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Excavations at Upper Russell Street / The Shambles Wednesbury

by
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Introduction

The archaeological excavation reported on here was commissioned by the Black Country Development Corporation, following consultation with Dr Mike Hodder of Sandwell Borough Council Planning Department, and was carried out by a small team from Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit in May 1992. The aim of the excavation was to investigate those archaeological deposits which would otherwise be destroyed without record by the development of a doctors' surgery planned for the site. In particular it was hoped that evidence might be recovered concerning the date at which the market area began to be developed and the type of activities attracted to its immediate periphery, the continued use of the area in the post-medieval period, and the local pottery industry in the 17th century and earlier.

Wednesbury Town Centre: Setting, History and Archaeology (Fig.1)

Church Hill, one of a number of prominent hills on the Birmingham Plateau which provided a focus for early settlement, was probably the focus of settlement in Wednesbury at least into the medieval period, and possibly later. The market place, situated to the southeast of Church Hill, still retains a triangular plan form, typically associated with medieval town and village planning, and was probably laid out in the general wave of settlement promotion believed to have occurred between the 12th and 13th centuries (Beresford 1967; Rodwell 1975).

The burgage plot was the basic unit of these developments, the plots characteristically being long and narrow (*c*.60m by 10m), and arranged in a series along the street frontage. Once laid out, dependent on the success of the venture and the relative status of individual streets, the plots were commonly subdivided and the back-plots infilled over a period of time with secondary buildings or features associated with the particular activities of the residents – features such as pits for rubbish, hearths for metal-working, or kilns for potting.

Burgage sub-division need not necessarily have occurred simultaneously with, or even shortly after, the initial process of planning and laying out of the plots. Understanding the timing and nature of this development remains an important priority in understanding the pattern of urban growth and change across the Birmingham Plateau as a whole between the 12th and 18th centuries.

In Wednesbury, excavations in 1989, just to the north of the present site (Hodder 1992), uncovered traces of medieval buildings fronting onto the market, together with a yard surface to the southwest; pottery from these features suggested that they were 14th or 15th century in date.

The evidence suggested that the development of the market-place burgages might not have occurred until relatively late in the medieval period, but the limitations of such a small sample make this suggestion extremely tentative. However, further evidence was provided by the 1989 excavations for the relative underdevelopment of the burgage plots fronting the market place. Towards the southern extent of the excavations, less than 20m from the market frontage, a spread of cultivated soil was encountered. While the presence of extensive cultivated areas within towns was a common phenomenon, even within large towns, this cultivated soil indicates that only a minimal utilisation of land was occurring in an important plot fronting onto the commercial heart of the town, at least until the 19th century.

Remains of a 17th-century pottery kiln and associated wasters were also found during the 1989 market-place excavations. Similar finds elsewhere in the town, complemented by a number of documentary references catalogued in Hodder (1992), indicate that pottery was being made in Wednesbury from at least the 15th century. The industry probably reached its peak in the 17th century when 'Wedgbury' wares

appear in probate inventories as far afield as Worcester (Dyer 1973,131), after which it was eclipsed by the Stoke-on-Trent Potteries.

As the regional economy developed, and production by local industries such as potting, mining, and metal-working became progressively more important in Wednesbury, it is likely that the fulcrum of settlement would have moved away gradually from the traditional centre of Church Hill towards the market place.

The results of the 1992 excavation, which continued exploration towards the back of the burgage plot dug in 1989, enable our archaeological picture of the development of this particular plot – and by inference of the market place as a whole – to be further enhanced and extended southwards away from the road frontage.

Method

The excavation was designed to record those archaeological deposits which would otherwise have been destroyed by the groundworks for the proposed building. Prior to the excavations the whole area was cleared of a loose brick and rubble demolition deposit (context 1000). The foundation trenches for the external walls of the building (Trenches A,D,E and G) and three of its internal walls (Trenches B,C and F) were then excavated by machine down to any archaeological deposits which were then to be excavated by hand to the natural clay subsoil. The trenches for the exterior walls were to be *c*.0.70m wide and those for the internal walls *c*.0.45m wide. However, ground conditions were such that the width of some trenches had to be extended for safety reasons where these cut through the loose backfill of a number of cellars.

Because of extensive destruction and truncation of archaeological deposits caused by the presence of 19th-century buildings on the site, a brief description, phasing and analysis of the remains of the disruptive, later structures follows, prior to discussion of the earlier archaeological deposits.

Structural Evidence (Fig.2)

A total of five individual structures was found: three cellared, brick buildings (Structures 1, 3 and 4), a curious circular, domed vat-type feature (Structure 2), and a brick-lined well (F9), which is discussed later in the summary of Trench A.

Structure 1 was probably the latest building discovered, the materials incorporated into the structure indicating a late-19th-century construction date. The cellar, which had an entrance from the southwest, had a raised ledge *c*.0.7m wide, finished with the blue engineering tile butted against the external walls of the building. The actual floor of the cellar was of nine-inch-square, machined quarry tiles, edged with machine-made drainage tiles, presumably to collect run-off from the ledge. Parallel examples of this build were seen underneath other late-19th-century structures fronting onto the market place.

