

# CHETHAM'S SCHOOL OF MUSIC, LONG MILLGATE, MANCHESTER



## Archaeological Watching Brief (Fox Court Wellhead)

Matrix Archaeology

January 2026

CHETHAM'S SCHOOL OF MUSIC,  
LONG MILLGATE,  
MANCHESTER

Archaeological Watching Brief  
(Fox Court Wellhead)

Report No. 2025-04  
(MA 882)

Client: Chetham's School of Music

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## **REPORT CONTENTS**

Summary

1. Introduction
2. Site Location and Geology
3. Historical Background
4. Previous Archaeological Work
5. Watching Brief
6. Interpretation

Appendix – Contents of Digital Archive

Sources and Bibliography

Figures

Plates

## **SUMMARY**

A watching brief was undertaken during dismantling for reconstruction of the sandstone wellhead within the Fox Court at the School of Music. The work revealed that the wellhead was in fact an access shaft into a late C19 water collecting gallery.

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 An archaeological watching brief at Chetham's School of Music, Manchester city centre, was undertaken by Matrix Archaeology Ltd. The work related to a proposal to reconstruct the wellhead within the Fox Court. The School of Music (and the adjacent Library) is Listed Grade I, and was built in about 1420, as a College of Priests. It is also located within the Manchester Cathedral Conservation Area (NGR SJ 839989) (**Figure 1**).
- 1.2 The well head was comprised of carved sandstone blocks, and is believed to have been reused from a rebuilt chimney top. Its condition has deteriorated significantly, and it is proposed to dismantle it, then to rebuild it, using stainless steel tie-rods and lime mortar bonding. An adjacent drain will also be repaired at the same time, and this work will fall within the scope of the watching brief.

Listed building consent (LBC) for restoration works has been granted by Manchester City Council, following an application by Senior Architect Steve Kendall of Buttress Architects. Condition No.3 of the Consent relates to an archaeological watching brief, applied by GMAAS:

*“No development works shall take place until the applicant or their agents or their successors in title has secured the implementation of a programme of archaeological works in accordance with a Written Scheme of Investigation (WSI) which has been submitted to and approved in writing by the local planning authority. The WSI shall cover the following:*

- 1. A phased programme and methodology of investigation and recording to include:- archaeological watching brief.*
- 2. A programme for post-investigation assessment to include:- production of a final report on the results of the investigations and their significance.*
- 3. Deposition of the final report with the Greater Manchester Historic Environment Record.*
- 4. Dissemination of the results of the archaeological investigations commensurate with their significance.*
- 5. Provision for archive deposition of the report and records of the site investigation.*
- 6. Nomination of a competent person or persons/organisation to undertake the works set out within the approved WSI.*

*Reason: To record and advance understanding of heritage assets impacted on by the development and to make information about the heritage interest publicly accessible pursuant to policy EN3 of the Manchester Core Strategy (2012) and in accordance with NPPF policy 16, paragraph 205”.*

- 1.3 The watching brief was commissioned by Steve Kendall of Buttress Architects, on behalf of the School of Music, and was undertaken on two site visits 18 July 2025, and 13 January 2026. The Fox Court was within the heart of the impressive late medieval (circa 1421) College buildings which were attached to the nearby parish church (now Manchester Cathedral). Located

within the core of the medieval town of Manchester, the College site is strongly suspected as being that of both the medieval castle and later manor house of Manchester. Although the site is not a Scheduled Monument, the late medieval College buildings were Listed Grade I.

- 1.4 A number of previous archaeological interventions and assessments have been undertaken within and around the site, by Matrix Archaeology Ltd.

**1.5 Acknowledgements**

The watching brief and reporting were undertaken by Steven Price and Mark Fletcher. Mike Armstrong of the School of Music; and the staff of Bullen Conservation Ltd are to be thanked for access and co-operation during the work.

**1.6 Disclaimer and limitations**

Please note that the contents of this report are intended exclusively to promote the historical and archaeological understanding of the site. They must not be used for any other purpose without the written consent of Matrix Archaeology. Matrix Archaeology accepts no responsibility for any use, whole or partial, of this report without such written authority.

## 2. SITE LOCATION AND GEOLOGY

- 2.1 The site was located between Manchester Cathedral and Victoria Station, within the northernmost part of Manchester city centre (**Figure 1**). Late post-medieval development had obscured the original topographic setting of the site. The buildings were originally located upon a distinct promontory, at *circa* 33m O.D., with the river Irwell to the west and the river Irk to the north. The Irwell is now confined between high embankment walls, and the Irk has been culverted. Furthermore, physical infilling adjacent to the river courses, and construction of large buildings around the area, has ensured that the Chethams site is no longer recognisable for its original defensive potential.
- 2.2 The solid geology below the study area comprised the Bunter Sandstone of the Permo-Triassic period (*Geological Survey of Great Britain*, Sheet 85, Solid Edition, 1975). Outcrops of this rock-head within the study area can be clearly seen, forming the promontory flanks, to the north and west of the late medieval college buildings, and also at the junction of the Irwell and Irk, to the north-west, and below Victoria Station Approach, just to the east of the site. The 2006 borehole No. 1, located within the car park to the north of Walker's Croft, encountered rock-head at about 24m O.D., which suggested that the northern flank of the Irk valley was much more gentle than the southern edge. The 1973 borehole No.2 (Morris, 1983, 45, 47) demonstrated rock-head at a depth of 8.5m (about 20m O.D.), which would be equivalent to the bed of the river Irk.
- 2.3 Other borehole evidence from 1973 (Morris, 1983) would suggest that the depth to the rock-head increases rapidly to the south and east of the college site, with thick overlying superficial deposits. This local variation is produced by the location of the pre-glacial channel of the Irk being located *circa* 300m to the east of the college site, and extending beneath Manchester city centre from north-east to south-west. The sandstone bluff at Chetham's is therefore defined on the east by a sub-drift surface falling away in that direction (Tonks *et al*, 1931, 176).
- 2.4 The drift geology underlying the study area comprised late-glacial flood gravels in the Irwell valley to the west, which were located at a height of 4.6m to 6.10m above modern alluvial levels (Tonks *et al*, 1931, 185). Morris (1983, 47) suggested that these deposits extended across the whole of the Chetham's site, but this seems unlikely because of the height of the promontory above river level, and it is more probable that they were confined to the valley floor. To the east and north of the School site, englacial boulder clays obscured the rock-head, apart from the base of the Irk valley, where Bunter Sandstone was exposed, having been scoured by the river (*Geological Survey of Great Britain*, Sheet 85, Drift Edition, 1970).

