

# birmingham archaeology



UNIVERSITY OF  
BIRMINGHAM

**NEWMAN BROTHERS  
COFFIN FURNITURE WORKS,  
13-15 FLEET STREET,  
BIRMINGHAM**

**ARCHAEOLOGICAL  
WATCHING BRIEF 2009**



**Project No. 1998**

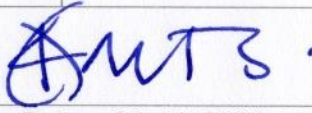
**11/2009**

**NEWMAN BROTHERS COFFIN FURNITURE WORKS**

13-15 Fleet Street, Birmingham

**ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF 2009**

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13-15 Fleet Street, Birmingham

Archaeological Watching Brief 2009

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**NEWMAN BROTHERS COFFIN FURNITURE WORKS**

13-15 Fleet Street, Birmingham

Archaeological Watching Brief 2009

**SUMMARY**

*Birmingham Archaeology was commissioned in November 2009 by White Young Green Environment, to undertake an archaeological watching brief in respect of proposed remediation works at the former Newman Brothers Coffin Furniture Works, 13-15 Fleet Street, Birmingham (centred on NGR SP0637 8709). The watching brief involved monitoring of the removal of contaminated ground in the enclosed courtyard of the Grade II\* listed former Coffin Furniture Works which was built in 1892, and altered during the 20<sup>th</sup> century.*

*During the watching brief a sunken brick structure, 16.4m long x 3.85m wide and up to 0.75m deep, was recorded. The structure had a brick-built outer wall and engineering brick floor surface. Evidence of internal fittings and bases for machinery was apparent, including mortar or concrete scars on the floor and voids in the floor surface, however, no original machinery or fittings remained. The southeast and northwest sides of the structure had a concrete platform, step and raised walkway structure with a brick, and probably later, concrete capped ramp or step at the north corner, leading to the Fleet Street entrance. Rubble backfilling the structure contained the remains of a hessian sack which contained silver plated coffin furniture and other items. The date of these finds suggested the structure had been backfilled in the mid to late-20<sup>th</sup> century. The structure was left in situ following completion of the works, and was recorded prior to backfilling with stable materials.*

## **NEWMAN BROTHERS COFFIN FURNITURE WORKS**

13-15 Fleet Street, Birmingham

Archaeological Watching Brief 2009

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

- 1.1.1. Birmingham Archaeology was commissioned by White Young Green Environment to undertake an archaeological watching brief during ground remediation works at the Newman Brothers Coffin Works, 13-15 Fleet Street, Birmingham (hereinafter referred to as the site).
- 1.1.2. This report outlines the results of the watching brief carried out between 30/10/2009 and 3/11/2009, and has been prepared in accordance the brief produced by Birmingham City Council (Appendix 1), and a Written Scheme of Investigation produced by WYG Environment (Kendall 2009) both of which were approved by the Local Planning Authority prior to implementation, in accordance with guidelines laid down in Planning Policy Guidance Note 16 (DoE 1990). The project conformed to the Institute for Archaeologists Standard and Guidance for Archaeological Watching Briefs (IFA 2001)

### **2. LOCATION AND GEOLOGY**

- 2.1.1. The site is located at 13-15 Fleet Street, Birmingham on the northwest side of the city centre (centred on NGR SP0637 8709, Figure 1).
- 2.1.2. At present the site is a brick paved enclosed courtyard within Grade II\* listed former Newman Brothers Coffin Furniture works built in 1892, with 20<sup>th</sup> century alterations and additions including warehousing, workshops and office. The standing buildings of the works stand on all four sides of this courtyard, with an entrance passageway leading from the courtyard on to Fleet Street on the northwest side of the courtyard (Figure 2).

### **3. AIMS AND OBJECTIVES**

- 3.1.1. The principal aim of the watching brief was to record any archaeological features, structures, deposits, or horizons exposed during intrusive groundworks across the site.
- 3.1.2. More specific aims (as stated in the Written Scheme of Investigation, Kendall 2009, 3) were to:
- Monitor the topsoil stripping and excavation to archaeological sterile sub-soils;
  - Identify archaeological feature and deposits of interest;
  - Record identified archaeological features and deposits to a level appropriate to their extent and significance;
  - Undertake sufficient post-excavation analysis of artefacts and samples to interpret their significance;

- Report the results of the watching brief and post-excavation analysis and place them within their local and regional context;
- Compile and deposit a site archive at a suitable repository.

