

Standing Remains of the
Former Gas Works,
Wolverhampton Road, Walsall
Waterfront, West Midlands

Supplementary Archaeological
Building Recording, 2005

Project No. 1268.01
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**Standing Remains of the Former Gas Works, Wolverhampton Road, Walsall
Waterfront, West Midlands**

Supplementary Archaeological Building Recording, 2005

By Christopher Hewitson

for

Advantage West Midlands

courtesy of

Johnson, Poole & Bloomer Land Consultants

For further information please contact:

Alex Jones (Director)

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

Supplementary archaeological building recording was carried out at the site of the former gas works, Wolverhampton Road, Walsall. The site opened as a coal gas works in 1850 and ceased production in 1895 when the site became an electricity generating station. The only surviving remains of the original gas works were the retort house. Supplementary recording revealed this to be of single-phase construction with later alteration. The northern elevation appeared to have been the principal elevation and opened onto the remainder of the buildings within the centre of the site.

1.0 Introduction

In December 2004 and January 2005 Birmingham Archaeology undertook the archaeological building recording of a series of standing structures that constituted the remains of the former Gas Works, Wolverhampton Road, Walsall. Supplementary work was undertaken on the basis of the preliminary report (Hewitson 2005) during the demolition of the buildings in February 2005. The work was commissioned by Johnson, Poole and Bloomer Land Consultants for Advantage West Midlands and was a condition of the planning permission prior to redevelopment of the site. The specific purpose of the work was to discharge the requisite Grants Conservation Area Consent prior to demolition.

2.0 Site Location

The site was located on the south side of Wolverhampton Road, Walsall, (NGR 400650 298650) on a plot of land between the arms of the Walsall Canal and the Walsall Town Wharf branch (Fig. 1 & 2). It was latterly a showroom for Rover Cars. The site lies within the Walsall Locks Conservation Area and the retort house and boundary wall are individually listed (Walsall MBC 2004). The topography of the land sloped gently north – south away from the road before becoming flat around the waterfront area. The underlying geology of the site was grey shales of the Carboniferous Coal Measures (Litherland 1996, 2). Archaeological investigations showed the underlying soil stratigraphy was natural clays overlain by a deep build-up of made-ground of up to 2.5m (Coates 1999, 4).

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3.0 Objective

The objective of the archaeological recording was to further the understanding of the principal upstanding architecture, as discussed in the existing report on the site (Hewitson 2005).

4.0 Methods

The initial survey was undertaken to RCHME Level 3, as defined in *Recording Historic Buildings: A Descriptive Specification* (RCHME 1996). The proposed method was to further the understanding of the building by the full supplementary recording of the northern elevation of the gas retort house after stripping of the cladding and demolition of the single-storey extension had occurred. This was to be undertaken by recording the northern elevation by use of Reflectorless EDM. In addition to the drawn record, a referenced photographic survey was produced digitally, and with monochrome and colour transparencies. Interpretation of the building was assisted by written notes detailing the evolution of the structure into its final form.

Access to the whole of the northern elevation proved logistically impossible. This was for two reasons. Firstly the removal of the corrugated cladding proved to be impossible without destabilising the underlying fabric of the building. Therefore localised removal of the cladding was undertaken in key locations to examine the underlying building material. Secondly, the single-storey extension proved to be impossible to record during demolition. Prior to demolition the building was contaminated by human excrement and evidence of drug-abuse and was therefore inaccessible. During demolition asbestos was discovered within the building. Although this was removed during the demolition process it was not deemed prudent to further examine the building in view of the limited information attainable from further survey work.

The side elevation (western) was to be examined by the removal of windows of render (to the order of 1m²) at ground level to examine the underlying building material.

5.0 Historical Background

The History of the Retort House

The gas works were constructed between 1849 and 1850. A second gas works at Pleck was eventually to take over production of gas for the whole area. The Wolverhampton Road site eventually closed for gas production in 1895. However, it continued to operate as a gas distribution centre (WLHC P665.7, 3) and a small electricity generating station was built, by 1901 which had taken over the site (Ellis 1999, 18). The present work represents the latest phase of extensive redevelopment that has occurred throughout the western side of the town.

