

Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit

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**Archaeological Investigations
at 12-14 Park Street, Walsall**

by

Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit

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SUMMARY

A programme of archaeological investigations was carried out by Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit at 12-14 Park Street, Walsall in November 1995. The work was carried out in response to a proposal to replace the existing retail units at the site. Park Street is thought to be a planned component of the medieval town. Soil investigations, undertaken at number 14 Park Street by DTS Technology Ltd, were archaeologically monitored and an inspection of the existing cellars was undertaken. The front cellar of number 14 Park Street appears to have been extensively rebuilt. However, rather more survives of the original fabric of the front cellar of number 12. Nothing of archaeological significance could be identified during the soil investigations.

INTRODUCTION

This report describes a programme of archaeological investigations undertaken at 12-14 Park Street, Walsall (fig. 1; SP986012). The work was undertaken by Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit in November 1995. It was carried out in accordance with a brief jointly prepared by West Midlands Sites and Monument Record and Nicol Thomas Ltd. in response to a proposal to replace the existing retail units on the site. Arrangements have been made for the deposition of the archive at the West Midlands SMR. The work was undertaken on behalf of Nicol Thomas Ltd.

OBJECTIVE

The objective of the work was to provide a rapid evaluation of the site. An attempt was made to determine the depth, date and extent of survival of archaeological deposits, and to determine the character of the existing cellars on the site.

METHOD

Desk Based assessment - An examination of available primary and secondary documentary and cartographic sources (including the County Sites and Monuments Record) was undertaken in an attempt to trace the recorded history of this site, and to place it within its wider local and regional context.

Cellar inspection - An inspection of the existing cellars to Nos. 12-14 was undertaken and any significant archaeological or architectural features were recorded.

Test Pitting - Soil investigations were undertaken by DTS Technology Ltd. This included the excavation of a test pit in the front cellar of number 14 and one to the rear of number 14. The excavation of these test pits was closely monitored by archaeological personnel and the stratigraphy was recorded.

RESULTS

Historical Evidence

Park Street is situated within the historic town centre of Walsall. It is a wide and important commercial street striking out north-east from the The Bridge, a large square built over Ford Brook in the 1850s. A conventional bridge was situated here from at least c.1300, and there is documentary evidence for houses in Park Street dating back to the 14th century. The Town Mill or Lord's Mill first recorded in the mid-13th century, though probably of earlier origin, was also situated here, and maps from before 1850 show a series of watercourses presumably associated with this mill.

Park Street was identified as an area of particular historic and archaeological importance in a report on the archaeology of Walsall commissioned by the Metropolitan Borough Council (Baker 1989). This report identified evidence for the medieval origins of Park Street as an important planned element of the town. Regular burgage or building plots were laid out along both sides of Park Street, generally with straight boundaries. In addition, the burgages on the north side of Park Street had a rear service lane which was redeveloped in the 19th century as St. Paul's Street. Situated within the valley bottom of the Ford Brook, the south-east end of Park Street was also identified as an area with good potential for archaeological preservation, because of a combination of deposit accumulation and the strong possibility of waterlogging (with consequent potential for long-term survival of organic materials). Therefore there was a strong expectation that archaeological deposits, if these survived within the proposed development area, might reveal important information concerning the origins and development of Walsall. The following rapid assessment of the evidence from readily available historical sources and the buildings themselves was undertaken to summarise our knowledge of the area. It should be noted that the parameters of this study were limited. The following discussion is based upon a rapid search of the records in the Walsall Local History Centre, an assessment of the historical mapping for the area, and an examination of various secondary references. As such it cannot, and does not, purport to be a definitive study of the historical development of 12/14 Park Street, merely a sketch history.

Two early maps of Walsall dated 1679 and 1763 (figs. 2 and 3) indicate that the north side of Park Street was heavily built up by the post-medieval period, and given its central commercial location this end of the street was probably well developed even in medieval times. The large number of relatively thin properties clustered along the Park Street frontage probably reflect an attempt to maximise the amount of commercial frontage space by the subdivision of the medieval burgages into a number of smaller units. In the 18th century the street was very busy; large numbers of carriers and mail coaches left from here (Pearce 1813), several large three or four storey Georgian town houses lined the road, and by 1799 the street led directly to the terminus of the newly built arm of the Walsall canal at Town End. The first map which is of sufficient accuracy and scale to reconstruct property boundaries is the Mason Map of 1824. A rescaled copy of the relevant part of this map is reproduced as fig.4. While the evidence from the Mason Map should be treated with a degree of caution, a reconstruction of the outline of the properties at the south east end of Park Street does reveal some correlation with features still visible on the ground. The most obvious of these is the boundary wall which runs behind the backyards of 12/14 Park Street (the earliest brickwork in this wall is 2½ inches thick, the same as the main build of 12/14 Park Street). In addition, part of the ground plan of the properties which occupied 12/14 Park Street can be reconstructed. Although the evidence is very patchy there is an implied dog-leg within the south-eastern boundary of 12 Park Street, a feature which still exists in the present-day building.

In the 60 years between the production of the Mason Map and the 1st edition large scale Ordnance Survey map, Park Street changed dramatically with the construction of The Bridge, and the arrival of the railway in 1849 (figs. 5 and 6). In fact, both these events resulted in a shift of the commercial centre of the town westwards away from the High Street towards the railway. The outline of 12/14 Park Street is clearly visible on the OS map together the outline of the Victorian rear service wings of both properties. Little change is discernible in the ground plan of each property in the later editions of the OS in 1903 and 1917, although the construction of what is now the Lloyds Bank at the end of Park Street between 1903 and 1917 removed a narrow property to the south east of the imitation timber-framed fronted section of Dorothy Perkins (fig.7). Other major changes adjacent to 12/14 Park Street included the construction of a large Art Deco style shop next to 14 Park Street and the construction of the bus garage off St. Paul's Street.

Building analysis and cellar inspection

Unfortunately, no historic illustrations or photographs were discovered which specifically show 12/14 Park Street. However, the south side of this end of the street was more popular with photographers, and several rows of small commercial premises which closely resemble 12/14 have been captured on film (plates 1-6). A cellar inspection of 12/14 Park Street was made, supplemented by a rapid photographic survey backed up with written descriptive notes describing the exterior of both buildings. No internal inspection was possible while both shops were still in commercial occupation.

Viewed from Park Street numbers 12/14 appear to form two parts of a row of three squat three-storey terraced properties. The third component of the row, which is currently occupied by Dorothy Perkins, differs slightly from 12/14, being narrower, with single rather than double windows to each of the upper stories (plates 7 and 8). The ground storeys of each property have modern shop fronts, but above these many original features have survived. The frontages are built in flemish-bond 2½ inch-thick brick, the coursing running uninterrupted between each property. A projecting moulded eaves cornice runs along the entire length of the row, and a squat parapet masks the roof from the street. The cornice of 14 Park Street has clearly been replaced recently; indeed, behind the facade most of the property has been extensively rebuilt. Number 14 Park Street has a matching set of balanced sash windows, the frames recessed from the wall front. The first-floor pair have 6 lights to each sash, whereas the squatter second-floor windows have three lights to each sash. The glazing bars are light, and it is probable that these are the original windows. The first-floor windows of 12 Park Street have been replaced with typical Victorian sashes. The second-storey windows have projecting stone sills, but the arrangement of the first-floor sills has been obscured by the modern shop fronts. The heads of each window are square, the decorative detail consisting of finely-rubbed bricks arranged as angled soldier-coursed voussoirs. These are best seen on the old photograph of the Danish Diary Company (plate 6).