### 3. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

#### 3.1 For the purposes of this report, the periods discussed are as follows:

|                       |                   |
|-----------------------|-------------------|
| Prehistoric           | Pre. AD 43        |
| Roman/Romano-British: | AD 43 - AD 450    |
| Early Medieval:       | AD 450 - AD 1066  |
| Medieval:             | AD 1066 - AD 1540 |
| Early Post Medieval:  | AD 1540 - AD 1750 |
| Late Post Medieval:   | AD 1750 - present |

#### 3.2 Prehistoric/Roman periods

There is evidence for both late prehistoric and Roman activity in the area of Chetham's College, assuming that accounts produced by Roeder and other antiquaries are authentic. Roeder (1906) relates how a significant number of Roman coins, of different periods, were retrieved from the bed of the Irk between Ducie Bridge and Scotland Bridge, during 1899-1901, when the Lancashire & Yorkshire Railway Company were undertaking excavations in this area. He also related how a bronze dagger and a 'flat celt' (bronze axe?) were recovered from Hanging Ditch in 1880. Both of these items were presumably of Bronze Age date.

#### 3.3 Early medieval period

The medieval centre of Manchester is traditionally believed to have been around the parish church and the college site, within the interfluvium between the Irwell and the Irk. The church of St Mary was first mentioned in the Domesday survey of 1086, and could be assumed to have existed before the Conquest of 1066. In 919, the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle stated that:

*"In this year after Autumn King Edward went with the army to Thelwall and ordered the borough to be built, occupied and manned; and while he stayed there he ordered another army, also from the people of Mercia, to occupy Manchester in Northumbria, and repair and man it."*

Edward was then at war with the Danish Vikings, and it is assumed that a 'burh', or defended settlement, was located at Manchester, and this had been damaged or destroyed by the Danes. One possibility was that the Roman fort at Castlefield was still in use as a settlement, although claims of Saxon *grubenhauser* being located at this site (Bryant, 1986, 143) seem somewhat implausible on the basis of lack of any finds evidence. The much more obvious burh location was the College site, as the core of the later medieval town. In 1850, a late sixth century urn was found at Red Bank, to the north of

the College, which clearly hinted at pre-Conquest settlement in the close vicinity (Morris, 1983, 7).

### **3.4 Late medieval period**

The only evidence related to a medieval castle at Manchester is derived from documentary sources. In 1184 Nigel and Robert de Burun spent 30s on repairs to the castle. The castle was in their custody because on the death of Albert de Gresle in *circa* 1181, his lands passed to his son, Robert, who was a minor. Albert was a powerful man, with extensive estates across Lancashire, and Manchester seems to have been his main residence. When Robert de Gresle came of age, he took back possession of his estates, and was among the barons who, in 1215, forced King John to sign the *Magna Carta*, for which he was excommunicated, and his estates seized, including the castle at Manchester. Adam de Yelland, a sub-tenant of de Gresle, was placed in charge of the castle, although Robert later recovered the castle (Morris, 1983, 36).

There were no further mentions of any castle at Manchester, but in 1267 a 'Baron's Hall' or 'Manor House' was first mentioned. Surveys in 1282, 1320, and 1322 refer to the Manor House, with two acres of grounds. There was also a stable and dog kennel adjacent to a plot of pasture land, which stretched down to the confluence of the Irwell and Irk (Morris, 1983, 39).

The 1320 survey made reference to an oven, a corn mill, and a fulling mill, which were typical features of any medieval manorial infrastructure. The corn mill, with its stifling monopoly, was worth £17 6s 8d. In 1515 the mills were transferred to the Manchester Grammar School (Morris, 1983, 39), thereafter providing a substantial element of the School's income.

In 1421 the college of priests was founded by Thomas la Warre, lord of the manor and rector of Manchester, on the site of the 'Baron's Hall', at a cost of about £3,000. The surviving buildings of the college, now used as Chetham's Library and accommodation for the School of Music, have been described by Anthony Emery as 'the most complete late medieval residential complex to survive in the north-west'. The history and development of the late medieval buildings has been recently presented in detail (Hartwell, 2004).

### **3.5 Early post-medieval period**

In 1515, the Manchester Grammar School was founded by Hugh Oldham, the building being erected on a plot of land located to the east of the College buildings (AHP Ltd, 2006). Following the Reformation of the late 1530s, the college was dissolved in 1547, and the buildings were acquired by the Stanley family, earls of Derby, in 1557. They were used as a town house for the family until the Civil War, when the Royalist 7th Earl was ejected from the town by Parliamentary supporters, triggering the first armed action of that conflict. The earl conducted a short, unsuccessful siege of the town, which was gallantly defended by Colonel John Rosworm, a professional mercenary. The College buildings were utilised during the siege, and apparently suffered some damage as a consequence (Hartwell, 2004, 54).

