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The Walker Building
58 Oxford Street
Digbeth
Birmingham

Archaeological Watching Brief
2007

UNIVERSITY OF
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THE WALKER BUILDING, 58 OXFORD STREET, DIGBETH
ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF

Project No. 1636
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By

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For

Hartwell plc

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SUMMARY

In June 2007 Birmingham Archaeology carried out an archaeological watching brief at the Walker Building, 58 Oxford Street, Digbeth. The work was commissioned by Associated Architects on behalf of Hartwell plc in advance of a series of geo-technical investigations.

The archaeological monitoring of the geo-technical pits across the site demonstrated that, although large parts of the area consists of demolition rubble and modern debris, buried in situ post-medieval structural remains were encountered in four of the test pits. Natural clay was identified in two of the test pits at depths of 1.5 and 2m below current ground level.

THE WALKER BUILDING, 58 OXFORD STREET, DIGBETH**ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF 2007****1 INTRODUCTION**

In June 2007 Birmingham Archaeology carried out an archaeological watching brief at the Walker Building, 58 Oxford Street, Digbeth (hereafter referred to as the site). The work was commissioned by Associated Architects on behalf of Hartwell plc in advance of a series of geo-technical investigations.

This report outlines the results of the fieldwork, which was carried out on the 5th and 12th of June 2007, and which was prepared in accordance a Written Scheme of Investigation (Birmingham Archaeology 2007) which was approved by the Planning Archaeologist, Birmingham City Council, in accordance with guidelines laid down in Planning Policy Guidance Note 16 (DoE 1990) and Policy 8.36 of the Birmingham City Council's Unitary Development Plan and Archaeology Strategy.

2 LOCATION AND GEOLOGY

The site is located within the Digbeth area of central Birmingham at NGR SP 0770 8657 (Fig 1). The proposed development site is bounded by Coventry Street to the north and Oxford Street to the West. (Fig. 2).

The underlying geology consists of Triassic Keuper Marl (Geological Survey of Great Britain, drift geology, sheet 168).

3 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The principle aim of the project was to assess the survival and potential significance of any archaeology within the site.

More specific aims were to:

- Establish the presence or absence of archaeological remains encountered during the excavation of the geo-technical pits

This information will be used to inform a mitigation strategy for future archaeological work on the site.

4 METHODOLOGY

The excavations of 8 geo-technical pits were monitored by a suitably qualified archaeologist. Recording was by means of pre-printed pro-forma record cards for contexts and features, by scale plans and sections, and high resolution digital photography. No archaeological excavation was undertaken other than cleaning, and all stratigraphic deposits were recorded even where no archaeological features or deposits were encountered.

5 ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT

From the cartographic evidence it can be shown that the site is situated immediately to the north of the backplots along the ribbon development along Digbeth/Deritend High Street, one of the main roads leading in and out of medieval Birmingham. It is likely that Deritend originally had its own market, and the subsequent growth in trade, industry and population filled in the gap between the market in Deritend and of that in the Bull Ring.

Close ties between Digbeth and the metal working industries go back at least 500 years, and there was an industrial specialisation in the metal trades in the area, with water power making an increasing contribution to Birmingham's industrial growth in the 16th and 17th centuries. Other industries such as tanning were also important to the economy of the area (Litherland 1996).

On Bradfords map of 1751 and on Hansons map of 1778 the site is shown to be within open fields to the north of Digbeth High Street, and possibly had water-filled field boundaries running through it. By 1810, urban development had spread to the north of the medieval thoroughfare, and Oxford Street, Coventry Street and Bordesley Street are all depicted as having buildings fronting them on Kempsons map of this date. However, the site itself does not appear to have been built on until later in the 19th century.

Previous work in the area has included desk-based assessment of the Digbeth Economic Reeneration Area and Cheapside Industrial Area (Litherland et al 1995) and evaluation at Hartwells Garage to the southwest of the site. This evaluation demonstrated that potentially significant archaeological deposits survived as 'islands' between areas of later disturbance, and included waterlogged deposits that contained preserved wood and leather, dated to between c.1500 and 1800 (Litherland and Moscrop 1996).

6 RESULTS

The results of the watching brief are outlined below with each geo-technical pit discussed individually.

Pit 1

The pit was excavated to a depth of 1.2m below current ground level. The earliest deposit encountered was a layer of dark grey sandy silt with rubble and brick inclusions (1001). The brick rubble was of a late 19th century date. Brick foundations (1002), consisting of 6 courses of mortared, early 20th century bricks, cut through (1001) at the southern end of the trench, aligned east west. All the above was sealed by modern concrete 0.2m thick.

