

Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit
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**Archaeological Recording at 'The Hovel',
192, Jerry's Lane, Erdington, Birmingham**

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Introduction

The following short report outlines the results of building recording carried out in advance of consideration of planning and listed building applications for this Grade II Listed Building. The work was required in order that features which may be destroyed, removed or altered in the course of the works be properly recorded in order to understand the historic character of the building. The recording work was carried out by BUFAU in late March 1998 for Crest Homes (Midlands) Limited, acting on behalf of Chapel Homes (Midlands) Limited.

The scope of the archaeological recording work was initially defined in a written scheme of investigation based upon a brief compiled by the Conservation Group of Birmingham City Council. However, following a site inspection by BUFAU and a Structural Engineer's report provided by Mr Barrie Davies of Chapel Homes (Midlands) Limited, it was realised that the dangerous state of the building meant it was necessary to modify the scope of any archaeological work to the parameters defined by a detailed risk assessment of the site.

Site Location (Figs.1 and 2)

The building, which is located in a slight depression off Jerry's Lane, Erdington (NGR SP 0981 9301), is almost entirely obscured by dense vegetation, consisting of a variety of overgrown shrubs including hawthorn, holly, ivy, laurel, and leylandi (Plate 1). The surrounding area is densely built up with a mixture of housing of various dates. Downhill, and to the west of 'The Hovel', Jerry's Lane joins Turf Pit Lane which backs onto a north-south flowing stream feeding Witton Lakes.

Historical Background

Desk-based research has established that the first record of a building in the same position as 'The Hovel' was the c.1802 Enclosure Map of Erdington, which noted that the land was occupied by the Biddle family (Demidowicz n.d.; Appendix A). This is confirmed by the detailed plan of 1817 which shows a cottage with identical dimensions to the main range of 'The Hovel', listed as occupied by one Ann Biddle, widow (Fig.2). Before c.1802, Tomlinson's Survey of 1760 shows a Biddles Close here, although the poor state of the map prevents identification of any buildings. The actual enclosure in which 'The Hovel' is situated may date to 1735 (Erdington Rent Roll; BRL 349805), but given the number of buildings listed as occupied by the Biddle family in 1817 it is not possible to relate any of the pre-c.1802 documentary evidence which exists for occupation by the Biddle family to the existing building.

The outline of the main range of 'The Hovel' can also be seen on Fowler's Survey of Erdington of 1833, and again on the 1848 Tithe Map of Erdington. The first map to record the wash-house extension was the Ordnance Survey First Edition of 1890 (Fig.3). The building was last occupied by one Alf Deathridge in 1962.

Method

The conclusion of the risk assessment was that, because of the danger of imminent collapse, any archaeological recording had to be non-intrusive to the fabric of the building. External inspection was limited to that deemed to be within Health and Safety parameters defined by experienced personnel on-site. Any internal inspection was impractical. Under these circumstances, it was not possible to accurately survey the building. Instead, the plans and elevation drawings made by D5 Architects in June 1997 were checked and annotated where appropriate (Fig.4).

A photographic record was also made of the accessible parts of the building on 35mm black and white film, supplemented by 35mm colour print coverage. The overgrown nature of the site precluded full elevation shots, although some clearance of the undergrowth was carried out in the immediate vicinity of the building prior to the archaeological survey. The photographic record was accompanied by the production of written notes which form the basis of the analytical report below. All visible detail, including brick bonding and coursing and blocked or adjusted openings, was noted, together with evidence for different periods of building. However, given the health and safety constraints outlined above some interpretations are, of necessity, rather tentative.

Description

The following section should be read in conjunction with Figure 4 and the accompanying photographic plates. The description presents the surviving physical evidence for the development of the building, beginning with the plan, and then moves systematically around the elevations of the building.

'The Hovel' is the ruin of a one-and-a-half-storey red brick cottage with a ridged blue plain clay-tile roof. The north elevation was encased by a tarpaulin which also covered most of the roof and precluded any inspection of the area underneath it. Both gable walls were only half-a-brick-thick, but reinforced by a central brick pillar which ran up to the ridge of the roof. The upper part of the west gable wall, including the chimney, has collapsed, with the exception of a central brick pillar. All doors and windows were secured to prevent unauthorised entry. Therefore, only the main south elevation, and the east gable wall were closely inspected. A wash-house built against part of the east gable wall was demolished virtually to ground level.

Floor plan and roof

'The Hovel' has a simple ground plan, consisting of a main range measuring approximately 5m by 4m and a wash-house extension to the east. The main range, which has a sunken floor, is partially subdivided by two partition wall stubs which form a baffle each side of the main entrance and demarcate the larger living area to the west from the service area to the east. The living area opens directly off the main entrance which is from the south. This was heated by a later fireplace situated in the northwest corner of the room. The north end of a central tie-beam, which supports the upper floor, rests upon the smaller wall stub. The other end of this beam is tied by an iron stay through the south wall of the building (Plate 2). The other partition wall defines a small pantry area to the east. Any access to the upper storey must also have been located in this eastern half of the building.

Inspection of the upper floor was limited to what could be seen through the various holes in the fabric of the building. There were two tiny bedrooms on the first floor. Access must have been via a staircase or ladder into the eastern room. A connecting doorway was cut through the single brick-thick partition wall over the central floor beam. The doorway also cut a thin-sawn tie-beam set into the partition wall which was positioned slightly beneath the existing wall plates (Plate 3). A similar beam was also seen in the east gable wall. The roof utilised a pair of roughly-cut reused purlins, originally set into the gable walls, which acted as trusses. The purlins were not split from the same piece of timber. The north purlin was very curved (Plate 4), the south purlin had a redundant mortice in its western end (Plate 5). Sawn rafters were laid on top of the purlins. A small dormer window was recorded by Demidowicz in the north-facing elevation near the east end of the building, but no trace of this was seen in the present survey.

The single-storey wash-house extension was a later addition. The floor was quarry-tiled (Plate 6), and a large fireplace and cast-iron 'copper' were located against the end gable. The cast-iron 'copper' lay amongst other demolition material nearby (Plate 7). A free-standing brick toilet was situated to the north of the wash-house, remains of a dry midden and toilet seat were still in situ (Plate 8).

The south elevation (Plates 9 to 13)

The majority of this wall was built in poorly-fired red clamped brick with large gravel inclusions (dimensions 8.75in. by 4.5in. by 2.5in.; length, width, height). Most of these bricks were very weathered, and several had been cut out and replaced with slightly darker red and smoother-faced bricks with no gravel inclusions. Above the wooden door lintel was a course of English Bond brick with four stretcher courses to the next course of English Bond above. The brickwork above the higher course of English Bond, including the projecting eaves cornice of a projecting course of header bricks with a stretcher course laid-on-edge over, was later and built of clamped bricks with a smoother face, which were generally 3in. tall. Repairs to the southwest corner of the building were also in similar brickwork. Beneath the lower course of English Bond the bonding changed to an irregular variant of Flemish Stretcher Bond with three courses of stretchers between bonded courses.

The doorway was original, but to the east the wall had been rendered with sand cement which obscured any earlier features beneath. The only other feature in the wall (with the exception of the tie-beam restraint noted above) was a blocked opening close to ground level to the west of the doorway. The head of this opening was flat and consisted of a row of bricks laid-on-edge. The blocking was also of thin clamped red brick.

The west gable (Plates 14 and 15)

The later 3in. high brickwork continued around the western gable of the building, and included the central brick pillar supporting the half-brick-thick wall. The ground floor window was the only one to retain part of its Deal frame. The window was probably a two-light casement, each light divided into three by thin horizontal bars (for comparative examples see Plates 21 to 24). The chimney, which was built of later machine-cut brick, had collapsed along with most of the upper part of the gable wall.

The east gable (Plates 16, 17 and 18)

The shadow of the single-storey wash-room is picked out by the interior whitewash applied to the east gable wall of the main range and clearly shows that the extension was later. In addition, the sand cement render covering the east end of the south elevation continued around the southeast corner of the main range up to the outline of the wash-house, possibly indicating that there was a lean-to structure here. Behind the patches of render the 2.5in. tall clamped brickwork with large gravel inclusions continues around the lower part of the east gable wall in a stretcher bonded half-brick-thick wall. The junction between this brickwork and larger, 3in. tall, more orangey-coloured brick above may indicate that the roof line was once lower. The doorway between the extension and the main range is boarded over, but was probably a later insertion. The two window openings in this gable are both plain. The upper is probably later, the lower may be original. A further blocked window was located opposite the entrance. It is visible as a blocked scar in the interior fabric of the north wall.

Interpretation

At least three major phases of development can be identified within the built form of 'The Hovel'. The first is represented by the earliest build of the main range in 2.5in. tall clamped red brick with large gravel inclusions. This build was identified within the south elevation and the east gable wall. It is probably also present within the north elevation, but this could not be verified. The map evidence, combined with the surviving areas of this fabric, indicates that at this stage 'The Hovel' had a single cell box plan with a southern entrance, and possibly plain windows in the east gable and north elevation and a fuel shute or crude damper for a fire in the south elevation.

