

Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit

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**An Archaeological Evaluation at South Road, Soho,
Handsworth, Birmingham.**

by

L.R.Jones

For further information please contact:
Simon Buteux, Iain Ferris or Peter Leach (Directors)
Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit
The University of Birmingham
Edgbaston
Birmingham B15 2TT
Tel: 0121 414 5513
Fax: 0121 414 5516

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Introduction (Figure 1a)

In November 1994 Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit (B.U.F.A.U.) was commissioned by Birmingham City Council to undertake an archaeological evaluation of land fronting 241 South Road, Soho, Handsworth, Birmingham (N.G.R. SP 05188903), on the site of the Soho Manufactory. The main purpose of the evaluation was to gain information to assist in the protection and interpretation of the site.

The Site and its Potential (Figure 1b)

The site occupies an area of 66 sq.m adjacent to the public footpath on the western side of South Road, currently the forecourt of a former garage. Evidence from documentary sources (Birmingham City Council, 1994) shows that the western side of South Road was occupied in the 18th and 19th centuries by Mathew Boulton's Soho Manufactory. A plan of the Soho Park estate c.1860 depicts the south-east corner of the Manufactory main building approximately corresponding with the south-east corner of the site. Plans of the building c.1859-60 show cellars at its south-east end. The Manufactory was demolished in 1862-3 and the site appears to have remained unoccupied (O.S. 25" to 1 mile, 1890) until a garage, the forecourt of which now occupies the site, was built, probably in the 1920's.

The aims of the evaluation were; (1) to locate precisely the south-east corner of the main Manufactory building, (2) to establish the location and depth of any archaeological deposits, (3) to establish the preservation of archaeological deposits and (4) to recover construction details of the building. The information gained from the evaluation was intended to be used to assist in the management and public interpretation of the site.

The Evaluation

Two small trenches were dug immediately to the west of, and running at right angles to, the public footpath, and were positioned in accordance with the evaluation brief prepared by Birmingham City Council. Due to the close proximity of live electricity cables and vehicular access it was decided not to go ahead with the excavation of a third trench, intended to be dug in the south-east corner of the site.

A JCB mechanical excavator with a concrete breaker was used to remove concrete, modern deposits and demolition rubble. The trenches were then cleaned and excavated by hand. Both trenches were 2m by 1m and were sited to avoid services.

Trench 1 (Figure 2)

After the removal of 0.2m of concrete, a modern concrete petrol storage tank was visible in the north-facing section, 0.84m in depth. Cut by the petrol tank was a layer of dark brown silty clay (1000), 0.10-0.15m in depth, containing mortar and brick fragments. Underlying this was a deposit of compact reddish-brown clay (1001), 0.15m in depth at the east end of the trench and 0.40m at the west end. Below this was a greyish-brown silty sand (1002), 0.18m in depth, which sealed a

deposit of clinker and ash (1003, not illustrated), 0.25m in depth, at the west end of the trench. Beneath these deposits was a layer of demolition rubble (1004), 0.8m in depth, containing lumps of pinkish-white mortar, red brick fragments and whole bricks (0.22m x 0.065m x 0.105m), fragments of green roof slates and 19th century pottery in a reddish-brown sand matrix.

Under the demolition rubble (1004) was the natural yellow-brown sub-soil (1007), located at 1.36m below the present ground surface. Cutting 1007 at the west end of the trench was a linear negative feature (F1), 0.6m in depth and aligned north-south, with very steeply sloping sides and a flat base. Feature F1 extended beyond the western edge of the trench and was filled with yellowish-brown sand and gravel (1005) containing lumps of pinkish-white mortar and a few brick fragments. Sitting on the natural clay at the base of F1 was the north-east corner of a truncated brick wall (F2). Feature F2 was 0.45m high and made of 6 courses of red brick (1006)(0.22m x 0.065m x 0.105m), was one brick wide, and bonded with a pinkish-white mortar.

