

**AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL SALVAGE RECORDING AND WATCHING BRIEF
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF WOLVERHAMPTON,
WOLVERHAMPTON, WEST MIDLANDS**

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1.0 Summary

A programme of salvage archaeological recording was carried out during development groundwork at the University of Wolverhampton, Wulfruna Street, Wolverhampton, by Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit in April and May 1996. The work was necessitated by the discovery of human remains by building contractors during excavation of a foundation pile. Careful archaeological excavation, according to the provisions of a Home Office Licence, uncovered the disturbed remains of four burials situated inside a machine-brick-lined vault. Further excavation revealed that the vault was probably part of a series or 'terrace' of vaults situated in the north-eastern corner of a 19th century overspill graveyard from St. Peter's Church. The survival of a small number of burial vaults here was probably influenced by the proximity of a wing of the former St. Peter's School which was still standing when the graveyard was reportedly cleared in the early 1970s. Archaeological survival was minimal over the rest of the development area, mainly because construction work for the nearby school and library appeared to have scoured away any archaeological deposits overlying the natural horizon of weathered red sandstone.

2.0 Introduction (Fig.1a-1c)

This report outlines the results of the salvage archaeological recording and a watching brief carried out at the University of Wolverhampton, Wolverhampton (SMR 8832; NGR: SO 915 989). The development consisted of an extension to the existing Robert Scott Library. The work was undertaken by Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit on behalf of the University of Wolverhampton in response to the chance discovery of human remains during building operations. The salvage recording of the burials was necessary in order to fulfil a planning condition imposed by Wolverhampton M.B.C.. Based upon the results of this salvage excavation of human remains it was then recommended that the most appropriate form for further archaeological monitoring during the continuation of the construction groundwork would be by archaeological watching brief. All archaeological work conformed to a brief prepared by Hilary White, archaeological advisor to Wolverhampton M.B.C. (White 1996). The preliminary investigation and subsequent exhumation of the human remains adhered to the conditions for the issue of the Home Office License granted under Section 25 of the 1857 Burials Act, and was carried out under the supervision of Public Health Officers of Wolverhampton M.B.C..

3.0 The Development Area and its Location (Fig.1c, Fig.2)

The development area is centred on an open piece of land defined to the west by the University of Wolverhampton Robert Scott Library, to the south by the MA Block of the University buildings, formerly known as the Technical College, and to the north and east by the surviving wings of the former St. Peter's School, currently in use as a teaching block, but due to be demolished in a later stage of redevelopment. The University campus is situated within the historic core of Wolverhampton, close to St. Peter's Church which itself is situated on a hilltop.

4.0 Archaeological and Historical Background (Figs.3 & 4)

The University campus lies generally within an area formerly occupied by the medieval and post-medieval Deanery of Wolverhampton and its associated grounds and gardens. The earliest known map of this area compiled by Isaac Taylor in 1750 (Fig.3) shows that the Deanery Hall was situated roughly in the location of the MA Block of the university, with an open area and formal gardens behind, which roughly corresponds to the present development area. The Deanery had developed to serve St. Peter's Church, an important early Christian centre in the region, reputedly founded by the Mercian royal family in the 7th century AD. By 1750 the gardens were crossed by access to a Bowling Green situated further north and may have formed an elegant urban recreational space within the town centre. The rapidly expanding population of the industrial town in the late-18th/early-19th century had led to the conversion of the gardens into an 'overflow' graveyard for St. Peter's by 1827 (map of Wolverhampton, 1827), and this is also depicted as such on the Tithe Map of 1842 (Fig.3). The Ordnance Survey map of 1919 (Fig.4) shows that St. Peter's School was built next to the south-eastern corner of the burial ground. The Deanery Hall was demolished in 1926. Any outbuildings situated behind the Deanery Hall were subsequently demolished in 1951. The cemetery itself was supposedly cleared prior to extension work to the University in 1973 (White 1996).

Research by Drs. Della Hooke and Terry Slater of the University of Birmingham into the early history of the Wolverhampton has further indicated that the development area may have been bisected by an outer ditch and/or rampart defining the northern limits of a putative Iron Age hillfort (Hooke & Slater 1986, 39). Three sides of the hypothesised, roughly circular earthwork can be traced from property boundaries defined on the Taylor Map of 1750. However, there is no clear evidence for the probable northern line of the boundary in the vicinity of the development area.

