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HIGH STREET, BILSTON, WOLVERHAMPTON

An Archaeological Evaluation

1993

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

This report describes the results of an archaeological evaluation of land at High Street, Bilston, Wolverhampton (Fig 1A-B). The evaluation was commissioned by Peter Maddox and Associates, Architects, on behalf of the proposed developers, Midland Co-Operative Society, and was undertaken by Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit, in accordance with a brief prepared by the Conservation Section of Wolverhampton Borough Council.

The aim of the evaluation was to determine the survival and extent of any medieval and early post-medieval settlement remains in the proposed development area, which is included within the Bilston Area of Potential Archaeological Importance. Such information was considered to be of particular importance, given the lack of previous archaeological fieldwork in Bilston. In particular, the evaluation was intended to establish whether this area lay within the bounds of the 16th-century urban nucleus of Bilston, and to assess the survival of any medieval structures built on the High Street and Stonefield Road frontages. Land to the rear of the frontages was also to be evaluated, to investigate the potential of this zone for evidence of the burgage (property) plot boundaries and rubbish pits which are typical of medieval urbanism.

2.0 THE SITE (Fig 1C)

The proposed development site, measuring approximately 1.2 ha. in extent, is located at the west end of Bilston High Street. The site is bounded to the north by the High Street, in the east by Stonefield Road, and to the south and west by the Black Country Route. Demolition of all standing buildings, except the Swan Public House, was completed by the time of the evaluation. The proposed development includes the construction of a supermarket in the east of the site, and the provision of car parking over the remainder of the area.

The most tangible evidence of medieval settlement in the area is the former Stow Heath Manor House, now the Greyhound and Punchbowl Public House (Fig 1B: West Midlands SMR No. 443), situated opposite the junction of High Street and Stonefield Road. This mid-16th century timber-framed house (Pevsner 1974, 71) set on an ashlar base, was located near to another house of similar date and construction called Stonecroft House, which could have been sited on the eastern margin of the development zone. According to a description by local antiquary Lawley (1920, 11) 'the lower storey was built entirely of stone, but the upper one, which overhung the lower, was half-timbered in the usual Tudor fashion, having panelled gables handsomely carved, and corbels at the angles of the overhanging floor, from which it may be justly inferred that it was erected in the reign of Elizabeth'. A survey of 1699 describes Stonecroft House as being 'a fine stone building, set within its own grounds' (Lawley 1893, 47-8). Lawley also describes the destruction of the house, due to 'the insatiable greed of man, for the mines underneath proving rich and near to the surface, it was first damaged and then demolished early in the last [19th] century, the materials being used largely in the boundary walls of neighbouring properties' (1920, 12).

Maps of the area dated in 1832 and 1867 (Fig 3) show that the High Street and Stonecroft Road were developed by the early 19th-century. By the time of the first Ordnance Survey map of 1887 the area appears to have been extensively re-developed, although some element of continuity is provided by the surviving Public Houses.

3.0 EVALUATION METHODOLOGY (Fig 1C)

As a first stage in site evaluation, the relevant documentary and cartographic sources were consulted. This also assisted in the location of the trial-trenches, by pinpointing those areas of highest archaeological potential, and, equally the areas where more recent building may have disturbed earlier archaeological deposits or features.

In the second stage of site evaluation, a total of five trial-trenches were dug in the area of the proposed supermarket, where groundworks were anticipated to cause the most extensive sub-surface intrusion. Trenches 1 and 2 (Fig 1C), located on the High Street frontage, were positioned in alleyways between 19th-century buildings, to avoid deep disturbances caused by cellerage and floors. Similarly, Trenches 4 and 5 were sited on the Stonefield Road frontage, both to the north and south of a terrace of 19th-century buildings. Trench 3 was cut on a west-east alignment, across the projected alignment of property boundaries dating to the early 19th century, or earlier, to sample an undisturbed area to the rear of the High Street, for evidence of medieval or early post-medieval boundary ditches, and rubbish pits.

A JCB excavator was employed to remove demolition rubble, garden soil, and the floors associated with the 19th-century buildings. This procedure permitted the selective hand excavation of earlier undisturbed archaeological features and deposits, and to locate the upper horizon of the natural subsoil where possible. This approach was considered adequate for a basic understanding of the archaeological potential of the area of the proposed supermarket. Excavation in all trenches was halted at a depth of 1.2m below the modern surface for safety reasons.

Recording was by means of pre-printed pro-forma recording sheets, supplemented by plans, sections and photographs, which are held in the archive.

