



THE UNIVERSITY
OF BIRMINGHAM

**Archaeological Building
Recording in the East
Wing of Alton Towers,
Alton, Staffordshire**

Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit



Institute of Field
Archaeologists

Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit
Project No. 1039
February 2003

**Archaeological Building Recording in the East Wing of Alton Towers, Alton,
Staffordshire**

by
Malcolm Hislop

For further information please contact:
Simon Buteux, Iain Ferris or Alex Jones (Directors)
Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit
The University of Birmingham
Edgbaston
Birmingham B15 2TT
Tel: 0121 414 5513
Fax: 0121 414 5516
E-Mail: BUFAU@bham.ac.uk
Web Address: <http://www.bufau.bham.ac.uk>

Contents

- 1.0 Summary
- 2.0 Introduction
- 3.0 Site location
- 4.0 Objectives
- 5.0 Method
- 6.0 Historical and Architectural Background
- 7.0 Results
- 8.0 Discussion
- 9.0 Acknowledgements
- 10.0 References

Figures

- 1. Location plan
- 2. Location of site
- 3. Drawing of Alton Lodge c.1800
- 4. Plan of Alton Lodge in 1804
- 5. Position of cross-wall
- 6. North elevation
- 7. South elevation
- 8. East elevation

Plates

- 1. North elevation, west end of cross-wall.
- 2. North elevation, vertical joint at first floor level.
- 3. North elevation, south jamb of east window.
- 4. South elevation, reused stone at first floor level.
- 5. South elevation, reused stone at first floor level.
- 6. South elevation, junction of cross-wall and east wall at second floor level.
- 7. Junction of east wall (right) and chapel of 1833 (left) after removal of 19th-century facing.
- 8. East elevation, masonry behind the 19th-century facing.
- 9. East elevation, vertical joint in the masonry behind the 19th-century facing.
- 10. Wall stub projecting from east wall at third floor level.
- 11. Keying for former cross-wall opposite wall stub.

Archaeological Building Recording at Alton Towers, Staffordshire

1.0 Summary

In January 2003 Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit undertook the archaeological recording of a cross-wall within the east wing of Alton Towers, Staffordshire (NGR SK06430743), in advance of consolidation and repair work that involved partial dismantling and reconstruction. Alton Towers is essentially a creation of the first half of the 19th century, but incorporates an older house known as Alton Lodge that was in existence in the early 18th century. The cross-wall lay within Alton Lodge, and crucial to its interpretation was its structural relationship to what had been the outer walls of the earlier house. Difficulties lay in the fact that much of the early stonework had been replaced in the 19th century, making the evidence appear ambiguous or even contradictory, and in the treatment of masonry in this part of Staffordshire, which displays very little typological development between the 17th and 19th centuries. However, the tentative conclusions were that Alton Lodge was built in two structural phases, denoted by a vertical joint in the masonry of the east elevation, and that the cross-wall formed an internal wall in the second phase of construction.

2.0 Introduction

In January 2003 Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit (BUFAU) undertook the archaeological recording of an internal rubble-built cross-wall at Alton Towers, Staffordshire, in advance of consolidation and repair work that involved partial dismantling and reconstruction. The work was commissioned by Alton Towers Ltd and was a condition of the Listed Building Consent for the repairs.

It was clear from a preliminary examination of the wall, prior to the commencement of the recording work, that analytical recording had a limited potential for increasing our knowledge of the structural and spatial development of the house, and that it offered an opportunity for identifying any pre-19th-century structures or materials that may have been incorporated into the structure.

The recording was undertaken according to a brief prepared by BUFAU in consultation with Staffordshire Moorlands District Council. The survey work also followed the requirements set down in the Standard and Guidance for the *Archaeological Investigation and Recording of Standing Buildings or Structures* (Institute of Field Archaeologists 1999). Essentially it consisted of a Level 3 record as defined by the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England (RCHME 1996), modified to suit the particular and limited scope of the project.

3.0 Site Location

Alton Towers is situated in north Staffordshire, close to the village of Alton, on the high ground that rises from the north side of the River Churnet (NGR SK0643 0743, Fig. 1). It is a large Grade II* Listed country house of asymmetrical plan (Fig. 2),

located within an extensive landscaped park that incorporates a large collection of 19th-century garden buildings.

4.0 Objectives

The primary objective of the project was to provide an analytical archaeological record of the wall prior to dismantling. More specifically, the work provided the opportunity to determine whether the structure formed part of the pre-19th-century phase of the house.

5.0 Method

The two elevations of the wall were recorded at a scale of 1:20, off horizontal data. The drawings were supplemented by monochrome and colour photography, and by structural analysis.

6.0 Historical and Architectural Background

Although Alton Towers is largely a creation of the first half of the 19th century it is built on the site of, and incorporates part of, a house known as Alton or Alveton Lodge, a building that was in existence in 1686 and which may have had earlier, perhaps medieval, origins. The house was depicted in 1732 in the background of an engraving by Samuel and Nathaniel Buck, and a closer view of the east front was recorded *c.* 1800. This shows a symmetrical three-storey, four-bay building of 18th-century character (Fisher 1998, I, 4-6).

