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Archaeological Recording at the Old Farmhouse and Dairy, Merridale, Wolverhampton, Black Country

Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit

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Archaeological Recording at the Old Farmhouse and Dairy, Merridale, Wolverhampton, Black Country

by
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1.0 Summary

In November 2002 Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit (BUFAU) undertook a programme of archaeological recording at the Old Farmhouse and Dairy, Merridale, Wolverhampton (NGR SO 9003 9841), for Maythorn Construction. The property is a Grade II Listed Building, which contains parts of a medieval house, and which was the subject of an archaeological assessment carried out by BUFAU in 2001. Stripping of the interior had revealed more of the historic fabric, and the excavation of foundation trenches for extensions to the rear of the building provided an opportunity to investigate the stratigraphy of the adjacent land. The building recording made further contributions to the interpretation of the internal arrangements of the house, and recording of the archaeological stratigraphy suggested that there was a high probability of medieval deposits surviving.

2.0 Introduction

In November 2002 Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit (BUFAU) undertook a programme of archaeological recording at the Old Farmhouse and Dairy, Merridale, Wolverhampton (Black Country SMR 2544), a Grade II Listed Building that contains parts of a medieval house. The work was commissioned by Chris Sedgemore of Maythorn Construction, and was the sequel to an archaeological assessment carried out by BUFAU in 2001 (Litherland and Watt 2001). This assessment recommended that further archaeological recording be carried out after the stripping of the interior walls and the further exposure of the building's historic fabric, and in the event of the buried archaeology being disturbed.

The programme of archaeology was based on the recommendations, following a site meeting, of Mike Shaw, Black Country Archaeologist, that were set out in a letter to Chris Sedgemore (Shaw 2002), and formed the brief for the archaeological work.

3.0 Location (Figure 1)

The Old Farmhouse and Dairy lies on the west side of Merridale Lane, at the junction with Merridale Road, approximately 1.5 km to the west of Wolverhampton city centre at NGR SO 9003 9841. The site is located on the shoulder of a gently sloping boulder clay ridge with a southwest aspect. This overlooks the valley of the Graisley Brook, which has cut through the boulder clay into an outcrop of Upper Mottled Sandstone.

4.0 Objectives

The areas of investigation were related to four aspects of the building work:-

- In the cross-wing the ground level floorboards had been taken up, the floor joists removed, and the fill of two former cellars partially excavated. Several dressed sandstone blocks had been recovered from this fill, and the sandstone walls of the cellars exposed. The brief was to evaluate the archaeological significance of the

floor timbers and the loose sandstone blocks and to record the character of the cellar walls.

- Stripping of the walls inside the house had revealed more of the historic fabric, and this had to be evaluated and recorded.

- Within the main range, as part of the original assessment, a test pit (Trial Pit 2) had been excavated adjacent to the position of the former cross-passage. This had revealed some stone footings on the alignment of the former spere-truss. Since the assessment, work had begun on extending Trial Pit 2 with a view to exposing a greater length of the footings. This extension was to be excavated and recorded archaeologically.

- To the rear (west) and side (south) of the property, where extensions were being built, foundation trenches had been excavated, foundations laid, and a service trench excavated. The trenches were to be cleaned and checked for archaeological deposits.

5.0 Method

Building Recording

Using the descriptive notes compiled during the archaeological assessment (Litherland and Watt 2001, 7-10) as a guide, a visual inspection of the property was undertaken, and any further elements of the historic fabric recorded by means of written notes, photography, and where appropriate, by additions to the existing 1:50 plans. The photography was carried out using monochrome, colour print and colour slide film.

Extension to Test Pit 2

The concrete floor was removed with a stonecutter, and the small section of exposed ground excavated archaeologically. The area was recorded before and after excavation by means of plans at 1:20, and by monochrome and colour slide photography.

Recording of Building Trench Sections

The positions of the foundation and service trenches were planned at 1:20, then cleaned, and the sections recorded by drawing at 1:20 and by monochrome and colour slide photography.

6.0 Results

6.1 Building Recording

The following descriptive notes are to be viewed as addenda to those compiled during the assessment (Litherland and Watt 2001, 7-11), and are to be used in conjunction with them. The system of room numbers devised for the 2001 report is also repeated here.

Undercroft (Figure 2)

U1 (front of cross-wing)

General: the cellar was filled with earth and rubble to within approximately 1m of the floor surface of G4. Examination of this material confirmed the conclusion of Litherland, who excavated a test pit here during the assessment, that it was a 20th-century deposit (Litherland and Watt 2001, 10-11).

North wall: built of dressed sandstone blocks (Plate 1)., possibly late medieval in date. In the centre is a brick pier for the main floor beam.

South wall: dressed sandstone blocks (Plate 2), possibly late medieval in date, rendered and lined as ashlar, served as an offset on which to support the main floor beam.

East wall: only brickwork visible.

West wall: dressed sandstone blocks, possibly medieval in date. In front of the stone a later wall has been built in 9" x4¼" x3¼" bricks, bonded with cement mortar, to serve as a support for the floor. At the south end the brick and stone wall has been broken through into U2.

Ceiling: one transverse beam, 17th-century in character, remains in position; it is chamfered on both sides, has plain run out stops, and was notched on either side for nine joists at 18" (0.46m) centres. Apart from the supports at either end there was also a central pier, the lowest visible component of which was a 0.50m x 0.25m sandstone block, above which were bricks bonded with cement mortar.

It seems clear from the structural evidence that the recently removed floor was a 20th-century creation, reusing earlier material, or a major 20th-century reconstruction and strengthening of an existing arrangement.

U2 (rear of cross-wing)

General: this cellar had also been filled with earth and rubble during the 20th century to within approximately 0.5m of the floor surface of G3. Apart from the stone east wall, only brick walls were visible, and it is not obvious whether there was originally a stone cellar here or not.

Ceiling: two axial floor beams remain in position, one to centre and one to south. The central beam was chamfered on both sides, and notched for seven joists at 18" (0.46m) centres, but was in poor condition. Its west end rests on a brick offset within the cellar wall, the east end was housed within the stone north wall and supported on a brick pier in front of the wall. The west end of the south beam falls short of the cellar west wall and rests on a brick pier; the east end rests on another pier made of 9"x 4¼" x3" bricks bonded with cement mortar. There was formerly a third beam to the north; the east end was supported on a brick pier and the west end on a wall extending across the northwest corner of the room.