4.0 THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESULTS (Figs 1-2, Plates 1-2)

4.1: The High Street frontage: Trenches 1 and 2

Trench 1 measured 2m in width and 8m in length, and was located in a passageway to the east of the west wall (F8) of Number 78 High Street. The natural subsoil, a brown-orange clay-silt (1032), was located at a depth of 1.2m below the modern surface. This subsoil was overlain by a pebble yard surface (1028) in the south of the trench. To the north of this yard was a line of flat, irregular sandstone blocks (1027) set in the subsoil, and forming a path. The yard and path were overlain by a build-up of dark grey-black clay-silt (1005), containing tipped lenses of charcoal, angular sandstone fragments and creamy-white mortar. The brick wall (F8) recorded in the east baulk of the trench was cut into layer 1004, which was sealed by demolition debris (1000).

Trench 2 measured a maximum of 2.0m in width and 9m in length, and was located in a second passageway between the east wall of Number 74 High Street (F6) and the west wall of Number 72 High Street (F5). Here the natural subsoil, located at a depth of 1.2m below the modern surface, was sealed by successive layers (1015, 1010, 1009) containing a quantity of sandstone rubble.

Above layer 1009 was a yard surface (F1) composed of worn quartz pebbles, located at a depth of 0.7m below the modern ground surface and set in dark brown clay-silt (Plates 1-2). This surface was cut by a drain (F10) aligned west-east. The yard was laid out between the street frontage and the north wall (F4: aligned west-east) of a building constructed to the rear. The tiled floor (F7) of this building was formed over a layer of clay-silt (1016). The floor and yard were sealed by a layer of demolition rubble (1000), the latter cut by the foundation trenches of walls F5 and F6.

4.2: The Stonefield Road frontage: Trenches 4 and 5

Trench 4 measured a maximum of 5m in width and 8m in length. The upper horizon of the natural subsoil was recorded here at a depth of 1.2m below the modern surface. This upper horizon was disturbed in the west of the trench, but an undisturbed horizon of orange clay was found in a sondage cut in the east. This subsoil was sealed throughout by a layer of dirty grey silt (1026) and overlain by a shallow layer of charcoal, ash and clinker (1027). This latter formed the foundation for two yard surfaces (F2, F3). The former, aligned northwest-southeast and composed of small closely set, well-worn cobbles, was recorded in the east of the trench. The western yard (F3) was composed of larger, more irregularly-laid cobbles. Both yard surfaces were sealed by a layer of ashy black soil (1029), recorded below approximately 1.0m of recent demolition debris (1000).

Trench 5 measured 2m in width and 4m in length. The earliest deposit encountered here (at a depth of 1.2m below the modern surface) was a mixed layer of demolition debris (1014) containing bricks, angular sandstone blocks and creamy-white mortar set in dark grey clay-silt. Above this was a dump of angular sandstone fragments (1013) mixed with mortar. Above was a further layer of demolition rubble (1012) sealed beneath a gravel yard, with a concrete hardstanding above (1011).

4.3: The backplot area: Trench 3

Trench 3 measured 2m in width and 7m in length. A light-brown clay-silt (1025) was exposed and cleaned at the machined base of the trench. This layer was sealed by a dark grey-black clay-silt (1023), and cut by the foundation trench (F13) of a sandstone wall aligned west-east. An ashy deposit (1024) was tipped against the western face of the wall, while to its east a deep homogenous garden soil (1022) sealed by a layer of clay (1022) was recorded below the modern garden soil (1000).

4.4: The Finds

The finds from Trench 2 included pottery, worked fragments of shell and mother-of-pearl. Pottery from layers sealed by the yard surface comprised mainly brown-glazed wares, with a terminus in the 18th century, while the pottery recovered from layers above the yard had a terminus in the 18th to 19th-centuries. The shell fragments had been formed into rings measuring approximately 3cm in diameter, and the mother-of-pearl fragments had been sawn. Of particular interest was a fragment of a medieval jug handle splashed with green glaze, with a terminus in the 12-13th-century, which was recovered from the uppermost layer of demolition rubble (1000).

The finds from Trench 4 include brown glazed sherds from the uppermost demolition layer, and sherds of 17th-18th century wares recovered from beneath the yard F2. There were no finds from the remaining trenches.

5.0 DISCUSSION (Figs 2-4)

On the High Street frontage the natural subsoil was found at a depth of approximately 1.2m below the modern surface, while the level of the yard of the Greyhound and Punchbowl Public House on the north side of High Street, and the yard surfaces exposed in Trenches 2 and 4 were recorded at a depth of approximately 0.7m below the modern surface. One sherd of medieval pottery was recovered from Trench 2, but no in-situ remains of medieval or early post-medieval date appeared to survive later disturbance. The cartographic evidence provides a context for the structures identified by trial-trenching, although their dating is unsure.