There has been a limited amount of archaeological fieldwork within this historic part of Wolverhampton. A watching brief over part of the Deanery site, carried out by Neil Lang (SMR 2555), found post-medieval foundations bedded onto natural sandstone at a minimal depth, while cellar survey in Lichfield Street, also conducted by Lang, revealed post-medieval structural remains (SMR 1708). An evaluation by BUFAU in 1995 behind the Art Gallery revealed post-medieval building had truncated earlier deposits (SMR 6500; Hughes and Sterenberg 1995). The only medieval archaeological deposits discovered in the city centre to date were somewhat paradoxically located underneath the base of the Saxon Cross in St. Peter's Graveyard (SMR 2516; Hughes and Buteux 1992).

5.0 Objectives

The principal objective of the archaeological work was to identify and record significant archaeological deposits before their destruction during development. Work was to be targeted towards the putative hillfort, possible Dark Age/Saxon remains, and remains associated with the medieval/post-medieval Deanery, in addition to the human remains identified during development groundwork. The objectives were to be met through a combination of desk-based assessment and field evaluation, involving the salvage recording of the human remains and a watching brief over the rest of the development groundwork.

6.0 Method

The human remains were recorded *in situ* by means of a photographic, drawn and written record before being carefully excavated and conveyed to the Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit for investigation. Subsequently, all the human remains, together with any coffin furniture, were re-buried in a wooden casket in accordance with the Home Office License. All foundation trenches were recorded on *pro-forma* record cards supplemented by scale drawings, plans, sections and photographs where appropriate. These records comprise the site archive which is currently stored at Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit.

7.0 The Archaeological Results

7.1 The Salvage Archaeological Recording

Trench A (Fig.2, Fig.5)

After the initial discovery of human remains by the contractors, Trench A was excavated by hand. Trench A (7m x 3m) was excavated to a depth of 1.92m below the modern ground surface, to reveal the remains of a 19th century brick-lined vault. All deposits above the vault had been previously removed by the contractors excavating the foundation pile.

Two sides of the vault had survived *in situ*. A wall (F7) running east-west for 1.4m, and surviving to a height of c. 0.48m, was truncated to the west by the modern cut (F8) for a pile foundation for the Robert Scott Library, built in the 1970s. Perpendicular to the east end of F7 was another wall (F6), which ran for a length of 2m into the north baulk of the trench. F6 measured 0.88m in height. Both walls F6 and F7 were built of 3"-high machine cut red-bricks, and are therefore probably late Victorian in date (Brunskill & Clifton-Taylor 1977,46-50). Wall F7 was built in English Garden Wall Bond, whereas F6 was only of a single brick thickness. Both walls were lime-washed on their respective interior faces. At a depth of 2.4m below the modern ground surface part of the brick floor (F9) of the vault survived. The floor was truncated to the west by cut F8, and extended 0.52m to the north of F7 where it was further truncated by disturbance caused by the machine excavation of the pile foundation. It was within the confines of this vault that the human remains were discovered, lying *in situ*.

To the east of the burial vault a deposit (1012) which consisted of a dark brown sandy-clay mixed with brick, fragmented tile and charcoal flecks was cut by the foundation trench (F5) for the burial vault. A total of 25 pottery sherds of 18th and 19th century date was recovered from 1012. Further to the east 1012 lay against a rough sandstone rubble wall base (F4). The foundation incorporated an apparently-reused harder red sandstone block with patches of lime mortaring and evidence of tooling. Above F4 was a levelling layer of lime mortar, 0.18m thick, upon which survived a few courses of a probably English Bonded brick wall (F3) constructed from 2½"-high clamped red brick.

The Burials (Fig.6)

Three skeletons (S1, S2 and S4) were discovered *in situ* associated with a dark grey sandy-clay fill (1018), within which were pieces of decayed coffin wood, rusted iron nails and casket handles. There was also a scatter of bones in the backfill of the vault that belonged to another, disarticulated skeleton (S3). The three articulated skeletons were each truncated by the cut for the foundation trench (F8), with the bones of the upper body and skulls being cut away. Skeleton S2 was laid on an east-west alignment, flush against the north face of wall F7. It measured 1.00m from the foot to the pelvis and had originally been laid over Skeleton S4. Lying next to the northern side of Skeleton S2 was Skeleton S1, which was also aligned east-west in an extended position, measuring 1.00m from foot to pelvis, and positioned on its right side with the right leg folded underneath the left. Skeleton S4 was situated under Skeleton S2 and consisted of the extended leg bones, aligned east-west. All the bones were in a state of good preservation and were exhumed for later re-burial.