Pit 2

The pit was excavated to a depth of 1.2m below current ground level. The western edge of the test pit was bounded by a modern brick foundation (1004) wall aligned north south. Excavations to a depth of 1.2m failed to exceed deposit (1003), consisting of demolition rubble similar in nature and date to (1001) in pit 1. All this was sealed by modern concrete ranging between 0.25 and 0.4m thick.

Pit 3

The pit was excavated against a wall of a 1960s extension built onto the yard. The pit was filled entirely by a similar material to the other test pits, being sandy silt with rubble inclusions (1005). A concrete covered service pipe was identified cutting through (1005) aligned east west.

Pit 4

The pit was excavated against the existing wall at the base support for the railway viaduct above. Natural clay 1010 was identified at a depth of 1.8m below current ground level. Wall foundation 1007 was recorded bisecting the pit on an east west alignment. With the base course sitting on the natural clay, the wall consisted on a total of 8 courses of 19th century bricks. Either side of 1007 was demolition rubble 1006. All the above was sealed by modern concrete forming the existing yard surface.



Plate 1 - Pit 4 showing wall foundation 1007

Pit 5

Brick surface 1008 formed the base of the trench at a depth of 2.3m below current ground level. This test pit was thought to lie over a 'void'. Once excavated it became apparent that it was a cellar type structure from a pre-existing building. The base (at 2.3m) was formed from mid 19th century brick (1008), as were the walls. There was a continuation of the concrete coated pipe seen in pit 3. This cut through the brickwork. Brick and other debris filled the pit. Again, a concrete layer covered this pit. It formed a thin crust on this test pit of only a few centimetres.



Plate 2 - Pit 5 showing possible cellar wall 1008

Pit 6

This pit was hand dug in the interior of the main existing 1910 building. It was dug against an existing wall to a depth of 1.2 metres. At the base of the pit were the truncated remains of brick wall 1013, consisting of two courses. Aligned east-west, it was constructed from two types of early 19th century bricks. This may represent the earliest structural evidence identified on the site during this project.

Wall 1013 was sealed by a layer of sandy silt and debris (1012) similar to the rest of the site, containing post medieval-pottery, tile and shell. The uppermost surface of the pit consisted of wooden boards, which in turn were covered by floorboards.



Plate 3 - Showing the uppermost course of wall 1013

Pit 7

Natural clay 1010 was encountered at a depth of 1.5m below current ground level. The truncated remains of a modern foundation wall, consisting of bricks and concrete, was recorded in the south-eastern corner of the trench. This was sealed by demolition rubble 1009, consisting of brick and concrete rubble, that in turn was overlain by a modern concrete surface.



Plate 4 - Pit 7 showing natural clay 1010

Pit 8

Natural clay was encountered at a depth of 2m below current ground level. This was overlain by a sandy demolition rubble similar to the rubble identified in the other test pits. Sealing this was a brick surface (1014) covering the base of the pit 0.8m below the current ground level. The bricks were of a late 19th century in date. This was overlain by modern rubble that, in turn, was sealed by modern concrete.

7 THE FINDS BY ERICA MACEY-BRACKEN AND STEPHANIE RÁTKAI

All the finds from the site were recovered from context 1012 (Pit 6). The assemblage consisted of pottery, clay pipe and shell.

Twelve sherds of post-medieval pottery were recovered from the site. The earliest sherds were two joining foot-ring base sherds from a creamware vessel, and a creamware bowl sherd which may have been from the same vessel. All three of these sherds dated to between 1770s -

1780s. Seven other sherds were dated to the late 18th - 19th century, including four coarseware sherds from a large jar or 'pan', a coarseware bowl rim sherd, and jar sherd and a stoneware flagon with honey glaze. This vessel had been heavily burnt both internally and externally around its neck and most particularly the rim. The remainder of the pottery assemblage was dated to the early 19th century, and comprised a possible pearlware jug sherd, overpainted with a blue transfer-printed design, and a yellow ware or cane ware flange rim bowl sherd, which was decorated with a blue tree pattern on a cream background.

8 CONCLUSIONS

The archaeological monitoring of the geo-technical pits across the site demonstrated that, although large parts of the area consists of demolition rubble and modern debris, buried *in situ* post-medieval structural remains were encountered in four of the test pits. Natural clay was identified in two of the test pits at depths of 1.5 and 2m below current ground level.

