

## Stone Undercrofts at Mary Street, Limerick

TRACY COLLINS

*ÆGIS Archaeology Ltd, 16 Avondale Court, Corbally, Limerick*

In 2000 a limited archaeological excavation was undertaken at 48-50 Mary Street in advance of development. This is one of the oldest parts of the city and the excavation yielded occupation evidence from the thirteenth century onwards, though much was in a disturbed state (Collins 2002). During that excavation and subsequent further investigation in 2002, the remains of two and possibly three stone undercrofts (a vaulted room, sometimes underground, below an upper room - generally used as an alternative term for cellar), were also discovered. Although difficult to date structurally, it is possible that they were built sometime in the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries.

### Introduction

The site is situated at 48-50 Mary Street, on King's Island. This was the original medieval High Street of the city's Englishtown, which ran from King John's Castle in the north to Baal's Bridge in the south. The site is bounded by Mary Street to the west, the northern relief road to the east, to the north by an unnamed lane, and to the south by Fish Lane. The *Civil Survey* notes buildings on the site in the seventeenth century (Simington 1938) and it had been occupied within living memory. The initial archaeological excavation has been detailed elsewhere (Collins 2002, 69-87). This investigation was undertaken on behalf of and funded by Limerick City Council, in advance of development.

### Excavation of the Undercrofts

During the initial excavation 2 trenches (A and B) were excavated by hand [under archaeological licence 00E0635] (Collins 2002, fig.1, 70), which investigated the northern and eastern portions of the site. An east-west limestone mortared wall was discovered in trench A and several associated walls also revealed. These walls were interpreted as being undercroft or cellar walls, relating to earlier structures that once stood on the site (Collins 2002).

After discussions with the client and the National Monuments Section (formerly *Dúchas*), it was agreed that these walls would be revealed in plan and recorded. Their elevations would also be exposed to a height of about one metre, so that they could be examined for corbels or springing stones (which would have supported the floor above). Several other trenches were opened across the site, by machine (trenches C-H) to investigate if any medieval archaeological layers remained (as had been the case in trenches A and B) and if further undercrofts were present on the site. This further archaeological work was carried out in August 2002. It was quickly discovered that the remainder of the site contained further walls. In order not to damage these undercroft remains, they were cleared of overburden by hand and *tentatively* by machine in order to reveal them fully in plan. Several trenches were then dug by machine between the undercroft walls to ascertain if there were any archaeological deposits remaining (Fig. 1; Table 1).

**Trench C** was dug to a depth of 2.6m. It did not contain any archaeological stratigraphy. It was filled with mixed garden soil material and rubble, which rested on the natural boulder clay parent material.



