

**A building record of Saint
Katharine's Church,
Cradley, West Midlands**

Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit
Project No. 833
October 2001

A building record of Saint Katharine's Church, Cradley, West Midlands

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Summary

Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit was commissioned by Hyperion Homes Limited to undertake building recording at Saint Katharine's Church, Cradley (NGR. SO 9437 8415, SMR No. 1810) in September 2001. The work was carried out in accordance with a specification issued by Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council as a condition of planning consent (P01/0801) for the demolition of the building.

Saint Katharine's was built as a small mission church to serve the rapidly expanding working class population of Cradley in the first decade of the 20th century. The design, by J. A. Meredith, was in a simple though somewhat eclectic Gothic style in which Early English detail predominates. The overall feeling of the predominantly brick-built structure was 'Low Church', the emphasis being upon function rather than ostentation. The only significant alteration to the church was the addition of a second community hall and connecting building to the rear of the church in the late 1960s. Access to this building and the provision of extra car parking necessitated a certain amount of landscaping that affected the ground level to the south of the church. In the latter decades of the 20th century a gradual decline in church attendance led to the eventual closure of the church.

1.0 Introduction

This short report presents the results of building recording carried out in advance of the demolition of Saint Katharine's Church, Cradley (SMR No. 1810; Fig. 1). The Church of Saint Katharine was located on the south side of Beecher Street, Cradley, in the Metropolitan Borough of Dudley, West Midlands (NGR SO 9437 8415). The work was carried out by Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit on behalf of Hyperion Homes Limited. It comprised a rapid analytical record of the building in order to identify and interpret successive phases of development and assess the significance of the church in relation to the provision of church building in the locality and the general development of church architecture. Measured ground and basement plans were prepared, as well as drawings of all four external elevations. In addition, monochrome print and colour slide photography was taken of both the interior and exterior of the church.

2.0 Historical background

The date of the church was given on the foundation stone (Plate 1) built into the north side of the building. It read '*December 21st 1908 / To the glory of God / In honour of His servant S. Katharine / And for the welfare of His people / This stone was laid by / Sir G. B. Hingley Bart*'. The Romans reputedly martyred Saint Katharine of Alexandria on a wheel in the 4th century for refusing to recant her religion.

The full opening of the church probably took place in early 1909. A trust deed for the church was drawn up on 7th April 1909 (Dudley Archives PR/CRA/7/2/3). Attached to this deed was a plan of the plot in Beecher Street. There is also a Licence for Divine Worship dated 15th April 1909. This was granted by the Bishop of Worcester to Robert Henry Edmonson, Vicar of Cradley, for a church in the parish of Cradley 'which has been recently erected as a Mission Church to be called 'Saint Katharine's Mission Church' (Dudley Archives PR/CRA/7/2/8).

The social background against which Saint Katharine's was built is well illustrated by examining the historic mapping that charts the industrial development of the surrounding landscape (Fig.2). This part of the Stour valley lay towards the southern edge of the Black Country Coalfield. Several collieries were sunk here in the later 19th century and increasing numbers of associated industries such as brick works, iron works and forges together with housing for the workforces colonised the fields once farmed by the monks of Halesowen Abbey. The rising population was followed by the provision of chapels and schools. Methodism was particularly strong in this area, and no doubt this growth may have prompted an evangelical response from the Church of England, of which Saint Katharine's was a concrete expression. Sir George Bartholemew Hingley was the head of an important local family and the director of a local ironworks that made anchor chains. The decorated door straps that are rather incongruous in this somewhat drab functional building may have been fabricated at his works (Plate 5).

During the 20th century various phases of suburban housing were added around Cradley, but the heavy industry of the area fell into terminal decline. The church itself remained largely unaltered until the late 1960s when a church hall was erected to the south. Plans and elevations that match the design of the existing hall were prepared in March 1966 (Dudley Archives PR/CRA/7/2/8). Access to this building and the provision of extra car parking necessitated a certain amount of landscaping that affected the ground level to the south of the church. Later, the heating system was changed to gas, possibly to keep an increasingly aged congregation economically warm. However, in the latter decades of the 20th century the general decline in church attendance led to the eventual closure of the Mission Church.

