

BIRMINGHAM UNIVERSITY
FIELD ARCHAEOLOGY UNIT

Archaeological Recording
at
Aldersley Junction, Wolverhampton,
West Midlands
1997

(SMR 8629)

B.U.F.A.U.



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1.0 Summary

Aldersley Junction (SMR 8629) was one of the busiest and most important junctions on the Staffordshire and Worcestershire Canal. It was a key arterial route from the heart of the canal system, the Birmingham Canal Navigations, to the Atlantic ports of Liverpool in the northwest and Bristol in the southwest. As a reflection of this importance, Aldersley Junction was once the site of several canal-side buildings, including a lock-keepers cottage, toll-houses and ancillary structures. These buildings were still standing for a period after the nationalisation of the canal network in 1948, but were subsequently demolished (Litherland 1996). Structural remains, which comprise several barrel-vaulted brick ground floor rooms and which may originally have been stables, were archaeologically recorded during an enhancement and consolidation scheme by British Waterways.

2.0 Introduction (Maps 1 and 2, Plate 1)

This report describes the results of archaeological recording which was carried out during the enhancement and consolidation of Aldersley Junction, Wolverhampton, West Midlands (NGR SJ 903 012). The archaeological fieldwork was sponsored by C.G. Hardwick, on behalf of Nicol Jones and Lomax Architects and British Waterways, and was carried out March-October 1997.

In response to an application for Conservation Area Consent made by British Waterways, a brief was prepared by the West Midlands Sites and Monuments Record (White 1997). The archaeological recording was carried out in accordance with that brief, and with a specification prepared by BUFAU (Mould 1997). The recording followed the guidelines set down in the *Standard and guidance for archaeological watching briefs* (Institute of Field Archaeologists 1994) and in the *Standard and guidance for the archaeological investigation and recording of standing buildings or structures* (Institute of Field Archaeologists 1996).

Prior to, and during, this project, a number of unauthorised, deep sections were cut through the site, exposing the ground-floor rooms and damaging two of the barrel-vaulted arches (Arches 1 and 2). These sections, which extended outside the area originally identified for consolidation (Arch 3), presented a serious safety hazard. At

a site meeting with British Waterways, it was agreed that, instead of collapsing the arches as originally proposed, the southernmost arch should be partially retained, with only the westernmost 1.5m - 2m being removed from the frontage to allow access into the arch for backfilling. The remaining arches would also be retained. All of the arches were filled with compacted material and then covered with topsoil and grass, allowing the re-development scheme, which included the reduction in height of a stone retaining wall belonging to the Toll House garden and the replacement of mortar capping on Aldersley Roving Bridge with stone coping, to be completed (Herrington 19/03/97).

3.0 Site Location and Description (Maps 1 and 2, Plates 1 - 4))

The site is located at the junction of the Staffordshire and Worcestershire canal and the former Birmingham Canal Navigations, to the north of Wolverhampton (Map 1). It was designated part of the 'Wolverhampton Locks' Conservation Area in 1975. The Aldersley Roving Bridge (No. 64) and the lock at the end of the Birmingham Main Line Canal are listed, and the latter is included in the 'Wolverhampton Locks Trail'.

The site, which corresponds with Area Ia of an earlier archaeological assessment report (Litherland 1996), comprised a tall, stone retaining-wall with damaged iron railings facing the towpath of the Birmingham Main Line Canal (Plates 2 and 3), a horse arch under the Aldersley Roving Bridge (Plate 4) which gave access to a complex of buildings, designated as Group B in the earlier assessment (Litherland 1996, figure 5). These buildings comprised several barrel-vaulted brick ground floor rooms, which were partially sealed by a substantial bank of spoil and building debris from the demolition of the buildings and subsequent dredging of the canal.

4.0 Objectives

The objectives of archaeological recording were to monitor the clearance, demolition and consolidation of the surviving buildings and any groundworks within the canal-side site, to record those structures which were to be demolished and altered, and to record any structures which were revealed by soil removal prior to renovation works, in order to allow their 'preservation by record'. Concern about the stability of structures on-site made these objectives subject to Health and Safety considerations.

5.0 Method

The objectives were achieved through a series of site visits during redevelopment of the site. The depth of demolition material over the barrel-vaulted arches and their instability prevented any detailed recording of architectural features and measurement of the building floorplans. Nor was it possible to establish the full extent of the arches' survival. However, a written, measured sketch and rapid photographic record of visible features was maintained throughout the programme of works. A

representative number of plates are included in this report. A full copy of the photographic archive will be deposited with Wolverhampton MBC and the West Midlands Sites and Monuments Record. The paper archive will be deposited with the West Midlands Sites and Monuments Record.

6.0 Archaeological Results (Plates 1 - 20)

The following narrative concentrates upon evidence for the original form and function of the barrel-vaulted rooms. An external description of the main elevation, facing the canal, is given first. This is followed by a description of a single storey extension to the main elevation, and then of each arch. A description of the interior, based on the visible divisions within each arch, is given. Broader interpretation is given separately in Section 7.0.

6.1 Western Elevation (Plates 5 and 6)

The main western elevation was set back approximately 3m from the canal-side (Plate 5). It survived as a single-storey ruin, constructed from clamped orange-red brick in irregular bonding, which abutted Aldersley Bridge. Two semi-circular arched entrances would have provided access to the building from the canal-side. The southernmost entrance had been blocked-in with machine-brick, whilst the northernmost one was filled with loose bricks which had been used to backfill the arches (Plate 6). A later modification of this entrance was represented by the insertion of machine-cut, blue-grey, engineering-brick. A window opening was located inbetween the entrances - the shape of its upper half was not preserved. An orange-red brick paviour extended from the main elevation to the canal edge.

6.2 Extension (Plates 7 and 8)

A single-storey clamped red-brick extension had been added to the building some time between 1845 and 1887. The extension abutted both the southern end of the western elevation and the northern side of Aldersley Bridge.

Exterior: Little of the exterior walls of the extension survives. The main access would have been through a doorway in the northern elevation, now represented by a gap. Although no roof-structure survived, a photograph in Wolverhampton Archives (D8/ALD/4) does show that the extension had a pitched roof, now visible as a line of moss against the northern face of Aldersley Bridge.

Interior: The only features within the extension survived against the northern side of Aldersley Bridge. They comprised a brick-built range with two hearths, each with an iron fire-grate *in situ*. Two iron bowls had been built into the brick-range, above the hearths. The main flue was set slightly forward from the range, and a third opening may have represented an additional hearth or some form of ventilation control for the range. A single-brick half-arch survived above the back of the range, abutting the bridge and main western elevation. The function of the arch, which was vandalised during the consolidation project, is unclear, but it is probably a later alteration. Access to the southernmost entrance to the main building was now via the extension.