Following the first Civil War, the merchant Humphrey Chetham attempted to purchase the property from the 7th Earl, by then in exile on the Isle of Man. The Earl would not respond, and it was not until 1665, long after the Earl was executed and Chetham had died, that Chetham's executors managed to obtain the buildings, and fulfil Chetham's desire to create a chained library and a school for poor boys.

## **4. PREVIOUS ARCHAEOLOGICAL WORKS**

- 4.1 A significant number of archaeological projects have been undertaken within the site precinct and peripheral areas. Two of these occurred in close proximity to the Fox Court.
- 4.2 During January 2018, a new fence was erected around the periphery of the Fish Court, immediately to the west of the late medieval Library building. No deposits or features of significance were revealed, which suggested that this area had been heavily disturbed by relatively recent gardening activity (Matrix Archaeology 2018).
- 4.3 During August 2014, a watching brief was undertaken during the excavation of an electricity service trench, 0.75m deep, which was extended from outside the Gatehouse at the north-east corner of the site; to link into both the Vallins Building, and the Library, in the west part of the site (Matrix Archaeology, 2014b). No features or deposits of archaeological significance were recorded, and most of the encountered deposits were of glacial or post-glacial sands and gravels.
- 4.4 Apart from these projects, in 1992, a disused well was uncovered just to the north of the Gatehouse, during groundworks for resurfacing. A staff member of the Greater Manchester Archaeological Unit attended, but the relevant records in the HER comprised only a few photographs, with no detail regarding the exact location of the well, or construction, or backfill content.

## 5. WATCHING BRIEF

### 5.1 General (Figure 2; Plates 1 – 5)

The Fox Court was located within the western part of the late medieval building, and comprised the open space (or garth) around which the south, west and north lodgings were arranged, with the great hall being on the east side. The cloister walk, now enclosed, facilitated both access to individual ground floor rooms, which originally houses the college priests, and daylight from the cloister garth.

The garth was surfaced primarily by river washed cobbles, at a height of c.33.75m AOD, and had a slight fall towards the north, which was probably intended for surface drainage. Within the north-east corner of the garth was an irregular area of gritstone setts, with a double line of the same extending through to the south wall. Against the east wall, on the south side, was a narrow area of irregular flagstones. These variations from the original cobbling may relate to post-medieval drainage.

Prior to dismantling, both the wellhead and the cloister garth were scanned by a smartphone using Polycam software. This was then used as a basis for plans and elevations. During dismantling, additional measurements were taken by Distomat laser and handtapes. These site drawings were used to create final drawings in AutoCAD 2026 (Figures 2 & 3).

### 5.2 Wellhead superstructure (Figure 3; Plates 6 – 8)

This comprised a regular, rectangular structure comprising three courses of local red sandstone, with a height of 0.60m above the cobbled courtyard. In plan, the feature had a maximum width of 1.05m, and a consistent inner shaft diameter of 0.62m (2ft). The shaft was sealed by a 70mm thick disk of Carboniferous sandstone, with a diameter of 650mm. This was seated within a rebate cut into the uppermost course of the wellhead. Embedded within the centre of the disk was an iron bolt, which was probably the surviving part of a long-removed iron ring, intended for lifting the disk away, for maintenance purposes. The disk had three drilled holes, concentrically spaced at 120 degrees, to allow for ventilation; peering down any one of these holes gave the impression of two eyes looking back at the viewer, hence the 'Fox Court'.

The uppermost course of sandstone blocks was octagonal in plan, and 0.14m deep (Plate 9). The outermost edge was moulded, with a cavetto upper profile, and an ovolo lower profile, which would tend to throw rainwater away from the lower part of the wellhead. There were four individual sections, and the joints between them were well weathered, and had been infilled with mortar. Upon removal of this mortar, it was apparent that contiguous faces had been linked by dovetailed grooves, into which slate cramps were probably inserted. This uppermost course was heavily weathered, compared with the two courses below, and it seems at least possible that this moulded stonework was reused, from the uppermost part of a late medieval chimneystack (Mike Armstrong, pers. comm.).

The middle course was the deepest course (0.29m deep), with a rectangular base, which carried upwards to form an octagonal plan by means of pronounced corner broaches with triangular faces (**Plates 10 & 11**). It comprised four blocks, with joints offset from those of the uppermost course. The uppermost course was linked to this course by means of four pairs of mortice holes, within which were located slate dowels, which measured 50mm long, by 20mm square. The contiguous block faces were also cut by wedge-shaped mortice holes, within which mortar was inserted, to forestall any lateral movement between the blocks.

The lowermost course comprised four sandstone blocks, 160mm deep, set at the level of the cobbled garth surface (**Plates 12 & 13**). The joint positions did not repeat those of the block courses above, but were at about 067 degrees from site north, and then at 90-degree intervals thereafter. Also, the joints were not radial in plan, but formed a canted obtuse angle.

All of the mortar noted during the dismantling had a dark grey colour, suggesting that it was made using ground boiler cinders and ash, rather than the white lime-based mortar which was common within the earlier post-medieval period.

### **5.3 Wellhead substructure (Figure 3; Plate 14)**

Beneath the superstructure described above, the well comprised a further five courses of handmade brickwork. The upper four courses were about 100mm thick each, whilst the lowermost course was 200mm thick, with these placed vertically, apparently as voussoirs. Beneath these, the well opened out as a chamber, only one wall of which could be seen (and measured) to the south, located 0.55m from the internal well edge. Within the south-west quadrant of the well, a short length of lead pipe, perhaps with an external diameter of about 50mm, could be seen extending from the brickwork. This may suggest that a hand pump was originally located in the south-west corner of the Fox Court, conveniently close to the existing external doorway here.