3.0 Architectural description

The church was built under the direction of J. A. Meredith in a simple, though somewhat eclectic Gothic style, in which Early English detail predominates. It was constructed of red brick in English bond, and had a slate roof. The four bays of the simple rectangular plan (Fig. 3) were articulated externally to the north by tall gabled buttresses (Fig. 4, Plate 2), and internally by an arcade that extended along the entire length of the southern side (Plate 3). There was no structural division between nave and chancel, nor was there an east window. Indeed, it seems possible from an examination of the structural details (see below) that the church represents the nave as originally planned, and that a chancel was contemplated, but never built. This may have been because the site fell away quite steeply towards the east, a circumstance that prompted the architect to incorporate a basement vestry beneath the sanctuary (Fig. 5). The main entrance to the building was via a porch in the northeast bay. There

was a doorway in the east wall to the vestry, and a later doorway (c. 1966) enlarged from a window opening in the south wall that provided access to the later hall behind.

The fenestration displayed a considerable degree of uniformity. Each bay contained two pairs of lancet windows, and there was a single pair of windows in the west end. In each case the surrounds were wave-moulded both internally and externally. However, the nave windows to the north and west were much taller than the lights of the south aisle (Fig.6). The porch (Plate 4) was timber-framed and set on a brick plinth with wave moulded coping. Its double-leaved door was set under a three-centred arch and has two pairs of strap hinges; each pair of hinges had 'S' and 'K' (for Saint Katharine) shaped perforations (Plate 5). A pair of small round headed windows flanked the door to left and right. Identical windows were found along the sides of the porch. An iron boot scraper (Plate 6) was situated to the right hand side of the door. Segmental headed windows lighted the basement in the east bay. These were blocked to the south and partially obscured behind the steps to the later church hall (Plate 7). The central portion of the east end wall broke forward rather oddly (Fig.7). This may have been caused by a later change of plan. Alternatively, it may have merely served to emphasise an altar in the east end of the church. The east wall contained the doorway to the vestry and two segmental-headed windows at lower ground level. A small timber belicote was situated above (Plate 2).

Internally, the south arcade comprised square-plan piers, set diagonally, to support wide segmental arches of two hollow-chamfered orders. To the north were bay size window embrasures that supported segmental rear-arches, a design that was repeated to the west (Fig.8). The nave had a segmental arched ceiling that sprung from a moulded plaster string and was decorated with plaster transverse ribs (Plate 8). The east end of the church was raised and approached by two steps. In the east wall was a wide, segmental arched recess. The feature was suggestive of a chancel arch, and may denote that a chancel was originally intended though the plan was not carried through. To the right (south) of the platform was a staircase with stick balusters leading down to the vestry with a concrete ceiling, supported from steel beams.

The church hall built in 1966 was utilitarian and undistinguished, and added little to the architectural interest of the church.

4.0 Discussion

Stylistically, the Mission Church of Saint Katharine was a building of idiosyncratic design that broke away from the archaeologically correct designs of many earlier Victorian church architects. The combination of a mid-thirteenth century style of fenestration and mouldings of mid-fourteenth century character was indicative of an eclectic, and perhaps even unscholarly, approach to Gothic architecture. Other aspects of the building, such as the receding buttresses, oddly proportioned aisle, plaster ceiling and decorative vaulting ribs, appeared to have used medieval architecture only as an initial source of inspiration, and have greater originality. The overall effect while not entirely successful was mitigated by the uneven character of the site that was turned to advantage by the architect to introduce an element of theatricality.

The principal significance of the building lies in its expression of the evangelical and social concerns of the Church of England in the early 20th century. The rapid growth of new industrial suburbs in the 19th century had severely strained the established parochial system in England. Against this background the appeal of Non-Conformist groups, such as the Wesleyian and Primitive Methodists, to the working classes had long been recognised by observers such as George Elliot. At the same time the Church of England was also being squeezed by a resurgence of Catholicism. Reaction to both forces gave rise at various points in the 19th century to calls for greater evangelical zeal in the established church. This is undoubtedly the background to the foundation of Saint Katharine's in Beecher Street, designed to serve the rapidly expanding industrial population in the area to the south of Cradley. The Edwardian phase of expansion of the Church of England was terminated by the impact of the aftermath of the First World War on the heavy industrial economy of the Black Country in general, and more specifically upon the confidence of the church in a blighted spiritual landscape.