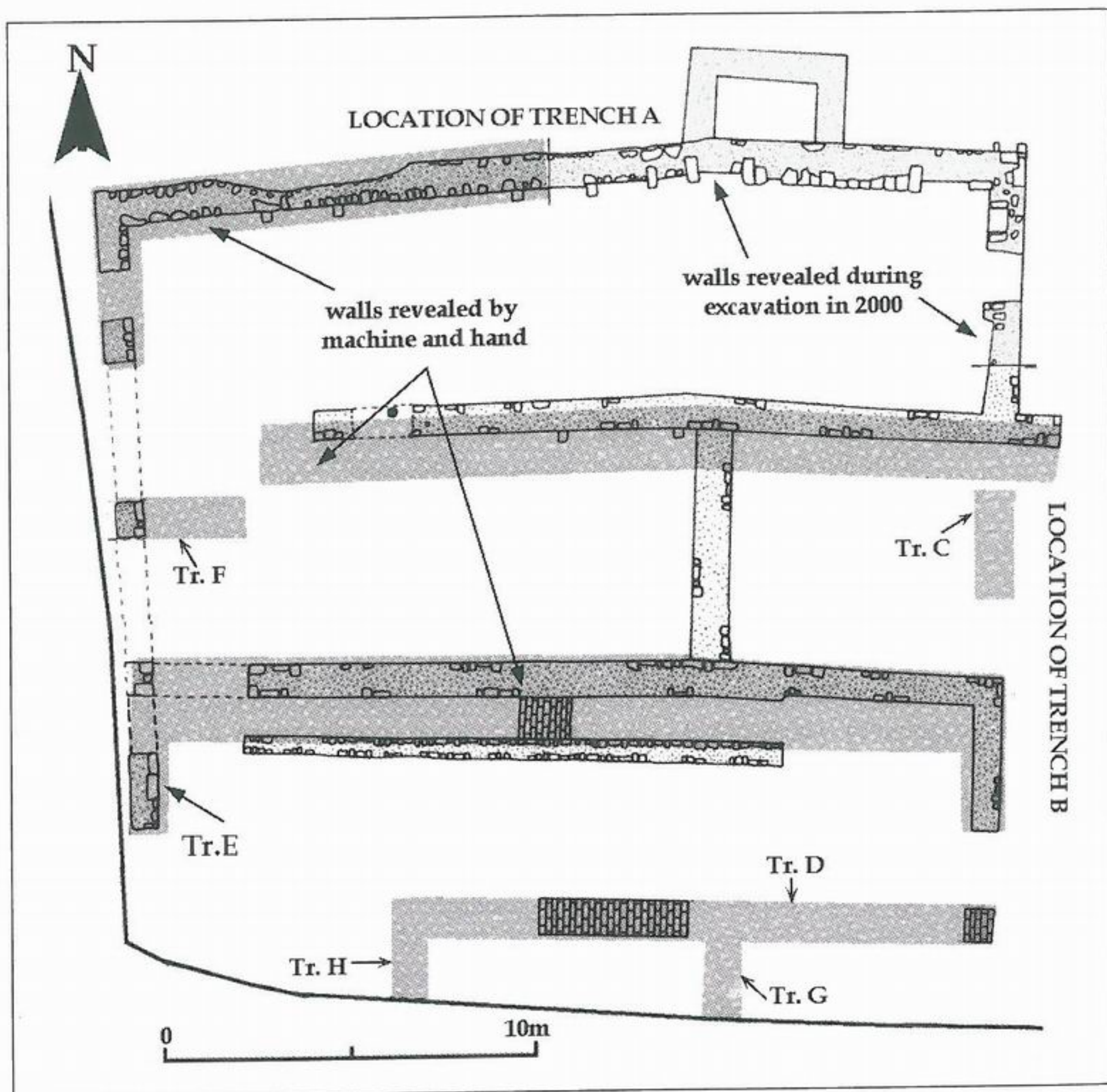


Fig. 1 Layout of trenches on site

Trench	Orientation	Length (in metres)	Width (in metres)
A	East-West	15	4 (dug 2000)
B	North-South	30	4 (dug 2000)
C	North-South	3	1
D	East-West	16	1
E	North-South	2.5	1
F	East-West	3.5	1
G	North-South	2	1
H	North-South	2	1

Table 1: Dimensions of trenches dug



No artefacts were retrieved from this trench. It appears from the earlier maps of the site that this part of the site was not enclosed in an undercroft, but was always an open garden area.

**Trench D** was filled entirely with rubble, with large quantities of red brick and mortar. Many of these bricks were mortared together and even though they were *ex situ* it could be seen that they once formed brick vaulting, perhaps for cellars of structures that once stood on the site, for instance "Dutch Billy" type houses that are known to have stood on parts of Mary Street (O'Shaughnessy n.d., 25). The rubble and debris rested on the natural boulder clay, which was about 2m below the ground surface.

**Trench E** was excavated at the gateway to the site, adjacent to the Mary Street frontage. A wall was encountered in this trench, c.0.10m below the surface. This was interpreted as being part of an undercroft structure, albeit in a disturbed state. No stratigraphy or finds were found in the trench.

**Trench F** was dug to investigate if there were any archaeological deposits remaining at this location on the site. It was also dug to ascertain if the western limit of a second undercroft was present. The trench revealed that there were no archaeological layers left at this location. Neither was the east-west wall of the undercroft present and it appeared to have been completely removed at some stage in the past. At the west end of the Trench F, a north-south wall was discovered. This was interpreted as part of the second undercroft on the site.

**Trench G** was dug in order to investigate if there was an undercroft wall present on the southern boundary of the site. The entire trench was filled with loose rubble and no *in situ* wall was discovered.

**Trench H** too was dug to ascertain if there was an undercroft wall on the southern boundary of the site. Again this trench was rubble filled and did not contain any remains of a wall.