The exact function of Structure 2 remains unclear. When the site was initially cleared of demolition material four of the upper courses of this circular, and presumably also partly or wholly domed, structure were revealed. Superficially resembling the top of a pottery-kiln, subsequent excavation revealed that Structure 2 was evidently some sort of vat-type feature used to contain a liquid; a chalk stopper was visible in the base of the feature. Backfilled with typical late-19th-century demolition material, including a few decorated clay pipe stems, Structure 2 was evidently still in use when Structure 1 was built against it. Roughly 1.95m in diameter and 1.1m deep, the bricks had been specially made to construct the feature and were bonded and lined on the inner face by an extremely hard grey mortar, probably derived from Portland Cement, first used in the mid-19th century. The outer face was clearly not intended to be seen.

The complete outline of Structure 3 could not be discerned because of the shape of the excavated trenches, but it was clearly originally a large, rectangular, cellared structure probably built in the mid-to-late 19th century. The foundations for the northern-facing wall cut 0.8m into the natural clay. The cellar had an ordinary brick floor bedded over the natural clay, with a later stairwell access butted onto the southeast corner. The way in which the southern-facing wall of Structure 3 interrupted the line of the foundation cut of Structure 2 (F802) suggested that, like Structure 1, Structure 3 also post-dated the construction of Structure 2.

The third building identified on the site, Structure 4, was evidently the oldest. The bricks were smaller and moulded, not later machine-cut types as used in the other buildings, suggesting a late-18th-century to mid-19th-century date. Cellared, with a brick-lined floor over natural clay, the building appeared to have been modified or strengthened a number of times, with several buttress-type features seen to support its west-facing wall. A curious kink indicated that the northern return was curved. Part of the east-facing wall was also exposed by the cutting of Trench F. An infilled entrance (F803) probably gave access from the cellar to the yard surface into which the vat-type Structure 2 was cut. The blocking of this entrance seems to have been necessitated by the construction of the southern-facing wall of Structure 3, which butts crudely against the north–south line of the older wall. Therefore, it seems likely that Structure 3 was built to extend Structure 4 into a building with a L-shaped plan.

Stratigraphic Summary (Figs.2, 3 and 4)

The summary of the stratigraphic sequence across the site is discussed trench by trench for those areas where archaeological deposits were not destroyed by 19th-century buildings and cellars. An interpretative overview of the significance of the whole site is then offered.

Trench A

Trench A was cut against the westernmost edge of the site, immediately adjacent to the original footpath alongside Upper Russell Street. This meant that the east-facing section was about 1m above the general level that the site had been cleared to. Given the location of the trench, near a road which was still in use, and the probable instability of the ground underneath the footpath, it was considered that adequate shoring of the east-facing section could not be achieved beyond a working depth of about 2m from the footpath surface, especially as the trench was to be left open until the building contractors commenced work. Because of these constraints it was considered that a strategy involving a watching brief of the final building works be adopted as the most appropriate archaeological response.

Consequently, natural clay deposits were not encountered at any point along the length of Trench A before excavation had to be abandoned for safety reasons, although at the junction of Trenches A and E, in the southwest corner of the site, natural clay deposits were seen at a depth of 135.37m A.O.D. before these, in turn, became waterlogged.

The machine excavated to a depth of between 1.5m and 1.75m below the level of the footpath to reveal deposits beneath either a series of levelling deposits in the south end of the trench, or the cultivated soil surface (1012) identified during the 1989 excavations in the north end. Further excavation by hand in this trench was limited by safety considerations to sampling the different contexts encountered in a series of spits in order to recover dating evidence, the excavation of two features cut from later levels (F7 and F8), and two sondages protected by shoring.

Because of the disturbance caused by a series of later features in the northern end of the trench, and the limited depth of the further excavation, it was difficult to determine which of the deposits excavated was the earliest. However, 1014, a layer of compacted black loamy silt, excavated in the northernmost sondage was probably the earliest. This layer was excavated to a depth of 135.52m A.O.D. where it merged into a layer of clayey loam, equivalent to a context seen in Trench G (7009), which was seen to overly the natural clay in the southern section of Trench G, just to the northeast. Pottery from 1014 was probably 17th century in date, although some of the wares found may have been produced into the 18th century.

South of 1014 a sondage was cut into a spread of grey clay (1013) which mainly contained 17th- and 18th-century pottery including some wasters, although some residual 13th- to 14th-century sherds were also found. Excavation ceased at 135.31m A.O.D when waterlogging occurred. While no physical relationship was found between 1014 and 1013 it is likely that both overlay 7009, which in turn overlay the natural clay, which must dip to the southwest.

Both 1013 and 1014 were sealed under the cultivated soil surface (1012) which contained 17th/18th century pottery, including an almost intact collapsed Black Ware mug waster. A layer of very mixed shale (1011) overlay 1012. F6, a shallow pit, 0.5m in depth and filled with 1011, truncated 1012 to the north; while F7 and F8, two similar, east–west-aligned, linear trenches with steep-sided profiles, appeared to truncate both 1011 and 1012 in the middle of the trench. A well (F9), made of hand-moulded pre-19th-century brick, was cut into the east section of the trench. Given the date of the contexts cut, the well was probably 18th century in date.