6.3 Arches 1-3 (Plates 1, 9-14)

The partial remains of three clamped brick-built arches were exposed. These arches formed the vaulted ceilings of a series of ground-floor rooms. The northernmost arch (Arch 1) was set back further from the canal than Arches 2 and 3. The front sections of Arches 2 and 3, nearest the canal, had been demolished. This, combined with the presence of demolition material, and with the unstable nature of the surviving sections of arching, meant that it was not possible to reconstruct the floorplan beneath all three arches.

6.3.1 Arch 1 (Plates 9 and 10)

The remains of this northernmost arch were set back further from the canal-side than the main building which contained Arches 2 and 3.

Exterior: The canal-side elevation of Arch 1 was not exposed as part of the consolidation and enhancement scheme. However, the top of a doorway could just be seen.

Interior: The full extent of the floorplan was masked by rubble infill. A brick oven or furnace was built up against the southern wall. An upper and lower small, semi-circular arched vent fed from the furnace/oven through the northern wall of the main building housing Arches 2 and 3. The upper vent was angled through the vault of Arch 1, coming out above the vault of Arch 2.

6.3.2 Arch 2 (Plates 11 and 12)

Exterior: The only feature to survive in the reduced canal-side elevation in front of Arch 2 was the northernmost entrance. Photographic evidence indicates that originally there were two windows to the north of this entrance, one being at the corner of the building.

Interior: This arch was partially filled with demolition material. It was divided into two rooms by a single brick interior wall which ran parallel to the canal. The front and back rooms were not inter-connected. A staircase built against the eastern wall of the back room provided access to the first floor. There may also have been access at ground floor level into Arch 3, but this was not exposed.

The upper and lower vents from the furnace/oven in Arch 1 were also recorded in the northern wall of the room closest to the canal-side. In addition, another chimney flue and large, lower vent were recorded in the southern wall of this room (Plates 11 and 12).

6.3.3 Arch 3 (Plates 13 and 14)

The remains of Arch 3 were set-back approximately 4.7m from the main western elevation.

Exterior: A doorway and window associated with Arch 3 were recorded in the western canal-side elevation.

Interior: A clamped-brick wall, running at a right-angle to the canal, sub-divided Arch 3 into a narrow northern passage and a larger southern area. The southern area was divided into two rooms by a second brick wall, running parallel to the canal, with a semi-circular arched entrance (Plates 13 and 14). No other features were identified.

6.3.4 Other Standing Features (Plates 15 and 16)

In addition to consolidation of the three arches, part of a tall, stone retaining-wall was reduced in height to create a uniform level (Plate 15), and an arch was built at the eastern end of Aldersley Roving Bridge (Plate 16). The wall and arch were built and consolidated with bricks salvaged from demolition material which covered the site. A number of panels of damaged iron railings were removed from the site for preservation. They were replaced by a design which is sympathetic to the existing character of the site.

The area over the backfilled arches, and an area immediately to the south, was landscaped, and a number of wooden benches were installed (Plate 17). A viewing point over the canal was created by raising the level of the main western elevation (Plate 18). A second viewing point and seating area was created by the canal-side itself (Plates 18-20).

7.0 Discussion

Due to the necessary limitations upon the archaeological recording of the building interiors during the consolidation scheme, as discussed above, no conclusive interpretation of the use of the arches can be proposed. However, evidence from the buildings, old photographs and maps shows that the complex of buildings at Aldersley Junction was altered several times - presumably in response to the changing needs of the canal company.

One possible function of the arches as the remains of stabling has become the most accepted interpretation in recent years (Blake 1995), and this would, of course, have been one of the important functions of the canal-side settlement. There is evidence both for and against this interpretation.

On the one hand, the original size of the northernmost entrance of the main canal-side elevation wall is suitable for the passage of horses into and out of the building, as is the arch underneath Aldersley Bridge. The choice of the original builders to span a series of groundfloor rooms of a four storey building with brick vaults rather than a conventional joist and floorboard arrangement may also be explained as an attempt to keep the smell of the horses separate from the living and work accommodation above. Equally, the choice of brick-vaulting instead of a wooden floor may have been prompted by a desire to maximise fire safety between a storage area and the living/work accommodation above.

On the other hand, the groundfloor of the building was almost certainly terraced into the slope behind. This would have provided minimal light and ventilation and would have complicated any daily clearing-out of horse stalls. The provision of stabling further back from the canal, away from the main building where space was less limited, seems the more likely option. The subdivision of the arches and the limited nature of access within the building itself is unlikely to be found within a stable, although it is possible that these walls are part of a later modification. The numbers of ovens, furnaces, wash tubs and associated flues and vents may form part of the regime of horse care and husbandry; however, the siting of them within the actual stabling area is unlikely.

While it is possible that the original function of the lower rooms, in particular Arch 2, was as stabling, the evidence indicates later modification and change of use - still associated with horse care and husbandry, but not stabling accommodation.

The value and importance of the buildings at Aldersley Junction, in terms of *Period, Rarity, Documentation and Group Value* (Planning Policy Guidance Note 16, Department of Environment 1990) has been considered in detail by an earlier assessment (Litherland 1996). However, recent recording during consolidation and enhancement works could be seen to have enhanced their value in the following areas:

Survival/Condition: Recording has confirmed the survival of architectural features beneath the demolition material and within each of the arches.

Fragility/Vulnerability: The vulnerability of the structural remains has been lessened by the recent consolidation, with the arches being backfilled and made safe. However, this project did show that, due to the remote location, the remains are vulnerable to unauthorised activity.

Potential: The potential of Aldersley Junction as a recreational and interpretative facility is still high. The consolidation and enhancement work of this project provides a solid foundation for further enhancement schemes.