Between 1811 and *c.*1820 Alton Lodge was converted into a larger Gothic mansion that was given the name Alton Abbey. Part of the older house was incorporated into the east wing of the new work, undergoing remodelling at the same time. The cross-wall lay within the former Alton Lodge, behind, and at right angles to, the east front depicted in the drawing of *c.* 1800 (Fig. 3). A plan of the Lodge, drawn up in 1804, shows a wall in roughly this position (Fig. 4). Architects involved in the creation of Alton Abbey were Thomas Hopper, William Hollins and Thomas Allason, Hollins overseeing alterations in the old house in 1817 (Fisher, 1998, I, 7-9).

7.0 Results

The cross-wall was situated between the two centre windows of the wing (Fig. 5). It was approximately 6m high, 4m wide and 0.52m thick. It was built of coursed sandstone rubble, incorporating some reused fragments of dressed stone and a number of dressed stone blocks, and laid with lime-based mortar. It rose from the 19th-century first floor level through two full stories and part of a further storey. Formerly, it extended right across the building, but most of the western half (Plate 1) had been demolished by the time of the survey, and the brief was confined to the eastern part.

North Elevation (Fig. 6)

First Floor

Plaster had been applied directly to the wall, and still adhered to the western half, terminating 0.4m above the existing floor level. Almost immediately beneath this, extending across the entire length of the wall, was a row of eight holes for timber plugs, approximately 0.02m square, probably for fixing skirting boards to. Towards the eastern end was an irregular vertical joint in the masonry (Plate 2), beginning at the western corner of the timber lintel over the east window embrasure, and descending to floor level, suggesting, on the whole, that the cross-wall post-dated the east wall of the house. The construction of the embrasure itself was of very poor quality, giving the impression that the opening was secondary and had been broken through an older wall. An examination of the area behind the southern jamb of the window frame suggested that the stonework of the window frames had been cut back in the 19th century to accommodate the new surrounds. One of the stones behind the jamb was a fine-grained sandstone with fine diagonal striations (Plate 3); this stone contrasted markedly with the coarser-grained herringbone-patterned masonry that is more characteristic of Alton Towers. At the eastern extremity of the wall there was a doorway, the substantial timber lintel of which projected westwards from the surviving wall.

Second Floor

At second floor level the lower part of the wall appeared to butt against the east wall in a continuation of the vertical joint recorded below, though the upper part was obscured. Immediately west of the window was a doorway, 2.04m high by 0.98m wide, with a timber lintel. The jambs were formed of similar coursed rubble as the rest of the wall, including one reused piece of dressed stone with coarse herringbone pattern tooling, and a few 9" x 4" x 2¼" bricks, probably of 16th or 17th-century date.

To the west of the door, 0.06m above the level of the sill, was a row of three plug holes, approximately 0.06 x 0.08m, and, 0.08m above sill level, a row of five plug holes approximately 0.02m square. The western end of the wall was formed by a series of dressed blocks, which contrasted markedly with the rubble work. It is evident that they formed the eastern jamb of a primary doorway that splayed outwards towards the south (Fig. 7, inset). Within the wall at this level was a number of reused fragments of dressed stone, including two with coarse diagonal tooling and another piece with herringbone tooling.

Third Floor

Only a fragment of the wall survived above third floor level, up to a height of 1.1m. The only features were two plug holes approximately 0.2m above the floor, and an irregular shaped hole that seems to have been broken through after the building went out of use.

South Elevation (Fig. 7)

First Floor

Two blocks of dressed masonry were recorded in this wall. One of these measured 0.60m x 0.19m and had herringbone pattern tooling (Plate 4), the other was 0.32m x 0.24m and had fine diagonal tooling (Plate 5). Patches of plaster survived at both ends of the wall. That at the east end was applied directly to the wall, whereas that at the west end comprised two skins applied to laths, which were themselves fixed to vertical batons attached to wooden plugs set into the walls. Two irregular rows of plug holes, about 0.08m x 0.06m, were visible at approximately 0.90m and 1.6m above floor level; one of the lower row of holes was cut through the plaster at the east end of the wall. The doorway at the west end of the wall retained the main elements of its timber frame and a chamfered, plaster-covered eastern jamb.

The relationship between the cross-wall and the east wall was unclear. At least one of the east wall stones was jointed into the cross-wall, but several of the cross-wall courses were jointed into the east wall.

Second Floor

At second floor level there was a row of floor joist sockets, and, in the east wall, a corresponding offset level with the sill of the eastern doorway. Ten centimetres above the joist sockets was a row of plug holes, probably for the skirting boards. A large patch of plaster on a lath and batten framework survived between the eastern and western doorways. A number of plug holes in the remaining areas of the wall indicated that this plasterwork extended across the whole surface.

At this level the east wall appeared to butt against the cross-wall (Plate 6).

Third Floor

At third floor level three floor joist sockets survived.

The East Elevation (Fig. 8)

Crucial to the interpretation of the cross-wall was the relationship between it and the east wall. At the time of the survey, the east wall retained similar proportions to those shown in the drawing of c.1800, though there was now a blind basement storey that is not evident in the drawing, and which was probably a creation of the 19th century.

However, it was clear from an investigation of the external elevation during repair work, that not only had the window frames been replaced, but that the entire front had been refaced with 19th-century ashlar masonry. The masonry of both the chapel of 1833, at the south end of the old east front, and the eastern entrance tower of 1811-20, at the north end, butted against this 19th-century refacing which must therefore pre-date both (Plate 7).

