

Recording of a WWII
Air-Raid Shelter at
Lanesfield Community Centre,
Lanesfield, Wolverhampton,
Black Country

Project No. 1201

Recording of a WWII Air-Raid Shelter at
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Summary

An air-raid shelter located in the grounds of Lanesfield Community Centre, Wolverhampton, Black Country (NGR SO 9275 9550) was recorded in June 2004 by Birmingham Archaeology for Wolverhampton MBC. The shelter had recently been discovered during the course of routine maintenance at the site. It measured 10m long, 2.1m wide, and was of brick construction with English bond walls 1½ bricks thick. Internally there was steel-bolted bracing defining 7 bays in total. The frame was a typical factory design with 3" L-shaped uprights and cross-beams, and 4" L-shaped beams for the longitudinal wall plates. This formed a box frame over which a poured concrete floor had been constructed. The roof was 6" thick, of reinforced concrete, and had been cast in-situ over good quality timber shuttering. The shelter was covered with c.0.25m of topsoil at the time of recording, however, this was probably much thicker when the shelter was constructed, with the mound being levelled and re-landscaped in the post-war period. All the materials used were of good quality, suggestive of an early date, and displayed quality workmanship

1.0 Introduction

This report describes the results of building recording carried out on an air-raid shelter situated in the grounds of Lanesfield Community Centre (Plates 1 and 2). The shelter was located at the corner of Birmingham New Road (A4123) and Ward Grove, Lanesfield, Wolverhampton (NGR SO 9275 9550, Figs. 1 and 2, hereafter referred to as the site). Birmingham Archaeology undertook the work reported on here in June 2004, on behalf of Wolverhampton MBC. The site was newly discovered in the course of routine maintenance at the site, and work was undertaken following consultation with the Black Country Archaeologist. Recording was undertaken in accordance with the guidelines laid down in Planning Policy Guidance Note 15 (DoE 1990).

2.0 Methodology

The structures were recorded by plans and details of elevations and cross-sections (at 1:20 and 1:50), supplemented by monochrome and colour print, and colour slide photography.

3.0 Description

The shelter was medium sized, constructed to accommodate c.50 people, measuring 10m in length and 2.1m wide (Fig. 3, Plate 3). It was constructed in brick, in English bond, and the walls were 1½ bricks thick. The bricks were good quality machine-made examples, very regular and evenly fired (measuring 9-9¼ x 4¼ x 3"), and had

even mortar courses that were well finished. Internally there was steel L-shaped bolted-bracing defining 7 bays in total (Fig. 4). The frame was a typical factory design with 3" L-shaped uprights and cross-beams, and 4" L-shaped beams for the longitudinal wall plates (Plate 4). This formed a box frame (Fig. 5) over which a poured concrete floor had been constructed, and screeded, and in which it was still possible to discern the rusting line of the base frame (Plate 5). The roof was 6" thick, of reinforced concrete, and had been cast in-situ over good quality timber shuttering. The shelter was covered with c. 0.25m of topsoil at the time of recording. However, it is likely that this was originally much thicker, with the mound being levelled and spread over the immediate area as part of its re-landscaping in the post-war period.

The main entrance was blocked by rough brick walling which was overlain by a dump of clay (Plate 6). Unfortunately it was not possible to ascertain whether there was an external blast wall, but this is highly likely given Home Office regulations for shelters at the time. There was an emergency escape hatch at the northwest end of the structure (Plate 7), the remains of the original metal hatch survived in-situ (Plate 8), but was badly bent and rusted. A steel foot support had also survived. The hatch itself appeared to have been of the same design as that belonging to a shelter recorded in Wednesfield (Nichol 2001, Plate 11).

The drain was probably situated close to the main entrance. There was evidence in the form of scars on the brickwork, within the alcove to the left of the door, revealing that this part of the shelter had originally been partitioned (Plate 9). Chemical or earthbox-style toilets were probably originally housed here. Evidence for other internal fittings included the provision of electricity, and there were rawl plugs and drilled holes for a line of central lights (Plate 10). There was also the remains of wiring for either a radio or telephone (Plate 11). The shelter had originally been heated by a stove, which was no longer extant, although the remains of the chimney was still in-situ (Plate 12). There were traces of a bitumised floor covering, probably linoleum, and the walls had a degraded covering of whitewash. There were also the vestiges of lead oxide paint on the steelwork. The shelter was remarkably graffiti free, with only a child's drawing of a house being evident (Plate 13). However, the floor was littered with items, some of which may have been contemporary with the end of the shelter's use, such as an old shoe, a bicycle frame, and steel pipes that may have once been used as an electrical conduit, as well as much later debris.

4.0 Discussion

Following air-raids made during the First World War, and the development of better aircraft and bombs, the Air Raid Precautions (ARP) committee was created in 1924 to safeguard civil defence (Brown 1999, 1). In 1937 the Air Raid Precautions Act was passed which compelled local authorities to provide protection from air-raids and gas attack for the local civilian population (Burrige 1997, 61). Birmingham New Road was constructed as a dual carriage way in the inter-war years and continued as a principle communication route during the war. Given the location of the shelter directly adjacent to the road, and the telephone or radio wires surviving within the shelter, it is possible that the shelter may have doubled up as an ARP post. Wardens posts were more commonly purpose built structures resembling surface shelters, or partitioned sections of larger shelters (Lowry 1999, 73). However, there were many

different sections of the ARP service including fire fighters and messengers all of which required some kind of telecommunications link.

Shelter construction was at its peak in Britain during the immediate pre-war period, with more appearing in response to heavy bombing by the Luftwaffe during the Blitz in the autumn and winter of 1940-41. Across the country many factories and foundries were given over to the production of munitions and other types of war material. The industrial nature of the Midlands meant that there was a concentration of these so-called *arms towns* and this made the region a major target for bombing raids. This area of Wolverhampton was indeed known to, and targeted by, the Luftwaffe as a German bombing map dating to 1939 reveals (Fig. 6). The map indicates several targets, the Mars Iron Works, outlined in red and marked GB 8228 *kesselfabrik* revealing that German intelligence had identified the site as a boiler works. The second site, which is again in relatively close proximity to the shelter, was the works marked GB 7062 *Roheisen u Stahl* which translate as *Pig Iron* and *Steel*. There was also the railway (*Eisenbahn*) junction further north, GB 8229. The word *Geheim* at the top left of the map indicates that this, not surprisingly, was a *secret* document, however, the Germans were using a much earlier survey on which to overlay their information than the date 1939 suggests.

