

**Rounds Timber Yard, Castle
Street, Tipton:**

An Archaeological Evaluation

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Rounds Timber Yard, Castle Street, Tipton

An Archaeological Evaluation

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Summary

An archaeological evaluation on land at the site of the former Rounds Timber Yard, Castle Street, Tipton (NGR SP 395238 292058) was commissioned by Framework Construction Limited. The work was undertaken by Birmingham Archaeology in March 2005. A total of three trenches were excavated to locate and identify any archaeological remains that would be affected by the proposed development.

The earliest archaeological features and deposits identified on the site probably relate to the construction of the canal in the late 1700s. The canal followed the 473ft contour with the land dipping away sharply on both sides. The buildings comprising Rounds Timber Yard were both built up from, and cut into an imported levelling deposit that consisted of a typical mixture of mining debris and waste that was used for this type of operation throughout the Black Country.

Two phases of building were identified on the Castle Street frontage. The earliest building identified during the evaluation appeared to be contemporary with the surviving standing building on the site (which is to be retained as part of the redevelopment plan) and a nearby Canal Keeper's Cottage. Later cellars, to the west of the early building, belonged to a mid-Victorian row of cottages that can be seen on the First Edition Ordnance Survey Mapping.

The early development of the canalside probably took place around 1800 as part of the industrial expansion of Tipton. The timber business itself formed an important part of the 19th century industrial economy, providing timber both for the houses provided for the working classes who were flooding into the area at this time, as well as props for the many coal mines that were being dug in the surrounding area.

1.0 Introduction

This report describes the results of an archaeological evaluation undertaken on land at the site of the former Rounds Timber Yard, Castle Street, Tipton (NGR SP 395238 292058). The below-ground archaeological evaluation was carried out by Birmingham Archaeology, with documentary research and standing building analysis and recording, by Dr Paul Collins, which will be reported on separately. The work was commissioned by Framework Construction Limited in order to determine the presence or absence of archaeological features within the application area so that an informed decision could be made on their preservation or recording in advance of redevelopment.

The archaeological evaluation complied with a brief prepared by Charlotte Lewis, Assistant Archaeologist for Sandwell MBC, and conformed to guidelines set down in the Institute of Field Archaeologists *Standards and Guidance for Archaeological Field Evaluation* (IFA 1999).

2.0 Site Location

The site was located on Castle Street, Tipton (SP 395238 292058, Figs. 1 and 2), and bordered to the south by the Wolverhampton/Birmingham Level Branch Canal. The proposed development occupies an area of approximately 3000sqm which currently forms part of an industrial complex.

3.0 Geology and Topography

The underlying subsoil is coal measures clay, which was identified during the evaluation and borehole survey at varying depths beneath the present ground level. The general topography of the area is undulating, with the canal appearing to follow a ridge of clay, with a steep drop to the south, and a level ground surface created by the infilling of colliery waste to the north. The canal follows a particularly winding route through Tipton Green, and it is possible that the clay ridge it follows has been accentuated by the coal working in this area. Given the proximity of the Brooch coal seam to the surface here, this coal would have been easily accessible and may have begun to have been exploited even before the canal was cut.

4.0 Archaeological Background

During the 19th century, Tipton was a totally industrial-based community reliant on the staple industries of the Black Country; coal and iron (Brook 1977, 195). Round and Sons, Timber Merchants, was one of the oldest firms in the area, established in 1772 (*ibid.*). The famous 'Ten Yard' coal seam stretched in an arc from Dudley, through Tipton, to Bilston and Wednesbury, and was one of the richest and thickest seams in the whole country (Booth 1973, 10). In 1712, Lord Dudley installed the first Newcomen steam engine to help drain the Coneygree coal mine at Tipton. Later, the first Boulton and Watt engine was installed at Bloomfield Colliery, also in Tipton (*ibid.*, 14).

The canal through Tipton is one of the earliest canals serving Birmingham and the Black Country. The Birmingham Canal was first authorised by an Act of Parliament on 24th February 1768, it was the original intention for the proprietors to build a canal from Birmingham to Wolverhampton effecting a junction with the Staffordshire and Worcestershire Canal. Construction started from the Birmingham end, with the route being engineered by James Brindley. Problems encountered during its construction caused the main canal route between Birmingham and Aldersley to be drastically altered, and when the canal was finished, the route was both longer and more convoluted than originally intended (Shill 1996, 3). The new route was 18ft above what had originally been suggested by Brindley, and passed through Oldbury and Tipton Green, whereas the original plan had been to bypass them (*ibid.*, 4). The canal is, at the Wolverhampton level of the Birmingham Canal Navigations, at 473ft AOD, and originally served the collieries, limeworks etc in the area. The importance of following the topographical contours to avoid excessive numbers of locks contributed to the canal's meandering course, but the course of the canal was also dictated by the coal masters themselves, ensuring that their mines were served by the new infrastructure.