From the rear, the extent of later alterations and repair to each property can clearly be seen. The long narrow Victorian service wings are clearly later, built from larger machine-cut brick. Numbers 10/12 Park Street retain ridge slate roofs, 14 having a modern flat roof (plates 9-12). The front cellar of 14 Park Street had been extensively rebuilt to overcome problems of flooding. The only early feature to survive is a blocked coal-chute from the street front. The rear cellar was part of the Victorian service wing, and is all of this date. However, above the Victorian brickwork of the cellar the party wall between 14 and 16 Park Street is built of 2½ inch-thick brick, and is part of the original build. The cellar of 12 Park Street was original, although the ground floor inside the shop was lowered when a modern concrete and breeze block floor was inserted (plates 13-16). The cellar was divided into three bays. The front bay is much wider, because of the dog-leg extension.

Access to the dog-leg extension was originally provided by two 2½ inch-thick brick pillars, three courses wide. These would have supported the ground floor above, by means of joist between them (plate 14; an arrangement that might have been repeated at ground floor level to maximise the available retail space). Later brick infill behind the stub furthest from the street frontage suggests that part of the cellar has been blocked in. The area enclosed within the dog-leg was raised and floored with square quarry tiles, as was the floor of the rest of the cellar. The base of a chimney situated against the party wall of 12/14 Park Street survived *in situ* (plate 16). This arrangement would probably have been mirrored in the plan of 14 next door, although no evidence for this now survives. Each section of cellar contained raised plinths for storage above floor level (plate 15).

The central bay was created by two parallel walls which probably supported a staircase running up the centre of the building, set parallel to the street frontage. The third bay of the cellar again contained raised storage plinths and a blocked doorway, possibly providing access to another cellar further to the rear, or a chute (plate 13). The blocking of 3 inch-thick machine cut brick is probably Victorian in date. Therefore this feature was probably blocked when the rear service wing was constructed.

The plan of the original buildings probably consisted of two rooms to each floor divided by a central staircase and heated by fireplace/s on the side walls. This overall plan is typical of urban vernacular architecture of the late 18th and 19th century, which was characterised by long thin buildings commonly arranged in horizontal rows or groups. The row comprising 10/14 Park Street shares several features with another row of four properties further up Park Street of late-18th/early-19th century date, which were recently demolished as part of the Town Wharf redevelopment. Similarities included the size of bricks used, the thickness of the main load-bearing walls, and the three-storey plan with a central staircase providing access to a front and back room on each floor. Clever use of dog-legs to maximise the commercial frontage of some of the properties was also a feature of both rows.

Without documentary evidence the dating of 12/14 Park Street must rely on stylistic comparison. The use of 2½ inch clamped brick (rather than mass-produced cut brick) would tend to indicate an earlier 19th century date, although this type of brick is common from the later 17th century onwards, and so does not preclude the possibility of a late-18th century date. The window design is also common to buildings of late-18th to mid-19th century date. This was a period of marked urban growth in Walsall, and it is tempting to link the construction of the row with these broader developments. Equally, a connection may be argued for the construction of the row with that of The Bridge in the 1850s. However, that was a large scale, high status, urban development project - and these buildings are a common-place functional design more beloved of the speculative builder. The evidence from the rescaled Mason Map indicates that a structure with a similar ground plan to 12/14 Park Street was probably situated here in 1824. Therefore, on balance an early 19th-century date is most likely for the row.

The provision of a rear service wing was a common Victorian innovation. This enabled the doubling of the available shop floor by removal of the central staircase and the opening out of the back room. Access to the first floor changed to a staircase in the rear wing. Again, parallels for this arrangement, or variants of it, are found in several small commercial properties in Walsall town centre, including the demolished row on Park Street near Town End. The photographs of these shops in their heyday reveal the vast changes which have taken place in retail design over the last century.

The test pits

The two test pits that were archaeologically monitored are indicated on figure 8.

Test Pit 1 - This was located in the front cellar of number 14. It measured 1m x 1m and was excavated to a depth of 0.6m. The concrete slab of the cellar floor overlay three courses of bricks. These modern surfaces directly overlay the natural sands and gravels. No archaeological deposits were identified.

Test Pit 2 - This was located to the rear of number 14. It measured 0.9m x 0.6m and was excavated to a depth of 1m. The modern reinforced concrete slab overlay a dark brown silty sand which in turn overlay mixed brick rubble and the remains of several former service trenches containing ceramic pipes. There was no indication of any significant archaeological deposits.

CONCLUSIONS

It seems likely that the existing buildings at 12/14 Park Street date to the late 18th or early 19th century, a period of marked urban growth in Walsall. Many of the original features within the cellar of number 12 were recorded during the assessment. Although map evidence indicates that the site was heavily built-up by the post-medieval period, there was no evidence for any earlier structures in the current fabric of the buildings or their associated cellars.

Furthermore, no significant archaeological deposits were identified in either of the test pits that were monitored. It seems likely that the front cellar of number 14 (Test Pit 1) would have truncated any deposits that might have previously existed. The area to the rear of the building (Test Pit 2) appears to have been heavily disturbed by later service trenches.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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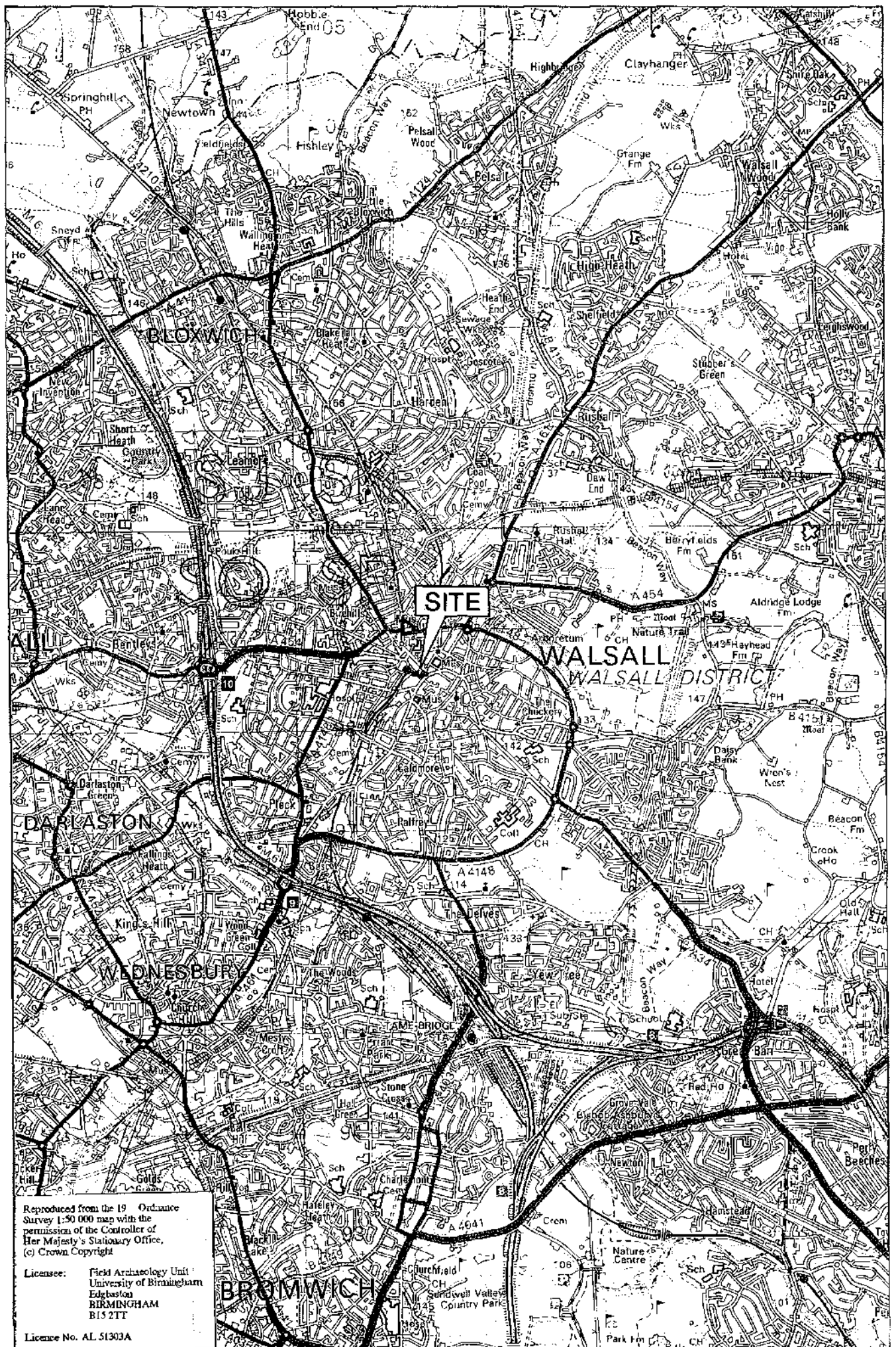


fig.1

Walfall ground plot, protracted by 50 poles in an inch.

