

*BIRMINGHAM UNIVERSITY
FIELD ARCHAEOLOGY UNIT*

An Archaeological Watching Brief

at

**21 - 27 High Street, Bilston,
Wolverhampton, West Midlands**

1997

(SMR 9466)

B.U.F.A.U.



Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit
Project No. 466.01
May 1997

**An Archaeological Watching Brief
at
21-27 High Street, Bilston,
Wolverhampton, West Midlands
1997**

(SMR 9466)

by
Catharine Mould

with a contribution by Lucie Dingwall

illustrations by Nigel Dodds

For further information please contact:
Simon Butcux, 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
E-Mail: BUFAU@bham.ac.uk
Web Address: <http://www.bham.ac.uk/BUFAU/>

**An Archaeological Watching Brief
at
21-27 High Street, Bilston,
Wolverhampton, West Midlands
1997**

(SMR 9466)

Contents

	Page
1.0 Summary	1
2.0 Introduction	1
3.0 Site Description	2
4.0 Historical Summary <i>by Lucie Dingwall</i>	2
5.0 Objectives	2
6.0 Method	3
7.0 The Archaeological Results	3
Number 21	3
Number 23	4
Numbers 25/27	4
8.0 Discussion	5
9.0 References	6
10.0 Acknowledgements	7

Figures

- 1 Location of the site. Ordnance Survey 1994.
- 2 Location of Numbers 21-27, High Street, Bilston.

Plates

- 1 Numbers 21-27: High Street elevation.
- 2 Numbers 21-27: rear.
- 3 Numbers 21-27: removal of roof timbers.
- 4 Numbers 21-27: rear view of partially demolished structures.
- 5 Number 21: rear view prior to demolition.
- 6 Number 21: rear view, roof tiles removed.
- 7 Numbers 21-23: cellar, taken from Number 23, showing arched entrance to cellar beneath Number 21.
- 8 Number 21: cellar, showing remains of vaulted roof and decorative metal box set into the cellar wall.
- 9 Number 21: scarring on back wall.
- 10 Number 21: scarring on back wall and remains of earlier roof gable.
- 11 Number 21: roof timbers.
- 12 Number 21: roof timbers.
- 13 Numbers 21-27: roof timbers.
- 14 Number 23: ground floor interior, imitation framing.
- 15 Number 23: ground floor interior, re-used ceiling timbers.
- 16 Number 23: re-used timbers.
- 17 Number 23: re-used timbers.
- 18 Number 23: re-used timbers.
- 19 Numbers 23-27: re-used timbers.
- 20 Numbers 23-25: re-used timbers.
- 21 Detail of roof timber: wall-plate re-used as purlin.

AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF
AT 21-27 HIGH STREET, BILSTON,
WOLVERHAMPTON, WEST MIDLANDS, 1997
(SMR 9466)

1.0 Summary

An archaeological watching brief was carried out during the demolition of 21-27 High Street, Bilston, Wolverhampton (SMR 9466). Although an earlier desk-based assessment and photographic survey (Dingwall 1997) had found the standing building at Number 25/27 to be largely modern, the watching brief recorded surviving roof timbers which are mainly wall-plates and floor-joists, re-used as purlins and set into a wall-as-truss arrangement. Similar roof timbers were found in Numbers 21 and 23, the re-used timbers were generally of square-profile scantling and therefore are likely to have belonged to a building of 17th - 18th century date.

2.0 Introduction (Figures 1 and 2)

This report describes the results of an archaeological watching brief which was carried out during the demolition of buildings at 21-27 High Street, Bilston, Wolverhampton, West Midlands (NGR SO 9470 9620, Figure 1). The demolition of Numbers 21, 23 and 25/27, High Street was required ahead of proposed redevelopment of the site. The archaeological fieldwork was carried out by Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit (BUFAU) on behalf of the sponsors, Wolverhampton Metropolitan Borough Council, in March 1997.

A desk-based assessment and preliminary recording of the buildings had been completed in February 1997 (Dingwall 1997), and a historical summary from that report is included here as Section 4.0.

Following the earlier assessment, no further archaeological work was recommended for the building at 25/27, High Street. However, the removal of roof tiles from Numbers 23 and 25/27 exposed re-used roof timbers in each of the three structures. These were recorded, along with a cellar in Number 25, during one site visit and the results are included in this report.

The watching brief was carried out in accordance with a specification prepared by BUFAU (Jones 1997), approved by the West Midlands Sites and Monuments Record. The guidelines set down in the *Standard and Guidance for Archaeological Watching Briefs* (Institute of Field Archaeologists 1994) were followed.

3.0 Site Description (Figure 2, Plates 1 and 2)

The site comprised a row of three buildings, Numbers 21, 23 and 25/27 High Street, lying opposite the junction with the northern end of Dudley Street in Bilston town centre (Figure 2). Prior to demolition, the buildings were in retail use, as were the buildings in the immediate surrounding area. The demolished buildings were of traditional brick construction under a slate roof. Number 21 was a three-storey building, Number 23 a two and a half storey building, and Number 25/27 a two-storey building. There were single storey extensions at the rear of Numbers 23 and 25/27 and a number of small outbuildings in the rear yard behind Number 25/27.

4.0 Historical Summary *by Lucie Dingwall*

The site is situated towards the western end of the area believed to be the medieval settlement of Bilston. The map evidence shows this area of the High Street as being developed at the end of the 18th century. The earliest map available for Bilston is the small scale Yates map of Staffordshire dating from 1775 (not illustrated), which shows the pattern of the main streets and built up areas of Bilston in the late 18th century, but no detail. By the time of the Ordnance Survey First Edition map in 1887, the town centre had been heavily re-developed, partly as a result of the increasing industrialisation of the town with the advent of the railway, and partly as a result of the extensive slum clearances carried out after the Public Health Act of 1875. Despite this later development, the tenement plot pattern, which probably dates from the medieval period, largely survives along High Street and Church Street, and the plot boundaries of the site are recognisable from 1839.

To summarise the map evidence, the building at Number 21 has retained the same ground plan since 1887, whereas the ground plans of Numbers 23 and 25/27 altered between 1887 and 1902, and again between 1938 and the present day.

5.0 Objectives

The objectives of the archaeological watching brief were to provide additional details of the historic structures on the site, as revealed during the process of demolition, and to enhance our understanding of the historical significance of the archaeology of the site. Specific objectives were to:

- 1) test the potential of the ground floor of Number 21 to contain traces of an earlier build beneath modern shop fittings.
- 2) provide details of any historic timber frame in the roof of Numbers 21-23.

