

ABERGLASNEY HOUSE ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION PHASE I AND PHASE II

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SUMMARY

As part of a renovation scheme on the historic garden at Aberglasney House, PRN 6782, Llangathen, Dyfed, the Aberglasney Restoration Trust commissioned Dyfed Archaeological Trust Field Operations to carry out phase II of an archaeological evaluation in the enclosed gardens PRN 25346, to the west of the house. The garden was surrounded by a cloistered walk with arches opening into the garden. The evaluation was intended to further investigate those features identified during a previous evaluation (Page 1995) and to examine any possible terraces associated with the garden.

The results of the fieldwork located some of the features of the former garden, including a central fountain of the late 19th century, cobbled paths and a terrace on the western side of the garden. No other terraces were discovered. The garden was designed and built with a gentle slope down east to west at a level which approximates to the present ground surface.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report was prepared by J Purdue, Project Officer, Dyfed Archaeological Trust Field Operations. The fieldwork was supervised by J Purdue and R Ramsey. The finds were examined and a report prepared by D Brennan. The Trust is grateful to Wendy Foulger for her help and comments during the fieldwork.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Project proposals and commission

The Aberglasney Restoration Trust commissioned Dyfed Archaeological Trust Field Operations to undertake a phase II archaeological evaluation within the enclosed formal garden at Aberglasney House, Llangathen, Dyfed, to further investigate a number of features identified during earlier fieldwork.

1.2 Scope of project

The project was originally intended to answer interrelated questions concerning the walled garden in front of the house: whether the cloistered walk around the garden was built on a level surface, whether there was a terrace in front of the house and an indication to the possible date of construction. To answer these questions eight archaeological test sections were excavated, six against the cloistered walk, one stretching from the house into the centre of the garden and one section located on the entrance to the northern raised stone walkway.

1.3 Report outline

This report outlines the physical setting of the site (Section 2) before summarising the fieldwork results (Section 3). Conclusions based on the results of Sections 2 and 3 are given in Section 5. Recommendations for further archaeological work arising from the results of Sections 3 and 4 are detailed in Section 6.

1.4 Abbreviations

All sites contained on the County Sites and Monuments Record (SMR) will be identified by their Primary Record Number (PRN), any new sites discovered during the fieldwork will be allocated a new PRN. All sites will be located by their National Grid Reference (NGR).

Archaeological features and contexts are referred to using a continuous three-figure numbering system (e.g. 001) employed by Dyfed Archaeological Trust Field Operations.

2. THE SITE

2.1 Location

Aberglasney House is situated on the western edge of Llangathen village, some 5km west of Llandeilo, Dyfed, (NGR: SN 581 221). The house sits in gently undulating land at the foot of Grongaer Hill. The evaluation site was in the enclosed gardens west of the main house. The garden is surrounded on the north, south and west sides by a cloistered walk. Prior to the evaluation the site was overgrown, and in the middle of being cleared. The gardens slope down from east to west - away from the house.

3. SUMMARY OF FIELDWORK RESULTS

3.1 Methodology

Eight hand-dug archaeological test sections were excavated within the enclosed garden at the front of the house. All sub-surface layers and archaeological features were recorded using a continuous three-figure numbering system, by measured drawing (scales 1:20 and 1:10) and by photography.

3.2 Test section 1 (Fig 1)

3.2.1 Location

Positioned against a pillar in the north cloister wall TS1 measured 2m x 1m, and was excavated to a depth of 0.95m.

3.2.2 Archaeological features

The only archaeological feature encountered was the northern edge of a patch of cobbles (050). The edge of the cobbles was 0.75m from, and parallel to, the north cloister wall. The cobbles had been laid into a clay bedding layer (051) forming a surface, which had been subsequently disturbed by root action.

A trace of a narrow trench (055), 0.10m wide, on the east side of the pillar was noted cutting from a level above the cobbles. It is not clear what this trench was for, there are several possibilities, including a construction trench for the pillar, a trench dug to allow repairs to the pillar, a small planting bed or the result of previous investigations in the garden.

3.2.3 Finds

Bedding layer 051 produced 5 sherds of 17th - 18th century North Devon Gravel Tempered Ware, 2 sherds of 19th -20th century pottery, 2 sherds of 18th - 19th century wine bottle and other finds of the 19th - 20th century. Layers above the cobbles produced an assortment of finds ranging from the 17th - 20th century.

3.3 Test Section 2 (Figs. 1 and 2)

3.3.1 Location

Test section 2 was positioned against a pillar of the west wall of the cloistered walk. It measured 2.8m x 2.1m and included the re-excavation of a backfilled trench dug by the stone masons during recent consolidation works in the summer of 1995.