Trench 2 (Figure 3)

A depth of 0.2m of concrete was removed to reveal, at the west end of the trench, a concrete petrol storage tank 0.85m in depth. This limited further excavation to a 1m square to the east of the tank. Here a dark brown silty sand (2000) was exposed, 0.20-0.30m in depth, containing lumps of charcoal, small lumps of pinkish-white mortar and a few fragments of brick. Under 2000, in the northern part of the trench, only was a deposit of demolition rubble (2001), 0.2m in depth, containing brick fragments and lumps of pinkish-white mortar in a yellow-brown sand matrix. Cutting layers 2001 and 2003 were two negative features, F3 and F4. The linear feature F3, aligned north-south, with steep sides and a gently sloping base, was 0.74m in depth. It was filled with large quantities of brick and mortar fragments in a light brown sand matrix (2002). Feature F4, a 1m wide oval pit 0.6m in depth, had a vertical southern side and a more gently sloping northern side with a flat base. It was filled with a brown silty sand (2005) containing large amounts of brick fragments, mortar and small fragments of purplish slate.

Beneath 2001 was a dark brown clay loam (2003), containing small pebbles and flecks of charcoal, 0.35m in depth. Under 2003 was a layer of yellowish-brown clay sand (2004), 0.2-0.3m in depth, containing small pebbles. Beneath 2004 was a disturbed yellowish-brown clay (2006), located 1.2m below the present ground surface. A shallow 0.10m sondage excavated through 2006 confirmed this to be the natural subsoil.

The Finds

The only pottery recovered from the site was from layer 1004 and was of 19th century date. Samples of brick, mortar and roof slate were also recovered from layer 1004 and retained.

Interpretation

The layer of demolition rubble (1004) in Trench 1 probably represents building materials from the levelled 18th century Manufactory building. The linear cut F1 sealed by this material appears to be a construction trench and the fill and shape of the feature are consistent with this interpretation. However, it is not possible to conclude, with any degree of certainty, that F1 is the cut for the front wall of the Manufactory building. The brick wall F2 appears to be too insubstantial to belong to the foundations, or even to a main cellar wall, of the Manufactory building and it

may represent either a structure built outside the building or an internal, below-ground structure within the building itself.

In Trench 2 no possible continuation of F1 could be observed due to the presence of a modern petrol tank. The linear feature F3, cutting a thin layer of probable 18th century demolition rubble (2001), may well be the cut for the insertion of this tank. The pit F4 also seems to be a relatively recent feature, as it also cuts 2001.

Conclusions

The results of the evaluation have proved largely inconclusive. It was not possible to identify the exact position of the east Manufactory wall. It is possible that F1 may represent the cut for the construction of the main Manufactory building and the main wall may survive further to the west. Alternatively, the wall may lie further to the east under the modern pavement.

The evaluation succeeded in locating and sampling building materials belonging to the demolished Manufactory building which appears to have been fairly thoroughly levelled.

Acknowledgements

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Reference

Birmingham City Council, 1994, Soho Manufactory Site, South Road, Soho Hill, Birmingham. Brief for Archaeological Evaluation.

Figures

Figure 1, Location Plans
Figure 2, Trench 1 Plan and section
Figure 3, Trench 2 Sections

