New MC Block, University of Wolverhampton, Wolverhampton, West Midlands. An Archaeological Watching Brief 2002

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An Archaeological Watching Brief
2002

By
Mary Duncan
with a contribution by Emma Hancox

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

An archaeological watching brief was carried out during the groundworks for an extension to an existing electrical substation associated with the new MC Block, University of Wolverhampton, West Midlands (NGR SO 3924 2999). Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit carried out the work in January 2002 on behalf of the University of Wolverhampton. Test pitting associated with the development of the MC Block had uncovered disarticulated human bone and its location within the former boundary of the 19th century St. Peter's graveyard, prompted the developers to have the remaining groundworks archaeologically monitored. This was to enable the appropriate excavation and recording of any further human burials encountered. No in situ human burials were encountered during the groundworks, although some disarticulated human bone was recovered. No other archaeological deposits were recorded. This negative evidence suggests that any human burials had been cleared prior to the 20th century development of the University. Some human bones had obviously been missed in the original site clearance.

1.0 Introduction

This report outlines the results of an archaeological watching brief carried out by Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit (BUFAU), during groundworks associated with building work at the University of Wolverhampton, in Wolverhampton city centre. The area observed in this watching brief consisted of the excavations of foundations for the extension of the MD/MC Block substation, built in order to service the new MC Block. This development was thought to be within a 19th century overflow graveyard associated with nearby St. Peter's Church. Initial test pitting revealed the presence of human bones within the area of development, although this area was believed to have been cleared before development in the 1970s. In response to this discovery, the University of Wolverhampton commissioned BUFAU to monitor any further groundworks. BUFAU were to excavate and record any human burials in an appropriate manner and in accordance with the conditions of the existing Home Office Licence issued for the clearance of the site in the 1970s. Mike Shaw, Black Country Planning Archaeologist, was advised of this work. The watching brief followed the guidelines set down in the *Standards and Guidance for Archaeological Watching Briefs* (Institute of Field Archaeologists 1999).

2.0 Site Location (Figs 1 and 2)

The development site (NGR SO 3924 2999), is on the northeast side of Wolverhampton city centre just within the course of the ring road between Stafford Street to the east, Wulfruna Street to the south, St Peters Square to the west and the Wolverhampton Ring

Road to the north. Groundworks consisted of the excavation of foundations for a substation building. This was located to the north of the Harrison Learning Centre and to the southwest of the MC Block, directly to the east of the MD Block. This was in an area which consisted of access routes and landscaping in the heart of the University campus.

3.0 Geology and Topography

Wolverhampton is on a spur of the Birmingham sandstone plateau. The area of the site is situated within the vicinity of the highest part of the plateau that slopes steeply towards the north and northwest (Hooke and Slater 1986). It is also part of a watershed for local drainage systems (*ibid.*) The drift geology consists of glacial clays, sands and gravels with tendencies towards bogginess in places (*ibid.*). Parts of this natural subsoil seem to have been heavily terraced in some areas of the Wolverhampton University Campus development.

4.0 Historical and Archaeological Background

The area of the watching brief site has been subject to an extensive desk top evaluation (Watt 2001), and will not be repeated in detail here. A brief summary of the archaeological and historical background of this site is appropriate at this stage. This development is located in an area of medieval and post-medieval activity associated with the origins and development of Wolverhampton.

It is apparent that formerly the site lay within an overflow graveyard of St. Peter's which was in use from the early to the mid 19th century (Watt 2001). The location of the proposed substation is evidently within the northeast corner of this graveyard and although it was cleared in the 1970s prior to development of the campus (*ibid.*), it was possible that some burials remained *in situ* within the area of this development (Neilson pers comm.). Previous work carried out by BUFAU in 1996 (Litherland and Coates 1996), and in 2001 (Birmingham Archaeology, forthcoming), indicated that there was a distinct possibility that *in situ* human remains and/or associated features from the graveyard may still remain within the bounds of this development.

5.0 Aims

Under the provisions of the Home Office Licence the archaeological watching brief was focussed primarily on the recovery of human remains from the excavated material cleared to create the foundations of the substation. Accordingly, all excavated material was visually assessed in order to recover any disarticulated human remains. In addition observation also included identification of any articulated remains or grave-cuts missed by the clearance followed with excavation, recording and lifting of any human burials remaining *in situ*. A record was to be made of any archaeological deposits or features

present below the modern ground surface, in order to define their location, extent, date, character, condition and significance.

