

BIRMINGHAM UNIVERSITY
FIELD ARCHAEOLOGY UNIT

AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION
OF THE PROPOSED
SAFEWAY DEVELOPMENT SITE
LOWER RUSHALL STREET,
WALSALL

B.U.F.A.U.



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by Jon Cane & Nigel Baker

Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit 1988

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SUMMARY.

The archaeological evaluation has revealed one wall of a building, possibly of 16th century date, on the Britannia Foundry site but, in general, very limited survival of archaeological deposits. The further recording of this building (duration: c.2 days) is recommended, before redevelopment commences, to be followed by an archaeological watching-brief (the monitoring of contractors' excavations) when ground in the foundry area is lowered. There should be no requirement for formal archaeological excavation.

INTRODUCTION.

In 1975, archaeological excavations on Lower Rushall Street, 19 metres to the south of Intown Row, found evidence of domestic occupation beginning in the 13th-14th centuries, overlain by the limestone rubble footings of a timber-framed building of the 15th or 16th century. It was clear from the results of this excavation, and from documentary and cartographic evidence, that this section of Lower Rushall Street was occupied in the late Middle Ages and built up in the early post-medieval period, the northern end of ribbon-development extending northwards from the town centre. On the basis of this evidence, Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit were requested by Walsall Borough Council to undertake an archaeological evaluation of a site in the immediate area, bounded by Whittimere Street, Lower Rushall Street, Walhouse Road, and Lichfield Street, in advance of a proposed redevelopment (fig.1).

ORGANISATION AND METHOD.

The evaluation took place in two phases, in March and April 1988, with machine-dug test trenches concentrating on the search for archaeological deposits on and immediately behind the Lower Rushall Street frontage.

PHASE ONE: THE OLD TANNERY AREA AND THE G.P.O. YARD (Figs. 2 and 3).

Between March 3rd and 10th four trenches were excavated by the BUFAU roving-team under the supervision of J. Sterenberg. All were dug by machine (JCB) under archaeological control. Two trenches were dug against the Lower Rushall Street frontage (areas 1 & 2) to the north of the redundant electricity sub-station, one trench was excavated at right-angles to the Walhouse Road frontage (area 3), and another (area 4) immediately to the west of the stream at the southern end of the G.P.O. yard.

Results.

Trenches 1 and 2 on the Lower Rushall Street frontage revealed extensive and deep 19th century brick cellarage: in Trench 1 this extended from the frontage as far back as the terrace-cut for the former tannery; in Trench 2 there were limited yard and garden deposits of 19th century date behind the cellarage. Natural in Trench 1 was sand, and in Trench 2 was clay. Trench 3 revealed a depth of 1.9m of rubble and garden soils overlying natural clay. All layers contained 19thC or later ceramics. Trench 4 encountered a series of brick-built tanning-pits immediately below the modern yard surface. The machine could not penetrate these and excavation of this trench was discontinued.

Conclusions:

The test-trenches showed no evidence at all of pre-19th century deposits surviving in this area of the site. The potential of this area of the site for the preservation of early deposits does, therefore, appear to be negligible.

PHASE TWO: THE BRITANNIA FOUNDRY (Fig.4).

This phase of the evaluation was carried out under the supervision of J. Cane, for the Field Archaeology Unit. All trenches were dug by machine (JCB 3CX) under archaeological control, with a Montabert Breaker to remove thick, and often reinforced, concrete floors which covered most of the area. All sections were drawn, except where their instability allowed no more than a photographic record to be made (trench F/1).

Results.

Site A: The north boundary wall of the foundry included a stretch of limestone rubble masonry which was thought to be an early property boundary. A small trench was opened against this section. The results suggest that this section of walling once formed the outside wall of a building, now demolished. One window, visible above ground, still retains its frame, while another had possibly been blocked while the building was in use. A contemporary ground surface was marked by a fragmentary brick path c.1m below the modern ground surface. About 2m to the south of the wall was a substantial brick wall which may have been a retaining wall for dumped material used to raise the ground level to the south. The two structures would have formed a narrow alleyway similar to that which marks the western edge of the foundry. The brick floor sealed a layer of garden soil, which in turn overlay a layer of dirty gravel. The natural subsoil was not contacted in this area. Finds from the soil beneath the floor, and the use of brick in the lower part of the house wall ,

suggests an 18th-19th-century date for the construction of this alleyway. The date of the building is unknown, though it is likely to be post-medieval. A limestone-walled building investigated on the 1975 site (fig.1), was dated by the excavators as probably 16th century.

