

**An Archaeological Watching
Brief of Soft Stripping at 24
and 25 Sheepcote Street,
Birmingham
2000**

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24 and 25 Sheepcote Street, Birmingham
2000**

By
Chris Hewitson

For Carillion Tarmac and Midland and City Development Limited

For further information please contact:

Birmingham Archaeology
The University of Birmingham
Edgbaston
Birmingham B15 2TT
Tel: 0121 414 5513
Fax: 0121 414 5516
E-Mail: bham-arch@bham.ac.uk
Web Address: <http://www.barch.bham.ac.uk/bufau>

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Summary

Birmingham Archaeology carried out an archaeological watching brief of the soft stripping of 24 and 25 Sheepcote Street, Birmingham on behalf of Midland and City Developments Limited and Carillion Tarmac in March, April and May 2000. This monitoring was the final phase of archaeological work and was designed to compliment and enhance information collated during a desk-based assessment and archaeological evaluation already undertaken at the site.

The monitoring work revealed further original features in each building. For example, at 24 Sheepcote Street the ground-floor layout of the building comprised a central cart way with smaller rooms arranged on either side, but when it was absorbed into the adjacent Tube and Rolling Mills, based in 25 Sheepcote Street, this cart way was removed and the building assumed a more open plan probably associated with storage. Soft stripping of 25 Sheepcote Street revealed fewer changes in the fabric of the building because it was largely unaltered, but several hidden architectural details of the building were revealed and recorded.

1.0 Introduction

This report describes the results of an archaeological watching brief of soft stripping carried out in March, April and May 2000, during the demolition of structures to the rear of 24 and 25 Sheepcote Street (Figure 1, Plate 1). The maintenance of an archaeological watching brief was required by Richard Hudson, the Conservation Architect of Birmingham City Council and followed a specification of work agreed at a site meeting in December 1999 (Birmingham Archaeology 2000).

2.0 The Site

The site was located between Sheepcote Street and the junction of the New Birmingham Main Line Canal and the Sherborne Wharf Loop of the Old Main Line Canal in Birmingham city centre (Figure 1; NGR SP 0560 8670). Number 24, Sheepcote Street was a Grade II listed building. The terracotta façade of the late-19th-century office buildings of 25, Sheepcote Street, and several 19th-century brick buildings behind the street frontage were locally listed Grade A. Several secondary structures that in-filled the site were of relatively recent date and were not listed. The site comprised redundant and unoccupied industrial and office premises (Structures A-Fii) recorded by a previous survey in 1999 (Fig. 2). There was a significant break of slope from the Sheepcote Street frontage towards the canal behind.

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3.0 Historical Background

The industrial development of this part of Sheepcote Street took place within a relatively short time-span, between 1857 and 1903. Prior to 1857, the site was undeveloped, and in 1824 it was depicted as a series of market garden plots. The first confirmed development was at 24 Sheepcote Street, where the Standard Works of Lawson and Holden was established in 1857. This was a coach works producing finished goods in iron and brass. The workshops, or 'shoppings', situated behind the frontage, were relatively small-scale structures where craftsmen worked over hearths, casts and polishing machines. Most of 24 Sheepcote Street dated from this period.

The tube and rolling mills of Grice, Grice and Booth were first listed in 1871. This company was based at 25 Sheepcote Street and gradually expanded in the next twenty years. In 1890 the works were given a 'respectable' purpose-built office frontage, 25 Sheepcote Street, and in 1896 James Booth & Co. took over the Standard Works and work proceeded to amalgamate the two sites into one large tube works. All this work had taken place by 1903.

4.0 Background and Objectives

The watching brief of the soft stripping was the final phase of archaeological work undertaken at the site and was supplementary to the survey carried out in September 1999. The monitoring described in this report involved the recording of architectural details not covered by the previous survey, and the recording of details exposed by the soft-strip operations. In general, the aim of the archaeological survey in 25 Sheepcote Street was to record hitherto hidden details of the largely intact and coherent historic fabric of the building, while in 24 Sheepcote Street the aim was to understand the development of the building by recording those parts of the historic fabric which were hidden behind more extensive later alterations.

5.0 Method

The soft stripping was carried out with the aim of keeping intact sound elements of the historic fabric of both buildings. An archaeologist was present to record details of the historic fabric as outlined below, and to liaise between the Contractor and the Conservation Architect if any questions arose on site as to the precise extent of the soft strip.

