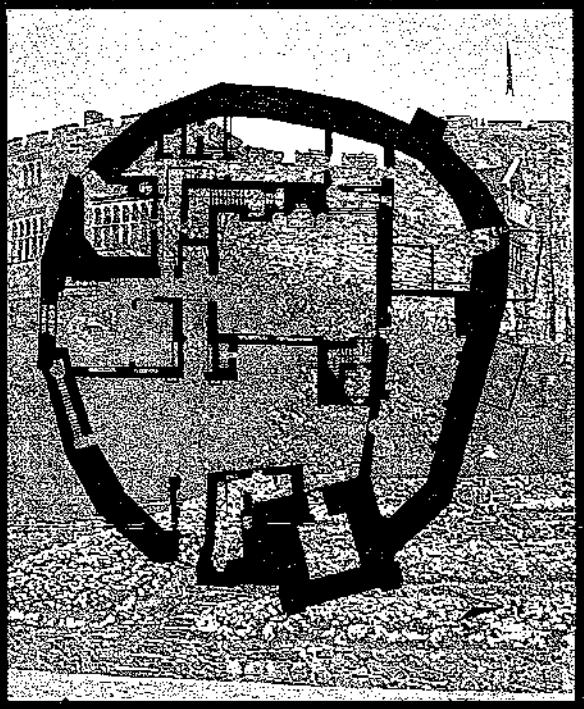
Tamworth Castle



An Archaeological Excavation & Building Recording

Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit

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by

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Introduction

In February 1995 Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit was commissioned by Duval Brownhill Partnership Chartered Architects, on behalf of the Borough of Tamworth, to undertake archaeological excavation and building recording at Tamworth Castle, Staffordshire (N.G.R 2063 0394, Figure 1a).
The castle motte dates from the 11th century and its polygonal shell-keep curtain wall was constructed in the 12th century. The work was carried out in advance of essential underpinning work on the west wall of the 17th century south wing (Figure 1b). The aim of the work was to record the upstanding historic fabric of a well head structure beneath the south wing and to excavate and record archaeological features and deposits in the angle between the shell keep wall and the west wall of the south wing liable to be disturbed by the underpinning work. The excavation and building recording was carried out in accordance with a brief supplied by Staffordshire County Council (Meeson 1994).

The Excavation

An 'L'-shaped trench was excavated manually to the north and west of the well-head (Figure 1c). This trench was 0.9m wide, and 3.3m long east-west and 4.6m long north-south, running parallel with the south wing up to the shell keep wall. Excavation ceased at 1.2m below the present floor surface, this being the maximum depth of underpining works. The trench conformed to the dimensions of the area affected by the underpining works with an extension to the south up to the shell keep wall, in order to make analysis of surviving stratigraphy more intelligible (Meeson 1994). Not all contexts and features mentioned in the text are depicted on the figures.

A disused modern drain (F1) made of ceramic pipe (1000), running parallel with the shell-keep wall (F7) and mortared to the present floor surface (F2), was removed. The brick paviour floor F2, was constructed of purple glazed bricks, 0.23m x 0.11m x 0.07m deep and bonded with light brown mortar (1001). These bricks were individually numbered, planned and photographed to facilitate reinstatement, before being removed. Beneath 1001 was a bed of light brown mortar (1002), 0.02m deep. Beneath 1002 (Figure 2), to the south, in the west-facing section of the trench, were several large rounded red sandstone blocks (1008), average size 0.47m x 0.28m x 0.30m deep. Under 1002, in the north arm of the trench, was a reddish brown clay sand (1003) 0.2m deep, containing small fragments of sandstone, brick, mortar pebbles and flecks of charcoal. Under 1002 to the south, and abutting 1003, was a reddish brown sandy clay (1004), 0.2m deep and containing mortar, sandstone and brick fragments.

Beneath 1003 and 1004 was a heavily compacted reddish brown sandy clay (1006) containing several large irregular sandstone blocks, small fragments of roof and floor tile, a fragment of brick, small fragments of limestone, lumps of coal, oyster shells, small pebbles, small fragments of slate, sherds of medieval cooking pot and two sherds of medieval green glazed ware. This layer was excavated to a depth of 1.2m below the present floor surface. Cutting 1006 in the northwest corner of the trench was a modern pipe trench (F5), aligned northeast-southwest, 0.2m wide and 0.4m deep. F5 joined a modern drain (F6), visible in the east-facing section, 0.5m wide and 1m deep, most probably the drainage system installed in the 1960's.