South of F7 and F8 the earliest layer was a clean grey clay (1020) located at a depth of 135.63m A.O.D. Also cut by F7, 1020 may be equivalent to 1013. The stratigraphy in the west end of Trench E indicated that 1020 overlay the yellower natural clay. Overlying 1020 was a solid layer of compacted sandy silt with some iron panning present (1018). In turn, 1018 was overlain by a thin black layer of loam (1017) which may be a thin trace of the buried cultivated soil (1012).

The layers overlying 1017 have no equivalent north of F7 and F8. A band of buff-brown solid clay (1016) was overlain by bands of loam and coal (1010 and 1015) which merged into a single context towards F7, which was cut from this level. F7 and F8 were filled with black/grey clay silt containing mudstone fragments, charcoal flecks, and 18th-century pottery (numbered 1009 in F7, and 1019 in F8). Pottery recovered from these features was 18th century in date. Massive blocks of coal (1007) sat on 1009; these blocks, the largest measuring 0.6m by 0.8m, supported a number of brick walls (F3 and F5 running north–south, while F4, a truncated return, must have run to the northeast).

A layer of clay and mudstone (1008), the top fill of F7, was sealed by a layer of friable, dark brown loam (1006); both these fills abut 1007 and F3, as does a later-looking brick wall (F1 and F2) which was built over 1006 up to the level of the present footpath.

Trench B

Most of this trench comprised the backfilled cellar of Structure 4. At the south end of the trench excavation was halted at *c.*135.50m A.O.D. to prevent waterlogging from Trench E. The earliest context, a black silty loam (2002), was overlain by a series of shale deposits (2001 and 2000) which sealed the entire southern sector of the site south of the disturbances caused by the cellared buildings.

North of Structure 4, which was cut into the natural clay, a small patch of buried topsoil, equivalent to 1012, survived between the external wall of the building and a modern pipe trench (F207). In turn, this was overlain by the general levelling deposit of shale.

Trench C

The southern arm of this trench comprised the cellar of Structure 1, and most of the north end was occupied by Structure 3. North of the external wall of Structure 3 the ground was heavily disturbed by the cut of a modern pipe trench (F207 in Trench B), while north of this feature the natural clay was overlain by a remnant of the buried cultivated soil (3012) which underlay a general layer of shale (3014). Underneath the floor of Structure 3, a brick drain (F308), presumably associated with Structure 4, was cut into the natural clay (3013).

Trench D

At the northern end of Trench D the natural clay (4005) was exposed at a height of 136.10m A.O.D. This was overlain by the buried cultivation soil (7002) and a later layer of shale (4000). South of Structure 3, the natural clay was cut by a series of pit-type features (F401, F402 and F403). The earliest (F403) was a circular pit containing 17th-century pottery in its fill of friable, loamy silt (4006). F403 was cut by a linear gulley (F402), filled with shale (4004), which blended into the general levelling deposit (4000). Parallel with F402 another linear gulley (F401) cutting F403 was filled with layers of solid buff clay (4007) and a slumped deposit of grey shaley loam (4003).

Trenches E and F

These trenches were not recorded. Trench E was waterlogged over the natural clay. Overlying deposits were all associated with later disturbances cut into the shale levelling deposit. Trench F was only cut up to the inner face of the

eastern external wall of Structure 4 because of the presence of Structure 2 which was believed to be a kiln at the time of the machining; as in Trench E only levelling deposits were observed in section.

Trench G

Natural clay (7010) immediately underlay the cultivated soil surface (7002) at a height of 136.10m A.O.D. in the eastern end of this trench. The natural appeared to dip towards the southwest in the middle of the trench (F703), which may account for the failure to encounter natural in Trench A. A solid deposit of buff-brown clay silt containing a high percentage of cobbles (7003) had accumulated over the dip in the natural clay. A number of exclusively medieval sherds was recovered from this context, the pottery ranging in date from the 13th to the 15th century. The deep cut of a modern pipe trench (F706) had destroyed any archaeological deposits in the western end of Trench G. The buried, cultivated soil surface (7002) extended over most of the length of the trench and was cut through in several places by modern gulleys and pits (F701 and F705). Overlying 7002 was an extensive shale levelling deposit (7005) which was also cut by F701, F705 and F706; in addition, a small pit (F704) cut 7005 and F705.

Conclusions

Excavation has shown that the site at Upper Russell Street/The Shambles, Wednesbury was cluttered with the remains of 19th-century backplot buildings, reflecting what Conzen (1968) has called 'the climax of the burgage plot cycle' in the mid- to late-19th century (Fig.5). However, sufficient surviving islands of earlier archaeological deposits were found for a general sequence of the development of the area to be tentatively proposed, back to the planning of the triangular market place in the Middle Ages.

This evidence, when taken in combination with the results of previous excavations in Wednesbury town centre and with evidence from early map sources, supports the views of Hodder (1992) that the town centre was probably not densely built up until the 18th and 19th centuries – in fact the topography of the Shambles side slope was probably altered to facilitate this development by use of extensive coal and shale deposits to level the area. These deposits were presumably derived from the spoil tips of the surrounding coal mines.