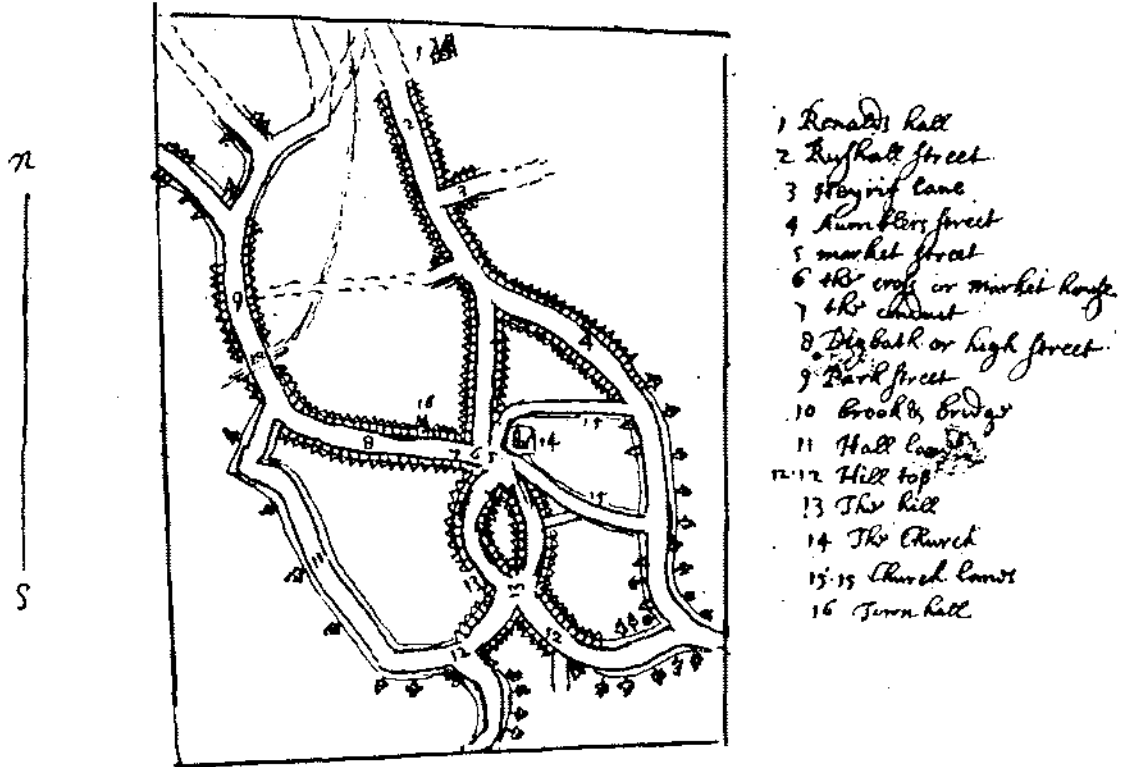


fig.2 1679

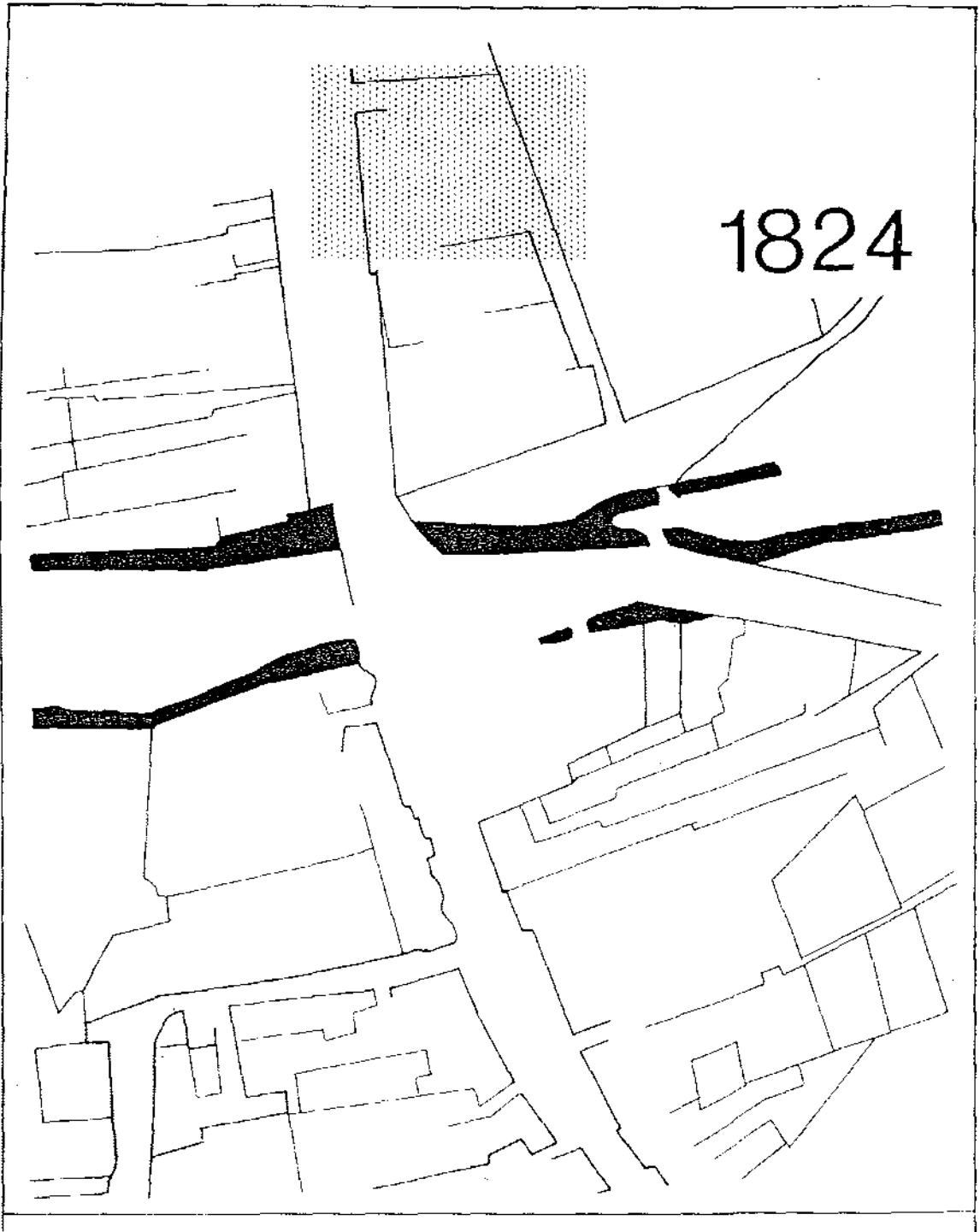


fig.4

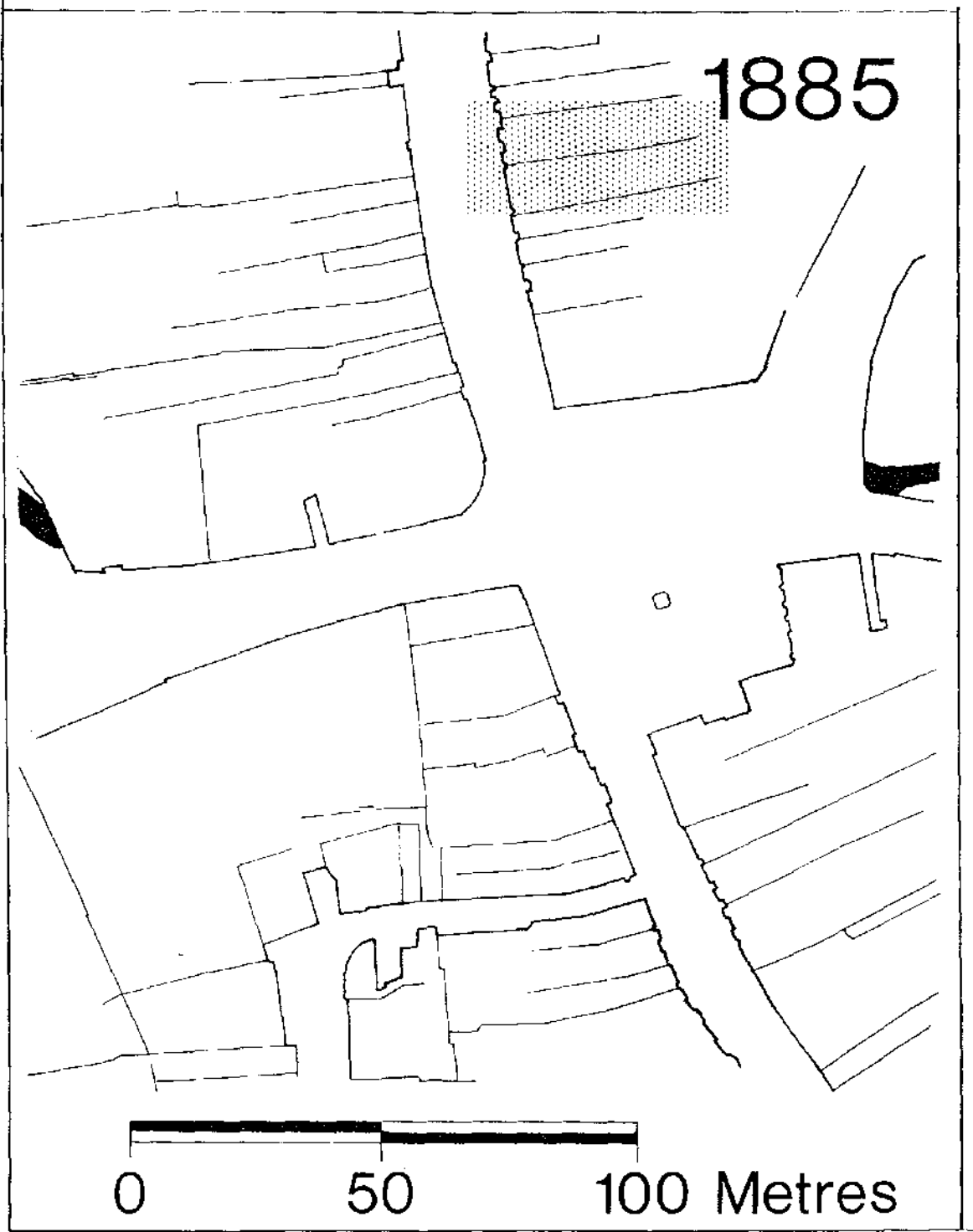


fig.5

WALSALL
FOREIGN

Sheet LXIII. S.W. Staffordshire