6.0 Methodology

These objectives were achieved through a series of site visits made in January 2002 during groundworks. These groundworks involved the excavation of foundations to depths required by the contractor, and using a mechanical excavator. This was done under archaeological supervision. Any archaeological deposits encountered during this excavation were to be excavated by hand. If appropriate, the exposed subsoil or archaeological horizon was to be defined and hand cleaned as necessary. A representative sample of surviving features was to be excavated in order to understand the structural record and the stratigraphic relationships of deposits.

All stratigraphic sequences were recorded, even where no archaeology was present. Features were planned at a scale of 1:20, and sections drawn through all cut features and significant vertical stratigraphy at a scale of 1:10. A comprehensive written record was maintained using a continuous numbered context system on pro-forma context cards and a monochrome print and colour slide photographic record was maintained throughout.

All human remains and associated grave material were recovered and stored at Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit, prior to reburial. The written, drawn and photographic record derived from this watching brief forms the site archive, which is currently housed at Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit.

7.0 Results

The groundworks which took place on this site comprised a series of trenches dug for the foundations of the wall of the substation building *c*.8.00m in length by,5.00m. These were dug to a depth of between 1.00m and 2.00m. Plinth type foundations were dug in the middle of this area, in order to support the transformers. These were dug through the existing stratigraphy down either to bedrock, or a similarly stable horizon. Generally, the stratigraphy comprised a layer of mixed sand and silts c.1.00m deep which lay under mixed rubble and silts c.0.50m deep, and finally a levelling layer for the path and landscaping surface which was c.0.50m deep. Much of the stratigraphy underlying the modern surface in the excavated area had been truncated severely by modern service trenches. These service trenches were mainly associated with the construction and maintenance of the existing substation. Disarticulated bones were recovered from all layers encountered, though only in relatively small numbers. There was no evidence of articulated burials during of this watching brief. Neither was there any evidence of other archaeological activity on this site.

8.0 Finds by E. Hancox

8.1 Human Bone

A small quantity of disarticulated human bone (1102g) was hand collected from the site. It consisted mostly of long bones, all of which were from adults. There were at least five individuals present. No obvious pathology was visible. The preservation of the bones was good, although some were fragmented.

8.2 Animal Bone

There was also a very small quantity of animal bone (150g) in with the human remains. The bones were well preserved. They were identified as sheep/goat and cow. The bones were probably all from modern breeds and there was evidence of a saw cut on the cow bone, suggesting that the bones were all residual. Due to the very small quantity of the assemblage and the problem of residuality the animal bone is considered to be of little archaeological importance.

9.0 Discussion

The absence of any articulated human skeletons suggests that this area of the graveyard had been cleared previously with some proficiency. In fact, the presence of disarticulated bones in deposits across the site is most likely to be related to the disturbance of earlier burials, when the graveyard was in use, rather than to the later clearance. However, within the confined area of this watching brief, it is possible that this area is not a representative sample of the surrounding, possibly less disturbed, zone.

The watching brief has demonstrated that some disarticulated human remains are present within the deposits below this part of the campus of Wolverhampton University. While the clearance of the graveyard appears successfully to have removed any articulated burials within the area of the watching brief, its limitations indicate that the possibility of some interments having been missed elsewhere within the graveyard remains. This, along with previous work in 1996 (Litherland and Coates 1996), and recent work in association with Harrison Learning Centre (Neilson & Coates 2002), provides some indication of the extent of the former St. Peter's graveyard. It also provides some idea of the extent to which it has successfully been cleared of burials.

10.0 Acknowledgements

This report was written by M. Duncan and edited by M. Hewson. The watching brief was carried out by M. Duncan and managed by G. Coates. The figures were drafted by Nigel Dodds. Thanks are due to E. Hancox and C. Neilson for their comments. Anthony Turner

monitored the project on behalf of the University of Wolverhampton and Mike Shaw monitored the project on behalf of Wolverhampton City Council. Finally, thanks are also due to Alan Bell of HGB Construction for facilitating work on site and to Paul Davis for the University of Wolverhampton who helped bring the project to a conclusion.