The water level could be seen, at a depth of 3.50m below the top of the wellhead (c. 32.05m AOD). A solid, level base was noted at c.30.85m AOD, giving a water depth of c.1.20m. This water body is linked directly to the drainage gulleys located in the south-west and south-east corners of the Fox Court, as demonstrated by Mike Armstrong, when he poured water into both of them. There was also a link between this water body, and a drain at the north end of the Fox Court, as Mike had once unblocked this drain, and this action drew down the (upstream) water level within the chamber.

## **6. INTERPRETATION**

### **6.1 Origin of the wellhead**

The Ordnance Survey sheet for Manchester & Salford, at 1:1,056 scale, published in 1850, does not indicate any well or pump within the Fox Court, although it does show a well on the open, elevated terrace which is located just to the north-east of the original kitchen.

The O.S. plan at 1:2,500 scale, published in 1892, shows a well within the Fox Court, and seems to be the earliest evidence for a well here. Neither the Palmer plan of 1815, nor the Alfred Waterhouse plan of 1876, showed any features within the Fox Court.

A black and white photograph reproduced in Hartwell (2004, 108), shows the Fox Court viewed from the south-west. The wellhead was then present, with the chimney and stair tower being shown before the 1890s restoration work.

The Waterhouse works began in 1876, and were intended to ‘improve circulation and achieve separation in the school and library’ (Hartwell, 2004, 109). Did this separation include for the provision of a dedicated water supply for the library? Prior to the arrival of a mains water supply, the school had use of the substantial well or collecting gallery beneath the elevated yard, located to the north-east of the original kitchen, which can still be viewed upon lifting a flagstone here.

### **6.2 Water collecting gallery**

The body of water beneath the wellhead is contained within a substantial chamber, which is probably best described as a ‘collecting gallery’. Only on the south side of the well could the limit of the gallery be defined, at a distance of 0.55m south from the lower well edge. To the north, east, and west, the limit could not be defined (at least, not without entering the well, as it would be considered as a ‘confined space’). The lowermost course of brickwork within the well (or access shaft) comprised header courses set vertically, and although the limited visual width (0.62m) did not allow for any curvature to be identified, it is suggested that the well was located at the crown of a north-south trending brickwork vault, comprising a segment of an arc.

The gallery was unlikely to exceed a total east-west width of 3.0m, or a north-south length of 4.8m, given the constraints of the peripheral buildings around the cloister. At this probable maximum extent, and the known water depth of 1.20m, a maximum volume of 17.3 cubic metres (17,300 litres) would result, which would seem perfectly adequate for water supplies for a 19th century public library.

However, any water drawdown would need to be quickly replenished, and a collecting gallery is dependent upon the total area of its below ground faces (walls and floor) to achieve this. It has to be sunk below the water table, and depends upon the natural permeability and porosity of the local bedrock (in this case Permian sandstone), to allow water to slowly seep into the void. By this means, the water is slowly filtered, avoiding the ingress of any impurities.

It was also essential that the gallery be sealed from above, so that any rain running off from the surface of the Fox Court did not enter the gallery. For this reason, it seems probable that the two surface drains which presently connect with the gallery were laid sometime after the gallery became redundant, i.e. following the mains water being first connected.

Following demolition of the Palatine Building in 2017, the upper surface of the Permian bedrock was revealed at about 30m AOD, on the west side of the Fish Court. The base of the Fox Court collecting gallery was located at a level of about 30.85m AOD. It seems probably that the bedrock will be substantially higher than 30m AOD beneath the Fox Court, given that the Fish Court was located at the extreme end of the rock promontory defined by the valleys of the rivers Irwell and the Irk.

There had been public undertakings to supply Manchester with water, with varying degrees of success, before 1850, but these were relatively small scale, and could easily be polluted by industrial activity. The first major such undertaking was the construction of the Longdendale chain of reservoirs over the period from 1848 to 1884, and clean Pennine water first found its way into Manchester during the 1850s.

But if 'safe' water could still be obtained for free within the Chetham's site, then why pay water rates? However, as the school and library complex extended further during the last decades of the 19th century, there would be a need to install additional toilet and kitchen facilities, which would push the demand for clean water well beyond that which was hitherto considered as sufficient.

Water collecting galleries were once commonplace within the Permian sandstones around the Manchester city centre, connected primarily to industrial enterprises which required clean water, such as dyeworks and breweries. It seems likely that many may have been rediscovered during site redevelopment within recent decades, and not have been recognised for their original function.

A massive collecting gallery was accidentally found during works on the Mancunian Way, near the Downing Street Industrial Estate, in about 1992, when Manchester City engineers broke into a void during piling (the author visited this gallery). The gallery extended horizontally, in an arc, for about 200m, was up to 6m in height, and about 2.5m in width. It penetrated deeply into the Permian sandstones, although in places the arched roof was within the overlying boulder clays. A number of brickwork shafts had once given access to the surface, but all had been blocked off by concrete slabs. This gallery had been originally located beneath a long-demolished brewery.