#### **4. METHODOLOGY**

- 4.1.1. Groundworks comprised the excavation of up to 0.75m of contaminated material within a brick structure, visible in plan in the centre of the courtyard with a mini-digger fitted with a toothless bucket. This was monitored by a suitably qualified archaeologist and complemented with the recording of any archaeological deposits and features revealed during works. A safe system of work (Erith 2009) was followed during the watching brief and detailed control measures were adhered to. Advice from Birmingham University Safety Unit concerning contamination levels was followed.
- 4.1.2. All stratigraphic sequences were recorded, even where no archaeology was present. Features were planned at a scale of 1:20, and sections were drawn of all cut features and significant vertical stratigraphy at a scale of 1:20. A comprehensive written record was maintained using a continuous numbered context system on *pro-forma* cards. Written records and scale plans were supplemented by photographs using black and white monochrome, colour slide and digital photography.
- 4.1.3. The full site archive will be prepared according to guidelines set down in Appendix 3 of the Management of Archaeological Projects (English Heritage, 1991), the Guidelines for the Preparation of Excavation Archives for Long-term Storage (UKIC, 1990) and Standards in the Museum Care of Archaeological collections (Museum and Art Galleries Commission, 1992). The archive will be deposited with Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, subject to permission from the landowner.

#### **5. RESULTS**

- 5.1.1. The results of the watching brief are illustrated in Figure 3 and Plate 1, while references to the surrounding buildings of the works are illustrated by Figure 2.
- 5.1.2. In the central part of the courtyard was a large sunken brick structure; this had been visible in plan, prior to the commencement of work and excavation revealed this to be up to 0.75m deep. The brick floor and wall of the structure were left *in situ*.
- 5.1.3. The structure was 16.4m long 3.85m wide and trapezoidal in plan orientated along the long axis of the central courtyard. The external wall (1000) was constructed in English bond of hand-made brick (9" x 4¼" x 3") worn in places with copper staining, and had been patched with later brick-work on the southwest side. At the southeast end of the structure the internal three sides of wall 1000 were faced with white-glazed bricks for a length of 1.85m corresponding with a narrowing of the southern corner of the structure. The glazed bricks were bonded with the remainder of the build of the structure.
- 5.1.4. The northwest wall had several concrete additions, including a possible concrete capped, but probably brick-built ramp or step at the north corner of the structure leading towards the entrance from Fleet Street into the courtyard. The northwest wall also included the remnants of three upright wooden posts presumably originally part of an upstanding wooden super-structure. This was the only evidence of a wooden structure above the modern ground surface that remained.

- 5.1.5. The floor of the structure (1002) was constructed of grey engineering bricks (8"x 4") and was generally laid with a regular stretcher bond. Along the central axis of the floor (aligned northwest-southeast) the bricks were laid to form a gutter that drained towards the centre of the structure where later drainage (1005) cut the floor.
- 5.1.6. A series of structures overlay the floor surface. The scars of several machine base attachments were visible in the floor structure, although no evidence of what these once supported remains. Close to the north end of the floor was a wooden platform base and adjacent to this to the west the floor was stained with copper residue.
- 5.1.7. At the southwest side of the structure was a concrete machine base or plinth (1004), raised 0.1m high and 2.85m long and up to 1.2m wide. There were some remnants of brick work set into the concrete, although this did not form a coherent structure.
- 5.1.8. On the northeast side of the floor aligned with the white-glazed bricks in wall 1000 was a void in the brickwork and on the southwest side of the floor was a mortar scar. These features appeared to correspond with the location of the glazed bricks in the southeast end of the structure and may indicate the sub-division of the structure.
- 5.1.9. On the northeast and northwest sides of the structure was an internal raised concrete walkway (1003), up to 0.3m above floor surface 1002. This was 'L' - shaped in plan, with one axis 9.8m long x 0.80m wide and the other 3.5m long x 1.0m wide. The arm of the internal walkway on the northeast side of the structure terminated opposite the entrance to the plating shop where there was a concrete step construction. The step was 1.15m wide, had a 0.2m drop.
- 5.1.10. Evidence of a possible square brick-built structure in the north corner of the main structure survived as bricks laid against the southwest wall 1000, at the edge of walkway 1003, and two bricks, aligned northwest-southeast, laid against the northwest wall of 1000. To the northeast and west the structure above the walkway 1003 the structure had been filled-in with concrete. The concrete set in the west corner probably capped a brick-built structure (discussed above), not fully visible in plan, and the stratigraphy was left *in situ* at this level.
- 5.1.11. The northwest part of the structure was backfilled with loose brick rubble (1001), this was contaminated, so was not investigated in detail. Rubble backfill 1001 contained the remains of a hessian sack which contained silver plated coffin furniture and other items (Plates 2-4). This suggested the structure had been backfilled in the mid to late 20<sup>th</sup> century.
- 5.1.12. The backfill 1001 was cut by a drainage trench and associated manhole (1005) that lead from the plating shop to the east, and the silver plating shop, to the southwest (Figure 2). This was left *in situ*.

