

5. THE EXCAVATION

The excavation area lies at the base of the northern slope of the ridge along which the Canongate runs (Illus 2), where natural drift geology consisted of grey clay silt with underlying boulder clay containing shattered sandstone. The excavation area (Illus 9a–c) was covered by a thick layer, up to 1.0m in depth, of demolition material related to the 20th-century buildings that had recently occupied the site. Under the demolition material, a well-stratified series of archaeological features, structures and deposits was revealed. These included structural elements of the Poorhouse, seven 17th/18th-century graves and substantial garden soil/midden deposits, including evidence for medieval cultivation and the remains of an original burgage plot boundary in the form of an earthen bank. Both the northern and southern ends of the site had suffered truncation through later development, probably associated with the expansion of the Poorhouse.

A rich assemblage of ceramics, tile and brick, glass, clay pipe, animal bone, metalwork and coarse stone was retrieved. The majority of these finds were recovered from the garden soil/midden deposits. The dating of the archaeological features was informed primarily by their stratigraphic relationships, augmented with dates derived from diagnostic artefacts, including the ceramic assemblage.

Seven phases of activity have been identified:

Phase 1: 12th–14th century – the lower garden soil/midden deposit, Context [007];

Phase 2: late 15th–16th century – garden soil/midden deposits, Contexts [105] and [099/127];

Phase 3: late 15th–17th century – garden soil/midden, Context [092], burgage plot boundaries and rig and furrow cultivation;

Phase 4: 17th century – the capping deposit;

Phase 5: later 17th century – the later garden soil/midden, Context [003];

Phase 6: 1688–1762 – cemetery burials, and

Phase 7: 18th/19th-century – Poorhouse (built in 1761).

5.1 Phase 1: 12th–14th century

Lower garden soil/midden, Context [007]

The basal deposit consisted of red-brown silt clay, Context [007], which lay directly over natural subsoil. The deposit ranged from 0.20m to 0.30m in depth and occurred across the site with the exception of the southern boundary (Area A). The deposit contained inclusions of animal bone and ceramics, the latter consisting of numerous sherds of 13th/14th-century Scottish White Gritty Ware (SWGW) together with a single rim sherd of glazed Yorkshire whiteware and a small unglazed sherd of stoneware of 14th/15th-century date. The deposit represents the early growth of the Canongate ‘backlands’ during the 13th/14th century and perhaps as early as the 12th century.

5.2 Phase 2: Late 15th–16th century

Garden soil/midden, Contexts [105] and [099]/[127]