3.3.2 Archaeological features

Part of a cobbled surface (028), similar to that in TS1, extended from the southern end of the section and ending just short of the pillar. The cobbles were bedded in to a layer of clay and covered by a layer of soil and rubble (027). Overlying layer 027 was a thick layer of lime mortar (023), which was in turn overlain by several layers of what seemed to be modern dumping and overburden.

At the north end of TS2 these upper layers had been cut by an east-west stone-built drain (025). Drain 025 was of dry-stone construction consisting of upright stone sides and capped with flat laid stones. It sloped from east to west and probably carried water from the garden, possibly from the fountain (see 3.4.2 below), to the cascade and pond west of the cloistered garden.

Above the cobbles there was a pronounced east - west slope down in the stratigraphy, including a shale/gravel path (020) just beneath the present ground surface, whereas the cobbles and underlying deposits appeared horizontal, probably having been levelled to lay the cobbles.

Despite the disturbance of the stone mason's trench part of what appeared to be the construction trench for the pillar was visible. Unlike the narrow trench in TS1 it was cut from a level below the cobbles, suggesting that the pillar is earlier than the cobbles.

3.3.3 Finds

Context 020 produced a range of finds including: 6 sherds of 17th -18th century pottery, 6 sherds of 19th - 20th century pottery, 12 18th century wine bottle fragments, 4 fragments of North Devon 15th - 16th century ridge tile and 2 fragments of Malvern type 15th - 16th century ridge tile. Layer 027 4 sherds of pottery with a date range of late-17th - 19th century and 24 fragments of 18th century wine bottles.

3.4 Test Section 3 (Figs. 1 and 3)

3.4.1 Location

Positioned at 90 degrees to the north bay window this test section measured 15m x 2m. Following

the examination of the upper archaeological layers the width was reduced to 1m and excavated to the bottom of the archaeological deposits.

3.4.2 Archaeological features

The east end of the section had been badly disturbed by the insertion of a large number of modern service pipes, making that end of little archaeological value. At the west end of the section part of the foundations for a circular fountain were uncovered. The fountain was central in the garden, and would have formed the focal point of the garden layout.

The fountain was a brick and mortar construction some 4m in diameter. A brick platform which formerly supported the central column was uncovered in the centre of the fountain.

Following its disuse the fountain was turned into a raised flower bed by placing large stones around the edge to hide the fountain foundations and covering the whole feature with topsoil.

3.4.3 Finds

The topsoil in this trench contained a wide range of finds including pottery, tile and glass with a date range from the Medieval Period to the 20th century. Other layers contained a similar assemblage of finds including 15th - 16th century North Devon ridge tile, 17th - 18th century North Devon Gravel Tempered Ware, slipwares and Bristol earthenware, 18th century Staffordshire ware and wine bottle of 18th and 19th century date. The majority of finds, however, from all layers comprised 19th - 20th century pottery. A fragment of brick, made by the Pontyclerk Brickworks which was operating between 1878 and the 1930s, was recovered from beneath the fountain, dating the construction of the fountain to sometime after 1878.

3.5 Test Section 4 (Figs. 1, 4 and 5)

3.5.1 Location

In the phase I excavation, Test Section 4 was a right angled area, 5m x 1m, positioned in the extreme southwest corner of the garden and excavated in front of the western most arch in the south wall and the southern most arch in the west wall. The arch in the south wall had been blocked and a small doorway constructed. In phase II, the trench was extended to the west beneath the walkway and to the east alongside the wall. Spur trenches were also dug to the north.

3.5.2 Archaeological features

In phase I, a cobbled surface (069) similar to those in TS1 and TS2 was uncovered. Some larger flat stones had been bedded into the cobbled surface in front of the doorway in the blocking wall which were worn on the surface suggesting that they were threshold slabs, and well used ones. The doorway led into a room in the southwest corner of the cloister which was also accessible from the west walk. It is uncertain what this room was for, although legend has it that it was where poachers were

kept while waiting for their hearings. A much more likely function would have been as a store room.

Overlying the cobbles was a layer of lime mortar (068), similar to 023 in TS2. This was fairly thick and could be associated with the construction or repair of the wall. As in TS2 the mortar was

overlain by several layers of what appears to be modern build up and overburden. A supporting pier had been built on these upper layers to support the arch in the south wall which had started to buckle. This pier can be dated to the Victorian Period.

Phase II excavations revealed that the cobbles stopped on the inner face of the cloister aperture. The cobbles extended east and abutted a terrace wall (079) running north - south, which had been robbed out at a later date leaving just some the foundation footings intact. Wall 079 had been butt jointed against the south wall of the cloistered wall, but the similarity of style of the two walls maybe an indication that they were built contemporaneously. Immediately to the east of this wall the archaeology had been disturbed by a modern sectional waste pipe running north-south which turned westwards towards and into the southern most aperture of the western walkway, cutting the archaeological layers at the interface of wall (079), through the cobbles and the internal floor surfaces within the confinements of the western cloisters. The subsoil level to the east of the waste pipe was some 0.5 - 0.6m higher than the cobbled surface (069). As can be seen on Figure 5, the pier base to the east of the waste pipe rested on the surface of the subsoil. A portion of the cobbles (069) was lifted in order to examine the underlying deposits and obtain dating evidence. No dating evidence from beneath the cobbles was obtained. The cobbles seem to have been laid down shortly after the construction of the walls and were bedded on to a hard layer of mortar mixed with clay.

