

*BIRMINGHAM UNIVERSITY  
FIELD ARCHAEOLOGY UNIT*

**An Archaeological Watching Brief  
At The Arena Theatre,  
University of Wolverhampton,  
Wolverhampton,  
West Midlands**

*B.U.F.A.U.*



Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit  
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**An Archaeological Watching Brief At The Arena Theatre  
University of Wolverhampton, Wolverhampton, West Midlands.**

by  
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**Arena Theatre, University of Wolverhampton.**

**An Archaeological Watching Brief**

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# **AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF AT THE ARENA THEATRE, UNIVERSITY OF WOLVERHAMPTON, WOLVERHAMPTON, WEST MIDLANDS**

**By Gary Coates**

## **1.0 Summary**

A series of trial pit excavations were carried out in the vicinity of the Arena Theatre, University of Wolverhampton, which were monitored by staff from the Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit in March 1997. The purpose of the excavations was to assess the structural integrity of the present buildings in light of a proposed planning application to extend the current theatre building. Three pits were excavated under archaeological supervision in order that any archaeological deposits encountered were recorded and subsequently evaluated: because the work was in the vicinity of the former Deanery. No archaeological deposits were identified, as there had been too much disturbance from previous groundwork construction, although a record of the level of the natural weathered brown sandstone was obtained.

## **2.0 Introduction**

This report outlines the results of an archaeological watching brief carried out at the Arena Theatre, located within the MA Block of the University of Wolverhampton, Wulfruna Road Campus. The excavation itself consisted of a series of approximately one metre square trial pits excavated by hand at structurally important points along the existing theatre building, and the workshops to its rear, to assess the extent of the existing foundation piles. This was carried out prior to an application for planning permission so that a clearer picture of the structural demands of the proposed development could accurately be assessed. The excavations themselves were carried out by contractors to the University of Wolverhampton, with the Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit commissioned to monitor these excavations to assess the depth, date, extent and nature of any archaeological deposits encountered.

## **3.0 The Arena Theatre and its Location (Figs. 1a, b & c)**

The Arena Theatre itself is located within the basement of the MA Block of the University of Wolverhampton, Wulfruna Road Campus: which, itself, is situated in the historic core of Wolverhampton town centre, close to St. Peter's Church. The MA block was formerly known as the Technical College and is still used as a teaching block.

#### **4.0 Archaeological and Historical Background**

A more detailed study of the archaeological and historical background of this particular location has been completed elsewhere (Coates & Litherland, 1996, 2); with a summary of the relevant information provided here.

The MA block of the University lies within the area formally occupied by the medieval and post-medieval Deanery of Wolverhampton and its associated grounds and gardens. This is illustrated on Isaac Taylor's 1750 map of Wolverhampton, which locates the Deanery Hall within the area equivalent to the modern Arena Theatre. The 1826 map of the town still depicts the Deanery, and it is evident in the 1919 First Edition of the Ordnance Survey (Fig. 3). The Deanery Hall was demolished in 1926, and replaced by the Technical College, with any remaining associated outbuildings demolished in 1951.

The area has received a limited amount of archaeological investigation: a watching brief was carried out over part of the Deanery site, by Neil Lang (SMR 2555), which uncovered post-medieval foundations bedded onto natural sandstone at a minimal depth. Monitoring of the redevelopment of the Robert Scott Library groundwork, in 1996, failed to identify any significant archaeological deposits that could be associated with the Deanery Hall or its gardens (Coates & Litherland, 1996).

#### **5.0 Objectives**

The principal objective of the watching brief was to identify and record any significant archaeological deposits prior to their destruction during these excavations. After this information was obtained, it was intended to propose a series of measures to further protect and record any archaeological deposits affected by proposed further development. Particular attention was paid to the identification of any remains possibly associated with the medieval/ post-medieval Deanery.

#### **6.0 Method**

The excavation of the test pits was monitored by suitably qualified archaeologists from Birmingham Field Archaeology Unit and any significant archaeological deposits were recorded on pro-forma record cards supplemented by scale plans, section drawings and photographs, where appropriate. Where no archaeological deposit was identified the stratigraphy was recorded and photographed. These records comprise the site archive, which, at the time of writing, is currently stored at Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit.

## 7.0 The Trial Pits (Fig. 2)

### Trial Pit 1

This pit was located against the western workshop wall, and measured 1.40m by 1.80m. The upper 0.40m was made up of the modern concrete floor and its levelling/ bedding layer. Below this, one encountered the natural weathered brown sandstone, which had been excavated to a depth of 1.20m. Cutting this sandstone there was the construction trench for a modern, ceramic drain pipe, aligned east-west, which had been back filled with concrete and cement. Underneath the modern structural post there was situated the foundation base, which measured 0.50m wide, 1.20m long and 0.80m deep. There was no evidence of any archaeological deposits.