## **7. FINDS**

Within rubble backfill 1001 were the remains of a hessian sack which contained 1773g of silver plated coffin furniture, some strung together with copper wire and other unidentifiable corroded items. These finds are depicted in an undated loose leaf Newman Brothers catalogue. As the catalogue includes coffin accessories that were not made at Newman Brothers it may be quite late, perhaps dating to the 1960s or later (pers com Elizabeth Perkins).

SF no.	Cntxt	Material	Description	cnt	wt
1	1001	silver plated metal alloy	Complete coffin handle	1	89
2	1001	silver plated metal alloy	Coffin handle partially broken with wire attached	1	65
3	1001	silver plated metal alloy	Part of a wreath holder with wire attached	1	23
4	1001	silver plated metal alloy	Partial handle, wire attached	1	48
5	1001	silver plated metal alloy	partial coffin handle	2	64
6	1001	silver plated metal alloy	partial coffin handle	2	60
7	1001	silver plated metal alloy	central part of coffin handle	1	27
8	1001	silver plated metal alloy	central part of a coffin handle with much heavy concretion / rust	1	22
9	1001	silver plated metal alloy	small part of a coffin handle, very eroded, concretion	1	9
10	1001	silver plated metal alloy	small part of coffin handle, very eroded, concretion	1	10
11	1001	Metal, unknown alloy	unidentifiable fragment, very eroded	1	10
12	1001	Metal, unknown alloy	unidentifiable fragment, eroded	1	6
13	1001	Metal, unknown alloy	unidentifiable fragment	1	4
14	1001	Metal, unknown alloy	curved unidentifiable fragment	1	8
15	1001	silver plated metal alloy	complete coffin handle with wire attached	1	86
16	1001	silver plated metal alloy	3 wreath holders (1 badly corroded) attached by copper wire	3	66
17	1001	silver plated metal alloy	2 wreath holders attached by copper wire	2	46
18	1001	silver plated metal alloy	part of coffin handle	1	40
19	1001	silver plated metal alloy	part of a coffin handle	1	29
20	1001	silver plated metal alloy	wreath holder attached to copper wire, very corroded	1	18
21	1001	silver plated metal alloy	coffin handle almost complete, corrosion	1	73
22	1001	silver plated metal alloy	coffin handle fragment attached to copper wire	1	25
23	1001	silver plated metal alloy	broken coffin handles attached to copper wire	3	105
24	1001	silver plated metal alloy	part of coffin handle	1	52
25	1001	silver plated metal alloy	part of coffin handle	1	31
26	1001	silver plated metal alloy	part of coffin handle	1	25
27	1001	silver plated metal alloy	part of coffin handle very corroded	1	6
28	1001	silver plated metal alloy	coffin handles attached by copper wire	7	345
29	1001	silver plated metal alloy	part of coffin handle quite corroded	1	50
30	1001	silver plated metal alloy	part of coffin handle	1	34
31	1001	silver plated metal alloy	part of coffin handle with copper wire attached	1	28
32	1001	silver plated metal alloy	part of wreath holder?	1	24
33	1001	silver plated metal alloy	part of coffin handle with copper wire attached	1	36
34	1001	silver plated metal alloy	central part of coffin handle	1	34
35	1001	silver plated metal alloy	central part of coffin handle	1	29
36	1001	silver plated metal alloy	end part of coffin handle	1	28
37	1001	silver plated metal alloy	end part of coffin handle	1	43
38	1001	silver plated metal alloy	part of coffin handle, very eroded, concretion	1	13
39	1001	silver plated metal alloy	small part of a handle, very eroded, concretion	1	20
40	1001	silver plated metal alloy	part of coffin handle	1	16
41	1001	silver plated metal alloy	part of coffin handle attached to copper wire	1	26
<b>Totals</b>				<b>54</b>	<b>1773g</b>