SOUTH ROAD, SOHO 1994

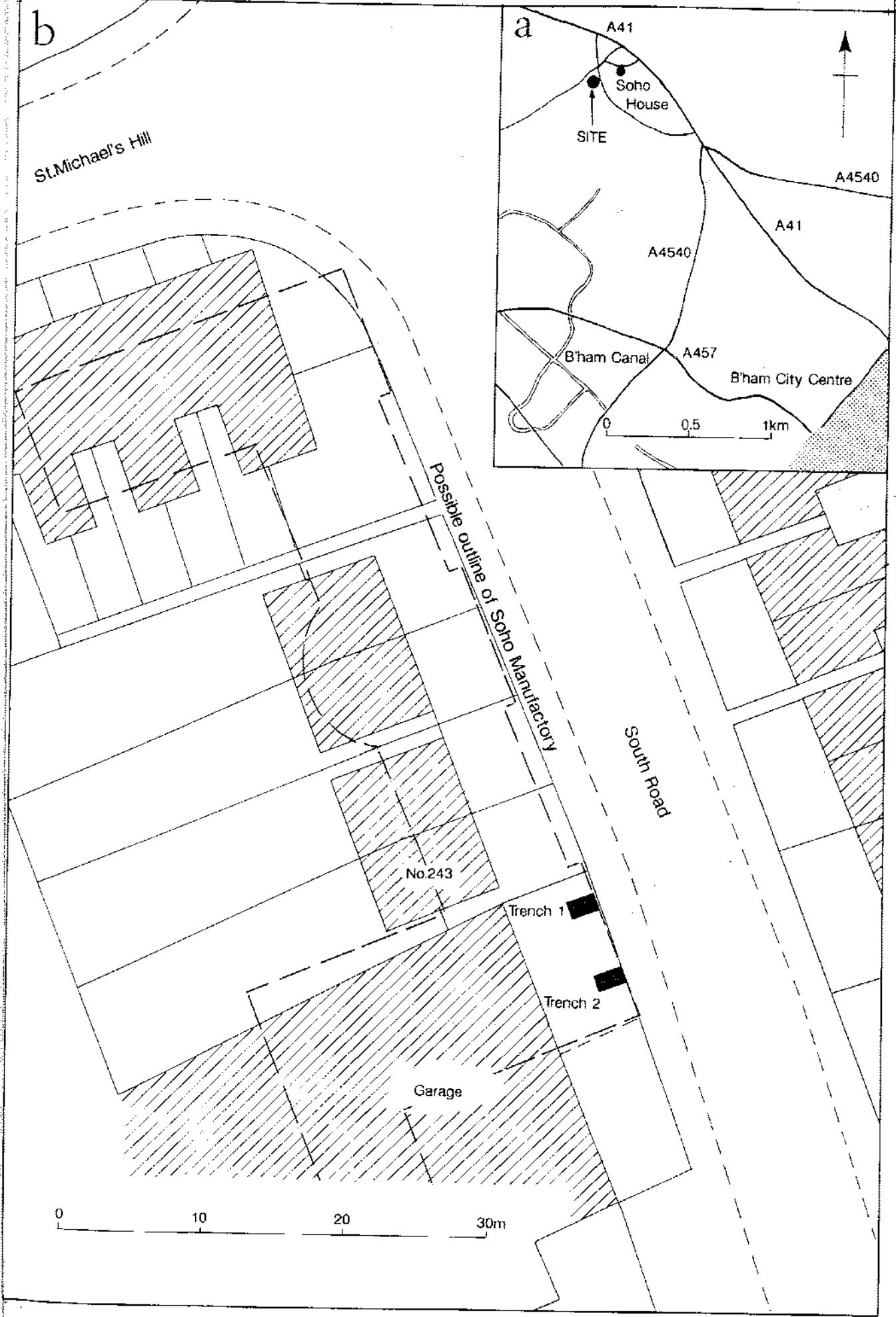
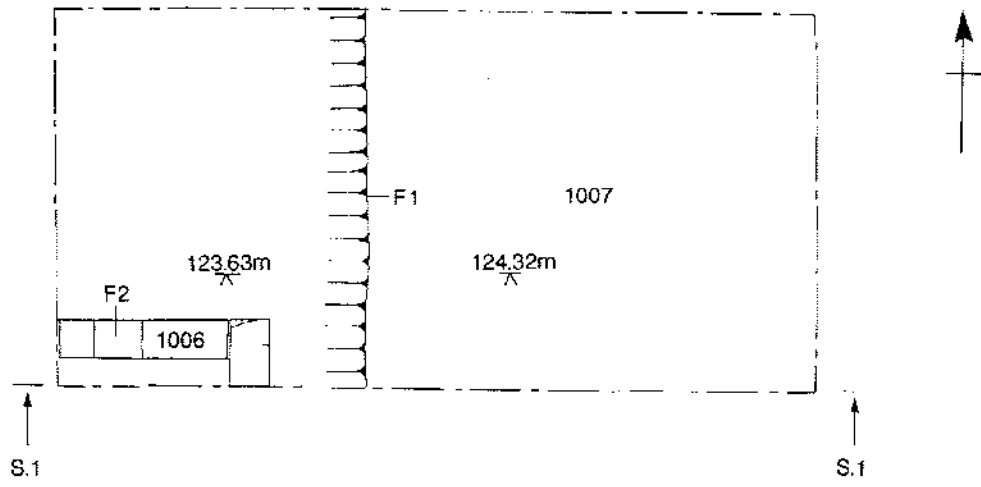


