

55/56 Lower High Street,
Wednesbury

**ARCHAEOLOGICAL
EVALUATION 2010**

Project No. 2109

11/2010

55/56 Lower High Street, Wednesbury

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION 2010

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55/56 Lower High Street, Wednesbury

Archaeological Evaluation 2010

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55/56 Lower High Street, Wednesbury

Archaeological Evaluation, 08/2010

SUMMARY

In August 2010 Birmingham Archaeology carried out an archaeological excavation at 55-56 Lower High Street, Wednesbury (NGR SO 988 948). This project was undertaken on behalf AR Demolition Ltd. in advance of a proposed redevelopment.

Two trenches measuring 1.6m by 6m were excavated. The earliest datable feature identified was a ditch containing a small quantity of pottery of possible Iron Age date. Other features comprised small ditches, including features containing pottery of 15-19th century date. Evidence of ironworking and possible pottery wasters were also found. The site is located near to a late medieval/early post-medieval pottery production site, and numerous other centres of pottery production have been found in the town. The discovery of a possible Iron Age ditch is important, given the limited evidence for prehistoric activity within Wednesbury, as well as within the west midlands conurbation as a whole. The fieldwork has also contributed to the understanding of the zoning of pottery production within Wednesbury.

55/56 Lower High Street, Wednesbury

Archaeological Evaluation, 2010

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1.1. Birmingham Archaeology was commissioned by AR Demolition Ltd to undertake a programme of trial trenching ahead of a residential development at 55/56 Lower High Street, Wednesbury (hereinafter referred to as the site).
- 1.1.2. This report outlines the results of a field evaluation carried out during August 2010 in accordance with the Institute for Archaeologists Standards and Guidance for Archaeological Evaluations (IfA 2008).
- 1.1.3. The evaluation conformed to a brief produced by Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council (Sandwell MBC 2010) and a Written Scheme of Investigation (Birmingham Archaeology 2010; reproduced as Appendix 1) which was approved by the Local Planning Authority prior to implementation in accordance with guidelines laid down in Planning Policy Guidance Note 16 (DoE 1990).

2. LOCATION AND GEOLOGY

- 2.1.1. The site is located within the historic settlement core of Wednesbury, and to the rear of standing buildings at 55/56 Lower High Street. The site is located within an area of archaeological potential, and a Conservation Area, and is centred on NGR SO 988 948 (Fig. 1).
- 2.1.2. The underlying geology consists of upper coal measures with overlying boulder clay deposits.
- 2.1.3. A range of 19th century L-shaped factory or workshop premises, demolished by the time of the evaluation, formerly occupied the site.

3. ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

- 3.1.1. The origins and early history of Wednesbury are currently not well understood and archaeological evidence for early settlement is limited. However the River Tame would have provided a valuable resource within the prehistoric period. It is possible that the earliest settlement may have been focused at an Iron Age hill fort situated on Church Hill. This is suggested by the place name '*bury*', the topography of Church Hill and possible evidence for ramparts (Gelling 1962, 11; Hackwood 1902, 7, cited in Hodder 1992). The River Tame also retains a Celtic name meaning "*dark river*". The name of Wednesbury is probably Anglo-Saxon in origin, deriving from a *burh* or fortified place of Woden.
- 3.1.2. Early medieval documentary and archaeological evidence is scarce; the Domesday Book of 1086 records Wednesbury as being part of crown lands. The manor house of Wednesbury and associated surrounding open fields are known to have been located to the north of the parish church. The original nucleus of the medieval settlement is speculated to have existed to the north side of Church Hill or within the market place, with later spread of settlement to the northeast (Hodder and Glazebrook 1987, 75-76, cited in Hodder 1992). Excavations at Oakswell Hall in

Walsall Street in 1983, revealed a timber structure of late medieval date, wasters of 15th to 17th century pottery and saggar fragments, and a pebble surface. This is suggestive of pottery manufacture taking place on this site (Hodder and Glazebrook 1987).