This map puts the location of the site in the centre of the Etingshall Colliery, and the Birmingham New Road had not yet been constructed. What is apparent from this old map, probably the First or Second Edition Ordnance Survey, is the industrial nature of the area. Although the area had become much more built up in the ensuing period, from when this map was surveyed to the commencement of the war, most of this development was housing and other associated utilities. This has always been a characteristic of the Black Country with a mixture of individual family workshops or speculative housing developments next to foundries and larger workshops, all built over the underlying geology of coal, ironstone, and fire clay that fuelled the economy in this area. It was this cheek by jowl, piece meal development that also put the local community at risk from air attack. Many bombs fell short of their industrial targets, and those that did hit their objective often destroyed surrounding buildings, many of which were civilian in nature.

With regard to the build of the shelter itself, both the concrete (which was not economy concrete) and reinforcing bars were good quality which suggests that it was constructed early in the war effort as these commodities began to run out quickly. The same can be said regarding the use of wooden shuttering for the poured concrete roof, wood was also in short supply and pre-cast alternatives were commonly used. The shelter was also constructed using good quality bricks, which is again indicative of an early date, as low quality bricks, was employed latterly.

The last great air strike that the Midlands was to endure took place on May 16 1941 (Anon 1942, 88). In Birmingham at the end of 1942 the total number of civilian dead was estimated at over 2,000, from a reported 1050 enemy aircraft that were engaged over the city (*ibid*, 87). With the launch of Operation *Barbarossa* against the Soviet Union, German air-raids over Britain dwindled. The Luftwaffe curtailed their night time blitzes, however, low-level daylight raids continued to cause much devastation, and the *Baedeker* raids cost many civilian lives in the historic towns and cities of Britain, as well as coastal towns which also continued to be targeted (Brown 1999,

16). The V weapons, of course, fired from the Continent, continued to menace London and the Kentish coast in particular right up until 1945. Without air-raid shelters and the efforts of the ARP units the numbers of civilian dead would undoubtedly have been far higher.

5.0 Acknowledgements

The project was commissioned by Wolverhampton MBC. Thanks are due to Glen Robinson for his help throughout the project. Thanks are also due to Mike Shaw who monitored the project for the Local Planning Authority. Work on site was carried out by Steve Litherland and Kirsty Nichol who also produced the written report which was illustrated by Nigel Dodds.

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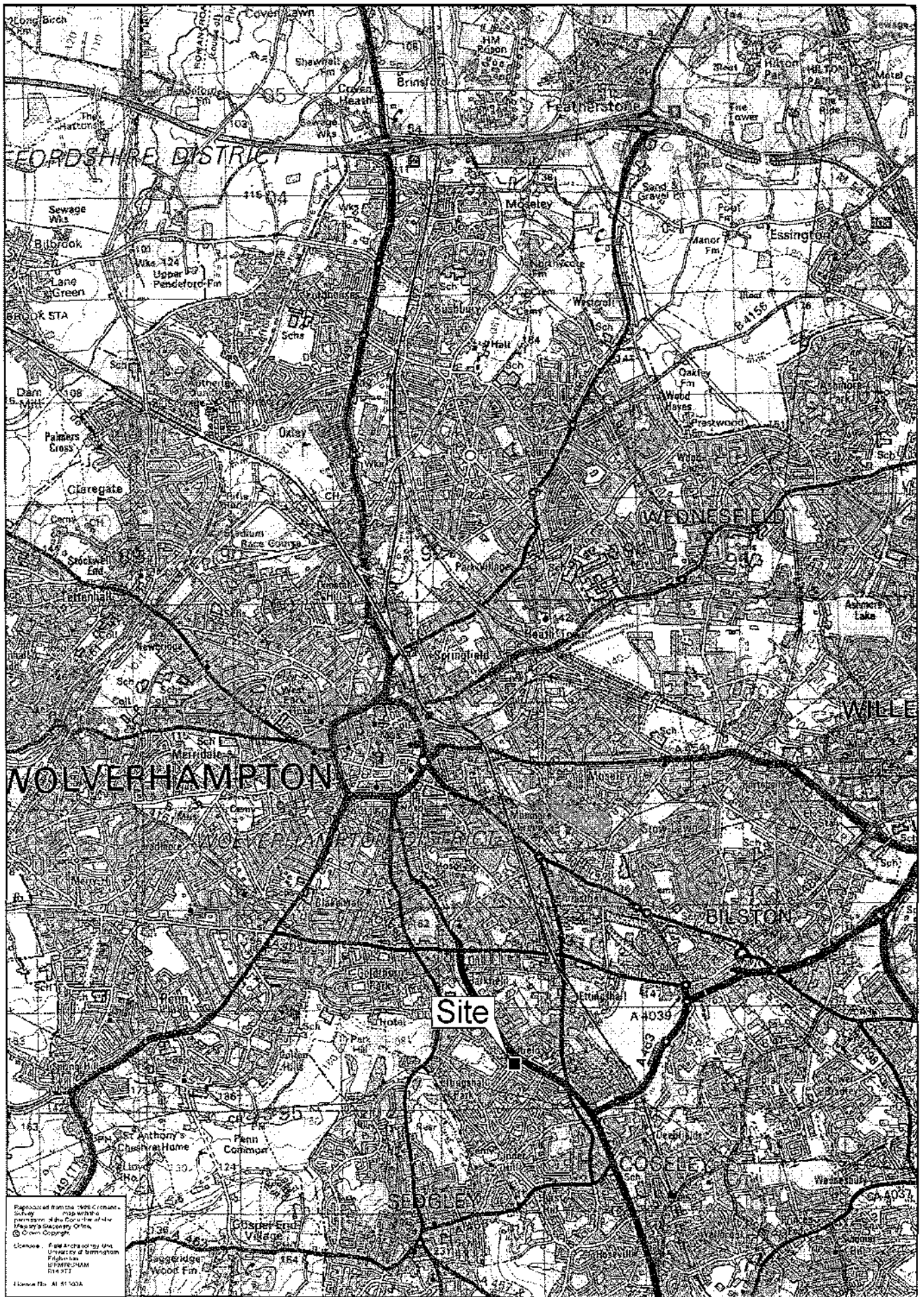