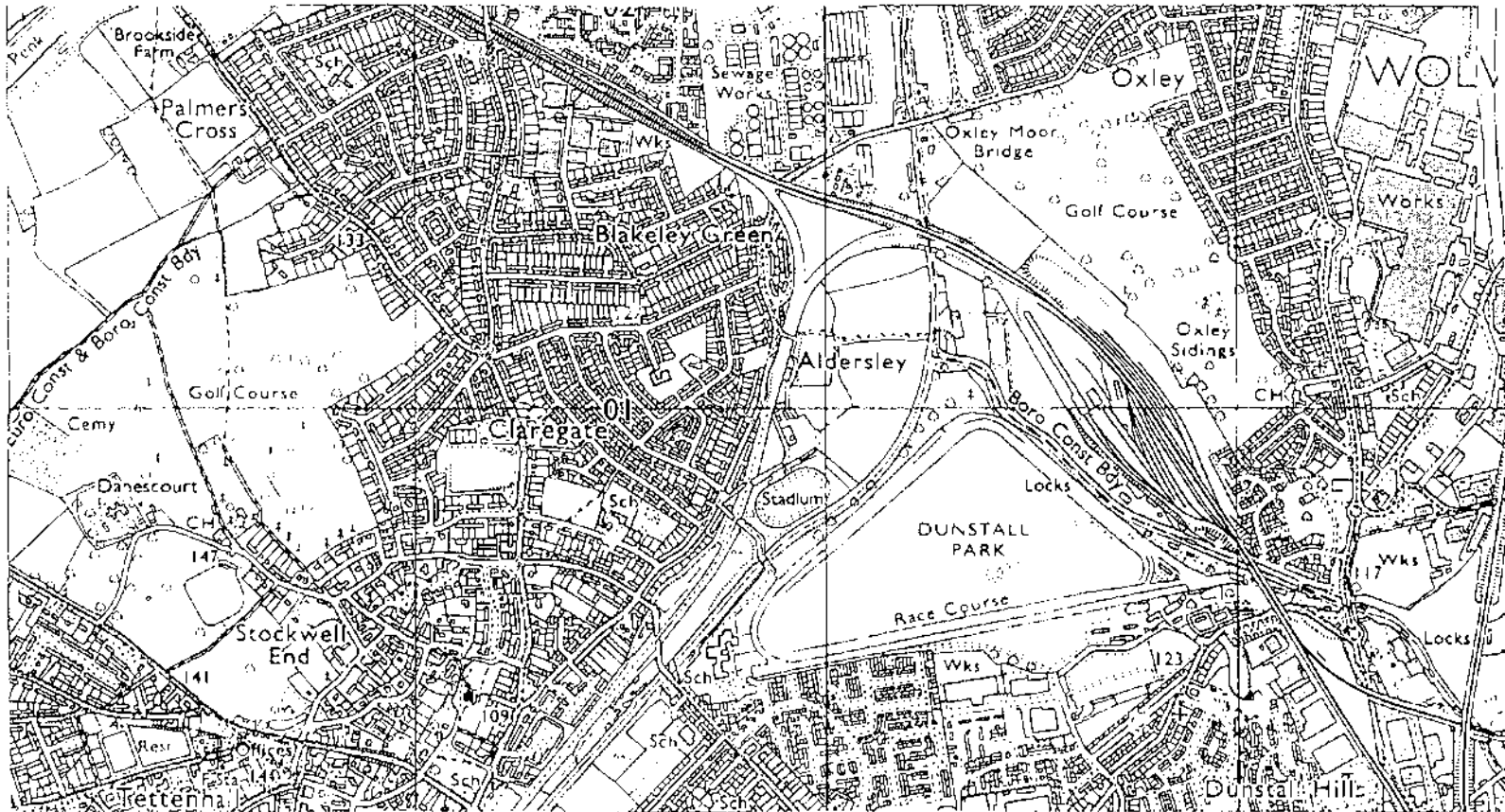
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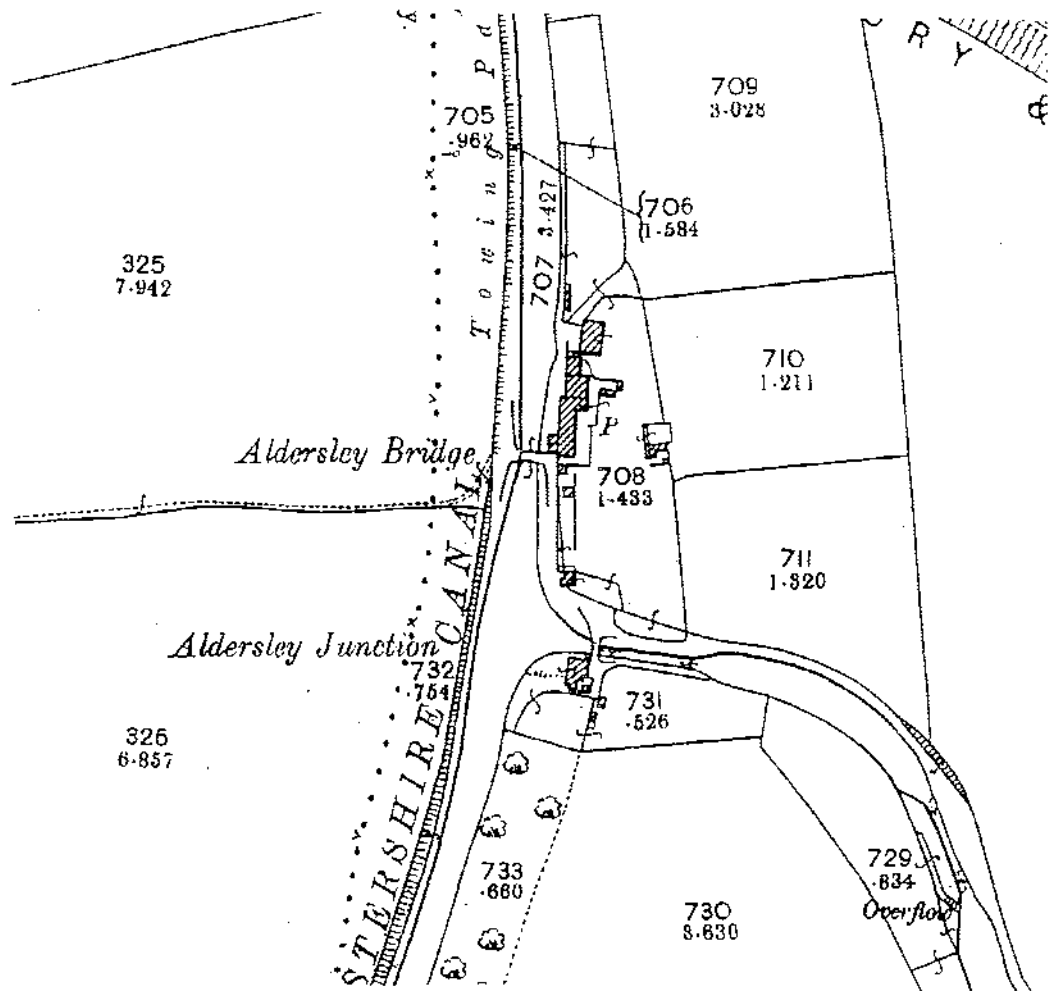
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9.0 Acknowledgements

