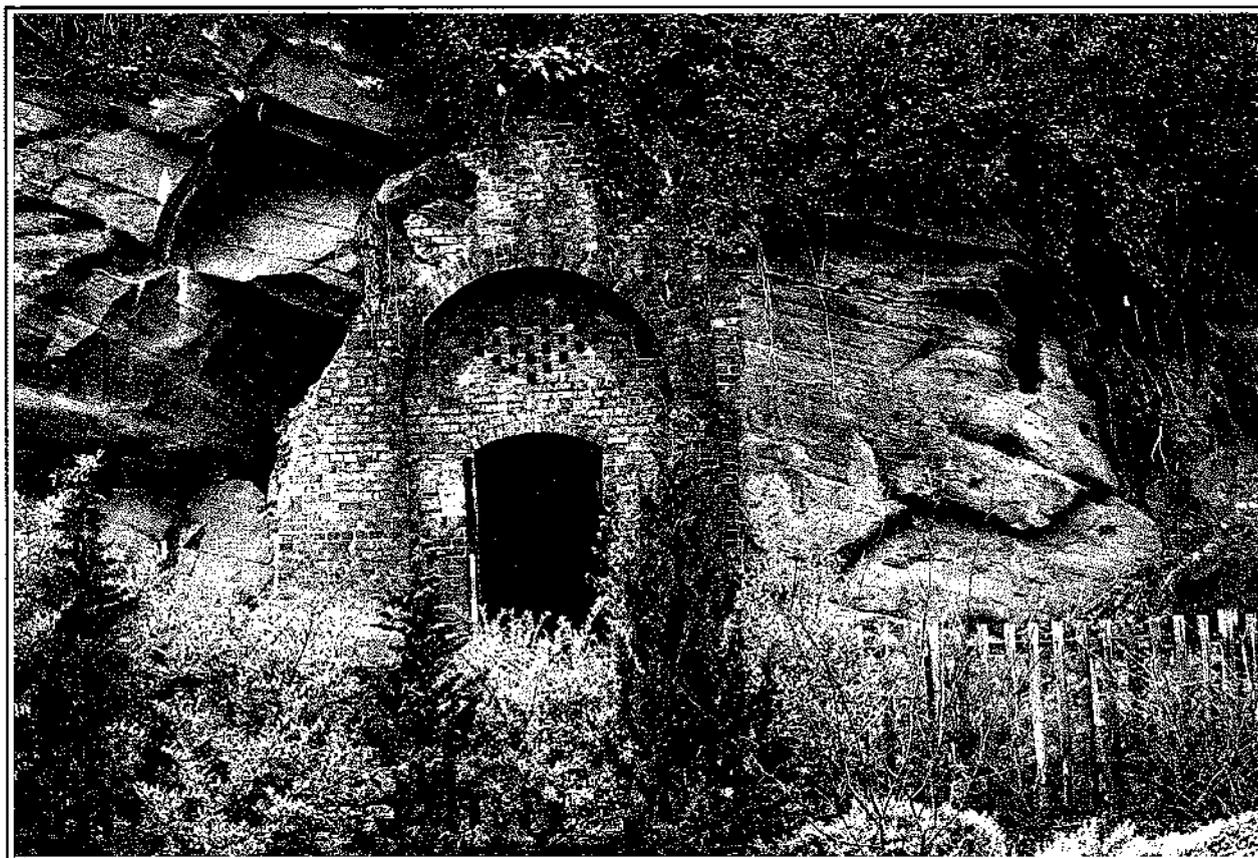


CAVES
IN AN URBAN SETTING
BRIDGNORTH
SHROPSHIRE



Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit

**Caves in an Urban Setting:
Bridgnorth, Shropshire**

By
Paul Sewter

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Introduction

This report is the result of a survey undertaken in the small market town of Bridgnorth in Shropshire. The aim of the survey was to assess and record the extent, nature and condition of the caves in the town. The intention was to look at caves as domestic habitations but it soon became apparent that the caves in the town had a variety of functions. These functions were commercial and industrial as well as domestic.

Methodology

The survey was undertaken over a period of five days in November 1989. The fieldwork entailed recording the location of caves and making ground plans. The results of the survey are presented in the catalogue with written descriptions accompanied by plans. Internal features such as putlog holes, rock cut shelves, and other details were recorded and listed separately. It was intended to draw elevations and profiles of the caves but lack of time prevented this. However, the elevations of some internal features were drawn.

Historical Research

The field survey was supported by some general background research into cave dwelling in Britain and Europe (Baring-Gould 1911; Crawford 1979; Kempe 1988), and into local examples at Kinver Edge (Brooker-Carey *et al* 1988; King and King 1975).

When the diversity of uses of the Bridgnorth caves became apparent special attention was paid to the parallel industrial and commercial roles of caves in Nottingham (Barley and Smith 1976; Cherry 1972; Cherry 1975; Hamilton n.d.; McCormack 1976; Terrell-Nield 1986). Visits were made to the Nottingham Castle Museum, Brewhouse Yard Museum, Nottingham Local Studies Library and the County Record Office.

For information on the Bridgnorth caves use was made of material in the Shropshire Sites and Monuments Record at Shire Hall, the Local Studies Library in Shrewsbury, and the County Library and the Old Town Hall Museum in Bridgnorth. The material consulted in all cases comprised secondary sources, books and journals. No primary documentary sources were seen for the Bridgnorth caves such as those known for the Kinver caves (Brooker-Carey *et al* 1988). Primary evidence, photographs, letters and newspaper accounts and so on must exist. Certainly there are people in the town with first- and second-hand experience of the caves and an oral history project might therefore be worthwhile. An effort should certainly be made to gather this information at some future stage.

Geology and Topography

Bridgnorth is a small market town (Price 1957), situated on the middle reaches of the River Severn. The town is sited on a natural escarpment, some 35-40 metres in height, aligned NE-SW for 0.8 kilometres along the west bank of the River Severn. It is formed of Permian Bridgnorth Sandstone (formerly Lower Mottled Sandstone), deposited under terrestrial desert conditions and is 'well sorted, cross stratified of largely aeolian origin, containing an abundance of well rounded wind polished quartz grains thought to have been deposited as sand dunes'. Their orientation suggests they were blown by easterly winds (Hains and Horton 1969, 63).

From the north the land rises gently to a plateau generally some 32 metres above the river. The so-called High Town occupies this plateau. From here the land falls away westwards and is cut by narrow, steep-sided, wooded valleys before rising further westward to higher ground. This higher ground is now covered by Bridgnorth's western suburbs. Dominating the High Town, St. Leonard's Church is located on

a rise some 9 metres above the plateau and 40 metres above the river.

To the south of St. Leonard's, the castle's inner and outer baileys stand on a sandstone outcrop 33 metres above the river. On its western side the ridge falls steeply away to a dry valley now occupied by Bridgnorth Railway Station. On the west side of this valley the ground rises gently south-westward towards Oldbury, about one mile away. A motte-and-bailey fort, Panpudding Hill, occupies a slight rise overlooking the railway station.

The dominating physical feature of the town is the sandstone ridge mentioned above. It covers an area, at its broadest point, 250 metres east to west, and 500 metres north to south. It narrows to a jutting peninsula at its southernmost point. The western side is marked by steep slopes and vertical cliff faces and it is in these cliffs that the caves are found. The slopes are most severe at the southern end of the peninsula. Proceeding northwards they ease in severity, which, combined with an increase in the width of the River Severn floodplain, allowed the development of the medieval borough in this area (Slater 1988, 10, fig 3).

History

In the medieval period the town's importance was derived from its control of one of the three major river crossings in the region (Fig 1). The sandstone ridge offered an ideal site for the Anglo-Saxon burgh, and later the castle and the Medieval walled borough. (Slater 1988, fig 2). The area is first mentioned in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle for the year 895-6, where it is recorded that the Danish army constructed a fort, (the eastern of two burghs), and overwintered there. In A.D. 912 Aethelflaed of Mercia constructed a second burgh at '*Bricge*'. According to the Mercian Register and the twelfth-century chronicler, Florence of Worcester, this burgh was on the west bank of the river (Slater 1988, 4). Slater suggests that it was a 'characteristic promontory burgh, perhaps reviving the hypothesised Iron Age defences'. The burgh consisted of a massive bank and ditch cutting off the tip of the promontory at its narrowest point

and forming the northern defences, the remaining sides being protected by the steep-sided sandstone cliff (Slater 1988, 4, fig 2).

The development of the town (Fig 3) has been comprehensively examined by T.R. Slater of the School of Geography, University of Birmingham (Slater 1988). In broad terms the town spreads northward from the Castle and bailey area, the hillside being developed in the medieval period, and ends its northward expansion at the Friary of the Franciscan order, founded before A.D. 1244 (Slater 1988, 10 & fig 3). Access to this suburb was by a single road, the Cartway. This road winds down from the High Street to the river crossing, now marked by a bridge built in 1823 (Pevsner 1958, 84).

Unlike the twelfth-century borough, where regular burgage plots were possible (Slater 1988, 12-13), on the hillside the pattern of small, irregular plots is dictated by the topography. Slater suggests these units are derived from early field enclosures (Slater 1988, 10).

Communication between the High Town and the riverside was supplemented by seven passageways cut down the cliff face (Gwilt n.d. 'a', 31). These passages, called Steps, are, from north to south, Granary Steps, Friars Load, St. Leonard's Steps, Bank Steps, Stoneway Steps, St. Mary's Steps and Library Steps.

In 1792 a 'New Road' was built connecting the riverside with the High Town (Pevsner 1958, 83). New Road rounds the base of the peninsula below the castle to gain access to the town on its western side. A more direct route was provided for pedestrians by the construction of the Cliff Railway in 1892, incidentally destroying several caves (Gwilt n.d. 'a', 37).

Many of the late-seventeenth to late-eighteenth-century houses, especially in the High Street, East and West Castle Streets, St. Mary's Street, St. Leonard's Close, Friary Street and Cartway are listed Grade II, for group value only (S.M.R. Shrewsbury). The town contains few buildings of outstanding architectural interest, with the exception of the Town Hall of 1648-52 and Bishop Percy's House of 1580 in Cartway (Pevsner 1958, 80-83). No houses appear to be listed because they have a rock cut element.

THE CAVES

Catalogue

The caves can be divided into four classes, by function.

