

**Shannon's Mill Road  
Scheme (Zone 1),  
Walsall: An  
Archaeological Watching  
Brief 2006**

Checked by

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## SHANNON'S MILL ROAD SCHEME (ZONE 1), WALSALL: AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF 2006

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## SUMMARY

*On May 26<sup>th</sup> 2006 an archaeological watching brief was undertaken of inspection trenches dug along the line of a proposed relief road in Walsall town centre which is part of the Shannon's Mill Redevelopment Scheme (NGR SP 0169 9836). The watching brief, which was carried out on behalf of Norton and Proffitt Developments Limited, recorded three trenches that had been cut to examine existing services close to 'The Ditch' in Zone I of the overall development area. Several truncated Victorian brick-built cellars were recorded which were seen to seal earlier archaeological deposits of 18<sup>th</sup> or 19<sup>th</sup> century date. No earlier deposits were observed although their presence is possible, as the natural ground surface was not contacted. A sherd of later medieval green-glazed pottery was recovered from a levelling deposit sealing the remains of the cellars, which may point to earlier occupation in this area. The houses belonging to the Victorian cellars appear to have been terraced into the hillside that rises up to the church on top of the hill. As in some places their walls were found just beneath the topsoil, whereas in other places they were buried under a metre of levelling material. The watching brief provided only a small-scale window into the buried deposits, and there remains the potential for surviving archaeological deposits to be located as 'islands' between areas of later disturbance.*

## **SHANNON'S MILL ROAD SCHEME (ZONE 1), WALSALL:**

### **AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF 2006**

#### **1 INTRODUCTION**

In May 2006 an archaeological watching brief was undertaken of inspection trenches dug along the line of a proposed relief road in Walsall town centre which is a part of the Shannon's Mill Redevelopment Scheme. The watching brief, which was commissioned by Norton and Proffitt Developments Limited observed three trenches that were cut to examine existing services close to 'The Ditch' in Zone I of the overall development.

This report outlines the results of the watching brief, which was carried out on 26<sup>th</sup> May and was prepared in accordance with the Institute of Field Archaeologists Standard and Guidance for Archaeological Watching Briefs (IFA 1999).

The assessment conformed to a brief produced by Mike Shaw the Black Country Planning Archaeologist, and a Written Scheme of Investigation (Birmingham Archaeology 2005) which was approved by the Local Planning Authority prior to implementation, in accordance with guidelines laid down in Planning Policy Guidance Note 16 (DoE 1990).

#### **2 LOCATION AND GEOLOGY**

The development area covers a large part of Walsall town centre, (Fig. 1) and is comprised of five zones. Zone I lies to the north-east of St Matthews Church and is defined by The Ditch, Ablewell Street, Upper Rushall Street and the terrace wall to the north of the church. Zone II comprises the majority of the street block defined by Lower Hall Lane, Caldmore Road, Upper Hall Lane, George Street and Digbeth/High Street. Zone III lies between George Street and Dudley Street/Peal Street and is currently a car park for the Sainsbury's store situated on the High Street. Zone IV covers the area of the Sainsbury's store and Zone V is located at the eastern end of the High Street, including a car park to the north of the road frontage and an area of the High Street itself.

The trenches observed were located close to 'The Ditch' a narrow street leading up from Ablewell Street to the church in the centre of Walsall in part of Zone I (NGR SP 0169 9836). The underlying geology consists of limestone which has been extensively quarried in the post-medieval period. The present character of the site is open grassland and here the relief road will be cut through the side of Church Hill.

#### **3 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES**

The principle aim of the project was to assess the survival and potential significance of the archaeology exposed in the trenches.

More specific aims were to:

- Gain further information on the depth that archaeological deposits may be anticipated to be encountered as an aid to the machine-stripping stage of work in advance of the construction of the road.
- Establish the date of any archaeological deposits predating the construction of the brick-built houses that were demolished here in the 1930s.

This information will be used to inform a mitigation strategy for future archaeological work on the site (see Section 7 below).