Cutting 1006 in the south of the trench was a rectangular vertical sided feature (F3) orientated north-south, 1.44m by 0.33m and 0.55m deep. F3 was filled with a dark brown clay sand (1007), containing small fragments of sandstone, roof tile and modern debris. The brick paviours were not firmly set above this feature indicating it had been dug fairly recently, probably as a sample test pit by contractors.

In the west-facing section, bonded to, and surrounding the faced sandstone (1009) lining the well (F4) to the east, was a red and green sandstone rubble with pockets of sandy clay roughly bonded with a buff mortar with white inclusions (1005), 0.4-0.6m wide. No cut was visible for F4 and it's precise stratagraphic relationship to 1006 was uncertain. At the south end of the trench large, rough, irregular, sandstone blocks bonded with a buff mortar (1010) were exposed, forming the foundations of the shell keep wall (F7), to a depth of 1.02m below the present floor surface. A single course of bricks (1012) infilled part of F7 at the top of the trench , almost certainly filling in damage to the wall caused by the insertion of a brick cistern to the west. Beneath 1010, abutting 1006, was a loose dark brown silty clay (1011) containing a fragment of animal bone and a small fragment of tile or brick, which was excavated to a maximum depth of 1.2m.

The Pottery by Lynne Bevan.

Twenty-three fragments of Medieval pottery were recovered from context 1006, two of which, both body sherds from jugs, had traces of green glaze. The first was of a 'hard white fabric with many small quartz-like grits...decorated with an emerald green glaze', and corresponding to Fabric 1 identified at the Moat Site, Walsall (Wrathmell and Wrathmell 1974/75,41). The second glazed sherd was of a reddish-coloured fabric with a dark grey interior and large quartz inclusions, splashed with yellow-green glaze. The remaining sherds in this small group were also in this coarse fabric, which, ranging from red to grey and black in colour, corresponds to Fabric 3 at the Moat Site, Walsall (ibid.,43).

Fragments from the rims of four separate cooking/storage vessels were identified among the 21 un-glazed sherds, the largest of which has a close parallel in a form again from the Moat Site, Walsall (Wrathmell and Wrathmell 1974/75, Figure 14:5). Connections between the Walsall pottery assemblage and similar material from Tamworth and other Staffordshire sites have already been noted, although none of the fabrics were considered closely datable (Ibid, 43). Two smaller, flatter rims have parallels in an assemblage from the Medieval ditch at Tamworth ranging 'from the twelfth to fourteenth century' (Gould 1967/8, 21, Figure 6:24,25). At this stage a generally 13th to 14th century date is therefore proposed for this most recent small Medieval assemblage from 1006. Further work is recommended on this small medieval assemblage, including comparison with material from previous excavations at Tamworth Castle conducted by B.U.F.A.U and other organizations.

Other Finds

Thirty-five fragments of bone from cow, sheep and chicken were also recovered from context 1006, as well as nine oyster shells and seven fragments of tile and brick.

The Building Recording Methodology

All elevations of the well-head structure were photographed and drawn at a scale of not less than 1:20. The standard B.U.F.A.U building recording system was used. Each major constructional phase was given a structural element number (SE; numbered in continuous sequence from SE 100) and architectural elements, such as walls, well shaft and timber well assembly were assigned an architectural element number(AE; numbered in continuous sequence from AE 1). For each numbered element a pro-forma record sheet was completed.

The earliest architectural element appears to be the well shaft (AE 1, Figure 3) constructed of mortared, curved, faced green sandstone blocks (SE 100). The timber-framed well head structure (AE 5) surrounding AE 1 appears to be encased by the west wall of the south wing (AE 4) and to predate it. The well head structure comprises four horizontal timber beams jointed to four timber uprights, the two southernmost of which are braced by timbers against the eastern and western horizontal beams. The uprights are tied together at the top by two horizontal beams jointed and secured with dowels. The southern pair of timber uprights had holes drilled in them to take the lower winding gear and had slots cut in them to accept the upper winding gear. The guard rail and hinged door over the well shaft are later additions.