- A Primary use as a dwelling.
- B As secondary or subsidiary rooms in a conventional house.
- C Small caves used as storage or for secondary domestic functions.
- D Caves related to industrial or commercial activity.

In addition there are a number of blocked and inaccessible caves that are, at present, unclassifiable.

For the location of the caves see Figure 2.

CLASS A

Cave 1. 54 Friars St. (Fig 4) N.G.R. SO 7184 9332

This is a three-chambered cave overlooking the site of the Friary. The main cave is 5.00m by 3.00m and 2.30m high. A lower recess, 1.60m high, extends back a further 2.70m and is 2.70m wide. Entrance is gained to a second chamber via a doorway with a girder lintel. This chamber is 4.10m by 3.50m and 2.00m high. The outside wall is largely brick, with an irregular opening that may have served as a window. Cut into the sandstone is a brick fireplace 2.12m wide, with a chimney breast 2.00m high. This is built through a hole cut in the sandstone roof. The fireplace itself has a wood lintel. To the left of the fireplace is a small chamber, 2.00m by 3.00m, 1.80m high and filled with débris.

CLASS B

Cave 2. 4 Library Steps. (Fig 5) N.G.R. SO 7174 9276

April cottage is formed from a pair of one-up, one-down eighteenth-century cottages, now converted into a single house. The original deeds, in possession of the owner, describe it as a "cave house". The brick built house butts onto the cliff face. At the ground floor rear, rooms are cut into the rock. Before the improvement of the property, the rock walls, with door and window openings, were visible (information from owner). These still exist but are masked by the modern work. The caves have been lined and are now used as a kitchen and living room but it was not possible to obtain dimensions of these rooms. In the garden a third cave, c.5m by 4m has also been improved, obscuring the cave walls. In the lower garden there is a brick chimney breast set into the cliff face, and next to this is a two-chambered cave complex. These caves belonged to numbers 2 and 3 Library Steps, now demolished.

Cave 3. 92 Cartway. (Fig 6) N.G.R. SO 7170 9311

To the rear of a property, demolished some time before 1962, is a small cave. Its dimensions are 4.60m wide, 3.10m deep and up to 2.04m high. The entrance is supported by a brick archway, and the cave divided by a brick wall. The external brick-work and foundations in the yard suggest that the house and the cave were an integral unit as in Cave 2 (see above). The cave walls and roof are smooth and rounded. The floor is of laid brick. There is a niche, 0.50m deep, in the back wall.

CLASS C

Cave 4a. Underhill St. (Fig 7). N.G.R. SO 7177 9287

This cave is 5.00m wide and 1.80 deep. The height at the entrance arch is 2.40m, decreasing to 1.05m at the back of the cave. Cut into the north wall are a series of putlog holes and a ledge, 0.50m wide.

Cave 4b. Underhill St. (Fig 7). N.G.R. SO 7177 9288

To the north of the main cave, 4a, is a small cave 1.60m wide, 1.60m deep and 1.70m high. It has smooth straight walls and a flat roof.

Caves 5a,b & c. Underhill St. (Fig 8)

N.G.R. SO 7174 9276

These three small caves have a 13m frontage of cliff face and appear to belong to the same property division.

Cave 5a: A small cave, 2.00m wide by 2.50m deep and 1.50m high.

Cave 5b: Only the upper part of the sandstone arch is visible, the remainder of the cave is full of debris.

Cave 5c: The cave front has a well-built brick arch, 1.60m high. The cave dimensions are obscured by a great deal of debris. It is approximately 3.10m wide, and 2.00m deep. Approximately 5m to the south are the caves in the garden of 4 Library Steps (see above Cave 2).

Cave 6. 3 Granary Steps. (Fig 9).

N.G.R. SO 7181 9332

The house, a small, brick structure set into a terrace below St. Leonard's Church, was demolished some time after 1969. It had a small two-chambered cave at the side, beneath Granary Steps passageway. Entrance is from the garden through a stepped door. The main chamber is 2.80m by 2.00m and at least 1.75m high. The floor is presently obscured by rubbish. A small chamber extends back 2.20m and is 1.10m wide. There is a narrow, rock-cut ledge on the back wall, and a now-blocked door once led into the front room of the house.

Cave 7. 3 Granary Steps. (Fig 10).

N.G.R. SO 7182 9332

Further down the hill, in the garden of number 3, is a second cave, again cut beneath Granary Steps. It has a small, oval chamber entered through a brick-arched door. The cave's dimensions are 5.50m long by 3.70m wide. The smooth, ovoid roof is between 1.65m and 1.80m high. A second, brick arch into the garden has been blocked up.

Cave 8. 20 St. Mary's Steps.

N.G.R. SO 7174 9287

19 and 20 St. Mary's Steps are a pair of nineteenth-century brick cottages. Access to a small yard at the back of number 20 is gained through a passage within the house. The yard backs against a cliff face and has two cave entrances. The size of the caves is not known. Number 19 may have a similar cave, but was not accessible at the time of the survey.

Cave 9. 9 St. Mary's Steps.

N.G.R. SO 7175 9294

In the garden of this house are two small caves. The Ordnance Survey maps and surviving house numbers suggest that two small properties, numbers 7 and 8, demolished before 1962, occupied what is now the garden of number 9. These caves may have performed a similar role to Cave 8, (see above).

Cave 10. 30 Riverside.

N.G.R. SO 7181 9314

Numbers 29-30 are the survivors of a late eighteenth/early nineteenth-century row of brick-built cottages on the River Severn waterfront.

Number 30 has a small yard to the rear of the house. In the cliff face is a small cave. The cave is 2.80m wide and 2.10m high. The smooth, straight walls are whitewashed. The barrel-dome roof has narrow, ribbed, brick arches. In the corner next to the door is a brick boiler. The cave has probably been used as a wash-house.

Cave 11. 6 Riverside.

N.G.R. SO 7184 9325

At the north end of Riverside, numbers 3 to 8 also survive as a terrace. At number 6 the narrow yard between the house and cliff is now covered, so that it and the cave are integrated with the house. The cave entrance is covered partly by a brick, and partly by a brick-and-stud, wall. A central doorway separates the two building methods. It is, perhaps, some 3m deep, and has whitewashed walls. It may have had a similar function to Cave 10; that is, used as a wash-house.

Cave 12. 68 Cartway.

N.G.R. SO 7180 9317

This house is a fine eighteenth-century building, possibly with late sixteenth-century origins. It has foundations and walls built partly of native sandstone. In the yard, smaller cottages, numbers 1 to 4 Friary Street, were demolished some time after 1969. These cottages backed onto a cliff face with a small cave, now blocked.

Cave 13. 1-2 Hollybush Rd.

N.G.R. SO 7161 9270

These two houses stand on a cliff above the road. Below, at road level, are two small caves. Both have well-made, brick arches at the entrance. The dimensions are not known. The smaller of the two is, perhaps, 2m deep and has a flat, brick ceiling. The larger has a barrel roof in brick.

CLASS D

Cave 14a. Underhill St. (Fig 11).

N.G.R. SO 7177 9290

The main cave consists of a single, large chamber, 11.00m across at its widest point, and 7.00m deep. The walls are an irregular curvilinear shape. The roof is domed but with irregular flaking of quite large blocks. It varies in height between 3.90m and 4.20m. The roof is supported by a single natural sandstone pillar, sub-rectangular in shape, with a maximum diameter of 1.50m. There is a second pillar formed of cemented, cut, sandstone blocks, 3.70m high.

The natural entrance is c.4.50m wide and is partially sealed by a brick archway with a door 1.10m wide. In the brickwork above the door is a lozenge-shaped fanlight. 6m to the north is a second entrance, now blocked, in a passage 3.00m long and 0.90m wide. Midway between these entrances, 1.80m above the ground, is an irregular opening, possibly the site of a window or a chimney stack, but there is no evidence inside for a fireplace. The curving back wall is cut by several putlog holes, all between 1.34m and 1.75m above the floor, possibly for supporting wooden shelves.

Cave 14b.

N.G.R. SO 7179 9291

3m to the north of the second entrance to the main cave is a smaller cave, 1.60m wide, 2.30m deep and 1.70m high. The walls are straight and smooth. There is a single putlog hole cut in the north wall and a slight ledge at the north-east corner. This cave may have been a Class C subsidiary to the main cave.

Cave 15. Underhill St. (Fig 12)

N.G.R. SO 7176 9286

Here the cliff face is cut back some 0.50m. At the south end of this plot a 1.60m-long fragment of natural sandstone wall survives. Cut into it are two putlog holes. In the cliff is a large cave with a double-arched entrance of natural sandstone. These arches are 2.10m and 1.30m high. The ante chamber is 4.20m wide and 2.30m deep, divided by a natural arch. The main chamber is 5.00m by 3.90m. The roof is an irregular, fractured dome. The curvilinear walls lean inwards. At the back of the cave a recess has a putlog hole at each end, 0.28m and 0.38m above the floor.

Cave 16. 4 Underhill St. (Fig 13).

N.G.R. SO 7177 9299

This is a large, late eighteenth/nineteenth-century house, now in use as a shop. It has outbuildings set around a yard, extending back some 30m. A cave, 4.00m wide, 4.50m deep and 3.00m high, is now used as a garage for a hearse. The walls of the cave are regular and vertical and the ceiling flat. The floor is formed by set bricks. Entrance is through a brick arch spanning the full width of the cave. In the south wall there is an irregular opening 0.60m above the floor. Its dimensions are 0.80m wide by 1.50m high. This hole opens through the rock face into a round "oven" base cut into the natural sandstone (Plate 19). It is approximately 1.40m in diameter. It survives to a height of approximately 2.00m. There are traces of burnt sandstone around the base, though the floor of poor brickwork shows no signs of excessive burning.

Cave 17a. 5 Underhill St. (Fig 14)

N.G.R. SO 7176 9298

This property includes buildings and a yard extending back some 30m to the cliff face. Two segmental brick arches lead into two caves. The southern cave is a single, large chamber 5.50m wide and 7.00m long. It is entered via a brick, arched passage 1.30m wide and 2.00m long, lit by a window above the door. The walls are generally straight and vertical. The roof is an irregular dome. The floor is brick with one limited area of small cobbling. A recess at the back of the cave 1.56m wide and 1.20m deep is partly rock floored. The alcove is divided by a brick wall. Each half of the alcove has a segmented brick, arched recess with a flat shelf above, c.1.30m high.

Cave 17b.