#### **4 METHOD**

The watching brief involved the cleaning and recording of three test pits that had been excavated in advance of the proposed road scheme. Generally, the pits measured c. 4m by 2m in plan and were excavated to depth of about 1.5m. The trench nearest to 'The Ditch' was larger in order to batter its more unstable sides. The test pits were excavated using a mechanical excavator. The stratigraphy in each pit was recorded by an archaeologist and sections drawn where appropriate. Photographs were taken using colour print film.

#### **5 ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT**

A detailed desk-based assessment has been carried out for this area (Conway 2001 and Ramsey 2003) that have demonstrated the high potential of this area for the survival and significant archaeological remains.

A Roman coin found on Church Hill provides the earliest evidence for activity in this area of Walsall (Conway 2001). It has been suggested that Church Hill may have been the site of an Iron Age hillfort which may represent an earlier phase of occupation, although this has yet to be substantiated archaeologically. Nevertheless, the hill appears to have been a focus for settlement and trading activity from the medieval period.

The documentary evidence from Walsall demonstrates that the town has been continuously occupied since at least the twelfth century (Baker 1989; Conway 2001). Settlement was already established by 1159 when Henry II granted the manor of Walsall to Herbert Le Rous. The town was granted a market charter in 1220, and it is likely that the High Street and associated burgage plots were laid out around this time (Baker 1989). The High Street and its market cross were certainly a focus of activity by the fourteenth century, and a great deal of central Walsall's street plan was in existence by the sixteenth century (Conway 2001). As well as settlement along High Street, there is also evidence to suggest settlement in the medieval period along Upper Rushall Street and the west side of Ablewell Street. Terracing around Church Hill is also likely to have begun in the medieval period. Industry was an important component of the economy of the town from an early period with coal and ironstone mining, and metalworking attested from the medieval period onwards.

The character of the town began to change from the eighteenth century with the layout of new streets, and occupation intensified during the industrial revolution. The town was densely occupied by the nineteenth century, yet a decline in the fortunes of the area around the High Street, Church Hill and Upper Rushall Street culminated in the demolition of slums in the 1930s.

An archaeological evaluation carried out behind the west frontage of Ablewell Street demonstrated the usual urban model of the presence of surviving 'islands' of archaeology

between eighteenth/nineteenth century cellars, including a stone built well of possible medieval date (BCSMR 13055). Lime-mortared stone walling has been recorded around Bullocks Row (BCSMR 11041) and in the gardens to the north-east of the Church (Baker 1989) at between 1 and 2m beneath the modern ground surface (Baker 1989). However, other test pits also dug in 1989 indicated that deposits are much shallower (0.3-0.5m) to the north in the area of Zone I (Fig. 1).

## 6 RESULTS

Trench 1 was highest up the hill a short distance to the north of the public footpath between Upper Rushall Street and 'The Ditch' (Fig. 2). Under the topsoil mantle the trench for a modern concrete capped service had been cut through the rubble backfill of a possible cellar or floor of a brick building. Six courses of the walls of this building survived to just under the topsoil mantle. The floor was paved with bricks bedded on a thin layer of sand and overlay a layer of mixed light brown sandy silt that contained brick fragments, mortar and pebbles. In turn this deposit overlay a lighter brown clay silt, with yellow sand and charcoal inclusions that overlay what appeared to be a redeposited natural yellow clay with large fragments of charcoal and pockets of orange sand. No trace was seen of natural weathered bedrock as excavation ceased after approximately 1.5m when the service had been defined. No dating material was recovered from this trench although the layers beneath the cellar floor are likely to be 18<sup>th</sup> or early 19<sup>th</sup> century in date and may seal earlier archaeological features and horizons.