- 3) examine the area between Numbers 21 and 23 in detail, to elucidate the sequence of construction.
- 4) examine the timber frame, and any associated structures in the rear of Number 23, and to consider the potential of the frame, or of any other structural timbers, for dendrochronological dating.

The undertaking of these objectives was subject to Health and Safety considerations.

6.0 Method

The objectives were achieved through a series of site visits during the demolition programme. However, the instability of Number 21 prevented soft-stripping of the ground floor walls, and also limited access to a cellar which extended beneath Numbers 21 and 23.

A written and photographic record of visible historic features was maintained throughout the demolition process. A copy of the photographic archive will be deposited with Wolverhampton MBC and the West Midlands Sites and Monuments Record. The written archive will be deposited with the West Midlands Sites and Monuments Record.

7.0 Archaeological Results (Plates 1 - 21)

No artefacts were recovered during this watching brief. All three buildings were demolished to ground level. The cellars were emptied and subsequently backfilled with compacted material.

Number 21 (Plates 1 -12)

A cellar beneath Number 21 was connected with a cellar beneath Number 23 (Plates 7 and 8). The only access visible to both cellars was from the front room of Number 23. The cellar under Number 21 was set back slightly from the High Street frontage, and had a vaulted roof, constructed from clamped red brick. The walls, which were also constructed from clamped red brick, had been covered in places by a thick layer of plaster. The cellar was open in plan, with an arched entrance cut into the party wall of Numbers 21 and 23. A small metal box (Plate 8), with a decorative front, but no locking device, was set into the front wall of Number 21. It may originally have been hidden by a wooden frame/structure, the remains of which were lying in front of the box.

The structural instability of Number 21 did not allow for soft-stripping of the interior elevations and ceilings of the ground floor, and no further recording was conducted in that area. However, the construction of the frontage above ground-floor level was similar to that of the cellar. In addition, it was clear that the back wall above the passage-way, through the property, was butted against the party wall with Number 23

and was partially supported by an infilled brick arch and a wooden lintel. This indicated that Number 21 was built after Number 23.

The removal of the roof over the main building and rear extension allowed further structural investigation (Plates 9 and 10). This indicated that the rear wings of Numbers 21 and 23 were added later in the life of both buildings. Numbers 21 and 23 were connected at the first and second storey levels. However, this was probably a relatively recent alteration, associated with the extension of retail space over virtually the entire ground floors of Numbers 21 and 23.

The plaster and lath ceiling in the attic masked a single, roughly finished purlin, set into the brick party walls (Plates 11 and 12). The sawn common rafters rested on the purlin, rather than being cut and fitted into it. The roof over the rear extension was all of sawn, square-cut timber.

Number 23 (Plates 1 - 4, 7, 10, and 13 - 19)

As described above, a cellar extended underneath Numbers 21 and 23 (Plates 7 and 8), with access being via a staircase in Number 23. No evidence of a well was recorded.

A further single storey extension at the rear of Number 23, contained elements of timber-framing. This comprised an imitation frame stuck onto the back wall of the machine-cut brick extension (Plate 14), and a beamed ceiling (Plate 15). The main beam had been re-used. The soffit of the beam had redundant mortices and dowel's, presumably for some form of interior partition wall originally. In addition, the beam was chamfered, although the chamfer stops had been sawn off the ends of the timber. The exposed ceiling joists were of sawn timber and were not jointed into the main beam. It was clearly the intention of the builder to create the impression of a timber-framed building to the rear of Number 23. The main ceiling beam was the only authentic piece of timber-framing and may well have been specially purchased for this job as its character differed markedly from the reused timbers found in the roofs of Numbers 21 and 23. Dendrochronological dating was not considered to be appropriate.

The exposed front purlin of Number 23 was built into the brick party walls of the building and was jointed into a continuation of this arrangement over Numbers 25/27 (Plates 16-19). The purlin of Number 23 was clearly re-used, with regular, redundant, mortices and cuts, and probably originally formed part of the wall-plate of an earlier building. The roof structure at the back of Number 23 was mainly of later construction, associated with the rear wing of the property.

Number 25/27 (Plates 1 - 4, 15, and 19 - 21)

A machine-brick cellar, measuring 5m x 5m, was recorded beneath Number 25. It was accessed from the front room. The cellar did not extend to Number 27, nor did it join with that of Number 23 and 21. The modern brick facade of Number 25/27 masked an earlier building, constructed from clamped red brick. The original roof was jointed with

that of Number 23, and would appear to indicate that Numbers 23, 25 and 27 were built as a row of commercial premises (Dingwall 1997, map dated 1832). Again, the purlins were of re-used timber, set into the brick party walls between the properties. The purlin in Number 27 had sagged significantly as the scarf joint in the middle of its span had weakened. The timber appeared to have been a re-used rail from part of the wall-frame of a box-framed building. There was access between the roof spaces above Number 25 and Number 27.

8.0 Discussion

As stated in the earlier assessment, buildings are probably one of the most significant surviving historical resources in Wolverhampton (Dingwall 1995, 10 and 1997). Examples of buildings which pre-date the urban improvements act of 1875 are relatively rare in the high streets of the smaller towns of the Black Country, many buildings having been removed by the slum clearance and urban improvement programmes of both the 19th and 20th centuries (RCHME 1991, 24). The monitoring of the demolition of Numbers 21, 23 and 25/27 has, therefore, enhanced our understanding of buildings of this age and type, and has resulted in their partial preservation by record.

It would appear that all the buildings were originally built as commercial premises, sometime in the later 18th century or early 19th century (Dingwall 1997, maps dated 1799, 1832 and 1839). This is consistent with both their main build in clamped red brick, and the extensive re-use of structural timbers belonging to earlier, possibly timber-framed, buildings. The support of the re-used timbers in a wall-as-truss arrangement (Peters 1980) is very typical of lower status Black Country building of this period, as indeed is the cost-conscious re-use of building materials. Numbers 23, 25 and 27 were probably constructed as a row, again a plan-form commonly adopted by the urban vernacular tradition of this period. Number 21, although superficially appearing to be the earliest of the buildings, was actually built against the side of Number 23, a small passage-way providing access to the yards behind and also by means of a side entrance off the passage into Number 23. Typically, the front of the ground floor of commercial properties of this type would have been utilised as a relatively small retail space, with living and storage accommodation on the floors above. Later, in the 19th century, the properties were improved by the addition of service wings to the rear (Dingwall 1997, map dated 1887), which may also have enabled an expansion of the ground floor shopping space. This process reached its climax in the 20th century when, commonly, the whole of the ground floor was devoted to retail space and the shop was rented entirely separately from the living accommodation above. In recent times, it was common for the space above the shop to be empty or to be used as a store for rubbish.