11.0 Bibliography

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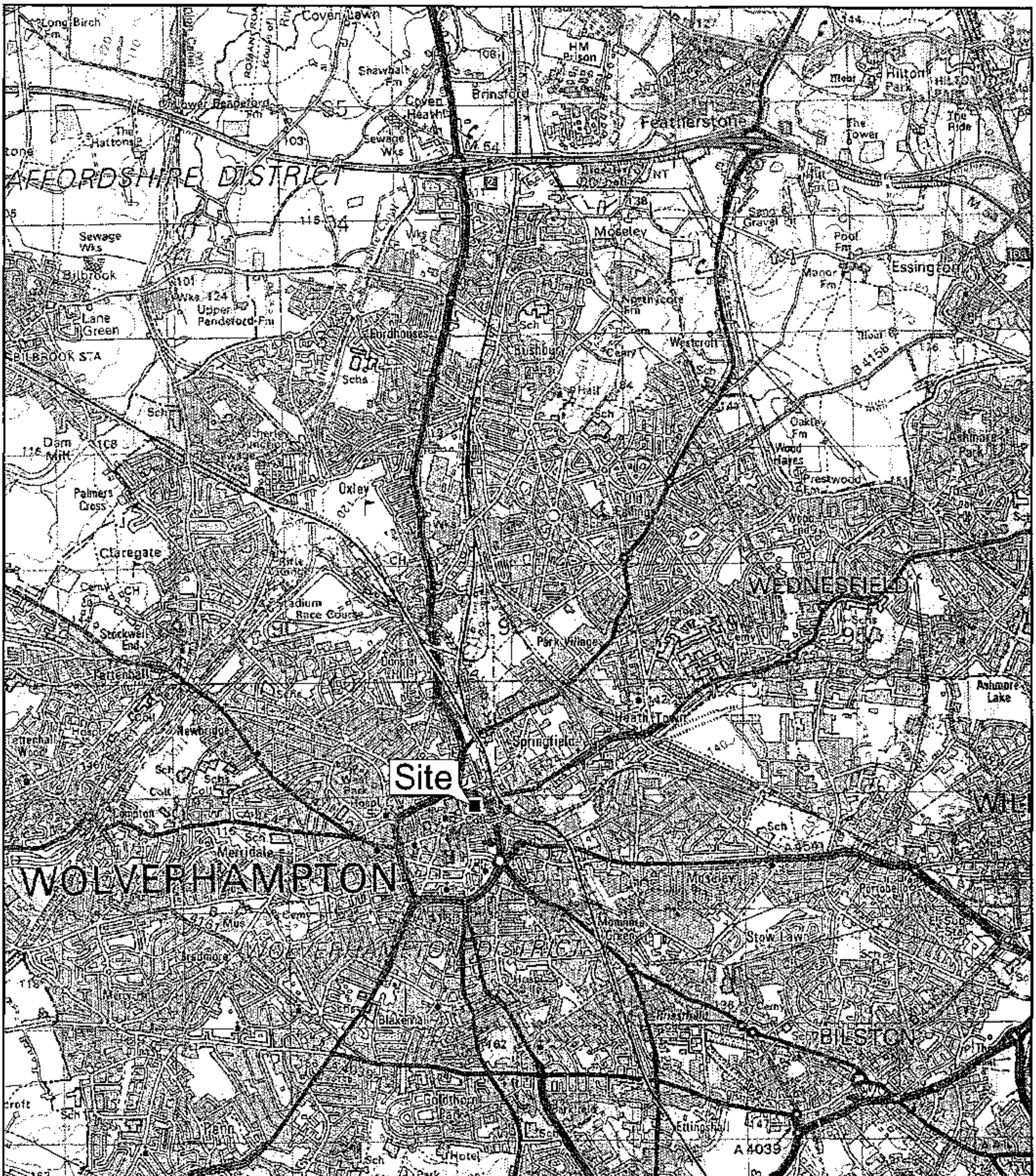
Site
WOLVERHAMPTON
WEDNESFIELD
BILSTON
COSELEY
SEDGLEY
Featherstone
Moseley
Essington
Bilbrook
Oxley
Claregate
Tettenhall
Newbridge
Springfield
Heath Town
Park Village
Penn
Ettingshall
Stow Lawn
Portobello
Penn Common
Gospel End Village
Baggeridge Wood Fm
Deepfields
Goldthorn Park
Blakenhall
Merridale
Bushbury
Fordhouses
Coven Lawn
Coven Heath
Brinsford
HM Prison
Hilton Park
Upper Pendeford Fm
Lane Green
BILBROOK STA
Palmers Cross
Dam Mill
Stockwell End
Compton
Fallings Park
Wood Hayes
Prestwood
Ashmore Park
Ashmore Lake
A 4039