Loose Timbers and Stones from U1 and U2

The timbers taken from the floors over U1 and U2 (Plate 3) were examined in order to assess their historical significance. These timbers were mostly 4½"x 4" (0.115m x 0.10m) unchamfered floor joists, one of which had a shorter piece jointed at right angles to it, possibly to accommodate a trap in the floor. None were reused pieces, and all are post-medieval in date; in view of their former association with the floor beams in U1 and U2 they probably date from the 17th century. There were no possible medieval timbers.

Amongst the stones recovered from U1 were a number of dressed sandstone blocks, which probably came from the walls of the undercroft. No special characteristics were noted apart from the deep tooling marks that had been recognised during the excavation of Test Pit 1 (Litherland and Watt 2001, 10).

Ground Floor (Figure 3)

G1 (main front room of cross-wing)

No new information.

G2 (pantry/service room)

North wall: immediately west of the doorway the cross-rail is a reused piece, having a redundant mortice in its face.

G3(Stairwell)

North wall: doorway to G2 is an insertion; it has been formed by cutting through a cross-rail, the peg holes of which survive on the eastern flanking post (the western post has been cut back at this point so corresponding evidence does not survive here). Although the archaeological evidence is slightly ambiguous, it is probable that the original doorway occupied the next timber panel to the west (Plate 4). Here the cross-rail (the reused piece visible from G2) appears to be an insertion; its east end is spliced, rather than jointed, into the stud, and it is not pegged at either end. In the stud on the east side of this possible doorway, approximately 1.88m above the concrete floor is a peg hole, though there is no corresponding peg on the west side. A further piece of evidence comes from the rail of the next panel to the west, which is pegged at its west end but not at its east end. The probable explanation is that the stud on the west side of the doorway has been replaced.

G4 (principal room of main range)

No new information.

G5 (service room of southern range)

South wall: chimney of room above (F5) is supported on two steel I-beams.

G6 (Dairy range)

No new information.

First Floor (Figure 4)

F1 (principal chamber, cross-wing)

South wall: the door to a cupboard at the east end is set between two studs of the timber frame; empty mortises and peg holes show that there was originally a horizontal rail between the two studs. Approximately 0.30m below the current ceiling is the original wall plate; evidence that the second floor is a later 17th-century addition.

West Wall: this wall has a noticeable lean towards the west, because of which the ceiling joists have been left unsupported by it. The problem was initially addressed by providing a new support in the form of a rail, which is attached to the wall. At a later date, it has evidently been necessary to take further measures, and a row of joist support blocks has been attached to the rail. A further structural remedy is now required.

Ceiling: the corbel on which the south end of the main cross-beam rests is now shown to be carried on a pair of steel I-beams.

F2 (secondary chamber, cross-wing)

South wall: see F3 north wall.

East wall: the main south post has on its north face a redundant mortice. This is not explicable as part of this cross-frame and suggests that the post is a reused piece. The mortice was probably for a brace.

F3 (stairwell, first floor)

North wall: doorway to F2 is an insertion; it has been formed by cutting through a cross-rail, the peg holes and mortices of which survive. The original door (Figure 4, Plate 5) was immediately west of it, the lintel is situated approximately 1.75m above floor level, and it is clear from the flanking studs that there was never a cross-rail across the opening. This doorway is blocked with bricks 9½" long x 2½" thick, bonded with lime mortar, and the existing staircase cuts across the front of it. On the former wallplate, notches for rafters can be seen, and between F1 and F2 is a scarf joint, apparently a fairly simple mortice and tenon arrangement, secured by two pegs.

F4 (chamber over main range)

North wall: rectangular fireplace opening exposed.

South wall: horizontal timber exposed at east end of brick wall. The bricks below the timber are 9 "x 4 "x 2 " and bonded with lime mortar. A diagonal fault line in the

brickwork runs diagonally across the timber from top left (east) to bottom right (west). It may represent a blocking or rebuilding.

F5 (chamber over south range)
South wall: small blocked, possibly inserted fireplace.

Second Floor (Figure 5)

S1 (main attic chamber over cross-wing)

South wall: blocked fireplace, the timber-frame having been cut through to accommodate it (Plate 6).

S2 (rear attic chamber over cross-wing)

West wall: interrupted tie-beam truss; the two main posts in the centre each retain, approximately 1.98m above floor level, a large peg hole, and corresponding mortice, apparently for a former door lintel which was removed when the current door frame was inserted. Some of the timber-frame panels are open, and are not provided with stave holes and grooves for wattle and daub. The original purlins were removed when the roof was heightened.

S3

No new information.

S4

No new information.

S5

No new information.

6.2 Below-Ground Archaeology

Extension to Trial Pit 2 (Figure , Plate 7)

Removal of a further section of the concrete floor revealed a continuation of the line of roughly hewn sandstone blocks that had been encountered in Trial Pit 4, and which was identified as the foundation for the medieval spere-truss. The two stones to the west were flat topped like the other stones in the foundation, but sloped markedly towards the south as though they had been subjected to subsidence. Laid against the south side of the wall was a compacted brown clay floor surface approximately 0.15m deep. The floor lay on top of the weathered clay subsoil. The subsoil itself had been cut by a foundation trench for the stone footings.

Service Trench (Figures 3, 6, & 7)

The service trench was excavated on a northeast/southwest alignment to the east of G4 down to the weathered clay subsoil. The trench is in low ground, the land to the

east and south falling away quite markedly towards this part of the site. Towards the southwest of the trench the lowest level, visible on the northwest-facing section, consisted of a yellow brown clay with occasional pebbles (1007), and above this a similar, but more mottled material with charcoal flecking (1004). Above 1004, in the southeast facing section there was a medium brown clay layer (1003). All three layers were cut or overlain by a dark grey/brown clayey soil containing charcoal flecks (1001), which dipped towards the northeast and was cut or overlain first by a dark grey/brown clay mix containing charcoal and mortar flecks (1002), and above by a medium brown clay soil (1000). The stratigraphy suggests an accumulation of layers related to the natural fall of the ground from southwest to northeast rather than specific features, but also points to the survival of deposits within the vicinity of the house. A single sherd of pottery made from an orange fabric, and bearing a dark brown manganese glaze, was recovered from context 1004 during the cleaning of the section, it probably dates from the 18th century. Also, a clay pipe bowl of *circa* 1600 was found immediately to the north of the foundations, although unstratified, there is a high probability that this artefact came from the disturbance caused when the site was prepared for the new foundations.

