

POST-MEDIEVAL STRUCTURES AT THE GEORGE HOTEL, QUAY STREET, YARMOUTH, ISLE OF WIGHT: CASTLE DEFENCES OR DOMESTIC STRUCTURES?

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ABSTRACT

Archaeology South-East were commissioned by the proprietor of the George Hotel, Yarmouth, Isle of Wight to undertake an archaeological watching brief during extension work at the rear of the hotel in May and June 2007. Footing trenches and an area of ground reduction revealed significant masonry structures and stratified deposits dating from the early post-medieval period. These included a section of the moat wall associated with nearby Yarmouth Castle. Other masonry structures revealed during the groundwork are thought to relate to early building phases associated with the construction of the property currently known as the George Hotel.

INTRODUCTION

Archaeology South-East (ASE) were commissioned by the proprietor of the George Hotel, Yarmouth, Isle of Wight to undertake an archaeological watching brief during extension works at the rear of the hotel in 2007 (NGR SZ 35390 89761) (Fig. 1). This article comprises a brief record of the principal findings of the watching brief.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

The site is situated on the Bembridge Marls of the Yarmouth foreshore, and is located within the grounds of the George Hotel, a post-medieval Grade II* listed building, immediately to the east of the curtain wall of Yarmouth Castle, an artillery fort constructed by 1547 (SAM 22016; fig. 1).

Yarmouth Castle forms one of a series of coastal forts constructed by Henry VIII. These

forts were sited at strategic points along the English coastline and were often located to protect key features such as harbour entrances or anchorages, thereby denying attackers a base for sustaining an invasion.

The Isle of Wight, sheltering the waters of the Solent, has been described as a 'stepping stone' for invaders anxious to attack the natural harbour of Portsmouth and the important medieval port of Southampton. Yarmouth Castle, located at the mouth of the river Yar on the north-western corner of the island was constructed at a strategic position, defending both Yarmouth harbour and the entrance to the Freshwater peninsula. It was situated at a main point of communication between the Isle of Wight and the mainland, and in association with Hurst Castle and Sharpnose Blockhouse protected the Needles passage into the Solent (Cantwell & Sprack 1986, 1–2).

The period of Henry VIII's reign saw rapid developments in military engineering and fortification, reflecting the increase in the use of heavy guns and cannon. Unlike traditional medieval castles, Henrician castles were lower in height, with thick rounded bastions to carry the guns, and deflect and absorb enemy fire (Saunders 1989, 38). By 1545 this type of design was being superseded by pointed 'arrow-head' bastions, which allowed better flanking cover along the line of the adjacent curtain wall. Yarmouth Castle has been identified as containing the earliest surviving example of one of these structures in England (Rigold 1978, 4).

The plan of Yarmouth Castle is very different to the earlier Henrician castles. It is square built in plan, with the original entrance to the east and the arrow-head bastion located on the south-east corner. The landward sides of the castle were flanked by a moat 9m wide,