The lower eastern and western horizontal beams of the timber well structure appear to have been supported by what may have been low brick wall (SE 112), which may have been subsequently used as a base for the south wing wall (SE 104) which abutts the shell keep wall (AE 6). The horizontal beams of the structure may have rested on timbers at the north end, the decayed remains of a sawn off timber visible in the north elevation (SE 108, Figure 4) may be evidence for one of these, and appears to have been free standing before being built over by the brick south wing (SE 104) in the early 17th century. The west wall of the south wing (AE 4) was carried over AE 5 by means of a massive 0.5m thick oak beam (SE 106), a reused timber beam and a short length of reused timber (SE 107) were used to pack the space between the top of AE 5 and this beam. The well-structure was walled off from the inside of the wing by the brick walls AE 3 and AE 8.

The east and north elevations of the timber well assembly AE 5 (Figure 3) appear to have been infilled with brickwork (SE 102, SE 103) on the evidence of internal chamfers on the timber uprights, either at this time or possibly later. The space between the lower horizontal timber beams of the timber well assembly AE 5, and the lip of the well shaft AE 1, was infilled with brick (SE 109 and SE 111). Probably at this time a brick pier (SE 110) was constructed to support AE 5, possibly replacing an original timber support. The plaster and lath ceiling of the well (SE 114) was added later by nailing lengths of timber to the upper horizontal timbers of AE 5, so that rafters could be supported. Two of the rafters were secured by mortice and tenon joints in the western and eastern upper horizontal timbers of AE 5.

Interpretation and Discussion

The evidence from the excavation was ambiguous and it was not possible to infer precise stratagraphic evidence for the phasing of the various phases of building in this part of the castle keep. The layers 1003 and 1004 exposed beneath the present brick floor surface (F2) are undoubtedly modern make-up material. The deep layer of sandy clay (1006) appears to have been deposited before the construction of the south wing in the early 17th century.

No evidence of a cut for the well F4 was observed and no dating evidence for the well was recovered. The cut for the well may not be visible because it may have been backfilled with the context it cut (1006) and any such cut may have been irregular. Alternatively, 1006 may be the backfill of a very large cut for the construction of the well. A third possibility is that the well may have been a freestanding structure from which facing stone has been robbed and subsequently the ground level around the well has been raised by the deposition of 1006. From the evidence currently available the former hypothesis seems the most plausible.

No firm evidence for a construction trench for the south wing was found, although it is possible that 1006 may be the backfill of a massive construction trench for the west wall of the south wing. 1006 extends right up to the 12th century shell-keep curtain wall F7 and is later, so there was no evidence of a construction trench for F7. The loose silty clay 1010 below F7 could possibly belong to the backfill of a truncated construction trench, but the loose nature of the context, the proximity of 1006, and lack of dating evidence appears to make it more likely to have been deposited at a later date possibly at the same time as 1006.

Unfortunately, the results of the excavations were ambiguous in several important respects. Consequently it has not always been possible to conclusively answer a number of questions which it was thought excavation in this part of the castle keep might resolve (Meeson 1994). The principle reason for this ambiguity was the small size of the trench and the fact that it was not possible to bottom 1006. Dating evidence indicates 1006 pre-dates the construction of the 17th century south wing. However, no precise evidence for a construction trench cut for either the south wing or indeed the well was seen, although it is possible both cuts may not have been visible because they were backfilled with material derived from 1006. In addition, because 1006 extended up to the shell-keep wall (F7) no evidence concerning the relationship between the motte, which is held to be 11th century, and the 12th century shell-keep was found at this depth.