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6.0 Description

The Gas Retort House – Northern Elevation

The corrugated cladding was removed for a short length of approximately 3-4m on the western corner. This revealed the remains of cement render head of the main entrance to the gas retort house. The render was c. 0.40m in height and continued along the entirety of the revealed area. The brick-work was in common with the remainder of the building, hand-made bricks in English bond (8¾" x 4" x 3"/220mm x 100mm x 75mm).

Little of the remainder of the rest of the elevation could be revealed due to the restrictions discussed in the method above. However, examination of the interior elevation was made easier by the removal of the roof as part of the demolition process. Supposition suggests that the distribution of lunettes across the first floor was identical to that located in the southern elevation. These were visible on both the interior and exterior. Those visible on the northern elevation followed the same form and pattern. A single later doorway cut the first floor centrally and extended onto the flat roof of the single-storey extension.

The ground floor level proved to be unattainable during the demolition process. However, the interior suggests that the large gateway entrance lay to the western side of the elevation. The majority of the remainder of the elevation was plain. However, there was the later addition of two cut, rectangular windows, with later metal casement frames.

The Gas Retort House – Western Elevation

Examination of the western elevation was undertaken by the removal of two windows of render. The first lay to the north of the central entrance approximately 1.5m from ground level. It was around 1.6m x 1.0m in size. The second lay to the south of the central entrance. This was slightly higher at about 2.0m from ground level and was of similar size. Both boxes revealed that the underlying construction material beneath the cement render was identical to that located throughout the remainder of the build. This was hand-made bricks in English bond (8¾" x 4" x 3"/220mm x 100mm x 75mm).

7.0 Discussion

The work revealed a little more about the construction of the gas retort house. Firstly it revealed that the fabric of the retort house was of a single construction with 20th century alterations the only major work undertaken after its construction. These were of hand-made bricks consistent with the historical date of its construction between 1849 and 1850.

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Secondly the northern elevation appeared to have been the principal elevation as suggested in the initial report (Hewitson 2005, 6). The large gateway entrance was located at the western side of the elevation and extended to the first-floor level. Otherwise the elevation was originally plain to the first-floor. The first-floor appeared to replicate the southern elevation in form. However, the exterior remained unexamined due to problems with the removal of the cladding. Examination of the cartographic evidence (Ordnance Survey 25" 1887) suggested that the gateway may have provided a direct link with the remainder of the buildings within the gas works complex located to the north-west. It also provided direct access to the street frontage.

Acknowledgements

The work was commissioned by Johnson, Poole and Bloomer Land Consultants for Advantage West Midlands. Thanks to the on-site staff who provided assistance during the survey. Thanks to the staff of Walsall Local History Centre whom provided help and material for the historical research. This report was written by Chris Hewitson and edited by Malcolm Hislop who also managed the project. Chris Hewitson, Mary Duncan and Keith Hinton carried out the site-based recording. The illustrations were prepared by Chris Hewitson and Nigel Dodds.