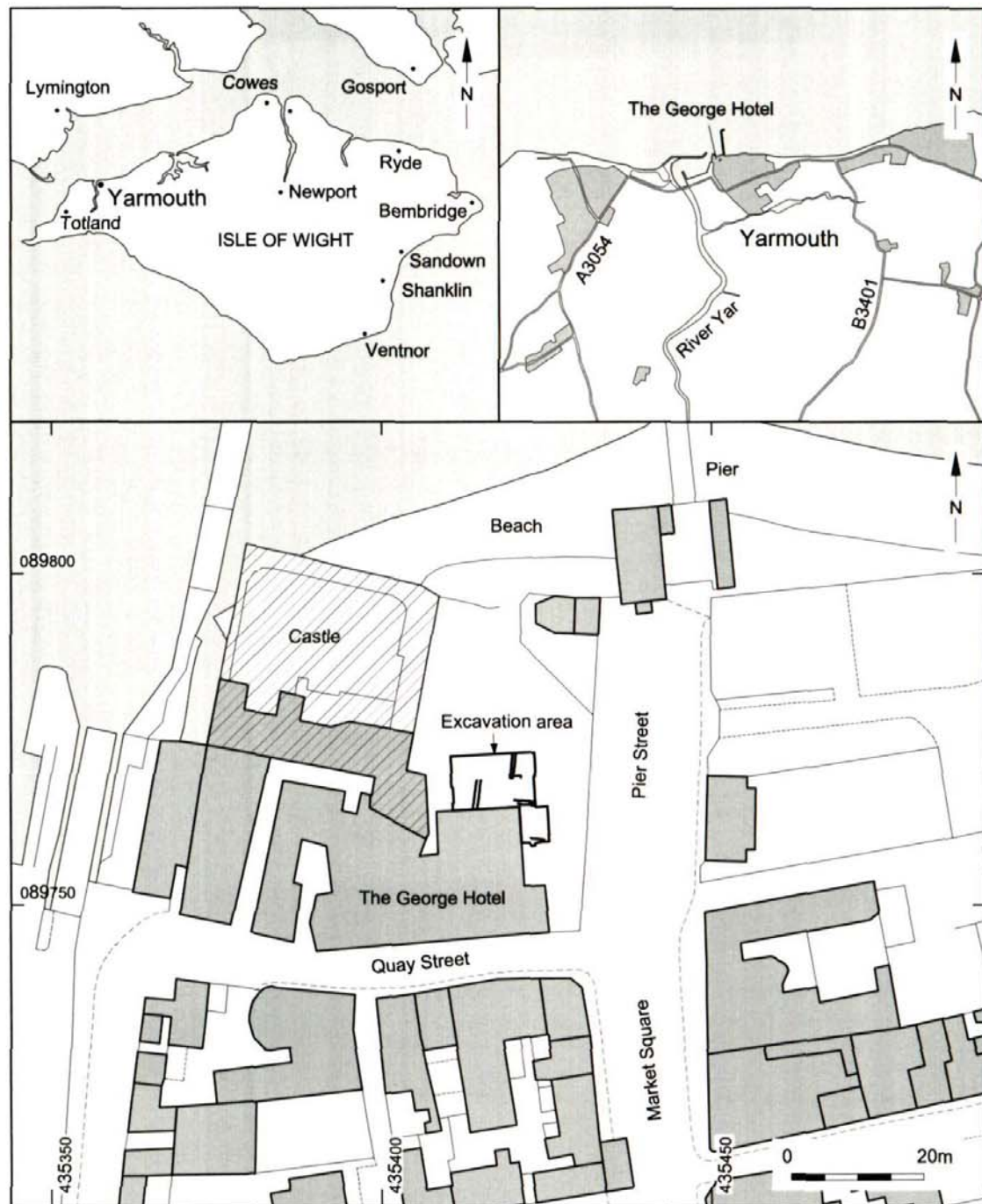


Fig 1 Site Location

terminated to the north and west by sluiced continuations of the castle wall (Rigold 1978, 9). This moat is no longer visible, but is known to survive as a buried feature (English Heritage 1994).

The castle underwent significant internal modification and improvement throughout its history. However, the external context and development of defences of the fort are not quite as well understood. In 1559 a royal survey of the coastal defences of the Isle of Wight records that at this time the fortress was not finished, and recommended several improvements, including construction of a solid platform within the fort, and the recutting of the moat (Kenyon 1979, 68). A plan of the fort produced at the time of this survey shows the line of the moat wrapped around the angle bastion (*ibid.*, 68, fig. 4). A final instruction (Kenyon 1978, 68) appears to indicate that an earthen bank was recommended behind the line of the moat and that the walls barring the moat on the seaward sides were to be demolished:

'quadraunte to be ringed on both sides to the see wardes, and to vaumure the same to the lande wardes inste to the flanker iij fote higher than the ringe, yf the dyche with all be countermured of those two sides that the flanker beates, and the walles that barreth the dyche taken downe the bredth of the dyche yt wilbe very stronge being manned.'

The platform within the fort is believed to have been constructed fairly soon after the recommendations of the survey mentioned above, in the period between 1559 and 1565 (Rigold 1978, 20). However, the earthen defences may not have been constructed until sometime later. Rigold (1978, 5) places this phase of work in the period 1597–98, when it is thought that an earthen bulwark with bastions and ravelins for more guns was constructed outside the line of the moat. However, a survey of south coast fortifications undertaken in 1623 does not mention these late Elizabethan outworks (English Heritage, NMR record). This survey records that at this time several elements of the fort were in a bad condition, and reports that the moat and the sluice gates regulating the supply of water were no longer of use. It

recommended that the moat (at this time 17 rods in circumference and 2 rods wide) was to be made 5 ft. deeper, and a counter-scarp of brick or earth was to be constructed (VCHH 1912, 286–292).