The west gable was subsequently rebuilt, but it is probable that a fireplace was always situated here, as indicated by the small projection on the plan of 1817 (Fig.2). There is evidence of the roof-line being raised later (see below). Therefore, it is likely that the upper course of English Bond brickwork visible in the south elevation represents the original eaves height of this early structure. This height corresponds with that of the thin-sectioned timber beams seen in the east gable wall and the central truss which would help tie the roof structure together, otherwise it is difficult to account for the presence of this timber. The relatively short height of this early building suggests that it was unlikely to be of one-and-a-half storeys, but there may have been a loft area for sleeping as the sunken floor would be vulnerable to damp.

The second phase is characterised by the 3in. tall orangey red clamped brick with a smoother face. The roof was raised by five brick courses, and the projecting eaves cornice added (Plate 19). This enabled an upper floor to be inserted, the connecting door cutting the crude upper tie-beam of the central roof truss. It is probable that a reused lower tie-beam was added at this stage to support the inserted timber floor; however, this cannot be proved without internal inspection. The wall plates and purlins were probably reused from the earlier structure as the ground plan of the building did not radically alter. However, the light scantling rafters and floor joists, which are mainly sawn timber, are probably contemporary with this phase. The west gable wall was rebuilt, possibly because the original chimney stack was inappropriate to the redesigned form of the building. Therefore, the remnants of window frame in this gable probably date from this phase of alteration.

The final phase involved the construction of the wash-house extension against the east gable, also in clamped frogless brick. It is possible that these improvements were contemporary with the raising of the roof structure. The large fireplace in the extension may have replaced a multi-purpose fireplace in the west gable wall which was down-graded to a room heating function only. However, the contemporaneity of these changes cannot be proved, because the remains of the existing corner fireplace in the main range post-date these events. The surviving gas fittings throughout the building, including an early-model gas cooker, are also of note (Plate 20).

Discussion

A combination of stylistic and documentary evidence suggests that 'The Hovel' was probably built by the Biddle family in the later-18th century as a single-roomed structure, on land that had been encroached from Erdington Common earlier in the 18th century. Erdington Common was very extensive in the 18th century, and was not subject to large scale enclosure until 1802-1806. Jerry's Lane and Turf Pit Lane to the west were the earliest roads in the vicinity of 'The Hovel'. The name Turf Pit Lane refers to the cutting of peat for fuel here in the post-medieval period. While we do not know the precise occupations of the Biddle family in the 18th century, it is tempting to speculate that they might have supplemented their basic income from farming by cutting peat, and it has been noted elsewhere that the single-room cottage was particularly associated with miners or quarrymen (Brunskill 1978,176).

'The Hovel' would not have required a specialised knowledge of building to erect in its original form. The irregular bonding of the south elevation suggests that the builders were not completely familiar with this building technique, and this impression is reinforced by the use of a half-brick-thick wall in the east gable. Looking at the 1817 plan (Fig.2), it is possible to envisage that simple structures like 'The Hovel' were constructed when needed by the Biddles, perhaps to provide housing or other accommodation for different generations or branches of the family. The main building in this group appears to have been the larger range to the southwest of 'The Hovel', which is recorded as having been extended several times. In this vein it is not inconceivable to see 'The Hovel' as a lowly version of a dower house for the widow, Ann Biddle, or, alternatively, with the cottage belonging to William Biddle, acting as a kind of 'gatehouse' to the family farm.

Between 1833 and 1848 a farmhouse at 168, Jerry's Lane was built, and was listed as being in the occupation of William Biddle in 1848 (Tithe Map of Erdington, 1848). This suggests that the Biddle family may have been moving up the social ladder in the first half of the 19th century. It is tempting to see the improvements represented by the addition of an upper floor and wash-house to 'The Hovel' within this context. Map evidence indicates that the wash-house was added between 1848 and 1890, but the continued use of clamped brick in its construction may imply a construction date within the earlier part of this time-span.

While labourer's 'hovels' were a common feature of several settlements in the West Midlands in the post-medieval period, their survival today is very rare. 'The Hovel' is probably one of the last of this building-type in the north of Birmingham. The survival of 'The Hovel' is probably due to a combination of the relatively early use of brick in a building of this status, and the location of the building in a relatively isolated spot on a bend in Jerry's Lane which did not fit easily into the plans of the later housing estates.

'Squatter' settlements or encroachments upon waste or common ground usually have very irregular plans, representing as they do individual rather than planned activity. Irregular elements have survived along parts of Jerry's Lane and Turf Pit Lane despite intensive 20th century development, but the most important example is 'The Hovel'. Comparison of 'The Hovel' with photographs of other 18th century cottages in the locality reveals the extent to which Erdington changed in character from a rural to an urban area in the 20th century. However, it is also clear that 'The Hovel' is an unusual survival of a significantly lower class of building to those depicted on Plates 21 to 24. Finally, while it has been demonstrated that the building was extensively altered in the second half of the 19th century, these changes are in themselves important evidence of the gradual improvements in the standards of lower class housing in the later half of the 19th century.

Acknowledgements

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List of Figures

Fig.1 Location map OS 1:25 000.

Fig.2 'Plan of cottages situate at the Turf Pits', 1817, by Ebenezer Robbins.

Fig.3 OS 1:10 000, 1890.

Fig.4 Annotated plan and elevations of 'The Hovel'.

Plate Captions

- 1 General view down Jerry's Lane, 'The Hovel' on the left.
- 2 Detail of interior floor beam - ground floor.
- 3 Detail of wall plate and small tie-beam - first floor.
- 4 Northern purlin, detail.
- 5 Southern purlin, note empty mortice.
- 6 Quarry tile floor, wash-house.
- 7 Cast-iron 'copper'.
- 8 Interior of outside toilet.
- 9 South elevation.
- 10 South elevation.
- 11 South elevation.
- 12 South elevation.
- 13 South elevation.
- 14 West gable.
- 15 West gable.
- 16 East gable.
- 17 East gable.
- 18 East gable.
- 19 Detail of eaves, southeast corner.
- 20 Detail, old gas cooker.
- 21, 22 2, Fern Road, Erdington, late-18th century cottage built on the waste.
- 23 Station Road Cottages, Erdington.
- 24 Berwood Cottages, Chester Road, Erdington, 17th century origins.