Dismantling of the 19th-century masonry prior to reinstatement presented an opportunity to examine the old front of Alton Lodge. This, like the 19th-century

facing, was constructed of high quality ashlar masonry, with herringbone pattern tooling (Plate 8). Metal clamps had been used to tie in the two phases of stonework. In the centre of the elevation (Plate 9), at third floor level, there was a vertical joint in the masonry, the two halves of the face being keyed together with a single block. This joint did not coincide with the position of the cross-wall but with the north side of a short, internal wall stub situated immediately south of the cross-wall at third floor level (Plate 10). This stub appeared to correspond with traces of a cross-wall on the west side of the room (Plate 11).

8.0 Discussion

Much of the sandstone ashlar masonry used at Alton Towers bears herringbone pattern tooling marks. This type of masonry is characteristic of the local vernacular architecture of Alton and the surrounding parishes (e.g. Cotton, Farley, Oakamoor) and ranges in date from the 17th century (e.g. Red Lion Cottage, Smithy Bank, Alton, 1657) to the mid-19th century (e.g. West Lodge, Moor Court, Oakamoor, 1861). This long period of popularity means that the pattern has limited usefulness for dating in a building like Alton Towers, where the buildings are all known to fall within this time span. A variation of this tooling pattern, whereby the herringbone design is edged with plain borders, appeared during the first half of the 19th century, and was used as high quality facing stone. This technique also occurs at Alton Towers, where it can be used to indicate 19th-century, rather than earlier, work.

Two stones, one on the south side of the cross-wall and the other on the north side, in the jamb of the east window, were of a different character to most of the masonry, being a more finely grained sandstone. They also bore a different type of tooling mark, namely fine, diagonally-placed striations. This treatment evidently belongs to a quite different tradition of masoncraft, and would not be out of place in a medieval context. At least one of these stones, perhaps both, was re-used and may represent material from an earlier building than the 18th-century house.

The east wall of the wing, apart from the external 19th-century facing and the window frames, appeared to belong to the Alton Lodge phase, and is probably to be dated to the 17th or 18th centuries, though the uppermost storey, at least, consisted of two structural phases denoted by a vertical joint in the masonry. This joint coincided with what seems to have been a cross-wall immediately to the south of the existing cross-wall. It does not seem to have been thick enough for an external wall, and was presumably a component of the internal layout of Alton Lodge. This suggests, perhaps, that Alton Lodge was built in at least two planned stages, a phenomenon that has been recognised in some medieval buildings (Hislop 1996).

If this is the case, then it is probable that the southern part of Alton Lodge came first, and that the existing cross-wall within the northern part is later. The structural relationship between the cross-wall and the east wall is ambiguous. At first floor level the cross-wall seems to stratigraphically later than the east wall, but at second floor level the reverse seems to be true. The very presence of the structure points to a change in the original layout of the house, in which the earlier cross-wall became redundant.

It is difficult to say exactly when this happened. The early bricks within the jamb of the eastern second floor doorway cannot be relied upon for dating evidence, as they may have been reused. This doorway, which is probably an insertion, is unlikely to have been contemporary with the western doorway. There appears to have been no more than a single room on each side of the wall, and the doorways themselves are of different characters. The roughly-finished eastern opening, evidently intended from the first to be fitted with a doorcase, contrasts markedly with the massive splayed and rebated jamb stones of its western counterpart. This doorway coincides with the position of the opening shown on the 1804 ground plan of Alton Lodge, and was probably contemporary.

9.0 Acknowledgements

This report was written by Dr Malcolm Hislop and edited by Dr Iain Ferris who also managed the project. John Halstead and Nigel Dodds prepared the illustrations. The author would like to thank Graham Dockerty of Alton Towers Ltd, John Curry the architect for the repair programme, and Faith Cleverdon of Staffordshire Moorlands District Council for their assistance.

10.0 References

- BUFAU 2002. *Brief for Archaeological Building Recording in Advance of Consolidation and Repair Work.*
- Fisher, M.J. 1998. *Alton Towers, Staffordshire: Historical and Archaeological Survey.* Parts I and II.
- Hislop, M. 1996 'Bolton Castle and the Practice of Architecture in the Middle Ages', *Journal of the British Archaeological Association* CXLIX, 10-22.
- RCHME 1996. *Recording Historic Buildings: a Descriptive Specification*, 3rd edn.