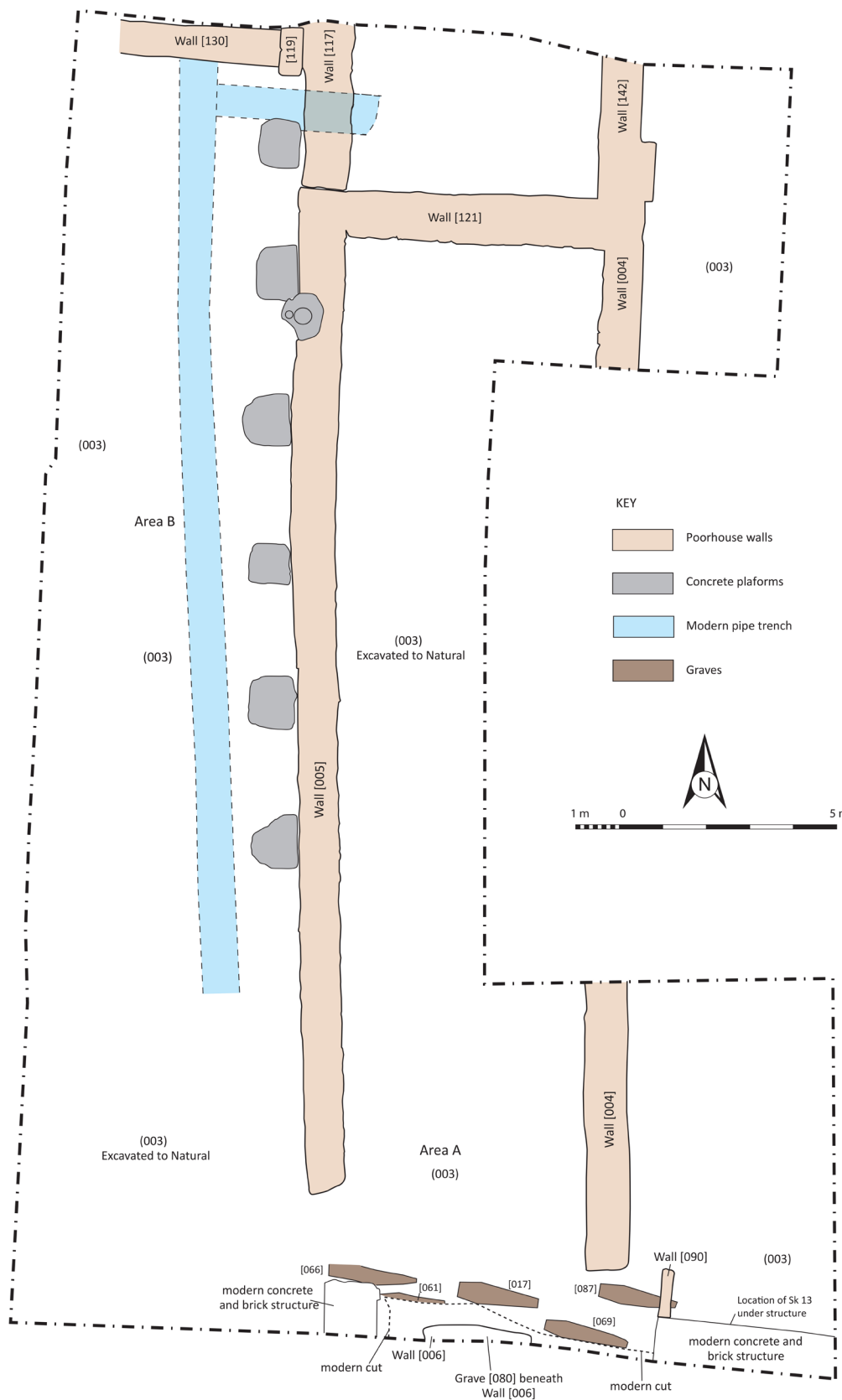
Medium brown silt clay, Context [105], immediately overlay the late 13th/14th-century deposit [007]. This buried soil was 0.40m in depth and contained sparse assemblages of animal bone and ceramic material. This deposit was absent from the southern boundary of the site, reflecting the sloping nature of the earlier ground surfaces. The ceramic material was restricted to three sherds of Scottish Post-Medieval Oxidised Ware (SPMOW) of probable late 15th-century date.

The deposit was overlain by a series of more organic garden soil/midden deposits of dark brown clay, Context [099]/[127], which ranged from 0.10m to 0.50m in depth. In addition to ceramic sherds, this deposit contained occasional oyster shell.