The portion of the site that was not investigated by hand during the 2000 excavations was revealed during this investigation (2002) to have contained 2 and possibly 3 undercrofts (or stone cellars, fig. 2). All the undercroft remains found were constructed of roughly coursed limestone rubble with a thick gritty mortar. All walls were faced with a rubble and mortar core. Where red brick had been used, it was clear that it was a later addition to the original structure. All the walls were of similar thickness being c.0.90m in width throughout the site.

### **Undercroft 1 (fig. 2)**

This feature was partially revealed during the 2000 excavations (Collins 2002). The remainder of this feature was revealed in plan in order to record its full extent during these investigations. The undercroft was 23m long (west-east) and 6m wide (north-south). Its limestone rubble walls rested on a foundation plinth of larger slabs, which were only visible on the northern face of wall 1 (fig. 3). This undercroft could be accessed from the rear (east end) via a series of steps placed centrally in its east wall made of red brick and limestone flags (plate 1). Immediately to the north of the entrance was a rectangular splayed alcove, presumably for storage. To the south of the steps was a pillar and rebate the precise function of which was unclear. The floor of the cellar appeared to have been of red brick of which there were some remnants in the north-east and south-east corners of the structure. It also appeared that the cellar could be accessed from Mary Street and a gap was found in its west wall, which was interpreted as an entranceway. No steps were identified however.

It seemed from the structural evidence that the ceiling to the undercroft was held by large curved limestone springing-stones and series of corbels (labelled C1-C5 on fig. 2). Several of these survived on the interior of the north wall, with only one extant on the south. The springing-stones were on average 0.50m in length and width, and were punch-dressed. They were held in place by a gritty white mortar. There was also a limestone drainage gully built into the row of springing stones, which appeared to flow into the undercroft itself. This was removed as it was very loose and did not seem to