Before this time Wednesbury was, in effect, a busy, large, but essentially rural village. Although the clamour of small-scale, family-based industrial activity would have progressively grown from the 16th century onwards – including the clatter of hammer and tongs, the whirring of potter's wheels, and the shouts of the carriers – it would appear that activity was largely confined to the main thoroughfares and market-place frontages established in the medieval period. If the results of the recent excavation are typical, it would appear that the use of the tail-ends of the market-place burgage plots was probably limited to cultivation until at least the late 18th century. This is notable because the economic incentive to subdivide, infill, and exploit plots such as the one excavated might be expected to be greatest in the busy market area, and therefore the history of this particular plot may reasonably be argued to give a fair indication of the general pattern of economic activity within this part of the town.

Furthermore, although the pottery assemblage recovered from archaeological deposits was overwhelmingly 17th/18th century in date, the dating of the earliest finds appears to confirm the findings of the other excavations in the town which suggest that occupation of this part of the market place area did not occur until relatively late in the medieval period.

Finds Summary (by S.Ratkai)

Most of the 17th/18th century Black Wares, Coarse Wares, and Yellow Wares recovered can be paralleled at several local sites, including West Bromwich Moat, Dudley Castle, Sandwell Priory and in Wednesbury itself. The parallel pottery from Dudley Castle was sealed below Civil War destruction rubble, so there is no doubt that some of these wares were in use in the mid-17th century. However, there is a problem in that there is no securely-stratified evidence for the introduction of these wares apart from the Yellow Wares, an example of which was found beneath the collapsed tower of Whitefriars, Coventry, and dated to 1572. There is no certainty either as to when some of the coarse pancheon types fell out of use.

The medieval pottery is paralleled at Dudley Castle, with the exception of a bowl rim and the fine, buff/white ware from 7003.

The Post-Medieval vessel forms are paralleled in Hodder (1992), and the presence of wasters in 1012 and 1013 indicate that most of the pottery was manufactured in Wednesbury. However, despite documentary evidence (Hodder 1992,2) there has been no waster evidence to indicate what types of medieval pottery were manufactured in Wednesbury, and it is therefore far from certain that the medieval pottery from the site was of local manufacture.

Summary of Documentary Research

A brief search was made of a sample of Trade Directories and Census Returns of 1841 and 1881 to try to establish the function of the vat-type feature Structure 2. It was quickly established that because of the intensive occupation of this part of Wednesbury, and because of the nature of the information, it was not possible to establish a firm link between the evidence and particular properties without further detailed research.

Acknowledgements

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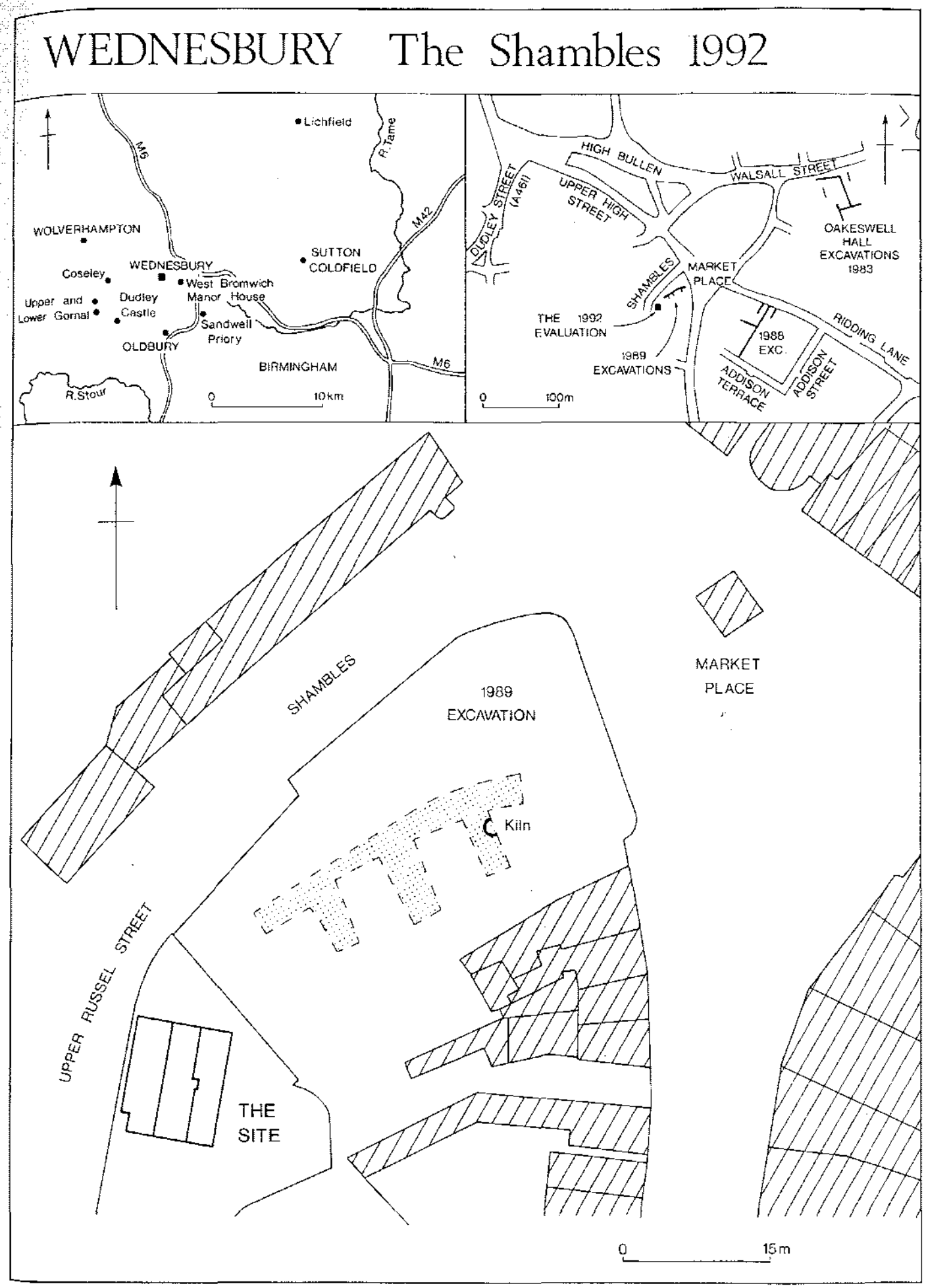
WEDNESBURY The Shambles 1992
Lichfield
R.Tame
M6
M42
WOLVERHAMPTON
WEDNESBURY
SUTTON COLDFIELD
Coseley
West Bromwich Manor House
Upper and Lower Gornal
Dudley Castle
Sandwell Priory
OLDBURY
BIRMINGHAM
M6
R.Stour
0 10km
HIGH BULLEN
WALSALL STREET
DUDLEY STREET (A461)
UPPER HIGH STREET
OAKESWELL HALL EXCAVATIONS 1983
SHAMBLES
MARKET PLACE
THE 1992 EVALUATION
1988 EXC.
1989 EXCAVATIONS
RIDDING LANE
ADDISON TERRACE
ADDISON STREET
0 100m
SHAMBLES
1989 EXCAVATION
MARKET PLACE
Kiln
UPPER RUSSEL STREET
THE SITE
0 15m