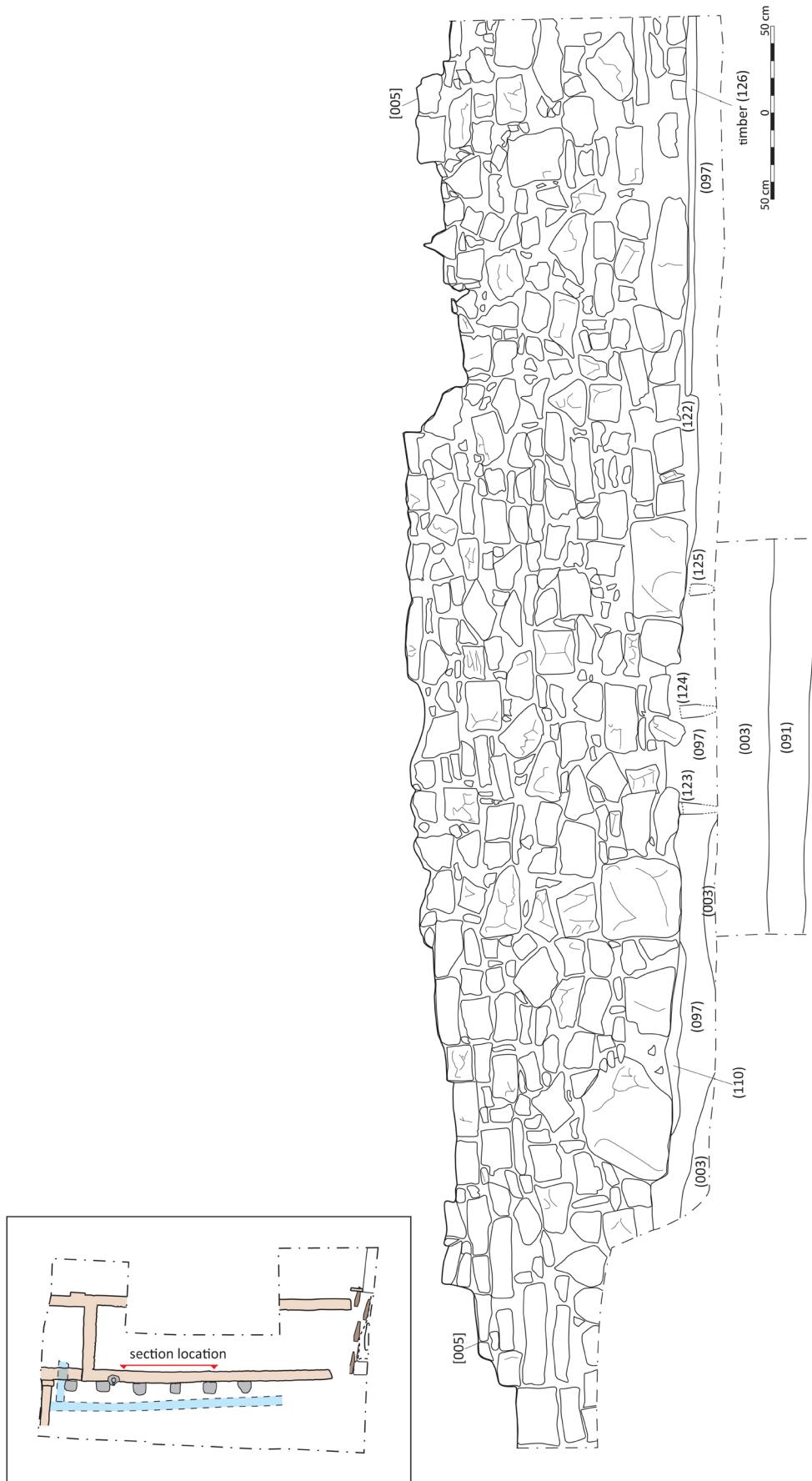
5.3 Phase 3: Late 15th–17th century

Garden soil/midden, Context [092]/[093], burgage plot boundaries, and rig and furrow cultivation