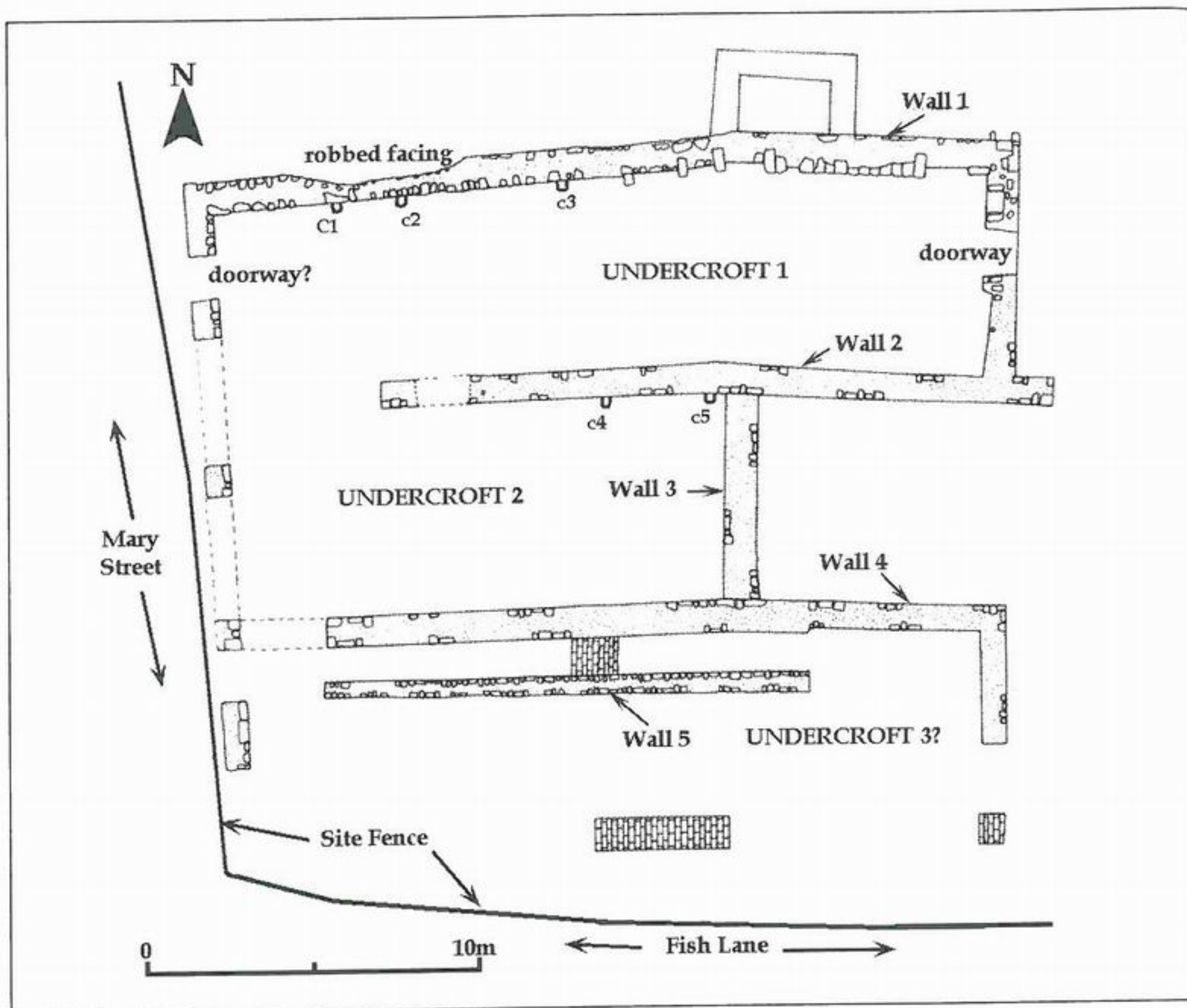


Fig. 2 Plan of undercrofts

be *in situ*.

Thus, this undercroft showed two different methods of roof support, both present on the inner face of its northern wall (wall 1). The eastern end showed that the roof would have been supported by shaped springing-stones, while the western end of the wall showed that at this point the roof was held by a series of large corbels. The corbels probably functioned by holding a long timber beam, parallel to wall 1 which in turn held the roof of the undercroft (or the floor above).

From these two construction techniques, it can be postulated that the western end of the undercroft, that is, the end closest to Mary Street, was roofed by the timber floor above which was supported by corbels. The rear (eastern end) of the undercroft may have been vaulted in stone. The reason for this difference in construction technique may be that the two areas had different functions. Perhaps, (although there is no strong evidence for this at Mary Street), the rear of the undercroft may have been used as a cold store, which would have functioned much better if it was made entirely of stone.

This undercroft had two yellow brick vaulted niches at the east end of its southern wall. These were in a poor state of repair and collapsed immediately after exposure. The supporting arches rested on pillars of yellow brick. The undercroft also had evidence of red brick arches resting on a central dressed limestone pillar, which seemed to form an internal north-south division in the undercroft. These arches were not tied into the main undercroft walls, but abutted them. This would indicate that



the redbrick arches were inserted later than the limestone walls on which they rested (although how much later could not be ascertained). These were also in a poor state of repair and collapsed after exposure.

The northern wall of undercroft 1 (fig. 2 wall 1) was slightly skewed and was not perpendicular to Mary Street. The reason for this skewing could not be established during the investigations. The fact that some of the outer facing of wall 1 had been removed and that the wall was constructed in two pieces (a western and eastern portion), both abutting and incorporating an earlier north-south wall further confused the interpretation of this skew.

At the external northeast corner of wall 1 two corbels projected from its corner. The function of these corbels remains unclear, and remains without parallel at the time of writing, though it is possible that they supported the superstructure of the building, which once stood over the undercroft, perhaps by a timber beam or suchlike.

Wall 2 did not have corbels or springing stones noted on its inner (northern) face. However, it is likely that they had been removed over the years and were once present, opposite the corbels and springing stones, which were *in situ* in wall 1.