The northern entrance leads into a small chamber about 2.20m by 3.00m. Beyond this is a larger chamber. This was almost wholly inaccessible due to the accumulation of a large amount of rubbish and debris, but was approximately 4.00m by 3.00m across. This leads in turn, beyond a sandstone pillar, to another chamber. The pillar is rectangular and formed of natural sandstone, 1.50m by 2.10m across. The chamber beyond was, again largely inaccessible, but was about 3.00m square. A notable feature of this chamber was a rock-cut cupboard, 0.50m wide, 0.60m high and 0.40m deep, cut into the south wall. The jambs were rebated to receive a door. The right hand jamb had two holes positioned for hinges.

Cave 18. 6 Underhill St., The Old Malthouse Yard. (Fig 15)

N.G.R. SO 7176 9297

The property extends back with various outbuildings around a yard some 25m to the cliff face. There is a brick, double-arched entrance to caves now used as a joinery shop. The left hand entrance leads to a large cave, 12.00m long and 4.50m wide. The roof is a natural barrel vault with narrow, brick, rib arches springing from the cave walls. At the entrance the ribbing springs from brick pillars set in the cave walls. The floor is of set bricks. At the back of the cave are five brick bins; four are between 0.90m and 1.05m wide, the fifth is 1.80m wide.

Outside, the northern semi-circular brick arch leads into a smaller cave, 4.00m wide and approximately 4.80m deep. There is a connecting passage between the back of this cave and the main cave. In the south wall of the main chamber, next to the main entrance, a brick arch, 1.10m wide, leads to a small cave system. This consists of at least three small chambers, but was not unfortunately accessible for survey.

Cave 19a. 29 Riverside. (Fig 16)

N.G.R. SO 7182 9314

Number 29 Riverside is one of three small nineteenth-century cottages on the riverside below Bank Steps. Yard space behind the houses is restricted but the caves are separated from the houses and may pre-date them.

The main cave is 10.60m long by 3.70m wide. The walls are curvilinear. The south wall is near vertical, the north wall curves inward slightly towards the top. There are three low-set recesses in the north wall and a single recess in the shorter, end wall. The floor is of recent concrete partially filling the north wall recesses.

A third of the way along the south wall a brick fireplace is set into the sandstone. The height of the arch for the chimney breast is 1.50m. A fragmentary brick chimney survives outside. Midway between the fireplace and the entrance is another opening 1.10m wide and 1.80m high.

The natural entrance arch is 3.50m wide. Apart from some brickwork on the south side it has not been modified.

Cave 19b. (Fig 16).

N.G.R. SO 7182 9314

North of cave 19a, within the same plot, is a large chamber, 10.50m long and at least 6.00m wide. To the north it extends beneath Bank Steps. To the east it appears to have had openings on to the riverside. The roof is about 1.85m high and is supported by a central natural sandstone pillar. The cave is divided into four compartments by single-width brick walls. The two smaller rooms were reached via doorways but are, at present, inaccessible due to the amount of rubble in them. Blocked doors in the far wall, presumably opening onto Riverside, could be seen. Outside a modern revetting wall, built to support new buildings on the terrace above, hide the earlier brickwork. The owner intends to apply for planning permission to re-open these doors. The further end of the main chamber was sealed by a single-width brick wall, probably early this century, but this wall is now broken through. Débris here strewn on the floor included brick and pottery.

Discussion

The caves south of Bridge Street are on the medieval waterfront (Slater 1988, 19), and they may have had their origins as commercial warehouses; for example, Caves 17, 19 and, possibly, 15. These caves do not have putlog holes, indicating fittings for shelves or racks for storing goods, suggesting that they were used for the storage of bulk goods.

In contrast, the caves at numbers 4,5 and 6 Underhill Street do have internal features. At number 6, Cave 18 has five brick bins at the back. Its dimensions closely match those recorded in the Victoria County History for a cave "33 by 17 feet holding 5 hogsheads of 320 gallons (of beer)" (V.C.H. 1908, 423) and the reference must indeed be to this same cave.

The brewery operation did not take place in the caves themselves. Rather, caves are noted for their uniformity of temperature which makes

them ideal for the maturing of beer and the use of caves for beer storage is well documented at Nottingham (Terrell-Nield 1986, 69-72).

The cave at number 5 Underhill Street has brick alcoves at the back suitable for housing barrels. The adjacent cave has three chambers that extend northwards beyond the property boundary and may have access into the yard of number 4. This may be because the cave systems pre-date the property boundaries or because there has been a later subdivision of the larger plots. At number 4, Cave 16 is, like the others, very regular in shape, but much smaller. Here there is a base of a large round oven possibly used for malting. The place-name evidence, 'Old Malthouse Yard', at 6 Underhill St., and the nature of the caves, suggests that this area was given over to the brewery trade.

BLOCKED CAVES

Between Bank Steps and Friars Load are a number of blocked caves.

Cave 20. Riverside.

N.G.R. SO 7182 9316

A brick segmental arch 2.20m wide, c.4.10m high, is closed by a wooden gate. The cave may be up to 6m high. It is large enough to house a sailing boat.

Cave 21. Riverside.

N.G.R. SO 7182 9316

A natural entrance, 4.00m wide, is supported on a natural sandstone pillar. One half is blocked by a sandstone wall, the other has brick blocking.

- Cave 22. Riverside.** N.G.R. SO 7182 9317
A brick arch, 2.80m high, is closed by a wooden gate.
- Cave 23. Riverside.** N.G.R. SO 7182 9317
A natural arch, 3.30m wide and 2.50m high, is blocked by a cemented, sandstone block wall.
- Cave 24. Riverside.** N.G.R. SO 7182 9317
A small cave, 2.65m wide, 1.40m deep and 1.40m high at the front, is located to the north of Cave 23.

Discussion

From their size and location it seems likely that this group had a similar function to those caves at 4-6 Underhill (Caves 16,17,18). The commercial activity was probably associated with the storage of River Severn trade goods. This suburb developed from the seventeenth century on as a result of this trade (Slater 1988,10).

- Cave 25. 32 Riverside.** N.G.R. SO 7181 9313
The house, demolished some time before 1962, was similar to 29-31 Riverside. There is a cave at the back of the property. The distance between the visible sandstone outcrops is 6.10m. A brick arch spans a blocked door, 2.00m wide.
- Cave 26. 38-39 Riverside. (Fig 17)** N.G.R. SO 7272 9311
Between 31 and 40 Riverside, terraced houses have been demolished exposing the cliff face to view. Redevelopment on the terrace above has necessitated the rebuilding of the retaining walls on the cliff face. In some parts late nineteenth-century buttressing survives. Associated with these works, in three places, are wooden lintels over blocked doors.
- Cave 27. Underhill St.** N.G.R. SO 7178 9289
An opening 3.60m wide is blocked by a sandstone wall. A limited view suggests that this is the entrance to a large cave.
- Cave 28. 78 Cartway.** N.G.R. SO 7175 9316
Over a bricked-up cave front is a sign indicating that the cave was last occupied 'as a dwelling' in 1856. The source for this statement was not established during fieldwork.
- Caves 29 to 33. 2-6 New Road, (Fig 19).** N.G.R. SO 7172 9265
This is a row of houses demolished for road widening some time after 1969. Ridge scars remain in the cliff face. Each house had a cave behind it but all are now sealed and overgrown with municipal shrubbery. Their functions are probably divided between classes B and C.

OTHER CAVES

- Cave 34. Lavington's Hole, Underhill St. (Fig 18)** N.G.R. SO 7175 9282
The cave and a tunnel was dug in 1646 by Parliamentary forces during the siege of the castle, then held by the Royalists. Only the outer chamber was planned during the survey. The tunnel started about 7.50m above the floor of the cave and was therefore inaccessible. It extends a total of 17m from the cliff face on a bearing of 264 degrees (Gwilt n.d 'c'). Subsequently the site was part of a foundry. In 1983 the cave and cliff front were cleared of rubbish and debris by an M.S.C. team (Shrops S.M.R. PRN 387).

CAVES NOT SEEN

- Cave 35. 95 Cartway** A small cave used as a storeroom, (information from a neighbour)
- Cave 36. 44 Cartway** Building planned by SMR Shrewsbury. Two small caves are noted at the back of the plot.

Conclusions

The caves in Bridgnorth have played a significant part in the past social and economic life of the town. This is particularly so from the sixteenth century onward when the cliff and riverside suburb around the bridge-head was the hub of the town's commercial activity. Bridgnorth was ideally situated to act as a link for the land and river trade routes between the industrial south-east Midlands, via the River Severn, to regions beyond.

In this brief survey it is difficult to establish if individual caves had natural origins or were partially, or wholly, artificial. Certainly, natural joints and fissures were a factor in the making of the caves and an example of this can be seen in Cave 15 where a natural fault line, that continues into the rock, forms the back wall of Cave 15b.

The curvilinear shape of many cave walls, e.g. in Caves 14 and 17, and, in particular, the crude ovoid ceilings, e.g. in Caves 1, 4 and 14 suggest fracturing along planes of weakness in the rock.

Also difficult to establish is the date of the construction of the caves. What is seen now is the fragmentary evidence of their late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century usage. The last cave dweller in Bridgnorth vacated The Hermitage, 1.5km east of the town, in the 1920s, but the caves in the town had been abandoned long before that. Some are bricked up, but many are now open to fill up with domestic rubbish, building debris and flaking sandstone.

Function is only slightly easier to determine. A primary attribute for a cave dwelling, but not a necessity, would seem to be a fireplace. Only two caves have them. Cave 1 is the only positive example of a "cave dwelling" surveyed. The second known example, Cave 28, was last used as a dwelling in 1856 but is now not accessible. The use of cave rooms as part of a normal house is more common (Class B), with twelve examples surveyed.

In Britain descriptions by antiquarian and later Victorian observers dwell on the social inferiority of those obliged to live in caves (Baring-Gould 1911, 60; Kempe 1988,149). Both these authorities publish an account of Cornish cave dwellers, while Daniel Defoe's

earlier encounter with Derbyshire lead miners during his 'Tour through Great Britain' makes interesting reading (Defoe 1778,569).

Topographically, caves are often perceived as being located at the margins of habitation and their occupants were thought of as being at, or beyond, the limits of polite society. Bridgnorth is a good example of this attitude for here all the antiquarian, and more recent interest, in cave dwelling has been focussed on the caves known as 'The Hermitage' (Smith 1878,159-72; Gwilt n.d. 'b'). The Hermitage caves are, as their name suggests, relatively remote, being about 1.2 kilometres east of the High Town, while the caves in the town have been ignored.