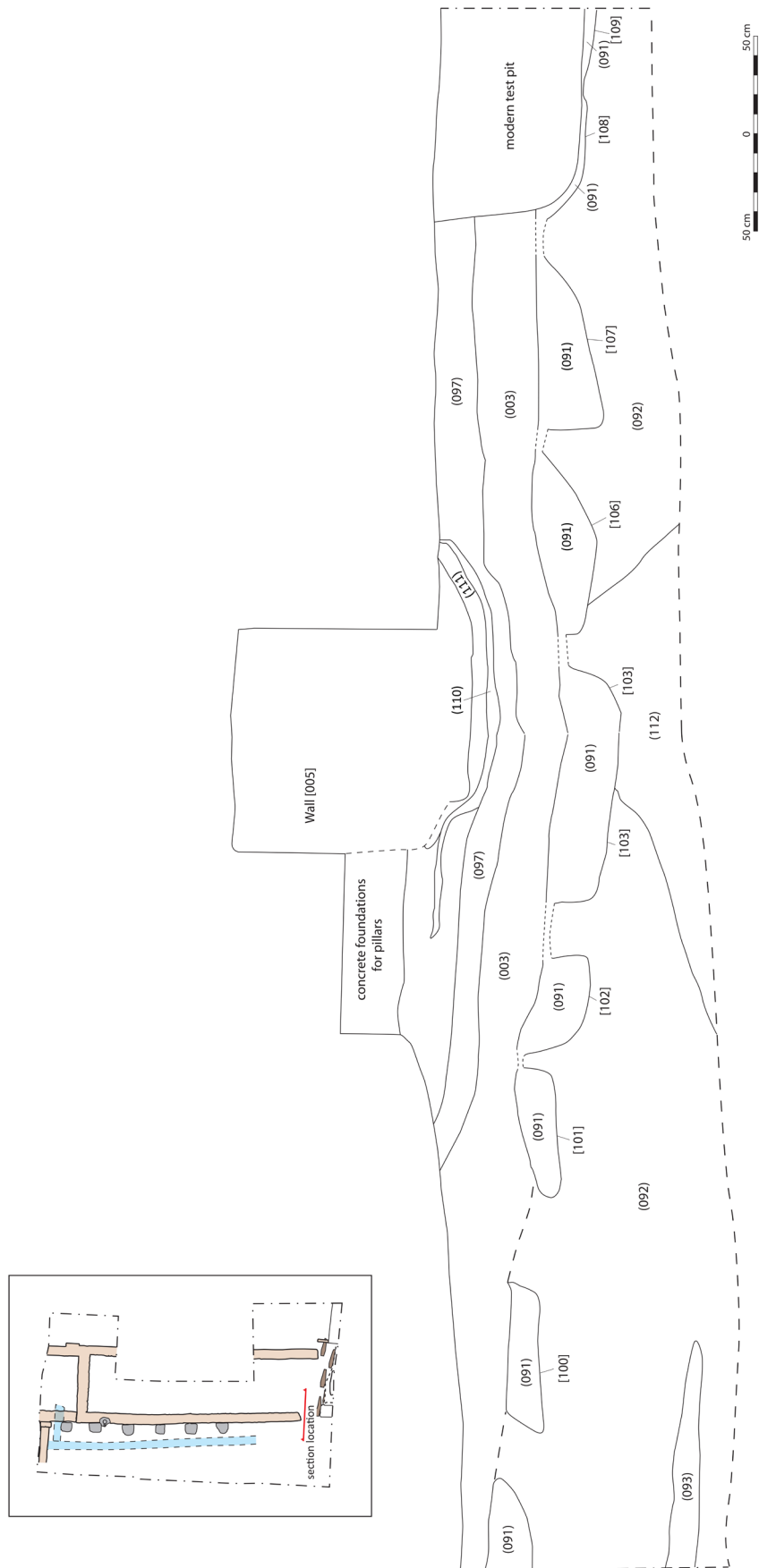
The excavation of areas close to the eastern and south-eastern site boundary identified a further organic soil deposit, Context [092]/[093], over which several narrow rigs and furrows were identified, running in a north/south alignment.



Illus 9a Detailed site plan



Illus 9b East-facing section along Poorhouse Wall [005] showing underlying deposits



Illus 9c South-facing section underlying Poorhouse Wall [005] showing agricultural furrows and underlying deposits

The rigs were spaced at 1.0m intervals with the furrows, eg [100], [101], [102], [106], [107], [108] and [109], reaching a depth of 0.20m. Context [092] directly overlay an earthen bank of compact sandy clay, Context [112], which was 0.58m in height. The bank was identified as the remains of an early burgage plot boundary; it was located approximately 10.0m from the western side of Old Tolbooth Wynd, forming a boundary stretching from the High Street to Calton Road.