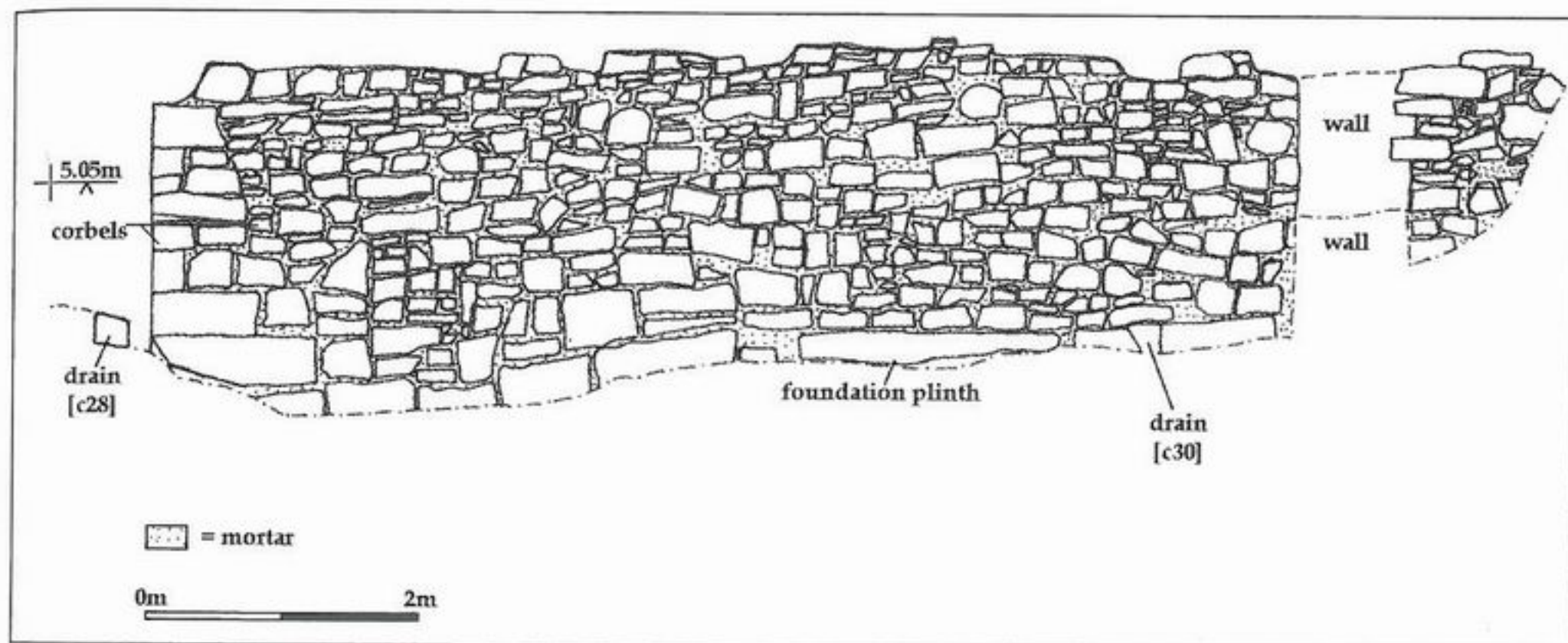


Fig. 3: North facing external elevation of undercroft 1, wall 1

## Undercroft 2

When wall 2 had been revealed it became obvious that the remains of another undercroft was present, due to the discovery of two corbels on the southern face of the wall. Its western end had been mostly destroyed by later activity, though some of its Mary Street frontage wall was present, albeit in a disturbed state.

This undercroft was smaller than undercroft 1. Though its north and south walls (walls 2 and 4 respectively) were as long as undercroft 1 (almost 24m in length), it appeared that the undercroft 2 was only about 14m in length from west to east. It was 6m in width. Its eastern wall (wall 3) was the same construction as the other walls, roughly coursed rubble limestone, though it was rendered in a thick plaster, much of which was still *in situ*. It could be seen from the walls that wall 3 clearly abutted wall 2 and was not built into its fabric. Therefore it could be said that wall 2 was earlier than wall 3, but the actual timeframe of construction cannot be ascertained from the evidence.

From earlier ordnance survey six-inch maps of the site (dates c.1840 and c.1870), it can be noted that the eastern end of undercroft 2 appeared as an open plot. The southern face of the east end of wall





**Plate 1 Undercroft 1, niche and access steps from west (note springing-stone to left)**

2 confirmed this fact, as it was very weathered and had several large ivy roots penetrating it, indicating that this wall face had been exposed for several years in the past.

The southern wall of undercroft 2 (wall 4) on its inner face had no supporting features evident. However, it is possible that they have been removed due to modern activity. During the trenching it was noted that for the entire length of wall 4 on its northern side, it was abutted by a large modern concrete slab, which was used as a foundation for later structures on the site, which may have destroyed any original supporting features.

### **Undercroft 3**

It is tentatively suggested that there was a third undercroft on this site due to the fact that wall 4 had a return at its eastern end. Having said this, it was the only wall to have had red brick built into its fabric, rather than having it added at a later date. This would imply that the wall 4 return (north-south wall at its eastern end) might in fact be a later addition to undercrofts 1 and 2. It was also noted that there was some re-building and blocking at the eastern end of wall 4. This undercroft also measured almost 24m in length.