- 3.1.3. Potters are first mentioned in Wednesbury in 1422 (Ede 1962, 108, cited in Hodder 1992). In the Quarter Sessions Rolls of 1583 to 1609 seven potters are mentioned (*ibid.*, 132), in the parish registers between 1600 and 1629, possibly twelve existed and between 1676 and 1775 there were twenty eight mentioned (Barker 1985, cited in Hodder 1992). During the 19th century there are no references to potters within the trade directories (Ede 1962, 138, cited in Hodder 1992).
- 3.1.4. During the 17th century, Wednesbury potters used yellowish and blueish clay from Monway field on the west side of town, and red clay from Tipton for slip (Plot 1686, cited in Hodder 1992). A probate inventory from 1692, of John Beasley, a Wednesbury potter included '*coals in oven*' (Weatherill 1986, 465 cited in Hodder 1992) and further probate inventories of Wednesbury potters Richard Palmer (1676) and Thomas Hale (1690) show pottery production was undertaken at a small scale in one workshop, and that their estates were smaller than those of Yeomen. They used less varied tools and fewer materials than contemporary potters at Burslem, Stoke-on-Trent (Weatherill 1971, 141 cited in Hodder 1992).
- 3.1.5. In 1988 and 1989 two sites in Wednesbury town centre were excavated in advance of redevelopment. These were situated in Market Place and Ridding Lane and they revealed a late medieval yard surface with possible structural features and a 17th century pottery kiln, waster dumps and pits, a clay pit and cultivated soil. It is suggested that the 17th century pottery industry was exercised at a domestic level and it was not until the 18th and 19th centuries that the town centre was densely built up (Hodder 1992).
- 3.1.6. Excavation in 2006 by Birmingham Archaeology in advance of the construction of a new supermarket revealed a range of features and deposits associated with pottery production (Edgeworth and Mitchell 2007). In particular, the excavation investigated a watercourse which varied in profile along its excavated length, and contained a large quantity of fragments of wasters, mostly 17th century in date. This feature may have functioned to provide a water supply, or a series of water-filled pits, associated with pottery production. The base of part of a pottery kiln, and a number of pits, post-holes and stake-holes, all associated with early post-medieval pottery production, were also found.
- 3.1.7. Excavation at the rear of 48-50 Lower High Street Wednesbury (to the north of the site evaluated in 2010) during 2006 (Mitchell 2007) revealed a complex sequence of activity. Medieval activity, in particular smithing was the earliest evidence of site use, dated to the 13th century. The remains of 15th-17th century pottery manufacture were more extensive. They comprised pits and spreads of soil incorporating wasters. A possible length of the town ditch was also located.

4. AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

- 4.1.1. The principal aim of the 2010 evaluation was to determine the character, state of preservation and the potential significance of any buried remains.

4.1.2. More specific aims were to:

- Evaluate any evidence for medieval settlement and activity.
- Evaluate any evidence for pottery production.
- Evaluate any evidence for other industry, eg metalworking.
- Assess the contribution the site can make to the broader understanding of the historical development of Wednesbury.

5. METHODOLOGY

5.1.1. Two trenches, each measuring 1.6m by 6m were excavated, representing 5% by area of the development plot (excluding the frontage building). Trenches were located to sample the proposed development site as widely as possible (Fig. 1, Plate 1).

5.1.2. All topsoil and modern overburden was removed using a JCB mechanical excavator with a toothless ditching bucket, working under direct archaeological supervision, down to the top of the uppermost archaeological horizon. Subsequent cleaning and excavation was by hand. All archaeological features and deposits were manually sample excavated. This was done to sufficiently define their character and to obtain suitable dating evidence using the following strategy:

- 50% of pits under 1.5m or postholes
- 25% of pits over 1.5m including a complete section
- 20% sample of linear/ curvilinear features under 5m in length
- 10% sample of linear/ curvilinear features over 5m in length

5.1.3. The depth of archaeological deposits across the site was assessed, although the full length of every trench was not excavated down to natural subsoil.

5.1.4. All stratigraphic sequences were recorded. Features were planned at a scale of 1:20, and sections 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.

5.1.5. Recovered finds were cleaned and marked. Treatment of all finds conformed to guidance contained within the Birmingham Archaeology Fieldwork Manual and *First Aid for Finds* (Watkinson and Neal 1998).

5.1.6. The full site archive includes all artefactual remains recovered from the site. The site archive will be prepared according to guidelines set down in Appendix 3 of the Management of Archaeology 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).

5.1.7. The paper archive will be deposited with Wednesbury Museum, subject to permission from the landowner.

6. RESULTS

6.1. Introduction

6.1.1. The following section is arranged in trench order and both feature (cut) and context numbers are highlighted in bold. A representative selection of trench plans and sections are illustrated.

6.2. Trench 1 (Fig. 2)

6.2.1. The natural subsoil in Trench 1 was located at a depth of 130.44m AOD at the eastern end of the trench and at 130.63m AOD at the western end, and consisted of a yellow clay-gravel **105**.

6.2.2. Cutting **105** was a northwest-southeast aligned ditch **107** (Fig. 2, Plate 2) that measured 0.94m in width by 0.24m in depth, and which was filled by a grey silty clay **106** that contained charcoal inclusions. It contained two sherds of possible Iron Age pottery (see below).

6.2.3. Sealing **106** was a layer of mixed yellow-orange clay **104** measuring 0.6m in thickness that contained black ash and small stones throughout, and which was overlain by a 0.32m thick layer of black silty clay **103**, probably a buried topsoil layer.

6.2.4. Overlying **103** was a layer of ash/charcoal industrial waste **102** measuring 0.18m in thickness, which was sealed by a layer of brick/rubble industrial material **101** measuring 0.3m in thickness. Cutting **101** in the eastern end of the trench was a modern brick lined drain **110**, and a modern U-shaped pit **109** which was filled by a black-brown silty rubble **108**.

6.2.5. Overlying these features and the remainder of the trench was a modern blue engineering brick yard surface **100**.

6.2.6. Layer 104 contained 18th-early 19th century pottery, a fragment of clay pipe and three fragments from a glass bottle.

6.3. Trench 2 (Fig. 3, Plates 3 and 4)

6.3.1. The natural subsoil in Trench 2 was located a depth of 131.26m AOD in the northeastern end of the trench and at 130.99m AOD in the southwestern end and consisted of a yellow-orange gravel **205**.