3.5.3 Finds

Finds from the topsoil in this trench were of 19th - 20th century date. Finds from above the cobbled surface (069) comprised: 17th - 18th century North Devon Gravel Tempered Ware, late-17th - 18th century tin-glazed earthenware, 19th - 20th century assorted pottery sherds, 15th - 16th century Malvern type ridge tile and fragments of 18th century wine bottle. One sherd of 17th - 18th century North Devon Gravel Tempered Ware, a late-17th - early-18th sherd of tin-glazed earthenware and 6 fragments of mid-18th - early-19th century wine bottle were found over the robbed out wall 079. No artefacts were found below the cobbled surface 069.

3.6 Test Section 5 (Fig 1)

3.6.1 Location

Trench 5 was positioned in the north-east of the garden at the junction of the northern stone raised walkway and garden to evaluate the continuity of the archaeological garden layers with the raised walkway. The trench was aligned north-south and measured 4m x 2m. After examination of the higher horizons, the section was reduced to 0.75m on the western edge of the trench and excavated to the subsoil.

3.6.2 Archaeological Features

A gravel pathway, as on the eastern end of TS3, lay close to the surface. Beneath this, deposits comprised two spread or dump layers.

3.6.3 Finds

Finds from the spread or dump layers comprised: 7 sherds of 17th - 18th century North Devon wares, 2 sherds of 17th - 18th century Westerwald Ware, 2 sherds of unsourced 17th - 18th century

wares, 1 sherd of medieval gravel tempered ware, 6 fragments of 18th century wine bottle, 5 fragments of medieval - 16th century floor tile 4 fragments of local medieval ridge tile and 8 fragments of 15th - 16th century Malvern type ridge tile.

3.7 Test Section 6 (Fig 1)

3.7.1 Location

Test section 6 was a 1m box section positioned against the right side pillar of the northern entrance, to evaluate the underlying horizons and determine the depth of the natural subsoil. This trench was excavated to a depth of 1m.

3.7.2 Archaeological Features

A garden path (099), similar to 020 in TS2 sealed an underlying garden soil layer which in turn sealed the construction/repair layer as located in TS2 and TS4. The construction trench for the wall foundation support was cut from a level below the buried garden soil layer and into a layer of mortar and clay. The foundation trench was clearly evident in the west facing section but not as easily defined in the east facing section. The foundations within this section were constructed with unbonded irregular sized stones (106), which in turn had pressed into the subsoil under the weight from the wall.

3.8 Test Section 7 (Fig 1)

3.8.1 Location

Test section 7, was a box section placed on the northwest area of the garden against the west pillar of the northern cloisters and was excavated to a depth of 0.55m.

3.8.2 Archaeological Features

Within this section the northern end of the terrace wall (097) was located. Only the west face was exposed in this trench and did not coincide with the west face of the pillar (078), but was stepped back 0.23m to the east and butt jointed against the western most upright. Due to the nature and the location of this feature in the trench, the depth of subsoil was not observed.

3.8.3 Finds

Two joining fragments of 15th - 16th century North Devon ridge tile were found in a layer overlying the wall 097.

3.9 Test Section 8 (Fig 1)

3.9.1 Location

Test section 8 was a 1m box section located in the south-east area of the garden against the southern wall of the cloistered walk.

3.9.2 Archaeological Features

This section revealed that the cloistered wall has shallow foundations 0.40m in depth, sitting 0.10m above the subsoil on a layer of mortar and clay with no construction trench in either the east or west section. The foundation was constructed using irregular sized stones loosely bonded with a yellowish-white mortar. A semi-circular trench (a shrub planting-hole or a perhaps a post-hole to support scaffolding erected during construction of the wall) was located at the base of this trench cut into the subsoil.

3.9.3 Finds

The finds from within the semi-circular trench comprised: 2 sherds possibly of 'Llanstephan Ware' dating to the 13th - 14th century, 1 late-17th - early-18th century wine bottle fragment, 1 fragment of medieval floor tile and 10 fragments of possibly local medieval ridge tiles.

4.0 SUMMARY OF FINDS

Most of the finds were of 18th, 19th and 20th century date, though artefacts of an older date were present, including numerous fragments of 15th - 16th century floor tile and ridge tile, but in all cases these were residual - they were in contexts that contained more recent finds. Layers containing artefacts of a wide date range are to be expected in gardens attached to houses which have been in occupation for several centuries, such as Aberglasney. The finds from the excavations indicate an occupation history at Aberglasney from at least the late Medieval Period to the 20th century. It was not possible to date when the cloistered wall was built as no artefacts were discovered in layers contemporaneous with its construction.