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Map 1



Map 2



Plate 1

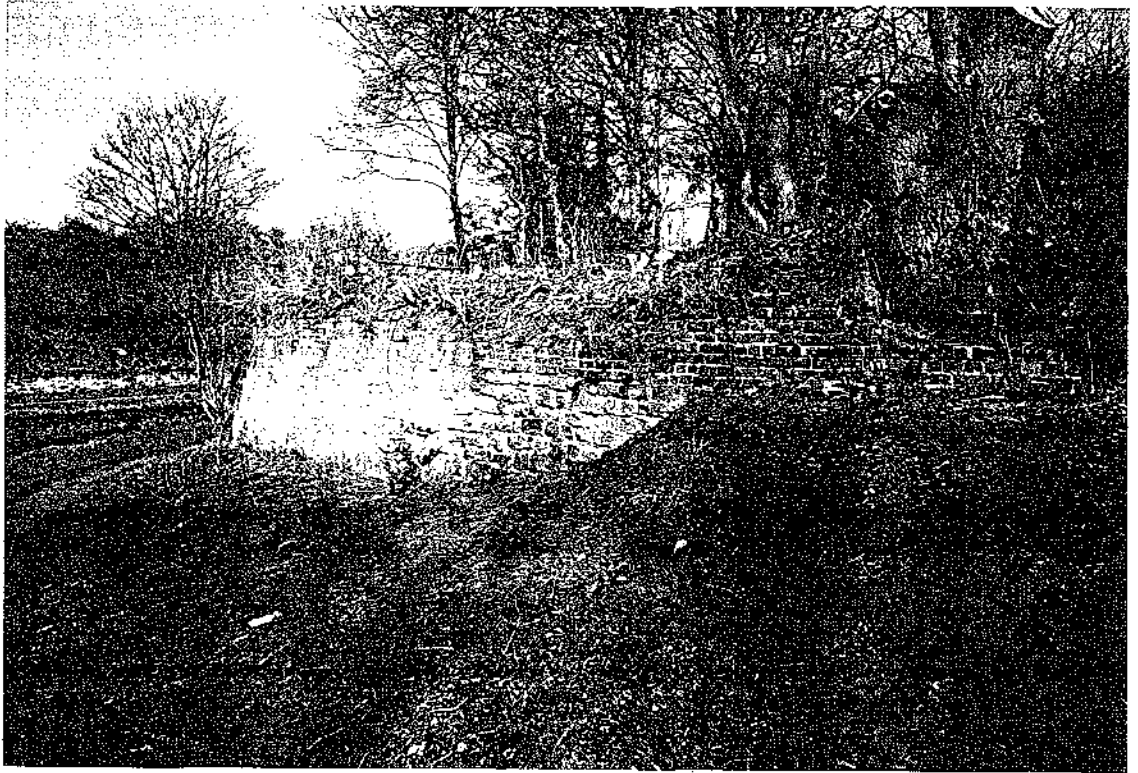


Plate 2

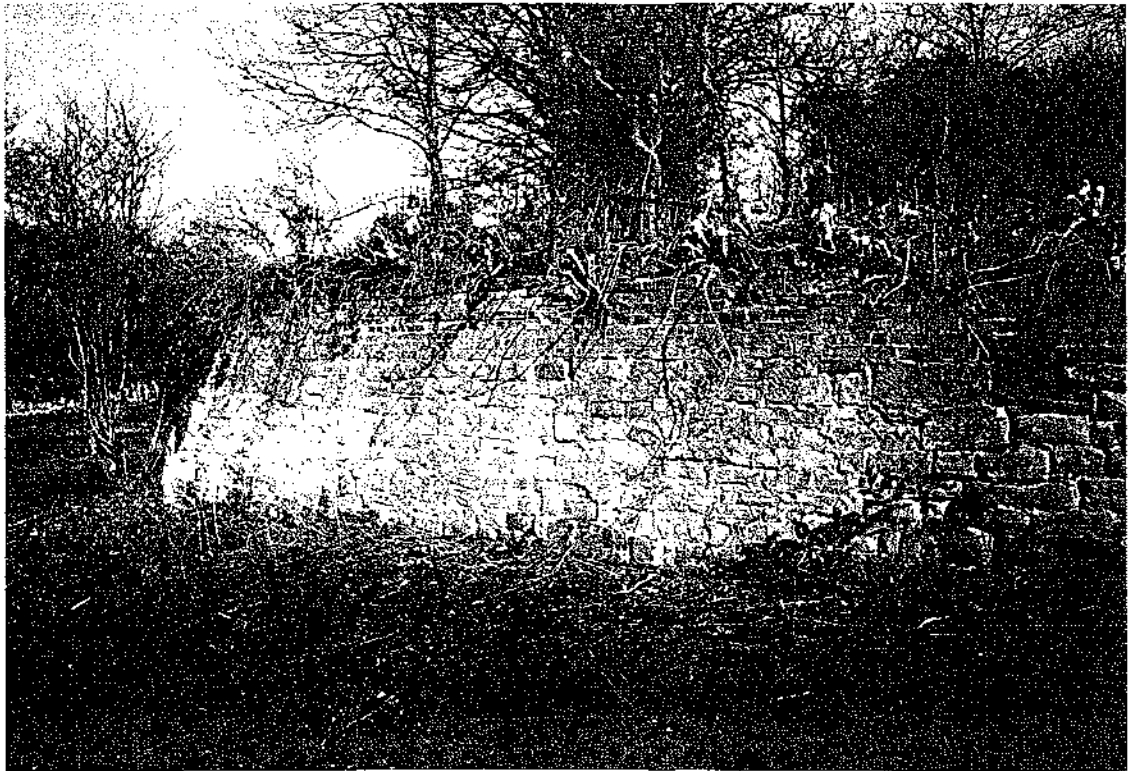


Plate 3



Plate 4