6.3.2. Cutting **205** was a series of parallel gullies running on an east-west alignment. Towards the northern edge of the trench was gully **212** (Fig. 3) which measured 0.12m in width by 0.26m in depth and was filled by a brown silty gravel with large stones throughout **211**. To the south of this was a shallow gully/ditch **210** that measured 0.22m in width by 0.06m in depth and which was filled by a dark brown silty gravel **209**.

6.3.3. To the south of **209** was another east-west aligned gully, **208** (Fig. 3). **208** measured 0.5m in width by 0.1m in depth and was filled by a light grey silty clay, **207**. Cutting the western end of **208** was a small irregularly shaped pit, **214**, that measured 0.46m in width by 0.42m in depth, although the feature was not fully excavated as it was only partially visible in the trench. Filling **214** was a dark brown-grey silty clay, **213**, that contained 15th-16th century pottery.

- 6.3.4. To the immediate south of **214** was gully **219**, a small feature measuring 0.21m in width and which/ although unexcavated, was filled by a dark brown silty gravel similar in type to that of gully **212**.
- 6.3.5. To the south of **219** was a further east-west aligned gully, **216** (Fig. 3) that measured 0.73m in width by 0.15m in depth and which was filled by a grey silty clay **217**, which had been cut by a small shallow gully **220**.
- 6.3.6. Overlying these features and the remainder of the trench was a layer of mid grey-brown silty clay, **204**, 0.25m in thickness, which was overlain by a thin 0.15m thick layer of ash/charcoal, **203**.
- 6.3.7. Sealing **203** was a layer of dark brown-black silty clay, **202**, measuring 0.5m in depth and which probably represented a buried topsoil layer. Overlying **202** was a 0.25m thick layer of ash/charcoal industrial material, **201**, which was sealed by a layer of modern brick/rubble demolition material **200** measuring 0.25m in thickness.
- 6.3.8. Fill 213 of cut 214 contained 15th-16th, and 17th century pottery, glass slag and fragments of kiln/hearth lining, and layers 215 and 217 contained pottery of 17th-18th century date. Tile fragments and fragments of glass slag and metalworking slag were recovered from Trench 2.

7. THE FINDS

7.1. The prehistoric pottery by Emily Edwards

- 7.1.1. Two plain body sherds, weighing 13g and 5g respectively, were recovered from context **106**.
- 7.1.2. The sherd fabrics have been characterised by principal inclusions and recorded using standard PCRG (1997) codes. No diagnostic features were present on these two sherds and it must be borne in mind that 25-30 sherds is widely recognised to be the minimum number of sherds required from a prehistoric features in order to be able to date it with confidence (Shennan 1981, Lambrick 1984; PCRG 1992)
- 7.1.3. The sherds were both very worn, with surfaces being missing in places and edges rounded; they appear to have once joined although the break clearly occurred prior to deposition, as the refitting edges are very worn. They were oxidised to a red-brown on the external and internal faces, with a black-grey core and were manufactured from a sandy, micaceous fabric. The sherds were smoothed, with no evidence of burnishing, or of slips, were bonfire fired and were not wheel-thrown.
- 7.1.4. These two sherds cannot be dated with absolute confidence. It is most likely that they are Iron Age, as the condition and manufacturing characteristics are consistent with pottery of this date.

7.2. The medieval and post-medieval pottery by Emma Collins

- 7.2.1. The small assemblage of post-conquest pottery from the site was examined macroscopically. It was mainly made up of post-medieval wares including some rare forms such as a colander and dripping dish. There was a coarseware waster base sherd and the dripping dish was probably a waster but, unusually, there was no other evidence of pottery production. There were also two sherds of late

medieval pottery (Cistercian ware) from contexts **104** and fill **213** of cut **214**; the sherd from **104** being residual.

7.2.2 Spot dates

- **104** - 18th-early 19th century. Coarseware, Blackware, late Yellow ware and blue transfer print, residual Cistercian ware with applied clay pellet decoration.
- Fill **213** of cut **214** - 17th century. Coarseware dripping dish and Yellow ware.
- Fill **213** of cut **214** - 15th-16th century. Cistercian ware cup base.
- **215** (cleaning layer) - 17th-18th century. Coarseware.
- **217** - 17th-18th century. Coarseware colander base and Blackware

7.3. Other finds by Emma Collins

7.3.1. Other finds recovered from the fieldwork consist of 12 fragments of ceramic tile, one clay pipe stem, 31 pieces of slag, hearth lining, and one glass bottle. The assemblage was quantified by count and weight, and examined macroscopically for the purposes of this brief report.

7.3.2. **Tile:** Recovered during the evaluation were 12 tile fragments recovered from four contexts (2 x **207**, 2 x **209**, 7 x **213** and 1 x **215**). The assemblage consisted entirely of flat roof tile. The fabrics present were all locally made and consist of Fabrics 1, 2 and 6 from High Bullen Service Station (Collins 2009). The condition of the assemblage varied with some pieces extremely abraded.

7.3.3. **Clay Pipe:** A single fragment of clay pipe stem weighing less than one gram was recovered from context **104**.

7.3.4. **Glass:** A glass bottle in three fragments was recovered from context **104**. The glass is clear light greenish blue and has a base with a diameter of 65mm which is heavily worn. The bottle is cylindrical in shape and was probably used to store soda or table sauce.