The soft strip concentrated on the removal of electrical fittings and other services, suspended ceilings, dry-lining, recent partitions, floor surfaces and unsound areas of plaster as defined below. Any historic fabric which has been re-used within a later context or stored out of its original context around the building was retained in store.

The soft strip was the first phase in a series of remedial steps carried out to the building. No active renovation work was carried out at this stage.

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Archaeological recording involved detailed written records supplemented by sketch drawings. In addition to the written and drawn record, a photographic survey was made using monochrome and colour prints and colour transparencies.

The results of the monitoring are presented room by room in the style outlined in the specification (Figures 3-6).

6.0 The Results

Basement: B1, B2 (25 Sheepcote Street) and B3 (24 Sheepcote Street) (Fig. 3)

Action: Main structure largely exposed throughout, therefore, service-strip, and clear out of rubbish, including gas, water, electric in B1 and B3. Clear up of lift assembly in B2. Action on sub-standard floor joists in B3 to be decided in due course.

Results: Clearance of the basements of rubbish and services did not reveal substantial new evidence about the architectural construction of the building. The uncovered wall surfaces meant there was not substantial scope for new information. The lift mechanism was revealed by removal of covering plasterboard (Plate 2) and the floor joists in B3 were removed (see G9 for full discussion).

Ground Floor: G4-G8 (25 Sheepcote Street) G9-G10 (24 Sheepcote Street) (Fig. 4)

Action: G4, service strip and dry-lining, suspended ceiling and recent skirting to be removed, including door and surround nearest front of building. Second door to rear to have recent sheeting removed to reveal paneled door, which was to be stored if removed. Window detailing, especially architrave to be recorded, (including paint-scraping and comparison throughout building). Wooden paneling to be recorded photographically in detail. Any paneling removed in order to check building condition should be stored with a view to eventual replacement.

Results: The majority of details were later including all of the plasterwork and the pine wooden paneling.

Action: G5, service-strip and removal of all later paneling, including under stairs. Plaster mouldings of the interior of the entrance porch to be secured and the tiled floor to be protected. Damaged ceiling to be cut back to 6" of cornice to expose beams. Door into hall G6 to be retained.

Results: The damaged ceiling was a lathe and plaster design, typical of the late-Victorian period.

Action: G6 and G7, service strip and removal of all later partitioning and paneling, ceiling to be retained. Lift to be left in-situ.

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Results: Paint scraping and detailed analysis showed that the skirting boards, doorjambs and window architraves were of later construction.

Action: G9 and G10, service-strip and removal of suspended ceiling and later floor surfaces. Record cast-iron columns and I-beams, investigate survival of cart-track surface.

Results: The cast-iron pillars supporting the first floor were shown to be later replacements that correlated with the removal of the central cart way. Rolled steel continuous I-beams were used in this construction (Plate 3). A slight change in the colour of brickwork of the façade of the building showed where the cart entrance had been bricked up, and soft stripping revealed evidence of in-situ stone hinge supports at the base of the front wall. Removal of the floor boards revealed an area of debris above the sloping passage of the former central cart way the arched supports of which were visible in the basement. The passage floor was located as a discontinuous cobble layer 1.0m below the present floor level. The floor at the north-eastern end of the building was original, but the remainder of the floor was a later replacement, probably contemporary with the removal of the central cart way.

Only the south-western end of the room was plastered which may indicate that this was an office space prior to the removal of the passage. Removal of the plaster revealed an original doorway adjacent to the later cart entrance that was part of 25 Sheepcote Street (Plate 6, G9). The plasterwork was two skins deep and used horse hair, being whitewashed over the top. The southernmost and northernmost windows appeared to have been replaced at the same time as the blocking of the passageway, but originally appeared to have contained larger lights.

First Floor: F11-F16 (25 Sheepcote Street) F17-F18 (24 Sheepcote Street) (Fig. 5)

Action: F11, service-strip and removal of all areas of failed plaster and ceiling, skirting to be retained where feasible. Record removed areas and backing of fireplace surround, including dimensions and fitting detail. F12, kitchen and toilets, service-strip to take out fittings as required. F13, service-strip and general clear out. F14, retain original fittings, especially skirting and door to F16, general clear out.

Results: Most architectural features were later replacements, including the skirting boards. No original architectural elements were revealed (Plate 5 F13, Plate 6 F11).

Action: F15, removal of toilets, modern door and internal sub-divisions, record as exposed.

Results: Originally a tiled bathroom, cast-iron air duct and architrave survives with detailed scrolling, both of which were retained.

Action: F16, service-strip, removal of all later infill/partitions, flooring and failed plaster-work, architrave, fireplace and skirting to record. Skirting to retained at present.