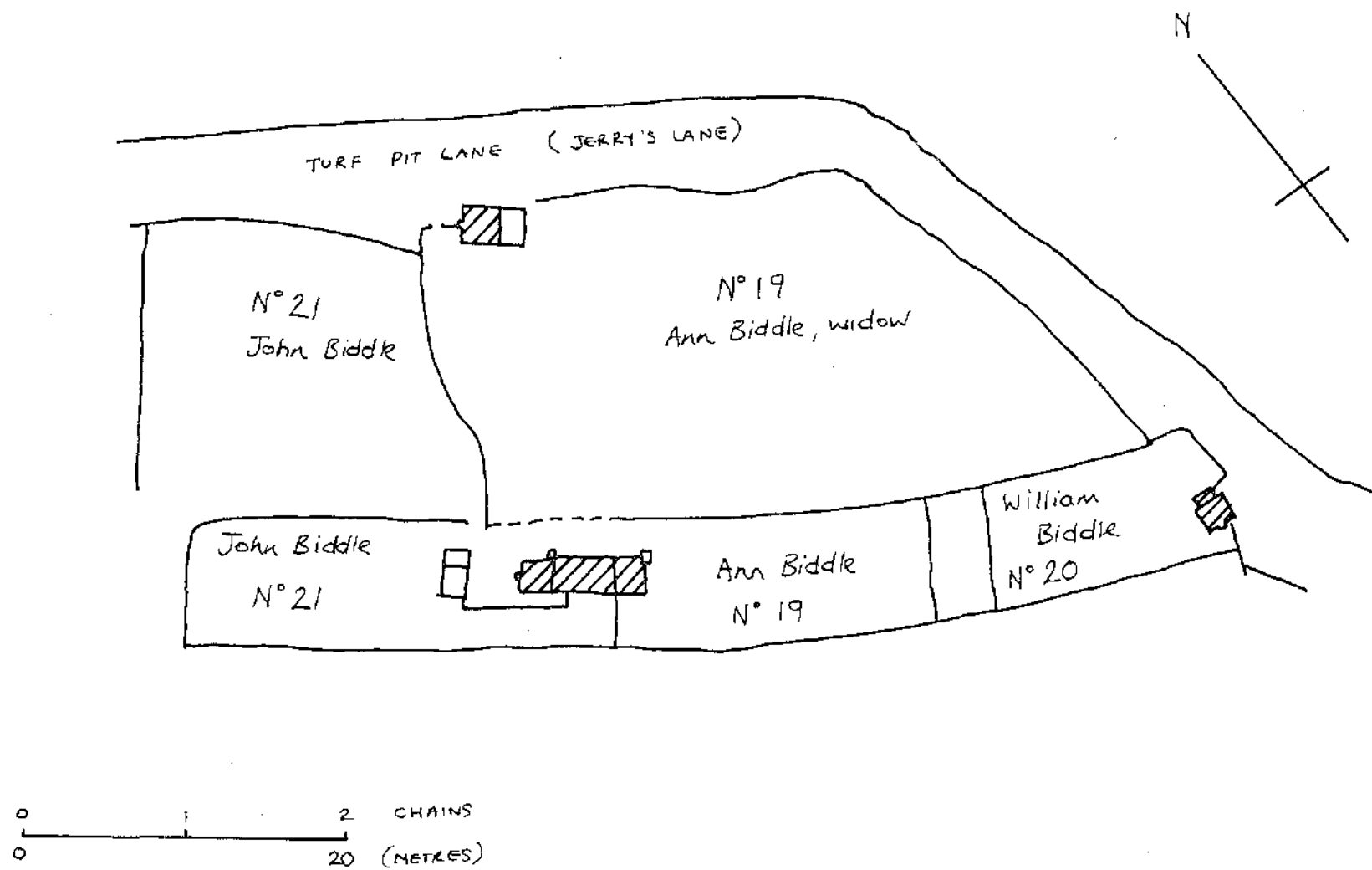


Fig.2

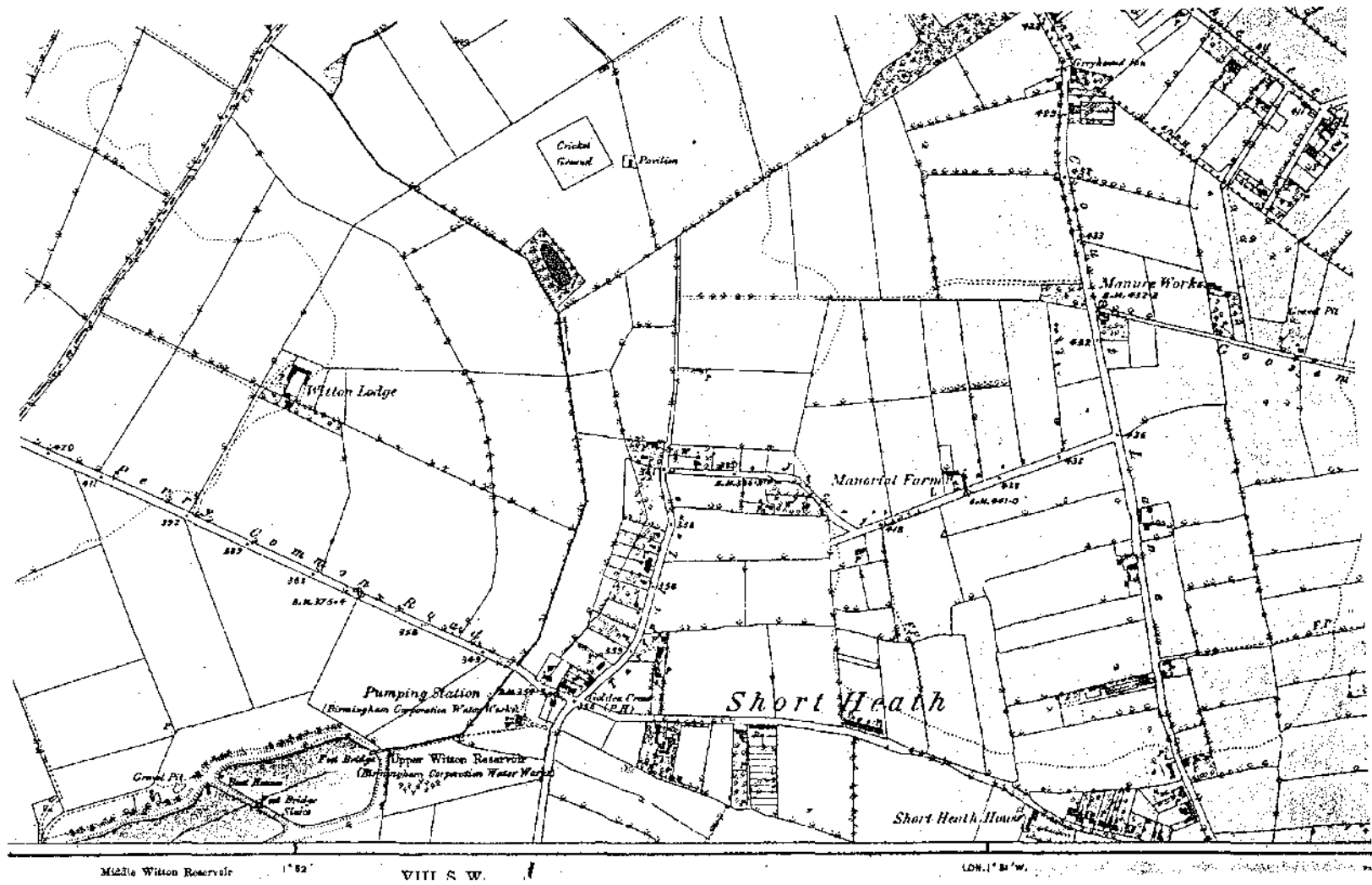
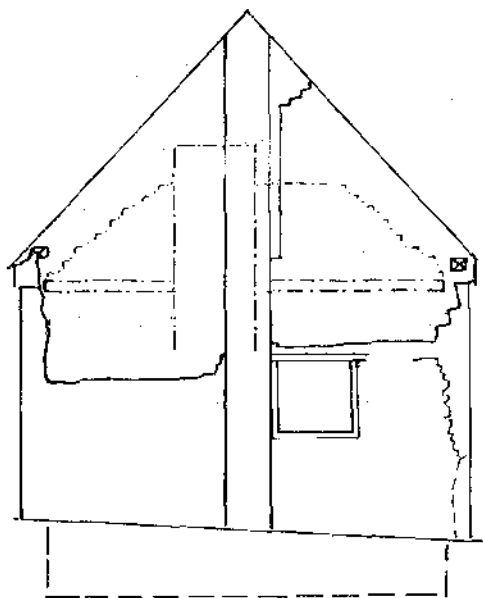
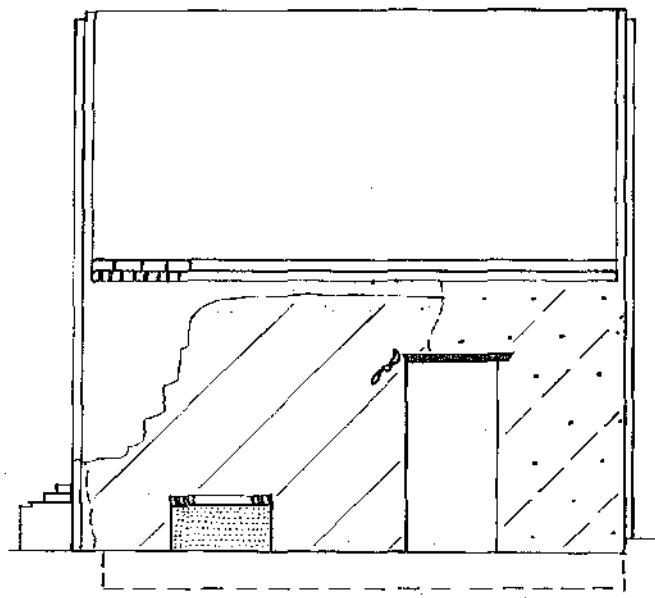


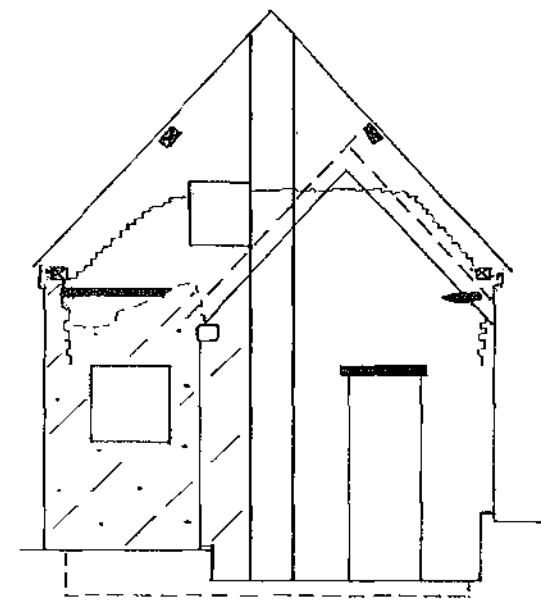
Fig. 3



WEST ELEVATION










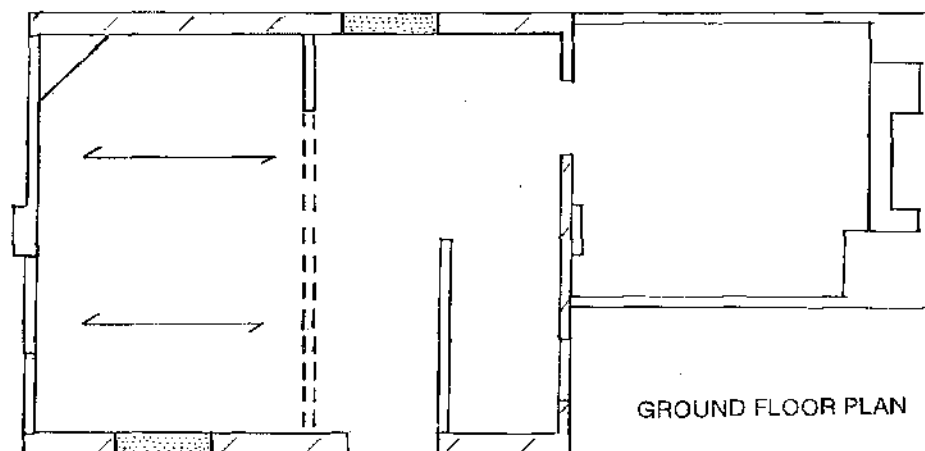
SOUTH ELEVATION



EAST ELEVATION



-  Blocking
-  Woodwork
-  Original Build
-  Render
-  Later Phases
-  Central Truss, Detail
-  Building Breaks