7.3.5. **Slag:** The evaluation revealed 31 grams of slag from three contexts (1 x **207**, 4 x **209**, 26 x **213**). Of the 26 pieces from **213**, only one piece was glass slag, the rest most likely being waste from iron working. From this context, five pieces were magnetic, the remainder were non-magnetic. Also from this context were four pieces of kiln/hearth lining and three burnt pieces of stone with small traces of slag adhered. The slag from **207** was non-magnetic and from **209** one piece was magnetic and the others non-magnetic.

8. DISCUSSION

8.1.1. The evaluation at 55/56 Lower High Street, Wednesbury has provided some significant new information.

8.1.2. Ditch 107 in Trench 1 may be Iron Age in date, on the assumption that the pottery is correctly dated, and derives from a primary, not a secondary deposit. This feature is important in possibly helping to provide a wider Iron Age context for the possible hillfort in the town.

8.1.3. Few sites of Middle Iron Age (Hurst n.d.) have been excavated in the west midlands region. A number of farmsteads of Iron Age date have been excavated, notably including the site at Langley Mill on the line of the M6 Toll (Hodder n.d). Hodder

notes that cropmarked enclosures within the Sandwell Valley could also be Iron Age in date. With the exception of the possible Iron Age hillfort at Wednesbury there is no local Iron Age context for the ditch. If the ditch is indeed Iron Age in date, it is possible that it could have defined part of a ditch enclosing a farmstead, although this interpretation is no more than speculation.

- 8.1.4. Perhaps surprisingly, there was no evidence of *in situ* pottery production. This negative evidence contribute towards our understanding of the zoning of later medieval and early post-medieval pottery production in Wednesbury.
- 8.1.5. The pottery from the evaluation included a waster and possible waster. More significantly, it included fragments of kiln/hearth lining that could derive from pottery production. Glass working slag and iron working slag was also recovered.
- 8.1.6. The re-cut gullies identified in Trench 2 may represent the repeated re-definition of a fenced plot boundary. The inclusion of slag within this feature group could suggest that this feature group was associated with industrial activity, unless the industrial debris derived from clearance after they went out of use.

9. IMPLICATIONS AND PROPOSALS

9.1 Implications

- 9.1.1 Trenching has identified important archaeological deposits. In particular, the possible Iron Age ditch, and late medieval/early post-medieval features which may be associated with industrial activity.

9.2 Proposals

- 9.2.1 If development proposals necessarily involve disturbance to significant archaeological deposits, prior archaeological excavation and recording (followed by appropriate recording of the results) will be appropriate in advance of construction. The cost of this archaeological work, including reporting, would be borne by the developer.
- 9.2.2. The scope and precise requirement for any programme of archaeological fieldwork and reporting would be determined by the Planning Archaeologist, Sandwell MBC.

10. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The project was commissioned by AR Demolition Ltd. Thanks are due to Richard Dolman of the company for his co-operation and assistance throughout the project. Thanks also go to Graham Eyre-Morgan who monitored the project on behalf of Sandwell County Council. Work on site was undertaken by Phil Mann and Pete Spencer. Phil Mann prepared the written report, with contributions from William Mitchell, which was illustrated by Nigel Dodds, and edited by Alex Jones who also managed the project for Birmingham Archaeology.

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Appendix 2

Photo Registers

B/W BA 2109

Film number 1

<i>No</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Orientatio n</i>	<i>Scale</i>	<i>Initials</i>
1	Trench 1 WFS	E	1x2m	PS
2	Trench 1 EFS	W	1x2m	PS
3	Trench 1 Full Strat SFS	N	1x2m	PS
4	<u>Trench 1 Full Strat SFS</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>1x2m</u>	<u>PS</u>
5	Trench 2 SWFS	NE	2x2m	PS
6	Trench 2 NEFS	SW	1x2m	PS
7	<u>Trench 2 Full Strat SEFS</u>	<u>NW</u>	<u>1x2m</u>	<u>PS</u>
8	Trench 2 Full Strat SEFS	NW	1x2m	PS
9	<u>Trench 2 Full Strat SEFS</u>	<u>NE</u>	<u>1x2m</u>	<u>PS</u>
10	Trench 2 Burnt deposits	SE	1x0.4 m	PS
11	Trench 2 Burnt deposits	SW	1x0.4 m	PS
12	Trench 2, detail of 2008, 2010 <u>and 2012</u>	NE	1x2m	PS
13	Trench 2, detail of 2008, 2010 and 2012	NE	1x2m	PS
14	Trench 2, detail of 2008, 2010 and 2012	SE	1x2m	PS
15	Trench 1, 107 NWFS	SE	1x0.4 m	PM
16	Trench 2, Extra Area	SW	1x2m	PM
17	Trench 2, Extra Area	SW	1x2m	PM
18	<u>Trench 2, SW comer</u>	<u>W</u>	<u>2x2m</u>	<u>PS</u>
19	Trench 2, SW comer	NE	2x2m	PS
20	Trench 2, general shot	NE	2x2m	PS
21	<u>Trench 2, general shot</u>	<u>SE</u>	<u>2x2m</u>	<u>PS</u>
22	Trench 2, 216 NEFS	SW	2x2m	PS