Trench 2 was also bisected by the same modern service, although here this was cut through a series levelling deposits brought in to contour the hillside (Fig. 3). All of these levelling deposits sloped markedly down to the north end of the trench, the lowest deposit possibly representing a buried ashy garden soil. To the southern end of the trench the return of a one brick wide brick wall of a building was observed. Again this building had been demolished to a level just under the topsoil horizon. Immediately to the north of this building was a brick-lined drain that contained a porcelain W.C. The bricks used in the wall were traditionally made and bonded with lime mortar. They measured nine by four and a quarter by two and a half inches and are most likely to date from the later 18<sup>th</sup> or early 19<sup>th</sup> century. One of the courses of the brick wall was laid on edge and is therefore most likely to be foundation rather than upstanding wall. Judging from its height relative to the slope and the presence of the drain the building was unlikely to have been cellared. One sherd of green-glazed later medieval pottery was recovered from one of the lower levelling deposits and may be indicative of activity of that date somewhere in the vicinity.

Trench 3 was dug about three metres back from the frontage of 'The Ditch'. It was larger than the other two trenches because the eastern side required a 45 degree batter in order to stabilise the loose material that was excavated from here (Fig. 4). Once again the concrete capped service bisected the trench at a depth of roughly 1.5m on a roughly east-west alignment. To the south the floor of a building was truncated by the service trench. This had been backfilled with loose demolition material. The building was set at right angles to 'The Ditch', and its north wall was one and a half bricks thick. It had a mortar floor laid over a crushed brick and concrete bed, therefore, in terms of the construction methods used, it appeared to be later than the other buildings observed in Trenches 1 and 2. Materials such as Welsh Slate and steel were also observed in the excavated material from this cellar that further suggest a later 19<sup>th</sup> or early 20<sup>th</sup> century construction date. The floor of the building lay about a metre under the present ground surface and sealed a dark ashy layer containing 19<sup>th</sup> century pottery. This layer was not excavated further, but may seal earlier archaeological deposits. The stub of a one brick thick wall also abutted the north wall of this building, but was only observed for a distance of one metre before it in turn was truncated by the service trench.

This wall was sealed by a demolition deposit that in turn was sealed by a thin ashy layer that lay in a spread over the area to the north of the building at a similar height to general demolition level, which was about 1m beneath the modern ground surface. These demolition layers sealed part of the wall and tiled floor of another building observed in the northern end of the trench. This building was on a slightly different alignment and appeared to have been orientated more towards the Ablewell Street frontage rather than 'The Ditch'. The construction materials of this building, which included traditionally made red brick that measured nine by four and a quarter by two half inches, were similar to those of the buildings observed in Trenches 1 and 2 and were consistent with a late 18<sup>th</sup> or early 19<sup>th</sup> date.

## **7 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The archaeological evidence confirms that the foundations and cellars of the slum buildings demolished here in the 1930s still survive and are found at varying depths across this side of Church Hill. The majority of these buildings appear to have been constructed in the late 18<sup>th</sup> or early 19<sup>th</sup> century on a series of terraces. By relating the information from the trenches to 19<sup>th</sup> century mapping it can be seen that Trench 1 cut through the floor or cellar of a building fronting onto the Bull's Head Yard. Trench 2 clipped the back of an adjacent building but was mainly located in the yard area behind, while Trench 3 was located within the footprint of a larger square-shaped building fronting onto 'The Ditch' (Fig. 5). Particularly in areas where there are no cellars these buildings seal earlier archaeological deposits, and while none of the deposits observed appeared to be earlier than 18<sup>th</sup> century in date, the potential remains that medieval deposits may be present.

In Zone I the bank to the south of the Ablewell Street plots appears to be largely comprised of brick rubble and overburden. These layers of material are likely to relate to the demolition of 19<sup>th</sup> century buildings in this area in the 1930s. It does, however, seem likely that these deposits serve to augment what is a natural slope rising to the summit of Church Hill to the south. This may be reflected by the comparatively clean clay layers recorded in Trench 1 which may represent redeposited colluvium relating to terracing activity. It is not possible, however, from the information provided by the watching brief to evaluate the extent of terracing activity here or its potential date.