WARD

FOREIGN WARD

WALSALL FOREIGN

LON. 1° 59'

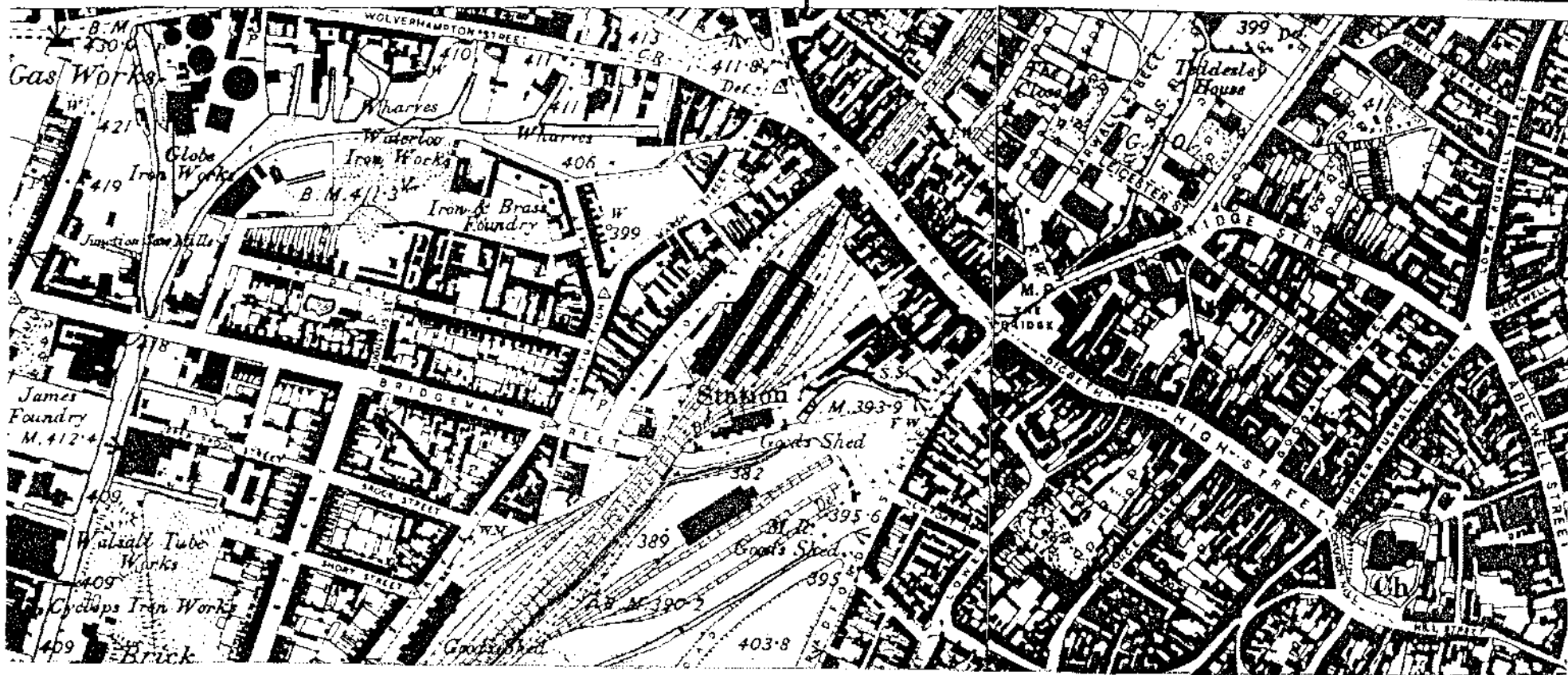
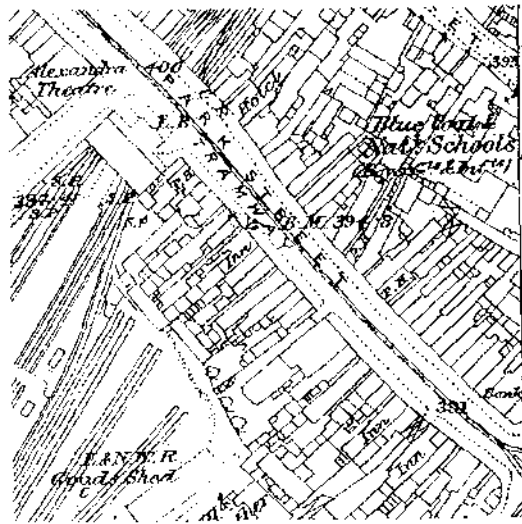
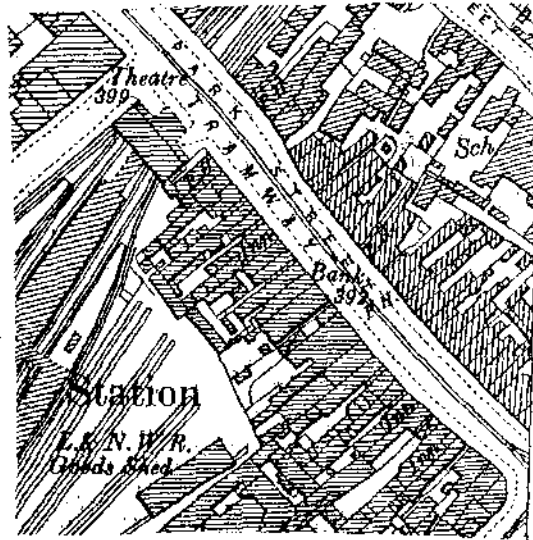


