map, Flintshire XXII.13.
- 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).

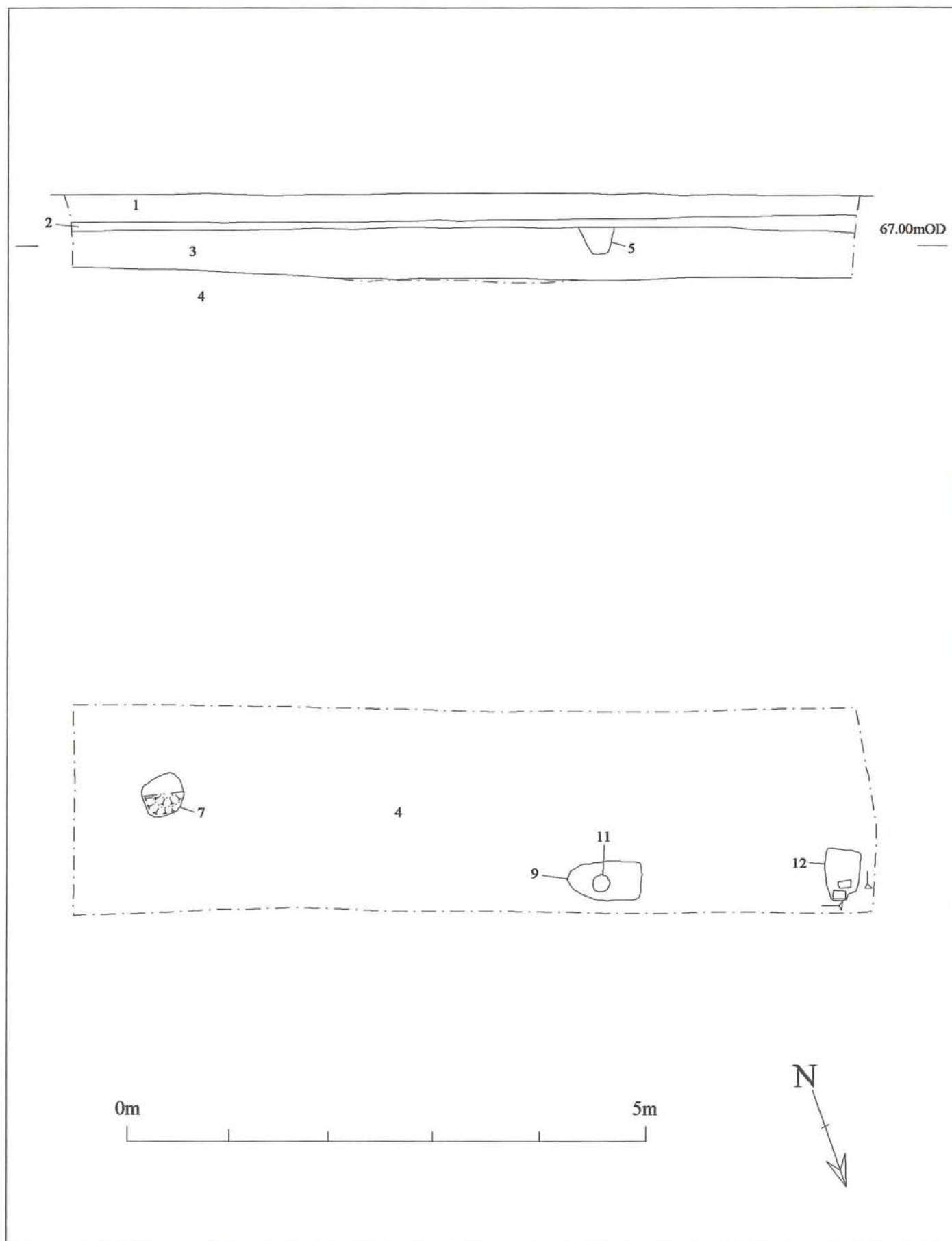


Fig. 5 Trench 1 plan and section Scale 1:50

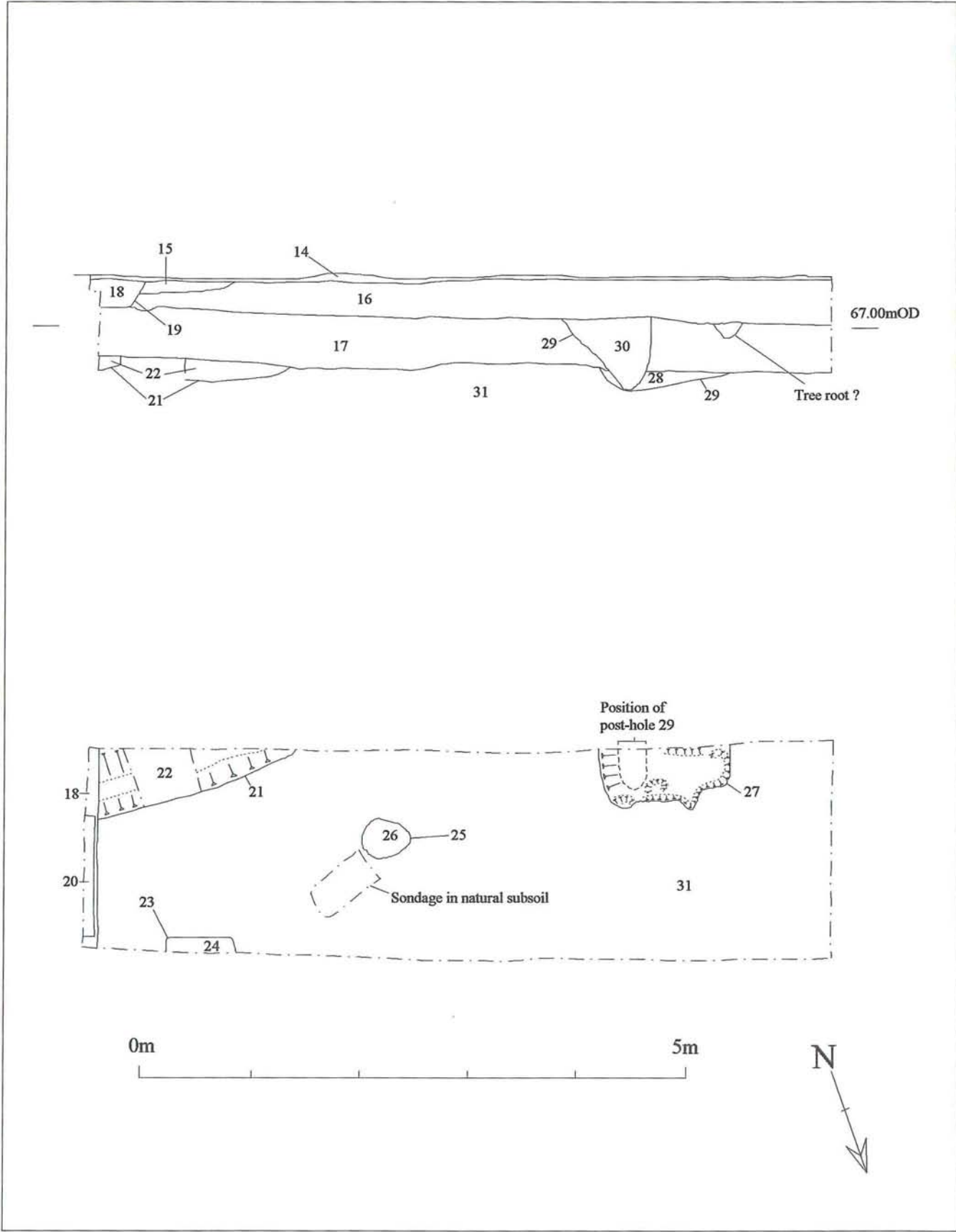


Fig. 6 Trench 2 plan and section Scale 1:50

APPENDIX 1**PROJECT ARCHIVE****SITE ARCHIVE**

31 context record forms

2 A1 site plans

26 Digital images

Photographic catalogue

FINDS CATALOGUES**Medieval pottery catalogue**

Trench	Context	Sherds	Comment
1	-	3	Un-stratified
1	(8)	1	
2	(22)	1	Rim sherd

Post-medieval pottery catalogue

Trench	Context	Sherds	Comment
1	(1)	4	
1	(3)	6	
1	(8)	1	
1	(13)	1	
2	(22)	7	All early post-medieval; 1 sherd of Midland's Purple ware
2	(26)	2	
2	(28)	1	Early post-medieval
2	(30)	10	

Miscellaneous finds catalogue

Trench	Context	Sherds	Comment
1	(1)	-	2 sherds green glass
1	(3)	-	1 small piece of grey slate
1	(3)	-	2 brick pieces
2	(30)	-	1 clay pipe piece, 1 piece green glass, 2 Fe objects, 3 brick pieces