While no evidence of any *in situ* structures dating to the early 18th century was found within the standing buildings, there is, nevertheless, potential for the survival of below-ground archaeological deposits associated with the possible earlier occupation of this site. The site probably lies on the periphery of medieval settlement in Bilston and although a history of demolition, rebuilding and cellarage may have scoured-out and erased evidence of any earlier occupation along Bilston's High Street frontage (Jones

1993), the cellars below Numbers 21, 23 and 25 are set back from the street frontage and are relatively discrete. Survival of archaeological deposits may, therefore, be anticipated along the frontages, especially within the plot of Number 27, which does not appear to be cellared. As with other known sites in the West Midlands, the degree of preservation further away from the building may be significantly higher (Litherland 1996, Litherland *et al* 1994, Mould 1995 and 1996). The value of the archaeological resource in Bilston, specifically along the High Street, should not be underestimated. Surviving archaeological deposits within this site, and within Bilston as a whole, have the potential to shed light on the historical development of the area and it is desirable that any future development should be preceded by above and below-ground archaeological investigation and mitigation, if appropriate.

9.0 References

- Dingwall, L. 1995 *The Wolverhampton SMR: An Accelerated Enhancement Project*. West Midlands Joint Data Team Arch. Report, New Series No. 4.
- Dingwall, L. 1997 *A Desk-based assessment and preliminary recording of buildings at 21-27 High Street, Bilston, Wolverhampton, West Midlands*. BUFAU Report No. 466.
- Jones, A. 1993 *High Street, Bilston, Wolverhampton: An Archaeological Evaluation*. BUFAU Report No. 266.
- Jones, A. 1997 *21, 23 and 25/7 High Street, Bilston, Wolverhampton: Specification*. BUFAU.
- Litherland, S. 1996 *A Desk-based Assessment and Recording of Industrial Buildings at the Rear of 9-13 Wolverhampton Road, Bloxwich, West Midlands*. BUFAU Report No. 460.
- Litherland, S.J., Mould C.A. and Ratkai, S. 1994 *An Archaeological Evaluation of the Old Crown, Deritend, Birmingham*. BUFAU Report No. 310.
- Mould, C.A. 1995 *An Archaeological Watching Brief at the Former Royal Tiger Public House, Wednesfield, West Midlands*. BUFAU Report No. 382.
- Mould, C.A. 1996 Archaeological Excavations at the Former Hanson's Brewery Site, High Street, Dudley. *Transactions of the Worcestershire Archaeological Society*, Third Series 15, 317-342.
- Peters, J.E.C. 1980 *The Wall as a Truss in Farm Buildings*. *Vernacular Architecture* 11, 17-21.
- RCHM(E) 1991 *Architectural Survey of the Black Country Development Corporation Area*.

10.0 Acknowledgements

This project was sponsored by Wolverhampton MBC; thanks are due to Sue Whitehouse and Sheila Ashworth of the Council for their help. Thanks are also due to Floyd Price of Cader Limited, for his help and co-operation on-site; also to Steve Litherland (BUFAU) for his advice regarding dating and analysis of the buildings, and for his contribution to Section 8.0 above. The archaeological watching brief was carried out by Catharine Mould. The report was prepared by Catharine Mould and edited by Alex Jones. The plates were prepared by Graham Norrie (University of Birmingham).