5.0 CONCLUSIONS

5.1 Introduction

Whilst answering the questions posed at the outset regarding the cloistered walk and the presence of the terrace, the evaluation uncovered evidence of former garden layouts which will be important when the issue of restoration is discussed.

5.2 The Cloistered Walk

A recent topographical survey indicated that there is an overall east-west slope in the landscape; this is reflected by the difference in height between the arches of the west wall and those of the north and south walls. The evidence gathered from the trial sections proved that the garden, including the cloistered walk, was built on sloping ground. The height and angle of this slope approximates to the modern ground surface. No evidence was recovered during the fieldwork to assist in the dating of the cloistered walk. The cloistered walk was the earliest structural evidence recovered on the site - deposits beneath the foundations recorded in some trenches were probably levelling layers and laid down immediately prior to building.

5.3 The Terrace

A terrace retained by a low wall (079) had been designed as an integral part of the garden running north - south across the western end of the garden. This terrace provided an asymmetrical element to the garden and created a cobbled walk 0.5 - 0.6m lower than the height of the garden to the east of the terrace.

5.4 The Cobbled Surfaces

All of the cobbled surfaces uncovered were well-laid and of identical construction, with irregular stones set into a bedding layer. There is little doubt that they are paths, built for solidity and with the yellowish colour of the stones adding a decorative element. The surfaces in TS2 and TS4 are contemporaneous, as their position in the stratigraphic sequence was almost identical with recognisable correlations between layers in both test sections. No absolute dating evidence for their construction was obtained, though it is considered that the cloistered walk, the terrace and the cobbled surface were designed and built at the same time.

The cobbled surface in TS1 is identical in type, although not relatable, at the moment, to the other surfaces because of its isolated position.

5.5 The Fountain

The brick-built fountain was the central feature of the late 19th century and early to mid 20th century garden, and extensive remains survive in good condition. After the fountain fell into a stage of disuse or disrepair, it was utilised as central garden feature in the form of a raised flower bed by incorporating large stones around the exterior of the base, the removal of the central column and covering the central aperture with soil. Even as a raised flower bed it would have remained the focal point of the garden.

5.6 Other Garden Features

In addition to the fountain, many other elements of 19th and 20th century gardening activity were encountered and recorded in the test sections. These elements are ephemeral and difficult to characterise in the small-scale excavations, nevertheless, they represent important evidence for the history of Aberglasney garden.

APPENDIX ONE: CATALOGUE OF THE EVALUATION ARCHIVE

The archive has been catalogued according to National Monument Record (NMR) categories and contains the following:

A Copy of the report

B Records made during fieldwork, including context record sheets and site notebook.

C Drawing catalogue and site drawings.

D Site photographs - catalogue, colour transparencies, colour prints and negatives, monochrome negatives and contact sheets.

E Finds catalogue, individual finds records and finds reports.

I Drafts of the final report.

J Report drawings.

M Miscellaneous correspondence.

N General miscellaneous.

There is no material in categories F, G, H, K and L.

The archive is currently held by Dyfed Archaeological Trust.