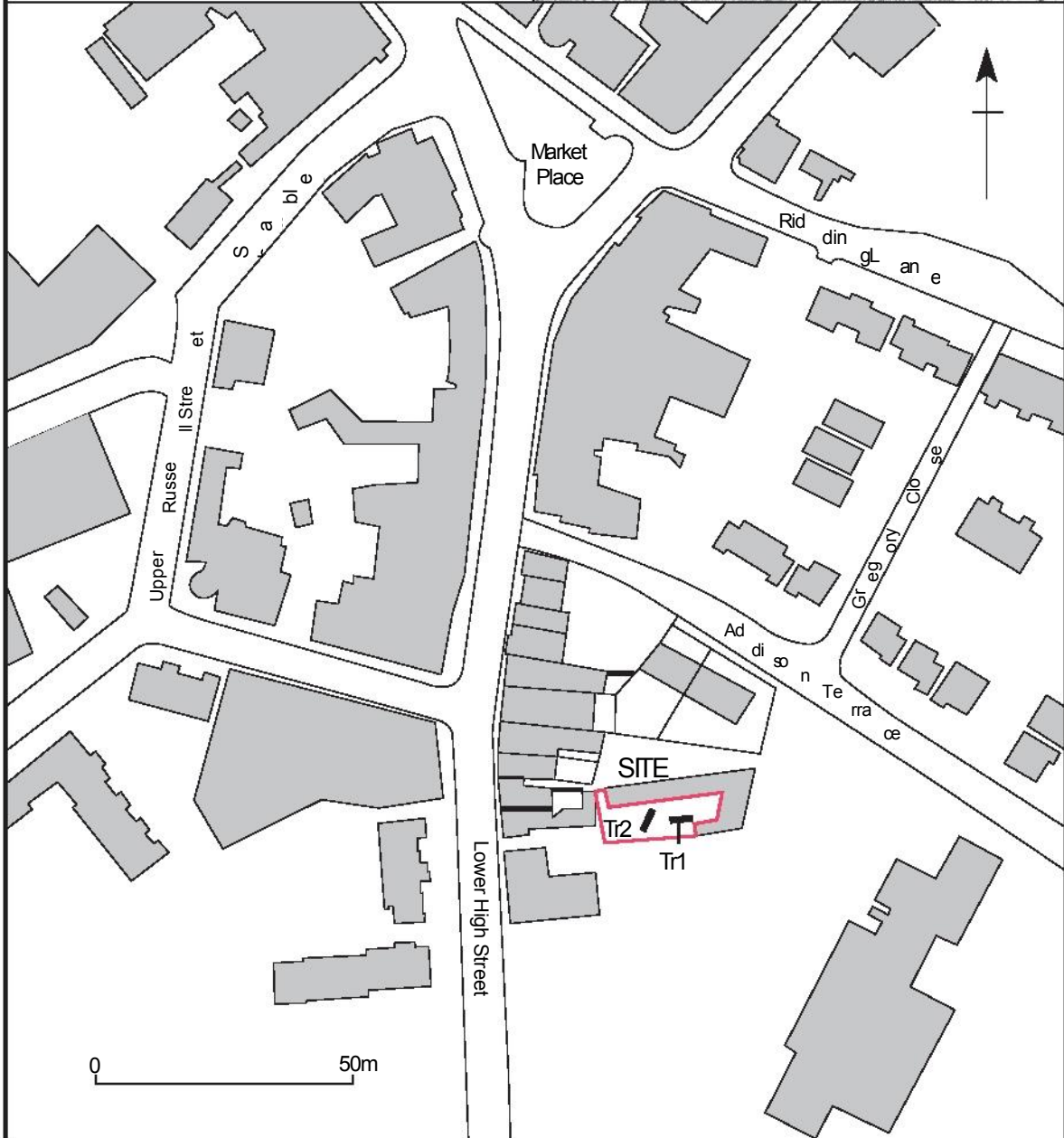
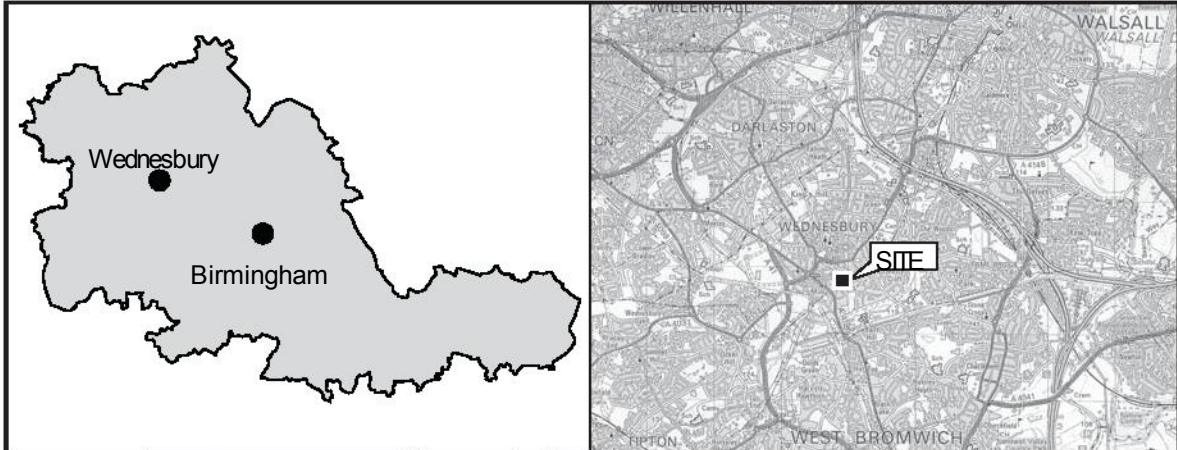
C/S BA 2109
Film number 1

