

1. INTRODUCTION

This assessment has been prepared by Exeter Archaeology (EA) on behalf of Urban Splash (South West) Limited to ascertain the potential archaeological impact of proposed mixed development at East Wharf, Watchet, Somerset (centre ST 0735 4339). The area considered also includes a corridor of land to the south-west, along and immediately to the south of Harbour Road, which is likely to be affected by construction (Fig. 1). The work has been carried out in accordance with the Somerset County Council (SCC) *General Specification for Archaeological Work in Somerset* (March 1995).

1.1 The assessment

This document is based on previous assessments prepared by EA in response to earlier proposals for Watchet Harbour (including East Wharf) and the concerns of SCC and West Somerset District Council (WSDC) about the impact of construction on the archaeological heritage of Watchet.¹ The information has been updated by way of additional searches of the SCC Historic Environment Record and in respect of current national and local government policies.

The following elements have been included:

- Analysis of geotechnical data from previous site investigations
- Collation and interpretation of relevant cartographic, pictorial and documentary information for the harbour area, including source material held at:
 - Somerset Record Office (SRO) and Somerset Studies Library (SSL), Taunton
 - United Kingdom Hydrographic Office (HO), Taunton
 - Somerset County Council's Historic Environment Record (HER), County Hall, Taunton
 - Westcountry Studies Library, Exeter (WCSL)
- Assessment of buildings and structures in the harbour area and determination of any adverse impact
- Consultation with the County Archaeologist and Harbour Master at Watchet

1.2 Statutory and other designations (see Fig. 1)

Key government guidance on all development affecting historic buildings, conservation areas and sites of archaeological interest is presented in Planning Policy Guidance Note 15 (PPG 15) *Planning and the historic environment* (1994), and Planning Policy Guidance Note 16 (PPG 16) *Archaeology and planning* (1990). The legislation to which this guidance primarily refers is the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 and the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990.

The national guidelines and legislation are reflected in specifications and policies contained within the SCC *General Specification for Archaeological work in Somerset* (March 1995), SCC *Somerset and Exmoor National Park Joint Structure Plan Alteration 1996–2006* (June 2004, Section 4), and the WSDC *Local Plan* (1998, adopted 2004, Section 5).

Statutory designations

The site area lies wholly within *Watchet Conservation Area*.²

There are no Scheduled Monuments within the development area. The nearest Scheduled Monuments are Daw's Castle, to the west of the town, and the cross at St Decumans church, to the south.³

Similarly, no Listed Buildings are located within the development area. However, several Grade II Listed Buildings lie adjacent to Harbour Road as follows:

- Methodist Church, Harbour Road (ST 0715 4327), 1871⁴
- National Westminster Bank, No. 54 Swain Street (ST 0712 4325), early 19th century⁵
- No. 5 Swain Street and adjoining Town Council Chamber (ST 0709 4324), late 18th century⁶
- Esplanade House, No. 9 The Esplanade. Late 18th-century⁷
- Sea View Terrace, Nos 1–4 (consec.) Govier's Lane, mid 19th century⁸

There are other Grade II and Grade II* Listed Buildings within the town (not shown on Fig. 1).

The area of saltings to the north of East Wharf and the harbour is a designated Site of Special Scientific Interest⁹.

Non-statutory designation

Non-statutory designations provide an advisory policy framework for guiding and influencing development initiatives. The site lies within an identified ***Area of High Archaeological Potential*** (AsHAP).¹⁰ Such areas are given high priority in SCC *Joint Structure Plan* Policy 11, the aim of which is to ensure that evaluation is sought prior to the determination of a planning application in order to promote early consultation between developers and the Local Planning Authority.

2. HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 General background

There has been little organised archaeological investigation within Watchet with the exception of Daw's Castle. Stray finds have been sporadically recorded, including prehistoric flints (with significant Palaeolithic assemblages from the Doniford Gravels to the east of the town, and occasional Roman finds. The Saxon and medieval periods are still imperfectly understood due to a lack of controlled excavation.¹¹

Watchet probably originated as a port in the 9th century, and a fortified *burh* had been established by the early 10th century, with a mint from *c.* 980.¹² The *burh* and mint may have been located at Daw's Castle to the west of the town at ST 062 433.¹³ The *burh* defences appear to have been ineffective as there were at least four documented raids by Scandinavians in the 10th century.¹⁴ A Saxon minster church is thought to have been located just to the east at ST 064 433.¹⁵ There is likely to have been a small settlement beneath the present town at ST 071 433,¹⁶ but the site of the Saxon settlement and port has never been archaeologically located.

Watchet's status as a possible borough is uncertain in 1086¹⁷ but it was certainly represented as such in the earlier 13th century, when a market and fair were also established.¹⁸ The focus of the medieval town may have been Market Street (formerly Chipping Street)¹⁹ or perhaps Swain Street²⁰. Alternatively, Swain Street and South Street, recorded in 14th-century

documents, might have developed as a result of inland expansion. Running westward along the shore from the market place was *Culvercliffe Street*. This is mentioned in documents from the 1270s to the mid 15th century, when it appears to have been lost through severe storms which washed away burgages and exposed the town to erosion.²¹

By the 17th century Watchet was still an important market centre and busy port. However, as Minehead (to the west) developed in importance so Watchet began to decline and it had few vessels by the end of the 18th century. A revival in fortunes came in the 19th century with the growth of iron mining in the Brendon Hills resulting in large quantities of ironstone being exported from the harbour.

2.2 The development of the harbour

Documentary evidence of 1458 records that the port had been almost destroyed by storms.²² A 1544 plan showing anti-invasion defences along the Somerset coast depicts three ships in Watchet Harbour sheltering behind a weir or semi-circular enclosure of piles. Later maps show a breakwater on the western side of the harbour, constructed of wooden piles with a stone core.²³ During the reign of Elizabeth I (1558–1603) the harbour was cleaned out and a new pier built.²⁴ The quay was damaged by storms in the 1640s,²⁵ and in 1659 and 1661 various churches appealed for funds for the repair of the storm-damaged pier and harbour.²⁶ There were also levies on various imports at this time to pay for repairs.²⁷

In 1708 an Act was obtained by Sir William Wyndham, Lord of the Manor, to improve and repair the ‘ancient pier harbour or key of stone which has by the violence of the sea been quite ruined’.²⁸ An agreement was signed that year between Wyndham and William Rowe, mason, stipulating that the work would be finished within two years. The harbour, to consist of a single semi-circular arm of ‘Ruff stones’, was to be two feet above the high water mark on the inner side and seven feet on the seaward side. However, in 1720 there were serious cracks in the new quay, and the following year the quay head and 50 feet of the wall were rebuilt, and extended by a further 50 feet.²⁹ An Act in 1721 had stated that the quay ‘... was built much too low, and not extended to a sufficient length to preserve the Town and the Ships’.³⁰ An 18th-century painting (Fig. 2) belonging to the Wyndham family (dating from *c.* 1700 by the rigging of the ships) is believed to represent the newly built harbour.³¹ This shows protruding ‘jetties’ with buildings close to the waterfront on the south side of the harbour. However, a map of 1801 (not illustrated)³² shows the southern edge of the harbour as comparatively straight, suggesting the land between the ‘jetties’ was reclaimed some time during the 18th century.

In *c.* 1797 the quay was seriously damaged,³³ and the construction of an eastern breakwater was advised by William Jessop. However, it was not until 1807–8 that a line of piles was provided instead,³⁴ possibly those illustrated in a *c.* 1811 sketch of the harbour by J.M.W. Turner (Fig. 4). An extensive piled eastern breakwater clearly shown on a plan of 1832 (Fig. 6) was described as ‘nearly destroyed’ in 1856 (Fig. 9). Early illustrations (e.g. Figs 3, 5) show the Western Pier being gently curved, compared to the 1832 plan where it is more angular. Although this suggests some rebuilding, no documentary evidence for it has been located.