It is more difficult to establish the significance of Saint Katharine's as a monument type in terms of rarity or survival. Most studies of the architecture of the Church of England are concerned with the Parish Church, and Mission Churches are more generally, although even here by no means exhaustively, studied in terms of Non-Conformist groups. The number of these small churches or halls has undoubtedly diminished in recent years, although their closure has not automatically led to their demolition. Perhaps, an extensive survey to establish the attrition rate of these places of worship is in order before we lose their evidence of the spiritual ramifications of the Industrial Revolution, and end up with a selective landscape of monuments to industry shorn of their broader social context.

Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to Mr S. Taylor of Hyperion Homes Limited for commissioning the work. Thanks are also due to the staff of Dudley Archives and to Peter Boland and John Hemmingway of Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council for providing a brief and for monitoring the archaeological work. The building recording was undertaken by Malcolm Hislop, and the documentary research and editing was by Steve Litherland. The illustrations were the work of Nigel Dodds, and Edward Newton processed the photographic plates.

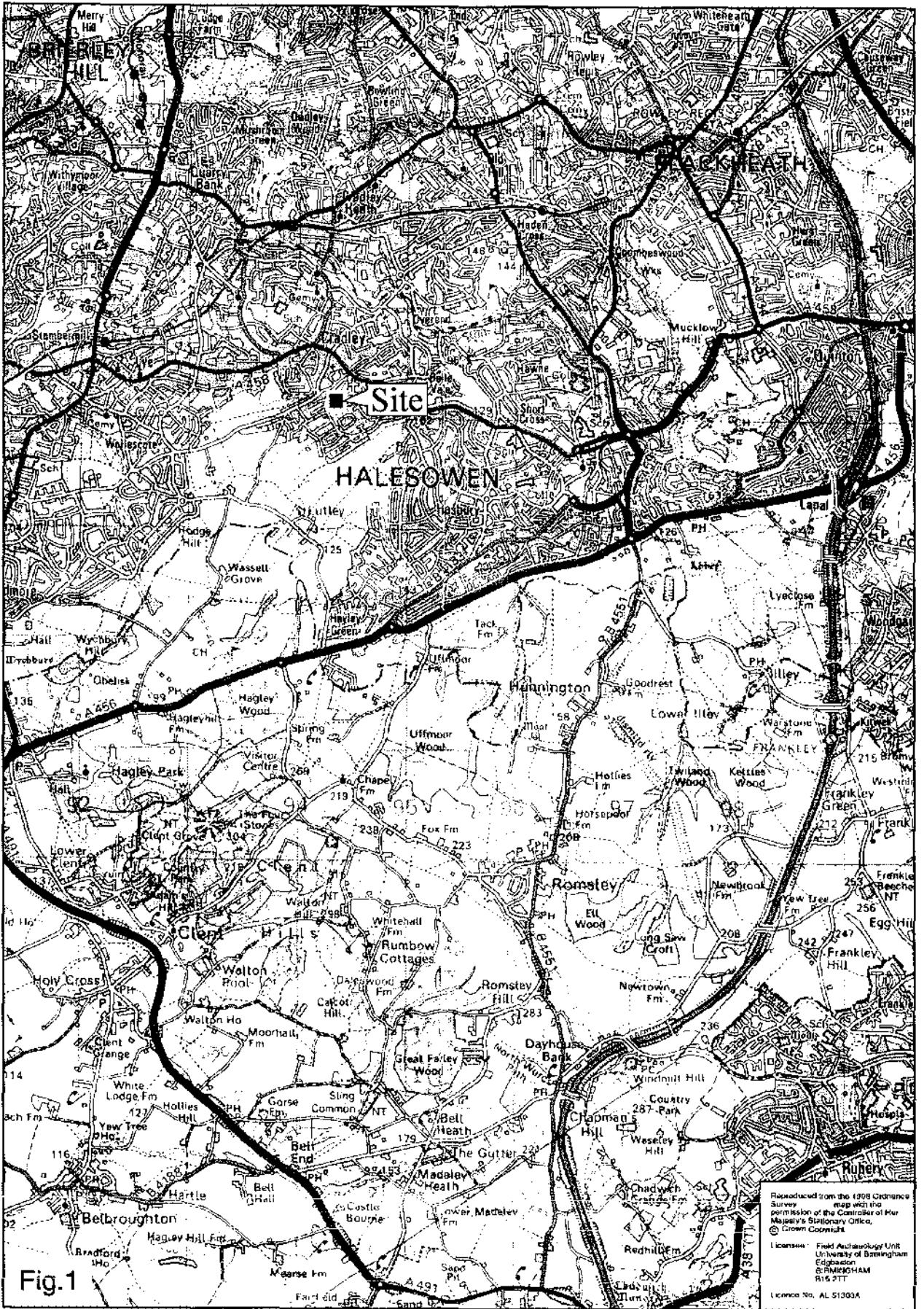
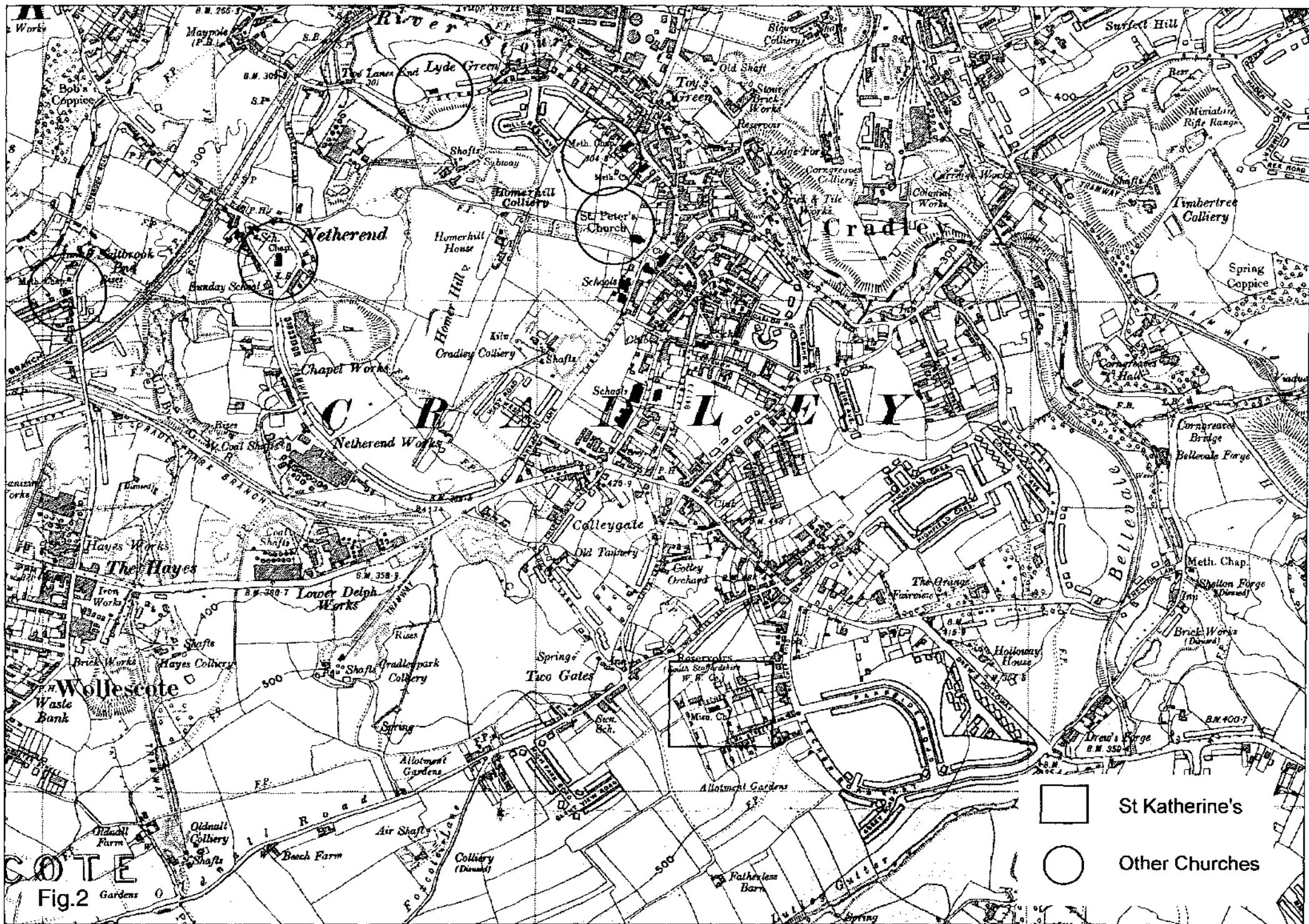