Fig.1 Location Plan

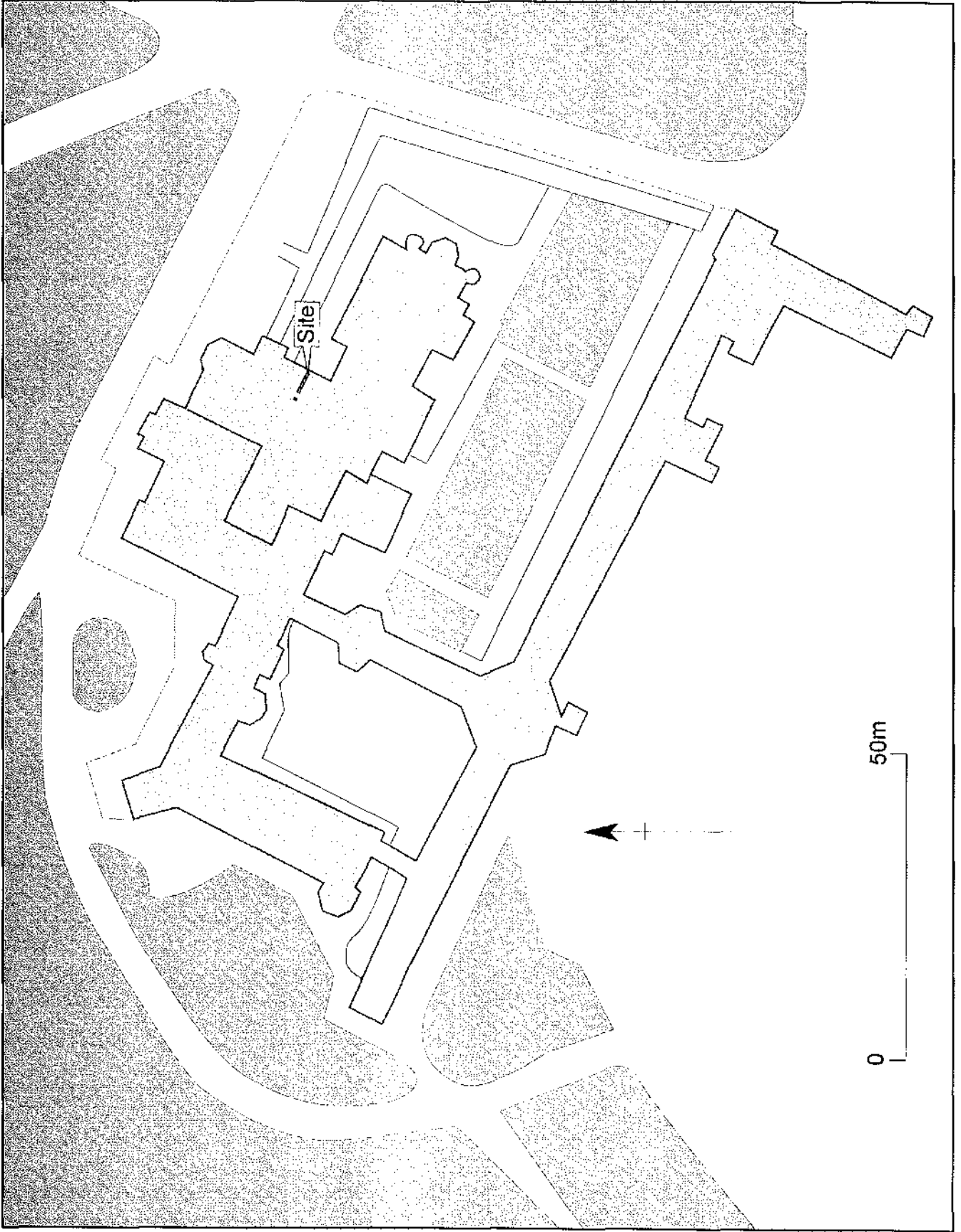
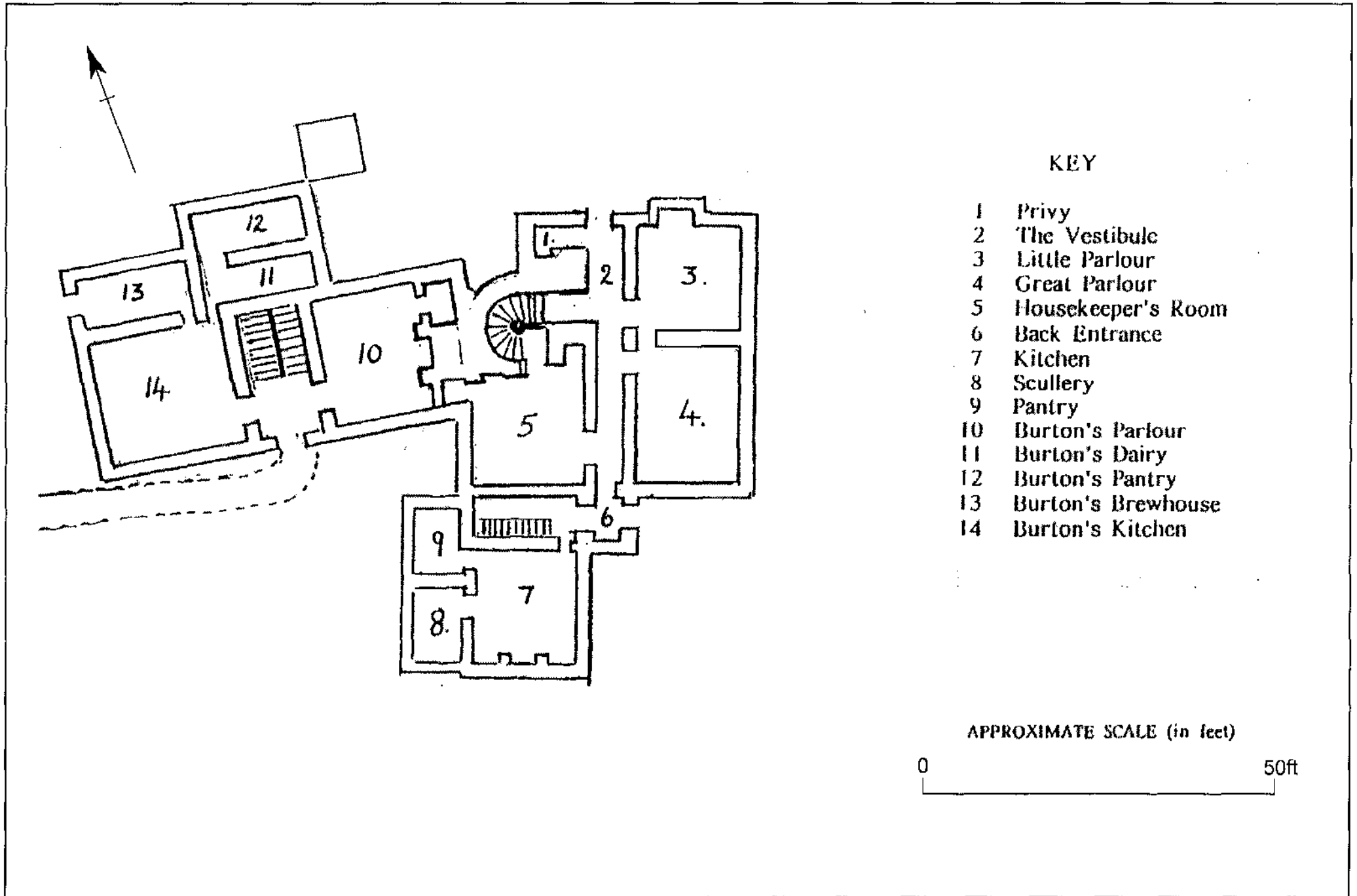