Figure 1

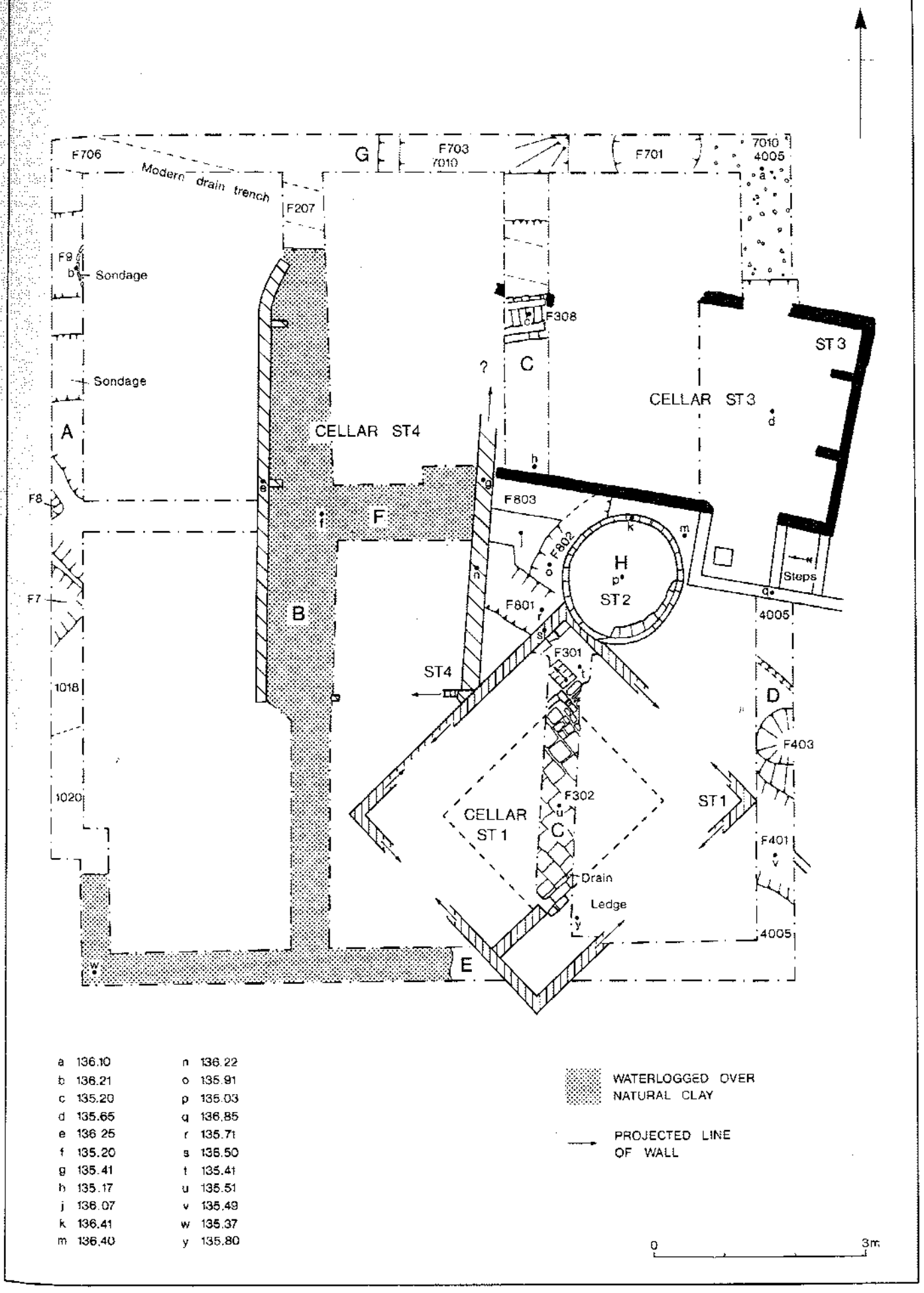
F706
Modern drain trench
G
F703
7010
F701
7010
4005
F207
F8
Sondage
Sondage
F308
ST3
C
CELLAR ST3
CELLAR ST4
A
F8
F
F803
F802
H
ST2
Steps
F7
B
F801
4005
F301
ST4
1018
D
F403
1020
F302
CELLAR
ST 1
C
ST1
F401
Drain
Ledge
4005
E
a 136.10
b 136.21
c 135.20
d 135.65
e 136.25
f 135.20
g 135.41
h 135.17
j 136.07
k 136.41
m 136.40
n 136.22
o 135.91
p 135.03
q 136.85
r 135.71
s 136.50
t 135.41
u 135.51
v 135.49
w 135.37
y 135.80
WATERLOGGED OVER NATURAL CLAY
PROJECTED LINE OF WALL
0
3m