Table 1: quantification of finds from context 1001



## **6. CONCLUSIONS**

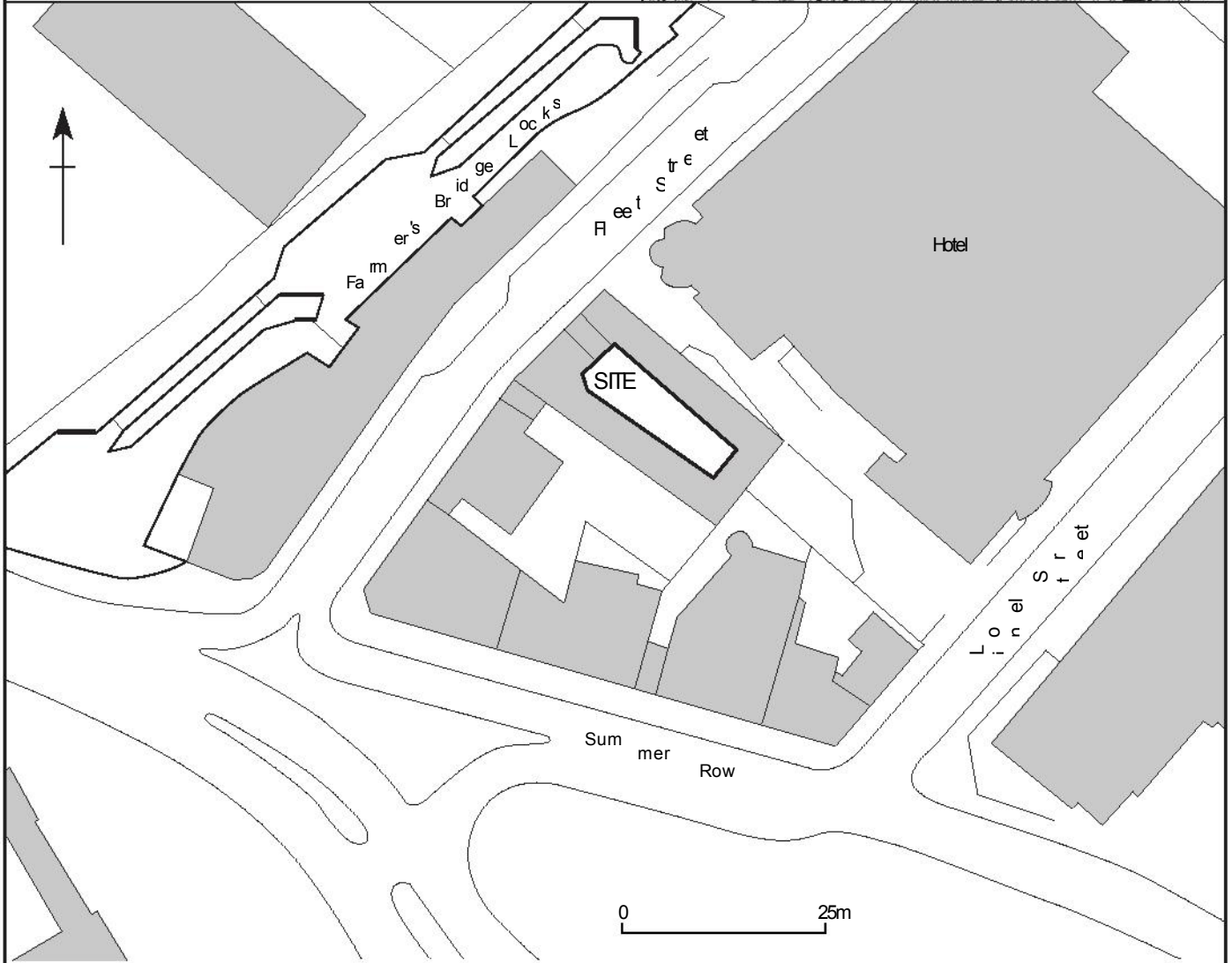
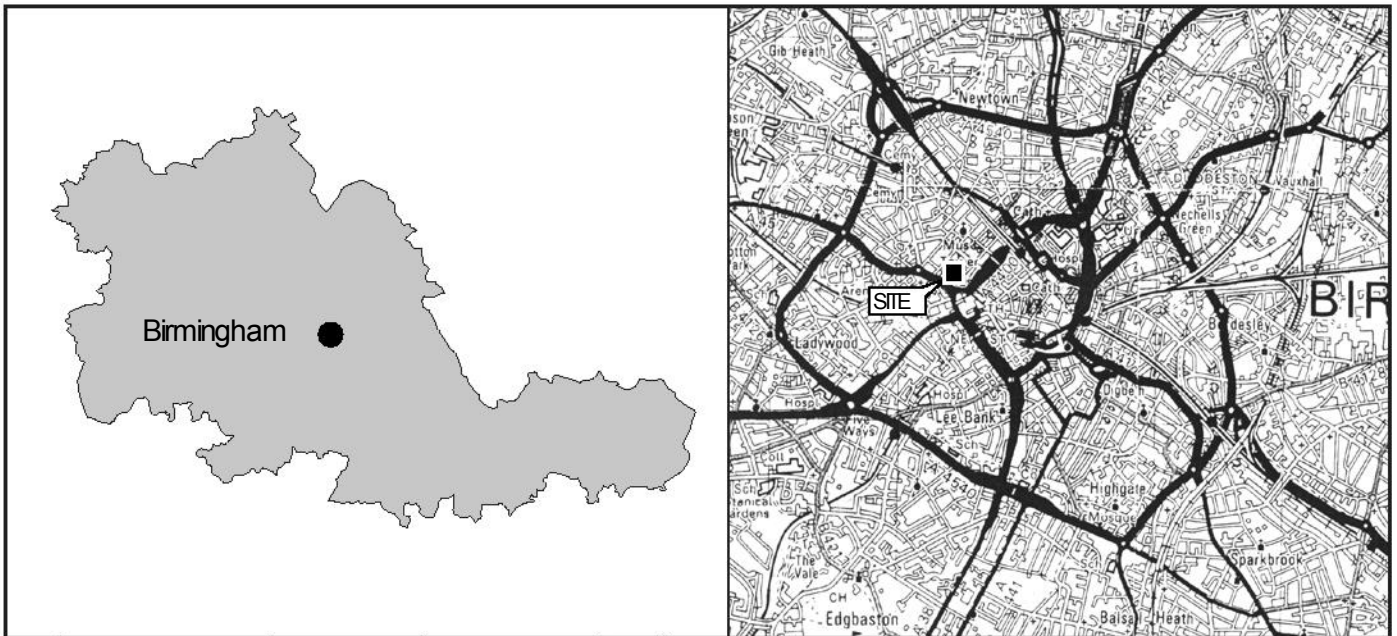
- 6.1.1. This watching brief revealed a brick-built structure, and evidence of associated internal fixtures. Drainage was provided by the central gutter in the floor. Access to the structure seems to have gained from the north corner, coinciding with the main entrance out of the site, and on the northeast side of the courtyard. A step up to a probable side entrance directly in front of the plating shop, also within easy access of the stamp room and the stairs to the upper floor, suggest that whatever industrial process was taking place, it was probably an integral part of the everyday processes in the works.
- 6.1.2. This structure was probably filled in during the mid to late- 20<sup>th</sup> century. After the completion of the watching brief the structure and floor surface were left *in situ* and was covered with a geotextile sheet before backfilling with stable materials by contractors.

## **7. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

The project was commissioned by White Young Green. Thanks are due to Guy Kendall and Mark Butler of White Young Green for their co-operation and assistance throughout the project. Thanks are also due to Elizabeth Perkins, Director of the Birmingham Conservation Trust, for her assistance with identifying the finds. The watching brief was undertaken by Emma V S Collins and Mary Duncan who also produced the written report which was illustrated by Nigel Dodds, and edited by Laurence Jones who also monitored the project for Birmingham Archaeology.

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**PN: 1998**  
Newman Brothers, Birmingham

**Figure 1: Site Location**