Fig.2 Location of Site



Fig.3 Drawing of Alton Lodge c.1800



KEY

- 1 Privy
- 2 The Vestibule
- 3 Little Parlour
- 4 Great Parlour
- 5 Housekeeper's Room
- 6 Back Entrance
- 7 Kitchen
- 8 Scullery
- 9 Pantry
- 10 Burton's Parlour
- 11 Burton's Dairy
- 12 Burton's Pantry
- 13 Burton's Brewhouse
- 14 Burton's Kitchen

APPROXIMATE SCALE (in feet)

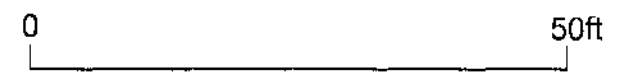


Fig.4 Plan of Alton Lodge in 1804

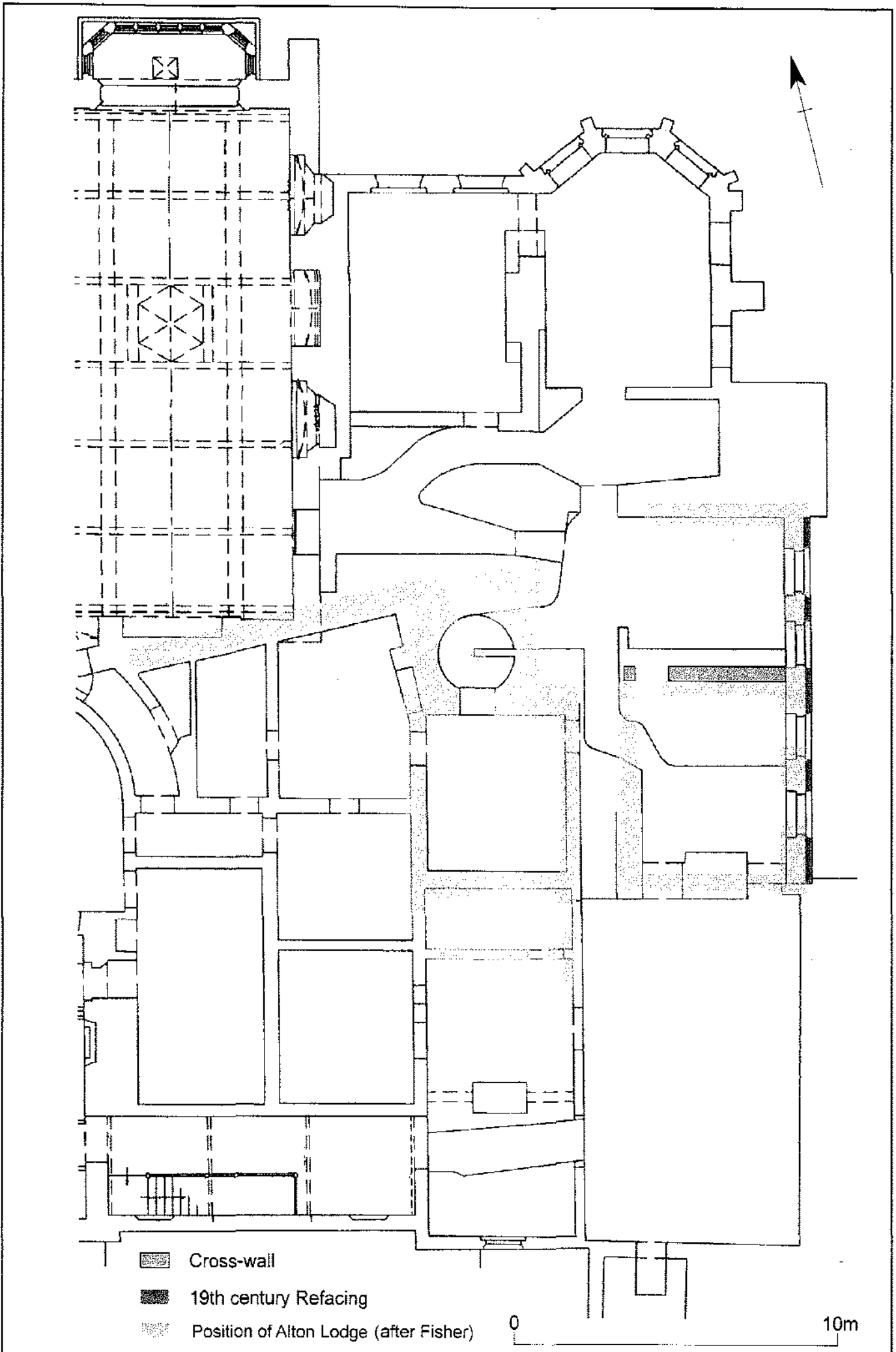


Fig.5 Position of Cross-wall

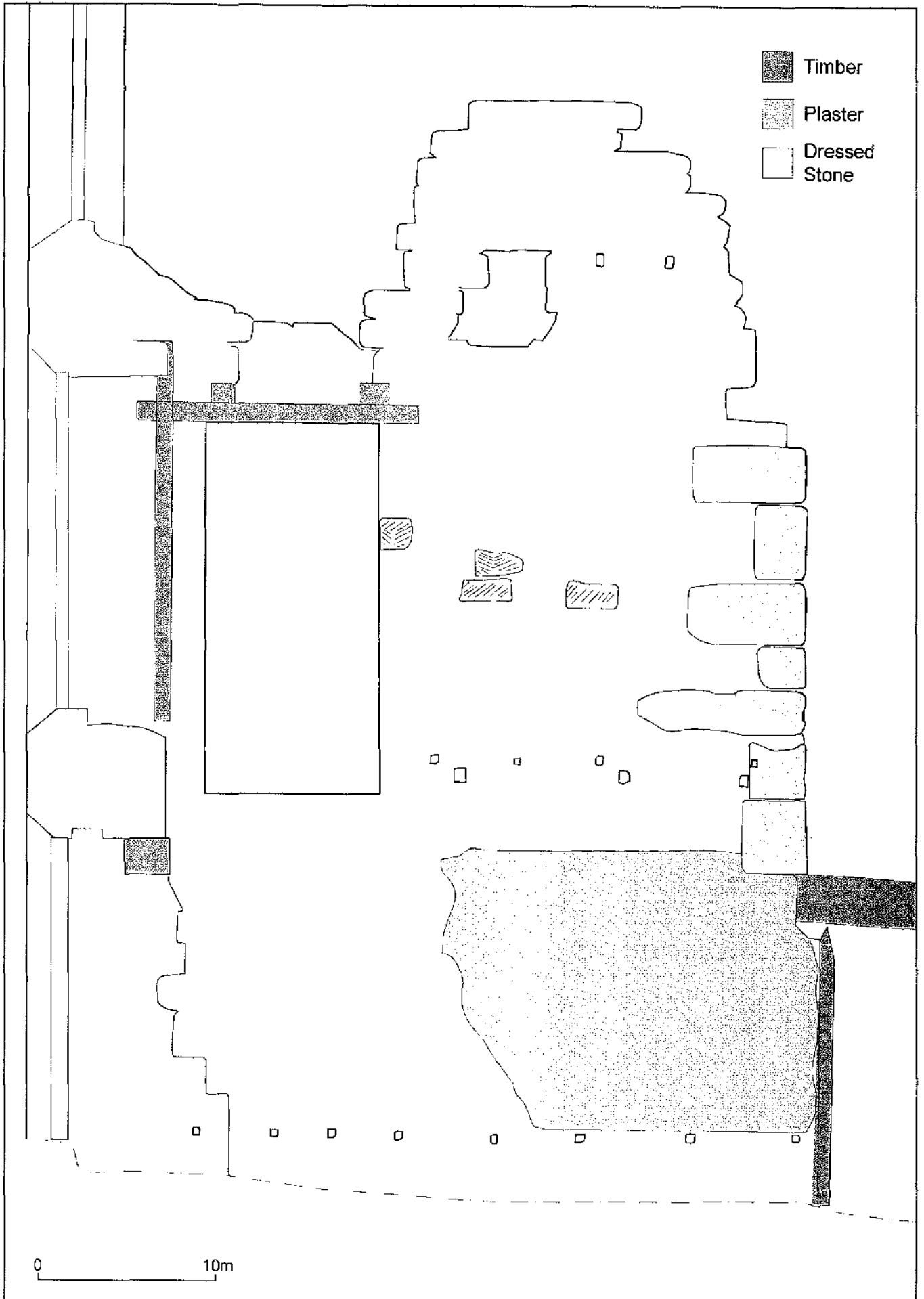


Fig.6 North Elevation

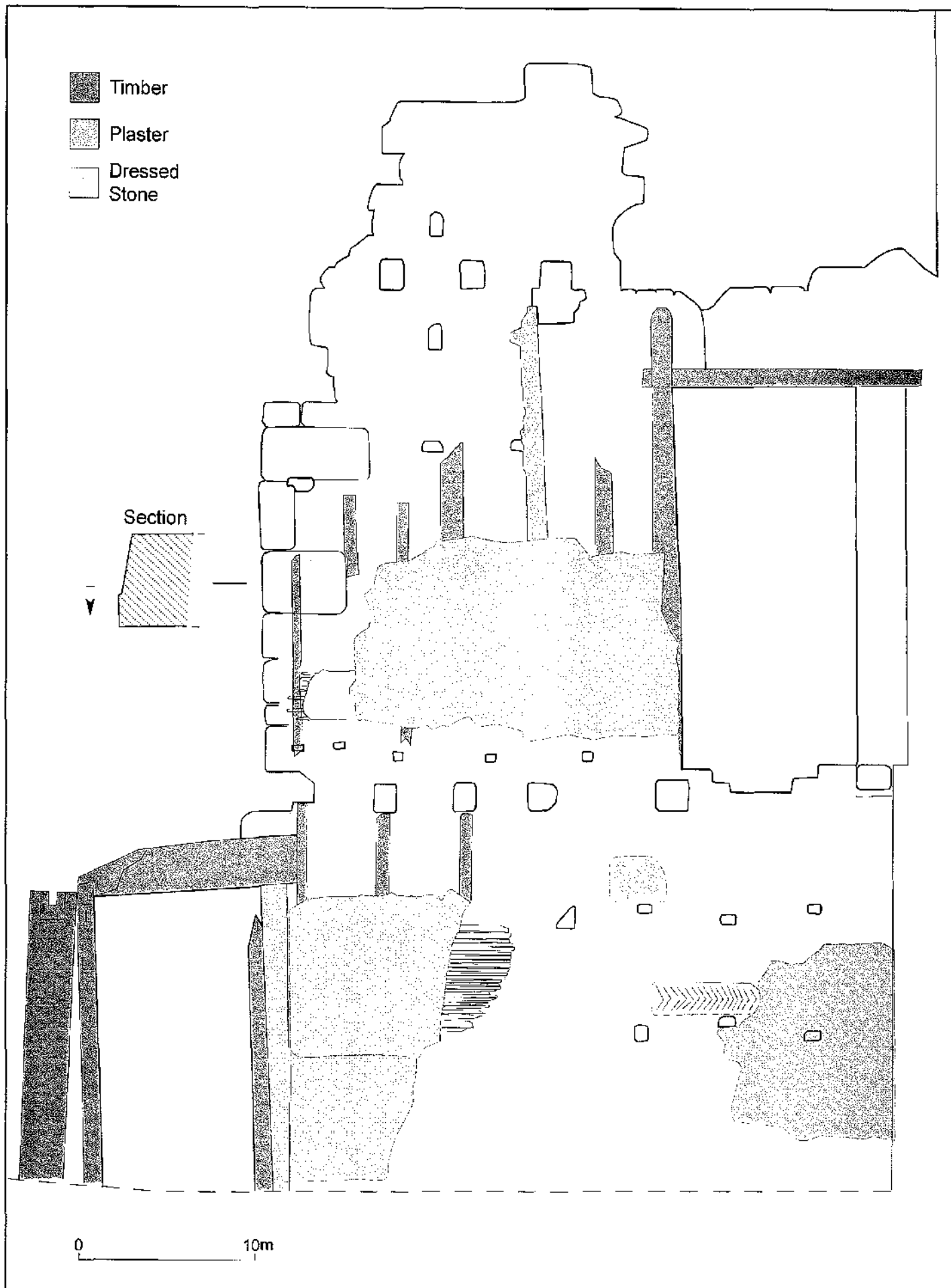


Fig.7 South Elevation

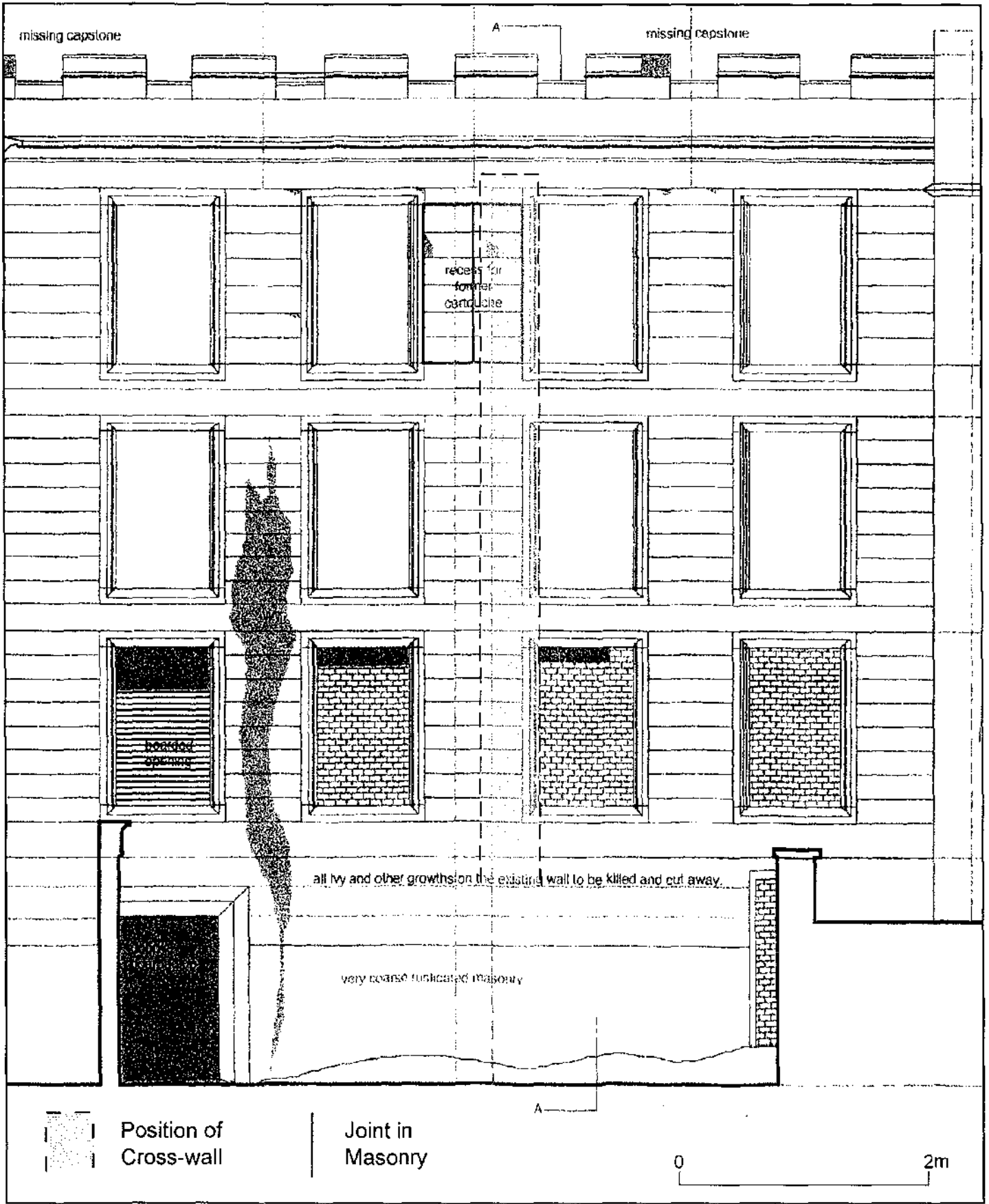


Fig.8 East Elevation



Plate 1. North Elevation, West End of Cross-wall

