

**Priory Street Square, Coventry:
Archaeological Observation and
Recording 2003**

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1.0 Summary	2
2.0 Introduction	2
3.0 The site	2
4.0 Archaeological and historical background	3
5.0 Objectives	4
6.0 Method	4
7.0 Results	5
8.0 Discussion	7
9.0 Acknowledgements	8
10.0 References	8

Figures

Figure 1: Study Area

Figure 2: Areas of Archaeological Observation

Figure 3: Depth of Excavation

Figure 4: Archaeological Features

Figure 5: 1888 Ordnance Survey

Figure 6: 1610 John Speed's Map

Plates

Plate 1: Area B - Depth of Stripping

Plate 2: Area C – Northern Area containing Vault 1 and 2

Plate 3: In-situ preservation of gravestones

Plate 4: Area C – South depth of stripping

Plate 5: Structure 2

Plate 6: Structure 4

Priory Square, Coventry

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1.0 Summary

Birmingham Archaeology carried out archaeological observation and recording on behalf of Coventry City Council in October and November 2003 during overburden stripping within Priory Square and Priory Street, Coventry (centered on NGR SP 33687904) in advance of the re-landscaping of an urban square. Three areas required archaeological observation and recording. Areas A and B were located adjacent to Priory Street and contained no archaeological remains. Area C, located west of the University of Coventry and east of the Old Cathedral, the main area for archaeological fieldwork, contained intact remains of the 18th century graveyard, and structures associated with the former New Street. Located in the northern part of Area C were three vaults belonging to St Michael's New Burial Ground. A partially-surviving brick and sandstone wall formed a boundary of the New Cemetery. The abandoned line of New Street was located in the form of a tarmac surface and curb stones. Three sandstone and brick structures were recorded in plan to the north and south of this street. Structure 1 formed part of the Providence Dispensary Building, and Structure 2 part of a possibly earlier build within it. Structure 3 comprised the discontinuous sandstone footings of an earlier building. Structure 4 was the remains of the footings of a terrace of buildings fronting Priory Street when it was called Priory Row. Survival of pre-19th century sandstone structures was limited. No significant archaeological finds were collected.

2.0 Introduction

This report describes the results of archaeological observation and recording carried out in October and November 2003 during groundworks associated with the re-landscaping of Priory Square and Priory Street, Coventry (centered on NGR SP 33687904, Fig. 1). Iain Soden, Planning Archaeologist for Coventry City Council recommended archaeological observation and recording. This fieldwork followed the requirements of a Design Brief (Coventry City Council 2003) and a Written Scheme of Investigation (Birmingham Archaeology 2003) approved by Coventry City Council. The fieldwork conforms to the Standard and Guidance for Archaeological Desk-Based Assessments (IFA 1994).

3.0 The site

The zone for archaeological observation and recording included three areas (A-C, Fig. 2) adjacent to Coventry Cathedral and Coventry University. The first two areas (A and B) consisted of two parcels of land, one on either side of Priory Street, where drainage and tree planting groundworks were proposed. The main area of proposed below-ground disturbance, Area C, was in the vicinity of Priory Square, directly to the west

of Coventry Cathedral, and comprised the re-landscaping of a public square, and the construction of water features.

4.0 Archaeological and historical background

The work was carried out within the medieval core of the city of Coventry. By the 12th century, Coventry was of considerable commercial importance and a castle was built by the Earls of Chester. The church founded monasteries in Greyfriars in the 13th century, and at Whitefriars and Charterhouse in the 14th century, as well as other monastic houses throughout the city. A defensive wall was built around the city in 1355 with twelve gates and 20 towers as well as a new manor house at Cheylesmore.

The city went into decline in the early 16th century with the population falling from 10,000 in *c* 1440 to 4-5,000 by the mid 16th century (Phythian-Adams 1979, 281). This can be attributed to the economic effects of the dissolution of the monasteries. The walls were made indefensible after the Civil War in the 1660 on the instructions of Charles II. In the 18th and 19th century the city became prosperous again with the construction of the canal and railway, and the use of local natural resources for coal mining and clay extraction. In 40 years between 1801 and 1841 the population of Coventry doubled from 16,049 to 30,781 (Smith 1945, 125). There was a change in plot usage associated with the industrialization of the city with spacious gardens to the rear of the street plots becoming sub-divided into congested courts.

During World War II the Blitz laid waste to significant parts of the city, particularly the Royal Ordnance Factory, although the historic core can still be defined by the circuit of the modern Ring Road. This bombing led to a period of extensive redevelopment of the city centre and the area surrounding the site which became associated with Coventry University. The destruction of the Old Cathedral (formerly the church of St Michael's) in the bombing of the 14th November 1940 eventually led to the construction of the new cathedral, itself located to the west of Priory Street. Excavations prior to the construction of the new cathedral revealed remains of the first priory cathedral and the associated Benedictine monastery (Hobley 1966).

The area for archaeological observation and recording in 2003 adjoined the eastern edge of the priory complex. The cathedral and Benedictine monastery was consecrated in 1043 and endowed with one half of the lands of the town. It was destroyed during the dissolution of the monasteries in 1539 (Page 1965, 52). The cathedral and associated buildings dominated the priory precinct. The area to the east, part of the priory precinct, appeared to have contained the remains of associated buildings as well as open agricultural land known as 'Priory Fields' until the tithe map of 1849. The priory boundary wall probably ran along the line of the river to the north, and along the former line of Miller's Alley to the east enclosing the area of the Priory Square development (Lilley 1994). The ruins of the former Benedictine cathedral are still depicted on Speed's 1610 map. On Samuel Bradford's 1748-49 map the ruins were built over by Priory Row.

The Priory Square area contained a number of historic buildings whose remains are thought to have possibly survived. The Bishops Palace was first depicted on Speed's

map of 1610. It was located at the turn of Priory Row and continued to be depicted until the Board of Health Map of 1851. The palace was demolished prior to the realignment of Priory Street in 1856. The palace crossed the line of the existing Priory Street and may have been located within Area B. The remains of the Priory Dye House were believed to be located adjacent to Area A, and were thought to be possibly affected by the proposed scheme.

The groundworks also extended into the former area of New Street, recorded in 1410-11, when it was named St Mary's Street. Speed's map of 1610 clearly depicts built-up street frontages along New Street (Fig. 6). The majority of this street was taken during the creation of the University in the 1960s. However, it was hoped there was potential for survival, particularly in the form of cellaring, along the former line of New Street within Area C of the proposed development. It was also considered possible that the remains of the Sea Horse Public House on the southern corner of New Street could have survived later landscaping.