The north wall (F4) and internal floor (F7) recorded in Trench 2 probably relate to an L-shaped building set back from the street frontage and shown on street plans of 1832 and

1867. The yard (F1) linked this building with the street frontage. The yards exposed in Trench 4 lay in the angle between High Street and Stonefield Road, shown as an undeveloped area on maps dated 1832, 1867 and 1919. The eastern yard (F3) probably formed part of Stonefield Road, while its western counterpart (F2) may have been associated with the adjoining Public House to the west. Trench 5 provided no evidence of intact structures, perhaps because of the demolition of successive Victorian buildings constructed along this frontage, as suggested by the examination of street plans. The north-south wall (F12) recorded in Trench 3 is recorded on plans of 1832 and 1867 and formed part of a building, with garden soil deposits found to its east.

Of some interest is the small assemblage of worked shell and cut mother-of-pearl fragments recovered from Trench 2, which could represent one of Bilston's cottage industries engaged in small-scale manufacture of such ornaments nearby during the later 18th or 19th-centuries.

6.0 IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1: Implications

No evidence of archaeological features or deposits of medieval or early post-medieval date was found, although the trenching was targetted both to examine areas where medieval remains were predicted, and to avoid areas of later deep disturbance. The evidence from trial-trenching suggests that the levelling of the site after demolition may have included the extensive scouring-out of earlier structures, although intensive 18th and 19th century use of the site would also have severely affected the remains of earlier structures and arrangements. It is known for example that the 16th-century Stonecroft House was demolished and almost totally obliterated early in the 19th century.

6.2: Recommendations

In the apparent absence of archaeological features or deposits of medieval, or early post-medieval date on the site, the difficulty of identifying and recording such remains during construction groundworks, and given the degree of later disturbance recorded here, it is recommended that no provision be made for an archaeological watching brief during construction groundworks.

7.0 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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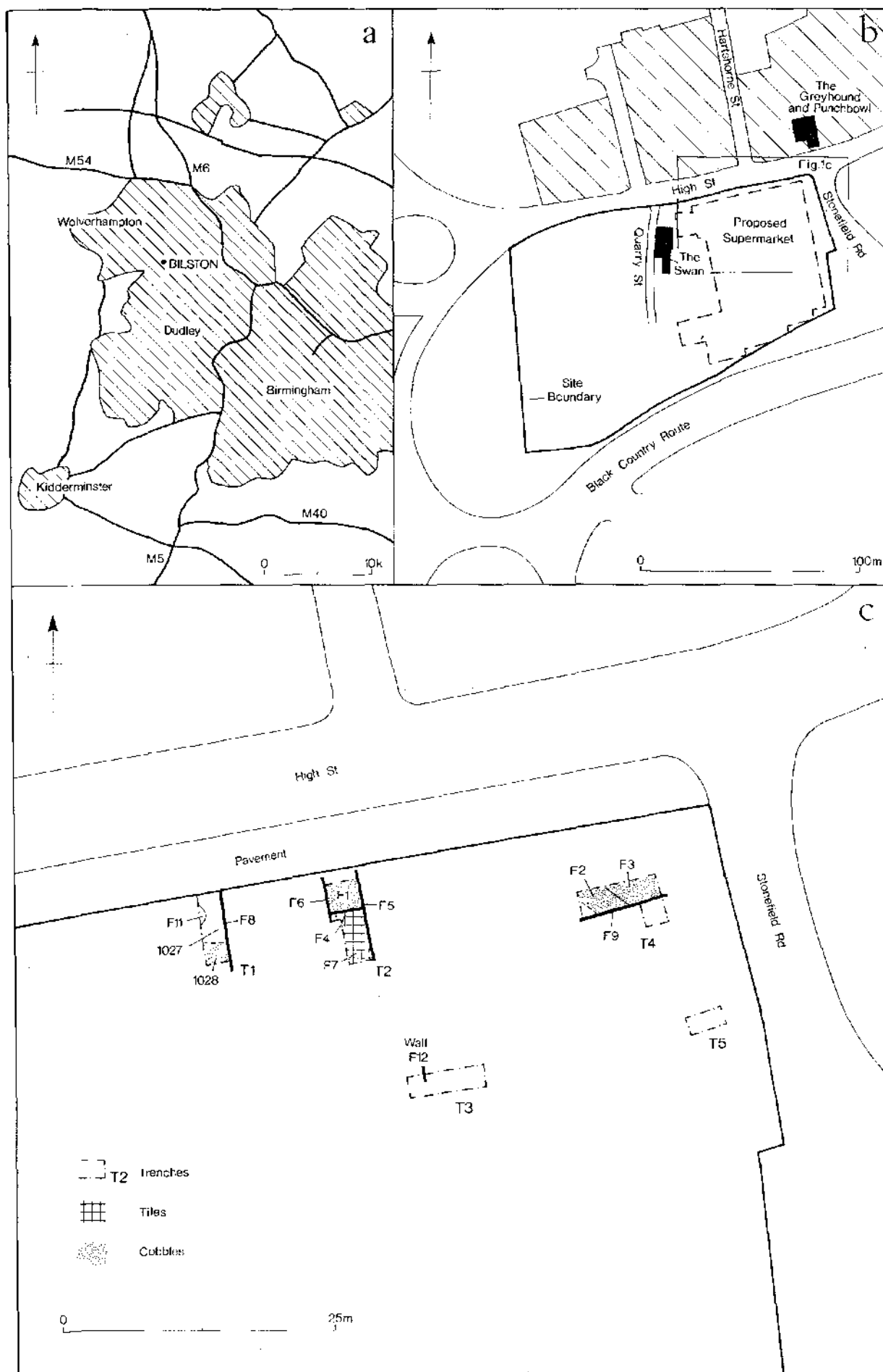