A two-storey house was built on the site c.1800 and has been little changed since (Framework Construction Ltd 2004). The First Edition Ordnance Survey Map (Fig. 3) shows the house with a circular driveway at the front, and three houses with outbuildings fronting onto Castle Street. The Ordnance Survey Map sequence (not illustrated) show these houses undergoing extensions and alterations to the rear of the properties over the years, but by 1988 they had been demolished.

5.0 Objectives

The objectives of the archaeological evaluation were to:

- Establish the presence or absence of any archaeological deposits and features within the proposed development site.
- Define the nature, extent and significance of surviving deposits and features.
- Provide information to allow the formulation of a mitigation scheme for any further work in advance of development, where appropriate.

6.0 Method

Three trenches were excavated, measuring 70m in total in length and 1.6m wide. They were located to ensure uniform coverage across the site whilst avoiding known services.

Two trenches were parallel to Castle Street, with the third located to the rear of this building parallel to the canal (Fig. 2). The concrete and overburden was mechanically removed by a JCB, under direct archaeological supervision, to the top of the uppermost archaeological deposit, to a safe working depth, or to the top of the natural subsoil where no archaeological deposits were encountered. The exposed horizon was defined and hand cleaned as necessary, and a representative sample of all significant archaeological deposits was excavated in order to understand the structural record and stratigraphic relationships of deposits.

All stratigraphic sequences were recorded, and a comprehensive written record was maintained on pro-forma context, feature and buildings record cards. Contextual information was supplemented by scale drawings (at a scale of 1:10, 1:20 and 1:50), and black and white, colour slide and colour print photography. These, together with recovered artefacts, form the site archive.

7.0 Results

Adjacent to the canal, in Trench 3 (Fig. 2), the natural yellow clay subsoil (3003) was identified at a depth of just 1m below the modern ground level (at a height of 143.50m Above Ordnance Datum). In Trench 2, it was reached at a height of 142.75m Above Ordnance Datum, and across the whole site, the natural subsoil was shown to be overlain by significant deposits of made-up ground.

In Trench 1 (Fig. 4), a sequence of layers (1026) was identified below the base of the terrace wall foundations (see below), which was hand excavated to a depth of 2.3m (to 143.35m Above Ordnance Datum). These layers included lenses of black ash and clinker, grey brown clay-silt and redeposited yellow clay natural which contained pottery datable to the late 18th-early 19th centuries. However, the full depth of these layers could not be ascertained for health and safety reasons.

Trench 2 was initially excavated to a depth of 1.2m, then a machine excavated sondage was dug in the centre of the trench. The archaeological deposits were characterised by a 2.3m deep sequence of layers, comprising layers of black silt with coke and ash, crushed brick, redeposited yellow clay subsoil and pink sandy gravel (Plate 1). A similar sequence of deposits was identified in Trench 3.

In Trench 1 the remains of cellaring were located along the Castle Street frontage. These were identified as belonging to two phases of buildings, both of which are depicted on the First Edition Ordnance Survey Map of 1887. Structural evidence suggests that the earliest building was to the east, and was probably

contemporary with the canal cottage known to have once stood on the corner of Castle Street. This had a barrel vaulted cellar, the ceiling of which was identified at the base of the trench.

Structural evidence for the early cellar, were two walls (1002 and 1004, Figs. 4 and 5, Plate 2). Wall 1002 was only visible in the south-facing section of the trench. Wall 1004 was a half brick thick and at right angles to 1002. A gap between these two walls probably relates to an entrance to the cellar in its northwest corner. The underside of the ceiling (1003) had been rendered and whitewashed or painted. The cellar had been constructed using hand made clamped-bricks that were thinner than 3" suggestive of a relatively early date.

To the west of this cellar, walls and floors associated with cellars belonging to a double terrace were observed. The floor levels of these later cellars were not as deeply sunken as the earlier building. In fact, they were probably semi-sunken, and were therefore similar to those in the remaining standing building on the site. They appeared to be of one phase of construction, and were divided by a half brick thick wall (1006, Fig. 5). However, the floor level in the westernmost terrace was slightly higher than the other (Plate 3), and brick dimensions and mortar varied between walls.

Both cellars were originally accessed by staircases on the outer walls, the remains of which are represented by walls 1005 and 1017, and 1013 and 1014 and the remains of a red quarry tile step (1012, Plate 4). This may also explain why the eastern gable wall was only a half-brick thick at this level. The stairwells had been infilled with a deposit of coke, ash and clinker (1031 and 1034). A second staircase into the western cellar (1007, Plate 5) gave access from the rear of the house, and it is not inconceivable that this was actually from the outside of the property.

The cellars were divided by a half-brick thick wall (1006), and both had been further sub-divided into smaller rooms by walls 1001, 1008 and 1010. There was also evidence of linking doorways through 1001 and 1010 (Plates 6 and 7). The floor of the easternmost cellar was constructed from brick pavers throughout (1020). The western cellar had several different floor types denoting different rooms; brick pavers (1021) at the bottom of the central staircase, and engineering bricks in the other rooms (1009 and 1011). Floor surface 1009 had a shallow drain running parallel to wall 1008, which was constructed from grey flue tiles.