The area for archaeological observation and recording also included the site of the Palace Orchard, the Bishop's Banqueting House, and two fishponds, located in the northern part of Area C. The Banqueting House was taken down around 1596 according to the survey of 1646. There is certainly no record of the Banqueting House on Speed's map of 1610. The orchard was consecrated as a detached burial ground for St. Michael's Church in 1793 due to overcrowding in the earlier cemetery, and was used for this purpose until 1848. Widespread exhumation of the cemetery occurred in 1956-8, ahead of the redevelopment of the area for Coventry University. However, the present development affected the area of the possible remains of both the cemetery and the earlier Banqueting House and fishponds.

5.0 Objectives

The archaeological observation and recording was intended to provide a record of archaeological deposits or features surviving below the modern ground surface, and, more widely, to contribute towards an understanding of the medieval townscape of Coventry.

The detailed aims of the archaeological observation and recording were:

- 1) To record the depth of modern overburden/disturbance.
- 2) To identify and record archaeological features, or possible archaeological features, and to identify their depth.
- 3) To establish the depth of undisturbed ground levels for future reference.

6.0 Method (Fig. 2)

All below-ground excavations below the existing surfaces were monitored archaeologically.

Archaeological remains were recorded prior to re-covering. Human remains were noted, collected, recorded and re-buried *in-situ* and were not subject to laboratory

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analysis. Inscriptions on grave ledger stones were recorded and photographed before re-covering.

All archaeological features were recorded by means of pre-printed pro-formas for context and features, scale plans and sections and photographed. Features were surveyed and noted onto scaled development plans.

7.0 Results

Areas A and B

The monitoring of Areas A and B revealed nothing of archaeological significance. The construction groundworks were limited to a depth of between 0.25m and 0.4m below the modern surface (see Plate 1). The material removed and exposed was of modern origin, and derived from recent landscaping of the area.

No features, or possible features of archaeological interest could be identified and no finds were collected.

Area C

Area C was stripped to two different depths (Fig. 3). The northern area which included parts of the 18th century graveyard was stripped to a level depth of 83.45m AOD. (Plate 2). The stratigraphy consisted of 0.2-0.4m of modern overburden (1001) capped by turf (1000). Where the modern pathways were removed they were underlain by 0.2m of sand and gravel bedding for the slabs (1002). Within the levelling layer, occasional pieces of small dis-articulated human bone were encountered.

The southern part of Area C was stripped to a depth of 83.20m AOD (Plate 4). Predominantly, the deposits encountered were associated with the demolition of New Street in the 1940s. The demolition deposits mainly comprised brick and other rubble (1005). In places, this contained large animal bones identified as bovine. Imported sand and gravel (1004) overlay the rubble to form foundations for the pathways in front of the University building and in the south of Area C. The deposits removed during groundworks became gradually deeper in the south of Area C, where the overburden measured a maximum of 0.5m in depth. This part of Area C was covered by a combination of turf and pathways (1003) resulting from the development of Coventry University in the 1960s.

Trenches for ducting associated with the construction of a water feature centrally placed within the area resulted in deeper excavation to a maximum depth of 82.90m AOD.

Three vaults were encountered within the northern part of Area C (Fig. 4). These were all recorded in plan only and none was excavated.

- ◆ Vault 1, F100, was orientated east-west and was only exposed for a length of c 1.0m. The walls were two bricks thick (0.25m) and were infilled with rubble. It

was sealed by a levelling layer (1001) associated with earlier landscaping of the cemetery.

- ◆ Vault 2, F102, was also only partly exposed in plan. It was orientated east-west and was 0.9m wide. Its brick roof was still intact.
- ◆ Vault 3, F116, was located during excavation of a north-south extension to the ducting trenches. It was stone-capped, with brick walls two bricks thick (0.25m). Its precise alignment could not be established. As exposed by the groundworks it was L-shaped in plan. It measured a minimum of 0.8m (north-south) by 1.65m (east-west) and was located 0.4m below the path level.

Running east-west and located at the southern edge of the former graveyard was the remains of a brick wall (Structure 5, F114), constructed directly over a sandstone wall (F115). The wall, F114, was three bricks thick (0.4m). This latter directly overlay a purple-red sandstone foundation, F115, of the same width that survived to a length of 4.7m (east-west). Although the brick wall was partially demolished during the 2003 groundworks, the earlier sandstone foundations were undisturbed.

In the southern part of Area C the remains of buildings formerly associated with New Street were encountered. North of the line of New Street were purple-red sandstone and brick walls (Structure 4, Plate 6) forming an L-shape in plan, comprising probable wall footings. These were discontinuous and of poor quality, although following the former line of New Street. The southern part of the surviving wall (F111) was of purple-red sandstone construction *c* 5.0m long (east-west) and 0.4m wide. Running parallel to the north was a discontinuous wall (F112) 2.2m long (east-west) and 0.8m wide of mixed sandstone and brick construction. The western wall was made of clamped bricks, the wall (F113) being two bricks thick, and of mixed bonding. The interior of the structure contained red-purple sandstone blocks presumed to be associated with the demolition of the structure.

The alignment of the northern side of New Street was not located. However, a clear line of curb stones defined the southern edge of the street *c* 15m in length (E-W), F117. A tarmac layer (1008) that extended *c* 10.5m to the north probably formed New Street.

Located *c* 2.50m south of New Street were the footings of a brick-built structure, outlined in plan (Structure 1). This building followed the north-south alignment of Priory Street and its western wall (F104) also formed the eastern boundary of the former pavement. Two walls ran parallel to this, F105 and F106, 4.30m and 7.50m further to the west, respectively. The north-south extent of the structure was 11.80m. The wall foundations were three brick courses wide (0.45m) and were constructed of machine-cut bricks. The foundations remained *in-situ* although in places several brick courses were removed during the 2003 groundworks.

An unusual brick cavity was located on the Priory Street frontage of this building (Structure 2, F109, Plate 5). It was arched, brick-capped and had collapsed in on itself. Its was rectangular in form and orientated east-west, measuring 1.8m by 1.0m. The interior remained unexcavated and any cavities were in-filled in order to construct a

solid foundation level for the new build. An east-west partition wall, F108, ran adjacent and parallel to the cavity along its southern edge suggesting the cavity was contemporary with the brick foundations.