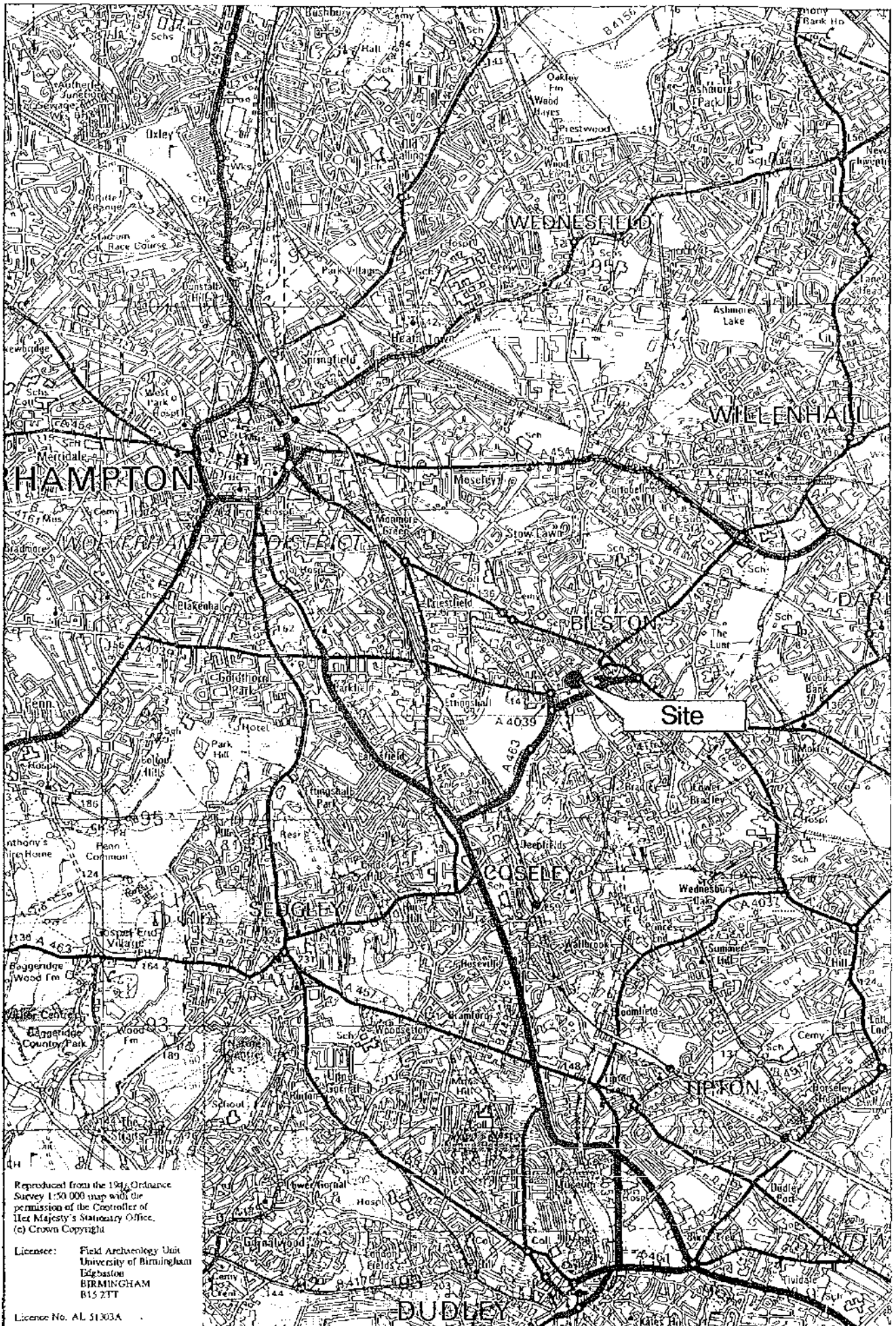


Fig 1

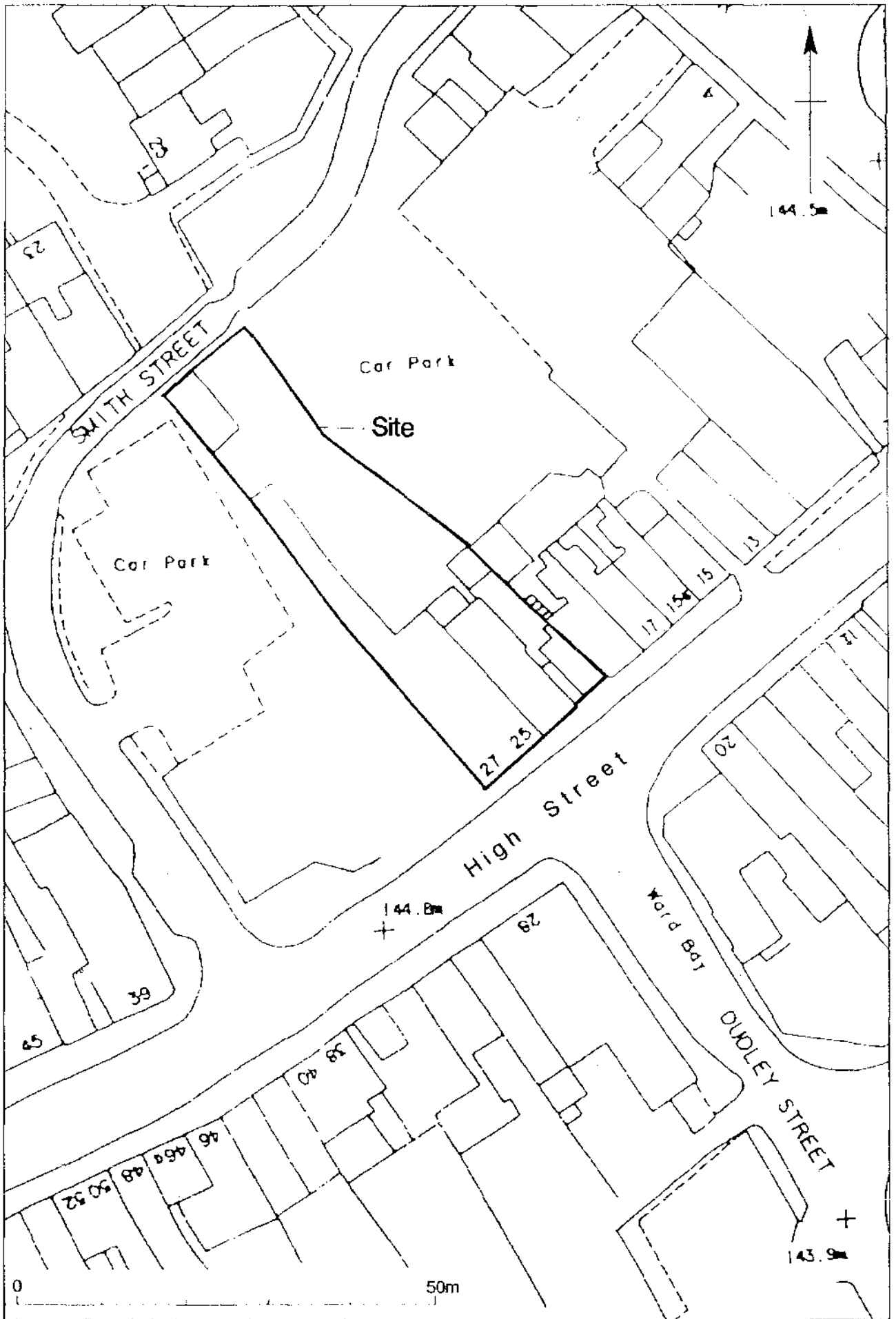


Fig. 2



Plate 1



Plate 2

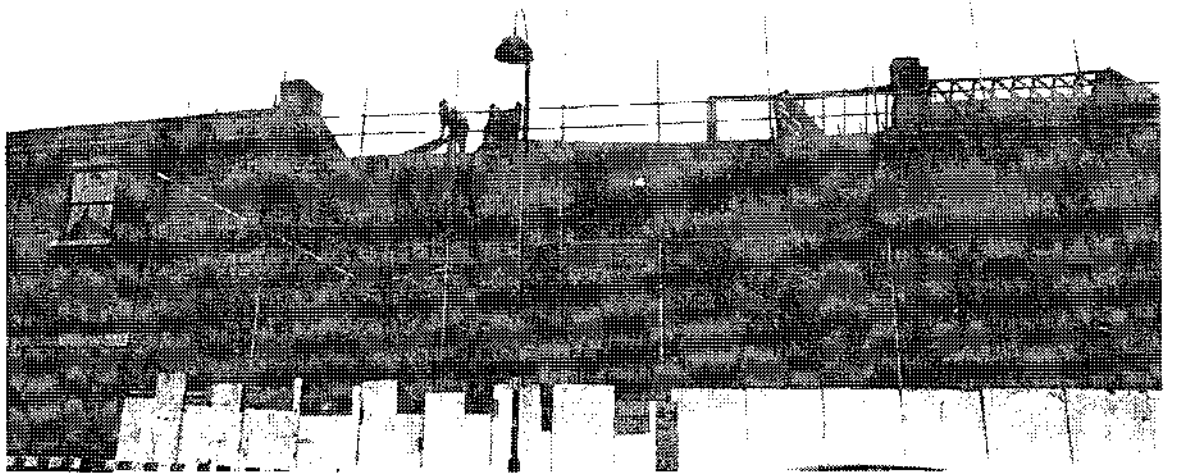