Foundation Trench (Figures 3 & 8)

The only open foundation trench lay to the south and west of the house. Here the land is considerably higher than the area in which the service trench was located, and, consequently, the potential for survival of the archaeology is greater. The principal feature of the east-facing section of the western foundation trench was a cobbled area, probably a yard surface (1009). It lay approximately 0.04m below the ground surface, was particularly prominent towards the southern end of the trench, but disappeared towards the northern end where the ground began to fall away. At this end of the trench the lower level consisted of a dark grey/brown clay soil containing mortar and charcoal flecks (1010), and was similar in character to 1002 in the northeast end of the service trench. There was no indication of date or particular archaeological features in this section. Owing to their proximity to the current ground surface, the cobbles probably served as a yard surface until comparatively recently. However, the height of the ground suggests that they may seal much earlier archaeological deposits.

The southwest corner of the foundations cut through a cistern or well, probably of 19th-century date. This was built of bricks, treated on the inside with some kind of render, and was sealed with a vault, the water being extracted by a metal pipe.

7.0 Interpretation

The Building

The discovery of the original doorways into G2 and F2 shows that these two rooms were entered from what is now the stair turret, a structure that lies outside the west wall of the main range. This turret belongs to a later phase than the cross-wing, so it must have been preceded by an earlier structure in this position. There are three main possibilities:-

- A new two-storey main range, since rebuilt and reduced in width, was constructed at the same time as the cross-wing.

- There was an earlier stair turret, contemporary with the cross-wing, that has since been rebuilt.
- When the cross-wing was rebuilt, the medieval hall was still in existence. If this was the case, then the hall must have extended further to the west than the present main range, which replaced it. G2 (and G1) would have been entered from the cross-passage; access to F2 (and F1), however, would either have been from a gallery over the passage, or the hall must have had a first floor inserted by the time the cross-wing was built.

Of these alternatives, the first is the least likely, on the grounds that the plan of the cross-passage has been retained in the existing building. If the whole structure had been built anew it is less likely that this feature would have survived.

It is not possible to prove or disprove either of the other two possibilities, but it is worth recalling that the excavation of Test Pit 2 during the assessment showed that the stone footings on the line of the former spere truss were cut by the foundations for the brick west wall (Litherland and Watt 2001, 11). This shows that the footings originally extended further to the west, in which case the medieval hall range may have been wider than its successor.

8.0 Recommendations

Maythorn Construction faces a number of decisions associated with the renovation of the property that impinge on the below-ground archaeology and the integrity of the historic building. This section is intended to offer some guidance on these issues. However, these will have to be worked out in substance with the Conservation Office of Wolverhampton MBC if these works are not covered by an existing Listed Building Consent.

- The sandstone blocks recovered from U1 are almost certainly part of the historic, possibly medieval, fabric; it is possible that they came from the west wall when it was breached to link U1 with U2. Although these stones are no longer *in situ* they should be retained, for future reference, preferably within U1 itself which is likely to have been their original context.

- Regarding the cellars themselves, the overriding concern is that the sandstone walls be retained, undamaged by whatever structural processes are undertaken in respect of the cellars, including the laying of concrete.

- The timbers that were taken from the floors over U1 and U2 are probably 17th century in date, though there are grounds for believing that they were not *in situ* when they were removed. Probably, they represent a part of the historic fabric that has been reconstructed, and ought to be retained if structurally feasible.

- It is intended leave the stone footings on the site of the spere truss exposed to view, and to reveal a further length of the structure. The excavation in the vicinity of these footings showed that the deposits above the clay floor on the south side were recent, probably contemporary with the concrete. Any excavation below this level should be undertaken by an archaeologist. From a presentational and interpretative point of view, it is suggested that any further length of the clay floor

that is exposed should be retained so that it would be possible to demonstrate the stratigraphical and structural sequence of weathered clay surface, construction trench, stone footings and clay floor in the manner of a cut-away diagram. The arrangement would have to be designed carefully to avoid deterioration (damp, mould etc).

- It is also intended to expose, as a feature, one of the wattle and daub panels of the wall between F1 and F2. It is recommended that the approach suggested for the footings is adopted in this instance too, so that all stages of construction can be seen.

- Owing to the lean of this wall, it will be necessary to construct a new support for the ceiling joists of F1. Any solution to the present problem should avoid damage to the original fabric (i.e. the timber framed wall). Two earlier measures to deal with this problem, namely, the rail and the later blocks that have been fixed against the wall are not part of the original fabric, but apparently belong to the period after the addition of the cross-wing's upper storey. However, if they were retained, they would add to the interest of the house through a visual demonstration of its structural history.

- In F4 a number of the ceiling joists require repair. These joists appear to be original and the presumption should be for retention of as much of the original fabric as possible. This means replacing sections, where possible, rather than whole timbers. Regarding the replacement timber, there is no reason why new, as opposed to old, wood should not be used.

- In respect of the below-ground archaeology, the section of the foundation trench suggests that there is a reasonably good chance that medieval layers have survived. There is a likelihood then that further excavations on the site (e.g. service trenches) would encounter archaeological deposits and features of this period. It is therefore suggested that an archaeologist be present when ground disturbance is being carried out.

9.0 Acknowledgements

This report was written by Malcolm Hislop and edited by Steve Litherland, who also managed the project. Annette Hancocks commented on the date of the pottery, and Erica Macey on the date of the clay pipe. Bryony Ryder prepared the illustrations. Thanks are due to Chris Sedgemore and the staff of Maythorn Construction for their assistance in accomplishing the fieldwork, and to Mike Shaw of Wolverhampton MBC for his advice on the scope of the archaeological brief.

10.0 References

Litherland, S. and Watt, S. 2001. *An archaeological assessment of the Old Farmhouse and Dairy, Merridale, Wolverhampton, Black Country* (BUFAU Report No. 777).