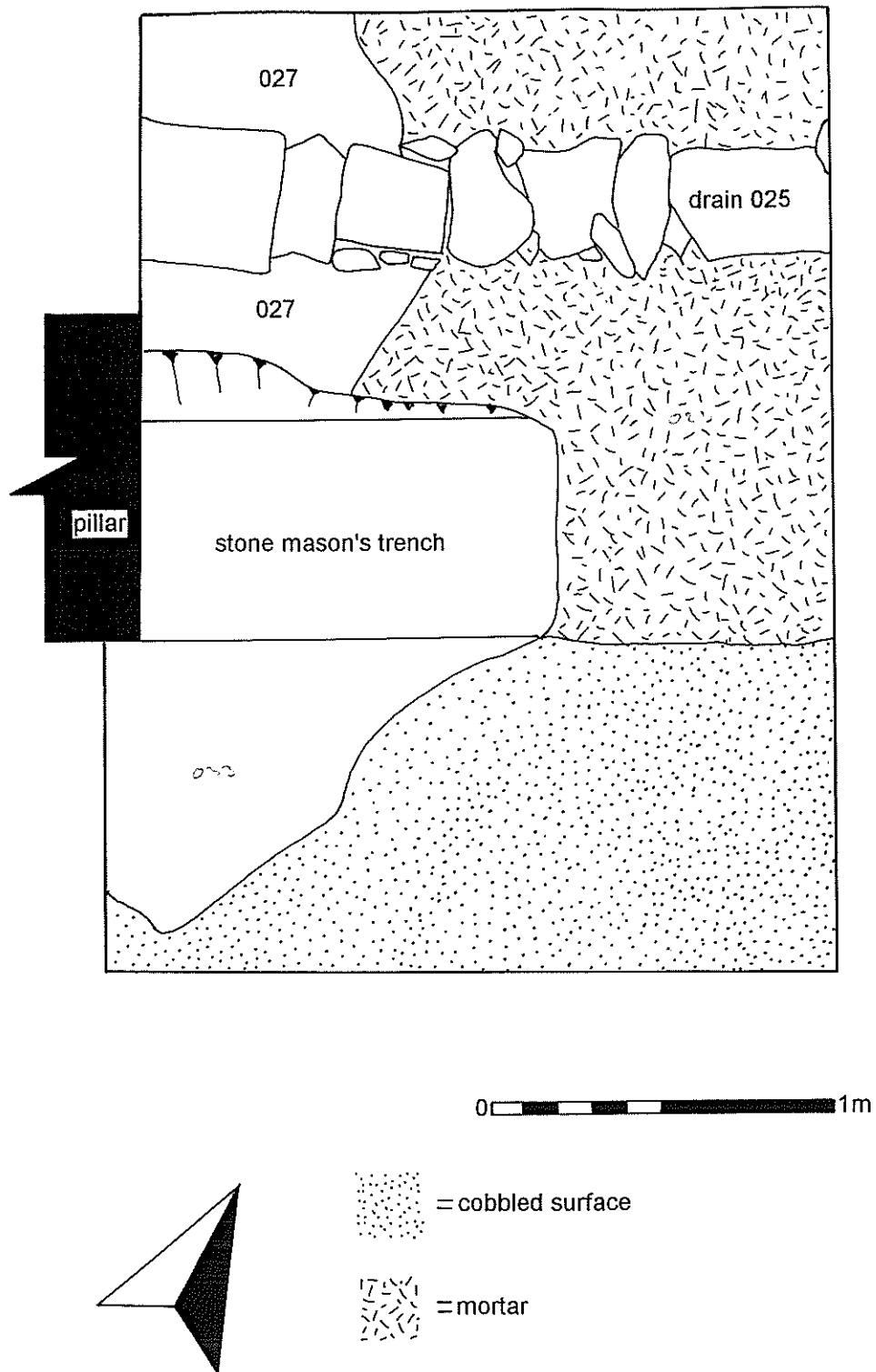
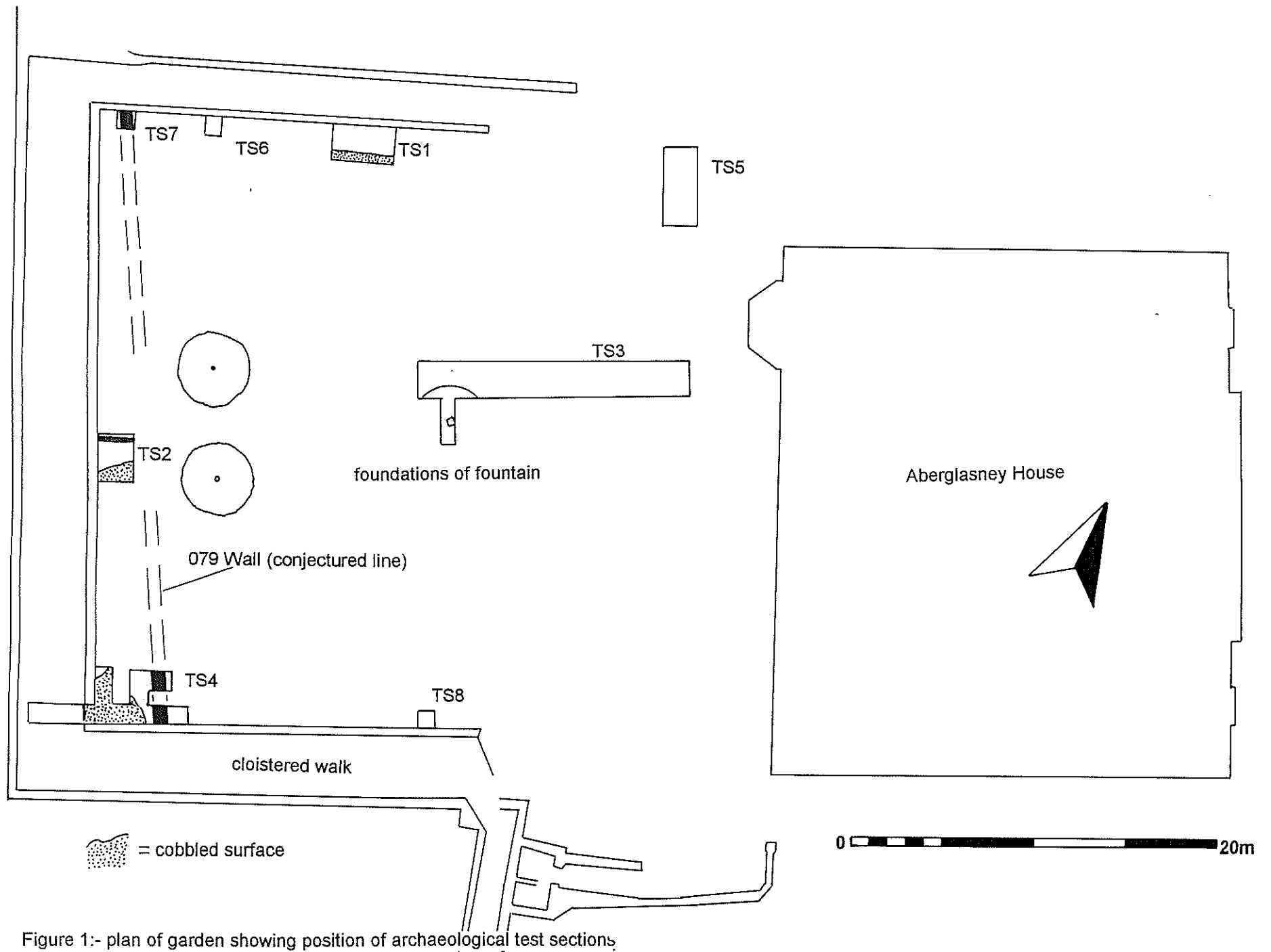