In 1838 George Rennie advised extending the Western Pier and building a new eastern breakwater. Due to continuing problems with erosion, the Esplanade was constructed.³⁵ At this time the Town Slip was also built (Figs 9–10). The Esplanade is shown on the plan of 1856 (Fig. 9). By this time the eastern breakwater of piles had rotted, the harbour silted up,

and the pier was virtually unusable, making the proposed development of the iron ore business impossible.³⁶

An Act of 1857 led to the appointment of the Harbour Commissioners, and under them the harbour was rebuilt by James Abernethy in 1861–2 (Fig. 10). The Western Pier was rebuilt and extended with a timber breakwater and jetty (with a lighthouse) and an Eastern Pier and quay were built.³⁷ The creation of East Wharf led to the loss of the former Yard Beach, which had housed a shipbuilding yard and limekilns,³⁸ and the creation of the Pleasure Ground further eastward. The 1862 plan and the 1888 OS map (Figs 10, 12) show details of the Mineral Railway which ran along the Western Pier to the iron ore jetty, and the West Somerset Railway, which branched on to the Eastern Pier. The rebuilt harbour of 1862 is much the same plan as it is today.

In December 1900 a tremendous storm destroyed much of the western breakwater, the iron ore jetty and damaged the Eastern Pier.³⁹ The damaged harbour is represented on Fig. 13 (published 1904 but surveyed some time earlier) where the western breakwater is depicted as a single line (the breach was temporarily blocked), the lighthouse is disused, and the iron ore jetty is devoid of railway tracks. The rebuilding of the harbour by c. 1904 included the demolition of the iron ore jetty, which may have been part of the 1708 pier or a reconstruction of 1862.⁴⁰ The western breakwater was rebuilt of masonry and large concrete blocks, and the outer part of the Eastern Pier was turned inwards and rebuilt in timber.⁴¹ It is not certain how much of the western quay had been rebuilt in the 1860s as Norman⁴² describes the iron ore jetty as being part of the original, however, the 1929 map also shows a groyne constructed on the south side of the harbour. In 1908 a 240ft long timber jetty was built to replace the demolished iron ore jetty, when an abortive attempt was made to revive the iron ore trade. Three damaged sections of this were removed in 1911, and the remainder in 1917.⁴³ During the latter part of WWI, the rails of the disused Mineral Railway were removed for the steel.

In 1924 a warehouse and a large section of the East Wharf collapsed into the harbour. In 1935 most of the wooden section of the outer part of the Eastern Pier was rebuilt in concrete. In 1937 gales caused a massive crack, up to 18 inches wide and 20 feet deep, along the length of the Western Pier. In 1949 part of the East Wharf collapsed, and steel piling was recommended to repair the breach. The silting up of the harbour was a continual problem, and the mud was frequently excavated. In 1952 for example, thousands of tons of silt were removed up to a depth of 7 feet, and considerable dredging has taken place since then.⁴⁴

There were few changes to the harbour between 1802–3 and 1841 (Figs 3, 7–8), with the exception of the west end of the quay which was reclaimed and built up. The Esplanade was built in the 1840s, giving a straighter line to the waterfront, and involving the loss of some buildings (Figs 9–10). The immediate surroundings of the harbour also appear to be little changed since the 1860s (Fig. 10). The harbour works of this time show a proposed culvert in the west corner of the harbour (Fig. 9), but is uncertain whether this is related to an existing watercourse or diversion. The stone bridge over the river in Market Street is said to have been built in the early 19th century, prior to which there was a ford.⁴⁵

The most recent development of the harbour relates to work completed in 2001 under the Watchet Harbour Revision Order, which involved the construction of an Inner Harbour Marina. A new impounding wall was built across the centre of the harbour between the Esplanade and Eastern Pier to separate the Marina from the outer harbour. The wall is 201m

long by 5m wide and is constructed of pre-cast concrete, with tidal gates at the north-east end. A rock armour breakwater was created in the south-west corner of the harbour in front of Market Street. A new slipway, 88m long, was constructed here, abutting the Western Pier. The existing slipway was repaired and resurfaced. Within the new Inner Harbour the existing walls of the Eastern Pier and Wharf have been encased in concrete to prevent water loss and the bed of the harbour has been lowered by dredging.