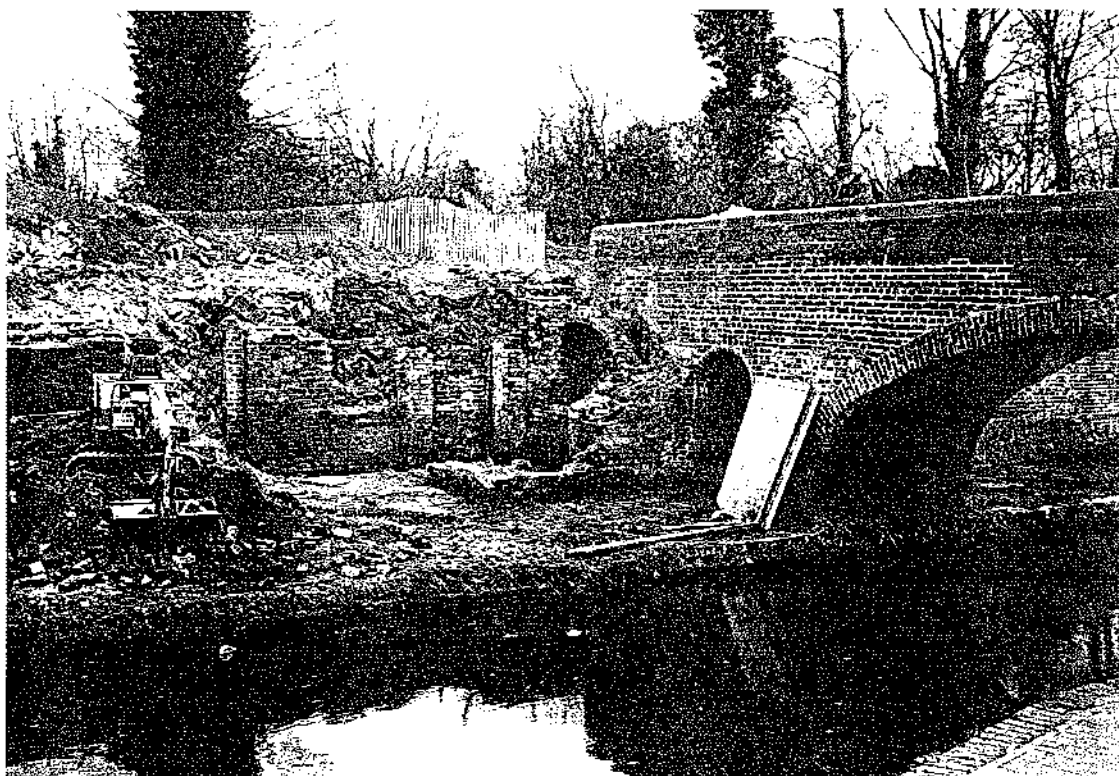


Plate 5



Plate 6

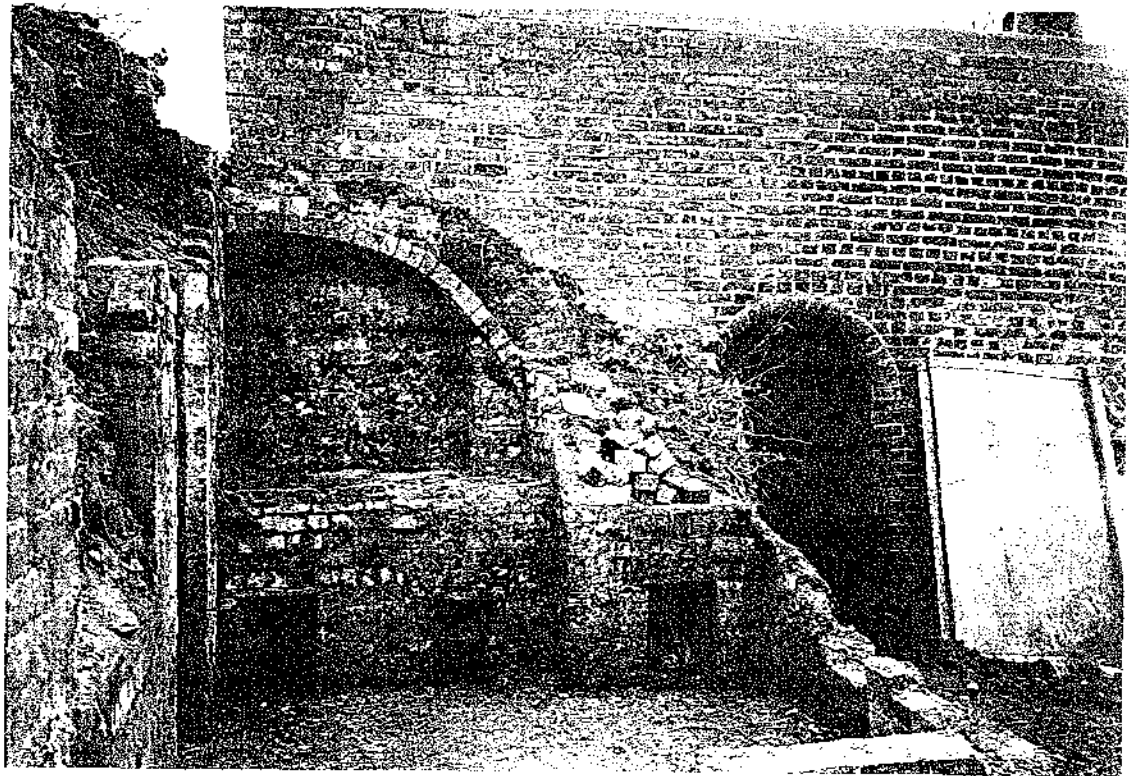


Plate 7

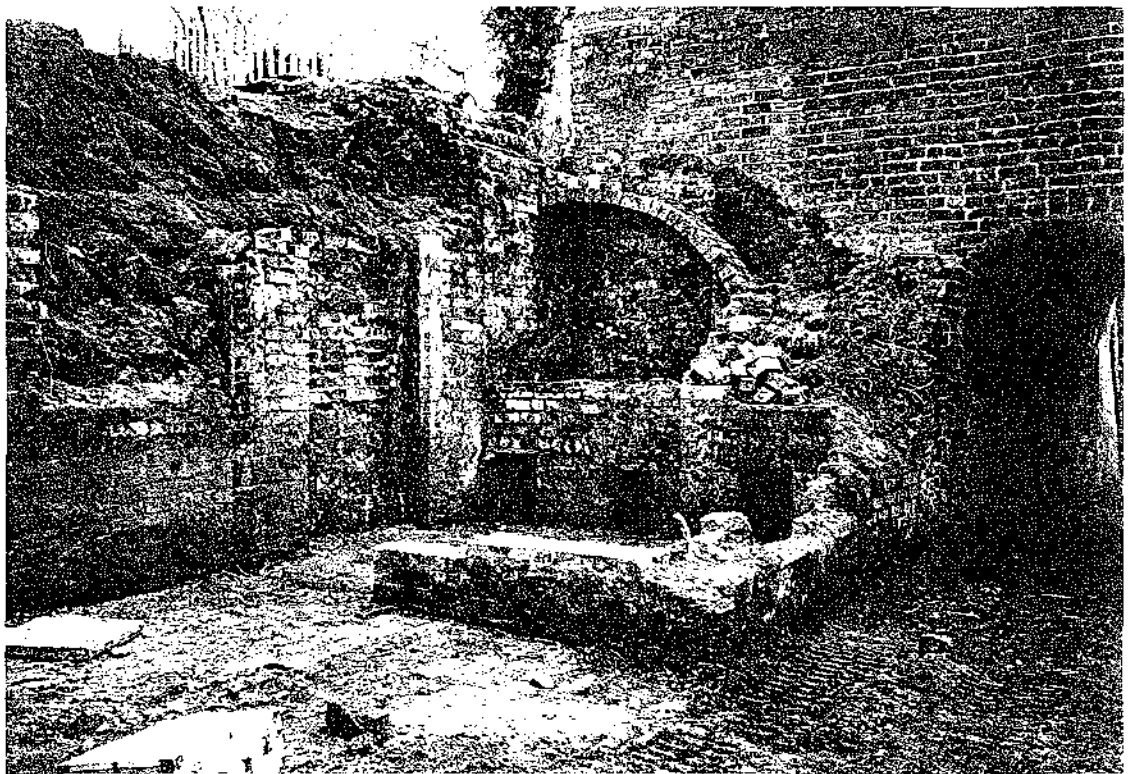


Plate 8



Plate 9



Plate 10



Plate 11