Figure 2

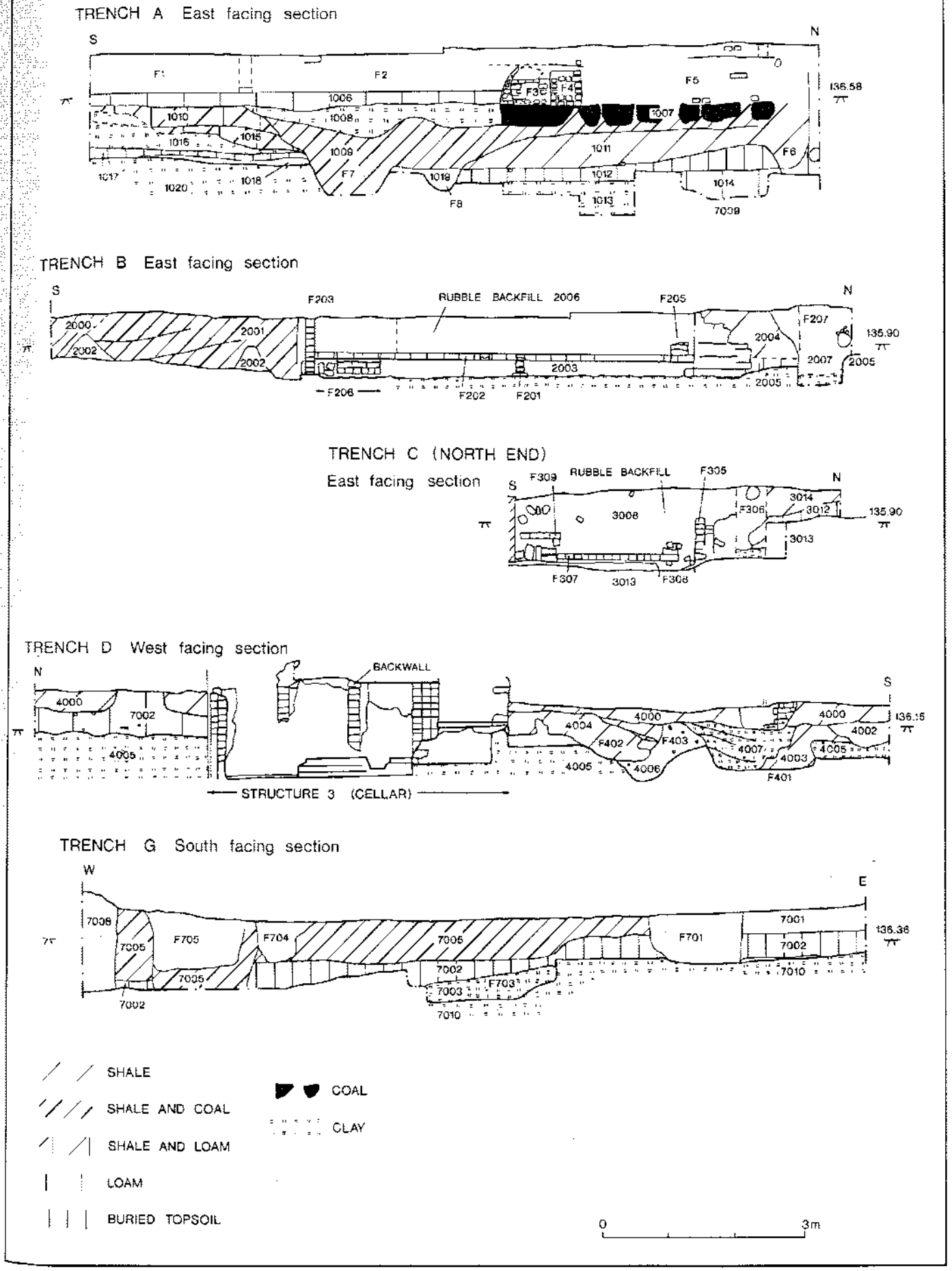
TRENCH A East facing section
S
N
F1
F2
F3
F4
F5
F6
F7
F8
1006
1008
1010
1015
1016
1009
1017
1020
1018
1019
1011
1012
1013
1014
1007
7009
136.58
TRENCH B East facing section
S
N
F203
RUBBLE BACKFILL 2006
F205
F207
2000
2001
2002
2002
2003
2004
2007
2005
2005
135.90
F206
F202
F201
TRENCH C (NORTH END)
East facing section
S
N
F309
RUBBLE BACKFILL
F305
3008
F306
3014
3012
3013
135.90
F307
3013
F308
TRENCH D West facing section
N
S
BACKWALL
4000
7002
4005
4004
4000
4000
4002
F402
F403
4007
4005
4003
4005
4006
F401
136.15
STRUCTURE 3 (CELLAR)
TRENCH G South facing section
W
E
7008
7005
F705
F704
7006
F701
7001
7002
7005
7002
F703
7003
7002
7010
7010
136.36
SHALE
SHALE AND COAL
SHALE AND LOAM
LOAM
BURIED TOPSOIL
COAL
CLAY
0
3m