Unfortunately, the remaining southern wall of the undercroft seemed to have been completely removed by later activity (trench H and G examined if a southern wall to this undercroft remained, and it did not), if it was present at all. There was a small remnant of a wall at the western end of this undercroft, which was of similar construction to the other western walls. This was then interpreted as the western or street frontage wall of undercroft 3.

Nothing remained of the rest of undercroft 3. It appeared that later red brick structures obliterated it. From what remained, it could be ascertained that a wall was inserted, which ran parallel to the



southern face of wall 4. This wall (wall 5) was rendered in thick plaster, had red brick in its fabric and was about 0.50m in thickness. It formed a narrow west-east passage, almost 1m in width. Midway along this passage, several red bricks were noted on edge mortared into the passageway walls. This was interpreted as a red brick vault which would have roofed the passageway. More red brick vaulting material was found in this area, particularly in trench D. None of these brick vaults were *in situ*, but their presence indicates that at some stage in the past this part of the site was filled with a red brick vaulted passage or narrow cellar. It is possible that a "Dutch Billy Type" structure may have once stood on the site (O'Shaughnessy n.d. 25; Hill 1991, 62- 5) and that the *ex situ* red brick arches may relate to such a structure.

## Discussion

During the investigations at the site 48-50 Mary Street, three undercrofts were recorded. Undercrofts of this type are unusual when *in situ*, in the archaeological record of the City. However, a similar arrangement of springing stones to the rear of a cellar structure, with corbels to the front, was identified in an investigation carried out by AEGIS on a site at the junction of Peter St and Nicholas Street (Cummins 2002, 196). Excavations carried out by Hodkinson to the south of King John's castle revealed a large two-phased undercroft. Similar in dimension to those at Mary Street, it measured 22m long and 7m wide. On the basis of wickerwork centring in some of the arches of the vault of the second phase the excavator suggested a date sometime in the later medieval period, with the earlier phase of the structure dating to the thirteenth to fourteenth centuries, based on ceramic evidence (Hodkinson 1990, 37).

Undercrofts are features of medieval and post-medieval urban settings and would have functioned as cellars, for storage or perhaps as workshops. The closest parallels for the examples at Mary Street were excavated during the excavations at Waterford (Scully 1997, 176-89). In all, three stone undercrofts were found at Waterford; the first (PSS1), was dated to the thirteenth century, the second (PSS2) was dated to the fifteenth century with the third (PSS3) also dating to the fifteenth century. All the undercrofts had two phases. The internal dimensions of the undercrofts at Waterford were on average larger than those found during this investigation. They had similar features to those in Limerick such as alcoves (niches) and steps for access. PSS1 also had a garderobe chute, a feature lacking from the Limerick examples. However, it appeared that all the undercrofts were used as cesspits at sometime in Waterford, though there was no evidence for this at Mary Street.

Most excavated or extant undercrofts tend to date from the period thirteenth to fifteenth centuries. There are excellent examples in Britain such as Winchelsea, Chester and Southampton (Faulkner 1966, 120; 1975). Undercrofts can be vaulted with a barrel vault with or without ribs, or can be groin-vaulted (*ibid*). However, '... an unvaulted undercroft without any architectural features in its side walls is almost undatable...' (Faulkner 1966, 120). The undercrofts found on this excavation seem to be such examples.

Vaulted undercrofts would have provided additional accommodation in a building in restricted areas such as the centre of a town or may have provided a fireproof area for storage. The use of brick in the examples at Mary Street would seem to indicate that these examples are later than those found at Waterford, and perhaps date to sometime in the sixteenth to seventeenth centuries. This date is also postulated as they lack the internal archaeological remains of those found at Waterford and also do not show evidence of early features such as garderobe chutes.

## Conclusion

The identification of these stone undercrofts at Mary Street serves to highlight the fact that there must



have been substantial stone buildings on Mary Street in the late medieval or post-medieval periods. It also seems from the cartographic and *Civil Survey* (Simington 1938) evidence that they maintained the long narrow burgage plot pattern of the medieval Englishtown (O'Rahilly 1995).

This site was archaeologically investigated in advance of a proposed development. It has been agreed that the undercroft walls will remain *in situ* and be protected under the new development, with a portion of them being exposed and incorporated as part of the new structure.

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