Fig. 1

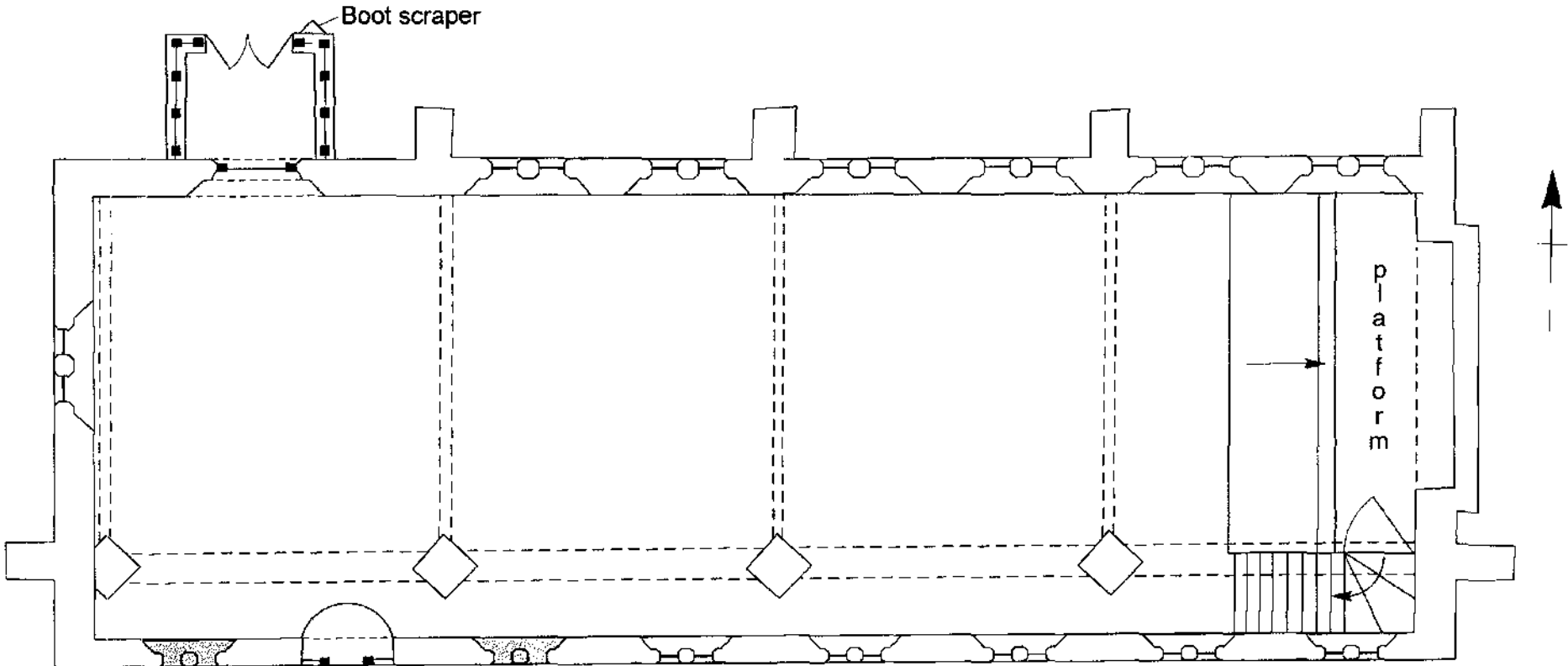
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SCOTE
Fig.2 Gardens