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Results: Originally used as a large open counting room. Original skirting survived only between the two doors opposite the fireplace. The remainder of skirting was taller and a later replacement. Architrave and windows surrounds were likewise later replacements. (Plate 5, F16)

Action: F17, F18 service strip, removal of suspended ceiling, dry-boarding, floor surfaces and partitioning. Recording of blocked-off stairs, including v-jointed boarding (F18), columns and all exposed areas. Monitored strip of ceiling and boarded off floor beams.

Results: Timber beams supported the second floor, the southernmost was replaced by a cast-iron I-beam from the central column to the front wall. Three cast-iron pillars supported the second floor. Two were of a design that bolted directly into the timber whilst the third was trenched to support the beam. The columns did not appear to line up with those below.

There was no clear evidence of earlier partitioning. The floorboards were a later addition but the plaster wall surface appeared original.

V-boarding covered a newel-post staircase. The newel posts were chamfered and had plain stops in order to accommodate the curve of the stairs against the angled wall. The pine floorboards were tenon-jointed together.

Second Floor: S19-S23 (25 Sheepcote Street) S24 (24 Sheepcote Street)

Action: S19-S23, there was a great deal of water damage to this upper storey of 25 Sheepcote Street. In general the soft strip was taken back to the structure including ceilings and damaged plaster. Wall paper samples were taken, and general recording carried out throughout, including details of fireplaces in S19 and S22. Doorframes and skirting were also recorded.

Results: S19: Plain undecorated skirting and door jambs with dark brown wood finish. Fireplace, concrete hearth (17" x 36"), simple, four-bar, cast-iron grate, inverse V profile to fire opening.

S22: Skirting boards of plain design like S19, central gas light, fireplace (Plate 5 S22), similar to S19 but larger, no grate survives, again inverse V profile to fire opening.

S23: Gas light no heating, suggested use as a store room (Plate 6, S23)

Action: S24, service-strip, removal of dry-boarding, suspended ceiling, floor surfaces, etc. Damaged areas of original ceiling to be removed, together with modern stairs at the front of the building.

Results: The suspended ceiling was removed revealing a replacement roof with extensive damage to the south end (Plate 4). This was supported by three simple queen-post trusses of typical 19th century design. Iron-framed window with segmental-arched head exposed in north wall adjacent to the chimney (Plate 6 S24). Three fireplaces survived (Plate 5 S24), one in the northern end and two in the

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southern. They were of simple semi-circular arch design. No evidence of internal partitions and the floor appeared to have seen periodic alteration.

7.0 Discussion

Examination of the fabric of 24 Sheepcote Street revealed considerable detail about the development of the building. The principal change was the removal of the central passageway that ran east-west through the centre of the building. Detailed examination of the fabric underlying the plasterwork and removal of the floorboards revealed evidence confirming the location of a central sloping passageway through the building with a gated entrance onto the street. The fabric of the building suggested originally two walls were located either side of the passage continuing up through the first floor level. These were later replaced by the cast-iron pillar and I-beam arrangement that presently supports the first and second floors. The passageway itself was located as a cobbled surface, c. 1m below the ground level and sloped down from east-west, in common with the contours of the larger plot.

Within the front wall of the building was a blocked doorway adjacent to the window at the southern end of the façade. This door opened into a former room, situated to the south of the central cart way, which was plastered and had a fireplace indicating that it was originally an office. The original first-floor layout of the building probably mirrored that of the ground floor, the cast-iron pillars replacing a continuation of the brick walls on formerly on either side of the central cart way. Therefore, the original layout of the building was much more sub-divided, the alteration to an open plan correlating with a change of use associated with the adoption of the site by the Tube and Rolling Works towards the end of the 19th century.

In contrast, the structure of 25 Sheepcote Street had not been radically altered since its construction in the late 1890s (Birmingham Archaeology 1999, 9). Therefore, the majority of the work undertaken within the building focused on the recording of previously hidden details as later panelling and partitioning was removed. The majority of the original skirting, door mouldings and window architraves survived on all three floors. Alteration had only occurred in the counting room (F16) where the majority of the skirting boards were taller, later replacements and the architrave above the windows appeared to have been replaced. Soft stripping revealed no evidence of major fabric change within the building.