Figure 2:- TS2 showing archaeological features



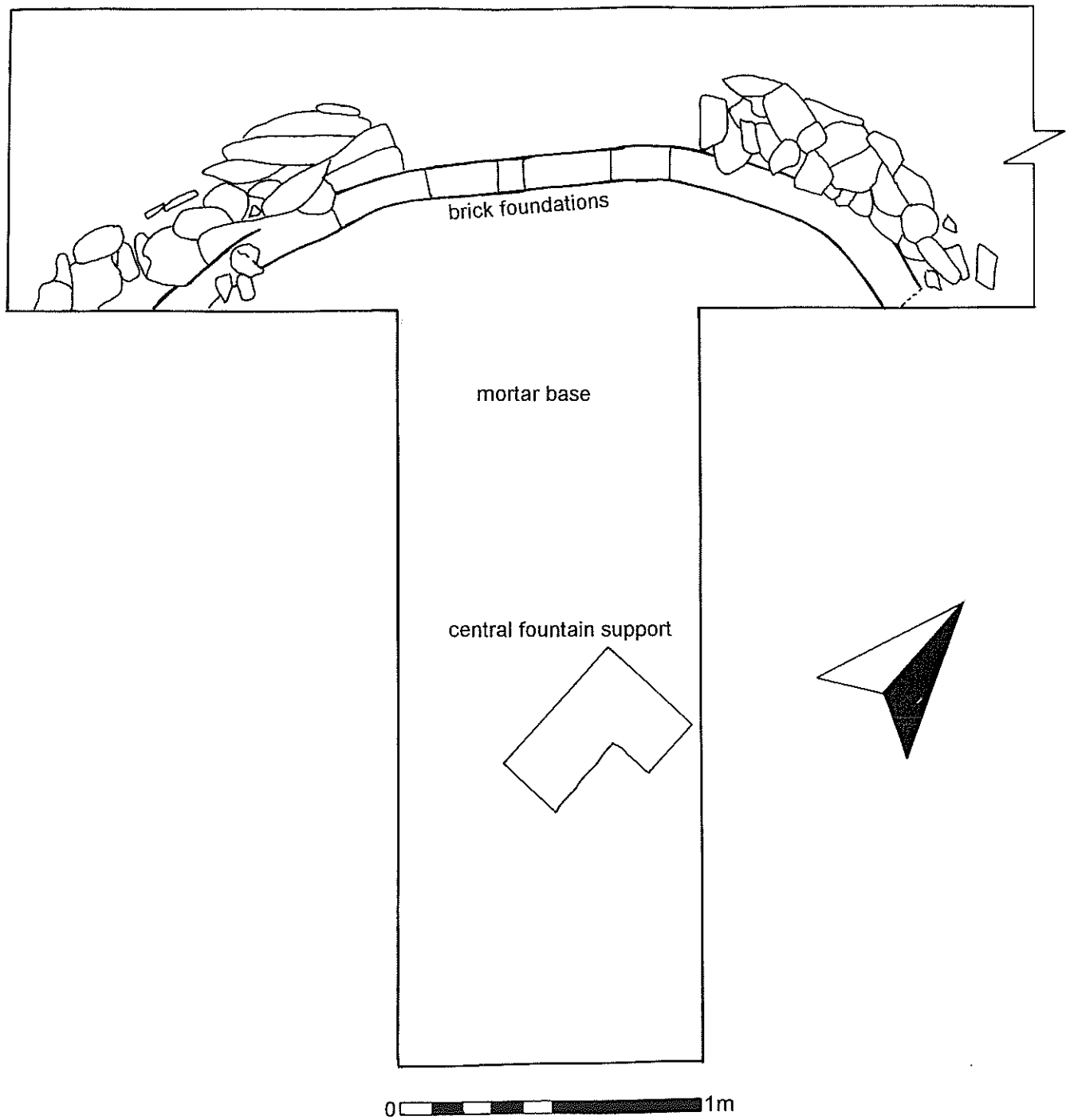


Figure 3:- TS3 showing