Plate 3



Plate 4



Plate 5

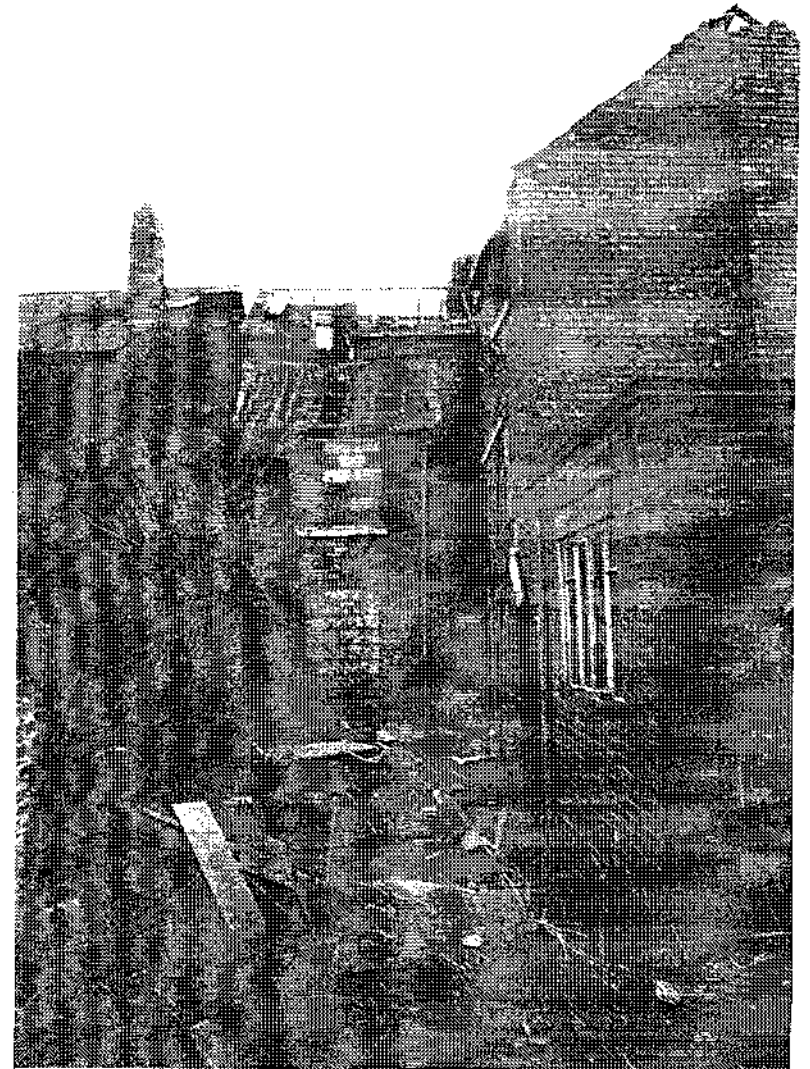


Plate 6

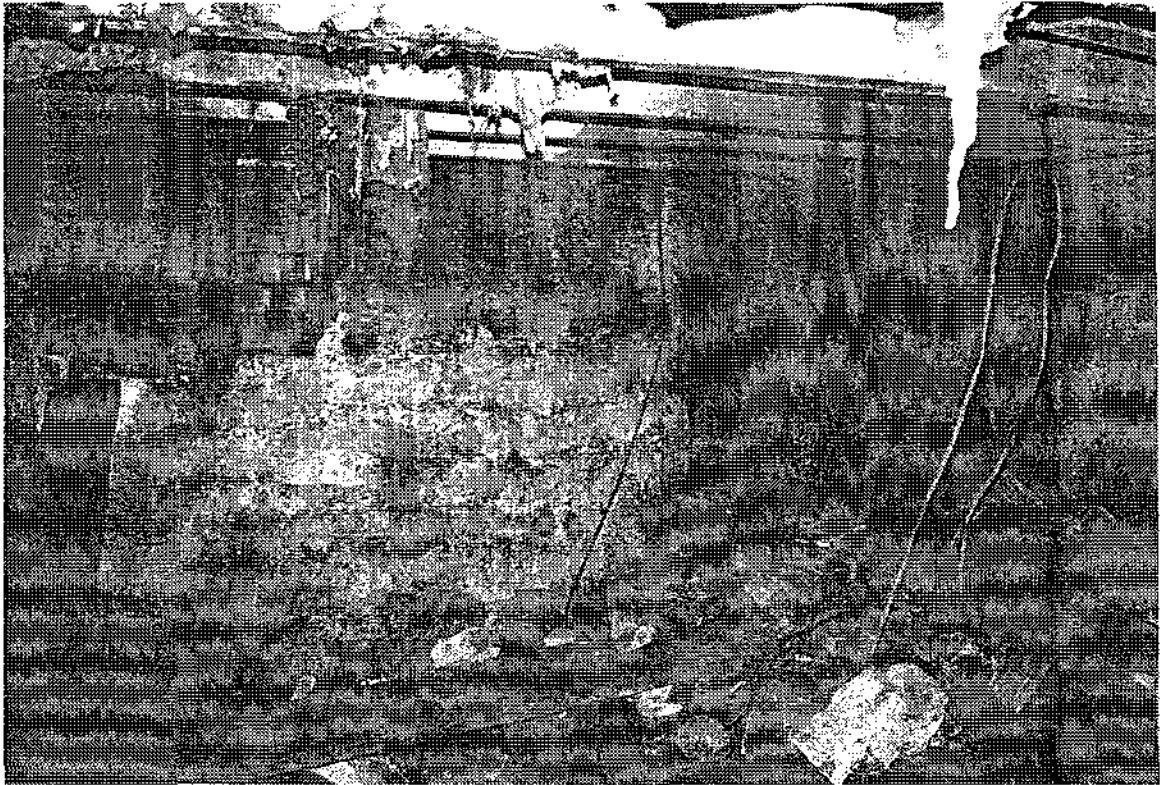


Plate 7