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8.0 Acknowledgements

The archaeological motoring of soft stripping was commissioned by Carillion and carried out on behalf Midland and City Development Limited. Thanks are due to John Costorphine of Midland and City Developments Limited and to Phil Wilkinson of Carillion. The archaeological work was monitored on behalf of Birmingham City Council by Richard Hudson, Conservation Architect. Steve Litherland of BUFAU undertook the archaeological recording and Chris Hewitson wrote this report. The illustrations were prepared by Nigel Doods and the project was managed by Steve Litherland for Birmingham Archaeology.

9.0 References

Birmingham City Council 2001 *Outline Specification for Soft Stripping of 24 and 25 Sheepcote Street*

BUFAU 1999 *Archaeological Evaluation of 24/25 Sheepcote Street, Birmingham: Building Recording and Desk-Top Assessment*

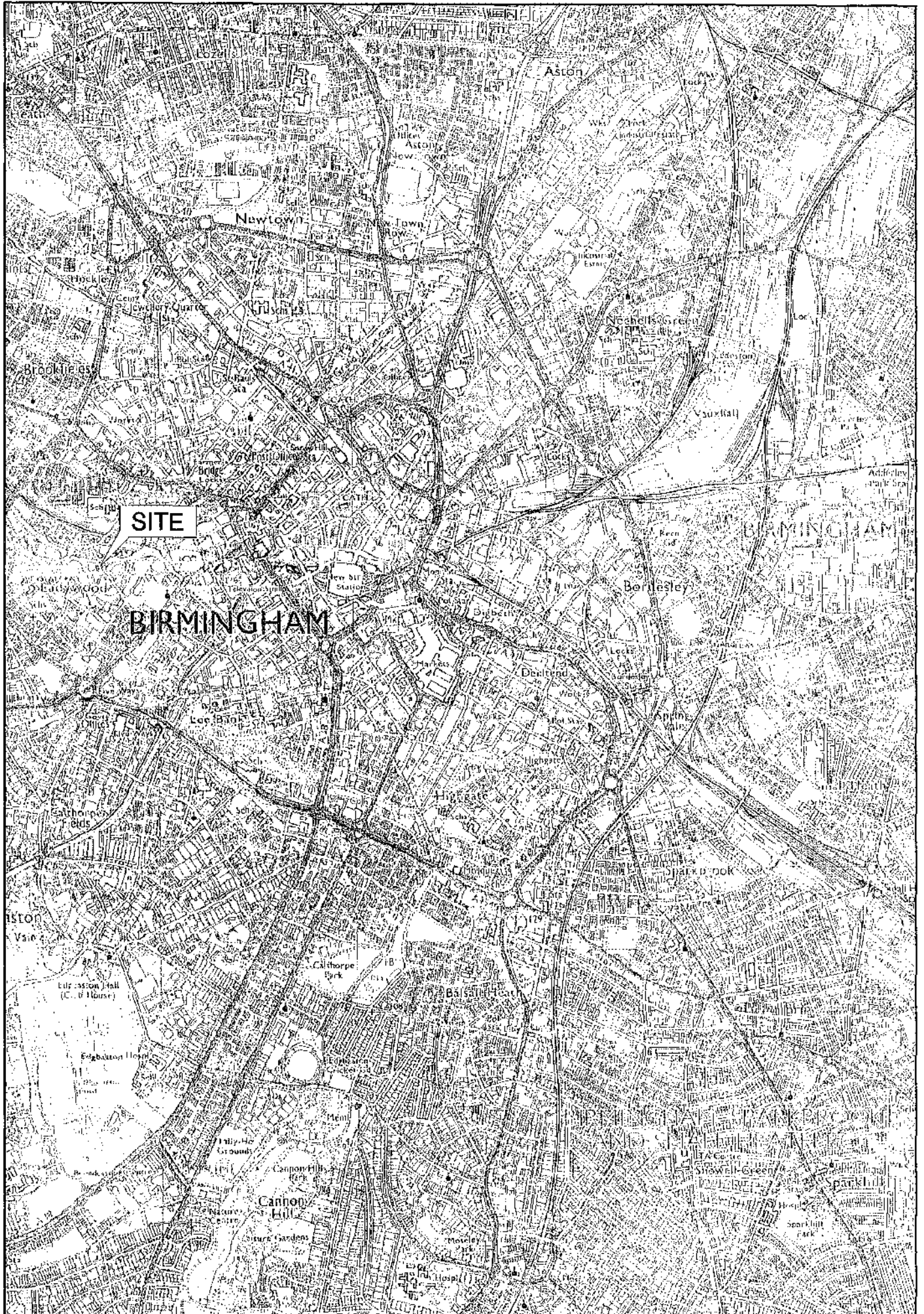


Fig.1

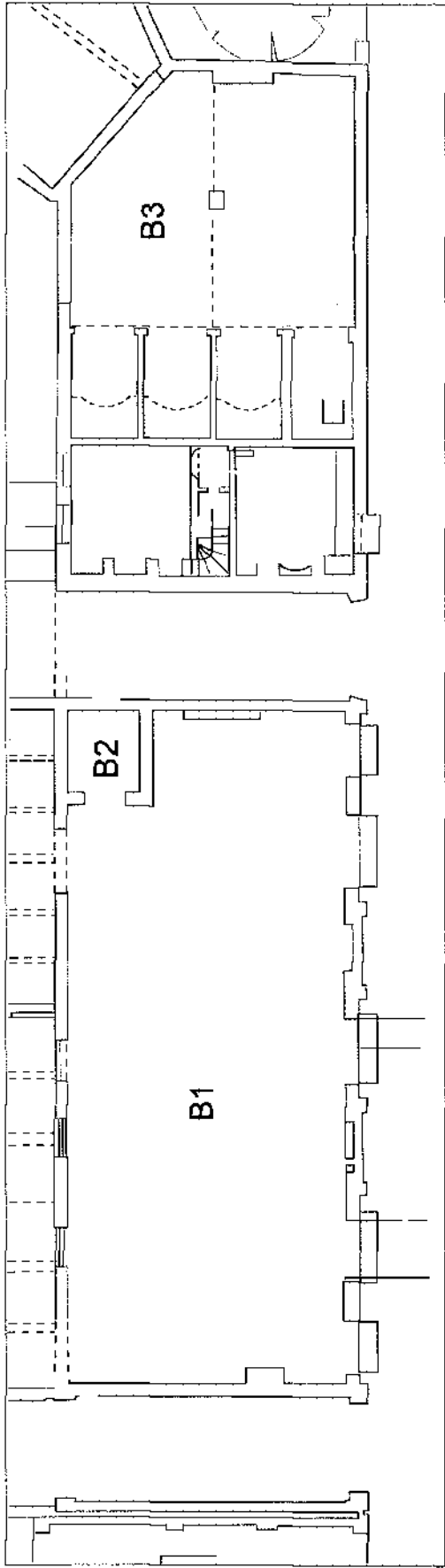


Fig.3

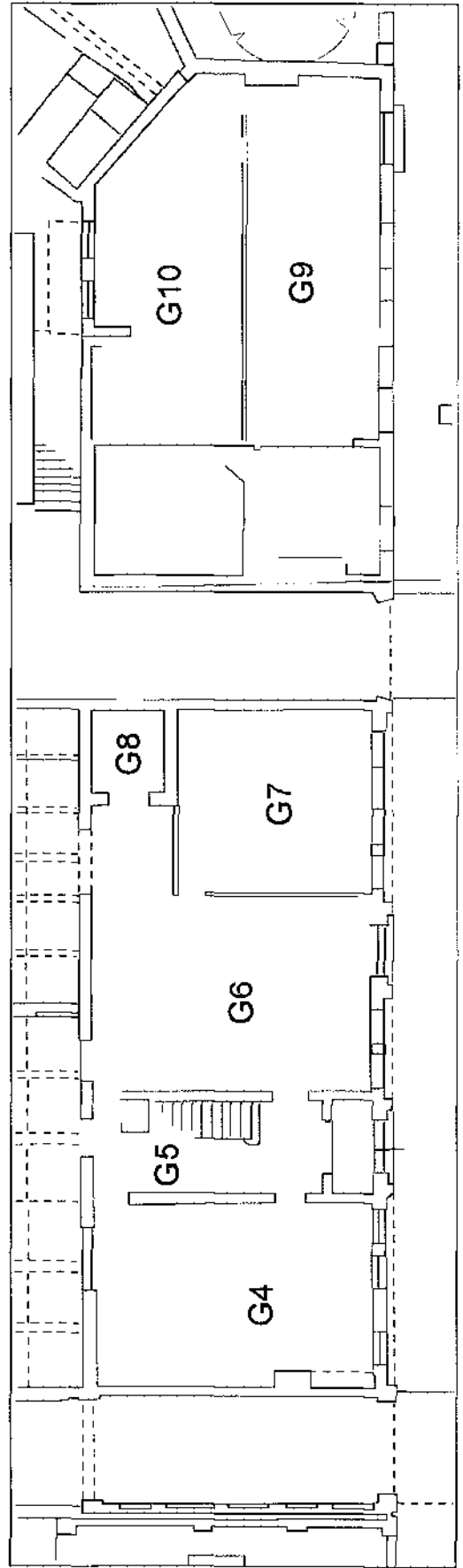


Fig.4

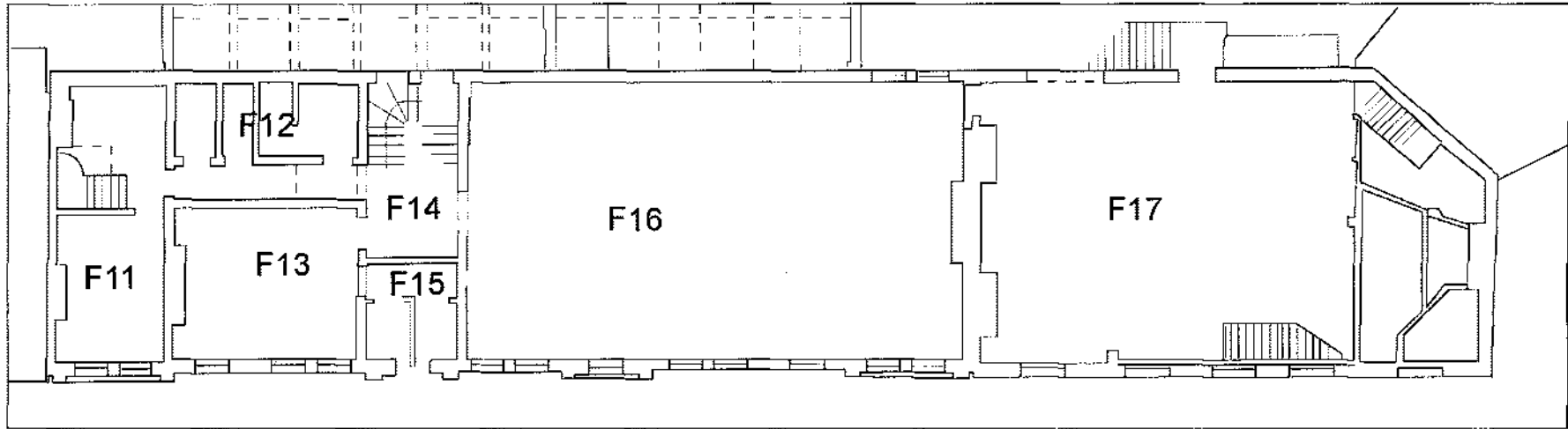


Fig.5

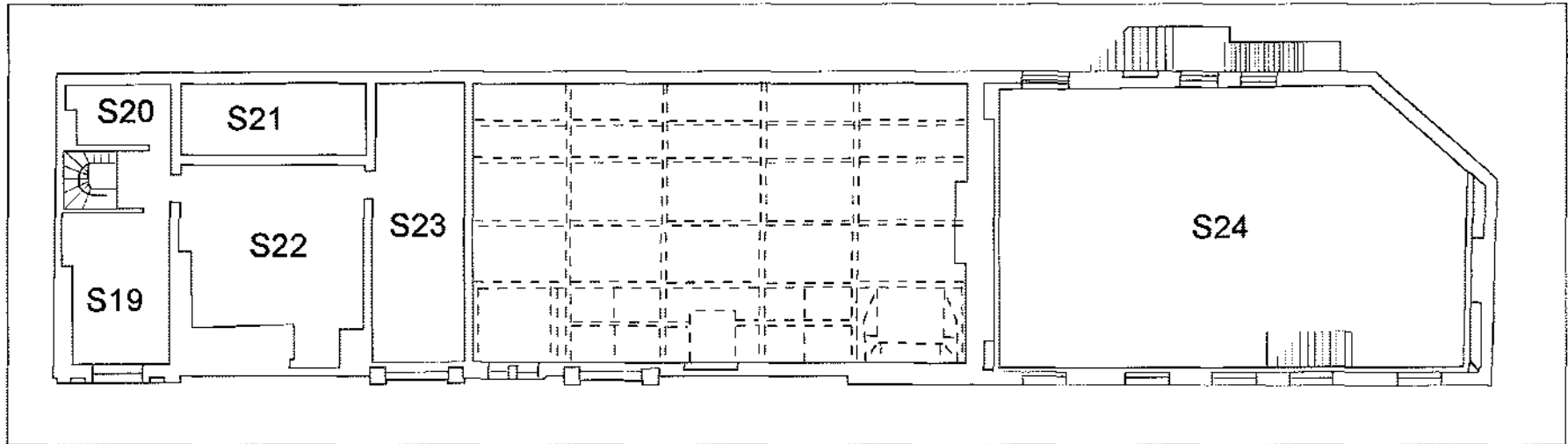


Fig.6



Plate 1

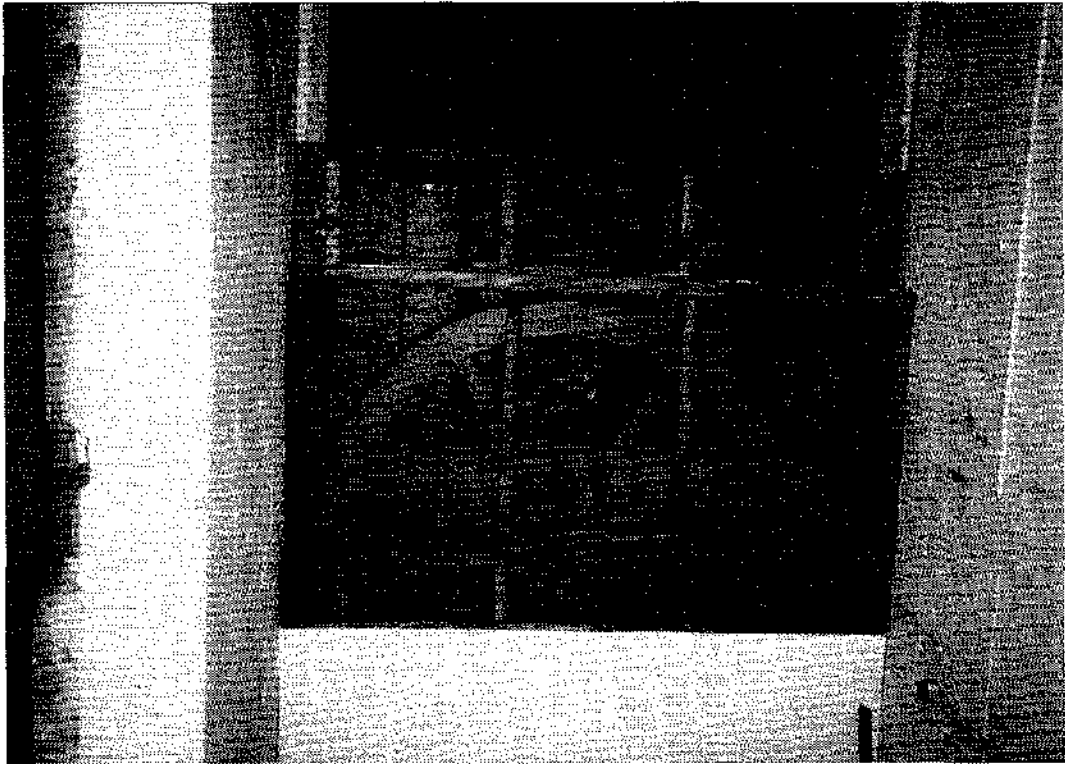


Plate 2