Shaw, M. 2002. *The Old Farmhouse and Dairy: summary of meeting 10.11.02* (letter to Chris Sedgemore of Maythorn Construction).

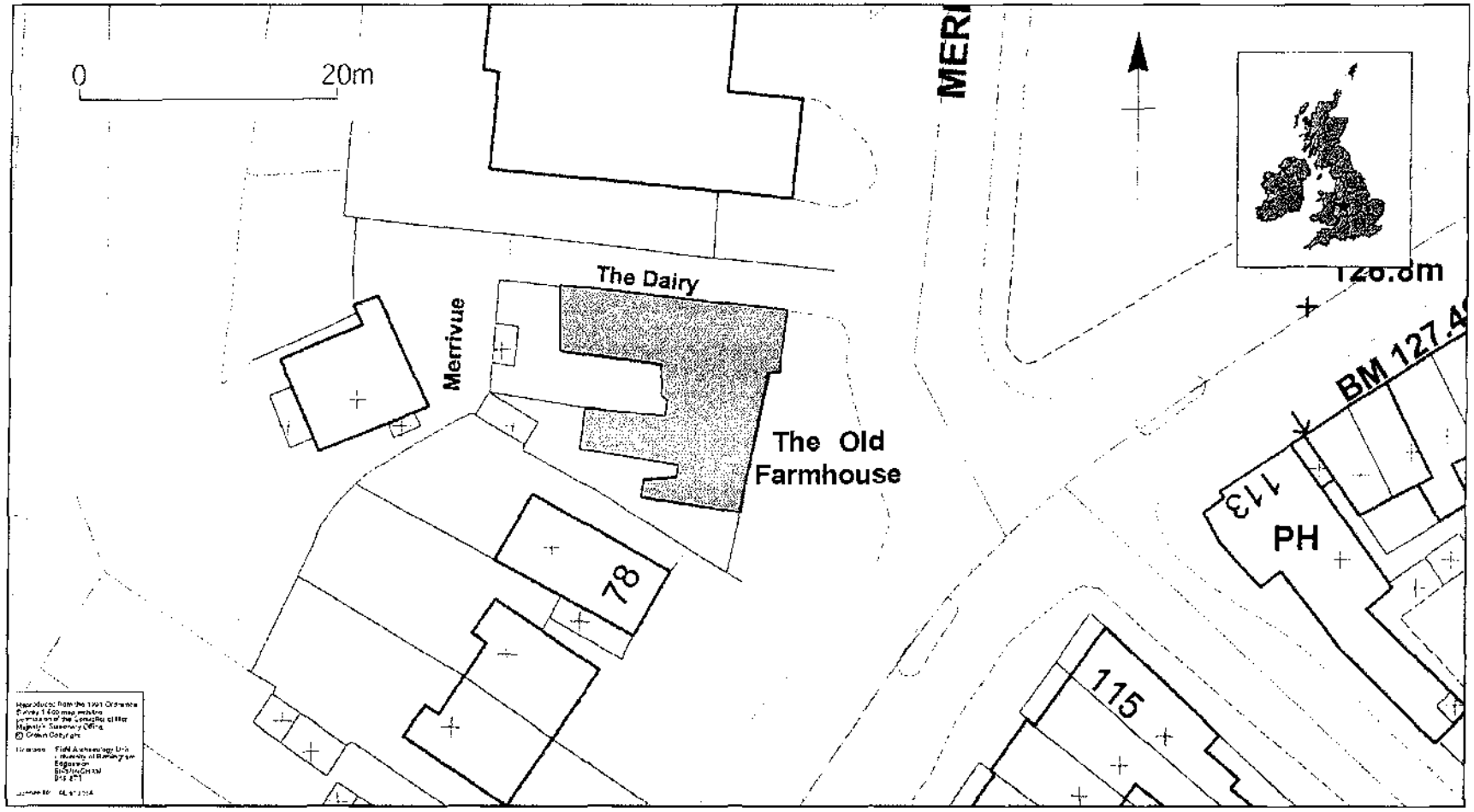
0
20m
The Dairy
Merrivue
The Old
Farmhouse
78
115
PH
113
BM 127.4

Fig.1

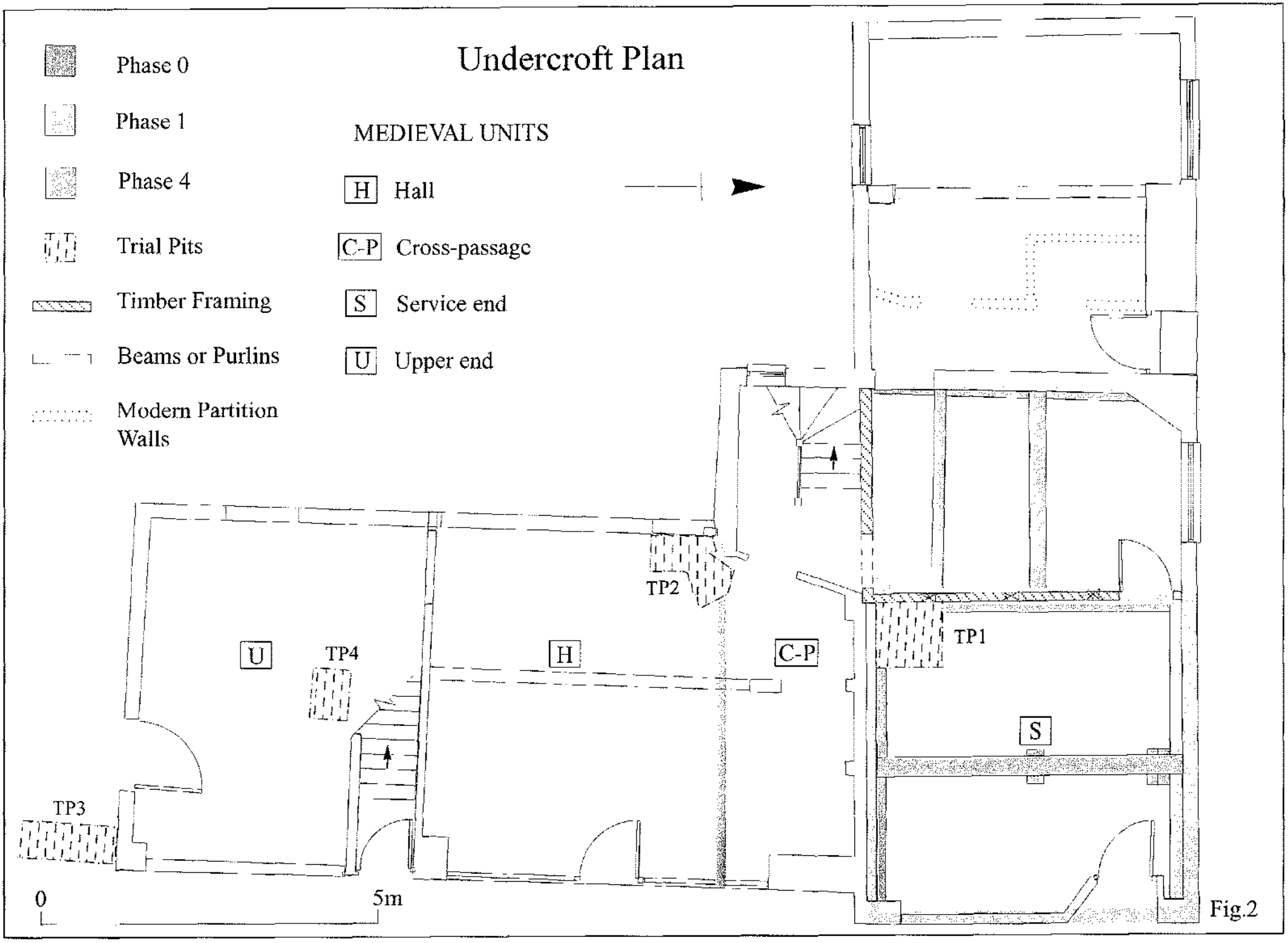
Undercroft Plan
Phase 0
Phase 1
Phase 4
Trial Pits
Timber Framing
Beams or Purlins
Modern Partition Walls
MEDIEVAL UNITS
H Hall
C-P Cross-passage
S Service end
U Upper end
TP1
TP2
TP3
TP4
U
H
C-P
S
0
5m