The remnants of a sandstone wall, F110 (Structure 3) was located within the interior of the brick structure. Located in the northeast corner of the structure they ran for 2.5m east-west before they returned to the south where they continued for 2.4m. The walls were made of irregular ashlar blocks, each 0.7m in width.

8.0 Discussion

The shallow nature of excavations within the redevelopment meant the majority of surviving archaeological remains could be retained *in situ* below the new paved surface. The deepest area of excavation was only to a depth of 0.5m below the ground surface level associated with the construction of a paved circular parking area (in Area C). Within Areas A and B the depth of groundworks was limited and no archaeological, or possibly archaeological features could be encountered.

Area C can be sub-divided, both in terms of depth of investigation and in historical sequence into two sub-areas. To the north the remains of the New Cemetery were encountered, while the area to the south was associated with the development of New Street. In the north the 2003 groundworks were shallower and the remains were accordingly less disturbed by the new construction. Here the remains of three vaults were located (A-C), which will be preserved *in situ* below the new pavement. The vaults presumably related to the development of the New Cemetery from 1793 onwards. Extensive grave clearance associated with the redevelopment of the area in the 1960s meant only a very few dis-articulated fragments of human bone were located and these were re-buried *in-situ*.

The boundary between the cemetery and the southern area appeared to have been defined by an east-west aligned wall (Structure 5). This wall appeared prior to the date of consecration of the burial ground on Samuel Bradford's map in 1749-50. It does not appear on earlier maps from the 17th century, which suggests that the boundary was not defined until the late 17th or early-18th century. Subsequent stone construction is likely to be a later re-build of the wall.

The line of New Street existed from as early as 1410-11 but the remains encountered, including the tarmac road surface clearly relate to the road in its latest form prior to its abandonment during the recent redevelopment of the area.

The remains of stone footings (Structure 4) north of the line of the road comprise a combination of clamped brick and purple-red sandstone. The combination of material suggested this was not associated with the earliest activity in New Street. However, the plot related to the second terraced building located on Priory Row, beyond the corner of New Street. It first appeared in plan on the Speed's map of 1610 but alteration of the plot shape between 1749 and 1807 suggests the building was re-built in the late-18th century.

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The size, location and orientation of the footings to the south of New Street (Structure 1) was similar to the mapped layout of the 19th century Provident Dispensary (Ordnance Survey Map 1888, Fig. 5). The earlier Sea Horse Public House had a similar plot shape, but the machine-cut brick footings identified suggest a whole-scale alteration of the plot post-1851. Sandstone footings located within the footprint of this building (Structure 3, Fig. 4) probably relate to an earlier building on the same plot, possibly the Sea Horse Public House (1851 Board of Health map). However, the plot appeared to have been built upon since 1610 (Speed's map) although the adjacent plot was vacant. The absence of material evidence means the footings could relate to any time between the foundation of New Street and 1850. The discontinuous nature of the surviving remains suggest that considerable disturbance had occurred to any medieval structures along New Street.

The brick cavity (Structure 2) in form and shape suggested a burial vault, however its location and association with the Provident Dispensary building suggested a former cellar. There is no cartographic evidence to suggest burial occurred east of Priory Street either before or after its layout.

Artifacts noted during the fieldwork were limited to modern finds, which were not collected, including large quantities of animal bones from recent deposits.

9.0 Acknowledgements

The fieldwork was sponsored by Coventry City Council. Thanks to Iain Soden, Coventry Planning Archaeologist who monitored the project. Thanks to Bardon Construction for their assistance, and co-operation. The archaeological observation and recording was undertaken by Helen Martin, Paul Harris, Bob Burrows and Chris Hewitson of Birmingham Archaeology. The project was managed by Alex Jones for Birmingham Archaeology who also edited this report. Illustrations were prepared by Bryony Ryder.

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Maps

1610 John Speed's map

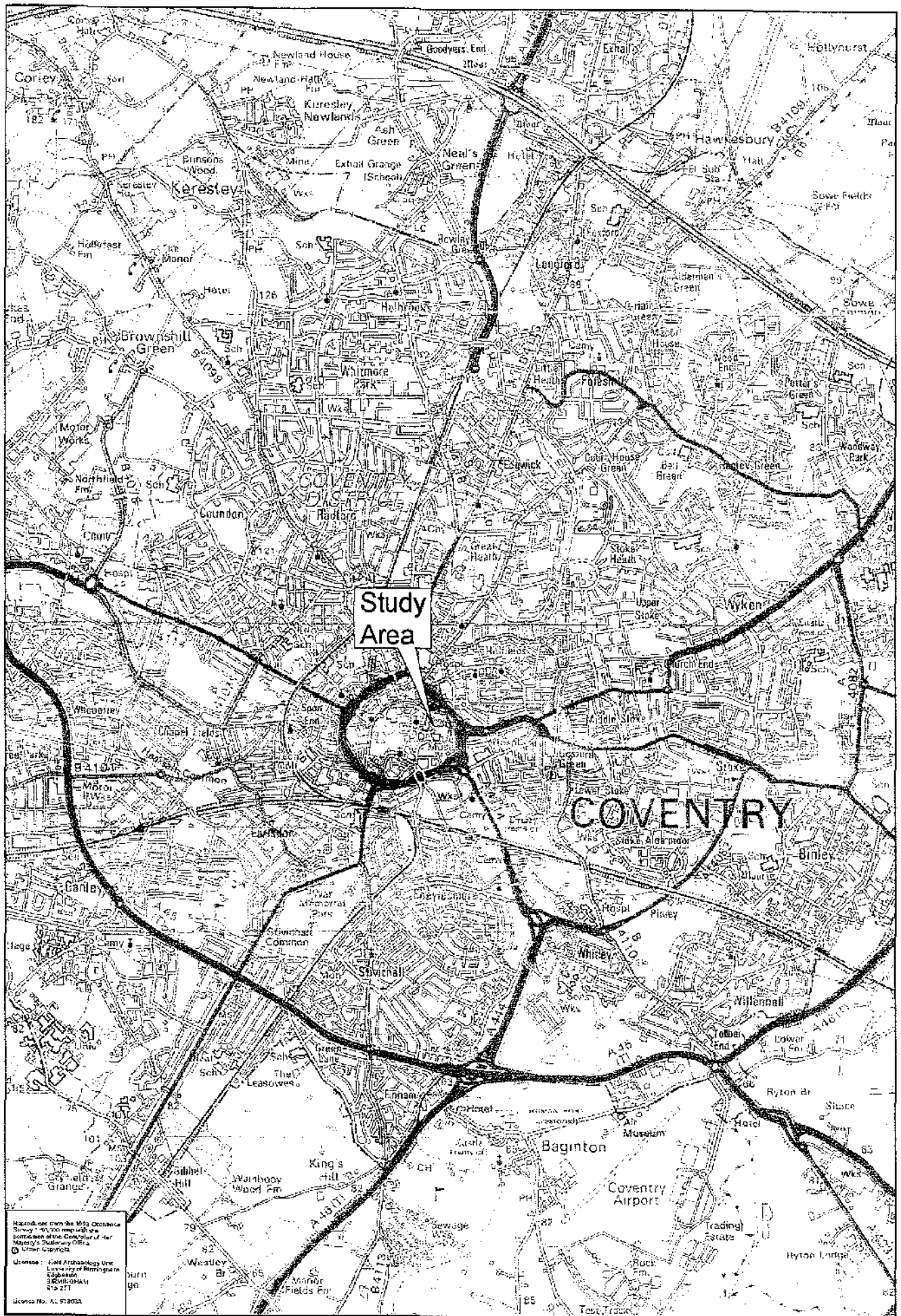
1656 Dugdale's Antiquities of Warwickshire