Acknowledgements

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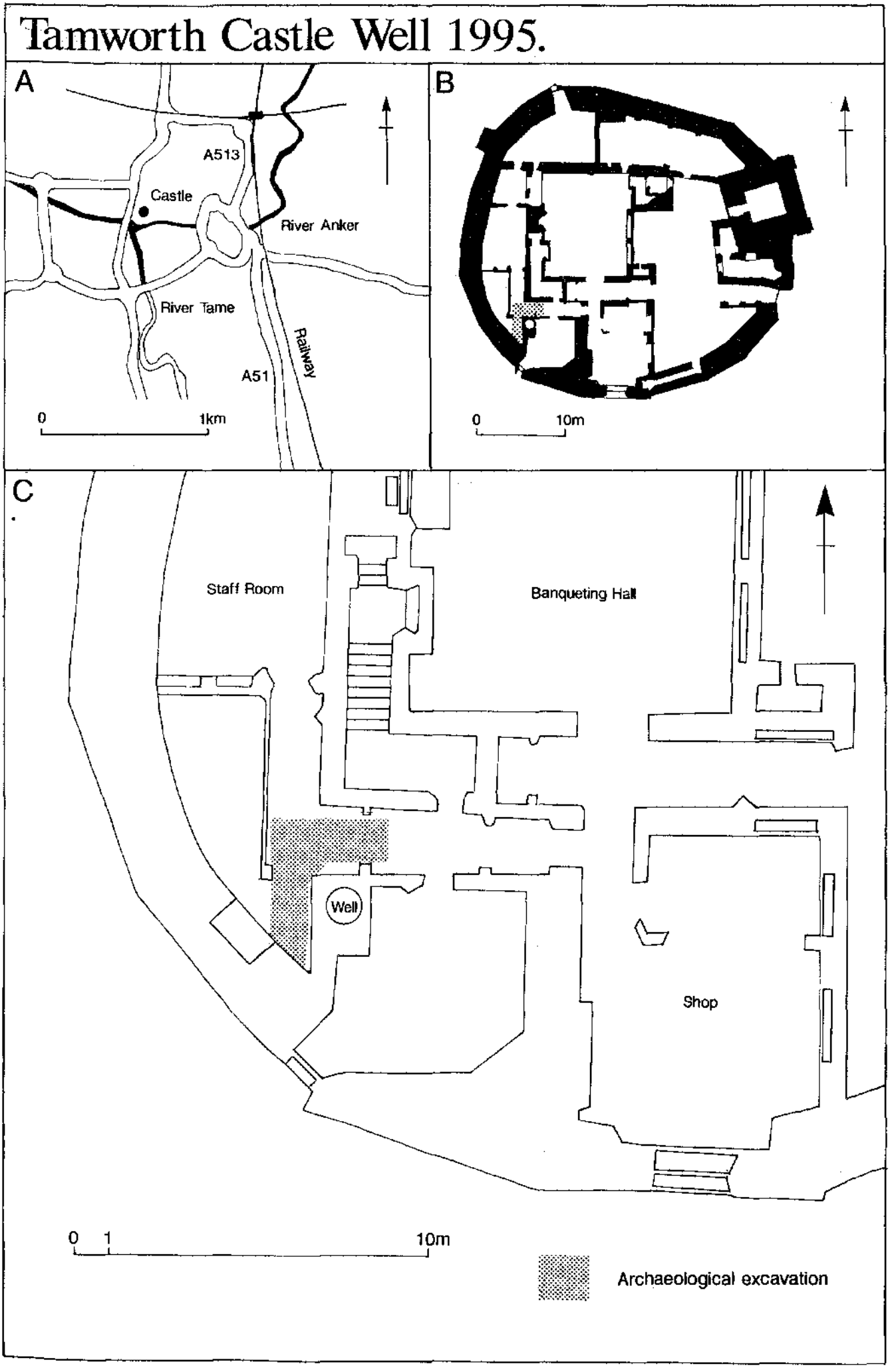

Tamworth Castle Well 1995.
A
A513
Castle
River Anker
River Tame
Railway
A51
0
1km
B
0
10m
C
Staff Room
Banqueting Hall
Well
Shop
0
1
10m
Archaeological excavation