7.2 The Archaeological Watching Brief

The location of the foundation trenches monitored by archaeological watching brief is given in Fig.2. Because of time constraints it was not possible to record each context or feature on a separate context and record form, indeed the limited results obtained would not have justified such a detailed level of record. Therefore, a brief description is provided of each trench in turn, noting in particular the changes in the height and composition of the underlying natural deposits across the development area.

Trench B (Fig.2)

This trench, which measured 11.5m by 4.2m, was situated against the east wall of the Robert Scott Library and was already exposed prior to the archaeological investigation. The trench had been cut to a depth of 2.4m beneath the modern ground surface. Earlier construction work for the library block had cut into the natural red sandy clay horizon which was less than 0.4m from the surface here. No archaeological features or deposits were recorded.

Trench C (Fig.2)

This trench, measuring 6.8m by 4.3m, had already been dug and filled with a shuttered concrete foundation base.

Trench D (Fig.2)

Trench D measured 9.9m by 7.8m and was also filled with a concrete foundation base.

Trench E (Fig.2)

This trench, which measured 4.2m by 3.8m, adjoined the north edge of Trench B. The trench was cut to depth of c. 2.4m beneath the modern ground surface. A natural horizon of weathered red clay occurred at a depth of 1m beneath the modern ground surface. In the north-east corner of the trench the natural was cut by a large concrete base, believed by the groundwork contractors to be a crane base, constructed for the Robert Scott Library development. Overlying the natural a layer of mixed building demolition material was in turn overlain by levelling deposits of sand and hard-core for the modern tarmac ground surface.

Trench F (Fig.2)

This trench, which measured 3m by 3m, was excavated directly north of Trench A in order to construct a transformer base. The north-south aligned vault wall (F6) seen in Trench A continued into this area; another wall running parallel and on a similar alignment to F6 was situated approximately 0.5m to the west of F6. In between the two walls was a light brown sandy fill. There was no evidence of any remaining human burials. Almost immediately after excavation the trench was filled with concrete due to its unsafe nature, and this allowed only a brief record to be made.

Trench G (Fig.2)

This trench, which also measured 3m square, was located in the middle of the site and was excavated to a depth of 1.5m. The natural red-brown sandy-clay horizon had been cut to a depth of 1.3m beneath the modern ground surface by a thick cemented foundation 0.7m in thickness, which in turn was overlain by a brown sandy fill mixed with general building rubble.

Trench H (Fig.2)

Excavated immediately to the south of Trench A, Trench H contained further remains of the brick-lined vaults. These remains consisted of a vaulted passageway situated on the east side of the trench, defined by two north-south aligned brick walls which survived to a height of almost 3m, including the partial remains of a vaulted brick ceiling. The arch was sealed by a 0.7m thick layer of dark brown silt mixed with building rubble. All the walls were whitewashed. The interior of the vault was filled with a grey/brown sandy clay backfill, but there was no evidence of human burials.

Trench I and Trench J (Fig.2)

Both trenches were excavated through the modern tarmac. A natural weathered horizon of red clay was overlain by a 0.4m thick layer of modern hard-core. The trenches were

excavated to a depth of 1.8m to provide secure footing for the concrete foundations. No archaeological features or deposits were recorded.

Trench K and Trench L (Fig.2)

These trenches were located in the north-eastern corner of the site, adjacent to the former St. Peter's School building. The natural horizon was different here, consisting of a weathered yellow/brown sand located c. 3m beneath the modern ground surface. The upper levels of both trenches consisted of a dark grey silt and building rubble and brick. There was no evidence that the 19th century brick-lined burial vaults continued into this area.

Trench M (Fig.2)

Located due south of Trench H, this trench was excavated to a depth of 3m. Again the yellow/brown natural sands were encountered at a similar depth to those in Trenches K and L. There was no evidence of the 19th century brick-lined vaulting visible in Trenches A, F and H.

8.0 A Discussion of the Archaeological Results

8.1 The Burials

The bones of the four skeletons uncovered in Trench A were of a sufficient size to suggest that they were all adults. Detailed analysis was not carried out, due to the conclusively modern date of the burials. If a later 19th century date is accepted as a *terminus post quem* for the dating of the vault walls, then the inhumation of these skeletons can only have taken place, at the earliest, c.100 years ago. It would seem likely that the burials were deposited together in what possibly constitutes a 'family' vault.