2.2.1 *Summary of development of harbour specific to the East Wharf*

The East Wharf and Pier were constructed in 1861–2 as part of the rebuilding of the harbour (Fig. 10). Prior to this the eastern side of the harbour was protected only by a breakwater of piles (Figs 4, 6, 9). East Wharf was built on the former Yard Beach, which had housed a shipbuilding yard and limekilns.⁴⁶ Yard Beach (a sandy beach) had extended from a point below Govier's Lane to Splash Point. The new harbour wall was built across the beach, and thousands of tons of rubble were filled in behind the wall to create the present east wharf.⁴⁷

The West Somerset Railway (later GWR, now a heritage railway) branched to the East Wharf and Eastern Pier,⁴⁸ and can be seen on the plan of 1862 (Fig. 10) and the 1888 OS map (Fig. 12). Two buildings are shown on the East Wharf in 1888, one in the eastern corner and another situated centrally between the railway lines. The latter appears to have been demolished by 1904 (Fig. 13).

Mooring posts and a crane are depicted on the edge of the east quay and pier in 1888 and 1904 and travelling cranes had been added by 1929 (not illustrated).⁴⁹ A severe storm in 1900 damaged much of the harbour, including the Eastern Pier, and shortly afterwards the outer part of the pier was turned inwards and rebuilt in timber.⁵⁰ In 1924 a warehouse and a large section of the East Wharf collapsed into the harbour; part of the wharf collapsed again in 1949, and steel piling was recommended to repair the breach.⁵¹

The present large warehouse on East Wharf is constructed of brick, concrete and corrugated iron, and probably represents the building depicted on the 1975 OS 1:10000 map.⁵² There are two modern brick buildings in the south-western corner of the site. The western building is a service block, and the eastern building is occupied by Quaywest Radio. The present ground surface of the quay is concrete and gravel. There is no visible evidence of the former railway tracks. There are a number of iron bollards and mooring rope fixings along the edge of the wharf. A large anchor, set on what appears to be a mill stone, forms a feature on the edge of the quay. The recent alterations relating to East Wharf are described above.

Several WWII harbour defence features are recorded to the east of East Wharf. These are: a gun emplacement in poor condition at ST 0740 4344, a pillbox in good condition at ST 0740 4342, and an artillery range observation post at ST07434342.⁵³

2.2.2 *Harbour Road*

Harbour Road was built between 1841 and 1862 (Fig. 10) probably in tandem with the construction of the West Somerset Railway (later GWR, now a heritage railway). The area to the south-east of Harbour Road formerly contained sidings and tracks associated with the rail extension to and from the East Wharf (Figs 1, 13). It is thought that all these features have been removed and the site is now occupied by a tarmac car park. The former Goods Shed survives and is now Watchet Boat Museum.

Sites recorded adjacent to Harbour Road (Fig. 1) are:

- West Somerset Railway (heritage railway).⁵⁴
- Watchet Boat Museum at ST 0714 4322 (former railway Goods Shed).
- Watchet Station at ST 0716 4321. This was the original terminus in 1862.⁵⁵
- Lifeboat house shown on the 1888 OS map (Fig. 12) at ST 0725 4334, the site now occupied by the Library.
- Grade II Listed Buildings: Methodist Church (ST 0715 4327), National Westminster Bank, No. 54 Swain Street (ST 0712 4325), and 1871, No. 5 Swain Street and adjoining Town Council Chamber (ST 0709 4324) (see section 1.2).⁵⁶

There was former also a railway engine shed at ST 0730 4332 (in use between 1862 and 1874), which is now removed.⁵⁷

Access to the new proposed development may affect this road and the Boat Museum and car park (former railway sidings) to its south-east.