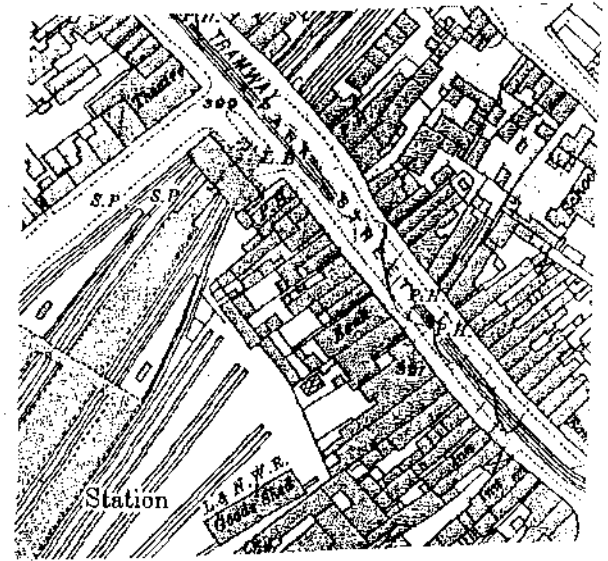
fig.6 1887



1887



1903



1917

fig.7

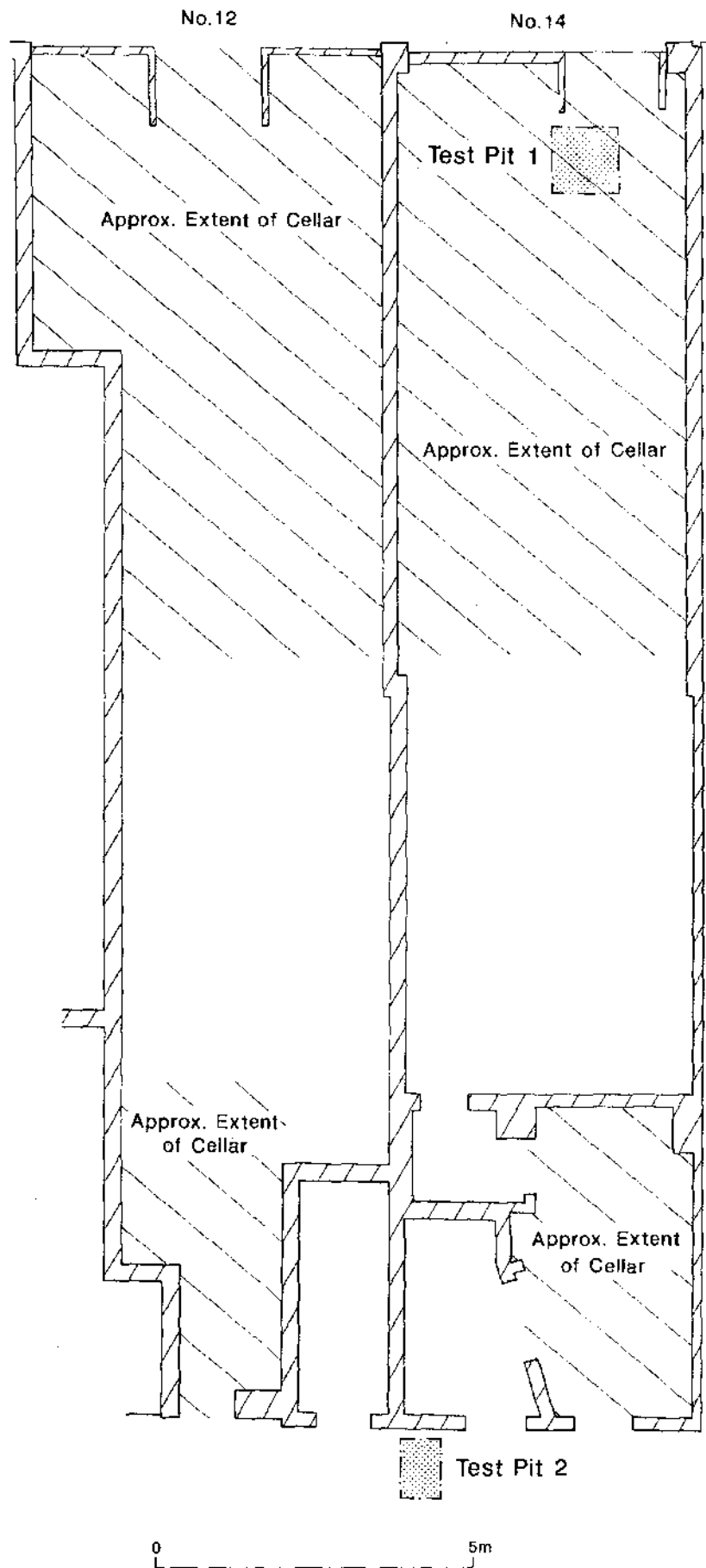
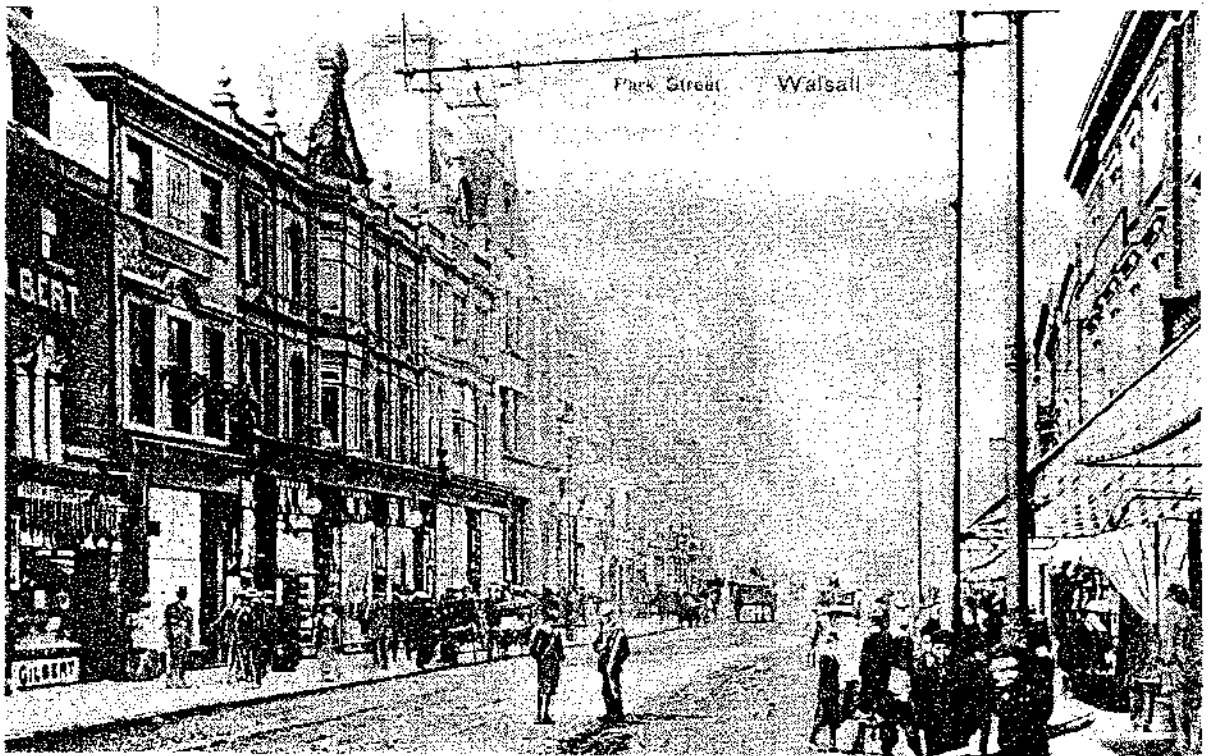