1748-9 Samuel Bradford's map

1807 Thomas Sharp's map

1851 Board of Health map

Ordnance Survey maps (1888, 1905, 1925, 1936)



Macroland from the 1954 Ordnance
 Survey 1:62,500 map with the
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 Majesty's Stationery Office.
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Fig.1

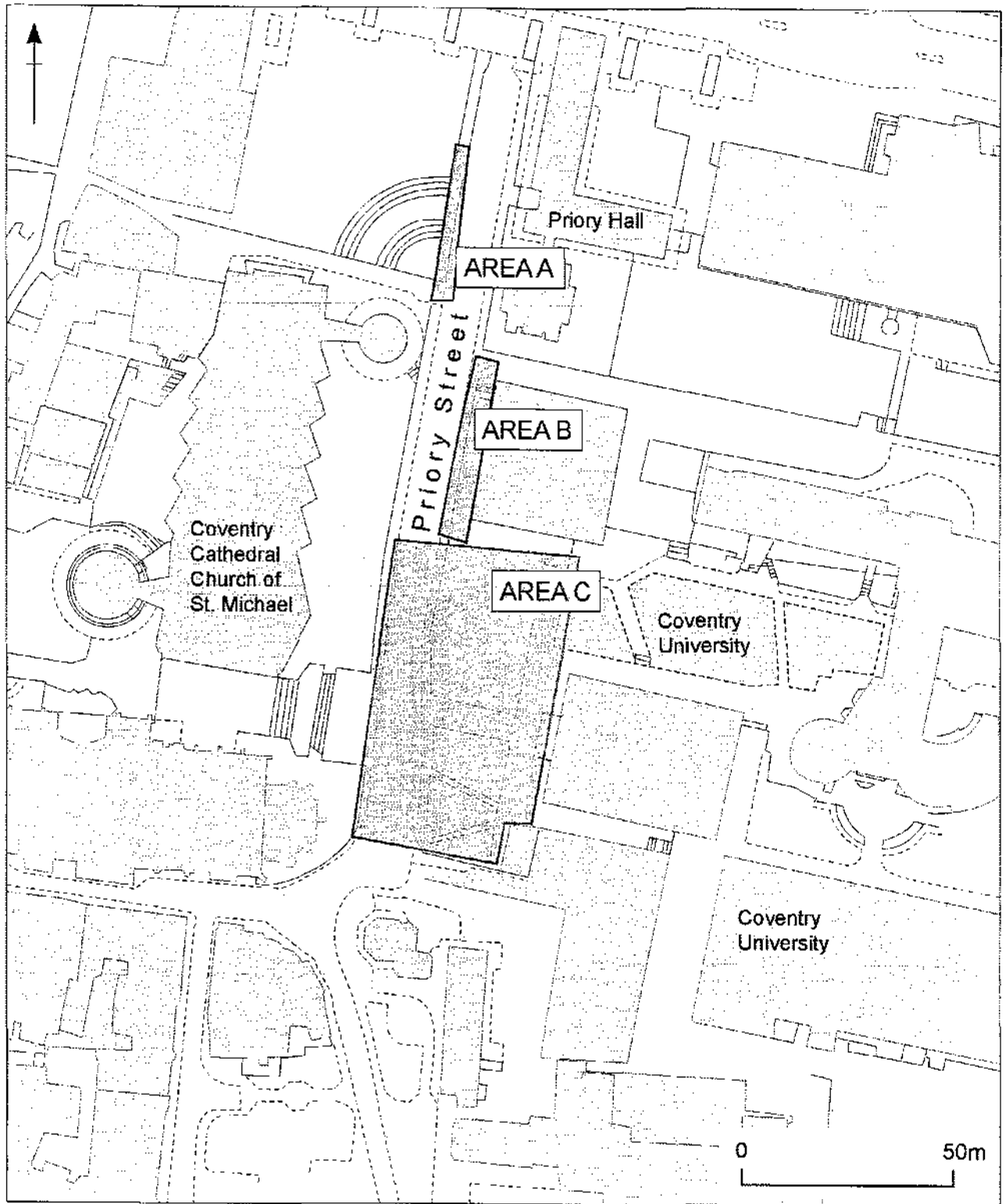


Fig.2

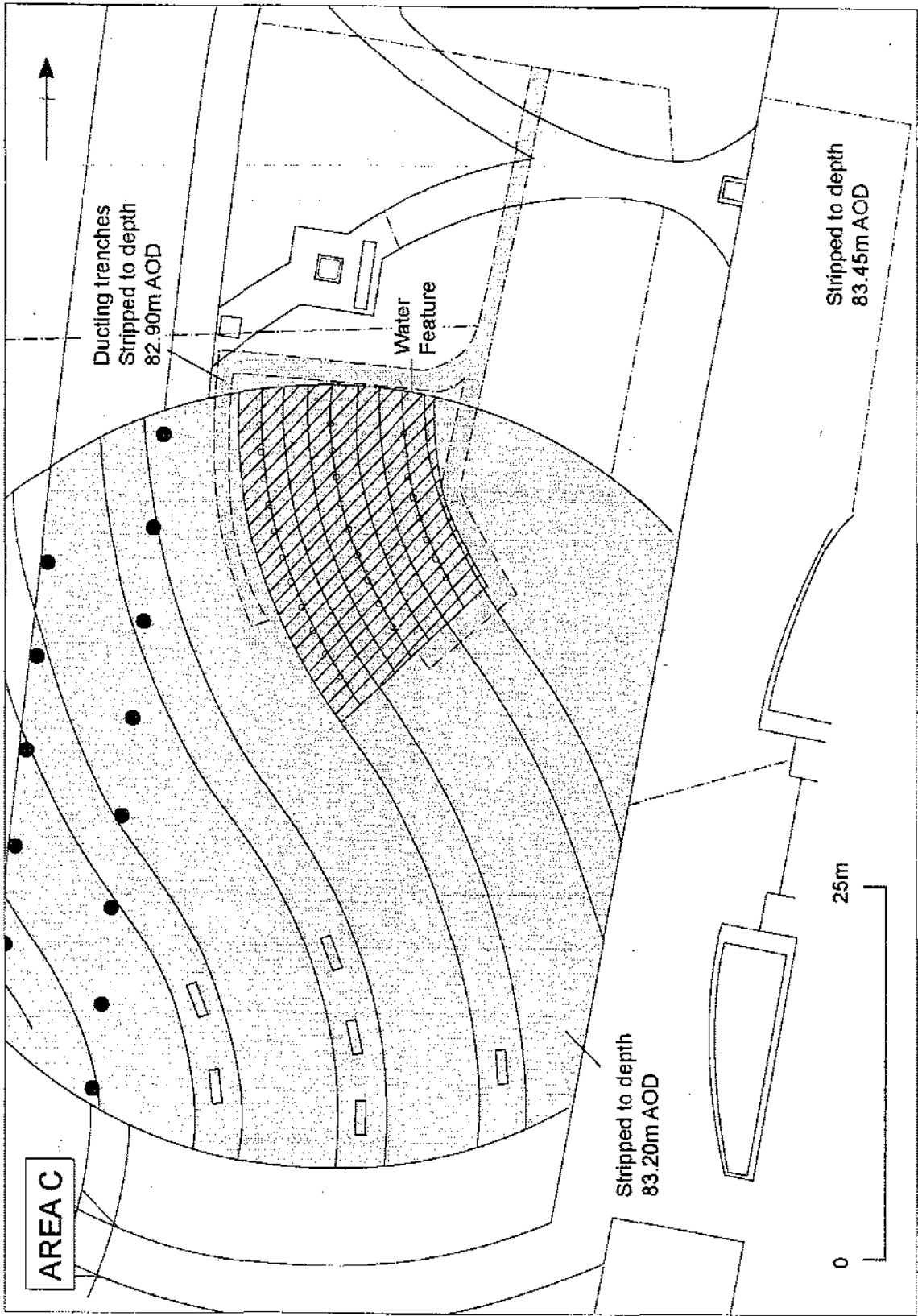


Fig.3

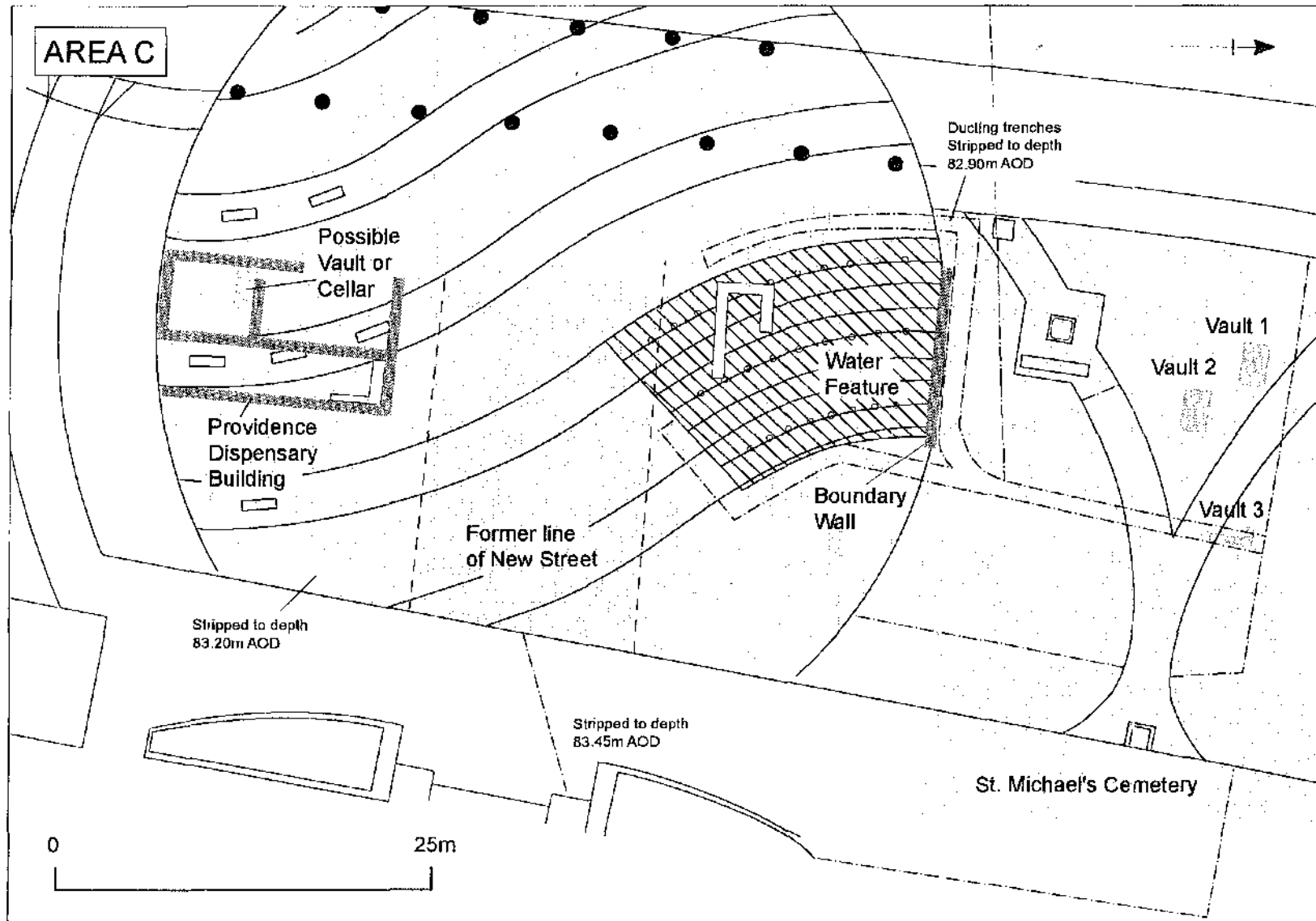


Fig.4

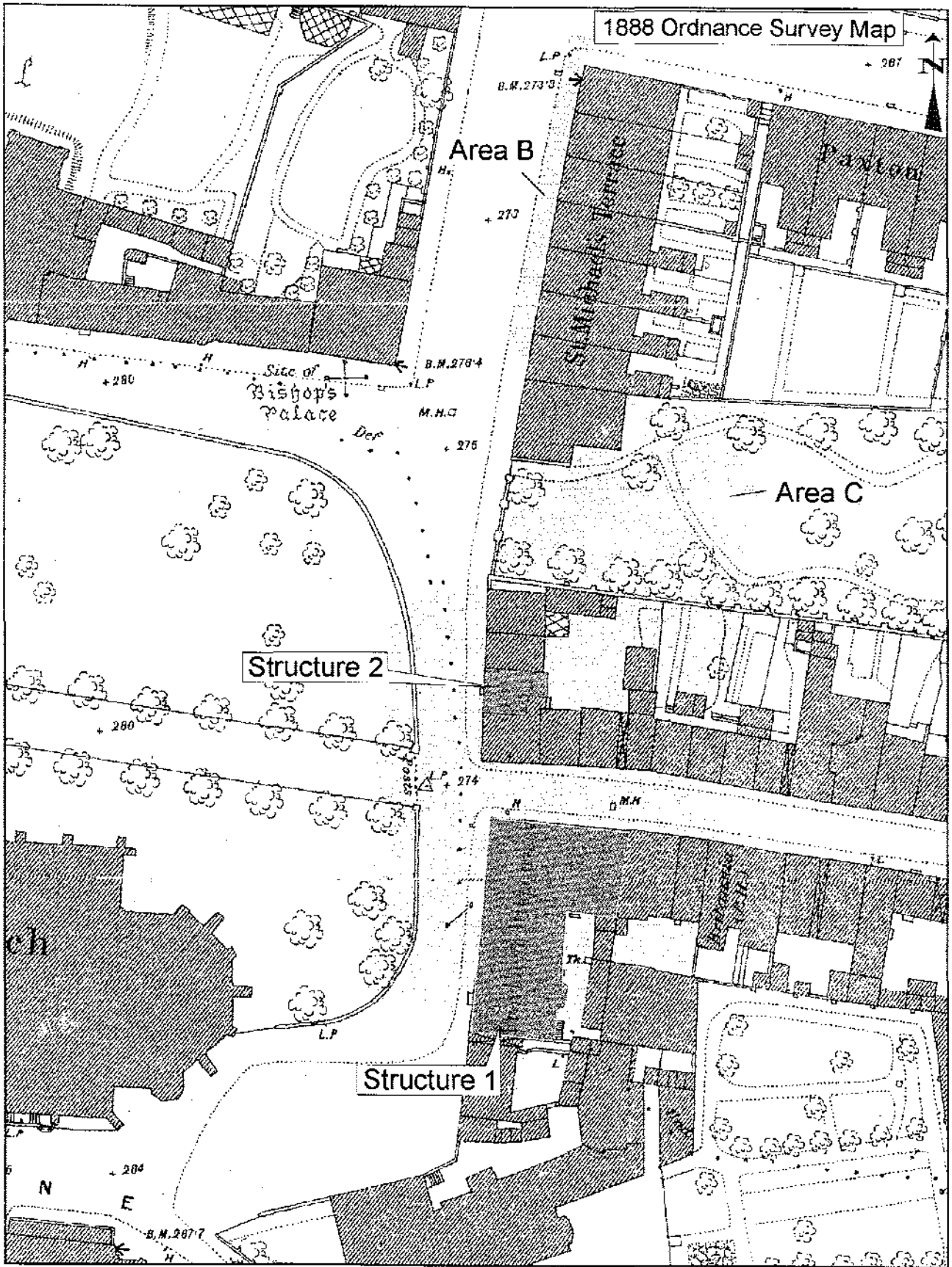