8.2 The Brick-Lined Burial Vaults

It is evident that there was a series of 19th century-brick-lined vaults in the north-west corner of the development area located in what used to be the south-eastern corner of St. Peter's overspill graveyard. There is cartographic evidence to indicate that part of the school encroached slightly upon the burial ground (OS 1919), to the west of the demolished garden wall F3/F4 in Trench A. Therefore, it is possible that the burial vaults had a very short lifespan. Two possible explanations for the presence and absence of burials in the different vaults may be proposed. Firstly, it is possible that these vaults were occupied and subsequently emptied prior to either the construction of the school or the 1973 development (no records have been found which relate to either event); with the burials in Trench A inadvertently left *in situ* during backfilling. The other possibility is that, due to the short lifespan of these vaults, only the vault exposed in Trench A was ever actually used for burials, and that the others were never actually occupied. Both explanations are viable, considering the available evidence.

8.3 Assessment of the Archaeological Importance of the Site

While the results of this programme of archaeological work were necessarily constrained by the nature of the salvage and watching brief recording, nevertheless some conclusions can be drawn concerning the survival and quality of archaeological deposits across the overall development area. It has been demonstrated that survival of archaeological features or deposits is limited towards the southern end of the site. This is because of the absence of any build up of features or deposits above the natural subsoil and extensive truncation from construction activity earlier this century. Archaeological survival is better towards the northern end of the site. The earliest structural evidence found was the ?18th century boundary wall (F3/F4), which is probably equivalent to those walls depicted on the early 19th century maps of Wolverhampton which define the eastern boundary of the graveyard, and may also relate to the garden boundary wall depicted on Issac Taylor's map of 1750. The reused sandstone block in the foundation (F4) may indicate the former presence of substantial medieval or early post-medieval stone buildings here, and may further suggest an 18th-century campaign of building work within the Deanery complex. The human remains located within Trench A have been dated to the later 19th century, and their survival may have been influenced by the proximity of the former St. Peter's School which may have prevented full clearance of this part of the graveyard in the 1970s prior to the construction of the Robert Scott Library.

The profile of the underlying natural deposits varied markedly between the south of the development area, where weathered red sandstone appeared quite close to the modern ground surface (usually at a depth of 0.5-0.6m beneath the modern ground surface), and the north of the development area where a yellow/brown sand was found between 1.5m-3m beneath the modern ground surface. These changes in the natural subsoil may indicate a break of slope here; a natural feature which, may, in turn, have been exploited by the northern boundary of the putative Iron Age hillfort. It should be stressed, however, that this assertion is highly speculative, and that in fact no features or archaeological deposits of a pre-18th century date were found.