St Katherine's
 Other Churches

Ground Plan



 Blocked window

0 5m

Fig.3

North Elevation

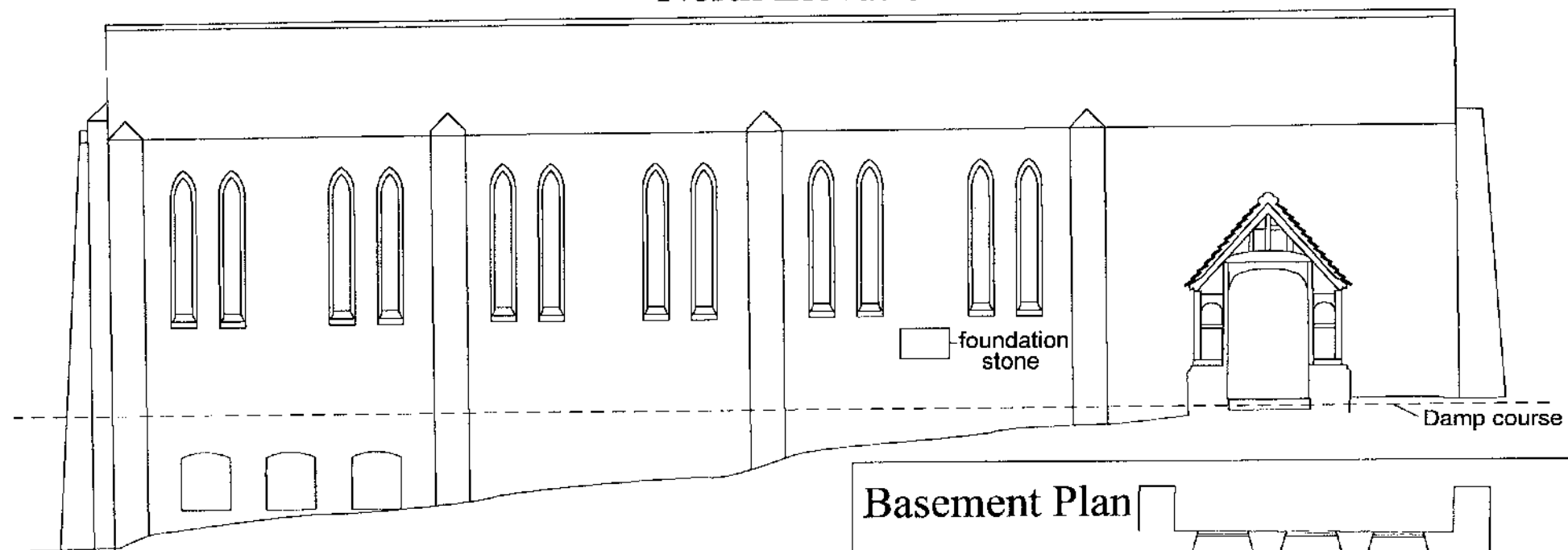


Fig.4

0 5m

Basement Plan

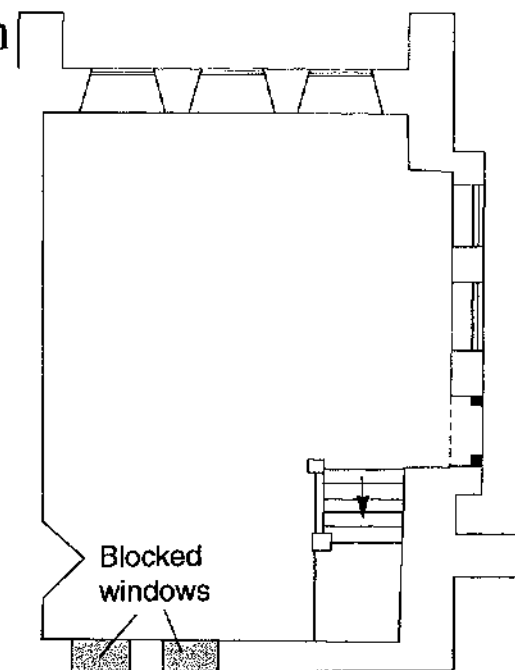
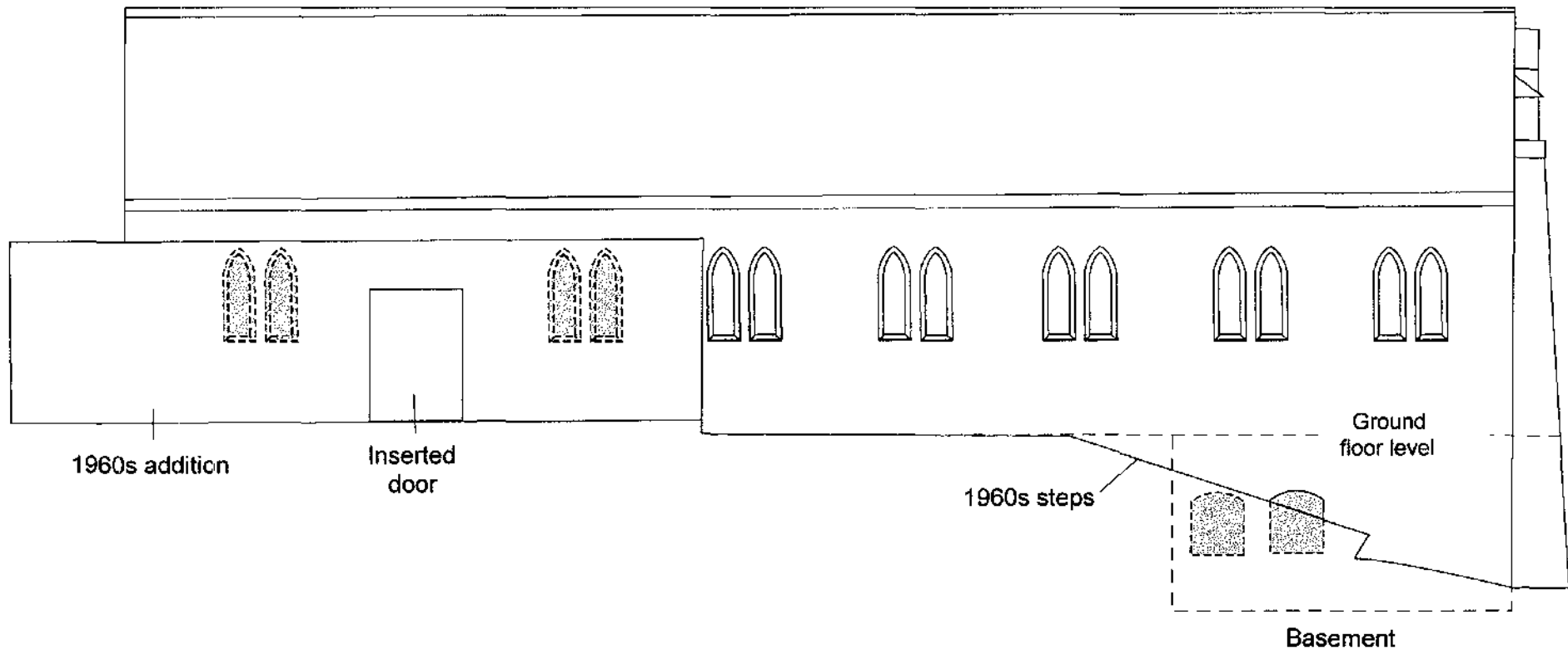