Baring-Gould and Defoe both stress the economic margins at which the cave dwellers lived and their specialised activities. For example, caves were lived in by shellfish gatherers in Cornwall, besom broom makers near Nottingham, and limeworkers in Derbyshire (Kempe 1988,144-9).

But the reality for many cave dwellers was that occupation of caves was related to work rather than unemployment and poverty. In areas where local geology made caves as easy and cheap to construct as traditional houses, as was the case at Nottingham, caves became common. A seventeenth-century commentator remarked that anyone desperate for a house "had simply to go to Nottingham with the right tools and work himself a hole or burrow for his family", (Barley 1986,278).

In these situations modifications might be made to natural caves or artificial caves be hewn out to make them habitable. These modifications might consist of,

- 1) Extending interiors by hewing out new chambers.
- 2) Bricking up cave openings and inserting doors and windows.
- 3) Laying brick or cobble floors.
- 4) Building fireplaces or putting in kitchen ranges.
- 5) Cutting holes or rebates to hold wooden fittings.

Despite the general poverty of the working classes and a lack of amenities, observers express surprise at the quality of life led by cave dwellers. Defoe noted that although the family he witnessed in Derbyshire was poor, the cave was "clean and neat". The cave had shelves for earthenware, pewter and glass, a flitch of bacon hung in the chimney, and there was a small garden, with a cow, pigs and growing barley (Defoe 1778, 569). At Holy Austin Rock and Vale Rock, Kinver (Brooker-Carey *et al* 1988), the houses have kitchen ranges, cupboards, furniture and brick floors. Outside there are vegetable gardens (Kempe 1988, 13).

Inside The Hermitage, wooden steps lead up to a bed chamber in the three-room cave; a fireplace and chimney had been built in the kitchen and a series of terrace gardens was associated with the cave dwelling (Gwilt n.d. 'b').

Another aspect of the caves is the economic one. The most comprehensive and best-studied caves in Britain are those at Nottingham. These are almost wholly dug beneath houses, for commercial purposes. Amongst the many uses identified through a survey by the British Geological Survey are as wells, cesspits, stores (for grain, meat, and fish), maltings, breweries, tanneries, houses, hideaways, and decorative follies (The Times, 13 December 1988).

At Bridgnorth many of the caves surveyed were for commercial use. Those at 4 to 6 Underhill related to the beer trade, as noted in *Shropshire Notes and Queries* (22 May 1885, 51) and the V.C.H. (1908, 423). Here, perhaps, is scope for studies similar to those of C.E. Terrell-Nield (1986, 69-78) where the use of pitfall traps for insects and the recording of temperature/humidity readings helped indicate possible previous uses of the caves.

In Terrell-Nield's study of the caves under York House in Nottingham the previous owner of the cave was shown to be 'The Nottingham Brewery' whose product was known informally as 'Rock Ale' owing to the brewery's extensive underground caverns for beer storage, *vide* Bridgnorth's 'Cave Ale' (V.C.H. 1908, 423). Cave fauna is generally habitat specific. At York House, although conditions in the cave had

altered slightly, (it was wetter and warmer, as a result of redevelopment above), temperature and humidity readings taken over an unspecified period were stable within $\pm 1^\circ\text{C}$ with humidity at 100%.

Pitfall traps at ten locations in the cave system collected a large number of Arthropod species. Many were present as a result of the changed conditions but there were survivals from the brewery period, the most notable being a species of weevil *Pentarthrum Huttoni* with a preference for old beer barrels, persisting twenty five years after the cessation of brewing on the site.

Future Research Potential

Bridgnorth's caves are interesting for several reasons. They are generally above ground (*i.e.* in cliff faces behind buildings, rather than under them as at Nottingham) and they are in an urban setting with a mixture of demonstrable domestic and commercial usage.

The Bridgnorth caves are generally in good condition. Lavington's Hole was cleared of debris by an M.S.C. team from Shrewsbury, and the area around is now cleared as a public amenity. This exposes the caves to the sort of anti-social behaviour apparent at Kinver (Brooker-Carey *et al.* 1988). However, their openness has meant that graffiti, firelighting etc. is reduced. There is some erosion of the cliff face at Underhill with some quite large blocks fallen. Many caves are relatively safe in private ownership.

At 29 Riverside (Cave 19) planning permission is being sought to make one of the caves into a living room and to clear debris to improve access to the caves.

At Nottingham where similar cave complexes exist a great deal is known about the archaeology and the natural history of these caves through a programme of research and excavation by the Nottingham Civic Society (Barley and Smith 1970; Cherry 1972, 211; Cherry 1975, 248; Crawford 1979), while evidence for the previous use of caves has been gained from observations on the flora and fauna present in the cave (Terrell-Nield 1986). At Bridgnorth no such research has taken place and, perhaps, a pilot study centred on

Cave 19 may provide the impetus for a wider archaeological faunal study. At present there is a great deal of débris, including pottery, in the cave, and there may be intact stratigraphy above the natural cave floor.

Further documentary research might help to throw light on the role of individual caves in the post-medieval town but for their earlier usage perhaps only archaeological investigation can fully realise the research potential of the topic. Though there is no direct evidence for a pre-medieval use of caves, this possibility, even if only the temporary utilisation of natural caves for shelter rather than the deliberate creation and digging of caves for specific purposes, must be borne in mind.

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Paul Sewter
December 1989

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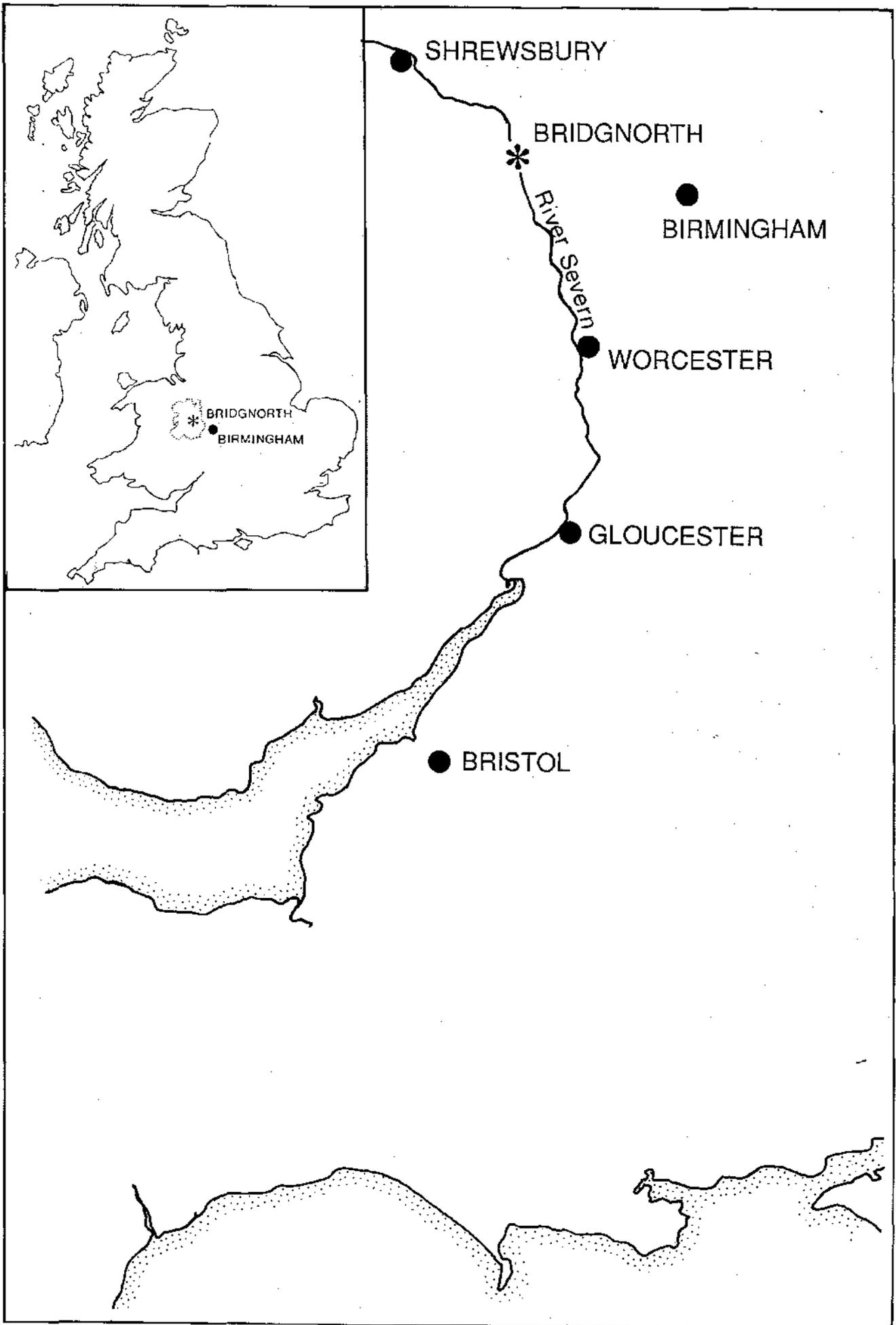