9.0 Acknowledgements

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10.0 References

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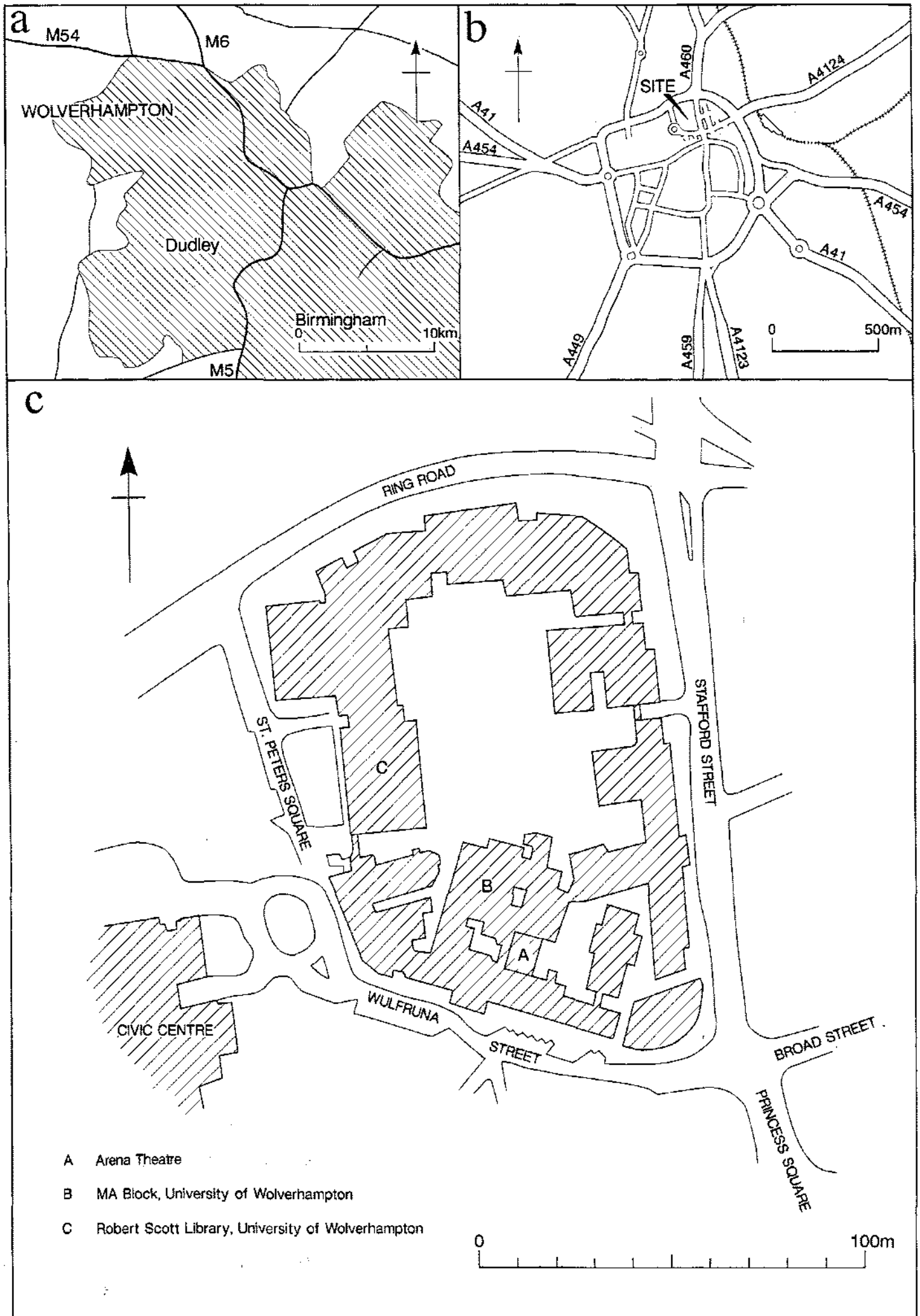