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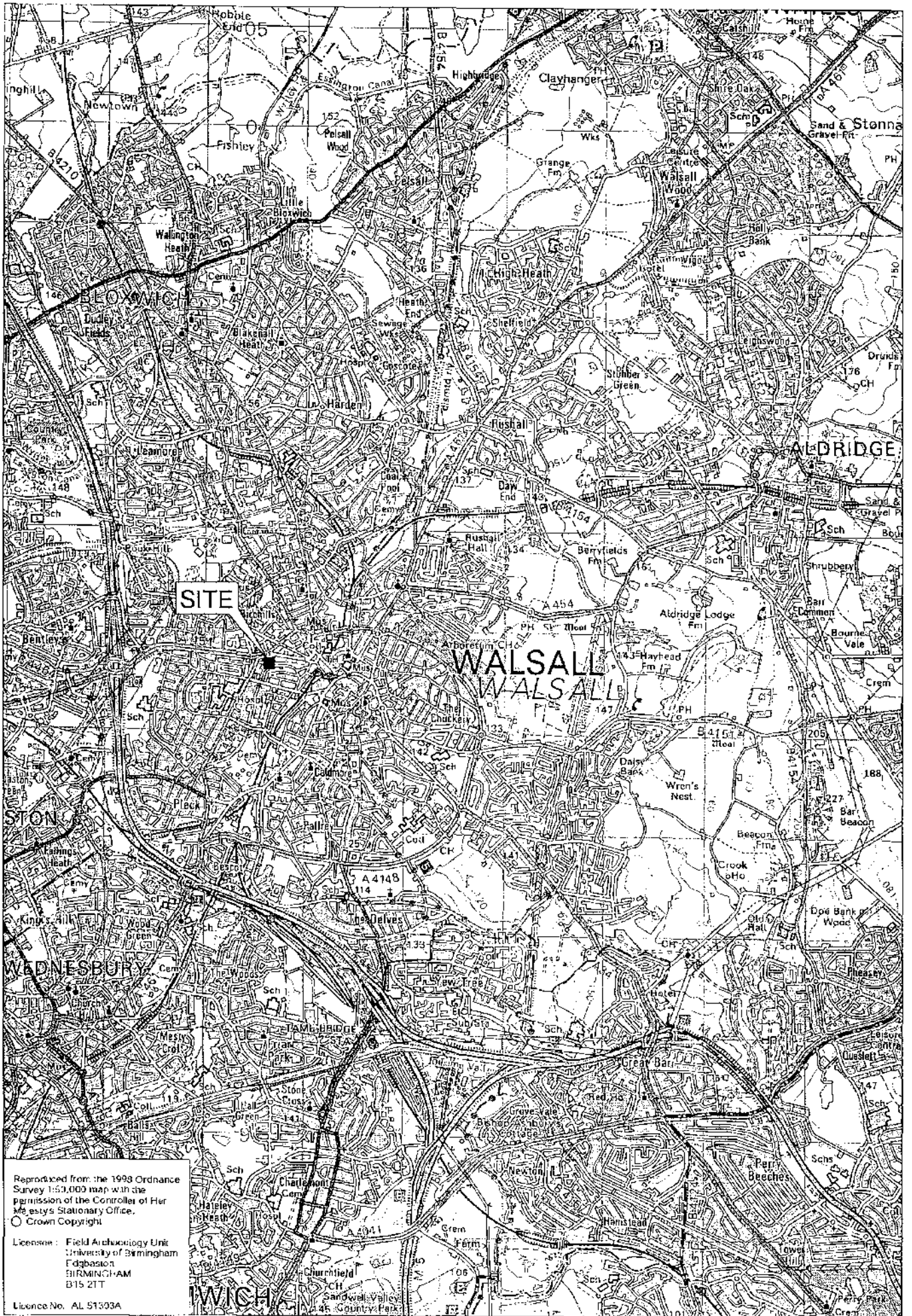