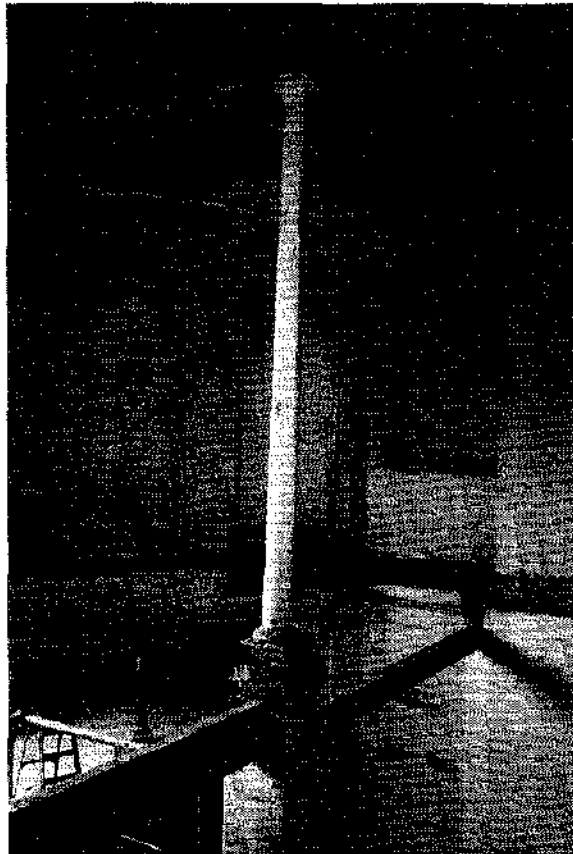
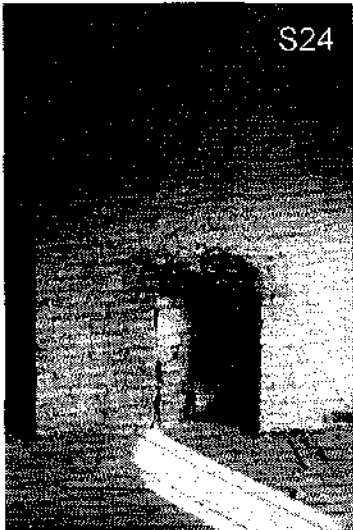
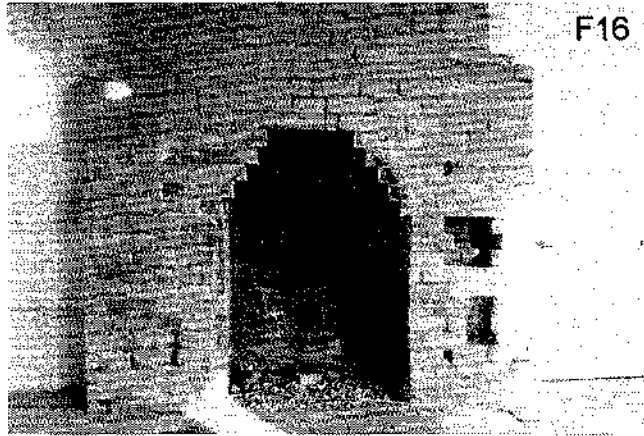
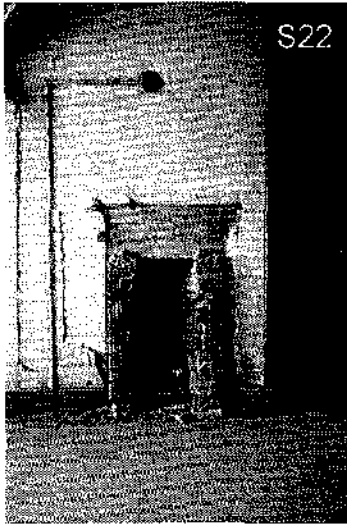


Plate 3



Plate 4



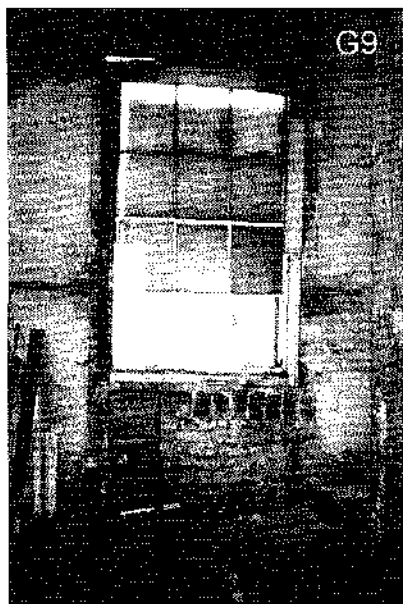
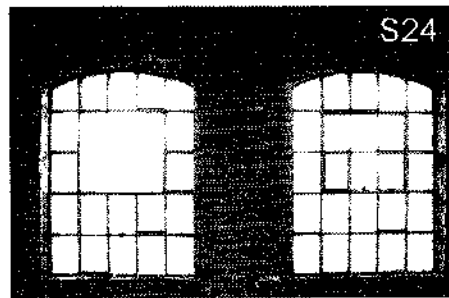
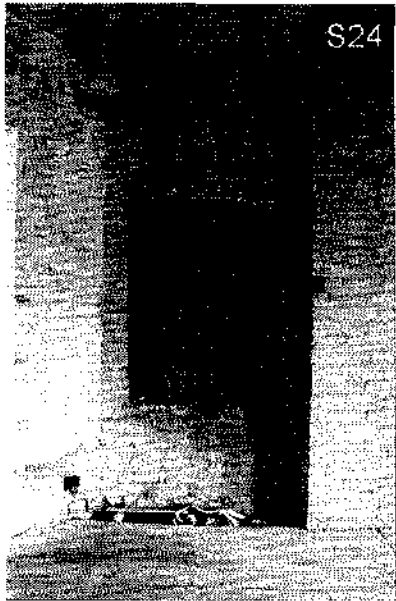


Plate 6