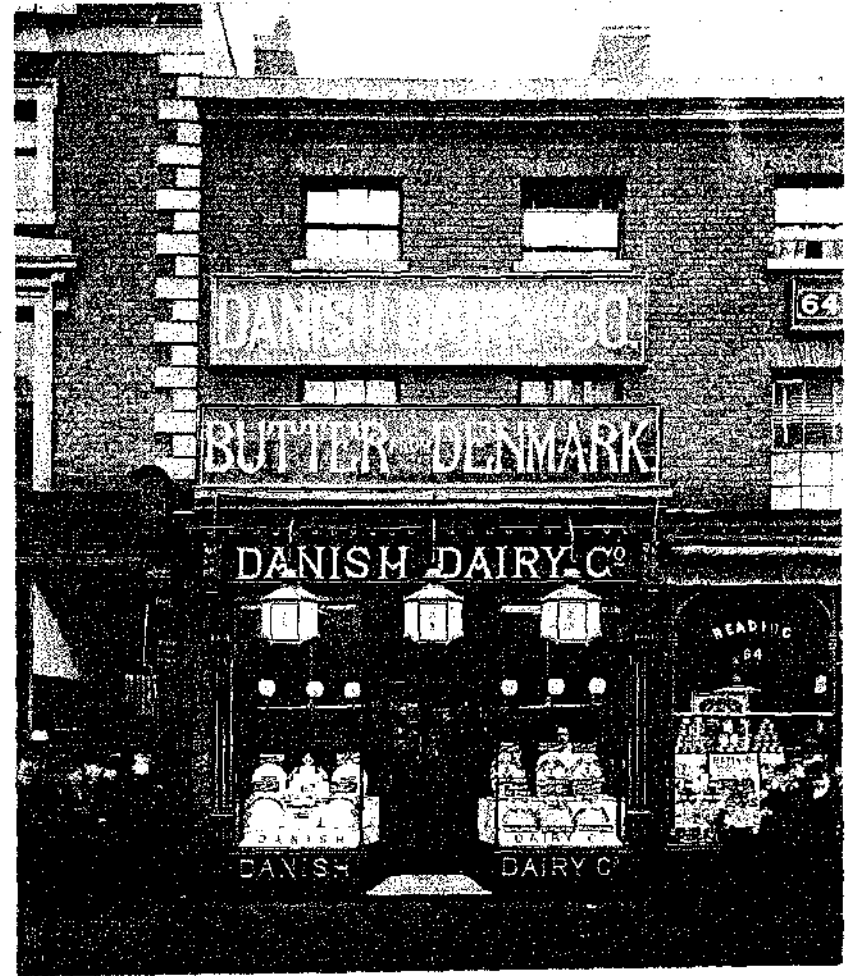
fig.8



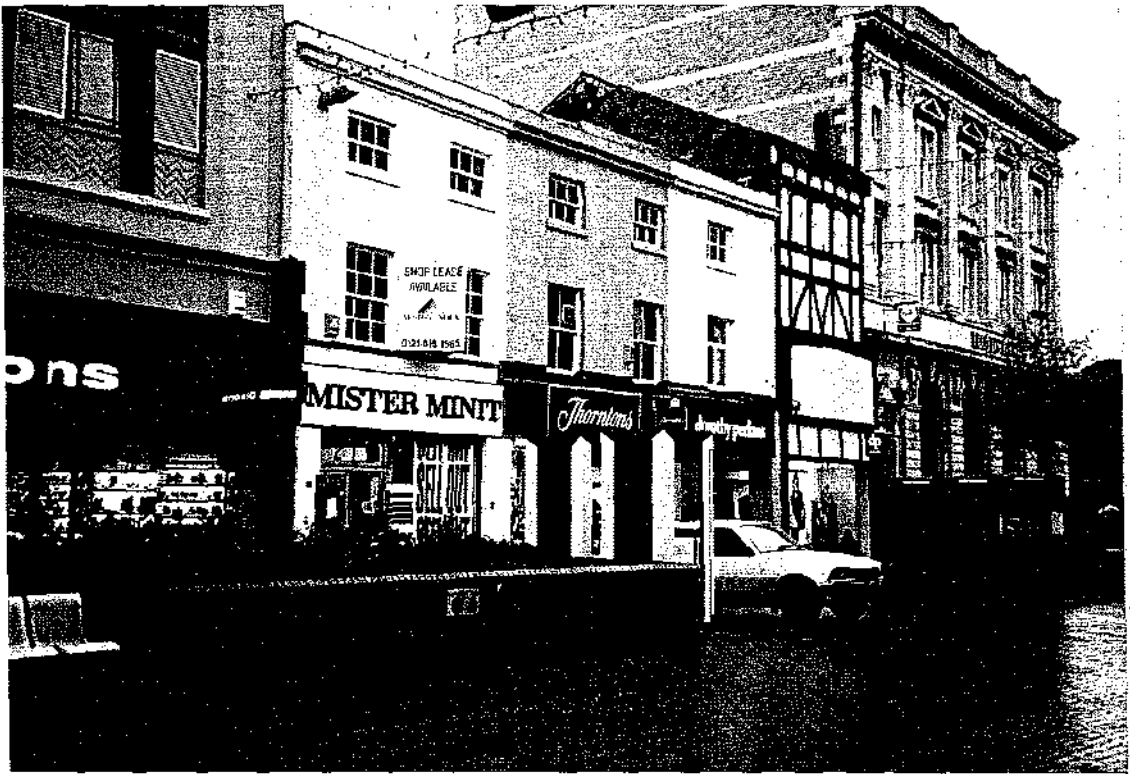
plates 1 and 2



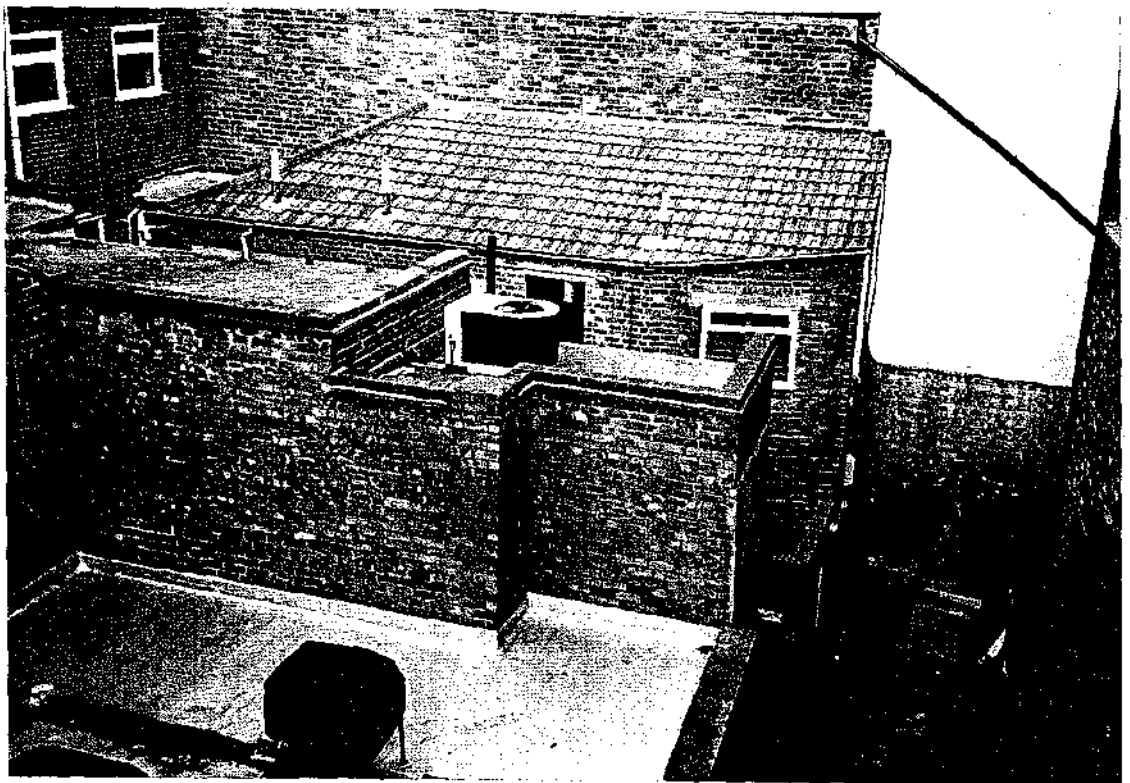