The cultivation soil ranged from 0.40m to 0.70m in depth and was confined to the central and northern parts of the site, indicating that only the lower part of the burgage plot was set aside for agriculture or horticulture. The soil contained a varied ceramic assemblage, including sherds of Scottish Post-Medieval Reduced Ware (SPMRW) and SPMOW and also numerous imports of Low Countries redware, Yorkshire whiteware, French Beauvais earthenware, a tin-glazed Spanish gaming piece and a sherd of North German stove tile, all probably dating to the late 15th to early 16th century. Other finds included English/Dutch tin-glazed earthenware of the 17th century.

Clay pipes were relatively common, with examples ranging in date from 1620 to 1680, representing both local manufacture and Dutch imports.

During the late 16th century, a period of economic growth led to the rapid expansion of both the royal burgh and the Canongate. Given the constrained nature of medieval settlement in Edinburgh along the Old Town Ridge, the tail behind the crag of Castle Rock (Ruckley 1997; City of Edinburgh Council 2005: 7–8), this expansion necessitated the scarping and terracing of the upper slopes of the backlands closest to the Canongate frontage.

5.4 Phase 4: 17th century

The capping deposit

The earlier garden soils/midden deposits appeared to be capped by a comparatively sterile deposit of crushed sandstone and clay, ranging from 0.05m to 0.40m in depth. This deposit was present across the central and northern part of the site, capping the deepest areas of soil deposition. A number of recent excavations undertaken within the backlands of the Old Town (Toolis & Sproat 2007: Gooder

2013: 14; Engl 2017) have revealed similar deposits providing dates ranging from the 15th to the early 17th century. It is likely that the deposit represents redeposited natural excavated from along the upper slopes of the ridge along which the Canongate runs. It is possible that the deposit was used to purposely seal the underlying soils either as hard standing for new development or in order to seal existing midden deposits, as at Advocate's Close (Engl 2017: 8).

5.5 Phase 5: Later 17th century

The later garden soil/midden, Context [003]

A later buried garden soil/midden ranged from 0.70m to 1.30m in depth and ran across the site. It was truncated at both the southern and northern ends by modern development and by the grave cuts of the 17th-century cemetery. This deposit reflects the change of the area into formal garden during the mid-17th century, as shown on the Gordon map (1647) (Illus 4) and Slezer's view of Edinburgh (1690) (Illus 5). Archival evidence from the Kirkyard Accounts of 1735 describes how the ground at the 'foot of the Churchyard' was used to grow turves with which to cover the interments (ECA McLeod Bundle 17 item 10, Bay D Shelf 11). In the 1750s, the Kirk Accounts describe cartloads of 'black earth' being introduced each year as a replacement for the taken turves (NRS CH2/122/41). This would explain the mixed assemblage of small finds retrieved from the deposit. The soil contained large quantities of mixed ceramic material, including both locally made and imported material. Though the majority of the material included substantial quantities of locally made SPMRW and SPMOW together with Yorkshire whitewares, high-quality glass fine-ware dating from the late 16th to the 18th century was also recovered.

5.6 Phase 6: 1688–1762

The cemetery burials

The removal of the later buried garden soil/midden Context [003] from a 3m-wide strip along the southern boundary of the site (Area A) revealed six tightly grouped post-medieval inhumations – marked by Grave Cuts [033], [063], [065], [068], [082] and [089] containing

Coffins [017], [061], [066], [069], [080] and [087] respectively. The skeletons associated with these were SK 018, SK 062, SK 067, SK 070, SK 081 and SK 088. An additional truncated burial (SK 013) was recorded during a watching brief undertaken in 2014 as part of the present project. The majority of the burials had been truncated by the pinion holes relating to the construction of the Poorhouse in Phase 7 (Illus 10 & 11), and by the concrete foundations of more recent development.

Although all the burials were contained within narrow wooden coffins, these were poorly preserved, and in some cases only visible as soil stains. The burials were set within narrow grave cuts with little space between the cut and the coffin. All of the cuts were trapezoidal in shape, and cut into the underlying midden deposit.