Figure 1

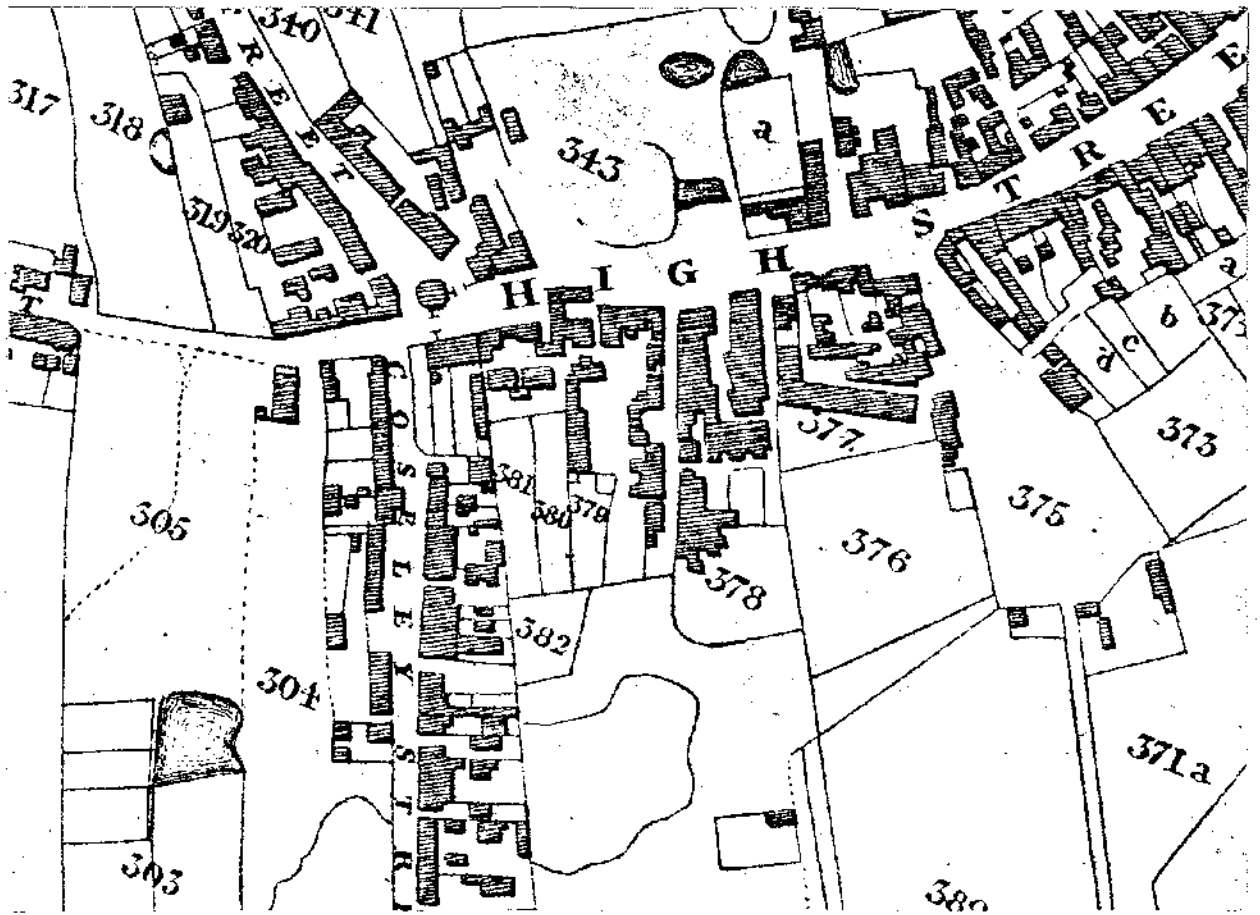


Figure 3



Figure 4