Site B: This consisted of a narrow trench dug in the north-eastern corner of the foundry. The top of the natural subsoil was contacted, but had been heavily truncated by brick features. These included a cellar in the extreme north-east corner and rubble-filled features to the south-west. At the south-western end the natural sand began to fall away to the north-west. This area had been levelled-up with dirty gravel similar to that revealed in the bottom of Site A, and may represent a large-scale levelling-up operation over the whole area.

Site C: The entry to the foundry complex provided another opportunity to excavate close to the frontage. Risk of substantial later disturbance was also thought to be less. In fact, the natural subsoil had been lowered by more than one metre and sealed by dark soil containing modern material.

Site D/E: A series of four trenches were dug by machine at right-angles to the eastern wall of the foundry, along the Lower Rushall Street frontage. All revealed substantial disturbance in the form of earlier cellars or other large post-medieval features. At the southern end, the present foundry floor is more than one metre below street-level, suggesting that, in addition to localised disturbance, there will be a general truncation of any potential archaeological deposits in this area.

Site F: The courtyard of the foundry complex was tested by a series of three trenches running from the rear of the Lower Rushall Street frontage towards the western edge of the foundry. All revealed considerable late disturbance, including a vaulted brick culvert, but also a distinct westwards fall in the level of the natural subsoil. Much of the made ground revealed by these trenches consisted of brick-rubble and soil, but the initial levelling was done with the same dirty gravel as was found in the adjacent sites. The site furthest from Lower Rushall Street, against the back wall of the western range of buildings, did not contact the natural subsoil but revealed truncated brick structures sealed by the same dirty gravel.

Site G: The area covered by the more recent buildings was investigated with a small machine-dug trench, primarily to test reports of large quantities of bone found during works in the area. The natural gravel was contacted at a depth of c.1.5m, but extensive brick features were also found. No bones were recovered.

Discussion.

The archaeological inferences to be drawn from limited excavations in this kind of environment must be fairly tentative. However, several trends can be identified from the results of this evaluation. Firstly, it seems likely that any early deposits which may have existed in the Lower Rushall Street frontage area have been destroyed by late post-medieval activity, relating principally to the industrial arrangements still surviving on the site. The trenches excavated here found only the truncated natural subsoil and/or recent brick features, and no artefacts earlier in date than the 18th century.

Secondly, the series of terraces by which the ground surface falls away to the west were probably constructed by dumping material rather than by cutting into the slope. Only in the frontage area and in the southern parts of the site does the natural sand and gravel seem to have been systematically removed to provide a levelled area. The terracing-out to provide this platform for building on the Lower Rushall Street and Whittimere Street frontages left a considerable drop in ground-level to the rear. The gaps between these terraces and existing buildings formed narrow alleyways, such as that revealed in Site A. This has implications for the potential survival of early deposits: archaeological evidence may have survived at the rear (west) of the site, sealed by these dumping-operations.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER ARCHAEOLOGICAL RECORDING.

1. There is no evidence to suggest that formal archaeological excavation on this site is required in advance of redevelopment.
2. The wall of the early limestone-rubble building should be recorded archaeologically in advance of any demolition or groundworks in this area. A photographic record and outline drawing has been made already; this should be supplemented by a detailed measured drawing, and the stripping of plaster from the north (internal) face of the wall to seek evidence of any internal features that may survive.
Timing: c.2 days, prior to demolition/groundworks.
3. A suitably-qualified archaeologist should monitor the progress of groundworks on the foundry site, to recover evidence of any early deposits, structures, or artefacts, that may have been sealed by the terracing operations to the rear of the Lower Rushall Street frontage area, as described above.
Timing: unknown, dependant on the duration of commercial excavations in this area.
4. A report on the results of activities 2. and 3., and on any artefacts recovered during the operation, should be prepared by

the archaeologist for deposition in the appropriate local and national archives.