These external ramparts have now completely disappeared, and are believed to have been demolished during the reorganisation of the defences by Sir Robert Holmes, Captain of the Island in 1669, who is thought to have blocked the old eastern entrance to the castle and infilled the moat (Rigold 1978, 7). Following this process Sir Robert is said to have built a house on the site, which was later rebuilt by his heir Henry Holmes and became the George Hotel (English Heritage Listed Buildings description: 393275). However, the origin of the George Hotel may not be quite as straightforward, and The Victoria County History records that Robert Holmes' mansion may have been built on the site of an older mansion, possibly 'the king's house' at Yarmouth mentioned in 1638, which may have been in turn situated on the site of a medieval house (VCHH 1912, 286–292, fn 80).

METHODOLOGY

An initial 0.5m wide footing trench with padding pits was excavated within the footprint of the new extension to the north of the rear dining room. The ground within this area was then reduced by c. 300mm, and to the east of the existing dining hall three service trenches were excavated. To the north of the extension an additional area was reduced by 300mm ahead of the construction of a patio (Fig. 2).

RESULTS

The groundwork excavations were of limited scope, allowing only 'keyhole' observation of the underlying archaeology. Interpretations are therefore invariably restricted. However several masonry structures and a series of stratified deposits dating from the early post-medieval period were partially exposed and the following phases of archaeological activity are cautiously proposed.