Fig.1

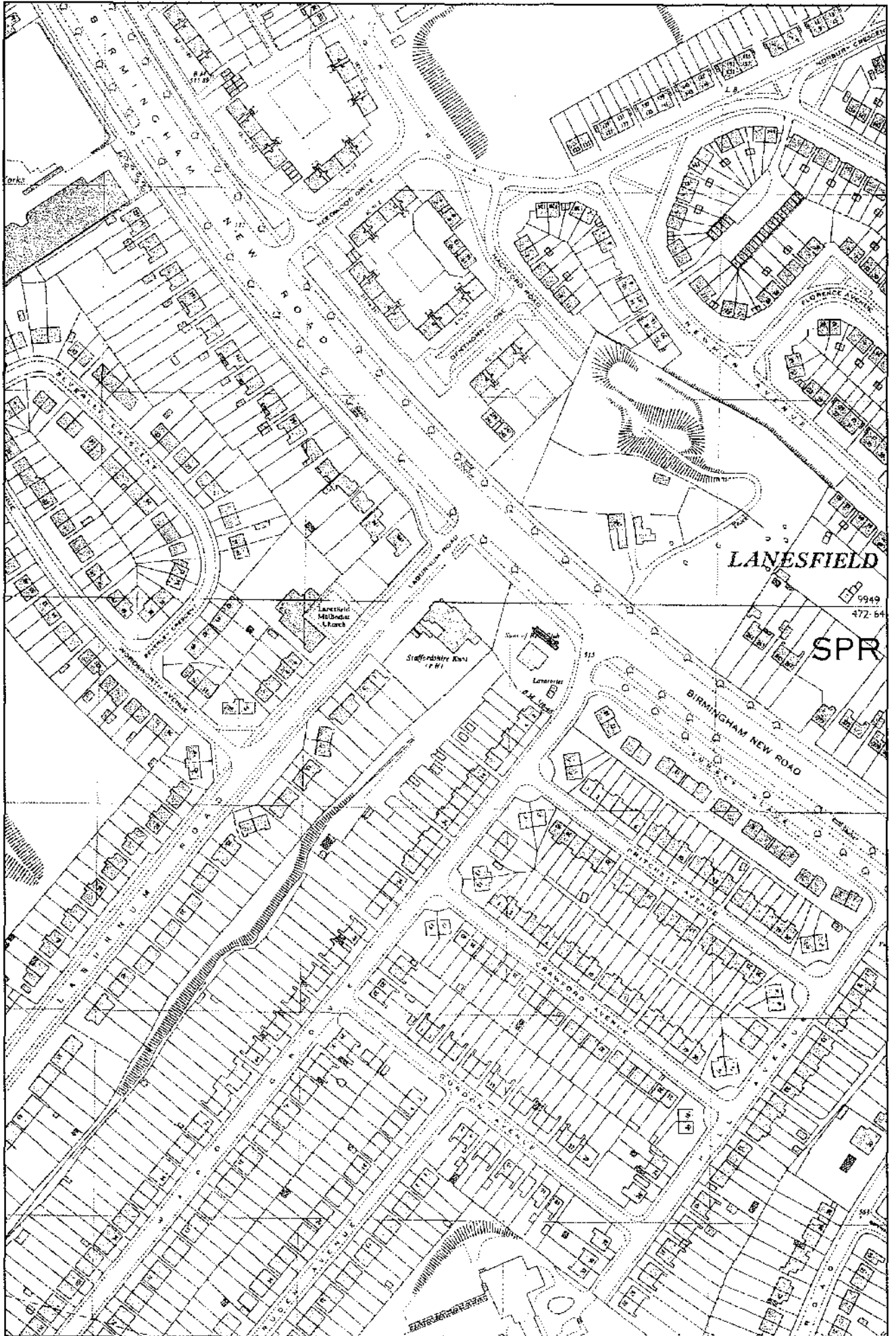
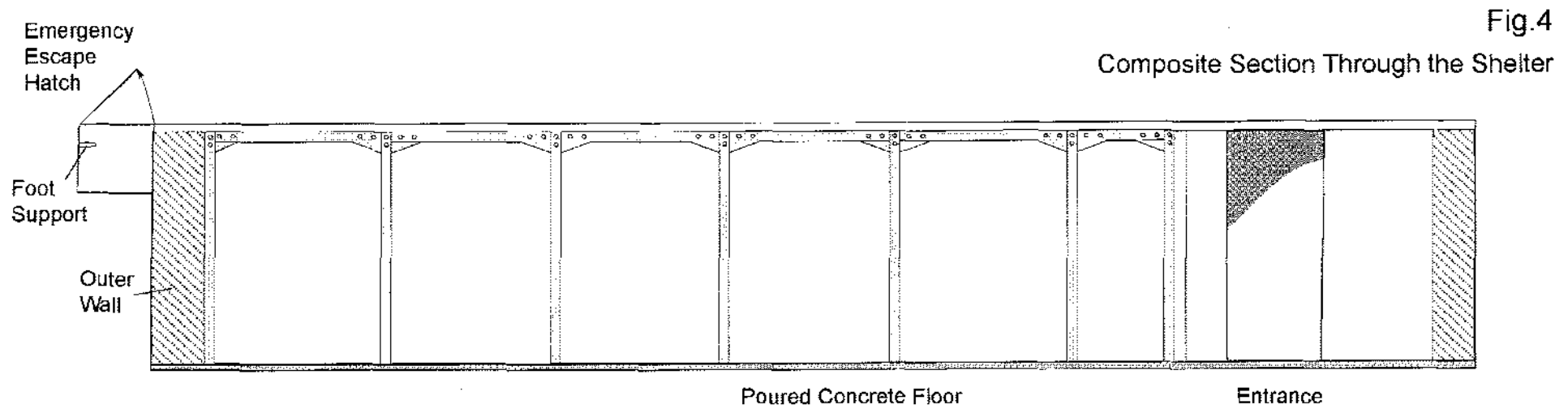
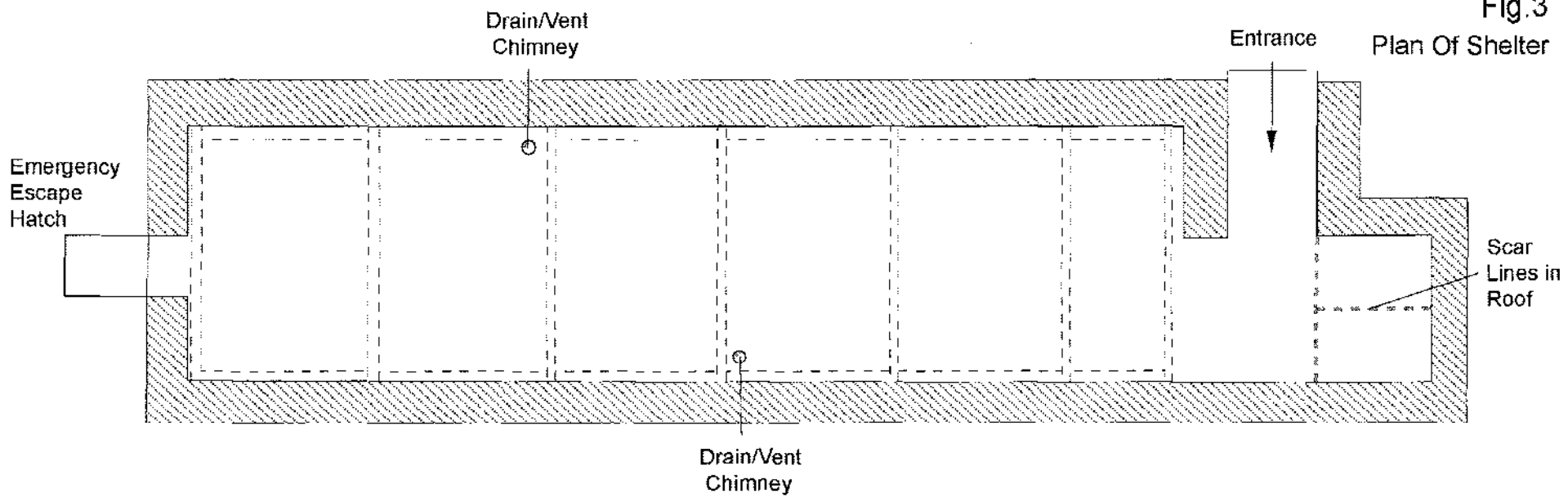