Fig.1

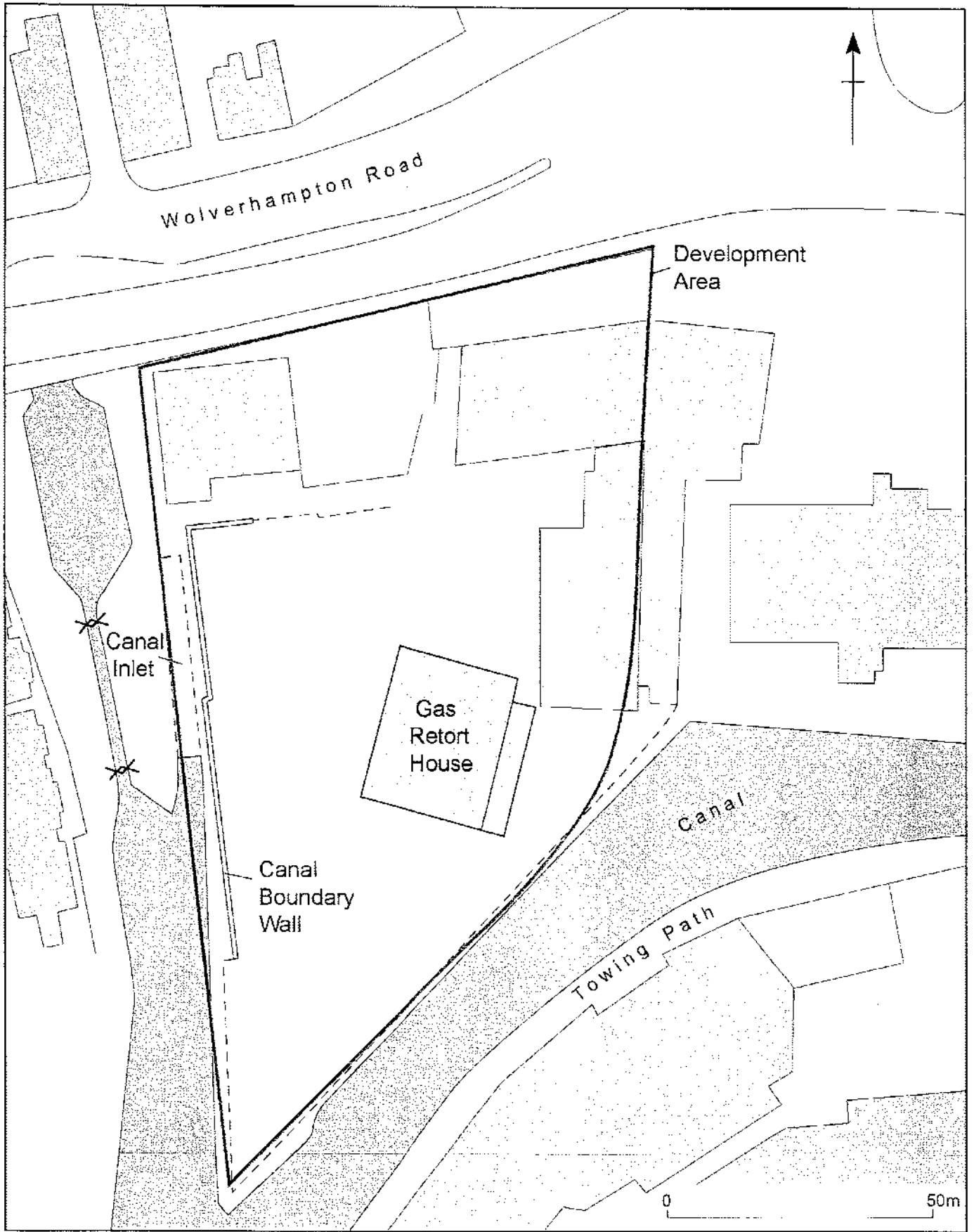
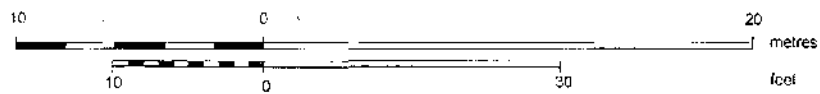