Fig.2

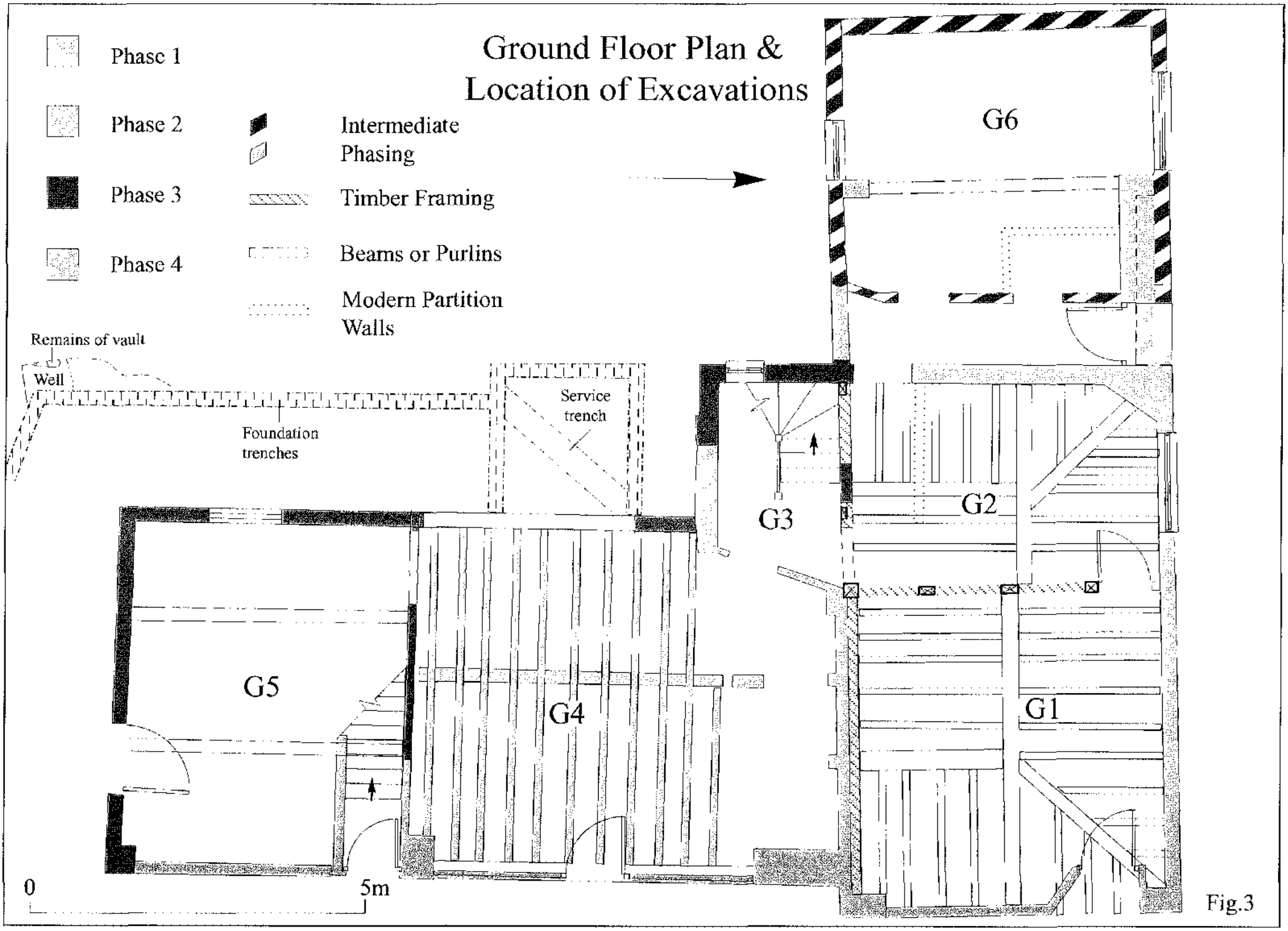
Ground Floor Plan &
Location of Excavations
Phase 1
Phase 2
Phase 3
Phase 4
Intermediate Phasing
Timber Framing
Beams or Purlins
Modern Partition Walls
Remains of vault
Well
Foundation trenches
Service trench
G1
G2
G3
G4
G5
G6
0
5m