Fig.5

South Elevation



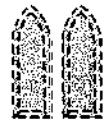
1960s addition

Inserted door

1960s steps

Ground floor level

Basement



Blocked windows only visible from the inside

0 5m

Fig.6

East Elevation

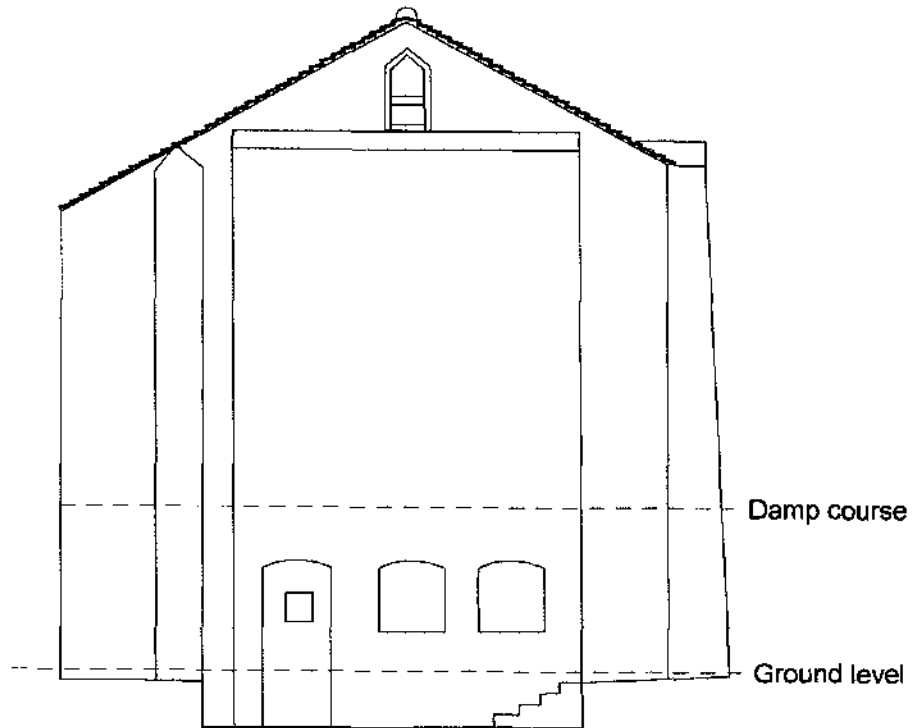
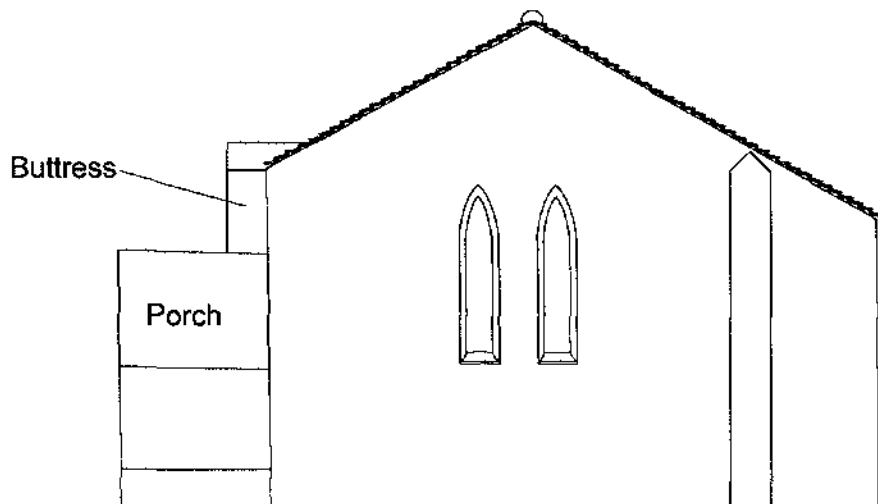