Quantities of intrusive animal bone, shell and ceramic material revealed that the overlying garden soil midden deposit had infilled the graves as a result of the collapse of the coffins. Numerous flat-headed handmade iron coffin nails were recovered from the burials along with items including a small fragment

of a lead token and a small copper alloy buckle found below the waist of an adult male (SK 067) in Grave [065] (Appendix 5).

Despite a considerable amount of modern truncation, all seven burials contained skeletal material sufficient to demonstrate the burial rite. All the burials were set on an east/west orientation and appeared extended and supine, with their heads at the west of the grave (Appendix 1). The skeleton retrieved during previous works in 1997 (Reed 1999) was incomplete, although it is assumed that the burial rite was the same.

5.7 Phase 7: 18th/19th century

The Poorhouse

5.7.1 The original structure

Removal of the site's overlying demolition material revealed the truncated foundations, Context [008], comprising sandstone Walls [004], [005], [006] and [121], of the original rectangular Poorhouse building recorded on Edgar's map of 1765 (Illus 6). The building survived only at foundation level and was found to measure 24.5m north/south by



Illus 10 Burial (SK 018) showing truncation by pinion holes



Illus 11 Detail of burial (SK 062) truncated by pinion holes

6.0m east/west. The building was composed of three substantial lime mortar-bonded sandstone walls with no surviving internal floors or features. The western wall had been truncated at the north-western corner by the construction of a drainage channel, which appeared to feed into a stone-built culvert that drained towards the Calton Road frontage and separated the original structure and its northern extension from the small outbuilding shown on the Kincaid map of 1784 and Ainslie's plan of 1804 (Illus 7).

At the northern end of the building, the substantial gable end was the best surviving of the walls, with a height of 1.64m and a width of 1.25m; the southern gable end, Context [006], had been severely truncated by a modern brick structure and survived largely as a series of post-holes for timber foundation pinions. These features were observed during the excavation of the later garden soil/midden deposit, with many cutting Graves [033], [063], [068], [082] and [089].

5.7.2 The timber pinions and plank foundations

No foundation cuts for the Poorhouse walls were revealed during the excavation. Instead, the walls were constructed on rafts of squared oak planking, visible in a degraded form in section (Context [111]) associated with construction deposits [110] and [122]. These rafts were placed on a substantial bedding deposit of clay silt, degraded lime mortar and cinder [097]. The planks varied in size from 0.60m to 3.84m in length and were between 0.17m and 0.44m in width and c 0.08m thick. Four parallel rows of circular holes spaced between 0.20m and 0.40m apart had been drilled through the planks in order to accept timber pinions, eg [123], [124] and [125]. The partial removal of the northern gable end and the western wall during excavation revealed a large number of these pinions in situ within the planking (Illus 12 & 13).

The pinions themselves were up to 1.10m in length and made of roughly squared oak



Illus 12 Oak plank and pinion foundations under excavation

roundwood with tapered ends. These timber pinions effectively fixed the foundations into the bedding deposits and the underlying 17th-century garden soils/midden.

A large number of post-holes related to the pinions were revealed at the truncated southern end of the building, marking out the position of the missing walls.

5.7.3 The northern extension

The excavations along the northern boundary of the site revealed two further sandstone walls, [117] and [142], abutting the northern face of the Poorhouse gable end. These walls represent the northern extension of the building towards the Calton Road

frontage, which, according to map evidence, was built between 1765 and 1773.

The walls were visible for a length of 4.0m before running beyond the northern limit of excavation. As with the walls of the original building, the northern extension was based on a succession of levelling foundation deposits of clay silt, crushed sandstone and degraded mortar.

The northern extension of the Poorhouse was abutted along its western edge by the sandstone culvert, [119], running from the original building. This appeared to separate the extension from a further wall of sandstone and degraded brick, [130], which extended for 3.5m and ran into the western limit of excavation. This wall was part of the small



Illus 13 Detail of pinions of the Poorhouse foundations

outbuilding shown as a separate structure on the Kincaid map of 1784 but apparently incorporated into the main building by the Ainslie map of 1804

(Illus 7). It is likely that the presence of the culvert separated the buildings on the earlier map and that it was built over and incorporated by 1804.