Figure 3

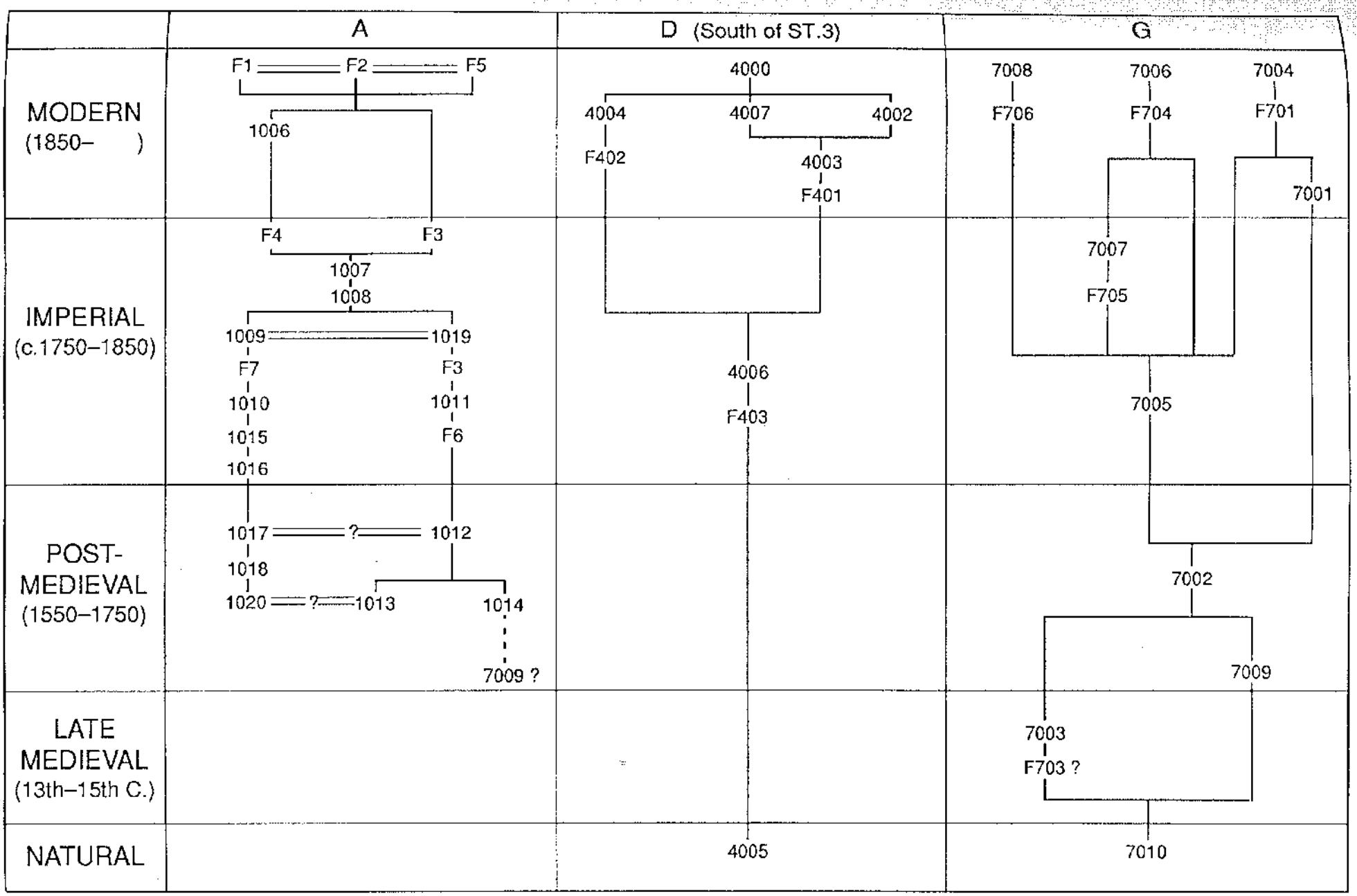
A
D (South of ST.3)
G
MODERN (1850–)
IMPERIAL (c.1750–1850)
POST-MEDIEVAL (1550–1750)
LATE MEDIEVAL (13th–15th C.)
NATURAL
F1
F2
F5
1006
F4
F3
1007
1008
1009
1019
F7
F3
1010
1011
1015
F6
1016
1017
?
1012
1018
1020
?
1013
1014
7009 ?
4000
4004
4007
4002
F402
4003
F401
4006
F403
4005
7008
7006
7004
F706
F704
F701
7001
7007
F705
7005
7002
7009
7003
F703 ?
7010