archaeological features

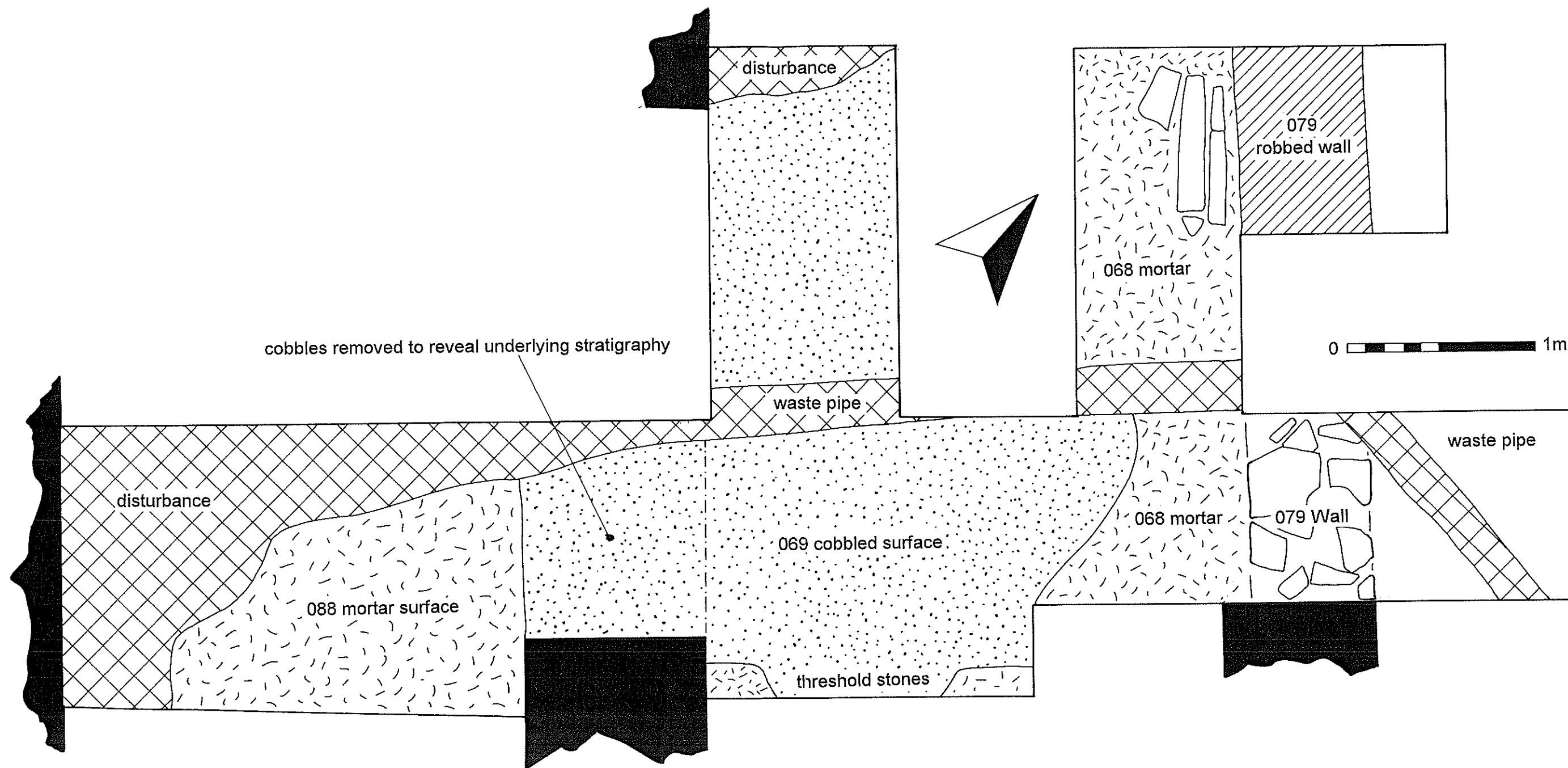


Figure 4 TS4 showing archaeological feature