Fig.2



0 ————— 2m

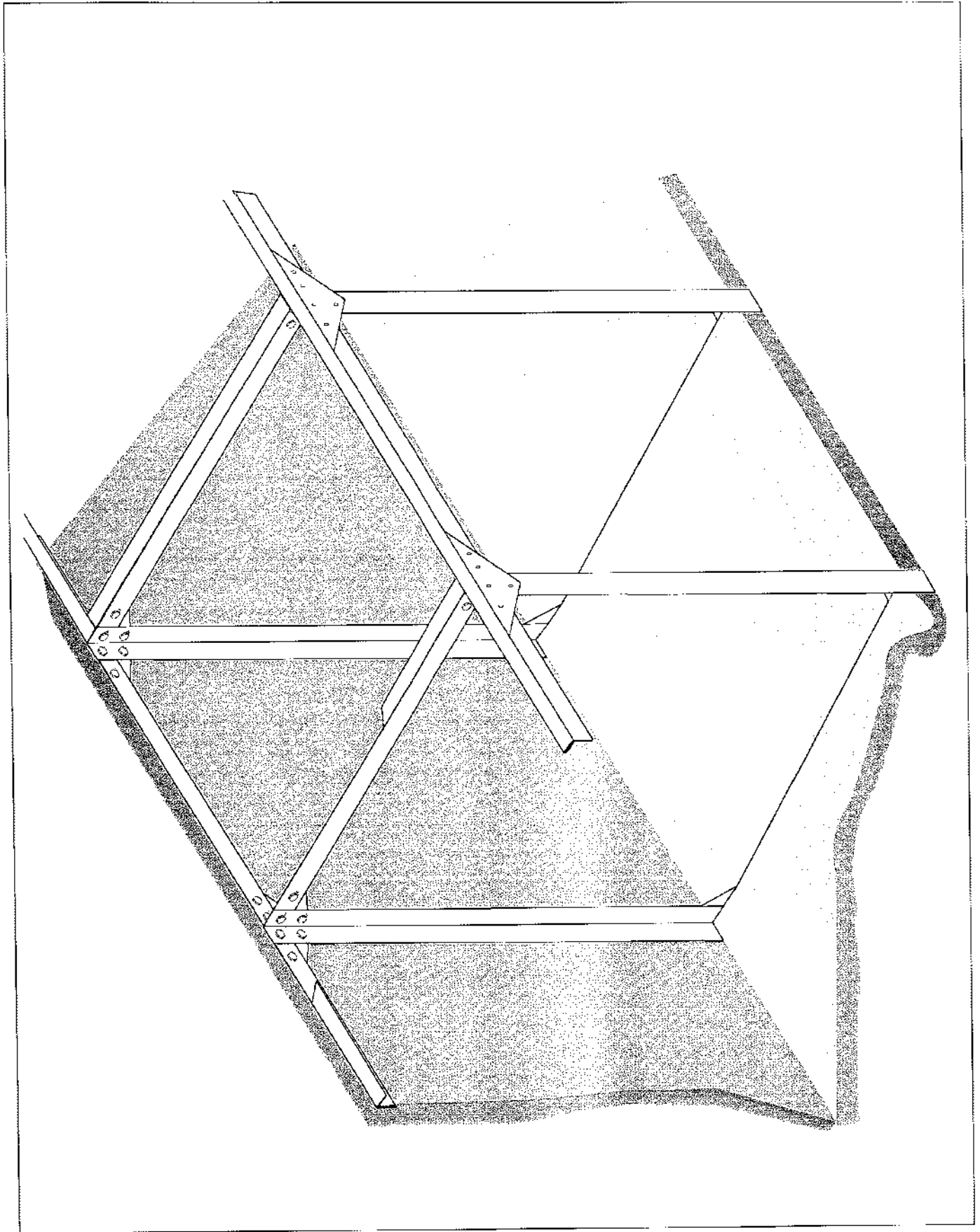


Fig.5

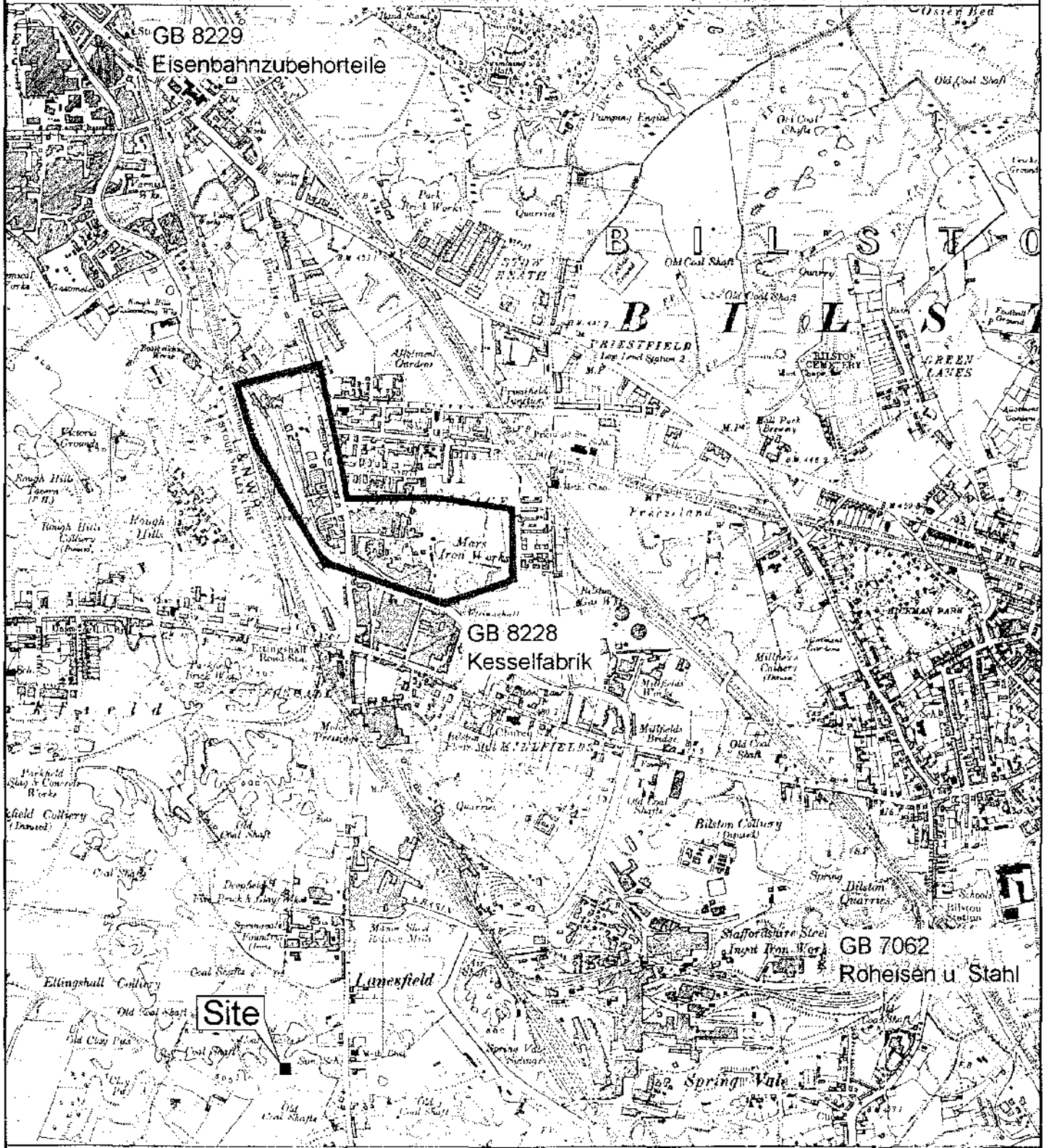
Geheim

Wolverhampton 550

Mars Iron Works

GB. 7061c

Länge (westl. Greenw.) $2^{\circ}5'55''$, Breite $52^{\circ}34'5''$
Missweisung: $11^{\circ}51'$ (Mitte 1939)