Figure 4

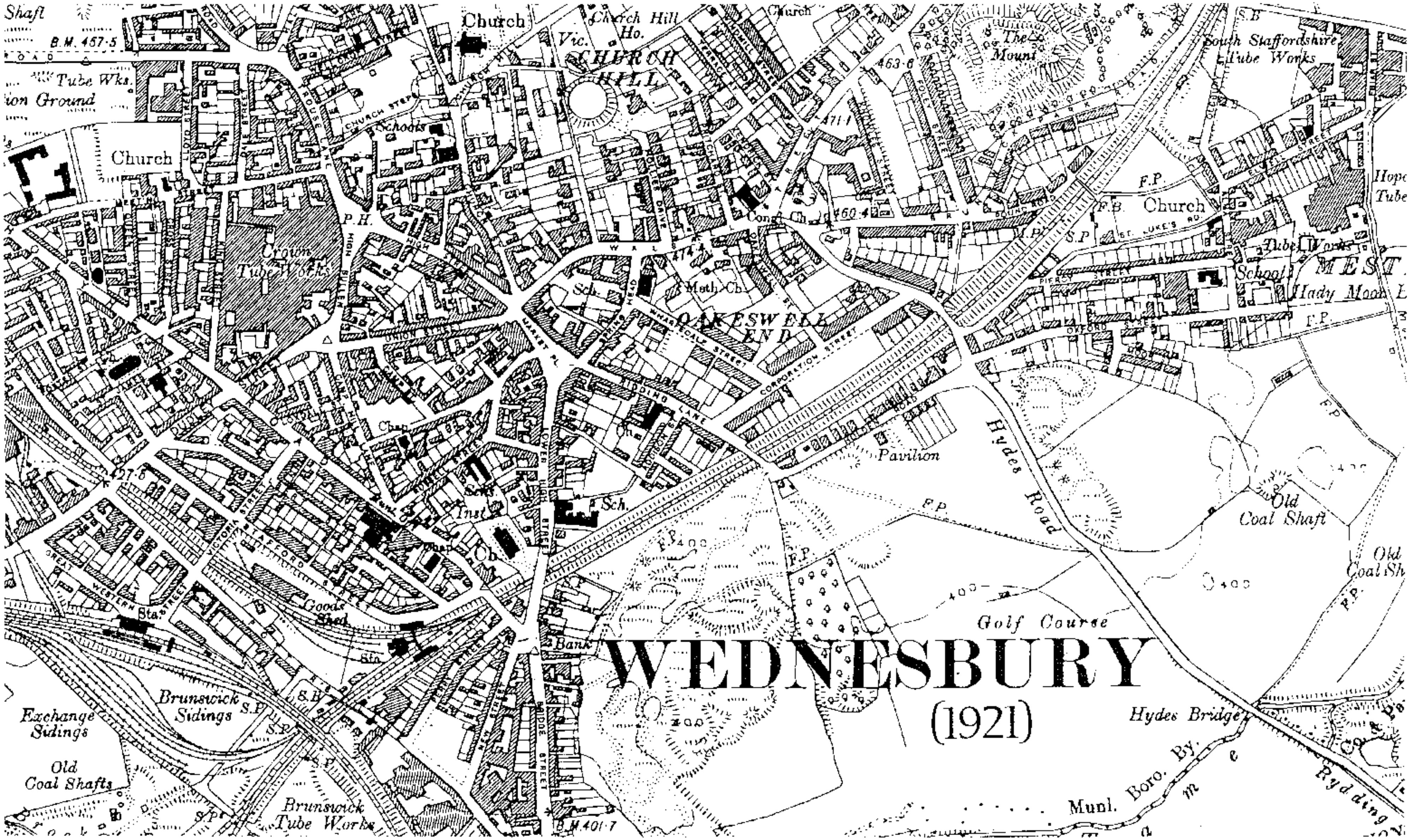
WEDNESBURY
(1921)
Golf Course
Hydes Road
Hydes Bridge
Pavilion
Old Coal Shaft
Crown Tube Works
Church Hill
The Mount
South Staffordshire Tube Works
Oakeswell End
Goods Shed
Brunswick Sidings
Exchange Sidings
Old Coal Shafts
Brunswick Tube Works
Munl. Boro. By.

Figure 5