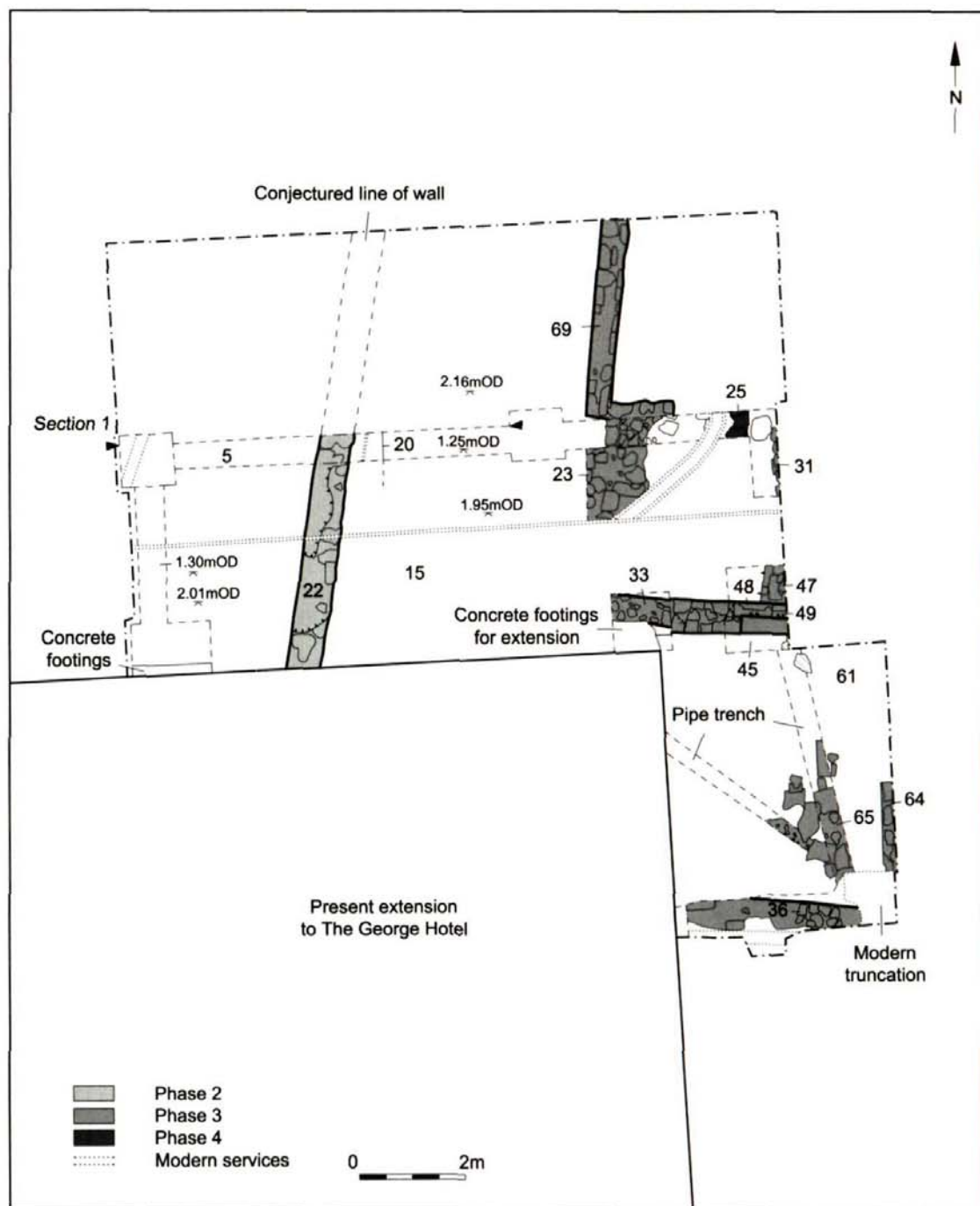


Fig 2 Excavation plan

Phase 1

A series of deposits consisting of thin layers of silty sands and layers of clayey sand (Contexts: 16, 17, 18; Fig. 3) were located in the east part of the site. The lowest deposits contained gravel and very occasional fragments of mortar and medieval slate, and are thought to be related to ground stabilisation. These deposits appear to be the earliest encountered on site, and could have been deposited during the early phases of construction of Yarmouth Castle, possibly relating to consolidation of the area behind the sea wall.

Phase 2

The phase 1 deposits were cut through by trench 21 into which was built a substantial wall [22] 0.72m wide (Figs 2 & 4.1). This was encountered at a height of 1.90mOD and was exposed to a length of 4.46m and a depth of 0.68m. The wall was constructed of uncoursed limestone, with occasional fragments of brick and greensand. It was located approximately 10.5m to the east of the castle's curtain wall, and was orientated upon the same alignment (and not the same alignment as the arrow headed bastion). This structure is believed to represent the moat retaining wall and thus may date from the castle's inception. However, as the documentary sources have indicated, an early 17th century survey recommended alterations to the moat. These recommendations included the construction of a counter-scarp wall of brick or earth, and it is possible that the wall (although of stone construction) is the counter-scarp and thus dates from this later phase of modification of the castle's defences, rather being an original feature.

Phase 3

A series of deposits to the west of wall [22] are thought to represent silting and backfill episodes within the line of the moat (contexts: 3-6, 8 and 9; Fig. 3). The upper deposits contained a finds assemblage that included locally produced glazed red earthenware bowls and pipkins, clay pipe fragments and ovoid wine bottles, which is thought to have been

deposited within a short time span during the 17th to early 18th centuries. The dating and sequence of these deposits appear to confirm the current understanding of the development of the site, with the moat believed to have been backfilled in the mid to late 17th century. The lowest deposits encountered (contexts 10 and 37), at a depth of between 0.60m to 0.74mOD, consisted of thin layers of silty and clayey sands, which are thought to represent original silting episodes within the line of the moat.

Phase 4

Small areas of several other structures were identified during the course of the watching brief, although due to the limited scale of the excavations it has not been possible to establish the full plan, or relationships of these features. It may be that some of the structures relate to features associated with the late Elizabethan external defences of the castle, but it is thought more likely they derive from early building phases associated with the George Hotel.

Masonry structure [69] comprised a 0.50m wide wall constructed of limestone with red unfroglged brick facing. It was found to follow the same orientation as the conjectured line of the moat retaining wall [22]. A length of 3.5m of this wall was exposed in plan at 2.27mOD, but only 0.10m of its height was exposed. A sample of the brick from this feature was dated to the 17th century. This structure is interesting, as its orientation closely matches the orientation of the moat and curtain wall of the fort. Whilst this might indicate an association with the castle defences, it is also possible that later domestic structures or even garden features could have been influenced by the prevailing architectural environment of the site. An irregular and truncated adjoining structure [23] may represent remnants of a foundation or surfacing layer associated with wall [69].