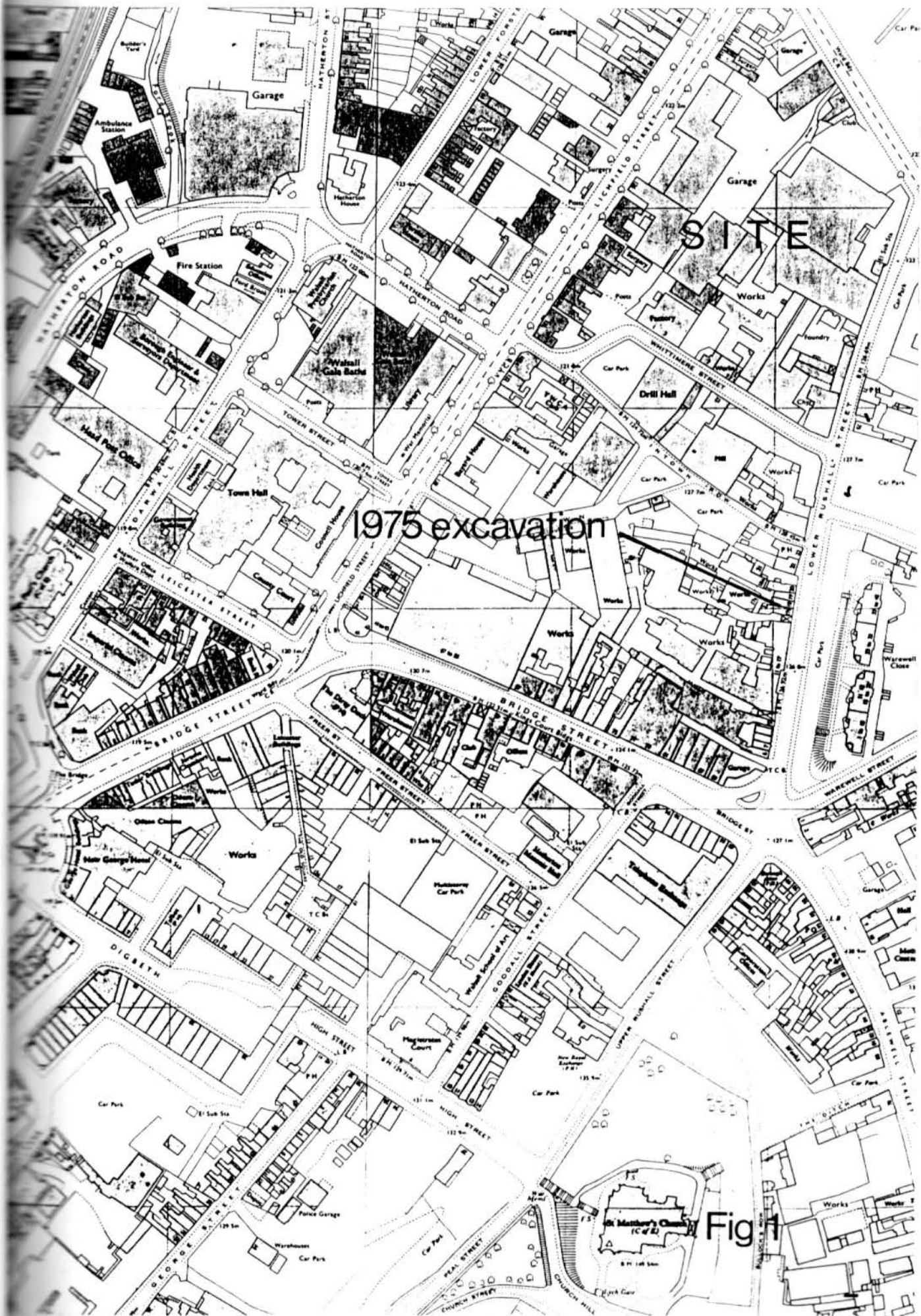
Timing: Difficult to assess on present evidence, but a probable maximum time required of one month.