Fig.1

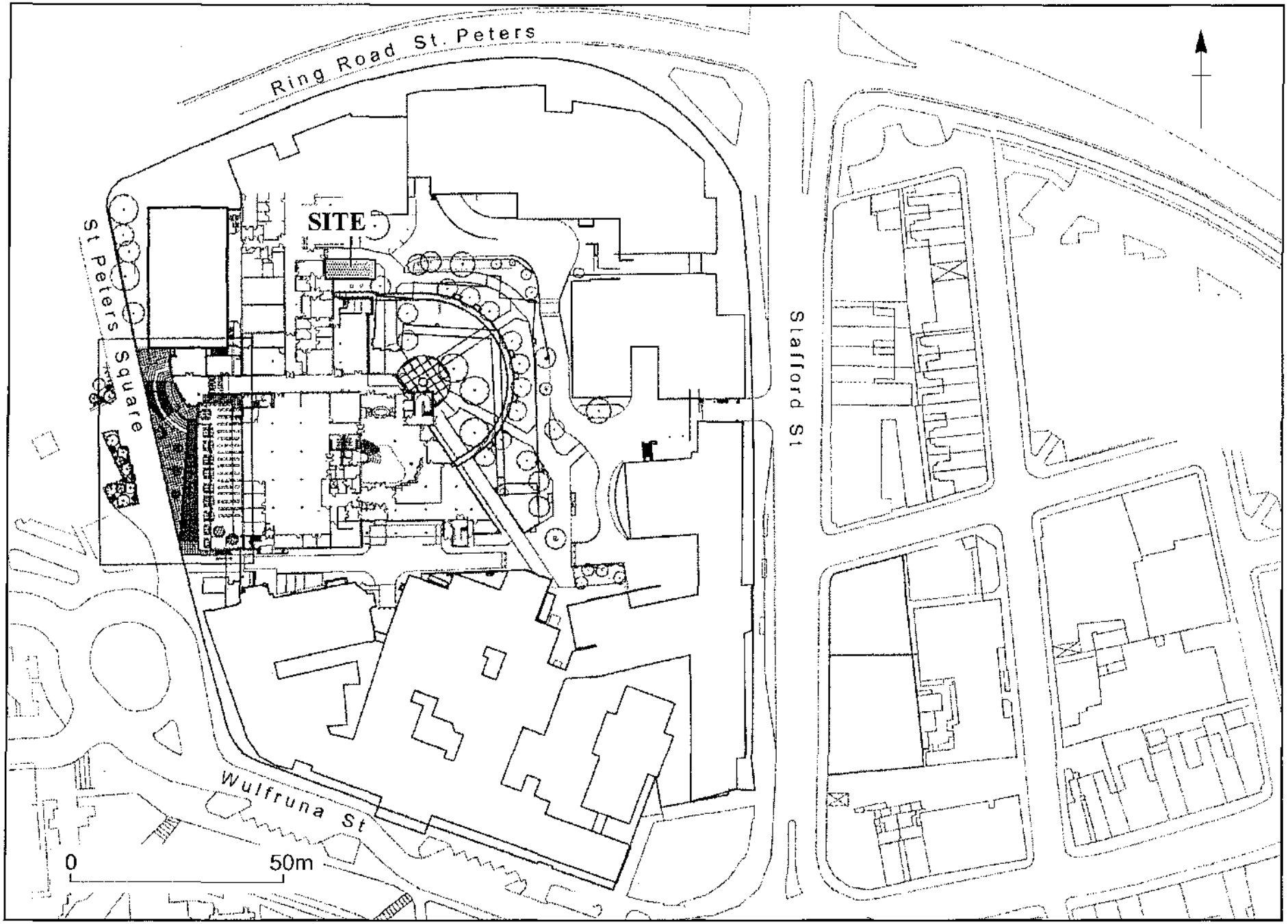
Ring Road St. Peters
SITE
St Peters Square
Stafford St
Wulfruna St
0
50m