Fig. 1

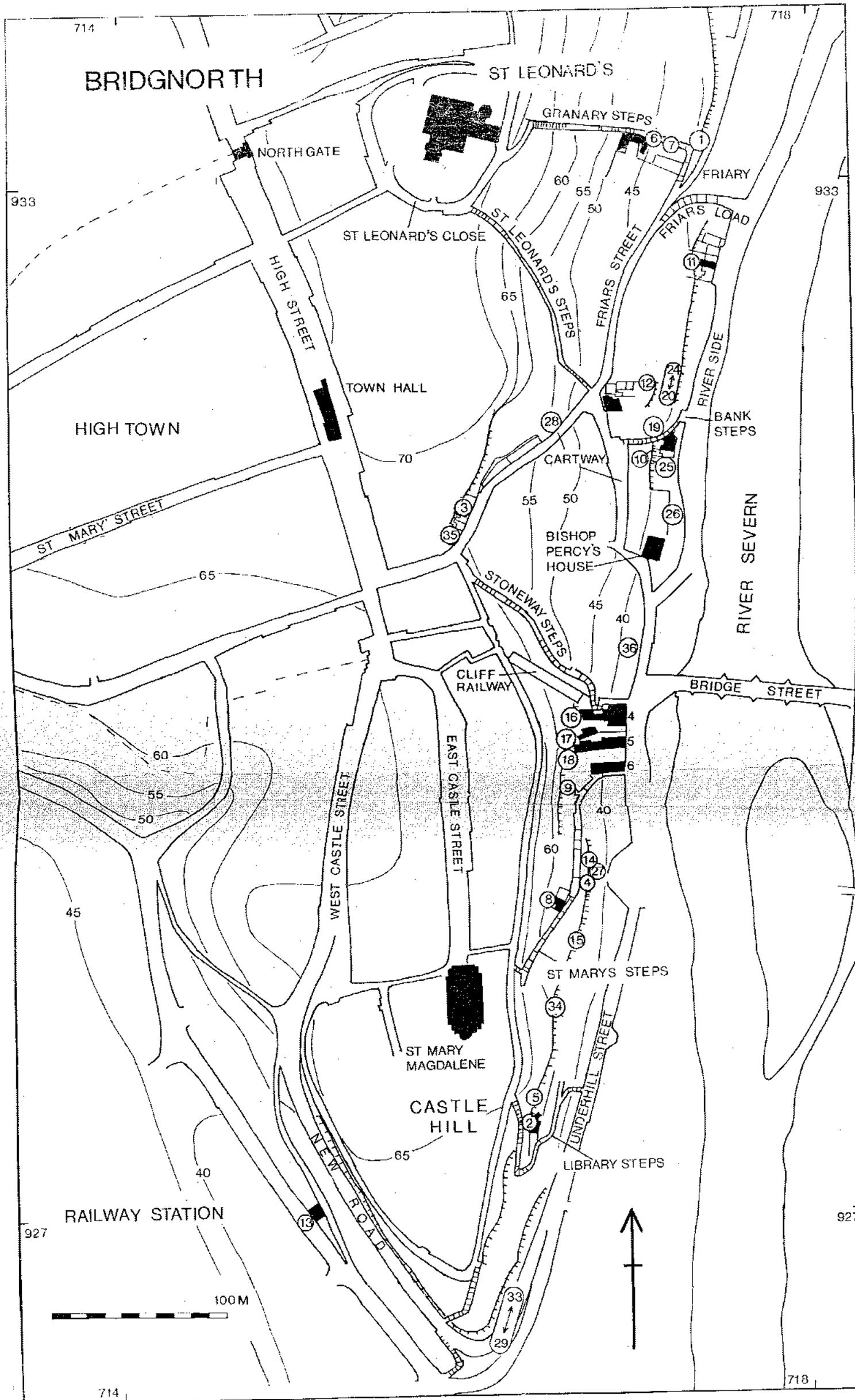


Fig 2

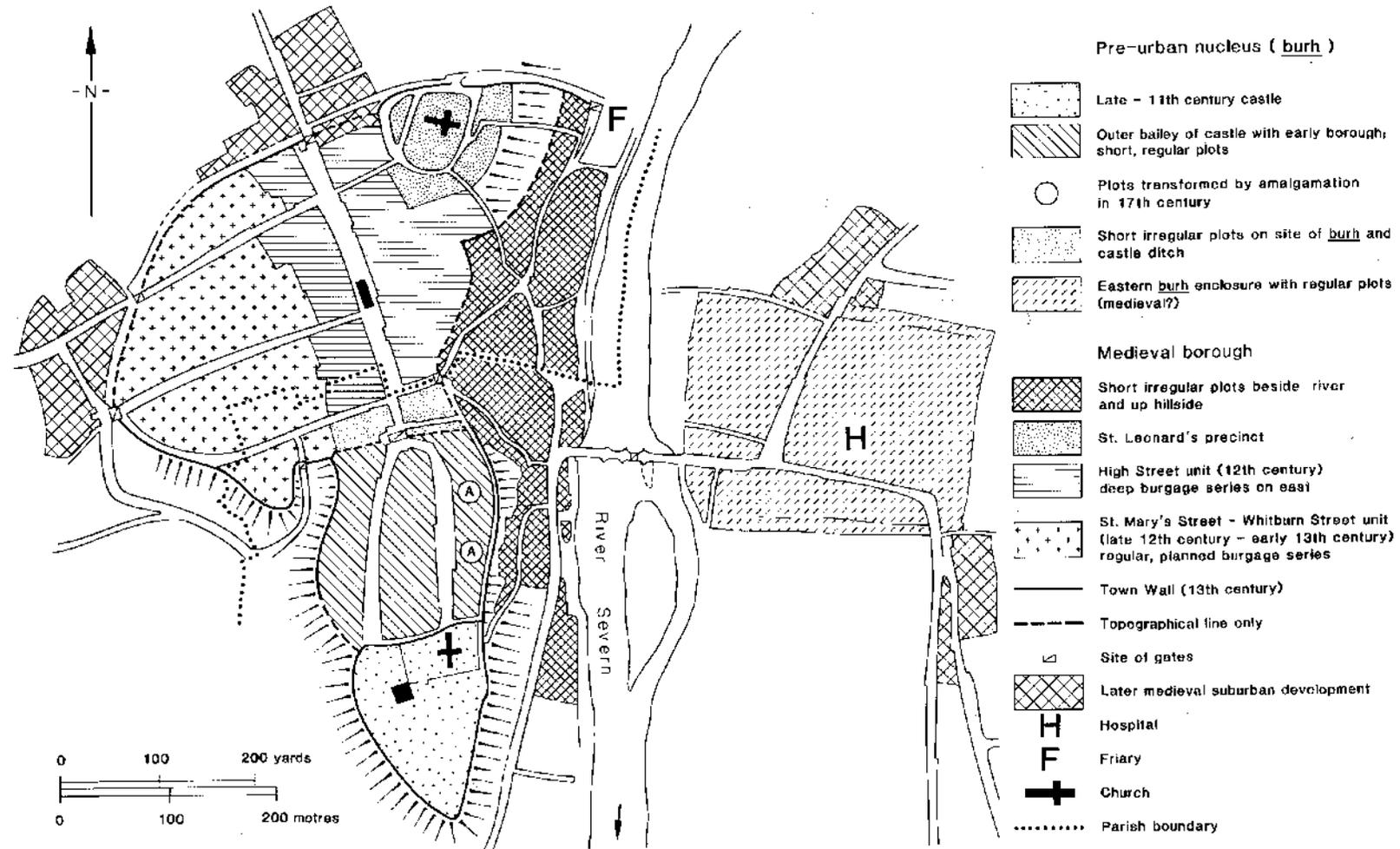


Fig. 3

1 54 FRIAR'S ST NGR SO 7184 9332

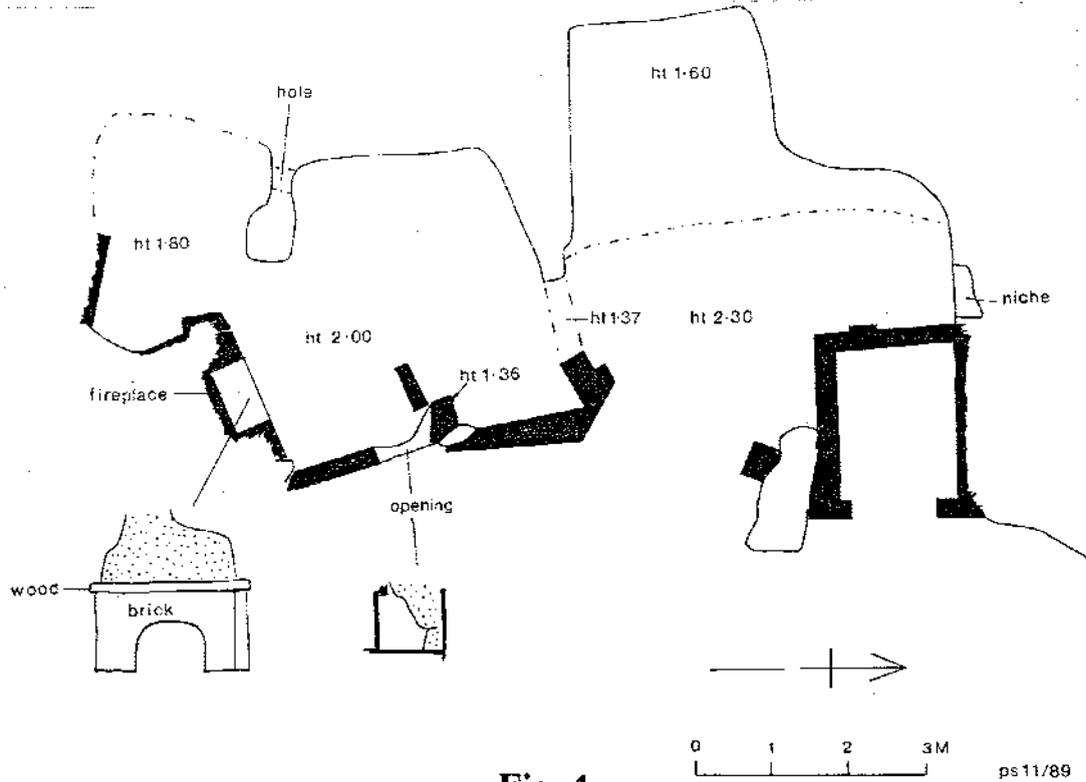


Fig. 4

2 4 LIBRARY STEPS NGR SO 7174 9275

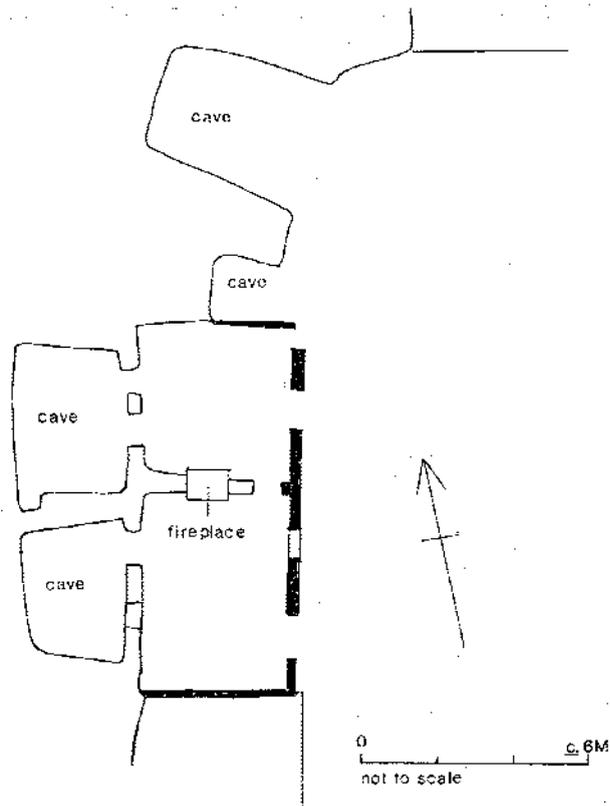


Fig. 5

3 92 CARTWAY NGR SO 7170 9311

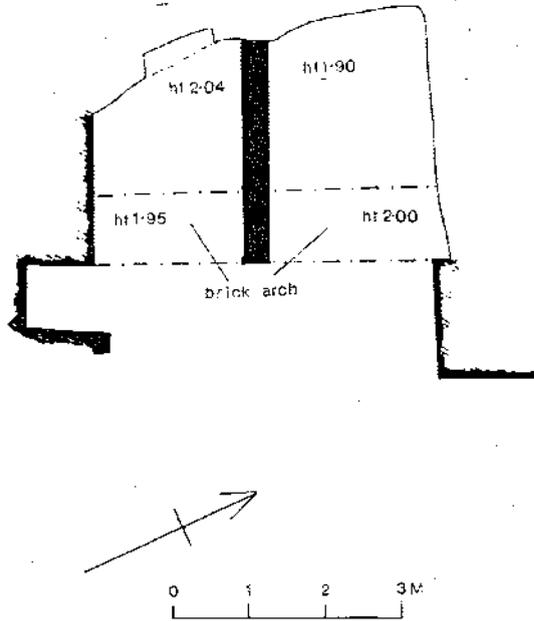


Fig. 6