100 50 0 500 1000

Maßstab 1:10560

Fig.6



Plate 1



Plate 2

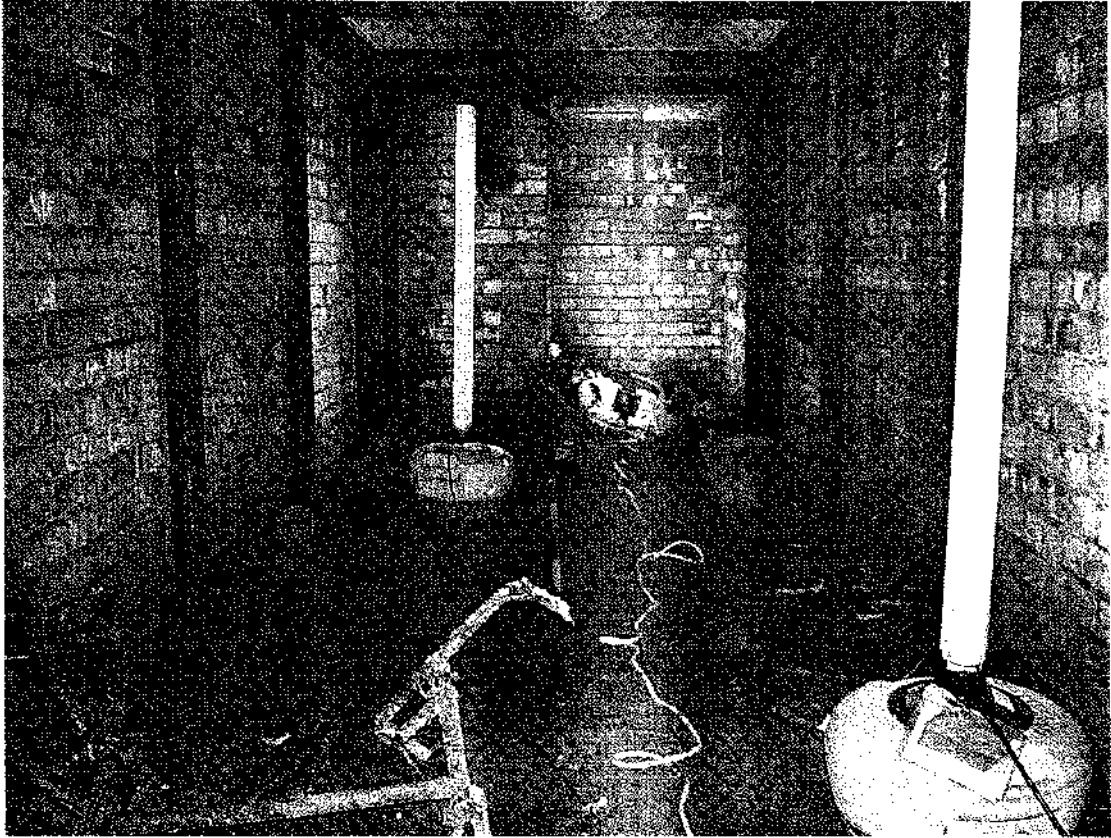


Plate 3



Plate 4

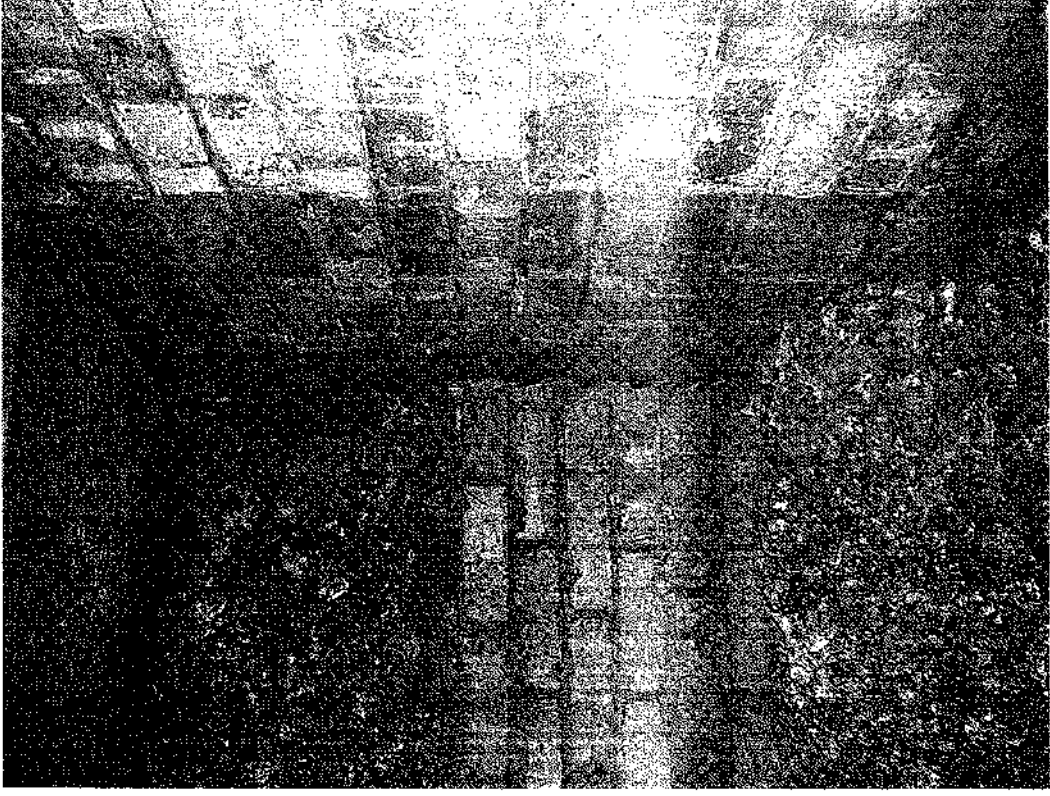