### Trial Pit 2

This pit was located in the annex to the south of the main workshop and measured 1.50m by 0.90m. As with Trial Pit 1, the first 0.20m was made up with a modern concrete flooring on top of a hard-core concrete levelling layer; below this there was a 0.35m thick demolition layer, which sat on top of a natural weathered brown sandstone horizon. The pit was excavated to a depth of 1.35m below the modern floor layer. In the north-facing section there were the remains of a recent foundation wall that had been aligned north-south. The structural post had been constructed on a concrete foundation base, which measured 0.50m by 1.20m by 0.50m. No identifiable archaeological deposits were identified.

### Trial Pit 3

This was excavated against the outside wall of the Arena Theatre and measured 1.10m by 1.50m. As the level of the theatre was approximately 1.20m below the modern ground surface, this pit was much deeper and reached a final depth of 2.50m. The first 0.40m was made up of the modern yard surface; below this there was a layer of 0.70m thick red/brown building sand. This was on top of the natural brown weathered sandstone horizon. The concrete foundation base was found at a depth of 1.60m and had similar dimensions to the two other bases in Pits 1 and 2. Again, there was no evidence of any archaeological deposits.

## 8.0 Assessment of the Archaeological Importance of the Site

As there were no archaeological deposits recovered it is difficult to make a positive assessment of the nature of the archaeology in this area. No evidence of the Deanery buildings or grounds were recovered, although the location of the trial pits adjacent to supporting posts and the presence of the concrete foundations lessened the chances of identifying any significant deposits within the restricted areas excavated.

The undisturbed natural sandstone horizon was observed at a depth of approximately 0.40 m in the workshops and 1.00m at the exterior of the theatre, which corresponds with the stratigraphical information already recorded from the area south of the theatre (Coates & Litherland, 1996, 6).

## 9.0 Recommendations

Although, it is unlikely that there is any significant archaeological survival in the depth of deposit overlying the natural horizon, as it has received various stages of construction activity over the last century; it is possible that there has been some degree of preservation underneath the workshop floors. As the proposed redevelopment of the Arena Theatre, involves lowering the floor level of the workshop approximately 1.20m to the reach the present level of the theatre area, it is recommended that this work is carried out under archaeological supervision to verify the preservation of any significant archaeological deposits, that may be associated with the Deanery. If any significant deposits were to be identified then it is also recommended that there be a contingency to properly excavate and record these deposits.