Figure 1

Plan and Sections

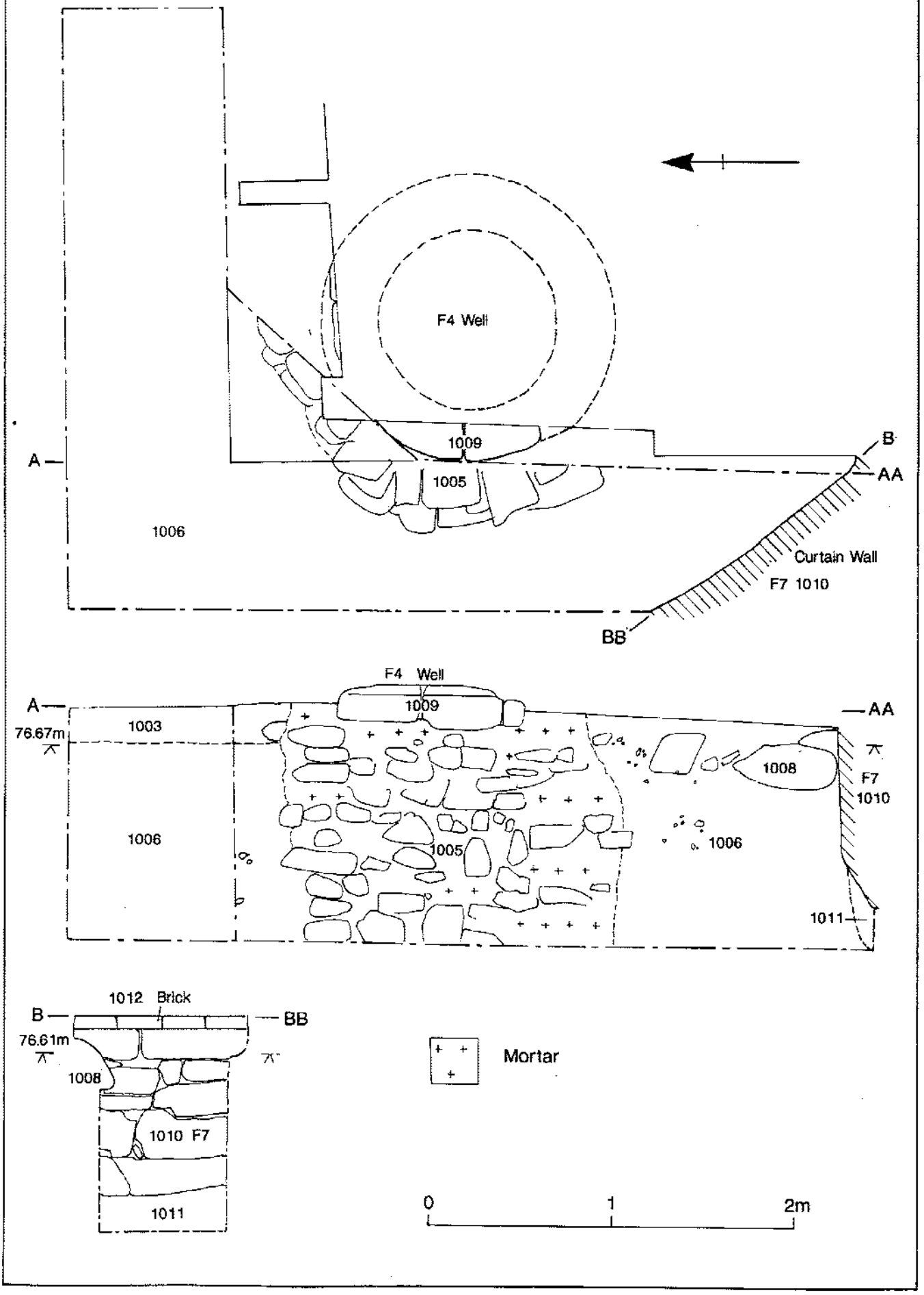