**APPENDIX: Contents of digital archive (forwarded to ADS, with report to OASIS)**

Report as PDF

Text as Wordfile

Figure 1 as a TIFF file

Figure 2 & 3 as DWG file (AutoCAD 2026)

Plates 1 – 14 as JPEG files

## SOURCES AND BIBLIOGRAPHY

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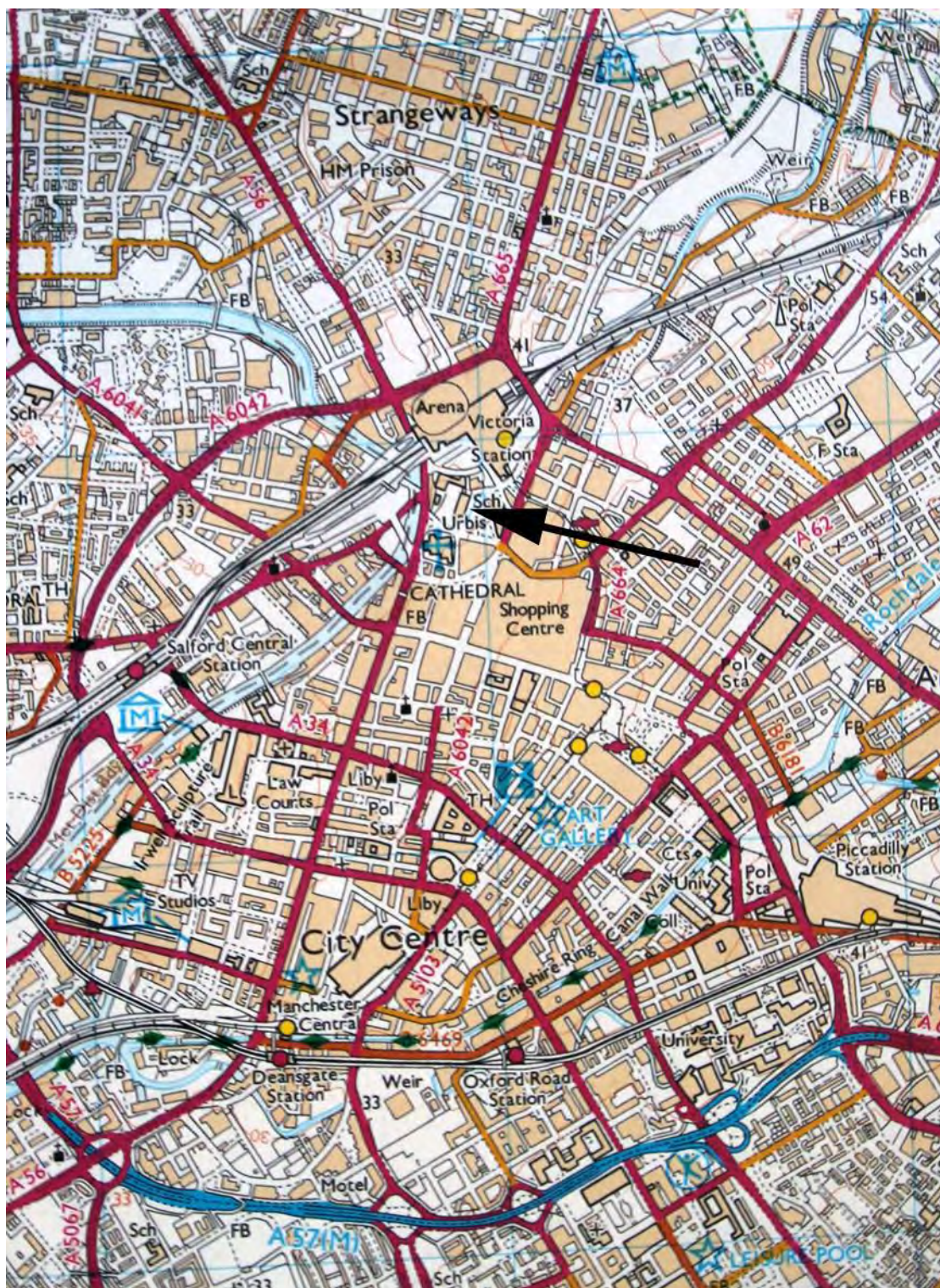
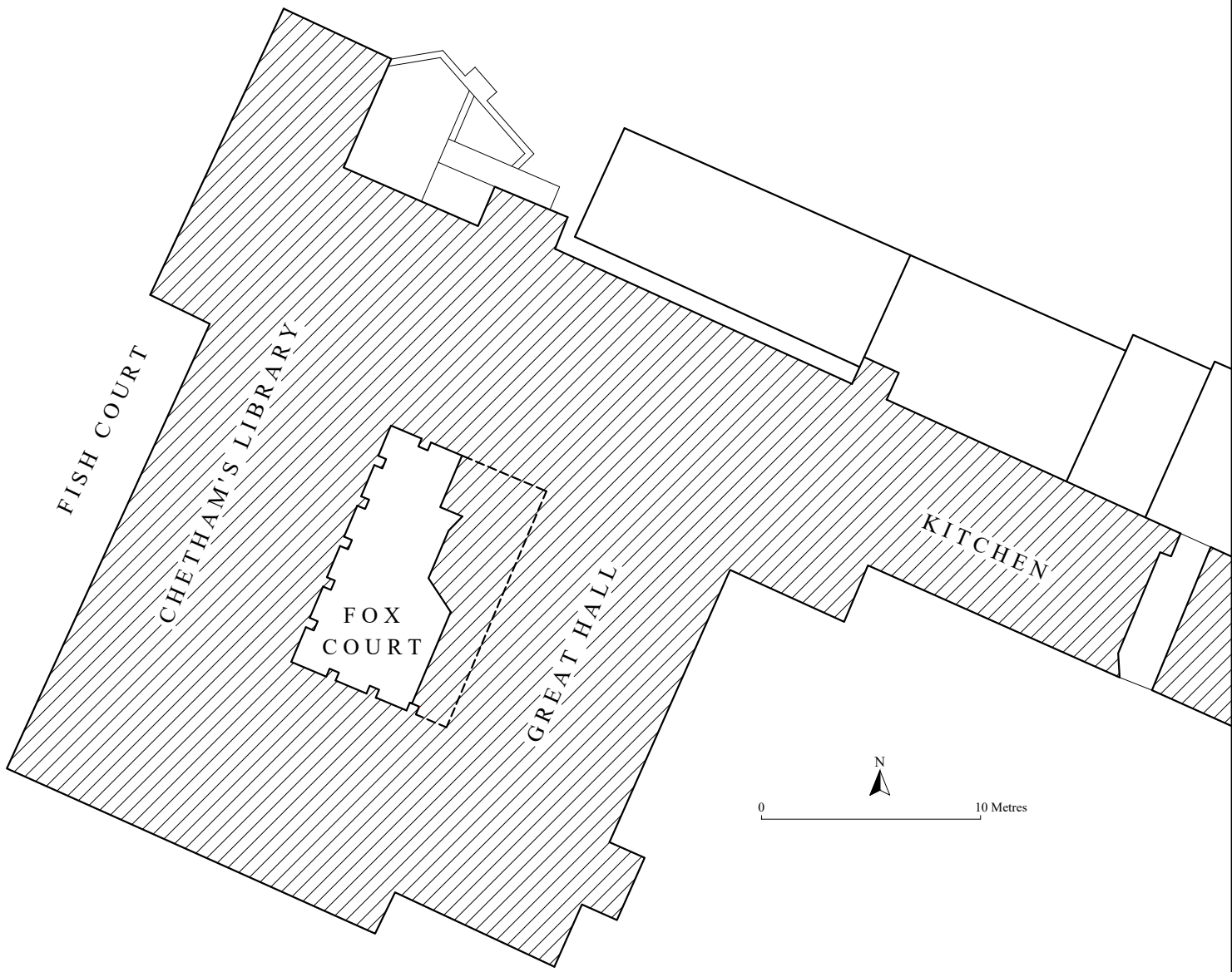
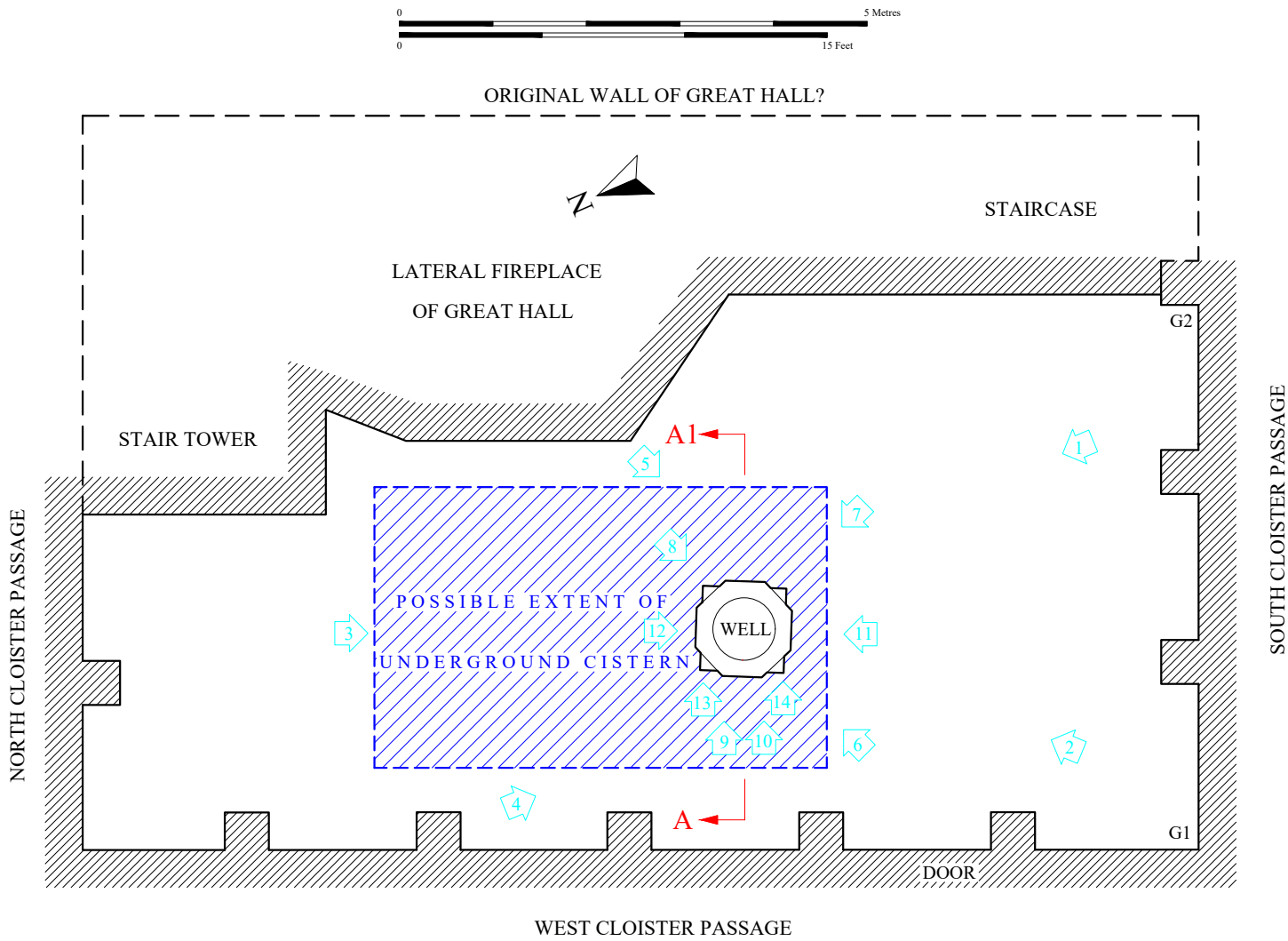
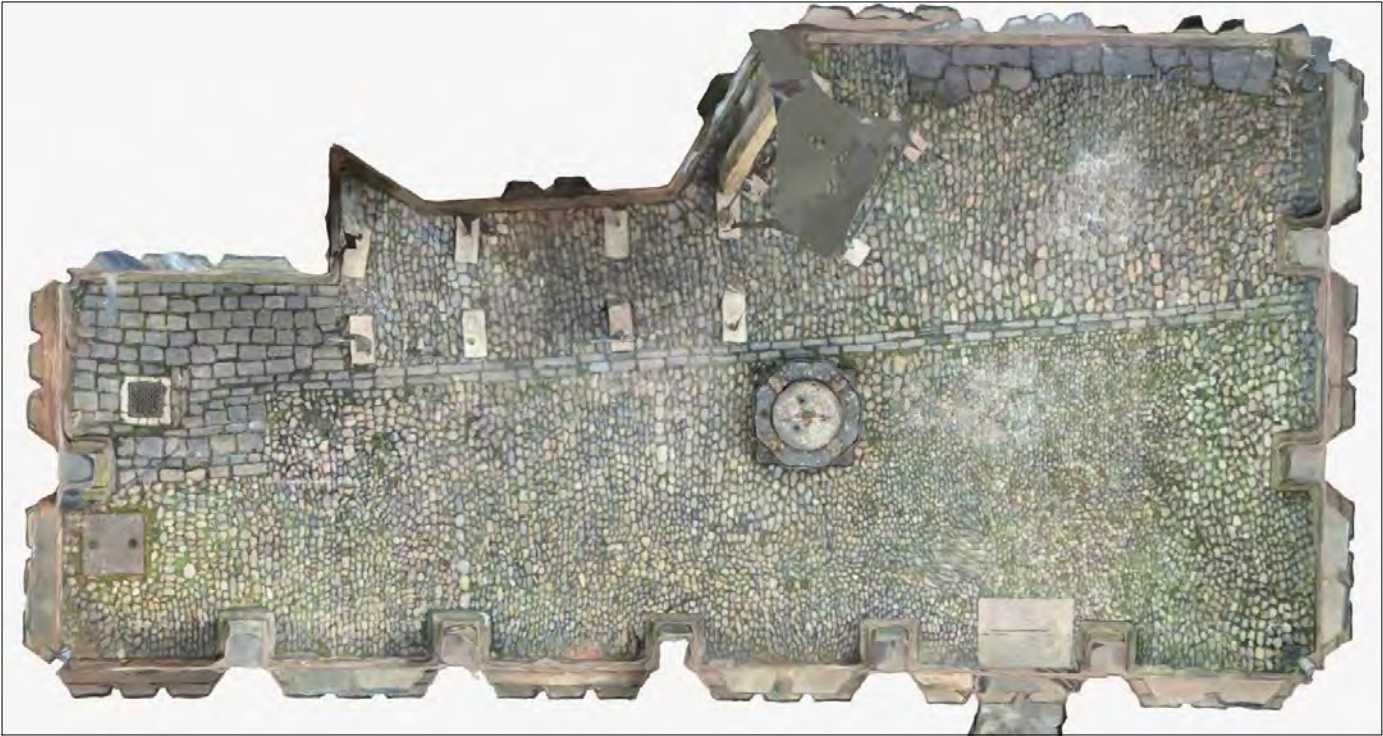