GROUND FLOOR PLAN

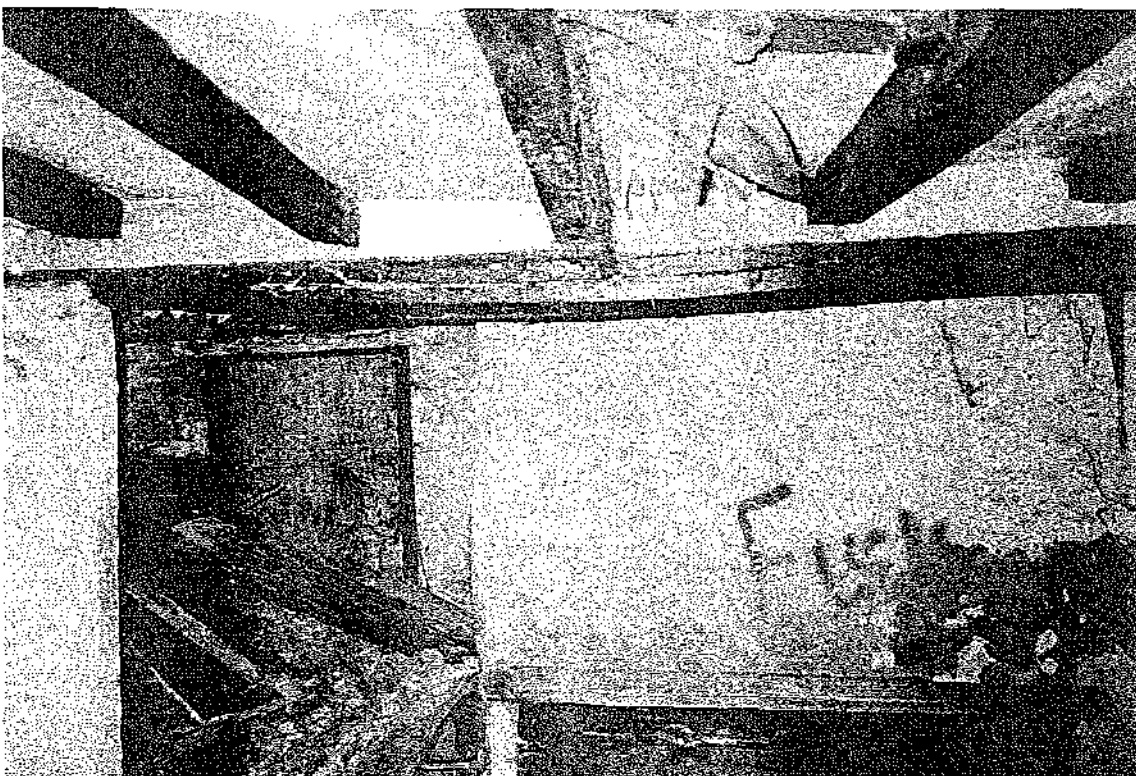


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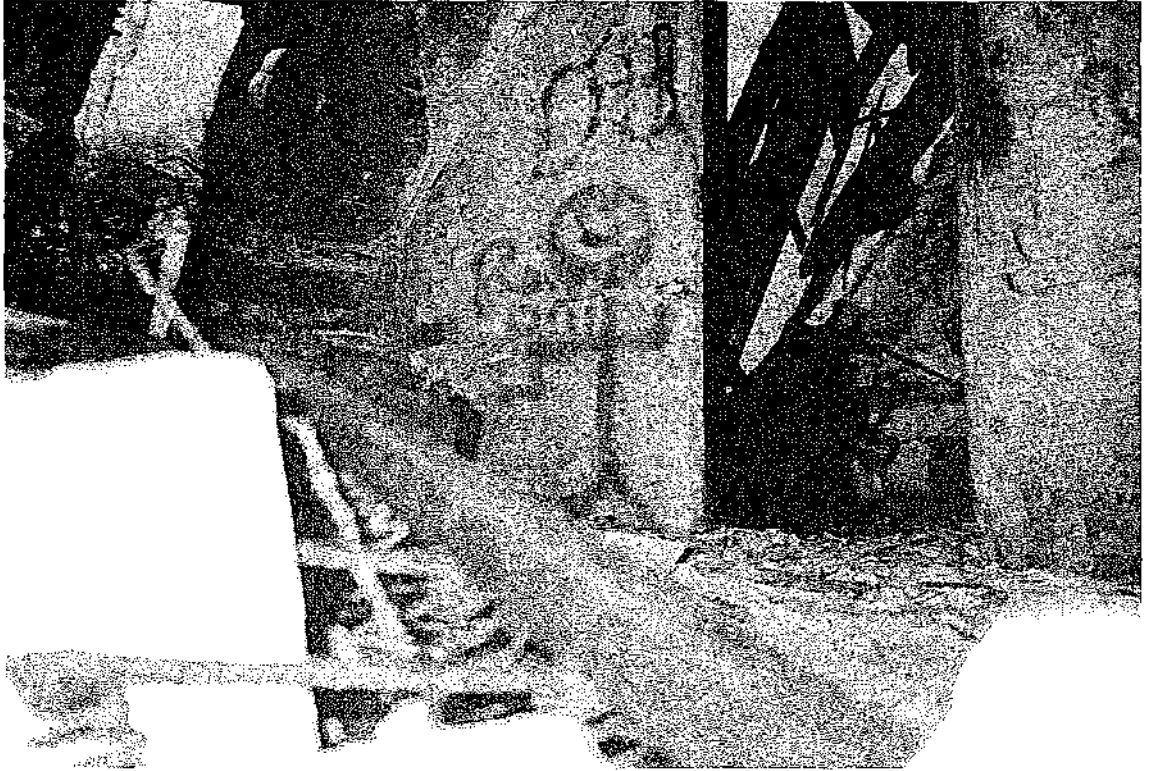
Fig.4