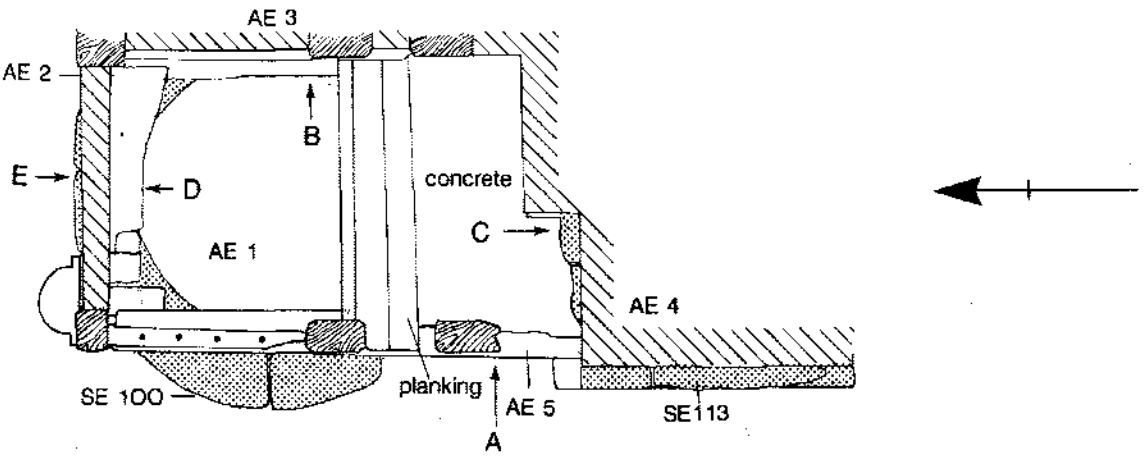
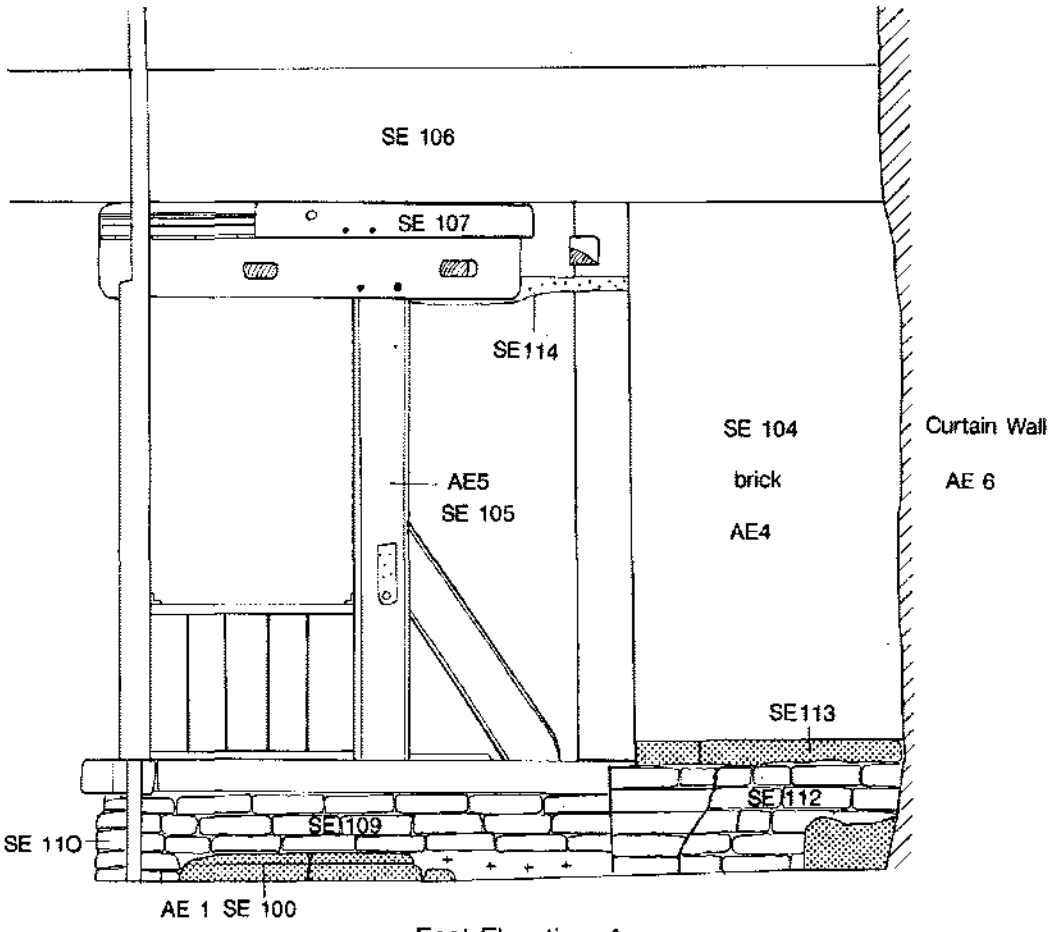