Fig.1

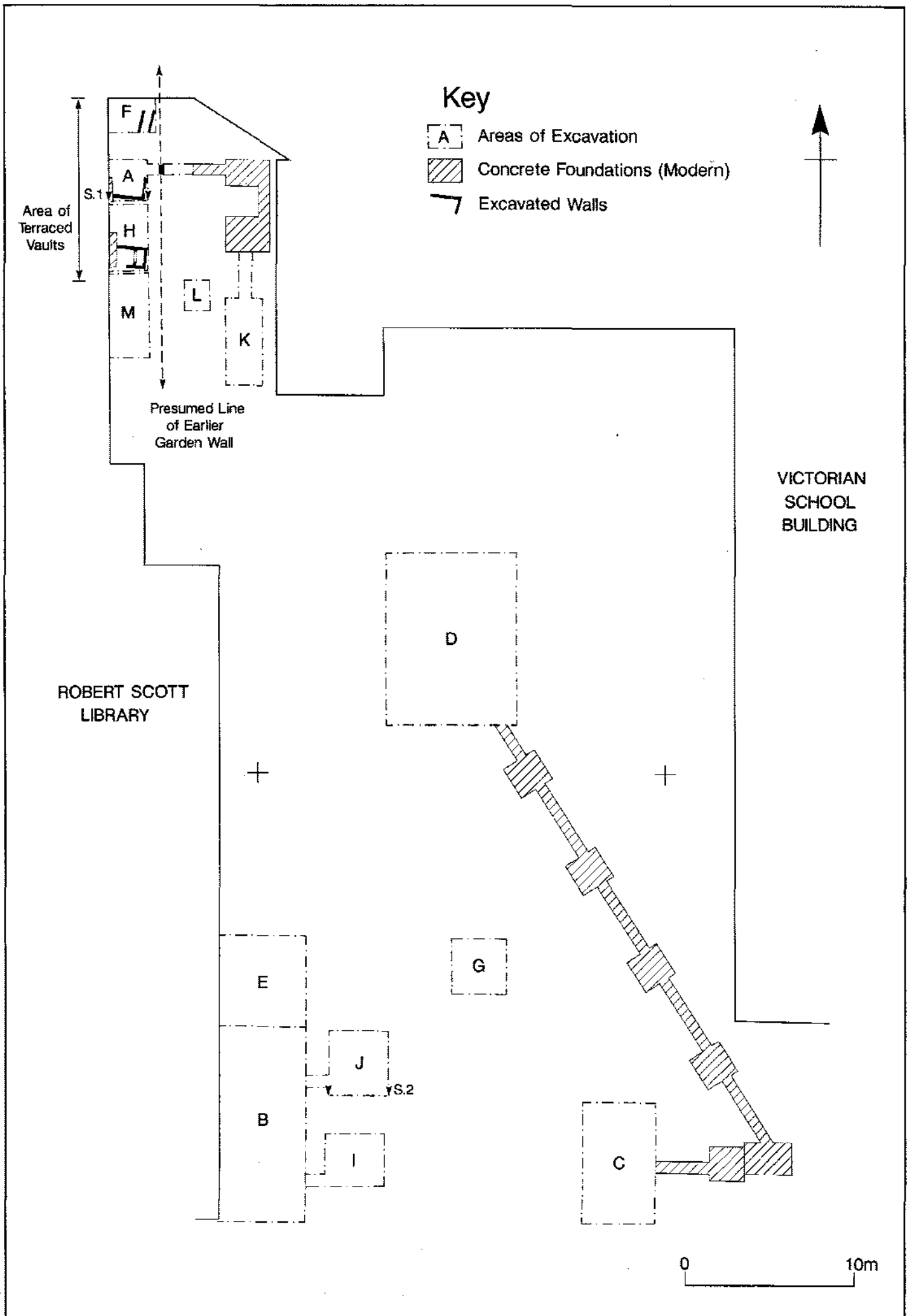
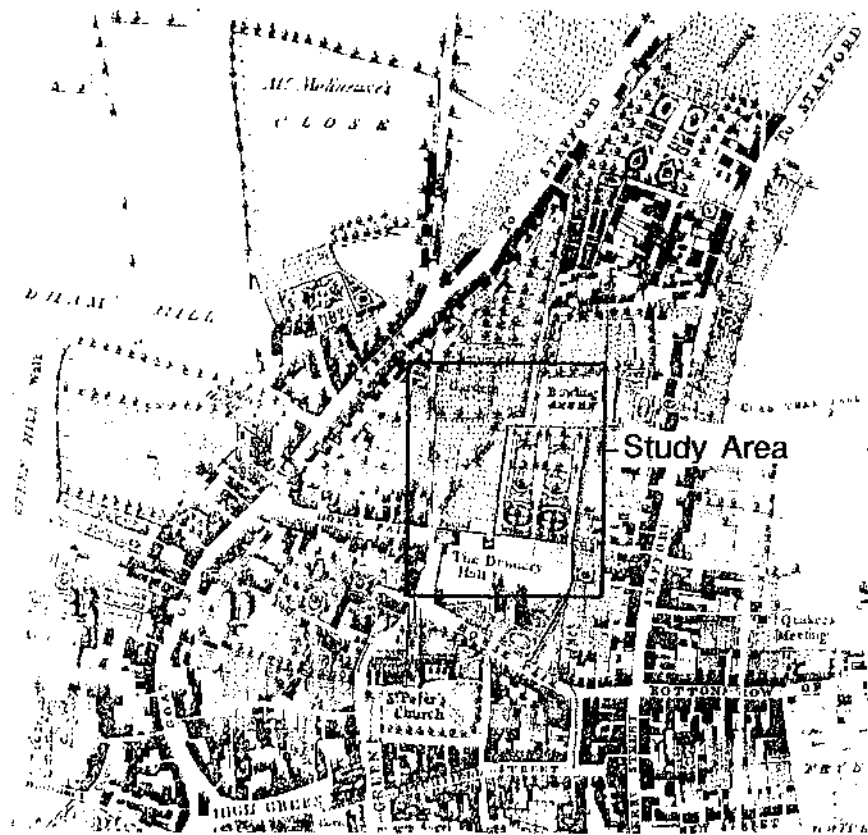
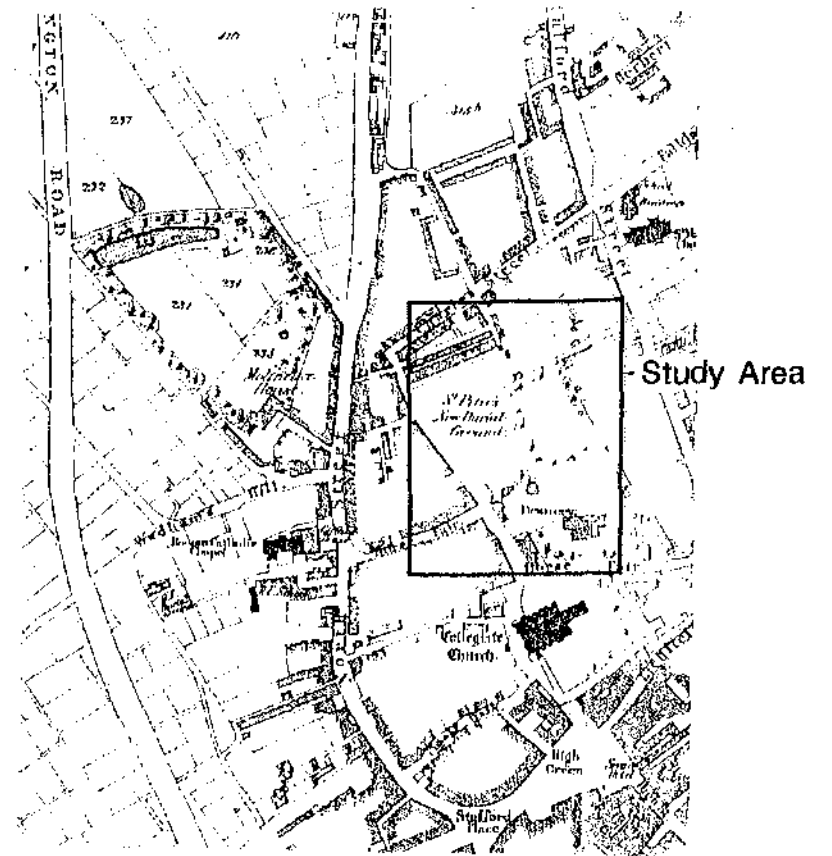