Figure 1

Trench 1 Plan



Trench 1 Section 1

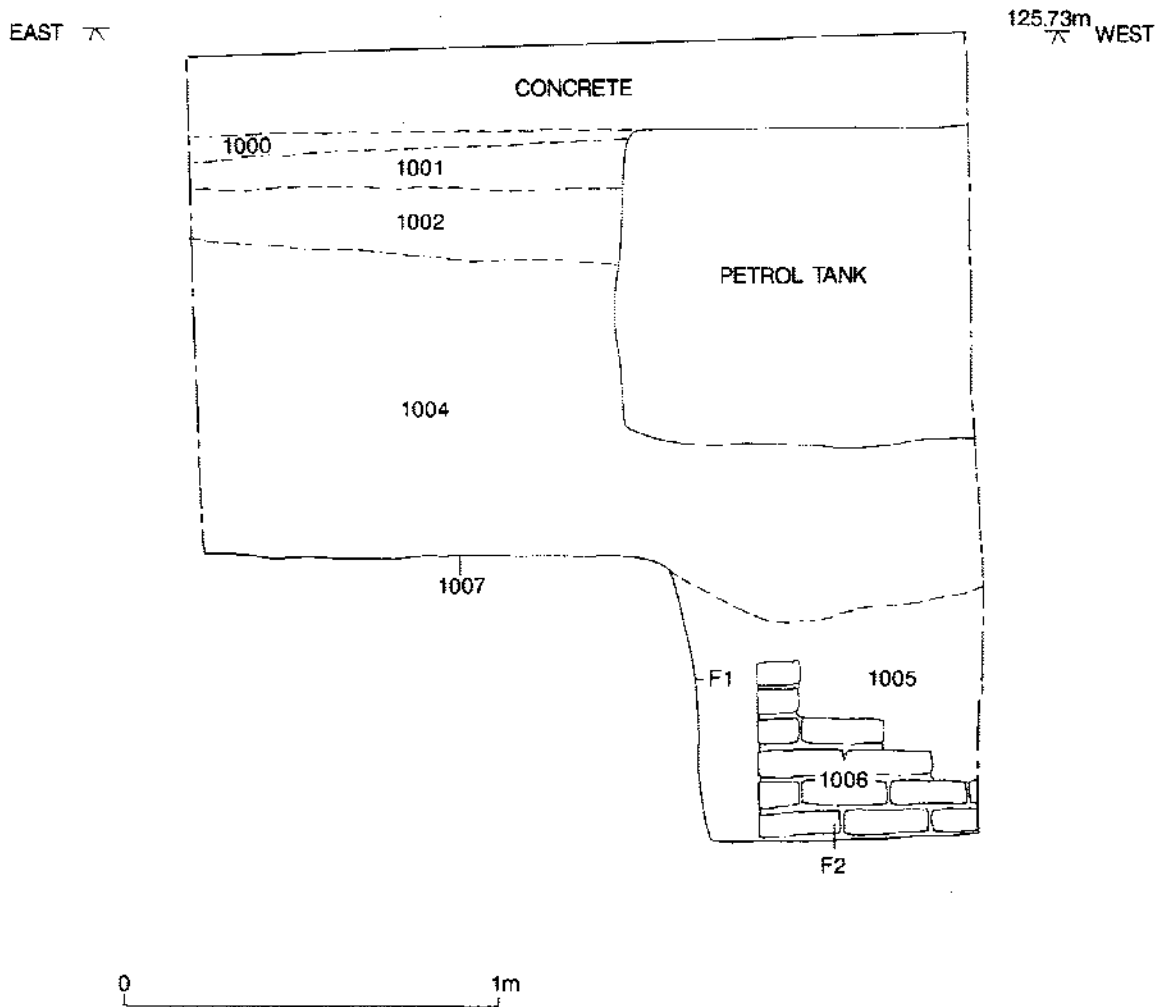
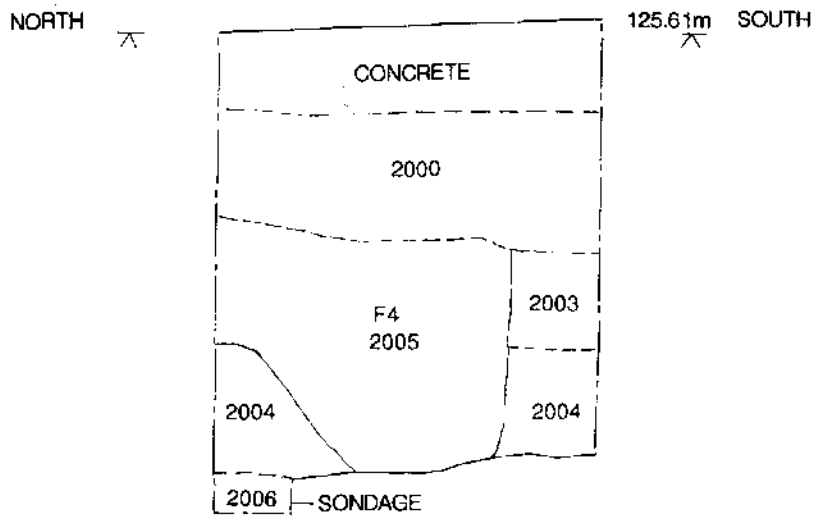