4a & 4b UNDERHILL ST NGR SO 7177 9287

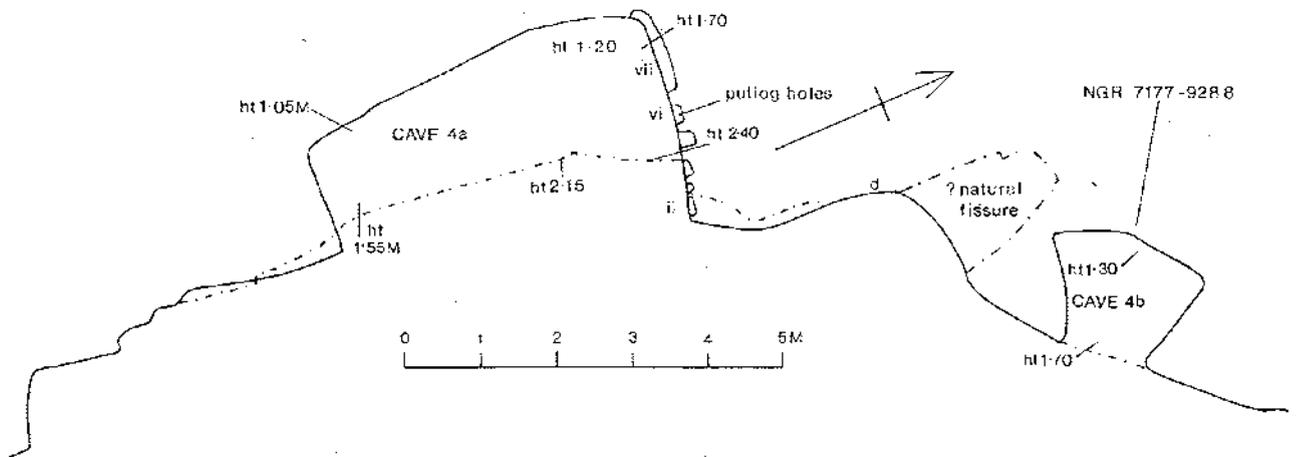


Fig. 7

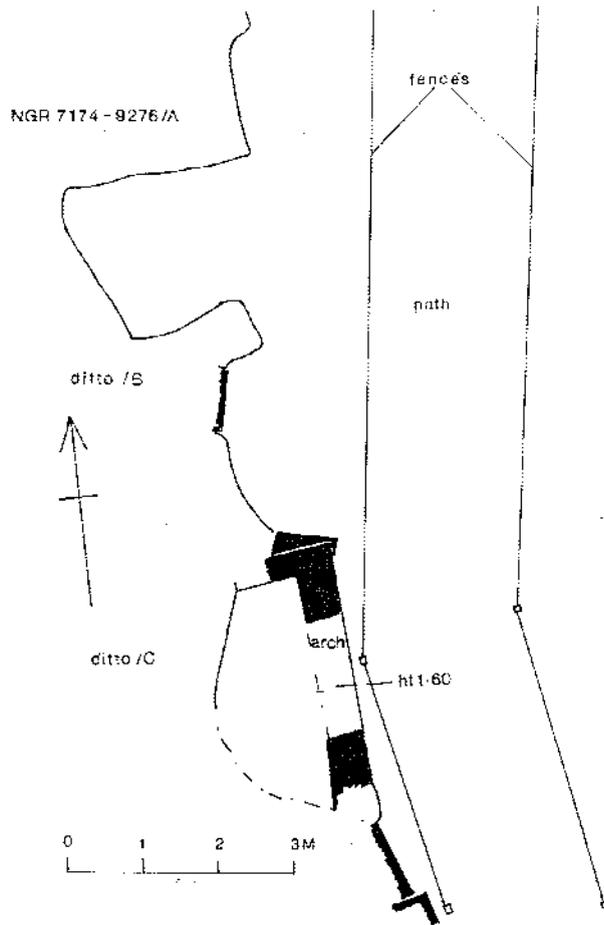


Fig. 8

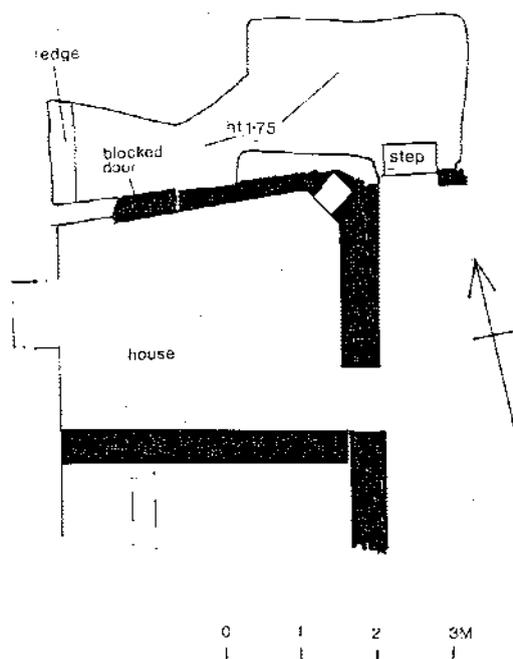


Fig. 9

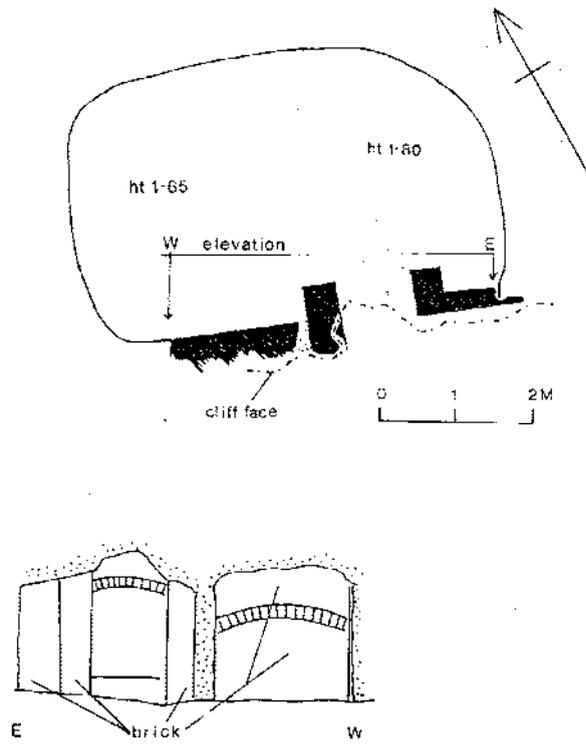


Fig. 10

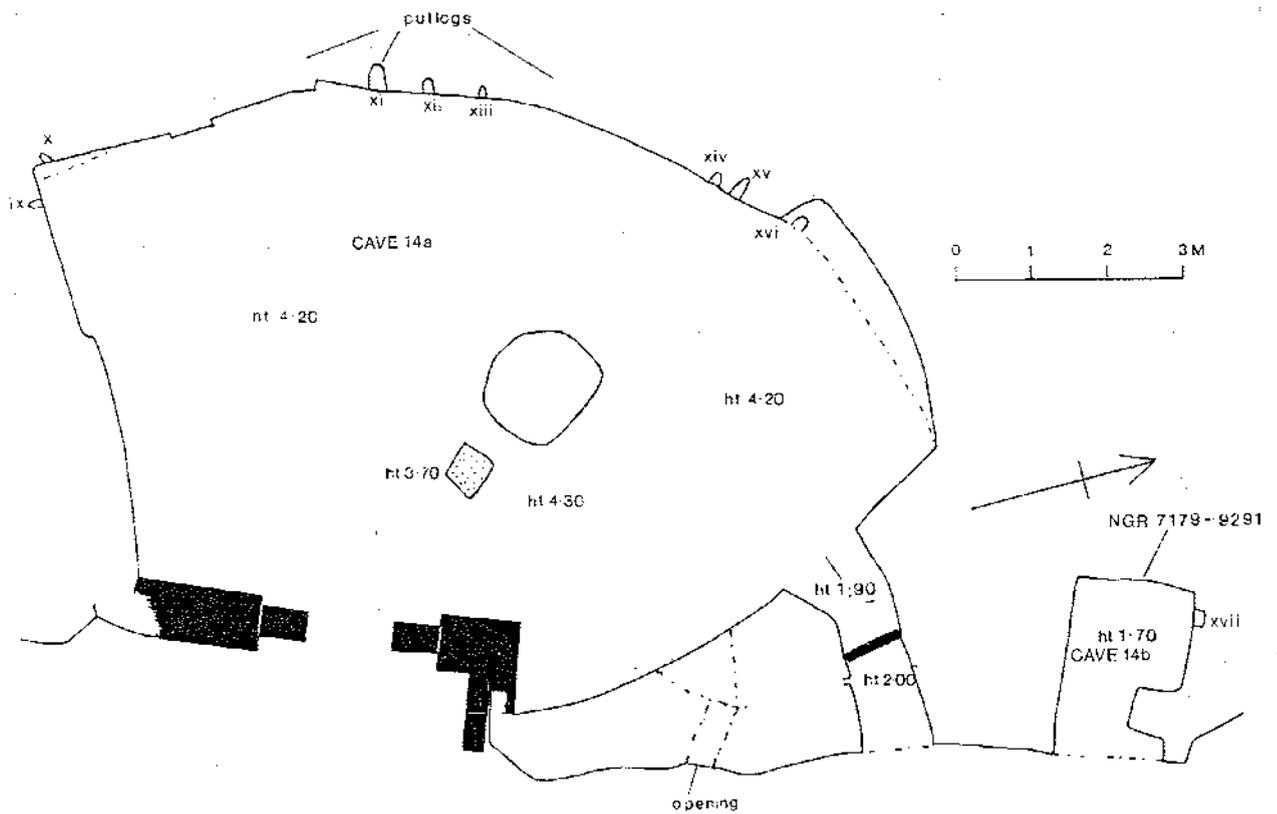


Fig. 11

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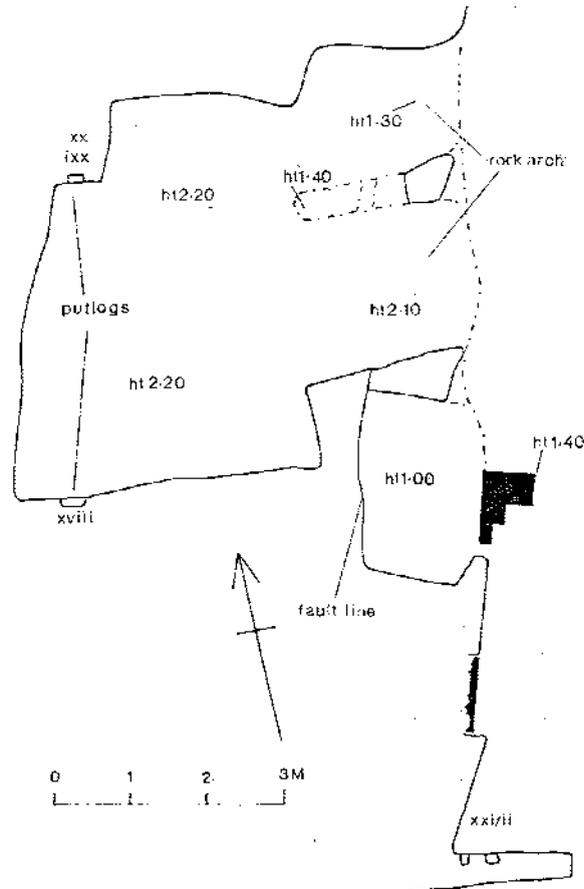