Figure 1. Site location map, derived from O. S. 1:25,000 series. Crown copyright, O.S. Licence No. AL100032621 (Matrix Archaeology Ltd).



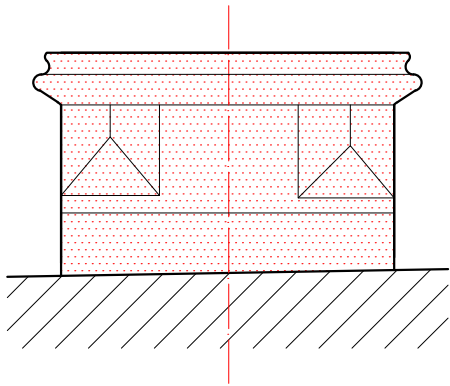
LOCATION PLAN WITHIN LATE MEDIEVAL BUILDINGS

11 - PHOTO NUMBER AND LOCATION

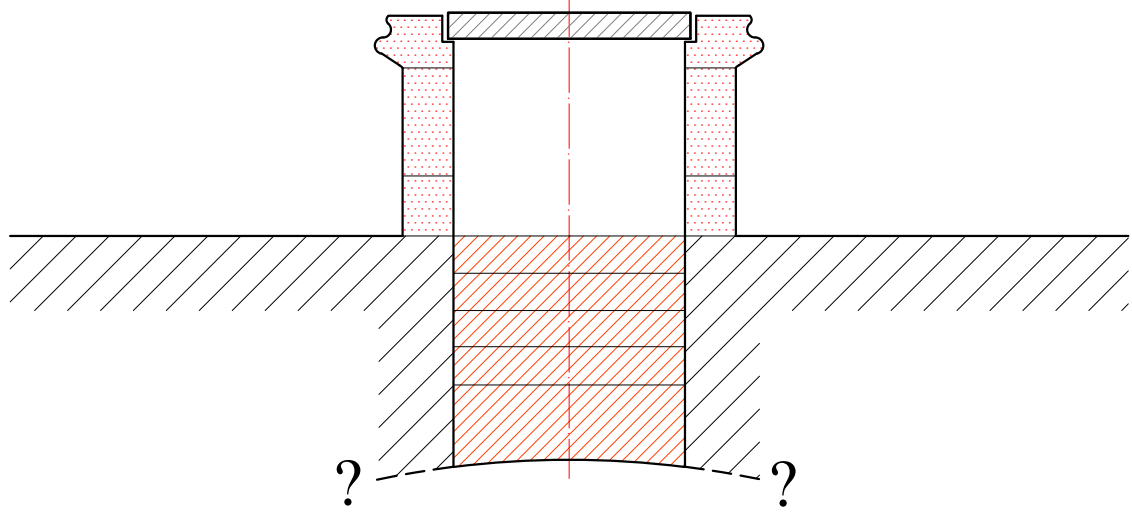
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|                                                                                                                           |                                                                  |                                                                                        | Scale:<br>As for scale bar | CAD Illustrator:<br>S. P. & M. F. | Figure 2               |