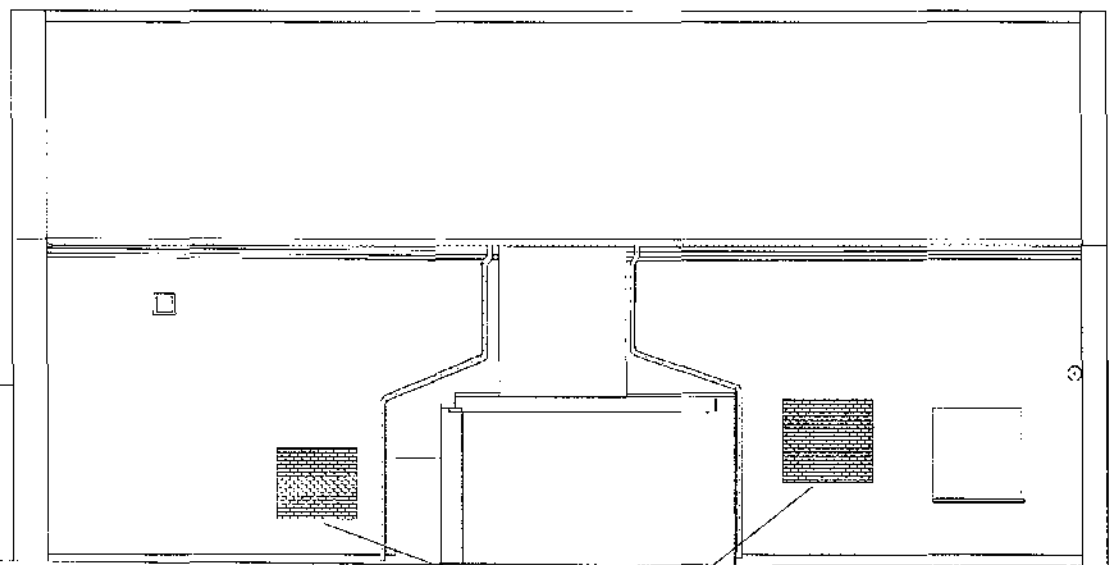
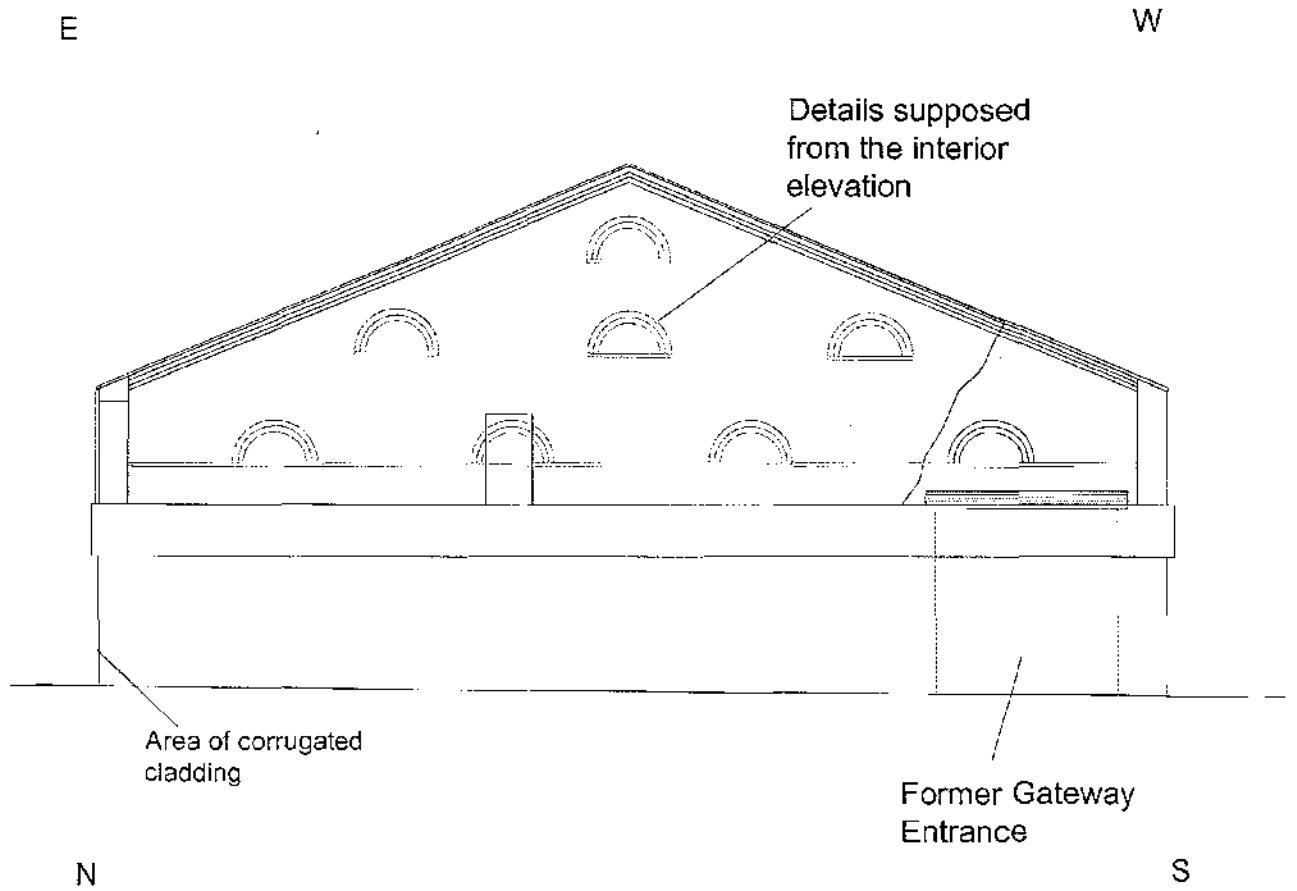