Plate 6

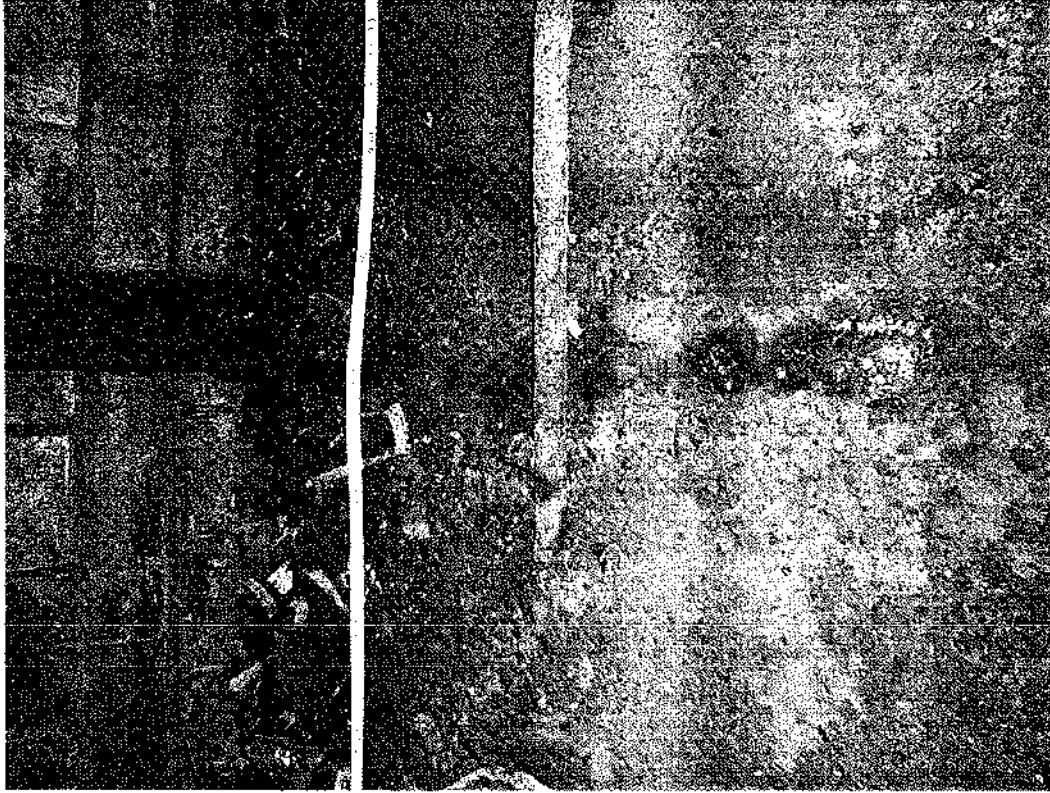


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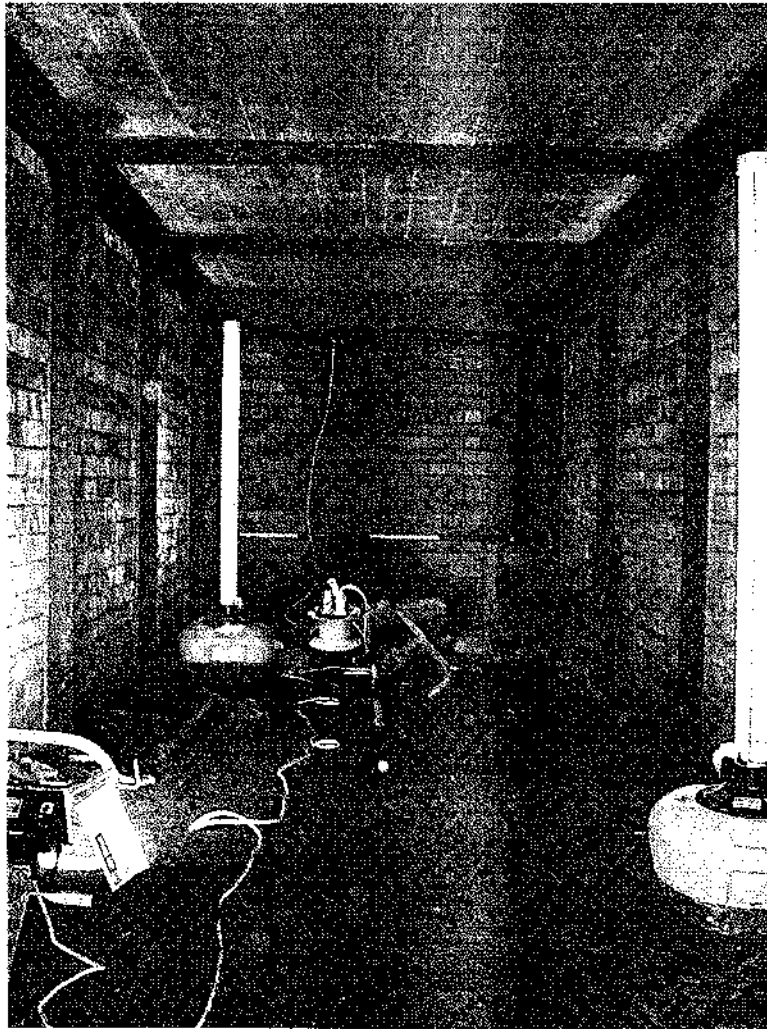