COSTS.

A detailed costing for this exercise can be provided, to include a contingency and the cost of preparing a full report, when a firm timetable for the redevelopment has been fixed.

Jon Cane
Nigel Baker

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SITE

1975 excavation

Fig 1

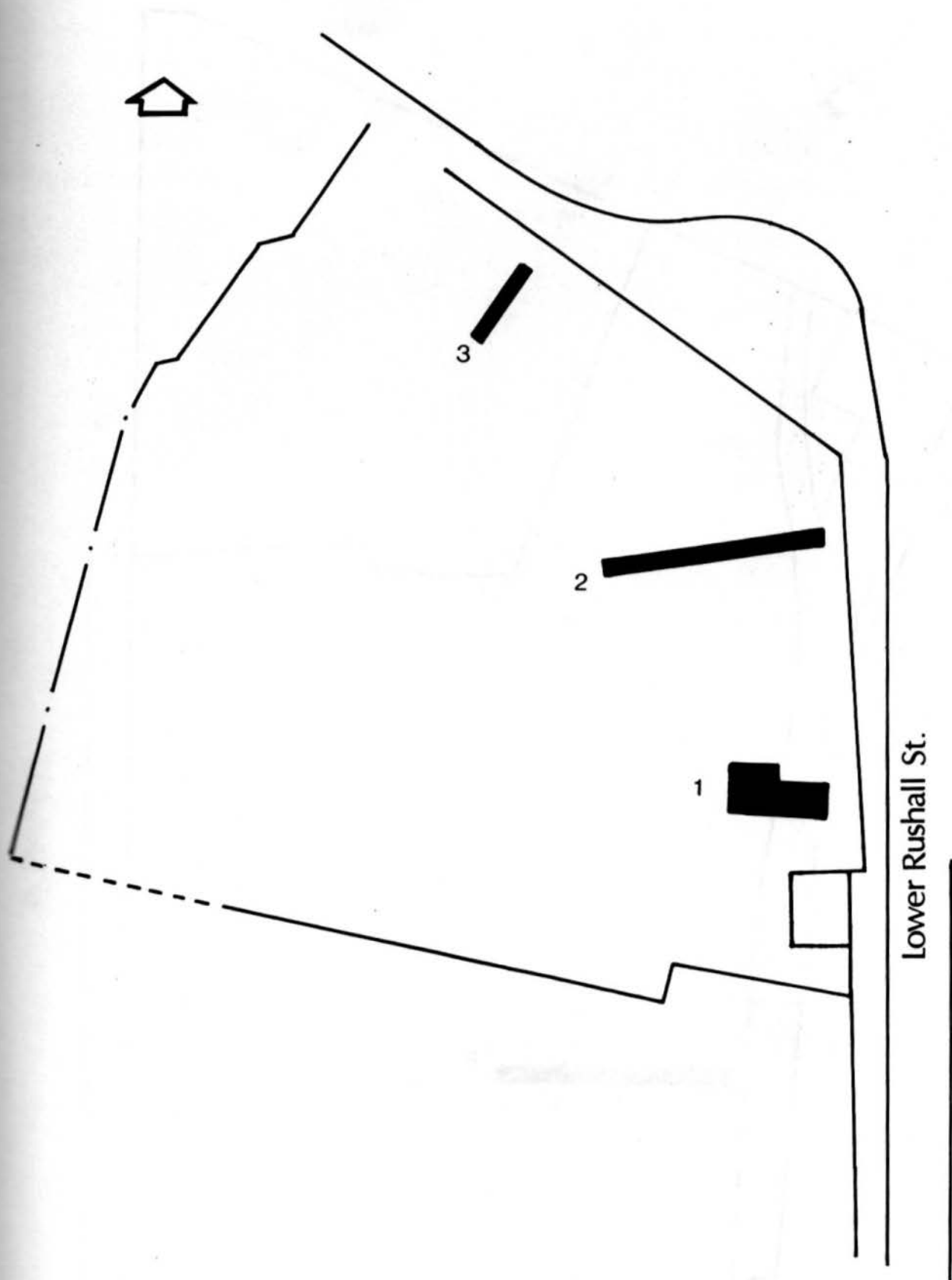


Fig. 2

Lichfield St.