Fig.3

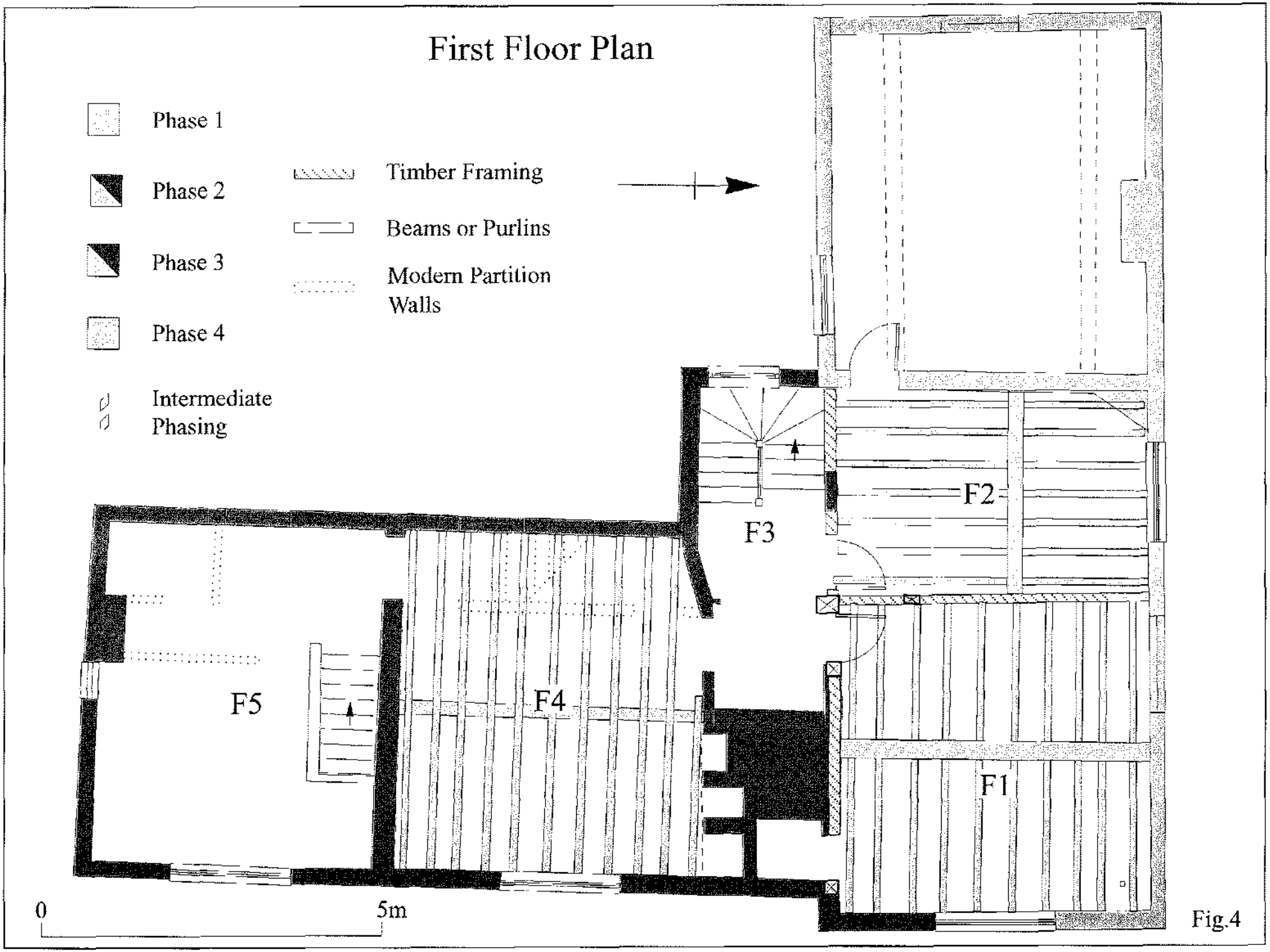
First Floor Plan
Phase 1
Phase 2
Phase 3
Phase 4
Intermediate Phasing
Timber Framing
Beams or Purlins
Modern Partition Walls
F1
F2
F3
F4
F5
0
5m