Fig.2



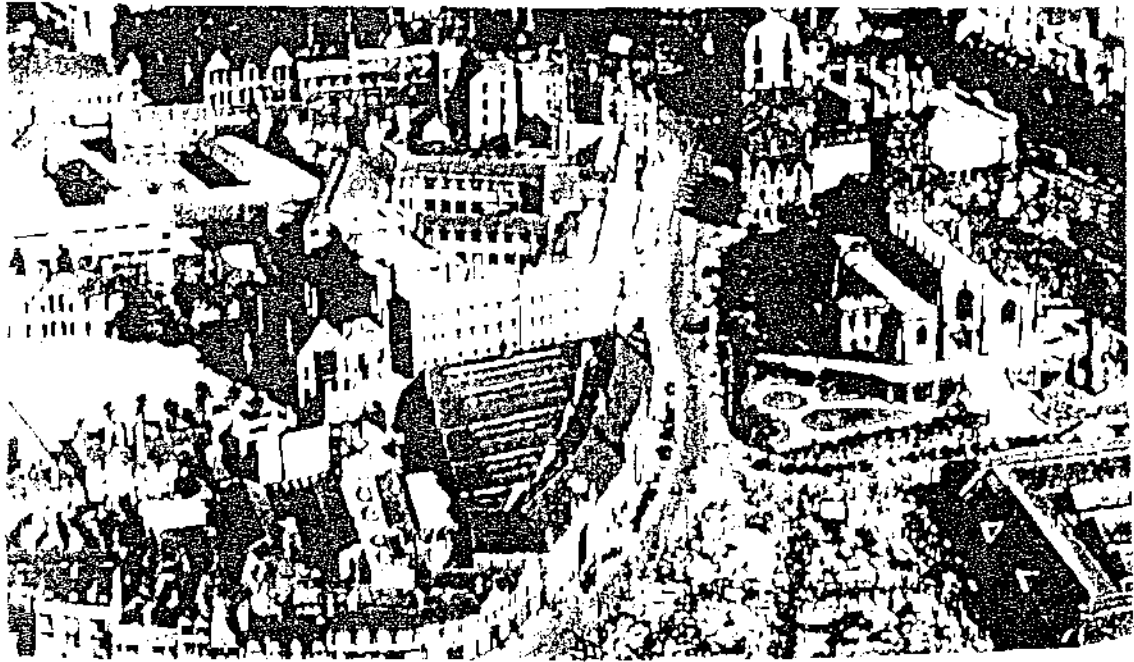
TAYLOR MAP (1750)