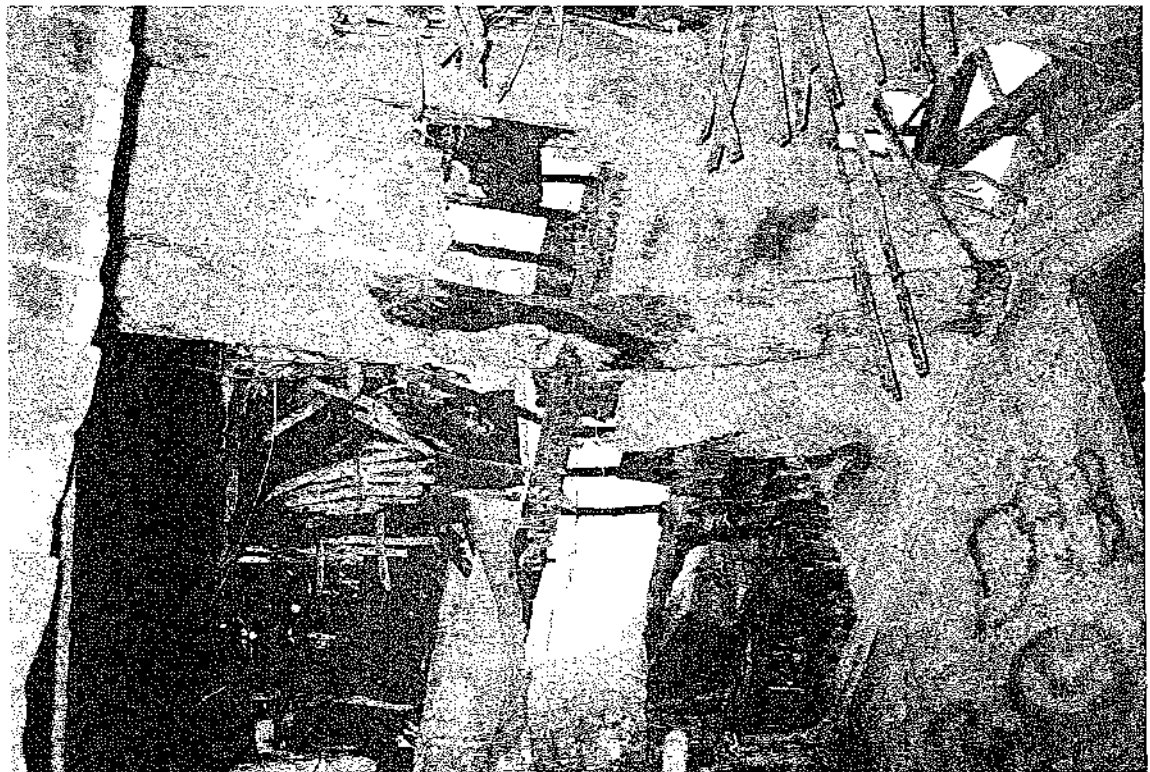
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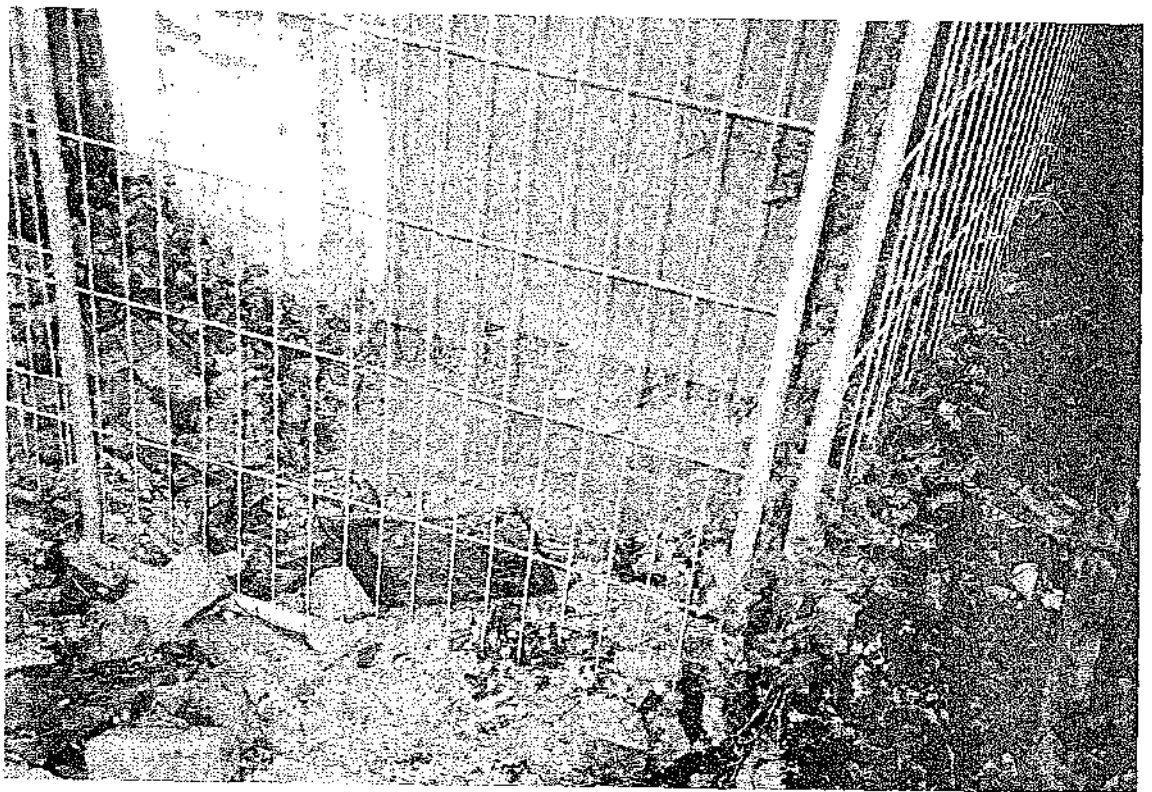
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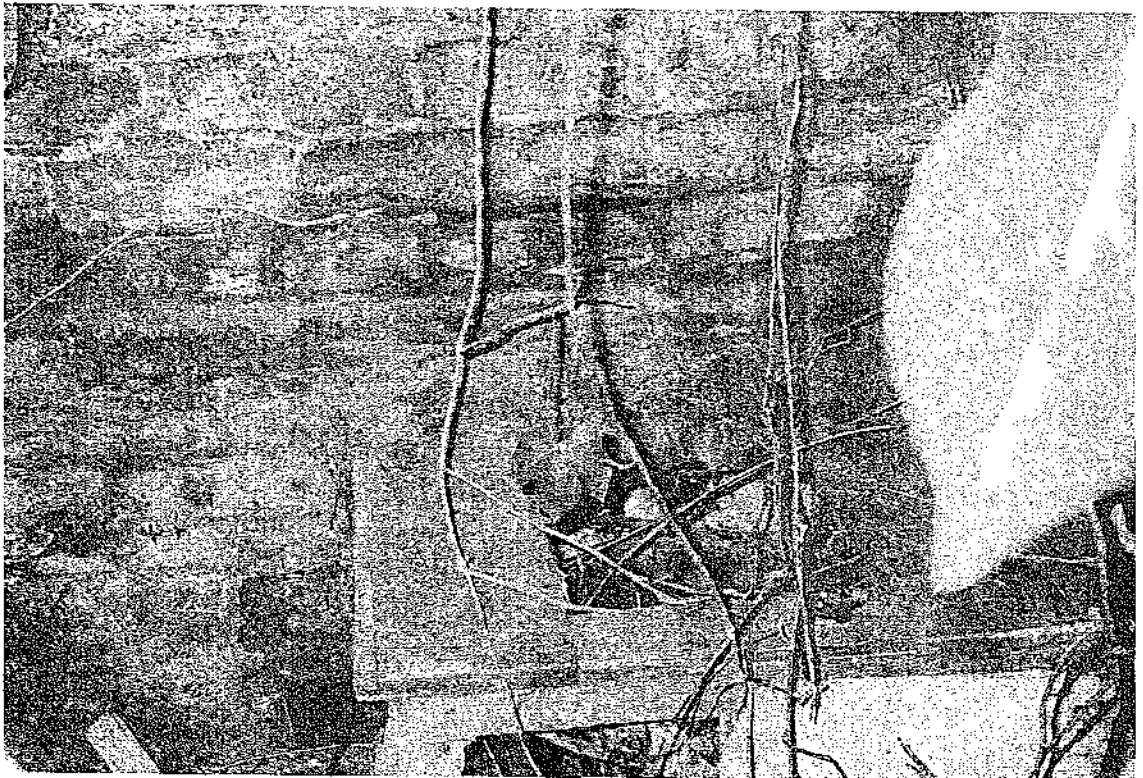
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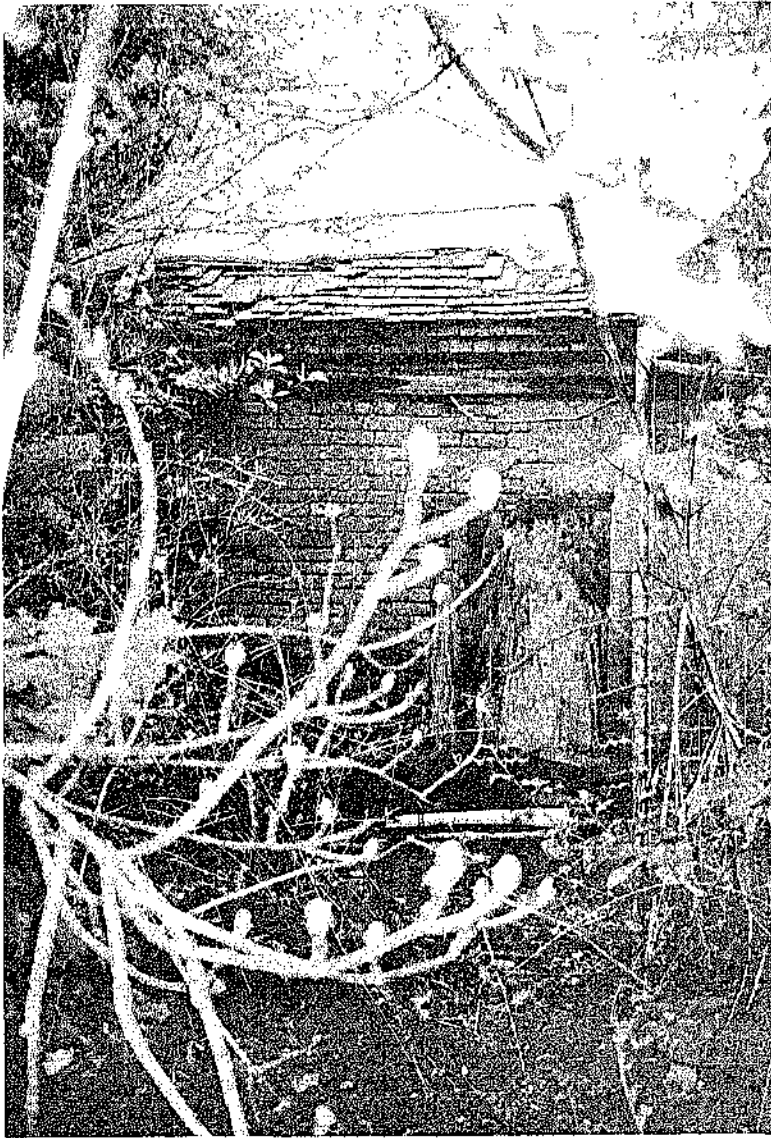
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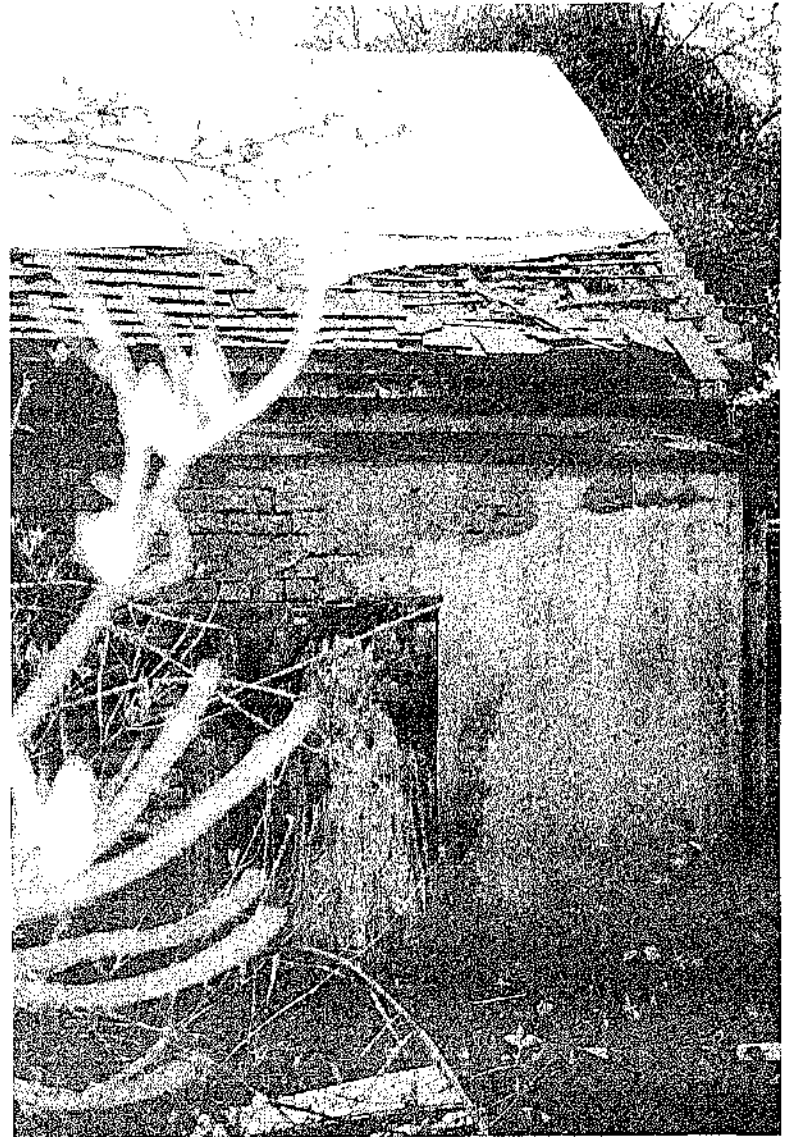