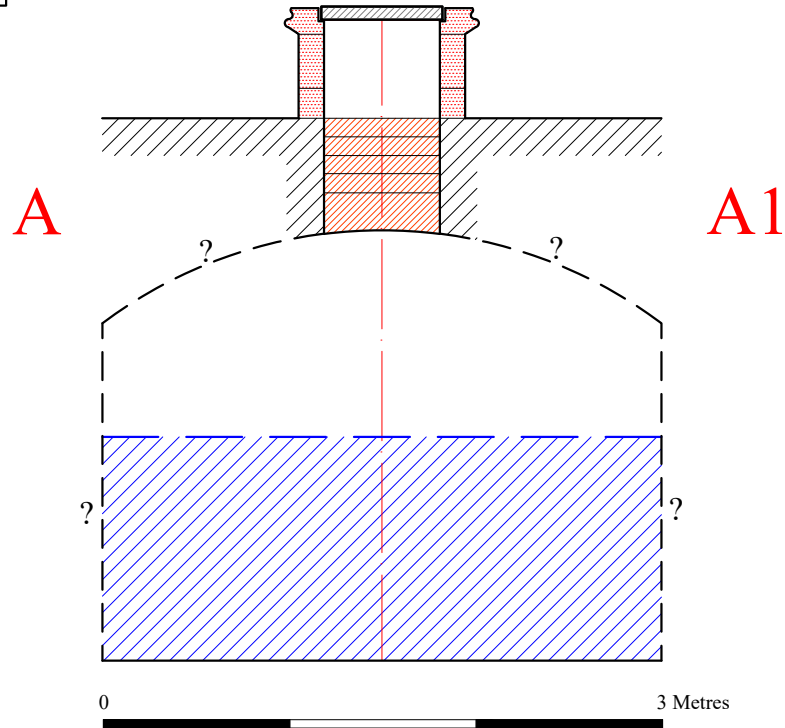
c 33.75m AOD



WELLHEAD ELEVATION,  
VIEWED FROM WEST



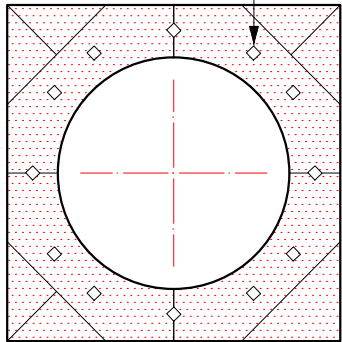
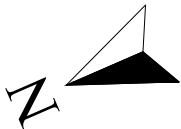
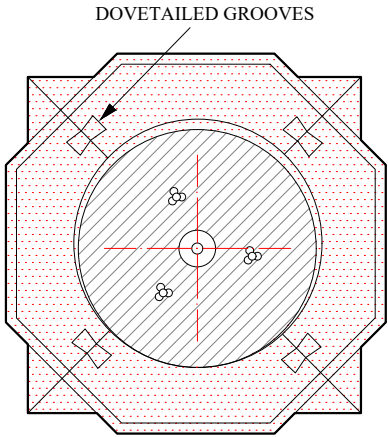
WELLHEAD EAST-WEST CROSS SECTION



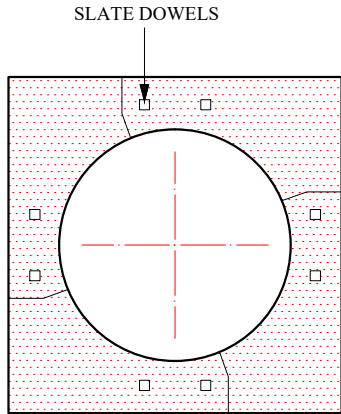
COLLECTING GALLERY SUGGESTED  
EAST - WEST CROSS SECTION



WELLHEAD PLAN, UPPER LEVEL



WELLHEAD PLAN,  
MIDDLE LEVEL



WELLHEAD PLAN, LOWER LEVEL





Plate 1. Fox Court, viewed from south.



Plate 2. Fox Court, viewed from south-west. Chimneystack for lateral fireplace of great hall in centre, stair tower to left.



Plate 3. Fox Court, viewed from north.



Plate 4. Fox Court, viewed from north-west.



Plate 5. Fox Court, viewed from north-east.



Plate 6. Wellhead, viewed from south-west.



Plate 7. Wellhead, viewed from south-east.



Plate 8. Wellhead, viewed from north-east.



Plate 9. Wellhead, viewed from west.



Plate 10. Wellhead, after removal of upper level, viewed from west.



Plate 11. Wellhead, after partial removal of middle level, viewed from south.



Plate 12. Wellhead, following removal of middle level, viewed from north.



Plate 13. Wellhead, north-west corner, following removal of middle level, viewed from west. Note pair of mortice holes on right, for slate dowels.



Plate 14. Wellhead, following removal of middle level, viewed from west. Note flattened lead pipe on right side of shaft, which probably connected to a pump.