Fig.4

Second Floor Plan

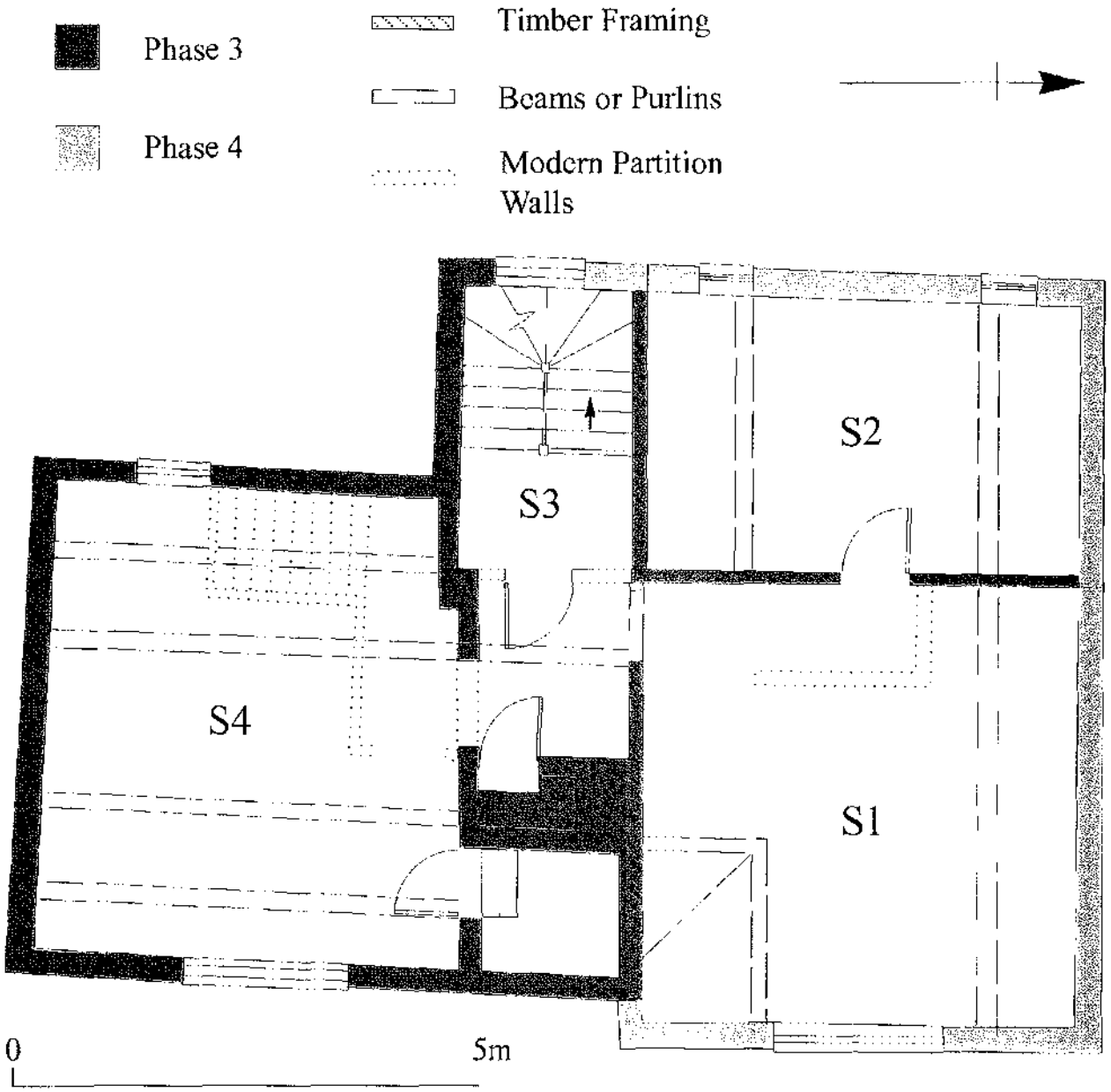

Fig.5

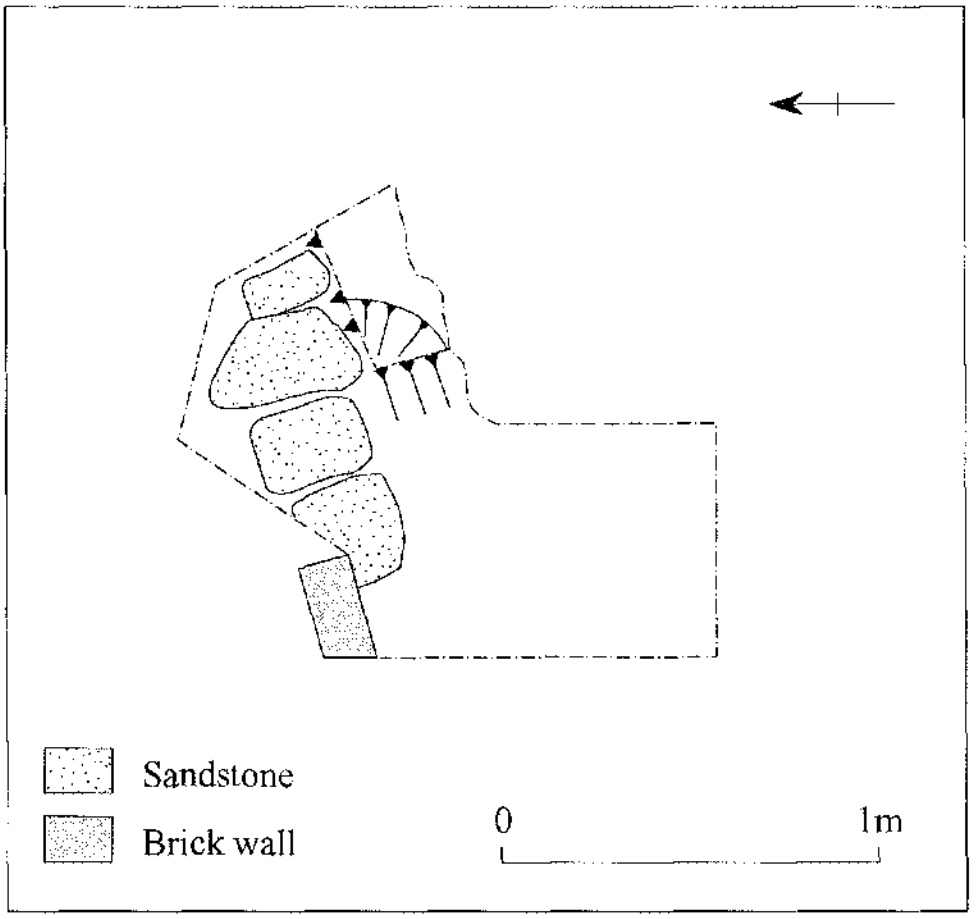

Fig.6 Plan of extension to Test Pit 2

Fig.7 Northeast facing section of service trench

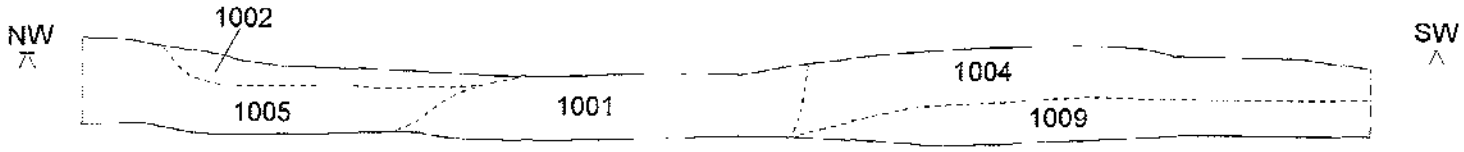

Fig.8 Southwest facing section of service trench

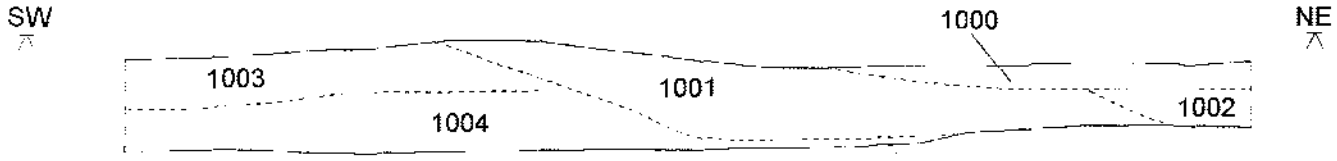

Fig.9 West facing section of foundation trench

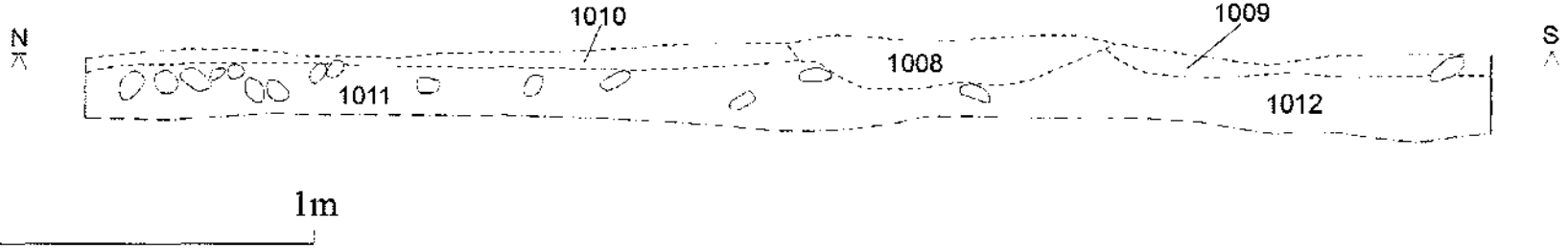