Fig.5

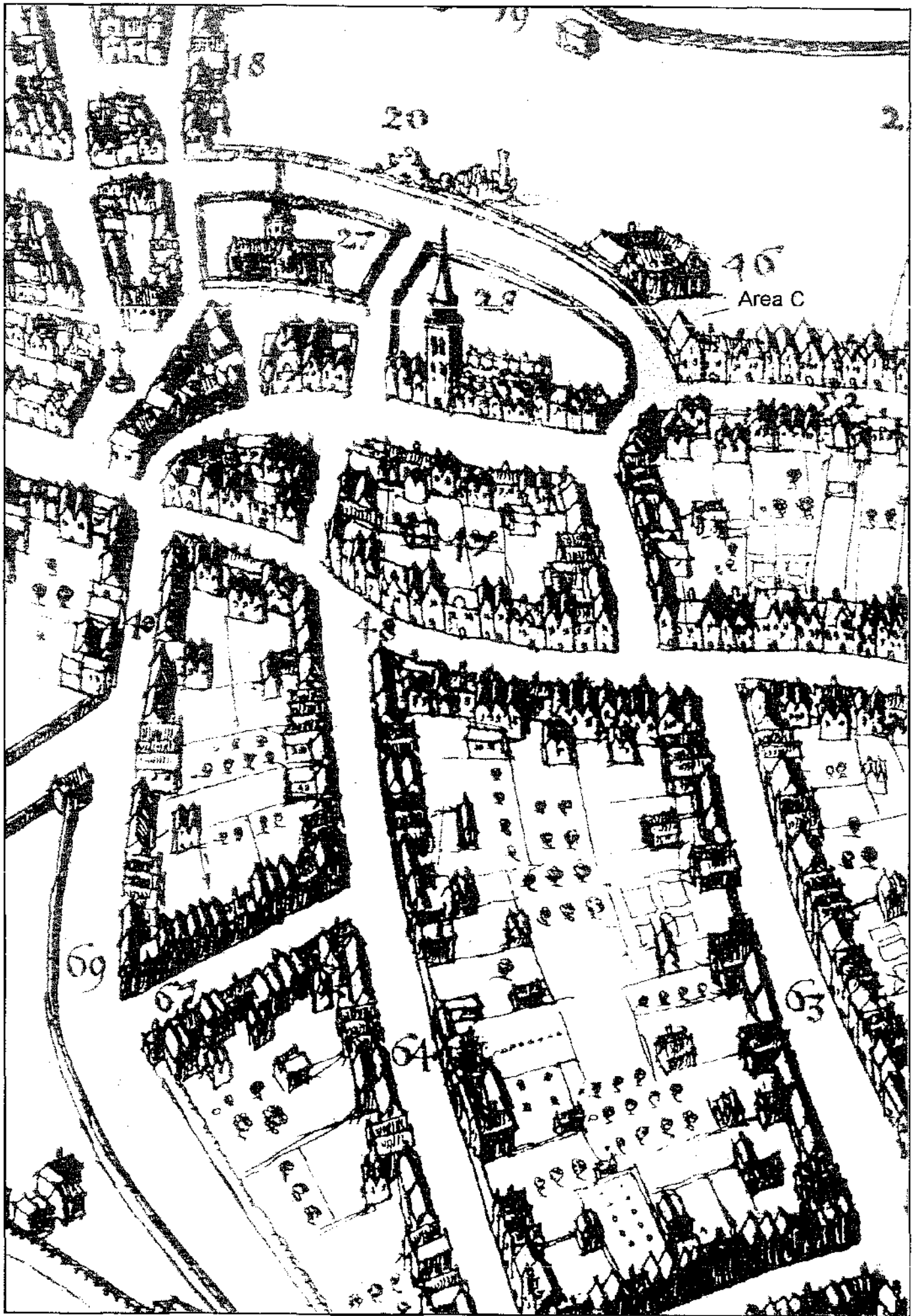


Fig.6

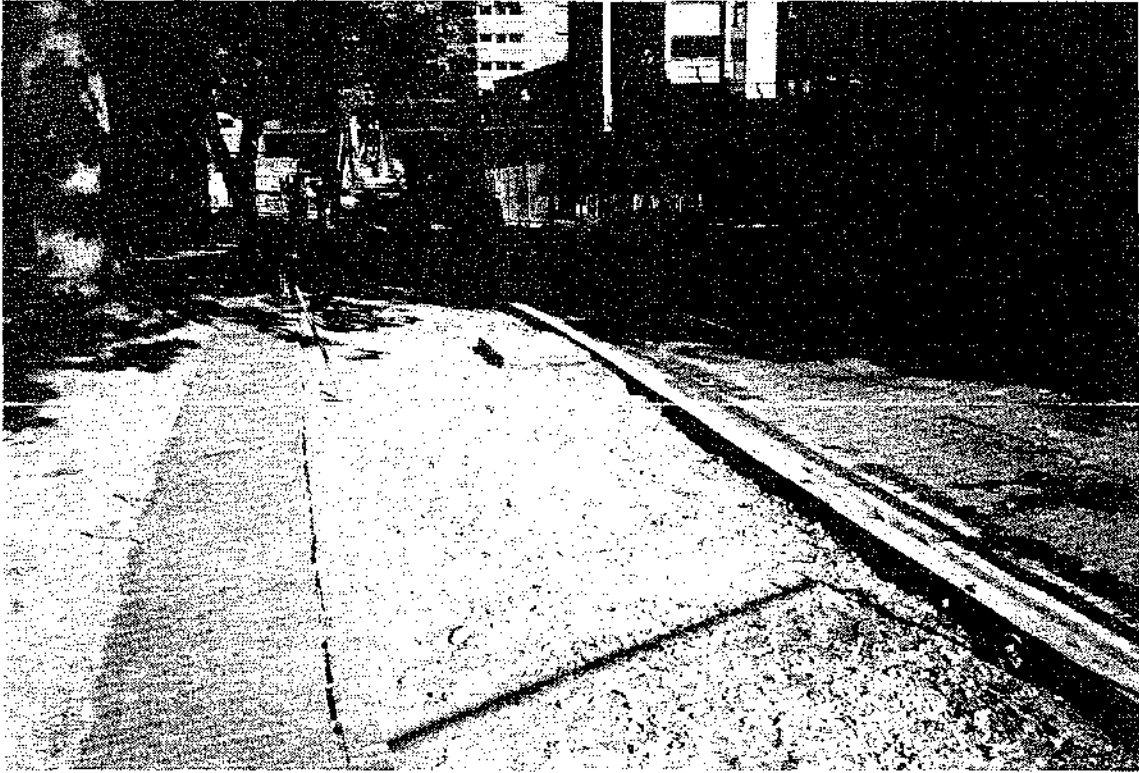


Plate 1



Plate 2



Plate 3

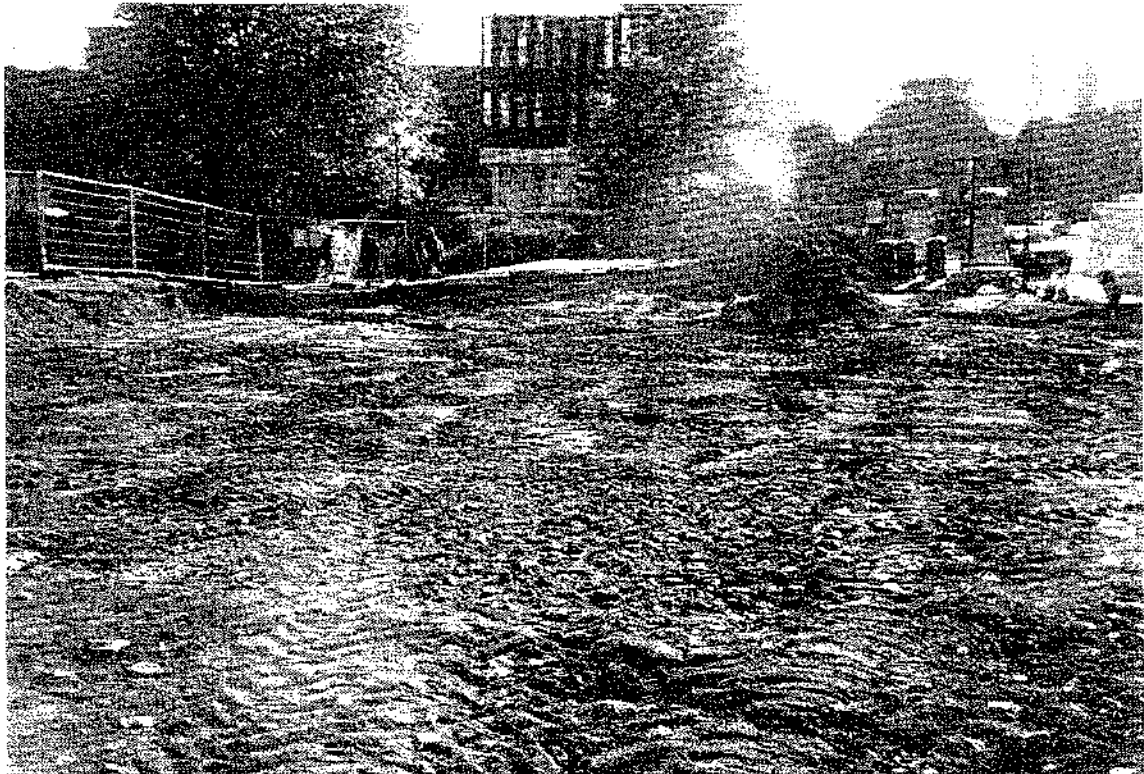