A third stretch of wall was observed, running perpendicular to the moat retaining wall. A 3m of stretch of this wall [33] was exposed in plan at 1.92mOD (Fig. 4.3). This was found to be 0.50m wide and constructed from roughly faced Bembridge limestone blocks. Two chamfered moulded masonry blocks [48] and [49] had been built into the line of this wall

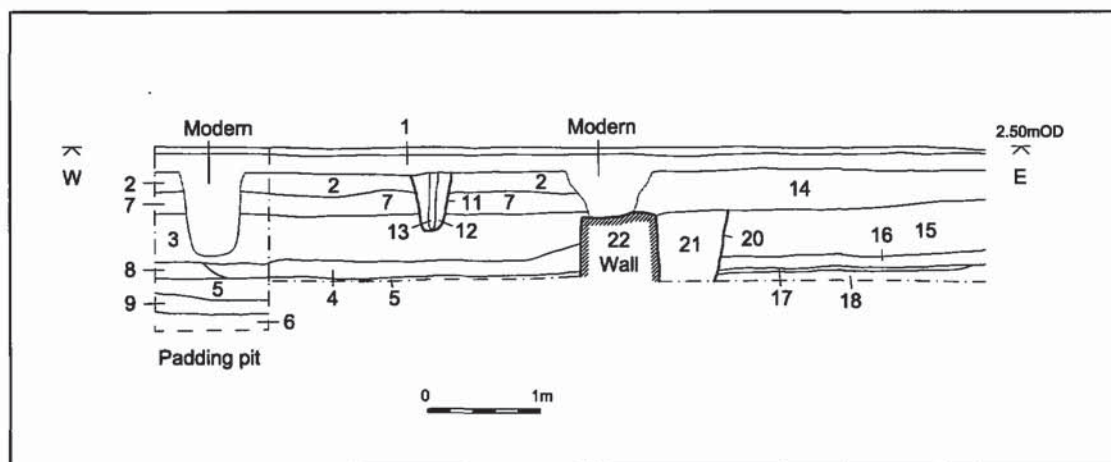


Fig 3 Section

(Fig. 4.2). These blocks had holes in their top surface suggesting the presence of iron fittings, and they appear to be reused window sills. They may have been set so that the holes on their surface could have been reused as a pivot point for a door (Collie & Sygrave 2007). Such reuse of stone is known to have occurred after the dissolution of nearby Quarr abbey, with stone from the site reused at Yarmouth and Cowes castle (pers. comm. Owen Cambridge). However, the suggestion in the VCH that an earlier mansion may have stood upon this site also adds another interesting dimension to the presence of these architectural fragments. Masonry structure [47] was found to abut the plinth blocks [48] and [49], and may be related to another heavily truncated structure [31] which was partially exposed in section to the north.

In the south-east of the site structure [36] comprised an east-west orientated wall constructed of randomly coursed limestone blocks at 2.07mOD (maximum height) (Fig. 4.4). This had been heavily truncated by a modern water main. Structures [64] and [65] were observed in adjacent pipe trenches. Both were constructed of roughly hewn limestone blocks. Structure [64] is thought to represent a north-south orientated wall, whilst structure [65], partially exposed in two pipe trenches, is thought to represent part of a much more extensive masonry structure.

Phase 5

A small section of a further wall, structure [25] is thought to represent a late post-medieval or modern garden wall, likely to be related to the modern garden path which lies on the same alignment immediately above it.

DISCUSSION

The watching brief has demonstrated that there are significant masonry remains and stratified deposits surviving within the grounds of the George Hotel gardens. Due to the very limited scale of groundwork undertaken, it has not been possible to establish a full plan or secure dating or phasing of these features, but some initial conclusions can be made regarding the structures exposed. Notably, the watching brief resulted in the identification of the moat retaining wall [22] and a series of deposits within the moat that indicate a period of backfilling in the 17th or early 18th century. This supports current understanding of the history of the site, with the backfilling of the moat prior to the construction of Sir Robert Holmes's house in the late 17th century.