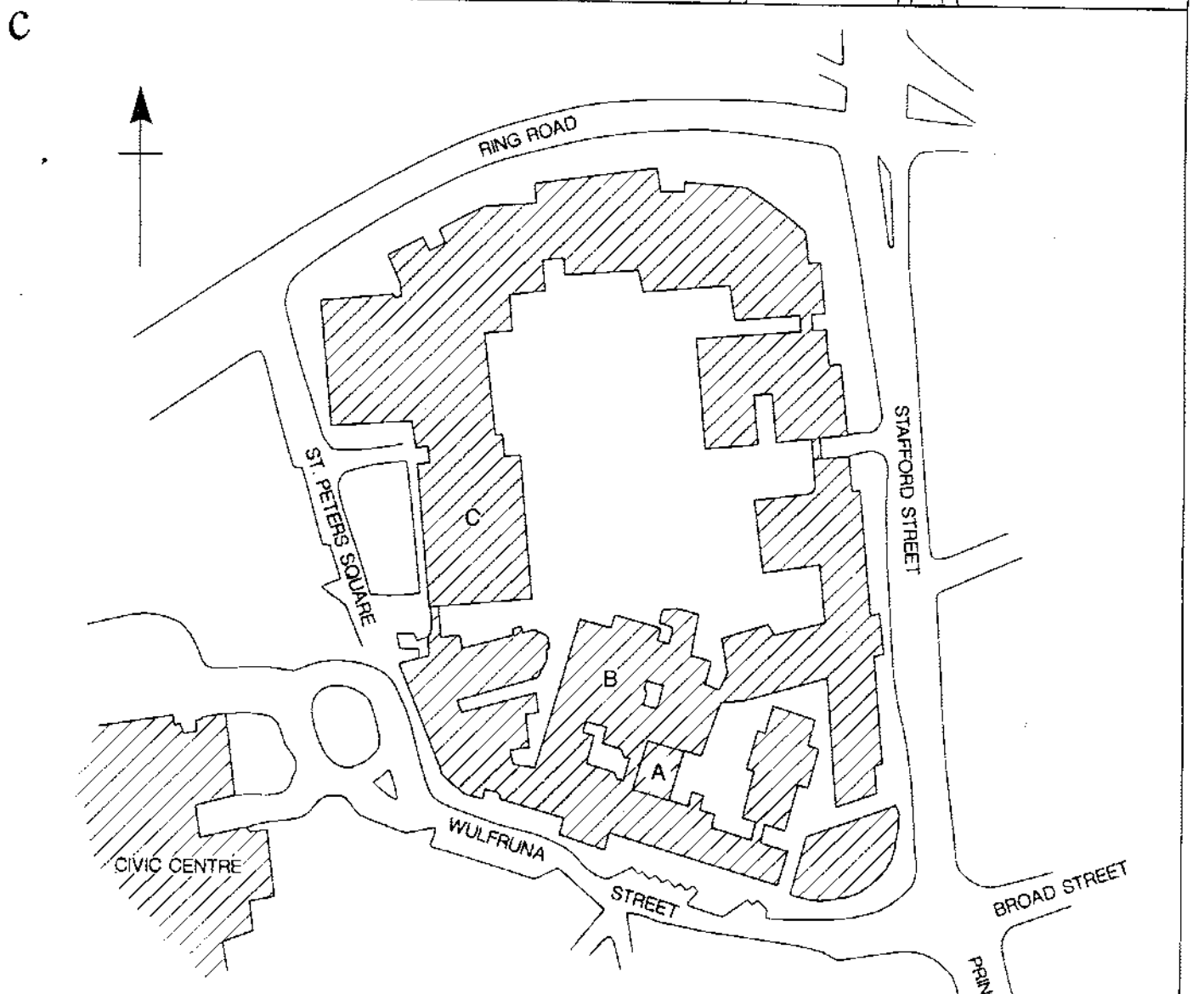
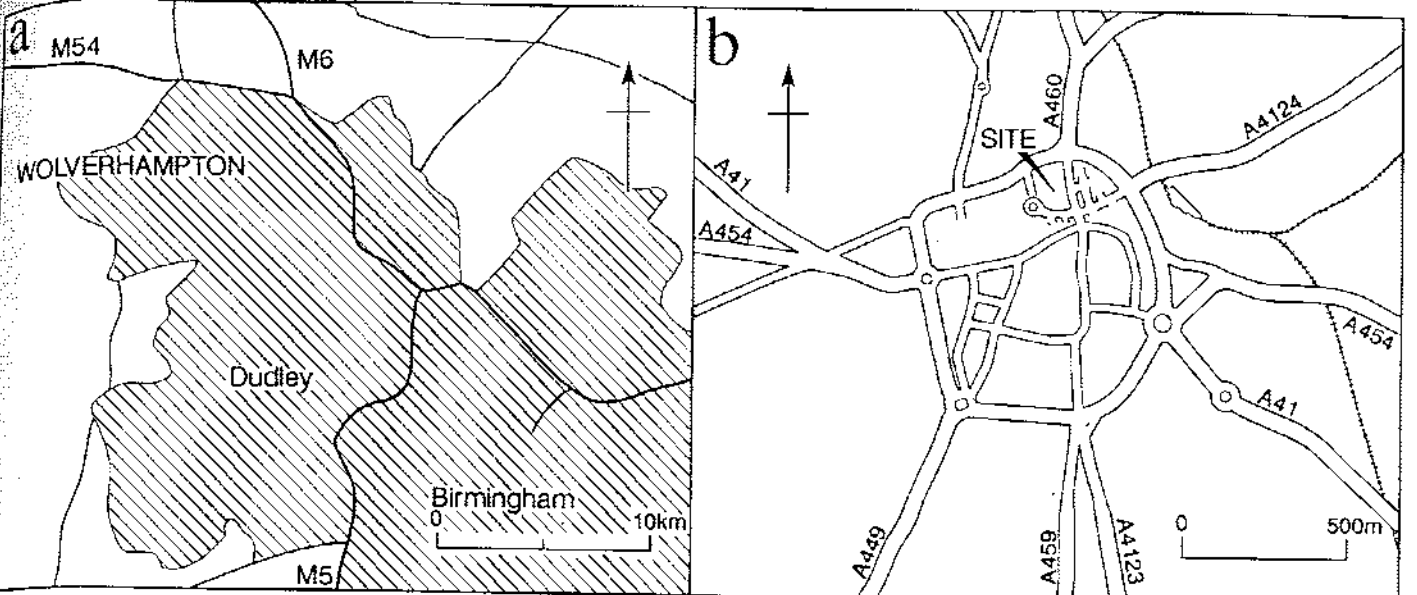
## 10.0 Acknowledgements