<i>No</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Orientatio n</i>	<i>Scale</i>	<i>Initials</i>
25	Trench 1 Full Strat SFS	N	1x2m	PS
26	Trench 1 Full Strat SFS	N	1x2m	PS
27	Trench 1, WFS	E	1x2m	PS
28	Trench 1, EFS	W	1x2m	PS
29	Trench 2 SWFS	NE	2x2m	PS
30	Trench 2 NEFS	SW	1x2m	PS
31	Trench 2 Full Strat SEFS	NW	1x2m	PS
32	Trench 2 Full Strat SEFS	NW	1x2m	PS
33	Trench 2 Full Strat SEFS	NE	1x2m	PS
34	Trench 2 Burnt deposits	SE	1x0.4 m	PS
35	Trench 2 Burnt deposits	SW	1x0.4 m	PS
36	Trench 2, detail of 2008, 2010 and 2012	NE	1x2m	PS

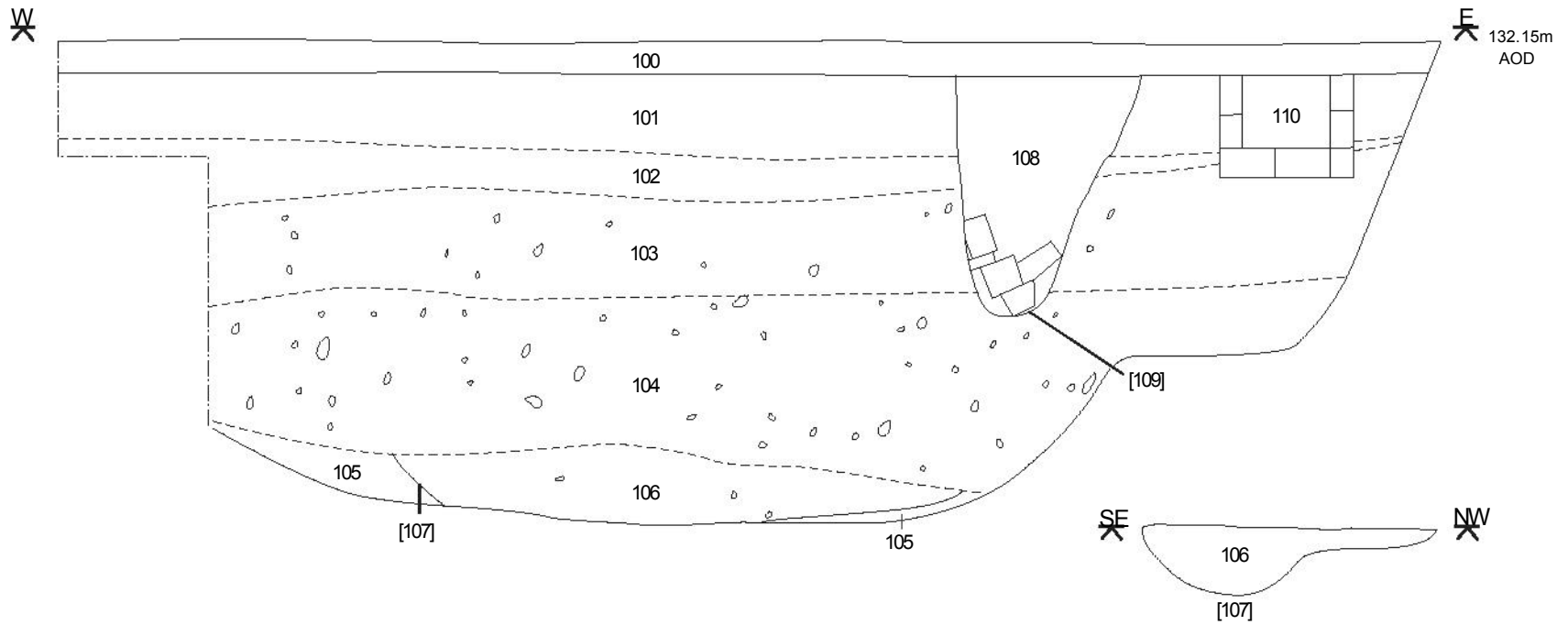
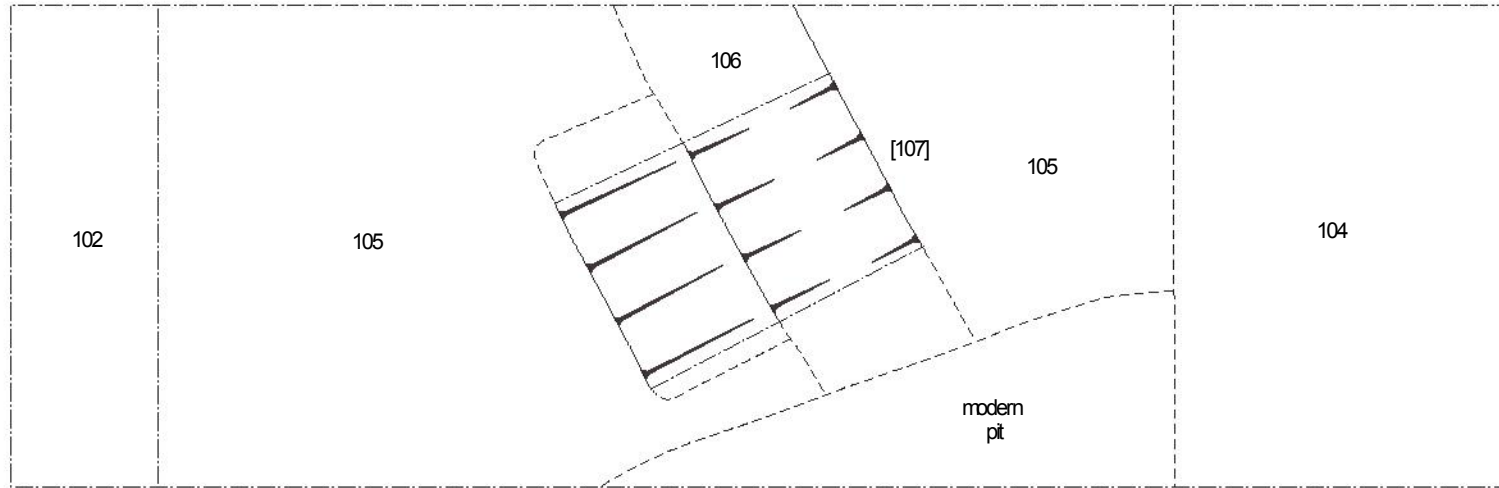
Digital BA 2109
Film number 1