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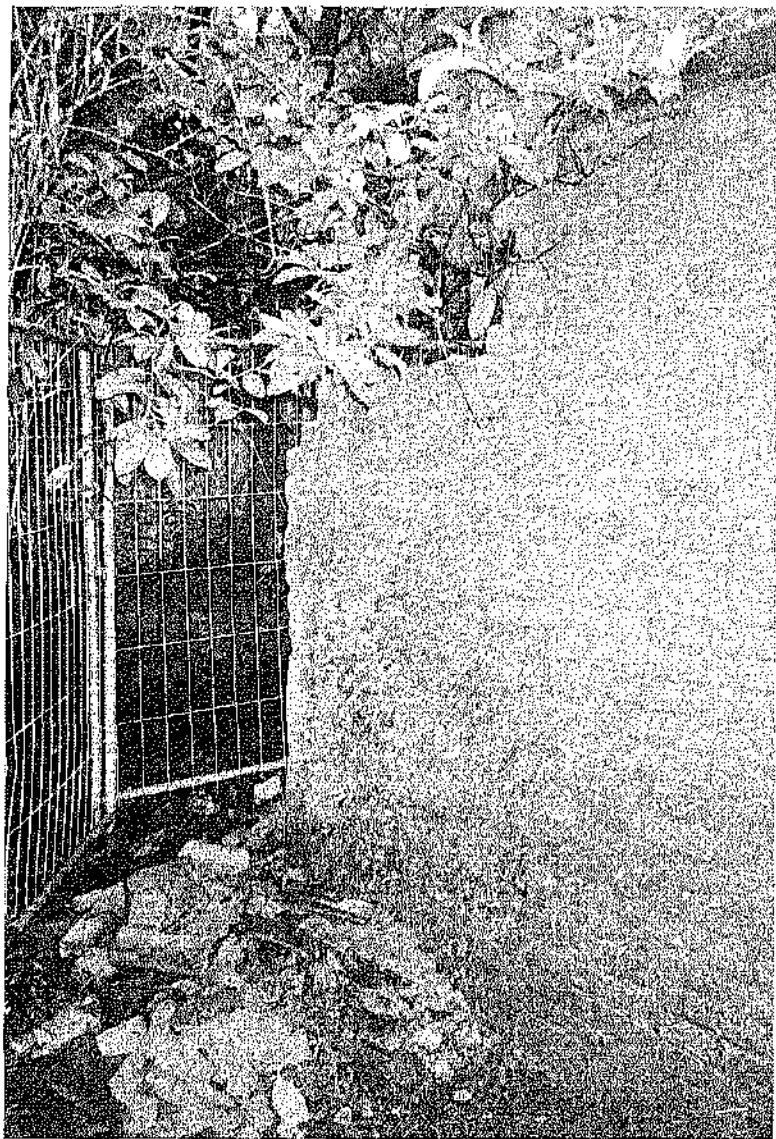
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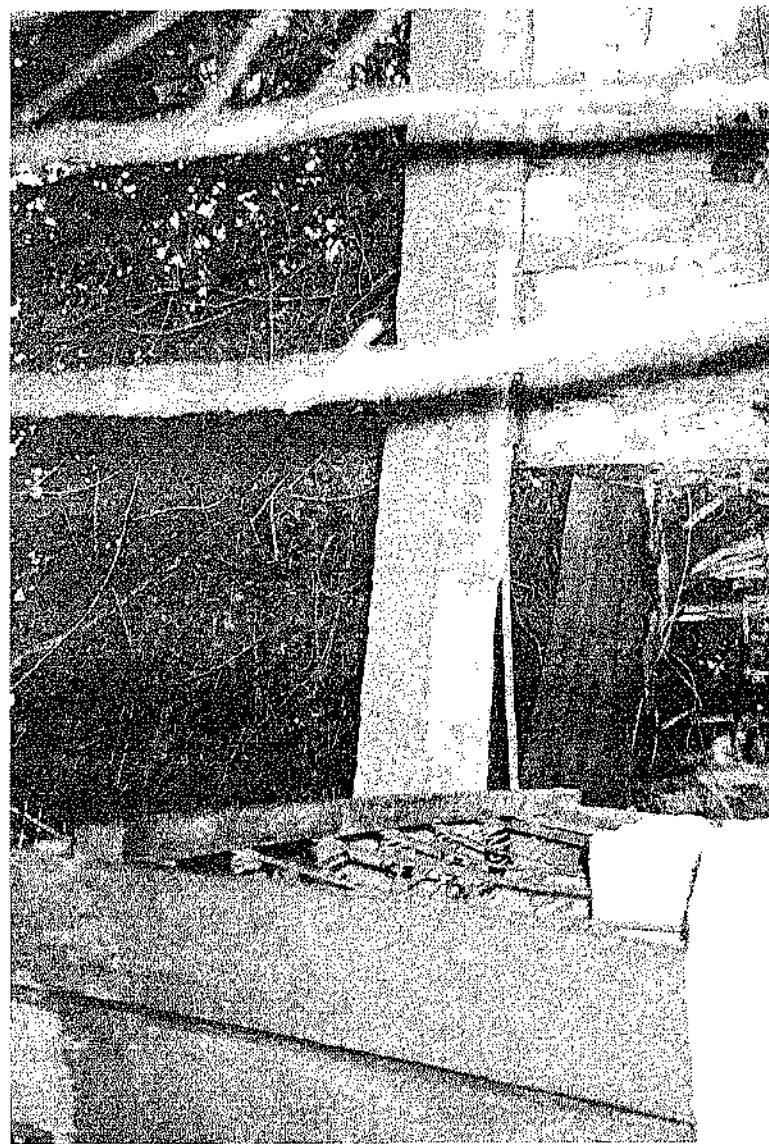
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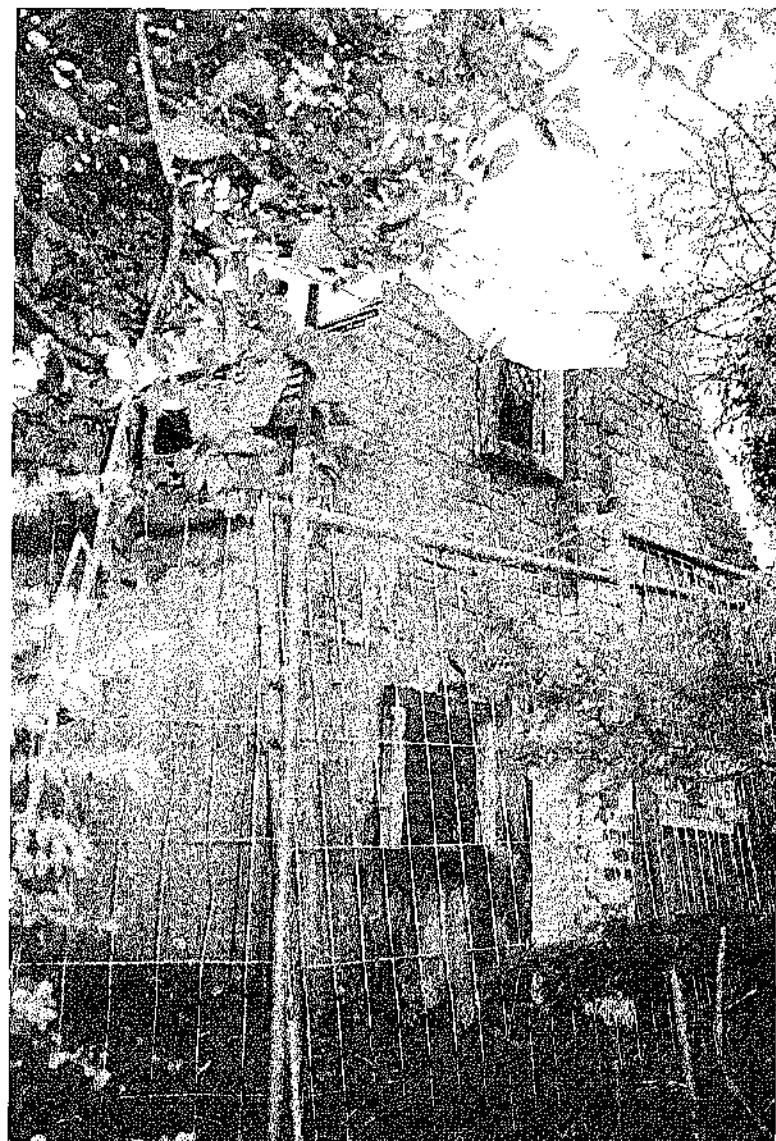
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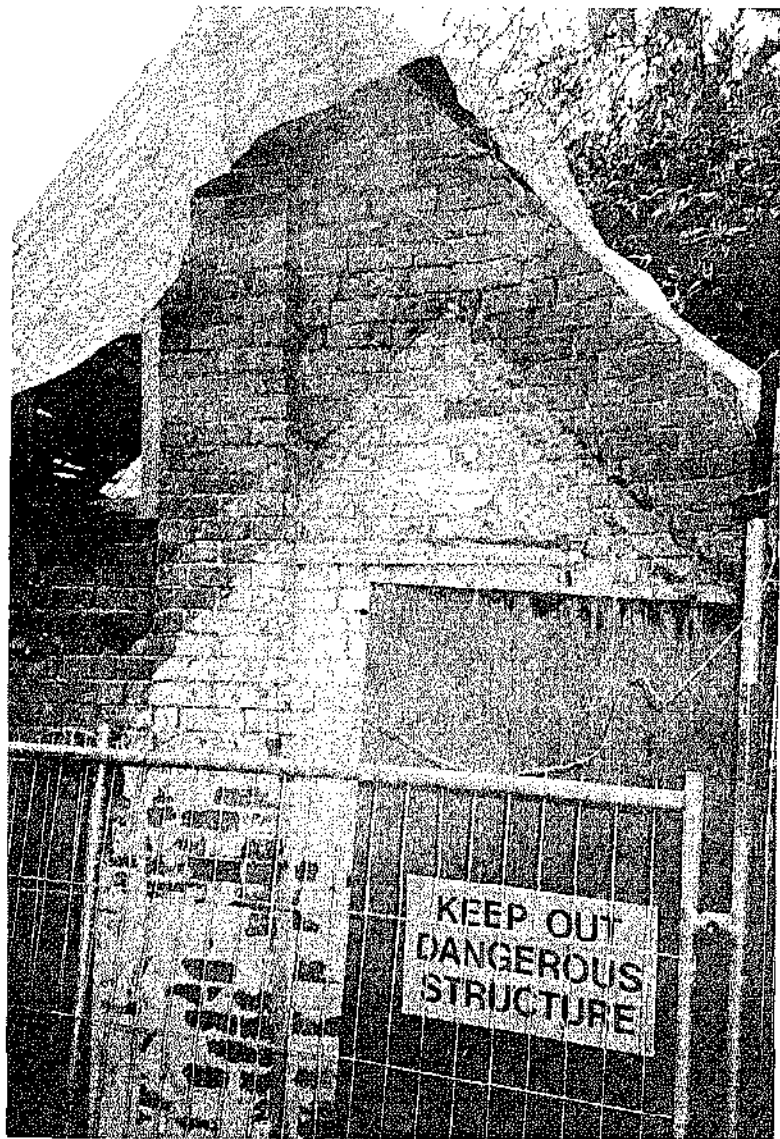