Fig. 12

16 4 UNDERHILL ST NGR SO 7177 9299

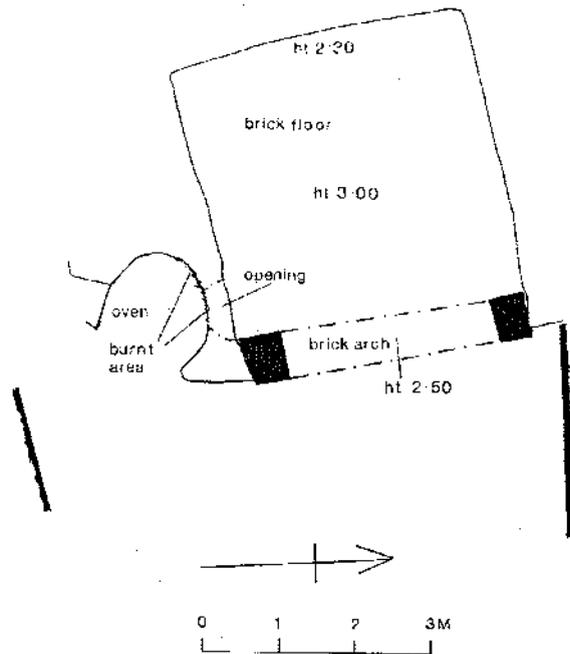


Fig. 13

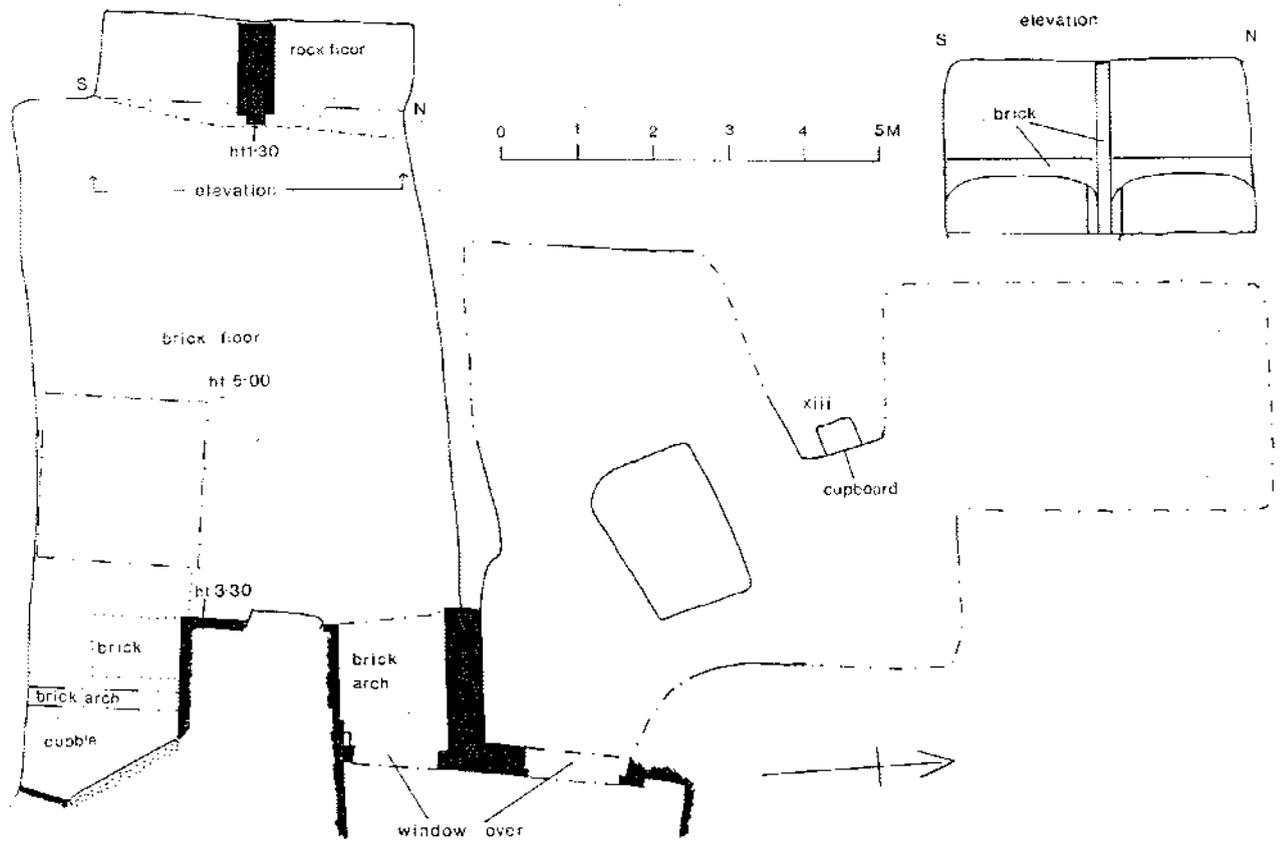


Fig. 14

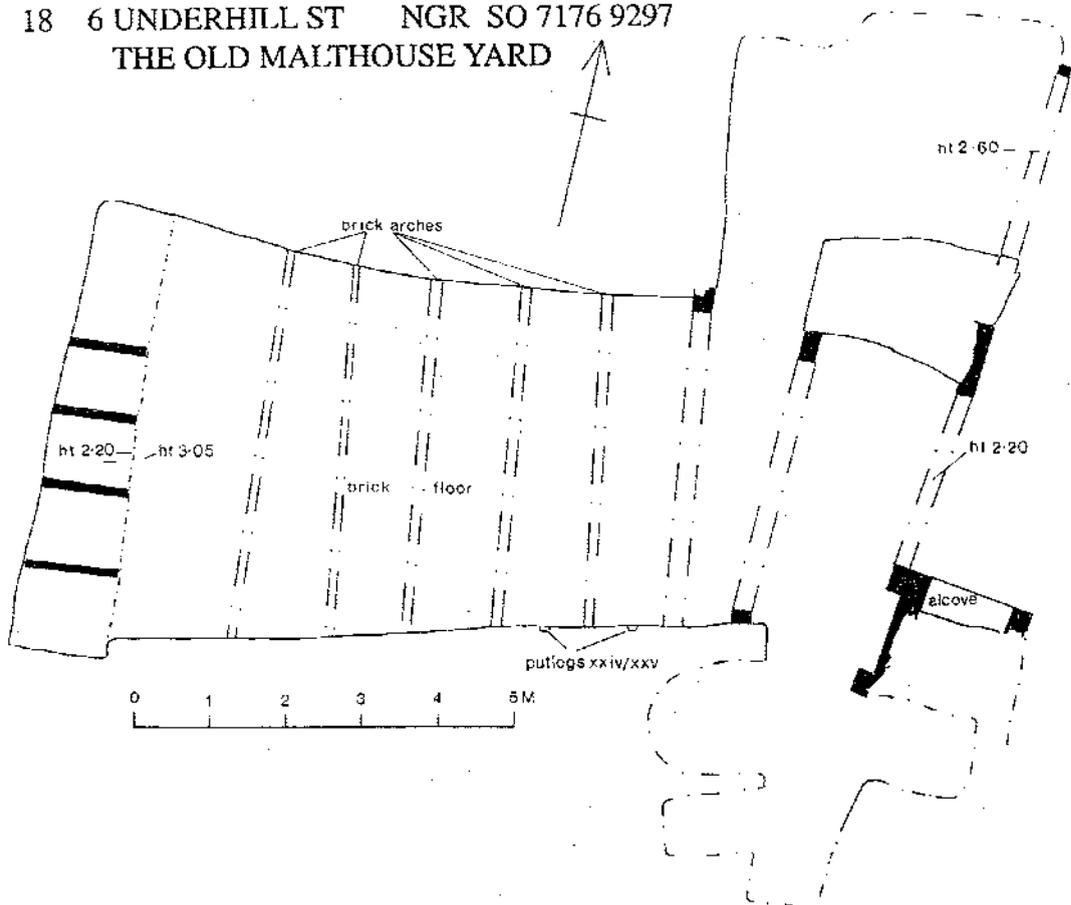


Fig. 15

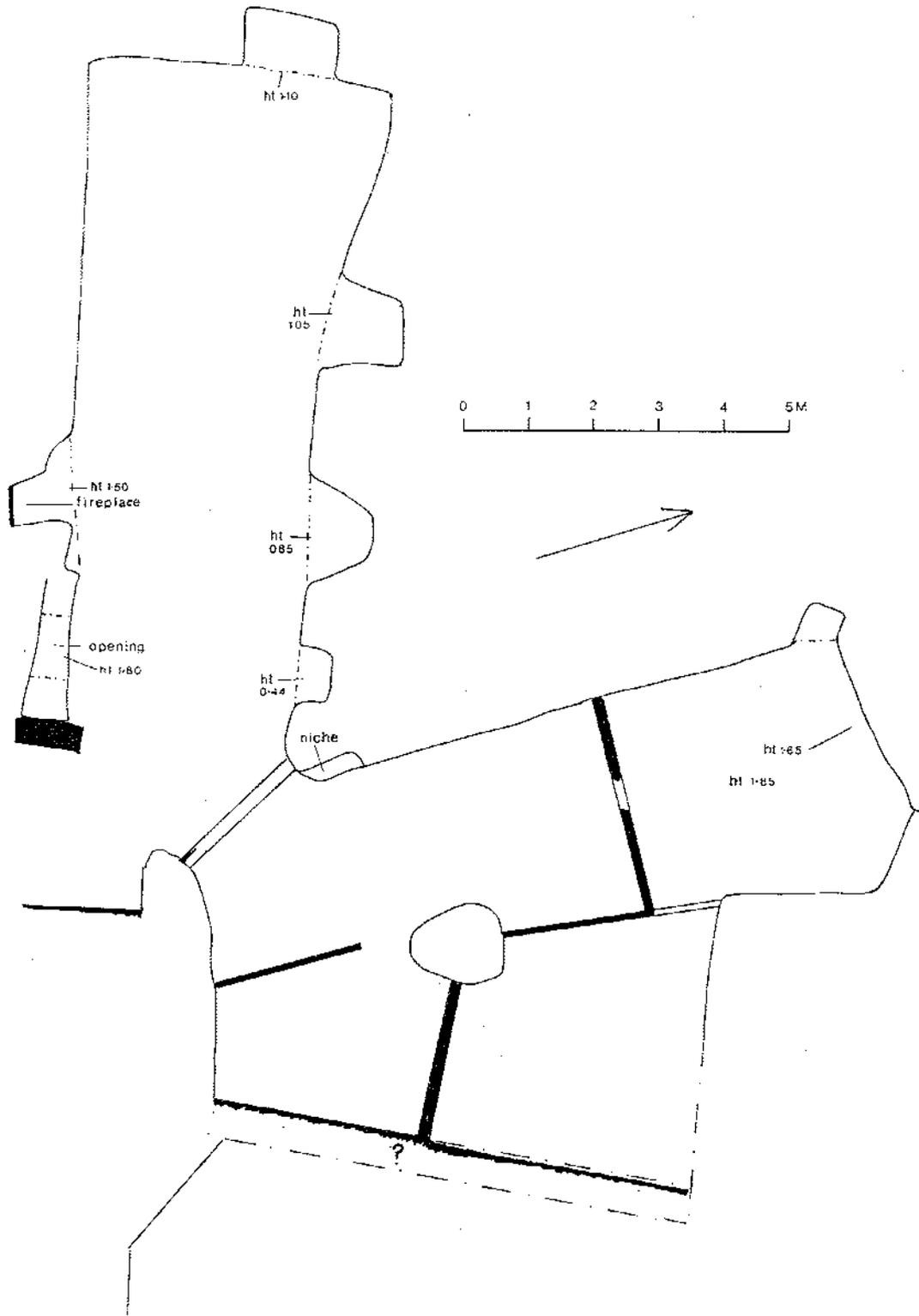


Fig. 16

26 38/39 RIVERSIDE NGR SO 7181 9312