Several other masonry structures were also identified. Designated as phase 4, it is thought most probable that these structures represent structures or outbuildings associated with

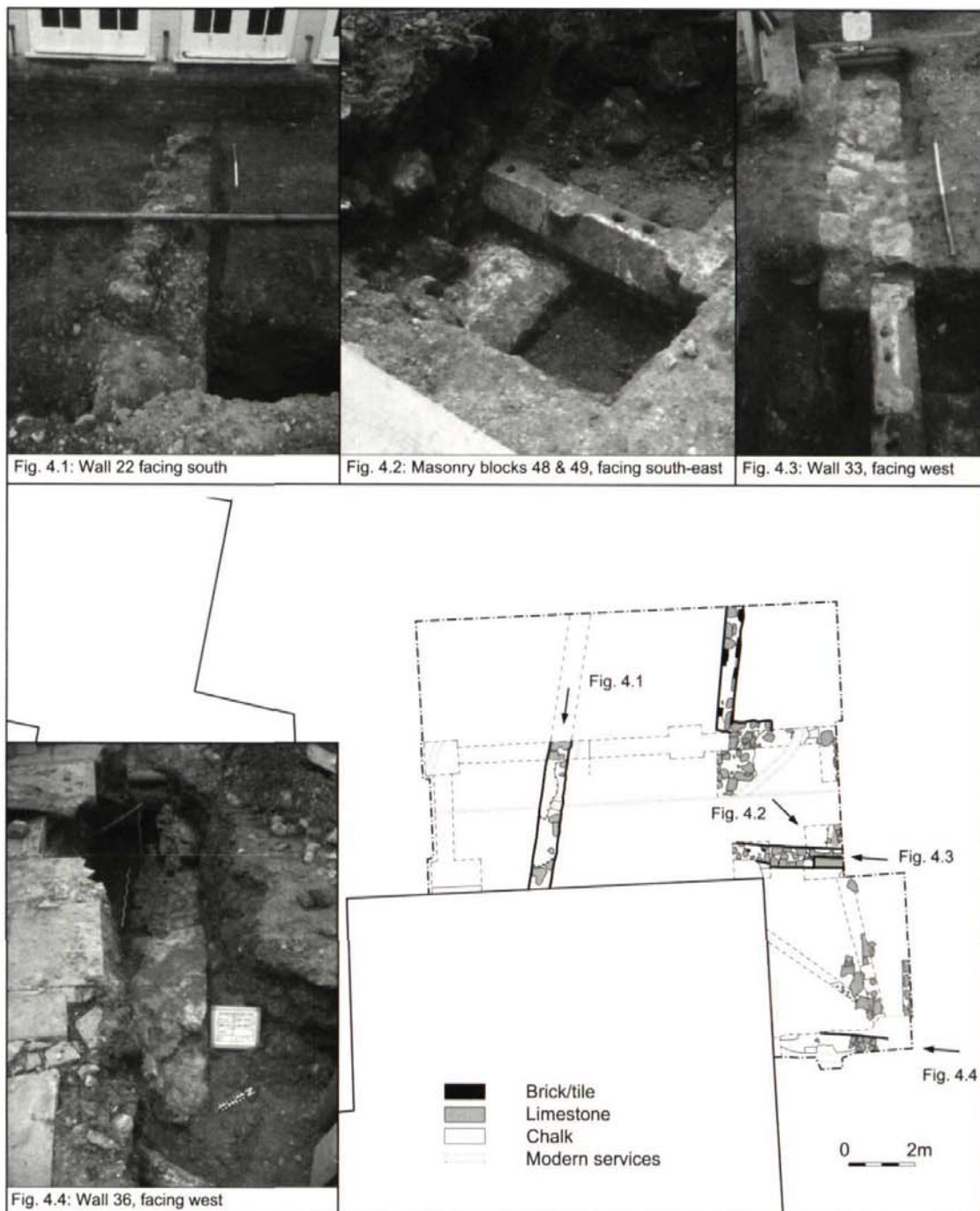


Fig 4 Photographs of key areas

Sir Robert Holmes' early house. However, at present a defensive character to some of the features cannot be ruled out, and it may be that some relate to outworks of the fort. A further intriguing possibility remains, raised by reference to 'the Kings house' (VCHH 1912), that some of these structures may represent remnants of an even earlier house predating Holmes' mansion.

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