<i>No</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Orientatio n</i>	<i>Scale</i>	<i>Initials</i>
1	Trench 1 WFS	E	1x2m	PS
2	Trench 1 EFS	W	1x2m	PS
3	Trench 1 Full Strat SFS	N	1x2m	PS
4	Trench 1 Full Strat SFS	N	1x2m	PS
5	Trench 2 SWFS	NE	2x2m	PS
6	Trench 2 NEFS	SW	1x2m	PS
7	Trench 2 Full Strat SEFS	NW	1x2m	PS
8	Trench 2 Full Strat SEFS	NW	1x2m	PS
9	Trench 2 Full Strat SEFS	NE	1x2m	PS
10	Trench 2 Burnt deposits	SE	1x0.4 m	PS
11	Trench 2 Burnt deposits	SW	1x0.4 m	PS
12	Trench 2, detail of 2008, 2010 and 2012	NE	1x2m	PS
13	Trench 2, detail of 2008, 2010 and 2012	NE	1x2m	PS
14	Trench 2, detail of 2008, 2010 and 2012	SE	1x2m	PS
15	Trench 2, detail of 2008, 2010 and 2012	SW	1x2m	PS
16	Trench 1, 107 NWFS	SE	1x0.4 m	PM

17	Trench 1, 107 NWFS	SE	1x0.4 m	PM
18	Trench 2, Extra Area	SW	1x2m	PM
19	Trench 2, Extra Area	SW	1x2m	PM
20	Trench 2, SW corner	W	2x2m	PS
21	Trench 2, SW corner	NE	2x2m	PS
22	Trench 2, SW corner	SE	2x2m	PS
23	Trench 2, general shot	NE	2x2m	PS
24	Trench 2, general shot	SE	2x2m	PS
25	Trench 1 and 2 working shot	SE	2x2m	PS
26	Trench 2, 216 NEFS	SW	2x2m	PM
27	Trench 2, 216 NEFS	SW	2x2m	PM