The cellars were infilled with loose brick rubble (1024, 1025, 1027, 1028, 1029 and 1030 Figs 4 and 5). Deposit 1027 contained large fragments of sandstone that showed some evidence of being worked.

Immediately outside the terrace (to the west) a deposit of grey clay-silt containing coke, charcoal and brick fragments was identified (1032), with the remains of a cobbled surface set into it (1015, Fig. 5). The garden wall associated with the house with the circular drive depicted on the First Edition Ordnance Survey Map (Fig. 3) was also revealed at this end of the trench (1016/1018). It appeared to have been constructed in two phases, although this may equally have represented repairs. A garden soil had built up against it on the house side of the wall (1033 and 1035). Pottery dating to the late 19th centuries was recovered from both the cobbled surface and the garden soil (Ratkai, pers. comm.). Overlying the whole of the trench was a levelling deposit of crushed brick and mortar (1022) with a surface of Type 1 hardcore (1000).

In Trench 2 the majority of the deposits were devoid of artefacts, though a small amount of post-medieval pottery was recovered from 2004 and 2005, which were both layers of made-up ground overlying the natural subsoil. Two sherds from 2005 dated to the late 17th early-mid 18th century, and a single sherd from 2004 was dated to the 19th century (Ratkai pers. comm.). However, they are of little value in terms of understanding the nature of occupation on the site as these deposits were undoubtedly imported from elsewhere.

Several features were observed cutting the natural subsoil in Trench 3 (Fig. 6) however, they were ephemeral, and it was unclear as to whether they related to the construction of the canal, the construction of the wharf or were later disturbances (Plates 8 and 9). Overlying these features, was a 0.3m deep layer of dark grey clay silt (3002), containing brick and tile fragments, mortar flecks and 19th century pottery. Sealing this deposit was a modern layer of hardcore.

8.0 Discussion

The earliest archaeological features and deposits identified on the site probably relate to the construction of the canal in the late 1700s. These directly overlie or were cut into the natural coal measure clays. The canal followed the 473ft contour with the land dipping away sharply on both sides. It would appear that the buildings comprising Rounds Timber Yard were both built up from and into an imported levelling deposit that consisted of a typical mixture of mining debris and waste that was used for this type of operation throughout the Black Country.

The main building, which, stylistically, appears to be either later 18th century or early 19th century in date, was clearly built up from the level of the natural clay and its cellar then buried by the imported levelling material. In terms of its build the structure identified at the easternmost end of the frontage is also likely to be contemporary with both the main building described above, and the nearby Canal Keeper's Cottage. This early building had a barrel vaulted cellar, and clearly pre-dated the terrace to the west that butted up against it and were made of more regular mass-produced brick. These later cellars belonged to a mid-Victorian row of cottages that can be seen on the First Edition Ordnance Survey Mapping (Fig. 3). The floor level in these later cellars was substantially higher than the (assumed) cellar depth of the earlier building (only the ceiling of this cellar was identified during the evaluation). A sondage excavated beneath the floor of the later cellars revealed that they had been cut through the made-up ground, therefore they post-dated them.

Overall, the earlier set of buildings appear to have been constructed at some point after the canal was built, and it is likely that this took place around 1800 as part of the industrial expansion of Tipton. Typically this expansion was centred around the canals and this would have justified the labour and expense of levelling the land upon which Rounds Timber Yard was built. The timber business formed an important part of the 19th century industrial economy, providing timber both for the houses provided for the working classes who were flooding into the area at this time, as well as props for the many coal mines that were being dug in the surrounding area.

9.0 Acknowledgements

This project was commissioned by Framework Construction Limited. Thanks are due to Graham Eyre-Morgan, Borough Archaeologist, and Charlotte Lewis, Assistant Archaeologist, who monitored the on behalf of Sandwell MBC. The evaluation was supervised by Eleanor Ramsey with the assistance of Tim Evans and Keith Hinton. Special thanks are due to Steve Litherland for his advice on the interpretation and recording of the archaeology, and to Stephanie Rátkai for the pottery spot dating. Kirsty Nichol managed the project for Birmingham Archaeology and edited this report. The illustrations were prepared by Nigel Dodds.

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Appendix 1

Pottery Spot Dates

Context 1026 **Date late 18th or early 19th century**

1 x creamware base sherd

Context 1032 **Date 19th century**

2 x coarseware sherds from large storage jar, internal black glaze
1 x utilitarian whiteware chamber pot rim
6 x utilitarian whiteware body sherds
1 x blue shell-edged dinner plate
1 x modern glazed ware, thick white translucent body, white/clear glaze

Context 1035 **Date 19th century**

1 x yellow ware
1 x hollow slipware, internal and external black glaze, trailed white slip pattern on exterior
1 x unglazed coarseware body sherd
1 x white salt-glazed stoneware, flange-rim bowl
1 x blue transfer-printed, willow pattern plate