Fig.2

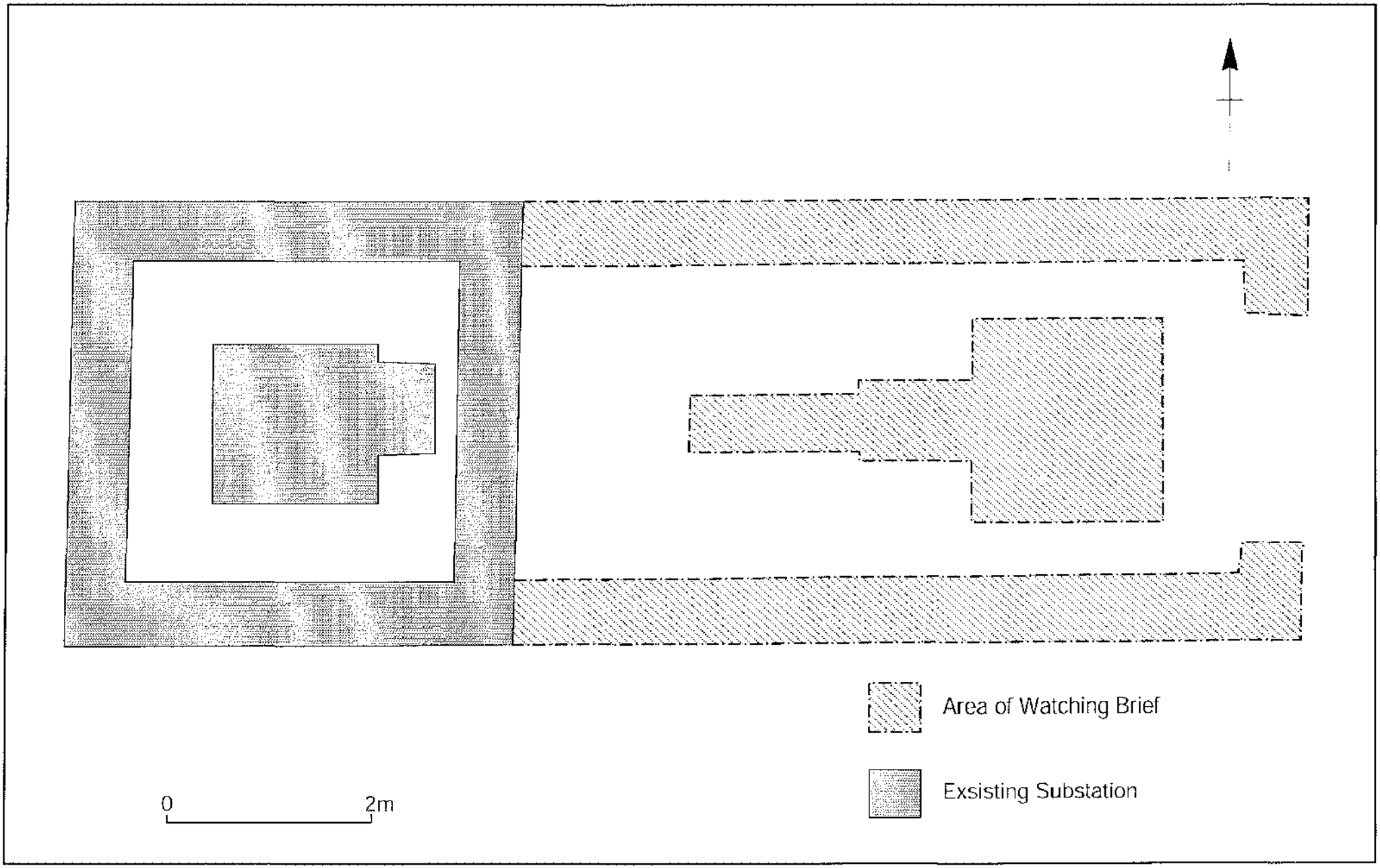

Fig.3