These results broadly conform to the pattern observed in other test pits on this side of Church Hill. Therefore, it is recommended that the area affected by the proposed new road be stripped by machine under archaeological supervision. This work should aim to remove all later levelling deposits and expose the walls and floors of the brick buildings. The watching brief confirms that this working level will be variable across the site. Once this has been achieved archaeological evaluation trenching can then be targeted towards areas of highest potential along the road line. Dependant upon the results of this evaluation it may then be necessary to conduct full excavation in order to mitigate the impact of the road as the depth of the proposed cutting will truncate any surviving archaeological deposits here.

## **8 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

The project was commissioned by DBK Back, on behalf of Norton and Proffitt Developments Limited. Thanks are due to David Ashe of DBK Back for his co-operation and assistance throughout the project, and Mike Shaw the Black Country Planning Archaeologist, who monitored the project on behalf of Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council. The watching brief was carried out by Stephen Litherland and Eleanor Ramsey of Birmingham Archaeology. Stephen Litherland produced the written report, which was illustrated by Nigel Dodds.



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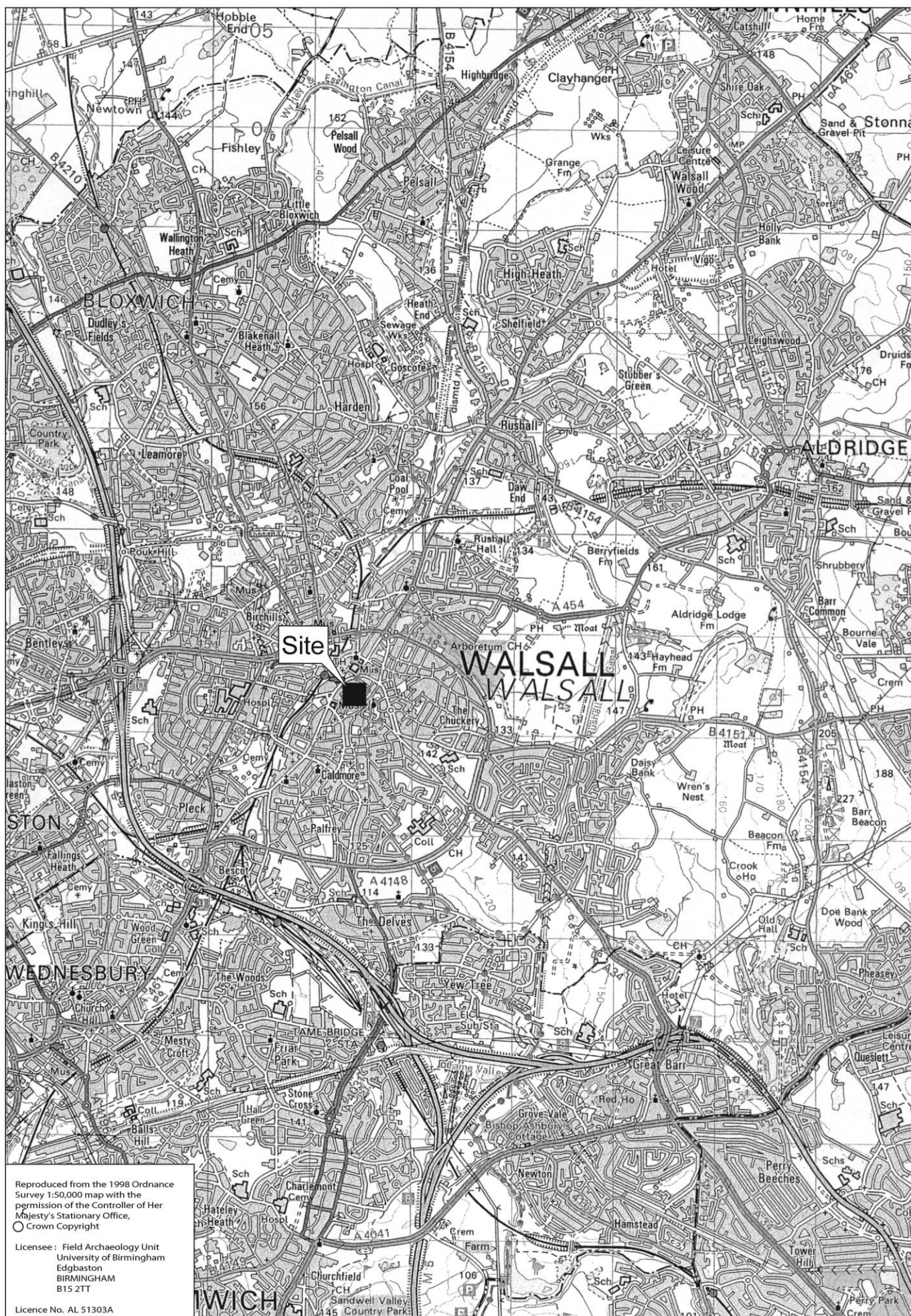