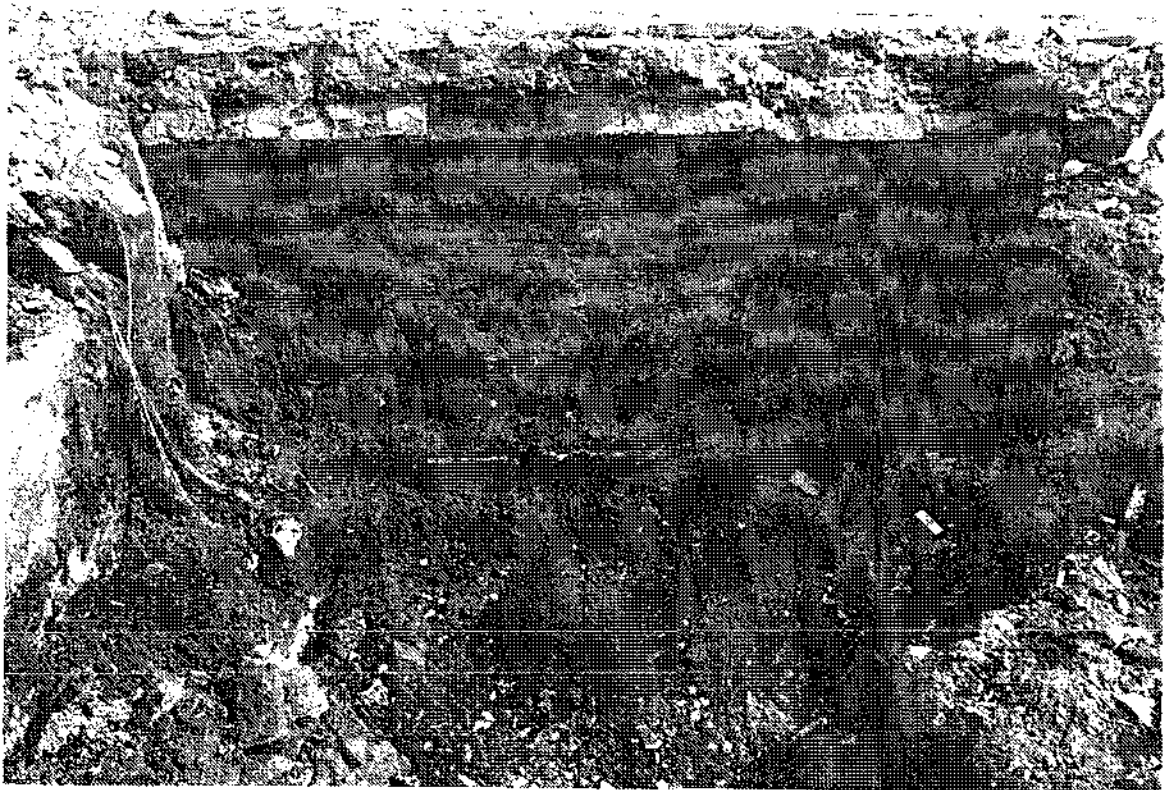


Plate 8



Plate 9

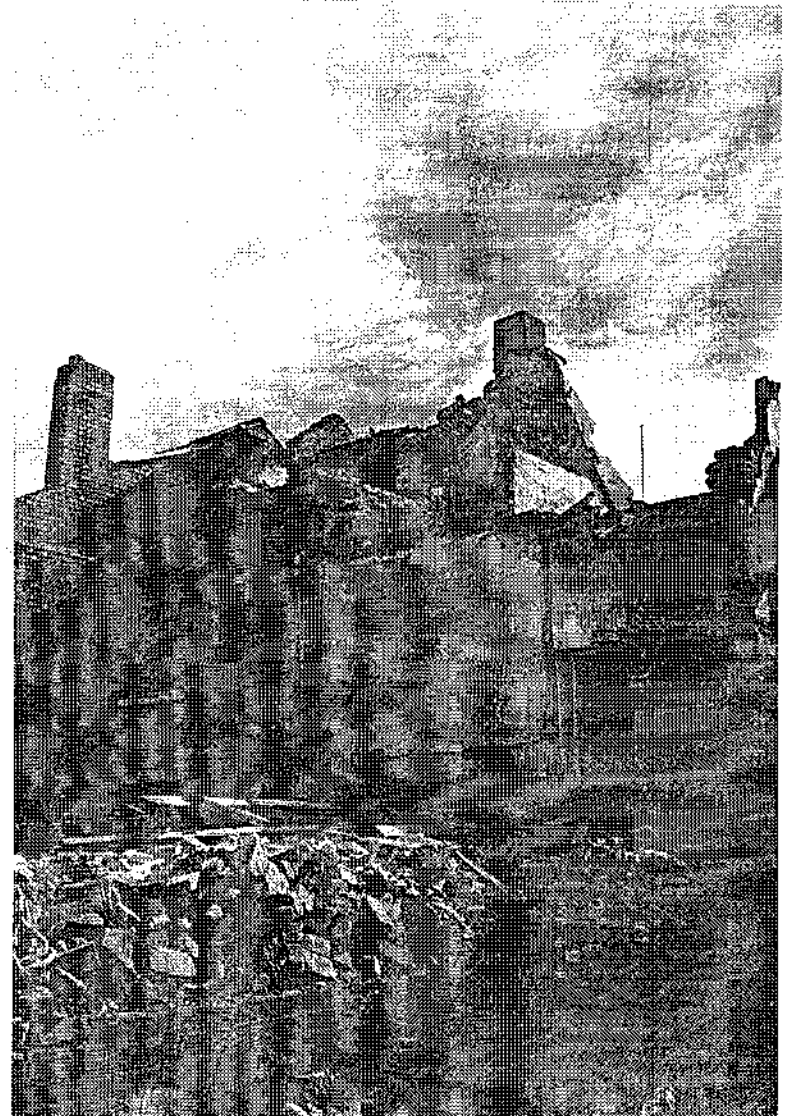


Plate 10

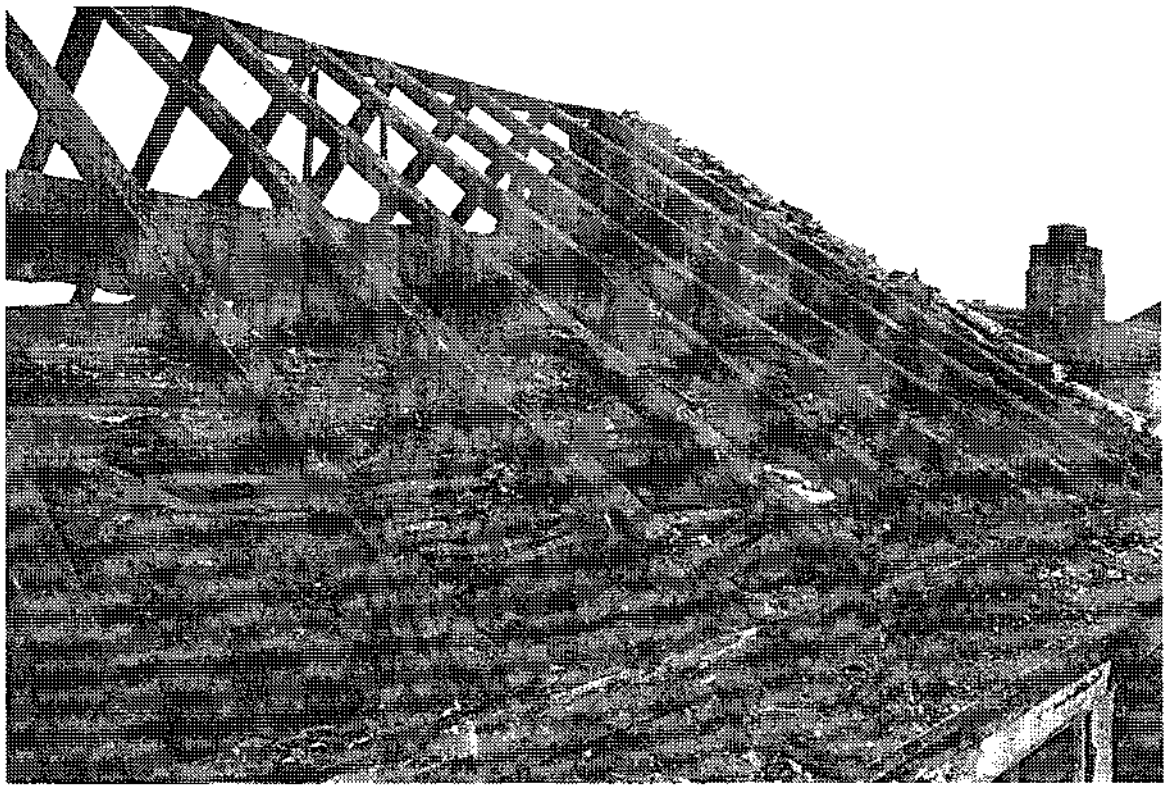