3. GEOTECHNICAL INVESTIGATIONS

3.1 East Wharf

Borehole and trial pit logs from the Parkman Environmental report (1997) indicate a depth of 'made ground', varying from 2.3m to 6.2m. This is effectively reclamation material which has been dumped behind the East Wharf wall over the Yard Beach, presumably during the 1861–2 construction works. The content of this fill includes modern materials such as wood and steel and this confirms the recent date of this activity. Some of the fill (clinker etc.) was thought to have derived from the nearby gasworks, although the majority of it appears to be re-worked natural material from the surrounding area.

The natural ground level was located in all the sites investigated, except trial pits 3 and 6. No evidence of archaeological deposits can be detected from the geotechnical logs, although it is possible that the parameters for measurement may be too coarse to have identified shallow deposits. However, the most likely explanation is that the beach was scalped and cleared of silts prior to construction and infill.

The harbour itself has been regularly dredged 30 years and a former Harbour Master has suggested that the mud has developed mainly since the extension of the Eastern Pier in about 1904 (Farr 1954, 134). Occasional finds of leather and wood have been noted.

3.2 Harbour Road

No geotechnical information is available for this area.

4. CONCLUSIONS: THE POTENTIAL IMPACT OF THE SCHEME

The impact of the proposed works on archaeological deposits and features of historical interest are summarised on Fig. 1, which shows the main identifiable elements described above. The site is located within Watchet Conservation Area and within an identified Area of High Archaeological Importance. However, the archaeological impact of the proposed scheme is low and the individual impacts are relatively minor.

4.1 East Wharf

The majority of the East Wharf site was originally part of Watchet Harbour and the original coastline is shown on the historic maps and Fig. 1. Most of the identified structures are of 19th-century or later date and there are no Listed Buildings within the development area. The East Wharf was reclaimed in 1861–2 using imported material, which earlier geotechnical investigations indicate to be between 2.3m and 6.2m deep. The former Yard Beach on this site may have housed a shipbuilding yard and limekilns. Depending on the depth of the groundwork excavations for the development, it is possible that the beach surface, and any potential archaeological remains, would be exposed. However, it is quite likely that the beach was cleared prior to the quay being constructed.

The construction works on East Wharf might expose features related to the former railway and other quayside activities. Remains of the buildings shown on the 1888 OS map may also be encountered. If the excavations extend beneath the level of the made-up ground, there is the potential for archaeological deposits and features to be exposed. The depth below ground at which remains could survive varies between 2.3m and 6.2m. In view of the conclusions of previous reports there is unlikely to be any impact on *in situ* harbour silts.

There should be no cumulative impacts on the general form of the harbour itself.

4.2 Harbour Road

There are five Listed Buildings near the development site, three of which lie adjacent to Harbour Road (see Fig. 1 and section 1.2). None of these buildings should be directly affected by the proposed works. Similarly, none of the features relating to West Somerset railway should be affected. However, possible adverse impacts caused by construction traffic should be minimised as far as possible by devising a scheme for traffic movements.

4.3 Suggested mitigation measures

The following measures are suggested to mitigate the impact of the proposed scheme:

Construction on East Wharf: watching brief during groundworks.

Access along Harbour Road: watching brief during any groundworks.

A written scheme of investigation for the above procedures would be agreed with the County Archaeologist prior to the commencement of works. All work will need to be carried out in accordance with the current *General Specification for Archaeological Work in Somerset* produced by Somerset County Council (March 1995) and PPG 16.

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SOURCES CONSULTED

Unpublished sources

EA Exeter Archaeology

Archives for Projects 3630 and 4248

HER Somerset Historic Environment Record

Various Primary Record Number (PRN) entries

HO United Kingdom Hydrographic Office

1832 A6589 Inset of Watchet Pier from plan entitled 'The South Shore of the Bristol Channel between Combe Martin Little Stoke Spit ...' surveyed by Lieut. Denham R.N.

1879 Chart of 'Bristol Channel: Watchet' surveyed by Staff Comm. G. Stanley, CHC Langdon & Mr Jamieson.

SSL Somerset Studies Library

'Watchet Ephemera & Illustrations' file

c. 1811 Engraving of Watchet Harbour by J.M.W. Turner.