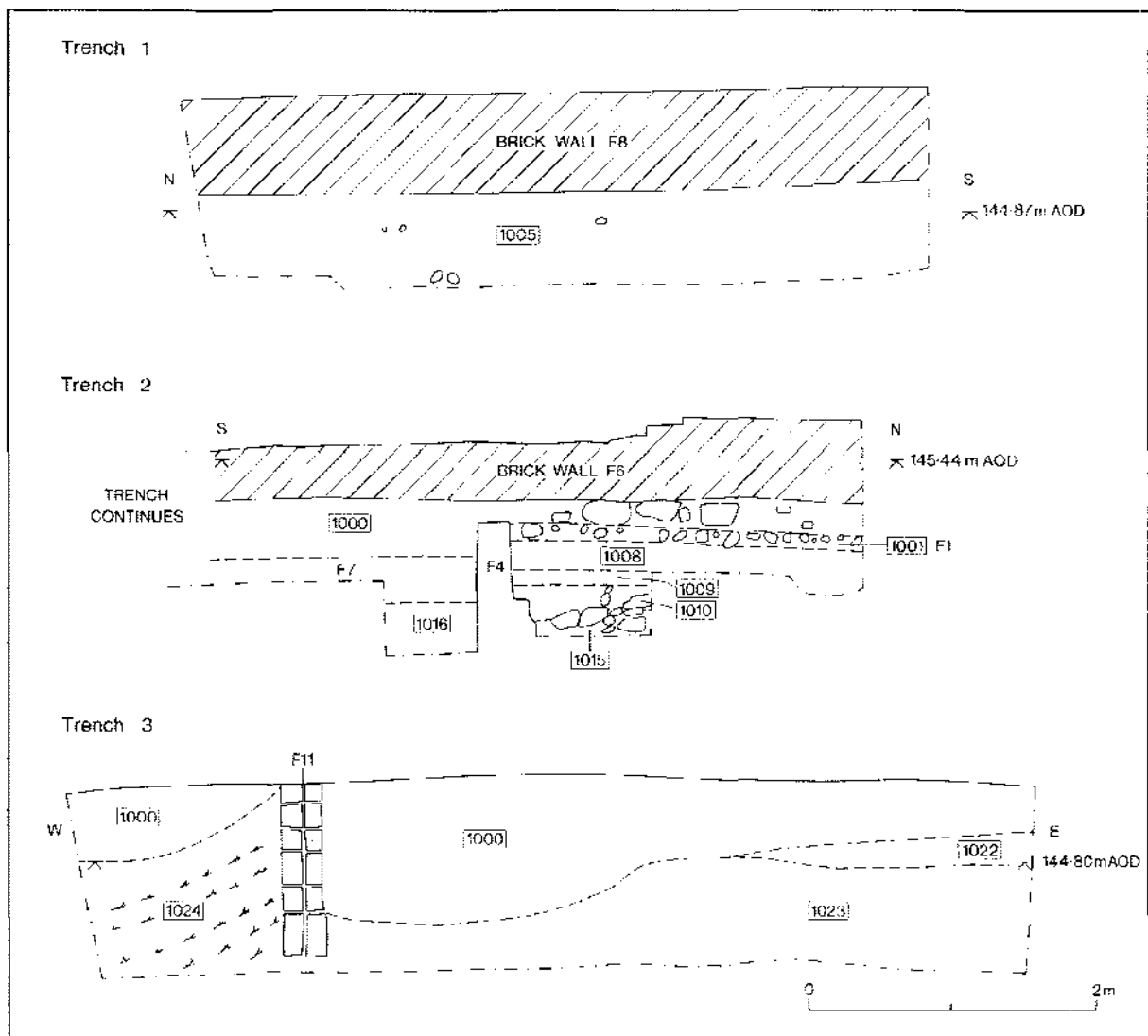


Figure 2



Plate 1



Plate 2