Trench 1



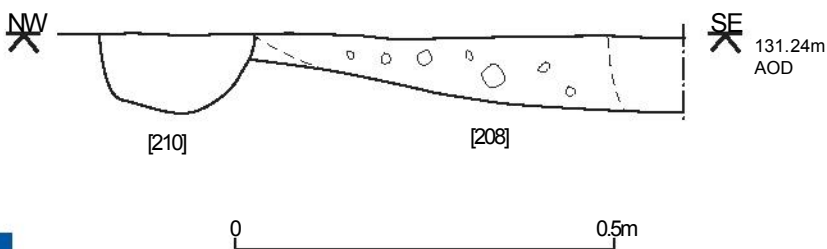
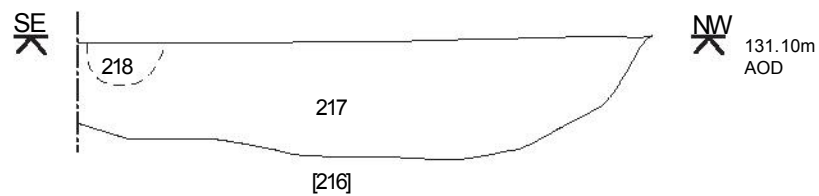
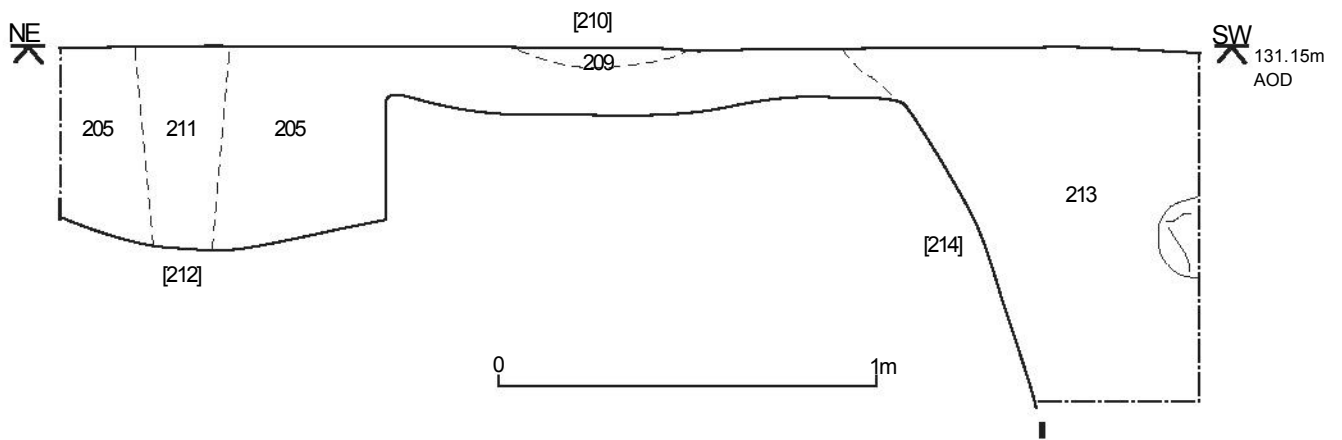
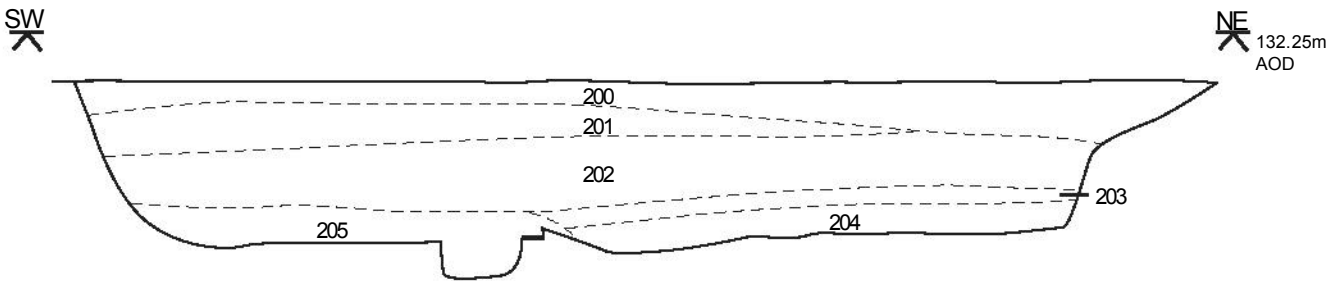
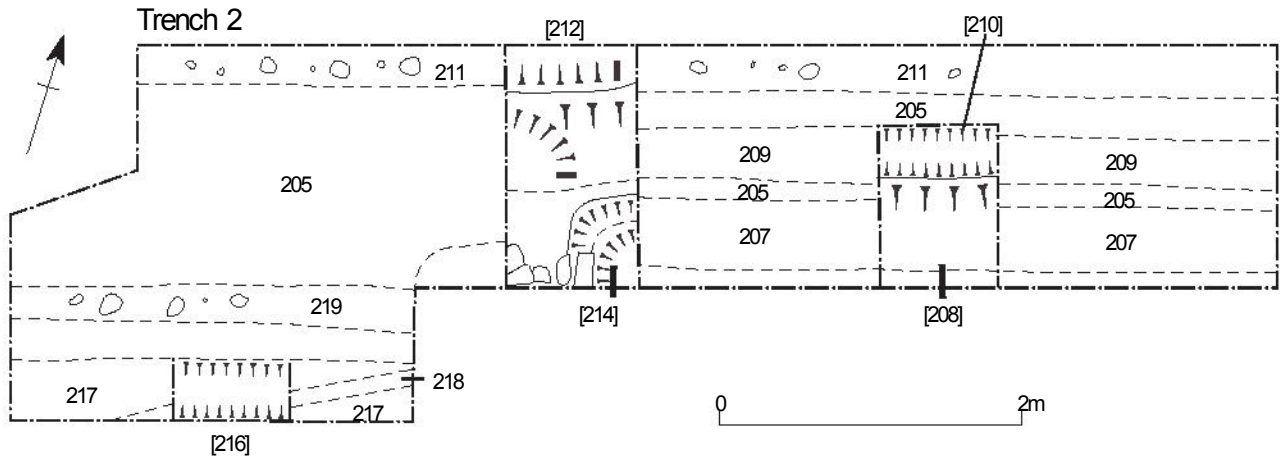




Plate 1



Plate 2



Plate 3



Plate 4