1864 Engraving 'Watchet Harbour Somersetshire'.

SRO Somerset Record Office (Somerset Archive & Record Service)

1801 DD\WY/C/306 Detail from enlarged inset titled 'Watchet Town and Borough' from 'A General Plan of the Manors of Williton Regis, Williton Hadley, Williton Fulford, Watchet and Washford belonging to the Earl of Egremont'. Surveyed by Chas Chilcott Crowcombe.

1856 Q/RUP/252 Detail from 'Plan of Watchet Harbour in the Parish of St Decumans in the County of Somerset showing proposed improvements. Engineer Rice Hopkins'.

1862 DD\WY/C detail of new harbour from 'Plan of the Town of Watchet Somerset'.

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Endnotes

- ¹ EA Projects 3630 (1999) and 4248 (2001).
- ² WSDC *Local Plan*, Settlement Map 19, Policies CA/1–5.
- ³ HER PRN 34164; 30002; Gathercole 2003, 15.
- ⁴ HER PRN 30012.
- ⁵ HER PRN 30025.
- ⁶ HER PRN 30020.
- ⁷ HER PRN 30010.
- ⁸ HER PRN 30011.
- ⁹ WSDC *Local Plan*, Proposals Map, Settlement Map 19, Section 4 Policy NC/1.
- ¹⁰ Gathercole 2003, Watchet Map F; WSDC *Local Plan*, Settlement Map 19, Policy AH/3.
- ¹¹ Gathercole 2003.
- ¹² VCH 1985; SCC 1995.
- ¹³ HER PRN 34164; 34209.
- ¹⁴ Aston & Leech 1977, 140.
- ¹⁵ HER PRN 34175.
- ¹⁶ HER PRN 34162.
- ¹⁷ Darby & Welldon Finn 1979, 197–9.
- ¹⁸ Beresford & Finberg 1973, 159.
- ¹⁹ VCH 1985, 146.
- ²⁰ Aston & Leech 1977, 140.
- ²¹ VCH 1985, 146.
- ²² Wedlake 1973, 82–3.
- ²³ Norman 1985, 2; Wedlake 1973, 82.
- ²⁴ Aston & Leech 1977, 140.
- ²⁵ VCH 1985, 147.
- ²⁶ Norman 1985, 3.
- ²⁷ VCH 1985 147.
- ²⁸ Sellick 1962, 20.
- ²⁹ Norman 1985, 6.
- ³⁰ Wedlake 1973, 84.
- ³¹ Norman 1985, 6.
- ³² SRO DD/WY/C/306.
- ³³ VCH 1985, 147.
- ³⁴ Sellick 1962, 20.
- ³⁵ Norman 1985, 25.
- ³⁶ Sellick 1962, 21.
- ³⁷ VCH 1985, 147.
- ³⁸ Farr 1954, 133.
- ³⁹ Norman 1985, 47–9.
- ⁴⁰ Norman 1985, 47–52; VCH 1985, 147.
- ⁴¹ 1929 OS 1:2500 Sheet 36.9.
- ⁴² Norman 1985, 47–9.
- ⁴³ *ibid.*, 54, 57.
- ⁴⁴ *ibid.*, 66, 71.
- ⁴⁵ *ibid.*, 4–5.
- ⁴⁶ Farr 1954, 133.
- ⁴⁷ Wedlake 1973, 91.
- ⁴⁸ HER PRN 33462.
- ⁴⁹ OS 1:2500 Sheet 36.9.
- ⁵⁰ Farr 1954, 134; Norman 1985, 47–9; 1929 OS 1:2500 Sheet 36.9.
- ⁵¹ Norman 1985, 66, 71.
- ⁵² Sheet ST 045SE.
- ⁵³ HER PRN 35392, 35393, 35394.
- ⁵⁴ HER PRN 33462.
- ⁵⁵ HER PRN 35419.
- ⁵⁶ HER PRN 30012; 30025; 30020.
- ⁵⁷ HER PRN 15348.