Fig.1

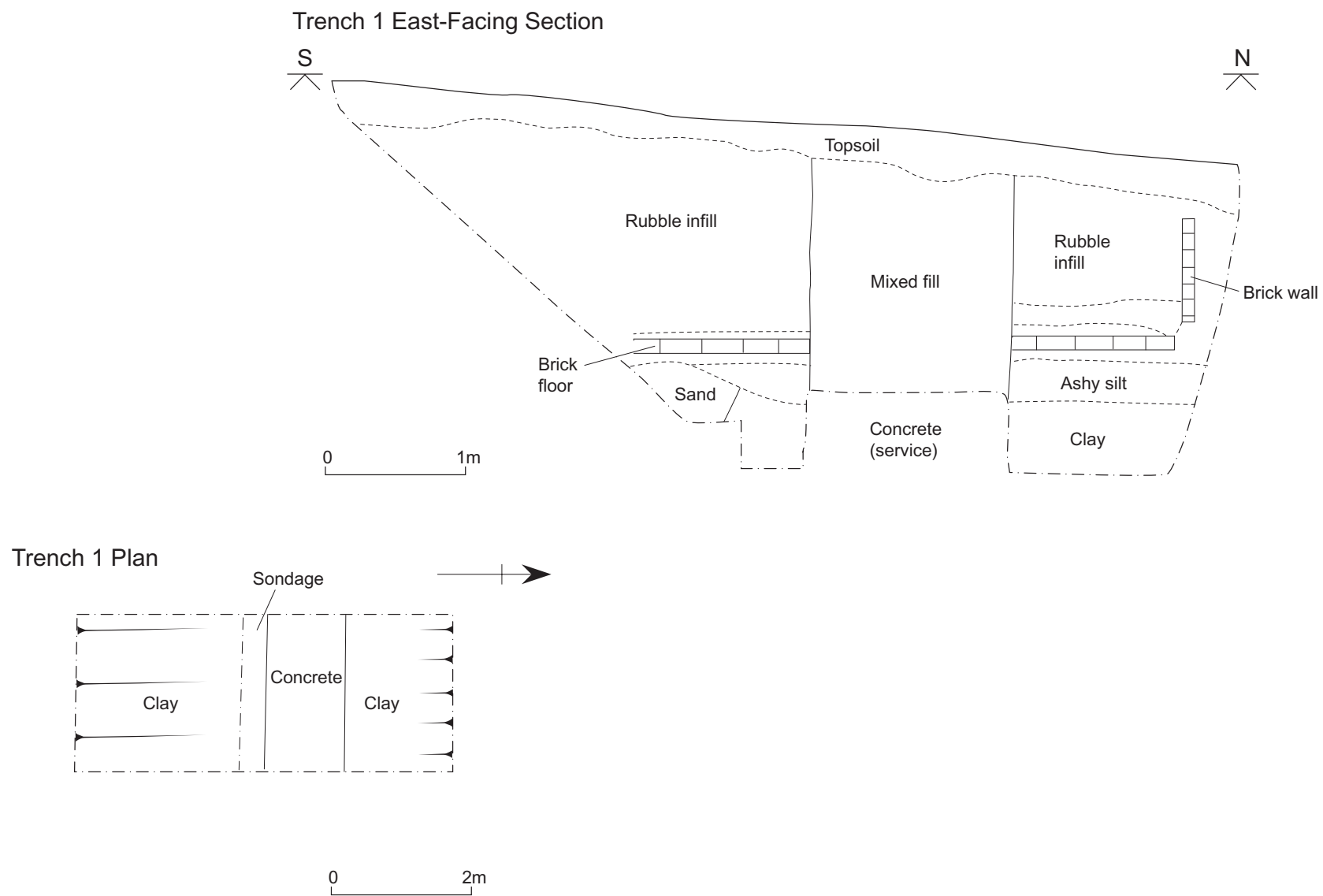
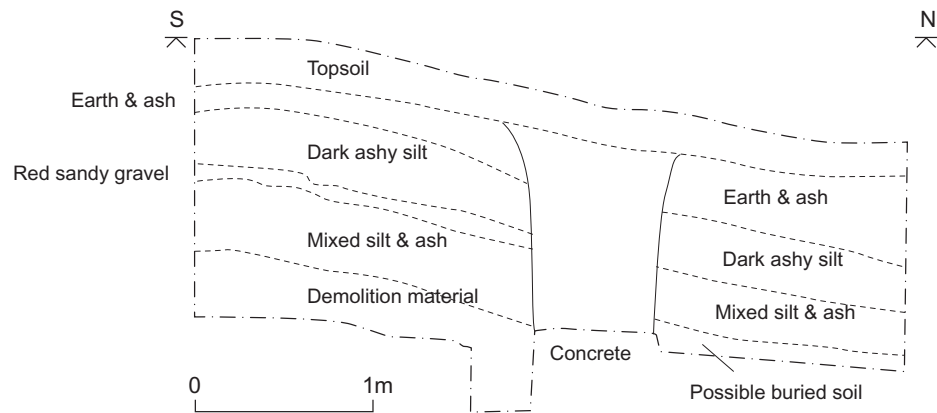