Context 2004 **Date 19th century**

1 x utilitarian whiteware sherd

Context 2005 **Date late 17th-early/mid 18th century**

1 x feathered slipware moulded platter
1 x blackware body sherd

Context 3002 **Date 19th century**

1 x coarseware body sherd, probably from a bowl
1 x slip-coated ware body sherd, internal black glaze, probably from a bowl
1 x creamware rim sherd from flange-rim bowl
1 x creamware body sherd
1 x blue transfer-printed (willow pattern type) base sherd from plate
1 x ?pearlware tea cup rim sherd, under-glaze blue decoration (possibly hand-painted rather than transfer print)

Context 3007 **Date 19th century**

1 x blackware body sherd
1 x creamware slightly dished rim sherd
1 x utilitarian ?whiteware (glaze and fabric has a greyish tone)

Context 3009 **Date 18th century**

1 x slip-coated ware bowl base sherd
1 x slip-coated ware body sherd

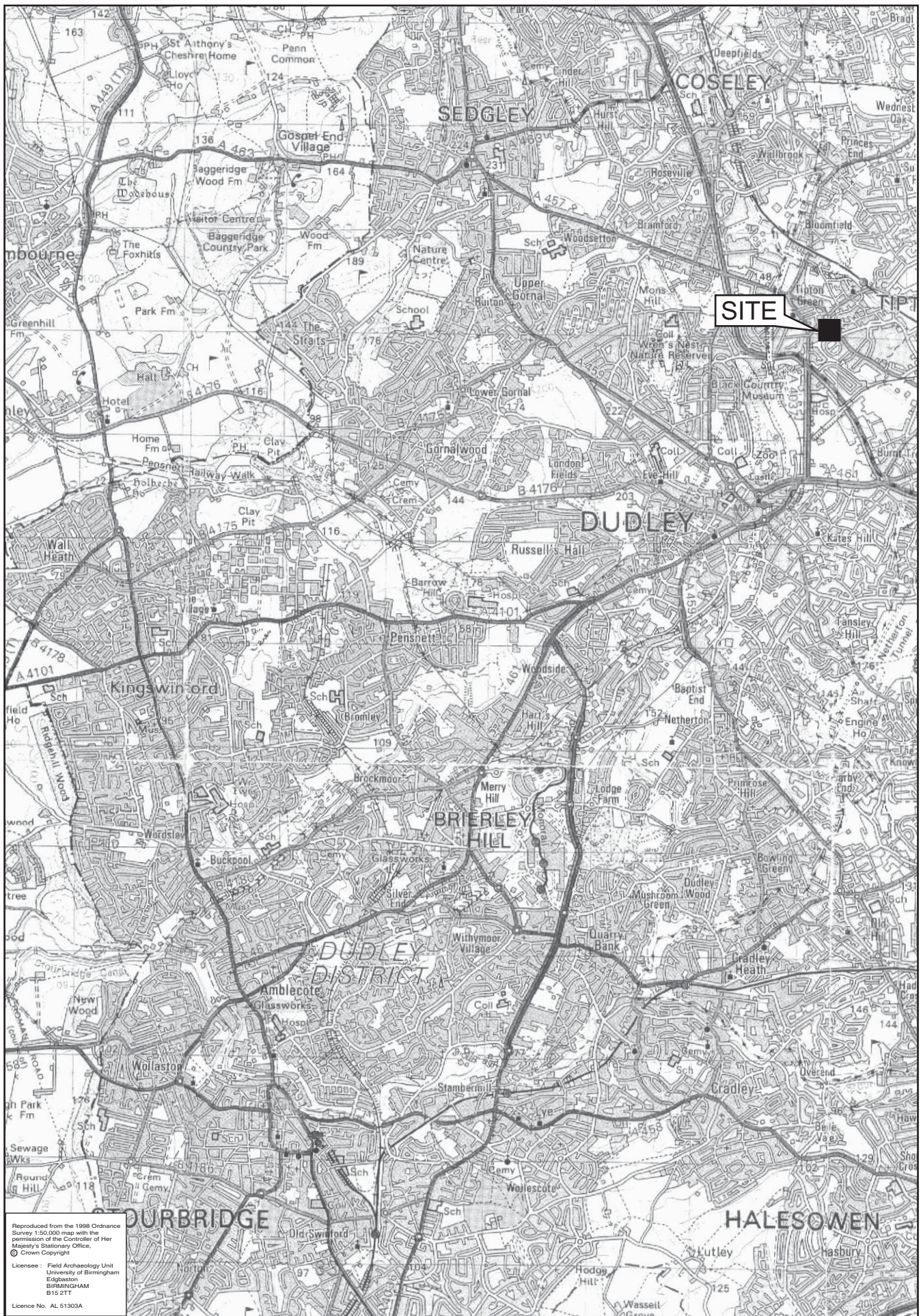


Fig.1

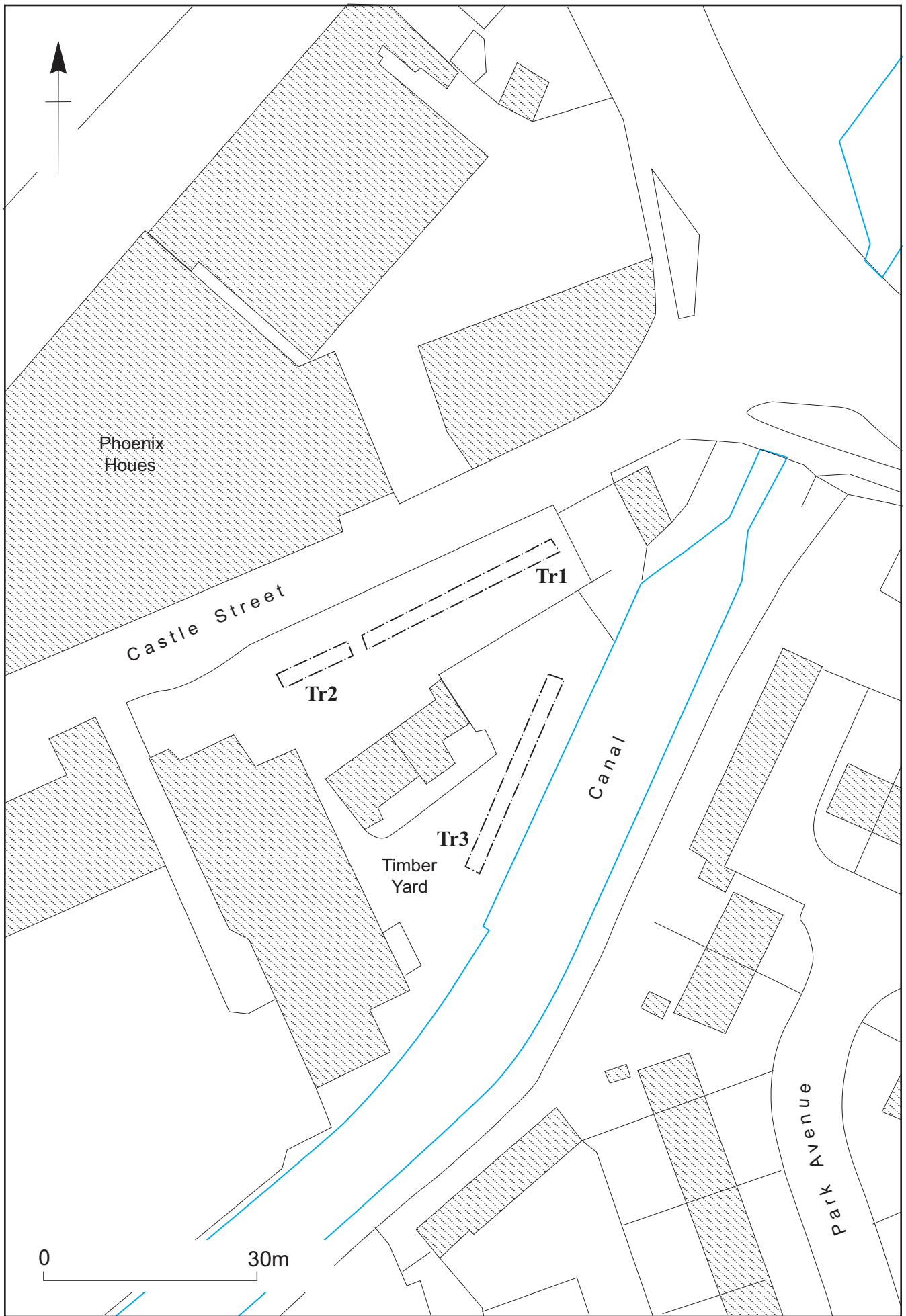


Fig.2

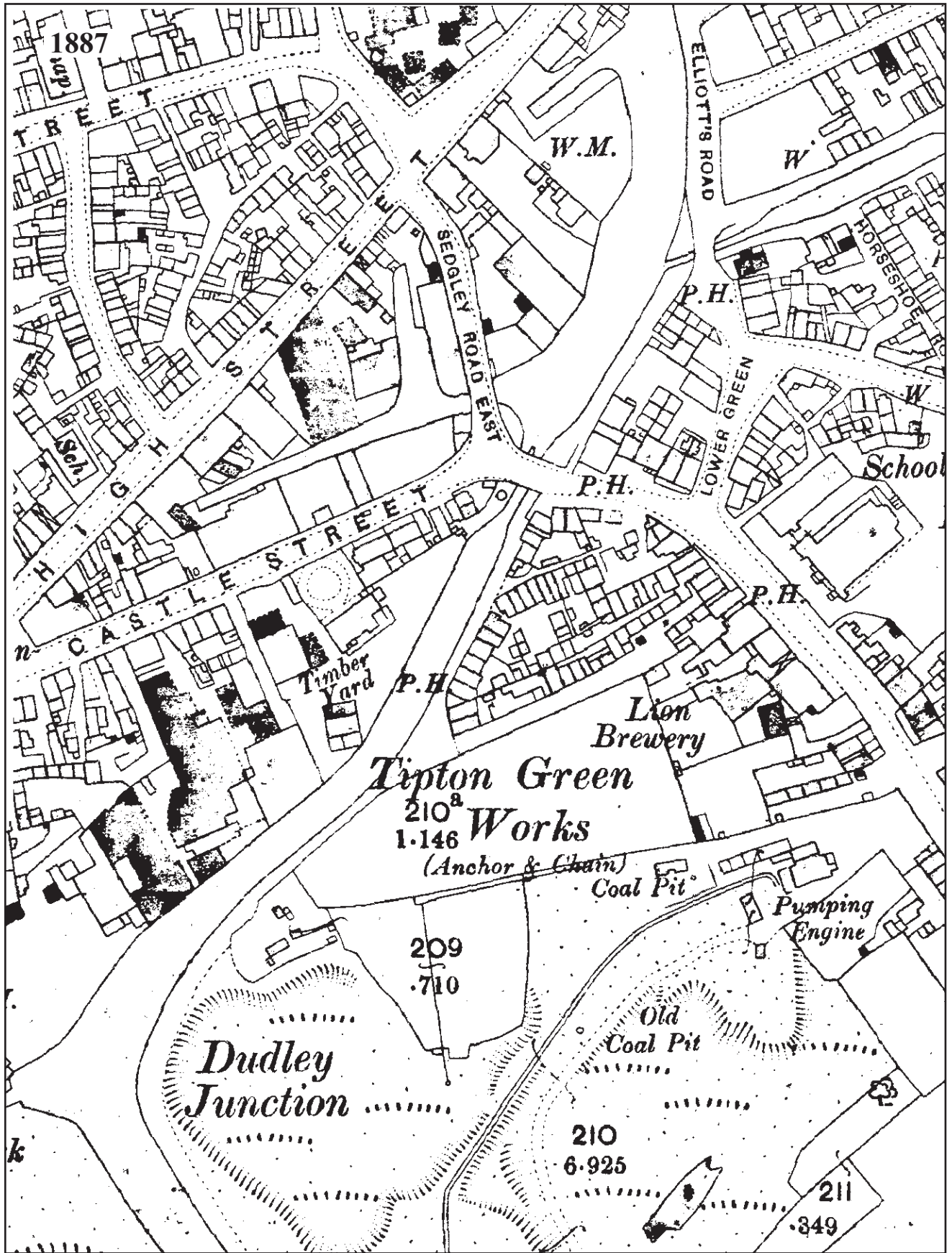


Fig.3

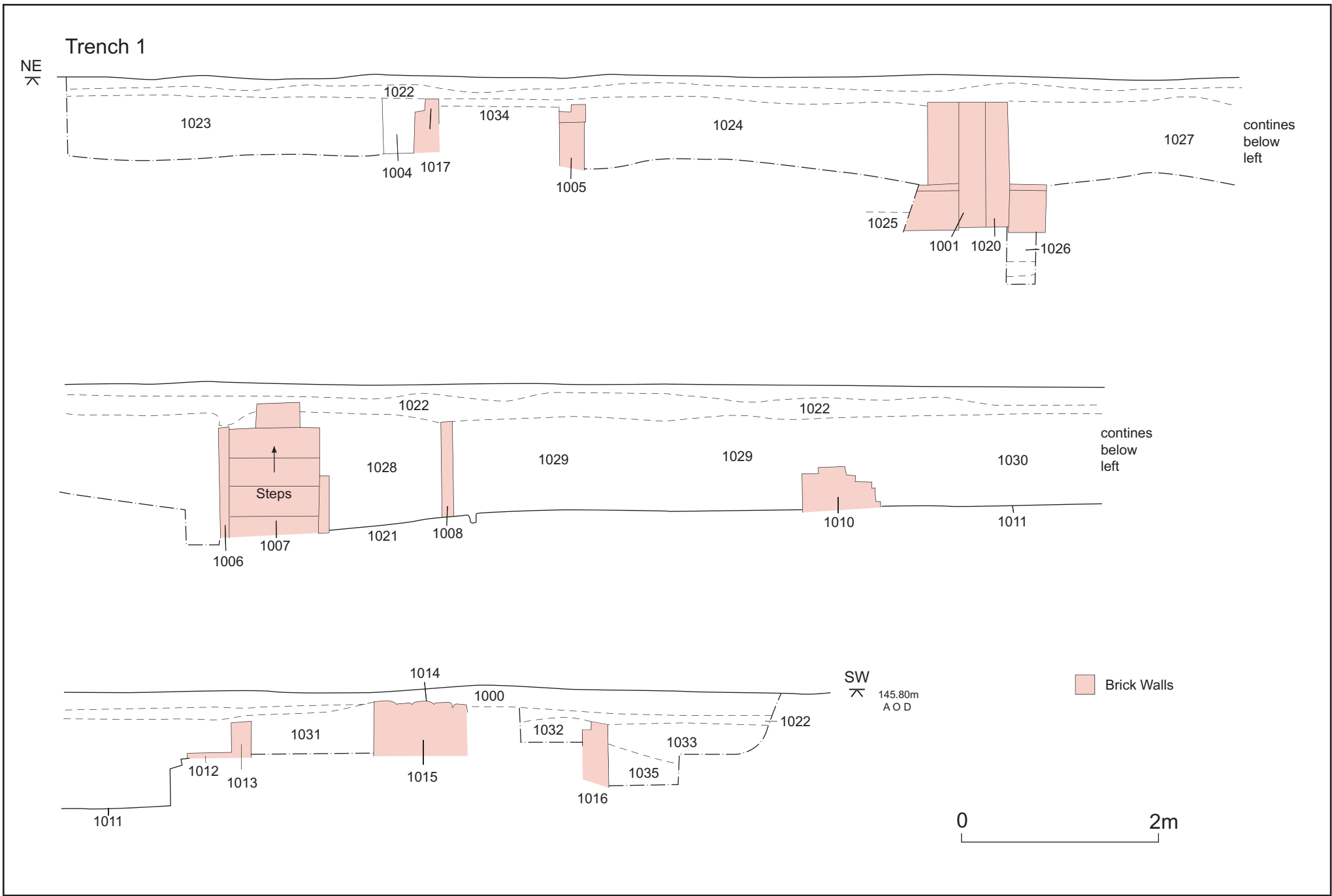


Fig.4

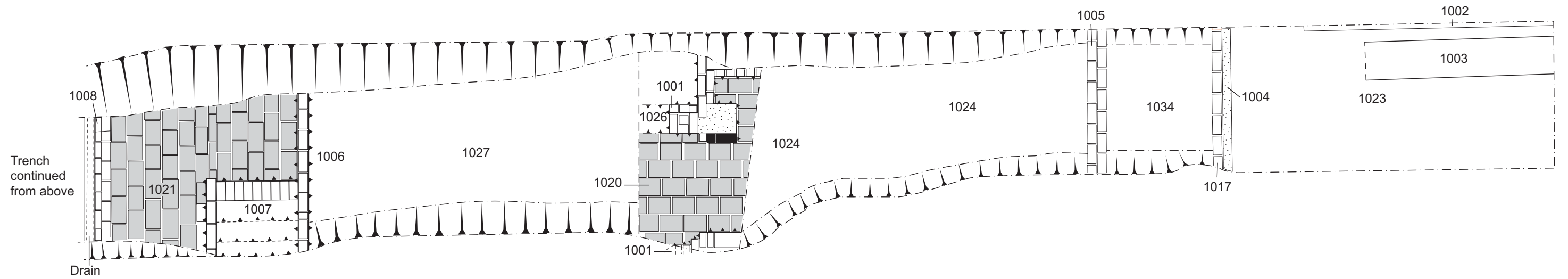
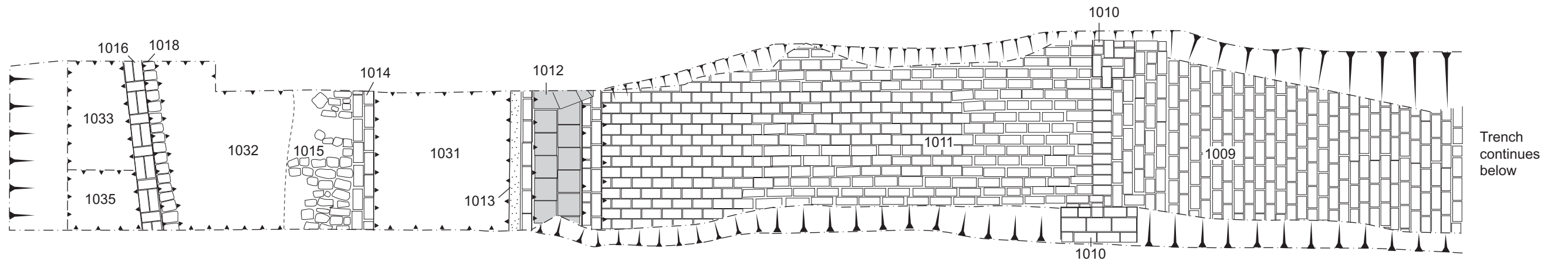