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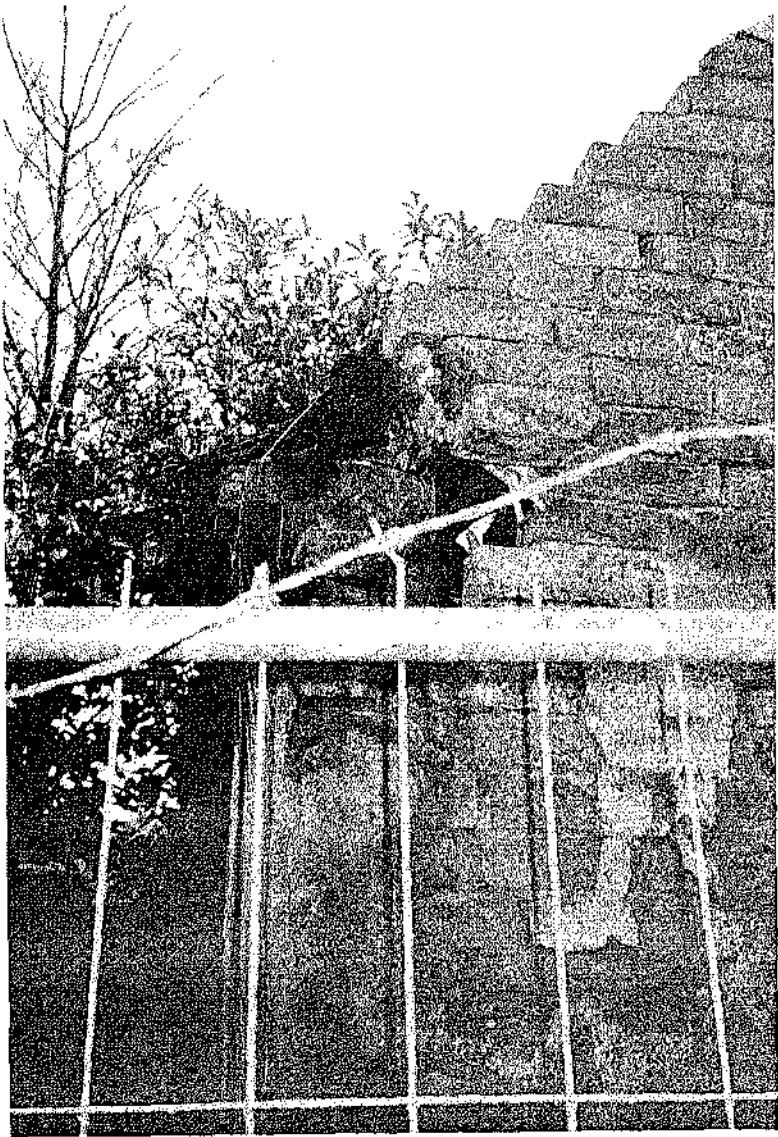
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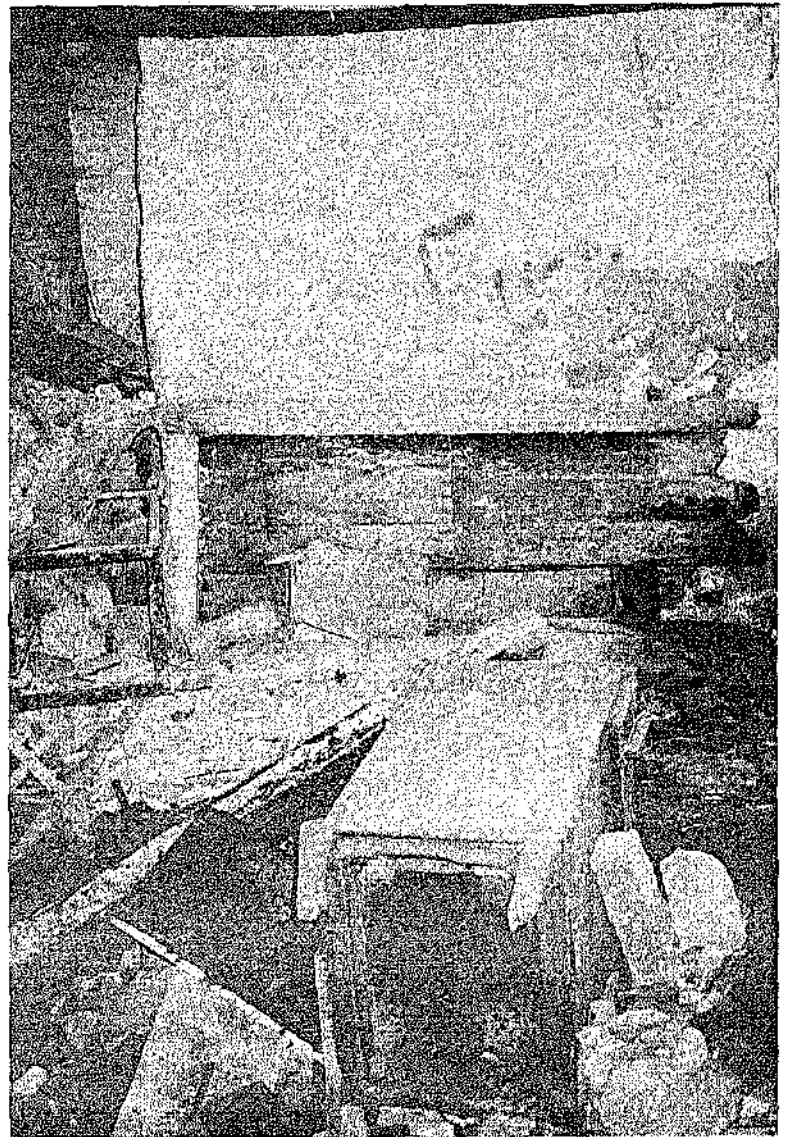
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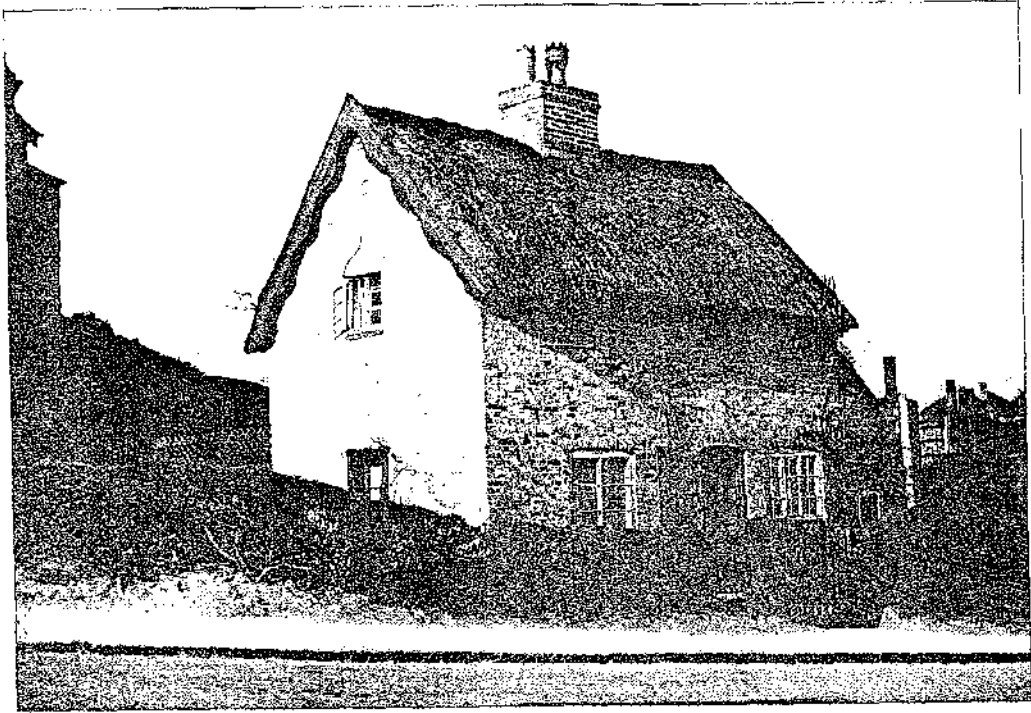
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FORMER LABOURER'S COTTAGE (HOVEL), 192 JERRY'S LANE, ERDINGTON