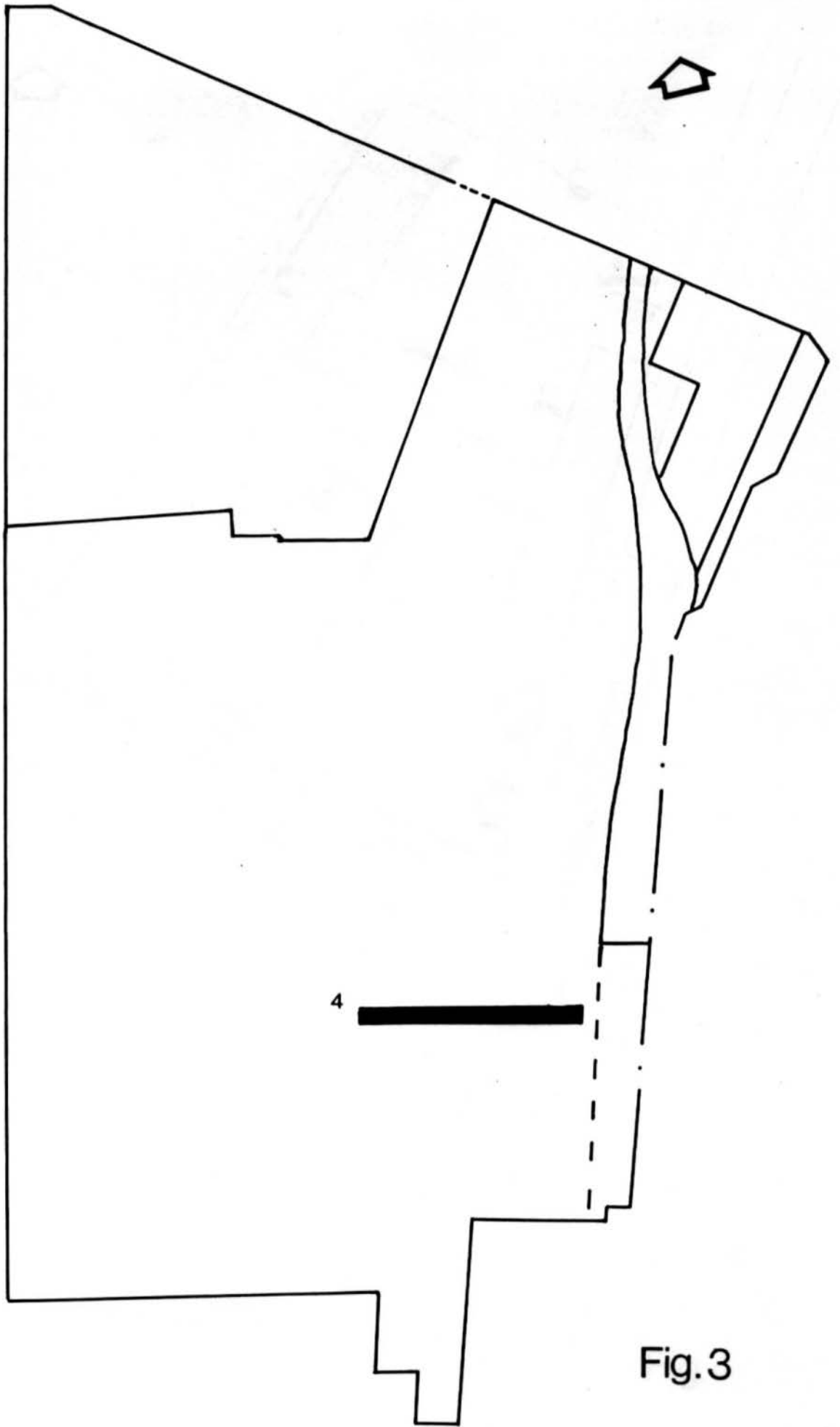


Fig.3