Fig.2



Northern and Western Elevations, Lexsite, Walsall Waterfront	Walsall MBC	NGR: 400650 298650
	PN1268	birmingham archaeology

Fig. 3

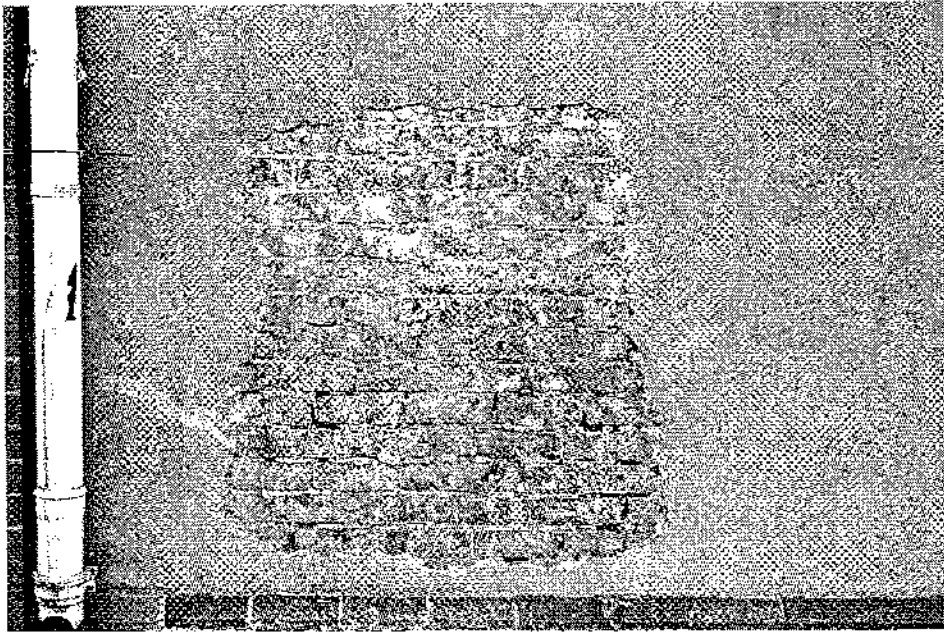


Plate 1

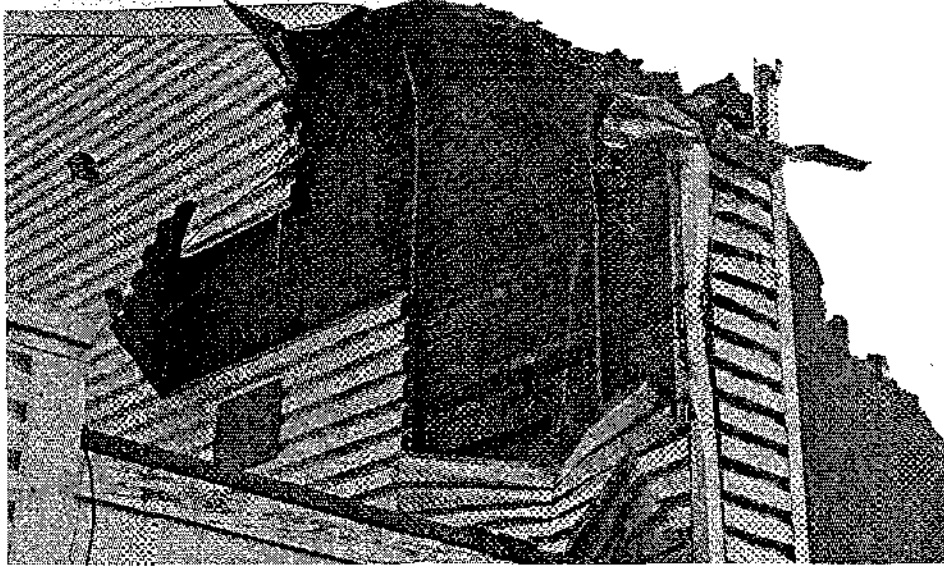


Plate 2



Plate 3