Plate 7

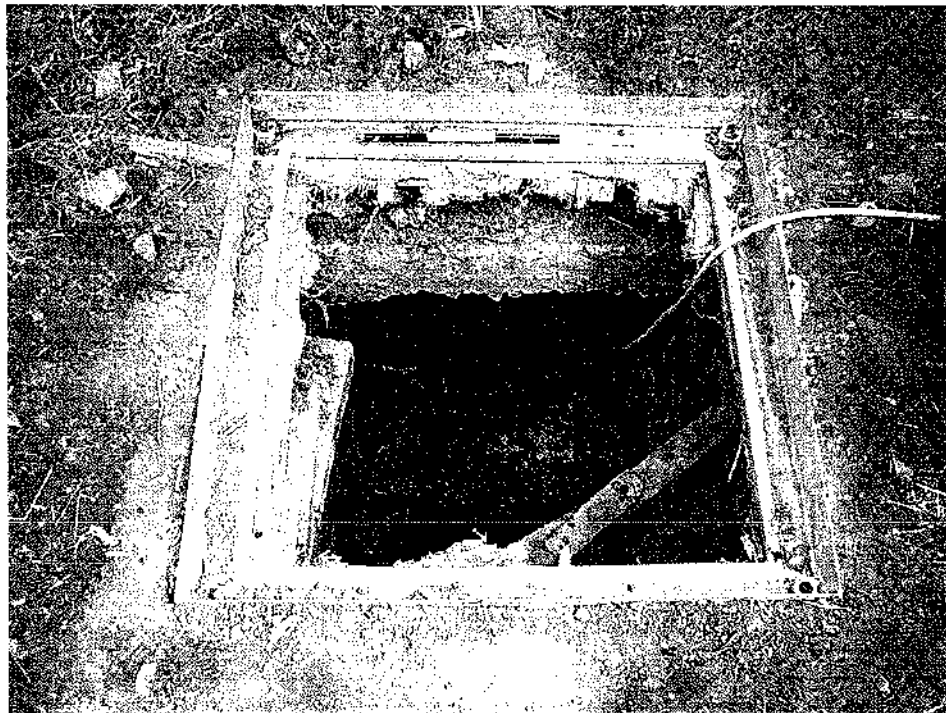


Plate 8

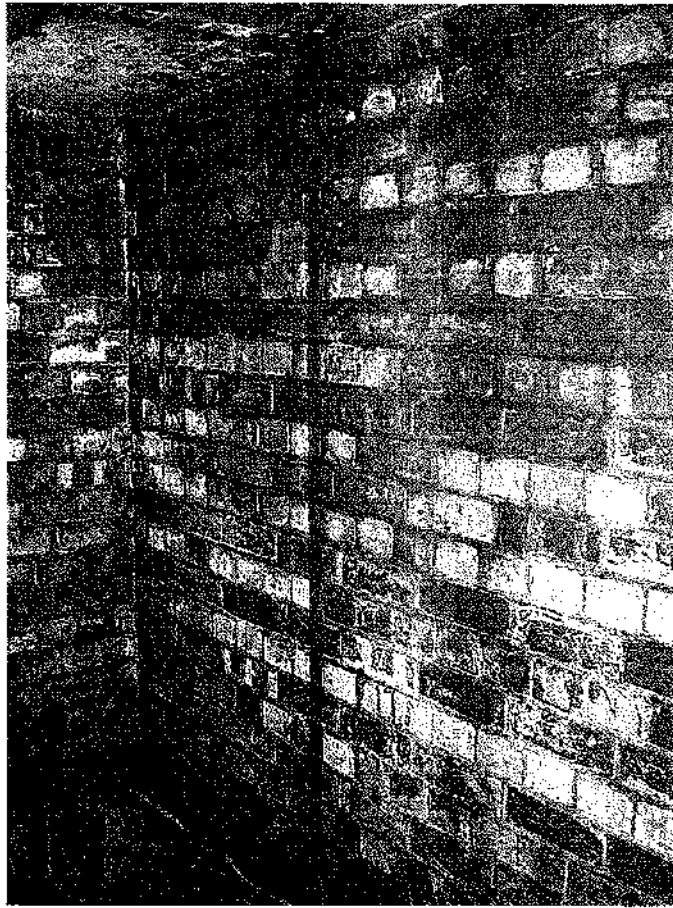


Plate 9



Plate 10