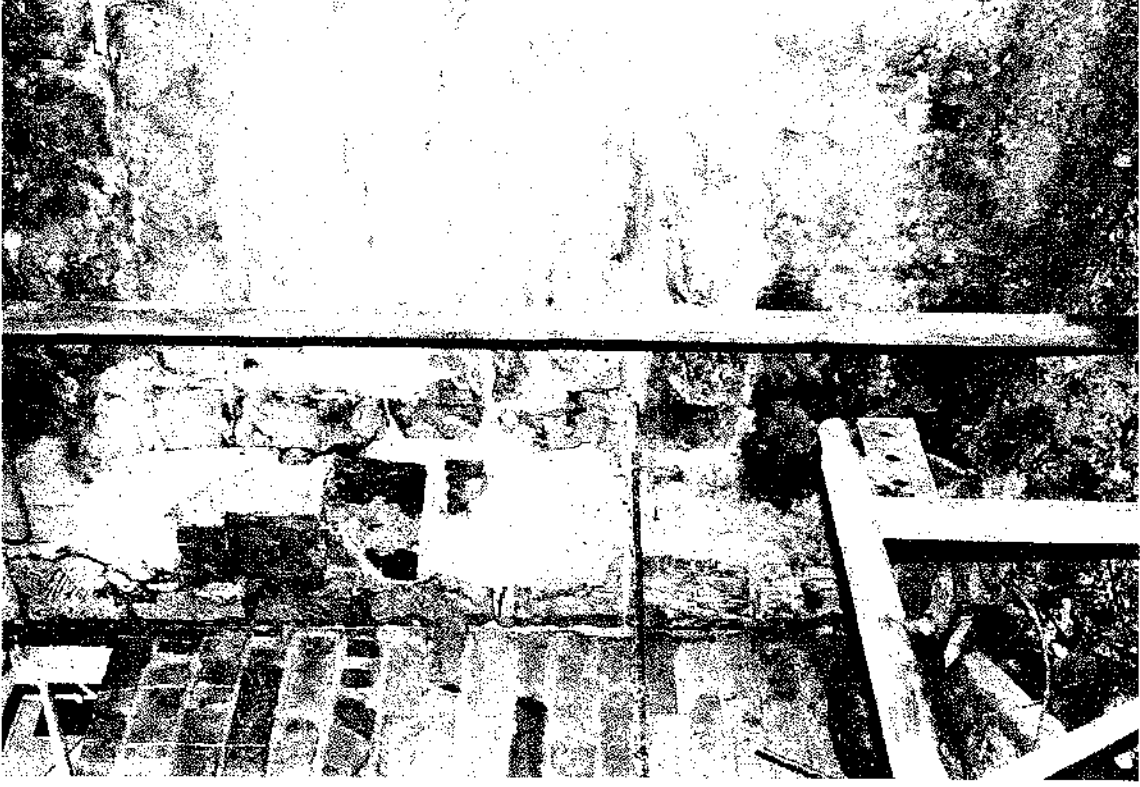


Plate 2. North Elevation, Vertical Joint at First Floor level



Plate 3. North Elevation, South Jamb of East Window



Plate 4. South Elevation, Reused Stone at First Floor Level



Plate 5. South Elevation, Reused Stone at First Floor Level



Plate 6. South Elevation, Junction of Cross-wall and East Wall at Second Floor Level



Plate 7. Junction of East wall (Right) and Chapel of 1833 (Left) After Removal of 19th-century Facing



Plate 8. East Elevation , Masonry Behind the 19th-century Facing



Plate 9. East Elevation, Vertical Joint in the Masonry Behind 19th-century Facing



Plate 10. Wall Stub Projecting from East Wall at Third Floor Level



Plate 11. Keying for Former Cross-wall Opposite Wall Stub