plates 3 and 4



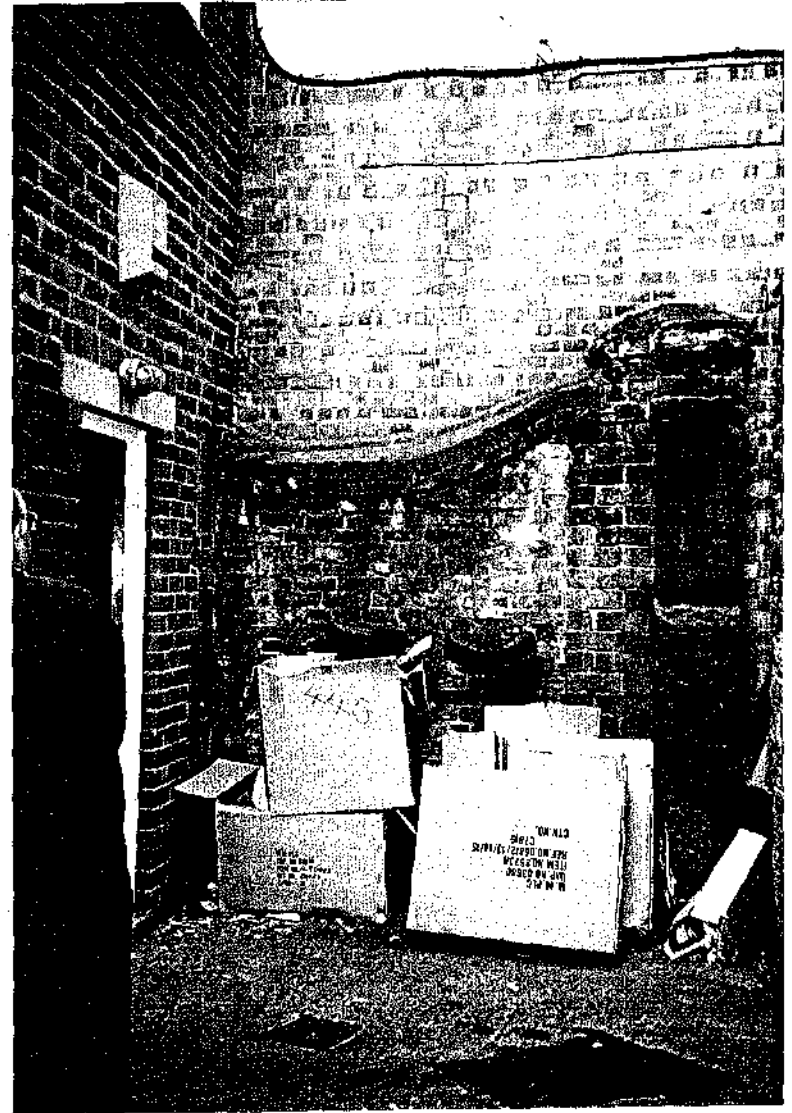
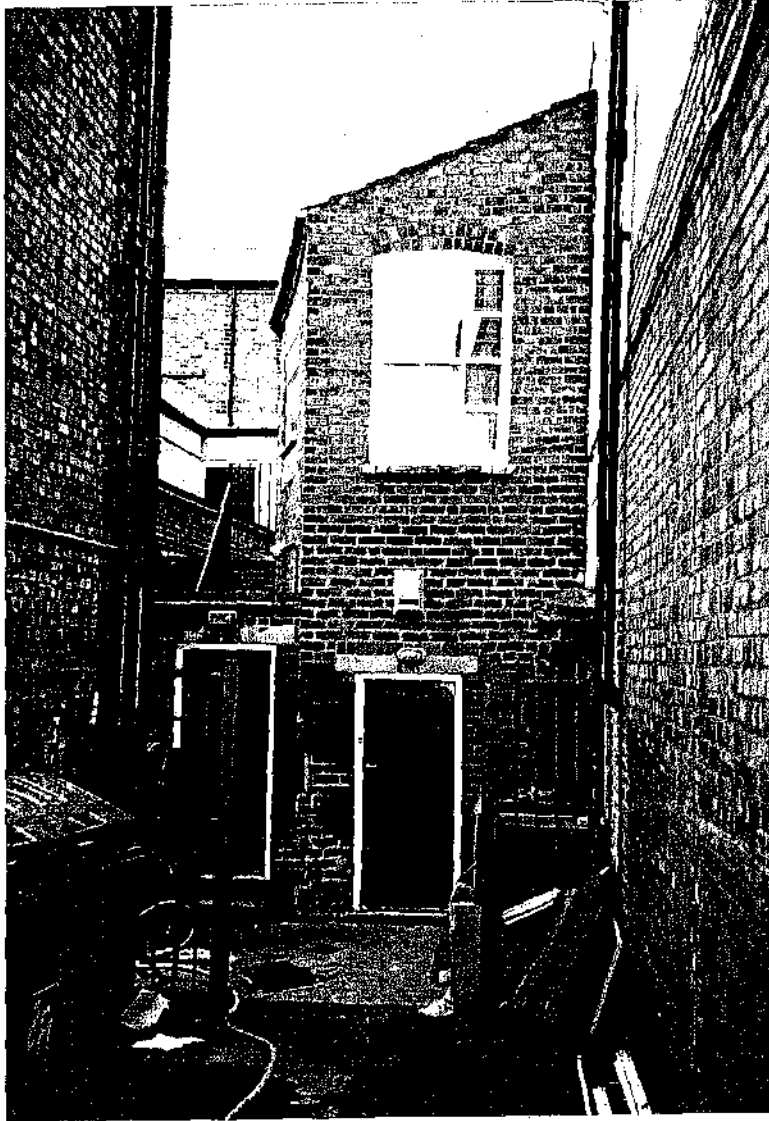
plates 5 and 6