TITHE MAP (1842)



Fig.3



c.1930 AERIAL PHOTOGRAPH



OS 1919 EDITION

Fig.4

S.1

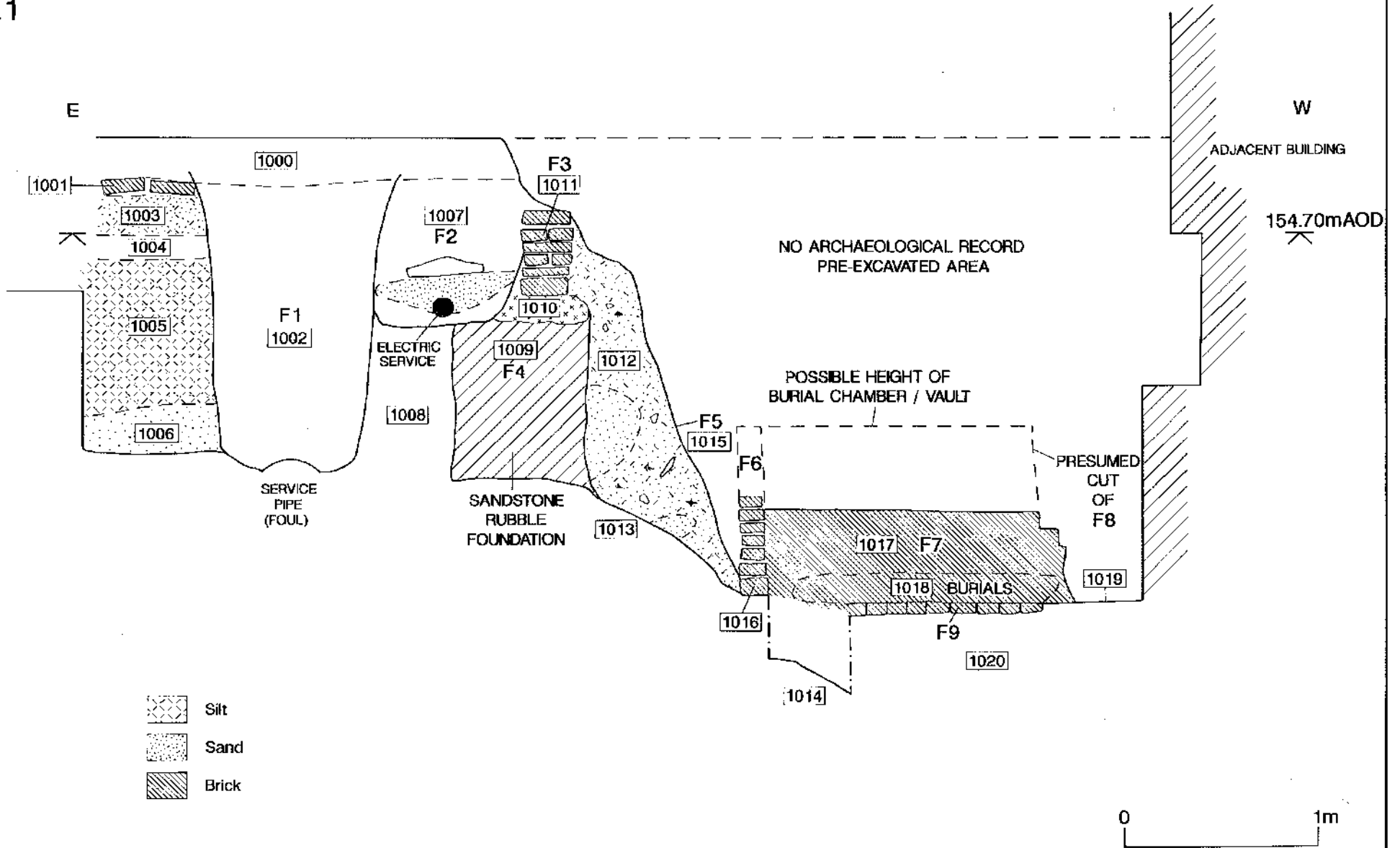


Fig.5