Figure 2

Trench 2 West Facing Section



Trench 2 South Facing Section

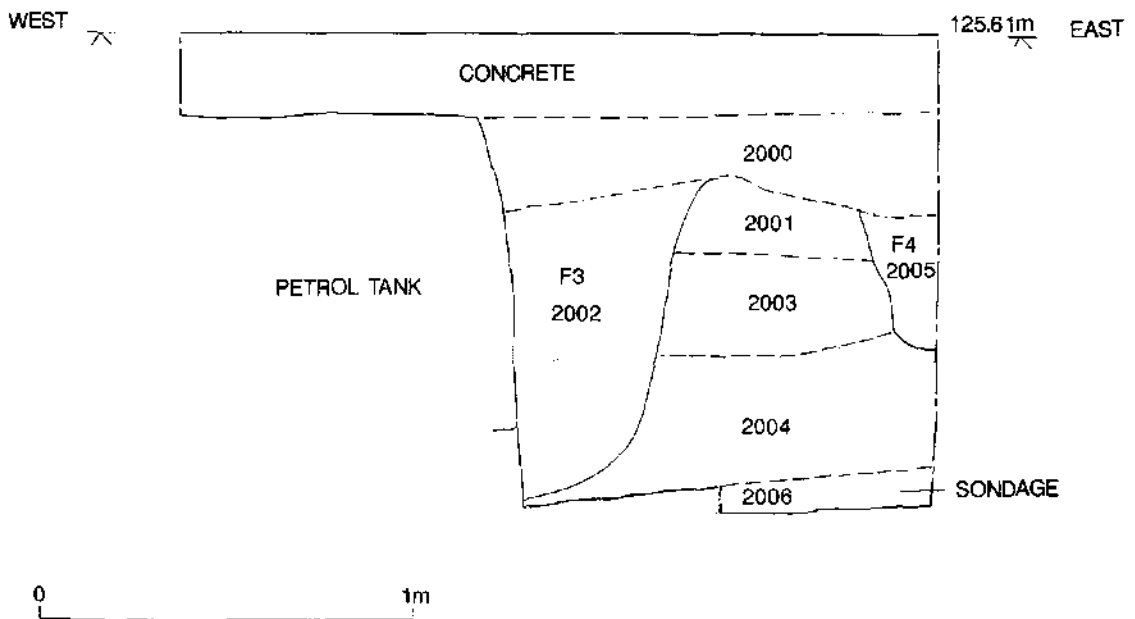


Figure 3