Fig.5

Trench 3

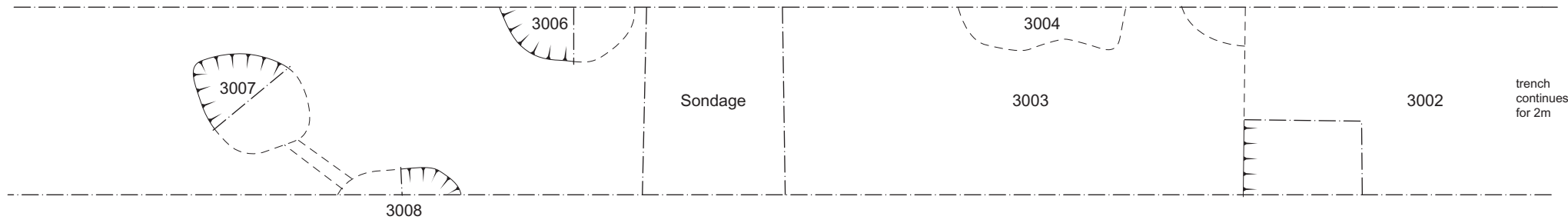
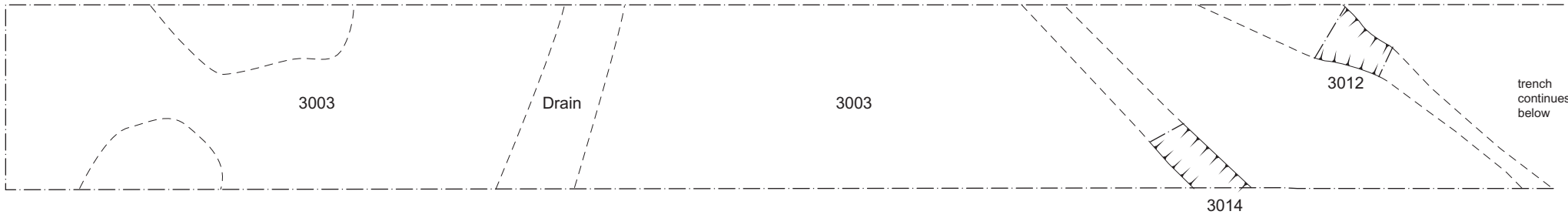
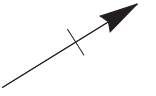


Fig.6

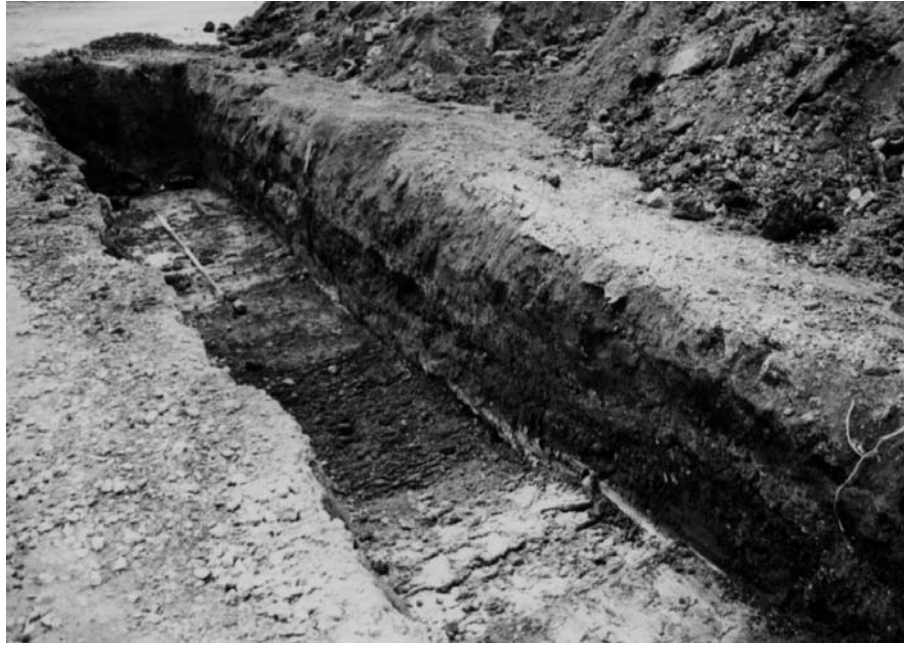


Plate 1



Plate 2

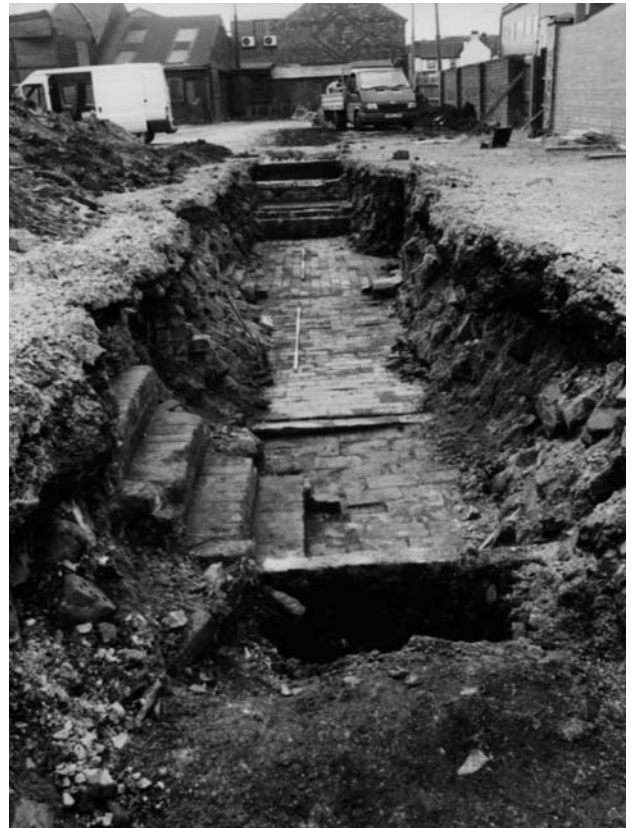


Plate 3



Plate 4



Plate 5



Plate 6



Plate 7



Plate 8



Plate 9