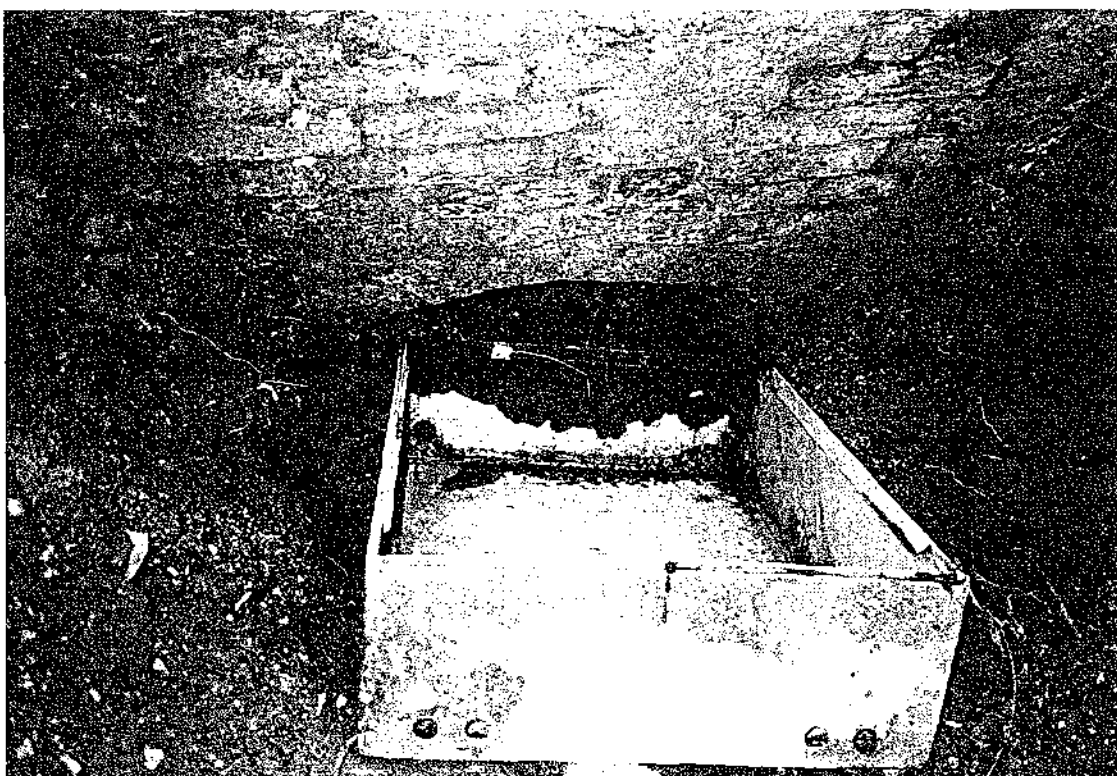


Plate 12



Plate 13



Plate 14

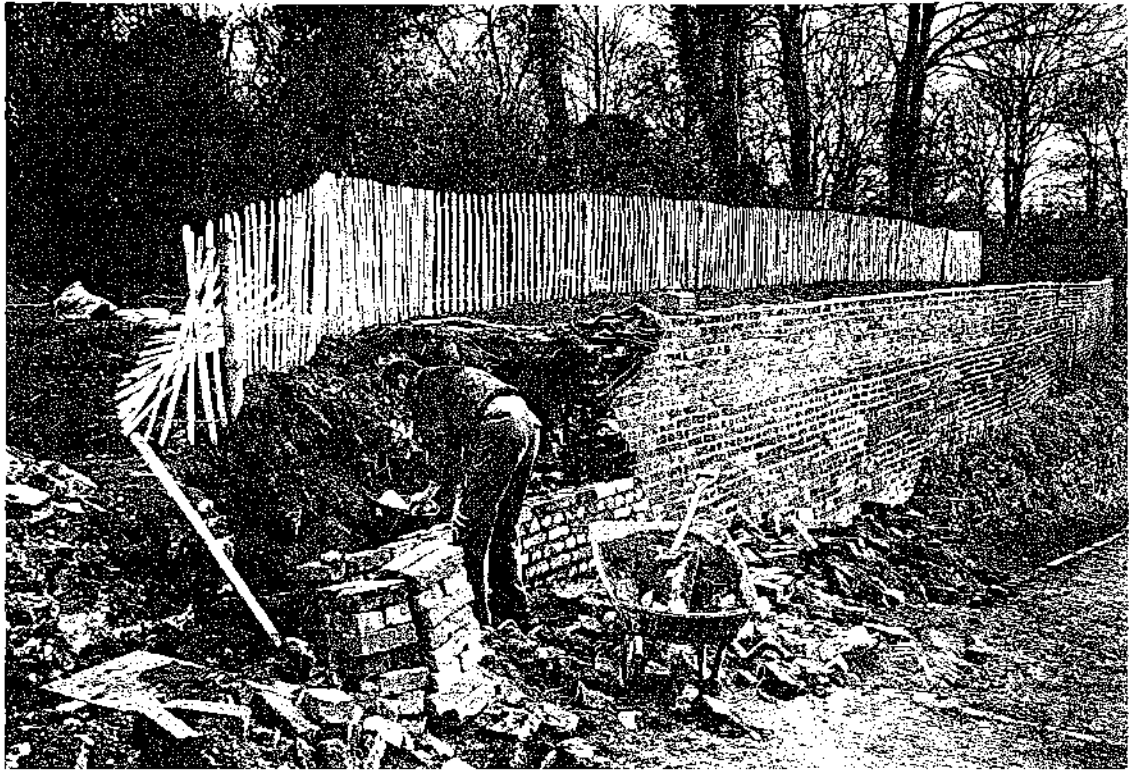


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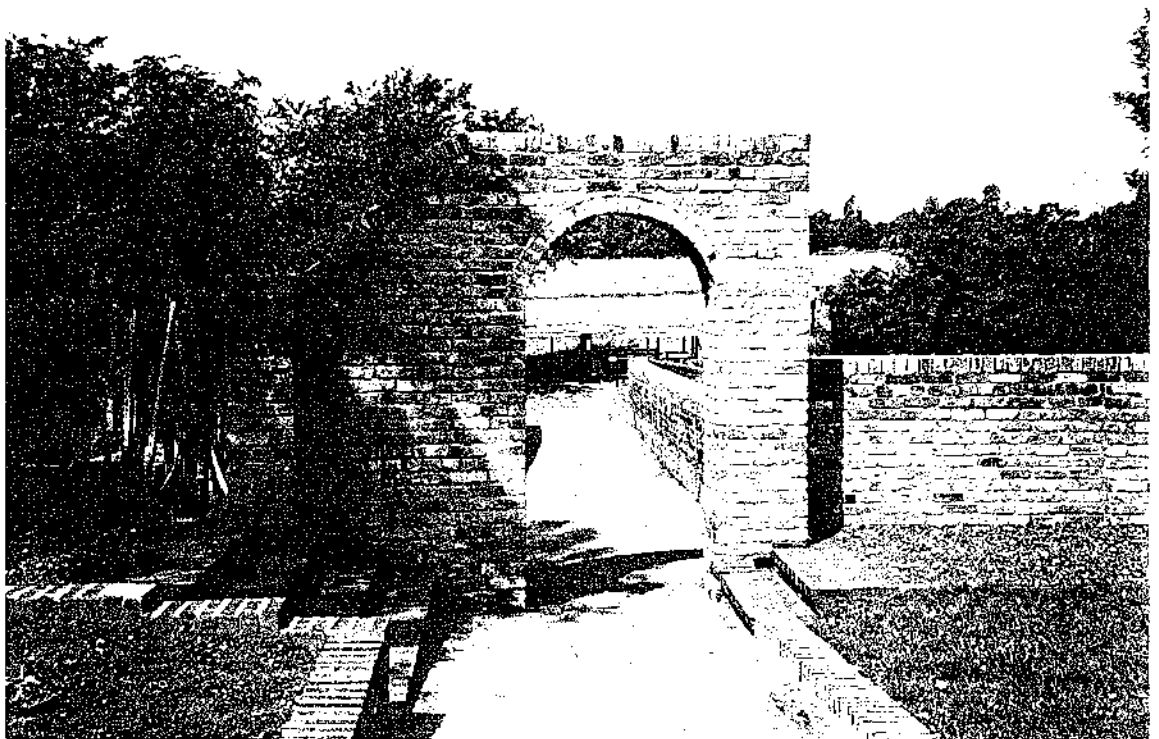