The structural remains in Pit 6, dating to the early 19th century, may be the earliest evidence on site. It seems likely that this feature predates the later, more substantial brick foundations recorded in several other pits. Cartographic evidence suggests a similar sequence of development with the site shown as open land until the late 19th century.

Although no medieval remains were encountered during the course of the watching brief, the present of *in situ* post-medieval structures on the site suggests that there is potential for pockets of earlier archaeological remains to exist as isolated islands between the modern truncated areas.

9 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The project was commissioned by Associate Architects, on behalf of Hartwell plc. Thanks are due to Richard Perry, James Hilton, and Warren Dukes for their co-operation and assistance throughout the project. Thanks are also due to the ground works team of Geotechnics Limited. Thanks also go to Dr. Michael Hodder, who monitored the project on behalf of Birmingham City Council. The fieldwork was undertaken by Paul Collins who produced the written report, illustrated by Nigel Dodds. The project was managed for Birmingham Archaeology by Kevin Colls, who also edited this report.

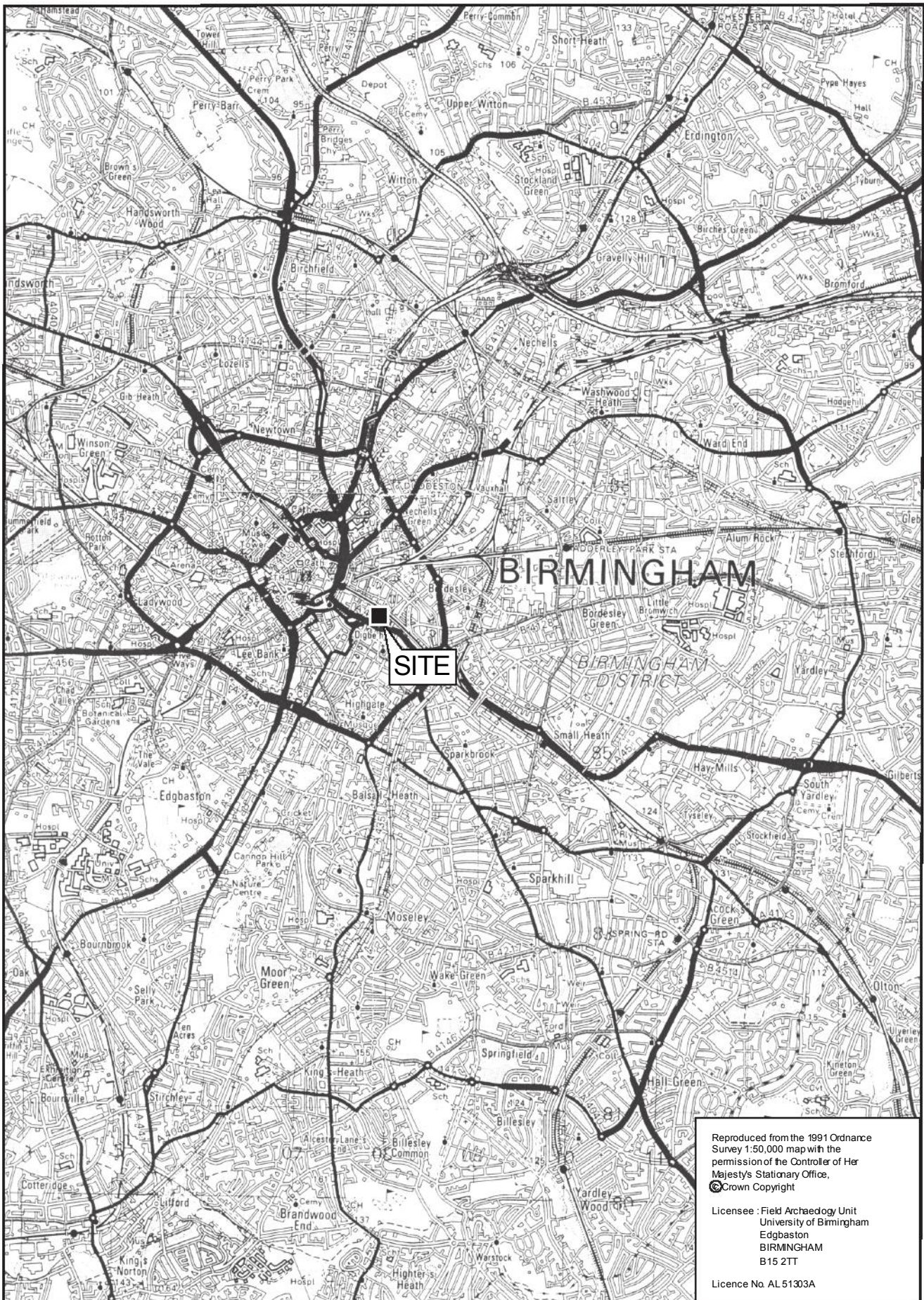


Fig.1

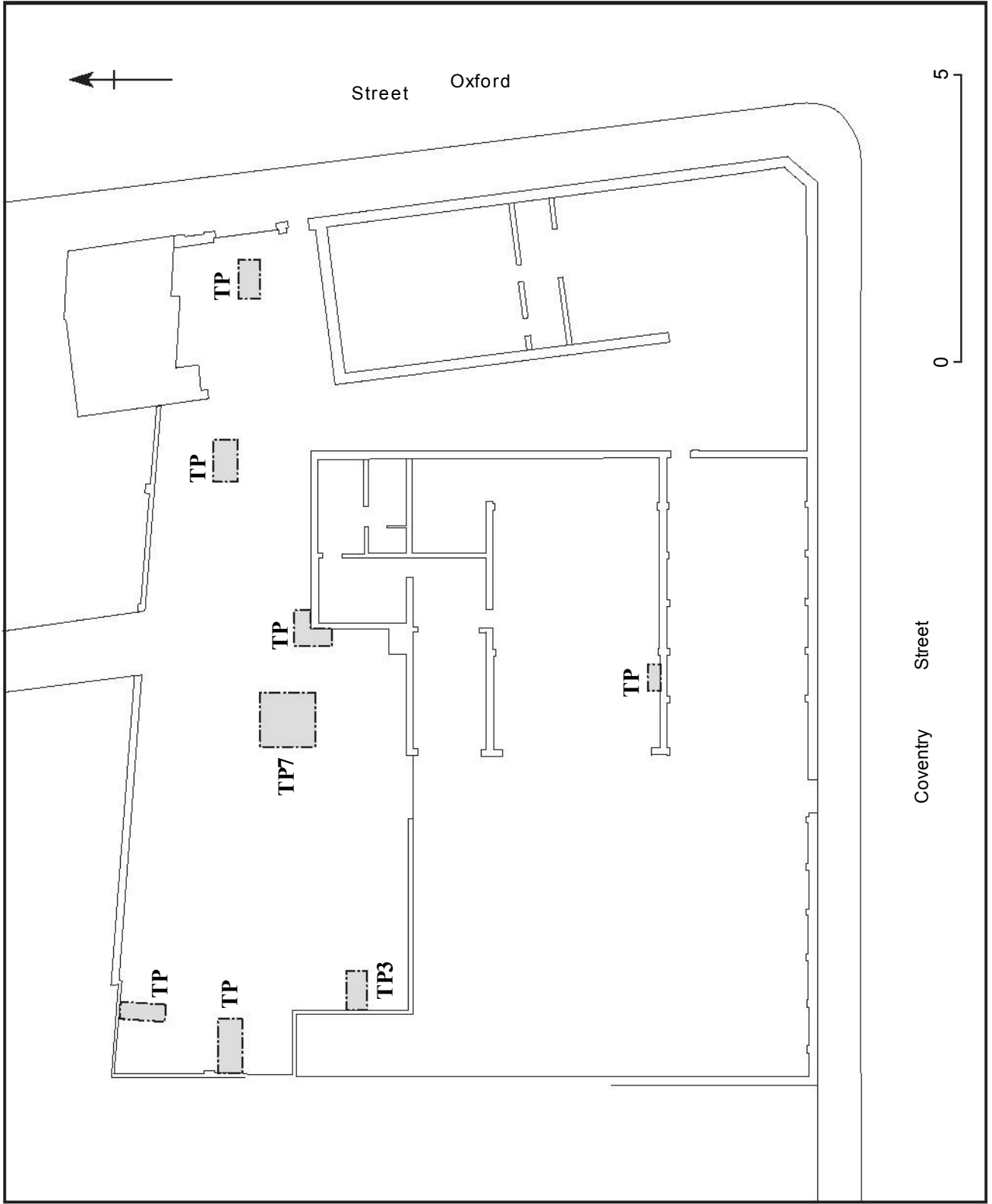


Fig.