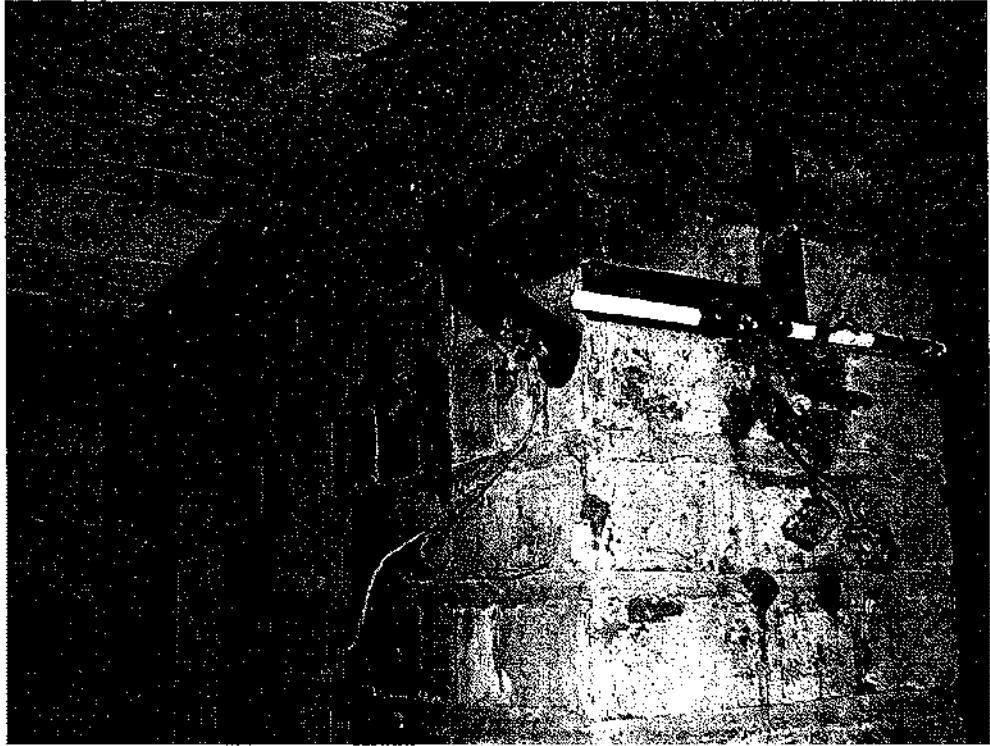


Plate 11

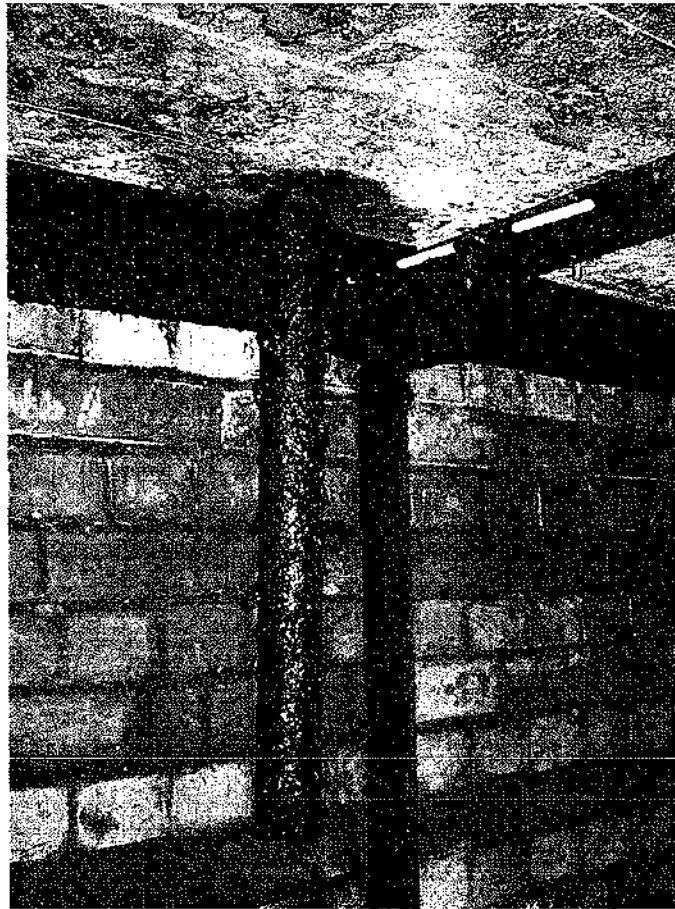


Plate 12



Plate 13