No. 192 Jerry's Lane is a one and a half storey red brick cottage with a ridged plain clay tile roof. The only entrance is in the south elevation through a small door of vertical wooden planks. There are two small casement windows in the west elevation and the remains of a small dormer on the north slope of the roof. On the north-west corner is a square chimney stack with a plain clay pot.

The interior of the cottage consists of a room approximately ten feet square with a corner fireplace containing a cast iron range. There is a small pantry storeroom and on the first floor two tiny bedrooms. On the east side is a single storey wash house extension with a ridged roof. It contains a brick "copper" furnace. The cottage has no water or electricity but there are a number of gas light fittings. It has been unoccupied for thirty years and is now semi-derelict.

History

A building on approximately the same site as the present day cottage is shown on a plan of Erdington which can be dated to c.1802. The same building appears on the Erdington Enclosure Maps of 1802-1806, shown on land occupied by the Biddles family. Turf Pit Road (now Jerry's Lane) is described as running:

"over part of the said wastelands and commons called Erdington Common and by the side of certain ancient enclosures called the Biddles to a certain corner called Turf Pit Corner."

The Biddles were a family of cottagers or smallholders who first appear in the Erdington documents in the eighteenth century. Tomlinson's 1760 survey of Erdington Manor shows a Biddles Close owned by John Addyse and tenanted by Walter Flavel and above this three enclosures from the waste or common. These are listed as cottage holdings occupied by John Biddle and described as a house and garden etc. The poor state of the map unfortunately makes it impossible to discern any buildings within these enclosures but they certainly contain the site of the existing cottage. The Biddle enclosures may in fact be those referred to in the 1735 Erdington Rent Roll where John Addyse, the owner of Biddles Close in 1760, is recorded as paying chief rent for property in Erdington and 3d a year for three encroachments.

A brief examination of earlier documents has failed to reveal any trace of the Biddles but after 1760 they make frequent appearances in the Erdington records. A William Biddle is listed in the Aston Levy Books from 1768-1775. He pays rates in 1769 and in 1770 but then is recorded as making no further payments. In 1792 John and Samuel Biddle pay 6d for a cottage and two plecks (small pieces of ground); Samuel Biddle pays 3d for a piece of land and William Biddle is fined 6d for non-appearance at court. From the available evidence then it

would seem that the cottage now in existence was built at some time in the late eighteenth century and certainly before 1802 on an encroachment from the waste which probably dates from the early eighteenth century.

An 1817 plan of cottages, "situate at the Turf Pits" clearly shows the existing building on the line of the road. It is recorded as the property of Ann Biddle, widow. In 1830 Heneage Legge, a prominent local landowner is recorded as the owner of Biddles Cottage etc. This however could refer to any of the three cottages shown as belonging to the Biddles on the 1817 plan and is most likely to refer in fact to the largest of the three. Fowler's 1833 Survey of Erdington lists the cottage as the property of Heneage Legge and occupied by Joseph Biddle:

"c.128 Biddle Joseph, Cottage, Garden etc."

Interestingly the building is not recorded in the 1838 Aston Valuation although surrounding properties occupied by members of the Biddles family are fully documented. It does however appear on the Erdington Tithe Map of 1848, owned by William Fowler and occupied by William Reynolds.

The farmhouse (No. 168 Jerry's Lane) was built between 1833 and 1848. It is shown on the Erdington Tithe Map and listed as being occupied by William Biddle senior. Both the farmhouse and the cottage appear on later Ordnance Survey maps of the area.

The Biddles occupied the farmhouse, the cottage and the surrounding enclosure up to the late 1920's. It was then taken over by R Bateman and Son, market gardeners. The farmhouse was occupied up to 1992, and unfortunately has been "modernised" with an inappropriate pantile roof, rebuilt chimneys and replacement windows.

There are a number of farm labourers 'hovels' surviving in the West Midlands, in Herefordshire, Worcestershire and, in an urban setting, North Coventry, although modernised and extended. The value of the Jerry's Lane cottage lies in its survival in urban Birmingham and in its almost original condition. It was last occupied in 1962, by Alf Deathridge.

Toni Demdowicz
Conservation Group

UD/C/TD/EB/N19

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Map of land belonging to Heneage Legge, c.1802, MS 275a 68c BRL

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