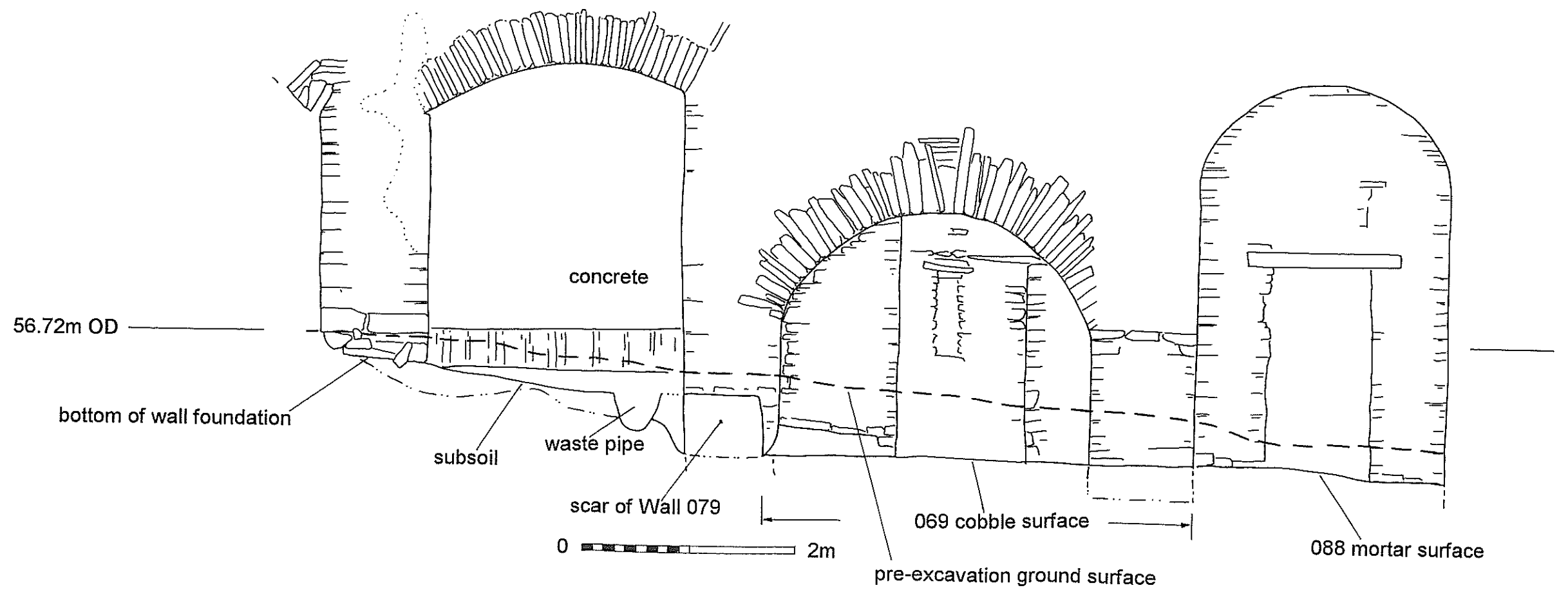
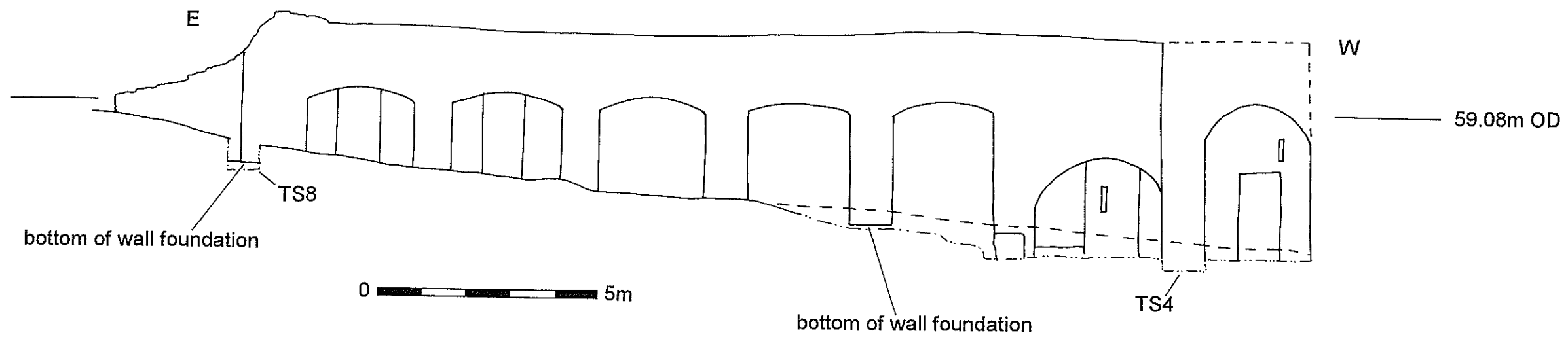


Figure 5 TS4 showing location and detail of section