Fig.2

### Trench 2 East-facing section



### Trench 2 Plan

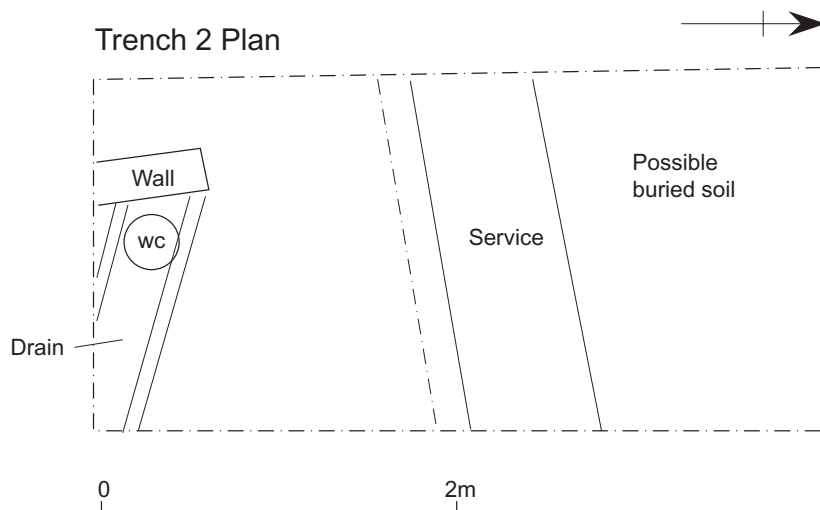
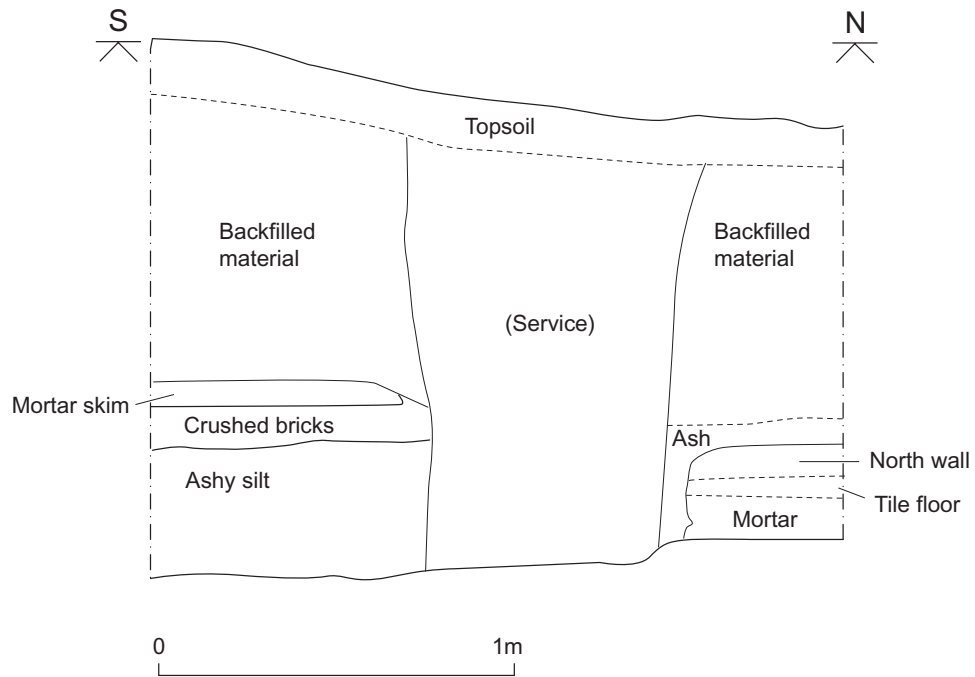