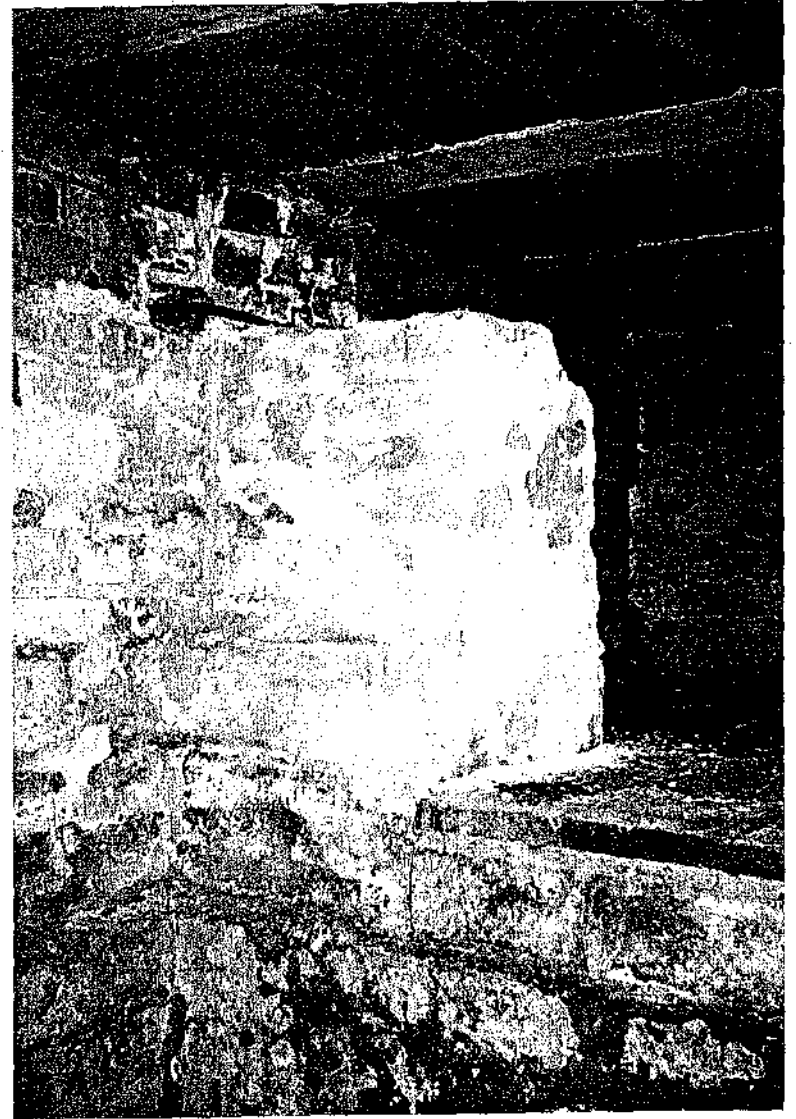
plates 7 and 8



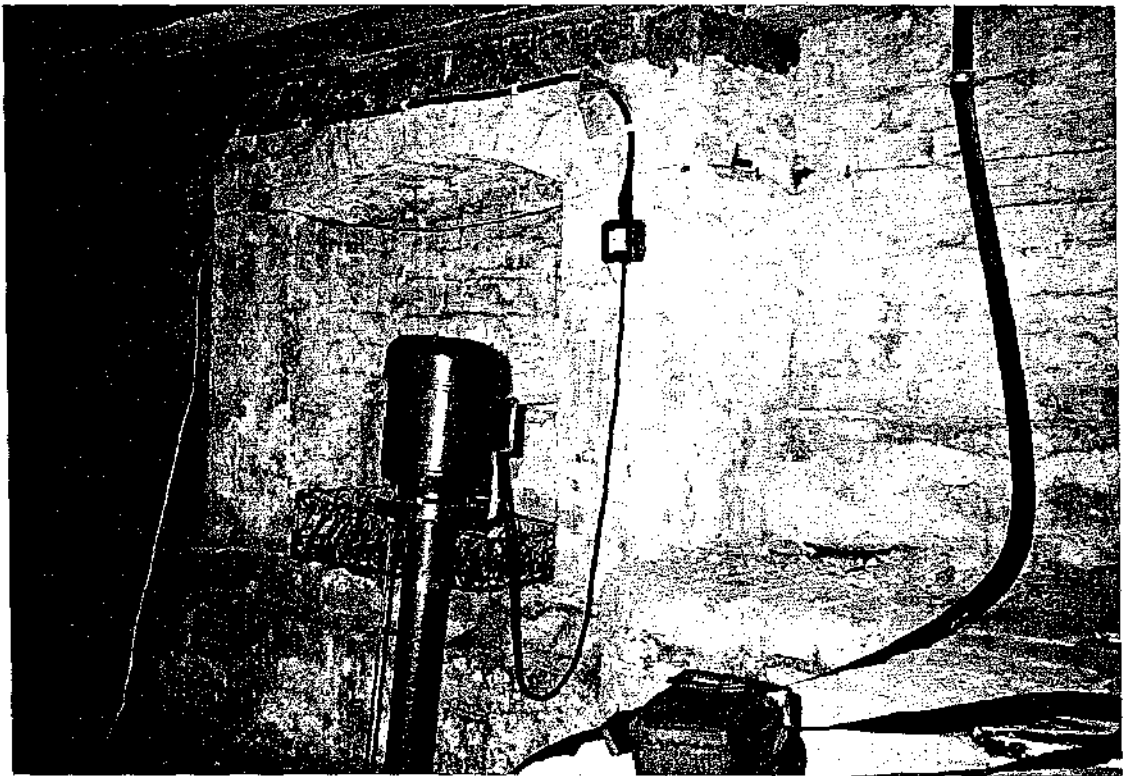
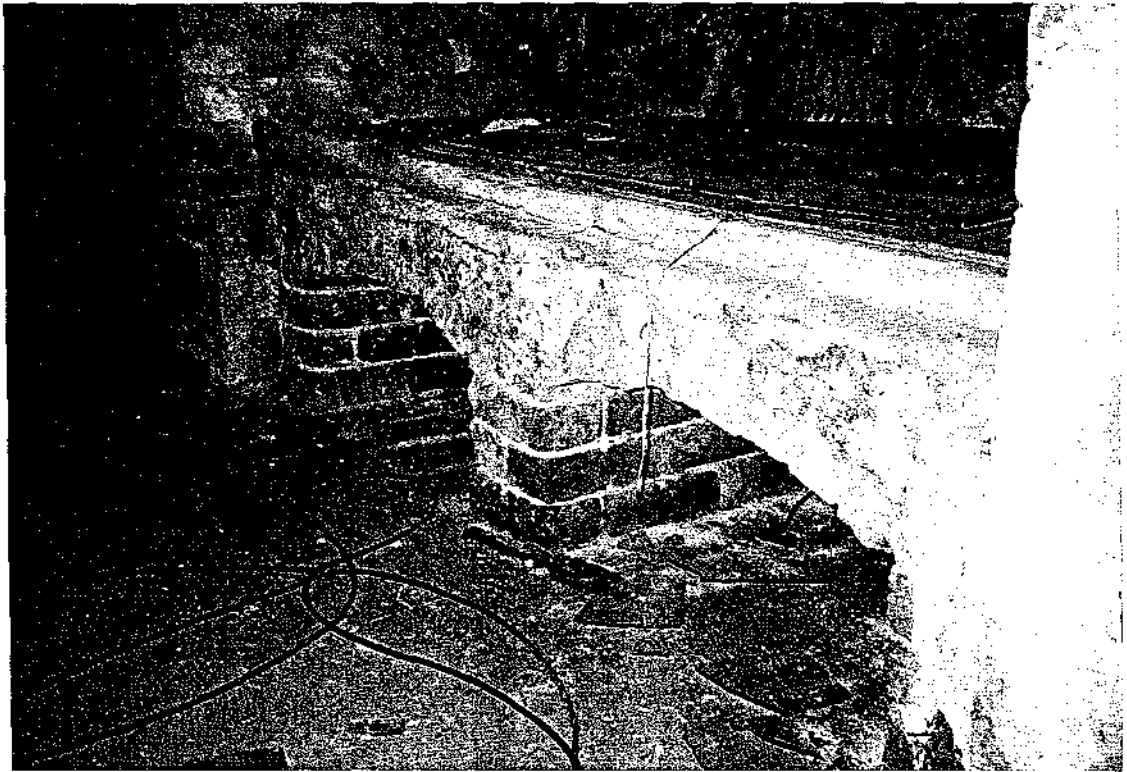
plates 9 and 10



plates 11 and 12



plates 13 and 14



plates 15 and 16