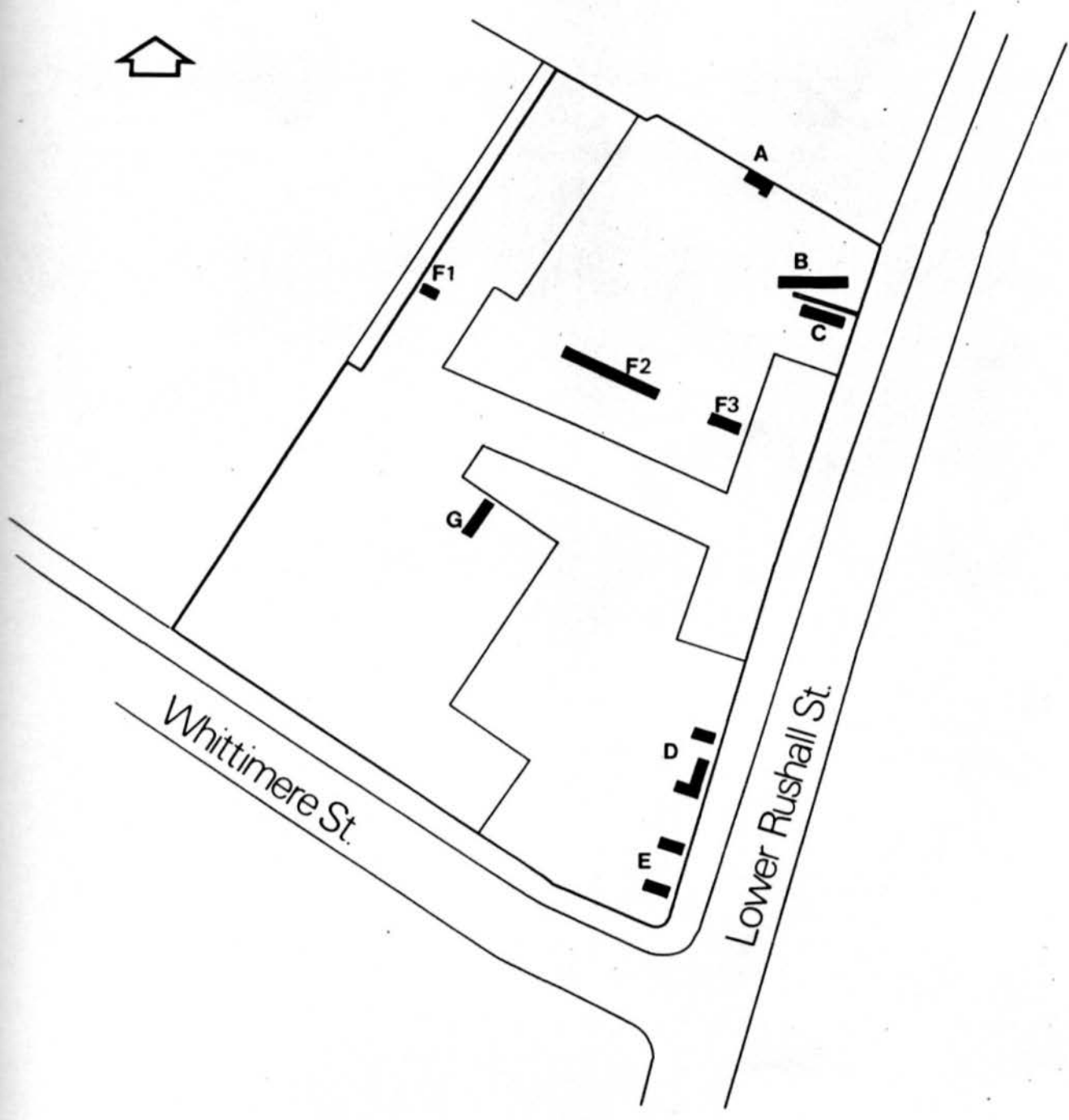


Fig.4