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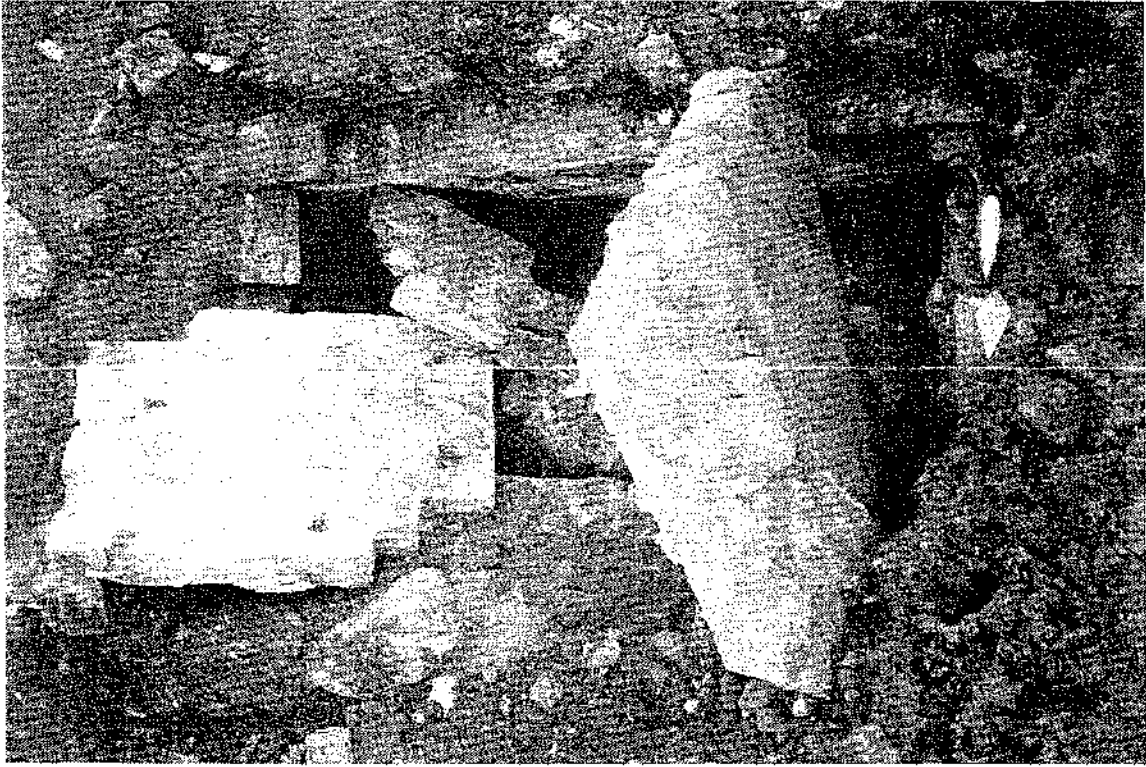


Plate 5

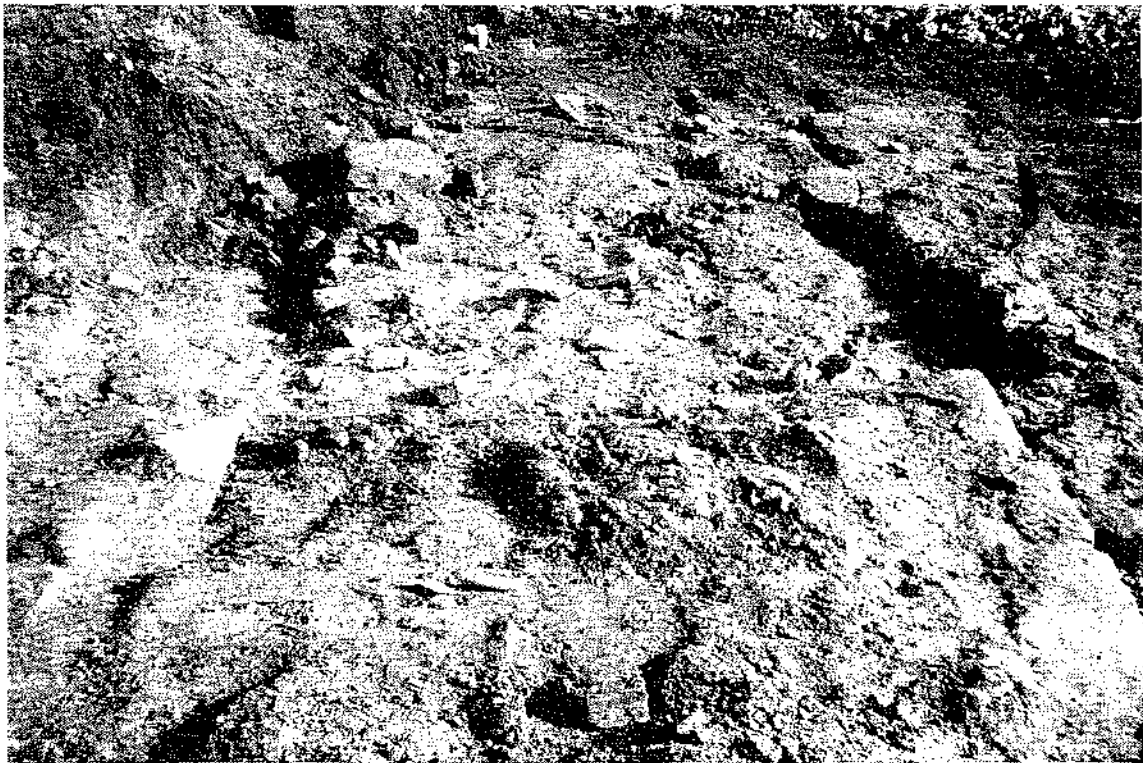


Plate 6