Plate 16

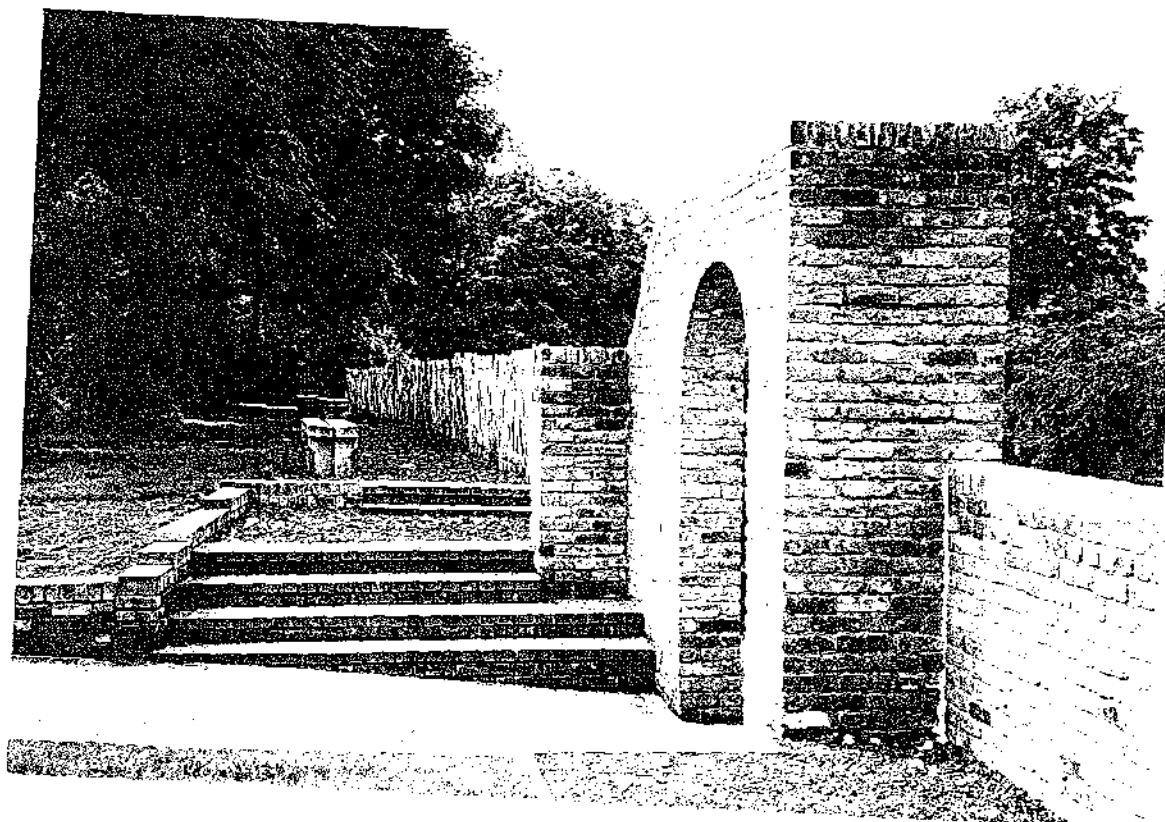


Plate 17

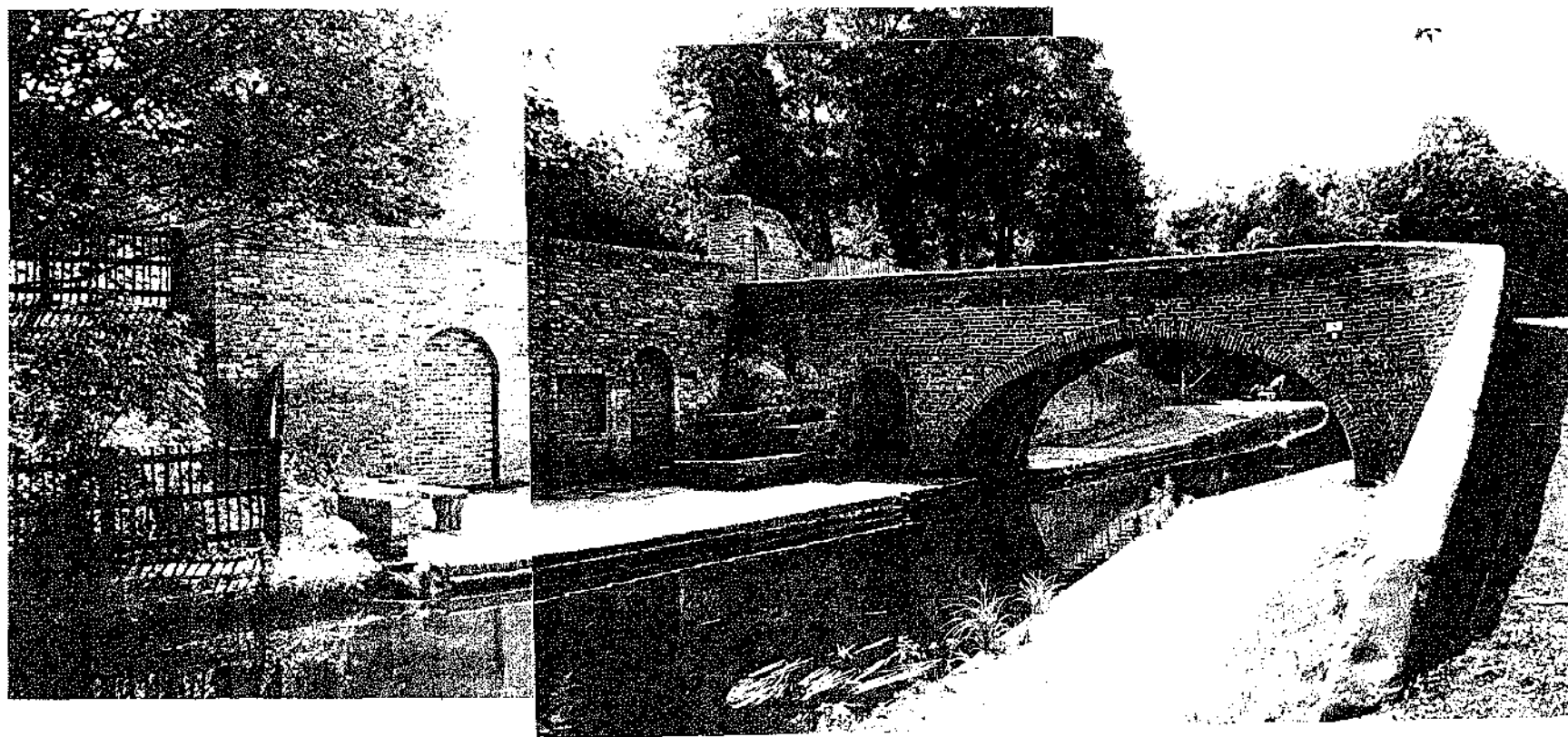