Plate 11

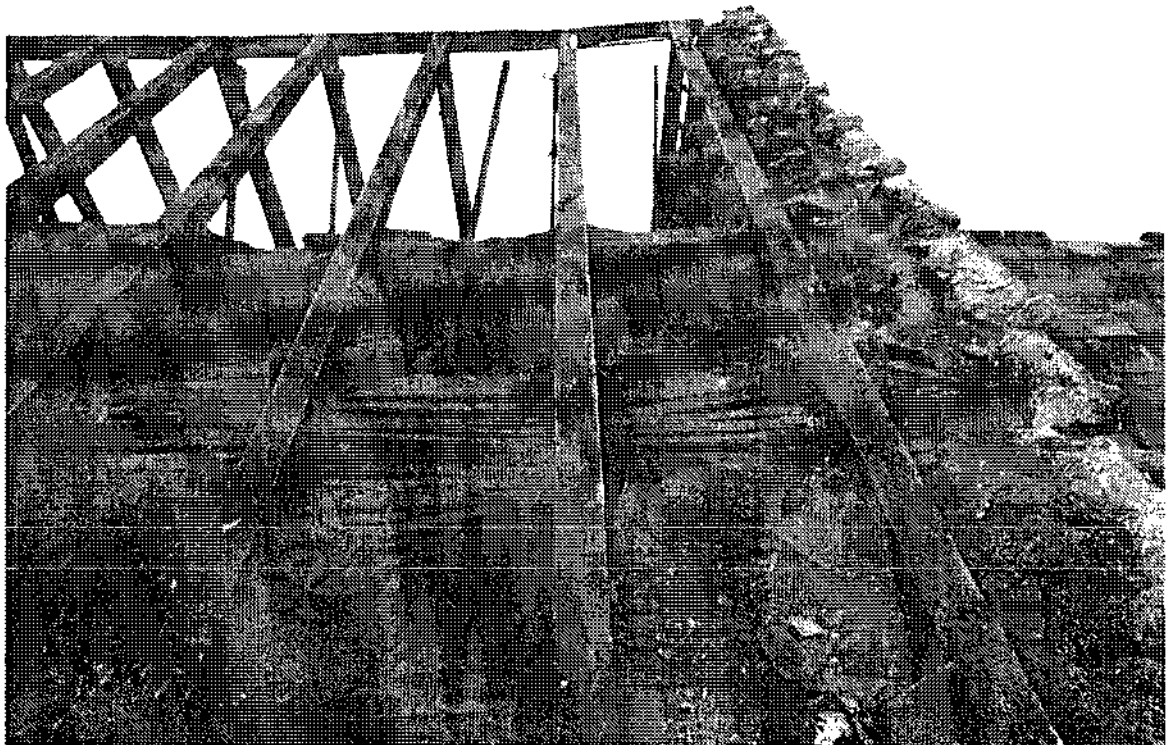


Plate 12



Plate 13

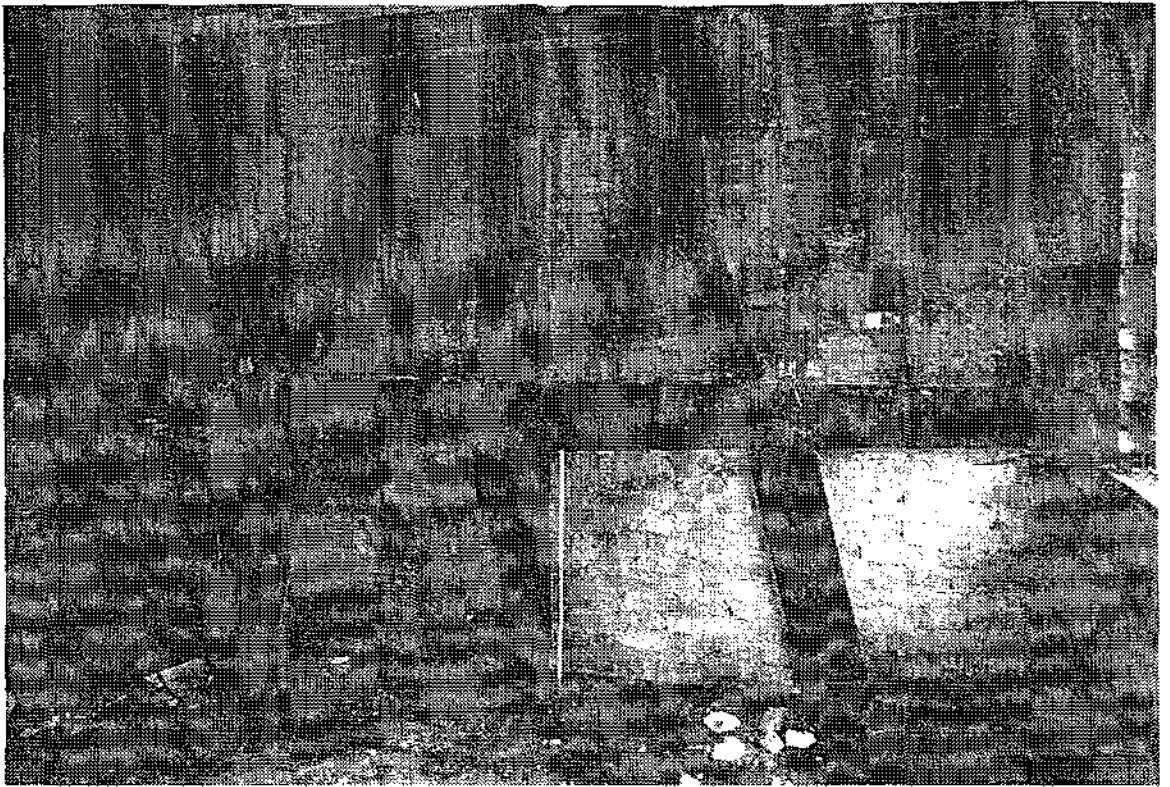


Plate 14



Plate 15