This project was sponsored by the Arena Theatre, University of Wolverhampton, under the co-ordination of Graham Roberts and Kevin O'Sullivan. Julian Marsh and Jerry Grochowski, Architects, supplied the details of the redevelopment along with Steve Wicham of Pryce & Myers, the structural engineers. The excavation of the trial pits was carried out by the employees of Edmund Nuttall, and the archaeological monitoring was facilitated by their co-operation; for which we are grateful. The archaeological watching brief was undertaken on the advice of Hilary White, Archaeological advisor to Wolverhampton M.B.C., and carried out by Gary Coates from B.U.F.A.U. Steve Litherland monitored the project throughout and edited this report.

## 11.0 References

Coates, G. & S.Litherland, (1996) *An Archaeological Salvage Recording and Watching Brief at the University of Wolverhampton, Wolverhampton, West Midlands*. BUFAU Report No. 417

Orton, G. (1976) *Maps of Wolverhampton* (which contains reproductions of all the historical cartography referred to in this document).



- A Arena Theatre
- B MA Block, University of Wolverhampton
- C Robert Scott Library, University of Wolverhampton

Fig. 1



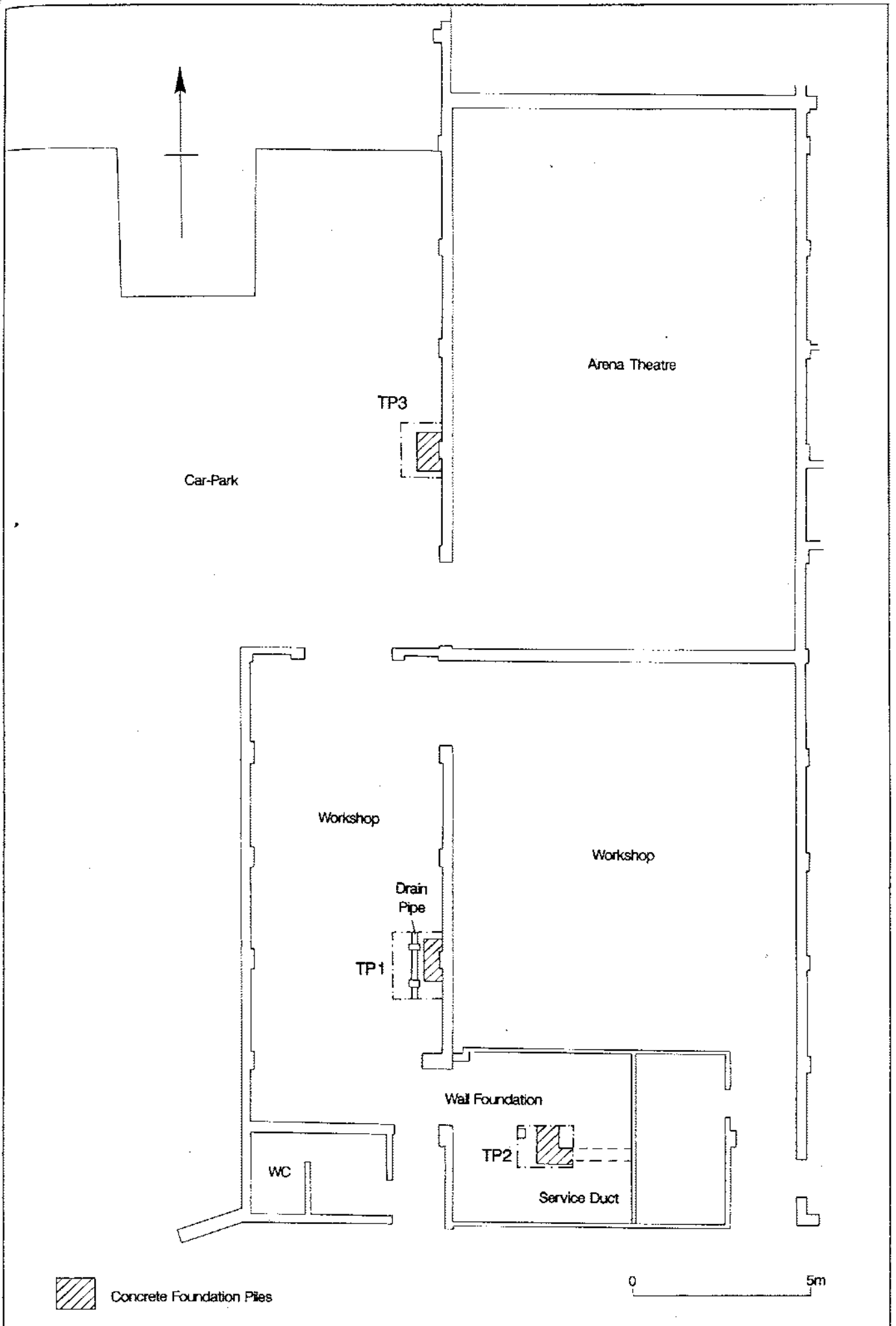


Fig. 2

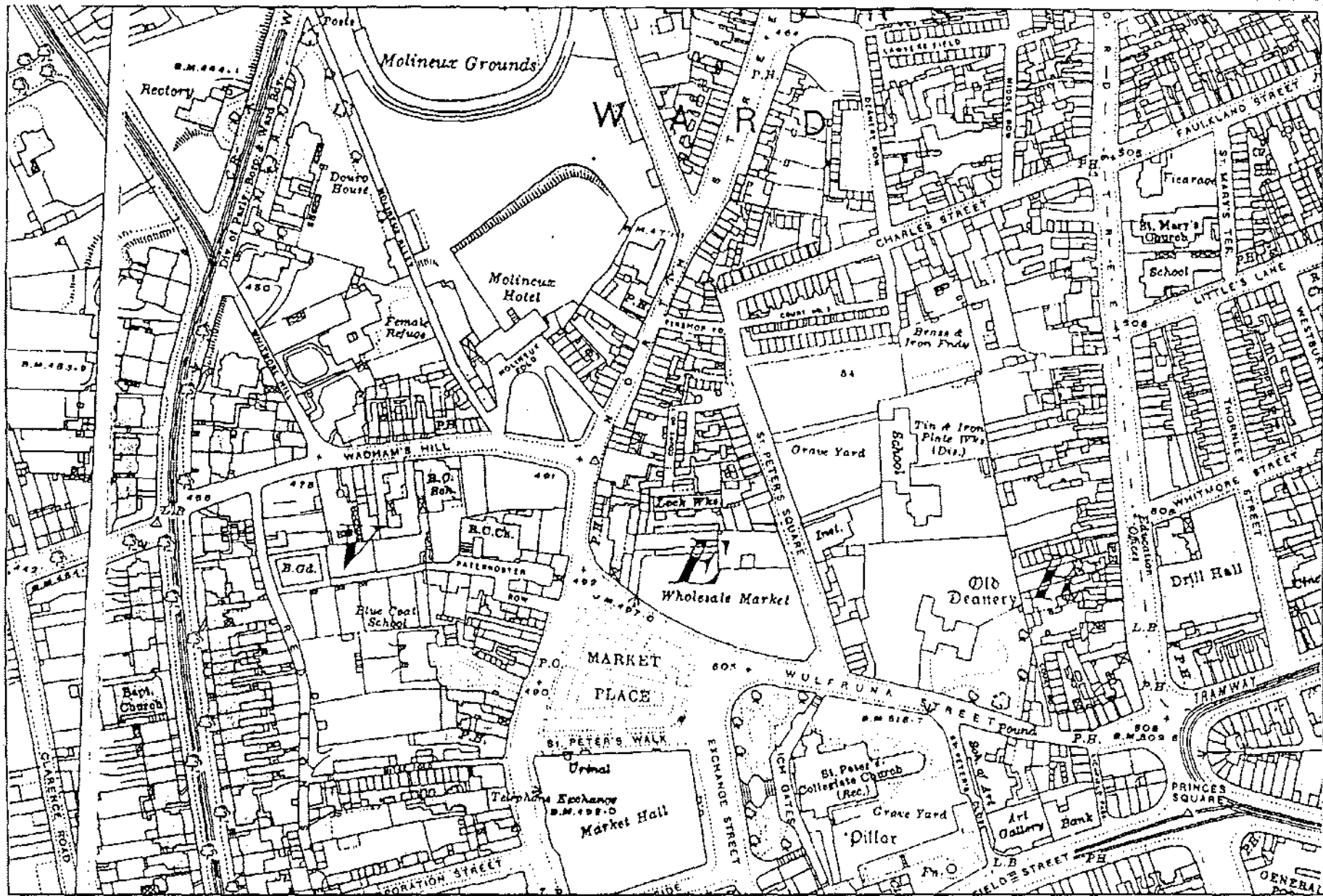


Fig.3