Plate 1. U1, north wall from the south

Plate 2. U1, south wall from the north

Plate 3. Floor joists from the cross-wing

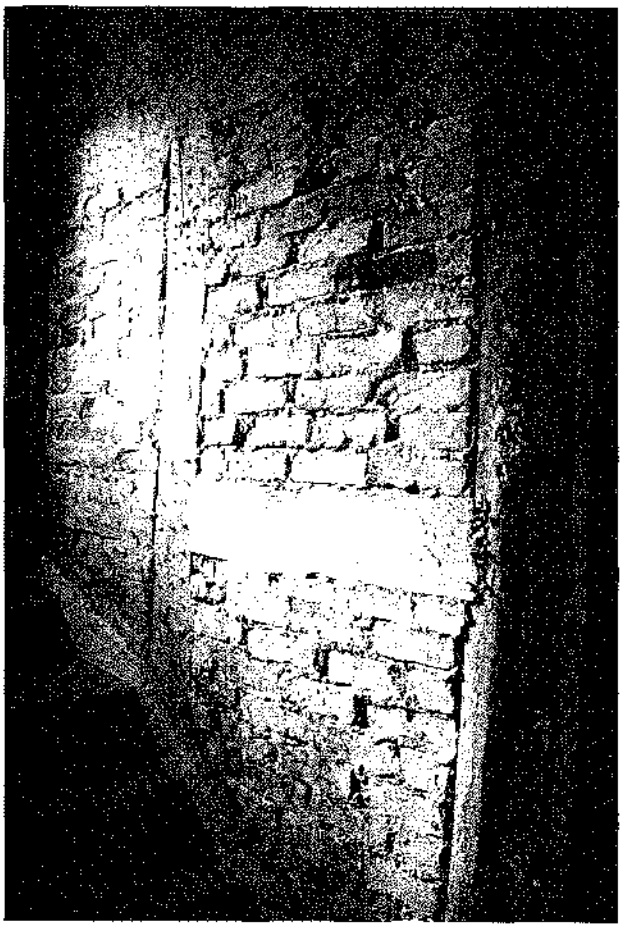

Plate 4. Blocked doorway to G2
from the southeast

Plate 5. Blocked doorway to F2 from the southeast

Plate 6. Blocked fireplace in S1 from the north

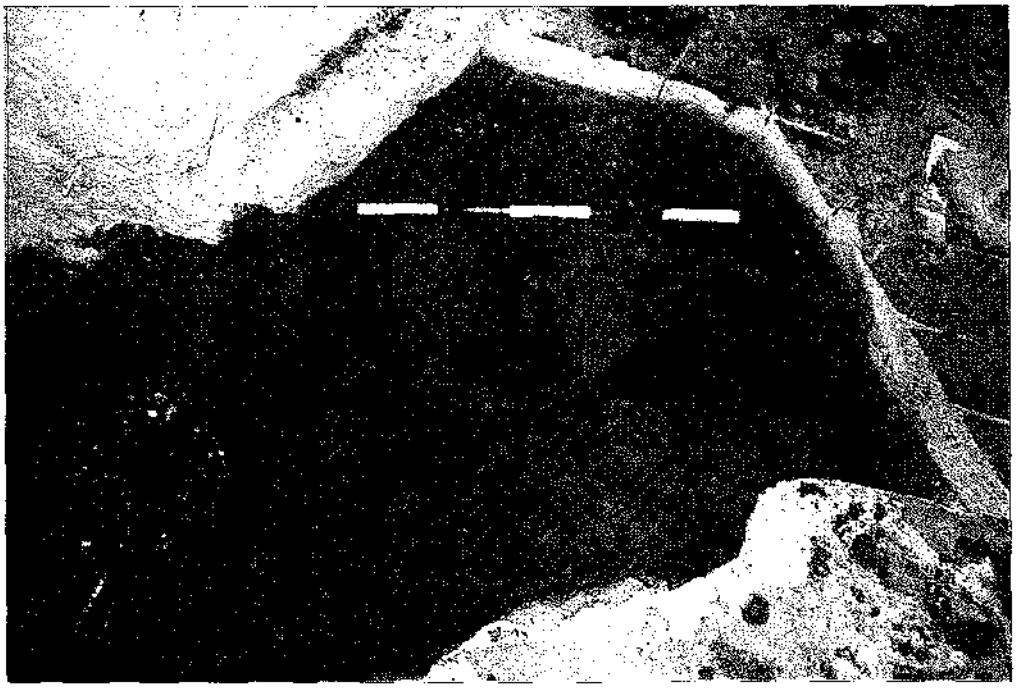

Plate 7. Extension to Test Pit 2 from the south