Figure 2

Well structure plan and elevations.





East Elevation A

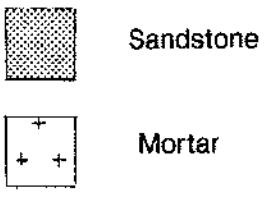


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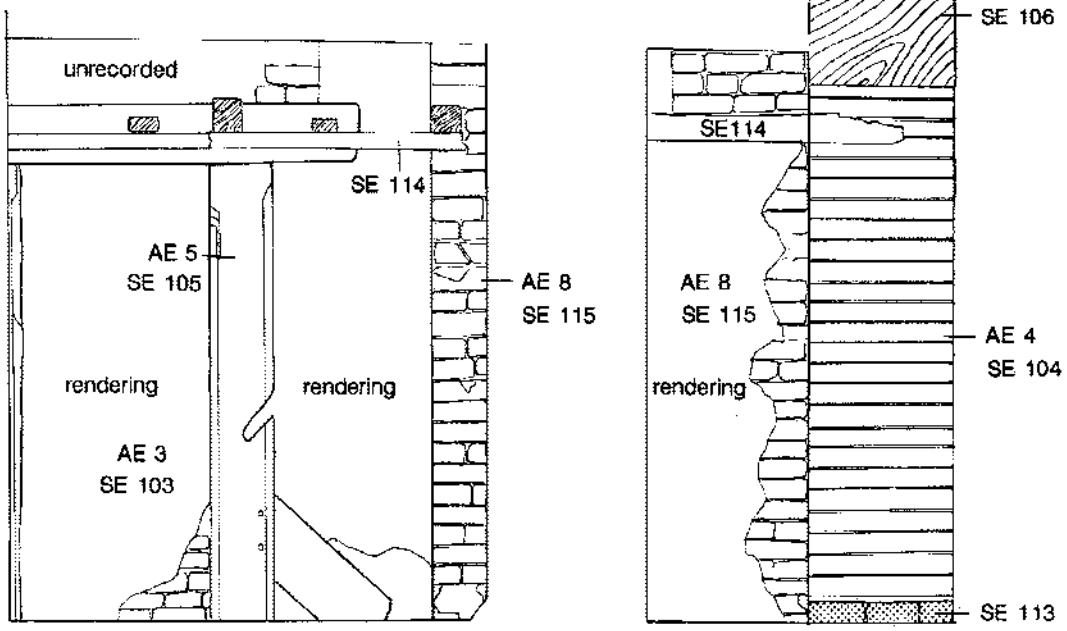
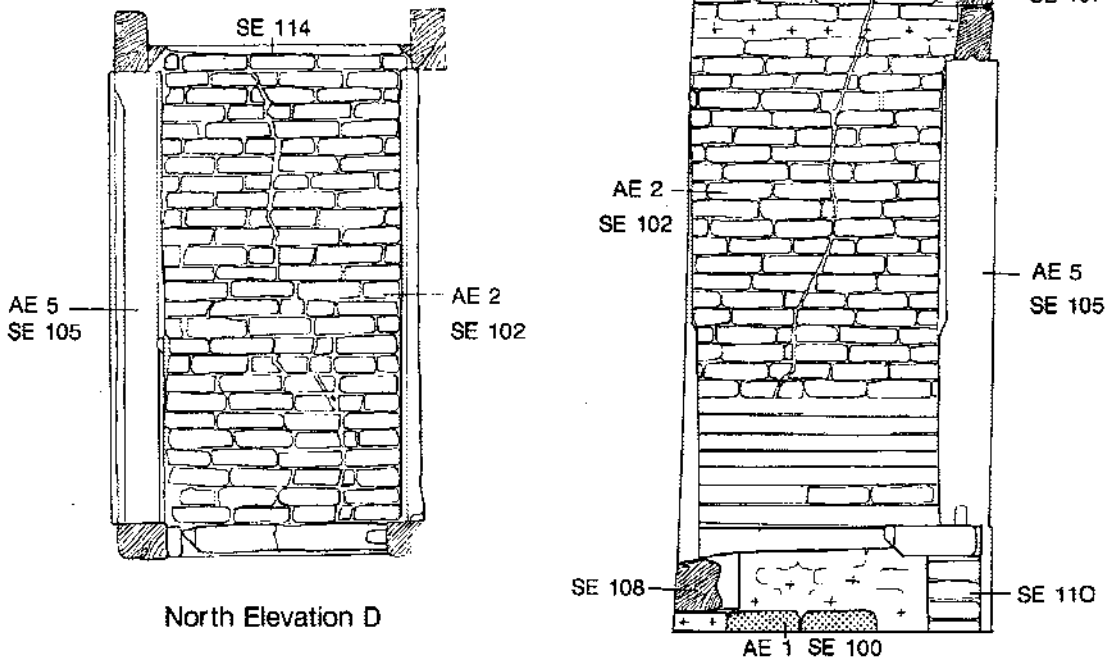
Figure 3

Well structure elevations.



East Elevation B

South Elevation C



North Elevation D

South Elevation E

0 1m

Figure 4