Fig.7

West Elevation



0 5m

Fig.8



Plate 1.



Plate 2.



Plate 3.

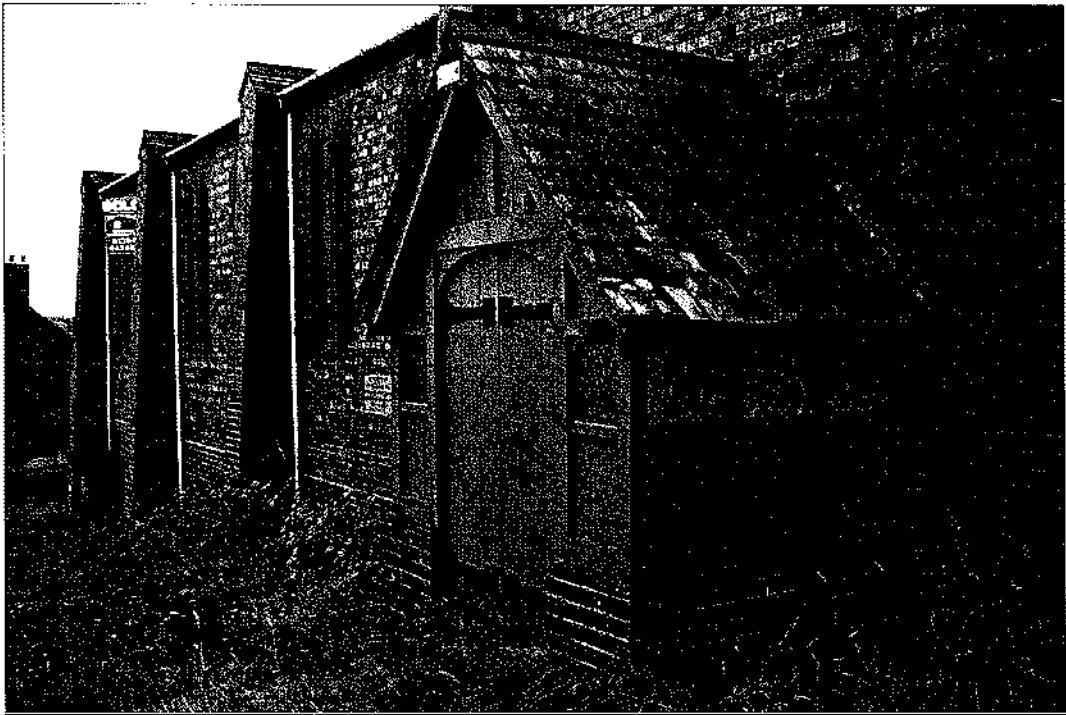


Plate 4.



Plate 5.



Plate 6.



Plate 7.



Plate 8.