Fig.3

# Portion of Trench 3, East-facing section



## Plan of Trench 3

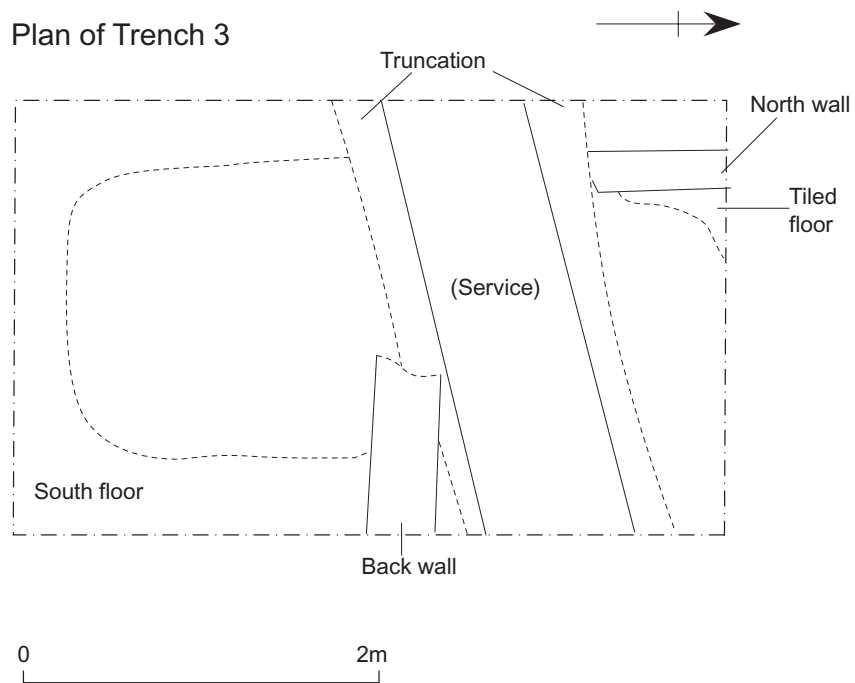


Fig.4





Fig.5





Plate 1



Plate 2



Plate 3





Plate 4



Plate 5





Plate 6



Plate 7