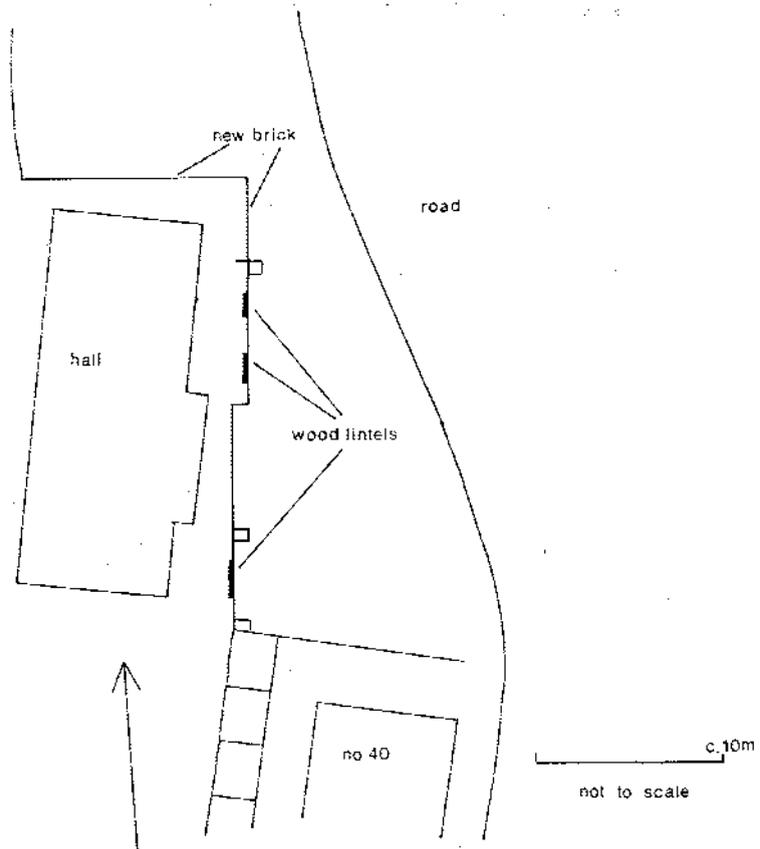


Fig. 17

34 UNDERHILL ST NGR SO 7175 9282

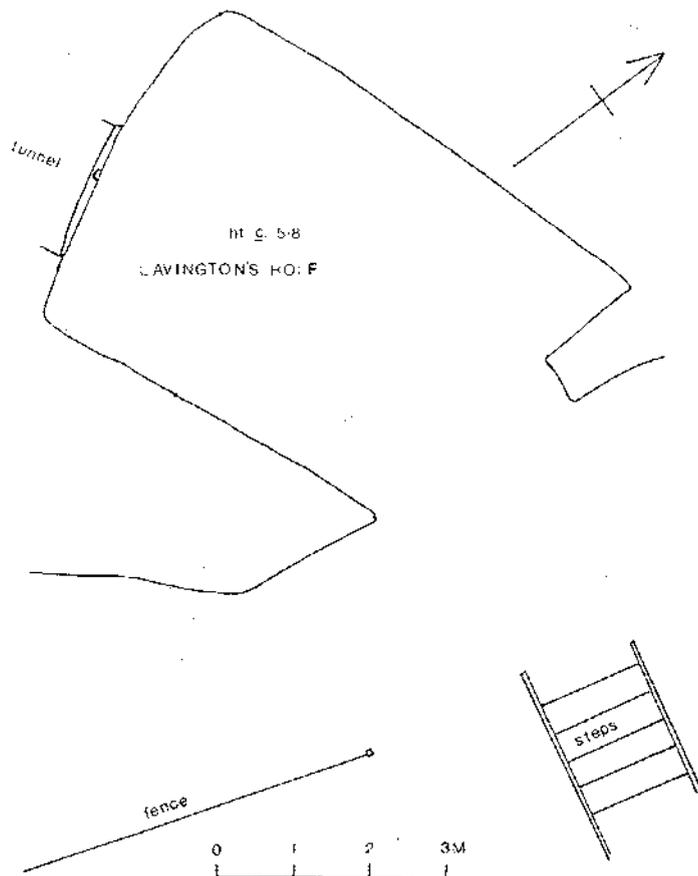
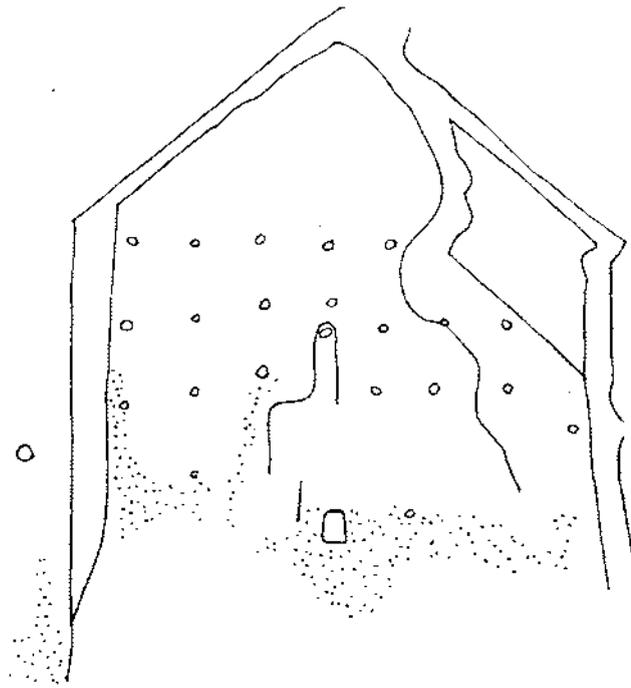


Fig. 18

29 2-6 NEW ROAD NGR SO 7172 9265



putlog holes ◊
plaster *

not to scale

Fig. 19