Plate 18

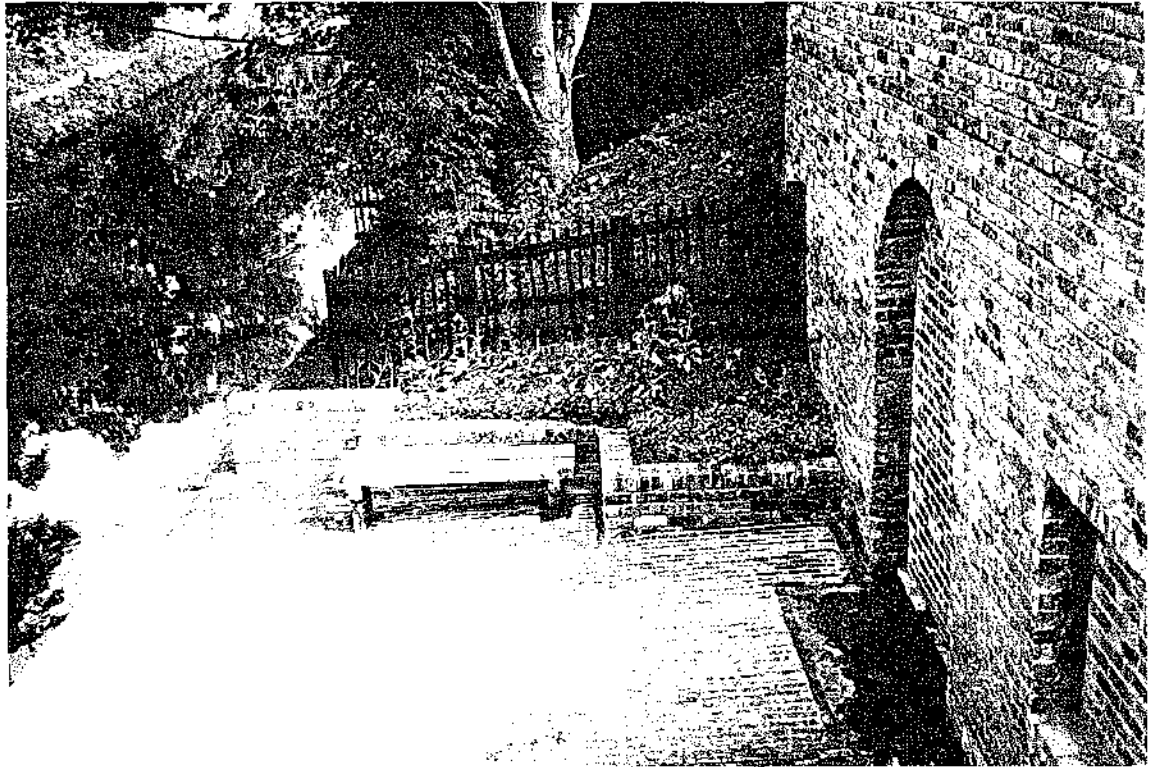


Plate 19

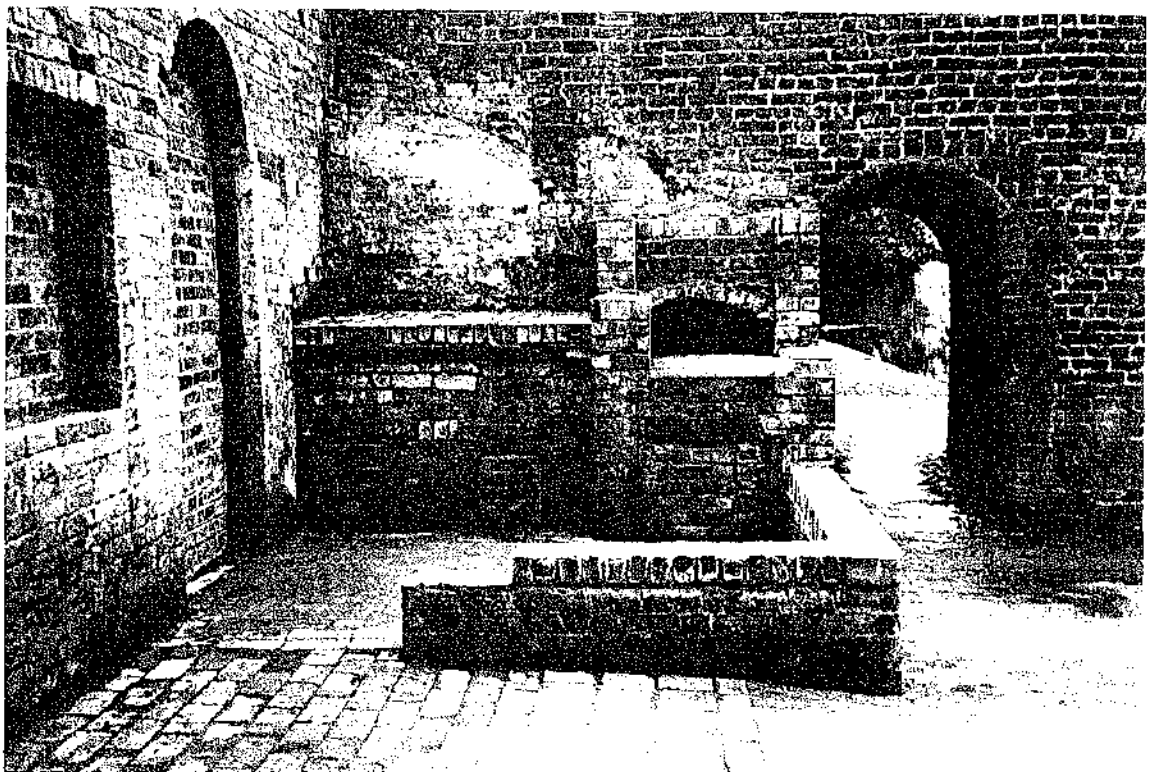


Plate 20