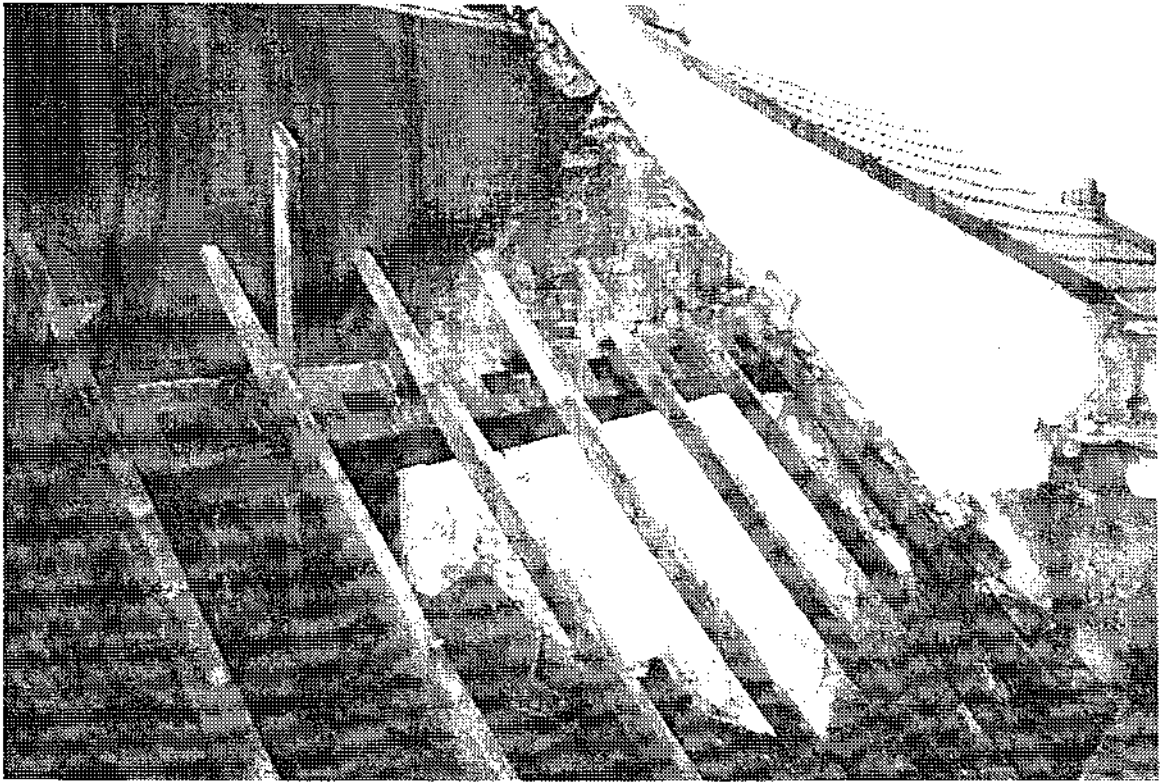


Plate 16



Plate 17



Plate 18



Plate 19

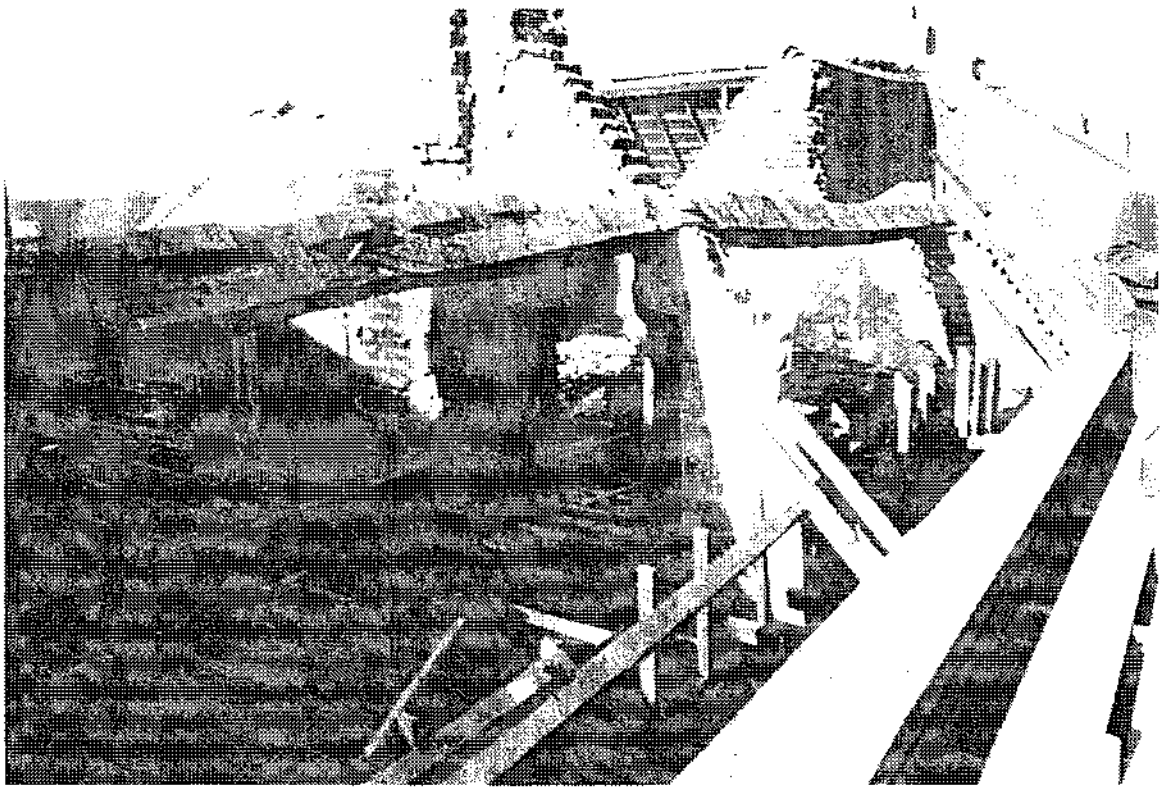


Plate 20



Plate 21